Object drop in English and Japanese

Masako Ohara

Shimane University

1. Introduction

It is well known that Japanese allows null arguments to occur in finite clauses whereas English does not.   For example, a Japanese sentence does not have to have an overt subject and object, whereas English requires both of them:

(1) Mi-ta?

   see-Past

   'Did <u>you</u> see <u>it</u>?'

(1) is perfectly grammatical in Japanese.   Referents of null arguments seem to be identified from the context.   This is not permitted in English.   This fundamental difference between English and Japanese makes it difficult for Japanese speakers to express arguments properly when speaking and writing English.   They tend to unintentionally drop subject and object arguments.   English speakers, on the other hand, find it difficult to figure out what a null argument is referring to in Japanese. The following examples clearly illustrate this point.   (2a) is cited from a Japanese novel *Kitchen*, written by Banana Yoshimoto.   (2b) is its English translation by Megan Backus:

(2)	a.	Kare-wa		nanimo	sira-nai-si,	**waruku-nai**-noni
		he-Top		nothing	know-Neg-and	bad-Neg-but

	nantonaku	kare-no	me-o	miru	koto-ga deki-nakat-ta.[1]
	for.some.reason	he-Gen	eye-Acc	see	fact-Nom can-Neg-Past

b.   Even though he couldn't know what had happened, and although **I had done nothing wrong**, I couldn't meet his eyes.

(2a) has only one subject *kare* 'he' overtly but it has four predicates, *siranai* 'do not know', *warukunai* 'is not wrong', *miru* 'see', *dekinakatta* 'couldn't do.'   *Kare* 'he' is the subject of the first two predicates.   The subject referent of the other two predicates, which is not overtly realized, is the speaker of this sentence.   This is somehow mistaken in English translation in (2b), where the speaker is incorrectly understood as the subject of the second predicate.   The correct translation should be 'Even though he couldn't know what had happened and **(he) had done nothing wrong**, I couldn't meet his eyes.'

The availability of null arguments in Japanese calls attention both from comparative and theoretical points of view.   One of the fundamental questions is why null arguments are allowed in Japanese, while they are not in English.   As a preliminary step to considering this question, this paper reviews previous studies on the status of null arguments, with particular attention to object drop.   As is well known, null subjects are permitted in languages such as Italian or Spanish and the phenomenon is usually reduced to rich verbal agreement in those languages.   Certain Asian languages such as Chinese, Korean and Japanese are problematic to such a view, since these languages, though they do not have rich agreement, still allow null arguments in more radical ways.   They allow not only subject arguments but also object arguments to drop.   This paper shows that null objects have various usages,

---

[1] Abbreviations used in this paper are as follows.   Acc: accusative, Gen: genitive, Ind: indicative Neg: negative, Nom: nominative, Pol: politeness, Q: question marker, Top: topic.

depending on the context.   In section 2, I will describe a phenomenon of 'object deletion' in English and show differences between English and Japanese.   Then in section 3, I will review previous analyses of object drop in Japanese.   Section 4 concludes the paper.

2. 'Object deletion' in English

Although English usually requires arguments to be overtly realized in a sentence, they can be left out in restricted circumstances.   For example, *wish you were here* in a postcard should not have a subject (Hinds 1986, 67).   Additionally, subject and object arguments can be dropped in recipes or instructions in general (Massam and Roberge 1989).   Since instructions are in the imperative mood, it is not surprising that they do not realize a subject argument.   What is important to note is that they do not have an overt object either.   Consider the following example in (3).   The object pronoun is omitted from the positions marked by underlines:

(3)   Bring cream and sugar to boil in large stainless steel sauce pan over medium heat, stirring constantly. Cook __ 3 minutes, stirring constantly. Remove pan from heat. Whisk __ in lemon and lime juices. Return __ to heat and cook __ until slightly thickened, about 7 minutes. Pour __ into six 8-ounce wine glasses or custard cups. Cover __ and refrigerate __ until set, about 4 hours. Top __ with raspberries. Sprinkle __ with powdered sugar. Garnish __ with fresh mint. Serve __ with sliced pound cake or shortbread cookies.

                              (from http://www.cooking.com/, underlines added)

Apart from object drop in a restricted context such as a cooking recipe,

3

English seems to have different types of object drop. To be more specific, certain transitive verbs permit their object arguments to be omitted. In the following examples, cited from Hinds (1986, 50), objects in the bracket can be left out.

(4) a.   We usually eat [dinner] at 7:30.

  b.   Ken drinks [sake] too much.

  c.   Every afternoon I read [books] for two hours.

