

Referential null subjects in German*

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This paper is about referential null subjects located in Spec-CP of German finite V2 clauses, and it argues that in contrast to 3rd person subject gaps, 1st and 2nd person null subjects are grammatical *out of the blue*. No context or gesture is needed to identify the omitted referent. By using several diagnostics for my claim, I will show that this *out of the blue*-drop (OBD) of 1st/2nd person subjects is neither ‘classical’ *pro*-drop, nor topic drop, and not (English style) diary drop, and that 1st/2nd and 3rd person null subjects are syntactically and pragmatically two different phenomena. Furthermore, I will present empirical data from which I derive that 1st/2nd person referential null subjects in Spec-CP are licensed by discrete inflectional endings notwithstanding apparent syncretisms within the German verbal inflectional paradigms, and suggest a solution why OBD is restricted to Spec-CP of V2 clauses.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is standardly assumed (cf. Huang 1984, Fries 1988, Cardinaletti 1990, Rizzi 1994) that referential null subjects in German can be omitted in all persons and that the well-formedness of this dropping process, commonly referred to as topic drop, is dependent on the presence of a salient antecedent within the discourse, which licenses and identifies the gap and its reference.¹ (1) illustrates typical examples, (a) for a missed subject, and (b) for a missed accusative object:

- (1) Kennst du **den Hans**?
Know you the Hans?
(a) Na klar, is’ mein Nachbar.
Of course, [he] is my neighbour.
(b) Ne, kenn’ ich nicht.
No, [him] know I not

The gaps in (1) are only grammatical when a (non-)linguistic antecedent is given—without it, the gaps are not licensed, nor can the gapped referent be identified, (2):

- (2) (a) * Is’ mein Nachbar.
(b) * Kenn’ ich nicht.

So, neither a 3rd person subject, nor a 3rd person accusative object can be dropped without an antecedent which agrees in person and number features with the gap. However, as (1a) shows, case agreement is not a necessary condition for topic drop.²

In contrast to the data in (1) and (2) which show that an antecedent must be obligatorily given when a referential 3rd person subject or object is left out, (3) suggests that there are occurrences where this obligation does not apply, i.e. subject drop is possible without

* For helpful comments and discussions I would like to thank Werner Frey, André Meinunger and Peter Staudacher. All errors are mine.

¹ The antecedent of a topic drop gap is marked **bold** and the gap itself is referred to by an underline [].

² For case agreement between antecedent and gap, see Bayer et al. (2001) and Trutkowski (forthcoming).

a contextually given, salient discourse antecedent.³ Yet, as (3) shows, this only holds for 1st and 2nd null subjects, not for 3rd person subject and objects gaps (as was already shown in (2)):

- (3) (a) Ø Komme/Kommst/*Kommt am besten nachher vorbei. 1./2./*3. Sg.
 [I/You/*He,She,It] Come/Come/Comes at best later along
 (b) Ø Kommen/Kommt/*Kommen am besten nachher vorbei. 1./2./*3. Pl.
 [We/You-pl/*They] Come/Come/Come at best later along
 ‘It would be best if I/you/he,she,it/we/you/they came along later.’

Besides the constructed example in (3), corpus data confirm the intuition that 1st and 2nd person subject gaps can be licensed and identified without a (compatible) antecedent, (4)⁴-(5):

- (4) Wolfram Müller – Ø Nutzen jetzt unsere Stärken (News heading)
 Wolfram Müller – [We] exploit now our strengths
 (<http://www.deutscher-leichtathletik-verband.de/index.php?NavID=1&SiteID=28&NewsID=21594>)
- (5) (a) Ø Bist mir so nah (Song title, pop singer Sandra Weiss)
 [You] are me so close
 (b) Dann: „Die lässt sich die Haare trotzdem so schneiden. Ø Kennst sie doch.“
 Then: “She gets REFL the hair nevertheless in this way cut. [You] know her PRT”

DWDS Corpus, BZ, 22.01.2005, S.3

In contrast to 1st/2nd person null subjects, no positive evidence from corpora can be given for *out of the blue* constructed referential 3rd person null subjects.

