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Agreement in Heritage Morphology: Past Forms in Veneto Speakers from Australia and Canada

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Ai miei nonni materni Corrado e Agnese
per avermi insegnato che l'amore
può perdurare oltre gli oceani.

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ABSTRACT

The acquisition of functional morphology is one of the main challenges for second language learners (Lardiere, 1998, 2005; Slabakova, 2009), but very little is known about morphological representations in Heritage speakers, (Albirini et al., 2013; Montrul et al., 2008) needless to say in Veneto. The aim of the current study is to investigate the expression of subject-verb agreement in past tenses in Veneto Heritage Speakers Canadian and Australian-born.

In Veneto all verbs agree in person and number, and in the Passato Prossimo forms (with *essere*) also in gender. Contrariwise, agreement in English is not active in the past tense (except for the copula *was/were*). Hence, Veneto Heritage Speakers whose majority language is English, may find it difficult to master the agreement in the past. In order to describe the distribution and frequency of use of this phenomenon, 20 Veneto heritage speakers (7 Canadian and 13 Australian-born), aged between 54 and 68 years old participated in the study, further grouped according to their heritage language exposure (shorter vs. longer). Their performance has been compared with a group of 5 age-matched native speakers residents in the Veneto region.

Participants were video recorded and completed a language background questionnaire 3 oral tasks that elicited past forms: 1- picture narrative task with 23 verbs (13 targeting a perfective form, 10 an imperfect form); 2- picture description targeted simultaneous actions through; 3- semantic interpretation task. All of them adapted into Dialecto Veneto from the SPLLOC project <http://www.splloc.soton.ac.uk/index.html>.

Overall, results showed that participants elicited a good amount of omission of the subject clitic pronoun. Moreover, a great number of errors concerning gender agreement on the subject clitic pronoun were also found, participants produced masculine instead of the target feminine.

This was observed in both short and long exposure groups.

INTRODUCTION

Language contact has had a great impact in language studies. Immigration and mixture of languages and cultures have helped increasing this phenomenon. In recent years, more concern on Heritage Speakers and their language competence have been the topic of great number of studies.

Heritage speakers can be defined as the second generation of immigrants, namely the children of the first generation of immigrants who have been exposed to the minority language at home in an informal setting as opposed to having learned it at school.

The acquisition of functional morphology is one of the main challenges for second language learners (Lardiere, 1998, 2005; Slabakova, 2009), but very little is known about morphological representations in Heritage Speakers, (Albirini et al., 2013; Montrul et al., 2008) needless to say in Veneto. The aim of the current study is to investigate the expression of subject-verb agreement in past tenses in Veneto¹ Heritage Speakers Canadian and Australian-born.

In order to describe the distribution and frequency of use of this phenomenon, 20 Veneto heritage speakers (7 Canadian and 13 Australian-born), aged between 54 and 68 years old participated in the study, further grouped according to their heritage language exposure (shorter vs. longer). Their performance has been compared with a group of 5 age-matched native speakers residents in the Veneto region.

The present dissertation is structured as follows:

Chapter 1 is a sociolinguistic analysis on the phenomenon of migrations that invest Italy and in particular northern regions, in the years in between the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th century.

In Chapter 2 I will outline an analysis of the term Heritage Speaker and the main issues and difficulties mainly on morphological acquisition, presenting important studies on this topic. Moreover, a comparison between Heritage Speakers and L2 learners will be delineated.

¹ In the present dissertation the terms *Dialetto Veneto* and Venetian will be used to refer to the northern Italian dialect variety investigated

In Chapter 3 an analysis of the differences in verbal morphology agreement between *Dialetto Veneto* and English will be outlined, along with a comparison between *Imperfetto* and *Passato Prossimo* concerning verb agreement.

Finally, chapter 4 will centre around the investigation that was conducted, depicting participants involved and the methodology that was adopted, as well as an analysis and discussion of the data and results.

Chapter 1 – “QUA BISOGNA ‘NDAR VIA”

1.1 – A sociolinguistic path through postbellum Venetian migration.

“Qua bisogna ‘ndar via” (We must leave).

This expression had been pronounced in almost every Veneto house during the great migration of the first decades of the 20th Century.

Years in between the end of the 19-20th Century have been marked by a massive migration process that affected all regions of Italy, in particular the Veneto region. It is estimated that over 856.844 Venetian citizens emigrated mainly to Australia, the Americas and western Europe.

Italy faced two main diasporas, a migration phenomenon on massive scale. The first began around 1880 and concluded in the 1920s to the early 1940s. The second started after the end of Second World War and ended in the 1970s.

In order to overcome the dramatic post war situation Italy was facing, especially after the World War II, the government highly encouraged citizens to emigrate. A great number of Venetian abandoned their houses, families, ordinary lives and routines, moved by an inner glimmer of hope to find prosperity and better life opportunities.

Many had been the causes of this mass migration phenomenon, both demographic and occupational. Not only were families poor and unemployed, but they were also numerous. Moreover, the agriculture was underdeveloped and families lived in unhealthy conditions. For these reasons, it was necessary to leave and find better life opportunities in those countries uncharted by the war, but where workforce was highly required. Almost every Italian family has at least one story concerning migration and the wish to guarantee a stable and solid future to enrich the social family situation. Not only did post war migration depended on social and economic variables, but also on difficulties of establishing in the host country. These countries in fact had strict rules regarding immigrants and did not want them to stay long.

Entire families of artisans, day labourers, farmers – mostly illiterate that before that had no idea where those foreign countries were located – have been forced to leave towards unknown and probably hostile places. Some of these immigrants returned to their hometown, while others decided to settle down in the new reality, starting their own families.

This experience certainly changed people inside, uprooted from their ordinary lives and forced to stabilize in a foreign country. Not only did they have to face homesickness, but also

difficulties concerning language. It was not a simple obstacle to overcome, since they were all farmers and day labourers with a very low school education and the only language they knew was the Venetian Dialect.

Venetian or Venetan is a Romance language spoken by over two million people, mostly in the Veneto region of Italy. The language is called *vċneto* in Venetian, *veneto* in Italian; the variant spoken in Venice is called *venesian/venessian* or *veneziano*, respectively. Although commonly referred to as an Italian dialect (*dialeto*, *dialetto*), even by its speakers, it does not descend from the Italian language but has its own morphology, syntax and lexicon. Venetian should not be confused with Venetic, an apparently unrelated (and extinct) Indo-European language that was spoken in the Veneto region around the 6th century BC.² Venetian is spoken mainly in the Italian regions of Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia and in some areas of both Slovenia and Croatia (Istria, Dalmatia and the Kvarner Gulf). Moreover, smaller communities are also present in Lombardy (Mantua), Trentino, Emilia Romagna (Rimini and Forlì), Sardinia (Arborea, Terralba, Fertilia), Lazio (Pontine Marshes), and formerly in Romania (Tulcea).

Around the world it is also spoken in North and South America. In Brazil, due to the great number of Venetian immigrants, a new dialect emerged; the so called *Talian*. It is a dialect of the Venetian language. It is not derived from Italian (as the assonance in name can suggest), it is primarily a mixture of Venetian dialects with an influence of other Gallo-Italian languages and the local Portuguese. It is mostly present in the Serra Gaúche region, which is located in the northeast of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, but also in parts of Espírito Santo and Santa Catarina. The Brazilian city of Serafina Corrêa, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, gave *Talian* a joint official status alongside Portuguese.

For some immigrants, the dialect was predominant as it continued to be the main mean of communication. Their knowledge in the foreign language covered only vocabulary and expressions connected with their occupations, useful for their daily life. Moreover, the dialects continued to be a fundamental vehicle of communication and their life and job experiences limited the chances to enlarge their linguistic and cultural range.

The maintenance of the relationship among Venetian communities established all over the world has become of bigger concern over the last decades. A great number of associations were

² https://data.mongabay.com/indigenous_ethnicities/languages/languages/Venetian.html

created such as “*Trevisani nel mondo*”, “*Veneti nel mondo*”, “*Veneto Club*”. Thanks to these groups immigrants are still in contact with each other and organize events, enthusiastic to welcome new members, willing to exchange experiences from different generations and backgrounds. They gather united by their strong bond with their motherland. Nowadays there are over 120 clubs, all over 18 countries.

Interestingly, in recent years the Italian government released laws to safeguard not only first generation of immigrants, but also to the so called *oriundi*, namely their descendants. This was intended to reinforce the identity bond with the home country cultural origin.

Legge regionale 9 gennaio 2003, n. 2 (BUR n. 4/2003)

NUOVE NORME A FAVORE DEI VENETI NEL MONDO E AGEVOLAZIONI PER IL LORO RIENTRO

CAPO I: DISPOSIZIONI GENERALI

Art. 1 - Finalità e destinatari.

