



NULL-SUBJECT PARAMETER IN ENGLISH AND PASHTO: A CROSS-LINGUISTIC SYNTACTIC STUDY

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Abstract

The paper explores whether Pashto qualifies as a null-subject (pro-drop) language within the framework of Universal Grammar (UG). Specifically, it examines the operation of the null-subject parameter in Pashto and compared it with English, where subject pronouns must be overtly expressed. The study applies qualitative research design. The data sample consisted of naturally occurring conversations collected from everyday discourse in contexts including family discussions, school interactions, and workplace exchanges within Pashtun society. The study uses these contexts to ensure authentic language use and to capture a broad range of syntactic environments. The analysis employs principles and parameters theory as the guiding framework, focusing on syntactic structures in finite clauses. The examples in the study examines to determine whether subject pronouns could be omitted without loss of clarity or grammaticality. The study finding shows that Pashto consistently allows the omission of subject pronouns in finite clauses, demonstrating pro-drop behavior enabled by its rich agreement morphology and reliance on contextual cues. In contrast, English does not permit such omissions, as its verb morphology lacks sufficient agreement to identify the subject, resulting in ungrammatical sentences when subjects are omitted. These findings confirm that Pashto sets the null-subject parameter to allow pro-drop, while English does not, thereby highlighting a clear parametric difference between the two languages. The results confirm the refinement of UG parameters, with Pashto conforming as a null-subject (pro-drop) language through its rich agreement morphology and consistent pro-drop behavior. Further studies may be carried out in the future to examine the limits and restrictions of pro-drop within Pashto and the way in which both the null subjects are acquired and processed within these languages.

Keywords: *English, Generative Syntax, Minimalist Program, Null-Subject Parameter, Pashto, Pro-drop*

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1. Introduction

Subject and Predicate are the two basic component that make up a sentence. The subject is commonly referred to as the naming part of a sentence or clauses (Nordquist, 2019) while the predicate determines what the subject is doing or what the subject is. Historically, the relationship between the subject and the predicate has been taken to be a structural characteristic of any language by grammarians. Certain world languages do permit sentences to be grammatically complete and still meaningful without an explicit subject bearing a finite verb while other do not permit this process. The languages which permit are called the null-subject or pro-drop languages. In this way, the subject does not come out clearly but can be deduced by the context by the native speakers (Macdonald, 2016). Accordingly, a null subject has both grammatical and semantic characteristics but does not have a spoken or written expression. On the other hand, in some languages finite verbs typically have an explicit subject on which a sentence can be considered grammatically sound. In such non-pro-drop or non-null-subject languages, the subject is required to be bot grammatically and phonetically present; otherwise, dropping it makes the sentence ungrammatical. These two kinds of languages are universal and binary: a language is systematically permitting or lacking null subjects (Radford, 2009). This is one of the most important differences among natural languages, which is reflected by this parameter of the null subject. Noteworthy, the difference does not seem out of genetic ties among languages as closely associated languages might vary in this regard whereas unrelated languages might act in the same way (Jaeggli and Safir, 1989). To study parameter of the null-subject, the paper is a comparative analysis of the null-subject parameter of Pashto and English, an attempt to explain how each language manages the presence or absence of the overt subjects in the grammatically correct sentences. The current paper is based on the theoretical linguistics and aims at explaining the null-subject in both languages within the framework of the Minimalist Program, introduced by Chomsky.

1.1 Research Questions

- What type of parametric choice does Pashto language shows in the setting of the subject parameter?
- How does Pashto language differ from English language in terms of the null-subject parameter?

2. Literature review

The concept of the theory of Universal Grammar (UG) is founded on the assumption that human beings are born with natural language a gift of linguistic knowledge and principles (Radford, 2009; Culicover, 1991). The other point that is explained by this theory is parametric variation; this is characterized by systematic grammatical variations that the human language faculty allows (Biberauer et al., 2009).

