

# Acquisitional Dynamics of Russian L2 in Italian Learners



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By

Nataliya Stoyanova

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To my husband Stefano  
and our children Sofia, Daniele and Miriam

It may seem as if all languages would have to be *like* each other in their *intellectual procedure*. [...] that which rests solely on mental self-activity, as the intellectual part of language does, seems to have to be alike in all men, given the similarity of purpose and means; and this part of language does, indeed, preserve a large degree of uniformity. But from various causes there also arises in it a significant diversity.

(Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language*)

To undergo an experience with language is something else again than to gather information about language. Such information – linguists and philologists of the most diverse languages, psychologists and analytic philosophers supply it to us, and constantly increase the supply, *ad infinitum*.

(Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*)

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## PREFACE

I am happy to present to the readers this relatively small, but very rich book by Nataliya Stoyanova. The main topic of this book – the ways discourse structures of Russian may be acquired by Italian-speaking students – grows out of the direct experience of its author, who spent many years teaching Russian in Italy (and before that, she studied Italian language and Romanic philology at the Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow, well known for its great traditions in this area). This connection of the two language competences in the personal biography of the author, I think, explains why this book is written so vividly and captivatingly – I would even say, vigorously: it reflects those aspects of language acquisition which are familiar to the author and have somehow refracted in her life path.

I am confident that this book will not get lost among the significantly increasing pile of works dealing with problems of second language learning. It stands out, not only for a special personal intonation and non-trivial approach to the problems, but also for the fact that it thoroughly addresses the phenomenon of interference at the level of complex syntactic structures and discourse strategies of the speakers, an aspect which is much less studied. The book not only provides a very informative introduction to the subject area (constituting its first chapter), but also contains a large and carefully selected amount of material, and important experimental data, which are discussed in detail in the second and third chapters.

All this makes the book very useful reading and a non-trivial source of the data, both for specialists in the teaching of foreign languages (especially Slavic and Romance) and for those who are interested in the theory of discourse and related problems. An attractive aspect of the presentation is that the author is not closed in on highly specific “shoppy talk”, but always keeps an eye on the theoretical dimension of the problem. Therefore this study will, I am sure, be interesting to many.

Vladimir Plungian  
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I thank my colleagues from the faculty of Linguistic Sciences and Foreign Literatures at the Milan Catholic University of Sacred Heart for their availability and their precious advice.

I also thank all the students of Russian language who have participated in my experiments, and especially Martina Lazzari who shared with me some materials that she had gathered in Moscow.

Finally, special thanks to my husband, who never allowed me to give up, and to my children, who made me appreciate the time I could dedicate to the research.

# INTRODUCTION

This work presents the results of an experimental piece of research<sup>1</sup> on the acquisition of Russian by native Italian speaking learners that is specifically focused on the acquisitional dynamics of the discourse structure and syntactic hierarchization. Our work is thus limited to this topic, although it touches upon a wider and older argument, while tracing the outlook questions of our research and in the conclusion, for some final reflections.

The research installation that hosts our experiment stems from a question that in elementary terms could be formulated as follows: “When Italians speak Russian, do they think in Italian or Russian? Or does the thinking not happen in any language?” And this first question immediately raises at least two further, more specific questions: “Does the way of thinking of an italophone change, if his/her study of Russian progresses? To what extent does an italophone think in Italian and when does he/she start to think in Russian?”

Yet again, does M. M. Bakhtin’s “influence of return” (*obratnoe vlijanie*) (1993: 99), the influence that a language has on thought and on our inner world, exist?

The influence of return that a formed and stable expression exercises on what we experience (i.e. the interior expression) has a huge significance and it should always be taken into consideration. It can be said that *it is not the*

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<sup>1</sup> This publication stems from our doctorate research work conducted at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan during the years 2010-2012. The dissertation on which it is based is titled “Struttura del discorso e gerarchizzazione sintattica tra linguospecificità e universalità: una ricerca sperimentale sull’acquisizione del russo da parte di italofofoni” and is accessible in the archive of UCSC following the link: [http://tesionline.unicatt.it/bitstream/10280/1807/1/tesiphd\\_completa\\_Stoyanova.pdf](http://tesionline.unicatt.it/bitstream/10280/1807/1/tesiphd_completa_Stoyanova.pdf). Some partial results and previous stages were published in Italian in Stoyanova 2013, 2014, 2016 and 2017, but since then the work was further developed and deepened, more parameters were taken in consideration in the analysis, the whole morphological part was added and the comparison between typological implicational universals and acquisitional patterns of the verb deranking in subordination was made.

*expression that adapts itself to our inner world, but rather our inner world that adapts to the possibilities of our expression and its potential ways and directions.*<sup>2</sup>

The questions above are the reflection, on an acquisitional level, of a more abstract philosophical issue regarding the *language-specificity* of thought: does a pure pre-linguistic thought exist and choose to “wear” one or another language? Or, do we start to think in language and, without the suggestions that it gives us, without its way to classify and to abstract the universal from the particular to which it educates us (and which by the way differs from language to language), our thoughts not only could never be expressed, but may be neither be born?

