

Answering strategies. A view from acquisition

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1. Answering strategies: Introduction

When we look at question-answer pairs concerning the subject of the clause, a striking fact emerges. Different languages adopt different ways to answer the very same question concerning the identification of the subject. The following pairs in Italian, French, English and German illustrate this fact:

- | | | |
|----|--|--------------------------------------|
| A. | a Chi è partito / ha parlato ? who has left/who has spoken b E' partito / ha parlato Gianni is left/has spoken Gianni | Italian: VS ("Free inversion") |
| B. | a Qui est parti/ a parlé? b C'est Jean (qui est parti /a parlé) | French: (reduced) Cleft |
| C. | a Who came/spoke? b <i>John</i> came/spoke c <i>John</i> did | English: focalization <i>in situ</i> |
| D. | a Wer ist gestern abgereist? who left yesterday? b Mary ist gestern abgereist. | German: focalization in V2 structure |

It appears that seemingly unrelated and different languages essentially follow the patterns identified above which thus constitute a fairly exhaustive sample¹. At least the following questions naturally arise concerning the identified strategies:

- How can they be analyzed?
- What can acquisition data reveal about the existence and (some) properties of the different strategies?
- Are (exclusively) grammatical reasons at the source of the existence and prevalence of the different strategies in the different languages?

The following sections address these questions and related issues.

2. Assumptions and outline of the analysis

Let us begin by making explicit the central general analytic proposal assumed in this article. As discussed in detail in previous work, following the guidelines of the cartographic projects (Belletti (2004, 2004a; Cinque (2002); Rizzi (2004)) the low part of the clause is assumed to contain a VP

¹ Sometimes adding a special particle on the new information focus subject, depending on the morphological properties of the language in question. The survey I have undertaken in this domain includes the following languages: Basque, Bellunese, Brazilian Portuguese, Chinese, European Portuguese, Greek, Gungbe, Hindi, Hungarian, Japanese, Malayalam, Norwegian, Paduan, Slovak, Spanish, Turkish. I want to take the opportunity to thank here all the linguists who have helped me in this recollection by acting as (most reliable and careful) informants.

periphery including discourse related dedicated positions (of Focus and Topic) along the lines in (1):

(1) [CP[TP[_{TopP} Top [_{FocP} Foc [_{TopP} TopVP]]]]]

The VP periphery is characteristically activated in so called “subject inversion” structures of the kind illustrated in (2)b for Italian, where the postverbal subject constitutes the focus of new information and it is thereby taken to fill the specifier of the low focus position in (1)²:

- (2) a Chi è partito / ha parlato ?
 who has left/who has spoken
 b E’ partito / ha parlato Gianni
 is left/has spoken Gianni
 c(*) Gianni è partito

In a null subject language like Italian, a sentence containing a postverbal subject, focus of new information as in (2)b, should correspond to a (schematic) representation along the lines in (3)³:

(3) [CP[TP *pro* ...è... partito/ha parlato ... [_{TopP} [_{FocP} Gianni [_{TopP} [VP]]]]]]]

Given these assumptions, the VS order of subject inversion structures involves two independent factors:

- i. the null subject nature of the language;
- ii. activation of the clause internal VP periphery.

i. is considered a necessary but not a sufficient property conditioning subject inversion/Vs; ii. is also necessary.⁴

2.1 French and adult L2 acquisition data: Answering with a cleft

Questions like (4)a (typically) admit the answer in (4)b in French (B, above), involving a (generally reduced) cleft:

- (4) a Qui a parlé?
 Who spoke

² As discussed in detail in Belletti (2004), the postverbal subject, when associated with a downgrading intonation, can also be interpreted as topic/given information. This is the case in i.b, where the postverbal subject should consequently fill the specifier of the topic phrase in the low VP periphery:

- i. a Che cosa ha fatto Gianni?
 What has Gianni done
 b E’ partito / ha parlato, Gianni
 has left/has spoken, Gianni

³ Much as in traditional accounts, (3) assumes that the relevant preverbal subject position (Cardinaletti (2004)) is occupied by a non overt null *pro*. I also assume (differently from traditional accounts, Belletti (2005a)) a doubling derivation of inversion structures, with a *referential pro* moved from an original “big DP”, and the lexical subject stranded in the low focus (or topic) position. Nothing crucial hinges on this aspect of the analysis for the present discussion, so this issue will not be taken up any further here. On doubling in similar terms see also Cecchetto (2000) and references cited therein.

⁴ The correlation between the positive setting of the null subject parameter and what is often called “free inversion” is thus less direct than traditionally thought (Nicolis (2005) for recent further discussion of this point). In this sense, it can be considered a weak correlation (Belletti (2005b)). See below for further discussion of this point.

b C'est Jean
It's Jean

As the conversational situation is the same in both (2) and (4), it seems natural to assume that the analysis of (4)b should share some of the properties of (2)b, despite the overt difference between the two structures. The discourse related part of the analysis should be the same: the new information focus subject should then fill the dedicated position in the VP periphery (Belletti (2005)). According to this proposal, the following holds:

(Reduced) Clefts exploit the (low, clause internal) VP periphery.

Hence, the analysis of (4)b corresponds to (5), with the assumed derivation indicated by the arrow:

(5) $[_{TP} Ce \dots [_{Top} [Foc [_{Top} [_{VP} \acute{e}tre [_{SC} Jean \quad [_{CP} \underline{\text{qui a parl}\acute{e}}]]]]]]]]]]$

In (5), the VP periphery of “be”/être is made use of by the subject of its small clause complement (cfr. Moro’s (1997) analysis of copular sentences); the copula raises to its functional host head yielding *C’est Jean qui a parlé*. (Expletive-like) “Ce” fills the preverbal subject position, as required by the non-null subject nature of French. In the reduced version in (4)b, the CP predicate of the small clause is eliminated/erased/left unpronounced (speakers’ judgments vary as to the extent to which they admit the overt realization of the CP). The (reduced) cleft is thus interpreted here as an instance of subject inversion in disguise⁵.

An (partly) independent interesting question concerns the origin of subject “ce”. As discussed, it is the expletive subject which comes with “être” in structures like (5).⁶ “Ce”, however, can also originate as the predicate of the small clause complement of “être”; this is probably the case in sentences like the following (6)a, from Moro (1997), which contrasts with 6)b:

(6) a Ma passion, c’est la lecture
My passion it’s eading
b *Ma passion est la lecture
my passion is reading

The derivation of (6)a would proceed as schematically indicated in (7), with predicate “ce” raising to the subject position of the main clause:

(7) Ma passion, $[_{TP} \dots [Top [Foc [Top [VP \acute{e}tre [SC \text{ la lecture} \quad \text{ce}]]]]]]]]]]$

2.1.2 Clefts in L2 Italian

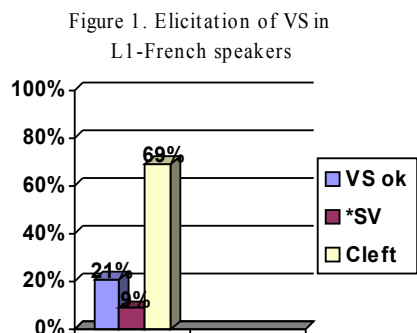
The idea of assimilating the “(reduced) cleft” answer to the Italian-style inversion answer is directly suggested by adult L2 acquisition experimental results, where the pragmatics of the

⁵ Belletti (2005) for further details

⁶ Where the CP predicate can be assumed to also contain an empty OP in its (relevant) Spec, in a relative type structure.

⁷ Cfr. also Munaro & Pollock (2005) for a comparable analysis of “ce” in the (now *figée*) expression “qu’est-ce (que)” (i.e.: est [que ce] ...).

conversational exchange is controlled for, and it is kept constant. In an elicitation task of VS structures of the type in (2)b presented in Belletti & Leonini (2004), (non advanced) French L2 speakers of Italian have produced a very high percentage of cleft sentences in places where VS was elicited. As shown in Figure 1, 69% of the answers were a (reduced) cleft, examples on the right:



Ex:

Chi ha portato questi fiori

“Who has brought these flowers?”

