CHAPTER 4. VARIATION (SPECIAL CONTEXTS, REGISTERS AND DIALECTS)

In the previous two chapters I have considered the uses of null arguments in more or less 'Standard' English. In this chapter, I point out some interesting contrasts between the grammatical and discourse properties we have found to be associated with these cases and the properties of null arguments appearing only in certain special contexts and registers. I also describe certain dialectal differences among English speakers with respect to null argument use.

4.1. RECIPE AND INSTRUCTION CONTEXTS

Objects are generally omitted much more frequently from recipes and instructions than they are from 'Standard' English, and with fewer restrictions. For example in the short recipe in (1) below, there are five normally obligatory objects missing (as well as some missing PPs).

(1). Chop or process fruits into tiny pieces. Place **0** in large bowl.
Add toasted wheat germ and cinnamon (to **0**).
Mix **0** thoroughly with large spoon. Add chopped nuts (to **0**).
Shape **0** into tight balls. Roll **0** in nuts and seeds. Refrigerate **0**.

A priori, this difference could either result from an increase in the use of what is generally an optional, lexically-constrained variation in English, or it could result from a different set of constraints, specifically shaped for this context.

In practice, it seems that these 'recipe' null objects are quite different from those in 'Standard' English. In particular, they may occur with strictly transitive verbs and do not in fact seem to be lexically-constrained at all. For instance, the verb place above occurs with a null object although, as shown below, it does not itself license a salient null object.

(2). The flowers were beautiful. Jean placed them/***0** in a large vase.

Zwicky (1987) argues that the constraints on verbs of this type are simply relaxed in instructional contexts, allowing salient objects to be [+null]. In other words, his suggestion is that any syntactic constraints normally requiring overt objects are not carried over into this context (i.e., all transitive verbs can allow salient object alternation). Though it does seem that these null objects act like zero pronominals, there are problems with the details of Zwicky's solution.

Most importantly, null objects are not just required to be salient, they are also dependent on certain other properties of the sentence. In particular, it has been argued (cf. Sadock (1974), Culy (1987), Massam (1989)) that null objects in these contexts can not occur with overt subjects. This explains why (3) can only mean that the subject (you) gets baked, not that something else gets baked.

(3). You bake 1 hour.

Note that it is not sufficient to say that these null objects must occur inside of commands with salient objects. In non-instructional registers, examples like (4) below are still unacceptable.

(4). a. That cat is driving me crazy. *Put **0** out.

b. I think my pie is ready. *Please remove **0** from oven.

While recipes and instructions tend to be a sequence of events, making this pattern a constraint is also not sufficient, as shown below:

(5). First, you should clean the old clothes out of the attic. When you have them all boxed up, bring **0** to Salvation Army.

Clearly, it is the perception of being in an instructional context rather than any one feature which affects the availability of these null arguments.[1]

I also think however that even within the instructional context, restricting null objects to occur only with null subjects is not sufficient. Notice that example (6)b is unacceptable even though it meets this constraint.

(6). a. Wrap **0** in wax paper and refrigerate **0**.

b. Keep **0** refrigerated at least overnight.

b´. ***0** Should keep **0** refrigerated at least overnight.

I suggest instead that the instructional imperative is itself the constraint on null objects. The oddity of (3) is only indirectly due to the overt subject. The real issue is that it does not read like an imperative. This should be perfectly understandable given that null subjects are the default in English imperatives and it is hard to imagine how an imperative in a recipe context might meet the conditions for using the marked, overt subject (see discussion of imperatives in Chapter 2).

The alternative analysis described in Massam (1989) is that a null object in an instructional context is identified by an empty discourse topic in subject position (giving it an analysis parallel to that of middle and 'tough' constructions). Massam is, therefore, implicitly restricting null objects to instructional imperatives as well because only these subjects can have an empty discourse topic (allowed because the agent of the imperative is actually in INFL as part of IMP element.)

However, Massam's analysis requires a separate analysis for the non-imperative subjects that may be missing from recipes and instructions too, as shown in (7) below.

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[1]One possibility may be that these instructions are not tied to the time of the utterance (or writing event) and are not necessarily aimed at a particular intended actor. It would be interesting to look further at a situation in which one person is giving another instructions aimed directly at them and intended to be carried out at that moment. My suspicion is that the instructor would tend to refer to the object overtly in this case. (eg. #"Ok Sue, now shape into little balls.")

(7). a. **0** Serves 3.

b. **0** Makes about 5 quarts.

These null subjects have the same types of referents as the null objects and may in fact refer to an entity that was represented by a null object in the previous sentence. Under my analysis, the same zero pronoun may be used to handle these sentences. The only remaining issue is how to constrain this zero pronoun to rule out examples like (8)b below.

(8). a. Bring **0** to a boil.

b. Mixture should be bubbling strongly.

b´. **#0** should be bubbling strongly.[2]

Perhaps the answer to the question lies in the placement of the acceptable utterances (eg., at the end of the instructions) or in the fact that they are not actually part of the instructions.

