

Is there life after death? Null subjects and agreement in the history of Russian

There is a long-term story about relations between the verbal paradigm complexity and the availability of null pronouns in a language. Languages that can not easily fit this hypothesis include but are not limited to Chinese (Huang 1989), German (Müller 2005), French (Roberts 2007). Another example of a problematic language, Russian, is being discussed in this paper.

Old Russian had null thematic referential subject pronouns that have been lost approximately in 16-17th cc., see (Borkovskiy 1949, Sukhoon 2003, Meyer 2011). The loss of null subjects was preceded by the decline of the past tense system, see (Franks 1995, Müller 2006). The Old Russian past tenses included aorist, imperfect, perfect and pluperfect that had elaborated person-number paradigm. Modern Russian lacks personal agreement for the past tense, but preserved it for the present. This calls in question Müller's (2006) account of a pro-drop loss as a result of impoverishment and system-defining syncretism.

In spite of the loss of referential thematic null subjects, two prominent semantic types of thematic pro are attested in Modern Russian, see (Franks 1995, Zimmerling 2009). These are a 3pl non-referential subject, (1) and a 2sg generic subject, (2). It could be argued that the semantic properties of these constructions are due to the interpretation of verbs only, but the standard tests on reflexive binding, (3) and adjunct control, (4) show presence of null subjects.

The so-called semi-null subject phenomenon displayed by Modern Russian with 3pl and 2sg null pronouns was reported in (Rizzi 1986), see (Biberauer 2008) for discussion. Semi-null subject contexts impose semantic constraints on the distribution of pro elements. One of the most typical cases of such constraint is non-referentiality.

The claim of the paper is that pro elements have not disappeared but have been reanalyzed on the way from Old to Modern Russian. I will argue that null pronouns have undergone semantic transformation after the past tenses decay.

The reanalysis proceeded in the following steps. At the first stage Old Russian had referential pro and personal agreement in the past (and other tenses):

(i) [pro{D} T{D} ...]

At that stage null subjects bore D features licensed by T heads and thus introduced referential antecedents (5). As reported in (Borkovskij 1949), non-referential 3pl pro was already present in Old Russian, see (6). At the same time, generic constructions with verbs in 2sg were not attested. These facts can be reduced to the referential properties of pronouns: ability to denote non-referential participants is a natural pragmatic extension of the 3rd person [-1,-2] pronoun, but not of the 2nd person pronoun. After that, T lost D features in past tenses:

(ii) [pro{D} T{} ...]

At this period (16th c.) Russian still had null subjects but in the past tense contexts they were not properly licensed and interpreted, that resulted in D features degeneration from pro:

(iii) [pro{} T{} ...]

This move led to another conflict state: the present tense could not discharge its D features:

(iv) [pro{} T{D} ...]

But the process of acquiring non-referentiality (loss of D features on T and pro) was supported in the present tense clauses by the fact that they regularly had habitual interpretation, (7). Examples like (7) report facts that are actual for any participant from some class at any moment of their existence. So, in some contexts verbs did no referential job (had no D features) even in Old Russian, what simplified the transition from T{D} to T{ }.

Thus we argued that development of non-referential 3pl and generic 2sg pro historically results from the two facts: a) the presence of referential null subjects in Old Russian and b) the loss of person agreement in past tenses from Old to Modern Russian.

(1) 3Pl (pro_{non-ref})
 Valenki nos'-at zimoj.
 felt.boots wear-3Pl in.winter
Everybody wears felt boots in winter.

(2) 2Sg (pro_{gen})
 Posmotr-iš' na nego i grustno stanovitsa.
 look-2Sg at him and sad become
Everybody, who looks at him, got sad.

(3.a) 3Pl (pro_{non-ref}) – Reflexive binding
 Valenki nadevaj-ut dl'a samix seb'a a ne dl'a roditelej.
 felt.boots put.on-3Pl for themselves but not for parents
People put on felt boots for themselves, not for their parents.

(3.b) 2Sg (pro_{gen}) – Reflexive binding
 Posluš-a-eš' samogo seb'a i grustno stanovitsa.
 listen-2Sg himself and sad become
Somebody listens to him/herself and it is getting sad.

(4.a) 3Pl (pro_{non-ref}) – Adjunct control
 Valenki zimoj nos'-at čtoby ne zamerznut'.
 felt.boots in.winter wear-3Pl for not freeze
People wear felt boots in winter for not freezing.

(4.b) 2Sg (pro_{gen}) – Adjunct control
 prid-eš' poran'se (čtoby) prigotovit' užin, a sil uže net
 come-2Sg earlier (for) cook dinner but forces already no
You come earlier to cook dinner, but you have no forces already.

(5) Novgorod birch bark letters, 12th c., (Letopisi 1950)
 A mьnѣ ne vьda-stъ ničъto že.
 And me not give-3Sg nothing EMPH
And he won't give me anything.

(6) 3Pl (pro_{non-ref}) in Old Russian, 13th c., (Borkovskij 1949:106)
 Kak to mesto zov-ut, gde stoim?
 how this place call-3Pl where stay.1Pl
What is the name of the place where we are staying?

(7) 13th c., (Gorshkova & Haburgaev 1981:286)
 Pol'ane bo svoix otъ obьčai im-outъ krotokъ i tixъ.
 Polans EMPH their fathers' customs have-3Pl gentle and quiet
As though Polans have gentle and quiet customs of their ancestors.

References: Biberauer, T. 2008. Semi null-subject languages, expletives and expletive pro reconsidered. || Borkovskij, V. I. 1949. Sintaksis drevnerusskih gramot. Prostoje predlozenie. || Franks, S. 1995. Parameters of Slavic Morphosyntax. || Gorshkova & Haburgaev 1981. Istoricheskaja grammatika russkogo jazyka. || Müller, G. 2006. Pro-Drop and Impoverishment. || Rizzi, L. 1986. Null Objects in Italian and the theory of pro. || Roberts, I. 2007. Taraldsen's Generalisation and Language Change: Two Ways to Lose Null Subjects. || Zimmerling, A. 2009. Aggressive pro-drop and the specificity of the 3rd person in Slavic languages.