

## **Subject inversion in L2 Italian.**

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### **Abstract**

The article investigates the ability to appropriately utilize “subject inversion” structures displaying the order VS, S= Focus of new information, in the L2 Italian of a group of adults with different L1s. The production of the relevant structures has been elicited through an experimental technique creating the relevant contextual conditions. The results indicate that VS is not adequately acquired by the investigated subjects. The article also discusses the ability in producing null-subjects in presence of finite verbal morphology, in particular by those L2 subjects whose L1 is a non-null subject language. The comparison of the results in the elicitation of VS and in the production of null-subjects shows a dissociation, with null-subjects available to a larger extent. We discuss the theoretical relevance of these results in the light of the following general issues: the structural mapping of discourse related information, according to the “cartographic” guidelines; the notion of “possible interlanguage”; the dissociation of the properties currently related through the null-subject parameter and the conditions at the interface possibly behind that in L2.

## 1. Introduction

In this study we investigate the interlanguage grammars<sup>1</sup> of a group of adult L2 speakers of Italian with different L1s with respect to their mastering of Italian subject inversion structures displaying the order VS. The relevant structures which will be considered are illustrated in (1) with respect to different verb classes:

- (1) a. *Ha tossito Gianni.*  
has coughed Gianni  
'Gianni has coughed.'
- b. *E' partito Gianni.*  
is left Gianni  
'Gianni has left.'
- c. *(La lettera) L'ha scritta Gianni.*  
(the letter) itCL has written Gianni  
'(The letter) Gianni has written it.'

We point out at the outset that, beside their direct relevance in contributing to a clarification of the very notion "possible interlanguage", the results to be discussed here appear to also have a general theoretical impact on the issue concerning the nature of the cluster of properties currently subsumed under the "Null Subject" parameter.<sup>2</sup> Classical work on the "Null Subject" parameter has systematically related the possibility of VS structures of the kind in (1) to the availability of phonetically null pronominal subjects instantiated in sentences of the kind in (2).

- (2) a. - *Ha tossito.*  
- has cough  
'he has cough.'
- b. - *E' partito.*  
- is left  
'he has left.'

- c.       - *L'ha scritta.*  
- itCL has written  
  'he has written it.'

The study to be presented here indicates that, although so called “free inversion” of the type in (1) necessarily requires a positive setting of the null subject parameter licensing a phonetically unrealized “pro” element in subject position, still availability of null subjects and availability of subject inversion/VS structures may correlate only partially and the two grammatical options may be dissociated to some extent. Our general results indicate that, whereas null pronominal subjects can be available to L2 speakers of Italian to a relatively important extent, subject inversion/VS structures may not be, or only significantly less so for the same speakers. We believe that this can be interpreted as a direct function of the pragmatic/conversational import of Italian subject inversion structures, which we analyze along the lines summarized in section 2.

Most of the L2 subjects analyzed in this study were L1 speakers of German (cfr. section 3 for a detailed description of the whole analyzed population), a language which has a negative setting of the null subject parameter and which does not admit either kinds of structures in (1) and (2); the same properties characterize French, the L1 of a smaller L2 group also analyzed here. Both groups manifest the same dissociation outlined above. Given the different performances in the two domains mentioned, the following general consideration can directly be made: adult L2 findings appear to be able to provide novel evidence as they make (better) visible properties which may remain obscured in (adult and child, cfr. Bel (2003) for the latter) L1 production data. These L2 findings can thus contribute an original type of evidence towards theoretical linguistic analyses which must take into account the complexity of the phenomenology connected to the null subject parameter.

