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# Interlinguistic contacts and metalinguistic awareness: studies with children and preadolescents in Italian contexts

Maria Antonietta Pinto  
Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza"

## *Abstract*

A long tradition of empirical and theoretical studies of early bilingualism has viewed the bilingual experience as something that profoundly affects the cognitive and psycholinguistic processing of the individual, and fosters his/her metalinguistic awareness (Bialystok, 2005, 2008). However, systematic interlinguistic contacts different from those occurring between two languages in classical bilingual development may yield similar favorable effects on metalinguistic awareness. In the present contribution, we will present studies conducted on children who were exposed to linguistically rich experiences in Italy. These include children with productive and receptive skills in the local vernacular in addition to productive and receptive skills in Italian; children enrolled in the standard Italian curriculum that offered courses of the local heritage language; other children enrolled in the standard Italian curriculum that offered courses of Latin or Esperanto, or particularly intensive courses of foreign languages. The results will be discussed in light of the common features of these experiences and their educational implications for language teachers.

## *Resumo*

Longa tradicio de teoriaj kaj empiriaj studoj pri frua dulingvismo montris, ke la dulingva sperto profunde influas la kognan kaj psikolingvistikan procezon de la individuo, kaj favoras lian/ŝian metalingvistikan konscion (Bialystok, 2005, 2008). Tamen, sistemaj interlingvistikaj kontaktoj, malsamaj de tiuj kiuj okazas inter du lingvoj dum/laŭ la klasika dulingva evoluo, povas efiki en same pozitiva maniero sur la metalingvistikan konscion. En ĉi tiu kontribuo oni prezentas studojn faritajn rilate al infanoj kaj antaŭadoleskantoj kiuj estis elmetitaj al lingvistike riĉaj spertoj en Italujo. Inter ili estis infanoj kun produktaj kaj ricevaj kapabloj en la loka dialekto aldone al produktaj kaj ricevaj kapabloj en la itala lingvo; aliaj infanoj, kiuj studis ĉe normalaj italaj lernejoj kiuj proponis kursojn pri la latina aŭ Esperanto, aŭ aparte intensajn kursojn pri fremdaj lingvoj. La rezultojn oni diskutos prilumigante la komunajn aspektojn de tiuj ĉi spertoj kaj la edukajn sekvojn por lingvoinstruistoj.

*Riassunto*

Una lunga tradizione di studi teorici ed empirici sul bilinguismo precoce ha visto nell'esperienza bilingue un fattore che incide profondamente sui processi cognitive e psicolinguistici dell'individuo, e ne favorisce la consapevolezza metalinguistica (Bialystok, 2005, 2008). Tuttavia, anche altri tipi di contatti interlinguistici, diversi da quelli che intercorrono fra due lingue nelle situazioni canoniche di sviluppo bilingue, possono produrre effetti analoghi sulla consapevolezza metalinguistica. Nel presente contributo vengono descritti alcuni studi condotti su bambini e preadolescenti esposti ad esperienze linguisticamente ricche in vari contesti regionali italiani. È questo il caso di bambini con capacità sia produttive che ricettive nel dialetto locale, parallele a capacità produttive e ricettive in italiano, o di bambini frequentanti scuole italiane che offrono l'insegnamento della lingua locale, o corsi sperimentali di latino o di esperanto, oppure ancora programmi di lingue straniere particolarmente intensi. I risultati evidenziano gli aspetti comuni di queste diverse esperienze e le implicazioni educative per insegnanti di lingua italiana e straniera.

**1. Introduction**

A well-established tradition of empirical and theoretical studies on early bilingualism has viewed the bilingual experience as something that profoundly affects the cognitive and psycholinguistic processing of the individual. Since the pioneering study by Peal and Lambert (1962), who showed superior abstraction capabilities in young bilinguals versus monolingual controls, six decades of research have enabled us to establish which are the typical areas of linguistic and cognitive excellence in bilinguals across their lifespan (Bialystok 2005, 2008; Adesope *et al.* 2010). Empirical studies report increased attentional control, working memory, metalinguistic awareness, abstract and symbolic representations skills as distinctive areas of bilinguals' superiority. As one of the main points of this article is metalinguistic awareness, we will first define this concept as being based on the ability to analyze language forms and meanings by means of language itself (Bialystok 1986, 2001; Gombert 1990; Jessner 2006; Pinto *et al.* 1999; Pinto & Eleuch 2015; Tunmer *et al.* 1984). When studying young bilinguals, several studies have recurrently shown that these children had significant advantages in metalinguistic abilities as compared to their monolingual peers at the same age (for a review, see Adesope *et al.* 2010; Baker & Prys Jones 1998; Bialystok 2001, 2004; Friesen & Bialystok 2012; Hamers & Blanc 1988 [2000]; Reynolds 1991).

