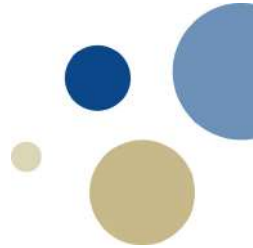**NTNU – Trondheim**
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology
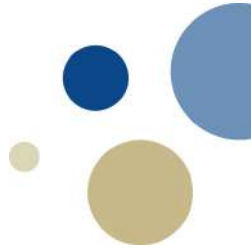
Comparison of the acquisition of two transparent gender systems: Italian and Croatian

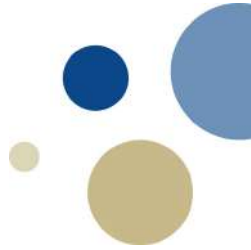Marta Velnić, NTNU
UniteGen Workshop
Tromsø 4.4.2019

AcqVA
Acquisition Variation Attrition

Outline

- Transparency as a factor facilitating gender acquisition
- The gender systems of Italian and Croatian
- The task
- Results
- Discussion

# Transparency as a factor of the acquisition of gender

- Three types of gender systems from a learner's perspective: transparent, opaque gender system, opaque existence of grammatical gender

- Transparent: the gender of the noun is evident from its phonological form

- Clear formal cues lead to an early acquisition of the system (Karmiloff-Smith 1981; Levy 1983)

Degrees of transparency

- Languages diverge from transparency to some extent (Audring 2014)

- Transparency on a continuum (Kupisch, Geiß, Mitrofanova, and Westergaard, 2018)

Spanish	Venetan	Italian	Russian	French	German	Norwegian Swedish Dutch
+			Transparency		-	
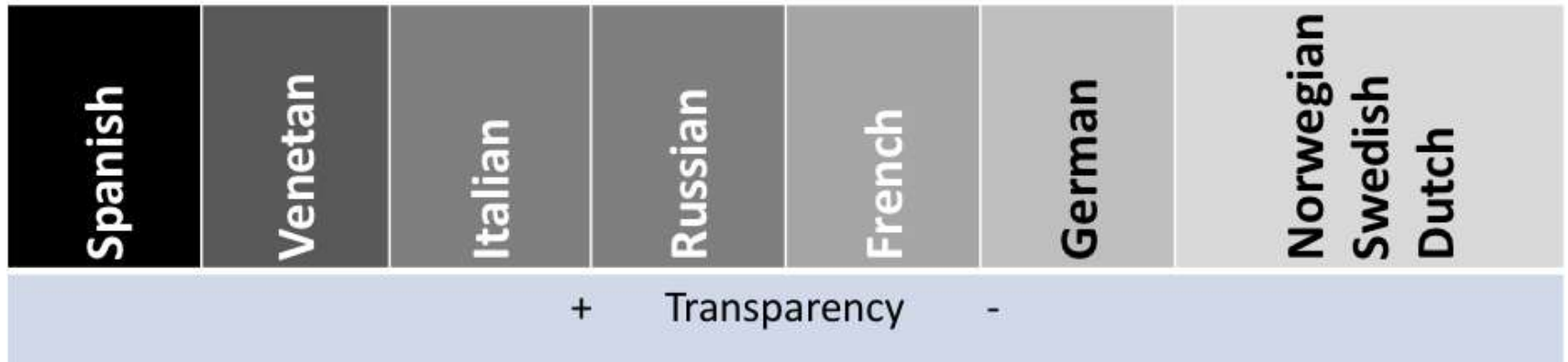
Gender assignment in the two languages
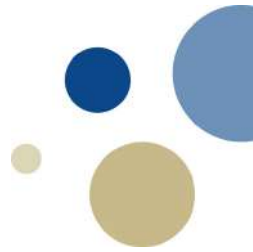
Italian

Noun endings	Gender	Example
-o/-i	M	Tavolo/i (table)
-a/-e	F	Sedia/e (chair)
-e/-i	M or F	Cane/i (dog), Volpe/i (fox)

- These noun endings make the 92,8% of the LIP corpus (Gudmundson, 2010)