In general, it seems Culy (1987) is correct in stating that *style* is the most important factor in the use of the zero pronominals in recipes and instructions. It seems that style (eg. 'instructional context') gives a zero pronominal, which is also available in conversational English, a different use.[3] As it doesn't seem likely that the function of the zero pronominal subject in English is a crucial one to recipes and instructions (i.e., there is no need for turn- or segment-boundary marking in these contexts), there is no conflict.

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[2]Notice that this sentence might be felicitous in the right context in conversational English.

[3]The exact nature of this function is beyond the scope of this work but I can briefly observe that it may well be that null objects are the default in these contexts (as they are in discourse-oriented languages), and that the special function lies in the decision to use an overt pronoun. Also, Culy (1987) suggests that the availability of the zero pronominal in recipe contexts is tied to a 'LOOKBACK' constraint that highly favors co-reference with an entity in the previous utterance. A data study on centering transitions associated with these null objects in recipes might therefore be interesting as well.

4.2. TELEGRAPHIC REGISTER

As with recipe contexts, the telegraphic register or 'sublanguage' (eg., the language used in telegraphs, memos, signs, etc...) makes more extensive use of null arguments than does 'Standard' English. This register, also known as "telegraphese", is exemplified by (9) and (10) below.

(9). **0** Believe the coupling from diesel to sac lube oil pump to be sheared.

(Linebarger et al. 1989:9)

(10). [sign seen on door into Williams Hall at UPenn]

SYSTEM TEST

Friday 1/19

May be some BELLS & ALARMS

DO NOT LEAVE BUILDING

Once again, there have been at least a couple different analyses proposed to treat this special case. Thrasher (1974) argues that there is a relationship between missing dummy subjects, auxiliaries, <u>if</u>, and articles in conversational English on the one hand, and the fragments found in telegrams, signs and headlines on the other. For Thrasher, the significant factors are that both types of phenomena can occur without any prior context, and both 'delete' the same elements -- which he says are words that are supplied by grammatical rule rather than by the lexicon-- and disallow the deletion of other elements. The major difference is that in "telegraphese", this deletion is not restricted to utterance-initial elements and is not optional.

Beyond the basic problems with Thrasher's deletion analysis for null subjects (discussed in Chapter 2), this proposal is problematic for tokens like (9) which do not meet the restriction to non-lexical information only, even as he defines it. Examples like these would force him to posit to different explanations for this context, which we have already shown to be unnecessary for conversational English.

The alternative, discussed in Linebarger et al. (1989), is to treat these tokens as having zero pronominals. The constraints on this null subject are clearly not identical to those for instructional contexts, though it seems that zero pronominals again have an unmarked role.

Perhaps one of the more telling features of telegraphic null subjects is the distribution of subject types. Ball (1989) examined 143 Navy messages (four different types) and found that, after excluding examples with dummy subjects, first person reference accounted for 97% of all the null subjects (143 out of 158).[4] In Chapter 2 of this thesis I noted that first person null subjects are second in quantity only to expletive null subjects in conversational English as well. This may be suggestive of a relationship between the two cases, especially given the contrast with null subjects in conversational Yiddish, (which, as discussed in Chapter 1, tend instead to have second person singular reference). A resolution of this issue will however have to await future research.

4.3. DIALECTS

In the sections above, I have described some of the ways that a particular speaker's use of null arguments may vary based on register or context. In this section I explore some of the types of variation that may be found between speakers, from dialect to dialect.

[4]In fact, virtually all of Ball's tokens were either clearly first person in reference or ambiguous between such an interpretation and another possibility. Ball suggests though that the first person tendency can be weakened when the originator of the message is 'backgrounded', and Linebarger et al. (1989) actually provide examples which clearly could not have first person subjects, so this feature does not appear to be an absolute constraint.

4.3.1. '**Yinglish**'

In addition to the those null objects found under strict lexical and discourse restrictions in 'Standard' English there is a type (or set of types) of English null objects used in a Yiddish-influenced dialect which has come to be known as 'Yinglish'. These are the null objects exemplified in sentences like those in (11).

(11). a. We're ordering in pizza -- (do) you want **0**?

b. So, (do) you like **0**?

c. (phone rings) I should answer **0**?

d. A: So, you want **0**?

B: No thanks.

A: Come on, have **0**.

The examples above are ruled out by many native speakers of English but are considered completely standard by speakers of Yinglish. This section will attempt to raise some of the questions which must be answered in order to characterize these Yinglish null objects and distinguish them from the other types of null objects in English.

First, there is a contrast apparently based on verb choice for some of these constructions. In particular, (11)b contrasts with the unacceptable tokens in (12) below.

(12). a. *So, do you hate?

b. *So, do you love?

Two possible hypotheses come to mind for explaining this contrast. The first is that the unacceptable examples involve verbs that have intransitive uses and can therefore only be interpreted in this way (see example (13)).

(13). a. Rose has learned how to hate.

b. Rose has learned how to love.

c. *Rose has learned how to like.

The second possibility is that both of these two contrasting phenomena are due to a difference in the level of semantic specification for the verb like and the verbs love/hate.

