Acquisition of the Possessive Determiners *his* and *her* in pre-adolescent L1 Catalan / Spanish children

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Abstract

The present TFG provides insight into the acquisition of possessive determiners *his/her* in English by L1 Catalan/Spanish speakers. Fourteen pre-adolescent children were tested through two elicited production tasks. Results show that the possessive determiner *his* cannot be claimed to be operative as an unmarked default form. In fact, a slight preference for *her* was found. On the other hand, because Catalan and Spanish agree the possessive determiners with the object and not with the subject, gender transfer was expected. However, results show that gender transfer does not seem to be an issue. The animacy hierarchy cannot account for the errors produced either. Further research concerning prepositional phrases should be pursued as well as concerning developmental sequences of the acquisition of possessive determiners.

1. Introduction

The masculine and feminine third person singular possessive determiners in English, i.e. *his* and *her*, have been proven to be difficult for L1 Catalan and Spanish speakers (White, Muñoz and Collins, 2007). This can be attributed to the fact that English possessive determiners agree with the subject and not with the object, as is the case with Catalan and Spanish. Catalan and Spanish possessive determiners overtly agree in number and gender in almost all cases. Moreover, the fact that Spanish third person singular possessive determiners do not overtly agree in gender is not relevant since agreement is still in the speaker's mind (Antón-Méndez, 2011).

In spite of the fact that number agreement between noun and determiner exists in English as well, it is only overtly marked in English for the demonstratives *these/those*. From this stems that English speakers do not implement agreement by default. On the contrary, most determiners in Spanish have overt marking, which is why speakers of Spanish appear to have the process of syntactic gender agreement rooted in their minds, regardless of the presence of morphological evidence (Antón-Méndez, 2011).

The present TFG aims at answering the three following research questions:

- RQ1: is *his/her* used as an unmarked default form?
- RQ2: can errors when selecting *his* or *her* be accounted for in terms of transfer, that is, transfer from L1 Catalan or Spanish?
- RQ3: if so, is it equally problematic when the object is animated as when the object is inanimate?

Therefore, the objective of the research is to find out whether or not there exists a unmarked default option and whether or not the L1 and the nature of the possessed has an influence in the learners' production of third person singular possessive determiners.

2. Literature review

The aim of this section is to provide a framework for the present study which relates to the previous research carried out in the field and which will allow for an interpretation of the results. Previous research (Antón-Méndez, 2010, 2012; Brown, Cazden, Bellugi, 1973; deSwart, Lamers, Lestrade, 2008; Dulay, Burt, 1974, 1975; Malchukov, 2008; White 1996; White, Muñoz, Collins, 2007) has shed light on crucial points for the present research, such as order of acquisition, default value, language transfer and animacy. Each of these points will be explored further down below in sections 2.3, 2.4, 2.5 and 2.6, respectively. A linguistic explanation of the construction and a contrastive analysis of English possessive determiners in Catalan and Spanish possessive determiners will be provided as well in sections 2.1 and 2.2, respectively.

2.1 Linguistic description

Possessive determiners, also known as attributive adjectives (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973) are a type of determiners which is mutually exclusive with the articles and modifies the head of a noun phrase to express possession of something or someone. Due to their position in the noun phrase, possessive determiners are central determiners. There are seven possessive determiners in English: *my, your, his, her, its, our, their*. Possessive determiners in English work according to the natural gender of the possessor rule, that is, they must agree in gender and number with the antecedent, as in examples (1) and (2):

(1) She loves her dog.

(2) He loves his dog.

Furthermore, *his* has been considered by some grammarians (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik) to be the unmarked form. Therefore, it may be taken as the dominant default form. Consider the following example by Quirck and Greenbaum (1973):

(3) Each of the students should have his/their own books.

On the other hand, animacy has been recently researched on in the grounds of SLA for it being a common characteristic of languages and for the impact it can have on grammar:

> Since discourse prominence is related to the speaker's empathy, it is conceivable that animate, in particular human, nominals are more eligible for number marking as compared to inanimate ones. Some other categories, like agreement, also seem to be sensitive to prominence, and display similar animacy effects. (Malchuknov, 2008: 204)

Indeed, animacy in linguistics is a recurrent topic and is often represented in the following hierarchy: human > animal (animate) > inanimate. This distinction proves useful in a lot of contexts, which is why it will be assumed in the present research. For instance, there is the restriction in most Mayan languages that the subject and the object of a sentence need to be of the same hierarchical status (deSwart, Lamers and Lestrade, 2008), thus:

(4) *The dog saw the woman

(5) The man saw the woman

As will be discussed in section 2.5, this distinction has also proved to have an impact on the use of third person singular determiners *his* and *her* in English by speakers of L1 Romance language.

Finally, it should be noted that in English there is natural gender, which means that the gender of the word depends on the sex of the item the word refers to in the real world. On the contrary, gender is an inherent property of nouns in Catalan and Spanish and, thus, has a syntactic consequence, that is, it determines the form of its modifiers. This difference is relevant for the present study as it opens the door to the possibility of gender transfer occurring.

2.2 Contrastive analysis of English possessive determiners and Catalan / Spanish possessive determiners

We will now examine the main differences between possessive determiners in Catalan and Spanish and English. We will focus on their agreement, form and use.

2.2.1 Agreement

In terms of agreement, English works according to the natural gender of the possessor rule, that is, using a masculine or a feminine determiner depends on who possesses the person or object, rather than on the possessed entity itself. On the contrary, Catalan and Spanish work according to the possessed entity rule, which means that gender is chosen according to the gender of what is possessed as in:

(6) Aquest és el seu germà i aquesta és la seva germana. (*Eng. This is his/her/their brother and this is his/her/their sister).*

Moreover, Catalan overtly agrees in gender with the possessum, which means that all determiners clearly show whether they are feminine or masculine. This holds only partly true for Spanish since the third person possessive determiners do not overtly agree in gender with the entity which is possessed. However, this lack of overt agreement may be seen as a coincidence due to phonological change through time, therefore, attention to gender agreement is still in the mind of any L1 Spanish speaker due to the fact that gender agreement is a core feature of the language (Antón-Méndez, 2011) as can be seen in (7):

(7) Nuestro coche y nuestra moto. (*Eng. Our car and our motorbike*).

2.2.2 Form

In terms of form, as can be seen in the table presented below, English has three possessive determiners for the third person singular, one for masculine possessora, another for feminine possessors and a third one for neuter possessors, mainly animals and objects. It is interesting to notice that these forms are all in the singular due to the fact that only the possessor is taken into account. On the other hand, Catalan has four possessive determiners, i.e. singular feminine, singular masculine, plural feminine and plural masculine. A property of Catalan determiners is that they are always preceded by a determiner as in:

(8) Aquest és el seu llibre. (*Eng. This is his/her/its book*).

