



UNIVERSITY OF  
GOTHENBURG

# NON-STANDARD FEATURES IN SPOKEN GERMANIC LANGUAGE VARIETIES - THE CASES OF NULL SUBJECTS AND NEGATIVE CONCORD

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Grammatical Relations in Spoken Corpora

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# Layout of the talk


- About me
- Null subjects - background
- Null subjects in Old Germanic
- Null subjects in Modern Germanic
- Negative concord in Germanic
- Factors causing grammatical differences between spoken and written languages

# About me

- Syntactician, historical linguist
- Interested in grammatical change, understudied dialects/vernaculars
- Thesis, Lund, 2004: *The Emergence of Conditional Subordinators in Swedish - a Study in Grammaticalization*
- Professor in Scandinavian Languages, Gothenburg, since 2015
- Research projects on (dialect) syntax:
  - member of the Scandinavian Dialect Syntax-network (2005-2008)
  - Nordic Dialect Corpus (2009-2010)
  - Germanic Referential Null Subjects (2009-2013)
  - Estonian-Swedish Linguistic Structures (2012-2017)
  - The Syntax of Negation in Swedish (2016-2020)

## Null subjects - background

Subjects can be omitted from various syntactic contexts.

1. Llueve. (Spanish) expletive null subject  
(it) is raining
2. Estoy trabajando. (Spanish) thematic null subject   
(I) am working
3. Sweden is great! (I) Wish you were here! diary drop
4. We travelled to Gothenburg and (we) had conjunction drop  
fresh shrimps.
5. -Do you like shrimps? -(I) haven't tried that. topic drop

## Null subjects - background

Thematic null subjects occur in a majority of the world's languages (Gilligan 1987).

Since the 1980s, thematic null subjects have been a popular research topic, following works by Luigi Rizzi (1982, 1986). The Romance languages have been in focus, but also Greek, Finnish and Mandarin.

Common research questions:

- what other features have null subject languages (NSL:s) in common?
- what is the status of the omitted subject?
- how is "rich" agreement related to the possibility to omit subjects?

# Null subjects - background

## Some important works:

Barbosa, Pilar. 1995. *Null subjects*. PhD dissertation: MIT.

Biberauer, Theresa, Anders Holmberg, Ian Roberts & Michelle Sheehan (eds). 2010. *Parametric Variation: Null subjects in Minimalist Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Camacho, José. 2013. *Null subjects*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cognola, Federica, & Jan Casalicchio (eds). 2018. *Null Subjects in Generative Grammar: A Synchronic and Diachronic Perspective*. Oxford: OUP.

Holmberg, Anders. 2005. Is there a little pro? Evidence from Finnish. *Linguistic Inquiry* 36: 533-64.

Jaeggli, Osvaldo & Ken Safir. 1989. *The null subject parameter*. Dordrecht: Foris.

Rizzi, Luigi. 1986. Null objects in Italian and the theory of pro. *Linguistic Inquiry* 17: 501-57.

Sheehan, Michelle. 2006. *The EPP and Null Subjects in Romance*. PhD dissertation, University of Newcastle.

# Null subjects - background

There are no thematic null subjects in the standard Germanic languages, and it has been claimed that this is due to a typological condition; Germanic V2 has been supposed to be incompatible with thematic null subjects (Jaeggli & Safir 1989:33, Rohrbacher 1999:251ff).

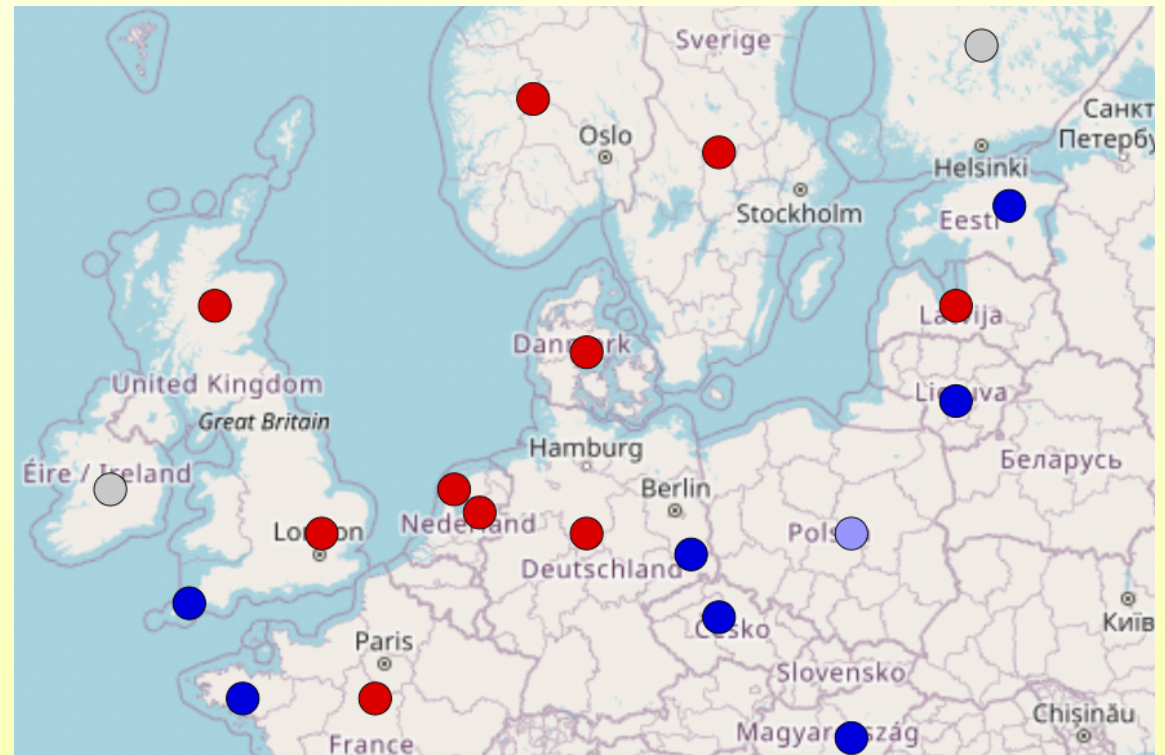
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**Feature 101A: Expression of Pronominal Subjects**

