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Clitic Left Dislocation in Absence of Clitics: a Study in Trilingual Acquisition

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1 Introduction

This paper discusses an unusual structure in the English of a trilingual child acquiring English, Italian and Scottish Gaelic. The child uses a structure where it appears that an object DP is "doubled" by a pronoun for an extended period of time (10 months):

(1) He don't like it dinosaur
(2) He forget it the teddy

In Italian, sentences that contain old information take two possible structures: they might contain a left dislocated topic resumed by a clitic:

(3) *Il libro, l'ho letto*
the book, it-have.1SG read
'The book, I have read it'

These are called Clitic Left Dislocation (CLLD) structures in the literature. Alternatively, the topic (the given information) can be introduced as a right dislocated element, again linked to a clitic:

(4) *L'ho letto, il libro*
It-have.1SG read the book
'I have read it, the book'

These are called clitic right dislocation (CLRD) structures. The structures produced in English by the subject of this study seem to be similar in some fundamental ways to this second kind of topicalisation strategy. We suggest that this reflects a "deep" transfer of CLRD structures from Italian, even though at the stage when the "doubling" structures occur, there is no evidence of overt clitics in the child's Italian. Our paper contributes to the debate in the literature concerning the existence or not of some form of transfer in multilingual acquisition.

2 Background

Over the last decade, research in multilingualism has been centered on the debate of whether multilinguals have one or more language systems. Early research by Volterra and Taeschner (1978) amongst others suggested that multilinguals start out with one language system. Volterra and Taeschner (1978) claimed that occurrences of words and constructions from one language appearing in the other language shows that multilingual children are unable to differentiate their languages in the early stages of development. Volterra and Taeschner (1978) interpreted this discovery as evidence of a unitary language system. However, later research by Meisel (1989), Genesee (1989), and more recently Gawlitzek-Maiwald and Tracy (1996), Müller and Hulk (2001), and DeHouwer (2005), amongst others argue that multilingual children can differentiate between their language systems from early on. Following this line of research, the debate on multilingualism has moved from whether multilingual children have one or more language systems to the debate on how much influence these languages have on each other in the development of the multilingual's language. This debate is still inconclusive with linguists such as Meisel (1989) arguing that there is no cross-linguistic influence between the languages and that the syntactic structures from one language cannot be transferred onto the other language. More recent research, however, argues for the existence of cross-linguistic influence between the languages in the syntactic (Müller and Hulk 2001, Serratrice et al. 2004) and phonological (Paradis 2001) domains. A problem with

the "pro-cross-linguistic influence" approach is that cross-linguistic influence is not uniformly found in all domains of grammar—see for example Hulk and Müller 2000 and Paradis and Genesee 1996. The challenge for researchers now is to show that these temporary stages of cross-linguistic influence are not random and that they occur systematically in the language development of multilinguals.

The paper presented here is part of a longitudinal study carried out on a child who has been recorded since the age of 2;3 every week. The study is currently ongoing and the child is currently 4;2. The focus of the research is to contribute to the debate briefly discussed above by investigating the relationship between the three languages being acquired and their development to see whether the languages do influence each other, if so then in what way and in which grammatical domain.

3 It-doubling: The Data

The child of this study is growing up with three languages, English, which is the language of the community and nursery and the shared language between the parents, Italian, which is the language of her mother, and Scottish Gaelic, which is the language of her father. In weekly recordings of her English, undertaken with two English speaking interlocutors, regular occurrence is found of structures of the following type:

(5) He don't like it dinosaur
(6) He forget it the teddy
(7) I don't like it carrots (2;4)
(8) He forget it the teddy (2;7)
(9) We will make it bed (2;7)
(10) You will sing it Winnie the Pooh (2;7)
(11) You find it my elegetch (2;7)
(*elegetch* is borrowed from Scottish Gaelic and means *money*)
(12) Don't wake it the baby (2;7)
(13) He's give it back the muffin. (2;9)
(14) There have it, the big scary dinosaur (2;10)
(15) No, pussy cat, leave it the flowers (2;10)
(16) Have to go touch it his tail. (2;10)
(17) You have it the piece? (2;11)
(18) I don't have it hair bobble (2;11)
(19) I want it animals (2;11)
(20) He broke it the duck (2;11)
(21) You fix it the trousers (3;2)
(22) He don't like it dinosaur (3;2)

These structures show a number of properties. In addition to a DP object (which is occasionally constructed as a bare noun), they contain a pronominal object and the DP object is somewhat dislocated from its original postverbal position. That object is always the pronoun *it*, and *it* can co-occur not only with singular DPs but also plural ones (as in (7), (15) and (19) above), even though in English *it* is restricted to referring to singular referents. Also in the child's data, *it* always refers to inanimate referents or lexical items which can be referred to as *it* in adult English, such as *baby* in (12). Finally, in some of the instances of doubling, there is a perceptible pause before the full DP object. It should be noted that this *it*-doubling phenomenon is relatively frequent. During the period from 2;4 to 3;2, 17.9% of sentences with inanimate objects show *it*-doubling. It therefore is clearly not an occasional happening, but a core aspect of the child's grammar.

It is important to emphasize that this structure is not characteristic of English and in general dislocation structures are not found in English L1 acquisition as shown in Van Der Linden and Sleeman 2007. The construction in question contains the doubling of the object by means of a weak element. In fact, we hypothesize that the third singular pronoun *it,* used in these constructions, is in the child's English the grammatical category that comes the closest to resembling the role played in Italian by a clitic in a dislocation structure. We argue that the right-dislocation seen

here is a strategy that in many ways resembles a clitic right dislocation in Italian:

(23) *Lo faremo il letto*
It-cl make.FUT.1PL the bed
'We will make the bed'

The word order is the expected one in a language that does not allow Italian-type cliticization, with *it* occurring postverbally, never preverbally. Constructions like the following are therefore never found in the data.

(24) *He it forget the teddy
(25) *He it broke the duck

However, the semantic effect is precisely that of clitic right dislocation which, as noted above, in Italian is used for topicalization. This semantic/pragmatic effect is in fact visible when the constructions are investigated in their context:

(26) INV: Aw what happened?
CHI: My broken it. He broke it the duck. (2;10)
(27) INV: A hair bobble?
CHI: Hair bobble? I don't have it hair bobble. (2;10)

These examples show clearly that the doubled element encodes old information, the topic of the conversation, which is the typical property of right and left dislocated topics in Italian.

One could wonder whether these structures arise as a response to a processing load effect and therefore whether the child is using *it* doubling as a strategy to buy herself additional time to find a lexical item. In line with this hypothesis one could imagine that what the child is doing in these cases is filling the object position with *it* until the full lexical item is retrieved. This however cannot be the case since (27) above clearly shows a case where the DP *hair bobble* which is doubled by *it* in the child sentence has in fact previously been uttered by both the interlocutor and the child herself, making it very unlikely for lexical selection to be the origin of the problem.

From what we have said above then we can conclude that *prima facie* the structure produced by the child in English looks rather like Italian CLRD. However, we must note that at this stage of language development, the child's Italian shows no use whatever of clitics, even where these would be obligatory in adult Italian.

(28) MOT: *La prendo?*
It take.1SG
'Will I take it?'
CHI: *Predi, prendi*
Take, take (2;7)
Target: Prendi**la**
(29) MOT: *Li metto?*
Them wear.1SG
'Will I wear them?'
CHI: *Metti*
Wear-2SG (2;7)
Target: Metti**li**

This is not surprising as it is well known that the acquisition of clitics occurs comparatively late. Research by Hamann (2002) and Leonini (2006) (amongst others including Hamann et al. 1996, Haegeman 1996) into the acquisition of clitics in L1 report that there is a clear delay in the acquisition of object clitics in comparison to determiners and other clitic elements such as subject clitics and reflexives. Hamann et al. 1996 report that the first regular use of object clitics in the Augustin corpus occurs at the age of 2;6 but we would not expect the child in this study to be producing object clitic constructions at this time given on the one hand the complexity of the acquisition task

