Competing grammars and licensing mechanisms in embedded wh-questions in Italian heritage speakers

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Introduction

BACKGROUND
Heritage speakers (HS) are subject to crosslinguistic influence (CLI), but the conditions under which this is the case are subject to debate. The following factors have been discussed:

• Interfaces (Hulk/Müller 2000, Sorace 2011)
• Complexity/markedness (Kupisch 2007, Liéd and colleagues)
• Partial syntactic overlap (Hulk/Müller 2000)
• Language dominance (Yip/Matthews 2006, Kupisch 2007)
• Frequency (Anderssen/Westergaard forthcoming)

AIM
• To investigate if the Italian syntax of Italian HSs in Germany is affected by transfer from the dominant language—a language external factor—than by syntactic complexity—a language internal factor.
• To control for (backwards) transfer from L3 English to L1 Italian

HYPOTHESES
1) HSs with strong Italian (based on vocabulary) score better in syntax task.
2) More complex syntactic constructions will be more vulnerable.
3) Sentences where German differs from Italian will be more problematic.

PHENOMENON

EMBEDDED WH-QUESTIONS
In wh-questions, German -not- Italian - displays a word order asymmetry between main and subordinate clauses (cf. e.g. Barbosa 2001, Poletto 2000, Rizzi 1996, 2006). In German and Italian matrix wh-questions, the wh-phrase and the inflected verb are adjacent:

1. a. Cosa *(Gianni)* ha cucinato Gianni?
   what G. AUX.3SG cook-PTCP G.
   b. *Was* *(Hans)* hat Hans gekocht?
   what H. AUX.3SG H. cook-PTCP
   ‘What has John cooked?’

   This requirement is also valid for embedded wh-questions in Italian (2a), but not in German (2b).

2. a. Maria non *sa* cosa ha cucinato Gianni.
   M. NEG knows what AUX.3SG cook-PTCP G.
   b. Maria *weiß* nicht, was Hans *gekocht* hat.
   M. knows NEG what H. AUX.3SG H. cook-PTCP
   ‘Mary doesn’t know what John has cooked.’

   Given its interface nature and the overlap in a subset of the surface structures (German/Italian), the phenomenon is potentially problematic for Italian HSs with German as their dominant language.

Method

GRAMMATICALITY JUDGEMENT TASK
• 48 sentences (24 grammatical, 24 ungrammatical)
• 4 test conditions x 6 item types varying in syntactic complexity
• Sentences contextualised to increase naturalness

PROCEDURE
1. Stimuli presented acoustically and under time pressure;
2. Participants judged sentences as (un)grammatical;
3. Sentences deemed ungrammatical appeared once more in written; participants were asked to provide an oral correction.

CONDITIONS TESTING CLI

ITEM TYPES (least to more complex)
A. wh-ARG with copula (essere ‘be’)
B. wh-ADJ with unergative (e.g. piangere ‘cry’)
C. wh-ARG with unergative (e.g. abitare ‘live’) (Syntactic Complexity)
D. wh-ADJ with unaccusative (e.g. partire ‘leave’)
E. wh-ARG with unaccusative (e.g. andare ‘go’) (Syntactic Complexity)
F. wh-ARG with transitive (e.g. comprare ‘buy’) (Syntactic Complexity)

PARTICIPANTS
• 20 Italian HSs in Germany (ages 17-31, mean age 24 yrs)
• 13 sequential (AoO German 3-6), 7 simultaneous from birth
• Speak various regional varieties of Italian and a Southern German variety

RESULTS

Scores calculated based on the number of correctly accepted sentences (grammatical items) and relevant corrections (ungrammatical items). Overall accuracy 50-94% (mean 84%)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS
• H1: No clear relation between Italian (lexical) proficiency and ability to correct ungrammatical sentences.
• H2: Syntactic complexity might play a role, since copula verbs prove to be least difficult. This is expected, since they have no vP/VF (cf. Belletti/Guasti 2015), thus one Phase less. Results in other conditions are less clear due to other factors making the items more difficult (e.g. OV vs. VO word order).
• H3: German transfer seems to take place, given more problems with Type 3 and 4 sentences, but Type 1 and 2 sentences were also problematic, suggesting that other sources of difficulty exist.

Selected references