1. La Regione del Veneto, nell’ambito delle finalità fissate in particolare dall’articolo 1, comma 5, dello Statuto in ordine al raggiungimento degli obiettivi di sviluppo economico e sociale:
 - a) promuove iniziative miranti a favorire e facilitare il rientro e l’inserimento nel territorio regionale:
 - 1) dei cittadini italiani emigrati, nati nel Veneto o che, per almeno tre anni prima dell’espatrio, abbiano avuto residenza in uno dei comuni del Veneto e che abbiano maturato un periodo di permanenza all’estero per almeno cinque anni consecutivi;
 - 2) del coniuge superstite e dei discendenti fino alla terza generazione dei soggetti di cui al punto 1);**
 - b) **interviene nei confronti della collettività veneta all'estero per garantire il mantenimento della identità veneta e migliorare la conoscenza della cultura di origine.**

A phenomenon with such great proportions left a deep mark in Italy’s past from politics to economic but also culturally.

REGIONI IN PRIMA FILA

VENETO	3.190.000
CAMPANIA	2.850.000
SICILIA	2.730.000
LOMBARDIA	2.420.000
PIEMONTE	2.455.000
FRIULI - V. G.	2.205.000
CALABRIA	2.010.000
PUGLIA	1.520.000
ABRUZZO	1.255.000
TOSCANA	1.215.000
BASILICATA	745.000
MARCHE	695.000
MOLISE	645.000
LAZIO	615.000
LIGURIA	440.000



COMPAGNI DI VIAGGIO:
VALIGIE, BAULI E DOCUMENTI

Italian migration from the 19th to the 20th Century, sorted by region.³

As can be seen from the image, the Veneto region is on the top three regions concerning emigration. The exodus affected all regions of Italy, but mainly the northern area. The Veneto region holds the record for migration flow. More than half of the departures (57% per cent) took place before the World War I. After the Second World War, Northern Europe, Canada and Australia become the most chosen destinations for another great migration period. Over four million of Italian citizens left the country and it was exhorted by the government, as solution to the demographical and economic crisis.

The table shows the main emigration countries in the years between 1876-1976⁴

EUROPEAN COUNTRIES		EXTRACONTINENTAL COUNTRIES	
FRANCE	4.117.394	USA	5.691.404
SWITZERLAND	3.989.813	ARGENTINA	2.969.402
GERMANY	2.452.587	BRAZIL	1.456.914
BELGIUM	535.031	CANADA	650.358
GREAT BRITAIN	263.598	AUSTRALIA	428.289
OTHERS	1.188.135	VENEZUELA	285.014
Total	12.546.558	Total	11.481.381

³ *Comunicato nr. 1481/2018 (FLUSSI MIGRATORI/VENETI NEL MONDO) ANEA (Associazione nazionale emigrati ed ex emigrati Australia e Americhe)*

⁴ <http://www.regioni.it/dalleregioni/2018/10/04/veneto-lemigrazione-in-cifre-il-veneto-prima-regione-nella-classifica-dellesodo-con-32-mln-di-emigrati-581074/> Source: *Rielaborazione dati Istat in Gianfausto Rosoli, Un secolo di emigrazione italiana 1876-1976, Roma, Cser, 1978.*

Drawing the attention on present days, the migration phenomenon reemerged in 2008 due to the economic crisis, which has been perceived as the worst time after the Post-War. A great number of young people, mostly graduated, left Italy seeking for job opportunities. Hence, it is not actually a “brain drain”, but more a matter of trying to find a solution to overcome unemployment and precariat.

It is estimated that in 2013 more than 82 million people emigrated abroad (7367 from the Veneto Region, which is the second region for number of departures after Lombardy)⁵. The main destinations were the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, France, the United States, Australia, and Canada. Furthermore, in recent years China has become one of the most chosen destinations.

To conclude, the migration phenomena Italy and in particular the Veneto region faced in years in between 19th and 20th Century, contributed to exporting the Venetian dialect abroad. The power of remembrance is so strong that it is still vivid in present days, that numerous clubs and associations.

⁵ <http://www.regioni.it/dalleregioni/2018/10/04/veneto-lemigrazione-in-cifre-il-veneto-prima-regione-nella-classifica-dellesodo-con-32-mln-di-emigrati-581074/>

1.2 - Multicultural society

"Those of us who come from very stable and highly focused societies may find it difficult to distinguish stereotypes about "normal transmission" from the real facts about language use, variation, and change in use, since we are so accustomed to think in terms of idealized, reified, discrete systems; but it is essential to see all language questions in terms of activity between individuals as they form social groups, even in the most static and highly focused societies."

[Le Page, Robert B. 1992. "You can never tell where a word comes from": language contact in a diffuse setting. In Ernest Håkon Jahr (ed.) Language contact: Theoretical and empirical studies. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 71-101 (p. 98).]

As outlined in the previous pages, people have always been in contact with other cultures and languages, and due to progresses in communication and globalization this phenomenon has risen over the past decades. Nowadays, it is common to find more than two languages coexisting together in an increasingly multicultural society due to recent migration flows and in these situations languages interact and influence each other. The importance of plurilingual contexts, relying both on the past and present, offer the chance to an interdisciplinary overview of specific themes and projects.

The phenomenon of linguistic contact touches all aspects of linguistic dimension including sociolinguistics, historical linguistics, and psycholinguistics and more specifically influencing lexicon, grammar, phonology, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics.

Multilingualism represents one of the most fascinating social effects of the immigrant population, leading both to cultural and political consequences. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Italy has faced the most important mass migration process, but it has also been and currently is one of the main destinations for recent migration. Hence, due to the continuous flow of migrants a great number of varieties are spoken. In order to reach a full integration in all the contexts of society, an adequate competence in the host country's language is fundamental. Learning the language of the hosting country is indeed a key factor for the integration of foreign people.

Moreover, it is important to analyse the linguistic situation of children of immigrants. They typically grew up speaking Dialecto Veneto at home, with parents and relatives, but learned English at a young age, hence they have a good competence in the foreign country official language. In spite of this, there can be a rift between the two generations, having different behavioural models. In other words, having grown up in both Anglophone and Venetian communities, they have learned both English and Dialecto Veneto, but at different stages of their lives. Moreover, not only did they

grew up surrounded by English and Venetian communities, but also Italian, hence some of them may result to be trilingual.

The phenomenon of multicultural linguistic interaction is preponderant in educational contexts. Nowadays, ever more classes in school are multilingual and it is essential to valorise these minority languages, sometimes ostracized to restricted contexts, and raising awareness on language diversity. They are part of each other's linguistic background history, but often perceived as with lower prestige and no official status.

As pointed out by Colucci (2019), in the 1970s plurilingualism acquired a new connotation. Studies made emerge a rising tendency in spreading linguistic register that differed from experience, also among biographical contexts. It was in these years that it started to be clear the distinction between Dialetto Veneto and the foreign language. This was due to an increase in educated and literate immigrants leading to the presence of a greater language competence. Nevertheless, the local dialects become less prevalent in the migration path.

Therefore, the 1970s marked a breakthrough period for migration and linguistics, inasmuch connected to the comeback. It was reported that some second generation of immigrants, children born and raised abroad from Italian families, were forced to return. They carried linguistics challenges, attending schools in foreign countries, and having scarce competence in Italian. Hence, they have a reverse problem compared to what their parents faced.

To conclude, this phenomenon which affected not only Veneto region but all countries worldwide, led the path to a multicultural environment. Languages are constantly in contact with each other, influencing each other.

Chapter 2 – HERITAGE SPEAKERS

2.1 – Heritage speakers: new term, timeless phenomenon.

Although the term Heritage Speaker is fairly new, this phenomenon has always been present in language contact situations. The term Heritage Speakers refers to second generation immigrants (children of the original immigrants) who lived in a bilingual or multilingual environment from an early age. They are considered early bilingual speakers who speak the heritage language as a minority language and the language of the host country is their dominant language.

Heritage Speakers are early bilingual speakers of ethnic minority language with different degrees of competence in the Heritage Language that goes from mere receptive competence in the L1 to balanced competence in the two languages (Bennamoun, Montul, Polinky, 2013).

As stated by Rothman (2008), the competence acquired naturally by Heritage Speakers differs from that of native monolinguals of comparable age. Early language exposure is not a sufficient condition for complete language acquisition in Heritage Speakers. It is interesting to notice that even if the Heritage Language is the first language to be acquired, it is possible that it will not reach a fully appropriate level of proficiency. Hence, this aspect underlines that not only does the effect of age influence on the development of a language, but also the importance of both quantity and quality of the input.

