



Pronoun interpretation in L2 Italian: prosodic effects revisited

Heather Goad¹, Lydia White¹, Guilherme D. Garcia², Natália Brambatti Guzzo¹, Sepideh Mortazavinia¹, Liz Smeets¹ & Jiajia Su¹

¹McGill University, ²Ball State University

GALANA 2018
September 27-30, Bloomington, Indiana

Introduction

- Revisit well-known findings relating to interpretation of null and overt pronouns in Italian.
- Biclausal sentences can be ambiguous with respect to pronoun interpretation.

Introduction

- Null pronouns preferred when antecedent is current topic/subject of higher clause.
- Overt pronouns preferred when antecedent is new topic/not subject.

(1) Bernardo_i ha scritto a Corrado_j dopo che \emptyset_i /lui_j si è trasferito a Torino.

‘Bernardo wrote to Corrado after **he** moved to Turin.’

Introduction

- Previous studies: focus on syntactic and discourse effects on pronoun interpretation.
- Current proposal: prosodic factors also play a role and should be examined, using appropriate methodologies.

Previous Experimental Findings

Several studies use picture verification tasks. Participants read sentence and choose picture that best illustrates it.

From Sorace & Filiaci (2006):



La mama dà un bacio alla figlia, mentre Ø/lei si mette il cappotto.

'The mother gives a kiss to her daughter while she puts on her coat'

Previous Experimental Findings

Null pronouns (Figure 1):

Both NSs and L2ers allow null pronouns to take non-subject antecedents about 50% of the time.

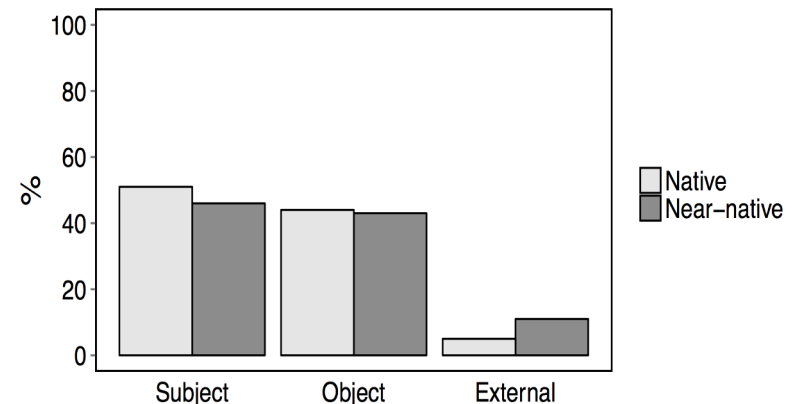


Figure 1*

Overt pronouns (Figure 2):

L2ers occasionally permit overt pronouns to take subject antecedents.

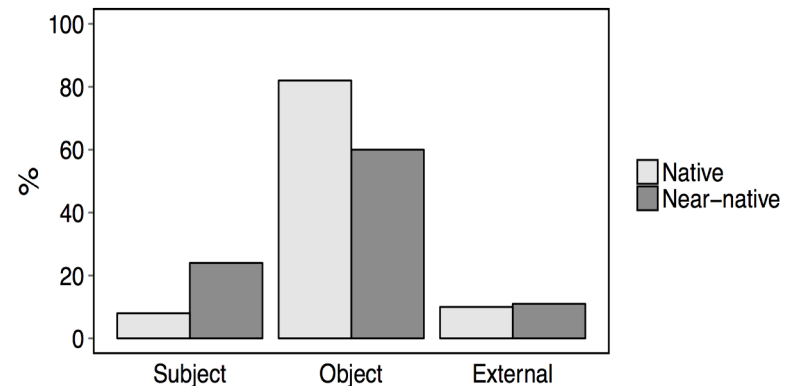


Figure 2*

*adapted from Sorace & Filiaci (2006)

Previous Experimental Findings

Previous explanations

- L2ers do not fully master discourse requirements on overt pronouns (Belletti et al. 2007; Sorace & Filiaci 2006).

Puzzles

- Overuse of non-subject antecedents for null pronouns.
- Underuse of object antecedents for overt pronouns.
- Could prosodic factors be at play?

Previous Experimental Findings

Problem

- In previous studies, not possible to determine what prosody has been assigned by participants.

Our assumption

- Individuals assign silent prosody in reading in order to interpret sentences (following Fodor 2002).

Hypothesis and Predictions

Hypothesis

- Prosodic factors influence choice of antecedent for null and overt pronouns in native and non-native grammars.

Hypothesis and Predictions

Prediction 1: Contrastive stress

- When overt pronoun is stressed, this signals that typical antecedent (object) is not to be interpreted as actual antecedent, leading to increase in choice of alternatives (subject or external antecedent).

Prediction 2: Pause

- When pause interrupts main and subordinate clauses, the two clauses form separate intonational domains, making subject less accessible, leading to increase in choice of object antecedents for null pronouns.

Methodology

Factors Manipulated

- Pronoun (null/overt)

- ▶ Carletto ha scritto a Roberto dopo che \emptyset si è trasferito a Torino.

- ▶ Bernardo ha scritto a Corrado dopo che **lui** si è trasferito a Torino.

- Stress (stressed/unstressed pronoun)

- ▶ Bennato ha scritto a Danilo dopo che **LUI** si è trasferito a Torino.

- Pause (pause/no pause between clauses)

- ▶ Bernardo ha scritto a Donato, dopo che lui si è trasferito a Torino.

Methodology

Items

- Total of 78 biclausal sentences, preceded by contexts.
- Participants read context on computer screen, then press a key to indicate they are ready to listen to test item. They then answer a question relating to sentence they have just heard.

Methodology

Example Item

Written context (on screen)	Bernardo, Corrado e Francesco sono amici. (Bernardo, Corrado and Francesco are friends.)
Test sentence (audio)	Bernardo ha scritto a Corrado dopo che lui si è trasferito a Torino. (Bernardo wrote to Corrado after he moved to Turin.)
Question (on screen)	Chi si è trasferito a Torino? (Who moved to Turin?)
Choices (on screen)	Bernardo, Corrado, Francesco

Methodology

Sentence types

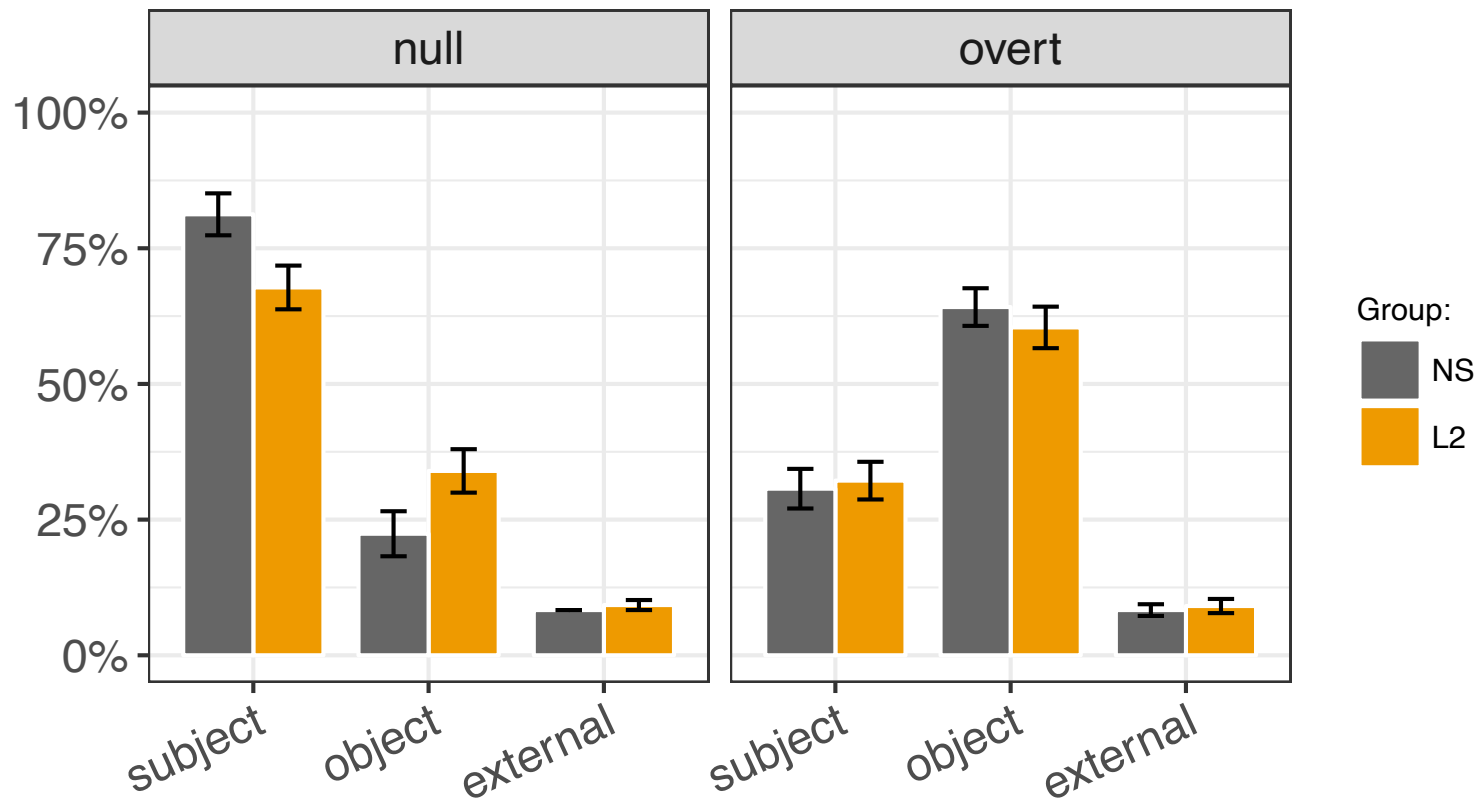
- 36 forwards anaphora sentences
- 42 fillers:
 - 12 forwards anaphora sentences with gender mismatch
 - 12 backwards anaphora sentences
 - 18 sentences with relative clauses

