Syntactic Cohesion In Third Language Acquisition: The Case Of Italian L3

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INTRODUCTION

The present work aims at explaining the possible influence that previously acquired languages could exert on an L3. More specifically, an attempt was made to understand how our learners had approached L3 and whether they had been influenced by their L1 or L2 during L3 narratives, or whether simultaneous bilingual speakers had adopted two different conceptualizations for the two languages, or whether there had been interference at an unconscious level.

OBJECTIVES

The research objectives analysed in this paper are as follows:
- Which types of morphosyntactic structures – main or subordinated, finite or non-finite – will the informants of the two groups exploit to convey the subordinated selected contents?
- What kind of semantic and/or logical components (temporality, causality...) will be selected to be narrated and highlighted through subordination?
- Will both experimental groups would encode the alternation between main structure (Foreground utterances) and side structure (Background utterances) by similar morphological and/or syntactic principles and if they would've employed the same verbal structures?
- Is there any conceptual or linguistic transfer from L1 to L3?

MATERIALS & METHODS

For the purposes of this investigation, a corpus of 20 informants (10 native German speakers of Italian L3 and 10 bilingual speakers of Italian L_A and German L_B) was selected. They were asked to narrate the short film Reksio in both languages to a listener who was not present during the screening of the film. The linguistic experiment was thus based on the lack of shared knowledge, and the order of the languages in which the narration took place was reversed for each interview, so as not to affect the internal validity of our data.
It is also noteworthy that at the time of the interviews the bilingual students were all part of a program initiated by the Stuttgart district in order to cultivate their heritage language (Italian) with native speakers.

An extract from the Polish *Reksio* mute series was is used to elicit informants' narratives. The story of the short film deals with the adventures of a dog and its owner during a winter day. Some extracts are shown below:

RESULTS & CONCLUSIONS

The analysis carried out led to the following considerations.
Regarding the morphosyntactic structures used by informants, the percentages of subordinate and main clauses follow the same trend, although German narratives present higher numbers of utterances.

	MAIN CLAUSES	SUBORDINATES	TOT
ITALIAN L_A	301 (79,2%)	79 (20,7%)	380
DE	322 (76,3%)	101 (23,7)	422
ITALIAN L3	278 (78,7%)	75 (21,2%)	353
DE	305 (69,3%)	135 (30,7%)	440

Table 1 ITALIAN L_A vs L3: main and subordinate clauses

However, with regard to the use of finite and non-finite verb forms, the Italian narratives (although less copious on the whole than the German ones) present a higher percentage of non-finite subordinates, showing that both experimental groups have acknowledged the fundamental importance of the verbal morphology of Italian language and the flexibility it allows.

As far as the semantic components in subordination are concerned, both groups of respondents preferred relative and purpose subordinate clauses. The experimental group with Italian L_A, however, resorted more often to temporal subordinations whereas the group of learners with Italian L3 preferred the use of causal subordinations.

	Relative	Object	Temporal	Purpose CVC	Purpose to/for + INF	Causal	Modal	Consecutive	Indirect Interrogative	Comparative	Conditional	Total subordinate
ITA L_A	19 (24 %)	8 (10,1%)	13 (16,5%)		18 (22,8%)	12 (15,2%)	8 (10,1%)				1 (1,3%)	79
DE	33 (24.4%)	29 (21,5%)	10 (7,4%)	11 (8,1%)	17 (12,6%)	19 (14,1%)	6 (4,4%)	5 (3,7%)	2 (1,5%)	2 (1,5%)	1 (0,7%)	135
ITA L3	26 (34,7%)	5 (6.7%)	7 (9,3%)		15 (20%)	19 (25,3%)		3 (4%)				75
DE	31 (31%)	15 (15%)	2 (2%)	11 (11%)	18 (18%)	17 (17%)	1 (1%)	3 (3%)	1 (1%)		1 (1%)	100

Table 2 ITALIAN L_A vs Italian L3: types of subordinate clauses

The alternation between Foreground and Background utterances in an Italian narrative is generally marked through syntactic encoding, whereby main propositions signal foreground events, while subordinate sentences signal background information. There is, however, no decisive morphosyntactic pattern to suggest the logic that German speakers use to alternate between foreground and background utterances. This might be a cue for further studies in the future.
Finally, two interesting episodes of lexical transfer were found in the corpus of data collected for the present study: the first concerning the verb *cadere*, whose German translation into *fallen* is inappropriate in the context of its use, and the second concerning the use of the dative pronoun for the beneficiary of the verb *aiutare*, a correct configuration as far as the German language is concerned, but impracticable in Italian since that semantic role requires the accusative case.

Dalia DE – Italian L_A
*DAL: er merkt aber nicht,
*DAL: während er so trotzig ist (.),
*DAL: dass sein Besitzer ins Eis **gefallen** ist,
*DAL: weil das Eis gebrochen ist (.)

Gabi ITA – Italian L_A
*GAB: Ehm (.) e poi il cane **gli** ha a- (/) **gli** ha aiutato (.).
*GAB: Ehm (.) ha (.) preso (.) un (/) un (.) boh - non so più come si chiama, […]
*GAB: così (.) ehm (.), il bimbo poteva uscire (.)
*GAB: ma poi anche (.) **gli** ha aiutato con la scarfa [sciarpa] (.)

A further conceptual transfer was found in the over-extended use of the temporal adverb *poi* by both experimental groups in the Italian narratives, a legacy perhaps of the predominant use of the adverb *dann* in the German retellings.

Dora – Italian L3
*DOR: Ehm (.) **poi** (.) voleva il ragazzo sciare (.) (///) skiare? (///) sciare?
*DOR: Ehm (.) **poi** (.) **dopo un po'** il ragazzo è (.) entrato nell'acqua
*DOR: – no (.) non è entrato, ma è (.) ehm, (.) – ok, si è entrato (.) nell'acqua
*DOR: e (.) [ride] **poi** (.) ehm (.) ha chiesto il cane per l'aiuto