

Null Subjects at the Syntax-Pragmatics Interface: Evidence from Spanish Interlanguage of Greek Speakers

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the acquisition of the Null Subject Parameter (Chomsky, 1981) in Spanish Interlanguage of Greek speakers and to investigate the syntactic and pragmatic use of null subjects at the syntax-pragmatics interface (Montrul, 2004; Serratrice, Sorace & Paoli, 2004; Sorace, 2003, 2004). In what follows, we will present an account of the Modular Approach (Bos, Hollebrandse & Sleeman, 2004) and the Null Subject Parameter, which has pragmatic consequences for Second Language Acquisition. Based upon research related to L2 acquisition of null subjects (Al Kasey & Pérez-Leroux, 1998; Licerias, 1988, 1989, 1996; Licerias & Díaz, 1998, 1999; Almqüera & Lagunas, 1993; Tsimpli & Roussou, 1991; White, 1985; Bini, 1993) and the influence of the L1 (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996 and Licerias, 1988, 1993), we will formulate our hypotheses in section 3. Section 4 includes a discussion of the methodology used in the study, the Greek and Spanish native speaker participants, the tasks and the subsequent data collection procedure. In section 5, we will discuss our results and section 6 will briefly address the results in light of our original hypotheses.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Modularity

According to the Modular Approach, speakers of a language have a grammar at their disposal, consisting of several modules: syntax, semantics and phonology. Moreover, they have a pragmatic system at their command. In figure (1) we present the interaction between the three grammatical modules, as well as the interaction of these modules with the pragmatic system and other systems such as memory and perception. This interaction is referred to as 'interface'. A system of interaction between pragmatics and syntax has at least three components: a module of pragmatics, a module of grammar and a set of mapping rules arranging how information of the pragmatic component is linked to information of the grammar component (Bos et al., 2004). Part of the knowledge of the various modules might be innate; other aspects have to be acquired by means of exposure to the language to be learned. One of the aspects to be learned is the interface between the modules due to the fact that the interface relations are not the same for all languages. In the present study, we focus on the syntax-pragmatics interface in L2 acquisition. In particular, we study the acquisition of a syntactic phenomenon, the Null Subject Parameter and its pragmatic consequences for Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

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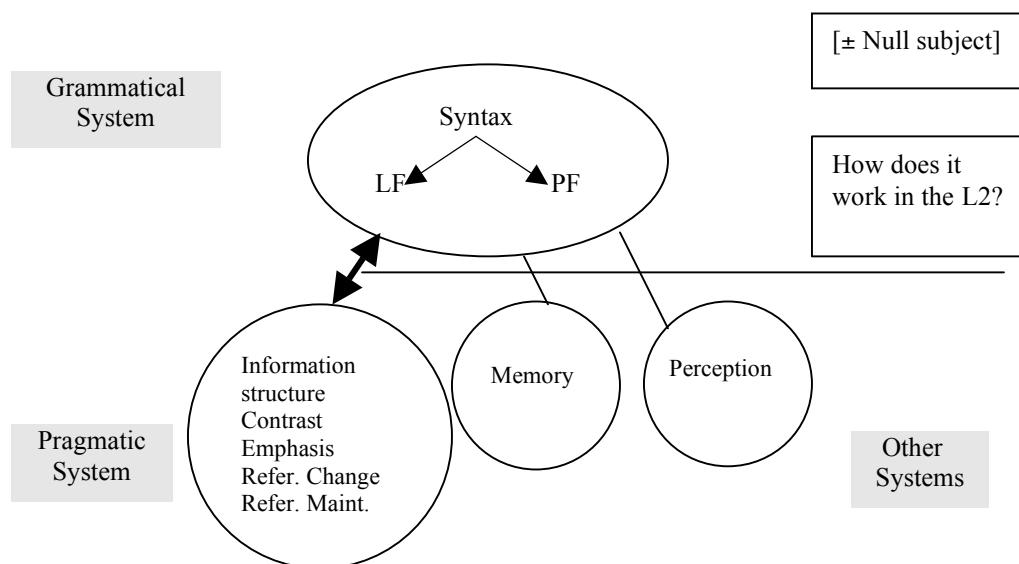


Figure 1. Interaction between modules

2.2 The Null Subject Parameter in SLA

The Null Subject Parameter is one of the first parameters proposed within the Principles and Parameters model (Chomsky, 1981; Jaeggli, 1982; Rizzi, 1982) and extended by the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995). The Minimalist Program retains the Principles and Parameters advantages of universal operating principles but at the same time aims to simplify the overall grammar by restricting computational mechanisms and processes to those required by the interfaces with PF and LF. In the present study we concentrate on the Null Subject Parameter that distinguishes non-null subject languages like English and French, from null subject languages such as Greek, Spanish and Italian in terms of optional or compulsory presence of subjects. Null subject languages allow subjects to be omitted and exhibit the [+null subject] value of the parameter. On the other hand, non-null subject languages require lexical subjects, representing the [-null subject] value. It is assumed that null subject languages allow the following properties of the parameter: 1) Null subjects; 2) Free inversion of subject in declarative sentences; 3) Null expletives; 4) Apparent violation of the [that-t] effect; 5) Long wh-movement of subject. In the present paper we will concentrate on the first two properties and leave aside the others.

There has been a great deal of research carried out on this phenomenon within the field of SLA. Al Kasey and Pérez-Leroux (1998), Licerias (1988, 1989, 1996), Licerias and Díaz (1998, 1999), Almoguera and Lagunas (1993) and Tsimpli and Roussou (1991) studied cases where the L1 differs from the L2 with respect to [+/- null subject] value. Al Kasey and Pérez-Leroux (1998) focused on English learners of Spanish. Licerias (1988, 1989, 1996) investigated the acquisition of null subjects in the Spanish Interlanguage of English and French students whose L1 is [-null subject]. Moreover, Licerias and Díaz (1998, 1999) concentrated on the acquisition of Spanish by learners whose L1 belongs to [-null subject]/ [-null topic] or [+null subject]/ [+null topic] languages. Furthermore, Almoguera and Lagunas (1993) examined English learners of Spanish as an L2. Tsimpli and Roussou (1991) observed Greek learners of English. On the other hand, White (1985) and Bini (1993) focused on cases where L1 and L2 exhibit the same parametric value. White (1985) analysed two [-null subject] languages: English and French while Bini (1993) examined two [+null subject] languages: Spanish and Italian. In our study we also concentrate on two [+null subject] languages: Greek and Spanish. In particular, we focus on the acquisition of the [+null subject] value and the distribution of null subjects.

Taking into consideration the research of Tsimpli, Sorace, Heycock and Filiaci (2004), Montrul (2004) and Sorace (2004) who study the phenomenon of attrition, we claim that the distribution of

null/overt subjects depends on discourse and pragmatic factors such as informational focus, contrastive/emphatic focus, presentation of new referents, change, maintenance or reintroduction of referents (see figure 1). Tsimpli et al. (2004) investigate the knowledge of the referential pronominal system in Greek and Italian in very advanced speakers of English. Montrul (2004) tests the generalization in second-generation speakers of Spanish, or heritage speakers, a bilingual group that presents different characteristics from the adult L2 speakers investigated in Tsimpli et al.'s study. In Montrul's study, the intermediate heritage speakers produce significantly more overt than null subjects, thus diverging from monolinguals and advanced heritage speakers in this respect. Montrul (2004) argues that attrition affects the distribution of referential pronouns because it is governed by features such as Focus and Topic Shift, which belong to the domain of pragmatics. Moreover, according to Bini (1993), Spanish learners of Italian up to an intermediate proficiency level use significantly more overt subjects than monolingual Italians and monolingual Spanish speakers, despite the fact that the two languages are essentially identical with respect to both the syntactic and the pragmatic conditions on the distribution of pronominal forms. Research on monolingual and bilingual L1 language acquisition (Serratrice et al., 2004) and L2 acquisition (Sorace, 2003) has in fact shown that the interface conditions governing the use of referential pronouns in null subject languages are acquired late or may remain permanently indeterminate. In other words, interfaces are more complex than narrow syntax and are inherently more difficult to acquire (Sorace, 2004). We will proceed in this line of reasoning.

