

SUBJECT PRONOUNS AND CLITICS IN THE SPANISH INTERLANGUAGE OF FRENCH L1 SPEAKERS*

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1. Introduction

Until around the turn of the century it was generally assumed that second language (L2) acquisition did not differ in any important respects from third and subsequent language (L3/n) acquisition. However, more recently researchers have recognized that the factors involved may be significantly different, and L3 acquisition poses interesting new questions that not only inform the specific issues involved but also contribute to our understanding of acquisition in general.

In this paper we will examine the acquisition of Spanish subject pronouns by L1 speakers of French, all of which speak English to a certain degree. Subject pronouns in Spanish are full pronouns in both Spanish and English, the L3/n and L2 of the speakers, while in French they are either clitics or weak pronouns. This combination allows us to examine whether transfer in L3 acquisition comes from the L2, from the L1, from both or from neither. Our results will show that these beginning learners seem to be at an intermediate stage at which they analyse the data as both weak and strong, with no clear cut judgements, raising interesting questions for future research.

2. Issues in third language acquisition

One of the most important debates regarding non-native acquisition revolves around the issue of the initial state. Although for some scholars the L2 initial state is identical to that of an L1 acquirer, namely Universal Grammar (UG) (Epstein, Flynn and Martohardjono 1996), the general consensus is that it is the L1, a position first argued for by Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) who also assumed that UG was available to adult learners. The development of the second language would therefore proceed in the following manner: as input is received that cannot be parsed by the L1 structure, the learner gradually changes the interlanguage structure. In principle, therefore, the learner can acquire an L2 grammar that is indistinguishable from a native speakers. However, in some cases it may be the case that certain types of ambiguous input are not sufficient to lead the learner to restructure. In other words, native-like acquisition is possible but not guaranteed.

Assuming the Full Transfer/Full Access account is correct for L2 acquisition, we may ask whether Full Transfer from the L1 is also the point of departure for L3/n acquisition. If it is not, what is the initial state in these cases? If the answer is that the L2 represents the initial state, Full Transfer from L2 as it were, it would seem to imply that

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the process of acquiring an L3 itself is quite different, given that the L2 may not be a Final State language, but one in the process of developing. Alternatively, the initial state may be both the L1 and the L2, or the L1 or the L2. In fact, most of these possibilities have been entertained regarding the source of transfer in L3/n. Leung (2005, 2006) argued that the L1 would always be the initial state since the native language always has a more prominent status. Bardel and Falk (2007.), Falk and Bardel (2010), in contrast, argue for what they termed the *L2 Status Factor*, according to which the last system acquired (the L2 or other) is the main source of transfer. According to Flynn, Foley and Vinnitskaya's (2004) Cumulative Enhancement Model (CEM), all previous linguistic knowledge may be the can potentially affect the L3/n. However, for these scholars transfer is always positive. A different position is taken by Rothman and colleagues (Rothman and Cabrelli Amaro 2010, Rothman 2013) for whom the decisive factor is typology, the closer the perceived typology of the L1 or the L2 to the L3 the higher the probability of transfer taking place. Typology is not used here in the sense of belonging to the same language family, but is rather based on how close the phonology of the languages in question appear to the learner. Finally, a possibility also suggested in Rothman and Cabrelli Amaro (2010) is that, as in the CEM, both the L1 and the L2 may be at the root of transfer, but in contrast to the CEM transfer may also be negative, that is, the L1 and or the L2 could be the source of misanalysis.

