

The Age of Onset of exposure factor: On a difference between Greek- Italian 2L1 and L2 near- natives compared to controls in the production of null and overt subject pronouns in Italian.

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 subjects in coreference with a topical antecedent. This is so in case of English-Italian attrited speakers (Tsimpli *et al.* 2004, Sorace and Filiaci 2006) and L2ers of Italian with English as an L1 (Belletti, Bennati and Sorace 2007). Sorace *et al.* (2009), furthermore, found similar results (in comprehension) in young Italian /Spanish bilinguals from birth. This is an interesting result, Spanish being, as Italian, a null subject language, which paves 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 (default) 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) could be due to cross- linguistic influence (F,S&C 2013:17). Overuse of overt pronouns in near – natives of Italian appears thus as the result of cross - linguistic influence, and this is seemingly so regardless of the specific near –native population involved.

In this work we collected data from two groups of adult near- natives of Italian with Greek as the other language, differing only with respect to Age of Onset of exposure: 8 Italian –Greek bilinguals from birth, and 8 L2ers (with post-puberty Age of Onset of exposure) of Italian with Greek as an L1. Their near-nativeness in Italian was tested through an adaptation of White and Genesee's (1996) test, and was found attested on the same value for both groups (mean: 9/10; range: 8.5- 9.3). Subjects were administered an elicited production task: they had to watch a short silent movie and then tell the story. Subjects' productions were recorded and then transcribed using the CLAN system and following the CHAT conventions (CHILDES, Mac Whinney 2002). From the overall total of sentences we took off the first mention of subject discourse referents, and the remaining typology of resumptions was then counted and analyzed. A Preliminary Study, comparing a control group of monolingual Greek and a control group of monolingual Italian speakers, with the same procedure described above, revealed no significant difference between the two language groups in the use of overt pronouns (see Table 1), so no cross-linguistic- influence- related effect was expected in the Italian of the experimental subjects. We then compared the results of the two experimental groups with the productions of the group of 8 monolingual native speakers of Italian (Preliminary Study). Though overt pronouns represent a marked option in all groups (see Figure 1), results (see Table 2 and Table 3) revealed a statistically highly significant difference in the use of null and overt pronouns between L2ers and controls, but no difference between 2L1ers and controls: L2ers (but not 2L1ers) use significantly more overt pronouns (and significantly less null pronouns) compared to controls.

Interpreting the results also in relation to the above quoted literature, we may interestingly conclude that although cross- linguistic influence seems to spread over different populations of near- natives (English/Italian attrited speakers and L2ers, Spanish/Italian simultaneous bilinguals), when no cross-linguistic influence occurs/may occur, a difference between 2L1ers and L2ers emerges: overt pronouns represent an acquisitional strategy only in the case of post-puberty Age of Onset of exposure.

Table 1. Preliminary Study: overt pronouns

	Total resumptions	overt pronouns (rough numbers)	overt pronouns (%)
Monolingual Greek	311	11	4%
Monolingual Italian	395	17	4%

We found no statistically significant difference between MG and MI ($X^2=0.2686$; with Yates correction $X^2=0.1050$; non- significant)

Table 2. AoO Study - Null subjects

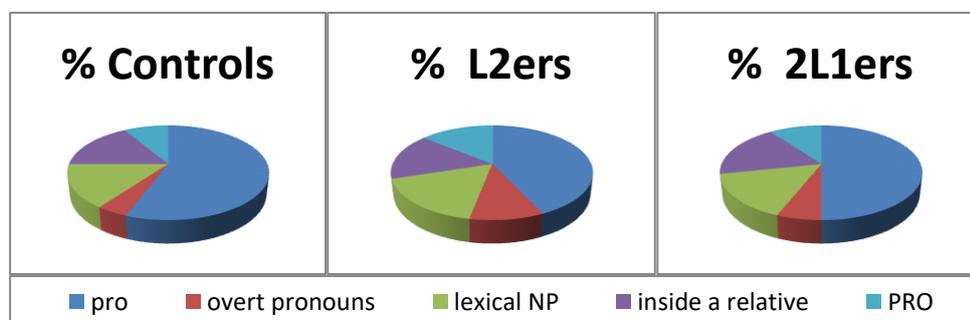
	Total resumptions	<i>pro</i> (rough numbers)	<i>pro</i> (%)
Controls	395	220	56%
2L1ers	250	125	50%
L2ers	280	121	43%

We found a statistically significant difference between Controls and L2ers ($X^2=10.2122/p=.05$, significant also at .01 and .005).

Table 3. AoO Study- Overt pronouns

	Total resumptions	overt pronouns (rough numbers)	overt pronouns (%)
Controls	395	17	4%
2L1	250	15	6%
L2	280	28	10%

We found a statistically significant difference between Controls and L2ers ($X^2=8.5443/p=.05$; with Yates correction $X^2=7.6534/p=.05$ significant also at .01)

Figure 1.

References

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