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# Transfer of Variable Grammars in Third Language Acquisition

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## ABSTRACT

Research on linguistic variation suggests that usage patterns are deeply embedded in native and non-native speakers' knowledge of grammar. This study explores the transfer of these variable sociolinguistic patterns at the initial stages of third language acquisition. We elicited narratives in Portuguese from two mirror-image groups of sequential Spanish-English bilinguals, early learners of Portuguese. Their production of variable subject pronoun expression was analysed. When comparing the two groups with regards to the linguistic factors that constrain subject pronoun expression, evidence of transfer from Spanish and not from English is consistent for both groups. We conclude that variable linguistic information is accessible in L3 transfer at beginning stages of acquisition and it is successfully predicted by holistic models of L3 acquisition.

**KEYWORDS:** Language transfer; third language acquisition; third language use; crosslinguistic influence; multilingualism.

## INTRODUCTION

As it is the case of second language (L2) acquisition, third language (L3) acquisition can be examined from a variety of perspectives that can provide significant insight into the relationship between linguistic systems when acquiring an additional language. Research in multilingual acquisition has shown that experience with previously known languages conditions the initial stages of language acquisition as well as the developmental sequences (Rothman, Cabrelli Amaro, & de Bot, 2013). The issue of crosslinguistic influence (CLI) has been a central topic in the study of L2 and L3 acquisition. Early claims on the key role of CLI, such as Lado's (1957), paved the way for an influential line of inquiry that focuses on how languages interact with each other in the language-learning process. The field of L3 acquisition has been devoted to examining and modelling the nature of transfer in multilingual acquisition contexts as well as the factors that may condition it. The models proposed for linguistic transfer have traditionally remained within the realm of formal linguistics and morphosyntax, drawing from (and attempting to predict transfer of) categorical linguistic behaviour (Bardel & Falk, 2007, 2012; Berkes & Flynn, 2012; Falk & Bardel, 2011; Flynn, Foley, & Vinnitskaya, 2004; Rothman, 2011, 2013, 2015).

In contrast to the categorical use of morphosyntactic forms, there are other linguistic forms present in people's grammars that display a variable pattern of occurrence. Such variability is often subject to context sensibility, causing some linguistic contexts to probabilistically favour one variant over the other. In this study, we focus on the transfer of these variable grammars in the context of the acquisition of Portuguese as an L3 by Spanish and English-speaking learners. To this end, we analysed the use of the linguistic variable of subject pronoun expression (SPE) and the factors that constrain its

production in order to determine whether variable linguistic behaviour is available for transfer at initial stages of L3 acquisition and, thus, observable in L3 linguistic choices.

### L3 TRANSFER

Research in the field of multilingual acquisition evidences that L3 acquisition is different from L2 acquisition. For example, Cenoz (2003, 2013) observed that bilinguals acquiring a third language appear to be more successful in language learning than monolinguals, arguing that bilinguals have a more developed metalinguistic knowledge when compared to monolinguals. Thus, the experience bilinguals have with language learning yields an advantage over monolinguals concerning second language attainment. This language experience available to speakers may, however, not only shape their language abilities with regards to managing one or two languages, but it may also affect the initial stage of language acquisition in very different ways as the number of linguistic systems learners have access to may vary.

Much scholarly effort has been devoted to investigate the role of transfer in order to examine how crosslinguistic influence works in language acquisition and what role previously acquired languages play in it. This issue also establishes a difference between L2 and L3 acquisition. In the context of L2 acquisition, the existence of one system available for transfer makes a straightforward prediction: the only linguistic system available is the one subject to transfer. The scenario in L3 acquisition differs in that two mental linguistic systems are available for transfer. This has motivated the proposal of several models such as *The Cumulative-Enhancement Model* (CEM) (Berkes & Flynn, 2012; Flynn et al., 2004), *The Typological Primacy Model* (TPM) (Rothman, 2011, 2013, 2015) and *The L2 Status Factor* (L2SF) (Bardel & Falk, 2007, 2013; Falk & Bardel, 2011), all of which seek to account for the variables that condition syntactic transfer from previously acquired languages.

One of the factors that has received more consideration in the study of L3 transfer is typology. Bardel and Falk (2013) claim that the notion of 'typology' in the L3 tradition may refer to the relatedness of background and L3 languages, or the similarity of a particular structure of an already-known language and the target language. At the same time, these relations of similarity and relatedness may be either postulated by the researcher in L3 studies or perceived by the learner when learning an additional language. This latter perceived typological similarity is the basis of the TPM. This model posits that (psycho)typological distance can determine linguistic transfer at the initial stages of multilingual acquisition. In other words, learners consider, with the help of an internal parser, structural cues to select and transfer the typologically more similar language when learning an L3. This typological proximity factor is also acknowledged in the L2SF model. Thus, the L2SF and the TPM models are not mutually exclusive but rather complementing hypotheses. While the TPM considers typological distance a decisive force that drives the selection of transferable systems, the L2SF posits that, in absence of these typological similarities, the L2 is the preferred linguistic system to be transferred into the L3 developing grammar.

In addition to this commonality, these two models (TPM, L2SF) also consider that one of the two already-existing linguistic systems is preferred and, consequently, transferred at the initial stages of L3 acquisition. This entails that a whole linguistic system acts as a filter when learning an additional language. As a result, we may hypothesise that information regarding the variable use of linguistic forms is also available at initial stages of L3 provided that this information is contained in the linguistic system that acts as a source.

A population that has been used to test the effects of (psycho)typology on L3 transfer is that of L3 learners of Portuguese who are speakers of L1 English and L2 Spanish or L1 Spanish and L2

English. According to the TPM, the typological distance between Spanish and Portuguese (two cognate languages) is perceived by these L3 learners as being closer than that between English and Portuguese, leading to the transfer from Spanish to Portuguese regardless of its L1 or L2 status. Transfer in this specific population has been analysed using different types of tasks that tap into knowledge of categorical linguistic behaviour. The results from these studies allowed researchers to test the predictions made by the TPM about the underlying structure of learners' linguistic systems at initial stages of L3 acquisition. However, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have explored the issue of transfer from a variationist perspective in the context of multilingual acquisition between Spanish and Portuguese or any other language pair. Therefore, the question that drives our present research is whether or not variable usage patterns of linguistic forms are available in L3 transfer. Both the TPM and the L2SF propose the transfer of entire linguistic systems which assumes that all linguistic information associated with a particular language would be accessed in early stages of L3 acquisition. Thus, these models predict that Spanish patterns of variable use will be observable in L3 Portuguese data.

## L2 ACQUISITION OF VARIABLE PATTERNS

On a somewhat related note, recent research on language variation has sparked in the field of L2 acquisition that incorporates variationist sociolinguistic techniques to reveal variability in learners' use of certain linguistic forms. These L2 variation studies recognise that the use of the native language is variable and so is the use of non-native languages.

When considering variation in a second language, it is important to distinguish between (1) the variation that exists in the learner's grammar that is absent in native speakers' production, and (2) the variation that exists in the production of both native and non-native speakers. For this study, we are interested in the second type of variation, which has motivated a number of studies in recent years. For example, in L2 Chinese SPE (Li, 2014), L2 Spanish LPE (Geeslin & Gudmestad, 2010; Geeslin, Linford, & Fafulas, 2015), or L2 French deletion of 'ne' (Regan, 1996). From this standpoint, the variability found in native languages creates a scenario where the use of the target form for learners is not categorical but rather 'the ability to vary speech across linguistic as well as interactional contexts in native-like ways' (Geeslin et al., 2015, p. 192).

Variationist research has shown that when two forms are in variation with each other in a variety spoken by monolinguals, certain contexts are probabilistically reserved for one form over the other. Extra-linguistic factors such as speakers' age and gender may affect the output of a variable as well. How L2 learners acquire this variability will potentially depend on the quality and quantity of the input they receive, as this variable behaviour is not explicitly taught in L2 classrooms.

Within this line of inquiry, Geeslin et al. (2015) looked at the development of subject pronoun expression in L2 Spanish in a cross-sectional study with six different groups of learners varying in proficiency. Their results show that, with proficiency, learners and NSs demonstrate sensitivity to the same linguistic predictors for subject pronoun expression despite it being underspecified in the input. These findings suggest that it is possible to display sensitivity to the factors that shape the distribution of a linguistic variable in the L2 provided there is extensive exposure to the target language.

Going back to L3 acquisition, the TPM model proposes an account for crosslinguistic influence that states clear predictions about the role of already known languages on the transfer at the initial stages of acquisition. Based on the findings discussed above that support the learnability of L2 variable patterns, we seek to examine whether linguistic predictors that condition a sociolinguistic variable can be subject to transfer into the newly developing L3 system either from the L1 or the L2. If positive, this

would mean that L3 transfer includes not only structural but also underlying information constraining the use of linguistic variants. In order to test this hypothesis, we will make use of subject pronoun expression.

#### THE VARIABLE: SUBJECT PRONOUN EXPRESSION

One of the foundations of sociolinguistics has always been the comparison of variation data in different linguistic samples (Tagliamonte, 2013). This comparative methodology has been extensively used to contrast data sets and analyse the effects of language contact from a variationist perspective (Carvalho, 2016). In what follows, we present a comparison of previous studies in order to develop a more informed prediction about SPE use in our testing population.

Perhaps the most salient difference between English and pro-drop languages like Portuguese or Spanish lays in the possibility to have unexpressed pronouns as the subject of a verb. For example, for the sentence *I drink*, one might say either *'eu/yo bebo'* or *'∅ bebo'*. Research on the covariation of overt and null pronoun forms in pro-drop languages reveals that, far from occurring in free variation, speakers appear to be sensible to a series of linguistic factors that shape the distribution patterns of subject expression. In other words, previous accounts on SPE suggest that some linguistic contexts appear to probabilistically favour one variant over the other. Furthermore, the effects of these linguistic factors on SPE appear to be strikingly similar across geographic locations and communities (Carvalho, Orozco, & Lapidus Shin, 2015). The factors constraining the use of this sociolinguistic variable have been studied in native and second language contexts.

Regarding Spanish (henceforth SP), variationist analyses on SPE in monolingual and bilingual varieties show consistent crossdialectal effects of a number of factors. In Spanish, subject pronouns are favoured by singular grammatical persons rather than plural ones (*grammatical person*: Abreu, 2009; Carvalho & Bessett, 2015; Carvalho & Child, 2011; Otheguy & Zentella, 2012); by morphologically ambiguous verb forms like the imperfect rather than morphologically non-ambiguous like the preterit (*TMA*: Abreu, 2009; Otheguy & Zentella, 2012; Travis, 2007); by an expressed previous coreferent rather than a null one (*persistence*: Abreu, 2009; Carvalho & Child, 2011; Travis, 2007); by a switch in discourse reference rather than a continuing reference (*discourse connectivity*: Abreu, 2009; Cameron, 1993; Carvalho & Child, 2011; Otheguy & Zentella, 2012; Travis, 2007); and by main clauses, less so by subordinate clauses, and even less so by coordinated clauses (*clause type*: Abreu, 2009).

At the same time, there are other factors that pertain to this study whose constraints do not apply uniformly across dialects. This is the case of *specificity* effects on SPE. Specificity refers to whether the referent is a specific or a generic and unspecified group or entity. Cameron (1993) demonstrated that speakers display a sensibility to *specificity* that yields differences in the treatment of the specific and nonspecific 2nd person singular form *tú*. These differences showed disparate effects across dialects, but consistency within the same linguistic variant. More concretely, Cameron found that specificity favoured the expression of subject pronouns in the Spanish of Madrid, while nonspecific *tú* favoured overt pronouns in Puerto Rican, Argentinian and Chilean Spanish. Therefore, even though it may be problematic to anticipate the direction of the effects exerted by specificity on SPE, previous findings predict homogeneous behaviour among speakers of a common dialect.

SPE has also been addressed from a second language acquisition perspective (Geeslin et al., 2015; Geeslin & Gudmestad, 2008). Geeslin and Gudmestad (2008) carried out sociolinguistic interviews with advanced L2 speakers and native speakers of Spanish and compared their use of *specificity* and *person and number*. Their results showed that L2 speakers are sensitive to these factors, as are NSs. However, both groups appear to use these factor categories in qualitatively different ways.

For example, the rates of pronoun use for both groups were similar for specific referents, while for non-specific referents L2 speakers used a greater number of null forms when compared to NSs. Despite this difference in category use, studies in L2 acquisition of SPE provide evidence that, at some level, the factors that shape its distribution patterns are reflected in the grammars of both groups of speakers.

Concerning Brazilian Portuguese (henceforth BP), sociolinguistic research on SPE has allowed researchers to compare the variable's behaviour in Portuguese and Spanish grammars. Studies such as the one carried out by Silveira (2012) find that some of the aforementioned factors are also significant for BP, although not necessarily in the same direction as in Spanish. This sociolinguistic study on BP shows that the factors *TMA*, *clause type*, *discourse connectivity*, and *person* constrain the use of subject pronouns (Silveira, 2012). Duarte (1995) also found a somewhat strong tendency to express [-animate] 3rd person singular pronouns in BP (66% of inanimate pronouns were expressed), while Spanish varieties show no expression across the board.

Despite being considered a non-pro-drop language, English has also been subject to variationist analysis with respect to SPE. Torres Cacoullós and Travis (2014) explored the non-expression of the 1st p. singular pronoun 'I' in conversational English, and how it may be affected by *persistence* and *discourse connectivity*. Their analysis finds that null subjects tend to appear in clusters in both coordinated and non-coordinated contexts. Then, the presence of an unexpressed form is favoured when immediately preceded by an unexpressed coreferential subject. The authors argue that, while *persistence* appears to be a crosslinguistic tendency, the effects of *discourse connectivity* in English are dependent on other factors like coordination or persistence.

This means that L1 English speakers have experience with language-specific patterns of variation that are also present in Spanish native grammars, although their effects may be qualitatively different. However, this sensibility to distributional factors appears to be a dynamic mechanism in the context of language acquisition as evidence from L2 studies on Spanish SPE suggests that learners' pronoun distribution is affected by factors that are not present in L1 English (Geeslin et al., 2015; Geeslin & Gudmestad, 2008). Thus, according to the TPM and the L2SF, if the variable usage patterns that condition the expression of SPE beyond *persistence* and *discourse connectivity* are present in L2 Spanish speakers' grammars, these would be available for transfer into L3 Portuguese and, therefore, observable in L3 production.

By bringing the fields of L3 acquisition and variationist sociolinguistics together, we investigate L3 transfer by looking at whether or not subject expression constraints are transferred to L3 at initial stages of acquisition from either L1 or L2 by analysing the production of SPE in two mirror-image groups of English-Spanish sequential bilingual learners of L3 Portuguese.

## THE STUDY

### *Participants*

Participants were 24 adult English-Spanish bilinguals enrolled in a large Southwest university in the United States. These participants were recruited from the first-semester 'Portuguese for Spanish Speakers' course where the BP variety is taught, used in materials and spoken by the instructors as their first language. At the time of the experiment, participants had been receiving Portuguese language instruction for 2 months. They were divided into two groups according to self-reported onset of L2 acquisition. The first group was comprised of L1 English speakers ( $n = 10$ ) between the ages of 19 and 26 (mean = 20.9,  $sd = 2.1$ ) who reported having been exposed to Spanish after the age of 11. The second group was composed of L1 Spanish speakers ( $n=14$ ) between the ages of 19 and 22 (mean

= 20.7, sd = 1.4) who reported to have been exposed to English after the age of 11. All of them attended college surrounded by a significant English-Spanish bilingual speech community.

