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Referential Null Subjects in Germanic Languages – an Overview

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Abstract

Based on the assumption that there are no referential null subjects in the Germanic V2-languages, it has been claimed that the V2-property is universally incompatible with referential null subjects. However, in this paper it is demonstrated that referential null subjects occur in several Old Germanic languages as well as in a number of non-standard Modern Germanic vernaculars, all of them V2-languages. Hence the assumed connection between V2-word order and non-present referential null subjects can be refuted. It is also shown that the referential null subjects in the two groups of languages (Old and Modern) display different syntactic properties, in several respects. Hence it is plausible that the referential null subjects in the two language groups belong to typologically different types, which in turn leads to the conclusion that the referential null subjects in the modern vernaculars are syntactic innovations, rather than remnants of an archaic syntactic system.

1. Introduction¹

In all of the Modern Germanic standard languages, referential null subjects (RefNSs) are disallowed.

- | | | |
|----|---|-------------------|
| 1. | Henne känner *(jag) inte.
<i>her know I not</i>
'her I do not know' | (Swedish) |
| 2. | Sie kenne *(ich) nicht. | (Standard German) |
| 3. | Ekki þekki *(ég) hana. | (Icelandic) |
| 4. | Her *(I) do not know. | (English) |

This observation led Jaeggli & Safir (1989) and Rohrbacher (1999) to the (erroneous) assumption that RefNSs are incompatible with V2-word order. Although RefNSs do not appear in the contemporary standard languages,

¹ I thank David Håkansson and Christer Platzack for valuable comments on this paper. All remaining errors and inconsequences can only be blamed on me.
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RefNSs are attested in the Old Germanic languages (cf. Sigurðsson 1993, van Gelderen 2000, Fuß 2005, Håkansson 2008 etc.) as well as in a number of Modern Germanic vernaculars (cf. Hoekstra 1997 or Axel & Weiß to appear for a discussion about RefNSs in Western Germanic). Here, RefNSs in four Old Germanic languages and in six Modern Germanic vernaculars will be briefly presented and discussed, focusing on the respective properties of the RefNSs.

However, in some cases (most notably in the case of Yiddish) there seem to be considerable empirical gaps – there has as yet been no broad systematic studies of RefNSs in Germanic languages, and the extant research is furthermore to some extent contradictory.

In the recent contributions to the scholarly discussion about null subjects (e.g. Holmberg 2005, Ackema et al 2006, Frascarelli 2007, Barbosa 2009 etc.), Germanic RefNSs are conspicuously absent, perhaps due to the influential statements by Jaeggli & Safir (1989) and Rohrbacher (1999), perhaps due to the lack of accessible data. Hence, this paper has two main purposes: to present and discuss RefNSs in Germanic languages, from a syntactic viewpoint, and to point at a field of research which, I think, has been insufficiently explored.

First, in section 2, I will present RefNSs in the following Old Germanic languages: Old English (OE), Old High German (OHG), Old Icelandic (OIce) and Old Swedish (OSw). In the following section, section 3, I turn to the Modern Germanic vernaculars which allow RefNSs, discussing Bavarian (Bav), Schwabian (Schw), Zürich German (ZG), Frisian (Fri), Yiddish (Yid) and Övdalian (Övd). Each of these two sections is concluded with a summary of the syntactic features of the RefNSs in the respective language group (Old and Modern Germanic). The properties that are in focus are mainly syntactic distribution, relation to verb agreement, and frequency (null v. overt subjects), but also other relevant aspects, such as person reference, will be discussed. In section 4, I discuss the syntactic properties of RefNSs in Old and Modern Germanic in more detail, and the paper is concluded in the final section 5.

I do not discuss null subjects in coordinate structures or in topic drop-contexts (diaries, postcards etc.) in this paper (cf. Mörsjö 2002 for a discussion about topic drop in Swedish). Neither will the distribution and syntactic properties of Germanic generic and/or non-referential subjects be addressed in the present paper (cf. Sigurðsson & Egerland 2009).

2. RefNSs in Old Germanic languages²

The Old Germanic languages are syntactically similar, and it has even been claimed that Old English, Old Icelandic, Old High German etc. should be considered to be mere dialects of one and the same language:

I am proposing in this book that it is appropriate to think of a single Old Germanic language with dialects of Old English, Old Icelandic, Old High German and others. (Davis 2006:15).

The survey of the properties of RefNSs in Old Germanic that is presented in the subsections below gives partial support to the hypothesis presented by Davis (2006); the resemblance between the languages is quite remarkable. A possible reason why this has not been debated earlier may be that researchers have focused on one single Old Germanic language at a time.

It should be kept in mind that all Old Germanic languages are not of the same age; the earliest Old Swedish and Old Icelandic texts are 400–500 years younger than the earliest Old English and Old High German texts. Thus, the differences between the rate of null subjects in e.g. OSw and OE may depend on a pan-Germanic diachronic development that has just started in OE and OHG (in the 8th century) but is fading out in OSw and Olce (in the 13th century).

2.1. Old English

The presence of RefNSs in Old English (OE) is somewhat controversial. On the one hand, Hulk & van Kemenade (1995:245) explicitly state that there are no RefNSs in OE: "The phenomenon of referential *pro*-drop does not exist in OE."

On the other hand, Mitchell (1985) discusses RefNSs in OE and comes to the conclusion that "[...] a subject pronoun need not be expressed..." (Mitchell 1985 I:109) and that "This non-expression of a pronoun subject which can be supplied from a preceding clause must be accepted as idiomatic OE" (Mitchell 1985 I:633). Furthermore, there are a number of traditional linguistic studies discussing OE RefNSs in various texts, such as Pogatscher (1901), Berndt (1956) and Visser (1963–1973). Drawing on these earlier works (among others), van Gelderen (2000:149) concludes that RefNSs were relatively common in OE, especially in the earlier stages of the language. The examples that are rendered

² Parts of this section have been developed in collaboration with David Håkansson.

by van Gelderen (2000:125–149), as well as her argumentation for the existence of RefNSs in OE, are in my view convincing. Hence I will assume that there indeed were RefNSs in OE, *contra* Hulk & van Kemenade (1995).