This problem is objectively at the roots of any linguistic consideration, yet, as profound and fascinating as it may be, it lies on the periphery of the scientific object of the linguistic investigation, and it becomes more relevant to philosophy. In fact, each linguistic discipline concentrates on particular aspects, studies *what a language does* and *how it is*, but they rarely wonder *what a language is*, since this question may lead out of their relevant scientific field. However, there is a paradox here because, at the same time, a linguist cannot avoid taking a position with respect to the object of his/her research, but this position inevitably involves a certain view of the relationships between language and thought. So, this position is included in the axioms – declared or not<sup>3</sup> – of any scientific investigation, and therefore cannot be falsified within the respective theory. In this way, it avoids being included in the scientific object of the latter. Even in cases in which a linguistic trend focuses on the study of the bond between language and

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Bachtin (1993: 99): “Это обратное влияние оформленного и устойчивого выражения на переживание (т. е. внутреннее выражение) имеет громадное значение и всегда должно учитываться. Можно сказать, что *не столько выражение приспособляется к нашему внутреннему миру, сколько наш внутренний мир приспособляется к возможностям нашего выражения и его возможным путям и направлениям*”.

<sup>3</sup> Among the schools that have explicitly adopted a conception of the nature of language is indubitably the most powerful branch of modern linguistics – generativism. This conception is rather peculiar: the faculty of language is what makes human a human, and a universal grammar exists for all languages and it is innate to any human being [Cf. for example Chomsky (1968: 23-25)]. It must be underlined that the identification of generativism occurs according to a hypothesis that regards the nature of human language and exceeds the competence of linguistics, in the sense that this hypothesis is not falsifiable within linguistics.

thought, as done, for example, by the semantic school of Moscow, which has introduced the concept of '*naivnaja jazykovaja kartina mira*',<sup>4</sup> many aspects of the functioning of this hypothetical entity can be analyzed, however it is not possible to demonstrate the language-specificity of thought, as it is taken for granted.

We'd like to clarify from the beginning that, in logical terms, the outlook question of our research is to check the existence ( $\exists$ ) of Bachtin's "influence of return"; in other words, to see how thinking in the native language influences the learning of the L2, without laying any claims on the relationship between thought and language in universal terms ( $\forall$ ). In order to carry out this task, it is generally possible to consider the critical points of the functioning of the linguistic system<sup>5</sup> that seem to be opening, a little, the door of the apparent fortress<sup>6</sup> of the relationship between thought and language. More precisely these critical points are: (i) the acquisition of the first language, when the system is in formation, (ii) the linguistic aphasias, in which it is possible to observe some damages of this relationship, (iii) the acquisition of the second language, when the relationship between thought and language established with the acquisition of the first language ceases to be univocal, and begins to include another language. It is also possible (iv) to compare entire systems from a contrastive and typological perspective, with the aim of identifying the universal components from the language-specific ones. Among these critical points, we opted for the "door" of acquisition of the second language, and this is for the practical reason that conducting a specific experiment in this field proves to be somewhat simpler.

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<sup>4</sup> The naive linguistic picture of the world, which "reflects a specific vision of the world, that is present in a given language and it is culturally significant for it, and in addition it distinguishes it from the other languages" Apresjan (2006: 35); the '*kartina mira*' would therefore be the vision of the world that is marked by the "influence of return" of Bachtin, and it is thus language-specific and conditioned by culture. The majority of studies in this field mainly focus on the semantic analysis of the language-specific lexical elements, showing the peculiarities of the Russian national linguistic picture of the world.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Moro (2006: 19, 58-60, 194-195).

<sup>6</sup> Wilhelm Von Humboldt (1999 [1853]: 46) notices that: "Historically, our concern is always with actually speaking men, merely, but we should not on that account lose sight of the true situation. Though we may separate intellectuality and language, no such division in fact exists."

We will now see how our research has attempted to approach its goal. Firstly, we had to renounce the direct measuring of the distance between the thought of the Italian and the thought of Russian native speakers, because, even though it was possible to scientifically identify what we mean by “thought”, there is no “meter” to measure this distance, in the sense that it would require an answer in terms of absolute values, to provide which there are no sufficient points of reference.

Instead, we propose to transform the absolute values question into a relative values one: to measure the distance between Russian and Italian, not in the single point (thought) but in two points, corresponding to two linguistic levels: the *discourse structure*, which is closer to the *thought* of the speaker, does not have evident signs of language-specificity, and would seem to be language-independent and universal, or is at least modeled as such by many linguistic theories;<sup>7</sup> and the *syntactic hierarchization*, which is evidently specific to each language by being part of the syntactic level.<sup>8</sup> Thus, we will compare the distances between Italian and Russian on these two levels, so that one will be measured relative to another, or better, we will compare them with one another, to understand in which of the two the distance between Italian and Russian is the largest. In order to do this, we begin with the commonly accepted idea, that the shorter the distance between the organization of a certain linguistic level in the native language and in the target language (i.e. the more the two levels are similar), the easier and faster the acquisition is.<sup>9</sup> By measuring the speed and the success of the

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<sup>7</sup> For example, we refer to the model “Meaning  $\Leftrightarrow$  Text” of I. A. Melčuk, a model of theoretical linguistics that aims to formalize the connection between thought (meaning) and language (text). It was developed in close contact with the studies of A.J. Žolkovskij, Ju.D. Apresjan, U. Weinreich, A. Wierzbicka, and Ch. Fillmore (cf. Mel’čuk 1999: 53).

<sup>8</sup> These two levels are more easily comparable since they are close to each other in the traditional classification (cf. for example Kibrik 2003: 11) of the linguistic levels (phonology – morphology – syntax – discourse), where discourse follows syntax, because, in the same way that the units of the syntactic level are composed of the units of the morphological level and the reasons for the choice of a specific morphological form (e.g. the accusative case) are found in the syntax, in the same way the units of the discourse level are composed of those of the syntactic level (phrases) and the motivations for the choice of a given syntactic structure (e.g. the choice of the predicate’s rank) are dictated by the discourse reasons.

<sup>9</sup> This reasoning stems from the famous CAH (Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis) of Robert Lado (cf. for example Larsen-Freeman – Long 1991: 53-56, 96-107), but at

acquisition of the syntactic hierarchization and discourse structure in Italian native speakers learning Russian L2, we will be able to understand in which of these two aspects of the linguistic system Russian and Italian are the closest to each other.

If our data suggests that the acquisition of the discourse level occurs more easily than of the syntactic hierarchization, we shall infer that the discourse level between Italian and Russian is organized in a more similar manner than the macro-syntactic level. Such a result would not be a surprise to us, as it would arguably seem natural that the level freer from grammatical restrictions and closer to thought, is more similar in the two languages. However, if the discourse level shows a stronger resistance to the acquisition compared to the syntactic hierarchization, then we shall infer that it is more distant in the two languages and we would be forced to ask where this distance is found, since the organization of discourse is objectively not conditioned by the language system in the same way as syntactic hierarchization. We could therefore hypothesize that the distance between Russian and Italian in the discourse organization, which is more directly connected to the organizing patterns of thought, indeed resides in that “influence of return” of the language on the thought of each speaker, mentioned above.

Our investigation is thus addressing a purely linguistic research question, the answer to which can prove to be significant even for the relationship between language and thought.

What has been described above is the general installation of the investigation resulting from our research questions. With regards to the method of the experiment, we collected an acquisitional corpus of Russian L2 of Italian speaking learners and two reference mini-corpora in native Russian and Italian for the comparison. We annotated the corpora for the analysis of the discourse structure, and for that of the syntactic hierarchization and for the crossed analysis of these two aspects. Lastly, we calculated the results for the analysis and interpretation.

Our annotated corpus is comprised of 101,561 characters, spaces included, (17,063 words or 4,101 clauses) and is composed of 44 written

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the same time it takes a step back from the CAH's strong version, which does not concern our case and has been much criticized and even rejected. Instead, we are only basing on the “positive transfer” phenomenon (cf. Ellis 1994: 299-346), which has been widely recognized by scholars and will be further discussed in 1.2.2 and 1.2.4.

narrative texts, which retell the plot of the short version of the silent film “Modern Times” by Charlie Chaplin. We chose this task because it had been used previously for similar research works within the project of the European Science Foundation (ESF)<sup>10</sup> on the material of English L2, German L2, Dutch L2, French L2 and Swedish L2, and so we compiled the corpus of Russian L2 that was lacking. The experiments were carried out with students of Russian L2 from across the course years at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan; furthermore, the corpus included the results of experiments in which Italian residents in Moscow participated. In this way it will be possible to identify the differences between guided and spontaneous acquisition. Lastly, we added narratives in Russian L1 and Italian L1 as reference points for the analysis.

The analysis was conducted in terms of preferential choices,<sup>11</sup> in other words by observing the differences between the choices of the speakers and by distinguishing between those that are a result of individual factors and those that constitute specific patterns. We took into consideration both the choices regarding *what* to say, and those regarding *how* to say it; and even though these choices can greatly differ between people with the same native language, it is possible to highlight trends and specific patterns among the speaker groups by applying statistical methods. The preferential choices on the discourse level are not conditioned from the point of view of grammatical correctness and they fall within the freedom zone of the speaker. Thus, in our opinion, they are better able to reflect the speaker’s line of thought. Therefore, we compared the patterns of the preferential choices made on the discourse and macro-syntactic levels in the various speaker groups; in particular we observed the divergences of the acquisitional dynamics on the respective levels.

For the analysis of the discourse structure we adopted the Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST), developed by Sandra A. Thompson and William C. Mann<sup>12</sup> and we applied it following the further elaborations proposed by Andrej A. Kibrik (2003, 2011). This version of the theory has been successfully employed in various research projects on linguistic corpora. For syntactic hierarchization, we based our analysis on typological studies, in particular on the work by Sonia Cristofaro “Subordination” (2003), that

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<sup>10</sup> A detailed account of the findings of the project is available in Perdue 1993.

<sup>11</sup> This type of analysis was proposed by Carroll and Lambert 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. for example Mann - Thompson 1987, 1988 and Mann - Matthiessen - Thompson 1989.



adopting a functional-typological perspective, systematically connects all the types of subordination to precise functional principles. This enabled us to apply this method of macro-syntactic analysis to interlanguages. Furthermore, Cristofaro describes the distribution of the structures that code subordination in the world languages in terms of implicational hierarchies, which allowed us to compare the typological patterns with the acquisitional patterns in our corpus, with the aim of verifying on our material the hypothesis that ontogeny would follow phylogeny.

Armed with these theoretical foundations, we elaborated a method of corpus annotation compatible with automatic calculation, which was realized after the actual corpus annotation. The results of the calculation were thus analyzed and interpreted.

