Overt subject pronouns in Italian: Comparing natives, bilinguals and L2ers

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1. Background. In a null-subject language like Italian, a division of labor is assumed between null and overt subject pronouns, the latter being the option in case of topic shift or focalization (Calabrese 1986, Cardinaletti 2004, Frascarelli 2007 a.o.). Experimental work on various populations of near-natives of Italian has brought to light an overuse of overt subject pronouns, as well as an over- acceptance of overt subject pronouns in coreference with a topical antecedent. This is so in the case of English-Italian attrited speakers (Tsimpli et al. 2004) and L2ers of Italian with English as an L1 (Sorace and Filiaci 2006, Belletti, Bennati and Sorace 2007). Sorace et al. (2009), furthermore, found similar results (in comprehension) in young bilinguals of two null-subject languages (Italian and Spanish). This result paved the way to the hypothesis that the overuse/over-acceptance of overt subjects may not be the result of cross-linguistic influence from the other language in the speakers’ mind (as in the case of English), but rather an acquisitional strategy. Results by Filiaci, Sorace and Carreiras (2013), however, showed that in Spanish, contrary to Italian, overt pronouns appear indeed to be compatible with a topical antecedent, suggesting that the findings in Sorace et al. (2009) as well could be due to cross-linguistic influence (F,S&C 2013:17). In order to establish whether the overuse/over-acceptance of overt pronouns is an acquisitional strategy for near-natives, a language combination where no cross-linguistic influence is expected should be employed. In this work we present two production studies. In the Preliminary Study, comparing Greek native speakers and Italian native speakers, we show that Italian and Greek are comparable languages as far as the production of overt subject pronouns is concerned; in the Main Study we analyze the productions of two groups of Greek/Italian near-natives differing only with respect to Age of Onset of exposure to Italian (bilinguals and L2ers) showing that L2ers, but not bilinguals, use significantly more overt pronouns than native speakers.

2. The Preliminary Study. 16 subjects participated in the Preliminary Study: 8 Greek monolinguals (mean age 39; 2 M and 6 F) and 8 Italian monolinguals (mean age 30; 4 M and 4 F). Subjects had to watch a short silent movie (The Pear Film) and then tell the story. Subjects’ productions were recorded and then transcribed using the CLAN system and following the CHAT conventions (CHILDES, Mac Whinney, 2000). Results: Given the nature of the task, we found a great variety of clausal structures, as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, for a total of 468 sentences in the Greek Corpus and 556 sentences in the Italian Corpus:

After taking out of the Corpus the sentences in which a subject Discourse Referent was introduced for the first time or referred to the narrator, we kept in the computation only the clausal types in
which a true choice between a lexical or pronominal (null or overt) subject is syntactically possible: finite and copular sentences, non-subject relatives, non-subject clefts. This leaves us with the Reference Total (283 s. for Greek and 342 s. for Italian natives), on which we counted the various resumption types. As shown in Table 1, no significant difference is found between the two groups:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>pro</th>
<th>lexical DP</th>
<th>overt pr</th>
<th>other</th>
<th>overt pr + other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gr. Natives</td>
<td>196/283 (69%)</td>
<td>63/283 (22%)</td>
<td>11/283 (4%)</td>
<td>13/283 (5%)</td>
<td>24/283 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It. Natives</td>
<td>235/342 (69%)</td>
<td>79/342 (23%)</td>
<td>22/342 (6%)</td>
<td>6/342 (2%)</td>
<td>28/342 (8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. The Main Study: 16 subjects (plus a Control group, i.e. the Italian natives of the Preliminary Study) participated in this study: 8 Italian – Greek bilinguals from birth, and 8 L2ers (with post-puberty, >15, Age of Onset of exposure) of Italian with L1 Greek. Their near-nativeness in Italian was tested through an adaptation of White and Genesee’s (1996) test, and was attested on the same value for both groups (mean: 9/10; range: 8.5-9.3). The procedure was the same employed in the Preliminary Study. From a corpus of 352 sentences for the bilinguals group and 385 for the L2ers group, we extracted a Reference Total of 200 sentences for the bilinguals group and 211 for the L2ers group. Results (Figure 3; Table 2) clearly show that L2ers, but not bilinguals, use significantly more overt pronouns than controls. Results also show that the significantly higher use of overt pronouns in L2ers is possibly related to their lesser use of pro, given the significant difference in this respect when compared to Controls:

Figure 3

4. Conclusions. While cross-linguistic influence seems to spread over different populations of near-natives, when no cross-linguistic influence occurs/may occur, a difference between L1ers and L2ers emerges: overt pronouns represent an acquisitional strategy only in the case of post-puberty Age of Onset of exposure.