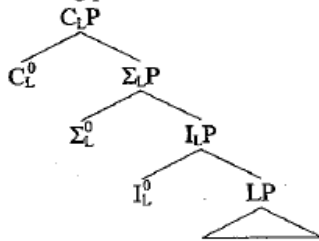
This paper will contribute to the debate with an examination of learners of L3 Spanish at the very beginning of their acquisition, just three weeks after the start of their first year university course in Spanish. If the L1 is always the source of transfer, the participants will assume Spanish subject pronouns are weak/clitic-like, as they are in French, and therefore reject sentences in which the subject is separated from the verb or focalized, for example. On the other hand, if the *L2 Status Factor* is operative, they should have no problem accepting sentences with a strong subject pronoun given that English and Spanish are similar in this respect. According to the CEM transfer can only be from English, as transfer from French would be negative leading to errors. In this study it is therefore impossible to distinguish between the L2 Status Factor and the CEM, both predicting English as the source of knowledge if transfer can only be positive. However, rather than the CEM in the strict sense, we also consider the possibility that both the L1 and the L2 could contribute to the learners' interlanguage grammar with both a positive and negative form of transfer. Finally, if typology is based on phonological perception only, it is difficult to tell whether learners would see English or French phonology as closer to Spanish. On the other hand, if it is based on a general perception of the three languages in question, it is probable that learners would assume French is closer to Spanish than English, but this is a tentative assumption only. As this position is indistinguishable from the L1 as source of transfer, we will not entertain it.

3. Nature of the problem

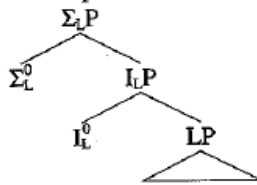
We will follow Cardinaletti and Starke (1999) and Schmitz and Müller (2008) in assuming that there are at least three types of pronouns: strong pronouns, weak pronouns and clitics. From a theoretical point of view the difference among the three is generally posited to lie in the amount of structure each type projects. Strong pronouns are equivalent to full CPs, weak pronouns are intermediate, and clitics only project the equivalent of IP, as illustrated in (1) from Cardinaletti and Starke (1999).

(1) Difference between pronoun types.

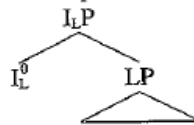
a. Strong pronouns



b. Weak pronouns



c. Clitic pronouns



Since the early nineties it has been known that French subject pronouns are more similar to clitics or weak pronouns than subjects pronouns in English. Roberge (1990) argued that French subject pronouns behaved like object clitics in several respects. More recently Schmitz and Müller (2008), based on acquisitional facts, have proposed that they are weak pronouns. Whether they are clitics or weak pronouns is orthogonal to our paper (we will consider them clitics). What is critical is that they exhibit properties quite different from strong pronouns, as the following comparison between French, English and Spanish subject pronouns shows.

English is a non-null subject language. As the examples in (2) show, subject pronouns are strong.

- (2)
- a. He is handsome.
 - b. HE was guilty.
 - c. He and I went to the movies.
 - d. He always runs in the morning.
 - e. It was HE who arrived late.
 - f. Who arrived late? He did/*He/Him.

Example (2a) shows the neutral word order. Example (2b) shows that the subject pronouns can be focalized by means of stress. In (2c) we see that subject pronouns can be coordinated, in (2d) that the subject pronoun can be separated from the verb, and (2e) that it appears in clefts, further evidence that it can be focalized. Finally, it is not possible for the pronoun to stand alone in response to a question such as that shown in (2f) but this is due to the fact that the accusative case is the default in English.

French is also generally considered a non-null subject language (but see Roberge 1990). However, French subject pronouns contrast with the English equivalents in all respects, with properties similar to those exhibited by object clitics in both French and Spanish. However, these nominative subject pronouns such as *il* 'he' contrast with oblique pronouns, such as *lui* 'him, that can be used to fill in some of the roles fulfilled by subject pronouns in English.

- (3) a. **IL* est coupable. / *LUI* est coupable.
 he is guilty HIM is guilty
 'He is guilty.'
- b. **Il* et je sommes allés là bas. / *Lui* et moi, nous sommes allés là bas.
 he and I are gone there him and me, we are gone there
 'We went there.'
- c. **C'*est *IL* qui est arrivé en retard. / *C'*est *LUI* qui est arrivé en retard.
 it is HE who is arrived late it is HIM who is arrived late
 'It is he who arrived late.'
- d. **Il* toujours mange des pommes. / *Il* mange toujours des pommes
 he always eats DET apples /he eats always DET apples
 'He always eats apples.'
- e. Qui est arrivé en retard? **Il* / *Lui*.
 who is arrived late? he/ him
 'Who arrived late? Him.'

As we see in (3), in contrast to English, the French subject pronoun *il* cannot be stressed as in focus constructions (3a), it cannot be coordinated (3b), it cannot appear in a cleft (a case of focus) (3c), it cannot be separated to the verb to which it cliticizes (3d) and it cannot stand alone (3e). However, the oblique pronoun *lui* does permit stress, coordination, clefting, and separation from the verb, showing it is a strong pronoun.

The following examples show that Spanish subject pronouns behave like the English pronouns.

- (4) a. *ÉL* es culpable.
 he is guilty
 'HE is guilty.'
- b. *Él* y yo fuimos allá.
 he and I went there
 'We went there.'

- c. Fue ÉL quien llegó tarde.
Was HE who arrived late
'It was he who arrived late.'
- d. Él siempre come manzanas. / Él come siempre manzanas.
He always eats apples. / He eats always apples
'He always eats apples.'
- e. ¿Quién llegó tarde? –Él.
who arrived late? he
'Who arrived late? Him.'

The examples in (4) show that, as in English, the Spanish subject pronoun *él* can be stressed (focalized) (4a), can be coordinated (4b), can appear in a cleft (4c), can be separated from the verb by an adverb (4d), which can appear on either side of the verb, and can stand alone in response to a question (4e). In other words, it behaves as you would expect a strong pronoun to behave. The difference between the three languages is summed up in Table 1.

Table 1: Crosslinguistic differences in subject pronouns

	English	French	Spanish
Strong	Yes	No (except for use of oblique)	Yes
Weak/Clitic	No	Yes	No

Given these facts we can summarize the different positions in the following ways. According to Leung, the L1, French, should be the source of transfer; therefore, the learners are expected to reject examples such as those in (4). In contrast, if the *L2 Status Factor* is on the right track, English would be the source of transfer and learners should accept examples such as those given in (4) instead of the French equivalents. If both are the source of positive and negative transfer (this last excluded by the CEM) the learners could choose either. The experiment we will now describe aimed at determining which of these positions is adequate to explain the data.

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

18 native speakers of French from Québec (3 of them were heritage speakers of Arabic but reported perfect knowledge of French), whose L2 is English participated in the study. These speakers were learning Spanish as their L3, and they were all in their third week of exposure to Spanish in a classroom setting. They were tested by their Spanish instructor in class and outside the classroom.

4. 2. Materials

4.2.1 Task 1: Bimodal Acceptability Judgment Task

Participants judged a total of 102 oral sentences in a 1-to-4 scale, where 1 meant ‘this sentence sounds very bad’, and 4 meant ‘this sentence sounds very good’. There was also an ‘I don’t know’ option, and sentences judged in this category were removed from the analysis. The sentences were orally recorded by a Colombian female native speaker of Spanish, and each sentence was played twice to the learners. At the same time of the listening, the learners could read the sentences along on the answer sheet. The decision to construct a bimodal AJT and not just a written AJT was determined by the linguistic structures under investigation, which some of them needed a special prosody, as we will see next.

