



# Topic-drop VS. *pro*-drop: Null Arguments in Chinese Native Speakers' L3 Italian

Alex Cherici [acherici@iu.edu](mailto:acherici@iu.edu)  
Indiana University



## 1. Introduction

This study investigates the **acquisition of null subjects by Mandarin Chinese NSs**, with different proficiency levels in L2 English, at initial stages of L3 Italian acquisition.

**Aim:** find out if, when acquiring Italian null subjects, Chinese NSs resort to L1 Chinese, which, like Italian, allows some form of null arguments, or to L2 English, given the typological similarity with the L3.

**4 groups** of Chinese NSs all at the **same stage of L3** acquisition, but **differing** with respect to their **L2 proficiency** level, were compared.

## 2. Null Arguments in Chinese and Italian

	Language Type	Null subjects	Null objects	Notes
Chinese	topic-drop	licensed by discourse	licensed by discourse	null subjects and objects as dropped topics
Italian	pro-drop	licensed via Agreement	not allowed	null and overt subjects not in free variation

## 3. Non-native null argument acquisition

*Null arguments acquired relatively swiftly...*

- **English NSs:** early near-native command of L2 null arguments
- **Spanish NSs:** obligatory subjects still omitted at high(er) proficiency levels

*...but NOT problem-free*

- **advanced** learners **overproduce/accept** null subjects
- **beginners undersupply** null subjects

An interesting L3 study: **Kong (2015):**

**L1Chinese – L2English – L3Spanish/(L3French)**

- Spanish L3ers acpted null subjects at nativelike rate but also in both widely accepted null objects

## 4. Research Questions & Hypotheses

RQ1	Will learners at initial stages of L3 acquisition show knowledge of null subjects?	H1	Availability of null arguments in Chinese eases acquisition of Italian null subjects (despite different licensing strategies)
RQ2	Will L2 English proficiency influence acceptance of overt subjects in L3 Italian?	H2	Transfer triggered by perceived typological proximity between L2 and L3 will occur (at least for learners with higher L2 proficiency)

## 5. Predictions relative to L3 Acquisition Models

- **Typological Primacy Model** (Rothman, 2013): **Wholesale transfer** at initial stages from the language perceived as typologically closer  
→ Transfer from English: high acceptance of overt subjects, low acceptance of null subjects, and high acceptance of overt expletives
- **Scalpel Model** (Slabakova, 2016); **Linguistic Proximity Model** (Westergaard et al., 2016): **Transfer** occurs when a **particular linguistic property** receives supporting input from the L1 or the L2, regardless of order of acquisition or typology.  
→ Relevant properties carved out from Chinese: high acceptance of null subjects and total rejection of overt expletives.

## 6. Method

### ❖ Participants

- **Experimental group** = 45 Chinese NSs
  - Enrolled in intensive language programs in Italy
  - Tested during the 8<sup>th</sup> week of class (=180 hrs of instruction)
  - Comparable language background and same L3 level
  - Divided in 4 groups according to L2 English proficiency, assessed by means of a cloze test
- **Control group (CTRL)** = 15 Italian monolinguals (mean age: 38.03 [SD = 13.52])

### ❖ Materials

- **Language background questionnaire** also investigating intensity of interaction (Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011)
- **English cloze** (adapted from Allan, 1992): 35 blanks to be optionally filled with subject or object pronouns (max possible score=35; participants' scores: 0–33)

### • Acceptability Judgment Task (30')

- **1–4 scale** (1 = unnatural/unacceptable; 4 = natural/acceptable)
- **32 experimental items** (+14 fillers)
- **4 types** (8 tokens each: 4 grammatical; 4 ungrammatical)

Type	Example
Matrix Subject	<i>Mia zia è dottoressa e (*lei) aiuta i malati.</i> 'My auntie is a doctor and she helps the sick.'
Embedded Subject	<i>Loro dicono che (*loro) sono bravi.</i> 'They say that they are good.'
Expletive	<i>(*Sì) piove spesso a Milano.</i> 'Milan is often rainy.'
wh-question	<i>Dove (*lei) va in vacanza?</i> 'Where is she going on vacation?'

