WORD ORDER ERRORS AT THE DISCOURSE-SYNTAX INTERFACE WITH ROMANIAN-HUNGARIAN BILINGUALS

VERONICA TOMESCU[1]

Abstract. The aim of the paper is to investigate the nature of word order errors in the Hungarian sentences of Romanian-Hungarian bilinguals. I argue that the data provide support in favour of the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace and Filiaci 2006, Sorace 2011) that predicts vulnerability at the interface between syntax and discourse. The paper tests the hypothesis according to which Romanian-Hungarian bilinguals commit word order errors that can be explained by conflicting discourse rules in the two languages.

Key words: Romanian-Hungarian bilinguals, focus, referentiality, interface.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research on bilingual language development has focused on two related, mutually non-exclusive, issues: language differentiation, that is children's ability to learn two languages separately as two independent systems (Paradis and Genesee 1996, Meisel 1989, Hulk and van den Linden 1996), and cross-linguistic influence (Hulk and Müller 2000, Müller and Hulk 2001). Along the same line, more recently, the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace and Filiaci 2006, Sorace 2011) posits that the vulnerability of language structures in bilingual development depends on whether the structures are part of core syntax or whether they involve an interface between syntax and other cognitive domains. The main claim is that the latter are less likely to be acquired completely.

In this paper I investigate the nature of word order errors in Hungarian by three Romanian-Hungarian bilinguals. Romanian and Hungarian word order is constrained by semantic/pragmatic requirements; however, the semantic/pragmatic requirements that constrain word order are different, even conflicting, in the two languages. Therefore, the investigation of the acquisition of word order by Romanian-Hungarian bilinguals offers a good testing ground for the Interface Hypothesis.

The organization of the paper is as follows. Section 2 gives a brief overview of word order in Hungarian and Romanian respectively, dwelling on the aspects relevant for the analysis in section 3 and pointing out the conflicting discourse requirements that might pose a difficulty to the bilingual. Section 4 presents previous studies on cross-linguistic

[1] University of Bucharest, Department of English, veronicatomescu@lls.unibuc.ro.

RRL, **LX**, *1*, p. 29–45, Bucureşti, 2015

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

influence and states the hypothesis to be tested in the present paper. Section 5 includes the study and discusses the results.

2. WORD ORDER IN HUNGARIAN AND ROMANIAN

2.1. Hungarian word order

Hungarian has rather strict word order, but the functions associated with the different structural positions are logical rather than grammatical (É. Kiss 2004). Hungarian sentences consist of a Topic and a Predicate; the Topic is the logical subject of the sentence, it consists of old information, and it appears to the left of the phrasal stress. The Predicate is verb initial, and the post-verbal word order is free[2]. The post-verbal positions are argument positions, while the preverbal positions are operator positions. Thus, the verb is usually preceded by a verb modifier (VM), which is a non-referential component acting as an aspectual operator.

The VM is often a particle (2a) but it can also be a bare or indefinite (non-specific) noun, which can be a subject (2b), an object (2c) or an oblique complement (*e.g.* a directional phrase − 2a), a predicative noun or adjective (d), or a bare infinitive (e).

(2) a. **Haza/Óvodába** megy**.**
home kindergarten-to goes
'He/she is going home/to kindergarten.'

b. **Víz** folyik.
water flows
'There is water flowing.'

c. **Szendvicset** esznek.
sandwich-Acc eat
'They are eating sandwiches.'

d. **Gyerek/Nagyobb** vagyok.
child bigger am
'I am a child/I am bigger.'

e. **Játszani** szeret.
play.inf. likes
'He/She likes to play.'

Nouns which are VMs must be non-referential, non-specific. Semantically, the function of the verb modifier can be resultative in change-of-state sentences, terminative in change-of-location sentences, or locative in sentences denoting existence or spatial configuration (Kiss 2005, 2008b). The VM affects the aspectual properties of the event description in Hungarian. Generally speaking, accomplishment and achievement verbs are

[2] É. Kiss (2004) finds nevertheless evidence of an existing hierarchy in the VP, evidence from anaphora, disjoint reference between two referring expressions, and Weak Crossover. É. Kiss (2008a) argues in favour of a flat VP. Since this however is beyond the scope of this paper it will not be pursued.

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

accompanied by aspectual modifiers; however, some state and activity verbs may also have VMs. Syntactically, the VM occupies the specifier position of an aspect phrase (É. Kiss 2004; the same projection may bear a different label: SpecTense in É. Kiss 2008a, SpecPred in Csirmaz 2004, É. Kiss 2008b, c) whose head hosts the verb.

The VM will however remain in situ, post-verbally, in a negative (3a) or imperative (3b) sentence or in the presence of focus (3c) (Babarcy 2006, É. Kiss 2004). É. Kiss (2008c) proposes however that sentences with VM always project a PredP; when a FocP (or a NegP) is also projected, the verb moves to an intermediate head between Foc/NegP and PredP, which she labels Non-Neutral head, yielding the desired word order.