Note that the missing objects in (4) denote something typical of the action described by the verbs.[2]   One of the interesting differences between English and Japanese, which is pointed out by Hinds (1986), can be seen if we compare (4) with the corresponding Japanese examples in (5).   Although arguments seem to be dropped freely in Japanese, when object arguments denote something typical, they cannot be omitted.

(5) a.   Watashitachi-wa   itsumo 7:30-ni   ??(yuugohan-o) tabe-masu.
       we-Top   always 7:30-at   dinner-Acc   eat-Pol
       'We usually eat dinner at 7:30.'

  b.   Ken-wa   ?(sake-o)   nomi-sugi-desu.
       Ken-Top   sake-Acc   drink-too.much-Pol
       'Ken drinks sake too much.'

  c.   Watashi-wa   mainichi   gogo-ni   2-jikan *(hon-o)
       I-Top   everyday   afternoon-at   2-hour   book-Acc
       yomi-masu.
       read-Pol
       'Every afternoon I read books for two hours.'

As shown in (5), whether the object argument can be left unspecified or not depends on the verbal predicate   For example, a compound verb *nomi-sugi-desu* 'drink too much'

---

[2] There are other types of object drop in English as well (see Rizzi (1986), Neeleman and Szendröi (2005), etc.), but they are not discussed in this paper.

in (5b) is closely linked to have an alcoholic drink and does not necessarily require the presence of the object argument.[3]   However, it is usually the case that the object referring to something in general should be provided in Japanese.   On the other hand, the object referring to something specific cannot be omitted in English but it can be dropped in Japanese.   Compare the following English example and its Japanese equivalent.

(6) a.   A: What did you do with the fish I bought yesterday?

     B: I ate **it**.

  b.   A: Kinoo   katta   sakana-wa   doo   narimasita-ka?
            yesterday   bought   fish-Top   what   became-Q

     B: Tabemasita.
          ate

                                                           (Hinds 1986, 51)

As shown in (6b), the utterance by B in Japanese example does not contain a subject and an object.   The subject refers to the speaker and the object refers to the specific *fish* appearing in the foregoing utterance.

    Why is there such a difference between English and Japanese?   Rizzi (1986) suggests in a footnote that the process of object drop in English is lexically governed. The lexical nature of this process is clearly shown in the fact that near synonyms differ in terms of the optionality of an object argument.   For example, *have*, which can be used synonymously to *eat*, cannot be used without an object argument.

(7) Yesterday, we had *(an excellent meal) in a new Italian restaurant.

I will not go into further details of the exact process of how the object drop in English

---

3 On the other hand, a simple verb *nomu* 'drink' requires the presence of an object argument.

works in the lexicon.　There might be two different lexical entries for a transitive and an intransitive usage, or the object argument is linked to a prototypical entity in the lexicon.　Rather, it is important to note that the lexical nature of this process is the reason for the difference between English and Japanese.　As described above, the applicability of object drop depends on the particular lexical item.　It is probably the case that words meaning the same thing in English and Japanese have different specification in terms of its object arguments.　For example, although *taberu* 'eat' cannot have an unspecified object, *nomi-sugi-desu* 'drink too much' can.　By contrast, both *eat* and *drink* can leave the object unspecified in English.　English seems to have more lexical entries than Japanese which allows their objects to be dropped.　In addition, if the object drop in English is a lexical process, it is natural that only the objects referring to something general can be dropped.　With the verb which can have its object unspecified, the object argument is linked to some generic entities in the lexicon.　The object argument never appears in the syntactic process and it cannot refer to a particular entity in discourse.

In summary, 'object deletion' in English is found in a highly restricted context such as recipes or restricted to certain predicates such as *eat*, *drink*, etc.　In Japanese, the process of object drop is more productive.　In the next section, let us overview previous approaches to object drop in Japanese.

3.　Object drop in Japanese

The status of null arguments in East Asian languages has long caught attention in the previous studies.　In this section, I will review the previous approaches to clarifying characteristics of null objects, mainly discussing the data in Japanese.

First of all, Kuroda (1965) argues that null arguments are pronouns which do not realize phonetic contents. Consider the following example:

(8)   A: Kyoo-wa   gakkoo-de   Hanako$_i$-ni   nanika   atta-no?

            today-Top   school-at   Hanako-to   something   happned-Q

            'Did something happen to Hanako at school today?'

            B: Taroo-ga e_i tataita   soo-desu.

            Taroo-Nom   hit   I.heard-Pol

            'I heard that Taro hit her.'

In B's reply, an object argument is not realized, but it clearly refers to *Hanako*, which appears in A's utterance. So, it functions like a personal pronoun in English (in this case, 'her').