she is facing and on the other the lack of clitic pronouns in two out of three of the languages that she is acquiring. In line with this kind of reasoning, Müller and Hulk (2001) report that object drop and clitic omission is higher in bilingual German/Italian, Dutch/French and German/French children than in monolingual Italian or French children. Müller and Hulk (2001) assume that clitic omission is a discourse strategy for bilinguals. The increased use of object drop and clitic omission in the bilinguals in this study in comparison to their monolingual Italian/French peers is reported to be a result of cross-linguistic influence from the topic-drop languages involved. Through Dutch and German, the bilingual children are exposed to the use of topic-drop as a discourse strategy. It is claimed that at this stage of language development, the bilingual children have not yet acquired the language-specific morphosyntactic mechanism for object omission in their French/Italian, i.e., cliticization.. As a way of fulfilling the not yet acquired discourse strategy of object omission in Italian/French, the bilingual children transfer the discourse strategy that they use in Dutch/German (topic-drop) into their Italian/French. If this is the case in general and bilingual children transfer constructions acquired in one language to fulfill an aspect of the grammar that is not yet acquired in the second language, then some questions arise with regards to this study: why is the child in this study transferring her knowledge of clitic constructions from her Italian to her English? What does she not have in her English that she is trying to fulfill by using the Italian clitic construction? Greater understanding of the specific pronoun doubling construction that the child is using is necessary in order to try to answer these questions.

4 Clitic Doubling or Clitic Right Dislocation?

Above we have argued that a first consideration of the properties of the structure under discussion would seem to indicate that what the child is producing in English is a structure that resembles a clitic right dislocated structure. On the other hand, languages that allow clitic dislocation structures often contain a second possible construction that involves a clitic, namely clitic doubling (CLD). CLD occurs when a full DP in an argument position is preceded by a clitic, thus forming a discontinuous constituent (Anagnostopoulou 2006).

(30) * *(Tu) (to) edhosa tu Jani to vivlio.*
Cl.GEN Cl.ACC gave.1SG the John.GEN the book.ACC
'I gave John the book.'

(31) * *Tu to edhosa #tu Jani #to vivlio.*
Cl.GEN Cl.ACC gave.1SG the John.GEN the book.ACC.
'I GAVE John the book (I did give John the book).'
(Data from Anagnostopoulou 2006:545–546)

Italian, unlike Greek and some Romance languages, does not allow clitic doubling as it is shown in the example below:

(32) * *Lo vedró domani Gianni*
Him see.FUT 1SG tomorrow Gianni
'I will see Gianni tomorrow.'
(Data from Anagnostopoulou 2006:524)

It is important then to consider whether the doubling structure produced in English has to be analysed as reflecting a quasi version in English of CLRD or of CLD since we could hypothesize transfer from Italian only in the case that the structure under analysis here was a case of CLRD. Anagnostopoulou (2006) discusses the cross-linguistic variation of clitic doubling and clitic dislocation and highlights the differences between the two. There are two main characteristics which differentiate the two constructions (Anagnostopoulou 2006, Cecchetto 1999, Zubizaretta 1998 amongst others): its intonational properties and in particular the presence of a pause before the dislocated DP and whether the sentence is subject to *Kayne's Generalization* (proposed in Jaeggli 1982).

The first characteristic that differentiates between Clitic Doubling constructions and Clitic Dislocated constructions is the intonational properties of the phrase. In CLRD (Clitic Right Dislocation), a clear intonational pause precedes the dislocated element, separating it from the rest of the clause. The intonational break between the dislocated element and the rest of the clause is not obligatory in CLLD structures and in CLD structures there are no intonational breaks in the phrase. This contrast is very clearly highlighted in the River Plate Spanish examples from Anagnostopoulou 2006: The first example shows the "doubled DP" dislocated to the right of the phrase following an adverb and a PP. In this dislocation construction, there is a clear pause before the dislocated element. The second example is a clitic doubling example. This is clear as the doubled element is preceded by the "special preposition" *a* which according to Kayne's Generalization, is one of the defining characteristics of clitic doubling. In contrast to the clitic dislocation construction, the clitic doubling construction has no pause.

(33) *Parece que tuvieron que llevarla de urgencia a los Estados Unidos, la hija de Coronel Martínez.*
Seems that had.3PL that bring-her urgently to the United States, the daughter of Coronel Martinez.
'It seems that they had to take her urgently to the United States, the daughter of Coronel Martinez.'

(34) *Parece que tuvieron que llevarla a la hija de Coronel Martinez de urgencia a los Estados Unidos.*
Seems that had.3PL that bring-her part the daughter of Coronel Martinez urgently to the United States.
'It seems that they had to take the daughter of Coronel Martinez urgently to the United States.'