2.3 Access to UG in SLA

The availability of UG in Second Language Acquisition has been a topic of considerable debate from the earliest applications of Principles and Parameters theory to the domain of SLA. There are three views concerned with the access to UG in SLA:

- a) the *no-access* position (Clahsen & Muysken, 1986; Bley-Vroman, 1989; Schachter, 1988). According to this proposal, L2 learners acquire the L2 grammar without any reference to UG; the grammar is learnt through other faculties of mind.
- b) the *direct access* position (Flynn, 1987; Mazurkevich, 1984). In this case, L2 learners learn in exactly the same way as L1 learners; they set values for parameters according to the L2 evidence they encounter without any other influence. Flynn and Martohardjono (1994), Flynn (1996), Epstein, Flynn and Martohardjono (1996, 1998) propose the *Full Access Hypothesis* without transfer from the L1 in an initial state.
- c) the *indirect access* position (White, 1988; Schwartz, 1987; Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996; Liceras, 1988, 1993). According to this view, L2 learners have access to UG through what they know of the L1. Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) assume that the initial state of L2 acquisition is a full instantiation of the first language (L1) constraint hierarchy (i.e. full transfer) and that subsequent acquisition is guided by UG (i.e. full access). Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) propose the *Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis*. In this paper, we depart from a revisited model of indirect access to UG. We argue that the role of the L1 is important but its influence is not as decisive as expected (Liceras, 1996) and proposed in the *Full Transfer Hypothesis*. In other words, we defend the *Indirect Transfer from the L1* as we assume that there is the influence of the L1 in the syntactic domain of grammatical knowledge and not at the syntax/pragmatics interface that is inherently more difficult to acquire in L2 (Sorace, 2004).

3. Hypotheses

Based on the stated theoretical framework, we formulate the following research hypotheses:

- 1) Greek students will acquire the [+null subject] value of Spanish, due to the influence of the L1, so-called positive transfer (Gass & Selinker, 1992) in cases where L1 (Greek) and L2 (Spanish) adopt the same parametric value. We suppose that if transfer plays a role, then there will be two possible areas of L1 influence:
 - a) only in the syntactic domain. In this case, there will be evidence of null/overt subjects. On the other hand, we predict that non-native learners will misuse subjects showing that they have not acquired the L2 pragmatics.

b) both in the syntactic domain and at the syntax/pragmatics interface. This predicts that students will produce null/overt subjects in the appropriate discourse contexts. In other words, they will display native-like behavior.

2) Based on the research of Bini (1993) and the proposals of Montrul (2004) and Sorace (2004) who consider the distribution of subjects as a potentially vulnerable domain of grammatical knowledge, we suppose that intermediate students will express pronominal subjects in optional contexts in which subject omission is the more natural and appropriate option not only in Spanish but also in Greek. This hypothesis will not confirm the role of direct positive transfer from the L1 at the pragmatic level.

3) Linguistic competence (proficiency) is an important factor that influences the acquisition of L2 Spanish.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

In order to address the research questions three groups of native and non-native speakers are examined. The first experimental group is formed by 10 Greek intermediate learners of Spanish (age range: 21–30 years old). The second group consists of 9 advanced learners (age range: 23–36 years old). The two experimental groups study at the University of Patras and learn Spanish in an institutional context. Their competence level is determined by the hours of exposure to Spanish. In our investigation we have collected data from a control group of 10 native speakers. They study at the University of Cordoba and at the Pompeu Fabra (age range: 20–30). The sociocultural level of Spanish speakers is similar to that of the two non-native groups.