Two examples of RefNSs in OE are presented below; both are taken from *Beowulf* (van Gelderen 2000:127).³

5. a þæt þone hilderæs hal gedigeð
 that the battle-storm unhurt endure
 'that **they** will withstand unhurt the heat of battle'

- b. Sona þæt gesawon
 soon that saw
 'Soon **they** saw that'

In neither of the examples in 5 can the unexpressed subject be assumed to be an instance of topic drop (cf. Mörsjö 2002), since the clause initial position is unavailable.

It is commonly assumed that the occurrence of RefNSs in a given language is due to "rich" or "strong" verb agreement morphology (cf. e.g. the discussions in Holmberg & Platzack 1995:67 and in Ackema et al 2006:chapter 1), the idea being that agreement on the finite verb may provide supplementary information concerning the omitted subject pronoun, which then may be considered redundant and remain unpronounced.⁴ In OE both singular and plural subject pronouns appear as RefNSs, irrespective of the fact that person agreement only was present in the singular verb forms: "In common with Old Saxon and Old Frisian, Old English did not distinguish person in the plural of any verb". (Mitchell 1985 I:9). The fact that there does not seem to be any difference between omission of subjects relating to number in OE is unexpected, if the presence of RefNSs is assumed to be connected with sufficiently rich verb agreement.

Rather than number, the distinguishing factor for OE RefNSs is person, as pointed out by van Gelderen (2000): "In summary, Old English has pro-drop, especially with third person [...]" (van Gelderen 2000:137). Hence, 3p subjects

³ In the English translations of the examples, subjects that correspond to RefNSs in the source language are in bold.

⁴ In the generative syntactic framework, this proposal was first presented by Taraldsen (1978).

are more frequently omitted than 1p and 2p subjects, and there are only marginal differences between the rate of omission of 3p singular and 3p plural subjects, although there is a distinct verb form for 3p singular (i.e. the OE verb form for 3p singular is unique in the agreement paradigm), but not for 3p plural.

In section 2.5, the facts about OE verb agreement and the frequency of different omitted subjects are summarized and further discussed, in comparison with similar data from Old High German, Old Icelandic and Old Swedish.

2.2. Old High German

In her comprehensive study of Old High German (OHG) syntax, Axel (2007) devotes an entire chapter to a discussion about the syntactic properties of OHG null subjects (referential as well as non-referential), with a focus on verb placement (Axel 2007:chapter 6).

RefNSs were most common in the earliest stages of OHG, i.e. in the eighth and ninth centuries. Two examples are presented below, both from Axel (2007:307, 310):

6. a. Druthin ist auh
Lord is also
 'He is also the Lord'
- b. uuanta sehente nigisehent
because seeing not-see-3pl
 'Because seeing **they** do not see'

OHG is similar to OE when it concerns the person reference of RefNSs; third person null subjects are overrepresented:

Referential null subjects are attested in all persons and numbers. However [...], it is only in third person singular and plural that the null variant is used more frequently than the overt one. (Axel 2007:314)

Another syntactic feature that Axel (2007) observes is that the RefNSs in OHG are restricted to main clauses: "[...] OHG null subjects occurred in main clauses and not in subordinate clauses". (Axel 2007:299). Although some RefNSs can be found in embedded clauses in OHG, these clauses display main clause word order and hence they do not contradict Axel's generalisation. All embedded

OHG clauses with the finite verb in final position thus require an overt subject; when the finite verb appears in second position, however, a RefNS is possible.

Unlike OE, the verb agreement in OHG distinguished six different verb forms in present tense indicative – each verb form was distinctly marked for person and number (see below). It thus seems to be possible to assume a connection between "rich" agreement and RefNSs in OHG; however, Axel (2007) notes that the diachronic development of OHG appears to contradict such an assumption:

Summing up, referential null subjects were largely lost in the OHG period even though there was no substantial weakening of inflectional endings (Axel 2007:323)

If the OHG RefNSs were dependent on or facilitated by distinct verb agreement, it is surprising that they disappeared although the verb agreement paradigm remained intact.

2.3. Old Icelandic

Also in Old Icelandic (OIce), RefNSs can be found. Sigurðsson (1993), drawing on earlier work by Hjartardóttir (1987), is careful to distinguish between topic drop and "genuine *pro*-drop", and presents a number of examples of the latter:

7. a. þá skar Rögnvaldr jarl [hár hans], en aðr hafði verit úskorit
then cut R. jarl hair his but before had been uncut
 'Then R. cut his hair, but **it** had been uncut before'
- b. ok kom hann þangat ok var Hoskuldr uti, er reið í tún.
and came he there and was H. outdoors when rode into field
 'And he came there, and H. was outdoors when **he** rode into the field'

Just as in OE and OHG, third person RefNSs were more frequent than other types, as pointed out by Sigurðsson: "dropping of first and second person arguments was very rare" (1993:253).⁵ Another apparent similarity is that the Icelandic RefNSs disappeared (during the 18th and 19th centuries (Hróarsdóttir 1996)) without any concomitant changes in the verbal agreement paradigm:

⁵ 1p and 2p pronominal subjects are frequent in OIce texts, as pointed out by David Hákanesson (pc). The low frequency of 1p and 2p RefNSs is hence not caused by a general lack of such subjects.

”this development did not relate to any weakening of the verb inflection” (Sigurðsson 1993:248f).

Unlike RefNSs in e.g. OHG, it appears that RefNSs were quite common also in OIce embedded clauses (cf. 7 b. above). Sigurðsson claims that “null subjects were frequent in subordinate clauses, especially in adverbial clauses” (1993:262). However, there are no quantitative studies of RefNSs in OIce which may be compared with e.g. the OHG data provided by Axel (2007) or with the OSw data provided by Håkansson (2008; see below). The numbers given by e.g. Hróarsdóttir (1996:130) are absolute; although she reports that she has found 13 instances of OIce RefNSs in her text sample from 1730–1750, the number of overt subjects in the sample is not presented, nor is the clausal context of the RefNSs provided. Hence, the exact frequency and the syntactic distribution of RefNSs in OIce are unknown, and the question whether OIce RefNSs actually were frequent in subordinate clauses is as yet unanswered.⁶

2.4. Old Swedish

In his dissertation about subject positions and RefNSs in OSw, Håkansson (2008) presents a number of examples of RefNSs in OSw:

8. a. þar gierþi kirchju aþra
 there built church other
 ‘There **he** built another church’
- b. þy wildi ai land þula vtan brendu hana
 that wanted not land stand but burned-3pl her
 ‘that the land could not stand but **they** burned it’

Although there seem to be very few RefNSs even in the oldest texts (from the 13th century), Håkansson (2008) is nevertheless able to conclude that, as in OE and OHG, third person RefNSs are by far the most frequent:

Omitted subjects that refer to third person dominate in all periods [...]. (Håkansson 2008:106; Old Swedish; my translation)

⁶ There do in fact not seem to be any OIce-studies at all in which the relative frequency and syntactic context of RefNSs are accounted for, but in the near future it will be possible to extract such data from the web-based Icelandic Diachronic Treebank (Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson, pc).