In these situations, speakers may undergo a language attrition which leads to a gradual loss of aspects in the native language by a healthy native speaker. In the language lifetime of a bilingual, one of the two languages tends to overcome the other which becomes weaker depending on experience and context. Heritage Speakers tend to grow up in a situation where they speak the Heritage Language, the one that is mainly spoken at home, but then change to the predominant language of the country. Hence, due to this shift Heritage Speakers tend to fail in reaching a fully appropriate levels of proficiency in the Heritage Language.

In light of the above mentioned, it is important to underline the subtle connection between the two languages of the Heritage Speakers, in order to understand the characteristic of Heritage Speakers.

Firstly, considering the order of acquisition of the languages, a distinction between first and second language is made.

Secondly, languages are divided in primary and secondary, according to their functional prevalence of use.

Finally, from a socio-political dimension there are minority vs majority language. The latter are spoken by an ethno-linguistically dominant group and are used in government and media, and also education imparted at school. On the other hand, minority languages typically have relatively lower prestige and isolated in restricted contexts.

2.2 – HERITAGE SPEAKERS: TWO DIMENSIONS COEXISTING.

As mentioned in the previous pages, Heritage Speakers do not reach fully appropriate levels of proficiency. There has been several research concerning this issue, from aspect to inflectional morphology. The purpose of most studies on Heritage Speakers is to localize the most preserved areas and those majorly affected by attrition or incomplete acquisition. In the present chapter a summary of the analysis on Heritage Speakers from Benmamoun Montrul, Polinsky (2013)⁶ will be provided.

As a result of language shift, by early adulthood a heritage speaker can be strongly dominant in the majority language, while the heritage language will become the weaker language. (Benmamoun, Montrul, Polinsky, 2013). Benmamoun et al. also underlined that, although the heritage language was first in order of acquisition Heritage Speakers will not be able to develop fully at age-appropriate levels because of the individual's switch to the societally dominant language. Moreover, they fail to demonstrate in adulthood age-appropriate levels of linguistic proficiency in the Heritage Language compared to monolingual norms, leading to an incomplete L1 acquisition. Arrested development, exposure to a different input, and a reduced or interrupted input are indeed the main causes of the incomplete competence in the L1.

After having outlined the characteristics of Heritage Speakers, it is essential to identify the factors that contribute to shaping the heritage grammars. Benmamoun et al. identifies four main factors: incomplete acquisition, attrition over the lifespan, transfer from the dominant language, and incipient changes in parental input that get amplified in the heritage variety.

Firstly, heritage speakers have a predominant exposure and use of the heritage language, but the input tend to be reduced as they begin to socialize in the majority language. This leads to a decrease in language competence.

A series of studies in the acquisition of the subjunctive in Spanish reported that heritage speakers, who receive less input at an earlier age and no schooling in the language, never fully acquire all the uses and semantic nuances of the subjunctive (Martínez Mira 2009; Montrul 2009; Potowski et al. 2009; Silva Corvalán 1994). Lack of attainment of a particular baseline phenomenon

⁶ Benmamoun, E., Montrul S., and Polinsky, M., (2013) *Heritage languages and their speakers: Opportunities and challenges for linguistics. Theoretical Linguistics* 2013; 39(3–4): 129 – 181

occurs primarily in childhood when input is insufficient for developing the full L1 system. Structures that were acquired at a certain age can be lost later on (Benmamoun Montrul, Polinsky, 2013).

Attrition is defined by Seliger (1996) as “the temporary or permanent loss of language ability as reflected in a speaker’s performance or in his or her inability to make grammaticality judgments that would be consistent with native speaker monolinguals of the same age and stage of language development.” As reported by de Bot (1991), this phenomenon may occur during the first generation of immigration, when either language shift or a change in the relative use of the L1 could affect structural aspects of the speaker’s native language.

Moreover, attrition can also occur much earlier in the life of a learner, damaging the integrity of the grammar. Research has also shown that severed or interrupted input in childhood leads to severe attrition and the possibility of total language loss, whereas reduced input in childhood, as in the case of heritage speakers, leads to partial attrition and incomplete acquisition (Montrul 2011).

The third factor concerns the transfer from the dominant language. This interaction between the heritage language and the dominant language is a fundamental issue in second language acquisition research. Studies on bilingualism and language contact (both at the social and psycholinguistic levels) suggests that the second language can encroach on the structure of the native language in systematic ways (Cook 2003; Pavlenko and Jarvis 2002; Seliger 1996).

The erosion of nominal and verbal inflectional morphology in Spanish and Russian heritage speakers may be linked to the fact that the contact language for most of the tested speakers is English, a language which lacks rich inflectional morphology on nouns and verbs. The same explanation may apply to the overuse of overt subjects and the loss of semantically based case in Spanish and Russian, as well as the preference for SVO over topicalization. The loss of the generic use of definite articles in Spanish could also follow from contact with English (Benmamoun Montrul, Polinsky, 2013).

Following the studies of Montrul (2004) and Montrul and Bowles (2009) on the incomplete acquisition of differential object marking in Spanish heritage speakers, Montrul and Sánchez-Walker (2013) tested adult and child heritage speakers and first-generation immigrants as well as control groups of children, young adults and adults in Mexico. The child and adult heritage speakers omitted differential object marking with animate and specific direct objects, but so did the first-generation immigrants. In comparison, the native speakers tested in Mexico had very low rates of omission of this marker. Hence, differential object marking underwent attrition in first generation immigrant adults.

Many studies have shown that when the use of the first language is reduced and a second language becomes more dominant, the latter becomes the primary language. In recent years, Heritage Speakers have been the main subject of a great number of linguistic research concerning language acquisition. These studies gave rise to the weakness these speakers have to deal with, not only concerning the role of input in the development and maintenance of a language during childhood, but also a reduced input condition and pressure from another language in a bilingual environment.

Recent studies have also tried to find the most resilient and the most vulnerable areas of grammar. For Heritage languages inflectional morphology is vulnerable in languages that have a solid morphological system. Studies on languages such as Arabic, with root and pattern morphology (McCarthy 1979), found that other issues can also arise concerning speakers' knowledge of the notion of a root and the mapping mechanisms for linking the root and the vocal melody to the template.

It is fundamental to analyse the form of language used by the immigrants in order to identify if changes in the variety may be traced back to the first-generation grammar itself.

In languages with concatenative and nonconcatenative morphology, attrition affects different types of inflectional morphology. It was observed that in the nominal domain, heritage speakers exhibit errors concerning gender agreement in languages like Russian, Spanish and Swedish (Håkansson 1995; Montrul et al. 2008a; Polinsky 2008b), with definiteness agreement in Swedish and Hungarian (Håkansson 1995; Bolonyai 2007), with case marking in Russian and Korean (Polinsky 1997, 2006, 2008a, 2008b; Song et al. 1997), and with concord in Arabic (Albirini et al. 2013). Similar patterns of erosion emerged in the verbal domain, including agreement in Russian (Polinsky 1997, 2006), lexical aspect in Russian (Pereltsvaig 2005; Polinsky 1997, 2006, 2011), grammatical aspect in Spanish and Hungarian (Montrul 2002; Fenyvesi 2000; de Groot 2005), mood in Spanish, Russian, and Hungarian (Lynch 1999; Montrul 2009; Silva-Corvalán 1994; Polinsky 1997, 2006; Fenyvesi 2000), and inflected infinitives in Brazilian Portuguese (Rothman 2007).

Considering these studies, morphological deficits in Heritage Languages are asymmetric, affecting more nominal morphology than verbal, in the latter subsets of categories are targeted. As an example, studies have shown that Hindi heritage speakers make case-marking errors in the range of 23–27%, while their verbal agreement errors are under 7% (Montrul et al. 2012). Moreover, low-proficiency heritage speakers of Russian have an error rate of about 40% in the nominal morphology, but less than 20% in their verbal agreement morphology (Polinsky 2006). Observations

on production in heritage Hungarian (Fenyvesi 2000; de Groot 2005), including the Hungarian of English-dominant bilingual children (Bolonyai 2007), also point to significant attrition of nominal morphology (omission of case affixes and the possessive suffix; overextension of definite forms), despite well-preserved verbal morphology, including agreement marking on verbs.

As pointed out by Benmamoun et al., these findings are particularly interesting since the verbal agreement paradigms are significantly larger than the adjectival paradigms and hence possibly costly to acquire. It seems that the centrality of verbs to sentential syntax may outweigh the relative morphological simplicity of adjectives, and thus facilitate the upkeep of these verbal paradigms in the heritage grammar.

