Bilingual children's answering strategies to New Information Subject questions: new evidence

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With the aim of investigating if bilingual children answer subject questions using the preferred strategy in each language they master, we analysed the production of 4 bilingual children (3 Italian-English, 6;1, 5;8, 9;0 and 1 Italian-Spanish, 6;3). Following the cartographic assumptions made by Belletti (2004), we assume that in both Italian and Spanish (both Null Subject Languages) the clause internal vP periphery is activated, hosting the New Information Subject (NIS) and, in combination with V-movement, yielding the order VS when answering NIS questions ("Chi è arrivato?" who has arrived? - "È arrivato Gianni" has arrived Gianni).

[CP … [TP *pro* … è arrivato [TopP Top [FocP [Gianni] Foc … [vP __<V>…]]]]]

In a Non-Null Subject Language like English, the preferred answering strategy displays the SV order, a form of focalization in situ accompanied by a dedicated prosody (Belletti, 2008).

Although these strategies are the preferred ones by monolingual adults, previous studies have shown that the VS order is not the preferred answering strategy neither of non-advanced nor of near-native L2 adult speakers of Italian (Belletti et al., 2007; Belletti & Leonini, 2004). Similar results have also been found in Italian heritage adult speakers (Caloi et al., 2018): when an appropriate NIS discourse context was presented, participants mostly produced the answering strategy of their majority language. Results from three Italian-Finnish speaking children (Dal Pozzo, 2011) showed that also bilingual children tend to prefer the SV Finnish prevalent strategy when answering NIS questions in Italian. Both strategies appear thus to be active, although to a different extent in different populations, in multilingual speakers' grammar(s). This is also consistent with the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace, 2011), according to which, when syntax and discourse information are integrated, multilingual speakers show optionality and instability.

In our study we checked whether Italian-English simultaneous bilingual children have a preference for either SV or VS order in Italian and how their behaviour compares with that of bilingual children speaking two languages that both have the VS order as the preferred strategy (Italian-Spanish). We administered our task also to 4 monolingual Italian children (mean age: 6;0). The task consisted of 25 videos (5 warm-up), each followed by 2 questions in Italian and 2 questions in the other L1 (Appendix1). Overall, we asked them 22 NIS questions per language. Our results (Appendix2) showed that the Italian-Spanish child produced nearly as many VS answers as monolingual children (around 60% of VS in both languages). When both languages have the same preferred structure, production reached monolingual-like performance (Kraš, 2008). Conversely, the 3 Italian-English children produced the VS order only around 23% of the times in Italian. Similarly to the populations referred to above, they preferred the SV order both when answering in Italian and when answering in English (where VS would yield ungrammaticality). These findings indicate that, irrespective of different environmental conditions and linguistic contexts, parallel results characterize multilingual speakers' production in different ages.

Appendix 1
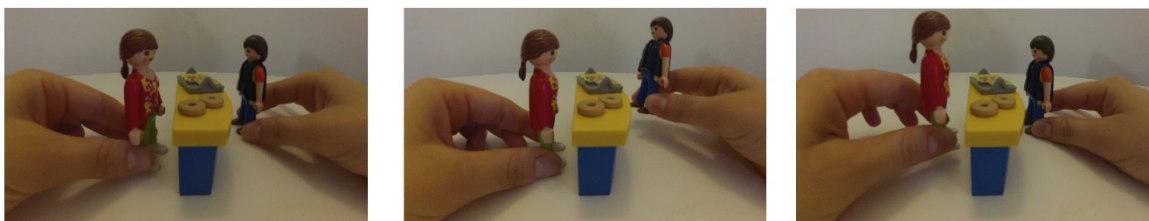
Example of a video from the task.

Dialogue in the video:

Frame 1 → Mum: "Che bella cena che stiamo preparando oggi!" – what a nice dinner we are preparing today
Frame 2 → Dad: "Sì, io cucino la pizza." – yes, I'm cooking pizza
Frame 3 → Mum: "Io invece ho preparato le ciambelle." – I have prepared donuts instead

Questions asked after the video to all the participants (both bilinguals and controls):

| ITA | Di che colore ha i capelli papà? | Random Question / Filler |
| ITA | Le ciambelle, chi le ha preparate? | NI Subject Question |

Additional questions asked to bilingual children (in English or Spanish):

ENG	What's the colour of Dad's hair?	Random Question / Filler
ENG	Who made the donuts?	NI Subject Question
SPA	¿De qué color tiene el pelo el padre?	Random Question / Filler
SPA	¿Las rosquillas, quién las preparó?	NI Subject Question

Appendix 2

Results' graph showing percentages of VS, SV, and Invalid/Other answers to Italian questions given by the different participants (controls, Italian-English bilinguals, and the Italian-Spanish bilingual) in the critical items (without warm-up).
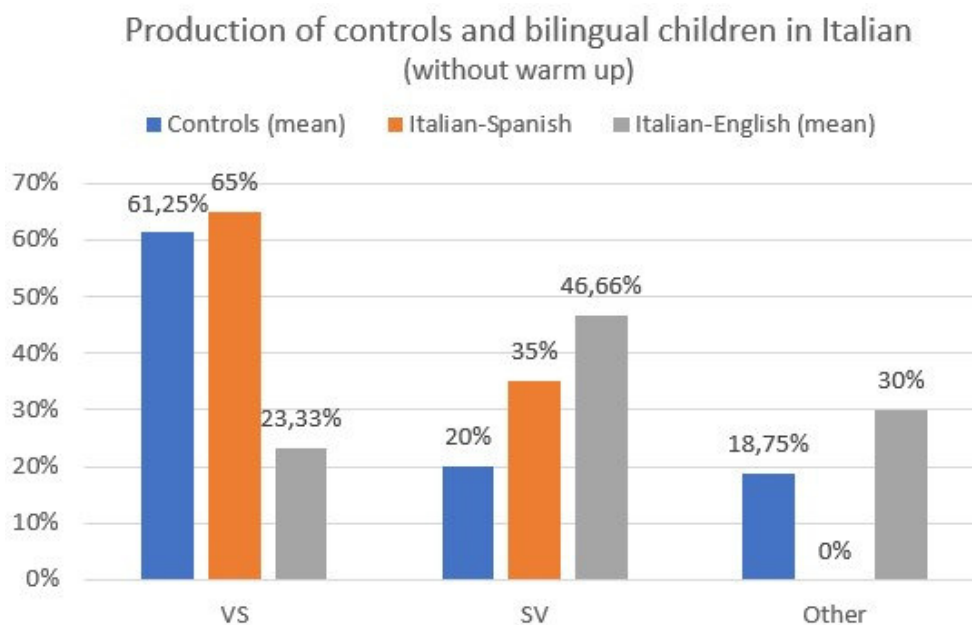
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