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## Empty NPs in English and Government in Unexpected Places

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**1. Background remarks.** In Bailey's polylectal grammar (as outlined, for instance, in his 1973 book) the repertoire of forms used by a speaker constitutes a single larger system in which stylistic and registral variants, like variants in general (whether these occur within the speech of a single person or between individuals), are related to one another along implicational scales provided by universal grammar.

This position is to be contrasted with the usual stance of generative grammar, which has tended to be variationally naive, either focusing on a single style and register to the exclusion of all others or else failing to differentiate partially similar forms from distinct styles and registers. In the former case we risk treating merely marked phenomena as if they were nonexistent, or at best unsystematic and uninteresting addenda to 'core' grammar. In the latter we risk treating incidental formal similarities as crucial ones and so mingling incomparables.

My interest here<sup>1</sup> is in syntax, and I am closer to Bailey than to the main line of generative tradition in that I assume not only that a generative

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<sup>1</sup>This paper is a revision and extension of Zwicky 1986c. My thanks to the institutions (the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, the Committee for Scholarly Communication with the PRC of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, and the College of Humanities of the Ohio State University) whose support enabled me to spend the autumn of 1985 teaching at the Beijing Language Institute and thinking about the topics reported on here. This is the version of May 9, 1987.

syntax must take cognizance of stylistic and registral distinctions (as in Zwicky 1987a), but also that a syntax must provide a basis for a systematic account of the differences within the inventory of styles and registers commanded by a single speaker. Bailey's writings encourage the hypothesis that a syntax is in itself an account of this sort, but I will not follow him all the way down that road—only as far as the signpost that advises us not to treat the command of an inventory of (say) four styles as if it were the command of four separate languages (like Yiddish, Hebrew, French, and English).

I assume, then, only that styles and registers, like social or geographical dialects, can differ minimally or (within limits) in many ways on many dimensions; that all such varieties must be consistent with the requirements of universal grammar; and that insight into both universal grammar and a particular syntax can be gained by examining the way varieties are distinguished in different dimensions. Within the particular (small) problem area I will consider in this light are several situations in which arguments of English verbs lack overt expression.

**2. Empty objects.** Any adequate account of English syntax must distinguish (at least) two different situations in which a verb can appear without a direct object, as illustrated in (1a) and (1b).

- (1) a. Kim vanished.  
 b. Kim noticed.  
 c. Kim noticed it.

In (1a) I will say that the object is missing, lacking, or absent, while in (1b) I will say that an object is present, but is empty or null. Examples like (1a) involve ABSOLUTE INTRANSITIVE verbs, verbs that are subcategorized to occur without objects. Examples like (1b) involve verbs that are subcategorized to occur with objects, but that permit objects with the feature [+NULL].<sup>2</sup> Definite NPs with this feature are interpreted as context-bound, so that (1b) is fully acceptable only in a context in which the referent of the object of *noticed* has been identified, in which case (1b) paraphrases (1c).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Though *Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar (GPSG)* serves as the framework for my discussion, I am departing here in a small way from the version of this theory in Gazdar et al. 1985, where [+NULL] constituents all correspond to gaps in gap-filler relationships. Instead, I assume that gaps constitute only a special subset of the full set of empty constituents.

<sup>3</sup>See Fillmore 1986 for discussion of various types of [+NULL] objects and the conditions on their occurrence, as well as for bibliographic references.

Now consider the example in (2a), involving an ABSOLUTE TRANSITIVE verb (*construct*, *build*, *make*, etc.). Like *notice* in (1b), such verbs are subcategorized to occur with objects. Unlike *notice*, however, they cannot have [+NULL] objects, even when the appropriate context is supplied, as in (2b).

- (2) a. \*Kim constructed.  
 b. The pieces of the bicycle lay on the porch.  
 Finally Kim constructed \*(it).

What are we to say about these (very familiar) facts? Apparently certain verbs require not only that they have objects (as *notice* does), but also that their objects be [-NULL]. That is, these verbs (*construct* among them) impose the feature [-NULL] on their objects. NORMAL transitive verbs in English, in contrast, occur with both [+NULL] and [-NULL] objects. Or to summarize: The default verb in English places no restrictions on the value of the feature NULL on its direct object NPs, but there is a set of verbs that instead impose [-NULL].

The part of syntax devoted to the imposition of features by one sister constituent on another is the theory of (morphosyntactic) GOVERNMENT.<sup>4</sup> Though morphological case features are the paradigmatic governed features, and so have gotten the most attention in the literature, it seems likely that a wide range of morphosyntactic features can be governed; Zwicky (1986b) alludes to the government of English verb forms by auxiliaries (3), to the government of nominal number (as well as case) by numerals within Russian NPs (4), and to the government of adjectival declension class by determiners in German (5). To such examples should be added the determination of morphophonological features in some languages—as in the Welsh consonant mutations determined by prepositions (6) (Zwicky 1986a)—and the imposition of syntactic CONSTRUCTION FEATURES, as in an analysis of the English passive (like the one in Zwicky 1987b) that treats it as a construction feature that can be imposed on complements of the auxiliary verbs *be* and *get* (7). I now suggest that verbs can also govern emptiness (that is, the feature [+NULL]) on their objects.

