NULL OBJECTS IN FUNCTIONAL PROJECTIONS*

Margaret Speas

0. INTRODUCTION

Virtually all recent studies of null pronouns follow Rizzi (1986) in assuming that null pronouns must meet a licensing condition and an identification condition. The majority of investigations of these two conditions have focused on null Subjects, for which elements of INFL are generally implicated in both licensing and identification.

When we look at the distribution of null objects, interesting problems arise with both the licensing and the identification conditions. The goal of this paper is to address some of these problems by looking primarily at data on the distribution of null Objects in Navajo. Navajo is an interesting case, because it does have object agreement morphology, and it does allow null objects, but null objects are allowed only if the subject is also null. Thus, it has looked like rich object agreement is not always sufficient to license null objects.

I will propose that an identification condition based upon a general principle of control, following Huang (1984, 1988), governs the distribution of Navajo null objects. This proposal raises two questions. First, with a Huang-style identification condition on pro, is a separate licensing condition necessary, and if so, what form should it take? Second, in what ways can the identification condition vary cross-linguistically?

This paper will be organized as follows: in Section 1, I will introduce the Navajo data, and will provide an account of the Navajo facts which adapts the Generalized Control Rule of Huang (1984). In Section 2, I will discuss the nature of licensing conditions on null arguments, and will argue that the licensing condition ought be stated not in terms of licensing by a designated head, but instead in terms of economy of projection. I will also briefly discuss the issue of possible parameterization of the relevant principles.
1. ON NULL OBJECTS IN NAVAJO

1.1. Navajo Null Objects and the Generalized Control Rule

Navajo has a fairly rigid SOV word order, with rich verbal morphology\(^1\) and no Case morphemes on NPs, as illustrated in (1) and (2).

(1)  
\begin{align*}
a. & \text{At'édéd ashkii yidootsqos} \\
& \text{boy girl 3O-3S-will:kiss} \\
& \text{"The boy will kiss the girl."} \\
\end{align*}

\begin{align*}
b. & \text{Yidoots'qós} \\
& \text{"S/he will kiss him/her."} \\
\end{align*}

(2)  
\begin{align*}
\text{Mósí tśís'ná yiishish} \\
\text{cat bee 3O-3S-stings} \\
& \text{"The cat stings the bee."} \\
& \text{NOT "The bee stings the cat."} \\
\end{align*}

As (1b) shows, both Subject and Object may be null in Navajo. However, the interesting fact is illustrated by (3) and (4). Here, we see that if a transitive sentence has only one overt NP, that NP must be interpreted as the Object. Such a sentence cannot have an interpretation in which there is a null object and the overt NP is the subject, even if a somewhat anomalous interpretation results, as in (4).

(3)  
\begin{align*}
\text{Ashkii yiyiítšá} \\
\text{boy 3O-3sgS-saw} \\
& \text{"He/she/it saw the boy."} \\
& \text{NOT: "The boy saw him/her/it."} \\
\end{align*}

(4)  
\begin{align*}
\text{Tśís’ná yiishish} \\
\text{bee 3O-3S-stings} \\
& \text{"He/she/it stings the bee."} \\
& \text{NOT "The bee stings him/her/it."} \\
\end{align*}

As Platero (1978, 1982) pointed out, it appears that these sentences are subject to a constraint whereby a null third person argument cannot be preceded by an overt third person argument.

(5)  
\text{NP-PRO CONSTRAINT:} \\
\text{If PRO immediately follows an overt noun phrase NP', it must be coreferential with NP'.} \quad \text{(Platero 1982:288)}

This constraint is essentially identical to the Generalized Control Rule proposed by Huang (1984, 1988) for Mandarin and Portuguese.