

NULL SUBJECTS IN PAPIAMENTU: A REASSESSMENT¹

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1 Introduction

Papiamentu's lexifiers, Spanish and Portuguese, allow null subjects to occur freely – a phenomenon known in the literature as *pro-drop*; their rich inflectional systems are thought to allow for unexpressed subjects to be identified. Papiamentu (Pp) appears to lack the rich inflectional system of its lexifiers. Nevertheless, null subjects do occur frequently in Pp texts. To give an initial impression, consider the following excerpt from a newspaper article. The author explains the Curaçaoan government's issuing of fiscal instruments to finance its deficit. Null subjects are indicated by \emptyset ; the bold-printed translations are intended to give an impression of the interpretation of the null subject as either an expletive ('it'), as having arbitrary-reference ('one'), or as having a referential interpretation ('they'):

- (1) *Si tene na kuenta ku \emptyset_1 mester kita 11.0 mion florin na debe ku mester paga bek (...) djaluna awor, \emptyset_2 por konstatá ku ta sobra 20.5 mion ku ta mas o ménos e défisit ku \emptyset_3 a kalkulá ku \emptyset_4 lo tin e luna aki, pa \emptyset_5 por paga mayoria di e obligashonnan ku Gobièrnu Insular tin pa e luna di desèmber aki. Pues ku e fianza aki i ku e otro entradanan ku Gobièrnu Insular tin lo \emptyset_6 por paga kreditornan (...), lo \emptyset_7 por paga e interes ku debe, obligashonnan pa APNA, institutonan supsidia, i salarionan na amtenar e luna aki.*

[If it is taken into consideration that **one** must deduct 11 million guilders in debt which must be repaid by this Monday, **one** may note that 20.5 million is left, which is more or less the deficit which **it** has been calculated that **there** will be for this month, for **them** to be able to cover most of the financial commitments which the Island Government has for this December. In other

¹ We wish to acknowledge the support of the Mona Campus Committee for Research & Publications and Graduate Awards of the University of the West Indies (Mona, Jamaica), which awarded a travel grant to Jodianne Scott for a short visit to Curaçao for her research on "The syntax and semantics of null subjects in Papiamentu". The Papiamentu-speaking respondents who she interviewed were given short texts in Papiamentu, followed by different versions of a target utterance, containing either a null subject or a pronominal subject. Respondents were asked to judge the acceptability of the different versions of each target utterance, and were asked to provide interpretations.

words, with this financing and with the other income which the Island Government has, **they** will be able to pay creditors, **they** will be able to service the debt, commitments to APNA, subsidized institutions, and the salaries of civil servants this month.] (source: *Èxtra*, 15/12/2006, p.11; translation by Silvia Kouwenberg)

The null subjects identified as ‘ \emptyset_1 ’ and ‘ \emptyset_2 ’ have arbitrary reference. ‘ \emptyset_3 ’ is the expletive subject of the propositional verb *kalkulá* ‘calculate’, ‘ \emptyset_4 ’ the expletive subject of an existential construction. ‘ \emptyset_{5-7} ’ are the referential subjects of different occurrences of *paga* ‘pay’; their reference is determined by the collective noun *Gobièrnu Insular* ‘Island Government’, which is present in the same CP as the first occurrence of *paga*.

Kouwenberg (1990) describes a restricted *pro*-drop system, where null pronominals appear mainly as non theta-marked subjects, and where theta-marked subjects can be null in contexts which allow for arbitrary reference. Scott (2009), on the other hand, shows that referential null subjects are admissible, but only where a salient antecedent is available in the discourse. In either account, Pp emerges as a partial *pro*-drop language. Veenstra (2009) goes a step further, arguing that Pp is a full *pro*-drop language. He relies on evidence which suggests that pronominal subjects in Pp are syntactic clitics whose function it is to mark agreement.

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This paper explores the occurrence of null referential subjects in Pp texts, and tries to reconcile the view that Pp is a full *pro*-drop language with the restrictions on null-subject constructions that lack an agreement marker which identifies the content of *pro*. In the following, we will first provide an overview of the different types of null subject constructions which may be distinguished in Pp. We then consider the view that Pp is a full *pro*-drop language, and the manner in which the content of *pro* is identified. We will see that there is ample scope for further research in this area.

2 Papiamentu as a partial *pro*-drop language

We basically distinguish two types of null subjects in Papiamentu, based on their (lack of) reference: expletive subjects, which lack content, and theta-marked subjects, whose content is determined either by coreference with an antecedent in the discourse, or by a default arbitrary interpretation.