Finally, Spanish has only two possessive determiners, *su* and *sus*, and choosing one or the other depends on whether the possessed entity is singular or plural. Interestingly enough, and due to the difference between adopting the possessor rule or the possessed

entity rule, English *its* has no equivalent in Catalan or Spanish. Therefore, 'its' will not considered in the present research.

<table>
<tr><th>ENGLISH</th><th>CATALAN</th><th>SPANISH</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">his / her / its</td><td>el seu</td><td rowspan="2">su</td></tr>
<tr><td>la seva</td></tr>
<tr><td>els seus</td><td rowspan="2">sus</td></tr>
<tr><td>les seves</td></tr>
</table>

Table 1. Possessive determiners in English, Catalan and Spanish.

2.2.3 Use

As far as the use of possessive determiners is concerned, all three languages use them to show possession or ownership of something or someone. However, English presents a more extensive use of possessive determiners than Catalan or Spanish in two situations. Firstly, possessives in English are systematically used to refer to parts of the body in most cases except in prepositional phrases, in which the definite article is usually preferred as in the following example:

(9) He grabbed me by the arm.

Secondly, English possessive determiners are frequently used with clothes (Eastwood, 2006). Compare the following examples:

	Parts of the body	Clothes
English	(10) I broke my arm	(11) put your T-shirt on
Catalan	(12) m'he trencat el braç	(13) posa't la samarreta
Spanish	(14) me he roto el brazo	(15) ponte la camiseta

Table 2: Difference of use of possessive determiners in English, Catalan and Spanish.

As far as the use of possessive determiners in Catalan is concerned, they are used less frequently than in English. For instance, the possessive determiners are not to be used when the context makes it clear who the possessor is as well as when it is possible to substitute them for *li*, *els* or *les*.[1] Consider the following examples:

(16) Reculli el premi. (*Eng. Collect the prize*).

(17) *Reculli el seu premi. (*Eng. Collect your prize*).

(18) Es va posar les mans al cap. (*Eng. *S/he put the hands to the/his/her head*).

(19) *Va posar les seves mans al cap. (*Eng. S/he put his/her hands to the/his/her head*).

The same holds true for Spanish: the use of *se* instead of the possessive determiner is encouraged:

(20) se puso las manos a la cabeza (*Eng. *S/he put the hands to the/his/her head*).

(21) *puso sus manos a la cabeza (*Eng. S/he put his/her hands to the/his/her head*).

Therefore, for the sake of ease of comparison, only contexts in which the three languages overlap will be considered in this research, that is, the use of possessive determiners when referring to parts of the body or clothes will be omitted and left for further research. Furthermore, contexts in which plural determiners would be used in Catalan and Spanish will not be considered either, for instance:

[1] Optimot, consultes lingüístiques. (n.d.) Generalitat de Catalunya. Retrieved from http://optimot.gencat.cat

(22) les seves sabates

(23) his/her shoes

2.3 *His* as a default form

As seen before, some grammarians consider (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik) *his* to be the unmarked default form. This claim is very relevant for the present study since it may be used to account for the results of the experiment. The reason why *his* is preferred, other than all languages seem to have marked and unmarked forms, is unclear. Some authors claim that it is a case of transfer of teaching, in Selinker's (1967) terms, since coursebooks tend to use more masculine examples. However, the claim that coursebooks are biased does not hold true anymore. Previous research on possessive determiners proved that there seems to be a slight tendency to use *his* over *her* (Antón-Mendez, 2010, 2012).

On the other hand, there also exists evidence that *his* is not necessarily an unmarked form. If we consider the eight stage developmental framework mentioned before in the study carried out by White, Muñoz, and Collins (2007), stage four corresponds to the emergence category and claims that L2 English learners have a "preference for *his* or *her*" (original emphasis). Therefore, it seems that there would be a stage in which L1 Romance language speakers would not have any clear preference for the masculine one.

2.4 Acquisition of English possessive determiners *his* and *her*

It has been claimed that learners of English, regardless of their L1, tend to follow a similar order when acquiring certain constructions or parts of the language.

Brown (1973) examined 14 grammatical morphemes and concluded that markers such as *ing* and the plural /s/ were acquired before features such as the possessive /s/. The results of his study were backed by further research carried out by other scholars, such as Dulay and Burt (1974, 1975). Furthermore, Krashen (1982) also devoted an important part of his theory of second language acquisition to what is known as the natural order hypothesis (Krashen, 1982). He claimed that the acquisition of grammatical constructions follows an order. This order is assumed to be similar, if not the same, with L2 learners of English, regardless of their L1.

More related to the present study is the research carried out by White, Muñoz, and Collins (2007), in which they tested an eight-stage developmental framework put forth by White (1996) which accounts for L1 Romance language speakers' acquisition of L2 English *his*/*her* feature. The results showed that the stages are an accurate account of L1 Romance languages speakers' development, at least for L1 French, Catalan and Spanish, when it comes to acquiring the possessive determiners *his* and *her*, starting from no use of them and finishing with perfect use of them. This developmental framework can be divided into three categories, i.e. pre-emergence, emergence and post-emergence.[2] In pre-emergence stages, learners do not use *his* or *her* at all. The emergence stages are characterised by some instances of *his* and *her* or also by the preference for one of the forms. In the post-emergence stages, learners start to differentiate between *his* and *her* in a wider variety of contexts. However, learners may continue to make mistakes typical of lower stages at all stages below the last stage (White *et al.*, 2007).

[2] Refer to appendix 9.3 for further insight in White's sequences of acquisition.

2.5 Transfer in the uses of *his* and *her*

There are a few theoretical concerns that will be relevant when analysing the results and aiming to answer the second research question on whether or not language transfer exists. Firstly and in order to analyse language transfer, it is necessary to classify the type of errors that learners make. Corder (1967) distinguishes two kinds of errors, i.e. interlingual and intralingual. We are concerned here with interlingual errors, which are the systematic errors caused by influence of the L1. Other authors have also carried out research on the influence of the L1. Selinker (1972) refers to it as language transfer, which is applicable not only to errors but constructions as well. Regardless of the terminology we choose to adopt, language transfer is a reality.

Secondly, other authors have claimed that language transfer stems from a lack of knowledge. As a result of the lack of knowledge in the L2, if learners are asked to produce output before they are ready to do so they use resources from the L1 (Newmark 1966, cited in Krashen, 1982: 27).

Finally, the distinction between learning, i.e. explicit knowledge of easy access, and acquisition, i.e. implicit knowledge which has become automatised, is relevant as well. Free variation is the result of learning and not integrating, i.e. acquiring (Ellis, 1999 cited in Long, 2005: 511).

2.6 Influence of animacy and gender in the choice of *his* and *her*

White (1996) noticed in her experiment with L1 French speakers learning English that "judgements about non-human PDs (inanimate and body parts) are significantly more accurate than judgements about human PD forms" and that "the

accuracy rate for body parts is similar to the rates for inanimate and kin-same" (White 2007: 224). Likewise, Antón-Méndez (2012) carried out a study on possessive pronoun gender errors and concluded that animacy itself did not seem to trigger errors. Antón-Méndez's study also concluded that while pronoun gender errors are particularly common for L2 Spanish speakers learning English, only inherent gender features of animate nouns trigger the L1 syntactic gender agreement. This seems to be due to a faulty processing at a conceptual level, that is, the antecedent's features in English are not properly processed.

On the other hand, Antón-Méndez's (2010) study on possessive pronouns gender errors shed some more light on the issue. She compared L1 Italian, Spanish and Dutch speakers' production of *his* and *her* and found out that gender errors are due to either an insufficient automatisation or an excess automatisation. In other words, when the L2, in this case English, demands a certain syntactic or morphological procedure which does not exist or is different in the L1, the automatisation is difficult to implement consistently.

3. Methodology

The data on which the research is based comes from 14 subjects, 9 girls and 5 boys all aged between 11 and 12 years old. All of them, except for two, have been attending EFL courses in a language school for two to five years.

A placement test was distributed to 25 L2 English learners aged 11 to 12 years old. Of those, 14 subjects have been selected to take part in the research. These subjects have between an A1 level and an A2 level. The subjects were asked to complete a translation task with specially designed sentences testing the use of the third person

singular possessive determiners *his* and *her*. They were also asked to complete a fill-in-the-blanks task. Both tasks are elicited production tasks and include distractors and were tested beforehand by a control group of three adult native speakers.

4. Results

This section focuses on the results gathered. We will consider each task in turn.[3]

First of all, and as far as the use of *his* or *her* is concerned in task 1, the following table presents the use of *his* and *her* that each participant made. We can see that in most cases, participants did not only make fewer mistakes when *her* was required but also used *her* incorrectly more often than its masculine counterpart. Participants 1 and 6 do not seem to conform to the pattern, making more mistakes when *her* was required and using *his* incorrectly more often than *her*.

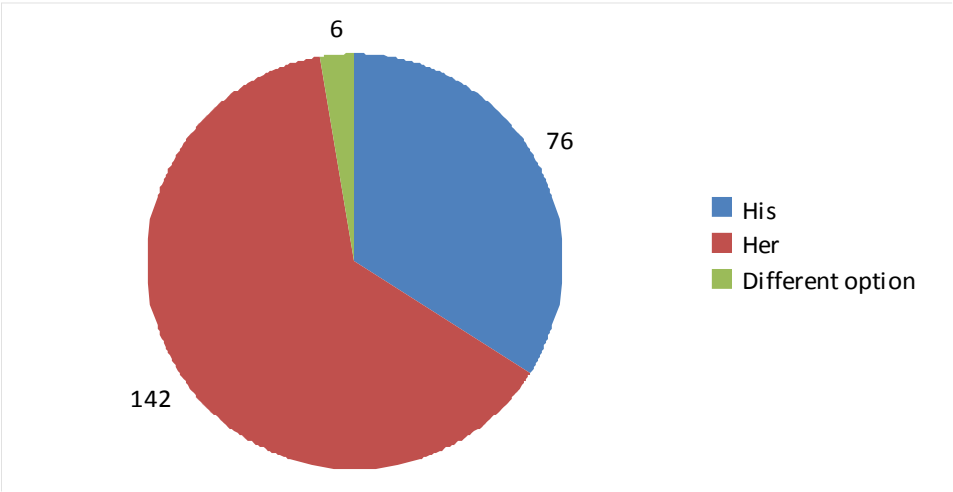
	Correct: *his*	Correct: *her*	Incorrect use of *his/her*
Participant 1	13/16	8/16	11 tokens (72.7% *his*; 27.3% *her*)
Participant 2	8/16	11/16	13 tokens (28.5% *his*; 61.5% *her*)
Participant 3	7/16	15/16	8 tokens (12.5% *his*; 87.5% *her*)
Participant 4	10/16	15/16	6 tokens (16.6% *his*; 83.3% *her*)
Participant 5	12/16	16/16	4 tokens (100% *her*)
Participant 6	16/16	12/16	4 tokens (100% *his*)

[3] Refer to Appendix 9.2 for a more detailed account of errors made in Task 1. Note that only 9 out of the 14 participants were included because the other 5 participants scored full marks.

Participant 7	3/16	14/16	15 tokens (13.3% *his*; 86.6% *her*)
Participant 8	7/16	16/16	8 tokens (100% *her*)
Participant 9	14/16	15/16	1 token (100% *her*)

Table 3. Use of *his/her* per participant in task 1.

If we consider the overall performance in task 1, results show that *her* was preferred over *his*. There were 112 instances in which *his* was required and 112 in which *her* was required. However, participants provided 76 instances of *his*, 142 instances of *her*, and 6 instances in which an article or nothing was used instead. Therefore, in 64% of the cases, *her* was used.



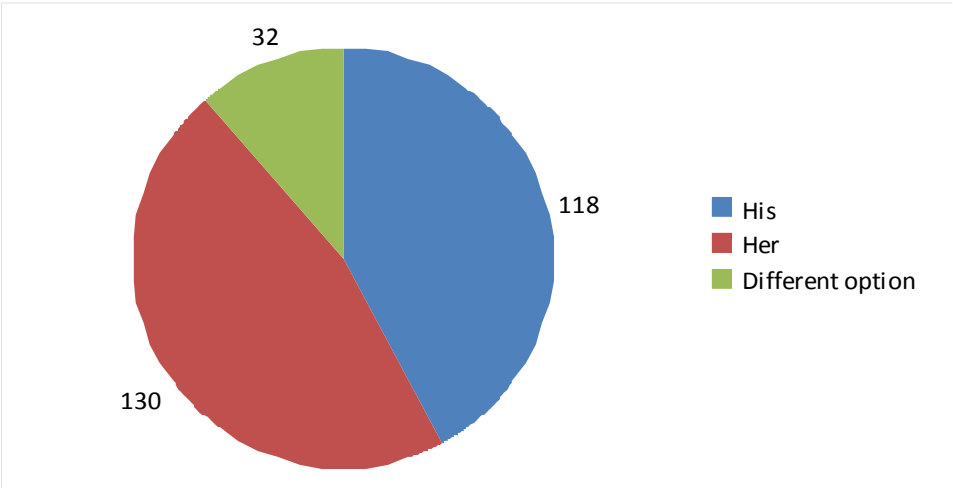
Graph 1. Use of *his* and *her* in Task 1.

