

DIARY NULL SUBJECTS IN L2 ENGLISH: A STUDY ON GRAMMATICAL ACCEPTABILITY

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Abstract: The current paper investigates the grammatical acceptability of null subjects in the diary register of L2 English by intermediate and advanced students, L1 speakers of Romanian. Overall results indicate performance that does not surpass chance level, and therefore, a strong conservative preference for overtly realized subjects in diary contexts. However, individual analysis has identified a small group of L2 learners who consistently scored well above chance in the four experimental conditions (overt subject, null subject in root clause, null subject in embedded clause and null subject in *yes-no* questions). I discuss several factors that relate to the difficulty L2 learners have with accepting on-target null subjects in the diary register. Quite likely, they never had enough exposure to the relevant input. L2 acquisition slows down when multiple grammars (core and non-core) are identified. Also, subject omission is optional, so the study tested a preference, not a mandatory phenomenon.

Keywords: English diary-register, null subjects, multiple grammars

1. Introduction

Recent studies whose main goal is to provide a learnability theory for second language acquisition capitalize on the idea that multiple grammars (henceforth MG), understood as distinct parallel sets of grammatical rules, become available in the process of acquisition (Roeper 1999, Amaral & Roeper 2014, Roeper 2016). From this perspective, second language acquisition amounts to (i) transferring the properties of the L1 grammatical system and using them as a benchmark in L2 acquisition, (ii) positing new rules that capture the L2 data and lead to full-fledged grammar(s) and (iii) assessing L2 rule productivity or lack thereof in relation to the L2 input.

MGs pertain to the linguistic competence of L1 learners too. When acquiring her mother tongue, the task of the L1 learner is to evaluate the MGs with which she can make sense of the input, select the most productive one and incorporate it into her linguistic knowledge but also identify the less productive ones. Interestingly, the MG approach argues that, when the most productive, the fittest grammar has been identified, child learners will not discard the less productive L1 rule sets they previously considered because it might turn out that these rules will end up accounting for peripheral, more marked data found in the input. This leaves room for the coexistence within L1 of seemingly contradictory grammatical rule sets: fully productive versus lexically restricted ones. The same happens in L2.

Amaral & Roeper (2014), Roeper (2016) identify various linguistic phenomena that provide sources for MGs. One of them has to do with the acquisition of subject use in L1 (and L2) English, i.e. the acquisition of the *pro*-drop parameter. Regarding L1, it is acknowledged that English features the relevant syntactic properties of a non-*pro*-drop language. Hence, the grammar that licenses phonologically overt subjects in affirmative

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contexts counts as the most productive one (the relevant cue for it is the existence of expletive subjects, see also Yang 2002). At the same time, English exceptionally allows for null subjects under lexically restricted conditions, i.e. with some verbs that select expletive subjects:

- (1) a. Seems nice.
b. Looks good.

(Roeper 2016: 14)

All things considered, English subject-drop is marked for occurrence with a limited choice of verbs and the grammar that licenses this phenomenon is visibly less productive than its non-*pro*-drop counterpart. Nevertheless, despite their conflicting, contradictory nature, both grammars coexist in the English-speaking children's linguistic representation.

The present paper investigates an L2 learning topic that has bearing on the above concisely sketched MG approach – the grammatical acceptability of L2 English diary-register null subjects as evaluated by adult monolingual speakers of Romanian.

English has a couple of specific registers that license not only subject, but also direct object and functional category (determiners, auxiliary and copula verbs) omission: diaries (Haegeman 1990 a, b, 2019, Ihsane 1998, a.o.), the note-taking register (Janda 1985), telegrams (Barton 1998), colloquial language (Thrasher 1977), newspaper headlines/headlines (Simon-Vandenberg 1981) and the instructional register (Haegeman 1987, Massam & Roberge 1989). Numerous studies have claimed and argued that different grammars underlie subject omission in these registers (Haegeman 1990a, b, 2007, 2019, Nanyan 2013, Weir 2012) such that a unified account of the phenomenon is not tenable (but see Horsey 1998 for an attempt to unify the null diary subject syntax and subject omission in the instructional register). For now, it is enough to mention that subject omission in diary style has not been analyzed as a syntactic property of a *pro*-drop grammar (see section 2 for more details) and to note that register-restricted subject omission is also a source of MGs.

Romanian, on the other hand, belongs to the class of *pro*-drop languages; subject omission is grammatical and phonologically realized subjects occur in specific contexts such as those involving subject focalization or topic shift.

Amaral & Roeper (2014) and Roeper (2016) claim that L2 learners encounter additional difficulty in the process of grammar evaluation in comparison to L1 learners. In our particular case, keeping to the MG approach assumptions, at the onset of L2 English acquisition, the Romanian learner relies on her native language *pro*-drop grammar. Subsequently, she will become aware that English has overt expletive subjects. Yang (2002), Amaral & Roeper (2014) consider expletive subjects as the most relevant piece of evidence in favor of the non-*pro*-drop property of the language. Once the use of expletive subjects gets target-like, everything is in place for the L2 learner to posit that English grammar has a productive rule that generates phonologically realized subjects in declarative sentences, i.e. that English is non-*pro*-drop. Upon exposure to diary language, the L2 learner has to block the productive rule and to make room for the syntactically- and also discourse-constrained contexts in which subject omission becomes legitimate.

Framed in the theoretical backdrop provided by the MG theory, the present paper attempts to answer two research questions about the comprehension of L2 diary null subjects: (i) do the L2 English learners overgeneralize the English core non-*pro*-drop grammar to contexts (such as the diary-register) that warrant, in fact, null subjects? or (ii) are these L2 learners aware of the properties of the subject omission grammar in L2 English? At this point, one additional remark is in order. Amaral & Roeper (2014), commenting on work by Snyder (2007), mention that monolingual children show a certain conservatism in L1 language production because they have knowledge of specific lexical restrictions that govern broad areas of acquisition (like double object verb learning) and this specific knowledge prevents them from making across the board generalizations (*say* cannot be used as a double object verb, it is an exception; the fact that *tell* is a double object verb does not endorse that *say* is too). As Amaral & Roeper note, nothing prevents conservatism to extend to L2 comprehension too. In our case, this implies that L2 learners will prefer to stick to overt subjects across the board, both in standard language and in the register-restricted variety.

All things considered, I expect two predictions to hold regarding the present grammatical acceptability study. If the L2 learners choose the conservative option and thus overgeneralize the non-*pro*-drop grammar, they are expected to reject grammatical sentences with null subjects in the diary register. If, on the other hand, they have become aware of the diary-grammar and its restricted productivity, they will accept null subjects in the syntactic contexts that license them (see Section 2).

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces the properties of the grammar of diary-style English, section 3 presents the methodology and the details about the participants in the present comprehension study, section 4 focuses on the results, section 5 discusses them and section 6 concludes.

2. The grammar of diary-style English

Extensive research on the topic reports that diary-register English relies on a particular grammar that is distinct from the grammar of *pro*-drop languages (Haegeman 2007, 2019, Weir 2012, a.o.). A couple of properties lie at the core of diary-style English. First, English verb morphology is mostly underspecified and, consequently, it cannot identify the agreement features on the null subject. This is why ambiguity between a first person and a third person reading sometimes arises as shown in (1) (*ec* abbreviates “empty category” and stands for the null subject):

(2) *ec* saw no one after we had left the party.

(Haegeman 1990a: 165)

Additionally, as seen in (2), no coreferentiality is required to hold between the null subject and embedded subjects.

Diary-null subjects are barred whenever there is fronted material preceding them in configurations involving movement to Spec,C or in I-to-C movement structures. Examples (3) and (4) illustrate this point with *wh*-phrases and *yes-no* questions:

- (3) *(When) will *ec* come back?
 (4) *Are *ec* coming to dinner tonight?

