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

2. Explaining the causes

1. Representational deficits:
     - Underspecification of [+interpretable] features at syntax-discourse.
   - Lozano (2006a, 2006b):
     - Underspecification of [-interpretable] features at syntax.
   - Müller & Hulk (2001):
     - Cross-linguistic influence, esp. (i) when the two langs’ property overlap, (ii) when the property constrained at syntax-discourse interface.

2. 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 languages like 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 saluda al cartero mientras él abre la puerta.
```

The porter greets the postman while he 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 es pobre.
  - Although Antonio earns a lot of money, the neighbors believe that he is poor.

- **Observance of PAS:** null selects subject in Spec, IP. [Structurally based]
- **Observance of AMP:** overt is required to avoid ambiguity. [Discursively based]

```
Aunque Antonio, y María, ganan mucho dinero, los vecinos creen que él / ella es pobre.
```

Although Antonio and Maria earn a lot of money, the neighbors believe that he/she is poor.

- **Contrastive Focus:**
  - Apparent violation of PAS: overt has selected subject in Spec, IP
  - Observance of AMP: overt is required to avoid ambiguity. [Discursively based]

6. Strength of PAS
- **Robust:**
  - 1. NULL selects antecedent in Spec, IP
  - 2. OVERT selects antecedent in lower position, BUT OVERT must select antecedent in Spec, IP iff ambiguity
  - [Avoid Miscommunication Principle]

- **Relaxed:**
  - 3. OVERT may select antecedent in Spec, IP if no ambiguity

```
Aunque Antonio, gana mucho dinero, los vecinos creen que él / ella es pobre.
```

Although Antonio earns a lot of money, the neighbors believe that he/she is poor.

```
Aunque Antonio, y María, ganan mucho dinero, los vecinos creen que él / ella es pobre.
```

Although Antonio and Maria earn a lot of money, the neighbors believe that he/she is poor.

7. PAS at syntax-discourse interface
- **WHY relaxation of PAS?**
  - Experimental evidence: overt selecting antecedent in Spec, IP → low processing cost (≈ traditional "redundancy")
  - Cost: NULL↔non-subject > OVERT↔subject

- Since relaxation (=violation) of PAS results in pragmatic anomaly but not ungrammaticality → PAS is at syntax-discourse interface (Sorace & Filiauci 2006).
8. INTERMEDIATE SUMMARY

Topic condition

- Unambiguous.
- Observance of PAS.

Contrastive focus condition

- Ambiguous.
- Observance of AMP.

9. Spanish and Greek

**Topic condition:**

Aunque el profesor Antonio, parece pobre, los estudiantes dicen que tiene mucho dinero. Al profesor él tienen mucha riqueza.

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

**Focus condition:**

Aunque el profesor Antonio y la profesora María parecen pobres, los estudiantes dicen que tienen mucho dinero. A la profesora ella tienen muchas riquezas.

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

8. INTERMEDIATE SUMMARY

9. Spanish and Greek

10. Previous studies: L2 Italian

- 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 ...
  - 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).

11. 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-Leoroux & 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]
12. Summary of L2 research

- Licensing mechanisms: OK
  - Narrow syntax

- Identification mechanisms: residual DEFICITS
  - Syntax-discourse interface

- Processing mechanisms: residual DEFICITS
  - Processor

13. 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 **intras**entential anaphora, Alonso-Ovalle et al 2002).

14. 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

15. 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>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interm</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
16. 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 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.

17. 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).

18. 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).

19. Conclusion 1

- Representative deficits:
  - In upper-advanced learners, overt pronoun is overspecified:

  - Spa natives
    - OVERT (él / ella) [+Contrastive Focus] [+Topic]
    - NULL (pro) [+Topic]

  - Upper-adv learners
    - OVERT (él / ella) [+Contrastive Focus] [+Topic]
    - NULL (pro) [+Topic]

- BUT: unexpected, since L1 Greek = L2 Spa:
  - pronoun 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
20. 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 high levels.

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

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21. 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!!!

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**Thank you!**
Backward anaphora

- Same behaviour as forward anaphora:
  - Overt = antecedent low position
  - Null = antecedent Spec,IP

*Mientras* \( \text{él}/\pro_{/i} \) abre la puerta, el portero, saluda al cartero.

While he/pro opens the door, the porter greets the postman
Overt Pronoun Constraint

![Graph showing mean acceptability rates for different groups (Gk interm, Gk low-adv, Gk upp-adv, Spa) with two lines representing #OVERT and NULL.]