
Does pro-drop in heritage languages influence null subject use in speakers' majority German?

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German is routinely regarded as a language with optional topic drop in certain registers (Fries, 1988). However, the use of topic drop is often characterized as sub-standard. We predict that bilingual heritage speakers will apply topic drop more widely, and argue that the expansion in topic drop represents a creative extension of German grammar which points to reorganization at the pragmatics-syntax interface.

We focus on the influence that bilingual speakers' heritage Greek, Russian or Turkish might have on their majority German. Greek is a consistent pro-drop language where null subjects appear regardless of grammatical features. Russian is a partial pro-drop language or a non-pro-drop language with abundant subject ellipsis. Turkish is a topic pro-drop language that only requires overt subjects in unspecified contexts. German is a topic-drop language but it is sometimes utilized as a non-pro-drop language (Müller, 2006; Trutkowski, 2016).

In this area, little is known about the effect of the heritage language on the majority language. We derive the following research question and hypothesis for a corpus study on RUEG data (Wiese et al., 2021): Does Greek, Russian and Turkish heritage speakers' expression of (pro)nominal reference in German align with monolingual speakers' productions? We predict that heritage speakers show creative transfer effects by a wider use of topic-drop in German.

There are four participant groups (Greek-German-bilinguals n=48, Russian-German-bilinguals n=61, Turkish-German-bilinguals n=64, monolinguals n=64). We manually annotated a small subset of the full data (total tokens=455,208) with respect to subject realizations.

So far, we found that 5% of all subjects are topic-dropped. Currently our sample is too small to make any conclusions on a group-level regarding the hypothesis. We plan to present data from at least 10 speakers per group. Our findings might reveal how bilingual speakers apply a strategy that is available in the standard grammar and extend it creatively to form a new system of subject drop in German.

References: Fries, N. (1988). Über das Null-Topik im Deutschen. *Sprache & Pragmatik* 3, 19–49. • Müller, G. (2006). Pro-drop and impoverishment. *Form, Structure, and Grammar. A Festschrift Presented to Günther Grewendorf on Occasion of his 60th Birthday*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 93-115. • Trutkowski, E. (2016). *Topic drop and null subjects in German*. Berlin: De Gruyter. • Wiese, H., Alexiadou, A., Allen, S., Bunk, O., Gagarina, N., Iefremenko, K., Jahns, E., Klotz, M., Krause, T., Labrenz, A., et al. (2021). RUEG Corpus. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5808870>