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The correlation between unbalanced bilingualism and language decay in small language minorities: the current status of research and future perspectives

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Abstract

“*The children have they said go-they play the ball.*” This sentence reproduces in English an instance of syntax uttered by a person who was born in a family speaking a German minority language in Italy, and who has spent her entire life in the minority community. She is a speaker with lower competence of her own native language, as is often the case in lesser-used language communities where only a part of the speakers achieve a full competence in the minority language. This puzzling case raises some compelling questions: (i) How pervasive are the effects of incomplete L1 acquisition in adult minority speakers in the specific environment of the small language minorities? (ii) Where can we find the linguistic reasons for incomplete L1 acquisition in minority communities? Are there early signals in the language production of children born in these communities that might allow us to predict, even before they begin school, how their minority language competence will be like, as adults? In this squib I present some preliminary results based on two pilot studies that I carried out with my research group on two German(ic) minority languages in Italy. In addition I discuss future research perspectives.

Keywords

Minority Languages; Cimbrian; Mòcheno; Low Proficiency; Semi-speaker; Unbalanced Bilingualism.

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1 Introduction¹

Maren is 40 years old. She lives with her family in a small village in the Italian Alps in which Cimbrian — one of the 153 minority languages in Europe that UNESCO considers to be in danger of extinction — is spoken (see Bidese 2004,

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2008 and Bidese, Padovan & Tomaselli 2013). Although Maren grew up, and has spent her whole life, in the village, her command of Cimbrian is by no means perfect. She understands when the people of the community speak the old Bavarian dialect and they understand her. However, her syntax is skewed and her active lexicon is poor and restricted to a few semantic domains. Most critically, her uncertain command of the minority language means that she will not be able to transmit the language to her son, thus contributing to its decline.

Maren's situation as a *semi-speaker* of her own native language is quite often encountered in minority language communities, as well as among second or third generation immigrant bilinguals. This raises two main questions:

(i) Where should the reasons for this kind of failure of language acquisition be sought?

(ii) Are there signals in the language production of children of minority communities that allow us at a very early stage to predict their language competence in the minority language as adults?

In this paper I discuss new research perspectives building on the results of two pilot investigations on eroded competence and unbalanced bilingualism in minority languages. I carried out these two studies with Andrea Padovan and Federica Cognola at the University of Trento (see Padovan 2011, Bidese & Padovan 2012, Cognola 2011a and 2011b, Cognola & Bidese 2016). Inspired by the literature on Specific Language Impairment that uses linguistic markers to assess delayed language development, the aim of the our research is to identify early syntactic markers of low competence in the production of children who are bilingual speakers of a lesser-used variety. Although these markers are language-specific, as are most of the markers proposed for assessing SLI, the planned research is intended as a case study which introduces a

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method for analyzing other less-used languages in similar situations and serve as a scientific basis for the development of language policies to curb the decline of small ethnic minorities in Europe, while also helping new immigrant communities to preserve their original language over the first and second generations.

2 Background: Bilingualism and eroded competence in heritage communities and in small language minorities

In Europe, 153 smaller-state languages, regional varieties and minority languages are considered in danger of extinction (see Moseley 2010). Based upon the criterion of the intergenerational mother tongue transmission, UNESCO reckons

that a significant proportion of these (124, i.e. 81.05%) are definitely (57, i.e. 37.25%), severely (55, i.e. 35.95%) or critically (12, i.e. 7.84%) endangered. If this analysis is true, Europe is rushing towards a collapse of its language richness within the next one or two generations.

As a recent study from the *Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning* (Bangma & Riemersma 2011) has pointed out, the main reasons for the disruption of the intergenerational language transmission in lesser-used languages should be sought:

I) in the family constellation prevailing nowadays in regional and small minority communities where only one parent masters the variety of the minority group, whereas the other only speaks the language of the majority (most often the language of the state or another international language);

II) in the fact that early fluency in the minority language is often blotted out later on, e.g., when children speaking the non-official variety start to attend the pre-school being basically exposed to the official language only. As a matter of fact, with the beginning of the educational path the standard language comes to exert a huge pressure on the non-official one. According to Bangma & Riemersma (2011: 66): “Children, with the minority language as home language, attending pre-school provisions where early immersion programs are offered in the majority (mostly State language) will *not* develop into *balanced multilingual* students” (italics added; see also Duquette 1992, Campos & Rosenberg 1995).

In most cases, therefore, the process of language extinction in Europe does not occur because parents openly refuse to transmit the traditional regional or minority language to the next speakers’ generation, but rather

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by reason of the particular kind of unbalanced bilingualism of the minority children which, unlike other types of bilingualism, even unbalanced bilingualism between standard or official languages, plays a fundamental role in the process of language decay. As matter of fact, regional and minority languages are sociolinguistically in a state of structural weakness compared to standard and official languages. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that a partial exposure to these regional and minority languages during childhood has dramatic consequences for the speakers’ ability to use them in an appropriate way in adulthood as there is not a sufficiently strong language environment to recover the low competence in the lesser-used language — contrary to what 30 years of classic bilingualism studies have suggested (from Volterra & Taeschner 1978 to Grosjean 2010).

Indeed, classical bilingualism studies have observed that bilingual children — in mixed marriages, for example — very often display a weakening of whichever language is less used in the mainstream environment, but that this language can —

in the appropriate context — be recovered very quickly and without particular effort. In contrast, as a new line of research in the last decade has pointed out (Montrul 2008), this is by no means the case for bilinguals when one of their languages is a country's majority language and the other is either that of an immigrant group or an ethnic minority. In such situations, in fact, the huge pressure of the majority language upon the heritage or minority language very often leads to the dominance of the majority language over the minority one, causing a clearly unbalanced proficiency in favor of the dominant language (Butler & Hakuta 2006). Furthermore, as numerous works on second or third generation immigrant bilinguals (children and adults) of Russian (Polinsky 1997, 2006 and 2008a and 2008b), Spanish (Silva-Corvalán 1994 and 2003, Montrul 2006) and Korean (Song et al 1997, Kim, Montrul & Yoon 2009 and 2010) in the U.S. has demonstrated, there is a significant correlation between unbalanced bilingualism in childhood and language decay and language loss in adulthood (see above all the results by Montrul 2008, Polinsky 2008a and 2008b, Montrul 2016). In fact, in many cases the language competence of immigrants' bilingual children is greatly impoverished, to the extent that Montrul (2008: 109) suggests that it should be referred to as "incomplete L1 acquisition", "[b]ecause the language looks as if parts of the grammatical system did not reach full development and stabilized at a more simplified stage".

Interestingly, this kind of incomplete L1 acquisition of a heritage language is very difficult to remedy without specific intervention during school years: it also has long-lasting consequences since it affects all aspects of grammar, particularly morphosyntax, and leads to a degraded language competence in adulthood, and consequently to speakers abandoning the weak language

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when raising their own children. Analyses of adult heritage speakers' proficiency confirm a correlation between incomplete L1 acquisition in children and impoverished language command of the heritage language in adults. All the studies display converging evidence of the morphosyntactic erosion of the heritage languages in the competence of the heritage adults, although core aspects of syntax are reported to be retained (Montrul 2008: 261).

While the impoverished competence of Russian or Hispanic L1 incomplete learners in the U.S. has been reconstructed in several studies, the present linguistic situation (especially with regard to syntactic phenomena) of L1 incomplete speakers of small minority languages and dialects in Europe has still received little attention.

More than thirty-five years ago Nancy Dorian carried out extensive studies of the phonology and morphology of the Gaelic spoken in East Sutherland (Dorian 1977, 1981, and 1989) and reported the presence of speakers in the communities who displayed a contracted competence in the production of their minority language, and erosion of morphological paradigms and morphosyntax. Dorian described such speakers as *semi-speakers*. Two further studies (Moretti 1999, on the

Lombard dialect in Switzerland, and Dal Negro 2004, on Walser, a German dialect in the West Alps) have adopted Dorian's description and analysis of reduced language competence in minority languages, extending them to certain syntactic phenomena of these two varieties and revealing a degraded command, even in the core domain of linguistic competence. However, apart from Dorian's pioneering research in the 1980s, and Moretti and Dal Negro's subsequent studies, a great deal more research into the phenomenon of syntax contraction in L1 incomplete speakers of minority languages remains to be done, especially in the light of the results achieved and the methods established by the abovementioned new works on heritage speakers in the U.S.

3 Two pilot studies on unbalanced bilingualism / incomplete L1 and language decay

In two recent pilot studies, we (Andrea Padovan, Federica Cognola and me) have investigated both above-mentioned phenomena, namely lower language proficiency and unbalanced bilingualism in two small German minority communities in the province of Trento, in northeastern Italy: the Cimbrians of Lusérna (Lusérn) and the Mòcheni of the Fersina Valley (Bersntol). Both traditional minority languages are included in the group of definitely endangered languages (Moseley 2010).

In the first study (see Padovan 2011, Bidese & Padovan 2012, Bidese 2012), we analyzed the linguistic production and, in particular, the syntax,

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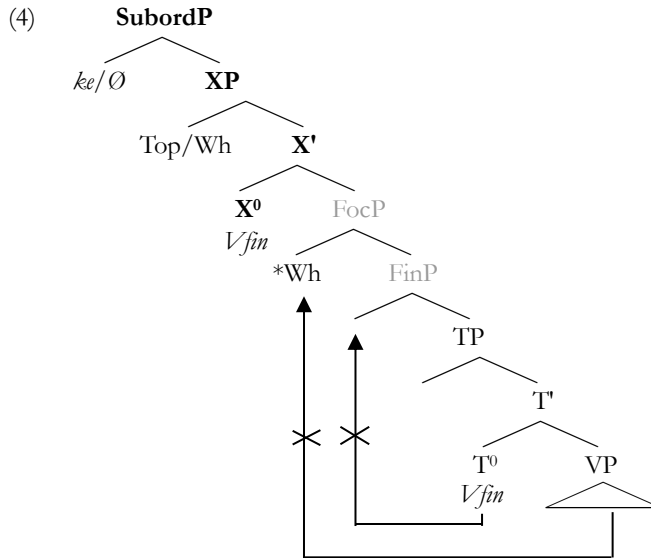
of a subgroup of adult speakers of Cimbrian. We concentrated on the left periphery of the sentence and were able to detect the erosion (absence) of functional elements of the language, including subordinating conjunctions or expletives, an inability to bind anaphors and relative pronouns, the repetition of the nominal subject through pronouns. We also documented the following irregularities: (i) severely deficient morphological paradigms, (ii) an extensive use of analogical leveling with a tendency to eliminate marked forms, (iii) the presence of few stylistic options and only one, or very few, registers, (iv) the availability of a very reduced vocabulary, evidenced by frequent gaps, hesitations or 'evasive' expressions, (v) an inability to provide reliable judgments about the grammaticality of sentences in the minority language. All these phenomena are signals of a contracted competence in the production of Cimbrian by the speakers interviewed, and mirror Dorian, Moretti and Dal Negro's findings on the reduced competence of adult minority speakers. The following sentences are taken from a translation task administered to Cimbrian semi-speakers (SS): (St.) stands for the Italian stimulus sentences and (FS) for the target sentence provided by a Fluent Speaker (control group):

- (1) a. (St.) I bambini hanno detto che vanno a giocare a pallone (*The children said that they are going to play soccer*)
 b. (FS) Di khindar hām khött ke da gian z’spila in balun
 c. (SS) Di khindar hân khött Ø gia=sa spilan in palun
 The children have.1PS said go-they Ø-play the ball
- (2) a. (St.) Sono arrivati i bambini (*There arrived the children*)
 b. (FS) ’Z soin=da gerift di khindar
 c. (SS) Ø soin=sa’ gerift di khindar
 Ø are=they arrived the children
- (3) a. (St.) Le mele che ha comprato la Maria sono buone (*The apples that Maria bought are delicious*)
 b. (CG) Di öpfln bo=da hatt gekoaft di Maria soin guat
 c. (SS) Di öpfln vo # bo=da=r hatt gekoaft Maria soin=sa guat
 the apples of that=da=her (?) has bought Maria are=they good

Delving deep into the structure of the left-periphery of the sentence, in which the mapping of discourse related information into the syntactic spine is supposed to be realized (see Bhatt and Yoon 1991 and Rizzi 1997), we were able to conjecture which syntactic nodes of the left sentence periphery are impoverished, i.e. inaccessible to syntactic movements in the eroded competence of the semi-speakers. This allowed us to formulate a general hypothesis of syntax contraction in minority languages, by obtaining an initial character

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rization of the eroded competence of Cimbrian semi-speakers (see for more details Padovan 2011, Bidese & Padovan 2012, Bidese 2012). In particular, we reconstructed which syntactic projections are allegedly affected in the low competence and which operations are impossible such as the impossibility of both wh-movement to the Focus projection [= FocP] and finite verb [=Vfnt] movement to Fin⁰) (see the grey projections and the crossed arrows in the diagram below).



It seems that some parts of the CP are still attainable, since only low nodes, i.e. FocP and FinP, appear to be completely absent, i.e. without features; the fact that FocP and FinP are inactivate seems not to impair the high part of the CP (the SubordP/XP layer). Syntax impoverishment manifests itself in deleting the features belonging to the functional layers rather than simply blocking upper branching. We assume that in semi-speakerness either discourse related features have gone lost or that, more reasonably, only a sub-part of them has been maintained: just a rough ‘thematization’ feature is present but no d-linking or familiarity topics, etc. are found.

In a second pilot study, Federica Cognola investigated the linguistic production of pre-school (four- and five-year-old) children belonging to the

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Möcheno-speaking minority. In particular, she analyzed the linguistic ability of a group of five minority children with respect to some syntactic features characteristic for the minority language (V2 rule, syntax of the main interrogative sentence, morpho-syntax of the subject pronouns) (see for the details Cognola 2011a and 2011b). Using measuring methods well-established in the literature (Schlyter 1993, Genese et al 1995, Jisa 2000, Döpke 2000, Lanza 2000, Meisel 2001, Bernardini & Schlyter 2004), such as the calculation of the *Mean Length of Utterance* and of the *Upper Bound* (the longest utterance produced by a child during a task session), the analysis of the syntactic complexity (presence of modal verbs or subordinating conjunctions) and the language preference of the children as well as the presence

of code-mixing in only one language, an unbalanced bilingualism was detected in all children in favor of Italian or the regional variety of Italian. Mòcheno, the minority language, is thus the weak language (see Cognola 2011b: 43.55; for the definition of ‘weak language’ see Lanza 2000 and Bernardini & Schlyter 2004) in any case, but with a very crucial differentiation: whereas three of the five children, whose minority language competence has been compared with the proficiency target stage, showed an impoverishment affecting only the lexicon, the other two displayed a lack of the expected syntactic competence, producing atypical sentences.

From a more detailed perspective: eliciting the capacity to use the specific kind of Mòcheno’s Germanic V2 rule we observed that the children with the lower language competence brought to bear only a reduced form of it without the inversion of the clitic subject, generalizing one possible correct structure for all the contexts, crucially, the structure that we find in the variety of Italian spoken in the region. This result contradicts the idea (Müller et al 2011: 183) that there is no transfer of grammatical structures and that there is no correlation between the grammar of the dominant language and the typology of influence upon the weak language. Our investigations confirm this conclusion only for the first type of *unbalanced bilingualism* affecting the lexicon that three of five children showed. On the contrary, in other two children, whose low language production concerned the syntax, the transfer of syntactic structures from the dominant language into the minority language was displayed very well (see Cognola 2011b: 65).

Another diagnostic pattern we used in order to estimate the syntactic proficiency of the minority children was the analysis of the structure of main interrogative sentences, introduced by a *wh*-word. As a matter of fact (cf. Chomsky 1968) *wh*-questions show some general syntactic phenomena as the replacement of a verbal argument by a *wh*-word and the rising of this last to the top of the sentence as well as other language-specific syntactic requirements. In the case of Mòcheno the finite verb must be realized immediately

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after the *wh*-word, the NP subject appears dislocated at the right periphery of the sentence whereas a subject pronoun mandatorily occurs encliticized to the finite verb. Thus, the correct production of *wh*-questions is supposed to be a good indicator of the capacity to deal with involved syntactic rules. Besides, with regard to this linguistic marker the children were forced to produce either correct or incorrect sentences since they had no possibility of generalizing one pattern for all contexts as for the first marker. The results validated our analysis: the children with the better competence only made lexical mistakes, whereas those belonging to the low competence group were wrong even with regard to the syntax of the utterance. Finally, they all showed an incapability to realize the subject pronoun inverted to the finite verb, which is exactly the marked pattern we missed in the production of the syntactic V2 rule (see for the details Cognola 2011b).

Thanks to these pilot studies we were able to describe *unbalanced bilingualism* in the minority languages syntactically. This significant achievement was possible, only because we cross-checked the measuring methods, which are well-known in the literature, with syntactic ‘markers’ that we introduced in the analysis to isolate the subgroup of children whose language competence is syntactically impoverished. In fact, because of the *unbalanced bilingualism*, all minority children turned out to be weakly proficient in the minority language; but a consistent group of them clearly showed indications of syntax contraction so that, with the beginning of the educational pathway and the consequent reinforcement of unbalanced bilingualism, an early language decay is likely to happen.

To sum up the preliminary results: The previous studies of our research group suggest that there might be an interdependence between the second type of *unbalanced bilingualism* in child language acquisition stages and the fossilized low language competence in adult *semi-speakers*. Remarkably, none of the methods developed in the bilingualism literature (cf. among others Schlyter 1993, Jisa 2000, Genese et al 1995, Döpke 2000, Lanza 2000, Meisel 2001, Bernardini & Schlyter 2004) is suited for measuring the grade of *bilingualism* and to make a prediction about the language acquisition developmental path of the unbalanced bilingual children, bringing to light whether bilingual minority children are at risk from becoming semi-speakers. Indeed, they all can diagnose the *unbalanced bilingualism* and ascertain which language is the weak one, but only introducing syntactic indicators (syntactic markers) of low competence we were capable of conceiving how to identify not simply bilinguals with a weakening minority language, but, among those, the children for which initial evidence seems to suggest that they could be going to become speakers with a low competence of their variety, accelerating the process of language decay.

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4 Future Perspectives

There can be no doubt that, in order to preserve the threatened language diversity in Europe and to promote multilingual communities successfully, the key is being able to understand better the phenomena of unbalanced bilingualism in minority children and lower syntactic proficiency in adult minority speakers. This might establish a more robust correlation between the two aspects, especially by trying to recognize markers of low proficiency at a very early stage. Therefore, future research perspectives might focus on following questions:

- (i) How pervasive are the effects of incomplete L1 acquisition in adult minority speakers in the specific environment of the small language minorities? Do they also affect core components of the language? Is it possible to make reliable generalizations about this phenomenon?

- (ii) Where can we find the linguistic reasons for incomplete L1 acquisition in minority communities? Are there early signals (markers) in the language production of children from these communities that might allow us to predict, even before they begin school, their minority language competence as adults?

Such a research will also make a useful contribution to the policy debate around the preservation of language diversity in Europe, by demonstrating the consequences of inadequate language exposure during childhood and its implications for the survival of many endangered languages in Europe. In fact, the investigations can provide a scientific basis for the development of language revitalization programs to support the bilingual competence of children in minority language communities in the minority language. In addition, the project's results and methods will be transferable to situations that involve a similar attrition between a majority and a heritage language, as in the case of the bilingual children of immigrants and refugees. The studies carried out in the last decade in the U.S. on the language proficiency of second and third generation heritage speakers have demonstrated the same language disruption process that we observe in ethnic minority communities: the latter reproduce comparable dynamics of language decay and language loss at a small scale. Pursuing the same goals of our pilot studies we will offer an important contribution to the development of policies for language preservation for the groups of new immigrants and refugees in Europe and to model educational pathways that help immigrant children to preserve their bilingualism.

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