

# Articles and clitics in English as L2 or L3: evidence from Greek and Turkish/Greek speakers\*

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## Abstract

This paper reports on a pilot study which investigates the acquisition of English pronouns and determiners at beginner level by adolescent speakers of Greek as L1 or L2. The L2 speakers of Greek are native Turkish speakers born and educated in Greece. Testing involved tasks in English and Greek and aimed at eliciting English pronominal objects and determiners. Given that for the Turkish/Greek speakers (i) English is L3, and that (ii) Turkish lacks determiners and clitics, the acquisition of English determiners and object pronouns presents an interesting case. English lacks pronominal clitics but, unlike Turkish, it disallows null objects. Furthermore, the absence of a determiner system in Turkish and its availability in Greek and English pose an interesting question regarding the acquisition of these categories by Turkish L1 speakers, who are expected to deviate from native-like performance in the form of omission. However, knowledge of Greek L2 could, in principle, interfere with English L3 acquisition of these elements in facilitating their use. In order to answer this question, the same tasks were used with L1 Greek learners of English. The results of the data analysis shed light to the role of Greek as L1 and L2 in the acquisition of determiners and object pronouns.

**Keywords:** definite/indefinite article, clitics, object pronouns, L3 acquisition

## 1. Introduction

Greek and English have a determiner system distinguishing between the definite and the indefinite article. In Greek, the article has to agree in gender, number and case with the noun or adjective in the DP whereas in English definiteness and indefiniteness are denoted by the use of the grammatical forms *the* before nouns in both numbers and *a/an* before singular nouns respectively.

Turkish, unlike Greek and English, lacks definite and indefinite articles as separate grammatical items that precede the noun. Instead, it allows for optional morphological case marking with semantic effects, i.e. specificity. Definiteness is denoted with the accusative case ending *-ı* on a direct object of a transitive verb:

- (1) kitab-ı okudum  
book.ACC read.PAST.IS  
'I read the book'

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Indefiniteness is denoted by the use of *bir*<sup>1</sup> along with a noun marked with the accusative case ending *-ı*:

- (2) Bir kitab-ı okudum.  
‘I read a (certain) book.’

Omission of the case ending *-ı* results in non-specific reading:

- (3) Bir kitap okudum.  
‘I read a book.’ (Kornfilt 1997)

With respect to the pronominal system, I adopt Cardinaletti & Starke’s (1999) tripartite distinction of pronouns into a) strong, b) weak, i.e. mildly deficient and c) clitic i.e. severely deficient forms. According to this classification, Greek has all three forms of pronouns. However, for the purposes of this study I will focus on object clitics, which are marked in Greek for case and *phi*-features. English lacks clitics but has overt pronouns, which can be strong or weak depending on the context. Turkish, on the other hand, unlike Greek and English, is a language that allows for null objects with specific reference. The pronominal object can generally be omitted if it can be understood from the context (Lewis 2000). The example below is drawn from Σελλά-Μάτζη (1994):

- |     |  |                              |
|-----|--|------------------------------|
| (4) | Dün çocukları nasıl buldun?                | Nerede buldun?               |
|     | Yesterday child.PL.ACC how found.2P?       | Where found.2P?              |
|     | ‘How did you find the children yesterday?’ | ‘Where did you find (them)?’ |

