A Modular Account of Null Objects in French

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Abstract

The interaction among pragmatics, semantics, and grammar and their shared responsibility for interpretation are essential factors in linguistic analysis. This paper explores the interpretation of null objects (NOs) in French from this perspective. Previous accounts have determined two major classes based on the referentiality of the NO; however, these analyses end up, paradoxically, with a semantically vague description of the difference, resorting to undefined notions of identifiability, topic/focus, or probable reference. Starting from the assumption that all NOs are syntactically represented, we tease apart the contributions of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, which turn out to be simple and straightforward. We propose a typology comprising two syntactic types of NO; further nuances are a function of the varying contributions of verbal semantics and pragmatics.

Keywords: null objects, French, transitivity, clitics, pragmatics, lexical semantics

Word count: 7342

1. Introduction

Null constituents have played a major role in linguistic theory. The syntactic component of grammar has been concerned with such elements, since the possibility of representing null constituents in a linguistic expression is a powerful tool that must be constrained if it is to be conceptually acceptable. For instance, the presence of null elements in subject position in pro-
drop languages can be said to follow from the EPP—the requirement that clauses have a subject—and from a theory of empty categories. The grammar must deal mainly with the interpretation of the null subject, through feature specification mechanisms. The availability of null subjects in a given language is thus not attributed to a property of certain verbs but follows from general principles.

Rizzi (1986) introduces a type of null object available only with certain transitive verbs in Italian whose interpretation involves default features and arbitrary reference. He proposes that the position occupied by these null objects is not projected in other languages, such as English, in similar constructions. In his account, null objects are quite different from null subjects: the lexicon plays a greater role in the presence and interpretation of the null object in both English and Italian. Similarly, other cases of null objects do not necessarily lend themselves to a purely syntactic account and seem to involve discourse context and pragmatic considerations; see Groefsema (1995), Fellbaum & Kegl (1989).

The danger lies in throwing the baby out with the bathwater, in holding that discourse factors or lexical specification alone can suffice to explain the behavior of certain null elements. Null objects in French are a case in point. Under such a view they would fall into the class of elements for which syntax does not have much to say. We have argued elsewhere that this view is untenable. More specifically we argue here that it is only through a thorough examination of the specific contribution of the lexical, syntax, semantic, and pragmatic modules that a clear picture of the behavior of null objects in French emerges.

In section 2, we present a widely accepted general classification of null objects in French, adopted in previous analyses, and point out some inadequacies of this classification. Section 3 provides the background assumptions that form the basis of the typology proposed in section 4.
2. Null Objects in French

Although French is usually considered to be a language that typically does not allow null arguments, in fact the phenomenon of null objects is quite common in all varieties of French. Some examples are given in (1):

(1) a. La lune, si t’y mets une porte et tu regardes Ø la nuit, tu peux être fier de ton boulot. (G:153)
   ‘If you put a door on the moon and you watch Ø at night, you can be proud of your work.’

b. C’est pas lui qui l’a écrit, son livre, le pape, c’est quelqu’un qui lui écrit Ø… (G:153)
   ‘The Pope didn’t write his book himself, someone writes Ø for him.’

c. On ne saura pas si le jeune homme est vraiment vendeur, mais en tout cas il vend Ø. (L:94)
   ‘You can’t tell if the young man is really a salesman, but in any case, he can sell Ø.’

d. Jacques F., vous connaissez Ø? (F: 6)
   ‘Jacques F., do you know Ø?’

e. A: Pourquoi avoir choisi cette époque? B: Parce que j’adore Ø. (L:50)
   A: ‘Why did you choose this period? B: ‘Because I adore Ø.’

This phenomenon has not gone unnoticed and a number of recent accounts are on the market. Larjavaara’s (2000) study has a primarily interpretive semantic basis: she classifies null objects as either latent (having an identifiable referent) or generic (without such a referent), and
considers that null objects are not represented syntactically, although a number of structural factors are correlated with them (such as the dative pronoun in (1b), for example.)

Fonágy’s (1985) study is also based on a contemporary corpus and focuses on stylistic and sociolinguistic characteristics. According to his observations, the frequency of null objects varies inversely with speaker’s age, and he sees some null objects as a recent fashion with an iconic basis, expressing nonchalance, haste or the desire to suppress the referent as well as its linguistic representation.

Noailly (1996) identifies the main function of NOs as assuring cohesion with the discourse, in the case of anaphoric NOs, and with the extralinguistic context, in the case of deictic null objects.

Lambrecht & Lemoine’s account (1996), also based on the notion of "definite" and "indefinite" reference, highlights the diverse factors—lexical, constructional, pragmatic, discursive—that must figure in an understanding of null objects.

The goal of our paper is to follow up on Lambrecht & Lemoine’s observations by developing a coherent account of null objects, and determining how they fit into the overall grammatical, semantic and pragmatic systems of French.