Methodology

Participants

- **20 Italian native speakers**
- **30 L2ers**
 - L1 Dutch (n=5) / L1 English (n=25)
 - intermediate (n=17), advanced (n=13)

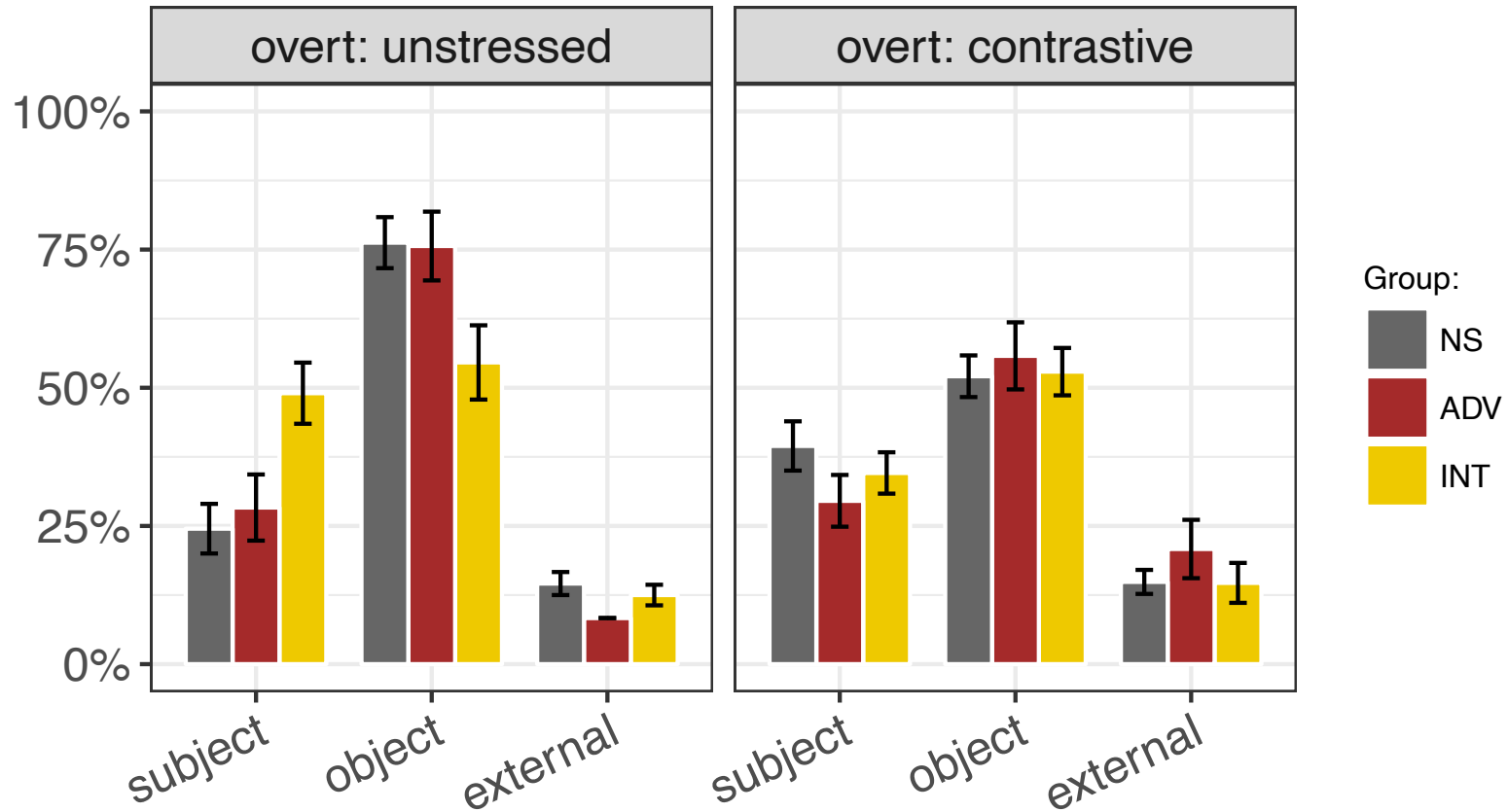
