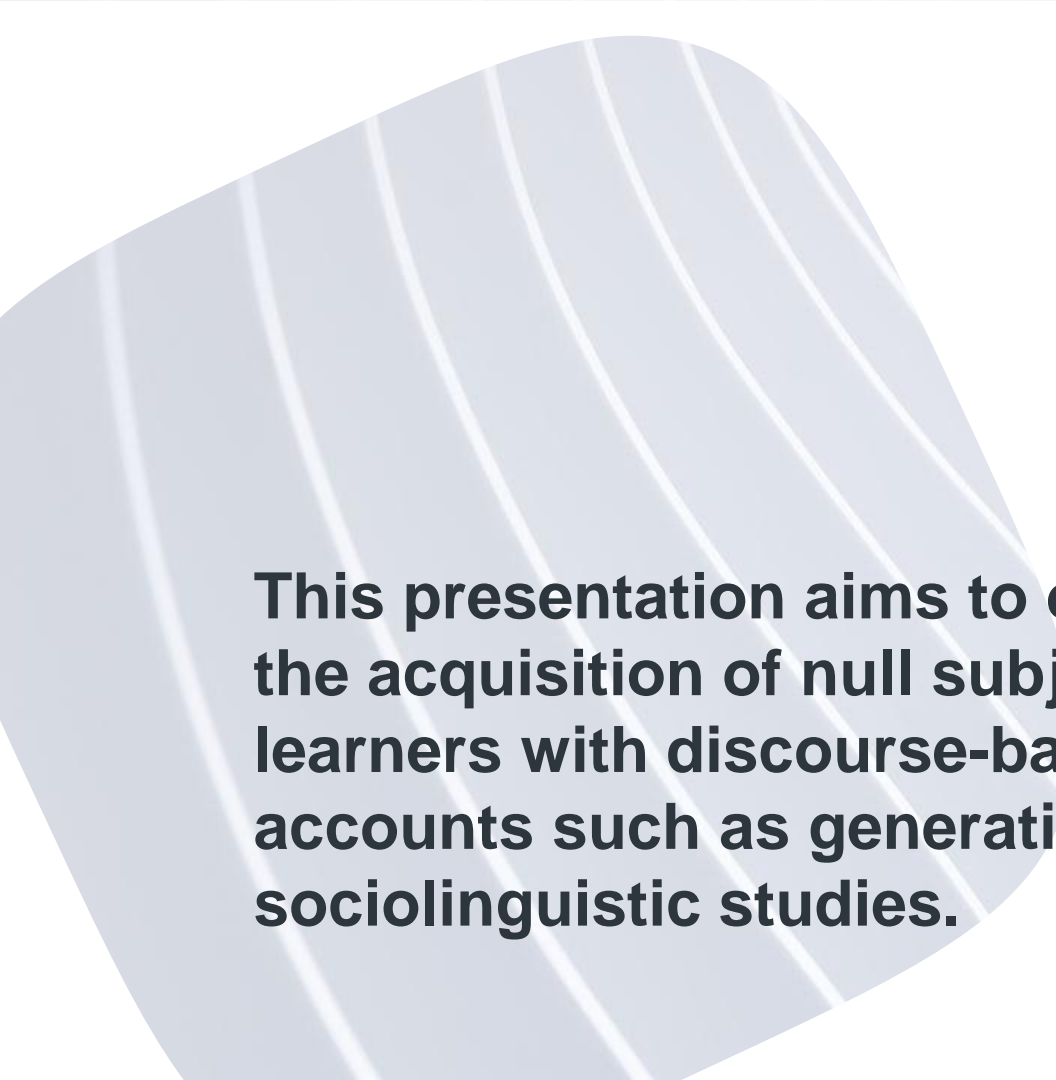


The Null Subject Pronoun Acquisition in Spanish

Presented by Kiss Nikolett



This presentation aims to overview the findings on the acquisition of null subject pronouns by L2 learners with discourse-based approaches, syntactic accounts such as generative grammar and sociolinguistic studies.



1

Introduction

A multifaceted issue

Null Subjects in Spanish

(1) **Él/ ∅** trabaja poco.

“**He/ ∅** works little”. (Lozano, 2018, pp. 412)

(2) **Diego** tiene mucho dinero aunque **#él/ ∅** trabaja poco.

“**Diego** has a lot of money although **he/ ∅** works a little.” (Lozano, 2018, pp. 413)

(3) (a) **Juan** es mi amigo de Venezuela. (b) **∅** Tiene tres hijos y (c) **∅** trabaja con Maria. Julia dice que (d) **él** es muy inteligente.

