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The Position of Antecedent Hypothesis in Romanian subject alternation: two experiments

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The choice between null and overt subject has been shown to be sensitive to several factors in Romance languages: word order (Mayol 2010, Catalan), person and animacy (Correa Soares et al. 2020, Brazilian Portuguese), discourse status (Runner & Ibarra 2016, Spanish), function of the antecedent (Carminati 2005, Italian). According to the *Position of Antecedent Hypothesis* (Carminati 2002, 2005), (i) null subjects favor a subject antecedent (ii) pronominal subjects favor a non-subject antecedent. These tendencies are at play in Romance (Table 1) with possible gradation across languages: in Italian, the preference for an overt subject with an object antecedent is stronger than in Spanish or Catalan (Sorace & Filiaci 2006, Sorace et al. 2009, Filiaci et al. 2014, Chamorro 2018, Contemori et al. 2019). We examine the situation in Romanian, a pro-drop language. In Experiment 1, we tested whether null subjects are preferred with a subject antecedent using an acceptability judgment task with items like (1). 56 participants (23 male, 33 female, mean age=26) judged 20 items on a 1-7 likert scale. While the use of null subjects is favored by the prescriptive norm in Romanian, participants only showed a small (but significant, CLMM, $p < .03$) preference (Figure 1). In Experiment 2, we ran a binary forced-choice task on Ilex Farm (20 experimental items, 30 distractors, comprehension questions after 20% of the trials) comparing antecedent choices in two conditions: *null*, *overt* (2, 3). Each experimental item contains a transitive verb with two human arguments (subject and object), followed by a temporal embedded clause containing a null or pronominal subject. Participants had to determine the antecedent of the embedded subject (either matrix subject or object). We had half masculine, half feminine antecedent/ subject pairs, to control for gender effects. We tested 64 Romanian native speakers (25 male, 39 female, mean age=24). The results of Experiment 2 (Figure 2) show that the trends in Romanian are similar to those in Spanish (Filiaci et al. 2013, de la Fuente et al. 2015) and Catalan (Mayol 2010) : participants mostly prefer to associate the null subject of the embedded clause with the subject antecedent of the main clause (64.2%), and the pronominal subject of the embedded clause with the object antecedent (58.2%) (GLMER, $p < .001$). In contrast to these three languages (Romanian, Spanish, Catalan), Italian and European Portuguese are characterized by a stronger tendency to link the pronominal subject to an object antecedent (about 80%). We conclude that null / overt subject alternation in Romanian is sensitive to the antecedent function as in other Romance languages. As predicted, the first part of Carminati's hypothesis is stronger than the second part. We conclude that Romanian falls into the group of languages with weaker preferences of overt subjects for non-subject antecedents, which might be related to a general weaker preference for null subjects (Experiment 1) (see Fernandes et al. 2018 for similar observations on Brazilian Portuguese).

Selected references Carminati, M. N. 2005. Processing reflexes of the Feature Hierarchy (Person > Number > Gender) and implications for linguistic theory. *Lingua*, 115, 259-285. De la Fuente, I & Hemforth, B., 2013, *Effects of Clefting and Left-Dislocation on Subject and Object Pronoun Resolution in Spanish*, in *Selected Proceedings of the 16th Hispanic Linguistics Symposium*, ed. Jennifer Cabrelli Amaro et al., 27-45. Fernandes, E. G., Luegi, P., Correa Soares, E., de la Fuente, I., & Hemforth, B., 2018, *Adaptation in pronoun resolution: Evidence from Brazilian and European Portuguese*. *Journal of experimental psychology. Learning, memory, and cognition*, 44(12), 1986–2008. Filiaci, F., Sorace, A., Carreiras, M., 2013, *Anaphoric biases of null and overt subjects in Italian and Spanish : a cross-linguistic comparison*, *Language and Cognitive Processes*. Mayol, L., 2010, *Refining Salience and the Position*

Examples of experimental items:

(1) Question: Ce părere are Maria despre acest restaurant?
 What opinion have.PRS.3SG Maria about DEM restaurant
 'What does Maria think about this restaurant?'

Answer: (Ea) este extrem de mulțumită.
 She be.PRS.3SG. extremely PREP satisfied
 '(She) is extremely satisfied'

(2) Ioana a văzut -o pe Alexandra când (ea) s-a urcat în autobuz
 Ioana AUX see -CI.3SG.F.ACC DOM Alexandra when (she) get.PST.3SG on bus
 bus

'Ioana saw Alexandra when she get on the bus.'

Question: Cine s-a urcat în autobuz?
 Who get.PST.3SG on bus
 'Who get on the bus?'

Answer: Ioana / Alexandra

(3) Matei l -a întâlnit pe Cătălin când (el) a ajuns
 Matei CI.3SG.M.ACC AUX meet DOM Catalin when he arrive.PST.3SG
 la Bușteni.
 in Bușteni.

'Matei met Catalin when he arrived in Busteni.'

Question: Cine a ajuns în Bușteni ?
 Who arrive.PST.3SG in Busteni
 'Who arrived in Busteni?'

Answer: Matei / Catalin

Language	Subject/ Object + null subject	Subject/ Object + overt subject
Italian	76.8 % / 23.1%	17% / 82.9%
European Portuguese	79 % / 21%	24 % / 76%
Spanish	66.3 % / 36.8%	33.6 % / 63.1%
Catalan	59.1 % / 40.9%	35.2 % / 64.8%
Romanian	64.2 % / 35.8%	41.8 % / 58.2 %

Table 1 Null/overt subjects and their antecedents in Romance languages

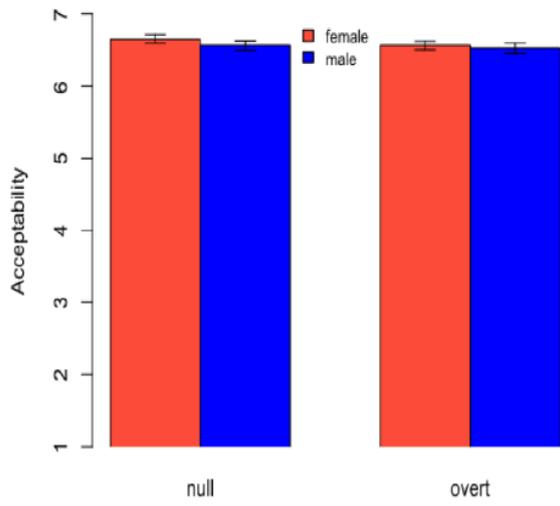


Figure 1. Results of experiment 1

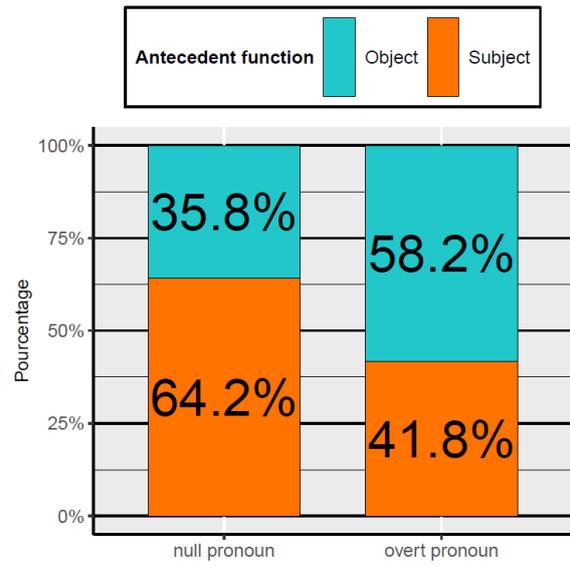


Figure 2. Results of experiment 2