

## Partial pro-drop in Gardenese Ladin: Syntax and Acquisition

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Gardenese Ladin ('GL') is a partial pro-drop language in which null subjects are only used with some grammatical persons (Casalicchio 2017, 2020, Salvi 2017, 2020, Ghilardi & Videsott 2019; in part similarly to Hebrew, Shlonsky 2009, 2014). Although this variety has been paid much attention to in traditional descriptive grammars, the syntax of subjects has not been fully described yet, let alone analysed in detail. In this presentation, I sum up what we know so far and I discuss novel data that give us important and previously unknown insights about the syntax and acquisition of the GL partial pro-drop. I demonstrate that its acquisition is complex and goes through a phase generalized *pro*: it optionally occurs in all contexts. In addition, while children with GL as L1 ('L1ers') fully master the system at age 11, same aged children with GL as L2 ('L2ers') produce significantly less *pros* in the contexts in which it is expected. Finally, the data also have important consequences for the syntactic analysis of GL pro-drop, because they reveal an asymmetry between main and embedded clauses that had gone unnoticed so far (on different partial pro-drop languages see Holmberg, Nayudu & Sheehan 2009 and Frascarelli 2018, a.o.).

**Basic data on GL.** The syntax of subjects is a particularly interesting field for language acquisition studies (starting at least from Valian 1990, Rizzi 1994, Antelmi 1997; for the use of null subjects in bilinguals, see Serratrice et al. 2004, Sorace et al. 2009, Klaschik & Kupisch 2016, Rinke & Flores 2018, a.o.). In the literature, GL is described as a partial pro-drop language, in which null subjects are in complementary distribution with subject clitic pronouns ('SCLs'). Thus, in unmarked [-Topic Shift; -Focus] contexts *pro* is used with the 1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> person, a SCL with the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> person:

- (1) *pro*<sub>1st</sub> dije / (\**pro*<sub>2nd</sub>) te dijēs / (\**pro*<sub>3rd</sub>) l/la dij / *pro*<sub>4th</sub> dijon / ...  
'I say, you say, he/she says, we say, ...'

Note that although the same distribution of SCLs is also found in many Northern Italian dialects ('NIDs'), in GL these SCLs are not morphological affixes (for NIDs, see Brandi & Cordin 1981, 1989, Poletto 2000, Roberts 2010, a.o.), because they pattern differently than NID SCLs in a series of contexts; most notably, they never double a lexical subject (DP or full pronoun):

- (2) Maria (\**la*) maia. / Èila (\**la*) maia.  
Maria she.SCL eats She.FULL she.SCL eats 'Maria/She eats.'

The behaviour of these pronouns in (2) and in other tests developed by Cardinaletti & Starke (1999) led Casalicchio (2017) to propose that they are argumental clitics, like Romance object clitics in general (corresponding to Roberts' 2010 *i*[ $\phi$ ]-pronouns). This means that they need a theta-role (which cannot therefore be assigned to the lexical subject, leading to the exclusion of subject doubling). In addition, due to the V2-nature of GL they are higher in the structure than subject clitics in NIDs (as shown by the fact that they are not repeated in coordination). In GL, SCLs and *pro* are thus in complementary distribution.

Overall, these data demonstrate that the system is rather complex: we thus expect that it should be difficult to acquire for children that had little exposure to GL before age 3 (when they start the trilingual kindergarten). This issue has become particularly important because the number of children that are exposed to GL at home has dramatically decreased: in 2006, only 50% of the children aged 3 acquired GL at home, while 64% acquired a German variety and 31% Italian (note that many children were exposed to two or three of these languages), Verra (2007).

**Research questions:** I designed an experiment to answer two research questions:

RQ1: what is the precise syntax of GL partial pro-drop, and how is it acquired?

RQ2: are L2ers (i.e., children that were not exposed to Gardenese at home) able to fully acquire the subject syntax?

**The tasks.** Two production tasks were carried out at the primary school of Ortisei (Gardena valley) in 2018, involving 153 children aged 6-11, with different L1s. This age group was chosen because on the basis of my previous experience I expected that many L2ers would not have acquired almost any GL before starting primary school, and in particular the partial pro-drop system. This hypothesis was fully confirmed by the present investigation.