As for what pertains to the nature of the possible interlanguages of the L2 speakers, the dissociation just described suggests that the formal grammatical property/ies licensing a null subject “pro” in the (dedicated, Cardinaletti (2002)) preverbal subject position can be acquired by L2 subjects whose L1 is a non-null subject language at a stage where VS is not similarly acquired. In accordance with the so called “No Impairment” hypothesis (Duffield et alii and reference cited there), this suggests that Resetting of the null subject parameter can take place; on the other hand, acquisition of the formal conditions licensing VS in particular pragmatic-conversational situations seems to follow a different path and appears to take longer.<sup>3</sup> At the stage of their interlanguage identified by this study, in those pragmatic/conversational conditions where VS is expected in standard Italian, L2 speakers appear to preferably resort to some strategy available in their respective L1. We speculate that this kind of interlanguage is UG compatible in that the same dissociation is also realized in some languages, where null pronominal subjects are available, but subject inversion is not.<sup>4</sup>

The following section 2 briefly introduces our general background theoretical assumptions concerning the syntax and pragmatics of “subject inversion” in Italian. The rest of the paper will then describe the methodology adopted in our study, will discuss the obtained results in detail (sections 3 and 4) and will finally take up data bearing on the dissociation issue addressed above in the light of its empirical and conceptual relevance (sections 5 and 6).

## 2. The Syntax of Inversion

The study of Italian/Romance type subject inversion phenomenon has been a classical central research topic in the Principles and Parameters (P&P) theoretical literature over the last twenty years or so. To briefly summarize what we take to be some of the essential features of a long standing debate, we can identify two major research paths devoted to this topic: i. the study of the relation between the postverbal subject and the so called “associate” (Chomsky (1995)) element in the preverbal subject position; ii. the study of the conditions at the interface allowing the lexical subject to appear in a position linearly following the verb. As for the latter point, the conditions typically taken into account considered the lexical nature of the verb as the crucial factor in licensing a postverbal subject, with sentences involving unaccusative verbs being those where the inversion structure should be expected to the greatest extent across languages. However, null subject languages appear to allow for subject inversion structures to a much wider scale, across lexical verb classes. The classical account has identified the crucial factor for that in the possibility available in these languages of licensing a null pronominal subject, “pro”, in the preverbal subject position.<sup>5</sup> In non null subject languages this option is not available and the noun phrase carrying the so called “external” Th-role cannot be found in the postverbal position; only if the noun phrase is in fact an “internal” argument, i.e. with unaccusative verbs, can it appear in the postverbal position where it is directly merged, according to the “unaccusative hypothesis”, yielding the VS order. In these cases, the preverbal subject position is occupied by an overt expletive, “associate” with the postverbal subject noun phrase. This directly relates to the former point i. above: the assumption is that the same relation established between the overt expletive and the postverbal subject in non null

subject languages should also hold between the postverbal subject and a non-overt expletive “pro” in null subject languages. Hence, VS is brought about through two different paths in null subject languages: in the way also available with (typically) unaccusative verbs in non-null subject languages where an overt expletive is involved, and in some different more extended way involving all verb classes. In both cases a non overt expletive “pro” fills the preverbal subject position in null subject languages. In the original literature on the topic (cfr. footnote 5), the difference was cast in purely structural terms: with non unaccusative verbs the postverbal subject was assumed to fill a VP adjoined position, to the right of the VP, whereas with unaccusative verbs it was assumed to fill the VP-internal object position where, following the “unaccusative hypothesis”, it is first merged. As right adjunction processes are ruled out in current more constrained versions of the general theory (Kayne (1994)), an analysis along these lines could not be literally assumed. In the approach we adopt here, we maintain the idea that the postverbal subject is necessarily VP-external with non-unaccusative verbs, without it being right adjoined; as for structures containing an unaccusative verb, the assumption is that the postverbal subject has access to either the VP-internal object position where it is first merged, or the external position also available to non-unaccusatives. Both options yield VS with V movement taking the verb outside of VP across the subject in both cases (see Belletti (2001) for detailed discussion).

More recent studies have focussed on the question as to how the extended availability of subject inversion structures in null subject languages, which cuts across verb classes, should be precisely characterized. Work by Zubizarreta (1998), Ordoñez (1998), Belletti (2001, 2002), Costa (2000),

Cardinaletti (2001) have all converged on the idea that the VS order corresponds to a particular informational value related to the pragmatics of the conversational exchange, with differences among the different Romance languages considered.

