

Pragmatic and semantic factors affecting the interpretation of subject pronouns in subjunctive clauses

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The interpretive properties of *pro* in subjunctive clauses have drawn the attention of generative linguists as early in the 1980s. In many languages, ranging from Romance to German and Slavic, the null subject of subjunctive clauses displayed an anomalous behaviour in view of Binding Theory Principle B, as it could *not* be ‘coindexed’ with arguments occurring within the superordinate clause, hence in a different binding domain (1a).

- (1) a. *Pia pensa che pro parta domani.* b. *Pia pensa che io parta domani.*
 ‘Pia thinks that he/she leave tomorrow.’ ‘Pia thinks that I leave tomorrow.’
 # *pro* = [[Pia]]

Later studies (Farkas 1992, Schlenker 2005) have discarded Binding approaches to subjunctive obviation – as the phenomenon is generally dubbed – and have shown that the effect may result from the competition between subjunctive and with infinitival clauses.

Competition theories of obviation predict that obviation occurs if and only if an infinitive is available. However, examples where obviation occurs even without there being an infinitival competitor can be built:

(i) PRO can only be an ordinary (i.e., not a quirky) subject. Thus, an infinitival clause cannot replace the subjunctive clause in sentences like (2). Yet, sentence (2a) is unacceptable. By contrast, if the embedded quirky subject does not have the same denotation as the attitude bearer, the sentence is fully acceptable (see (2b)).

- (2) a. # *Credo che questo fatto mi preoccupi.* b. *Credo che questo fatto lo preoccupi.*
 Lit. ‘I believe this fact worries me.’ ‘I believe this fact worries him.’

(ii) Epistemic modals are relative to a ‘judge’ (the person in view of whose evidence an epistemic possibility or necessity is asserted, see Lasersohn 2005), which corresponds to the speaker, if not differently specified. Since epistemic modals cannot select for an infinitival argument clause (Epstein 1984), a subjunctive clause should always be acceptable no matter whether its subject denotes the ‘judge’/speaker. This is however contrary to fact (see (3a)). Thus, sentence (3a) is unacceptable in spite of the fact that an infinitival competitor is not available. Notice that if the embedded clause subject does not refer to the speaker, the sentence is fully acceptable (3b).

- (3) a. # *È possibile che io abbia il mal di testa.* b. *È possibile che lei abbia il mal di testa.*
 Lit. ‘It is possible I have a headache.’ ‘It is possible she has a headache.’

The contrasts in (2) and in (3) parallel the contrast in (1), so that a unified explanation is desirable.

This presentation aims to show an alternative approach to subjunctive obviation. To do so, I observe that:

(i) in sentences (2a) and (3a) the embedded predicate refers to a self-ascribed mental state (Shoemaker 1968). Sentence (1a) can also be shown to express a mental state, because subjunctive predicates can be futurate, and futurate predicates involve plans (Copley 2008). The self-ascription of a mental state has been the subject of much work in philosophy of mind as part of the question of self-awareness (or self-knowledge, cf. Shoemaker 1968, Burge, 2007, Recanati 2007). Knowledge of one’s own mental state is peculiar because it relies on introspection, which lets one have a direct, non-inferential access to mental states. Because of this, ‘introspective’ knowledge is epistemically secure and is endowed with the presumption of truth.

(ii) Epistemic predicates such as *believe*, *doubt*, etc. introduce a sentential implicature whereby the subject of the attitude does not know if the content of the attitude holds true as of the uttering time in the actual world (or she knows that it may not be the case that the

content of the attitude is true as of the actual world, see Gazdar 1978). The same holds true for other types of attitude predicate selecting for subjunctive clauses and instantiating obviation, such as volitional and factive predicates, since they both presuppose doxastic alternatives (Heim 1992).

I propose that the interpretation of null subject in subjunctive clauses derives exactly from a semantic clash between the presuppositions introduced by attitude predicates (which introduce doxastic alternatives) and the semantic properties of the embedded proposition (based on self-knowledge, epistemically secure).

This proposal directly accounts for the interpretation of *pro* in (1a), because if the embedded clause expresses a plan on the part of the attitude bearer and the attitude predicate presupposes that the attitude bearer has doxastic alternatives, since one is (normally) aware of one's own plans, a semantic clash arises and makes unavailable the interpretation whereby *pro* denotes the attitude bearer herself. Moreover, it accounts for the contrasts in (2) and (3), as a clash obtains in sentences (2a) and (3a) similar to the one occurring in (1a).

Additional facts appear to support this theory:

(i) Sentences like (1b) are acceptable as long as the embedded proposition is not based on introspection. If the intended 'director' (Copley 2008) of the plan expressed in the embedded clause is the bearer of the attitude herself, these sentences are uninterpretable in the same way (1a) is.

(ii) Obviation does not obtain if the embedded proposition cannot be based on introspection.

(4) *Maria dubita che sia alta 1,82.*

'Maria doubts she is 1,82 tall.'

'Being 1,82 cm tall' can no way be a piece of information achieved through introspection. Thus, sentence (4) is fully acceptable, as expected.

(iii) It is a well-known fact that obviation tends not to obtain when the subjunctive verb is an aspectual auxiliary (Picallo 1985). This fact is also expected, as argument clauses containing an auxiliary in the subjunctive make reference to past events, which may not be recollected directly through one's own memory (see Higginbotham 2009).

(iv) Another very-well known fact is that obviation may not obtain if the subjunctive verb is a modal (Picallo 1985). This fact is expected, too, as deontic or epistemic propositions are not based on introspection.

(v) Obviation obtains no matter what the embedded mood is, as long as a semantic clash arises between the propositional attitude and the epistemic state expressed in the embedded clause (see Wittgenstein 1953).

(5) # *So che parto domani.*

lit. 'I know I am leaving tomorrow.'

To sum up, the interpretation of null subject in subjunctive clauses appears to result from a complex interplay of different interface factors involving the semantic notion of self-awareness and the sentential implicatures introduced by attitude predicates.

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