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A Study About Nothing: Null Subjects as a Diagnostic of Convergence Between English and French

Martine Leroux and Lidia–Gabriela Jarmasz*

1 Introduction

If it is generally accepted that a minority language is permeable to borrowing from the dominant language, it is still a matter of open debate whether grammatical features can be transferred from one linguistic system to another (for surveys of different views, see Backus 2004, Poplack 1997, Thomason and Kaufman 1988, Winford 2003).

Numerous studies have inferred convergence from surface similarities, most notably the landmark Gumperz and Wilson (1971) study, without ruling out the possibility of coincidental parallels and without systematic comparison with the structure of a contact–free variety. The present paper adopts the comparative method to accountably and quantitatively measure similarities between language varieties (after Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001). Following others who have used this approach to study language contact (Torres–Cacoullos and Walker 2003, Van Herk 2005, Walker *et al.* 2004), we will invoke the construct of the hierarchy of constraints to ascertain the degree of similarity of a minority variety with, on the one hand, a contact–free variety of the same language and, on the other hand, the majority language.

Canada provides an ideal laboratory to test claims of contact–induced grammatical change, or convergence, because both of its official languages, English and French, are found in minority and majority guises in different parts of the country, and speakers of the minority variety typically exhibit signs of linguistic insecurity (Poplack 1989; Poplack *et al.* to appear).

1.1 Subject Expression: A Candidate for Contact–Induced Change?

Not all linguistic variables are equally diagnostic of convergence, since, in order to compare hierarchies of constraints, both languages in contact must have at least partially overlapping variants, and must also crucially present some level of conflict between the two systems (see Poplack and Meechan 1998 for the notion of *conflict site*). The tense/mood system has proved fruit-

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ful for many previous studies of convergence (*e.g.*, Laurier 1989, Poplack 1990, Pousada and Poplack 1982). In this paper, we turn our attention to another part of the grammar: variable subject expression. As illustrated in (1), the subject of a tensed clause can be either overtly expressed or omitted, in both French and English.

- (1) a. ENGLISH: **Dad** rolls up his sleeves, \emptyset picks up the— \emptyset wets his hand with soap and \emptyset all picks up the insides of the horse (QEC/QC/013/659)¹
- b. FRENCH: *Quand **je** me suis faite opérer celui-là, six mois après \emptyset me suis faite opérer celui-là* (OH/108/845–846)
 ‘When **I** had that one operated on, six months later \emptyset got the other one operated on’

With a few exceptions for French (Kaiser and Meisel 1991, Roberge 1990), both languages are generally classified as non-pro-drop (Haegeman 1997, Heap 2000, Pollock 1998). It is not surprising, then, that apart from Cote (1996), Lawrence (1996) and Harvie (1998), null subjects in these two languages have not received a great deal of attention, especially from a variationist perspective. In the rare cases where the normative and syntactic literature does acknowledge null subjects, it invokes the same conditioning factors in both languages, namely coordination, co-reference with the previous subject, and grammatical person of the referent (*e.g.*, Quirk *et al.* 1973 for English, and Grevisse and Goosse 1980 for French). But these three factors have also been invoked to explain variable subject expression in a wide variety of officially pro-drop (or split pro-drop) languages, including Bislama (Meyerhoff 2000), Chinese (Li and Thompson 1981), Polish (Bak 1978), Portuguese (Paredes Silva 1993) and Spanish (Silva-Corvalán 1982). To what extent can these factors be used as diagnostics for membership in a particular grammatical system, or are they universal?

2 Methodology

2.1 The Samples

The study reported here is based on two corpora housed at the Sociolinguistics Laboratory of the University of Ottawa constructed expressly to test

¹Codes refer to community, speaker number and transcription line number in the *Corpus of Spoken Quebec English* (Poplack *et al.* to appear) for the English examples and in the *Ottawa-Hull French Corpus* (Poplack 1989) for the French examples.

claims of convergence in stable bilingual communities. The *Corpus of Spoken Quebec English* (Poplack *et al.* to appear) is made up of natural speech data from Anglophones from Quebec City, who comprise 1.5% of the population, as well as from monolingual controls from Oshawa–Whitby, in the vicinity of Toronto. The *Ottawa–Hull French Corpus* (Poplack 1989), for its part, contains informal interviews with native Francophones from both English-dominated Ottawa and the neighboring French city of Hull (now Gatineau). This design allows us to not only contrast the structure of the variability in English and French, but also to compare varieties of the same language at different levels of contact.

