

Overt and Null Subjects in a Pro-drop Language: A View from the Acquisition of Bulgarian

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Introduction

The study investigates the use of overt and null subjects in the oral narratives of children speaking Bulgarian as L1, either as their only language or as their dominant language with German as the other language. Bulgarian is pro-drop or a consistent null subject language (Genevska-Hanke 2019). In such languages, the alternation of overt and null pronominal subjects is dependent on both grammatical and discourse conditions so that null subjects are typically used in contexts of topic-continuity, while overt subjects are associated with topic-shift or focus (e.g. Sorace 2005). The alternation of overt and null subjects is dependent on cross-linguistic microvariation, acquired overall late in L1 acquisition (syntactic aspects are early, Belletti & Guasti 2015, discourse aspects not fully in place by age 15, Shin & Cairns 2009) and vulnerable in bilingual/L2 development and L1 attrition. Overt and null subjects are generally well-studied, see Paradis & Navarro (2003) or Kupersmitt & Berman (2001) and Serratrice (2007) who found similar use of pronominal subjects for referencing in elicited narratives in bilingual and monolingual children.

Theoretical Background

- both Bulgarian and German are null subject languages, but only Bulgarian is pro-drop (Roberts & Holmberg 2010, Bojadzjev et al. 1999, Genevska-Hanke 2019)
- overt vs. null subject alternation of referential subjects in pro-drop languages is not exclusively grammatically-driven but discourse-dependent (syntax-discourse interface conditions)
- overt referential subjects are typically used in focal and topic-shift (TS) contexts vs. null referential subjects are generally associated with topic-continuity (TC), compare the Italian examples:
 - (1) Il professore_i ha parlato dopo che lui_{i/j} è arrivato.
the professor has spoken after he is arrived
'The professor started speaking after he arrived.'
 - (2) Il professore_i ha parlato dopo che *pro*_{i/j} è arrivato.
the professor has spoken after is arrived
'The professor started speaking after he arrived.'
- cross-linguistic microvariation among consistent null subject languages attested recently so that Italian and Greek more strict in the licensing of overt subjects in topic continuity, while Spanish and Bulgarian more liberal (Filiaci 2013, Di Domenico & Baroncini 2018, Genevska-Hanke 2019)

Table 1 Participants

groups	N	age in years	N of narratives
bilinguals	10	4-8 (mean 5.8)	20
child monolinguals	10	4-10 (mean 7.2)	20
adult monolinguals	10	19-65 (mean 42)	10

Study: Overt and Null Subjects in Acquisition (MAIN Narratives)

- questionnaire on language background (Questionnaire for Parents of Bilingual Children, PaBiQ, Tuller 2015)
- language dominance index (LDI) calculated on the basis of patterns of input and use over the lifespan – 9 children considered Bulgarian-dominant (LDI range – 7 to – 24,5), 1 German-dominant (LDI= +14)
- Method: elicitation of narratives, retelling and telling of MAIN picture material (Gagarina et al. 2012) in the case of the children and telling only for the adults

