

Sensitive Contexts for D Omission in Italian L1: A Case Study

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1. Introduction

This study deals with the acquisition of functional categories. Specifically, it focuses on determiner omissions in L1, a wide-spread phenomenon of early grammar which is subject to variation among languages (Chierchia et al., 1999; Guasti et al., 2004). Previous research on early article omission, based on analysis both of spontaneous production and elicited production, has stressed the crucial role played either by prosodic constraints or syntactic constraints. On one hand, the former group of studies converges in explaining determiner omissions in terms of prosodic constraints on the output of the speech production system (Gerken, 1991 for English L1; Crisma and Tomasutti, 2000 for Italian L1). According to this hypothesis, there is a strict correlation between the prosodic properties of the element preceding or following the determiner and article omissions. On the other hand, the latter group of studies focuses on the correlation between the position occupied by nominals in the sentence and article omissions (Guasti et al., 2004 for Dutch and Italian, Caprin & Yoghà, 2006 for Italian). In particular, the sentence initial position appears to be more sensitive to determiner omission than the sentence internal one (Guasti et al., 2004; Caprin & Yoghà, 2006).

The present research is a contribution to the second group of studies. It aims at reconstructing a fine-grained mapping of syntactic contexts sensitive to D omission, focusing on the spontaneous production of one Italian monolingual child. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the role played by structural configurations in early D omission.

The paper is organized as follows: in section 2, 3 and 4 we present the corpus, the criteria adopted for the identification of the utterances relevant to our analysis and the data collected; section 5 and 6 are devoted to the analysis of the different contexts sensitive to determiner omission and to the development of explanatory proposals for the non-target patterns. In section 7 we conclude with a brief discussion of the findings.

2. The Corpus

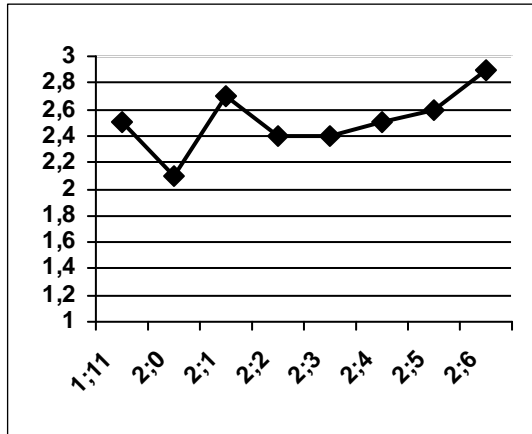
We base our study on the analysis of an original corpus consisting of 11 recordings of Sabrina, a female Italian monolingual child living in Tuscany (Italy). The corpus was transcribed in CHAT format following the CHILDES criteria and successively double checked. Table 1 and Figure 1 show the MLU and the MLU variation during the period analyzed¹.

¹ The data have been collected and transcribed by Simona Matteini. They have been further double checked by Valentina Chianciani, Sara Paolucci, and Ida Ferrari

Table 1: MLU

Age	MLU
1;11	2,5
2;0	2,1
2;1	2,7
2;2	2,4
2;3	2,4
2;4	2,5
2;5	2,6
2;6	2,9
Average MLU	2,51

Figure 1: MLU variation



As can be observed, Sabrina's MLU is high since the first recording. Nevertheless, we identified a difference between a first period (1;11-2;2) during which the MLU considerably fluctuates and the second period (2;3-2;6) during which the MLU variation steadily increases.

3. Criteria for the identification of the relevant utterances

We took as 'determiners' definite/indefinite articles and their early manifestations as protosyntactic devices (PSD, henceforth). As PSD, we considered the indistinct vocalic morphemes produced by the child in front of nominals which can be taken as morphophonological placeholders according to Bottari et al., (1993/94). We considered for our analysis count and mass nouns in argumental/predicative position when they obligatorily require a determiner. As for argumental position we included subject/objects of verbs, prepositional objects, nominals produced in isolation as answers to questions about the subject/object of the event. The utterances are exemplified in (1):

- (1) **a** CHI: c' è farfallina.
 there is _ small butterfly
 'There is a small butterfly.'
- b** CHI: metti a potto libetto?
 put away _ small book?
 'Can you put away the small book?'
- c** CHI: dai sapone?
 give _ soap?
 'Can you give me the soap?'
- d** CHI: con matello [martello].
 with _ hammer
 'with the hammer'
- e** INV: chi arriva?
 'Who is coming?'
- CHI: principe
 _ prince
 'the prince.'

f INV: allora # che disegnamo?
 ‘What should we draw now?’

CHI: pinguino.
 _ penguin
 ‘A penguin.’

As for predicative position we included singular count nouns in copular constructions:

(2) CHI: questa è treno.
 this is _ train
 ‘This is the train.’

(3) INV: guarda un po’ # chi è questo qui?
 ‘Look ! Who is this?’

CHI: drago.
 _ dragon
 ‘A dragon.’

Crucially, we included in our analysis also mass noun with a ‘specific’ reading, as they require a determiner in Italian, as, for example, in possessive constructions:

(4) CHI: Questo è il latte mio!
 This is the milk my
 ‘This is my milk!’

We excluded all the contexts not requiring a determiner, such as (i) mass nouns and bare plurals with a ‘non specific’ reading in argumental or predicative position; (ii) proper names/kinship terms, since they do not require a determiner in the variety of Italian spoken by the child², (iii) all combinations of nominals and prepositions not requiring a determiner in Italian such as, for example, *andare a casa* (to go home). Relevant examples are given in (5) and (6).

(5) **a** CHI: questo è ciaccino!
 ‘This is bun.’

b CHI: vuole mangiare sassolini.
 want._{3.prs.sing} to eat pebbles
 ‘He wants to eat small pebbles’

c CHI: quelle so’ [=? sono] candele.
 ‘Those are candles!’

(6) **a** CHI: dov’è mamma?
 ‘Where is mummy?’

b CHI: dov’è zia Simona?
 ‘Where is aunt Simona?’

Finally, we excluded: (a) idiomatic expressions and routine sentences containing a nominal; (b) unclear sentences, (c) immediately adjacent complete repetitions of the child’s own utterances, (d) corrected initial errors.

² The variety of Italian spoken in Siena (Tuscany).

4. The data

On the basis of such criteria, we isolated 661 contexts which required a determiner. On these utterances, the rate of D omissions/occurrences/PSD was calculated. Table 2 and Figure 2 illustrate the pattern we observed:

Table 2: D occurrences/omissions/PSD

Age	Occ	Omiss	PSD
1;11	(49/101) 48%	(27/101) 27%	(25/101) 25%
2;0	(23/49) 47%	(17/49) 35%	(9/49) 18%
2;1	(76/114) 67%	(35/114) 31%	(3/114) 3%
2;2	(55/81) 68%	(24/81) 30%	(2/81) 2%
2;3	(69/95) 73%	(17/95) 18%	(9/95) 9%
2;4	(82/108) 76%	(24/108) 22%	(2/108) 2%
2;5	(44/55) 80%	(8/55) 15%	(3/55) 5%
2;6	(47/58) 81%	(11/58) 19%	(0/58) 0%
Total	(445/661) 67%	(163/661) 25%	(53/661) 8%

Figure 2: D occurrences/omissions/PSD

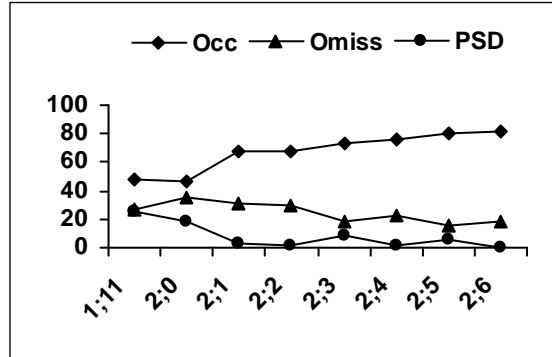
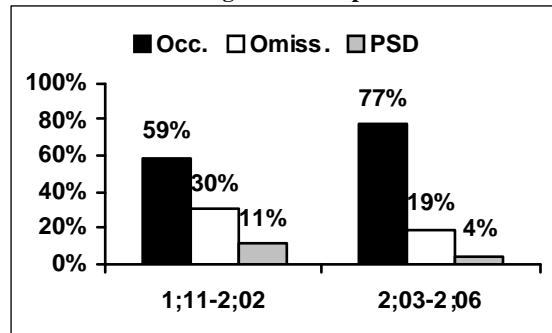


