Theoretical Linguistics Meets Pedagogical Practice Pronominal Subject Use in Spanish as a Second Language

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Abstract: This article attempts to highlight the importance of theoretical linguistics and empirical cognitive linguistics studies for the practical teaching of Spanish as a second language. Looking at the domain of subject pronominal use as an example, I endeavor to show how formal linguistics can be useful to language instructors. This is a significant enterprise since language instructors could benefit from both a better understanding of the linguistic properties of the languages they teach and what psycholinguistic studies have revealed about the nature of adult language learning in general.

Keywords: discourse constraints, null subjects, overt subjects, pragmatics, switch reference

1. Introduction

Must a person be a linguist to be a language expert? Is anyone who teaches language a de facto linguist? It would be intuitive to point out to any reasonable person that an individual with a penchant for rocks and landscapes, a massive gem collection, and an earnest interest and great endurance for cartography is not a geologist unless this person has seriously studied theory. Applying this reasoning to language is less intuitive, although equally true. Given its ubiquitous nature and the fact that, independent of overall intelligence, social class, geographical location, and explicit motivation, all normal human adults speak their native language effortlessly well, it is not surprising that many people earnestly believe themselves to know more about the nature of language than they do in actuality. Nevertheless, since being human is virtually synonymous with being a communicatively competent speaker of at least one language in adulthood, it is not so farfetched that many people unpretentiously claim a level of expertise in linguistics. That said, to be a true expert in language and to understand both its grammatical constitution and its underlying linguistic and sociolinguistic representations, one must be trained in the subdisciplines of linguistics in the same sense that an authentic geologist is different from a geological hobbyist. This means that teaching language and even being highly metalinguistically knowledgeable about particular grammars do not make one a priori an expert in language, much less a linguist.

Without question, there is a palpable disconnect between linguistic theory, formal empirical acquisition research, and pedagogical practice. It should not be assumed, nevertheless, that this disconnect is unnoticed by linguists or that it is wholly intentional. At the most basic level, the lack of communication is twofold. On the one hand, language acquisition experts need to remain unbiased with respect to the pursuit of descriptive accuracy of the second language (L2) process. For some, this means functionally ignoring pedagogical implications, as such implications can only be an artifact of first revealing the process itself. Under such a mindset, the two have mutually exclusive interests, which are best left separate from each other; the

formal linguist is not concerned with facilitating acquisition like the pedagogue, but simply understanding it.[1] On the other hand, and no less important, is the fact that it is extremely difficult to explain the jargon, abstraction, working assumptions, and the like of a discipline to people outside that discipline in such a way that simplifies the issues enough for the important messages to be apperceived while still doing justice to the inquiry of study. Since this is a daunting task, many choose simply not to attempt it. Regardless of the reasons presented to explain the lack of communication between linguistics and language teaching, no one would deny that a language teacher who is more aware of the linguistic structures of the language s/he is teaching and key issues in the general understanding of adult language acquisition will make a more effective, empathetic teacher.

The objective of this article is to build bridges between linguists and language instructors, attempting to provide the latter with some tools to employ the formers' work into language teaching. To do so, I will need to justify why this is mutually beneficial and how this is possible. Thus, I will need to (a) meaningfully explain what linguistics and formal acquisition theory are as disciplines to an audience of nonspecialists; (b) deconstruct some notions about what grammar is, explaining the difference between prescriptive, descriptive, and pedagogical grammars and why only one is taken to be legitimate by linguists; (c) provide a concise review of the key issues and what is known in L2 acquisition theory; (d) offer a tangible example of how linguistic research can be useful for language teachers; and (e) discuss the broader implications that this example has. In the present article, we will look at the distribution of subject pronouns in Spanish as such an example, noting that this is one of a multitude of possible examples to make the points that will be made. The syntax and discourse use of Spanish subject pronouns are well studied in both a theoretical and descriptive sense for monolingual knowledge and for their acquisition by English native speakers of adult L2 Spanish (see Rothman and Iverson 2007a; Rothman 2009 and works cited therein), making this an extremely fruitful topic to engage the larger discussion set forth in this article.

