# Born empty

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## Abstract

Chinese seems to allow argument ellipsis in object but not subject positions according to interpretive contrasts between null subjects and objects. It has been claimed that this contrast can be captured by allowing only a null subject to be a *pro*, which is licensed by agreement. The presence of agreement means the absence of argument ellipsis. This line of analysis would require Chinese to have subject agreement. However, it will be shown that this language does not have agreement. Moreover, there are constructions disallowing missing objects, challenging the available analyses. It will be argued that these complex facts, including the noted subject/object asymmetry and the impossibility of missing objects in various constructions, can be accommodated if a base-generated true empty category is possible when a *pro* is not available. Interestingly, the arguments supporting this proposal would lead us to claim that VP-ellipsis should be the result of a deletion operation; i.e., not all ellipsis constructions are derived via the same mechanisms.
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## 1. Introduction

The study of inaudible/invisible but meaningful elements in natural languages – loosely referred to as missing, empty, null or "deleted" elements in this work[1] – has helped uncover many significant empirical generalizations cross-linguistically and contributed substantially to the understanding of the properties of grammar. In the process, many issues have been raised. For instance, what are the syntactic properties of missing arguments? What is the nature of "deletion"? Are missing elements base-generated as empty? Are they the result of deletion in Syntax, or are they simply non-spell out of elements in certain structures at PF? There have been many works addressing the issue of the "timing" of deletion (for a recent work, see Baltin, 2012, and the papers in this issue). Focusing on the empty elements in argument positions that are not derived by movement (variables and NP-traces), this work argues that such missing arguments should be distinguished into two types – an empty pronoun (*pro*) and an emptier empty element (true empty category), which is base-generated, rather than resulting from deletion in Syntax or PF. The distinction will capture many interesting facts regarding interpretive possibilities and distribution of missing arguments. The empirical support will be based on the constructions with missing arguments in Chinese. It will be demonstrated that Chinese does allow arguments to be missing (section 2). Importantly, the interpretive possibilities for empty subjects and empty objects differ systematically. The former is much more restricted than the latter (section 3). Such a difference will be shown to be due to the types of

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[1] The terms "deleted", "deletion" are used very loosely as cover terms for the phenomenon of elements missing. They do not mean a deletion operation is actually involved.

empty elements allowed in subject and object positions. An empty subject must be a *pro* and an empty object is like what ''argument ellipsis'' is as discussed in the relevant literature, taking the term ''argument ellipsis'' to refer to any arguments missing that are not *pro*/variables/NP traces. That is, argument ellipsis is possible with objects but not subjects in Chinese. The (un)availability of argument ellipsis has been claimed to be related to the presence or absence of agreement (Saito, 2004, 2007, Şener and Takahashi, 2010, among others). Miyagawa (2010) suggests that the existence of *pro* is correlated with the presence of agreement. I will show that Chinese has a subject *pro* but cannot have agreement, which poses challenges to the agreement-based analyses (sections 4–5). Moreover, there are constructions disallowing missing objects (section 6), not expected by the proposed analyses. It will be shown that these complex facts, including the noted subject/object asymmetry and the impossibility of missing objects in various constructions, can be accommodated by distinguishing different types of empty arguments, the nature of which will be spelled out and compared with alternatives in section 7. The concluding remarks in section 8 will address some issues regarding the nature of the true empty category. The concluding section will also briefly describe an important implication of this work – that VP-ellipsis should be different from argument-ellipsis. The former, not the latter, should have full representations syntactically, due to some important properties distinguishing these two constructions. That is, not all ellipsis constructions are derived by the same mechanisms.

## 2. Missing arguments

Arguments in subject and object positions can generally appear in the null form in Chinese. This section discusses what such missing arguments are and are not. We begin with what they are not. First, consider the following sentences[2]:

(1)　　(ta)　zou-le　　ma?
　　　　he　　leave-LE　Q
　　　　'Has (he) left?'

(2)　　ta　kandao-le　yi-ge　　nanhai;　wo　ye　　kandao-le　(yi-ge nanhai).
　　　　he　see-LE　　one-CL　boy　　　I　　also　see-LE　　one-CL boy
　　　　'He saw a boy; I also saw (a boy).'

In (1), the subject of the sentence can be missing and in (2) the object of the second clause can be empty. What are such null arguments? According to the relevant literature, there are at least these analytic options to consider:

(3)　　a.　Missing arguments are variables bound by empty topics.
　　　　b.　Missing arguments are the counterpart of overt pronouns or nouns.
　　　　c.　Missing arguments are due to ''argument ellipsis'' (to be elaborated).
　　　　d.　The missing object in (2) is the result of deleting some projection of V - some version of VP-deletion. The missing subject in (1) is (3a, b or c).

The analysis stated in (3a) was proposed in Huang (1982, 1984a, 1984b) for some empty arguments in Chinese – a language that productively topicalizes arguments and the topic phrase can be null. For instance, a sentence like (4) is possible when the intended object of the verb is clear from the discourse. The object is expressed as a variable bound by a topic, which can be empty:

(4)　　(tamen),　wo　hen　xihuan ___.
　　　　they　　　I　　very　like
　　　　'(Them), I like ___.'