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Object Drop in English and Japanese

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1. Introduction

It is well known that Japanese allows null arguments to occur in finite clauses whereas English does not. For example, a Japanese sentence does not have to have an overt subject and object, whereas English requires both of them:

(1) Mi-ta?

see-Past

'Did you see it?'

(1) is perfectly grammatical in Japanese. Referents of null arguments seem to be identified from the context. This is not permitted in English. This fundamental difference between English and Japanese makes it difficult for Japanese speakers to express arguments properly when speaking and writing English. They tend to unintentionally drop subject and object arguments. English speakers, on the other hand, find it difficult to figure out what a null argument is referring to in Japanese. The following examples clearly illustrate this point. (2a) is cited from a Japanese novel *Kitchen*, written by Banana Yoshimoto. (2b) is its English translation by Megan Backus:

(2) a. Kare-wa nanimo sira-nai-si, **waruku-nai-noni**
 he-Top nothing know-Neg-and bad-Neg-but
 nantonaku kare-no me-o miru koto-ga deki-nakat-ta.¹
 for.some.reason he-Gen eye-Acc see fact-Nom can-Neg-Past

b. Even though he couldn't know what had happened, and although I **had done nothing wrong**, I couldn't meet his eyes.

¹ Abbreviations used in this paper are as follows. Acc: accusative, Gen: genitive, Ind: indicative, Neg: negative, Nom: nominative, Pol: politeness, Q: question marker, Top: topic.

(2a) has only one subject *kare* 'he' overtly but it has four predicates, *siranai* 'do not know', *warukunai* 'is not wrong', *miru* 'see', *dekinakatta* 'couldn't do.' *Kare* 'he' is the subject of the first two predicates. The subject referent of the other two predicates, which is not overtly realized, is the speaker of this sentence. This is somehow mistaken in English translation in (2b), where the speaker is incorrectly understood as the subject of the second predicate. The correct translation should be 'Even though he couldn't know what had happened and **(he) had done nothing wrong**, I couldn't meet his eyes.'

The availability of null arguments in Japanese calls attention both from comparative and theoretical points of view. One of the fundamental questions is why null arguments are allowed in Japanese, while they are not in English. As a preliminary step to considering this question, this paper reviews previous studies on the status of null arguments, with particular attention to object drop. As is well known, null subjects are permitted in languages such as Italian or Spanish and the phenomenon is usually reduced to rich verbal agreement in those languages. Certain Asian languages such as Chinese, Korean and Japanese are problematic to such a view, since these languages, though they do not have rich agreement, still tolerate null arguments in more radical ways. They allow not only subject arguments but also object arguments to drop. This paper shows that null objects have various usages, depending on the context. In section 2, I will describe a phenomenon of 'object deletion' in English and show differences between English and Japanese. Then in section 3, I will review previous analyses of object drop in Japanese. Section 4 concludes the paper.

2. 'Object deletion' in English

Although English usually requires arguments to be overtly realized in a sentence, they can be left out in restricted circumstances. For example, *wish you were here* in a postcard should not have a subject (Hinds 1986, 67). Additionally, subject and object arguments can be dropped in recipes or instructions in general (Massam and Roberge 1989). Since instructions are in the imperative mood, it is not surprising that they do not have an overt subject. What is important to note is that they do not have an overt object either. Consider the following example given in (3). The object pronoun is omitted in the underlined positions:

(3) Bring cream and sugar to boil in large stainless steel sauce pan over medium heat, stirring constantly. Cook ___ 3 minutes, stirring constantly. Remove pan from heat. Whisk ___ in lemon and lime juices. Return ___ to heat and cook ___ until slightly thickened, about 7 minutes. Pour ___ into six 8-ounce wine glasses or custard cups. Cover ___ and refrigerate ___ until set, about 4 hours.

Top ___ with raspberries. Sprinkle ___ with powdered sugar. Garnish ___ with fresh mint. Serve ___ with sliced pound cake or shortbread cookies.

(from <http://www.cooking.com/>, underlines added)

Apart from object drop in a restricted context such as a cooking recipe, English seems to have different types of object drop. To be more specific, certain transitive verbs permit their object arguments to be omitted. In the following examples, cited from Hinds (1986, 50), objects in the bracket can be left out.

- (4) a. We usually eat [dinner] at 7:30.
 b. Ken drinks [sake] too much.
 c. Every afternoon I read [books] for two hours.

Note that the missing objects in (4) denote something typical of the action described by the verbs.² One of the interesting differences between English and Japanese, which is pointed out by Hinds (1986), can be seen if we compare (4) with the corresponding Japanese examples in (5). Although arguments seem to be dropped freely in Japanese, object arguments that denote prototypical entities cannot be omitted.