Focussing our attention on Italian, we follow here the analytical proposals in Belletti (2001, 2002), undertaken within the so called “cartographic” approach. According to this approach, clause structure is enriched of positions dedicated to different interpretations/intonations.<sup>6</sup> Clause structure is thus optimally transparent for the interpretation at the interfaces. In this way, one of central aims of the Minimalist Program is met by the cartographic approach.<sup>7</sup> In particular, following the quoted work, we assume that the low area of the clause immediately above the VP contains dedicated positions of Topic and Focus constituting a VP periphery which closely parallels the clause external CP left periphery. The postverbal subject is assumed to fill (the Spec of) one of these discourse-related projections and is thus associated with different interpretations/intonations accordingly. In the present work we concentrate on the new information Focus interpretation of the postverbal subject illustrated in exchanges of the type in (3 a, b) (vs (3c)):

- (3) a. *Chi è partito?*  
who is left  
‘Who has left?’
- b. *E’ partito Gianni.*  
is left Gianni  
‘Has left Gianni.’
- c. *#Gianni è partito.*  
Gianni is left  
‘Gianni has left.’

The postverbal location of the subject is mandatory in (3b) as witnessed by the oddness of (3c) in the same conversational exchange. In (3c), an otherwise perfectly grammatical sentence in Italian, the preverbal subject cannot be interpreted as focus of new information.<sup>8</sup> We assume that the

postverbal subject in (3b) fills the clause internal Focus position in the VP periphery, schematically represented as in (4) (S, the postverbal subject in Spec of FocP):

(4).....[<sub>TopP</sub> Top [<sub>Foc</sub> S Foc [<sub>Top</sub> Top .....VP]]]

The correlation established within the null subject parameter thus takes the following shape: the possibility of licensing a null “pro” in subject position is a necessary condition but not a sufficient one in order for VS structures of the Italian kind to be available. According to this approach, availability of subject inversion mainly reduces to the ability of making use of the dedicated position in the VP periphery.

### **3. The Experiment**

We describe now the experiment we designed to investigate the L2 mastering of Italian subject inversion structures.<sup>9</sup> Section 3.1 provides a description of the population taking part into the experiment; the method we adopted to elicit the VS order is described in section 3.2. Section 4 reports and analyses the results in detail.

#### **3.1. L2 Subjects**

26 adult L2 learners of Italian participated in the experiment. Their age ranged between 19 and 35 y. o. The majority (24 out of 26) were visiting students at University of Siena. All subjects had been exposed to some Italian in their native countries, either starting in high school or at the university. None of the subjects, however, had had any early exposure to Italian. After their arrival in Italy, they all had attended a language course of Italian for three weeks at the university. The time of their exposure to Italian in their native countries ranged between 6 and 63/72 months (the latter in 3 cases

only), while the time of their permanence in Italy ranged from a minimum of 1 month to a maximum of 5/6 years (two cases only).

The 26 L2 learners of Italian had different L1s. However, the most significant group investigated was constituted by native speakers of German. The whole population consisted of:

16 Germans;            1 Russian;  
 3 French;             1 Greek;  
 2 Polish;             1 Albanian;  
 1 Dutch;              1 Bosnian.

Relevant information concerning the L2 subjects is summarized in Table 1:

**Table 1. L2 subjects**

Subject	Age	L1	Study in the native country	Permanence in Italy
1	22	German	9 months	7 months
2	25	German	6 months	6 months
3	22	Russian	3 months	13 months
4	22	Polish	36 months	11 months
5	24	German	18 months	2 months
6	24	German	27 months	2 months
7	21	German	27 months	1 ½ months
8	23	Dutch	18 months	10 months
9	22	German	9 months	1 ½ months
10	22	Polish	63 months	1 month
11	22	French	45 months	1 month
12	21	French	45 months	1 month
13	22	Bosnian	36 months	1 month
14	23	German	9 months	2 months
15	31	German	1 month*	1 month
16	19	Albanian	9 months	2 months
17	22	French	63 months	4 months
18	35	German	36 months	6 years
19	24	Greek	6 months	5 years
20	22	German	6 months	1 month
21	23	German	27 months	6 months
22	23	German	18 months	3 months
23	21	German	18 months	3 months
24	22	German	18 months	6 months
25	22	German	6 months	3 months
26	23	German	72 months	3 months

\*This subject has a very good knowledge of Spanish (15 years of study at school).

