REFERENTIAL NULL SUBJECTS IN GERMANIC V2-LANGUAGES

1. Specific aims

Referential null subjects (RefNS) in V2-languages constitute a research topic which has not been extensively explored. I therefore aim to investigate and analyse RefNS in contemporary as well as ancient Germanic language varieties (setting out from my current ongoing research about RefNS in Övdalian), with the intention to first map the phenomenon of RefNs in Germanic, and then to establish whether there is a direct link between RefNS in the ancient languages and in the contemporary in this respect. The theoretical background will be modern versions of generative grammar; in a longer perspective, one of the goals of the project is an improved general understanding of RefNS. There are hence empirical as well as theoretical aspects of the project.

The project will culminate in a monography about RefNS and a web site with interactive maps etc, and it will be conducted within a vital and well-established international research network (ScanDiaSyn/NORMS).

2. Referential null subjects – an overview

In most of the Romance languages, referential subjects are in general covert. In a number of influential studies, Rizzi (1982, 1986) suggested that the languages of the world could be divided in on the one hand null subject languages (NSLs) and on the other languages which require overt subjects. In NSLs, there is a specific subject pronoun (pro) which is syntactically similar to regular pronouns, but not pronounced. According to Rizzi’s hypothesis, pro must be licensed and identified – the licensiation specifies which structural positions that allow pro, and the identification recreates the content of pro, usually through ”strong” verb agreement. For this reason, languages with ”weak” verb agreement only allow non-referential null subjects (and the presence of RefNS in a language implies that also non-referential null subjects must be possible). An important factor is thus verb agreement (Taraldsen 1978, Rohrbacher 1999). Integrating these facts in a generative analysis, Borer (1986) proposed that agreement affixes per se may function as subjects in NSLs, a proposal which has become a standard analysis: ”Indeed, the possibility of null subjects in a given language has been generally attributed to the pronominal character of its agreement morphology” (Frascarelli 2007:692). More recently, similar suggestions have been put forth by e.g. Barbosa (1995, 2009), Platzack (2004) and Koeneman (2006).

Languages without verb agreement which nevertheless allow RefNS are a problem for Rizzi’s hypothesis, and also partial and asymmetric NSLs are

1 For a summary of this research, see Ackema et al (2006) or Roberts (2007:24ff).
2 The correspondence between covert subjects and ”strong” verb agreement is not a new observation, however; it was a well known fact for the Neogrammarians (cf. e.g. Wessén 1965:187ff).
problematic. In a partial NSL (such as Finnish and Hebrew), RefNs are not allowed in all person/number-combinations, and in an asymmetric NSL (such as Arabic and Old French), RefNS are only possible in certain syntactic configurations.

In later versions of generative grammar (Chomsky 1995, 2001), the subject cannot consist of a specific unrealized pronoun (pro) which is identified by agreement on the finite verb, since φ-features (gender, number, person) are only interpretable on NPs/DPs. Agreement affixes on the finite verb that express φ-features are therefore uninterpretable and must be valued and eventually deleted in the course of the syntactic derivation, before Spell-Out. After Spell-Out, there can therefore be no φ-features on the verb which may identify a null subject. Holmberg (2005:536) points out that ”The theory of pro [...] cannot be maintained in a theory making the distinction between interpretable and uninterpretable features that plays a crucial role in Chomsky 1995:chapter 4 and subsequent work by Chomsky and others.”.

The theoretical development within generative grammar has hence resulted in a new interest for RefNs and NSLs. New analyses has e.g. been proposed by Holmberg (2005; Finnish, 2007), Ackema et al (2006), Barbosa (2009; Portuguese), Frascarelli (2007; Italian) och Sigurðsson (2008). These new analyses either depart from Borer’s pronominal-affix model (see above) or from the assumption that RefNS somehow may be identified through the discourse context (like e.g. Frascarelli 2007). These two strategies for identification appear to be the only options available in the current generative model.