The following table shows the results gathered for each participant in task 2. Note that there are 9 participants listed (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 and 10) because the numbers have been kept the same for task 1 and 2. This time 7 participants scored full marks (participants 4, 8, 9, and 11-14).

	Correct: *his*	Correct: *her*	Incorrect use of *his/her*
Participant 1	7/10	3/10	5 tokens (20% *his*; 80% *her*)
Participant 2	8/10	4/10	5 tokens (60% *his*; 40% *her*)
Participant 3	2/10	7/10	8 tokens (100% *her*)
Participant 5	6/10	10/10	4 tokens (100% *her*)
Participant 6	9/10	7/10	1 token (100% *her*)
Participant 7	8/10	7/10	1 token (100% *his*)
Participant 10	8/10	7/10	3 tokens (33.3% *his*; 66.6% *her*)

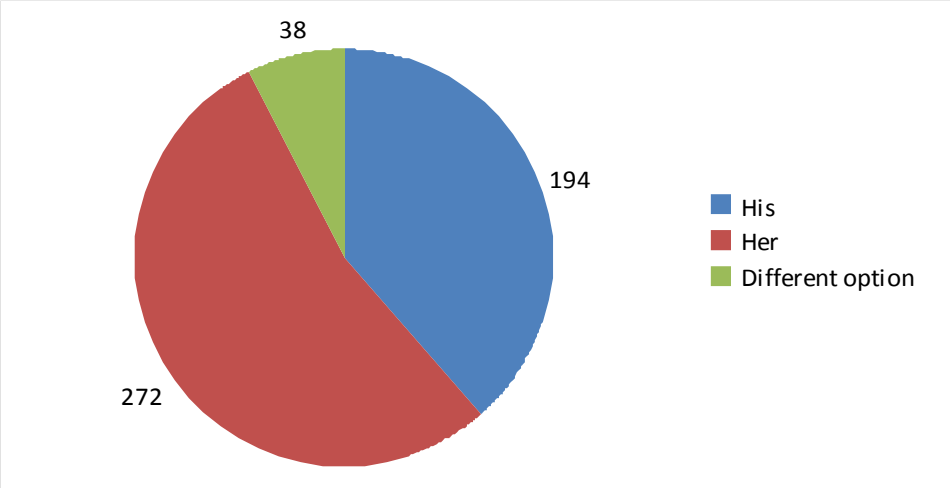
Table 4. Use of *his/her* per participant in task 2.

The overall data gathered in task 2 shows that *her* was slightly preferred over *his*, with 130 instances of it and 118 instances of the masculine determiner. In 32 instances, the blanks were completed with articles or different possessive determiners other than *his* or *her*.



Graph 2. Use of *his* and *her* in Task 2.

The following graph shows the use of *his* and *her* in task 1 and task 2.



Graph 3. Overall use of *his* and *her*.

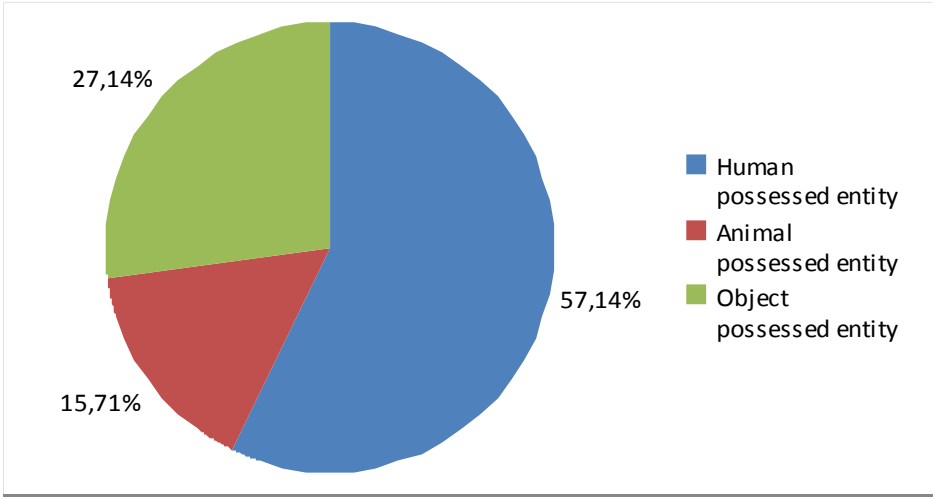
On the other hand, and as far as the mistakes made in task 1 relating to the animacy hierarchy are concerned, the following table shows the results gathered in task 1 for each participant. We can observe that all participants with no exception make more mistakes when the possessed entity is a human being. Furthermore, 8 out of the 9 participants made more mistakes when the possessed entity was an object than when it was an animal. If the animacy hierarchy was respected, one would expect the error rate to increase from object to human, thus, animals should present fewer errors than humans but more than objects. This tendency is only respected by participant 4.

	Human	Animal	Object
Participant 1	7/11 (63.6%)	0/11 (0%)	4/11 (36.3%)
Participant 2	8/13 (61.5%)	2/13 (15.4%)	3/13 (23.1%)
Participant 3	4/8 (50%)	1/8 (12.5%)	3/8 (37.5%)
Participant 4	3/6 (50%)	2/6 (33.3%)	1/6 (16.6)

Participant 5	4/4 (100%)	0/4 (0%)	0/4 (0%)
Participant 6	2/4 (50%)	1/4 (25%)	1/4 (25%)
Participant 7	6/15 (40%)	3/15 (20%)	6/15 (40%)
Participant 8	4/8 (50%)	2/8 (25%)	2/8 (25%)
Participant 9	1/1 (100%)	0/1 (0%)	0/1 (0%)

Table 5. Error rate for possessed entities for participant in task 1

Considering the overall performance in task 1, results show that the category with the fewest errors is the one in which the possessed entity is an animal, with 19.64% error rate. On the other hand, the other two categories, that is, human possessed entity and inanimate object possessed entity, show a higher error rate, at 35.7% and 34%, respectively. This translates to 57.14% of the mistakes being made with human possessed entities; 15.71% with animal possessed entities; and 27.14% with inanimate objects as possessed entities.



Graph 4. Error rate for possessed entities in Task 1.

