

OMISSIBILITY AND LEARNABILITY  
CAN UG REALLY PROVIDE INSIGHTS FOR SLA?

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Preamble

There are a number of languages in the world (like French and English) in which the presence of subjects and objects is obligatory in a range of contexts in which other languages (like Spanish and Zulu) may omit them. Thus the Spanish sentence

*no es nada*

not is nothing

with no overt subject, would be translated in English as

*it is nothing*

with an obligatory (but semantically empty) subject.

Similarly in Zulu the one word sentence

*simbonile*

where both subject and object are omitted, would be translated as

*we saw him/her*

The effects of this phenomenon have been fairly widely investigated for both first language (Huang 1984; Hyams 1983, 1986, 1987) and second language acquisition (Hilles 1986; Liceras 1988, 1989; Phinney 1987 and White 1985, 1986, 1987, 1989). As we might expect, this phenomenon does influence the process of language acquisition. Evidence from the writing and speech of Zulu learners of English suggests that they have difficulty with obligatory subjects and objects, while English speakers learning Zulu seem to have little difficulty with the notion of omitting subject and object NPs.

My interest in how easy (or difficult) it is to learn a language with obligatory (or omissible) subjects really arises from an attempt to investigate the relevance of Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar (UG) to applied linguistics and language teaching. In particular I am interested in the concepts of

parameterized core grammar and markedness (Jaeggli & Safir, 1989:3-9). Thus if obligatory/omissible are two settings on a particular parameter in UG, and if it can be shown that, in the context of L2 acquisition, it is more difficult to learn in one direction (say from omissible to obligatory) than the other, then it seems that at the very least this is consistent with Chomsky's claim that certain parameter settings are more marked (ie in some sense less natural) than others. At the same time this could provide valuable information for the language teacher.

The issue of pro-drop and second language acquisition has already been investigated by a number of scholars, but all the investigations I have come across so far (eg. White, 1985,1986,1987; Liceras, 1989; Phinney, 1987) seem to involve only Indo-European languages - specifically Spanish and English. The purpose of this study is to examine whether comparable patterns arise in an unrelated pair of languages, such as English and Zulu.

There are certain difficulties in attempting to interpret evidence about omissibility in this way. Bonnie Schwartz (personal communication) has suggested that while it may be relatively easy for learners of Zulu as L2 to interpret Zulu input as conforming to a rule of omissibility, Zulu learners of English probably do not interpret English input as evidence for obligatory subjects. It seems to me that there are essentially two arguments to support this suggestion. Firstly, learners will almost certainly encounter subjectless utterances in English (in answers to wh-questions and in non-tensed clauses for example). Secondly, even if there are no instances of pro-drop in the learner's input corpus, this would not automatically mean that subjects are obligatory *in all cases*. Thus as John Taylor (personal communication) has suggested, the difficulty that L2 learners have in arriving at a new rule may be a consequence of how difficult it is to derive the rule from the input data - an explanation which does not necessarily depend on

the existence of a marked-unmarked distinction, or even on the existence of UG. Such an explanation could also be adduced to explain the appearance of pro-drop at early stages of English L1 acquisition (Hyams, 1983 p126).

The fact remains however that MT learners of Zulu, faced with input in which subjects are sometimes physically present and sometimes not, end up with a rule which permits pro-drop, and English MT learners, who are presumably also faced with input in which subjects are sometimes present and sometimes not, begin by permitting pro-drop, but end up with a rule which blocks pro-drop in tensed clauses. Since both languages exhibit at least some instances of subjectless utterances, this difference (to pro-drop or not to pro-drop) is evidently not fully determined by the data. As suggested by Schwartz (1986) it then seems reasonable to look to UG to provide an alternative explanation.

#### Some syntactic features of Zulu

Zulu verbs are morphologically quite complex and carry inflectional markers which agree with the number and person/gender of the subject and object (The traditional notion of noun class is here taken to be a type of gender classification which is not sex-based). The appendix A contains some examples showing how the verb identifies subjects and objects by gender rather than word order. As long as the subject is recoverable from the context (situational or textual) its presence is not obligatory and it would normally appear only if required for emphasis (as in example 3) or to avoid ambiguity. The complex gender system however reduces the possibility of ambiguity considerably.

Objects are handled somewhat differently in Zulu. In the first place objects usually provide new information, are less likely to be anaphors, and therefore less likely to be deleted. Secondly the object marker on the verb is to some extent optional - it must be there if the subject is dropped, but it can be left out if the object is present. It is not surprising

therefore to find that object drop is less frequent than subject drop in Zulu English (Appendix B).

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that when I speak of subject/object deletion being optional in Zulu, this is true only at the syntactic level. At the level of discourse the presence or absence of a (lexical or anaphoric) NP does have significance (For example it may indicate what the speaker assumes about shared knowledge).

English however requires an obligatory subject in a much wider range of syntactic structures - to the extent that it even makes use of empty subjects (eg It's raining. There are no tigers in Africa). Even if we take an utterance-based rather than a sentence-based view, it is still the case that the conversational contexts in which subject/object ellipsis occur in English are very much more circumscribed than the contexts in which pro-drop occurs in Zulu.

### The data

Most of the Zulu-English data gathered so far is from Zulu speaking first year students at the University of Natal. All of them are taking one semester of English Language Studies (an ESL course), and all of them have completed at least 9 years of English instruction at school. The first assignment required of these students is called a reaction paper: a relatively stress-free opportunity for them to express their feelings and describe their situation. It is made quite clear to them that credit for the assignment is not dependent on how perfectly they write, but on whether they attempt the task of describing their problems, discoveries or achievements honestly.

My sample consisted of 16 students in each of two years (1990 & 1991). They are random samples in the sense that they were arbitrarily assigned to the tutorial groups for which I was responsible.

Gathering comparable English-Zulu data has proved both interesting and problematic. Most English students registered for the first course in Zulu at the University of Natal have no prior knowledge of the language and are therefore, strictly speaking, not comparable with the Zulu students registered for English Language Studies. However it is interesting that, while students occasionally produce subjects in inappropriate contexts fairly often in the first semester, this has virtually disappeared by the end of the first year. Also since pro-drop is (syntactically) optional, exercises which require students to translate decontextualized sentences into Zulu can hardly count as convincing evidence, even if students do tend to insert subjects rather frequently.

Other evidence which might be considered relevant here is from South Africa's home grown pidgin: *Fanakalo*, which has a vocabulary drawn largely from Zulu, but has obligatory subjects, like English. This evidence is somewhat questionable, but I will return to my hesitations concerning *Fanakalo* later.

### Hiccups

Only 10% of the "Subject drop" data comes from the 1991 sample. I can only speculate about the reason for this. We do know that the faculty as a whole had a smaller intake of Zulu students compared to 1990. Perhaps this means that we had a more select group of students in 1991. Also several tutors have pointed out that they found a greater incidence of pro-drop in the second reaction paper, written about 3 weeks after the first one. They suggest that the reason for this may have been that in the first reaction paper students were still suspicious of our motives and they therefore edited their work more carefully than they did in their second attempt.

The context for subject-drop

In Zulu-English, subject-drop apparently occurs more frequently in complex sentences than simple sentences, and I have found only 4 examples (eg 17 & 24) out of the total available data in which the omitted subject is the left-most subject in a complex sentence. With very few exceptions the omitted subject is co-indexed with one of the subjects to its left (Apart from 5, which required a bit of detective work), or it is an empty subject (eg *there*). All the exceptions among complex sentences (ie where the omitted subject is the left-most subject) work like simple sentences: that is the subject is recoverable from preceding text.

Interestingly most of my examples come fairly late in a paragraph. Perhaps this is because, as students become more involved in what they are conveying, they are less likely to monitor (if I may use Krashen's term).

As we would expect, spoken data provides us with a considerably greater frequency of omitted NPs. Of course in face to face interaction all sorts of additional contextual cues are available, and monitoring is less prevalent than it is in academic writing. This can give rise to an interchange such as the following. A is a 28 year old Zulu male with five years of education. R is his employer (English speaking). A has just undergone minor surgery and is phoning his employer to ask for a lift home.

## Telephone rings

R: Hello

A: Is me.

R: Hello Alpheus, are you finished?

A: Ja, is finished.

The doctor she's cut my knee this side.

R: OK. Did they clean it out?

A: Ja, did clean out like this.

R: Did the doctor say you can go home now?

