

Parametric Variation

Parametric variation in linguistic theory refers to the systematic grammatical variation permitted by the human language faculty. Although still widely assumed, the parametric theory of variation has in recent years been subject to re-evaluation and critique. The Null Subject Parameter, which determines among other things whether or not a language allows the suppression of subject pronouns, is one of the best-known and most widely discussed examples of a parameter. Nevertheless its status in current syntactic theory is highly controversial. This book is a defence of the parametric approach to linguistic variation, set within the framework of the Minimalist Program. It discusses syntactic variation in the light of recent developments in linguistic theory, focusing in particular on issues such as the formal nature of minimalist parameters, the typology of null-subject language systems and the way in which parametric choices can be seen to underlie the synchronic and diachronic patterns observed in natural languages.

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defective goals and therefore cannot be deleted. I will leave this and other points regarding the nature of null operators open. The central observation in the present context is simply that they constitute a further possible case of a defective goal attracted to the specifier of their probe by an EPP-feature, and as such they are required to delete. In this connection, it is interesting to note that Kayne (1994: 88) mentions that an "avoid relative pronoun if possible" principle is at work in French and Italian relatives, where only the complementiser *que/che* is allowed in subject and object relatives:

A further prediction stemming from (26) concerns v. If consistent, agreement-licensed null subjects are only found where T has ϕ -features, D-features and an EPP-feature, then we expect exactly the same to hold at the v level. We therefore expect to find consistent, agreement-licensed null objects just where v has ϕ -features, a D-feature and, most important, an EPP-feature. It therefore follows that such null objects will only be found in OV languages, since the presence of an EPP-feature on v will guarantee OV order (perhaps by means of VP-pied-piping; see (25) above).

Many of the cases of null objects that have been discussed in the literature appear to be instance of 'radical' argument drop; this is the case for Chinese, Japanese and other East Asian languages, arguably also Brazilian Portuguese. ²¹ Whatever is going on here, it is clear that agreement is playing no role in licensing these elements, since there is no object agreement in these languages. The arbitrary null object of Italian, discussed and analysed in Rizzi (1986a), may have more properties in common with 'partial' null subjects; again, it is not associated with object agreement and, given its arbitrary interpretation, we conjecture that it is not associated with a D-feature (see footnote 18 and Holmberg and Sheehan (Chapter 3)).

There are, however, languages with 'rich' object agreement and what seem to be consistent null objects, with properties similar to those of null subjects in languages like Italian and Spanish (notably definite reference and the association with rich agreement). One such case is Pashto, as discussed in Huang (1984). Pashto is a split-ergative language, showing a nominative–accusative

These might be cases of topic deletion (in the sense of Huang (1984), Raposo (1986), Modesto (2000a)), which it would be natural to account for in terms of the notion of defective goal. However, if Chomsky (2008) is correct in proposing that topicalisation is triggered by an Edge Feature, and that such cases of movement do not involve Agree, then it is difficult to see how to make such an account work in the terms being assumed here. See below for a further brief comment on 'radical' pro-drop, in the light of the proposals in Saito (2007).



Parametric Variation: Null Subjects in Minimalist Theory

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