10 adult native speakers of Italian served as a control group. They came from different regions in Italy but they all lived in Siena, where they were tested. Their age ranged between 22 and 33 y.o.

### **3.2. Method**

In order to analyze the production of Italian structures with subject inversion, where the postverbal subject is interpreted as Focus of new information, we have adopted an elicitation task procedure.

As discussed in section 2, in structures of this kind we assume that the subject fills a clause internal dedicated (Spec of) Focus position in the VP periphery (cfr. structure (4) above).

The experiment was run using a Power Point presentation: the subjects were shown 22 scenes occurring in 22 videos. A question concerning the situation shown in the video was asked by one of the characters in the scene. After each video, the presentation proposed other questions about the scene. The subjects had been instructed to answer to the question in the video first and then to the remaining ones, using a sentence containing the verb, in the way they felt as the most natural one.

Distractor scenes were also inserted among the relevant ones. Two examples of the proposed scenes are given in Appendix 2. It is worth pointing out here that the adopted experimental technique has turned out to be very effective in eliciting the relevant VS structures (see the results of the control group in Table 3) as the video presentation appears to create the relevant pragmatic conditions prompting the expected answer in a particularly natural way.

Subject inversion structures displaying the VS order were elicited by asking questions containing verbs of different verb classes; some examples of the questions asked in the videos and of the elicited answers are given in (5) and (6):

- (5) a. *Chi ha urlato?* *intransitive*  
 ‘Who has screamed?’
- b. *Chi è arrivato?* *unaccusative*  
 ‘Who has arrived?’
- c. *Chi ha aperto la finestra?* *transitive*  
 ‘Who has opened the window?’
- d. *Cosa c’è sopra il tavolo?* *existential “ci”*  
 ‘What is there on the table?’
- (6) a. *Ha urlato la ragazza.*  
 has screamed the girl  
 ‘The girl screamed.’
- b. *E’ arrivato Francesco.*  
 is left Francesco  
 ‘Francesco left.’
- c. *L’ha aperta Silvia.*  
 itCL has opened Silvia  
 ‘Silvia opened it.’
- d. *Ci sono le chiavi.*  
 ‘There are the keys.’

As indicated by (6c), VS structures containing a transitive verb typically realize the direct object as a clitic pronoun in Italian; thus, the acquisition of object clitic pronouns constituted a related topic of investigation. A further experiment was proposed to elicit clitic pronouns to the same 26 subjects and to the control group, using a similar elicitation procedure.<sup>10</sup>

L2 subjects were tested individually. They took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete each task. Their answers were recorded, then transcribed and analyzed. For the analysis, we took into consideration only full sentences containing a verb; repetitions were discarded.

#### 4. Results

Let us now proceed to the analysis of the results.

Subject inversion structures displaying the VS order were expected in 39 contexts (as indicated in the table below two subjects, 1 and 2, used 40 contexts).

Table 2 and 3 illustrate the individual performances of the L2 group and of the control group on the production of the VS order.

