Language dominance, structural complexity and variation: Competing factors in the acceptability of Italian embedded *wh*-questions

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We investigate which factors lead to apparent differences between heritage and monolingual grammars, focussing on embedded *wh*-questions in heritage Italian in Germany. In matrix *wh*-questions, Italian and German both require adjacency of the *wh*-phrase (WH) and the inflected verb:

(1) a. *Cosa*   *{*Gianni}*   *ha*   *cucinato*   *{Gianni}?*
        what   G.   AUX.3SG   cook-PTCP   G.
     b. *Was*   *{*Hans}*   *hat*   *{Hans}*   *gekocht?*
        what   H.   AUX.3SG   H.   cook-PTCP
        'What did John cook?'

In embedded *wh*-questions, this requirement disappears in German (see 2), while being maintained in Italian. As shown in (3a), adjacency is the unmarked option, whereas lack thereof yields marginal sentences (see 3b):

(2)   *Maria weiß nicht, was   Hans gekocht   hat.*
         M.   knows NEG   what H.   cook-PTCP   AUX.3SG
         'Mary doesn't know what John has cooked.'

(3) a. *Maria non   sa   cosa ha   cucinato Gianni.*
        M.   NEG   knows what AUX.IND.3SG   cook-PTCP G.
     b. ??*Maria   non   sa   cosa Gianni ha   cucinato.*
        M.   NEG   knows what G.   AUX.IND.3SG   cook-PTCP

However, structures with a pre- verbal subject like (3b) can be licensed either by subjunctive mood (4a) (cf. Rizzi 1996) or if a constituent is left in the VP (4b) (cf. Poletto & Pollock 2000).

(4) a. *Maria non   sa   cosa Gianni abbia   cucinato.*
        M.   NEG   knows what G.   AUX.SBJV.3SG cook-PTCP
        'Mary doesn't know what John has cooked.'
     b. *Maria non   sa   cosa Gianni ha   cucinato   per cena.*
        M.   NEG   knows what G.   AUX.IND.3SG   cook-PTCP for dinner
        'Mary doesn't know what John has cooked for dinner.'

Embedded *wh*-questions thus display a range of alternative derivations in Italian, but are strictly uniform in German – an asymmetry that may facilitate cross-linguistic influence (CLI) (e.g. Hulk & Müller 2000).

Three factors have been considered: (i) language dominance, (ii) structural complexity − defined as the number of required syntactic operations (Merge, Move and Agree) and (iii) variation (e.g., Jakubowicz 2011, Yip & Matthews 2007). If (i) is crucial, only unbalanced HSs with low proficiency in Italian will deviate from monolinguals. If (ii) is crucial, complex structural types should be particularly vulnerable, irrespectively of dominance. If (iii) is crucial, HSs should display the same patterns of variation as monolinguals, independently of dominance and complexity.

We tested 20 adult HSs of Italian in Germany and 20 Italian monolinguals using a bi-modal acceptability judgement task (AJT). The task consisted of 48 items: 12 test items (2 types), 12 control items (2 types) and 24 fillers. Test items involved embedded *wh*-questions with post-verbal (type #1) and pre-verbal subjects (type #2) respectively. For each type, there were 6 structural conditions differing in complexity: Verb class (copula, unaccusative, unergative and transitive) and thematic type of WH (argument vs. adjunct) were considered, with copulas representing the least complex and transitive verbs the most complex type. Only "bare" *wh*-phrases (like *dove* 'where') were used. We controlled for Italian-type interrogative inversion in matrix questions, i.e. movement of the entire TP instead of T° to the C-domain (type #3, see 5) and lack thereof in embedded *wh*-questions with "complex" WHs like *perché* 'why' (type #4, see 6) (Rizzi 1996, 2006; Bocci & Pozzan 2014). Fillers were either grammatical (type #5) or ungrammatical (type #6) in both Italian and German.

(5)   *Ha   Paola   trovato   le   chiavi?
      AUX.IND.3SG P.   find-PTCP   the   keys
      'Did Paola find the keys?'

(6)   Mara si   chiede perché Thomas è   andato   al   mare.
      M.   REFL.3 asks   why   T.   AUX.IND.3SG   go-PTCP-MSG   to-the sea
      'Mara wonders why Thomas went to the seaside.'

The results show that the group of monolingual Italian speakers does not perform significantly better than the group of Italian HSs (83% vs. 81% appropriate responses). Language dominance –operationalised as performance on a lexical decision task– did not correlate with the AJT results, contrary to (i). Moreover, there were more appropriate responses in the transitive condition (84%) than in the unergative and unaccusative conditions (71% and 66% respectively). This is inconsistent with (ii), which predicts that more complex structures (e.g. transitives, involving checking of two structural Cases) are more vulnerable than less complex ones (e.g. unergatives and unaccusatives, with only one structural Case). Interestingly, wherever monolinguals judge categorically, HSs are similarly categorical: ungrammatical items in the copula-condition were rejected by all speakers. In addition, both groups were inclined to accept pre-verbal Subjects in structures with adjunct-WHs (e.g. 62% of accepted items in the condition unaccusative-adjunct). The latter two findings suggest that the range of variation is governed by the same structural constraints in both groups, supporting (iii). Overall, our findings suggest that the syntax of HSs is relatively resistant to CLI, and that we should be wary of interpreting all deviations from monolingual norms as indicators of "incompleteness" or "deviance" (e.g. Pascual y Cabo & Rothman 2012, Putnam & Sánchez 2013).

References

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