

ACQUISITION MEETS COMPARISON. SOME NOTES.

ADRIANA BELLETTI

1. Introduction

The contribution that linguistic theory can provide for the understanding, characterization and ultimately for the explanation of patterns and stages in language development is probably among the most significant results of the work on acquisition over the last twenty years or so. Reciprocally, the contribution from acquisition studies and acquisition data can also prove and has proved crucial in clarifying and better shaping the form and the content of theoretical hypotheses and explanations (Hyams (1986), Rizzi (2005)). It is often observed, ever since the Principle and Parameters approach and subsequent developments have guided the work on acquisition, that characteristic stages in language development typically reflect the adoption by the child of options selected in some other language, different from the target one. In this sense, stages in acquisition are not dead ends, to put it Chomsky (2002) terms. A fundamental contribution in substantiating this line of explanation has come and continues to come from theoretically refined comparative studies. In the notes that follow I would like to address this fairly general and classical issue on the relation between language comparison and language acquisition from a particular angle. I will illustrate through two examples that not only can comparative studies feed acquisition studies in the described way, but that data coming from acquisition, in different modalities - L1, L2, bilingual, typical and atypical development - can directly constitute a peculiar form of language comparison and can as such be treated as true comparative data. Thus, comparative data and acquisition data can meet in highlighting areas of language variability.

The two domains considered here deal with results i. from previous work (Belletti (2007), forthcoming) on so called *Answering strategies* emerging in answers to questions on the identification of the subject of the clause (section 2), and ii. from current work on the development of subject

and object relatives in Italian (section 3). In both cases I will primarily concentrate my attention here to the comparative issue that emerge in the two domains in the sense just described. In the last section 3.1 it will also be discussed how the comparison emerged through acquisition data between Italian and Hebrew in the domain of relative clauses and passive, may also provide some non trivial hints for the characterization of aspects of language development in relation with the issue of the complexity and economy of syntactic derivations.

2. On the identification of different answering strategies in different languages: Comparative (acquisition) data

As I have discussed in detail in Belletti (2007, forthcoming), different languages appear to preferably adopt different ways, call them strategies, to answer the very same question concerning the identification of the subject of the clause. For reasons of space, I just list them below; the reader is referred to the references quoted for closer discussion and analysis.

- i. **VS:**
Italian, European Portuguese, Romanian, Paduan
- ii. **(Reduced) Clefts:**
French, Japanese, Norwegian, Malayalam
- iii. **SV:**
English, Hungarian, German, Basque, Gungbe ...

Unrelated languages may adopt the same strategy, which suggests that the options in i-iii essentially exhaust the space defined by UG in this domain. I assume, in line with cartographic analyses (Cinque (2002), Rizzi (2004), Belletti (2004a)), that the new information post-verbal subject in languages of group i. (Italian type languages) fills a discourse related low focus position in the vP-periphery of the clause (Belletti (2004)); that the new information post-copular subject in languages of group ii. (French type languages) fills the same low focus position in the vP-periphery of the copula so that (reduced) clefts can be ultimately interpreted as disguised forms of subject inversion; that the new information subject in the languages of group iii. either fills the TP internal preverbal subject position with focalization implemented *in situ*, DP internally (English type languages), a computation which can also be combined with subsequent V2 (German type languages), or fills a high focus position within the articulated CP left periphery (Rizzi (1997)) which may be compatible with

new information (Hungarian type languages). I concentrate here on the strategies in i. and ii. According to the analysis adopted, the two strategies share one crucial feature: the new information subject fills the same vP-peripheral new information focus position in both cases. The schema below illustrate the essential steps of the assumed derivations, for the answers in (1)b and (2)b in Italian and French respectively:

- (1) a. Chi è partito/ha parlato?
Who left/spoke
b. E' partito/ha parlato Gianni
is-left/has-spoken Gianni
- (2) a. Qui est parti/a parlé
who left/spoke
b. C'est Jean (qui est parti/qui a parlé)
it is Jean (who left/who spoke)

(3)

[CP [TP *pro* è partito/ha parlato [TopP[FocP Gianni [TopP [vP]]]]]

(4)

[TP_{Ce} [TopP [FocP [TopP [vP être [_{sc} Jean [CP qui a parlé]]]]]]]¹

In order to allow for a post-verbal subject as in (3) the language must be a null subject language, while the (reduced) cleft answer is compatible with the non null subject nature of the language, as in the case of French. For further relevant discussion see the quoted references on which this analysis is based.

