Cross-linguistic influence in acceptability: possessive structures in Norwegian-Italian bilingual children

Cross-linguistic influence is a phenomenon in multilingual speakers in which Language A can influence language B for a specific property. According to Hulk and Müller (2001) CLI is likely to happen when there is (i) surface structure overlap, and (ii) interface between two modules of the grammar (i.e syntax & pragmatics) (Hulk & Müller, 2001). CLI is widely studied in bilinguals' production (Anderssen & Bentzen, 2018; Kupisch, 2014; Nicoladis, 2006; Westergaard & Anderssen, 2015), but it can also influence acceptability in a way that they accept a structure more than their monolingual peers (Sorace et al., 2009).

In the current paper we investigate CLI in possessive structures in Norwegian-Italian bilingual children. Both languages have two possessive variants: one prenominal and one postnominal, but these have opposite distributions in terms of contextual use and frequency (table 1). In each language the marked variant signals change of possessor when the context allows for it (1,2).

We designed a forced-choice acceptability judgment task in OpenSesame Web. The task consisted of short animations in which a character either interacted with their own object (neutral condition) or with someone else's object (contrast condition); two additional characters then described the scene, each using a different possessive structure, and the participants had to choose who described it better. Thirty-one Norwegian-Italian bilingual children (mean age=6;5) completed the task.

The preliminary results for the responses (table 2) show that in Italian marginally more marked variants (postnominal) are used in the contrast condition when compared to the neutral condition (p<0.1) which is in line with the pragmatics; marginally more marked variants (prenominal) used in neutral condition in Norwegian than in Italian, which may indicate CLI from Italian to Norwegian. Statistically, there is no indication of CLI from Norwegian to Italian, but the raw numbers in table 2 suggest this: more postnominal possessives used in the Italian neutral condition than in the (appropriate) contrast condition.

There was no significant effect in the reaction times (RTs) (table 3). Overall, the children were faster in the Norwegian task- here also the RTs reflected the contextual use as the fastest responses were for prenominals in contrast and postnominals in neutral condition. In Italian the fastest mean RTs is for the prenominal in neutral condition, but the children were slowest in choosing the postnominals in contrast condition, indicating that they still struggle with this choice.

We conclude that there is bidirectional CLI for possessives in Norwegian-Italian children. Nevertheless, the results from the responses and RTs incompatible: CLI from Italian to Norwegian is more pronounced, but the responses for Italian are slower and indicate that the choice of variant in the contrastive condition may still be problematic. CLI for acceptability is complex, but these results show an interesting interplay between response and processing. In future analyses we will integrate dominance and age, and we plan to compare this with production data from the same group.

	Norwegian		Italian	
	Pre-nominal	Post-nominal	Pre-nominal	Post-nominal
Example	Min bil My car	Bilen min Car-the my	La mia macchina The my car	La macchina mia The car my
Markedness (contextual)	Marked	Unmarked	Unmarked	Marked
Frequency	Less	More (73%)	More (86%)	Less

Table 1: summary of differences between Norwegian and Italian possessives

Context: Minnie has a red bed and Daisy has a pink bed.

    (1) a. *Minnie sover. Sengen hennes er myk*. - The bed belongs to Minnie
          Minnie sleeps. bed-the her   is   soft
      b. *Minnie sover. Hennes seng er myk*. - The bed belongs to Daisy
           Minnie sleeps. her   bed is soft
    (2) a. *Topolina   dorme   nel suo letto*. – The bed belongs to Minnie
          Minnie   sleeps in-the her bed
      b. *Topolina   dorme nel   letto suo*. – The bed belongs to Daisy
         Minnie   sleeps in-the bed her.

Responses	Norwegian		Italian	
	Postnominal (unmarked)	Prenominal (marked)	Prenominal (unmarked)	Postnominal (marked)
Neutral	161	105	172	95
Contrast	151	114	130	61
	531		458	

Table 2: Responses to the task. The gray cells indicated pragmatically felicitous responses, the blue cells indicate potential CLI from the other language.

RTs (ms)	Norwegian		Italian	
	Postnominal (unmarked)	Prenominal (marked)	Prenominal (unmarked)	Postnominal (marked)
Neutral	3333.876	3885.019	3965.844	4617.881
Contrast	3501.033	2862.658	4854.669	5621.303

Table 3: mean RTs. The gray cells indicated pragmatically felicitous responses.

References

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