

# Multilingual Literacy and Metalinguistic Reflection in Primary School

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**Abstract** This paper addresses the issue of multilingual classrooms in a context such as South Tyrol (Italy), characterised by both endogenous and exogenous multilingualism, the latter stemming from pupils with international backgrounds. The paper discusses the results of a research study conducted in highly multilingual primary school classrooms, inspired by the concept of 'Éveil aux langues', with the goal of fostering metalinguistic awareness.

**Keywords** Primary school. Multilingualism. Éveil aux langues. Metalinguistic awareness. Morphological manipulation.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Context. – 3 The Project. – 4 The Final Task. – 5 Results. – 5.1 Lexical Matching. – 5.2 Morphological Choices: Deciding which Article in Ladin. – 5.3 Morphological Choices: Deciding for Singular Forms in Dutch. – 6 Conclusions.

## 1 Introduction

This contribution<sup>1</sup> addresses the issue of plurilingual repertoires and multilingual classrooms by gathering data from two intertwined projects: VALI and IKSU.<sup>2</sup> Both projects draw inspiration from the 'Éveil aux langues' approach of FREPA/CARAP (Candelier et al. 2012) and the 'Noi e le nostre lingue' project (Andorno, Sordella 2018; 2020; Andorno 2020).

The paper outlines pedagogical activities in three primary school classes in the Province of Bolzano, Italy, and discusses how the use of all languages in the classroom, from school to home language(s), encourages learners to reflect on similarities and differences between languages at various linguistic levels, specifically at the lexical and morphological ones.

We begin by describing the research context, analysing the features of the school systems in South Tyrol. Subsequently, we provide an overview of the project along with the theoretical framework that guided the data collection. Finally, we analyse the metalinguistic reflections of pupils, presented both orally and in written form. We focus in detail on the results of the final task, examining both the lexical recognition exercise and the activities related to morphological reflection.

## 2 The Context

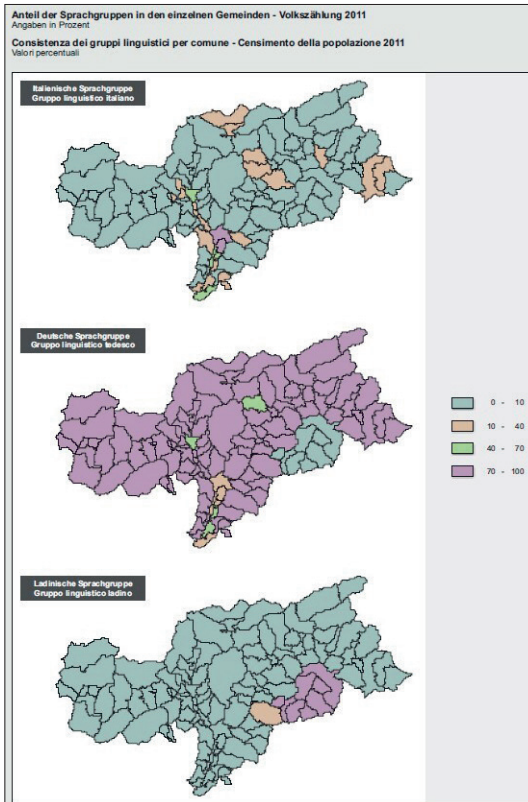
The context of the research is the multilingual classrooms in a region like South Tyrol, Italy, historically characterised by endogenous multilingualism (De Mauro 1980; Vedovelli 2014). The languages – Italian, German, (Ladin), as well as both Italian and South Tyrolean dialects – are present with varying percentages in different districts of the Province of Bolzano (ASTAT 2012) [fig. 1]. Furthermore, the school structure is divided into three departments (German, Italian, and Ladin) [fig. 1].

In two of them, either German or Italian serves as the primary school language, with the other taught as a second language. In the third department, the Ladin one, German and Italian are taught for an equal number of hours, while Ladin is present for two hours per week.

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**1** The research presented here was collaboratively conducted between the two authors. As for the drafting of this paper, Cecilia Varcasia is responsible for sections 4 and 5, and Emanuela Atz for sections 1, 2 and 3. The introduction and conclusions were collaboratively written.

**2** VALI: Valuing the competencies in the linguistic repertoire of the child for language learning. A learning path for primary school in South Tyrol. IKSU: Ein inklusives Konzept für Sprache(n)förderung im Unterland (An inclusive outline for language(s) promotion and support in Bassa Atesina/Unterland).

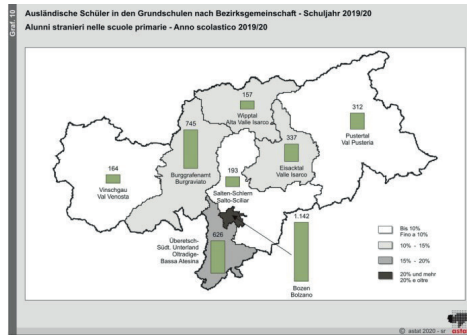


**Figure 1**  
Percentage of the different language groups (German, Italian and Ladin) in the individual municipalities.  
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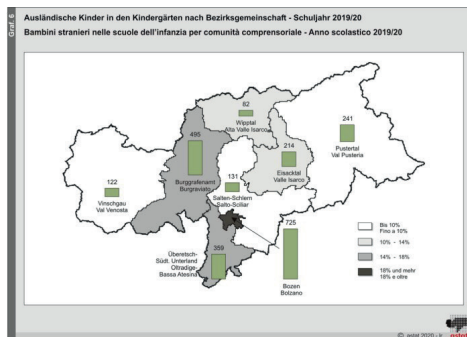
As a whole, the system currently accommodates pupils from international backgrounds with their own complex linguistic repertoires (Varcasia 2022; Ciccolone, Dal Negro 2021). However, the percentages of pupils with international family histories (ASTAT 2023) vary from town to town. The German and Italian school departments in South Tyrol are characterised in certain areas, such as the urban districts of Bolzano and Merano or the border districts of Alta Val d'Isarco and Bassa Atesina, by highly multilingual groups and classrooms, mainly in kindergarten and primary school (ASTAT 2022 [figs 2-3]).

The challenges faced by an educational system divided into separate departments are simultaneously common in the three sectors, yet they differ in their combination and complexity. In school, pupils are part of an educational structure that introduces specific patterns of linguistic interaction, which may or may not align with the communicative experiences and practices of the society in which they are integrated (Hélot 2014). To promote interactive practices observed outside the educational context, the pedagogical approach should

**Figure 2**  
The numbers and percentage of migrant children in kindergarden in school year 2019/2020.  
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**Figure 3**  
The numbers and percentage of migrant children in primary school in school year 2019/2020.  
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strive to move away from the lingering monolingual principle (Howatt 1984, 289) or habitus (Gogolin 1997) still present in the school system in South Tyrol.

The initial step should involve challenging the “two solitudes assumptions in bilingual education”, as suggested by Cummins (2008). This can be achieved by enhancing linguistic competences in the first language (L1) as a prerequisite for improving competencies in other languages. The promotion of plurilingualism and the first languages involves the use of both school languages (German and Italian), local dialects, and other languages - the learners’ L1s - in the class, irrespective of the type of school (Italian/German). This approach creates communicative situations for emergent plurilinguals. To foster language learning in diverse and rich learning contexts, semiotics should be at the centre of all subject areas (Dendrinos 2018, 26). Semiotics should serve as a fundamental and central component across various disciplines to underscore its significance in understanding communication, meaning-making, and the ways in which signs and symbols operate in different languages. The semiotic lens focuses on the underlying structures and processes that facilitate the construction and interpretation of meaning.



Figure 4 The multilingual linguistic repertoires (in the German school) © VALI project 2022

### 3 The Project

The project started in the school year 2021-22 and was carried out in two primary schools in Bassa Atesina, the district south of Bolzano: an Italian-speaking school and a German-speaking school. Two classes in the second year of the Italian-speaking school were involved (31 pupils), while in the German-speaking school, a third-year class (15 pupils) participated in the project. The pupils were between 7 and 9 years old. The research included such young learners, as supported by Lo Duca (2004), who posits that they already possess implicit knowledge of the languages they speak. Lo Duca draws on previous studies in cognition, such as that by Bialystok, who assumes that “we know more than we can tell” (1988, 33), referring to the implicit knowledge in the first language (L1) of children. We also believe that, given the plurilingual repertoires of the observed pupils, they could have implicit knowledge of all the languages in their repertoires. Additionally, these pupils attending school have already been exposed, to some extent, to explicit grammatical reflection in the school languages they are learning, namely Italian and German. The activities took place in spring 2022 and were conducted over several sessions. The research began with a sociolinguistic questionnaire and linguistic silhouettes (Busch 2015, Gogolin and Neumann 1991) to highlight the diverse linguistic repertoires present in the classroom [fig. 4].

Based on the gathered data about the languages of the groups,<sup>3</sup> activities were designed as follows: one session (two hours) introduced the topic with the storytelling of a book in an invented language (Ellis 2016), and six additional sessions (two hours each) were conducted with plurilingual storytelling. For the latter, the book *La Geometria del Faraone* by Anna Cerasoli (2019) was divided into six sequences and narrated in six different languages. The story was told using the school languages in both systems, such as Italian and German, as well as some of the pupils' home languages, namely Arabic and Punjabi/Hindi. Additionally, other languages that nobody knew, such as Romanian and Albanian, were also included in the storytelling. The choice of the latter played a role of decentralisation (Candelier et al. 2012) from the beginning, starting with Romanian as the first sequence, and concluding with Albanian as the final segment. This approach ensured that all pupils were exposed to 'new' languages throughout the sessions. By incorporating both school and home languages in the classroom, the students were encouraged to reflect on the similarities and differences between the languages at various linguistic levels, particularly at the lexical and morphological levels.

The aim of the project was to foster learners' metalinguistic awareness,<sup>4</sup> recognising that "the interaction between teachers, pupils and the community is never neutral" (Cummins 2021, 72). In this regard, the activities prepared in the classes aimed to stimulate cross-linguistic reflection (Torregrossa, Eisenbeiß, Bongartz 2023, 3). The collaborative reflection contributed to the development of a process that engaged pupils in "learning about language rather than changing their language" (Hudson 2007, 228).

In particular, the paper focuses on the results of the final task conducted in the three different primary school classes. Two weeks after the storytelling sessions, a task was administered by presenting two short stories in two new languages for children: a rhyme in Ladin accompanied by a picture, and a cartoon in Dutch displayed along with Dutch subtitles.

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**3** Italian, German, Italo-romance dialect, South-Tyrolean dialect (Ger), English, Arabic, Bengalese, Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Turkish and Portuguese.

**4** Metalinguistic awareness encompasses knowledge about the way languages work, including their similarities and differences (metalinguistic analysis). It also involves the skills to manipulate or rearrange elements of language and play with them (metalinguistic control) (Svalberg 2007). Researchers commonly conceptualise metalinguistic awareness as explicit knowledge about language (Roehr-Brackin 2018, 2). Furthermore, metalinguistic awareness has been defined in terms of attentional focus, as the term implies an active concentration on the domain of knowledge that describes the explicit properties of language (Bialystok 2001, 127).

1. Verbinde den Namen des Tieres mit dem Bild.



olp   meder   schirata   cargara   scorpiun   tas   laurs   cerf

2. Wie bist du auf den richtigen Namen gekommen? Was hat dir geholfen?  
Gibt es in anderen Sprachen ähnliche Wörter für diese Tiere, die du kennst?

Figure 5. The lexical recognition task in Ladin © VALI project 2022

## 4 The Final Task

The final task comprised two parts. The first part featured a brief text in Ladin titled *L'orchestra di tiers*, narrated by a native speaker, our colleague Ruth Videsott, and complemented by a picture depicting the characters from the story.<sup>5</sup> Following the text reading, students were asked to match some lexical items representing key elements in the story with their respective pictures. Additionally, they were required to complete a multiple-choice exercise where they had to identify the correct determiner for the provided lexical items. Figure 5 illustrates the lexical-matching task [fig. 5].

The second part of the final task involved a short cartoon in Dutch titled *De grootste schat*, which was presented along with Dutch subtitles. Following the cartoon viewing, students were required to undertake another matching exercise involving lexical items. Additionally, they participated in a second activity where they had to transform plural words from a provided list into their singular forms. Figure 6 illustrates the task related to the manipulation of morphology [fig. 6].

5 The text of the rhyme and the supporting picture are provided in the Appendix.

3. Come si dirà se è UNO di questi animali?  
Osserva gli esempi e prova a scrivere il singolare di questi nomi di animali.

UNO	TANTI
 schoap.	schoapen.
 adelaac.	adelaacs.
 	paarden.
 	varkens.
 	haren.
 	koniinen.
 	estels.
 	honden.

4. Cosa ho osservato?

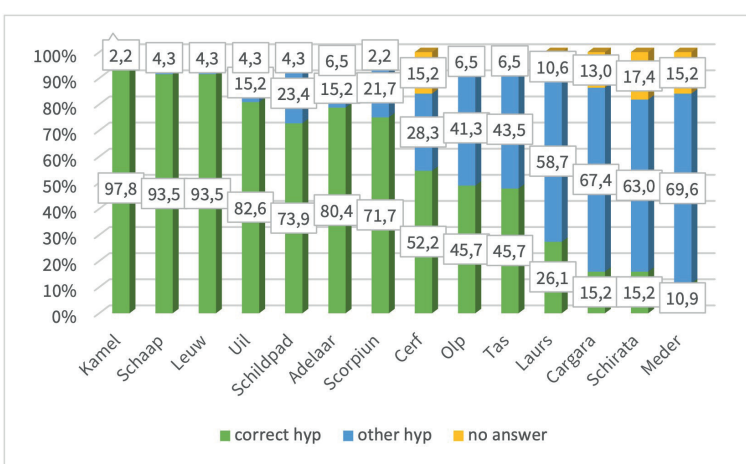
**Figure 6**  
Manipulation  
of morphology in Dutch:  
from plural to singular of nouns.  
© VALI project 2022

The entire activity was video-recorded, and after each task, pupils were individually interviewed to gather their metalinguistic reflections. The languages selected for the final task continued the project's theme, involving two languages unfamiliar to all pupils in the three observed classrooms. The choice of these languages aimed to maintain equal typological distance from at least the two languages of instruction, namely German and Italian. Consequently, Ladin, being a Romance language spoken in the region, could benefit pupils more proficient in Italian, while Dutch could offer a similar advantage for those more skilled in German. Both texts featured animals as the main characters, aligning with the theme of animals encountered in the story of *La Geometria del Faraone* narrated in previous sessions.

## 5 Results

Firstly, we analyse what pupils did in terms of lexical recognition, i.e., their comprehension of individual lexical items through the provided picture/name matching exercise and in the activities involving the manipulation of noun morphology. This includes a focus on the use of articles in Ladin and singular/plural forms in Dutch. Furthermore, we examine the metalinguistic reflections of pupils, both oral and written, aiming to highlight the level of metalinguistic awareness that pupils at this age (7-9) can demonstrate and the potential implications this may have for learning.





Graph 1 Lexical recognition in Dutch and Ladin

## 5.1 Lexical Matching

Graph 1 offers a comprehensive overview of the outcomes from the lexical matching exercise in the final task. It illustrates the diverse responses given in the two languages presented. The names of animals are arranged from left to right based on the accurate responses provided by pupils. The graph depicts the proportion of correct hypotheses, instances where pupils proposed an alternative hypothesis, and occasions where they left an empty space. The responses in the graph are also organised (from left to right) beginning with the names in Dutch and progressing to those in Ladin [graph 1].

