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Grammatical Relations and Word Order in Italian Child Discourse  
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1. Here an attempt is made to define some aspects of Grammatical Relations of Subject and Object as used by children from 1;6 to 2;6 years in Italian and Veneto dialect. In particular, the relationship between the mastering of some of the basic coding properties of Grammatical Relations (GRs) and their linearization rule (Li 1976; Cole/Sadock 1977) will be discussed.

In Italian and Veneto, the properties characterizing the GRs of Subject and Object within a clause are represented in their formal structure by a clustering of intersecting morphosyntactic rules that refer to features such as person/gender/number/ "case", while the basic order is considered SVO.

These coding properties appear to be controlled regularly and systematically by the child, from the very beginning of his linguistic production, in the process of mastering the suffixal Verb conjugation and the related pronominal system. On the other hand, the mastering of these coding properties of GRs does not imply a fixed pattern in their ordering (Bates 1976: 209) as being typical of this stage, nor does it seem to follow those of the adult schemata (Gruppo di Padova 1974; Lonzi 1974, Magno/Fava 1974; Trumper 1976; Antinucci/Cinque 1977). From a first analysis of the rules that motivate variation encountered in different ordering of GRs, it appears that the order of the Subject with respect to the Verb and the Object conforms to more general rules on word order, which have a contextual value and are dependent on the discourse.

2. The study of the acquisition of GRs and word order was first directed towards the demonstration of the innate character of syntax. By assuming the configurational definition of Subject, Object of the *Aspects* type as a realistic model, research by McNeill (1966a, 1966b, 1970), Slobin (1966), Roper (1973a, 1973b) tries to demonstrate that the existence of a preferential or fixed order can be explained only by reference to an innate knowledge of syntax. McNeill (1966a: 102), for instance, by assuming the configurational definition of Subject, Object as universal, has tried to demonstrate the existence of basic language-definitional universals, reflecting a specific linguistic ability and not necessarily a cognitive ability. The child's innate knowledge of GRs was reflected by the use of fixed order strategy even in languages which permit a relatively flexible ordering rules (children talk base strings even in Russian).

A serious challenge to such proposals made on the grounds of purely syntactic strategy was given by Bowerman (1973a, 1973b) who showed that the evidence used to attribute to the child an understanding of basic GRs and the constituent structure they entail was inconclusive. On the contrary, she affirms, there is evidence of variable word order from the time of the earliest two word utterances. She suggests that the word order is heavily influenced by input (adult's speech to child) and that the children's initial

combinations are based primarily on semantic considerations. A partially similar position is encountered also in Bates (1976:192-211), who, besides, stresses the importance of pragmatics in determining word order in the preoperational stage. Also Bates' interest centers on the verification of the acquisition of Subject and Object. By analyzing the statistical occurrence of the orders of the semantic Subject and Object with respect to the Verb and between them as appeared from the speech of two Italian children, a large use of orders different from the basic SVO order (Bates 1976:183) was discovered, as was a tendency to regularize the orders in the pattern SVO at the end of the period she analyzed. The importance given these two ranges of data, together with not very clear heuristic procedures for identifying Subjects, plus the difficulty of reading data on inflections (Bates 1976: 209; 263) induce her to conclude that the notion of syntactic Subject is acquired relatively later on and it coincides with the mastering of the order SVO. In this paper I will argue that in order to explain some rules of inflection and case marking that appear to be mastered by the child at a very early stage, it seems necessary to assume a framework as sketched in slightly different ways in Relational Grammar, where GRs are in underlying free structures defined in terms of their basic properties and the grammatical processes in which they are involved.

3. Our analysis is based on tape recorded conversations collected from six children (Daniele, Elisabetta, Gabriele, Massimo, Orietta, Paola) following their progress every week for a year, from 1;6 year to 2;6 years. Even if the main interest in this longitudinal study has been the linguistic data given, attention was also paid to the sensorimotor development. Data have been gathered by recording their verbalizations in a nursery school, while they were playing together or with the interviewer (Gianna Tiron-dola). Notes were usually made after each session and were based on the tape recorded conversation and recollection of the situation at the time of the utterance. The whole corpus consists of about 2,800 utterances.

Control data have been supplied by John Trumper, who has recorded linguistic production of his son Carletto.

The background of Daniele, Elisabetta, Gabriele, Massimo, Orietta and Paola is rather similar: the socioeconomic level of their families is working class: all the fathers are factory workers or small time tradesmen. In four cases the mothers are also factory workers; in the other two cases they are housewives. Parents had received public education up to eleven years but no further. Except for the two children whose mothers are housewives, all the others have been put in the nursery school before reaching seven months, and they spent most of the time there. Due to the poor ratio of staff to children and more generally of qualified teachers in this nursery school (merely one nun), the children were used to playing and interacting verbally most of the time with other children of the same age and it was only during the time they were in the home that they received specific attention.

All the children then were extremely happy about the attention Gianna gave them and they felt free to talk to her: the time given in each session, which permitted spontaneous and unplanned interactions, and the children's desire to have in some way a preferential relationship with her, contribute to characterize their conversations as initiated and partially controlled by the child.

The families of all children have been living for several generations in Valdagno, a small conservative town in the Veneto, where dialect, a local variety of Venetian dialect, is still largely spoken by wide social strata. At home the parents generally speak dialect, even if they make efforts to speak Italian to them. In the nursery school children often prefer to talk with the others in dialect, but with the nun or with Gianna in Italian. The interference between the two systems, Italian and Veneto, is sometimes clearly revealed, an interference which mirrors general problems of diglossia situations (Mioni/Arnuzzo 1977; Mioni/Trumper 1977). In other cases, moreover, the similarity of linguistic structure between Italian and Veneto, together with the fact that the lexicon used by the child is more basic and so more often common to the two languages, does not give enough information to permit the interpretation of a given utterance as either Italian or dialect. These phenomena of interference, particularly problematic in the study of the acquisition of a language, where they cannot be treated as separate systems nor in terms of deviations of one from the other (Labov 1972), require an analysis in terms of a single continuum with code switching between Italian and Veneto.

3. In Italian and in Veneto dialect the coding properties characterizing the Subject within a clause are represented in their formal structure by a clustering of rules that refer to underlying semantic features such as person/gender/number, rules generally called agreement rules: both in Italian and in Veneto the Verb agrees with the Subject in person and number, when used in the finite forms; when used in the past participle forms, number and gender are involved, though not precisely in the same way in both codes (Lepschy 1963). As to Pronouns, both systems admit case.

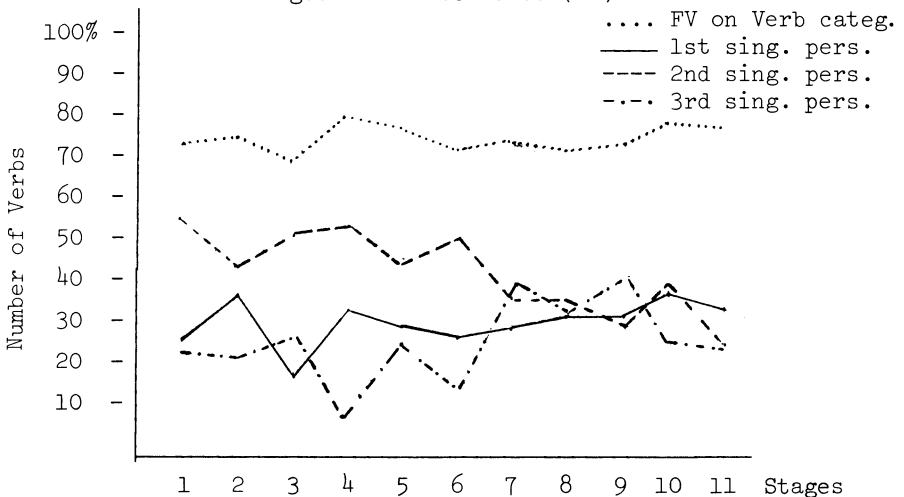
Italian and Veneto are generally both classified as having SVO basic sentence order; orders different from the basic SVO are explained on the basis of the information structure of the sentence and are considered marked (Gruppo di Padova 1974). Italian may have a rightward movement rule that places "new information" Subject in sentence-final position and a leftward movement rule for the Object, requiring several constraints such as a copying pronoun before the Verb or a special intonation contour (Magno/Fava 1974). In Veneto there are analogous rules for the Object, while Subject movement requires, in certain cases, a dummy pronoun replacement (Trumper 1976).

A careful inspection of our data indicates a large use on the part of the child, from the very beginning of his linguistic production, of the suffixal Verb conjugation and the related pronominal system, which occur respectively in 30% (832 Verbs) and 3% (81 Pronouns) of their utterances. From a detailed analysis of the

structure of children's discourse in their interaction with adults or with other children it appears that children's utterances are not only pragmatically appropriate in various ways (Ervin Tripp/ Mitchell Kernan 1977; Freedle 1977) but also grammatically matched with respect to Verb morphology and pronoun system. 85% of Verbs used by the child present either finite Verb morphs or past participle ones, which must refer to person and number or number and gender of the Subject. Pronouns appear firstly in the Italian Subject (full form) and later in the non-Subject case (clitic form), a fact particularly indicative because Subject Pronouns are generally omitted both in Italian and in Veneto.

The systematically significant relations between Verb suffixes and pronominal system appear mainly in the case of finite Verb morphology (see Table 1 for percentages of finite Verbs over total Verb categories (past participle and infinitives)), where the child's ability to cover almost the whole range of morphological endings, mostly in the present tense, and a meaningful part of the pronoun system permits the verification of agreement as a productive set of rules. From the very beginning children use 1st (-o), 2nd (-i), 3rd ( $\emptyset$ ) singular morphological endings. Later they use plural forms, the 1st plural (-mo) with the different rules for treating thematic vowels in the two codes; the Italian 3rd plural (-no) (in Veneto 3rd singular and plural are neutralized in morphological Verb endings).

Table 1.  
Percentages of Finite Verbs (FV)



Correspondingly, Pronouns appear first in 1st and 2nd person form (firstly in the Subject case and later in the non-Subject); later 3rd person Pronouns also occur. There is a coherently isomorphic relation between Verb morph and case marking of the pronominal system that is characteristic of the utterances where the child re

fers to himself. Self-reference may either be with a 3rd person Verb morph ( $\emptyset$ ) and, eventually, the proper name, or with a 1st person Verb morph (-o) and, eventually, 1st person Subject Pronoun. Even when the variation is in the same *discourse* unit, the relation is respected.

- (1) Lele (Gabriele) 2;2 pointing to a child who cries most of the time:
- 1.1. L: mato quello la/  
crazy+m. s. that+m. s. one/  
1.2. G: e perché sarebbe matto?  
and why (he) is crazy?  
1.3. L: gioca mai/ pange/ Lele no pange/  
play+3rd s. never/ cry+3rd s./ Lele no cry+3rd s./  
1.4. G: qualche volta anche tu piangi/  
sometimes even you cry/  
1.5. L: pango mai io/  
cry+1st s. never I (Subject)/.

In example (1) Lele switches from the use of his proper name (Lele) in 1.3. to personal Pronoun (io) in 1.5. to indicate himself. The alternation Proper Name/ Personal Pronoun corresponds to variation in the flexive verbal system (pange/pango). The same coherently isomorphic relation is characteristic also of utterances where the child refers to the hearer, always indicated by the 2nd person morph.

- (2) Lele 1;9 is playing a joke on the nun:
- 2.1. G: e suor Marcellina cosa dirà?  
and what suor Marcellina will say?  
2.2. L: (with a puzzled look on his face) tu dici?  
you (Subject) say+2nd s.

