

# USE AND PLACEMENT OF OBJECT PRONOUNS IN GERMAN AS L2\*

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## 1. Introduction

In this article I will report on some data from two experiments aimed at investigating use and placement of weak object pronouns in old information contexts in German subordinate and main clauses by Adult Italian Native Speakers learning German as L2. The main interest of this research lies in the cross-linguistic differentiation between Italian and German as far as their pronominal system is concerned. Since Cardinaletti and Starke's tripartition of pronouns (1996, 1999), the two languages under study here have been shown to differ in the number of pronominal classes they select. Whereas Italian displays three classes of pronouns (clitic, weak and strong), German displays only the latter two (weak and strong). In a still ongoing debate on the initial and developing grammars in Adult Second Language Acquisition (SLA), this differentiation opens an interesting area of investigation. Furthermore, Italian and German show different properties as far as their word order is concerned. Whereas Italian is an SVO language, German is an SOV one, which displays the SVO order only in main clauses as a consequence of the V2 phenomenon (den Besten 1983). Neither the SOV order, which characterizes German subordinate clauses introduced by an overt complementizer, nor the V2 rule of the German main clauses is instantiated in Italian. Two phenomena which need to be acquired by non native speakers of German and turn out to play a role in the acquisition of use and placement of weak pronouns. Finally, Italian and German have been shown to display similarities w.r.t. the cartography of clause structure. The cartographic approach to clause structure adopted here contributes to a better understanding of the possible positions targeted by pronominal objects in the Italian L2ers' interlanguage grammars.

## 2. Classes of Pronouns

Cardinaletti and Starke (1999) have provided evidence for the existence of three different classes of pronouns (clitic, weak and strong), which are attributed a different categorical status. More specifically, clitic pronouns are analyzed as heads ( $X^0$ ), weak pronouns as deficient maximal projections (deficient XPs) and strong pronouns as non deficient maximal projections (non deficient XPs). In fact, not all three classes of pronouns are always instantiated in a language. In particular, Italian and German differ with respect to pronoun classes: German has only weak and strong pronouns, whereas Italian has all three pronominal

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classes, with the class of weak pronouns restricted to the subject pronoun *egli* ‘he’ and the dative *loro* ‘to them’. In contrast to Italian, the class of weak pronouns in German is very productive. The Italian L2ers acquiring the German pronominal system must then reduce the number of pronominal classes from three to two. Furthermore, they must be able to distinguish between weak and strong forms, which are homophonous in German, contrary to Italian (see 2.1), they must be able to place pronouns of different classes properly (see 2.2) and must be able to choose the proper pronoun class in old information contexts, a further point where Italian and German differ (see 2.3).

## 2.1. Morphological Ambiguity and Disambiguation

In Italian, pronouns belonging to different classes are morphologically distinguished, as shown in (1a-b) in which a clitic pronoun (*Lo*) morphologically differs from a strong one (*LUI*). The same does not hold for German in which pronouns belonging to the two classes are homophonous. Disambiguation between weak and strong pronouns in German is possible through some diagnostic tests, first developed by Kayne (1975) for Romance languages. Position of pronouns with respect to adverbs is one of the tests that allow us to distinguish between weak and strong pronominal forms. In particular, weak pronouns must precede an adverb, whereas strong pronouns can follow it as shown in (2a-b):

- (1) a. Lo ho conosciuto ieri.  
 him<sub>CL</sub> have met yesterday  
 ‘I met him yesterday.’
- b. Ho conosciuto LUI ieri.  
 have met him<sub>STRONG</sub> yesterday  
 ‘I met him yesterday.’
- (2) a. Ich habe ihn gestern kennengelernt.  
 I have him<sub>WEAK</sub> yesterday met  
 ‘I met him yesterday.’
- b. Ich habe gestern IHN kennengelernt.  
 I have yesterday him<sub>STRONG</sub> met  
 ‘I met him yesterday.’

Pronouns of different classes target different positions in the clause as briefly shown in the following paragraph.

