On the morphosyntactic acquisition of the German DP by Italian adult L2 learners: Possessive constructions, Noun placement and inflectional morphology on nominal modifiers

Author: Simona Matteini
matteini3@unisi.it

On the acquisition of German possessive constructions by Italian L2 learners

Morphosyntactic properties of German Saxon genitive constructions
(i) The case affix is attached to bare proper names (BPN, Poss) and lending terms only
(ii) The Saxon genitive cannot be introduced by determiners
(iii) In the Saxon genitive construction the definiteness of the noun phrase depends on the definiteness of the possessive noun

(i) base: /Ilse/ Mutter/ Tasche/ his/her mother’s bag
a) “Ilse’s/ the mother’s red bag”
b) “Ilse’s bag/ his/her mother’s red bag”
c) “Ilse’s/ the mother’s red bag”
d) “Ilse’s/ the mother’s red bag”

On the acquisition of German possessive constructions by Italian L2 learners

Possessive constructions, Noun placement and inflectional morphology on nominal modifiers

On the acquisition of German possessive constructions by Italian L2 learners

Theoretical background

(i) Split D
(ii) More than one position available for the licensing of possessors
(iii) NP raising analysis
(iv) AP’s universal hierarchy

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*Derivation assumed for German Saxon genitive constructions*

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*Morphosyntactic properties of Italian possessive constructions containing a BPN Poss*

(i) The BPN Poss is licensed postnominally through the proposition di
(ii) The possessive construction is introduced by a determiner
(iii) The possessive construction does not have definiteness inheritance

(2) a) /La/ una borsa rossa di Ilse/
the/a bag red of Ilse’s
b) *la/una (di) l’ultima borsa rossa*
the/a last/bag red of Ilse’s

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Syntactic domain investigated

German Saxon genitive constructions: an option available in German but not in Italian

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German Saxon genitive constructions: an option available in German but not in Italian

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*Aim of the research*

Investigate the process of L2 parameter rescaling in the domain of nominal syntax

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- Derivation assumed for Italian possessive constructions containing a BPN Poss
  \[ \text{(i) BPN Poss} \]
  It is licensed in situ through the insertion of the preposition \( \text{di} \). As a consequence, the DFin position is filled with a determiner.

- NP
  It moves from the merged position to the specifier of an intermediate functional node crossing over "low" APs (i.e., adjectives of color, adjectives of nationality)

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- Parameter resettings involved in the acquisition of German Saxon genitive constructions by Italian L2 learners
  \( \text{(i) BPN Poss Movement Parameter} \)
  (a) \( \text{[strong]} \) in German > BPN Poss is raised to the DFinP layer
  (b) \( \text{[weak]} \) in Italian > BPN Poss is licensed in the NP lexical layer through preposition

  \( \text{(ii) NP Raising Parameter} \)
  (i) \( \text{[weak]} \) in German > NP is not raised to an intermediate FP position
  (ii) \( \text{[strong]} \) in Italian > NP is raised to an intermediate FP position

  - If the L2 word order is to be achieved, Italian L2 learners of German have to:
    (1) reset the feature strength responsible for NP Raising from the \( \text{[strong]} \) Italian value to the \( \text{[weak]} \) German value;
    (2) reset the feature strength responsible for BPN Poss Movement from the \( \text{[weak]} \) Italian value to the \( \text{[strong]} \) German value

On the acquisition of German possessive constructions by Italian L2 learners

- The tasks
  \( \text{(A) an oral picture description task (henceforth PDT)} \)
  administered to a group of 16 Beginner/Intermediate/Advanced Italian learners of German. The same test was administered to a control group of 8 native German speakers;

  \( \text{(B) a written sentence completion task (henceforth SCT)} \)
  administered to a group of 14 Beginner/Intermediate Italian learners of German. The same test was administered to a control group of 10 native German speakers.

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- The PDT
  \( \text{(i) Aim of the task} \)
  Elicit possessive constructions of the Saxon Genitive type (25 items and 40 fillers). Furthermore, the task gives cues on sufficiency of inflectional morphology on nominal modifiers (-s affix on BPN Poss and agreement morphology on attributive adjectives)

  \( \text{(ii) Saxon genitive constructions were investigated in two structural conditions:} \)
  (i) in Simple DPs
  (ii) in DPs containing an attributive adjectives (APs of color and APs of nationality)

  - The subjects were asked to look at a drawing while listening to some information about the content of the picture and to answer a question posed by the investigator

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- The PDT – example of fillers

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- The PDT – example of items
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- **The SCT**

  - **Aim of the task**
    Investigate the tendency to extend a property of the L1 to the Saxon genitive constructions, namely the co-occurrence determiners and pronominal possessors.
  
  - **Structural conditions investigated** (35 fillers and 15 items)
    (i) Saxon genitive in simple DPs
    (ii) Saxon genitive in DPs containing an attributive adjective (APs of color, APs of quality and modal APs)
  
  - The subjects were asked to complete a total of 50 sentences using lexical/functional elements given in brackets and discarding only one of them when they deemed it necessary in order to construct a well-formed sentence. The “intruder” contained in all items were a definite article. The items were given all inflected and in German.

