

# **Evidence for Null Subjects in Malagasy**

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## **1. Introduction.**

This paper shows how the concept of Empty Category<sup>1</sup> of the kind proposed in Chomsky (1981, 1982) is indispensable in an adequate description of Malagasy syntax and exploits in a systematic manner one central idea put forth in Randriamasimanana (1994a, 1994b). Basically the availability inside the functional<sup>3</sup> head<sup>2</sup> of a clause, i.e. the Inflections (Infl, for short) for tense/aspect of a nominal<sup>4</sup> element accounts for the indispensable presence of an overt subject noun phrase<sup>5</sup> inside the Malagasy clause. If such a nominal element is not present inside Infl, then a Malagasy sentence need not have an overt subject nounphrase.

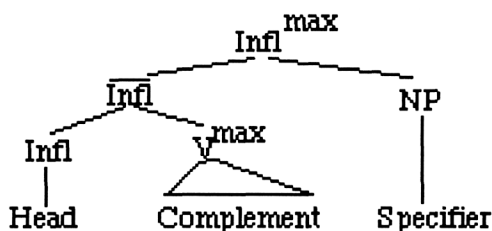
The major purpose of this paper is to show how the two facets of the main idea just presented apply through a whole range of Malagasy constructions involving Control and Stative predicates, Antecedent Government, Complex Movement Verbs, Raising and Marked Causative constructions. Each one of the above will be illustrated in turn.

But first, one basic assumption underlying this paper needs to be made explicit. That is that a tree representation such as the one shown on Figure 1 below will be assumed following Chomsky (1986b). As a result, the basic intuition about the occurrence of Empty Categories in subject position in Malagasy can be summarised as shown on Figure 2 below. Note however that the Tense option shown in section (i) of Figure 2 will not be dealt with in depth. See Randriamasimanana (1994b) for additional illustrative examples involving this specific case.

## **2. Assumptions and Summary of Findings:**

### **2.1 X-Bar Theory.**

As shown on figure 1, the tree representation chosen to describe the internal structural organization of a Malagasy clause follows one version of X-Bar theory found in Chomsky (1986b); in particular, his distinction between lexical heads for grammatical categories such as V(erb), N(oun), P(reposition) and A(djective) and functional heads for function words such as Agreement, Aspect, and Tense --the last three being subsumed under the label 'Infl' for the purpose of the present



where head = lexical = { V, P, N, A }; head = functional = { tense, aspect, agreement }; NP = DP or bare noun

Figure 1: X-Bar Theory and Tree Geometry

paper. In addition, it is assumed that each one of the above categories, i.e. functional as well as lexical, will have a two-level projection in terms of a one-bar level and a two-bar level (here, represented as 'max', i.e. maximal projection of the given category). The label NP is used to symbolize either a DP or Definite Phrase projection, i.e. a noun phrase comprising a definite determiner which serves as the head of the entire projection --following Abney (1987)-- or a bare noun phrase, i.e. a phrase which only comprises a noun without a determiner. Obviously, crucial to our present concern is the view that 'Infl' representing tense, aspect and agreement is the head of the entire clause; whereas the verbal predicate labelled 'Vmax' is its complement and the NP occupying the subject position inside the clause is a Specifier.

## 2.2 Summary of the Distribution of Empty Categories

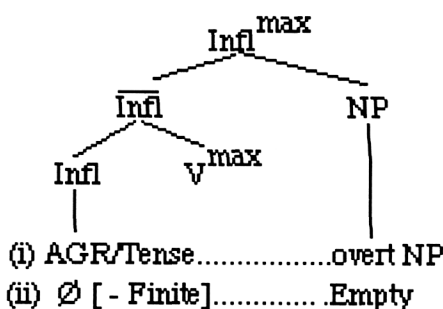


Figure 2: Summary of Distribution of Empty Categories

As seen on figure 2, when agreement or AGR is present within Infl, the head of the clause, the subject position NP must be

filled by an overt noun phrase. Likewise, when a certain kind of case-carrying tense-marker occupies Infl (see Randriamasimanana 1994b for detail). However, when no AGR shows up under Infl, then the subject position is typically empty. Obviously the above only pertains to a subset of Empty Categories to the exclusion of structures involving Raising predicates and those involving an embedded Small Clause<sup>6</sup>. In addition, note that when the predicate is incompatible with AGR, such a predicate will accommodate only a [ - finite] Infl and as a result, the Empty Category showing in subject position will automatically get assigned the interpretation of arbitrary big PRO.