(3) a. Nem megy **haza**.
not goes home
'He/she is not going home.
b. Menj **haza**.
go-imp. home
'Go home'.
c. PÉTER ment **haza**.
Peter went home
'It was Peter who went home.

Hungarian focus has phonological prominence: it has primary stress and deletes the stress of the verb. The focus position is an operator position, to the left of the VP. Hungarian focus can be contrastive or identificational. Contrastive focus is exhaustive and presupposes the negation of one or more elements of a closed set in favour of a chosen constituent (4a). But Hungarian focus is often identificational, where one element out of an open set is singled out, like in (4b) below, where Liszt is identified from the array of all Hungarian composers, and not contrasted to one other in particular (examples from É. Kiss 2004: 79−80). Note that the leftmost constituent in sentence (4b) is the Topic, while sentence (4a) lacks one.

(4) a. PÉTERT mutatta be Marinak.
Peter-Acc introduced P Mari-to
'It is Peter that was introduced to Mari (and not Zoltán).'
b. [A Magyar rapszódiákat]$_{\text{Topic}}$ LISZT írta.
the Hungarian rhapsodies Liszt wrote
'As for the Hungarian rhapsodies, it was Liszt who wrote them.'

Since the function of Hungarian focus is exhaustive identification, some elements are barred from Focus position: universal and existential quantifiers and *is* 'also' phrases (É. Kiss 2004). By contrast, some elements have an inherent [+focus] feature and must always appear preverbally: interrogative phrases, *csak* 'only' phrases, negative existential quantifiers, negative degree, negative manner adverbials. Notice that the universal quantifier in (5a) cannot appear in preverbal focus position, whereas the 'only' phrase, which is compatible with unique exhaustive identification cannot appear elsewhere (5b) (É. Kiss 2004).

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

(5) a. *VALAKIT mutatott be Marinak.
somebody introduced P Mari-to
'It was somebody that was introduced to Mari.'
b. Csak Pétert mutatta be Marinak.
only Peter-Acc introduced P Mari-to
'He only introduced Peter to Mari.'

Another operator position is that of the distributive quantifier (universal quantifiers, *is* 'also' phrases), which will appear to the left of the VM or to the left of Focus, as the case may be; unless the Focus scopes over the quantifier, in which case the quantifier will appear postverbally (É. Kiss 2004).

2.1. Romanian word order

In this section I will focus on the semantic/pragmatic conditions on preverbal DPs since, as will be seen, this is where the most important difference between Hungarian and Romanian lies.

The basic Romanian word order is VSO (Dobrovie-Sorin 1993, Cornilescu 1997, 2002, Alboiu 2002).

The preverbal field is reserved for old/presupposed information, it is topical, thematic. Definite objects and subjects are freely allowed to appear preverbally. According to Cornilescu (1997) these preverbal DPs occupy a TopicP; Alboiu (2002) on the other hand argues that in Romanian topicalization involves adjunction to IP. New information is limited to the post-verbal field that is lower than the highest projection that the verb raises to: I^0 (Dobrovie-Sorin 1993, Alboiu 2002)/$Mood^0$ (Cornilescu 2002).

Information newly introduced to the discourse is conveyed by means of presentational focus (Alboiu 2002). Presentational focus is not prosodically stressed, the elements stay in situ. It is a discourse property. Thus, sentence (7a) informs the hearer as to the identity of the subject, of which the hearer had been ignorant; sentence (7b) implies that the subject has previously been mentioned in the discourse or made salient in some way – hence the subject can be classified as old information, while the predicate bears new informative content: the predicate is an instance of presentational focus.

(7) a. A venit Matei.
has come Matei
b. Matei a venit.
Matei has come
'Matei has come.'

Romanian contrastive focus is unique and prosodically marked. Operator movement takes place to the left periphery, into scope position, with the requirement of verb adjacency, but, in contrast to Hungarian, this movement is not obligatory. (8a), where focus is marked both syntactically – by movement − and prosodically, is the equivalent of (8b), where it is only the emphasis which signals contrastive focus. Due to the verb adjacency requirement and the assumption that the verb raises as far as I^0, Alboiu (2002) proposes that the landing site of the focused constituent is SpecIP. Cornilescu (2002) proposes that in

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

sentences with focus, the MoodP becomes a rhematic FocusP, whose specifier hosts the focused constituent.

(8) a. A venit MATEI.
has come Matei
b. MATEI a venit.
Matei has come
'It is Matei who has come.'

Hence it is not unsurprising that in Romanian indefinite non-referential nouns are barred from preverbal position unless contrastively focused (Alboiu 2002), since it is unlikely that they express old information. Notice the contrast between the ungrammatical (9a), with a preverbal indefinite object, and (9b), where the contrastively focused object is allowed in preverbal position.

(9) a. *Sandvişuri am făcut.
sandwiches have made
'I have made sandwiches.'
b. SANDVIŞURI am făcut.
sandwiches have made
'It is sandwiches that I have made.'

Alboiu (2002) mentions other interpretations allowing the preverbal placement of indefinite DPs: partitive (10a) and generic collective reading (10b). Sentence (10a) is only grammatical with the partitive reading: 'two of the sandwiches'.Preverbal indefinite subjects may also be allowed if anchored by a locative phrase (10c).

(10) a. (*) Două sandvişuri s-au mâncat.
two sandwiches refl. have eaten
'Two *(of the) sandwiches have been eaten.'
b. Două sandvişuri sunt mai bune decât unul.
two sandwiches are more good than one
'Two sandwiches are better than one.'
c. Sandvişuri sunt îngrămădite *(pe masă).
sandwiches are piled on table
'There are sandwiches piled on the table.'

2.3. Summary

One important difference between Hungarian and Romanian is that in Hungarian non-referential nouns are barred from post-verbal position (they are Verb Modifiers and will surface in SpecAsp to the left of the V), while in Romanian the exact opposite requirement is operational: preverbal nouns must be referential. Non-referential nouns can only appear preverbally if contrastively focused, anchored by a locative phrase or otherwise made specific in the discourse (*e.g.* partitive). Hence the indefinite noun in (11) must be preverbal in Hungarian (11a) and post-verbal in Romanian (11b).

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

(11) a. Szendvicset esznek.
sandwich-Acc eat
b. Mănâncă sandvişuri.
eat sandwiches
'They are eating sandwiches.'

Another difference between the two languages is that Romanian presentational focus is necessarily post-verbal, while in Hungarian wh-questions may also be answered by identificational focus, which is obligatorily preverbal. Note the differently worded answers, in the two languages, to the question 'What is there to eat?'. In the Romanian sentence it is with post-verbal presentational focus that the question is answered (12a). In the Hungarian sentence, the verb is preceded by a non-specific noun: note that reference is not made to one specific sandwich, but to the kind of food – sandwiches – of which there is a sample that has been prepared (12b).

(12) b. Am făcut sandvişuri.
have made sandwiches
a. Szendvicset készitettem.
sandwich-Acc made
'I have made sandwiches.'

Moreover, while contrastively focused constituents may move to the preverbal position in Romanian, the movement is optional, while Hungarian focused constituents will always be preverbal. In addition, Hungarian inherently focused constituents and distributive quantifiers must be preverbal/prefocus.

3. THE INTERFACE HYPOTHESIS. PREDICTIONS FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1. Previous studies on cross-linguistic influence and the interface hypothesis

Ever since the publication of the cross-linguistic hypothesis (Hulk and Müller 2000, Müller and Hulk 2001), a considerable body of research on cross-linguistic influence (for an overview see Serratrice 2013) has reported evidence for both qualitative and quantitative differences between bilingual and monolingual children. By qualitative differences we mean that a phenomenon unattested in language A is nevertheless produced by the bilingual child possibly under the influence of language B. Quantitative differences refer to the over- or under-production of a phenomenon, again as a result of interference from language B; or, alternatively, as Patuto *et al.* (2011) argue, phenomena unattested in monolingual acquisition might simply be the effect of processing difficulties due to bilingualism per se.One condition put forth by Hulk and Müller (2000) is that there has to be structural overlap between the two languages for cross-linguistic influence to occur. Further research has looked into the difference in complexity between the two languages as well as the language combination and language dominance (for an overview see Serratrice 2013).

The strong version of the Interface Hypothesis regarding bilingual acquisition predicts that structures at the interface between syntax and other cognitive domains will be

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

acquired with some delay or difficulty, while structures that only require syntactic computation will be acquired early (Sorace 2011). It is the interface between syntax and pragmatics which has been found to exhibit the highest levels of optionality and instability.

Serratrice *et al.* (2004) point out that cross-linguistic influence is unidirectional, from the language with fewer pragmatic constraints to the language where pragmatic constraints are more complex, since coordinating competing solutions that are at the syntax/pragmatics interface is a highly demanding task. Their study focuses on the acquisition of pronominal subjects with English-Italian bilinguals. Since the contrast between null and overt pronominal subjects in Italian is constrained pragmatically by topic shift and focus, it is expected that it is in Italian that the bilinguals will show delay in acquisition. Similar results are found in Paradis and Navarro (2003) with English-Spanish bilinguals, in Sorace *et al.* (2009) with English-Italian bilinguals, in Pinto (2006) with Italian-Dutch bilinguals, among others. The acquisition of focus, an interface phenomena which is also investigated in the present study, has also been found to be problematic with bilinguals. Leray (2009) investigates the acquisition of the French focus particle *aussi* by French-German bilingual children, concluding that the acquisition route of bilingual children differs from that of the monolingual child; the wider range of associations used by bilinguals corresponds in fact to the possibilities available in German.

Serratrice (2013) considers two possibilities regarding the manifestation of cross-linguistic influence: either the co-existence of conflicting structures in the two languages results in underspecification, permitting a more flexible use and interpretation of the phenomenon in question, or differences between bilinguals and monolinguals are caused by processing difficulties. Underspecification is an interesting idea, since bilinguals do not replace the whole system of one language with the system of another: what they do is optionally and occasionally produce structures that monolinguals never do. On the other hand, Sorace (2011) points out that the underspecification account cannot explain why similar patterns are attested with speakers of different language combinations, while it may however account for certain qualitative differences. Quantitative differences on the other hand will best be explained by processing difficulties, which account both for the differences in performance attributable to the characteristics of the task and for individual variation.