According to Abney (1987), nominal arguments in English are projections of the functional head D(eterminer), lexicalised by the articles *a* and *the*. Under this hypothesis, demonstratives and personal pronouns are classified as [D] elements and have the categorial status of determiners. However, in languages which have determiners and both strong pronouns and clitics, it is determiners and clitics rather than strong pronouns which exhibit morphological, semantic and syntactic similarities and share categorial features. (Sportiche 1995; Tsimpli & Stavrakaki 1999 for Greek; Marinis 2000). Particularly for the definite article and object clitics in Greek, Tsimpli and Stavrakaki (1999) argue that they serve a purely grammatical function in that both lack semantic content and can thus be used expletively and resumptively. However, with respect to their distribution, definite articles are merged in the DP domain, whereas accusative clitics, which are also nominal elements, either precede or follow the verb, i.e. they are also related to the verbal domain (Marinis 2001). Within the paradigm of accusative clitics and articles, a further distinction based on interpretability, has been proposed between 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> vs 3<sup>rd</sup> person clitics, and between the definite vs the indefinite article: 3<sup>rd</sup> person clitics are clusters of uninterpretable features of case and agreement, whereas 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person clitics also bear an interpretable feature of [person] for which 3<sup>rd</sup> person clitics are unspecified (Tsimpli & Stavrakaki 1999). With respect to the articles, the indefinite article bears uninterpretable case and agreement features and the interpretable feature of [-definiteness], whereas the definite article bears uninterpretable case and agreement features but is underspecified for [definiteness]. The interpretability distinction suggests a learnability effect: uninterpretable clusters of features (e.g. on the 3<sup>rd</sup> person clitic or the definite article) should be problematic in non-native language

<sup>1</sup> The word *bir* can be used either as a numeral meaning ‘one’ or as an indefinite adjective.

development as they resist parameter-resetting, contrary to interpretable features, which are accessible to the language learner even after the Critical Period (Tsimpli & Roussou 1991; Smith & Tsimpli 1995). To account for the presence of elements which bear uninterpretable features in non-native grammars, it has been proposed that learners misanalyse these elements (in our case it would be referentiality and definiteness) by attributing interpretable features to them to overcome optionality (Tsimpli 2003).

## **2. Third language acquisition**

Cross-linguistic influence has long been an important area of research for second language acquisition. However, the study of cross-linguistic transfer in trilingual acquisition is a relatively under-explored field which involves complex processes associated with the interactions that are possible among the three languages and the effect of L1 and L2 on the acquisition of L3 (Cenoz 2000).

Although privilege of L1 has been suggested in the acquisition of L3 (Ringbom 1987), further research indicates that different variables, such as language typology, proficiency and language mode determine the choice of the source language of influence as well as the amount of transfer. With respect to language typology, studies have reported that typological closeness between L2 and L3 facilitates language transfer (Cenoz 2001; De Angelis & Selinker 2001). Leung (2003) argues in favour of full transfer from L2 to L3 with evidence from tense and agreement as well as the feature of [definiteness] in Cantonese-English bilinguals' French interlanguage. Extensive reliance on nonnative L2 for function words is reported by De Angelis (2005) in her study of the acquisition of L3 Italian by speakers of L1 English and L1 Spanish provided that the source and the target language are typologically close to each other. Further support for the claim that experience in a language other than the L1 can influence subsequent language acquisition is also provided by Vinnitskaya et al. (2003) in their study of L3 acquisition of relative clauses. Research findings also show L2 influence on speakers with a low degree of L3 competence (Fuller 1999; Dewaele 2001), particularly in the transfer of form (Ringbom 2001). For the transfer of meaning as well as semantically-based lexical transfer which require considerable fluency and automatization in the source language, Ringbom (*ibid.*) argues that there is more evidence of L1 influence even when L1 and L3 are not typologically close. In terms of language mode, that is the state of activation of the speaker's languages and language processing mechanisms at a given point in time (Grosjean 2001), it appears that the L2 remains at a high level of activation while the L1 can be deactivated more successfully and appear less frequently as a source of transfer (Williams & Hammarberg 1998).

## **3. Aims of the study**

Through elicitation of articles, clitics and object pronouns in different tasks, this pilot study aims to: (i) investigate the acquisition of pronominal objects and determiners of definite and indefinite DPs in English (L3) by Turkish L1/Greek L2 speakers; (ii) compare the above speakers' performance to that of Greek L1 speakers acquiring the same categories in English L2 and (iii) compare the data from the above two groups to establish whether the development of Greek clitics and articles (lacking in L1 Turkish) facilitates the acquisition of pronominals and articles in English. Given that English is the target language for both groups tested, and Greek is L1 and L2 respectively, possible differences which might arise in the use of pronouns and determiners in English should be attributed to the role of Greek as a source language for influence.

#### 4. The study

The study was conducted in a high school in the Evros region. Two groups of students attending the same school were involved: (a) 5 Greek L1 speakers of English (hence GL1S), beginner level and (b) 7 Turkish L1/Greek L2 speakers of English (hence TL1S), beginner level. The age range of the students was 14-16 yrs. They all had very little prior knowledge of English and attended a beginner level class after scoring below base in a diagnostic test administered at the beginning of the school year. The TL1S had attended a minority primary school in Evros before going to mainstream high school and shared a common educational and cultural background with Turkish as the language spoken in the family and the community and Greek being introduced at primary school. They all had 6 years of formal instruction in Greek at minority primary schools (1-3 hours of instruction per day) and 2-3 years of attendance at high school.

##### 4.1 Methodology

The subjects had received an 8-month period of tuition in English before taking the tests. Both groups were exposed to the same syllabus which, among other phenomena, included formal instruction on the use of the definite and the indefinite article and pronominal objects in appropriate contexts in English<sup>2</sup>. The materials to be tested were covered within 2 weeks of teaching. During those weeks, practice in the form of homework was assigned to both groups.

##### 4.2 Tests

Two types of tests (listed below) taken in English and Greek by all subjects were administered to elicit contexts for the use of the categories under investigation. Both tests were recorded and later transcribed.

###### 4.2.1 The Map Task

The Map Task (hence MT) is a cooperative referential communication task in which participants exchange information which is partially shared (Brown 1995). It consists of a map with a treasure route drawn on it passing from features which are familiar to the subjects and form part of their active vocabulary, e.g. a house, a tree etc.

The subjects carried out the task in pairs. They sat at a desk facing each other without having access to each other's data. One student in each pair had a fully detailed map in front of him/her whereas the other one had a photocopy in which some of the features and the treasure route were missing. The subjects had to exchange information in order for the second subject to draw all the missing information on his/her map. Each subject did the task 4 times, 2 in Greek and 2 in English and was assigned both roles, that of the Instruction-Giver as well as that of the Instruction-Follower.

###### 4.2.2 The Elicited Response Tasks

These tasks (hence ERT) involved the speakers' oral description of two activities: making Greek coffee and sending a letter, both in English and Greek.

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<sup>2</sup> The teaching materials were from Prodromou (1995), Dooley & Evans (1998), and Perrett (2001).

The subjects were given the objects (realia) to carry out the activity, e.g. a coffee-pot, a spoon, sugar, coffee etc. for the first task and a letter, an envelope, a pen etc. for the second task. A card with the name of each object was placed in front of it and a set of cards with verbs the speakers might find useful for their description was placed for reference nearby. The speakers carried out the tasks individually in English and Greek. Both the MT and the ERT were useful tools for data elicitation because they provided contexts for the use of articles as well as pronominal objects and clitics in English and Greek respectively.

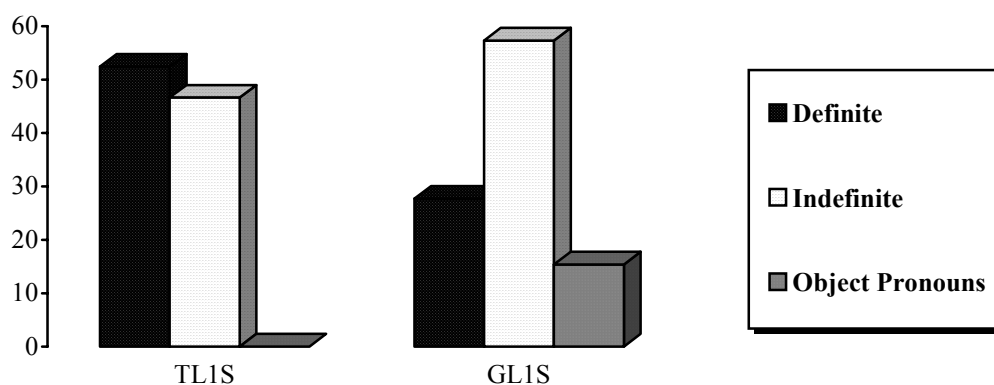
## 5. The data

### 5.1 Results from the tasks in English

The results from the use of the articles and pronominal objects in English from each task are presented in Table 1, as well as in Figure 1 below.

**Table 1.** Accurate production of articles and object pronouns in obligatory contexts in English

<i>Subjects/Tasks</i>	<i>Definite Article</i>		<i>Indefinite Article</i>		<i>Object Pronoun</i>	
TL1S Map Task	86/170	50.5%	29/67	43.2%	-	-
GL1S Map Task	27/126	21.4%	48/85	56.4%	-	-
TL1S ERT	43/76	56.5%	6/8	75%	0/23	0%
GL1S ERT	24/58	41.3%	3/4	75%	2/13	15.3%
TL1S Mean	129/246	52.4%	35/75	46.6%	0/23	0%
GL1S Mean	51/184	27.7%	51/89	57.3%	2/13	15.3%



**Figure 1.** Target performance (%) in articles and the object pronoun in both tasks

As far as the use of articles is concerned, there is considerable variation in both groups of learners. The TL1S achieve higher scores in the use of the definite article than the GL1S in both types of tasks, particularly in the MT, where they appear to perform at chance level, whereas the GL1S' respective score is lower. Better performance in the use of the definite vs indefinite article was found by Trenkic (2000). Trenkic studied the acquisition of articles in English L2 by native speakers of Serbian, a language which lacks determiners. The GL1S perform better in the use of the indefinite rather than the definite article in both tasks, while the performance of the TL1S in the use of the

indefinite article in the MT is lower. However, both groups of speakers score equally high in the use of the indefinite article in the ERT.

With respect to the type of inaccurate responses produced by the speakers, there is a high percentage of article omission for both groups, particularly in questions and echo contexts, while substitution of the required article with a non-target one (definite in the place of indefinite or vice versa) is minimal (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Type of inappropriate responses in the use of the articles

<i>Subjects</i>	<i>Definite Article</i>		<i>Indefinite Article</i>	
	Omission	Substitution by <i>a</i>	Omission	Substitution by <i>the</i>
TL1S	115 – 98.2%	2 – 1.7%	36 – 90%	4 – 10%
GL1S	130 – 97.7%	3 – 2.2%	36 – 94.7%	2 – 5.2%

As far as the use of the zero article is concerned, it was obligatory in 19 contexts for the TL1S in both tasks, i.e. in 13 indefinite plural nouns and 6 mass nouns. Only 2 errors of indefinite overuse with plural count nouns occurred. As for the GL1S, in 27 contexts for the zero article use, 12 were with indefinite plural nouns and 15 with mass nouns. Only 2 errors of indefinite article overuse with indefinite plural nouns occurred. The pilot study, however, focuses on the use of overt article forms, since it is not easy to determine whether the zero article is the result of a speaker's choice to use a bare indefinite plural/non-count noun or a case of uncontrolled article omission.

As regards pronominal objects, the MT did not provide contexts for the use of the object pronoun. In the ERT, the TL1S show total omission of the pronominal object whereas two GL1S provide it in two contexts. The average performance of both groups in the use of pronominal objects is much lower than that in the use of the definite and the indefinite article.

