On Interpretation of Null Arguments in L2 Japanese by European non-pro-drop and pro-drop language speakers

Kazumi Yamada¹, Yoichi Miyamoto²

¹Kwansei Gakuin University, Japan
²Osaka University, Japan

Oku (1998) claims that null subjects prohibit sloppy interpretation in Spanish, while null arguments in Japanese allow it. This dichotomy suggests that Spanish null subjects are null pronominals, pro’s, whereas null arguments in Japanese result from argument ellipsis (AE) (Saito, 2007). Theoretically, the absence of phi-feature agreement yields AE (Saito 2007), while pro’s are licensed by D-features along with phi-features (Roberts 2007).

Assuming the impossibility of phi-feature “de-learning” (Ishino, 2012; Tsimpi & Dimitrakopoulou, 2007), we predict that European non-pro-drop and pro-drop language speakers cannot learn AE in their L2 Japanese since their L1s have phi-features.

This paper reports an experiment testing the availability of sloppy interpretation with L2 learners of Japanese whose L1 is Spanish (S-JFL) (n=17) and European non-pro-drop languages (Euro-JFL) (n=12), with eight Japanese native controls. The learners were screened through a Grammaticality Judgment Task to confirm that they allow null arguments in their Japanese. In the main study, a Truth-Value Judgment Task was conducted to investigate the availability of sloppy and strict interpretation with their null arguments.

As predicted, our results indicated that both of the upper intermediate and advanced Euro-JFL learners rejected sloppy interpretation with null arguments (65-80%) while they accepted strict interpretation (60-85%). The Euro-JFL learners must have added a D-feature to the feature bundles of T in their Japanese. Accordingly, pro’s become available in their L2, allowing only strict interpretation.

Surprisingly, however, the S-JFL learners from all the levels (elementary, intermediate, and advanced) accepted both of the interpretations (65-85%). No developmental pattern was observed. Under the present assumptions, this finding should follow from their L1 phi-feature setting. This means that Spanish null subjects should allow sloppy interpretation, as recently claimed by Duguine (2013, 2014), contra Oku (1998). The present L2 study thus suggests that null subjects in pro-drop languages may not be pro’s.

Keywords: sloppy interpretation, Spanish, European non-pro-drop languages, L2 Japanese, argument ellipsis.