What is also of significance is that with bilinguals both languages are simultaneously active (Sorace 2011), which translates into additional effort for the bilinguals to suppress the unwanted language; this may result on the one hand in processing difficulties, but it might also predict a failure in the suppression of the language whose rules might thus interfere with the language actually in use.

3.2. Predictions for the present study

The study aims to look into the word order errors in the Hungarian utterances of unbalanced Romanian-Hungarian bilinguals (Hungarian the weaker language) with a view to testing the Interface Hypothesis. The facts as outlined above are: (1) Romanian and Hungarian word order is constrained by conflicting discourse rules; (2) phenomena that are at the syntax-discourse interface have been shown to be vulnerable with bilinguals. The following hypothesis is to be tested: Romanian-Hungarian bilinguals commit word order errors that are caused by the conflicting discourse rules. The children may be unable to

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

suppress the rules of the language not actually in use (here Romanian) and thus apply them unnecessarily to Hungarian contexts; or perhaps the existence of conflicting structures has as a result the underspecification of certain requirements in Hungarian, yielding occasional undesired optionality. Since the children in the present study are unbalanced bilinguals, language dominance might also play a part.

4. THE STUDY

4.1. Data and method

The subjects are three simultaneous Romanian-Hungarian bilingual brothers. Their father is a Romanian monolingual and their mother is a Hungarian-Romanian bilingual; the family lives in a Romanian community. Aside from their mother, they speak Hungarian with their maternal grandmother and occasionally among themselves. As a result, they are unbalanced bilinguals, with Hungarian their weaker language.

The data used for the analysis was collected as follows: the children were required to describe pictures in their storybooks or tell stories (e.g. outline the plot of a movie they had seen, or say what scene/character they liked best); they however preferred to draw their own pictures and describe them. They were asked to speak only in Hungarian. The three children were recorded together and some utterances are in fact fragments of conversations among them. They were not prompted to use any particular structure; the recordings are spontaneous. The corpus consists of 7 one hour recordings over a period of two months. The ages of the children at the time of the recordings were as follows: Matei: 8;10-9;0, Toma: 5;7-5;9, Petru: 4;1-4;3.

4.2. Results

Of all the sentences produced by the children only those sentences were selected that contain contrastive focus, identificational focus or inherently focused constituents, or verb modifiers. Table 1 below gives the number of utterances that can be considered pragmatically infelicious or incorrect, out of the total of utterances analysed. The table also highlights the importance of the age factor: the number of errors is significantly higher with the youngest child.

Table 1

Ratio of infelicitous utterances

Utterances	Matei	Toma	Petru
Infelicitous	7 (4%)	27 (20%)	56 (35%)
Total	185	137	158

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

The word order error types encountered in the data are the following:(1) *focus-related errors*, that is the word order produced by the child is infelicitous in the sense that the focused constituent is not preverbal, as required in Hungarian (section 4.3.1);(2) the *position of the verbal modifier*, especially when it is an *indefinite/bare noun* (section 4.3.2); (3) failure to grasp the *semantic unity* of infinitives with an auxiliary-like matrix verb, which is apparent in the incorrect positioning of the particle (section 4.3.3).

4.3. Analysis

4.3.1. *Focus-related errors*

The inherently focused negative manner adverbial in (13a) should be preverbal – the correct word order is given under (13c). The word order as used by the child could be acceptable if the particle were focused (13b). However, it needs to be pointed out that the particle is correctly positioned to the left of the verb, as it should be in a neutral sentence. What the child uses here is the Romanian presentational focus instead of the Hungarian identificational focus: according to the Romanian discourse rules, the new information conveyed by the PP must appear at the end of the sentence.

(13) a. *haza megy cipő nélkül (Petru 4;0)
home goes shoe without
'He is going home barefoot.'
b. HAZA megy cipő nélkül.
'It is home that he is going barefoot.'
c. CIPŐ NÉLKÜL megy haza.

In (14a, b, c), the child fails to move the contrastively focused constituent to preverbal position; this optionality of movement is only available for Romanian. In Hungarian the contrastively focused constituent should be preverbal (14a', b', c').

(14) a. ?fogja EZT mert nagyon kicsi (Petru 4;0)
holds this because very small
'It is this one that he is holding, because it is very small'
a'. nem EZT fogja, EZT fogja
b. ?le- esett ODA (Toma 5;7)
down-fell there
'It's over there that it fell.'
b'. ODA esett le
c. ?akarom HUPPOT (Petru 4;0)
want Hupp-Acc
'It is Hupp that I want.'
c'. HUPPOT akarom

The sentence below is in fact an answer to a wh-question ('What is there in this picture?') The child gives an infelicitous answer with respect to Hungarian word order: the word order would be correct if either the verb (15b) or the adverb (15c) were focused. The

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

indefinite NP must appear preverbally (15d) as identificational focus. The word order as used by the child is a copy of the Romanian sentence where indeed the new information (presentational focus) is post-verbal (15e).

