

The metalinguistic benefits of Italian–vernacular bilingualism. Studies in some southern regions of Italy

Maria Antonietta Pinto¹, Paolo Iliceto²

The aim of present research is to study the relationships between Italian-vernacular bilingualism and metalinguistic development in primary school children of some southern regions of Italy, namely Sicily, Campania and Calabria. Authoritative linguists have demonstrated on structural linguistic grounds that Italian vernaculars are in fact neo-Latin languages on their own, standing in a low variety position towards the national language, following a typical diglossic pattern. In the introduction, it is argued that in contexts where a local vernacular and Italian are learnt simultaneously in early childhood, children who develop through these two codes must be considered as bilinguals just as other types of bilinguals with two national languages.

A first explorative study, carried out by the authors in Sicily, produced convincing evidence that balanced Italian-vernacular 5th graders were more advanced than their unbalanced counterparts matched by age, sociocultural background and non verbal intelligence, when assessed through a metalinguistic ability test in Italian. A more complex design was applied afterwards in two other regions, the results of which are partly referred to in the present study. A total sample of 202 5th graders (mean age: 10,6 years) was selected on the following grounds: a) balanced and unbalanced Italian-vernacular bilingualism, assessed through a sociolinguistic questionnaire; b) sociocultural status, low and middle class level, from a village and from a city in Campania; c) an experimental factor, consisting of a short translation task from Italian into vernacular. Half of the total sample was asked to perform it, and thus constituted the Experimental Group (EG), as opposed to the Control Group (CG) who did not perform it. In both EG and CG, half of the children were randomly selected from the balanced and the unbalanced group. Metalinguistic abilities were assessed through 4 tasks of MAT-2, a specific Italian metalinguistic ability test for ages 9 to 14, administered at the pre-test and at the post-test to the whole sample, with a 4 months interval, whereas the translation task was only administered to the EG in between.

Results show that: a) balanced bilinguals always are metalinguistically superior to the unbalanced, both at the pre-test and at the post-test; b) the Italian-vernacular translation task has an even more powerful effect on metalinguistic scores at the post-test, significantly enhancing the performances of the whole EG; c) sociocultural background has an indirect influence on metalinguistic awareness, i.e. only when combined with the language balance factor, low status unbalanced children performing the worst and low status balanced children performing just as middle class ones. Results, which are very consistent in Campania and in Calabria, are discussed in the light of the unexplored potential of this type of bilingualism, especially relevant to low sociocultural status children.

¹Dipartimento di Psicologia dei Processi di Sviluppo e Socializzazione – Università di Roma "La Sapienza" – Via dei Marsi, 78 – 00185 ROMA.

E-mail: mariantonietta.pinto@uniroma1.it oppure maripinto@tiscalinet.it

Indirizzo per la corrispondenza: Maria Antonietta Pinto – Dip. PPSS – Università di Roma "La Sapienza" – Via dei Marsi, 78 – ROMA 00185.

²Laboratorio Psicometrico – Via Lorenzo il Magnifico, 35 – 00162 Roma.