(Haegeman 2007: 98)

The restriction on co-occurrence with fronted constituents also entails that null subjects are disallowed when arguments are topicalized. However, adjunct-fronting exceptionally does not affect the grammaticality of null subjects: see the contrasting pair in (5), with a topicalized direct object and manner adverbial, respectively:

- (5) a. *This book, *ec* didn't like.
 b. With a sigh of relief, *ec* saw a heap of ruins.

(Wilder 1994: 36)

(Woolf 1940: 330 in Ihsane 1998)

Last, it has been conjectured that null subjects represent a root phenomenon, they never occur in embedded sentences:

- (6) a. *I think that *ec* will leave.
 b. *John called me when *ec* returned.

(Haegeman 2007: 98)

This is a disputed claim, though. Weir (2012) notes that null subjects in embedded clauses, though marginal in acceptability, are not completely ruled out. He offers examples from *Bridget Jones's Diary* by H. Fielding such as:

- (7) *ec* understand where *ec* have been going wrong.

Regarding this issue, Haegeman & Ihsane (2001) suggest that there is dialectal variation in the diary register between a “majority” dialect, featuring root null subjects and a “minority” one, which permits embedded null subjects. The latter is illustrated by “recent British fictional diaries” such as H. Fielding’s book (Haegeman & Ihsane 2001: 330).

It has been suggested that a phase-based account captures the distribution and syntactic behavior of null subjects in the diary-register (Haegeman 2019). These subjects sit in the specifier position of Subject Phrase, the highest functional projection in root clauses. Upon phase transfer, null subjects never get spelled-out because only the head (Subject, in this case) and its complement get sent to PF. Put simply, the existence of null subjects follows from considerations related to the structure of the left periphery (which explain why Subject Phrase is the topmost projection) in conjunction with assumptions about the way in which phase spell-out proceeds. Arguably, the grammar that generates null subjects in the diary register can be viewed as an alternative grammar, fundamentally different from the *pro*-drop phenomenon, which revolves around checking agreement features (but see also Neeleman & Szendrői (2007) on agreement and subject drop), i.e. one of the MG set. This second grammar is also more restricted, since in *pro*-drop grammars the agreement features on the null subject are identified through verb morphology, phonologically empty subjects co-occur freely with both *wh*-phrases and

yes-no questions, null subjects are allowed in sentences in which the direct object has undergone topicalization and both root and subordinate clauses may have null subjects.

The phase-based account, however, applies to null subjects in spoken language, first and foremost. When it comes to the diary-register, Haegeman acknowledges that her proposal has problems explaining the distribution of embedded null subjects that pertain to the “minority” dialect. Still, there are alternative accounts for the diary register: Scott (2010) and Weir (2012).

Scott (2010) opts for an explanation rooted in pragmatics and discourse considerations. In her view, the writer who resorts to null subjects aims at creating a familiar, casual piece of discourse. In doing so, the writer is fully aware that null subjects represent the marked option in a non-null subject language like English and that the reader will put in additional cognitive effort so as she can process the sentences. Nevertheless, the writer assumes that the reader will be able to assign the intended meaning to the null subject because this null constituent links up to a highly accessible antecedent: the speaker/author of the piece of discourse. In her turn, the reader assumes that the writer aims at optimal relevance in the contexts created and hence makes the cognitive effort required to ultimately get to the intended meaning. Scott’s theory places null subject comprehension at the interface between syntax and discourse/pragmatics. The Interface Hypothesis (Sorace & Filiaci 2006, Sorace 2011) predicts the existence of optionality and variability effects for near-native L2 speakers when it comes to dealing with linguistic phenomena pertaining to external interfaces. In our particular case, this entails that the processing cost incurred by assigning reference to null subjects in the diary-style register might result in non-target like performance in the interpretation of these subjects. Since the participants in the present study do not have the near-native proficiency level, I will not further pursue the implications of this research avenue for the current study.