Another analysis is proposed by Huang (1984), based mainly on data in Chinese. The same line of analysis is applied to Japanese by Hasegawa (1984/85). On their view, null objects are not null pronouns but rather variables linked to null Topics. This analysis (call it the variable analysis) tries to capture the fact that a null object in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean does not refer to an entity arbitrary in reference but requires a particular individual salient in discourse. The variable analysis is supported by an asymmetry between subject and object null arguments. Consider the following examples taken from Hasegawa (1984/85):

(9)   a.   John$_i$-ga   [$e_{i/j}$ Mary-o   nagutta to]   itta.

            John-Nom   Mary-Acc   hit   that   said

            'John$_i$ said that he$_{i/j}$ hit Mary.'

            b.   John$_i$-ga   [Mary-ga $e_{?*i/j}$ nagutta to]   itta.

            'John$_i$ said that Mary hit him$_{?*i/j}$.'

(10) John$_i$-ga [$e_{i/?*j}$ $e_{j/?*i}$ aisitei-nai] hito$_j$-to kekkon sita.

  John-Nom love-Neg person-with marry did

  'John$_i$ got married to a person$_j$ who (he$_i$) doesn't love.'

In (9) and (10), the index *i* refers to a person indicated by the matrix subject, while *j* refers to a person salient in discourse.   Hasegawa makes the following observation: as in (9), when a null argument is the subject in the embedded clause, it can refer to the matrix subject or someone in discourse.   When a null argument is the object of the embedded clause, however, it can refer to a person in the discourse but not to the matrix subject.   The same kind of asymmetry can be seen in the relative clause in (10). The null object of the relative clause in (10) cannot refer to the matrix subject, but should refer to the relative head.

  The unavailability of the matrix subject as an antecedent of the null object argument may support the hypothesis that the null object is a variable linked to the null Topic.   The basic idea of the variable analysis can be represented as follows (Hasegawa 1984/84, 294):

(11) a. [$_{Topic}$ $_j$] [John$_i$-ga [$e_{i/j}$ Mary-o nagutta to] itta]

   b. [$_{Topic}$ $_j$] [John$_i$-ga [Mary-ga $e_{*?i/j}$ nagutta to] itta]

When the null argument *e* is a variable, it is coindexed with the Topic (*j*), which refers to someone in the discourse both in (11a, b).   When the null argument is *pro* (in Huang) or *PRO* (in Hasegawa), it can be coindexed with the matrix subject in (11a), but not in (11b).   (11b) does not allow coindexation of the matrix subject and the null argument because of the presence of the embedded subject.   The embedded subject is the closest nominal argument of *e*, but it cannot refer to the embedded subject because of the Binding Condition B, which requires a pronominal to be free in its governing

8

category.   Thus, in the variable analysis, the null subject argument is either *pro* or a variable, but the null object argument can only be a variable, which explains the subject-object asymmetry described in (9) and (10).

However, many researchers raise objections to the variable analysis, particularly with respect to the alleged subject-object asymmetry observed in (9) and (10) (see Hoji 1985, Nakamura 1986, among many others).   Although Hasegawa judges them to be ungrammatical with the reading in which the null object refers to the matrix subject, this judgment seems to be questionable.   For example, even if we use a predicate in the embedded clause which forces the reading whereby the null object argument is coreferential with the matrix subject, the sentence is still grammatical. Consider the following examples:

(12)   Haha$_i$-ga   [titi-ga $e_{i/j}$ kyuukon-sita   to]   itta.
        mother-Nom   father-Nom   propose-did   that   said
        'My mother$_i$ said that my father proposed to her$_{i/j}$.'

(13)   John$_i$-ga   [$e_{?i/j}$ $e_{?j/i}$ nagutta]   hito$_j$-o   uttaeta.
        John-Nom   hit   person-Acc   sued
        'John$_i$ sued a person$_j$ who hit him$_i$.' or '?John$_i$ sued a person$_j$ who he$_i$ hit.'

The example (12) corresponds to the example (9), but the sentence is grammatical even with the reading where the embedded object is coreferential with the matrix subject. Similarly in (13), the relative clause contains null subject and object arguments just like the example (10) does, but the preferred reading in (13) is completely opposite to that of (10) in that the embedded object is more likely to refer to the matrix subject. If the null object is truly a variable, it should not be coreferential with the matrix subject, due to the Condition C of Binding Theory, which requires a variable to be

A-free.[4]   This fundamental problem falsifies the validity of the variable analysis.

