Outward over-explicitness and the over-use of overt subject pronouns by L2ers

Elisa Di Domenico¹, Ioli Baroncini², Diletta Comunello³

¹Università per Stranieri di Perugia
²Università per Stranieri di Siena
³Rijksuniversiteit Groningen

elisa.didomenico@unistrapg.it, i.baroncini@studenti.unistrasi.it, d.comunello@student.rug.nl

Several works have highlighted that advanced L2 speakers of a null subject language over-use overt subject pronouns (OSPs) with respect to native speakers, using them also in topic continuity, even when their L1 is also a null subject language (Bini 1993; Margaza & Bel 2006; Lozano 2006 a. o.). Cross-linguistic influence may play a role if there is micro-variation between the two null subject languages of the speakers (Filiaci et al. 2014). Other proposals suggest that properties at the syntax-discourse interface (such as topicality) are complex to compute for L2ers, whose processing resources are more taxed (Sorace 2011, 2016): OSPs appear thus as a convenient default option. Finally, some authors argue that L2ers simply tend to be over-explicit (Ryan 2015 a. o.), violating pragmatic principles banning redundancy more than pragmatic principles banning ambiguity (Lozano 2016). In this work we propose that L2ers’ over-explicitness is just outward, and that OSPs are the necessarily explicit devices for L2ers in the contexts where they occur. Analyzing the oral productions (collected through a Story Telling task) of three group of speakers (15 Greek native speakers [GN], 15 Italian native speakers [IN] and 15 L2ers of Italian with L1 Greek) in terms of topicality and number and kind of active referents, we found:

a) no GN/IN differences in the use of OSPs
b) significantly higher use of OSPs by L2ers in topic continuity with respect to GN (p=0.012) and IN (p=0.023)
c) significantly higher use of OSPs in contexts with two active referents differing for gender and/or number (2rgn) by all speakers’ groups (IN p=0.013; L2ers p<0.001; GN p<0.001)
d) significantly higher use of OSPs by L2ers in the 2rgn context with respect to the other groups (p=0.030)
e) use of OSPs in topic continuity by L2ers mostly attested in 2rgn
f) significantly higher use of pro in topic continuity by GN with respect to the other two groups (IN p=0.031; L2ers p=0.004)

The use of OSPs in topic continuity by L2ers cannot be due to cross-linguistic influence given a), nor to general difficulties to deal with topicality since they do not transfer into Italian the properties of the Greek pro (f)). Given e), we argue that L2ers have difficulties in computing topicality when the presence of an additional character decreasesreferents’ prominence (Arnold & Griffin 2007), making the topic/non-topic distinction unclear. In this situation, the OSP is the necessarily explicit (not over-explicit) device to employ.

We finally analyze comparable data from a group of 12 L2ers of Italian with L1 Serbo-Croatian, where we observe a similar pattern in the distribution of OSPs: the related explanation can be thus extended to speakers with a different null subject L1.

References


