



PROJECT MUSE®

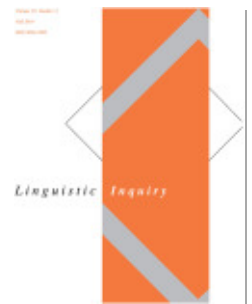
---

## Null Subjects in Old English

Elly van Gelderen

Linguistic Inquiry, Volume 44, Number 2, Spring 2013, pp. 271-285  
(Article)

Published by The MIT Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/lin/summary/v044/44.2.van-gelderen.html>

# Remarks and Replies

## Null Subjects in Old English

*Elly van Gelderen*

I review the proposal made by Sigurðsson (2011) that null arguments follow from third-factor principles, as in Chomsky 2005. A number of issues remain unclear: for instance, the kind of topic that licenses null arguments in Modern Germanic, including Modern English. I argue that Old English is pro drop and add to the discussion Frascarelli (2007) started as to which topic licenses a null subject. I agree with Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl (2007) that the licensing topic in Modern Germanic and Old English is an aboutness-shift topic. I also argue that verb movement to C is necessary to license the empty argument in the modern Germanic languages (including Modern English), but not in Old English, since agreement is still responsible for licensing in that language, as in Italian.

*Keywords:* edge linking, Germanic, Old English, Modern English, pro drop, topic drop

Pro drop has recently received a Minimalist makeover in work by Holmberg (2005), Frascarelli (2007), Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl (2007), Biberauer et al. (2010), Sigurðsson (2011), and others. In this article, I present data on referential null subjects in Old English and then, using these data, add to the claims made by Sigurðsson (2011), in particular regarding the type of topic licensing the null subject and the role of movement into the C-domain.

The article is organized as follows. In section 1, I present the relevant aspects of Sigurðsson's work. In section 2, I provide the Old English data. In section 2.1, I sketch the distribution of overt and null subjects and argue that Old English is a genuine pro drop language, although the system is in decline. Then, in section 2.2, I examine verbal agreement with the subject, linking it to the licensing of pro drop in Old English. In section 2.3, I argue that the topic that licenses the null subject is the aboutness-shift one, in line with Frascarelli's and Sigurðsson's proposals, and that the position to which the null argument moves in the C-domain is the specifier of the FinP (Spec,FinP). Section 3 concludes the article.

I would very much like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and the Syntax Reading Group at Arizona State University for a lively discussion and helpful suggestions.

## 1 Sigurðsson's Edge Linking

Adopting the recent Minimalist turn toward principles not specific to the faculty of language (i.e., toward third-factor ones, as in Chomsky 2005), Sigurðsson (2011) argues that overt and silent definite arguments require C/edge linking for interpretation at the relevant interface. This linking fits a third-factor approach because the linking condition is not about null subjects but about interface conditions on interpretation. If a definite argument is silent, its linking by the edge is not visible if a C intervenes. In that case, the null topic must raise across C (pp. 269–270).

Sigurðsson distinguishes three main types of null subjects: Chinese discourse drop, Romance pro drop, and Germanic topic drop. Chinese subjects do not have to move to the C/edge; instead, they are linked by long-distance topics. I will not discuss this type. According to Sigurðsson, agreement on the verb in Italian is an incorporated pronoun, with first and second person matching the speaker and addressee features in the C-domain and third person matching an aboutness-shift topic in the C/edge. Movement of the topic to the C-domain is not necessary. Germanic null topics require an empty Spec,CP to which they move, as in (1a–b). Either a subject or an object topic can be left null, marked as an empty underlined space in (1).

- (1) a.        Komt morgen terug. (Dutch)  
       *pro* comes tomorrow back  
       ‘She/He will come back tomorrow.’  
    b.        Heb ik niet gezien.  
       *pro* have I not seen  
       ‘That/Him/Her, I haven’t seen.’

Sigurðsson's (2011:282) generalization is given in (2), where  $A_A$  stands for *logophoric agent*,  $A_P$  for *logophoric patient*, and  $CL_n$  for *C/edge linker*.

- (2) *C/Edge-Linking Generalization*  
 Any definite argument, overt or silent, *positively* matches *at least one*  $CL_n$  in its local C-domain,  $CL_n \in \{A_A, A_P, \text{Top}, \dots\}$ .

Matching takes place under Agree, where, for instance, a first person subject will be valued as  $[+A_A]$  and will thus be interpretable.

As is well-known, topic drop is prohibited in Germanic when an adverbial or other phrasal element is sentence-initial, as in (3a); and there is no topic drop in subordinate clauses in most Germanic languages, as (3b) shows, or in interrogative clauses, as (3c) shows.

- (3) a. \*Waarschijnlijk komt        morgen terug. (Dutch)  
       probably comes *pro* tomorrow back  
       ‘She/He will probably come back tomorrow.’  
    b. \*Ik denk dat        komt terug.  
       I think that *pro* comes back  
       ‘I think she/he comes back.’

- c. \*Komen \_\_\_\_ terug?  
 come *pro* back  
 ‘Will they/you/we come back?’

