Theories of Argument Ellipsis:
The View from Vietnamese

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1   Introduction

Some languages allow null argument constructions. Vietnamese, for example, allows null objects in (1):[1]

(1)   a.   Nam đọc ba   **quyển sách**.
                 Nam read three CL   book
                 'Nam reads three books.'
       b.   Lâm cũng đọc *e*.
                 Lâm also read
                 'Lâm also reads.'

Null argument constructions can be analyzed as either pronoun drop or as argument ellipsis. Consider (1) where (1b) is ambiguous: Lâm can read the same three books that Nam reads, but he can also read three different books. The first reading is traditionally considered the strict reading, while the second reading is considered the sloppy reading. In this case, the sloppy reading is allowed and this null subject construction can be analyzed as argument ellipsis. However, the sloppy reading is not always allowed in null argument constructions. Consider (2) in Spanish from Oku (1998):

(2)   a.   María cree   que **su propuesta** será   aceptada.   (Oku, 1998: 185)
                 Maria believes that her proposal   will.be accepted
                 'Maria believes that her proposal will be accepted.'
       b.   Juan también cree   que *e* será   aceptada.
                 Juan too   believes that   will.be accepted
                 'Juan also believes that it will be accepted.'

Because (2b) can only be understood that Juan believes that Maria's proposal will be accepted, this null object construction is analyzed as pronoun drop.

There have been many theories proposed to explain the phenomenon of argument ellipsis. Oku (1998) research on Japanese proposes that argument ellipsis is tied to weak theta-features, which is then tied to the existence of scrambling. Saito (2007) proposes that agreement disallows argument ellipsis, while Cheng (2013) says that argument ellipsis is tied to the lack of DPs in NP languages.

This paper examines cross-linguistic data of null argument constructions from Japanese, Turkish and Vietnamese with a view to applying each of the three theories. The next section summarizes data of both null subject and null object constructions in these three languages. Section three looks at how well each theory explains the data, and section four provides some conclusions.

2   Cross-linguistic Data

2.1   *Japanese*   According to previous analyses by Oku (1998) and confirmed by Şener and Takahashi (2010), Japanese allows both subject and object ellipsis. Consider (3) and (4) from Şener and Takahashi (2010), which demonstrate subject and object ellipsis respectively:

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[1] Null arguments are represented as *e* in this paper.

(3)   a.   **Sannin-no onnanoko-ga** Taro-ni   ai-ni kita.   (Şener & Takahashi, 2010: 84)
              Three-GEN girl-NOM   Taro-DAT   see-to came
              'Three girls came to see Taro.'
        b.   *e* Ken-ni-mo   ai-ni kita.
              Ken-DAT-also see-to came
              'Lit. *e* came to see Ken, too'

(4)   a.   Taro-wa **zibun-no hahaoya-o**   aisiteiru.   (Şener & Takahashi, 2010: 79)
              Taro-NOM self-GEN   mother-ACC loves
              'Lit. Taro loves self's mother.'
        b.   Hanako-wa *e* nikundeiru.
              Hanako-TOP   hates
              'Lit. Hanako hates *e*.'

(3a) allows both the strict and sloppy (or quantificational) reading, so the three girls who visit Ken can be the same three girls who visit Taro or three different girls. Similarly, (4b) allows both the strict reading that Hanako hates Taro's mother or the sloppy reading that Hanako hates her own mother.

However, it must be noted that not all linguists agree that Japanese has subject ellipsis. Cheng (2013) analyzes that the apparent subject ellipsis in Japanese is not in fact subject ellipsis, and that the sloppy reading is caused by something else. I will return to this analysis in section 3.3.

2.2   *Turkish*   According to data by Şener and Takahashi (2010), Turkish allows object ellipsis but not subject ellipsis:

(5)   a.   Can **[pro anne-si]-ni**   eleştir-di.   (Şener & Takahashi, 2010: 87)
              John [his mother-3SG]-ACC   criticize-PAST
              'John criticized his mother'
        b.   Mete-yse   *e* öv-dü.
              Mete-however   praise-PAST
              'Lit. Mete, however, praised *e*.'

