This study investigates the cross-linguistic differences between Italian and Spanish regarding their discourse-pragmatic biases on the interpretation of personal subject pronouns. It also tries to identify possible links between such cross-linguistic differences and other morphosyntactic differences related to the verbal morphology.

Spanish and Italian are two typologically related and morpho-syntactically similar languages, which have been assumed to instantiate the same setting of the null subject parameter with respect to not only its syntactic licensing conditions, but also the pragmatics determining the distribution of null subjects (NS) and overt subject pronouns (OSP). This assumption has had important implications for cross-linguistic research, particularly investigating language acquisition and loss (see for example Sorace et al., 2009).

The first aim of this study was to test directly this assumption. In order to do so, we run two pairs of self-paced reading experiments using the same materials translated in each language, so that the results were directly comparable. The first experiment used the same (Italian) materials and method as Carminati’s (2002) study on antecedent preferences for Italian intra-sentential NS and OPS anaphors, testing the ‘Position of Antecedent Strategy’. Below is an example of sentence tested, the forward slashes indicate the text that was presented together.

(1) Ita. a. Quando Anna è andata a trovare Maria all’ospedale,/ lei le ha portato un mazzo di fiori.
   b. Quando Anna è andata a trovare Maria all’ospedale,/ ∅ le ha portato un mazzo di fiori.
   ‘When Ana went to visit Mary at the hospital, she/∅ gave her a bunch of flowers’.
   c. Quando Anna è andata a trovare Maria all’ospedale,/ lei era già fuori pericolo.
   d. Quando Anna è andata a trovare Maria all’ospedale,/ ∅ era già fuori pericolo.
   ‘When Ana went to visit Mary at the hospital, she/∅ was already out of danger’

Sp. a. Cuando Ana visitó a María en el hospital,/ ella le llevó un ramo de rosas.
   b. Cuando Ana visitó a María en el hospital,/ ∅ le llevó un ramo de rosas.
   c. Cuando Ana visitó a María en el hospital,/ ella ya estaba fuera de peligro.
   d. Cuando Ana visitó a María en el hospital,/ ∅ ya estaba fuera de peligro.

As revealed by the reading times for the second clause and by the answers to the comprehension questions, the results suggest that while in Italian there is a strict division of labour between NS and OSP (confirming Carminati’s findings), this division is not as clear-cut in Spanish. More precisely, while Italian personal pronouns signal a switch in subject reference, as shown by significantly faster RTs when they refer to an object antecedent (condition c. in the examples), the association between OSP and switch reference seems to be less reliable and significantly weaker in Spanish. The results are confirmed by a second pair of experiments, involving the same conditions, where the materials where presented phrase-
by-phrase. Significant cross-linguistic differences emerged for the RTs at the wrap up region, and in the accuracy and reaction times to the comprehension questions (example below).

(2) Ita. a. Quando / Carlo / ha chiesto aiuto / a Diego / per preparare / l’esame / lui / lo ha superato / con voti / eccellenti.
b. Quando / Carlo / ha chiesto aiuto / a Diego / per preparare / l’esame / lui / lo ha superato / con voti / eccellenti. ‘When Carlo asked Diego for help to prepare the exam, he passed it with excellent marks’.
c. Quando / Carlo / ha prestato aiuto / a Diego / per preparare / l’esame / lui / lo ha superato / con voti / eccellenti.
d. Quando / Carlo / ha prestato aiuto / a Diego / per preparare / l’esame / lui / lo ha superato / con voti / eccellenti. ‘When Carlo provided Diego with help to prepare the exam, he passed it with excellent marks.

Sp. a. Cuando / Carlos / pidió ayuda / a Diego / para preparar / el examen/ él / aprobó / con notas / excelentes.
b. Cuando / Carlos / pidió ayuda / a Diego / para preparar / el examen/ aprobó / con notas / excelentes.
c. Cuando / Carlos / ayudó / a Diego / a preparar / el examen/ él / aprobó / con notas / excelentes.
d. Cuando / Carlos / ayudó / a Diego / a preparar / el examen/ aprobó / con notas / excelentes.

The findings highlight for the first time an asymmetry between the strength of NS and OSP biases in Spanish that could not have emerged from the numerous studies carried out within the variationist tradition, based on corpus analysis (Enriquez, 1984; Cameron, 1992 among others), which could only produce evidence for the existence of a correlation between subject expression and switch in subject reference (robustly attested for several varieties of Spanish).

A subsequent pair of phrase-by-phrase self-paced reading experiments tested the hypothesis that the cross-linguistic differences attested might be related to the relative ambiguity of the Spanish verbal morphology compared to the Italian one with regard to the unambiguous expression of person features on the verbal head.

The results only provided weak support for the hypothesis, although they did confirm again the presence of the cross-linguistic differences in the processing and resolution of anaphoric NS and OSP dependencies revealed by the previous experiments.

References: