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, Lleó 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 more 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 vulnerable.

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. cook-PTCP AUX.3SG
     '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

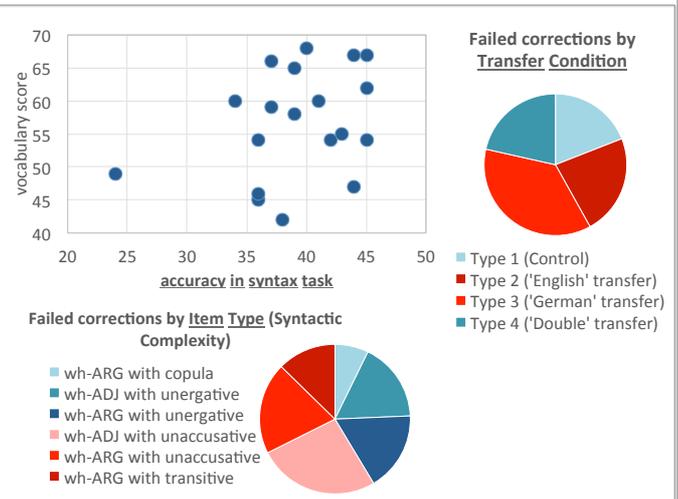|	ungrammatical				grammatical			
	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4
It.	*	*	*	*	Gr	Gr	Gr	Gr
Ge.	*	*	Gr	Gr	Gr	Gr	*	*
En.	*	Gr	*	Gr	Gr	*	Gr	*

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')
D. *wh*-ADJ with unaccusative (e.g. *partire* 'leave')
E. *wh*-**ARG** with unaccusative (e.g. *andare* 'go')
F. *wh*-**ARG** with transitive (e.g. *comprare* 'buy')

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%)

Failed corrections by **Transfer Condition**

Type 1 (Control)
Type 2 ('English' transfer)
Type 3 ('German' transfer)
Type 4 ('Double' transfer)

Failed corrections by **Item Type** (Syntactic Complexity)

■ wh-ARG with copula
■ wh-ADJ with unergative
■ wh-ARG with unergative
■ wh-ADJ with unaccusative
■ wh-ARG with unaccusative
■ wh-ARG with transitive

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/ VP (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

Belletti, A. & Guasti, M.T. 2015. *The Acquisition of Italian*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. **Bocci, G. & Pozzan, L. 2014**. Some questions (and some experimental answers) about Italian subjects. In C. Contemori & Dal Pozzo, L. (eds), Siena: CISCL Press. 28-44. **Hulk, A. & Müller, N. 2000**. Crosslinguistic influence at the interface between syntax and pragmatics, *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition, 3*, 227-244. **Rizzi, L. 1996**. Residual verb second and the *Wh*-Criterion. In A. Belletti & Rizzi, L. (eds), New York: Oxford University Press. 63–90.