Table 2. AJT item types and examples

Group	N	Age		Cloze-test Score		
		Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD
L2ADV	9	20.04	2.18	26-33	29.11	2.37
L2INT	10	22.11	2.42	20-23	21.70	1.25
L2ELE	12	21.03	2.90	12-18	14.92	1.98
L2PRE	14	21.06	2.26	0-9	5.64	3.08

Table 1. The four learner groups

L2ADV = Chinese NSs w/advanced L2 proficiency

L2ELE = Chinese NSs w/elementary L2 proficiency

L2INT = Chinese NSs w/intermediate L2 proficiency

L2PRE = Chinese NSs w/pre-elementary L2 proficiency

## 7. Results

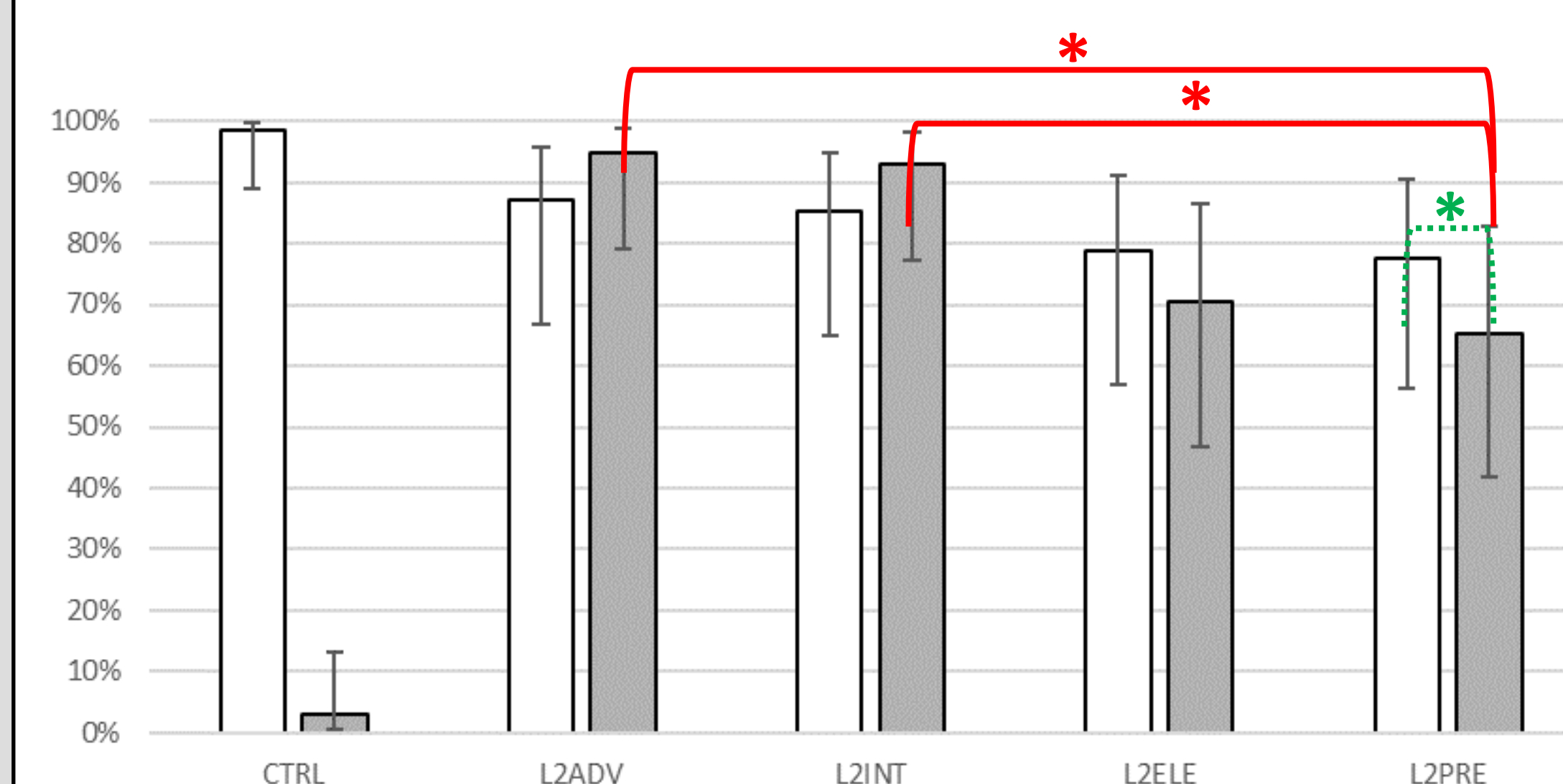
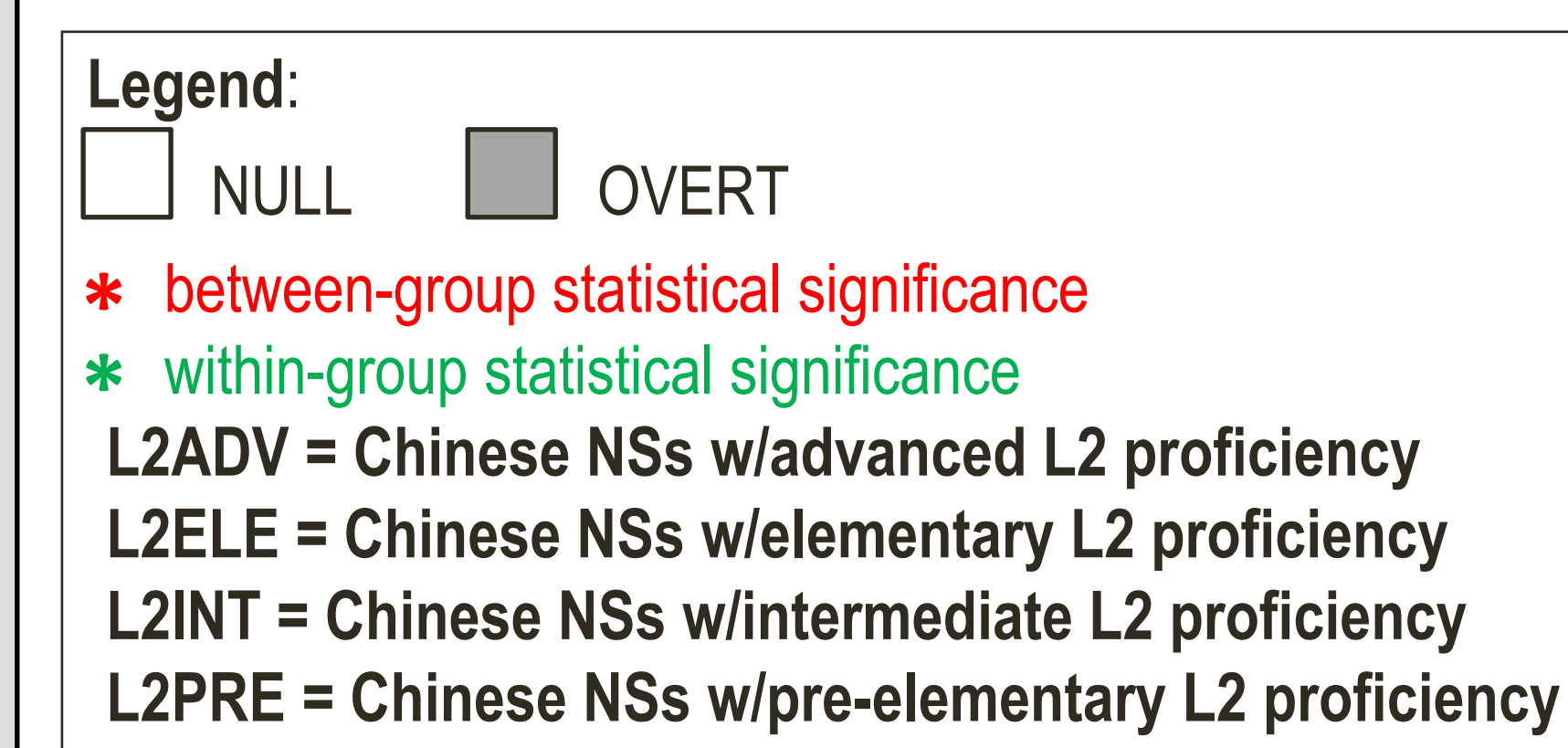


