How prosody affects L2 processing: Pronoun interpretation in L2 Italian

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In Italian, null pronouns are preferred when the antecedent is subject of a higher clause; otherwise, overt pronouns are preferred (see (1)). Carminati (2002) attributes this to a processing strategy, the Position of Antecedent Strategy (PAS). Sorace and Filiaci (2006) and Belletti et al. (2007) report that L2ers, unlike native speakers (NSs), overuse overt pronouns in contexts where null pronouns are appropriate, attributing this to processing problems relating to the PAS. They further report that NSs and L2ers allow null pronouns to take non-subject antecedents about 50% of the time, unexpected on the PAS.

We hypothesize that prosody influences pronoun choice, both for NSs and L2ers, affecting operation of the PAS. Prior research used written stimuli, making it impossible to assess prosody effects. Our experiment included 78 aurally-presented biclausal sentences, preceded by written contexts to introduce external referents. Presence/absence of pause between clauses and presence/absence of contrastive stress on overt pronouns were manipulated. Participants had to indicate the referent for the pronoun (see (2)). 15 intermediate and advanced L2ers (Dutch and English L1s) and 20 NSs have been tested so far.

Overall, results on null and overt pronouns mirror (in fact surpass) previous research. Both NSs and L2ers showed significant differences depending on pronoun type ($p_{s}<0.001$), preferring subject antecedents for null pronouns and objects for overt (see Fig 1). As far as overt pronouns are concerned, there were significant differences depending on stress ($p_{s}<0.001$): contrastive stress decreased object choices by all groups, increased selection of external referents by both L2 groups, increased selection of subject antecedents for NSs, and reduced intermediates’ inappropriate choice of subject antecedents (Fig 2). Contrary to expectation, presence of pause had no effects. In conclusion, the PAS alone cannot explain the determination of antecedents for pronouns by NSs and L2ers: prosodic factors must also be considered.
(1) Lorenzo ha scritto a Roberto quando Ø/lui si è trasferito a Torino.
‘Lorenzo wrote to Roberto when (he) moved to Turin.’

(2) Example of test 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

Fig 1. Null vs. overt pronouns:
NSs vs. L2ers (collapsed)

Fig 2. Unstressed vs. contrastively stressed pronouns:
NSs vs. two groups of learners

References
