

## INTRODUCTION

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This volume includes selected and adapted papers from *The Romance Turn VII*, held in Venice on October 1-3, 2015. As for previous editions, the conference brought together researchers from across Europe and overseas with the aim of communicating results and developing further research in the acquisition of Romance languages.

The selected papers focus on a broad range of topics which are at the heart of the current debate on language acquisition (clitic pronouns, left-dislocations, passives, relative clauses, *wh*-questions) in a number of different acquisition settings: L1 and L2 acquisition, bilingualism, typical and atypical development. In addition to syntax, the volume covers other modules of grammar: semantics, pragmatics, and phonology, and adds a perspective on language processing to the current discussion on the acquisition of Romance languages. It mainly focuses on Italian, Brazilian Portuguese, and Romanian, in a comparative perspective with other Romance languages (Catalan, European Portuguese, French, Spanish) and languages of other language families (English, German, Persian, Sesotho, Turkish, etc.). One contribution on bilinguals with Greek as one of the two languages opens a perspective on a Balkan non-Romance language which may be interesting to be compared with Romanian.

This book also includes contributions to the debate on atypical language acquisition, in particular the underrepresented research on language development in case of deafness. One contribution also presents a study of language intervention based on formal linguistics.

The book is intended not only for scholars and students interested in the nature and processes behind first, second and bilingual acquisition, and impaired language acquisition focusing on Romance languages in Europe and beyond, but also for language educators and clinicians. It informs on the state of the art in the field of Romance language acquisition, with the aim of inspiring new research and interdisciplinary collaborations.

The volume opens with the chapter by **Marina Nespor** and **Alan Langus**, which discusses processing of rhythm in both L1 and L2 acquisition. In L1 acquisition, rhythm is crucial for bootstrapping into syntactic prop-

erties. Phrasal prominence is important for syntactic as well as semantic processing, for instance allowing us to disambiguate potentially ambiguous sentences. As for L2 acquisition in adulthood, Nespor and Langus suggest that the rhythmic cues are not processed in the same way as infants. When adults listen to speech, they do so through the filter of their native language, so-called ‘native listening’, not only at the segmental level, but also at the phrasal level. Furthermore, the perception of a new language does not only have to overcome the rhythm of the sound system of the L1, but also the rhythm of the visual input of gestures which accompany speech. Nespor and Langus close the chapter with an important suggestion for language education: “for a period just rhythm, not meaning”. A rhythmic training might allow adults to process new languages in ways similar to infants. Starting with the acquisition of rhythm would allow second language adult learners to proceed like infants.

In her contribution, **Giulia M. L. Bencini** advocates for convergent theories of language representation and language processing in children and adults. She claims that linguistics should account for both grammar and processing. In other words, a full account of how humans represent, comprehend, and produce language requires an account of both competence and performance. Bencini reviews and discusses many methodological issues in the study of both comprehension and production, and in the last part of her chapter, she focuses on the acquisition of passives. Studies on syntactic priming lead us to conclude that the observed paucity of full passives before age 5 in many languages are not grammatical difficulties, but processing difficulties, which means that children have representations of the passive identical to adults. She also reports on cross-modal priming studies to argue for the existence of abstract representations common to comprehension and production, the One Cognitive System view.

**João Claudio de Lima Júnior** and **Letícia M. Sicuro Corrêa** also discuss a long-standing issue in the research on language acquisition, namely the comprehension of passive sentences by preschool children, based on the fact that different results are found in the research on different languages. They focus on children acquiring Brazilian Portuguese and use different tasks trying to disentangle the conditions which are claimed to favour passive comprehension, namely Discourse Continuity and Felicity. The results show that Discourse Continuity may be a relevant factor for the comprehension of passives, at least for children around the age of 4, if the effects of reversibility are controlled for. Reversibility is in fact an independent source of cost that may add up to the burden of the syntactic parsing. Felicity, i.e., the presence of two potential agents, instead, did not

turn out to be a facilitating factor for the comprehension of long verbal passives.

**Vincenzo Moscati** discusses the processing by preschool-age children of sentences containing left-dislocated subjects and focalized objects, coming in the two orders SOV and OSV. Prosody and discourse provide cues that disambiguate the sentence. Moscati tested the sensitivity to these two types of information through a judgment task. Adults and children were asked to judge whether the correction by one of the two characters engaged in a dialogue were correct or not. Results show that both adults and children were much more likely to accept true sentences in the SOV condition; in other words, the preferred parsing strategy is the one that interprets the first DP as the sentential subject. As for the OSV condition, adults dislike this word order in general, but they are sensitive to prosody: with the correct prosodic contour, this interpretation becomes more accessible to them. Children instead showed no visible improvement associated with the correct prosody in the OSV condition.

**Fabrizio Arosio, Valentina Persici and Elena Pagliarini** deal with processing of object clitics in Italian monolingual children. While most previous studies focused on the production of object clitics, they study the comprehension of these elements by Italian children aged 4;6 to 6 years. Using a looking-while-listening task, clitic comprehension was investigated with the clitic pronoun embedded in a discourse fragment, where the gender marking of the clitic should be used to identify the antecedent among different referential expressions previously introduced in the discourse. Results show that Italian-speaking children make use of the gender morphology to identify the antecedents of clitic pronouns in discourse. The syntactic function of the antecedent also influences this process. Comprehension accuracy is highest when the antecedent is the subject of the previous discourse and there is an adjunct competitor. Comprehension accuracy is however the same when the subject has an object competitor and the clitic refers to either the subject or the object. Finally, no difference was found between the comprehension of feminine and masculine clitics, which might be explained by the fact that the subject of the sentence containing the clitic pronoun was a first person singular pronoun, and no interference with the gender feature of the pronoun was found. This study also highlights the impact of memory resources on accuracy in the comprehension of object clitics.

The second part of the volume is devoted to two studies on bilingual acquisition.

**Maria Andreou and Ianthi Tsimpli** study the role of crosslinguistic influence and cognitive skills in measuring syntactic complexity in bilin-

gualism and biliteracy. They focus on syntactic complexity in narrative production as a measure of language ability in bilinguals, analysing the frequency of complex over simple sentences and the types of subordinate clauses produced (i.e., relative, adverbial, and complement clauses). Since they also studied the effect of biliteracy on syntactic complexity, they tested children aged 8 to 12 years. Their findings suggest that bilingual children do not necessarily produce less syntactically complex clauses than monolingual children, provided that they have a rich vocabulary. More balanced literacy in the two languages was responsible for higher production of causal and temporal clauses, i.e., clauses which express cohesion between events in the narrative. This seems to confirm the beneficial role of biliteracy, a fact that requires more attention in education policies.

**Elisa Di Domenico** discusses the well-known optionality observed in L2 acquisition, e.g., in English speakers who are near-natives of Italian, who also use overt pronouns and preverbal subjects when natives would only use null and postverbal subjects, respectively. Di Domenico suggests that the optionality which characterizes L2 acquisition is evidence for transfer, relying on the idea that parameters are not specified in principles, but are to be conceived of as features on the heads of the functional lexicon. When in L2 acquisition, a given L2 item enters a syntactic derivation, it is possible to transfer or not the grammatical properties of the 'equivalent' L1 item. This produces optionality. The under-specified representation of lexical items is not due to the other language near-native speakers know, but is a general feature of language acquisition, given that in L1 acquisition, too, the acquisition of the [sound / meaning] pair of a lexical item precedes the acquisition of its grammatical properties.

The third part of the volume presents studies on typical and atypical language development.

**Giorgia Del Puppo** discusses the production of passives by school-age children (from 6;3 to 10;4), with the aim of finding out at what age the use of passive sentences by children becomes adult-like. She tested the very same children in four different tasks with the further aim of determining the conditions that favor the production of passive sentences. In addition to a task aimed at eliciting passive sentences, which contains patient-oriented questions, Del Puppo elicited other types of sentences (object relative clauses, cleft sentences, and *wh*-questions) in which the use of the passive voice is possible. Results show that the highest percentage of passives is produced by school-age children in the task eliciting object relative clauses, as a means to turn the object relative into a subject relative. Del Puppo argues that the choice of a passive sentence depends on different factors. The production of passives in relative clauses is favoured because a sim-

pler, canonical alternative is not available. Main clauses in which the passive is uniquely felicitous are instead rare; in these cases, it is always possible to find an acceptable active counterpart. Overall, whenever children until 9-10 years can exploit an active sentence, this is their preferred option, as for younger children. In spite of showing full competence of both the syntactic and the pragmatic properties of passive structures, school-age children are still different from adults, who use (a higher amount of) passive sentences in all tasks.

**Larisa Avram** and **Anca Sevcenco** deal with another important topic in the current debate on language acquisition, namely *wh*-questions. Testing preschool-aged Romanian children with a picture-matching task, they aim at identifying the role of number in the comprehension of subject and object *wh*-questions. Although in the number mismatch task, the children performed worse than in the number match one, number mismatch facilitated the comprehension of object *which*-questions. Furthermore, subject *which*-questions were significantly worse than subject *who*-questions in the number mismatch task, a result which is not predicted by the argument intervention approach, but is predicted by the AGREE intervention approach. The role of the DOM *pe* in Romanian is also discussed. The presence of *pe* enhances the comprehension of object *wh*-questions, but not of object *which*-questions. In spite of the presence of *pe*, *which*-questions feature two dependencies because they contain a resumptive clitic, which makes them more vulnerable.

The chapter by **Marina Augusto**, **Erica Rodrigues** and **Igor Costa**, discusses a new construction of Brazilian Portuguese in which PP arguments have become syntactic subjects agreeing with the verb. The construction is also found with weather verbs, which end up being plural if the locative or temporal topic-subject is plural. In an elicited production study, this innovative construction is widely used by both adults and 5-year-old and 7-year-old children in order to exploit the construction of a subject relative instead of a relative clause built on a PP argument. The authors conclude that processing demands may play an important role in language change. An innovative structure, like the one studied here, may be preferred over the conservative competing structure when it implies less cost in the processing of language, subject relative clauses being less demanding than PP relative clauses.

Moving to atypical acquisition in case of deafness, two chapters focus on Italian children with cochlear implants and hearing aids, respectively.

**Silvia D'Ortenzio**, **Silvia Montino**, **Alessandro Martini** and **Francesca Volpato** report on two children with cochlear implants who showed weaknesses in the comprehension and production of relative clauses.

These children were administered a protocol of language intervention based on formal linguistics and were explicitly taught verb argument structure, the Theta criterion, and syntactic movement used to derive relative clauses. Immediately after the intervention and some months later (2 and 5, respectively), the two children showed better comprehension and production of relative clauses. In addition, generalization effects were found. Non-treated structures and narrative skills (tested in one of the children) also improved, and improvement was maintained some months after the end of the treatment, a very encouraging result for clinical practice.

In the last chapter **Francesca Panzeri** and **Francesca Foppolo** tested the comprehension of metaphor and irony in a group of children with hearing aids, aged 8 to 11, controlling for both their linguistic skills and cognitive abilities related to the Theory of Mind (ToM). It is well-known that the understanding of non-literal language develops late in typically developing children, and that deaf children may show weaknesses in the development of grammar, with negative consequences on the development of cognitive skills and ToM. Results show that deaf children have a good understanding of metaphors, but have more problems in the comprehension of ironic stories. Controlling for age, Panzeri and Foppolo found an influence of both ToM and grammatical skills, with a more prominent role played by syntactic abilities. When children reach good grammatical abilities, their ability to understand the speaker meaning in metaphors and irony increases. The strong asymmetry between ironic criticisms and ironic compliments is explained by the fact that ironic compliments are less common in everyday interactions and that pragmatic factors such as social interaction experiences might facilitate irony comprehension.

In conclusion, the richness of discussed topics, the accuracy as far as methodological aspects of data collection are concerned, the numerous potential applications of the presented results make the volume an important contribution to the study of the acquisition of Romance languages. It will have an impact not only on theoretical research and methodological issues, but also on language education and clinical practice.