## 2.2. Position of Pronouns

With finite verbal forms, clitic pronouns of the Romance type must surface pre-verbally (pre-auxiliary) as shown in (1a) above. They can follow the verb only when this latter is non

finite (e.g. infinitival) as shown in (3) below. On the contrary, German weak pronouns must follow the finite verb as shown in (2a) above, they cannot surface in the initial position of the clause, since that position can only be filled by strong pronominal forms, as exemplified by (4) below and cannot occupy the second position of the clause (i.e. between the subject and the main verb) (see example (5)), as a consequence of the V2 phenomenon which requires that: a) the second position of the clause is occupied by the finite verb and b) one (and only one) overt maximal projection moves to the first position. Since weak pronouns are analyzed as maximal projections, they would count in the computation of the Verb Second. V3 structures are only allowed with certain particular constructions in German such as Hanging Topic (HT) and Left Dislocation (LD) as shown in (6a-b) respectively:

- (3) Incontrar lo domani sarebbe un errore.  
 To meet him<sub>CL</sub> tomorrow would be a mistake
- (4) Ihn habe ich gestern kennengelernt.  
 Him\*<sub>WEAK/√STRONG</sub> have I yesterday met
- (5) \*Ich ihn habe gestern kennengelernt.  
 I him have yesterday met
- (6) a. Peter, ich werde ihn sehen.  
 Peter, I will him see
- b. Den Peter, den habe ich gesehen.  
 the Peter, him have I seen

In the following paragraph the condition that regulates choice of pronouns will be taken into account.

### 2.3. Choice of Pronoun

According to an Economy of Representations principle -*Minimize Structure*- a smaller structure is obligatorily chosen, if possible (Cardinaletti and Starke 1999). Given a proper question test, Italian and German will make use of pronouns of different classes to refer to an entity already prominent in discourse. In particular, Italian will make use of a clitic pronoun to express topicality, whereas German will make use of a weak pronoun for the same purpose. Consequently, a strong pronoun is ungrammatical in those contexts in which a more deficient pronominal form is possible. The contrast is shown in (7) and (8) for Italian and German respectively:

- (7) a. Quando hai conosciuto il ragazzo?  
 When have (you) met the boy  
 ‘When did you meet the boy?’

- b. √Lo ho conosciuto ieri.  
Him<sub>CL</sub> have met yesterday
- c. \*LUI ho conosciuto ieri.  
Him<sub>STRONG</sub> have met yesterday
- (8) a. Wann hast du den Mann kennengelernt?  
When have you the man met  
‘When did you meet the man?’
- b. √Ich habe ihn gestern kennengelernt.  
I have him<sub>WEAK</sub> yesterday met
- c. \*Ich habe gestern ihn kennengelernt.  
I have yesterday HIM<sub>STRONG</sub> met

### 3. Cartographic Approach to Clause Structure

Since Rizzi (1997), a more fine-grained architecture of clause structure has been proposed for the German prefield and middlefield (Frey 2004, Grewendorf 2005). In particular, Grewendorf argues in favour of different topic and focus positions in the German middlefield in order to account for the phenomenon of *scrambling*. Following the proposal made by Belletti (2004) for the left periphery of the vP in Italian, Grewendorf has shown evidence for the existence in German of a lower topic-focus field that covers the portion of the clause between the Case position of the subject and the Case position of the object. According to Grewendorf’s analysis the lower topic focus-field is targeted by new information focus and recursive topics. One example is provided in (9):

- (9) Uli Hoeness hat freiwillig [<sub>Topic</sub> diesen Schal] DEM PRÄSIDENTEN VON 1860  
Uli Hoeness has voluntarily this scarf<sub>ACC</sub> the president<sub>DAT</sub> of 1860  
[<sub>Topic</sub> im Olympiastadion] überreicht.  
in the Olympicstadion handed over

Placement of the pronominal object in the L2ers’ interlanguage grammar seems to target positions dedicated to low topics which are instantiated both in Italian and in German.

### 4. The Experiments

In order to test use and placement of weak object pronouns in German two experiments were set up. An elicited production task (EPT henceforth), which aimed at testing use and placement of weak pronouns with respect to adverbs in German subordinate clauses, and an oral grammaticality judgment task (OGJT henceforth), which aimed at investigating acceptance of weak object pronouns in different ungrammatical positions in a matrix clause.

#### 4.1. The EPT

Participants were required to listen to a statement (10) made by a girl (Lydia) and to answer the question (11). Both the statement and the question were auditorily and visually (in written form on the PC screen) presented. In order to answer the question, participants were instructed to use the complementizer **...dass** introducing declarative subordinate clauses in German, which appeared on the PC screen immediately after the question had been asked (12). They were also instructed to pronominalize the object whenever they felt it natural. The expected answer and the non target one are provided in (12a) and (12b) respectively. Participants were given 8000 ms to answer the question. 24 items were used. 34 fillers were also inserted.

(10) Ich lese jeden Abend das Buch.

I read every evening the book

‘I read the book every evening.’

(11) Was hat Lydia über das Buch gesagt?

What has Lydia about the book said

‘As for the book, what has Lydia said?’

(12) a. ...dass sie es jeden Abend liest

...that she it every evening reads

‘that she reads it every evening’

b. \*...dass sie jeden Abend es liest

...that she every evening it reads

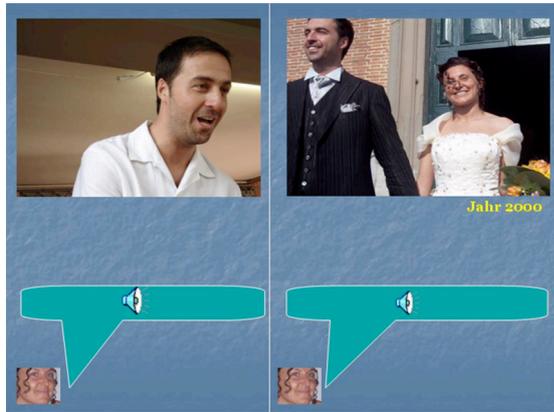
20 Italian Native Speakers between 19 and 26 years of age participated into the experiment. Their level of proficiency was assessed on the basis of the Common European Framework of Reference for Language: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (CEFR). According to CEFR they were divided into Intermediate (15 speakers) and Advanced (5 speakers). 14 German Native Speakers served as a control group.

#### 4.2. The OGJT

The experimental subjects were presented with two pictures each accompanied by a sentence. In the first picture the main character either performed an action or introduced some objects or people. In the second picture she always performed an action on the object already introduced in the first one, as exemplified by Figure 1. Each picture was accompanied by a sentence in which the main character auditorily introduced the object on which the action was then performed or described what was happening. At the end of the second sentence, the same pictures appeared on the PC screen. At this point participants were required to either repeat the second sentence if they judged it target consistent or to reformulate it in the way they felt

most natural if they judged it non target or inappropriate in the given context. Participants were given 10000 ms time to complete the task. 48 items and 24 fillers were used. Only some of the tested structures will be taken into account in the present article, as shown by Table 1.

Figure 1.



20 Italian Native Speakers, between 19 and 35 years of age, on three levels of proficiency of the Target Language (4 Beginners, 9 Intermediate and 7 Advanced) took part into the experiment. 7 German Native Speakers served as a control group.

#### 4.2.1. The Items

The items proposed in the OGJT and taken into account in the present article are provided in Table 1:

Table 1. Structures investigated in the OGJT

<u>Type 1</u>	-S	Context sentence	Das ist mein Mann This is my man
		Sentence to be corrected	*Ich ihn heiratete im Jahr 2000 I him married in the year 2000 S <i>pr_obj</i> V Adv
	-P	Context sentence	Mein Sohn sitzt auf dem Sofa My son sits on the sofa
		Sentence to be corrected	*Ich ihn habe um fünfzehn Uhr darauf gesetzt I him have at fifteen there sat S <i>pr_obj</i> Aux Adv Adv PstPrt
<u>Type 2</u>		Context sentence	Das sind ein Mädchen und ein Junge This are a girl and a boy
		Sentence to be corrected	*Ich das Mädchen umarmte um einundzwanzig Uhr I the girl ugged at twenty one S <i>DP_lexobj</i> V Adv