### *Methodology*

Participants were recorded in a laboratory equipped with computers and headsets connected to each station. The data was collected through a controlled production task where participants had to orally respond to prompts (see Appendix). These consisted of open questions designed to elicit narratives and to foster the opportunity to use different tenses, grammatical persons, and specificity – variables that have been shown to condition SPE. A total of 18 prompts were designed and recorded by a female native speaker of BP. Participants came into the lab, sat down in front of individual computers and filled out a language background questionnaire used in Child (2014). Next, they were instructed to put the headsets on and start the presentation that was already open in their computers. After instructions were read, participants were presented with one question at a time in written and aural form. They were asked to answer the question by speaking to the microphone in their headset and to press the spacebar to go on to the next question after they were done. Their answers were recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed.

### *Coding*

In this study, we investigated the use of SPE by looking at every finite verb form produced that showed either overt subject pronouns or null subject pronouns. Both variants of the variable are presented in the following examples from the data obtained.

1. 'Eu gosto da escritura' (P07)
2. 'também Ø gosto de assistir filmes'" (P22)

Although there are other variables that have been shown to constrain SPE, we focused on six of them: *grammatical person and number* (which included specificity and animacy), *discourse connectivity*, *persistence*, *TMA*, and *clause type*. The *grammatical person* variable included the following categories: first person singular, second person singular [+specific], second person singular [–specific], third person singular [+animate] [+specific], third person singular [–animate] [+specific], third person singular [+animate] [–specific], first person plural, and third person plural. The *discourse connectivity* variable included: previous referent is the same (same reference), a change in referent (switch reference), and the first token in the discourse. The *persistence* variable included: a change in reference, previous coreferent is expressed, and previous coreferent is not expressed. The *tense mode and aspect* (TMA) variable included: present simple, preterite, imperfect, and the rest of verb tenses. Finally, the *clause type* variable included: main clause, subordinated clause and coordinated clause. A total of 993 tokens were coded from 24 oral narratives produced by the participants, 471 for the L1 English group, and 522 for the L1 Spanish group. All coding was conducted by the researchers. Any unclear cases were discussed until agreement was reached.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Expression Rates*

A first look at overall rates of expression in Table 1 reveals that overt subject pronoun rate appears to be more prominent in the case of the L1 Spanish (63.8%) group when compared to the L1 English

(39.5%). Based on these overall rates, results point to lack of convergence between both groups of participants. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between group (L1 Spanish, L2 English) and pronoun form (null, overt). The relation between these variables was significant  $\chi^2(1, N = 993) = 58.61, p < .001$ . Thus, participants in the L1 English group were less likely to express subject pronouns than those in the L1 Spanish group. Therefore, we can conclude that L1 English speakers show a significantly lower rate of expressed pronouns when compared to L1 Spanish speakers.

Table 1: Rate and percentage of expression of Portuguese subject pronouns across groups.

P#	L1 English		P#	L1 Spanish	
P01	30/126	23.8%	P11	8/13	61.5%
P02	24/61	39.3%	P12	30/36	83.3%
P03	10/33	30.3%	P13	32/49	65.3%
P04	42/46	91.3%	P14	8/28	28.6%
P05	6/18	33.3%	P15	26/30	86.6%
P06	18/42	42.8%	P16	11/21	52.4%
P07	19/53	35.8%	P17	17/25	68%
P08	24/33	72.7%	P18	24/26	92.3%
P09	6/30	20%	P19	38/57	66.6%
P10	7/29	24.1%	P20	28/32	87.5%
			P21	17/19	89.4%
			P22	20/29	68.9%
			P23	41/107	38.3%
			P24	33/50	66%
Overt	186/471	39.5%		333/522	63.8%
Null	285/471	60.5%		189/522	36.2%

This difference in the overall rate of expression appears to be counterintuitive due to the characterisation of English as a non-prodrop language. Furthermore, the results from the L1 English group, but not those of the L1 Spanish group, mirror previous findings on the frequency rates of monolingual Spanish SPE (see Table 2). The rate differences in our data yield two possible explanations. First, these results could be explained by means of an effect of L2 English on L1 Spanish behaviour. However, Bessett (2018) found no effects of English influence on the Spanish subject expression of Spanish-English bilingual when compared to monolingual speakers, thus, ruling out a contact effect. Second, it could be the case that only the L1 Spanish group noticed pronoun expression differences between SP and BP despite their limited exposure to the latter. Salient factors such as the use of overt pronouns for [-animate] referents may have influenced L1 Spanish speakers' interlanguage system resulting in a higher rate of full pronouns across the board, reaching rates higher than 80% in some of the cases (see Table 1). This would mean that the Spanish system that is transferred at beginning stages of the acquisition of Portuguese as an additional language could be more permeable to the linguistic



characteristics of Portuguese if that Spanish system bears the L1 status. Further inquiry could confirm this hypothesis and examine the effect of longer exposure to BP on the development of L1 Spanish speakers' overall rates and sensitivity to linguistic factors that are contrastive in BP and SP.