Not only do Heritage Speakers have problems with morphology associated with mood and polarity, but also with aspectual morphology (Montrul 2002, 2009; Polinsky 2006, 2008c; de Groot 2005). Nominal morphology is more vulnerable than verbal morphology, and within verbal morphology, agreement is the most vulnerable. Some researchers have argued that nominal morphology is post- or extra-syntactic, whereas verbal morphology is directly reflexive of syntactic structure (cf. Bobaljik and Branigan 2006; Bobaljik 2008). Hence, it is possible that heritage speakers retain the syntactic ability to form predication relations and mechanisms to generate syntactic structures that realize thematic and semantic dependencies (such as head-complement, head-specifier, and adjunction relations, all of which are essential properties of narrow syntax) but have a reduced capacity to perform post-syntactic operations that require mapping the output of one component onto another. On the other hand, this explanation would explain the noun-verb asymmetry in inflectional morphology but not why various verbal categories are affected differentially.

2.3 – HERITAGE SPEAKERS: AN INTERMEDIARY STATUS BETWEEN L1 AND L2 LEARNERS.

As studies on language acquisition showed, it is possible to assume that heritage speakers have some characteristics in common with both native speakers and L2 learners, concerning various areas of the grammar.

The acquisition of functional morphology is one of the main challenges for both Heritage speakers and second language learners (Lardiere, 1998, 2005; Slabakova, 2009). Lardiere proposes the Feature Assembly Hypothesis stating that a successful acquisition of a Second Language is determined by the reassembling of features of the L2 which already exist in the L1 into new functional categories and lexical items. As a result, convergence depends on whether L1 features have the same morpho lexical expressions in the L2 and whether learners can effectively reconfigure them when they do not. (Testing the predictions of the feature-assembly hypothesis: evidence from the L2 acquisition of Spanish aspect morphology) In other words, learning a second language entails reconfiguring the formal features of the native language and those available from Universal Grammar into the new or different configuration in the L2, hence this process of assembly and reassembly constitute the core of language acquisition.

Furthermore, the Bottleneck Hypothesis proposed by Slabakova provides a possible a hierarchy on the parts of grammar that are harder and easier to acquire for second language learners. According to this hypothesis, functional morphology is the bottleneck in L2 learners due to the fact that it is where differences among languages are located, it indeed bundles a variety of semantic, syntactic, and phonological features that affect the meaning and acceptability of the whole sentence. Hence, “morphology is the interface par excellence in the linguistic system” (Perpiñan, 2021). It is safe to say that learning a second language entails acquiring the configurations where both interpretable and uninterpretable features are mapped onto the target language inflectional morphology. Hence, each part corresponds to a building block of the Bottleneck Hypothesis.

As argued by Slabakova, inflectional morphology is hard not only in production but also in comprehension, and it is challenging for native speakers who do not pay attention to syntactic cues. Hence, it is the sticking point of acquisition since it encodes all the formal features of the grammar. Moreover, considering the difficulty of functional morphology, Slabakova questions whether acquiring morphology is harder than acquiring syntactic properties. A possible conclusion is that

what is difficult for non-native speakers is also difficult for low-educated native speakers who have had little exposure to complex syntactic constructions. After they learn the formal features, non-native speakers roughly pattern with their native speaker education peers in processing complex language. In processing syntax, as well as in the processing of morphology, learning a L2 may afford some advantages in terms of attending to syntactic cues in processing.

Errors or omissions are not a definite sign of lack of knowledge, as there can be other grammatical pieces of information that point towards the acquisition of that functional category (Perpiñan, 2021). Another approach is to explain the frequent errors as some sort of representational deficit in the L2 morphology, which can be permanent or not depending on the type of feature (Hawkins and Franceschina 2004; Tsimpli and Mastropavlou 2007).

L2 learners may exhibit a disassociation between morphology and syntax since they are able to master knowledge of the syntactic properties of the language but omitting verb inflection (Lardiere 1998a; Lardiere 1998b). Hence, some researchers argued that second language acquisition differs from first language acquisition either because new functional categories or feature values are not attainable in L2 acquisition (Tsimpli and Roussou 1991), because the learner is restricted to the formal features found in the L1 (Hawkins and Chan 1997; Franceschina 2001), or because after a certain age UG is no longer accessible (Meisel 1997). On the other hand, Prévost and White (2000) have argued that the problem in the production of inflection is not related to a deficit but is rather a problem of mapping.

L2 learners acquire the abstract features of agreement at relatively low levels of L2 proficiency (Bruhn de Garavito, 2003a, 2003b). On the other hand, there is also evidence for the use of default forms in learners' errors (McCarthy, 2007, 2008), and that these may be predicted based on the Morphological Underspecification Hypothesis.

As outlined by Rodgers (2011), studies in Italian child L1A (e.g., Pizzuto & Caselli, 1992) and Italian adult L2 (e.g., Banfi & Bernini, 2003) have found evidence for the use of such variability and for defaults, in particular 3rd person singular forms. Similar conclusions emerged from studies on the acquisition of L2 verbal inflection in languages such as Spanish (McCarthy, 2007).

Bruhn de Garavito (2003a, 2003b) examined Spanish verbal morphology in beginning English speaking L2, proposing both a production and a recognition task. Results showed that learners produced more errors in the production task than in the recognition task, leading to a processing or performative problem.

Several studies questioned whether errors in second language morphology follow from impaired syntax (Vainikka and Young-Scholten 1994; Hawkins and Chan 1997) or mapping problems between syntax and morphology (Lardiere 1998a,b; Prévost and White 2000).

McCarthy proposed the Morphological Underspecification Hypothesis, which predicts that learners will not produce errors that result in feature clash, but that errors of underspecification may occur. Underspecified features are those features that are unmarked. This pattern was found for person, number, and finiteness in verbal morphology and for gender and number morphology in determiners. (McCarthy, 2011).

There have been some disagreements concerning Morphological Under specification Hypothesis. Müller (2011; 2013) stated that “Evidence from grammatical theory suggests that underspecification may not exist: it is not needed for an account of systematic instances of syncretism in morphology if an optimality-theoretic approach is adopted”.

2.4 – SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT BIAS IN L2 LEARNERS.

As outlined by Bruhn de Garavito (2003a, 2003b), an important debate in SLA centres around whether the mental representation of agreement in the L2 grammar is somehow deficient. L2 learners may exhibit knowledge of the syntactic properties of the language while consistently omitting verb inflection.

Researchers argued that second language acquisition differs from first language acquisition not only because new functional categories or feature values are not attainable in L2 acquisition (Tsimpli and Roussou 1991), but also due to the fact that the learner is restricted to the formal features found in the L1 (Hawkins and Chan 1997; Franceschina 2001). It was also assumed that after a certain age Universal Grammar is no longer accessible (Meisel 1997).

On the other hand, Prévost and White (2000) have argued that the difficulties in the production of inflection resides in the mapping and a deficit.

In light of this, Bruhn de Garavito (2003a, 2003b) examined knowledge of agreement in the grammar of adult L2 learners of Spanish at the beginning stages. She took into consideration elicited production and recognition data, looking at the types of errors produced and any possible differences between recognition and production. Results showed that production errors are much more frequent than recognition errors, and, in fact, even these are fewer than one would expect from results found in the literature. This is taken as evidence for the hypothesis that there is no deficit in second language acquisition.

Table 2
Percentage of total number of errors for each type

Type of error	Percentage
Infinitive used for a conjugated verb	13.5% (12 errors)
Third person to replace another person	66.3% (59 errors)
First person to replace another person	12.4% (11 errors)
Second person to replace another person	7.9% (7 errors)

As shown in Table 2, the greatest number of errors concerned the production of the third person in place of other person forms. This is no surprise since in Spanish, unlike languages such as English, the infinitive is morphologically marked. The third person, however, invariably ends in the stem vowel (the preterit tense may be the exception). Bruhn the Garavito outlined that L2 speakers seem to be generalizing the one form which is not overtly inflected. Furthermore, the second largest

number of errors is the use of the infinitive in the place of a conjugated verb. However, only seven of the participants made this type of error. Finally, the other verbs which appeared in this test are only irregular in the first person, and may exhibit stem changes (tener, hacer, venir).

Studies concerning first language acquisition has outlined that possibility of two types of languages existing.

In the first type, L1 learners go through an Optional Infinitive Stage (Wexler 1994) where non-finite forms alternate with correctly inflected finite verbs. These languages are English, German and French. On the other hand, in pro-drop languages such as Spanish and, the production by L1 learners of non-finite forms in a finite context is not present (Ezeizabarrena 2002). A possible explanation is that in these languages the infinitive is morphologically marked.

Most of the research into verbal agreement in second language acquisition has concentrated on the acquisition of languages of the first type, namely French and German (Meisel 1997; Prévost and White 2000) and English (Haznedar and Schwartz 1997; Lardiere 1998a; Lardiere 1998b).

At least since the studies carried out in the 1970s and 80s on the order of acquisition of different morphemes it has been known that, in languages such as English, agreement is acquired relatively late (Bailey, Madden et al. 1974; Dulay and Burt 1974; Lightbown 1983a; Lightbown 1983b) and there is a great deal of variability in the use of non-finite and inflected verb forms.

There have been debates on this topic regarding the implications of optionality in L2 acquisition. It is argued that this optionality is the reflection of the lack of accessibility to UG which characterizes adult SLA (Meisel 1997), or it is a reflection of a local impairment in the acquisition of functional categories and feature values (Eubank 1994; Eubank, Bischof et al. 1997; Beck 1998).

On the other hand, according to the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (Prévost and White 2000), there is no deficit at the abstract featural level, and the problem is one of mapping between the surface inflection and the abstract formal features

Bruhn de Garavito (2003a, 2003b) outlined that learners resort to a default form to express agreement. Not surprisingly, the infinitive, which has a clear morphological marking in Spanish (stem vowel + -r), is not the preferred default. It was observed that the preferred default is clearly the third person singular, which accounted for almost two thirds of the errors. Since the third person singular invariably ends in the stem vowel and does not exhibit any overt person marking, this preference was expected.

It was concluded that the test provide evidence that there is no impairment in adult second language acquisition, since the number of errors was low. Furthermore, if it is correct to assume that the recognition task provides a better picture of the learners' competence, the number of errors was almost non-existent, showing learners are able to acquire verbal agreement inflection. The fact that learners have problems in producing agreement in some languages may be due to other factors, unrelated to any deficit in the domain of functional categories.

Although results were not sufficient to provide clear evidence for an impairment in adult second language acquisition, it was observed that learners showed problems in producing agreement in some languages. Bruhn de Garavito concluded that this may be unrelated to any deficit in the domain of functional categories.

As above mentioned, Prévost and White (2000) presented the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis and pointed out that second language (L2) learners exhibit optionality in their use of inflectional morphology, with tense and agreement markings sometimes being present and sometimes absent in L2 production data. While the fact of variation is uncontroversial, there is relatively little agreement as to what such optionality implies and, in particular, whether it indicates major impairment to the interlanguage grammar (ILG) in the domain of functional categories or whether it is the consequence of some more superficial problem. The variability in use of verbal inflection in L2 French and German was examined, taking into consideration the incidence of finite versus non-finite morphology and the contexts in which each is found, as well as verbal agreement. Following earlier work (Lardiere, 1998a; 1998b; Prévost and White, 1999), they argued whether variability in adult L2 performance does not reflect a deeper lack of functional categories or features associated with tense and agreement. Rather, L2 learners have difficulties with the overt realization of morphology.

Chapter 3 – DIALETTO VENETO AND ENGLISH MORPHOLOGY

3.1 – DIALETTO VENETO OR VENETIAN

As mentioned in Chapter 2.4, Heritage speakers, as well as L2 learners, may exhibit difficulties in mastering gender agreement concerning the verb. Dialecto Veneto and English differ for what concerns agreement.

On the basis of the previous-mentioned fundamental studies, it was decided to investigate the competence of mastering subject-verb agreement in past tenses, mainly *Passato Prossimo*, in 20 Veneto Heritage Speakers Canadian and Australian-born.

As previously mentioned, *Dialetto Veneto* is a dialect mostly spoken in the Veneto region, but also in some area of Friuli-Venezia-Giulia and Trentino-Alto Adige.⁷

There are some varieties and subvarieties of Venetian language, mainly divided according to the provinces:

- *Central* (including Padua, Vicenza, Polesine) with about 1,500,000 speakers
- *Eastern/Coastal* (referece to the nearby Friuli venezia giulia, including Trieste, Grado, Istria, Fiume)
- *Western* (*Verona, Trentino*)
- *Northern Sinistra Piave* of the Province of Treviso, most of the Province of Pordenone (the latter belong to Friuli Venezia-Giulia)
- *North-Central Destra Piave* of the Province of Treviso, (Belluno, comprising also Feltre, Agordo, Cadore and Zoldo Alto)

The intelligibility among these variants is mutual, they have in fact a minimum 92% in common among the most diverging ones (Central and Western). Interesting to notice that modern speakers reportedly can still understand Venetian texts from the 14th century to some extent.

It is worth specifying that, for the purpose of this thesis, the *Trevigiano* variety (*Northern Sinistra Piave*) will be taken into consideration. The choice of this particular variety is due to the fact that all the participants originate from this area, as well as the control group.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venetian_language

3.2 – IMPERFETTO AND PASSATO PROSSIMO

In Dialetto Veneto the Perfective and Imperfective aspects are realised with two distinct tenses, respectively *Passato Prossimo* and *Imperfetto*. Whereas in English they can be expressed with the Past Simple.

a) *Ti te ghe magnà sareze al to compleanno.*

You ate cherries on your birthday.

b) *Ti te magnavi sareze in primavera.*

You ate cherries in Spring.

c) *Ti te ieri imbrigo co ze rivà to nona.*

You were drunk when your grandmother arrived.

The *Imperfetto* is used to describe habitual events in the past (*Imperfetto Abituale*), simultaneous actions in the past with a (*Imperfetto Progressivo*), and actions occurred in past with no information about time and length of time (*Imperfetto Continuo*).

Dialetto Veneto has 3 verbal conjugations, (I *-ar*, II *-er*, III *-ir*) and are marked for person, number and also gender.

Scrivar (-ar)		Saver-er		Sentir (-ir)	
Mi	<i>Scrive(v)o</i>	Mi	<i>Save(v)o</i>	Mi	<i>Sentivo</i>
Ti te	<i>Scrive(v)i</i>	Ti te	<i>Save(v)i</i>	Ti te	<i>Sentivi</i>
Lu el	<i>Scrive(v)a</i>	Lu el	<i>Save(v)a</i>	Lu el	<i>Sentiva</i>
Ea ta		Ea a		Ea a	
No(i)altri	<i>Scrive(v)imo</i>	No(i)altri	<i>Savevimo</i>	No(i)altri	<i>Sentivimo</i>
Vo(i)altri	<i>Scrive(v)i</i>	Vo(i)altri	<i>Save(v)i</i>	Vo(i)altri	<i>Sentivi</i>
Lori i	<i>Scrive(v)a</i>	Lori i	<i>Save(v)a</i>	Lori i	<i>Sentiva</i>
Lore te		Lore e		Lore e	

Table 2- Verbal flexion of the *Imperfetto*⁸

⁸ This conjugation refers to the *Trevigiano* variety, as above mentioned the variety of both participants and control group.

Imperfetto agrees in person and number, but not with gender. Gender agreement is in fact realized on the subject clitic pronoun (the particle in bold).

Ea **ta** scrive(v)a

The grammar of *Dialetto Veneto* presents a compulsory “clitic subject pronoun” (te, el/ta, i/te) placed before the verb, which encodes the agreement for person, number and gender. These particles are used in second and third person singular, and third person plural.

Independent pronouns, such as *ti*, on the contrary, are optional.

‡ te sentivi.

*Ti sentivi.

Compound verbs, such as *Passato Prossimo*, are formed by an inflected auxiliary and the past participle. *Passato Prossimo* in a compound verb formed by an auxiliary (*to be and to have*) conjugated in the present form and the past participle. In *Dialetto Veneto* auxiliary *aver* is more frequently use than in Italian since it extended to impersonal, reflexives.

ESAR		AVER	
Mi	<i>so</i>	Mi	<i>go</i>
Ti te	<i>si</i>	Ti te	<i>ghe</i>
Lu el Ea a	<i>ze</i>	Lu el Ea a	<i>gà</i>
No(i)altri	<i>semo</i>	No(i)altri	<i>ghemo</i>
Vo(i)altri	<i>sì</i>	Vo(i)altri	<i>gavi</i>
Lori i Lore e	<i>ze</i>	Lori i Lore e	<i>ga</i>

Table 3-Present conjugation of the verbs to be and to have.

Table 3 shows conjugation for the present tense of the auxiliary verbs *ESAR* and *AVER*. As the table shows, these two verbs agree in person and number. There is no gender agreement in the verb. As for all the verbs in *Dialetto Veneto*, there is the presence for the subject clitic pronoun in the second and third person singular and the third plural, which encodes agreement for person, number and gender.

a. Fabio el **ze** un caro nevodo.

Fabio is a nice nephew.

b. Sveva a ga sie ani.