(15) a. *Itt van egy állat. (Petru 4;0)
here is a animal
Intended: 'There's an animal here.'
b. [Itt]$_{Topic}$ VAN egy állat.
'Here, there IS an animal (as opposed to there, where there is not).'
c. ITT van egy állat.
'HERE's an animal (not elsewhere).'
d. Itt EGY ÁLLAT van.
'There's an animal here.'
e. Aici e un animal.
here is an animal

Another operator position that the child fails to grasp is the distributive quantifier position, *mind a kettő* 'both' in example (16a). The correct neutral sentence is given under (16d). In Romanian, the equivalent quantifier would appear post-verbally, in the presentational focus position (16e). The word order produced by the child corresponds to the focusing of the adverb (16b) or the verb (16c).

(16) a. *itt látszik mind a kettő (Petru 4;0)
here is-visible all the two
'Both are visible here.'
b. ITT látszik mind a kettő.
'It is here that both are visible.'
c. [Itt]$_{Topic}$ LÁTSZIK mind a kettő.
'Here both ARE visible, it is not the case that they are not visible.'
d. Itt mind a kettő látszik.
e. Aici se văd amândouă.
here refl. see both

Is 'also' phrases must also appear preverbally: sentence (17a) is corrected under (17b) – in fact, the element *is* must follow rather than precede the noun; the child copies the Romanian word order of the equivalent sentence (17c), both as regards the positioning of the *is* phrase, and the ordering of the noun and *is*.

(17) a. *Kap(o)tt is Matei egy ornitorinkot. (Petru 4;0)
got too Matei a platypus-Acc
Intended: 'Matei also got a platypus.'
b. Matei is kapott egy ornitorinkot.
Matei also got a platypus-Acc
c. A primit şi Matei un ornitorinc.
has got too Matei a platypus

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

The percentage of focus-related errors out of the total of contexts containing focus (inherent, contrastive or identificational) is 38% in the case of the youngest child, 14% for the middle child and 8% for the eldest.

4.3.2. *Verb modifiers*

Another type of error is that related to the position of the VM, especially when the VM is a noun: not surprising, since this is the case where Romanian and Hungarian word order constraints clash: Romanian requires non-referential nouns to follow the verb, while in Hungarian they are VMs and must precede it. This is the kind of error with the highest frequency: for Petru 100% (n = 20) and for Toma 80% (n = 12) of the sentences with nominal VMs are incorrectly constructed; even with the eldest brother it is the error most often committed (19%). It needs to be reiterated that the subjects and objects which are VMs are non-specific: they refer to kinds and not uniquely identified individuals; see the examples under (19).

(19) a. *eszik **fa-szendvics-et** (Petru 4;0)
eats wood-sandwich-Acc
'He eats wood sandwiches.'

b. *kell nekik **vas** (Toma 5;7)
need them iron
'They need iron.'

c. *csinálta **fából** és **fényből** (Toma 5;7)
made wood-from and light-from
'He made it out of wood and light.'

Neither are predicative nouns positioned preverbally. The word order in (20a) is only compatible with the interpretation where the subject is in fact focused (20b), which would then require the VM to follow the verb. The correct sentence is given under (20c).

(20) a. *én vagyok egy teafőző (Petru 4;1)
I am a teapot
Intended: 'I am a teapot.'

b. ÉN vagyok egy teafőző
'It is I who is a teapot.'

c. [én]$_{\text{Topic}}$ egy teafőző vagyok

d. (Eu) sunt un ceainic
I am a teapot

It is interesting that there appear to be fewer errors with adjective VMs, although the Romanian word order still requires the adjective to follow rather than precede the copula (21d). Curiously enough, here it is the youngest child who has the lower number of errors: 1 error out of 8 sentences, while Toma has 3 errors out of 7 sentences; the oldest child has no postverbal predicative adjectives. The word order in the child's utterance is compatible with the focusing of another constituent in the sentence: in this case the subject.

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

(21) a. *én vagyok nagyobb (Petru 4;1)
I am bigger
Intended: 'I am *bigger*.'
b. ÉN vagyok nagyobb.
'It is I who is bigger.'
c. [én]$_{Topic}$ nagyobb vagyok.
d. Sunt mai mare.
am bigger

Particle verbs do not appear to be a problematic structure. The two older brothers have no errors out of a large number of particle verbs, while with Petru out of 56 particle verbs there is only one error. The error is also lexical, since the child fails to choose the correct directional particle *le* 'downwards' instead of *lent* 'down'[3]. In fact, this non-directional particle appears to be the translation of the Romanian *jos* 'down', whose correct position is, unsurprisingly, after the verb – see the Romanian translation provided under (22c).

(22) a. *Mikor ér az lent akkor kész. (Petru 4;1)
when gets that down then done
Intended: 'When it reaches the bottom it's done.'
b. Mikor az le- ér
when that down gets
c. Când ajunge jos
when gets down

There are also three cases of an infinitive verb modifier which fails to move to the left of the verb. The children most likely fail to interpret the infinitive as a verb modifier, with aspectual properties, and treat it as they would any object clause which normally follows its head, not only in Romanian, but in Hungarian as well. Note that Hungarian infinitives selecting complements of their own are no longer required to appear preverbally (b).

(23) a. *és a szélfiucska azt hitte hogy akar **hintázni** (Toma 5;7)
and the windboy that thought that wants swing.inf.
'And the little wind boy thought (the ladybug) wanted to swing.'
b. Sokan szeretnek [játszani a szavakkal]$_{DOCl}$.
many like play.inf. the words-with
'Many like to play with words.'

[3] In fact, the child has trouble making the locative/directional distinction non-existent in Romanian; he keeps using directional particles in stative contexts and the other way around. Below, it is the non-directional ott 'there' which should be used; in fact, the actual meaning of the particle verb uttered by the child is idiomatic: 'His sword is gone.'

i. *oda van a kardja (Petru 4;1)
that way is the sword-his
Intended: 'There is his sword.'

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

4.3.3. *Semantic unity of infinitive and matrix verb*

In the case of a non-finite verb with an auxiliary-like matrix verb (such as *akar* 'want', *fog* 'will'), the VM will be expected to move to the left of the matrix verb, since the two verbs form a semantic unit and the scope of Aspect is extended over the matrix clause as well (É. Kiss, 2004). The children however fail to capture the semantic oneness of the two verbs and consistently place the particle on the infinitive, where it would normally belong but for this semantic reanalysis of the two verbs. In fact, their error merely proves that the infinitive and its matrix are not viewed as one semantic unit. Had the matrix verb been a full verb, the VM would not have been required to move to the left of the matrix verb (24e).

(24) a. *akarom be-kapni mamát (Petru 4;0)
want up-gobble mother-Acc
'I want to gobble mother up.'
b. Be akarom kapni mamát.
c. *mert akartak kicsik lenni (Toma 5;7)
because wanted small be.inf
'Because they wanted to be small.'
d. kicsik akartak lenni
e. Jöttem be-kapni mamát
came up-gobble mother-Acc
'I came in order to gobble mother up.'

4.4. Summary

Table 2 breaks down the total of infelicitous sentences according to the type of error committed. For each error type, the number of infelicitous utterances is given as well as the total number of contexts containing the respective structure. There are 24 focus-related errors with Petru, 38% out of a total of 63 contexts containing focus, 5 out of 37 (14%) with Toma and 2 out of 25 (8%) with Matei. As for nominal verb modifiers, Petru has 20 errors out of 20 contexts, Toma 12 errors (80%) out of 15, while Matei only has 4 errors (19%) out of 21 contexts. Adjectives and infinitives are fewer in number overall: Toma has 3 postverbal predicative adjectives out of 7, and Petru 1 out of 8, but the three infinitive VMs are all postverbal. Particles on the other hand do not appear to pose a problem at all for the three children – there is one (perhaps accidental) error out of a great many contexts. The final row gives the number of instances of failure to move the VM to the left of the semantic complex composed of an auxiliary-like matrix verb and a non-finite verb: 9 errors out of 10 contexts for Petru, 5out of 9 for Toma and only 1 out of 4 for Matei. No percentages have been given where the number of contexts is too small to permit any conclusions as to the proportion of errors.

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

Table 2

Infelicitous/incorrect utterances. Summary

	Matei		Toma		Petru	
Utterances	**Infelicitous**	**Total**	**Infelicitous**	**Total**	**Infelicitous**	**Total**
Focus	2 (8%)	25	5 (14%)	37	24 (38%)	63
N VM	4 (19%)	21	12 (80%)	15	20 (100%)	20
A VM	0	9	3	7	1	8
P VM	0	119	0	67	1	56
inf VM	0	0	2	2	1	1
(P)^Aux^(*P)^Inf	1	4	5	9	9	10

Particle contexts appear to have been fully acquired by all three children. There are no word errors with negative particle verbs. In fact, this erroneous word order (*Neg^P^V) is present during earlier stages of acquisition and is also found with monolingual children. Csirmaz (2004) claims that in the beginning children use constituent negation rather than clausal negation. The two younger children in the present study also went through a stage when they failed to produce the correct word order in negative sentences (Tomescu 2013):

(25) *nem kifolyik (Toma 2;2)
not out-flow

4.5. Discussion

The structure which appears to pose the biggest problem to the children is the preverbal positioning of the nominal VM. This is clearly a case of cross-linguistic influence: there is a clash between the requirements regarding non-referential nouns in Hungarian and Romanian. Hungarian non-referential nouns are VMs and must precede the verb, while in Romanian non-referential nouns are barred from preverbal position – they introduce new information to the discourse and are therefore expressed by means of presentational focus, at the right-hand side of the sentence.

