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Pregledni rad

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ENGLISH NULL SUBJECT RELATIVE CLAUSES IN THE ARKANSAS REGIONAL VARIETY

Abstract

Modern Standard English does not license null subjects in finite clauses, making the subject an obligatory element whenever the verb is inflected for person, number and tense, even when the meager English morphology fails to show it. A rare exception to this rule are relative clauses in certain non-standard varieties of English in which the wh-word or that which would otherwise occupy the subject position are not pronounced. This seems to be a systematic feature of those varieties and it is claimed to be under the influence of sociolinguistic factors, such as the level of formality, and to appear under specific syntactic conditions. This paper will examine some of these factors by analyzing a regional dialect found in the southern United States as depicted in the speech of characters in the crime drama series "True Detective".

Key words*: relative clause, null subject, non-standard variety, sociolinguistic factors*

Introduction

English finite clauses in standard varieties require an overt subject, which makes the latter sentence of the pair ungrammatical:

(1) a. He complains all the time about his job.

*b. *Doesn't understand my problems at all!*

This has not always been the case. Subjects in English finite clauses could be realized as null elements, i.e. those that lack phonological properties or content, but carry semantic properties or meaning (Aljović, 2017) in Old English, but even at that time they were in decline (van Gelderen, 2013). Cognola describes this process as a gradual change from a partial null subject (NS) language to a non-NS language (2018). According to Baugh, "The Middle English period was marked by momentous changes in the English language. (...) [Changes] in the English grammar reduced English from a highly inflected language to an extremely analytic one" (1993, p.154). It is this morphological evolution that is sometimes cited as one of the reasons why null subjects became illicit in the recent stages of English, in contrast to the verbs in earlier stages which carried a richer set of agreement inflections that could help identify the subject even when it was not pronounced (Radford, 2009). Null subjects were encountered up until the Early Modern English period and Radford provides an example from Shakespeare's *Othello* (p.347):

Lives, sir. (Iago, *Othello*, IV. i, in reply to "How does Lieutenant Cassio?")

Cognola (2018), however, states that null subjects are not restricted to languages with rich agreement, and that they can be identified through discourse. Moreover, a mechanism is proposed by which in languages with poor inflectional morphology where the subject-verb agreement is not

visible (audible) pro is controlled by a clause-external antecedent and interpreted via feature inheritance.

When it comes to English relative clauses, Kortmann (2005) claims that gapping of the subject position is an extremely wide-spread phenomenon in non-standard varieties of English in and outside the British isles. Instances of such null subjects can be found in certain non-standard varieties in the United States and they involve the omission of the relative pronoun when it functions as the subject of the relative clause, the structure which will be the main focus of this paper:

(2) We also had to talk to all other cops ( ) worked the Woodard scene.

This apparent exception is also found in other languages, for instance Old French and Czech allow for null subjects in embedded clauses, while not in the matrix clause (Kučerova, 2014), and in modern Hebrew a third person subject can be dropped under embedding. Kato relies on examples from Chinese to call this "controlled pro-drop" which involves only subjects of subordinate clauses (1999, p.6). Cognola (2018) mentions examples from Russian in which null subjects are only allowed when the antecedent is very close, usually an immediately preceding definite NP. Some linguists such as Camacho (2016) analyze the null subject as a weak pronoun which undergoes phonological deletion. Kortmann (2005) similarly argues that English preverbal pronouns in connected speech often tend to be realized as phonologically reduced forms. Quirk (1985) joins them by describing the case above as slovenly or subaudible pronunciation. He goes on to list the specific contexts in which this is permissible, namely in very informal speech, if the antecedent is an indefinite pronoun and most commonly in cleft and existential sentences, giving the following examples (p.1250):

(3) a. There's a table ( ) stands in the corner.

b. It's Simon ( ) did it.

Trudgill (2000), on the other hand, claims that formality is one of key extra-linguistic factors which can have a linguistic effect and goes on to say that styles in English are mainly distinguished by vocabulary differences, but also syntactic ones. This is in line with what Scott (2013) terms informal style nulls, which contribute to the intimate tone of discourse, the effect which can justify the extra effort on the part of the hearer in processing null subjects.