- (3) They have vanished / \*vanishing. They are vanishing / \*vanished.

<sup>4</sup>Throughout my discussion here I reserve the term government for the determination of features that are of phonological relevance (either directly or via the determination of morphosyntactic features which themselves determine phonological form), thus avoiding the extension of this term to other sorts of relations between syntactic constituents, as in the 'government' of GB syntax.

- (4) *dva doma* / \**domov*      *pjat' domov* / \**doma*  
 NOM.PL GEN.SG                      NOM.PL GEN.PL  
 'two houses'                          'five houses'
- (5) *unser alter* / \**alte Mann*      *dieser alte* / \**alter Mann*  
 NOM.SG MIXED                      NOM.SG WEAK  
 'our old man'                          'this old man'
- (6) *wedi cath* / \**gath*                      *o gath* / \**cath*  
 'after a cat'                              'from a cat'
- wedi cathod* / \**gathod*                      *o gathod* / \**cathod*  
 'after cats'                                  'from cats'

- (7) The bicycle was/got made / \*making / \*make by our mechanic.

The paradigm in (2) holds not only for absolute transitives but also for causative transitives like *boil* and *roll*. (8a) can be understood only intransitively, even when a discourse referent is supplied for the object, as in (8b).

- (8) a. Kim boiled.  
 b. There was a chicken in the pot. \*Kim boiled. / Kim boiled it.

I now observe that the separation of subcategorization facts about verbs like *construct* and *boil* from government facts about them is supported by observations about the REGISTERS of English.

In the written instruction register of English (including the subregisters of recipes and instructional labels), the government condition for certain verbs can be lifted, while subcategorization requirements remain untouched. Examples like those in (9)–(11) are possible only when the context has picked out the referent of the object; as Sadock (1974) has observed about medicine bottle instructions like (11), it is not necessarily the specifically linguistic context that does this work.

- (9) Hand wash gently in cool to lukewarm water using a mild soap specifically for woolen products. Rinse twice, thoroughly, with cool water, and gently remove excess water by shaking or patting dry. Do not wring. [Washing instructions for the Aussie Woolie Imports sheepskin steering wheel cover]

- (10) Halve or quarter each pheasant; clean with damp cloth and dry thoroughly. Season with salt, pepper, seasoning salt, and dredge with flour. Brown to golden brown on both sides under broiler or in dutch oven on top of stove. Remove to roasting pan... ['Pheasant', in River Road Recipes (Junior League of Baton Rouge, 1962:139)]
- (11) Apply three times a day. [Instructions on Synalar prescription]

Such examples have [+NULL] objects, not missing objects, and they can be accommodated by positing that the (marked, or nondefault) rule stipulating government of [-NULL] objects is not carried over into certain marked registers.

**3. Empty subjects I: root clauses.** Now consider the facts that make English not a PRO-DROP language, namely the requirement that English (nonimperative) root clauses must have a subject, as illustrated in (12). This is the celebrated Subject Requirement Constraint (SRC) of Perlmutter (1971), which English shares with French (but not Spanish or Italian).

- (12) a. \*Just can't keep myself satisfied.  
 b. \*Seems we are going to have a tornado.

In the framework I have suggested, the SRC describes the (default) government of a [-NULL] subject. The unmarked, or default, subject NP in English is [-NULL], whereas in Spanish (for instance) for such an NP the values for the feature NULL can be freely instantiated.

Once again, a government condition can be lifted in particular registers and styles, in this instance in the epistolary register (especially in the subregister of diary writing, where speed and brevity are of some significance) and generally in narratives in conversational style. Sentences like those in (12) are entirely acceptable in these contexts, a fact that is illustrated by the epistolary, diary, and narrative-conversation data in (13), (14), and (15), respectively. Note that I have merely said that the government condition can be lifted; the nonempty-subject versions of these examples are also acceptable, of course, and in fact there is a very strong tendency for subjects to appear in English letters, diaries, and conversational narratives, even when they are completely reconstructible from context.

- (13) Just learned from Maggie that you were very ill. Hope you're making a speedy and thorough recovery! Didn't like any of the get-well cards I saw, but thought you might enjoy this. Congratulations to Elizabeth.