Figure 3: D occurrences/omissions/PSD: stages of development



Overall, determiner omission ranges between a highest rate of 35% (2;0) and a lowest rate 15% (2;5). Hence, this fact allows us to infer that D omission is a residual phenomenon which follows a developmental path during the period analyzed. As suggested by Figure 2, production of PSD and D omission are quite a noticeable phenomena in the first two recordings. Starting from (2;1) the former strategy drastically decreases, while the latter option decreases steadily. As for D occurrences, they increase gradually from 48% (1;11) to 81% (2;6). Considering the decrease of D omission, we identified two stages of development: in the first stage (1;11-2;2) the average rate of D omission is about 30% whereas from 2;3 to 2;6 the average rate of D omission is attested at about 19% (Figure 3).

5. Sensitive Contexts for D Omission

In order to identify to which aspect the omission of D may be related, we verified the correlation between the omission of determiners and the following properties of nominals: gender, number, mass distinction. Furthermore, we also considered the position occupied by nominals in the sentence and their functions.

5.1. Gender, Number, Mass distinction of nominals and D omission

Table 3 illustrate the percentage of D omission/occurrences with respect to mass, number and gender distinction of nominals.

Table 3: D omissions/occurrences according to Mass, Number and Gender distinction of nominals

	D Omiss.	D Occurr.		D Omiss.	D Occurr.		D Omiss.	D Occurr.
+	(13/58)	(45/58)	+	(132/578)	(446/578)		(56/280)	(224/280)
Mass	22%	78%	Sing	23%	77%	Fem	20%	80%
-	(145/603)	(458/603)	-	(27/83)	(56/83)		(100/381)	(281/381)
Mass	24%	76%	Sing	33%	67%	Masc	26%	74%
p = 0,87			p = 0,07			p = 0,06		

Let us focus on the data more in detail. As for the distinction [+/- Mass], the percentage of article omission with [+ Mass] nominals (22% - 13/58) is similar to the one of [-Mass] nominals (24% - 145/603). The difference between the two groups is not statistically significant (Fisher's E. P-Value = 0,87)³. This fact suggests that, at this stage of acquisition, the [+/- Mass] distinction does not seem to play a crucial role in the phenomenon under investigation.

Turning to the [+/-Singular] distinction, Table 3 show a slightly higher percentage of D omissions within [- Singular] contexts. Determiner omission is attested at 33% (27/83) with plural nominals and at 23% (132/578) with singular ones. This difference is statistically near to the significant threshold: (Fisher's E. P-Value = 0,07). Contrary to the tendency emerged within [+/- Mass] nominals, the [+/- Singular] distinction seems to play a role in early determiner omission. However, a further analysis of the data reveals that the rate of D omissions in plural contexts is higher only in the configuration in which the nominals are introduced by the quantifier *tutti/e* as in "*Ho macchiato tutte *(le) paperine*" – I soiled all ducks. [QP+D+N: + Sing 25% (1/4) vs – Sing. 90% (9/10)]. Once the nominals introduced by QPs are excluded from the count⁴, the difference between the rate of D omissions with singular nominals (23% - 131/574) and the one with plurals (25% 18/73) is not statistically significant (p=0,76).

As for gender, we observe that the Determiner is omitted 26% (100/381) with masculine nouns and 20% (56/280) with feminine ones. This difference is near to the significant threshold (Fisher's E. P-Value = 0,06). In our opinion this result is not unexpected. Taking into consideration the Italian article paradigm, two facts may account for this finding: (i) only the masculine article shows allomorphic variants in Italian; (ii) the definite masculine singular article *il* and the definite masculine plural article *gli* are more complex from a phonetic and a phonological point of view. Hence, the child may be induced to omit determiners more frequently in the former context but not in the latter.

