

On the interpretation of null objects in French

The interaction among pragmatics, semantics, and grammar and their shared responsibility for interpretation are essential factors in linguistic analysis (cf. Huang 2000; Levinson 2000). This paper explores the interpretation of null objects (NOs) in French from this perspective; consideration of the three domains leads to a revealing account of the grammar and uses of NOs.

As is well known, French allows an “absolute” use in which a transitive verb superficially appears without a direct object, as in (1). In this case, the missing object receives a generic, non-referential interpretation.

- (1) *Il s’agit là d’un comique qui n’a pas peur de provoquer Ø.*
‘He is a comedian who is not afraid to provoke.’

The grammar of French requires that referential NOs be recovered via a pronoun; thus (2a) is grammatical while (2b) is not.

- (2) a. *J’ai appelé Jean mais je n’ai pas pu le_i rejoindre Ø_i.*
‘I called Jean but I couldn’t reach him.’
b. **J’ai appelé Jean mais je n’ai pas pu __ rejoindre Ø.*
‘I called Jean but I couldn’t reach.’

These two patterns are uncontroversial. However, attested examples are found of the ungrammatical case in (2b)—referential NOs that are not recovered via a pronoun (see Larjavaara 2000, Fónagy 1985, Lambrecht & Lemoine 1996, Noailly 1997, inter alia).

- (3) a. *«Tu as lu les pages?» ... Il avait lu.* (Larjavaara 2000:55)
‘“Did you read the pages?” ... He had read.’
b. *Mais qu’est-ce que tu attends? Gifle!* (Fónagy 1985:19)
‘What are you waiting for? Slap!’

Clearly, these are not instances of the absolute use; at the very least, the missing object must be assumed to refer to an entity present in the speech context. Nor do these uses stem from production errors; rather, they involve deliberate manipulation of language resources to achieve a stylistic effect.

Previous analyses that distinguish between referential and non-referential NOs on purely semantic grounds end up, paradoxically, with a semantically vague description of the difference, resorting to undefined notions of identifiability, topic/focus, or probable reference. A purely syntactic approach, on the other hand, does not achieve a coherent account of NOs (see Huang 2000) and cannot readily handle variability; examples like those in (3) are not unusual, but the construction is not consistently acceptable and remains a marked one. The licensing mechanisms normally used in syntax to account for null arguments are not designed to deal with such nuances.

We propose instead an account wherein grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic factors each play a well-defined role. As point of departure, we assume that a standard pattern in French discourse is the sequence [*lexical noun ... pronoun ... NO*] in which all nominals are interpreted as coreferential; this is exemplified in (4):

- (4) *J’ai vu ton chien_i dans le parc. Je l_i’ai caressé Ø_i.*
‘I saw your dog in the park. I petted it.’

The coreference between the pronoun and the NO is established by purely grammatical means, while that between the lexical noun and the pronoun is pragmatic and defeasible, involving