The adverbial in (3a) blocks the topic from moving to Spec,CP and from being matched to a CLn, and the complementizer and interrogative features block the licensing in (3b–c). Sigurðsson (2011:292, (60)) argues that successful C/edge linking of the null argument in verb-second languages, as in (1), occurs when the null argument moves to the C-domain across the intervening element in C. It may be that only verb movement expands the CP to accommodate a landing site for the null topic—in other words, that the presence of a complementizer doesn’t. Sigurðsson is not explicit about this.

Sigurðsson does not discuss topic drop in (Modern) English, but this language is like the other Germanic languages in allowing topic drop of a main clause subject, as in (4a–c), but not generally of an embedded clause subject, as in (4d), or of one where an initial adverbial appears, as in (4e) (see Cole 1987). Null subject topics are most common in first and third person. (Modern English differs from the other modern Germanic languages in that a null object is not possible, as in (4f), but I will leave object drop out of the discussion.)

- (4) a. Might see you tomorrow. (topic drop of first person)  
 b. Shouldn’t have done that! (topic drop of second person)  
 c. Comes here often apparently. (topic drop of third person)  
 d. \*I know that comes late. (topic drop of embedded subject)  
 e. \*Now come late. (topic drop with initial adverbial)  
 f. \*I haven’t seen. (object drop)

Since English is not a verb-second language, we don’t actually know if movement of the null topic to the CP-domain is necessary in (4a–c). It might be that the C/edge can license the null topics in (4a–c) directly. However, like its counterparts in the other Germanic languages, (4e) is ungrammatical, suggesting that the null subject moves to the C-domain. I will assume that C always blocks C/edge licensing unless the null argument moves to the C-domain.

Sigurðsson (2011:286) writes that third person null subjects in Italian are licensed by an aboutness-shift topic, and I assume this is true in Germanic as well. The null argument must be a low topic, since adverbials and topicalized elements in the high CP-domain do not block it in Icelandic, although that is not true in Dutch; see (5a) and (5b), respectively.

- (5) a. Nei, Jóhann, hef \_\_\_\_ ekki séð hann. (Icelandic)  
 no Johann have *pro* not seen him  
 ‘No, Johann, I haven’t seen him.’  
 (Sigurðsson 2011:287)
- b. \*Nee, Jan, heb \_\_\_\_ (‘m) niet gezien. (Dutch)  
 no Jan have *pro* him not seen  
 ‘No, I haven’t seen Jan.’

I will now turn to Old English and show that *pro drop* occurs and is licensed by agreement on the verb. It thus receives an analysis with an incorporated pronoun, as in Italian. I will also examine the type of topic that licenses this particular null subject and the position the null argument moves to in the contemporary Germanic languages.

## 2 Old English

Old English has three types of subject pronouns. In section 2.1, I outline some of the subjects that are available and show that Old English *pro drop* looks unlike Modern Germanic topic drop in that Old English null subjects can appear after initial adverbials and in subordinate clauses. In section 2.2, I present the Old English agreement system and argue that as in Italian, agreement helps license *pro drop*. In section 2.3, I argue that Old English null subjects are typically controlled by familiar or given topics that continue aboutness-shift topics; I then turn to Modern English.

### 2.1 Old English Subject Pronouns, Overt and Null

Old English has three types of subject pronouns used to refer to previously mentioned nouns: an *h*-pronoun, an independent demonstrative, and a null subject. All three are represented in (6).

(6) Talking about the warriors present in the hall:

Wæs þeaw hyra þæt **hie** oft wæron an wig gearwe wæs **seo** þeod tilu.  
 was custom their that they often were one war ready was that people good  
 — Sigon þa to slæpe  
*pro* sank then to sleep

‘It was their custom that they were always ready for war. They were good people. They went to sleep.’

(*Beowulf* 1246–51; punctuation and capitalization as in the facsimile edited by Zupitza (1959))

In (6), the expletive subject is left empty (as is common in Old English), but I will ignore expletives here. The subject of the subordinate clause is an *h*-pronoun, *hie* ‘they’, and the continued topic is referred to by the stronger, demonstrative pronoun *seo*, to emphasize that this line refers to the same people who were just mentioned, rather than to people mentioned earlier. There is no break in the manuscript until the period before the verb *sigon* ‘sank’. Periods are rare in the manuscript; moreover, *sigon* is capitalized and starts a new section in the text. Yet the subject of *sigon* is a null subject that continues the topic. The verb ending *-on* is plural but not specified for person. Reflexive pronouns (not shown in (6)) do not (yet) have a distinctive form in Old English; the *h*-pronoun is used instead. Old English *h*-pronouns are therefore not independently referential but anaphoric, much like null arguments. Demonstrative pronouns typically shift the topic or are emphatic, as in (6).

