

Contrastive Analysis of the Interlanguages of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors Learning L2 Italian

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Abstract— This paper proposes a contrastive analysis of the interlanguage of L2 Italian learners belonging to the category of “unaccompanied foreign minors”, with the same L1 but different levels of education. The profile of unaccompanied foreign minors is complex and sociolinguistically very peculiar, since it is characterized by the frequent coexistence of a plurilingual ability and a (very) low, or zero, level of education. The study is based on oral productions collected through video interviews and studied with the support of conversation analysis. Focusing on the acquisition of verb inflectional morphology, the comparison of learners’ varieties aims to show to what extent several differences depend on learners’ profile and, particularly, on the only parameter that differentiates them, namely literacy vs. illiteracy in L1.

Keywords— Foreign Minors Learning L2 Italian.

I. INTRODUCTION: ILLITERACY AND UNACCOMPANIED FOREIGN MINORS

Besides adults, many teenagers who fled their homelands in Africa and Asia are still coming to Italy, very often surviving an extremely hard journey. Sicily is almost always the first Italian region they reach. For this reason, the city of Palermo is a multilingual environment nowadays, hosting a considerable number of migrants from different places. The title of “unaccompanied foreign minors” (henceforth UFM) refers to minors who are not Italian citizens, nor asylum seekers, and are in Italy without parents or other adults who have legal responsibility. They are hosted by the Italian reception centres, where they are followed by different operators (mediators, educators, psychologists), and they keep the linguistic environments of Italian classrooms mixed. UFM constitute a rather heterogeneous and peculiar category (see Barone 2016). From the sociolinguistic point of view, these are individuals belonging to very different cultures, coming from different areas often characterized by a high rate of multilingualism (especially from Africa and Asia). Furthermore, two elements characterize the UFM considerably: an extraordinary plurilingual ability and, at the same time, a low or rather very low level of education. On the one hand, in addition to their own L1, it is easy for UFM to have some competence in one or more languages spoken in the place of origin, on top of which English or French (official languages in many African and Asian countries) can also be added, as well as other languages

they came into contact with during the long stops that often characterize their travels to Italy. On the other hand, their level of education is mostly low, or very low (less than 5 years of school), or even non-existent. Ultimately, the specificity that makes these learners’ profile peculiar and unprecedented is that of being both plurilingual and functionally or completely illiterate.

In the absence of solid previous schooling, competence in languages (including L1) is very often limited to oral competence alone, and this has significant repercussions on second-language acquisition and, therefore, on social inclusion. Owing to their low level of education, the UFM learners have a much slower pace than other users with the same educational pathway, as well as a greater risk of fossilization. Moreover, if the knowledge of the language of the place in which one lives is the first instrument of integration in society, illiteracy consequently represents a factor of exclusion, especially if related to time, space, the complexity of the society in which one lives; conversely, teaching an individual to read and write means to profoundly change him, his way of living in society, and therefore society itself (see Demetrio & Moroni 1980; Watson 2011).

The low or zero level of schooling and the often very traumatic experience of the journey thus makes UFM a “fragile” category of learners, to whom particular attention must be paid to the specificity of needs. In this regard, the descriptors of the initial A1 level of the “Common European Framework of Reference of Languages” (CEFR) do not seem to account for the specificity of these learners’ profile, which ultimately lies in the gap between competences related to oral texts and those related to written texts. If such competences progress in a linear and uniform way in the CEFR, the same does not happen in the UFM. Due to the low level of schooling, these have over time developed a certain ability to manage oral texts, but have a low familiarity with written texts, with inevitable consequences in terms of meta-textual and meta-linguistic reflection, which in turn have repercussions on the process of acquiring an L2. The problem is even more serious for those who are completely illiterates.

It is well known that some competence, even partial, in writing and reading has an important impact on the mental processes of the individual (see, among others, Luria 1976; Ong 1982). The brain of someone who knows how to write has some resources that are given by their familiarity with the written

word, which an illiterate person does not have. Someone who knows how to write usually thinks of a word, calling to mind the graphic image of the word itself, and this makes them not only more able to memorize, but also to analyze, since they are more used to breaking down the phonic continuum into words (and the words, in turn, into smaller units). Dealing with written texts, the brain of someone who knows how to write is therefore more suited to metalinguistic reflection and, in general, to processes of abstraction, generalization and modeling, while that of the illiterate is anchored to mechanisms that are purely pragmatic and semantic (see Minuz 2005).

