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Syntactic and pragmatic aspects of object clitic production in Polish learners of L2 Italian

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a new study investigating object clitic production by Polish learners of L2 Italian in different syntactic environments. Object clitic pronouns have different distributional properties in Italian and Polish. Additionally, Polish is less restrictive than Italian in allowing object drop in pragmatically felicitous contexts. New findings indicate the presence of object clitic omissions in language production, especially in the context of clitic left dislocation (CLLD). It is proposed that Italian CLLD constructions are particularly demanding for Polish learners, since both syntactic and discourse-pragmatic requirements support clitic omission in their native language.

1. Introduction

Object clitic pronouns have often been investigated in first (L1) and second (L2) language acquisition. Due to their “special” properties, clitics represent a point of contact between morpho-syntax, phonology, semantics, and discourse-pragmatics (Monachesi, 2005). Research has largely focused on omissions and substitutions in subjects’ production as well as on comprehension.¹ This study presents new results concerning the production of clitic pronouns by Polish learners of L2 Italian.² The

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- 1 For an overview of monolingual first language acquisition of Italian object clitics, see Tedeschi (2009). For Polish, see Trzyzna (2009). For a cross-linguistic comparison using a standardized set of materials and a uniform data collection methodology, see Varlokosta et al. (2015).
 - 2 In this paper, the term second language is used to indicate a language acquired after the L1, either in the country where the L2 is commonly spoken, or in the country of origin of the L2 learner. A more subtle terminological distinction would characterize the second option as foreign language (see Pallotti, 1998). While L2, in its narrow meaning, is acquired to a large extent spontaneously, without specific instruction, a foreign language is usually learned in a more structured, explicit way, for example during a language course. The subjects who participated in the current study could be defined as foreign language learners since their Italian language skills were developed to a large extent in an academic environment in their native country, Poland. However, it should be noticed that all subjects had spent at least one month in Italy at the time of testing. Additionally, while the distinction between implicit and explicit learning might be relevant for some morpho-syntactic properties of Italian object clitics, possibly learned in a more explicit way in a foreign language context, it is not clear whether the same distinction could be applied to the discourse-pragmatic properties that are object of investigation in this paper. It appears unlikely that they would be explicitly taught. For these reasons, it was decided to adopt the more neutral term L2.

comparison between these two languages is particularly significant due to different syntactic and pragmatic properties associated with object clitics in Italian and Polish: while both languages have object clitics, their distribution is not identical. Additionally, only Polish allows an extensive use of null objects under specific discourse-pragmatic conditions. After illustrating the syntactic and pragmatic characteristics of object clitic pronouns in Italian and Polish, this paper provides the results of a new study investigating clitic omission in L2 Italian in different syntactic contexts. The data indicate the presence of clitic omission in Polish learners' production, specifically, in contexts of clitic left dislocation. The possible causes of this phenomenon are discussed, taking into consideration both syntactic and discourse-pragmatic factors.

2. Object clitics in Italian and Polish

2.1 Syntactic properties of Italian object clitic pronouns

Tedeschi (2009) summarizes the main syntactic properties of Italian object clitics. Clitics are different from other types of pronouns. Kayne (1975) proposed a series of criteria to identify them. Clitics usually occur in a "special" position in the sentence. They must be adjacent to the verb, whose presence is obligatory. Clitic clusters occur in a fixed and special order. Clitics cannot be conjoined with other clitics, nor can they be modified. Moreover, they cannot be stressed. In Italian, proclitics immediately precede the verb in indicative, subjunctive and conditional forms. Enclitics occur post-verbally with non-finite verbs (infinitives, gerunds, and past participles). Affirmative imperatives take enclitic forms, while with negative imperatives clitics can appear in both preverbal and post-verbal position (Rizzi, 2001). Some examples are given in (1) below:

- (1) a. La conosco (indicative)
 (I) cl-her know
 'I know her'
- b. Non lo prendere! (imperative)
 not cl-it-acc take
 'Don't take it!'
- c. Conoscerla (infinitive)
 know cl-her
 'To know her'
- d. Non prenderlo! (imperative)
 not take cl-it-acc
 'Don't take it!' (Rizzi, 2001)

Cliticization in Italian does not allow clitic doubling. A phenomenon related to clitic placement in Italian is object clitic climbing (see Rizzi, 1982). In infinitival embedded

clauses, the clitic is allowed to be attached to either the matrix verb (2a) or the embedded verb (2b), as one can observe in the following example (Zanuttini, 1996, p. 186).

- (2) a. Ti devo parlare
to-you-cl-dat (I) must talk
b. Devo parlarti
(I) must talk to-you-cl-dat
'I must talk to you'

Italian object clitics can co-occur with a left-dislocated nominal phrase (Cecchetto, 1999; also see Anagnostopoulou, 1997). This phenomenon, known as Clitic Left Dislocation (CLLD), is exemplified in (3). From a pragmatic point of view, the dislocated object is associated with familiar information.