Whether Old English is genuinely a *pro drop* language is a controversial issue. Mitchell (1985:628–634), Traugott (1992), and I (van Gelderen 2000) claim that *pro drop* exists, whereas

Visser (1963:4) and others argue that the overt pronoun “was the rule.” Using corpus data, Rusten (2010) and Walkden (2012) show that Old English texts vary tremendously. According to Walkden (2012:184–187), texts such as *Beowulf* have 21.8% pro drop in main clauses but other (later) texts have less; for example, *Orosius* has 0.3%. Walkden argues that pro drop is an Anglian dialect feature—that is, present in Northumbrian and Mercian texts. This is correct, although of course we have more older texts from the Anglian area than from the West Saxon ones.

Mainly on the basis of the data from the Anglian area, I therefore assume that null subjects occur in Old English, although they are in decline. As I will show, these null subjects constitute pro drop and not topic drop because they follow sentence adverbials and occur in subordinate clauses. Sentences (7) and (8) have adverbials before the finite verb, making Old English very different from the modern Germanic languages with topic drop.

- (7) **Nu** — scylun hergan hefaenricaes uard  
 now *pro* must praise heaven.kingdom’s guard  
 ‘Now **we** must praise the lord of the heavenly kingdom.’  
 (beginning of the Northumbrian version of *Caedmon’s Hymn*, Cambridge University Library manuscript M, also known as the Moore Manuscript)

- (8) **Nearwe** — genyddon on norðwegas.  
 anxiously *pro* hastened on north.ways  
 ‘Anxiously, **they** hastened north.’  
 (Exodus 68, Krapp 1931 edition)

As for pro drop in subordinate clauses, this is somewhat frequent, as shown by Pogatscher’s (1901:261) 176 examples. Examples of embedded null subjects are provided in (9)–(13), the last two from prose texts; all five are listed in Visser 1963:4.

- (9) Talking about Hrothgar:  
 Him on mod bearn þæt — healreced hatan wolde medoærn micel men  
 him to mind came that *pro* palace command would meadhall large men  
 gewyrcean  
 build  
 ‘He thought that he would order his men to build a big hall, a big meadhall.’  
 (*Beowulf* 67–69)
- (10) Talking about sea-demons:  
 þæt — syðþan na ymb brotne ford brimliðende lade ne letton  
 that *pro* since.then never on broad waterway seafarers passage not let  
 ‘that they after that never kept people from passing that water’  
 (*Beowulf* 567–569)

- (11) Beowulf is described and speaks:

— Gegrette ða gumena gehwylcne . . .

*pro* greeted then men every

Nolde ic sweord beran wæpen to wyrme gif ic wiste hu — wið ðam  
not.wanted I sword bear weapon to dragon if I knew how *pro* against that  
aglæcean elles meahte  
monster else might

‘He greeted then the men . . . I would bear no sword, weapon against the dragon, if I knew what else I could do against the monster.’

(*Beowulf* 2514–2520)

- (12)
- sume men secgað þæt þa beteran wæren þonne — nu sien*

some men say that then better were than *pro* now are

‘Some men say that the tides were better then than they are now.’

(Alfred, *Orosius*, Bately 1980 edition, 49.3)

- (13)
- Ða wæs sum þegen annanias gehaten. and his wif saphira hi cwædon him*
- 
- then was some thane Ananias named and his wife Saphira they said them
- 
- betweenan þæt hi woldon bugan to þæra apostola geferrædene:

between that they would bend to the apostles’ fellowship

— namon þa to ræde þæt him wærligor wære þæt hi sumne dæl heora  
*pro* took then to council that them better was that they some part their  
landes wurþes æthæfdon weald hu him getimode.

land’s worth withhold in.case how them befell

‘There was a thane, Ananias, and his wife, Saphira, and they said between themselves that they wanted to join the fellowship of the apostles. They then proposed to the council that it was better for them to keep part of their land’s worth to themselves in case anything should happen to them.’

(Ælfric, *Homilies* I, Thorpe 1844–46 edition, 316.22–26)

Walkden (2012:184, 188) shows that *pro* drop in main clauses is more frequent than *pro* drop in subordinate clauses in, for instance, *Beowulf* and that the difference is statistically significant in this text. However, null subjects do occur in subordinate clauses, making Old English very different from Old French and Old High German. Adams (1987) and Axel (2007) argue that null subjects depend on verb movement in Old French and Old High German, respectively. Sentence (14) shows such a null subject with verb movement.<sup>1</sup>

- (14)
- Sume hahet in cruci*

some hang.2PL to cross

‘Some of them, you will crucify.’

(*Monsee Fragments*, Axel 2007:293)

(Old High German)

<sup>1</sup> As a reviewer points out, even though Old French and Old High German did not have null subjects in subordinate clauses, they could have lexical material in the C-domain, as (14) shows.

Axel's evidence for the role of verb movement is that there is no pro drop in subordinate clauses and that there are very few verb-initial structures with pro drop unless they are *yes/no* questions. Adams (1987) similarly claims that verb fronting in the main clause is relevant in Old French. In modern Germanic, the only cases of null arguments involve the main clause<sup>2</sup> and therefore automatically exhibit verb-second; but in Old High German and Old French, the movement of the verb extends the clause to a CP that can be involved in C/edge licensing.