2. Linguistics: What It Is and Is Not

All things linguistic and grammatical inherently deal with language; however, the studies of grammar and linguistics are not the same thing. Whereas grammar is traditionally understood as the prescriptive description of a particular language, linguistics is the scientific study of language more generally. Formal linguistic theory offers particular analyses of properties in specific languages based on standard scientific methodology, starting with observation of language use in normal discourse and/or acceptability of stimuli based on native speaker judgments. It endeavors to descriptively account for, in an explanatorily adequate manner, the properties of all possible languages, which includes microdescriptions of properties in particular languages. Thus, linguistic descriptions of specific properties in any given language have the additional goal of addressing larger questions addressing what particular analyses can tell us about the mental architecture of language, how language comes to be acquired, and what the relationship is between language and a complete theory of mind. Linguistics does not impose norms on a particular manifestation of language; it merely observes and accounts for observations of how language is used. Thus, a core difference between grammarians and linguists is how they approach the very object of study. Whereas Spanish is both the key object and objective of study for a Spanish grammarian, Spanish is simply the object or tool of study examined by the linguist (its properties or its acquisition) to understand a larger objective, that is, the understanding of how language operates at a cognitive level and is represented in the mind/brain of its speakers (native and nonnative alike).

Coinciding with the cognitive revolution across the social sciences in the mid to late 1950s, the most influential proposals of language and human cognition have emerged since this time (see Chomsky 2007; O'Grady 2005, 2008; Tomasello 2003) for the tenets of different

cognitive-based theories. Although there is no agreement as to what in-born species-particular language-specific mechanisms, if any, underlie linguistic systems and language acquisition, it is uncontroversial to claim that humans are special in the extent to which they are able to communicate, and that we are designed to acquire language is observable. Understanding this observation more deeply is the goal of modern linguistics.

3. Types of Grammars

As a reader, you might take exception to the claim that not being a linguist means that one is principally untrained in language. This might seem counterfactual since most educated adults are undeniably trained metalinguistically in their native language, that is, explicitly instructed in the so-called grammar of languages they have acquired as children, and even more so for the languages they have acquired in adulthood. In the case of a language instructor, the individual likely has a very intimate knowledge of the prescriptive and pedagogical grammars of the target language for instructional purposes and beyond. However, the type of training inherent to this type of knowledge is different from linguistic training, and this has to do with the types of grammars such knowledge involves.

For ease of presentation, I will put some details aside and claim that there are essentially three types of grammars that describe the properties of any given language. These three grammars are descriptive, prescriptive, and pedagogical grammars. Linguistics concerns itself exclusively with the first type of grammar, which is precisely the type of grammatical knowledge lacking in educated adults if not trained in formal linguistic analysis. Being aware of the differences in these types of grammars and understanding their goals is an important first step toward understanding the limitations of each and determining how a relationship between linguistics and language teaching can be beneficial.

3.1 Prescriptive Grammars

Prescriptive grammars advance so-called grammatical rules that are created on the basis of some idealized (and arbitrary) norm, usually the "standard" or "educated" version of the language. Did you ever ask yourself who decided that one cannot end a sentence with a preposition in English, that we may not use the word *hopefully* at the beginning of a sentence, or that we cannot use a double negative when it is clear that all native speakers do in everyday speech? In fact, as native speakers of English, we end sentences with prepositions all the time, most naturally in unaffected colloquial speech. This is different from Spanish where ending sentences with a preposition (preposition stranding) is truly ungrammatical to the extent that native speakers simply cannot produce such sentences or understand them easily if judging them. Rules belonging to the prescriptive grammar are violated ubiquitously, especially in everyday speech. Interestingly, prescriptivism is rejected by all formal linguists and promoted by many teachers, news reporters, and politicians who knowingly or inadvertently see language as a monolithic, finite entity as opposed to an organic and fluid one.

3.2 Pedagogical Grammars

Pedagogical grammars are grammars of the type offered in any foreign language textbook for nonnative speakers. They are grammars of purposeful design based on direct and indirect comparisons between the target L2 language and the native language of the audience. With this in mind, it is easy to appreciate how these grammars cannot be completely accurate, for such would be to assume that Spanish, or whatever foreign language, is based on English. This immediately explains why pedagogical grammars are only useful within particular contexts. For example, the leading Spanish textbooks sold in the United States, even if written entirely

in Spanish, would not have a good market in Italy since what is explained in these books is based on a comparison to English, which in the context of Italy is rendered invalid. In addition to highlighting similarities and differences between the first language (L1) and the target L2, pedagogical grammars offer rules of general design usually based on frequency that attempt to approximate usage trends but are overall inaccurate.[2] For example, it is commonly taught that after adverbs denoting repetition or long periods of duration such as *siempre* 'always' and *a menudo* 'often', the imperfect as opposed to the preterit past tense must be used. Although the imperfect is far more likely in such contexts, it is inaccurate to claim that the preterit could not be used and specifically to convey a particular meaning, as in *Siempre supe que me ibas a abandonar* 'I always knew you would leave me'. It is possible that these overgeneralizations actually impede native-like use even in advanced L2 speakers (see Rothman 2008b).[3]