Another type of analysis is proposed by Huang (1991) and Otani and Whitman (1991).   They observe that certain instances of null objects are analyzed as ellipsis.   Consider the following examples:

(14)   a.   Taroo-ga   zibun-no   heya-o   soozisita.
             Taro-Nom   self-Gen   room-Acc   cleaned
       'Taro$_i$ cleaned self$_i$'s room.'

       b.   Hanako-mo   *e*   soozisita.
            Hanako-also   cleaned
       'Hanako$_j$ also cleaned self$_j$'s room.' (sloppy reading)

       'Hanako also cleaned Taro's room.' (strict reading)

(14b) is ambiguous.   The null object is interpreted either as *Hanako's room* (sloppy reading) or *Taro's room* (strict reading).   The ambiguity of (14b) is comparable to the VP-ellipsis in English.

(15)   John cleaned his room, and Mary did [$_{VP}$ *e*], too.

The sloppy reading in (14b) is problematic to the analysis taking the null object as a null pronoun.   With the sloppy reading, the null object is coindexed with the subject. Due to the Condition B of Binding Theory, however, a pronoun should be free in its governing category.   Observing the inadequacy of analysis taking the null object as a null pronoun, Huang (1991) and Otani and Whitman (1991) propose an analysis involving empty VPs.

Note that the strict/sloppy reading in (14b) is available only when (i) the former sentence is followed by a parallel sentence (Whitman and Moriyama (2004),

---

[4]   A similar criticism is made of the data in Chinese by Xu (1986).

cited in Neeleman and Szendröi (2005, 14)), and (ii) there is an anaphoric antecedent (Takahashi 2006).   Firstly, in terms of parallelism, if (14b) is changed to the following example, there is no ambiguity:

(14)   b'   Atode   Hanako-ga   *e*   tazunetekita.

               afterwards   Hanako-Nom   visited

               'Afterwards Hanako visited (Taro's room).'

The sensitivity to parallelism in particular shows that the sloppy reading in (14b) results from ellipsis, rather than a null pronoun.

       Secondly, when no anaphoric antecedent is available, there is no sloppy reading.   For example, the null object in (16) can be coreferential with several persons, but not with Hanako herself.

(16)   Taroo-ga   Ziroo-to   kita-ra   Hanako-ga   *e*

        Taro-Nom   Ziro-with   come-when   Hanako-Nom

        homeru rasii.

        praise   it.seems

        'It seems that when Taro comes with Ziro, Hanako will praise him, them, you,

        me, etc.'   (Takahashi 2006, 14 (31))

This means that the ellipsis analysis can be applied to a certain restricted circumstance and we still need a null pronoun in a case like (16).

       The VP-ellipsis analysis is argued against from various researchers, however (Hoji 1998, Kim 1999, Oku 1998).   For example, Kim (1999) discusses inadequacy of the VP-ellipsis analysis by the part-whole construction in Korean:

(18)   a.   Jerry-nun   [caki-uy   ai]-lul   phal-ul   ttayli-ess-ta.

             Jerry-Top   self-Gen   child-Acc   arm-Acc   hit-Past-Ind

             'Jerry hit his child on the arm.'

b.　　　Kulena　Sally-nun　　　[NP *e*]　tali-lul　ttayli-ess-ta.

　　　　　but　　Sally-Top　　　　　　leg-Acc　hit-Past-Ind

　　　i)　　　　But Sally hit her (= Sally's) child on the leg. (sloppy reading)

　　　ii)　　　But Sally hit his (= Jerry's) child on the leg. (strict reading)

(Kim 1999, 259 (8))

In the part-whole construction, the body part NP ('arm' in (18a)) requires the presence of the whole NP ('his child' in (18a)) overtly or implicitly.　So, the VP-ellipsis hypothesis predicts that the sloppy reading in (18b.i) is impossible, when the part NP is different from that of (18a).　The reason that Kim (1999) gives goes as follows: in the VP-ellipsis analysis, we need to copy the trace of the verb and the object argument. In order to obtain the sloppy reading in (18b), we need to copy the whole-NP and a verb's trace.　Since the part NP in (18b) is different from that of (18a), what is copied is everything in the VP but the part NP.　In the current syntactic theory, a whole phrase need to be copied and its part cannot be left out.　Still, a sloppy reading is available in (18b), which strongly suggests that the gap in (18b) is not a result from VP-ellipsis.

　　　Another argument against VP-ellipsis analysis is provided in Hoji (1998). Note that in the discussion so far, we have seen null objects in Japanese which correspond to pronouns or ellipsis in English.　However, Japanese null objects can be used in a different way.　For example, consider the example below:

(19)　A:　　John-ga　　　　zibun-no　　　kuruma-o　　　aratta.