Thus, as (9)–(13) show, Old English is quite different from Old High German and Old French in having pro drop in subordinate clauses, not licensed by verb movement. Therefore, Old English null subjects look like instances of pro drop. In the next section, I examine what may be responsible for licensing them.

## 2.2 *The Role of Agreement*

As mentioned above, Sigurðsson (2011) argues that agreement in Italian is an incorporated pronoun, with first and second person matching the speaker and addressee features in the C-domain and third person matching an aboutness-shift topic in the C-edge. Unlike in Italian, in Old English first and second person pronouns are less frequently dropped than third person ones (as shown in Berndt 1956, van Gelderen 2000, and Walkden 2012). I will argue that the reason for this is the loss of overt agreement on the first and second person pronouns' verbs; that is, the agreement features are uninterpretable. Third person verbal agreement, especially singular, remains more stable (up to the present), and this licenses third person pro drop up to late Old English because the features on the verb are interpretable. The licensing by agreement readily follows from Sigurðsson's model for Italian.

Regarding the person split, Berndt (1956) shows that pro drop occurs more with third than with first and second persons. I reproduce his data in table 1 for the Lindisfarne and Rushworth Gospels (but see also van Gelderen 2000:chap. 3). The data represent two (Anglian) dialect areas: sections 1 and 2 of Lindisfarne and section 2 of Rushworth are Northumbrian, and section 1 of Rushworth is Mercian. Both manuscripts are glosses to a Latin original. However, whereas the

**Table 1**

Null and overt subjects in Lindisfarne and Rushworth Gospels (percentages represent overt subjects)

	Lindisfarne		Rushworth	
	Section 1	Section 2	Section 1	Section 2
1SG	9/212 (= 96%)	9/656 (= 99%)	6/191 (= 97%)	21/528 (= 96%)
1PL	0/53 (= 100%)	1/120 (= 99%)	1/44 (= 98%)	2/100 (= 98%)
2SG	16/103 (= 87%)	22/308 (= 93%)	12/90 (= 88%)	22/226 (= 91%)
2PL	10/206 (= 95%)	21/428 (= 95%)	20/168 (= 89%)	62/302 (= 83%)
3SG	445/116 (= 21%)	1292/225 (= 15%)	223/246 (= 54%)	995/186 (= 16%)
3PL	263/108 (= 29%)	618/154 (= 20%)	130/141 (= 52%)	528/124 (= 19%)

<sup>2</sup> See Sigurðsson 2011:292–293 for extraction drop in Swedish and Icelandic, where a subordinate subject is dropped if the C-domain is left empty. I disregard these cases here.



**Table 2**

Subject-verb agreement pattern for weak verbs in Old English when the subject precedes the verb

Present		Preterite	
Singular	1 -e	Singular	1 -de
	2 -(e)s(t)		2 -des(t)
	3 -(e)ð		3 -de
Plural	-að	Plural	-dun, -don, -dan

gloss maker adds first and second person pronouns to the glosses of Latin verb forms, he doesn't add third person pronouns. For instance, 7 of the first 30 occurrences of Latin *dico* 'I say' are preceded by *ego* 'I', but the Northumbrian version has 29 instances of *ic*; that is, 22 have been added. Contrast this with third person: in the glosses of the 27 occurrences of *dicit* 'he says', the Northumbrian version never adds a third person pronoun. The small difference between the dialects is not so important; the main point is to show that first and second person pronouns act very differently from third.

The person split where pro drop is concerned may indicate that agreement is involved in licensing pro drop. Third person agreement would be interpretable (in the sense of Chomsky 1995 and later works), but first and second agreement would be uninterpretable or at least variable.

If we look at one of the traditional agreement patterns in table 2 (based on Campbell 1959), we see that all persons are marked separately in the singular but that the first person ending is just a schwa and the second person ending can be reduced to *-(e)s*. That the third person singular *-eð* differs in phonological strength from *-es* is argued by Jespersen (1942:17) and, even if one is skeptical about *-es* being a reduced form in table 2, first and second person singular and plural agreement are frequently reduced when the subject follows the verb (see van Gelderen 2000: 158–162) but third person singular agreement is not.

The reduction seen in table 2 is also found in the dialects of the Lindisfarne and Rushworth glosses; that is, the endings of verbs preceded by pronominal subjects are reduced in the first person singular in Rushworth and in the second person singular in both Rushworth and Lindisfarne. Table 3 shows the inflections for strong verbs in the indicative singular, accompanied by pro

**Table 3**

Lindisfarne and Rushworth inflections on strong indicative verbs with and without a pronoun (based on Berndt 1956:94–131)

	Lindisfarne (section 1)		Rushworth (section 1)	
	With pronoun	Without	With pronoun	Without
1SG	-o	-o	-e	-u
2SG	-as, -es, -s, -st	(none)	-es(t), -ast, -st	-est
3SG	-eð, -es, -as	-eð, -es, -as, -æs	-eþ, eth, -aþ	-eþ, -aþ, -æþ, -iþ

drop or a pronominal subject. The forms are based on Berndt 1956:94–131, for section 1 of Lindisfarne and section 1 of Rushworth (i.e., the Northumbrian dialect and the Mercian dialect, respectively). An example of pro drop with full verbal inflection is given in (15).

