

Null subjects and verb placement in Old High German

Katrin Axel

SFB441 – University of Tübingen, Germany

katrin.axel@uni-tuebingen.de

1 Synopsis

This paper deals with null subject constructions in Old High German (OHG). I will demonstrate that the use of (referential) null-subjects in the older OHG prose texts is intricately related to verb placement and that it is influenced by morphological factors. It will be argued that early OHG must have allowed genuine *pro*-drop even of referential subjects (contra e.g. Eggenberger 1961), but that this was confined to a specific syntactic configuration. On the basis of this, I will finally draw the requisite conclusions from this study concerning the issue of linguistic evidence.

2 Overview of OHG null subjects constructions

The OHG prose texts from the 8th and 9th centuries (e.g. the *Monsee Fragments*, *Isidor* and *Tatian*) witness a wide range of null subject phenomena. Not only do we find constructions with non-referential null subjects, like null quasi-arguments, cf. (1a) below, and null subjects pronouns with arbitrary reference (1b), but there also numerous sentences where a referential subject is not overtly realized, (3)-(5). On the one hand, the presence of null referential subjects clearly shows that older OHG (or, more precisely, the dialects as they are documented in the earlier texts) cannot be classified as a semi *pro*-drop language like Modern German or Modern Icelandic. On the other hand, if one applies some of the null subject diagnostics that have been established on the basis of the canonical (full) null subject languages, it becomes evident that the older OHG texts do not pattern with these languages either. In the older OHG texts (i) (unstressed) overt and null pronominal subjects appear to exhibit parallel referential properties (the overt realization of referential subject pronouns does not have a semanto-pragmatic effect like emphasis or focus and there is no

prohibition against coreference between an embedded overt subject pronoun and a matrix subject); (ii) overt pronouns with arbitrary reference (*man* ‘one’, *sia* ‘they’) are attested alongside null pronouns with arbitrary reference (in the canonical null subject languages overt pronouns cannot have an arbitrary interpretation); (iii) quasi-arguments in meteorological constructions can be overtly realized; (iv) in certain syntactic environments overt subject pronouns appear to be obligatory.

3 Refutation of alternative approaches

Even though the hybrid situation described above would suggest that the omission of OHG subject pronouns is not due to genuine *pro*-drop, it will be argued that the only alternative explanations that might be envisaged for these data, i.e. topic drop or loan syntax, are untenable. A topic-drop analysis cannot be applied to omitted subjects in post-finite position like in (2) since topic drop is cross-linguistically restricted to clause-initial position, neither can it account for non-referential null subjects. The philological literature considers all the omissions of OHG subject pronouns as instances of ‘loan syntax’ imposed on the OHG translations by the Latin source texts (e.g. Eggenberger 1961). This approach, however, cannot explain why subject omissions are also attested in ‘native’ texts without Latin sources. Furthermore, Latin influence cannot account for the curious morphosyntactic distribution of null subjects in the OHG translations (cf. section 4). It may, however, well be the case that the null subject property actually belonged to an older language stage in the spoken language and that this feature was preserved in the OHG theological texts due to their archaic style and their close relationship to the Latin.

4 Morphosyntactic distribution

The older OHG prose texts evidence a complex distribution pattern regarding the use of null subjects. Like Modern German, OHG is an SOV language with asymmetrical word order: in subordinate clauses the verb stays in final/late position whereas (complementizerless) main clauses are largely subject to verb fronting. It emerges that referential (and, arguably, non-referential) null subjects are limited to the ‘middle field’ of all types of V2-, V1- or V3-clauses, (2)-(4). Verb-final/late clauses with subject omissions are only attested very rarely and in the translations overt subject pronouns are regularly inserted against the Latin source in this case, (5). This strongly suggests that OHG null subjects are only licensed in post-finite position. As in the modern language, there is no evidence for obligatory overt movement of overt full subjects to a canonical subject position in the middle field (only unstressed pronouns are overtly moved to a left-peripheral *Wackernagel* position). Full subjects

can thus be argued to be able to remain in their VP-internal position and this could also be the position occupied by *pro*-subjects. Regarding overt verb movement, it will be argued that in contrast to e.g. Old English the finite verb always targets the C-domain in main clauses (even in those with V3 order) and that there is no verb movement to a sentence-medial I-projection in subordinate clauses. Now, if subject *pro* appears to be only licensed when the finite verb occurs to its left, the only configuration where this holds are sentences where the verb has been moved to positions in the C-domain, i.e. to Fin^0 in V3-clauses, to Force^0 in V1-clauses and to Force^0 (and possibly Foc^0) in V2-clauses.

Moreover, the distribution of null subjects appears to be influenced by morphological factors. In the older OHG prose texts referential null subjects are attested in all persons and numbers. However, it is only in the 3rd person singular and plural that the null variant is used more frequently than the overt variant. In contrast to many modern Germanic complementizer agreement dialects, the 2nd person does not figure prominently in OHG null subject constructions. Crucially, this distribution cannot be related to feature strength. All OHG verbal paradigms have six distinct forms in the present indicative. The only syncretism is between the third and first person singular which are identical in the past indicative and in the present and past subjunctive.