4.2 Tasks

The participants answered a questionnaire with linguistic and academic information (questions about their dominant language, their studies, the knowledge of second languages, their competence level, the hours of exposure to Spanish and the contact with Spanish people) and completed two tasks: a) a cloze task contained in a narrative text designed for this purpose and b) a written production task. The first task consisted of a narrative text of 268 words which described some events that took place at the airport Venizelos of Athens. The narrative included a cloze test with 40 subject positions and the students were asked to fill in the blanks selecting the correct answer. The aim of this test was to investigate the syntactic and pragmatic distribution of overt/null nominal and pronominal subjects in discourse contexts. The second test consisted of a written production task of a free narrative text, in which the participants were asked to describe a situation of their life in which they had experienced fear, anxiety, danger, etc. The presence/absence and the appropriateness of subjects were evaluated.

4.3 Data Collection Procedure

The tasks were conducted during the 2003–2004 school year. The first week of December Greek students and Spanish speakers completed the questionnaire in a session of 45 minutes. The following week, the participants filled in the text with 40 blanks in 1 hour. Then they were asked to write a composition. They were given 1 hour to do so. The non-native students were given written instructions in their L1 (Greek) in order to avoid misunderstandings. They were not permitted to use dictionaries.

Subsequent to data collection, we analysed 1.160 subject positions (null or overt subjects in distinct contexts) from the first task and 755 subjects from the second test, shown in Table 1:

Task	Total Subject Positions
Cloze task	1.160
Written production task	755

Table 1. Analysed data

5. Results

5.1 Cloze Task

The results from the native Spanish speakers served as the criterion for comparison on the cloze task. We examined the items of the text on which the native speakers converged at between 80%-100% either with the null or overt subject. We used this range of percentages because in some sentences the expression or omission of the subject is completely optional and depends on pragmatic (and not grammatical) factors.

As far as the overall results are concerned, non-native students (intermediate and advanced informants) and native speakers (control group) produce distinct percentages of null subjects as shown in Table 2:

	Matrix clauses	Subordinate clauses
INTERM	52 %	81.66 %
ADVAN	85.50 %	98.13 %
CONTR	96 %	100 %

Table 2. Null Subjects

As can be seen, the non-native students are able to omit subjects in Spanish. This seems to confirm the first hypothesis of our study related to the knowledge of Spanish [+null subject] value. In other words, Greek speakers know the parametric option of the target language. Moreover, they produce more null subjects in subordinate than in matrix clauses. It is worth stressing that it is easier to omit the subject when the antecedent is close. This is in accordance with the principles of Binding. An explanation could be that in subordinate clauses the processing task is not as hard as in matrix clauses because the antecedent of the null category is closer. The null subject of the subordinate clause maintains the discourse referent introduced in the antecedent matrix clause. In the sentences of this test the omission of the subject is the most natural option.

In matrix and subordinate clauses the intermediate group employs fewer null subjects than the other groups. If, according to Hypothesis (1b), transfer played a role both in the syntactic and the pragmatic domain, students would not overuse subjects. But this is not the case because the intermediate learners of our study do overuse overt subjects. Although they display knowledge of the [+null subject] value of Spanish syntax, they do not show command of the pragmatic distribution of subjects in this language. The results of the intermediate students are compatible with Hypothesis (1a) in that these participants include overt subjects in contexts where the advanced learners omit them. In the subordinate clauses the advanced informants almost reach the percentage of native speakers. This result confirms the hypothesis that competence level affects the production of null/overt subjects.

