Goals: In this study we aim to test speakers with Spanish L1/Portuguese L2, verifying their sensibility to topic specificity and certain syntactic constraints in topicalization and null object constructions.

Theoretical Framework: Spanish and Portuguese are typologically similar languages. However, they differ regarding the properties of their topic constructions. In Spanish, when the topic is specific, a clitic must be inserted in the comment; otherwise, the construction occurs without the clitic. Hence, Spanish displays a division of labour between topicalization (Top) and clitic left dislocation (CLD) constructions: like Portuguese, CLD is only allowed with specific topics (1); on the other hand, unlike Portuguese, Top is restricted to non-specific topics (2). In terms of distribution, however, neither Portuguese nor Spanish allow Top with strong islands (Duarte 1987, 2003). Following Valenzuela (2006), in Spanish, in embedded contexts only CLD can occur (3), contrary to Portuguese where both constructions (Top and CLD) are possible (4). In root contexts, however, both constructions are allowed in both languages (5) and (6).

There is a relationship between topicalization and null objects structures: in both structures, the empty category in object position is an A-bar variable bound by a phonetically null topic (Huang 1984, Raposo 1986). Hence, both constructions are subject to the same semantic and syntactic constraints (Duarte 1987, 2003 and Alamillo & Schwenter 2007).

Regarding the acquisition of these properties in L2, an hypothesis such as Full Transfer / Full Access Hypothesis (Schwartz & Sprouse 1994), predicts that it is possible to acquire all the properties of the L2 grammar, although, initially, there will be transfer of the L1 grammar. On the other hand, Sorace (2003), Robertson & Sorace (1999) and Tsimpli & Sorace (2006), for example, have argued that, unlike purely syntactic properties, the domain of interpretation remains "vulnerable" at the final stage of L2 acquisition. This asymmetry may be due to the fact that properties which involve an interface between two or more grammatical domains require more complex processing.

Previous studies on the acquisition of topic constructions in Spanish L2 (e.g. Valenzuela 2006) reveal the presence of L1 transfer (from English, in this particular case) in the results of near natives, showing that this influence is stronger with interpretative properties than syntactic ones. Ivanov (2009), however, concluded that interpretative properties may be acquired as fast as syntactic ones.

Hypotheses: In line with the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis, we make the following predictions:

1- At an elementary level, there will be L1 transfer of the relevant properties, which is manifested by a correlation between topic specificity and construction type (learners will prefer Top with [-Spec] Topics and CLD with [+Spec] topics).

2- At an advanced level, the target specificity constraints of each of the constructions will have been acquired (learners will prefer Top with [-Spec] topics and they will accept both options with [+Spec] topics).

3- There will be a correlation between the results of Top and null objects, revealing that these two constructions have the same representation in the learners’ interlanguage grammar.

Methodology: Our study is composed of two groups of Spanish speakers learning Portuguese as a second language (one elementary, one advanced) and a control group of native speakers. Three tasks were used: two production tasks and one judgement task. The first production task aims to test whether the learners produce topicalization structures in answer to questions where the object is presented as old information. The second task is also a production task,
designed to elicit null objects. The subjects are shown an image and are asked a question of the type “O menino comeu o bolo?/Did the boy eat the cake?”, eliciting a verbal answer. The third task is a judgement one, which aims to test if learners have knowledge of some of the semantic and syntactic properties of topicalization and null object constructions. Learners are instructed to read a sentence (which they may also hear and is accompanied by an image). 44 items were presented: 24 are designed to test for knowledge of the specificity constraints of topicalization/CLD and null objects/clitic constructions in root sentences with specific and non-specific topics; 12 test for knowledge of syntactic constraints in the same constructions, presenting strong island contexts with specific topics; 8 are control items presenting embedded structures from where extraction is allowed, in contrast to strong islands.

Results: Our results indicate that learners have knowledge of the relevant constructions, even if that knowledge is non-target. No L1 transfer effects were observed, as elementary learners tend to choose an option that is allowed neither in Spanish nor in Portuguese – i.e. CLD and clitic constructions both in islands contexts and with non-specific topics. Our results also show that the elementary group seems to ignore specificity distinctions, even if they appear to know the syntactic constraints. The advanced group presents results close to those of the control group in both constructions (Top and Null Objects). The relationship between topicalization and null objects seems to have been established. We conclude that, although there may be a delay in the acquisition of interpretative properties (when compared to syntactic ones), these are fully acquirable. Finally, it is important to refer that both groups tend to choose “CLD” or clitic constructions more often than the other options, generally speaking. They seem to have a preference for CLD, which can be attributed to the fact that CLD may involve less processing costs than Topicalization (Abalada 2011).

Examples:

(1) O bolo, o João (o) comeu [The cake, John ate (it)]
Este libro, *(lo) he leído muchas veces (Valenzuela 2006) [This book, I read *(it) many times]

(2) Revistas, leio(*-as) frequentemente [Magazines, I read (*them) often]
Revistas, *(la)s leo a menudo (Valenzuela 2006) [Magazines, I read *(them) often]

(3) a) Te aseguro que, tu secreto, no se lo he dicho a nadie [I can assure you that, your secret, I didn’t tell it to anyone]

b) Me pregunto si, secretos, puede guardar. (Valenzuela 2006) [*I wonder if, secrets, he can keep]

(4) Asseguro-te de que, o teu segredo, não (o) conto a ninguém. [I assure you that, your secret, I won’t tell (it) to anyone]

(5) O bolo, o João comeu(-o). [The cake, John ate (it)]

(6) a) Este libro, lo he leído muchas veces [This book, I read it many times]

b) Libros, leo a menudo (Valenzuela 2006) [Books, I read often]

References