

**BILINGUAL CHILDREN'S INTERPRETATION OF INTERFACE STRUCTURES:
CROSS-LINGUISTIC EFFECTS VS. PROCESSING COSTS**

Antonella Sorace

University of Edinburgh

Some of the interfaces between syntax and other cognitive systems have been shown to be unstable and seemingly open to cross-linguistic influence in different areas of bilingual language development, including bilingual first language acquisition, adult second language acquisition, and native language attrition. But which interfaces are most unstable, and why? I will focus on recent comprehension evidence from school-age simultaneous Italian-English and Italian-Spanish bilingual children living in Italy and the UK to propose a developmental differentiation between “internal” and “external” interfaces. Syntax-semantics interface structures, such as determiners with specific vs. generic NPs, are sensitive to both qualitative and quantitative input factors: Italian-English bilingual children unidirectionally overgeneralize null determiners to generic noun phrases in Italian (*In genere fragole sono rosse ‘Generally strawberries are red’), whereas Italian-Spanish children do not, and bilingual children in the UK do so significantly more often than bilingual children in Italy. In contrast, syntax-discourse interface phenomena, such as subject pronoun antecedent assignment, are not affected by language combination: both Italian-English and Italian-Spanish bilinguals unidirectionally overgeneralize overt subject pronouns to null subject pronoun contexts (Paperinoi ha detto che lui è caduto ‘Donald Ducki said that he fell’), although there is still some interaction with language environment. Such a contrast points to different explanations for these effects. Internal interface effects are due to computational operations at the level of representations, which favor the influence from the language that has the most economic option (i.e. English in the case of determiners, since it has the most economical setting of the Nominal Mapping Parameter – see Chierchia 1998). External interface effects result from processing costs in integrating the multiple types of information involved in the appropriate selection of a particular pronominal form, which favor the use of a ‘default’ option (i.e. the overt pronoun in Italian; see Sorace & Filiaci 2006). Such a default is also found, to a significantly lesser extent, in younger monolingual Italian child and adult speakers; in contrast, both native control groups perform at ceiling with respect to determiners. These patterns suggest that bilingual performance is subject to different types of constraints and that we need a strongly interdisciplinary approach to unravel their interaction.