(Data from Anagnostopoulou 2006:526)

As we have already mentioned before, the data produced by the child shows that the *it*-doubling structure regularly, though not absolutely always, contains a perceptible intonational break before the dislocated DP. The fact that the intonational break is present in the data suggests that the pronoun doubling construction in this project is in fact a dislocation structure.

The second characteristic that is used to differentiate between clitic doubling and clitic dislocation is whether the construction is subject to Kayne's generalization. Kayne's generalization states that doubling may occur only if an object NP is preceded by a special preposition. Suñer (1988) claims that the special preposition that precedes doubled elements is an animacy marker and the presence or not of this animacy marker is what differentiates between CLD and CLRD in Spanish and Catalan. She claims that clitic doubling only occurs with DPs that are preceded by the special preposition *a* 'to' and associated with animacy, whereas CLRD occurs with DPs of any kind as exemplified in data from Anagnostopoulou 2006:

(35) *La vaig VEURE la baralla.* Catalan
It see.1SG.PST the fight
'I SAW the fight (I did see the fight).'

(36) *La lavó mamá, la mamadera* Standard Spanish
Cl.ACC washed Mother the milk.bottle
'Mother washed the milk bottle'

(Data from Anagnostopoulou 2006: 527–528)

The sentences above exemplify two cases of clitic right dislocation of inanimate DPs. Interestingly, the *it*-doubled structures studied here contain almost entirely [-animate] DPs which would suggest that the target deviant structures discussed here are clitic dislocation structures rather than clitic doubling ones since only [+animate] DPs can be doubled in the languages that have this kind of structure.

4 Discussion

Above we have presented English data from a trilingual child simultaneously acquiring English, Italian and Scottish Gaelic. The sentences are target deviant and we have argued that they seem to be similar in some crucial ways to clitic right dislocation constructions. As previously discussed, dislocation is used in Italian for topicalization and in fact the consideration of these constructions in context has shown they are uttered in given information contexts.

However, there is still the remaining question as to why the child in this study is transferring the clitic right dislocation construction from Italian to English considering that she does not have use of the construction in her Italian yet. As we noted above, the "transfer" in fact takes place at a stage when she does not have clitics in Italian, and indeed her Italian is in general less developed than her English, making a straightforward "bootstrapping" from a stronger to a weaker language unlikely.

A promising line of explanation of the phenomenon under study here seems to relate to the hypothesis of Bilingual Bootstrapping proposed by Gawlitzek-Maiwald and Tracy (1996). In their case study of a bilingual child they argue that their data reveals evidence of systematic cross-linguistic influence between the languages giving rise to a situation where the linguistic structures from one language are "used" to boost the development of the second, less developed language system. This in essence shows that the bilingual child uses all of the linguistic skills available to her to form a more complex construction in her less developed language by combining the elements that she has acquired in her more developed language to fulfill those that she has not yet acquired in her less developed language. Their research looks at an English/German bilingual child, Hannah, who is 2;1 at the beginning of the data collection. Hannah shows evidence of having two separate language systems although language mixed utterances are still produced.

(37) *Ich habe gemade you much better*
I have ge-made you much better.
(Data from Gawlitzek-Maiwald and Tracy 1996)

The data above is just one example of the systematic mixing constructions produced by Hannah. The data shows Hannah using German to construct the TP layer of the sentence and English to construct the VP layer of the sentence. This correlates with the different acquisition stages in Hannah's languages as at this stage of development, the child has not acquired the TP layer in English, whereas she has acquired the TP layer in German. Following this observation and based on the numerous mixing constructions produced by Hannah, Gawlitzek-Maiwald and Tracy (1996) argue that the bilingual child uses a grammatical structure available to her in German in her production of English, so as to create a more complex sentence in her English.

The target deviant constructions in Gawlitzek-Maiwald and Tracy's (1996) study differs from those discussed in our study as Hannah has the use of the TP in her German and transfers this knowledge to her English to produce a more complex construction. The child in our study, however, is not producing clitic constructions in her Italian and yet appears to be transferring her knowledge of these constructions into her English, hence raising questions regarding the deeper relationship between languages in the bilingual/multilingual brain.