Sveva is six years old.

As above mentioned, *Passato Prossimo* is a compound verb formed by an auxiliary conjugated in present tense and the past participle.

SCRIVAR (-AR)		SAVER (-ER)		SENTIR (-IR)	
Mi	<i>Go scritto</i>	Mi	<i>Go savuo</i>	Mi	<i>Go sentio</i>
Ti te	<i>Ghe scritto</i>	Ti te	<i>Ghe savuo</i>	Ti te	<i>Ghe sentio</i>
Lu el Ea ta	<i>Ga scritto</i>	Lu el Ea ta	<i>Gà savuo</i>	Lu el Ea ta	<i>Ga sentio</i>
No(i)altri	<i>Ghemo scritto</i>	No(i)altri	<i>Ghemo savuo</i>	No(i)altri	<i>Ghemo sentio</i>
Vo(i)altri	<i>Gavì scritto</i>	Vo(i)altri	<i>Gavì savuo</i>	Vo(i)altri	<i>Gavì sentio</i>
Lori i Lore te	<i>Gà scritto</i>	Lori i Lore te	<i>Gà savuo</i>	Lori i Lore te	<i>Gà sentio</i>

Table 4- The three conjugation (-ar, -er, -ir) in *Passato Prossimo*

As can be seen in *table 4*, the agreement with person and number is realized only on the auxiliary and on the clitic. The participle is the same for all the person. Moreover, as for *Imperfetto*, the gender agreement is realized on the clitic (which also agrees in person and number), and not on the verb.

- a) *Ti te **ghe magnà** un panin.*
 Tu ha mangiato un panino
You ate a sandwich.
- b) **Son ndato** a Venesia.
 Sono andato a Venezia.
 I went to Venice.
- c) *Nel 2016 e do soree e **ze ndate** a Madrid.*
Nel 2016 le due sorelle sono andate a Madrid.
In 2016 the two sisters went to Madrid.

The participle of the Passato Prossimo agrees in gender when the verb *esar* (to be) is used as the auxiliary.

Tables 5 and 6 shows the conjugation of the verb to be in *Passato Prossimo* respectively with feminine and masculine subject.

In *table 5* the subject is feminine and the suffix of the participle agrees in number and gender. (-a for the singular forms, -e for the plural forms)

In *table 6* the subject is masculine and the suffix of the participle agrees in number and gender (-o for the singular and -i for plural).

<i>ESAR</i> <i>Feminine gender agreement</i>	
Mi	<i>So ndat -a</i>
Ti te	<i>Si ndat -a</i>
Ea ta	<i>Ze ndat -a</i>
No(i)altri	<i>Semo ndat -e</i>
Vo(i)altri	<i>Si ndat -e</i>
Lore te	<i>Ze ndat -e</i>

Table 5- Feminine subject

<i>ESAR</i> <i>masculine gender agreement</i>	
Mi	<i>So ndat -o</i>
Ti te	<i>Si ndat -o</i>
Lu el	<i>Ze ndat -o</i>
No(i)altri	<i>Semo ndat -i</i>
Vo(i)altri	<i>Si ndat -i</i>
Lori i	<i>Ze ndat -i</i>

Table 6- Masculine subject

As outlined by Cordin (1981), (1989) e Rizzi (1986)⁹, clitic subject of norther Italian varieties do behave as part of the verbal flexion, rather than typical pronominal subjects. Hence, it emerged that clitic subjects are analysed as flexive elements.

On the basis the implicational scale outlined by Poletto (2000), the Dialecto spoken in the central part of the Veneto region (Veneto centrale) has a less use in the use of the clitics then other norther Italian varieties. In this model, Poletto propose that:

- When in a variety the lexical subjects (“DP”) are double by the clitic subjects, also the tonic pronouns are doubled.
- When quantifiers are doubled (“QP”), hence also DP and tonic pronouns are.
- When variables in relative clauses are double, all the other subjects are double.

Tipo	Pronomi tonici	DP soggetto	QP soggetto	Variabili	Varietà di esempio
a	+	+/-	-	-	Veneto centrale
b	+	+	-	-	Trentino centrale
c	+	+	+	-	Lombardo
d	+	+	+	+	Friulano

Tabella 2 - Scala implicazione dell’uso dei clitici soggetto (adattamento di Poletto [2000]).

As can be seen from Table 2, Dialecto Veneto represents case (a). Not only are subject clitic pronouns used with a null subject, but also doubled (hence the agreement co-occurs) in the presence of a tonic pronouns (as can be seen in example 1 below). On the other hand, clitic subjects co-occur with nominal subject phrase only when these are topicalized.

(1) Ti te parli sempre.

‘Tu parli sempre.’ (trevigiano)

(2) Marco, el gelato, el lo ga za magnà.

‘Marco, il gelato, l’ha già mangiato.’

⁹ Casalicchio, J. and Frasson, A. (2008), *Cambiamenti nell’uso dei soggetti clitici veneti: il ruolo del contatto con l’italiano*. Chilà and De Angelis *Capitoli di morfossintassi delle varietà romanze d’Italia: teoria e dati empirici*. pp. 117-133. Centro di studi filologici e linguistici siciliani - Palermo

In Dialetto Veneto, the clitic pronoun goes with the verb; it is placed before the verb in affirmative forms and it follows the verb in interrogative sentences.

The number of persons in a verbal conjugation in which the clitic subject pronoun appears varies among the varieties, due to evolutionary factors and also, due to the more invasive Italian linguistic contamination. There are varieties that use the clitic subject only for the 2° person singular, others in the 2°-3° singular and 3° plural, others in the first three singular and the third plural.

As outlined by Benincà (2017) Even though the subject clitic grammar of Northern Romance is extremely varied, a series of absolute and implicational generalizations tell us that there is a variation within a single complex system.

Venetian is a pro-drop language and has a rich subject agreement morphology on the verb which is quite consistent in verb classes tenses. In Veneto all past verbs agree in person and number, and in the *Passato Prossimo* forms (with auxiliary *to be*) also in gender.

The clitic subject pronoun (*te, el/ta, i/te*) is used with the 2nd and 3rd person singular, and with the 3rd person plural. This feature may have arisen as a compensation for the fact that the 2nd- and 3rd-person inflections for most verbs, which are still distinct in Italian and many other Romance languages, are identical in Venetian

Subject clitic pronouns are considered preverbal features of agreement placed between the verb and the subject, and constitute one of the main studied topics in northern Italian dialects. As outlined by Carolyn MacKay (*“Veneto lexicon: the dialect of Segusino and Chiplio”*) Dialetto Veneto presents “proclitic subject pronoun”, a particle that comes between personal pronoun and verb. MacKay states that the proclitic pronominal particle of the subject can be interpreted as a pleonastic of the subject. This phenomenon is also known as pronominal doubling. The proclitic particle reference to the affirmative form, but in Venetian dialect the clitic subject pronouns is also present in the interrogative form. In the latter, this particle follows the verb and sometimes it merges with it.

Chapter 4 – A STUDY CASE ON VENITIAN HERITAGE SPEAKERS

4.1 – SUBJECT – VERB AGREEMENT IN *PASSATO PROSSIMO*

The experiment's initial purpose was to investigate the competence in mastering the difference between *Passato Prossimo* and *Imperfetto*, namely Perfective and Imperfective aspects and whether the potential difficulty in the distinction between the two was originated in the semantic interpretation or the morphology form. The main research question regarded whether Heritage Speakers of Dialecto Veneto have a clear distinction between *Passato Prossimo* and *Imperfetto* or if there is a tendency to produce more *Passato Prossimo* rather than *Imperfetto*.

In the present study, we will focus on the expression of the morphology of the past. This general research question come from the fact that in English both Perfective and Imperfective aspect can be realised with one form, namely Past Simple.

20 Veneto Heritage speakers were interviewed (13 Australian and 7 Canadian-born), aged between 54 and 68 years old. Participants were divided into two groups based on the length of the exposure to the dialect; Shorter Exposure (SE n=8) input reduced at school age (at 6/8 years old), Longer Exposure (LE n=12) continuum of input. Their performance has been compared with a group of 5 age-matched native speakers residents in the Veneto region.

The experiment was conducted through video calls and is composed of two main parts; a background questionnaire, useful to observe their naturalistic production and an experimental part. The latter consisted of a series of 3 tasks: 1- Semi-controlled picture narrative task (oral production), 2- simultaneous actions task (oral production), 3- Morphology Recognition task (oral and written comprehension).¹⁰

- Task 1: participants were asked to retell a story from images, using the appropriate form of past aspect (23 verbs to be conjugated, 13 targeted *Passato Prossimo*, 10 *Imperfetto*). The purpose of this task was to observe the ability to use the Dialecto Veneto past forms in the suitable aspects.