**Table 2. VS - SV in L2 subjects**

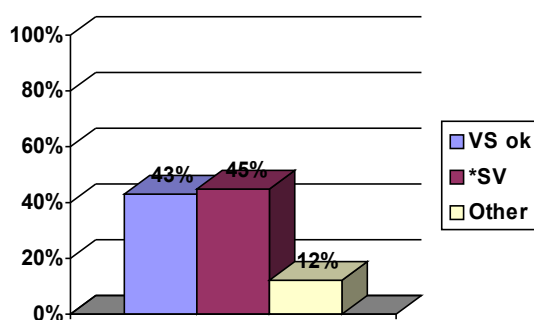
Subjects	VS ok	*SV	Other
1	(24/40) 60%	(10/40) 25%	(6/40) 15%
2	(6/40) 15%	(34/40) 85%	0
3	(33/39) 85%	0	(6/39) 15%
4	(36/39) 92%	0	(3/39) 8%
5	(6/39) 15%	(33/39) 85%	0
6	(4/39) 10%	(31/39) 79%	(4/39) 10%
7	(5/39) 13%	(34/39) 87%	0
8	(27/39) 69%	(9/39) 23%	(3/39) 8%
9	(6/39) 15%	(31/39) 79%	(2/39) 5%
10	(36/39) 92%	(1/39) 3%	(2/39) 5%
11	(11/39) 28%	(4/39) 10%	(24/39) 62%
12	(6/39) 15%	(6/39) 15%	(27/39) 69%
13	(33/39) 85%	(6/39) 15%	0
14	(5/39) 13%	(34/39) 87%	0
15	(35/39) 90%	(3/39) 8%	(1/39) 3%
16	(38/39) 97%	0	(1/39) 3%
17	(8/39) 21%	(1/39) 3%	(30/39) 77%
18	(19/39) 49%	(17/39) 44%	(3/39) 8%
19	(37/39) 95%	(2/39) 5%	0
20	(5/39) 13%	(31/39) 79%	(3/39) 8%
21	(16/39) 41%	(23/39) 59%	0
22	(5/39) 13%	(32/39) 82%	(2/39) 5%
23	(5/39) 13%	(33/39) 85%	(1/39) 3%
24	(9/39) 23%	(27/39) 69%	(3/39) 8%
25	(12/39) 31%	(24/39) 62%	(3/39) 8%
26	(5/39) 13%	(32/39) 82%	(2/39) 5%
<b>Total</b>	(432/1016) 43%	(458/1016) 45%	(126/1016) 12%

**Table 3. VS - SV in Control Subjects**

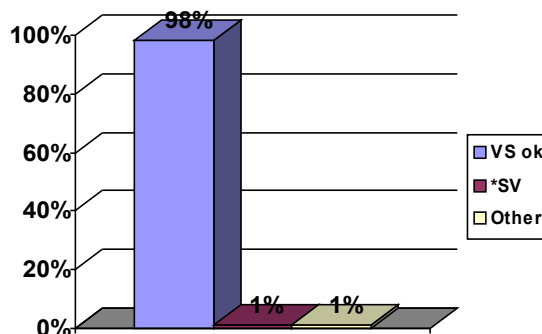
Subjects	VS ok	*SV	Other
1	(39/39) 100%	0	0
2	(36/39) 92%	(2/39) 5%	(1/39) 3%
3	(39/39) 100%	0	0
4	(37/39) 95%	(1/39) 3%	(1/39) 3%
5	(39/39) 100%	0	0
6	(39/39) 100%	0	0
7	(38/39) 97%	0	(1/39) 3%
8	(39/39) 100%	0	0
9	(38/39) 97%	0	(1/39) 3%
10	(37/39) 95%	(2/39) 5%	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>(381/390) 98%</b>	<b>5/390 1%</b>	<b>4/390 1%</b>

Data show that most of the L2 subjects do not master the order VS. Their behavior sharply contrasts with the behavior of the control group. The comparison between the performances of the two groups illustrated in the Diagrams 1 and 2 shows it very clearly:

**Diagram 1. VS - SV in L2 subjects**



**Diagram 2. VS - SV in the Control group**

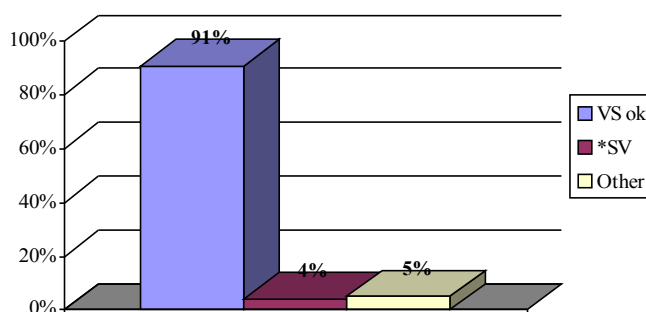


While subject inversion structures are attested in almost 100% of the elicited contexts in the control group, they are produced at a roughly chance level by L2 learners of Italian, who also produced the SV order to a comparable extent.

