

Introduction

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The Acquisition of Italian: Morphosyntax and its interfaces in different modes of acquisition

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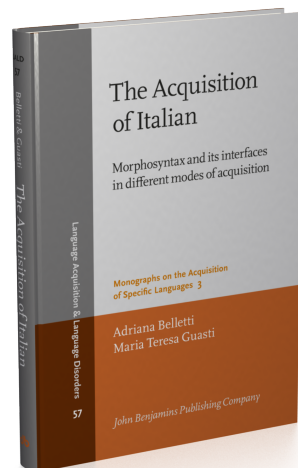
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Introduction

Theoretically oriented acquisition studies: The state of the art in Italian

Language acquisition is a complex phenomenon in which internal and external factors inevitably interact in complex ways. Our point of departure is an approach to the study of the human language capacity according to which newborn children are equipped with (more or less) structured internal language-dedicated mechanisms (e.g. Chomsky 1988, 2005; Mehler & Dupoux 1990). These mechanisms are put into work through interaction with the external environment and the language data it provides. Results from formal studies in language acquisition have shown that it is only by looking at theoretically well defined research questions which typically concern subtle properties of the developing system that development itself can be properly characterized. At the same time, this type of study provides specific evidence on the functioning of the linguistic internal mechanisms themselves. In fact, the contribution of theoretically oriented studies on language acquisition is typically twofold: they both enhance our understanding of the linguistic computational mechanisms and define aspects and stages of linguistic development. Although the contribution of the external input is made evident by the fact that typically developing children converge on the language(s) they are exposed to and quickly pick up some crucial properties of the ambient language, it is a fact that children also make “errors”, that is, they create expressions that do not reproduce the input. Crucially, the “errors” that children make during development always are linguistically possible expressions in some human language (e.g. Crain & Thornton 1998; Rizzi 2006); for instance, children have never been documented to undergo a stage in which they produce sentences with negation filling the third position in the sentence. Indeed, comparative studies indicate that languages with this property are not attested. This is a property that can be learned by a human being as the rule of a game, but, as neuroimaging techniques have clearly shown, its use does not activate typical language areas (Moro 2008). Hence, the internal language capacity is not just a predisposition to language, but an abstract structured system (e.g. Franck, Millotte, Posada & Rizzi 2013; Fisher 2002). These general considerations are in the background of the present book.

We report here results on the acquisition of Italian from studies run with different populations in different modes of acquisition. The specific perspective that we have adopted in our overview is in the tradition inaugurated by the Principles & Parameters (P&P) approach to the study of language and its more recent developments in minimalism and syntactic cartography (e.g. Chomsky 1981, 1995, 2001; Cinque & Rizzi 2010; Guasti 2002; Hyams 1986).

The fundamental insight of this approach to the study of language acquisition is that developmental acquisition data bear directly on the issue of how the final state

of language knowledge can be characterized. Developmental data from both typical and atypical development often reveal properties that may remain unnoticed by solely looking at the adult system, hence they also have a direct impact on the proper characterization of the adult state as well. For instance, sometimes typically developing children even at young ages appear to be able to use (produce and comprehend) constructions which look pre-theoretically complex; this immediately calls for a closer investigation of the computational mechanisms involved. A number of cases with these characteristics will be discussed in the chapters to follow; one case in point is resort to passive in object relative clauses and in *wh*-questions.

The described approach to the study of language acquisition, which we endorse in our investigations and in our overview, also has another important property. It is often the case that children undergo stages in their acquisition that are not target-like and cannot be directly drawn from the input. An important and innovative result of the approach is the observation that children's non-target stages are in fact possible options in other languages of the world as is expected in a biologically determined perspective. Specifically, in the P&P approach it is natural to think that children are open to try out possible UG compatible options before converging to the adult system. This is why the study of development may turn out to be crucial also in revealing general properties of the language system itself. Italian is no exception to this general outcome. Often in this book, we will consider non-target stages in development and recognize in them the manifestations of possible grammatical options active in different languages. Cases in point are the clitic omission stage, the article omission stage, the preference for types of passives that are not exploited in the adult grammar, the use of overt and null pronominal subjects.