“(a) **John** is my friend from Venezuela. (b) **[he]** has 3 kids and (c) **[he]** works with Mary. Julie says that (d) **he** is very intelligent.” (Geeslin & Gudmestad, 2008, pp. 70)

Introduction


- Null pronouns cause issues for all learners, even if their mother tongue is similar to Spanish.
- Null pronouns are constrained by pragmatic rules.
- Learners tend to overuse overt pronouns. (Lozano, 2018; Bel et al. 2016, & Geeslin & Gudmestad, 2008)
- Pragmatic knowledge may not be transferable. (Margaza & Bel, 2006 as cited in Lozano, 2018)



2

Discourse based approaches

The topic-focus distinction



Null subject languages

- Null subject languages distribute null and overt pronouns based on topic-continuity, which is a discourse-pragmatic constraint. (Bel et al., 2016, & Lozano, 2018)
- Discourse-pragmatic constraints can cause difficulties with the distinction of overt and null pronouns.

The Position of Antecedent Strategy (PAS)

Null pronouns are used in topic continuity contexts, while overt pronouns mark contrastive focus. (Carminati, 2002 & 2005, as cited in Lozano, 2018)

→ using overt pronouns in topic continuity contexts leads to redundancy

(4) Jorge_i saludó a Diego_j [mientras $\emptyset_{i/\#j}$ /él_{#i/j} abría la puerta.]

‘Jorge greeted Diego [while he/ \emptyset opened the door.’ (Lozano, 2018, pp. 414)

Lozano (2018)

- L1 Greek learners of Spanish, both languages are null-subject languages
- Positive transfer would be expected
- BUT: results show that correct pronoun use develops with time and practice
- Learners were not able to transfer their L1 knowledge. Why?
 - flexibility of overt pronouns
 - developmental process
 - learners like to be redundant over ambiguous

Bel et al. (2016)

- L1 Arabic (null subject language) and L1 English (non-null subject language) learners.
- Arabic learners had an advantage at intermediate levels over English native speakers → transfer expected at early stages.
- At advanced levels both groups overcame the challenges of null pronoun interpretation to some extent.
 - L1 English learners were still behind L1 Arabic speakers
- Here, transfer seems to be possible?

Bel et al. (2016)

- Deficiencies result from:
 - limitations of working memory
 - pragmatic knowledge is acquired later
- Unanswered Q: the displayed data shows gradual progress for both groups
- Further Q: Why is that L1 Arabic learners were able to transfer their knowledge and L1 Greek were not?



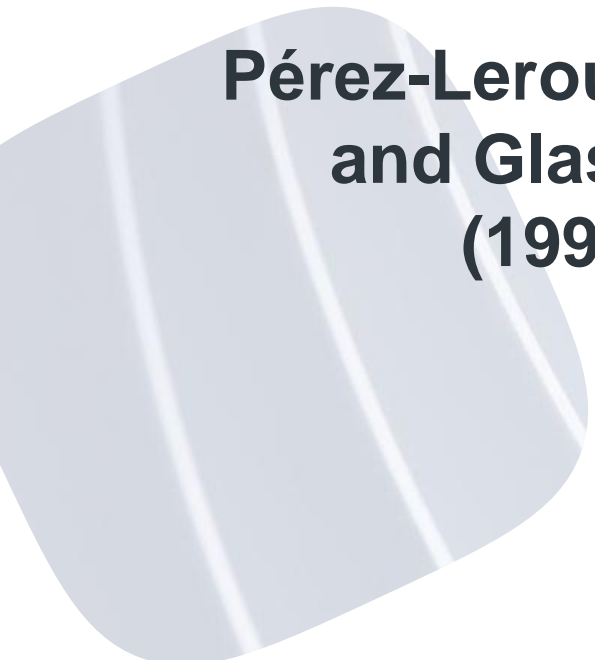
3

Syntactic accounts

The OPC constraint

Pérez-Leroux and Glass (1999)

- A generative approach examining (1) the nature of null pronouns and (2) the availability of UG for null pronoun resolution.
- They separate two governing forces:
 - the 'overt pronoun constraint' or OPC (Montalbetti, 1984), a syntactic interface
 - topic-focus distinction, a pragmatic interface
- They claim that the first one is available in early acquisition, while the second one is learned.



