

## **Acquisition of L2 French object pronouns by advanced Anglophone learners**

Object clitics in Romance are late learned in L1A (Schmitz & Müller) and represent persistent problems for L2 learners (Arche & Dominguez) and impaired L1 populations (Rossi). French object clitics are prosodically, morphosyntactically and semantically deficient (Cardinaletti & Starke, Franks), whereas English object pronouns are comparable to lexical DPs in these areas. Under a minimalist account, uninterpretable features of functional categories drive syntax, so one crucial question is whether L2 learners can fully acquire features that are absent or different from their L1 system (Arche & Dominguez), and another is whether L1 prosodic transfer hinders L2 mastery (Goad & White). This study examines the acquisition of L2 French pronouns by advanced Anglophone learners, using production and grammaticality judgement task data.

In minimalist terms, English and French differ parametrically in the value of features in DP and their morphosyntactic spell-out. Roberts analyzes French clitics as “simultaneously maximal and minimal elements”, feature bundles in D (number, gender, person, case) whose defective nature requires that they cliticize to an inflected verb or infinitive instead of remaining in situ (1), whereas English pronouns resemble lexical DPs (2). The differences between English and French object pronouns include: placement (cliticization); morphological features (gender, number, person, case); and also prosodic structure (prosodic words in English (3a) vs. free clitics left adjoined to the verb in French (3b) (Goad & Buckley, Astésano & Bertrand)). The Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis (PTH, Goad & White) argues that learners have difficulty with L2 prosody distinct from that of the L1, but proposes that target prosody can be built when L1 structures are licensed in new positions (“minimal adaptation”).

Studies of beginning learners of L2 French indicate frequent errors of in situ placement of strong and clitic pronouns (Herschensohn), but as learners advance in proficiency they show more native-like command of pronouns (Cuza et al.; Sneed et al.). This paper presents data to argue that advanced Anglophone learners of L2 French master morphosyntactic and prosodic differences to gain native-like French settings.

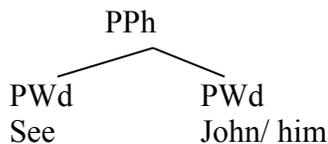
We present new evidence from three interviews each with three advanced adult learners (total 17,000 word count, 500 pronouns) and grammaticality judgments that show accuracy at 99% for both morphological form and placement. All pronouns are attested and correctly cliticized to tensed verbs, auxiliaries and infinitives. Errors are all wrong case, not placement mistakes, while GJs are accurate but for three “not sure” responses from one subject. We infer that the learners’ grammars include correct French settings for both features and morphological forms. As for the PTH, at beginning and intermediate levels—despite the availability of leftward free clitics in both L1 and L2 DP (4)—learners are unable to adapt that structure to TP, persisting in GJ acceptance of in situ French pronouns (cf. Herschensohn, Sneed). We argue that at the advanced level learners attain the ability to adapt the DP structure of prosodic free clitics to the TP domain, supporting PTH. This analysis adopts the concept of minimal adaptation of native prosodic structures to construct the new L2 ones, but demonstrates that the adaptation is not an immediate transfer. Rather, a certain threshold of proficiency must be reached before the prosodic adaptation may be implemented.

## Examples

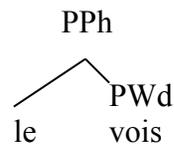
(1) Je le vois (Je vois Jean)

(2) I see him (I see John)

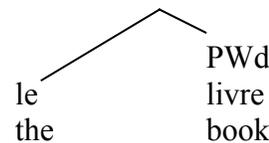
(3) English  
a)



French  
b)



(4) French/English  
PPh



## References

- Arche, M.J. & Domínguez, L. 2011. Morphology and syntax dissociation in SLA: evidence from L2 clitic acquisition in Spanish. In A. Galani, G. Tsoulas and G. Hicks (eds) *Morphology and its Interfaces*, 291-320. J. Benjamins.
- Astésano, C. & Bertrand, R. 2016. Accentuation et niveaux de constituance en français: Enjeux phonologiques et psycholinguistiques. *Langue française* 191: 11-30.
- Cardinaletti, A., & Starke, M. 1999. The typology of structural deficiency: A case study of the three classes of pronouns. In H. Van Riemsdijk (ed), *Clitics in the Languages of Europe*, 145-233. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Cuza, A., Pérez-Leroux, A. T., & Sánchez, L. 2013. The role of semantic transfer in clitic drop among simultaneous and sequential Chinese-Spanish bilinguals. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 35, 93-125.
- Franks, S. 2016. Clitics are/become minimal(ist). In Marusic & Zaucar (eds) *Formal Studies in Slovenian Syntax*, 91-128. J. Benjamins.
- Goad, H. & Buckley, M. 2006. Prosodic structure in child French: evidence for the foot. *Catalan Journal of Linguistics* 5.
- Goad, H. & White, L. 2006. Ultimate attainment in interlanguage grammars: a prosodic approach. *Second Language Research* 22, 243-268.
- Herschensohn, J. 2004. Functional categories and the acquisition of object clitics in L2 French. In Prévost, P. & Paradis, J. (eds), *The Acquisition of French in Different Contexts: Focus on functional categories*, 207-242. J. Benjamins.
- Roberts, I. 2010. *Agreement and Head Movement: Clitics, incorporation and defective goals*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Rossi, E. 2013. Modulating the sensitivity to syntactic factors in production: Evidence from syntactic priming in agrammatism. *Applied Psycholinguistics*
- Schmitz, K. & Müller, N. 2008. Strong and clitic pronouns in monolingual and bilingual acquisition of French and Italian. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 11: 19-41.
- Sneed German, E., Herschensohn, J. & Frenck-Mestre, C. 2015. Pronoun processing in Anglophone late L2 learners of French: behavioral and ERP evidence. *Journal of Neurolinguistics* 34, 15-40.