

Parametric Variations in Urdu and French: Examining Null Subject Parameters

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Abstract: Universal Grammar principles indicate that our natural linguistic abilities comprise a restricted collection of fundamental principles shared by all languages, with distinctions arising from parameters. Essentially, these parameters determine the syntactic variations between languages within the defined constraints of a specific parameter. This research explores a particular parametric difference between Urdu and French, focusing on the null subject parameter and assessing whether Urdu and French function as null subjects or pro-drop languages. It examines the interaction between a mechanic and a driver in Urdu, complementing this with a French translation of the same dialogue. The results indicate that the null-subject element is a key characteristic of Urdu syntax, while French is categorized as a non-prodrop or non-null subject language. Furthermore, whereas the French structure does not allow for null subjects, Urdu adheres to the pro-drop or null subject classification as determined by a binary principle. The study is significant as it contributes new linguistic insights to the principles and parameters framework.

Key Words: Parameters, French, Urdu, Universal Grammar

Introduction

Every complete sentence contains two key components: the subject and the predicate. The subject is often recognized as the naming part of a sentence, while the predicate describes *the subject's action or defines its identity* (Nordquist, 2010). Linguists widely agree that the connection between the subject and predicate is a critical structural feature across all languages. However, null-subject or pro-drop languages can convey grammatical and meaningful phrases even when the explicit subject and finite verb are absent. In these languages, the null subject is masked phonologically and morphologically, yet it can be understood in context by experienced native speakers, as noted by Macdonald (2016).

A null subject possesses grammatical and semantic properties yet lacks a visible phonetic form. In certain languages, finite verbs typically demand explicit subjects to form a grammatical phrase; however, other languages permit null subjects. In these cases, the material exhibits phonological and morphological attributes alongside grammatical and semantic features. Without a subject, the sentence becomes unclear. The key feature of this subject parameter is binarity, indicating that a language can be categorized as either pro-drop, where subjects can be left out, or non-pro-drop, where they cannot be omitted. Radford (2009) elaborates on this developing universal concept by stating that 'the range of grammatical variation found across languages appears to be strictly limited to just two possibilities – languages either do or don't systematically allow finite verbs to have null subjects.

The null-subject parameter represents a common type of parametric variation across natural languages. As previously noted, some languages necessitate a subject in each sentence, while others often leave subjects out. This variation is not attributable to genetic factors; for instance, Bani-Hassan Arabic contrasts with Levantine Arabic, even though they belong to similar language groups. Conversely, entirely different language families, such as Italian and Chinese, can exhibit comparable subject requirements (Jaeggli & Safir, 1989).

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This paper presents a comparative study of the null subject parameters in Urdu and French. It aims to clarify how these languages choose parameters when forming grammatically convergent sentences that include null-subject elements. The emphasis is on theoretical linguistics, providing insights into the null subject status in both languages.

Research Objectives

This research study aims to accomplish the following objectives:

1. To examine whether Pro-drop is present or absent in Urdu and French
2. To offer new linguistic perspectives on principles and parameter theory
3. To enhance the learning experience of Urdu and French as second languages

Research Questions

This research aims to address the following questions:

1. What is the parametric choice of the Urdu language regarding null or non-null subject parameters?
2. In what ways does the Urdu language differ from French regarding subject parameter settings?

Literature Review

The Universal Grammar theory emphasizes the idea of an "innate Language Faculty" (Radford, 2009, p. 19), which includes both inherent knowledge and linguistic principles (Culiover, 2011), as well as the systematic grammatical variations permitted by the human language faculty (Biberauer et al., 2009). According to this theory, understanding a native speaker's grammatical abilities requires revealing the cognitive system embedded in the brain/mind of native speakers (Chomsky, 2006).

This internalized system is referred to as 'shared among human beings' in relation to Universal Grammar (UG) (Chomsky, 2006, p.1). Chomsky argues that, despite noticeable differences, all human languages possess fundamental similarities that originate from innate principles specific to language; essentially, there is only one human language (Chomsky, 2000). In summary, a limited set of core principles is embedded within the language faculty, which is common to all languages. However, this does not imply that all languages follow the same grammatical structure, as significant variations in language-specific features, such as lexical differences, are present. Languages display differences in their word order and syntax. Smith (2005) points out that "although languages differ along various dimensions, the principles and parameters have been there from the beginning, and children are born with the principles with some specifications of the range of variations in possible human languages" (p. 38). These differences are called parametric differences, with Universal Grammar (UG) using parameters to describe these variations. Biberauer et al. (2009) clarify that parametric variation refers to the systematic grammatical variations permissible by the human language faculty.

