

The acquisition of postverbal subjects in heritage Italian: How timing of L1-acquisition modulates the acquisition of syntax-discourse interface structures

Andrea Listanti, Jacopo Torregrossa

[Session 1: Attrition vs. Innovation]

Across the literature, it has been claimed that speakers of a heritage language (and bilinguals, in general) have difficulties with syntax-discourse interface phenomena (e.g., Montrul 2008; Rothman 2009; Sorace 2011). The aim of this study is to show to what extent the timing of L1-acquisition of syntax-discourse interface structures modulates the process of their acquisition by HL-speakers (Schulz & Grimm 2019; Tsimpli 2014): Syntax-discourse interface structures that are acquired early (in L1-acquisition) should not show any sign of incomplete acquisition, contrary to late-acquired ones. Furthermore, late-acquired structures should be more likely to be affected by cross-linguistic influence and possibly be the locus of the emergence of innovative structures in HL-grammars.

The acquisition of post-verbal subjects in Italian provides a valid testing ground for this hypothesis. With unaccusative verbs, verb-subject is the unmarked word order (in broad-focus contexts). However, if the subject is discourse-given, it appears in pre-verbal position (Belletti 1988). Therefore, the positioning of the subject with unaccusative verbs is motivated by information-structure. With transitive verbs, post-verbal subjects are only allowed if they have a (contrastive or information) focus interpretation (Belletti 2004) and the object (expressed either as a clitic or a clitic-left-dislocated constituent) is discourse-given. Crucially, Italian monolingual children master the discourse conditions related to the distribution of subjects relatively early with unaccusative verbs (by age four or even earlier, according to Vernice & Guasti 2015; Lorusso, Caprin & Guasti 2005), but at age 5 still perform at chance with post-verbal subjects in association with transitive verbs (cf., e.g., the comprehension study by Abbot-Smith & Serratrice 2015). Therefore, Italian disposes of two syntax-discourse interface structures that differ from each other in the timing of their L1-acquisition.

We analyse the acquisition of postverbal subjects by Italian heritage children living in Germany. We tested 24 children (age range 7;5-10;9, $M = 8;11$) attending a German-Italian bilingual school in Hamburg. Most of them were born and raised in Germany (19 out of 24) and all of them had at least one Italian-speaking parent and were exposed to German before 4 years of age (based on background questionnaire information). VS-structures were elicited by means of a narrative-task (based on Schneider et al. 2005). For the analysis, the transcribed narratives were divided into units based on the occurrence of a finite verb. We considered only clauses in which an overt subject occurred and coded them considering: 1) the position of the subject (pre- vs. post-verbal); 2) the verb class (unaccusative, unergative or transitive); 3) the informational features of the subject (referentially given, referentially new, contrastive). For the informational analysis, we relied on the fine-grained classification of information structure in spoken data by Riester & Baumann (2013).

The final dataset consists of 280 units, 34 of which containing post-verbal subjects. First, we considered the structures with unaccusative verbs ($N: 44$). The data show that with this verb

class, children are sensitive to the conditions of use of pre-verbal vs. post-verbal subjects: pre-verbal subjects tend to be discourse given (N : 20 out of 21), while post-verbal subjects discourse new (N : 19 out of 23), as shown in (1) and (2) – where the unaccusative verb appears in first position or after an adverb, respectively:

- (1) *Viene un altro elefante con la rete.*
Comes another elephant with a net.
(2) *Poi arriva un'altra elefanta.*
Then arrives another female-elephant

The word order of (2) is consistent also with the V2-constraint in German (with the verb following an adverb). Transfer of this structure from German may account for the production of the abovementioned inappropriate discourse-given post-verbal subjects (N : 4 out of 23): In all these cases, an adverb appears in first position in the sentence, as shown in (3), where the subject *il palloncino* “the balloon” is discourse given.

- (3) *#E poi vola via il palloncino*
And then flew away the balloon

The analysis of the clauses containing transitive verbs (N : 115 in total) shows a different picture. Most of preverbal subjects (N : 90) are discourse-given and thus appropriate. We also found some instances of pre-verbal subjects carrying a contrastive or information focus feature (N : 16), whose production is non-target like and probably motivated by cross-linguistic effects: given that the SV-word-order is allowed in both languages, this kind of structure is expected to be produced in contexts in which the use of a language-specific structure (VS in Italian) would be more appropriate (Müller & Hulk 2001). An example is shown in (4), where the pronoun *io* “I” would be preferred in post-verbal position:

- (4) *#io lo prendo con una rete*
I it-CLIT take with a net

Furthermore, post-verbal subjects tend to be used in an inappropriate way. Most of them (N : 9 out of 11) are discourse-given. Crucially, they all occur in clauses in which the verb is preceded by an adverb, mirroring the corresponding V2-structures in German, as shown in (5):

- (5) *# poi aveva la giraffa un giocattolo*
And then had the giraffe a toy.

Our analysis of the correlation between word-order possibilities and marking of informational categories in heritage Italian reveals that when producing unaccusative verbs, Italian heritage children master the mapping between pre-verbal subjects and given information and post-verbal subjects and new/contrastive information. This is in line with our hypothesis that early acquired syntax-discourse interface phenomena can be fully acquired by heritage children. On the contrary, the positioning of the subject in correspondence with transitive verbs, which is a late-acquired phenomenon, seems to be more vulnerable to cross-linguistic effects. In this sense, our results put the Interface Hypothesis into perspective, showing that it cannot be generalized to all syntax-discourse

interface phenomena. To conclude, it should be noticed that only some of the cross-linguistic structures observed in this study are predicted by traditional accounts of cross-linguistic effects (i.e., the production of focused pre-verbal subjects). The production of structures of the type “adverb-verb-discourse given subject” suggests the emergence in Italian of innovative grammatical structures due to transfer of the V2-constraint from German.

References

- Belletti A. (2004). Aspects of the low IP area. In L. Rizzi (a cura di), *The structure of CP and IP. The cartography of syntactic structures, volume 2* (pp. 16-51). Oxford University Press.
- Abbot-Smith, K., & Serratrice, L. (2015). Word order, referential expression, and case cues to the acquisition of transitive sentences in Italian. *Journal of child language*, 42(1), 1-31.
- Lorusso, P., Caprin, C., & Guasti, M. T. (2005). Overt subject distribution in early Italian children. In *A supplement to the proceedings of the 29th annual Boston university conference on language development*.
- Müller N., Hulk A. (2001). Crosslinguistic influence in bilingual language acquisition: Italian and French as recipient languages. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 4, 1-21.
- Riester, A. & Baumann, S. (2013). Focus triggers and focus types from a corpus perspective. *Dialogue and Discourse*, 4(2), 215-248.
- Schneider, P., Dubé, R. V., & Hayward, D. (2005). The Edmonton narrative norms instrument. <http://www.rehabresearch.ualberta.ca/enni>.
- Sorace, A. (2011). Pinning down the concept of interface in bilingualism. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 1(1), 1-33.
- Vernice, M., & Guasti, M. T. (2015). The acquisition of SV order in unaccusatives: manipulating the definiteness of the NP argument. *Journal of child language*, 42(1), 210-237.