5 The Loss of referential null subjects

By the time of Notker Labeo's writings (≈ 1000 AD) and Williram's paraphrase of the Song of Songs (11th century), referential null subjects must have been driven out of the language since they are no longer attested in these texts. The major prose and poetical sources from the Middle High German period do not witness the use of referential null subjects either. In contrast to what has been claimed for the loss of null subjects in other languages, no morphosyntactic innovations are identifiable that could have triggered this development in late OHG. Crucially, referential null subjects are lost despite the stability of a rich verbal inflection. Also, the syntax of verb movement is not subject to major changes during this time. A solution to this problem is offered by the account of Sprouse and Vance (1999). They demonstrate that an alternation between overt and null atonic pronouns will be expected to be diachronically unstable and drift towards a high frequency of overt pronoun use if this alternation reflected a true grammatical competition (in the sense of Kroch 1989), and if one assumed that sentences with overt pronouns would be parsed more successfully than sentences with null pronouns. The gradual loss of null subjects need therefore not be related to any grammar-internal changes. This also makes it possible to view the OHG developments within a wider typological context of Germanic and other Indo-European languages which manifest a strong tendency to replace null arguments by overt atonic pronouns even though their syntax and morphology differ considerably, both in synchronic and in diachronic respects.

6 Relevance of historical and diachronic evidence

The paper will demonstrate in detail that the curious distribution of OHG null subject constructions can only be described coherently if the putative role of extra-grammatical factors is precisely explored (e.g. the relation to the Latin source texts, the role of archaisms in certain genres, the difference between prose and poetry etc.). This study thus contributes to the on-going debate on the question how some of the drawbacks of corpus data from written texts can be partly overcome.

More importantly, however, it will become evident at various points in the paper that the turning to historical and diachronic data can be fruitful for syntactic theorizing:

The study of remote language stages increases the typological pool of well-studied languages. The work on OHG null subjects shows us, for example, that the V2-property itself does not prohibit the licensing of null subjects as it is claimed by various theoretical approaches. Furthermore, it contributes to a series of studies based on historical and dialectal data that have identified the so-called ‘partial’ null subject languages. In this ‘language type’, (referential) null subjects are restricted to specific morphosyntactic environments and their distribution does not appear to be governed solely by a parametrizable binary property of a licensing head. (e.g. Vanelli, Renzi, and Benincà 1985 on the medieval stages of French, Rhaeto-Romance and the northern Italian dialects, Vance 1997 on Medieval French, De Crousaz and Shlonsky 2003 on a Franco-Provençal dialect).

Last but not least, if we take diachronic evidence into consideration, i.e. historical data from successive language stages, this may have an impact on various assumptions that are implicit in syntactic theories. For example, the widely claimed relationship between null subject licensing and feature strength can only partly be confirmed by diachronic studies: While there appears to be a temporal correlation between the loss of null subjects and agreement morphology in Middle English, the loss of null subjects in German is not temporally related to the weakening of verbal morphology.

This paper thus not only comments on methodological issues regarding historical data, but it also addresses the relevance of historical data for theory building.

Examples

- (1) a. In themo tage ... regenota fiur Inti sueual
On the day ... rained-3sg fire and sulphur
‘On the day ... it rained fire and sulphur’ *Tatian*, ed. by Masser, 525, 15
- b. noh intprennent lioht Inti sezzent iz untar mutti
nor light-3pl lamp and put it under bushel
‘no one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel’ *Tatian* 137, 21

- (2) Sume hahet [0] in cruci V2-declarative
 Some nail-2pl to cross
 ‘Some of them you will crucify’ *Mons. Frag., ed. by Hench, XVIII, 1*
- (3) quidis [0] zi uns thesa parabola oda zi allen V1-interrogative
 say-2sg to us this parable or to all?
 ‘are you telling this parable to us, or to everybody?’ *Tatian 529, 2*
- (4) Auuar . iu sagem [0] V3-declarative
 Again you-2plACC say-1sgNOM
 ‘Again, I tell you’ *Mons. Frag. XI,18*
- (5) uuanta thaz **uuir** uuzumes (thaz sprehhemes [0]) verb-last relative
 because what we know (that speak-1pl)
 ‘because we speak of what we know’ *Tatian 407,7*

References

- De Crousaz, I. and U. Shlonsky (2003). The distribution of a subject clitic pronoun in a Franco-Provençal dialect and the licensing of pro. *Linguistic Inquiry* 34: 413-442.
- Eggenberger, J. (1961). Das Subjektspronomen im Althochdeutschen. Ein syntaktischer Beitrag zur Frühgeschichte des deutschen Schrifttums. Phil. Diss., University of Zurich, Switzerland.
- Kroch, A. (1989). Reflexes of grammar in patterns of language change. *Language Variation and Change* 1: 199-244.
- Sprouse, R. and B. Vance (1999). An explanation for the decline of null pronouns in certain Germanic and Romance languages. In M. DeGraff, ed., *Language Creation and Language Change: Creolization, Diachrony, and Development*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, pp 257-284.
- Vance, B. (1997). *Syntactic Change in Medieval French: Verb Second and Null Subjects*. Kluwer, Dordrecht, Holland.
- Vanelli, L., L. Renzi & P. Benincà (1985). Typologie des pronoms sujets dans les langues romanes. *Actes du XVIIe Congrès International de Linguistique et Philologie Romanes* (1983); Vol. 3, Aix: Université de Provence, France, pp. 163-176.