3.3 Descriptive Grammars

Descriptive grammars seek to minimally describe that which they observe actual native speakers say and what native speakers intuit as possible and impossible sentences of their native language through judgments. This is the grammar to which linguists subscribe, that is, linguists are charged with describing what native speakers know about their grammar and language in general. Descriptive grammars do not tell people what is acceptable; they study how people actually speak and use their internal grammar. If a descriptive grammar thus makes reference to the unconscious rules that native speakers have, then it is at the same time an attempt at proposing a model of description of what the internal grammar of an individual speaker is. In this sense, then, the linguist tries to uncover the internal regularities of the language and explain what every native speaker knows implicitly in an explicit way. Let us consider the following example sentences with this question in mind: can the bold words refer to one another (i.e., be co-referential)?

(1)   a.   ***Juan*** *sabe que **él** es muy atractivo*.   (co-reference and disjoint reference)
              '**John** knows that **he** is very attractive'.
       b.   ***Él*** *sabe que **Juan** es muy atractivo*.   (disjoint reference)
              '**He** knows that **John** is very attractive'.
       c.   ***Juan*** *sabe que **Juan** es muy atractivo*.   (disjoint reference)
              '**John** knows that **John** is very attractive'.

How do native speakers of Spanish know that in (a) *Juan* and 'he' can be the same person (co-referential) but not in (b) where they must be different people (disjoint reference). Furthermore, why should this be? From the point of view of a pedagogical grammar, such information does not even enter conscious thought since these words work the same in Spanish and English (this could not be ignored in other language pairings such as English and Korean where these words operate differently). From a prescriptive grammar view, facts like this are simply ignored, but a descriptive grammar confronts these facts and explains them straightforwardly. A descriptive analysis observes that *Juan* 'John' and *él* 'he' are types of nouns. Both are subjects and apparently can be in either matrix (main clausal) or embedded clause positions, but their interpretations for co-reference are dependent on an interplay of the order in which they appear relative to one another and the type of words that they are. Many details aside (see Chomsky 1981 for details), pronouns (*él* 'he') have a different status than proper names (*Juan* 'John'), and their binding abilities for co-reference are affected as such.

The point I wish to make here is that knowledge of this last type of grammar might prove quite useful to language instructors, as it goes beyond typological comparisons of one language to the other and offers an understanding as to why the target language works as it does. An additional benefit of understanding the target grammar past the limitations of prescriptive and pedagogical analyses is that it approximates more closely the type of unconscious knowledge

that native speakers have for the target language, thus avoiding overgeneralizations that happen as a result of pedagogical description.

4. L2 Acquisition Theory: What We Know and Do Not Know

Before stating what the research tells us about adult L2 acquisition, we should concisely say what we know of child L1 acquisition since the juxtaposition of L1 and L2 constitutes the standard comparative control.[4] Barring pathological problems, children acquire near-adult competence of the grammar of the dialect of the language to which they are exposed by the age of seven (see Synder 2007 and works cited within). Although language acquisition is not an instantaneous process, it is marked by observably uniform stages of development that transcend the language(s) being acquired (i.e., crosslinguistic similarities in developmental sequence). Not all children are corrected when acquiring their native language, yet all children wind up accomplishing, with more or less the same level of success, the task of acquiring the language of their environment. The input available to children is incomplete in that it does not provide all the information children would need to explain everything that they know about their native language. This is known as the logical problem of language acquisition, which highlights and seeks to understand how children can come to be fully competent speakers in light of a lack of experience with critical information that would be logically needed if language acquisition were indeed purely an instance of highly sophisticated behavioral modification. These observations have prompted linguists to argue that L1 acquisition operates under specific in-born universal principles of linguistic well-formedness. Since children are purported to be born with these general principles of grammar, it is not surprising that all children would be equally success-ful in the task of converging on the grammar of their native language and that this could be accomplished without exposure to some seemingly crucial input that is lacking in the environ-ment. A particular instantiation of this biological program of language is known as universal grammar (UG), or the Chomskyan model of language (see Chomsky 2007; Synder 2007 for review). This position maintains that all humans are born with a language acquisition device (LAD), a neurological subsection of specific linguistic design that streamlines the process of language acquisition by reducing the search space for hypotheses of how particular languages operate. In this sense, equipped a priori with universal limits of what is possible and not pos-sible in natural grammars, the child is restricted with respect to the forms that the grammar he develops can take, thus explaining why children avoid otherwise logical developmental errors. L1 acquisition is quick and collectively successful, and children of vastly different languages pass through the same stages of acquisition at roughly the same ages.

Although we know adult L2 learners to be, at the onset, quicker language acquirers than children, we also know that in ultimate attainment children are far superior (e.g., Long 1990). We know that adult L2 acquisition is affected by factors that seemingly do not come to bear on child L1 acquisition, such as motivation, context, type of input available, instruction, and other factors (see Long 2005). We know that the interfaces of morphology and pragmatics with syntax in L2 acquisition are especially problematic for adult learners (Lardiere 2007; Prévost and White 2000; White 2009), manifesting in residually optional use of target L2 grammatical forms as compared to native speakers even at high levels of L2 proficiency. Because cases to the contrary are rare, we do not expect the average adult L2 learner to become a truly near native speaker—in the sense that this speaker is not reliably indistinguishable from native speakers. Despite all the differences we could continue to highlight, one cannot ignore the similarities that research has uncovered. For example, adult L2 learners do come to acquire properties for the target L2 that could not have been transferred from their L1, are not taught to them, and are not directly available from the L2 input they receive (see Rothman 2008c; Rothman and Iverson 2008 for discussion). We know that L2 adult learners seem to acquire purely syntactic properties of the L2 quickly and successfully as well as complex semantic properties related to

the acquisition of new syntactic properties (see Slabakova 2008). We also know that adults can acquire the processing strategies and preferences of the target L2 (e.g., Dussias 2003; Sorace and Filiaci 2006).

As a result of the juxtaposing and seemingly contradictory facts, the extent to which adult language acquisition is maturationally conditioned to be different from child L1 acquisition in the sense that whatever language-specific mechanisms are at work to guarantee language acquisition in children are no longer available to adults is a topic of considerable debate in the L2 theoretical literature (see Long 2005; Paradis 2004; Rothman 2008c; White 2003). For some, the reality of salient differences between L1 and L2 acquisitions is enough to believe that the cognitive mechanisms available for language acquisition in childhood and adulthood are divergent. Nevertheless, such a contention makes theoretical predications that must come to bear under experimental scrutiny. Although no one denies that the outcomes of L1 and L2 acquisition are different, it is not at all clear that the underlying processes themselves or avail-ability to the cognitive mechanisms that are purported to drive L1 acquisition are different, since, like L1 acquisition, adult learners come to acquire knowledge of the L2 that creates a logical problem of acquisition. So, although the outcomes are unquestionably different, it is unlikely that they are maturationally conditioned to be so.

Not all researchers agree that explicit L2 language instruction is particularly gainful (e.g., Rothman 2008c; Schwartz 1993) in terms of advancing underlying L2 competence. Notwith-standing, more accurate descriptions based on sound theoretical analyses of the L2 can aid the acquisition process in at least two ways: (a) explicit knowledge can help at the very least the performance of L2 learners, which according to some theories of acquisition assist the process of acquisition (e.g., Long's interaction hypothesis); and (b) better descriptions might come to help actual acquisition in a trickle-down sense whereby a more accurate description of the distribu-tion of L2 properties might affect the quality of the input L2 learners receive from nonnative instructors aware of the native-like uses of particular properties. In the example we will use for the present article, the distribution of null and overt pronominal subjects in actual discourse, explicit knowledge of the formal pragmatic restrictions on overt subject use can help teachers provide a more native-like model to their students as well as explain the trends of actual use by Spanish native speakers, who do not randomly choose when to overtly express *yo* 'I' but use it with pragmatic function.

5. Pronominal Subjects in Spanish as an Example

All complete sentences have at least two subcomponents: an understood subject—the person or object doing an action—and a predicate—that which is being done or the verb and its complements. One obvious difference between Spanish and English is seen in the way that they express pronominal subjects. Compare (2) to (3).

(2) a.   John believes that we are good people.
    b.   *John believes that __ are good people.
(3) a.   *Juan cree que nosotros somos buena gente*.
    b.   *Juan cree que __ somos buena gente*.

Human languages are divided into two with respect to subject expression. Null-subject languages (3) like Spanish, Italian, Turkish, and Japanese can either express pronominal sub-jects overtly or not, and non–null-subject languages (2) like English, French, German, and Afrikaans must always express pronominal subjects overtly.[5] It is relatively uncontroversial to claim that rich verbal morphology correlates to the possibility of having null subjects as a syntactic option in a given language (e.g., Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou 1998). Under such a scenario, it is not surprising that Spanish is thus a null-subject language and English is not

since only in the case of Spanish are verbal conjugations able to unambiguously identify the subject. That is, *cant-o* is unique from *cant-as*, *cant-amos,* and *cant-an* in that grammatical person and number is encoded in the verbal conjugation morphemes of Spanish, whereas the bare form 'sing-ø' cannot specify the person or number features that its Spanish equivalents do and, therefore, must be accompanied by a subject pronoun. Insofar as verbal morphology is linked to the acquisition of null-subject licensing, there is plenty of input in Spanish that should trigger such knowledge since every sentence has conjugated verbs; this is true for child and adult learners alike. But acquiring the null-subject status of Spanish in the sense that one comes to know that overt subjects are not necessary does not guarantee that the distribution of overt versus null subjects in use will be acquired. This is true since the licensing of null subjects is a purely syntactic phenomenon acquired on the basis of triggers that are entirely independent of the triggers that regulate null-subject use relative to overt subjects in discourse.

