TWO KINDS OF NULL ARGUMENTS IN AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE*

1. INTRODUCTION

In some languages, such as Italian and Spanish, the subject of a sentence can be non-lexical, as in example (1).¹

(1) Mangia una mela. (Italian)
(He-/she-) eats an apple.

Although the subject is not phonologically overt in these sentences, it is understood as a definite pronominal such as 'he' or 'she'. English, on the other hand, does not allow such NULL ARGUMENTS in tensed clauses. In this paper, I will investigate the appearance of null arguments, (that is, those subjects and objects which are not specified phonologically as a separate overt lexical pronoun or noun phrase), in yet another language, American Sign Language (ASL). It will be seen that there are two kinds of null arguments in ASL, one corresponding to the null arguments found in languages like Irish, and the other corresponding to the null arguments found in languages like Chinese. I will show why two analyses are needed for null arguments in ASL, and how this bears on the analyses of other languages with and without null arguments. I will also examine some other syntactic constructions which have been reported to be connected to null arguments, and explain why ASL does or does not manifest these constructions. Throughout, I am assuming in general the

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¹ The following notation is used in the English translations. When a pronoun is not given in the original language (i.e., it is null), but is needed for a grammatical English translation, it will be included in the translation within parentheses, e.g. (she). If a pronoun is needed in English, and does not appear as a pronoun in the original language but is signified by verb agreement, it will appear in the translation within parentheses preceded by a hyphen, e.g. (-them), if it is a subject, or followed by a hyphen, e.g. (He-), if it is an object.
theoretical framework of Government and Binding, as outlined in Chomsky (1981) and subsequent works.

In American Sign Language, for a large set of verbs, subject and object are not necessarily distinguished from each other by word order or case marking. Rather, they are marked by the movement of the verb in relation to specific points in space. This spatially expressed syntactic system has been called ‘verb agreement’ by researchers working on ASL.² This paper will examine the null arguments of verbs that use this system to mark agreement, and null arguments of verbs that do not mark agreement. It will be shown that the null arguments to these two types of verbs are differentially distributed and in fact should be explained in different ways. Specifically, if an inflectional marker is present, the effect, even when the pronoun ‘agreed with’ is null, is the same as if an overt pronoun were present, indicating that the empty category should be pronominal, pro. However, when there is no inflectional marker, then the appearance of null arguments is much more limited, and the empty category will be analyzed as a nonpronominal (Wh-trace) empty topic.³

2. VERB AGREEMENT IN ASL

American Sign Language is the visual-gestural language used by most of the deaf community in the United States and parts of Canada. The

² Researchers who have discussed ASL verb agreement in various terms include Coulter (1979), Fischer (1974), Fischer and Gough (1978), Frishberg and Gough (1973), Kegl (1976), Lacy (1973), Liddell (1977), Meier (1982), and Padden (1983), and Shepard-Kegl (1986), among others. For an overview see Klima and Bellugi (1979), or Wilbur (1979).

³ The analysis to be presented here resembles in many ways an analysis of null arguments in ASL proposed independently by Shepard-Kegl (1986, pp. 480-491). Both analyses conclude that ASL is both a pro-drop language and a discourse-oriented language, with the same distinction between agreeing verbs and nonagreeing verbs serving to distinguish the two types of null arguments. However, many details of the analyses differ. Importantly, Shepard-Kegl assumes a different analysis of the internal structure of the ASL sign than the one assumed here. This analysis takes as morphologically significant many of the properties of ASL signs (such as the handshape, and aspects of the location and movement) which are considered here merely formational. With respect to the analysis of null arguments, the main difference is that in some cases, Shepard-Kegl does not consider the verb movement to spatial loci as the agreement (AGR) which sanctions null arguments. Rather, the position of the signer's body with respect to the spatial loci, which Shepard-Kegl calls a clitic, sanctions empty arguments. Shepard-Kegl's analysis of the internal structure of the sign is highly complex, leading her to posit that the single inflected sign which I would represent by "GIVE", consists of 43 morphemes (p. 136). Under my analysis, this complexity is unneeded and unwarranted, at least for the analysis of the null argument structures discussed here. (See Lillo-Martin 1986b for further discussion of the similarities and differences between these two accounts.)