

Optionality in generational attrition: Italian clitic pronouns in first language attriters and heritage speakers

Roberta Spelorzi¹, Giuditta Smith², Antonella Sorace¹ & Maria Garraffa³

¹ University of Edinburgh, Department of Linguistics and English Language

² University of Trento, Department of Psychology and Cognitive Sciences

³ Heriot-Watt University, Department of Psychology

Roberta.Spelorzi@ed.ac.uk, Giuditta.Smith@unitn.it, A.Sorace@ed.ac.uk, M.Garraffa@hw.ac.uk

Use of clitic pronouns in Italian is an area of variability in several linguistic circumstances, from clinical grammars such as Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), for which it is an early marker (Bortolini et al. 2006, Arosio et al. 2014), to multilingual speakers (Vender et al. 2016, Garraffa et al. 2019). Numerous studies on attriters and heritage speakers show that the grammars of these bilingual speakers present signs of attrition on some syntactic elements, particularly when they allow for alternative structures (Tsimpli & Sorace 2006; Sorace 2011), for instance allowing more optionality for overt subject pronouns in null subject languages (Chamorro & Sorace 2019) and omitting object pronouns more frequently than their monolingual peers (Serratrice, Sorace & Paoli 2004).

The present study is a comprehensive assessment of Italian clitic pronouns in two bilingual groups, aiming to explore the role of complexity in the choice of alternative structures. The two groups, namely first-generation Italian speakers and second-generation (heritage) Italian speakers living in an English-speaking environment, can be thought to belong to a bilingual continuum, where attriters provide heritage speakers with the input that determines the acquisition of their heritage language (Kupisch & Rothman 2018). The assessment consists in a sentence-picture matching task for comprehension of DO clitics, and a set of elicitation tasks targeting an array of clitic pronouns on a gradient of complexity: direct object (DO) > indirect object (IO) > double-object clitic (1st/2nd person and 3rd person).

Results show that the abstract representation of the clitic is available to both attriters and heritage speakers, as proven by the ceiling performance on comprehension tasks and the absence of errors of feature and placement on the clitics; first generation Italian speakers frequently produce this element when it is a single argument, but infrequently cliticise two arguments at the same time. On the other hand, second generation Italian speakers always show a preference for the production of lexical NPs the majority of the time regardless of the type of clitic elicited, thus maintaining the canonical argument structure, and rarely produce clitic combinations. Importantly, when clitics are produced by this population, few mistakes on features and no mistakes of misplacement are made. Our data shows that, if a structure allows for optionality and requires a syntactic operation, bilingual speakers will prefer the less computationally demanding alternative in production in different capacities according to the group, but, regardless of the group, they will not make structural mistakes.

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