Subjectless language:
syntactic aspects of S. Beckett's "Rockaby"[*]

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Samuel Beckett's *Rockaby* is a very intriguing text from a linguist's point of view. In this paper I discuss certain aspects of its syntax for which a linguistic analysis proves particularly fruitful. First, I argue that the text shows some syntactic phenomena typical of the novelists' free indirect style (Banfield 1982), and in particular, some phenomena belonging in the domain of logophoricity. Secondly, I show that Beckett reduces to the minimum the number of finite predicates and uses unembedded nonfinite predicates, which are interpreted by means of logophoric control. Finally, the most peculiar aspect of the syntax of *Rockaby* is the omission of pronominal subjects with finite verbs. This phenomenon is not found in the ordinary use of language, but only in the "abbreviated" written register of diaries (Haegeman 1990). It is shown that the distribution of overt and omitted subjects in Beckett's text is syntactically conditioned: the omitted subjects are limited to the most prominent position of root clauses; more importantly, all the overt subjects except for one impersonal subject are found in syntactic environments where subject omission is impossible, namely, in clauses introduced by a subordinating conjunction or a *wh*-word (cf. Haegeman 1990, Rizzi 2000). The linguistic analysis thus shows that Beckett avoids overt subjects as much as is syntactically possible. In the final section, an interpretation of these facts is attempted on the grounds of the linguistic theory of logophoricity.

1. The syntax of the "stream of consciousness"

The Woman's "voice outside the body" in *Rockaby* seems to be the theatre equivalent of the novelists' stream of consciousness: in fact, the text read by the recorded voice presents various syntactic phenomena typical of free indirect style, according to the seminal work of Banfield (1982).

Free indirect style – or, in Banfield's terms, represented speech and thought – is syntactically non-embedded, contrary to indirect discourse, and it is shares certain features of direct discourse. The source of direct discourse is a speaker; the source of represented speech and thought is instead a "centre of consciousness", a *self* that is referred to by first or third person pronominals. The discourse is a pure expression of this *self*, and not a representation of communication; accordingly, free indirect style necessarily lacks the second person – referring to the addressee – and all addressee-oriented forms, like e.g. vocatives and imperative verb forms. Furthermore, it is not in the present tense, which is anchored to the moment of utterance; however, it may contain deictic and demonstrative expressions, which are consistently shifted and anchored to the *self*'s spatial and temporal point of view (see Banfield 1982, chapter 3).

Banfield's identification of the *self* (subjective point of view) as a separate entity from the speaker has had important consequences for the development of the theory of logophoricity (see in particular Sells 1987): also in the ordinary use of language, various syntactic phenomena have been discovered which are sensitive to a *self* distinct from the speaker. It is impossible here to fully summarize Banfield's analysis, as well as the linguistic literature on logophoricity that followed her seminal work. I will only discuss some specific phenomena characteristic of free indirect style, which are also found in Beckett's text.[1]

The text by the Woman's recorded voice is in the third person and in the past tense (like the free indirect style of e.g. *Mrs. Dalloway)*.[2] The pronominal third person refers to the "centre of consciousness" (here, the Woman sitting on the rocker). This is confirmed by the

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[1] In the following discussion I use the term *reprise* to identify the four parts of the text that are separated by a pause and by the word "more" uttered by the Woman sitting on the rocking chair.

[2] Actually, the last lines of *Rockaby* contain an imperative form, which should in principle be disallowed (*saying to the rocker/ rock her off…*). These imperative forms seem to be included in a reported speech (although in a direct speech the third person pronoun *her* would not refer to the Woman; see below). Note however that they are addressed to the rocking chair, which constitutes an "internalized addressee", i.e. an addressee internal to the Woman's stream of consciousness.

use of the anaphoric elements *him/herself* in non-reflexive contexts to refer to the centre of consciousness (see Zribi-Hertz 1989). The phenomenon is typical of free indirect discourse, but it is also found in the ordinary use of language (see e.g. Maling (1984) and Sigurdhsson (1990) on Icelandic; Kuno (1987), Sells (1987) on English; see also Cole *et al.* (2001) for a recent cross-linguistic overview). In the syntactic literature, these elements are commonly dubbed *logophoric anaphors*.[3]

The logophoric and reflexive uses of the anaphors can be easily distinguished by means of the following test. A logophoric anaphor can be substituted for by a pronoun with the same reference (indicated by coindexing):

(1)   a. she$_i$ looked for another creature like herself$_i$

       b. she$_i$ looked for another creature like her$_i$.