E' una donna che ha portato i fiori.

(Speaker 11)

‘It is a woman who has brought the flowers.’

E' la mamma che ha portato i fiori.

(Speaker 12)

‘It is the mother who has brought the flowers.’

E' una donna che ha portato i fiori.

(Speaker 17)

‘It is a woman who has brought the flowers.’

The L2 speakers appear to have adopted an answering strategy which essentially extends to the L2 (Italian) the strategy of their L1, yielding Transfer from French. According to the analysis discussed, the two strategies can be considered much closer to each other than meets the eye⁸.

Note that an answer like (8)b in French, the equivalent of (2)b in Italian, is ruled out by the non-null subject nature of French, as no *pro* is licensed in the preverbal high subject position in this language:

- (8) a Qui a parlé?
b *A parlé Jean

The option in (9) where an expletive would fill the preverbal high subject position is also ruled out:

- (9) *Il a parlé la maman

since an expletive cannot be freely inserted/added to the initial numeration.⁹ Assume that the insertion of an expletive is essentially lexically constrained: the option is taken when the associate of the expletive is not merged at the edge of the vP-phase. This is a possible consequence of the special status of the edge position of phases (Kayne (2005), Rizzi (2005), (2005)a; Chomsky (2001)), which requires the edge of a phase to remain empty. This in turn typically singles out unaccusatives as the verb class which best tolerates the expletive-associate relation¹⁰.

⁸ It is interesting to point out that use of (reduced) clefts is also taught in the reversed situation of L2 French, in exactly the same conditions as those set in the experiment above (cfr. Sleeman (2004)).

⁹ Nor could a doubling derivation along the lines referred to in footnote 3 involving a (overt) pronominal expletive be available, as expletives cannot be present in the original “big DP”.

¹⁰ In Belletti (2005) other (partly impossible and partly possible) options involving pronoun doubling are presented in some detail. The reader is referred to that work for closer discussion.

2.2 English and German

In the same experimental conditions, German (non advanced) L2 speakers of Italian, in place of VS, have typically adopted the order SV (Belletti&Leonini (2004)). SV is the order appropriate in the L1 of these speakers, as indicated in D. above. Figure 2 below reports the results of the elicitation test in Belletti &Leonini (2004), for a group of L1 German speakers, and Figure 3 has the results from a native control group. Table 1 compares the salient aspects of the results for the three groups, French, German and Italian. The different strategies emerge in a particularly clear way from this table.

Figure 2. VS - SV in the L1-German speakers

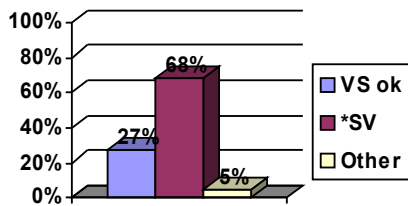


Figure3. VS - SV in the Control group

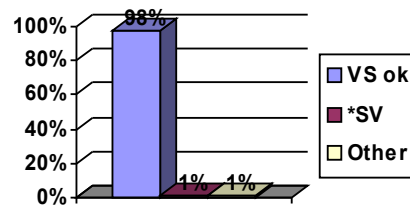
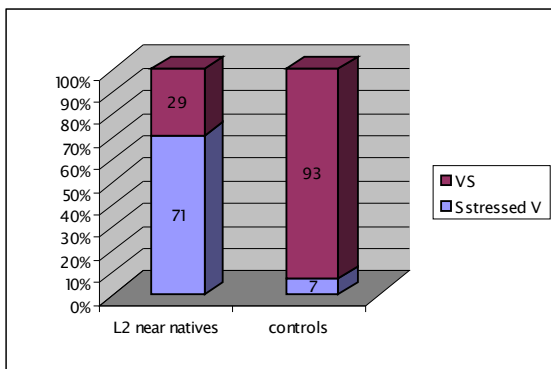


Table 1. Summary

| L1 | VS | SV | Cleft |
|-------------------|-----|-----|-------|
| Italian (control) | 98% | 1% | - |
| French | 21% | 9% | 69% |
| German | 27% | 68% | - |

Comparable experimental results have been found for L1-English speakers of L2 Italian and in attrition situations (Bennati (2003); (Tsimpli et alii (2004)). L1-English L2 speakers of Italian also at the near native level (Belletti, Bennati , Sorace (2005)) continue to prefer the order SV in Italian in the same experimental setting. Figure 4, from Belletti, Bennati & Sorace (2005) illustrates this point:

Figure 4. SV (S stressed) vs. VS across verb classes in L1-English “near native” speakers



VS: 29% near natives vs 93% controls (across verb classes)

As noted in Belletti, Bennati & Sorace (2005), the intonation of the produced SV sentences in L2 Italian is peculiar as S carries a special stress reproducing the parallel intonation of the answers in the L1 English (C):

a Who came?

b *John* came

c *John* did

2.3. Dissociation with availability of referential pronominal null subjects

While, as seen above, VS is available only to a very limited extent, referential null subjects are much more widely available for L2 speakers of Italian. Spontaneous production data clearly show this point, for the same L2 speakers of Italian at the same time, both at the non-advanced and at the very advanced/near native level. This fact indicates a dissociation between the two grammatical options, as is assumed in the analysis outlined in section 2, where the possibility of VS is interpreted in terms of a weak correlation with the null subject property: a necessary, but not a sufficient property.

Table 2. VS/Null subjects (French)

| | VS | Null subjects |
|---------------|------------|---------------|
| Control group | 98% | 95% |
| L1 Italian | 381/390 | 333/352 |
| L1 French | 21% | 70% |
| | 25/117 | 73/104 |

(adapted from Belletti & Leonini (2004))

While the null subject property of Italian has been acquired by the L2 speakers, the Italian style use of the VP periphery is not acquired at a comparable level.

Similar considerations apply for the other groups of L2 speakers of Italian. The L2ers with L1 German, in the same testing situation, show a comparable ratio VS-null subjects (27% // 55%). The advanced/near native speakers of Italian with L1 English show a native like use of null subjects in a spontaneous production task. The results are reported in Table 3:

Table 3. Types of subjects

| | Preverbal subjects | | |
|------------------------|--------------------|------------|------------|
| | Null | Pronominal | Lexical |
| L2 near natives | 52% | 14% | 18% |
| Total | (375/714) | (97/714) | (127/714) |
| Controls Total | 59% | 4% | 22% |
| | (209/351) | (14/351) | (76/351) |

(adapted from Belletti, Bennati & Sorace (2005))

This sharply contrasts with the results in Figure 4 from the same group of L2 near native speakers.

3. Lines of interpretation: The different strategies

Given the experimental results just reviewed, the following lines of interpretation can be outlined:

- The extension to the L2 of the L1 answering strategy is not to be interpreted as the reflex of a grammatical property, but rather as the manifestation of a, typically persistent, discourse “prominent” strategy.
- Since the L2 speakers, both non advanced and near native, do properly utilize VS to some, although relatively limited, extent, this indicates that more options are available to L2 speakers in the relevant discourse exchanges than to native speakers.
- It appears that the L2 speakers of Italian have more readily access to a different subject focalization strategy: the strategy active in their native L1 (e.g. English, French, German...). Crucially, however, no grammatical principle is violated in the extension of this strategy to the L2 in all cases. Adoption of the L1 strategy qualifies as a matter of preference¹¹.

Several questions need to be raised now. Let us consider the following, which will be taken up and developed in some detail in the remaining of this article:

- i. How early in (first language) acquisition does a strategy take priority over the other(s)?
- ii. Are the different strategies active in (early) bilinguals, in the same way as they appear to be active in monolinguals in the different languages?
- iii. How can the prominence (leading to “priming” in L2, footnote 11) of one strategy over the other(s) be characterized?
- iv. Why does a strategy take priority over the other(s) in different languages?

i. and ii. are mainly factual questions; one can speculate on iii. and iv. The following sections are devoted to develop some speculative answers to these questions.

