

Verb classes and Discourse Anchored Variables in the Acquisition of L1 Italian

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Verbs are produced in different clausal configurations: they differ for the number of arguments and for the underlying syntactic representations. In the traditional definition of (Perlmutter 1978) in (1) verb classes are distinguished by the loci of generation of the subjects. The main purpose of this study is to identify the structural characteristics of the verb classes as they appear in the first productions of Italian children and how their I-structure interact with the distribution of overt argument at scope-discourse semantic interface. Our hypothesis is that the loci of generation of the subjects and their interpretation at scope discourse-semantic interpretation influence early verb structures: the presence of an internal argument and its preferential focus interpretation has a central role in explaining children's data. The informational structure, then, of each verb class interacts with discourse variables: the split between discourse participants (1st and 2nd persons) and the and 'event-anchored referents (3rd person) influence the syntactic pattern of appearance of early arguments. To support our hypothesis we will provide the following data.

- The distribution and the position of overt subjects along verb classes
- The analysis of the person of the overt/null subjects.
- The distribution of person clitics across verb classes.

Different studies have shown that children early differentiate Unaccusatives from other verb classes (Shimada and Sano, 2007, Friedmann, 2007). We performed a longitudinal analysis of a corpora of the productions four Italian children (18-36 months) and of their parents (Calambrone, CHILDES MacWhinney & Snow, 1990). Children distinguish Unaccusatives and Unergatives/Transitives (as in Lorusso, Caprin, Guasti, 2005) from an early age, treating the verb types differently with respect to the rate of subject omission: more overt subjects with Unaccusatives than with Unergatives and Transitives (tab.1). Nevertheless children differ from adults in producing more null subjects with Unergatives ($\chi^2= 6,50$; $df=1$ for P-Value <0.010787).

The higher number of overt subjects with Unaccusatives, is due to the presence of a low focus position within the VP (Belletti, 2004) where indefinite postverbal Unaccusative subjects can be licensed. We found that indefinite postverbal subjects are found just with Unaccusatives (tab.2): children from the earliest stage distinguish Unaccusatives for the use of postverbal indefinite as Vernice & Guasti (2013) found for later stage.

The Italian clitic system features a person split (Manzini & Savoia 2011): 3rd person clitics (*event-anchored participants*) specialized forms (*lo/la*) for accusatives and (*gli/le*) for the dative, while 1st and 2nd person clitics (*discourse-anchored participants*) display syncretic accusative/dative forms (*mi/ti* for both cases). Children show an early sensitivity to this pattern and its informational implication. We found (Tab.3) that in the productions of both children and adults accusative clitics bear 3rd person morphology 90% of the times (also in Tsedryk & Punko, 2008 for L1 French). For dative clitics (tab.4) we found the opposite pattern: children produce significantly more dative clitics for 1st and 2nd person than adults, which, in turn, preferentially produce 3rd person also for dative clitics, ($X^2=21,992$, $df=1$ P-Value < 0.00001 . $p < 0.01$).

In summary, children differentiate between verb classes from the very early stage for the loci of generation of the subjects but they show differences with adults in the use of overt subjects and in the distribution of dative clitics (1/2 vs 3 person). On the one side children are sensible to the informational implication linked to the projection of arguments of each verb classes, on the other side early verbs interact with the scope-discourse semantic interface requirements. The distribution of early clitics is strictly linked to the availability in the referential space of discourse participants.

- (1) a. Transitive Verbs NP[VP V NP/CP]
 b. Unergative Verb: NP[VP V]
 c. Unaccusative Verb: _____[VP V NP/CP]

Tab.1 Overt Subject Distribution across verb classes (absolute number and percentages)

	Unergatives		Transitives		Unaccusatives	
	N.	%	N.	%	N	%
Children	69	25,56	407	23,59	199	36,65
Adults	35	39,77	129	20	84	41,38

Tab.2 Absolute numbers and percentage of (in)definite subjects across verb classes and clausal position

	Preverbal Subjects		Postverbal Subjects	
	Indefinite	Definite	Indefinite	Definite
Unaccusatives	2(4%)	55(96%)	0	14(100%)
Transitives	3(1%)	290(99%)	0	117(100%)
Unergatives	3 (4%)	70(96%)	23(18%)	130(82%)

Tab.3 Distribution Across Singular Persons of Accusative Singular Clitics

Distribution of the Accusative Clitics (Absolute Numbers and Percentage)		
	1 st and 2 nd persons	3 rd person
Diana	8 (9,5%)	76 (90,5%)
Martina	3 (6,4%)	44 (93,6%)
Raffaello	7 (5,2%)	127 (94,8%)
Rosa	14 (22,6%)	48 (77,4%)
Children (total)	32 (9,8%)	295 (90,2%)
Adults	20 (10%)	167 (90%)

Tab.4 Distribution Across Singular Persons of Dative Singular Clitics

Distribution of Dative Clitics (Absolute Numbers and Percentage)		
	1 st and 2 nd persons	3 rd person
Diana	38 (86,4%)	6 (13,6%)
Martina	5 (100%)	–
Raffaello	15 (75%)	5 (25%)
Rosa	14 (100%)	–
Children (total)	73 (57,1%)	11 (13,1%)
Adults	69 (27,6%)	54 (44%)

Selected References

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