

Diary null subjects: an analogy with imperatives?

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Liliane and I first met at the LAGB meeting in 2008. I wasn't presenting; I was there to meet her. Caroline Heycock had sent Liliane my undergraduate dissertation, about null subjects in spoken and written English, which had naturally drawn heavily on Liliane's work on diary drop (Haegeman 1990, 1997, 2007, 2013, 2018, Haegeman & Ihsane 1999, 2001); and we talked for some time about my dissertation and about the possibility of my coming to Ghent for doctoral study. Well, I took a detour via Massachusetts to get to Ghent, but I got there eventually; and can honestly say that my year there with Liliane as my supervisor was one of the most enjoyable I have had as a linguist. Liliane was and is a fantastic mentor, co-author, and friend. However, when I was in Ghent, we got distracted by the properties of response particles in West Flemish, and never actually returned in a systematic way (though we've exchanged a lot of emails about it) to the phenomenon that 'got us together' in the first place – diary drop. This squib is an attempt to remedy that – and an invitation to Liliane for us, as we have thought we should for a while, to join forces and solve this knotty problem for good.

We start with an empirical question: are there person restrictions on null subjects in 'reduced written register' (RWR)? First-person null subjects are indubitably OK, and third-person null subjects also are given an appropriate discourse (cf. e.g. Haegeman 2007: 96), but this is somewhat difficult to determine for second person; diary context does not lend itself to second-person subjects, and interrogatives (which might more naturally have second-person subjects) are independently ruled out with null subjects (in any person) in English diaries (Haegeman 1997 a.o.). Berthelot (2017: 88) states that second-person singular null subjects are ruled out in diary contexts in French, but in Weir (2018: 159), I suggested that null second-person pronouns were grammatical in English RWR, on the basis of the below example.

- (1) (comments on a student's essay)
∅_[2p] Don't need to go into so much detail here.

But I should have been more careful. The problem is that (1) is grammatical in spoken register too, something which is the result of a quite different process, a prosodically-governed operation that can target a wide range of deaccented utterance-initial material (Napoli 1982, Weir 2012). That raises the possibility that (1) is simply a rendering in text of that spoken string. To check if diary drop *per se* can delete second-person pronouns, one needs to check examples like (2), which are ungrammatical in speech (see Weir (2012) for why). And interestingly, in my judgment, they are *also* degraded in written register (e.g. text messaging¹), even if the 'topic' of the utterance is plausibly the addressee. For me, the examples in (2) contrast fairly sharply with first-person dropped subjects (3).

- (2) You shouldn't have done that. ??∅_[2p] Are going to regret it. / ??∅_[2p] Will regret it. / ??∅_[2p] Have been reported to the police.
(3) ∅_[1p] Am going to regret this. / ∅_[1p] Will regret this. / ∅_[1p] Have been reported to the police.

If this is right – and I should caution here that I have not done any corpus work to back up my intuitions – then it seems that second-person subjects can *not* undergo diary drop. This distinction between first- and second-person does not immediately fall out from extant analyses, as far as I can see. (I'll return to third person briefly below.) I want to sketch here an alternative line of attack. Consider the below properties of diary drop (from Haegeman 2007: 102):

- (4) Diary null subjects are almost always root subjects: they are marginal in embedded contexts without a complementizer, and ruled out under complementizers or in adjunct or relative clauses.²
- ∅ Am going to the gym later.
 - ??∅ Think ∅ will go to the gym later.
 - *∅ Think that ∅ will go to the gym later.
 - *∅ Was sore after ∅ had gone to the gym.

¹I am assuming here that the grammatical properties of e.g. text message register are fundamentally the same, at least when it comes to subject drop, as diary register. This might not be a safe assumption.

²Modulo the more liberal, 'Bridget Jones' dialect described in Haegeman & Ihsane (1999, 2001). The properties of that dialect remain to be accounted for. The marginality (as opposed to complete ungrammaticality) of (4b) represents my judgment.

- (5) Diary null subjects are strongly ungrammatical in construction with subject-auxiliary inversion or with *wh*-fronting.
- *Am \emptyset just going mad?
 - *What was \emptyset thinking?
 - *Only then will \emptyset do that.
- (6) Diary null subjects are degraded in construction with argument topicalization – although (in my judgment) the degradation is not as strong as with SAI or *wh*-fronting.
- ??More problems, \emptyset don't need. (Thrasher 1977: 83)
- (7) Diary null subjects are however permitted in construction with left-peripheral adjuncts, or with left-dislocation.
- Tomorrow \emptyset will go to gym.
 - If you are hungry, \emptyset have left some biscuits in the cupboard.
 - ?More problems, \emptyset don't need 'em. (cf. Haegeman 2007: fn. 8)

A fact that I don't believe has previously been noted is that this constellation of facts lines up nearly perfectly with constraints on (English) imperatives.³

- (8) Only permitted in root contexts (marginally in certain complementizer-less embedded clauses)
- Fix the problem.
 - ?He said fix the problem. (Crnič & Trinh 2009)
 - *He said that fix the problem.
 - *I demand that fix the problem.
- (9) No *wh*-fronting/auxiliary fronting
- Don't touch! – Don't touch what?/*What don't touch?⁴
 - Never eat this./*Never do eat this. (cp. negative inversion/do-support in declaratives: *Never do I eat this*, Henry 1995: 68f.)

