

# On the Acquisition of Weak Object Pronouns in German as L2

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper I will report on an experiment aimed at investigating the acquisition of weak object pronoun placement with respect to adverbs in German subordinate clauses by Adult Italian and English Native Speakers learning German as L2. Cardinaletti and Starke (1999) have provided strong evidence for the existence of three different classes of pronouns in human languages, which have been classified as clitic, weak and strong. Cross-linguistic differentiation is determined by the number of pronominal classes a particular language selects. The three languages under study here differ with respect to pronoun classes' selection. Whereas Italian displays all three classes of pronouns, German and English display only two of them, weak and strong. Choice of pronoun is guided by Minimize Structure, according to which a smaller structure is obligatorily chosen if possible: clitic ( $X^0$ ) < weak (deficient XP) < strong (non-deficient XP). Given an appropriate informational context a most reduced form is selected over its strong counterpart as exemplified in (1)-(3) for Italian, English and German respectively:

- (1) ITA. a. Question: Che cosa ha fatto Maria con il ragazzo?  
What has done Mary with the boy?  
"What has Mary done with the boy?"  
b. Expected answer: L' ha invitato  
Him<sub>CL</sub> has invited  
"(She) has invited him"  
c. Improper answer: \*Ha invitato LUI  
Has invited HIM<sub>STRONG</sub>  
"(She) has invited him"
- (2) ENG. a. Question: What did Mary do with the boy?  
b. Expected answer: She took him<sub>WEAK</sub> in  
c. Improper answer: \*She took in HIM<sub>STRONG</sub>
- (3) GER. a. Question: Was hat Marie gestern mit dem Mann gemacht?  
What has Mary yesterday with the man done?  
"What has Mary done with the man yesterday?"  
b. Expected answer: Ich glaube, dass sie ihn gestern eingeladen hat  
I think that she him<sub>WEAK</sub> yesterday invited has  
"I think that she has invited him yesterday"  
c. Improper answer: \*Ich glaube, dass sie gestern ihn eingeladen hat  
I think, that she yesterday HIM<sub>STRONG</sub> invited has  
"I think that she has invited him yesterday"

L2ers of German under investigation here are faced with a Target Language that much like English but unlike Italian does not distinguish morphologically between weak and strong pronouns. In fact, syntactic position of pronouns with respect to other elements of the clause, such as adverbs, disambiguates between the weak and strong reading (see example (3) above).

The following questions then arise: a) Will L2ers of German be able to distinguish between weak and strong position of the pronoun? b) Will L2ers of German with different L1s behave differently as for weak object pronoun placement is concerned? c) Are developmental patterns of acquisition to be observed, similarly to what has been found for the acquisition of cliticization in L2 French (Towell and Hawkins 1994; Granfeldt and Schlyter 2004), or is pronoun placement correctly placed from the earliest stages of acquisition, similarly to findings in L2 English (Zobl 1980)?

The paper is organized as follows: section 2 provides a description of the experimental design; section 3 supplies some information about the population taking part into the experiment; in section 4 data obtained from the experiment will be reported; section 5 concludes the paper.

## 2. Experimental design

An elicited production task was run in order to test the use and placement of weak object pronouns with respect to adverbs in German subordinate clauses, making use of the DMDX Version 3 (University of Arizona). Participants were required to listen to a statement (4) made by a girl (Lydia) and to answer the question (5) that was asked 500ms after the statement had been uttered. Both the statement and the question were orally and visually (in written form on the PC screen) presented. In order to answer the question, participants were instructed to use the complementizer ...dass introducing Verb final subordinate clauses in German that appeared on the PC screen immediately after the question had been asked (6). They were also instructed to pronominalize the object whenever they felt it natural.

- (4) Lydia:                   Ich trinke um 5.00 Uhr den Tee  
                                   I drink at 5.00 the tea  
                                   “I drink tea at 5.00”
- (5) Question:               Was hat Lydia über den Tee gesagt?  
                                   What has Lydia about the tea said?  
                                   “As for tea, what has Lydia said?”
- (6) a. Expected answer:   ...dass sie ihn um 5.00 Uhr trinkt  
                                   ...that she it at 5.00 drinks  
                                   “(She has said) that she drinks it at 5.00”
- b. Incorrect answer: \*...dass sie um 5.00 Uhr ihn trinkt  
                                   ...that she at 5.00 it drinks

Participants were given 8000ms to answer the question. 24 items were used (see Appendix A for a complete list of the items). Only inanimate object were used in this experiment. 34 fillers were also inserted. Some time before being tested participants were provided with a CD containing the audio files they were going to hear during the test, a written version of the sentences they were going to hear and their respective translation from German into their mother tongue in order to make sure they were able to understand the context they were presented with and their respective questions they were required to answer to.

## 3. Participants

L2 learners participating into the experiment were all students of German at intermediate (15 Italian and 5 English) and advanced (5 Italian and 4 English) level of proficiency. Their proficiency in German was classified on the basis of the Common European Framework of Reference for Language: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (CEFR). In particular, the intermediate L2ers were attending classes at B1/B2 level and the advanced ones at C1/C2 level. 12 Italian Intermediate L2ers were tested in Italy and hadn't had any exposure to the Target Language longer than 1 month. The other three had already spent three months in Germany at the time of testing. Speakers of the other groups were all tested in Germany and had already spent a minimum of three months in Germany. Participants' age ranged between 19 and 26 years old. They all had been learning German for one year at least. 12 German Native Speakers served as a control group.

## 4. Findings

As shown in Table 1 and Graph 1 Italian and English Native Speakers at different stages of acquisition behave alike with respect to pronoun placement in L2 German. In particular, both Italian and English Intermediate L2ers produce object pronoun post-adverbially at a higher rate, a position dedicated to strong pronominal forms in German. Indeed, 98 embedded clauses out of 168 (58%) for the Italian L2ers and 45 embedded clauses out of 82 (55%) for the English L2ers are non-target consistent, namely they are of the type exemplified in (6)b above.

By contrast, both Italian and English Advanced L2ers perform target-like most of the times: 69 subordinate clauses out of 95 (73%) for the Italian L2ers and 59 subordinate clauses out of 66 (89%) for the English L2ers are target-consistent, namely they are of the type exemplified in (6)a above.

I take this result as an indication that weak pronoun placement in L2 German does not depend on the source language. In fact, the two populations with different L1s as for the pronominal system is concerned perform similarly.

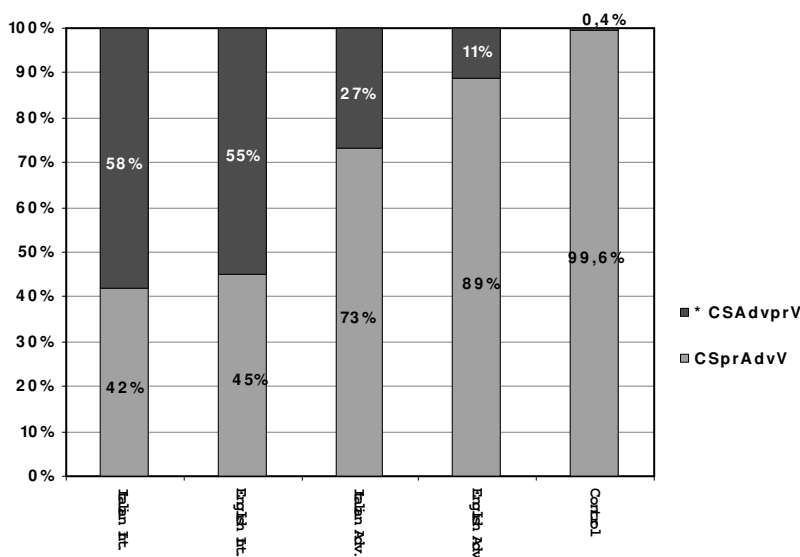
**Table 1: weak object pronoun placement in German subordinate clauses**

	Intermediate		Advanced		Control
	Italian	English	Italian	English	
<b>CSprAdvV</b>	42% (70/168)	45% (37/82)	73% (69/95)	89% (59/66)	99,6% (261/262)
<b>*CSAdvprV</b>	58% (98/168)	55% (45/82)	27% (26/95)	11% (7/66)	0,4% (1/262)

C = complementizer; S = subject; *pr* = pronoun; Adv = adverb; V = verb

Percentages calculated on the amount of full embedded clauses produced containing a pronoun

**Graph 1: Weak object pronoun placement in German subordinate clauses**



Moreover, a comparison between Intermediate and Advanced L2ers with the same L1 reveals that pronoun placement in L2 German proceeds through stages. Whereas Italian Intermediate L2ers produce non target consistent structures at a higher rate (58% of incorrect structures vs. 42% of correct structures), Italian Advanced L2ers perform target like most of the times (27% of incorrect structures vs. 73% of correct structures). The same pattern of acquisition is observable for the English groups: while production of incorrect answers exceeds production of correct answers for the group of the Intermediate L2ers (55% of incorrect answers vs. 45% of correct answers), the opposite is true for the group of the Advanced L2ers (11% of incorrect answers vs. 89% of correct answers).

