Subjectless Sentences in English

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1. Introduction*

One of the goals of modern linguistics is to develop a model of Universal Grammar which captures natural language features that are universal, while also accounting for variation among languages. Thus a much-discussed phenomenon in Government and Binding theory is pro-drop (Jaeggli and Safir 1989). Pro-drop is the parameter which determines whether the subject of an independent clause must be overt or may be left empty (Crystal 1991:279). The sentences in (1) and (2) are subjectless sentences from Japanese and Spanish, which are considered to be pro-drop languages.

(1) Japanese

Choq, anna itazure o shinakereba yokatta.

‘Tisk, (I) shouldn’t have done that dirty trick!’

(Martin 1992:53)

(2) Spanish

Tienes una familia grande.

‘(You) have a large family.’

Subjectless sentences also occur in English, as illustrated in (3).

(3) English

(I) Gotta go now.
(I) Must have left it at home.
(It’s) Too bad about old Charlie.

(Thrasher 1974:5,75)

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According to the definition given above, it would appear that English is a pro-drop language. However, Crystal (1991:279) cites English as an example of a non-pro-drop language. If this is correct and English is non-pro-drop, then how are subjectless sentences in English to be explained?

2. The investigation

The use of empty subjects in English has been explained in both syntactic and stylistic terms. Syntactically, empty subjects in independent clauses occur in non-initial coordinate clauses (Givón 1990) and in imperatives (Perlmutter 1971). Examples such as those in (3) which violate these rules are said to occur only in colloquial (typically, spoken) discourse, and thus are stylistically conditioned (Greenbaum and Quirk 1990; Thrasher 1974). However, there has been little attempt to account systematically for where and why empty subjects occur in English.

This paper presents the results of a discourse analysis of two written English texts that make extensive use of subjectless sentences. The texts, written by Robert Fulghum (1990:13-16; 1991:7-13), are expository essays that make frequent use of embedded narratives and are written in a colloquial style. In text one, which I call the spider text, 42% of the subjects in independent clauses are empty. In the second text, which I call the wedding text, 23% of the subjects of independent clauses are empty. The empty subjects represent all persons and both singular and plural referents. In discourse terms, over 78% of the empty subjects in each text serve as the topic of the containing independent clause.

I hypothesized that subjects could only be zeroed when they were predictable from the discourse context. Since this is also the case for continuous topics, I employed Givón’s (1983) methodology for measuring topic continuity to determine the motivation for inter-sentential and intra-sentential use of empty subjects in independent clauses. I counted the number of clauses between each clause topic and its previous occurrence (referential distance) as well as the number of interfering topics in the immediately preceding discourse (topic interference) in order to determine to what extent empty subjects are continuous, predictable topics (Givón 1983:13).

The results show that a topic in subject position can be zeroed when 1) its absence would not cause ambiguity, and 2) it has a referential distance of one. Constituents which occur sentence initially, but do not serve as topics, may also be zeroed when they are pragmatically recoverable.

3. Empty subject as topic

Givón (1983) defines Referential Distance as the number of clauses between a clause topic and its previous reference. It is not necessary for the previous
reference to be the topic of the clause in which it is contained. Following Givón’s methodology, a minimum value of one is assigned to those topics whose last reference is in the immediately preceding clause. The maximum value assigned is 20. This is an arbitrary boundary set by Givón in order to reflect the fact that a referent most likely cannot be held in the “erasable, short-term file” for more than this distance (Givón 1983:13). In both texts it was found that an empty subject only occurs when the topic has a referential distance of one. This means that empty subjects are maximally continuous topics. A referent cannot be realized by an empty category if there is any interruption of its topicality. The analysis also reveals that shorter interruptions (a RD of 2-6) favor the use of a pronoun to reintroduce a referent as topic. A longer interruption calls for the use of a full noun phrase as does the introduction of a new referent.

The term “sentence” used in this paper refers to an orthographic sentence. These units were determined by the author of the texts. The term “clause” is used herein according to Pike and Pike (1982), who define a clause as the nucleus of a sentence. A clause is the minimum unit in which a proposition is stated, i.e., in which a term is part of a statement, question, command or wish. Margins of Purpose, Time, Speaker Attitude, etc. are added to clauses to form sentences.

The following are examples of subjectless sentences from the Fulghum texts.

(4) Subjectless sentences
1. I have married more than a thousand times.
2a. Ø(subj) Ø(aux) Officiated as the minister at a whole lot of weddings and
2b. Ø(subj) Ø(aux) usually managed to get so involved in each occasion that it felt like I was the one getting married.
   (Fulghum 1991:7)

(5) Subjectless sentences
14a. Ø(subj) Clutches at her face and hair and
14b. Ø(subj) goes <Aaaagggghhh!!!> at a new level of intensity.
15. Ø(subj) Tries opening the front door without unlocking it.
16. Ø(subj) Tries again.
17. Ø(subj) Breaks the key in the lock.
18. Ø(subj) Runs around the house headed for the back door.
   (Fulghum 1990:14)

The topic of sentence 1 in (4) is ‘I’. The topic of clause 2b is the same and thus has a referential distance of one. Because the continuous topic is the subject of the clause, the use of an empty subject is allowed. The same is true for the second clause of sentence two.
The topic of the clauses in (5) is ‘she’. The topic is established in sentence 12 and continued into sentence 13. This means that sentences 13 through 18 have a referential distance of one and that the use of an empty subject is allowed.

However, a referential distance of one does not guarantee the use of an empty subject. Between the two texts there are 51 continuous topics that are not realized as zeros. Each of these occurrences falls into one of the following seven categories:

1. Topic is not in subject position 29.4%
2. Topic’s last referent is a comment on the previous topic 3.9%
3. Referents are parts of a whole 15.7%
4. Subject is preceded by something other than a coordinating conjunction 35.3%
5. There is potential interference from other referents in preceding clauses 2.0%
6. Lack of parallelism between verbs 11.8%
7. Other 2.0%

Examples of each of these categories are presented and discussed below.

3.1 Topic is not in subject position

The topic of sentences 9 and 10 in (6) is ‘a spider web’. Therefore, a referential distance of one is assigned to sentence 10. However, because the topic of sentence 10 is not the subject of the clause, it cannot be zeroed in spite of the referential distance of one.

(6) Topic not in subject
9. Spider Web!
10. She has walked full force into a spider web.
   (Fulghum 1990:13)

3.2 Topic’s last referent is a comment on previous topic

In example (7) below, the topic of sentences 5 and 6 is ‘she’. The topic of sentence 7 to which ‘that’ refers is ‘Aaaaagggghhh!!!’ or the scream.

(7) Comment on previous topic
5a. She gives me the big smiling Hello,
5b. Ø(subj) takes three steps across her front porch.
6. And Ø(subj) goes “Aaaaagggghhh!!!”
7. That’s a direct quote.
   (Fulghum 1990:13)
The scream is first introduced in sentence 6 as a comment on the topic of ‘she’. It is then reintroduced as the subject and topic of sentence 7. However, an empty subject is not used, even though the topic has a referential distance of one. If an empty subject were used it would indicate that the topic of sentence 6 is carried over into sentence 7. Thus, the unambiguous demonstrative pronoun occurs in order to establish the new topic clearly.

3.3 Referents are parts of a whole

In (8), from the wedding text, the topic of sentence 81 is ‘we’. The subjects of the string of clauses in sentence 82 are the parts that make up the ‘we’ to which the author refers. Thus, the topic of each of these clauses is also ‘we’. However, because the parts cannot be identified from the whole, the use of empty subjects does not occur.

(8) Parts of a whole

81. We had a fire drill then and there at the front of the church that only the Marx Brothers could have topped.
82a. Groomsmen rushed about heroically,
82b. mini-princess flower girls squalled,
82c. bridesmaids sobbed, and
82d. people with weak stomachs headed for the exit.

(Fulghum 1991:11)

3.4 Subject is preceded by something other than a coordinating conjunction

In (9) the topic of the second clause of sentence 88 is ‘the word’. This is also the topic of sentence 89.

(9) Constituents preceding the subject

88a. And if not, well, there are lots more spiders,
88b. and the word gets around.
89. Especially when the word is “Aaaaagggghhhh!!!!”

(Fulghum 1990:16)

However, in spite of the referential distance of one, an empty subject does not occur in sentence 89. According to Thrasher (1974), the deletion of subjects in English is part of a larger phenomenon. What is actually taking place is the omission of unstressed, pragmatically recoverable material in sentence initial position. Thus, when anything other than a coordinating conjunction appears sentence initially, as in (9), the subject cannot be dropped.

The same phenomenon is observed in (10). The topic for sentences 6 and 7 is ‘weddings’. This means that a referential distance of one is assigned to the topic of sentence 7. However, because of the sentence initial phrase ‘in more ways than one’ an empty subject does not occur.
(10) **Constituents preceding the subject**

6. Weddings seem to be magnets for mishaps and for whatever craziness lurks in family closets.

7. *In more ways than one*, weddings bring out the ding-dong in everybody involved.