One area that needs to be clarified is the classification of different kinds of null objects. All of the previous analyses are agreed on a major distinction between null objects with a context-free non-specific interpretation and those that have a specific referent. Larjavaara’s generic/latent distinction is based on the ability of the hearer to identify a possible referent. Lambrecht & Lemoine’s categories of indefinite (those that cannot refer to an entity in the discourse) and definite (those that must be interpreted as referring to an entity in the discourse)
capture a similar distinction, and they add a third category—“libre” (‘free’)—to handle the indeterminate cases.

These distinctions differentiate canonical cases of these two types, illustrated in (2) and (3).

(2) generic/indefinite

a. Les écrivains attirent Ø sexuellement. (L&L:286)
   ‘Writers attract Ø sexually.’

b. Le costume du clergyman est toujours noir...ça mincit Ø. (L:88)
   ‘The clergyman’s suit is always black...that slims Ø.’

(3) latent/definite

a. «Mais...T’as pas à lui filer le tournevis...J’étais où quand tu lui as donné Ø?»
   (L:39)
   ‘“But...You shouldn’t let him have the screwdriver...Where was I when you gave him Ø?”’

b. Avant j’avais mon dossier à Jester, mais j’ai enlevé Ø. (L&L:295)
   ‘Before, I had my file at Jester, but I removed Ø.’

In between the canonical poles are cases that are harder to classify, like the examples in (4).

(4) a. Le chanteur Renaud nous gratifia de l’un de ses vieux tubes, «En cloque», qui émut Ø beaucoup. (L:65)
   ‘The singer Renaud treated us to one of his old hits, “En cloque”, which moved Ø greatly.’

b. bon alors il y a l’infirmière qui arrive avec tous ses médicaments parce que mon chirurge avait laissé euh un ordre c’est à dire que j’avais droit à tout ce que je
voulais - c’était tellement c’est - oui pour calmer la douleur c’est tellement
douloureux comme opération que il a dit euh aucune limite - bon alors on m’a
donné Ø mais en fait ça te fait absolument rien. (L&L: 307)
‘well the nurse came with all the medication because my surgeon had left
instructions that is I could have whatever I wanted - it’s so it’s - yes, for the pain
it’s such a painful operation that he said uh no limits - okay so they gave me Ø but
it does absolutely nothing for you’

In these cases the null object is partly identifiable from the speech context, but it is not
definite or specific. That is, in (4a), it can be inferred that the reference of the NO of émut is a
subset of the persons present (note that it is not identical to nous, those who were treated to the
performance) but the utterance does not pick out a particular identifiable referent. In (4b) it can
be inferred that the reference of the null object of donner is ‘some medication’; that too is just a
subset of the related entities mentioned in the speech context: tous ses médicaments and tout ce
que je voulais. The reference is not a definite, specific entity but neither is it independent of the
speech context.

These cases, in which the NO is neither generic nor definite, highlight the need to go
beyond classifications relying on the definiteness or identifiability of the NO in order to account
for the full range of NOs occurring in French.

3. Background assumptions

3.1. Syntax

We assume basic Minimalist operations, the most important one for us being Merge,
which allows for the creation of a Vmax from Merge of V and another constituent. This
becomes a V-Obj relation interpreted as a complementation/transitivity relation.
We also assume that null objects are structurally present, an assumption that distinguishes our analysis from previous ones. Based on work by Roberge (2002, to appear), we hold that all null objects are syntactically represented. Roberge proposes a Transitivity Requirement, parallel to the Extended Projection Principle for subjects, whereby the direct-object position, complement of the verb, is given by Universal Grammar. Thus, the direct-object position is not seen as a result or a characteristic depending on lexical-semantic features of the verb, but rather as an integral, essential element of the predicate.

The EPP, whether it is seen as an uninterpretable feature of T needing to be checked or as a stipulation that the functional category heading a clause must have a filled Spec position (Lasnik 2001), establishes a clear split between selection and subcategorization, such that an externalized subject is merged regardless of whether the lexical V selects one or not. The Projection Principle, which in GB applies to direct objects (among other arguments), does the opposite: selection and subcategorization are one and the same. Consequently, a direct object position is merged within a VP if and only if the lexical V selects one. In effect, the TR proposes to extend the split between selection and subcategorization to direct objects also. Empirically, this proposal stems from evidence presented by many researchers, from Blinkenberg (1960) to Larjavaara (2000), that the vast majority of verbs (at least in French) can appear both with and without direct-object complements, regardless of the verb’s semantic content or the semantic relationship between verb and object. If this is the case, the complement position must be projected—either optionally or obligatorily. The latter option, the more restrictive one, is embodied in the Transitivity Requirement.

(5) Transitivity Requirement (TR) (Roberge 2002; to appear)

The direct-object position is given by Universal Grammar, and is not dependent on
lexical features of the verb.

We define a null object descriptively as a phonologically null element in the VP, involved in the event denoted by the VP. If subjects are merged in Spec of vP, then a null element within VP will automatically count as a null object, thus excluding external arguments from the definition.\(^4\)

This definition broadens the empirical coverage of the concept of “null object” considerably; thus a null object is present in all of the sentences in (6).\(^5\)

\[(6) \quad a. \quad \text{Un des deux convives n’avait pas mangé Ø. (L:95)}\]
\[\quad \text{‘One of the two guests hadn’t eaten.’}\]

\[b. \quad \text{Rose est morte. Comment vous expliquez Ø? (F: 5)}\]
\[\quad \text{‘Rose is dead. How do you explain?’}\]

\[c. \quad \text{Tu es en retard, je constate Ø. (F: 5)}\]
\[\quad \text{‘You’re late, I observe Ø.’}\]

\[d. \quad \text{La lettre était par terre. Je l’ai ramassée Ø.}\]
\[\quad \text{‘The letter was on the ground. I picked it up.’}\]

\[e. \quad \text{Il lit Ø une fois, il sait Ø. (F: 6)}\]
\[\quad \text{‘He reads Ø once, he knows Ø.’}\]

\[f. \quad \text{Eh bien, Rodin, on n’aimait Ø pas du tout. (F: 7)}\]
\[\quad \text{‘Well, Rodin, we didn’t like Ø at all.’}\]

\[g. \quad \text{Une bonne bière reconcile Ø avec soi-même. (Authier 1989: 47)}\]
\[\quad \text{‘A good beer reconciles Ø with oneself.’}\]
3.2. Semantics

Our background assumptions concerning the syntactic component raise the question of what type of relationship holds between a direct object position and the V head if it is not a selection relation. Clearly, under the view presented here, this relation is akin to selection. In other words, the lexical semantics of the verb contribute to the actual or potential semantic interpretation of the obligatorily merged direct object. Several options are available. The lexical properties of the verb serve to limit the possible interpretations of the direct object; see 4.3. In this sense, the relation between verb and object could be a type of modification relation. But this is not commonly accepted for a complementation relation. This general issue is addressed directly in Hale & Keyser (2002:88-94) but in the more restricted context of denominal verbs. We adopt their suggestion that the relation is one of classificatory licensing whereby “the verb identifies the complement to some sufficient extent” (p. 92). They use the term “hyponymy” to refer to this selectional relation and illustrate it with braced indices as in (7).

(7) \( V \) Hale & Keyser (2002:93)

\[
V_{\text{dance}} \quad N_{\text{dance}} \\
\text{dance}
\]

In addition to this relation, it must be assumed that lexical items (verbs, more specifically) include some type of specification as to the roles played by the participants involved in the denotation of the item. This can be a semantic frame, valency, or theta-grid. However, given our assumptions with respect to the merging of an object, strict thematic specifications may turn out to be expendable—superfluous, in that they are not responsible for the projection of an object position, and incorrect, since they predictions they make are not borne out.
Finally, the well-recognized distinction between sense and reference surfaces in a crucial way in this study of null objects. The semantic licensing we adopt makes it possible for the verb to identify its complement. The reference of the complement when such reference exists must be determined independently. This is the point at which pragmatics can start playing a role.

3.3. Pragmatics

We assume that a standard pattern of nominal reference in French discourse is the sequence \[\text{lexical noun ... pronoun ... NO}\] in which the default interpretation (barring contradictory information) is that all nominals are coreferential, as in (8):

\[(8)\]

\[\begin{align*}
\text{a. J’ai vu ton chien, dans le parc. Je } & \text{i’ai caressé } \emptyset. \\
\text{‘I saw your dog in the park. I petted it.’}
\end{align*}\]

\[\begin{align*}
\text{b. Elle ne lisait pas ses journaux, parce qu’elle les avait laissés } & \emptyset \text{ à la maison.} \\
\text{‘She wasn’t reading her newspapers, because she had left them at home.’}
\end{align*}\]

However, coreference is established in different ways. The coreference between the clitic pronoun and the NO in (8) is established by purely grammatical means, while that between the noun and the pronoun is not. This type of coreference is pragmatic and defeasible. We adopt Levinson’s (2000) account, wherein this kind of coreferential interpretation comes under a Generalised Conversational Implicature, primarily the I-principle, based on Grice’s maxim of informativeness. The essential elements, for our purposes, of Levinson’s formalization of the I-principle are given in (9): In particular, we are interested in the Recipient’s corollary, to amplify the informational content of the speaker’s utterance, by finding the most specific interpretation, and to assume stereotypical relations and coreference where possible.

\[(9)\]

\[\text{I-principle} \quad (\text{Levinson 2000:114})\]

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Speaker’s maxim: the maxim of Minimization: "Say as little as necessary"; that is,}
\end{align*}\]
produce the minimal linguistic information sufficient to achieve your communicational ends...

*Recipient’s corollary:* the Enrichment Rule. Amplify the informational content of the speaker’s utterance, by finding the most specific interpretation... Specifically:
... Assume that stereotypical relations obtain between referents and events...
... Avoid interpretations that multiply entities referred to (assume referential parsimony): specifically, prefer coreferential readings of reduced NPs (pronouns or zeros)...

The I-principle accounts for the default assumption of coreference between pronoun and lexical noun in the examples in (8). This coreference is strongly preferred, but it is defeasible, as shown in the possible follow-ups given in (10).


‘I saw your dog in the park. I petted it—I mean the little dog that was playing with your big dog.’

b. Elle ne lisait pas ses journaux, parce qu’elle les avait laissés à la maison — c’est-à-dire, ses verres de contact.

‘She wasn’t reading her newspapers, because she had left them at home—her contact lenses, that is.’

The coreference between the NO and the clitic is not defeasible. In the following section, we will show how these two established mechanisms—grammatically established coreference between NO and clitic and pragmatically established coreference of reduced nominals—can help account for the various types of NOs observed in French.
4. A typology of NOs

We are now in a position to investigate various types of null objects in French from the point of view of each module's contributions to their interpretation.

4.1. Definite NOs recovered by a clitic

This type of NO is familiar in Romance:

(11) J’ai appelé Jean, mais je n’ai pas pu le rejoindre Ø.

‘I called Jean, but I couldn’t reach him.’

This case is usually not mentioned in studies of null objects, because its recovery by the clitic is complete, direct, and obligatory. However, it does fall under our definition of null objects and is essential to our account of the phenomenon. We adopt a standard, albeit not uncontroversial analysis, whereby the NO is a null pronominal (pro); its semantic content corresponds to its $\phi$ features (person, number, gender), which are recovered through feature-checking with the clitic. (See, e.g., Roberge (1990), and Sportiche (1998) for a unification of the two main approaches to Romance pronominal clitics, mention what they are.)

4.2. Definite NOs not recovered by a clitic

This type of NO is identical to the previous type, except that there is no overt clitic. In this sense, the NO is "delinked". Like the NO recovered by a clitic, this NO is definite and referential:

(12) a. On lui tendit une main. Pas besoin d’aide. Vexé, il négligea Ø et se releva... (L: 48)

‘A hand was extended to him. Don’t need help. Annoyed, he ignored Ø and got up...’

B: Je maîtrise Ø. (L: 50)

“Do you master your interviews? Interviews are very important.”

“I master Ø.”

c. ...Et la tête qu’il fait le jour où on rapporte au logis un store décoré d’une photo de Marylin...S’il déteste vraiment, on le case dans la salle de bain... (Noailly: 100)

‘...And the look on his face the day you bring home a blind decorated with a photo of Marilyn Monroe...If he really hates Ø, you stick it in the bathroom...’

It appears in the same contexts as NOs recovered by a clitic and its interpretation is identical; that is, the sentences in (12) are equivalent to those in (13).

(13) a. On lui tendit une main. Pas besoin d’aide. Vexé, il la négligea Ø.

‘A hand was extended to him. Don’t need help. Annoyed, he ignored it.


B: Je les maîtrise Ø.

‘I master them.’

c. S’il le déteste vraiment, on le case dans la salle de bain...

‘If he really hates it, you stick it in the bathroom...’

In the case of NOs recovered by a clitic, we held that coreference between the clitic and a lexical noun was inferred, under the I-principle; we suppose that coreference between the lexical noun and the NO is inferred in the same way, since these NOs occur in exactly the same contexts.

Several researchers have analyzed definite referential NOs as null variables bound by a null topic or other null operator in the left periphery; see, e.g., Raposo (1986). Evidence in favor
of this type of analysis usually involves inhibition of appearance of the NO when there is other material in specCP. The NOs not recovered by an overt clitic do not seem to fall under this constraint; constructed sentences with material in specCP and a NO appear just as acceptable as those with no overt material in specCP.\footnote{7}

(14) a. Tu as lu les pages? Tu m’as dit que tu avais lu Ø.

‘Did you read the pages? You told me you had read Ø.’

b. (in a video store) Si on prenait Tigre et Dragon? Qui a vu Ø?

‘How about Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon? Who has seen Ø?’

Moreover, there is at least one attested example with past participle agreement, identical to the agreement which would be found if the sentence contained a clitic recovering the NO.

(15) Nikel m’a dit de prendre une boîte bleue dans le vestiaire. J’ai prise Ø. (cf. Je l’ai prise.)

‘Nikel told me to take a blue box from the cloakroom. I took Ø.’ (L: 59)

While this example is certainly unusual and would doubtless be rejected by most speakers, it is difficult to see how even erroneous agreement could arise unless the clitic-less construction is essentially similar to the structure with the clitic. Past participle agreement is normally triggered by an overt preverbal element linked to a null element in the postverbal direct-object position. In (15), this preverbal element is absent.

