

NULL SUBJECTS IN URDU AND ENGLISH: A MINIMALIST CROSS-LINGUISTIC STUDY

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Abstract

This study investigates the syntactic constraints on null subjects in formal Urdu and English short stories under Chomsky's Minimalist Program (1995). Urdu, a pro-drop and morphologically rich language, allows omission of overt subjects through agreement and discourse recoverability. English, being non-pro-drop, restricts subject omission to specific syntactic environments such as imperatives and ellipsis. Using a descriptive qualitative method and purposive sampling technique, data were collected from formal Urdu and English short stories. The analysis, based on Minimalist operations of Merge, Move, and Agree, shows that Urdu licenses null subjects through rich agreement features, while English requires overt subjects due to weak morphology and EPP satisfaction. Findings highlight how Urdu's morphology permits syntactic economy, whereas English maintains overt realization for structural completeness. The study contributes to understanding cross-linguistic variation in null subject licensing.

Keywords: Null constituents, Null subjects, Minimalist Program, Syntactic constraints, Pro- drop, Urdu, English, Cross-linguistic study.

Introduction

Language is a complex system of communication that operates not only through overt expression what is explicitly spoken or written but also through covert forms, where certain syntactic elements remain unpronounced yet are fully understood by competent speakers. These unexpressed but semantically recoverable elements are known in syntax as null constituents. They may include null subjects which are absent from the surface structure of a sentence but are retrievable through morphological cues, syntactic structure, or discourse context. In typological terms, Urdu is classified as a pro-drop language. It has a morphologically rich agreement system that marks verbs for person, number, gender, and tense, enabling it to omit overt subjects while still ensuring recoverability of meaning from verb morphology and discourse. This syntactic flexibility extends to both finite and non-finite clauses in Urdu.

By contrast, English is generally classified as a non-pro-drop language. It exhibits comparatively weak verbal morphology and satisfies the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) by requiring an overt subject in finite clauses. Null constituents in English are typically licensed only in highly restricted environments such as coordination, verb phrase ellipsis (VPE), gapping, and certain embedded clauses where recoverability is ensured by syntactic identity or discourse salience. The difference between Urdu and English in their treatment of null subjects reflects deeper theoretical contrasts in their syntactic architecture. In Minimalist syntax, constituent omission is not a matter of stylistic choice alone but is regulated by constraints such as feature checking, derivational economy, and interface legibility. Pro-drop languages like Urdu often satisfy the EPP and φ -feature agreement morphologically, allowing omission, whereas non-pro-drop languages like English require overt syntactic material to

fulfil these conditions.

This study addresses this gap by conducting a comparative syntactic analysis of null subjects in formal Urdu and English prose, using the Minimalist Program as its theoretical framework. It examines how omissions are distributed across clause types, and how they are licensed or blocked according to language-specific and universal constraints.

Research Objectives

1. To trace null constituents with respect to the omission of subjects in formal English and Urdu.
2. To highlight the variations in omission patterns of subject null constituents within Minimalist syntactic framework.

Research Questions

1. How are subjects omitted in formal English and Urdu?
2. What are variations in omission patterns of subject null constituents within Minimalist syntactic framework?

Literature Review

In the theory of syntax the investigation of null constituents like null subjects, null objects, and phenomena of ellipsis has been of critical concern, particularly in cross variance. Urdu is a pro- drop language and it allows omission of the subject based on the inflection of the verb and the discourse context (Maqsood et al., 2018). English, however, falls into the non-null subject language category and needs overt subjects in the case of finite clauses (Holmberg, 2005). Research on these the syntactic restrictions on null elements furthers computational modeling of language processing, theory of language and second-language acquisition. A theoretical basis for the investigation of economy-driven operations of the syntax affecting the licensing of null constituents like Merge and Move, comes from the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995). Based on research, it was found that Urdu permit null subjects due to rich agreement of the verb while English reveal that English prohibit null subjects due to weak agreement morphology (Uzair & Khan, 2020). Furthermore, Bruening (2010) shows that language- specific rules, rather than universal principles, regulating English null components.

