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## The analysis of subjects in the oral and written production of L2 English learners: transfer and language typology

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### Abstract

This study considers the oral and written production of L1 Danish L2 English learners and focuses on the analysis of sentential subjects and the issue of transfer. To deal with (the lack of) transfer in typologically close languages, it analyzes the English subjects produced by 20 primary school students divided in two groups depending on the time of exposure. The results show that the subjects produced are both grammatically correct and pragmatically adequate. Therefore, the analysis of transfer should look into language typology as a primary source for transfer, rather than into amount of exposure when typologically close languages are considered.

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*Keywords:* language typology; second language acquisition; transfer; exposure; experimental tests

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### 1. Introduction

The present study focuses on the analysis of sentential subjects and on the issue of transfer within the oral and written production of speakers with Danish as a first language (L1) who are learning English as their second language (L2). Its aim is to account for the importance of language typology, time of exposure and the possibility of transfer when two typologically similar languages are in contact. Furthermore, and given that both written and oral data are elicited (through an oral semi-guided interview and a written picture description task), it seeks to explore how different experimental tasks might influence the L2 English output in a specific grammatical area, i.e. sentential subjects.

### 2. Background

Previous studies on L2 acquisition have argued that typologically different languages often influence each other resulting in negative transfer (e.g. Odlin 1989, Meisel 2001, Pladevall Ballester 2012). In this respect, transfer is said (1) to have a specific directionality, since structures are often transferred from the L1 into the L2 and (2) to be linked to the amount of exposure so that the more exposure learners have the more native-like production they would have. However, one can hypothesize that, if the L1

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and the L2 exhibit similar grammatical properties, no transfer is expected in this particular area of grammar and amount of exposure should, therefore, play no role.

Sentential subjects have been widely studied both under linguistic theory (i.e. as in the null subject parameter) and in the case of language acquisition studies, both monolingual and bilingual, and in bilingual acquisition studies, both simultaneous bilingual (L1+L1) and sequential bilingual (L1+L2). Under the null subject parameter (Perlmutter, 1971; Jaeggli, 1981; Chomsky, 1981; and Jaeggli and Safir, 1989, among others), languages are typologically divided into two groups: [+ null subject] languages (i.e. Spanish and Bosnian) and [- null subject] languages (i.e. Danish and English). The examples bellow show how sentential subjects are presented in the different languages.

1. Tom and Mary are friends. **They** always play with a ball. (English)
2. Tom og Mary er venner. **De** leger altid med en bold. (Danish)
3. Tom y Mary son amigos. Siempre **Ø** juegan con un balón. (Spanish)
4. Tom i Mary su prijatelji. Uvijek **Ø** se igraju sa \_ loptom. (Bosnian)

In the case of sentential subjects, most works on L2 acquisition deal with transfer between two typologically different languages (e.g. Brice and Rivero, 1996; Gottardo, Siegel, and Wade-Woolley, 2001; Gebauer, Zaunbauer, and Möller, 2013). In the case of L1 Spanish – L2 English, an overproduction of (illicit) null subjects in the L2 has been shown to occur and it has been attributed to the influence of the L1 where null subjects are a “legal” option (e.g. Montrul and Rodríguez Louro, 2006; Montrul, 2010). That is, given that null subjects are a grammatical option in Spanish (example 3), these speakers were transferring this grammatical property into English, a [-null subject] language (as in example 1 above). As a result, the English of these speakers contains a high amount of ungrammatical null subjects.

Although much work has been done on typologically different languages, studies discussing typologically similar languages are scarce (e.g. de Prada, 2009; Filiaci, 2010). Sauter (2002) reviews previous research on the null subject parameter where she argues that most research has actually been conducted on typologically different languages, where a [+ null subject] language is compared to a [- null subject] language and vice versa. Her review points to issues such as the following: (1) L2 Spanish learners start using null subjects before they have mastered the agreement morphology of the verb, (2) L2 Spanish learners from both [+ null subject] L1s and [- null subject] L1s omit both referential and non-referential subjects from the early stages of L2 acquisition and (3) L1 speakers of [+ null subject] languages who are learning a [- null subject] language omit both referential and non-referential subjects, which can be interpreted as transfer of the L1 possibility of null subjects. After looking at the research available, Sauter (2002) seeks to comprehend whether parameter resetting is possible in L2 acquisition and, if that is so, whether parameters actually transfer. The conclusion that she reaches is that the linguistic formulation of the null subject parameter is essential and any proposal related to parameter settings must involve a cluster of properties. In this respect, the few studies discussing typologically similar languages (de Prada, 2009; Filiaci, 2010) combine the basic property of the null subject parameter (i.e. the possibility of null subjects in finite sentences) and other related issues such as the lexico-semantic interface (de Prada, 2009) and pronominal antecedent retrieval (Filiaci, 2010).

De Prada (2009) deals with Catalan and Spanish and she argues that the discourse-pragmatic interface is more vulnerable to interlinguistic influence than the lexico-semantic interface. The main focus lies on the subject position in unergative and unaccusative constructions in Spanish, because in this context the lexico-semantic interface and the discourse-pragmatic interface can be studied. Both Spanish and Catalan are [+null subject] languages and in both the subject position is a syntactic reflex of predicate type and focus. The difference lays in the broad focus of unergative predicates; in Spanish preverbal subjects of unergative verbs are far less preferred than in Catalan. Everything considered, Spanish and Catalan have similar word order preferences seen from the discourse-pragmatic interface but differ in the word order preferences at the lexico-semantic interface. So, de Prada concludes that the results obtained are related to language pair similarity rather than to the vulnerability of interfaces.

Filiaci (2010) deals with the analysis of subjects by considering two closely related languages (Italian and Spanish); that is, languages that have a similar distribution in terms of the null subject parameter, as they are both [+null subject] languages. However, in spite of this similarity, Italian and Spanish exhibit a slight difference in retrieving the antecedent, especially when pragmatic aspects play a role in the interpretation. Filiaci argues that this difference is problematic as it is located at the interface between syntax and pragmatics, an interface that has been shown to be vulnerable when languages are in contact (Hulk and Müller, 2000; Müller and Hulk, 2001; Paradis and Navarro, 2003; Serratrice, Sorace and Paoli, 2004; Serratrice, Sorace, Filiaci, and Baldo, 2009, among others). In her study, she states that the difference between Italian and Spanish lies in the distribution between strong and weak pronouns and, in particular, between the types of antecedents these pronouns can have in the two languages. Both the Italian and the Spanish pronominal systems possess two series of overt pronouns: a strong one (*lui* and *lei* as the Italian 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular ones; and *él/ella* as the Spanish 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular ones) and a weak one (*egli/ella* in Italian; and *él/ella* in Spanish). However, while in Italian the weak pronoun can co-refer with discourse antecedents, the strong pronoun cannot. In Spanish the anaphoric behavior of the pronouns *él/ella* could then be understood as an indication of structural deficiency. The author argues for two possible approaches for this cross linguistic difference: (1) cross linguistic differences in the position of the antecedents and (2) cross linguistic differences in the nature of the personal pronouns. The data available show

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