

Experimenting with pro-drop in Telugu and Indian English

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This paper investigates pronominal subjects dropping in Telugu and Indian English and the severity of first language impact on learning and usage of a second language. Numerous languages from various language families are spoken in India. Many of the languages among them are pro-drop languages. Telugu is a full-fledged consistent null subject language with rich verbal agreement. So, pro-drop is common in spoken Telugu. This paper aims at how first language (L1) influences its rules and morpho-syntactic properties on second language (L2) in relation to pro-drop at various levels. To some extent, pro-drop parameter helps us to understand how the language acquisition takes place in children and adults mind/brain in setting the parameter in a specific language. Based on the empirical evidence, several Telugu-speaking children and adults are examined on how they drop pronouns in spoken Telugu and Indian English.

Keywords: *pro-drop*, acquisition, Telugu, Indian English

1. Introduction

Universal Grammar (UG) is common for all languages. It has a certain system of principles and parameters. A theory of parameters was developed within the paradigm of the Lecturers on Government and Binding framework in 1980's. It came to be known as Standard Parameters Theory (SPT) which was a bold attempt in linguistic theory. SPT attempted to handle the problem of language acquisition and linguistic variation. It focused on the question as to how a child arrives at the correct grammar of the language he is exposed to, especially with the limited evidence available to him and with no explicit instruction. In fact, the problem of linguistic variation is directly related to the problem of language acquisition. We know that languages are similar because of the universal principles shared by them. But languages exhibit variation also. A set of parameters or set of language specific options were assumed to be available within UG. These parameters have to be set in their respective language by the child. Pro-drop parameter is one of those which has to be set by the child to a specific language.

2. Does L1 affect L2 acquisition?

There is a vast difference between L1 and L2 acquisition and some people learn L2 with equal ease and fluency while others may find nervousness in voice and stumble over words. Individual differences are there in acquiring L1 and L2 and it depends on many factors. Many scholars extensively worked on how the L1 affects L2 acquisition. In the 1950s, the concept of transfer was widely discussed in relation to second language acquisition (SLA). Jespersen's (1927) use of transfer clearly shows the influence of a

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Notation: ACC: accusative, F: feminine, M: masculine, NOM: nominative, NPST: non-past tense, PST: past tense, PL: plural, Q: question mark, SG: singular, 1: first person, 2: second person, 3: third person.

language already known on learning and speaking a new one. However, transfer means carrying over the forms and meanings of one language to the other, resulting in interference.

Weinreich (1953, p.1) states that “Instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language.” There are many instances to show that many children use L1 rules on second language acquisition directly. French learners of English fail to distinguish /i:/ and /i/ in “keen” /ki:n/ and “kin” /kin/ because the distinction doesn’t exist in French. Japanese learners of English produce spellings such as “*adovocated,” “*courese,” and “*English” because Japanese consonants are always separated by a vowel. The concept of transfer led to the approach called Contrastive Analysis, which looked for differences between the two languages; these form the main areas of difficulty for learners and automatically lead to ‘negative’ transfer from the L1 (Lado, 1957).

One of the key notions of SLA is children have their own independent grammars that may not be found in adults. During the process of SLA, children produce their own rules and properties and apply them to the target language. Children build up new and independent grammars of the L2. In relation to this, several scholars coined various terms to this notion.¹ ‘*Interlanguage*’ is one of the terms coined by Selinker (1972) in one of his papers.

3. Pro-drop in Telugu and Indian English

Cross-linguistically, world languages can be classified into two categories: pro-drop languages and non-pro-drop languages. Examples of pro-drop languages are Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Tamil, Italian, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese and so on. English, Japanese, Indonesian are some examples of non-pro-drop languages. Pro-drop languages that allow pronouns to be dropped in the languages are also called null subject languages. It is well-known that Standard English doesn’t allow any pro-drop but it is observed that in most of the cases pronouns are dropped in Indian English. Many of the Indian languages have the common feature of dropping pronouns and this feature is injected into Indian English. This might be the main reason why native speakers of Standard English feel strange when pronouns are dropped in Indian English.

English is widely used by millions of people across the world and it plays a vital role in strengthening the empowerment through many aspects. English consists of a number of varieties across the world. Indian English is one of those which has many variations when we compare with Standard English in terms of pronunciation, accent, intonation, sentence structures, etc. The English language is categorized as non-pro-drop language since it does not allow null subjects and null objects in finite clauses. Consider the examples below:

- (1) a. Raju speaks Hindi.
b. *speaks.

¹ Several terms were coined for the idea that L2 learners had independent grammars with slightly different emphases, such as “approximative system” (Nemser, 1971) and “transitional competence” (Corder, 1967).

The above (1a) is to be considered grammatical. Sentence (1b) is ungrammatical because there are dropped elements, specifically the subject and the object. In fact, people say it is common in colloquial spoken English in many places. It is already known that Telugu allows the verb-subject agreement and it lacks verb-object agreement. Still, null subjects and null objects are freely dropped in this language. Now, we will examine some of the Telugu examples:

- (2) a. ra:ɕʒu Hindi maɽlaɖa-ta:-ɖ-a:
 Raju-NOM Hindi speak-NPST-3.SG.M-Q
 ‘Does Raju speak Hindi?’
- b. maɽlaɖa-ta:-ɖu.
 speak-NPST-3.SG.M
 ‘(he) speaks (Hindi).’

Since Telugu is a pro-drop language it allows null subjects in finite clauses. Both (2a) and (2b) are grammatical. (2b) indicates that both subject and object can be dropped in Telugu at the discourse level. More or less this phenomenon is common in most of the Indian languages. Now, we shall examine the following English and Telugu examples:

English	Telugu
1. Did he meet her?	(i) ataɖu a:me-nu kalis-æ-ɖa:? He-NOM she-ACC meet-PST-3.SG.M-Q ‘Did he meet her?’
2. Yes, he met her.	(ii) avunu, ataɖu a:me-nu kalis-æ-ɖu. Yes, he-NOM she-ACC meet-PST-3.SG.M
3. *met her	‘Yes, he met her.’
4. *he met	(iii) a:menu kalis-æ-ɖu. she-ACC meet-PST-3.SG.M ‘(he) met her.’
5. *met	(iv) ataɖu kalis-æ-ɖu. He-NOM meet-PST-3.SG.M ‘he met’
	(v) kalis-æ-ɖu. ‘(he) met’

Table 1. Examples of English and Telugu

In the above examples, Telugu allows subjects and objects to remain unexpressed and the sentences are grammatical as in (i-v). While in the English examples, arguments should be expressed. Since Standard English doesn’t allow dropping the pronouns, the sentences (3-5) are ungrammatical. Telugu has the ability to drop any pronoun in a sentence.²

² Butt (2001, August) states that South Asian languages in general have the ability to pro-drop any and all arguments.

Research scholars proposed various approaches to account null subject languages from traditionalist to minimalist framework. Perlmutter (1968, 1971) was the one who brought the Pro-Drop Parameter to the attention of linguists.³ Rizzi (1982, p.143) proposed that null subject parameter (NSP) can be divided into two sub-cases, one applying to languages in which the unexpressed pronoun can only be an expletive, and another applying to languages where it can be referential. Scholars like Chomsky (1982) and Rizzi (1982, 1986) argue that referential null subjects are permitted because the language has rich agreement morphology. In Rich Agreement Hypothesis, a standard assumption is that the inflectional system of null subject languages like Spanish or Italian are in some sense ‘rich’ enough to allow for the phenomena. But this is not the same in other languages like Chinese and Korean. Jaeggli and Safir (1989) believe that Morphological Uniformity is the crucial property that determines null subjects in tensed sentences are licensed, where “An inflectional paradigm P in a language L is morphologically uniform iff P has either only underived inflectional forms or only derived inflectional forms” (Jaeggli & Safir, 1989, p. 30). They claimed that English is an example of a language with a mixture of morphologically complex and bare stems. As English marks agreement only on the third person singular, it doesn’t qualify as a null subject language in either of the above frameworks.

Harvie (1998) says while Morphological Uniformity constraint on the context of null subjects suggests that it should be highly restricted, in his own investigation of recorded spontaneous conversation in Ottawa English, he did find examples of null subjects, one of which is shown in (3).

(3) @ watch a movie or something, you know (246, 212 A, 055)

That such examples exist is not surprising from a variationist point of view, since we should expect the natural discourse of speakers to vary from what prescriptive grammars say. But it is unexpected, given that English does not fulfill the criteria proposed for null subject languages by theoretical linguists. Harvie (1998) argues that finding what the prescriptive and theoretical grammarians define as a “sentence” in naturally-occurring, spontaneous discourse is a challenging task. Conversation is full of stops and starts, hesitations, interruptions, and other such phenomena, which means that defining the boundaries of sentences for the purpose of extracting tokens leads to a large number of potential tokens which must be discarded because of their inherent ambiguity. He argues that the constraints that hold for English are also important for pro-drop languages and this point is open for debate. He says that he does not believe that English is a pro-drop language, or even a semi-pro-drop language, but it does hint at the universal nature of this phenomenon. The importance is not the difference between pro-drop and non-pro-drop languages, but rather the similarity of the factors conditioning null subject in all languages in which it occurs. Finally, the disparity between daily experience and textbook grammar exposes the very real gap between natural language and the prescriptive rules of language. This study is one of a very few investigating this gap for null subjects in English and, as such, requires elaboration.

³ Perlmutter (1971) distinguished languages with the surface filter in (i) which he called type A languages, from those lacking it which he calls Type B languages.

While subject pronouns are dropped both in colloquial spoken English and in certain informal registers of written English, these two phenomena are distinct and require different analyses (Weir, 2008). He has provided evidence to support a metrical analysis of subject pronoun drop in spoken English. In fact, in spoken English, ‘subject pronoun drop’ is somewhat a misleading name, as the element that can be dropped is the first syllable in an intonational phrase, if that syllable is unstressed. It simply happens that the element is often a subject pronoun. However, he has shown that in written English, the phenomenon is syntactic. Ramifications resulting from the separation of spoken and written grammars in this respect have been noted above. We do not yet have a complete account of this phenomenon, which awaits further research.

In the minimalist framework, scholars identified four-types of null subject languages in world languages. They are: 1) Consistent null subject languages 2) Expletive null subjects 3) Discourse pro-drop 4) Partial null subject languages. We account for this null subject phenomenon in greater detail in Telugu by adopting ideas from Roberts and Holmberg (2010). It is noticed that consistent null subject languages are most analyzed in pro-drop languages. For example, the Romance null subject languages and Modern Greek are paradigm examples of this kind of languages. Now, following are the two diagnostic features of a consistent null subject language: (i) the possibility of leaving the definite subject pronoun unexpressed in any person-number combination in any tense. (ii) the rich agreement inflection on the verb (Roberts & Holmberg, 2010). At this point, this paper tries to give an explanation to support the claim that Telugu is a consistent null subject language. Taking (i) and (ii) into consideration, we shall observe some examples in Telugu to find out whether it is a consistent null subject language or not.

