Impersonal null-subjects
(in Icelandic and elsewhere)

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In this paper (a part of a joint project with Verner Egerland) I continue my exploration of silent features in language, including studies on PRO, silent Agree(ment), topic-drop, and silent but active speech event features. The leading ideas behind the general approach are:

1. The performative hypothesis (Ross 1970) was on the right track, but it should be stated in terms of a general Speech Event Theory (Sigurðsson 2004).
2. Silent features are 'pervasively active' in syntax, not only in the CP domain (cf. Rizzi 1997, a.o.) but also in lower domains.
3. The lexicalism (Chomsky 1970, 1995, etc.) must be abandoned. Syntax operates exclusively with abstract features and abstract *concept roots*, thereby building structures that are subsequently bundled up as 'words' and 'phrases' (it does not follow that all nominalizations are derived in syntax – that is a different issue).

Here, I study the content and distribution of impersonal null-subjects, in particular in Icelandic, exploring the idea that such elements are constructed in syntax by linking a concept root, interpreted in PF as zero, with syntactic features like αHUMAN, βSPEAKER, etc.

Many consistent pro-drop languages, like Spanish and Italian, lack *generic* impersonal pro, whereas partial pro-drop languages like Hebrew and Finnish have such null-subjects:

(1) Sinne __ ei   muuta   vapaehtoisesti.   (Finnish, Holmberg 2007)
     there   not.3SG moves   voluntarily
     'One doesn't move there voluntarily.'

(2) En este país   **se** trabaja   duramente.   (Spanish, Jaeggli 1986:53)
     in this country SE   works.3SG   hard
     'In this country, one works hard.'

Icelandic has **both** an overt generic pronoun, *maður* 'one', **and** a generic null-subject:

(3) a. Fyrst beygir   **maður** til hægri.
         first turns.3SG one   to   right
         'First, one turns to the right.'
     b. Fyrst verður   __ að beygja til hægri.
         first must.3SG   to turn   to   right
         'First, one must turn to the right.'

These circumstances give us the opportunity of making a detailed language-internal comparison of the properties of silent and 'sounding' impersonal subjects.
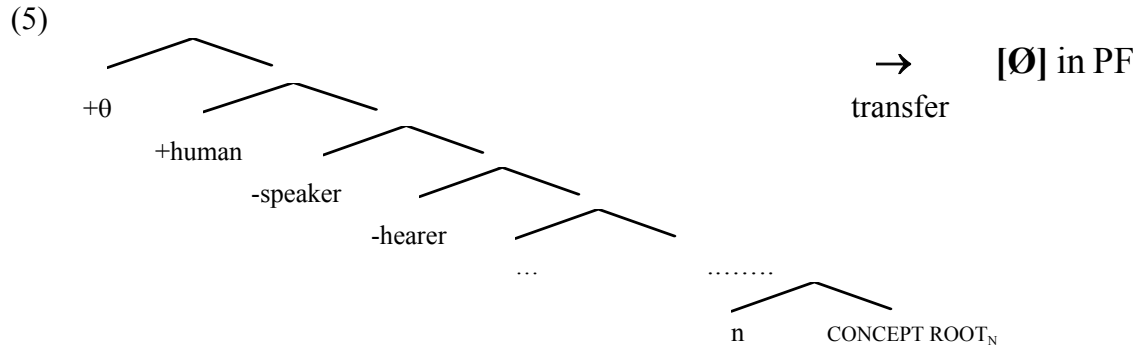
Largely adopting the approach in Egerland (2003, elaborating on Cinque 1988), I distinguish between three readings of impersonal subjects:

Generic: non-restricted +HUMAN reading, i.e., people in general, potentially including the speaker and the hearer
Arbitrary: a non-specific +HUMAN reading, excluding the speaker or the hearer, "close to 'some people', unspecified 'they' or 'someone'" (Egerland 2003:76)
Specific: a specific +HUMAN reading, referring to a (partly or wolly) specific set of individuals, most commonly including the speaker (often as the only member)

In terms of a simple (and simplifying) feature analysis:

(4) a.   Generic   =   +human
     b.   Arbitrary   =   +human, –speaker, –hearer
     c_1.   Specific, 1SG/PL =   +human, +speaker, –hearer
     c_2.   Specific, 2SG/PL =   +human, –speaker, +hearer
     c_3.   Specific, 3SG/PL =   +human, –speaker, –hearer, +X (='specific')

This gives us the following structure of, for instance, the arbitrary null-subject (for a conceptually related approach to overt pronouns, see Heim and Kratzer 1998:244):

(5)
$\rightarrow$ **[Ø]** in PF
+θ   transfer
    +human
        -speaker
            -hearer
                …   ………
                        n   CONCEPT ROOT$_N$

Subsequently, a 'word' is formed by bundling up the concept root with the commanding features by successive roll-up 'head'-movement (largely in PF). Overt pronouns or markers like English *they*, *you*, *one* or Italian *si* only differ from Ø in getting interpreted or signaled in PF as an arbitrary string of sounds. – The common observation (see Cardinaletti and Starke 1997, Huang 2000:88-90) that overt pronouns and zeros typically have different uses is correct, but it does not undermine or even bear on this approach, I argue.

Holmberg (2005, 2007) suggests that there might be a macro-parametric account of the fact that Finnish and Hebrew have a generic null-subject, as opposed to Italian, Spanish, etc. I present data that suggest that this is too optimistic and that we are instead forced to adopt a micro-parametric approach that makes no claims about any universal links between impersonal and personal pro-drop. Moreover, the parameter is *domain sensitive*, that is, it is set for subdomains in languages and not for whole languages.

Finally, I will discuss a peculiar pattern. The impersonal null-subject in Icelandic as well as in Finnish and Hebrew has the whole range of impersonal semantics, that is, it may either be generic, arbitrary or specific (in various ways). In contrast, impersonal *maður* is blocked from being arbitrary, i.e., it can only be either generic or specific. That is, the impersonal null-subject in Icelandic has more in common with overt impersonals *in other languages* than with *maður*. For Icelandic, thus, there is no way of finding the 'general impersonal subject' in any dictionary – since dictionaries do not contain 'null-words' – but it evidently exists in the language of Icelandic speakers.

Meaningful 'nulls' illustrate that meaning resides in the internal language of syntax (and concepts) and not in the external language of sounds or signs, a trivial but also a perplexing (anti-lexicalist) truth. Sounds and signs symbolize (in production) and activate (in processing) an internal biological system that is 'already there'.

References:
Cardinaletti & Starke. 1999. The typology of structural deficiency: ... Chomsky 1970: Remarks …Chomsky 1995: *The Minimalist Program*. Cinque 1988: On *si* constructions … *LI*. Egerland 2003: Impersonal pronouns … *WPSS* 71. Heim & Kratzer 1998: *Semantics in Generative Grammar*. Holmberg 2005: Is there a little pro?... *LI*. Holmberg 2007: The null generic subject … Huang 2000: *Anaphora*. Jaeggli 1986: Arbitrary ... *NLLT*. Rizzi 1997: The fine structure ... Ross 1970: On declarative sentences. Sigurðsson 2004: The syntax of Person … *Italian Journal of Linguistics* (see also lingBuzz).