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WHAT MAY STATISTICS TELL US ABOUT NULL SUBJECTS IN RUSSIAN? ¹

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Abstract. The article highlights the linguistic phenomenon of abandoning the expletively presented syntactic subject (the Null Subject Phenomenon) in different languages and focuses on its exemplification by the Russian language. It is shown that despite the existing number of studies on this issue, there is lack of precisely formulated criteria that determine the choice of linguistic means to represent a syntactic subject in the languages, which allow both options (partial null subject languages). Based on the discussion of literature on the topic and on the statistical analysis of 16,718 sentence samples from the spoken language, print journalism, and fiction subcorpora of the Russian National Corpus, the article argues that the choice between null and overt subjects in Russian sentences depends on factors such as tense, person, and style, but that this dependency is rather weak, owing to the fact that the Russian language system is now in the process of change. Null-subjectness is not an exclusive syntactic parameter and should be studied along with other aspects like semantics and pragmatics. The statistical data from this study support previously discussed diachronic and acquisition data, and confirm that languages do not nicely distribute themselves into distinct groups, but inhabit a constantly changing continuum.

Key words: pro-drop languages, null subject, corpus study, syntax, continuum, syntactic subject, Russian.

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ЧТО СТАТИСТИКА МОЖЕТ РАССКАЗАТЬ О НУЛЕВОМ СУБЪЕКТЕ В РУССКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ? ¹

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена проблеме возможности или невозможности опущения эксплицитно выраженного синтаксического субъекта (null subject phenomenon) в различных языках мира; данное явление рассмотрено на примере русского языка. Показано, что, несмотря на большое количество исследований по этой проблеме, точные критерии, определяющие выбор способа выражения синтаксического субъекта в языках, допускающих оба возможных варианта (partial null subject languages), не сформулированы. В результате статистического анализа 16 718 финитных глагольных клауз из трех стилистических подкорпусов Национального корпуса русского языка (публицистика, устная речь и художественная литература) выявлено, что эксплицитная реализация синтаксического субъекта или его опущение в русском языке связаны не только с традиционно выделяемыми в лингвистике факторами (время и лицо глагольной формы), но и с фактором стиля текста, однако показано, что эта связь проявляется слабо. С учетом имеющихся в литературе диахронических данных и современных данных, полученных при изучении процесса развития речи, делается вывод, что в настоящее время в русском языке происходит изменение норм опущения синтаксического субъекта. Установлено также, что языки не распределяются по данному критерию на несколько закрытых групп, а образуют постоянно изменяющийся континуум.

Ключевые слова: языки pro-drop, нулевой субъект, корпусная лингвистика, синтаксис, континуум, синтаксический субъект, русский язык.

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Introduction

Null Subject Phenomenon (also known as “Null Subject Parameter,” or “Pro-Drop Parameter”) has been a consistent interest in linguistic studies since its first appearance in early 1980s. The parameter originally divided languages into two groups: those that require explicit syntactic subjects in any syntactic structures (“non-pro-drop languages,” or “non-null subject languages”) and those that allow subject omission (“pro-drop languages,” or “null subject languages”)². Overt, or non-null, subjects in non-null subject languages are licensed by syntactic structure and do not add any specific pragmatic nuances, while in null subject languages overt subjects are not structural and therefore the scope of supplied pragmatic shades is very large. Consequently, scholars have suggested that null subject languages be further subdivided. Huang [1984] has suggested the existence of the so-called “radical null subject languages,” and Holmberg [2005] has more recently introduced the group of “partial null subject languages”. Nevertheless, these groups do not have rigid boundaries, settled by some precise absolute criteria, which has led Duguine [2014] to note the “chaotic character” of null-subject phenomenon.