Results: effect of pronoun



NS and L2 responses are affected by pronoun:

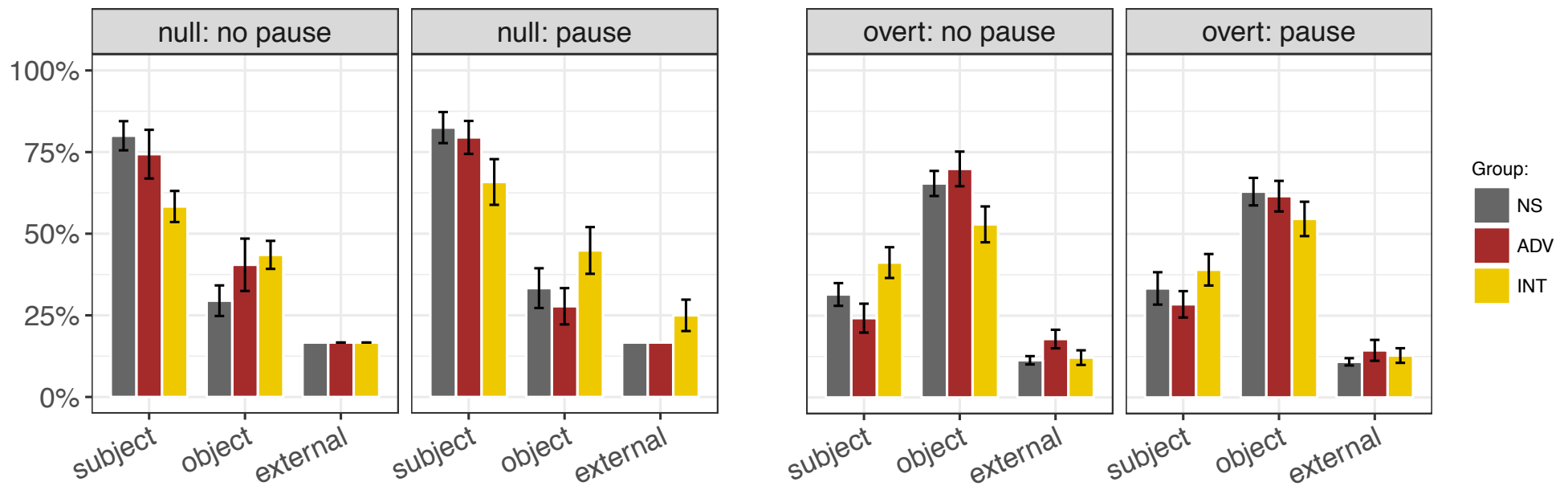
- **Null** pronouns → subject antecedents
- **Overt** pronouns → object antecedents