- (15) ic sæcge þe þæt to ðisse niht ærþon hona cræd þriowa — me **onsæcest**.  
 I say you that on this night before cock crows thrice *pro* me deny.2SG  
 ‘I say to you that this night before the cock crows you will deny me three times.’  
 (Rushworth, Matthew 26.34, from Berndt 1956:98)

Let me say a little about the role of number. As table 1 indicates, there is more pro drop in the singular than in the plural in all three numbers, and first and second person plural pattern with the singular in occurring more often with an overt subject. The plural verbs in Old English have the same ending, as shown in table 2. This makes it hard to account for the person split in the pro drop data that are shown in table 2. Table 2 is based on cases where the subject precedes the verb. In cases where the order is reversed, however, there is a difference: first and second person plural endings are more reduced than third. Campbell (1959:296) writes, “When a pronoun of the 1st or 2nd pers. follows, the pl[ural] endings *-þ, -on, -en* can be reduced to *-e*.”

The account I will suggest, therefore, is that some agreement features in Old English are interpretable. Old English pro drop and verbal agreement were robust enough for the language learner to have sufficient evidence to include interpretable  $\phi$ -features on T, unlike in present-day English. In late Old English, a reanalysis occurs from interpretable to uninterpretable (see van Gelderen 2011 for more on third-factor principles that may be responsible for this), starting with first and second person agreement. In Old English, pro drop is possible but there is a person split suggesting that, if we think of pro drop as indicating “strength” of the agreement features, third person retains interpretable features the longest. Once the interpretable features on the verb are lost, a pronoun with interpretable features becomes obligatory.<sup>3</sup>

The null subject situation in Old English can be summarized as follows:

- Pro drop occurs in all persons, but more with third person than with first and second.
- Verb movement is not required for pro drop to occur.
- Pro drop occurs without the null subject having to move to the C-domain.

In the next section, I turn to the licensing topic.

### 2.3 *The Null Subject’s Topic*

In this section, I examine which topic serves as the C/edge linker. I also discuss which position the null topic moves to in the C-domain in those languages where it needs to move.

As argued by Sigurðsson (2011) and by Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl (2007), there are at least three types of topics—aboutness-shift, contrastive, and familiar—and they occur in the following hierarchy:

<sup>3</sup> The link between rich agreement and pro drop is of course not an absolute one. For instance, Icelandic has rich verbal agreement but pro drop is licensed by an antecedent, according to Sigurðsson (1993).

- (16) Aboutness-Shift Topic (ST) > Contrastive Topic (CT) > Familiar Topic (FT)  
(Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl 2007:89)

The aboutness-shift topic is a newly introduced or changed-to topic; the contrastive topic “induces alternatives which have no impact on the focus value” (Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl 2007:89); and the familiar topic is typically unstressed and pronominal. Evidence for the various topics comes from pitch and also from word order, as in (17). In (17), the aboutness-shift topic precedes the familiar topic.

- (17) **Io, inglese** non l’avevo mai fatto. (Italian = ST > FT)  
I English not it.have never done  
‘I never studied English before.’  
(Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl 2007:96)

Frascarelli (2007:704) argues that null subjects “are always interpreted in relation with the closest Aboutness-shift Topic without ambiguities” and that “the interpretation of referential *pro* does not depend on the agreement features of the licensing head, but on a matching relation with the local Aboutness-shift Topic.” An example of an aboutness-shift topic, *il mio capo* ‘my boss’, that licenses *pro* drop in Italian is given in (18).

- (18) [**il mio capo**]<sub>i</sub> come diceva Carlo [ . . . ] **pro**<sub>i</sub> è un exreporter [ . . . ]  
[**my boss**]<sub>i</sub> as Carlo used to say [ . . . ] **pro**<sub>i</sub> is a former reporter [ . . . ]  
**pro**<sub>i</sub> è stato in giro per il mondo [ . . . ] **pro**<sub>i</sub> mi ha preso in simpatia solo [ . . . ]  
**pro**<sub>i</sub> has been all over the world [ . . . ] **pro**<sub>i</sub> likes me  
‘My boss, as Carlo used to say, he is a former reporter, he has been all over the world, he likes me.’  
(Frascarelli 2007:703, with her marking of *pro* retained)

When the aboutness-shift topic is maintained throughout the text, as in (18), it is not distinct from a familiar topic. That is, familiar topics continue the aboutness-shift topic, according to Frascarelli (2007) and Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl (2007:111–112), and I will refer to this sequence as *aboutness shift/familiar topic*.

Now, what are the topics that null arguments refer to in Old English? In the opening lines of *Beowulf*, there are a number of null subjects. In (19), the narrator talks about Scyld Scefing, who is first introduced by name and then referred to by means of a null subject. The passage in (20), with a variety of subjects (an *h*-pronoun, a demonstrative, and one null subject), follows immediately.