The second important issue will be resolving where the antecedent can and can not come from in the discourse. Notice, for instance, that the antecedent does not need to be in object position:

(14). Pizza is the only thing on the menu tonight. Do you want **0**?

The next open issue is when the subject can be something specific, as in (11)c, and when it has to be an indefinite quantity or amount, as required in examples like (15) and (16).

(15). #There were some beautiful sweaters on sale at Macy's today so I bought.

(16). A: There were some beautiful sweaters on sale at Macy's today so I bought some.

B: You bought 0?! I thought you hated that store.

Lastly, it would be useful to see whether the null object is less restricted to verb type and/or indefinite quantity when it occurs in particular constructions, such as those defined below:

(17). a. X, so I VERBED (Where X is an independent clause)

b. NP should VERB

c. Imperatives (take, have, eat,...)

As a final point, notice that non-native speakers of English with Yiddish as a native language appear to use an even broader range of null objects, as shown in (18) below.

(18). a. *So I took that, and I took **0** to the doctor.

b. *He never gave me **0**.

c. *And they bring **0** to my mother.

These are unacceptable even for a native English speaker whose dialect is Yinglish so the null objects in Yinglish can not be just a direct borrowing of the whole Yiddish null object phenomenon.

4.3.2. Black English

Null subjects occur conversationally in the 'Black English' dialect(s) as well as in 'Standard' English, as can be seen in example (19) below.

(19). **0** Means he a faggot or sump'm like that. (Labov 1969:717)

The constraints on utterances like these may well be the same as those in 'Standard' English, though a corpus study would be useful.

There is however also at least one interesting difference in the use of conversational null subjects in this dialect. Example (20) illustrates this difference.

(20). [overheard on street in Philadelphia][5]

a. She live up the street from my Dad.

b. **0** Keep on asking me over to her house.

c. **0** Want to make me out shopping all the time, this and that.

Although I have little to say about the function of examples like this, I include it because it differs markedly from the other conversational examples I have discussed in two ways. First, the null subjects refer to an animate third person referential subject, a reference virtually absent from my other null subject data. Second, the utterance in (20)b does not appear to be at a discourse boundary of any sort (i.e., it is both turn-internal and segment-internal). A corpus study would perhaps also help us to determine if this variation in function is tied to the fact that it is an animate third person subject, or part of a broader dialectal difference.

[5]Thanks to Lyn Walker for providing me with this token.

4.3.3. "Take with"

Some apparently idiosyncratic constructions involving null arguments also may be found in some dialects of American English (eg. parts of Chicago, IL and Buffalo, NY for instance).[6] (21) below is just one example that is not in my personal dialect.

(21). You can take (it) with.

(22). Let's go with.

In this case, the object of a preposition may be missing -- an otherwise rare occurrence even in special registers.

This construction and others like it raise the question of what constitutes 'standard' language. Speakers who accept constructions such as this one, that are not available in all dialects, may still consider them to be 'standard'.

4.3.4. British/American English Variation

Conversational null subjects in British English may have somewhat broader functions (or narrower constraints) than their American counterparts. Certainly, null subjects have the appearance of being more common in British English, though most of the actual utterances sound like those that are heard by speakers of American English as well. Again of course, only a serious corpus study could find out if this perceived difference in quantity is significant and if there is any difference in the discourse constraints employed by these two major dialects.

[6]These tokens were taken from a discussion on the newsgroup sci.lang.

There is, however, at least one null subject construction typical to British English (conversational) but not seen in American English. This construction is illustrated by the examples in (23).[7]

(23). a. **0** Made a mess of it, he did.

b. **0** Ate a live frog, he did.

Notice that both the matrix clause and the tag-phrase are tensed, so this can not be a simple case of movement. The most likely explanation therefore is that the construction involves a zero pronominal. Hence, one possible purpose for the tag-phrase is to make the null subject interpretable.

There is a variant of this construction which apparently requires a full NP in the 'tag', as shown in (24).

(24). **0** Made a mess of it, did Ralph.

Again, the same possibility exists that the tag-phrase affects the interpretability of the null subject. This is particularly interesting given that the construction seems to be very acceptable with third person animate subjects (and perhaps *only* with subjects with these features). However, I am aware of no studies to determine the function of these constructions and the closest equivalent in American English seems to be tag-questions whose function, as mentioned in Chapter 2, is also an open issue.

4.4. DISCUSSION

What we have seen in this chapter is that, even within English, null arguments have an assortment of forms and functions that either are associated with special contexts or registers, or are acceptable in one particular dialect and not in another. Conversely, what we have not seen is any

[7]Thanks to Ellen Prince and Bonnie Webber for passing on these tokens, and especially to Mark Steedman for his judgments.

evidence that the variety of uses which might be available to a particular speaker would clash, which suggests that the various registers and contexts can merge with each other without trouble.

The breadth of this variation seems to me to be another argument in favor of thinking of null arguments as a tool or device that a language may use whenever interpretability conditions are met and in whatever way(s) are useful. I will return to this issue in Chapter 6.