Despite differences in overall rates for both groups, the effect of the conditioning factors for both sets of data could still be parallel (Travis, 2007). In order to explore the constraints underlying these overall rates for each of the groups under investigation, we analyse the results for each group of participants separately in the following section. A statistical power analysis was performed for sample size estimation using the software G\*Power 3.1. It was estimated that 171 observations would be needed in each group in order to obtain a small effect size following Cohen's (1988) criteria, with an alpha = .05, and power = .90. Therefore, our sample sizes (L1 English,  $n = 471$ ; L1 Spanish,  $n = 522$ ) will comfortably allow us to fulfil the objectives of this study. For each of the groups, the tokens were submitted to a Varbrul analysis (multivariate logistic regression) using GoldVarb (Sankoff, Tagliamonte, & Smith, 2005). This statistical test, largely used in sociolinguistic research (Johnson, 2008), provides information about significant effects (if any) as well as the weight that describes the probability of influencing the dependent variable of the factor groups included in the coding. The results of both analyses will allow us to compare the present data with previous accounts on SPE. The analysis of our two variants (overt or null SPE) discarded some of the factors that had been used during the coding process and kept others. Next, we present the factor groups that resulted significant in the analyses for the two participant groups.

*Table 2.* Subject pronoun expression overall rates in Brazilian Portuguese, and L1 and L2 Spanish.

Madrid, Spain	21%	(Cameron, 1993)
L1 English L2 Spanish Speakers	26%	(Abreu, 2009)
Rivera, Uruguay	35%	(Carvalho & Child, 2011)
<i>L1 English L2 Spanish Speakers</i>	39.5%	<i>This study</i>
Fortaleza, Brasil	56.2%	(Silveira, 2012)
<i>L1 Spanish L2 English Speakers</i>	63.8%	<i>This study</i>
Brazilian Portuguese	71%	(Duarte, 1995)

#### *SPE Conditioning Factors: L1 English Group*

The results from the multivariate analysis for the L1 English group are presented in Table 3. Factor groups that are statistically significant are ordered based on their importance and impact in the selection of subject pronoun expression. The ranking shows that *grammatical person* appears first in the hierarchy of factor groups. This factor had the highest probability weight in explaining subject pronoun expression. Within this factor group, we find the 3rd person singular *ele/ela* [+animate, +specific] to be the most expressed pronoun, followed by the 1st person singular *eu*, and the 2nd person *você* [+specific]. On the other hand, the 3rd person plural *eles/elas*, followed by the 1st person plural *nos* favoured the null variant of subject pronouns. Moreover, the analysis revealed two knockouts. Both *você* [−specific] (6 occurrences), and 3rd person singular *ele/ela* [−animate, +specific] (33 occurrences) were expressed by means of null pronouns across the board. Thus, for this group, *specificity* favoured the expression of pronouns but only in the [+animate] context. Meanwhile, *animacy* yielded a considerably radical behaviour with [+animate] reaching the highest expression rate and [−animate] the lowest.

Table 3. Hierarchical ranking of constraints in Portuguese subject pronoun expression among the L1 English group.

Factor	Weight	%	# Tokens
<i>Grammatical Person</i>			
Ele/ela [+animate, + specific]	.93	87%	14/16
Eu	.56	43%	145/333
Você [+specific]	.48	37%	3/8
Eles/elas	.47	32%	16/50
Nos	.34	24%	6/25
Você [-specific]*		0%	0/6
Ele/ela [-animate, +specific]*		0%	0/33
<i>Persistence</i>			
Previous coref. expressed	.68	60%	55/92
Previous ref. not the same	.55	41%	109/263
Previous coref. not expressed	.26	19%	22/116
<i>Tense, Mood &amp; Aspect</i>			
Compound	.66	56%	32/57
Preterit	.60	38%	16/42
Present	.47	38%	135/358
Imperfect	.29	21%	3/14

Log likelihood = -269.523

$p < 0.05$

\*Knockouts discarded from analysis.

*Persistence* was the second significant factor group for this group. The expression of the previous coreferent generated a greater probability of subject expression. At the same time, the presence of a null coreferent yielded higher rates of null pronoun use. Both, *persistence* and *discourse connectivity* are factor groups that are collinear since all tokens in the *discourse connectivity* 'previous referent is not the same' category are found in 'first token' and 'switch reference' and all the tokens in the *discourse connectivity* 'same reference' category are either 'previous coref. is expressed' and 'previous coref. is not expressed'. In order to avoid this collinearity, two different variable rule analyses were run for each of the datasets: one including *persistence* in the analysis but not *discourse connectivity*, and another using *discourse connectivity* but not *persistence*. The reports of all the significant factors were taken from the run without the *discourse connectivity* factor for both groups. The factor *discourse connectivity* did not yield any significance in any of the two runs and was, therefore, disregarded. The remaining significant factors including their weights did not suffer any changes from one analysis to the other.

Finally, *TMA* is the last significant factor group that influenced the production of overt pronouns for our L1 English participants. In Spanish, the imperfect tends to favour subject pronoun expression the most, while imperative is found to favour it the least (e.g. Orozco, 2015; Shin & Erker, 2015). However, in Portuguese, imperfect does not always seem to trigger the highest rate of expression in the *TMA* factor (Duarte, 1995; Silveira, 2012: present, imperfect, preterit & imperfect, preterit and present *TMA* rankings respectively). Despite these findings that could be due to methodological differences, Spanish and Portuguese have very similar *TMA* patterns. On the other hand, English learners of Spanish seem to have difficulties to acquire the distinction between preterit and imperfect, resulting in an overextension of the preterit use (Cuza, 2010) which can be observed in

the higher number of tokens with preterit (42) than with imperfect (14). L1 English participants seem to favour the appearance of overt subject pronouns with the preterit tense and the remaining verb tenses. On the contrary, present, and especially imperfect tenses, show an inclination to appear as unexpressed subject pronouns. This result could be due to different reasons such as the input these participants have received with regards to the use of the imperfect, usually introduced in language classes after the preterit has been mastered.