- (19) Oft **Scyld Scefing** sceaþena þreatum monegum mægþum meodo setla of  
often Scyld Scefing shadows crowd many family mead benches away  
teah egsode eorl syððan — ærest wearð feascaft funden  
took scared brave.men since *pro* early became poor found  
‘Often Scyld Scefing took away mead-benches from the crowd of warriors, from many people, after he had once been discovered poor.’

- (20) **he** þæs frofre gebad — weox under wolcnum weorðmyndum þah. oð þ  
 he that consolation waited *pro* grew under clouds honor grew till that  
 him æghwylc þara ymb sittendra ofer hronrade hyran scolde gomban gyldan  
 him every those around sitting across sea obey should tribute pay  
**þ** wæs god cyning.  
 that was good king  
 ‘He was consoled for that. He grew up. His honor grew until every one of the neighbor-  
 ing people on the other side of the sea had to obey him and pay tribute. He was a good  
 king.’  
 (*Beowulf* 4–11; again the punctuation and spelling are as in the facsimile)

In (19), *Scyld* is the aboutness-shift topic, and the null subject connected to *wearð* ‘became’ is licensed by that topic. This topic is subsequently referred to with an *h*-pronoun, *he* in (20); in other words, *he* is a familiar topic that continues the aboutness-shift topic *Scyld*. The next *pro* drop occurs before *weox* ‘grew’ and is licensed by the familiar topic *he*. The topic then shifts again to the king with the demonstrative *þ*, short for *þæt*.

The first problem we face is that we don’t have a very clear prediction of when *pro* drop will occur or when a pronoun will. Frascarelli (2007:713) says that “the use of weak pronouns in a [null subject] language can be considered as a stylistic means to restate the Aboutness Topic, which is idiosyncratic to individual speakers.” I will assume the same idiosyncrasy for Old English null subjects and *h*-pronouns.

The second problem is to determine what types of topics license null subjects in Old English. To review the null subjects in previous examples: The null subject in (6) refers to the topic ‘the warriors’. When first introduced, it is an aboutness-shift topic, but it is a familiar topic in the local C-domain; that is, the familiar topic continues the aboutness-shift one (Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl 2007:114). Sentence (7) is the beginning of a prayer and is addressed to the hearer; thus, the null subject is interpreted as inclusive first person plural. First and second person *pro* drop is not licensed by a topic here; rather, it is licensed by the C/edge linkers “speaker” and “addressee.” As for (8), the entire context is that given in (21), from a translation into Modern English. The text talks about Moses leading his people out of Egypt, and it contains several topics: *Moses*, ‘his people’, and ‘host/army’ are all aboutness-shift/familiar topics. In the final sentence (i.e., (8)), the third person plural is left null, and even though some topics intervene between the null subject and the topic ‘people’, and ‘people’ isn’t the most obvious topic to link with the null subject, the plural ending on the verb serves to disambiguate.

- (21) Past these, with many a hindrance, Moses led his people. And two nights after they  
 escaped their foes God bade the noble prince to make encampment about the town of  
 Etham in the marchlands, with all his force, a mighty army, and tumult of the host.  
 With anxious hearts **they** hastened on their northward way.  
 (lines 61–69, from <http://omacl.org/Junius/exodus.html>)

In (9) and (10), there are no intervening topics. The null subject in (9) refers to Hrothgar, who has just been introduced as *him*. The null subject in (10) refers to ‘the sea-demons’, which were

introduced and referred to by means of *h*-pronouns just before (10) was uttered. In (11), the third person pro drop starting the sentence is certainly an aboutness-shift/familiar topic since *Beowulf* has been the topic for a few lines; the first person pro drop is immediately preceded by two overt pronouns that are licensed by the “speaker” in the C/edge. In (12), the null subject refers to *sume men* ‘some men’, and no other possible antecedents intervene. In (13), the most immediate possible antecedent for the null subject is the plural *þæra apostola* ‘of the apostles’ rather than the pronoun *hi* ‘they’. It may be that ‘the apostles’ is too much in a focus position as genitive to *geferrædene* ‘fellowship’ to serve as a topic; hence, the null subject is interpreted as referring back to *hi*. To answer the question, then, of what types of topics license null subjects in Old English: they are aboutness-shift topics, continued by familiar topics.

Now, where are the null topics actually moving to in the C-domain? For Sigurðsson (2011), this is not important as long as they are below the CLn positions. Bianchi and Frascarelli (2009: 15–16) argue that Modern English has positions for aboutness-shift and contrastive topics but lacks a dedicated position for familiar/continuing topics. A left-dislocated topic represents the aboutness-shift topic and a topicalization represents the contrastive topic and secondarily the familiar topic. If that is indeed the case, the Modern English topic drop in (4c) may be licensed by an aboutness-shift topic, and that in (4a–b) by the “speaker” and “hearer.” The null subject could be moving to Spec,FinP, the lowest position in the C-domain.

In Old English, movement of the null argument to the C-domain is not necessary (yet). Still, it would be interesting to consider which positions are available, possibly to see how topic drop is licensed by this movement in Modern English. How do we know which topic positions are available in Old English? Koopman (1997:308) provides examples of multiple topics, among them (22) and (23).

