NULL SUBJECTS AND UNINTERPRETABLE FEATURES: EVIDENCE FROM FINNISH

ANDERS HOLMBERG

Abstract

The traditional view of the null subject as pro identified by Agr (the φ−features of I) cannot be maintained in a theory where Agr is uninterpretable. Two hypotheses will be compared with regard to the predictions they make for the Finnish null subject construction: (A) Agr is interpretable in null-subject languages, and pro is therefore redundant; (B) Null subjects are fully specified pronouns which assign values to the uninterpretable features of Agr before getting deleted in PF. Since Finnish has an EPP condition and an expletive pronoun, Hypothesis A predicts that null subjects should co-occur with expletives. The prediction is false, favouring B over A. Some consequences of this will be discussed.

1. Introduction: Little pro and uninterpretable features

The most authoritative view of null subjects within the Principles-and-Parameters framework, in particular as found in languages with rich subject-verb agreement, is the one articulated by Rizzi (1986), building on earlier work by Chomsky (1981, 1982), Rizzi (1982), Bouchard (1984), among others: The null subject is an empty pronominal, (little) pro, inherently unspecified for φ−feature values. The distribution of pro is determined by the following two conditions:

(1)  a. pro must be licensed.
     b. pro must be identified.

In (3), representing the (relevant part of) the structure of (2), pro is licensed because it is governed by I (INFL), which in Spanish is sufficiently rich to be a licenser of pro. The content of pro is identified by Agr, the person-number-gender features of I; pro inherits the feature values of I because pro and I are coindexed.

(2) Las chicas están cansadas. (Spanish)
    the girls be-3PL tired-F.PL
    ‘The girls are tired.’

(3) \[ IP
    \]
    \[ pro_{i} \]
    \[ [3PL] \]
    \[ I' \]
    \[ I_{i} \]
    \[ [3PL] \]

* The research for this paper was supported by a grant from AHRB (AR14458). Thanks to the audiences at the 1st Null Subjects Workshop in Cambridge and the Colloquium in the School of Linguistics and Language, Durham. Special thanks to Mary Fender.
The theory can explain the well known correlation between rich agreement morphology and null subjects: In languages with weak agreement morphology I fails to license pro. It may also fail to identify pro. However, the theory accounts for the possibility that a language can identify pro in some persons (for instance 1st and 2nd person plural in French), yet never allows null subjects.

This theory of null subjects cannot be maintained in a theory making a distinction between interpretable and uninterpretable features, as proposed by Chomsky (1995: ch. 4) and subsequent works. Chomsky argues that there are two varieties of φ-features: an interpretable and an uninterpretable variety. The person, number and gender features of an NP (or DP) are interpretable, restricting the denotation of the NP. The person, number, or gender features which appear on a verb, auxiliary or adjective, as in (2), are uninterpretable as they do not restrict the denotation of these categories. (2) asserts that a group of female individuals excluding the speaker and the addressee (the denotation of the NP las chicas) each have (some degree of) the same, indivisible and genderless property of being tired (the denotation of the predicate estan cansadas). The sentence does not, for example ascribe to the girls a particular female way of being tired, or repeated occurrences of being tired. By definition uninterpretable features cannot survive until LF, so they must be eliminated in the course of the derivation of LF. However, they may be, and typically are, visible in PF. According to Chomsky 2000, 2001a, 2001b their role in the grammar is to drive syntactic operations, particularly movement.

Chomsky 2001a furthermore proposes that the formal difference between the interpretable features and their uninterpretable counterparts is that the latter enter the derivation unspecified, being assigned values as part of the process of derivation by virtue of entering into the relation Agree with an interpretable counterpart (see Zwart 1997: 189 for a version of the same idea). This theory gives formal expression to the intuition that agreement is directional. In for example (2), the auxiliary verb and the adjective agree with NP, not vice versa. Once the uninterpretable features are assigned values, they are removed from the syntactic derivation being handed over to phonology, the derivation of PF.