The crucial point here is the following: how is the existence of the different answering strategies detectable? At least four answers can be provided to this question: i. by asking for grammaticality judgements or judgements of appropriateness to native speakers; ii. through experimental data, eliciting subject answers in different languages; iii. through the same experimental setting, in situations of (adult) L2 acquisition, where the L2 adopts a strategy different from the L1 strategy; iv. by checking child

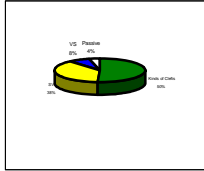
¹ sc= small clause. See Belletti (forthcoming) for a proposal on the nature of the small clause complement of the copula in cleft sentences. The CP predicate of the small clause is deleted in the reduced version of the answer in (2)b. The copula raises in a high functional head, past the focussed subject.

spontaneous production data in the relevant discourse conditions to control for the emergence of the different strategies. It should be noted that experimental results are particularly welcome in this domain as they provide a uniform controlled discourse situation where the relevant answer can be checked. To the extent that spontaneous production data are checked with respect to discourse situations comparable to the experimental conditions, spontaneous production data are equally welcome. All four ways to detect the existence of the different answering strategies have been pursued, revealing in a particularly straightforward way a domain where language comparison and language acquisition meet in the sense described in the introduction. Specifically:

1. A survey done through a questionnaire of grammaticality judgements on subject question-answer pairs in different languages, has revealed the three strategies listed in i-iii above.
2. The experiment first designed in Belletti & Leonini (2004) to detect the adult L2 acquisition of new information post-verbal subjects in L2 Italian, has been realized in Brazilian Portuguese (BP, Guesser (2007)), thus serving as a descriptive comparative tool. In the experiment, subject answers of the kind in (1)b/(2)b were elicited in BP by showing short videos to the experimental subjects and then asking them questions about the event seen in the video, crucially including subject questions of the kind in (1)a/(2)a. As indicated in (5) below, the experimental results, from Guesser (2007), have shown that BP adopts either the SV strategy or the cleft strategy, (with different kinds of reduction; Guesser (2007), Belletti (forthcoming) for details). Hence, BP adopts the typical strategies of non-null subject languages. Note that this confirms, in the domain of answering strategies, the diachronic change that BP has gone through over the last century (Guesser (2007); Belletti (forthcoming) and references cited there).
3. The original results on L2 Italian presented in Belletti & Leonini (2004), summarized in (6) have first revealed the very existence of the different answering strategies through the manifestation of non target consistent behaviour of non advanced L2 adult speakers of Italian. The same experiment has been run again with L2 near-native speakers of Italian in Belletti, Bennati, Sorace (2007), illustrating the resistance of the L1 strategy in the L2, also at this very advanced level of attainment; main relevant results summarized in (7).
4. The very early emergence of the different strategies has been checked in Italian, French and English by looking at child data

from spontaneous production in the relevant discourse conditions in the CHILDES database (Belletti (2007)).²

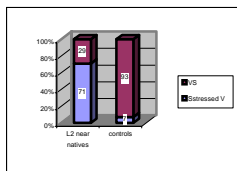
(5) Main results on the strategies of BP (from Guesser (2007))³:



(6) The different strategies (adapted from Belletti & Leonini (2004))

L1	VS	SV	Cleft
Italian (control)	98%	1%	0
French	21%	9%	69%
German	27%	68%	0

(7) Prevalence of SV strategy in L2 near native speakers of Italian (from Belletti, Bennati, Sorace (2007))



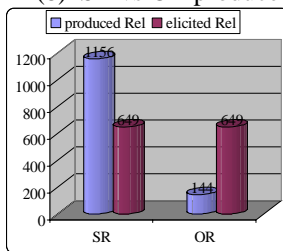
² The analysis of adult corpora in the same domain is also foreseen

³ VS is limited to unaccusatives, see the discussion in Guesser (2007) and Belletti (forthcoming); see also Costa (2004). Sometimes the answers are provided with a passive sentence with the new information subject in the *by*-phrase.

3. A comparative reasoning on object relatives

Novogrodsky & Friedmann (2006) have developed a particularly effective experimental design to elicit the production of subject and object relatives. Object relatives (OR) are known to be harder in acquisition than subject relatives (SR; Guasti & Cardinaletti (2003), and references cited there). As argued in De Vincenzi (1991) the difficulty with object relatives, also observed in parsing, may crucially involve the operation of a principle such as her Minimal Chain Principle (Arosio, Adani, Guasti (2007) for recent discussion in comprehension), since object chains are in a way longer than subject chains in relativization. I would like to address the issue of the difficulty with object relatives from the particular angle of the comparative perspective assumed here. Thus, the focus of the discussion will not be the general question of the possible reasons responsible for the fairly widespread difficulty with object relatives across languages, but rather what the particular way in which the difficulty emerges in different languages may reveal for the comparison of the different grammatical systems involved. The main results of an extension to Italian of Novogrodsky & Friedmann (2006) experimental design (Preference Task) has shown that Italian children aged 6-11 manifest a clear difficulty in object relative production. OR were successfully produced only in a smaller percentage than they had been elicited, as illustrated in the following figure (8) from Utzeri (2007)⁴:

