TOPICS AND PASSIVES IN ITALIAN-SPEAKING CHILDREN AND ADULTS

Adriana Belletti[1,2], Claudia Manetti[2]
[1]University of Geneve, [2]University of Siena

The present study investigates the production of topics and passives, and in particular it focusses on the use of Clitic Left Dislocation (CLLD) by Italian-speaking children and adults. Given a patient-oriented question (see 1a), Italian children and adults prefer different answers: children tend to topicalize the patient of a transitive action through a pronoun (2a), whereas adults prefer passives (2b) (Volpato et al. 2015; Manetti 2013). Focussing on children, their most frequent answer consists of pronominalizations with a *covert* dislocated topic, resulting in a sentence (2c), in which the left dislocated DP, *il re* (the king), remains preferably covert; due to its mention in the immediate previous discourse, its overtness would sound redundant, producing *a special stylistic effect of reiteration* (Rizzi, 2005, Balaban et al. 2015). The optionality also holds for the subject of the passive sentence (see 2b).

Building on these findings, we aim at exploring children's use of left peripheral topic positions by investigating the production of *overt* vs. *covert* topics. In the first condition we introduce one topic patient in the question in order to control for the use of pronominalizations with covert topics, as found in previous research; instead, the new setting introduces two topic patients in a contrasting relation, thus favoring the production of pronominalizations with an explicit left dislocated topic in a left peripheral position (CLLD). The comparison will allow us to dig into two interrelated research questions: a) Do 4- and 5-year-old children master appropriate use of left peripheral topic position(s), b) How do children and adults differ in the use of topics and passives? To this aim, we tested 36 children (aged from 4;1 to 5;11) and 24 adults using an elicited production task. The test presents a set of pictures depicting transitive actions, shown on a power point presentation. We manipulate the discourse conditions (within-subjects) so that the participant answers to 8 patient-oriented questions (asked by a curious smurf), with *one patient* (4 trials; condition 1, see 3) vs. *two patients* (4 trials; condition 2, see 4). Each question elicits the description of two events.

Results show that children prefer pronominalisations with a covert topic in the one topic condition (67%), in line with previous studies; and only 3% CLLD emerges. Whereas, in condition 2, when children produce a clitic structure, they opt for the overt expression of a left dislocated topic, yielding CLLDs (25%; e.g. OSclV *il cane il gatto lo lava* 'the dog the cat him.Cl washes'; SOclV *il gatto il cane lo lava* 'the cat the dog him.CL washes'), and the use of simple pronominalizations decreases (8%): Production of covert vs. overt topics (graph 1) significantly differs across conditions (p<.001). Passivisation in children only consists of *si*-causatives. Adults' preferred answer is *venire*/copular passive in both conditions; they also produced some pronominalizations with covert topics (22% in condition 1) and very few CLLDs, in sharp contrast with children (see table 1 for a summary of the results).

In sum, children and adults differ in the use of pronouns and passives: overall, children prefer the pronominalization of the topic patient (being covert or overt depending on the context) over its passivisation, in clear contrast with adults. Overall, these results shed some more light on the use of topics by children, who show to be able to distinguish between the topic pragmatic conditions in terms of overtness/covertness of topics (see De Cat 2009 for similar results with left dislocated subjects in French), with a good mastering of left peripheral topics from age 4. When passivisation is resorted to, the only type of passive in children is the *si*-causative passive (see Manetti & Belletti 2015; Contemori & Belletti 2013 for related results), again in clear contrast with adults. We will conclude by addressing the

relevance of these results from both a theoretical and a developmental perspective comparing CLLD vs passive in the expression of topics.

(1) Event: Tiger scratching king
   a. *Che cosa succede al re?*
      'What happens to the king?'
(2) a. (Il re) la tigre lo graffia.
      '(The king) the tiger him.CL scratches.'
   b. *(Il re) viene/è graffiato dalla tigre.*
      '(The king) comes/is scratched by the tiger.'
   c. *La tigre lo graffia*
      'The tiger him.CL scratches.'

Experimental trial - Condition 1:
(3) Events: Cow licking cat; Hedgehog touching cat
      Question: *Che cosa succede alla mia amica, la gatta?*
               'What happens to my friend, the cat?'
Experimental trial - Condition 2:
(4) Events: Cat washing dog; Rabbit dressing bear
      Question: *Che cosa succede ai miei amici, il cane e l'orso?*
               'What happens to my friends, the dog and the bear?'

Table 1: Overall production in children and adults

	CHILDREN		ADULTS	
	One Topic	Two Topics	One Topic	Two Topics
Pronoun (covert topic)	67%	8%	22%	0%
CLLD (overt topic)	3%	25%	1%	1%
Copular/Venire Passive	0%	0%	45%	49%
Si-causative Passive	9%	11%	13%	20%
Active-SVO	6%	29%	12%	12%
Other	15%	27%	7%	18%

Graph 1: Production of clitic structures as a function of covertness vs. overtness of topics (%)