

Pragmatic versus grammatical coding of time: The acquisition of TAM markers in an Italian-Indonesian bilingual child

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This paper describes the development of temporal expressions in a bilingual child exposed since birth to two typologically different languages, Italian and Indonesian. Until the age of 5;0, Guglielmo has not fully mastered the Italian verbal system, whereas his Indonesian has progressed in a parallel way to his Indonesian peers.

Due to the divergent typology of the two language systems in the encoding and expression of tense-aspect-mood, it is interesting to observe what kind of cross-linguistic influence one system has on the other. Italian verbs are heavily inflected for person/number and TAM whereas in Indonesian the encoding of TAM markers is not morphological but lexical and in some cases is unnecessary if it can be inferred to by the context. This means that TAM in Indonesian is often marked pragmatically rather than grammatically. If Guglielmo is able to talk about actions following the path of monolingual Indonesian children, he lags behind in his capability to produce the rich morphological verbal system of Italian. Contrary to monolingual Italian children who are able to produce morphologically adult-like forms from early on (Hyams, 1986, Guasti, 1994) until the age of 5,0 Guglielmo still fails to produce verbal forms where tense-aspect-mood, and number/person are correctly encoded. Tense is not overtly expressed until relatively late, and the Italian verb forms occur in the infinitive (or any other default form that might have been rote learnt by the child) preceded by a lexeme that indicates perfectivity like in the following utterance:

basta addormentato Bea?

enough fallen.asleep-M.SG Bea

'has Bea fallen asleep?'

Based on evidence like this where the verbal construction contains mistakes in tense/person agreement, and seems to be a reproduction of the correspondent Indonesian sentence:

sudah tidur Bea?

PFCT sleep Bea

'has Bea fallen asleep?'

I argue that pragmatically marked aspect in speech events, as in Indonesian, is more salient in the mind of the bilingual child. This seems to be in contrast to the view that morphologically transparent languages such as Italian allow children to acquire grammatical contrasts earlier.

This study tries to explain that the child's inability to produce morphologically correct forms in Italian is due to a lack of input, but that there is also cross-linguistic influence from Indonesian, the dominant language where the only salient verbal marker is aspectual that can be alternatively expressed periphrastically. The production of utterances where verbal morphology is incorrect can be the result of overgeneralization that a single form of the verb plays all the functions played by the verb in Indonesian. This analysis strengthens the hypothesis that children learn aspectual opposition before the tense one (Antinucci & Miller, 1976) and that verbal morphology is acquired through slow and gradual verb-specific learning (Serratrice 2002).