- (4)
- | | | | |
|----|------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| a. | pro _i | pa:ʃa | paɖ-æ-nu _i |
| | | song | sing-PST-1.SG |
| | | ‘(I) sang the song.’ | |
| b. | pro _i | pa:ʃa | paɖ-æ-mu _i |
| | | song | sing-PST-1.PL |
| | | ‘(We) sang the song.’ | |
| c. | pro _i | pa:ʃa | paɖ-a:-vu _i |
| | | song | sing-PST-2.SG |
| | | ‘(You) sang the song.’ | |
| d. | pro _i | pa:ʃa | paɖ-a:-ru _i |
| | | song | sing-PST-2.PL |
| | | ‘(You) sang the song.’ | |
| e. | pro _i | pa:ʃa | paɖ-æ-ɖu _i |
| | | song | sing-PST-3.SG.M |
| | | ‘(He) sang the song.’ | |
| f. | pro _i | pa:ʃa | paɖ-in-di _i |
| | | song | sing-PST-3.SG |
| | | ‘(She) sang the song.’ | |
| g. | pro _i | pa:ʃa | paɖ-a:-ru _i |

song sing-PST-3.PL

‘(They) sang the song.’

In the above examples, overt pronominal subjects are totally absent. It means that they are phonetically null arguments. It is observed that part of the pronoun spells out as an affix on the verbal inflection to represent the specified pronoun. So, the understood null subjects can be identified by the listener. It is clear in these examples that the personal endings on the verb are distinct. The dropped pronouns are *ne:nu*, *me:mu*, *ni:vu*, *ataḍu*, *a:me/adi*, *wa:ru*. In Telugu, the 1st person and 2nd person pronominal subjects are dropped freely in any context but the 3rd person (pronominal) subject is generally dropped when it is already expressed in an earlier sentence or when the speaker assumes that the listener knows whom he is talking about (Suman, 2014). It is claimed that Telugu is a full-fledged consistent null subject language since it characteristically shows ‘rich’ agreement inflection on the verb in all persons.

Since English is a non-null subject language, a pronoun has to be expressed in the subject position of the finite clauses. At this juncture, native speakers of Telugu have untaught knowledge of mother tongue which enables them to apply first language rules to second language. According to Hyams (1986) all children start out speaking ‘Italian’ with respect to the null subject option. This is the same in the case of Indian languages. Children start speaking by dropping the pronoun in their native language. Since a child sets the pro-drop parameter in their native language, it is difficult for them to reset the parameter in a non-pro-drop language. So, the child mismatches this parameter at the appropriate values for the target language.

4. Methodology

We collected samples from schools and colleges of various levels of students in Telugu states of India. As part of the survey, we visited schools and colleges to examine how the children and adults use Telugu and English languages in relation to pro-drop. The data was collected from native speakers of Telugu children and adults through a questionnaire, face-to-face interviews, and personal observations. Spoken corpus data was collected and recorded from the students in various contexts especially in classrooms, birthday parties, festival celebrations, conversations, role plays, and activities. The data was randomly collected from 20 children aged 11 and 20 adults aged 22, respectively. The background of respondents was a mixture of both rural and semi-urban areas of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Since the respondents’ mother tongue was Telugu (pro-drop language) they dropped pronouns in English specifically in informal register.

5. Results of the study

Overt pronoun dropping rate is examined in Telugu-speaking children and adults in their first and second languages. According to Taylor (1975), learners at elementary level produced more transfer errors than learners at intermediate or advanced levels. Consider the following table below:

<i>(L1)Telugu Person</i>	Percentage	Number of Times	<i>(L2) English Person</i>	Percentage	Number of Times
<i>ne:nu</i> (1SG)	67%	20/30	<i>I</i> (1SG)	63%	19/30
<i>me:mu</i> (1PL)	77%	23/30	<i>We</i> (1PL)	67%	20/30
<i>ni:vu</i> (2SG)	80%	24/30	<i>You</i> (2SG)	77%	23/30
<i>mi:ru</i> (2PL)	87%	26/30	<i>You</i> (2PL)	83%	25/30
<i>ataḍu</i> (3SG.M)	63%	19/30	<i>He</i> (3SG.M)	50%	15/30
<i>a:me</i> (3SG.F)	60%	18/30	<i>She</i> (3SG.F)	53%	16/30
<i>adi</i> (3SG)	67%	20/30	<i>It</i> (3SG)	50%	15/30
<i>wa:ru</i> (3PL)	87%	26/30	<i>They</i> (3PL)	80%	24/30
Total	73%	176/240	Total	65%	157/240

Table 2. Overt pronoun dropping rate in children in spoken Telugu (L1) and English (L2).

