# Referential and expletive subjects at the end-state of English L2 acquisition

*Joana Teixeira*
Universidade NOVA de Lisboa
joana.v.teixeira@gmail.com

Over the past decade, research on adult L2 acquisition has shown that the syntax of pronominal subjects is unproblematic in L1 non-null subject language (NNSL)-L2 null subject language (NSL) pairings (e.g. Rothman & Iverson, 2007; Sorace & Filiaci, 2006), but not in L1 NSL-L2 NNSL combinations, where null subjects are accepted at least up to advanced stages of acquisition (e.g. Judy & Rothman, 2010; Judy, 2011). Judy & Rothman (2010) and Judy (2011) propose that the latter combinations pose difficulties, because here the L1 is the superset to the L2 regarding the null subject parameter (NSP), which makes it possible for an interlanguage grammar with the L1 setting for this parameter to efficiently parse sentences from the L2. According to them, in the absence of parsing failures, the NSP may never be reset to the target value. Given that no study has ever investigated whether null subjects are allowed in the grammars of near-native speakers of NNSLs, it remains unclear whether L1 NSL-L2 NNSL pairings give rise to permanent divergence in the domain of syntax.

The present work investigates referential and expletive subjects in advanced and near-native English. Its purpose is twofold: i) to examine whether L2 speakers (L2ers) of a NNSL exhibit difficulties regarding the syntax of subjects at the level of ultimate attainment and/or at advanced developmental stages, and ii) to investigate the role of L1 influence in the acquisition of subjects in English. Participants were adult native speakers of English (*n*=26), French (*n*=26), two NNSLs, and EP (*n*=28), a NSL. The EP and French speakers had either a near-native (*n*=11 in each language group) or an advanced level in English. All participants were administered two tasks: i) an *untimed drag & drop task*, where they were asked to create continuations to sentences, by ordering the blocks of words provided to them; and ii) a *contextualized speeded acceptability judgment task*, where, in each item, participants were asked to make an acceptability judgement in response to a sentence presented word by word at a rate of 400 ms per word. These tasks 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. 50% of the items which tested referential subjects had inanimate antecedents, while the other 50% had animate ones.

Results indicate that French speakers behave native-like across all conditions and tasks, while EP speakers do not. Those who have an advanced level of English admit null expletives and inanimate referential null subjects in the task that involves time pressure. Crucially, at a near native level, EP speakers behave target-like across all tasks. These findings suggest that the syntax of subjects may give rise to significant developmental delays depending on L1-L2 combinations, but is completely acquirable in an L2. The reasons why certain aspects of the syntax of subjects are difficult and yet acquirable in L1 NSL-L2 NNSL pairings will be discussed in detail.