

The syntax of registers: Diary subject omission and the privilege of the root[☆]

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Abstract

This paper examines register-based language internal variation, focussing on subject omission in English diaries. This register-specific pattern might be seen as some kind of 'extragrammatical' culturally-determined stylistic convention associated with this particular register, but a survey of the relevant data shows that the omission of the subject in diary styles is subject to the core syntactic constraints that have been identified in formal syntax. Importantly, the observed restrictions on subject omission do not follow from a purely functional account according to which recoverable subjects can be omitted: while recoverability certainly plays a role, there are precise constraints on the syntactic positions in which recoverable subjects can be omitted.

The empirical generalisation that emerges is that subjects can be omitted in root clauses. Moreover, apart from fronted adjuncts no other constituent can precede the non-overt subject. The generalisation applies both to English and to French.

The paper develops an account for subject omission which, in addition to standard assumptions about phrase structure, makes use of (i) the Phase based theory of truncation, (ii) the hypothesis of the articulated subject field.

It is shown that other instantiations of subject omission such as that found, for instance, in note style journalese or in Samuel Beckett's poem *Rockaby* (Bianchi, 2007), are governed by the same principles, suggesting that the pattern is subject to grammatical constraints which are not exclusively tied to the specific register. That the type of subject omission identified here should be analysed in terms of core grammatical principles is confirmed by the fact that subject ellipsis in second conjuncts, a phenomenon which is independent of register variation, is subject to the same restrictions as subject omission in the diary style and can be accounted for using the hypotheses developed here. The conclusion I draw from this discussion is that the grammatical patterns displayed by what might seem a culturally determined linguistic system are fully amenable to core principles and parameters of universal grammar.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Register-based variation

It has frequently been observed that a pattern which is judged ill-formed in a language may still be acceptable in specific registers of usage of the same language (Ferguson, 1982; Zwicky and Zwicky, 1982; Biber, 1995; Barton, 1998). In English, even when contextually recoverable, subjects of finite clauses (1) and objects in general (2) cannot be omitted,

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and singular countable nouns have to be accompanied by a determiner element (3), such as an article or a possessive pronoun.

- (1) a. This dish serves four people.
b. *__Serves four people.
- (2) a. You should bake the chicken for an hour.
b. *You should bake __for an hour.
- (3) a. A man ordered his wife to shoot her sister.
b. * __ man ordered __ wife to shoot __ sister.

Examples similar to those in (1b), (2b) and (3b) are attested in specific registers. For instance, subject omission is one of the hallmarks of diary writing, as illustrated in the attested (4), object omission is typically found in instructional type of writing such as recipes (5), and newspaper headlines display singular count nouns without determiners (6):

- (4) Origo rather contorted: __ says Italy is blind red hot devoted patriotic; __ has thrown her wedding ring into the cauldron too. __ Anticipates a long war. . . (*Diary of Virginia Woolf*, V: p. 6, 10 January 1936) (cf. Haegeman, 1990, 1997, 1999).
- (5) Put the prepared potato chunks into a large saucepan with enough salted water to take the pasta later, and bring __ to the boil.
(http://www.bbc.co.uk/food/recipes/pasta_alla_genovese_with_63248)
- (6) __Man orders __wife to shoot __sister. (Stowell, 1997:his (4), for Dutch: Oosterhof, 2012)

As a general property, the patterns displayed above all involve a form of ellipsis, i.e. the non-expression of certain contextually redundant content, and one might propose a 'functional' deletion rule along the lines of (7) (based on Stowell, 1997):

- (7) Delete any constituent whose meaning is recoverable, either from the context or from the grammar.

However, as already shown clearly by Stowell (1997), while recoverability does indeed play its part in licensing these types of ellipsis, it is not the sole determining factor. In the diary register, a first person subject is recoverable *par excellence*, since diaries are by definition about their writers. And yet, in the examples in (8) the underlined first person subject pronouns cannot be omitted. In (8b) recoverability can hardly be an issue: the presence of the reflexive *myself* eliminates any ambiguity as to the interpretation of the subject of *do*. Similarly in (8c), it is contextually clear that the subject of the relative *where* clause is the diary writer (cf. for early discussion see Haegeman, 1990, 1997). While plausibly the first occurrence of the pronoun *he* in (8e) might not be fully recoverable, the second occurrence is fully recoverable and yet it cannot be omitted.¹ These data are the main focus of the paper.

- (8) a. __ Dreamt that I picked up a New Yorker. (Plath, 1982:304)
- b. __ Read my annual message. It was good if I do say it myself. (*Truman's diary*: <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/diary/page3.htm>, 7 January 1947)
- c. __ Never saw such crowds-such enthusiasm. __ Arrive at Embassy [.] __ bid President goodbye. __ Have dinner at Palace where I make a speech in reply to the [Truman writes "Tuesday night" above this part of the entry] Mexican President. (*Truman's diary*: <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/diary/page3.htm>, 7 January 1947)
- d. Before I went, Clive came to tea. (*Diary of Virginia Woolf*, III, 26 December 1929)
- e. __ Says he has been struck by the number of more or less ordinary Conservatives he has met who are becoming perturbed by the Government's foreign policy. (*Orwell diaries*, Villa Simont, 22.11.38: <http://orwelldiaries.wordpress.com/2008/11/>)

Similarly, object omission in recipe contexts is not unrestricted. In (9a), though contextually recoverable, the object pronoun *it* cannot be omitted. Cross-linguistically, the descriptive generalisation seems to be that object omission in instructional writing is restricted to clauses lacking an overt subject such as imperatives or non-finite clauses (see Massam, 1989; Massam and Roberge, 1989; Sigurðsson and Maling, 2007 for discussion).

¹ There are other types of register related omissions, for instance see Stark (2011) on the marking of agreement inflection in French text messages.

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