Null Subjects and Reference

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Abstract

Null-subject languages track reference and discourse-pragmatic information (+/- Topic Shift) straightforwardly, exploiting the array of specialized forms provided by their grammar. So, for Italian Grimshaw & Samek-Lodovici (1998) claim that null subjects (NS) in Italian, as opposed to overt pronouns, must refer back to discourse topics. This correlation between form and interpretation seems to hold for Spanish as well, and in these two languages it is normally used as the baseline against which acquisition and contact varieties can be evaluated. However, empirical data show a different picture. A number of studies report that L1 speakers of Spanish do not perform at ceiling with respect to NS (Montrul 2004, Rothman 2009, Liceras et al. 2010). In other words, native speakers do use NS also in contexts where the topic is not maintained. These data question the empirical validity of the assumed baseline, particularly when the latter is used to determine the proficiency of speakers of different acquisition and contact varieties.

This paper presents the results of a study on the distribution and interpretation of overt and null 3rd person pronouns. 19 adults L1 Italian and 17 adults L1 Italian L2 Dutch were tested in a comprehension and a production task. The picture verification task (PVT), consisting of anaphora and cataphora with overt and NS, was chosen to test how these two groups deal with anaphora interpretation in ambiguous contexts. This task forces the reader to resolve ambiguity by indicating which pictures best depicts the intended interpretation. As shown in (1), both the control and the experimental group chose for about 30% of the times for the object of the main clause as antecedent of the subject in the embedded clause. This means that they interpreted the NS as referring to a shifted/new topic.

A PVT, however, does not offer any contextual information that may help recovering the correct antecedent. Therefore subjects were also asked to tell a Frog Story. This production task tests discourse-pragmatic strategies in (semi)-spontaneous speech. In this test ambiguity and redundancy can be avoided, on the assumption that the speaker chooses discourse-appropriate forms. Moreover, narratives force speakers to keep track of the discourse-pragmatic role of the referents introduced into the conversation, what may shed light on how discourse is constructed. Two more experimental groups were added: 10 Italian/Dutch bilingual children (age 4-11), and 10 adults Dutch L1 Italian L2 (in progress). The analysis (form vs. interpretation) of the results of this task shows that when the Topic is new, an overt form is used; when the Topic does not change, a null pronoun is used almost 100% of the times. Finally, when an old Topic is re-introduced, various forms are used, among which a NS (30%). No quantitative differences were found between the control group, the Italian L1 Dutch L2 group, the more advanced Dutch L1 Italian L2, and the older Italian/Dutch bilingual children (confirming Liceras et al.’s (2010) findings for Spanish). Summing up, both in Italian L1 and in its contact and learning varieties, NS can show up in contexts where a previously introduced Topic becomes again prominent. These NS are not ambiguous. A qualitative analysis revealed that their antecedent is recovered by exploiting
contextual cues, such as verbal agreement, or the semantics of a lexical verb (Orsolini et al. 1996). These data provide a novel picture of the use of subjects in Italian and reveal different strategies for anaphora resolution. From a representational perspective, it will be suggested that: the choice among these strategies is determined by economy on derivations. The lack of interference between L1 and L2 is explained in terms of feature specification.
1. Percentages of antecedent choice for both experimental and control group in PVT.

![Bar chart showing antecedent choice percentages for both groups.](image)

2. Examples of non-ambiguous NS in elicited narratives.

A un certo punto il bambino col cane si svegliano e cercano il ranocchio. Cos’è successo? Il ranocchio non c’è più dentro il vaso, è scappato. E quindi si mettono alla ricerca del ranocchio.

‘At a certain point the boy with the dog wake up and Ø look for the frog. What happened? The frog is no longer in the jar, Ø is gone. So Ø start looking for him.’

[[the boy with the dog], wake up] [pro, look for [the frog],] [[the frog], is ...] [pro, is gone] [pro, start looking ...]

Selected references