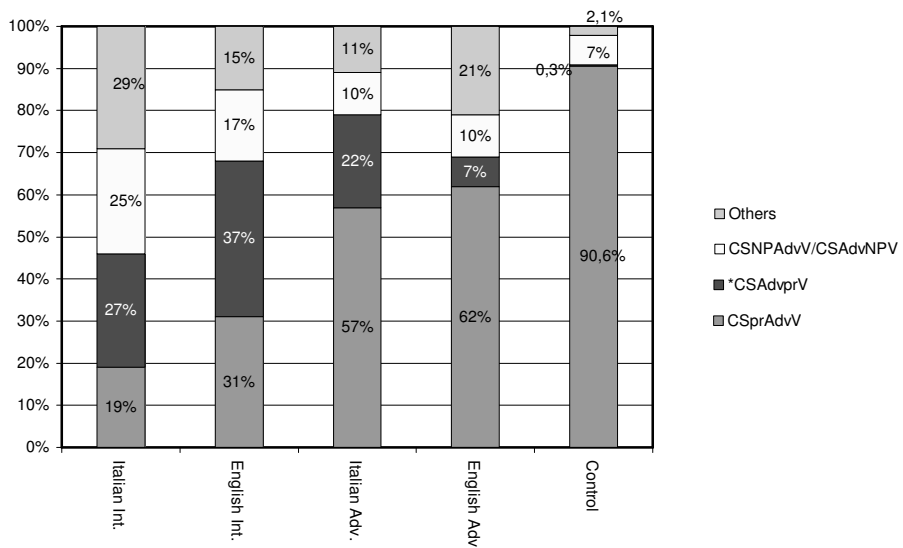
A further observation concerning the relationship between location of the pronominal object in the clause and realization of the object as a full lexical NP has to be made. As it can be observed in Table 2 and Graph 2 both Italian and English Intermediate L2ers that misplace the pronominal object at a higher rate in comparison to the more advanced, also realize the object as a full lexical NP at a higher rate than the Advanced L2ers. As for the Italian Intermediate L2ers object misplacement occurs at a rate of 27% and realization of the object as a full lexical NP at a rate of 25%; as for the Italian Advanced L2ers pronominal misplacement occurs at a rate of 22% and lexicalization of the object at a rate of 10%. The same pattern of acquisition occurs for the English L2ers. As for the Intermediate group, misplacement of the pronominal object occurs at a rate of 37% and realization of the object as a full lexical NP at a rate of 17%; as for the group of the Advanced L2ers pronominal misplacement occurs at a rate of 7% and realization of the object as a full lexical NP at a rate of 10%.

**Table 2: Use of pronouns and lexical NPs**

	Intermediate		Advanced		Control
	Italian	English	Italian	English	
<b>CSprAdvV</b>	19% (70/360)	31% (37/120)	57% (69/120)	62% (59/96)	90,6% (261/288)
<b>*CSAdvprV</b>	27% (98/360)	37% (45/120)	22% (26/120)	7% (7/96)	0,3% (1/288)
<b>CSNPAdvV/ CSAdvNPV</b>	25% (88/360)	17% (20/120)	10% (12/120)	10% (10/96)	7% (20/288)
<b>Others</b>	29% (104/360)	15% (18/120)	11% (13/120)	21% (20/96)	2,1% (6/288)

Percentages calculated on the total amount of answers expected

**Graph 2: Use of pronouns and lexical NPs**



I also consider this correlation between pronoun misplacement and realization of the object as a full lexical NP as an indication of stages of acquisition of pronoun placement. I interpret realization of the object as a full NP as an avoidance strategy (Belletti and Leonini 2003).

Since studies on the acquisition of cliticization have reported of a stage where L2ers omit the object pronoun (Towell and Hawkins 1994) and stages of acquisition have been found in the present study, I also had a look at object omission. As shown in Table 3 and Graph 3 object is omitted at a very low rate