The subject pronouns of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person singular were tested in 5 target constructions, plus distractors, all counterbalanced for grammaticality in Spanish and French: 1- Coordination, in grammatical ($k = 6$) and ungrammatical ($k = 6$) configurations. To avoid possible dialectal differences, the grammatical sentences combined the *yo*, *tú* and *él* pronouns in a way that no you-plural was needed, as in (5a). The equivalent of these sentences are ungrammatical in French. The ungrammatical condition consisted of coordination of the pronouns *ti*, *mí*, and *él* with reduplication of the strong pronoun (*nosotros*). *Ti* and *mí* are Spanish pronouns that can only be used as the object of a preposition (oblique pronouns); the French equivalent construction is grammatical. An example is shown in (5b). 2- Contrastive focused strong subject pronouns (grammatical, $k = 9$) and contrastive focused oblique pronouns with repetition of the nominative pronoun, as it would be grammatical in French (ungrammatical, $k = 9$), shown in (6a) and (6b). 3- Adverb intervention, with the adverb after the verb, as its grammatical French counterpart ($k = 9$), and with the adverb intervening between the pronoun and the verb, ($k = 9$, ungrammatical in French). Both of these structures are grammatical in Spanish, shown in (7) below. 4- Cleft Sentences with the strong nominative pronoun (8a), grammatical in Spanish, ungrammatical in French ($k = 9$), and with the oblique pronoun, ungrammatical in Spanish but grammatical in French ($k = 9$), exemplified in (8b). 5- Dative clitics, all grammatical in Spanish ($k = 9$), exemplified in (9a). This was a total of 78 target sentences, complemented with 24 ungrammatical sentences with gender and error problems, and without pronouns, as in (9b).

Table 2: Conditions tested in the AJT

Condition	Example	Spanish	French
Coordination	5. a. <i>Tú y yo trabajamos bien en equipo.</i> You and I work well as a team.	G	U
	b. <i>*Él y mí, nosotros escribimos un cuento cada año.</i> He and me, we write a tale every year.	U	G
Focus	6. a. <i>TÚ eres la tonta, no yo.</i> YOU are the stupid one, not I.	G	U
	b. <i>MÍ, yo soy el nuevo estudiante, no él.</i> ME, I am the new student, not he.	U	G
Adverb Intervention	7. a. <i>Él habla siempre japonés.</i> He speaks always Japanese.	G	G
	b. <i>Tú siempre compras café por la mañana.</i> You always buy coffee in the morning.	G	U
Cleft	8. a. <i>Soy yo quien participa en la clase, no Pedro.</i> It is I who participates in class, not Pedro.	G	U
	b. <i>Es mí quien lee novelas históricas, no Roberto.</i> It is me who reads novels historic, not Roberto.	U	G
Object Clitic Distractors	9.a. <i>Juan me explica las tareas.</i> Juan me explains the homework.	G	G
	b. <i>Marisa limpia el cocinas sucio.</i> Marisa cleans the kitchen dirty.	U	U

Task 2: Oral Production Task

The purpose of this task was to elicit subject pronouns in fragments. Participants were set up in a role-play situation in which they had to answer as briefly as possible the questions posed by the researcher. In order to answer these questions, they were given a table with the chores to be done at home, and with the information regarding which roommate had assigned each task. We avoided employing pronouns in the information given, so possessives were used instead. Table 3 presents the information that the participants had, and below there is a sample of the questions asked by the research assistant.

Table 3: Sample of Materials for the Oral Production Task

<i>Mis Tareas</i>	<i>Tus Tareas</i>	<i>Las Tareas the Alex</i>
<i>Lavar los platos</i>	<i>Tirar la basura</i>	<i>Preparar el almuerzo</i>
<i>Cocinar la cena</i>	<i>Limpiar la casa</i>	<i>Hacer las camas</i>
<i>Comprar el pan</i>	<i>Ordenar los cuartos</i>	<i>Arreglar los armarios</i>
<i>Pagar los recibos</i>	<i>Hacer el café</i>	<i>Ir de compras</i>

Sample of questions posed, and expected response.