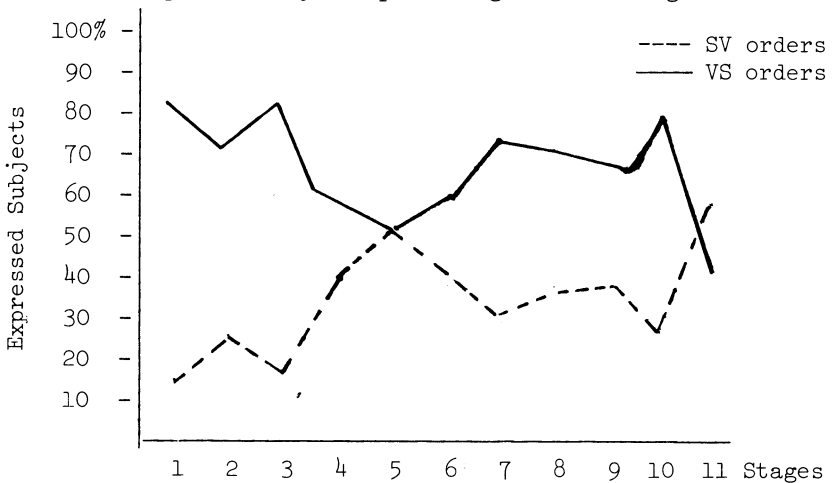
Note, moreover, that anaphoric descriptions are always in 3rd singular or plural Verb endings. According to Veneto and contrary to Italian morphosyntactic rules, we have on occasions found 3rd singular agreement even when the Subject was plural, as in (3); on the other hand, 3rd person plural morphs always and refer to a plural Subject as in (4).

- (3) Massimo 2;2 finally succeeds in finding a toy which does work: a helicopter. He is showing it to Gianna:
- 3.1. M: .... potrei volare? .... no potrei/angeeti vola/  
tati no/ vero?  
.... could+1st s. cond. fly+inf. ? .... no could+1st s. cond. /little angel (m.) +p. fly+3rd s./children no/ true?
- (4) Daniele 2;6 is feeling low because he has had his hair cut. He feels ugly. Running to the mirror:
- 4.1. D: .... tuto senza! tati ridono/  
.... all+m. s. without! child+p. laugh+3rd p.

This correct use of the set of formal rules concerning Verb agreement - despite the rather different framework of intersecting morphosyntactic categories of Italian and Veneto - and of the case marking system, which characterizes not only finite Verbs but also past participle ones, may be generalized by assuming that child has a productive control over the coding properties of the Subject. 4. These coding properties of the Subject, controlled regularly and systematically by the children from the very beginning of their linguistic production, do not imply a fixed pattern in the order of the Subject which seems, according to Bates, wholly performed by a later stage. For instance, Subject pronouns may follow the Verb, as in 1.3. or they may precede it, as in 2.2.

The same variation characterizes also proper names. Table 2. specifies the curve of the SV order and VS one, where the Subject is a name or a pronoun (SV order includes SV, SVO orders; a VS order includes VS, VOS, VSO).

Table 2.  
Percentages of Subjects preceding or following the Verb



To explain order variations, it has been proposed that at this stage there is a tendency to have first *new* information and later *given*, both in utterances where there isn't any preferential order predictable on syntactic basis and phrase elements seem to be juxtaposed on semantic ground (Baroni/Fava/Tirondola 1974) and in utterances where GRs hold (Bates 1976)

- (5) Daniele 2;1 is telling Gianna about his holidays in particular about the days he spent with his parents at the seaside. He likes the colours of the sea most of all.
- 5.1. D: ...nona no mare/ casa a nona/  
 ....grandmother no sea/ home the grandmother/

- (6) Gianna and Orietta 1;8 are looking to a cat on the roof. Orietta pointing out the cat to Gianna:
- 6.1. O: gato nero/  
cat(m.) +s. black+m. s./
- 6.2. G: che bel gattone! ti piacciono i gatti?  
what a nice cat! do you like (the) cats?
- 6.3. O: (gr)afiano i gati?  
scratch+3rd p.the cat+p.?
- (7) Elisabetta 2;3 is desperate because she is unable to learn a poem off by heart. The nun has warned her: Jesus won't give her any gifts. Gianna is consoling her: Jesus doesn't care about poems and she will get some presents. Elisabetta is still not convinced:
- 7.1. E: .... so neanche poesia/  
.... know+1st s. not at all poem/
- 7.2. G: non ha importanza/  
it is not important/
- 7.3. E: deto no regali/ suora deto no/  
said no present+p. /nun said no/

In 5.1. the element mentioned in the first utterance (a nona) is repeated in the last position in the second utterance; analogously, in (6) and (7) the Subject or the Verb are in last position, depending on what element (gato/gatti, deto no) has been previously mentioned, while the elements adding more information are in first position ((gr)afiano, suora). Such a structuring, where the information conveyed seems to add just enough information to frame a context (Cook Gumperz/Gumperz 1974; Leonardi 1977), reflects the effort of the child to contribute actively to the *discourse*. Very often the word, or words conveying the most information and which are firstly selected by the child are not part of the background child and adult have in common. Child's interest in unit larger than sentences explains the lack, in the utterances relative to the discourse, of the pattern *given/new*, which mirrors the "strong tendency in continuous discourse to start sentences with old information, i.e., with something already known and to introduce new information towards the end of the sentence" (Kuno 1971: 333) and which seems established in the structure of Italian language.

This interest for the discourse as unit is reflected in the relationship between *topic* as *discourse* (Ochs Keenan/Schieffelin 1974) and *topic* as *sentence* notion (Sgall et al.1973).<sup>1</sup>

The child, who masters the notion of a discourse topic, does not regularly signal the sentence topic in the ongoing discourse, as for the word order. If the topic is the element contextually bound and so it is coincidental with a given element, either it is not expressed at all or it is shunted to the end of the utterance. We came across frequently VOS orders or VSO depending on whether the Subject or the Object is topic and given (a nona, sechielo).

- (8) Massimo 2;3 is telling Gianna about the illness he has had, and how nice was the grandmother on that occasion:

- 8.1. M: ....a nona sempe..../ da Masimo /  
 ....the grandmother always..../ near Masimo /
- 8.2. G: e non giocavi con la nonna?  
 and (you) didn't play with the grandmother (did you)?
- 8.3. M: contava stoie a nona/  
 tell+*past.*+*3rd s.* story+p. the grandmother/  
 (9) Orietta 2;4 is fighting over a bucket with another  
 girl. When she succeeded in taking it away, she says  
 to Gianna:
- 9.1. O: deso mio/  
 now mine+m.s. /
- 9.2. G: Orietta non devi fare così!  
 Orietta don't do that!
- 9.3. O: volio io sechiolo!  
 want+*1st s.* I(*Subject*) bucket(*m.*) +*s.* !

In example(8) the child introduces in the conversation a new discourse topic, switching from the illness he has had to his grand mother. This element is in first position in the first utterance in line 8.1., but it is not maintained as such in the successive utterance, whose structure can be described as comment/topic in that order.

The contextual values that word order in general, and GRs in particular, has for the child, are reflected also in child utterances which provide self-corrections in *repair* phenomena (Schegloff/Jefferson/Sacks 1977), where the different pragmatic strategies that arise and which depend on the different types of initiation techniques employed by the adult, also determine the ordering of GRs. This explains the diversity of Subject order in 10.5. and 11.5, which have a similar construction with Verb and Adjective not referring to the Subject (as appears from the agreement rules).

(10) Ele (Gabriele) 2;2, who played a joke on Gianna, is now unsure of her feelings. He gives her a kiss, still wanting more reassurance:

- 10.1. E: bavo Ele / vero?  
 good +*m. s.* Ele/ true?
- 10.2. G: no no bravo / birichino /  
 no no good / impish /
- 10.3. E: biichino/ sempe a mama /  
 impish+m. s. / always the(*f. s.*) mummy(*f.*) /
- 10.4. G: cosa la mamma?  
 what the mummy?
- 10.5. E: dice biichino a mama/  
 say+*3rd s.* impish+m. s. the mummy(*f.*)/
- (11) Elisabetta 2;1 is very proud of her new hair cut:
- 11.1. E. bela così?  
 nice+f. s. this way?
- 11.2. G: si / proprio bella /  
 yes/ really nice/

- 11.3. E: anche papà/  
even daddy/  
11.4. G: anche papà bello?  
even daddy nice?  
11.5. E: (laughing) no::/ papà deto bela!  
no::/ daddy(m.) say+past part. m.s. nice+ f.s.!

In (10) where the child is asked to clarify by adding more information, with a constructional device consisting of a partial repeat of the trouble source turn (la mamma) plus a question word (cosa), the structuring is similar to the one just discussed. The already mentioned element (the Subject, in this case), taken for granted by the adult, is in last position. In example 11.5., on the contrary, the Subject, which is in first position, obeys different pragmatic rules: in fact, when elements previously mentioned in the preceding turns are not understood in their relations within the context, they are reintroduced in first position and in many cases may be clearly described as topic/comment in that order. In the cases observed, both the syntactic devices responsible for the mastering of GRs and the pragmatic ones responsible for the ordering rules seem to operate as parallel strategies, with no conflict between them. In other cases of Repairs, however, the redefinition of what the child is talking about seems to imply a rearrangement of constituent order both in pragmatic and syntactic hierarchies: this seems typically the case when semantic relations between referents not correctly identified by adults are involved.

- (12) Lele (Daniele) 1;11 sees flies near the window and he gets excited. He calls Gianna and Orietta, who doesn't seem to understand:  
12.1. L: Eta/ gada fale / fale là / vedi / ecote là /  
Eta/look butterflies/butterflies there/ look/ there they are/  
An older boy tells him that are not butterflies ((far) fale) but flies (mo(s)che):  
12.2. L: moche::/ bute moche/  
fly(f.) +p.: / naughty+f. p. fly+p. /  
mangia Lele moche /  
eat+3rd s. Lele fly+p. /  
12.3. G: tu mangi le mosche?  
do you eat (the) flies?  
12.4. L: (laughing) no::/ moche mangia!  
no::/ fly+p. eat+3rd s.

In 11.2., following the usual way of constructing discourse, Daniele shunts the Subject to the end of the utterance, when it also coincides with the topic of the conversation ('moche' previously confused with 'farfalle'). The ordering rules just described with "postposition" of the Subject, rules which go in the opposite direction of the adult ordering rules (the Subject is postposed if it is new) and the agreement rules, that in this particular case

do not provide enough information to disambiguate the context, create a misunderstanding. To disambiguate it, Daniele reorders in line 11.4. the elements previously mentioned in 11.2. (moche, mangia), thus utilizing a strategy which bears only on word order. This choice of a preferential order SV seems to be made in analogous contexts in which we found the choice of a topic/comment ordering. This suggests that, when the child realizes he hasn't been understood, he tries to correct himself and at this point he may reorganize a subpart of his discourse, so turning his attention to units smaller than the discourse, by choosing as a possible strategy the pattern topic/comment and/or the SV order.

5. From the analysis it appears that the child masters that part of the formal system of Italian and Veneto which concerns agreement rules and case marking system, despite the partially different intersecting morphosyntactic rules of the two codes. Such a knowledge may be generalized by operating in a Relational Grammar framework and by assuming that the child has, from the very beginning of his linguistic production, a productive control over the coding properties of the Subject within a clause. However, the order of GRs seems to be a variable depending on the discourse. Either the strategies determining word order are an automatic extension of earlier strategies (Bates 1976: 210; Greenfield/Smith 1976) or they already have specific symbolic features, they are used by the child with a context value: the different pragmatic needs which vary in conversational interaction according to different sequential environments and different pragmatic situations, determine the order of the Subject with respect to Verb and Object. The basic unit at which the word order is mastered is the discourse: child's tendency to advert to units smaller than the discourse are pretty rare. However, in such cases, where there is a tendency to move from a mastering of ordering strategies at the level of discourse to the mastering of ordering strategies at the level of sentence, pragmatic strategies responsible for the word order seem to interact with a syntactic one, the mastering of GRs, in determining by a slow and gradual process the linearization of GRs towards the preferential form SV(0). In this interplay between syntax and pragmatics appears the close relationship between language as a system and its functioning in the process of communication, which makes the discourse a basic variable in the child linguistic system.

#### Footnotes

This paper is presented here in a first shortened preliminary form. I would like to express my gratitude to John Trumper for his invaluable comments, to Gianna Tirondola, who generously shared both data and interpretations; to Franca Agnoli, who helped me with statistical elaborations. A special thanks to Serena Zovato for her sweet assistance, to Paolo Leonardi and Charlotte Linde.

<sup>1</sup> The distinction between topic/comment, given/new, firstly drawn by the structuralist scholars Daneš, Firbas, Beneš, has been restated by Halliday (1967) and by the generativists Sgall et al. (1973)

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