2. Two hypotheses

Within this theory of agreement it is obviously not possible for an inherently unspecified pronominal to be specified by the φ-features of I, as those features are themselves inherently unspecified. The following are two alternative hypotheses consistent with the feature theory sketched above:

_Hypothesis A:_
There is no pro at all in null-subject constructions. Instead Agr, the set of φ-features of I, is itself interpretable; Agr is a referential, definite pronoun, albeit a pronoun phonologically expressed as an affix. This presupposes that Agr is also assigned a subject theta-role, possibly by virtue of heading a chain where the foot of the chain is in vP, receiving the relevant theta-role. A version of this hypothesis is articulated by Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 1998, another one by Manzini & Savoia 2002, yet another one by Platzack (to appear). If Agr is interpretable, it could, on that account, specify the features of pro. But if Agr is interpretable,

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1 There are languages that have an interpretable plural form of the verb; see Newman 1990, Schmidt 2002. This verb form is “used primarily to indicate plural action, either on the part of several agents /…/ or applied to several objects on one or several occasions, or an event that is taking place on several occasions. (Schmidt 2002: 10).
there is no need for pro. The role of (subject) pro in Chomsky (1981, 1982), Rizzi (1982, 1986) and related work is to carry the subject theta-role, possibly nominative Case, and satisfy the EPP. But if Agr is interpretable, hence referential, then Agr must itself carry the subject theta-role. This means that there could at most be an expletive pro in specIP. If Agr absorbs nominative Case as well, as seems most plausible if it is referential and heads a chain, then it would be a Caseless expletive pro. Expletive pro is a dubious category, particularly in a minimalist framework, as it has no interface properties at all, neither at LF not PF. But even granting the theoretical possibility, the only condition that could conceivably require an expletive pro in specIP would be the EPP. Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 1998 and Manzini & Savoia 2002 exclude this possibility by stipulating that the EPP is (effectively) satisfied by Agr in null-subject languages. We may, however, for the sake of argument, retain as a theoretical possibility that specIP can be filled by a covert expletive pro in null-subject languages.

A consequence of Hypothesis A is that a preverbal agreeing subject, lexical or pronominal, in a null-subject language is in an A-bar position. It is a position neither associated with Case nor with a theta-role, and furthermore, if Agr bears the subject theta-role, the lexical subject’s relation to the sentences must be that of an adjunct or apposition.

Hypothesis B:
The null subject is specified for interpretable φ-features, and values the uninterpretable features of Agr just like any other subject. This implies that the nullness is a phonological matter. Two possible implementations of this hypothesis will be considered:
(i) the pronouns in question are derived exactly as ordinary pronouns, but are deleted in Phonology, the derivation of PF following Spell-out;
(ii) they are derived as ordinary pronouns, but are not spelled out. In other words, at the point in the derivation when syntactic categories are assigned phonological shape (assuming some version of late insertion) the null pronouns are not assigned phonological features.

The following is a clear empirical difference between hypotheses A and B: According to A, in finite null-subject constructions the subject position specIP is either vacant or filled with expletive pro. According to B, the position is occupied by a pronoun, and is therefore not available for filling by some other category. Hypothesis A therefore predicts that a language that has null subject but also has overt expletives should allow, or even require, specIP in finite null-subject constructions to be filled with an overt expletive. Hypothesis B predicts this to be impossible.

Null-subject languages are generally assumed not to have (overt) expletive pronouns, especially not ‘pure’, there-type expletives (see Chomsky 1995: 288). There is at least one null-subject language which has overt pure expletive pronouns, though, namely Finnish, see Holmberg & Nikanne (2002). As will be demonstrated below, Hypothesis B makes the right prediction for Finnish.

3. Null subjects and agreement in Finnish

Finnish is a partial null-subject language in that 1st and 2nd person pronouns are optionally null, in any environment.

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2 There-type, ‘pure’ expletives do not trigger agreement and appear not to be assigned Case. Their only function is to satisfy the EPP. For it-type expletives one may argue that they are excluded from specIP in a finite null-subject construction since they are not assigned Case, if nominative Case is absorbed by (interpretable) Agr. Hypothesis A therefore makes a clear prediction only for pure expletives.
(4)  a. (Minä) puhun ruotsia.  (Me) puhumme ruotsia.
    I speak-1SG Swedish  we speak-1PL Swedish
  b. (Sinä) puhut ruotsia.  (Te) puhutte ruotsia.
    you speak-2SG Swedish you-PL speak-2PL Swedish
  c. *(Hän) puhuu ruotsia.  *(He) puhuvat ruotsia
    he/she speak-3SG Swedish  they speak-3PL Swedish

A 3rd person definite subject pronoun can be null only in certain environments, essentially when it is bound by a higher subject (see Vainikka & Levy 1999).

(5) Pekka väittää [että (hän) puhuu ruotsia].
    Pekka claims that he speaks Swedish

The null variety is necessarily bound by the matrix subject. In most dialects the overt counterpart is ambiguous between a bound and a disjoint reading, although reportedly there are dialects where it is unambiguously disjoint. Generic pronouns can, and must, be null; see footnote 7. Quasi-referential pronouns in construction with weather predicates or extraposed clauses can also be null. In standard (as opposed to colloquial) Finnish the subject pronoun must be null in weather expressions.

(6) a. Nyt (se) taas sataa.
    now it again rains
    ‘Now it’s raining again.’
  b. (Se) oli hauskaa että tulit käymään.
    it was nice that came-2PL visiting
    ‘It was nice that you came to visit.’

As shown by (4), Finnish has rich agreement morphology. 3rd person agreement is a bit less rich than 1st and 2nd person agreement, in that 3SG is null in the past tense and the conditional mood, where tense is neutralized; see Holmberg & Nikanne (1993), Holmberg & al. (1993). In many varieties of colloquial Finnish there is no distinction between 3SG and 3PL. In these varieties, 3PL is also null in the past tense and the conditional mood. In the present tense indicative 3SG is, however, phonologically visible in the form of vowel lengthening, and 3PL has a suffix –vat (or –vät, subject to vowel harmony) in all tenses and moods, except in those colloquial varieties where it is = 3SG. I will focus on 1st and 2nd person in this paper, as these are the forms which uncontroversially allow a null subject.

Most varieties of Finnish do not use definite null pronouns much. The use is largely restricted to formal varieties, including standard written Finnish. It is nonetheless clear that the null subjects are part and parcel of Finnish ‘core grammar’, since Finnish speakers have largely uniform intuitions about null-subject constructions. See Holmberg & Nikanne (2002) for discussion.

4. The Finnish expletive sitä
Finnish has an expletive pronoun which is obligatory in certain contexts. In general, Finnish does not tolerate verb-initial declarative sentences.

(7) *Sattui minulle onnettomuus.
    happened to-me accident
Instead, either an argument or adverbial must be fronted, or an expletive be merged. See Holmberg & Nikanne (2002).

(10) a. Minulle sattui onnettomuus.
    to-me happened accident

     b. Sitä sattui minulle onnettomuus.
     EXPL happened to-me accident
     'I had an accident.'

(11) a. Nyt meni hullusti.
    now went awry

     b. Sitä meni nyt hullusti.
     EXPL went now awry
     'Now things went wrong.'

(12) a. Saunassa viihtyy.
    in-sauna feels-good

     b. Sitä viihtyy saunassa.
     EXPL feels-good in-sauna
     'One feels good in the sauna.'

The expletive sitä is the partitive form of the pronoun se ‘it’. As shown by Holmberg & Nikanne (2002), it is essentially a there-type, pure expletive, merged in the position where the subject is found in unmarked sentences. As shown by Holmberg & Nikanne, this is not a subject position per se, as it can be filled by other referential categories. If anything, it could be characterized as a topic position. I will continue to refer to it as specIP. It is not a specCP position, as shown, for instance, by the fact that it can invert with the finite verb in questions (where the finite auxiliary or verb moves to C, and is affixed with a question particle):

(13) Menikö sitä taas hullusti?
    went-Q EXPL again awry
    'Did things go wrong again?'

There is not necessarily any interpretive difference between the (a) and the (b)-sentences in (10, 11, 12). Fronting the argument or temporal or locative adjunct is the solution to a formal condition, the Finnish version of the EPP, as is merge of the expletive. The fronted argument or adjunct can have more specific information-structural implications, but need not have any. In fact, in written Finnish the use of the expletive is proscribed, leaving fronting as the only acceptable means to satisfy the EPP.
A couple of caveats are in order: First, a verb-initial sentence is acceptable with ‘verb-focus’, or rather polarity focus, as in (14), where the verb tends to have focus stress and possibly a focus particle.

(14) SATTUI(-pas) minulle onnettomuus.  
happened (FOC) to-me accident  
‘I did have an accident.’

In this case the finite auxiliary or verb, or more precisely, the functional head which incorporates the finite auxiliary or verb and encodes polarity is moved to C: see Holmberg (2001).

Second, verb-initial impersonal sentences are allowed if the sentence contains no category that can move to specIP to satisfy the EPP. A category can move to specIP if it is referential, in the sense that DPs and certain adverbials (locative, temporal, instrumental, but not for instance manner or reason) are referential. According to Holmberg & Nikanne (2002) they must be ‘potential topics’. For instance (15) is therefore acceptable:

(15) Meni hullusti.  
went awry  
‘Things went wrong’

The manner adverb *hullusti* is not a potential topic, while the time adverb *nyt* ‘now’ in (8) is, hence the difference: The time adverbial must move to specIP in the absence of an expletive. In the absence of a referential category, the expletive is optional; compare (15) and (16).

(16) Sitä meni hullusti.  
EXPL went awry  
‘Things went wrong.’

See Holmberg & Nikanne (2002) for discussion of verb-initial clauses. The following is thus a viable formulation of the EPP in Finnish:

(17) **EPP in Finnish:** If the sentence contains a referential category, SpecIP must be overtly filled either by a referential category or by an expletive pronoun.

It is important to note that the expletive is not restricted to impersonal and generic sentences, but also occurs in construction with, for instance, 1st and 2nd person finite verbs and ditto subjects, if the latter are not moved to specIP, as in (18):

(18) a. Sitä olen minäkin käynyt Pariisissa.  
EXPL have-1PL I-too visited Paris  
‘I have been to Paris, too (actually).’

b. Minä sitä olen käynyt Pariisissa.  
I EXPL have-1PL visited Paris  
‘I’ve been to Paris (would you believe it).’/’I’m the one who has been to Paris.’
According to Hypothesis A, Finnish 1st and 2nd person Agr is made up of interpretable features, and so is essentially an affixed definite pronoun. An overt 1st or 2nd person pronoun is therefore not required, and if included, it is (presumably) in a higher, A-bar-type position. The prediction is, then, that specIP, the position immediately preceding the finite verb or auxiliary in a declarative sentence, or immediately following it in a yes/no question, could, or even should be filled with an expletive pronoun. The prediction is false, as first observed by Hakulinen (1975); see also Holmberg & Nikanne (2002).

   EXPL speak-1SG Swedish

b. Oletteko (*sitä) käyneet Pariisissa?.
   have-2PL-Q EXPL visited Paris
   'Have you been to Paris?'

This is predicted by Hypothesis B, according to which a null pronoun occupies specIP. (19a,b), with the expletive, are ill formed for the same reason that (20a,b) are.

(20) a. *Sitä minä puhun ruotsia.
   EXPL I speak-1SG Swedish

b. Oletteko te (*sitä) käyneet Pariisissa?
   have-2PL you EXPL visited Paris

(20a,b) show that a subject pronoun can’t be combined with an expletive in pre-verbal position in either order. (18b) is possible, since there, the subject pronoun has moved to specCP, a contrastive focus position, see Vilkuna (1995), Holmberg & Nikanne (2002).

There is another interpretation of the facts, compatible with Hypothesis A: (a) The EPP in Finnish is a requirement that every finite sentence should have a Topic, and (b) Agr, particularly 1st and 2nd person Agr, being a referential, definite pronoun, is a Topic satisfying the EPP, and therefore precluding merge of an expletive. In the following I will show that this hypothesis is untenable.