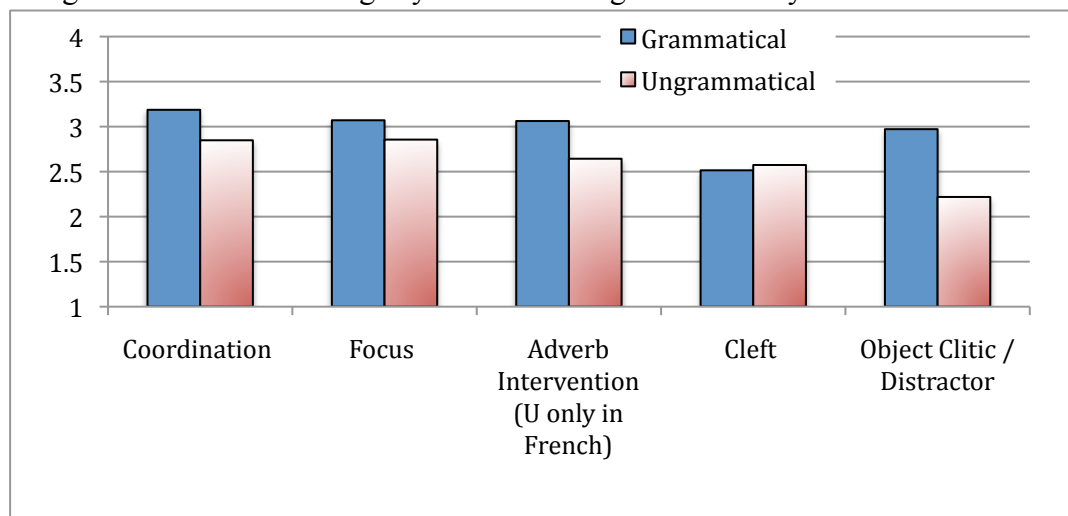
¿Quién cocina la cena? Yo
Who cooks the dinner?
¿Quién limpia la casa? Tú
Who cleans the house? You
¿Quién arregla los armarios? Alex
Who tidies up the closets? Alex

5. Results

5.1. Results of the Acceptability Judgment Task

The acceptability judgment ratings were averaged by category and submitted to a repeated measures ANOVA with two independent variables: grammaticality (2 levels), and structure (5 levels). No main effect of grammaticality ($F(1, 17) = 1.26, p > .1$), or structure ($F(4, 68) = 1.09, p > .1$) was found, and no significant interaction. Overall, all participants had indeterminate knowledge of the structures, and as Figure 1 shows, they displayed very similar ratings for all structures, grammatical and ungrammatical. Paired-samples t -tests were also performed in order to detect possible differences within each structure. Besides the difference between the control structure (object clitics) and the ungrammatical distractors, which were rated significantly lower ($t(17) = 4.641, p < .001$), participants only behaved differently within the adverb intervention structure ($t(17) = 3.22, p = .005$), which in fact is the only structure with two grammatical options. Still, the L3 learners judged significantly lower the sentences in which the adverb was intervening between the pronoun and the verb; notice that the equivalent to this sentence in French would be ungrammatical but grammatical in Spanish and English. The version of the sentence in which the adverb follows the verb was rated significantly higher, as it would be grammatical in French, but ungrammatical in English.

Figure 1: AJT mean ratings by structure and grammaticality



5.2. Results of the Oral Task

The production of the oral task was recorded and later transcribed by a native speaker. We will only analyze in detail the data from the 1st and 2nd person contexts since the 3rd person produced the name ‘Alex’ in all the cases except for one in which the pronoun ‘él’ was used. In the contexts in which the pronoun ‘yo’ was expected, the oblique pronoun ‘mí’ instead was used most of the time; on the other hand, in the contexts in which the pronoun ‘tú’ was elicited, the target pronoun was produced. Table 4 presents the percentages, tokens, and the number of participants that produced that pronoun (sample size).

Table 4: Production in the Oral Task

1st Person	Yo (strong, nominative)	Mí (oblique)	Me (object, weak)
Percentages	19%	75.28%	5.62%
Tokens	17/89	67/89	5/89
Sample Size	3/18	14/18	1/18
2nd Person	Tú (strong, nominative?)	Ti (Oblique)	Usted (strong, nom.)
Percentages	87.64%	6.74%	5.62%
Tokens	78/89	6/89	5/89
Sample Size	16/18	1/18	1/18

6. Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of the current study is to determine whether, in the acquisition of L3 Spanish subject pronouns, the main source of transfer is the L1 French, a language with properties that differ in important ways from the L3 in relation to subject pronouns, the L2 English, a language that is similar in the relevant domain to the L3, or a combination of both. Results of both the GJT and the production task seem to point to a certain amount of indecision. There were no main effects of grammaticality or structure, but there were certain trends, and some particular conditions were judged differently regarding their grammaticality.