Table 2 represents pro-drop rates in Telugu-speaking children during the process of using their L1. Since Telugu is a pro-drop language it permits the omission of pronominal subjects in finite clauses. Though English is not a pro-drop language, English-speaking children are transferring the rules and properties of L1 on L2 as shown in Table 2. Our reports show that Telugu-speaking children dropped subjects at a rate of 73% whereas English-speaking children dropped subjects at a rate of 65%.⁴ It is also observed that a higher rate of dropping was found in plural pronouns than singulars in both the languages. In this case, children are not able to switch the pro-drop parameter at the appropriate values for the English language.

<i>(L1) Telugu Person</i>	Percentage	Number of Times	<i>(L2) English Person</i>	Percentage	Number of Times
1. <i>ne:nu</i> (1SG)	67%	20/30	(i) <i>I</i> (1SG)	27%	8/30
2. <i>me:mu</i> (1PL)	60%	18/30	(ii) <i>We</i> (1PL)	23%	7/30
3. <i>ni:vu</i> (2SG)	50%	15/30	(iii) <i>You</i> (2SG)	27%	8/30
4. <i>mi:ru</i> (2PL)	53%	16/30	(iv) <i>You</i> (2PL)	33%	10/30
5. <i>ataḍu</i> (3SG.M)	67%	20/30	(v) <i>He</i> (3SG.M)	37%	11/30
6. <i>a:me</i> (3SG.F)	60%	18/30	(vi) <i>She</i> (3SG.F)	33%	10/30
7. <i>adi</i> (3SG)	77%	23/30	(vii) <i>It</i> (3SG)	33%	10/30
8. <i>wa:ru</i> (3PL)	57%	17/30	(viii) <i>They</i> (3PL)	30%	9/30
Total	61%	147/240	Total	30%	73/240

Table 3. Overt pronoun dropping rate in adults in spoken Telugu (L1) and English (L2).

Overt pronoun dropping rates in adults is shown in Table 3 in Telugu and English, respectively. In spoken Telugu, pronouns are freely dropped and the higher dropping rates are found in 1st person and 2nd person

⁴ Italian children omit subjects at a rate of 70% whereas English-speaking children omit subjects at a rate of roughly 30% (Valian, 1991).

Telugu pronominal subjects, while in English higher dropping rates are found in 2nd person and 3rd person pronominal subjects. Our reports show that Telugu-speaking adults dropped subjects at a rate of 61% whereas English-speaking adults dropped subjects at a rate of 30%. The overall issue from the beginning is how these two languages are represented in the minds of persons and how the L1 reflects its rules and properties on the L2 in relation to pronominal subjects. One of the findings is children and adult speakers of Telugu dropped pronouns whenever they find more VP length. Our reports show that Telugu children dropped pronouns at a rate of 73% while Telugu adults dropped pronouns at 61% in Telugu language. English-speaking children omitted pronominal subjects at a rate of 65% whereas English-speaking adults omitted pronouns at a rate of 30%. However, children dropped pronouns at a higher rate in both the languages.

6. Data interpretation

There was no imposition on speakers which means there were no rigid frameworks to elicit the data from speakers. The data was collected naturally and dynamically from the participants in general conversations. It is also observed that sometimes the speakers changed the conversation from one topic to another topic, especially children. Adults initially tried to focus on certain grammatical elements in English and subsequently they dropped those patterns which are considered to be ungrammatical in Standard English.