When one wants to learn the grammatical competence of a native speaker, he or she has to examine the cognitive system that is internalized in the brain/mind of the native speakers (Chomsky, 2007). The theory of UG states that this internal system is common to all humans (Chomsky, 2007), and that although the face of languages may be diverse, there are minimal similarities that can be ascribed to the inherent principles of language. As Chomsky (2000) puts it, all human languages are united in terms of finite core principles which are incorporated into the language faculty. This does not however imply that every language is grammatically similar. The various languages have their own distinct, language-specific characteristics, including vocabulary and syntax. As an example, word order could differ across languages. According to Smith (2005) as much as languages vary in numerous aspects, children are born with universal principles and a number of viable alternatives. The said differences are regarded as being parametric, and UG describes cross-linguistic variation as being a systematic choice of parameters that are either turned off or turned on in a given language (Biberauer et al., 2009). The principles and parameters model created by Chomsky (1993) and expanded by other linguists including Radford (1997, 2004a, 2004b) and Webelhuth (1995) accounts the syntax of natural languages in terms of general principles and parameters. A good example is the head parameter that is the position of the head element in a phrase (Haegeman, 2009; Cook, 1988). In a head-initial language, such as Thai and Yoruba, the heads come before their complements whereas in a head-final language, such as Turkish, Basque, and Tamil, the heads come after their complements (Kornfilt, 1997; Comrie, 1981). The other significant syntactic variation that is of interest to the current study is the parameter of the null subject. Macdonald (2016) explains that the null-subject or pro-drop parameter is one of the UG principles and parameters theorized concepts. Nordquist (2019) refers to a null subject as an absence (or apparent absence) of a subject in a sentence, a phenomenon otherwise called subject drop. Biberauer et al. (2009) discuss the null subject parameter as one of the most popular examples of parametric variation because it defines the possibility of omitting subject pronouns in a language. According to Cook (1994), there are languages that do not require explicit subjects in a sentence like Hungarian, Greek and Malayalam that are pro-drop languages. Other such languages as Dutch, Swedish, and Polish have overt subjects and are classified as non-pro-drop languages. As Macdonald (2016) notes, although pro-drop cannot be used in English, in Portuguese, it is a characteristic of syntax. Radford (2004a) confirms this saying that all finite clauses in Portuguese have null subjects, but English is a non-pro-drop language (Chomsky, 1995; Radford, 2004a).

In English, the subject position specifically, the Specifier of Inflection is overt and morphologically realized. If a sentence is constructed with a null subject in this position, it becomes ungrammatical and unacceptable to native speakers (Radford, 2004a). As Nordquist (2019) explains, a subject is normally essential in English sentence structure, to

the extent that a dummy subject (e.g., “There is a problem”) is sometimes required. However, subjects are typically omitted in imperative sentences (e.g., “Go!”) and may be dropped in informal contexts (e.g., “Coming soon”). Thus, while English is not a null-subject language, it does allow pro-drop in imperatives and truncated null subjects in colloquial speech (Radford, 2004a).

This article adopts a parametric approach to linguistic variation within the Minimalist Program, using Pashto as a case study to explore the typology of null-subject language systems. Pashto belongs to the Eastern Iranian division of the group of Indo-Iranian languages of Indo-European language family. It is official languages in Afghanistan and is also used in some regions of Pakistan especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Baluchistan as a regional indigenous language of Pashtun community. Pashto has a highly developed inflection system, which indicates tense, aspect, mood, gender, number and case. In the Pashto, nouns are divided based on gender (masculine and feminine), number (singular and plural), and case (direct and oblique), but verbs are person, number and time inflexed. The dialects of Pashto are also diverse and can vary in the area of phonology and some grammatical aspects.