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- **The SCT – example of items**

  1. **(4) Ich fahre mit dem Peters Auto nach Berlin**
     - Expected answer:
       - (4a) Ich fahre mit Peters Auto nach Berlin
         "I go to Berlin with Peter’s car"
     - Example of possible non-target answer:
       - (4b) "Ich fahre mit dem Peters Auto nach Berlin"
         "I go to Berlin with the Peter’s car"

  2. **(5) Der Polizist sucht Ilses rote Tasche**
     - Expected answer:
       - (5a) Der Polizist sucht Ilses rote Tasche
         "The policeman is looking for Ilse’s red bag"
     - Example of possible non-target answer:
       - (5b) "Der Polizist sucht die Ilses rote Tasche"
         "The policeman is looking for the Ilse’s red bag"

On the acquisition of German possessive constructions by Italian L2 learners

- **Resetting of BPN Poss Movement Parameter**

  - **Initial state, which reflects properties of the L1 grammar**

    - PDT - Beginners L2 learners only resort to possessive constructions available in their L1 (van de Craats et al. (2000) for similar results).

    - The use of a case assigner for expressing the possession prevails over Saxon genitive DPs

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- **The SCT – example of fillers**

  1. **(3) Brigitte braucht ein Hotelzimmer**
     - Expected answer:
       - (3a) Brigitte braucht ein Hotelzimmer
         "Brigitte needs a hotel room"
     - Example of a possible non-target answer:
       - (3b) "Brigitte braucht in dem Hotelzimmer"
         "Brigitte needs in the hotel room"
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- Resetting of BPN Poss Movement Parameter
  - Initial state, which reflects properties of the L1 grammar.
  - SCT - L2 learners extend a property of their L1 into the L2.
  - L2 learners insert the definite determiner when the BPN Poss is in prenominal position (Matteini (1999), Di Domenico and Bennati (2006) for similar results).

- Resetting of BPN Poss Movement Parameter
  - Intermediate state, which is affected by:
    - PDT - a more variability as for the use of Saxon genitive constructions in Intermediate L2 learners:
      - Saxon genitive constructions alternate with possessive constructions expressed through a case assigner.

- Resetting of BPN Poss Movement Parameter
  - Discrepancy between simple and modified DPs as for the position of BPN Poss is concerned.

- Resetting of BPN Poss Movement Parameter
  - Proposal: In the process of L2 parameter resetting, a parameter could be "partially" set to a new value (White (1990), (1991), Hawkins (1993), Herschensohn (1998)). L2 learners may go through a stage during which they adopt the L2 value for a give parameter only in specific contexts, but not in others.

- Resetting of BPN Poss Movement Parameter
  - Summary of BPN Poss always occurs in postnominal position within modified DPs.

**Figure (2): SCT - Co-occurrence of determiner and prenominal BPN Poss**

**Figure (3): PDT - Use of Saxon genitive constructions**

**Figure (4): Poss-N**

**Figure (5): Poss-AP-N**
Resetting of BPN Poss Movement Parameter

Final state, which reflects properties of the L2 grammar:

PDT – Advanced L2 learners resort to Saxon genitive constructions as the favourite option for expressing the possession.

SCT - Lack of co-occurrence determiner-BNP Poss; lack of word order variability as for the position of BPN Poss

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Figure (6): PDT - Use of Saxon genitive constructions

Figure (7): SCT - Co-occurrence determiner and BPN Poss

Figure (8): Poss-AP-N order. Comparison between PDT and SCT according to level of proficiency

Main findings

The resetting of BPN Poss movement Parameter is characterized by a "three-step process" (initial, intermediate, final state)

The resetting of NP Raising Parameter seems to be possible from earlier on.

Dissociation emerged in the resetting of parameters

Proposal: a reason for such a dissociation may lie in the complexity of the syntactic derivation at work in BPN Poss Movement with respect to NP Raising and in the difficulty for L2 learners' computational system to acquire the former derivation with respect to the latter:

\[ \text{SpecDP}\rightarrow \text{FinPSpecIP}\rightarrow \text{SpecFPPasserTasche}\rightarrow \text{SpecNP} \]

Suppliance of inflectional morphology on nominal modifiers

Missing inflection on prenominal modifier is a restricted phenomenon in the L2 interlanguage grammars

(10) *Sie ist Uta\text{ö} gelbe Tasse
   "It is Uta(\text{ö})'s yellow cups"

(11) *Eine gelb\text{ö} Blume
   "a yellow flower"

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Figure (9): AP-N order. Comparison between PDT and SCT according to level of proficiency

Figure (10): Missing inflection on nominal modifiers
Only 4 out of 10 subjects omit the appropriate morphology on BPN Poss.

Only subject 14 consistently avoids -s insertion.

