Null subjects in Middle Low German
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As is well-known, referential null subjects (RNS) are disallowed in the Modern Germanic languages (Rosenkvist 2009), with a few exceptions (e.g. Axel & Weiß 2010). While RNS in the older Germanic languages have been studied in some detail (recently by Rosenkvist 2009, Axel 2007, Schlachter 2012, Van Gelderen 2012, Walkden 2013, 2014, Kinn 2014), considerably less is known about the intermediate periods. The present paper analyses the distribution of RNS in Middle Low German (MLG), the West-Germanic language spoken and written in northern Germany (and, in connection to the Hanseatic trade, around the North and Baltic seas) between c. 1250 and 1600, the syntax of which has only recently begun to attract the attention of linguists. It is shown in this paper that RNS are attested in MLG, and while they show remarkable continuity with Old Saxon, they are distributed in a peculiar fashion, posing a challenge both for an analysis in terms of partial pro-drop as well as in terms of topic drop. The present study is based on a 45,000-word corpus of eight MLG texts (14th -16th ccenturies) from three genres (laws, charters, (religious) prose).

In the great majority of the cases, a pronominal subject is omitted in a main clause introduced by the conjunction vnde 'and'. However, an analysis in terms of conjunction reduction is not available in the relevant cases. Often, the referent of the RNS is typically found in a preceding adjunct clause, such as a relative or conditional clause. Hence, the antecedent cannot bind the null pronoun. In other cases, the referent in the discourse appears in a different number, case, or grammatical function, adding further doubt about an analysis in terms of conjunction reduction. In (1) for instance, the referent is contained in the first of two conjuncts, but it is not the subject there, but the object. The overt nominative form is found inside an embedded (final) clause (dat ghi … weerden).

(1)   God gheue iv also to soeken vn(de) to lessen dat ghi daer by verbetert weerden. Vnde
        [pro] willen dit boeck to godes eeren beghinne(n).
        God give.sbjn you.acc.pl therefore to search and to read that you.nom.pl there at
        improved be and [you] will this book to God's honour begin
        'May God inspire you to search and to read, in order for you to be improved by it.
        And [you] may/may [you] begin (to read) this book to honour God.'
        (Münster, *Spieghel der leyen*, 1444)

More generally, it can be noted that vnde 'and' is in many cases not used as a coordinating conjunction, but rather as a discourse marker dividing up chunks of information. Hence, cases like (1) are not in fact conjunction reduction, but contain genuine RNS. Furthermore, RNS are not only found in what could be argued to be a topic position as in (1). In (2), the topic position is already filled with an adverbially used infinitive phrase.

(2)   v(m)me vns to verlose(n) heuest [pro] willen anneme(n) vnse kranch(ei)t
        for us to deliver have [you] want.IPP on-take our disease
        'In order to relieve us, you have wanted to take on our disease'
        (Münster, *Dat myrren bundeken*, 1480)

That is, both an analysis in terms of conjunction reduction and in terms of topic drop is ruled out. As null objects are attested, if rarely, null expletives are frequent, and as null generic subjects are possible, if dispreferred (as in other older West Germanic pro-drop systems), we propose to analyse MLG as a partial pro-drop language. As in Old Saxon (Walkden 2014),

there is a significant preference for RNS to be 3rd person and to occur in main clauses. This makes MLG appear conservative compared to languages contemporary to it, viz. Early NewHigh German (preferring 2 nd as well as 3 rd person, Volodina 2009) and Middle Norwegian (preferring 1 st and 3 rd person, Kinn in prep.). A closer look reveals a curious distribution: About 60% of the RNS are found in SpecCP/SpecFinP, where they strongly prefer 3 rd person. 1 st person is possible, but rarer, and 2 nd person RNS are not attested in this position. About 40% on the other hand are found in a position following C, i.e., the so-called Wackernagel position. In this position, all persons are attested, especially 2 nd and 3 rd , though 3 rd person remains most frequent in absolute numbers.

Based on these observations, we argue that MLG distinguished two different kinds of RNS, one in SpecCP/SpecFinP and one in SpecTP. In this respect, MLG resembles Old Icelandic (cf. Sigurðsson 1993:264). As in Old Icelandic, we argue that the former is a null topic, or rather, a full DP with a [uD]-feature licensed by a null topic operator as proposed by Walkden (2014) for Old Saxon, among others. This will in most cases be an Aboutness topic operator in SpecShiftP, as under Walkden's analysis, but it may also be a topic operator in SpecΛ AP (Sigurðsson 2011, identifying the referent of the null subject as the logophoric agent).

The latter type of RNS, on the other hand, is what Sigurðsson calls "genuine pro". Based on its distribution and the system of strong and deficient pronouns (cf. Cardinaletti & Starke 1999) in MLG more generally, we argue that this element is a phonetically null clitic pronoun. This analysis is supported by the observation that RNS in this position are mostly 2 nd or 3 rd person singular, which are exactly the categories for which there are also overt clitic forms in the MLG pronominal system.

This analysis predicts that two null arguments should be possible in a single clause, which is indeed borne out, as (3) demonstrates.

(3) ... du byst alleine myn i wiff vude [pro i] hebbe nye [nene ander] j gehad noch [pro i] [Ø j] hyr na hebben wil
... you are alone my wife and [I] have never no other had nor [I] [another] here after have will
'...you alone are my wife, and [I] have never had another one, nor will [I] ever have [another one]'
(Hamburg, *Griseldis*, 1502)

We take the fact that the SpecCP/SpecFinP-type of RNS is more frequent (60%) than the Wackernagel clitic type (40%) as evidence for MLG beginning the transition to a topic-drop language, though the distribution of the RNS in SpecCP/SpecFinP is still not the same as in the modern V2-Germanic languages, and MLG retains a proportion of genuine pro.

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