

# Cross-linguistic Effects of Input Frequency and Sentence Structure in Relative Clause Comprehension

Flavia Adani  
Freie Universität Berlin  
(joint work with Maria De Martino)

The ability to interpret object relative clauses (OR, examples 1-3) in an adult-like manner takes some years and is influenced by different factors. Brandt et al. (2009, a.o.) show that English- and German-speaking children are sensitive to input frequencies: the most frequent OR with an inanimate head (OR:IN-AN, example 1) are acquired earlier by children than OR with two animate nouns as verb arguments (OR:AN-AN, example 2), which are rarer in their input. Moreover, Biondo et al. (2022, a.o.) argue that number mismatch of the verb arguments (e.g., one singular, one plural as in OR:SG-PL, example 3) in Italian facilitates sentence comprehension also in acquisition. Adani et al. (2017) have tested the predictions of these accounts in German using a within-subject design and showed that 3-year-olds already exploit input frequency as a cue to target OR comprehension while sensitivity to number marking is only detected in 5-year-olds.

In this talk I will focus on Italian, a language that differs from German with respect to critical linguistic properties, including word order (with German featuring verb-final relative clauses, unlike Italian) and the presence of case-marking (highly reliable cue to syntactic roles in German, but absent in Italian). As a result, the Italian sentence in (4) is ambiguous in that “*il ragazzo*” can be interpreted as either the object of a subject relative clause (hence SR:AN-AN) or a (post-verbal) subject (as in an OR:AN-AN). Our goals are twofold: (a) to disentangle the concurrent impact of input frequency and number marking on OR comprehension and (b) to explore the effect of post-verbal subject licensing in Italian SR/OR comprehension.

- (1) (Di che colore è) il pullover che l'uomo sta grattando (OR:IN-AN, both NP singular)  
(*what color is*) *the pullover that the man is scratching*
- (2) (Di che colore è) l'uomo che il ragazzo sta grattando (OR:AN-AN, both NP singular)  
(*what color is*) *the man that the boy is scratching*
- (3) (Di che colore è) l'uomo che i ragazzi stanno grattando (OR:SG-PL)  
(*what color is*) *the man that the boys are scratching*
- (4) (Di che colore è) l'uomo che sta grattando il ragazzo (SR:AN-AN/OR:AN-AN, both NP singular)  
(*what color is*) *the man that is scratching the boy/the man that the boy is scratching*

## References

- Adani, F., Stegenwallner-Schütz, M., & Niesel, T. (2017). The Peaceful Co-existence of Input Frequency and Structural Intervention Effects on the Comprehension of Complex Sentences in German-Speaking Children. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8(1590).
- Biondo, N., et al. (2022). Features matter: the role of number and gender features during the online processing of subject- and object- relative clauses in Italian. *Language, Cognition and Neuroscience*, 1-19.
- Brandt, S., et al. (2009). The discourse bases of relativization: An investigation of young German and English-speaking children's comprehension of relative clauses. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 20(3), 539-570.