

### Null Objects in French and English

Sarah Cummins & Yves Roberge\*  
Université Laval University of Toronto

## I. Introduction

### A subject-object asymmetry

#### subjects

- EPP: subject position always projected
- lexical and pronominal subjects
  - expletive subjects
  - null subjects

#### objects

- only transitive and unaccusative verbs project an object position
- lexical and pronominal objects

### expletive objects

- (1) a. *J'aime pas ça quand tu vas en voyage.*  
'I don't like it when you travel.'
- b. *Elle t'a dansé ça!*  
'She danced that for you!'
- c. *We demand it of our employees that they wear a suit.*
- d. *Really dance it!*

### null objects

- (2) a. *Lac Édouard, c'est un grand bol d'air frais. J'adore \_\_!* (PCF)  
'Lake Édouard is a big bowl of fresh air. I adore \_\_!'
- b. *Son fameux numéro sur le sexe...prouve la dextérité d'un comique qui n'a pas peur de provoquer \_\_.* (PCF)  
'His famous act about sex...proves the dexterity of a comic who is not afraid to provoke \_\_.'
- c. *Les éditeurs vous lisent avec plus d'attention, les autres auteurs vous respectent, et ça encourage \_\_ à se lancer dans la course.* (PCF)  
'Publishers pay more attention to your work, other authors respect you, and it encourages \_\_ to throw oneself into the race.'
- d. *"Sorry to disturb \_\_, darling," she said to Bob.* (BNC)
- e. *"How soon can you deliver \_\_?"* (BNC)

PCF: Presse canadienne française (newspaper/magazine corpus)

BNC: British National Corpus

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## Proposal

- an object position is always projected
- recoverability is semantically based, interacting with pragmatics, discourse, and grammar
- null objects may be discourse-linked null pronominals, null elements bound by an operator, or null objects cognate to the verb

## II. On Transitivity

### Transitivity Requirement (TR)

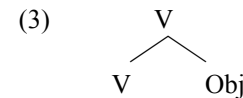
**An Object position is always included in VP, independent of lexical choice.**

### 2 possible frames:

SVO (corresponding to transitive and unergative verbs)

VO (corresponding to unaccusative verbs)

UG gives the configuration in (3)—order irrelevant—regardless of lexical choice of verb:



The TR is similar to the EPP in that

- it targets a position and not necessarily the nature of the element occupying this position
- the end result varies depending on lexical choice and the merger and movement operations involved in the derivation

The TR differs from the EPP in that

- it does not target a Spec position
- it is active in the thematic layer of the clause rather than the inflectional layer

Null object: an argument x such that x is:

- phonologically null
- involved in the event denoted by the VP
- not an external argument

One familiar null object: the PRO-controlling, anaphor-binding null object with an arbitrary affected human interpretation in sentences with generic tense in Romance (Rizzi 1986; Authier 1989; Roberge 1991)

- (4) a. *Ce gouvernement rend \_\_ malheureux.*  
'This government makes \_\_ unhappy.'  
b. *Une bonne bière reconcilie \_\_ avec soi-même.*  
'A good beer reconciles \_\_ with oneself.'

### III. Towards a typology of null objects

Larjavaara 2000 (L); García Velasco & Portero Muñoz 2002 (G)

#### 2 types of unexpressed objects

##### indefinite/generic

- (5) a. *Do you write \_\_?* (G)  
b. *Le peuple crève de faim, n'y croit plus, bricole \_\_, trafique \_\_, fait des poubelles et recycle \_\_.* (L:107)  
'The people are dying of hunger, they have lost hope, they patch up \_\_, trade \_\_, hunt through garbage cans and recycle \_\_.'

##### definite/latent

- (6) a. *"Do you like \_\_?"* (G)  
*"I love \_\_!"*  
b. *«Tu as lu les pages?» Il avait lu \_\_.* (L:43)  
'"Did you read the pages?" He had read \_\_.'

