Online comprehension of anaphoric subject pronouns in L2 Italian: Evidence from eye movements

Tihana Kras¹, Patrick Sturt², Antonella Sorace²

¹University of Rijeka, Croatia
²University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom

It is controversial whether adult L2 learners below native-like proficiency levels are capable of target-like processing of L2 grammar. In this eye-tracking study we explore whether advanced adult L2 learners whose L1 is a non-null-subject language (English) converge with native speakers in their online comprehension of anaphoric subject pronouns in Italian. We base our predictions on the Position of Antecedent Strategy (PAS) (Carminati, 2002), according to which in intra-sentential contexts the null pronoun is biased towards the subject antecedent and the overt pronoun towards a non-subject antecedent.

Native speakers (n=28) and L2 learners (n=24) read complex bi-clausal sentences with anaphoric null or overt pronouns in the subordinate clause introduced by the adverbial quando (‘when’). The pronoun matched either the subject or the object of the main clause, depending on its gender (Roberto/Adriana ha salutato Adriana/Roberto con un grande sorriso quando lui/Ø è entrato in ufficio dopo pranzo, 'Roberto/Adriana greeted Adriana/Roberto with a big smile when he/null entered[masc] the office after lunch’). The results for the native speakers were consistent with the PAS, while those for the L2 learners were not: second-pass reading times on the adverbial plus pronoun (quando lui/Ø) suggest that the native speakers attempt to assign the null pronoun to the main clause subject and the overt pronoun to the main clause object, while first-pass reading times on the auxiliary plus participle (è entrato) indicate that the L2 learners try to assign both pronoun types immediately to the main clause object, the linearly closest antecedent. We compare these findings with our previous findings on cataphora, as well as the work on Spanish, and discuss possible reasons for the L2 learners’ non-target-like pattern, including working memory constraints and L1 transfer.

References


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