## Values

<span style="color: red;">●</span>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Obligatory pronouns in subject position
<span style="color: blue;">●</span>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Subject affixes on verb
<span style="color: lightblue;">●</span>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Subject clitics on variable host
<span style="color: yellow;">●</span>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Subject pronouns in different position
<span style="color: magenta;">●</span>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Optional pronouns in subject position
<span style="color: gray;">●</span>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mixed



## Null subjects - background

However, thematic null subjects are attested in:

- (all?) Old Germanic (OG) languages
- many Modern Germanic (MG) vernaculars

For the theme of this workshop, both of these diachronic stages are relevant.

- in the transition from spoken to written, things happen with OG null subjects...
- MG vernaculars are traditionally spoken, not written

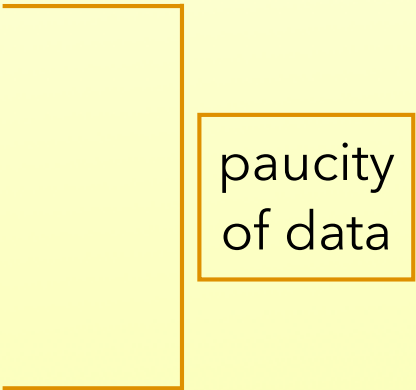
# Null subjects in Old Germanic

The OG languages that are included in this presentation are:

- Old English (OE)
- Old High German (OHG)
- Old Icelandic (OI)
- Old Swedish (OS)

Not included in this talk (cf. Robinson 1992):

- Gothic
- Old Saxon/Old Low German/Old Dutch
- Old Low Franconian
- Old Frisian



paucity  
of data

## Null subjects in Old Germanic

The OG languages are of various age:

LANGUAGE /PERIOD	600	700	800	900	1000	1100	1200	1300	1400	1500	
OLD ENGLISH		650-1150									
OLD HIGH GERMAN		750-1150									
OLD ICELANDIC						1150-1400					
OLD SWEDISH							1225-1525				

The Loan Syntax hypothesis: OG null subjects are copied from Latin. Rejected by van Gelderen (2000:132ff) and Axel (2007:319ff; cf. Schlachter (2012:157f.))

## Null subjects in Old Germanic

6. Sona þæt gesawon (OE; van Gelderen 2000:127).

*soon Ø that saw*

'Soon **they** saw that'

7. Druthin ist auh (OHG; Axel 2007:307)

*Lord is Ø also*

'**He** is also the Lord'

8. þá skar R. [hár hans], en ađr hafði verit úskorit (OI; Sigurðsson 2003)

*then cut R. jarl hair his but before Ø had been uncut*

'Then R. cut his hair, but **it** had been uncut before.'

9. þar gierþi kirchiu aþra (OS; Håkansson 2008:77)

*there Ø built church other*

'There **he** built another church.'

The phenomenon of referential  
pro-drop does not exist in OE.  
Hulk & van Kemenade (1995:245)

# Null subjects in Old Germanic

Is there a correlation between verb agreement and null subjects in OG? Let's look at OE:

NUMBER	PERSON	PRESENT	PAST
<b>SING.</b>	1	-E	-DE
	2	-ES(T)	-DES(T)
	3	-EP	-DE
<b>PLURAL</b>	1	-AP	-DUN, -DON, -DAN
	2		
	3		
<b>INFINITIVE</b>		-AN	

Table 1. Verb agreement in OE.

Expectation: singular null subjects should be more frequent.

NUMBER	PERSON	TOTAL	OVERT SUBJ.	NULL SUBJ.
<b>SING.</b>	1	1632	97% (1587)	3% (45)
	2	799	91% (727)	9% (72)
	3	3728	26,5% (773)	73,5% (2955)
<b>PLURAL</b>	1	321	99% (317)	1% (4)
	2	1217	91% (1104)	9% (113)
	3	2066	26% (527)	74% (1539)
<b>Σ</b>		9763	52% (5035)	48% (4728)

Table 2. Null subjects in two OE texts (after Berndt 1956:65ff).

Result: 3rd person null subjects are most frequent.

# Null subjects in Old Germanic

OHG is very similar:

NUMBER	PERSON	PRESENT	PAST
<b>SING.</b>	1	-U, -OM, -EM	-TA
	2	-IS, -ES(T), -OS(T)	-TOS, -OST
	3	-IT, -ET, -OT	-TA
<b>PLURAL</b>	1	-MES, -EN, -ON	-TUM, -UN
	2	-ET, -OT	-TUT
	3	-ENT, -ONT	-TUN
<b>INFINITIVE</b>		-AN	

Table 3. Verb agreement in OHG  
(Braune & Reiffenstein 2004 )

NUMBER	PERSON	TOTAL	OVERT SUBJ.	NULL SUBJ.
<b>SING.</b>	1	60	90% (54)	10% (6)
	2	19	74% (14)	26% (5)
	3	161	68% (110)	32% (51)
<b>PLURAL</b>	1	14	91% (13)	9% (1)
	2	32	78% (25)	21% (7)
	3	61	57% (35)	43% (26)
<b>Σ</b>		347	72% (251)	28% (96)

Table 4. Null subjects in OHG  
(Schlachter 2012:184)

Expectation: all null subjects should be equally frequent.

Result: 3rd person null subjects are most frequent.

## Null subjects in Old Germanic

OI and OS are exactly the same: irrespective of verb agreement, third person null subjects are by far the most frequent.

[...] dropping of first and second person arguments was very rare.

(Sigurðsson 1993:253)

Omitted subjects that refer to third person dominate in all periods [...].

(Håkansson 2008:106; HRK translation)

In all OG languages, 3p null subjects are more frequent than 1p/2p null subjects.

## Null subjects in Old Germanic

Another indication that OG null subjects were not dependent on verb agreement is that they were lost although the verb agreement remained intact.

Summing up, referential null subjects were largely lost in the OHG period even though there was no substantial weakening of inflectional endings.

(Axel 2007:323)

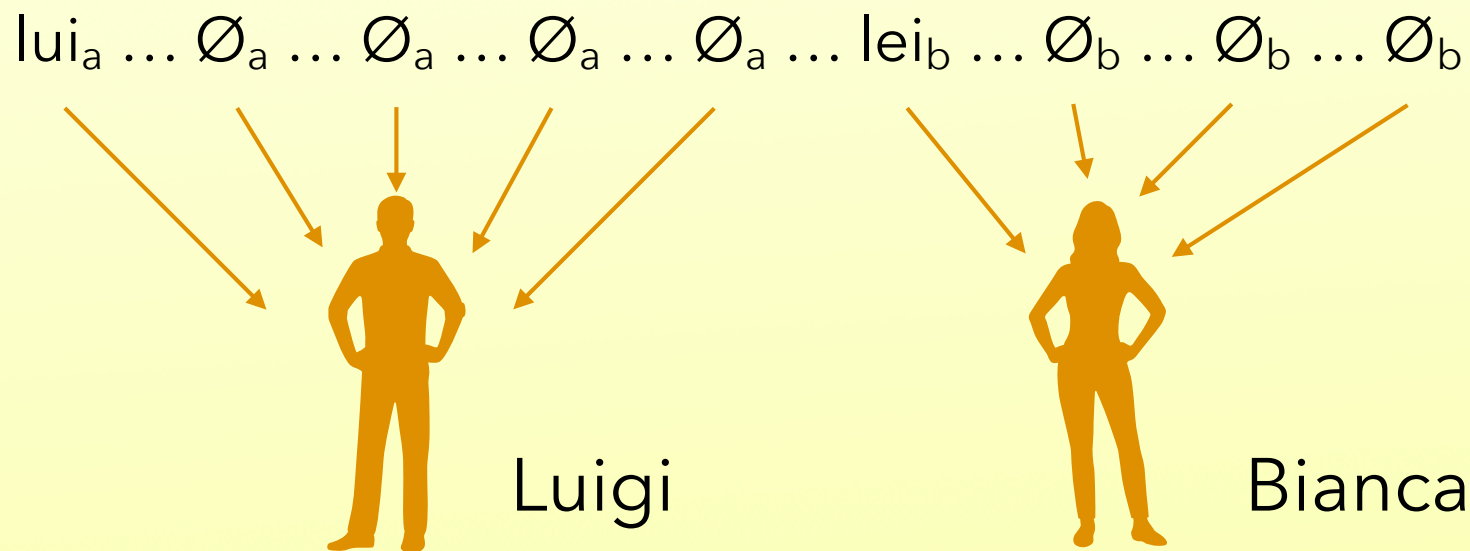
[...] Icelandic generally lost subject drop [...] without any concomitant change of grammar – in particular, without any relevant weakening of its robust agreement morphology.

(Sigurðsson 2011:276)

## Null subjects in Old Germanic

Question: why were 3p pronouns (non-SAP-pronouns) more often null in OG than 1p/2p (SAP-pronouns)?

Frascarelli (2007): 3p subjects are often Aboutness Topics. In Italian, 3p subjects are null when part of a chain of reference, but overt when a new Aboutness Topic is introduced.



## Null subjects in Old Germanic

In discourse, the reference of 3p pronouns is a fixed point, whereas 1p/2p pronouns constantly change reference.

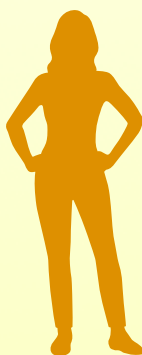
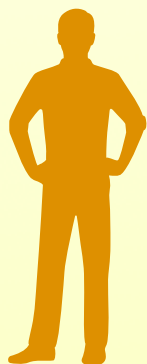
10. Luigi: I<sub>a</sub> would like to know if you<sub>b</sub> think he<sub>c</sub>'s coming.  
 Bianca: Why do you<sub>a</sub> think I<sub>b</sub> should know if he<sub>c</sub>'s coming?

Luigi

I<sub>a</sub>

you<sub>b</sub>

he<sub>c</sub>



Bianca

I<sub>b</sub>

you<sub>a</sub>

he<sub>c</sub>



he

Discourse participants agree on the reference of 3p pronouns, but 1p/2p pronouns shift reference continuously.

This may make OG 3p pronouns easier to omit.

## Null subjects in Old Germanic

The null subjects were lost in the early periods of OE, OHG and OSW, respectively.

LANGUAGE /PERIOD	600	700	800	900	1000	1100	1200	1300	1400	1500
OLD ENGLISH		null subjects		overt subjects						
OLD HIGH GERMAN			null subjects		overt subjects					
OLD SWEDISH							null subjects		overt subjects	

So, why did the null subjects disappear 100-200 years after these languages started to be written, if there was no morphological weakening?

## Null subjects in Old Germanic

So, why did the null subjects disappear 100-200 years after these languages started to be written, if there was no morphological weakening?

A possible explanation is provided by Ong (1984) and Koch & Oesterreicher (1985): textualization/Verschriftlichung.

Textualization is a unintentional process that occurs in the initial stages of the transition from spoken to written language.

Unlike speech, writing can be:

- observed
- reviewed
- revised/corrected
- manipulated

## Null subjects in Old Germanic

Textualization targets “irrational” structures that may be completely natural in spoken language, but appears to be incompatible with written language – typically (it seems) reduplications and ellipsis/omissions.

- doubling structures in (non-standard) Germanic: subject doubling, determiner doubling, agreeing complementizers, negative concord, resumptive pronouns, wh-doubling, possessive doubling, *do/tun*-support etc. (cf. Brandner 2008, Barbiers et al 2008, van Koppen 2017 and others)
- omissions: null subjects in OG?

- null subjects in OG were not related to verb agreement (but cf. Walkden 2013).
- they disappeared from OE, OHG and OS due to textualization, not any grammatical change.

# Null subjects in Modern Germanic

In several MG vernaculars, null subjects are attested.

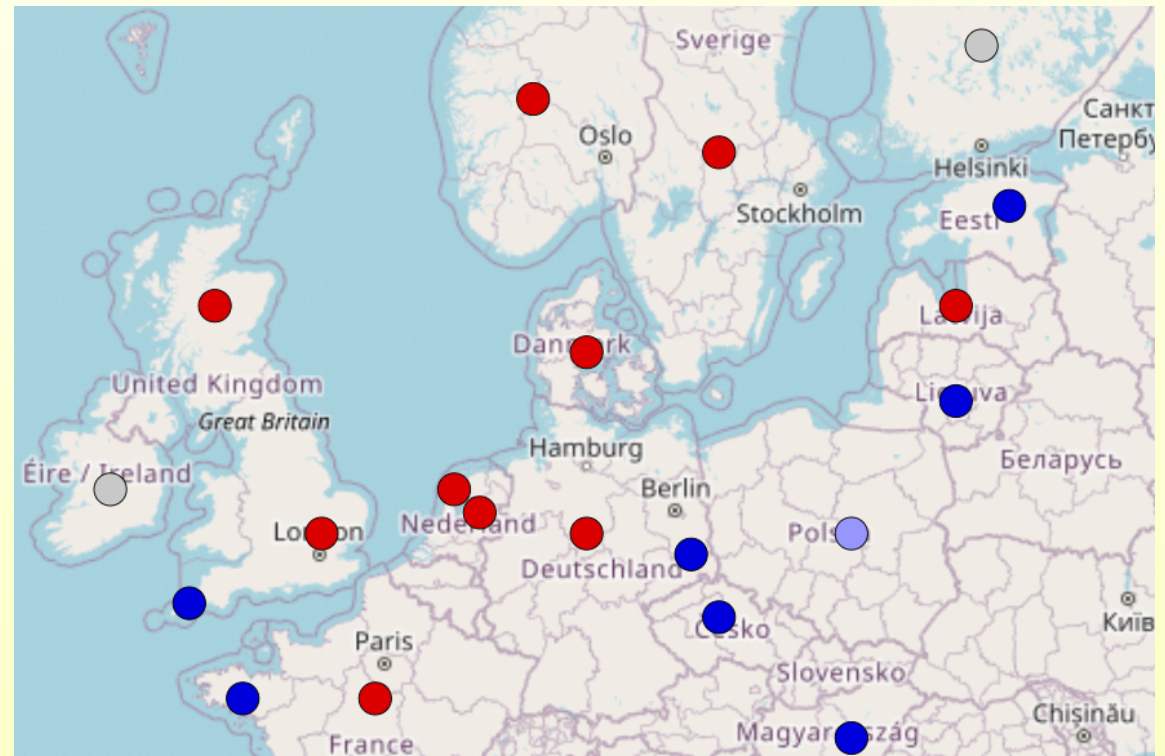
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**Feature 101A: Expression of Pronominal Subjects**

