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Resolving the Null Subject Debate in Yiddish

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What are null subjects and why are they important?

Grammatically acceptable sentences that **lack subjects**

Null subjects can have a discourse antecedent (Huang 1984) or be "out of the blue" (Trutkowski 2016, p. 188)

Linguistic theories: Associations between null-subject and other aspects of the grammatical systems

Significance: also important to document the target adult language for language acquisition

What does a sentence with a null subject look like?

Nousin junaan.
step-PAST-1-SG train-into

‘(I) boarded the train’

Finnish (Vainikka & Levy, 1999, p. 614)

Lima-n-ra noko-ke.
Lima-DIR-EVID arrive-PERF

‘(He/she) went to Lima.’

Shipibo (Camacho & Elías-Ulloa, 2010, p. 72)

Null subjects in the Germanic languages

"In all of the Modern Germanic standard languages, referential null subjects...are disallowed." (Rosenkvist 2011, p. 151)

Rosenkvist (2011): *null subjects may be allowed in some Germanic "vernaculars"* (p. 152) (see also Hoekstra 1997, Axel & Weiß 2011)

Yiddish null subjects: controversy

- Jacobs, Prince & van der Auwera (1994): Omission of "*salient main clause initial subjects*" (p. 408) is grammatical in Yiddish (ex. Hirschbein 1923, Prince 1998)

Vaist, az ix bin dir mexane?
 know.2-SG that I am-1-SG you-ACC-2-SG envy?

‘(You) know I envy you?’

- Koeneman (2006) and Speas (2006): Referential null subjects are ungrammatical in Yiddish

No claims that "*out of the blue*"- new information/ no antecedent in the discourse- (cf. Trutkowski 2016) null subjects are grammatical in Yiddish

Null subjects in Yiddish today

The only empirical investigation: Prince's (1998) corpus study of *Grine felder* (Hirschbein 1923), which provided evidence for Jacobs, Prince & van der Auwera (1994)

Limitations:

- Written artwork
- Studied variety is not contemporary

Present Study: Empirical investigations into Hasidic Yiddish null subjects

Studies conducted:

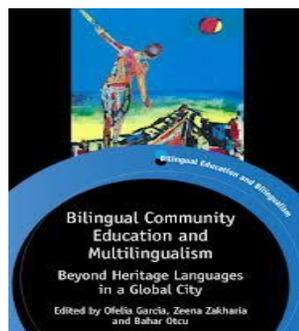
- Corpus analysis of spontaneous speech
- Grammaticality judgment surveys

Informants:

- Native speakers of Brooklyn Hasidic Yiddish

Context

1. Spanish
2. Chinese
3. Russian
4. Haitian (Creole)
5. Italian
6. French
- 7. Yiddish**
8. Korean
9. African Languages
10. Polish
11. Tagalog
12. Greek



13. Arabic
14. Hebrew
15. (Bengali)
16. Urdu
17. Hindi
18. German
19. Japanese
20. Serbo-croatian
21. Portuguese
22. Persian
23. Vietnamese
24. Hungarian
25. Gujarati

*Languages Other Than English (LOTE) spoken by New Yorkers over 5 years of age, US Census Bureau (2009)
American Community Survey Table B160001 in Garcia, Zakharia & Ötücü, 2013, p13.*

Corpus analysis

Recordings of native Hasidic Yiddish-speaking mothers in the context of symbolic play with their toddlers

Subject constructions in transcripts coded for:

- grammatical person and number marking on verb
- discourse-salience
- whether the subject was realized or null

Zj hot a twin. Zejst az hot a twin?
 She-3-SG has-3-SG a twin. See-2-SG that has-3-SG a twin?
 ‘She has a twin. Do (you) see that (she) has a twin?’



Corpus analysis: Results

Subject construction	Realized subject	Salient null subject	<i>Out of the blue</i> null subject
1SG	19 [95.0%]	1 [5.0%]	0 [0.0%]
2SG	91 [50.3%]	90 [49.7%]	0 [0.0%]
3SG	449 [98.9]	5 [1.1%]	0 [0.0%]
1PL	0 [0.0%]	0 [0.0%]	0 [0.0%]
2PL	8 [100.0%]	0 [0.0%]	0 [0.0%]
3PL	16 [100.0%]	0 [0.0%]	0 [0.0%]
Total realized subjects	Total salient null subjects	Total <i>out of the blue</i> null subjects	
583 [85.9%]	96 [14.1%]	0 [0%]	

First judgment task

Grammaticality judgments (paper) on simple, 2-SG subject constructions (rated on 3-interval Likert scale)

All interrogative

Host an epl -e?
 have-2-SG an apple DIM
 ‘Do (you) have a little apple?’

Vjlst špjln?
 want-2-SG play-INF
 ‘Do (you) want to play?’

First judgment task: Results

Of 106 data points involving null subjects, 49 (46%) were considered grammatical

3 participants (2 from Borough Park, 1 from Williamsburg) systematically chose ‘never used’ for all null 2SG subject constructions

18 participants judged at least 1 null subject construction as grammatical

Limitation: not all possible syntactic contexts

Second judgment task

- Null subjects in questions, in statements, embedded sentences, and embedded questions currently being administered to native speakers
- Stimuli are ranked on a five-internal Likert scale

Mejn az host a starke kul
 think-1-SG that have-2-SG a loud voice
 ‘(I) think (you) have a loud voice.’

Hobn gefregt, ven bjst cerjkgekemen
 Have-2-SG/-2-PL/-3-PL ask-PTCP, when is-2-SG return-come
 ‘(You [form.]/we/they) asked when (you) came back.’

Second judgment task (results)

- Preliminary results (n=3) confirm that salient null subjects are grammatical when clause initial; all participants judged at least two clause-initial salient null subject forms as grammatical
- Grammaticality judgment task is currently being administered to a wider group of participants

What's going on?

Null subjects in Hasidic Yiddish seem to:

- be most prevalent in the 2SG context, and
- follow Jacobs, Prince & van der Auwera's (1994) constraints regarding discourse salience and placement

Phonological reduction?

Regular 2.SG inflectional suffix (-st) ends in /t/, 2.SG pronoun (*dj*) begins with /d/

Is the null subject really just a phonological reduction?

Unlikely, because informants accept null subjects **in writing** even when them being null is prominent (below)

Vjlst špjln?
want-2-SG play-INF
'Do (you) want to play?'

Other 2-SG constructions:

Vilst dj špiln
Want-2-SG you play-INF
'Do you want to play?'

Vilst-j špiln
Want-2-SG.you play-INF
'Do you want to play?'

Conclusions: Where do we go next?

→ Native speakers of two different varieties of Hasidic Yiddish (Borough Park and Williamsburg) use salient 2SG null subjects.

Continued administration of grammaticality judgment survey

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