According to Bialystok (2008), bilinguals show superior ability to ignore misleading information and attend to relevant cues and structure, due to their highly developed control processes. This attentional advantage also applies to *some* but not all metalinguistic tasks, and specifically to those which require participants to detect anomalies and conflicts between form and meaning, such as the various word awareness tasks (awareness of the arbitrary relation between name and referent and awareness of the boundaries between words); grammatical and syntactical awareness under different forms of judgments of grammaticality. Based on these recurrent outcomes, bilingualism has been seen as an *accelerator* of the normal course of metalinguistic awareness, compared to what can be observed in monolinguals at the same developmental stage.

In this article we will present studies on Italian children between grades 5 and 8, (age range: 10,6 to 13,6) who had not been raised as bilinguals in the classical sense of the expression, in the home and/or at school, but who experienced types of interlinguistic contacts more intensely than their peers in the everyday context. We will show that this linguistic experience was reflected in more advanced metalinguistic abilities in the national language, i.e. Italian, as measured by a specific test developed for the above age range. We will first consider the influence of interlinguistic contacts on metalinguistic awareness in some regional contexts. This is the case of vernacular-speaking or heritage language-speaking contexts in some regions in Italy, where groups of children may experience this type of interlinguistic contacts in a more systematic way than others. We will then present cases in which children enrolled in standard Italian curricula had a limited school experience with highly structured languages, namely Esperanto and Latin, and their metalinguistic abilities were compared to control children. Finally, we will present studies investigating the influence of previous foreign language learning or of intensity of foreign language learning on metalinguistic awareness by comparing children studying these languages at different rhythms in the same school. Although the studies were conducted in different geographical areas, and at different times, they all share some important features: *a*) they all refer to the same age range, which covers from the end of primary to the end of Middle school; *b*) metalinguistic abilities were assessed with the same test, an Italian validated instrument called the TAM-2 (acronym for *Test di Abilità Metalinguistiche n.2*, 9-14, by Pinto *et al.* 2003); *c*) children were from low to average sociocultural status; *d*) they were all involved in particularly rich linguistic experiences.

## 2. The studies

Our first study (Pinto *et al.* 2003) explored metalinguistic awareness in children raised in diglossic regions where a persistent vernacular tradition coexists with the practice of the national language (Mioni 1975). According to authoritative Italianists such as Lepschy (2001), vernaculars in Italy can be considered as neo-Latin languages from a structural point of view, although with a lower sociolinguistic status with respect to the national language. Therefore, it is plausible that the daily practice of this type of language along with the practice of another neo-Latin language, in this case Italian, triggers spontaneous contrastive analysis, which is itself a form of metalinguistic processing. In these conditions, we wondered what could be the level of metalinguistic awareness in children having more or less balanced competence in the local vernacular and in Italian. We considered that children who could both speak and understand the local vernacular of their region (having therefore productive and receptive skills), and at the same time speak and understand Italian, could be called “spontaneous balanced Italian-vernacular bilinguals” (BB, henceforth), as vernacular is spontaneously learnt. On the contrary, those children having only receptive skills in vernacular and productive and receptive skills in Italian could be considered as “spontaneous unbalanced Italian-vernacular bilinguals” (UB, henceforth). Two hundred and two 5<sup>th</sup> graders (mean age = 10,6), partly living in the city of Benevento and partly in a smaller city, Montesarchio (Campania region) were recruited for this study. Metalinguistic awareness was investigated as a function of the following factors: a) *degree of Italian/ vernacular bilingualism*, with approximately half of the sample as balanced (BB) and the other half as unbalanced (UB) children; b) *sociocultural background*, with approximately half of the BB and the UB having high sociocultural status (HSS) in Benevento, and the other half having lower sociocultural status (LSS), in Montesarchio; c) a *limited experience of translation from vernacular to Italian*, which was performed in the middle of the school year by approximately half of the BB and by half of the UB, randomly selected. The participants who performed the translation were treated as an experimental group (EG), opposed to a control group (CG) who did not perform it. Performances at four of the TAM-2 subtests (Comprehension, Synonymy, Acceptability and Grammatical function) were measured at the beginning (pre-test) and at the end of the school year (post-test). A three-factor Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was then performed, with degree of bilingualism, sociocultural background, and