On the contrary, a reflexive anaphor cannot be substituted for by a pronoun with the same reference:

(2)   a. she$_i$ said to herself$_i$ ...

       b. she$_i$ said to her $_{k\neq}$ ...

Note also that the logophoric use of the anaphor is subject to a syntactic constraint: as discussed by Reinhart & Reuland (1993), an anaphor cannot be logophoric if it is the direct argument of a semantic predicate (roughly, a verbal or adjectival predicate endowed with a subject), because here it necessarily receives a reflexive interpretation; a logophoric anaphor can only be a complement to a noun or a preposition. In the syntactic environments where the logophoric anaphor is disallowed, we find the pronoun *her* instead (e.g.: *rock her off* in the final lines of *Rockaby* quoted above).

In *Rockaby* we find various instances of the logophoric use of the anaphor *herself* referring to the centre of consciousness, e.g. in the first *reprise*:

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[3] This syntactic feature of free indirect style is difficult to translate in a language like Italian: as argued in Bianchi (1999,115-117), the Italian anaphors *se stesso/a* do not allow a logophoric use, and

for another

another like herself

another creature like herself

[...]

one other living soul

going to and fro

all eyes like herself

and in the second *reprise*:

for another

at her window

another like herself

[...]

one other living soul

at her window

gone in like herself

Third, recall that in free indirect style deictic and demonstrative elements are anchored to the physical (spatial and temporal) point of view of the centre of consciousness. In *Rockaby* we find some instances of a demonstrative used in this way, in the third *reprise*:

another creature <u>there</u>

somewhere <u>there</u>

behind the pane

and in the fourth *reprise*:

right down

into the old rocker

<u>those</u> arms at last

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the only possibility is to use the pronominal forms *lui/lei stesso/a*, which however have a strong

[...]
the rocker
<u>*those*</u> *arms at last*

Finally, free indirect style – like direct discourse, and unlike real indirect discourse – allows for exclamations and incomplete sentences (Banfield 1982, 71 ff.) Once again, in *Rockaby* we find some instances of these phenomena, e.g. in the first and second *reprise*:

when she said to herself
<u>*whom else*</u>

in the third *reprise*:

one blind up
<u>*no more*</u>
<u>*never mind*</u> *a face*
behind the pane
[...]
<u>*no*</u>
a blind up
like hers
a little like
one blind up <u>*no more*</u>

and in the fourth *reprise:*

off her head they said
[...]
dead one day
no
night

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emphatic flavour.

dead one night

[...]

saying to herself

no

done with that

In sum, the syntax of the Voice's text in *Rockaby* presents various features that are characteristic of free indirect style, suggesting that it is a sort of stream of consciousness of the protagonist. This is in fact the most plausible interpretation of the text, though one difficulty remains: the words *time she stopped*, that are repeatedly pronounced by the Woman on the rocking chair together with her recorded Voice, contain a third person pronoun which, according to this interpretation, refers to the Woman herself. In other terms, the Woman seems to utter a third person pronoun to refer to herself. I will return to this problem in the final section.

2. **Nonfinite predicates**

A striking feature of Beckett's text is the avoidance of finite verb forms, and the frequent use of nonfinite verbs. For instance, in the third *reprise* we find an exceptionally unembedded gerundive form:

sitting at her window

quiet at her window (repeated three times)

In generative syntax, nonfinite verb forms without an expressed subject are assumed to have an implicit subject. The reference of this implicit subject is determined by the context in a number of ways (for a thorough discussion, see Landau 2000). When the nonfinite form is selected by a matrix predicate, the reference of its implicit subject (indicated as

PRO) coincides with one of the arguments of the matrix predicate; this phenomenon is called obligatory control:[4]

(3)   She$_i$ wanted PRO$_i$ to stop.

When the nonfinite form is within an adverbial clause or is an unembedded infinitive, the reference of its implicit subject is fixed in a less rigid way. According to Landau, Williams and others[5], in this case the implicit subject is controlled by the "centre of consciousness", namely, there is logophoric control. The point can be illustrated by means of the following example (from Williams 1992, 300):

(4)   PRO having travelled all day, the hotel was a vision indeed.

Clearly, the person who has travelled all day is the person whose subjective point of view is reported – that is, the person who perceives the hotel as a vision. By default, in ordinary language this is the speaker, but in a narrative it may well be a *self* distinct from the speaker or the author. In the passage of *Rockaby* quoted above, the subject of the unembedded gerundive verb *sitting* is the Woman on the rocker, by logophoric control. The same holds in the following passages of the second *reprise:*

so in the end
close of a long day
went back in
in the end went back in
saying to herself
[...]
close of a long day
saying to herself

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[4] Obligatory control also obtains when the nonfinite form is contained in a restricted set of adverbials (see Williams 1992, 1994). I leave side here nonfinite verbs used as restrictive modifiers.
[5] Kuno (1987); Rooryck (2001). Of couse, here I am glossing over several differences in the specific analyses offered by these authors.

Note that in its first occurrence, the gerundive *saying* is syntactically adjoined to the matrix clause and it is controlled by the unexpressed subject of the a finite verb (*went back in*; I will return to this unexpressed subject below); in the second occurrence, the finite verb is not repeated and the gerundive form, unembedded, is logophorically controlled. The suppression of the finite verb in the repeated lines also occurs in the first *reprise*, strenghtening our impression that Beckett studiously avoids finite verbs as much as possible.

A third case of logophoric control is the infinitival forms in the following passage of the fourth *reprise*, which have a purposive flavour:

she so long all eyes
famished eyes
all sides
high and low
to and fro
at her window
to see
be seen

In other cases (fourth *reprise*), the nonfinite verb form has an expressed subject; note however that the subject is inanimate:

head fallen
and the rocker rocking
rocking away

Besides nonfinite verbs, in various cases the main predicate is simply a directional particle. Consider the following passages from the *third reprise:*

all blinds down
never one up
hers alone up

[...]

for a blind up

one blind up

[...]

no

a blind up

[...]

one blind up no more

and from the fourth *reprise*:

let down the blind and down

right down

into the old rocker

Finally, in the following passage from the third *reprise* the main predicates are past participles and adjectives, and the subject they are predicated of (the mother) is left unexpressed:[6]

off her head they said

gone off her head

but harmless

no harm in her

dead one day

no

night

dead one night

3. **The syntax of the subject**

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[6] This implicit subject cannot be easily interpreted as an instance of control, but it resembles more closely the phenomenon of "topic drop" discussed by Haegeman (1990), as the mother is the topic of the whole passage.

The syntactic devices discussed above give the impression of a "verb-less" and "subject-less" language. In fact, in the ordinary use of language every finite verb in English has an expressed subject, even when the latter has no actual reference, as in the case of weather verbs (5a) and of extraposed subject clauses (5b):

(5)   a. It is raining.

        b. It is clear that you made a mistake.

        c. She is speaking.

In generative syntax, Modern English is dubbed an "absolutely non-*pro*-drop language", since it cannot drop a pronominal subject of a finite verb, not even an expletive one. Other languages like e.g. Russian allow for partial drop of expletive subjects, and fully *pro*-drop languages like Italian can drop any pronominal subject; for a thorough discussion, see Rizzi (1986) and Jaeggli & Safir (1989).

At this point we arrive at the most striking aspect of the syntax of *Rockaby*. Besides avoiding finite verbs, Beckett strongly deviates from the ordinary use of language in that he often omits the subject of finite verbs. Note in passing that this exceptional character of the syntax of *Rockaby* cannot be translated in a *pro*-drop language like Italian, which has free omission of pronominal subjects, as mentioned above.

If I counted correctly, out of 62 finite verbs 41 have an expressed subject, and 21 an omitted subject.[7] I report here all the unambiguous cases of subject omission with a finite verb:

second *reprise*:

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[7] In the case of two coordinated verbs, the expressed subject precedes the first one, but also the second one was obviously counted as having an expressed subject. In some cases, however ,it is unclear whether a finite verb is really coordinated to the preceding one, e.g. in the following passage (repeated several times):
till in the end
the day came
in the end came
close of a long day...

so in the end

close of a long day

<u>*went*</u> *back in*

in the end <u>*went*</u> *back in*

[...]

so in the end

close of a long day

in the end <u>*went and sat*</u>

<u>*went*</u> *back in and* <u>*sat*</u>

at her window

<u>*let*</u> *up the blind and* <u>*sat*</u>

quiet at her window

[...]

fourth *reprise*:

so in the end

close of a long day

<u>*went*</u> *down*

in the end <u>*went*</u> *down*

down the steep stair

<u>*let*</u> *down the blind and down*

right down

into the old rocker

[...]

so in the end

close of a long day

<u>*went*</u> *down*

I counted the second occurrence of *came* as endowed with an expressed subject like the first one, but actually this is not a straightforward case of coordination. If we consider the second occurrence of *came* subjectless, the number of expressed subjects is 37 out of 62 finite verbs.

in the end <u>went</u> down

down the steep stair

<u>let</u> down the blind and down

right down

into the old rocker

those arms at last

and <u>rocked</u>

<u>rocked</u>

with closed eyes

[...]