3.1 The emergence of the strategy

While results on question ii. are not available yet in a systematic way, a preliminary, although fairly clear answer to question i. can be formulated, based on a search of spontaneous production data from the CHILDES database. The following spontaneous productions indicate that the different strategies are in place early on, as soon as the first felicitous conversational exchanges can be documented. Note the quasi identical *wh* questions on the subject and the different answers provided by the child in the different languages considered, French, Italian and English, whenever the answer is a whole sentence containing the verb¹².

- French: *MOT: qui est ce qui dodo dedans ?
 *CHI: *c'est Kiki* . (Gregoire, 2;3.01)
- *MOT: qui t' a donné le collier, Philippe ?
 *CHI: *Ginette* .

¹¹ Using a term familiar from the psycholinguistic literature, we could say that the L1 strategy remains *primed* for the L2 speakers.

¹² It should be pointed out that, typically, children tend not to directly answer questions asked by the adult(s) they are interacting with, thus making the relevant context poorly available in the first productions. In contrast, children at the same time (same files) appear to be able to produce *wh* questions of the relevant type in a seemingly appropriate fashion. Furthermore, much as with adults, one word answers (e.g.: Q. Chi ha parlato? A. Gianni) tend to prevail, thus making the relevant context even less available. Nevertheless, some relevant exchanges can be found and they indicate the early emergence of the different strategies active in the different languages, as discussed in the text.

*MOT: non, non, c' est pas Ginette .

*FAT: Ginette lui avait donné xxx .

*CHI: *c' est Josiane* (Philippe, 2;1,26)

*CHI: la tortue va à , va pas à l'école .

*FAT: non, qu' est-ce qui va pas à l'école ?

*CHI: *c' est des garçons va à l' école* . (Philippe, 2;2.03)

*FAT: qui est Isabelle ?

*CHI: *c' est une petite fille Isabelle* . (Philippe, 2;2.03)

*CHI: faire cuire à manger les vaches .

*MOT: faire cuire à manger ?

*MOT: qui leur fait cuire à manger ?

*CHI: *c' est le monsieur*. (Philippe, 2;2.03)¹³

- Italian:

*DON: ma chi te l' ha comprato, quel tamburo ?

*CHI: Natale !

*DON: chi ?

*CHI: *portato Babbo Natale* (Camilla, 2;11.17)

*CHI: mangia la pastasciutta

(gira una pagina dell' album)

*CHI: E' Giulia questa , E' Giulia hai visto

(gira una pagina dell' album)

*MOT: e questo?

*CHI: *mangia la pastasciutta Diana* .

*CHI: questo è il cacco .

*MOT: ah il casco, ma più avanti .

*CHI: *mangia la pastasciutta Diana* . (Diana, 2;00.17)

*FAT: eh, chi è quello là ?

*CHI: *E' Babbo Natali* (Guglielmo, 2;4.12)

*FAT: ma chi te l' ha detto ?

¹³ In a few occasion the child seems to try out the different strategies in the first files. Cfr:

*MOT: qui est tombé?

*CHI: est tombé moi (Philippe, 2;1.19)

*MOT: qu' est-ce qui est cassé ?

*CHI: est cassé le xxx dedans . (Philippe, 2;1.19)

This apparent Italian-like strategy can be interpreted as resulting from use of a truncated/reduced structure (in terms of the analysis in Rizzi (1994; 2005). Note lack of subject agreement in the first answer, which crucially contrasts with the Italian closest equivalent where agreement is required.

*MOT: qui l' avait réparé le tracteur ?

*CHI: papa réparé le tracteur. (Philippe, 2;1.19)

*FAT: qui est gourmand ?

*FAT: j' ai pas entendu .

*CHI: Philippe est gourmand . (Philippe, 2;1,26)

This is an English-like strategy. Note that this kind of answer is also not totally excluded by some adult French speakers as well. See (18) below.