translation experience as main factors. The results showed that, at the pre-test, BB outperformed UB children irrespectively of their sociocultural status. At the post-test, in addition to the degree of bilingualism factor, which still yielded significant differences in favor of the BB children, the experimental factor (the translation experience) also had a significant impact on metalinguistic awareness, with the EG children having significantly better performances at the TAM-2 subtests than the CG. The replication of this research design in three more southern regions of Italy (South Latium, Abruzzi, Calabria), with a total number of participants of about 800 children, always confirmed the significance of the above two factors, namely balanced bilingualism and translation from the vernacular to Italian, whereas sociocultural status never reached statistical significance (fieldwork described in the unpublished Master dissertations by Annichiarico, Campobasso and Romano, discussed at the Faculty of Psychology-University of Rome “Sapienza” in 2003 and 2004).

The next study moves us towards the region of Sardinia (fieldwork described in the unpublished Master dissertation by Seddaiu, discussed at the Faculty of Psychology-University of Rome “Sapienza” in 2003). In fact, in the last four decades there has been a strong political movement for promoting Sardinian culture and language, and projects have been introduced for teaching Sardinian as a heritage language (Baker 2001). Sardinian is a Romance language (Blasco Ferrer 1984; Sanna 1957) with lower sociocultural status with respect to Italian, but with a considerable corpus of written production based on magazines, poetry and a lively political literature. In several schools of the region, syllabuses and other teaching materials have been developed by expert linguists, and curricula have been implemented for teaching Sardinian from preschool to secondary level. In such a context, it was interesting to investigate the influence of studying Sardinian at school on metalinguistic awareness in Italian. To this end, 55 8<sup>th</sup> graders were recruited (mean age = 13,6), composed of three groups, two of whom studied Sardinian at school, respectively for 2 and 7 years, and a third one who did not study it at all. All of the children lived in the same sociolinguistic context in small centers near the city of Sassari, where Sardinian and Italian alternate in speech on a daily basis. Furthermore, they were all from a low-average sociocultural milieu, had average school proficiency, as assessed by their teachers, and experienced the same teaching methods and materials of the other disciplines taught at school except the formal study of Sardi-

nian. By means of a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), with the learning of Sardinian as a factor at three levels (0, 2 and 7 years duration) we tested the significance of differences between the performances of the three groups at the TAM-2. The results showed that the children who had the longest experience with learning Sardinian at school (7 years) had the best metalinguistic performances at the TAM-2 in all the subtests (Comprehension, Synonymy, Acceptability, Ambiguity, Grammatical function and Phonemic segmentation) and in all the scores of the test. These performances were significantly higher than those of the children with a shorter experience (2 years), who, in turn, performed significantly better than those who had no school experience of Sardinian at all. Therefore, the effect of studying the heritage language at school, beyond spontaneous oral use in everyday communication, not only had an overall positive influence on metalinguistic awareness in Italian, but was proportionally related to the duration of the learning experience. The longer the practice of studying the heritage language, the deeper was the influence on metalinguistic awareness in the national language, i.e. Italian, in accordance with a well-established line of research on heritage languages (Baker 2001; García *et al.* 2013).

We will now turn towards teaching/learning experiences implemented in Italian schools that addressed two highly structured and little used languages, namely Esperanto (Pinto & Corsetti 2001) and ancient Latin, in order to investigate their influence on metalinguistic abilities in Italian. In an Italian public school in a small city near Rome, some expert teachers of Esperanto implemented a curriculum of Esperanto for 7th graders, two hours a week for 8 months. This course was proposed to the parents in general terms as a linguistic enrichment of the curriculum free of charge, and left to their choice. In fact, this teaching experience was part of a research project promoted and supervised by the Faculty of Education of the University of "Roma Tre" (Acciaroli *et al.* 1995-1997), in collaboration with the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Rome "Sapienza" in order to explore the metalinguistic consequences of studying Esperanto, a planned language, on the first language (La Torre 1995). The children belonging to the families who accepted this proposal were treated as an experimental group (EG; N = 50), and opposed to a control group (CG; N = 67), matched by grade, mean age (12, 1, at the beginning of the school year), gender balance, low sociocultural status, proficiency level, as assessed by teachers, and nonverbal intelligence, as measured by the Raven's Matrices PM38 (Raven *et al.* 1998), and the initial level

