



The production of *wh*-questions in Italian-speaking children with SLI

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ABSTRACT

We aim at determining whether 7-year-old Italian-speaking children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI): (1) have problems with the production of *wh*- questions; (2) display a subject/object asymmetry in producing *which*- and *who* questions; (3) attempt to simplify questions, especially *which*- questions; (4) have difficulties with movement and verbal agreement in *wh*- questions. We elicited subject and object *who* and *which* NP questions in 10 children with SLI ($M = 7;2$), in 10 chronological age (CA)-matched controls ($M = 7;2$) and 10 language-matched controls ($M = 5;2$). Results showed that (1) children with SLI produced fewer questions than both control groups; (2) a subject/object asymmetry was observed in *who* questions but not in *which* NP questions; (3) *which* NP questions were more problematic than *who* questions; (4) children with SLI produced more agreement errors and resorted to simplification strategies to avoid *wh*- question production. Results point to a grammatical deficit due to the computation of complex grammatical relations and suggest that there is a misalignment among pieces of linguistic competence needed to form Italian *wh*-questions (*wh*- movement and agreement computation). Outcomes have implications for clinical assessment recommending the production of *wh*- questions to be considered in the evaluation of SLI in Italian.

KEYWORDS

Wh-question; agreement; SLI; developmental language disorders

Introduction

Many studies with children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI, or developmental language disorder) have reported specific difficulties in the mastery of some aspects of inflectional morphology and of complex syntactic structures, with some differences depending on the language. For example, while the omission of inflectional morphemes on verbs (third-person singular *-s* and past tense *-ed*) is claimed to be a clinical marker of SLI in English (Rice & Wexler, 1996), this role is taken up by a failure to produce third-person direct object clitic pronouns in Italian (Arosio, Branchini, Barbieri & Guasti, 2014; Bortolini, Arfè, Caselli, Deevy & Leonard, 2006) and French (Jakubowicz, Nash, Rigaut, & Gérard, 1998). Some problems with the use of third-person plural inflection on verbs are observed in Italian, which may be due to its marked phonological pattern, with antepenultimate rather than penultimate stress; however, the use of third-person singular inflection on verbs is error free (Leonard & Bortolini, 1998). Weaknesses in the comprehension and production of specific syntactic structures displaying non-canonical word orders like

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