An indication that the research about RefNS is a hot topic within current linguistics is the fact that two comprehensive studies are to be published soon: Empty Pronouns (De Gruyter) and Null Subjects: The Structure of Parametric Variation (Cambridge University Press). Furthermore, Studia Linguistica 63:1 (April 2009) is a thematic issue about partial NSLs – however, no data from any Germanic language are discussed in the articles there.

3. The importance of the project for the field of research

As for the Germanic languages, non-referential subjects may be omitted in e.g. Icelandic and German (Sigurðsson & Egerland 2009), but no Germanic standard language allow RefNS. This observation led Jaeggli & Safir (1989) and Rohrbacher (1999) to the assumption that V2-word order is incompatible with RefNS. For this reason, the research about RefNS has only very marginally touched upon Germanic circumstances.

There are thus no systematic or comprehensive studies or analyses based on RefNS in Germanic V2-languages, and contemporary hypotheses concerning the syntactic properties of RefNS in general fall short, accordingly, when it comes to RefNS in Germanic. It is indicative of the research situation that Olaf Koeneman, who is active in a Dutch project about dialect syntax (SAND), in his article about partial NSLs only discusses Finnish and Hebrew (Koeneman
2006), and not e.g. Frisian. Hence, an investigation and a subsequent analysis of RefNS in Germanic would certainly constitute an important contribution to the research about RefNS – empirically as well as theoretically.

4. Preliminary results 1 – RefNS in Övdalian

In Övdalian (a language variety spoken by 2000–3000 people in the northwestern part of Dalecarlia, Sweden; it was first described by Näsman 1733), subject pronouns corresponding to we (wįð) and you (pl.) (ið) are in general omitted (Levander 1909:109f, Rosenkvist 1994, 2006, 2009). When these subjects are overt, they are interpreted as emphatic/contrastive (in most cases – see below). The non-referential subject it (eð) can however never be covert – a fact which contradicts in principle all hypotheses about the morphosyntactic conditions for RefNS (cf. e.g. Rizzi 1986).

Övdalian verbs are only inflected for person and number in 1pl and 2pl, and as was shown above, both of these subjects are in general covert. However, these null subjects follow different syntactic restrictions.

Hence, Övdalian is a partial asymmetric NSL – only 1pl and 2pl can be covert, but not in the same syntactic configurations. This circumstance and the fact that non-referential subjects must be overt indicate that Övdalian is a unique NSL. Furthermore, the overt version of 1pl (wįð) is only interpreted as emphatic/contrastive when it occurs in a position where it could have been null, whereas the 2pl-subject (ið) always can be null, and consequently it is also always understood as emphatic/contrastive when overt, irrespective of its position (SpecTP or SpecCP).

In Rosenkvist (2006, 2009), null ið is analysed as a defective pronoun; since the pronoun and the relevant affix are conspicuously similar (ið v. -ið), a RefNS could have emerged (diachronically) when the speakers confused the pronoun with the affix (cf. Fuß 2005:159, Koeneman 2006). Following Déchaine & Wiltschko

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3 A volume with articles about Övdalian morphosyntax has recently been accepted for publication by John Benjamins, in the *Linguistik Aktuell*-series, with Kristine Bentzen and myself as editors.

4 The hook on i shows that the vowel is nasal – nasality is a phonematic feature for vowels in Övdalian (Steensland 2000:364f).
(2002), I assume that 1p and 2p subjects are DPs, but in Övdalian the similarity of the 2pl-forms enable the speakers to split the subject-DP, so that the D-feature cliticizes to the verb in T, where it is realized as -ið. The remains of the DP, i.e. φP, EPP-moves to SpecTP where φP recieves values for D and φ. For this reason, the φP in SpecTP is always interpreted as a definite 2pl-subject. The analysis thus builds on the syncretism between ið and -ið – see figure 1, where the analysis of the simple clause Kåytið strai’tt ('You are running quickly') is presented.

![Diagram](image)

Figure 1. The derivation of null ið.

When there is an overt 2pl-subject, I assume that the affix is analysed as a regular (non-pronominal) affix.