#### Structural contexts favourable to unexpressed objects

##### sequences of verbs

- (7) a. *He will steal \_\_, rob \_\_, and murder \_\_.* (G)  
b. *Elles ont caressé \_\_, pétri \_\_, étreint \_\_, pénétré \_\_ ...* (L:97)  
'They have caressed \_\_, kneaded \_\_, clasped \_\_, penetrated \_\_ ...'

##### imperatives

- (8) a. *Push \_\_ hard.* (G)  
b. *Fais voir \_\_.* (L:50)  
'Show \_\_.'

##### contrastive uses

- (9) a. *He theorises about language, but I just describe \_\_.* (G)  
b. *Seulement moi, je n'assassine \_\_ pas, je ressuscite \_\_.* (L:91)  
'Only I don't murder \_\_, I resuscitate \_\_.'

##### infinitive

- (10) a. *This is a lovely guitar, with an uncanny ability to impress \_\_ and delight \_\_.* (BNC)  
b. *Strickland qui aime à pénétrer \_\_, passer \_\_ ... et défendre \_\_ en interceptions.* (L:53)  
'Strickland, who likes to penetrate \_\_, pass \_\_ ... and defend \_\_ with interceptions.'

##### generic present tense

- (11) a. *There are those who annihilate \_\_ with violence—who devour \_\_.* (BNC)  
b. *Un peintre dérange \_\_ bien moins qu'un écrivain.* (L:83)  
'A painter disturbs \_\_ much less than a writer.'

##### dative pronoun (French)

- (12) *J'étais ou quand tu lui avais donné \_\_?* (L:39)  
'Where was I when you gave him \_\_?'

##### ça as subject (French)

- (13) *Ça flingue \_\_ à tout va là-dedans.* (L:91)  
'They're shooting \_\_ like crazy in there.'

Goldberg (2001): unexpressed objects are dependent on information structure: they are typically neither topical nor focal, and the verb is emphasized (iterative or generic, contrasted with another verb, having narrow focus).

Rizzi (1986:509-510) the arbitrary third-person human interpretation and the "prototypical-object" interpretation are available lexically to saturate the argument's theta role and prevent projection of the direct-object position.

### IV. Syntactic presence of null object

#### NOs can serve as antecedent of a compatible pronoun

- (14) a. *Ce roman amuse \_\_ quand on le prend avec humour.*  
'This novel amuses if one takes it with a sense of humour.'  
b. *His attitude intimidates \_\_, until you figure out he's a phony.*

#### In some contexts, NOs must have linked reference

- (15) a. *Qui aime \_\_ bien châtie \_\_ bien.*  
'Who loves \_\_ well punishes \_\_ well.'  
b. *It's better to reuse \_\_ than to recycle \_\_.*

NOs can serve as the argument of a secondary predicate

- (16)a. *Les steaks, moi, je préfère manger \_\_\_ saignant.*  
'I like to eat my steak rare.'  
b. *Vous avez acheté \_\_\_ en solde?*  
'Did you buy \_\_\_ on sale?'  
c. *Beat \_\_\_ until thick and lemon-coloured.*

NOs are available for a parasitic gap interpretation (Roberge (2002))

- (17)a. *The spy left without eating.*  
b. *Which document did the spy memorize before eating?*

NOs can receive further specification

- (18)a. *C'est une chose si douce que de louer \_\_\_, et surtout ses amis.*  
'To praise \_\_ is such a sweet thing, and especially one's friends.'  
b. *\*C'est une chose si douce que de naître, et surtout ses amis.*  
'To be born is such a sweet thing, and especially one's friends.'