- (3) Gianni, io lo odio
Gianni I him-cl hate (Cecchetto, 1999, p. 40)

2.2 Syntactic properties of Polish object clitic pronouns

In his 1998 study, Witkoś describes the main properties of Polish pronominal clitics. As mentioned in 2.1, clitics cannot be used in isolation. They cannot be stressed, hence they do not appear in focus positions. Clitics cannot appear in coordinated structures with other clitic pronominal forms or full noun phrases, they do not allow adverbial modification or constituent negation. As in Italian, Polish object clitics lack clitic doubling.

Witkoś observes that despite the fact that Polish generally allows free word order, pronominal clitics placement in Polish is constrained by very regular properties. For example, clitic pronouns avoid clause initial position in simple affirmative clauses, as exemplified in (4).

- (4) a. widziałem go
saw him-cl-acc
b. *go widziałem
him-cl-acc saw
'I saw him' (Witkoś, 1998, pp. 155–156)

Witkoś observes that since clitic pronouns cannot appear in initial position, they cannot be topicalized. On the contrary, strong pronouns and full nominals can function as topics (5):

- (5) Prezydenta/jego/*go Maria widziała wczoraj w parku
president/him/*him-cl-acc Mary saw yesterday in the park
'Mary saw the president/him in the park yesterday' (Witkoś, 1998, p. 151)

Polish clitics tend to appear in clause internal position. The clause final position is only allowed in opposition to the clause-initial one, that is if the clause does not contain additional constituents (6).

- (6) a. widziałem go wczoraj
saw him-cl-acc yesterday
b. wczoraj go widziałem
yesterday him-cl-acc saw
c. *widziałem wczoraj go
saw yesterday him-cl-acc
d. *%wczoraj widziałem go
yesterday saw him-cl-acc
'I saw him yesterday' (Witkoś, 1998, p. 156)

Only strong pronouns and full nominals can be extraposed, as exemplified in (7):

- (7) widziałem wczoraj w parku prezydenta/jego/*go
saw yesterday in park president/him/*him-cl-acc
'I saw the president/him in the park yesterday' (Witkoś, 1998, p. 156)

Some differences in clitic placement can be found between Italian and Polish pronominal clitics. Differently from Italian, where clitics can occur between negation and their verbal host, Polish pronominal clitics cannot intervene between the negative particle 'nie' and the verb. Another difference concerns the fact that Polish clitic clusters can be discontinuous.

From this short review, it appears that Italian and Polish clitic pronouns share some common properties. However, clitic placement in Polish displays more freedom than in Italian and in general the distribution of clitics in the two languages presents several differences. Section 3 will present the results of a new study investigating clitic omission by Polish learners of L2 Italian in constructions that have different clitic placement in Italian and Polish.

2.3 Object drop in Italian and Polish

A difference between Italian and Polish concerns the presence of objects that are not overtly realized. This section will focus precisely on this topic, leaving aside the question of how such null elements should be analyzed from a syntactic point of view. Hence, we will not discuss the nature of the empty category (null clitic, null object, VP ellipses, etc.). Notice that in general the choice of overt/null referring expressions is conditioned by both syntactic and pragmatic factors. While the presence of an overtly realized object is obligatory in some languages, and optional in other, the selection of the actual referring expression used (full noun phrase, strong pronoun, clitic pronoun, null object, etc.) will depend on the discourse-pragmatic context: clitic

and null forms can only be used if the referent is highly accessible in the preceding discourse/extra-linguistic context (Ariel, 1990). Studies in different areas of language acquisition, including monolingual/bilingual L1 acquisition as well as L2 acquisition, have shown that the task of integrating syntactic and pragmatic requirements is rather demanding, and that it can lead non-target-like productions (for example, ungrammatical subject/object omissions or pragmatically inappropriate use of overt subjects/objects) even in near-native L2 speakers (Sorace, 2011; White, 2010).

The possibility of producing sentences containing a transitive verb without an overt complement is rather restricted in Italian. It mainly applies to generic null objects (Rizzi, 2001), as exemplified in (8).

- (8) Questo conduce \emptyset a concludere quanto segue
 ‘This leads to conclude the following’

In referential contexts, however, the object is obligatory. In Polish, on the contrary, referential null objects can occur within declarative sentences, if the referent is mentioned in the preceding discourse (Kowaluk, 1999), as exemplified in (9).

- (9) A: Czy podlałaś moją palmę? B: Podlałam \emptyset /ją
 A: if watered my palm B: watered \emptyset /it
 A: ‘Did you water my plant?’ B: ‘I watered (it)’ (Kowaluk, 1999, p. 3)

Kowaluk mentions animacy as one of the factors that influences the choice of an overt clitic over a null object: objects are more likely to be dropped in case of [-Animate] referents than with [+Animate] ones.

