

*PRO-DROP PARAMETER AND DOUBLE MENTION: A CASE
STUDY OF SPANISH STUDENTS OF ENGLISH*

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1. Introduction

The application of the Universal Grammar (UG) theory to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has come about through recent work of a number of second-language researchers. According to UG theory, the principles of UG involve a set of properties with certain parameters. These parameters remain "open" until they are set by experience with the environment. According to Noam Chomsky, language acquisition is not so much a problem of acquiring grammatical rules, but rather a process whereby the learner sets the values of the parameters of the principles of UG. The grammar of a language is the set of values it assigns to various parameters. As Chomsky put it, "experience is required to set the switches. Once they are set, the system functions" (1986: 25).

An often cited example of such a parameter is the pro-drop parameter, which specifies that languages vary with regard to whether they allow the deletion of pronouns in subject positions, together with related phenomena such as inversion of subject and verb. English does not have pro-drop [-PD] because a subject is required for every sentence and the subject cannot be inverted with the verb in declarative sentences. However, Spanish, which, as a pro-drop language [+PD], allows empty subjects and subject-verb inversion in declarative sentences, does utilise the parameter. For the purpose of this paper I will refer to pro-drop as PD, and non pro-drop as non-PD.

Contrastive studies on the pro-drop parameter in the case of English and Spanish have generated useful studies. These predictions focus on the course of interlanguage and the influence of the first language. The bulk of the evidence suggests that language acquisition proceeds by mastering the easier unmarked

properties before the more difficult marked ones, considering unmarked forms those that are more usual in the world's languages, whereas marked forms are those that are less common (Eckman 1977). Research also shows that there are exceptions in the early stages of acquisition and where both first-language and second-language constructions are marked. Such exceptions lead to inconsistencies in research.

2. Background information

The acquisition of pro-drop (PD) in the cases of English and Spanish has been studied by White (1985, 1989, 1992), Lakshmanan (1986), Hilles (1987), Liceras (1988, 1989, 1993), Almoguera – Lagunas (1993) and Martín Uriz (1993). The different approaches and methodologies of these studies make it difficult to compare the results. Nevertheless, I will discuss briefly some interesting similarities and discrepancies that are relevant for the present study.

White, Lakshmanan, Hilles, Phinney and Martín Uriz have investigated the resetting of the PD option to non-PD in the case when subjects were native speakers of Spanish learning English. Phinney, Liceras, and Almoguera and Lagunas have investigated the acquisition of Spanish by speakers of English.

White (1985) presents data from Spanish [+PD] and French [-PD] learners of English [-PD]. She finds that Spanish speakers learning English have to change the parameter, which creates more difficulties. She considers that the option [+PD] of the Spanish language is the marked option, and concludes that there exists transfer of this option, because the data from the French group differ from those of the Spanish group.

Lakshmanan (1986) presents data from Spanish, Japanese, and Arabic learners of English and agrees with White that the Spanish option is the marked one.

Hilles (1987) assumes different properties of the PD parameter in her investigation of the acquisition of English by a native speaker of Spanish:

1. obligatory pronoun use;
2. use of the two non-referential *it* and *there*, as in *it's raining* or *There is rain in the forecast*, and
3. use of uninflected modals (e.g., *must*, *could*, etc.).

Hilles shows that these three features were related in the speech of her learner. Specifically, there was an inverse relationship between the learner's lack of referential subject use and the appearance of modal verbs. As Jorge, the learner, began to use subject pronouns in English, he also began to use modals as non-inflected forms. Hilles hypothesised that the triggering factor for the switch from [+PD] to [-PD] was the use of non-referential subjects.

This was an indication that this learner had truly understood the mandatory nature of subjects in English.

Martín Uriz (1993) presents data from Spanish learners of English. She suggests that the Spanish [+PD] option is the unmarked one, as Phinney (1987) and Liceras (1989) suggested before in the case of English learners of Spanish.

All four researchers found missing pronouns in the early stages of the acquisition process, which might be interpreted both as evidence for the unmarked status of the PD option, with direct access to UG and no role for L1 (Hilles 1987), or as evidence of the influence of L1 (White 1989).

Phinney (1987) suggests that the acquisition of English subject pronouns is more difficult than the acquisition of the Spanish system, because her English students of Spanish have no problems in producing null subjects when learning Spanish. Thus, she hypothesises that Spanish [+PD] represents the unmarked option, as Hyams (1986) pointed out before in reference to Spanish and Italian. Hyams based his argument on the basis that children learning English as their first language drop subject pronouns until non-referential expletives *it* and *there* as well as modals (lexical material in AUX) are incorporated in their grammar.