So, the question arises if *out of the blue* licensing of 1st and 2nd person referential null subjects in German is enough to classify German as a *pro*-drop language. The answer is, at least partly, negative. Nonetheless fresh data suggest that the hitherto assumed classification of German as a non-null subject language (cf. Biberauer 2010, Holmberg & Sheehan 2010) has to be amended for an adequate account of the empirical data.

In the following subsections I will show that *out of the blue* omission of 1st/2nd person referential null subjects in Spec-CP of a finite V2 clause is not

- (i) (Italian-style) *pro*-drop
 (ii) (German style) topic drop
 (iii) (English style) diary drop

but, instead, a separate phenomenon within German syntax, best characterized as *out of the blue* drop or restricted *pro*-drop. After having shown that German *out of the blue* drop cannot be analysed along the lines of the above mentioned constructions I will outline the licensing and identification conditions by which one can account for referential 1st/2nd person null subjects in German and give reasons for why they are restricted to Spec-CP of V2 clauses.

To avoid clashes with other phenomena I will refer to the process by which antecedentless preverbal null subjects in finite V2 clauses are licensed and identified as *Out of the Blue Drop* (OBD).

³ I will refer to instances where the drop is well-formed independently of the presence of an antecedent by the symbol [Ø].

⁴ In (4) only a 1st person plural interpretation of the gap is possible (though the verb form is syncretic and would also allow a 3rd person plural interpretation).

1.1. OBD is not *pro*-drop

In contrast to older stages of German (e.g. Old High German, cf. Axel 2007, Axel/Weiß to appear), today spoken varieties of Standard German show no *pro*-drop in the German Mittelfeld. This can be shown by the contrast in (6):

- (6) (a) /quidis zi uns thesa parabola/ (Axel 2007: 308, ex. (25a⁵))
say-2SG to us this parable
 ‘are you telling this to us?’
 (b) *Wollt *pro* uns Märchen erzählen?
Will [you-PL] us fairytales tell? [=Are you kidding us?]

Furthermore, in finite V2 declaratives, OBD is not licensed postfinitely, when the prefield is occupied by another constituent, e.g. a time adverbial as in (7), nor is OBD licensed in embedded clauses where C° is occupied by a complementiser, (8):

- (7) *In 20 Minuten sind *pro* wieder da.
In 20 minutes are [we] again here.
 (8) *Ich glaube, dass *pro* komme später.
I think/believe, that [I] come later

1.2. OBD is not topic drop

In what follows I will show that 1st/2nd person OBD would have been wrongly analysed in terms of topic drop. The crucial data contrasts given in (9) and (10) show that unlike 3rd person subjects, 1st and 2nd person subjects can be freely dropped:

- (9) [[**Hans**] und [**ich**]] haben den Film schon gesehen.
Hans and I have the film already seen
 (a) Ø komme deshalb etwas später.
[I] come therefore a bit later
 (b) *Ø kommt deshalb etwas später.
[He] comes therefore a bit later
 (10) [[**Hans**] und [**du**]](, ihr) seid ja schon seit 20 Jahren zusammen.
Hans and you(, you-pl) are indeed already for 20 years together
 (a) Ø Kannst ihm wohl nichts mehr vormachen, oder?
[You] cannot him probably nothing more put over, right?
 (b) *Ø Kann dir wohl nichts mehr vormachen, oder?
[He] cannot you probably nothing more put over, right?

