Clitic right dislocation in English: Cross-linguistic influence in multilingual acquisition

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Abstract

This paper investigates target-deviant constructions produced in English by a child acquiring three languages simultaneously from birth: English, Italian and Scottish Gaelic. These constructions involve the weak pronoun '*it*' doubling direct object DPs which are dislocated to the right-periphery of the sentence. Additionally, we consider subject dislocations, where the child dislocates the subject to the left and the right periphery of the sentence, and doubles it with a variety of pronouns. We argue that both of these constructions are produced as a result of cross-linguistic influence from Italian, where dislocations in general and clitic right dislocations in particular are very frequent in the adult input. We analyse these constructions as involving adjunction. Finally, regarding the wider question of cross-linguistic influence and the vulnerability of the C domain, we show that the notion of vulnerability is not necessarily tied to the presence of the C domain: while cross-linguistic influence happens with dislocation phenomena exactly because they are syntax–discourse phenomena, it is clear that children can produce them even before they acquire the C-domain fully.
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1. Introduction

In this paper we discuss an unusual doubling construction which appears for a considerable period in the English of a trilingual child (henceforth S) who has been acquiring English, Italian and Scottish Gaelic from birth. The child uses the pronoun *it* alongside a DP object which is dislocated to the right edge of the clause.

(1)   a. He forget it the teddy   (2;7)
        b. We will make it bed   (2;7)
        c. He's give it back the muffin   (2;9)
        d. Have to go touch it his tail.   (2;10)

This unusual structure is clearly not characteristic of adult English nor is it commonly observed in monolingual English acquisition.[1] The construction differs from a typical transitive sentence in that a semantically and syntactically weak

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 [1] Right dislocation is possible in English but it is normally found with subjects and is in fact rare compared to left dislocation. This is indeed true also of some Romance languages but not of Italian where right dislocation is just as frequent as left dislocation (see Hidalgo, 2000 for extensive discussion and for a cross-linguistic quantitative overview of right dislocation in English and Spanish).

pronoun, *it*, doubles the object DP which is then dislocated to the right. This target-deviant construction has a number of interesting properties: first, the structure involves a weak element (*it*) in the canonical object position; second the object DP is located in the right periphery of the clause; third, it is clearly an information structuring device of some kind. As these constructions are not a characteristic of child English, it appears that they may be the result of cross-linguistic influence from the child's Italian. Specifically, we argue, they resemble Italian Clitic Right Dislocation (CLRD) structures, exemplified below in (2) where a clitic is linked to the right dislocated topic '*il libro*':

(2)   L'ho   letto,   il libro.
        It-have-1sg   read   the book.
        'I have read it, the book.'

These constructions occur in the child's spontaneous data at a frequency of 6.4% of all constructions containing direct object DPs, over a period of 15 months from the age of 2;4–3;7. Crucially the overall frequency of the *it*-doubling constructions is well above the accepted 2% where errors are labelled as noise (Platzack, 2001: 365) in the child's language. Indeed there is a period of 8 months (between age 2;4 and 3) where the construction occurs with a frequency of 14.6%.

Furthermore, the duration for which these constructions occur (a period of 15 months) clearly suggests that these target-deviant constructions cannot simply be dismissed as performance errors. Rather, the consistency of the target-deviant constructions in the child's output, and the frequency with which these constructions occur within this time frame as well as within certain single transcriptions suggest that they are representative of a grammatical option in the child's grammar. Additionally we also consider constructions where S dislocates subjects, both to the right and to the left of the clause with a variety of pronouns (not just *it*). These constructions, although grammatical in English, are not typical of monolingual acquisition. What is relevant for us is that these constructions also involve a clause internal element doubled with a dislocated DP at the edge of the clause, somewhat similarly to the *it* doubling structures.

The analysis of these phenomena is part of a bigger study, Project S (Devlin et al., 2012, 2013; Devlin, 2014), an extensive longitudinal case study of the simultaneous trilingual acquisition of English, Italian and Scottish Gaelic from birth investigating the effect that acquiring three languages simultaneously has on the child's English, with a particular focus on cross-linguistic influence. Indeed project S has revealed cross-linguistic influence also in the production of complex DPs (Devlin et al., 2013; Devlin, 2014) and the unaccusative/unergative distinction (Devlin et al., 2015).

1.1. Cross-linguistic influence and vulnerable domains

The study of multilingual language development is crucially centred around questions regarding the interaction of the languages as they develop. The interaction between languages in multilingual language development is referred to in the literature by different terms, e.g. interference, transfer, cross-linguistic influence. Interference is now mostly used to refer to code-switching in bilingualism (e.g. see Köppe and Meisel, 1995) while the two latter terms are used interchangeably. One important difference between them is that transfer is more often used in the literature that looks at the cognitive mechanisms that are at play in language selection in bilinguals. This study takes as a starting point the view that the interaction between languages can be viewed as cross-linguistic influence following Döpke (1998), Hulk and Müller (2000), Müller and Hulk (2001),[2] Serratrice et al. (2004), Sorace and Serratrice (2009), and Sorace (2011), among others. The challenge for researchers trying to model this phenomenon is to understand where cross-linguistic influence occurs and why it occurs in some domains rather than others as well as why cross-linguistic influence is not always consistently found across bilingual or multilingual populations.[3]

One popular theory of cross-linguistic influence is the vulnerable domains hypothesis. Vulnerable domains in acquisition are those domains that are reported to take children longer to acquire. Müller (2003) observes that cross-linguistic influence does not occur in every domain and that only some grammatical domains are vulnerable to cross-linguistic influence. Müller and Hulk (2001) follow Platzack (2001) in proposing that the C-domain is the grammatical domain that is vulnerable in acquisition. Its vulnerability lies in the fact that it is in the C-domain where syntax interfaces with other cognitive domains. Sorace's (2000, 2004, 2005, among others) research in the field of bilingualism has focused on the task of accounting for the selective cross-linguistic influence observed in different bilingual populations. Research spanning over a decade from Sorace et al. (Sorace, 2004, 2005; Sorace and Filiaci, 2006; Sorace and Serratrice, 2009; Serratrice et al., 2004; Tsimpli et al., 2004) examines the existence of cross-linguistic influence in bilingual populations,

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[2] Müller and Hulk (2001) make a distinction between transfer and cross-linguistic influence and argue that transfer refers to direct interference by the dominant language, while cross-linguistic influence can be indirect and purely due to the existence of structural ambiguity in domains that are considered as vulnerable, and is not related to dominance.

[3] For a recent evaluation of the cross-linguistic influence hypothesis and a discussion of the phenomena that would be important to consider in relation to it see the issue of Linguistics Approaches to Bilingualism 2011, 1.1.