Gender and Number Agreement in Italian as a Heritage Language:
A Self-Paced Reading Study

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Grammatical gender is acquired early by monolingual children in many languages. Yet, gender shows variability in (some) heritage speakers (HSs). It is generally vulnerable for low proficiency HSs especially when the majority language (ML) lacks gender (e.g., Polinsky, 2008). Conversely, gender seems to be on target in HSs with high proficiency, especially when the ML has gender (e.g., Bianchi, 2013). We examined sources of potential morphological variability in Italian HSs with a focus on markedness and knowledge type (explicit vs. implicit).

54 adult Italian HSs living in Germany and 40 non-heritage native speakers of Italian participated in two experiments. Experiment 1 examined gender agreement in an offline Grammaticality Judgement Task (GJT) involving sentences with grammatical and ungrammatical noun-adjective sequences with masculine (unmarked) and feminine (marked) nouns in the singular (unmarked) and plural (marked). This probed for HSs' potential overreliance on "defaults" (masculine/singular). Experiment 2 examined the same conditions in an online Self-Paced Reading (SPR) task. In addition, participants completed a vocabulary test to gauge proficiency.

In both tasks, controls performed at ceiling and showed faster reading times (RTs) compared to HSs (Figures 1 and 2). In the GJT, HSs showed high accuracy and were more sensitive in detecting violations realised on marked adjectives; they showed an effect of markedness for gender and number (more accurate with masculine and singular). In the SPR, both groups showed sensitivity to violations realised on marked adjectives but only in the masculine (longer RTs in the critical region 'antica' in Figure 2). Proficiency was significant for HSs in the GJT, but not in the SPR.

HSs' performance on both offline and online comprehension was qualitatively similar to that of the Italian controls, suggesting that these HSs of Italian process gender in a native-like manner, albeit modulated differentially by markedness and proficiency at the individual level.

References

Bianchi, G. (2013). Gender in Italian-German bilinguals: A comparison with German L2 learners of Italian. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition, 16*(3), 538-557.

