

An argument for the existence of null DPs
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This snippet presents a simple argument against a WYSIWYG (“What You See is What You Get”) principle banning the use of covert elements in syntax (see e.g. Hudson 1986, Culicover & Jackendoff 2005). The debate in this area typically revolves around rather intricate properties of traces, PRO, and other postulated null elements. This snippet attempts to establish the existence of a certain class of null DPs in a relatively theory-independent manner.

It is well known that Heavy NP Shift of the first object in the English double object construction is impossible:

- (1a) I told [the man who I met last Friday] a story.
(1b) * I told t_1 a story [the man who I met last Friday]₁.

Curiously, shifting of the object in (2b) is also degraded:

- (2a) I told [the man who I met last Friday] about John.
(2b) * I told t_1 about John [the man who I met last Friday]₁.

As shown in (3), there is no general ban on shifting an object past an argument PP on its right:

- (3a) I told [the story that I heard last Friday] to Bill.
(3b) I told t_1 to Bill [the story that I heard last Friday]₁.

Furthermore, whereas the *about* PP in (2) is compatible with the modifier *all*, as shown in (4a), this modifier is not permitted in the superficially similar (4b):

- (4a) I told John (all) about Bill.
(4b) I talked to John (* all) about Bill.

These facts are straightforwardly explained if (2a) and (4a) are taken to be double object constructions, with the *about* phrase attaching to a null DP:

- (5) I told John [THE FACTS [about Bill]]

(“The facts” is intended only as a rough gloss – it is not the aim of this snippet to probe the semantics of the construction.) In further support of this analysis, note that stranding of *about Bill* in (4) under VP ellipsis – (6a) – is comparable in acceptability to its parallel with an ordinary double object verb – (6b) – and not to stranding of a true PP argument – (6c):

- (6a) ?* I told John about Mary and Bill did about Jane.
(6b) ?* I gave John a book and Mary did a magazine.

(6c) I gave books to Jane and Mary did to Bill.

If the preceding arguments suffice to establish the presence of a null DP in (5), this obviously speaks against any strong version of a WYSIWYG principle. Although nothing in this snippet argues directly against WYSIWYG theories of control or raising, it does seem that such theories cannot be correct in virtue of any more general principle of this sort.

References:

Culicover, Peter & Ray Jackendoff. 2005. *Simpler Syntax*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hudson, Richard. 1986. *Word Grammar*. Oxford: Blackwell.