The logic behind these data is the following: As it is not reasonable to assume that arguments within coordinated structures like (9) or (10) behave differently, the constraint which blocks the contextually given arguments from being singled out in order to act as gap identifying antecedents must apply equally to all members of a coordinated expression. So the grammaticality of the 1st person subject gap in (9a) and the 2nd person subject gap in (10a) must be due to a process which is sensitive to the distinction between 1st/2nd and 3rd person subjects, and formally licensed without a salient antecedent—therefore it cannot constitute an instance of topic drop (as a topic drop gap is only licensed and identified by the presence of

⁵ Axel (2007:313) points out that the datum (6a) constitutes unambiguous evidence for a postfinite null subject since “in this sentence type [i.e. yes/no interrogatives—ET] overt subject pronouns never appear prefinally”.

an extra-sentential antecedent, cf. Huang 1984, Rizzi 1994). If the process of deriving 1st/2nd person subject gaps were the same as for 3rd person subject gaps, the (b) sentences in (9)/(10) would be expected to be grammatical too, contrary to fact.

Furthermore, (11a) shows that a 1st person singular null subject is licensed even though the 1st and 3rd person singular forms are syncretic⁶ (I will come back to this point in section 2), and even binding cannot alter the ungrammaticality of (11b):

- (11) [[**Hans**] und [**ich**]] haben den Film schon gesehen.
Hans and I have the film already seen
 (a) Ø_i Will deshalb lieber Zuhause bleiben (und mich_i entspannen).
[I] will therefore rather at home stay (and myself relax)
 (b) *Ø_i Will deshalb lieber Zuhause bleiben (*und sich_i entspannen).
[He] will therefore rather at home stay (and himself relax)

Crucially, in a Spanish example from Cole (2009: 567) which is parallel to (11), the null subject is not licensed, because the ambiguity conflict which arises from the 1st/3rd person syncretism cannot be resolved:

- (12) ??Juan y yo llegamos tarde. Ø Tenia mucho que hacer.⁷
Juan and I came late. [I/He] had.IMP a-lot to do

The contrast between (11) and (12) further supports the claim that, contrary to Spanish,⁸ in German 1st (and 2nd) person null subjects are derived differently from 3rd person null subjects. Otherwise it would be not possible to explain why the syncretisms in (11) play no role in licensing a 1st person null subject. On that basis, I will assume that 3rd person null subjects are excluded from the licensing/identifying conditions which apply to OBD (1st/2nd person null subjects) and conclude that (13) holds:

- (13) OBD Hypothesis I (valid for Standard German only):
 (a) 1st and 2nd person referential null subjects need no (non-)linguistic antecedent to be formally licensed in Spec-CP (i.e. the prefield) of a finite V2 clause.
 (b) OBD applies exclusively to 1st and 2nd person subjects.

The reason why apparent syncretisms (between 1st/3rd and 2nd/3rd persons) do not rule out the otherwise ambiguous reference for 1st and 2nd person null subjects can be explained by the fact that although both dropped OBD subjects and (topic) dropped 3rd person subjects and objects appear in the very same position (i.e. Spec-CP), they are nonetheless in complementary distribution regarding their licensing conditions (*out of the blue* versus *antecedent-dependent*).

1.3. OBD is not diary drop

In the following I will give some arguments which speak against a diary drop analysis of OBD.

Diary drop is said to be a register phenomenon (cf. Haegeman 1997, 2007, Haegeman & Ihsane 1999, 2001, Weir 2008). It occurs most notably in diaries, telegrams, letters,

⁶ In German, modal verb conjugation displays syncretisms between 1st and the 3rd person singular present tense.

⁷ Thanks to Núria Bertomeu for the Spanish datum.

⁸ Cole (2009: 568) shows that among other languages, also in Serbian, Amharic, Arabic (and for some speakers also in Italian (within the present subjunctive tense)) a null pronoun is excluded in patterns like (11)/(12).

- (b) [ec] Kommer [ec] strax.¹¹
come.Ø-AGR right-away

So what the data in (16)-(19) reveal is that English (and maybe Swedish too) displays a (nearly grammaticalised) default 1st person singular interpretation of empty subjects (referentially equivalent to the speaker/author).¹² Following Cole (2009: 570), I will assume that regarding null subjects a preferred interpretation will be chosen, if neither recovery by unique agreement, nor recovery by a suitable antecedent is possible (in that order). Is the preferred interpretation not the required one, an overt pronoun must be used.