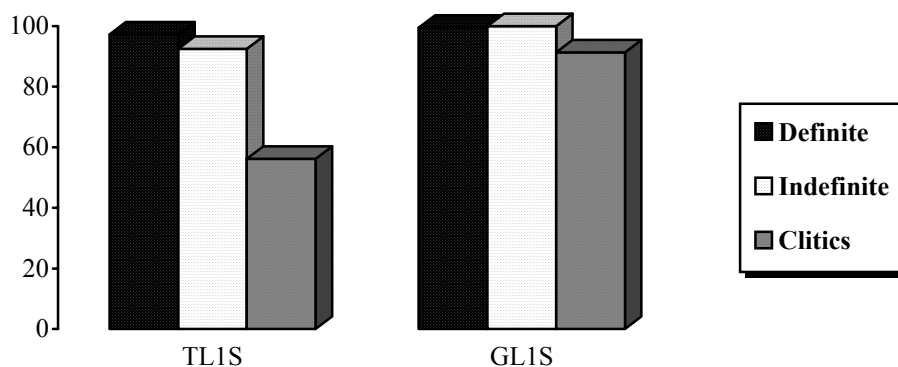
The low performance of both groups might allow us to suggest that null objects are the default option in early stages of non-native language development for reasons to do with the 'Avoid Pronoun Principle' (Chomsky 1986). Recoverability of the null object is established through discourse. Particularly for the TL1S, the total omission of pronominal objects might also be related to L1 transfer, since null objects with specific reference are allowed in their L1 Turkish. Similar results are mentioned by Hawkins (2001), reporting on Yuan's experimental test with Chinese learners of English, who continue to accept null objects (allowed in their L1 Chinese) in English, even at an advanced level. However, the size of the samples in this pilot study does not provide strong evidence that the TL1S encounter more difficulties in the acquisition of pronominal objects than the GL1S.

### 5.2 Results from the tasks in Greek

The Table below presents the results from the use of the articles and clitics in Greek by both groups (the GL1s were used as the control group since Greek is their L1) for each task separately as well as the mean scores. The latter are also presented by means of a graph in Figure 2.

**Table 3.** Accurate production of articles and clitics in obligatory contexts in Greek

<i>Subjects/Tasks</i>	<i>Definite Article</i>	<i>Indefinite Article</i>	<i>Clitics</i>
TL1S Map Task	215/220 – 97.7%	33/36 – 91.6%	7/11 – 63.6%
GL1S Map Task	128/128 – 100%	23/23 – 100%	2/2 – 100%
TL1S ERT	69/72 – 95.8%	4/4 – 100%	20/37 – 54.05%
GL1S ERT	65/66 – 98.4%	3/3 – 100%	19/21 – 90.4%
TL1S Mean	284/292 – 97.26%	37/40 – 92.5%	27/48 – 56.2%
GL1S Mean	193/194 – 99.48%	26/26 – 100%	21/23 – 91.3%

**Figure 2.** Target performance (%) in the use of articles and clitics in both tasks

As far as suppliance of determiners is concerned, the TL1S are extremely accurate, particularly as regards the use of the definite article. The GL1S score slightly higher than the TL1S in the definite article and target in the indefinite article. The only type of error made by the speakers is that of omission of articles where the context required them. The TL1S omit both articles whereas the GL1S omit 1 definite article and have target performance in the use of the indefinite article.

**Table 4.** Type of inappropriate responses in the use of the articles

<i>Subjects</i>	<i>Definite</i>		<i>Indefinite</i>	
	Omission	Substitution	Omission	Substitution
TL1S	8	-	3	-
GL1S	1	-	-	-

Regarding the use of the zero article, both groups exhibit target-like performance in singular and plural nouns. The TL1S use it correctly in 104 contexts with questions and declaratives and so do the GL1S in 40 contexts:

- (5a) Exis paralia? Exis vouna?  
Have.<sub>2S</sub> beach? Have.<sub>2S</sub> mountains?  
'Do you have a beach? Do you have mountains?'
- (5b) ...vazume zaxari, nero kai kafe...  
...put<sub>1P</sub> sugar water and coffee  
'...we put sugar, water and coffee...'