The first task consisted in transforming sentences from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> pers. and vice versa. In the second task, participants were asked questions about their own habits and preferences so that they would produce spontaneous sentences with a 1<sup>st</sup> person subject. Since virtually no child above age 3 is monolingual in GL, I chose adult speakers as control group (age 24-50, n=15).

**RQ1: results.** Table 1 shows the percentages of the use of *pro* and SCLs in L1ers aged 6 and 11. At age 6, they use *pro*<sub>1st</sub> to a similar extent in main and embedded clauses, while they show a main-embedded divide in the use of SCLs. At age 11, this divide is visible with *pro*<sub>1st</sub> as well. The most unexpected fact, however, is that the main-embedded asymmetry is systematic in the adult controls: in main clauses they predominantly use a strong pronoun, in embedded clauses only a *pro*<sub>1st</sub>/SCL<sub>3rd</sub>. Note that the same pattern is found with both *pro* and SCLs: this is further evidence for the analysis of GL SCLs as argumental clitics. A second finding is that the youngest children use a *pro*<sub>3rd</sub> in almost half of the cases, although there is no *pro*<sub>3rd</sub> in the target GL inventory. This shows that in a partial pro-drop language like GL, null subjects are first extended to all persons during the acquisition process.

	6 y.o. children	11 y.o. children	Adults
<i>pro</i> <sub>1st</sub> , main clause	80%	35%	9%
<i>pro</i> <sub>1st</sub> , embedded clause	71%	85%	100%
SCL <sub>3rd</sub> , main clauses	32%	20%	0%
SCL <sub>3rd</sub> , embedded clauses	69%	70%	100%
<i>pro</i> <sub>3rd</sub> , all clauses (* in the target grammar)	45%	0%	0%

**Table 1:** The percentages of *pro* and SCLs in a sample of speakers with GL as L1 (total n of answers = 258)

**RQ2: results.** The comparison between L1ers and L2ers shows that:

- a. 3rd person: L2ers perform much less target-like than L1ers at age 6, but they reach similar results of expected production at age 11. Moreover, at age 6 they produce much more (non-target-like) *pro*<sub>3rd</sub> than L1ers (74% vs. 45%); the use of *pro*<sub>3rd</sub> almost disappears at age 11.
- b. 1st person: in all age groups, L2ers produce much less *pro*<sub>1st</sub> than L1ers, in both main and embedded clauses (at age 11: main cl.: 7% vs. 35%; emb. cl.: 48% vs. 85%). Therefore, they behave more like the adults in main clauses, but less so in embedded clauses.

**Conclusion.** The preliminary results offer an important contribution to our knowledge of the acquisition mechanisms of partial pro-drop in GL, and to our typology of partial pro-drop languages. On the acquisitional side, they demonstrate in particular that L2ers still perform at chance level in the use of embedded *pro*<sub>1st</sub> at age 11 (48%). As far as syntax is concerned, this investigation has shown that the partial pro-drop nature of GL does not only depend on the syntactic person, but also on the clause type in which the subject occurs. Whether this feature is recent or old, and whether it is the result of contact (i.e., to the opposed influences of the typologically different languages Italian and German) or of an internal development, is still unclear. But, in any case, these new results are further evidence for the uniqueness of the GL syntax of subjects within the Italo-Romance world.

### **Selected Literature.**

**Casalicchio** J. 2017. ‘Unstressed subject pronouns in Gardenese Rhaeto-romance: neither weak nor clitic?’. Talk at CIDS12. **Frascarelli** M. 2018. ‘The interpretation of *pro* in consistent and partial NS languages: A comparative interface analysis’ in Cognola & Casalicchio (eds.), *Null Subject in Generative Grammar*. Oxford: OUP, 211-39. **Ghilardi** M., **Videsott** R. 2019. L’incompletezza del sistema pronominale soggetto del ladino gardenese e le sue ricadute didattiche’. Talk at AItLA 19. **Poletto** C. 2000. *The higher functional field*. Oxford: OUP. **Rinke** E., **Flores** C. 2018. ‘Another look at the interpretation of overt and null pronominal subjects in bilingual language acquisition: heritage Portuguese in contact with German and Spanish’. *Glossa* 3:1, 68. **Salvi** G. 2020. ‘Il ladino e le sue caratteristiche’, in Videsott, Videsott & Casalicchio (eds.), *Manuale di linguistica ladina*. Berlin: de Gruyter. **Verra** R. 2007. ‘Sprachwechsel in Gröden’. *Ladinia* 31, 274-286.