Holmberg (2005) suggests that also in Finnish, there is a null subject in the shape of a φP, but unlike Övdalian null ið, the Finnish null φP cannot recieve any value for D from T, and accordingly the Finnish null φP is interpreted as generic, unless there is a possible antecedent in the context.

Null wįð may on the other hand not be regarded as a reanalyzed pronoun (contra the hypothesis presented by Koeneman 2006). My explanation is based on the fact that wįð can only be null in main clauses (in SpecCP) and in such embedded clauses which allow extraction. Whenever a constituent is topicalized in the embedded clause, extraction as well as null wįð are illicit. It is thus not possible to extract ittað ('this') over a topicalized i morgu ('tomorrow') in (3 a), and likewise, null wįð is impossible in such a clause (3 b). However, extraction and null wįð are both allowed in an embedded clause without any topicalized constituent (3 c).

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5 Vikner (1995:chapter 4) analyzes such clauses as instances of CP-recursion:

\[ \text{[CP [C° at [CP i morgu C° irum]]...} \]

Hence, there is no appropriate landing site for the subject in front of the finite verb. Cf. also Julien (2007:139).
3. a. *Ittað saggd Bo at i morgu irum wįð tungner djārā.
   *This Bo said that tomorrow are-1pl we forced do
   'This Bo said that we must do tomorrow'

   b. *Bo saggd at i morgu irum tungner djārā ittað.
   Bo said that tomorrow are-1pl forced do this
   'Bo said that tomorrow must we do this'

   c. Ittað saggd Bo at irum tungner djārā morgu .
   *This said Bo that are-pl forced do tomorrow
   'This said Bo that we must do tomorrow'

A way to make sense of these data is to assume that null wįð somehow is interpreted by the surrounding discourse (cf. Frascarelli 2007, Sigurðsson 2008), and that when there is no possibility to access the discourse, via the embedded SpecCP, the identification of null wįð fails. Sigurðsson (2008:13ff) assumes that there is a Context Linker in the pre-field of the clause, and in the Germanic languages a topicalized constituent blocks access to a position where a constituent may be identified in an Agree-relation with the Context Linker. For this reason, Topic Drop is only possible from SpecCP in main clauses in Germanic.

Figure 2. Identification of a null subject via a Context Linker.

In figure 2, it is shown that a null subject (Ø), with the same φ-features as the verb affix (Agr), may be hindered by an intervening constituent (X), and thus it cannot reach the Context Linker – accordingly, neither can it be successfully identified. The analysis is quite reminiscent of Frascarelli’s analysis of null 3p-subjects in Romance languages (Frascarelli 2007:718, 722), although she assumes that there is an Aboutness-shift TopicP with specific semantic/pragmatic properties in the prefield of the clause.

It is unclear whether Övdalian wįð obeys the same non-syntactic restrictions as the Romance 3p-RefNS; I intend to investigate this during the project.

5. Preliminary results 2 – RefNS in contemporary Germanic V2-varieties

Övdalian is merely one of several Germanic partial NSLs (Platzack 2004, Holmberg 2005, Koeneman 2006). It is remarkable that these languages/dialects only allow RefNS in 1p and/or 2p, and that RefNS always seem to be identified by distinctive verb agreement (but the reverse is not true – some cases of seemingly
distinct agreement forms do not allow RefNS). In table 1, the verb forms that appear with RefNS are in bold.