The labels Type1-S and Type1-P refer to V3 structures in which a pronominal DP precedes the finite verb and the finite auxiliary respectively. The label Type2 refers to V3 structures in

which a lexical DP precedes the finite verb.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. The EPT

#### 5.1.1. Pronoun Placement

Pre- and post-adverbial placement of pronouns nearly approaches chance level. The L2ers do not seem to differentiate between weak and strong pronominal forms as shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Weak object pronoun placement in German subordinate clauses

	C	S	<i>pr<sub>obj</sub></i>	Adv	V	*C	S	Adv	<i>pr<sub>obj</sub></i>	V
<b>L2ers</b>			53%					47%		
			(139/263)					(124/263)		
<b>Controls</b>			99%					1%		
			(300/301)					(1/301)		

However, if we consider the two groups of speakers, we observe a preference for the post-adverbial position of the pronoun in the Intermediate group (Table 3):

Table 3. Weak object pronoun placement. Intermediate and advanced L2ers

	C	S	<i>pr<sub>obj</sub></i>	Adv	V	*C	S	Adv	<i>pr<sub>obj</sub></i>	V
<b>Intermediate</b>			42%					58%		
			(70/168)					(98/168)		
<b>Advanced</b>			73%					27%		
			(69/95)					(26/95)		

This may be interpreted as an indication of stages of acquisition. Speakers with a lower level of proficiency of the TL preferably use positions dedicated to non-deficient maximal projections (strong/demonstrative pronouns and lexical DPs) for pronominal objects, similarly to findings on the acquisition of pronominal clitics in Romance languages (Towell and Hawkins 1994, Herschensohn 2004). Furthermore, it may be speculated here that the Italian L2ers place the pronominal object in one of the topic positions of the low area of the clause which is instantiated both in Italian (as proposed by Belletti 2004) and in German (Grewendorf 2005).

#### 5.1.2. Use of Pronominal and Lexical DPs

Even if use of pronominal DPs is the preferred option<sup>1</sup> to express topicality in German,

<sup>1</sup> Higher use of pronouns rather than lexical DPs may be due to the experimental design itself, given that the L2ers were explicitly instructed to use a pronominal object. This seemed to be a necessary

the Italian L2ers still use lexical DPs for the same purpose at a quite high rate, at least in comparison to the controls (Table 4), which is in line with findings on the acquisition of clitics in Italian as L2 (Leonini 2006, Leonini and Belletti 2004):

Table 4. Comparing use of pronominal and lexical DPs

	C	S	<i>pr_obj</i>	Adv	V /	C	S	<i>DP_lexobj</i>	Adv	V /
	*C	S	Adv	<i>pr_obj</i>	V	C	S	Adv	<i>DP_lexobj</i>	V
<b>L2ers</b>			72%					28%		
			(263/363)					(100/363)		
<b>Controls</b>			92%					8%		
			(301/328)					(27/328)		

In particular, use of lexical DPs is higher in the group of the Intermediate. Postadverbial placement of the pronominal object correlates with higher use of lexical DPs, which leads to the claim that the Italian L2ers with a lower level of proficiency of the Target Language opt for a non-deficient maximal projection in the answer (i.e. lexical DP/strong pronoun), instead of a deficient one (i.e. weak pronoun) (Table 5). Use of lexical DPs instead of pronominal objects is interpreted as an avoidance strategy (similarly to Leonini and Belletti 2004).

Table 5. Comparing use of pronominal and lexical DPs

	C	S	<i>pr_obj</i>	Adv	V	*C	S	Adv	<i>pr_obj</i>	V	C	S	<i>DP_lexobj</i>	Adv	V /
											C	S	Adv	<i>DP_lexobj</i>	V
<b>Intermediate</b>			27%					38%					34%		
			(70/256)					(98/256)					(88/256)		
<b>Advanced</b>			65%					24%					11%		
			(69/107)					(26/107)					(12/107)		

Once the L2ers feel confident with use of pronouns to express topicality in German, they reduce use of lexical DPs for this purpose and use weak pronouns instead of non deficient maximal projections, as can be observed by the performance of the advanced (Table 5).

