

Indefinites And Negation: Scope And Word Order In Italian

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The question. Musolino (1998) observed that English children interpret (1) as (1'), while adults (only) interpret (1) as (1''):

(1) The detective didn't find some guys

(1') It is not the case that the detective found some guys ($\neg\exists$ surface scope)

(1'') There are some guys that the detective didn't find ($\exists\neg$ inverse scope)

Lidz&Musolino (2007) claimed that this preference depends on c-commanding relations between indefinites and negation, independently of surface order. Gualmini (2003&2008) argued that children access inverse scope readings in felicitous settings. I intend to contribute to this debate testing Italian children. Allowing post-verbal subjects, Italian constitutes an interesting ground for investigating children's access of inverse scope readings in sentences with negation interacting with pre- and post- verbal subjects. Ultimately, this study can help clarifying the status and children's mastery of post-verbal subject in Romance languages.

The study. By means of a Truth-Value-Judgment-Task (Crain&Thornton, 1998), I tested 4-year-old children in two conditions:

C1 Due signore non hanno preso il treno [lit. Two-ladies-not-have-taken-the-train]

C2 Non hanno preso il treno due signore [lit. Not-have-taken-the-train-two-ladies]

Both sentences can either mean (i) or (ii)

(i) there are two ladies that didn't take the train ($\exists 2\neg$ = surface scope for C1) = TRUE

(ii) there aren't two ladies that took the train ($\neg\exists 2$ = surface scope for C2) = FALSE

They were heard after a story in which two of four ladies got on a train and the other two went by boat; thus, they were true under interpretation (i) and false on (ii).

Results and Discussion. Interpretation (i)-*inverse scope* for C2- was preferred 70% of the times in C1 and 44% in C2 ($p<.01$), while interpretation (ii)-*surface scope* for C2- gained equal preference in both conditions (~20%). An interesting crucial difference across conditions was found in the rate of "confused" responses, that was near 40% in C2, where subject appeared post-verbally ($p<.01$). Thus, while Italian 4-year-olds seem to master *inverse scope* interpretations (when they were not confused, they accepted C2, contrary to Musolino's 1998 findings) they seem to have some difficulty with V(O)S order, as also attested by other studies on Italian (Arosio et al. 2005). The hypotheses that I am currently testing to explain this result is that this difficulty is more "pragmatic" than "syntactic" in nature. Using a modified version of this task (building on Gualmini et al. 2008), I'm testing a new group of 4 year old children in a setting that is specifically designed to control for the role of expectations and QAR (Question-Answer-Requirement): children hear C2 again (containing negation and post-verbal subject) in a similar context as before but this time it comes as a (more felicitous) answer to an *overt* question (did all the ladies manage to take the train in the end?) and as a statement that an *overt* expectation (all the ladies should take the train – the alternative here being "missing" it, not taking a boat instead) went unfulfilled (two were late in the end and missed the train). Very preliminary results on this new experimental task seem to show that Italian 4-years-old improve in this setting: not only they do access inverse scope interpretations, accepting (more than rejecting) C2 in the context, but also they seem to be less confused by the use of a sentence with a post-verbal subject when its use is made felicitous by overtly specified contextual assumptions and expectations. My claim is that, in the end, children can master "marked" (or more demanding) syntactic constructions if their use is pragmatically justified and felicitous.

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