¹⁰ The tasks were adapted from the SPLLOC project <http://www.splloc.soton.ac.uk/index.html>.

- Task 2: participants had to describe two images depicting two simultaneous actions in the past (10 stimulus, 20 verbs to be conjugated). The purpose of this task was to test the production of past tenses in a task where the target was Imperfetto.
- Task 3: Morphology recognition task: participants were asked to judge 5 couple of sentences referring to habitual actions in the past (one in the Imperfetto and one in Passato Prossimo). As in task 2, the target was Imperfetto, and participants had to evaluate the appropriateness of the perfective or imperfective morphology according to the interpretation.

The initial questionnaire was useful to investigate on the language background of the Heritage Speakers. Questions on the frequency with which they spoke dialect at home and in present day were asked.

EXAMPLE OF THE TASKS

- TASK 1- Picture narration task.

A Madrid

(Magnare) panini / (Bere) vin

(Visitar) a città

- TASK 2: Simultaneous actions.

Mentre Mario (lesare) na letera...

Carla (scoltare) musica

- TASK 3: Semantic interpretation.

Fabio says that he has fond memories of his childhood, especially when he went on picnics with his grandparents.....

a- Fabio ga cantà co a nona.

Fabio says that he has fond memories of his childhood, especially when he went on picnics with his grandparents.....

-2 -1 0 1 2

b- Fabio cantava co a nona.

-2 -1 0 1 2

Overall, results were consistent with the research question, *Dialetto Veneto* Heritage Speakers produced more *Passato Prossimo* also in the context where *Imperfetto* was required. There was also a tendency in omitting the auxiliary in the *Passato Prossimo*.

Furthermore, it was observed a tendency in producing errors on subject verb agreement, mainly concerning gender. In light of these results, a deep morphological analysis on the data was conducted, mainly considering the responses elicited in Task 1 (Relatively controlled picture narrative).

As mentioned in the previous chapters, in *Dialetto Veneto* *Passato Prossimo* agrees in person, number and also gender in certain constructions. As explained before, *Dialetto Veneto* presents subject clitic, which encapsulate the gender agreement with the verb.

The main quest of the present dissertation centres whether *Dialetto Veneto* Heritage speakers are able to realise the subject-verb agreement, and if there is a tendency in producing the default masculine since the English language has no distinction for what concerns gender on the verb.

4.2 – RESULTS

Overall, results showed errors concerning subject-verb agreement in the realization of the subject clitic pronoun and on the verb inflexion. Moreover, there is a great tendency in omitting the subject clitic pronoun, and this was observed in both Shorter and Longer Exposure group. The omission of the auxiliary in *Passato Prossimo* was also observed.

Hence, results have been categorized in two main parts.

One concerning the subject clitic: its omission, as well as problems with gender and number agreement. The other section concerned the agreement on the verb, taking into account the gender and number agreement of the auxiliary and its omission, as well as of the participle of the *Passato Prossimo*.

It is worth underling that a great number of participants tended to produce verbs with a strong influence from Italian, in which the auxiliary was elicited in Italian, and the participle in *Dialetto Veneto*.

INPUT: (ciapare) el treno

TARGET: e ga ciapà el treno

ELICITED: hanno ciapato el treno

Moreover, some participants, especially in SE, tended to repeat the infinitive input verb leading to an incorrect morphological form to be analysed.

INPUT: (domandare) aiuto al controeore.

TARGET: e ghe gà domandà aiuto al cotroeore.

ELICITED: domandare aiuto al controeore.

In these particular contexts the omission of the clitic may not be considered as an error of omission. Hence, for the purpose of this study and a coherent analysis of the data it has been decided to leave aside these responses and to analyse only the correctly elicited verbs.

4.2.1 – CLITIC OMISSION

HS	N of verbs produced	OMISSION of the clitics	%
SE 1	7	5	0.71
SE 2 ¹¹	/	/	/
SE3	15	5	0.33
SE 4	4	3	0.75
SE 5	2	1	0.50
SE 6	3	3	1.00
SE7	16	4	0.24
SE 8	3	0	0
			50%

Table 7 – Percentage of omitted clitics in the SE group

HS	N of verbs produced	OMISSION of the clitic	%
LE 1	22	0	0
LE 2	21	8	0.38
LE 3	16	11	0.69
LE 4	19	10	0.53
LE 5	22	0	0.00
LE 6	21	1	0.05
LE 7	20	4	0.20
LE 8	4	3	0.75
LE 9	10	10	1.00
LE 10	18	6	0.33
LE 11	17	10	0.59
LE 12	16	7	0.44
			41%

Table 8- Percentage of omitted clitics in the LE group

Table 7 and table 8 shows the percentage of omitted clitic pronouns in Task 1 (Relatively controlled picture narrative), respectively from Shorter and Longer exposure groups. Participants were asked to retell a story through images, using given verbs to be conjugated.

For each participant the number of correctly produced *Dialetto Veneto* verbs, that required the subject clitic pronoun, are shown in the second column (*Verbs produced*). The third column (OMISSION of the clitic) represents the omitted subject clitic pronouns. Hence, the average of errors in the omission of the clitics (fourth column) is calculated on the correctly produced verbs.

As *table 7* shows, the N of verbs produced is lower in the SE group. Hence, shorter exposure produced less accurate *Dialetto Veneto* past forms than Longer Exposure. For what concerns SE, the number of subject clitic pronoun omission related to the number of correct verb form produced is high. Whereas LE produced a higher percentage of correct *Dialetto Veneto* verb, as well as more clitics.

¹¹ SE2 did not produce verbs that required a clitic, since most of the verb produced were in Italian hence it was not counted in this analysis.

4.2.2 – GENDER AGREEMENT

As above mentioned, a great number of errors in subject-verb agreement concerning gender were observed. These agreement errors mainly appeared on the subject clitic pronoun, where participants produced plural masculine (*i*) instead of the target plural feminine (*e*), hence resorting to a default masculine form to express agreement. This was observed in both Shorter and Longer exposure groups. Since the latter produced more clitics, this phenomenon was more frequent in the LE group.¹²

Example from SE Heritage Speaker

INPUT: (Nell'istà del 2016 e do soree) rivare all'aeroporto

TARGET: (Nell'istà del 2016 e do soree) e ze rivae (fem.plu)

*ELICITED: (E do soree) *i ze rivai (gender error agreement on the clitic)*

Table 9 and 10 show the percentage of errors in gender agreement on the clitic. As can be seen from Table 10, Longer Exposure tend to produce a relevant number of errors concerning gender agreement on the clitic. 33 % of the participants, in fact, tend to produce masculine instead of the target feminine, this may also due to the fact that LE produced more clitics than SE.

HS	clitics produced	GENDER errors	%
SE1	2	0	0.00
SE2	0	0	0.00
SE3	10	4	0.40
SE4	1	0	0.00
SE5	1	0	0.00
SE6	0	0	0.00
SE7	12	0	0.00
SE8	3	0	0.00
		4	5%

Table 9 - Gender agreement error on clitic SE

HS	clitics produced	GENDER errors	%
LE 1	22	5	0.23
LE 2	13	0	0
LE 3	5	5	1.00
LE 4	1	0	0.00
LE 5	22	11	0.50
LE 6	20	6	0.30
LE 7	16	10	0.63
LE 8	1	0	0.00
LE 9	0	0	0.00
LE 10	12	1	0.08
LE 11	7	1	0.14
LE 12	10	10	1.11
		49	33%

Table 10-Gender agreement error on clitic LE

¹² As for the previous results on the subject clitics omission, for the present analysis only the corrected elicited verbs were considered.

4.2.3 – NUMBER ON THE CLITIC

There has not been relevant amount of errors concerning number agreement on the clitic. Just one participant in the SE group produced feminine singular subject clitics pronouns where the target was feminine plural.

INPUT: (De colpo in treno) domandare

TARGET: (De colpo in treno) e ga sentio

ELICITED: (De colpo in treno) a ga sentio

As above mentioned, the target for the clitic was feminine plural, and the participant produced a singular feminine clitic. Since that only one participant produced this error, it does not represent a high tendency, hence is not particularly relevant.

Whereas only one participant from the LE produced a plural masculine subject clitic pronoun (with *Passato Prossimo*) where the context required feminine singular (with *Imperfetto*).

TARGET: (ogni fine settimana) a lezeva

ELICITED: (ogni fine settimana) i ga letto

Not only did this represents an error on number and gender agreement on the clitic, but also on the aspect. It is worth noticing that the participant in fact produced *Passato Prossimo* where the target was *Imperfetto*.

