Explaining the ‘syntax-before-discourse’ phenomenon:
Pronominal subject distribution in L1 Greek – L2 Spanish

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1. The phenomenon

Observation: Syntax before Discourse.

- Syntax: native-like, early acquisition
- Discourse: deficits, residual deficits (optionality)
- Context: 2 properties of pro-drop parameter:
  - Null pronominal subjects
  - SV inversion

Pronominals:
- L1 Spa – L2 Greek: Lozano 2003
- L1 Eng – L2 Ital: Sorace & Filiaci 2006
- L1 Croat – L2 Ital: Kras 2006
- L1 Ital – L2 Spa: Bini 1993
- L1 Jap – L2 Eng: Polio 1995
- SV inversion:
  - L1 Spa – L2 English: Lozano 2006a, Hertel 2003
  - L1 Spa – L2 Greek: Lozano 2006b
  - L1 Ital – L2 Italian: Bellotti & Leoni 2004
  - L1 Quechua – L2 Spa: Camacho 1999

2. Explaining the causes

Representational deficits:
  - Underspecification of [+interpretable] features at syntax-discourse.
- Lozano (2006a, 2006b):
  - Underspecification of [-interpretable] features at syntax.

Processing deficits:
  - Language processor: deficits when processing syntax-discourse properties.

3. Anaphora resolution

Italian: Carminati 2002, 2005
Spanish: Alonso-Ovalle et al 2002
Also operational in other pro-drop langs: Croatian (Kras 2006), Romanian (Geber 2006).

Position of Antecedent Strategy (PAS)
- NULL: strong bias towards antecedent in SpecIP (subject position, topic).
- OVERT: biases towards antecedent in lower position (object position).

PAS → structural configuration guides language processor in choosing relevant antecedent.
4. Forward anaphora: PAS

- Overt ↔ antecedent lower position.
- Null ↔ antecedent in Spec,IP

El portero_i saluda al cartero_j mientras #él_i/pro_j abre la puerta

The porter greets the postman while he/pro opens the door

5. Position of Antecedent Strategy (PAS) and Avoid Miscommunication Principle (AMP)

- **Topic:**
  Aunque Antonio, gana mucho dinero, los vecinos creen que #él_i es pobre.
  Although Antonio earns a lot of money, the neighbours believe that he/pro is poor.
  - Observance of PAS: null selects subject in Spec,IP. [Structurally based]

- **Contrastive Focus:**
  Aunque Antonio, y María, ganan mucho dinero, los vecinos creen que #él_i/ella_j es pobre.
  Although Antonio and Maria earn a lot of money, the neighbours believe that he/she/pro is poor.
  - Apparent violation of PAS: overt has selected subject in Spec,IP
  - Observance of AMP: overt is required to avoid ambiguity. [Discursively based]

6. PAS at syntax-discourse interface

- PAS is at syntax-discourse interface (Sorace & Filiaci 2006) ➔ since violations of PAS and AMP lead to pragmatic anomaly BUT not ungrammaticality.

7. INTERMEDIATE SUMMARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic condition</th>
<th>Contrastive focus condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Processor can match correct antecedent: 
  -Observation of PAS (relaxed) |
| Processor can match correct antecedent: 
  -Observation of AMP |
| Processor cannot match antecedent due to ambiguity: 
  -Observation of PAS (very robust) |
| Processor cannot match antecedent due to ambiguity: 
  -Observation of AMP |

- Unambiguous. 
  -Observance of PAS.
- Ambiguous. 
  -Observance of AMP.
8. Spanish and Greek

**Topic condition:**

Aunque el profesor Antonio parece pobre, los estudiantes dicen que tiene mucho dinero.

Although professor Antonio appears to be poor, the students say that he/pro has a lot of money.

**Focus condition:**

Aunque el profesor Antonio y la profesora María parecen pobres, los estudiantes dicen que tiene mucho dinero.

Although professor Antonio and professor María appear to be poor, the students say that he/she/pro has a lot of money.


9. Previous studies: L2 Italian

- **Sorace & Filiaci (2006):** L1 Eng – L2 Ital (near-natives).
- **Kras (2006):** L1 Croat – L2 Ital (near-natives).

**Null subjects:**
- Near-natives = natives
  - Null refers to matrix subject in Spec,IP ➔ null encodes topic

**Overt subjects:**
- Near-natives ≠ natives
  - Overt refers to matrix object ... BUT...
  - Overt may refer to matrix subject (prag anomalous) ➔ violation of PAS ➔ overt incorrectly encodes topic

**Unidirectionality** of results (deficits with OVERT but not with NULL).

10. Previous studies: L2 Spanish

- **L1 Eng ➔ L2 Spa:**
  - Formal licensing properties in place from earlier stages.
  - Discursive properties are late-acquired or deficit.
  - **Unidirectionality** is the norm (overuse of overt), but **bidirectionality** also attested (overuse of overt AND overuse of null): Montrul & Rodriguez-Louro 2006, Perez-Leorux & Glass 1997

- **Attrition:** L2 Eng ➔ L2 Spa
  - Satterfield (2003): overuse of overt, correct use of null
    - “Cuando ellos vienen aquí, ellos lo pierden” [i.e., el español, su lengua]

11. This study: novelty

- **Previous studies:** L1 Eng ≠ L2 Spa
  - L1 Eng ≠ L2 Ital
  - This study: L1 Greek = L2 Spa

- Previous L2 studies: near-natives only
  - This study: developmental

- **Forward** anaphora only
  - To discard effects of antecedent position (forward vs. backward)

- **Antecedent:** subject in [Spec,IP]
  - To discard effects of antecedent position (subject vs object position).