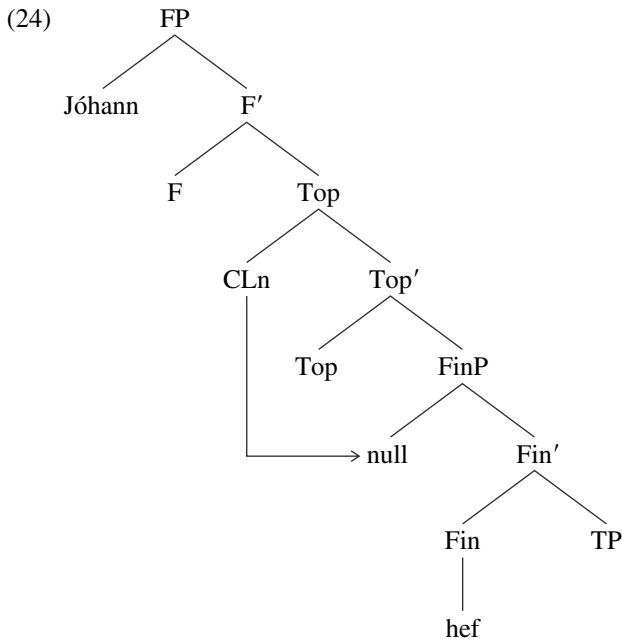
- (22) [Eft] [on þære ylcan nihte] [æfter þæs ceman martyrdome] **ferde** decius to þam  
 again on the same night after the soldier’s martyrdom went Decius to the  
 hatum baþum wið ðam botle salustii  
 hot baths opposite the house Salust  
 ‘Again, on the same night, after the soldier’s martyrdom, Decius went to the hot baths,  
 opposite the house of Sallust.’  
 (Ælfric, *Homilies* I, Thorpe 1844–46 edition, 428.9)

- (23) [Him] [sona] [of heofena mihte] **com** unasecgendlic myrhð, engla sum mid  
 him at.once from heavens’ might came unspeakable joy angel some with  
 blisse, se . . .  
 bliss who  
 ‘There came to him at once through heavens’ might unspeakable joy, an angel, with  
 bliss, who . . .’  
 (Baker and Lapidge 1995; *Byrhtferth’s Enchiridion*, 150.22)

These topics are hard to classify in a hierarchy, such as (16), which prompts a reviewer to not regard them as topics. In (22), *eft* ‘again’ is an unlikely aboutness-shift topic (or hanging topic, which I have not discussed). It could be a familiar topic together with *on þære ylcan nihte* ‘on the same night’ and even with *æfter þæs ceman martyrdome* ‘after the soldier’s martyrdom’

because events on that night were described just before. The sequence of what look like three topics would thus be only one topic, not a sequence. In the sentence before (23), a third person pronoun is used twice, and the *him* in (23) is therefore a familiar topic. If *him* is a familiar topic, it isn't clear where the other two topics are generated, but we see that the C-domain is quite full! This is not an issue because the null argument does not need to move to the C-domain in Old English. What about the languages where this movement does happen?

Let us look at the Icelandic sentence (5a). Here, the first person null argument is licensed by the C/edge linker ‘‘speaker.’’ Sigurðsson (2011:287) argues that *Jóhann* in (5a) must be high since these ‘‘elements do not induce intervention’’ between the CL<sub>n</sub> and the null topic. If the finite verb *hef* ‘have’ is in Fin, the most obvious position that is left for the null subject is Spec,FinP, as shown in (24).



As we saw in (5b), however, the position of various topics may vary. The shift from Old to Modern English involves the loss of verb movement to Fin (which was finalized before 1600); this loss means that Spec,FinP remains available for null arguments to move to, as in (4a–c).

In section 2, I have provided examples of Old English pro drop and have argued that, in accordance with Frascarelli 2007 and Sigurðsson 2011, the topics licensing the null subject are aboutness-shift topics that are continued by familiar topics. Old English differs from the modern Germanic languages in that the agreement on the verb is interpretable and the null argument does not need to move to the C-domain. This makes it like Italian and means that initial adverbials and complementizers do not block null subjects, as shown in (7)–(13). In Modern English and the other modern Germanic languages, agreement is uninterpretable and the null topic needs to move to Spec,FinP (such movement being blocked, however, by intervening adverbials and complementizers).

### 3 Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that Old English has pro drop (probably in addition to topic drop, though I have not addressed that question here). Since verbal agreement still distinguishes the different persons, Old English can be added to Sigurðsson's (2011) list of languages that have Romance-style pro drop. Old English is like Italian in that null subjects can be matched with a speaker, hearer, or topic without needing to move to the C-domain. Once agreement changes, English becomes similar to the other (modern) Germanic languages in licensing topic drop only if the null subject can move to the C-domain to avoid intervention by C, in accordance with the C/Edge-Linking Generalization.

