

## Null Subjects in Chinese

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Chinese is a well-known null subject language (henceforth NSL), in which null subjects (and null objects) occur extremely freely in both discourse and sentence. Consider the following examples from Chinese (1) and English (2):

- (1) 张先生           说    [Ø   明天       要    来]。  
Zhangxiansheng shuo [Ø   mingtian yao   lai].  
Zhang Mr        say           tomorrow want come  
'Mr Zhang said that (he) wants to come tomorrow.'

- (2) \*John said that Ø wanted to come tomorrow.

The main difficulty regarding the null subject phenomenon in Chinese for linguistic theories is that, unlike Italian-type NSLs, Chinese lacks inflectional morphology to identify the contents of null subjects. Instead, null subjects in Chinese resort primarily to discourse/context factor[s] to retrieve contents rather than by reference to syntactico-morphological features. Consequently, the standard agreement-based generative approaches (see Perlmutter 1971; Taraldsen 1978; Chomsky 1981; Jaeggli 1982; among many others) cannot apply to Chinese. Recently, more and more scholars have started realizing the important role played by the discourse factor on the interpretation of null subjects in Chinese-type NSLs (e.g. Y. Huang 1994, 2000; Cole 2009, 2010). However, no studies have put forward a comprehensive discourse-based approach to explain how the discourse factors work for Chinese null subjects in naturally occurring data. In order to fill this gap, this study is concerned with null subjects in Chinese discourse and sentence within the framework of Centering Theory (Grosz, Joshi and Weinstein 1983, 1995, henceforth GJW). Centering Theory is proposed to model the local component of attentional state and examine interactions between local coherence and choice of referring/anaphoric expressions within discourse segments (GJW 1995).

The novelty of this study is twofold. First, it starts with null subjects in Chinese discourse (that is, at the inter-sentential level) rather than in isolated sentences, so as to explore how discourse, alongside with other factors such as syntactic, semantic, cognitive etc. would determine the interpretation of null subjects. What is more important, our results show that this approach, in turn, can be used to explain intra-sentential null subjects as well, in contrast to C. T. J. Huang's (1984, 1989) distance-based syntactic approach. This indicates that null subjects in Chinese discourse and sentence can to some extent be interpreted by the same mechanism. Second, this study adopts a corpus-based methodology; we built and annotated our own corpus in terms of Centering Theory by choosing three genres of data, i.e. press editorials, religion material and general fiction from the Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese (LCMC), with 30,000 words in total. It provides strong and reliable empirical evidence for the interpretation of null subjects in Chinese.

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