Empirical research on null constituents has demonstrated that omission is not only a theoretical construct but also a robust linguistic practice in several languages. In Urdu and Hindi, for instance, omission of subjects and objects is frequent in both spoken and written registers, provided discourse context or verb agreement allows recovery. Such findings show that null constituents are not random gaps but are systematically constrained by morphological and pragmatic cues. This suggests that any theory of null constituents must balance formal syntactic rules with discourse-driven explanations. Psycholinguistic studies have also explored how speakers interpret sentences with null arguments. These studies reveal that language users can recover omitted elements efficiently if the surrounding discourse provides strong contextual support. This implies that null constituents are not a deficiency in the grammar but an economy strategy that relies on the processing capacities of native speakers.

Although null constituents are frequently permitted in informal Urdu, their acceptability decreases in academic and professional writing, conforming to the formal register constraints of English (Mahajan, 1990; Adger, 2003). Despite great deal of theoretical research, numerous gaps still remain. Many researches lack empirical validation through corpus-based analysis. Furthermore, bilingualism and code-switching remain underexplored, especially how Urdu- English bilinguals deals with null constituent constraints (Mahajan, 2012). Investigating deepen insights into language typology and cognitive processing may result from examining whether bilingual speakers transfer syntactic rules between languages.

In both English and Urdu, the existence or absence of null constituents can often be outlined by the morphological properties of the language. Urdu is a language with a rich system of verb inflections, which permits for more flexibility in dropping subject or object noun phrases. According to Asif (2015), the verb in Urdu encodes elaborate subject details like person, number, and gender, and hence it allows the skipping of the subject elements. For example, a sentence such as “Ja rahe hain” /dʒaː re: fiː/ (literally “Going are”) could imply “He/She/They are going” depending on the context without the overt subject. English, on the other hand, has a relatively weak inflectional system, i.e., it usually requires overt subjects to complete the Subject-Verb-Object construction. According to Macdonald (2021), English lacking the use of morphological cues necessitates the reliance on overt subjects in declarative sentences.

Languages with rich morphological agreement, such as Urdu, Italian, and Spanish, show greater tolerance for null subjects because the verb form itself carries person, number, and gender information. This morphological transparency provides enough cues for the listener or reader to identify the omitted subject without ambiguity. In contrast, English, with its weak inflectional system, must generally express the subject overtly. The cross-linguistic differences highlight how morphological richness directly conditions syntactic freedom in argument omission.

Extended Projection principle (EPP), defined in Haegeman (1994), mandate that English declarative sentences need to have an overt difficulty, even if the reference is recovered from discourse. This requirement differs from languages like Urdu, wherein the verb morphology encodes individual, wide variety, and gender, and the difficulty can be neglected. Macdonald (2013) further affirms this claim, explaining that null subjects are strictly forbidden in formal English except in imperatives and particular elliptical structures, which are not common in academic or professional writing. Furthermore, English uses dummy subjects, such as it and there, to fulfil syntactic requirements, even in cases where these elements do not participate to meaning. This characteristic is not present in pro-drop languages, where subjects are excluded without impacting grammaticality.

One of the most unique characteristics of formal language in Urdu is the acceptability of null subjects, something strictly ungrammatical in formal English. The verbal morphology in Urdu affords adequate agreement markers of person, range, and gender, allowing it to drop the subject and preserve the grammar intact. This places it in direct comparison to English, in which the Extended Projection principle (EPP) obligatorily needs to have a covert or overt difficulty in declarative statements. As Jabeen (2020) also elaborates on the omission of subjects in Urdu, wherein Urdu speakers rely on discourse-pragmatic cues to infer subjects omitted without hesitation. English, on the contrary, needs the subject to be overt for it to be grammatically correct. Urdu speakers infer subjects according to verb inflections and the format of discourse. With such syntactic flexibility, formal Urdu is structurally distinct from the English language, where the subject omission only holds in particular conditions like imperative and elliptic constructions.