Polinsky, M. (2008). Gender under incomplete acquisition: Heritage speakers' knowledge of noun categorization. *Heritage Language Journal 6*(1): 40-71.
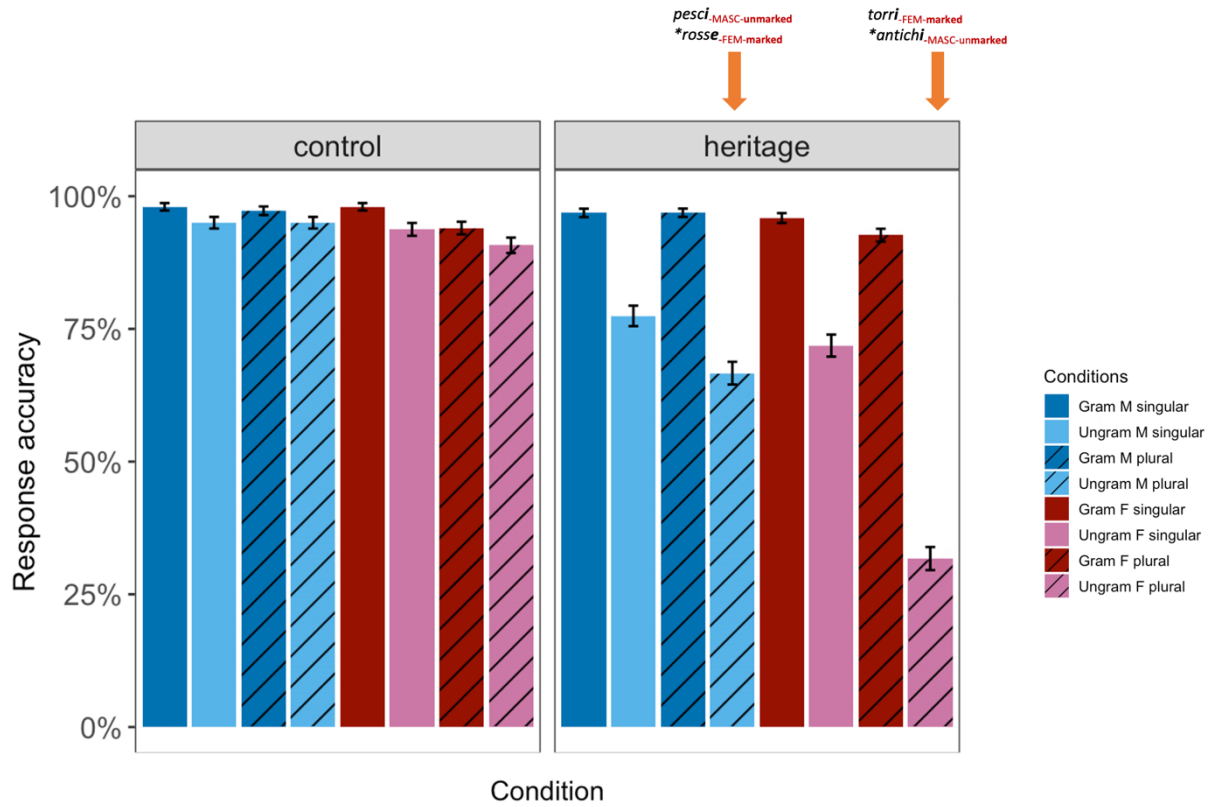
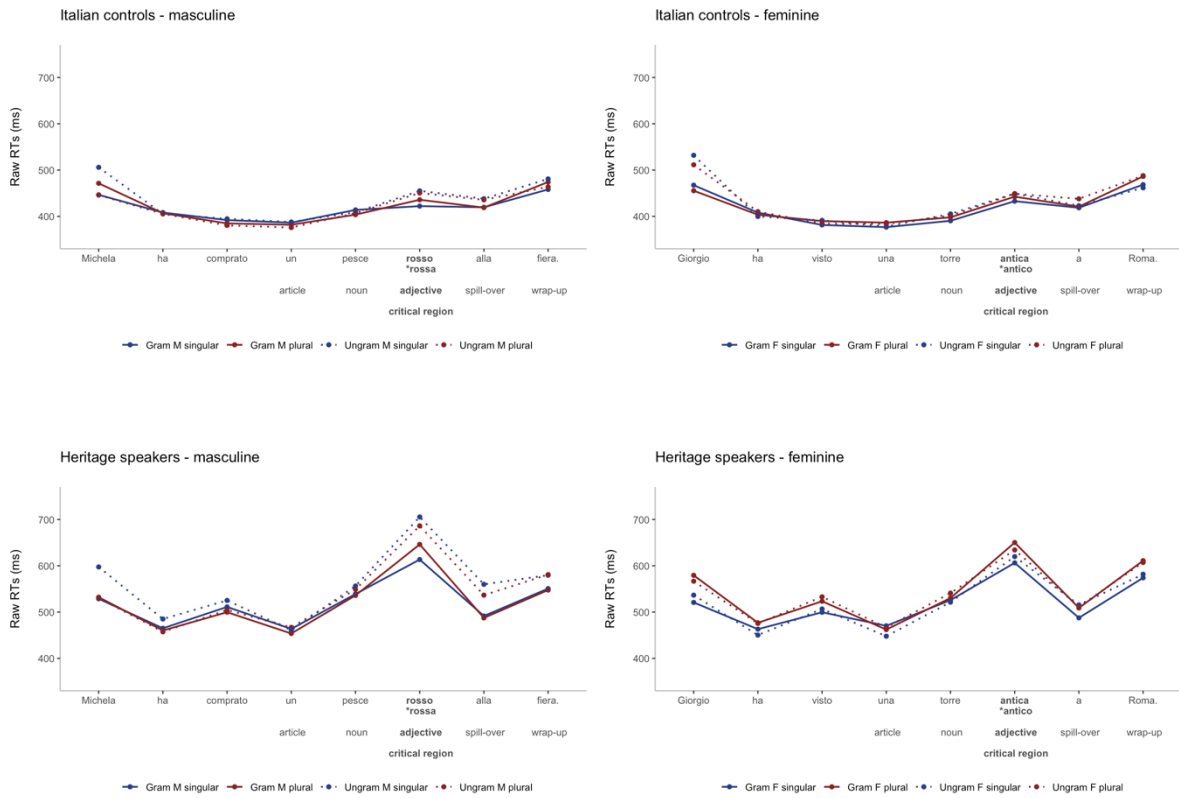*Figure 1. Mean accuracy (%) for grammaticality judgement task*

Figure 2. Raw RTs (ms) for self-paced reading task