

The acquisition of noun-adjective gender agreement in Italian and Croatian

A comparative study

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Outline

- The adult gender systems
- Hypothesis and predictions
- Methodology
- Results
- Discussion and review of the results

Gender

“Gender is a nominal invariable category inherent to the noun ”

Corbett 1991



The Italian gender system

- Transparent two-way gender system
- Targets for gender markings: articles and other determiners, possessives, pronouns, adjectives(not all) and past tensed verbs



Examples

a. il mio vecchio albero
the-m my-m old-m tree
my old tree

b. la mia vecchia casa
the-F my-F old-F house
my old house

The Croatian gender system

- Transparent three-way gender system
- Targets for gender markings: determiners, possessives, pronouns, adjectives and past tensed verbs



Examples

a. *Taj moj lijepi kamion*
that-M my-M beautiful-M truck

b. *Ta moja lijepa ovca*
that-F my-F beautiful-F sheep

c. *To moje lijepo nebo*
that-N my-N beautiful-N sky

Differences

- Presence/absence of the article
- Number of genders



The Italian article

Definite article

Gender/Number	Singular	Plural
Masculine	Il/lo/l'	i/gli
Feminine	la/l'	le

Indefinite article

Gender	Article
Masculine	un/uno
Feminine	una/un'

The Hypothesis



The lack of a frequent gender cue (the gender marked article) in Croatian makes it more difficult for the children to master gender agreement of nouns and adjectives. Also, a three-way gender system should require more time to be mastered. Therefore, given that both systems are quite transparent, will the systems be acquired simultaneously in both languages?



Predictions

Croatian children will take more time to master the gender paradigm and therefore also the adjectival agreement paradigm



Method

Adjective elicitation task: the children were presented 30 images and guided to describe the objects on the images with an adjective.

- Duration: 5-15 minutes
- Individual interviews
- Responses: Correct, Inocrrrect or Null



Participants

- 30 Italian and 30 Croatian monolinguals
- 2 age groups: 2;3-3;6 (3,00) and 3;6-4;4 (3,10) for the Italian speakers; 2;3-3;4 (2,10) and 3;8-4;10 (4,2) for the Croatian speakers
- 15 children per group for a total of 60 children



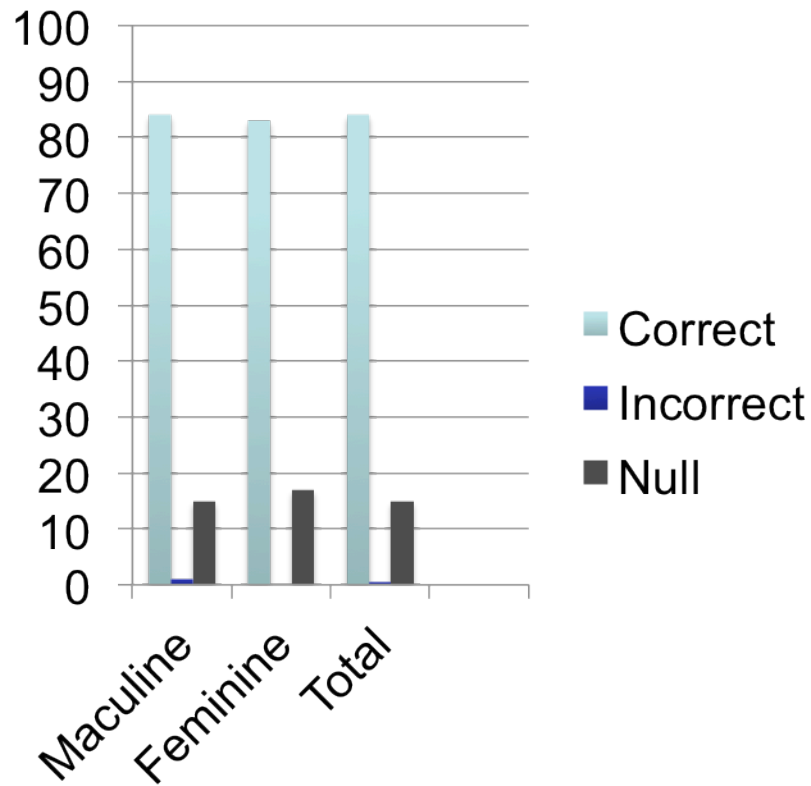
Materials

- 30 images depicting animals, fruit and everyday objects equally distributed among the languages genders
- The test items were chosen in order to fit equally the genders of the two languages so the same images could be used for both language groups
- Examples:

