Referring expressions in narrative texts of Italian teenagers: a guided production study

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We present the first results of a guided production study conducted within the PRIN project "Racconta", in which we elicited short spoken narrative texts by 13-18 years old students with the aim to analyze the management of referents in discourse. In particular, we focus on (i) the use of definite articles with first mentions; (ii) the use of demonstrative pronouns with anaphoric, recognitional and indefinite functions; (iii) the presence of clitic pronoun resumption in topicalizations. The experimental setup allows us to compare the distribution of these referential strategies in formal and informal contexts, as well as their use by a sub-group of participants composed by Chinese-Italian bilingual speakers. This way, we explore the effect of sociolinguistic variables on the management of discourse referents.

For our study we adopted the RUEG protocol,[1] which is based on a method that allows to combine the respect for semi-naturalistic, ecological conditions of elicitation with the necessity to control the general structure of linguistic productions in order to ensure comparability (LangSit, Wiese 2020). Spoken texts re-telling the events shown in a short video were collected in formal and informal settings at school from 103 speakers in different school programs.

The texts provide interesting data for the phenomena listed above, a.o.,

(i) with respect to the use of definite descriptions to introduce first-mentioned discourse referents, we observe that this happens more frequently when the nominal may receive a weak definite interpretation, in stereotypical, familiar situations (Leonetti 1999:793, Donazzan 2013), as in (1):

(1) uno stava giocando co**l** pallone e il pallone è finito in mezzo alla strada (BOTMiScovo_ii)
 one was playing with.the ball and the ball is ended in middle to.the street
'a guy was playing with a ball and the ball ended in the middle of the street'

(ii) we frequently find the use of demonstratives in presentative constructions to introduce hearer-new, discourse-new referents (indefinite demonstratives, Ionin 2006, von Heusinger 2011). Significantly, the informal texts show this phenomenon also with colloquial demonstrative forms composed of a reduced demonstrative stem and a post-demonstrative reinforcer (2):

(2) e c' era **sto qua** con il cane che attraversava (BOLMiGio_ii)
 and there was ths here with the dog that crossed
'and there was this guy with the dog who was crossing the street'

(iii) clitic left dislocations (3) are frequently used in both formal and informal texts when previously introduced referents are topicalized, especially when at least one referent intervenes between the first mention and the topicalized anaphoric expression.

(3) alla signora gli è caduta la spesa (BOTMiMazzins_ii)
 to.the lady to.her is fallen the purchase
'the lady dropped her groceries'

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[1] The official description is available here: https://www.linguistik.hu-berlin.de/en/institut-en/professuren-en/rueg/rueg-corpus#Survey%20methods

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