of metalinguistic abilities, as measured by four subtests of the TAM-2 (Pinto *et al.* 2003), namely Synonymy, Ambiguity, Grammatical function and Phonemic segmentation. Metalinguistic awareness was measured at three different times during the school year: the first month (mid-September), in the middle of the year (beginning of February) and at the end of the year (end of May). A two-factor Analysis of variance (ANOVA), with time of assessment (Time 1, 2 and 3) and group (EG and CG) as main factors, was performed on all of the scores of the TAM-2. Both groups significantly improved their metalinguistic performances from the beginning to the end of the school year, but with a marked difference between the two scores of the test. While in the scores that measure intuitive and global forms of awareness (L answers, acronym for Linguistic answers, consisting of yes/no answers, right/wrong or other very limited answers) the two groups did not differ, a significant gap emerged in the scores that required a *justification* of the previous L answers, and were therefore genuinely metalinguistic (ML, in acronym). This gap appeared at the intermediate assessment time and was amplified by the end of the year. In synthesis, while for the intuitive forms of awareness of the structures of language, the normal course of the standard Italian curriculum was sufficient to determine an improvement in both the EG and the CG, for the most complex and demanding forms of metalinguistic awareness the study of Esperanto represented an added value. This result is all the more significant if we consider the limited duration of the learning experience (8 months), the highly structured nature of Esperanto, the low sociocultural status of the participants and their unawareness of the social utility of a language such as Esperanto.

In a similar vein, although not in the context of an academic research project, we wished to explore the consequences of studying a highly structured language such as Latin on the awareness of Italian at junior school level fieldwork described in the unpublished Master dissertation by Occhipinti, discussed at the Faculty of Psychology-University of Rome "Sapienza" in 2005. In the Italian school system, the teaching of Latin starts at secondary level, by age 14, approximately, within the classical studies curriculum for those who opt for it. Before this time, teachers may choose to "sensitize" their pupils to some aspects of Latin language and culture related to history or etymology but they are not obliged to do so. In a public school of Ragusa (Sicily), a group of teachers sensitive to the stimulating influence of Latin with respect to linguistic and cognitive processing – a widespread opinion in a country where

classical studies have always flourished – implemented a Latin course for 7th and 8th graders. The course presented basic grammatical and lexical elements that enabled the learners to translate small texts and build up simple utterances with a methodology very similar to the one used for beginners at a later age. Seventy-five children belonging to the families who had accepted this Latin course were recruited for this study. They were considered as an experimental group (EG), composed of 7th and 8th graders (N = 24 and N = 51, respectively), and were opposed to 75 Control (CG) children, attending the same school, also composed of 7th and 8th graders with the same number of participants in each grade (N = 24 and N = 51). The two groups were matched by age in each grade (7th grade: mean age = 12,2; 8th grade: 13,3), gender balance, proficiency, as assessed by teachers, nonverbal intelligence, as measured by the Raven's PM38 (Raven *et al.* 1998), and average sociocultural level. The measures included three subtests of the TAM-2 (Pinto *et al.* 2003), namely Synonymy, Ambiguity, and Grammatical Function, and a metacognitive questionnaire on mathematics, exploring attitudes and personal opinions on mathematics (Cornoldi 1995). This instrument was chosen for exploring the relationship between studying Latin and general metacognitive processes, as one of the Italian stereotypes related to studying Latin is that this language fosters "general reasoning and logical processes". A two-factor Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), with grade (7th and 8th) and group (EG and CG) as main factors, was performed on all of the metalinguistic and metacognitive measures. The results showed that the group factor, i.e. the experience of studying Latin significantly affected *all of the measures* considered, whereas the grade factor, i.e. the curricular and chronological transition from grade 7 to grade 8 influenced only 2 out of the 6 metalinguistic scores (Ambiguity-ML and Grammatical Function-ML), and 2 out of the 3 metacognitive scores. Therefore, the study of an ancient and structurally complex language such as Latin, generally not considered as particularly motivating by preadolescents, and furthermore *added* to the standard curriculum, yielded more significant advances in the awareness of Italian than the passage from one school grade to the following. In addition, this language experience, limited in time as in the case of Esperanto, not only affected metalinguistic processes but also *metacognitive processes* related to a different domain, mathematics, in this case.