In what follows, some examples from the cloze task are analysed in detail:

- (1) ¿A dónde vas? **pro_i voy_i** a Barcelona.
Where go-2nd pers.sing? go-1st pers.sing. to Barcelona.
- (1a) ¿A dónde vas? **?Yo** voy a Barcelona.
Where go- 2nd pers.sing? I go to Barcelona.
- (2) **pro_i tengo_i** que irme.
have-1st pers.sing. to go.
- (2a) **?Yo** tengo que irme.
I have to go.

In these instances, the majority of the advanced students (88.88%) and the native speakers (100%) choose the more natural option, the null subject. On the other hand, the intermediate learners (70%) use the unacceptable overt subject *yo* (I). In native Spanish the only possible interpretation of the overt pronoun *yo* (I) is the contrastive or the emphatic one which is not adequate in these contexts. Intermediate students' production is not in favour of the direct positive transfer from the L1. If there were direct positive transfer or full transfer from the L1 according to Schwartz and Sprouse (1996), all Greek speakers should omit the subject in these contexts as they do in their L1. Where do overt

subjects come from if neither the L1 nor the L2 provide them? In fact, the students of the intermediate group might misuse pronouns in order to reinforce verbal inflection of Spanish and identify the subject. Although the informants produce no errors related to verbal morphology, we must distinguish between the acquisition of lexical items –inflectional morphology in this case– and the properties related to the inflection. Despite the fact that inflection licenses null subjects, identification is not assured at the intermediate stage of Spanish Interlanguage and learners use overt pronouns. Our conclusion is similar to what Bini (1993) found in her data and what she called “strategy”. This analysis would claim that Spanish overt pronouns are reanalysed as weak in the learner’s grammar because students have not fixed the [+null subject] value of their Spanish Interlanguage yet. An alternative analysis would claim that learners have acquired the properties of the [+null subject] parameter only in the syntactic domain, and not at the pragmatic level, the vulnerable domain, according to Hypothesis (1a).

Although the goal of this paper is to analyze the distribution of null/overt subjects, the cloze test also included some instances of obligatory quotative inversion. We will report here some results relevant to this phenomenon because they are related to our hypothesis regarding the influence of the L1, one of the main hypotheses of this paper. As we will see, some instances of non-inverted subjects are attested in quotative contexts despite the fact that Greek and Spanish require the inversion of the subject in these contexts.

In Table 3, there is evidence from the production of postverbal subjects:

INTERM	75.55 %
ADVAN	98.61 %
CONTR	100 %

Table 3. Subject Inversion in quotative contexts

This table shows that the intermediate students produce more preverbal subjects (SV order) than the advanced speakers in contexts in which subject postposition is expected to occur not only in L2 but also in L1. Taking into consideration this result, we can assume that the intermediate students have not acquired the property of subject inversion and that the influence of their [+null subject] L1 is not as decisive as expected. If there were direct positive transfer or full transfer from the L1, all intermediate informants should invert the subject in these contexts. It is important to report that the advanced group almost reaches the percentage of the native speakers and has acquired the VS order. This assumption confirms the hypothesis that the competence level is related to the production of the appropriate and grammatical word order.

In example 3, all advanced students and the native speakers invert the subject (VS order); in this case, the object is an interrogative sentence in topic position and the inversion of the subject is compulsory in order to avoid ungrammaticality.

(3) ¿A dónde vas? - preguntó *el señor*.

Where go-2nd pers.sing? - asked the man.

On the other hand, half of the intermediate learners (40%) prefer the incorrect OSV order (3a). They might interpret the object as a distinct and independent sentence. The second clause consists of the transitive verb *preguntar* (ask) that permits the omission of the object [object drop] in some discourse contexts.

(3a) *¿A dónde vas?- *el señor* preguntó.

Where go-2nd pers.sing? - the man asked.

It is worth stressing that the structures of obligatory (quotative) inversion are difficult because it is not easy to recognize the displaced object. However, the advanced students do not have problems with this type of inversion as they reach a high percentage of correct answers (98.61%).