## 5.2. The OGJT

### 5.2.1. Repetition of Ungrammatical Structures

Acceptance of the preverbal pronominal object is found in the performance of the L2ers (contra Zobl 1980), as shown by Table 6:

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condition, since in a pilot test, the 5 participants taking part into the experiment and with a similar level of proficiency of the TL had not used pronominal object at all in answering the questions.

Table 6. Data on ungrammatical Type1-S structures

\*Ich ihn heiratete im Jahr 2000.  
I him married in the year 2000

	<b>L2ers</b>	<b>Controls</b>
<b>Repeated</b>	21% (25/120)	0% (0/42)
<b>Properly changed</b>	68% (81/120)	100% (42/42)
<b>Others</b>	12% (14/120)	0% (0/42)

The Italian L2ers seem to reproduce structures of their L1 in which a clitic pronoun precedes the verb. However, a comparison with repetition of ungrammatical Type 2 structures (\*S *DP<sub>lexobj</sub>* V Adv) reveals that the L2ers do not treat the German pronominal object as a clitic, but rather as a maximal projection. Indeed, acceptance of the pronominal object preverbally parallels acceptance of a lexical one in the same position (Table 7).

Table 7. Comparing repetition of V3 structures

	<b>*S <i>pr<sub>obj</sub></i> V Adv</b>	<b>*S <i>DP<sub>lexobj</sub></i> V Adv</b>
<b>Repeated</b>	21% (25/120)	20% (24/120)

Acceptance of the pronominal DP in preverbal position is the result of the non acquisition of the V2 phenomenon. Indeed, repetition of V3 structures decreases consistently with the level of mastery of the Target Language. Once V2 has been acquired, repetition of V3 structures decreases, independently of the type of element occupying the second position of the clause (i.e. pronominal/ lexical DP) (see Table 8):

Table 8. Comparing repetition of V3 structures. The three groups of speakers

<b>L2ers</b>	<b>*S <i>pr<sub>obj</sub></i> V Adv</b>	<b>*S <i>DP<sub>lexobj</sub></i> V Adv</b>
<b>Beginners</b>	46% (11/24)	54% (13/24)
<b>Intermediate</b>	24% (13/54)	19% (10/54)
<b>Advanced</b>	2% (1/42)	2% (1/42)

### 5.2.2. On Object Omission

Some instances of object omission have been found in repetition/production of Type1-S and Type1-P structures. In particular, omission of the object occurs at a higher rate in the group of the intermediate speakers as shown in Table 9:

Table 9. Object omission in the three groups of speakers

L2ers	Object omission
<b>Beginners</b>	4% (4/96)
<b>Intermediate</b>	14% (30 /216)
<b>Advanced</b>	1% (2 /168)

Interestingly, omission of the object is higher in the group of the intermediate L2ers who misplace objects at a lower rate in comparison to the beginners (compare Table 8 and Table 9). This seems to parallel the stages of acquisition found for the acquisition of Romance languages (Towell and Hawkins 1994, Herschensohn 2004), in which the stage of omission of the object follows that of object misplacement/in situ pronouns.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

- In both experiments placement of pronominal objects in old information contexts parallels placement of lexical DPs, namely object pronouns are treated as non deficient maximal projections.
- Use of non deficient maximal projections (pronouns in ‘strong’ positions and lexical DPs) in old information contexts is attributed to the Categorical Uniformity Principle (Rizzi 1998), according to which L2ers *assume a unique canonical structural realization for a given semantic type*, similarly to Granfeldt and Schlyter (2004), namely the L2ers assume the fewest possible different elements, thus treating pronouns as maximal projections.
- Use of lexical DPs qualifies as an avoidance strategy (Leonini and Belletti 2004).
- In the OGJT, omission of the object occurs at a higher rate in the group of the intermediate L2ers.
- Higher misplacement of the pronominal object in the group of the beginners and higher omission rate of the argument object in the group of the intermediate has been interpreted as an indication of stages of acquisition similarly to findings on the acquisition of cliticization in Romance languages.
- Developmental effects are found in the data in accordance with level of proficiency of the Target Language.
- UG guides the acquisition of a second language: pronoun placement targets positions available in the Target Language.

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