In recent years, research in the field of language acquisition, in synergy with the field of language teaching, is trying to give adequate answers to the extent of the problem of illiteracy, investigating the relationship between multilingualism, acquisition of L2 and literacy, in order to reach more suitable and effective methods and procedures.

In order to investigate the impact of (il)literacy on the acquisition of an L2, with particular reference to verbs and verbal categories in Italian, it was decided to analyze the interlanguage (Selinker 1972) of two substantially analogous UFM learners in the sociolinguistic profile, except for the fact that one of the two is completely illiterate in his own L1, while the other has a low (but not very low) level of schooling. The

TABLE.I PERSONAL AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC INFORMANTS' DATA

Informant code	Age	Nation	L1	L2	Level of education (years)	Time in Italy (months)
S.D.	15-17 (?)	Gambia	Mandinka	English	9	3
M.S.	15-17 (?)	Gambia	Mandinka	English	0	7

On the one hand, S.D., who has been in Italy for three months, studied in Gambia for 9 years and is therefore literate in his L1 despite having a low level of schooling. On the other hand, M.S., who has been in Italy for seven months, never went to school in his country of origin and arrived in Italy illiterate. Actually, as shown by the interview, S.D. is more widely plurilingual, since he seems to know Wolof as L2 and has a certain competence, likely passive, of Joola and Fula as well.

As far as their L1 is concerned, Mandinka is a language of the Mande group, a linguistic group that belongs to the sub-family of the Niger-Congo languages, which in turn belongs to the Niger-Kordofanian linguistic family. The Mande group is set up as a clearly distinct group within the family, based on several common typological characteristics. The languages of said group are spoken in a vast and geographically compact area of West Africa, ranging from Senegal to Nigeria. As far as the grammatical categories of the verb are concerned, temporal, aspectual, and modal information is conveyed by affixes in Mandinka. From a syntactic point of view, Mandinka presents an unmarked order of the SOV type, as well as other Mande languages (unlike the other Niger-Congo languages, which have an SVO order), and a variable order modifier/name following the scheme: Gen/N, Poss/N, N/A, DimN/NDim, NPlur (for further details on Mandinka, see Banfi & Grandi 2008).

corpus is based on oral productions collected through video interviews and analyzed with the support of conversational analysis. Although the case study deals with two learners, the results shown merit the analysis to be extended to other cases.

II. METHODOLOGY: SAMPLE, FIELD RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE

A. Sample selection and learners' profile

The sample choice responds to very precise motivations, since the study does not want to limit itself exclusively to a descriptive analysis of the L2 Italian varieties of the learners in question, but also intends to verify whether, and to what extent, any divergences in their varieties are to be attributed to a given parameter, i.e. (il)literacy in L1, which it is therefore sought to isolate. The learners whose oral productions have been examined are in fact both UFMs who arrived in Italy a few months ago initially originating from Gambia, with Mandinka as L1 and English as L2 (Gambian official language). Both learners are at the end of a course in L2 Italian (about 40 hours) as absolute beginners. The noteworthy individual variable that serves as a distinction between the two learners, which are otherwise analogous from the sociolinguistic point of view, is instead the parameter of literacy in L1 (see Table 1).

B. Method of data collection and analysis

Data, that will be analyzed later (see Section 3), consists of two oral texts produced respectively by the two learners in question. With regard to the methods of data collection, the field research was conducted through semi-structured face-to-face interview. The conversation is triggered from a list of questions prepared by the native interviewer and concerning aspects of the informant's personal and everyday life as well as his experiences in linguistic matters. Several specific questions were also chosen by the interviewer in order to stimulate the informant to use certain linguistic structures to better investigate the acquisition stage of the verbal categories.

As it is known, the native-non-native interaction is considered as prototypically asymmetric from the perspective of conversation analysis, due to the linguistic, cultural and social distance that divides the interactants so that the native has the dominant role of "director" of the conversation, compared to the subordinate of the non-native (Orletti 2000: 111). In order to return the data in the most faithful and complete manner, avoiding distortions that could affect the subsequent analysis of the interlanguages, the interviews were taken through digital audio-video recording tools and subsequently transcribed in full according to the transcription method of Conversation analysis. This type of transcription is

the most appropriate tool to grasp the data in its complexity, because, representing both verbal and non-verbal aspects of the conversation (such as turn-taking, overlaps, pauses, silences, movements, gestures), it considers the interaction in its entirety and returns its overall “atmosphere”.