Where the Russian language falls has been a matter of debate for decades. Some linguists argue that Russian should be considered a null subject language [Růžička, 1986; Perlmutter, Moore, 2002], while others suggest it is a non-null subject language [Franks, 1995; Gordishevsky, Avrutin, 2003]. A third group of scholars claim that Russian is a typical partial null subject language [McShane, 2009; Madariaga, 2018]. Section Two discusses the merits of each position. In Section Three I present a new statistical study of null subjects in Russian based on data from the Russian National Corpus (henceforth RNC)³. The data shows that the choice between null and overt subjects in Russian depends on such factors as tense, person, and style, but that this dependency is weak, and Russian is in the process of change. The data can also help us understand some tendencies in modern Russian syntax and pragmatics that can aid in the development of

computational dialogue systems, text processing, and machine translation software.

The problem of null subjects

A number of groups or a continuum?

Null Subject Parameter was first formulated in the 1980s as a set of criteria for separating null subject languages (NSL) from non-null subject languages (non-NSL) [Rizzi, 1982]. These criteria initially included the possibility of silent referential subjects, free subject inversion, and other properties of formal syntactic structure. Further studies showed that the typology of languages in relation to this parameter is much more complicated and NSLs are not homogeneous. Lindseth [1998] proposed three absolute properties of a true NSL: 1) only null pronominal subjects are stylistically unmarked; 2) only null pronouns can function as bound variables; 3) only null third plural pronominal subjects can have arbitrary reference.

Following Lindseth, Barbosa [2011] distinguished three typological patterns of NSLs: 1) languages with rich subject agreement which allows subjects to be freely dropped (the so-called consistent NSLs [Holmberg, 2005]); 2) languages that have agreement and referential null subjects in restricted contexts (partial NSLs⁴); 3) languages that lack agreement but allow both null subjects and null objects (radical NSLs, or discourse NSLs)⁵. In 2018, Barbosa added one more group of the so-called “semi pro-drop languages” that only have impersonal and quasi-argumental null subjects [Barbosa, 2019]. Lastly, Cognola and Casalicchio compare expletives in non-NSLs and in Romance dialects that are classified as NSLs and conclude that they follow different rules and should not be regarded as homogeneous [Cognola, Casalicchio, 2018]. They restrict the use of null subjects in partial NSLs with such factors as person (not every person allows null subjects), asymmetry between main and embedded clauses (null subjects tend to embedded clauses) and interpretation of generics (only 3rd person may have arbitrary generic interpretation).

Thus, the original division NSLs and non-NSLs developed into a more nuanced separation of five different types, but this seems to have largely

complicated things. The most decisive distributing factors are the existence and the role expletive pronouns play and the dependence of null and overt subjects from text form and discourse structure. Chinese scholars differentiate discourse-oriented and sentence-oriented languages according to the place of null referential subject antecedents: if an antecedent can be found somewhere in the discourse, but not necessarily within the same sentence, then we are dealing with a discourse-oriented NSL (later they were renamed as a “radical NSL”); if not, we are dealing with one of the other groups [Huang, 1984]. Interestingly however, and as I consider more below, Huang’s test does not work for Russian which is considered to be a partial NSL, but allows antecedents in both discourse and extra linguistic reality (cf. [Tseytlin, 1976] for a discussion of situational versus contextual ellipsis).

In contrast, Wrátil [2011] argues that there is a continuum of partial NSLs. While Camacho focuses on the distinction between thematic and expletive subjects, and suggests four possible combinations: 1) null thematic subjects + null expletive subjects; 2) overt thematic subjects + null expletive subjects; 3) null thematic subjects + overt expletive subjects; 4) overt thematic subjects + overt expletive subjects [Camacho, 2013]. The study of diachronic changes [Madariaga, 2018; Kinn, Rusten, Walkden, 2016; Simonenko, Crabbé, Prévost, 2018], of dialects of NSLs [Camacho, 2013; Cognola, Casalicchio, 2018], of first language acquisition [Wrátil, 2011; Pinto, 2006] and of heritage languages [Nagy et al., 2011; Bidese, Tomaselli, 2018] testify that as languages pass from one group to another, pronouns and syntactic structures will often change their properties and behave differently both in history and in language usage. Taken as a whole, these findings prove that the distribution of null subjects is too diverse and we should consider NSLs as a continuum with no rigid boundaries between classes.

Is Russian a partial NSL?

The position of Russian is still vague. At first, it was described as a NSL because it lacks expletive empty pronouns. Subsequently, it was considered to be a non-NSL because its complete syntactic structure requires an explicit subject position. Today however, you often find Russian on the list of languages illustrating partial NSLs.

At the same time, many studies show that Russian often behaves as a discourse or consistent NSL, and it differs too much from typical partial NSLs such as Finnish or Brazilian Portuguese [Madariaga, 2018; Cognola, Casalicchio, 2018]. On the one hand Gordishevsky and Avrutin [2003] among others point out that the null subject is merely an optional strategy in Russian, which differs it from the majority of other Slavic languages that are canonical NSLs [Lindseth, 1998]. On the other hand, Bizarri argues that Russian exhibits properties that are closer to consistent NSLs than to the partial ones [Bizarri, 2015]. And yet others argue that the distribution of null subjects differs significantly in spoken and written Russian with null subjects more frequent in spoken language [McShane, 2009]. This relies on the idea that null subjects in Russian are not structural but are licensed by context and text form, as well as the idea that Russian is a discourse-oriented language [Bizarri, 2015] which makes it closer to radical NSLs than to the partial NSLs (cf. [Barbosa, 2019] for their similarity).

This disagreement raises the question about the nature of this process: is it syntactic or pragmatic? McShane [2009] provides four criteria for answering this question for Russian: 1) syntactic configuration (is it a coordinate or subordinate clause); 2) avoidance of redundancy (including repetitions, series of co-referential actions, elaboration, etc.); 3) avoidance of long-winded formulations; 4) stylistic nuances with only the first one being syntactic. However, the conditions and parameters that were used as the focus in most past studies have not considered the usage of null subjects because such a complex phenomenon requires large statistical and psycholinguistic research to understand its functioning in real speech data (cf.: [McShane, 2009; Bizarri, 2015]). For typical NSLs, null subjects are stylistically unmarked while overt subjects emphasize the referent or signal the change of referents, but this is not true in Russian. In Russian, both null and overt subjects may be stylistically neutral or indicate some idea depending on the context of communication. Interaction between topicality, morphology, and null subjects is significant for any NSL [Cognola, Casalicchio, 2018], and Russian is not an exception.

Material and methods

In this section I present some statistics of null and overt subjects in modern Russian. The RNC has become a fruitful source of information about

any aspect of modern Russian and its diachronic changes. The size of the RNC is more than 600 million of tokens. The RNC includes twelve subcorpora: the main subcorpus, dialectal subcorpus, poetry subcorpus, subcorpus of spoken Russian, etc. Rich metadata and detailed linguistic annotation allows one to compare various parameters in texts from different times, styles, and genres. This is a very important advantage for studying the Null Subject Phenomenon, since the use of null or overt subjects is determined not only by the syntactic characteristics of the language, but also by other pragmatic factors discussed in Section Two.

I focus on the influence of three main factors that are considered decisive for choosing between null and overt subject: 1) *tense*, 2) *person*, 3) *style*. Tense shows the role of agreement, since person is expressed morphologically in present forms, but in past tense this information is hidden. Person corresponds to a) the difference between first and second person behavior on the one hand, and third person behavior on the other hand; b) the arbitrary interpretation of generic null subjects which was repeatedly indicated as one of the most important factors for considering Russian as a partial NSL [Holmberg, Nayudu, Sheehan, 2009]. Style shows the difference between spoken language, print journalism, and fiction which reflects the distinct topic-focus structure of these text forms and can show the role of the discourse structure in the choice of subjects⁶.

