Preface

The textbook and reference grammar view of null subjects as found in, for example, Finnish is that the pronouns are not needed because the agreement on the finite verb shows the person and number of the subject.

Because the personal endings SG1, SG2, PL1, PL2 attached to the verbs give clear information about the grammatical subject, it is natural that the corresponding pronoun subjects are often omitted (Karlsson 2018: 113).

In the case of languages with null subjects but no agreement, such as Chinese, the textbook view is that pronouns can be omitted because the context can indicate who the intended subject is, by providing a salient antecedent. This raises the question why that couldn't equally well be the case in languages with agreement. Indeed, there is important research from the late nineties onwards showing that contextual clues are relevant for the interpretation of null pronouns in languages with rich subject-verb agreement, too (Samek-Lodovici 1996; Grimshaw & Samek-Lodovici 1998; Frascarelli 2007; Cole 2010). It also raises the question why it couldn't be the case in languages like English and French, notorious for not employing null subjects. The answer is that it is the case. They make use of null subjects, too, as in *Can't tell you how happy I am to see you!*. As discussed by Haegeman (2013), this is not a marginal or exceptional phenomenon, but subject to strict universal, grammatical principles. Note how the 1st person singular pronoun is omitted in the embedded infinitival clause as well, but not in the embedded finite clause, a characteristic of this type of subject omission.

So it may be the case that all languages make use of null subjects. And why wouldn't they? It is a characteristic property of language use that meaning is conveyed by minimal means, observing computational efficiency, in Berwick & Chomsky's (2016: 101) terms. Their favourite example is the obligatory deletion (non-pronunciation) of all but one copy in a chain of copies derived by movement. Null pronouns is another case in point; if the meaning of an argument (chain) can be conveyed without any physical signal, then that is what happens, obligatorily or optionally, as the case may be. The conditions under which the meaning of an omitted argument can be conveyed is subject to cross-linguistic variation, though, which is what comparative research on null subjects/*pro*-drop wants to account for.

A fact which has become abundantly clear by virtue of much comparative research on *pro*-drop carried out ever since Perlmutter's (1971) seminal work is that there is a greater variety of null subject/*pro*-drop systems than was envisaged in the early days. The differences between *pro*-drop in languages with agreement and those without agreement have been an object of research from early on,

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starting in earnest with Jim Huang's early work on Chinese (Huang 1984, 1989). The distinction between *pro*-drop of referential subject pronouns, as found in Italian, and expletive pronouns, as found in German and Icelandic (so called semi-*pro*-drop), was formally described in Rizzi (1982) (see Biberauer et al. 2010, ch. 4). There was some important research in the late 1980ies and 90ies on null subjects, particularly in Romance languages (Rizzi 1986; Barbosa 1995), but also in Greek (Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 1998) and in Arabic (Fassi Fehri 1993), among other languages, widely taken, at the time, to be archetypal agreement-based null subject languages. In Vainikka & Levy (1999), Modesto (2000a, b), Kato (2000), and a bit later, in work by myself and my colleagues, a distinction was identified between what came to be called consistent (or full) null subject languages and partial null subject languages (Holmberg 2005; Holmberg et al. 2009; Biberauer et al. 2010).

Consistent null subject/*pro*-drop languages are characterized by the following properties: (a) pronominal subjects are null unless they are focused/contrastive or introduce a new topic, (b) 3rd person pronominal subjects can be null in main clauses, interpreted by linking to an argument in the discourse context, (c) generic subject pronouns are not null, or are licensed by sentence-internal passive or reflexive morphology, and (d) they have a full set of person and number distinctions marked on the finite verb. In partial null subject/*pro*-drop languages, on the other hand, (a) pronominal subjects are only optionally null, (b) 3rd person pronominal subjects cannot be null in main clauses, (c) there is a null generic subject pronoun in active finite clauses, and (d) the subject-verb agreement paradigm is typically, though not necessarily, incomplete. The partial *pro*-drop languages that were identified and described in greatest detail were Brazilian Portuguese, Finnish, Hebrew, and Marathi. Several other Indo-Aryan languages probably belong to this class, as well (see Holmberg 2017 on Russian). In the references mentioned we also proposed a formal explanation of the dichotomy. The idea was that the nominal features of T, which end up as an agreement affix on the verb, include a definiteness feature in consistent *pro*-drop languages but not in the partial *pro*-drop languages. This has the consequence that a null 3rd person subject is necessarily interpreted as referential in consistent *pro*-drop languages, but not in partial *pro*-drop languages, where it can only be interpreted as generic, unless it has a referential antecedent, a controller, in a higher clause. First and second person null subjects are interpreted as such because they always have a contextual referent, the speaker and the addressee (to put it simply).