4.1 Interface Phenomena as Vulnerable Domains

Müller (2004) discusses vulnerable grammatical domains in acquisition that are areas that require more complex syntactic, phonological or semantic analysis. This assumption is made based on the previous studies of vulnerable domains in bilingual children. Müller and Hulk (2001) look into cross-linguistic influence by investigating its source and attempting to predict areas in which this cross-linguistic influence can be expected to occur. Their prediction is that cross-linguistic influence will occur in the C-domain because this is where syntax interfaces with other cognitive systems. This claim is further defined following the analysis of data from three bilingual Dutch/French, German/French and German/Italian children in comparison to monolingual children. Müller and Hulk (2001) focus on the use of object drop Romance languages. They focus on

this phenomenon as effective use of object drop requires the mapping of pragmatic principles onto syntactic structures which is a process that occurs in the C-domain. Their study found that bilingual children use object drop at a higher rate and for a longer period than MLU-matched monolingual children. Müller and Hulk (2001) argue that this difference is due to bilingual children having more difficulty mapping pragmatic principles onto syntactic structures than monolinguals. This results in the instantiation of the C-system of bilinguals taking longer to be acquired than in monolinguals. From this research Müller and Hulk (2001) then conclude that cross-linguistic influence occurs before the instantiation of the C-domain. The work of Müller and Hulk (2001) is extended by Serratrice et al. (2004) who also claim that cross-linguistic influence occurs in relation to the C-domain. Their study of the distribution of subjects and objects in an English/Italian bilingual child shows the child making two types of errors which they argue are a result of cross-linguistic influence. The first type of error occurs before the instantiation of the C-domain and the errors at this stage reflect pragmatic accuracy even though they are syntactically deviant. The second type of error occurs after the instantiation of the C-domain and these errors are pragmatically inaccurate and are a result of conflicting syntactic options available from the two languages. From this study Serratrice et al. (2004) claim that vulnerable domains in acquisition are the interface domains where syntax interacts with other cognitive systems. If we relate all of this to the target deviant constructions in our study, it is conceivable that the structures are the result of an interface phenomenon as the strategy adopted by the child involves doubling which is often associated with discourse effects and dislocation and the C domain.

Our proposal is that our data illustrate a "deep" transfer where the child is transferring the key characteristics of CLRD from Italian, even though for some reason, she does not produce clitic constructions in her Italian at this stage. As we mentioned already, clitics are acquired later even by monolingual children due to their morphosyntactic complexity. Perhaps what we see in the target deviant constructions in this data is transfer which is not simply a surface transfer as shown in previous research (by Müller and Hulk (2001) amongst others). It is possible that transfer in multilinguals is not restricted to surface transfer but also to the transfer of structures from one language to another, even before performance has been established in the language from which transfer takes place.

4.2 *It* as an English Clitic

If the *it*-doubling structure is a type of clitic right dislocation, then the question arises as to why the only doubling element available in English for this purpose is the third singular pronoun *it,* whilst in Italian (and more generally in languages that allow dislocation structures) a range of clitic pronouns can appear in dislocation structures. Also, in CLRD there is an obligatory agreement relationship between the clitic and the DP: They need to agree in gender, number and case. Moreover, in non-doubling structures, the child in this study does use other pronouns: where pronouns are used alone, not doubling a DP, a variety of pronouns occurs hence indicating that her English does not contain only *it:*

(38) INV: Is Emily your friend?
CHI: Mm-hmm. Don't like her.
(39) CHI: I go find them

The explanation to this, we would argue, lies in the nature of *it* in English. *It*, as previously suggested by Cardinaletti and Starke (1999), has some of the characteristics of clitics. For example, unlike other English pronouns, it cannot be conjoined or stressed:

(40) I saw John and him.
(41) *I read the book and it.
(42) Them, I don't like.
(43) *It, I don't like.

Thus, *it*, while not occurring preverbally like Italian object clitics, is nevertheless the most clitic-like of the English pronouns. It is not therefore surprising that the child uses *it* as the equivalent of

Italian clitics in a right dislocation structure, and this makes it all the more likely that our analysis of *it*- doubling as the transfer of a clitic right dislocation structure from Italian is on the right track.

Note that this must mean that in a sense the child **has** clitics and clitic right dislocation in Italian in her underlying grammar. The fact that clitics do not surface in her output in Italian must be due to some characteristic of Italian clitics that makes them difficult to be used at this stage. One possibility is that what makes clitics difficult is their syntactic position, namely the fact that they generally occur immediately preverbally unlike most objects; another possibility relates to the varying phonological shape of clitics according to gender and number, and in particular their need to show agreement in grammatical gender. The former appears an unlikely explanation, since, as we saw above, the child does not use clitics in Italian even where, as in imperatives, they are post-verbal. Thus, it would seem more likely that it is the need to show gender and number agreement in clitics that causes the difficulty.

The situation therefore is as follows: From her Italian, the child has acquired the nature of cliticization as a process used for topicalization. In Italian, the child does not use clitics, either because they require complex agreement or because of the fact that they can appear in a variety of positions in the clause (whether this is done by movement or by base-generation in different positions need not concern us here, although we are aware that it is a long-standing debate in the literature on clitics). What happens then when the child needs to topicalize an object in English? Given that fronting is not an option, as it is not yet acquired, the child transfers the CLRD construction from Italian. In doing so, she draws from two important properties of English that her stronger grammar has already developed: (a) the existence of a "clitic-like" weak pronoun, *it*, obviating the agreement requirement of CLRD, and (b) the English word order, with adjunction of a DP to the right. To sum up, we argue that she "bootstraps" CLRD from Italian, to help her get over the fact that she has not yet acquired the topicalization strategy of English.

4.3 Alternative Explanations

However appealing transfer of clitic right dislocation may be, we should also consider other possible explanations for the structure. One plausible alternative might relate to the nature of the input of the child's English. As we said above, the mother is a native speaker of Italian and she speaks Italian to the child, but English is the language of the household since the mother and the father speak to each other in English. One could then wonder if the structure under investigation here could be present in the mother's L2 English. Careful observation of the mother's English fails to show evidence of this type of structure.

An alternative explanation of the target deviant constructions in this study is that *it* could be acting as a transitivity marker which appears with verbs which take direct objects. Such transitivity markers are found for example in Pacific Creoles, as in the following example from Pijin (Lefebvre 2011:19):

(44) *dig-em* *siton*
dig-TRANS stone
'dig up a stone'

This would be an alternative explanation for why *it* can double a plural DP as in the following examples:

(45) I don't like it carrots
(46) I want it animals

Lefebvre notes that while transitivity markers tend to occur in Creoles with a substrate language which also has such markers, they also occur in languages such as Australian-language based creoles whose substrates do not show these markers. This might lead us to believe that transitivity markers are somehow unmarked in Universal Grammar terms, and thus tend to occur when a creolization situation arises and children form a creole on the basis of an underlying pidgin. However, if transitivity markers were in some sense natural in UG terms, and UG-unmarked forms were prone to occur in multilingual acquisition, one might expect them to be reported as occurring in

many cases of multilingual acquisition. This has not been found to be the case however. Thus, the deep transfer explanation we offer appears to be the best available candidate for explaining the appearance of *it*-doubling. We should note, of course, that this is appearing in a case of trilingual acquisition. Although Scottish Gaelic does not have clitic right dislocation structures, the presence of a third language in the mix which the child has to acquire may be sufficient to make cross-linguistic transfer in itself more likely to appear.

5 Conclusion

We have considered the case of a child who uses structures where a direct object is doubled by the pronoun *it*. We presented several arguments in favour of considering this a "deep transfer" of clitic right dislocation structures from Italian, even though such structures are not present in the child's Italian output at the stage when these structures surface regularly in her English, since there were no clitics present in her Italian at this stage. We consider that this presents evidence in favor of cross-linguistic transfer in multilingual acquisition, which may however be of a rather subtle type: unlike previously documented cases of bilingual bootstrapping the case under analysis here does not seem to be confined to using structures from a more advanced linguistic system to support progress in a weaker one. Instead in this case study, the child is adopting a subtly different kind of bootstrapping strategy: she is transferring a construction from one language (CLRD) to avoid using a construction in another language (topicalization) that she has not acquired yet. In doing so, the child draws from basic properties of English (standard SVO word order, *it* as a weak pronoun) that come for free.

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