　　　　　　John-Nom　　　self-Gen　　　car-Acc　　　　washed

　　　　　　'John washed self's car.'

12

B: John igai-no   subete-no hito-mo   (minna) *e* aratta.

John except-Gen   all-Gen   person-also   all   washed

'Everyone other than John also washed a car.'

(Hoji 1998, 140 (37))

(19) is structurally similar to (14), but the null object in (19B) is not interpreted as anaphoric expression like VP-ellipsis. Rather, it is interpreted as referring to an indefinite NP.[5] Having observed inadequacies of the VP-ellipsis analysis, Hoji (1998) and Kim (1999) propose an analysis involving null NPs or NP ellipsis.[6] Although their analyses differ, they more or less support an idea to have an empty NP in the syntax and copy an appropriate referent from the context.

Summarizing this section, we have seen previous analyses concerning the status of null objects in Japanese. As shown in the discussion above, the distribution of null objects in Japanese is wider than the distribution of pronouns in English. The content of the null objects are recovered from the context, and they can function as null pronouns, null possessors, etc, depending on the contexts where they occur.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we have observed object drop in English and Japanese. In English, it occurs in special context such as recipes or requires specific verbal predicates. In Japanese, on the other hand, a null argument appears more freely and productively. From the overview of the previous analyses, it becomes clear that a null argument in Japanese is not merely a null pronoun but corresponds to any overt NP. Thus, it can be said that object drop in English is a lexical process, whereas that in Japanese is a

---

[5] Note that the null object in (19) does not correspond to a pronoun 'it' either. For more detailed observation on the various usages of null objects, see Tomioka (2003).

[6] Oku (1999) independently proposes an analysis of null object using NP-ellipsis.

syntactic process.   Why this kind of syntactic process is not available in English will be a question pursued in the future research.

References

Hasegawa, Nobuko (1984/85) "On the so-called "zero pronouns" in Japanese," *The Linguistic Review* 4, 289-341.

Hinds, John (1986) *Situation vs. Person Focus*, Tokyo: Kurosio Publishers.

Hoji, Hajime (1985) *Logical Form Constraints and Configurational Structures in Japanese*, PhD dissertation, University of Washington.

Hoji, Hajime (1998) "Null object and sloppy identity in Japanese," *Linguistic Inquiry* 29, 127-152.

Huang, C.-T. James (1984) "On the distribution and reference of empty pronouns," *Linguistic Inquiry* 15, 531-574.

Huang, C.-T. James (1991) "Remarks on the status of the null object," In Robert Freidin (ed.), *Principles and Parameters in Comparative Grammar*, MIT Press, Combridge, Massachusetts, 56-76.

Kim, Soowon (1999) "Sloppy/strict identity, empty objects, and NP ellipsis," *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 8, 255-284.

Kuroda, S.-Y. (1965) *Generative Grammatical Studies in the Japanese Language*, PhD dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Massam, Diane & Yves Roverge (1989) "Recipe context null objects in English," *Linguistic Inquiry* 20, 134-139.

Nakamura, Masaru (1990) "Japanese as a *pro* language," *Bunpo to Imi no Aida* (The Relation between Grammar and Semantics) Tokyo: Kurosio Publishers, 61-91.

Neeleman, Ad and Kriszta Szendröi (2005) "Radical pro-drop and the morphology of pronouns," ms. UCL & Utrecht University.

Oku, Satoshi (1998) *A Theory of Selection and Reconstruction in the Minimalist Perspective*, PhD dissertation, University of Connecticut.

Otani, Kazuyo and John Whitman (1991) "V-raising and VP-ellipsis," *Linguistic Inquiry* 22, 345-358.

Rizzi, Luigi (1986) "Null objects in Italian and the theory of *pro*," *Linguistic Inquiry* 17, 501-557.

Takahashi, Daiko (2006) "Apparent parasitic gaps and null arguments in Japanese," *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 15, 1-35

Tomioka, Satoshi. (2003) "The semantics of Japanese null pronouns and its cross-linguistic implications," In Schwabe, Kerstin & Susanne Winkler (eds.) *The Interfaces: Deriving and interpreting omitted structures*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing, 321-339.

Xu, Liejiong (1986) "Free empty category," *Linguistic Inquiry* 17, 75-93.

Sources

http://www.cooking.com/recipes/static/recipe6223.htm

Yoshimoto, Banana (2002) *Kitchen*, Shinchobunko. (originally written in 1988) English translation Megan Backus (1993), Faber and Faber.