

Grammatical Gender Agreement in Italian as a Heritage Language: A Self-Paced Reading Study

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Grammatical gender is acquired early by monolingual children but it shows variability in heritage speakers (HSs) related to proficiency and linguistic difference between the minority and majority languages; it is vulnerable in populations with low proficiency and with a majority language without gender (e.g., Polinsky, 2008), while it seems to be fully acquired in populations with high proficiency and with both languages with gender (e.g., Bianchi, 2013). We examined sources of morphological variability in Italian HSs living in Germany, with a focus on morphological markedness and task type (explicit vs. implicit knowledge).

Fifty-four adult Italian HSs living in Germany and 40 native speakers of Italian living in Italy participated in two experiments. Experiment 1 examined HSs' gender agreement in an offline grammaticality judgement task (GJT) (tapping explicit knowledge) involving sentences with grammatical and ungrammatical noun-adjective sequences with masculine (unmarked) and feminine (marked) nouns in the singular (unmarked) and plural (marked). Gender violations were realised on the adjective. This examined HSs' potential overreliance on unmarked forms or "defaults" (masculine/singular). Experiment 2 examined the same conditions in an online self-paced reading (SPR) task (tapping implicit knowledge) to address how HSs process gender agreement violations. A language history questionnaire and a vocabulary test addressed relationships between gender agreement, language exposure/use and language proficiency.

In both tasks, participants living in Italy performed at ceiling and showed faster reading times (RTs) compared to HSs (see Figures 1 and 2). In the GJT, HSs showed high accuracy and were more sensitive to violations realised on marked adjectives; they showed an effect of markedness for number (more accurate with singular vs. plural in the feminine) and for gender (more accurate with masculine vs. feminine in the plural). In the SPR, both groups showed sensitivity to violations realised on marked vs. unmarked adjectives but only in the masculine (longer RTs in the critical region 'antica' in Figure 2). A significant correlation between the results of the GJT and proficiency suggests that proficiency and having a majority language with grammatical gender facilitate the acquisition of gender agreement in HSs.

These results suggest that despite the differences between the groups in the GJT, there are no qualitative differences in the processing of grammatical gender between high proficient HSs with a majority language that has grammatical gender and native speakers who are not HSs. Importantly, markedness impacts grammatical gender in both explicit and implicit tasks in HSs but in different ways. This stresses the importance of combining methods of empirical testing to gauge competence and processing at the same time in the same groups of participants.

References

- Polinsky, M. (2008). Gender under incomplete acquisition: Heritage speakers' knowledge of noun categorization. *Heritage Language Journal* 6(1): 40-71.
- Bianchi, G. (2013). Gender in Italian-German bilinguals: A comparison with German L2 learners of Italian. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 16(3), 538-557.