In (5b), the null object construction allows for the sloppy reading. In this case, the sentence can be understood as Mete praises John's mother (the strict reading) or as Mete praises his own mother (the sloppy reading). While Turkish allows objects to be elliptic, this is not the case for subjects in Turkish:

(6)   a.   **Üç öğretmen** Can-ı   eleştir-di.   (Şener & Takahashi, 2010: 91)
              three teacher   John-ACC   criticize-PAST
              'Three teachers criticized John.'
        b.   *e* Filiz-i-yse   öv-dü.
              Phylis-ACC-however praise-PAST
              'Lit. e praised Phylis.'

Even with (6a) as the antecedent, (6b) can only have the strict reading that the same three teachers who praised John also praised Phylis. Therefore, subjects in Turkish cannot be elliptic. With previous data from Japanese and Turkish in mind, I now turn to original data on argument ellipsis from Vietnamese.

2.3   *Vietnamese*   Vietnamese allows object but not subject ellipsis. (1) demonstrates object ellipsis in Vietnamese and is repeated below for convenience. (7b) allows the sloppy interpretation that Lâm reads three different books from Nam.

(7)   a.   Nam đọc ba   **quyển sách**.
              Nam read three CL   book
              'Nam reads three books.'
        b.   Lâm cũng đọc *e*.
              Lâm also read
              'Lâm also reads.'

However, Vietnamese does not allow subject ellipsis. Consider (8), where the five friends who visit Nam are also the ones who visit Lâm. That is to say, (8b) does not allow the quantificational, sloppy reading.

(8)   a.   **Năm người bạn**   thăm Nam.
              Five CL   friend visit Nam
              'Five friends visit Nam.'
        b.   Và *e* cũng thăm Lâm.
              And also visit Lâm
              'Lit. And *e* visit Lâm, too.'

2.4   *Summary of Section 2*

Language	Subject Ellipsis	Object Ellipsis
Japanese	Yes	Yes
Turkish	No	Yes
Vietnamese	No	Yes

Table 1: Summary of Data on Argument Ellipsis

After considering the data from Japanese, Turkish and Vietnamese, I will now turn to an examination of the three theories of argument ellipsis and how they apply to this data.

3   Previous Theories

3.1   *Oku (1998)*   According to Oku, argument ellipsis in both the subject and option position in Japanese is permitted because of the existence of scrambling: 'the sloppy identity interpretation and the indefinite interpretation of Japanese null arguments are possible because θ-features are weak in Japanese, exactly the same reason that scrambling is available in Japanese' (Oku, 1998: 215). To demonstrate scrambling in Japanese:

(9)   a.   John-ga [dare-ga [**dare-no shasin-o**]   katta   ka] sitteiru.   (Oku, 1998: 155)
              John-NOM [who-NOM [who-GEN picture-ACC] bought Q] know
              'John knows who bought some pictures of who.'
        b.   [**dare-no shasin-o**]$_1$ John-ga   [dare-ga t$_1$ katta   ka] sitteiru.
              [who-GEN picture-ACC]   John-NOM [who-NOM   bought Q] know
              'John knows who bought some pictures of who.'

In (9b), the embedded object (bolded) moves to the front of the matrix clause, keeping the same meaning as (9a). To Oku (1998), this type of long-distance scrambling in Japanese is allowed due to weak θ-features in Japanese, and it is also weak θ-features that Japanese allow argument ellipsis.

Şener and Takahashi (2010) analyze Turkish to also have scrambling. Consider (10), which demonstrates that Turkish allows for a modifier *her hafta* 'every week' to come between the verb *gid-er* 'go-AOR' and its argument *sinema-ya* 'movies-DAT.'

(10)   a.   Can her   hafta **sinema-ya   gid-er**.
              John every week movies-DAT go-AOR
              'John goes to the movies every week.'
        b.   Can **sinema-ya** her   hafta **gid-er**.
              John movies-DAT every week go-AOR
              'John goes to the movies every week.'

While Turkish does allow scrambling, it does not allow argument ellipsis in all positions. Data from Turkish poses a problem for Oku's (1998) theory that argument ellipsis is tied to scrambling because while Turkish does have scrambling, it does not allow argument ellipsis in the subject position. Admittedly, the examples provided for scrambling in Turkish are not the exact same kind of scrambling in Japanese.

