There has been a recent debate regarding the initial state in L3 acquisition and the conditions for syntactic transfer in this type of multilingualism. According to the Cumulative Enhancement Model (Flynn et al., 2004), all previous linguistic knowledge (L1 + L2) may affect the attainment of the L3; on the other hand, Bardel and Falk (2007) proposed that it is the L2 that plays a key role in L3 acquisition. On the other hand, Rothman (2011) believes that syntactic transfer is selective and that typological proximity plays a crucial role in L3 transfer: independently from the order of acquisition, it will be the typological closer language the source of transfer. In this study, we investigate further this issue by examining the initial state of L3 Spanish learners in French native speakers, with English as their L2.

Certain grammatical categories such as personal pronouns appear to be similar in nature but may belong to different classes, a crucial distinction that entails important syntactic differences (Cardinatelli & Starke, 1999). Spanish is uncontroversially a null subject language. When subject pronouns are present, they are strong pronouns; that is, they may be separated from the verb, they may appear alone, they may be focused and they may be coordinated (1). They behave in a similar fashion to English pronouns. French is considered by many a non-null subject language because subject pronouns are obligatory. Following Roberge’s (1990) seminal work, we assume that these pronouns are clitics, that is, they cannot be separated from the verb, they cannot be focused, nor can they appear alone. In other words, they behave more in line with morphological agreement features than strong pronouns.

The question that arises is whether third language learners at the initial stages of acquisition will be able to distinguish the different nature of subject pronouns in Spanish and French, and whether they will resort to English, a typologically different language but more proximate than French with respect to subject pronouns when acquiring Spanish. In particular, we wonder whether they will be able to recognize in sentences such as (1-3) that Spanish pronouns have different syntactic behaviour than their French counterparts, and that the default pronoun in Spanish is in nominative case, unlike in English or French.

(1) Él nom y yo nom estudiamos español por la mañana.
He and I study we Spanish in the morning.

(2) *Mí obl, yo nom como el helado de fresa, no él nom.
Me, I eat the ice-cream of strawberry, not him.

(3) *Eres ti obl quien canta bien, no Jaime.
are you who sings well, not Jaime

We tested 20 native speakers of French and 20 native speakers of English learning Spanish as their L3 in their third week of exposure to Spanish. Participants completed a written and oral Acceptability Judgment Task with coordinated pronouns (1), pronouns in contrastive focus (2), cleft-sentences (3) and other similar constructions in which French pronouns would act differently from Spanish pronouns. They also completed an oral task in which they had to answer with one word who the actor of several house duties was. This task elicited responses with pronouns, such as (4) “Who has to clean the dishes?, and the expected response was: “Yo”.

Results indicated that learners at early stages of exposition to Spanish as L3 had significant problems restructuring their grammars, presenting pronouns in the wrong case (i.e.: they produced ‘mí’, and sometimes ‘ti’ for second person to answer to questions such as (4). At the
same time, they had indeterminate knowledge about the possibility of coordination of pronouns, or their appearance in isolation, showing that their source of transfer can be both, the L1 and the L2, as the Cumulative Enhancement Model (Flynn et al., 2004) would predict.

References: