Information structure and nominal ellipsis in L2 Spanish
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It has been argued that interfaces between internal modules of the grammar, such as syntax, and external modules, such as information structure, are problematic for different types of learners, including early and late bilinguals, heritage speakers, and second language learners (Sorace 2011). Several explanations for this have been suggested, including processing difficulties. If processing is the problem, the fact that the L1 encodes similar constraints for a particular structure should not be helpful. We report on an experiment that aims at determining whether this is the case in relation to noun drop in L2 Spanish.

Recent work in Spanish has shown that nominal ellipsis exhibits syntactic constraints, such as gender parallelism with the antecedent. Furthermore, as in English, the L1 of the subjects, information structure is critical in the licensing of noun drop (Braver 2009; Eguren 2010). As example (1) shows, ellipsis is only possible if the ellipsis site is focused. This is similar in English, although in English the noun is generally replaced by a pronoun, one, as the translations show.

(1) a. –Tienes salsa picante y salsa dulce. ¿Cuál prefieres? You have both spicy and mild sauce. Which do you prefer?
   –Prefiero la _____ picante.
   I prefer the spicy one.

b. –Esta salsa picante está deliciosa. ¿Qué le echaste?
   This spicy sauce is delicious. What [ingredients] did you use?
   –#Le eché un poco de ají a la _____ picante.
   #I put some hot chili pepper on the spicy one.

In (1a) salsa picante is focused and therefore noun ellipsis is possible. In (1b), however, salsa picante is old information and the focus is un poco de ají and, as a result, the answer is anomalous.

The present paper investigates whether highly proficient speakers of L2 Spanish are able to perceive these subtle constraints on noun drop, particularly given that these are not taught. A group of 10 advanced L2 Spanish speakers completed three tasks of which we will be reporting on two: a production task and an acceptability judgment task that used questions and answers such as those illustrated in (1).

The production task on noun drop was a question-answer task based on a series of pictures. Subjects had to answer 28 (18 target) questions based on what they saw, eliciting responses with noun drop. For example, (see Fig.1): “¿Qué camiseta te gusta más?” (what t-shirt do you like the most?) with the expected response: “la roja” (the red one). Results show the speakers have no problem producing noun drop in context correctly. Regarding the role of focus (the acceptability task), there was no difference between the native and the L2 speakers. We take this as evidence against the inherent difficulty in processing different modules, as Sorace argues. In other words, speakers not only control the syntax of noun drop, but also the information structure that licenses it.