5.2. DPs placement, DP functions and D omission

This section deals with the correlation between article omissions and: (i) the position occupied by DPs; (ii) the function that the DP has in the sentence.

Concerning DP placement, four contexts were analyzed: (i) DP-V; (ii) V-DP; (iii) P-DP⁵; (iv) DP in isolation. As for (i), we considered all DPs preceding a verb. In this pattern we included preverbal subjects, preposed objects and preposed predicative nominals of copular constructions⁶. As for (ii), we included all DPs following a verb as post verbal subjects, post verbal objects and post verbal predicative nominals. In (iii) we considered all DPs following a monosyllabic preposition, also when the latter has been omitted. Finally, the pattern in (iv) includes: (a) subject and object DPs uttered in isolation as answers to questions about the subject/object of the action; (b) predicative nominals uttered in isolation as answer to questions.

³ All the data were statistically analyzed using Fisher test. The significance threshold is 0,05.

⁴ This fact is particularly interesting in that suggests how article omission may correlate more on DP placement rather than on intrinsic properties of nominals (i.e. number).

⁵ It has been pointed out that P-DP cannot be considered merely a 'position' as PP can occur preverbally, post-verbally or in isolation. Moreover, P can either be selected by nouns and verbs. Our purpose here was to stress the fact that DP_s occur after a preposition.

⁶ Although ungrammatical in standard Italian, this construction is occasionally produced by the child.

As it emerges from the data analysis reported in the Table 4, the position occupied by nominals in the sentence seems to play a crucial role in D omission.

Table 4: D omission and position of DP

	D Omissions	D Occurrences
DP-V	(3/9) 33%	(6/9) 66%
V-DP	(67/356) 19%	(289/356) 81%
P-DP	(42/85) 49%	(43/85) 51%
DP in isolation	(49/211) 23%	(162/211) 77%

The highest rates of D omission are attested in the contexts P-DP 49% (42/85) and DP-V 33% (3/9)⁷, whereas, it is considerably lower in the contexts V-DP 19% (67/356), and DP in isolation 23% (49/211). The data show that the most sensitive pattern to D omissions is the prepositional context. A significant difference emerges comparing the P-DP values and those of V-DP and DP in isolation respectively (Fisher's E. P-Value < 0,0001 in both cases). On the contrary, we do not observe a statistically significant difference comparing the V-DP values with the DP in isolation values (Fisher's E. P-Value = 0,23).

We turn now to the correlation between article omissions and the function that the DP has in the sentence⁸. In analyzing Sabrina's corpus, we consider the following function: (i) subject, (ii) object, (iii) object of preposition, (iv) predicative nominals. Table 5 shows the results of this analysis:

Table 5: D omission according to the DP function

	D Omissions	D Occurrences
Subject DPs	(18/108) 17%	(90/108) 83%
Object DPs	(65/327) 20%	(262/327) 80%
Predicative nominals	(37/141) 26%	(104/141) 74%
Prepositional Object DPs	(42/85) 49%	(43/85) 51%

As for D omission, no subject/object asymmetry is found in Sabrina's corpus (D omissions in Subject DPs 17% vs Object DPs 20% - Fisher's Exact P-Value: 0,57). A slightly higher tendency to omit determiners in predicative position, though not statistically significant, emerges in the data analysis (D omission in Predicative DPs 26% vs Subject DPs 17% - Fisher's Exact P-Value: 0,08; D omission in Predicative DPs 26% vs Object DPs 20% - Fisher's Exact P-Value: 0,14). Crucially, the highest rate of omissions in prepositional contexts still remains (49%). A significant difference emerges comparing the values of Prepositional Object DPs with the one of Subject/Object DPs (Fisher's Exact P-Value: <0,0001 in both cases) and with the one of Predicative DPs (Fisher's Exact P-Value: 0,0005).

The most striking result prompted by these data, is that the residual phenomenon of D omission seems to be related more to the position occupied by DPs, rather than to other properties of nominals (gender, number, mass distinction)⁹. In particular, this study identifies PPs structures as a source of

⁷ Due to the few occurrences, this pattern will be neither further discussed nor statically analyzed.

⁸ Previous studies on this topic have stressed that, besides a first position effect, a subject/object asymmetry is found in children's production data (Baauw et al., 2005). Nevertheless, these studies do not converge in indicating a preference for D omissions in subject or object position. Baauw et al., 2005 found individual variation in Dutch speaking children; Schoenenberger et al., 1997 found a preference for D omission in object position in German children; Caprin & Yoghà, 2006 report a preference of D omission in subject position for Italian speaking children.

⁹ The influence of linear order on D omissions has already been reported in the literature (Guasti et al., 2004 for Dutch and Italian, Caprin & Yoghà, 2006 for Italian). Results of these studies converge in indicating the sentence initial position as the most sensitive to D omission. It is worth noticing that the child under consideration produced

difficulty in determiner provision by the child. This aspect has received little attention in the literature on this topic. In fact, a few studies on language acquisition have focused on D omission in PP contexts. As for Italian L1, Antelmi (1997) has observed that determiners were often omitted when nominals are introduced by a preposition. However, the author does not provide quantitative analysis of the phenomenon. In Leonini (2006), the same tendency has been observed in the acquisition of Italian L2 by German learners (both in a elicited task and in spontaneous production). In the following two sections we will focus on determiner omissions in prepositional contexts and we will formulate some explanatory proposals for the non-target patterns produced by the child.

6. Focus on prepositional contexts

This section is devoted to the analysis of the child's production of prepositional phrases requiring a determiner. Only monosyllabic prepositions were considered¹⁰: 85 PPs obligatorily requiring a determiner out of 226 PPs were identified in the corpus.

Focusing on these contexts, it emerges that, besides the target form [P+D+N]¹¹, three non-target patterns are produced by the child: (a) both the preposition and the determiner are omitted *[_P_D+N]; (b) only the determiner is omitted *[P_D+N]; (c) only the preposition is omitted *[_P+D+N]. The relevant patterns are exemplified from (7) to (10):

(7) Target form [P+D+N]

CHI: nella foretta [foresta]
'in the forest'

(8) *[_P_D + N]

CHI: mette cassetino!
put _ drawer
'Put it into the drawer'

(9) *[P_D+N]

CHI: con principe.
with _ prince
'with the prince'

(10) *[_P+ D+N]

CHI: paura la matigna!
fear _ the stepmother
'I am afraid of the stepmother'

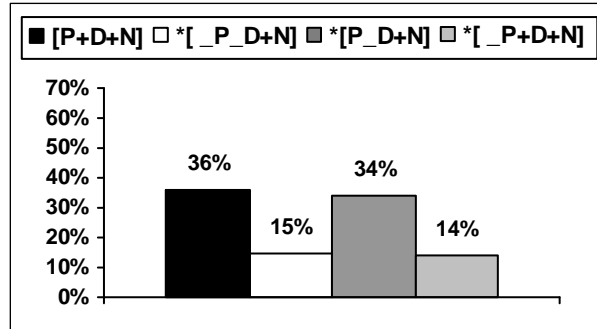
very few DPs in sentence initial position to have reliable quantitative and qualitative analysis on this topic. Moreover, none of the previous studies consider D omissions in P contexts separately.

¹⁰ See the appendix for Italian monosyllabic prepositions and their syncretic articulated forms.

¹¹ With the notation [P+D+N] we refer to articulated prepositions produced by the child as: (i) syncretic forms (*nella foresta* – *in the forest*); (ii) non syncretic forms with definite articles (*con la matrigna* – *with the stepmother*) or with indefinite ones (*per un bambino* – *for a child*).

Table 6: Different patterns in P-DP contexts

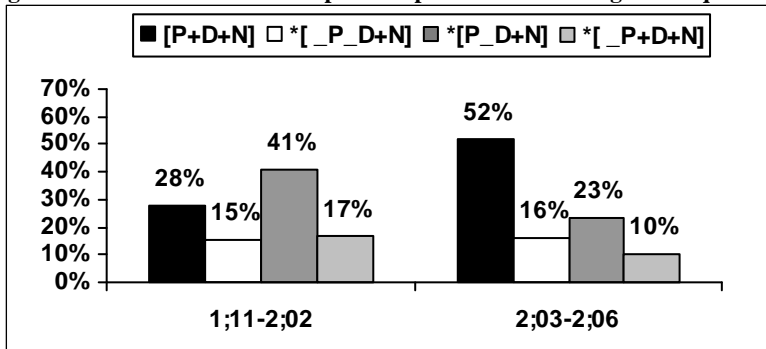
[P+D+N]	*[_P_D+N]	*[P_D+N]	*[_P+D+N]
(31/85)	(13/85)	(29/85)	(12/85)
36%	15%	34%	14%

Figure 4: Different patterns in P-DP contexts

As exemplified in Table 6 and in Figure 4, [P + D] contexts are rather problematic for the child as far as D insertion is concerned. Thus the child resorts to the non-target pattern *[P_D+N] to a greater extent (34%). The non-target patterns involving dropping of the preposition *[_P+D+N] or dropping of both the preposition and the article *[_P_D+N] are less attested. Moreover, a developmental path as for the pattern *[P_D+N] is attested. In fact, if we consider the two stages of acquisition outlined in section 2, the data show an opposite tendency between the target form [P+D+N] and the *[_P_D+N] pattern. The former is attested at 28% in the first period and at 52% in the second one. The latter decreases from 41% in the first stage to 23% in the second one. Table 7 and Figure 5 exemplify such contrast.

Table 7: P-DP contexts – Developmental path across two stages of acquisition


	[P+D+N]	*[_P_D+N]	*[P_D+N]	*[_P+D+N]
1;11-2;02	(15/54) 28%	(8/54) 15%	(22/54) 41%	(9/54) 17%
2;03-2;06	(16/31) 52%	(5/31) 16%	(7/31) 23%	(9/31) 10%

Figure 5: P-DP contexts – Developmental path across two stages of acquisition

6.1. PPs context as a vulnerable domain for D insertion: proposals

The aim of this section is to provide an explanatory proposal for the non-target pattern emerged within the P-DP contexts.

Our analysis is based on the assumption that the articulated preposition in Italian undergoes a process of head incorporation, as assumed by Granfeldt (2003) for French, and Giusti (2003) for Italian. According to this view, the determiner in D° adjoins to the head of the PP above the DP projection, as exemplified in (11):

- (11) [SpecPP [P° [SpecDP [D° [.....]
- 

Turning to the child performance observed in this study, we propose that two interacting factors may contribute to make the PPs context a vulnerable domain for determiner omission: (i) articulated prepositions show a syncretic form in Italian; (ii) D and P are in a local configuration and both provide functional structure to the NP.

Let us now focus on the two hypotheses more in detail;

(i) It might be hypothesized that, through D omission, the child is avoiding the extra complex syntactic process at work in the derivation of articulated prepositions in Italian.

Evidence in favour of this hypothesis comes from the fact that determiners are supplied in contexts not requiring a process of head incorporation in Italian, like, for example, preposition with indefinite articles:

- (12) CHI: stata a uno ballo
 been at a dance
 ‘She went to a dance’

Moreover, the definite article is not omitted when combining with the preposition *per* that does not take a syncretic form in Italian:

- (13) CHI: pe la mamma.
 ‘For the mother’

(ii) Regardless of the head incorporation process, D omission is favoured by the nature of the two heads involved in this configuration. Both P and D are heads of the NP functional extended projection and they are both involved in the NP case assignment. Hence, the child may be induced to omit one in order to prevent overburdening structures for the still immature computational and performance system. The omission of D over P might be preferred in order to avoid a loss of interpretability of the entire PP.

Following Giusti’s (1993, 2003) analysis for Rumanian¹², we suppose that in *[P_D+N] pattern, P is presumably inserted by the child in the highest head (F^{max}) of the extended nominal projection, the position usually occupied by the determiner as Case marker as exemplified in (14).

