

The Role of Animacy and Contrast in Overt Personal Pronoun Subjects in Child Romanian

Contribution Romanian, a pro-drop language, permits the omission of pronominal subjects in certain contexts. This study examines how contrast and animacy influence the selection of overt versus null personal pronoun subjects in child and adult Romanian. We show that 3-year-olds are not sensitive to contrast like adults are, and they readily associate overt personal pronouns likewise with animate and inanimate entities, unlike adults, who prefer them for animate antecedents.

Background In adult Romanian, null pronouns are preferred as subjects over overt personal pronouns when the antecedent is easily recoverable (Istrate et al. 2022, 2023, 2024), in line with Chomsky's (1981) Avoid Pronoun principle and Ariel's (1990) Accessibility Theory. However, two important remarks have been made regarding overt pronominal subjects. First, their use can be triggered by contrastive context (Dobrovie-Sorin & Giurgea, 2013). Second, as in many languages (Slovenian, Italian, a.o.), in Romanian, they are more likely to pick up animate antecedents than inanimate ones (Giurgea & Ivan, 2023). Regarding child Romanian, much less is known in this respect. Corpus evidence shows that children younger than 3 use both null and overt pronoun subjects, after going through a null subject stage (Avram & Coene, 2010, Teodorescu, 2017). Moreover, experimental evidence from anaphora resolution studies shows that children interpret null and overt pronouns similarly (Avram & Teodorescu 2016; Stoicescu & Cotfas 2017).

Aims Instead, our current study focuses on anaphora selection, testing whether in contrastive contexts, overt personal pronouns are preferred over null ones, and whether overt pronouns are more likely with animate antecedents. We investigate the relation between contrast and animacy, probing into whether the need to mark contrast can override animacy preferences for subjects.

Current study To address these issues, we conducted two tasks: a *No Contrast Task* (31 Romanian adults, 31 monolingual 3 y.o., mean age: 3;04) and a *Contrast Task* (26 adults, 30 monolingual 3 y.o., mean age 3;06). In both tasks, participants were introduced to a character, Maria, who was learning Romanian. In the No Contrast Task, Maria provided a single sentence with a 1st subject, a past tense verb, and a 3rd nominal object. In the Contrast Task, Maria further added a second incomplete sentence introducing a contrast between a general and a present state. Participants then had to choose between continuations with an overt personal pronoun subject or a null subject, both referring back to a 3rd object antecedent (see Tables 1 and 2). Materials included 2 training items, 32 test items, and 16 fillers. Apart from the *between subjects* contrast manipulation, the test items involved the *within subjects condition* Animacy (animate vs. inanimate for the antecedent).

Results (Figure 1) In adult Romanian, overt personal pronouns were avoided in topic continuation contexts (in the No Contrast Task) but preferred in contrastive contexts. Moreover, overt pronouns were more frequent referring back to animate antecedents than to inanimate ones, but some participants selected overt pronouns for inanimate antecedents in contrastive contexts. In the No Contrast Task, 25/31 adults preferred null pronouns for both antecedent types. In the Contrast Task, 15/26 adults chose overt pronouns for both antecedent types, with some showing mixed preferences. In contrast, in child Romanian, regardless of context type (contrastive/non-contrastive) or antecedent type (animate/inanimate), overt personal pronouns were almost consistently preferred over null ones. In each of the tasks, only 3 children preferred null pronouns. A generalized linear mixed-effects model with Answer as a DV, Group, Task, and Animacy, and their interactions as fixed effects and random effects per Item and Participant revealed significant effects for Group, Task, Animacy, and the interaction between Group and Animacy ($p < .05$).

Discussion In adult Romanian, pronoun selection is driven by contrast: null pronouns for non-contrastive topics, overt ones for contrastive contexts. The fact that overt pronouns can be used to refer to animates and inanimates shows that animacy is not a defining feature of overt personal pronouns. In contrast, Romanian 3-year-olds prefer overt personal subjects regardless of context or animacy of the referent. Thus, they do not yet master the *pro-drop* parameter at an adult-like level. Following Biberauer & Roberts (2015, 2017), they first associate pronouns with referential stability (*Feature Economy*), generalizing this across contexts (*Input Generalization*), and only later refine their use based on contrast or animacy (as argued by Avram et al. 2023 for DOM).

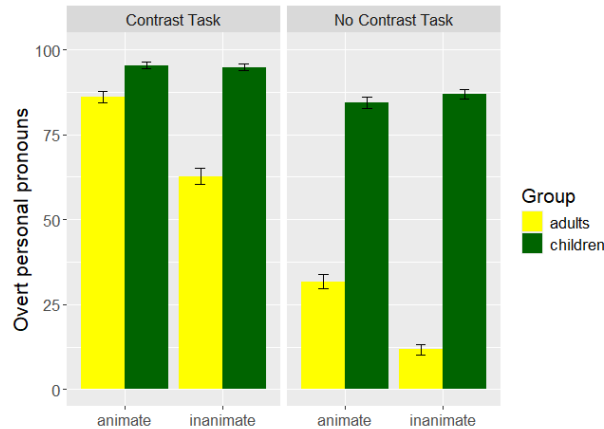
Table 1: Examples of test items employed in the No Contrast Task

Animacy of the antecedent	Lead	Pro continuation	Personal pronoun continuation
Animate DP	Am auzit o bufniță. have.1SG heard an.F.SG owl-F.SG	Era zgomotoasă. was noisy-F.SG	Ea era zgomotoasă. she was noisy-F.SG
Inanimate DP	Am luat o umbrelă. have.1SG taken an.F.SG umbrella-F.SG	Era colorată. was colorful-F.SG	Ea era colorată. she was colorful-F.SG

Table 2: Examples of test items employed in the Contrast Task

Animacy of the antecedent	Lead	Pro continuation	Personal pronoun continuation
Animate DP	Am auzit o bufniță. have.1SG heard an.F.SG owl.F.SG Ador bufnițe-le tăcut-e dar adore.1SG owls-the.F.P silent-F.PL but	era zgomotoasă. was noisy.F.SG	ea era zgomotoasă. she was noisy.F.SG
Inanimate DP	Am luat o umbrelă. have.1SG taken anF.SG umbrella-F.SG Ador umbrelele negre dar adore.1SG umbrellas-the.F.PL black-F.PL but	era colorată. was colorful-F.SG	ea era colorată. she was colorful-F.SG

Figure 1. Rate of personal pronoun answers in the No Contrast Task and in the Contrast Task



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