5.2 Written Production Task

In this section, we analyse the results obtained from the second test: the written production task. The length of the compositions varies and depends on the competence level of the informants. The intermediate students generate texts with a range between 50 and 190 words while the advanced group produces a range between 70 and 380 words and the native speakers create a range between 115 and 490 words.

In Table 4, we present the percentages of null subjects the three groups use in matrix and subordinate clauses. The percentage is calculated over the total number of null subjects in matrix and subordinate clauses. We examine these types of sentences as we suppose that the type of clause influences the production of subjects. In the subordinate clauses the null subject maintains the pragmatic referent introduced in the antecedent matrix.

As it is shown in Table 4, non-native speakers produce null subjects. This confirms the hypothesis that they are able to omit the subject in Spanish and acquire the [+null subject] value of this language. Moreover, all participants use more null subjects in subordinate than in matrix clauses in accordance with the results in section 5.1. In this context it is important to notice the nature of the task and the fact that we have examined spontaneous production data. This means that each informant freely produces the subjects and sentences they are able to. For example, the advanced group expresses more null subjects than the native speakers. What's more, all groups present similar percentages in subordinate clauses. However, due to the nature of the task, these results are not comparable and could differ from the conclusions of other researches reported in corpus analyses. Thus, we cannot arrive at categorical or general conclusions.

	Matrix clauses	Subordinate clauses
INTERM	49.48 %	84.15 %
ADVAN	64.96 %	76.11 %
CONTR	53.87 %	70.42 %

Table 4. Null Subjects

In the following examples the non-native speakers demonstrate that they are able to use subjects in contexts of introduction (4), reintroduction (5) and maintenance (6) of referents:

- (4) *La humanidad* debe ayudar a las personas que necesitan ayuda.
Humanity has to help the persons who need help.
- (5) *Los chicos* están siempre llorando.
The boys are always crying.
- (6) Llegamos a plaza Omonia y allí *pro; bajamos* del autobús.
Arrived-1stpers.plur. at square Omonia and there got off-1stpers.plur. the bus.

In Table 5 we present the rate of pronominal subjects generated by native and non-native speakers:

	Matrix clauses	Subordinate clauses
INTERM	15.27 %	3.12 %
ADVAN	4.27 %	1.32 %
CONTR	11.32 %	7.91 %

Table 5. Pronominal Subjects

The three groups express fewer pronominal subjects in subordinate than in matrix clauses. This is consistent with the previous results, i.e., the informants produce null subjects in order to maintain the reference introduced by the subject of the antecedent matrix. In this table, we focus on the variability found in the data. It is interesting to report the difference between the advanced students and the native speakers. The advanced group does not reach the percentage of Spanish informants and does not create the same pragmatic contexts as native speakers do. In other words, the advanced students do not display native-like competence and have problems with the pragmatic uses. This result is compatible

with the fact that the acquisition of pragmatics is difficult (see Sorace, 2003, 2004). Furthermore, as we have already stated, it is not easy to make categorical assumptions departing from spontaneous production data.

Moreover, the intermediate students overuse pronouns in sentences in which the expression of the pronominal subject is redundant and has no emphatic, contrastive or other pragmatic role (see examples 7) and 8). As we have proposed (Hypotheses (1a), (2) and the results of the previous section derived from the cloze task), the learners of this group overuse the overt subject in cases where verbal inflection determines the person and permits subject omission. As time goes by, this behaviour disappears because the advanced informants do not overuse pronominal subjects. The competence level affects the production of null/overt subjects.

(7) ?*Nosotros tenemos* una casa en la montaña y voy cada fin de semana con amigos y amigas.

We have a house at the mountains and go each weekend with friends and girlfriends.

(8) ?*Yo no voy* con el coche y con la motocicleta porque no quiero estar muerto.

I don't go with the car and with the bike because don't want to die.

In these examples we notice no relationship between the production of pronominal subjects and the command of verbal morphology: the intermediate students who misuse pronouns do not present lack of competence related to the inflection.

