8. Null objects
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I. The form-meaning mismatch

- Null objects in Latin: definite (1) and indefinite (2)

(1) convocatis suis clientibus, facile incendit
    call.together-PPP-INS.PL own-INS.PL dependent-INS.PL easily excite-PERF-3SG
    [Vercongetorix] summoned together his dependents, and easily excited them.'
    (Caesar, De bello Gallico 7.4.1, cf. Luraghi 2004:242)

(2) Si a in lus vocat, a, ito.
    if in law-ACC call-PRS-3SG GO-IPV-3SG
    'If someone summons someone else to court, the latter shall come.' (lus XII tab. 1,1)

- Null objects: an emblematic case of a 0:1 form-meaning mismatch.

- There is evidence that null objects in Indo European (IE) languages are 'real' syntactic objects.

i. Thus, "under what conditions can the mismatch between meaning and form be tolerated?" (Rizzi 1986:501)

ii. How is the unexpressed piece of information retrieved?

Question → What are the conditions licensing null objects? How and why do they change over time?

II. Motivation

- The diachrony of null objects has rarely been examined in depth.

- They compete with overt object pronouns, probably in a non-arbitrary way.

- Recoverability depends on accessibility hierarchies.

- It is usually held that in later stages of IE, null objects became more and more restricted (but see our hypotheses in IV)

i. We expect changes in a linguistic system to influence the distribution of null objects;

ii. we expect such changes to give rise to new configurations in which null objects are licensed.

III. Research questions

- How is the usage of null objects affected by language change?

- Given several language stages, what are the structural and discourse conditions for each language stage under examination?

- How do these conditions interact with the grammatical system of each language stage?

- Does the loss of a certain type/function of null objects correlate with other grammatical changes?

- Similarly: under which conditions do new types of null objects arise?

- Are there shifts within the types of null objects?

IV. Hypotheses and method

Hypotheses → Changes in the distribution of null objects depend on (1) developments in the pronoun system, (2) changes in the syntactic system, (3) competition between different accessibility hierarchies. Thus, the availability of null objects can be reduced but also enhanced over time.

- In-depth study of the development from Late Latin to Early Romance (corpus-based)

  i. the frequency of null objects vs. overt objects over time;

  ii. the distribution of null objects vs. clitic and other pronouns;

  iii. the syntactic and discourse-structural conditions governing this distribution.

- Some types of null objects in Old French Coordination

  (3) il [..] prent [s’ amie], devant lui, baisant et acolant
      he takes his-F friend-F in front him kissing and hugging
      'he [..] took his beloved in front of him, kissing and hugging her.' (Aucassin et Nicolette 28.20, Trobberg 2004:152)

  (4) Einsi le pans et cuit
      thus it= think.PRS.1SG and believe.PRS.1SG and believe.PRS.1SG
      'Thus I think and believe it.' (Perceval 1044, cf. Donaldson 2012:70)

- Adjunct clauses

  (5) il les conquiest sanz ocrir
      he them= conquered-3SG without.kill.INF
      'He conquered them without killing them.' (Questa del Saint Graal §54, cf. Jensen 1990:74, Donaldson 2012:74)

- Écrasement: Clitic sequences laïelles + lilor → lilor

  (6) que e an li aport [ses armes], et an li aporte
      that the one him= bring-SBJV.3SG his weapons and one him= brings
      'that someone bring him his weapon, and one brought it to him' (Perceval 2138–39, cf. Donaldson 2012: 69)

- Topic-comment structures

  (7) [Cest nostre rei], por coi lessas
      this our king for what let-GERF.2SG flounder-INF
      'This king of ours, why did you let him flounder?' (Roland 1.2583, cf. Arteaga 1997:2, Trobberg 2004:137)

V. Connections to other research projects

- Type of form-meaning mismatch: 7,9 (0:1 form-meaning mismatch)

- Empirical domain: 2,5,11 (language change)

- Content: 2 (discourse conditions), 5 (non-canonical arguments)

- Methods: most projects (corpus study), in part. 11

VI. Possible follow-up studies

1. Null objects from Old French to Middle French
2. Null objects in languages with similar time-depth, as e.g. Greek and Indo-Aryan
3. Null objects in modern Romance languages: A comparative approach