The acquisition of Italian questions by Tamil speakers

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1. Introduction

Formal approaches to language like Generative Grammar assume that linguistic variation is highly constrained and that all languages share the same fundamental structure, or Universal Grammar (UG). The principles that make up UG in turn are supposed to be active not only in the stable language of adults, but also during the acquisition of language itself. But while First Language Acquisition (see Friedemann-Rizzi, 2000, among others) has been extensively studied to see how much it conforms to the constraints imposed by UG, less is known about the role played by universal principles in Second Language Acquisition and their interaction with interference from the first language of the learner (see Flynn-O'Neil, 1988, on this topic).

In this paper we will study the syntax of interrogative clauses and *wh* items in the interlanguage of Tamil learners of Italian, living in Italy. In particular, we will focus on the acquisition of *wh* movement, since Tamil does not have overt movement of *wh*-items. Several hypotheses were proposed to account for the parametric difference between *wh*-movement and *wh* in-situ languages; we will base our analysis on the Clausal Typing hypothesis proposed by Cheng (1997), according to which languages can check the interrogative feature either through *wh*-movement or base-

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1 The authors would like to thank Cecilia Poletto and Federico Damonte for their precious help and advice. We also thank an anonymous reviewer, who gave us some useful suggestions. However, we are responsible for any errors.

2 Tamil is a Dravidian language, spoken in Southern India (Tamil Nadu) and in the island of Ceylon.
generation of an interrogative particle. We will also adopt Rizzi's (1997) split-CP hypothesis and assume that the interrogative feature is spelled out in the Focus Phrase in Italian. We will argue that our findings show that both UG principles and interference from the native language play a role during second language acquisition (as also claimed by Flynn-O'Neil, 1988). Moreover, it will be shown that interference from the first language is restricted to formal properties of the *wh* items and that the universal structure of the left periphery is accessible during the acquisition process.

The paper is organised as follows: section 2 presents the theoretical background we assume and introduces briefly Italian and Tamil interrogative structures, pointing out some major differences between the two languages; section 3 describes the data collection techniques we used and contains some essential information about our informants; section 4 presents the results of our survey, and some generalizations that can be made about them. Some peculiar phenomena will be pointed out and investigated in more detail; section 5 provides our analysis of these phenomena. We argue that UG principles are visible in the interlanguages of Tamil learners and that interference from the first language is restricted to the formal properties of the *wh* items; section 6, lastly, provides some conclusive remarks.

2. Theoretical Background

It is well known that sentences can have different functions. Some of these functions are overtly marked by different morpho-syntactic mechanisms. Together, these mechanisms are labelled “Clause Typing” (see, for example, Cheng, 1997). Informally, the “type” a clause belongs to indicates its illocutionary Force, such as declarative or interrogative (see, among others, Chomsky, 1995: §4). In his seminal work on the “left periphery” of the sentence, Rizzi (1997) argues that the Force of a sentence is encoded in the left periphery (and more precisely in the upper part of it): he identifies a functional projection (which he calls Force Phrase), where several features have to be checked. These features, in turn, determine the Clause Type of the sentence. In (1) we report the map of the left periphery as proposed by Rizzi (1997) and slightly modified by Benincà (2001):
Following Chomsky’s (1995) Feature Checking Requirement, we assume that the interrogative clausal type is related to an interrogative feature [+Q], which must be checked in order to license an interrogative interpretation. In some languages, for example Italian, this feature must be checked in a low projection in the left periphery, namely Focus Phrase (Rizzi, 1997: §5), as it can be seen in (2), where a left dislocated phrase in [Spec, TopicP] precedes an item in [Spec, FocusP]:

(2)  Il biglietto quando lo compri?
     the ticket     when    it buy-2sg
     ‘The ticket, when are you buying it?’

As it has been shown by Cheng (1997) for wh questions, languages vary as to the way they check the interrogative feature [+Q]. Some languages use wh movement to the left periphery (wh movement languages), while others allow the wh item to stay in situ (in situ languages). According to Cheng, in situ languages mark questions by means of specific interrogative particles (which can be phonologically null). This hypothesis is based on the observation that all in situ languages have phonetically realized interrogative particles in yes/no questions.\(^3\)

These considerations are summarized in Cheng’s (1997: 22) Clausal Typing Hypothesis:

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\(^3\) Baker (1970: 207), who first introduced the concept of the [Q] feature, considers English if and whether as interrogative particles and notes that there is a close connection between the position of yes/no particles and syntactic movement of wh elements. However, his conclusion that only languages which place yes/no particles in clause-initial position permit wh-movement turned out to be wrong: it seems that all in situ languages have some morphologically overt process to mark yes/no questions.
Every clause needs to be typed. In the case of typing a -question, either a -particle in $C^0$ is used or else fronting of a -word to the Spec of $C^0$ is used, thereby typing a clause through $C^0$ by Spec-head agreement.

In *wh-in situ* languages overt *wh* movement is not necessary, because the interrogative feature does not have to be checked before Spell-Out. This variation is explained by the parametrisation of features’ strength: in some languages [+Q] is strong and must be checked before Spell-Out; on the contrary, if [+Q] is weak, *wh* movement takes place at LF.

2.1. Comparing Italian and Tamil Interrogatives

Italian is a *wh* movement language, while Tamil is an *in situ* (verb final) language. Italian is very similar to English, as it can be seen in (3), where the *wh* word is fronted:

(3)  Cosa fai per il tuo compleanno?
    what do-2sg for the your birthday
    ‘What are you doing for your birthday?’

In Tamil, a declarative sentence and its correspondent question have the same surface word order (Savio, 1991):

(4)  a. avan sâ tam sâppiṭṭān.
    he rice ate-3sg
    ‘He ate some rice’

b. avan enna sâppiṭṭān?
    he what ate-3sg
    ‘What did he eat?’

In the Italian sentence (3) the *wh* direct object is raised to [Spec, FocusP], and the inflected verb *fai* is raised to Focus$^\circ$ (as argued by Rizzi, 1997); in the Tamil question (4b), the *wh* word *enna* stays in situ and the [+Q] feature is checked by a null particle. We assume the existence of such null interrogative particle, since in Tamil questions are marked by special morphemes on the verb or the interrogated argument. In (5) an example of a yes/no interrogative sentence is given; the final verb shows the interrogative suffix -ā:
Raman vandār-ē?
Raman came-yes/noPrt
‘Did Raman come?’

Similarly, *wh*-interrogative words are marked by the prefix *e-*, which distinguishes them from correspondent adverbs, adjectives and pronouns, as it can be observed in table 1, where some interrogative and demonstrative pronouns are reported:

**Table 1: Interrogative and demonstrative pronouns**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRONOUNS</th>
<th>DEMONSTRATIVE</th>
<th>INTERROGATIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prorximate i-</td>
<td>Distant a-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Idu</em></td>
<td>“this thing”</td>
<td><em>Adu</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“that thing”</td>
<td></td>
<td>“which thing?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ivaru</em></td>
<td>“this person”</td>
<td><em>Avaru</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“that person”</td>
<td></td>
<td>“which person? who?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ivan</em></td>
<td>“this male”</td>
<td><em>Avan</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“that male”</td>
<td></td>
<td>“which male?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While Tamil uses morphological means in the formation of *wh*-questions, Italian resorts to both morphological and syntactic means. It should be pointed out that Tamil is different from *in situ* languages taken into consideration by Cheng (1997), as Chinese: in Tamil there are not independent interrogative particles. This fact shows that a third type of language should be added to Cheng’s typology: *in situ* languages with interrogative bound morphemes and null particles in CP.

3. Methodological Remarks

In this section we describe the data collection techniques we used and provide some information about the Tamil speakers interviewed for this study. The data collection took place in a series of encounters with the informants during the period from May to September 2003.
3.1. **Typology of the Elicitation Tasks**

The data were obtained by asking informants to perform three different types of linguistic tasks. These in turn were written down or recorded on tape.

**TASK 1:** the first task consisted in the translation in Italian of Tamil sentences;

**TASK 2:** the second task asked for the question corresponding to a given answer (in Italian), such as the one in (6), the expected output being “Perché sei tornato?” (‘Why did you return?’):

(6) Sono tornato perché è tardi.
    ‘I returned because it is late.’

**TASK 3:** in the third task informants had to complete a short dialogue in Italian where some questions were omitted. This type of linguistic task is different from the previous one because in this case the omitted questions are inserted in a context, which helps the informants to reconstruct the missing question.

3.2. **The informants**

The data were obtained from five Tamil speakers who have been living in Italy for different periods of time. The informants reside in three different cities of Central Italy (Bologna, Florence and Pisa). The main information about the informants are shown in table 2. In order to respect the privacy of our informants, nicknames are used in place of real names.

**Table2:** Informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NICKNAME</th>
<th>SRI</th>
<th>RAJA</th>
<th>SUJE</th>
<th>SUJATHA</th>
<th>KABILAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SEX</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLACE OF ORIGIN</td>
<td>Sri Lanka (Jaffna)</td>
<td>Sri Lanka (Jaffna)</td>
<td>Sri Lanka (Jaffna)</td>
<td>Tamil Nadu (Nagercoil)</td>
<td>Tamil Nadu (Madras)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOB</td>
<td>employee</td>
<td>workman</td>
<td>housewife</td>
<td>shop-assistant</td>
<td>engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIME IN ITALY</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>1,5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COURSE OF ITALIAN</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER LANGUAGES</td>
<td>English (a little)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>English (a little)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>English, Hindi, Kannada</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Results of the investigation

Before presenting the results of our study, it should be noticed that the aim of our research is that of identifying the specific properties of the syntax of Italian interrogative sentences produced by Tamil speakers. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a complete picture of the different stages of acquisition of Italian interrogative syntax by Tamil speakers. For this reason we did not carry out a longitudinal study, and we will not try to qualify the phenomena we observed as belonging to an early (or late) acquisitional stage.

4.1. Main Divergences from the Italian Interrogative Structure

About 10% of produced sentences can be considered totally incorrect. These sentences were produced mainly by speakers who have been living in Italy for a short period of time or who have few contacts with Italian people.

There are two main types of mistakes:

1. The wrong wh item is used;
2. The wh item is left in situ.

First we analyse some sentences with a wrong wh item. In (7a) and (8a) examples of this kind of error are given: (7a) was produced as translation (task 1) of the Tamil sentence (7a), while (8a) was produced as translation of (8b):

(7)  a. Lei dove suo paese? (SUJE)
     you (polite) where your (polite) country
     b. Nĩga eppó ūrkkup pɔrĩŋa?
        you when journey-dat go-2pl
        ‘When do you make a trip (to your country)?’

(8)  a. Dove andato Tiruchi? (SUJE)
     where gone Tiruchi’
     b. Tiruccikku eppadi pɔrĩŋa?
        Tiruchi-dat how go-2pl
        ‘How do you go to Tiruchi?’

In these examples the wh item dove is used instead of quando ‘when’ and come ‘how’. An other similar case is shown in (9), which is produced as a question (task 3) to the given answer (10):
(9) Quando volta vai in India?  
when time go-2sg in India

(10) Ci torno due volte l’anno.  
there return-1sg two times the year
‘I return there two times in a year.’

Here *quando volta* is used instead of *quante volte* ‘how many times’ (but this output could be motivated by a phonetic interference). Another kind of error, where L1 structures play a more evident role, is the *wh in situ* construction, which is presented below (11a), which was produced as translation (task 1) of (11b):

(11) a. Mio pena è dove? (KABILAN)  
my pen is where
b. En pēnā enē ngē irukkudu?
my pen where is
‘Where is my pen?’

It should be noticed that in (11) the verb-final structure of Tamil is not transferred to the Italian translation. This means that at this stage of acquisition the position of the inflected verb in Italian has already been learned, and the *wh* item occupies the position of a locative PP in an unmarked declarative order. Similar errors occur only in sentences produced as translations (task 1).

4.2. Specific Phenomena

We observed two peculiar phenomena in our corpus. The first can be observed in sentence (12):

(12) Comsichiama tu? (RAJA)  
how-oneself-call-3sg you
‘What’s your name?’

In this sentence the *wh* item and the verb (with the reflexive clitic) are written by the informant as one word. This is a written example, but this phenomenon seems quite frequent also in the spoken data. The informant seems to consider the *wh-item-verb* complex as a single unity.

The second phenomenon is present in 20% of the sentences and thus can be considered very frequent: a topicalised DP (mostly the subject or the
direct object of the sentence) appears before the *wh* item and the inflected verb:⁴

(13) a. Mia pena tove sono? (RAJA)
    my pen where are
    ‘Where is my pen?’

b. Tua fratello qando parte? (RAJA)
    your brother when leave-3sg
    ‘When does your brother leave?’

c. Lei che lavoro? (SUJE)
    you (polite) what job
    ‘What’s your job?’

In these sentences the position of the *wh* word can be considered correct, since, as we have shown above in example (2), a topic can precede a *wh* item, in Italian as in many other languages.

5. Analysis

Hawkins (2001) assumes that the clause structure of interlanguages is deprived of the CP layer, at least in the first stages of acquisition. We will show that this is not true, at least in the Italian clause structure of our informants. Instead, the data presented in the previous section lead us to think that UG, and the hierarchy of the left periphery in particular, are active during the acquisitional process.

Consider the examples in (13): the topicalised DP always precedes the *wh* item. Without a precise configuration of the CP layer, this is surprising, but, if we assume the left periphery mapping of Rizzi (1997) and Benincà (2001), the reason for such order is clear: a topic (either a Hanging Topic or a Clitic Left Dislocated phrase) must precede a *wh* word in [Spec, Focus]. This is the reason why in Italian (14a) is acceptable but (14b) is ungrammatical:

(14) a. Il libro quando lo compri?
    the book when it buy-2sg
    ‘The book, when are you buying it?’

b. *Quando il libro lo compri?*

Our informants make several types of morphological and syntactic mistakes,

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⁴ An anonymous reviewer points out that the order Subj-*wh*-Verb in (14) reflects the Tamil word order. So, even if we analyzed the initial DP as a topic, it is not possible to exclude the influence of the Tamil word order in such examples.
but they never put a topic after a *wh* item. Even if our informants are not able to produce some complex structures involving the left periphery, such as cleft sentences, they seem to have a correct “map” of the order of elements in the CP domain. We leave open the question whether the topicalised phrases in (14) are Hanging Topics or Clitic Left-Dislocated phrases, but it should be noticed that they correspond to either the subject or the object of the verb: probably this is due to the fact that DPs are more naturally topics than adjunct PPs.

The structure of sentences like (13b), repeated below as (15) without orthographical errors, is shown in (16):

(15) Tuò fratello, quando parte?

(16)

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      TopicP
         |  Topic°
        DP,  Tuo fratello
             FocusP
                quando Focus°
                parte IP
                              pro, t_
```

The DP *tuo fratello* is located in [Spec, TopicP], while the *wh* item *quando* and the inflected verb *parte* are in [Spec, FocusP] and Focus°, respectively. They are in a Spec-Head configuration, and therefore the [+Q] feature in Focus° is checked. Here we will not address the question whether the topic DP is raised from IP or it is base-generated in [Spec, TopicP]; in the former case it leaves a trace, in the latter it is coreferential with a *pro* in subject position (as shown in (16)).

The other peculiar phenomenon, exemplified by sentences like (12), repeated as (17), is also worth discussing:

(17) Comsichiama tu?
    how-oneself-call-3sg you
    ‘What’s your name?’

The fact that the informant writes the *wh* word and the inflected (reflexive) verb as one word means that such sentences are produced through a
reanalysis of the *wh* item as a *wh* agreement morpheme on the inflected verb in a way parallel to the strategy used in Tamil for *yes/no* questions (see (5)). As we said above, in Tamil there are no free phonetically realized interrogative morphemes, be they *wh* items or interrogative particles. Such examples, triggered by L1 interference, may be considered as evidence of an intermediate stage of acquisition. In other words, since in their mother language interrogative sentences are always marked by bound morphemes, our informants interpret the *wh* word *come* ‘how’, which appears before the verb, as an interrogative prefix.

These facts show that what is transferred from L1 to L2 in second language acquisition are the formal properties of the elements rather than the clause typing strategy. Tamil learners of Italian learn very quickly that *wh* items and verbs have to be moved to CP in interrogatives (as pointed out above, *wh* items *in situ* are very rare in our corpus), but they treat *wh* words as bound morphemes.

6. Conclusions

At the end of this study, it is possible to say that Tamil speakers acquire Italian interrogative strategies very soon in the acquisition process. *Wh* words, even if not always the correct ones, are fronted in most sentences. Furthermore, even when the *wh* word is not fronted, informants correctly move the inflected verb past the direct object, both in declaratives and interrogative sentences. The verb final configuration of Tamil is not transferred to Italian. It should be added that also Italian interrogative intonation (which is sometimes the only way to distinguish a *yes/no* question from a declarative) is acquired without any difficulty.

Two kinds of interference phenomena can be observed. The first is related to Tamil word order: as pointed out above in section [3], sometimes *wh* words appear *in situ*. The second one, which is more frequent and relevant, is related to Tamil affixal morphosyntax: Italian *wh* items are treated as interrogative morphemes incorporated onto the verb.

The fact that very often a topic DP precedes the *wh* item reveals that informants have access to the internal structure of the CP and know that in Italian [+Q] is checked in FocusP. This leads us to conclude that at least some of the principles of UG are active during second language acquisition. It also seems to indicate that errors made at intermediate stages of the acquisition process are caused by the lack of movement operations rather than gaps in the structure of the clause. Second language learners have a CP layer in their syntactic representations, but they lack the morphological and lexical means to produce complex structures involving this representation. This is the reason why cleft sentences are not produced and why topics lack
resumptive clitics, as it should be the case in clitic left dislocation constructions.

References


