

**MICROVARIATION IN ANAPHORA RESOLUTION IN ROMANCE NULL
SUBJECT LANGUAGES:
DATA FROM L1 AND L2 SPEAKERS**

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Abstract

Most SLA studies have assumed that null subject Romance languages (NSRLs) behave alike in anaphora resolution: null subjects are associated with topic continuity, retrieving subject antecedents, whereas overt pronominal subjects tend to occur in topic shift contexts and retrieve non-subject antecedents in complex sentences (e.g., Carminati, 2002; Alonso-Ovalle et al., 2002). However, recent studies have found differences across NSRLs such as Italian and Spanish, particularly in the interpretation of overt pronouns (e.g., Filiaci, 2010; Filiaci, Sorace & Carreiras, 2014; Torregrossa, Andreou & Bongartz, 2020). Preferences in overt pronoun interpretation also seem to vary intralinguistically depending on the animacy of the antecedent (Cardinaletti & Starke, 1999; Morgado et al., 2018), but this factor has not been considered in L2 acquisition. These studies have mostly considered contexts with animate antecedents and have found that learners display persistent optionality regarding overt but not null subjects (e.g., Sorace, 2016).

We will start by reporting on a study that investigates the interpretation of overt and null pronominal subjects in European Portuguese (EP) (a language that has not been considered in the comparative studies conducted to date), Italian and Spanish, considering intrasentential contexts with the order Matrix – Subordinate and controlling for the animacy of the object antecedent. A total of 90 adult native speakers participated in the study: 30 speakers of EP, 30 of Italian, and 30 of Spanish. Each language group was administered two multiple-choice tasks (speeded and untimed), which crossed the following variables: ‘animacy of the matrix object’ ([+ human] vs. [- human]) and ‘type of pronominal embedded subject’ (overt vs. null). Our results show that there is microvariation in the resolution of overt pronominal subjects in EP, on the one hand, and in Italian and Spanish, on the other: the position of the antecedent is the most relevant factor in EP, whereas, in Italian and Spanish, the animacy of the antecedent is the preponderant factor. Moreover, our results reveal that the resolution of null subjects is an area of microvariation: the bias for subject antecedents is weaker in Italian and Spanish than in EP.

Our second study examines whether adult Italian and Spanish learners of L2 EP are sensitive to L1-L2 differences regarding the role of animacy and the strength of the subject antecedent bias in anaphora resolution. Participants were 69 L1-Italian and 42 L1-Spanish adult learners of L2 EP at three levels: upper-intermediate, advanced, and near-native. They were administered the same tasks as in the previous study. Results indicate that sensitivity to microvariation develops as L2 proficiency increases. However, learners' performance remains permanently unstable in the areas where the L1 and the L2 differ, thus challenging the idea that the L1 plays a minor role in anaphora resolution.

Finally, we will also present the preliminary results of a corpus study based on the L1-EP/L2 Spanish data from CEDEL2 (upper intermediate, lower, and upper advanced), where we analyse the written production of 3rd person referring expressions in subject position (null subject, overt pronoun, and full DP), using a tagset implemented in the UAM Corpus Tool (O'Donnell, 2009). Learner data will be compared to two types of control subcorpora: a native subcorpus of EP, to analyse possible L1 transfer effects, and a native subcorpus of Spanish, to determine whether learners' performance is native-like.

Keywords: anaphora resolution, subjects, animacy, L2 acquisition, European Portuguese, Spanish, Italian

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