Croatian

Noun endings	Gender	Example
-ø	M	Stol (table)
-a	F	Stolica (chair)
-o or -e	N	Nebo (sky), jaje (egg)

- There is also an additional declension class for F nouns ending in a consonant, it is considered opaque but was not part of the study (i.e. Kost-bone)

Agreement

- Italian: **article**, possessives, <u>adjectives</u>, demonstratives
- **Il** mio tavolo bianco / **La** mia sedia bianca

- Croatian: possessives, <u>adjectives</u>, demonstratives perifrastic past tense
- Taj moj bijeli stol / Ta moja bijela knjiga / To moje bijelo jaje

- Italian article: the first and most frequent syntactic gender cue (Chini, 1995)
- Makes the opaque nouns transparent: il cane/ la volpe
- Croatian learners will mostly encounter bare nouns

Italian article paradigm

Gender	Singular	Example	Plural	Example
	Definite			
Masculine	il	Il tavolo	i	I tavoli
	lo	Lo zaino	gli	Gli zaini
	L'	L'albero		Gli alberi
Feminine	la	La sedia	le	Le sedie
	l'	L'ape		Le api
	Indefinite			
Masculine	un	Un tavolo, un albero	NA	
	uno	Uno zaino		
Feminine	una	Una sedia	NA	
	un'	Un'ape		

- F has the –*a* vowel analogous to the noun

Syncretisms in Croatian

|	Masculine class "Deer"		Feminine "House"		Neuter class "Tree"	
	SING	PL	SING	PL	SING	PL
NOM	jelen	jelen-i	kuća	kuć-e	stablo	stabl-a
ACC	jelen-a	jelen-e	kuć-u	kuć-e	stablo	stabl-a
GEN	jelen-a	jelen-a	kuć-e	kuć-a	stabl-a	stab-a-la
DAT	jelen-u	jelen-ima	kuć-i	kuć-ama	stabl-u	stabl-ima
VOC	jelen-e	jelen-i	kuć-o	kuć-e	stablo	stabl-a
LOC	jelen-u	jelen-ima	kuć-i	kuć-ama	stabl-u	stabl-ima
INS	jelen-om	jelen-ima	kuć-om	kuć-ama	stabl-om	stabl-ima

9

Previous acquisition studies of gender

- Children have been found to acquire **Italian gender** quite easily including the opaque nouns (Kupisch et al, 2002; Belletti & Guasti, 2015)

- The article as a gender cue contributes to acquiring the gender system (Chini, 1995; Pizzuto & Caselli 1992)

- The F article is acquired earlier (Bottari et al., 1993)

- The acquisition of **Croatian gender** is understudied

- Kovačević et al (2009) report that the frequency of gender of the nouns that the children use is comparable to the adult nouns

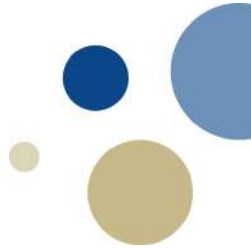- No reports on gender agreement

Degrees of transparency revised
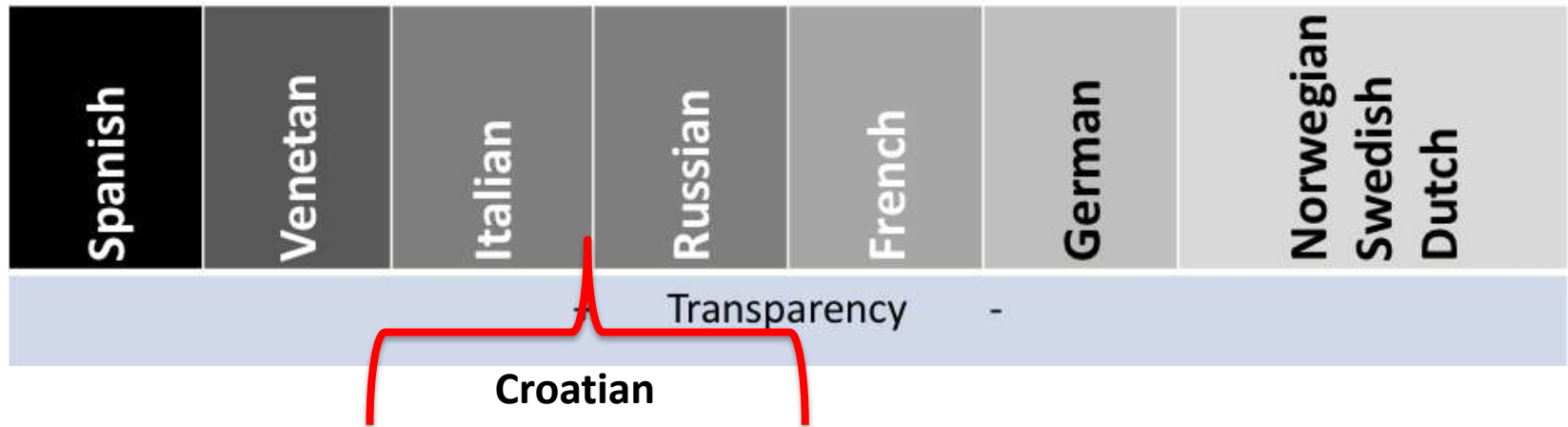
- Italian is more transparent than Croatian

Research Questions

1. Are Croatian children slower than Italian children to acquire the gender system?

2. Is the most regular gender (feminine) acquired first in both languages?

Methodology

- **Participants**: Total of 60 children; two groups of monolinguals each divided in two age groups: ItY (3;0), ItO (3;10), CroY (2;10), CroO (4;2)
- **Task**: adjective elicitation task
- **Procedure**: the children were shown images depicting animals and inanimate objects and were asked to describe them
- **Materials**: 30 images divided equally per gender (15+15 Italian; 10+10+10 Croatian)
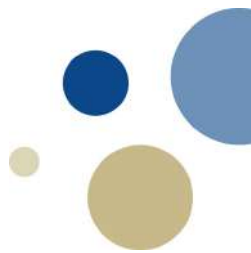
Summary responses

Distribution of correct/incorrect agreement
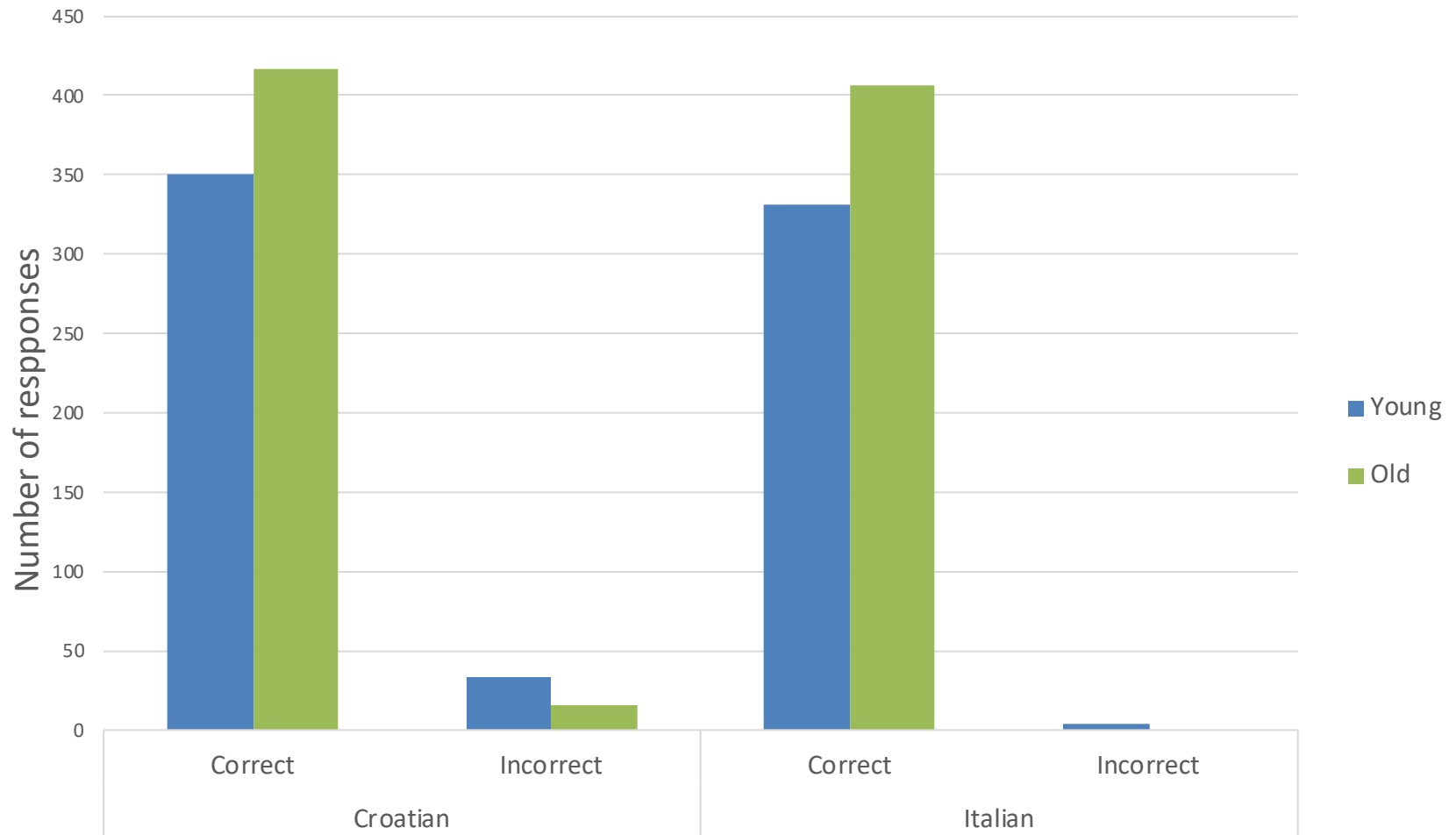
Results (tables)