3. Research Methodology

This study is descriptive in nature and employs an observational and analytical research method to investigate the phenomena in question (Creswell, 2014). The data has been analyzed qualitatively. Observation as research tools is used for data collection and natural conversation is observed and collected in everyday discourse to obtain authentic data in a real-life context (Dörnyei, 2007). The researchers, being native speakers of Pashto with an academic background in English Linguistics, analyzed the conversations to confirm the presence or absence of the null subject parameter in Pashto. This analysis was cross-checked and authenticate by two Pashto native speakers who hold PhDs in English linguistics and are recognized experts in the field. The data was examined within the framework of the Minimalist Program, introduced by Chomsky. The Minimalist Program seeks to explain the properties of natural language using the simplest and most economical principles possible. Regarding the Null-Subject Parameter, the Minimalist Program proposes that the ability of a language to allow or disallow null subjects is determined by specific syntactic features, such as the richness of verbal inflection and the presence of agreement. In pro-drop (null-subject) languages, these features enable the subject to be omitted because its reference can be recovered from the verb morphology or context, whereas in non-pro-drop languages, the subject must be overtly expressed for the sentence to be grammatical.

3.1. Theoretical framework

The Minimalist Program, introduced by Chomsky in 1995, aims to account for the structure of natural languages using the most economical and universal principles. Within

this framework, the null-subject parameter is understood as a syntactic property that determines whether a language allows the subject of a sentence to be omitted (pro-drop) or requires it to be overtly expressed (non-pro-drop). According to the Minimalist Program, the presence or absence of null subjects in a language is linked to the richness of the language's verbal inflection and agreement system. In languages with rich agreement morphology, such as Italian or Spanish, the verb endings provide enough information to identify the subject, making it possible to omit the subject pronoun without causing ambiguity. In contrast, languages with less distinctive verb morphology, like English, require the subject to be explicitly stated for the sentence to be grammatical. This study explores whether Pashto exhibits the characteristics of a null-subject (pro-drop) language or a non-null-subject language. By analyzing natural conversational data and consulting linguistic experts, the research aims to determine if Pashto allows the omission of overt subjects in sentences, and under what conditions this may occur, in light of the principles outlined by the Minimalist Program.

4. Analysis

The analysis and findings are presented in the following section.

Situation 1: Family (Talking about a sibling)

Father:

Zoy de cherta de?

(Where is your son?)

Mother:

Bazar ta teli.

([He] has gone to the market.)

Null subject: "He" is omitted.

According to the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995), the null-subject parameter determines whether a language permits an empty category (pro) in the subject position of finite clauses. In Pashto, the sentence "Bazar ta teli" ([He] has gone to the market) omits the overt subject pronoun. The verb "teli" carries third person singular masculine agreement, which allows the subject to be identified without being explicitly stated. This is grammatical in Pashto because the language licenses pro in the subject position. In contrast, if we attempt the same subject omission in English producing "*Has gone to the market" instead of "He has gone to the market" the sentence becomes ungrammatical. English does not have sufficient verbal agreement to recover the subject, and the grammar does not allow a null subject in finite clauses. Therefore, English requires the overt subject pronoun for the sentence to be acceptable. This comparison demonstrates that Pashto, but not English, sets the null-subject parameter to allow pro-drop. In Pashto, subject information is recoverable from verb morphology, while in English, the lack of rich agreement morphology means the subject must always be overt. This difference is a direct

reflection of how the null-subject parameter operates in each language under the Minimalist Program.

Situation 2: School (Talking about a classmate)

Teacher:

Sara wale na da raghle?

(Why hasn't Sara come?)

Student:

Naoragha da.

([She] is sick.)

Null subject: "She" is omitted.

According to the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995), the null-subject parameter determines whether a language allows an empty category (pro) in the subject position of finite clauses. In the Pashto exchange, the teacher asks, "Sara wale na da raghle?" (Why hasn't Sara come?), and the student replies, "Naoragha da" ([She] is sick). In this response, the subject pronoun "she" is omitted. The verb "da" (is) and the predicate "naoragha" (sick, feminine singular) provide enough agreement features to identify the subject as third person singular feminine, making the sentence grammatical and clear without an overt pronoun. This is possible because Pashto licenses pro in the subject position. If we attempt the same subject omission in English, producing "*Is sick" instead of "She is sick," the sentence is ungrammatical. English does not allow a null subject in finite clauses because its agreement morphology is insufficient to recover the subject, and the grammar requires an overt subject pronoun. This contrast shows that Pashto, but not English, sets the null-subject parameter to allow pro-drop. In Pashto, subject information is recoverable from context and verb agreement, while in English, the subject must always be overt. This difference directly reflects the operation of the null-subject parameter in each language as described by the Minimalist Program.