- (5) a. Watashitachi-wa itsumo 7:30-ni ??(yuugohan-o) tabe-masu.
 we-Top always 7:30-at dinner-Acc eat-Pol

'We usually eat dinner at 7:30.'

- b. Ken-wa ?(sake-o) nomi-sugi-desu.
 Ken-Top sake-Acc drink-too.much-Pol

'Ken drinks sake too much.'

² There are other types of object drop in English as well (see Rizzi 1986, Neeleman and Szendrői 2005, etc.), but they are not discussed in this paper.

- c. Watashi-wa mainichi gogo-ni 2-jikan *(hon-o)
 I-Top everyday afternoon-at 2-hour book-Acc
 yomi-masu.
 read-Pol
 'Every afternoon I read books for two hours.'

As shown in (5), whether the object argument can be left unspecified or not depends on the verbal predicate. For example, a compound verb *nomi-sugi-desu* 'drink too much' in (5b) is closely linked to have an alcoholic drink and does not necessarily require the presence of the object argument.³ However, it is usually the case that the object referring to something in general should be provided in Japanese. On the other hand, the object referring to something specific cannot be omitted in English but it can be dropped in Japanese. Compare the following English example and its Japanese equivalent.

- (6) a. A: What did you do with the fish I bought yesterday?
 B: I ate it.
- b. A: Kinoo katta sakana-wa doo narimasita-ka?
 yesterday bought fish-Top what became-Q
 B: Tabemasita.
 ate

(Hinds 1986, 51)

As shown in (6b), the utterance by B in Japanese example does not contain a subject and an object. The subject refers to the speaker and the object refers to the specific *fish* appearing in the foregoing utterance.

Why is there such a difference between English and Japanese? Rizzi (1986) suggests in a footnote that the process of object drop in English is lexically governed. That is to say, it is an idiosyncratic process. For example, *have*, which can be used synonymously to *eat*, does not allow object drop.

- (7) Yesterday, we had *(an excellent meal) in a new Italian restaurant.

³ On the other hand, a simple verb *nomu* 'drink' requires the presence of an object argument.

I will not go into further details of the exact process of how the object drop in English works in the lexicon. There might be two different lexical entries for a transitive and an intransitive usage or the object argument is linked to a prototypical entity in the lexicon. Rather, it is important to note that the lexical nature of this process is the reason for the difference between English and Japanese. As described above, the applicability of object drop depends on the particular lexical item. It is probably the case that a lexical item in English and its Japanese counterpart have different specification in terms of their object arguments. For example, although *taberu* 'eat' cannot have an unspecified object, *nomi-sugi-desu* 'drink too much' can. By contrast, both *eat* and *drink* can leave the object unspecified in English. English seems to have more lexical entries than Japanese which allows their objects to be dropped. In addition, if the object drop in English is a lexical process, it is natural that only the objects referring to something general can be dropped. With the verb which can have its object unspecified, the object argument is linked to some generic entities in the lexicon. The object argument never appears in the syntactic process and it cannot refer to a particular entity in discourse.

In summary, 'object deletion' in English is found in a highly restricted context such as recipes or restricted to certain predicates such as *eat*, *drink*, etc. In Japanese, the process of object drop is more productive. In the next section, let us overview previous approaches to object drop in Japanese.

3. Object drop in Japanese

The status of null arguments in East Asian languages has long caught attention in the previous studies. In this section, I will review the previous approaches to clarifying characteristics of null objects, mainly discussing the data in Japanese.

First of all, Kuroda (1965) argues that null arguments are pronouns which do not realize phonetic contents. Consider the following example:

(8) A: Kyoo-wa gakkoo-de Hanako-ni nanika atta-no?
 today-Top school-at Hanako-to something happened-Q

'Did something happen to Hanako at school today?'

B: Taroo-ga e_i tataita soo-desu.
 Taroo-Nom hit I.heard-Pol

'I heard that Taro hit her.'

In B's reply, an object argument is not realized, but it clearly refers to *Hanako*, which appears in A's utterance. So, it functions like a personal pronoun in English (in this case, 'her').

Another analysis is proposed by Huang (1984), based mainly on data in Chinese. The same line of analysis is applied to Japanese by Hasegawa (1984/85). On their view, null objects are not null pronouns but rather variables linked to null Topics. This analysis (call it the variable analysis) tries to capture the fact that a null object in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean does not refer to an entity arbitrary in reference but requires a particular individual salient in discourse. The variable analysis is supported by an asymmetry between subject and object null arguments. Consider the following examples taken from Hasegawa (1984/85):

- (9) a. John_i-ga [*e*_{*i**j*} Mary-o nagutta to] itta.
 John-Nom Mary-Acc hit that said
 'John_i said that he_{*i**j*} hit Mary.'
- b. John_i-ga [Mary-ga *e*_{?*i**j*} nagutta to] itta.
 'John_i said that Mary hit him_{?*i**j*}.'
- (10) John_i-ga [*e*_{*i*?*j*} *e*_{*j*?*i*} aisitei-nai] hito_{*j*}-to kekkon sita.
 John-Nom love-Neg person-with marry did
 'John_i got married to a person_{*j*} who (he_{*i*}) doesn't love.'

