3 A conspiracy against overt idiom subjects

3.1 Why not a full NP?
If the speaker pronounces something that could be elided, the hearer is led to assume that the repeated piece is contrastive. Huang & Mendes 2019

(4) For English idiom the shit hit the fan: #The shit didn’t → something else hit the fan.
No plausible predicates to consider, if the shit and hit the fan both lack denotations.

3.2 Why not an overt pronoun?
- But idioms do not necessarily introduce discourse referents.

(5) O atual presidente da empresa é da família Silva. No ano que vem, [#ele / #o presidente/ #] vai ser da família next year he the president will be of the family Mendes. Mendes ‘The current president of the company is from the Silva family. next year, he will be from the Mendes family.’ [Brazilian Portuguese]

(6) Qunian zongtong shi minzhudangren. Jinnian [#ta / #zongtong/ #] last year president be Democrat this year he president shi gonghedangren. be Republican ‘Last year, the president was a Democrat. This year, he is a Republican. [Mandarin Chinese]
To avoid a contrastive or referential interpretation, languages must find ways to “hide” the subject. How?

4 Two ways to not pronounce a subject

(7a) NP (+ VP) ellipsis
C
AuxP

(7b) Causal ellipsis

In both options in (7):
- Idiom is syntactically present, just unpronounced → idiomatic reading. Huang & Mendes 2019; cf. Ross 1969; Lasnik 1999; Merchant 2001, etc.
- Both options are independently motivated.

4.1 Brazilian Portuguese (partial null-subject)
BP example (2) involves polarity focus.
- We assume that these constructions involve verb-raising clausal ellipsis (7b).
Kato 2016, Holberg 2016, Mendes 2018
(8) A: Não? B: Não! [Não] sim. nobody washed the dish washed somebody the dish yes ‘Nobody did the dishes.’ ‘Yes, someone did.’
Deriving null pronouns by NP ellipsis in BP (7a) is at odds with two facts:
- Bare arguments are limited in BP. They are typically generic.
- Null subjects in BP matrix clause are limited to topic deletion. Ferreira 2000
(9) ‘Compro ou carro.’ bought the car ‘He bought the car.’

4.2 Mandarin Chinese (null subject)
Popular proposal for East Asian languages: (Some) null pronouns are derived from NP ellipsis (7a). Tomioka 2003, Bi & Jenks 2019
Clausal ellipsis analysis (7b) does not work well for MC:
- Unclear if MC has clausal ellipsis (sluicing) independently. Adams 2004, Song & Yoshida 2017
- MC auxiliaries do not raise.

4.3 Against a null expletive analysis
Assume that clausal idioms are inserted as sPs:
- Wrongly predicts Aux-SVO or VSO in MC and BP.
- Theory-internal problem: Null expletives lack PF and LF content, irrelevant to interfaces. Sheehan 2006

Acknowledgements: Special thanks to Howard Lasnik, Alexander Williams, Benjamin Bruening, Jason Merchant, Kyle Johnson, Dan Goodhue, Maria Polinsky, and members of the UMD S-Lab community for comments. This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 1449815 and CAPES 0652-14-8.

References: