On transfer in SLA of German weak pronouns[*]

Giulia Bianchi

University of Hamburg

This study investigates second language acquisition of object weak pronouns in old information contexts in German by adult Italian Native Speakers. Provided that Italian and German differ in their pronominal systems and select different types of pronouns in old information contexts, the hypothesis was investigated whether the Italian L2 learners of German use pronouns clitic-like, then transferring the Italian choice into German, or rather use strong pronouns. Based on an oral grammaticality judgment task and an elicited production task, data show that our L2 learners place pronouns in positions dedicated to strong elements and that their accuracy on pronoun placement (i.e. use of target weak pronouns) increases dependently on their level of proficiency of the target language. In fact, results show that acquisition of target placement of pronouns proceeds through stages similar to those found for the acquisition of cliticization in Romance languages (e.g. Towell and Hawkins 1994, Herschensohn 2004).

Keywords: transfer, L2 acquisition, pronouns, Italian, German, Object omission

1 Introduction

Many studies on second language acquisition (SLA) have shown that adult speakers learning a second language (L2ers) often transfer properties of their

---

first language (L1) into the L2, at least in the earliest stages of acquisition (see White 2003 for an extensive overview on the topic).

This study deals with the acquisition of object weak pronouns in old information contexts in German as L2 by adult Italian Native Speakers. This is an appealing area of investigation for two main reasons:

1. to our knowledge only few studies exist on SLA of German weak pronouns (e.g. Bianchi 2002, Bianchi 2006, Bianchi 2007; Bianchi 2008a Young-Scholten 2000)

2. Italian and German differ in their pronominal systems, and specifically in the class of pronouns that encode old information, as extensively shown by Cardinaletti and Starke (1996, 1999).

Given this differentiation, the question then arises as to whether transfer takes place with respect to this property of the grammar or not. The acquisition of the German pronominal system turns out to be a difficult process for the Italian L2ers because it requires the accomplishment of a series of tasks. In order to acquire the German pronominal system, the Italian L2ers must reduce the number of pronominal classes from three to two (see 2.1). Furthermore, they must be able to distinguish between weak and strong forms, which are homophonous in German, contrary to Italian (see 2.2), they must be able to place pronouns of different classes properly (see 2.3) and must be able to choose the proper pronoun class in old information contexts (see 2.4).

The relevant properties of the Italian and German pronominal systems are illustrated in section 2.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Classes of pronouns

Cardinaletti and Starke (1999) have shown the existence of three different classes of pronouns (clitic, weak and strong), which have different morpho-phonological, semantic and syntactic properties. Differences between the three classes of pronouns are attributed to their different categorical status. More specifically, clitic pronouns are analyzed as heads (X°), weak pronouns as deficient maximal projections (deficient XPs) and strong pronouns as non deficient maximal projections (non deficient XPs). Whereas all three classes of pronouns are instantiated in Italian, only two of them (weak and strong) are attested for German. Furthermore, whereas the class of weak pronouns is very productive in German, this is not the case for Italian, where this class is restricted to the subject pronoun *egli* 'he' and the dative *loro* 'to them'. A further property that characterizes German but not Italian is that the two classes of pronouns are homophonous and they can be distinct through some diagnostic tests (see 2.2).

2.2 Morphological (non)ambiguity and disambiguation

In Italian, pronouns belonging to different classes are morphologically distinct, as shown in (1a-b) in which a clitic pronoun (*Lo*) morphologically differs from a strong one (*lui*). The same does not hold for German given that pronouns belonging to the two classes are homophonous. Disambiguation between weak and strong pronouns in German is possible through some diagnostic tests, first developed by Kayne (1975) for Romance languages. Position of pronouns with respect to adverbs is one of the tests that allow us to distinguish between weak and strong pronouns. In particular, weak pronouns must precede an adverb, whereas strong pronouns can follow it as shown in (2a-b):

(1) a.   Lo   ho   conosciuto ieri
               (I)Him-CL   have   met   yesterday
               'I met him yesterday.'

     b.   Ho   conosciuto lui   ieri
               (I)have   met   him-STRONG   yesterday
               'I met him yesterday.'

(2) a.   Ich habe   ihn   gestern   kennengelernt
           I   have   him-WEAK   yesterday   met
           'I met him yesterday.'

     b.   Ich habe   gestern   ihn   kennengelernt
           I   have   yesterday him-STRONG   met
           'I met him yesterday.'

Pronouns of different classes surface in different positions of the clause as shown in 2.3.

2.3   Placement and order of pronouns

With a finite verbal form, clitic pronouns must precede the inflected verb (*proclisis*), whereas they are attached post-verbally to a non-finite verbal form (*enclisis*) as respectively shown in (3a-b) for Italian:

(3) a.   L(o)'   ho   conosciuto   ieri
               (I) Him-CL   have   met   yesterday
               'I met him yesterday.'

     b.   Incontrarlo   domani   sarebbe un   errore
           To meet him-CL   tomorrow   would be a   mistake
           'It would be a mistake to meet him tomorrow.'

German weak pronouns cannot occur pre-verbally, a position which is reserved to strong pronominal form (see 4a) and cannot occur in the second

position of the clause (i.e. pre-verbally) as a consequence of the verb second phenomenon (V2), which requires the second position of a matrix clause to be filled by the inflected verb as shown by the ungrammaticality of (4b). Weak pronouns must follow the finite verb as shown in (5a) and can precede the pronominal subject only when the latter is stressed as shown in (5b). They can also occur in a pre-subject position with a lexical subject as in (5c):

(4) a. Ihn   habe   ich   gestern   kennengelernt
       Him*WEAK/√STRONG   have   I   yesterday   met
       'I met him yesterday.'

    b. * Ich   ihn   habe   gestern   kennengelernt
         I   him   have   yesterday   met
         'I met him yesterday.'

(5) a. Gestern   hat   er   ihn   gesehen
       Yesterday   has   he-NOM   him-ACC   seen
       'He saw him yesterday.'

    b. weil ' s   ihm   ER   nicht   geglaubt   hat
       since it-ACC   him-DAT   he-NOM   not   believed   has
       'since he hasn't believed it him.'

    c. Gestern   hat   ihn   mein   Vater   gesehen
       Yesterday   has   him-ACC   my   father-NOM   seen
       'Yesterday my father saw him.'

    Use of deficient pronouns in the two languages is guided by an Economy of Representation Principle, which is taken into account in 2.4.

2.4   Choice of pronouns in old information contexts

According to an Economy of Representations principle -*Minimize Structure*- a smaller structure is obligatorily chosen, if possible (Cardinaletti and Starke 1999). Given a proper question test, Italian and German use pronouns of different classes to refer to an entity already introduced in the discourse. In particular, Italian chooses a clitic pronoun for this purpose, whereas German selects a weak pronoun in the same context.

Consequently, a strong pronoun as well as a lexical DP is infelicitous in those contexts in which a more deficient form is possible. The contrast is shown in (6a-d) and (7a-d) for Italian and German respectively:

(6)   a.   Quando   hai   conosciuto il   ragazzo?
           When   have (you)   met   the   boy
           'When did you meet the boy?'

      b.   √   Lo   ho   conosciuto   ieri
           (I)Him-CL have   met   yesterday
           'I met him yesterday.'

      c.   *   ho   conosciuto   lui   ieri
            (I) have   met   him-STRONG yesterday
           'I met him yesterday.'

      d.   *   ho   conosciuto   il ragazzo   ieri
            (I) have   met   the boy   yesterday
           'I met the boy yesterday.'

(7)   a.   Wann   hast   du   den   Mann kennengelernt?
           When   have   you   the   man   met
           'When did you meet the man?'

      b.   √ Ich   habe   ihn   gestern   kennengelernt
           I   have   him-WEAK   yesterday   met
           'I met him yesterday.'

c. * Ich habe gestern ihn kennengelernt
    I   have yesterday him-STRONG   met
    'I met him yesterday.'

d. * Ich habe gestern den Mann kennengelernt
    I   have yesterday the man   met
    'I met the man yesterday.'

With this theoretical background in mind, let's now turn to the description of the experiments.

3 The experiments

In order to test knowledge of pronoun placement and use in German, two tests were run: an elicited production task (EPT henceforth) and an oral grammaticality judgment task (OGJT henceforth). Sections 3.1 and 3.2 provide a detailed description of the participants and the experiments.

