

**Connecting L2 acquisition and language change:
null subjects and null objects in L1 European Portuguese – L2 English**

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Poster Session 1, Thursday, September 12, 16h00

L2 acquisition (L2A) and language change are characterised by grammatical instability, variation, and change. According to various authors (see Donaldson, 2022), in both situations, similar processes may be involved in grammar restructuring. To test this proposal, the present study investigates whether there are parallels between diachronic change and L2A regarding the shift from a null subject (NS) to a non-NS grammar and from a null object (NO) to a non-NO grammar.

Research on diachronic change in Brazilian Portuguese (BP) has shown that this language is gradually becoming a non-NS language, but has simultaneously become a NO language (e.g., Cyrino et al., 2000). According to Cyrino et al. (2000), these changes have been guided by the referential hierarchy in Figure 1, where the 1st and 2nd person, with the inherent [+human] feature, occupy the highest position, and the expletive the lowest. These authors propose that “the more referential, the greater the possibility of a non-null pronoun”, and that “a null variant at a specific point on the scale implies null variants to its left in the referential hierarchy” (p. 59).

The L2A of a non-NS language like English by L1 speakers of a NS language like European Portuguese (EP) involves a change comparable to the one that BP has undergone. Hence, the following question emerges: in L2A, is the change from a NS grammar to a non-NS grammar also guided by the referential hierarchy? Since the referential hierarchy is also proposed to apply to NOs, when we consider the L2A of English (non-NO language) by L1 speakers of EP (NO language), an additional question arises: is the change from a NO grammar to a non-NO grammar guided by this hierarchy in L2A? To the best of our knowledge, these questions have not been addressed to date, despite the existence of various studies on NSs and NOs in L2 English (Teixeira, 2019; Yuan, 1997).

The present work investigates NSs and NOs in L2 English – L1 EP. The participants were 15 adult native speakers of English and 54 L1 EP adult learners of L2 English (18 B2, 18 C1, 18 C2). They were administered two timed acceptability judgement tasks, which is a type of task proposed to tap primarily into implicit knowledge (Ellis, 2005). The task on subjects had a 2x5 design, crossing the variables *overtness* (null vs. overt) and *type of subject* (2p human vs. 3p human vs. 3p non-human vs. propositional vs. expletive). The task on 3p objects had a 2x3 design crossing the variables *overtness* (null vs. overt) and *type of object* (human vs. non-human vs. propositional).

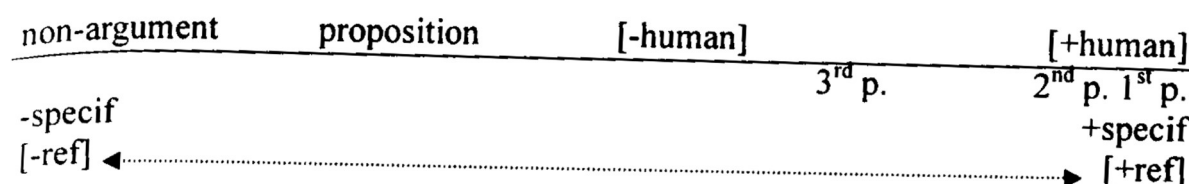
Results show that, at the B2 level, learners accept overt pronominal subjects (OSs) significantly more than NSs when the subject is [+human] (2p and 3p) as well as when it is [-human] ($ps \leq .0446$). However, learners exhibit an animacy effect in the acceptance of 3p referential NSs: they assign higher acceptance rates to [-human] than to [+human] NSs ($p=.0229$). As for propositional and expletive subjects, B2 learners fail to make a distinction between the NS and the OS ($ps \geq .1116$), accepting both. Nevertheless, expletive NSs are significantly more accepted than propositional NSs ($p=.0166$). At the C1 level, learners clearly prefer OSs over NSs in all conditions ($ps < .0001$), except in the expletive condition, where the difference between NSs and OSs is only marginally significant ($p=.0738$). The animacy effect found in the acceptance of 3p NSs at the B2 level is also observed at the C1 level ($p=.0003$), as is the asymmetry in the acceptance of propositional and expletive NSs ($p=.0015$). Finally, C2 learners converge with the L2, accepting OSs and rejecting NSs across conditions ($ps \leq .0002$), like the natives. No differences are found in the acceptance of NSs ($ps \geq .1$).

Regarding objects, our results reveal that the native and L2 groups accept overt objects significantly more than NOs in all conditions ($ps \leq .0286$). However, unlike the native speakers, B2 and C1 learners do not completely reject NOs, as they assign mean acceptance rates above 3 (1-5 scale) to [-human] NOs at the B2 level and to propositional NOs at the B2 and C1 levels. Statistical analyses show that, at these levels, the acceptance of NOs is higher when the antecedent is [-human] than when it is [+human] ($ps \leq .0366$), and that propositional NOs are significantly more accepted than [-human] NOs ($ps \leq .0022$). At the C2 level, learners equally reject NOs in all conditions.

Taken together, these findings suggest that, as observed in BP diachronic change, in the L2A of English by EP speakers, the changes involving null categories unfold gradually following the referential hierarchy. In L2 English interlanguages, the NSs and NOs bearing a [+human] feature are more permeable to change than their [-human] counterparts, which occupy a lower position in

the referential hierarchy. The NSs and NOs displaying greater resistance to change are those situated at the bottom of this hierarchy, specifically propositional null categories and expletives. The task on subjects, which is the only one that included expletives, reveals that these NSs tend to be the most difficult to eliminate from L2 grammars. The only contrast predicted by Cyrino et al's (2000) referential hierarchy that is not found in L2 English interlanguages (at least at the levels we tested) is the asymmetry between 1p/2p and 3p in the acceptance of [+human] NSs. Thus, overall, our results indicate that, as in the diachrony of BP, in the L2A of English by L1 speakers of consistent NS languages and NO languages, the less referential, the greater the possibility of a null category.

Figure 1. Referential hierarchy (Cyrino et al, 2000: 59)



Sample test item from the task on subjects:

Item: *The streets of Chicago are covered in a white blanket because yesterday snowed all day.*

The sentence is presented word by word at a rate of 500 ms per word and is followed by the instruction below:

Indicate to what extent the sentence you read is acceptable in English.

(Please, answer this question as fast as possible)

Totally unacceptable | 1 2 3 4 5 | Totally acceptable

If you don't know, press 'N'

Sample test item from the task on objects:

Item: *Did you find your credit card? - Yes, I found in the car.*

The sentences are presented word by word at a rate of 500 ms per word and are followed by the instruction below:

Indicate to what extent the last sentence you read is acceptable in English.

(Please, answer this question as fast as possible)

Totally unacceptable | 1 2 3 4 5 | Totally acceptable

If you don't know, press 'N'

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