Acquisition of Spanish as an L2 and L3: knowledge of pronouns by Greek and English learners of Spanish

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**Abstract**

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing body of research on lexical transfer in L3 acquisition within a psycholinguistic approach (e.g., Dewaele, 1998; Singleton, 1987). It has been found that L3 learners transfer lexical items mostly from their L2 (and not their L1) into their L3. An interesting question is whether the same pattern is found in the development of syntactic knowledge.

The focus of this study is the interpretation of overt and null pronominal subjects in L3 Spanish within a generative approach. In particular, I investigate the Overt Pronoun Constraint (Montalbetti, 1986, 1987). The OPC states that in [+pro-drop] languages like Spanish or Greek, where overt and null pronominal subjects alternate, an overt pronominal subject cannot bind (i.e., cannot refer) to a universal quantifier. For example, in the Spanish sentence Nadie cree que él/∅ es culpable ‘Nobody thinks that he/∅ is guilty’, the overt pronoun (él ‘he’) cannot refer to the quantifier nadie ‘nobody’, whereas the null pronoun (∅) can. The OPC holds-crosslinguistically and is claimed to be a universal invariant of Universal Grammar (UG).

An experiment was designed to compare sensitivity to the OPC, firstly, in speakers of L1 Greek who had acquired English as an L2 and Spanish as an L3; secondly, in speakers of L1 English who had acquired Spanish as an L2. Briefly:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>L1</th>
<th>L2 Spanish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>[-pro-drop]</td>
<td>[+pro-drop]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>[+pro-drop]</td>
<td>[-pro-drop]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two predictions were made. Firstly, if acquisition of an L2 influences development of syntactic knowledge in an L3, it was expected that Greek speakers would respond to OPC cases in Spanish as English speakers do. Secondly, if the OPC is a universal principle (and L2 learners have access to UG), it was expected that even English speakers would show some sensitivity to OPC constraints.

Results suggest that, while English speakers do show sensitivity to the OPC, they are not as clear in their judgements as Greek speakers; these Greek speakers show little evidence of the influence of their L2 English. This is consistent with the claim that L2 has little influence on the development of L3 syntactic knowledge (in contrast to the results of psycholinguistic studies on L3 lexical development).
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1  Assumptions

Perlmutter (1971), then Chomsky (1981) and Rizzi (1997):

[+]pro-drop] languages

(1) a. Yo voy al cine (Spanish)
   b. pro voy al cine

(2) a. Ego pao sto sinema (Greek)
   b. pro pao sto sinema

BUT:

[-pro-drop] languages

(3) a. I go to the cinema (English)
   b. *pro go to the cinema

2  Overt Pronoun Constrain (OPC)


Context:
The government has published a report about students’ financial situation. The report concludes that...

(a) cada estudiante dice que él tiene poco dinero.
   each student says that he has little money
(b) cada estudiante dice que pro tiene poco dinero.
   each student says that has little money

(a) QDPi . . . . . . . . . .OVERT *i
(b) QDPi . . . . . . . . . .NULL i

3  Topic/ Focus constraints

Context:
Mr López and Ms García work at the university and at a famous publishers. However...

(a) cada estudiante dice que él tiene poco dinero.
(b) cada estudiante dice que pro tiene poco dinero.

(a) QDPi . . . . . . . . . .OVERT j
(b) QDPi . . . . . . . . . .NULL *j

Avoid Pronoun Principle (Chomsky, 1981:65), follows from Economy Principle (Chomsky, 1995): choose least restricted pronoun if not ambiguity:

pro [+masc]
el ‘he’ [+masc]
ella ‘she’ [-masc]
4 Previous studies

- Abundant studies on the use of overt/null pronouns in Spanish L2 (e.g., Al-Kasey & Pérez-Leroux, 1998; Liceras, 1989; Pérez-Leroux & Glass, 1997, 1999; Phinney, 1987; Roebuck et al, 1999) → findings: learners recognise from earliest stages that null pronouns are possible in Spanish.
- However, very little on OPC and Topic/Focus constraints.

5 Subjects

- 3 groups:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control: Spanish natives (n=10)</th>
<th>L1 Spanish +pro-drop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental 1 English natives (n=22)</td>
<td>L1 English -pro-drop L2 Spanish +pro-drop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental 2 Greek natives (n=10)</td>
<td>L1 Greek +pro-drop L2 English -pro-drop L3 Spanish +pro-drop</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Learners: all advanced level; two standardised placement tests: one in Spanish (Wisconsin, 1998), another in English (Allan, 1992).

6 Predictions

- Syntactic transfer (both groups behave differently):

  L1 English L2 Spanish

  L1 Greek L2 English L3 Spanish

- Recall that previous studies on lexical transfer found that:

7 Method

- Grammaticality judgement test:

  The government has published a report about students’ financial situation. The report concludes that...
  (a) cada estudiante dice que él tiene poco dinero. -2 -1 0 +1 +2
  (b) cada estudiante dice que tiene poco dinero. -2 -1 0 +1 +2

- 2 different versions of the test: version 1, version 2. Order of presentation of items varies in each test to avoid presentational effects.

- Sentences were randomised following Cowart’s (1997) ‘blocking’ procedure.

8 Results

(see next page)
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**OPC**

- **Within group**: each grammatical vs ungrammatical condition is statistically significant for each group (p<0.05)
- **Between groups**:
  - **Grammatical** [QDPi ... NULLi] → no difference between groups (p>0.05)
  - **Ungrammatical** *[QDPi ... OVERTi] → between groups:
    - English ≠ Natives different (p=0.02)
    - Greek = Natives not different (p=0.82)

**Topic/Focus**

- **Within group**: each grammatical vs ungrammatical condition is statistically significant for each group (p<0.05)
- **Between groups**:
  - **Grammatical** [QDPi ... OVERTj] → no difference between groups (p>0.05)
  - **Ungrammatical** *[QDPi ... NULLj] → between groups:
    - English ≠ Natives different (p=0.02)
    - Greek = Natives not different (p=0.27)
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9 Conclusion

- Even though Greeks and English distinguish grammatical vs. ungrammatical constructions:
  (i) **Greek** speakers do not differ in their knowledge from Spanish natives. POSSIBLE REASON: L1→L3??
      Their knowledge could have been influenced by L2 Eng (they would have rejected less *QDPi … OVERTi )
  (ii) **English** speakers differ in their knowledge from Spanish natives. POSSIBLE REASON: L1→L2?? (Pérez-Leroux &

- **OPC→Poverty of stimulus:** OPC constructions are not…
  (i) instantiated in English.
  (ii) operative in the Spanish L2/L3 input.
  (iii) taught in class or explained in textbooks.

- **Top/Foc→Possible scenarios:**

  \[
  \begin{array}{ccc}
  \text{L1 English} & \text{L2 Spanish} \\
  \text{L1 Greek} & \text{L2 English} & \text{L3 Spanish}
  \end{array}
  \]

- **Feature underspecification** (English group)
  Focused context: Mr Lopez  Ms Garcia
  Target: *pro tiene dinero
          pro has money
          ‘he/she has money’

- **In line with Hawkins & Chan (1997):** L1 influence in L2 development:
  IF features L1≠L2
  THEN (i) constrained by UG
  (ii) divergent from natives
  IF features L1=L2
  THEN (i) constrained by UG
  (ii) native-like

- **Hawkins (2001:163):** “These findings are consistent with modulated structure building … learners first establish representations for local relations like head-complement selection and only subsequently for non-local relations… and that L1 influence occurs at points of development where the cognate property in the L2 emerges.”

- Learners (English group) show **divergent** mental representations (Sorace, 1993).
10 References