

Word Order and Auxiliary Selection in L1 Italian and L1 French L2 Italian: two sides of the same coin?

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This paper investigates to which extent a decomposed approach to Unaccusativity as proposed in Sorace (2000, 2004, 2011, 2015) determines the Italian word order variation between the subject (S) and the finite predicate (V) in two adult populations: L1-Italian speakers and L1-French L2-Italian speakers. As well known, the opposition between unergative and unaccusative predicates is not binary. Rather, depending on their lexical-semantic properties, predicates are arranged along a scale, the Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy (ASH) which goes from the core unaccusatives, Change of location, to the core unergatives, Controlled Process (Sorace 2000; Cennamo 2001; Bentley & Eythórsson 2003; McFadden 2017; a.o.), as in (1).

(1) The Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy (Sorace, 2000: 863)

Change of Location	Unaccusative select BE (least variation)
Change of State	
Continuation of pre-existing state	
Existence of state	
Uncontrolled Process	
Controlled Process (motional)	
Controlled Process (non-motional)	Unergative select HAVE (least variation)

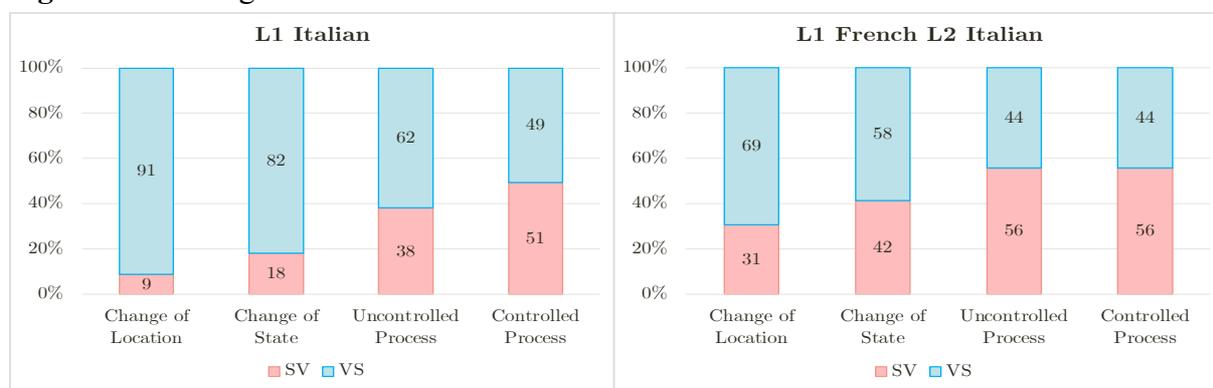
While the hierarchy is claimed to be universal, languages may vary in its cut-off. French and Italian alternate in the auxiliary selection HAVE vs. BE according to the classes of the hierarchy and display different cut-off points (Sorace 2000; Legendre 2007). Whereas in both languages change of location verbs select the auxiliary BE, in Italian change of state and uncontrolled process predicates allow both BE and HAVE; on the contrary, in French uncontrolled and controlled verbs select HAVE, while change of state allow both auxiliaries (Sorace 2000; Legendre & Sorace 2003). The two languages also differ with respect to their answering strategies according to the focus-type. Manipulating unaccusatives vs. unergatives as two verb classes, previous experimental studies have shown that in Italian, in broad focus sentences the unmarked order is SV with unergative verbs and VS with unaccusative verbs, whereas in narrow focus both verb classes tend to exhibit VS order (Belletti *et al.* 2007; Caloi *et al.* 2018). Conversely, in French, with both unergatives and unaccusatives, SV is found in broad focus, while cleft sentences in addition to SV are attested in narrow focus (Belletti 2008; Lahousse 2012; Karssenbergh & Lahousse 2018). Building on these theoretical premises, we ask (Q1) whether the ASH plays a role in determining the variation in S/V orders as it does in the auxiliary selection and (Q2) whether L1 and L2 speakers differ in their word order patterns as their L1 languages differ with respect to the cut-off point of the hierarchy.