Bavarian and Lower Bavarian are well documented (Bayer 1984, Weiβ 1998), and I have myself investigated Övdalian. But otherwise, there are no systematic or comprehensive studies (cf. de Haan 1994, Cooper 1995, Hoekstra 1997). Above all are the Yiddish conditions for RefNS poorly known – the two accounts that are known to me (Prince 1998, Jacobs 2005) actually contradict each other.\(^6\) In table 1, I present the version given by Jacobs (2005).

\[\text{Table 1. Verb agreement and RefNS in some modern Germanic V2-varieties.}\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bavarian</th>
<th>L. Bavarian</th>
<th>Zürich Ger.</th>
<th>Övdalian</th>
<th>Yiddish</th>
<th>Frisian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sg.</td>
<td>kumm</td>
<td>kumm</td>
<td>chume</td>
<td>kumb</td>
<td>kum</td>
<td>kom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>kummst</td>
<td>kummst</td>
<td>chunnsh</td>
<td>kumb</td>
<td>kumst</td>
<td>komst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>kummt</td>
<td>kummt</td>
<td>chunnt</td>
<td>kumb</td>
<td>kumt</td>
<td>komt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>kumman</td>
<td>kumma</td>
<td>chömed</td>
<td>kumum</td>
<td>kunn</td>
<td>komme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>kummts</td>
<td>kummts</td>
<td>chömed</td>
<td>kumið</td>
<td>kunt</td>
<td>komme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>kumman</td>
<td>kumman</td>
<td>chömed</td>
<td>kumå</td>
<td>kunn</td>
<td>komme</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is unclear why 1p and 2p have a special status. Sigurðsson (2004) proposes that the feature Person may have syntactic repercussions, but is is also possible that different pronouns actually are different types of phrases. As mentioned above, Déchaine & Witzschko (2002:426) assume such a difference. According to them, 1p and 2p are DPs, 3p is a \(\Phi\)P and the generic one is a NP. If the Germanic RefNS follow this categorization, it is to be expected that their syntactic properties vary – this is also a question which I intend to investigate closer in the course of the project. One may note, however, that in Kashmiri, a non-Germanic V2-language, also 3p-RefNS are possible (Bhatt 1999:48).

The West Germanic varieties in table 1 have agreeing subordinators and clitic subjects, and in these varieties RefNS are in general only possible when there is an agreeing element in C. There are however also language specific restrictions which do not support any generalizations. For example, in Zürich German \(i\) (‘I’) can only be null in front of clitic pronouns and, oddly, in front of \(em\), a marker for dative masculine (Cooper 1995:63). In Yiddish, RefNS seem to be delimited by the discourse context, except for 2sg, which may be null everywhere. Such restrictions are most plausibly caused by language specific circumstances – the Övdalian difference between 1pl and 2pl is yet another example.

It will be necessary for me to seek assistance from local researchers when it comes to Frisian etc. Therefore, I have taken preliminary contacts with Helmut Weiβ (Frankfurt), Jarich Hoekstra (Kiel), Erik Haeberli (Geneva) and the Yiddish Institute in Vilnius (however, since Lund has a national responsibility

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\(^6\) Koeneman (2006:86) claims that there are no RefNS at all in Yiddish, which underlines that our knowledge of RefNS in Yiddish is very limited.

\(^7\) or \(kumma\), without RefNS.
for Yiddish studies, some if the research pertaining to Yiddish may be carried out in Lund). Everyone have given a positive response and offered their support. Through ScanDiaSyn I have furthermore contact with researchers in the Netherlands (the SAND-project).

Primarily, I intend to collect data from existing studies and from local experts – in the first hand linguists who are native speakers of the respective language varieties, in the case of the contemporary varieties. Having experience from field work in Sweden, I realize that similar undertakings in e.g. Switzerland would be very time consuming and would require substantial local support. Establishing a contact with reliable informants takes a long time, and in general it is necessary to return to the same informants repeatedly to assure that the tasks have been correctly understood and that the assembled data are trustworthy and relevant (cf. Schütze 1996 and Cornips & Poletto 2005 for relevant methodological dicussions).

6. Preliminary results 3 – RefNS in Old Germanic V2-varieties

RefNS can also be found in Old Germanic languages (Sigurðsson 1993, van Gelderen 2000, Fuß 2005, Axel 2007, Håkansson 2008) and preliminary studies (Rosenkvist 2008, Rosenkvist & Håkansson 2009) indicate that there are remarkable similarities between RefNS in e.g. Old Icelandic, Old English, Old High German and Old Swedish. In all of these languages, RefNS seem to be low frequent, most common in 3p and in principle restricted to main clauses. They furthermore do not appear to be directly related to verb agreement, and overt subjects do not seem to trigger emphatic/contrastive readings. All of these properties suggest that RefNS in the Old Germanic languages are of another type than the RefNS in the contemporary Germanic language varieties; the opposite hypothesis – that the modern RefNS are direct descendants of the Old RefNS – is however launched by Axel & Weiβ (in print).