The present paper primarily intends to observe the influence of extra-linguistic factors in the use of null subjects in a subset of subordinate clauses, the relative clauses in which the relative pronoun functions as the subject of the embedded clause, namely the level of formality which is emphasized by Quirk (1985), but also race, sex, class and age to see if they might also affect the frequency of null subjects in those contexts. The examples of null subjects in relative clauses will also be checked for the linguistic factors mentioned above that could possibly exert effect - the antecedent proximity and category and the presence of cleft and existential sentences.

Methodology

Since, according to Trudgill (2000), "in the Anglophone world, it is rather unusual for nonstandard dialects to occur in formal situations" (p.84), it was evident that to collect sufficient

data featuring null subjects in relative clauses it would be preferable to observe the spoken language, rather than analyze available written texts. For this reason, and due to the lack of access to native speakers of nonstandard varieties, the corpus selected for this research needed to be readily available and accessible. Therefore, it was decided that the anthology crime drama television series "True Detective", season 3, released in 2019 was to be used. While there is inherent deficiency in using a work of fiction instead of authentic, real life speech for linguistic research, there are also advantages, especially having in mind the aims of this paper; the wider context of the series allows at most times for accurate description of situational factors which determine the level of formality and character (speaker) attributes.

The material surveyed was 8 hours and 15 minutes long, and most of the speech was in the form of dialogues. Not all speech was included in the analysis. Sections such as a priest reading to parishioners from the Scriptures, a teacher reading to students from a book of poetry or a TV newscaster heard in the background were excluded because they did not represent instances of real-life, vernacular use of the local variety. The series takes place in its entirety in the state of Arkansas, in the southern United States at three time periods: in 1980, in 1990 and in 2015. The scenes typically provided ample context to determine the familiarity between the characters, their relationship and the communicative intent, while it was possible to ascertain for most characters, especially the recurring ones, their social background.

Each instance of a relative clause was noted, along with the character information and the level of formality. Character information included their age, estimated based on situational clues and roughly divided into three categories of 'young' (0-20 years of age), 'middle-aged' (20-55 years of age) and 'old' (55 years of age and above); sex, which meant 'male' or 'female'; racial background in the three categories of 'black', 'white' and 'Native American'; class, arrived at by the means of contextual clues (profession, level of education, property owned) and divided into the categories of 'working', 'middle' and 'higher' class; while all instances of sentences containing relative clauses were marked, in a deliberately simplified fashion, either as 'formal' or 'informal', based on the nature of the communicative event in question (for example, police officers questioning a detained suspect vs. spouses conversing at dinner).

There were instances of sentences which had to be disregarded, although they included relative clauses. Those sentences for which it could not be ascertained whether there was a full deletion of the subject or whether it was merely subaudible due to reasons of sound quality were not taken into consideration. They were few in number. Also, here is an example of a sentence containing neither a subordinator nor a relative pronoun and for which it could thus not be unambiguously stated whether it contained a null subject relative clause (4a) or a subordinate *that*-clause with a null subordinator (4b):

(4) *a. We never knew the workers ( ) climbed the stairs.*

b. We never knew ( ) the workers climbed the stairs.

These were very rare as well and not included in the list.

Results and discussion

There were 174 relative clauses in total that satisfied the criteria explained above and that were further analyzed. Of these, 32, or 18.4% had a null subject. Here are some examples of these null subject relative clauses, with the episode and the exact time in parentheses:

(5) *She's the one ( ) helped us out with that.* (episode 2, 21:55)

(6) *'Cause you're the type ( ) like bullying someone weaker than you.* (episode 5, 15:50)

(7) *Helluva day when a gunfight is the second most exciting thing ( ) happens to you.* (episode 6, 2:40)

Note that this variety shows signs of impoverished morphology so the verb might lack inflections and, in addition, some sentence elements might be dropped as well, most often auxiliaries (8) and prepositions (9), or the subject in the main clause (10):

(8) *Lady seen Julie Purcell in a dream.*

(9) *Met him some diner.*

(10) *Killed a dude in a bar fight.*

The lack of morphology on the verb forms and of finite auxiliaries which would aid with establishing subject-verb agreement might further undermine the explanation offered by Radford (2009), since even this variety which is lower on the scale of morphological richness compared to the standard variety licenses null subjects.