We sub-sampled the data according to age group, community and individual level of bilingualism (see Table 1). This scheme addresses three assumptions concerning the extent and directionality of convergence, outlined in Poplack (1997). First, convergence is conceived of as a change from a contact-free stage. Second, contact-induced change is favored by the perceived prestige of the dominant variety. In Quebec, French has gained in prestige and importance with the passing of Bill 101 in 1977, a law making French the sole official language of this province and of the workplace, and restricting access to English schooling². In the rest of Canada, including the Ottawa–Hull region, it is English that enjoys both demographic and economic power. The third hypothesis concerns highly bilingual speakers who are commonly believed to have lost command of their native language and who would therefore be more vulnerable to the influence of the dominant language. As a corollary, communities where contact is more intense are also more likely to present evidence of convergence.

2.2 Extraction

Null subjects in French and English are relatively infrequent in tensed clauses: in English, the speaker with the most null subjects chose ellipsis in only 14% of all possible cases, while in French this figure reaches at most 9%. Since the average rate of null subjects across all speakers would obviously be still lower, we adopted Harvie's (1998) method of extraction, whereby we first located all instances of null subjects and then only the immediately preceding and immediately following overt subjects. We therefore obtained an artificial overall distribution of one-third null subjects and two-thirds overt subjects.

²The older speakers of the sample acquired English before 1977 and the younger ones after this date.

	English Sample			French Sample	
	Quebec City	Chawu-Whitby	Control group	Full	Ottawa
	Low French proficiency	High French proficiency		Low English proficiency	High English proficiency
Younger	3	3	3	3	4
Older	3	3	3	4	4

Table 1: Stratification of English and French samples

2.3 Coding

We coded each token for different hypotheses culled from the literature on null subjects in both English and French, and in a variety of pro-drop languages. After eliminating hypotheses that were impossible to operationalize or that were not independent from others, we retained the following factor groups: Subject Number, Type of Clause (main or conjoined/juxtaposed), Turn Position (beginning, middle or end of a speaker's turn, or single utterance), Form of Previous Token (overt or null), Position of Subject in Clause (initial or not), and Discourse Connectedness. This last factor group is an adaptation of Paredes Silva's (1993) refinement of the same/switch referent factor group (Silva-Corvalán 1982, Harvie 1998, among others) that evaluates the local coherence of the discourse by considering not only co-reference with the previous subject but also retention of the same verbal tense and mood. Based on the possibilities reflected in our data, we ultimately invoked a three-way distinction between *optimal connectedness* (tokens with both a subject co-referential to the preceding one and a verb sharing the same tense and mood as the previous one) as in (2a), *simple connectedness* (tokens where the referent of the subject, but not the verbal tense or mood, is maintained) as in (2b), and *no connectedness* (tokens where the subject does not have the same referent as in the previous clause) as in (2c).

- (2) a. ENGLISH: I went to a few parties **the cops** c— uh— came by and **crashed**....But **they** usually **left** us alone (QEC/QC/021/1261)
 FRENCH: **J'ai pas vu [perfect] le vol. J'ai vu [perfect] les résultats la journée après.** (OH/61/776)
 'I didn't see the robbery. I saw the results the day after.'
- b. ENGLISH: **I** always **shot** that as a kid you-know. [1] Yeah? [062]
 Right now, **I** just **bring up** friends from the city and they'll go crazy you-know, shooting partridges. (QEC/QC/062/728)
 FRENCH: **J'ai [present] une vitre de cataracte moi, J'ai été opéré [perfect] pour les cataractes deux ans passés.** (OH/59/1148)
 'I have a cataract lens, I had a cataract operation two years ago.'

- c. ENGLISH: And Sister Assumpta was a very, very fat nun, and when **she** talked her cheeks were like plum, plum, plum and **Susan** bends over (QEC/QC/006/646)
 FRENCH: *ils m'avaient donné une grosse tasse de whisky puis j'étais saoule.* (OH/71/1329)
 'They gave me a big mug of whiskey, and I was drunk.'

3 Results

3.1 General Results

3.1.1 Lexical Effect in French

Inspection of the distribution of subjects by lexical verb reveals a nearly categorical association of French null subjects with two verbs: *sembler* ('to seem') and *falloir* ('to have to, must'). As shown in Table 2, which displays the four French verbs that occur more than ten times with no overt subject, all but one of the 37 tokens of *sembler* (or 97%) have a null subject, while *falloir* is used with the ellipsis 92% of the time. Together, these two verbs account for 53% of all null subjects extracted. This finding suggests that null subjects in French are for the most part not used productively. In order to determine the factors contributing to productive variant choice, we excluded these two verbs from the remainder of the analysis.

No such lexical effects were found for English, a finding that already signals an important difference between the two languages.