These facts argue against a lexical/constructional account, which would also leave unexplained:

non-arbitrary human/non-prototypical object interpretations of NOs

- (19)a. *Lifting his arm to strike \_\_\_, he felt a grip of iron around his wrist, restraining him.* (BNC)  
b. *On voit que ce n'est pas lui qui lave \_\_\_.* (L:86)  
'It's obvious he's not the one who washes.'  
c. *M. Jospin, maintenant, régularisez \_\_.* (protesters' banner referring to the situation of immigrants without papers) (L: 55)  
'Mr. Jospin, now, regularize.'  
d. *Il livrait \_\_\_ pour la Shell.* (L:93)  
'He delivered for Shell.'  
e. *When you don't have money and you have to work hard to accomplish \_\_\_ in life, it's not that easy to just throw it down...* (Toronto *Globe&Mail*, 8 March 2003)  
f. *Vous avez éclaté \_\_\_, tripoté \_\_ et gratouillé \_\_ à mort?* (L:46)  
(ad for acne medicine)  
'Have you popped, squeezed, scratched to death?'

the predilection of NOs for imperatives

- (20)a. *«C'est peut-être lui! C'est peut-être votre ministre de tutelle. Décrochez \_\_.»* (L:47)  
'''Maybe it's him. Maybe it's your supervising minister. Answer \_\_.'''  
b. *Égoutter \_\_\_ et servir \_\_\_ immédiatement.*  
'Drain \_\_ and serve \_\_ immediately.'  
c. *Bring \_\_\_ to a boil and simmer \_\_ for 20 minutes.*  
d. *Here—catch \_\_!*

Lexical/constructional/pragmatic accounts predict that French and English would be substantially the same, yet:

a type of NO found in French but not in English

- (21) a. *«T'as pas à lui filer le tournevis... Ça devrait être à lui de nous dépanner. ..J'étais où quand tu lui as donné \_\_?»* (L:39)  
'''You're not supposed to give him the screwdriver. He should be helping us out. \*Where was I when you gave him \_\_?'''  
b. *«Tu as lu les pages?» Il avait lu \_\_.* (L:43)  
'''Did you read the pages? \*He had read \_\_.'''  
c. *On lui tendit une main... Vexé, il négligea \_\_.* (L:48)  
'A hand was extended to him. Annoyed, \*he ignored \_\_.'  
d. *Si un mec t'offre un café balance lui \_\_ à travers la gueule.* (L:50)  
'If a guy offers you a coffee, \*throw \_\_ in his face.'  
e. *«Nikel m'a dit de prendre une boîte bleue dans le vestiaire. J' ai prise \_\_.»* (L:59)  
'''Nikel told me to take a blue box from the locker. \*I took \_\_.'''  
f. *J'ai déjà lu ce livre et j'ai adoré \_\_!*  
'I read that book already, and \*I loved \_\_!'

**V. Recoverability of NOs**

**3 means of recovery**

**•from discourse (d-linked)**

- (22) *«Maîtrisez-vous vos interviews? C'est capital, les interviews.»*  
*«Je maîtrise \_\_.»* (L:50)  
'''Do you control your interviews? Interviews are very important.''  
'''I control \_\_.'''

**•from the left periphery (bound)**

- (23)a. *Chou-fleur, j'ai acheté \_\_.*  
'Cauliflower, I bought \_\_.'  
b. *John, I cannot abide \_\_.*

**•from within IP (internally-licensed)**

(encompasses García Velasco & Portero Muñoz's definite and indefinite understood objects, Goldberg's unexpressed objects, all of Larjavaara's generic absent objects and some of her latent absent objects)

NO is not linked to an element in the discourse

- (24) a. *We have to get rid of all the ugly dishes before your date arrives.*  
*Okay, you wash \_\_\_ and I'll dry \_\_\_.* (Goldberg 2001)  
*≠ Okay, you wash them and I'll dry them.*  
b. (pulling out of the driveway) *Did you lock \_\_?*  
*\*Did you lock it?*

When linking is forced, NO is inappropriate

- (25) a. *What happened to that carrot?*  
\*I chopped \_\_\_\_ . (Goldberg 2001)  
b. *The door is open. \*Didn't you lock \_\_\_\_?*