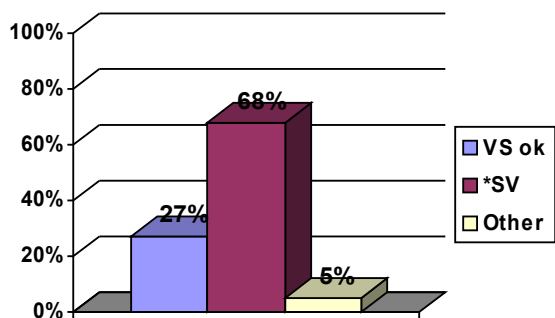
The results are sharper if the L2 speakers are divided into different subgroups according to their L1. As can be deduced from Table 2, which shows the individual performances, the shape of Diagram 1 is largely affected by the answers given by 7 subjects, who produced a quite high number of VS

structures. With the exception of one case,<sup>11</sup> L2 subjects who performed similarly to the control group were all native speakers of languages other than German and French. Diagrams 3, 4, 5 below illustrate the performances of the three subgroups we took into consideration: the first group, shown in Diagram 3, is constituted by the Albanian, Bosnian, Greek, Russian and Polish L2 subjects. Diagrams 4 and 5 show the performances of the German and the French group, respectively.

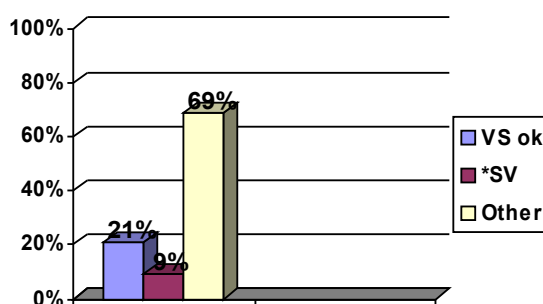
**Diagram 3. VS – SV in L2 Subjects with L1 different from German and French**



**Diagram 4. VS - SV in the German group**



**Diagram 5. VS – SV in the French group**



The performances of the first group in Diagram 3 essentially conform to those of the control group. The behavior of the two latter groups, on the other hand, differs completely. As illustrated by Diagrams 4 and 5, German and French subjects do not properly master the VS order.

Note that in the L1s of the group in Diagram 3 the VS order would also be produced in the same pragmatic contexts identified by the elicitation test. This is not the case for the German and the French group, since both German and French lack any subject inversion phenomenology comparable to the one found in Italian. This is probably one crucial factor distinguishing the behavior of the three groups. On the other hand, it should be also pointed out that the L2 subjects belonging to the first group are the most fluent ones in Italian.<sup>12</sup> As for the German speakers, only a subset of subjects appears to be comparably fluent. This is also the case for the French speakers.

L1, thus, appears to influence the performances of (not particularly fluent) L2ers, as is indicated by the case of the German and the French group. The performances sharply differ between the two groups, though. The German speakers tend to use the order SV, thus realizing the informational value of the Italian VS order through resort to the order appropriate in their L1. The case of the French speakers is particularly revealing: the VS order is utilized in 21% of the cases only, while they produced 69% of what we label “other”. In their cases, “other” systematically corresponds to a Cleft sentence: 98% of cases, 79 out of 81 performed utterances. A Cleft sentence would be the structure utilized in French in the same contexts. This neatly indicates the tendency to use the syntactic option active in their L1 in similar pragmatic contexts.

Some examples of the answers provided by the French subjects to questions of the type in (7) are given in (8):

- (7) *Chi ha portato questi fiori?*  
 ‘Who has brought these flowers?’
- (8) a. *E’ una donna che ha portato i fiori.* (Subject 11)  
 ‘It is a woman who has brought the flowers.’
- b. *E’ la mamma che ha portato i fiori.* (Subject 12)  
 ‘It is the mother who has brought the flowers.’
- c. *E’ una donna che ha portato i fiori.* (Subject 17)  
 ‘It is a woman who has brought the flowers.’

The results can be further illustrated taking into consideration the different verb classes present in the elicitation task. Tables 4 through 7 reproduce the general results above with respect to the different subgroups and the control group, distributed according to different verb classes. Overall, verb class belonging does not appear to particularly influence the production of the VS order, which is either available or essentially unavailable or only marginally so anyway. Note, however, that for both the German and the French groups the use of VS order is higher with unaccusative verbs than with intransitive and transitive ones.

