BE / HAVE SELECTION IN DELAYED L1 ACQUISITION: DATA FROM DEAF SUBJECTS ELICITED THROUGH LOGOGENIA

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1. Introduction

Though Italian cannot be classified as a *Ser/Estar* language in the fullest sense, it has three functional verbs *Essere*, *Stare* and *Avere* (E/S/A), with or without an Auxiliary role (1) – (6)[1]. The three verbs seem to compete for the same contexts, changing the information they convey, or mutually excluding each other, with language-specific selection properties.

(1) E. è/ha una mamma giovane.	E. is/has a young mother
(2) Quel libro è/ha un grande successo.	This book is/has a great success
(3) Il bambino è/sta buono.	The boy is good /The boy keeps quiet
(4) Gianni *è/sta/??ha male.	J. is sick
(5) Gianni è/*sta/*ha alto.	J. is tall
(6) Gianni *è/*sta/ha fame.	J. is hungry

From a theoretical perspective, a number of researchers (starting with Kayne in 1993, and indeed even earlier with Benveniste[2]) have attempted to assign the same structure to the E/S/A syntax in both Aux and NonAux uses. In the study of acquisition, this hypothesis would lead us to expect a period of development in which the child has not yet identified the specific restrictions of the target language and thus selects BE in all contexts of production. This paper is an attempt to address this hypothesis on the basis of an analysis of Logogenia data by a prelingual profoundly deaf subject, with particular reference to the NonAux contexts of standard Italian.

2. E/S/A selection in deaf subjects: a case-study

Logogenia activates and studies a late L1 acquisition process in prelingual profoundly deaf subjects. Activating and monitoring this process makes it possible to observe specific phenomena, some of which are not as clearly visible in normal development conditions because they arise early and are resolved quickly.

The case-study addresses the production of a non-signing prelingual profoundly deaf subject (D) whose language development was stimulated from the age of 11 through a series of Logogenia sessions. The data refer to the first 99 hours of interaction between the subject and the logogenist, corresponding to 99 sessions in which data for comprehension and spontaneous and elicited production were recorded.

At the beginning, D.'s production was very poor. As for E/S/A selection, E/A are mutually interchangeable (7) – (11). Where possessive HAVE is required, D. systematically selects existential BE (12) – (14). Also in contexts calling for STARE D. can substitute the three forms (15) – (17). At this stage of development, D. makes grammaticality judgements consistent with production data.

(7) Quanti ora è hai?   [*How many hours BE you HAVE?*]
(8) io sono super   [*I BE super*]
(9) io ho super   [*I HAVE super*]
(10) SEI 23 ANNI   [*you BE 23 years*]
(11) Io HO/SONO stanco   [*I HAVE/BE tired*]
(12) NON C'È UN CANE   [*There is no one dog*]
(13) NON C'È GLI OCCHI BLU   [*There is not blue eyes*]
(14) SI' CI SONO   [*Yes, there are*]
(15) STO poco stanco   [*I STARE a bit tired*]
(16) È/HA MALE PANCIA   [*He BE/HAVE pain stomach*]
(17) STAI MALE LA MANO   [*You STARE pain hand*]

Though E/S/A selection in D's corpus is certainly not consistent with standard Italian, it nevertheless appears to be governed by specific restrictions: STARE replaces BE only in a context which in *Ser/Estar* languages in fact selects *Estar*[3]. STARE never appears in auxiliary contexts or in possessive HAVE contexts, nor is it selected in contexts like *Avere freddo* or *Avere x anni*; BE is never selected in contexts such as *Stare male*, and in only one case appears instead of *Have* in the locution *Avere mal di*…; existential BE appears systematically in possessive contexts but not in others.

From the longitudinal point of view, each possible context for using E/S/A permits an initial stage of free selection (i.e., free within the constraints described above). This constrained freedom in selecting E/S/A results in no more than 40/50% of correct items in the various contexts during the initial stage of development. On the other hand, each context invariably shows a precise turning point in development, when the percentage of correct items goes from 40/50% in one session, to 100% in the next session, one to three days later. We thus never see a gradual transition, but only discontinuous stages of development, in which the possibility of free selection recedes on its own. The general features of this phenomena would thus appear to denote a natural development, regulated by an internal timer, as occurs in normal L1 acquisition.

As the process is extremely slow and the sessions are frequent, it is possible to observe that specific E/S/A selection properties are not correctly set "once and for all" for all of the contexts considered. The latter emerge in successive stages in D's spontaneous production, and each time a new context appears, constrained freedom of selection is again possible, albeit briefly[4]. Individual Level predicates are the first to select BE correctly in Italian. In the same stage, the possessive contexts that require HAVE in Italian systematically select existential BE in D's production. The restriction on using HAVE in this context is set in such a way that we see correct contexts passing from 40% at the 39th session, to 100% from the 40th session onwards. In this same period, contexts such as *Avere x anni* appear in D's production. At the beginning, these contexts select HAVE correctly only in familiar, routine exchanges, while BE emerges in more unexpected contexts (example 10). Contexts such as *Avere freddo* take a similar course, where an initial stage of constrained free selection is followed by correct setting. In these two contexts, the correct selection of HAVE is simultaneous. Stage Level predicates such as *stanco* appear at an even later stage, and here D. can always alternate freely between E/S/A at the beginning (example 15). Between the 70th and 72nd sessions, D. passes from an average of 45% of correct selection to a stable 100%. *Avere mal di…* and *Stare male* are the last contexts to appear in D's production, and those for which the free selection stage lasts longest (from the 59th to the 72nd session, the average of correct selections remains below 20%, and then rises to a stable 100% from the 73rd session onwards).

3. Conclusions

Though late and slow, the development process found in D. would nevertheless appear to be regulated by UG: the forms that are not

consistent with the target language, in fact, are for the most part expected in UG, and strong restrictions seem to stand in the way of nonstandard selections that are possible in theory, but "impossible" within the confines of UG. The phenomenon in question, moreover, recedes spontaneously – and all at once – as is to be expected for L1 acquisition. The role of input is crucial: the Logogenia sessions attended by D. offer him the minimum input needed to trigger development in this area of syntax, development that then follows its own perfectly natural course. Mis-setting of E/S/A selection properties appears systematically, but disappears quickly: it may be that it can be detected in D. only thanks to the near-daily sessions and to the fact the process at this age is undoubtedly slower.

D's corpus would thus appear to demonstrate that there is in fact a stage of E/S/A selection property mis-setting which cannot be identified as clearly from normal L1 acquisition data. A rapid analysis of longitudinal data from the production corpus of three Italian L1 children (Raffaello, Rosa and Martina, CHILDES, Calambrone Corpus, ages 1;7 – 3;3) indicates that only one child (Martina) had a development stage at the beginning of production comparable to that observed in D. In a single file, Martina overextends BE to contexts which require HAVE and MAKE in standard Italian[5].

(18) Martina   C'è acchio [meaning *Ce l'ho anche io* / I have it too]
      (1;8,02)   È nanna [meaning *Fa la nanna* / goes beddy-bye]
                    È pipì [meaning *Fa la pipì* / goes pee-pee]

Though the data are undeniably limited (BE appears in nonstandard contexts in 5/1586 cases, or 0.3% of all contexts analyzed for the three children), here as with D., they appear subject to precise restrictions: BE is overextended only to nonlexical uses, and the existential form is reserved for possessive contexts. Overextension is restricted to BE, while HAVE never appears in copular contexts. The E/(S)/A selection properties that are specific to Italian have already been perfectly acquired at the beginning of production, but, as was seen with D., there seems to be a stage of development in which the specific E/S/A selection properties in NonAux contexts have not yet been set. As with D., the process is both early and rapidly evolving, and is completed so quickly that it can barely be captured in sessions held at monthly intervals.

Notes

[1] Italian also shows a broad spectrum of variability from dialect to dialect as very well shown in Manzini & Savoia (2005).

[2] "The *mihi est* type thus prevails over the *habeo* type which, even where it exists, can be considered as a form that derives from the other: the Indo-European languages, in fact, long knew no other form than *mihi est*", quoted in Cocchi (1995:69)

[3] The sequence "Sto stanco" is found in several Italian dialects and variants, though not in D's area, and his deafness has obviously prevented him from being exposed to it.

[4] This constrained freedom of selection never violates "existing pieces of grammatical knowledge", as Rizzi (2004) tells us is to be expected for L1 development under normal conditions.

[5] The use of ESSERE in contexts calling for FARE is also found in the deaf population. E., 11, writes "Il mio fratello È la V Elementare" instead of "…FA la V elementare" [My brother is in 5th grade]. In these contexts, the verb FARE clearly does not have the same meaning as transitive MAKE, much as occurs in the case of the expression "It does not MAKE sense", which corresponds to the Italian "Non HA senso".

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