³Not constraints on imperative null subjects – the grammaticality of the examples in (9)–(11) does not change if the subject is overt – but constraints on the syntax of imperatives generally.

⁴One might wonder if *don't* has in fact undergone subject-aux inversion here (with the unpronounced subject), but Zhang (1991), Henry (1995), Rupp (2007), Weir (2013) give reasons to believe that imperative *don't* is base-generated above the subject.

- (10) Argument topicalization marginal (but better than *wh*-movement/SAI)⁵
- a. ??These instructions, read carefully.
 - b. ??These cookies, don't touch.
- (11) Adjunct topics and left-dislocation OK
- a. Tomorrow, go to the gym.
 - b. If you're hungry, eat some biscuits.
 - c. ?These cookies, don't touch 'em.

We might hope to capitalize on these similarities, and on the fact that imperatives, exceptionally among clause types in English, allow null (second-person) subjects. One common way of understanding, or encoding, this latter fact is to propose that some functional head is – in imperatives only – endowed with second-person ϕ -features (see recently e.g. Jensen (2003), Bennis (2006), Zanuttini (2008)). These features can enter in to some (obligatorily very local) relationship (such as Agree) with a *pro* subject with the same features, licensing its non-pronunciation. Such a representation 'encodes the addressee in the syntax', as Zanuttini (2008) puts it. Authors differ in where they put the ϕ -features, but it seems plausible to me that a construction restricted to imperatives should have its etiology localized to the head that encodes the force of the clause (cf. Bennis 2006: sec. 3.1), so this is where I propose the ϕ -features are in (12).

- (12) [_{ForceP} Force_{[imp],[2p]} [_{VP} *pro*_[2p] [_{VP} eat your dinner]]]

Suppose, now, that just as *imperatives* encode the *addressee* in the syntax, written-register *declaratives* encode (or can encode) the *speaker*.⁶ That is, these registers allow a declarative Force head to (optionally) be endowed with first-person ϕ -features. This Force head can enter into the same (obligatorily local) relation with a *pro* subject and license its non-pronunciation.

- (13) [_{ForceP} Force_{[decl],[1p]} [_{TP} *pro*_[1p] [_{TP} am going to the gym later]]]

One might speculate that these ϕ -endowed Force heads are highly restricted in their distribution (only to root or perhaps certain 'embedded root' environments,

⁵Though the data are variable here. Potsdam (1998: ex. 82) states that sentences like *The tie, give to Bob; the aftershave, give to Don!* are fully grammatical. They do sound considerably better than those in (10), for reasons I don't understand.

⁶It needs to be worked out how this aligns with proposals that both speaker and addressee are *always* encoded in the left-peripheral layer, e.g. Speas & Tenny (2003), Sigurðsson (2004), Sigurðsson & Maling (2010), Haegeman & Hill (2013).

cf. Portner et al. (2014) on embedded imperatives); that the relevant relationship between the Force head and the *pro* subject would be disrupted, in both imperatives and diary sentences, in cases where material has moved to the left periphery; and that the obligatory localness of the relation between Force and *pro* rules out e.g. null objects. Together, then, this is what leads to the correlation between diary null subjects and imperatives shown in (4)–(11).⁷ One might also speculate that the diary context provides a ‘natural’ environment for something like this, a declarative Force head endowed with [1p] features, to develop; diaries are prototypically sequences of declaratives where the speaker (writer) is recounting their actions. Once this head was independently available in speakers’ lexicons for the diary register, it might also be plausible to assume that it could easily ‘jump’ to other written registers, such as text message register.

All of the preceding paragraph is highly speculative, and much remains to be worked out. One glaring lacuna is the handling of dropped third-person subjects:

- (14) a. $\emptyset_{[1p]}$ Saw Bill yesterday. $\emptyset_{[3p]}$ Was absolutely furious about the bill he’d received.
 b. $\emptyset_{[3p, \text{expl}]}$ Is raining. (Haegeman & Ihsane 1999: 121)

To explain (14a), we might appeal to Weir (2018)’s proposal for (third-person) object drop, which proposes the existence of a null D in reduced written register, giving rise to completely silent third-person pronouns. In principle this could be independent of the licensing of null first-person pronouns. However, I crafted that system specifically to exclude the possibility of null expletive pronouns (which I argue do not occur in object position in RWR); so (14b) remains an issue. And there are several other places where the basic idea needs to be fleshed out. This squib, then, shouldn’t be taken as anything definitive. It’s rather something on the order of a tentative proposal – and an invitation to Liliane that, if she finds the ideas here intriguing, we might think about developing them together, and solving the problem of diary drop for good, or at least for a while.

⁷If this is right, it would imply that, if a structure includes ϕ -endowed Force, the relevant relationship between Force and the subject must be established whether or not the subject is pronounced (because the imperative examples in (9)–(11) have the same status whether or not the subject is pronounced). On my reading of Zanuttini (2008) (who puts the action in a Jussive head rather than Force), this is true for the abstraction relationship that Jussive establishes over the subject, but Zanuttini also discusses (in her section 4) cases where she argues that the Agree relationship between Jussive and the subject can be blocked (without leading to ungrammaticality). Working out if what I am saying is compatible with what Zanuttini says is one of many areas where the present proposal will have to be developed.

All the very best, Liliane – \emptyset_{1p} hope $?*\emptyset_{2p}$ have enjoyed reading this squib as much as $?*/\%0_{1p}$ enjoyed writing it!

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