On the interpretation of null arguments in L2 Japanese by German Speakers

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This paper reports experimental data, showing that L1 German learners of L2 Japanese permit null arguments (NAs) in their L2. This result appears to show that they have "unlearned" the L1 features, under the assumption that availability of Japanese NAs correlates with an absence of φ-features (Saito 2007). Nevertheless, we argue that NAs to which our subjects have access are instances of German topic drop and therefore, our subjects must have retained L1 φ-features.

Oku (1998) shows convincingly that Japanese NAs, assumed widely to be *pro* (Kuroda 1965), have an interpretation which cannot be explained under their *pro*-based analysis. Consider the contrast between (1b) and (2b):

(1) a. Bear wiped his own car.
    b. *Penguin also wiped [e].

(2) a. Kuma-wa   jibun-no   kuruma-o   fuita.
      Bear -Top   self -GEN car   -ACC wiped.
   b. Pengin-mo [e] fuita.
     Penguin also   wiped
     (i) [e]= Bear's car (strict)
     (ii) [e] = Penguin's car (sloppy)

While (1b) is merely ungrammatical, (2b) is acceptable; [e] can be interpreted as the bear's car (strict reading) or the penguin's car (sloppy reading). Oku (1998) states that [e] in (2b) is a result of a copying operation in Japanese, dubbed 'Argument Ellipsis' (AE). Oku suggests that *jibun-no kuruma-o* (=his own car) in (2a) has been copied onto [e] in (2b) at LF. Saito (2007) developed Oku's (1998) copy analysis; given Activation Condition (Chomsky, 2000, 2008), requiring an unvalued uninterpretable Case feature in φ-feature agreement under Agree, Saito proposes that availability of AE correlates with an absence of φ-features. If the copying operation under consideration took place in (1b), the DP *his own car* without any unvalued uninterpretable Case feature would be copied onto [e] (Chomsky 2000, 2008). Consequently, this object DP would not be able to Agree with *v* in (1b) again, and the uninterpretable φ-features of *v* remain unvalued, explaining the ungrammaticality of (1b). Conversely, Activation Condition is irrelevant for Japanese AE as it does not have uninterpretable φ-features (Kuroda 1988), making no Agree relation necessary between *v* and the copied DP in (2b), resulting in the grammaticality of (2b). In short, Saito's AE analysis supports that absence of φ-feature agreement counts as a parameter to explain the grammar of Japanese language (Saito, 2013).

In light of the above theoretical developments, the difference in feature compositions between L1 and L2 raises a critical question in second language acquisition research: can L2 learners whose L1 has φ-feature agreement acquire L2 without φ-feature agreement? Yamada & Miyamoto (Y&M) (2017) investigated the interpretation of NAs in L2 Japanese of native speakers of European *non-pro-drop* languages (Euro-JFL). They found that the advanced Euro-JFL learners rejected the sloppy reading with NAs. This indicates that the learners cannot acquire AE as they have difficulty in "unlearning" L1 φ-features in their L2 interlanguage grammar.

By examining the acquisition of AE through data from German L1 speakers learning L2 Japanese

(G-JFLs), the current study tests the validity of results from Y&M (2017). We predict that Japanese AE would not be available in the L2, since German has φ-features and thus, G-JFLs could not eliminate them. To explore this prediction, we, following Y&M (2017), adopted a Truth-Value Judgment Task (TVJT).

Contrary to our expectation, we found that G-JFLs allowed NAs in both subject and object positions to have sloppy reading (77.0% and 65.4% of the time each).

Table 1: Acceptance rates- null subject and null object

Subject		Null subject		Null object	
		Sloppy	Strict	Sloppy	Strict
G–JFLs	(n=13)	77.0%	88.5%	65.4%	88.5%

Under the assumption that Y&M's (2017) finding is accurate, the current subjects must have retained L1 φ-features. Consequently, we argue that the AE-like NAs in question are due to L1 transfer: they are instances of German topic drop. Trutkowski (2016) claims that German topic drop (nonverbatim topic drop = NVTD in his term) allows sloppy reading in cases in which an NA with a nominative or accusative case refers to an antecedent with a structural case as well. Importantly, the TVJT used in the current study tested G-JFLs' interpretation of NAs in exactly the same environment in which NVTD occurs. Accordingly, the subjects likely permitted sloppy reading with AE-like NAs in their L2 Japanese.

The current study suggests that L1 German learners of L2 Japanese permit AE-like NAs, making use of German topic drop. To the extent that φ-feature agreement is required for German topics, our result further shows that they must have retained L1 φ-features, consistent with Y&M (2017).

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