The work is articulated in three chapters. The first chapter provides the theoretical groundings of our experimental research. Firstly, the phenomenon of *first language thinking in second language speaking* is presented, then we move to the acquisitional linguistics, as it is the field of our experiment, and we characterize it from the disciplinary point of view and discuss some of its recent theoretical breakthroughs relevant to our investigation. Lastly, we present two studies on the acquisition of the textual-discourse competence and comparative textuality which greatly influenced the methodology of our research.

The second chapter is dedicated to the setting of the experimental part of the work, and presents the theoretical foundations of the analysis of our corpus. We provide a description of the theoretical model with which the analysis of discourse was conducted, as well as a rationale for the choice of this model. Then, the typologically motivated theoretical bases of our macro-syntactic analysis are provided. Lastly, from these theoretical models we draw the parameters that will be taken into consideration for the corpus analysis, and the lists of parameters for both the discourse structure and syntactic hierarchization are presented, so that it is possible to reformulate the queries of the research in terms of statistics of the chosen parameters.

In the third chapter, we finally introduce the results obtained during the experimental research. After comparing and analyzing the preferences expressed by the five groups of speakers regarding the use of various structures in the bilingual corpus we compiled, we propose an interpretation, while taking into account the outlook question of our research.

## CHAPTER ONE

# THINKING FOR SPEAKING AND STUDIES ON THE ACQUISITION OF THE TEXTUAL- DISCOURSE COMPETENCE

This chapter introduces the theory of the experimental research that will be presented in Chapters 2 and 3. In 1.1 we consider the change of the scientific perspective, which provided the foundations for the application of the experimental methodology to the research on the connection between thought and language. This, consequently, allowed us to maintain this matter as the outlook question of our research. The experiment regards two fields, one is that of comparative textuality and the other is that of acquisitional linguistics. The present work was carried out within the framework of the latter, thus in 1.2, acquisitional linguistics is characterized by a disciplinary point of view, and a description and comment of the recent theoretical findings relevant to our experiment are provided. Lastly, in 1.3 we present two studies on the acquisition of the textual-discourse competence and on comparative textuality, which influenced our research in a significant way.

### 1.1 Thinking for speaking

#### *1.1.1 From “thought and language” to “thinking for speaking”*

The transition stated in the title of this paragraph and mentioned above allowed us to maintain the question on the connection between thought and language as the outlook question of our research. Let us now see what this transition is about. In the miscellany *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity* we find the article by Dan I. Slobin (1996) *From “Thought and Language” to*

*“Thinking for Speaking”*<sup>1</sup> which describes a piece of research in experimental linguistics whose results are relevant to the problem of linguistic relativity, thus proposing a completely new approach to the everlasting problem of the relationship between thought and language. What does the new theoretical turning point that allowed this approach, consist of? Slobin himself (1996: 71) describes it as: “a shift from names of abstract entities to names of activities”. Basically, such a turning point is one of the results of the estrangement from structuralism and the transfer of the center of scientific attention from language to speech, from the system to its actual use. Let us see how Slobin (1996: 75) collocates his finding within the reflection on language:

[...] I wish to present a new version of the von Humboldt-Whorf position on linguistic relativity and determinism. Recall that those theorists were concerned to relate **language to world-view** or **habitual thought**. The classic position thus seeks to relate two **static** entities: language and thought. [...] I have a more cautious, but more manageable formulation - one that seeks to relate two **dynamic** entities: **thinking** and **speaking**.

It is worth noting that Slobin proposes his *version* of von Humboldt and Whorf's position that was briefly presented in the introduction above; it is not another position, but rather a reformulation of von Humboldt's idea and Sapir and Whorf's hypothesis which makes them more manageable.<sup>2</sup> This is possible because he avoids the key problem of the study of thought and language, conceived as static systems that exist outside the context, while, on the contrary, they are exclusively given in a context. In other words, in an attempt to study thought and language as static systems, it is inevitable that certain ontological questions will arise: “where and how does language exist as system?” and “where and how does habitual thought, the ‘kartina mira’, exist?”, which, unfortunately, it is impossible to answer. What happens is that, if we attempt to study thought and language as static systems, of which we cannot define either the place or the form of existence,

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<sup>1</sup> The term thinking for speaking was proposed in 1987 by Slobin (1987). We will refer to his 1996 article though because in this, the author related the term to the hypothesis of linguistic relativity, presenting it in a perspective that interests us more.

<sup>2</sup> It should also be mentioned that the development of Slobin's thinking for speaking conception has been significantly influenced by the theories of the Russian psychologist Lev Semënovič Vygotsky (2005).

then the concrete facts which could corroborate or falsify the hypotheses that arise during the research, turn out to be completely inapplicable. For this reason, the theory and models cannot be falsified, and this is problematic because the ability to falsify is a necessary condition for each discipline to be scientific. While the shift proposed by Slobin permits the studies of this area to return to the scientific principles, since it consists of observing and studying concrete facts and the dynamic processes as they happen:

The world does not present “events” and “situations” to be encoded in language. Rather, experiences are filtered into verbalized events through language. A “verbalized event” is constructed on-line, through the process of speaking. (Slobin 1996: 75)

Starting from this perspective on the function of language, Slobin (1996: 76) coins the formula “thinking for speaking” defining it as: “a special form of thought that is mobilized for communication”, and he introduces it as the following:

“Thinking for speaking” involves picking those characteristics of objects and events that (a) fit some conceptualization of the event, and (b) are readily encodable in the language. **I propose that, in acquiring a native language, the child learns particular ways of thinking for speaking.** (Slobin 1996: 76)

The hypothesis formulated as such is falsifiable and there could be different ways to verify it. Slobin chooses to compare the ways in which speakers of different languages describe the same events, in other words, he chooses to carry out a piece of research on the field of comparative textuality. Thus, together with other researchers from Berkeley, Slobin gathered a collection of narrative texts in English, German, Spanish and Hebrew which describe the story of the cartoon book *Frog, where are you?* The texts were produced by speakers of three different age groups: pre-school (from three to five years old), school (nine years old), and adulthood. The results of the research demonstrated that language-specific patterns of thinking for speaking take place even at the pre-school age, and that these patterns have implications in the development of the rhetorical style<sup>3</sup> of each language.

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<sup>3</sup> In this regard, we shall mention a beautiful book dedicated to the study of contrastive rhetoric. *Contrastive Rhetoric: Cross-cultural aspects of second-language writing*

In recent years, some scholars have made new research efforts in this field. For example Bjørn Wessel-Tolvig and Patrizia Paggio (2016) in their work “*Revisiting the Thinking-for-Speaking Hypothesis: Speech and Gesture Representation of Motion in Danish and Italian*” compared the conceptualization of the movement in Danish and Italian, and they have shown that gestures are strongly influenced by the syntactic structures chosen by the speakers, and should undoubtedly be considered as a part of the thinking for speaking patterns repertoire available to the speakers of each tongue.

Another way to verify the afore-mentioned hypothesis could be in the study of the acquisitional varieties, and in the next paragraph we will see the grounds for it.

### *1.1.2 First-language thinking in second-language speaking*

Before concluding his article, Slobin (1996: 89-91) dedicates a paragraph to first-language thinking in second-language speaking, and states that studying the acquisition of second languages could be an alternative method of verifying his proposal.<sup>4</sup> This is motivated by the fact that each language trains the speaker to focus on different aspects of events and experiences, on the basis of the grammatical categories that need to be expressed, and this training, that takes place during childhood, has an incredible resistance to the re-structuring required for the acquisition of second languages in adulthood.

How could this resistance be studied? How could this first-language thinking in second-language speaking be analyzed? There are at least two modalities, which are in a sense opposed: longitudinal and transversal. In the longitudinal modality, the study follows the acquisition of each learner by observing their first-language thinking in second-language speaking.

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by Ulla Connor (1996) defines the discipline and traces its history, showing the interaction of contrastive rhetoric with other fields of applied linguistics, among them linguistics of text, sociolinguistics and translations studies. Lastly, the author focuses on the research methods of contrastive rhetoric and its possible directions for future development. Furthermore, see a more recent article by the same author, *Mapping Multidimensional Aspects of Research. Reaching to Intercultural Rhetoric* (Connor 2008), which proposes a new methodological finding that shifts from contrastive rhetoric to intercultural rhetoric.

<sup>4</sup> Slobin (1996: 90) refers to the European Science Foundation project, on which we will base our research and will therefore present in more detail in 2.1.

Moreover, in the case of a guided learning study, the researcher could, on occasion, influence the acquisitional process with a variation of the teaching methodology, in order to verify which method is more effective. Thus, in the longitudinal modality few cases are studied for a long time. For example, a recent study by Gale Stam (2015) “*Changes in Thinking for Speaking: A Longitudinal Case Study*” considers just one speaker followed for 14 years. She shows an initial hard influence of the native Spanish on the advanced English L2 production of her informant on the level of conceptualization of events, which slightly diminished only after 14 years of permanence in the USA, so that the informant’s thinking for speaking became more similar, but not quite the same, as in the target language.

Instead, in the transversal modality, students of L2 are grouped together according to their proficiency level of the L2 and it is possible to observe whether, following an increase of proficiency, thinking for speaking changes and adjusts itself to the target language. For example Maria Andria and Raquel Serrano (2017) in their article “*Developing New ‘Thinking-for-Speaking’ Patterns in Greek as a Foreign Language: The Role of Proficiency and Stays Abroad*” showed that speakers of Greek L2 rely on the patterns of their L1 (Spanish/Catalan), and although initially, with the growth of L2 proficiency, they acquire some language-specific Greek patterns, at some point the acquisition stops; the time spent in Greece only affects the recognition of specific Greek patterns, but not the active production of them. These results recall ours, as we will see in the Chapter 3.

Thus, for the present research, we chose the transversal modality. However, it is worth mentioning the results of one longitudinal study that encouraged our research. It was the didactic work of Laura Salmon (2008), which, in contrast to the above works, did not try to prove the Slobin’s thesis, but in our opinion, constitutes a completely independent evidence for it. Salmon (2008: 153) states that: “the language classroom turns out to be (at least for now) the best “live” laboratory to study how the linguistic brain works.”<sup>5</sup> and proposes a new foreign language teaching paradigm, which she calls the functional-translation method. This, according to Salmon (2008: 162), allows us: “to adapt the teaching to the functioning of the students’ brain rather than adjusting the students’ brain to the

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<sup>5</sup> Salmon (2008: 153): “l’aula di lingue risulta essere (almeno per ora) il miglior laboratorio “in vivo” per studiare come funziona il cervello linguistico”.

prejudices imposed by an indefensible tradition”.<sup>6</sup> Salmon’s statement is so strong because the results that she managed to obtain by changing the method are extremely significant, even if they have not yet been scientifically “measured”. For a complete picture of the functional-translation method, refer to the second paragraph of the fourth chapter of her book (Salmon 2008: 134-163); here we will only mention that the main activities proposed to the students, starting from the zero level of L2 proficiency, consist of training them to functional translation. Foreign words are not memorized in order to produce utterances such as “How do you call yourself?”<sup>7</sup> (which is not grammatically incorrect, but is not pragmatically acceptable). Such productions happen frequently during L2 learning with the traditional method; at the same time, there are no attempts to teach L2 as if it were L1, as the communicative method proposes. Rather, it is admitted that there is hardly a perfect correspondence between grammatical categories, between usual expressions and cultural concepts of the L1 and those of the L2, thus the learner is trained to treat the cases of language diversity as normal and to quickly find functional correspondences that are pragmatically correct.

Now let us try to express the difference between the three teaching methods - the traditional, the communicative and that of functional-translation - from the perspective of thinking for speaking. We could say that the *traditional method* does not envisage the diversity between thinking for speaking of L1 and of L2, so grammatical asymmetries are studied on the level of knowledge of rules, and the lexical mismatches are learnt by heart as exceptions, thus, the learner comes to *know* these regularities. The *communicative method* allows for the diversity of thinking for speaking between L1 and L2, but seems to underestimate the resistance of thinking for speaking of the native language that was acquired contemporarily with the knowledge of the world. This method is based on the observation that learning the conceptualization of the world proposed by the native language, the child starts from reality, that is, reality has a decisive role in language teaching and is oriented towards unconscious acquisition, as if the adult L2 students should get to know reality once again, starting from the

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<sup>6</sup> Salmon (2008: 162) consente “di adeguare la didattica al funzionamento del cervello degli studenti invece di adeguare il cervello degli studenti ai pregiudizi imposti da una indifendibile tradizione.”

<sup>7</sup> This is a result of a word-by-word translation of Italian “Come ti chiami?” (What’s your name?).

beginning, and in a different way from that of their own L1. For this reason, this method risks creating a sort of detachment between L1 and L2 thinking for speaking so that, even though the learner acquires perfect L2 proficiency, including the behaviors, gestures and stock phrases of native speakers, nevertheless they often can't translate from L2 to L1. The functional-translation method instead is based on translation training, through which the learners achieve the *know-how* (unlike the traditional method), and become aware of their native language thinking for speaking, while creating a correspondence between the typical L1 forms and L2 forms (unlike the communicative method). Curiously, thinking for speaking is especially sensitive to this last method.

We believe that the success of the functional-translation method used in various countries, among which is Russia,<sup>8</sup> can be interpreted as an argument in favor of the fact that thinking for speaking exists, and constitutes the essence of the skills of an appropriate language use. This method permits the learning of a foreign language as the acquisition of “a new standpoint in the world-view hitherto possessed”<sup>9</sup> (Humboldt 1999 [1835]: 60), which is added to the conceptualization of the world of the native language. These “longitudinal” results are thus encouraging for us to proceed on our “transversal” path.

In our experimental research, we will study *first-language thinking in second-language speaking* and we will try to discover to what degree *thinking for speaking* of the native language is actually maintained in the second language. By studying *second-language speaking* we will inevitably enter the field of acquisitional linguistics, whose theoretical frameworks, relevant to our research, will be presented in the next paragraph. Furthermore, the discovery of the degree of resistance of *thinking for speaking* to acquisition presupposes a comparison between *thinking for speaking* of the native speakers of the two compared languages, similar to that of Slobin. In this way, we will also enter the field of comparative textuality, which we will mention in 1.2.4 and 1.3.2.

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<sup>8</sup> For example, in the Russian State University for the Humanities, Italian language is taught with this method; the related didactic material has been elaborated, and partially published, by Professor Galina Danilovna Murav'eva (cf. for example Murav'eva 1994).

<sup>9</sup> For the complete citation see footnote 117.



## 1.2 Acquisitional linguistics: some theoretical turning points

The acquisition of a language is a mystery: we do not know how it happens, especially acquisition of the first language by a child who does not study to memorize words, but listens and plays, and at some point, speaks. We can observe how, when a child begins to speak, his or her games, actions and perception of the world become more ordered. However, we cannot affirm with certainty that language acquisition is a necessary condition for the structuring of the child's conscience of reality, and not, in fact, the opposite. We must admit that very little is known on how language acquisition occurs. Yet, it is a real fact that happens time and time again in each child, for his or her L1, and in many adults for their L2.

Furthermore, it has been discovered that language acquisition possesses certain regularities that can be observed and measured with the rigor of natural sciences. For example, in the 70s and 80s it was noticed that there is a certain order in the acquisition of grammatical categories for each language, which is followed by most learners for both L1 and L2 (cf. Ellis 2000: 73-117).

It could be said that acquisitional linguistics assumes a similar position to that of philosophy, since it is “at the beginning”,<sup>10</sup> in the sense that acquisition is the beginning of the language for the person who is learning it. What is more, acquisition is a dynamic phenomenon in which the linguistic system is constantly evolving, so it is right here that one can hope to discover how language works. As already mentioned in the introduction, the linguistic *system* acquisition is one of the “critical” points, at par with aphasias. It is for this reason that acquisitional linguistics attracts the attention of scholars from different fields, similarly to philosophy which welcomes mathematicians, physicists, chemists, biologists, etc.

In fact, acquisitional linguistics, albeit a young discipline, is very heterogeneous and includes researches that take the lead from various fields. Despite this, from a disciplinary point of view, it remains well defined

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<sup>10</sup> Philosophy is “at the beginning” both in the sense that it is defined as a science that “questions the beginning” (cf. Achutin 2007: 15-22), and in the sense that it puts its object of study under the object of any other science; in other words, it puts it at the beginning (cf. Bibichin (2002: 144-147). Using Euclid's geometry as a metaphor, we could say that science is based on axioms and demonstrates theorems in a scientific and falsifiable way, whereas philosophy asks about the reasons of the axioms.

by its object of study. Let us take a closer look at the disciplines that intersect with acquisitional linguistics. Marina Chini (2005: 14-19) proposes the following list: general linguistics, linguistic typology, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics and in particular foreign language teaching, cognitive psychology, social psychology and neurolinguistics.<sup>11</sup> Every discipline arrives at acquisitional linguistics with its own “architecture of questions”,<sup>12</sup> theoretical framework and methodology. An example of the fruitfulness and richness of the questions, which are formulated in these confining areas, could be that of the intersection between linguistic typology and acquisitional linguistics, which will be presented in detail in 1.2.2. On the other hand, the heterogeneity of the approaches of this discipline is at times so great that the results of studies on apparently similar topics, albeit carried out with different models, hardly appear comparable.

Acquisitional linguistics includes studies on acquisition of L1 and L2, and as far as L2 is concerned, some concentrate on spontaneous acquisition, while others on guided learning. There are different classifications of the studies on acquisitional linguistics. For example, Marina Chini (2005: 29-48) ranks the studies based on the type of theoretical explanatory model used and proposes the following 4 groups: (i) innatist models, which explain the acquisitional facts through the innate

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<sup>11</sup> For the details on the ways in which these disciplines interact with acquisitional linguistics, see Chini (2005: 14-19).

<sup>12</sup> We use this term with the same meaning as it was proposed by V. V. Bibichin (2002: 144-147): “Science withstands thanks to the miracle that happens in each generation of researchers: the non-granted ability to see in each fact not an answer, but a question. When this ability comes to a halt, science will become a system of superstitions. [...] Science safeguards the poignancy of the problem from hurried solutions. [...] A scientific discovery is not a solution to the questions, rather the enhancement of their architecture, that is the solution of many old questions, and the birth of a greater number of new ones, more refined and acute. [...] Science makes room for the omni-comprehensive logos, but by force of the persistence and clarity of its questions, luckily it remains science and, in order to remain so, it leaves this space free. [...] To occupy the space of the truth of being, empty in science, is not a higher work than science, but lower. Science does not lower itself to this in order to preserve its purity. And it is right here that it coincides with philosophy (*translation is mine* – NS).

component of each human being,<sup>13</sup> which is not reducible to their intellectual skills; (ii) cognitive, cognitive-functional and production models, which refer to cognitive processes of a wide spectrum and concerning the functional aspect of language, in other words the communicative needs that it is required to satisfy; (iii) environmental models, which emphasize the role of the socio-cultural and linguistic context in which acquisition occurs, considering it the key factor, and lastly; (iv) integrated models that try to take into account more dimensions of the acquisitional process (for the classification criteria and further details see Chini 2005).

It must be noted that from a methodological perspective, the studies on acquisitional linguistics can be divided according to whether they belong to one of the following paradigms of analysis: the qualitative, “phenomenological”, or the quantitative, “positivist”. Some characteristics of the two can be compared in the table below:

*Table 1.1 Two paradigms of analysis<sup>14</sup>*

Qualitative analysis	Quantitative analysis
“phenomenological” approach: it observes human behavior in order to interpret it from the inner perspective of the observed subject	“positivist” approach: it observes human behavior “from the outside”, regardless of the subjective mental states of the observed subjects
observation under “natural” conditions	observation under “controlled” conditions
oriented towards discovery	oriented towards verification
oriented towards the process	oriented towards the product
it draws its validity and reliability from the richness and multi-planarity of interpretation	it draws its validity and reliability from the replicability of the results and statistic validation

<sup>13</sup> Some of these models refer to Universal Grammar in the conception of generativism, others instead prescind from it, e.g. the monitor model of Stephen Krashen (cf. Chini (2005: 33-35) or Ellis (2000: 255-256)).

<sup>14</sup> This table refers to the notes of Cecilia Andorono “Italiano L2” course, a.y. 2010/2011, University of Pavia, Italy.

The positivist approach is rather common among generativist studies, since they have to verify, through concrete data, a hypothesis<sup>15</sup> stemming from the theoretical field, whereas the phenomenological approach is more widespread among functional studies.