If the two structures differ only in the overt presence or absence of the clitic, a more precise account emerges, whereby 1) clitics are analyzed as morphological markers on the verb; 2) they are represented by features throughout the derivation and spelled-out at PF; 3) in the clitic-drop construction no morphophonological realization is assigned to the features.\footnote{8}

This approach has at least three desirable properties. First, it accounts for the facts, especially the close link between delinked NOs and those recovered by a clitic. Second, because
independent arguments have been advanced that pronominal clitics in colloquial/popular French appear to behave more like morphological entities (agreement markers) than their standard French counterparts (see, e.g., Auger 1994), it provides some explanation for the innovative character of the construction and the fact that it is not judged fully grammatical by all speakers. Third, one widespread case of clitic drop in most regional and social varieties of French, illustrated in (16), appears to be morphophonologically motivated and could indeed have given rise to the stranded NOs construction.

(16) Je le lui donne → [ʒləlɛidɔn] → [ʒlɛidɔn] → [ʒidɔn]

Although the constructions involving the delinked NO and the clitic-linked pro share many properties, it is not our claim that they are entirely equivalent. Obviously, they differ stylistically and discursively; moreover, just as there are factors that favor the presence of a NO, other factors may inhibit its presence. An anonymous reviewer points out that a sentence such as (17a) with an overt clitic is grammatical with the intended reference, yet its counterpart with clitic-drop (17b) is not. In this example, the null object seems to behave like an R-expression and thus a null epithet.

(17) a. Jean, a dit que Marie l’avait embrassé pro.  
‘John said that Marie had kissed him.’

b. *Jean, a dit que Marie avait embrassé Ø.  
‘John said that Mary had kissed Ø.’

Nearly all of the examples of delinked null objects we have found involve [-human] antecedents. Probably [+human] reference is a factor that strongly disfavors clitic drop. Bianchi & Figueiredo (1994)'s analysis of similar facts in Brazilian Portuguese holds that delinked NOs must be [-human], a restriction that does not hold for NOs recovered by a clitic. This restriction
is supported by the fact that coreference does not obtain even when the null object is not bound by the antecedent, as in (18a), to be contrasted with (18b).

\begin{enumerate}
\item [18] a. * [ La mère de Jean, ] a dit qu’elle avait embrassé Ø.
  ‘John’s mother said that she had kissed Ø.’

\item b. [ La mère de Jean, ] a dit qu’elle l’avait embrassé pro.
  ‘John’s mother said that she had kissed him.’
\end{enumerate}

Nevertheless, the fact that acceptable examples of delinked NOs with [+human] reference (admittedly with other structural or contextual elements that favor clitic-drop) are attested or can be constructed, as in (19), suggests that further research of this issue is necessary to determine how these factors interact and the status of the restrictions, while supporting our central claim that NOs are licensed independently of these factors.

\begin{enumerate}
\item [19] a. «Crystal tient à cette fille, Snif. On va lui prendre Ø.» (L: 65) (dative clitic)
  ‘“Crystal cares about that girl, Snif. We’re going to take Ø from him.”’

\item b. Laure m’a vu pour la première fois à la bibliothèque et tout de suite elle a adoré Ø!
  ‘Laure saw me for the first time at the library and right away she loved Ø!’

\item c. C’était le procès de Jean. Tout le monde était là pour le condamner. Moi, je l’ai condamné. Julie aussi. Louis l’a blâmé, Diane a condamné, même la mère de Jean a condamné Ø. (cf. (18b))
  ‘It was John’s trial. Everyone was there to condemn him. I condemned him. So did Julie. Louis blamed him, Diane condemned him, even John’s mother condemned Ø.’
\end{enumerate}
Jean n’a jamais voulu reconnaître que tout le monde était contre lui, tout le monde le blâmait, tout le monde l’avait condamné. Mais seul la nuit dans sa cellule il a dû reconnaître que oui, même Marie avait condamné Ø. (cf. (17b))

‘John would never admit that everyone was against him, everyone blamed him, everyone condemned him. But alone at night in his cell, he had to admit that yes, even Mary had condemned Ø.’

4.3. Null Cognate Objects

A third type of NO corresponds to the canonical case of the “generic” or “indefinite” null object, in what is often called the “absolute” use, exemplified in (20).

(20) a. De loin, la France continue de séduire Ø, mais, de près, les Français agacent Ø. (L: 36)

‘From afar, France continues to attract, but close up, the French annoy Ø.’

b. Cela a un rapport avec la survie : l’être humain a toujours accumulé Ø. (L: 86)

‘It’s related to survival: humans have always accumulated Ø.’

Under the TR, we hold that even here the NO has syntactic representation: it is not an “absence”; it is not incorporated into the verb; the verb remains transitive. In canonical cases, this NO has no possible antecedent or referent in the linguistic and extralinguistic context. Moreover, the NO cannot itself be an antecedent to a definite expression, as shown in (21). (21a) is an ad for a credit card, whose text contains an example of a NO, the complement of acheter.

