# ARE POSTVERBAL SUBJECTS DIFFICULT TO ELIMINATE FROM THE L2 ENGLISH OF L1 SPEAKERS OF ROMANIAN?

## Andreea Dogaru[*]

**Abstract:** The availability of post-verbal subjects in non-canonical sentences is one of the properties which distinguish between non null-subject languages, like English, and consistent null-subject languages, like Romanian. L2 learning studies provide conflicting results with respect to whether native speakers of a null-subject language can fully eliminate ungrammatical postverbal subjects from their L2 English. The aim of this paper is to investigate if postverbal subjects are difficult to eliminate from the L2 English of L1 speakers of Romanian. The main results show that postverbal subjects are no longer accepted by L1 Romanian advanced and proficient learners of L2 English. However, intermediate learners accept significantly more postverbal subjects with unaccusative verbs than the other two groups. These results are in line with the Interface Hypothesis and the Full Transfer/Full Access Model.

**Keywords**: postverbal subjects, Full Transfer/Full Access, The Interface Hypothesis, the null subject parameter, L2 English

## 1. Introduction

A central question in second language learning studies is whether the acquisition of a second language (L2) is similar to the acquisition of one's mother tongue (L1). The generally accepted belief is that these two processes are distinct. Firstly, because the initial states of the two processes are different, i.e. when one starts learning a second language, L1 parameters are already set. Secondly, the end-state of L2 grammar is not always the same as the end-state of L1. While in L1 acquisition, the end-state grammar is the same for all native speakers, in L2 learning it may vary from learner to learner (Tsimpli & Roussou 1991). However, the precise factors which determine the initial and the end-state of the two processes are still debated.

Regarding the initial state of L2 learning, the main approaches can be divided depending on whether learners are assumed to have access to Universal Grammar and on whether and to what extent L1 influences subsequent language acquisition. At one extreme, Clahsen & Muysken (1986), for example, consider that there is no access to Universal Grammar in second language learning. According to this hypothesis, the acquisition of the L1 and the learning of an L2 are distinct and should be analysed separately: the principles of Universal Grammar which constrain L1 acquisition do not guide L2 learning; hence, learners employ different learning strategies. The Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis (Schwartz & Sprouse 1996) posits that the end-state of the L1 grammar is the initial state of the L2 grammar (full transfer), which will have to change when the input of the target language cannot be generated by the grammar of L1. The learning process is constrained by Universal Grammar at all stages (full access). This hypothesis focuses on the early stages of L2 learning and makes no general claim about final attainment (Sprouse 2011).

[*] University of Bucharest, "Limbi şi Identităţi Culturale" Doctoral School, andreead97@yahoo.com.

Regarding the end-state of the L2 grammar, a central question is whether learners can set the value of a parameter in L2 when its value differs from the one in their native language. Some linguists (Prentza & Roussou 1991, Prentza 2014) claim that a syntactic mismatch between L1 and L2 will result in prolonged problems which will never be overcome. Another account, known as the Interface Hypothesis, is that the properties pertaining to narrow syntax are fully acquirable, while those which involve an external interface are vulnerable (Sorace & Serratrice 2009, Sorace 2011, a.o.). This hypothesis predicts that L2 learners can reach ultimate attainment with respect to narrow syntax properties.

The aim of the present paper is to contribute to these debates by looking at how native speakers of Romanian who are L2 learners of English set the value of the null subject parameter. I focus on one of the properties traditionally associated with this parameter, i.e. the postverbal placement of the subject. Romanian, as a consistent null-subject language, allows subject-verb inversion, whereas English, a non-null subject language, does not.

Another key ingredient in the present study is verb type. Previous studies on postverbal subjects in L2 English have shown that postverbal placement of the subject is also sensitive to predicate type, i.e. L1 speakers of a null-subject language produce and accept more postverbal subjects in L2 English with unaccusatives than with unergatives. In light of this, I also investigate if there is any correlation between the L2 learners' evaluation of postverbal subjects and verb type, namely unaccusative, unergative and transitive.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly discusses the theoretical background on L2 learning. Section 3 highlights the distribution of subjects in English and Romanian. Section 4 provides a brief overview of several relevant studies that investigated the learning of subject placement in L2 English. In section 5 I present my own study. The main findings are summarized in section 6.

## 2. Theoretical background

The Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis (Schwartz & Sprouse 1996) assumes that second language learning is determined by the interaction of three factors, namely input, Universal Grammar, and learnability. The major claim is that at the early stages of development the L1 grammar is fully transferred to L2, while any subsequent change of the interlanguage is forced by the inability to grammatically license parses of input (Sprouse 2011). This restructuring is constrained by the principles of Universal Grammar at all stages. As for target-deviant structures, they are assumed to be caused by the transfer of L1 at the initial stage; however, the mechanisms allowing these structural problems to be overcome depend on "the logic of learnability of each successive grammatical state" (Sprouse 2011). Hence, this model makes no general claim about the end-state of L2 grammar, only that ultimate attainment similar to that of L1 acquisition is not guaranteed.

On the other hand, the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace & Filiaci 2006, Sorace 2011) aims to account for interlanguage grammar that demonstrates vulnerability/optionality at

advanced or near-native levels of proficiency. For example, it has been shown that while L1 English L2 learners of Italian (null-subject language) can successfully reset the null subject parameter and thus produce sentences with null and postverbal subjects, they still struggle with discourse-related conditions which govern the distribution of subjects in L2 Italian; such difficulties persist even at advanced levels of proficiency (Belleti & Leonini 2004, Belletti et al. 2006). Based on such findings, the main claim is that phenomena which involve external interfaces are vulnerable even in the case of the most proficient L2 learners, while those properties pertaining to narrow syntax alone are fully acquirable. An interesting question, starting from this approach, is whether an L1 interface property can be reflected in (selective) crosslinguistic interference effects in L2.

### 3. Postverbal subjects in Romanian and English

Traditionally, the availability of postverbal subjects has been correlated with rich agreement morphology (Barbosa 1995, 2009, Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 1998), i.e. rich agreement morphology has the status of a pronoun, which can satisfy the EPP only by verb-movement to the inflectional domain. As a result, the postverbal subject remains in its low position in the absence of an attracting feature (Sheehan 2009). Null-subject languages like Romanian have rich verbal agreement morphology, hence they allow postverbal placement of the subject, as can be seen in (1). English, on the other hand, is a non-pro-drop language, which has impoverished verb morphology, and disallows postverbal placement of the subject[1], as illustrated in (2). However, the notion of rich and poor morphology is too vague. An alternative account for the different behaviour displayed by English and Romanian is in terms of the different realization of the EPP feature, a selectional feature (Chomsky 1998), present in Inflection. Alboiu (2002) assumes a minimalist approach according to which this feature is subject to parametrization across languages, i.e. in some languages, it is realized as a [D], in others as a [T] or as a [V], which gives rise to three types of languages: [D]-type, [T]-type and [V]-type respectively. Based on this classification, Romanian is argued to be a V-type EPP language, which means that Inflection has a strong [+V] feature (the EPP feature) checked by the lexical verb, which always undergoes raising to $I^0$, i.e. it is checked via verb movement. On the other hand, English is a D-type EPP language; the EPP feature is checked by selecting an agreeing XP and merging it in Spec IP (Alboiu 2002: 74).

(1)    A    venit Ion.
       has  come  Ion
       'Ion came.'
(2)    a.       *Is a book on the table.
       b.       *Came Mary yesterday.

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[1] There are certain contexts where (non-canonical) subjects can be placed in postverbal position in English such as:
    (i)    Locative inversion: In the corner lay a lamp.
    (ii)   *There*-sentences: There are many trees in the yard.
    (iii)  Quotative inversion: 'You should go home', said John. (from Prentza 2014)

Within this analysis, in Romanian Nominative case is checked via Agree with all predicate types, unaccusatives included; no remerge is required, structural case is assigned in first Merge position, irrespective of whether the subject is definite or not. The subject moves to the left periphery for non-Case related reasons, for example when it can be interpreted as specific.

## 4. Previous studies on postverbal subjects in L2 English

The acquisition of postverbal subjects has been a topic of much debate in the L2 learning literature. On the one hand, there are studies that claim that the syntactic divergence between L1 and L2 is a cause of insurmountable problems, therefore the elimination of ungrammatical postverbal subjects is prone to serious delays. Data supporting this claim come from different studies. For example, Lozano & Mendikoetxea (2010) analysed Verb-Subject order in two corpora of L1 Spanish upper-intermediate learners of L2 English and in a comparable native English corpus. Their results showed that Spanish upper-intermediate learners of L2 English produced significantly more ungrammatical postverbal structures than the control group who were accurate at all times. Prentza & Tsimpli (2013) and Prentza (2014) investigated the acquisition of some properties associated with the null subject parameter (null subjects and postverbal subjects) in an L1 Greek–L2 English setting. The results for the condition with postverbal subjects showed that L1 Greek learners of different proficiency levels accepted ungrammatical postverbal subjects up to an advanced level.

On the other hand, subject placement in L2 English is constrained by syntax; hence, following the Interface Hypothesis, postverbal placement of the subject should not constitute a vulnerable domain in L2 learning. This prediction is borne out by results reported in different studies. White (1986) showed that L1 upper-intermediate Spanish learners had a high rate of accuracy (91%) in rejecting ungrammatical postverbal subjects in L2 English. Similar behaviour was reported by Garcia Mayo (1998); L1 Spanish and L1 Basque upper-intermediate learners were successful in identifying ungrammatical VS structures in L2 English in 95% of the cases. Tsimpli & Roussou (1991) found that intermediate and post-intermediate Greek learners of English were accurate in rejecting postverbal subject structures in L2 English.

Previous studies on postverbal subjects in L2 English have shown that postverbal placement of the subject is also sensitive to predicate type, i.e. L2 learners of English treat unaccusatives and unergatives differently with respect to VS structures. More precisely, it was observed that speakers of null subject languages learning a non-null subject language, first produce more ungrammatical postverbal subjects with unaccusative than with unergative verbs. Lozano & Mendikoetxea (2010) observed that upper-intermediate Spanish learners produced postverbal subjects only with unaccusative verbs and two-thirds (65.5%) of the VS structures produced by their learners were ungrammatical, i.e. structurally impossible in native English. Agathopoulou (2014) showed that advanced L1 Greek learners produced VS structures only with unaccusative verbs. Similar results were reported in the case of L1 Arabic learners of L2 English of different proficiency levels (Rutherford 1989), while Zobl (1989) also showed that L1

Japanese (discourse a discourse subject-drop language) upper-intermediate and advanced L2 learners of English placed the subject in postverbal position only with unaccusative verbs.

## 5. Present study

### 5.1 Main questions and predictions

Due to the existing disagreement regarding the acquisition of subject placement and the end-state of L2 grammar, as well as the fact that very few studies analysed data coming from very proficient L2 learners, an experimental study was designed to investigate if ungrammatical post-verbal subjects can be eliminated from the grammar of L2 learners of English in an L1 Romanian setting.

The questions which I address in the present study are:

(i)      Is postverbal placement of the subject a vulnerable domain in an L1 Romanian –
         L2 English setting at early stages? Is ultimate attainment possible?
(ii)     Does verb type influence the evaluation of ungrammatical free inversion in
         English?

Given the fact that Romanian allows postverbal subjects, while English disallows them, following the Full Transfer/Full Access model, which claims that L1 grammar is the initial state of L2 grammar, we expect learners of lower proficiency levels to be less accurate in evaluating VS structures than the more proficient groups.

Based on the results reported in previous studies regarding verb type, namely that unergatives and unaccusatives are treated differently by L2 English learners in VS structures (the "psychological reality" of the Unaccusative Hypothesis, Lozano 2003, Lozano & Mendikoetxea 2010, Balcom 1997, a.o.), we expect L1 Romanian learners to be less accurate in evaluating ungrammatical free inversion with unaccusative verbs than with unergatives or transitives, at least at early stages of acquisition.

Finally, since the ungrammaticality of postverbal subjects in English is a purely syntactic phenomenon, pertaining to narrow syntax, following the Interface Hypothesis, we predict that L1 Romanians will have no problems in resetting the right value of the parameter in L2 English and that the end-state of L2 grammars will be native-like with respect to this property.