Furthermore, singular RefNSs were more common than plural RefNSs in OSw, although there was only one verb form for singular in OSw.⁷ The OSw-data accordingly suggest (again) that the hypothesis that there is an equivalence relation between “rich” agreement and RefNSs is untenable, at least when it comes to the Old Germanic languages.

The OSw RefNSs also display the same pattern as OHG concerning the syntactic distribution; Håkansson (2008:101ff) concludes that RefNSs are most frequently found in main clauses. Only 18% of the OSw RefNSs appear in embedded clauses, and in only 2% of all embedded clauses can RefNSs be found.

2.5. Syntactic properties of RefNSs in Old Germanic

The examination of some properties of RefNSs in OE, OHG, OIce, and OSw leads to the observation that these Old Germanic languages display some striking similarities.⁸

First, the distribution of RefNSs does not in any language depend on the “richness” of verbal inflection. In table 1, the distinct verb forms (i.e. the verb forms that unambiguously may identify an omitted subject) are in bold.

Table 1. *Verb agreement in Old Germanic.*

num.	pers.	OIce	OE	OHG	OSw
sg.	1	vaki	nerie	nimu	kalla(r)
	2	vakir	nerest	nimis(t)	
	3		nereþ	nimit	
pl.	1	vokum	neriaþ	nemem	kallum
	2	vakið		nemet	kallin
	3	vaka		nemen	kalla
inf.	nerian				

⁷ In some cases, 1p singular was marked by the suffix *-r*, however.

⁸ A substantial part of the Old Germanic texts are translations from Latin, a classic null-subject language, and hence the hypothesis that the Old Germanic RefNSs are instances of loan syntax may seem plausible. This hypothesis is discussed and convincingly rejected by van Gelderen (2000:132ff) as well as by Axel (2007:319ff).

Had the properties of the agreement determined whether RefNSs were possible, then we would not expect 3p plural RefNSs in any of the languages, since this form is identical to the form of the infinitive (cf. the discussion in Vikner 1995, 1997) or since the person distinction is missing in plural (OE); still, 3p plural RefNSs are attested from each language. As a matter of fact, some of the non-distinct forms allow RefNSs to a greater degree than the distinct forms do – in OSw, 3p RefNSs are most frequent, and still none of the OSw verb forms for 3p is distinct.

Furthermore, the careful diachronic studies that have been used as sources above (van Gelderen 2000, Sigurðsson 1993, Axel 2007 and Håkansson 2008) all suggest that there is no relation between the loss of RefNSs and the gradual decrease of the number of distinct verb forms in the respective languages, or, as in OHG and OIce, that the loss of RefNSs did not correlate with any significant loss of agreement suffixes. It can accordingly be concluded that “richness” of inflection was not a vital feature for RefNSs in the Old Germanic languages.

Another robust generalization is that 3p RefNSs were by far the most frequent in all of these Old Germanic languages. Quantitative data from OE (taken from Berndt 1956:65ff and summarized by van Gelderen 2000:133), OHG (Axel 2007:315) and OSw (Håkansson 2008:115) are presented in table 2. The percentages for each language show how many of the respective subjects that are null – in the case of OSw, e.g., 5% of 3p subjects are omitted.

Table 2. *RefNSs in Old Germanic – person reference.*

person	OE	OSw	OHG
1	3%	2 %	21%
2	9%	0 %	25%
3	78%	5 %	57%

Widening the perspective, one may note that a similar observation has been made for Old Dutch (de Smet 1970), another language in which 3p RefNSs were more common than other types. Also Old French, which was a V2-language (albeit a Romance V2-language), may be relevant in this context (cf. Adams 1987 and Vance 1995); it appears that third person RefNSs were the most common type of RefNSs also in Old French (Barbara Vance, pc).

The syntactic distribution of the RefNSs does not at first sight suggest any possible generalization. van Gelderen (2000:128) notes that OE RefNSs may appear “after finite complementizers”, although she does not examine the syntactic distribution of the RefNSs in detail; several of the examples of RefNSs rendered by van Gelderen seem to occur in embedded clauses, however. Likewise, Sigurðsson (1993; cf. the quote above) claims that RefNSs were common in OIce embedded clauses, despite the fact that no exact figures can be adduced. On the other hand, Axel (2007) as well as Håkansson (2008) clearly state that the respective RefNSs were strikingly more frequent in main clauses. In fact, Axel (2007:299) concludes that even if OHG RefNSs did appear in embedded clauses, all of these seemingly embedded clauses displayed main clause word order, and all OHG RefNSs accordingly appeared in what must be analysed as main clause contexts. The word order of the embedded clauses that allowed RefNSs in OE and OIce remains to be investigated; it is possible, however, that a closer look at OE and OIce data will reveal that the distribution of RefNSs in OE and OIce is reminiscent of the distribution of RefNSs in OHG and OSw.

Another similar feature of the Old Germanic RefNSs is that they all seem to depend on lexically realized antecedents in the preceding discourse. E.g, Sigurðsson (1993:264) points out that “those referential subjects that are here analyzed as *pro* were always coreferential with an NP in preceding discourse”. As for OE, none of the examples provided by van Gelderen (2000) occur in a discourse-initial position, as it appears – many of the examples contain an adverbial that requires a preceding context, such as *þa* (‘then’) – but she does not remark upon this particular property of the OE RefNSs. Mitchell (1985 I:633) points out, however, that OE RefNSs only could be null if they were “supplied from a preceding clause” (cf. the full quote in section 2.1).

There also seem to be non-syntactic similarities between OE, OHG, OIce and OSw that indicate that RefNSs in these languages differ from RefNSs in canonical null-subject languages such as Spanish and Italian. First, RefNSs in the Old Germanic languages are relatively infrequent (cf. table 2), while a null subject in Spanish or Italian is the default choice.⁹ Only in 3p and only in OE

⁹ Cole (2009, to appear) shows that there are interesting differences between the use of null v. overt subjects that separate *inter alia* Italian and Spanish, however. His hypotheses are further discussed in section 5.

and OHG were null subjects more common than overt subjects. As for OIce, Hróarsdóttir (1996:130) found 13 RefNSs in her sample from 1730–1750, as was mentioned above, and although the number of overt subjects is not provided, the 13 RefNSs must constitute a small minority; the sample is made up of 30 letters plus some shorter texts.

The second non-syntactic generalization that seems to apply to all of the four Old Germanic languages in this survey is that there does not seem to be any semantic/pragmatic difference between overt and null subjects in neither of the languages. Again, this separates the Old Germanic languages from standard null-subject languages, in which overt subjects trigger an emphatic/contrastive interpretation. Axel (2007:324; cf. also p. 300) points out that in OHG, “the overt realization of a subject pronoun does not trigger an emphatic or contrastive reading”, and van Gelderen’s discussion (2000:chapter 3) indicates that there was no systematicity in the choice of overt or null subjects in OE, other than that 3p subjects were more often omitted. OSw followed the same pattern (Håkansson, pc); the low number of RefNSs in OSw also leads to the conclusion that overt subjects could not have had an emphatic/contrastive meaning – more than 95% of the subjects in a text are rarely emphatic/contrastive.

3. RefNSs in Modern Germanic vernaculars

As was mentioned in the introduction, a number of Modern Germanic vernaculars, all of them V2-languages, also allow RefNSs. The majority of these vernaculars are spoken in the southern parts of Germany, in Switzerland and in Austria, but also in Frisian, a Low German language variety, Yiddish and Övdalian (which is spoken in Dalecarlia, Sweden) RefNSs appear. As for the southern German vernaculars, Bavarian, Schwabian and Zürich German will be addressed here; however, RefNSs seem to appear in virtually all non-standard varieties of West Germanic spoken in the southern part of the West Germanic language area.

Hoekstra (1997) presents some of the similarities and differences between RefNSs in Bavarian, Zürich German, and a number of Frisian dialects, focusing on the relation between RefNSs, agreeing complementizers and the “richness” of verbal inflection, but otherwise, it seems, there are few studies of RefNSs with a cross-Germanic perspective. E.g. in Koenenman (2006), a paper about so

called partial *pro*-drop languages (like Bavarian etc. – see below), the sole objects of study are Finnish and Hebrew, even though the author has been active in a European dialect syntax project.

In this section, each of the Modern Germanic language varieties will be discussed, with a focus on the same properties that have been on the agenda above. A concluding discussion and summarizing tables can be found in section 3.7.

3.1. Bavarian

The syntax of Bavarian (which is spoken mainly in Bavaria and Austria) has been studied in depth by e.g. Bayer (1984) and Weiß (1998), and Fuß (2004, 2005) presents a detailed explanation of the emergence of RefNSs in Bavarian, among other languages.

In Bavarian, 2p singular and plural RefNSs are possible, as illustrated in 9.

9. a. ...obst noch Minga kummst (Bayer 1984)
if-2sg to Munich come-2sg
 'whether **you** come to Munich'
- b. Hobbds khoa geld nimma. (Fuß 2005:159)
have-2pl no money not-anymore
 '**You** have no money anymore'

In 9 a. the complementizer is inflected for 2p singular – the suffix *-st* appears on both *ob* ('whether') and the finite verb. This type of double inflection is typical for the West Germanic vernaculars that allow RefNSs, and, crucially, an inflected complementizer is a prerequisite for RefNSs in embedded contexts in most of these language varieties (Hoekstra 1997). The Bavarian verb forms for 2p singular and plural are distinct; the former has the suffix *-st* and the latter *-ts* (or *-ds*). As demonstrated by Fuß (2004:60ff), the agreeing suffix on the complementizer is obligatory in Bavarian embedded clauses, but only in 2p singular and plural, and, in contrast with e.g. 1p singular, the suffix on the complementizer cannot be replaced by an overt subject. The contrast is illustrated in 10 and 11, with examples from Fuß (2004:60f).

10. a. ...obst (du) noch Minga kummst
 b. *...ob du noch Minga kummst
11. a. ...ob'e (*i) noch Minga kumm
if-CL-1sg to Munich come-1sg
 'whether I come to Munich'
- b. ...ob i noch Minga kumm
if I to Munich come-1sg
 'if I come to Munich'

The Bavarian forms for 2p singular *-st* and plural *-ts* on complementizers are accordingly not clitic pronouns, but rather actual inflectional suffixes.

In Lower Bavarian, spoken in the eastern part of Bavaria, also 1p plural may be null, in addition to 2p singular and plural. Interestingly, in this dialect the verb form for 1p plural is distinct (*-ma*), in contrast with the Bavarian form *-an*, which is identical with the infinitive (see table 3 below). An example of Lower Bavarian is presented in 12.

12. Fahrma noch Minga? (Bayer 1984)
travel-1pl to Munich
 'Are **we** going to Munich?'

In Bavarian and Lower Bavarian the correlation between distinct verb agreement, agreeing complementizers, and RefNSs is accordingly absolute – only those inflectional forms that unambiguously may recover the person and number features of an omitted subject allow RefNSs.

RefNSs are, if possible, the default choice in Bavarian, and an overt *du* ('you'), e.g., signals emphasis. Weiß (1998:125) remarks:

[...] daß die pro-drop Version den unmarkierten Fall darstellt, dagegen clitic-doubling [an overt subject – my remark] nur unter spezifischen Bedingungen (Emphase) erlaubt ist.

As was demonstrated above, the Bavarian RefNSs occur in main clauses as well as in embedded clauses, and they are of course highly frequent, since an overt (but possibly null) subject only is permitted when the speaker wishes to emphasize the subject.