However, Oku (1998) also does not explain data from Vietnamese well. Vietnamese does not allow scrambling either in the Japanese type given by Oku (1998) or in the Turkish type given by Şener and Takahashi (2010).

(11)   a.   Minh biết [ai mua [**ảnh   của ai**]].
              Minh know who buy photo of   who
              'Minh knows who bought photos of whom.'
        b.   *[Ảnh của ai]   Minh biết [ai   mua]
               Photo of   whom Minh know who buy

(12)   a.   Minh **dọn** **nhà**   sáng   hôm qua.
                 Minh clean house morning yesterday
                 'Minh cleaned the house yesterday morning.'
         b.   *Minh **dọn**   sáng   hôm qua   **nhà**.
                  Minh clean morning yesterday house

While Vietnamese does not allow scrambling like Japanese or Turkish, argument ellipsis is still permitted in the object position in Vietnamese. Hence, both Turkish and Vietnamese pose a problem to Oku's (1998) theory that argument ellipsis is tied to scrambling.

3.2 *Saito (2007)*   Saito (2007) proposes that agreement disallows argument ellipsis. According to this theory, Japanese allow argument ellipsis because Japanese has no agreement, whether between subject-verb or object-verb. In contrast, Turkish is a language with subject-verb agreement. Consider (13) where the verb has to agree with the subject in person and number:

(13)   a.   (Ben) bu makale-yi   yavaşyavaş oku-yacağ-**ım**.   (Şener & Takahashi, 2010: 86)
                 (I)   this article-ACC slowly   read-FUT-1SG
                 'I will read this article slowly.'
         b.   (Biz) her   hafta sinema-ya gid-er-**iz**.
                 (We) every week movies-DAT go-AOR-1PL
                 'We go to the movies every week'

Saito (2007) correctly predicts that Turkish has object but not subject ellipsis because Turkish only has subject-verb agreement. The theory is even more convincing because 'even in Turkish, subjects that do not participate in agreement are predicted to be able to be elliptic' (Şener & Takahashi, 2010: 95).

(14)   a.   John₁ [Bill₂ gel-ince]   mi gid-ecek?   (Öztürk, 2006: 270)
                 John   Bill come-when Q go-FUT
                 'Will John go when Bill comes?'
         b.   Evet, [*pro₂* gel-ince]   *pro₁* gid-ecek.
                 Yes   he   come-when he   go-FUT
                 'Yes, he will go when he comes.'

     While Saito's (2007) theory explain data from Japanese and Turkish well, data from Vietnamese pose a potential problem to this theory. Vietnamese is a language with no agreement, consider (15) where the verb *học* 'study' does not change its form depending on person or number.

(15)   a.   Tôi **học**.
                 1SG study
                 'I study.'
         b.   Anh ấy **học**.
                 3SG.M study
                 'He studies.'
         c.   Họ học.
                 3PL study
                 'They study.'

Despite not having any form of verbal agreement, Vietnamese does not permit subject ellipsis. While Saito (2007) predicts that agreement disallows argument ellipsis, it remains to be seen what, then, disallows subject ellipsis in Vietnamese.

3.3 *Cheng (2013)*   Cheng (2013) proposes that object ellipsis is licensed by the lack of Determiner Phrase; in other words, argument ellipsis is only possible in Noun Phrase languages. In this theory, Japanese, Turkish and Vietnamese all allow object ellipsis because they are all NP languages. Furthermore, Cheng (2013) argues that no languages should allow subject ellipsis, as subjects are never in complement positions. He argues that the apparent subject ellipsis in Japanese is derived from the null subject being bound to a (potentially empty) null topic, not the result of ellipsis.

4   Conclusion

I have examined three different theories of argument ellipsis and see how well they predict data from Japanese, Turkish and Vietnamese. Oku (1998) does not correctly predict ellipsis in Turkish and Vietnamese, while Vietnamese poses a potential problem for Saito (2007). Cheng (2013) is a more radical proposal since it rejects all subject ellipsis, but among the three theories, it predicts data from Vietnamese the best.

References

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