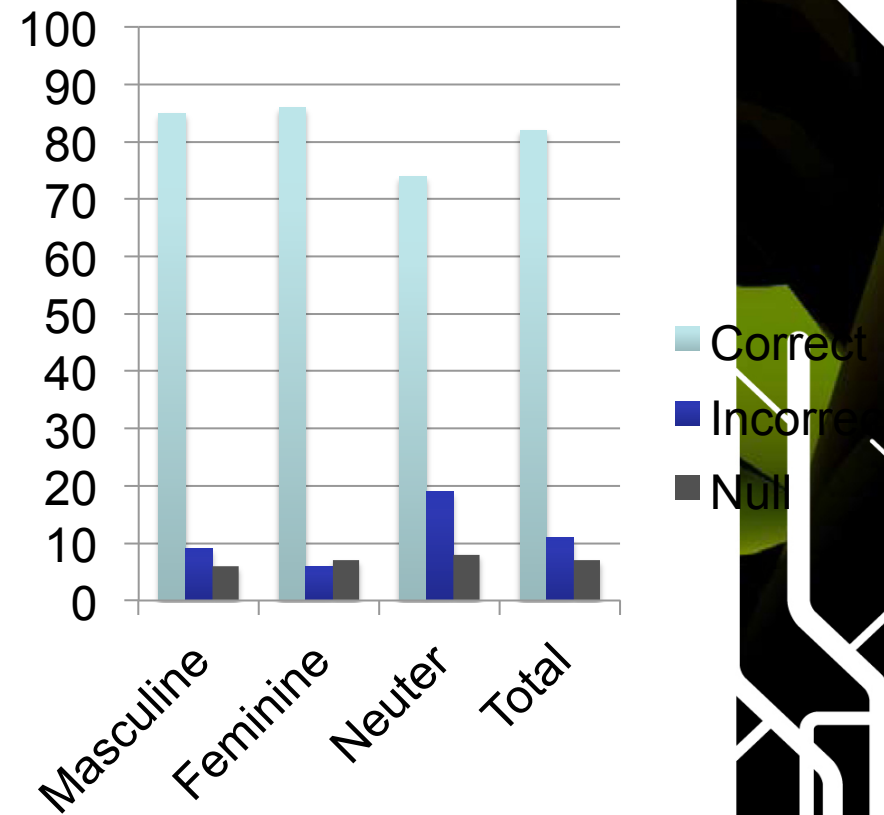


Results of the younger groups

Italian

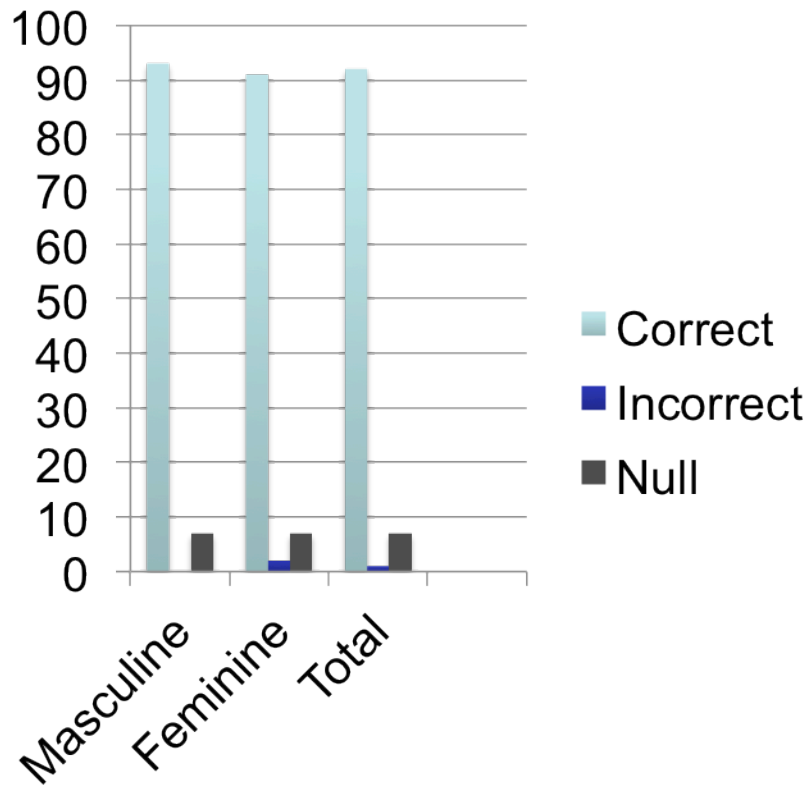


Croatian

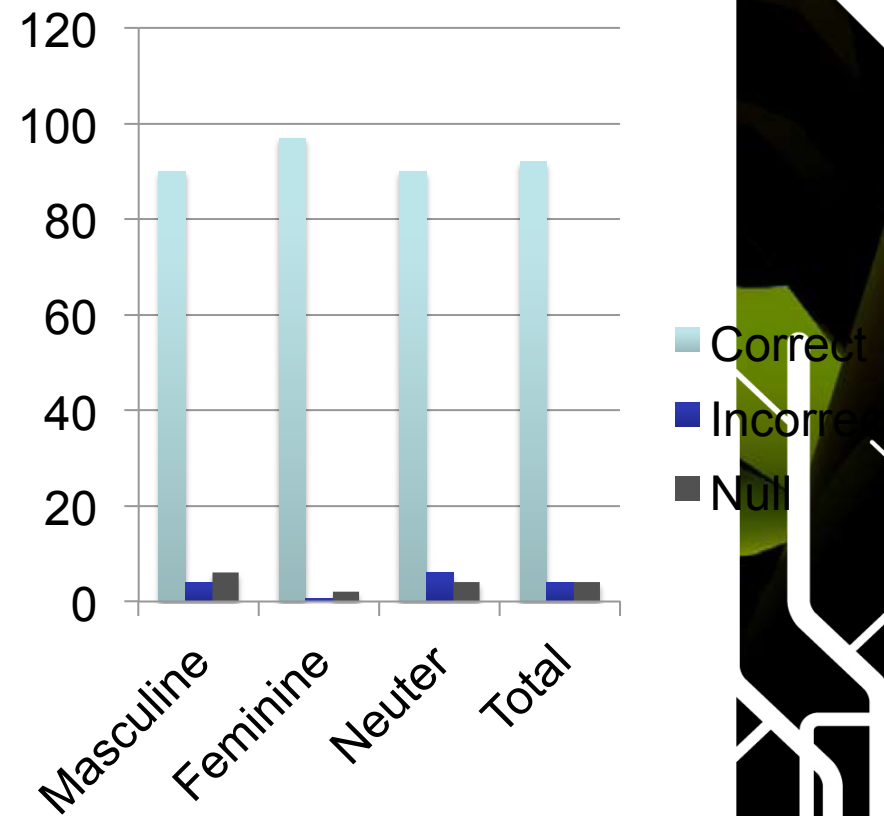


Results of the older groups

Italian



Croatian



Statistical results

Age factor is statistically significant in Croatian with the $p < 0.01$
non parametric test for Wilcoxon paired variables



