

Development of Italian clitic case morphology in L2 grammars: language transfer or continuity?

Current research in second language acquisition (White 1996; Prévost et al. 1997; Granfeldt & Schlyter 2004, among others) does not seem to agree on how and when Romance clitic case morphology is acquired. Are categories and properties related to Italian clitics entirely (*Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis*: Schwartz and Sprouse 1994, 1996), or partially accessed through L1 categories (*Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis*: Lardière 1998b), or derived directly from learners' universal knowledge (*Full Access Hypothesis*, Epstein et al. 1996)?

This paper wishes to shed some clearer light on this particular issue by investigating the acquisition of Italian clitic case morphology by adult Anglophone speakers. The choice of this particular language group is justified by the fact that the two pronominal systems show striking morpho-syntactic differences. Italian, for instance, has two sets of clitic pronouns. A direct object paradigm that carry accusative morphology including: *mi* (me), *ti* (you) *lo* (him, it), *la* (her, it) *ci* (us), *vi* (you plural) *li* (them, masculine) *le* (them, feminine). A set of indirect object clitics that presents (+ dative) features, and they are as follows: *mi* (to me), *ti* (to you) *gli* (to him) *le* (to her) *ci* (to us) *vi* (to you, plural) *gli/loro* (to them). English, on the other hand, is assumed to lack clitics, and to display only weak or strong pronouns.

Italian clitics were analyzed within Sportiche's (1996) theoretical framework, since, contrary to other syntactic approaches (Kayne 1994, Uriagereka 1995, among others), it makes a clear-cut distinction between accusative and dative clitics. Furthermore, Sportiche claims that Romance clitics are generated as heads of their own projections, called 'voices'. These categories are located above the vP, and their morphological content is recuperated by an empty category, i.e. a silent XP generated in the complement position of the selecting verb. This silent XP, which has been identified with *pro*, at LF moves to the Spec-position of the clitic projection where it will license the pronoun in a Spec-head configuration. English, being a cliticless language, is assumed to lack these projections. The acquisition task of Anglophone speakers learning Italian clitics would be to either create these categories *ex novo*, or activate them though projections already present in L1.

Data were gathered using a Timed Grammaticality Judgment Task where subjects had to determine whether the sentences presented to them were grammatical or ungrammatical. Results showed that Italian clitic case morphology develops in a rather slow, but gradual and consistent manner. Such a delayed development seems to be due to several factors: (i) initial absence or underspecification of the functional structure (ii) partial English influence, and (iii) intrinsic complexity of the case-assignment operation.

From a theoretical perspective, this study provides evidence that clitic properties and projections are not available from the very beginning, but they develop later on (concomitant with the *Minimal Tree Hypothesis*). However, once they are in place, the use of clitics increases quite rapidly, even though L2 data may still show some imperfections supporting the idea that mapping the morphological information to the syntactic features is a problem that persists even at advanced proficiency levels (*Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis*). Furthermore, English grammar does play a substantial role, but its effects are not pervasive as the *Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis* would predict.

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