Optional use mediated by pragmatic function in the discourse (a grammar external interface) is inherently more complex than something that is purely syntactic (a grammar internal property, part of the I-language) if for no other reason than it involves the integration of multiple levels of information, which arguably poses a greater level of difficulty for adult learners (e.g., Sorace 2005), who have L1 transfer, less available relevant input, and other obstacles to overcome for ultimate convergence of these properties. So, we can expect that adult learners of L2 Spanish would acquire the possibility of null subjects before they converge on the target distribution of null versus overt subjects. In general, this is precisely what the literature on the L2 acquisition of Spanish has demonstrated (e.g., Liceras 1989; Montrul and Rodríguez-Louro 2006; Pérez-Leroux and Glass 1999; Rothman 2007, 2009; Rothman and Iverson 2007a, 2007b).[6] In light of the ample triggers available in the input for null-subject licensing itself, it would seem that highlighting the fact that Spanish allows subject pronouns to be unexpressed is not necessary. This fact is favored by examining and comparing naturalistic L2 learners to classroom learners, which has shown that both sets of learners come to acquire null-subject licensing equally well (Rothman and Iverson 2007c). However, highlighting the discourse restrictions on the pragmatic felicitousness of null subjects versus overt subjects, precisely what even highly advanced L2 Spanish learners have difficulty with irrespective of whether they learn in a classroom or naturalistically, might be particularly gainful for English learners of L2 Spanish.

Despite the fact that the discourse properties for pronominal subject distribution in Spanish are well documented in linguistic literature, the complexity of the distribution is largely untaught to (most) L2 learners.[7] The first step toward teaching these constraints to L2 learners is to make the restrictions readily available to instructors and explain how and why they exist, in other words, explain the discourse function of overt subjects and why null subjects are the preferred default pronoun in languages like Spanish. The next section endeavors to do just that.

6. The Discourse Pragmatics of Pronominal Subjects in Spanish

Putting aside details relating to minor dialectal differences in subject distribution in Spanish (e.g., Toribio 2000), the distribution of null versus overt subjects in the majority of Spanish dialects is the same and is well documented. In line with general principles of linguistic economy, which essentially dictate that in language less is more, null subjects are the default form of pronominal subjects in Spanish since it is obviously more economical not to say something than it is to say something that is otherwise superfluous. Roughly 25% to 30% of pronominal subjects are overtly expressed (see Grinstead 2004; Montrul 2004) and, further in line with general linguistic economy, when they are used, their presence adds more than person and number features, which are expressed by verbal morphology. In general, it is accepted that overt Spanish subjects necessarily have some type of disambiguation and/or focalized quality (e.g., switch reference, use as a topic or focus, contrastive focus; see Fernández-Soriano 1993; Picallo 1998; Rigau 1998; Rizzi 1997).

Overt subject pronouns (or lexical subjects) are required to remove referential ambiguity when new referents are introduced into the discourse, as seen by comparing (4) with (5) and (6) with (7). Alternatively, once a discourse referent has been established it becomes pragmatically odd to use overt subject pronouns to refer to the same referent unless the subject verbal morphology is ambiguous with competition for reference, as in (6), where there are two accessible subjects as compared to (7), where there is only one.

(4) *Paco y María dejaron caer el vaso y se rompió. *Paco y María/?ellos/Ø estarán avergonzados.*
'Paco and Maria dropped the vase and it broke. *Paco and Maria/?they/Ø must be embarrassed'.

(5) *Dejé caer el vaso y se rompió en frente de todos. Paco y María/ellos/*Ø piensan que estoy avergonzado ahora.*
'I dropped the vase and it broke in front of everyone. Paco and Maria/they/*Ø think that I am embarrassed now'.

(6) *Pablo, Josefina y tú son muy inteligentes, pero Pablo/él/*Ø es más inteligente.*
'Pablo, Josefina, and you are very intelligent, but Pablo/he/*Ø is the smartest'.

(7) *Pablo, Josefina y tú son muy inteligentes, pero ?tú/Ø eres el más inteligente.*
'Pablo, Josefina, and you are very intelligent, but ?you/Ø are the smartest'.

Additionally, as seen by comparing (8) with (9), lexical subjects or overt subject pronouns are the only felicitous answer to topic questions, whereas null subjects are the expected answers to yes/no type questions.

(8) *¿Hablaste con Roberto ayer? . . . Sí, ?nosotros/Ø nos hablamos.*
'Did you speak with Roberto yesterday? . . . Yes, ?we/Ø spoke to each other'.

(9) *¿Quién habló con Roberto ayer? . . . Yo/*Ø le hablé.*
'Who spoke to Roberto yesterday? . . . I/*Ø spoke to him'.

Although both a co-referential and a disjoint referential interpretation is possible in (10), the fact that embedded overt subject pronouns are most naturally understood as referentially disjoint (without further context) with subjects in the main clause follows from the observation that they serve to express contrastive focus in the sense of "X not Y."

(10) *El padre cuyos hijos Laura y Pedro son muy exitosos cree que él se dedica más [que ella].*
'The father whose children, Laura and Pedro, are very successful thinks that he dedicates himself more [than she (does)]'.

So although it is possible that *él* 'he' in (10) refers to 'the father' or even some other person unknown in the immediate discourse, it is most likely that *él* 'he' refers to Pedro and in a contrastive sense to Laura given the pragmatics of the sentence. The presence of *él* of the contrastive interpretation adds to the likelihood that Pedro is selected as the understood embedded subject. Finally, overt subjects are compulsory to convey focus since obviously focal stress cannot be assigned to subjects that are phonetically null, as evidenced in (11).

(11) *Nunca pensé que te divorciaras. Fulano me dijo que él nunca te dejaría.*
'I never thought you would get divorced. Fulano told me he would never leave you'.

Besides the uses of overt pronominal subjects detailed in (4)–(11) above, null-subject pronouns are always used in Spanish, as the use of overt subject serves to signal to the inter-locutor a specific pragmatic function. As such, these discourse-dependent uses of overt subjects are regulated in the pragmatics by features of [Topic shift] or [Focus]. Simply knowing that a language allows for the possibility of null subjects is not a sufficient condition to guarantee that they are used correctly. Recall that the possibility of null subjects is a purely syntactic phenom-enon, that is, a language has an independent mechanism in the grammar to identify subjects, like the case of the rich morphology of Spanish, or it does not, like English. Only overt subject pronouns in null-subject languages are specified for [+Topic shift]. This means that null subjects are the unmarked form and that overt subjects obtain only when the discourse sets up/favors a semantic interpretation that involves focus or disambiguation. Figure 1 from Rothman (2008a) below schematizes the linguistic modular components involved in determining the felicitous use of overt subjects in Spanish.
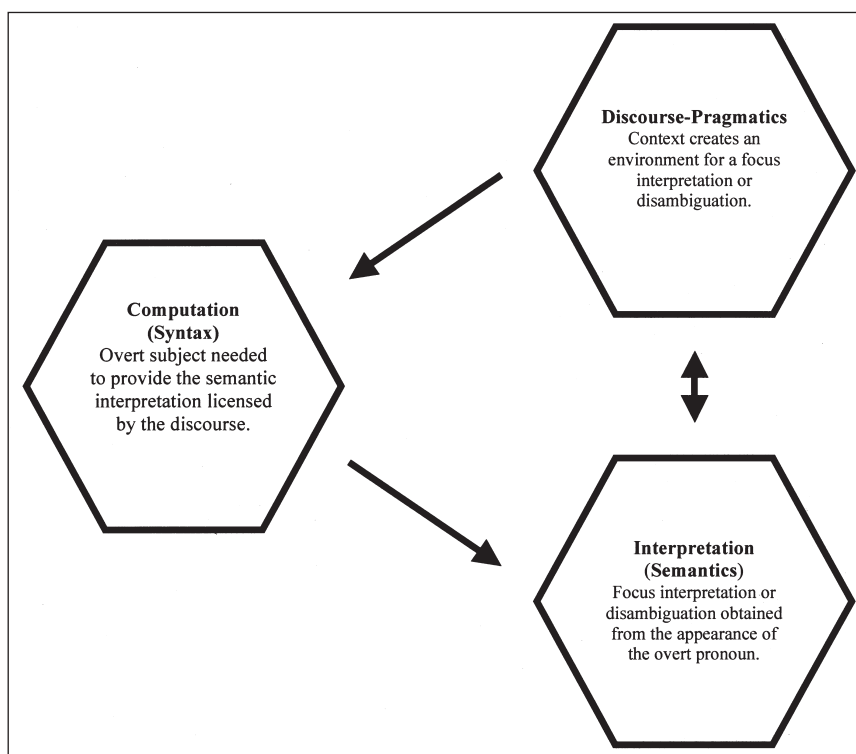

Figure 1. The modular design of the syntax-pragmatics interface and Spanish subjects

As can be appreciated in Figure 1, the discourse context comes to bear on the syntax in that it motivates which type of pronominal subject (overt or null) is chosen from the lexicon to be expressed. In turn, the signal embodied in the subject type, conditioned on the discourse environment, feeds into the semantic component, delimiting possible semantic interpretations in accord with the discourse context (in the following sense: if overt = [+Focus] or [+Topic shift]; if null = [-Focus] or [-Topic shift]).

In light of the subtleties inherent to the distribution of null versus overt subjects in Spanish, it is reasonable to deduce that the learning task of English learners of L2 Spanish is in no way a

simple one. First, they must acquire the syntactic licensing of null subjects, which we suggested is not too difficult given its relationship to ubiquitously available Spanish verbal morphology. Previous research has demonstrated that English learners of L2 Spanish do this by intermediate levels of proficiency, whether or not they are formally instructed on these properties (see Rothman and Iverson 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). Additionally, English learners of L2 Spanish must learn that unlike in English, where subject use solely pertains to syntax, pronominal subjects are regulated by the syntactic and pragmatic components in Spanish. Since this domain is precisely the most difficult aspect of L2 Spanish subject knowledge, and since linguistic theory has already articulated the constraints that regulate the use of pronominal subjects in Spanish, this is a domain in which knowledge of formal linguistic description can directly benefit language instructors and students of Spanish. Parlaying this information to language instructors and students via explicit description that is more linguistically formed yet accessible and appropriate for the intended audience could help them to realize (more quickly) that overt subjects in Spanish are used only in specific pragmatic contexts and, if these conditions are not met, then null subjects are always realized.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

With the micro- and macrogoals of this article in mind, this section discusses implications for teaching pronominal subject distribution in L2 Spanish and, more importantly, highlights larger implications for the integration of linguistic theory, formal language acquisition research, and foreign language instruction. At the microlevel, this article addresses the acquisition of pronominal subjects in L2 Spanish. We discussed what this entails from a linguistic perspective. English speakers of L2 Spanish need to come to learn that Spanish does not need to overtly express subject pronouns in the majority of contexts since the verbal morphology allows for the interlocutor to understand who the subjects are within a given discourse context. Converging on the syntax of this, the ability to license/produce null-subject pronouns is something that previous research has shown to be possible early in the process of L2 acquisition. Since null-subject licensing occurs by the intermediate level of L2 proficiency with or without formal instruction (see Rothman and Iverson 2007c), it seems clear that instructors need not focus on null subjects explicitly (although doing so is perfectly fine). Conversely, much L2 acquisition research has demonstrated that although the syntax is converged upon straightforwardly, the pragmatic conditions for the native-like use of null versus overt subject pronouns is greatly delayed (e.g., Rothman 2007, 2009) and might even prove especially prone to persistent variability even for the most advanced adult learners (e.g., Sorace and Filiaci 2006). Interestingly, most tutored learners are never explicitly taught the discursive restrictions on overt subject use in Spanish despite the fact that they are well documented. I would like to suggest that focusing on the pragmatic contexts for pronominal subject distribution is something that can be done easily in the L2 Spanish classroom and should be done in light of the fact that it proves indefinitely problematic for adult learners. The first step toward doing so is making language instructors aware of the linguistic literature that provides such descriptive analyses of how particular properties are restricted in the target language. The extent to which such pedagogical intervention will have gainful benefits for L2 learners is an empirical question that can only be determined in controlled experiments. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to suppose that such intervention might benefit the L2 learner, at least at the level of performance, and/or reduce the time it takes for convergence of delayed properties such as this.

At the macrolevel, it is important to state clearly that what is proposed here is not limited to the connection linguistic description has for the teaching of pronominal subject distribution in L2 Spanish, but should apply equally to all properties of any target language taught as a foreign language to adult L2 learners. Moreover, it should be pointed out that the property chosen to be investigated here might not be the ideal structure from all perspectives from which to derive

the overall points of the article. Nonetheless, it was consciously chosen to complement the other articles in this special issue. These articles take up other grammatical domains that have equally subtle properties understood by formal linguistic description/explanation, which seem to be largely absent from teaching practices. An anonymous reviewer points out that a more ideal linguistic structure to drive home the importance of the argumentation offered herein that transcends the domain of pronominal subject distribution should conform to the following:

(a) a linguistic phenomenon that we know L2 learners struggle to master (lots of errors and persistent errors)
(b) little (or lack of) focus on this phenomenon in the classroom (either via the teacher or the textbook), be it through formal grammar teaching, focus on form, or interactive communication
(c) little (or no) conscious knowledge of the linguistic phenomenon in question on the part of the instructor

