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APPARENT PARASITIC GAPS AND NULL ARGUMENTS
IN JAPANESE*

The purpose of this article is twofold: first, it aims to point out that though what appear to be parasitic gaps exist in Japanese, they behave differently from their English counterpart in crucial ways; second, it argues that the existence of those apparent parasitic gaps in Japanese is closely related to the possibility of null arguments in the language. The argument crucially relies on the proposal, independently made in the literature, that certain cases of null arguments involve ellipsis rather than empty pronouns.

1. Introduction

Languages vary in the extent to which they permit arguments such as subjects and objects to drop or to be expressed without phonetic content. For instance, English allows neither subjects nor objects of finite clauses to drop whereas Japanese permits them to be empty (see Kuroda (1965), Ohso (1976), and Huang (1984), among many others). This difference can be illustrated by the following data in the two languages:

(1) John told Mary that he/*e would recommend her/*e for the position.

(2) Taroo-wa Hanako-ni kare-ga/*e sono syoku-ni
Taroo-Top Hanako-to he-Nom/*e that position-to
kanozyo-o/*e suisensuru to itta.
her-Acc/*e recommend that said
‘Taroo told Hanako that he would recommend her for that position.’

The English example in (1) contains two pronouns in the embedded clause. The subject pronoun and the object pronoun may refer to John and Mary, respectively. If these pronouns are dropped or expressed without phonetic content, an ungrammatical sentence results. The Japanese sentence in (2) also contains pronouns as the embedded subject and object, but it differs from (1) in an important way: in (2), unlike in (1), either or both of the
embedded subject and object can be dropped without changing the meaning of the sentence and without resulting in an ungrammatical sentence.

The status of null arguments, and the status of null objects in particular, have long been the locus of attention in the literature. While it has been more or less standard to view them as phonetically empty pronouns or pros (see Kuroda (1965), Ohso (1976), Hoji (1985), and Saito (1985), among others), it has not been unchallenged. Mostly based on data in Chinese, which, like Japanese, permits subject and objects to drop, Huang (1984) puts forth the hypothesis that null objects are variables or traces created by movement of empty topics.¹ More recently, another hypothesis has been proposed by Huang (1991), Otani and Whitman (1991), Oku (1998), and Kim (1999), who argue in one way or another that certain cases of null objects actually involve ellipsis rather than empty pronouns.

The purpose of this article is to provide a novel argument for the ellipsis theory of null objects (or more generally, null arguments). The argument concerns what I call apparent parasitic gaps in Japanese. In the next section I briefly summarize some basic properties of English parasitic gaps and then point out that their apparent Japanese counterparts exhibit quite different behavior. Since it is highly unlikely that language learners have easy access to those often very complicated data involving parasitic gaps, it should be desirable to derive the difference from a more readily detectable difference between the two languages. In section 3 I argue that the presence of null objects in Japanese vis-à-vis their absence in English is responsible for the peculiarity of apparent parasitic gaps in Japanese. Most importantly, my analysis relies on the hypothesis that certain null objects involve ellipsis, and hence, to the extent that it is successful, it counts as an argument in favor of the ellipsis theory of null objects. In section 4 I provide further arguments for my proposal, pointing out some of its consequences. In section 5 I summarize the overall discussion.

2. APPARENT PARASITIC GAPS IN JAPANESE

Let us begin by reviewing some basic properties of parasitic gaps in English that have been noted in the literature. The following examples are taken from Engdahl (1983), one of the most cited papers on parasitic gaps:

(3)a. Which articles did John file without reading e?
b. Which boy did Mary’s talking to e bother t most?

Each sentence has two types of gap. The gaps indicated as t are what we call real gaps or the traces left by movement of the wh-phrases, and those