- **Inter-sentential** anaphora (works identically to *intrasentential* anaphora, Alonso-Ovalle et al 2002).
12. Hypotheses

- **If representational account** is correct, then learners (all levels) = natives
  - since L1 Greek = L2 Spa.

- **If processing account** is correct, then learners ≠ natives
  - Residual deficits expected even at very advanced levels

13. Subjects

- Spa natives, n=12
- Learners: L1 Greek - L2 Spa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Proficiency range</th>
<th>Proficiency mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intermed</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>60-85%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low adv</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>96-91%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper adv</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>93-100%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

University of Wisconsin Placement Test

14. Stimuli

- Similar to previous examples (contrastive focus, topic).
- Paired acceptability judgement, e.g.:
  - Mi compañera María siempre saca buenas notas en los exámenes, por lo que...
    - (a) los profesores dicen que estudia mucho. -2 -1 0 +1 +2
    - (b) los profesores dicen que ella estudia mucho. -2 -1 0 +1 +2
- Design:
  - 6 topic, 6 focus, 12 distracters
  - Two versions of test, randomised.
  - Overt pronoun in sentence (a) 50% of the time (the same for null).
  - Vocabulary: taken from beginners’ textbook.

15. Result 1: Contrastive Focus condition

**CONCLUSION:**
- All learners obey PAS (overt>null)
- Between group differences (lower levels) strength of PAS develops with proficiency
- Upp-adv group show native-like behaviour...but is this so? (see next slide).

**SUMMARY:**
- Overt (contr focus)=native-like (upper-advanced).

**WITHIN-GROUP ANALYSIS:**
- ALL learners discriminate as natives do, preferring acceptable OVERT to unacceptable NULL.
- Discrimination intensity increases with proficiency towards the native norm.

**BETWEEN GROUP ANALYSIS:**
- OVERT: intermed=natives low-advanced=natives upper-advanced=natives NULL: upp-advanced=natives low-advanced=natives intermed=natives
**16. Result 2: Topic condition**

**CONCLUSION:**
- Learners: relaxation of PAS: #overt may select subject in Spec,IP → violation of PAS and AMP.
- Natives: slightly mild relaxation of PAS (very weak negative ratings... they should be stronger). See Alonso-Ovalle et al 2002.

**SUMMARY:**
- Null pronouns (topic): native-like.
- Overt pronouns: RESIDUAL deficits, they don’t consider it as redundant (advanced groups).

**WITHIN-GROUP ANALYSIS:**
- Except intermediates, all groups prefer null to overt, similarly to natives. BUT...

**BETWEEN GROUP ANALYSIS:**
- OVERT: upp-advanced≠natives NULL: upp-advanced=natives
  - low-advanced=natives
  - interm=natives


**17. Conclusion 1**

- **Representational deficits:**
  - In upper-advanced learners, overt pronoun is overspecified:
    - OVERT (él / ella) NULL (pro)
    - Spa natives [+Contrastive Focus] [+Topic]
    - Upper-adv learners [+Contrastive Focus] [+Topic]

- BUT: unexpected, since L1 Greek = L2 Spa:
  - Pronominal inventory in terms of discursive features [Contrastive Focus] / [Topic] encoded in overt / null
  - Kras (2006) results in the same line: L1 Croat = L2 Ital
  - Alternative explanation? Processing deficit


**18. Conclusion 2**

- **Processing deficit**
  - Upper-adv learners:
    - Deficits, relaxed PAS for overt (if redundant)
    - Overt may select antecedent in Spec,IP when no ambiguity → overt residually encodes topic
    - Native-like behaviour, strict PAS for null and overt (if ambiguous):
      - Null selects antecedent in Spec,IP → null encodes [topic]
      - Overt selects antecedent in Spec,IP if ambiguity → overt encodes [contrastive focus]

- Deficits are just RESIDUAL, as expected, otherwise native-like behaviour at very adv levels.

- Results seem to initially support Sorace and associates’ proposal: deficits with overt. --- tentative (but provisional) explanation.

**19. Conclusion 3**

- **“Syntax-before-Discourse” phenomenon:**
  - Deficits at the syntax-discourse interface (vulnerability)
  - Representational deficits (likely)
  - Processing deficits (more likely)

- Further questions:
  - Why overextension of null as well? (bidirectionality has been also attested in L2 Spa)
  - Why deficits affect processor rather than representations? Perhaps both, i.e., representations are faulty hence processor cannot perform effectively?
  - Preliminary evidence that discursive properties (like Focus) could be in place before their syntactic properties (WOSLAC research group at Univ Autónoma Madrid).

- Just the tip of the iceberg… More research needed!!!
Reference List