Main findings

- The hypothesis seems to be confirmed: there is a delay in Croatian children
- The Italian and Croatian children use different answering strategies
- There is a path of acquisition in the Croatian groups: in the younger group M and F are at the same level and N falls behind while in the older group F is almost error free and M and N are at the same level

Discussion

- The absence of the article cannot fully account for the acquisition path that is noticed in the Croatian children
- There must be some other language-internal factors that are the cause of the stages that we see
- Children tend to be more attentive to assignment than to agreement (Karmiloff-Smith 1979), and the article is a manifestation of agreement



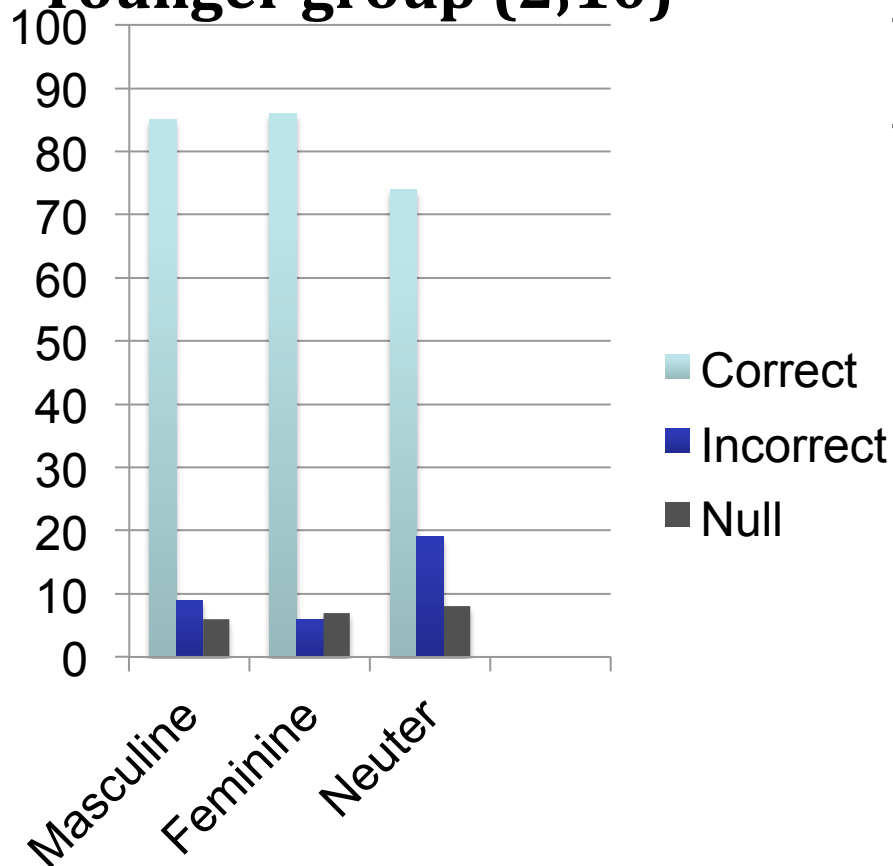
Question

Are other factors, other than the absence of article and the number of genders, involved in the delay of gender agreement mastery in Croatian children?