As this sentence is the beginning of a text there is no linguistic antecedent; moreover, nothing in the accompanying illustration is a possible referent of the NO. The sentences in (21b) and (21c) are non sequiturs in the context; they are not coherent following sequences to (21a).
(21) a. Avec la carte Cofinoga, on commence par acheter Ø et on finit par s’envoler.

(L:79)

‘With the Cofinoga card, you start out by buying Ø, and you wind up flying away.’

b. # Il est joli, et vous en avez besoin.

‘It’s nice and you need it.’

c. # Vous les payez peut-être trop cher.

‘You might be paying too much for them.’

The inability to serve as an antecedent is not a characteristic of all NOs. Definite NOs not recovered by a clitic can be the antecedent to a pronoun. In (22), for example, the NO, complement of détester, is the most likely antecedent of the following clitic le.

(22) S’il déteste Ø vraiment, on le case dans la salle de bain... (Noailly 1996:100)

‘If he really hates Ø, you stick it in the bathroom...’

Lack of referentiality and the inability to be an antecedent correspond to the behavior of bare nouns in French:

(23) a. Ils ont mis fin aux hostilités, et #elle₁ est irrévocable.

‘They have put end to the hostilities and it₁ is irrevocable.’

b. Marc a fait preuve de courage, et #elle₁ était très convaincante.

‘Marc made proof of (i.e. showed) courage and it₁ was very convincing.’

c. J’aimerais prendre part au match, mais #elle₁ ne m’est pas permise.

‘I would like to take part in the game but it₁ is not allowed to me.’

The semantics of the NO in the absolute use correspond to that of a prototypical object of the verb:
(24) a. *acheter* Ø (Ø = what is bought or can be bought)
b. *agacer* Ø (Ø = those who are or can be annoyed)

In this regard, these NOs correspond to cognate objects, whose semantics are derived from the semantics of the verb:

(25) a. *vivre sa vie, chanter une chanson*
   ‘live one’s life, sing a song’
b. *combattre le dernier combat*
   ‘battle the last battle’
c. *Quel rêve j’ai rêvé!*
   ‘What a dream I dreamt!’

These characteristics lead us to propose that the NO in the absolute use is a null cognate object—a null bare noun whose semantics are derived from the semantics of the verb; see section 3.2. This proposal corresponds to Hale & Keyser’s (2002) account of the structure of denominal unergative verbs (see also (7) above):

(26) V        Hale & Keyser (2002:15)
    V       N
     |      |
    laugh Ø

Similarly, Kayne (2002) hypothesizes from its distribution and the fact that it has comparative and superlative forms, that the English word *few* is an adjective, one which does not modify an NP directly, but instead modifies a null bare noun with the semantic content of NUMBER, as in (27). The semantic content of the N is derived from that of the adjective.

(27) a. *...few NUMBER books*
b. *...fewer NUMBER books...*
c.  ...fewest NUMBER books...

The null cognate object we propose thus fits into a system of empty bare nouns.\(^9\) Another way to approach this null object would be to consider it similar to Lasnik & Stowell’s (1991) null epithet. But null epithets are non-variable R-expressions while the null cognate object is generally non-referential (although it can acquire reference via deixis; see 4.4.\(^{10}\))

In many cases, a more precise interpretation than that of cognate or prototypical object is attributed to the null object, as in (28):

(28)  Il y a ceux qui ne mangent plus Ø, il y a ceux qui boivent Ø, il y a ceux qui se demandent si leur chagrin est authentique ou fabriqué. (L:52)

‘There are those who no longer eat Ø, there are those who drink Ø, there are those who wonder if their pain is authentic or manufactured.’

Here the NO complement of *manger* is interpreted as the prototypical object of the verb (‘food’), but that of *boire* has a more stereotypical interpretation, not just of whatever is drunk or can be drunk or a prototypical drinkable, but ‘alcoholic beverages’. This interpretation is due to the I-principle, which leads the hearer to infer a stereotypical interpretation. The two NOs have the same referential and syntactic status; only the semantic-pragmatic interpretations distinguish them. Interpretation of the NO of *manger* relies more on verbal semantics, while interpretation of the NO of *boire* relies more on stereotype. In considering the two NOs to be nonetheless basically similar, we differ from purely semantic accounts, like Larjavaara’s, which classifies the two as essentially different in terms of the specific identifiability of their semantics.

In other cases, the NO, without achieving definite reference, has an even more specific interpretation than that of a cognate or stereotypical object.
(29) a. Même avec trois cuillerées de sucre en poudre, le breuvage reste amer. Leroy
touille Ø en comptant les miettes sur la toile cirée. (L:49)
‘Even with three spoonfuls of sugar, the drink still tastes bitter. Leroy stirs Ø,
counting the crumbs on the oilcloth.’

b. Elle ressortit d’un pas nerveux et, tandis que je posais les billets sur un guéridon,
lui dit avec humeur qu’elle lui téléphonerait. Placide, il nous lança «au plaisir», et
verrouilla Ø derrière nous. (L:44)
‘She stepped out nervously and, as I placed the tickets on a small table, told him
testily that she would phone him. Calmly, he said “so long” and locked Ø behind
us.’

