Questions (and experimental answers) about Italian subjects.
Subject positions in main and indirect question in L1, attrition and L2[*]

GIULIANO BOCCI[1], LUCIA POZZAN[2,3]

[1] University of Geneva, [2]University of Pennsylvania, [3]University of New South Wales
giuliano.bocci@unige.ch, lpozzan@sas.upenn.edu

"La clef de toutes les sciences est sans contredit le point d'interrogation, nous devons la plupart des grandes découvertes au : Comment ? et la sagesse dans la vie consiste peut-être à se demander à tout propos : Pourquoi ? (Honoré De Balzac)"

Abstract

A well-studied property of Italian syntax is that subjects can appear both pre-verbally (e.g., "Mario ha mangiato) or post-verbally (e.g., "Ha mangiato Mario"). In her seminal work, Belletti (2001, 2004 and much related work) showed that subject inversion is not free in Italian. Post-verbal subjects convey a narrow information focus interpretation under certain circumstances, while in other case they are right-dislocated topics.

A related issue concerns the information value of post-verbal subjects when the pre-verbal subject position is not available due to adjacency requirements. Rizzi (2001), in fact, showed that in main wh-questions like "when" and "where" require adjacency to the main verb; the occurrence of a pre-verbal subject engenders ungrammaticality (e.g,*"Dove Mario mangia"). This contrasts with elements like "why", which allows the subject to occur in a pre-verbal

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position (e.g., "Perche' Mario ride?"). When the pre-verbal subject position is structurally unavailable in these structures, the post-verbal position is not necessarily associated with a specific information structure import (narrow information focus, Bellettti, 1999; right-dislocated topics, Cardinaletti, 2001; 2002). Relatedly, it is currently unclear whether and to what extent the pattern observed in main wh-questions holds in other wh-contexts like (a) embedded questions (Poletto, 2000; Rizzi, 2001) and (b) free relatives.

In this paper, we experimentally investigate the extent to which, in broad focus information contexts, the pre-verbal subject position is similarly available in main, embedded questions and free relatives and the extent to which this availability is modulated by different syntactic elements (why, when, if). In two separate experiments, native speakers of Italian were asked to choose between structures with pre-verbal and post-verbal subjects (Experiment 1) and to judge the acceptability of structures with pre- and post-verbal structures (Experiment 2). The syntactic structures tested in the experiments were either yes/no or main why- and where-questions (Experiment 1) and embedded questions and non-interrogative structures (Experiments 1-2) introduced by either if, why or where.

Taken together, the results of the two experiments show that the pattern observed for main questions generalizes to embedded questions and non-interrogatives structures. Given a broad focus interpretation, a pre-verbal subject is preferred and rated more highly for "if" and "why" structures, regardless of clause-type. By contrast, in where-structures, the pre-verbal subject position is highly dispreferred regardless of clause-type (free relatives, embedded and main questions) and the post-verbal subject position were preferred and rated more highly in such broad focus contexts. These empirical results confirm Belletti's insight that not all post-verbal subjects are born equal: when only the post-verbal position is available by virtue of independent factors, this position is not associated with a specific information structure interpretation.

Having established this generalization concerning the distribution of post-verbal subjects in Italian, we investigate the extent to which it can be influenced by the properties of a competing grammar (i.e., English), such as native speakers of Italian who use English as their main language in everyday life and second language learners.

Selected references

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