In the acquisition of the DP by TL1S, the choice of gender, case and number is of particular interest. Out of the 284 occurrences of the definite article in obligatory contexts, 39 present a problem with gender, case or number (13.7%), thus reflecting the difficulty in the acquisition of the appropriate form of the definite article, with preference for the neuter substituting for masculine and feminine:

- (6a) *to proto gefiro* (cf. *i proti gefira*)  
 to.\*NEUT.SG proto.\*NEUT.SG gefiro.\*NEUT.SG  
 the-first-bridge (feminine gender)
- (6b) *to kafe* (cf. *o kafes*)  
 to.\*NEUT.SG kafe.\*NEUT.SG  
 the-coffee (masculine gender)
- (6c) *apo to dentra* (cf. *apo ta dentra*)  
 apo to.NEUT.\*SG dentra.NEUT.PL  
 from-the-trees (neuter)
- (6d) *sta lofi* (cf. *stous lofous*)  
 sta.\*NEUT.PL lofi.\*MASC.PL  
 to-the-hills (masculine gender)

Out of the 40 occurrences of the indefinite article, only 1 presents a problem with gender (2.5%):

- (7) *ena trapeza* (cf. *mia trapeza*)  
 ena.\*NEUT.SG trapeza.FEM.SG  
 a bank (feminine gender)

Object clitics, however, are more problematic than articles, thus indicating that even at an advanced level of L2 knowledge, use of object clitics remains problematic. Omission of the clitic reached 43.8% for the TL1S (see Tsimpli & Mastropavlou in press, for similar results) and quite surprisingly an 8.7% for the GL1S due to object clitic omission twice by the same Greek L1 speaker. Out of the 27 uses of the clitic by TL1S, only 4 present a problem of appropriate choice of gender:

- (8a) *Perno tin anaptira, tin anavo...*  
 Take.<sub>1S</sub> the.\*FEM.SG lighter, \*her-CL light.<sub>1S</sub>  
 'I take the lighter, I light it...'
- (8b) *Vazo to kafe, to vrazo...*  
 Put.<sub>1S</sub> the.\*NEUT.SG coffee, \*it-CL boil.<sub>1S</sub>  
 'I put the coffee, I boil it...'

However, in all 4 cases there is agreement with the gender of the definite article in the DP which is their antecedent in the discourse. This allows us to speculate that agreement has been acquired and that the choice of the inappropriate forms is only a result of incorrect gender specification of the head noun by the subjects.

## 6. Conclusions

The performance of Turkish learners of English in pronouns and determiners revealed a contrast between the two categories: the definite article is used in obligatory contexts more frequently than the object pronoun which was omitted in all obligatory contexts in



the results presented. The contrast between the two categories is also found in the Greek L2 of the same group in similar tasks.

Given that Turkish L1 lacks both categories, the role of L1 transfer cannot account for the discrepancy observed. Moreover, the Greek group of English L2 learners, who act as a control group, shows similar contrast in their use of the definite article vs. the object pronoun. This result casts further doubt on the role of L1 transfer in L2 development of pronominal and article use.

We could tentatively argue that pronominal object drop is a valid choice in developing grammars for reasons to do with economy on spell-out properties (PF), subject to recoverability, i.e. discourse ensures recoverability of features at LF.

With respect to the question regarding the role of L2 in L3 development, it appears that the results presented provide a positive answer. Specifically, the L3 performance of Turkish learners with Greek L2 is better than that of the Greek group in the use of the definite article, particularly in the MT. It is then plausible to suggest that properties of the L2 grammar which differ from the L1, namely the existence of a D system requiring the display of overt elements, facilitate L3 development from the earliest stages, whereas the availability of these features in the native language does not affect L2 performance in the early stages. L2 effects on L3 acquisition could be accounted for on the grounds that the two grammars share the property of being distinct from the developmental and representational properties associated with the native language.

As far as the interpretability distinction is concerned, the data from the article system appear to be consistent with it: the Greek learners fare better in the indefinite rather than the definite article. Having acquired their Greek L1 article system they appear to be having a problem in mapping the distribution of articles in their English L2. The Turkish L1 group, however, has better performance in the use of the definite article than the Greek L1 group. Having an articleless L1, the TL1S resort to the application of a specificity feature when the context requires a definite article to ensure interpretability.

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