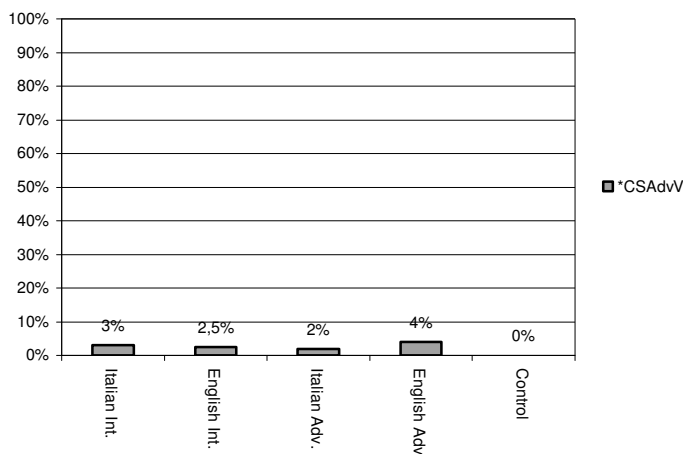
both at an Intermediate and Advanced level of the Target Language. For the time being I do not have an explanation for this phenomenon and I leave it for further research.

**Table 3: Object omission**

	Intermediate		Advanced		Control
	Italian	English	Italian	English	
*CSAdvV	3% (11/360)	2,5% (3/120)	2% (2/120)	4% (4/96)	0% (0/288)

Percentages calculated on the total amount of answers expected

**Graph 3: Object omission**



## 5. Conclusion

The present study on Adult L2 acquisition of weak object pronoun placement in German subordinate clauses by Italian and English Native Speakers has shown the following:

- i. weak object pronoun placement in German as L2 is not dependent on the L1. The two populations under study here with different L1s perform alike with respect to pronoun placement.
- ii. weak object pronoun placement proceeds through stages. At an Intermediate level of proficiency of the Target Language both Italian and English Native Speakers place object pronoun post-adverbially at a higher rate. By contrast, Advanced L2ers produce target consistent utterances most of the times.
- iii. a correlation has been found between object pronoun misplacement and realization of the object as a full lexical NP. The more the pronominal object is misplaced the higher the object is realized as a full lexical NP, as it has been observed for the Intermediate L2ers. Once weak pronoun is properly placed, production of full lexical NP also decreases.
- iv. realization of the object as a lexical NP has been interpreted as an avoidance strategy.
- v. object is omitted at a very low rate in all groups.

## 6. Appendix A: List of the items

1. Lydia says: Ich verkaufe bald die Wohnung  
Question: Was hat Lydia über die Wohnung gesagt?
2. Lydia says: Ich kaufe einmal in der Woche die Pizza.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über die Pizza gesagt?
3. Lydia says: Ich esse am Sonntagvormittag die Wurst.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über die Wurst gesagt?
4. Lydia says: Ich lese am Samstagabend die Zeitung.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über die Zeitung gesagt?

5. Lydia says: Ich putze jeden Montagnachmittag die Küche.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über die Küche gesagt?
6. Lydia says: Ich hole am frühen Morgen die Post.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über die Post gesagt?
7. Lydia says: Ich nehme jeden Abend die Schlaftablette.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über die Schlaftablette gesagt?
8. Lydia says: Ich trinke nach dem Essen die Limonade.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über die Limonade gesagt?
9. Lydia says: Ich trinke um fünf Uhr den Tee.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über den Tee gesagt?
10. Lydia says: Ich wasche alle drei Tage den Pullover.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über den Pullover gesagt?
11. Lydia says: Ich hole später den Computer  
Question: Was hat Lydia über den Pullover gesagt?
12. Lydia says: Ich lackiere alle zwei Jahre den Wagen.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über den Wagen gesagt?
13. Lydia says: Ich backe jedes Wochenende den Kuchen.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über den Kuchen gesagt?
14. Lydia says: Ich rezensiere am Abend den Artikel.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über den Artikel gesagt?
15. Lydia says: Ich benutze jeden Tag den Fahrstuhl.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über den Fahrstuhl gesagt?
16. Lydia says: Ich bügele am Wochenende den Rock.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über den Rock gesagt?
17. Lydia says: Ich renoviere nächstes Jahr das Haus.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über das Haus gesagt?
18. Lydia says: Ich organisiere am Sonntag das Fest.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über das Fest gesagt?
19. Lydia says: Ich mache um 8.00 Uhr das Frühstück  
Question: Was hat Lydia über das Frühstück gesagt?
20. Lydia says: Ich lese jeden Abend das Buch.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über das Buch gesagt?
21. Lydia says: Ich tapeziere am Dienstag das Apartment.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über das Apartment gesagt?
22. Lydia says: Ich übersetze in zwei Wochen das Buch.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über das Buch gesagt?
23. Lydia says: Ich fahre in der Nacht das Auto.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über das Auto gesagt?
24. Lydia says: Ich benutze dreimal in der Woche das Fahrrad.  
Question: Was hat Lydia über das Fahrrad gesagt?

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