

*Null/overt subject alternations in L2 Spanish and L2 Greek*

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The aim of this study is to explore the distribution of null/overt subjects, a widely studied phenomenon in the context of the Interface Hypothesis (IH). Sorace and colleagues (Sorace & Filiaci, 2006; Tsimpli & Sorace, 2006; Sorace, 2011, a.o.) claim that the phenomena that involve the integration of syntax with external modules such as pragmatics may not be fully acquirable in a second language. In order to test the validity of the IH, we examine the alternation of null/overt subjects in two null subject languages, Spanish and Greek. Here the aim is to observe if the L1-L2 null subject value enhances the L2 acquisition of this parameter, circumventing the effect of the pragmatic interface. Competence level is also taken into account to test if the increase in proficiency facilitates the acquisition of null subjects in L2 Spanish or L2 Greek, against (or not) the IH (Rothman & Slabakova, 2011; White 2011).

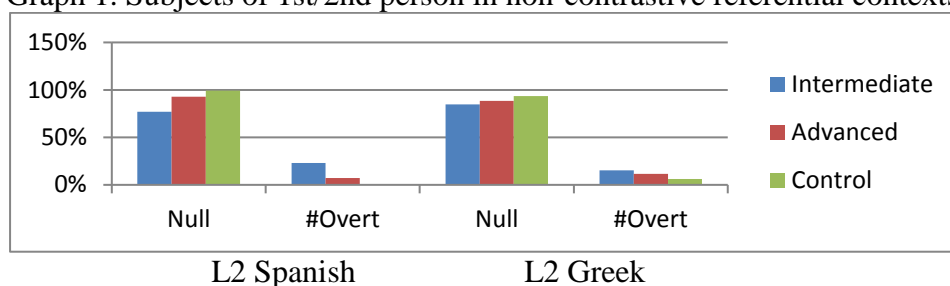
We designed and administered two multiple choice tasks, one in L2 Spanish and one in L2 Greek. Each task was run with 90 subjects, 30 intermediate and 30 advanced learners, and 30 native speakers. The conditions examined were: (i) null subjects of 1st/2nd person in non-contrastive contexts, (ii) null subjects of 3rd person in unambiguous shift contexts and (iii) overt subjects of 3rd person in contrastive shift contexts. Test items are exemplified in (1a), (2a) and (3a) for Spanish and (1b), (2b) and (3b) for Greek.

- (1) a. *El fin de semana e<sub>i</sub> doy<sub>i</sub> un paseo por el parque de la ciudad.*  
b. *To savatocirjako e<sub>i</sub> kano<sub>i</sub> mja volta sto parko tis polis.*  
the end of week give-1sg.prs. a walk by the park of the city.
- (2) a. *Juan<sub>i</sub> estudia para las oposiciones y sus amigos no creen que e<sub>i</sub> tenga<sub>i</sub> tiempo para tomar un café con ellos.*  
b. *O Janis<sub>i</sub> djavazi ja tis eksetasis ce i fili tu den pistevun oti e<sub>i</sub> exi<sub>i</sub> xrono ja na pji enan kafe mazi tus.*  
Juan/Janis-nom. studies-3sg.prs. for the exams and his friends-nom. do not think-3pl.prs. that has-3sg.prs. time-acc. to drink a coffee-acc. with them.
- (3) a. *Pese a que María<sub>i</sub> y Jorge fueron a la universidad, el profesor se enteró de que ella<sub>i</sub> no asistió a la clase de filosofía.*  
b. *An ce i María<sub>i</sub> ce o Jorgos pigan sto panepistimio, o kathijitis katalave oti afti<sub>i</sub> den parakoluthise to mathima tis filosofias.*  
although Maria-nom. and Jorge/Jorgos-nom. went-3pl.pst. to the university, the professor-nom. realized-3sg.pst. that she not attended-3sg.pst. the class of philosophy.

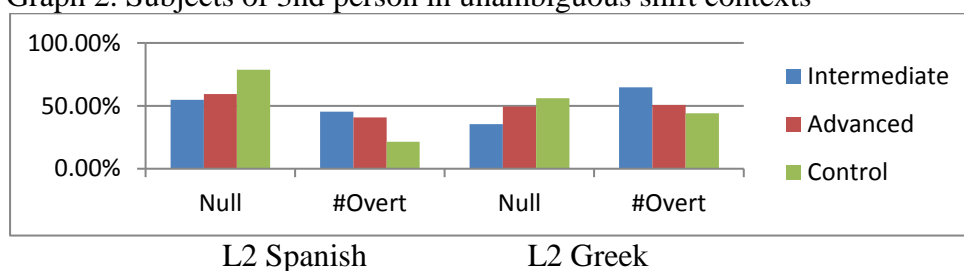
The results appear in Graphs 1-3. The three conditions involve the syntax-pragmatics interface and should, by hypothesis, give rise to problems of L2 acquisition. In the results, statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the native and the two experimental groups were found for non-contrastive subjects of 1st/2nd person in L2 Spanish, but not in L2 Greek ( $p > 0.05$ ). However, in both L2s the distribution of unambiguous subjects of 3rd person was significantly different for natives and both L2 groups ( $p < 0.05$ ) in the Kruskal-Wallis test. In the Mann-Whitney test it was significant for both intermediate-control and advanced-control groups in L2 Spanish, but only for the intermediate-control groups in L2 Greek. As for the distribution of

contrastive subjects of 3rd person, significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between natives and L2 groups were attested in L2 Spanish, but not in L2 Greek ( $p > 0.05$ ) in the Kruskal-Wallis test. Only in L2 Spanish the intermediate-control groups showed significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) in the Mann-Whitney test. Out of the three conditions, the IH was fulfilled in the first and second conditions for the two experimental groups in L2 Spanish, but only for the intermediate group in the second condition in L2 Greek. In the third condition the IH was fulfilled for the intermediate group in L2 Spanish, but not in L2 Greek. Therefore, the results were affected by the L2 (Spanish or Greek), and also by competence level, but the IH failed to predict the performance pattern of the L2 learners.

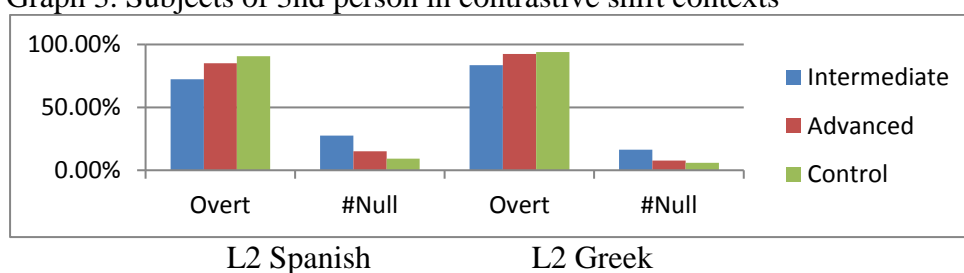
Graph 1. Subjects of 1st/2nd person in non-contrastive referential contexts



Graph 2. Subjects of 3rd person in unambiguous shift contexts



Graph 3. Subjects of 3rd person in contrastive shift contexts



#### Selected references

- Sorace, A. (2011). Pinning down the concept of “interface” in bilingualism. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 1 (1), 1–33.
- Sorace, A. & F. Filiaci (2006). Anaphora resolution in near-native speakers of Italian. *Second Language Research*, 22 (3), 339–368.
- Tsimpli, I. & A. Sorace (2006). Differentiating interfaces: L2 performance in syntax-semantics and syntax-discourse phenomena. *Proceedings of the 30th Annual Boston University Conference on Language Development* (653–664). Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press.