

[Abstract for presentation in the main session]

**From a Romance null subject grammar to a non-null subject grammar:
The syntax of subjects in advanced and near-native English**

Null subjects and “free” inversion are traditionally considered to be among the cluster of properties that distinguish null subject languages (NSLs), like European Portuguese (EP) and Italian, from non-null subject languages (NNSLs), like English and French (e.g. Rizzi, 1982). Evidence brought to light by recent studies on consistent and partial NSLs (e.g. Costa & Figueiredo Silva, 2006; Nicolis, 2008) suggests that “free” inversion and null subjects correlate as follows: i) “free” inversion is admitted in sentence focus contexts in a language L if L licenses null expletives; ii) “free” inversion is allowed in narrow focus contexts in a language L if L licenses referential null subjects.

In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), the Null Subject Parameter (NSP) has been investigated by a large number of studies. Those which concentrate on L1 NNSL – L2 NSL pairings have shown that L2 speakers/learners (L2ers) acquire null subjects early on (e.g. Al-Kasey & Pérez-Leroux, 1998; Rothman & Iverson, 2007), but tend to exhibit difficulties with respect to the discourse conditions which govern the distribution of overt pronominal subjects and SV and VS orders, even at near-native levels (e.g. Sorace & Filiaci, 2006; Belletti, Bennati & Sorace, 2007). These findings are in line with the Interface Hypothesis (IH) (Sorace & Filiaci, 2006; Sorace, 2011), according to which purely syntactic properties are fully acquirable in an L2, while properties at the interface between syntax and grammar-external domains, like discourse, are a locus of residual, but permanent, optionality at the level of ultimate attainment, due to processing inefficiencies. While acquiring the syntax of subjects is unproblematic in L1 NNSL – L2 NSL pairings, the same does not happen in L1 NSL – L2 NNSL combinations. The few studies carried out to date on this type of language combination have indicated that L2ers accept null subjects at advanced stages of acquisition (Judy & Rothman, 2010; Judy, 2011), and produce “free” inversion at least up to an upper intermediate level (cf. Lozano & Mendikoetxea, 2010).

To account for these differences in the acquisition of the syntax of subjects in L1 NNSLs – L2 NSLs and L1 NSLs – L2 NNSLs, Judy & Rothman (2010) and Judy (2011) propose that the latter language combination poses more obstacles to L2ers than the former because, in the latter case, the L1 and the L2 are in a superset-subset relationship regarding the NSP. Based on the Full Transfer-Full Access model (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996) and the Subset Principle (Manzini & Wexler, 1987), these authors claim that, as a language like EP is a superset grammar to English for the NSP, it is possible for an EP-type grammar to efficiently parse English sentences. They further argue that, in the absence of parsing failures, the L1-transferred setting for the NSP may never be reconfigured. Given that, to the best of our knowledge, no study has ever investigated whether null subjects and “free” inversion are allowed at near-native levels in L2 NNSLs, it remains unclear whether L1 NSL – L2 NNSL pairings give rise to permanent divergence in the domain of syntax, as the superset-subset hypothesis predicts (contra the IH).

With a view to filling in this gap in SLA research, the present study investigates the acquisition of referential and expletive subjects and of the relative order of the subject and the verb in narrow and sentence focus contexts by L1-EP L2-English speakers and L1-French L2-English speakers. The purpose of the study is threefold: i) to examine whether L2ers exhibit difficulties with respect to the syntax of subjects in a NNSL at the level of ultimate attainment and/or at advanced developmental stages; ii) to investigate the role of L1 influence in the acquisition of the syntax of subjects in English; and iii) to analyse whether there is any correlation between the

(un)availability of referential null subjects and the (un)availability of “free” inversion in narrow focus contexts, on the one hand, and between the (un)availability of expletive null subjects and the (un)availability of “free” inversion in sentence focus contexts, on the other.

The participants in this study were adult native speakers of English ($n=26$), EP ($n=26$) and French ($n=26$). The EP and French speakers had started to learn English between the ages of 8 and 11, and had either a near-native or an advanced level of proficiency in this language (50%-50% within each language group). Their proficiency was assessed through the same type of screening procedure used by Sorace & Filiaci (2006). All participants were administered four experimental tasks: i) 2 *untimed drag & drop (D&D) tasks*, where, in each item, they were presented with a linguistic context, and asked to create a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 2 continuations to the last sentence presented, by ordering the blocks of words provided to them; and ii) 2 *contextualized speeded acceptability judgment (CSAJ) tasks*, where, in each item, participants were asked to make an acceptability judgement on a scale of 1 to 5 in response to a sentence presented word by word at a rate of 400 ms per word. The D&D task and the CSAJ task which focused on pronominal subjects crossed the following variables: i) *type of pronominal subject* – null referential subject vs. overt referential subject vs. null expletive subject vs. overt expletive subject – and ii) *type of clause* – matrix clause vs. embedded clause. The tasks on “free” subject-verb inversion, on the other hand, crossed the following variables: i) *type of discourse context* – sentence focus context vs. narrow subject focus context –, ii) *type of verb* – unaccusative vs. unergative – and iii) *type of word order* – SV vs. VS. All tasks contained as many fillers as experimental items.

(1) *D&D task: Sample item*

On Friday the city was covered in snow, but the weather improved over the weekend. On Monday ...

	again	snowed	
he	him	himself	it

Red = Obligatory Green = Optional

(2) *CSGJ task: Sample item*

The Midsteeple is an historic building which dates back to the 18th century. [presented as a block without time constraints]

In / the / past / contained / Council / offices [presented word by word]

A preliminary analysis of the results indicates that French speakers behave native-like across all conditions and tasks, while EP speakers do not. At an advanced stage, they admit expletive null subjects and, to a lesser extent, referential null subjects. In addition, they tend to allow VS orders, but almost only when the verb is unaccusative and the subject is narrowly focused. In all tasks and conditions, advanced EP-speaking L2ers of English display a higher preference for overt subjects than for null subjects and for SV orders than for VS orders. Crucially, at a near native level, these speakers behave fully target-like across all conditions and tasks. Taken together, our results suggest that the syntax of subjects may exhibit significant developmental delays depending on L1-L2 combinations, but is completely acquirable in all language pairings. These findings thus confirm the IH and contradict the predictions of the superset-subset hypothesis with respect to ultimate attainment. The reasons why certain syntactic properties of subjects are difficult and yet acquirable in L1 NSL – L2 NNSL pairings will be discussed in detail, as will the relation between the (un)availability of null subjects and of “free” inversion in interlanguage grammars.

Selected references: Judy, T. (2011). L1/L2 parametric directionality matters: More on the Null Subject Parameter in L2 acquisition. In *EUROSLA Yearbook 1* (pp. 165–190). Amsterdam: John Benjamins // Judy, T., & Rothman, J. (2010). From a superset to a subset grammar and the semantic compensation hypothesis: subject pronoun and anaphora resolution evidence in L2 English. In *Proceedings of the 34th annual Boston University Conference on Language Development* (pp. 197-208). Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press. // Lozano, C., & Mendikoetxea, A. (2010). Interface conditions on postverbal subjects: a corpus study of L2 English. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 13(4), 475-497. // Sorace, A. (2011). Pinning down the concept of ‘interface’ in bilingualism. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 1, 1–33. // Sorace, A., & Filiaci, F. (2006). Anaphora resolution in near-native speakers of Italian. *Second Language Research*, 22, 339-368.