Object drop and the Empty Left Edge Condition (ELEC)
A few facts and a bit of a theory

1. Introduction
"Unrestricted" object drop, as in (1a)-(2a), is probably more common than often assumed (see Cummins & Roberge 2005), but, as compared to subject drop, it is cross-linguistically rare:

(1) a. ... ok munu nú taka __ óvinir þínir. OldNorse (Sigurðsson 1993)
   ... and will now take (it) enemies your * in Modern Icelandic
   ‘... and your enemies will now take it.’
   b. * Mario ha constretto __ a partire. Italian (Rizzi 1986)
   Mario has forced (me, you, ...) to leave

(2) a. José sabe que Maria __ viu. Eur Portuguese (Raposo 1986)
   Jose knows that Maria (him) saw
   b. * Gianni sa che Maria __ vide. Italian
   Gianni knows that Maria (him) saw

In contrast, various contextually or grammatically restricted object drop types are not rare, and some are common or even general. Restricted object drop is commonly subject to an Empty Left Edge Condition, ELEC, requiring that the left edge of the clause not be spelled out. ELEC can largely be explained in terms of minimality, as due to an intervention effect. However, we present evidence from Icelandic that ELEC is operative in PF (suggesting that it is a 3rd factor effect).

2. Restricted object drop: an overview

Topic Object Drop, TOD, in V2 Germanic:

(3) a. Weiss ich nicht __. Ger
   b. Vet ‘ja inte __. Swe
   c. Veit ‘é ekki __. Ice
   know I not
   ‘That I don’t know.’

Conjunct Object Drop, COD, in Scandinavian varieties (Old Norse, Icelandic, Norwegian varieties, Swedish varieties, cf. Åfarli & Creider 1987, Rögnvaldsson 1990)

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1 Largely based on Sigurðsson & Maling 2010, Sigurðsson 2011.
a. Hann elskar hana og dáir __.  
   he loves her and admires (her) 
   ‘He loves and admires her.’

b. Stál blí og eyðilagði __.  
   stole car and destroyed (it)

b. Hon tog en näve hjordnötter och gav __ mig.  
   she took a fist[ful] of peanuts and gave (them) to me

Deictic Object Drop, DOD (universal?):

(5)  
   a. Here, read __!  
   b. Open __ carefully.  
   c. Wet paint. Do not touch __!

Recipe Object Drop, ROD, found in recipes and other instructions, as in the English (6) (from Massam & Roberge 1989:135), and the Hungarian (7):^2

(6) Take 3 beaten eggs. Put __ in a hot oven for 5 minutes. Watch __ carefully.

   take three eggs. break into a bowl. beat [up] carefully

The verb forms, at least in European languages, are typically either infinitive or imperative (1st and 2nd P.PL. exhortatives are here included in the imperative category).^3

A.  
   okImp ROD, okInf ROD:  
   French, Polish, some Italian varieties

B.  
   okImp ROD, *Inf ROD:  
   Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Slovenian, Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, Hungarian

C.  
   *Imp ROD, okInf ROD:  
   Czech, many or most German varieties, Dutch, Spanish, many or most Italian varieties,

D.  
   *Imp ROD, *Inf ROD:  
   Catalan, some Spanish varieties, some Italian varieties, some German varieties

3. The Empty Subject Condition, ESC:

In all these languages, subjects must never be spelled out in ROD clauses, not even in those languages where infinitives (rarely) or imperatives (more commonly) otherwise allow overt subjects:

(8) Take three eggs. *You beat __ well while someone else mixes the flour and the butter.

^2 Provided by Gréte Dalmi.

^3 Many thanks to our friends and colleagues for sharing with us their knowledge of these (and some other) languages, too many to list here (but see Sigurðsson & Maling 2010).
Prenez trois oeufs. *Vous déposez ___ dans un bol. *Vous battez ___ doucement. take three eggs. you break into a bowl. you beat gently

Even excluded on an intended contrastive reading.

4. The Empty Left Edge Condition, ELEC

Germanic Topic Subject Drop:

(10) a. (Ich) kenne ___ das nicht. Ger
    b. (Jag) känner ___ det inte. Swe
    c. (Ég) þekki ___ það ekki. Ice

(I) recognize ___ that not

(11) a. *Jetzt kenne ___ das nicht. Ger
    b. *Nu känner ___ det inte. Swe
    c. *Núna þekki ___ það ekki. Ice

now recognize (I) that not

Germanic Topic Object Drop:

(12) a. (Das) kenne ich ___ nicht. Ger
    b. (Det) känner jag ___ inte. Swe
    c. (Það) þekki ég ___ ekki.