3.1 The EPT

3.1.1 Participants

Participants taking part in the EPT were 20 Italian Native Speakers between 19 and 26 years of age. According to their proficiency in German, they were classified as intermediate (15) and advanced (5). 14 German Native Speakers served as a control group.

3.1.2 Experimental design

The EPT aimed at testing use and placement of weak pronouns in German subordinate clauses. Participants were required to listed to a statement (8) made by a girl (Lydia) and to answer a question asked by a second speaker about Lydia's statement (9). Target answer is provided in (10a), non target and infelicitous answers are provided in (10b) and (10c) respectively:

(8)   Ich   lese   jeden   Abend   das   Buch
        I   read   every   evening   the   book
        'I read the book every evening.'

(9)   Was   hat   Lydia   über   das   Buch   gesagt?
        What has   Lydia   about   the   book   said
        'What did Lydia say about the book?'

(10) a.   dass   sie   es   jeden   Abend   liest
          that   she   it   every   evening reads
          'that she reads it every evening.'

    b. * dass   sie   jeden   Abend   es   liest
         that   she   every   evening   it   reads
         'that she reads it every evening.'

    c. * dass   sie   das   Buch   jeden   Abend   liest
         that   she   the   book   every   evening reads
         'that she reads the book every evening.'

Participants were given 8000ms to answer each question.

3.2 The OGJT

3.2.1 Participants

20 Italian Native Speakers took part in the experiment. Their age ranged between 19 and 35. According to their level of proficiency in German, they were divided into three groups: 4 Beginners, 9 Intermediate and 7 Advanced. 7 German Native Speakers served as a control group.
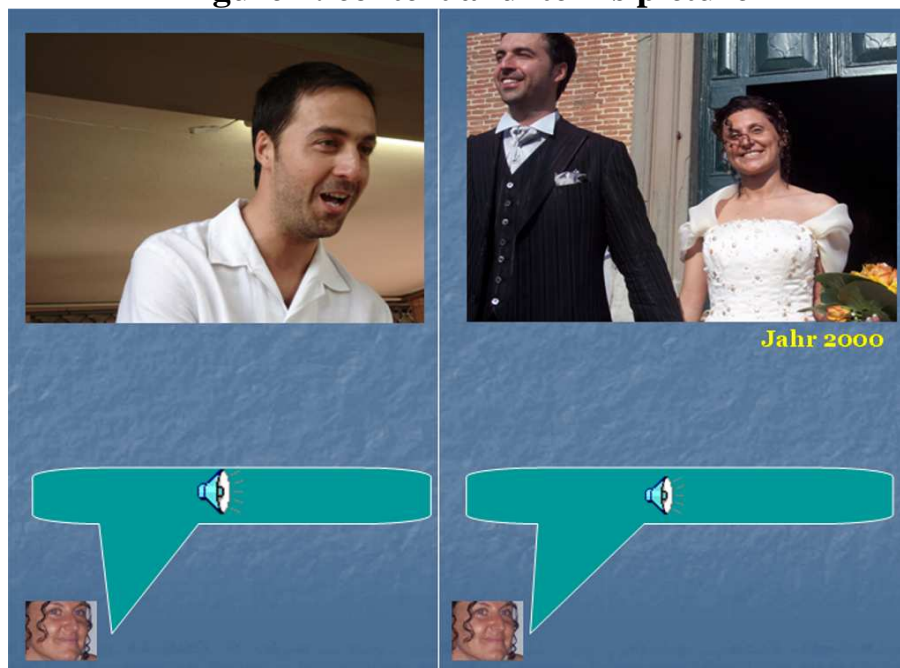
3.2.2 Experimental design

In the OGJT, participants were asked to judge the grammaticality of contextualized sentences. They were asked to repeat the sentence if they judged it grammatical or to correct it if they judged it ungrammatical. Contexts as well

as items were provided both visually (through a sequence of pictures) and auditorily. A complete example pertaining the items is provided in (11)[1,2]:

(11) a.   Das ist mein Mann   (context sentence)
        This is my   man
        'This is my man.'

    b. * Ich ihn heiratete im   Jahr 2000   (sentence to be judged)
        I   him married in the year 2000
        'I married him in 2000.'

Figure 1: context and item's picture

The other types of structures that were proposed in the experiments are provided in (12) through (15):

---

[1] The sentence to be judged is provided in (11b).
[2] For each sentence-type a grammatical counterpart was always provided in the experiment.

(12) * Ich ihn habe um 15 Uhr   darauf gesetzt
        I   him have at 15   there seated
        'I seated him there at 3p.m.'

(13) * Um 9 Uhr badete   es ich
        At   9   washed it   I
        'I washed him at 9a.m.'

(14) * Ich kaufte   am   Sonntag   sie
        I   bought on the   Sunday   it
        'I bought it on Sunday.'

(15) * Ich das Mädchen umarmte   um 21 Uhr
        I   the   girl   hugged   at   21
        'I hugged her at 9p.m.'

   Section 4. provides a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of the data.

4   Analysis of the data

As shown in Table 1. pre- and post-adverbial placement of pronouns in the EPT

approaches chance level:

Table 1. Weak object pronoun placement in the EPT

	C S *pr* Adv V	*C S Adv *pr* V
L2ers	53% (139/263)	47% (124/263)
Controls	99% (300/301)	1% (1/301)

   If we look at the performance of the two groups of speakers separately,

we observe that the Intermediate L2ers show a preference for a post-adverbial

placement of the pronoun (see. Table 2.):

Table 2. Weak object pronoun placement. The two   groups of speakers

	C S *pr* Adv V	*C S Adv *pr* V
Intermediate	42% (70/168)	58% (98/168)
Advanced	73% (69/95)	27% (26/95)

Looking at Table 2, we could draw the conclusion that pronouns are used clitic-like at a lower level of acquisition, since they are preferably placed in preverbal position. Since that position can also be occupied by strong pronouns, a comparison with production of lexical DPs could be of help to understand the nature of post-adverbial pronouns[3] (see. Table 3):

Table 3. Use of lexical and pronominal DPs in the EPT

	C S *pr* Adv V	*C S Adv *pr* V	*C S DPlex Adv V / C S Adv DPlex V
Intermediate	27% (70/256)	38% (98/256)	34% (88/256)
Advanced	65% (69/107)	24% (26/107)	11% (12/107)
Controls	92%		8%

---

3   Given the nature of IP in German, it is not clear whether pronouns remain lower in the structure (strong pronouns) or move higher up to the verb (clitics).

	(301/328)	(27/328)

Table 3. reveals that higher use of post-adverbial pronouns correlates with higher use of lexical DPs in the group of the Intermediate L2ers, which strengthens the fact that pre-verbal pronouns are not used clitic-like but rather as strong elements and are interpreted as maximal projections. In fact, this idea is supported by the data of the OGJT. By comparing acceptance of clitic-like pronouns in second position of the clause and lexical DPs in the same position, we observe that rate of acceptance of pronouns parallels that of lexical DPs and decreases with increase of proficiency of the target language, as shown in Table 4:

Table 4. The three groups of speakers on structure- types (11) and (15)

	*S *pr* V Adv*	*S *DP* V Adv*
Beginners	46% (11/24)	54% (13/24)
Intermediate	24% (13/54)	19% (10/54)
Advanced	2% (1/42)	2% (1/42)

Acceptance of pronouns pre-verbally in German is due to the non acquisition of the V2 phenomenon rather than to transfer of the Italian pronominal system into German.

Further evidence that pronouns are analyzed as strong elements rather than clitics comes from judgments on structure-type (14), where a pronoun follows an adverb in a matrix clause. If our L2ers analyzed pronouns as clitics, a rate of acceptance of 27,5% of post-adverbial pronouns couldn't be accounted for. See Table 5 for the relevant data:

Table 5. Performance on structure-type (14)

	L2ers	Controls
Repeated	27,5% (33/120)	0% (0/42)
Properly changed	59% (71/120)	100% (42/42)
Others	13,5% (16/120)	0% (0/42)

Furthermore, as is the case for ungrammatical V3 structures (i.e. (11) and (15)), acceptance of sentences such as (14) decreases with increase of proficiency of the target language as shown in Table 6:

Table 6. Acceptance of structure type (14)

	*S V Adv pr
Beginners	54% (13/24)
Intermediate	28%

	(15/54)
Advanced	12% (5/42)

The fact that the tripartite Italian pronominal system is not transferred into German is also confirmed by the performance of the speakers on sentences-type (13), where a pronominal object precedes the pronominal subject. Italian does not allow enclisis with finite verbal form which would be the case if the Italian L2ers treated pre-subject pronouns as clitics. Acceptance of pronouns in that position also confirm that our L2ers treat pronouns as strong elements (with possibly focusing of the pronominal subject). Data on this type of structures are provided in Table 7.:

Table 7. Performance on structure-type (13)

	L2ers	Controls
Repeated	33% (40/120)	0% (0/42)
Properly changed	58% (70/120)	100% (42/42)
Others	8% (10/120)	0% (0/42)

Data have shown that the Italian L2ers of German in the early stages of acquisition do not use pronouns as clitics but rather as strong pronouns and target use of more deficient forms (i.e. weak pronouns) is a gradual process.

This leads to the conclusion that the economy of representations principle, *Minimize structures* (Cardinaletti and Starke 1999), remains inoperative in L2 till the more advanced level of proficiency of the target language. Instead, the *Categorial Uniformity Principle* (Rizzi 1998; 2000) 'assume the fewest possible different elements' (Granfeldt and Schlyter 2004) happens to hold for the L2ers. A further observation that needs to be made here is that acquisition of weak pronoun placement in German follows stages similar to those attested for the acquisition of cliticization in Romance languages (e.g. Towell and Hawkins 1994, Herschensohn 2004).

As it is the case for the acquisition of cliticization in Romance languages, our data also show some instances of object omission, which were mostly found on structure-type (12) (see Table 8.):

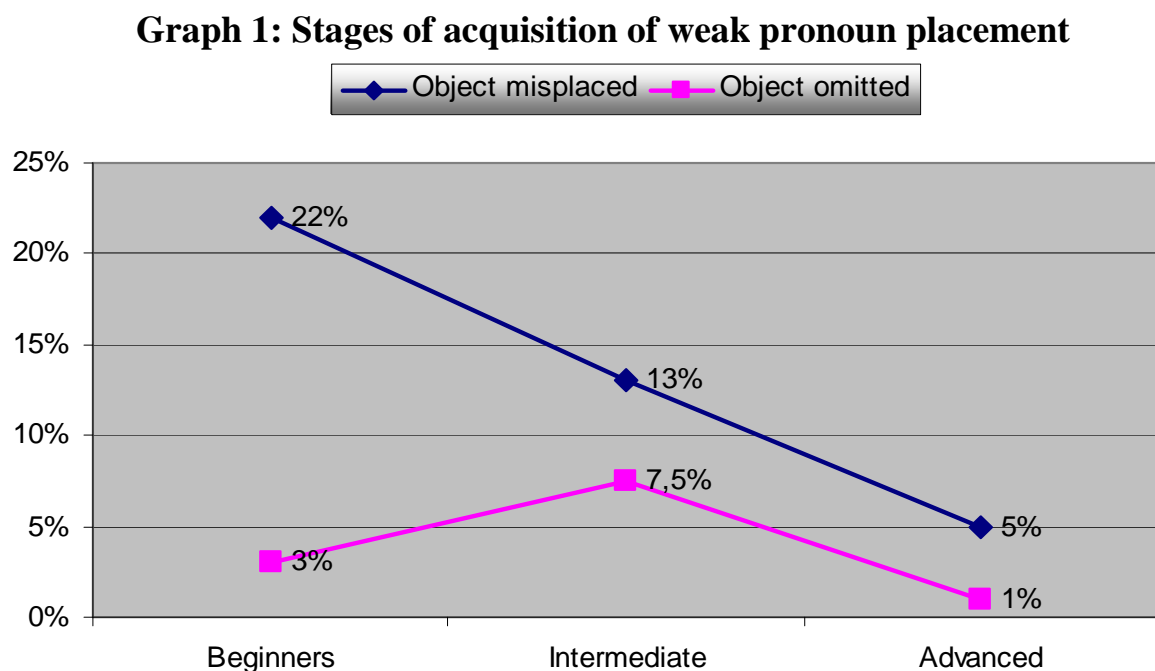**Table 8: Object omission on structure-type (12)**

	*S *pr* Aux XP V / S Aux *pr* XP V
Object omission	13% (31/240)

In particular, objects are omitted at a higher rate by the Intermediate L2ers, which strengthens the similarity between acquisition of cliticization in Romance languages and acquisition of weak pronoun placement in German. In both cases acquisition of placement of the most deficient form follows similar patterns:

1. misplacement of the object (i.e. use of pronouns in strong position, which

correlates with higher use of DPs); 2. object omission; 3. target placement of the pronouns

The different stages of acquisition of weak pronoun placement in German are shown in Graph 1.:

Graph 1: Stages of acquisition of weak pronoun placement

5   Conclusion

The present study has provided evidence that the Italian Native Speakers do not transfer the pronominal system of their L1 into German, i.e. they do not use pronouns clitic-like in contexts where a clitic would be expected in Italian. Rather, they use strong pronominal forms or lexical DPs, thus reducing the numbers of categories available to the minimum. Furthermore, it has been shown that acquisition of weak pronoun placement in German proceeds through stages, which are similar to those attested for the acquisition of cliticization in Romance languages.

6   References

Bianchi, G. 2002. La seconda lingua e l'uso di es: uno studio trasversale su italiani adulti con tedesco come L2.   Unpublished   MA   dissertation. University of Siena.

Bianchi, G. 2006. Il caso *es* nell'acquisizione del tedesco come L2. In G. Bianchi and I. Ferrari (eds.), *Sull'acquisizione bilingue e L2 adulta da e verso l'italiano. Alcuni Studi*. Dipartimento di Filologia e   Critica   della Letteratura, CISCL (Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Cognitivi sul Linguaggio). 21-39

Bianchi, G. 2007. On the Acquisition of Weak Object Pronouns in German as L2. In *Proceedings of the 2nd Conference on Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition North America (GALANA),* ed. Alyona Belikova, Luisa Meroni, and Mari Umeda, 21-26. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

Bianchi, G. 2008a. Use and placement of object pronouns in German as L2. In *Nanzan Linguistics: Special Issue 5*. 1-11.

Bianchi, G. 2008b. Use, interpretation and drop of object pronouns in German as L2. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. University of Siena.

Cardinaletti, A. and M. Starke. 1996. Deficient pronouns: a view from Germanic. A study   in the unified description of Germanic and Romance. In H. Thräinsson, S. Epstein and S. Peter (eds.), *Studies in   Comparative Syntax II*. Dordrecht: Kluwer. 21-65.

Cardinaletti, A. and M. Starke. 1999. The typology of structural deficiency: a case study of three classes of pronouns. In H. Van Riemsdijk (ed.), *Clitics in the Languages of Europe*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 145-253.

Granfeldt, J. and S. Schlyter. 2004. Cliticization in the acquisition of French as L1 and L2. In P. Prévost and J.   Paradis (eds.), *The acquisition of French*

in different contexts: Focus on functional categories.   Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 333-370.

Herschensohn, J. 2004. Functional categories and the acquisition of object clitics in L2 French. In P. Prévost and J.Paradis (eds.), *The acquisition of French in different contexts: Focus on functional categories*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Kayne, R. 1975. *French syntax*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Rizzi, L. 1998. Remarks on early null subjects. In A. Greenhill, M. Hughes, H. Littlefield and H. Walsh (eds.), *Proceedings of the 22nd Annual Boston University Conference on Language Development*. Sommerville, MA: Cascadilla. 14-39.

Rizzi, L. 2000. Remarks on Early Null Subjects. In M.-A. Friedeman and L. Rizzi (eds.)*, The acquisition of syntax*. Harlow, UK: Longman.

Towell, R. and R. Hawkins. 1994. *Approaches to Second Language Acquisition*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

White, L. 2003. *Second language acquisition and Universal Grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Young-Scholten, M. 2000. The L2 acquisition of Cliticization in Standard German. In S.M. Powers and C. Hamann (eds.), *The Acquisition of Scrambling and Cliticization*. Kluwer Academic Publisher. 319-343.

5   Contact Info

Giulia Bianchi
University of Hamburg
SFB538
Max Brauer Allee, 60
22765 Hamburg
Germany
giulia.bianchi@uni-hamburg.de