In Italian, object referents mentioned in the immediately preceding discourse will require the use of an overt clitic (for more discussion about null objects in the input, see Tedeschi 2009, pp. 31–38). Polish learners of L2 Italian, when producing utterances with object clitics, will be required to integrate their knowledge of the morpho-syntactic properties of these functional elements, including the fact that they are obligatory, with discourse-pragmatic requirements that allow object drop in the presence of highly accessible antecedents.

3. New findings: Object clitic omission in Polish learners of L2 Italian

This section presents the results of a new study investigating object clitic production by Polish learners of Italian. Clitic omission in the Italian-Polish bilingual context has rarely been investigated in a systematic way, and it is particularly relevant since a) the distributional properties of Italian and Polish object clitics differ in many respects, and b) object clitics are always obligatory in Italian, while they can be omitted in Polish if the referent is present in the preceding discourse.

In a study on L2 English, Kowaluk (1999) observed that Polish learners produce object pronoun omission, especially at a lower-intermediate proficiency level. This

finding has been associated by Kowaluk with the option available in Polish, but not in English, of leaving the object unexpressed in felicitous pragmatic contexts, particularly with [-Deictic], [-Animate] referents. Less attention has been paid to object omission by Polish learners of L2s that have object clitics. In a study on the acquisition of object clitics in L2 Italian by native speakers of several different languages, including Polish, Leonini and Belletti (2004) found clitic omissions and substitutions (full noun phrases, less often strong pronouns) but no mistakes concerning clitic placement. They observed that L2 learners whose native language had Romance clitics were less likely to produce non-target like sentences. Only one of the two Polish subjects who participated in the study produced some sentences with clitic omission, however the omission rate was low (4%).

The new study described in the following paragraphs focuses entirely on the acquisition of Italian object clitics by Polish speakers. It provides the results of a detailed investigation of clitic omission in different syntactic constructions. Discourse-pragmatic factors are also taken into consideration.

3.1 Participants

Sixteen Polish learners of L2 Italian (age: 21- to 31-years old) and six native Italian control subjects (age: 23- to 64-years old) took part in the study. All Polish participants were students in the Department of Italian Studies at the University of Warsaw at the moment of testing, except from one ex-student. Subjects in their third year of bachelor (N=7) were classified as upper-intermediate, while students in their second year of master (N=8) were classified as advanced. Post-graduate subjects (N=1) were classified as near-native.

3.2 Method and materials

The study was part of a larger investigation on the omission of functional categories by Polish learners of L2 Italian. Subjects completed a written cloze test. They were asked to insert missing functional elements, including object clitics, in empty slots. Participants were instructed that some of the slots could be left empty. Each participant completed 32 sentences in total, each with one or more empty slots. The test contained, among others, 8 sentences where an object clitic pronoun was required. Object clitic production (singular, feminine/masculine, animate/inanimate) was investigated in the following contexts:

- clause-initial position
- internal position
- post-negation
- clitic left dislocation.

The actual sentences with clitic constructions included in the cloze-test are given in table 1. English translations follow each test sentence.

Clause-initial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • __ madre di Andrea è americana. __ abbiamo invitata in Italia. (The) mother of Andrea is American. (her-cl-acc) have invited to Italy. 'Andrea's mom is American. We have invited her to Italy.' • Mi interessa __ collana di ambra. Era in vetrina ma ora non c'è più. __ avete già venduta? To me interests (a) necklace of amber. Was in shop window but now not there is anymore. (it-cl-acc-fem) have already sold. 'I am interested in an amber necklace. It was in the shop window, but it is not there anymore. Have you already sold it?' • Sto cercando __ ragazzo alto. __ ho visto entrare in questo bar. am looking for (a) tall guy. (him-cl-acc) have seen enter in this bar. 'I am looking for a tall guy. I have seen him enter this bar.'
Internal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sto cercando __ moneta antica. Purtroppo __ ho persa. Am looking for (a) coin ancient. Unfortunately (it-cl-acc-fem) have lost. 'I am looking for an ancient coin. Unfortunately, I have lost it.'
Post-negation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stiamo cercando __ ladro che è fuggito ieri sera. Per ora non __ abbiamo identificato. Are looking for (a) thief who is escaped yesterday evening. For now not (him-cl-acc) have identified. 'We are looking for a thief who escaped yesterday evening. For the time being, we haven't identified him.' • Ho trovato __ costume da bagno bellissimo ma non __ ho comprato perché costava troppo. Have found (a) swimming suit wonderful but not (it-cl-acc-masc) have bought because cost too much. 'I have found a wonderful swimming suit, but I have not bought it because it cost too much.'
Dislocated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • __ collana colorata __ ho regalata a mia sorella. Ho tenuto per me quella nera. (The) necklace colorful (it-cl-acc-fem) have given as a gift to my sister. Have kept for me that one black. 'As for the colorful necklace, I have given it to my sister as a gift. I have kept the black one for myself.' • __ cellulare nuovo __ ho comprato in sconto, quello vecchio era rotto. (The) mobile phone new (it-cl-acc-masc) have bought on sale, that one old was broken. 'As for the new mobile phone, I have bought it on sale, the old one was broken.'