As for the omission of 2nd person subjects, this is another aspect which further differentiates diary drop from OBD: though possible, as in (20)-(21), 2nd person subject drop is quite infrequent in English. Most of the examples cited refer to 1st or 3rd persons.

- (20) He lives up the road a couple of miles, Pebwater Farm, [ec₂] can't mistake it...

Symons, J. (1967). *The Progress of a Crime*, from Haegeman (2007), example (5c)

- (21) (a) [Have] [ec₂] Seen any good movies lately?
 (b) [Have] [ec₂] Read any good books?

Strasser, T. (2000). *Give a Boy a Gun*, p.110

Haegeman and Ihsane (1999:121) relate the rarity of 2nd person diary drop to the fact that “diary writing rarely addresses an interlocutor directly”—thus, it seems that the discourse function of English diary drop is first and foremost not to focus equally on speaker and hearer, but instead, to emphasise on the speaker by maintaining its perspective within the discourse. In the above data, 2nd person diary drop is licensed by the presence of a discourse antecedent (towards whom the direct speech is directed), or by questions (which address an interlocutor directly).¹³

Turning now to dropped 3rd person subjects, (22), partially a repetition of (14), shows that 3rd person subjects in English need a salient antecedent to be licensed.¹⁴

- (22) [ec₁] got the address from Mrs Whatever-hername-is, [ec₃] said it was care of Rider.
 Rider, I thought, I know that name, it's Geoff's friend and employer Billy. [ec₃] Doesn't call himself Billy any more, though.

Without an antecedent, no referential index can be assigned to the 3rd person null subjects in (22),¹⁵ hence they would be interpreted as 1st person subjects, by default (if made possible by inflection and context).

Concluding from the discussion above, an analysis of OBD in terms of diary drop does not seem to be an option.

¹¹ I render Sigurðsson's original notation.

¹² See also Weir (2008: 27).

¹³ Haegeman (2007: 3) also cites an example with generic interpretation: (i) ‘No, it wouldn't do for me. Sharing everything with your neighbours, [ec₂] haven't even got a bit of garden to call your own except for that pocket handkerchief out there. ...’ (Symons, J. (1967). *The End of Solomon Grundy*. London: The Crime Club, 30)

¹⁴ Therefore, I hypothesise that as in German, in English (at least) 3rd person diary gaps have to be analysed differently from 1st (and 2nd) person gaps.

¹⁵ Trivially, 3rd person pronouns, be they covert or overt, can never be interpreted *out of the blue*, not even in *pro-drop* languages, like Polish, where inflectional morphology is maximally distinct (person, number and gender):

(i) *Ø/*Ona mówila po polsku.

Ø/She spoke in Polish (‘She spoke Polish’)

2. GERMAN OBD – LICENSING AND IDENTIFYING CONDITIONS

By OBD I refer to the omission of 1st and 2nd person singular/plural subjects in Spec-CP of a German V2 clause. However, I do not want to exclude that there may exist languages where (a smaller set of) null subjects is licensed by a process similar and comparable to German OBD.¹⁶

In this section, I will show that (23) holds (not only for Standard German) and derive the validity of (23) by two independent pieces of evidence.

(23) OBD Hypothesis II

OBD is licensed by non-syncretic verbal inflections which distinctly mark person and number features of the subject.

It is generally assumed that German verbal inflectional paradigms show a lot of syncretisms which disallow distinct identification, or one-to-one correspondence, respectively, of spelled out form and person/number features (cf. Müller 2005, Fuß 2009).

Syncretisms within the German inflectional paradigms are marked bold in the table beneath:

(Table 1) *Inflectional paradigms, indicative present/preterite active, German können=‘can’; sagen=‘say’; kommen=‘come’; tragen=‘wear’; sein=‘be’*

	<i>Modal conjugation</i>	<i>Weak conjugation</i>	<i>Strong conjugation</i>	<i>Strong-umlauting conjugation</i>	<i>Suppletive conjugation</i>
1.Sg	kann/konnte	sage/sagte	komme/ kam	trage/ trug	bin/ war
2.Sg	kannst/konntest	sagst/sagtest	kommst/kamst	trägst/trugst	bist/warst
3.Sg	kann/konnte	sagt/sagte	kommt/kam	trägt/ trug	ist/ war
1.Pl	können/konnten	sagen/sagten	kommen/kamen	tragen/trugen	sind/waren
2.Pl	könnt/konntet	sagt/sagtet	kommt/kamt	tragt/trugt	seid/wart
3.Pl	können/konnten	sagen/sagten	kommen/kamen	tragen/trugen	sind/waren

As table 1 shows, with regard to syncretisms, three different conjugation classes have to be distinguished. These are (i) the modal conjugation, (ii) the strong/weak conjugation, and (iii) the strong-umlauting conjugation and the suppletive conjugation of auxiliary verbs:

(Table 2) *Systematic syncretisms within German inflectional paradigms*

<i>Syncretism</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Conjugation class</i>	<i>Tense</i>
1.Sg / 3.Sg	singular	all conjugation classes	preterite
		modal conjugation classes	present
1.Pl / 3.Pl	plural	all conjugation classes	all tenses
3.Sg / 2.Pl	mixed	weak/strong conjugation classes	present

The first piece of evidence in favour of the view that 1st and 2nd person Spec-CP null subjects are licensed by inflection, independently of an antecedent, was already presented in section

¹⁶One such case might be Icelandic, where referential null subjects are also limited to Spec-CP, and distinctly marked inflections determine their reference unambiguously—contrary to e.g. English and Swedish (see Sigurðsson, to appear). S. claims that these Icelandic null subjects are only *constrained*, but not *preconditioned* by agreement. He cites the following examples: (i) a. __ Ligg __ bara á ströndinni. (1sg); b. __ Liggjum __ bara á ströndinni. (1pl) [= ‘I am/We are just lying on the beach’]. However, as (ia/b) can be uttered *out of the blue* whereby the null subjects’ reference is unambiguously determined by inflection and not by context (a salient discourse antecedent), their interpretation seems to be made possible exclusively by inflection.

1.1. The main point there was that in contrast to 3rd person null subjects, 1st/2nd person null subjects are licensed though there is no salient discourse antecedent to which the gaps could possibly be linked. This was shown by the data in (9)-(11). Together with the Spanish example in (12) these data made clear that licensing conditions for German 1st/2nd person null subjects differ from those for 3rd person null subjects, a division which does not hold for *pro*-drop languages.

Regarding 3rd person null subjects, one could claim that at least quasi-argumental instances of 3rd person null subjects can be dropped in German and put forward the following datum:

- (24) _ Regnet ja wirklich übelst grad'.
 [*It_{expl}*] rains indeed really very-bad at-the-moment

However, such a sentence can only be uttered when the situation the speaker refers to is the current discourse topic, i.e. (24) is only possible when uttered while looking out of the window. To capture (24), I will assume that the expletive ‘es’ represents the current discourse topic—see Falk (1993: 172) for the view that in a wider sense situations which are represented by expletives can also be topics, and—consequently—can be topic-dropped.

That this is indeed the right way to account for (24) is proven by (25). Here, no situational discourse topic (a weather situation) is available, hence an expletive weather-*it* cannot be dropped:

- (25)*_ Regnet bestimmt, wenn wir in Urlaub gehen.
 [*It_{expl}*] rains for sure, when we on holiday go

So, from the data presented so far we can infer that only 1st/2nd person subject gaps in CP-Spec of finite V2 clauses can be licensed without reference to an antecedent, *out of the blue*.

The second piece of evidence will be given by dialects—in this case, Swabian. As table 3 shows, in this (Southern German) dialect only singular verb forms are distinctly marked. Plural forms are identical for all persons.