In (9) and (10), the index *i* refers to a person denoted by the matrix subject, while *j* refers to a person salient in discourse. Hasegawa makes the following observation: as in (9), when a null argument is the subject in the embedded clause, it can refer to the matrix subject or someone in discourse. When a null argument is the object of the embedded clause, however, it can refer to a person in the discourse but not to the matrix subject. The same kind of asymmetry can be seen in the relative clause in (10). The null object of the relative clause in (10) cannot refer to the matrix subject, but should refer to the relative head.

The unavailability of the matrix subject as an antecedent of the null object argument may support the hypothesis that the null object is a variable linked to the null Topic. The basic idea of the variable analysis can be represented as follows (Hasegawa 1984/85, 294):

- (11) a. [_{Topic} ϕ_j] [John_i-ga [e_{ij} Mary-o nagutta to] itta]
 b. [_{Topic} ϕ_j] [John_i-ga [Mary-ga e_{*ij} nagutta to] itta]

When the null argument e is a variable, it is coindexed with the Topic (j), which refers to someone in the discourse both in (11a, b). When the null argument is *pro* (in Huang) or *PRO* (in Hasegawa), it can be coindexed with the matrix subject in (11a), but not in (11b). (11b) does not allow coindexation of the matrix subject and the null argument because of the presence of the embedded subject. The embedded subject is the closest nominal argument of e , but it cannot refer to the embedded subject because of the Binding Condition B, which requires a pronominal to be free in its governing category. Thus, in the variable analysis, the null subject argument is either *pro* or a variable, but the null object argument can only be a variable, which explains the subject-object asymmetry described in (9) and (10).

However, many researchers raise objections to the variable analysis, particularly with respect to the alleged subject-object asymmetry observed in (9) and (10) (see Hoji 1985, Nakamura 1986, among many others). Although Hasegawa judges them to be ungrammatical with the reading in which the null object refers to the matrix subject, this judgment seems to be questionable. For example, even if we use a predicate in the embedded clause which forces the reading whereby the null object argument is coreferential with the matrix subject, the sentence is still grammatical. Consider the following examples:

- (12) Haha_i-ga [titi-ga e_{ij} kyuukonsita to] itta.
 mother-Nom father-Nom proposed that said

'My mother_i said that my father proposed to her_{ij}.'

- (13) John_i-ga [e_{*ij} e_{*ji} nagutta] hito_j-o uttaeta.
 John-Nom hit person-Acc sued

'John_i sued a person_j who hit him_i.' or '?John_i sued a person_j who he_i hit.'

The example (12) corresponds to the example (9), but the sentence is grammatical even with the reading where the embedded object is coreferential with the matrix subject. Similarly in (13), the relative clause contains null subject and object arguments just like the example (10) does, but the preferred reading in (13) is completely opposite to that of (10) in that the embedded object is more likely to refer

to the matrix subject. If the null object is truly a variable, it should not be coreferential with the matrix subject, due to the Condition C of Binding Theory, which requires a variable to be A-free.⁴ This fundamental problem falsifies the validity of the variable analysis.

Another type of analysis is proposed by Huang (1991) and Otani and Whitman (1991). They observe that certain instances of null objects are analyzed as ellipsis. Consider the following examples:

- (14) a. Taroo-ga zibun-no heya-o soozisita.
 Taro-Nom self-Gen room-Acc cleaned
 'Taro_i cleaned self_i's room.'
- b. Hanako-mo *e* soozisita.
 Hanako-also cleaned
 'Hanako_j also cleaned self_j's room.' (sloppy reading)
 'Hanako also cleaned Taro's room.' (strict reading)

(14b) is ambiguous. The null object is interpreted either as *Hanako's room* (sloppy reading) or *Taro's room* (strict reading). The ambiguity of (14b) is comparable to the VP-ellipsis in English.

- (15) John cleaned his room, and Mary did [_{VP} *e*], too.

The sloppy reading in (14b) is problematic to the analysis that takes the null object as a null pronoun. With the sloppy reading, the null object is coindexed with the subject. Due to the Condition B of Binding Theory, however, a pronoun should be A-free in its governing category. Inadequacies of the null pronoun analysis lead Huang (1991) and Otani and Whitman (1991) to propose an idea that a null object in fact corresponds to an empty VP.