As discussed by Vilkuna (1989, 1995), there are strictly two positions in the left periphery preceding the finite verb or auxiliary, in Finnish: A contrastive focus position which is also the landing site for a fronted wh-phrase, and a Topic position, which is the unmarked case is occupied by the subject. For example, (21a) (adapted from Vilkuna 1995) can only be interpreted with Annalle ’to Anna’ as Contrastive Focus and the subject Mikko as Topic, (21b) can only be interpreted with the fronted object kukkia as Contrastive Focus and Annalle as Topic (the subject in that case being Information Focus or 'Main News' in Vilkuna's 1995 terms), while (21c) is ill formed, having one argument too many preceding the finite verb; see Vilkuna 1995 (ALL = Allative case).

(21) a. Annalle Mikko antoi kukkia.
   Anna-ALL Mikko gave flowers
   'It was to Anna that Mikko gave flowers.'

b. Kukkia Annalle antoi Mikko
   flowers Anna-ALL gave Mikko
   'Flowers, Anna received from Mikko.'
It does not matter whether the arguments are pronouns or lexical NPs; the information-structural interpretations remain the same. That is to say, a sentence cannot be introduced by two Topics. Now if 1st and 2nd person Agr is itself a Topic, the prediction is that an overt pronoun preceding Agr should have Contrastive Focus interpretation.

(22) Minä olen käynyt Pariisissa.
I have-1SG visited Paris-INE

The prediction is false. The initial pronoun can, but certainly need not have Contrastive Focus interpretation. For example, it is a perfectly licit answer to a question "Where have you been?", even in the formal register where null subjects are most common. Consequently it can be preceded by a contastively focused category:

(23) Pariisissa minä olen käynyt.
Paris-INE I have visited
‘It’s Paris I’ve been to.’

What if 1st and 2nd person Agr is a Topic only optionally, being optionally unmarked for information structural features? That would allow (22) and (23), but then (19a,b) are again wrongly predicted to be grammatical, that is when the unmarked option is taken.

I conclude that UG allows for the possibility of null-subject constructions with a null subject pronoun. Following the Chomskyan approach to agreement, the null pronoun has interpretable φ−features, and assigns values to the inherently unspecified features of Agr. In other words, the null subject pronoun identifies Agr (= the finite verb or auxiliary agrees with the null pronoun), not vice versa.

5. Is the null pronoun derived by absence of spell-out or deletion?

As mentioned, there are two alternative versions of Hypothesis B:
(i) null pronouns are derived exactly as ordinary pronouns, but are deleted in PF;
(ii) null pronouns are derived as ordinary pronouns except that they are not spelled out.

Can we decide which of the two alternatives is right? I am not aware of any direct empirical evidence favouring one over the other. The following is a suggestion, though:

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3 Matters are complicated by the fact that an object or adverbial may ‘scramble’ to preverbal position when (a) the sentence is introduced by a focused category, and (b) the object or adverbial is not Main News. If the subject is then Topic, the result will be a sentence with two Topics preceding the finite verb, in the loose sense of Topic employed here. Thus for instance (i) is well formed:
(i) Kukkia Mikko Annalle antoi.
flowers Mikko Anna-ALL gave
See Vilkuna 1995, Holmberg 2001a,b. This does not, however, impact on the argument in the text: The generalization still holds that the sentence cannot be introduced by two Topics. Another version of Hypothesis B is that null pronouns is a subcategory of pronouns which a language may or may not include among its lexical items, in the same way as a language may or may not have weak pronouns or clitic pronouns. This is the position taken by Cardinaletti (in press), building on Cardinaletti & Starke (1999). In this theory, null pronouns are a subcategory of weak pronouns, contrasting with strong as well as with clitic pronouns.
There is a form of null pronoun which plausibly is null because it is not spelled out, namely PRO. Given the theory of syntactic features in Zwart (1997) and Chomsky (2001a), a category can’t be spelled out before its uninterpretable/unspecified features have been valued. PRO is a pronoun (an NP, or more properly, a DP) in a non-Case position, typically the subject position of a non-finite clause. Its Case feature therefore does not get assigned a value, and consequently the pronoun does not get spelled out. This is not a problem in itself, as long as the pronoun can either be interpreted as a bound anaphor (controlled PRO) or, as a default option, be assigned a generic interpretation (arbitrary PRO). In this view, an unspecified Case feature does not in and of itself cause a derivation to crash, as long as the interpretation of the NP in question at LF can be ensured.