	N null/Total N (Total=296/876)	% null	% null tokens in sample	
<i>Ssembler</i> ('to seem')	36/37	97	12	53
<i>Falloir</i> ('to have to')	121/132	92	41	
<i>Faire</i> ('to make')	21/45	47	7	
<i>Être</i> ('to be')	79/222	36	36	

Table 2: Distribution of null subjects in French by lexical verb occurring more than ten times with a null subject

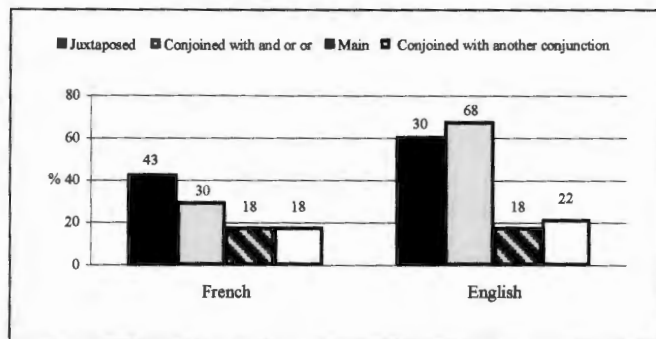
3.1.2 Conflict Sites

Table 3 exposes several other differences in the two systems. Multivariate analyses performed independently in French and in English with Goldvarb (Rand and Sankoff 1990) reveal that not all factor groups have a statistically

significant effect in both languages: indeed, Turn Position plays no role in the choice of zero in English (as shown by the square brackets), but it is the third most important factor group in French, as indicated by its range.³

Further, different factor groups account for the majority of the variability in the two languages, as can be inferred from the differences in ranking according to relative strength. For example, Subject Number is the most important factor group in French (with a range of 42), while it is the least important one in English (with a negligible range of 4). In contrast, Discourse Connectedness and Type of Clause come out on top in English (ranges of 50 and 31), while they finish last in French (ranges of 16 and 18).

But most importantly, the factor group Subject Number has a different effect in each language: in French, it is plural subjects that favor the ellipsis (with a probability of .77), while in English it is the singular ones (at .51).



Graph 1: Distribution of null subjects according to type of clause and conjunction

Yet, other factor groups do appear to play the same role in the two systems, as they share the same hierarchy of constraints. The true role of at least one of them, Type of Clause, is, however, masked by the broad classification we used for the multivariate analyses. Though conjoined and juxtaposed clauses favor the null variant more than main clauses in the two languages, a finer breakdown that also takes into account the type of *conjunction* (displayed in Graph 1) shows that null subjects in French actually occur more frequently with juxtaposed clauses (43%; $N=17/40$), while in English they

³ The percentages for English show, moreover, that the hierarchy of constraints would not be the same had the factor group been selected as significant: in English, it is the middle or end of turn position that favors null subjects the most (36%), while in French, single utterances are the most favoring context (probability of .60).

do so with clauses conjoined with *and* or *or* (68%; N=120/203). The ranking of the remaining factors also differs between the two languages.

	French speakers			English speakers		
Corrected mean	.14			.27		
Total N	140/719			302/906		
Subject Number	P	N/Total N	%	P	N/Total N	%
Plural subject	.77	90/240	38	.47	82/257	32
Singular subject	.35	47/476	10	.51	196/624	31
	<i>RANGE</i>	42		4		
Form of Previous Token						
Previous subject overt	.59	89/378	24	.56	155/332	47
Previous subject null	.27	12/134	9	.36	46/143	32
	<i>RANGE</i>	32		20		
Turn Position						
Single utterance	.60	11/30	37	[]	8/29	29
Middle or end of turn	.54	112/557	20	[]	271/749	36
Beginning of turn	.33	16/108	15	[]	14/102	14
	<i>RANGE</i>	27				
Position of Subj. in Clause						
Initial	.64	58/202	29	.58	233/510	46
Non-initial	.44	82/517	16	.39	65/386	17
	<i>RANGE</i>	20		19		
Type of Clause						
Conjoined and juxtaposed	.64	43/125	34	.69	203/348	58
Main	.46	82/453	18	.38	95/551	17
	<i>RANGE</i>	18		31		
Discourse Connectedness						
Optimal connectedness	.61	36/124	29	.75	182/281	65
Simple connectedness	.59	11/47	23	.56	38/103	37
No connectedness	.45	51/333	15	.25	36/301	12
	<i>RANGE</i>	16		50		

Table 3: Multivariate analyses of the contribution of linguistic factors selected as significant to the choice of null subjects in French and in English

As for the remaining factor groups in Table 3, namely Form of Previous Token, Position of Subject in Clause and Discourse Connectedness, it is not clear *a priori* if they are indicative of universal constraints on subject expression or if they are indeed loci of convergence between English and French.