Weir (2012), on the other hand, preserves Haegman’s idea that null subjects occupy the topmost position in syntax (Subject Phrase), but he proposes that phonological considerations license their occurrence in both spoken and written English. Adopting an approach couched in the Optimality Theory framework, Weir conjectures that sentences should not have a weak start (Weir 2012: 123), i.e. they should not begin with a phonologically weak element because this violates the STRONGSTART constraint. Personal pronoun subjects get deleted so as the constraint is not violated. In his view, STRONGSTART also explains why null subject sentences begin sometimes with an adverbial modifier (*Tomorrow will go the gym*). The author himself acknowledges that his proposal fully accounts for the distribution of null subjects in spoken language, but that it needs more fine-graining before being extended to null subjects in the written register. For this particular reason, I will not further pursue the consequences of his theory for the topic at hand.

3. Methodology and participants

The participants in the study were 37 student volunteers from the University of Bucharest who qualify as intermediate and advanced L2 English learners. They did not

take an L2 proficiency test, but were placed in different levels of proficiency in accordance with the average number of years they spent on studying English. More precisely, the intermediate group (n = 28) studied English for 12.7 years on average, and the advanced group (n = 9) for 17.8 years. The mean ages were 21.3, and 28 respectively.

The participants were asked to assess the grammaticality of twenty-four sentences with null subjects using binary judgments, i.e. grammatical versus ungrammatical. They were also instructed to provide the correct version for the sentences that they marked as ungrammatical, but they were not asked to explain why they considered a sentence to be ungrammatical. Test sentences with null subjects were preceded by another sentence that was meant to set up a brief context and evoke the diary style manner of presentation¹. The experiment had one independent variable with four levels (lexically realized subject, null subject in root clause, null subject in embedded clause and null subject in *yes-no* question) and one dependent variable, the score. Three out of the six items in the null subject condition featured expletive *there/it* subject drop (see 9b,c). The test items were presented in randomized order. I give below a sample of each of the four conditions:

Lexically overt subject

- (8) The journey was exhausting. I stopped a couple of times.

Null subject in root clause

- (9) a. February 26 was a lovely day. Took a walk in the park.
 b. The task is tricky. Seems impossible to solve.
 c. The traffic is crazy. Must be an accident up ahead.

Null subject in embedded clause

- (10) Had coffee after got to the office.

Null subject in *yes-no* question

- (11) Doubts surfaced. What can say?

The study included nine fillers whose purpose was to control if the L2 learners had already set the correct value for the *pro*-drop parameter in L2 English. The filler items were selected in terms of the cluster properties associated with the Null Subject Parameter, i.e. post-verbal subjects, *that*-trace contexts. More precisely, three fillers were

¹ One reviewer inquires whether the test items were clearly identifiable as diary-style entries rather than utterances pertaining to colloquial language. The sentences preceded by an opening (like those in 9) resemble the diary set-up. It is true, however, that the test items in the null embedded subject condition (like 10) are not necessarily easily recognizable as belonging to a diary context and could be attributed to informal, spoken language. As for expletive subjects (see 9c), they can be non-overt in diaries, not just in spoken English (Nanyan 2013).

sentences with post-verbal subjects (**Read the kid the whole Harry Potter series*), another three had *wh*-subject extraction over a null complementizer (*Who do you think sounded the alarm?*) and the last three included *wh*-subject extraction over an overt complementizer (**What do you suspect that destroyed the building?*).

At the beginning of the study, the participants were instructed on what to do. An example of an unacceptable sentence was presented to them that did not involve ungrammaticality caused by inappropriate null subject use, but stemming from a subject – verb agreement mismatch. Indications on how to correct it were provided. The test was administered as a Google Form and the data were provisionally stored on the author’s Google Drive.