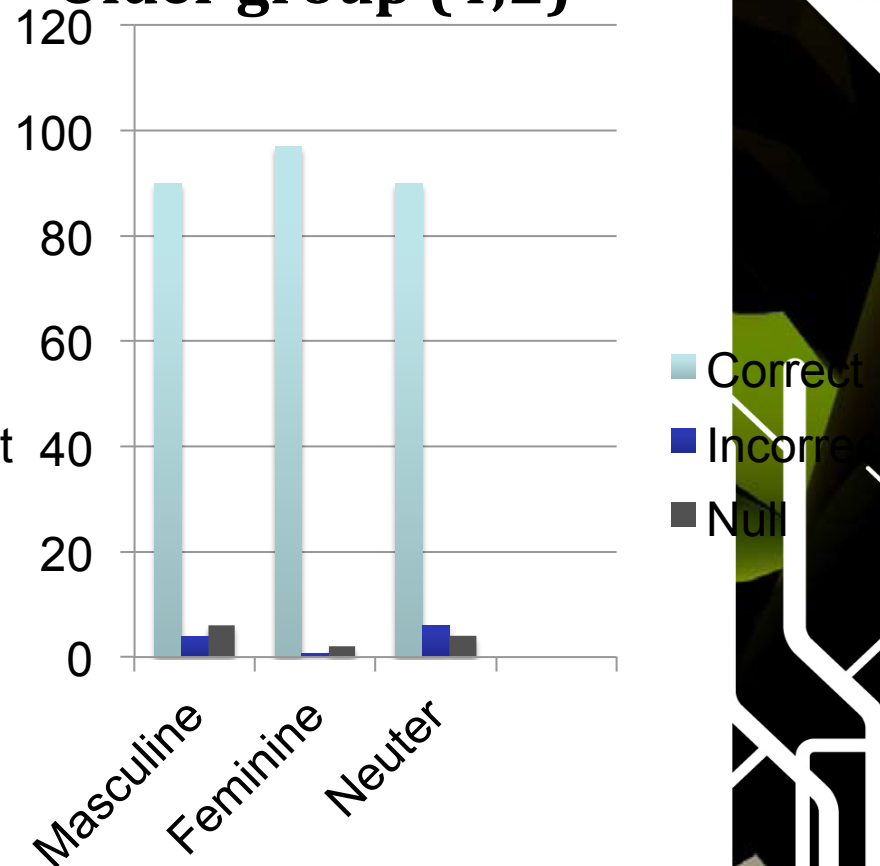


The stages of mastery of Croatian gender agreement

Younger group (2;10)



Older group (4;2)



Corpora analysis

Productions of neuter agreement are quite rare:

Gender	Masculine		Feminine		Neuter	
	Corr	Err	Corr	Err	Corr	Err
	295	13	191	28	23	3
Total	308		219		26	

Can frequency explain the higher number of errors in the youngest group?



The Croatian declination pattern

	Masculine class (deer)		Feminine -a class (house)		Feminine -i class (bone)		Neuter class (tree)	
	SING	PL	SING	PL	SING	PL	SING	PL
NOM	jelen	jelen-i	kuća	kuć-e	kost	kost-i	stablo	stabl-a
ACC	jelen-a	jelen-e	kuć-u	kuć-e	kost	kost-i	stablo	stabl-a
GEN	jelen-a	jelen-a	kuć-e	kuć-a	kost-i	kost-i(ju)	stabl-a	stab-a-la
DAT	jelen-u	jelen-ima	kuć-i	kuć-ama	kost-i	kost-ima	stabl-u	stabl-ima
VOC	jelen-e	jelen-i	kuć-o	kuć-e	kost-i	kost-i	stablo	stabl-a
LOC	jelen-u	jelen-ima	kuć-i	kuć-ama	kost-i	kost-ima	stabl-u	stabl-ima
INS	jelen-om	jelen-ima	kuć-om	kuć-ama	kost-i	kost-ima	stabl-om	stabl-ima



...the Croatian declination pattern

- in 4 out of 7 cases Masculine and Neuter show syncretism
- Some of this syncretism can also be seen in 3 plurals of the Feminine *-i* class
- Reminder: we saw on slide 7 that the feminine agreement pattern is the most regular one



Additional reasons for the gender mastery delay of Croatian children

- Low frequency of the Neuter gender
- Regularity of the Feminine
- Greater syncretism of Masculine and Neuter

Conclusions

The delay of Croatian children compared to Italian ones is not only caused by the lack of the article and the complexity of a three-way gender system; but some language-internal factors also influence the acquisition and make the children go through different stages of gender agreement.

Questions?