(Table 3) *Inflectional paradigms, indicative present active; Swabian könne=‘can’; sage=‘say’; komme=‘come’; trage=‘wear’; sei=‘be’; the personal pronouns are: I/Du/Er,Se,Es/Mir/Ihr/Se*

1.Sg	koa/konnt	sag/ sagte	komm/ kam	trag/ trug	ben/ war
2.Sg	koasch/konntesch	sagsch/sagtesch	kommsch/kamsch	trägsch/trugsch	bisch/warsch
3.Sg	koa/konnt	sagt/ sagte	kommt/ kam	trägt/ trug	isch/ war
1.Pl	könnet/konntets	saget/saget	komet/kamet	traget/truget	sen/waret
2.Pl	könnet/konntets	saget/saget	komet/kamet	traget/truget	sen/waret
3.Pl	könnet/konntets	saget/saget	komet/kamet	traget/truget	sen/waret

So, from the hypothesis in (23) we would predict that due to syncretisms within all conjugation classes in plural number, OBD should only be possible with 1st and 2nd person singulars. This is borne out by the data in (26):

- (26) (a) Passet uff, Ø komm glei nüba. (1st Sg)
 Take care, [*I*] come soon along
 (b) Ø Bisch wirklich a Liebe. (2nd Sg)
 [*You*] are really a lovely-one_{fem}
 (c) *Ø Kommt net. (3rd Sg)
 [*He*] comes not

- | | | |
|-----|---|----------------------|
| (d) | *Ø Gebet nix.
[We] give nothing | (1 st Pl) |
| (e) | *Ø Kommet wohl immer z' spät.
[You-PL] come surely always too late | (2 nd Pl) |
| (f) | *Ø Sen wieder net `komme.
[They] are again not come | (3 rd Pl) |

The Swabian data also show that it is neither sufficient nor necessary to assume speaker/hearer features to capture the OBD phenomenon, as it is solely determined by discrete inflectional endings.¹⁷

Finally, one aspect concerning the syncretism problem should be mentioned: as 3rd person subject gaps are only derivable via a salient antecedent (i.e. by topic drop), 3rd person subject gaps are excluded from OBD anyhow, and it does not matter whether there are some inflectional forms which are syncretic with the 3rd person or not. If this mattered, neither 1st nor 3rd (respectively, neither 2nd nor 3rd) person subjects would be able to be dropped, since syncretisms constitute a symmetric relation. Note also that there are no syncretisms between 1st and 2nd persons within any German conjugation class.

3. GERMAN OBD – THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this section I will say something about the nature of the empty pronoun involved in OBD, and try to give an explanation for why referential null subjects in German are only licensed in Spec-CP of finite V2 clauses. Furthermore, I will close with a suggestion on how to integrate German within the classes of null/partial/non-null subject languages.

In section 1 and 2 it was shown that 3rd person null subjects in German have to be recovered via an extrasentential antecedent (like dropped objects) by which the gap's content can be identified. Seeing that fact in the light of 3rd persons pronouns identification in general or e.g. with regard to the identification of 3rd person null subjects in *pro*-drop languages (Samek-Lodovici 1996, Frascarelli 2007), one can be tempted to qualify German as a very 'economical' language which does not license 3rd person subjects by (unnecessarily) distinct inflectional morphemes, as 3rd person null subjects have to be identified by a salient discourse antecedent anyway.

Regarding the nature of the empty element involved in OBD, I will assume a silent pronoun, *pro*, being licensed by discrete inflectional endings which are marked for person and number. The configuration by which OBD-*pro* is licensed is a Spec-Head configuration whereby the verb in C° carries the person/number specifications of the empty subject (located in Spec-CP) and stands in an Agree relation with it. The OBD gap cannot be PRO, as the well-formedness of OBD is not dependent on a controlling (matrix) argument. Furthermore, it cannot be a trace, as we had to assume that an empty category c-commands a trace. A bound empty operator is also not at hand, as empirical data has proved that Spec-CP subjects in finite environments are well-formed *out of the blue*.