Minimalist analyses have shown that null constituents are not arbitrary deletions but the result of feature checking and economy-driven operations. In South Asian languages like Urdu, rich agreement features satisfy the Extended Projection Principle, allowing subjects to be omitted without ungrammaticality. This demonstrates how Minimalist principles account for cross-linguistic variation by linking morpho-syntactic features to structural licensing. Applications of Minimalist theory to Hindi and Urdu further suggest that omission operates within phase boundaries, ensuring that deleted material is recoverable from the local syntactic domain. This insight strengthens the view that omissions are not violations but regulated operations within grammar. By situating Urdu within the Minimalist framework, researchers

have demonstrated how its pro-drop properties harmonize with broader universal principles of economy and derivational efficiency.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Chomsky's Minimalist Program (1995, 2000, 2001), which explains syntactic structures through principles of economy, feature checking, and derivational processes. Minimalism assumes operations such as Merge, Move, and Agree, constrained by the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) and φ -feature agreement. For non-pro-drop languages like English, EPP requires overt subjects in finite clauses, restricting null subjects to exceptional contexts such as imperatives or ellipsis. In contrast, pro-drop languages like Urdu license null subjects freely because rich verbal morphology satisfies agreement features, making the subject recoverable without being overtly expressed.

The distinction is captured by the Null Subject Parameter, which differentiates between languages that permit subject omission and those that do not. Within Minimalism, Urdu's agreement morphology allows EPP satisfaction morphologically, while English requires overt syntactic material. By applying these principles, the study analyzes how null subjects in Urdu and English are licensed, blocked, or contextually permitted, highlighting their cross-linguistic variation within a unified syntactic framework.

Methodology

The study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, focusing on the identification and interpretation of syntactic structures instead of statistical or corpus-based analysis. The method is organized to assure an intensive examine, overlaying the research philosophy, method, approach, design, data collection, and analysis techniques. This study uses a comparative linguistic strategy to analyses syntactic constraints on null constituents in formal English and Urdu short stories. The main focus is on language comparison, finding similarities and differences in syntactic structures between the two languages and examining how formal storytelling conventions affects the presence or absence of null constituents.

The study uses a descriptive qualitative research design, with a goal to identify, characterize, and analyses syntactic trends in formal English and Urdu short stories. This design is non-experimental, meaning that linguistic data is authentic but rather seen and interpreted in its natural textual form. A purposive sampling method is used to choose formal English and Urdu short stories that successfully demonstrate null constituent behaviour. Since the study does not seek statistical generalizability but rather an in-depth linguistic comprehension, purposive sampling guarantee that only texts satisfying particular syntactic criteria are selected. The sampling criteria assure equal representation of English and Urdu formal narrative, the availability of identifiable null elements in sentence structures, and texts that upholds formal linguistic rules in both languages.

The research is rooted in Noam Chomsky's Minimalist Program of 1995, a model for generative grammar that attempts to account for the form of language using the most economic and efficient syntactic processes. Minimalism is a research methodology of particular usefulness for this work because it furnishes the means to examine null constituents syntactically implied elements that are expressed in formal language.

The Minimalist model predicts that syntactic structure results from operations like Merge, Move, and Agree subject to economy constraints. Presence or absence of constituents within a sentence is determined by features such as Extended Projection Principle (EPP) as well as φ -feature agreement, which force overt subject realization within non-pro-drop languages like English. By contrast, the pro-drop status of Urdu means that there is more omission of overt subjects, thanks to the rich morphology of its verbs as well as its flexible rules of syntax. This cross-linguistic difference is conceptualized by the Null Subject Parameter, which makes a distinction between subject-omissible languages and subject-

nominal languages.

The study analyses syntactic constraints on null constituents in formal English and Urdu short stories using textual data collecting. The chosen texts serve as primary data sources, offering genuine linguistic proof of null constituents in organized storytelling contexts. Each text is examined for syntactic patterns, to find occurrence of omitted constituents and their contextual constraints. Since the study does not depend on corpus-based frequency analysis, it concentrates on specific syntactic descriptions inside formal storytelling.

