

## POSSIBLE READINGS OF NULL IMPERSONALS

**Ildikó Tóth**

Pázmány Péter Catholic University  
i.toth@t-online.hu

### I. Possible interpretations of null impersonal subjects

Possible impersonal readings:

- (1) Itt hal-at pucolt-ak.  
here fish-ACC cleaned-3PL  
'Someone(s) cleaned fish here.'
- (2) Megerősítették a hírt a rádió-ban.  
confirm-PAST-3PL the news the radio-in  
'They confirmed the news in the radio.'
- (3) Ebben a parkban délutánként fociz-nak.  
this-in the park afternoons play-football-3PL  
'In this park, they play football in the afternoons.'
- (4) Az Ókorban nem ett-ek burgonyát.  
the ancient-times not eat-3PL potato  
'In Ancient Times people did not eat potato.'
- (5) Amerikában ilyenkor még alsza-nak.  
America-in such-time still sleep -3PL  
'In America, people are still asleep at such an hour.'

*Possible interpretations for null impersonals:*

	episodic	habitual
$\exists$	yes ex.(1,2)	yes (3)
$\forall$	yes (5)	yes (3,4)

Chierchia (1995), Cinque (1988), Holmberg (2007), Jaeggli (1986), Rizzi (1986), Sigurdsson (2009), Suñer (1983): only deal with  $\exists$  readings in episodic and  $\forall$  readings in characterizing sentences.

Further constructions with impersonal subjects:

Hungarian: Topic prominent lang. with no verbal passive

Non-subject topic + impersonal subject + V-3PL

i. Non-quantificational generic sentence predicating over a kind.

- (6) a. A lottót sorsol-ják.  
the lottery-ACC draw-3PL  
'Lottery is drawn.'

- b. A kalácsot keleszt-ik.  
'Sweetbread is leavened.'

ii. Quantificational characterizing sentence.

(7) a. [<sub>TOPP</sub> A pénz] gyakran hamisítják.  
 the money-ACC often forge-3PL  
 ‘Money is often forged.’

b. [<sub>TOPP</sub> A megengedett sebességet] gyakran túllépi.  
 ‘The speed limit is often exceeded.’

Topic – in restrictor                       $pro_{impers} \rightarrow \exists$  interpret.

$Q_s[\text{speed limit } (L) \wedge C(L,s)] \exists x[\text{human}(x) \wedge \text{exceed}(s,x,L)]$

null impersonals ( $:=pro_{impers}$ ), like lexical indefinites (a man), are variables:  
 variables  $\rightarrow$  can have both  $\exists$  and  $\forall$  readings depending on the partitioning of the clause.

Partitioning depends on word order & stress pattern

(8) a. Ezen a parton délutánként napoz-nak.                       $\exists$  reading  
 this the beach afternoons sunbathe-3PL  
 ‘On this beach people sunbathe in the afternoons.’

b. Ezen a parton délutánként [<sub>FP</sub>NAPOZNAK].                       $\forall$  reading

$\exists$  or  $\forall$  reading also depends on the lexical semantics of the verb and on pragmatics/world knowledge:

(9) a. Ebben a városban ebéd után sziesztáz-nak.                       $\forall$   
 this the town lunch after have-siesta-3PL  
 ‘In this town people have a siesta after lunch.’

b. Ebben a városban ebéd után ingyen sört osztanak.                       $\exists$   
 ‘In this town they distribute free beer after lunch.’

The predicate *ingyen sört osztanak* (*distribute free beer*) makes the existential more salient but the universal reading is not excluded only improbable given our world knowledge.

## II. $pro_{impers}$ versus lexical generics

(10) a. Az emberek félnek a cápáktól.  
 the people be-afraid the sharks  
 ‘People are afraid of sharks.’

b. # Félnek a cápáktól.

Notation: # - impersonal reading is infelicitous

c. Ebben az országban félnek a cápáktól.  
 ‘In this country people are afraid of sharks.’

[+human] lexical NP is an appropriate subject of predication in generic sentences.

(11) Az ember/az emberek/egy ember szavakkal is ki tudja fejezni az érzéseit.  
 ‘People/one/a man can express emotions in words as well.’

We assumed:  $pro_{impers}$  is a variable with inherent value:[+human]

**Question:** The contrast between (10a) and (10b) needs explanation. Why do we need a locative?

- $pro_{impers} \neq$  null counterpart of overt impersonals
- $pro_{impers} = \Phi^{\min/\max}$  (minimally specified nominal) cf. Déchaîne&Wiltschko(2002)

## Answer:

### i. Two impersonal readings (Egerland 2003)

- a) Generic ('one'): [+human], potentially including speaker & hearer
- b) Arbitrary ('they'): [+human], excluding speaker & hearer

Ambiguous overt impersonals: Eg. French 'on', Italian 'si', Swedish 'man'

Unambiguous overt impersonals: Eg. Icelandic 'madur', Hungarian 'az ember'

### ii. In the case of arb reading the group of humans must be specified → restrictor is needed

- [+human] does not exclude speaker & hearer
- Q-adverbs & *if/when*-clauses do not exclude speaker & hearer

(12) #Stresszes napokon általában több édeset esz-nek.  
stressful days usually more sweets eat-3PL  
'On stressful days they usually eat more sweets.'

