

Selective vulnerability and superficial ‘proximity’ in the acquisition of differential object marking by Romanian/Hungarian bilingual children

Introduction. Differential object marking (DOM) (Bossong 1985) is an interface phenomenon which involves syntax, semantic features and/or discourse pragmatics. The Interface Hypothesis (Sorace, Filiaci 2006; Tsimpli, Sorace 2006; Sorace 2011) postulates a dichotomy between narrow syntax and structures which involve external interfaces; only the latter are vulnerable in 2L1. This hypothesis finds support in the results reported for DOM in child 2L1 Spanish, which reveal late emergence and high omission rates (Montrul, Sánchez Walker 2013; Ticio 2015). Romanian, like Spanish, has an overt differential object marker, *pe*, whose use is constrained by animacy and specificity (Farkas, von Heusinger 2003). At discourse level, *pe* signals prominence and topicality (Chiriacescu, von Heusinger 2010). But in Romanian DOM interferes with clitic doubling (CD): with definite pronouns and, according to most speakers, proper names as well, CD is obligatory; *pe* is a case marker required by syntax, in accordance with Kayne’s generalization (Dobrovie-Sorin 1993). Romanian DOM offers the perfect ground to test the Interface Hypothesis. The use of *pe* with definite pronouns and proper names is obligatory because of a syntactic requirement. The Interface Hypothesis predicts, in this case, early acquisition. The use of *pe* with (in)definite descriptive DPs is discourse-built. The Interface Hypothesis predicts delayed acquisition in this case. **Aim.** In this study we investigate the acquisition of DOM in Romanian by simultaneous Romanian-Hungarian bilinguals. We address two questions: (i) Is DOM vulnerable in 2L1 Romanian?; (ii) If it is, is the developmental difficulty selective, as predicted by the Interface Hypothesis? **Method and participants.** We analyze early *pe*-marking (i) in the spontaneous speech of two Romanian/Hungarian bilinguals (longitudinal corpora), compared to data from two corpora of monolingual Romanian (Table 1); (ii) in narratives by Romanian/Hungarian bilinguals, compared to narratives by a group of age-matched Romanian monolinguals and by Romanian/Russian bilinguals (Table 2). **Results and discussion.** The longitudinal data reveal early emergence, low error rate and identical error pattern with both monolingual and bilingual children. In all the longitudinal corpora, DOM applies earlier and more robustly to proper names and definite pronouns, i.e. DPs with which marking is constrained by syntax. But with definite descriptive DPs, whose marking requires integration of contextual information, the rate of marked objects is lower with the bilinguals (Table 3). This discrepancy indicates that the vulnerability of DOM in early 2L1 Romanian is selective, as predicted by the Interface Hypothesis. In narratives, however, older bilinguals mark definite descriptive DPs at a higher rate than age-matched monolinguals (Table 4). The findings can be accounted for in terms of cross-linguistic interference effects. Hungarian does not have DOM on the noun phrase (É.Kiss 2013). But the verb features two conjugations, triggered by definiteness/indefiniteness on the direct object, a residual of the earlier DOM system on verbal morphology (Bárány 2013). The acquisition of the two conjugations is early and flawless both in L1 and 2L1 Hungarian (MacWhinney 1976, Weber 2011). This early awareness of the definiteness feature of the direct object in Hungarian could boost the acquisition of DOM in 2L1 Romanian, contributing to the increase in marked definite descriptive DPs. This account is supported by the comparison with the use of *pe* in narratives by a group of Romanian/Russian bilinguals, whose *pe*-marking with definite descriptive DPs is much lower (Table 4). More generally, our findings reveal that vulnerability of DOM in 2L1 can be selective and that cross-linguistic interference effects are not necessarily from the dominant to the non-dominant language. Rather, some cross-linguistic interference effects can result from the availability of structures which are superficially similar in the two languages, resembling the ‘typological proximity’ invoked in relation to transfer in L3 learning (Rothman 2011).

Table 1. Longitudinal corpora

Setting	Child	Age	MLU	Hours	Nr of (Romanian) utterances	V+object
2L1	T.	1;11-2;11	1.94 - 4.51	42	9,310	976
	P.	2;0 - 2;8	1.47 - 3.79	18	6,024	447
L1	I.	1;10-3;1	1.11 - 3.63	16	8,006	1,196
	A.	1;9 - 3;1	1.51 - 2.79	17	8,047	1,245

Table 2. Frog story corpora

Setting	Number of participants	Age range	Number of <i>pe</i> -marked objects/ number of DOM contexts
Romanian/Hungarian	18	3;3-5;10	61/86
Monolingual Romanian	18	3;2-5;10	32/63
Romanian/Russian	11	5;9-8;1	21/60
Romanian	17	3;0-3;11	24/88

Table 3. Longitudinal corpora: Object marking per DP type

Setting	Child	Proper names and pronouns	Definite DPs	Indefinite DPs
2L1	T.	84.4%	29%	0
	P.	87.8%	27%	0
L1	A.	76.6%	75%	0
	I.	93%	100%	2.1%

Table 4. Narratives: DOM use per DP type

Setting	Mean age	Proper names and definite pronouns	Definite DPs
2L1 (Romanian/Hungarian)	4;5	100% (n= 6/6)	69% (n=55/80)
L1 (group 1)	4;5	100% (n=3/3)	48% (n= 29/60)
2L1 (Romanian/Russian)	7;2	100% (n= 5/5)	29% (n= 16/55)
L1 (group 2)	3;5	100% (n= 2/2)	27% (n= 22/86)

Selected References: Bárány, A. 2013. Differential object marking in Hungarian and the nature of variation in DOM, CASTLE Spring Conference on DOM, Tromsø, 24 May 2013. Bossong, G. 1985. *Differenzielle Objektmarkierung in den neuiranschen Sprachen*, Tübingen: Narr; Chiriacescu, S., K. von Heusinger 2010. Discourse prominence and *pe*-marking in Romanian, *The International Review of Pragmatics* 2, 298-322; É.Kiss, K. 2013. The inverse agreement constraint in Uralic languages, *Finno-Ugric Languages and Linguistics* 2(1): 2-21; Dobrovie-Sorin, C. 1993. *The Syntax of Romanian*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter; Farkas, D., K. von Heusinger, 2003. Stability of reference and object marking in Romanian, paper presented at *Workshop on Direct Reference and Specificity*, ESSLLI, Vienna, August 2003. Montrul, S., Sánchez Walker 2013. Differential object marking in child and adult Spanish heritage speakers, *Language Acquisition* 20, 109-132; Rothman, J. 2011. L3 syntactic transfer selectivity and typological determinacy: The typological primacy model, *Second Language Research* 27(1): 107-127. Sorace, A., 2011. Pinning down the concept of ‘interface’ in bilingualism, *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 1(1): 1-33; Sorace, A., F. Filiaci 2006. Anaphora resolution in near-native speakers of Italian. *Second Language Research* 22: 339-368; Ticio, E. 2015. Differential object marking in Spanish-English early bilinguals, *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism* 5(1): 62-90; Tsimpli, I.M., A. Sorace 2006. Differentiating interfaces: L2 performance in syntax-semantics and syntax-discourse phenomena. *BUCLD Proceedings* 30: 653-664.