The analysis was conducted in phases. By closely reading each text and noting instances where a syntactic element subject was missing from the surface structure but recoverable from context, morphology, or syntax, null constituents were first found in the chosen Urdu and English short stories. Under the Minimalist Program, these were subsequently divided into analytical types. The underlying syntactic structure and derivational procedures of each discovered sample were then depicted using X-bar-style tree diagrams by the Syntax Tree Editor program to visually express constituent structures and demonstrate the presence or absence of null constituents, in accordance with Chomsky's Minimalist operations of Merge, Move, and Agree.

Data Analysis

The largest syntactic contrast between Urdu and English may be how these languages approach null subjects. Urdu, a pro-drop language, permits the lack of overt subjects both within non-finite and within finite clauses, whereas English, a non-pro-drop language, will typically prohibit subject dropping within finite clauses. This parametric contrast follows automatically from fundamental syntactic mechanisms under the Minimalist Program, particularly operations of feature checking, agreement, and the Extended Projection Principle (EPP).

Subject reference can be recovered from verb morphology due to copious agreement marking of person-gender-number in Urdu. This allows φ -feature checking of the subject at the PF interface, and therefore overt realization of the subject is an option. English subjects, however, need their features checked pre-spell-out within syntax, under EPP, which requires [Spec, TP] to host an overt filling of a DP.

Syntactic Context and Explanation

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Urdu Null Subject Examples

The table shows how Urdu allows pronouns, in particular, to be omitted when their reference is obvious from context. This is a characteristic of pro-drop languages. Using real-

world examples from literary writings, it demonstrates how readers or listeners might deduce the missing subject by using verb morphology (gender, number). Urdu's syntactic flexibility and the way meaning is preserved by verb agreement and context, even in sentences with no structure, are demonstrated by this.

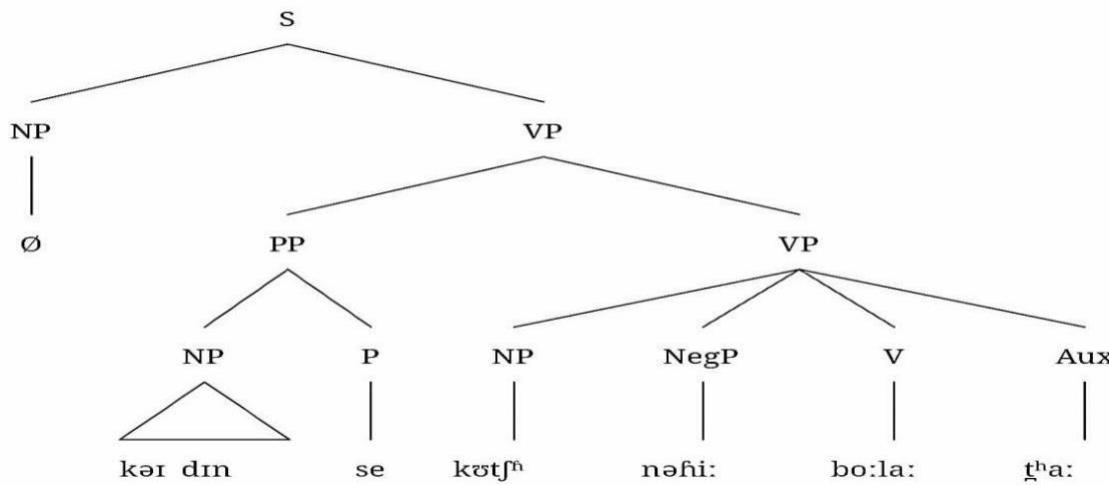
Examples of Urdu Null Subject

No.	Example Sentences (Urdu)	English Translation	IPA Transcription	Source	Author	Pages Number
1	کوئی نہ کہیں کہیں سے نہیں بولا	He hadn't spoken for days	/kəi ðm̩ kotʃi:n nəfi: bo:la: t̬a:/	Thanda Gosht	Saadat Hasan Manto	45
2	میں 0 میونپری بے ہل	(He) was sitting in the hut	/dʒ̩fə:n.pri: me:n bət̬ha: t̬a:/	Kafan	Premchand	12
3	سب سے 0 رہی نہیں	(She) was listening to everything	/səb sən rəfi: t̬i:/	Lihaaf	Ismat Chughtai	58
4	بک کر 0 لہی رہی	(She) remained huddled.	/dəbək kər le:t̬i: rəfi:/	Lihaaf	Ismat Chughtai	79

5	Ø دروازے کھلی پر	(She) was standing at the door.	/dərwa:ze: pər kʰəlī: tʰi:/	Aangan	Qurratulain Hyder	102
6	کہا نہیں کہا 0	(He) didn't say anything	/kotʃ̩ nəfi: kəha:/	Toba Tek Singh	Saadat Hasan Manto	25
7	0 کر کھلی	(She) got up and left.	/ʊtʰ kər tʃ̩əli: gəli:/	Chandni	Bano Qudsia	64
8	Ø درخت کے نہیں کے	(She) was sitting under the tree	/dərəxt̩ ke: ni:tʃ̩e: bətʰi: tʰi:/	Aangan	Qurratulain Hyder	53
9	0 بارش باری بارش باری	(It) was raining outside	/ba:ʃər ba:riʃ̩ fi: rəfi: tʰi:/	Jannat Ki Baat	Saadat Hasan Manto	111
10	0 بیٹھے کمرے میں دروازہ بند	The door was closed in the back room.	/p̩itʃ̩le: kəmre: me:n dərwa:za: bənd tʰa:/	Kafan	Premchand	87

Tree Diagram for /kai din se kotʃ̩ nəfi: bo:la: tʰa:/ (Kai din se kuch nahi bola tha)

The tree diagram represents the syntactic structure of the sentence /kai din se kotʃ̩ nəfi: bo:la: tʰa:/ and indicates how a Null Subject (Ø) emerges with syntactic constituents' hierarchical ranking.



Tree Diagram of /kəi din se kʊtʃn nəhi: bo:la: tʰa:/

Explanation of Tree Diagram

- [S → NP (pro) + VP]: The subject position is a null pronoun (pro), licensed by Urdu's pro-drop property, while the VP provides the full predicate.
- [VP Structure]: The VP expands into PP (kə.i din se "for days"), NP (kʊtʃn "something"), Neg (nəhi: "not"), V (bo:la: "spoke"), and Aux (tʰa: "was"), showing a layered predicate.
- Interpretation: The sentence is interpreted as "(He) hadn't spoken for days," with the tree showing how meaning is recovered despite the null subject.

English Null Subject Examples

The following table presents examples of English short stories, all of which contain a null subject syntactically allowed in English but ungrammatical under literal Urdu translation without overt addition of a subject.

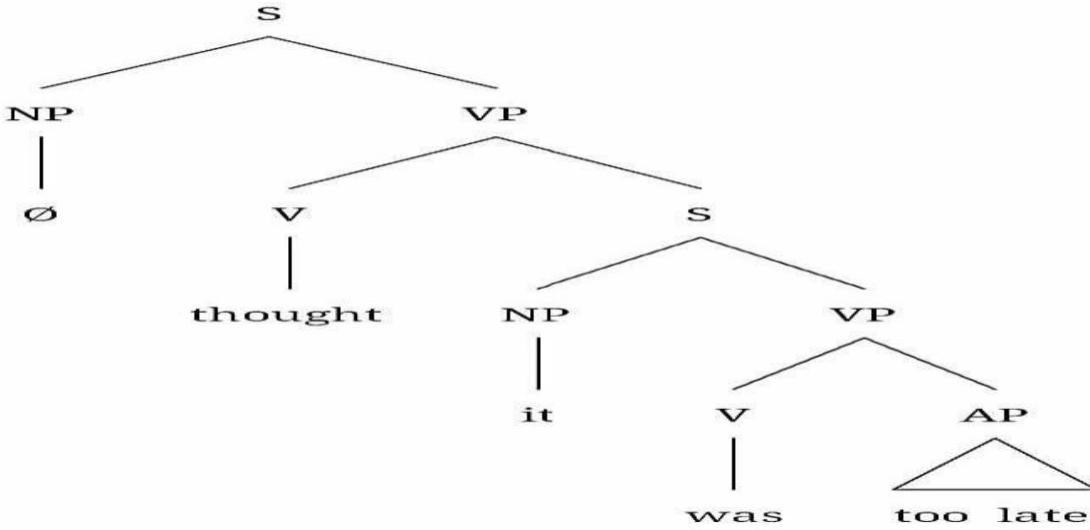
Examples of English Null Subject

No	Example Sentences (English)	Source	Author	Page Number
1	Ø Was an odd sensation.	The Lottery	Shirley Jackson	22
2	Ø Looked out into the rain.	A Good Man is Hard to Find	Flannery O'Connor	38