*CHI: mamma .
 *FAT: mamma ?
 *CHI: *no , l' ha detto 0w pambino* (Guglielmo, 2;4.12)

*MOT: raccontalo a lui se vado a prendere, tu intanto raccontalo ad Alessandro chi te l' ha regalata .
 *CHI: *a bici 0w 0w ha regalata nonno Pietro* . (Raffaello, 2;6.13)

- English: *LOI: yeah # who else has a fire
 *CHI: *I do* # I'm gonna show you (Peter, 3;1.20)¹⁴

3.2 Speculations on questions iii. and iv.

As for the question in iii. it can be speculated that the very fact that an answering strategy becomes prominent in a given language suggests that the other possible strategies, which may be grammatically correct and compatible with the set of parametric choices of the language, are in sense “forgotten” by the speakers. The very existence of the different answering strategies can thus be seen as the manifestation of a general feature of language acquisition, often referred to as “learning by forgetting” (Mehler & Dupoux (1992), Rizzi (2005)). The interesting property of this instance is that this feature seems to also be active in connection with grammatical options at the interface with discourse.

The question in iv. as to why a strategy should take (some) priority over the others is a particularly complex one in those cases in which the alternatives would not involve the violation of any grammatical principle. Thus, if, as discussed above, grammatical reasons related to the negative setting of the null subject parameter rule out adoption of the straight VS strategy in French and similarly in English (and the non V2 character of this word order would also exclude its direct extension to German), still the following questions remain open:

Why doesn't Italian choose the French or the English strategy?
 Why does French adopt the (reduced) cleft strategy, rather than the English focalization *in situ* strategy?
 Why does English adopt the *focalization in situ* strategy rather than the French (reduced) cleft strategy?

In all these alternatives no grammatical principle would be violated in the relevant language in each case.

Let us sketch out an answer to these three questions in turn by considering pairs of languages.

a. Italian/French

The following exchange is virtually impossible in Italian:

| | | |
|------|---|---------------------|
| (10) | a. Chi ha parlato? | (a' Qui a parlé?) |
| | b ?? Sono/è io/Gianni (che ho/ha parlato) | (b' C'est moi/Jean) |
| | -am-I (It's me) | |

¹⁴ Note the similar exchange later on, with the same answer from the adult:

*CHI: who pulled it . (Peter, 3;1.20)
 *LOI: *Patsy did*

A (reduced) cleft is not a real option in these contexts in Italian, even if no grammatical principle would rule it out. As pointed out above several times, (2)b is consistently the preferred answer in Italian, whenever V is pronounced. This has been shown very clearly by the results from the control group in the elicitation test, which provided a pragmatically controlled setting. The following presumably holds. Since “inversion” along the lines in (3) is directly available in a null subject language like Italian, it is adopted as it involves less structure and less computation, than a (reduced) cleft. It then qualifies as a more economical option. This option then becomes a prominent answering strategy in the relevant contexts in Italian, and the (reduced) cleft option is consequently “forgotten”.

Note, however, that, as should be expected in principle, the (reduced) cleft is also a possible option in Italian. This typically happens in the particular circumstances where a cleft is contained in the question and it is then prompted, as in the exchanges in (11):

- | | | |
|--------|--|--|
| (11) a | Chi è che parla/ha parlato(/a parlare)? Who is it who is talking (/to talk) | Who has been who has broken (/to brake) the vase |
| | | b E' Gianni It's Gianni (-is Gianni) |
| | | c Sono io It's me (- am I) |
| d | Chi è stato che ha rotto(/a rompere) il vaso? “who broke the vase” | e E' stato Gianni/Sono stato io -has been Gianni/ -have been I “It's been Gianni/me” |

The answers in (11)b/c-e are analyzed along the lines in (12):

- (12) *pro* E' (stato)/sono (stato) ... [_{FOC} Gianni/io ... [VP [_{sc} - che ha/ho parlato/a parlare]]..]¹⁵
- ▲──────────────────┘

b. Italian/English

At first sight, adoption of the English strategy in Italian could not be equally discarded on the basis of economy considerations, as in the previous case concerning the French strategy. Let us first consider how the English strategy, repeated in (13), could be analyzed:

- (13) a Who came?
b *John* came

¹⁵ Similarly, in cases of the type in i. following, with different types/degrees of reduction involved in the answer (Cfr. discussion in Belletti (2005); on reduced clauses in similar contexts see also Brunetti (2003)):

- | | | | |
|------|---|----|---|
| i. a | Chi è (- alla porta)? who is (- at the door) | b. | Sono/è io/Gianni (alla porta) am/is I/Gianni (at the door) |
| c | Chi è (che parla) who is talking | d. | Sono/è io/Gianni (che parlo/a) am/is I/Gianni (who is talkin |

c *John* did

Suppose that *focalization in situ* of the subject in its IP internal position is involved in (13)b, c. Note that (13)b should be kept distinct from (14):

(14) JOHN came (not Bill)

which displays left peripheral contrastive focalization. *Focalization in situ* in (13)b, c can be analyzed as involving DP-internal focalization, possibly along the lines overtly manifested in (15). The peculiar intonation on the subject could be the reflex of a silent DP internally focalizing “himself”, i.e. an activated DP internal focus position:

(15) John himself came/did

Why isn't this focalization strategy adopted in Italian?¹⁶ A hypothesis along the following lines provides a promising explanation. Since, according to the proposed cartographic analysis, the new information focus interpretation of the postverbal VP peripheral subject can be directly read off the syntactic configuration in a null subject language like Italian, this option is considered preferable to the English one which necessarily requires both activation of a syntactic position (the DP internal focus position, as a “signal” for prosody) and, crucially, adoption of a special prosody. It is indeed only through the special prosody that the new information focus interpretation of the preverbal subject is signaled and distinguished from the standard “aboutness” interpretation that subjects are normally attributed in this position. In a language like Italian the English option could again count as ultimately less “economical” than adoption of straight VS, although in a subtler fashion than in the case of the French cleft option. It is then consequently “forgotten”. Note that it is virtually never adopted by Italian speakers, as clearly indicated by the results on the elicitation test in Figures 3,4/Table1 above.

Interestingly, when a new information focus object is involved, also in English the VP peripheral Focus position is directly exploited; in this case no incompatibility arises with other parametric choices of the language:

(16) a What have you written yesterday?
b I have written a paper

In the object case English is no different from Italian (cfr. (24)a, c below). This in turns strongly suggests that *focalization in situ* is a peculiar strategy adopted in English, which solely concerns the subject, as direct use of the VP periphery does not count as an available option for the subject in a non null subject language like English.¹⁷

¹⁶ Note that Italian has a DP internal focalization similar to English (15):

- i. Gianni stesso ha parlato di questo
Gianni himself has spoken of that

¹⁷ An answer like i. to the question in (16):

- i. % *A paper* I have written

is not adequate as in English, much as in standard Italian, left peripheral focalization is dedicated to contrastive focalization and not to simple new information focus. This differentiates both English and Italian from the variety of Sicilian analyzed in detail in Cruschina (2004) where the equivalent to i. given in the comparable exchange in ii. (ii.b) is perfectly acceptable:

- ii. a Chi scrivisti ieri?
what did you write yesterday

In sum, a new information focus direct object in English can directly exploit the clause internal, VP peripheral new information focus position (with no need of a special prosody here). Hence, this option is taken ((16)b). The same cannot be done with a subject of new information for the reasons discussed throughout, ultimately due to the negative setting of the null subject parameter.

It is worth pointing out that German as well appears to display a similar behavior in object questions, thus indicating a direct use of the clause internal VP periphery, the traditional *Mittelfeld*. (17)b is given by German speakers as the most natural answer to (17)a. In contrast, the most natural answer to the subject question in (17)c is considered (17)d, as also indirectly confirmed by the experimental results on the L2 Italian of L1 German speakers.¹⁸

- (17) a Was hat Mary gekauft?
 what has Mary bought
 b Mary hat einen Pullover gekauft
 Mary has bought a sweater
 c Wer ist nach Rom gefahren?
 who went to Rome
 d Mary ist nach Rom gefahren.
 Mary went to Rome

c. *French/English*

On the reason why French should privilege a seemingly uneconomical strategy such as the (reduced) cleft strategy over the English style *focalization in situ*, the following should be observed. First of all it should be noted that the English strategy is to some extent active in French as well: for various French speakers the following exchange may sound acceptable, with a special stress on the preverbal subject:

- (18) a Qui a parlé?
 b (??) *Jean* a parlé

On the other hand, it can be speculated that the ample use of a (reduced) cleft in answers concerning the subject could somehow be related to the widespread use, in this language, of cleft sentences and *wh in situ* in question formation. Consider in this regard the parallelism holding in (19)a,b: if an analysis of *wh-in situ* along the lines proposed in Kato (2003) is adopted (Belletti (2005)), both the *wh*-phrase in the (colloquial) question (19)a and the subject *Jean/moi* in the answer (19)b fill the same VP peripheral focus position¹⁹:

- b *N'articulu* scrissi
 an article I have written

See also Belletti (2005) for some discussion of this point.

¹⁸ Thanks to G.Grewendorf for providing the relevant data. This indicates that the left peripheral position filled by the subject in (17)d in the V2 construction can be compatible with the new information focus interpretation. Other possible appropriate orders, such as i.b below where the low subject should fill the low *Mittelfeld* focus position and a different constituent satisfies V2, will not be addressed in detail here; see Grewendorf (2004), Haeberli (2002) for relevant closely related discussion:

- i. a Wer ist nach Rom gefahren?
 who went to Rome
 b Nach Rom ist Mary gefahren

¹⁹ The reduced cleft answer remains prompted also for questions where the *wh* has further moved to the left periphery, as in i.:

- i. a. Qui est-ce qui a parlé ?
 b C'est Jean/moi

- (23) a Qu'est ce que t'as lu?
what have you read
b*? C'est un roman
it is a novel
c J'ai lu un roman
I have read a novel

This is also very clearly the case in Italian; (24) sharply contrasts with (22):

- (24) a Che cosa hai letto?
b*? E' un romanzo
c Ho letto un romanzo

Once again, as discussed in connection with (16) in English above, in the object case direct use of the low focus position in the VP periphery is possible throughout, hence it is preferably adopted. Interestingly, no difference emerges in question-answer pairs concerning the object in the different languages considered, in sharp contrast with the subject case .

c. *English/French*

As one would expect by now, the reduced cleft answer on the subject is not completely excluded in English; it becomes available in particular circumstances²³:

(25) a Who is knocking at the door?

b It's [Foc me/John ... [be [sc- knocking at the door]]..]

As usual with “be”, (25)b is a perfectly natural answer to an (identificational) question like (26):

(26) Who is it/this?

However, similarly to Italian in this respect, the (reduced) cleft does not become prominent in English. This is ultimately due to reasons of computational, structural economy along the lines discussed for Italian.

4. Some general conclusions

The following main points can be underscored from the previous discussion and taken as general conclusions of this work.

Instances of the detected answering strategies dedicated to new information subjects are found across the languages investigated with one exception. This exception is due to formal grammatical reasons: the pure VS strategy is limited to null subject Italian.

(L2) Acquisition data make the very existence of the different answering strategies all the more visible.

Prevalence of one strategy over the other can be due to economy reasons, e.g. Italian and English vs French; to structural reasons, e.g. Italian vs English, ultimately reducible to economy as well; and to reasons internal to the grammatical system of a given language, French, which make the (reduced) cleft computation, somehow more prominent, hence overall less costly than in other languages, e.g. French vs English/Italian (and German).

Prevalence of one strategy over the other(s) appears to occur relatively early in (first) language acquisition.

“Learning by forgetting” seems to occur in this domain whereby the different, grammatically possible strategies are “forgotten” fairly soon and one strategy becomes prevalent over the others.

It can be speculated that the latter constitutes (one of) the reason(s) why the different answering strategies seem to resist the kind of “retuning” necessary in L2 acquisition, so that the L1 strategy remains prominent in the relevant discourse conditions and it is characteristically transferred to the L2, also at the very advanced level.

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²³ E.g. “John” has to be somehow present in the immediate context in order for (25)b to sound appropriate (C.Collins, p.c.).

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