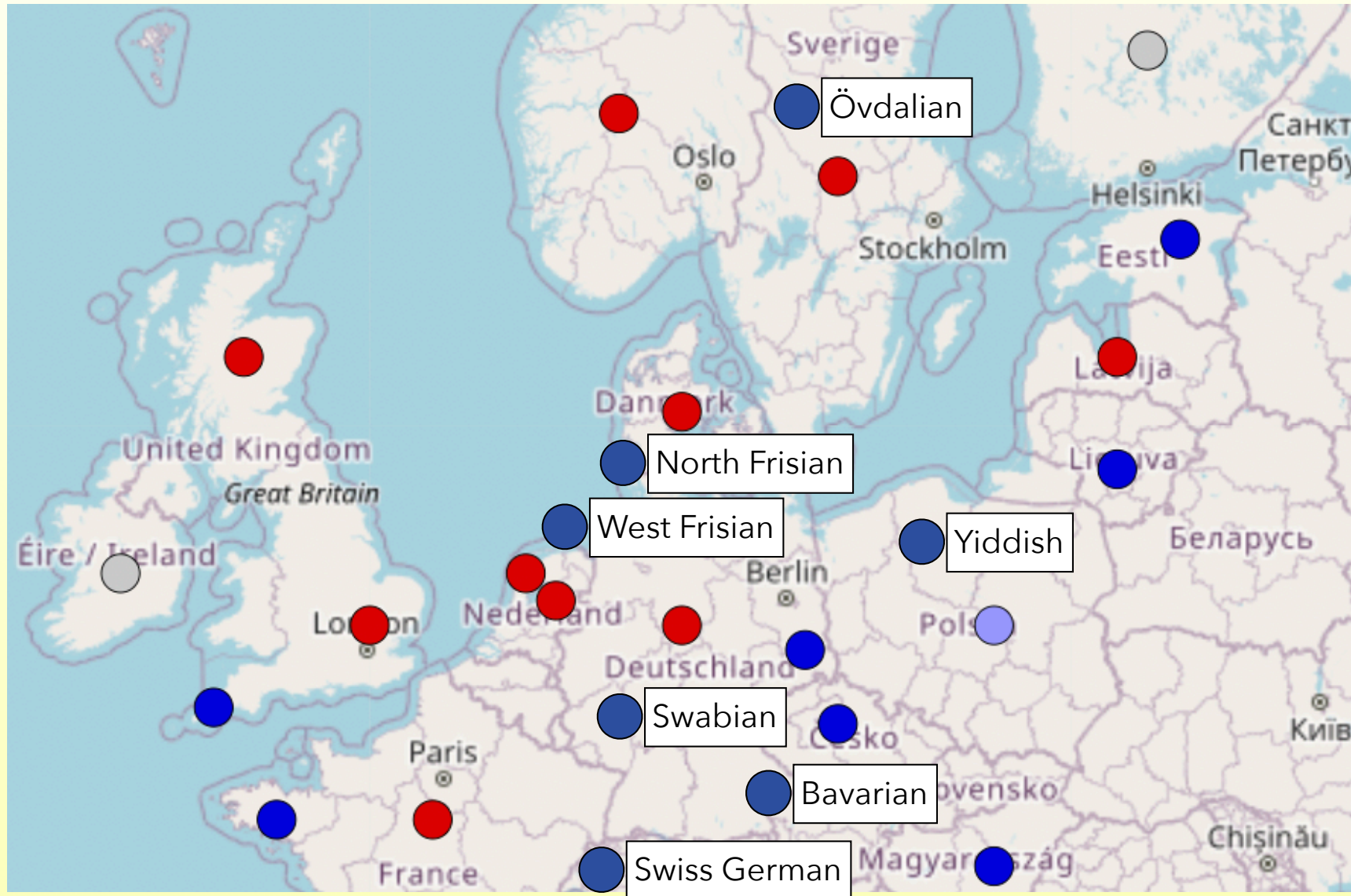
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<span style="color: gray;">●</span>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mixed



# Null subjects in Modern Germanic

In several MG vernaculars, null subjects are attested.



# Null subjects in Modern Germanic

11. I glaub moang bisd wieda gsund. (Bavarian; Axel & Weiß 2011:36)  
*I think tomorrow are-2sg Ø again healthy*  
 'I think that **you** will be well again tomorrow'
  
12. ...wama bmaid hama. (Central Bavarian; Axel & Weiß 2011:34)  
*because-1pl Ø thought have-1pl*  
 'because **we** have been thinking'
  
13. Ha der das nöd scho verzellt? (Zürich German; Cooper & Engdahl 1989:33)  
*have-1sg Ø to-you it not already told*  
 'Haven't I told **you** that already?'
  
14. Vielleicht merksch Ø plötzlich nix mee. (Swabian; Bohnacker 2013:10)  
*maybe notice-2SG suddenly nothing more*  
 'Maybe **you** suddenly will not feel anything anymore.'

## Null subjects in Modern Germanic

15. Ik tink datst my helpe moatst. (West Frisian; de Haan 1994:81)  
*I think that-2sg Ø me help must-2sg*  
 'I think that **you** must help me'
16. Trink nit di kave, vorem vest nit kenen slofn. (Yiddish; Jacobs 2005:261)  
*drink not the coffee because Ø get-2sg not no sleep*  
 'Don't drink the coffee, because **you** won't be able to sleep'
17. An wet byddjum i Övdalim. (Övdalian)  
*he knows Ø live-1pl in Älvdalen*  
 'He knows that **we** live in Älvdalen'

# Null subjects in Modern Germanic

In contrast with OG, there is a very clear correlation between null subjects and verb agreement.

NUM.	PER.	BAVARIAN	C. BAVAR.	SWISS GER.	SWABIAN	FRISIAN	ÖVDALIAN	YIDDISH
SG.	1	KUMM	KUMM	<b>(CHUME)</b>	<b>(KOMM)</b>	KOM	KUMB	KUM
	2	<b>KUMMST</b>	<b>KUMMST</b>	<b>CHUNNSCH</b>	<b>KOMMSCH</b>	<b>KOMST</b>		<b>KUMST</b>
	3	KUMMT	KUMMT	CHUNNT	KOMMT	KOMT		KUMT
PL.	1	KUMMAN	<b>KUMMA/</b> KUMMAN	CHÖMED	KOMMET	KOMME	<b>KUMUM</b>	KUMN
	2	<b>KUMMTS</b>	<b>KUMMTS</b>				<b>KUMIÐ</b>	KUMT
	3	KUMMAN	KUMMAN				KUMÅ	KUMN
INFINITIVE		KEMMA	KEMMA	CHU	KOMMA	KOMMEN		
POSSIBLE NULL SUBJECTS		2SG, 2PL	2SG, 1PL, 2PL	1SG, 2SG	1SG, 2SG	2SG	1PL, 2PL	2SG

Table 5. The verb *come* in Modern Germanic. **Marked** forms allow null subjects.

# Null subjects in Modern Germanic

However, some 3sg forms are person/number-specific. Why don't these forms license null subjects?

NUM.	PER.	BAVARIAN	C. BAVAR.	SWISS GER.	SWABIAN	FRISIAN	ÖVDALIAN	YIDDISH
SG.	1	KUMM	KUMM	(CHUME)	(KOMM)	KOM	KUMB	KUM
	2	<b>KUMMST</b>	<b>KUMMST</b>	<b>CHUNNSCH</b>	<b>KOMMSCH</b>	<b>KOMST</b>		<b>KUMST</b>
	3	KUMMT	KUMMT	CHUNNT	KOMMT	KOMT		KUMT
PL.	1	KUMMAN	<b>KUMMA/</b> KUMMAN	CHÖMED	KOMMET	KOMME	<b>KUMUM</b>	KUMN
	2	<b>KUMMTS</b>	<b>KUMMTS</b>				<b>KUMIÐ</b>	KUMT
	3	KUMMAN	KUMMAN				KUMÅ	KUMN
INFINITIVE		KEMMA	KEMMA	CHU	KOMMA	KOMMEN		
POSSIBLE NULL SUBJECTS		2SG, 2PL	2SG, 1PL, 2PL	1SG, 2SG	1SG, 2SG	2SG	1PL, 2PL	2SG

Table 5. The verb *come* in Modern Germanic. **Marked** forms allow null subjects.

# Null subjects in Modern Germanic

The hypothesis of Distinct Agreement (DA):

- a verb agreement suffix must match the features of the omitted pronoun precisely.

Verb agreement is distinct iff

- a specific verb form (Fa) and a pronoun (P) express the same set of  $\varphi$ -features (number, person, gender)
- Fa and P have the same values for  $\varphi$
- only Fa matches the values for P.

NUMBER	PERSON	PRONOUN	PRESENT	DA?
<b>SING.</b>	1	ICH	KAUFE	<b>OK</b>
	2	DU	KAUFST	<b>OK</b>
	3	ER, SIE, ES	KAUFT	<b>X (A, C)</b>
<b>PLURAL</b>	1	WIR	KAUFEN	<b>X (C)</b>
	2	IHR	KAUFT	<b>X (C)</b>
	3	SIE	KAUFEN	<b>X (C)</b>
<b>INFINITIVE</b>			KAUFEN	

Table 6. Pronouns and verb agreement in Standard German.

Standard German has an inherent (but dormant) possibility to develop null subjects (cf. Trutkowski 2016).

# Null subjects in Modern Germanic

The relation between verb agreement and pronouns can be illustrated in feature correlation tables.

PERSON	NUMBER	PERSON	GENDER	PERSON	NUMBER	PERSON	GENDER
1SG		<i>II</i>		1SG		<i>IG</i>	
2SG		<i>DU</i>		2SG		<i>DU</i>	
3SG. MASC.			<i>EA</i>	3SG. MASC.			<i>AN</i>
3SG. FEM.			<i>SIE</i>	3SG. FEM.			<i>Q</i>
3SG. NEUT.			<i>ES</i>	3SG. NEUT.			<i>ED</i>
1PL		<i>MIA</i>		1PL		<i>WJÐ</i>	
2PL		<i>EES</i>		2PL		<i>ID</i>	
3PL		<i>SE</i>		3PL		<i>DIER</i>	

Table 7. Feature correlation in Bavarian.

Table 8. Feature correlation in Övdalian.

Shaded cells show the morphological “richness” of the finite verb.

## Null subjects in Modern Germanic

OG and MG null subjects are not the same grammatical feature.

- MG null subjects are directly dependent on verb agreement – OG null subjects are not.
- MG null subjects only appear in 1st and 2nd person – OG null subjects are most frequent in 3rd person.

