

Research Article

Pro-drop and subject pronouns in Assamese

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ABSTRACT

In recent years a considerable attention has been given to the study of control and pro-drop. Languages with rich agreement patterns allow for phonetically empty subject which is called “pro”. This paper deals with the pro-drop phenomena of Assamese. The main objective of the paper is to give a descriptive analysis of the subject pronouns and their nature in the pro-drop phenomena. The paper also aims to give a basic idea of this pro-drop phenomenon and shows how certain subject pronouns behave differently in Assamese. Pro drop in Assamese is a major linguistic characteristic of the language. The findings of the study revealed that we can drop most of the subject pronouns in Assamese. Though Assamese is considered as a pro-drop language, this phenomenon is not acceptable in written language. The sentences should be in a full structural representation in written language. In other words, we can say that pro-drop is used in our daily conversations; it is more or less like informal conversations.

Introduction

“There is an intrinsic fascination in the study of properties of empty categories” (Chomsky 1981, p. 51). The topic of the paper falls under the domain of control theory which is the module of Government and binding theory. The government and binding is a theory of syntax which was introduced by Noam Chomsky in 1980s. According to the control theory of GB there are two pro(s); one is small pro (pro) and the other one is big pro (PRO). Small pro is the name given to the non-overt subjects occupying the subject position of a finite clause in a pro-drop language. The concept of pro-drop is related to this small pro. Some languages with special linguistic characteristics tend to leave the subject in sentences, those subjects is called as null subject or empty subject, these types of subject don’t have phonological content, they are covert. Those languages having these types of constructions are considered as “pro-drop languages”. On the other hand, the concept of big pro is not related to the topic of the paper. The null pronoun subject of a non-finite clause is called big pro, big pro can be controlled by its antecedent. In the sentence “he tried to do the work” the second clause “to do the work” doesn’t have an overt subject. This violates the EPP. According to EPP (Extended Projection Principle) every subject must have an overt subject. It can be solved by assuming that there is a null subject in the second clause, which is big pro. The sentence will be now as follows:

She tried to [PRO do the work.]

However, this paper only deals with the concept of small pro. In pro-drop languages with a highly inflected verbal morphology, the subject pronoun can be dropped since the verbal morphology indicates the person and number of the subject.

Assamese is an Eastern Indo-Aryan language which is spoken mainly in the Indian state of Assam, where it is an official language. The language is spoken by over 14 million speakers and serves as a lingua franca in the region. The basic word order of Assamese is Subject-Object-Verb (SOV). The language has both agglutinating and inflectional features.

. There are numerous works which mention Assamese as a pro-drop language and some papers can be found which focus on different syntactic and morphological characteristics of the language, yet the phenomena of subject pronouns in pro-drop

has not yet been discussed as a single topic. The paper first gives an introduction about the concept of pro-drop in terms of control theory. Next, the paper gives a small background of Assamese language and its linguistics characteristics. The paper then describes the types of subject pronouns which can be dropped. The keywords which are mentioned in the paper have been discussed throughout the paper. This paper also shows how the verbal inflections lead the language to be a pro-drop language.

Literature Review

There is evidence of having numerous works on pro-drop in different languages. There have been many new theories and concepts on this topic in recent time. For example radical pro-drop can be found in Chinese. Languages which we considered as non-pro drop languages, some constructions have been found as exceptions. The phenomena of pro-drop in Assamese have been discussed in many works. But no paper has been found which only deals with this phenomenon as a single topic. There is a paper on "Control in Assamese" (Haddad, Y. A,2006) which focuses on both finite and non-finite clause, ECM construction etc.

Methodology

The methodology used for the research is descriptive. The data have been collected from the Author's own native language; therefore most of the data have been collected from the author's real life experiences. In order to verify some of the data the author took help from both primary and secondary sources.

