The Acquisition of Spatial Prepositions in Italian L2

Linda Meini

When talking about acquisitional process of spatial prepositions, there are at least two main open issues in the background. The first one concerns the current debate about spatial language, enlivened by two main models. According to the nativist approach (Jackendoff, 1983; Landau and Jackendoff, 1993; Landau, 1994; Talmy, 2000; Li and Gleitman, 2002), there is a restricted list of primitive, universal and innate topological notions, shared by all human beings and coded more or less directly by adpositions. On the contrary, relativist/functionalist approaches (Levinson, 2003; Bowerman and Choi, 2003; Brugman, 1983; Lakoff, 1987; Herskovits, 1986; Vandeloise, 1986; Brugman and Lakoff, 1988; Cuyckens, 1991) claim that spatial language and cognition are conditioned in several ways and to several degrees by cultural conventions. The second issue concerns second language acquisition: when trying to learn a second language, we struggle with the correct use of prepositions. It has become a leit motive even in language teaching: prepositional uses are so arbitrary and idiomatic that they can be learned only by memorization.

So, goals of our study are manifold. First of all, investigating the domain of spatial prepositions of Italian L2, we want to verify whether the acquisitional process of prepositions is really one of the few lacking any kind of systematic organization and whether we can single out which principles drive such process. Moreover, according to Klein and Perdue (1997), «The study of learner varieties and the way in which they evolve should ... shed light on how linguistic systems function in general». Accordingly, we will start from a “simplified” system like Italian learners’ varieties to investigate the domain of spatial prepositions of Italian L1: namely, we want to investigate what principles govern the use of spatial prepositions in Italian L1.

In order to achieve our goals, we will analyze two corpora of university learners of Italian L2: the corpus Rosi and the corpus ISA. The first one is a corpus of written and oral Italian by 24 learners of Italian L2 (namely 12 Spanish speakers and 12 German speakers), who attended university courses in Pisa. The corpus contains also a check sample, consisting of written and oral descriptions by 24 Italian native speakers. During three different elicitation sessions, two months apart one another, all the informants were asked to describe three scenes from the film “Modern Times”. Learners’ linguistic level range corresponds to A2 and B1 levels of the European Framework.

The corpus ISA consists of written paragraphs composed by university American students that attended the I.E.S. program in Milan. Since the corpus is currently being developed at the Department of Linguistics of the University of Pavia, we could analyze only a part of it, namely the descriptions of 8 scenes from “Pane e Tulipani” by 107 learners, whose linguistic level ranges from A1 to C2. The acquisitional setting of both the corpora is semi-spontaneous, the main kind of input consisting of daily interactions with Italian society.

We examined our corpora manually, in order to isolate spatial from non-spatial uses of prepositions, pinpoint omissions and keep track of the context. The statistical variables we used to describe our data consist of: code of the learner, his linguistic level and L1; the number of the elicitation session or of the scene described by the learner and, eventually, the kind of elicitation; the verbal lemma associated with the preposition uttered and the RELATUM occurring with it. Moreover, there is a first analysis of the data: for each preposition uttered, we have specified whether it has static or dynamic meaning, the spatial expression or expressions the TL requires in that context and whether the preposition uttered matches the latter. We are well aware of the fact that this procedure is in fact an interpretation of the data and we are also aware of the risks it involves. In order to minimize these risks, on one hand we have kept track of the linguistic components of the context, like the verbal lemma and the RELATUM; on the other hand, we have constantly kept in mind what was happening in the scene described by the learners. Finally, we have specified the type of RELATUM occurring with each preposition uttered.
For that purpose, we set up an ontology of semantic types of RELATA: it is based on one hand on the distinctions considered relevant in the literature about spatial language (hence the distinction between living entities, objects, spaces and figurative places, etc.) and on the other it is based on the characteristics of our data (hence the distinction between solid and non-solid food).

Our investigation revealed a fundamental consistency of the data elicitated from the three groups of learners, who have different L1. Characteristics of learners’ varieties common to all three groups are:

