EARLY SUBJECTS IN CHILD ROMANIAN: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: This paper documents the use of early subjects in one longitudinal corpus of monolingual Romanian. The focus is on the null/overt and preverbal/postverbal subject alternation, as well as on pragmatic adequacy. In accordance with previous studies, the results indicate that the syntax of subjects is acquired early. Overt and null subjects are attested from the first available transcript (age 2;1). Overt subjects are correctly placed in both pre- and post-verbal position. The use of null and overt subjects reveals early sensitivity to discourse-pragmatic constraints. The corpus contains, however, several 1st and 2nd person pronominal subjects which are pragmatically infelicitous. This is interpreted as a delay in discourse-pragmatic knowledge of subject use.

Keywords: null subjects, overt subjects, child Romanian, *pro*-drop

1. Introduction

According to the acquisition literature on early subjects, children who are acquiring an Infl-licensed null subject language set the *pro*-drop parameter correctly very early. Some studies argue that the syntax of the early subjects is target-like practically from the onset of acquisition (Aguado-Orea and Pine 2002, Bel 2003). This view is rooted in the empirical fact that in null subject languages referential null subjects are licit; therefore, at least at first sight, the early null subjects in child grammar do not violate the value of the *pro*-drop parameter. Other studies, however, identify an early stage when the parameter has not been set yet and when children produce exclusively null subjects (Bates 1976, Grinstead 1998, 2000, 2004, Villa-Garcia 2013).

The availability of both null and overt subjects, however, does not necessarily show that the subjects are used in an adult-like way from the onset of language acquisition. The use of null and overt subjects is constrained by discourse information factors. For example, an overt subject is generally pragmatically infelicitous when it is not associated with topic shift. On the other hand, in contexts in which there is a switch in reference, a null subject would be pragmatically odd. Austin et al. (1997) offer data from child Spanish and child English which show that the *pro*-drop parameter is set very early. What is delayed is discourse-pragmatic knowledge of subject use.

The aim of this paper[1] is to document the early use of subjects in child Romanian, an Infl-licensed null subject language. The first question which I address is whether Romanian children know the syntax of subjects from the onset of acquisition, as previously argued for other *pro*-drop languages, or whether they go through a non-target "no overt subject stage", as argued for Spanish and Catalan by Grinstead (1998, 2000, 2004) and for Italian by Bates (1976). The second question targets the use of null and overt subjects in terms of discourse-pragmatics.

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The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 summarizes the main findings reported in previous studies on the early use of subjects in *pro*-drop languages, with a focus on those which use longitudinal data. The main properties of subjects in Romanian are discussed in Section 3. Section 4 presents the study on early subjects and parameter setting in child Romanian. I analyze the use of early null and overt subjects in naturalistic data coming from one longitudinal corpus of child Romanian (age range 2;1–3;1). The link between verb movement and the *pro*-drop parameter is also examined. The results are compared to child directed speech, to data reported for child Romanian in previous studies (Avram and Coene 2008, 2010) as well as to those reported for other null subject languages. The main findings are summarized in Section 5.

2. Previous acquisition studies on early subjects in null subject languages

It has been commonly assumed in the literature that children who are acquiring a null subject language set the value of the *pro*-drop parameter very early. Various studies showed that the rate of null subjects used by these children is similar to the one used by adults (Lorusso, Caprin and Guasti 2004 for Italian, Bel 2003 and Cabre Sans and Gavarró 2007 for Catalan, Valian and Eisenberg 1996 for Portuguese, Bel 2003 for Spanish). During the early stages, the children who are acquiring a *pro*-drop language use a higher rate of null subjects than the children acquiring a non *pro*-drop language. For example, the Spanish and the Catalan children in Bel's (2003) study use approximately 67% null subjects, whereas the rate is much lower (15%-33%) with the English-speaking children in Austin et al.'s (1997) study. The same picture emerges from Valian (1991). Cross-sectional data from 21 American children and 5 Italian children (age range 1;8 – 2;5) show that the children who are acquiring English, a non *pro*-drop language, use more overt subjects than their Italian peers, who are acquiring a *pro*-drop language. At an MLU lower than 2, the English-speaking children use 69% overt subjects, whereas the Italian children only 30%.

Both null and overt subjects are attested from the earliest transcripts available. Italian children, for example, use overt subjects very early and they properly distinguish between the contexts which require null and overt subjects (see Belletti and Guasti 2015 for an overview). Null subjects are attested in root and in non-root contexts. The early overt subjects are correctly placed in pre- and in post-verbal position.

At the same time, many studies report some developmental changes which indicate that children acquire the properties of subject use gradually. Some studies mention an increase in the use of overt subjects, which is parallel to an increase in MLU. Cabre Sans and Gavarró (2007) show that during the stage when the MLU is lower than 2.5, Catalan-speaking children produce a significantly higher proportion of null subjects. Lorusso, Caprin and Guasti (2005) also notice that Italian-speaking children use overt subjects from the very early stages, but there is an increase in overt subject use parallel to an increase in MLU. Austin et al. (1997) report a decrease in the use of null subjects for child Spanish (at age 1;02 – 2;10, MLU range 1.25 – 4.33). The rate of null subjects may be as high as 100% in some of the corpora during an early stage. Grinstead (1998, 2000, 2004), on the basis of similar findings from child Spanish and Catalan, argues that

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children actually go through a "no overt subject" stage when they use exclusively null subjects. The onset of overt subject use correlates with the adult-like use of tense and agreement morphology. Further evidence in favour of a "no overt subject" stage in child Spanish is provided by Villa-Garcia (2013)[2]. The data come from four longitudinal corpora of Spanish (three of European Spanish and one of Carribean Spanish). Null subjects emerge significantly earlier than overt subjects. Spanish children go through an early stage when they do not use overt subjects with inflected verbs. Bates (1976) offers similar data for Italian. The two Italian-speaking children whose subjects she investigated go through a "no overt subject" stage (at an MLU 1.7 – 2.3) (unlike the findings in Serratrice 2005).