### 2.3 Sentence Subject Requirement In Malagasy.

Malagasy sentences --especially where matrix or independent clauses are concerned-- prototypically require an overt subject noun phrase even if the clause involves a weather predicate.

- (1)a. Alina ny andro<sup>7</sup>.  
       night the day  
       "Night has fallen."  
       b. ?\*Alina
- (2)a. Mivatravatra ny orana<sup>8</sup>.  
       rain-heavily the rain  
       "A heavy rain is falling."  
       b. \*Mivatravatra

As seen in (1)a and (2)b, when the subject of a clause is left out as in an out-of-the-blue type of situation, the utterance becomes ungrammatical. However, in some cases an appropriate context of situation may be invoked in marked configurations which for example involve discourse considerations to justify the use of sequences such as (1)b.

### 2.4 Reflexivization and the Subject in Malagasy.

It is a well-known fact about Malagasy reflexive that (i) it requires its antecedent to be in the same clause as the reflexive and that (ii) the antecedent must be a subject. Consult Randriamasimanana (1986) for an in-depth treatment.

- (3) N-amono tena i Paoly.<sup>9</sup>  
       past-kill self Paul  
       "Paul killed himself."
- (4)a. N-ilaza tamin'i Jaona i Paoly [fa h-amono tena --- ]  
       past-say to John Paul that fut-kill self EC  
       "Paul told John that he (Paul) would kill himself."

- b. N-ilaza tamin'i Jaona [fa h-amono tena --- ] i Paoly.  
 "Paul told John [ that he (P.) would kill himself EC]."  
 \*"Paul told John to kill himself."

Given sentence (3), it must be the case that inside the embedded clause between square brackets in (4)a there has to be an antecedent to the reflexive 'tena' and that antecedent does not have phonetic content. Likewise in (4)b, where we note that the antecedent can only be a subject, i.e. 'i Paoly' and never a nonsubject, for example, 'i Jaona'.

Overall the above suggests that in a marked structure, i.e. in an embedded position, for instance, the subject of a given Malagasy clause is likely to be an Empty Category (EC). However, see (11) and (12) below pertaining to other types of predicates showing up in independent or matrix clauses.

## 2.5 Empty Categories in Subject Position.

Now, in complex constructions involving a Control predicate, a Movement Verb predicate and a Raising predicate, the required overt subject noun phrase appears to be absent from all the relevant embedded structures (shown between square brackets).

- (5) M-ikasa [ h-amono tena --- ] i Paoly.  
 pres-intend [ fut-kill self EC ] Paul  
 "Paul intends to kill himself."  
 (6) N-angataka an'i Paoly [ h-amono tena --- ] i Jaona.  
 past-ask DO Paul [ fut-kill self EC ] John  
 "John asked Paul to kill himself."  
 (7) Lasa [ n-andeha ---] [ n-amono tena ---] i Paoly.  
 gone [ past-go --- ] [past-kill self EC ] Paul  
 "Paul went and killed himself."  
 (8) I Paoly aloha marina tokoa [ fa n-amono tena ---].  
 Paul first true truly [that past-kill self EC ]  
 "First of all, it is true that Paul killed himself."

In (5), we have a subject Control construction; in (6), an object Control construction; whereas in (7), we have a complex Movement Verb construction and in (8) a Raising construction. In each one of the embedded clauses between square brackets, there is a reflexive, which under normal circumstances requires a subject within the same clause. Now, such a subject cannot have phonetic content. It must be an Empty Category, in Chomsky's sense (Chomsky 1981, 1982).

## 3. Accounting for the Distribution of Empty Categories:

The explanation for the phenomenon shown in (3), (4), (5),