<u>was</u> her own other

own other living soul

so in the end

close of a long day

<u>went</u> down

down the steep stair

<u>let</u> down the blind and down

right down

into the old rocker

and <u>rocked</u>

<u>rocked</u>

saying to herself...

Given the syntactic characterization of English as a non-*pro*-drop language, these sentences should be utterly ungrammatical. This is not quite correct, however. As discussed by <u>Haegeman (1990)</u> and <u>Rizzi (2000),</u> in the written register of diaries subject drop with a finite verb is allowed. Consider the following example, quoted by Haegeman (1990) :

(6) A very sensible day yesterday. ___ saw noone. ___ took the bus to Southwark
      Bridge.
         ___ walked along Thames Street....
                    (Virginia Woolf, <u>Diary</u>, vol.5, 1936-41, pp. 203-4)

As discussed by Haegeman and Rizzi, this type of subject omission with a finite verb has structural properties very different from those of full *pro*-drop in a language like Italian: the omitted subject is limited to root clauses, and it must occur in the structurally highest position of the clause. Thus, subject omission is impossible in a finite clause that is introduced by a *wh*-phrase or by a subordinating conjunction.

According to Rizzi's analysis, these syntactic constraints are due to the nature of the understood subject. By hypothesis, subject omission involves an unpronounced pronominal category whose content must be syntactically recoverable (in technical terms, it must be identified). In a full *pro*-drop language like Italian, the reference of the unpronounced subject can be recovered by means of the "rich" inflection of the finite verb, which specifies the values of the person and number features. In Modern English, instead, the verbal inflection isn't "rich" enough to identify a null pronoun. Therefore, the unpronounced subject of the written register of diaries is not syntactically identified within the clause, but its reference is recovered by its being connected to the surrounding discourse.[8] According to Rizzi, this type of discourse identification is only possible when syntactic identification is impossible, namely, when the unpronounced subject is in the structurally highest position in the clause, so that there isn't any more prominent category that can in principle act as an identifier. This is why subject omission in the written registers of English is limited to the highest position of root clauses.[9]

I have dwelled into this somewhat technical discussion because it can help us to understand the distribution of omitted and explicit subjects in Beckett's text. In all the 21 examples reported above, the finite verb with omitted subject is in a root clause;

[8] Furthermore, this unpronounced subject differs from that of Italian in that it is not a pronominal category but a "null constant". I will leave aside these technical details here, as they are not relevant to my present purposes.

[9] More specifically, on Rizzi's analysis discourse identification is made possible by the fact that the topmost part of the syntactic structure of the clause can fail to be realized, leaving the subject position as the topmost position in the clause. The same phenomenon is found in a specific stage of the acquisition of English, around the age of two years. According to Rizzi, the marked possibility of "truncating" the syntactic structure of the clause in child language also allows for other phenomena, like the use of nonfinite verbs and nominal predicates in matrix clauses. As noted above, this type of verb-less predication is also found in Beckett's text, confirming the clustering of syntactic properties proposed by Rizzi. The correlation is linguistically interesting, but I don't think that the language of *Rockaby* could possibly be considered an imitation of child language

furthermore, the finite verb is only preceded by a coordinating conjunction or by the adverbial expression (*so*) *in the end*. I will tentatively hypothesize that the latter is syntactically peripheral, so that it does not block discourse identification of the unpronounced subject.

The syntactic analysis is even more significant for the distribution of the 41 overt subjects of finite verbs in Beckett's text. Apart from one impersonal pronominal subject in a parenthetical clause in the fourth *reprise (off her head they said)*, all overt subjects, both pronominal and nonpronominal, are in a syntactically nonprominent position, where discourse identification would be impossible: namely, they are preceded by a subordinating conjunction or by a *wh*-word. I report a few examples below; the subjects and the preceding subordinating conjunctions are underlined.

first *reprise*:

till *in the end*
the day *came*
in the end came
close of a long day
when she *said*
to herself
whom else
time she *stopped*
time she *stopped...*

second *reprise*:

so in the end
close of a long day
went back in
in the end went back in

(though the hypothesis may seem appealing, given the regressive character of the Woman's stream of consciousness).

saying to herself

whom else

<u>time she</u> stopped

<u>time she</u> stopped

going to and fro

<u>time she</u> went and sat

at her window...

fourth *reprise*:

let down the blind and down

right down

into the old rocker

mother rocker

<u>where mother</u> sat...