4. Results

A binary coding system was used with answer-rating, i.e. on-target responses were rated with 1 and 0 went to the off-target ones. The subordinate clause condition was assessed as follows: answers with a null or an overt DP subject in the main clause and an overt DP embedded subject received 1 (for instance *Guess that he/she got lost on the way and I guess that I got lost on the way = 1*); and answers with null subjects in main and embedded clause as well as those with an overt DP subject in the main clause and a null embedded subject got 0 (such as **Confessed that had met them before* and **I wrote a nice review after left = 0*).

Figure 1 displays the overall means of on-target responses (overt subject, $M = 6$ ($SD = 0$); null subject in root clause, $M = 2.54$ ($SD = 2.16$), null subject in embedded clause, $M = 4.76$ ($SD = 1.75$) and null subject in *yes-no* question, $M = 5.46$ ($SD = 1.12$)).

Figure 2 plots results for the intermediate students (overt subject, $M = 6$ ($SD = 0$); null subject in root clause, $M = 2.60$ ($SD = 1.96$), null subject in embedded clause, $M = 4.67$ ($SD = 1.88$) and null subject in *yes-no* question, $M = 5.35$ ($SD = 1.25$)).

Figure 3 illustrates the descriptive statistics for the advanced group (overt subject, $M = 6$ ($SD = 0$); null subject in root clause, $M = 2.33$ ($SD = 2.82$), null subject in embedded clause, $M = 5$ ($SD = 1.32$) and null subject in *yes-no* question, $M = 5.77$ ($SD = 0.44$)). The error bars in all the figures represent standard error.