According to Hyams, children do not need negative evidence to assume that missing pronouns are not possible in English. Expletives and modals act as a trigger to fix the parameter setting so that English is not a PD language. The opposite would occur in the case of children learning Spanish: They would continue to produce missing pronouns because neither expletives nor modals are encountered in Spanish.

Phinney's position is in disagreement with White's conclusion. Both of them agree that resetting the parameter from Spanish to English is difficult. However, White argues that, according to the logic of markedness, going from L1 (marked setting) to L2 (unmarked setting) requires negative evidence. Thus, null pronouns will not be definitely eradicated until negative evidence is available. Phinney, on the other hand, interprets the results as a confirmation of the unmarked status of the Spanish option: Spanish speakers learning English have to reset the L1 (unmarked) to the L2 (marked), and therefore more positive evidence is needed. To support her conclusion, Phinney compares those results with the ones provided by her English-speaking subjects. She found that they used null subjects very regularly and with no evidence at all of overuse of pronominal pronouns in compositions.

Liceras' (1988, 1989) results confirm Phinney's in the sense that the [+PD] option seems to be the unmarked one. Both agree that PD was well established both at the acceptance and at the production level. Neither Phinney (1987) nor Liceras (1988) found any instance of lexical expletives (pleonastic pro) in the Spanish L2, which indicates that expletives (non-referential subjects) are not transferred into the Spanish interlanguage. This, together with the fact that her

Spanish subjects omitted significantly more expletives than referential pronouns, is interpreted by Phinney as evidence for the unmarked status of Spanish as opposed to English. White (1987), on the contrary, believes that those results prove that expletives are not the trigger for grammar change, but instead an aspect of the parameter that undergoes later revision when acquiring English.

Almoguera and Lagunas (1993) data from English students of Spanish confirm the conclusions by Phinney (1987) and Licerias (1988, 1989) that English learners do not transfer systematically the option [-PD] to their Spanish IL. This seems to confirm the hypothesis that [+PD] languages represent the unmarked option.

3. The option [-PD] in the English interlanguage of Spanish speakers

In order to investigate the setting of PD in English, I have analysed the interlanguage of a group of Spanish students learning English, assuming that they will use the [+PD] option of their L1. That is, that there exists transfer in the resetting of the parameter and that this is perfectly compatible with UG principles.

I will also contrast the results of addition or repetition of subject pronoun in English with the use of subject pronoun in Spanish.

In Spanish the presence of the subject pronoun in the surface structure is, as has already been observed, not obligatory in most cases. Nevertheless, normally its presence in a sentence is not redundant because, as some studies have shown (Alarcos Llorac 1970, García 1975, Muñoz 1988), when the subject pronoun is present it fulfils certain referential, social or cohesive functions. A brief review of contexts in which we observe the frequent and meaningful presence of the subject pronoun in Spanish can lead us to the following conclusions:

1. The need to clarify the gender of the 3rd person (if there is not adjective or participle that shows agreement in the predicate) or the person when the first and third person forms of the verb have the same ending.
2. Expression of emphasis or calling attention to this participant by means of the strategy of "double mention".
3. Expression of contrast of a participant with respect to others.
4. Expression of rheme ("new information") of the sentence.
5. Reintroduction of a known participant who has not been mentioned recently ("old but not given").
6. Reintroduction of change of the topic of discourse.
7. Space-time shift in narrative.
8. Expression of emotion or empathy.
9. Personification of inanimate objects.

Aside from the need to clarify already mentioned, the remaining cases that one observes on the level of the sentence can perhaps be included in García's theory (1975: 115-165) of "double mention". This refers to the presence together in the syntagmatic chain of two items with the same specification of person, in this case the verbal suffix and the subject pronoun. García considers "double mention" as an essential strategy in Spanish. Through it, the speaker calls the attention of the listener to a specific participant with the purpose of helping him/her infer, in each case, the various roles of the participants, that is, their relative degree of participation in the event expressed by the verb. For example:

- (1) a. Spanish: *Juan y tú estábais jugando con ese plato. ¿Quién lo ha roto?*
English: *John and you were playing with that plate. Who has broken it?*
- b. Spanish: *Ha sido él.*
English: **has done it.*
- c. Spanish: **no he sido.*
English: **haven't done it.*
- d. Spanish: *El (lo ha roto).*
English: **he.*

Sentence (1c) in Spanish is inappropriate because the subject is missing and in situations of contrast or emphasis is necessary, even though the subject personal reference is sufficiently specified in the verbal ending. The correct answer will be: *Yo no he sido* 'I haven't done it'.