Results: effect of stress



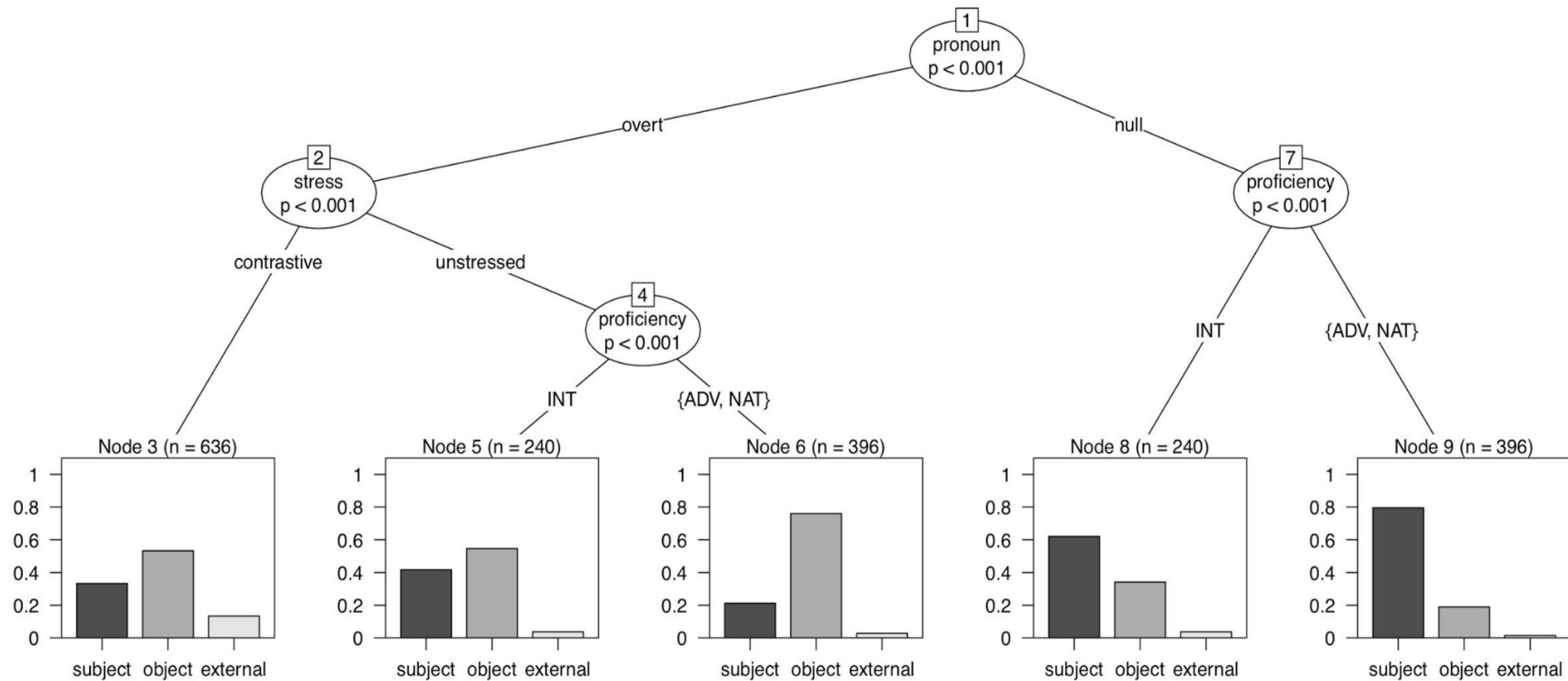
- **Unstressed:** more variation across groups
- **Contrastive stress:** lower rate of object responses for NS and ADV

Results: pause



- No apparent effects of pause

Overall results



- Significant effects of **pronoun** and **stress**
- **Proficiency** effects: null and contrastive overt pronouns:
 - ADV L2ers pattern with natives

Summary

- Contrary to previous studies, advanced L2ers did not overselect subject antecedents for overt pronouns relative to native speakers.
- Contrastive stress signals contrast with normally preferred antecedent (typically object), in support of prediction 1.
- Absence of effect of pause, contra prediction 2.

Discussion

- Role of prosody not apparent from accounts relying solely on syntax/discourse.
- In earlier studies, pronouns might sometimes have been interpreted (in silent reading) as unstressed and sometimes as stressed, accounting for some of the variability reported.
- Prosodic factors can result in differences in expected choice of antecedents and must be more carefully considered in investigations of pronoun choice.

Acknowledgements

- We would like to thank Carlotta Lega for research assistance.
- This work was supported by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and les Fonds de Recherche du Québec – Société et Culture.

References

Belletti, A., E. Bennati & A. Sorace. 2007. Theoretical and developmental issues in the syntax of subjects: Evidence from near-native Italian. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 25: 657-689.

Carminati, M. 2002. *The processing of Italian subject pronouns*. PhD dissertation, UMass Amherst.

Fodor, J.D. 2002. Prosodic disambiguation in silent reading. *Proceedings of NELS* 32: 113-132.

Sorace, A. & F. Filiaci. 2006. Anaphora resolution in near-native speakers of Italian. *Second Language Research* 22: 339-368.

Design earlier experiment

Target sentence:

Lorenzo ha scritto a Roberto (#) quando lui si è trasferito a Torino

‘Lorenzo wrote to Roberto (#) when (he) moved to Turin’

- Comment (subject)

È Lorenzo che si è scritto a Torino

‘It is Lorenzo who moved to Turin.’

- Comment (object)

È Roberto che si è scritto a Torino

‘It is Roberto who moved to Turin.’

- Comment (external)

È una persona diversa da Lorenza e Roberto che si è trasferito a T.

‘It is someone else who moved to Turin.’