The reason why PRO is illicit in for example (21), whether it is controlled by the subject (‘John hit himself’) or has an arbitrary interpretation (‘John hit anyone’) is that it cannot avoid being assigned Case in this position by the transitive verb, and thus be spelled out (as him, himself, or anyone, etc., depending on which features it is composed of) – on the assumption that Case must be assigned where it can be.

(21) *John hit PRO.

More precisely, the operation Agree (see Chomsky 2000, 2001a, 2001b), by which an NP is assigned a Case value by a functional head (by finite I in the case of the subject, by v, the abstract transitivizer head, in the case of the object), and the functional head is assigned φ-features by the NP in return, must apply where it can apply.

What about pro in specIP? Arguably specIP in a finite clause is not a Case-position in Finnish, or indeed any language. According to Chomsky (2000, 2001a, 2001b) it is not, since although nominative Case assignment is concomitant with movement to specIP in many languages, the movement is not crucial to Case-assignment. However, whether the pronoun moves from its first-merged position in spec,vP or not, it will unavoidably get assigned nominative Case by finite I through the operation Agree. We are led to conclude that the subject pronoun is assigned Case and thereby gets spelled out. In the same process of Agree with finite I, the φ−features of I get assigned values by the pronoun.

If so, the nullness of the null definite subject pronoun in finite sentences must be the effect of deletion of phonological features in PF. That is to say, we are back to a version of the original pro-drop analysis in Perlmutter (1971): null subjects are derived by deletion of a pronoun. I conclude that 1st and 2nd person null subjects in Finnish are not instances of pro in the sense of Chomsky (1981), Rizzi (1982, 1986) and related work. They are, however, like pro in the sense that they occupy a syntactic position, and generally partake in syntactic operations just like other referential NPs.

6. The correlation between rich agreement and null pronouns

How does this theory capture the correlation between rich agreement and null subjects -- ignoring, for the sake of argument, the well known counterexamples to the correlation, including those languages which have no agreement, yet have null subjects (including many East Asian languages), and those languages which have rich agreement, yet do not have null subjects (Icelandic, German)?

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5 It has occasionally been proposed (Jaeggli 1982, Bouchard 1984: 144f.), that nominative Case is absorbed by Agr, leaving the subject pronoun caseless, like PRO. This is, again, incompatible with the hypothesis that Agr is uninterpretable, hence unspecified until it is assigned values by an NP with interpretable features.
The answer is: It doesn’t. The correlation is not a matter of Narrow Syntax, in the sense of Chomsky 2000 and related works. I suggest that it derives ultimately from conditions on processing. In the parlance of traditional transformational grammar it is a matter of Performance, not Competence. The claim is that a null 1st or 2nd person subject pronoun in Finnish is a fully specified pronoun which is deleted in Phonology, and is therefore not pronounced. The deletion is a phonological operation, but one which is dependent on a condition on processing, namely recoverability of deletion. The processing of a sentence (by a listener) crucially includes undoing operations of Phonology, such as assimilation, contraction, deletion, etc., as a step in the reconstruction of the LF of the expression. The deleted pronoun can be recovered on the basis of the features of the agreeing auxiliary, verb or adjective in conjunction with contextual cues. In this process the status of the features as interpretable or uninterpretable does not matter; the form of the inflection on the auxiliary, verb, or adjective encodes feature values, and these feature values entail the existence of a pronoun with the corresponding interpretable feature values. The deletion of the pronoun and the undoing of the deletion is conventionalized and systematic (in ways not explored in this paper), and in that sense part of the grammar in a wide sense, but the claim is that it is not part of Narrow Syntax, including the operation Agree, that is the operation where Agr, Case, and other uninterpretable features receive their values, and which is crucial also for NP-movement and wh-movement (following Chomsky 2000 and subsequent works).

