Recent acquisitional studies reveal that formal syntactic properties are in place before properties at the syntax-discourse interface in adult L2 acquisition, L1 attrition and child bilingualism (Sorace 2004, White 2009 for overviews). In particular, it is well known that L1 English learners of L2 Spanish are sensitive to the formal syntactic mechanisms licensing null pronominal subjects, even from early stages of acquisition (e.g., Liceras 1989, Lozano 2002, Phinney 1997). But, importantly, they show residual yet persistent deficits at the syntax-discourse interface with the identification mechanisms of overt pronouns in topic contexts [1b] and null pronouns in contrastive focus contexts [2a], even at near-native levels of proficiency (e.g., Lozano 2009, Montrul & Rodriguez-Louro 2006, Perez-Leroux & Glass 1999). Similar results are reported for L1 English – L2 Italian (Belletti et al. 2007, Sorace & Filiaci 2006).

It has been argued that learners’ deficits stem from vulnerability at the syntax-discourse interface, caused by either (i) interpretable features like [topic] and [focus] (Sorace 2004) or by (ii) processing factors (Sorace & Filiaci 2006), or by (iii) cross-linguistic influence (Serratrice et al. 2004), or by (iv) external (vs. internal) interfaces (Sorace & Serratrice 2009). But, crucially, these proposals cannot fully account for two important facts: First, there exists a well-attested asymmetry in these studies: overuse of overt pronouns in topic context [1b] is far higher than overuse of null pronouns in contrastive contexts [2a]. Secondly, the above studies have focused on L1≠L2 mismatches in terms of discursive features, e.g., L1 Eng–L2 Spa, L1 Eng–L2 Ital. In L1=L2 scenarios, we should not expect any of the above deficits (as in Kras 2008 with L1 Croat–L2 Ital), since the learners should be able to apply the syntax-discourse constrains from their L1 onto their L2 from early stages of development.

To test the above two facts, we administered a contextualized acceptability test to adult Greek native learners of non-native Spanish at three stages of development (intermediate, n=22; low advanced, n=32; upper advanced, n=31) and a control group of Spanish natives (n=12). The rationale of the study is that, if syntax-discourse factors (like i-iv above) were responsible for learners’ deficits, we would expect our learners with L1 Greek–L2 Spanish to show native-like knowledge, even from early stages of development, since the features (topic and contrastive focus) responsible for the discursive distribution of null and overt pronouns in [1] and [2] operate similarly in both Greek and Spanish (Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 1998; Dimitriadis 1996; Lujan 1999, Zagona 2002). But results indicate that learners show persistent deficits at the syntax-discourse interface from early stages of development, which can residually last until very advanced levels of development, despite the L1–L2 featural match. Additionally, deficits are more frequent in topic contexts [1b] (overacceptance of an overt pronoun in topic contexts) than in contrastive contexts [2a] (overacceptance of a null pronoun in contrastive contexts). This asymmetry is, therefore, independent from L1-L2 pairings and cannot be accounted by cross-linguistic influence or by syntax-discourse interpretable features like [topic] and [focus], otherwise we should expect native-like behavior from early stages, which is contrary to fact. Following recent theoretical developments (Lopez 2009), this asymmetry can be ultimately accounted for in terms of the interaction of two UG primitive features, [±discourse-anaphor] and [±contrast], whose combination ultimately yields the traditional notions of topic, focus and contrastive focus.
   b. #Aunque Antonio gana mucho dinero, los vecinos creen que él es pobre.

[2] a. #Aunque Antonio y María jganan mucho dinero, los vecinos creen que pro es pobre.
   b. Aunque Antonio y María gnan mucho dinero, los vecinos creen que él / ella es pobre.

References
Dimitriadis, A. When pro-drop languages don’t. *CLS* 32, 33-47. 1996.