The next section will examine how conclusive they are with respect to our central question of convergence.

3.1.3 Potential sites of convergence?

The three above-mentioned factor groups do the same work in English and in French. First, the Form of Previous Token has the effect of favoring a null subject if the previous subject is overt. This finding is consistent with functionalist conceptions of language (see discussion in Kiparsky 1982), whereby once a piece of information has been established in the discourse, it need not be repeated. This consideration is not language-specific, but rather based on general communicative principles. As such, it would ultimately not be very compelling to base an argument for convergence on this result.

As for Discourse Connectedness, as seen in Table 3, the null variant is favored by optimal or simple connectedness. Since similar results have been found in many officially pro-drop languages, it is not surprising to find them again in both French and English. What is more unexpected, however, is the previously mentioned discrepancy in relative strength: this factor group accounts for most of the variability in English, but for only a slight portion of it in French. Though this could be used as evidence against convergence, it cannot be ruled out, without further investigation, that this strongest factor group in English is beginning to infiltrate the French system. We will come back to this below.

Finally, the effect of the factor group Position of Subject in Clause is that the initial position within a clause favors a null subject in both languages. Haegeman (1997) had already noted this result for written (though informal) European French and English, where no claims of convergence are made.

How, then, can it be determined if these effects are signs of convergence, or if they are parallel but independent phenomena resulting from universal constraints on subject expression or even from coincidence? And if there were convergence, how could we establish its direction?

To infer convergence, we must first ascertain whether there is a change in progress, and then, whether this change can be ascribed to contact with another language. Consequently, we also compared the linguistic conditioning of variable subject expression (which we take to represent the grammar of the variability) across age cohorts and between levels of bilingualism. We posit that if there is contact-induced change, the grammar of the younger speakers will be both 1) distinct from that of the older ones and 2) closer to the system of the dominant language. But an even stronger case will be made for convergence if, in particular, the more bilingual speakers more closely

emulate the structure of the dominant language than their more monolingual counterparts. For example, if Discourse Connectedness really were being transferred into French from English, then the young Francophones most proficient in English would presumably be more sensitive to this factor group than the more monolingual ones. Likewise, if the conditioning by Form of the Previous Token and Position of Subject in Clause were being transferred from French into English, then young English speakers from Quebec City that are highly proficient in French should be more sensitive to the effect of these two factor groups than other Anglophones.

The comparative method will thus allow us to establish whether all speakers of a given language share the same grammar, regardless of how vulnerable to influence from the dominant language they are considered to be. The next two sections will present the results of an analysis by age to detect any changes in progress, followed by an analysis by individual level of bilingualism to assess the impact of the amount and nature of exposure to the other language.⁴

3.2 Results by Age

Once we segment the data set by age group, the number of tokens becomes too small to perform viable multivariate analyses. To see if we can adduce any evidence of change, we nonetheless still invoke the construct of the hierarchy of constraints, based on marginal percentages of occurrence of null subjects.

Table 4 presents the proportions of null subjects by age in both English and French. It shows that the hierarchies of constraints are internally coherent⁵: within our samples, all speakers of the same language share the same grammar of variable subject expression, regardless of their age⁶. We therefore find no substantial evidence of change in progress in either language,

⁴Due to space constraints, we will not address results obtained for the control group here.

⁵There is one area where the hierarchy of constraints of older and younger Anglophones appear to differ markedly: Turn Position, where single utterances seem to favor null subjects the most for younger speakers, whereas it is ranked second amongst older speakers. This is, however, quite likely due to the restricted amount of data from younger speakers in this cell (N=4).

⁶Chi-square tests show no significant differences (at $p < 0.05$) between age cohorts of one language, except for Subject Number in French and Form of Previous Token in English. In both cases, the range between the two factors becomes wider as age decreases. For the French, nevertheless, this accentuates the difference with English where Subject Number has essentially no effect for either age group.

even for the three contentious factor groups discussed above. We may also conclude, by the same token, that Bill 101 has not had any impact on the structure of subject expression in English, since the hierarchy of constraints has not budged since its passing.

Age Group	French speakers				English speakers			
	Older		Younger		Older		Younger	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
	67/358	19	73/361	20	104/312	33	95/285	33
Subject Number								
Plural subject	34/108	32	56/132	42	20/59	33	27/73	30
Singular subject	31/248	13	16/228	7	76/245	31	65/204	31
Form of Previous Token								
Previous subj. overt	47/197	24	42/181	23	48/108	44	54/99	54
Previous subj. null	4/53	8	8/81	10	20/55	36	6/36	16
Turn Position								
Single utterance	5/12	42	6/18	33	4/19	21	2/4	50
Middle/end	54/279	19	58/278	21	91/241	37	84/235	35
Beginning	7/63	11	9/61	15	8/45	17	4/34	11
Pos. of Subj. in Clause								
Initial	31/115	27	27/87	31	80/184	43	77/155	49
Non-initial	36/243	15	46/274	17	23/127	18	17/124	13
Type of Clause								
Conj. and juxtaposed	22/60	37	21/65	32	62/109	56	74/112	66
Main	39/249	16	43/204	21	38/198	19	21/171	12
Discourse Connectedness								
Optimal connectedness	14/56	25	22/68	32	58/86	67	57/81	70
Simple connectedness	6/29	21	5/18	28	13/33	39	13/38	34
No connectedness	25/157	16	26/176	15	13/101	12	10/88	11

Table 4: Distribution of null subjects by age group

We shall now inspect the data from the perspective of level of bilingualism.

3.3 Results by Level of Bilingualism

Proficiency Level	French speakers				English speakers			
	Low English		High English		Low French		High French	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
	73/344	21	67/375	18	104/312	33	95/285	33
Subject Number								
Plural subject	47/124	38	43/116	37	28/77	36	14/55	25
Singular subject	23/217	11	24/259	3	72/231	31	69/218	31
Form of Prev. Token								
Previous subj. overt	47/182	26	42/196	21	52/107	48	50/100	50
Previous subj. null	10/76	13	2/58	3	18/54	33	8/37	21
Turn Position								
Single utterance	8/19	42	3/11	27	5/19	26	1/4	25
Middle/end	58/265	22	54/292	18	91/254	35	84/222	37
Beginning	7/58	12	9/66	14	6/33	18	6/46	13
Pos. of Subj. in Clause								
Initial	28/98	29	30/104	29	87/179	48	70/160	43
Non-initial	45/246	18	37/271	14	17/130	13	23/121	19
Type of Clause								
Conj. and juxtaposed	29/69	42	14/56	25	77/120	64	59/101	58
Main	35/206	17	47/247	19	25/188	13	34/181	18
Discourse Connected.								
Optimal connectedness	24/66	36	12/58	21	66/94	70	49/73	67
Simple connectedness	6/20	30	5/27	19	10/30	33	16/41	39
No connectedness	25/165	15	26/168	16	9/100	9	14/89	15

Table 5: Distribution of null subjects by individual level of bilingualism

We again appeal to hierarchies of constraints revealed by proportions of null subjects in different linguistic contexts to uncover any differences that could be correlated with a speaker's level of bilingualism, as displayed in Table 5 (where percentages are again in bold). The results are once more

consistent from one level of proficiency to the other⁷, which again confirms that all speakers of the same language by and large possess a unique grammar, independently of how much they use the dominant language. Because we have not shown that the grammar of highly bilingual French or English speakers is systematically closer to the one of the majority language, we find no argument for convergence here either.

4 Discussion

This “study about nothing” served to evaluate two central methodological issues concerning the study of convergence. The first is the choice of variable. Subject expression has proven to be only partially successful as a conflict site between English and French. On the one hand, it exhibited differences between the two systems that could be used to determine language membership. These include the lexicalization of French null subjects with *falloir* and *sembler*, the differences in the hierarchy of constraints for the factor groups Subject Number, Turn Position and Type of Clause, and the overall differences in relative strengths. But on the other hand, it also displayed many instances of overlap between English and French, namely the factor groups Form of Previous Token, Position of Subject in Clause and Discourse Connectedness. Interestingly, these do not actually relate to any language-specific elements, but rather touch upon processing and discursive considerations. As previously mentioned, some of them are also operational in pro-drop languages. For these reasons, this variable does not provide a fully compelling argument for or against convergence.

The second issue concerns the type of results needed to infer contact-induced change. Some have relied only on common effects, but we chose to examine the grammar of each language with the comparative method to determine if all speakers, regardless of their age or level of bilingualism, behave in the same way linguistically. Our results lead us to conclude that subject expression makes no convincing case for convergence. Alternately, we suggest that it might be more interesting to extensively study this variable across typologically distinct languages in the hope of defining the extent of its possibly universal nature.

⁷Chi-square tests show no significant differences (at $p < 0.05$) between more and less bilingual individuals in either language, with the exception of Type of Clause in French. The distinction between conjoined or juxtaposed clauses and main clauses is neutralized amongst the speakers most proficient in English, and is no longer significant. Since this does not reflect the grammar of English, it cannot be unequivocally attributed to convergence.

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