The process of data collection was the following. First, I limited the search within three subcorpora: 1) the spoken subcorpus, which contains domestic conversations, public lectures, transcripts of TV talk-shows, etc.; 2) the print journalism subcorpus, which

contains Russian newspapers and magazines published after 2000; 3) the fiction subcorpus, which contains novels, short stories, and other fiction writing originally in Russian and published after 1980. I created a series of specific search queries focusing on verbs of all possible forms – i.e., three tenses (present, past, and future), three persons (first, second, and third), and two numbers (singular and plural). I repeated this series of search queries for each subcorpus and received a sample of more than 25,000 sentences. I then looked through the search results and eliminated all sentences with the verb “быть” (“to be”) because it lacks finite forms in the present and is widely used in compound verb forms which may skew my statistics. Then I manually tagged each sentence with either null subject, overt pronominal subject, or overt nominal subject (only in third person verb forms). In complex sentences I tagged only the initial clause to avoid any asymmetry between main and embedded clauses ([Cognola, Casalicchio, 2018] for an overview).

I further tagged as null subjects only null referential subjects, and eliminated all generic ones. In Russian there are three types of null generic sentences: impersonal where the verb is in the third person form either in present or past; second person generalized human construction; indefinite personal construction (third plural both in present and past); in all these structures the use of syntactic subjects is forbidden, if the position is fulfilled we get another sentence with different meaning (compare examples 1 and 2). Referential null subjects may be fulfilled: if we use an overt subject in place of a null one, we get neither another sentence with different meaning nor an ungrammatical sentence (compare examples 3 and 4). The resulting clause

Examples:

(1) Iz trubny kapalo.
from pipe[GEN.SG] drip [PST.3SG.N]
Something was dripping from the pipe.

(2) Iz trubny kapalo vino.
from pipe[GEN.SG] drip [PST.3SG.N] wine [ACC.SG]
Wine was dripping from the pipe.

(3) Khochesh chaj? – Khochu, spasibo!
want [PRS.2SG] tea [ACC.SG] want [PRS.1SG] thank you
Do you want some tea? – Yes, I do, thank you!

(4) Ty khochesh chaj? – Khochu, spasibo!
2SG want [PRS.2SG] tea [ACC.SG] want [PRS.1SG] thank you
Do you want some tea? – Yes, I do, thank you!

will be grammatically correct, but may need some editing because of its position in the discourse.

Thus, in Russian in the case of a generic null subject, the very fact of its absence is syntactically and semantically meaningful, while in the case of a referential null subject its absence is pragmatically neutral in many contexts. Kasevich [2004] refers to the former as “subject reduction” and to the latter as “subject ellipsis,” since referential null subjects always correspond to some verb argument, while subject reduction⁷ (as well as expletives in non-NSLs) do not fulfill any arguments and are only structural⁸.

This initial analysis revealed that the data needed to be slightly modified. The complexity of Russian tenses and its aspectual system result in a deficient verb paradigm for perfective verbs which have lost the present forms, and so Russian has only five tense-aspect forms [Bondarko, 1971]. Consequently, in this analysis the forms of perfective future were combined with the forms of imperfective present, which have the same set

of inflexions⁹, and these figures were labeled as “no-past.” The plural and singular forms were also combined as there was little reason to expect this factor to be determinant. In addition, search results provided by the RNC comprise quite short context and it is sometimes impossible to distinguish the form of second person plural from the second person polite form which are homonyms. The final set of analyzed sentences is presented in Table 1.

Results and discussion

All three factors proved to be statistically significant for the choice between null and overt subjects (Table 2).

These results show that Russian null subjects are linked with morphology (i.e., agreement), reference (i.e., person), and discourse features (i.e., topic distribution in different text forms). Moreover, the data – which shows a significant number of null subjects in the initial clauses – refutes Holmberg’s statement [2016] that in partial

Table 1. The final set of analyzed sentences

			S(N)	S(Pron)	NULL	Total		
Spoken	no-past	1 person	–	1254	709	1963	5480	6647
		2 person	–	939	1067	2006		
		3 person	587	623	301	1511		
	past	all	261	619	287	1167	1167	
News	no-past	1 person	–	690	655	1345	3861	4871
		2 person	–	423	552	975		
		3 person	1213	204	124	1541		
	past	all	423	456	131	1010	1010	
Fiction	no-past	1 person	–	1110	743	1853	4417	5200
		2 person	–	666	849	1515		
		3 person	645	250	154	1049		
	past	all	421	253	109	783	783	
<i>Total</i>			3550	7487	5681	–	–	16718

