What are null subjects and why are they important?

Grammatically acceptable sentences that lack subjects

Null subjects can have a discourse antecedent (Huang 1984) or be "out of the blue" (Trutkowski 2016, p. 188)

Linguistic theories: Associations between null-subject and other aspects of the grammatical systems

Significance: also important to document the target adult language for language acquisition
What does a sentence with a null subject look like?

Nousin junaan. Lima-n-ra noko-ke.
step-PAST-1-SG train-into Lima-DIR-EVID arrive-PERF

‘(I) boarded the train’
‘(He/she) went to Lima.’

Finnish (Vainikka & Levy, 1999, p. 614)
Shipibo (Camacho & Elias-Ulloa, 2010, p. 72)

Null subjects in the Germanic languages

"In all of the Modern Germanic standard languages, referential null subjects...are disallowed." (Rosenkvist 2011, p. 151)

Rosenkvist (2011): null subjects may be allowed in some Germanic “vernaculars” (p. 152) (see also Hoekstra 1997, Axel & Weiß 2011)
Yiddish null subjects: controversy

• Jacobs, Prince & van der Auwera (1994): Omission of "salient main clause initial subjects" (p. 408) is grammatical in Yiddish (ex. Hirschbein 1923, Prince 1998)

Vaist, az ix bin dir mexane?
know.2-SG that I am-1-SG you-ACC-2-SG envy?
‘(You) know I envy you?’

• Koeneman (2006) and Speas (2006): Referential null subjects are ungrammatical in Yiddish

No claims that "out of the blue"—new information/no antecedent in the discourse—(cf. Trutkowski 2016) null subjects are grammatical in Yiddish

Null subjects in Yiddish today

The only empirical investigation: Prince's (1998) corpus study of Grinefelder (Hirschbein 1923), which provided evidence for Jacobs, Prince & van der Auwera (1994)

Limitations:
• Written artwork
• Studied variety is not contemporary
Present Study: Empirical investigations into Hasidic Yiddish null subjects

Studies conducted:
• Corpus analysis of spontaneous speech
• Grammaticality judgment surveys

Informants:
• Native speakers of Brooklyn Hasidic Yiddish

Context
1. Spanish
2. Chinese
3. Russian
4. Haitian (Creole)
5. Italian
6. French
7. Yiddish
8. Korean
9. African Languages
10. Polish
11. Tagalog
12. Greek
13. Arabic
14. Hebrew
15. (Bengali)
16. Urdu
17. Hindi
18. German
19. Japanese
20. Serbo-croatian
21. Portuguese
22. Persian
23. Vietnamese
24. Hungarian
25. Gujarati

Corpus analysis

Recordings of native Hasidic Yiddish-speaking mothers in the context of symbolic play with their toddlers

Subject constructions in transcripts coded for:
- grammatical person and number marking on verb
- discourse-salience
- whether the subject was realized or null

Zj hot a twin. Zejst az hot a twin? She-3-SG has-3-SG a twin. See-2-SG that has-3-SG a twin? ‘She has a twin. Do (you) see that (she) has a twin?’

Corpus analysis: Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject construction</th>
<th>Realized subject</th>
<th>Salient null subject</th>
<th>Out of the blue null subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1SG</td>
<td>19 [95.0%]</td>
<td>1 [5.0%]</td>
<td>0 [0.0%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2SG</td>
<td>91 [50.3%]</td>
<td>90 [49.7%]</td>
<td>0 [0.0%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3SG</td>
<td>449 [98.9]</td>
<td>5 [1.1%]</td>
<td>0 [0.0%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1PL</td>
<td>0 [0.0%]</td>
<td>0 [0.0%]</td>
<td>0 [0.0%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2PL</td>
<td>8 [100.0%]</td>
<td>0 [0.0%]</td>
<td>0 [0.0%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3PL</td>
<td>16 [100.0%]</td>
<td>0 [0.0%]</td>
<td>0 [0.0%]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total realized subjects</th>
<th>Total salient null subjects</th>
<th>Total out of the blue null subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>583 [85.9%]</td>
<td>96 [14.1%]</td>
<td>0 [0%]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First judgment task

Grammaticality judgments (paper) on simple, 2-SG subject constructions (rated on 3-interval Likert scale)

All interrogative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Host</th>
<th>an epl</th>
<th>-e?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>have-2-SG</td>
<td>an apple</td>
<td>DIM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Do (you) have a little apple?’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vílst</th>
<th>špíln?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>want-2-SG</td>
<td>play-INF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Do (you) want to play?’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First judgment task: Results

Of 106 data points involving null subjects, 49 (46%) were considered grammatical

3 participants (2 from Borough Park, 1 from Williamsburg) systematically chose ‘never used’ for all null 2SG subject constructions

18 participants judged at least 1 null subject construction as grammatical

Limitation: not all possible syntactic contexts
Second judgment task

• Null subjects in questions, in statements, embedded sentences, and embedded questions currently being administered to native speakers

• Stimuli are ranked on a five-internal Likert scale

Mejn az host a štarke kul
think-1-SG that have-2-SG a loud voice
‘(I) think (you) have a loud voice.’

Hobn gefregt, ven bjst cerjkgekemen
Have-2-SG/-2-PL/-3-PL ask-PTCP, when is-2-SG return-come
‘(You [form.]/we/they) asked when (you) came back.’

Second judgment task (results)

• Preliminary results (n=3) confirm that salient null subjects are grammatical when clause initial; all participants judged at least two clause-initial salient null subject forms as grammatical

• Grammaticality judgment task is currently being administered to a wider group of participants
What's going on?

Null subjects in Hasidic Yiddish seem to:

• be most prevalent in the 2SG context, and
• follow Jacobs, Prince & van der Auwera’s (1994) constraints regarding discourse salience and placement

Phonological reduction?

Regular 2.SG inflectional suffix (-st) ends in /t/, 2.SG pronoun (dj) begins with /d/

Is the null subject really just a phonological reduction?

Unlikely, because informants accept null subjects in writing even when them being null is prominent (below)

Vilst źpln
Want-2-SG play-INF
‘Do you want to play?’

Vilst-j źpln
Want-2-SG you play-INF
‘Do you want to play?’

Other 2-SG constructions:
Conclusions: Where do we go next?

Native speakers of two different varieties of Hasidic Yiddish (Borough Park and Williamsburg) use salient 2SG null subjects.

Continued administration of grammaticality judgment survey

Acknowledgements

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