3	Ø Stood motionless, staring.	The Monkey's Paw	W.W. Jacobs	44
4	Ø Walked across the street.	The Gift of the Magi	O. Henry	56
5	Ø Had to let it go	Hills Like White Elephants	Ernest Hemingway	77
6	Ø Had been waiting for hours.	The Yellow Wallpaper	Charlotte Perkins Gilman	93
7	Ø Could feel the tension rise.	The Necklace	Guy de Maupassant	15
8	Ø Heard the knock at the door.	The Open Window	Saki (H.H. Munro)	42
9	Ø Thought it was too late.	The Story of an Hour	Kate Chopin	38
10	Ø Couldn't speak a word	The Tell-Tale Heart	Edgar Allan Poe	56

Tree Diagram for Ø Thought it was too late

This is the tree diagram of the sentence "Ø Thought it was too late." of Kate Chopin's The Story of an Hour, following the rules adhered to in the Urdu example. From this tree diagram, we can see how the syntactic formation of a sentence can be determined, like using a null subject (Ø) and its position within a sentence.



Tree Diagram of (Ø Thought it was too late)

Explanation of Tree Diagram

- [NP pro] – The subject position is filled by a null pronoun (pro), understood in context as the experiencer (I).
- [VP [V thought] [S ...]] – The main verb thought *selects* for a sentential complement (S) directly, without a CP layer.
- [S [NP it] [VP [V was] [AP too late]]] – The embedded sentence has it as the subject and *was too late* as the predicate, expressing the content of the higher verb's complement.

Minimalist Explanation: Syntactic Analysis of Null Subjects in Urdu and English

Both /kər̩ d̩n se k̩t̩ñ nəfi: bɔ:la: t̩ha:/ (He hadn't spoken for days) from Urdu and "Ø Thought it was too late" from Kate Chopin's The Story of an Hour have null subjects (Ø). In Urdu, the subject is usually missing because it can be implied based on morphology of verb and close context. The verb (had spoken) is past perfect tense and marked with gender (masculine) and number (singular) and has sufficient information with which to recreate the subject. In English, subject dropping is typically ungrammatical, yet with literary contexts as seen with Chopin's prose, syntactically, a null subject is permitted. The subject Ø of **Thought it was too late** is implied based on a discourse context, assumed about the central character. The verb "thought" just so happens to occur with past tense, which has sufficient information with which to specify an implied subject.

For Chomsky's Minimalist Program, feature checking is central to syntactically possible null subjects. Under this explanation, every syntactic feature must check its features if a sentence grammatically well formed exists. In Urdu, *bo:la: t̪ha:* contains sufficient features tense, gender, and number to check the feature of the subject even if this is absent. In English, "thought" has tense (past), checking the feature of the subject so this may be implied.

Extended Projection Principle (EPP) requires a [Spec, TP] position with a subject in every clause. But this requirement is eased in pro-drop languages like Urdu, and an unoccupied [Spec, TP] is fine as long as recoverability of the subject is available from verb morphology along with discourse context. In written English texts, too, EPP is eased, tolerating subject-drop. In both cases, syntactically this subject-drop is fine because it can be recovered from context and verb morphology.

Implications for Syntactic Theory (English & Urdu)

The contrast between "/ kəɪ dɪm se kʊ t̪ʃi nəfi: bo:la: t̪ha:/" meaning "He hadn't spoken for days" in Urdu and "**Thought it was too late.**" in English reveals how these two languages handle null subjects. In Urdu, absence of a subject is syntactically allowable because of verb morphology as well as discourse setting, revealing syntactic economy, as Chomsky's Minimalist Program would anticipate. In English, an overt subject is usually demanded by the Extended Projection Principle (EPP), yet within literal situations like within Chopin's writing, context-driven recoverability makes subject absence feasible. This reveals the cross-linguistic difference between pro-drop languages like Urdu and non-pro-drop languages like English, yet validating feature checking's status within both languages to economically convey meaning.