Importantly, sentences containing particles are always correctly formed (with one exception), whether affirmative or negative. In fact, particles are among the elements earliest acquired by children − see Csirmaz (2004) for Hungarian, Van Kampen and Schippers (2010) for Dutch. In a longitudinal study (Tomescu 2013), the two youngest children in the present study are shown to have acquired particles in a native-like manner very early (particles are first attested at 1;5/1;6 as minimal predicates with deictic value; particle verbs are first attested at 1;10). Second, Romanian does not have particle constructions: it is unable to lexicalize aspect or direction outside the verb. Hence there is no conflicting input from Romanian that might hinder the acquisition of particles.

Neither are particles an interface phenomenon. The movement of the particle to SpecAspP, or the impossibility of moving it in the presence of another operator (Babarczy, 2006, É. Kiss 2004), or, alternatively, if we accept É.Kiss's (2008c)proposal, the movement of the verb to NNP above AspP are not discourse phenomena; there is no complexity due to pragmatic rules or confusing input from the other language.

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

VMs must appear to the left of the verb in Hungarian because they have aspectual value: they move to SpecAspP/SpecPredP, while the verb is moved to Asp/Pred. The same is true for non-referential nouns; however, the bilingual child appears to be unable to overrule the conflicting Romanian discourse requirement which forbids non-referential nouns from moving to the left-hand side of the sentence. What the bilinguals in the study fail to grasp is not so much the status of the VM in the sentence but perhaps the fact that non-specific nouns can be VMs, that they play a role similar to that of the particle. They tend to follow the Romanian discourse requirements applicable to non-specific, indefinite nouns, treating them as newly introduced information (presentational focus) and positioning them at the end of the sentence.

Adjective and infinitive VMs are fewer in number overall, hence the percentage of errors is much less relevant. However, adjectives are not differentiated according to referentiality, and hence there is less complexity for the child to acquire regarding the position of the adjective. The children also fail to treat bare infinitives as VMs and have them follow the matrix verb, which is the natural word order in Romanian with infinitive clauses, but also in Hungarian in the case of subordinate clauses that are not bare infinitives.

The other frequent error is the failure to move the VM to the left of the auxiliary-like matrix verb. It is important to point out that this is not a syntactic error, but rather an error in interpretation. The children do not grasp the importance of the semantic unit formed by the two verbs: since in the case of a matrix verb with independent meaning this obligatory movement of the VM no longer applies. Here, however, there can hardly be any interference from Romanian, since Romanian has no particle verbs, and sentences containing infinitive clauses are constructed in a completely different fashion. In fact, they treat this VM^Inf string as a subordinate clause following its matrix, in line with the failure to front the bare infinitive verb modifier.

As for the Hungarian sentences containing focus, the children either fail to front the focused constituent, applying the optionality available in Romanian sentences containing contrastive focus, or, alternatively, they use presentational instead of the Hungarian identificational or inherent focus and position the constituent at the end of the sentence where it belongs in Romanian. In the longitudinal study (Tomescu 2013), contrastive focus is attested as early as 1;10 both in Romanian and Hungarian for both children. It is not argued here that Hungarian focus is not acquired at all by the children, but that, under the influence of the second language, the constraints governing word-order are more lax, underspecified, to use Serratrice's (2013) term.

In conclusion, Hungarian word order errors occur under the influence of conflicting Romanian discourse requirements, in line with the Interface Hypothesis which predicts difficulty in the acquisition of aspects at the syntax/discourse interface. One such error is the failure to prepose indefinite/bare nouns in Hungarian, following the Romanian discourse rule according to which non-referential nouns must be positioned at the end of the sentence, as presentational focus. Presentational focus is also used instead of identificational focus in some contexts. If we accept that with bilinguals the other language is never turned off as it were, we might explain these errors by the perpetual presence in the child's mind of the Romanian rules – he cannot ignore them and he ends up applying them in Hungarian. Another error is the failure to prepose contrastively focused constituents, which can optionally be left in situ in Romanian, but not in Hungarian. Perhaps there is

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

underspecification of the feature with the bilingual children, allowing a non-target-like optionality.

5. CONCLUSION

The study aimed to offer an account of word order errors in the Hungarian sentences of Romanian-Hungarian bilinguals. The findings support the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace and Filiaci 2006, Sorace 2011) that predicts vulnerability at the interface between syntax and pragmatics. The analysis of word order errors has revealed that most ungrammatical or infelicitous sentences contain errors caused by conflicting discourse properties of the two languages: pertaining to referentiality and focus. The two most frequent error types are failure to front focused constituents and failure to position non-referential nouns preverbally, as a result the interference of the Romanian discourse rules which allow the optionality of the former and forbid the latter. Perhaps we can apply here the notion of underspecification (Serratrice 2013) regarding the necessity of fronting focused constituents in Hungarian, whether contrastively or inherently focused. Processing difficulties may also interfere, and especially the notion that bilinguals need to exercise executive control (Sorace 2011) to prevent unwanted interference of the language not in use: it appears that the bilinguals in the study fail to overrule the Romanian discourse requirements and end up applying them instead of the Hungarian rules.

REFERENCES

Alboiu, G., 2002, *The Features of Movement in Romanian*, Bucureşti, Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti.

Babarczy, A., 2006, "Negation and word order in Hungarian child language", *Lingua,* 116, 377–392.