Certain other salient aspects of morphology and syntax of this variety will only be mentioned but not further analyzed since they are not perceived as pertinent to the matter at hand, for example, past tense formation in (11) and multiple negation in (12):

(11) *I oughta knowed something was too wrong.*

(12) *Don't have no kids, man.*

What might be of relevance to the present analysis is that other elements in subordinate clauses are occasionally also dropped, for example the wh-element in adverbial clauses in (13), the complementizer 'if' in (14) or prepositions which are parts of prepositional verbs in (15):

(13) *A lot of guys have trouble, (when) they come back.*

(14) *(If) you ever learned that, you wouldn't be telling me this.*

(15) *You seem like the kinda type that thing matters (to).*

Going back to the null subject clauses and the character background, it is apparent that the quantity of examples found is tilted in favor of middle-aged (77%), male (83.3%) characters. This imbalance reflects the fact that the overall number of lines spoken by male characters in middle class professions greatly outnumbers those spoken by female characters. The series' focus on the male perspective reduces the quantity of female speech from which to extract useful data, but still some inferences can be made. Most of the examples (74.7%) are spoken by middle class characters, with only 5.7% spoken by higher class characters and 19.6% by working class characters. The racial composition is 50.6% black, 47.1% white and 2.3% Native American. The data for the overall number of lines by all characters was not collected, so the numbers above cannot be indicators of the frequency of relative clauses in the speech of a particular social category, but they

are a good estimate of the focus the series places on certain social groups. The data for the total number of relative clauses has been summarized in Table 1:

Social / contextual criteria

Sex	Male 145 (83.3%)	Female 29 (16.7%)	
Age	Young 2 (1.1%)	Middle-aged 134 (77%)	Old 38 (21.9%)
Class	Working 34 (19.6%)	Middle 130 (74.7%)	Higher 10 (5.7%)
Race	Black 88 (50.6%)	White 82 (47.1%)	Native American 4 (2.3%)
Formality	Formal 66 (37.9%)	Informal 108 (62.1%)	

Table 1. The distribution of relative clauses by social and contextual criteria

Keeping in mind the general percentage of relative clauses which have a null subject (18.4%), the results for racial groups stay close to this average, with black characters using null subjects 19.3% of the time and white characters 18.3% of the time. Native Americans feature very little in the series, and only one of them uses relative clauses, but since their overall number is just 4, the 0% occurrence of null subjects is deemed statistically irrelevant. While one of the working hypotheses was that the null subjects might be a feature of African American Vernacular English, these results do not bear it out.

In regard to the level of formality, 24.2% of relative clauses in formal speech contained null subjects, compared to only 14.8% of their informal counterparts. This seems to contradict Quirk's (1985) prediction that only very informal contexts may yield such constructions. Even allowing for a rather large margin of subjectivity, which to some extent is always present in ascertaining what counts as formal and what as informal circumstances, the results still seem to indicate that the (low) level of formality is not the decisive factor in increasing the frequency of null subjects.

The social class of the characters also yields some unexpected results. Although one might suppose that the speech of the working class might be further away from the standard variety and as such feature a larger percentage of null subjects, that is also not borne out by the numbers. In fact, the working class characters demonstrated the lowest percentage of null subjects at 14.7%, followed by middle class at 19.7% and higher class at 20%. Since the overall sample size of relative clauses in the speech of higher class characters is only 10, the results for that section of characters might be dismissed, but the general tendency in any case does not favor the class-related expectations.

