

Genericity in the grammars of Romanian, French, and English trilinguals
Mihaela Pirvulescu¹ and Elena Valenzuela²
University of Toronto¹ and University of Ottawa²

A number of studies argue that bilingual language acquisition is subject to crosslinguistic influence in the domain of determiner interpretation. We are referring to research done with bilingual adults/children showing cross-linguistic influence from English to the Romance languages. For example, Serratrice et al. (2009) show acceptance of ungrammatical bare plural noun phrases in generic contexts in Italian in bilinguals Italian-English children. English-Spanish adult heritage speakers of Spanish also show acceptance of ungrammatical bare plural NPs and preference for the specific interpretation of definite plurals (Montrul and Ionin, 2012). These results point to unidirectional cross-linguistic influence from English to the Romance language.

We are extending this research by looking at trilinguals with two romance languages (Romanian, heritage language, and French, third language) and English as the majority language. We examine the interpretation of genericity in French, English, and Romanian to address the following research questions: 1) Do Romanian heritage speakers know the restrictions on bare plurals in their three languages? 2) is there evidence of cross-linguistic interaction in the use of bare plurals? The interpretation of NPs in English, French, and Romanian, involves both morphosyntax (bare, definite, or indefinite determiner) and a semantic interpretation (specific or generic). Under Chiercha's Nominal Mapping Parameter (NMP), languages are classified based on whether bare nouns can appear as arguments. In English, genericity in canonical argument positions such as subject is expressed by bare plurals while specificity is expressed by definite plurals:

- (1) Bears eat fish. [$\sqrt{\text{generic}}$, *specific]
- (2) The bears eat fish. [*generic, $\sqrt{\text{specific}}$]

In French and Romanian, on the other hand, bare plurals are ungrammatical in subject position. Plural indefinites can be generic or specific (depending on context):

- (3) *Ours mangent du poisson. / Ursi mănâncă peste.
- (4) Les ours mangent du poisson. / Ursii mănâncă peste. [$\sqrt{\text{generic}}$, $\sqrt{\text{specific}}$]

Singular definites can also be used in generic or specific contexts. Differently from French and English, Romanian definites are enclitic on the noun.

In the present study, we provide data from a picture-based elicited production task (Table 1) from trilingual children between 8-11 years-old (Romanian, heritage language/English, majority language/French, L3, immersion) born and raised in Toronto, Canada. All children speak Romanian at home, French at school and English is the societal language. A group of trilingual Romanian children born and raised in Romania serves as control. The children were tested in generic and specific conditions in all three languages. Preliminary data (Table 2) show influence from English to Romanian in the generic condition – the non-target answers (49%) represent bare nouns. In comparison, Romanian children born and raised in Romania, do not use bare forms (one child used bare plurals for only one question). We explore explanations in the line of economy considerations (Serratrice et al. 2009). Responses for French L3 are mostly target-like. Interestingly, in the Specific condition, we see signs of possible morphosyntactic loss or

reinterpretation of the definite determiner in both Romanian and English: non-target responses in these languages are mostly bare forms (25% in English and 31.7 in Romanian).

Table 1. Picture Task sample


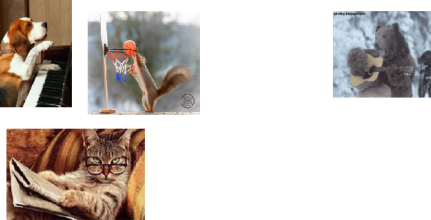
<p>Generic condition</p>  <p>Stimuli question samples: In general, what animals drink milk? In general, what animals live in the jungle?</p>	<p>Specific condition</p>  <p>Stimuli question samples: What animal is riding a bicycle? What animal is eating ice cream?</p>
---	---

Table 2 Results (in percentages) of target forms in the Generic and Specific conditions

Language	Target form in generic condition	Percentage correct in generic condition	Target Form in Specific Condition	Percentage correct in Specific Condition
Trilinguals				
Romanian	Definite PL/Definite SG	42.3	Definite Singular	61.9
English	Bare PL	86.6	Definite Singular	57.1
French	Definite PL/Definite SG	85.2	Definite Singular	95.4
Monolinguals Romanian		77	Definite singular	81

References

- Chierchia, Gennaro (1998) Reference to Kinds across Languages. *Natural Language Semantics* 6, 339-405
- Montrul & Ionin (2012) Dominant Language Transfer in Spanish Heritage Speakers and Second Language Learners in the Interpretation of Definite Articles, *The Modern Language Journal*, 96, 1 70–94.
- Serratrice, Sorace, Filiaci & Baldo (2009) Bilingual children’s sensitivity to specificity and genericity: Evidence from metalinguistic awareness, *Bilingualism: language and cognition*, 12(2) 239–257.