3.2. Schwabian

Schwabian (or Swabian) is spoken in an area west of Bavaria (with the city of Ulm as a geographic centre), and it is traditionally categorized as a northern Alemannic dialect.

The syntax of Schwabian pronouns is the topic of Christine Haag-Merz's dissertation (1996); all Schwabian examples in the present paper are taken from that work.

In Schwabian, 1p and 2p singular subjects may be null, as illustrated in 13.

13. a. ...daß scho des Buch kauft hasch.
that already the book bought have-2sg
 'that **you** already have bought the book'
- b. Geschtern han-mr en Bobbel Eis kauft.
yesterday have-1sg-me-CL a ball ice cream bought
 'Yesterday **I** bought myself a ball of ice cream'

2p singular RefNSs seem to be acceptable in all contexts,¹⁰ but 1p RefNSs are restricted to medial positions in clitic clusters, as illustrated in 13 b. In these positions, a clitic *e* ('I') is possible, unless the following clitic is realized as a single nasal consonant (but the clitic *mr* allows a RefNS). In those cases, an overt subject clitic is ungrammatical (Haag-Merz 1996:162f) (see 14 a. and b.). On the other hand, the accusative clitics *s* ('it') and *se* ('her') always prohibit 1p singular RefNSs (see 14 c. and d.), and hence require the presence either of the 1p singular clitic *e* or of a 1p singular subject pronoun.

14. a. *Geschtern han-e-m a bißle gholfe.
yesterday have-1sg-I-CL-him-CL a little helped
 'Yesterday, I helped him a little'
- b. Geschtern han-m a bißle gholfe.
yesterday have-1sg-him-CL a little helped
 'Yesterday, **I** helped him a little'

¹⁰ Haag-Merz (1996:155) underlines, however, that her syntactic intuitions do not always coincide completely with other speakers' and researchers' intuitions.

- c. *Geschtern han-s ufgmacht.
yesterday have-1sg-it-CL opened
 'I opened it yesterday'
- d. Geschtern han-e-s ufgmacht.
yesterday have-1sg-I-CL-it-CL opened
 'I opened it yesterday'

Having established these distributional differences between the two possible RefNSs in Schwabian, Haag-Merz proposes that the enabling conditions for these two possible RefNSs are inherently different:

Zusammenfassend kann man festhalten, daß ich-drop phonologisch bedingt ist und nur im Cluster auftreten kann. Du-drop stellt eine syntaktische Option dar. (Haag-Merz 1996:167)

Syntactic and phonological factors both seem to regulate the distribution of RefNSs in Schwabian, accordingly. However, in both of the cases, the verb agreement is distinct, as illustrated in table 3. below.

3.3. Zürich German

Zürich German (ZG) is an Alemannic language variety, spoken in the Swiss canton of Zürich.

The distribution of RefNSs in Zürich German has been discussed by Cooper & Engdahl (1989) and by Cooper (1995). 1p and 2p singular subject pronouns may be null in ZG. The examples below are taken from Cooper & Engdahl (1989:33, 38).

15. a. Ha der das nöd scho verzellt?
have-1sg to-you it not already told
 'Haven't I told you that already?'
- b. Wänn nach Züri chunnsch, muesch mi bsueche.
when to Zürich come-2sg must-2sg me visit
 'When **you** come to Zürich, **you** must visit me'

Both possible RefNSs in ZG are restricted by syntactic and/or phonological factors, as discussed below.

Unlike the situation in Bavarian (cf. 10 b.), a 2p singular RefNSs in an embedded clause does not require an inflected complementizer:

16. ...öb nach Züri chunnsch.
whether to Zürich come-2sg
 'whether **you** come to Zürich'

But on the other hand, an omitted *du* ('you') in an embedded clause requires the presence of a preceding lexical element in the same embedded clause – otherwise, a RefNS is not possible. Any lexical element seems to do: a negation, an adverb or a clitical object, e.g.

17. a. *Es chunnt aa wie frögsch.
it depends on how ask-2sg
 'It depends on how **you** ask'
- b. Es chunnt aa wie mir frögsch.
it depends on how me ask-2sg
 'It depends on how **you** ask me'

Cooper & Engdahl (1989) conclude that null *du* in embedded clauses in Zürich German always requires a preceding lexical element:

Summing up, we can say that *du-drop* is always ok if C is filled by a complementiser. If C is empty *du-drop* is only ok if there is some lexical material preceding the verb.

As in Schwabian, the 1p RefNSs require embedding in a clitic cluster (see 15 a. above), with one exception: a position in front of the masculine determiner *em*, which is homonymous with a dative masculine clitic, is also possible (Cooper & Engdahl 1989:39):

18. ...wil em Brüeder alli Artikel schicke.
because to-the brother all articles send-1sg
 'because **I** send my brother all the articles'

An interesting combination of syntactic and phonological prerequisites is hence needed for 1sg RefNSs in ZG. The verb inflection is furthermore distinct in both 1p and 2p singular, meaning that a morphological condition also seems to apply.

3.4. Frisian

Frisian is spoken along the shores of the North Sea, mainly in the region of Friesland and in the southwest part of Jutland (north Frisia). A small number of speakers can still also be found in Saterland (Germany). In each region, a local dialect of Frisian is spoken.

RefNSs in Frisian were discussed by Hoekstra & Marácz (1989), and later de Haan (1994) as well as Hoekstra (1997) have explored Frisian RefNSs.

In Frisian, only the verb form for 2p singular is distinct, and only 2p singular RefNSs are possible: “An interesting property of Frisian syntax is that *-st* can license phonetically empty subjects ('pro drop')” (de Haan 1994:88). The examples in 19 are taken from de Haan (1994:81).

19. a. Miskien moastst my helpe.
perhaps must-2sg me help
 'Perhaps **you** must help me'
- b. Ik tink datst my helpe moastst.
I think that-2sg me help must-2sg
 'I think that **you** must help me'

As in Bavarian, an inflected complementizer is obligatory whenever a RefNS appears in an embedded clause. However, Hoekstra (1997:73) notes that in the north Frisian spoken on the islands Föhr and Amrum, this restriction does not seem to apply (cf. the Schwabian example in 13 a. above).