With regard to the positional restriction of OBD, the first assumption I will make refers to German sentence structure. I assume that in finite V2 clauses the finite verb has moved to C° and any constituent preceding the finite verb is located in Spec-CP. I do not share the view that German has a designated subject position, but instead assume a *Haider*-like sentence structure for German (see e.g. Haider 2010), whereby in embedded sentences

¹⁷ Note that all occurrences of null subjects which are blocked due to syncretisms can be topic dropped, as e.g. in (i):

(i) Warum bisch denn so sauer **auf ons**?
Why are you PRT so angry on us?
 Ha, _ kommet halt immer z'spät.
 INTERJ, [you-PL] come PRT always too late

introduced by a complementiser, the subject as well as all arguments/adjuncts are located within the VP/adjoined to it.

I must start by admitting that for every instance of OBD I have to allow a topic drop analysis when a salient discourse antecedent is contextually given. At the moment this option cannot be excluded (except for cases when 1st/2nd person null subjects are uttered *out of the blue*). However, an analysis which assumes 1st/2nd person subject drop to be topic drop has to include the more or less uneconomical process of ‘person conversion’, which is due to the lack of person agreement between antecedent and gap,¹⁸ shown in (27):

- (27) (a) Wo bist **du**?
 Where are you?
 _ Bin hier.
 [*I*] am here
- (b) Wo habe **ich** mich versteckt?
 Where have I myself hidden?
 _ Bist hinter'm Schrank.
 [*You*] are behind-the cupboard

To account for the positional restrictions for OBD I will offer a rather global constraint to explain the impossibility of OBD within the Mittelfeld (i.e. the ‘IP domain’ up to the CP in German). Assuming that OBD in the Mittelfeld would be an option, we would have to allow topic drop and ‘Mittelfeld-OBD’ at the same time. This, however, would yield structures like (28b):

- (28) Wo sind denn **die Kinder**?
 Where are PRT *the children?*
- (a) Die haben wir nicht gesehen. (overt pronouns)
 Them have we we not seen
- (b) * _ haben_{1sg/3pl} Ø nicht gesehen. (covert pronouns)
 (i) [*Them*] have [*we*] not seen (topic drop and OBD)
 (ii) [*They*] have not see (topic drop or OBD)

Then, (28b) could be either understood as indicated in (28bi), ‘We haven’t seen them’ (with the dropped object (derived from the subject *Kinder* in the context) in Spec-CP, and the dropped OBD-subject in the Mittelfeld, or as translated in the second gloss, (28bii), meaning ‘The children didn’t see’ where the antecedent *Kinder* is interpreted as a dropped subject (*Die* ‘They’), in Spec-CP.

Such ambiguities would arise (i) since both subjects and objects can undergo topic drop, and (ii) due to syncretisms within verbal inflectional morphology. Due to these facts, German OBD must be restricted to the same position as topic drop, in order to prevent such ambiguous structures. The positional restriction to Spec-CP is forced by discourse conditions on topic drop, as Spec-CP is “the only position in which an empty element can fail to have a clause internal identification, and is available for discourse identification” (Rizzi 1994: 162).

The last note refers to the question of whether German should still count as a non-null subject language (see the contributions in Biberauer, Holmberg, Roberts and Sheehan 2010). The evidence that it is not seems to prevail, as the differences from non-null subject languages like English and Swedish are too apparent to put German within this class. Furthermore, it was shown that licensing of null subjects in the latter languages follows different regularities.

¹⁸ If we stipulated a general ban on ‘person conversion’ for topic drop we could also derive the ungrammaticality of dropped 1st/2nd person null objects (which is commonly assumed in the literature, see e.g. Cardinaletti 1990, Steinbach 2007, Sigurðsson to appear).

On the other hand, German lacks a generic null subject, which differentiates it from partial null-subject languages, and, of course, German is by no means a null-subject language.

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