2.1 Expletive subjects

Expletive subjects have no content, and occur in positions that are not theta marked; their main function being that of satisfying the EPP (Extended Projection Principle) – i.e., the requirement that a subject be present. Expletive subjects are never overt in

pro-drop languages (see discussion in Veenstra, 2009). In (2), expletive null subjects appear with *parse* ‘seem, look like’, existential *tin* ‘exist’ (literally: ‘have’), and *importá* ‘be important, matter’:²

- (2) a. Parse ku Maria ta malu.
 seem COMP Maria COP ill
 ‘It seems that Maria is ill.’³ (adapted from Kouwenberg, 1990: 46)
- b. Tin hopi hende.
 have many people
 ‘There are many people.’ (adapted from Kouwenberg, 1990: 46)
- c. No ta importá mi ni un bledu.
 NEG TNS matter-1SG not INDF bit
 ‘I don’t give a shit.’ (adapted from Veenstra, 2009: 70)

Passivization may provide another context for a null expletive subject. Thus, in (3), passivization has resulted in the suppression of the Agent role of *kalkulá* ‘calculate’, whose complement is a proposition, hence unavailable for movement to the subject position. An attempt to insert an overt subject pronoun *e* [3SG], resulting in *E ta ser kalkulá...*, was resisted by Papiamentu-speaking respondents in Curaçao who were interviewed by Jodianne Scott on a short fieldtrip in January 2007.

- (3) (*E) ta ser kalkulá ku Dr. L. a kobra
 (*3SG) TNS PASS calculated COMP Dr. L. ASP charge
 1.8 milyon florin di mas ku e kobranzanan aki
 1.8 million guilder of much than DEF charge-PL here
 ‘It has been calculated that Dr. L. has overcharged by 1.8 million guilders over the current fees.’ [adapted from *Bon Dia Aruba*, Friday 3 March 2006]

Additionally, Veenstra (2009) argues for the presence of an expletive null subject in inverted structures such as that in (4), where the subject is postverbal; note that the verbal string *ta biba* is in absolute sentence-initial position. In such cases, the EPP-feature must be assumed to be checked by an expletive element; since this element does not have phonological features, it can only be expletive *pro*.

- (4) Ta biba un mion hende riba e isla aki.
 TNS live INDF million person on DEF island here

² We have standardized spelling and glosses, which may differ therefore from their originals. Abbreviations used are: 1/2/3SG and 1/2/3PL for singular and plural pronouns; ASP Aspect, COMP Complementizer, COP Copula, DEF Definite article, INDF Indefinite article, LOC Locative, NEG Negation, PASS Passive auxiliary, PL Plural, TNS Tense.

³ Subject-to-subject raising is not possible in Pp.

‘On this island live a million people.’ (Veenstra, 2009: 65)

Finally, quasi-argumental null subjects are those which appear with weather predicates. The prototypical weather predicate, *yobe* ‘rain’, optionally allows for *awa* ‘water’ as overt subject; other weather predicates take null subjects only:

- (5) a. (Awa) ta yobe.
(water) TNS rain
‘It is raining’
b. Ta hasi friu / calor.
TNS make cold / heat
‘It is cold / hot.’

In sum, several contexts can be distinguished for an expletive *pro* subject; in all cases, the function of expletive *pro* is that of satisfying the EPP feature of T:

- (i) with predicates which inherently lack a theta-role for an external argument; these include *parse* ‘seem’, existential *tin* ‘have’, weather predicates, etc.;
- (ii) in the passive of a propositional verb;
- (iii) in so-called inverted structures, where the subject is postverbal.

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Veenstra (2009: 67f) notes a definiteness effect which further supports the lack of content of *pro* in these constructions: a definite postverbal subject cannot function as an associate of the expletive.

2.2 Theta-marked null subjects

Kouwenberg (1990: 48) points to the existence of theta-marked null subjects; she notes that this possibility is restricted to arbitrary, human reference, as illustrated in (6a).⁴ Veenstra (2009) further notes that it is limited to strictly generic contexts; hence the unacceptability of (6b):

- (6) a. Ta bende mata.
TNS sell plant
‘Plants are sold (here).’
b. *Ta bende e flor.
TNS sell DEF flower
‘The flowers are sold here.’
(Veenstra, 2009: 69).