Despite the precautions, some negative factors played a role during the field research. Disregarding the initial difficulties due to a certain reluctance by the learners to be filmed, it should be noted that, while on the one hand the audio-video recording has allowed a certain accuracy in the subsequent transcription phase, on the other hand, it is likely that the presence of the video camera has further inhibited informants, who were already tense and intimidated by the situation itself. This contributed to raise Krashen’s (1981) affective filter, partially compromising the spontaneity of the performance. Furthermore, the way the interviewer deals with the situation could play a role due to the linguistic and emotional fragility of the informants. In fact, in some cases the interviewer’s reformulations resolves the interviewee’s impasse too quickly and, if on the one hand this makes him feel more at ease, on the other hand it prevents the opportunity to find more data.

III. LEARNERS’ ORAL PRODUCTIONS AND ANALYSIS OF THEIR INTERLANGUAGES

In this section, the analysis of the two learners’ varieties is presented through a careful examination of their oral productions, in order to identify the strategies implemented by the learners. The analysis aims at establishing both the stage of acquisition they are in and the role played by (il)literacy, with reference to the acquisition of the verb (and its grammatical categories) and phraseology. To this end, reference will be made to the interviews (see Section 3.1.-3.2.). For various reasons, it was not possible to interview the learners further. However, various significant elements emerge from the analysis of their oral productions.

Before the analysis of both learners’ oral productions, it is possible to make an initial general consideration. Having both been in Italy for a few months – i.e. S.D. for about 3 and M.S. for about 7 – and both having attended only a 40-hour course for absolute beginners, the learners examined clearly have a very limited repertoire and tend to produce short sentences and simplify a lot.

A. Analysis of the variety of M.S.

The presence of different verbal forms in the learning variety of M.S. (the illiterate learner) shows that, regardless of the correctness of the overt inflectional morphology, he somehow distinguishes the verb as an entity. In fact, most verbs occur in a “base” form (Klein & Perdue 1997): most of the time the learner overextends the use of the third person of the present indicative, other times of the second person, and in others of the infinitive (e.g. *Io comincia*; *io vai a Mondello*; *non studiare Gambia*). The use of the second person is probably based on that of the input, in the question. Among the base forms, the use of the infinitive can usually depend on two factors: either the input to which the learner is most frequently exposed, especially if the natives with whom he is in contact use ultra-simplified varieties (such as foreigner talk), or the

particular context of non-actuality, non-reality of the event (such as in this case). In the context of interaction, the phrase *non studiare Gambia* actually means *non ho studiato in Gambia* (“I did not study in Gambia”) and therefore refers to an event that is perfective and non-actual: through overextension, the functional use of the infinitive form of the verb helps the learner to express a distinction which is aspectual (i.e. perfective vs. imperfective). The use of person markers in the present indicative is sporadic and the learner is still completely uncertain, as evidenced by the presence of several reformulations (e.g. *a mare: gioca: | gioco football or in io non lo so, then reformulated as non lo sa*). The correct use in *non lo so* could also depend on a memorization of said formula – generally, occurring frequently in the input – of which the learner is not fully aware. There are also other examples of formulas, e.g. *come stai?* or the request for help in the quite uncertain phrase *come mi tiam que?* (which would be *come si chiama questo?* “How do you say this?”). In several cases the learner simplifies the statement by omitting the copula, as in *Palermo buono, tutti buono, Mondello bravissimo*. In other cases, he tries to make up for it through extra-linguistic elements (gestures and mimicry), like when he says *Casa* nodding with his head to indicate “staying”, or through leaning on his L2 (i.e. English), like when he says to: // miming the action of swimming, which references back to the English infinitive form with the particle *to*.

The only isolated example of an aspectual marker is in the past participle of *capire* “to understand”, e.g. *io no capito italiano*. According to acquisition stages, said past participle marker *-to* is the first aspectual marker learnt, and, in turn, [auxiliary + past participle] constitutes an Italian tense conveying perfective aspect (i.e. *passato prossimo*), which is learnt successively. Furthermore, in the last example, the verb in question (i.e. *capire*) also represents a prototypical case where learners usually start to use the aspectual marker *-to*, due to actional features (Aktionsart) of the verb, namely telicity, which makes telic verbs semantically more compatible with expressing perfective aspect (see Vendler 1967; Giacalone Ramat 2003).

