

Cross-linguistic structures in the acquisition of WH-questions in an Italian-Indonesian bilingual child

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This paper presents a case study of Guglielmo, a 3;7 year old child exposed since birth to two typologically different languages, Italian and Indonesian. The study provides examples for untypical structures that can be explained through cross-linguistic influence. One hypothesis tested in this study is that the cross-linguistic influence is due to dominance (Schlyter 1993). In other words, while Indonesian, exhibits normal monolingual acquisition, Italian lags behind. Another possibility is that the structural properties of the languages involved play an important role in transfer (Lanza 2000). It is also possible that there is cognitive interaction between the two, and therefore the child's immature stage of structure building is affected by cross-language cue competition (see Dopke 2000).

In order to demonstrate why and where cross-linguistic structures occur, it is important to identify areas where the structures of the two languages display different patterns. One of these areas is the expression of WH-questions.

Indonesian is basically a WH- in situ language, although instances of sentence-initial WH may occur (Cole, Gil, Hermon, Tadmor 2001). By contrast, Italian has Subject Auxiliary inversion (SAI) (Guasti 1996) that has been analyzed by Rizzi (1990) as involving movement of I to C. In Italian interrogative sentences the subject cannot intervene between the WH- operator and the verb. Thus, the subject may occur sentence-finally or in a left-dislocated position. In the acquisition of WH-questions, Italian children do not produce questions where there is no movement of I to C. This is an indication that Italian children consider these interrogative sentences as fixed structures reproducing a particular intonation pattern (Antelmi 1997).

Data for this study are taken from a diary study and transcribed video recordings taken regularly since the age of 8 months in different language contexts. Preliminary results show that Guglielmo's development of WH-questions follows that of Indonesian-speaking children. At the age of 19 months, he is able to produce Indonesian WH-questions comparable to those of other Indonesian-speaking children, but his Italian WH-questions lag behind those of his Italian peers significantly. He tends to apply Indonesian grammar when speaking Italian, and produces mixed utterances such as the following:

1. questa la casa **siapa?** (2;8)
this the house who
whose house is this?
2. i pesci mangiare che cos'è? (3;2)
the fishes eat what thing-is
what are the fish eating?

These kinds of WH-questions demonstrate that cross-linguistic influence applies in the area of inversion, which is apparently a vulnerable domain. From the analysis of Guglielmo's WH-questions in Italian, the language where his performance is lower, it is clear that he is unable to apply the movement of the WH- operator from the in-situ

position where it is normally found in Indonesian to the beginning of the sentence, as it would be expected in Italian. The mixed utterance in (1) shows that the Indonesian WH-operator *siapa* is maintained in the question, whereas in (2) it is replaced by the Italian *che cosa*.