Table 1. Investigated contexts of object clitic production

3.3 Results

The results of the cloze test for clitic omission are reported in table 2 below:

Clitic context	Correct clitic L2 learners	Clitic omission L2 learners	Clitic omission control group
Clause-initial	100% (48/48)	0% (0/48)	0% (0/18)
Internal	94% (15/16)	6% (1/16)	0% (0/6)
Post-negation	97% (31/32)	3% (1/32)	0% (0/12)
Dislocated	70% (22/32)	30% (10/32)	8% (1/12)
Total	90.5% (116/128)	9.5% (12/128)	2% (1/48)

Table 2. Object clitic omission in different contexts (Polish L2 learners and Italian L1 controls)

In total, Polish speakers produced 9.5% non-target-like clitic omissions. Omissions were found in both subjects with an intermediate proficiency level (5 omissions) and with an advance proficiency level (7 omissions). The omission rate was not equal in all syntactic contexts. In left dislocation contexts, 30% of clitics were omitted. Omission in CLLD represents approximately 85% of the overall omitted clitics. Omission was almost completely absent in other syntactic constructions: 6% (1/16) omission was found in internal position and 3% (1/32) in post-negation position. Only one control subject omitted an object clitic, in the context of clitic left dislocation.

The results were further analyzed to investigate the possible influence of gender and animacy features on clitic omission (table 3).

Clitic omission	Feminine, animate	Masculine, Animate	Feminine, inanimate	Masculine, inanimate
Clause-initial	0% (0/16)	0% (0/16)	0% (0/16)	-
Internal	-	-	6.25% (1/16)	-
Post-negation	-	6.25% (1/16)	-	0% (0/16)
Dislocated	-	-	25% (4/16)	37.5% (6/16)
Total	0% (0/16)	3.12% (1/32)	10.42% (5/48)	18.75% (6/32)

Table 3. Omission of feminine vs. masculine and animate vs. inanimate clitics

The analysis did not reveal any gender effect, as feminine/masculine clitics were omitted at similar rates: approximately 42% (5/12) feminine clitics and 58% (7/12) masculine clitics. As for animacy, approximately 92% (11/12) omissions concerned inanimate objects. This result, however, cannot be considered reliable, since dislocated clitics always had inanimate referents in the test sentences. The predominant omis-

sion of inanimate objects was limited to dislocated constructions. The data suggest that this phenomenon is the direct consequence of clitic omission in constructions with clitic left dislocation.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The new results presented in 3.3 indicate the presence of object clitic omissions in the production of Polish learners of L2 Italian. Omissions were almost exclusively found in the context of clitic left dislocation. In this context, the structure produced by L2 learners is grammatical in Polish, where topicalized objects are not followed by a resumptive clitic (see 2.2, example 5). From a discourse-pragmatic point of view, the omission of an object with a topicalized antecedent appears to be a felicitous option. It is possible that CLLD constructions are especially demanding as far as the integration of syntax and discourse-pragmatics is concerned, since both Polish syntactic and discourse-pragmatic requirements support clitic omission. The same cannot be said for the other tested contexts, since even when clitic placement diverged in the two languages, the presence of a clitic was grammatical. In particular, no significant difference was found in omission between contexts where clitic placement overlapped in the two languages (internal position) and contexts of clitic placement mismatch (clause-initial, post-negation). A further investigation targeting animate/inanimate referents is needed to verify possible animacy effects.

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Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia wyniki pracy badawczej poświęconej produkcji zaimków klitycznych w funkcji dopełnienia przez osoby uczące się języka włoskiego jako drugiego języka (L2). Zaimki klityczne w tych dwóch językach nie zawsze występują na tym samym miejscu w zdaniach. Ponadto w języku polskim dopełnienia domyślne są bardziej dopuszczalne. Najnowsze wyniki wskazują na występowanie pominięcia zaimków klitycznych w funkcji dopełnienia w produkcji językowej, zwłaszcza w kontekście przesunięcia dopełnienia w lewo (Clitic Left Dislocation, CLLD). Ponadto sugerują, że konstrukcje CLLD stanowią szczególne wyzwanie dla polskojęzycznych osób uczących się języka włoskiego, gdyż wymogi syntaktyczne i pragmatyczne wspierają pominięcie zaimków klitycznych w języku polskim.