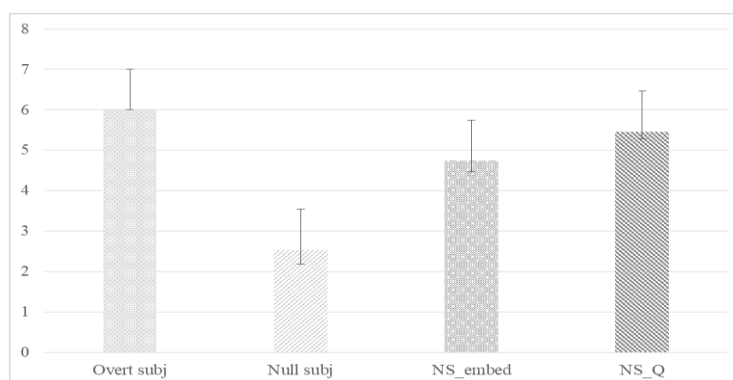


Figure 1. On-target response means: Group results

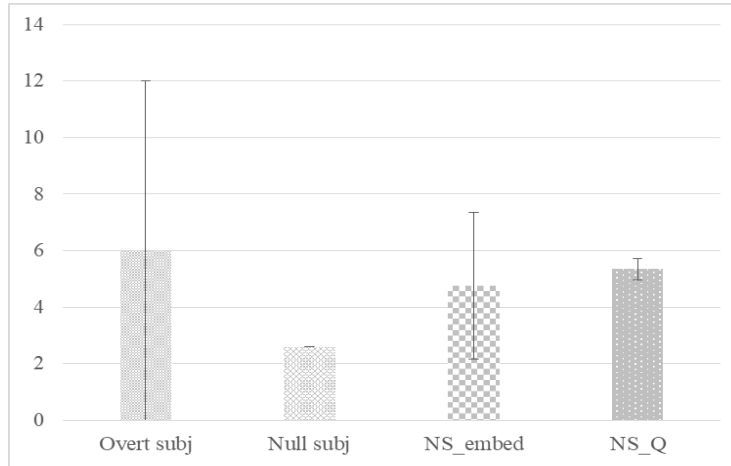


Figure 2. On-target response means. Intermediate L2

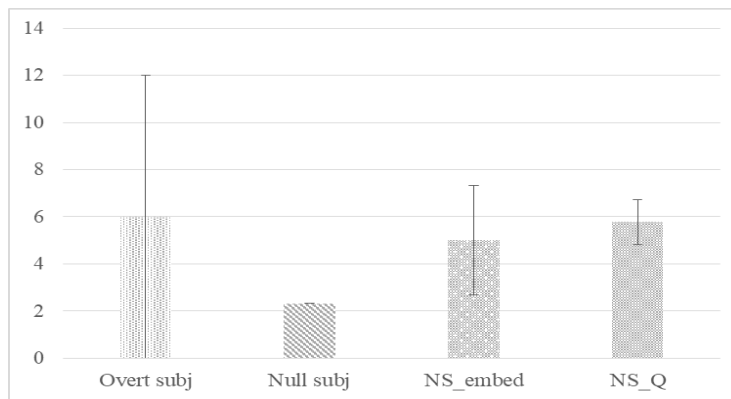


Figure 3. On-target response means. Advanced L2

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted in order to determine whether the four experimental conditions differed to a significant extent. The results confirm the presence of an overall significant difference among them: $F(1.60, 57.72) = 35.248$, $p < .001$. *Post hoc* Bonferroni tests point out to statistically significant differences between responses to (i) the overt subject and the null subject in root clause conditions ($p < .01$), (ii) the null subject in root clause and the null subject in embedded clause conditions ($p = .01$) and (iii) the null subject in root clause and the null subject in *yes-no* questions conditions ($p < .01$).

A one-sample t-test indicated that the responses in the null subject in root clause condition did not get over the chance level, $t(36) = -1.289$, $p > .05$. One-sample t-tests performed for the null subjects in embedded clauses and in *yes-no* questions show that, in those cases, responses are situated above chance level: $t(36) = 6.091$, $p < .05$ and $t(3) = 13.353$, $p < .05$.

A paired-sample t-test compared the total number of responses for null DP ($M = .92$) and null expletive subjects ($M = 1.62$) and indicated a statistically significant

difference between them. There were more on-target answers in the null expletive subject condition, $t(36) = -4.175, p < .05$.

Individual analysis offers a slightly different picture from the overall results because there are seven participants from the intermediate group and another three from the advanced L2 learners who gave answers above chance in the null subject in root clause condition. More precisely, out of these ten participants, five provided 5 / 6 on-target responses (amounting to 83.3%) and the other five responded at ceiling, 6 / 6. On closer inspection, though, only two participants from the intermediate lot consistently responded above chance in all four conditions. Regarding the advanced group, another four learners were consistent in this sense. One caveat applies here. As per our coding system, in the null embedded subject condition both answers with two overt DP subjects and those with a null subject in the main clause and an overt DP embedded subject were rated on-target. But L2 learners who are fully aware of null subject distribution would be expected to opt for the null subject in main clause and overt subject in the subordinate clause. Out of the six participants with above the chance responses, four had the expected pattern: null subject in the main clause – overt DP subject in the embedded clause. The other two (more conservatively) used overt DPs in both positions. All things considered, at the strictest assessment, I conclude those four L2 learners (two intermediate and four advanced) seem to command the use of null subjects in the diary-style register.

As for the control items, a one-way repeated measures ANOVA pointed out to a significant overall difference among the three clustering properties: $F(1.75, 63.25) = 11.319, p < .001$. *Post hoc* Bonferroni tests reveal a significant difference between (i) the extraction of *wh*-subject over overt C condition and extraction of *wh*-subject over null C ($p < .001$) and (ii) again, *wh*-subject extraction over overt C condition and the post-verbal subject condition ($p < .05$). No statistically significant difference holds between the overt post-verbal subject and *wh*-phrase extraction over a null C conditions ($p > .05$).

5. Discussion

Four main findings stand out from the present study. The analysis of group-performance indicates that the grammatical acceptability of null subjects in the L2 English diary register does not surpass chance level. However, a closer look at the performance of four participants (three intermediate and one advanced learner) reveals above chance performance conceptualized as 5 or 6 on-target responses out of a total of 6 in all four conditions. Overall, those L2 learners who allow for omission prefer to omit third person expletive subjects rather than first person ones. Last but not least, all the participants seem to have integrated in their linguistic system the knowledge that L2 English is not a *pro*-drop language (unlike Romanian, their maternal tongue).

Turning to the research questions formulated in the beginning, these findings support the view that the participants conservatively overgeneralize the core non-*pro*-drop grammar of English to diary language, a specific register that allows, in fact, subject omission (even if in syntactically restricted contexts). Only four L2 learners out of 37 have shown solid awareness of the availability of subject drop in diaries, as they performed above chance level in all experimental conditions.

These results find a comprehensive explanation only after careful consideration of a couple of factors. The most obvious issue that springs to mind relates to the input available to the L2 learners. It goes without saying that linguistic/grammar development relies on constant exposure to input and, quite importantly, it is both quantity and quality of input to an equal extent that matter in the process of L2 adult and child acquisition (for (bilingual) child acquisition, see Unsworth et al. 2019 and references therein, a.o.). When it comes to the diary register, input quantity could be measured in terms of (i) the actual hours per a certain unit of time that L2 learners spend on reading diaries or (ii) the number of tokens (first, third person null subjects, etc.) encountered while reading². But input quality is also highly relevant because it has been noted that there is variation in terms of null subject distribution across diaries. Regarding this particular aspect, remember that Haegeman & Ihsane (2001) speak about a majority and a minority dialect with embedded null subjects (recent British work). Moreover, Haegeman (2007) acknowledges that no restriction on the occurrence of null subjects in embedded clauses holds either in recent or not so recent work like *Bridget Jones's Diary* (H. Fielding) and *The Diary of a Provincial Lady* (E.M. Delafield, 1930), respectively. I therefore take diary dialect type to provide a measure of input quality. No assessment of input quality or quantity was undertaken for the current study. Given these considerations, there is no guarantee that the participants in the current study were exposed to the relevant quantitative and qualitative input necessary to the successful acquisition of diary language. On the other hand, it is not far-fetched to suppose that they have had a certain amount of exposure to subject drop in the colloquial register through watching and listening to a variety of TV and radio programs or interacting with native speakers in informal set-ups, etc. I surmise that, for those participants who were aware of *pro*-drop in diary grammar, exposure to this undifferentiated input (i.e. not specific to the diary-register) might have been enough to guide their on-target performance in the comprehension of diary null subjects. It is generally acknowledged that the distribution of null subjects in spoken and in diary-register English overlap only to a certain extent. Indeed, there are fine points of variance coming into play in this respect (for instance, the diary register does not feature 2nd subject pronoun drop, but this is not necessarily true of spoken language – Haegeman 2007). But putting such details aside, it could be that, in the beginning, L2 learners get to a stage in their linguistic development when they have received enough input to infer that the non-*pro*-drop grammar is not pervasive, even if it is doubtlessly the most productive one. At that stage, they are prepared to allow for null subjects, for a restricted *pro*-drop alternative grammar, that is. Only later on will they settle the fine points of variance in the distribution of these empty categories across specific registers and differentiate between null subjects in the spoken and the written registers. An indication that this supposition might be on the right track comes from the comment made by one L2 learner, RP, who rated the test item *Guess that got lost on the way* as grammatical because spoken English allows it. She is also one of the participants who gave ceiling responses in the null subject in root clause condition and scored 5 out of 6 on-target answers for the null subject in embedded clause.

² Most null subjects in the diary-register are 1st person singular; 1st person plural and 3rd person null subjects occur much less frequently (Nanyan 2013).

I believe enough evidence has accrued to indicate that exposure to the specific L2 input cannot be the whole story accounting for the main result of the study. After all, individual result examination identified four participants with consistent performance on the task, understood as on-target responses within the 83.3% to 100% range in all experimental conditions. So what other factors could possibly relate to our findings?