Italian Groups

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	0.9940	0.00269	369.49	< .001
old – young	0.0118	0.00538	2.19	0.29
F – M	-0.106	0.00536	1.98	0.48

Croatian Groups

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	0.9384	0.00826	113.652	<.001
old – young	0.0491	0.01652	2.971	0.003
F – M	0.0171	0.02017	0.846	0.398
N – M	0.0624	0.02022	3.084	0.002

Results (description)
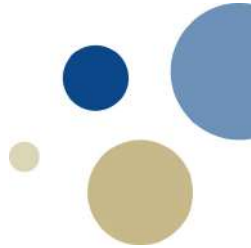
- No difference between Italian groups

- Significant difference between Croatian age groups (p=0.003) and between the correct responses of M and N (p=0.002)

- The error ratio of N contributes strongly to the difference between the two age groups but it is not the only reason

- When N is excluded the age groups are still significantly different (p=0.02)

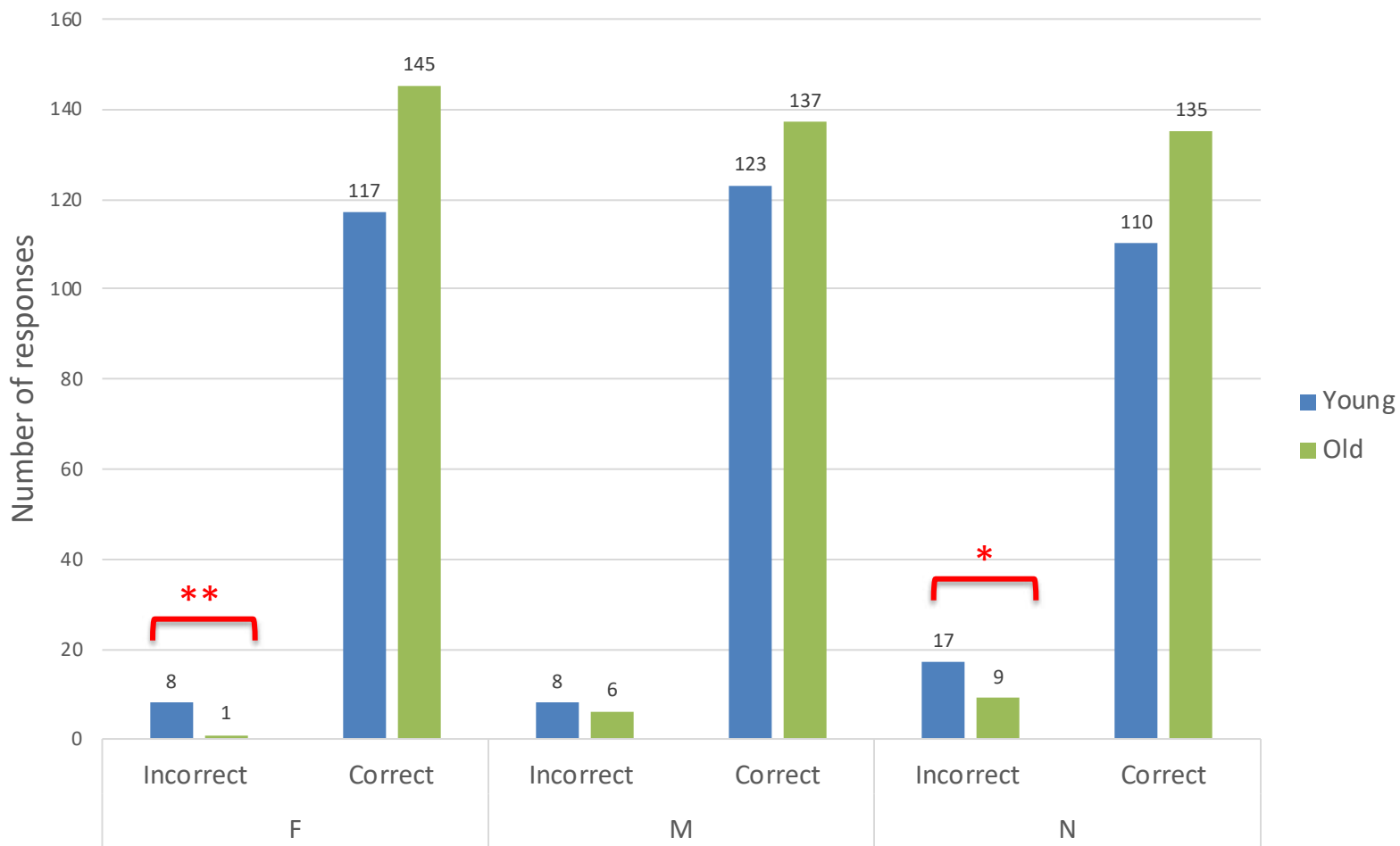- Italian children seem to be target-like in the younger group

Errors in Italian

Distribution of answers per gender in the Italian groups
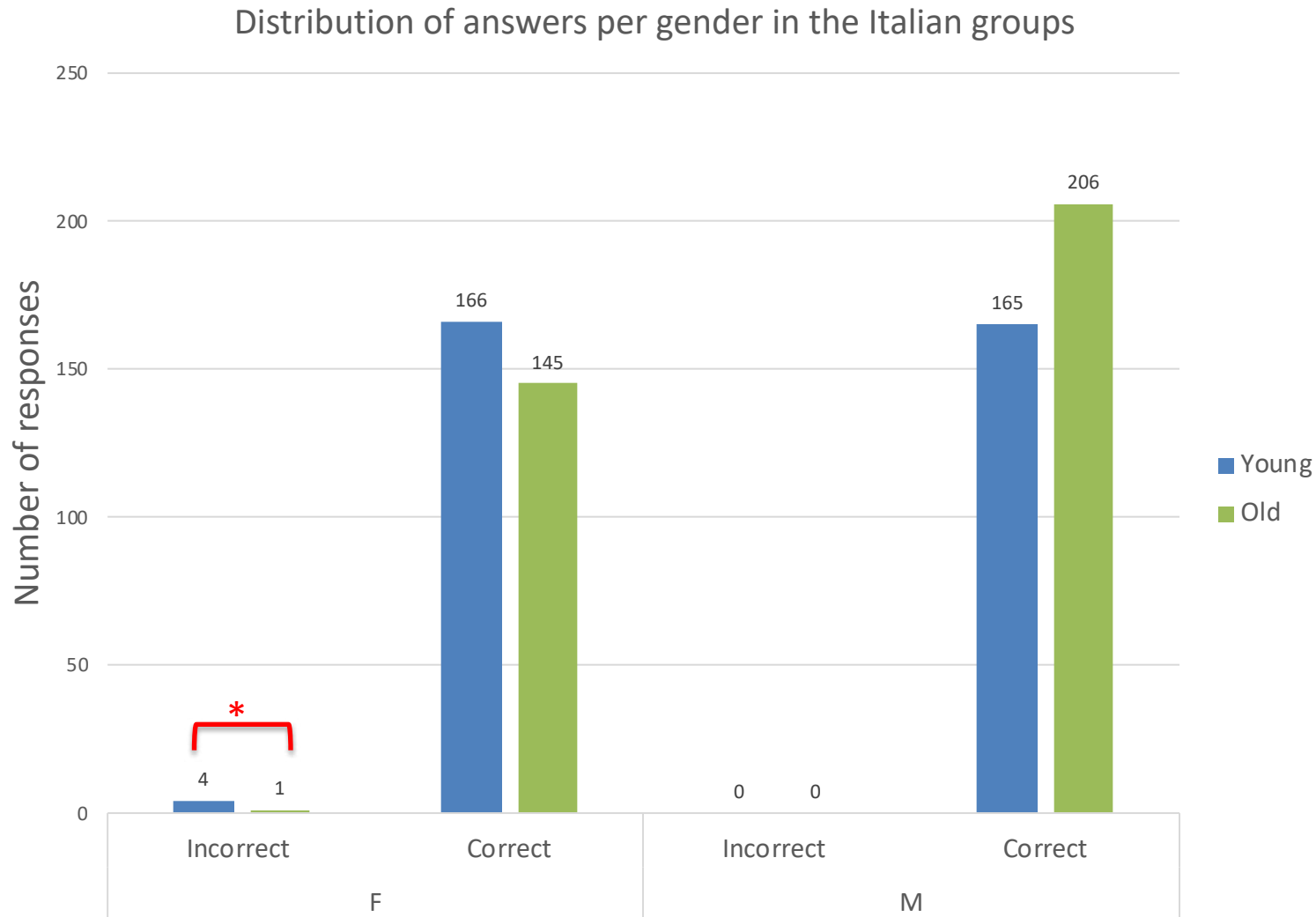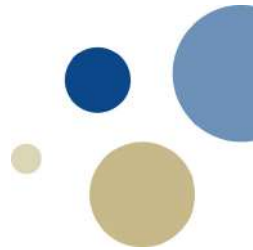
Errors in Croatian

Distribution of answers per gender in the Croatian groups

Error patterns in Croatian

| Target gender	group	Response gender		
		F	M	N
F	old	144	0	1
	young	117	3	5
M	old	2	137	4
	young	1	123	7
N	old	3	5	134
	young	3	14	109

Discussion

- No significant differences between the **Italian** age groups entail that they have mastered adjectival gender agreement by age 2;6 (youngest participant)

- **Croatian** children also make very few errors but with an interesting pattern

- Two stages of acquisition: **(F=M)<N** and **F<(M=N)**

- The first stage is likely due to the low frequency of N (6% in CDS)

- The significant improvement of N agreement in the second stage is likely due to a longer exposure to N nouns which also means exposure to syncretisms with M

Conclusion

- Grammatical gender is acquired easily in both Italian and Croatian
- The level of transparency matters and influences acquisition
- Italian is more transparent and thus acquired more quickly and with less errors
- We do not see an advantage of F in adjectival agreement as has been reported for article agreement in Italian
- In Croatian F seems to be mastered first
- Transparency should be considered as a continuum and the full paradigms have to be taken into consideration to assess how transparent a gender system is
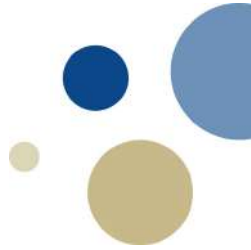
Thank You!

Questions?

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