20. Ik hööbe, dat ilang komst.
I hope that tonight comes-2sg
 'I hope that **you** will come tonight'

As pointed out by Hoekstra (1997:79), the clitic form for 2sg pronouns in this dialect was *'t*. Hence, the clitic may have merged completely with the inflectional ending *-st* as well as with the complementizer *dat*.

3.5. Yiddish

The presence of RefNSs in Yiddish is adamantly denied by Speas (2006:60): “Yiddish does not allow null referential pronouns”, and in the same volume

Koeneman (2006:86) makes a similar statement. However, according to Prince (1998:83), traditional Yiddish grammarians acknowledge that “*du*, the second person singular pronoun is deletable” and in his Yiddish grammar, Jacobs (2005:261) provides some examples of RefNSs in Yiddish, which are rendered in 21. *Du* ('you') is omitted in a main clause (21 b.) as well as in an embedded clause (21 a.):

21. a. Trink nit di kave, vorem vest nit kenen slofn.
drink not the coffee because get-2sg not no sleep
 'Don't drink the coffee, because **you** won't be able to sleep'
- b. Efser volst mir gekent lajen a finf rubl.
maybe would-2sg me loan a five rubles
 'Maybe **you** could loan me about five rubles'

The verb form for 2p singular is distinct in Yiddish. Given these and other examples and the discussions in e.g. Prince (1998) and Jacobs (2005), it seems unreasonable to refute the existence of Yiddish RefNSs, and I will assume that RefNSs indeed are a feature of Yiddish grammar. It is however obvious that the conflicting statements need to be resolved – more research is required.

Prince (1998) recognizes the statements concerning omission only of 2p singular subject pronouns by earlier Yiddish grammarians, but she claims that all referential subject pronouns in Yiddish may be null. However, it is evident from her discussion that she does not separate RefNSs from topic dropped subjects, and the syntactic properties of the omitted subjects that she investigates actually suggest that the explored phenomenon is topic drop, and not RefNSs. E.g. according to Prince (1998:83ff) the omitted subjects must be clause initial and they must have an antecedent in the preceding discourse. Most syntacticians has separated these two forms of subject omission from each other at least since Sigurðsson (1993), who very clearly draws a line between topic drop, semi *pro*-drop (of expletive subjects) and genuine *pro*-drop (Sigurðsson 1993:247). Hence, I do not find the argumentation in Prince (1998) fully convincing, but again it must be stressed that further research is essential.

Perhaps the different opinions about RefNSs in Yiddish are due to dialectal differences – Western Yiddish had a more prominent position in the 19th

century than it has now, for instance, and if traditional grammars reflect the syntax of Western Yiddish (which possibly allowed RefNSs to a greater degree than Eastern Yiddish), then it is natural that the contemporary speakers of Yiddish do not immediately consent to the descriptions, since Eastern Yiddish now is predominant in the Yiddish speaking community.

3.6. Övdalian

Övdalian is spoken in the northwestern part of Dalecarlia, in central Sweden, by about 2 500 speakers. Traditionally classified as a dialect, it displays linguistic properties that differ from Swedish at all levels, and several scholars take it to be a separate language (Garbacz to appear).

In Övdalian, 1p and 2p plural may appear as RefNSs; the examples below come from Rosenkvist (in progress).

22. a. ...dar wilum glāmā min wennanan.
when want-to-1pl chat with eachother
 'when **we** want to chat with each other.'
- b. Nū irið iema.
now are-2pl. home
 'now **you** are home'

The two RefNSs obey different restrictions. While 2p plural may be omitted from all positions, 1p plural require access to a position in front of the finite verb, both in main clauses and in embedded clauses. The topicalization of a non-subject in any type of clause will hence make a 1p plural RefNSs ungrammatical.¹¹ Hence, in 22 a. and b, only a 2p plural RefNSs is possible.

22. a. I Ståkkål *am/avið tjiöpt eð.
in Stockholm have-1pl/2pl bought it
 '*We/you bought it in Stockholm'

¹¹ Barbosa (1995:80) suggests that a postverbal position may be a general requirement for RefNSs in Romance and Germanic languages. Interestingly, 1p plural RefNSs in Övdalian have exactly the opposite distribution – they must be preverbal.

- b. ...at i Ståkkål *am/avið tjiöpt eð.
that in Stockholm have-1pl/2pl bought it
 'that *we/you bought it in Stockholm'

The Övdalian verb forms for 1p and 2p plural are distinct, and an overt subject must be emphasized and/or contrastive. It should be noted, however, that an overt *wið* ('we') only is understood as emphatic/contrastive in those cases where it could have been null.

In Övdalian, there are word order-variations in embedded clauses (cf. Garbacz to appear). The finite verb may appear after or in front of clause adverbials. In the latter case, it is in general assumed that the verb has moved to an intermediate position in the embedded clause (to I or T) – Holmberg & Platzack (1995) assume that this is one of the basic differences between e.g. Icelandic (verb movement) and Swedish (verb *in situ*). Recent studies show that both of the Övdalian RefNSs are restricted to embedded clauses with verb movement; if the verb is preceded by a clause adverbial such as *sakta* ('actually'), then a RefNS is not possible. In this respect, Övdalian is partly similar to OHG (cf. above).

3.7. Syntactic properties of RefNSs in Modern Germanic

The exposition above shows that RefNSs (i.e. partial RefNSs) are a grammatical reality in several non-standard Modern Germanic vernaculars. In some cases there have been quite extensive syntactic studies of the features of the RefNSs (e.g. Bavarian), while other language varieties have been insufficiently investigated; most of all, this applies to Yiddish. The data that have been presented above must be judged accordingly.

None of the language varieties discussed here allow all types of RefNSs; only 1p and 2p RefNSs are possible (in contrast with the Old Germanic languages).

The direct connection between distinct verb agreement and RefNSs is furthermore obvious – in neither of the Modern Germanic language varieties in this survey are RefNSs possible unless there is a verb form that uniquely can identify the omitted subject. The relation between verb agreement and RefNSs is illustrated in table 3, where the verb forms that allow RefNSs are in bold.¹²

¹² I thank Ute Bohnacker for providing the inflection pattern of the Schwabian verb *komma*.