#### *SPE Conditioning Factors: L1 Spanish Group*

Results for the L1 Spanish group are presented in Table 4 by order of significance. The ranking of the different factors differs slightly from what we have seen for the previous group of participants. In this case, *grammatical person* and *persistence* continue to be first and second in the ranking respectively, followed by *clause type*. The rest of factors did not yield any significance in the analysis.

*Table 4.* Hierarchical ranking of constraints in Portuguese subject pronoun expression for the L1 Spanish group.

Factor	Weight	%	#Tokens
<i>Grammatical Person</i>			
Ele/ela [+animate, +specific]	.62	64%	9/14
Eu	.60	71%	263/369
Eles/elas	.50	60%	30/50
Nos	.36	50%	12/24
Você [+specific]	.31	48%	14/29
Você [-specific]	.30	50%	4/8
Ele/ela [-animate, +specific]*		0%	0/28
<i>Persistence</i>			
Previous ref. not the same	.58	70%	205/291
Previous coref. expressed	.54	71%	103/144
Previous coref. not expressed	.19	28%	25/87
<i>Type of Clause</i>			
Main	.56	70%	260/372
Subordinate	.38	57%	45/79
Coordinate	.30	40%	28/71

Log likelihood = -274.576

$p < 0.05$

\*Knockouts discarded from analysis.

*Grammatical person* is the first factor in the ranking to trigger overt pronouns. Following a similar pattern to that of the L1 English group, 3rd person singular *ele/ela* [+animate, +specific], 1st person singular *eu* and 3rd person plural *eles/elas* are the categories that are more susceptible of being expressed. *Você* [+specific], and *você* [-specific] seem to disfavor the use of overt SP. The analysis also reported knockouts for *ele/ela* [-animate, +specific] with 28 null tokens.

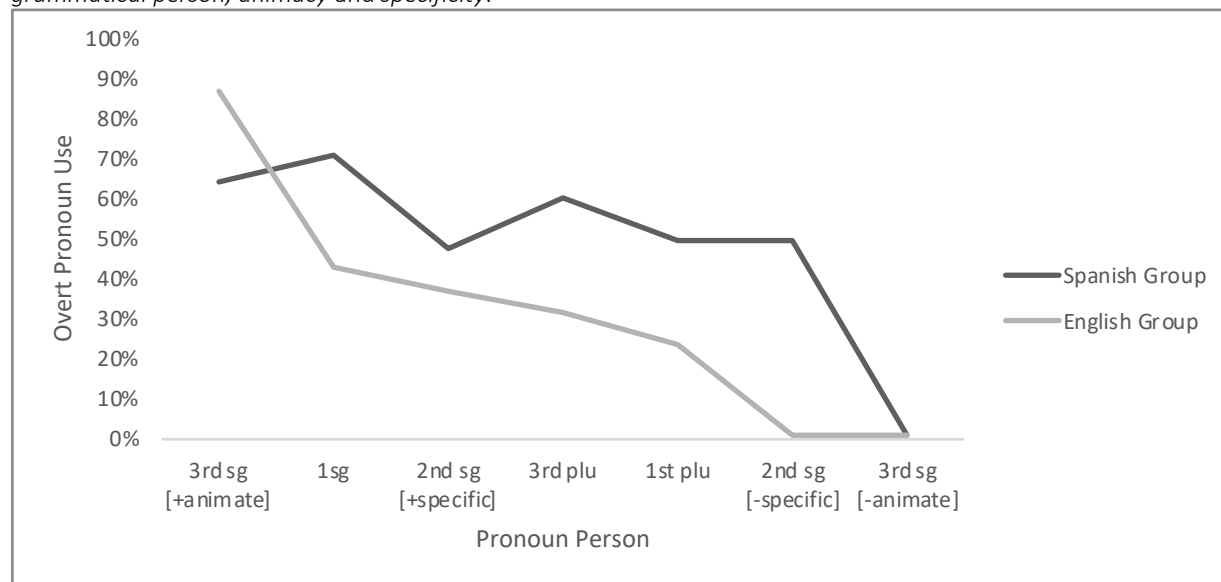
In line with previous studies (Abreu, 2009; Cameron, 1993; among others), the present analysis shows that a switch in reference and the first expression of a referent trigger a higher presence of overt pronouns. Furthermore, when it comes to *persistence*, in the L1 Spanish group expressed coreferents probabilistically yielded the presence of overt pronouns while unexpressed ones strongly disfavoured it.

Finally, the factor *clause type* occupies the last place in the ranking and, thus, it is probabilistically less likely to affect the production of expressed pronouns. Within clause type, we find the previously reported order of significance, main clauses triggering the most expressed pronouns, and coordinated sentences producing more null variants.