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- Suppliance of inflectional morphology on nominal modifiers
  - Proposal: Knowledge of L2 adjectival agreement categories is available via L1 transfer in Italian L2 learners of German. The residual phenomenon of missing inflection can be interpreted in terms of a problem of mapping phi-feature agreement into their particular morphological manifestation (Lardiere 1998 a and b, Lardiere 2000, Prevost and White 2000a and b).

- Accuracy on morphology suppliance increases considerably according to proficiency level only in case of the -s affix on BPN Poss.

- Proposal: a reason for such a dissociation may lie in an easier acquisition of invariable bound morphemes (-s affix) over variable ones (inflectional endings of the adjectival declension in German).

- Do the non-target patterns represent possible UG options?

- SCT- Group C: Co-occurrence determiner-prenominal BPN Poss.

- Do the non-target patterns represent possible UG options?

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(20) Davide’s sun
    “David’s Son” (Marzolla 1991)

(21) Iacob’s God
    “Jacob’s God”

(22) Sione’s daughter
    “Sion’s daughter”

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As possessors, proper names are preceded by a determiner:

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<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(23) a János kalap-ja</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the János-NOM hat-POSS-3sg</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Jano’s hat”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>b * János kalap-ja</td>
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</tbody>
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The co-occurrence determiner (non pronominal) possessor is attested in the languages of the world. Italian learners of German resort to UG options during the process of resetting the BPN Poss Movement Parameter from the L1 to the L2 value.

Do the non-target patterns represent possible UG options?

(ii) Hungarian (Szabolcsi 1987, 1994): in Upper Tisza and Decebrencen dialects proper names do not take an article

(22) a Jánsos iszik
    the János-NOM drink-3sg
    “Jano drinks”

b * a Jánsos iszik

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(24) läärare-DEF-POSS book
    the teacher-DEF-POSS book
    “the teacher’s book”

In some northern varieties the same construction appears with the definite marker on the noun:

(26) Janne-POSS car
    Janne’s car

(27) Per-POSS casa-DEF
    Per’s house

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(25) Johan-Poss book-DEF
    John’s book

Scandinavian dialects (iii) In Standard Swedish the definite suffixed marker does not show up in possessive constructions: Northern Swedish

(26) Janne’s car

(27) Per’s house

(28) Johans bok-DEF

Scandinavian dialects (iii) Scandinavian dialects:

    John’s book

(26) Janne’s car

(27) Per’s house

(28) Johans bok-DEF
    John’s book

The co-occurrence determiner (non pronominal) possessor is attested in the languages of the world.
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- Do the non-target patterns represent possible UG options?

  - SCT - Group B:

    (13) Die Kinder schlafen auf Erwins Bett
    "The children are sleeping on Erwin's bed"

    (14) Der Polizist sucht die rote Tasche Ilse's
    "The policeman is looking for the red bag of Ilse's"

  - The determiner occurs when BPN Poss movement does not take place
  - BPN Poss movement does not take place when the DP is modified by an adjective

- Norwegian possessive constructions containing an adjective:
  - If the possessive pronoun is prenominal, neither the suffixed article on the noun nor the expletive determiner may occur. If the possessive is postnominal, both article do occur.

  - (31) min gamle hest
    "my old horse"
  - (32) *min gamle hesten
    "my old horses"
  - (33) *den gamle hesten
    "the old horse"
  - (34) den gamle hesten min

- Norwegian option:
  - When the possessive pronoun is postnominal, the noun has the suffixed definite article -a.

    (28) mi bok
    "my book"

    (29) boka mi
    book-DEF my

    (30) *mi boka

- Tentative proposal:
  - In the L2 interlanguage grammar this option is restricted only to possessive DPs containing an attributive AP.

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- Análisíng the the pattern of Group B: a further speculation

  - BPN Poss movement over APs conforms to locality condition. An AP that intervenes the BPN Poss and its trace cannot function as antecedent for BPN Poss trace.

- In the interlanguage grammar of L2 learners of Group B, the AP seems to act as intervener. It blocks BPN Poss movement to SpecIP.

- Rizzi (2002): RM effects are found within the same featural class but not across classes.

- Tentative proposal: In the L2 interlanguage grammar of Group B, the BPN Poss with -s affix is analyzed as a "pure" modifiicional element rather than an argumental element (this could be due to the fact that possessive pronouns have the categorial status of adjectives in Italian). As a consequence, an attributive AP may act as potential intervener of the local relation between the BPN Poss and its trace.
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- What does this study tell us about the process of parameter resetting in L2 acquisition?

- L2 learners are able to change parametric values responsible for word order asymmetries between the L1 and the L2, namely the different positions of the noun and of BPN Poss in possessive constructions.

- L2 learners may show different paths in dealing with a parametric variation, including the fact that a parameter could be “partially” set to a new value. As a consequence, interlanguage grammars may show mastery and non-mastery of a given parameter.

- Incompleteness of parameter resetting observed in some L2 learners of this study can be taken as evidence for the fact that interlanguage productions represent possible UG options.

Selected references