Pragmatics has a free hand in interpretation

•reference may be inferred from linguistic and extralinguistic context

- (26) a. *Ils ont gagné \_\_\_\_ . Ils ont arrosé \_\_\_\_ .* (L:63)  
'They won \_\_\_\_ . They toasted \_\_\_\_.'  
b. *Il n'a pas plu depuis trois semaines. Est-ce qu'on arrose \_\_\_\_ ?*  
'It hasn't rained for three weeks. Should we water \_\_\_\_ ?'  
c. *Je laisse \_\_\_\_ ici?* (speaker holding up object)  
'Can I leave \_\_\_\_ here?' (Lambrecht & Lemoine 1996:301)  
d. *Même avec trois cuillerées de sucre en poudre, le breuvage reste amer. Leroy touille \_\_\_\_ en comptant les miettes sur la toile cirée.* (L:49)  
'Even with three spoonfuls of sugar, the drink was still bitter. Leroy stirred \_\_\_\_ , counting the crumbs on the oilcloth.'

•lexical knowledge makes prototypical -object interpretation available

(cf. Groefsma 1995)

- (27) a. *«Ben, qu'est-ce qu tu fais?»*  
*«J'explore \_\_\_\_.»* (L:83)  
'''What are you doing?''  
'''I'm exploring \_\_\_\_.'''  
b. *Crystal claqua dans ses mains. On décilla \_\_\_\_ .* (L:54)  
'Crystal clapped his hands. We opened \_\_\_\_.'  
(*dessiller*: cause (eyes) to open)  
c. *Dans ma hâte à décacheter \_\_\_\_ , j'ai déchiré la feuille.* (L:76)  
'In my haste to unseal \_\_\_\_ , I tore the page.'

•arbitrary human is the prototypical object interpretation of psych-verbs

- (28) a. *La magie des séries, c'est de surprendre \_\_\_\_ , de dépayser \_\_\_\_ .* (L:98)  
The magic of the playoffs is in surprising \_\_\_\_ , disorienting \_\_\_\_.'  
b. *Where Boulestin never falters or misleads \_\_\_\_ is in the sureness of his taste and the sobriety of his ingredients.* (BNC)  
c. *...the patter of the camp, grey-haired one between songs can irritate \_\_\_\_* (BNC)

•other "favourable factors" are within IP

de-actualisation (generic present, infinitive, ça as subject)

- (29) a. *Vouloir \_\_\_\_ c'est pouvoir \_\_\_\_ .*  
''Where there's a will there's a way.'  
b. *Le costume du clergyman est toujours noir...ça mincit \_\_\_\_ .* (L:88)  
'A clergyman's suit is always black...it slims \_\_\_\_ .'

imperatives

- (30) a. *...montrons \_\_\_\_ , soulignons \_\_\_\_ , exhibons \_\_\_\_ , révélons \_\_\_\_ , pigeonnons \_\_\_\_ , voire trichons...* (L:57)  
'...let's show \_\_\_\_ , emphasize \_\_\_\_ , exhibit \_\_\_\_ , reveal \_\_\_\_ , trick \_\_\_\_ , even cheat...'  
b. *Simplify!* (*Homemakers* magazine, March 2003)

**• the internally-licensed NO is a "null cognate object" (NCO)**

**• the interpretation of a predicate containing a NCO corresponds to the thetic interpretation**

- "an assertion is being made as to the existence of an object or of an event involving the object" (Basilico 1998:542)
- unlike the categorical judgment, the object is not singled out from the event for a second judgment, such as assignment of a property

**VI. Topics and null objects**

Null subjects and objects in spoken German (Cardinaletti 1990)

- (31) a. *Habe ich gestern gekauft.*  
have I yesterday bought  
'I bought it yesterday.'  
b. *Habe es gestern gekauft.*  
have it yesterday bought  
'I bought it yesterday.'

Null subjects are *pro*-drop; null objects involve a base-generated empty operator locally binding a null pronominal variable.