Note that the strict/sloppy reading in (14b) is available only when (i) the former sentence is followed by a parallel sentence (Whitman and Moriyama 2004, cited in Neeleman and Szendrői 2005, 14), and (ii) there is an anaphoric antecedent (Takahashi 2006). Firstly, in terms of parallelism, if (14b) is changed to the following example, there is no ambiguity:

⁴ A similar criticism is made of the data in Chinese by Xu (1986).

- (14) b' Atode Hanako-ga e tazunetekita.
 afterwards Hanako-Nom visited
'Afterwards Hanako visited (Taro's room).'

The sensitivity to parallelism in particular shows that the sloppy reading in (14b) results from ellipsis, rather than a null pronoun.

Secondly, when no anaphoric antecedent is available, there is no sloppy reading. For example, the null object in (16) can be coreferential with several persons, but not with Hanako herself.

- (16) Taroo-ga Ziroo-to kita-ra Hanako-ga e
 Taro-Nom Ziro-with come-when Hanako-Nom

 homeru rasii.
 praise it.seems
'It seems that when Taro comes with Ziro, Hanako will praise him, them, you, me, etc.'
(Takahashi 2006, 14 (31))

This means that the ellipsis analysis can be applied to a certain restricted circumstance and we still need a null pronoun in a case like (16).

The VP-ellipsis analysis is argued against from various researchers, however (Hoji 1998, Kim 1999, Oku 1998). For example, Kim (1999) discusses inadequacy of the VP-ellipsis analysis by the part-whole construction in Korean:

- (18) a. Jerry-nun [caki-uy ai]-lul phal-ul ttayli-ess-ta.
 Jerry-Top self-Gen child-Acc arm-Acc hit-Past-Ind
'Jerry hit his child on the arm.'
- b. Kulena Sally-nun [_{NP} e] tali-lul ttayli-ess-ta.
 but Sally-Top leg-Acc hit-Past-Ind
- i) But Sally hit her (= Sally's) child on the leg. (sloppy reading)
ii) But Sally hit his (= Jerry's) child on the leg. (strict reading)
(Kim 1999, 259 (8))

In the part-whole construction, the body part NP ('arm' in (18a)) requires the presence of the whole NP ('his child' in (18a)) overtly or implicitly. So, the VP-ellipsis

hypothesis predicts that the sloppy reading in (18b.i) is impossible, when the part NP is different from that of (18a). The reason that Kim (1999) gives goes as follows: in the VP-ellipsis analysis, we need to copy the trace of the verb and the object argument. In order to obtain the sloppy reading in (18b), we need to copy the whole-NP and a verb's trace. Since the part NP in (18b) is different from that of (18a), what is copied is everything in the VP but the part NP. In the current syntactic theory, a whole phrase need to be copied and its part cannot be left out. Still, a sloppy reading is available in (18b), which strongly suggests that the gap in (18b) is not a result from VP-ellipsis.

Another argument against VP-ellipsis analysis is provided in Hoji (1998). Note that in the discussion so far, we have seen null objects in Japanese which correspond to pronouns or ellipsis in English. However, Japanese null objects can be used in a different way. For example, consider the example below:

(19) A: John-ga zibun-no kuruma-o aratta.
 John-Nom self-Gen car-Acc washed
 'John washed self's car.'

B: John igai-no subete-no hito-mo (minna) e aratta.
 John except-Gen all-Gen person-also all washed
 'Everyone other than John also washed a car.'

(Hoji 1998, 140 (37))

(19) is structurally similar to (14), but the null object in (19B) is not interpreted as an anaphoric expression like VP-ellipsis. Rather, it is interpreted as referring to an indefinite NP.⁵ Having observed inadequacies of the VP-ellipsis analysis, Hoji (1998) and Kim (1999) propose an analysis involving null NPs or NP ellipsis.⁶ Although their analyses differ, they more or less support an idea to have an empty NP in the syntax and copy an appropriate referent from the context.

Summarizing this section, we have seen previous analyses concerning the status of null objects in Japanese. As shown in the discussion above, the distribution of null

⁵ Note that the null object in (19) does not correspond to a pronoun 'it' either. For more detailed observation on the various usages of null objects, see Tomioka (2003).

⁶ Oku (1999) independently proposes an analysis of null object using NP-ellipsis.

objects in Japanese is wider than the distribution of pronouns in English. The content of the null objects are recovered from the context, and they can function as null pronouns, null possessors, etc, depending on the contexts where they occur.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we have observed object drop in English and Japanese. In English, it occurs in limited contexts such as recipes or it requires specific verbal predicates. In Japanese, on the other hand, a null argument appears more freely and productively. From the overview of the previous analyses, it becomes clear that a null argument in Japanese is not merely a null pronoun but corresponds to any overt NP. Thus, it can be said that object drop in English is a lexical process, whereas that in Japanese is a syntactic process. Why this kind of syntactic process is not available in English will be a question pursued in the future research.

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