For this reviewer, (c) would be best met for a property such as complex semantic entailments (i.e., syntax-semantic properties) such as those pertaining to *ser* versus *estar* reviewed by VanPatten (in this issue 29–38). Although I do not disagree per se, it should be pointed out that these properties are in fact acquired by advanced learners (e.g., Bruhn de Garavito and Valenzuela 2008) despite the fact that instruction ignores the subtleties and this is not at all limited to the domain of copula selection in L2 Spanish (see Slabakova 2008 for a review of the literature that shows incidental acquisition of very complex and seemingly input-lacking semantic entailments across many L2 languages and properties). Of course, this does not mean that integrating linguistic description/explanation into a practical pedagogy for these properties should not be attempted, but that semantics being universal seems to be less problematic even in the absences of explicit instruction. Despite the fact that teachers, at least at an intuitive level, are aware that null versus overt subjects are not in free variation but rather have a complementary distribution based on the discourse, it is not clear that most teachers are at all aware of the actual use that is reducible to the patterns discussed in section 6 above. What continues to be observable is that L2 learners rarely achieve native-like mastery of the native pronominal distribution, at least from what can be seen in real-time use (see, e.g., Belletti, Bennati, and Sorace 2007; Sorace and Filiaci 2006), despite the fact that teachers might be somewhat aware of it, and this is to be compared with the fact that many studies have shown that learners do come to acquire semantic subtleties that they and their teachers are likely not explicitly aware of. The point to be made is that all domains of grammar as presented in pedagogy can benefit from linguistic insights and will likely improve convergence toward the native target if done effectively. At a minimum, linguistic description should be reflected more faithfully in the pedagogical grammars in textbooks, as these serve as the main source of reference to both teachers and adult learners alike. Ideally, linguists will participate more actively in this endeavor by doing what is being done in this article and others in this special volume (VanPatten in this issue 29–38, Collentine in this issue 39–51), that is, providing theoretical pedagogues, textbook authors, language instructors, and even adult L2 learners with meaningful interpretations of theoretical linguistic description for more general consumption. The articles in this special issue are merely a step in this direction, and space limitations do not allow us to demonstrate with precision how this might be accomplished. I look forward to the space a monograph provides to continue in a longer format this dialogue, develop these points, and demonstrate across a multitude of linguistic properties how this all might be accomplished successfully.

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as the basis for this paper. Any and all remaining errors are my own. I am particularly grateful to the Obermann Center for Advanced Studies where I enjoyed an in-residence grant period while I wrote this article.

NOTES

[1]By the term *formal*, I mean theoretical linguists who study the formal (syntactic, semantic, phonological, etc.) properties of language in an abstract way that accounts explanatorily for how mental computation is designed and computed.

[2]Not all pedagogical rules are inaccurate of course, but insofar as they are based on implicit and explicit comparisons to the L1 of the target audience they are inherently different from truly linguistic rules of a native grammar. A reviewer suggests that beginning textbooks cannot offer all of the rules since students "will most probably not attend to it" and "are definitely not linguistically mature (enough) for certain grammatical information." These are empirical questions that are outside the scope of this article. What research like Collentine (1995) has shown, for example, is that introducing the subjunctive before students are able to parse and produce subordinate clauses is perhaps futile since subordination is a prerequisite of subjunctive modality; however, this does not necessarily mean that students before the intermediate/advanced level are linguistically immature.

[3]In an experiment with grammatical aspect selection (preterit vs. imperfect) between very advanced classroom learners and naturalistic learners of L2 Spanish, Rothman (2008b) demonstrates that only the classroom learners make errors and only in places that correspond to grammatical rules of the overgeneralization type discussed herein. He offers the competing systems hypothesis to explain this observed behavior.

[4]I put aside here without further discussion the inherent comparative fallacy (see Bley-Vroman 1983) of this standard comparison.

[5]I knowingly put aside counterexamples for these languages under the assumption that such examples in these languages can be explained under analyses of topic-drop and diary-drop as opposed to the syntactic licensing of an empty category, *pro*.

[6]This is under the assumption that parameter resetting is possible and convergence in the realm of syntax-pragmatics interface properties is possible.

[7]An anonymous reviewer suggested that upper-level composition courses and the like do teach this, at least at his/her institution. I submit that this is not the typical case at all institutions; in fact, it might be the exception. As a final aside, even if the distribution is introduced in a way, it is not enough to simply go over some of the relevant restrictions, like disjoint reference, in the absence of others, such as focus, contrastivity, and more, which are likely not taught.

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