

Overt subject pronouns in Italian: Comparing Italian monolinguals and Croatian-Italian bilinguals

Tihana Kraš and Maja Miličević Petrović

Properties at the discourse-syntax interface have proved problematic in bilingual L1 and L2 acquisition and L1 attrition. This has been shown in particular for the use and interpretation of subject pronouns in null subject languages. Compared to monolinguals, highly proficient bilinguals (especially speakers of a null- and a non-null-subject language), tend to over-accept and overuse infelicitous overt pronouns referring to topical antecedents, while being (mostly) target-like on null pronouns. Two broad explanations have been proposed. The representational account (Tsimplici, Heycock, & Filiaci, 2004) attributes the bilinguals' problems to cross-linguistic influence, while the processing account ascribes the difficulties primarily to bilinguals' hypothesised less-than-optimal processing abilities (Sorace & Filiaci 2006). According to the representational account, difficulties should not arise when two grammatical systems pattern together with respect to an interface property; according to the processing account, difficulties should occur even then.

In this paper, we compare the results of three parallel studies into the interpretation of Italian subject pronouns in intra-sentential contexts by Croatian-Italian bilinguals, the aim of which was to test the predictions of the two accounts. The two languages involved pattern together with regard to the antecedent biases of null and overt subject pronouns (Kraš, 2008a). The first study, Kraš (2008b), included adult L1 Croatian near-native speakers of Italian ($N=24$) and a control group of Italian monolinguals ($N=24$), the former aged 21-30 and the latter 21-34 years. The second study, Kraš (2016), included highly proficient L1 Croatian child L2 learners of Italian ($N=40$) and a control group of Italian monolinguals ($N=48$), both aged 13-14 years. The same group of Italian monolinguals served as a control group in the third study, Kraš & Miličević Petrović (in press), in which Croatian-Italian simultaneous bilinguals ($N=40$), aged 11-15 years, also participated. The same picture-selection task was used in the three studies. Participants read sentences containing null or overt pronouns, which either followed or preceded the candidate antecedents (anaphora vs. cataphora) (see (1)), and matched each sentence to one of three pictures, showing the antecedent as the matrix subject, the matrix object or an extra-linguistic referent (see Figure 1). This task is an adaptation of the task used by Tsimplici et al. (2004) and Sorace and Filiaci (2006), the results of which, also based on off-line measures, have provided the basis for the two accounts.

The bilinguals expressed the same antecedent preferences as the monolinguals in all conditions apart from cataphora with overt pronouns, where they chose the topical, subject antecedent *less* often than the monolinguals, i.e. in 14.67% compared to 20.83% of the cases in the first study, in 22.08% compared to 37.5% of the cases in the second study, and in 24.1% compared to 37.5% of the cases in the third study. In other words, it was the monolinguals, rather than the bilinguals, who accepted more overt pronouns referring to discourse topics. However, the difference reached statistical significance in a logistic regression analysis only in the second study. We interpret the results of the three studies as pointing to cross-linguistic influence, and thus lending support to the representational account.

References

- Kraš, T. (2008a). Anaphora resolution in Croatian: Psycholinguistic evidence from native speakers. In M. Tadić, M. Dimitrova-Vulchanova, & S. Koeva (Eds.), *Proceedings of the sixth international conference, Formal Approaches to South Slavic and Balkan*

Languages (pp. 67-72). Zagreb: Croatian Language Technologies Society – Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

- Kraš, T. (2008b). Anaphora resolution in near-native Italian grammars: Evidence from native speakers of Croatian. *EUROSLA Yearbook*, 8, 107-134.
- Kraš, T. (2016). Cross-linguistic influence at the discourse-syntax interface: Insights from anaphora resolution in child L2 learners of Italian. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 20(4), 369-385.
- Kraš, T., & Miličević Petrović, M. (in press). Anaphora resolution in Italian by Croatian-Italian simultaneous bilinguals. In A. Dudley, A. Wallington, & J. Corbet (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 14th Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition conference (GASLA 2017)*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Sorace, A., & Filiaci, F. (2006). Anaphora resolution in near-native speakers of Italian. *Second Language Research*, 22(3), 339-368.
- Tsimpli, I.-M., Sorace, A., Heycock, C., & Filiaci, F. (2004). First language attrition and syntactic subjects: A study of Greek and Italian near-native speakers of English. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 8(3), 257-277.

Examples

- (1) a. ANAPHORA WITH A NULL PRONOUN
Il testimone_i indica l' accusato_j mentre pro_{i/j} entra in tribunale.
 the witness points the accused while pro enters in courtroom
 'The witness points to the accused as he enters the courtroom.'
- b. ANAPHORA WITH AN OVERT PRONOUN
Il testimone_i indica l' accusato_j mentre lui_{i/j/k} entra in tribunale.
 the witness points the accused while he enters in courtroom
 'The witness points to the accused as he enters the courtroom.'
- c. CATAPHORA WITH A NULL PRONOUN
Mentre pro_{i/j} entra in tribunale, il testimone_i indica l' accusato_j.
 while pro enters in courtroom the witness points the accused
 'As he enters the courtroom, the witness points to the accused.'
- d. CATAPHORA WITH AN OVERT PRONOUN
Mentre lui_{i/j/k} entra in tribunale, il testimone_i indica l' accusato_j.
 while he enters in courtroom the witness points the accused
 'As he enters the courtroom, the witness points to the accused.'

Figures

