Ambiguous pronoun resolution has mainly been studied so far in languages with only overt and no zero pronouns. In these studies, it has been found that pronoun resolution is influenced by a complex interplay of different factors, including syntactic role, order of mention and information structure (e.g., Arnold & al., 2000; Kaiser & Trueswell, 2008). By contrast, very little is known about the question of which types of factors influence the resolution of zero anaphora in languages in which these are common. Available studies on the online resolution of zero (subject) anaphora in Italian (Carminati, 2005) and Chinese (Yang et al., 1999) found a strong preference for zero anaphora to refer to antecedents in subject position. Similarly, in an offline questionnaire study, Alonso-Ovalle et al. (2002) observed that zero anaphora in Spanish were preferentially interpreted as referring to subject antecedents. The same tendency was observed for overt pronouns, but to a lesser degree.

Together, these results are compatible with the idea that at least in richly inflecting languages such as Italian, Spanish and Turkish, the resolution of zero anaphora is determined mainly by syntactic factors (Carminati, 2005). This would stand in contrast to the results for overt pronouns showing the influence of multiple types of factors. Non-syntactic factors, however, might influence the resolution of zero anaphora as well, but this type of factors has not been investigated in the studies on zero anaphora available so far. In the current study, we made a first attempt to fill this gap by testing the influence of (explicitly) topicalising or focusing the syntactic subject on the resolution of zero anaphora in Turkish. Topicalisation was achieved by separating the first-mentioned referent with a comma from the rest of the sentence, and focusing by placing the subject referent in second position, which has been shown to be a focus position in Turkish (Ergüvanlı, 1984). We tested these conditions in a written questionnaire with 24 experimental sentences interspersed with 40 fillers. 64 native speakers of Turkish completed the questionnaire, by filling a gap in a sentence following the critical sentence (e.g., “____ worked in Rome” for the example below). We tested the four conditions described in (1)-(4) with their respective choice of subject antecedents in percentages.

(1) Subject sentence-initial and topic by default:
Ergin Latif‘i Roma‘da çalıstağı zaman bıçakladı. (56%)
Ergin-NOM Latif-ACC Roma-LOC worked when stabbed
Ergin stabbed Latif when he worked in Rome.

(2) Subject sentence-initial and explicitly topicalised:
Ergin, Latif‘i Roma‘da çalıstağı zaman bıçakladı. (58%)
Ergin-NOM, Latif-ACC Roma-LOC worked when stabbed

(3) Subject in focus position, object topic by default:
Latif‘i Ergin Roma‘da çalıstağı zaman bıçakladı. (70%)
Latif-ACC Ergin-NOM Roma-LOC worked when stabbed.

(4) Subject in focus position, object explicitly topicalised:
Latif‘i, Ergin Roma‘da çalıstağı zaman bıçakladı. (67%)
Latif-ACC, Ergin-NOM Roma-LOC worked when stabbed.

We found on average 57 % of subject-interpretations in (1) and (2), and 68,5 % in (3) and (4), showing that, in line with previous findings (Alonso-Ovalle et al., 1999; Carminati, 2005;
Yang et al., 1999), comprehenders globally preferred subject over object antecedents for zero pronouns ($t_1(63) = 5.44, p > .01; t_2(23) = 8.49, p < .0001$). However, the subject was preferred even stronger when it was in focus position ($F_1(1,60) = 7.71, p < .01; F_2(1,20) = 17.58, p < .0001$). No systematic influence of topicalisation was established (all $F$s < 1). This is to our knowledge the first piece of evidence suggesting that pragmatic factors can influence the resolution of zero anaphora on top of syntactic factors.

References: