On postverbal subjects in Italian L2 speakers: judgments and productions

Abstract

This work investigates the mastery of VS structures among non-advanced L2 speakers of Italian with different L1s. Following Belletti (2001), postverbal subjects are analysed as focalized subjects occupying the specifier of a low Focus Projection taken to be just above VP. Some other related issues have been addressed, as the Definiteness Effect holding on postverbal subjects of unaccusative verbs, and the mastery of the clitic system in the realization of object clitic pronouns with transitives.

Two different experiments have been carried out: the first one, named “Appropriateness Test”, was a grammaticality judgment task; the second one was the VS-videos elicitation task, as designed by Belletti & Leonini (2004). The rationale behind this choice is the idea that, even if grammaticality judgments and productions clearly belong to distinct sides of linguistic behaviour, and as such engage different processes within our cognitive system, we could expect a coherence among linguistic “systems”, and we can speculate that they proceed in a parallel way, following the same grammatical constraints.

The literature on this topic has shown that the proper mastery and implementation of postverbal subjects is somehow delayed in L2 acquisition, also at very high levels of proficiency (Belletti, Bennati and Sorace 2007 among others). In light of this, we tested how Italian L2 speakers of our experimental group judged and to which extent they produced VS structures; our main research questions were: do (non-advanced) L2 Italian speakers properly master the discourse and pragmatics factors governing Italian postverbal subjects? Do they judge and produce VS structures to the same extent as native speakers do? Are Italian L2 speakers “aware” of the different argument structure of (in)transitive and unaccusative verbs, and are they sensitive to the Definiteness Effect holding on the IA position of unaccusatives? Do the L1 and/or the level of L2-proficiency play a role in the acquisition of the formal and discourse conditions allowing subjects to occur postverbally in Italian? And also: are judgments-of and productions-on the same structure in compliance with each other?

The results have shown that, consistently with previous findings on upper levels of L2 acquisition (Belletti & Leonini 2004; Belletti, Bennati and Sorace 2007; Caloi, Belletti and Polletto 2017 among others), postverbal subjects are not mastered at a control-like level by non-advanced L2 speakers; as for post-unaccusative subjects, both controls and L2 speakers showed sensitivity to the DE. The graph below shows a piece of result of the Appropriateness Test concerning unaccusatives; participants had to assign a score to different structures, on a Likert Scale from 1 to 5:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>L2</th>
<th>CONTROLS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indefinite VS</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definite VS</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HighScore (4 &amp; 5)</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HighScore (4 &amp; 5)</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The graph clearly shows that, in judgments on VS structures, both controls and L2 speakers consistently preferred an indefinite postverbal subject over a definite one. This brings evidence of the fact that the DE is in fact a deep, structural property of unaccusative verbs...
(Belletti and Bianchi 2016), and it would suggest that Unaccusativity might indeed constitute a linguistic universal.

As for VS structures in general and across verb classes, their difficulty in L2 acquisition has been shown to reside on the fact that they intersect purely grammatical properties with informational features at the interfaces with discourse and pragmatics. This seems to be the reason why this “area” of L2 acquisition is often the place for linguistic transfer, possibly due to the fact that some other options exploited by UG may remain available in L2 grammars giving rise, sometimes, to linguistic interference in the case of multilingual acquisition.

Main References


