

# Some thoughts on the early Dutch null subject

Maria Teresa Guasti

Between the age of 2;0-3;6, children speaking non-pro drop languages (English, Flemish, French, Danish) omit the sentential subject from their sentences. This occurs more often if the verb is nonfinite, but it occurs with average percentages that go from about 50% to 20% in finite sentences as well. For example, a French-speaking child could utter (1).

- (1) est trop gros  
(he) is too big  
(Philippe, 2;2)

Italian-speaking children also omit the sentential subject, but this is not surprising since their grammar allows it. Dutch-speaking children omit the sentential subject. Although this should not surprise, as topic drop is licit in the target language, Haegeman (1995) has challenged the claim that children's omissions were target-consistent and has convincingly shown that these omissions had to be put in the same basket as subject omissions in English, French. She has claimed that the early null subject of Dutch-speaking children is a root phenomenon. She has shown that omission occurs from matrix, but not from embedded clauses, that is, subject omission is limited to declarative sentences and non-existent in *wh*-questions. However, these properties characterize Dutch topic drop as well. To support her claim, Haegeman has provided data showing that subject omission in early Dutch decreases between 2;0 and 3;0 years and this decrease parallels that of root infinitives, another phenomenon observed in the early grammar of children speaking a wide varieties of languages. On this basis, she argues that the early Dutch null subject is a developmental phenomenon that fades away as children's grow older and their cognitive resources increase. Specifically, Haegeman, following Rizzi (1994), has proposed that Dutch-speaking children were applying clausal truncation to their sentences and produced null

subjects in the Spec of the root. She has also shown that this phenomenon is not only present in child Dutch, but in diaries written by several well renowned adult writers (Haegeman 1990, Weir 2012), although adults' null subjects may be different from children's ones. Thus, in omitting the root subject children were exercising an option available in Universal Grammar. Of course in the case of writers, it is not short of cognitive resources that is behind the phenomenon, but something else.

The phenomenon of subject omission has been extensively investigated since Hyams (1986), but mostly in non-null subject or non-drop languages, with some exceptions. When the productions of children exposed to null subject or topic drop languages have been examined, it were to show that subject omission by these children were qualitatively and quantitatively different from those of children exposed to a language where omission was not target consistent. One example is Wang et al. (1992). Mandarin is a topic drop language, whereby both subjects and objects can be dropped under appropriate contextual conditions. Wang et al. (1992) have shown that Mandarin speaking children drop subjects and objects 46% and 22% of the time, respectively, at 3;0 years of age. Their English-speaking peers do so much less, especially for objects, i.e., 33% and 4%. It is clear that these figures tell us that the null subject phenomenon in child Mandarin and in child English emanates from different grammatical sources. An important and disregarded finding from Wang et al. (1992)'s paper is that Mandarin-speaking children omit in a similar way as adults, as far as the asymmetry subject vs. object is concerned. Adults drop subjects more often than objects, i.e., 36% and 10%, respectively. However, looking at Wang et al. (1992)'s data, we can observe that during children's development there is a decrease in null subjects: subjects are omitted 56% around age 2;0, 46% around age 3;0 and 38% around age 4. In other words, it is around age 4;0 that children's subject drop and adult subject drop quantitatively matches, as already observed in Guasti (2017). Wang et al. (1992) did not look systematically at the pragmatic conditions of subject drop. They merely say that "the null subject was sometimes clearly related to an antecedent. . . In other cases, the referent of the null subject was not previously mentioned in the discourse, although it was usually understandable from context"(Wang et al. 1992: 233). Therefore, we can infer that most of the time the use was appropriate, but a more systematic analysis would have been appropriate.

A developmental decrease in subject omission is also observed in early null subject languages. Valian (1991) reports that Italian adults omit the sentential subject 64% of the time. Serratrice (2005) shows that, across four MLU stages,

omission of the the sentential subject decreases from 80% to 65%. At the same time, she also demonstrates that Italian-speaking children from their earliest multiword productions (around age 2;0) are sensitive to the pragmatic constraints regulating subject omission (e.g., informativeness). They omit more 1st and 2nd person subjects than 3rd person subject, as the former are always recoverable from context. They use overt subjects when it is needed because the antecedent is not easily recoverable. However, when we look at the quantitative data she provides, we realize that there is a certain amount of null subjects whose use is not accounted for by her pragmatic constraints and in fact she recognizes that “. . . although children are sensitive to discourse-pragmatic features in their choice of referential expressions, this sensitivity becomes more fine-tuned over time” (Serratrice 2005: 457).

These findings invite us to think that subject omission in early Dutch (and in early Italian as well) conceals two phenomena: the phenomenon found in other early non-topic drop or non-null subject languages and the adult topic drop option, as proposed in Guasti (2017). This would reconcile Hageman’s claim that Dutch-speaking children are using the option exploited by English-speaking children with the claim by de Haan & Tuijnman 1988 and Verrips & Weissenborn 1992 that children are using the adult topic drop option. To further explore this hypothesis, one would also need to look more closely at the features of topic drop in spoken Dutch. Trift (2003), through a judgement experiment with Dutch-speaking adults, has shown that dropping 1st person subjects is more tolerated than dropping 2nd and 3rd person subject. One may wonder if this is the case in early Dutch. Some other similar insights come from work by Frazier. Based on adult data, Frazier (2015) has proposed a view that is different from that taken here. According to her, subject omission is not a grammatical option, as assumed in Haegeman (1995), but it is due to a performance error that occurs when the subject is highly predictable. She bases her claim on an experiment carried out by Mack et al. (2012) combined with a second experiment she carried out. In the first experiment, English-speaking adults heard mini-dialogues, in which the final sentence had a 1st or 3rd person subject, and either it was in the present or past tense. The subject was degraded, so that it was not clear whether it was pronounced or not. Adults were invited to repeat the sentence. It was found that they restored the unheard subject more often with a 3rd person than with a 1st person verb and more often in the past than in the present tense. In the second experiment, the same result was obtained with non-sense verbs, supporting the conclusion that the phenomenon is not lexically driven. Frazier interpreted these findings as evidence that adults expect a subject and restore it more often

in certain conditions than in others, specifically they restore it when it is less predictable. Frazier only used sentences with possible root null subjects. Therefore, we cannot establish whether the accepted null subjects (i.e., those not restored) emanate from a grammar that allows the root null subject or is really the expression of a speech error, as Frazier claims. It would be interesting to extend Frazier's study to contexts with highly predictable subjects in *wh*-questions or embedded questions to establish whether adults restore the subject more often in these contexts than in root contexts, as our grammatical approach would suggest. It would also be interesting to see what children would do in these same contexts, if the experiment is feasible. This would give us some insights not only into their syntactic knowledge, but also into their pragmatic knowledge.

In conclusion, I have attempted to reconcile two opposing views concerning subject omission in early Dutch and suggested that Dutch-speaking children know that their grammar allows topic drop, but at the same time they exercise another option found in other grammars. Second, I have suggested a new path of investigation which is concerned with the pragmatics of null subjects, i.e., the conditions that lead speakers of non-null subject grammars to tolerate omission.

## References

- Frazier, L. 2015. Do null subject sentences (mis-)trigger pro-drop grammars? *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 44. 669–674.
- Guasti, M.T. 2017. *Language acquisition*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (2nd edition).
- de Haan, G.J. & Tuijnman, K. 1988. Missing subjects and objects in child grammar. In P. Jordens & J. Lalleman (eds.), *Language development*. 101–122. Dordrecht: Foris.
- Haegeman, L. 1990. Non-overt subjects in diary contexts. In J. Mascaró & M. Nespor (eds.), *Grammar in progress. GLOW essays for Henk van Riemsdijk*. 167–174. Dordrecht: Foris.
- Haegeman, L. 1995. Root infinitives, tense, and truncated structures in Dutch. *Language Acquisition* 4(3). 205–255.
- Hyams, N.M. 1986. *Language acquisition and the theory of parameters*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- Mack, J., Clifton, C.J., Frazier, L. & Taylor, P.V. 2012. Pragmatic constraints influence the restoration of optional subjects. *Journal of Memory and Language* 67(1). 211–223.

- Rizzi, L. 1994. Early null subjects and root null subjects. In T. Hoekstra & B.D. Schwartz (eds.), *Language acquisition studies in generative grammar*. 151–176. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Serratrice, L. 2005. The role of discourse pragmatics in the acquisition of subjects in Italian. *Applied Psycholinguistics* 26(3). 437–462.
- Trift, K.E. 2003. *Object drop in the L1 acquisition of Dutch*. Leiden: LOT.
- Valian, V. 1991. Syntactic subjects in the early speech of American and Italian children. *Cognition* 40. 21–81.
- Verrips, M. & Weissenborn, J. 1992. Routes to verb placement in early German and French: The independence of finiteness and agreement. In J.M. Meisel (ed.), *The acquisition of verb placement: Functional categories and V2 phenomena in language acquisition*. 283–331. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Wang, Q., Lillo-Martin, D., Best, C.T. & Levitt, A. 1992. Null subject versus null object: Some evidence from acquisition of Chinese and English. *Language Acquisition* 2. 221–254.
- Weir, A. 2012. Left edge deletion in English and subject omission in diaries. *English Language and Linguistics* 16(1). 105–29.