Table 3. *The relation between verb agreement and RefNSs in Modern Germanic.*

num.	per	Bav	LBav	ZG	Schw	Fris	Övd	Yidd
sg.	1	kumm	kumm	chume	komm	kom	kumb	kum
	2	kummst	kummst	chunnsch	kommsch	komst		kumst
	3	kummt	kummt	chunnt	kommt	komt		kumt
pl.	1	kumman	kumma	chömed	kommet	komme	kumum	kumn
	2	kummts	kummts				kumið	kumt
	3	kumman	kumman				kumå	kumn
inf.		kemma	kemma	chu	komma	kommen		

It is important to observe that a distinct verb form does not *per se* imply that RefNSs are possible. E.g. 3p singular has a distinct suffix (-t) in five cases, but 3p singular subject pronouns must nevertheless be overt. One reason for this (which rarely has been taken into consideration in the research about RefNSs – cf. e.g. Rohrbacher 1999, the articles in Ackema et al 2006 or Frascarelli 2007) – may be that 3p singular subjects in general are not fully identified solely by person and number features on an agreeing element; it is common that 3p singular pronouns also have gender features. Accordingly, in many languages a 3p singular RefNSs cannot be fully recovered by mere verb morphology, unless the verb form for 3p singular is marked also for gender. In languages with gender features on 3p plural pronominal subjects (such as Spanish), the same applies to verb forms for 3p plural, of course.

In all of the Modern Germanic vernaculars, RefNSs are possible in both main clauses and in embedded clauses, and there do not seem to be any differences in frequency related to clause type – again, this is in sharp contrast to the distribution of RefNSs in Old Germanic.

Another possible generalization is that an overt subject (which could have been omitted) appears to trigger emphatic/contrastive interpretations in all of these language varieties – but there are not clear data concerning the pragmatic effects of overt subjects from all of the language varieties in the survey.

Apart from these generalizations, the rich and very evident microvariation concerning language-internal restrictions for RefNSs in this set of closely related languages is quite spectacular. In West Germanic, there seem to be complex interdependencies between agreeing complementizers, clitic pronouns, and verbal agreement (cf. de Haan 1994, Fuß 2004), which indicate that the licensing of RefNSs in some cases is dependent on syntactic as well as morphological and phonological factors. It has of course not been possible to include all details of these language-specific intricacies in the discussion in this paper. Rich clitic systems and agreeing complementizers are however absent from Övdalian and Yiddish,¹³ two languages that nevertheless offer intriguing problems regarding the distribution of the respective RefNSs. It can only be concluded that more research is necessary. Much more, in fact.

4. Syntactic similarities and differences – Old Germanic RefNSs vs. Modern Germanic RefNSs

Above, I have presented syntactic data from four Old Germanic languages and six Modern Germanic vernaculars which all allow (partial) RefNSs. These data falsify beyond doubt the recurrent assumption that RefNSs always are illicit in V2-languages.

In the survey, the focus has been on a number of mainly syntactic features of the respective RefNSs: the relation to verb agreement, person reference, the distribution in different types of clauses, frequency, and the pragmatic significance of overt subjects. Although I have not been able to access relevant data from all the language varieties, a general pattern emerges: RefNSs in the Old Germanic languages and RefNSs in Modern Germanic vernaculars form two groups, readily distinguishable from each other. In table 4. below, the findings are summarized; the abbreviations in the table are explained in the accompanying key.

¹³ The idea that RefNSs always require an agreeing element in C (cf. e.g. Weiß 2005) is thus contradicted by the RefNSs in Övdalian and Yiddish.

Table 4. *Systematic syntactic differences between RefNSs in Old Germanic and in Modern Germanic.*

feature language	agr.	type	3p.	prag.	infreq.
Old Germanic					
Old High Ger.	-	+	+	-	+ (?)
Old English	-	?	+	-	+ (?)
Old Icelandic	-	?	+	-	+
Old Swedish	-	+	+	-	+
Modern Germanic					
Bavarian	+	-	-	+	-
L. Bavarian	+	-	-	+	-
Z. German	+	-	-	+	-
Schwabian	+	-	-	+	-
Frisian	+	-	-	+	-
Övdalian	+	-	-	+	-
Yiddish	+ (?)	- (?)	- (?)	+ (?)	- (?)

key to table 4:

- agr. = the person and number features of the RefNSs can be reconstructed from verb agreement.
- type = RefNSs are sensitive to clause type (they are more frequent or only possible in main clauses).
- prag. = an overt subject (which could be null) is understood as emphatic and/or contrastive
- 3p. = third person RefNSs are possible.
- infreq. = RefNSs are less frequent than overt subjects.

The data in table 4 clearly indicate that RefNSs in Old Germanic inherently had other syntactic properties than the RefNSs in Modern Germanic, and, accordingly, a proposal that the latter have developed from the former must account for this typological shift.

In section 5 below, I discuss this further, as well as some other implications for general theories about RefNSs that the Germanic RefNSs bring about.

5. Conclusions

In generative grammar, the research about RefNSs has to a large extent concentrated on the Romance languages, taking influential works by Rizzi (1982, 1986) as a starting point. Eventually other languages and language families have been included, such as Mandarin (Huang 1984), Hebrew (Borer 1986) and Finnish (Vainikka 1989). Data from these (and many other languages – cf. Gilligan 1987) have influenced the theoretical development considerably. However, the Germanic null-subject languages, spoken in central parts of Europe, have not had any real empirical or theoretical impact on the ongoing research. It is my conviction that further studies of the syntactic patterns of RefNSs in Germanic V2-languages may contribute significantly to the research about RefNSs, partly because V2-languages in general have relatively strict word order regulations, and hence allow for meticulous and elaborate investigations of which syntactic contexts allow or prohibit RefNSs.

In this final section, I will, in relative brevity, address two issues that the survey above has brought to the fore: the diachronic relation between RefNSs in Old and Modern Germanic, and which implications the syntactic features of Germanic RefNSs may have for current assumptions about RefNSs.

