New factors in anaphora resolution: topic continuity in L1 English-L2 Spanish (CEDEL2 corpus)

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L1 English-L2 Spanish learners (even at very advanced stages) show deficits with anaphora resolution (AR) at the syntax-discourse interface. In particular, when compared to Spanish natives in topic-continuity contexts (TC), learners significantly produce infelicitous forms such as:

(i) redundant overt pronouns from the outset (Montrul & Rodríguez-Louro 2016; Rothman 2009; Lozano 2009), as in (1), though it is not entirely clear whether this could be due to L1 influence (since their L1 English is a non-null-subject language), or to a more general overspecification phenomenon in L2 acquisition (Hendriks 2013; Ryan 2015).

(ii) full Noun Phrases (NPs) (Lozano 2016), as in (2), whereas in native Spanish a null pronoun is expected to mark topic-continuity (3).

Unlike previous research, this paper focuses on the multiple factors constraining AR exclusively in TC contexts. The anaphoric forms produced were finely annotated with UAM Corpus Tool (Fig. 1) based on: 1) their pragmatic (in)felicity; 2) the syntactic patterns in which they occur (coordination vs. non-coordination); and 3) the chains created between the anaphoric form and their antecedent(s), a factor that has not been fully explored in previous studies. We tagged and analysed the written compositions of L1 English-L2 Spanish at 3 proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate, advanced/near-natives; N=57) and compared them against a Spanish native control subcorpus (N=20) from CEDEL2 (http://cedel2.learnercorpora.com). Additionally, some examples from near-natives were analysed qualitatively in order to explore other factors conditioning the overproduction of overt forms in comparison with natives.

Figure 1. Tagset (3rd person singular anaphoric forms tagged)

As in previous research, learners initially overspecify: they redundantly use overt forms (prouns, NPs) in contexts where null pronouns are pragmatically expected (Fig. 2). While their production of pragmatically adequate forms tends towards the native norm as proficiency increases (Fig. 3), native-like behaviour cannot be eventually attained at very advanced levels, thus supporting the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace & Filiaci 2006; Sorace 2011), which claims that at the syntax-discourse interface learners at the end state show residual deficits such as overuse of overt pronouns in null-subject L2s.


‘A famous person is Beyoncé Knowles. Beyoncé is very beautiful. She sings really well. She dances very well.’


‘John Lennon is a famous person. John was born in Liverpool, England, in 1940. John was dark-haired, tall’.
Additionally, the L1 was shown to be a modulating factor (Fig. 4): learners use felicitous null pronouns in syntactic coordination from early stages (see 4 and 5), which results in native-like behaviour (simply) because this is possible in their L1 English. By contrast, in non-coordinate contexts there is a gradual increase of null pronouns, which eventually approaches native levels in near-natives. This indicates that learners acquire the pragmatic rules of AR at the syntax-discourse interface as proficiency increases.

Finally, in topic chains, null antecedents are typically followed by null anaphors in native Spanish in line with previous research (Blackwell & Quesada 2012; Cameron & Flores-Ferrán 2004; Geeslin & Linford 2012), though our learners are sensitive to this with increasing proficiency.

In short, our corpus approach reveals facts about AR in TC contexts that have previously gone unnoticed in the L2 acquisition literature as well as some additional qualitative findings.

References

Figure 2. Referential forms in TC

Figure 3. Pragmatic (in)felicity

Figure 4. Null pronouns x syntactic pattern

(3) Chloe se enamora de Chris, Φ₁ le introduce en la empresa familiar y Φ₁ acaba casándose con él. [CEDEL2 L1Spa Native]
‘Chloe falls in love with Chris, (she) introduces him in the family business and (she) ends up marrying him’.

(4) Ella ha aparecido en muchas películas y Φ₁ ha registrado cuatro álbumes [CEDEL2 L1Eng-L2Spa Beginner]
‘She has appeared in many films and (she) has recorded four albums’

(5) Porque ella gasta tanto dinero, ella está en deuda y Φ₁ no puede pagar sus cuentas de tarjeta de crédito [CEDEL2 L1Eng-L2Spa Intermediate]
‘Because she spends a lot of money, (she) is in debt and (she) cannot pay her credit card bills’.