In these cases, the NO is interpreted not as whatever can be stirred or locked or the
typically stirred or locked entity, but instead as the previously mentioned bitter drink and the
door that can be assumed to exist in this context of leaving. This interpretation is inferred; the
greater specificity is again due to Levinson’s I-principle, allowing the hearer to infer from lack
of specificity that there is no need for greater specificity. In these cases, the I-principle instructs
the hearer to prefer local coreference and to make bridging inferences; thus the hearer can
augment the semantic interpretation, given by the verb’s lexical semantics, with stereotypical or
contextual information.

Although these NOs are not generic in interpretation, and in fact may receive a fairly
specific interpretation, they are nonetheless not definite and not referential. That is, for (28a), for
example, the recipient may infer that Leroy is stirring the bitter drink and the speaker may intend
the recipient to infer that, but the speaker has not said or asserted it.
Even in the canonical cases of generic NOs in the absolute use, recipients augment the semantic interpretation given by the verb with further pragmatic inferences derived from context. What proportion of the interpretation is due to the verb’s lexical semantics and what proportion to pragmatic inferences will vary in each case. There is no principled way of distinguishing less-vague non referential NOs from their vaguer counterparts; therefore we consider all to belong to the class of null cognate objects.

4.4. Deictic uses of NOs

A last type of NO involves reference to an entity that is salient in the extralinguistic context but not necessarily present in the discourse. This type of NO, which has been called “deictic” by Noailly (1996), is particularly common with imperatives, as in (30).

(30) a. «C’est quoi, le sujet de ta rédac?»
«Complètement con.»
«Fais voir Ø.»
...Le rouquin s’était levé...et voilà qu’il s’asseyait à côté de lui sur la banquette et que, du bout des doigts, il faisait signe d’abouler Ø.
«Allez, envoie Ø.» (L:50)
“‘What’s your paper about?’”
“Total garbage.”
“Show Ø.”
...The redhead had got up...and now he sat down beside him on the bench and wiggled his fingers to signal ‘give’ Ø.
“Come on, hand Ø over.’”
b. A: C’est quoi, son journal, à ce mec? Le Monde...

B: Tenez, prenez Ø, je ne voudrais pas vous priver de lecture! (Noailly 1997: 103)

‘What paper does he have, that guy? Le Monde...

Here, take Ø, I wouldn’t want to deprive you of reading matter!’

c. Garder Ø hors de la portée des enfants. Ne pas utiliser Ø si le sceau intérieur est brisé.

‘Keep Ø out of the reach of children. Do not use Ø if inner seal is broken.’

d. (in the presence of a misbehaving child) Mais qu’est-ce que tu attends? Gifle Ø!

(F: 19)

‘What are you waiting for? Slap Ø!’

However, it occurs in other contexts as well.

(31) a. (holding up a bag) Je laisse Ø ici? (L&L: 301)

‘Can I leave Ø here?’

b. Pourquoi tu agites Ø? C’est déjà secoué. (F: 11)

‘Why are you shaking Ø? It’s already shaken.’

Because of the absence of a linguistic antecedent, there is no coreference established among members of the sequence [lexical noun ... pronoun ... NO] as in the cases involving clitics or clitic-drop. The NO is interpreted differently than in the “absolute” cases: it does not receive a generic, non-referential interpretation but a specific, referential one. In some cases, these NOs receive an interpretation similar to that of a clitic or other pronoun in corresponding examples.


‘Show it. Hand it over to me.’
b. Prenez-le.

‘Take it.’

c. Je laisse ça ici? Je le laisse ici?

‘Can I leave this here? Can I leave it here?’

However, this correspondence is not perfect; Lambrecht & Lemoine point out that the NO can have an interpretation distinct from that of definite clitics or ça. What is similar is that both pronouns and NOs can establish a link with a referent that need not have previous linguistic status. We take this to be another subcase of the I-principle, whereby the hearer arrives at a maximally specific interpretation by seeking a referent outside the discourse.

4.5. Summary

Table 1 presents our typology of NOs, and the contribution each component of the grammar makes to their recovery and interpretation.11

The five types of null objects (which in fact are really only four types, because the non-referential NOs differ only in the reliance on context to achieve the interpretation) are exemplified by the examples in (33); all of them are complements of the verb lire ‘read’.

(33) a. NO recovered by clitic

A : Tu veux ce livre ?

B : Oh ! Mais je l’ai déjà lu Ø.

A: ‘Do you want this book?’

B: ‘Oh! I’ve already read it.’
b. delinked NO

A : Tu veux ce livre ?
B : Oh ! Mais j’ai déjà lu Ø.
A: ‘Do you want this book?’
B: ‘Oh! I’ve already read Ø.’

c. NO recovered through deixis

(A hands a paper to B and says): Tiens, lis Ø.
‘Here, read Ø.’

d. NCO (more contextual)

Je vais acheter un magazine au kiosque, et je lirai Ø en t’attendant.
‘I’ll buy a magazine at the stand, and I’ll read Ø while I’m waiting for you.’

e. NCO (more stereotypical)

Pendant mon congé sabbatique j’ai surtout l’intention de lire Ø.
‘During my sabbatical I mainly intend to read Ø.’

Phonologically, all of the French null objects are identically null. Null objects come in two syntactic types: pro and bare Ns. When pro is recovered by a clitic, other modules of the grammar make little contribution; this is reflected in the rigidity of interpretation of the null object. How is the interpretive choice made among the other null objects? Following the recipient’s corollary of the I-principle, recipients will opt for the maximally specific interpretation. This means that in the context of a linguistic antecedent or a contextually salient referent, the recipient will assign coreference between those entities and null object. The null cognate object, the bare noun whose semantic content is derived from the verb, gives rise to the least specific interpretation. It seems that this interpretation is what recipients settle for in the
absence of more specific possibilities, and within this category they opt for the more specific contextually-conditioned interpretation over the purely prototypical interpretation. In other words, hearers use everything available to make their interpretation maximally rich.

5. Conclusion

We have argued that the availability of null objects in French follows from general principles of grammar which interact to give rise to various types of null objects. The contribution from three modules of grammars has been considered. First, syntax (or more precisely the computational component), through the Transitivity Requirement, systematically provides a complement position within all VPs. Second, the lexical semantics of a given verb, whether transitive or unergative, allows for basic prototypical identification of the complement. Finally, pragmatics can account for cases where the reference of a null object is not determined by syntactic principles but is rather inferred from context. Pragmatic principles also allow recipients to identify non-referential null objects more precisely than as prototypical objects.

The advantage of this modular approach is that it makes it possible to tackle a complex set of related facts while at the same time simplifying the mechanisms needed in each module to account for these facts.

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Table 1: A Typology of Null Objects

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References


Endnotes

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1 Since grammaticality judgements can be inconsistent and unreliable, we have taken most of our examples from other authors’ informal corpora: Larjavaara (2000) (L), who assembled a corpus from contemporary (post-1985) sources, mainly written; Fonágy (1985) (F), which contains examples personally attested by the author; Gourio (2002) (G), a collection of snippets of conversations purportedly overheard in bars and cafés (a collection which we consider equivalent to a corpus of conversation in literature); and Lambrecht & Lemoine (1996) (L&L), which draws on two scholarly research corpora of spoken French.

2 In Rizzi (1986), the assumption is that not all null objects are projected in syntax, but this is problematic for instances of null objects that receive neither the arbitrary-human nor the prototypical-object interpretation and for which elements of the linguistic and extralinguistic contexts come into play. It seems obvious that such information is not part of the lexical entry of the verb; see Cummins & Roberge (2004) for a discussion of lexical and constructional accounts of null objects.
The TR raises important issues related to the distinction between inherent and structural case (as applied to accusative) but these will not be addressed here.

Note that although we are exclusively dealing with direct objects in this paper, this definition clearly extends to indirect objects.

However, we will not be dealing here with propositional null objects, as in (6b) and (6c), or null objects with control and binding capabilities, as in (6g). Note also that including (6d) as an instance of a base-generated null object, while fairly standard, is not uncontroversial.

Thus, a non-contingent approach to lexical descriptions, in which such descriptions do not include properties that the item only has in specific contexts (Bouchard 1995), might turn out to be more on the right track.

A similar conclusion (i.e. that the null objects in (13) are not null variables) would be reached through an application of the tests proposed in Raposo (1986). For example, when talking about a safe, it would be acceptable in French to say:

(i) J’ai informé la police de la possibilité que la secrétaire ait ouvert Ø à l’insu de son patron.

“I informed the police of the possibility that the secretary might have opened without her boss’s knowledge.”

Raposo uses the ungrammaticality in European Portuguese of a similar construction to argue that this type of null object is a variable in this language. However, in Brazilian Portuguese the facts seem to point towards a pro analysis; see Farrell (1990), Maia (1997) and references cited therein. A detailed discussion of the Portuguese facts goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Alternatively, the clitic could be present throughout the derivation as a morphological affix on the verb and then be deleted at PF.
Indeed, there are strong similarities between the properties of overt bare nouns in French and their empty counterparts postulated here; on bare nouns in French see Mathieu (2004).

As pointed out to us by an anonymous reviewer, Huang (1991) uses Lasnik & Stowell’s null epithet category to analyze Chinese NOs; but see Liu (2004) for arguments that they are pronouns and behave like antilogophors. At first sight, the contrast in (17) also looks like an antilogophoricity constraint on delinked NOs in French but the data in (18) cannot be accounted for under this view.

English has non-referential NOs, and referential NOs recovered through deixis, but not NOs with reference to a linguistic antecedent. English does not have an empty category pro or the means of its recovery by a clitic or other agreement marker. This type of referential null object would be unrecoverable in English.