Several studies mention that the increase in the proportion of overt subjects is actually determined by an increase in the use of overt pronominal subjects. For Spanish, Austin et al. (1997) mention a high rate of 1st person pronouns: 70% of all overt personal pronominal subjects. Some of these overt pronouns are not used in a pragmatically appropriate way. Pragmatically illicit null subjects (whose proportion can be as high as 68%) are also found (Austin et al. 1997).

Such findings indicate that children acquire the syntax of subjects early across languages. But in spite of the fact that they are sensitive to the discourse conditions on null vs. overt subject use early, full knowledge of these conditions and the integration of syntax and pragmatics are delayed. Serratrice (2005) investigated the use of subjects in child speech from a pragmatic perspective, focusing on whether children are sensitive to the pragmatic constraints on the use of null and overt subjects. Her examination of subjects in six longitudinal corpora of Italian children (age range 1;7 – 3;3) reveals the absence of a "no overt subject" stage. Overt subjects are uttested from the earliest available recording sessions. But, similarly to what was reported in other studies on the acquisition of subjects in *pro*-drop languages, she also reports an increase in overt subject use parallel to an increase in MLU. This increase is due to an increase in the use of personal pronouns as the MLU gets higher. And similarly to what has been reported for child Spanish (Austin et al. 1997), 1st person pronominal subjects are the most frequently attested. Her data also show that Italian-speaking children are sensitive to the pragmatic conditions on null and overt subject use (informativeness, disambiguation, person) as early as MLU 2. They use subjects in a pragmatically felicitous way. But "this sensitivity becomes more fine-tuned over time" (Serratrice 2005: 457).

The findings for Romanian reported in the few previous studies (Avram and Coene 2008, 2010) offer a picture which is similar to the one attested for other languages. Avram and Coene (2010) use data from two longitudinal corpora of monolingual Romanian (age range 1;5 – 2;11) which show that overt subjects emerge very early, before age 2;0, at an MLU lower than 2. Three stages in the acquisition route of subjects in child Romanian are identified:

> Stage I: the "no overt subject" stage, attested only in the B. corpus (1;5 – 1;9, MLU: 1.067 – 1.350);

[2] But see Aguado-Orea and Pine (2002) for arguments against a "no overt subject" stage in Spanish.

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> Stage II (B. 1;10 – 2;0 and A. 1;9 – 2;2), delimited by the emergence of the first overt subject;
>
> Stage III (after age 2;0 in the B. corpus and after age 2;2 in the A. corpus) delimited by the first attested context in which a null subject was found in an embedded clause.

According to their study, there might be evidence in favour of the "no overt subject" stage in child Romanian, in line with Grinstead (1998, 2000, 2004). In one of the corpora, in the earliest 10 files (representing 10 hours of transcribed conversations between the child and a caretaker), between age 1;5 – 1;9, no overt subject was attested. Even though this supports findings from other null subject languages (Bates 1976, Grinstead 2000, Grinstead and Spinner 2009), the authors themselves state that the evidence is weak, given the fact that the stage is attested in only one longitudinal corpus and that the number of verbal utterances associated with this stage is very low (only 23). On the other hand, the qualitative analysis of the early overt subjects provides further evidence that these are not adult-like from the onset. During the first two stages, the inventory of overt subjects includes only proper names, demonstratives, and situation-bound lexical DPs (referentially *no-choice* DPs). This restrictive inventory is taken as an indicator of a deficient Person system and it is correlated with a deficient C-domain, within which the force-finiteness system is not yet activated. At the core of Avram and Coene's (2010) analysis lies the idea that the setting of the *pro*-drop parameter depends on the valuation of the Person feature and the activation of the C-domain.

According to these authors, the starting point of the third stage is marked by the emergence of the first null subject in a context in which null subjects are not attested in child non null subject languages: finite embedded clauses. The activation of the C-system coincides with the first null subjects in embedded contexts (attested at 2;1 in the B. corpus and at 2;3 in the A. corpus) and with a change in the range of overt subjects. Pre- and post-verbal subjects are first attested early, concurrently, and they are correctly placed. Romanian children use post-verbal subjects with all types of predicates, not exclusively with unaccusatives, as attested in non *pro*-drop languages, such as English (Pierce 1992).

Another important developmental change in the use of overt subjects during the third stage is the increase in the use of pronominal subjects, as reported for other null subject languages (Serratrice 2005, Valian and Eisenberg 1996). Most of the pronominal subjects are 1st and 2nd person pronouns, used as contrastive focus or to signal change of topic. Overt 3rd person pronominal subjects are much less frequently encountered. The increase in pronominal subject use (but only 1st and 2nd person) correlates with a decrease in the use of demonstratives as subjects. This change signals, according to the authors, that subjects begin to be used target-like, both grammatically and pragmatically.

Avram and Coene (2008, 2010) rely on the analysis of data from only two longitudinal corpora. Extending the investigation to a new corpus can contribute to the overall picture of the use of early subjects in child Romanian.