(Fulghum 1991:7)

3.5 **Potential interference from other referents in preceding clauses**

Givón (1983:14) defines Potential Interference as “the disruptive effect which other referents within the immediately preceding register may have on topic availability or identification”. If there is another referent in the previous five clauses that could be confused with a reference to the current topic, then there is potential for ambiguity. There are few examples of Potential Interference in the texts; however, wherever there is potential for ambiguity an unambiguous construction has been used to alleviate possible confusion. This leads to use of a noun phrase to refer to continuous topics rather than a pronoun or an empty subject. In (11) the topic of sentence 49 is ‘the mother of the bride’ and has a referential distance of one.

(11) **Potential interference**

48. And the mighty MOTB coasted down the aisle with the grandeur of an opera diva at a premier performance.

49. Never did the mother of the bride take her seat with more satisfaction.

(Fulghum 1991:9)

An empty subject is not used because of the verb phrase constituents that precede it. The noun phrase is used instead of a pronoun because there is potential for ambiguity. If ‘she’ were used in sentence 49 it could be construed as a reference to the ‘opera diva’ in sentence 48.

3.6 **Lack of parallelism between verbs**

For our purposes, a lack of parallelism is defined as either non-parallel aspects (a change in verbal aspect from one clause to the next) or non-parallel verb types (active versus stative, etc.). 11.8% of the non-zeroed subjects with a referential distance of one fit into this category. The following is a discussion of the two types of non-parallel verbal structures.

The topic of both sentences in (12) is ‘the mother of the bride’ and is encoded by ‘she’. However, an empty subject does not occur in the first clause of sentence 51. In this instance, the presence of the subject as topic is necessary because its absence would indicate that there was no change in verbal aspect. This, however, would incorrectly communicate the author’s message.
(12) *Change in verbal aspect*

50. She *had done* it.
51a. She *glowed*,
51b. Ø(subj) *beamed*,
51c. Ø(subj) *smiled*,
51d. Ø(subj) *sighed*.

(Fulghum 1991:9)

The same process is seen in (13) where the topic of the first clause of sentence 23 has a referential distance of one, yet an empty subject is not used.

(13) *Change in verbal aspect*

21. Here’s the spider.
22. Ø(subj) Ø(verb) Ø(art) Rather ordinary, medium gray, middle aged lady spider.
23a. She’s *been up* since before dawn working on her web and
23b. all is well.

(Fulghum 1990:14)

Here again the presence of the subject is associated with a change in verbal aspect from simple present in sentences 21 and 22 to the present perfect in 23a.

In (14) the verb in clause 114a involves a prepositional phrase which gives the verb an active meaning. The verb in clause 114b involves an adjective phrase that causes it to be stative and descriptive in nature.

(14) *Non-parallel verb types*

114a. The mother of the bride is still at it, but
114b. she’s a lot looser these days.

(Fulghum 1991:13)

It seems that without parallel structures and verb types in a clause predicate the subject cannot be zeroed.

3.7 *Other*

Only one of the non-zeroed topics with a referential distance of one remains. However, this one exception does not fit into any one of the previously mentioned categories. Unfortunately, I am unable at this time to come up with an explanation for why the subject of sentence 57 in (15) is not empty.

The topic of sentences 57 and 58 of (15) is ‘the bride’, making the referential distance of sentence 58 equal to one. However, a subject pronoun is used in 58 rather than a zero.
(15) Other

57. Ah, the bride.
58. She had been dressed for hours.

(Fulghum 1991:10)

The use of a pronoun following a noun phrase is not surprising in light of certain cross-linguistic findings cited by Givón (1983). He presents a list of syntactic constructions encoding topics ranging from the least continuous to the most continuous. Zero anaphora is used to code those topics that are most continuous while pronouns code topics that are somewhat less continuous. Definite noun phrases code topics that are not new to the discourse, but are less continuous. The use of a pronoun in sentence 58 constitutes a progression up the scale of syntactic devices for coding continuity. However, this progression does not provide an explanation for the overt presence of the subject in sentence 58.

Empty subjects are not used in the first six categories for two reasons: to avoid ambiguity, and because zeroed constituents must occur sentence initially. Categories one and four preclude the use of an empty subject because the topic does not occur sentence initially. The other four categories preclude empty subjects in order to avoid ambiguity.

These seven categories account for all of the non-zeroed topics with a referential distance of one in both texts. There remain 22% of the empty subjects in each text which do not serve as the topic of the containing clause. The following discussion accounts for the remaining empty subjects found in the texts.

4. Non-topic zeros

I call the empty subjects found within both texts that do not serve as clause topics “non-topic zeros”. Each occurrence of non-topic zeros in the texts can be categorized as either an expletive, the subject of an imperative or the subject of “free direct thought” (Leech and Short 1981). The following examples of these three types of non-topic zeros demonstrate that non-topic zeros, like topic zeros, occur when they are predictable from other textual information.

