

Asymmetries in the acquisition of subject pronouns: the case of Italian

Research on pronouns has focused on distributional properties deriving them from structural distinctions (Cardinaletti & Starke 1999, Déchaine & Wiltschko 2002). Occasionally, it was observed that the acquisition of 1st and 2nd person pronouns precedes that of 3rd person (Chiat 1978, Clark 1985, Serratrice *et al.* 2004). These were also the author's findings in a longitudinal study of three Italian corpora from *CHILDES*: 3rd person subject pronouns systematically emerge later than 1st and 2nd person. To date, no formal account has been proposed for this asymmetry.

This paper explores how linguistic theory may account for this order of acquisition. In addition, the proposed explanation aims at reflecting not only the grammatical development of the child, but also its cognitive maturation.

The hypothesis examined argues that the asymmetry observed in the acquisition schedule of pronouns in Italian is due to the specific combination of morphological features that distinguish 1st and 2nd person pronouns on one side, from 3rd person pronouns on the other. These different feature combinations interact in different ways, both with syntax and with language specific rules at the level of discourse pragmatics, affecting thus the time at which these forms are acquired.

In the case of Italian, this hypothesis predicts that: a) 1st and 2nd person pronouns will be available in the earlier stages in copular constructions; b) null subject *pro* will emerge when subject-verb agreement is available, and 3) overt 3rd person subject pronouns, that in Italian are mainly used in topic shift contexts and hence occupy an A'-position, will emerge only when the C-domain is acquired.

At a more general level, the proposed approach predicts linguistic variation at the onset of pronoun formation (see Harley & Ritter, 2002), and at the interface with discourse pragmatics, as this is the locus where languages employ different strategies to achieve pragmatic aims.

The hypothesis examined assumes that pronouns consist of bundles of features representing distinctive cognitive categories. The mapping of cognitive categories into grammar may follow a universal systematic pattern, as proposed by Harley & Ritter (2002)'s geometric representation of morphosyntactic features. However, this model does not explain *why* cognitive notions are acquired in a specific order. The examination of how these lexical features combine to form a pronoun and how they contribute to the construction of sentence structure sheds light on this point. Following Kratzer (2008), it is argued that the grammaticalization of specific features results in constituents with a different internal structure: 1st and 2nd person pronouns consist just of features referring to the speaker and the hearer (inherently referential), 3rd person pronouns consist instead of descriptive features (gender). In order to become a pronoun, the latter features (on N) have to combine with [*definiteness*] on D, resulting in a DP.

How does this analysis relate to the acquisitional schedule of pronouns? Drawing on Van Kampen (2004), it is argued that the acquisition of a fundamental linguistic notion like *reference* occurs stepwise and reflects the growing structural and interpretational complexity of nominal forms. Abstraction moves gradually from a situation-bound to a discourse-bound context and can be tracked while interacting with the acquisition of other fundamental linguistic notions like *finiteness*, *definiteness* and *agreement*. It follows then that 1st and 2nd person pronouns are acquired first, because they are indexicals, i.e. they consist just of [*participant*] features that can be interpreted in the context of the situation, before the acquisition of any Tense or Agreement reference. The descriptive features of 3rd person pronouns need the feature [D] in order to become DPs. It is hence plausible that these pronouns will emerge only when the child acquires the concept of *definiteness*. This

stage is characterized by the emergence of definite articles and by the appearance of lexical verbs. Some pronouns can further enter specific configurations at the syntax/pragmatics interface.

Italian 1st and 2nd person pronouns emerge at MLUw-stage 1.5-2.0 and outnumber overt 3rd person pronouns at least until the age of 3. As expected, they occur in predicative constructions and do not have any anaphoric force. Italian 3rd person pronouns have a more complex feature architecture than 1st and 2nd person. In addition, their use reduces to the specific discourse-pragmatic context of topic shift, where these pronouns show up in the leftmost position of the clause establishing a connection with an external antecedent, different from the current topic (Frascarelli 2007).

Italian 3rd person pronouns are thus DPs consisting of the features [gender] and the feature [D]. The acquisition of [D] is revealed by the presence of determiners on the nouns. Italian children start using determiners very early. However, a closer inspection of the forms produced reveals that most of the Det + noun combinations are constructions that frequently occur in child language. Real DPs emerge only after 2;3. Around this stage children produce constructions with a double determiner (*le lolive* 'the the-olives'), what might suggest that the child has just understood how to form a DP. At this stage free anaphors become available. This is what happens, for instance, in Dutch (Van Kampen, 2004).

Yet, when Italian children reach this stage, another, more economical possibility becomes available for pronouns: *pro*. Although null subjects are traditionally viewed as an anaphoric device in null subject languages, a detailed analysis of the data reveals that the first instances of *pro* refer all to an antecedent *inside* the situation. With other words, at this stage *pro* is not yet used as a discourse anaphora, as its referent can be easily pointed at in the current situation. Most interestingly, the first 3rd person pronouns that emerge short afterwards show the same peculiarity: They all refer to a situation-bound antecedent.

Until at least the third year, no 3rd person discourse anaphors are found. In Italian 3rd person subject pronouns and *pro* are devices to track reference outside the situation and as such, they are supposed to occupy an A' position in the C-domain. This is the final step in the development of reference in Italian. We expect that the presence of the C-domain is revealed by WH object questions and by embedded clauses. These constructions slowly appear in the very last transcriptions of the children examined and seem indeed to introduce a more abstract way of dealing with referents.

Selected References

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