The author visited library and educational institutes to search relevant books on this topic. The author went through many papers of different languages to understand the topic better. The author also observed her linguistic environment to know about the linguistic characteristics of the language. In order to find out relevant materials on the topic, the author observed the native speaker's linguistic behaviour in informal situation.

The author also took help from internet to find out relevant data on the topic.

Results and Discussion

The pronouns used as subjects in sentences are called as subject pronouns. In pro-drop languages, the subject pronouns can be dropped.

In Assamese, all of the personal pronouns can be dropped.

Verb "kha" – "eat"

Personal pronoun	Present tense	Past tense	Future tense
Moi (I)	kha-u	kha-l-u	kha-m
Ami (we)	Kha-u	Kha-l-u	Kha-m
Tumi (you)	Kh-u-a	Kha-l-a	Kha-b-a
Tumaluke (you plural)	Kh-u-a	Kha-l-a	Kha-b-a
Toi (you informal)	Kha-o	Kha-l-i	Kha-b-i
Tohote (you pl informal)	Kha-o	Kha-l-i	Kha-b-i
He (he)	Kha-i	Kha-l-e	Kha-b-o
Tai (she)	Kha-i	Kha-l-e	Kha-b-o
Hehote (they)	Kha-i	Kha-l-e	Kha-b-o

From the above examples we can see that the inflections in the verbs show the agreement feature of person and tense. Therefore, we can drop the subject like below.

1. Kha-u. 2. Kha-l-u 3. Kha-m
Eat-1sg eat-pst-1sg eat-fut.1sg

Assamese has no marker for present tense, yet it has present progressive marker. The past tense marker is "l" or "il" and future tense marker is "m", "im" and "b" or "ib". "u" is the first person present tense agreement marker. On the other hand, future tense marker "m" indicates both tense and person.

2. kha-u 5. Kha-l-u 6. Kha-m

Eat-1p eat-pst-1p eat-fut.1p

Assamese verbs don't inflect for number and gender. In the examples of above sentences we can see that there is no distinction of the structure of the sentences between 1 and 4, 2 and 5 and 3 and 6.

According to the control theory, small pro is the non-overt subjects occupying the subject position of a finite clause. A finite clause includes a verb which can be inflected for tense, person and sometimes number.

The next question comes to our mind that can we use all finite clauses as pro-drop in Assamese? In order to find out, we will have to see if all finite clauses can be transferred into pro-drop.

1. he kam-tu kor-il-e
 he-nom work-cl do-pst-3sg
 pro kam-tu koril-e
 pro work-cl do-pst-3sg

The subject "he" is in the nominative case. Assamese doesn't have marker for nominative case. The inflections in the verb "kor" show that the subject is in the third person and in past tense.

2. Tar jor ho-is-e
 He-gen fever be-impf-3sg
 pro jor hoise
 pro fever be-impf-3sg

The genitive subjects cannot be dropped since we cannot identify the subject from its verbal inflections. The verb "hoise" can be used for first, second and third person in the present tense.

- Mur jor ho-is-e
 I-gen fever be-impf-1sg
- Tumar jor ho-is-e
 You-gen fever be-impf-2sg

Genitive pronoun	Present tense	Past tense	Future tense
Mur (I gen)	Jor hoise	Jor hol	Jor hobo
Amar(we gen)	Jor hoise	Jor hol	Jor hobo
Tur(you informal)	Jor hoise	Jor hol	Jor hobo
Tumar(you formal)	Jor hoise	Jor hol	Jor hobo
Apunar(you honorific)	Jor hoise	Jor hol	Jor hobo
Tar/tair(he,she gen)	Jor hoise	Jor hol	Jor hobo
Hehotor (they gen)	Jor hoise	Jor hol	Jor hobo

There have been continuous arguments regarding the pro-drops in languages. It has been observed that pro-drop phenomena not only show up in languages with rich inflectional systems, but also in languages with no verbal inflection e.g. imperative constructions.

English is not considered as pro-drop language, yet we can drop the subjects of imperative constructions.

For example:

Go there, come here, shut the door etc.