Situation 3: At a Friend's House (Talking about a guest)

Host:

Melma tsa wakht lar?

(When did the guest leave?)

Friend:

Makham lar.

([He/She] left in the evening.)

Null subject: "He/She" is omitted.

According to the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995), the null-subject parameter determines whether a language allows an empty category (pro) in the subject position of finite clauses. In the Pashto dialogue, the host asks, "Melma tsa wakht lar?" (When did the guest leave?), and the friend replies, "Makham lar" ([He/She] left in the evening). In this

response, the subject pronoun ("he" or "she") is omitted. The verb "lar" (left) is inflected for third person singular, and the context established by the question makes the referent clear. This omission is grammatical in Pashto because the language licenses pro in the subject position, and the verb agreement and discourse context are sufficient for interpretation. If we attempt the same subject omission in English, producing "*Left in the evening" instead of "He/She left in the evening," the sentence is ungrammatical. English does not allow a null subject in finite clauses, as its verb morphology does not provide enough information to recover the subject, and the grammar requires an overt subject pronoun. This comparison demonstrates that Pashto, but not English, sets the null-subject parameter to allow pro-drop. In Pashto, the subject can be omitted when it is recoverable from context and verb agreement, while in English, the subject must always be overt. This difference directly reflects the operation of the null-subject parameter in each language as described by the Minimalist Program.

Situation 4: At the Doctor (Talking about a patient)

Doctor:

Plar de senga de?

(How is your father?)

Child:

Kha dy.

([He] has recovered.)

Null subject: "He" is omitted.

According to the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995), the null-subject parameter determines whether a language allows an empty category (pro) in the subject position of finite clauses. In the Pashto exchange, the doctor asks, "Plar de senga de?" (How is your father?), and the child replies, "Kha dy" ([He] has recovered). In this response, the subject pronoun "he" is omitted. The verb "dy" (is/has) is inflected for third person singular masculine, and the context provided by the question makes the referent unambiguous. This omission is grammatical in Pashto because the language licenses pro in the subject position, and the verb agreement, along with the discourse context, is sufficient for interpretation. If we attempt the same subject omission in English, producing "*Has recovered" instead of "He has recovered," the sentence is ungrammatical. English does not allow a null subject in finite clauses, as its verb morphology does not provide enough information to recover the subject, and the grammar requires an overt subject pronoun. This comparison demonstrates that Pashto, but not English, sets the null-subject parameter to allow pro-drop. In Pashto, the subject can be omitted when it is recoverable from context and verb agreement, while in English, the subject must always be overt. This difference directly reflects the operation of the null-subject parameter in each language as described by the Minimalist Program.

Situation 5: At the Office (Talking about a report)

Manager:

Raport de walika?

(Did you write the report?)

Employee:

Ho, ao walika.

(Yes, [it] was written.)

Null subject: "It" is omitted.

According to the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995), the null-subject parameter determines whether a language allows an empty category (pro) in the subject position of finite clauses. In the Pashto exchange, the manager asks, "Raport de walika?" (Did you write the report?), and the employee replies, "Ho, ao walika" (Yes, [it] was written). In this response, the subject pronoun "it" is omitted. The verb "walika" (was written) is inflected for third person singular, and the context established by the question makes the referent clear. This omission is grammatical in Pashto because the language licenses pro in the subject position, and the verb agreement and discourse context are sufficient for interpretation. If we attempt the same subject omission in English, producing "*Was written" instead of "It was written," the sentence is ungrammatical. English does not allow a null subject in finite clauses, as its verb morphology does not provide enough information to recover the subject, and the grammar requires an overt subject pronoun. This comparison demonstrates that Pashto, but not English, sets the null-subject parameter to allow pro-drop. In Pashto, the subject can be omitted when it is recoverable from context and verb agreement, while in English, the subject must always be overt. This difference directly reflects the operation of the null-subject parameter in each language as described by the Minimalist Program.