Regarding the GJT, if we take the responses to the distracters seriously, we can set a baseline of grammaticality for these learners. Recall that the distracters were made up of sentences with object clitics, which were grammatical, and errors in gender and number for the ungrammatical sentences. Results show that the grammatical sentences were accepted around 75% of the time, and the ungrammatical were rejected 50% of the time. If we compare this with the results of coordination, we see that the acceptance rate for coordination of nominative pronouns, grammatical in Spanish, was 85%, quite high for these learners. However, at the same time, learners accepted the ungrammatical coordination of oblique Spanish pronouns at a level of around 70%. This seems to indicate that they prefer strong nominative pronouns but accept the French system as well to a lesser extent. This is even more clear in the case of focused pronouns, where acceptance for both the correct nominative form and the incorrect oblique is around 75% for each. In other words, they find both grammatical. With respect to the cleft sentences, we believe these are not very informative because they may have been too difficult to

parse given their syntactic complexity; these learners were not yet ready for these complex sentences. Finally, the adverb intervention condition, the only structure in which we found a statistical difference between the two versions, direct us towards an explanation. These two sentences are grammatical in Spanish, but the version in which the adverb follows the verb is the only possibility in French, but it is ungrammatical in English, at least with lexical verbs. The L3 learners rated this structure significantly higher than the one with the intervening adverb, a result that suggests that these learners are following their L1 grammar and not their L2 English grammar, and therefore, they prefer to have the pronoun coalescent with the verb. The lower results of the intervening structure, grammatical in Spanish and English but ungrammatical in French, further tells us that these learners are resorting to their native French, even when it leads them to the wrong predictions.

Turning now to the oral production task, we observed that for the second person responses, learners overwhelmingly prefer *tú*, the target response, which could come from Spanish itself or from the French pronoun *tu*, in which case it would be an instance of L1 transfer. Another interpretation for this pronoun would be to analyze this *tú* as the provided possessive, but this explanation seems more remote. In any case, it seems that these L3 learners have adopted correctly the strong pronouns of Spanish, at least for the 2nd person singular. With respect to the first person, the learners mostly produced *mí*, which is the oblique Spanish pronoun. This is an ungrammatical response in Spanish, but its pronunciation is very similar to that of ‘me’ in English, the default accusative form that would rightly appear in this fragment responses. If this *mí* is coming from ‘me’ in English, then we would have an instance of transfer from the L2. There are, however, other possible interpretations for this response, one of them being the Spanish possessive *mi*, and another one being the direct calque from the oblique French form *moi*, also appropriate in this context. Whatever the adequate interpretation of these forms is, we have an asymmetrical system in the target language, with the correct nominative form for the 2nd person, but the incorrect oblique form for the 1st person.

Can we conclude that some version of the CEM is the correct one at the initial stage, since we have mixed results, with transfer from the L1 in some cases, but influence from English in others? We believe the answer is negative. The CEM, however flexibly it is interpreted, argues for transfer from one of the languages with respect to a particular linguistic feature, not from both at the same time, and usually with positive results. But our results seem to indicate that two grammars are in competition with each other, even when this misleads the learners in their development. This is not a new idea. For some time it has been suggested that the grammar of early bilinguals may be permeable in certain circumstances (Hulk and Müller 2000, Müller and Hulk 2001) and certainly transfer from the first language is an acknowledged factor in L2 Acquisition. Roeper (1999) argues that two properties can exist in a language that do not belong to a single grammar. Although he applies this idea to monolingual grammars, claiming we are all bilinguals in this way, this would certainly apply to an interlanguage grammar, and more so in the case of L3 acquisition. In other words, these French L1 speakers learning Spanish in some situations rely on their French grammar to interpret the facts and in others on their English grammar. It is therefore not possible to assume that one of the two grammars is the initial state of third language acquisition, but rather both grammars are available and used whenever they facilitate processing of the input.

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