- in, a and su are the most frequent prepositions uttered by learners, exactly like the data from the check sample in corpus Rosi;
- the so called “locuzioni preposizionali”, both topological and projective, are rarely used, though semantically more transparent, again exactly like the data from the check sample;
- differently from the data of Italian native speakers, but likewise data of previous studies, da with ablative meaning is usually avoided by Italian learners.
- Regarding the choice of the prepositions to be uttered, it seems to be driven by the type of RELATUM, so that we can talk about a RELATUM-Type Primacy: these types are not real entities, but geometrical abstractions of real entities, that are conceived as points, lines, surfaces, volumes. Moreover, geometrical abstractions are associated with prototypical functions, typically expressed by the topological prepositions in, a, su (for instance, buildings are conceived as volumes, that are associated with the containment function, expressed by the preposition in). An indirect evidence of what we call RELATUM-Type Primacy may come from mismatches. Learners fail to utter the TL preposition when the functions of the entities used as RELATUM depend heavily on the context. This is the case of the RELATUM “street”: it can be conceived in many ways, like, for instance, a bounded space and a bi- or tridimensional path to follow. We found mismatches also with the RELATUM “bed”, because in the scene submitted to our learners the bed is used not in its prototypical function as a place where to lay down and rest or as a place to slip in: it is used by the main character as a surface with a support function.
- Learners fail to utter the TL preposition also when they express a specific functional relation between THEME and RELATUM. So, for instance, Charly Chaplin ha dovuto andare al prigione (“Charly Chaplin had to go at/to the prison”) is not completely wrong from a grammatical point of view: it is wrong because a cannot express the functional relation between the main character (who will be a prisoner very soon) and the RELATUM. Finally, learners fail to utter the TL preposition when it is used in idiomatic expressions, like cadere per terra (“to fall on the ground”).

Summing up, we can claim that learners fail to utter the TL preposition when its use depends more on linguistic conventions than on physical features and prototypical functions of RELATA.

Interesting insights come from learners’ performances of a and da.
- Even though a is not the most frequent preposition learners utter (that is in), it is the one that learners overextend. The overextension of a is pervasive: we found it in both dynamic and static contexts; in the data of all three groups of learners; in combination with different types of RELATUM, as closed places, bounded surfaces and vehicles. Moreover, we found a with fuori, in the phrase a fuori: in some cases, a confers a telic value to the verbal phrase (in some sentences, for instance, we can gloss andare a fuori as “to reach the outside”); sometimes, this phrase refers to an exterior subspace of an implicit RELATUM: that is, fuori is used as relational noun, without conferring any additional value to the verb. So, we believe that learners recognize a as the semantically lightest preposition, lacking a full semantic meaning, and it signifies the most neutral topological relation.
- Consistent with Bernini’s data (1987), learners tend to avoid the preposition da in its ablative meaning. In order to do that, learners take different strategies. First of all, they usually use verbal phrases expressing ablative motion, with the source left implicit, as in ha andato/è andato fuori lui “he went outside”. Clearly, in this way there is no need to use any preposition. Sometimes, learners fail to use any preposition, especially with the verb uscire (“to go out”).

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Other times, learners replace *da* with *di*. In Italian *di* is the suppletive preposition of *da*, when expressing ablative motion: in this case, entities used as RELATA are closed spaces or vehicles, and they are not preceded by any article, like in *uscire di/dalla casa* (“to go out [the] house”) or *cadere di/dalla bicicletta* (“to fall off [the] bike”). The *da/di* variation is found both in the diachronic development of Italian and, synchronically, in its diatopic varieties. Moreover, *di* is the Italian most frequent preposition and the semantically lightest one. Consistent with the input, learners use *di* instead of *da* (when expressing ablative motion) mostly with closed spaces or vehicles as RELATA. In some cases, learners utter *de*, instead of *da*: our hypothesis is that learners re-analyze the initial *de-* of contracted prepositions as the basic form to which the definite article is added. In comparison with previous studies (Schmid, 1994; Vietti, 2005), our hypothesis has two main advantages. First of all, it explains the use of *de* instead of *di* as a simplification process of the allomorphy of *di*: that is, it appeals to the diagrammaticity principle, widely attested in learners’ varieties (and specially in learners’ acquisitional processes of Italian morphology). Second, it keeps the hypothesis, valid for other prepositions, that learners use linguistic material of the input they are exposed to, irrespective to their own L1.

Some conclusions can be drawn.

Regarding the first goal of our study, we can claim that learners of Italian L2 develop a (micro)system of spatial prepositions, that is built mostly on the input (on the system of spatial prepositions of Italian) and only scarcely on the learners’ L1 systems. Moreover, we saw that the (re)construction of the system of spatial prepositions is driven by frequency (the most frequent preposition uttered by learners are the same uttered by Italian native speakers), semantic markedness (overextension of *a*; use of *di* instead of *da*; rare use of projective prepositions), diagrammaticity (use of *dil/de*). That is, principles widely attested in the acquisitional processes of other linguistic categories.

The other goal of our study was to investigate the domain of spatial prepositions of Italian L1, starting from a “simplified” system like Italian learners’ varieties. Our data show that there are some universal principles governing the organization of spatial prepositions of both Italian L1 and L2 (at least, for learners who speak genetically related languages). We can see universal principles in the process of geometrical abstraction of entities used as RELATA and in the fact that learners are very sensitive to relations between types of RELATA and spatial prepositions. But our data show also that cultural/linguistic principles condition the organization of spatial prepositions. In fact, prepositional uses are related not only to the physical features of entities but also to their function and to how the speaker conceptualizes the scene. And learners fail to master Italian prepositions exactly when their uses depend on linguistic conventions.