- (32) D-structure: [CP Op [IP ich gestern pro gekauft habe]]  
S-structure: [CP Op habe [IP ich gestern pro gekauft]]

The content of *pro* is determined by Op, which is only compatible with 3rd-person pronouns. "The Op is sanctioned by the preceding discourse." (p. 78). Crucially, null arguments may not appear if specCP is filled by lexical material:

- (33) a. \**Gestern habe ich \_\_\_\_ gesehen.*  
yesterday have I \_\_\_\_ seen  
b. \**Wann hast du \_\_\_\_ gesehen?*  
when have you \_\_\_\_ seen

Presence of lexical material in specCP does not prevent NO's appearance

- (34) a. (in video store) *Si on prenait Tigre et Dragon? Qui a vu \_\_\_\_ ?*  
'How about *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*? Who has seen \_\_\_\_ ?'  
b. *Tu as lu les pages? Tu m'as dit que tu avais lu \_\_\_\_ .*  
'Did you read the pages? You told me you had read \_\_\_\_ .'

### No restriction on person features

- (35)a. *Crystal tient à toi. Mais les méchants veulent \_\_ lui prendre.*  
'Crystal wants to keep you. But the bad guys want to take \_\_ from him.'
- b. *Yan m'a vue pour la première fois à la bibliothèque, et tout de suite il a adoré \_\_!*  
'Y. saw me for the first time in the library, & right away he adored \_\_!'
- (36)a. That book, I hated \_\_.                    \*Ce livre, j'ai détesté \_\_.  
b. John, I can't stand \_\_.                    \*Jean, je ne supporte pas \_\_.
- (37)a. Ton livre, je l'ai acheté \_\_.  
b. Sa soeur, je la connais \_\_.

### **Topics in English and French**

Rizzi (1997): in English ('Your book *OP* I bought *ec*.'), the *ec* is a null constant licensed by an anaphoric operator; in Romance, clitics fill the same function of establishing the connection between the topic and the open position in the comment.

### Overt topics

	<b>English</b>	<b>French</b>
<u>token</u>		
(38)a.	<i>That book, I hated __.</i>	<i>Ce livre, je l'ai détesté __.</i>
b.	<i>John, I can't stand __.</i>	<i>Jean, je ne le supporte pas __.</i>
<u>type</u>		
(39)a.	<i>Wine, I bought __.</i>	<i>Vin, j'ai acheté __.</i>
b.	<i>Bananas, I'll eat __.</i>	<i>Vin, j'en ai acheté __.</i> <i>Les bananes, je mange __.</i> <i>Les bananes, j'en mange.</i>

### Ø topic (either none or a null topic)

	<b>English</b>	<b>French</b>
" <u>definite</u> " (with a linguistic antecedent)		
(40)a.	<i>Did you read the pages?</i> *He had read __.	<i>Tu as lu les pages?</i> <i>Il avait lu __.</i>
b.	<i>What do you think of my cake?</i> *I like __.	<i>Que penses-tu de mon gâteau?</i> <i>J'aime __!</i>
" <u>indefinite</u> " (no linguistic antecedent)		
(41)a.	<i>You like __?</i> <i>I love __!</i>	<i>Tu aimes __?</i> <i>J'adore __!</i>
b.	<i>? So...how would you rate __?</i>	<i>Alors, comment avez-vous trouvé __?</i>

### **Summary**

- Nondefinite null objects are fine in both languages: (39), (41)
- In English, a definite null object must be linked to an overt topic: (38) vs. (40)
- In French, a definite null object must not be linked to an overt topic: (38) vs. (40)

NOs in French with a definite antecedent in discourse are null pronominals whose content is recovered through discourse rather than by a clitic. Examples in (21) are instances of clitic drop.

### **VII. Conclusion**

The existence of null objects is largely determined by TR;

Three types of null objects:

- Bound: bound variable or null constant
- D-linked: null pronominal.
- Internally-licensed: Cognate null objects (predicted by TR)

French and English differ only in the availability of D-linked null objects and bound definite null objects.

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