Mitchell and Robinson (1986) say that null subjects are in fact found in Old and Middle English. It is known that English must have an overt subject whether nominal or pronominal according to prescriptive grammar and linguistic theory. Initially, various situations were given to respondents to find out the usage of pronouns in both the languages, Telugu and Indian English. Our main focus is to investigate the pronoun-dropping rate in L1 and L2. The following are some examples collected from our data which are widely misused by children.

- (5)
- a. *That boy, don't like
 - b. *will give chocolate?
 - c. *Do have book?
 - d. *want pen
 - e. *came

The samples above evidently explain that young English-speaking children will drop subjects more frequently than objects. Other elements are also dropped in the given sentences above. This may be the result of L1 which affects its ability on L2. During earlier stages, children start speaking out in their mother tongues which are pro-drop languages and they try to imitate utterances of elders.⁵ Eventually, L1 characteristics are being fixed at cognitive level of children and those are spontaneous and easy to use without having any pressure. As a result, children may not try to reset the parameter according to the respective language. Researchers have been investigating how the languages are being represented in the

⁵ In *Verbal Behavior*, Skinner (1957) described language as a behavior that, as such, is learned: "A child learns verbal behavior when utterances relatively lacking in pattern, and which are selectively reinforced, gradually take on forms that produce the appropriate consequences in a given verbal community" (p. 40).

minds of children and adults. A lot of research has been done on whether there is any natural sequence through which all second language learners progress or if it varies from person to person based on various reasons. It is observed that Telugu-speaking children start learning English with plurals, then they move on to other grammatical properties. Similarly, Dulay and Burt (1973) state that Spanish-speaking children learning English start with plural 's' and progress through continuous 'ing', copula *be* 'is', and so on.

Teacher	Student
Did you do homework?	*don't
Did Rakesh watch the movie?	*watched
Is he a good boy?	*bad boy
How many lions are there in the zoo?	two lions are there
Do you have two English books?	Yes, I have two English Books.

Table 4. Examples of English from child L2 speakers in the present study

In the conversations in Table 4, it is shown that majority of the pronouns are dropped in English-speaking children. Both Gerken (1991), and Valian and Eisenberg (1996) have found that in elicited imitation young English-speaking children are less likely to repeat pronominal subjects than lexical NP subjects. In a similar way, pronouns are being dropped more in comparison to lexical NPs in Telugu- and English-speaking children. In other words, pronouns are more likely to drop than full NPs in child language.

7. Conclusion

Principles are common to all languages while parameters have to be set in a specific language by the speakers. Most of the time Telugu-speaking children showed interest in speaking out at the discourse level. In other words, children may not initiate new topics abruptly as adults do. Since they always communicate at discourse level, pro-dropping rate is higher in children than adults. It is also observed that subjects are dropped at a higher rate than objects in both children and adults. Our study shows that higher pronoun-dropping rates are extensively found in children versus adults in both Telugu and English languages. It is not an easy task to investigate knowledge of children and adults at their competence level and it is more complex in children especially. Some researchers observed that children's linguistic performance is largely irrelevant to their competence. This research emphasizes rules and properties of L1 and how it transfers its grammar to L2. When it comes to pro-drop parameter in Indian English, children directly transferred their knowledge on L2 without setting the parameters to specific language. As a result, pronoun dropping rate in children is higher.

This study compared the pro-drop rate in Telugu-speaking children and adults in both Telugu and Indian English languages respectively. The overall contributions of these early days of SLA research were that the two languages may be separate or closely linked in the mind/brain, where the forms of one language may affect the other, and that L2 learners create a distinct interlanguage with its own rules and properties. We all know that Standard English is a non-pro-drop language which does not allow dropping of any pronoun. However, Telugu children have the untaught knowledge especially in L1 and the pro-drop

option is there in their native language. So, they directly apply it to other languages. In pro-drop in Indian English, children may not take any pressure to reset the parameter to a specific language. So it is the failure of performance. Adults know the rules and properties of L2 at competence level. That is the reason lower dropping rate is found in Indian English. However, this is a common phenomenon witnessed in Indian English.

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