It seems that MG null subjects is not a continuation of OG null subjects, but rather an innovation that has developed in parallel in several MG vernaculars.

# Negative concord in Germanic

Negative concord (NC) is the phenomenon where two or more negations yield one semantic negation.

Negative concord, sometimes also called double negation or multiple negation, involves instances where two or more negative morphemes cooccur and effect an overall negative reading in a clause, without logically cancelling each other out.

(Anderwald 2005:113)

18. I didn't see anything.

19. I didn't see nothing.

Without NC:  $\approx$  'I saw something'

With NC: 'I saw nothing'

## Negative concord in Germanic

The presence of NC in Germanic has been disputed. Bernini & Ramat (1996:187) claim that typological properties prohibit NC in Germanic languages, and Giannakidou (2006:328) states that no Germanic language has NC.

As for north Germanic:

There is no cumulative or multiple negation, either in standard speech or in the dialects [...]

(Haugen (1986:157))

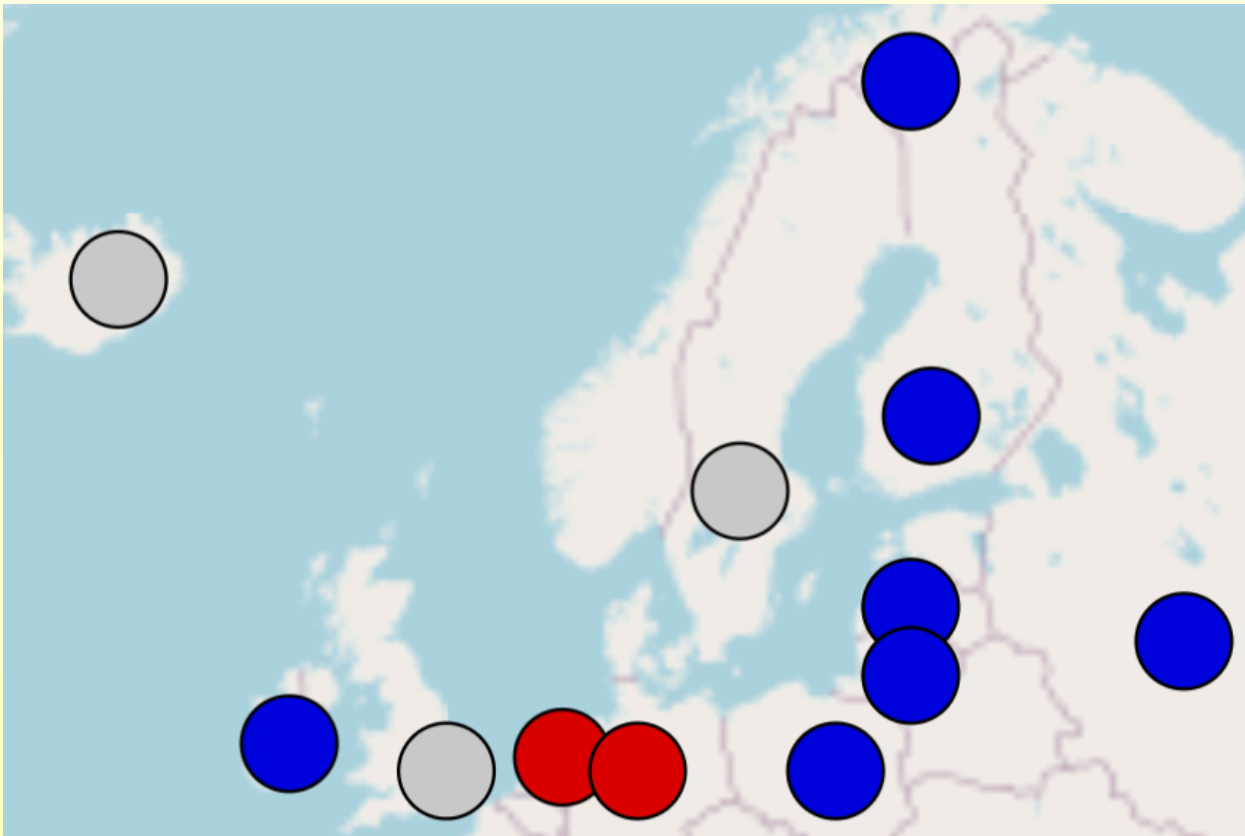
# Negative concord in Germanic

Also according to WALS, there is no NC (“predicate negation”) in Germanic.

## Feature 115A: Negative Indefinite Pronouns and Predicate Negation



This feature is described in the text of chapter 115 [Negative Indefinite Pronouns and Predicate Negation](#) by [Martin Haspelmath](#) [cite](#)



### Values

<span style="color: blue;">■</span>	<input type="radio"/> ▾	Predicate negation also present
<span style="color: red;">■</span>	<input type="radio"/> ▾	No predicate negation
<span style="color: grey;">■</span>	<input type="radio"/> ▾	Mixed behaviour
<span style="color: yellow;">■</span>	<input type="radio"/> ▾	Negative existential construction

# Negative concord in Germanic

However, NC does occur in several Germanic language varieties.