As regards to the sex of the characters, the male characters surpass slightly the average frequency of null subjects with 21.4%, but the female characters show almost no occurrences with

Still, a lot of the sentences were neither of the existential or cleft type, nor did they have an indefinite pronoun as an antecedent:

(19) I wanna thank the volunteers ( ) came out with us today. (episode 1, 47:45)

(20) They don't exactly wear signboards ( ) say psycho killer. (episode 4, 28:10)

Finally, testing the prediction that, similar to some other languages, the antecedent needs to stand in close proximity to the null subject, we get the result of 90.6% instances where that is the case, i.e. the null subject immediately follows the nominal which is the antecedent. In the remaining 9.4% the antecedent is followed by a postmodifier with which it forms a complex noun phrase, so it is not physically adjacent to the null subject of the relative clause, for example:

(21) There's a little whole in her wall ( ) came back out to Will's closet. (episode 6, 7:55)

The proximity therefore doesn't seem too relevant, since there can be at least one intervening element between the antecedent and the null subject of the relative clause, and presumably more of them as well, although none of the examples in the corpus show this.

Conclusion

When trying to explain how this particular linguistic phenomenon fits into the grammar of English, even if it a grammar of a regional variety which diverges from many grammatical principles present in the standard variety, one has to account for the fact that it only occurs in this narrow context of relative clauses in which the expected relative pronoun *that* or *who* functions as the subject of the relative clause. The subject omitted in a main clause may be analyzed as a case of ellipsis and it can be inferred from the context, and this is common even in the standard variety. The lack of the obligatory subject in the relative clause, however, is rather viewed by some linguists as a phonologically reduced element (barely audible) or a null subject by others. Some fringe explanations of the phenomenon are radical and presuppose major deviations from the established theories of grammar, such as Jansen's (1991) *contact clause* which sets aside certain conventional restrictions in the theory of generative grammar, namely *the Single Mother Condition*, allowing the two clauses to effectively share (govern) the same constituent, obviating the need to explain the null subject altogether. Whatever the accurate and elegant linguistic description may be, the fact remains that null subject relative clauses present an interesting oddity contrasted to Modern Standard English and that they are indeed grammatical, rule-based expressive tools available to speakers in the respective varieties.

This paper has intended to show that some of the evidence for the systematic nature of null subjects of relative clauses comes from the manner in which sociolinguistic factors may influence its frequency. It is not a matter of random occurrence or an occasional case of slip of the tongue in informal speech, but rather a commonly present linguistic variable that may be affected by extralinguistic factors such as the sex of the speaker or even class and level of formality to a degree. While the results attained in this survey have to be received with caution, the conclusions reached might warrant a further examination of the phenomena with the help of informants, which could, for example, take the form of acceptability judgment surveys to indicate whether the provisional assumptions about the effect of speaker sex on the frequency of null subjects are borne out in the

real world. There could be underlying sociolinguistic factors unforeseen and untested by this study that could also affect the frequency, which opens new avenues to explore and new ways to tackle this intriguing linguistic phenomena.

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ODNOSNE REČENICE SA IZOSTAVLJENIM SUBJEKTOM U DIJALEKTU ENGLESKOG JEZIKA U AMERIČKOJ SAVEZNOJ DRŽAVI ARKANSAS

Sažetak

Standardna varijanta savremenog engleskog jezika ne dozvoljava izostavljanje subjekta u finitnim klauzama, dakle subjekt je obavezan rečenični element kada predikat iskazuje lice, broj i glagolsko vrijeme, makar to ne bilo jasno iz morfologije predikata. Jedan od rijetkih izuzetaka su odnosne klauze u nekim nestandardnim varijantama engleskog jezika u kojima se odnosna

zamjenica, koja inače zauzima mjesto subjekta, ne izgovara. Ovo je sistematična odlika tih varijanti za koju se tvrdi da je pod utjecajem sociolingvističkih faktora, poput nivoa formalnosti, i da se javlja u specifičnim sintaksičkim okruženjima. Ovaj rad ima za cilj da ispita utjecaj nekih od tih faktora u regionalnoj varijanti sa juga Sjedinjenih američkih država analizirajući govor likova iz televizijske drame "True Detective".

***Ključne riječi**: odnosna klauza, izostavljen subjekt, nestandardna varijanta, sociolingvistički faktori*