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Null-subject languages and subject-clitics

It has been argued that the rich subject-agreement morphology in null-subject languages such as Spanish, Italian and Greek is in fact a subject-clitic incorporated in the verbal head, which is responsible for the checking of the strong nominal feature of the T head. Consequently [Spec, TP] is not available and this gives rise to the VSO structures (Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 1998). On the other hand, in Northern Italian dialects, overt subject-clitics constitute head elements which have been assumed to be either adjoined to the T head (Brandi & Cordin 1989) or constitute the head of a functional category AGRcl above the T functional category (Poletto 2000, Manzini & Savoia 1997, Sportiche 1998). In the latter case, this functional category has been proposed to be the realization of the strong nominal feature of the T head, satisfying thus its EPP requirements.

In this paper we will try to bring together the structure of these languages by proposing that they all involve subject-clitics (Safir 1985, Sportiche 1998) and to derive their differences from the different status of this subject-clitic. More specifically we will propose a typology of subject clitics according to their categorial status (D^0 vs D^{max}) and their identification (overt vs null).

	D^0	D^{max}
overt	Northern Italian dialects	(French)
null	Italian	Greek, Spanish

The first step towards this hypothesis is to show that null-subject languages involve a null subject clitic. Greek provides crucial evidence for this proposal. First of all, we will accept the view that subject-agreement morphology cannot be interpreted as a subject-clitic incorporated in the verb head, because of both morphological (Ralli 1998, Philippaki-Warburton & Spyropoulos 1999) and syntactic reasons (Spyropoulos & Philippaki-Warburton forth.). The properties of 'subject' in Greek are better accounted for by assuming that it involves a null nominal element in the [Spec, TP] position projected by the strong nominal feature of T. Crucial evidence derives from the availability of subject control in a gerundival clauses even in cases where there is no overt subject or the DP-subject is VP-internal.

(1)a.   sinandisa tin ana$_i$ [PRO$_{*i/j}$ pi_enondas sti   vivlio_iki]
        met   the Anna-ACC   going   to-the library
        'I met Anna as I was going to the library'
   b.   ir_e   i   maria   kle_ontas …
        came   the Mary-NOM crying
        'Mary came crying…'
   c.   an sinandisi   o   nikos$_j$ tin ana$_i$ [PRO$_{*i/j}$ pi_enondas sti   vivlio_iki]
        if   meet-3rd,SG the Nikos-NOM the Anna-ACC   going   to-the   library
        'If Nikos meets Anna on his way to the library…'

Interestingly control from an object clitic is disallowed, which indicates that material incorporated in the verb head is unable to control and that control requires a nominal element in an A position.

(2)   ton$_j$ i_a   [PRO$_{i/*j}$ trexondas]
         him-saw-1st,SG   running
         'I saw him while he was running'

We will propose that the element responsible for control is a null subject-clitic in the [Spec, TP] position, a conclusion reinforced by other pieces of evidence as well.

A systematic comparison with similar structures from Italian, Spanish and Northern Italian dialects will reveal the pattern of agreement which generally follows the generalization proposed by Cardinaletti (1997), with covert movement having been replaced by the interaction of subject-clitic and the operation Agree. More specifically, the availability of VSO orders in Greek and Spanish without DR effects is attributed to the existence of a subject clitic in [Spec, TP] which enters in a clitic-doubling structure with the DP-subject in the VP-internal position. Agreement is always established between the DP-subject and the verb by means of the subject clitic. On the other hand, Italian and Northern Italian dialects possess head subject-clitics which occupy the head of a separate AGRcl functional category. The pattern of agreement and the non-availability of VP-internal subjects, unless indefinite and in

unaccusative structures, will be attributed to the property of this subject clitic. In addition, it will be shown that the overtness of subject clitic depends on its identificational requirements. Subject-clitics are weak elements consisting of a bundle of nominal features that require morphological identification. Whenever this is provided by the verb morphology, the subject-clitic is null. This means that the visibility of subject-clitic depends on the richness of the morphological marking of its features on the verbal head.

The proposals above will be tested on a very interesting structure from Greek. Greek exhibits small clauses the subject of which appears as an accusative clitic.

(3)a.   (to jani)   ton eoro   eksipno   (to jani)
         the John-ACC him-consider-1st,SG clever-MASC,SG,ACC the John-ACC
         'As for John, I consider him clever'
   b.   ton eoro eksipno
   c.   * eoro eksipno

We take these structures to be the counterpart of null-subject structures of full clauses (Spyropoulos 1998). The absence of case assigning properties in the small clause forces the subject-clitic to establish a checking relation with the V, acquiring thus accusative case. Since the verbal head has no overt object-agreement properties the clitic acquires an overt form. On the other hand, when the main predicate has no case assigning properties the clitic-subject is associated with the main T and acquires nominative case. Morphological manifestation is now provided and thus the subject clitic is null.

(4)a.   ine   eksipnos
         is$_{3rd,sing}$ intelligent$_{nom,sing,masc}$
         'He is clever'
   b.   [$_{TP}$ subj.cl.$_i$ ine [$_{SC}$ t$_i$ $eksipnos$]

The structures discussed above indicate that null-subject languages are in fact null subject-clitic languages. The systematic comparison of these languages reveals that the properties of their subjects are in fact a reflection of the status of this subject-clitic. A two way distinction is established with the subject-clitic being either a D^0 merged to an AGRcl functional head or an X^{max} occupying a [Spec, TP] position. However, it will be argued that this distinction has in fact three values, if we consider the VSO structures of Celtic and Semitic languages. In these languages it has been proposed that the subject-agreement morphology is in fact a bound morpheme which is the exponent of an AGR functional category and the V moves to pick it up in overt syntax (Roberts & Shlonsky 1996). By considering this bound morpheme as an instance of subject-clitic we derive a three-way distinction of subject-clitics: bound morpheme – D^0 – D^{max}, with each instance being associated with different properties of 'subject'.

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