Lastly, it should be stated that despite its heterogeneity, acquisitional linguistics possesses some basic concepts, such as the concept of interlanguage, which were formed during its history and have penetrated all its models, creating a sort of DNA of the discipline.

Historically the paradigm of acquisitional linguistics has shifted its focus from the study of the language to the learner, from the description of the facts to their explanation, from error analysis to the study of the order of acquisition and development patterns of acquisitional varieties, that is, to their systematicity and variability, and lastly to the interest for the roles of the pragmatic factors in acquisition.<sup>16</sup> These dynamics are summaries by Ellis in the table below:

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<sup>15</sup> We are referring to the hypothesis based on the observation that language faculties are what make humans human (no other being possesses this ability), and it could be thus formulated: A Universal Grammar (UG) exists for all languages and it is innate to any human being. This intuition stemmed from the astonishment at the phenomenon of language acquisition by children. According to generativists, if the children did not have the LAD (*Language Acquisition Device*) which contains the innate UG, they would not be able to build a complete grammar of their native language on their own in the short time during which children acquire their first language, and, above all, they would not be able to provide negative information on the language, that is, they would not know that “you *can’t* say that”. In fact, if a child has never heard a given sentence X, logically he or she cannot infer that it is incorrect, and thus this knowledge does not derive from input, but from the grammatical system that formed in the child itself. A further argument quoted in favor of the existence of a UG is the “lack of stimulus”: the input received is considered insufficient to build a grammar in such a short time as that of L1 acquisition. Thus, the study of linguistic acquisition, more precisely the verification of the theoretical hypothesis described above on the acquisitional material, falls within the direct interest of that extremely powerful branch of modern linguistics that is generativism. For further details see the book by Lydia White (2003).

<sup>16</sup> For further details on the role of pragmatic factors in acquisition see Andorno (2005).

Table 1.2 A framework for investigation L2 acquisition (Ellis 2000: 18)

Focus on learning			Focus on the learner
Description	Explanation		
Area 1	Area 2	Area3	Area 4
characteristics of learner language	learner-external factors	learner-internal mechanisms	the language learner
errors	social context	L1 transfer	general factors e.g. motivation
acquisition orders and developmental sequences	input and interaction	learning processes	learner strategies
variability		communication strategies	
pragmatic features		knowledge of linguistic universals	

The majority of works of acquisitional linguistics is dedicated to L2, in other words to the acquisition of non-native language, and it places itself in the field of SLA (*Second Language Acquisition*). This occurs because the material of L2 is more accessible and furthermore, experiments, which would never be allowed on children under three years old, can be carried out. For example, Andrea Moro's research (2006), which belongs to the intersection between neurolinguistics and acquisitional linguistics, studies "the language in the brain" and tests different neuronal networks to see if there is a specific network for syntax. The experiment is designed so that during acquisition the brain activity of the subjects is measured with specific devices. Such an experiment is necessarily carried out on adult subjects, in other words on the L2 material, but it is worth noting that nevertheless, both the query and the results of the research are relevant to L1 acquisition. We will also work with L2 because of the accessibility of data and the possibility of carrying out experiments; however, we do not want to outdistance much from the study of L1 acquisition.

Due to space constraints and little relevance to the actual nucleus of our work, we cannot provide here a thorough review of the history of acquisitional linguistics, its approaches, its school, and recent studies. These notions can be found first of all in Rod Ellis (2000) *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*, which introduces the reader to the history of the discipline, reconstructing step by step, and decade after decade, the logic of its development and the gradual reconsideration of the object of its interest. Furthermore, we mention the work of Diane Larse-Freeman and Michael H. Long (1991) titled: *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*, which provides more technical notions concerning the methodology of the research, collection and analysis of data in this field, and lastly proposes a review of the theories that, at the time of the writing, were the strongest. For the current state of SLA research, see the miscellanea *Theories in Second Language Acquisition*, edited by Bill VanPatten and Jessica Williams (2008); whereas to see the concrete application of the SLA framework to spontaneous acquisition of Italian, refer to the book *Verso l'italiano. Percorsi e strategie di acquisizione*, edited by Anna Giacalone Ramat (2003), which collects the studies carried out during the Project of Pavia (*Progetto di Pavia*).<sup>17</sup>

In the next paragraphs, we will focus on the turning points<sup>18</sup> of acquisitional linguistics that prompted the methodology of our research, as well as laying its theoretical foundations.

### ***1.2.1 Acquisition as a path from pragmatic to syntactic mode***

The vision of the acquisition process stated in the title of this paragraph traces back to an intuition by Talmy Givón that was expressed in his 1979 article *From Discourse to Syntax: Grammar as a Processing Strategy*.

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<sup>17</sup> The project was carried out by multiple Italian universities, coordinated by University of Pavia, and was focused on the study of spontaneous, non-guided acquisition of Italian as L2 by immigrant citizens who learnt the language in Italy. The study was longitudinal and the material analyzed was oral, it is composed by the corpus of transcriptions of the learners' oral productions.

<sup>18</sup> While introducing the material from 1.2 we will try to follow the chronological order of the *birth* of the branches of acquisitional linguistics hereby presented. Thus, in 1.2.1 there will be ideas from 1979, in 1.2.2 1984 and 1991, the model described in 1.2.3 is from 1987, and the turning point in 1.2.3 occurred in 2003.