Pérez-Leroux and Glass (1999)

Implications:

- While OPC contexts are rarer, they are more available for learners, it is available through Universal Grammar.
- There are different levels of awareness of pronoun distribution.
- These findings are in line with the previously discussed data and the claim that syntactic elements are transferable, while pragmatic aspects must be learned. (Margaza and Bel, 2006 as cited in Lozano, 2018)



4

Sociolinguistic proposals

Multinomial investigations



The studies

- Multiple independent linguistic factors are investigated: the person and number of the verb, the specificity of the referent, the tense/ mood/ aspect (TMA) of the verb, switch reference, referent cohesiveness, and perseveration.
- Both studies tested on L1 English L2 advanced Spanish speakers



Geeslin & Gudmestad (2008)

- Two main aspects, person and number of the subject and specificity.
- They claim that not only topic continuity and contrastive focus triggers specific pronoun preference, but
 - **ambiguous verb forms**, that agree with several person and number (Silva-Corvalán, 1982)
 - **perseveration**, “an overt subject is more likely to follow a preceding overt subject and a null subject is more likely to follow a null subject” (Flores-Ferrán, 2004 as cited in Geeslin & Gudmestad, 2008, pp. 71).



Geeslin & Gudmestad (2008)

- Overall, L1 English speakers used more null pronouns than L1 Spanish speakers → unlimited variation
- **Exception:** first person singular and third person plural
- **Main problem:** inappropriate uses → pragmatic issue
- 3rd person is especially problematic: native speakers often use a wider range (demonstrative pronouns or indefinite pronouns, etc.)



**Geeslin &
Gudmestad
(2008)**

- Main finding: there are **systematic differences** between L1 Spanish speakers' and L2 advanced learners' interpretation of anaphoras



Gudmestad et al. (2013)

- Multinomial, statistical investigation.
- Learners have to also acquire a **semantic property** as well.
- Both syntactic and pragmatic constraints influence the use of pronouns.
- The differences between natives and non-natives were **mainly syntactic and semantic**.
- L1 Arabic learners had syntactic-semantic advantage over L1 English learners, not pragmatic?



5

Conclusion

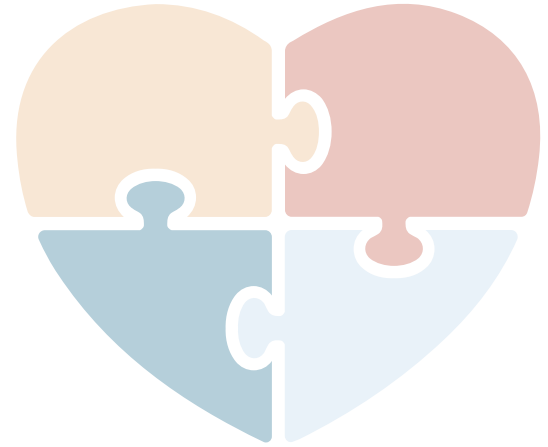


Conclusion

- The distribution of Spanish overt and null pronouns are dependent on many aspects.
- the syntactic elements are acquired by all learners at very early stages, allowing both overt and null pronouns, the pragmatic and semantic rules are learned with practice over time.
- The positive transfer might be weak, or even not possible at all.
- The third person is the most problematic factor.
- Need for further studies on L1 null subject language learners of Spanish.

**Thank you for your
attention!**

Do you have any questions?



References

- Bel, A., Sagarra, N., Comínguez, J. P., & García-Alcaraz, E. (2016). Transfer and proficiency effects in L2 processing of subject anaphora. *Lingua*, 184, 134-159.
- Geeslin, K. L. & Gudmestad, A. (2008). Variable Subject Expression in Second-language Spanish: A Comparison of Native and Non-native Speakers. In *Selected Proceedings of the 2007 Second Language Research Forum*, ed. Melissa Bowles, Rebecca Foote, Silvia Perpiñán, and Rakesh Bhatt, 69-85. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. <http://www.lingref.com/cpp/slrf/2007/paper1736.pdf>
- Gudmestad, A., House, L. and Geeslin, K.L. (2013). What a Bayesian Analysis Can Do for SLA: New Tools for the Sociolinguistic Study of Subject Expression in L2 Spanish. *Language Learning*, 63, 371-399. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lang.12006>
- Lozano, C. (2018). The Development of Anaphora Resolution at the Syntax-Discourse Interface: Pronominal Subjects in Greek Learners of Spanish. *J Psycholinguist Res* 47, 411–430. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10936-017-9541-8>
- Pérez-Leroux, A. T., & Glass, W. R. (1999). Null anaphora in Spanish second language acquisition: probabilistic versus generative approaches. *Second Language Research*, 15(2), 220–249. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43104593>

Special thanks to all the people who made and released these awesome resources for free:

- Presentation template by [SlidesCarnival](#)
- Photographs by [Unsplash](#)