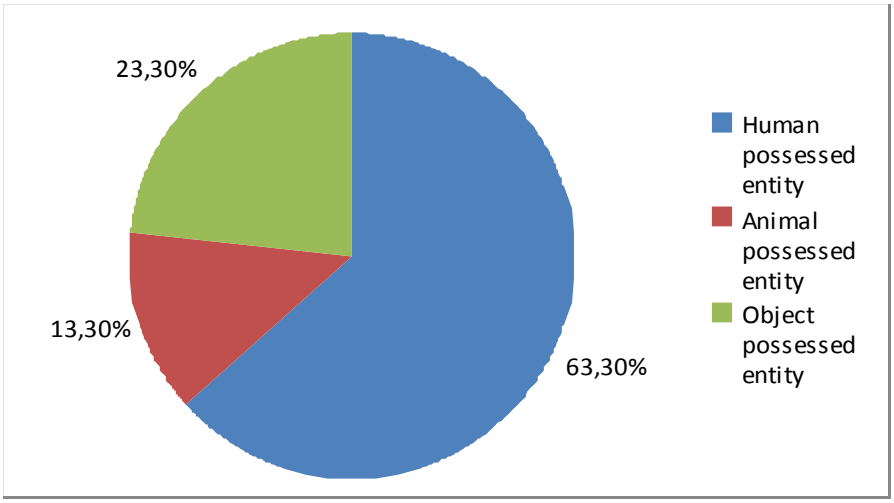
Results gathered in task 2 for each participant are presented in the following table. Similarly to in task 1, participants in task 2 tend to make more errors when the possessed entity is a human being, except for participants 6, 7 and 10. Interestingly enough, 2 participants seem to follow the pattern marked by the animacy hierarchy and of the remaining five participants, 3 make more mistakes when the possessed entity is an animal rather than when it is an object.

	Human	Animal	Object
Participant 1	5/5 (100%)	0/5 (0%)	0/5 (0%)
Participant 2	4/5 (80%)	1/5 (20%)	0/5 (0%)
Participant 3	5/8 (62.5%)	2/8 (25%)	1/8 (12.5%)
Participant 5	3/4 (75%)	0/4 (0%)	1/4 (25%)
Participant 6	0/1 (0%)	1/1 (100%)	0/1 (0%)
Participant 7	0/1 (0%)	1/1 (100%)	0/1 (0%)
Participant 10	0/3 (0%)	2/3 (66.6%)	1/3 (33.3%)

Table 6. Error rate for possessed entities per participant in task 2

Overall data gathered in task 2 shows that sentences with animal possessed entities are the ones with least errors, at 7.14%. Contexts in which the possessed entities are human beings or objects present, again, the most errors, with 11.3% and 12.5%, respectively. This translates to 63.3% of the mistakes being made with human possessed entities; 13.3%, with animal possessed entities; and 23.3% with inanimate object possessed entities. Note that in this case the tendency with human and object possessed

entities slightly reverses when we consider the total amount of instances and, therefore, the frequency of occurrence.



Graph 5. Error rate for possessed entities in Task 2.

5. Discussion

In this section, an interpretation and discussion of the results are provided. The discussion is divided into sections corresponding to each research question.

5.1 RQ1: Default form

We have previously stated the possibility that *his* be considered the unmarked form. Some grammarians (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik) agree with the idea that all languages have default forms and so *his* in English would be one. This would imply that wrong choices would have a tendency to favour the use of the masculine possessive rather than its feminine counterpart.

If we take into account the individual performance of the participants we will see that only 2 out of 9 used *his* more frequently than *her* in task 1 and 2 out of 7 did so in task 2. Likewise, considering the overall data, task 1 shows that *her* was used in 29.5%

of the instances more than *his*. Concerning task 2, *her* was used in 4.3% of the instances more than *his*. Grouping both tasks we can realise that the feminine possessive determiner was used in 15.5% of the instances more than the masculine possessive determiner. Therefore, the data analysed does not provide evidence for considering *his* the unmarked form. Likewise, the difference of frequency between the two determiners does not prove sufficient to claim that *her* could be the default form.

5.2 RQ 2: Language transfer

As seen before, Catalan and Spanish adhere to the possessed entity rule, that is, gender and number agreement take place between determiner and possessed entity. In the case of English, the determiner agrees with the possessor. Therefore, the following discussion will be concerned with gender agreement taking place with one entity or the other. We will deal with the concept of congruency and non-congruency, that is, when possessor and possessed are masculine or feminine as in (24) and when they diverge as in (25):

(24) He talks to his dad.

(25) He talks to his mum.

Data from task 1 shows that of all the contexts possible, 31.25% of the choices were made incorrectly, that is, in 70 cases *his* was chosen when *her* was the correct answer and the other way around. Furthermore, it is interesting to remark that 18 mistakes took place when possessor and possessed were non-congruent and both animate. It is in these contexts that one could claim that agreement is made with the determiner and the possessed entity rather than with the possessor. When it comes to animals and objects, if we take into account the gender they encode in Catalan and

Spanish, we find that 10 out of the 16 errors took place when the gender of the possessor in English and that of the possessed entity in Catalan and Spanish were non-congruent as in:

(26) Billy plays with his ball.

Regarding task 2, the error rate with non-congruent human possessed entities is 14.3%. Errors with animals and objects as possessed entities proved to be minor. 7 mistakes were made with animal possessed entities, 2 of which were non-congruent if we take the gender of the possessed entity in Catalan and Spanish. Finally, 6 mistakes were made with object possessed entities, of which only 2 could be seen as being influenced by the gender of the possessed entity in Catalan or Spanish.

(27) *Milly is going to feed his cat.

5.2.1 Gender transfer: humans

5.2.1.1 Masculine possessors

Of all the possible contexts with a masculine possessor in task 1, half of the sentences were translated incorrectly when it came to choosing the right possessive determiner. In the study carried out by Antón-Méndez (2010), researchers found out that speakers tended to make more errors when the biological genders of the possessor and the possessum were non-congruent, that is, when they differed. However, in this case, the opposite seems to hold true in the case of masculine possessors. Errors when choosing *his* or *her* proved to be more common in those cases in which possessor and possessum were congruent.

In the second task, with a 16% error rate with masculine possessors, participants made double the amount of wrong choices when possessor and possessed were non-congruent (6 instances) than when they were congruent (3 instances). However, the errors were marginal and do not prove sufficient to hold against the previous claim. Consider the following two real mistakes, (28) non-congruent and (29) congruent:

(28) *Pete is tired of waiting for her dad.

(29) *Tom loves her mum very much.