The graph illustrates that, regardless of the type of school attended and, consequently, regardless of linguistic background, pupils found it easier to comprehend the lexical items in Dutch compared to identifying the meaning of the Ladin names for animals. Specifically, for Dutch, pupils matched all items correctly, ranging from 98% to 78%. In contrast, for Ladin, the proportion of correct matches decreased significantly, ranging between 75% and 11%. In this case, pupils faced greater difficulty in determining the possible meanings of different words, indicating challenges in finding similarities with words from the Italian dialect spoken by some pupils (*schirata/sghiràt*, ‘squirrel’; *laurs/ors*, ‘bear’), from Italian (*scorpion/scorpi-one*, ‘scorpion’; *tas/tasso*, ‘badger’; *cerf/cervo*, ‘deer’; *olp/volpe*, ‘fox’; *laurs/orso*, ‘bear’) and from German (*meder/Marder*, ‘marten’). Despite the challenging task, pupils generally preferred attempting to provide an answer rather than leaving an empty space.

If we focus on the three classes observed, we can notice that these results are consistently shared among the three classes [graph 2] which illustrates the proportion of correct hypotheses in both Dutch and Ladin for each class. All three groups exhibit high lexical matching with the Dutch names, ranging between 92% in the German school and 87.5% and 76% in the two classes of the Italian school department. This outcome suggests that Dutch played a facilitating role for all students, partly due to the delivery method - i.e., the cartoon - and partly because all pupils appear to share a common linguistic repertoire, wherein their knowledge of German aids them in identifying Dutch words. If we consider the results of the Ladin task we can observe that, in this case, the picture used to support the text in the unknown language did not have the same highly supportive effect. This is attributed to the non-correspondence of the picture to the text, and the way it was presented to pupils, with less reference to the picture.

Observing the metalinguistic reflections provided by the pupils, we can discern that they employed two types of strategies in approaching the text in Dutch. The first strategy, as shown in example 1, involved finding similarities with German. Knowing German enabled them to make accurate hypotheses about the similarities between this language and Dutch. The second strategy, explicitly mentioned in the pupils' reflections, is a learning strategy. They were able to select the correct matches by watching the video and noting the repetition of different lexical items, as illustrated by the pupil in example 2.

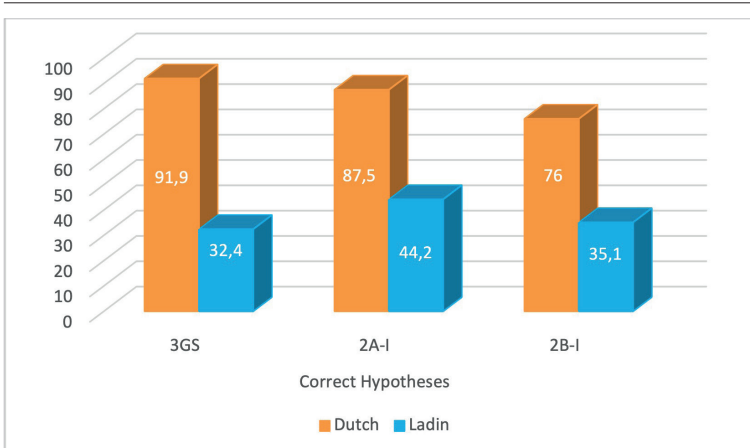
Example 1

P41: il tedesco è simile a questa lingua e tutte queste parole sono simili al tedesco.  
'German is similar to this language and all these words are similar to German.'

Example 2

P22: ho visto il video, quindi, sono riuscito a mettere i nomi al posto giusto.  
'I watched the video, and I was able to put the words at the right place.'

On the other hand, Ladin consistently posed a challenge for all pupils, regardless of the school system attended. They achieved only 32.4% correct hypotheses in the German class, and respectively 44.2% and 35.1% in the two Italian classes. This indicates that, despite the selected words being theoretically recognizable by children as similar to words in Italian, the Italian dialect, and German, they were unable to make these connections. This difficulty significantly impacted their comprehension of the text. This is reinforced by the range of alternative hypotheses made by the children when encountering Ladin words, especially the more challenging ones such as *meder*, the word for 'marten', and *cargara*, the word



Graph 2 Lexical recognition in Dutch and Ladin: groups

for ‘ant’, both of which had 75% of alternative hypotheses from the pupils. In both cases, it is apparent that pupils were confused about the two nouns.

*meder*, ‘marten’: bear (9), squirrel (8), badger (5), fox (3), deer (3)  
*cargara*, ‘ant’: marten (6), deer (6), squirrel (5), scorpion (4), fox (3), bear (3), badger (3)

This confusion is further evident in the diverse choices they made, indicating that they could not identify any common clues leading them closer to the meaning of the words with limited options. The various hypotheses (5 for *meder*/ ‘marten’; 7 for *cargara*/ ‘ant’ out of a total of 8 possibilities) also highlight the presence of multiple linguistic backgrounds in these classes, as illustrated in example 3 below:

#### Example 3

P7: in punjabi klingt *olp* wie einchorchen. *Cargara* klingt wie fuchs.  
 ‘In Punjabi *olp* sounds like squirrel. *Cargara* sounds like fox.’

This pupil provides the reasons why she chose different matches, revealing that, unable to identify similarities with other known languages, she turned to her heritage language, Punjabi, where the words *olp* and *cargara* sound respectively like ‘fox’, ਲੁਬਾਰੀ *Lūbarī* and ‘squirrel’, ਗਿਲਹਾਰੀ *Gilaharī*. These choices, and more importantly, the metalinguistic comments provided by the pupil, represent valuable data for teachers in school, offering evidence of potential false friends for the pupil. Alongside divergent strategies, successful similarities outlined by pupils can also be identified, confirming our initial

hypotheses that this unknown language is similar to both Italian and the Trentino dialect, as illustrated in examples 4 and 5.

Example 4

P37: L'italiano è simile a questa lingua, il ladino quindi c'erano delle parole simili e io ho collegato le parole che erano simili all'italiano.

'Italian is similar to this language, Ladin, so there were such words and I connected the words that were similar to Italian.'

Example 5

P21: *Tas* è simile alla lingua del dialetto trentino tipo *tas, olp, scorpiun*.

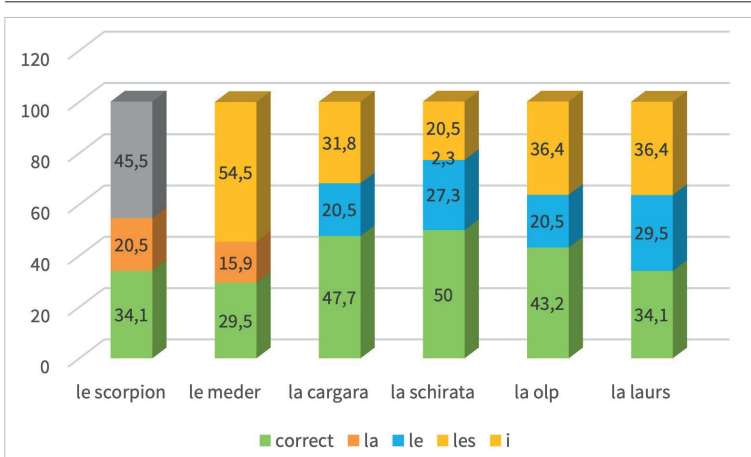
'Tas is similar to the language of the Trentino dialect like *tas, olp, scorpiun*.'

These metalinguistic comments bring some evidence of how faced with an unknown language pupils enact positive strategies that helped them successfully fulfill the task.

## 5.2 Morphological Choices: Deciding which Article in Ladin

The task of choosing which definite article should accompany six of the animal names mentioned in the story was generally challenging for the pupils. Graph 3 illustrates the proportion of correct answers in relation to the other options available in the multiple-choice item. The purpose of examining what pupils did and their correct hypotheses is solely to identify the difficulty of the task itself. In the context of the present study, the focus is on understanding the reasoning behind the answers provided, which can reveal and enhance metalinguistic competence in the school languages (Italian and German) [graph 3].

The graph indicates that even when confronted with the system of definite articles in Ladin, which is very similar to the Italian system, pupils still grappled with the underlying meaning of some words. The graph underscores the general difficulty children faced in identifying the correct definite article, ranging between 50% and 29.5%. If we focus on the three most challenging words for the pupils to identify, namely *la schirata* / 'the squirrel', *la cargara* / 'the ant' and *le meder* / 'the marten' we observe that for the first two words, children seemed to encounter less difficulty in matching the correct article, achieving 50% and 47.7% correct hypotheses, respectively. *Le meder* posed a greater challenge, with only 29.5% of pupils providing the correct answer, while the majority (54.3%) were misled and chose *les* as the correct determiner for *meder*. One possible reason why pupils may have chosen *les* instead of *le* could be attributed to both the unusual ending of the word, different from the way words in Italian end, and the opaque meaning of the word. The distinct word endings are a common feature shared with other names used in the rhyme, such as



Graph 3 The definite article in Ladin: pupils' choices – All

*scorpion*, *olp*, *laurs*. Interestingly, despite these words being similar to their Italian counterparts (*scorpion/scorpione* 'scorpion', *olp/volpe* 'fox', *laurs/orso* 'bear'), this similarity did not significantly aid pupils in deciding the correct definite article. Pupils themselves invoked the similarity with Italian in their reflections on this part of the task:

Example 6

P14: ich habe beobachtet das ein Par Wörter wie Deutsch und Italienisch kliengen  
'I observed that some words sound like German and Italian'

Example 7

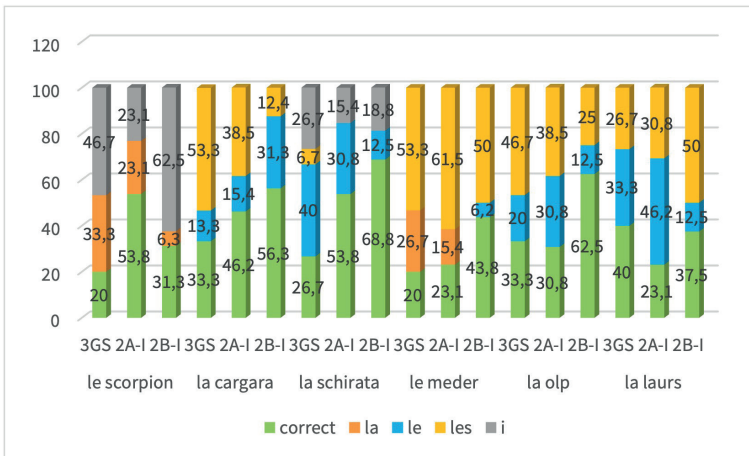
P37: ho guardato gli articoli in italiano poi ho provato a scriverli in quella lingua  
'I looked at the articles in Italian and then I tried to write them in that language (Ladin)'

