

Selection and the Interpretation of Null Objects

1. The aim of this paper is to explore how one particular empirical domain involving important interactions among syntax, semantics, and pragmatics can be used in developing and evaluating analyses of the internal structure of the syntactic projections involved, as well as accessibility of the material included within these projections for interpretive purposes. The empirical domain of interest here concerns the interpretation of null objects (i.e. phonologically empty direct objects) within a Minimalist Framework (Chomsky 1995, 2001, 2004, 2005) with special emphasis on the role of asymmetry on legibility at the interfaces (Di Sciullo 2005). Obviously, the questions of determining the degree to which a phase-based approach to derivations is needed (Boeckx & Grohman 2005) and the relevance of the phase's edge (here, vP) to legibility are directly linked to this work but we believe that useful conclusions can only be reached once at least some of the properties of the internal structure of the putative phase are well understood. We first look at the various ways in which null objects are interpreted. On the basis of these interpretations, a specific proposal is made as to the minimal realization of verbal transitivity. Finally, we define some of the properties of vP based on this minimal realization hypothesis.

2. Object drop appears to be much more variable than subject drop. For example, Italian is a straightforward null subject language but displays null objects in limited contexts (Rizzi 1986). Null object phenomena are thus more restricted than null subjects and do not seem to correspond to a "global" property in many grammars. In other words, null objects do not correspond to one of the settings for a given parameter in the way null subjects do. Therefore although French is usually considered to be a language that typically does not allow object drop, in fact the phenomenon of null objects is quite common in all varieties of French (Lambrecht & Lemoine 2004, Cummins & Roberge 2005, among others). A similar statement can apply to English (García Velasco & Portero Muñoz 2002, Goldberg 2001, among others). All of the previous analyses are agreed on a major distinction between null objects with a context-free non-specific interpretation (non-individuated or generic) and those that have a specific referent (individuated or definite).

(1) Non-individuated

a. Do you write ___?

b. *C'est un jeu qui défoule* ___.

"This is a game that distresses ___."

(2) Individuated

a. "Do you like ___?" "I love ___!"

b. "*Tu as lu les pages?*" *Il avait lu* ___.

It would thus appear that a simple referential vs. non-referential (or definite vs. indefinite) distinction should be sufficient. However, Cummins & Roberge (2005) show that there are cases that are harder to classify on the basis of this distinction. Such null objects are partly identifiable from the speech context, but are not definite or specific. It can be inferred that the reference of these null objects corresponds to a subset of the related entities mentioned in the speech context. Therefore, the reference is not a definite, specific entity but neither is it independent of the speech context. Pragmatics, more specifically the I-principle of Levinson (2000), is responsible for the interpretation of these null objects. For its part, the syntax of French or English must provide a null object type that can potentially acquire inferred reference. We argue that this null object corresponds to the one associated with the generic interpretation, when a transitive verb is used in what appears to be an intransitive frame as in (3).

(3) John ate already.

Based on work by Hale & Keyser (2002), a bare N is merged at V root and enters into a semantic hyponymic relation with the V root. As a bare N, this object is non-referential but its class denotation makes it open to pragmatically-based inference. This approach eliminates the need for multiple lexical entries for transitive verbs used intransitively. First, this use is not idiosyncratic and thus probably not lexical in nature, since most if not all transitive verbs can be used intransitively (even the verb *devour* is attested as an intransitive in corpora). It is a question of relative frequencies. Second, given the possible parasitic gap interpretation available in (4),

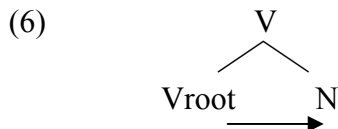
(4) Which document did the spy memorize __ before eating __?

under a lexical approach, three “entries” would have to be available for transitive verbs: transitive, intransitive, and transitive with a null object. The bare N analysis unifies the three options under one. We also argue that this analysis extends to unergative verbs: such verbs always merge a bare N at V root. This N can be seen as null cognate object; see Dobrovie-Sorin (1998).

3. We assume the simple basic transitive structure in (5).

(5) [TP John T [VP ~~John~~ [_v eat] [VP eat DP]]]

In the case of unergatives and transitives with no overt object, a bare N is merged to V instead of a DP (or other types of overt complements). Since this is the basic option available to all verbs we take it to be the minimal instantiation of transitivity. It is represented in (6).



Crucially, the selectional relation that operates between V and N at Merge ensures hyponymic identification; it is logically asymmetrical (with semantic transfer from V to complement), but structurally symmetrical (since V and the complement are in a sisterhood relation). The complements must be overt nouns that can act as cognate objects or belong to the tight semantic field of V, or a null counterpart of such nouns. We argue that this Merge position only establishes an s-selection relation. Considering that asymmetry is fundamental to language economy (Di Sciullo 1999, 2005), the symmetrical structure for DO licensing through s-selection alone, as in (6), is partly insufficient for legibility at the interfaces. More specifically, for transitive verbs with DP objects, s-selection is insufficient and the DP must move to Spec,VP to complete complement identification through an asymmetrical structural mechanisms or c-selection. We show that the contrastive behavior of null objects with respect to pragmatic reference follows from the distinction between exclusively s-selected object and s- and c-selected ones.

Selected References

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