A: Ja, say can go home.

R: OK I'll come and fetch you. I'll be there in 15 minutes.

Where will you be?

A: Can wait outside outpatients.

A's contribution is heavily dependent on context, more so than we would normally expect in a telephone conversation, and, significantly, he omits nearly every single subject. I have omitted a rather gruesome description of the actual operation which reflects exactly the same pattern of subject omission, but also contains an abundance of deictic terms which were extremely difficult for R to make sense of, since it was not a face-to-face interaction.

#### The evidence from Fanakalo

Fanakalo is a somewhat unusual pidgin in that the vast bulk of its vocabulary is drawn from Zulu. I'm not an expert in pidginization, but it seems that the usual pattern for the development of a pidgin is for the vocabulary of the more influential/dominant language to form the basis of the pidgin. There are very few pidgins in the world in which the vocabulary is drawn largely from a less powerful language. As far as the presence or absence of subjects is concerned, Fanakalo looks very much like English. Subjects (and objects) are seldom omitted, and pronominal and empty subjects abound. If this were taken as evidence of English speakers' attempts to learn Zulu, it would suggest that it is even more difficult to learn to drop subjects than it is to deal with obligatory subjects. However the nature and history of Fanakalo makes it doubtful whether one can interpret the evidence in this way.

Speakers of Zulu and other indigenous languages of Southern Africa perceive the use of Fanakalo as reflecting contempt for the indigenous languages and a refusal to learn those languages. They do not see Fanakalo as an interlanguage, but rather as a device which removes the need for whites to make a real effort to learn African languages. In this view Fanakalo is some third language, neither Zulu nor English.

This perception strikes me as being a relevant one, and for this reason I am hesitant to make use of the evidence from Fanakalo.

### Consequences for Language Learning and Language Teaching

Obviously my investigations so far can hardly be considered to constitute final proof of the relevance of UG to language teaching. What I have however found is evidence that Zulu speakers have a problem with obligatory subjects in English which seems highly resistant to change, and a lack of evidence of a similar degree of difficulty (in the other direction) for English speakers learning Zulu. At least this is consistent with the hypothesis that pro-drop in Zulu is a consequence of the relevant parameter being unmarked in Zulu, and obligatory subjects in English being a consequence of the parameter being given a marked setting

What is particularly relevant to me is firstly that it appears to be easier to learn to drop subjects in contexts where they are not essential than it is to learn to insert subjects, particularly pronominal and empty ones. UG suggests why this is so. Secondly the fact that this phenomenon occurs more frequently in situations where students are not consciously focusing on the form of their output (What Krashen would call unmonitored output), even after 10 years of ESL teaching, suggests that unmarked settings are very resistant to change. At the conscious level our students appear to be aware of the appropriate rule - witness the fact that written tasks handed in for credit contain markedly fewer omissions, yet this rule/parameter setting is not yet part of their linguistic competence. I suggest that further formal teaching of in situations like this will be no more successful, and that learners will acquire the new setting or rule when they are ready. As teachers we would probably be more successful at this stage focussing on more global issues.

## APPENDIX A

SUBJECT OMISSIBILITY IN ZULUSYMBOLS

pres	Present tense
perf	Perfect tense
fut	Future tense
S	Subject marker (on verb)
O	Object marker
I	First person
II	Second person
s	singular
p	plural
1	class 1 noun
2	class 2 noun
etc	

Thus "S<sub>1s</sub>" stands for a first person singular subject marker  
 "O<sub>3s</sub>" stands for a singular class 3 noun object marker

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DATA

1. Angimbonanga (I didn't see/haven't seen him/her)

a - ngi - m - bon - anga  
 neg-S<sub>1s</sub>- O<sub>1s</sub>- see - perf|neg

2. (Where the context makes it clear that bread is the subject)

Siphelile (It's finished)

si - phel - ile

S<sub>4s</sub>-finish-perf

(Isinkwa (bread) is a class 4 noun)

3. (Where the topic of conversation is learning Zulu)

Iyosifunda kahle leyondoda (That man will learn it well)

i - yo - si - fund - a kahle leyo - ndoda

S<sub>5s</sub>- Fut- O<sub>4s</sub> - learn well that - man

(IsiZulu is a class 4 noun & indoda is class 5)

