NULL AND OVERT SUBJECT PRONOUNS IN ITALIAN AND SPANISH: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Introduction

- Fernandez *et al*. 2018, EP/BP

  Giannakou & Sitaridou 2020, Greek/Chilean Spanish

  Differences between the two languages; differences in interpretation

  preferences pattern with differences in production

- Italian and Spanish:

  -> It is unclear whether the two languages display the same preferences in the interpretation of null and overt pronouns.

  -> Existing corpus studies do not allow a direct comparison

  -> Comprehension and production have not been examined with comparable tasks

- **Aim of the present study**: comparing Italian and Mexican Spanish in comprehension (Experiment 1) and production (Experiments 2 and 3).

Interpretation of null and overt pronouns in Italian and Spanish

(1) Quando Mario ha incontrato Carlo, *pro* ha sorriso.

(2) Quando Mario ha incontrato Carlo, *lui* ha sorriso.

'When Mario met Carlo *pro/he* smiled'

Calabrese (1986)

Carminati (2002)

(3) La mamma dà un bacio alla figlia mentre *pro* si mette il cappotto

'The mother kisses her daughter while *pro* is wearing her coat'

(4) La mamma dà un bacio alla figlia mentre *lei* si mette il cappotto

Sorace & Filiaci (2006); Belletti, Bennati & Sorace 2007

Interpretation of null and overt pronouns in Italian and Spanish

Filiaci, Sorace & Carreiras (2014):
In Peninsular Spanish the object antecedent preference for explicit pronouns is less strong than in Italian (self-paced reading study)

faster reading in the congruent condition, as in Italian

(5) Después de que Bernardo criticó a Carlos tan injustamente, *pro* le pidió disculpas.

After Bernardo criticized Carlos so unjustly, *pro* apologized.

no differences, ≠ Italian

(6) Después de que Bernardo criticó a Carlos tan injustamente, él se sintió muy ofendido.

After Bernardo criticized Carlos so unjustly, he apologized.

Interpretation of null and overt subject pronouns in Italian and Spanish

Chamorro (2018) did not replicate Filiaci *et al.*' s subject antecedent preference for null subject pronouns in Peninsular Spanish:

(7) La madre saludó a la chica cuando *pro* cruzaba una calle con mucho tráfico.
'The mother greeted the girl when she crossed a street with a lot of traffic.'

(8) La madre saludó a la chica cuando ella cruzaba una calle con mucho tráfico.
'The mother greeted the girl when she crossed a street with a lot of traffic.'

Production

- Corpus studies in Italian and different varieties of Spanish are not directly comparable.

  Lorusso, Caprin & Guasti (2005): 36.3% of overt subjects (lexical DPs + overt pronouns);

  Belletti et al. (2007): 4% (only 3rd person pronouns).

  Enriquez (1984): 20% overt pronouns in Madrid Spanish;

  Michnowicz (2015): 20%, Yucatan

  Lastra & Martín Butragueño (2015): 22%, Mexico City

Experiment 1: Comprehension

	Italian (N=33)			Spanish (N=33)		
Intra-sentential anaphora and cataphora	Subject	Object	External	Subject	Object	External
Anaphora / Null pronoun **(1) George saw Lewis when (he) was going to the coffee shop**	0.73	0.19	0.05	0.62	0.36	0.015
Anaphora / Explicit Pronoun **(2) George saw Lewis when he was going to the coffee shop**	0.19	0.76	0.01	0.37	0.59	0.035
Cataphora / Null pronoun **(3) When (he) was going to the coffee shop, George saw Lewis**	0.86	0.06	0.07	0.64	0.06	0.28
Cataphora / Explicit Pronoun **(4) When he was going to the coffee shop, George saw Lewis**	0.39	0.38	0.19	0.46	0.11	0.41

Logistic Mixed-effects Regression Modeling analyses revealed:

Subject interpretations

Language*Type of Pronoun: Italian speakers chose the subject interpretation significantly more often for null pronouns (0.79) than Spanish speakers (0.63), while no difference emerged for explicit pronouns between the two languages (Italian: 0.31; Spanish: 0.42);
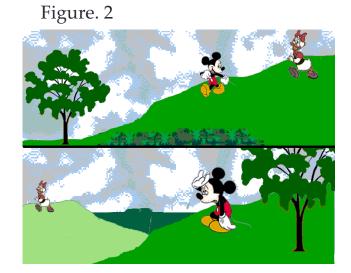
Object Interpretations

Language*Type of Pronoun: a significant difference is found in object interpretations for explicit pronouns in the two languages (Italian: 0.54; Spanish=0.35), but not for null pronouns (Italian: 0.13; Spanish=0.21);