A contextualized multiple-choice preference task was administered to 34 adult L1-French L2-Italian speakers with minimum B2 proficiency level (CEFR) and 40 adult L1-Italian speakers. To align our study with the previous research, we manipulated two variables: (1) focus, broad (N=16) vs. narrow (N=16); (2) 4 semantic classes along the Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy (ASH) denoting processes, i.e., Change of Location and Change of State as for Unaccusatives; Uncontrolled process and Controlled Process as for Unergatives (8 items × each class). Each stimulus consisted of a short story providing the context. The story ended with a question in broad focus, *cosa è successo?* ‘what happened?’, or narrow focus, *chi è/ha V_{participle}?* ‘who is/has V_{participle}?’. The question was followed by two answers, pre-recorded with unmarked prosody, minimally differing in their word order, SV/VS. Participants had to read the story and the question, to listen to the SV/VS answers, and to choose one of the two proposed answers.

We calculated the number of SV/VS responses considering the word order as our dependent variable tested against three factors: the discourse focus (broad vs. narrow), the quadripartite

division of semantic classes of the ASH and language (L1 vs. L2). Statistical analyses (GLMM followed by post-hoc comparisons with Tukey's correction) revealed main effects of language, focus and ASH (all p 's $<.001$) and a significant interaction: Language*ASH ($p <.001$). The VS order was chosen significantly more in the L1 group than in the L2 group, more in narrow focus than in broad focus, more with Change of Location verbs than with other semantic classes. In the L1 group (**Fig 1**), the amount of VS decreased progressively along the ASH from core unaccusatives to core unergatives, always differing between the classes of both unaccusatives and unergatives (p 's $<.004$). In the L2 group (**Fig 2**), the amount of VS decreased along the semantic classes of the ASH, differing between Change of Location vs. Change of State ($p=.028$) and between the classes of unaccusatives vs. unergatives (p 's $<.001$), but crucially no difference was found in the comparison between Uncontrolled Process and Controlled Process verbs. The interaction Language*ASH indicated that the L1 group chose more VS than the L2 group with Change of Location, Change of State, and with Uncontrolled Process verbs (all p 's $<.001$) except for the comparison with Controlled Process ($p=.062$).

Fig. 1–2 Percentages of SV/VS orders across the classes of the ASH in L1 and L2 Italian



Besides confirming that discourse focus determines the Italian word order variation, with narrow focus licensing the VS order more consistently than broad focus in both L1 and L2 speakers, as proposed in Belletti (2001), our study demonstrates (Q1) that the SV/VS variation is also constrained by the lexical properties of the predicates decomposed along the ASH (Sorace 2000). The closer the predicate is to the unaccusativity pole, the higher is the probability to license the VS order in both L1 and L2 Italian speakers. More precisely, the way the ASH determines the Italian word order variation mirrors the way in which it determines the auxiliary selection BE vs. HAVE in both Italian and French. In Italian, the amount of VS order differed along the ASH as the auxiliary differs across the classes of the ASH. In French, the amount of VS order differed along the ASH, except in the comparison between Uncontrolled vs. Controlled Process as the auxiliary selection differs between Change of Location and Change of State, but not between the two classes of the unergatives. As for (Q2), our results revealed a different behavior between L1 and L2 Italian speakers: the L2 group show less VS orders than the L1 group, transferring the SV strategy available in French. In conclusion, our findings show that the acquisition of the VS order with a fine-grained notion of Unaccusativity is problematic for L2 Italian speakers. Our results further suggest that a decomposed structure of the v/VP area as in Ramchand (2008) may be adequate to formally capture the role of the semantic classes of the ASH in the SV/VS variation in correlation with the auxiliary selection HAVE vs. BE.

Selected References: Belletti, A. (2001). Inversion as focalization. In Hulk A. and Pollock J.Y.(ed.), *Subject Inversion in Romance and the Theory of Universal Grammar*, 60–90. New York: Oxford University Press. Burzio, L. (1986). *Italian syntax: a government-binding approach*. Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing Company. Ramchand (2008). *Verb Meaning and the Lexicon: A first Phase Syntax*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Sorace, A. (2000). Gradients in Auxiliary Selection with Intransitive Verbs. *Language*, 76 (4), 859-890.