⁴ That arbitrary *pro* has human reference appears to be a cross-linguistic requirement (Cabredo Hofherr, 2006)

(7) contrasts an utterance containing a null subject of this type (7a), and the equivalent utterance containing the overt pronominal subject *nan* [3PL] (7b). Jodianne Scott's respondents accepted both utterances. Nevertheless, they did not consider them to be equivalent: while no specific referent is identified for the subject of (7a), *nan* in (7b) is considered anaphoric, and must refer to a specific group identified earlier in the discourse. In other words, an arbitrary interpretation is not possible for the overt pronoun. In this regard, Pp *nan* [3PL] differs from third person plural pronouns in other Caribbean Creole languages, which are typically able to appear with arbitrary interpretations.

- (7) a. Ayera nochi a tene e seremonia eukoméniko
 yesterday night ASP hold DEF ceremony ecumenical
 kual tabata bou guia di Monsigneur Luis Secco.
 which TNS under guidance of Monsignor Luis Secco.
 'Last night the ecumenical ceremony was held which was under the
 guidance of Monsignor Luis Secco.' [adapted from *Bon Dia Aruba*,
 Friday 3 March 2006]
- b. Ayera nochi nan a tene e seremonia eukoméniko ...
 yesterday night PL ASP hold DEF ceremony ecumenical
 'Last night, they held the ecumenical ceremony under the guidance of
 Monsignor Luis Secco.'

In contrast to Kouwenberg (1990), Scott (2009) found that Pp also allows for referential pronouns to be null under certain discourse conditions. Consider (8):

- (8) Guarda Costa a manda foto saká for di helikòpter
 Guard Coast ASP send photo taken from of helicopter
 momento ku tabata aserká e krusero.
 moment COMP TNS approach DEF cruise-ship
 'The coast guard sent a picture taken from the helicopter when approaching the
 cruise-ship.' [adapted from *Bon Dia Aruba*, Friday 3 March 2006]

As seen earlier in (6)-(7), a null subject can have an arbitrary referent, which is necessarily outside of the discourse. But in the case of (8), respondents insisted that the null subject of *aserká* could only be *Guarda Costa*. In other words, the null subject in (8) has the following properties: (i) it has a definite interpretation; (ii) it is anaphoric; (iii) its antecedent is found in the preceding discourse. Note that *Guarda Costa*, although grammatically singular, is a collective noun. In other words, the null subject in (8) is compatible with a 3PL interpretation.

In (9), the null subject of *skonde* ‘hide’ again is anaphoric: its antecedent *e spesialistanan* ‘the specialists’ is located in the preceding discourse. The null subject binds the 3PL reflexive *nan mes* ‘themselves’, showing that it is syntactically active and displays the typical behavior of pronominals:

- (9) E spesialistanan ta sigui ku e práktikanan aki ketu bai.
 DEF specialist-PL TNS follow with DEF practice- PL here quiet go.
 Ta skonde (nan mes) tras di “tradishon”.
 TNS hide (3PL self) behind of tradition.
 ‘The specialists simply continue with these practices. They hide (themselves) behind “tradition”.’ [adapted from *Bon Dia Aruba*, Friday 3 March 2006]

It seems that, given a choice between an antecedent local to the discourse and reference to an arbitrary entity in the world, there is a preference for a null theta-marked subject to be identified with the former. Nevertheless, the availability of an antecedent in the discourse is not a sufficient condition for a referential null subject to be able to appear. Thus, respondents rejected (10) with a null subject in the second utterance, asking “who” was leaving hospital, and requiring the appearance of an overt pronoun *el* [3SG] instead. This, we suggest, shows that a discourse-linked null subject is compatible only with a 3PL interpretation. At this stage, this idea has the status of a hypothesis, which requires further investigation; it is worth noting, though, that we have seen no cases of discourse-linked null subjects in any of the Pp texts that we looked at which would contradict this idea. Moreover, person sensitivity is well attested in partial *pro*-drop languages: in some languages, only 1st and 2nd person subjects may be omitted, while in others, only 3rd person subjects may (Deal, 2005).

- (10) Ayera nochi, e viktima di un “hit-and-run” a wòrdu atmití
 yesterday night DEF victim of INDF “hit-and-run” ASP PASS admit
 na hospital den kondishon basta grave. Awe mainta *(el) a sali
 LOC hospital in condition quite grave. This morning *(3SG) ASP leave
 for di hospital na pia komosifwera ku nada no a pasa kuné.
 from of hospital LOC foot as.if COMP nothing NEG ASP happen with-3SG
 ‘Last night the victim of a “hit-and-run” had been admitted to hospital in serious condition. This morning, he left the hospital as if nothing had happened to him.’ [adapted from *Bon Dia Aruba*, Friday 3 March 2006]

Summarizing, the evidence so far is that Pp is a restricted *pro*-drop language: null subjects appear primarily in expletive contexts. Additionally, null subjects with a 3PL

reference may appear where a compatible discourse-linked antecedent is available, or, failing that, where an arbitrary interpretation is available.