Table 2. Chi-squared tests of the statistical significance of tense, persons, and styles

Factor	χ^2	df	p
Tense	715.886	2	< 0,001
Person	286.195	2	< 0,001
Style	756.146	4	< 0,001
Spoken			
Tense	150.838	2	< 0,001
Person	163.815	2	< 0,001
Print journalism			
Tense	176.227	2	< 0,001
Person	37.418	2	< 0,001
Fiction			
Tense	647.808	2	< 0,001
Person	97.356	2	< 0,001

NSLs null subjects can only be in embedded clauses (or we should admit that Russian is not a partial NSL).

To ascertain the statistical significance of these factors I compared the tense and person in total and within each style (Table 3, the most interesting and unexpected results are italics).

These comparisons verified the role of tense and person for the choice between null and overt subjects, but showed that although correlated, their association is weak in most cases and should be considered only as predisposition and not as some strict rule. At the same time, the data falsified the conventional statement that spoken Russian favors null subjects in contrast to written Russian. Rather, the difference was marked most obviously by the text form (e.g., newspaper versus fiction), which confirms the previous findings of the role

of text form (cf.: [Simonenko, Crabbé, Prévost, 2018], for French). Furthermore, the comparison of first and third persons challenged the previously suggested significance of the person distinction for Russian [Holmberg, Nayudu, Sheehan, 2009], and it supports the idea that referential and generic third person subjects should be considered separately in future studies since they follow different syntactic and pragmatic rules (cf.: [Kinn, Rusten, Walkden, 2016; Rosenkvist, 2018], for Germanic languages).

The only factor that showed a tighter correlation with the choice between null and overt subjects is tense, and it is significant for each style (Table 3). This finding proves that rich agreement – despite being disputed in many works recently [D’Alessandro, 2015] – is meaningful for Russian in each analyzed subcorpus. Russian speakers are

Table 3. Paired comparisons of the choice between null and overt subjects in all tenses, persons, and styles

Compared parameters	Yates continuity correction Chi-square test		Cramer’s V	
	χ^2	p-value	V	association
Total, tense, S(N) / S(Pron)	250.447	< 0,001	0.151	weak
Total, tense, S(Pron) / Null	1138.994	< 0,001	0.329	<i>middle</i>
Total, tense, S(N) / Null	642.025	< 0,001	0.263	<i>middle</i>
Total, 1 st vs 2 nd persons, S(Pron) / Null	190.171	< 0,001	0.141	weak
Total, 2 nd vs 3 rd persons, S(Pron) / Null	191.495	< 0,001	0.177	weak
Total, 1 st vs 3 rd persons, S(Pron) / Null	17.797	< 0,001	0.051	no association
Total, spoken / Print journalism, S(N) / S(Pron)	688.673	< 0,001	0.299	<i>middle</i>
Total, spoken / fiction, S(N) / S(Pron)	144.916	< 0,001	0.138	weak
Total, Print journalism / fiction, S(N) / S(Pron)	182.171	< 0,001	0.165	weak
Total, spoken / Print journalism, S(N) / S(Null)	460.720	< 0,001	0.270	<i>middle</i>
Total, spoken / fiction, S(N) / S(Null)	72.594	< 0,001	0.109	weak
Total, Print journalism / fiction, S(N) / S(Null)	161.083	< 0,001	0.164	weak
Total, spoken / Print journalism, S(Pron) / S(Null)	16.492	< 0,001	0.043	no association
Total, spoken / fiction, S(Pron) / S(Null)	16.487	< 0,001	0.041	no association
Total, Print journalism / fiction, S(Pron) / S(Null)	0.063	<i>0.802</i>	0.003	no association
Spoken, tense, S(N) / S(Pron)	67.030	< 0,001	0.126	weak
Spoken, tense, S(Pron) / Null	36.281	< 0,001	0.080	no association
Spoken, tense, S(N) / Null	151.899	< 0,001	0.218	<i>middle</i>
Spoken, 1 st vs 2 nd persons, S(Pron) / Null	116.269	< 0,001	0.172	weak
Spoken, 2 nd vs 3 rd persons, S(Pron) / Null	107.181	< 0,001	0.192	weak
Spoken, 1 st vs 3 rd persons, S(Pron) / Null	3.312	<i>0.069</i>	0.035	no association
Print journalism, tense, S(N) / S(Pron)	0.003	<i>0.959</i>	0.002	no association
Print journalism, tense, S(Pron) / Null	150.390	< 0,001	0.216	<i>middle</i>
Print journalism, tense, S(N) / Null	148.932	< 0,001	0.220	<i>middle</i>
Print journalism, 1 st vs 2 nd persons, S(Pron) / Null	13.878	< 0,001	0.078	no association
Print journalism, 2 nd vs 3 rd persons, S(Pron) / Null	34.037	< 0,001	0.163	weak
Print journalism, 1 st vs 3 rd persons, S(Pron) / Null	12.143	< 0,001	0.087	weak
Fiction, tense, S(N) / S(Pron)	362.117	< 0,001	0.330	<i>middle</i>
Fiction, tense, S(Pron) / Null	34.296	< 0,001	0.092	no association
Fiction, tense, S(N) / Null	512.856	< 0,001	0.420	<i>quite strong</i>
Fiction, 1 st vs 2 nd persons, S(Pron) / Null	84.355	< 0,001	0.159	weak
Fiction, 2 nd vs 3 rd persons, S(Pron) / Null	40.342	< 0,001	0.146	weak
Fiction, 1 st vs 3 rd persons, S(Pron) / Null	0.463	<i>0.497</i>	0.015	no association