¹² As reported by Giusti (1993), in Rumanian the enclitic article is ungrammatical with unmodified nominals object of prepositions as exemplified in (i):

- (i) M’am adus la profesor(*ul)
 I am gone to professor (*the)
 ‘I have been to the professor’ (Giusti 1993, ex. 39a, pg. 67)

An exception to this pattern is represented by the preposition *cu* (with).

The enclitic article has to be morphologically realized when the object of preposition is modified by an adjective or by a complement as in (ii):

- (ii) M’am adus la profesur *(ul) tău
 I am gone to professor *(the) your
 ‘I have been to your professor’ (Giusti 1993, ex. 39b, pg. 67)

(14) [FP1[con]][NP principe]]

Following this proposal, it might be hypothesized that P and D are in complementary distribution in Sabrina's early grammar.

The two analyses just sketched may be **strictly interrelated**. Further investigation on languages in which prepositions and articles do not show a syncretic form may shed light on the matter. In particular, they may clarify whether children tend to avoid the complexity of head incorporation or, when facing a configuration in which two functional heads in a local relation share similar properties, produce only one for economy reason.

7. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that, during the period analyzed, the omission of D is a residual phenomenon more related to the structural configurations in which the nominals occur than to other factors (i.e. gender, number, +/- mass distinction of nominals). Specifically, results of this study have identified P-DP configurations as one of the most sensitive to D omission in child's early grammar. A further study on corpora of other Italian monolingual children would be desirable in order to verify whether the phenomenon is attested or other strategies are used. Furthermore, a comparison with corpora from languages in which prepositions and articles do not show a syncretic form may help provide possible explanatory proposals for this finding.

8. Appendix

Table A: Italian article paradigm

	definite		indefinite	
	masculine	feminine	masculine	feminine
singular	il/lo [°] /l'##	la /l'##	un/uno [°]	una/un'##
plural	i/gli [°]	le	Suppletive form: partitive di dei degli [°] delle	

[°]allophonic variants

##reduction in front of a vowel

Table B: Italian article choice

	singular	plural
Definite NP (Known to the speaker and to the hearer-Common ground)	il gatto/la casa	i gatti/le case
Specific Indefinite NP (Known only to the speaker-No common ground)	un gatto/una casa	dei gatti/delle case
Non specific Indefinite NP (Unknown both to the Speaker and to the Hearer-No common ground)	un gatto/una casa	dei gatti/delle case or _gatti/_case

Table C: Italian monosyllabic prepositions and articulated forms

Monosyllabic Prepositions	Articulated prepositions	Monosyllabic Prepositions	Articulated prepositions
di (of) ¹³	+ di + il = del di + lo = dello di + l' = dell' di + la = della di + i = dei di + le = delle di + gli = degli	in (in/at)	+ in + il = nel in + lo = nello in + l' = nell' in + la = nella in + i = nei in + le = nelle in + gli = negli
a (at/to)	+ a + il = al a + lo = allo a + l' = all' a + la = alla a + i = ai a + le = alle a + gli = agli	con (with/by)	+(in spoken language) con + il = col con + lo = collo con + l' = coll' con + la = colla con + i = coi con + le = colle con + gli = cogli
da (from/to/by)	+ da + il = dal da + lo = dallo da + l' = dall' da + la = dalla da + i = dai da + le = dalle da + gli = dagli	su (on)	+ su + il = sul su + lo = sullo su + l' = sull' su + la = sulla su + i = sui su + le = sulle su + gli = sugli
		per (for/to)	-
		tra (in/between)	-
		fra (in/between)	-

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¹³ In brackets a roughly corresponding translation is given.

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Proceedings of the 3rd Conference on Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition North America (GALANA 2008)

edited by Jean Crawford,
Koichi Otaki, and Masahiko Takahashi

Cascadilla Proceedings Project Somerville, MA 2009

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Ferrari, Ida and Simona Matteini. 2009. Sensitive Contexts for D Omission in Italian L1: A Case Study.
In *Proceedings of the 3rd Conference on Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition North America (GALANA 2008)*, ed. Jean Crawford, Koichi Otaki, and Masahiko Takahashi, 13-24. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. www.lingref.com, document #2302.