

When more is less: (over)use of pronominal forms in L2 acquisition.

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ABSTRACT

In this work we will present an overview of different studies facing the intriguing issue of subject pronoun use in L2 acquisition and we will attempt to give a unified account for the reported results. The use of overt subject pronouns in null subject languages (such as Italian and Spanish) and in partial null subject languages (such as Finnish) is regulated by subtle properties that involve both discourse and syntax. Several studies in the last decade have reported difficulties for L2ers in the acquisition of these properties at the syntax-discourse interface.

We will discuss the L2 data extending to L2 acquisition the assumption first presented in Platzack (1999, 2001) and further elaborated in Hulk & Muller (2000) and Muller and Hulk (2001) following which the C domain is the more vulnerable domain as it is an interface level connecting internal grammar and other cognitive systems, namely syntax and pragmatics/discourse. Hulk & Muller (2000) further assume that in bilingual language acquisition crosslinguistic influence can take place at the interface of two modules in the C-domain whenever there is overlapping of a structure in the two languages at the surface level. Hence, it follows that for L2ers of a null subject language there can be overlapping in the domain of the pronominal system resulting in the extension of overt pronouns in the L2. Comparing independent studies the postulation appears to be true independently from the status of the L1 as for the pro-drop parameter (null subject language, partial null subject language, non null subject language), a fact that puts under discussion the role of transfer and crosslinguistic influence in the acquisition of the discourse-syntactic properties involved in the use of pronominal forms. Data are presented from different studies on Italian L2 (Dal Pozzo 2012, 2015; Contemori, Dal Pozzo and Matteini 2015; Sorace, Serratrice, Filiaci and Baldo 2009; Tsimpli, Sorace, Filiaci and Heycock 2004 on attrition effects, a.o.) and Finnish L2 (Dal Pozzo 2015) showing that L2 learners generally prefer overt pronominal forms to null ones as this is the option available in both languages.

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