In 1981, Chomsky proposed a generative linguistics framework known as Principles and Parameters, which was adopted by linguists like Radford (1997, 2004a, 2004b) and Webelhuth (1995). This framework indicates that natural language syntax is defined by overarching principles (i.e., abstract rules or grammars) and specific parameters (i.e., markers or switches) that can be turned on or off for distinct languages. Recent research on parametric methods for exploring interlinguistic variations and grammatical universals has gained attention, as noted by Hoeksema (1992). He states, "a great deal of attention to what to many appears to be one of the most basic cases of parametric variation, the position of the head element within a constituent," stressing that many "of the syntactic differences between languages are thought to derive from (in the typological tradition: to correlate with) the placement of head elements" (p. 119).

The head parameter exemplifies how languages vary in the arrangement of heads within phrases (Haegeman, 2008; Cook, 1988). In head-initial languages, heads are positioned before their complements, while in head-final languages, they come afterwards (Cook & Newson, 1996). "In English, all heads- whether nouns, verbs, prepositions, or adjectives- typically precede their complements" (Radford, 2004b). For example, Japanese, Persian, and Korean display head-initial syntax (Gunji, 1987; Rahmani & Abdolmanafi, 2012). Another syntactic distinction addressed in this study is the null subject parameter. Macdonald (2016) observes that "The null subject or pro-drop parameter is a concept rooted in the principles and parameters theory of Universal Grammar (UG)" (p. 80). Likewise, Nordquist

(2019) explains a null subject as the absence (or apparent absence) of a subject in a sentence. Subject drop relates to the presence of null subjects. Biberauer et al. (2009) highlight that the Null Subject Parameter is among the most recognized and often contested examples of a parameter that affects whether a language allows the omission of subject pronouns.

In his article *Universal Grammar and the Learning and Teaching of Second Languages*, Cook (1994) points out that some languages, such as Russian, Spanish, and Chinese, allow sentences to be formed without subjects, categorizing them as 'pro-drop' languages. Conversely, languages like English, French, and German require subjects in sentences, placing them in the 'non-pro-drop' category. Macdonald (2016) notes, "Although pro-drop is not a permissible parameter in English grammar, it is the parametric choice of Italian syntax" (p. 81). Non-pro-drop languages- including English, French, and German- do not permit sentences to lack subjects, reaffirming their classification as non-pro-drop languages. Macdonald writes, "Although pro-drop is not a possible parameter in English grammar, it is the parametric choice of Italian syntax" (2016, p. 81).

To bolster his argument, he cites Radford (2004a: 107), who asserts that "all finite clauses in Italian permit null-subjects. In contrast, English, as mentioned by Chomsky (1995) and Radford (2004a), is characterized as "a non-pro-drop language. "A subject is generally crucial in English sentence construction- so much so that sometimes a dummy subject is required (e.g., It is raining). However, subjects are typically absent in imperative sentences (e.g. Listen!) and may be ellipsis in casual contexts (e.g. See you soon)" (Nordquist, 2019). Although English is not a null-subject language, it allows pro-drop in imperative phrases as well as "truncated null subjects in colloquial spoken English" (Radford, 2004a: p. 106).

This article advocates for a parametric view of linguistic variation within the Minimalist Program. It introduces fresh linguistic evidence from Urdu and French structures to support the classification of null-subject languages. The study specifically examines the null subject parameters in both Urdu and French structures. To provide context, we briefly explore the characteristics of Urdu and French. Per Schmidt (2007), Urdu belongs to the Indo-Aryan subgroup of the Indo-European language family. It serves as the official language of Pakistan and is recognized as a scheduled language in India's constitution. Urdu shares a close relationship with Hindi, which flourished in the Indian subcontinent. Both languages stem from the same Indo-Aryan roots and exhibit similar phonological and grammatical features, often appearing indistinguishable. However, they diverge significantly in writing systems: Urdu employs a modified Perso-Arabic script known as Nastaliq, while Hindi uses the Devanagari script. Despite their similarities, they are commonly viewed as distinct languages.

Urdu is likewise a language with a lot of inflexions. Words are inflected to represent gender, number, person, and case in addition to tense, and this is done by adding a new suffix or modifying the sound of the word endings. Two genders, two noun types (count or non-count), two numerals, and three cases are all included in Urdu nouns. The marked and non-marked declension of nouns is also used to classify them.

French is the most widely spoken Romance language in the world. French is one of the most commonly spoken languages in the world, with 53 nations speaking it. The number of individuals who speak French as a primary or second language is estimated to be between 220 and 300 million people globally. It is a de facto or official national language of 29 countries. The French alphabet has the same letters as the English alphabet. The most common word order in French is Subject-Verb-Object. However, there are many different ways to communicate topic, subject and emphasis.

The interplay of complex verb formulations, object and adverbial pronouns, inversion, imperatives, adverbs, and negative structures further complicate word order. The majority of adjectives come after the noun, such as *un chat noir* 'a cat black.' French grammar has been substantially reduced from that of Latin, as has the grammar of the other Romance languages. The case does not apply to nouns. They used to be designated for plural by adding -s or -es, but the ending has mostly been lost in pronunciation, although being kept in spelling. The masculine and feminine genders are distinct; however, they are normally indicated in the surrounding article or adjective rather than in the noun. In spoken French, plural marking is frequently recognized in the same way. The verb is conjugated in French for three

persons, single and plural; however, some of these forms are pronounced similarly despite their differences in spelling. Indicative, imperative, and subjunctive moods; imperfect, present, future, and conditional tenses; and passive and reflexive constructions are all covered in French verb forms (Ponser, [2018](#)).

Research Methodology

This study is descriptive because an 'observational research method' has been used to collect the data to understand the phenomena under question. The data has been qualitatively analyzed. The following research tool was used for data collection.

- ▶ An Urdu dialogue between a driver and a mechanic was recorded to find the required data in a real-life situation. Five experts in Urdu verified the dialogue in their mother tongue for confirmation of the null/non-null subject parameter.
- ▶ The same dialogue was translated into the French language by a French teacher who has native-like competence and then verified by five native French Speakers for confirmation of the null/non-null subject parameter.

The data is analyzed against the backdrop of the Minimalist Program proposed by Chomsky. The analysis of the data is provided in the following section.

Data Analysis

Data collected through observation and a short dialogue are analyzed in this section.

Urdu Dialogue

The actual conversation took place in Urdu language.

ڈرائیور: لو بھئی! آگئی تمہاری لاڈلی!
 مستری: کیا کہتی ہے؟
 ڈرائیور: خود پوچھ لو جو کہتی ہے۔
 مستری: پھر رستے میں دھوکہ دے گئی؟
 ڈرائیور: کچھ مزاج ہی ایسا رکھتی ہیں خیر سے!
 مستری: دھکے سے بھی نہیں چلی؟!
 ڈرائیور: تھک چکا ہوں دھکا لگا کر بھی۔
 مستری: اب کے آئی ہے تو سب مسئلے حل کر کے دوں گا۔
 ڈرائیور: خود ہی رکھ لو، قیمت سے زیادہ تو تیل اور مرمت کا خرچ کرواڈالتی ہے ہر مہینے۔

French Dialogue

The same dialogue was translated into the French language.

Chauffeur: La-voilà, ta bien aimée est là!

Mécanicien: Bon, ben qu'est-ce qu'elle veut?

Chauffeur: Il fait lui demander ce qu'elle veut?

Mécanicien: Elle vous a trop mé sur la route encore une fois?

Chauffeur: Oui, elle a un tel comportement!

Mécanicien: Et elle a même pas marcher quand vous l'avez poussée?

Chauffeur: J'en ai marre de la pousser!

Mécanicien: Cette fois-ci je vais résoudre tous ses problème

Chauffeur: Tu peux la garder pour toi, chaque mois elle me coûte beaucoup plus que son prix original pour l'essence et pour les réparations

Analysis and Discussion of Urdu and French Dialogue

The following part involves the analysis of the sentences in the Urdu language and their French counterparts respectively to investigate the occurrence or non-occurrence of Pro-drop in both languages.

1A:

ڈرائیور	لو بھئی	آ	گنی	تمہاری	لاڈلی
Driver	Lo bhai	Aa	Gai	Tumhari	Laadli
Driver	Here you go	come	Has	Your	Beloved

English Translation: Driver: Here she is, your favourite!

This conversation took place between a driver and a mechanic. The Driver has brought the car to a mechanic workshop, and he informs the mechanic sarcastically about the bad performance of the car by addressing it as "Tumhari Laadli", which means "Your Favorite". The car is referred to indirectly by using Laadli. However, this is the first sentence of the dialogue. Therefore, the mention of the subject is important to carry on the conversation. Though the subject is not used very directly, it still makes sense as native speakers of the Urdu language understand the sarcasm hidden in the sentence.

1B:

Chauffeur:	lla	voilà,	ta	Bien- aimée	est	là!
Driver	she	Here is	your	Favourite/beloved	Is	Here

English Translation: Driver: Here she is, your favourite!

1B is the counterpart of 1A in the French language; if it is analyzed and compared, it is found that the subject of the sentence "la" (third person feminine singular) is mandatory, and it is used in the very beginning of the sentence to refer to car explicitly. In 1A, the car was referred to implicitly by using the word "lady"; however, in the French language, if the overt subject is dropped out, the sentence becomes ungrammatical. It suggests that French is a non-pro-subject or non-null subject language.

2A:

مستری	کیا	کہتی ہے	Pro
Mistari	Kia	Kehti hai	
Mechanic	What	Says	

English Translation: Mechanic: What does she need now?

The second sentence in Urdu is a reply from the mechanic, and it has a null or pro subject. The sentence with a pro subject remains meaningful and grammatical as there is a morphological agreement between the auxiliary "hai" and the feminine singular form of the verb "kehti". The verb, in this case, has a null subject which can be thought of as a silent or invisible counterpart of the pronoun "she", which appears in the corresponding English and French translation. It seems that subject drop with finite verbs is a common phenomenon in Urdu.

2B:

Mécanicien:	Bon,	ben	qu'est-ce qu'	elle	veut?
Mechanic	So	[a filler]	What	She	Wants

English Translation: Mechanic: What does she need now?

The reflection of the same sentence (2A) is given in its French counterpart (2B). However, if the option of pro is opted for in the French sentence provided in (2B), the sentence becomes ungrammatical. As it is a question, the subject "elle" must be there otherwise it would appear as * "qu'est-ce qu' veut" where 'veut' does not determine any gender category

therefore subject "elle" that is ^{third} person feminine singular is obligatory to refer to the car. It shows that French is a non-pro or non-null subject language, whereas Urdu is a null subject or pro-language.

3A:

مستری	پھر	راتے	میں	دھوکہ دے گئی	Pro
Mistari	Phir	Raastay	Mein	Dhoka dai gai	
Mechanic	again	way	On	Ditched	

English Translation: Mechanic: Did she ditch you on the road once again?

On the complaint of the Driver, the mechanic asks a question in 3A. However, there is no mention of an overt subject in this question form. Still, this question is meaningful. The content of the null subject in this question form is phonologically and morphologically covert but is recoverable in the context and easily understood that car has ditched the Driver again. The verb "dhoka dai gai" is in the third-person-feminine singular form in Urdu, we need to posit that it has a third-person-feminine singular subject; under the null-subject analysis, we can say that "dhoka dai gai" has a null pronoun (pro) as its subject, and that pro (if used to refer to the car) is a third-person-feminine-singular pronoun. In other words, a null subject has grammatical and semantic properties but lacks overt phonetic form.

3B:

Mécanicien:	Elle	vous	a trompé	sur	la	route	encore	une	fois?
Mechanic	She	You	ditched	on	the	Road	again	one	Time

English Translation: Mechanic: Did she ditch you on the road once again?

However, in the French sentence in (3B) which is a translation of the question by the mechanic i.e. "a trompe", is the past participle form of the verb that does not denote any gender category and there is no morphological agreement between verb and the subject in French language, therefore an overt subject 'elle' is obligatory in this sentence and if the option of pro is opted for, the French sentence becomes ungrammatical. It suggests that French is a non-pro-subject or non-null subject language.

4A:

مستری	دھکے	سے	بھی	نہیں	چلی	Pro
Mistari	Dhakkay	Say	Bhi	Nahi	Chali	
Mechanic	Pushing	Through	Even	Not	Moved	

English Translation: Mechanic: Didn't she start even after you pushed it?

The mechanic asks another question in sentence 4 A, which clearly makes it meaningful and grammatically correct too without an overt subject as the verb "chali" conjugates with the feminine gender category of the noun 'car' and refers to it covertly. There is another reason for thinking that the verb "chali" or "pushed" has a null subject in (4A). Chali "pushed" (in the relevant use) is a two-place predicate which requires both a subject argument and an object argument: under the null subject analysis, its subject argument is pro (a null pronoun). Therefore, this sentence confirms that Urdu is a null subject or pro-drop language.

