On the interpretation of null objects in French

The interaction among pragmatics, semantics, and grammar and their shared responsibility for interpretation are essential factors in linguistic analysis (cf. Huang 2000; Levinson 2000). This paper explores the interpretation of null objects (NOs) in French from this perspective; consideration of the three domains leads to a revealing account of the grammar and uses of NOs.

As is well known, French allows an “absolute” use in which a transitive verb superficially appears without a direct object, as in (1). In this case, the missing object receives a generic, non-referential interpretation.

(1) Il s’agit là d’un comique qui n’a pas peur de provoquer Ø.
   ‘He is a comedian who is not afraid to provoke.’

The grammar of French requires that referential NOs be recovered via a pronoun; thus (2a) is grammatical while (2b) is not.

(2) a. J’ai appelé Jean mais je n’ai pas pu le rejoindre Ø.
   ‘I called Jean but I couldn’t reach him.’

b. *J’ai appelé Jean mais je n’ai pas pu__ rejoindre Ø.
   ‘I called Jean but I couldn’t reach.’

These two patterns are uncontroversial. However, attested examples are found of the ungrammatical case in (2b)—referential NOs that are not recovered via a pronoun (see Larjavaara 2000, Fónagy 1985, Lambrecht & Lemoine 1996, Noailly 1997, inter alia).

(3) a. «Tu as lu les pages?» ... Il avait lu. (Larjavaara 2000:55)
   ‘Did you read the pages?’ ... He had read.’

b. Mais qu’est-ce que tu attends? Gifle! (Fónagy 1985:19)
   ‘What are you waiting for? Slap!’

Clearly, these are not instances of the absolute use; at the very least, the missing object must be assumed to refer to an entity present in the speech context. Nor do these uses stem from production errors; rather, they involve deliberate manipulation of language resources to achieve a stylistic effect.

Previous analyses that distinguish between referential and non-referential NOs on purely semantic grounds end up, paradoxically, with a semantically vague description of the difference, resorting to undefined notions of identifiability, topic/focus, or probable reference. A purely syntactic approach, on the other hand, does not achieve a coherent account of NOs (see Huang 2000) and cannot readily handle variability; examples like those in (3) are not unusual, but the construction is not consistently acceptable and remains a marked one. The licensing mechanisms normally used in syntax to account for null arguments are not designed to deal with such nuances.

We propose instead an account wherein grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic factors each play a well-defined role. As point of departure, we assume that a standard pattern in French discourse is the sequence [ lexical noun ... pronoun ... NO ] in which all nominals are interpreted as coreferential; this is exemplified in (4):

(4) J’ai vu ton chien, dans le parc. Je l’ai caressé Ø.
   ‘I saw your dog in the park. I petted it.’

The coreference between the pronoun and the NO is established by purely grammatical means, while that between the lexical noun and the pronoun is pragmatic and defeasible, involving
Generalised Conversational Implicatures (GCIs)—primarily Levinson’s I-principle, which handles inferences from a lack of specification to the lack of need for it; the default here is for the hearer to assume coreferential readings of reduced nominal expressions (e.g. the clitic in (4)).

Other, less canonical, patterns are observed. When a possible referent is salient in the context but not necessarily established in the discourse, coreference between this entity and a clitic or NO is inferred, as in (5). This interpretation is a pragmatic one as well — similar to the situation in (4) — but the hearer is directed to seek an antecedent outside discourse.

(5) (holding up a box) a. Je la laisse ici? b. Je laisse Ø ici?
   ‘Should I leave it here?’ ‘Should I leave here?’

Another pattern involves interpretation of a NO without a pronoun clausemate or a salient nonlinguistic antecedent. The hearer seeks an antecedent in the discourse and, if an appropriate one is found, presumes coreference, again by the I-principle. This is the construction exemplified in (3a), which we informally characterize as clitic drop (cf. Guasti & Cardinaletti 2003).

If no appropriate antecedent is found, the gap is interpreted as a null cognate object—that is, an empty N whose semantic features are derived from those of the verb. This interpretation is enriched by pragmatic considerations, primarily involving the I-principle, whereby the hearer upgrades to a stereotypical and maximally pertinent interpretation. This is the absolute use (1).

We propose a series of tests to distinguish, apart from vague semantic notions, among the “absent” objects attested in French. These tests distinguish not only between referential and non-referential NOs but also establish two types of reference within the category of “null referential objects”, one with a linguistic antecedent and the other without, e.g. (3a) vs. (3b). This latter distinction has not been identified in previous studies; interestingly, English allows the second type but not the first. The obvious reason for this difference is that NOs with a linguistic antecedent involve clitic drop, an option available in French but not in English; in other words, French has an established grammatical mechanism for recovering referential NOs and this mechanism can be manipulated, while English is without this means of recovery.

This raises a further issue: there does not appear to be a conflict between the null cognate object interpretation and the referential null object interpretation despite the fact that the two strings are superficially identical. For instance, (3a) cannot have the null cognate object interpretation such as the one associated with the string Il lit dans sa chambre. ‘He is reading in his room’, that would otherwise be available for the same string in a different context. If this fact can be attributed to a maximum interpretation of the CGIs—opt for a maximally rich (or specific) interpretation—then this would mean that the two interpretations need not correspond to different syntactic structures. This in turn becomes a crucial argument in the perennial debate as to whether or not null cognate objects are syntactically projected.