

**On the bilingual acquisition of Italian and Venetan dialects:
A focus on subject and object clitic pronouns**

1. In this talk, we present data from the bilingual first language acquisition of an Italian child acquiring Italian and a variety of Venetan, the Rosà dialect. His spontaneous productions from the age of 2;0.17 to the age of 3;00 will be compared to the monolingual first language acquisition of a child acquiring another variety of Venetan, the Cassola dialect (age 2;8-3;4), and children acquiring Italian, data coming from corpora collected by our research group and from previous literature. We discuss both code-mixing and the syntactic emergence of subject and object pronouns.

2. We first show how the two languages develop in the bilingual child in terms of the MLU values of monolingual (both Italian and dialect) and mixed utterances. Until the age of 2;4.19, the dialect is the dominant language in both types of utterances. Afterwards, Italian becomes the dominant language. The bilingual child's code-mixing data are analysed following Bernardini and Schlyter's (2004) Ivy Hypothesis. Most of the examples of code-mixing in the corpus can be accounted for under this hypothesis; some unexpected examples (mainly concerning unaccusatives verbs) will be presented as well.

3. A comparison between the bilingual child and the monolingual children with respect to the acquisition of object clitics is undertaken.

In the bilingual child, object clitic pronouns emerge roughly at the same time in Italian and the dialect, and omissions stop at the same time in the two languages (at 2;3.14; see age 2;4 in Müller et al. 2006). In the monolingual Cassola dialect child, object clitics are omitted at a much higher rate and longer. They are still omitted 50% of the time at the age of 3, and omissions continue until the last recording. These data might be due to individual differences between the two children, as found in previous works and other languages. They might however also be attributed to the beneficial effect, on the bilingual child, of exposure of two close languages with clitic pronouns, Italian and the dialect.

Similar tendencies characterize the acquisition of Italian and dialectal object clitics. Comparing proclisis to enclisis, proclisis is in general more largely employed than enclisis; omissions are also more frequent in proclisis than in enclisis, although some opposite pattern is also found. The data are compared with previous studies on clitics acquisition in Italian and other Romance languages (Schaeffer 2000; Wexler et al. 2004; Müller et al. 2006, Costa et al. 2008, Caprin and Guasti 2009, Tuller et al. 2011 among many others).

4. Since the Venetan Dialects display subject clitics, this paper also reports on the acquisition of subject clitics in northern Italian dialects. We discuss the acquisition of subject clitics in the different contexts in which they occur (declarative, interrogative, negative).

Subject and object clitics emerge roughly at the same time (they are already present in the first recording of the bilingual child, at 2;0.17), subject clitics are however omitted at a much higher rate than object clitics. In declarative contexts, omissions of subject clitics tend to be more numerous than their productions, and they are still found in the last recording of the monolingual Cassola dialect child (at 3;4).

Subject omissions could be analysed as the influence of Italian on the acquisition of the dialect. There are however data that speak against this hypothesis. Comparing our data with other child languages which also present two classes of subject pronouns, tonic and deficient, we observe that the acquisition of the Venetan dialects is similar to the acquisition of Swahili (Deen 2012) and differs from the acquisition of French (see Hamann and Belletti 2008 for an overview). If frequent structures in the input were acquired earlier than rare structures, frequency considerations should predict the acquisition of subject clitics before object clitics. The prediction seems to be correct for French, but it is not correct for Veneto dialects and Swahili. The analysis will take into account the difference between weak and clitic pronouns (Cardinaletti and Starke 1999; Hamann et al. 1996, Hamann and Belletti 2008), and the partial pro-drop status of northern Italian dialects (Cardinaletti

and Repetti 2010). In Child Venetan (as in Swahili), pronominal subjects are true clitics, as in the adult language, while they are weak pronouns in French. Null subjects in child Venetan (a non full pro-drop language like adult Venetan) must be analysed as root null subjects as in Rizzi (1993/94), (2000). Support for this hypothesis comes from the observation that subject clitics are less omitted in interrogative sentences than in declarative sentences, and more in negative than in positive declaratives.

5. In conclusion, converging evidence from two close languages seems to speed up the acquisition of object clitics. When the two languages differ, however, as in the subject system, children succeed in keeping apart the properties of the two languages, not analysing the dialect as a full pro-drop language under the influence of Italian, but assuming the truncation option available in non-pro-drop languages.

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