In table 2, the verb forms that could identify a RefNS distinctly are in bold (as for Old French, see below). However, in all of these languages 3p-RefNS were most frequent, in spite of the fact that agreement in 3p in almost all cases is non-distinct; in general, the form for 3pl is identical with the infinitive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Verb agreement in some Old Germanic V2-languages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old Icelandic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>sg.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 vaki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 vakir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 vakir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>pl.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 vokum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 vakið</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 vaka</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RefNS in the Old Germanic languages have not been studied systematically and comprehensively – each study is centered on a particular language (e.g., Axel 2007 studied Old High German, and Håkansson 2008 focussed on Old Swedish). The research situations for Old and modern Germanic RefNS are thus quite similar.

Old French was a non-Germanic V2-language which allowed RefNS (Adams 1987, Vance 1995), and RefNS in Old French seem to display virtually the same properties as RefNS in the Old Germanic languages (Barbara Vance, pc). Hence, the conditions for RefNS in Old Germanic may be related to the V2-word order.

7. A short project description

Through ScanDiaSyn/NORMS I have been included in a vital research network, with a focus on dialect syntax. Prof. Berndt Kortmann (Freiburg) recently commented (in an evaluation) that ScanDiaSyn ”has attracted a lot of attention and admiration among dialect researchers all across Europe over the last few years.”. Hence, I will be able to present and discuss ongoing research at project workshops etc, and already I have established contacts with researchers in the Netherlands (the SAND-project) and in northern Italy (the ASIS-project), e.g. Naturally, I will also continue to present talks at international conferences and to publish results in international journals.

The following issues will be central in the project:

- which syntactic configurations allow/disallow RefNS in the different language varieties? More specifically, I will investigate the relations between RefNS and finite verbs, other agreeing elements, and clause type.
- how are RefNS in the contemporary Germanic V2-varieties linked to RefNS in the Old Germanic languages? Or are they unrelated?
- how should RefNS in Germanic V2-languages be analyzed?
- what do RefNS in Germanic V2-languages mean for general theories about RefNS?

Initially, I will establish methods for the empirical investigations (departing from the detailed methodological considerations forming the fundament of the field work in ScanDiaSyn/NORMS, as well as from Schütze 1996 and Cornips & Poletto 2005). Then I aim to finish my studies of RefNS in Övdalian, and begin with Yiddish and Frisian, eventually approaching the better documented varieties Bavarian and Zürich German in the second year of the project. As mentioned above, I do not rule out field studies, but I see them as a last resort. Also the Old Germanic languages will be explored during year 2. During the final year of the project, I will mainly focus on the theoretical analysis and on
the monograph. I also intend to produce a project web site, with the aid of the ScanDiaSyn-group at the Text Laboratory in Oslo.

A preliminary time plan is presented below.

- year 1: methodological preparations, project planning, collection of data (Övdalian, Frisian, Yiddish). Research visits in Vilnius and Kiel.
- year 2: collection of data (Zürich German, Bavarian, Lower Bavarian, the Old Germanic languages). Research visits in Geneva and Frankfurt.
- year 3: collocation of data, theoretical analysis. Final work on monography and web site.

During the two first years, I will need support from local experts at the different locations. For that reason, I apply for funds for the research visits (travel and accommodation) as well as for local assistants. I will also need a portable computer.

I consider the possibility to carry out the project successfully as high, at present, and I am also convinced that the project would make an important contribution to the modern research about RefNS, and to the understanding of RefNS in general. The project would hence add to a very vital and exciting international field of linguistic research.
References


