TOPICS AND PASSIVES IN ITALIAN-SPEAKING CHILDREN AND ADULTS

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The present study investigates the production of topics and passives, and in particular it focusses on the use of Clitic Left Dislocation by Italian-speaking children and adults.
Given a patient-oriented question as (1b), Italian allows for two felicitous answers, a pronominalization of the patient (CLLD, see 2a) and a passive (2b), both topicalizing the patient. Previous research on the use of topics and passives in Italian (Volpato et al. 2015; Manetti 2013) has shown that when answering to patient-oriented questions (1b), Italian-speaking children, from age 3-4, tend to topicalize the patient of a transitive action through pronominalization (as in 2a), whereas adults strongly prefer passives (as in 2b).

(1) a. Event: Tiger scratching king
b. Q: *Che cosa succede al re*? (What happens to the king?)
(2) a: *(Il re) la tigre lo graffia*. ((The king) the tiger him.CL scratches)
b: *(Il re) viene/è graffiato dalla tigre*. ((The king) comes/is scratched by the tiger)

Focussing on children, their most frequent answer consists of pronominalizations with a *covert* dislocated topic, resulting in a sentence as e.g. *la tigre lo graffia* ('the tiger him.CL scratches'). This is indeed a preferred option: In these cases, the left dislocated DP, *il re* (the king), remains preferably covert; due to its mention in the immediate previous discourse, its overtness would sound redundant, producing *a special stylistic effect of reiteration* (Rizzi, 2005, Balaban et al. 2015). The optionality also holds for the subject of the passive sentence (see 2b).

Building on these findings, the present study aims at further exploring children's use of left peripheral topic positions and in particular we examine the production of *overt* vs. *covert* topics in a production task, in which we manipulate the topic conditions, presenting either one or two topic referents in the patient role. This manipulation first enables us to control for the production of pronominalizations with covert topics as the *baseline* condition (condition 1), as already investigated in previous studies. Condition 2, instead, provides a new setting, which presents two topics in a contrasting relation. In this contrastive topic condition, the production of pronominalizations with an explicit left dislocated topic in a left peripheral position (CLLD) is favored. The comparison will allow us to dig into two interrelated research questions: a) do 4- and 5-year-old children master appropriate use of left peripheral topic position(s), b) How do children and adults differ in the use of topics and passives?

We tested 36 children (aged from 4;1 to 5;11, MA= 60 months) and 24 adults using an elicited production task, in which a curious smurf asks questions to participants. The test presents a set of pictures depicting transitive actions and pairs of either human or animal characters, shown on a power point presentation. We manipulated the discourse conditions (within-subjects) so that the participant has to talk about *one patient* (condition 1, see 3) vs. *two patients* (condition 2, see 4). Each experimental trial consists of three steps: first, all characters are introduced (agents and patient(s)); second, the participant is told that the smurf is particularly curious about either one or two of them (e.g. the cat in (3), and the dog and the bear in (4)); finally the smurf asks a patient-oriented question, which is about one patient in condition 1 (e.g. What happens to my friend, the cat?, figure 1) and two patients in condition 2 (e.g. What happens to my friends, the dog and the bear?, figure 2). After five practice trials, the test includes eight fillers and eight experimental questions (four in each condition) presented in pseudorandomized order: each experimental question elicits the descriptions of two pictures, appearing on the same slide (see figure 1 and figure 2).

(3) Fig.1: Condition 1 (one topic)

(4) Fig.2: Condition 2 (two topics)

Results show that, as expected from previous findings, in the one-topic condition children opted for pronominalizations with covert topics (67%) and only 3% overt dislocated topics were produced; whereas adults' production mainly consisted of passives, 58% (venire/copular passive 45%; *si*-causative 13%); 22% were pronominalizations with covert topics and 1% CLLDs. In contrast, the two-topic condition led to an increase of pronominalizations with overt left dislocated topics in children's description (25%; e.g. OSclV *il cane il gatto lo lava* 'the dog the cat him.Cl washes'; SOclV *il gatto il cane lo lava* 'the cat the dog him.CL washes'), whereas covert topics decreased to 8%. As for adults, passives were the preferred answer (49% copular/venire passive; 20% *si*-causative passive) and only 1% CLLDs emerged. Passivisation in children only consisted of *si*-causative passive, in both conditions. Table 1 reports answers by adults and children.

Table 1

	CHILDREN		**ADULTS**	
	One Topic	**Two Topics**	**One Topic**	**Two Topics**
Active-SVO	6%	29%	12%	12%
Pronoun (covert topic)	**67%**	**8%**	**22%**	**0%**
CLLD (overt topic)	**3%**	**25%**	**1%**	**1%**
Copular/Venire Passive	0%	0%	45%	49%
Si-causative Passive	9%	11%	13%	20%
Other	15%	27%	7%	18%

Children and adults differ in the use of pronominalization and passive: overall, children prefer the pronominalization of the topic over its passivisation, in clear contrast with adults. If some pronominalization is used in the one topic condition by adults, it is, however, resorted to to a lesser extent than by children. As concerns the use of CLLDs, only 1% dislocated structures (with resumptive pronoun) are produced by adults in the two-topic condition in sharp contrast with children, for whom the two-topic condition favors the use of an overt topic: the production of CLLDs with overt topics increases in the contrastive topic condition when children have to contrast between two possible patient characters.

Overall, these results shed some more light on Italian-speaking children's competence of topics: children showed to be able to distinguish between the topic pragmatic conditions in terms of overtness/covertness of topics (see De Cat 2009 for similar results with left dislocated subjects in French), with a good mastering of left peripheral topic emerging from age 4. When passivisation is resorted to, the only type of passive used by children is the *si*-causative passive (confirming previous results from priming studies, see Manetti & Belletti 2015; Contemori & Belletti 2013 for related results), again in clear contrast with adults. We will conclude by addressing the relevance of these results from both a theoretical and a developmental perspective comparing CLLD vs passive in the expression of topics.