4.1 Expletives

The first type of non-topic zero is one in which the clause subject is filled by an expletive. An expletive is a semantically empty element such as ‘it’ in ‘It’s raining’. Empty subjects may occur when expletives would normally fill the subject slot because they are non-referential and easily reconstructable using knowledge of English syntax.
(16)  Expletives
23a.  She’s been up since before dawn working on her web and
23b.  all is well.
24a.  Ø(subj) Ø(verb) Ø(article) Nice day,
24b.  Ø(subj) Ø(verb) no wind,
24c.  Ø(article) dew point Ø(verb) just right to keep things sticky.

(Fulghum 1990:14)

The topic of clause 24a in (16) is ‘nice day’. Knowledge of the syntax of English weather constructions makes it easy to predict that the subject of this clause is ‘it’. This, as well as the verb tense of clause 23b, leads us to reconstruct ‘is’ as the verb for clauses 24a-c. The same process leads us to infer the expletive ‘there’ as the subject of clause 24b, yielding ‘there is no wind’. Example 24c, which contains an empty article and an empty copula verb, illustrates that non-subject zeroes can occur under conditions of pragmatic recoverability as well.

4.2 Subject of an imperative

The second type of non-topic zero is the subject of an imperative. The understood subject of an imperative in English is ‘you’ and is normally realized as Ø except in cases of emphasis. (17) and (18) are imperatives taken from the spider text.

(17)  Imperative
47.  Ø(subject) Imagine what it would be like if people were equipped like spiders.

(Fulghum 1990:15)

(18)  Imperative
51.  Ø(subject) Think of the Olympic events.

(Fulghum 1990:15)

An empty subject is used in both examples because it is syntactically conditioned by the imperative construction.

4.3 Subject of free direct thought

The third type of non-topic zero found in the texts occurs with free direct thought (Leech and Short 1981). Free direct thought is communication of a character’s thoughts without use of some type of reporting clause such as ‘she was thinking’. Sentences 30 through 33 of (19) make use of free direct thought. In this portion of text the reader understands that the spider’s thoughts are being communicated. However, this is done without the use of a reporting clause. It is as if the spider were thinking out loud.
(19) **Free direct thought**

29a. The web is torn loose and
29b. Ø(subj) is wrapped around a frenzied, moving haystack, and
29c. a huge piece of raw-but-painted meat is making a sound the spider never heard before: Aaaagggghhh!!!!
30a. It’s too big to wrap up and eat later,
30b. it’s moving too much to hold down.
31. Ø(aux) Ø(subj) Jump for it?
32a. Ø(aux) Ø(subj) Hang on?
32b. Ø(aux) Ø(subj) Hope?
33. Ø(aux) Ø(subj) Dig in?

(Fulghum 1990:14)

Context makes the subjects of the four questions in sentence 31 through 33 quite predictably ‘I’, thus allowing their omission. Note, however, that the full form of the spider’s thought would be ‘<Should I> jump for it?’ This means that not only has the subject been zeroed, but the auxiliary as well. The auxiliary in this case is deleted because it is pragmatically recoverable because of knowledge of the syntax of questions in English. Once the auxiliary is deleted then the unstressed, pragmatically recoverable ‘I’ is available for deletion.

The use of zeros in each of the three categories listed occurs because the zeroed material is recoverable. Expletives are easily supplied from knowledge of English syntax and construction types. The same is true of zeroed subjects of imperatives. The zeroed auxiliary and subject of the “free direct thought” examples are recoverable from contextual information. Thus, the use of non-topic zeros is also systematically conditioned.

5. **Conclusion**

It was noted at the beginning of this paper that the use of empty subjects in English is stylistically determined. This makes style an important predictive factor in the use of empty subjects, but not a sufficient one. The findings presented in this paper allow one to predict precisely which subjects will be zeroed and which will not.

In the colloquial written texts considered, the occurrence of empty subjects was found to be limited to maximally continuous topics not found in any of the seven environments discussed, and to three kinds of non-topics. These findings support Givón’s (1983) statement that “the most obvious topics receive their coding as zero”. Thus, subjectless sentences in English are a discourse level phenomenon in which pragmatically recoverable material is deleted sentence initially. This is a satisfying conclusion since it also accounts for verb phrase constituents that are often zeroed along with subjects in the texts.
The results of this study motivate further text-based analysis of ‘true’ pro-drop languages, in order to see to what extent pro-drop in these languages is conditioned by — or independent of — higher-level discourse-pragmatic factors.

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