So, in both school systems, pupils observed similarities of some words with Italian, but also with German, such as for *scorpion/Skorpion*. As P37 outlines in example 7, they declare to have matched the article system in Italian with the unknown language. P37 is one of those pupils who matched correctly four items out of six but found difficulty in identifying the correct article for the words *meder* and *laurs*, as did many of his peers.

When asked to manipulate the morphology of an unknown language, pupils faced the task by often applying the rules of the languages they knew. For example, P33 in example 8 manipulated the morphology according to the similar prosody of the language.

Example 8

P33: ho scelto per le lettere che suonavano bene  
'I chose the letters that sounded good'



Graph 4 Definite article in Ladin: comparison of groups

Graph 4 shows the responses given by pupils in each group for each of the lexical items they had to pair with the definite article. The graph illustrates that pupils in the German school encountered more difficulties in identifying the articles to match, making them the group that faced the most challenges with distractors and formulated alternative hypotheses. Conversely, one of the two Italian classes, 2B, achieved higher percentages of correct hypotheses, reaching up to 68.8% for the word *schirata* - ‘squirrel’. This particular word serves as the dividing factor among the three classes: pupils in 2A in the Italian school achieved 53.8% correct matchings, while pupils in the German school (GS) only matched the correct article in 26.7% of cases and instead preferred to match *le* (40%), the masculine singular article [graph 4].

The graph also indicates differences in the hypotheses made for each lexical item. For *scorpion*, the most commonly chosen alternative hypothesis is the article *i*, used by 46.7% of pupils in the German school and 62.5% of pupils in the Italian school (2B). Another word where pupils were presented with the definite plural article *i* as a distractor is the word *schirata* - ‘squirrel’, selected with equal frequency in the three classes but less frequently (between 15% and 27%).

If we observe the other hypotheses for the use of the feminine article *la* for *cargara*, we can notice that 53.3% of pupils in the German school opted for *les*, and identified *la*, the correct option, in 33.3% of the cases. Both Italian school classes, on the other hand, show a growing proportion of correct identification of the feminine article, at 46.2% and 56.3% respectively. When considering alternatives to *la*, these pupils are divided between the other two alternatives given *le* or *les*, with 31.3% in 2B, and 38.5% in 2A.

The most challenging word *le meder* - 'the marten' appears to have been more difficult for the pupils attending the German school (20% or correct answers) and for those in the 2A in the Italian school (23%), whereas almost half of the pupils in the other 2nd class (43.8%) actually identified the correct article. The most chosen option to match this word has been the plural article *les*, respectively chosen by 53.3% in the German school, and 61.5% and 50% in the two classes of the Italian school.

*La olp* is another word that, similarly to *la cargara*, *la schirata*, *le meder*, was more easily identified with the correct article by pupils of 2A in the Italian school, with 62.5% of the pupils. In the other two classes, half of the pupils were able to match the correct article (33.3% in the German school, and 30.8% 2B of the Italian school). Again the most chosen alternative here was the plural article *les*.

Eventually, when they encountered *la laurs*, those who were more challenged this time were pupils in 2A, who identified the correct article in 23% of the cases, compared to the pupils in the German school who identified it 40% of the time, and those in 2B of the Italian school who were able to match it 37.5%. This last word divided pupils in the German school, who alternatively chose the other two possible articles, *le* and *les* (33.3% and 26.7%).

To sum up, the discussion of these results suggests that, despite the students mentioning the similarity of the chosen keywords in both Italian and German, the task of correctly matching determiners based on their knowledge of both languages may have been too challenging for them. They seem to have identified some similarities between the two languages, but these similarities could not be consistently found for all the proposed words.

### 5.3 Morphological Choices: Deciding for Singular Forms in Dutch

The manipulation of the morphology of Dutch required the pupils to decide how to form the singular forms of the names of animals quoted in the text, starting from the plural forms. Overall, the responses given by the pupils include six different morphemes for the formation of the singular: the correct form, explicitly shown at the basis of each column in the graph, and different morphemes such as *-e*, *-an*, *-en*, *-er*, *-in*, and empty or translation solutions.

What is extremely interesting here is that pupils, regardless of the class they attended and the word they were focusing on, found the same strategies to apply to the formation of the singular form, and most of the time, they used these strategies for all lexical items in the list.