likely to experience some difficulties to co-reference agents of past actions, but they may rely on inflectional gender information although this factor seems to be skipped in the majority of studies. The strongest association between tense and the choice of nominal overt subject versus null subject was found in fiction. This finding needs further research as fiction follows specific rules of reference, permits sentences much longer than both spoken and journalistic language, favors the serial sequences of actions, etc. All these properties may influence the choice of subject [McShane, 2009].

Conclusion

The statistical analysis of Russian data shows that Russian deviates from expectations that fit NSLs, non-NSLs, or partial NSLs. It allows null subjects in all persons, all analyzed styles, and both main and embedded clauses, as well as possessing a rich agreement system (this matches consistent NSLs). Furthermore, Russian is co-referential to antecedents but they may be extrasentential, and it allows null objects (this matches discourse NSLs). And lastly, although rich in its subject agreement system, Russian is still deficient here and it includes arbitrary generic pronouns including the third person (this matches partial NSLs), while at the same time null subjects are not restricted to any finite verb forms or styles and third person referential null subjects may be found in clauses of any type (in contrast to partial NSLs).

All in all, Russian presents a very complicated example of the Null Subject Phenomenon which consequently needs to be studied by means of corpus and psycholinguistic methods. Together with the data from the history of Russian and from Russian acquisition, these findings show that Russian is likely to be currently undergoing a process of change, but the direction, reasons, and modes of this change are still unclear.

NOTES

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² As I do not discuss the problem of *pro* in this paper, I from now on use only the term “null subject”.

³ RNC is available at www.ruscorpora.ru.

⁴ They are also called “non-full pro-drop languages” [Cardinaletti, 2012].

⁵ Holmberg argues that radical NSLs is a false term because it suggests some radical rules of argument eliding [Holmberg, 2016].

⁶ A detailed analysis of topic prominence and topic chains must stay outside the scope of the present study, although recent studies have shown it to be a significant factor for the choice between null and overt subjects [Frascarelli, Casentini 2019].

⁷ Kasevich [2004] suggested this term in its phonological meaning.

⁸ Cf. [Haider, 2019] for a discussion of semantically void arguments and expletives subjects.

⁹ The forms of imperfective future were eliminated at the previous stage.

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