

On Pro-Drop and Impoverishment: Towards a New Concept of Morphological Richness

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It is often assumed that some notion of morphological richness plays a central role in the theory of pro-drop: In languages with sufficiently rich verbal ϕ -feature (person, number, gender) agreement morphology, pronominal arguments can (and, in some contexts, must) remain without phonological realization; in languages without such a rich verbal agreement morphology, pronominal arguments must be overtly realized. Following Chomsky (1982), Rizzi (1986), and Grewendorf (1989), among many others, I assume that pro-drop is not a post-syntactic phenomenon (cf. Perlmutter (1971), Adger (2003), Holmberg (2004)), but involves an empty syntactic category *pro*. Such a non-overt pronoun *pro* is merged in the canonical position for subjects (in Spec of vP or within the VP, depending on its status as an external or internal argument), and undergoes Agree with T in the languages under consideration here (which rely on a nominative/accusative system of argument encoding), thereby ensuring nominative case and subject agreement; cf. Chomsky (1995; 2001).

Even though the hypothesis that morphological richness is involved in the licensing of argumental *pro* seems to be a natural one, and is widely accepted, it has proven extremely difficult to pin down. In fact, it seems that the notion of morphological richness relevant here is left somewhat vague in most of the relevant literature; notable exceptions are the analyses by Jaeggli & Safir (1989: 29-30) and Rohrbacher (1999: ch. 5)). Notwithstanding empirical differences between these two approaches (as well as others), it seems fair to conclude that all existing approaches do not straightforwardly exclude languages like German or Icelandic (which distinguish 1. and 2. person in paradigms) as pro-drop languages; but both languages lack (referential) subject argument *pro*. Furthermore, these approaches crucially presuppose a concept of inflectional paradigm that corresponds to the traditional notion adopted in reference grammars, but that is incompatible with recent developments in theoretical morphology. Here, paradigms are often viewed as epiphenomena, i.e., descriptive generalizations that principles of grammar cannot refer to by definition (e.g., this holds for all of the work carried out within Distributed Morphology; see Halle & Marantz (1993; 1994), Bobaljik (2002), among many others); or they are viewed as abstract grammatical objects that bear little resemblance to the traditional reference grammar notion (compare, e.g., the notions of paradigm in Williams (1994), Wunderlich (1996), and Wiese (1999)).

In view of this state of affairs, the main goal of the present paper is to argue for a new concept of morphological richness underlying the theory of pro-drop that is based on recent morphological research and correctly derives the cross-linguistic distribution of subject argument *pro*. The central claim that I want to propose here is that morphological richness should be captured not by looking at and counting distinctive forms of traditional paradigms (which I assume to be mere epiphenomena), but rather by invoking an abstract property of morphological inventories – more specifically, by relying on the concept of impoverishment developed in Distributed Morphology. For concreteness, I would like to suggest that *pro* cannot be licensed by T if T is subject to an impoverishment operation that leads to a neutralization of ϕ -features. However, to make this approach work, a pre-syntactic version of Distributed Morphology is needed; and it turns out that there is independent support for this (Alexiadou & Müller (2005)).

On the empirical side, I will have a close look at the morphological systems of verb inflection and the syntactic distribution of pro-drop in Germanic (German, Icelandic) and Slavic (Russian, Czech) languages. The approach to morphological richness in terms of ϕ -feature impoverishment will be shown to make the right predictions for these (and other) languages.

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