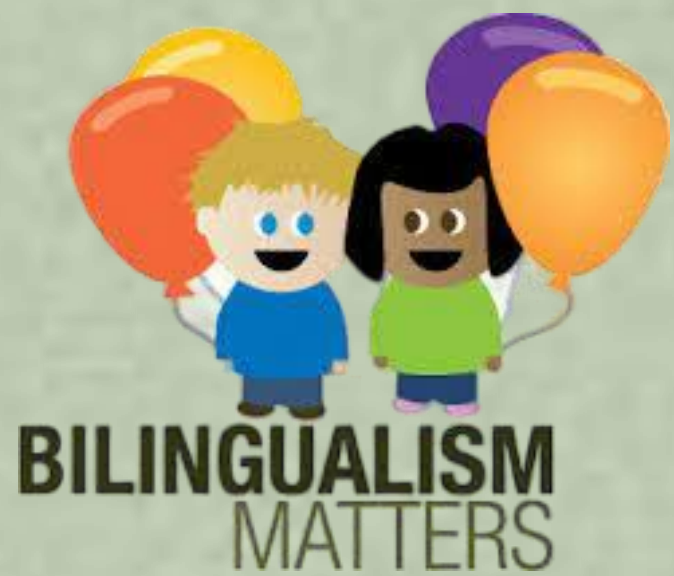


The role of heritage languages and cognition in Italian L2: a study of auxiliary selection



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INTRODUCTION

Our study focuses on the longitudinal acquisition of Italian as an L2 by an immigrant Chinese child, Fiona, who was observed from the age of 3;8 to 6;11. The young informant is part of a database concerned with Italian L2 of immigrant children from different countries. Some of these children's first contact with the Italian language took place at the age of three when they started to attend Italian kindergarten. Fiona was born in Naples but, when she began to attend Italian kindergarten, she spoke no Italian. Our study is focused on the development of auxiliaries in Fiona's interlanguage.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND OBJECTIVES

Our purpose was to analyze the development of verb morphology in Fiona's linguistic productions with respect to the Italian auxiliaries *essere* ('to be') and *avere* ('to have'), used to obtain compound tenses. We focused on the *Passato Prossimo* (PP): a form of analytical perfect tense corresponding to the first type of past in Italian native children's productions. We adopted Sorace's (2000) gradient model of split intransitivity (Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy or ASH) (cf. also Cennamo 2008) and tested the hypothesis that the selection of *essere* or *avere* can be motivated by semantic constraints reflecting the lexico-aspectual and thematic characteristics of the verbs employed by our young informant (change of location, change of state, continuation of a pre-existing state, uncontrolled process, controlled - motional and non motional - process).

We will also furnish observations on the *Passato Prossimo* of transitive and intransitive or transitive pronominal verbs, and will wonder about the role of cognition in the acquisitional path drawn by our data, the possible interference with the heritage language of the informant but also the possible similarities with the path followed by her native-speaker peers.

METHODOLOGY

Fiona was interviewed with respect to a range of narrative tasks with no written or audio-oral texts (*Frog, where are you* and *Frog on her own* by M. Meyer, an episode of *Reksio* by L. Marszalek, *The finite story* and *The princess story* by C. Dimroth, *The cat story*, *The Horse story* by H. Hendriks). According to the type of task, Fiona either shared or did not share information with her listener. The same tasks were reposed every two months approximately.

RESULTS

The First Six Months of Observation

Fiona only utters non productive forms of the verb *fare* ('to do') for some tasks or nothing at all for other tasks.

1. From the 25th February 2014 (age 4;0) to the 14th May 2014 (4; 3), the first occ.s of intransitive verbs in perfective contexts show up with *è caduto* (is fallen = 'he has fallen') and *è finito* (is finished = 'it is/has finished'). The latter (realized also as *le/finito*, an amalgamated structure: *lo+è+finito*, 'it+is+finished') often seems to be a formulaic expression. The verb *stare* replaces *essere* in an inappropriate way with the Past Participle (PP) *finito* (*sta finito*: litt. stay finished = 'it is/has finished'). *Cadere* (4 occ.s **change of location category**) and *finire/non finire* (**change of state/continuation of a pre-existing state categories**) are the only ones entering Sorace's Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy (ASH).

2. When using the auxiliary *essere*, Fiona **does not master the agreement** between the auxiliary *essere* and the PP.

3. *Avere* can replace *essere* in contexts demanding the **intransitive pronominal verb** *addormentarsi* (to fall-asleep oneself: 'to fall asleep') – which must go along with the auxiliary *essere* –, that the child realizes as the simple *dormire* ('to sleep') – that conversely demands *avere*.

(1) Signora Blu **ha** dormito (= si è addormentato: himself is fallen-asleep)
Mrs Blue has slept
'Mr Blue has fallen asleep'

Alternatively, Fiona realizes the pronominal predicate *si è addormentato* (litt. himself is fallen-asleep) as *è dormito* (litt. is slept), and she does the same with *è svegliato* (litt. is woken-up = *si è svegliato*: litt. himself is woken-up: 'he has woken up').

4. Concerning **transitive verbs** (4 productive occ.s and 10 formulaic *ha detto*: 'he/she has said'), they can also go along with an auxiliary, in this case *avere*, **as demanded by Italian**, that the child realizes either as *l'al* or as *ha*: [*la*] *mangiata*: it-has eaten = 'he has eaten' (*l'al* is a not analysed amalgamated structure formed by *lo/l'al+ mangiata*, 3 occ.s); *ha finito di bere*: 'he/she has finished to drink' (1 occ.).

5. In 18 perfective (**transitive or intransitive contexts**) the child produces **only the Past Participle**

The Second Year of Observation:

During the second year of observation, the number of perfective Past Participle with no Aux lowers more and more from the 1st to the 3rd interview (10 occ.s; 3 occ.s) and the *presente progressive* shows up.

1. Aux *essere* shows up in 19 productive occ.s with **change of location** verbs of the ASH (*cadere*: 'to fall', *volare*: 'to fly', *partire*: 'to leave', *arrivare*: 'to arrive', *uscire*: 'to go out'), with which the agreement between Aux and PP is not necessarily respected, and as a matter of fact the Aux is always realized as *è* even when the context demands other inflected forms.

2. Fiona makes also **some mistakes by selecting the Aux *avere*** (4 occ.s) **with change of location verbs** (*andare*: 'to go', *scappare*: 'to escape', *scendere*: 'to go down', *cadere*: 'to fall'), that would demand *essere*. At this stage the form *ha* = 'has' is predominant with respect to the amalgamated structure [*la*] = 'it + has' but. Furthermore, in two contexts the verbs *cadere* and *scappare* go along with the pronoun *si*, not required in Italian.

(2) a. Signore Rosso [*la*] caduta = Mr Red it+has fallen: 'Mr Red has fallen'
b. *Ha andato* = has gone: 'he has gone'

3. In one context we still find the verb *stare* ('to stay') at the 3rd sing. (*sta* = 'stays'), that happens with *saltare* ('to jump'), a verb belonging to the **controlled (motional) process** category of the ASH. For this verb, Italian native speakers admit both *avere* and *saltare*, and the child is actually **undecided between Aux [*la*] and Aux *sta***:

(3) </la/> [//] *sta saltato*
It+has [//] stays jumped
'he/she has jumped'

By the end of 2015, Fiona shows a **relevant progress with respect to perfective auxiliaries**, which is supported by the auxiliated transitives structures as well (cf. [*la*] *rotto il piede* 1 occ.: litt. It+has broken the foot = 'he has broken his foot', [*la*] *messo quello*: litt. it.+has put that = 'he has put that')

Concerning **transitive verbs**, Fiona makes **just two mistakes** with two types of the same token (*bere*: 'to drink'): *è bevuto*: litt. is drunk = *ha bevuto*: 'he has drunk'.

The Last Year of Observation:

In the last year of observation, Fiona's interlanguage progresses more and more with respect to verb and noun morphology domains (imperfetto abituale and imperfetto progressivo, markings of plural and gender emerge), but also to vocabulary and syntax.

The annulation of the auxiliaries in the perfective past is remarkably reduced: 6 in the 1st interview, 3 in the second one and no annulation in the last meeting.

The auxiliary *stare* instead of *essere* has completely disappeared. The clitics are often still omitted and the agreement of PP with the subject (when needed) is not always correct.

Concerning *avere*, the child produces 9 wrong occ.s with **intransitive change of location verbs** (*venire*, *andare*, *cadere*, *scendere*) and 2 with intransitive pronominal predicates (*svegliarsi*: 'to wake up oneself', *fermarsi*: 'to stop oneself'). 117 occ.s of *avere* appear with transitive verbs., as it must be. The auxiliary amalgamated structure *l'al* has disappeared and been **replaced by standard *ha* or *c'ha***. The latter expression is made of pleonastic *ci* and *ha*, and in spoken Italian it often shows up with *avere* as possession; furthermore, in Southern Italy, *ci* replaces datives *gli*, *le* in substandard varieties of Italian and in Neapolitan. But Fiona **overgeneralises the use of *c'ha* to auxiliaries function** in contexts where native speakers never use it

(4) *la bambina c' ha visto un topo*
the child PRO has seen a mouse
'the child has seen a mouse'

As to Aux *essere*, **now it is never over-generalised to contexts demanding *avere***, and it always goes along with **change of location verbs (50 occ.s)**. The verbs *cadere* e *scivolare* can go along with the reflexive pronoun *si*, which is not really analysed by the child. An anticausative verb shows up (*si è sciolto*: litt. itself is melted = 'it has melted').

CONCLUSIONS

a. From a **cognitive and acquisitional viewpoint**, the child **immediately grasps the concept of perfective process**, that it be expressed with an auxiliary or without it by the simple PP. Chinese also has at its disposal auxiliaries attached to the lexical verb (telic verbs select *-le* and dynamic atelic verbs select *-zhe*), which are sensitive to Sorace's Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy but **only** in some specific locative constructions (cf. Liu 2007). However, at this stage, **it is not possible to evaluate any phenomenon of transfer**.

b. The child has certainly some problems with the selection of *avere* vs *essere* with intransitive verbs, but on the whole they are **not so frequent**;

c. These mistakes **are not concerned with peripheral semantic categories** of Sorace's Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy, but with the **core change of location domain**;

d. The alternation of *essere* and *avere* seems better explained by the following reasons:
- the local dialect (Neapolitan) often admits a **different auxiliary with respect to standard Italian**, and the child is exposed to both;

- some verbs have both a **simple transitive and a pronominal intransitive structure** in Italian, which involves, respectively, the auxiliary *have* (*addormentare*, *svegliare*, *fermare* etc.) and the auxiliary *essere* (*addormentarsi*, *svegliarsi*, *fermarsi* etc.);
- the situation is made even more complicated by the existence of verbs such as *bersi qualcosa* ('drink smth'), *mangiarsi qualcosa* ('eat smth') etc., that are the pronominal version of transitive verbs such as *bere*, *mangiare*, with the latter being less emphatic than the former;

e. Our results have a point of contact with children learning Italian as L1, since they also **rapidly master auxiliaries** with transitive and intransitive verbs.