Language acquisition in a multilingual society: a case study in Veneto (Italy).

Children born in a multilingual society are confronted with a highly variable linguistic environment. And yet, they use the languages of their community as early as a monolingual child. However, little is known on the acquisition process in a multilingual social setting.

An initial step towards a better understanding of this process is to explore the links between the languages the child receives and the languages she uses. A case study involving two sisters - Rachel (5;4) and Sally (9;1) - has been carried out in the Veneto region (Italy), where Dialect and Italian are on a linguistic continuum. Six hours of interactions between the two sisters and twelve members from four generations of their family were recorded. The transcribed utterances were coded into three categories - Italian, Dialect and Mixed - following precise criteria.

Results: 1/ The children receive and produce more Italian than Dialect and produce more mixed utterances than adults; 2/ Adults prefer Italian when speaking to children, 3/ Both sisters adjust their language choice according to their interlocutor; 4/ Compared to Italian utterances, Dialect utterances appear to exert greater influence on the children's language choice.

These results suggest that Dialect becomes progressively the object of joint attention between the adult and the child. Appearing in isolation in an Italian utterance, the Dialect sequence directs the child's attention to the pragmatic functions it fulfils.