5.1. The diachronic relation between Old Germanic and Modern Germanic

The traditional view of RefNSs in Modern West Germanic vernaculars is that they are linguistic innovations. E.g. Fuß (2004, 2005) demonstrates how universal principles of grammaticalization have transformed Old Bavarian pronouns to clitics and clitics to inflectional markers, thereby laying the ground for the Modern RefNSs in Bavarian:

[...] enclitic pronouns were reanalyzed as (dissociated) agreement morphemes on C. This change forced the learner to assume that the subject position is occupied by *pro*, giving rise to partial pro-drop [...] (Fuß 2004:89)

Hoekstra (1997:78ff) assumes a similar point of view, and Björklund (1958) reaches virtually the same conclusion when speculating about the possible source of the 2p plural RefNSs in Övdalian.

In a recent paper, Axel & Weiß (to appear) instead propose that RefNSs in Modern West Germanic are direct descendants of the Old Germanic RefNSs. Their idea builds on the observation that RefNSs both in OHG and in the Modern West Germanic vernaculars must be c-commanded by verbal agreement: "[...] it is precisely pronominal Agr-in-C that licenses *pro*" (Axel & Weiß to appear:13). When inflection started to appear on complementizers, they argue, RefNSs were eventually licensed also in embedded clauses. However, not all of the Modern Germanic vernaculars that have been presented in the present paper have agreeing complementizers. As for West Germanic, RefNSs are possible in both Zürich German and Schwabian, apparently without agreeing complementizers (cf. examples 13 a, 16 and 18), and neither Yiddish nor Övdalian exhibit such elements. Hence RefNSs are possible without Agr-in-C in Germanic, and the vital factor for the presence of RefNSs in embedded clauses cannot be the emergence of agreeing complementizers. Another counter-argument against the hypothesis presented by Axel & Weiß (to appear) is that there is a cluster of other syntactic features (e.g., person reference, frequency etc.) that must be included in a diachronic explanation of how RefNSs developed in the Modern Germanic vernaculars (as was mentioned above).

5.2. Germanic RefNSs – theoretical consequences

Rich agreement and RefNSs seem to be tightly related in many languages, and many linguists have argued that "rich" agreement is a necessary prerequisite for RefNSs (cf. Taraldsen 1978, Chomsky 1981:240ff, Rohrbacher 1999 etc.). In this vein, Borer (1986) suggested that the inflectional affixes may function as pronominal subjects *per se*, being I-subjects. This has become a standard analysis:

Indeed, the possibility of null subjects in a given language has been generally attributed to the pronominal character of its agreement morphology. (Frascarelli 2007:692).

Similar ideas have been presented by e.g. Barbosa (1995, 2009), Platzack (2004) and Koenenman (2006).

The notion of *pro*, a certain non-pronounced subject (or object) pronoun identified by agreement, is on the other hand not tenable in current versions of generative grammar (Chomsky 1995, 2001), since features that express phi-features only are interpretable in a NP/DP. The subject agreement features of the verb must hence be eliminated in the syntactic derivation, and therefore the verb cannot act as a subject identifier in overt syntax, as noted by Holmberg (2005).

The theory of *pro* [...] cannot be maintained in a theory making the distinction between interpretable and uninterpretable features that plays a crucial role in Chomsky 1995:chapter 4 and subsequent work by Chomsky and others. (Holmberg 2005:536)

The theoretical development has led to a revitalized interest for RefNSs, and new analyses have been presented by e.g. Holmberg (2005; Finnish, 2007), Ackema et al. (2006), Barbosa (2009; Portuguese), Frascarelli (2007; Italian) and Sigurðsson (2008). The new analyses depart either from Borer's (1986) notion of I-subject (e.g. Holmberg 2005, Alexiadou 2006 and Barbosa 2009), or from the assumption that RefNSs are identified through the discourse context (e.g. Frascarelli 2007 and Sigurðsson 2008).

The syntactic characteristics of the Old and Modern Germanic languages suggest that there are indeed two fundamentally different strategies for the identification of RefNSs. In the Old Germanic languages, we have seen that verbal agreement is of little importance and that RefNSs are rare in embedded clauses. Furthermore, some authors, for instance Sigurðsson (1993), explicitly point out that RefNSs in Old Germanic need an overt antecedent in the preceding discourse, and Håkansson (2008) arrives to the conclusion that the OSw RefNSs were directly dependent on a link to discourse antecedents (with a few exceptions). On the other hand, RefNSs in Modern Germanic are directly dependent on verb agreement, they appear in all clause types and they do not need overt antecedents but are in general the default choice of subject. Hence, it seems to me that any explanation of how RefNSs in Old Germanic are identified requires a clause-external approach, while RefNSs in Modern Germanic are best understood as being identified by a clause-internal mechanism. Typologically, a similar difference may separate isolating languages, such as Mandarin, from inflectional languages, such as Italian.

In two recent papers, Cole (2009, to appear) suggests that both reference to an antecedent and subject verb agreement decide whether RefNSs are allowed in a

language. The access to an antecedent is dependent on the antecedents' salience, whereas "richness" of inflection is defined within separate languages, according to Cole. If verbs may agree for e.g. person and number in a certain language, then verb forms that express features for both person and number are morphologically maximal in that language, and will allow RefNSs. Cole (2009, to appear) provides several examples of how data from Italian and other languages may be explained by his theory. In Rosenkvist (in progress), I argue that also Övdalian may be a language in which RefNSs are identified by different mechanisms. The distribution of the 1p plural RefNSs in Övdalian indicates that it requires not an overt antecedent, but some form of escape hatch where access to the discourse context is provided, while the distribution of the 2p plural RefNSs suggests that it is identified within the clause; this is not the place for a detailed presentation of Övdalian RefNSs, however. Suffice it to say that it is worth exploring the hypothesis that multiple mechanisms may be active in the identification of RefNSs.

A remaining problem is however the phonological conditions for RefNSs in West Germanic language varieties, such as e.g. Schwabian; it is not obvious how such prerequisites for the occurrence of RefNSs are to be explained in an analytic model where only agreement and access to antecedents decide whether RefNSs are allowed or not.

In the near future, I intend to investigate RefNSs in Övdalian (and in other Germanic language varieties) further, in the research project GRENS (*Germanic Referential Null Subjects*) that will commence in 2010. Some of the gaps in our knowledge of RefNSs in Germanic will then eventually be filled.

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