Conclusion

Urdu, as a pro-drop and morphologically wealthy language, permits such omissions freely, specifically in finite and non-finite clauses. The language is predicated on verbal inflections, discourse cues, and morph syntactic agreement to recover lacking elements. In comparison, English, usually classified as a non-pro-drop language, imposes stricter constraints, allowing omissions usually in restrained syntactic environments including vp-ellipsis, gapping, and coordination conditions that still require structural and discourse recoverability.

The data have a look at present's empirical evidence demonstrating that Urdu permits omission across each clause sorts, while English usually restricts omissions to non-finite or elliptical structures with clear antecedents. However, existing syntactic literature gives constrained theoretical cause of these patterns primarily based on actual literary information, specifically from South Asian languages like Urdu.

Furthermore, maximum available analyses have no longer hired Chomsky's Minimalist program as a framework to explain cross-linguistic variation in omission behaviour. The constructs of derivational economy, feature checking, EPP delight, and the pro-drop parameter offer effective gear to investigate why omissions are licensed in Urdu but often blocked in English. Yet, those gear have now not been widely applied to comparative data from Urdu and English short stories. This study seeks to address these critical gaps by investigating the syntactic licensing of null constituents in both languages across multiple clause types, analysing omission behaviour through the Minimalist framework, supported by authentic formal prose data, and clarifying how Urdu's morphological richness and flexible clause structure contrast with English's reliance on structural recoverability.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable theoretical and empirical insights into the syntactic behaviour of null constituents in formal Urdu and English, it is important to acknowledge its inherent limitations. One key limitation concerns the nature of the dataset. The analysis draws exclusively from formal written texts, specifically short stories authored in literary Urdu and English. Although these texts offer controlled and grammatically rich environments for

observing omission patterns, they do not represent the full spectrum of language use, particularly in spoken or informal registers. Spoken discourse often allows for spontaneous omissions, elliptical constructions, and discourse-dependent recoverability, which are not fully reflected in written narrative forms. The study is grounded exclusively in the Minimalist Program. While this framework offers a robust model for analysing omission phenomena, it does not incorporate perspectives from alternative syntactic theories such as Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG), Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG), or Construction Grammar, which could yield complementary insights. The research focuses solely on Urdu and English. Although these languages are typologically distinct, they represent only a small portion of the world's linguistic diversity. Comparative work involving additional pro-drop and non-pro-drop languages could further validate and generalise the findings. Furthermore, although the study distinguishes between finite and non-finite clauses, it does not exhaustively explore all subordinate clause types. Null constituents in conditional, relative, or adverbial clauses may exhibit unique syntactic behaviours depending on their depth of embedding, dependency relations, or thematic roles. Lastly, the corpus size is limited. The data, though drawn from recognized literary works, remains relatively small and may not capture all the syntactic variability within each language.

Implications of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the comparative syntactic analysis of null constituents including subjects within two typologically distinct languages: Urdu, a pro-drop, morphologically rich language, and English, a non-pro-drop language with strict syntactic realization constraints. From a theoretical standpoint, this study engages with Chomsky's Minimalist Program, applying its core constructs to real linguistic data in order to understand how grammatical economy, clause structure, and morphosyntactic features interact to either license or block omissions. By exploring finite vs. Non-finite clause omissions, the study adds an important structural dimension to omission behavior. It not only highlights when and where omissions occur, but also explains why certain omissions are grammatical in one language but ungrammatical in another, based on syntactic licensing conditions. On a practical level, the study offers value to language educators, bilingual curriculum developers, translators, and computational linguists. Understanding null constituent behavior in Urdu and English can inform syntactic parsing tools, bilingual grammar instruction, and translation accuracy, particularly in educational contexts where learners navigate both languages. For second language acquisition, the findings shed light on typical omission patterns that learners may struggle with due to cross-linguistic interference.

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