

L2 Acquisition at Interfaces: New Information Subjects in Finnish L2

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Finnish has been recently classified as a partial null subject language (PNSL) (Holmberg et al. 2009, Holmberg & Sheehan 2010). Finnish allows 1st and 2nd person null subjects but it does not allow 3rd person null subjects, except in some embedded clauses when the null subject is ‘controlled’ by a higher argument and with weather verbs. The present study aims at (i) enriching the ongoing discussion on the properties of partial null subject languages presenting and (ii) discussing experimental data on the production of new information subject in Finnish L1 and Finnish L2, a phenomenon located at the syntax-discourse interface. As emerges from the discussion on answering strategies carried out in Belletti (2001, 2004), Belletti, Bennati & Sorace 2007, the traditional classification in null subject language (NSL) and non null subject languages (NNSL) is reflected at the syntax-discourse interface by the word orders and structures adopted in contexts in which the subject is interpreted as new information. NSLs such as Italian typically adopt a Verb-Subject order (*free inversion*) (Chi è arrivato? – È arrivato Gianni) whereas NNSLs resort to other possibilities, such as cleft strategies in French (Qui est arrivé? – C’est Jean) or *in situ* focalization, resulting in the Subject-Verb order, in English (Who came? – John came). As thoroughly discussed in the literature, there is a relation between the possibility to instantiate free inversion, with the subject interpreted as new information, and the null subject nature of the language (Rizzi 1982, Burzio 1986, Hulk & Pollock 2001, Kayne 2005, Sheehan 2010 a.o.). Successively, it has been postulated that in NSLs a lower vP-peripheral subject position is activated in free inversion structures when the subject is interpreted as new information (Belletti 2001, 2004) with a small *pro* that satisfies the EPP property of the relevant high subject position of the clause. In the light of these findings the present study shows experimental results on Finnish, a PNSL, and discusses which answering strategies are exploited under similar discourse conditions. The discussion is further extended to Finnish L2 data by speakers whose L1 is a NSL (Italian) and to the related acquisitional issue. Data was collected through a video test that was administered to 15 adult native speakers of Finnish and to 10 adult L2 speakers of Finnish (L1 Italian). The experimental task (first created by Belletti & Leonini 2004 and used by Belletti, Bennati & Sorace 2007 for Italian, successively adapted in Guesser 2007 for Brazilian Portuguese, Kras 2010 for Croatian, Dal Pozzo 2011 for Finnish) consists of 22 short videos and aims at creating the ideal discourse-pragmatic conditions for question-answer pairs in which the subject is new information focus. The task was implemented through a Power Point presentation run on a laptop and each participant was tested individually. The main results for the L1 group show that in Finnish new information subjects can be generally interpreted as such in preverbal position (82% for transitive verbs, 88% for unaccusative verbs, 84,9% for unergative verbs) and no free inversion of the type observed in NSLs is observed. However, also other answering strategies emerge (and are in fact grammatically and pragmatically correct structures in such discourse contexts), such as XPVS and clefts. In particular, the possible activation of the vP peripheral new information focus position will be discussed in the light of the XPVS word order. It will be proposed that the Finnish XPVS order instantiates a different way to satisfy the EPP property of the high subject position of the clause, different from the one characteristically exploited in a NSL. As for the L2 group the results show that L2ers almost never adopt strategies different from the canonical SV(O) order (97% for transitive verbs, 100% for unaccusative verbs, 94,3% for unergative verbs). The data will be corroborated by production samples of written texts in

Finnish L2 in which the use of null/overt pronominal subjects emerge. It will be discussed whether this is due to acquisitional processes or whether it might be the case that Finnish is acquired (at least at this stage) as a NNSL due to the input sources available to this kind of L2ers.

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