3 Papiamentu as a full *pro*-drop language

Pp verbs are invariant: there is no inflection which allows for the identification of person or number features of a null subject. This can be observed whether overt pronominal subjects appear or not:

- (11) a. Mi ta bende mata.
1SG TNS sell plant
'I sell plants.'
- b. E ta bende mata.
3SG TNS sell plant
'S/he sells plants.'
- c. Nos ta bende mata.
1PL TNS sell plant
'We sell plants.'

However, more recently, Kouwenberg (2007) and Veenstra (2009) have argued that subject pronouns such as those in (11) are weak pronouns, which contrast with strong counterparts, and which have the status of syntactic clitics; these claims have consequences for the status of Pp as a *pro*-drop language. The evidence for the existence of weak pronouns is both prosodic and syntactic. Prosodically, weak subject pronouns must be integrated into a tonal domain by the assignment of a contextually determined tone; that tonal domain is syntactically defined in ways which are as yet poorly understood (Kouwenberg, 2007; 2009). Syntactically, weak subject pronouns cannot be separated from the TMA domain, cannot be coordinated or modified, and must be preceded by the mood marker *lo* (Kouwenberg, 2007). The prosodic and syntactic evidence supports the view that weak pronouns are syntactic clitics, whose function is to mark Agreement. This also means that they do not occupy the same position in the syntactic structure as lexical subjects do: they are functional heads which head AgrP.⁵ In contrast, lexical subjects, including strong pronoun subjects, are tonally independent, may be separated from the TMA domain, and precede the mood marker *lo*.

Kouwenberg (2007) makes no attempt to relate the status of weak pronouns as syntactic clitics to the *pro*-drop issue. However, it is on the basis of her findings that

⁵ This behavior contrasts with that of strong subject pronouns, which are high-toned, and which can be focused or separated from the TMA domain by adverbial material, and which can be modified. Strong pronouns are functionally and distributionally equivalent to lexical subjects, and occupy the same position in the syntactic structure. See Kouwenberg (2007) for details.

Veenstra (2009: 74ff) argues that these agreement markers allow for a null subject to be identified. In other words, the pronominal subjects in (11) are the equivalent of the rich inflection of Pp's lexifiers. This means that *pro* is licensed in Pp in a fashion similar to that of a prototypical *pro*-drop language such as Italian: Pp is, then, a full *pro*-drop language. Veenstra (2009) proposes the clause structure in (12) for Pp, which we adopt. In (12), [SPEC,TopP] houses a lexical subject, i.e., a strong pronoun or a full DP.

(12) [TopP SUBJECT [AgrPP ADVERB [AgrP Agr [TP T ... VERB ...]]]]

Where that position is empty, *pro* in [SPEC,AgrP] is expected to be identified by the material in Agr⁰, which takes the form of a weak pronoun. For an utterance such as that in (11a), this translates to (11a)'; *pro* is identified here by the content of Agr, which is filled by weak pronoun *mi* which has the features [1st person, singular]:

(11a)' [AgrP *pro*_i [Agr *mi*_i] [TP ta bende mata]]
pro 1SG TNS sell plant
 'I sell plants.'

But what of constructions where no overt material appears in Agr? An expletive null subject has no content, hence no *phi*-features; in that case, recoverability is not at issue. This is not true, however, for theta-marked null subjects: where *pro* has an interpretation, the expectation is that it should appear with an overt agreement marker. Consider, once again, the configuration in (6), given here as (6)':

(6)' [AgrP *pro*_{arb} [Agr *e*] [TP ta bende mata]]⁶
pro TNS sell plant
 'Plants are sold (here).'

In (6), an arbitrary interpretation arises. Not only do we fail to see some or other agreement marker for arbitrary *pro*, but where an overt form such as *e* [3SG] or *nan* [3PL] appears in Agr, a definite, not an arbitrary interpretation ensues, as seen in the preceding. In short, the interpretation of *pro* in an utterance such as that in (6)' has an out-of-the-blue arbitrary interpretation, which, it appears, need not be identified by overt material in Agr. (9)', on the other hand, illustrates the discourse-dependence of referential *pro* where no overt material fills Agr. We see where the antecedent *e*

⁶ *e* in Agr in (5)' and (8)' is an empty category, not the Pp subject pronoun *e* [3SG].

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