If we adopt Rizzi's analysis of this exceptional subject omission with finite verbs, we come to the conclusion that apart for one impersonal subject, all the expressed subjects in Beckett's text are syntactically conditioned, that is, they occur in a context where an unpronounced subject is impossible.

4. **Some speculations**

In the preceding discussion, I have tried to show that a careful linguistic analysis may uncover certain significant aspects of Beckett's text in a non-impressionistic way. The next step is to offer an interpretation of these observations, and this requires a literary, not an exclusively linguistic competence. Nevertheless, I wish to offer some speculations, starting once again from my linguistic background.

The most prominent aspect of the syntax of *Rockaby* is the avoidance of finite verbs and of expressed subjects. These two phenomena are linguistically related: cross-linguistically, expressed subjects are always possible (and even required, in non-*pro*-drop languages)

with finite verbs, whereas nonfinite verbs usually have implicit subjects. In recent work (Bianchi 2001, 2003, forthcoming) I have proposed a hypothesis to account for the correlation between finiteness and overt subjects. The basic insight is that the subject of a finite verb can have any value of the person feature, and finite verbs, contrary to nonfinite ones, are endowed with person agreement with the subject.[10] The person feature is intrinsically deictic because, as Jakobson (1971, 134) synthetically puts it, "person characterizes the participants of the narrated event with reference to the participants of the speech event": first person refers to the speaker, second person refers to the addressee, and third person to anyone and anything else (leaving aside courtesy forms). Holmberg & Platzack (1995) have observed that the finite verb has the property of expressing another deictic feature, absolute tense, which is interpreted with respect to the time of the utterance. Putting these observations together, I have proposed that the finite verb syntactically encodes the speech event, which functions as the centre of deixis: the tense feature is interpreted w.r.t. the time of the speech event, and the person feature is interpreted w.r.t. the participants of the speech event (speaker and addressee). [11]

Going back to *Rockaby*, let us reconsider the avoidance of finite verbs and the marked omission of subjects. These features may be interpreted as the hallmarks of an abbreviated register: Beckett strives to obtain a language as synthetic as possible. However, given the linguistic considerations offered above, we can attempt a different interpretation: by using nonfinite verbs with logophorically controlled implicit subjects and finite verbs with discourse-identified implicit subjects, Beckett reduces to the minimum the expression of the person feature, and the opposition between referentially distinct values of the person feature. Recall that even in the Woman's utterance of the words "time she stopped", she is apparently uttering a third person pronoun rather than a first person pronoun to refer to

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[10] There are some exceptional cases of nonfinite verbs with inflection for person, like e.g. the inflected infinitive of European Portuguese (see Raposo 1987); these are however cross-linguistically rare. See Bianchi (2001) for some discussion.

[11] As noted above, Banfield (1982) argues that represented speech and thought is a form of pure expression, not of communication: there is no real speech event, no utterance. The centre of deixis is the *self*'s temporal and physical perspective; as for the person feature, the *self* can be referred to by first person (as in Molly Bloom's stream of consciousness) or third person (as in *Mrs. Dalloway*), but second person is not licensed. In recent work (Bianchi 2001, 2003), I have proposed that the speech event is just one instance of a broader notion of *logophoric centre*: any speech or mental event (even a reported one) can function as a centre of deixis, but only the "external" utterance event can license a full-fledged person feature.

herself[12] (similarly in the final lines with the reported words "rock her off"), as if the use of first person were linguistically impossible. This corroborates the impression that the Woman's language is virtually person-less. In fact, the linguistic category of person is strongly related to animacy.[13] The obsessive refrain in the Woman's stream of consciousness is the complete absence of *another creature like herself*, of an at least potential interlocutor (*when she said to herself / whom else...*), until in the end the mother-rocker is turned into an interlocutor (the addressee of the final imperative verbs). In the gradual fade out of the Woman's consciousness, the complete absence of an interlocutor makes the deictic category of person virtually vacuous.

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[12] Note that Beckett avoids here the possibility of a nonfinite verb with an implicit subject (*time to stop*).

[13] Consider the so-called "animacy hierarchy": see Bianchi (2003) for discussion.

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