The left periphery in bilectal children: when the Heritage Language influences the dominant language

This paper investigates the syntax-pragmatic interface in bilectal contexts, in which a dominant language coexists with an indigenous heritage language (henceforth, 'HL'; following the definition of Heritage/dominant language given by Rothman 2009). The focus lies on the syntax of left and right peripheries related to topicality in the language pairs Italian-Carnic Friulian (CF) and Italian-Fodom Ladin (FL), which differ in the make-up of either periphery. Whereas in Italian both peripheries can host given topics, and aboutness and shift topics are admitted only in the left periphery (Benincà 1988, Cruschina 2021), preliminary results indicate that the two HLs have a more restricted left periphery, not allowing all recursive topics/foci possible in Italian. We investigate how the peripheries of the two languages in contact interact in the grammar of heritage children, taking an understudied line of research: while much research has focused on the influence from the dominant to the weaker language (including the cases in which the latter is an HL), in our case we focus on the opposite direction: we show that the syntax-pragmatic strategies are transferred from the HL into Italian, despite Italian being the dominant language.

18 preschool children exposed to both Italian and CF from birth and 17 exposed to both Italian and FL from birth (*Table 1*), plus 2 adults for each language-pair, were tested with the Italian version of the "Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives" (Levorato/Roch 2020), translated into the two HLs. Information on the quantity of the child's production and input in both languages was collected through the Questionnaire for Parents of Bilingual Children (Italian: Dicataldo/Roch 2020). Each participant was tested first in the HL and then in Italian on both narrative telling and retelling.

Our findings revealed **(A)** substantial differences in production between Italian and HLs. All children properly understand both languages, but we found qualitative differences in their HL production: if a child produced some HL-syntactic structures (e.g., subject clitics), they also produced HL-elements at the phonological, morphological, and lexical levels but not *vice versa*. Positive, though not significant, correlations were detected between the quantity of input in the HL and the quality of HL-elements produced: children with more than 60% of HL-input produced HL-syntax. **(B)** pragmatic information was mapped onto specific syntactic positions, independently of the HL-input quantity. In this paper, we focus on (B).

Taking inflected predicates as our reference marker, the patterns that emerged are:

1. in **preverbal position**:

(i) only one specifier is available in children's sentences, always hosting the grammatical subject DP, which was definite, agentive, and an Aboutness Topic, usually [+Shift]:

(1) *Poi* **[**AT/ST ***la mamma pecora*****]** *ha tirato fuori quell' agnellino e* **[**AT/ST ***il lupo*****]** *è*
then the mom sheep has taken out that lamb and the wolf is
saltato per prendere la pecora ma dopo **[**AT/ST ***il piccolo*****]** *ha smesso di mangiare*
jumped to take the sheep but then the baby has stopped to eat.INF
'Then the mother sheep pulled the lamb out [from the lake] and the wolf jumped to chase the goat, but then the baby stopped eating.' (CF)

(ii) Conversely, both adults and one 6-year-old CF child also produced adverbials (ModP) preverbally, yielding the order Subject>AdvP>V.

(iii) Left dislocations were almost absent in children's and adults' productions.

2. In **postverbal position**, there are:

(i) no constraints on the number and syntactic quality of the constituents

(ii) no aboutness topics in the right periphery.

(iii) at least 3 pragmatic positions (given and continuity topics, focus/contrastive information):

(2) (Why is the child sad?) *perché ha mangiato* [ContrT ***il cane***] [GT ***le sue salsicce***]. (FL)
because has eaten the dog the his sausages
'Because the dog ate his sausages.'

(3) (Why is the crow angry?)
perchè ***le*** *hanno prese* [GT ***le capre***] [ContinT ***le volpi***] (CF)
because them.CL have3.PL taken the goats the foxes
'Because the foxes took the goats.'

(4) (Why is the fox sad?)
perchè ha preso [ContrT ***l' aquila***] [GT ***col becco***] [GT ***la coda***] (CF)
because has taken the eagle with-the beak the tail
'Because the eagle grabbed the tail with the beak'

(iv) unambiguous right dislocations were produced by all children and subjects were right-dislocated when they were Continuity Topics (3).

(v) adults did not produce right dislocations but we detected movements to the vP periphery.

In conclusion, HL children overuse the right periphery to mark pragmatic information of focus and given/continuity topicality. The left periphery/preverbal position hosts only one specifier [+Shift/Aboutness-Topic] and undergoes a developmental change, leading to a more granular COMP domain. We suggest that HL children initially assume a strict isomorphism between semantics, syntax and pragmatics (Roeper 2018): preverbally, subjects are only agentive and Aboutness/Shift Topic DPs. This isomorphism is revised during acquisition: the [topic] feature is dissociated from [aboutness], eventually yielding the presence of object DPs in preverbal position, when topical (5).

(5) *il mio papà abbocciava i pessi che abbiamo preso,* [AT-OBJ ***tre***] [SBJ ***il gatto***]
the my dad fished the fish that have.1PL taken three the cat
li *ha mangiati..* (CF; age of the child: 5;10))
them.CL has eaten
'My father fished and the cat ate three of the fish we caught… '

Conversely, the postverbal periphery is more granular from early on. We propose that pragmatic information is mapped onto syntax in bilectal acquisition, obeying the syntactic possibilities of the HL, i.e., more positions in the right than in the left periphery, as it represents a subset of the positions allowed in Italian in accordance with the subset principle (Berwick 1985; Clark & Roberts 1993). Theoretically, our findings can contribute to the debate about the analysis of right dislocations, and their relation to left dislocations ((e.g., Cecchetto 1999; Cruschina 2022) and not as a single phenomenon (Cardinaletti 2002; Frascarelli/Hinterhölzl 2007; Giorgi 2015).

Table 1. Participants' overview (only children) (SD months)

	Age 3	**Age 4**	**Age 5**	**Age 6**
Italian-Carnic	4 (2F) 3;3-3;9 (SD 3,1)	5 (2F) 4;0-4;8 (SD 3,8)	6 (4F) 5;1-5;9 (SD 3,8)	3 (1F) 6;2-6;3 (SD 0,6)
Italian-Fodom	4(2F) 3;2-3;10 (SD 3,6)	4 (3F) 4;2-4;10 (SD 3,7)	5 (4F) 5;2-5;10 (SD 2,9)	4 (4F) 6;2-6;5 (SD 1,5)

Selected References:
Benincà 1988. *L'ordine degli elementi della frase e le costruzioni marcate*, in Renzi (ed.), *Grande grammatica italiana di consultazione*, I, Bologna, 115-195. **Cardinaletti 2002**. Against Optional and null clitics. Right dislocation vs. marginalization. *Studia Linguistica* 56/1:29-57. **Cruschina 2021**. Topicalization in the Romance languages. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*. Oxford. **Levorato & Roch 2020**. Italian adaptation of the multilingual assessment instrument for narratives. ZAS PiL, 64:139-146. **Sorace 2011**. Pinning down the concept of "interface" in bilingualism. *Linguistic approaches to bilingualism*, 1(1), 1-33.