4. (Where the topic of conversation or the context is a meal)

Siyozigeza khona manje (We'll wash them presently)

Si - yo - zi - gez - a                      khona manje

SIP- fut-O<sup>4</sup>p - wash                      presently

(Izitsha (plates) is class 4 plural)

5. Basibonile isikhonyana, bangitshela ukuthi siyabuya

(They saw the locust swarm and told me that it is coming back)

ba - si - bon - ile isikhonyana ba - ngi - tshel - a

S<sup>1</sup>p- O<sup>4</sup>s- see -perf locust-swarm S<sup>1</sup>p- OIs - tell

ukuthi si - ya - buy - a

that S<sup>4</sup>s-pres- return

#### COMMENTS

1. There are 7 noun classes/genders in Zulu
2. Pronouns do exist in Zulu, but they are used for emphasis or in situations where there could be ambiguity (some of the subject/object markers are homonyms).
3. Word order is free in Zulu. The order used in the data is generally regarded as the unmarked order. When pronouns are used they are usually at the end of the utterance (?outside the boundary of the clause).
4. The -a suffix on some of the verbs is an "unmarked" (non-past) form which generally occurs in the present, future (3&4) and subjunctive (5).

APPENDIX B

Zulu-English; First year university level

Students were asked to write about their feelings and experiences as an African student at a predominantly white university, and about why they came to this University. Words in brackets were not part of the original texts, but have been added, where necessary, to prevent ambiguity

A. Subject Drop

1. He said that if one can be aware of what can cause culture shock will be able to prevent that happening.
2. What I have noticed is that, even though the students attend the same lectures or the same classes they don't make friends, they don't even talk together, except when for example want to know what the time is.
3. Some people do not think so. Underminingly [they] would say I didn't deserve this chance.
4. I heard about this from one of my neighbour's daughters, and told me more about the University.
5. She was engaged in comparing their exam papers, and [exam papers from the other university] were so much weaker than this university.
6. But to go to that university better have taken my bag and baggage back home.
7. Sometimes it rained and sometimes [we] faced more than chilly weather.
8. So that's why am here today.
9. That's what [I] have experienced so far.
- 10 But still am reluctant to mingle with my hosts.
- 11 In fact [I] have a problem comprehending poetry.
- 12 At Howard College a ceiling has apparently been reached, while is a disturbing drop in the success rate in Pietermaritzburg.
- 13 What is your name by the way? I'm sorry didn't ask before.
- 14 You know [I] never had a white student speaking so politely as you do.
- 15 One day three people met in a hotel. Were all strangers to one another.
- 16 When that person was confused by what was happening [she] responded verbally.....

- 17 This is because of our method of socialisation. [we] Do not get a socialisation (?which) may help to allay problems regarding cross-cultural communication.
- 18 One might suggest that [the University] has set out equal opportunities for all the groups...by enrolling many black students.
- 19 For communication to take place must be a sender and a receiver.
- 20 In turn [he] would do business with me.
- 21 As a communicator, [?] plays a very important part in the role of communication.
- 22 I would say that I am a successful communicator because ensure that my message is encoded correctly....
- 23 Since University is experiencing increase in student numbers, [it/there] is a strong possibility that this can go on.
- 24 Thus communication is affected. Is affected also in the sense that will be a communication breakdown.
- 25 On my essay I am going to....start looking at what [I/we] can say are the most cause of intercultural miscommunication.
- 26 I also believe that if one encounters this problem always feels ashamed and uncomfortable.
- 27 I'm sorry, don't know which form to use.
- 28 As this institution is internationally recognised, I think there will not be any difficulty to find a place of work provided get good results.
- 29 I applied and they responded positively and was chosen for 2 weeks programme.
- 30 He said that if one can be aware of what can cause culture shock will try to avoid or prevent that [ie miscommunication] happening
- 31 What I have noticed is that even though the students attend the lectures or the same classes they don't make friendship; they don't talk together except when for an example want to know what the time is.

B. Object drop

- 1 I will first point out [those factors] which I think are most important.
- 2 It is imperative for me to discuss [?], and I must mention that.....
- 3 You should ask your lecturer and he will solve [the problem] for you.
- 4 Fortunately a friend told me about the Teach Test Teach programme... He also supplied with the application form.

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