One might consider the extra difficulty posed by handling MGs in the process of L2 acquisition. Framing L2 learning in the MG approach, one could claim that the L2 learners indeed had a difficult task ahead which required of them to focus on three main aspects. First, they had to discern the existence of a non-core grammar. Put differently, they had to figure out that, in some cases, overt/null subject realization does not depend on verb morphology (poorly specified morphology goes hand in hand with overt subject expression), but on facts related to subject position at the topmost layer in the root clause (see Haegeman's phase-based account). This means pitting the core (and productive) non-*pro*-drop grammar against another (non-core) grammar that is sensitive to root and left-periphery facts. Second, they had to establish that the productivity of the non-core grammar is restricted to a particular register variety of L2. Finally, in order to make room for null subjects in their linguistic representation, they had to block the core grammar from applying to the diary-style context.

Another factor that could tie in with chance level performance has to do with the optionality of subject drop in the diary register. There is always the possibility for the L2 learner to use a phonologically realized subject without going wrong. So, instead of accepting the grammaticality of a test item like *February 26 was a lovely day. Took a walk in the park* one could just as well fit in an overt subject for the verb *take*. This means that whenever a preference for a particular option is tested rather than a mandatory phenomenon, the door to chance performance might stay open.

One more lingering question is why the L2 learners showed a strong preference for expletive null subject omission over 1st/3rd person subjects. Two equally possible reasons emerge, but the available data does not help with decisively choosing one over the other. Even if expletive subjects occur at the beginning of a sentence, a position invested with salience, they are completely non-salient formal items and thus more easily dispensable. Alternatively, it could be that expletive subjects make good candidates for omission because they bring a meagre contribution to what Scott (2010: 220) calls 'the explicit content of the utterance'. Either way it is easier to leave phonologically empty an item with the lowest degree of informativeness. First person subjects, on the other hand, turn the speaker into an accessible referent in discourse. This in principle makes the pronominal subject amenable to omission (Scott 2010), but L2 learners who have not yet settled the productivity of the non-core omission grammar might still hesitate when it comes to turning the speaker into an omissible element.

Granted, the current study suffers from a couple of limitations. First, there is an unbalanced number of L2 learners in the two groups, the number of intermediate students exceeds by far that of their advanced peers. Quite importantly, no information on the exposure of the participants to diary language has been gathered (under the form of a questionnaire filled in by them, for instance). As such, no measure of input has been included in the study. Last but not least, one problem of task design presents itself. The issue regarding the unacceptability of null subjects in embedded clauses is not at all clear.

Many studies present it as a property of the non-core omission grammar but then the authors of the very same studies include a lengthy list of exceptions featuring what they deem as perfectly acceptable null subjects in subordinate clauses; moreover, there is also talk of dialectal variation in the diary register. Consequently, performance on this particular condition may not have been relevant; other properties of the diary register grammar should be considered. Future research should address these limitations and include other factors such as: acceptance of 3rd person versus 1st person omissions, how coreference or disjoint reference between null subject and the main clause subject affects comprehension.

6. Conclusions

The present study has investigated the grammatical acceptability of diary-style null subjects in the L2 English of monolingual Romanian speakers. The main finding is that, overall, null subjects are (incorrectly) deemed grammatically unacceptable, the participants showing a quite strong preference for phonologically realized subjects, i.e. for the core non-*pro*-drop grammar of English. However, a small number of L2 learners behaved differently from the main group and consistently allowed for null subjects. This result provides some support to the view that intermediate and advanced L2 learners have acquired both the core non-*pro*-drop grammar of English and the non-core restricted grammar of omission. Nevertheless, the study does not provide fine-grained evidence about the nature of the non-core grammar, i.e. whether it clearly pertains to the diary-style register or to colloquial speech. The poor performance of the majority was put down to a couple of factors: insufficient exposure to the relevant input, difficulty with handling multiple grammars in adult L2 acquisition and the optionality of the omission phenomenon itself.

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