(8) SR vs OR produced by a group of Italian children (6-11)



⁴ The group was constituted by 41 Italian children aged 6-11. The development at different ages was not analyzed in Utzeri (2007). However, a large control group of adults produced even less OR in the experimental conditions than did the children. This suggests that the particular experimental condition did not especially favour the production of OR in Italian. Further experimental work is on the way to better settle this aspect.

The interesting comparative question which arises is the following: the results on Italian children contrast sharply with the results obtained in Hebrew with typically developing children in the same age span, discussed in Novogrodsky & Friedmann (2006). Both in resumptive OR and in OR with a gap⁵, Hebrew children do not experience any particular difficulty. Why should it be so? Why should Hebrew differ from Italian and, we may add, from the other languages where the difficulty with OR has been reported?

Focussing on the Italian/Hebrew comparison, I would like to put forth the following proposal, to be further strengthened with future experimental work: the developmental difference emerged between Italian and Hebrew children in their ability to produce OR is the indirect reflex of independent differences of the two grammatical systems. Thus, this data from acquisition makes available a peculiar form of language comparison. In order to substantiate this claim the following further result from the elicitation experiment in Italian must be taken into account: children seem to avoid the production of OR and produce instead other structures. One widespread alternative is the production of a SR in place of the elicited OR, which typically entails in turn the transformation from an active to a passive sentence⁶, as illustrated in (9) (36% of the elicited OR were passive SR):

- (9) Target elicited OR:
 il bambino che la mamma copre
 the child that the mother wraps up
- b. Produced passive SR:
 il bambino che è coperto dalla mamma
 the child that is wrapped up by the mother

An alternative way to avoid production of a standard OR which in Italian contains an object gap (as in (9)) consists in adopting a substandard strategy involving a resumptive clitic pronoun, as in productions of the

⁵ Both structures are possible in Hebrew. See Novogrodsky & Friedmann (2006) for detailed discussion.

⁶ Other ways of transforming a OR into a SR entail the change of the verb or use of a passive-causative structure. I concentrate here on the passive and resumptive structures discussed in the text.

kind illustrated in (10) (60% of the OR produced by the children were OR with a resumptive pronoun):

- (10) *la bambina che la mamma la copre*
 The child that the mother her(clitic) wraps up

As is well known, Hebrew has a productive (non substandard) resumptive pronoun strategy for relative clauses. Thus, it could be argued that lack of problems with OR in Hebrew children of the relevant age is due to their use of the resumptive strategy which, as the productions of the Italian children seems to suggest, appears to be somehow easier or anyway favored in development. Thus, Italian children tend to adopt a substandard strategy in their language and in so doing they converge to a strategy productively available in a language like Hebrew. However, this cannot be the whole account since, as we have already mentioned, Hebrew children do not have problems in the production of OR with gap as well, a further relativization strategy available in the language. The OR with gap strategy is precisely the one that Italian children tend to avoid most. We have just seen that, putting aside resumptive OR, Italian children tend to produce passive SR in place of OR with gap. As pointed out in Novogrodsky & Friedmann (2006), Hebrew is known not to have a productive (verbal) passive. It is then tempting to suggest that unavailability of productive passive in Hebrew may indirectly provide a reason why object relatives are more readily accessed by Hebrew children who lack the privileged way to transform an object relative into a subject relative. Furthermore, productive availability of resumptive relatives in Hebrew may also play a role, as pointed out, affecting the production of both resumptive and non-resumptive OR relatives. Since (verbal) passive is productive and relatively widespread in standard Italian - and, most importantly, it is available at the developmental ages considered here - this may in turn suggest a reason why Italian children resort to passive SR, thus avoiding the production of an OR (with gap). The crucial point for the comparative issue addressed here is that grammatical properties differentiating two grammatical systems such as Italian and Hebrew are ultimately responsible for the very different reaction to the same experimental task in children of matching ages in the two languages. Productive availability of (verbal) passive is the distinctive grammatical factor (possibly complemented with more or less readily access to the resumptive relativization strategy). These findings from acquisition thus indirectly reveal important differences between the two grammatical systems and as such constitute an indirect form of language comparison.

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