

Clitic Right Dislocation in absence of clitics: a case study in trilingual acquisition

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This paper reports on a study of simultaneous trilingual acquisition of Scottish Gaelic, Italian and English. The child speaks Italian with her mother, Scottish Gaelic with her father, and English is the language used in the nursery, the extended social circle and between parents. The data was obtained through weekly recordings during free play from 2;3 – 3;3.

The combination of the three languages is particularly interesting: first, this is a probably unique combination of these languages in acquisition, with no such cases reported in the literature; second, the three languages vary significantly in their morphosyntactic properties, including word order, null subjects and the use of clitics.

While we report on a number of characteristics of the acquisition patterns, the data examined in detail are cases where structures occur in English which are not characteristic of adult English or monolingual English acquisition. We focus on sentences with pronominal copies and right dislocation, of the type given in (1), which are very productive in the data and demonstrate some sort of doubling strategy, involving a pronoun and a right-dislocated DP.

The phenomenon is interesting from three points of view:

- (i) It involves doubling of the object by means of a weak element, a pronoun, a structure not characteristic of English. In general, dislocation structures of the canonical kind are not found in English L1 acquisition (Van Der Linden & Sleeman 2007) at this stage.
- (ii) It shows the tendency of the child to right-dislocate, a strategy that in many ways resembles clitic right dislocation in Italian.
- (iii) The semantic effect is precisely that of clitic right dislocation since the acoustic analysis of the data shows a pause after the pronominal element, hence confirming that these are topic comment structures.

This might be thought to be due to influence of Italian. The equivalent structure in Italian would involve cliticisation and right dislocation, (2). However, crucially, at this stage of development the child does not produce clitics in Italian (Hamann 2002 and Leonini 2006 a.o.) and in fact tends to omit the object, (3). Therefore we cannot see this as a case of superficial cross-linguistic transfer. Moreover, direct transfer would produce the word order in (4) and on the contrary the order we see is English SVO with a postverbal pronoun. Since the child's Italian is less advanced than her English, this also cannot be seen as a straightforward case of bilingual bootstrapping (Gawlitsek-Maiwald and Tracy (1996)). We argue, however, that this is in fact a type of crosslinguistic transfer of a rather subtle kind: the child is aware, to some extent, that doubling (and clitic dislocation) is a pragmatic strategy that fulfils the function of topic marking in Italian and that this strategy is more effective than a simple displace prominence strategy. Marking the topic of a clause in Italian involves displacing a constituent to a peripheral position and using a pronoun. It is this knowledge that the child transfers to English, even before she is producing the Italian equivalent which would require the use a clitic, a weaker pronoun which is not available yet. The data highlights that (i) the grammatical system of the two languages must be both independently developing (see (2) vs (3), (ii)

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interface levels where syntax interacts with other cognitive systems are vulnerable domains in acquisition (Serratrice, Sorace & Paoli (2004), Müller, (2004), hence susceptible to a form of ‘deep’ syntactic transfer where two language particular characteristics (Italian doubling and English non-clitic pronouns) can combined.

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| (1) | a. We will make it bed. | [it= bed] | 2:4 |
| | b. You find it my elegetch. | [it = elegetch] | 2: 5 |
| | c. Don’t wake it the baby | [it= the baby] | 2: 7 |
| | d. I don’t like it carrots. | [It = carrots] | 2:9 |
| | e. You have it the piece? | [it= the piece] | 2: 11 |

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|-----|---|---|--------|
| (2) | Mother: Lo faremo il letto.
it (we) will make, the bed | Sofia: si, faremo
yes, we will make | |
| | Mother: La prendo?
It take-3sg?
Shall I take it? | Sofia: Predi, Prendi
Take, take!
(Target: Prendila) | [2; 7] |
| | Mother: Li metto?
Them wear-3sg?
Shall I weat them? | Sofia: Metti!
Wear-2sg
(Target: Mettili) | [2:7] |
| | Mother: Come ti chiami?
How you-cl call-2sg
What is your name”? | Sofia : Chiamo Sofia
I am Called S...
(Target: Mi chiamo S) | |

- (4) *We will it make bed.

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