**Table 1** Pupils hypotheses in Dutch

Dutch pl.	schapen	adelaars	paarden	varkens	hanen	konijnen	ezels	honden
Dutch sg.	schap	adelaar	paard	varken	haan	konijn	ezel	hond
Transl.	sheep/-	eagle/-s	horse/-s	pig/-s	rooster/-s	rabbit/-s	donkey/-s	dog/-s
P40			paarde*	varke*	hane*	konijne*	ezel	hond
P32			paardan*	varkans*	hanan*	konijnan*	ezals*	hondan*

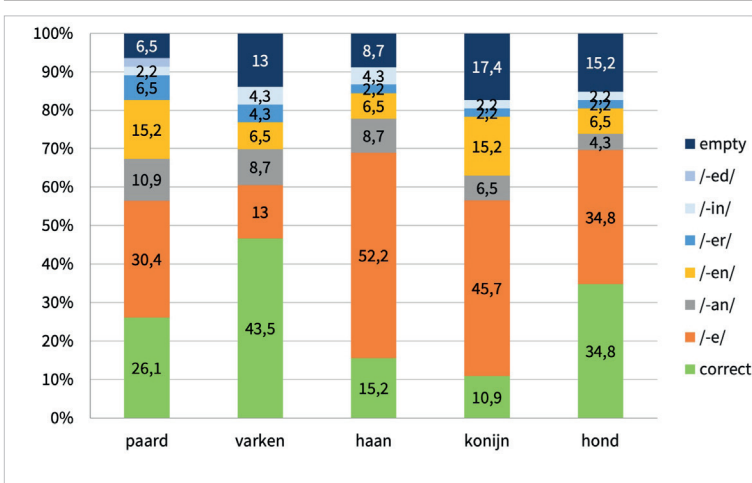
The examples in the table demonstrate the systematic approach of pupils in identifying possible morphemes to form singular forms. They started with two examples, one featuring a regular name and one with an irregular form: *schap/schapen* for ‘sheep/sheep’ and *adelaar/adelaars* for ‘eagle/eagles’. Apparently, the difference between regular and irregular forms went unnoticed by pupils who consistently applied the rule they decided upon, as shown by P40 [table 1]. This involved cutting out the last letter in the plural and using the morpheme *-e* to form the singular of *paarden* → *paarde\**, *varkens* → *varke\**, *haan* → *hane\**, *konijnen* → *konijne\**, *ezels* → *ezel*, and *honden* → *hond*. A similar systematic approach is evident in the other example provided by P32, who consistently decided to insert an /a/ to form the singular of the names. Thus, *paarden* (horses) becomes *paardan\** (vs. *paard*, ‘horse’), *varkens* → *varkans\**, *haanen* → *hanan\**, *konijnen* → *konijnan\**, *ezels* → *ezals\**, *honden* → *hondan\**. Graph 5 illustrates the choices made by all the children in manipulating the morphology of Dutch names. The word *ezel* ‘donkey’ was excluded from Graph 5 and 6 because it was the easiest word for pupils to transform, achieving a correct manipulation rate of 65.2%. Additionally, it differed in terms of strategies used to form the singular compared to the other words [graph 5].

If we consider the overall picture, it becomes evident that the majority of pupils, for all lexical items, exceeded 55%, either using the correct singular form or by adding */-e/*. More precisely, pupils constantly left the final */-e/*, cutting out the final letters to form the singular. The operation of removing something to transform from plural to singular is noteworthy. Pupils are aware that, typically, to form the plural of a word, they need to add something, and in performing the reverse procedure, they demonstrated an understanding of how grammar operates in the languages they are learning, be it Italian or German. The graph also indicates that pupils found the task less challenging, given the proportion of correct answers and the uniform strategy of ending with */-e/*.

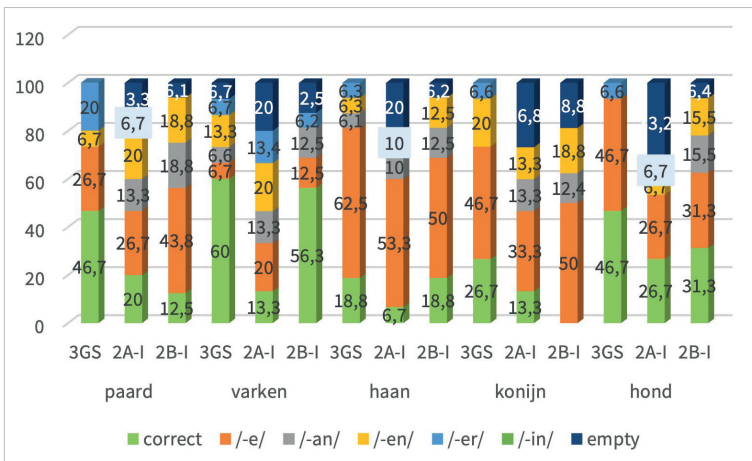
Some differences in the behaviour of pupils can be observed when we focus on the responses provided, dividing the three groups: the Italian school classes, 2nd year (2A and 2B) and the German school class, 3rd year (3GS) [graph 6].

The initial overall data suggests that pupils in the German school seem to have identified the correct form more frequently than their counterparts in the Italian school system. This is evident for the words





Graph 5 Manipulating the morphology of Dutch – All



Graph 6 Manipulating the morphology of Dutch – comparison of groups

*varken* (60%), *paard* (46.7%), *hond* (46.7%), *konijn* (26.7%), *haan* (18.8%) and *ezel* (86.7%). It confirms that pupils attending the German school compare the Dutch words with the German ones and recognise the closeness of these two languages, aiding them in both matching the meaning and manipulating the morphology of the unknown language.

The two classes of the Italian school exhibit a similar behaviour in which the most common strategy used by them, though not leading to correctness in the target language, involves ending with *-e/* for all lexical items they need to transform. This approach is closer to the ending

in Italian, i.e., with a vowel. The ending with /-e/ has been identified as the most common strategy used by kids, regardless of the school system. Another strategy (ranging between 6.7% to 20%) employed by almost all groups of pupils is the ending with /en/. For some words, this means they didn't report any change between the plural and singular forms, such as in the case of *paarden* and *honden*, for others, it involved some reduction, as seen with *varkens* and *konijnen*. Differences in the behaviours of the two school groups can be found in the transformation into the singular using the morpheme /-er/, as seen in *varcer*, *haner*, *konijner*, *ezer*, *holder*, used by some pupils (6.7% to 20%). These differences are especially interesting in the German school class as they reveal metacognitive competence in the language of the school, i.e., German, being applied to the unknown language here. Some other pupils in the Italian school classes formed the singular by adding a /-in/ morpheme, such as *pardin*, *varkins*, *hanin*, *hondin*, and, based on this modification, they also formed *ezils* for *ezel* - 'donkey'. Finally pupils in the Italian schools were those who sometimes decided to leave a blank space or opt for a translation in either Italian or German (up to 26.7% for *konijn* and 40% for *hond*, the last two words to transform), whereas in the German school this rarely happened and only for the irregular name proposed, i.e., *varkens* - 'pig' (6.7%).

Finally, when we examine the observations that pupils produced after the task, we can see that pupils in the German school highlight the similarity of this language with German. On the one hand, they mention that this language is very similar to German, as expressed by P2 in example 9, who writes, *ich habe beobachtet das das fast Deutsch ist* ('I noticed that that is almost like German'), stating that this language was easy and the similarity with German lies in similar words. Other types of reflections also inform us and confirm what we have just observed in the strategies used to form the singular of the names proposed, as shown in examples 10 to 12.

Example 9

P2: *ich habe beobachtet das das fast Deutsch ist*  
'I noticed that that is almost like German'

Example 10

P5: *nur 's' und 'en' wek tun.*  
'only cut "s" and "en"'

Example 11

P19: *togliamo ultima lettera e diventa singolare.*  
'we remove the last letter and it becomes singular.'

Example 12

P37: *ho osservato che alla fine del plurale c'è sempre en oppure s e nell'esempio hanno tolto en o s*  
'I observed that at the end of plurals there is always en or s and in the example they cut en or s.'



Figure 7 The picture used to support the narration of the rhyme in Ladin © Taplin 2012

These comments confirm that often pupils formed the singular by cutting out one or two letters, /en/ or /s/ for the pupils in the German school and the last letter, meaning /n/, for the pupils in the Italian school.

Summing up, the results obtained from the manipulation of Dutch noun morphology indicate that, in this case, young learners found it easier to identify similarities with German. Modifying the morphology proved to be a task that they could accomplish more easily, and pupils employed systematic strategies to transform plurals into singular forms.

## 6 Conclusions

Results show that kids at that age, regardless of the school system they attend, share a common linguistic repertoire that plays a facilitating role in some instances and a hindering role in some others. For example, the results indicated that Dutch comprehension was commonly supported by the German competencies of the children, whereas Ladin was only partially facilitated by Italian and Italian dialect competencies. The individual linguistic repertoires of emergent plurilinguals, although not explicitly used in the activity, played a scaffolding role in reconstructing the morphology of the unknown new languages. All pupils approached the task by using their own linguistic repertoires and recalled different learning strategies they had been using in the curricular activities, as seen in the Dutch morphological

task where they applied grammatical rules for singular and plural forms. This suggests that structured work in the curricular activities, which fosters home languages, can enhance school languages as well. The common strategies made explicit by the pupils reflect both high levels of metalinguistic and metacognition awareness at a young age (7-9 years), as demonstrated in the Dutch manipulation of plural and singular, as shown in example 12. It also highlights the competence of pupils in dealing with unknown languages: learners apply to them the grammatical rules of the individual linguistic repertoires, as observed in the Ladin morphological choice of *schirata* 'squirrel'. Such structured activity in class suggests that skills in the school languages are reinforced, which aligns with previous research indicating that emergent bilinguals' literacy skills benefit from including their home language(s) during classroom activities (Cummins 2019). Lastly, this structured work also can help teachers think about pupils' oral and written productions, reflecting with them on the learning process, as Auerbach suggests: "[T]he issue isn't whether to leverage students' primary linguistic resources, but how" (2016, 937).

## Appendix

The input text used in Ladin (Ruth Videsott)

*L'orchestra di tiers*

Le bachët é tla man dl dirighënt.  
I tiers ciara tles notes y mët man da soné.  
Mo an n'alda degun sonn.  
Ci spavënt:  
Le scorpiun ti á taié ia les cordes dla vidora al meder.  
La schirata á ciaigné ti bachëc di tambüri.  
Ales posaines ti él tomé jö la ciampana y la cargara é rovada sotite.  
Le cerf á juté ega tles trombêtes.  
Al clarinet dl tas ti mancel le bochin.  
La olup ti á arobé l'archët dl cuntrabas ala laurs.  
Dal gran spavënt toma ia le dirighënt y le konzert é rové.

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