Figure 2. Model estimates of probability of acceptance of null and overt subjects in WH-QUESTIONS and 95% CI

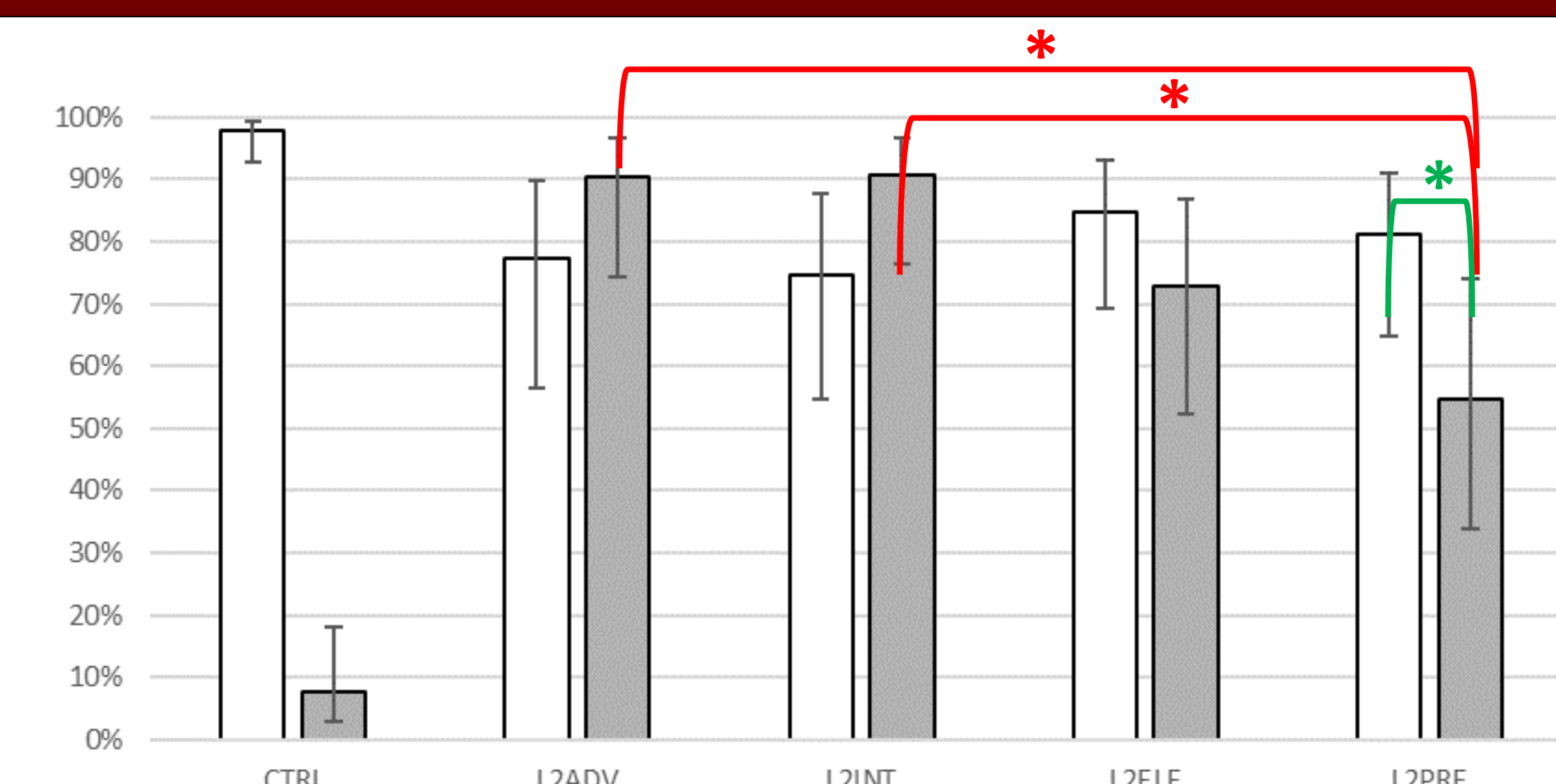


Figure 1. Model estimates of probability of acceptance of null and overt subjects in BICLAUSAL DECLARATIVES and 95% CI

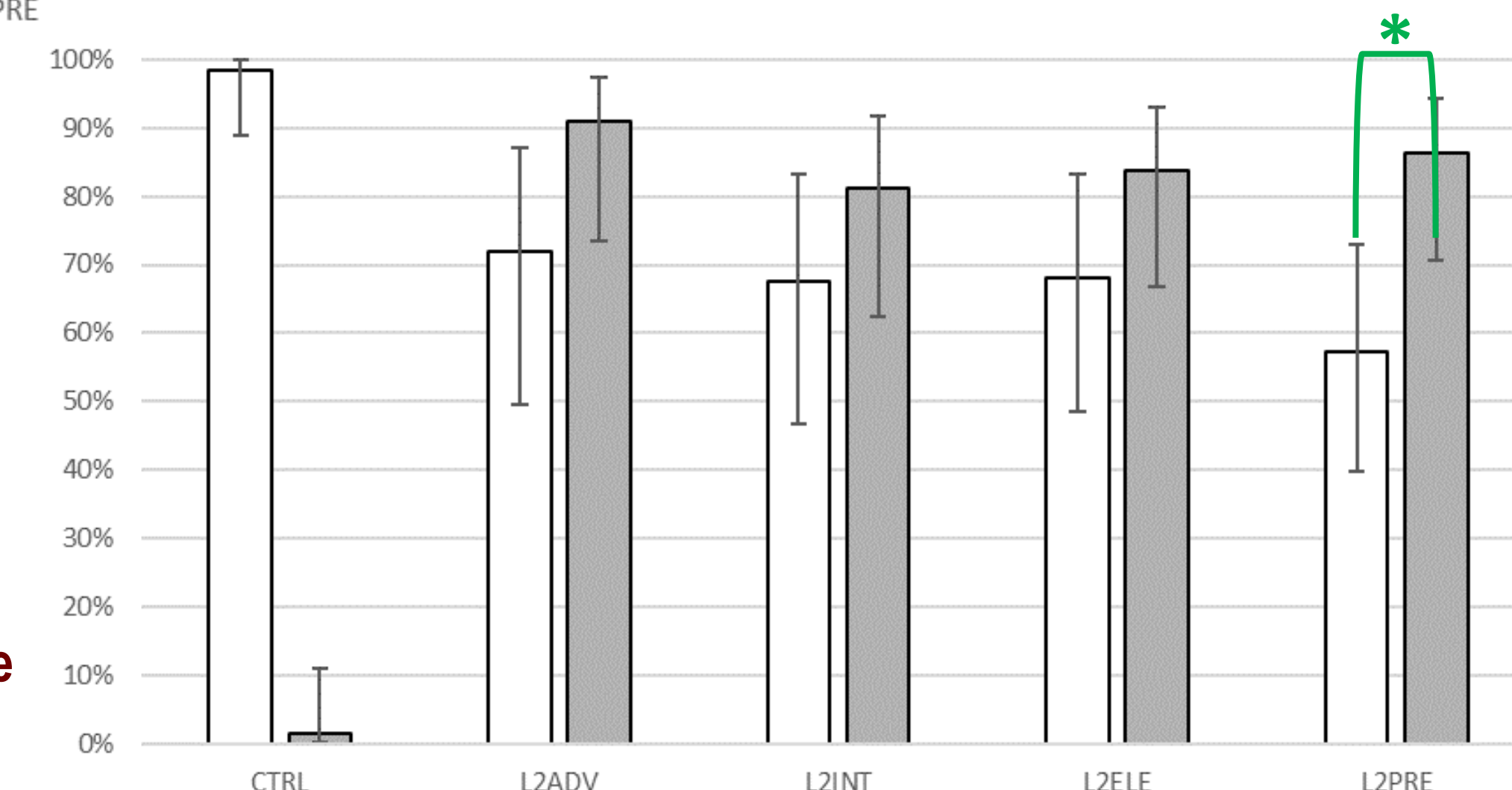


Figure 3. Model estimates of probability of acceptance of null and overt subjects in EXPLETIVES and 95% CI

## 8. Discussion

- Learners' null subject acceptance rate always above chance
  - L1 transfer?
  - UG (i.e. unmarked system acquired more "swiftly")?
  - Naturalistic Input?
- Learners' overt subject acceptance rate always significantly higher rate than the controls
  - L2 transfer?
  - Classroom input?
  - Textbook input?
- "Two-by-two" trend
  - L2 transfer?
- For groups with a higher L2 proficiency, both L1 and L2 seemingly exerted some influence:
  - L1 Chinese → high null subject acceptance
  - L2 English → high overt subject acceptance

### • L3 models' predictions:

**No wholesale** transfer (à la TPM)

- If English, **how to explain high acceptance of null subjects?**

**No property-by-property** transfer based on linguistic similarity (à la Scalpel Model/LPM)

- If relevant property "carved out" from Chinese, **how to explain the high acceptance of overt expletives?**

### To do's:

- Look at null object acceptance rates
- Test production

## 9. Conclusion

**RQ1:** Will learners at initial stages of L3 Italian acquisition show knowledge of null subjects?

**They show knowledge of availability of null subjects but not of their distribution**

**RQ2:** Will L2 English proficiency influence acceptance of overt subjects in L3 Italian?

**Perhaps → "two-by-two" trend in two conditions**

## Selected References

- Allan (1992). *The Oxford Placement Test*. Oxford University Press.
- Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos (2011). Proficiency, length of stay, intensity of interaction and acquisition of conventional expressions in L2 pragmatics. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 8(3), 347-84.
- Guasti (2002). *Language Acquisition: The Growth of Grammar*. MIT Press.
- Huang (1984). On the distribution and reference of empty pronouns. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 15, 531-74.
- Kong (2015). L3 initial state: Typological primacy driven, L2 factor determined or L1 feature oriented? *Taiwan J. Linguistics*, 13(2), 79-116.
- Rothman, J. (2013). Linguistic and cognitive motivations for the Typological Primacy Model (TPM) of third language (L3) transfer: Timing of acquisition and proficiency considered. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 18(2), 179–190.
- Slabakova (2017). The Scalpel Model of third language acquisition. *IJB*, 21(6):1-15.
- Westergaard, Mitrofanova, Mykhaylyk, & Rodina (2017). Crosslinguistic influence in the acquisition of a third language: The linguistic proximity model. *IJB*, 21(6), 666-682.