Results and Discussion

Graph 1 Lexical DPs, overt and null pronouns

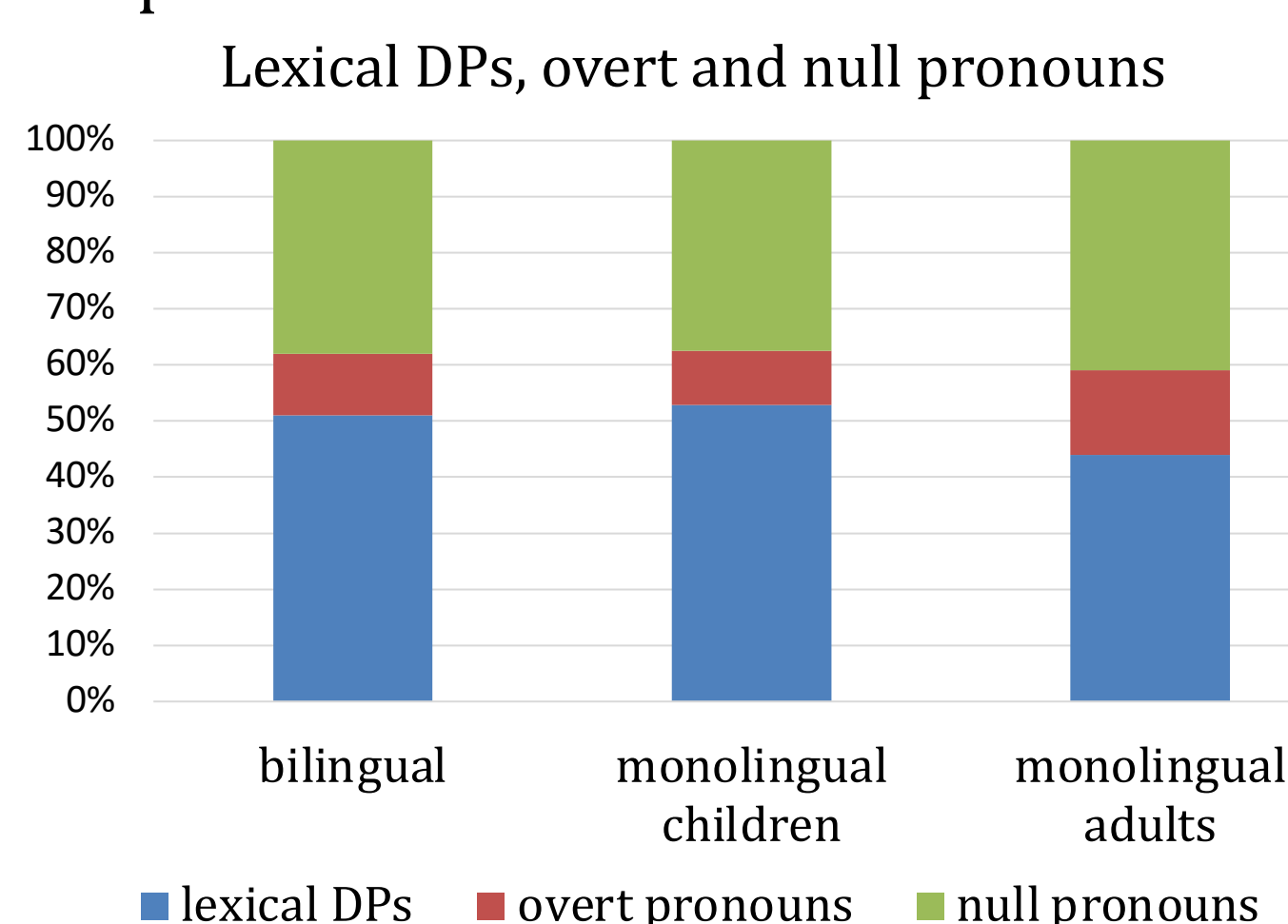
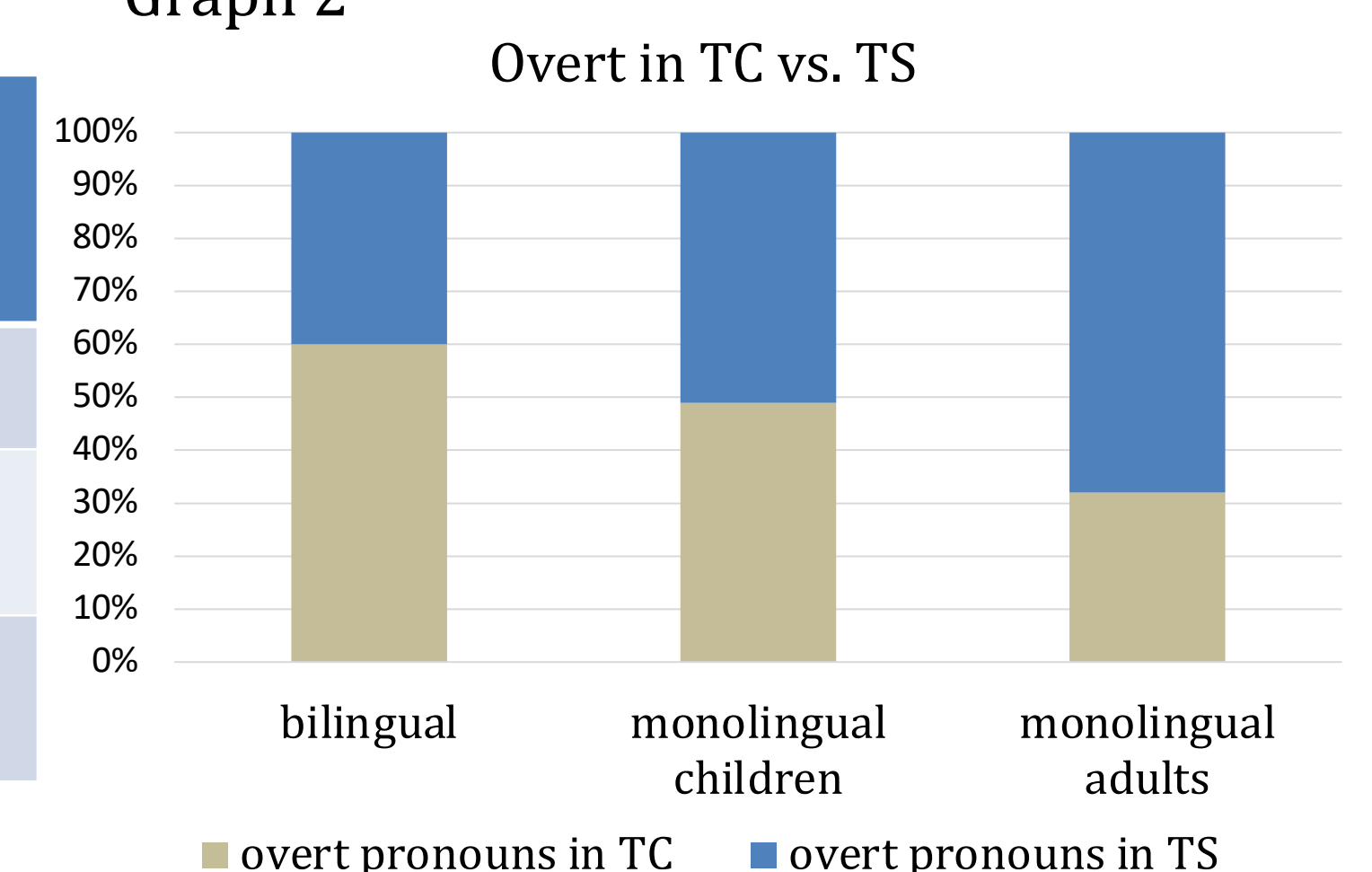