### References

- Adams, Marianne. 1987. From Old French to the theory of pro-drop. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 5:1–32.
- Axel, Katrin. 2007. *Studies on Old High German syntax*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Baker, Peter, and Michael Lapidge, eds. 1995. *Byrhtferth's Enchiridion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series 15.]
- Bately, Janet, ed. 1980. *The Old English Orosius*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series 6.]
- Berndt, Rolf. 1956. *Form und Funktion des Verbums im nördlichen Späلتenglischen*. Halle: Max Niemeyer.
- Bianchi, Valentina, and Mara Frascarelli. 2009. Is topic a root phenomenon? Ms., Università degli Studi di Siena and Università degli Roma Tre.
- Biberauer, Theresa, Anders Holmberg, Ian Roberts, and Michelle Sheehan, eds. 2010. *Parametric variation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Campbell, Alistair. 1959. *Old English grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1995. *The Minimalist Program*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Chomsky, Noam. 2005. Three factors in language design. *Linguistic Inquiry* 36:1–22.
- Cole, Peter. 1987. Null objects in Universal Grammar. *Linguistic Inquiry* 18:597–612.
- Frascarelli, Mara. 2007. Subjects, topics and the interpretation of referential pro. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 25:691–734.
- Frascarelli, Mara, and Roland Hinterhölzl. 2007. Types of topics in German and Italian. In *On information structure, meaning and form*, ed. by Kerstin Schwabe and Susanne Winkler, 87–116. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Gelderen, Elly van. 2000. *A history of English reflexive pronouns*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Gelderen, Elly van. 2011. *The linguistic cycle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holmberg, Anders. 2005. Is there a little pro? *Linguistic Inquiry* 36:533–564.
- Jespersen, Otto. 1942. *A modern English grammar VI*. Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard.
- Koopman, Willem. 1997. Topicalization in Old English and its effects: Some remarks. In *Language history and linguistic modeling*, ed. by Raymond Hickey and Stanislaw Puppel, 307–321. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Krapp, G. P., ed. 1931. *The Junius manuscript*. Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 1. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Mitchell, Bruce. 1985. *Old English syntax I*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Pogatscher, Alois. 1901. Unausgedrücktes Subjekt im Altenglischen. *Anglia* 23:261–301.
- Rusten, Kristian. 2010. A study of empty referential pronominal subjects in Old English. Master's thesis, University of Bergen.
- Sigurðsson, Halldór. 1993. Argument-drop in Old Icelandic. *Lingua* 89:247–280.
- Sigurðsson, Halldór. 2011. Conditions on argument drop. *Linguistic Inquiry* 42:267–304.

- Thorpe, Benjamin. 1844–46. *The homilies of the Anglo-Saxon church*. 2 vols. London: Ælfric Society.
- Traugott, Elizabeth. 1992. Syntax. In *The Cambridge history of the English language I: Old English*, ed. by Richard Hogg, 168–289. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Visser, F. Th. 1963. *An historical syntax of the English language I*. Leiden: Brill.
- Walkden, George. 2012. Syntactic reconstruction and Proto Germanic. Doctoral dissertation, University of Cambridge.
- Zupitza, Julius. 1959. *Beowulf, reproduced in facsimile*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [Early English Text Society, Original Series 245.]

*Department of English*  
*Arizona State University*  
*Tempe, AZ 85287-0302*  
*ellyvangelder@asu.edu*

### **Does Maliseet-Passamaquoddy Have VP-Ellipsis?**

*Philip S. LeSourd*

Richards (2009) proposes that VP-Ellipsis relates pairs of sentences in the Eastern Algonquian language Maliseet-Passamaquoddy that contain morphologically related verbs, one of which lacks a stem component that appears in the other. Under his proposal, the polysynthetic verbs of the language are decomposed into abstract syntactic structures, and VP-Ellipsis is applicable within the word. I argue that his data are better explained without postulating VP-Ellipsis for Maliseet-Passamaquoddy. The verbs that he sees as derived via ellipsis are independently occurring lexical items. There are in fact no ellipsis gaps in the structures he considers, only null pronouns, and overt pronouns may always occur in the relevant positions. My conclusions are fully consistent with the Lexical Integrity Hypothesis of Bresnan and Mchombo (1995).

*Keywords:* polysynthesis, lexical integrity, VP-Ellipsis, Maliseet-Passamaquoddy, Algonquian

### **1 Introduction**

Richards (2009) proposes that the relationship between pairs of Maliseet-Passamaquoddy sentences like (1a) and (1b) reflects the application of VP-Ellipsis. Maliseet-Passamaquoddy is an Eastern Algonquian language of New Brunswick and Maine. Richards's examples come from

I owe special thanks to the two Passamaquoddy elders who worked most closely with me in connection with the present project, Estelle Neptune and Wayne Newell. Passamaquoddy consultant Phillip Newell made important contributions as well. Maliseet speakers Victor Atwin, Sharon Nash, Darryl Nicholas, and Alice Paul provided assistance with material in their language. Paul Kroeber, Kevin Rottet, and Rex Sprouse commented helpfully on drafts of this article, and two *LI* reviewers made suggestions that led to substantial improvements.