The third major type is discourse *pro*-drop languages (also called radical *pro*-drop languages). They have no nominal features in T. This has the consequence that a null subject can be interpreted as referential if it has an antecedent in the

immediate context, or, in the absence of an antecedent, as generic (Phimsawat 2011; Holmberg & Roberts 2013).

Subsequent research has questioned aspects of the theory, with the postulated trichotomy between consistent, partial, and discourse *pro*-drop. Barbosa (2019) argues that the partial *pro*-drop languages crucially share the property with discourse *pro*-drop languages that the null argument is not a pronoun but a minimally specified noun. The idea that discourse *pro*-drop is dependent on the absence of articles, and that argument drop in such languages is NP-ellipsis was proposed already by Jayaseelan (1999) and Tomioka (2003). The status of Russian in the trichotomy is controversial. Bizzarri (2015) has argued that Russian, counted among the partial null subject languages in Barbosa (2019) (on the basis of Lindseth 1998) and, more tentatively, in Biberauer et al. (2010), has some properties of a consistent Null Subject Language. Frascarelli (2018) and Frascarelli & Jiménez-Fernandes (2019) have shown by experimental research that there is more variation in the use of null subjects among speakers of partial (Finnish) and consistent Null Subject Languages (Italian, Spanish) than previously realized, and they propose a different formal account of the difference between these null subject types. Alexiadou & Carvalho (2018) discuss some striking differences between the two partial Null Subject Languages Finnish and Brazilian Portuguese. Sigurðsson (2011) articulates a theory where differences between *pro*-drop systems are explained as variation in how the null arguments are linked to the context. These are just some examples of recent work on null subject/*pro*-drop in the context of the consistent-partial-discourse trichotomy.

The reflections above concern null subjects in finite clauses. Null subjects are, of course, also found abundantly in non-finite clauses. In the 1980ies and 90ies this was regarded as governed by mechanisms distinct from those that governed null subjects in finite clauses. This is not the case anymore. Concomitant with the research on partial Null Subject Languages it has become clear that null subjects in embedded finite clauses are interpreted by rules similar to, though not necessarily identical to, control into non-finite clauses (Landau 2004; Biberauer et al. 2010: ch. 3; Sheehan 2018). This is not in contradiction with the consistent-partial-discourse trichotomy. Note, for example, how PRO, the null subject of infinitival clauses, is similar to the subject of finite causes in discourse *pro*-drop languages: referential if controlled by a referential antecedent, generic if not controlled, as in *It's nice [PRO to be rich]*.

Against this background, I find the present volume particularly welcome. What is the status of the various Slavic languages in the trichotomy of consistent, partial, and radical *pro*-drop languages? As mentioned, the position of Russian is controversial; in this volume it is scrutinized in two of the chapters. The West Slavic languages Polish and Czech show the outward signs of consistent Null

Subject Languages, as does South Slavic Bulgarian. Subjected to close investigations in three chapters in the book, they each turn out to have certain surprising properties, given the prevalent views of *pro*-drop sketched above. There is a chapter on impersonal generic null subjects in the Baltic languages Latvian and Lithuanian, two languages that I have always been keen to know more about. The Uralic languages, with the exception of Finnish and Hungarian, have not had their null subject-related properties examined in anything like the detail seen in the present volume, where, in addition to Finnish and Hungarian, there are chapters on Mari, South Saami, and two Samoyedic languages, Selkup and Nganasan. They all, in one way or other, present challenges for prevalent views on null subjects. Hungarian, for example, turns out to combine properties of three major types of NSLs. It is interesting, as well, to consider Urpo Nikanne's theory of Finnish null subjects, a representative of the school of thought where omitted arguments are radically absent from syntactic structure, being interpreted by semantic inference.

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