These sentences don't have an overt subject. But from the pragmatic point of view it has been assumed that the subject is in the second person "you".

(you) go there.

(you)come here.

(you)shut the door.

Till now, we have come to know that it is possible to leave out the subject in case the imperative verb is uninflected. If the imperative verb has inflections, is it possible to drop the subjects as well? Let's find out whether it is possible for Assamese.

Assamese has three types of pronouns for second person- toi(informal), tumi(formal, inferior), apuni (honorific, superior). There are different inflectional markers for these second person pronouns.

Verb "porh"(read)

Pronoun	Imperatives
Tumi	Kitapkhon porha
Toi	Kitapkhon porh
Apuni	Kitapkhon porhok

1. Kitap-khon porh-a.
Book-cl read-2p(formal)
(tumi) kitap-khon porh-a.
(you) book-cl read-2p

From the above example we can see that we can identify the subject pronoun from the person marker in the verb “porha”. “-a” is the second person agreement marker(formal) for imperative sentence.

2. Kitapkhon porh-ok.
Book-cl read-2p(honorific)
(apuni/apunaluke) kitapkhon porh-ok.
You honorific book-cl read-2p

In this example “-ok” is the second person(honorific) agreement marker for imperatives. Therefore we can identify the subject pronoun after dropping the subject.

3. Kitapkhon porh
Book-cl read.2p (informal)
(toi) kitapkhon porh.
You informal book-cl read

There is no inflection for second person(informal) in the imperative sentence. But we can easily identify the subject although it has been dropped. The verb is always in its root form in these types of sentences. For example- kha(eat), poh(read), ja(go), ah(come), boh(sit), nas(dance) etc.

The interrogative constructions in Assamese also show a numerable numbers of pro-drop phenomena.

Personal pronouns used in interrogative sentence:

pronoun	Present tense	Past tense	Future tense
Toi (you, informal)	Bhat khaiso?	Bhat khali?	Bhat khabi?
Tumi(you, formal)	Bhat khaisa?	Bhat khala?	Bhat khaba?
Apuni(you, honorific)	Bhat khaise?	Bhat khale?	Bhat khabo?
He (he), tai (she)	Bhat khaise?	Bhat khale?	Bhat khabo?

From the above examples we can say that most of the verbs agree with persons in these types of constructions.

1. bhat khali?
Rice eat-pst-2sg (informal)
Are(you) eating rice?

But the agreement marker for “apuni” and “he,tai” is same. It may create confusion when we drop these pronouns in interrogatives.

2. Bhat khaise?

The above example creates confusion. It has not been identified whether the subject is in the second person honorific or in the third person.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to give a descriptive analysis of subject pronouns in Assamese pro-drop; it has been found out that we can drop most of the subject pronouns in Assamese. Personal pronouns in declarative sentences can be dropped since their verbal inflections indicate its subject. The inflections only indicate about the person of the subject, we cannot identify about its gender and number. However, genitive pronouns cannot be dropped; the verb has same verbal inflection

for tense and person. The subjects in the imperative sentences also can be dropped. There are two different verbal inflections for second person pronoun in imperative constructions. The personal pronouns used in Assamese interrogative construction can be dropped, yet there may be confusions while dropping the second person honorific pronoun and third person pronoun. This paper gives a basic idea about the subject pronouns in Assamese pro-drop, it can help other researchers to write more topics related to this area. The study shows that the linguistic characteristics of the language lead it to be a pro-drop language. Though Assamese is considered as a pro-drop language, this phenomenon is not acceptable in written language. The sentences should be in a full structural representation in written language. In other words, we can say that pro-drop is used in our daily conversations; it is more or less like informal conversations.

About the Author

Radhika Boruah is currently working as a Field Assistant at the Centre for Endangered Languages, Tezpur University, India. She is working on two dictionaries of Endangered Languages, namely Khelma and Purum under CFEL, Tezpur University. She is interested in doing PhD in the coming years.

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