### 5.2 Participants

The participants were 49 native speakers of Romanian studying L2 English, coming from different environments: high school, Faculty of Medicine, Polytechnic University of Bucharest, Academy of Economic Studies. Their proficiency level was assessed through an Oxford Placement Test (2001) and they were divided into four proficiency levels depending on their scores:  an intermediate group (INT) (n = 19), an advanced group (ADV) (n = 20), and a proficient group (PROF) (n = 10)  All of them, except for 4 participants in the proficient group, were linguistically naïve, i.e. they were

exposed to English in a classroom setting during elementary, primary and high school, while 4 of them continued to study English at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Bucharest.

Table 1. Participants' linguistic background

| Group | Number | Mean age |
|-------|--------|----------|
| INT   | 19     | 17.3     |
| ADV   | 20     | 21.4     |
| PROF  | 10     | 24.1     |

**5.3 Method**

The material used was a grammaticality judgment task. It included 18 test sentences and 18 distractors, balanced across three conditions depending on verb type: transitive, unergative, and unaccusative. The test sentences were balanced for grammaticality, as illustrated in the examples below:

(3)  a.  Yesterday morning, Mary brought me the best coffee. Condition I
     b.  *In the morning, reads my grandpa the newspaper.
(4)  a.  The bride danced with her father all night.           Condition II
     b.  *Ran many students in the park last evening.
(5)  a.  Yesterday, Carry fell and broke her arm.              Condition III
     b.  *Began my problems the night I met Roger.

All of the items were randomised, and each participant received an online questionnaire with the test sentences and the distractors. They were also instructed to evaluate each sentence by choosing one of the options: correct or incorrect and to provide the grammatical counterpart of the sentences evaluated as ungrammatical, in order to control if the ungrammaticality was related to postverbal subjects.

Regarding the coding method, I gave 1 point for each grammatical sentence correctly identified as grammatical and for all ungrammatical sentences correctly identified as ungrammatical. I also gave 1 point when a grammatical sentence was evaluated as ungrammatical if the alternative provided by the participants did not target subject placement. For example, the sentence in (6) is grammatical; however, some participants evaluated it as ungrammatical and gave (7) as the right alternative:

(6)    In the evening, many people walk by the lake.
(7)    *In evening, many people walk by the lake.

For the statistical analysis, since the data were not equally distributed, I used the non-parametric counterpart of the single factor analysis of variance, i.e. Kruskal-Wallis-Test to check whether there was a difference between our three independent groups. Because Kruskal-Wallis-Test cannot tell which specific groups of the independent variable are

statistically significantly different from each other, I also ran a post-hoc Dunn's test to find out which specific group(s) differed statistically from the other(s). For within-group comparisons, I used several ANOVAs for repeated measures.

### 5.4 Results

#### 5.4.1 Condition I: Transitive verbs

The results for the first condition, with transitive verbs, show that the participants had a high rate of accuracy overall. The advanced and the proficient groups correctly identified both grammatical and ungrammatical sentences in 100% of the cases, followed by the intermediate with a 99% rate of accuracy.

The Kruskal-Wallis test indicated that there is a non-significant difference in the dependent variable between the different groups, $\chi^2(2) = 1.58$, $p = .45$, with a mean rank score of 24.21 for the intermediate learners (INT), 25.5 for the advanced group (ADV), 25.5 for the proficient group (PROF) (post-hoc Dunn's test: INT: ADV $p = .25$; INT: PROF $p = .34$, ADV: PROF $p = 1$).

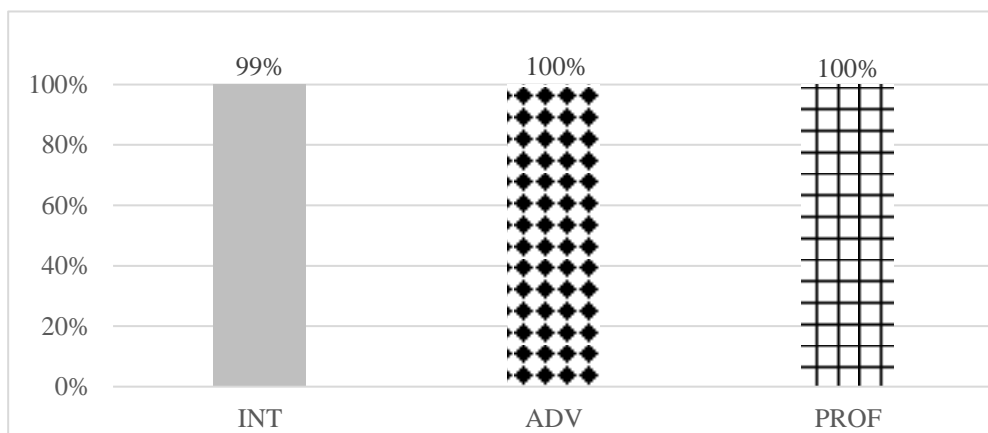The overall results are summarized in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Condition I. Overall results

Another Kruskal-Wallis-Test was conducted, but this time only with the data coming from the ungrammatical sentences which were correctly evaluated. The results were the same, i.e. even if the intermediate group had a 99% rate of accuracy while the advanced and the proficient groups had a 100% rate of accuracy, this difference was not statistically significant (post-hoc Dunn's test: INT: ADV $p = .25$, INT: PROF $p = .3$, ADV: PROF $p = 1$).

Regarding the judgment of grammatical vs ungrammatical sentences, we used a one-way ANOVA test for repeated measures which showed that even though the intermediate learners were more accurate in evaluating grammatical sentences than ungrammatical ones, this difference was not statistically significant ($p = .33$).

|  | INT | ADV | PROF |
|---|---|---|---|
| ⁚successfully identified as grammatical | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| ▪successfully identified as ungrammatical | 98% | 100% | 100% |

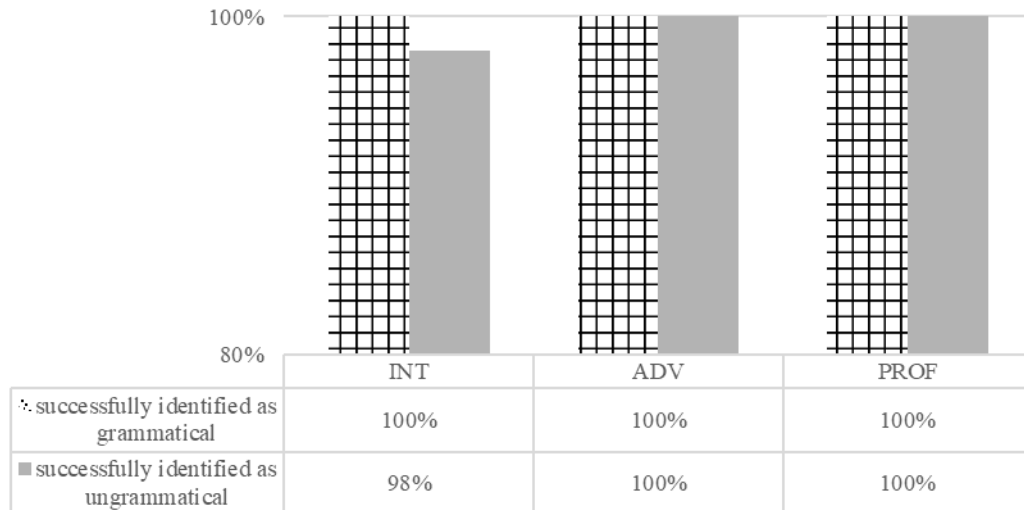Figure 2. Condition I. Successfully identified as grammatical and ungrammatical

### 5.4.2 Condition 2: Unergative verbs

The results for the second condition, with unergative verbs, are similar to the previous one. Both the advanced and the proficient groups had a 100% rate of accuracy, followed by the intermediate learners who were accurate in 99% of the cases. Like in the previous case, the Kruskal-Wallis H test indicates that there is a no significant difference in the dependent variable between the different groups, $\chi2(2) = 1.58$, $p = .45$, with a mean rank score of 24.21 for INT, 25.5 for ADV, 25.5 for PROF (post-hoc Dunn's test: INT: ADV $p = .25$, INT: PROF $p = .34$, ADV: PROF $p = 1$). The overall results are summarized in Figure 3.
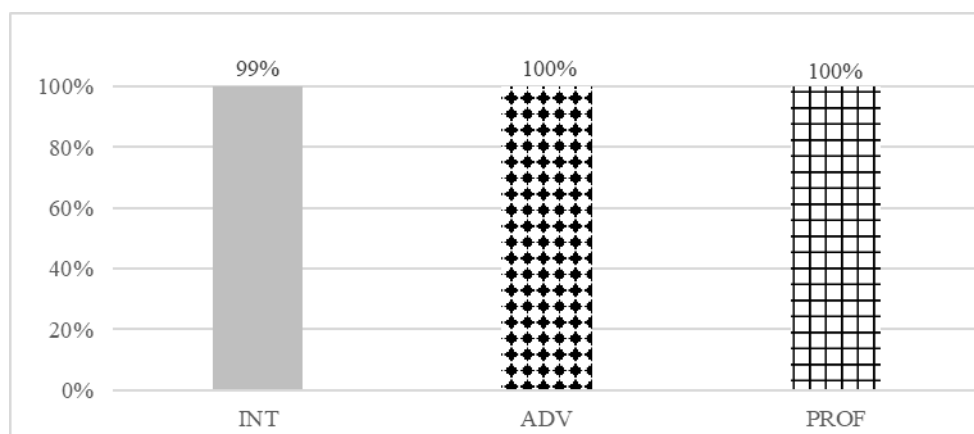


Figure 3. Condition II. Overall results

Regarding the evaluation of ungrammatical sentences, the intermediate group was again accurate in 98% of the cases, while the advanced and the proficient groups correctly evaluated ungrammatical sentences in 100% of the cases, while no significant difference was found between the three groups (post-hoc Dunn's test: INT: ADV $p$ = .25, INT: PROF $p$ = .34, ADV: PROF $p$ = 1). As in the previous case, within-group comparisons showed that the intermediate group was more accurate in evaluating grammatical sentences than ungrammatical ones, but this difference did not reach significance ($p$ = .33).



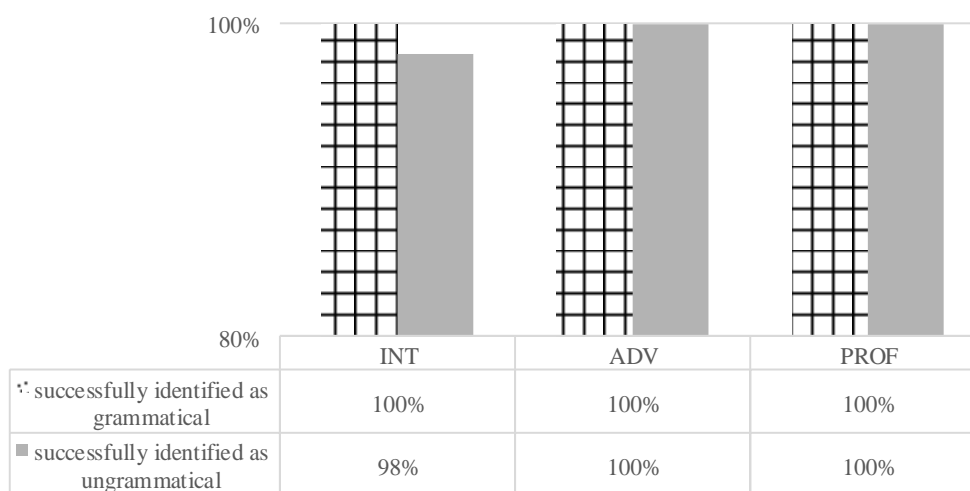| | INT | ADV | PROF |
|---|---|---|---|
| ∵ successfully identified as grammatical | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| ∎ successfully identified as ungrammatical | 98% | 100% | 100% |

Figure 4. Condition II. Successfully identified grammatical vs. ungrammatical

### 5.4.3 Condition 3: Unaccusative verbs

The results for the third condition, with unaccusative verbs, show that overall the participants performed well. The advanced and the proficient groups had again a 100% rate of accuracy, while the intermediate group had a slightly lower accuracy rate, of 93%. However, in this case, the Kruskal-Wallis test indicates that there is a significant difference in the dependent variable between the different groups, $\chi2(2)$ = 6.72, $p$ = .03, with a mean rank score of 21.84 for INT, 27 for ADV, 27 for PROF ($p$ = .03). The post-hoc Dunn's test using an alpha of .05 indicated that the mean rank of the following pairs is significantly different: INT: ADV $p$ = .01; INT: PROF $p$ = .02. The overall results are summarized in Figure 5.

If we analyse the results obtained for the ungrammatical sentences correctly evaluated as ungrammatical, we see again that the percentage of the intermediate group changes. The intermediate group was accurate in 87% of the cases, while the advanced and the proficient groups had a 100% rate of accuracy. The Kruskal-Wallis test indicates that there is a significant difference in the dependent variable between the different groups, $\chi^2(2)$ = 6.72, $p$ = .035, with a mean rank score of 21.84 for INT, 27 for ADV, 27 for PROF ($p$ = .03). The post-hoc Dunn's test shows that the mean rank of the following pairs is significantly different: INT: ADV $p$ = .01; INT: PROF $p$ = .02.
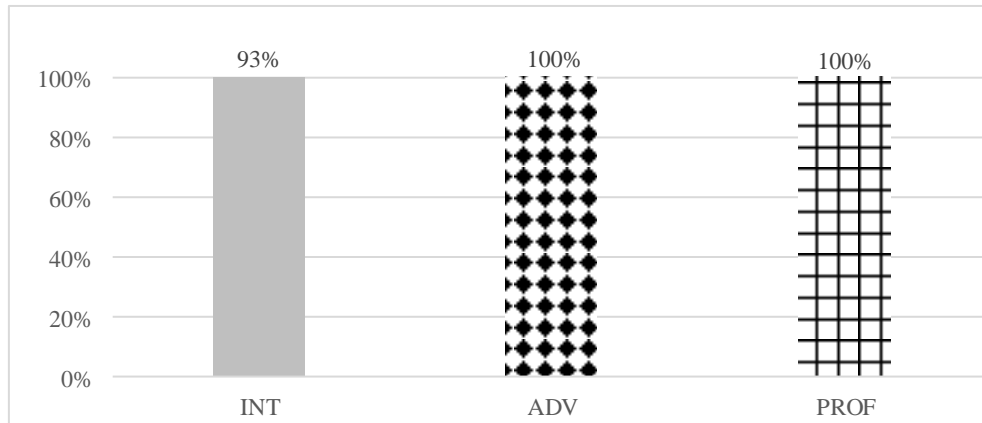
Figure 5. Condition III. Overall results

Within-group analysis showed that even though the intermediate group was more accurate in evaluating grammatical sentences than ungrammatical ones (100% vs 87%), this difference was not statistically significant ($p = .06$).



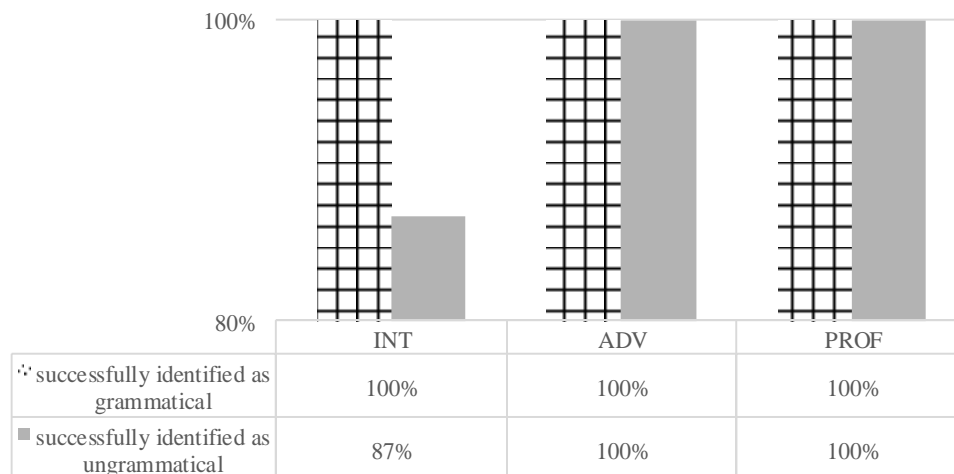| | INT | ADV | PROF |
|---|---|---|---|
| ∵ successfully identified as grammatical | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| ■ successfully identified as ungrammatical | 87% | 100% | 100% |

Figure 6. Condition III. Successfully identified as grammatical and ungrammatical

### 5.4.4 Comparing the results

Overall, the Romanian L2 learners of English performed well, especially the advanced and the proficient groups who had a 100% rate of accuracy across conditions. The intermediate group correctly evaluated both grammatical and ungrammatical sentences in 97% of the cases overall. The Kruskal-Wallis H test indicated that there is a significant difference in the dependent variable between the different groups, $\chi^2(2) = 9.81$, with a mean rank score of 69.26 for INT, 77 for ADV, 77 for PROF. The post-hoc Dunn's test using an alpha of .05 indicated that the mean ranks of the following pairs are significantly different: INT: ADV ($p = .004$); INT: PROF ($p = .01$).

Within-group comparisons indicate that the intermediate learners accepted significantly more postverbal subjects with unaccusative verbs (93%) than with transitives or unergatives (99%) ($p = .04$).

### 5.4.5 Discussion

The results of the present study indicate that L1 properties related to postverbal subjects are not active in the L2 grammar of L1 Romanian advanced and proficient learners of English, since they had a 100% rate of accuracy across all conditions. Postverbal subjects are successfully eliminated from the grammar of L2 English at an advanced proficiency level. These findings support the Interface Hypothesis which predicts that properties pertaining to narrow syntax are acquirable. Since the distribution of subjects in L2 English is regulated by narrow syntax properties, it follows that it does not constitute a vulnerable domain. Our results are different from the ones reported for L1 Greek-L2 English learners, who accepted ungrammatical postverbal subjects up to an advanced level (Prentza & Tsimpli 2013, Prentza 2014). But they are in line with White (1986) and Garcia Mayo (1998), who showed that postverbal subjects are eliminated from the grammar of L1 Spanish and Basque L2 learners of English even at an upper-intermediate proficiency level.

However, ungrammatical postverbal subjects continue to be accepted, at low rates, by the intermediate learners in the present study. They transfer their L1 preference for postverbal subjects to L2 English in the case of unaccusative verbs. This can be accounted for in terms of transfer from L1 Romanian following the Full Transfer/Full Access Model which claims that target-deviant structures are caused by L1 transfer. Given that L1 Romanian allows VS structures, it follows that this property is still active in the L2 grammar at an intermediate stage of development. The question that arises is why the intermediate L2 learners did not accept VS structures with unergatives and transitives, since subject-verb inversion is also found in Romanian with such verbs. One possible explanation is that "revision" (Sprouse 2011) took place at an earlier stage. English allows postverbal subjects in certain structures with a subclass of unaccusative verbs, but more rarely with unergatives or transitives; hence, based on the input received they were forced to get rid of the VS option (available in L1) with unergative and transitive verbs first. Another explanation could be that L2 learners in general are aware of the unergative/unaccusative distinction. Several previous studies (Lozano & Mendikoetxea 2010, Agathopoulou 2014, Zobl 1989, Rutherford 1989) showed that L2 learners accepted postverbal subjects in L2 English only with unaccusative verbs.

### 6. Conclusions

The results obtained in this study support all our predictions. Firstly, the intermediate group was less accurate in evaluating ungrammatical postverbal subjects than the more proficient groups, since at the early stages of development L1 grammar is transferred to L2.  In the case of the advanced and the proficient groups, their L2

grammar has already undergone revision due to the fact that the input of the target language could not be generated by the grammar of L1 Romanian.

Secondly, L1 Romanian learners were expected, based on the results reported in other studies, to be less accurate in evaluating postverbal subjects with unaccusative verbs than with unergatives or transitives, which again was borne out by our data in the case of intermediate learners.

All in all, the present study showed that subject-verb inversion, which is part of the cluster of properties associated with the null subject parameter, can be fully acquired at an advanced and proficient level.

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