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3. Null and overt subjects in Romanian

Romanian is a VSO language (Dobrovie-Sorin 1994), which evinces all the core properties of Infl-licensed null subject languages. The 1st and the 2nd persons are distinctly marked from the 3rd person in both the singular and the plural on the finite verb, a property which has been taken as central for the licensing of null subjects in *pro*-drop languages in general (Rizzi 1982) and also in Romanian (see, for example, Avram and Coene 2008).

Romanian allows referential null subjects, both in root and in embedded clauses, as illustrated in (1) below:

(1) Mi- a spus că a alergat mult ieri.
me has told that has run much yesterday
'He told me that he ran a lot yesterday.'

But, unlike other *pro*-drop languages, Romanian allows overt Nominative subjects in non-finite clauses as well (e.g. with infinitives and gerunds, Avram 2003):

(2) a. Înainte de a pleca **tu** …
before of INF leave you
'Before you leave…'
b. Venind **el** pe drum …
come-GER he on road
'While he was coming on the road...'

Romanian lacks overt expletives with weather verbs and with impersonal constructions:

(3) a. Ninge.
snow-3.SG
'It is snowing.'
b. E important că Ion a obţinut un premiu.
is important that Ion has got a prize
'It is important that Ion got a prize.'

Like all the other Infl-licensed null subject languages, Romanian, a verb movement language, in which both lexical and functional verbs move overtly to Inflection, allows overt subjects to occur both pre- and post-verbally:

(4) a. **Maria** a sosit.
Maria has arrived
b. A venit **Maria**.
has arrived Maria
'Maria arrived.'

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The vast majority of studies place post-verbal subjects inside the VP (Dobrovie-Sorin 1994, Avram 1992, 1999, Motapanyane 1997, Isac 1999, Alboiu 2002). For the pre-verbal subject, there are several analyses. In the present study, I adopt the more standard view according to which the pre-verbal subject occurs in a non-argumental position in the left periphery of the clause (see Avram 1992, 1999), in line with many studies on subjects in *pro*-drop languages (see e.g. Barbosa 2001 for Spanish, Alexiadou 1994 for Greek). I also assume that the subject moves to this position only to check a topic feature (Avram 1992). The EPP feature is checked by verb movement to Inflection. The subject DP gets Nominative case via Agree, in first Merge position, i.e. the DP subject does not have to move out of the vP/VP in order to be assigned Nominative case (Alboiu 2002).

Generally, in *pro*-drop languages, null pronominal subjects signal topic continuity and overt pronoun subjects signal topic shift or contrastive focus; overt pronoun subjects have the feature [+switch reference]. This property, however, is subject to cross-linguistic variation. In Italian, [+switch reference] is strong with overt pronoun subjects, which cannot be used in topic continuity contexts. In Spanish, on the other hand, [+switch reference] is weaker, which makes overt pronoun subjects more compatible in topic continuity contexts (Filiaci 2010). Romanian overt pronoun subjects can appear with topic continuity (Zafiu 2008: 760); the [+switch reference] feature is weak(er) in this language (Teodorescu 2017). In (5) below *not* using an overt pronominal subject would be pragmatically odd.

(5) Cărtărescu a revoluţionat romanul românesc contemporan.
Cărtărescu has revolutionized novel-the Romanian contemporary
?(El) a scris mai multe romane.
he has written more many novels.
'Cărtărescu has revolutionized the contemporary Romanian novel. **He** wrote several novels.'

(from Teodorescu 2017)

The strong pronominal form, the overt one, is used without implying any contrast. It does not indicate topic shift or contrastive focus, but topic continuity, behaving like "weak" pronouns. Some overt pronominal subjects in null subject languages can behave like weak pronouns, being interpreted as *pro* (see Frascarelli 2017).

Languages may have pronominal systems with two series of overt personal pronouns: strong (e.g. *lui/lei* in Italian) and weak (e.g. *egli*/*ella*) (Cardinaletti and Starke 1999). Romanian has a pronominal system with a similar distinction (Giurgea 2010); overt pronominal subjects have hybrid behaviour: they can be both weak and strong pronouns; they are used both in topic shift and in topic continuity contexts. This may result in lack of robust cue for language acquisition, which might delay the learning of the constraints on overt pronominal subjects.

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4. Early subjects in child Romanian

4.1 Aim and assumptions

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the general picture of the acquisition of subject use in Romanian on the basis of data coming from one new corpus. The analysis is based on naturalistic speech from a longitudinal corpus of monolingual Romanian, Cristina (age range 2;1 – 3;1).

I start from the assumption that one can argue in favour of early positive setting of the *pro*-drop parameter if the following conditions obtain: (i) both null and overt subjects are attested and their quantitative analysis reveals that their proportion is relatively similar to the one in child directed speech; (ii) no trade-off between null subjects and overt pronominal subjects is found in the corpus; (iii) overt subjects are placed in both pre- and post-verbal position and the position which they occupy is the one required in the target grammar; (iv) null subjects are attested in non root contexts.

4.2 Corpus

The longitudinal corpus contains 12 audio recordings of spontaneous interactions between Cristina, a monolingual Romanian girl, and a caretaker, usually her grandmother. Occasionally her 6-year-old brother is also present. Cristina is from Slatina, a city in the south of Romania. She is the second child in a middle class family. She spends a lot of time with her grandmother, who recorded their spontaneous interactions. The data were collected monthly for a period of 12 months at the child's home. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes. For the present study, the first 20-25 minutes of each session were transcribed. The recordings cover the period 2;1 – 3;1 and include situations of free interaction. The data are summarized in Table 1:

Table 1. The longitudinal corpus

Child	Age	MLU	No. of files	No. of verbal utterances
C.	2;1 – 3;1	2.791–3.935	12	2,024

The subjects in child speech are compared to those in child directed speech. The adult data are summarized in Table 2:

Table 2. Child directed speech in the longitudinal corpus

No. of files	No. of verbal utterances used in the analysis
12	1,656

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4.3 Method

All the child verbal utterances were extracted. Formulaic uses, imitations and self-repetitions, songs and rhymes as well as imperative sentences were excluded. The extracted verbal utterances were coded for (i) overt and (ii) null subject. The overt subjects were coded as (i) pre-verbal and (ii) post-verbal, and then according to their category: (i) proper noun; (ii) demonstrative; (iii) personal pronoun (1st, 2nd and 3rd person); (iv) definite lexical DP; (v) indefinite lexical DP. A classification of these utterances according to the class the verb belonged to (transitive, unergative, unaccusative) was also made.

All the verbal forms were coded as (i) finite and (ii) non-finite. The finite forms were further coded for person, number and tense marking.

Besides the comparison with child directed speech, an important part in the analysis is played by the comparison with data reported for other languages. Comparative analysis can shed light both on the Romanian data, which can thus be incorporated in the larger picture of early subjects in child language, as well as on the analysis of previously reported findings.

4.4 Results and discussion

4.4.1 Null and overt subjects

The first overt subjects are attested in the first transcript, at age 2;1, both in pre-verbal and in post-verbal position:

(6) a. **Zane** a mâncat la grădiniță.
Zane has eaten at kindergarten
'Zane ate at kindergarten.'

b. Mă aşteaptă **tataie Joni**.
me waits Grandpa Joni
'Grandpa Joni is waiting for me.'

(Cristina 2;1)

Sentences with null subjects, as expected, are also attested:

(7) a. Buni, vreau ciocolată.
Grandma want chocolate
'Grandma, I want some chocolate. '

(Cristina 2;1)

b. Aicea mă joc cu Zane.
here REFL play with Zane
'I am playing here with Zane.'

(Cristina 2;2)

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The comparison of the proportion of early null and overt subjects in child speech and in child directed speech (CDS) reveals that overall they are similar (see Table 3 for a summary of the data and Annex 1 for an analysis of the data per file).

Table 3. Overt vs. null subjects in child speech and in CDS in Romanian

	No. of verbal utterances	Overt subjects	Null subjects
Child speech	2,024	33.8% (= 684)	66.2% (= 1340)
CDS	1,656	27.5% (= 456)	72.5% (= 1200)

In this respect, the Romanian data are similar to those reported for other null subject languages, as can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Overt vs. null subjects in child speech and CDS in null subject languages

Language	Longitudinal study	Null subjects in child speech	Null subjects in CDS
Italian	Lorusso, Caprin and Guasti (2004)	74%	75%
Catalan	Cabre Sans and Gavarró (2007)	69%	62%
	Bel (2003)	67.7%	62%
Spanish	Bel (2003)	67.3%	60% - 80%
Portuguese	Valian and Eisenberg (1996)	72%	76%
Romanian		**66.2%**	**72.5%**

The rate of overt and null subjects is relatively constant across files, i.e. the level of *pro*-drop is constant. Avram and Coene (2010) report a slight increase in the use of overt subjects in child Romanian in the two longitudinal corpora which they examined. The analysis of the data in the Cristina corpus offers a relatively similar picture. The trendlines in Figure 1 indicate a slight decrease in the use of null subjects and a slight increase in the use of overt subjects across files. This is similar to what was found in other *pro*-drop languages (see e.g. for Italian, Bates 1976, Serratrice 2005, and for Portuguese, Valian and Eisenberg 1996).

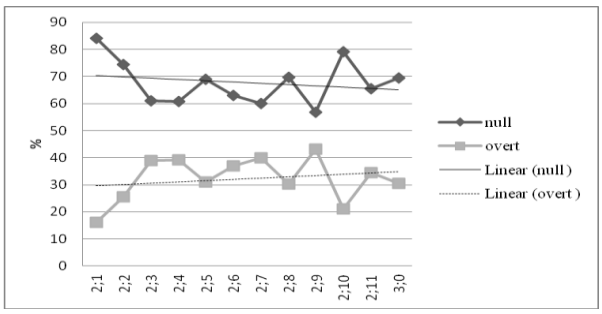


Figure 1. Cristina: The use of null and overt subjects across files

The percentage of overt subjects in CDS, on the other hand, undergoes a slight decrease over time, as indicated by the trendline in Figure 2:

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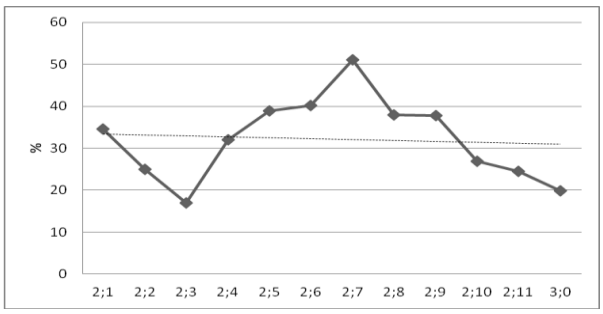


Figure 2. CDS: The use of overt subjects across files

Summing up the data presented so far, in the Cristina corpus both null and overt subjects are attested very early. Given the age and the MLU of the first available recording in the corpus, the data are not informative with respect to a possible "no overt subject" stage. In Avram and Coene (2010), a "no overt subject" stage was attested, but only in one corpus, where the recordings had begun before age 2;0. Similarly, for child Spanish and child Italian, a "no overt subject" stage is attested only in those corpora which include very early recordings (Bates 1976 *vs.* Serratrice 2005). The data coming from the Cristina corpus provide strong evidence that at age 2;1 and an MLU of 2.791, overt subjects are already attested, and they occur both pre- and post-verbally.

The proportion of null and overt subjects in child speech remains relatively constant across files. In particular, the proportion of null subjects is consistently high and similar to the one in CDS. This is different from the data reported in previous studies. This difference, however, may be due to the fact that the recordings for this corpus began relatively late, at 2;1.

4.4.2 Early post-verbal subjects

An analysis of the 12 transcripts was conducted in order to investigate the proportion of pre- and post-verbal subjects. As already mentioned in the previous section, Cristina uses both pre- and post-verbal subjects from the first available recording, at age 2;1. The overall results are given in Table 5:

Table 5. Pre- and post-verbal subjects in child and CDS

	Overt subjects	Post-verbal subjects	Pre-verbal subjects
Child speech	684	46.4% (n = 287)	53.6% (n = 397)
CDS	456	47.4 % (n = 216)	52.6% (n = 240)

The comparison of the ratio in child speech and in CDS reveals a clear similarity. For child speech, the data also show that there is no overall preference for non-moved subjects left *in situ*, in post-verbal position. At first sight, the trendline in Figure 3 indicates a slight preference for Merge over Move during the early stage, with more *in situ* subjects. This conclusion, however, must be taken with a grain of salt. Firstly, placing the subject in pre- and post-verbal position is determined by discourse pragmatic factors

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which might have influenced these results. Secondly, a similar trendline can be seen in Figure 4, which illustrates the use of post-verbal subjects in CDS.

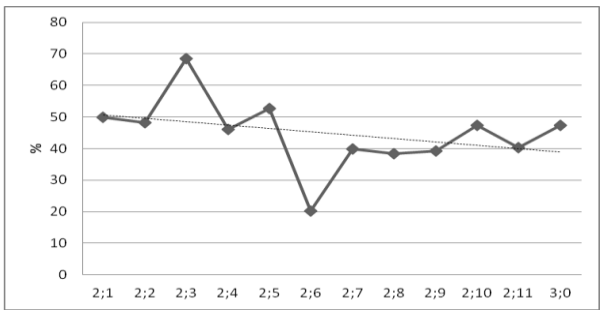


Figure 3. Cristina: the use of post-verbal subjects across files

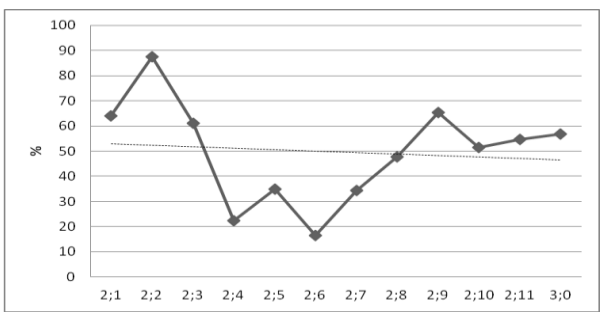


Figure 4. CDS: the use of post-verbal subjects across files

The mere presence of both null and overt, of pre- and post-verbal subjects does not necessarily show that the *pro*-drop parameter has been already set. In Romanian, the availability of overt subjects in post-verbal position directly reflects verb movement. As already mentioned, the first post-verbal subject in the Cristina corpus is attested in the first transcript, at age 2;1. As post-verbal subjects emerge in the context of verb movement, they provide convincing evidence that verb movement is available at this early stage, as argued in the literature for verb movement across languages (see e.g. Wexler 1998). Further evidence that the post-verbal subjects signal verb movement comes from the analysis of subjects and verb classes. Even though a significant number of post-verbal subjects occur with unaccusative verbs (as in example 8), they are not restricted to this context. They are attested with unergative (9a) and transitive (9b) verbs as well from the earliest available transcripts.

(8) a. Buni, s- a ridicat ăsta….
Grandma REFL has stood up this
'Grandma, this one stood up.'

(Cristina 2;1)

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b. A căzut scaunul!
has fallen chair-the
'The chair has fallen down.'
(Cristina 2;2)

(9) a. Vine[3] baba pe salon.
comes old woman-the on hospital ward
'The old woman is coming in the hospital ward.'
(Cristina 2;3)

b. Mă aşteaptă tataie Joni!
me waits Grandpa Joni
'Grandpa Joni is waiting for me.'
(Cristina 2;1)

The availability of post-verbal subjects (not restricted to unaccusatives) provides evidence that there is verb movement in the early grammar. But they do not straightforwardly indicate a positive setting of the *pro*-drop parameter. Post-verbal subjects have been attested in the acquisition of non *pro*-drop languages as well (e.g. French: Friedemann 2000, Dutch: Haegeman 1995). For French, in some studies, they have been analyzed as VP-internal subjects (either true left-branching VP-internal subjects, Deprez and Pierce 1993, or right-branching VP-internal subjects, Friedemann 2000). According to other studies, however, they are right-dislocated subjects (Ferdinand 1996, Labelle and Valois 1996). Labelle and Valois (1996) point out that one needs to find instances of VSO structures in order to provide crucial evidence that the early post-verbal subjects occur VP-internally. By analogy, it is not implausible to assume that the early post-verbal subjects in Romanian might be different from the ones in the adult grammar. Avram and Coene (2010) offer data which show that, indeed, in Romanian, VSO structures are attested early in the corpora which they investigated (at age 2;0). VSO structures are also attested in the Cristina corpus:

(10) a. A făcut mami unghiile.
has done mummy nails-the
'Mummy has painted (my) nails.'
(Cristina 2;2)

b. Vreau şi eu cărbune!
want and I charcoal
'I want charcoal too!'
(Cristina 2;3)

Such data provide evidence that in child Romanian the early post-verbal subjects occur VP-internally; they are not right-dislocated constituents. In Romanian, right-dislocated subjects are generally associated with old information; therefore, indefinite DPs do not undergo right-dislocation (11a). But non-dislocated post-verbal subjects can be indefinite DPs (11b):

[3] In Dragomirescu (2010) *a veni* 'to come' with animate subjects is analyzed as an unergative.

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(11) a. *A citit un copil.
has read a child
'A child read.'
b. Venea o moară pe Siret.
came a mill on Siret
'A mill was coming on Siret.'

Though the vast majority of early overt subjects in the corpus are proper names, demonstratives and definite lexical DPs (see also Avram and Coene 2008, 2010 for a similar conclusion on the basis of data coming from other longitudinal corpora), post-verbal indefinites, which are first attested at 2;6, though rare, are also found as subjects:

(12) a. Era o muscă acolo.
was a fly there
'There was a fly there.'
(Cristina 2;6)
b. Aici e apă.
here is water
'There is water here.'
(Cristina 2;4)

This reinforces the conclusion that post-verbal subjects in child Romanian do not obey the constraints of right-dislocated subjects. The analysis of the audio recordings also reveals that these subjects do not show the intonation pattern of dislocated constituents either. We can therefore safely conclude that the early post-verbal subjects occur VP-internally.

4.4.3 Early pre-verbal subjects

As shown earlier, pre-verbal subjects are attested from the first available transcript. In Romanian, pre-verbal subjects have been argued to occupy an A-bar position. Several studies assume that this position is in the left-periphery of the clause. Therefore, for a pre-verbal subject in child language to occur in the C-domain, the latter has to be activated. Grinstead and Spinner (2009), for example, offer data that in child Spanish overt pre-verbal subjects, fronted objects and *wh*-questions emerge concurrently.

The examination of the data in the Cristina corpus reveals that overt pre-verbal subjects and *wh*-questions are present from the first available transcript (at 2;1) and continue to be attested in the following transcripts:

(13) a. Cine e?
who is
'Who is it?'
(Cristina 2;1)

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b. Ce cheamă maşina?
what calls car-the
'What is the car calling?'
(Cristina 2;2)

c. Ce zice băiatul?
what says boy-the
'What is the boy saying?'
(Cristina 2;4)

In Romanian, pre-verbal accusative clitics move to an FP projection (Uriagereka 1995) in the left periphery of the clause (Avram and Coene 2009). Pre-verbal accusative clitics are found in the first transcript, at 2;1. This indicates that movement to the left periphery is already part of the system at this age and that the C-domain is active. For pre-verbal subjects, the co-occurrence with other constituents analyzed as occupying a position in the left periphery offers indirect evidence that these early subjects have the properties which they have in the adult grammar.

Further support that these pre-verbal subjects occur in a position in the left periphery of the clause comes from those utterances with the word order DP subject XP Verb, for example Subject pronominal clitic (cluster) Verb (remember that clitics are assumed to move to the FP position in the left periphery).

(14) a. Eu mă joc cu Zane.
I REFL play with Zane
'I am playing with Zane.'
(Cristina 2;3)

b. Buni mi- a dat suc.
Grandma me has given juice
'Grandma gave me juice.'
(Cristina 2;7)

Utterances in which pre-verbal material intervenes between the subject and the verb are also attested, indicating that pre-verbal subjects occur in a higher projection in the left periphery:

(15) a. Eu măcar o să cos unghiile.
I at last AUX SUBJ sew nails-the
'At least I will sew the nails.'
(Cristina 2;5)

b. Zane ca o pisică e.
Zane as a cat is
'Zane is like a cat.'
(Cristina 2;7)

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4.4.4 Early subjects in non root contexts

One important difference between the null subjects attested in the early speech of the children acquiring a non *pro*-drop language and the speech of the children acquiring a *pro*-drop language is related to the contexts in which these subjects are used. In non *pro*-drop languages, null subjects are attested only in root contexts. Most acquisition studies look at *wh*-questions and null subjects in embedded clauses and argue that null subjects are never found in these contexts in the speech of children acquiring a non *pro*-drop language. But null subjects have been reported for child non *pro*-drop languages in *wh*-questions (see Avram 2002 for an overview). This is why the availability of null subjects in embedded contexts would represent more solid evidence that the *pro*-drop parameter has been positively set. The examination of the early subjects in the Romanian corpus reveals that null subjects in embedded clauses are already used at age 2;2.

(16) a. Şi poţi să te joci cu ea.
and can SUBJ REFL play with her
'And you can play with her.'
b. N- ai voie acolo, că te muşcă.
no have permission there because you bites
'You are not allowed in there because it will bite you.'
(Cristina 2;2)

The Romanian data provide convincing evidence in favour of the very early reading of the *pro*-drop parameter.

4.4.5 On the range of early overt subjects

Avram and Coene (2008, 2010) notice that during the early stages Romanian children do not use all the possible DP types in subject position. The early subjects have situation-bound reference (also reported for child Dutch and child French, van Kampen 2006). The inventory includes demonstratives, proper names and, more rarely, definite DPs. It is only after 2;4 – 2;5 that indefinite DPs and overt pronominal subjects begin to be used. These authors report an increase in the use of the latter, which seems to be part of a trade-off with null subjects. The analysis of the subjects used by Cristina reveals a slightly different picture. The child uses proper names, demonstratives, definite lexical DPs and interrogative pronouns as subjects from the first recording session (at 2;1). Overt pronominal subjects are attested very early, at 2;3 (illustrated in 17). They represent the highest number of overt subjects (n = 196); but overall the proportion (28.6%) is similar to the one found in child directed speech (30%).

(17) a. Eu sunt mare?
I am old
'Am I old?'

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b. Da, eu mă joc.
yes I REFL play
'Yes, I am playing.'

c. Eu mă plimb cu buni.
I REFL walk with grandma
'I walk with grandma.'

(Cristina 2;3)

Most of the overt pronominal subjects are 1st person pronouns (see the examples above) or 2nd person pronouns[4] (illustrated in 18); but 3rd person pronominal subjects are also found in the corpus (illustrated in 19), though they are attested later and are much less frequent. Pronominal subjects occur both pre- and post-verbally (as shown in 20).

(18) a. Şi tu ai flori!
and you have flowers
'You also have flowers.'

(Cristina 2;9)

b. Tu eşti mare.
you are big
'You are big.'

(Cristina 2;3)

(19) şi el are codiţă
and he has tail-DIM
'He has a little tail too.'

(Cristina 2;8)

(20) a. Vreau şi eu la tataie Joni.
want and I to Grandpa Joni
'I want to go to Grandpa Joni, too.'

b. Şi eu vreau din astea!
and I want of these
'I want some of these, too!'

(Cristina 2;3)

Previous studies mention an increase in the proportion of overt pronominal subjects. The data in the Cristina corpus are relatively ambiguous in this respect. The trendline in Figure 5 indicates that, indeed, there was an increase. But the same picture emerges from the CDS data in Figure 6, which casts some doubt on this conclusion:

[4] 2nd person pronominal subjects are attested in the first available transcript, but in an imperative sentence (which were excluded from the analysis):
(i) Mami, ţine tu ăsta!
Mummy keep you this
'Mummy, keep this!'

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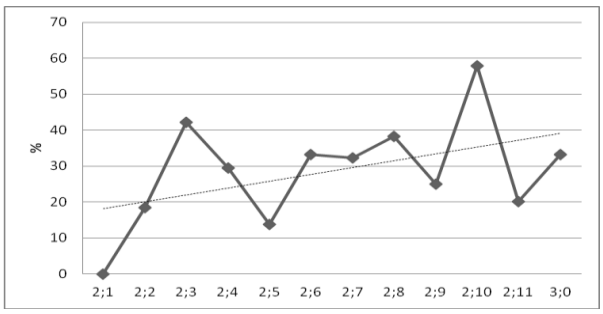


Figure 5. Cristina: the use of overt pronominal subjects across files

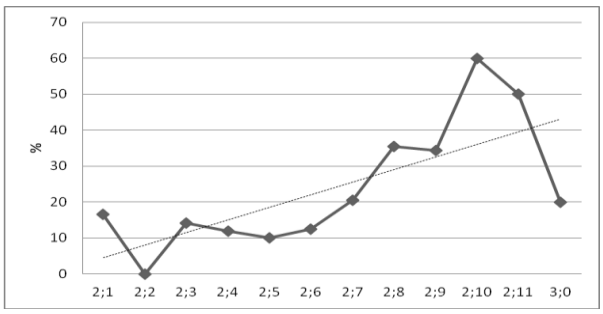


Figure 6. CDS: the use of overt pronominal subjects across files

At first sight, this is surprising. Since 1st and 2nd person pronouns are deictic, they identify the speaker and the hearer; pragmatically, they are good omission candidates (Serratrice 2005). When they are overt, they are discourse marked. In most cases, they show contrastive focus or topic shift. The early 1st and 2nd person pronominal subjects used by Cristina are used correctly; they occur mainly in contexts in which they signal topic shift or contrastive focus.

(21) a. Ăştia sunt căluţii mei. Tu te bate cu căluţii tăi.
these are horses-the my you REFL fight with horses-the your
'These are my horses. You should fight with your horses.'
(Cristina 2;5)

b. Eu pun aici, tu pui acolo.
I put here you put there
'I am putting it here, you are putting it there.'
(Cristina 2;4)

c. Că tu eşti mică, şi eu sunt mai mare.
because you are small and I am more big
'Because you are younger and I am older.'
(Cristina 2;6)

d. Eu citesc şi tu lucrezi.
I read and you work
'I am reading and you are working.'
(Cristina 2;10)

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Cristina is, generally, sensitive to the discourse-pragmatic constraints on overt subject use. But this sensitivity is not adult-like yet (as also reported by Serratrice 2005 for child Italian). She occasionally uses 1st person pronouns in contexts in which they do not seem to signal either topic shift or focus, in violation of the pragmatic constraint on the use of overt pronominal subjects.

(22) a. Adult: Aşa este calul!
so is horse-the
'The horse is as such!'
Child: (out of the blue)
Şi eu nu pot să le fac.
and I not can SUBJ them do
'I cannot do them as well!'

b. Child: Are, dar nu merge.
has but not works
'It has but it does not work.'
Child (with no obvious relationship to the previous utterance)
Eu rup şi pe astalaltă.
I tear and PE other one
'I tear the other one as well.'

d. Adult: Dă- mi o bucată de hârtie.
give me a piece of paper
'Give me a piece of paper!'
Child: Nu am.
not have
'I do not have.'
Child: Eu vreau decât să şterg.
I want only SUBJ erase
'I only want to erase.'

(Cristina 3;1)

The most frequently used pronominal subject is the 1st person singular pronoun. There is a clear asymmetry between 1st (n = 130) and 2nd person (n = 51) subjects, on the one hand, and overt 3rd person pronominal subjects (n = 15) on the other. In this respect, the Romanian data are similar to those reported for Italian and Spanish (Austin et al. 1997, Serratrice 2005).