Experiment 2: Picture description task

- Participants were presented with a two-panels picture (Arnold & Griffin 2007)

- After listening and reading a description of the first panel, participants were asked to repeat the description and complete the story by describing the second panel

Figure. 1

Mickey went for a walk with Daisy in the hills one day

Figure. 2

Experiment 2: Picture description task

Figure 1. 1-Referent

Mickey went for a walk in the
hills one day,

Figure 2. 2-referents (gender ambiguous)

Mickey went for a walk with
Donald in the hills one day,

Figure 3. 2-Referents (gender different)

Mickey went for a walk with Daisy
in the hills one day

Experiment 2: Picture description task

	Italian (N=32)			Spanish (N=26)		
Context: One day Mickey went for a walk (with Daisy/Donald) in the hills…	**Null Pronoun** =(he) was tired	**Explicit Pronoun** =he was tired	**NP** =Mickey was tired	**Null Pronoun** =(he) was tired	**Explicit Pronoun** =he was tired	**NP** =Mickey was tired
1-Referent	0.87	0.03	0.10	0.66	0.11	0.24
2 Referents (different gender)	0.41	0.06	0.52	0.20	0.10	0.70
2 Referents (gender ambiguous)	0.27	0.00	0.73	0.15	0.06	0.79

- **Analysis of null pronouns->** Language Group effect= Italian speakers produced significantly more null pronouns than Spanish speakers (0.50 vs.0.32).

- **Analysis of explicit pronouns->**Language Group effect = Italian speakers produced significantly fewer explicit pronouns than Spanish speakers (0.03 vs.0.08).

- **Analysis of NPs->** Language Group effect=Italian speakers produced significantly fewer NPs than Spanish speakers (0.46 vs. 0.59).

Experiment 3: Sentence completion task

1) Subject-reference expected: Mary scared John because….

2) Object-reference expected: Mary liked John because…

Subject-reference (Mary scared John because….)	Null Pronoun	Explicit Pronoun	NP
Italian	0.98	0.005	0.005
Spanish	0.93	0.06	0
Object-reference (Mary liked John because…)			
Italian	0.85	0.13	0.005
Spanish	0.74	0.25	0.003

Experiment 3: Sentence completion task

Subject-reference (Mary scared John because….)	Null Pronoun	Explicit Pronoun	NP
Italian	0.98	0.005	0.005
Spanish	0.93	0.06	0
Object-reference (Mary liked John because…)			
Italian	0.85	0.13	0.005
Spanish	0.74	0.25	0.003

Analysis of null pronouns:
➢ Main effect of Language = Italian speakers produced significantly more null pronouns than Spanish speakers (0.92 vs.0.85).

Analysis of explicit pronouns:
- Main effect of Language = Italian speakers produced significantly fewer explicit pronouns than Spanish speakers (0.07 vs. 0.14).

Experiment 3: Sentence completion task

Subject-reference (Mary scared John because….)	Null Pronoun	Explicit Pronoun	NP
Italian	0.98	0.005	0.005
Spanish	0.93	0.06	0
Object-reference (Mary liked John because…)			
Italian	0.85	0.13	0.005
Spanish	0.74	0.25	0.003

Analysis of explicit pronouns: Language Group*Verb Bias Condition approached significance

➢ Spanish and Italian speakers produced more explicit pronouns in reference to object than subject referents (Italian: 0.85 vs. 0.13; Spanish: 0.74 vs. 0.25).

➢ Spanish speakers produced more explicit pronouns for object referents than Italian speakers (Italian: 0.13 vs. Spanish: 0.25)

Experiment 3: Sentence completion task

Subject-reference (Mary scared John because….)	Null Pronoun	Explicit Pronoun	NP
Italian	0.98	0.005	0.005
Spanish	0.93	0.06	0
Object-reference (Mary liked John because…)			
Italian	0.85	0.13	0.005
Spanish	0.74	0.25	0.003

Why lower production of overt pronouns for object referents in Italian?
An object referent is not a suitable antecedent for an overt pronoun if the implicit causality of the verb makes it the 'expected' antecedent
(in the spirit of Calabrese 1986)

Conclusions

- Our study shows micro-variation in Spanish and Italian in the interpretation of null as well as of overt subject pronouns

- In both languages null pronouns are preferably interpreted as co-referent with a subject antecedent and overt pronouns as co-referent with an object antecedent, but in Spanish to a lesser degree.

Conclusions

- The weaker object bias of the Spanish explicit pronoun parallels with a higher use of explicit pronouns to refer to subject antecedents (and also to 'expected' object antecedents) in production.

- As far as object antecedents are concerned, we leave to future research a proper characterization of what happens when the object antecedent is not the 'expected' antecedent.

Thank you!