This accords, by and large, with the findings of Cole (2000), who says...
.../.../even in languages where null subjects occur widely, they are not null regardless of circumstances, but in particular fairly well defined circumstances. There is a step by step process in the recovery of null subjects in languages with rich agreement that proceeds first by reference to discrete morphology, then if this is not discrete, to the features of an available antecedent in context and, thirdly, to identification by virtue of default interpretation. Finally if none of these adequately identifies the null subject, overt pronouns are resorted to. (Cole 2000: 82)

The interplay of morphological and contextual features governing the distribution of null subjects in null subject languages, discussed at length by Cole (2000) (see also Samek-Lodovici 1996), would seem not to be a matter of Narrow Syntax, but of processing.

In terms of Rizzi’s dichotomy of licensing and identification of null subjects, we can maintain that identification squarely belongs to a theory of processing while leaving open the possibility that licensing of null subjects belongs in Narrow Syntax. That would amount to saying that there is a parameter which allows null subjects in some languages (in principle, although languages may vary in the extent they make use of this option), while excluding it in other languages. If Cole (2000) is right, this parameter has nothing to do with richness of agreement, though, as there appears to be no universal correlation between richness of agreement and availability of null subjects. An alternative is that null subjects are in principle available in any language, but some other, independent parametric choice(s) may prevent the derivation of null subjects. That amounts to saying that there are no special licensing conditions for null subjects (see Cole (2000) for arguments in favour of this view). For example, if a language has a phonological EPP feature’ in finite I which requires an overt subject or overt expletive pronoun in the spec of finite I, then this may effectively rule out the possibility of a null subject, regardless whether it is recoverable from the morphology or from the context. I leave the choice between these alternatives for future research.

Other operations which belong to grammar but arguably not Narrow Syntax include operations which reorder constituents so that light ones come to precede heavy ones. As

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6 See Holmberg (2000). Finnish has an EPP feature in finite I, but it is not so much a phonological as a semantic EPP as it requires a Topic in specIP, but (a) allows the Topic to be deleted in PF (the null subject case), and (b) is suspended if the sentence has no potential Topic (following Holmberg & Nikanne 2002; see (17) in the text).
argued by Hawkins 1990, 1998, these operations are motivated by constraints on processing. The same is true of null pronouns, if we are right: Their distribution is crucially restricted by a constraint on processing, namely recoverability of deletion.7

Does the account of null subjects in Finnish necessarily generalize to all other languages/forms of definite null subjects? Conceivably some null subject constructions discussed in the literature are truly cases of a referential agreement inflection absorbing Case and theta role, thereby making a subject NP redundant, along the lines of Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou (1998), Manzini & Savoia (2002), Platzack (to appear). Italian is a language which is claimed by all these scholars to have this form of null subject constructions. On the other hand, empirical arguments have been advanced, by Rizzi (2000) and Cardinaletti (to appear), against referential agreement inflection in Italian, in favour of null pronouns which occupy argument positions like overt pronouns. See also Szabolcsi (1994: 231) on Hungarian. I take this as an indication that referential verb inflection either doesn’t exist at all or is less wide-spread than might be assumed.

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7 One of no doubt many problems which do not have an obvious solution in this theory is why Finnish does not allow 3rd person null subjects. The following is a suggestion: Finnish does allow 3rd person null subjects, but they have a particular interpretation, namely as generic pronouns.

(i) Täällä saa polttaa.
here may-3SG smoke
‘One may smoke here/Smoking is allowed here.’

(i) represents the standard, unmarked way of expressing a generic subject. See Vainikka and Levy … for evidence that the generic pronoun is syntactically expressed. In this view, the impossibility of deletion of the 3rd person definite pronoun, except when it is bound (see (5) above), would be the result of a form of morphological blocking: The existence of a null lexical item blocks deletion of a minimally contrasting overt lexical item. Arguably the empty bound pronoun is a distinct lexical item, too, namely a logophoric pronoun (see Sells 1987), not derived by deletion, but blocking deletion of the non-logophoric counterpart.


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