

## Chapter 17

# Icelandic as a partial null subject language: Evidence from fake indexicals

Susi Wurmbrand

University of Connecticut

The distribution and licensing of null subjects has been a much debated topic in generative grammar. In many recent works, Anders Holmberg has proposed an enlightening typology that distinguishes between three types of null subject languages (see Holmberg 2005; 2010b,a; Holmberg & Sheehan 2010): consistent null subject languages such as Spanish, discourse *pro*-drop languages such as Chinese, and partial null subject languages. Among the latter are Finnish, Brazilian Portuguese, Marathi, and Icelandic. In this short note, I provide some new data from binding, in particular fake indexicals in Icelandic, that support Holmberg's view that Icelandic is a partial null subject language.

One of the core defining characteristics of partial null subject languages is that 3<sup>rd</sup> person subjects can be unexpressed when they receive a non-referential generic interpretation or when they are a bound variable. Non-null subject languages such as German, in contrast, do not allow null subjects of any kind.

- (1) a. Icelandic (Holmberg 2010a: 106, (27a))

*Nú má Ø fara að dansa.*

now may Ø go to dance

'One may begin to dance now.'

- b. German

*Jetzt kann ✓ man/\*Ø tanzen gehen.*

now can ✓ one/\*Ø dance go

'Now, one can go dancing.'

The account offered by Holmberg is that in partial null subject languages, null third person pronouns are weak deficient pronouns which contain  $\varphi$ -features



(hence displaying agreement with the verb) but no referential D-feature. The only way such  $\varphi$ Ps can be interpreted is via binding by a higher DP, or as default generic pronouns.

Partial null subject languages differ regarding whether 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns can be null when they are used as indexicals: Finnish and Hebrew allow null indexical subjects, Marathi only allows a 2<sup>nd</sup> person indexical, and Brazilian Portuguese and Icelandic allow neither. According to Holmberg, indexical subjects (i.e., referential 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns) in partial null subject languages are always full definite pronouns including a referential D head, and languages differ regarding whether these subjects can be non-pronounced at PF. In consistent null subject languages, on the other hand, null indexicals are weak deficient pronouns lacking a DP, and the referential interpretation is contributed via a D-feature in I/T.

A prediction this account makes is that in partial null subject languages, even 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns should be allowed to be null (bare  $\varphi$ Ps) when they are not interpreted referentially—i.e., not as indexicals but as bound pronouns. As shown in (2), 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns in English, German, and Icelandic can be interpreted as bound variables.<sup>1</sup> As indicated by the paraphrase, in these contexts, the person features of indexicals are not interpreted (e.g., the 1<sup>st</sup> person pronoun *my* is not interpreted as the speaker in the set of alternatives, but as a variable), hence the term fake indexicals.

(2) All: I/You did my/your best and no one else did their best.

a. English

Only I did my/\*her best.

b. German

Only you did your/\*his best.

c. German

*Nur ich habe mein/\*ihr Bestes gegeben.*

only I have.1.SG my/\*her best given

d. German

*Nur du hast dein/\*sein Bestes gegeben.*

only you have.2.SG your/\*his best given

---

<sup>1</sup>The tenses are varied in some of the examples to avoid syncretism. This has no influence on fake indexicals.

- e. Icelandic<sup>2</sup>  
*Aðeins ég geri mitt/\*hennar besta.*  
 only I do.1.SG my/\*her best
- f. Icelandic  
*Aðeins þú gerðir þitt/\*hans besta.*  
 only you did.2.SG your/\*his best

Turning to fake indexicals in subject position, an interesting difference arises between Icelandic and German. Let us start with the Icelandic examples in (3). In these cases, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person possessive pronouns are interpreted as bound variables (one cannot do someone else's best). The embedded verbs obligatorily agree with the matrix subjects, and this agreement, I propose, is controlled by a null subject in the embedded clause as indicated (an overt subject is not possible).

(3) Icelandic

- a. *Ég er sá eini sem Ø.1.SG geri mitt besta.*  
 I am.1.SG DEM one that Ø.1.SG do.1.SG my best  
 'I am the only one who is doing my best.'
- b. *Þú ert sá eini sem Ø.2.SG gerðir þitt besta.*  
 you are.2.SG DEM one that Ø.2.SG did.2.SG your best  
 'You (SG) are the only one who did your best.'

One may object that the null elements in (3) are simply null relative operators and not (true) null subjects. While this is in part correct, the existence of a true null subject in (3) can nevertheless be motivated by two properties. First, as shown in (4a), German does not allow fake indexicals in contexts where the embedded verb agrees with the matrix subject. German does, however, exhibit a special form of relative pronoun 'doubling' where the *d-* pronoun is paired with a regular personal pronoun (see Ito & Mester 2000). For some speakers this is only possible in non-restrictive relative clauses, but for others it is also possible in cases such as (4b). When such a pronoun is added, the embedded verb must agree with the additional subject, and, crucially, a bound variable interpretation then becomes possible for the possessive pronoun.

- (4) a. German (Kratzer 2009: 206; (36a))  
*\*Ich bin die einzige, die meinen Sohn versorge.*  
 I am the.F.SG only.one who.F.SG my son take.care.of.1.SG  
 'I am the only one who is taking care of my son.'

<sup>2</sup>All of the following Icelandic examples are provided by Gísli Rúnar Harðarson.

b. German

*%Ich bin die einzige, die ich meinen Sohn versorge.*  
 I am the.F.SG only.one who.F.SG I my son take.care.of.1.SG  
 ‘I am the only one who is taking care of my son.’

Under Holmberg’s typology of null subjects, the differences between (3) and (4) follow if it is assumed that the possessive pronoun requires a featurally identical antecedent in subject position, in order to be interpreted as a fake indexical (see Wurmbrand 2015 for a detailed account of fake indexicals along these lines). Since Icelandic is a partial null subject language, subjects can be unexpressed, but only if they are bound by a higher DP. This is the case in (3), illustrated in (5a): the matrix (true) indexical pronoun binds the embedded null subject, which in turn binds the possessive pronoun—thus both the embedded subject and the possessive pronoun are bound fake indexicals. In the German varieties that allow relative pronoun doubling in restrictive relative clauses, the same configuration is possible, however, since German is a non-null subject language, the only option is to overtly realize the embedded subject.<sup>3</sup>

- (5) a. DP.1.SG [CP OP.3.SG [TP Ø.φP.1.SG T.1.SG ]] Icelandic  
 b. DP.1.SG [CP OP.3.SG [TP φP1.SG T.1.SG ]] German

The second piece of evidence for a null subject in (3) comes from constructions in which the embedded fake indexical subject cannot be bound. Note first that the examples in (3) also have a counterpart in which the null operator corresponds to the head of the relative clause, the 3<sup>rd</sup> person DP *the only one*. In these cases, the embedded verb shows 3<sup>rd</sup> person agreement and only the reflexive possessives are possible, as shown in (6).

(6) Icelandic

- a. *Ég er sá eini sem gerir sitt besta.*  
 I am.1.SG DEM one that do.3.SG REFL best  
 ‘I am the only one who is doing her best.’  
 b. *Þú ert sá eini sem gerði sitt besta.*  
 you are.2.SG dem one that did.3.SG refl best  
 ‘You (sg) are the only one who did her best.’

<sup>3</sup>This account has interesting consequences for the structure of relative clauses and DPs in general. Since the relative operator and the additional subject pronoun correspond to one argument, a DP structure is necessary that allows splitting, for instance, the D-part (the relative operator/pronoun) and the φ-part (the additional pronoun).

An important difference regarding binding arises in the inverted (specificational) sentences in (7). As shown in (7a,b), the analogues of (3) are impossible—fake indexical possessives, and as I suggest, fake indexical null subjects are not licensed in these configurations. Crucially, as shown in (7c,d), bound variable interpretations of the possessive are still possible, however, only when both the verb and the possessive show 3<sup>rd</sup> person agreement. If all that is involved in (3) is a relative operator, it would not be obvious why in cases such as (3)/(6) both 3<sup>rd</sup> person bound pronouns and fake indexicals are possible, whereas in cases such as (7) only the 3<sup>rd</sup> person variant is available. An account based on the existence of null subjects, which are only licensed in Icelandic when bound by a higher DP, covers this difference very well. While the matrix DPs in (3)/(5) can bind and license an embedded null subject, this is not possible in (7) due to the lack of c-command in the inverted order.

## (7) Icelandic

- a. ?\**Sá eini sem geri mitt besta er ég.*  
 DEM one that do.1.SG my best am.1.SG I.NOM  
 ‘The only one who is doing my best is me.’
- b. \**Sá eini sem gerðir þitt besta varst þú.*  
 DEM one that did.2.SG your best was.2.SG you.NOM  
 ‘The only one who did your best is you.’
- c. *Sá eini sem gerir sitt besta er ég.*  
 DEM one that do.3.SG REFL best am.1.SG I.NOM  
 ‘The only one who is doing his/her best am I.’
- d. *Sá eini sem gerði sitt besta varst þú.*  
 DEM one that did.3.SG REFL best was.2.SG you.NOM  
 ‘The only one who did his/her best is you.’

Finally, the assumption that the additional subject in German cases such as (4b), like the null subject in Icelandic, is licensed by a higher c-commanding antecedent, predicts that this option should also disappear in inverted specificational sentences. The examples in (8) show that this is correct—(8a) is impossible for all speakers of German, and only a 3<sup>rd</sup> person possessive as in (8b) is possible to express a bound variable interpretation.

(8) German

- a. *\*Die einzige die ich mein Bestes gegeben habe bin ich.*  
 the only.one who I my best given have.1.SG am.1.SG I  
 ‘The only one who did her (lit. my) best is me.’
- b. *Die einzige die ihr Bestes gegeben hat bin ich.*  
 the only.one who her best given have.1.SG am.1.SG I  
 ‘The only one who did her best is me.’

While the behavior of fake indexicals in relative clauses provides nice evidence for Holmberg’s null subject typology, the conclusions have to also be taken with a grain of salt. As shown in (9), null fake indexicals are not possible in complement clauses. Even under the bound variable interpretation, the pronoun must be realized overtly.<sup>4</sup>

(9) Icelandic

- a. *Aðeins ég held að \*(ég) tali íslensku.*  
 only í think.1.SG that \*(I) talk.1.SG.SUBJ Icelandic  
 ‘Only I think that I can speak Icelandic.’
- b. *Aðeins þú hélt að \*(þú) talaðir íslensku.*  
 only you thought.2.SG that \*(you) talked.2.SG.SUBJ Icelandic  
 ‘Only you thought that you could speak Icelandic.’
- c. *Aðeins hann hélt að \*(hann) talaði íslensku.*  
 only he thought.3.SG that \*(he) talked.3.SG.SUBJ Icelandic

Holmberg’s proposal which treats Icelandic as a partial null subject language makes surprising, but correct, predictions about subtle differences between Icelandic and German (and English) in the distribution of fake indexicals, yet leaves as still open the difference between relative clauses and complement clauses. The question remains whether Holmberg will think that I am the only one who likes my extension of his analysis.

---

<sup>4</sup>A reviewer mentions that control contexts, under certain assumptions, may constitute another case of an obligatorily null bound variable subject. Since infinitival subjects in Icelandic have Case (Sigurðsson 1991) and  $\varphi$ -features (in particular in partial control contexts), the reviewer suggests that one could perhaps treat those subjects as *pro* rather than PRO.

## Acknowledgments

Thanks to Jonathan Bobaljik, Gísli Rúnar Harðarson, and Ian Roberts for comments and feedback.

## References

- Holmberg, Anders. 2005. Is there a little pro? Evidence from Finnish. *Linguistic Inquiry* 36(4). 533–564.
- Holmberg, Anders. 2010a. Null subject parameters. In Theresa Biberauer, Anders Holmberg, Ian Roberts & Michelle Sheehan (eds.), *Parametric variation: Null subjects in minimalist theory*, 88–124. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holmberg, Anders. 2010b. The null generic pronoun in Finnish: A case of incorporation in T. In Theresa Biberauer, Anders Holmberg, Ian Roberts & Michelle Sheehan (eds.), *Parametric variation: Null subjects in minimalist theory*, 200–230. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holmberg, Anders & Michelle Sheehan. 2010. Control into finite clauses in partial null-subject languages. In Theresa Biberauer, Anders Holmberg, Ian Roberts & Michelle Sheehan (eds.), *Parametric variation: null subjects in minimalist theory*, 125–152. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ito, Junko & Armin Mester. 2000. “ich, der ich sechzig bin”: An agreement puzzle. In Sandra Chung, James McCloskey & Nathan Sanders (eds.), *Jorge hankamer webfest*. Santa Cruz: University of California Santa Cruz. <http://babel.ucsc.edu/Jorge/>.
- Kratzer, Angelika. 2009. Making a pronoun: Fake indexicals as windows into the properties of pronouns. *Linguistic Inquiry* 40. 187–237.
- Sigurðsson, Halldór Ármann. 1991. Icelandic case-marked PRO and the licensing of lexical arguments. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 9. 327–364.
- Wurmbrand, Susi. 2015. *Fake indexicals, feature sharing, and the importance of gendered relatives*. Colloquium talk, MIT, Cambridge, MA.