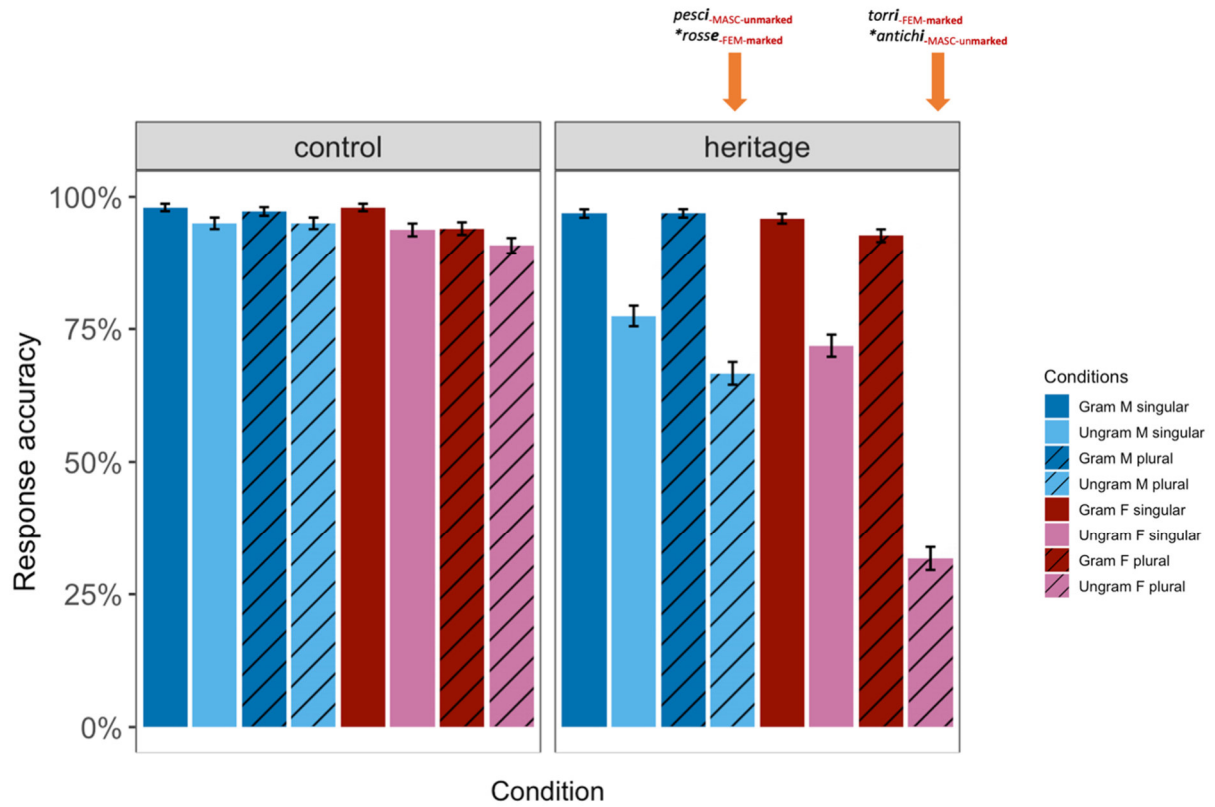


Figure 1. Mean accuracy (%) for grammaticality judgement task

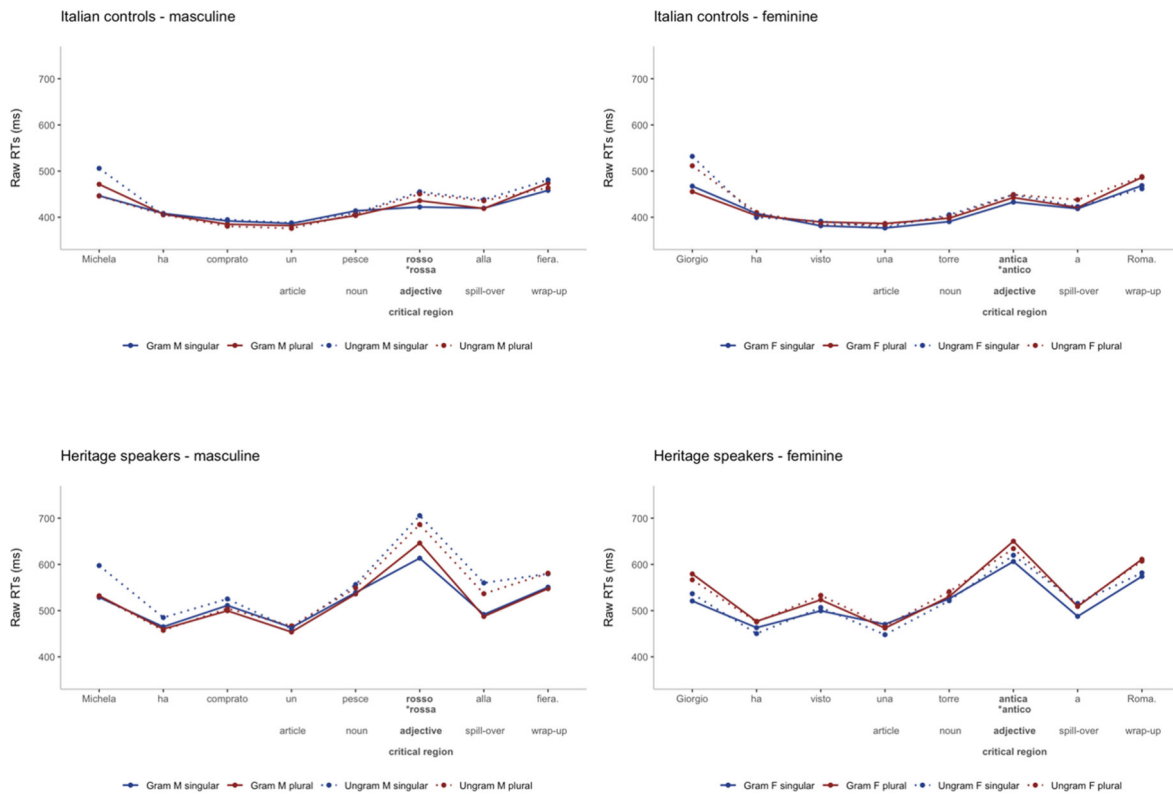


Figure 2. Raw RTs (ms) for self-paced reading task