Considering the above comments about PD parameter in relation to English and Spanish, and the obligatory use of subject pronoun in Spanish in emphatic or contrast contexts, my empirical study will serve to check if the following hypotheses are true:

1. Spanish speakers omit arbitrarily the subject pronouns in their English IL.
2. Spanish speakers transfer the properties of PD parameter [+PD] from L1 to L2.
3. The acquisition of the new properties of the PD parameter is not an easy one because the learners have to go through the unmarked option (Spanish) to the marked option (English).
4. Spanish speakers transfer the conditions of the obligatory subject presence from L1 to L2 in contexts of contrast or emphasis.

4. Subjects

The subjects are first-course students of English Philology at the University of Alcalá, Madrid, Spain. Students were between 18 and 20 years old. All the subjects have studied English at secondary school (four courses), so they can

not be considered beginners. Although they came from different backgrounds, they may be considered to have a low intermediate level of English as the "entrance exam" proved.

5. Task

The 'entrance exam' was taken by the students the first week of the course. It consisted of different tasks: a reading comprehension exercise with some questions and a multiple choice activity; a listening comprehension exercise followed by the same type of activities; and a writing exercise in which students had to choose one of the above topics and write a 150-200 word composition. The topics were:

1. What is the best summer holiday you can remember? What did you do? Where did you go?
2. Why you have chosen to study English Philology?
3. In your last summer holiday you met Jill, a student from Alaska. You would like to visit her and spend some months improving your English. Write a letter to her, asking her about the possibility of an exchange.

For the purpose of this paper I analysed 50 of these compositions.

I will use *pro* for the empty subject with referential value (e.g. I, she, he, etc.), and *pleonastic pro* (\emptyset) for the empty subject without referential subject (as in *it rains*, *it is important*, etc.). The existential *there* has not been counted as it is considered to be learned as a lexical unit.

The cases of production and omission of PD parameter are the following items:

- (1) *(Gijon) \emptyset Was beautiful. (It)*
- (2) *Every day \emptyset arrived at the beach. (We)*
- (3) *I'm nervous, so \emptyset want to sit in those moments. (I)*
- (4) *I went to the beach every morning where \emptyset played. (I)*
- (5) *London is very big, [is about four times Madrid and] very beautiful. (It)*
- (6) *\emptyset is a week very funny, although very tiring. (It)*
- (7) *In July \emptyset went to a friend's house. (I)*
- (8) *The August 14th \emptyset chose the king. (They)*
- (9) *Although \emptyset could seem that I didn't enjoy, I enjoyed very much.*
- (10) *In 1991 \emptyset was the best.*
- (11) *In Vitoria \emptyset was so fun.*
- (12) *\emptyset is easy speak with people.*
- (13) *The best summer holiday I can remember (+) it's the last one.*
- (14) *The best summer holiday I can remember (+) it's this summer.*

- (15) *Another reason why I study this (+) it's my ambition to know other things about people.*
- (16) *We played football with other people who (+) they were from Majorca.*
- (17) *We must forget the past of these countries which (+) it is an important thing.*
- (18) *In September \emptyset is when are the festivals.*
- (19) *The best summer I can remember has been this summer because have come a Dutch group for an exchange.*

The various aspects of the realisation of PD that were tested can be grouped as follows:

I. Cases of *pro* (items 1-7) with specific reference. These items include declarative sentences, where the use of *pro* (\emptyset) versus *yo* ('I', or another subject personal pronoun, is optional in Spanish. For example:

- (1) *\emptyset Was beautiful. (it meaning Gijón) (Spanish: 'Era bonito').*
- (2) *Every day \emptyset arrived at the beach (we) (Spanish: 'Todos los días íbamos a la playa').*
- (3) *I'm nervous, so \emptyset want to sit in those moments. (I) (Spanish: 'Soy nervioso, por eso quiero sentarme en esos momentos').*

II. *Pro* with an arbitrary reference as the only possible option in Spanish, as in (8) and (9):

- (8) *The August 14th \emptyset chose the king. (Spanish: 'El 14 de agosto eligieron al rey'. Another possibility is the use of the Spanish Se-Construction: 'El 14 de agosto se eligió al rey').*

III. Cases of *pleonastic pro* (items 10-13). These items include sentences that can not have a lexical subject in Spanish. Chomsky (1982) proposes that the *pro* (the empty category) that accounts for the fact that the verbs are third person singular is a pleonastic *pro*- namely, it does not have an actual reference in the world.