(that) recognize I not

(13) a. *Jetzt kenne ich ___ nicht. Ger
    b. *Nu känner jag ___ inte. Swe
    c. *Núna þekki ég ___ ekki.

now recognize I (that) not

Conjunct Object Drop (cf. Rögnvaldsson 1990; see also Áfarli & Creider 1987 on Norwegian):

(14) a. Þeir lömdu hann og ___ börðu __.
    they hit him and (they) beat (him)
    b. *Þeir lömdu hann og þeir börðu __.
    they hit him and they beat (him)
    c. Þeir lömdu hann og þeir börðu hann.
    they hit him and they beat him

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4 Provided by Yves Roberge.
5. ELEC and ESC as a minimality (intervention) effect

On the assumption that the C-domain contains Top features (Rizzi 1997, Frascarelli 2007), ELEC can be analyzed in terms of minimality, as an intervention effect, such that the Aboutness-Shift Top or A-Top feature cannot be matched by a null topic across lexical elements in the C-domain:5

(15) a.  *[CP ... {A-Top} ... X \_ ... [TP ... Ø ...]]] \\
    \[\text{up}\] * \[\text{up}\]

b.  [CP ... {A-Top} ... Ø \_ ... [TP ... Ø ...]]] \\
    \[\text{up}\] \text{OK} \[\text{up}\]

A similar analysis extends to ESC in ROD and DOD clauses:

(16) a.  *[CP ... {A-Top} ... [TP X \_ ... Ø ...]]] \\
    \[\text{up}\] * \[\text{up}\]

b.  [CP ... {A-Top} ... [TP Ø \_ ... Ø ...]]] \\
    \[\text{up}\] \text{OK} \[\text{up}\]

Thus, we seemingly have a syntactic account of ESC and of ELEC in general. If so, however, it is remarkable that overt objects are not constrained by any emptiness conditions of this sort (cf., e.g., 14c). Overt objects are phonologically and not syntactically different from null objects, hence ELEC and ESC must be interpretative (identifying) restrictions applying in PF.

6. ROD and ESC in Icelandic

(19) a.  Infinitive  \\
    brjóta ‘break’  \\
    fara ‘go’

b.  Basic 2SG imperatives  \\
    (poetic and biblical language)  \\
    %brjót (þú)  \\
    %far (þú)

Ordinary, cliticized 2SG imperatives and ordinary 2PL exhortatives, bare and cliticized:

(20) a.  2SG imperatives + a clitic  \\
    brjóttu (*þú)  \\
    %brjóttu (*þú)  \\
    break.IMP-CL.2SG  \\
    go.IMP-CL.2SG

b.  2PL exhortatives:  \\
    b1.  no clitic  \\
    brjótið (þið)  \\
    farið (þið)  \\
    break.2PL (þú)  \\
    go.2PL (þú)

b2.  cilitic:  \\
    brjótiði (*þið)  \\
    fariði (*þið)  \\
    break.2PL-CL.2PL  \\
    go.2PL-CL.2PL

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5 The relevant topicality is aboutness-shift topicality, in the sense of Frascarelli 2007, rather than familiar (given) or contrastive topicality. The curly brackets indicate that A-Top itself is non-lexicalized.
6 Specifiers are arguably nonexistent, cf. Lohndal 2012.
Now, consider the following ROD and ESC facts:

(21) Takið þrjú egg.
    take.2PL three eggs
    a. * Brjótið þið ___ í skál og ...
       break.2PL you.PL into a.bowl and ...
    b. ?? Brjótorið ___ í skál og ...
       break.2PL-CL.2PL into a.bowl and ...
    c. Brjótorið ___ í skál og ...
       break.2PL into a.bowl and ...

(22) Taktu þrjú egg.
    take.2SG three eggs
    a. * Brjöt þú ___ í skál ...
    b. ? Brjóttu ___ í skál ...
    c. % Brjót ___ í skál ...
       (bare SG imperatives confined to biblical/poetic language =%)

As seen, the more reduced the subject is, the more acceptable the null object.

The plural ??brjótið in (21b) gets a secondary (trisyllabic) stress on the clitic – no such stress in the singular ?brjóttu in (22b). Moreover, if the vowel of the singular clitic disappears, due to hiatus, then ROD is possible!

(23) Taktu þrjú egg. Brjótt’ ___ í skál ...
    take.IMP-CL.2SG three eggs. break.IMP-CL.2SG into a.bowl ...

    Brjótt’ is pronounced [prjuht] (not [prju:t], as the basic imperative brjót).

That is, a clearly phi-visible subject induces an intervention effect, rendering the null object phi-invisible, hence unrecoverable or uninterpretable.

ELEC in general is amenable to a similar generalization. A null-argument is uninterpretable unless it raises into the root C-domain, but it can neither raise across an overt Spec-C nor into an interrogative C-domain:

(24) a. __ Visste’ja inte [__ var förbjudet].
    knew’I not was forbidden
    b. * Då visste’ja inte [__ var förbjudet].
    then knew’I not was forbidden

(25) a. Ska åka imorgon (will go/leave tomorrow).
    b. * Imorgon ska åka.
    c. * Ska åka imorgon?
7. Conclusion

ELEC and ESC are interpretative restrictions applying in PF. There are no genuinely syntactic differences between overt and covert arguments (and the question of whether a null argument is syntactically licensed is beside the point). Rather, null arguments are obviously ‘less PF visible,’ hence also subject to more severe PF (identification) constraints, than are overt arguments.

Recipe Object Drop and Deictic Object Drop are cross-linguistically much more widespread than other instances of ELEC. The reason might be that the C-domain remains non-lexicalized in ROD and DOD, leaving these constructions open to free context-linking, much as argument drop in general in many South East Asian languages.

References

7 Most of ‘syntax’ in the traditional sense belongs to the externalization component of language (broad PF).