## OVERALL RESULTS

The most noticeable similarity between both groups is found in the contribution of *grammatical person* to the realisation of SPE. Previous research on SPE (Abreu, 2009; Carvalho & Bessett, 2015; Otheguy & Zentella, 2012) found that singular forms tend to be related to more expression rates than plural forms. Our data present differences in this pattern that are consistent across both groups (see Figure 1). 3rd person singular *ele/ela* [+animate, +specific], 1st person singular *eu*, and 3rd person plural *eles/elas* are the forms that favour overt pronouns the most; with the ordering of these three categories being identical for the L1 English and the L1 Spanish groups. Another similarity found in all groups is the shared sensibility to *animacy* and *specificity*. The ranking of categories within grammatical person reveals the consistent role of *specificity* in the [+animate] context. The L1 English group shows a category weight of .48 for *você* [+specific] vs. a categorical use of null *você* [-specific], while for the L1 Spanish group the same categories show .31 vs. .30, respectively. Even though we do not find a reasonable difference in the L1 Spanish data, the L1 English participants appear to have overextended this *specificity* difference found in Spanish (Cameron, 1993) so that all [-specific] forms are null. These L2 results are in line with those found in Geeslin and Gudmestad (2008). Moreover, a robust effect of *animacy* for third person singular forms [+animate, +specific] and [-animate, +specific] was found. The L1 English group shows a category weight of .93 vs. a categorical use of [-animate, +specific] third person singular null pronouns, similar to the L1 Spanish group with .62 vs. a categorical use of null forms respectively. These commonalities among groups reveal a shared sensitivity to the *grammatical person* factor present in the grammars of Spanish speakers.

Figure 1. Frequency of overt subject pronoun expression in the Spanish and English groups as a function of grammatical person, animacy and specificity.



The second significant factor in the analysis for both groups was *persistence*. Moreover, the direction of the effects is consistent in both sets of data. Unexpressed coreferents favoured null pronouns and expressed coreferents enhanced a higher rate of overt pronouns – .26 vs. .68 for the L1 English group, and .19 vs .58 for the L1 Spanish group. However, this particular pattern is also found in the production of 1st person singular pronouns in native English productions. Torres Cacoullós and Travis (2014) found that previous unexpressed coreferents favoured null pronouns by 88% while expressed coreferents favoured overt pronouns by 60%. Thus, albeit significant for both groups, this factor cannot be used as evidence for transfer from either Spanish or English since both seem to have a similar tendency when it comes to *persistence*.

Data from the L1 English group also revealed that *TMA* was an important factor in the shaping of SPE distribution with an unexpectedly low rate of overt pronouns occurring with verbs in the imperfect tense, a tense that tends to trigger pronoun expression due to its possible ambiguity forms. While *TMA* was not a significant factor in the analysis of the L1 Spanish data, this group showed a similar tendency for a higher usage of preterit vs. imperfect (42 vs. 6 tokens, respectively); however, in this case, 4 out of the 6 imperfect SPE tokens were overt, behaving similarly to the Spanish monolingual varieties (Orozco, 2015). Our L1 Spanish group did, nevertheless, show sensitivity to *clause type*: main clauses favoured the expression of subject pronouns while subordinated and coordinated clauses disfavoured them. This factor, however, was significant only for the L1 English group. Finally, discourse connectivity was the only factor that did not yield any statistical significance in the analyses of either group.

The results on the importance of grammatical person as a factor that contributes to the realisation of SPE point towards the interpretation of transfer from Spanish for both bilingual groups. The similarity in rankings and the parallel uses of *animacy* and *specificity* reject the possibility of transferring from English, a language that does not display effects for these factors.

Nonetheless, due to differences in coding with previous analyses, the tendency for singular pronouns to trigger a higher rate of overt pronouns cannot be compared to native BP data and, thus, it cannot be used to rule out the influence of BP in the results of the present L3 data. A factor that has been found to behave significantly different in crosslinguistic analyses of SP and BP, and that can be used to rule out BP influence is *animacy*. Soares da Silva (2006) compared his expression rate results for [-animate] pronouns from Buenos Aires (BA) and Madrid Spanish (MA) to Duarte's (1995) BP data. The differences in [-animate] subject expression rates (0% BA, 0% MA, 66% BP) can help identify the data from the bilingual groups as belonging to SP productions as their production of inanimate entities yielded null subjects across the board. This evidence rejects the possibility that participants might be using a commonly developed BP linguistic system with native-like characteristics. Rather, they would be using an L3 system that contains the transferred linguistic properties of their knowledge of Spanish. Additional considerations contributing to this interpretation are those of exposure and instruction. All participants had been exposed to BP in the same classroom environment during only two months, which is certainly not enough to have developed sensitivity to factors shaping the distribution of BP subject pronouns if we bear in mind the type of input received in a first foreign language course. Furthermore, SPE behaviour is not subject to instruction in classroom settings. Learners most likely first observe the possibility to drop subject pronouns in BP and interpret their distribution as parallel to that of SP subjects. Therefore, the limited exposure participants had with BP appears to indicate that, when pushed to produce L3 oral narratives, our participants used their knowledge of Spanish as it was the only system they could resort to in order to complete the task. Thus, transfer must be the force behind the results of the present study.

The reason behind the differences in SPE constraints between both groups of bilinguals may substantially lie in their different experience with SP. This difference has been noticed in *grammatical person* and *specificity* by previous accounts that looked at native and highly proficient non-native speakers of SP (Geeslin & Gudmestad, 2008). Another potential explanation for this difference (as well as for the fact that some factors remained non-significant for one or both groups) could be related to the limited amount of data available for the analysis as participants that fit the profile required to carry out this investigation were rare. Furthermore, factor significance differences with previous accounts on Spanish SPE could also be explained by the limited amount of data. This is not unique to this study as previous analyses have found lack of significance of other factors such as *grammatical person* in Spanish SPE (Geeslin et al., 2015).