The different modes of acquisition

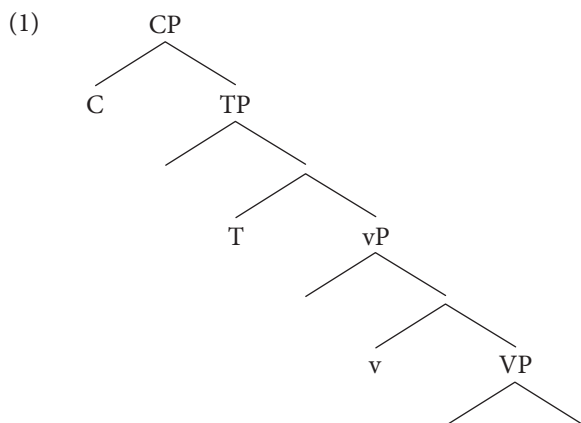
This book focuses on different acquisition modes of Italian, i.e. the acquisition of Italian in typical and atypical development, child and adult L2, bi/multilingual acquisition. Use of the term typical development refers to a mode of acquisition, which is identified as monolingual and which corresponds to the path followed by the majority of children. It should be kept in mind, however, that, strictly speaking, a pure monolingual speaker is probably an abstraction: the external conditions generally provide the opportunity to be exposed to more than one language (or dialect) for most of the Italian population. The extent to which the multilingual input is accessed is what makes the difference between what we call a monolingual speaker and a bi/multilingual speaker. With this proviso in mind, the monolingual mode of acquisition will constitute the *baseline* against which the other modes are compared. By atypical development, we mean different forms of pathological development such as Specific Language Impairment (SLI), Developmental Dyslexia (DD) and other forms mani-

fested in other syndromes. The study of atypical development directly contributes in a peculiar form to the understanding of the language faculty, as it is always the case that, by looking at a dysfunctional system, properties of the regularly functioning one may be displayed in an amplified fashion. This is realized in at least two ways. On the one hand, in the dysfunctional system non-target stages may last longer so that they can be better identified and more closely looked at; on the other hand, the acquisition of different linguistic properties does not always proceed in a parallel way as in typical development, which in turn may reveal specific points of higher computational complexity. One case in point may be represented by the (hard) acquisition of cliticization in contrast with the (easier) acquisition of some aspects of discourse pragmatics in the SLI population. This uneven development may also reveal that there might be some linguistic properties that need to be acquired at a critical time: if this does not happen, the relevant property may not be ever fully acquired and the problem may continue to manifest itself later in development.

Types of L2 acquisition and simultaneous bi/multilingual acquisition offer another lens through which the language faculty can be investigated. The studies that we will report from these populations all point to the necessity of distinguishing among them and from other forms of atypical behaviors which stem from language pathology. Moreover, they also shed light on the possible transfer of parametric properties, which is a peculiar route through which one may arrive at a better characterization of the format of parameters and the space of influence across languages.

Some general assumptions of linguistic analysis

Throughout the chapters of this book we will have as our background an analysis of clause structure along the lines that we now describe in order to make our basic assumptions explicit. Following the minimalist tradition, we will usually represent clause structure in the simplified way in (1), with TP selected by C and selecting v:



We will assume that CP and TP are widely more expanded as results from cartographic studies have shown (Cinque 2002; Rizzi 2004b; Belletti 2004b; and much subsequent work). Thus, whenever needed, we will make reference to the more articulated functional architecture of the clause. For instance, we will assume that inflectional heads related to different voices are present in the low functional area of the clause expressing e.g., (part of) the passive voice with its crucial property of triggering syntactic movement of part of the verb phrase (Collins 2005). The low area also hosts discourse related positions, such as the one expressing new information Focus (Belletti 2001b, 2004a), which is to be kept distinct from the left peripheral focus position (Rizzi 1997) in a language like Italian. A number of D-related agreement type heads are also present in the clause structure hosting agreement features expressing subject verb-agreement, past participle agreement and so on (Belletti 2001a). The CP left periphery is assumed to contain head positions attracting constituents into their specifier, as in the case of relative clauses (Friedmann, Belletti & Rizzi 2009) and *wh*-questions (Rizzi 2004a; Guasti, Branchini & Arosio 2012). In the nominal system, we will assume an articulated structure for the noun phrase, although we will basically employ the simplified D+NP DP structure (Abney 1987).

This book provides an overview of the state of the art of the research on the acquisition of Italian. It can be read in two ways. It can be both used as a tool to be informed of what we take to be the most significant results up to now on the acquisition of Italian in different acquisition modes, and it can also be used as a starting point for further investigating different topics in acquisition, also comparatively. Our aim is to present results in such a way that *baselines* of different profiles can be recognized thus constituting a point of departure for further investigation. In this vein, all chapters are organized in the same way. First, we present some basic descriptive properties of the phenomena to be investigated in the chapter itself integrated with some analytical assumptions adopted. Then, we proceed to the presentation of the overview of the research in typical monolingual development, followed by the presentation of the acquisition of the same domain in different modes of acquisition, in atypical development of various kinds (mainly SLI; DD; Hearing impaired) and in bi/multilingual acquisition and adult and child L2. We conclude each chapter with a section in which its content is summarized and the various profiles emerged are synthetized. Finally, the concluding section indicates a number of questions for further future research, which are opened by the results and theoretical analyses presented.

This book can be read chapter after chapter; alternatively, the reader can go directly to the chapter(s) dealing with a topic of interest. For this reason, each chapter is self-contained and does not rely on information given in previous chapters. This has the consequence that some redundancy may be detected across some of the chapters as for the presentation of analytical hypotheses and analyses; however, each time hypotheses and analyses strictly refer to the issues addressed in the relevant chapter(s).