Will be back from vacation on Labor Day. [Postcard from colleague, August 6, 1986]

- (14) Drinking too much again without question. Between two binges, float foggily to the surface and learn that finally I've been granted a Guggenheim. [Ned Rorem, *New York Diary* 1967:90]
- (15) a. Very few people talk on the bus going home. Sort of sit there and look dejected. Stare out the window, pull out their newspaper, or push other people. ['Sharon Atkins', a receptionist, as cited in Studs Terkel's *Working* 1975:60]
- b. Used to daydream on the job, now I don't. ['Hobart Foote', a railroad utility man, Terkel: 238]
- c. And then you come across the same set of tracks you cross in the morning. Get in the car, roll your window down, and you're not in a hurry to get home, because you're not timed to go home. [ibid.]
- d. We might go out on strike. We may go down to four days a week. Been like this all these years. ['Steve Dubi', steelworker, Terkel: 715]

On a first inspection it might seem that subjects fail to appear in examples like (12) by virtue of a rule (or rules) deleting sentence-initial material, which could happen to encompass subjects. Certainly there is a considerable literature (much of it summarized in Napoli 1982 and Zwicky and Pullum 1983) on the deletion of sentence-initial material in English, but work on the subject has tended to confound what should be seen as several different sorts of rules, some phonological and some not, some sensitive to speech tempo, and some to style.

It should be clear, however, from (13)–(15) that the nonappearance of subjects there is most unlikely to be either phonologically conditioned or related to speech tempo rather than style. Note in particular that in several of these examples subjects are missing from clauses that are not sentence-initial, and of course that the first two illustrations are from written sources. Consequently I assume that we are dealing with a syntactic phenomenon here; a (default) requirement that subjects in root clauses be [-NULL] is overridden in certain (marked) styles and registers.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Note that this assumption about English is consistent with a number of possible analyses of PRO-drop languages. In particular, nothing I have said implies that empty subjects and absent subjects are in complementary distribution with one another. A language might well have both, just as English has both empty and absent direct objects.

Note, by the way, that the restriction to root clauses is essential, since the requirement cannot be lifted in finite subordinate clauses, whether or not the nonappearance of a subject would be parallel to the pattern in a corresponding main clause and whether or not the referent would be reconstructible from context:

- (16) a. \*(I) went because wanted to. [adverbial subordinate clause]  
 b. \*(I) realize (that) must go. [complement clause]  
 c. \*(I) greet everyone (that) am acquainted with. [relative clause]

**4. Empty subjects II: imperatives.** The claim that there are empty, rather than absent, subject NPs in examples like those in (13)–(15) requires some defense. The evidence for a present (but [+NULL]) subject in such sentences is parallel to the evidence for present (but [+NULL]) subjects in English bare imperatives (those in which no subject NP appears): arguments from anaphoric elements with syntactic conditions on their distributions (17) and arguments from syntactic constructions that involve ‘derived’ subjects (18).<sup>6</sup>

- (17) a. Make yourselves/\*ourselves a drink!  
 b. [on postcard from France] Made ourselves/\*yourselves at home in Paris.
- (18) a. Be tough for us/\*you to please!  
 b. Tried to shrug my/\*your shoulders, but couldn’t.

A few words on empty subjects in imperatives are in order. In the analysis suggested by Zwicky (1987a) (based on the survey of data and analyses in Davies 1986), [+NULL] as an unmarked feature for subjects is one of the formal concomitants of a construction feature [+IMP] associated with root clauses.<sup>7</sup> But what sort of rule stipulates that [+NULL] subjects are the expected case for imperatives?

One possibility is that this situation is to some degree parallel to the ones I discussed in §3: a (default) requirement that subjects in root clauses be [-NULL] is overridden—not in certain styles and registers, as in §3, but

<sup>6</sup>Zwicky (1988) observes that all the relevant evidence of both types supports positing a second-person subject for bare imperatives in English, but also that, since the arguments depend entirely on phenomena for which nonsyntactic descriptions are available, there is no empirical bar to a thoroughgoing absent-subject analysis.

<sup>7</sup>The morphosyntactic feature [VFORM:BSE] and *do* serving as a negative or emphatic auxiliary are the others.

in a syntactic context, namely when the governing *VP* is [+IMP]. If an analysis along these lines is correct, then the pragmatic effects of overriding a rule in marked styles and registers must be distinguished from the pragmatic effects of overriding the same rule in specified syntactic contexts, since [+NULL] subjects in imperatives are neutral pragmatically, in contrast to examples like those in (19), which acquire a special effect by virtue of their having expressed subjects.

(19) You be quiet! Somebody be the chairman!

**5. Concluding remarks.** In these notes I have suggested that to some extent the nonappearance of direct object and subject *NPs* in English is to be described via principles regulating the distribution of the features [+NULL] and [-NULL] on these argument *NPs*. Some insight into these principles can be gained, moreover, by treating variation across styles and registers as variation within a single grammar.

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