

Rhetorical questions in Italian: lexical-syntactic marking in monolingual and bilingual elicited productions

Rhetorical questions (RhQs), such as ‘Who likes paying taxes?!’, do not request information, but rather signal the speaker’s belief that the answer is (or should be) already obvious. They can have the same syntactic surface structure as information-seeking questions (ISQs), from which they can be disambiguated by context, prosody, and lexical-syntactic cues (Biezma & Rawlins, 2017). Phenomena that integrate information across different domains, so called “interfaces”, are known to be especially challenging in language acquisition, and bilingual acquisition in particular (Platzack, 2001; Sorace, 2011).

In this talk, I will explore how rhetorical questions (RhQs) are marked in Italian through lexical and syntactic means (discourse particles, aggressive expressions, information structure, etc.), with an eye on the meaning contribution that each cue provides and how it may lead to a rhetorical interpretation. I will present the results of a production study that elicited the production of RhQs and ISQs in Italian across several populations: monolingual adults, bilingual adults, 6- to 9-year-old monolingual children and bilingual children. For bilingual participants, Italian was the heritage language and German the majority language.

In adults’ productions, the most frequent cue was the counter-expectational particle *ma* ‘but’, present in around 50% of the sentences. Both groups used also clitic right dislocations, cleft questions and the reflexive pronoun *si*. Only monolinguals and not bilinguals produced questions with a condition verb and the particle *mai* (e.g., *Chi mangerebbe mai...* ‘Who would ever eat...’). Monolingual and bilingual children exploited the same range of cues as monolingual adults, although a developmental effect is observed in the frequency and patterns of use. Therefore, on the one hand bilingual children showed a more appropriate use of cues than adult heritage speakers. On the other hand, some instances of transfer from German were found in the production of four bilingual children: children used the temporal adverb *già* ‘already’, a direct translation of German *schon*, which, if used as a discourse particle in questions, is marker of rhetoricity.

In conclusion, in the age period investigated, monolingual and bilingual children undergo the acquisition of the appropriate use of syntactic and lexical cues marking non-canonical questions. Bilingual children and adults show effects of cross-linguistic influence, adults in the form of a reduction of types of cue, and children in the form of lexical transfer from the majority language. The study contributes to our understanding of the acquisition of optional pragmatic marking of non-canonical questions and its interaction with bilingualism.