(13) #Ha életveszélybe kerülnek meglepő dolgokra képesek.  
if life-danger get-3PL surprising acts be-able-PL  
'If people's life is threatened people can do surprising things.'

- Locatives (interpreted as either individual and stage-level predicates) can restrict the domain and exclude speaker & hearer.

## Default content-assignment rule:

Assign the feature [+human] to an argument position with no feature-content.

cf. also: object  $pro_{arb}$ ,  $PRO_{arb}$

## PF – default rule:

[+human,  $\emptyset$ person,  $\emptyset$ number] → 3PL

cf.  $-\theta$  subject (expletives, weather verbs): [ $-\theta$ , ( $\emptyset$ person,  $\emptyset$ number)] → 3SG

## III. Possessive construction

Existentially interpreted null subject:

(14) Az utcákon egész éjjel a himnuszt énekelt-ék.  $\exists$  reading  
the streets all night the anthem sang-3PL  
'They sang the national anthem on the streets all night'

(15) #Az utcákon egész éjjel a dalaikat énekelték. referential reading  
the streets all night the songs-3PLPoss sang-3PL  
'They sang their songs on the streets all night.'

(16) Talált-ak egy biciklit a kertj-ük-ben.  
found-3PL a bicycle the garden-3PLPoss-IN  
'They<sub>impers/ref.</sub> found a bicycle in their<sub>ref.</sub> garden.'

Universally interpreted null subject:

(17) #Errefelé nem figyelnek eléggé az egészségükre. referential reading  
here not attention-pay-3PL enough the health-3PLPoss  
'Here they don't pay enough attention to their health.'

→3PL agreement on the possessed noun does not license impersonal null possessor.

**IV. Inflected infinitives**

Existentially interpreted null subject:

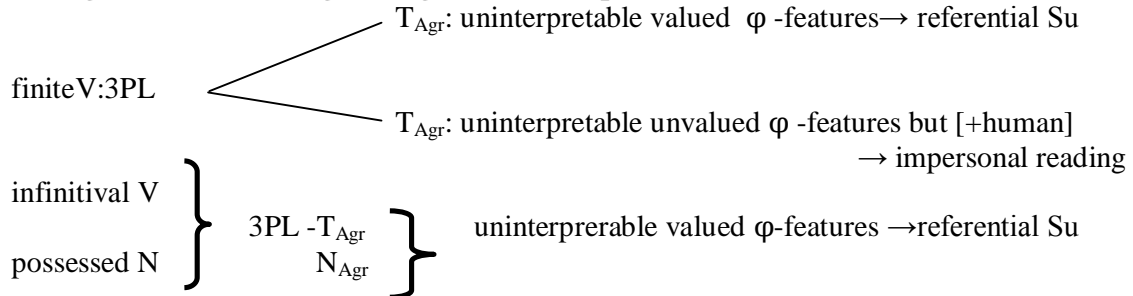
- (18) #Dél van. Most kell kézbesíteniük a postát.  
 noon is now must deliver-Inf-3PL the post.  
 ‘It is noon. They must be delivering the post now.’

Universally interpreted null subject:

- (19) #Itt kellemetlen éjszakai műszakban dolgozniuk.  
 here unpleasant night shift-in work-Inf-3PL  
 ‘It is unpleasant to work night shifts here.’

→3PL agreement on infinitives does not license impersonal null subject.

**Ambiguous and unambiguous agreement morphemes:**



*Typology of null subjects with 3rd person Agr.* (Sigurdsson & Egerland 2009)

	Definite pro		Impersonal pro	
	general	controlled	generic	Arbitrary
Old Norse	yes	yes	yes	yes
Italian etc.	yes	yes	no	yes
Finnish	no	yes	yes	yes
Icelandic	no	no	yes	yes
English	no	no	no	no

4 types of null subjects → 16 possible combination in theory

*PRO:*

	Definite PRO		Impersonal PRO	
	general	controlled	generic	Arbitrary
PRO ∅Agr	no	Yes	Yes	No

***Null subjects in Hungarian with 3PL agreement***

	Definite pro		Impersonal pro	
	general	controlled	generic	arbitrary
finite clause	yes	yes	<b>yes?</b>	yes
inflected infinitive	yes	yes	no	no
possessive DP	yes	yes	no	no