Situation 6: Friends Planning (You)

Friend 1:

Ta saba raze?

(Are you coming tomorrow?)

Friend 2:

ao Razam.

([I/You] am/are coming.)

Null subject: "I/You" is omitted (verb form can indicate either, depending on context).

According to the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995), the null-subject parameter determines whether a language allows an empty category (pro) in the subject position of finite clauses. In the Pashto exchange, Friend 1 asks, "Ta saba raze?" (Are you coming tomorrow?), and Friend 2 replies, "Ao, razam" ([I] am coming). In this response, the

subject pronoun "I" is omitted. The verb "razam" is inflected for first person singular, and the context of the conversation makes it clear that the speaker is referring to themselves. This omission is grammatical in Pashto because the language licenses pro in the subject position, and the verb agreement, along with the discourse context, is sufficient for interpretation. If we attempt the same subject omission in English, producing "*Am coming" instead of "I am coming," the sentence is ungrammatical. English does not allow a null subject in finite clauses, as its verb morphology does not provide enough information to recover the subject, and the grammar requires an overt subject pronoun. This comparison demonstrates that Pashto, but not English, sets the null-subject parameter to allow pro-drop. In Pashto, the subject can be omitted when it is recoverable from context and verb agreement, while in English, the subject must always be overt. This difference directly reflects the operation of the null-subject parameter in each language as described by the Minimalist Program.

Situation 7: Talking about a Group (They)

Mother:

Halkān cherta de?

(Where are the boys?)

Father:

Lobay kawi.

([They] are playing.)

Null subject: "They" is omitted.

According to the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995), the null-subject parameter determines whether a language allows an empty category (pro) in the subject position of finite clauses. In the Pashto exchange, the mother asks, "Halkān cherta de?" (Where are the boys?), and the father replies, "Lobay kawi" ([They] are playing). In this response, the subject pronoun "they" is omitted. The verb "kawi" (are doing/playing) is inflected for third person plural, and the context provided by the question makes the referent clear. This omission is grammatical in Pashto because the language licenses pro in the subject position, and the verb agreement and discourse context are sufficient for interpretation. If we attempt the same subject omission in English, producing "*Are playing" instead of "They are playing," the sentence is ungrammatical. English does not allow a null subject in finite clauses, as its verb morphology does not provide enough information to recover the subject, and the grammar requires an overt subject pronoun. This comparison demonstrates that Pashto, but not English, sets the null-subject parameter to allow pro-drop. In Pashto, the subject can be omitted when it is recoverable from context and verb agreement, while in English, the subject must always be overt. This difference directly reflects the operation of the null-subject parameter in each language as described by the Minimalist Program.

5. Findings/Discussion

The findings of the current research that prove the functioning of the null-subject parameter in Pashto and English can be directly related to the theoretical framework of Universal Grammar (UG) and principles and parameters approach as established in the literature. Before its findings, both theoretical framework and empirical findings support the notion that all human languages have a set of universal principles, yet vary in particular parameters. A good example of such variation is the null-subject parameter, as Biberauer et al. (2009) and Macdonald (2016) focus on. The Pashto and English findings are easily explained within this model: the Pashto language has the null-subject parameter that is set to pro-drop whereas English does not. The theory is expected to predict that languages with rich verbal agreement (such as Pashto) can license null subjects, because the verb morphology contains sufficient information to be able to reconstruct the subject. And this is precisely what the data indicate: in the Pashto, not a single word is lost as a result of the absence of subject pronouns due to the inflection of the verb. This is in agreement with the theoretical assertions made by Chomsky (1995) and Radford (2004a). According to the literature (e.g., Radford, 2004a; Chomsky, 1995), English is a non-pro-drop language, whereby overt subjects are obligatory in finite clauses. The findings prove this: when the subject is omitted in English, the sentence becomes ungrammatical as evidenced by the inadmissibility of such sentences as *"*Has gone to the market."* The theoretical framework cites other pro-drop (Hungarian, Greek, Malayalam, Portuguese) and non-pro-drop (Dutch, Swedish, Polish, English) languages, placing Pashto and English in a wider typological framework. These cross-linguistic patterns are supported by the results of Pashto and English. According to the theoretical context, although English is non-pro-drop in general, subject omission is permissible in imperatives (Go!), and in some informal or truncated uses (Coming soon). In the results part, however, the attention is paid only to finite declarative clauses, in which the omission of subjects is ungrammatical. Therefore, these exceptions are not tackled by the results, and this could be further investigated to make a more comparison. The theory recognizes that pro-drop may be stronger or weaker between languages (e.g. formal and informal styles, or in Urdu itself). Results on Pashto indicate a high, stable pro-drop form, but do not say anything about the potential limitations and exceptions in Pashto vision, nor give any detailed data of Urdu. This begs the question of whether or not Pashto is a complete pro-drop language in all situations, or whether it is limited in some way like any other language. Although the theoretical background has focused on the significance of verb morphology, the findings also show the significance of the discourse context in the recovery of omitted subjects in Pashto. The theoretical overview is not as pragmatic and prefers to dwell upon syntactic and morphological aspects. The theory (Smith, 2005; Chomsky, 2006) talks about the parameters which are determined by the children based on the linguistic input, nevertheless

the outcomes do not refer to language acquisition or the ways speakers learn to use (or not use) the null subjects. This is one of the aspects on which the empirical evidence might be expanded to relate more closely to the UG arguments concerning language development. This research has shown that its empirical results are highly in line with the predictions of the Universal Grammar framework and the principles and parameters model on the null-subject parameter. The theory and the data are in agreement that Pashto is a pro-drop language since it has rich morphology of agreement, whereas English is not. Their findings however are limited to the standard, finite declarative clauses and not the exceptions or finer details observed by the theoretical literature, e.g. imperatives or informal ellipsis in English or potential limitations in Pashto. These areas can be further studied by future research to give a more detailed account of parametric variation and its limits.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The research questions posed in this study were: (1) What kind of parametric choice does Pashto make in the context of the subject parameter and (2) How does Pashto contrast with English in terms of the null-subject parameter? The results present new information about the syntactic behavior of these languages. In line with the first research question, the analysis shows that Pashto embraces a positive environment to the null-subject parameter. In Pashto, subject pronouns are omitted in finite clauses without ambiguity and ungrammaticality. This is because of the fact that Pashto language has a rich verbal system of agreement that captures adequate details on the person, number and gender of the subject. Consequently, the listeners are able to accurately retrieve the intended topic of the verb form and the context of the discourse. This pro-drop phenomenon can be observed in numerous real-life communicative contexts, which can prove that Pashto actively permissions the null subjects as the natural and grammatical characteristic of the language. Come to the second research question, the study reveals that there is a definite difference between the Pashto language and English language in terms of the null-subject parameter. The result showed English always a need to use overt subject pronouns in the finite clauses; failure to include the subject results in unacceptable and ungrammatical sentence constructions. This is because English would be poor in verb agreement morphology, which would not give sufficient information to determine the subject in case it is not mentioned directly. On the other hand, Pashto, has subject omission in most cases, especially when the subject is evident in the form of the verb or in the discourse. The analysis shows that Pashto have pro-drop behaviors, owing to the agreement schemes and contextual features, not like English, which does not allow null subjects in the finite clauses. These results have shown the paramount influence of parametric variation in comprehending cross-linguistic syntactic disparity and the significance of morph syntactic and pragmatic elements in the formation of grammar of respective languages. Further studies may be carried out in the future to examine the limits

and restrictions of pro-drop within Pashto and the way in which both the null subjects are acquired and processed within these languages.

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