# Negative concord in Germanic

## Examples from varieties of Swedish.

20. Finggum **int intnoð** wattu og avlopp i stugū. (Övdalian)  
*got. 1pl not nothing water and drain in house-the*  
 'We didn't get any water and drain in the house.'
21. **It** ha dām ju **aldri** ut tāmde förr **i**. (southern Ostrobothnian)  
*not had they well never out those before not*  
 'They never had those out before.'
22. Han fick **int** ändo **inga** straff. (Nylandic)  
*he got not still no punishment*  
 'He still wasn't punished.'
23. **Äte** hav vi **engan** kro pa Run, å **äte** hav vi **engt** kino. (Estonian Swedish; Runö)  
*not had we no pub on Runö and not had we no cinema*  
 'We had no pub on Runö, and we had no cinema.'

# Negative concord in Germanic

NC was also present in Old West Germanic.

- Hoeksema (1997): NC in Old Dutch
- Langer (2001): NC in (Old) High German
- Ingham (2006) NC in Old English
- Breitbarth (2013): NC in (Old) Low German

NC is not attested in Old North Germanic (Rosenkvist 2015).

Why did NC disappear from the standard West Germanic languages?

# Negative concord in Germanic

Why did NC disappear from the standard West Germanic languages?

[...] despite a decrease in the use of polynegation as a marker for emphatic negation in general writing (cf. Pensel 1976), the grammarians did discuss the construction and, in all cases until the eighteenth century, polynegation was a legitimate, sometimes even positive (*zierlich*, Girbert 1653) rule of German which stood in contrast to Latin in that two negative words did not cancel each other out. This view had changed, however, by the mid-eighteenth century, when polynegation was negatively stigmatized as a redundant construction, violating the general rationalist view that language should be as precise as possible, and avoid all that is not strictly necessary (cf. Blackall 1966).

(Langer 2001:167)

# Negative concord in Germanic

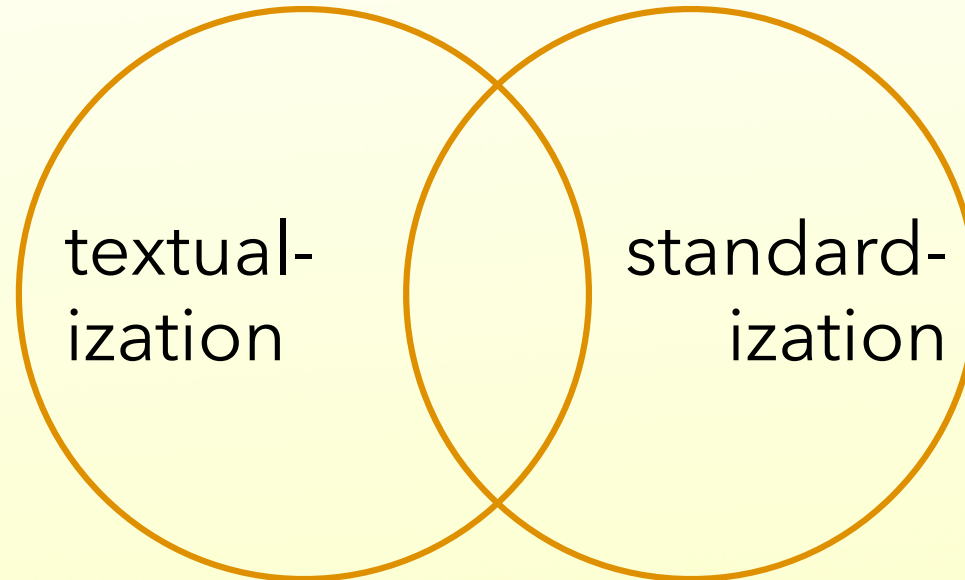
Why did NC disappear from the standard West Germanic languages?

The disappearance of optional clitic negation appears to be part of the process of standardization which leads to modern standard Dutch. Flanders, which at that point is politically detached from the northern Netherlands, is not subject to the standardization process. Many archaic features of Dutch, such as verb projection raising and clitic negation remain present in Flemish dialects and are only now being pushed out of the system by the pressure of standardization. (Hoeksema 1997:141)

(Hoeksema 1997:141)

NC disappeared due to standardization (but cf. Zeiljstra 2016 etc.)

## Factors causing grammatical differences between spoken and written languages



Unintentional consequence of transition from spoken to written language.

Targets omissions and reduplications (?).

Loss of OG null subjects

Intentional process establishing and upholding linguistic conventions.

Targets structures that are seen as irrational and/or vulgar.

Loss of negative concord

## Factors causing grammatical differences between spoken and written languages

Standardization is furthermore an ongoing process that blocks innovations in a language.

[the role of standardization is to] fix and 'embalm' (Samuel Johnson's term) the structural properties of language in a uniform state and prevent all structural change.

(Milroy 2000:14)

MG null subjects and North Germanic NC seem to be innovations that are disallowed by linguistic conventions in the standard languages.

## Factors causing grammatical differences between spoken and written languages

Summing up:

Old Germanic  
null subjects



disappeared due to  
textualization

Modern Germanic  
null subjects



innovations - blocked in  
the standard languages

Negative concord  
in West Germanic



disappeared due to  
standardization in the standard  
languages - archaisms in the  
vernaculars

Negative concord  
in North Germanic



innovations - blocked in  
the standard languages

Thank you for listening!

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(references provided if required)

Some of my publications, including the ones about null subjects and negative concord, can be downloaded as pdf-files here:

<https://henrik-rosenkvist.webnode.se/kultur/>