Demonstratives are also frequently used as subjects. This has been found for Romanian (see Avram and Coene 2010) as well as for other *pro*-drop languages (see Serratrice 2005 for Italian, for example). The present data, however, differ from the findings discussed in Avram and Coene (2010). These authors notice a decrease in the use of demonstratives as subjects which parallel an increase in the use of overt pronominal subjects. In the corpus investigated in the present study no similar trade-off is attested. The trendline for demonstratives used as subjects indicates a slight increase (see Figure 7). Pragmatically, these demonstratives are used appropriately. They often signal topic shift or emphasis when the referent of the subject is a 3rd person inanimate.

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(23) a. Child: Nu aia!
not that
'Not that one!'
Child: Asta trebuie aici.
this one must here
'This one goes in here.'

b. Child: Nu … asta e a mea!
no this is of mine
'No, this is mine!'

c Adult: Şi ăsta e tot al tău.
and this is too of your
And this is also yours!'
Child: Nu, asta-i a ta.
No this is of your
'No, this is yours.'

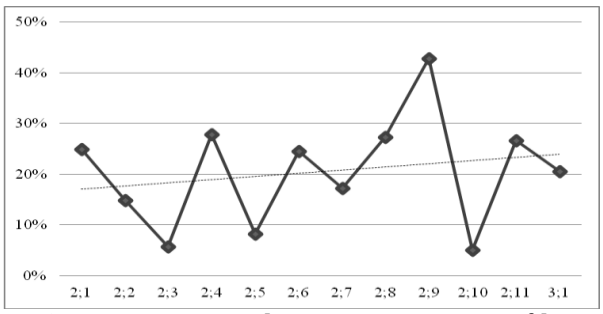


Figure 7. Cristina: demonstratives across files

As Serratrice (2005: 455) points out, the frequent use of demonstratives is expected, "given the nature of the adult–child interaction in the recording sessions, where most of the conversations revolved around toys or characters in books that were physically present and available to both interlocutors". Therefore, the increase or the decrease in the use of demonstratives may be determined by the nature of the interaction during the recording session. The fact remains that Cristina uses a higher number of demonstrative subjects than those attested in CDS (156 vs. 63). However, importantly, she uses them appropriately.

Indefinite DP subjects are attested at 2;6. They are the least numerous overall (n = 32) and occur only post-verbally.

(24) a. Uite, a venit un domn.
look has come a man
'Look, there came a man.'

(Cristina 2;8)

c Aici e apă.
here is water
'There is water here.'

(Cristina 2;6)

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Considering the range of subjects, one might conclude that with respect to DP range, the use of subjects is adult-like in this corpus. The data are similar to what has been reported for other languages: Romanian children acquire the syntax of subjects very early. But there is a slight delay in the acquisition of the discourse pragmatic constraints on the use of null and overt subjects, i.e. it is not syntax but properties at the syntax-pragmatics interface which are vulnerable. This is also in line with Wexler (2013), who distinguishes between informationally-undistinguished subjects and subjects which are informationally marked. The inventory of the former includes expletive subjects and discourse old subjects of discourse old predicates. Wexler suggests that both pronominal subject omission and pronominal subject over-use (both attested in child data coming from studies on non null-subject languages) can be accounted for in terms of under-developed discourse abilities. For example, subjects are often treated as "informationally-*undistinguished* if the referent of the subject is active in the child and the predicate is equally active in the child" (Wexler 2013: 347). This results in the erroneous use of null subjects (in non null subject languages). This analysis can also account for the early slight overuse of null subjects in *pro*-drop languages. Children also differ from adults in allowing informationally marked subjects in more contexts. This seems to be the case in the corpus of child Romanian investigated in this chapter as well.

5. Conclusions

The goal of this paper was to investigate early subject use in child Romanian, an Inflection-licensed null subject language. The main question which I addressed was whether Romanian children know the syntax of subjects from the onset of acquisition, as argued in the literature in relation to the acquisition of other *pro*-drop languages. This small scale study based on a novel longitudinal corpus revealed that, indeed, the null subject parameter is set very early in Romanian. Both null and overt subjects are attested from the first available transcripts (at age 2;1). The proportion and the distribution of subjects are similar to the ones found in child directed speech. There is, however, a slight decrease in the use of null subjects across files which is correlated with a possible slight increase in the use of overt pronominal subjects. The latter are occasionally pragmatically infelicitous. I tentatively suggested that this may be accounted for in terms of a delay in the acquisition of the discourse pragmatic constraints on the use of null and overt subjects. Although Cristina uses null and overt subjects correctly, both syntactically and pragmatically, she occasionally uses overt pronominal subjects in contexts in which they would not be used in the target-language. Interestingly, however, this overuse does not apply to 3rd person pronominal subjects.

The Romanian data are similar to what has been reported for other languages: Romanian children acquire the syntax of subjects very early, at approximately age 2;0. But there is a delay in the acquisition of the discourse pragmatic constraints on the use of null and overt subjects, i.e. it is not syntax but properties at the syntax-pragmatics interface which are vulnerable.

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Annex 1. Longitudinal corpus

Age	MLU	No. of verbal utterances
2;01	2.79	25
2;02	2.91	106
2;03	3.14	90
2;04	3.39	156
2;05	2.91	117
2;06	3.52	188
2;07	3.64	234
2;08	3.73	241
2;09	3.93	130
2;10	3.91	91
2;11	3.91	360
3;01	3.59	286

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