5.2.1.2 Feminine possessors

In the case of feminine possessors in task 1, there was an error rate of 21%. Therefore, choosing the wrong possessive determiner when the possessor was feminine was far less common than with masculine possessors. Notwithstanding, errors were quite balanced, with a minimal difference of 41.6% with masculine possessed entities (non-congruent) versus 58.3% with feminine possessed entities (congruent).

The second task, with an error rate slightly above 7%, showed the exact same amount of errors (2) both in congruent and non-congruent contexts. It is noteworthy to mention that in the case of an ambiguous possessed entity, that is, words that can be used to describe both feminine and masculine entities, 6 errors were committed, all of them wrongly choosing *her* over *his*.

5.2.2 Gender transfer: animals

The error rate with animal possessed entities for task 1 was close to 20%; 11 incorrect choices were made out of 56 possible contexts. Interestingly enough, 10 of these errors occurred when the possessor was masculine, that is, the feminine possessive

determiner *her* was preferred over *his* when referring to animals. What's more, 7 of them had *cat* as an object. Thus, students wrote translations for (26) as in (27).

(26) Ell juga amb el seu gat

(27) *He plays with her cat

This may be taken to imply that the claim that gender could be transferred from Catalan or Spanish into English (Antón-Méndez, 2012) does not seem to have supportive evidence, for *cat* is masculine both in Catalan and in Spanish. The other 4 mistakes occurred with the possessed entities being *bird* and *dog*, both of which are masculine in Catalan and in Spanish. If gender of the possessed entity in the L1 was to affect the L2 possessive determiner, one would expect *his* to be used instead of *her*, which is not the case. This statement may have two implications. Firstly, English not showing gender prevents the agreement from taking place. Secondly, the L1 lexical item is not activated and this is why gender cannot be transferred.

With regards to task number 2, with an overall error rate of 7.14%, participants made three times more errors when the possessor was feminine than when it was masculine. Nevertheless, the total number of errors was 3, which proves insufficient to extract a pattern. The gender of the possessed entity in Catalan and Spanish does not seem to have an effect either.

5.2.3 Gender transfer: objects

In task 1, the error rate for object possessed entities is close to 34%. More errors were committed when the possessor was masculine (68.42% versus 31.57%). Again, this means that the possessive determiner *her* was more frequently used than *his*.

Considering now the gender of the possessed entity in Catalan and Spanish, only in 6 out of 16 instances could it be assumed that the gender of the possessum has influenced the wrong choice of determiner. Task 2 is consistent with what seems to be the pattern for the previous task; of the seven wrong choices made (12.5%), 5 took place with a masculine possessor and two with a feminine possessor. If we consider the gender of the possessed entity in Catalan and Spanish, out of the seven wrong choices, four were *her ball*, which could be seen as gender transference since *ball* is feminine in both Catalan and Spanish. However, the fact that there were very few instances and that the pattern cannot be applied to *book* and *notebook*, the other possessed entities in the sentences with errors, makes us think that there was no gender transfer.

It is noteworthy to remark that the lexical item *homework* or **homeworks* proved especially difficult for participants, who got the sentence wrong much more often than with other lexical items. However, there seems to be no correlation in choosing one possessive determiner or the other.

5.3 RQ3: Animacy hierarchy

The hierarchy human > animal > inanimate object has been used and proved useful in a number of studies. It has been previously tested in contexts similar to the one we are being faced with now, such as Antón Méndez's (2012) study on possessive pronoun gender errors, in which the researcher concluded that animacy itself did not trigger errors.

Data in task 1 may be taken as evidence that the animacy hierarchy does not seem to have any remarkable influence on the error rate. If it did, one would expect the most errors to occur in the human possessed entity category and the least errors to occur

in the object possessed entity, which only held true for participant 4. Data shows that while the category with the most incorrectly used determiners was the human possessed entity category, the object possessed entity category was the second with the highest error rate. In regards to task 2, data shows three different patterns. The first one coincides with task 1 and concerns 2 out of 7 participants; they make more mistakes with human possessed entities, then with objects and then with animals. The second pattern observes the animacy hierarchy and concerns 2 participants who made 4-2-1 and 5-2-1 mistakes in the categories human < animal < object. Finally, the third pattern presents more mistakes with animals than the two remaining categories and is adhered to by 3 students. If we consider all the data obtained in task 2 we can see that 63% of the errors were made with human possessed entities, 26% with animals and 11% with objects, thus confirming the influence of the animacy hierarchy. However, due to the fact that the pattern does not extend to the individual participants in most cases and that the results for task 1 do not validate such an influence, we can say that there is not strong enough evidence to claim that the animacy hierarchy triggers errors.

6. Further Research

In carrying out this study, two factors worth pursuing have arisen. Firstly, if we consider the different types of sentences, errors in both tasks were much more common in prepositional phrases rather than in transitive or ditransitive sentences. Although further research is needed, errors being more common in prepositional phrases than in transitive and ditransitive sentences may imply that there is some cognitive difficulty in processing prepositional phrases and applying the correct gender agreement at the same time for non-proficient speakers of L2 English. I would argue that the difficulty is

cognitive rather than grammatical because there does not seem to be any syntactic transfer from L1 Catalan/Spanish to L2 English in terms of prepositional phrases.

Secondly, results have a relevance for White's (1996) developmental sequence for the acquisition of *his* and *her*. [4] White's eight-stage developmental sequence in the acquisition of the English agreement rule for *his*/*her* was applied firstly to French speakers and then, in 2007, to Catalan and Spanish speakers. Data arising from the present study shows that stage 4, which consists of having a preference for either *his* or *her*, could be applied to the stage in which at least 7 participants in the study are now. The 5 participants who made no mistakes at all can be thought to be in the latter stage, which implies an error-free application of the agreement rule. This could imply that the L2 process of agreement between determiner and possessor has been automatised. However, this latter stage also considers its application in contexts with body parts, which has not been tested in the present study. It is not farfetched to assume that White's developmental sequence could be applied to other. Nonetheless, further research and more extensive studies should be carried out in order to gain more insight into the sequence.

7. Conclusion

In light of the previous discussion, we can conclude that neither *his* nor *her* can be claimed to be the unmarked default form but rather that there is a slight preference for the feminine possessive determiner. Furthermore, it would appear that congruency may have an effect on certain participants but not a remarkable overall effect. In fact, when it comes to accounting for errors in terms of transfer, it would seem that gender transfer is not an issue in most cases. On the other hand, there is not enough supportive

[4] Refer to appendix 9.3 for further insight into White's sequences of acquisition.

evidence for the animacy hierarchy triggering errors. In fact, mistakes with objects as possessed entities were higher than those with animal possessed entities, clearly breaking the animacy hierarchy. Notwithstanding, all results are expected to diverge for participants with a different level of proficiency.

Finally, the present TFG also serves the purpose of motivating further research in the field. The question of developmental stages in the acquisition of possessive determiners and the possible influence of prepositional phrases in the production of possessive determiners were left for further research because they fell out of the scope of the present TFG.

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9. Appendices

9.1 Task 1 and task 2

1. Translate these sentences into English:

1. En Jamie estima el seu gos.
2. La Carla parla amb la seva mare.
3. A tothom li agrada la Peppa Pig.
4. Ella passeja el seu gos.
5. A en Peter li agrada el seu boli nou.
6. Els meus pares són professors.
7. La nena fa els seus deures.
8. Ell dóna la joguina al seu gos.
9. Fer exercici és molt bo per la salut.
10. Ella juga amb el seu gat.
11. El teu pare està enfadat amb el seu avi.
12. M'encanten les galetes.
13. En John juga amb la seva pilota.
14. Ella estima el seu marit.
15. La Peppa porta una pilota a les mans.
16. La Mary compra menjar pel seu ocellet.
17. El meu pare juga amb el seu gat.
18. París és una ciutat molt gran i molt maca.
19. Ell parla amb la seva nòvia.
20. L'Anna dóna la pilota a la seva filla.
21. El rellotge està trencat.
22. La nena juga amb el seu gat.

23. L'Albert juga amb el seu ordinador.

24. Sóc feliç.

25. El Billy estima la seva germana.

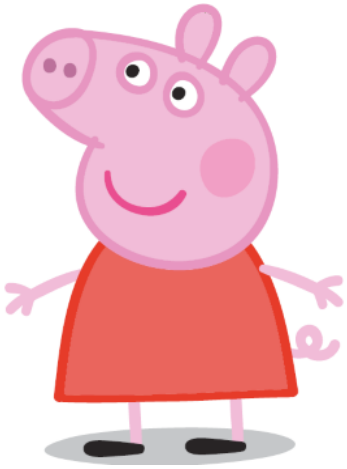
26. Ell juga amb el seu gat.

27. Parles anglès?

28. La Blanca dibuixa la seva germana.

29. Ell dóna l'ampolla al seu amic.

30. La Peppa és de color rosa.



31. En John parla amb la seva mare.

32. L'Ann va de compres amb el seu pare.

33. El Paul és molt feliç quan viatja.

34. L'Aina sempre es baralla amb el seu nòvio.

35. L'Ann juga amb el seu videojoc.

36. Vull ser traductor.

37. En Manel fa els seus deures.

38. En Joan parla amb el seu germà.

39. Els plàtans porten moltes proteïnes.

40. La Júlia escriu sobre la seva mare.

41. Ella dóna el llàpis al seu fill.

42. M'agraden els llibres.

43. El teu germà estima el seu pare.

44. El pare dóna el llibre a la seva filla.

45. Quan jo era petita menjava molts tomàquets.

46. La meva mare cuina la seva recepta.

47. La dona juga amb el seu mòbil.

2. Fill the gaps with a possessive determiner: my, your, his, her, its, our, your, their.

1. He was talking with _____ girlfriend.
2. Jerry calls _____ cat but the cat doesn't pay attention.
3. Betty has broken _____ chair.
4. Zoe thanks _____ colleague for helping her.
5. Peppa and George are excited to see _____ new cousin, baby Alexander.
6. Milly is drawing _____ sister.
7. Peppa plays with _____ brother George.
8. Zack wants to talk to _____ cousin.
9. Peter is tired of waiting for _____ dad.
10. Billy plays with _____ ball.
11. Jilly is playing with _____ cat.
12. I love pizza! It's _____ favourite dish.
13. Joel, can I borrow _____ scissors?
14. Caroline loves _____ dad.
15. Tom needs to see _____ doctor.
16. Will talks to _____ brother.
17. Tom loves _____ mum very much.
18. I like it when _____ dad helps me with _____ homework.
19. Rosie writes in _____ notebook.
20. Milly is going to feed _____ cat.
21. William has lost _____ book.
22. These sweets will be good for _____ cough.
23. Tom likes playing with _____ dog.
24. The dentist cleans Mr Dinosaur's teeth, now _____ teeth are clean and shiny.
25. Tania laughs at _____ teacher.
26. She was talking with _____ boyfriend.

9.2 Table 7. Comprehensive account of mistakes in task 1.

1	Masculine subject + his + feminine animate person	Masculine subject + his + animal	Masculine subject + his + object	Masculine subject + his + masculine animate person
Right	4/4	4/4	3/4	2/4
Wrong (used *her* instead)	0/4	0/4	1/4 "Manel do her homework"	2/4 "Joan talk with her brother" "Your brother love her son"
Different answer	0/4	0/4	0/4	0/4
	Feminine subject + her + feminine animate person	Feminine subject + her + animal	Feminine subject + her + object	Feminine subject +her + masculine animate person
Right	1/4	4/4	1/4	2/4
Wrong (used *his* instead)	3/4 "Anna give the ball his daughter" "Blanca draw his sister" "Julia write about his mother"	0/4	3/4 "Ann play with his computer game" "My mother play with his telephone" "My mother cook his recipy"	2/4 "Anna go shoping with his father" "She give a pencil to his son"
Different answer	0/4	0/4	0/4	0/4
2	Masculine subject + his + feminine animate person	Masculine subject + his + animal	Masculine subject + his + object	Masculine subject + his + masculine animate person
Right	3/4	2/4	2/4	1/4
Wrong (used *her* instead)	He talk with her girlfriend"	"My dad play with her cat" "He play with	"Albert play with her computer"	"He give a bottle her friend"

		her cat"	"He do her homeworks"	"Joan talk with her brother" "Your brother love her dad"
Different answer	0	0	0	0
	Feminine subject + her + feminine animate person	Feminine subject + her + animal	Feminine subject + her + object	Feminine subject +her + masculine animate person
Right	1/4	4/4	3/4	3/4
Wrong (used *his* instead)	"Blanca draw his sister" "Julia write about his mum" "Anna give the ball his daughter"	0	"My mum cooks his recipi"	"She love his husband"
Different answer	0	0	0	0
3	Masculine subject + his + feminine animate person	Masculine subject + his + animal	Masculine subject + his + object	Masculine subject + his + masculine animate person
Right	1/4	2/4	1/4	3/4
Wrong (used *her* instead)	"He talks with her girlfriend" "Billy loves her sister" "John talk with her mom"	"My dad play with her cat"	"John plays with her ball" "Manel do her homeworks"	"Joan talk with her brother"
Different answer	0	"He gives the toys to the dog"	"Albert plays in the computer"	0
	Feminine subject + her + feminine animate person	Feminine subject + her + animal	Feminine subject + her + object	Feminine subject +her + masculine animate person
Right	4/4	4/4	3/4	4/4