4B:

Mécanicien:	Et	elle	a	même	pas	marcher	quand	vous	l'	avez	poussée?
Mechanic	and	she	has	even	not	moved	When	You	Her	Have	Pushed

English Translation: Mechanic: Didn't she start even after you pushed it?

The French counterpart 4B shows that auxiliary "a" and participle form "marcher" without an overt subject "elle", that is 3rd person feminine singular, cannot make semantically and morphologically correct sentences. Therefore, the subject

"elle" must be phonologically spelt out in the French language. Rather, there are two subjects in this sentence, "vous" has also been used when the mechanic asks the driver "vous l'avez poussée" is correct? i.e. "you have pushed it". This is also the style of the French language that they must include the subject as many times as they find necessary to create clarity in communication.

5A:

ڈرائیور	تھک چکا	ہوں	دھکا لگا لگا کر	بھی	
Driver	Thak chukka	Hoon	Dhakka laga laga kar	Bhi	Pro
Driver	Tired	Am	having pushed	so much	

English Translation: Driver: I am tired of pushing it now.

The Driver shows his frustration in this sentence by saying "thak chukka hun" i.e. "tired". The very expression of being tired because of "dhakka laga laga kar", both 'chukka' and 'laga' give complete meaning without mentioning any overt subject "I". Finite verbs agree with their subjects in Urdu: hence, in order to account for the fact that the verb "chukka" is in the first-person-masculine singular form in (5A), we need to posit that it has a first-person-masculine singular subject; under the null-subject analysis, we can say that "hoon" 'am' has a null pronoun (pro) as its subject, and that pro (if used to refer to I) is a first-person-masculine-singular pronoun. Native speakers of the Urdu language can easily figure out that person is talking about himself, being 1st person masculine singular, the verb forms used in the Urdu language make this utterance grammatically and semantically correct. Thus, it shows the Urdu language is a null subject or pro-drop language.

5B:

Chauffeur	J :	'en	ai	marre	de	la	pousser!
Driver	I	of it	have	sickness	Of	it	pushing

English Translation: Driver: I am tired of pushing it now.

However, in French sentence in (5B) which is the counterpart of sentence 5A, shows the subject "I" being overtly used as the main verb "ai" is the conjugation of the subject "Je" and if the option of pro is opted for, the French sentence becomes ungrammatical. The structure of the French language and grammatical categories do not allow null subjects in sentences. Meanings cannot be drawn if the content of the subject in the French language is phonologically and morphologically covert because it cannot be recoverable in the context and easily understood. In other words, a null subject in the French language does not have grammatical and semantic properties. Thus, it suggests that French is a non-pro-subject or non-null subject language.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper aims to determine if Urdu is a null subject/pro-drop language or a non-null subject language. It also examines whether Urdu adheres to the boundaries proposed by Universal Grammar regarding null subject parameters. To facilitate this comparison, observations were made against French, known as a non-null drop language, shedding light on the subject parameter.

The data analysis indicates that Urdu qualifies as a null subject language. Although both languages share biological characteristics- essentially the foundational concepts of language identified by linguists as universal grammar- they also exhibit distinctive grammatical features that arise from their differing parameterization. Additionally, Urdu displays a pattern of morphological agreement between auxiliary verbs and their corresponding verb forms. The third-person singular auxiliaries 'hai', 'hoon', and the singular verb forms agree with the null pro subject. This agreement helps interlocutors identify the subject or topic of discussion. Essentially, the null subject in Urdu has grammatical and semantic functions, but it lacks a clear phonetic representation. In contrast, French entirely forbids pro subjects and requires the subject to be mentioned multiple times within sentences. This is critical because meanings can become obscured if the

subject is phonologically and morphologically hidden, making it challenging for interlocutors to recover and comprehend within context.

This research indicates that Urdu speakers learning French should avoid the translation method. Instead, they should adopt a parametric resetting approach, as directly translating a null-subject sentence from Urdu to French can lead to grammatical mistakes. Furthermore, it is advisable to explore other parametric differences between Urdu and French using a quantitative method, emphasizing elements such as the position of the 'head element' and 'wh-movement' within a constituent.

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