

The acquisition of Italian clitics outside of Italy: The role of individual differences in different language contexts

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The role of Age of Acquisition (AoA) has been found to be beneficial to language acquisition. However, that it might not be true for heritage speakers (HLers) who are exposed to their heritage language from early in life but have similar performance to late bilingual speakers (L2ers) (Romano, 2020). In this context, the role of other factors such as language dominance (Flores et al., 2019) or length of exposure (Kuhl et al., 2016) are also potential modulators which remain under investigated.

We explore how the exposure to Italian in the speakers' lifespan could be determinant to clitic production depending on the characteristics of the majority language. We hypothesize that while immersion will predict successful acquisition of clitics, its role will be determined by the majority language each speaker has grown up in. We tested HLers ($n=21$) and L2ers ($n=41$) that have lived most of their life with Spanish or Swedish as their dominant language. In addition to completing a placement test and an ethnolinguistic questionnaire (following Romano, 2020), all participants completed a structural priming task and a Grammatical Judgment Test (GJT) in Italian with sentences varying in complexity (causal, lexical, or modal). While the results of these tasks are explored elsewhere with a distinction between language profiles (L2ers vs HLers), to account for individual differences we calculated an immersion to Italian compound index including age, AoA, and years of use (Li et al., 2019).

The analysis showed that participants immersed in Spanish produce significantly more correct clitics than those immersed in Swedish, and this was determined by the Immersion in Italian just for participants in the Spanish dominant group (see Figure 1a). The production of correct structures was explained by an interaction between majority language, complexity, and immersion. While immersion in Italian positively predicted the production of correct structures of causal and modal sentences for the Spanish dominant group, it negatively predicted the production of correct structure of lexical sentences for the Swedish dominant group (see Figure 1b).

These results reflect the fact that HLers are exposed to a limited input in Italian. This environment accounts for an incomplete acquisition of the heritage language (Carreria & Kagan, 2018) that seems to be present only when the input of the majority language does not reinforce the

acquisition of the given structure. Overall, these results accounted for a different analysis of linguistic experience when studying the ultimate attainment on a given language.

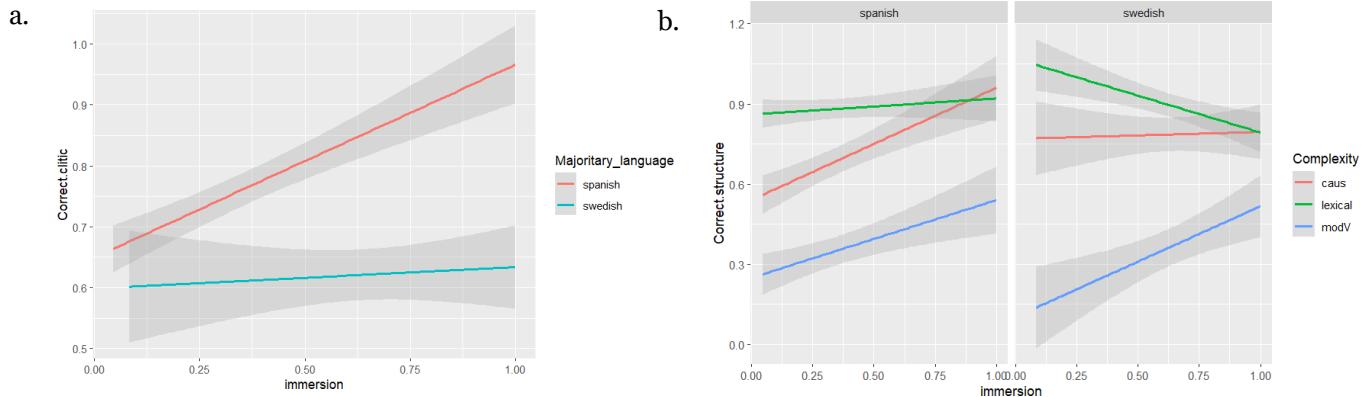


Figure 1. (a) Correct clitics production as a function of immersion and majority language. (b) Correct structure production as a function of immersion, complexity and majority language

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