4.2.4 – OMISSION OF THE AUXILIARY IN PASSATO PROSSIMO

In producing the Passato Prossimo, it was reported that a great number of SE participants tended to omit the auxiliary.

INPUT: (A Madrid) visitare a città.

TARGET: (A Madrid) e ga visità a città.

ELICITED: (A Madrid) (...) visità a città.

In this example the context required the *Passato Prossimo*. The participant only elicited the participle, omitting the auxiliary to have. In doing so, the subject clitic pronoun was also omitted.

Table 11 and table 12 show the percentage of omitted auxiliaries in *Passato Prossimo*, respectively for SE and LE. This phenomenon was observed in both groups, and as the table shows it was more frequent in the SE which shows a 35% of omitted auxiliaries. It is worth noticing striking individual differences: whereas SE6 omitted quite all the auxiliaries, while SE7 did not make this omission.

HS	PP produced	PP no aux	%
SE 1	12	9	0.75
SE 2	19	4	0.21
SE 3	17	5	0.29
SE 4	7	3	0.43
SE 5	12	2	0.17
SE 6	11	10	0.91
SE 7	23	0	0
SE 8	13	1	0.08
			35%

Table 11- Percentage of omitted auxiliaries in SE.

HS	PP produced	PP no aux	%
LE 1	14	0	0.0
LE 2	13	2	0.15
LE 3	12	2	0.17
LE 4	11	1	0.09
LE 5	12	0	0.00
LE 6	23	1	0.04
LE 7	11	0	0.00
LE 8	13	2	0.15
LE 9	11	1	0.09
LE 10	13	0	0.00
LE 11	8	0	0.00
LE 12	11	0	0.00
			6%

Table 12- Percentage of omitted auxiliaries in LE.

Overall, just one error in the choice of the auxiliary was reported.

INPUT: (de colpo) caiuo iose de acqua

TARGET: (De colpo) ze caiuo iose de acqua

ELICITED: (De colpo) ga cascà

The input was the auxiliary to be and the participant elicited the verb with the auxiliary to have.

4.2.5 – GENDER ON THE PARTICIPLE

As previously mentioned, in conjugating a verb in *Passato Prossimo*, when the auxiliary is the verb to be the participle agrees also in gender.

Out of the 23 verbs those that required the auxiliary to be in *Passato Prossimo* were just three (to arrive, to be, to fall). Just 2 participants produced an error concerning agreement on the past participle. This error is not particularly relevant since it does not represent a high tendency.

TARGET: e ze rivae a Madrid.

ELICITED: arrivato a Madrid (sing.masc)

In this case the participant produced a Participle that does not agree in gender with the feminine plural subject. The target was third person plural feminine, and the participant produced a singular masculine participle. Moreover, the auxiliary was omitted and

INPUT: Da cee (esare) tanto diverse

TARGET: Da cee **e iera** tanto diverse (3pers.plu.fem)

ELICITED: è stato tanto diverse (3pers.sing.masc)

In this case the participant produced 3 main errors:

- 1- Gender agreement:
- 2- Person
- 3- Aspect: the target was *Imperfetto* and the participant produced *Passato Prossimo*

4.2.6 – PERSON AGREEMENT ERRORS ON THE AUXILIARY

As for the number agreement on the clitics, participants did not produce relevant errors concerning the person in the *Passato Prossimo*.

In the LE group there has been observed a slightly higher number concerning errors in number agreement on the auxiliary.

The table shows the number of person agreement errors concerning the auxiliary (to have).

HS	PERSON agreement errors	%
LE 1	0	0
LE 2	4	0.31
LE 3	1	0.08
LE 4	7	0.54
LE 5	0	0
LE 6	0	0
LE 7	0	0
LE 8	0	0
LE 9	0	0
LE 10	0	0
LE 11	0	0
LE 12	0	0
		8%

Some participants tended to produce first person plural *Passato Prossimo* where the target was third person plural.

INPUT: (magnare) un panin

TARGET: e ga mangà un panin

ELICITED: ghemo mangà un panin

4.3 – DISCUSSION

The aim of this thesis is to give a humble contribution on the research on Heritage Languages, especially concerning *Dialetto Veneto*.

Overall, results showed that a good amount of participants, both in SE and LE tended to produce errors related to the subject clitic pronoun. These errors mainly concern the realization of the agreement of the subject clitic pronoun, where participants produced masculine instead of the targeted feminine, hence resorting to a default form to express agreement. This gender agreement on the clitic was observed in both singular and plural contexts. On the other hand, number and person agreement was relatively unproblematic.

INPUT: (Nell'istà del 2016 e do soree) rivare all'aeroporto

TARGET: (Nell'istà del 2016 e do soree) e ze rivae (fem.plu)

*ELICITED: (E do soree) *i ze rivai (gender error agreement on the clitic)*

It has emerged that Shorter Exposure participants, who have reported a decrease in the use of the *Dialetto Veneto*, tended to produce less accurate verbs in *Dialetto Veneto* and a tendency in producing verbs with Italian morphology is also found. The tendency to produce less clitics is directly proportional to the production of a correct *Dialetto Veneto* verb, hence, compared to SE, LE produced more errors concerning the clitics since they produced more corrected verbs, hence more clitics.

There are some cases in which both groups of Heritage Speakers and some participants of control group did not produce a subject clitic pronoun, even if the target based on the system based on the literature required a clitic.

What is interesting is that these apparent clitics omissions in both Heritage Speakers and control group are realized in the same contexts, namely the flashback part on the habitual actions on the two sisters, in which the target was *Imperfetto*.

Da picoea Rosa (a) lezeva un libro, (a) faseva i compiti presto.

Da picoea Rosa a lezava un libro, a faseva i compiti presto.

Hence, in enlisting actions with the *Imperfetto*, the clitic can sometimes be omitted. It is worth underling that in producing *Passato Prossimo*, the control group did not omit a single subject clitic pronoun.

One hypothesis could be that, as cited by Casalicchio and Frasson (2008), the results may represent a frame of unstable changes and tendencies that are taking place. Another interpretation, more coherent with the present results could be that in retelling the story, participants enlisted a series of habitual actions

PARTICIPANT	VERB produced that required the clitic	Clitics produced	%
CONTROL 1	22	17	0.77
CONTROL 2	21	15	0.71
CONTROL 3	22	21	0.95
CONTROL 4	22	15	0.68
CONTROL 5	20	17	0.85
			79%

Casalicchio and Frasson (2008) proposes that when Dialecto Veneto is not the dominant language, interfaces between syntax and semantics are more vulnerable. Hence, there can be a subjectivity in the interpretation since some sentence can be accepted with or without the clitic. On the other hand, there can be a transition of the interface rules in syntactic rules. They also propose that this transformation is coherent with studies on the acquisition on bilinguals. It was in fact observed that interface phenomenon can be challenging for those acquiring a language. This was particularly observed in the interface on syntax-pragmatics. Casalicchio and Frasson referes to the studies conducted by hulk / Müller [2000]; Müller / hulk [2001]; Platzack [2001] and the «Interface Hypothesis » proposed by Sorace / Serratrice [2009]; Sorace [2011]).

Drawing the attention on the auxiliary of the *Passato Prossimo*, participants showed a tendency in omitting the auxiliary. This was observed in both Shorter and Longer Exposure group and was more frequent in the Shorter Exposure. This may be due to influence of the English Past Simple. On the whole, despite these morphological errors, Heritage Speakers are in general able to carry out a conversation in Dialecto Veneto. It is also worth noticing that in some tended to switch to Italian.

As pointed out by Lardiere, 1998, 2005; Slabakova, 2009, the acquisition of functional morphology represents one of the main challenges for second language learners. A reduced frequency in use of the Heritage Language leads to a slower and less efficient processing. In bilinguals, as well as in heritage speakers, the languages are in competition, thus one language can affect another.

CONCLUSION

The present study made emerge some conclusion concerning agreement in Heritage morphology. Gender error agreement were observed in the realization of the subject clitic pronoun.

Participants produced masculine clitic pronoun where the target was feminine, in both singular and plural contexts. The same general tendencies have also been found in L2 speakers and Heritage Speakers alike in noun-adjective concours, that is, resorting to masculine gender as a default (McCarthy, 2008; 2012; Montrul et al, 2008, among others).

It was also noted that there is a notable omission of the auxiliary in Passato Prossimo, which is almost inexistent in Longer Exposure participants.

As pointed out by Casalicchio and Frasson (2008), results may represent a frame of unstable changes and tendencies that are taking place.

Further investigation needs to be conducted on these topics, not only in other to contribute to the Heritage Language linguistic literature but also to emphasize the importance and the essentiality of minority languages.

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