

## Submission for the poster session

### Null and overt subjects in child heritage Romanian in contact with Italian and Dutch

**Introduction.** The choice between overt and null pronominal subjects depends on syntactic and discourse pragmatic conditions. Properties at the syntax-pragmatics interface are more vulnerable in bilingual acquisition and more likely to be affected by reduced input (Tsimplici, Sorace 2006, Sorace 2011) and cross-linguistic interference (Hulk, Müller 2000, Sorace 2011). For heritage language acquisition, available studies provide controversial findings. Some report vulnerability of either overt or null pronominal subjects (Montrul 2018, Giannakou 2018, Flores & Rinke 2024), while others show that subject use is not problematic in the null subject language (Brehmer et al. 2023).

**Aim.** The aim of the current study is to contribute to this debate by investigating the use of overt and null pronominal subjects in child heritage Romanian in two different settings: (i) Romanian in contact with Italian and (ii) Romanian in contact with Dutch. The former involves two Romance languages, both canonical null subject languages, in which null pronominal subjects signal mainly topic continuity and overt (pronominal) subjects mainly topic shift. The latter involves two typologically different languages, a canonical null subject one and a semi-null subject one (Biberauer 2010). Dutch, like many non-null subject languages, allows topic drop (subject drop included) in main clauses while banning it in embedded clauses.

**Method.** We examined subject use in the “frog story” narratives of 12 balanced simultaneous Romanian-Italian heritage speakers (age range 6;0-12;07), 12 balanced simultaneous Romanian-Dutch heritage speakers (age range 7;09-12;03) and 12 age-matched monolingual children (age range 5;08-12;05) living in the homeland. We focused on syntactic (intersentential and intrasentential) and pragmatic context (topic continuity and topic shift).

**Results.** The analysis<sup>1</sup> revealed no main effect of group ( $F(2,33) = .600, p > .05$ ) with respect to subject use in intersentential contexts. In intrasentential contexts, though, two differences were found: (i) the Romanian-Dutch bilinguals used more overt subjects (lexical DPs) and fewer null subjects than the Romanian-Italian bilinguals and the monolingually-raised children (Figure 1); (ii) the heritage speakers, irrespective of the environmental language, overused null subjects in topic shift contexts (see Figure 2).

**Discussion.** Subject realization was affected by cross-linguistic interference in heritage Romanian in contact with Dutch. The child heritage speakers of Romanian used more overt subjects, possibly adopting a superficially similar pattern available in the two languages. Null subjects (be they *pro* or dropped topics) are available in both Romanian and Dutch, but in Dutch topic drop is licit only in main clauses. This may explain why these bilinguals used more overt subjects only in embedded clauses. Divergence with respect to discourse use singled out null subjects as *the* vulnerable subject type, irrespective of the environmental language. Although for the Romanian-Dutch group this divergent use could be accounted for in terms of cross-linguistic interference from Dutch, for the Romanian-Italian bilinguals such an account does not hold. We argue that this divergent use is probably an effect of insufficient exposure to the heritage language, which may delay the acquisition of a syntax-discourse interface property.

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<sup>1</sup> The number of pronominal subjects was extremely low in all corpora, a possible task effect. This is why in the analysis we focused on null subjects and overt lexical DP subjects.

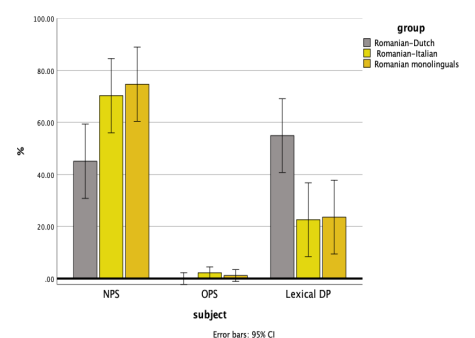


Figure 1. Subject use in intrasentential contexts.

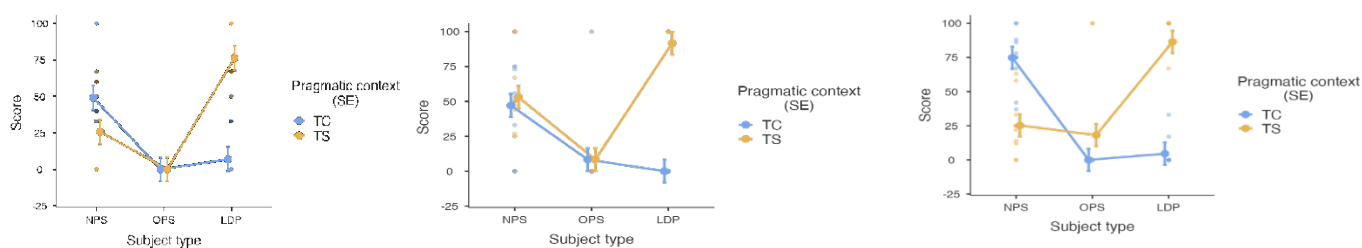


Figure 2. Subject use in topic continuity and topic shift contexts.

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