B. Analysis of the interlanguage of S.D.

Turning to the analysis of the learning variety of S.D. (the schooled learner), it is possible to identify some features common to the variety of M.S, despite there being several significant differences. S.D. also seems to distinguish verbal entities within the sentence, although he is still lacking in terms of inflectional morphology. Even in his production there are several occurrences in which the verb occurs in the base form. However, the overextension concerns only the infinitive form, except for two occurrences of the third person, which are actually reformulated immediately (*io non è > non ho*). In fact, in *io / tre lingue / parlaretre lingue*, the use of the infinitive form overextends into present indicative contexts, while in the other three occurrences (*io andare scuola, giocare calcio, scuola giocare e basta*) seems to make up for the lack of the imperfect, in its value of imperfective past, to express habitual actions in the past (on verbal aspect in Italian, see, among others Bertinetto 1986).

Also S.D. simplifies omitting the copula, as in *Palermo: bella, tutti: bravo*, although less often than M.S..

As far as the emergence of the inflectional markers of first person is concerned, S.D. seems to be more at ease in using them compared to M.S. In fact, the first person of the indicative present fully represents the most frequent verbal form in its variety, as it is evidenced by several examples: *io sono gambiano, ho novo ani, io ho /fratello: piccolo, mi piace, io mi piace capoeira, mi facio capoeira*.

C. Discussion: comparison of learning varieties

Although learners move continuously from one variety to another along the gradual learning process, and not without overlaps and transitional phases, the characteristics of the learners' interlanguages analysed above in descriptive terms allow to consider their varieties as certainly *basic varieties*, as it was reasonable to predict. According to Klein & Perdue (1997), both learners are in fact in that non-inflectional initial phase of the second language acquisition process. Both seems to be aware of the entity of verb and distinguish it from noun. In some cases, they also seem to have some awareness of the argumental structure of the verbs they use. Regarding the expression of the verbal categories of tense and aspect, the functional role of both is made up exclusively for the indicative present or the infinitive form: both learners in fact present the typical base forms, overextending the infinitive or the second or third person of the indicative present to express the past as well as a perfective aspect. The only form of morphologically overt aspectual opposition is isolated: this is the past participle of understanding, which M.S. uses only once. Both learners do not have the means to express the future and implement avoidance strategies in relation to the question chosen so as to stimulate the informant to use the future.

Finally, both learners tend to omit the copula and do not yet have full awareness of the markers of first-person of the present indicative, although with significant differences between the two: S.D. has in fact several occurrences and seems clearly more at ease.

In order to make a more general comparison of the two productions, clearly taking into account the considerations made so far, it is possible to note a certain gap between the two performances and to consider to what extent any differences between their interlanguages depend on the parameter opposing the two learners, i.e. literacy vs. illiteracy in L1.

Despite being in Italy for less time (3 months vs. 7 months), and having probably had less exposure to the input, the schooled learner (S.D.) clearly shows a greater skill in oral interaction, greater communicative efficacy, greater accuracy and fluency. He understands the questions from the interviewer without the difficulties shown by M.S., he also responds more promptly, he takes fewer breaks, and without requesting any help. Moreover, he never produces bilingual statements, nor does it rely on English (second-language for both learners) to make up for lexical or syntactical gaps, as M.S. does. Also the dependence on the context and on common knowledge is minimal, if not null, with respect to the frequent use of the gestures or lexical strategies of M.S.. Furthermore, in the acquisition of verbal morphology, a considerable gap - for accuracy and number of occurrences - is seen in the use of the

markers of first-person (which M.S. uses well only in some formulaic statements like *non lo so*, while elsewhere he is uncertain). Finally, the use of the basic forms of S.D. (only the infinitive) is also limited to the narrative context that would have required the expression of the past (with a perfective and imperfective aspect).

IV. CONCLUSION

From the analysis of the interlanguages of the two learners, from the characteristics of their interlanguage and from the strategies implemented by them, it was possible to place them, without too many uncertainties, within the basic acquisition phase.

Given the close analogy of the sociolinguistic profile and the learning context, the differences between their varieties are mostly blurred, but not without importance. The elements of difference found in the analysis of their productions seems to reasonably depend on the single feature that differentiates the two learners, namely from the fact that S.D. has a certain level of education, while M.S. is completely illiterate. As it has been said, a certain, albeit low, level of proficiency in writing skills (both comprehension and production) has a significant impact on the learning process, due to the development of a certain meta-textual and meta-linguistic competence, which those who are (functional or completely) illiterate do not possess. In all probability, therefore, besides his larger plurilingual competence, the positive differences in the performance of the schooled learner (S.D.), compared to the illiterate one (M.S.), can be ascribed to literacy, which substantially distinguished their sociolinguistic profile. This is highlighted more so when considering the fact that, despite the same length of learning course (about 40 for both), S.D. had an exposure to the target language presumably less than M.S. (3 months vs. 7 months).

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