Table 2

groups	NS (ambiguous)	NS pros	OS (pronominal)	OS 3P (pronominal)	OS 3P TC (pronominal)	OS (ambiguous)
bilinguals	36 (28%)	131	37	35	21 (60%)	13 (37%)
child monolinguals	4 (3%)	123	35	35	17 (49%)	10 (29%)
adult monolinguals	3 (4%)	84	30	22	7 (32%)	3 (10%)

Graph 2 Overt in TC vs. TS



- overall, all three groups of speakers use lexical DPs as well as overt and null pronominal subjects to a comparable extent (graph 1, MANOVA, ns, for lexical DPs, $p = 0.191$, overt subjects, $p = 0.612$, and null subjects, $p = 0.558$)
- as to the overt subjects used in TC, these make up 32% of the overt subjects used by the adult monolinguals (table 2, graph 2)
- both groups of children used more overt subjects in TC in comparison to the adults (60% for the bilingual children vs. 49% for the monolingual children) but the difference is best described as a tendency since it did not reach statistical significance (Kruskal-Wallis test, ns, $p = 0.631$)
- (3) illustrates the use of an overt subject in a TC context (the pronoun 'toj' has the same reference as the preceding DP 'Džak' and there is no intervening character activity between the two)
 - (3) Džak loveshe riba nablizo. Dovoleno ot ulova si, toj tákmo se kaneše da se pribira kám káshti kogato *pro* vidja tsjalata slučka s Tom.
Jack catch.PST.3.SG fish nearby Pleased from catch his he just RFL prepare.PST.3.SG to RFL go to home when (he) see.PST.3.SG whole.the happening with Tom.
'Jack was fishing nearby. Pleased with his catch, he was just getting ready to go home, when he saw what happened with Tom.'
- ambiguous overt subjects (table 2) were used to a higher extent by the children, both monolingual (29%) and bilingual (37%), compared to the adults (10%) but this tendency was also non-significant so that performance was overall comparable (Kruskal-Wallis test, ns, $p = 0.622$)
- all groups used some ambiguous null subjects (table 2) but while this was rarely the case in the monolinguals (3%-4%), the bilinguals used them to a higher extent (28%, difference non-significant, Kruskal-Wallis, $p = 0.099$), which might be attributed to influence from German
- ambiguous null subjects have been reported for 10-year old Italian monolinguals, in cases where reference was rather clear, that of the main character or could be deduced from gender information or semantics (Orsolini et al. 1996) and for child heritage speakers alongside with ambiguous overt subjects (Montrul 2018)
- taken together, the findings reveal similar performance for children and adults, corroborating Paradis & Navarro (2003), Kupersmitt & Berman (2001) and Serratrice (2007) but a slight developmental delay is possibly at work, in line with the previous results of Shin & Cairns (2009) for Spanish monolinguals and those of Paradis & Navarro (2003), Serratrice et al. (2004), Kaltsa et al. (2015) and Montrul (2018) for bilinguals, different processing for children (Avrutin 1999) and assumptions on timing in acquisition (Tsimpli 2014)
- the fact that the use of illicit pronominal subjects is a feature of adult grammars is particularly revealing as to the gradient nature of the phenomenon
- language dominance (in a fixed dominance relation) can be regarded as the source of the similar performance of the bilinguals in comparison to the monolinguals (Bulgarian was the dominant language of nine of the ten bilinguals), which is in-line with results on the impact of language dominance for null subjects previously reported for null subjects by Di Domenico & Baroncini (2018) and for overt subjects by Köpke & Genevska-Hanke (2018)

Conclusion

The results revealed that the grammatical and discourse constraints of the alternation of overt and null subjects were successfully acquired by the monolingual and Bulgarian-dominant bilingual children. As to the discourse constraints, some influence of development (different processing) with regard to the alternation of overt and null subjects as a very late acquired phenomenon was present but non-significant since the children's rates did not fully resemble the adults' rates.

Selected References

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