Cornilescu A., 1997, "The Double Subject Construction in Romanian. Notes on the Syntax of the Subject", *Revue Roumaine de Linguistique*, 42, 3−4, 1–45.

Cornilescu A., 2002, "Rhematic Focus at the Left Periphery. The Case of Romanian", in C. Beyssade, R. Bok-Bennema, F. Drijkoningen, P. Monachesi (eds.), *Romance Languages and Linguistic Theory 2000: Selected papers from 'Going Romance' 2000, Utrecht, 30 November – 2 December*, viii, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 77−91.

Csirmaz, A., 2004, "Acquisition patterns of particle constructions in Hungarian", in A. Csirmaz, A. Gualmini, A. Nevins (eds.) *Plato's Problems: Papers on Language Acquisition*, Cambridge, MIT Working Papers in Linguistics.

Dobrovie-Sorin, C., 1993, *The Syntax of Romanian*, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter.

É. Kiss, K., 2004, *The Syntax of Hungarian*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

É. Kiss, K., 2005, "First steps towards a theory of the verbal particle", in Ch. Pinón, P. Siptár (eds.), *Approaches to Hungarian 9*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 57−88.

É. Kiss, K., 2008a, "Free Word Order, (Non)configurationality, and Phases", *Linguistic Inquiry*, 39, 441–475.

É. Kiss, K., 2008b, "The Function and the Syntax of the Verbal Particle", in K. É. Kiss (ed.), *Event Structure and the Left Periphery*, Dordrecht, Springer, 17−56.

É. Kiss, K., 2008c, "Apparent or Real? On the Complementary Distribution of Identificational Focus and the Verbal Particle", inK. É. Kiss (ed.), *Event Structure and the Left Periphery*, Dordrecht, Springer, 17−223.

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

Hulk, A., E. van der Linden, 1996, "Language mixing in a French-Dutch bilingual child", in E. Kellerman, B. Weltens, T. Bongaerts (eds.), *Eurosla 6. A selection of papers*, Amsterdam, VU Uitgeverij, 87−101.

Hulk, A., N. Müller, 2000, "Bilingual first language acquisition at the interface between syntax and pragmatics",*Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 3, 3, 227–244.

van Kampen, J., R. Schippers, 2010,"An acquisition procedure for category assignment: The case of Dutch P", in M. Pîrvulescu, M. C. Cuervo, A. T. Pérez-Leroux, J. Steele, N. Strik (eds.), *Selected Proceedings of the 4th Conference on Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition North America*, Somerville, Cascadilla Proceedings Project, 139−149.

Leray, E., 2009, "Additive focus particles in bilingual language acquisition", in A.Dufter, D. Jacob (eds.), *Focus and Background in Romance Languages*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 205−238.

Meisel, J., 1989, "Early differentiation of language in bilingual children", in K. Hyltenstam, L. Obler (eds.), *Bilingualism across a lifespan: Aspects of acquisition, maturity and loss,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 13−40.

Müller, N., A. Hulk, 2001, "Crosslinguistic influence in bilingual language acquisition: Italian and French as recipient languages", *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 4, 1–21.

Paradis, J., F. Genesee, 1996, "Syntactic acquisition in bilingual children: Autonomous or interdependent?", *Studies in Second Language Acquisition,* 18, 1−25.

Paradis, J., S. Navarro, 2003, "Subject realization and crosslinguistic interference in the bilingual acquisition of Spanish and English: What is the role of the input?" *Journal of Child Language,* 30, 371–393.

Patuto, M., V. Repetto, N. Müller, 2011, "Delay and acceleration in bilingual first language acquisition", in E., Rinke, T. Kupisch (eds.), *The Development of Grammar: Language acquisition and diachronic change. In honour of Jürgen, M. Meisel*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 231–261.

Pinto, M., 2006, "Subject pronouns in bilinguals", in V. Torrens, L. Escobar (eds.), *The Acquisition of Syntax in Romance Languages*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 331−352.

Serratrice, L., A. Sorace, S. Paoli, 2004, "Crosslinguistic influence at the syntax-pragmatic interface: Subjects and objects in English-Italian bilingual and monolingual acquisition", *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 7, 3, 183−205.

Serratrice, L., 2013,"Cross-linguistic influence in bilingual development. Determinants and mechanisms", *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism,* 3, 1, 3−25.

Sorace, A., F. Filiaci, 2006, "Anaphora resolution in near-native speakers of Italian", *Second Language Research* 22, 3, 339−368.

Sorace, A., Serratrice, L., Filiaci, F., Baldo, M., 2009, "Discourse conditions on subject pronoun realization: Testing the linguistic intuitions of older bilingual children", *Lingua*, 119, 3, 460−477.

Sorace, A., 2011, "Pinning down the concept of 'interface' in bilingualism", *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 1, 1, 1–33.

Tomescu, V., 2013, *The syntax and acquisition of particles in English, Hungarian and Romanian*, Bucureşti, Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti.

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)

BDD-A10606 © 2015 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:39 UTC)