Furthermore, the students who use null subjects do not invert subjects as it is shown in Table 6. Notice that in this task we analyse cases of free inversion (one of the standard properties of the Null Subject Parameter) and not instances of obligatory quotative inversion as we did in the cloze task (see 5.1.).

	Matrix clauses	Subordinate clauses
INTERM	3.19 %	0
ADVAN	0.88 %	4.04 %
CONTR	8.32 %	8.31 %

Table 6. Free Inversion of the Subject

In Table 6 it is obvious that Greek speakers avoid the postposition of the subject in the written production task and do not create many contexts of free inversion. Recall the nature of the task: it is a spontaneous production task. Even native speakers do not produce many inverted subjects. In this case, we assume that they omit subjects because the more natural option in native Spanish is the null subject. However, the control group inverts significantly more subjects than the non-native groups. Specifically, the non-native speakers produce a few postverbal subjects with unaccusative verbs (see examples 9) and 10). This results from the fact that the postposition of the subject is a complex phenomenon and might have an indirect relationship with the Null Subject Parameter. In addition, the inversion of the subject depends on lexical factors and on verb types that are not the central focus of the present study. Generally the results related to free inversion of the subject do not reinforce the influence or full transfer from the L1 which shares the same value with L2 Spanish. This is in accordance with the results obtained in the first task. That is why we report them although the inversion of the subject is not the main goal of this paper.

INTERMEDIATE

(9) Desde hace 15 años antes me *ocurrió un accidente* bastante serio.

15 years ago to me happened an accident quite serious.

ADVANCED

(10) Esperé hasta que *llegara la policía*.

Waited-1st pers.sing. until came the police.

6. Conclusions

In sum, the Greek students of our study are able to produce null subjects in L2 Spanish showing that they acquire the [+null subject] value of this language. It is possible that there is the influence of the L1 (Greek) in the syntactic domain of grammatical knowledge, according to Hypothesis (1a). As we have argued in the previous sections, the participants produce more null subjects in subordinate than in matrix clauses due to the fact that in subordinate clauses the antecedent is close to the subject according to the principles of Binding. The null subject of the subordinate maintains the discourse referent introduced in the antecedent matrix so processing is not difficult. Moreover, the non-native informants demonstrate that they know the use of subjects in contexts of introduction, reintroduction and maintenance of discourse referents in the written production task.

However, the intermediate students misuse pronominal subjects in optional contexts in which subject omission is the more natural or acceptable option in Spanish and Greek (see intermediate heritage speakers in Montrul, 2004 and Spanish learners of Italian in Bini, 1993, for similar results). They express the subject in order to reinforce verbal morphology (Hypothesis 2). As time goes by, this behavior disappears because the advanced informants do not overuse pronominal subjects. Thus the competence level affects the production of null/overt subjects (Hypothesis 3). The students who misuse subjects seem not to transfer the pragmatic knowledge from their L1. It is likely that **transfer** plays a role in syntax but not in all pragmatic contexts. This confirms Hypothesis (1a). This hypothesis is also confirmed in the case of free inversion, as shown by the results of the written production task.

With regard to the obligatory quotative inversion of the subject, the intermediate students do not invert subjects in contexts in which their [+null subject] L1 requires the obligatory postposition of the subject. In other words, Greek speakers seem not to take advantage of the fact that the two languages—Greek and Spanish—share the same pattern. This result is related to the competence level of the participants because the advanced learners produce more inverted subjects than the intermediate students. In general, our data are not compatible with the direct positive transfer or full transfer from the L1.

These conclusions seem to be in accordance with the hypotheses of the present study. In future projects we will investigate the acquisition of the Null Subject Parameter in Greek and Spanish IL of speakers of distinct L1 and of distinct levels with the purpose of drawing more robust conclusions that can be generalized to a greater number of contexts.

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