Null objects across languages and populations

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Whereas the study of null subjects in Slavic has received much attention (Franks 1995, Lindseth 1998, Fehrmann & Junghanss 2008, Müller 2006, a.o.), null objects (NO) still constitute an under-researched area and the distribution of object drop is still not uniformly capturable. The aim of this paper is to shed some light on this issue by discussing object omission in a cross-linguistic context with special emphasis on Slavic from the perspectives of both adult and child grammar.

I start by looking at some notorious cases of (optional) transitivity in verbs such as read, wash or dry in (1) and water in (2) in adult grammar. The latter is grammatical with a NO in Russian and Polish but ungrammatical in the same condition in Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian, German or English. I revise the contrast between purely lexical and syntactic approaches to object omission with a special emphasis on the syntactic transitivity approach by Cummins & Roberge (2005). The main premise of the transitivity-based approach that NOs are a default structural possibility present in all languages and transitivity is a universal grammatical property (rather than a lexical property), provides a fruitful ground for making precise predictions about the initial states of human grammar. If NOs are always presented in the syntactic structure and transitivity is a default, we should expect children to go through a stage of object optionality (cf. Perez-Leroux et al. 2008), irrespective of the object-drop capacity of the specific target grammars. Overgeneralization of the free availability of NOs due to a failure to restrict the null structure to the appropriate context is predicted.

In order to test the validity of these theoretical predictions, I turn to another population, namely young children, and examine how they deal with direct objects (DO) in the acquisition process. The comparison of developmental patterns in typologically different languages such as Russian, Greek, French and Chinese, to name only a few, helps hypothesize about universally represented structures as the starting point of linguistic development and about the grammatical elements that are specific to a particular language. A data survey from 16 typologically different languages (including four Slavic representatives-Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian, Russian and Ukrainian) challenges the postulated obligatory structural presence of NOs and calls for a re-evaluation of the theoretical analysis of the phenomenon in adult grammar.

The prediction made by the transitivity-based approach is not borne out – out of the 16 languages, 8 allow object omission in early grammar, 6 do not, and 2 (French and English) show conflicting results. There is no evidence that NOs are an initial setting in the acquisition process, and that NOs are a default structural possibility present in all languages. Instead, there is a clear division between languages with and without object drop in the early stages. Focusing on Slavic, I show that child Serbo-Croatian and Bulgarian pattern since children do not allow NOs and do not omit objects in obligatory contexts (cf. studies in Stiasny 2006, Radeva-Bork 2013). In child Polish, Ukrainian and Russian NOs are the preferred option (cf. studies in Tryzna 2015, Mykhaylyk and Sopata 2015, Gordishovsky and Avrutin 2004, Frolova 2014).

On the basis of the empirical survey, I suggest that children generally opt for the weakest alternative in accordance to the scale pronoun-elicit-null, depending on what is available in their language (cf. Varlokosta et al. 2016). They are conservative and faithful to the syntax of the input as their object drop reflects the presence of (optional) object drop in the target grammar and gives no evidence that NO are a default setting for all languages. Children omit objects only if their target grammar allows NOs, which is the case for Russian, Ukrainian and Polish, but not for Serbo-Croatian and Bulgarian (the same observation for the other
languages from the survey). Furthermore, in the first group of languages, children overgeneralize novel intransitives out of novel transitives and drop objects at higher rates than adults. Data from Chinese as well as from European and Brazilian Portuguese similarly confirm that children tend to overuse the option of dropping the objects, licensed by their target grammar in some contexts, as late as the age of five (Wang et al. 1992, Costa et al. 2012, Lopes 2009). In addition, I show that if a null argument is available in the grammar, the grammatical properties of DOs become irrelevant, allowing the discourse-pragmatic or semantic features of the DO referent to play a more important role in argument realization. This is supported by the empirical observation of a semantic effect on the use of DOs, since around the age of five overt objects (clitics/pronouns) are used more often for animate referents, and around the age of six – for inanimate objects. Generally, NOs are different from null subjects in that semantic and discourse factors play a greater role in the presence and interpretation of the null object.

Examples
(1) a. I’ll buy a magazine at the stand, and I’ll read Ø while I’m waiting for you.  
    (Cummins & Roberge 2005)  
    b. We’ll have to get rid of all the ugly dishes before your date arrives.  
    Okay, you wash Ø and I’ll dry Ø.  
    (Goldberg 2001)
(2) Čto ty delaeš s etim rasteniem?  
    Russian  
    what youNOM doISOG with this plantACC  
    ‘What are you doing with this plant?’  
    Polivaju Ø./Ja polivaju ego.  
    (I) watering (it)/ I watering it  
    ‘I’m watering it.’  
    (Goldishevsky & Avrutin 2004)

References