A further limitation of this study lays in the lack of Spanish data from the same participant groups. This would strengthen the conclusions with regards to L3 transfer of variable grammars. Future endeavours should focus on comparing L2/L1 data to L3 data in order to control for task effects in L3 productions. Despite these limitations, the fact remains that both groups displayed similar sensitivity to the linguistic factors *grammatical person*, *animacy* and *specificity* which can only be explained by means of transfer from their knowledge of Spanish.

## CONCLUSION

In this novel study, we tested the permeability of early, developing L3 systems with regards to variable linguistic behaviour. By applying the methodological framework of comparative sociolinguistics to the field of L3 acquisition, this investigation furthers our understanding of the nature of L3 transfer as it supports the claim that variable patterns are accessed in L3 acquisition just as structural properties of language are. As predicted by holistic models of L3 transfer (TPM, L2SF), the typological distance between Spanish and Portuguese determined transfer from Spanish and not from English into the developing L3 system. The two mirror-image groups of bilinguals that participated in this study displayed a shared sensitivity to SPE constraining factors in L3 production early in the acquisition process that correspond to previous sociolinguistic descriptions of Spanish SPE behaviour and not those of Portuguese or English. For the first time, these findings test and support the claim that L2 speakers can learn variable linguistic knowledge, and transfer this knowledge into their L3, regardless of its L1 or L2 origin.

Most importantly, this study provides evidence of transfer of non-structural properties of language. Previous accounts and theories of L3 transfer have mainly relied on categorical morphosyntactic information. Here, we provide evidence that variable behaviour results are in line with findings supporting L3 holistic transfer models (TPM, L2SF). The implications of these results could be generalised to other non-structural properties of language such as pragmatic knowledge. If, as our results indicate, a whole system can be selected for transfer, L3 developing knowledge must contain information of a wide range of linguistic characteristics, as many as there are stored in the transferred system. Therefore, provided that a certain linguistic property can be acquired or developed by L2 learners, mirror-image Spanish-English bilingual groups should display results comparable to ours if the appropriate methodology is used.

Finally, this study opens up a new avenue for multilingual research that draws from recent development in the field of L2 acquisition and the learnability of variable patterns. This enterprise would benefit from further examination of this and other variables in language groups with non-cognate languages or where the typological similarity factor is not as direct as that between Spanish and Portuguese. Under optimal conditions, such inquiry could be used to examine the claims of the

L2SF model by measuring variable grammatical knowledge. Finally, further sociolinguistic studies using advanced learners of the L3 could be used to test the learnability of L3 variable patterns in a variety of linguistic environments.

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## APPENDIX

## Production task prompts with English translations

1. Como foi sua primeira experiência dirigindo um carro?/How was your first experience driving a car?
2. Quais foram as suas melhores férias com família ou amigos? O que vocês fizeram?/ Which were your favourite holidays with family or friends? What did you do?
3. Fale sobre você. Quais são seus hobbies?/ Talk about you. What are your hobbies?
4. Que relação você acha que as pessoas têm com a tecnologia hoje? (telefones, a internet, redes sociais)/What kind of relationship do you think people have with technology nowadays? (phones, internet, social networks)
5. Que efeitos você acha que a tecnologia tem sobre as pessoas?/ According to you, what effects does technology have on people?
6. Fale sobre seu celular, como ele é e como você usa ele?/Talk about your cellphone, how is it and how do you use it?
7. Quem são seus amigos? Como você conheceu eles?/Who are your friends? How did you meet them?
8. O que você vai fazer quando você acabar a faculdade?/ What will you do when you finish school?
9. O que você vai fazer nas férias de verão? Onde você vai e com quem?/ What are you doing during your next summer holidays? Where are you going and with whom?
10. Fale sobre o que você vai fazer esta tarde./ Talk about what you are going to do this afternoon.
11. Seus pais são importantes para você? Quais são algumas expectativas que seus pais têm sobre a sua vida e o seu futuro?/ Are your parents important to you? What are some expectations they have about your life and your future?
12. O que você acha das próximas eleições nos Estados Unidos?/ What do you think about the next presidential elections in the US?
13. Qual é o melhor candidato? Por quê? O que ele ou ela propõe?/ Who is the best candidate? Why? What does he or she propose?
14. Como são os preços das casas aqui em \_\_\_\_? São caras ou baratas? Quais são as possibilidades para morar perto do campus?/ How is the rental market here in \_\_\_\_? Is lodging expensive or cheap? What are the possibilities to live close to campus?
15. É possível alugar um quarto por 300 dólares ou eu precisaria de mais dinheiro? Em qual área eu poderia encontrar quarto por esse preço?/ Is it possible to rent a room for 300\$ or would I need more money? In which area would I be able to find a room for that price?
16. Estou com fome, eu vou precisar comer logo. Em que restaurante eu posso comer? Onde ele fica?/ I am hungry and I need to eat now. Where can I eat? Where is that restaurant?
17. Como eu posso chegar nesse restaurante?/ How do I get to that restaurant?
18. Você gostou do questionário?/ Did you like the questionnaire?