Wrong (used *his* instead)	0	0	"The girl do his homeworks"	0
Different answer	0	0	0	0
4	Masculine subject + his + feminine animate person	Masculine subject + his + animal	Masculine subject + his + object	Masculine subject + his + masculine animate person
Right	3/4	2/4	3/4	2/4
Wrong (used *her* instead)	"Billy loves her sister"	"My dad play with her cat" "He play with her cat"	0	"Your father is angry with her grandfather" "He gives the bottle to her friend"
Different answer	0	0	"Peter likes new pen"	0
	Feminine subject + her + feminine animate person	Feminine subject + her + animal	Feminine subject + her + object	Feminine subject +her + masculine animate person
Right	4/4	4/4	3/4	4/4
Wrong (used *his* instead)	0	0	"Ann is playing with his videogame"	0
Different answer	0	0	0	0
5	Masculine subject + his + feminine animate person	Masculine subject + his + animal	Masculine subject + his + object	Masculine subject + his + masculine animate person
Right	2/4	4/4	4/4	2/4
Wrong (used *her* instead)	"John talks with her mother" "Dad gives the book to her daughter"	0	0	"John talks with her brother" "Your brother loves her dad"
Different answer	0	0	0	0
	Feminine subject + her + feminine	Feminine subject + her + animal	Feminine subject + her + object	Feminine subject +her + masculine

	animate person			animate person
Right	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4
Wrong (used *his* instead)	0	0	0	0
Different answer	0	0	0	0
6	Masculine subject + his + feminine animate person	Masculine subject + his + animal	Masculine subject + his + object	Masculine subject + his + masculine animate person
Right	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4
Wrong (used *her* instead)	0	0	0	0
Different answer	0	0	0	0
	Feminine subject + her + feminine animate person	Feminine subject + her + animal	Feminine subject + her + object	Feminine subject +her + masculine animate person
Right	3/4	3/4	3/4	3/4
Wrong (used *his* instead)	"Julia writes over his mum"	"Mary buy food for his bird"	"Ann plays with his videogame"	"Ann goes shopping with his dad"
Different answer	0	0	0	0
7	Masculine subject + his + feminine animate person	Masculine subject + his + animal	Masculine subject + his + object	Masculine subject + his + masculine animate person
Right	2/4	1/4	0	0
Wrong (used *her* instead)	"He talk with her girlfriend" "Joan talk with her mom"	"Jamie love her dog" "My parent play with her cat" "He play with her cat"	"Peter like her new pen" "John play with her bol" "Albert play with her computer" "Manel do her homeworks"	"Your dad are angry with her grandparent" "He give the bottle to her friend" "Your brother love her dad" "Joan talk with

				her brother"
Different answer	0	0	0	0
	Feminine subject + her + feminine animate person	Feminine subject + her + animal	Feminine subject + her + object	Feminine subject +her + masculine animate person
Right	4/4	4/4	3/4	3/4
Wrong (used *his* instead)	0	0	"My mum cook his recept"	"She give the pencil to his son"
Different answer	0	0	0	0
8	Masculine subject + his + feminine animate person	Masculine subject + his + animal	Masculine subject + his + object	Masculine subject + his + masculine animate person
Right	2/4	1/4	2/4	2/4
Wrong (used *her* instead)	"John talk with her mum" "The dad give the book to her daughter"	"Jamie love her dog" "He give the toy with her dog"	"Peter like her new pen" "John play with her ball"	"Your dad is angry with her grandad" "Your brother love her dad"
Different answer	0	"Mary buy food for the bird"	0	0
	Feminine subject + her + feminine animate person	Feminine subject + her + animal	Feminine subject + her + object	Feminine subject +her + masculine animate person
Right	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4
Wrong (used *his* instead)	0	0	0	0
Different answer	0	0	0	0
9	Masculine subject + his + feminine animate person	Masculine subject + his + animal	Masculine subject + his + object	Masculine subject + his + masculine animate person
Right	4/4	4/4	3/4	3/4
Wrong (used *her* instead)	0	0	0	"Your dad is angry with her

				grandfather"
Different answer	0	0	"Manel is doing homeworks"	0
	Feminine subject + her + feminine animate person	Feminine subject + her + animal	Feminine subject + her + object	Feminine subject +her + masculine animate person
Right	4/4	3/4	4/4	4/4
Wrong (used *his* instead)	0	0	0	0
Different answer	0	1/4 "Mary buy eat for bird"	0	0

9.3 Table 8. Developmental sequence in the acquisition of the English agreement rule for *his/her* by French-speaking learners (adapted from Spada *et al.*, 2005; White, 1998)

Pre-emergence	
Stage 1	**Avoidance of *his* and *her* and/or use of definite article** The little boy play with bicycle. He have band-aid on *the* arm, *the* leg, *the* stomach.
Stage 2	**Use of *your* for all persons, genders and numbers** This boy cry in the arm of *your* mother. There's one girl talk with *your* dad.
Emergence	
Stage 3	**Emergence of either or both *his/her*** A little boy do a cycle ride and he fall. He have a pain on back and butt. He said the situation at *her* mom.
Stage 4	**Preference for *his* or *her*** The mother is dressing *her* little boy, and she put *her* clothes, *her* pant, *her* coat, and then she finish. The girl making *hisself* beautiful. She put the make-up on *his* hand, on *his* head, and *his* father is surprise.
Post-emergence	
Stage 5	**Differentiated use of *his* and *her*, but not in kin-different contexts (marked with*)** The girl fell on *her* bicycle. She look **his* father and cry. The dad put **her* little girl on *his* shoulder, and after, on *his* back.
Stage 6	**Differentiated use of *his* and *her*; agreement rule applied to kin-different gender for *either his* or *her*** The mother dress **her* boy. She put *his* pants and *his* sweater. He's all dressed and he say at **her* mother he go to the bathroom.
Stage 7	**Differentiated use of *his* and *her* to criterion; agreement rule applied to kin-different gender for *both his* or *her*** The little girl fell the floor, and after she go see *her* father, and he pick up *his* girl in *the* arms.
Stage 8	**Error-free application of agreement rule to *his* and *her* in all contexts, including body parts** The little girl with *her* dad play together. And the dad take *his* girl on *his* arms.

From White, J., Muñoz, C., Collins, L. (2007). The his/her challenge: Making progress in a "regular" L2 programme. *Language Awareness*, 16 (4): 281.