Finally, we will illustrate studies investigating the influence of previous foreign language experience on metalinguistic awareness in

the Italian language, and the extent to which the intensity of foreign language learning may also have contributed to metalinguistic awareness. The first study took place in the city of Viterbo (Latium region), where we measured metalinguistic awareness with the whole TAM-2 in 98 6th graders (mean age = 11,6), divided into three groups according to the number of years they had previously studied a language at primary school, i.e. no experience at all, 1 or 2 years, 3 or more years (fieldwork described in the unpublished Master dissertation, by Monfeli, discussed at the Faculty of Psychology – University of Rome "Sapienza" in 1999). The participants were matched by age, gender balance, average sociocultural status and nonverbal intelligence, as measured by Raven's PM38 (Raven *et al.* 1998). A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was run on all the scores of the TAM-2 and the results showed that the previous foreign language learning factor significantly and proportionally differentiated the three groups. *The earlier and longer* the experience of foreign languages at primary level, *the greater* the effect on metalinguistic awareness in Italian at 6th grade. The children who started to study a foreign language as 2nd or 3rd graders had significantly better metalinguistic performances than those who started as 4th or 5th graders, who, in turn, performed significantly better than those who had no experience of foreign language at all at primary level. Very similar results were found with a sample of 92 7th graders (mean age = 12,5) and of 114 8th graders (mean age = 13,7), where some subgroups had experienced three or more years of previous foreign language learning versus others with no experience at all. The groups were matched by the same criteria as those in the previous study. Again, differences on all of the L and ML scores of the TAM-2 were markedly significant in favor of the former subgroups.

In another study, a sample of 115 children, composed of 6th, 7th and 8th graders (mean age = 11,5; 12, 6 and 13, 6, respectively) from a small city near Rome, who took foreign language courses 3 hours a week, was opposed to a sample of 115 children, also composed of 6th, 7th and 8th graders (mean age = 11,6; 12,6 and 13,4, respectively), who took similar courses 6 hours a week. The participants were matched by the same criteria as in the previous studies (age, gender balance, sociocultural status, general proficiency, nonverbal intelligence). They were examined with two subtests of the TAM-2, namely Ambiguity and Acceptability, and a test of metaphor comprehension (Pinto *et al.* 2006). A two-factor Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), with intensity of foreign

language learning and grade as the main factors, was performed on all the scores of the two tests. The results highlighted the influence of intensity of foreign language learning on metalinguistic awareness in Italian: at each grade, the children who were enrolled in the most intense foreign language curriculum had significantly better metalinguistic performances than those who took half of the hours of these courses. A nearly identical research design was also performed in the Abruzzi region (fieldwork described in the unpublished Master dissertation, by Maurizi, discussed at the Faculty of Psychology-University of Rome "Sapienza" in 2004). That was a very similar sociocultural context, except for the fact that there were three subgroups instead of two, based on the number of hours of foreign language learning, i.e. 4, 6 and 8 hours. The results confirmed the relevance of the language learning intensity factor.

### 3. Conclusion

The type of interlinguistic contacts we have addressed, between Italian, as the first language of the children, and another language – be it vernacular, heritage, planned, ancient or modern – is rarely considered in studies on bilingualism, second language learning and metalinguistic awareness. The first study, in particular, is considered by sociolinguists as a case of bilingualism with diglossia (Mioni 1975) but, to our knowledge, it has never been investigated by educational psycholinguists with experimental methodology, also because the bilingual experience explored took place essentially outside the school system, contrary to the other cases referred to in this article, where the teaching of additional languages took place at school and was intentionally planned. Furthermore, experimental research on metalinguistic awareness requires valid age-appropriate tests to compare groups of participants on statistical grounds, and this was the case in all the studies reported in this article thanks to the presence of the Italian TAM-2 (Pinto *et al.* 2003).

Overall, the main results of the studies we reported can be summarized as follows:

- (a) the linguistic experiences that were *more demanding* in terms of attentional control on forms and meanings, in which the experimental groups were involved, resulted in significantly more advanced metalinguistic abilities in Italian with respect

to the control groups. This outcome is perfectly in line with the current interpretation of the results reported in the international literature on bilingualism as related to metalinguistic awareness (See the Introduction, above).

- (b) When the *duration* or the *intensity* of these stimulating linguistic experiences could be investigated (see, for instance, the study on the Sardinian and the foreign language experiences), the result was that the earlier and/or the more intense this practice, the more generalized its effect on metalinguistic abilities in Italian.
- (c) Where there were marked sociocultural characteristics in the groups investigated, as in the study on Esperanto learners which took place in a low sociocultural milieu, or in the study on Italian/vernacular bilingualism, with two contrasting sociocultural groups, the better results of the experimental versus the control groups were independent of the sociocultural factor.

We think that these results and the methodology that enabled the researcher to discover them should be known by both researchers and language teachers in Italy. The enhancement of metalinguistic abilities in Italian, which is the vehicular language of the entire school system in Italy, should be a primary concern for the language teacher not only for monolingual Italian children but for all the children enrolled in Italian curricula.

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