- (10) *In Vitoria \emptyset was so fun. (Spanish: 'En Vitoria fue divertido').*
- (11) *\emptyset is easy speak with people. (Spanish: 'Es fácil hablar con la gente').*

IV. Overt realisation of pleonastic *pro* with a specific reference, as occurs in items (13, 14, 15). This could be interpreted as a violation of the so-called *that-t* filter. The *that-t* filter, as Liceras (1989: 111) explains, accounts for the fact that extraction of a *wh*-phrase from the subject position next to a lexically filled COMP (the phrase structure category present in the underlying structure of sentences) is excluded in English, as in: *Who did you say is going to come?*

In the case of Spanish, *t*, representing the trace left by the *wh*-phrase movement, must be preceded by *quién* (for personal reference ('who')) or by *que* (non-personal reference ('that')), as in: *¿Quién has dicho [PRO] que t va a venir?*

- (14) *The best summer holiday I can remember (+) it's this summer.* (Spanish: 'Las mejores vacaciones de verano que recuerdo son las de este verano').
 (15) *Another reason why I study this (+) it's my ambition to know other things about people.* (Spanish: 'Otra razón por la que estudio esto es por mi ambición de conocer cosas sobre la gente').

V. Overt realisation of the subject of the embedded clause. Spanish can have a long *who*-movement (movement across at least one clause boundary), and it also makes explicit the subject when emphasis or contrast is required ("double mention") as in items (16) and (17).

- (16) *We played football with other people who (+) they were from Majorca.* (Spanish: 'Jugamos al fútbol con otra gente que era de Mallorca').
 (17) *We must forget the past of these countries which (+) it is an important thing.* (Spanish: 'Debemos olvidar el pasado de estos países que es algo importante').

VI. Inversion of subject and verb. Spanish can have free subject – verb inversion, as occurs in items (18) and (19). For example:

- (18) *In September Ø is when are the festivals.* (order) (Spanish: 'En septiembre es cuando son las fiestas').

6. Data analysis

For the purpose of this study I analysed 50 compositions written by first-course Spanish students of English Philology in the first week of the course.

I found 19 cases of production and omission of the PD parameter. The analysis of the data reveals that:

I and *it* are the most often elided pronoun (3 times each one), as usually happens in Spanish. *We* was elided only once. I did not find any examples of the omission of *you*.

There are two examples of arbitrary reference that would correspond to the Spanish impersonal *se*-structure. Those are:

- (8) *The August 14th Ø chose the king.* Spanish 'el 14 de agosto se eligió al rey'.
 (9) *Although Ø could seem that I didn't enjoy, I enjoyed very much.* 'Se podría pensar que no me divertí, pero me divertí mucho'.

In both cases, the learners seem to maintain the verbal form, but, as the referent is unambiguous with respect to arbitrary or specific reference in Spanish, the subject is elided in both cases.

Pleonastic *pro* (Ø) is used in four cases, showing the transfer from L1. However, there are three cases of over realisation of pleonastic *pro* with a specific reference, which may mean that the learners have internalised the [+PD] option, but the resetting is not complete, as it coexists with other restrictions.

The same happens in the case of embedded clauses, where the subject is repeated in two cases.

As for the subject-verb inversion, I only counted two examples. This is a very low rate, considering that this is a free option in Spanish, and students at a beginning level show a higher percentage of errors of this type.

A note that seems interesting to mention, with respect to the elided subjects in the analysed interlanguage, is that, in general, *pro* and expletive Ø do not appear in initial position. They are more common in subordinate clauses.

7. Discussion

I chose to analyse the use and omission of subject pronouns in English IL of Spanish students with a low-intermediate proficiency level of English in order to investigate if the principles of UG applied to L2 acquisition.

In relation to the hypotheses formulated, the results confirm that the learners do not omit arbitrarily the subjects. The data show that referential and pleonastic *it* are the most frequently elided subjects, together with *I*.

The second hypothesis is confirmed in the sense that the [+PD] Spanish option is transferred to the English IL.

As for the third hypothesis, the data confirm that the English option [–PD] is the marked option, as Hilles (1986), Phinney (1987), Liceras (1988, 1989), Almoguera – Lagunas (1993), and Martín Uriz (1993) suggest. That is, the students have difficulties in eradicating null subjects from their IL. If the opposite were true and [+PRO] was the marked option, students would reset the option [–PRO] earlier.

The data also suggest that over realisation of *pro*, as in the presence of "double mention", may be due to the influence of L1 in those cases where Spanish use the subject for emphasis or contrast. Thus hypothesis four is confirmed. However, in order to confirm this influence of L1, more research needs to be done in this specific topic.

Summarising, data indicate that the resetting of the PD parameter in Spanish students of English at intermediate level is on process, and that transfer of the option of L1 persists. The omission and realisation of pronominal subjects at the same time may be interpreted both as evidence of the difficulty in the acquisition of these types of subjects, and, as evidence of the IL variability (Tarone 1988).

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