A new look at full, no and partial pro drop

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Some languages allow subjects to remain absent, whereas other languages do not:

1. a. (Lui) parl-a   *Italian*
        I speak.1SG
        'I speak'
    b. *(She) speak-s   *English*

Setting aside so-called 'radical pro drop' languages for the moment (cf. Neeleman & Szendrői 2007), there is a general consensus that rich agreement in some way plays an important role. The devil is - as always - in the details. The 3SG -s in English is as informative about the missing subject as the 3SG -a is in Italian, yet only Italian allows null subjects. A common solution is to refer to the whole paradigm (Rizzi 1982, Jaeggli & Safir 1989, among others): Italian allows null subjects because the paradigm <u>as a whole</u> is rich, and English is poor overall, despite the "rich" affix in 3SG contexts.

Such a paradigmatic account faces two problems, one theoretical, one empirical. Theoretically, a paradigm is epiphenomenal, has no status in the grammar and can therefore not be consulted during the derivation. How, then, can we derive paradigm effects without reference of the grammar to the paradigm? Empirically, the paradigmatic account fails in the light of so-called 'partial pro drop' languages. In Bavarian and Frisian (to name two examples), null subjects are possible but only in 2SG contexts. Here, reference to the whole paradigm is apparently not at stake, which begs the question why it would be in English and Italian.

In this talk, we are going to look at full, no, and partial pro drop languages with the aim to develop a theory that makes predictions about the distribution of these distinct language types. A central claim will be that null subjects can only be licensed by an affix which expresses the same agreement features as those of the missing subject. Although it is quite standard to assume that an affix may not be *under*specified with respect to the properties of the null subject, we will argue that an affix may also not be *over*specified, where pro drop is effectively blocked if an affix spells out agreement and tense features at the same time.

References:

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