**Table 4. VS-SV with Intransitives**

Order	L1 German	L1 French	L1 different from German and French	Control
<b>VS</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>87%</b>	<b>99%</b>
<b>*SV</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Other</b> <sup>13</sup>	<b>5%</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1%</b>

**Table 5. VS-SV with Unaccusatives**

Order	L1 German	L1 French	L1 different from German and French	Control
<b>VS</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>87,5%</b>	<b>95%</b>
<b>*SV</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>12,5%</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

**Table 6. VS-SV with Transitives**

Order	L1 German	L1 French	L1 different from German and French	Control
<b>VS</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>93%</b>	<b>98%</b>
<b>*SV</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>2%</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1%</b>

**Table 7. VS-SV with “Ci” existential**

Order	L1 German	L1 French	L1 different from German and French	Control
<b>VS</b>	<b>95%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>93%</b>	<b>96%</b>
<b>*SV</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>4%</b>

The case of the existential “ci” construction must be singled out: as shown in Table 7, in existential structures the VS order is systematically produced by all subjects with no difference depending on the L1.

Let us concentrate now on the case of transitive verbs. We may note that, although the necessity to use a clitic pronoun for the object in VS structures containing verbs of this class may eventually constitute a factor of complexity, yet it does not appear to play the central role in the limited production of a word order which is hardly available anyway. This is particularly visible throughout

the German group. In particular, taking into consideration the general results on the clitic elicitation experiment presented in Leonini & Belletti (2003) (see also the Tables in Appendix 1), we observe that clitic production is limited within the German speakers, and that use of a clitic pronoun appears to be avoided in part through omission, but most of all through use of a full lexical noun phrase as a complement. As shown in Diagram 4 and in the Tables 4 through 7 above, the use of VS order also appears to be very limited in this group. If we now analyze the production of VS/SV order with transitive verbs in the German subjects in better detail, we observe that in some cases the object has been realized as a clitic in both VS and SV structures. This is illustrated in Table 8:<sup>14</sup>

**Table 8. VS–SV with transitive verbs and clitic production in the German group**

Subject	VS	*SV
1	2	0
2	0	8
5	0	0
6	0	0
7	0	8
9	0	0
14	0	3
15	16	0
18	9	4
20	0	1
21	3	4
22	0	3
23	0	3
24	0	1
25	0	3
26	0	0
TOT	30/68 <b>44%</b>	38/68 <b>56%</b>

The presence of a clitic pronoun in SV structures, where inversion has not been produced, is particularly significant: it clearly indicates that the VS order constitutes a problem for the L2ers,

independently of the production of a clitic pronoun. This is further indicated by speakers 18 and 21, where a clitic is produced with both VS and SV.

As for the French speakers, use of a clitic does not appear to be problematic, as production of clitics ranges up to 78% of the cases in this group (see Leonini & Belletti (2003) and Appendix 1). This is expected as French has pronominal clitics of the same Romance type as Italian. Hence, the fact that the subjects belonging to this group do not master the VS order properly must be independent of the production of clitics. Table 9 below shows the relatively high percentage of production of clitic pronouns in the Cleft sentences, the structures typically utilized by the French group in place of VS:<sup>15</sup>

**Table 9. VS – SV with transitive verbs and clitic production in the French group**

Subject	VS	*SV	Cleft
11	1	2	5
12	0	0	1
17	0	1	14
TOT	1/24 <b>4%</b>	3/24 <b>12,5%</b>	20/24 <b>83%</b>

It is interesting to point out that subject inversion with transitive verbs takes a peculiar shape in the case of the German subject 1 who has a relatively high production of VS structures (60%) but performed very poorly in the clitic elicitation task (4% of clitics produced), where a widespread use of full lexical noun phrase complements (65%) instead of clitics was performed (Leonini & Belletti (2003) and Appendix 1). While using the VS order, however, the subject systematically avoids VOS and VSO, with O realized as a full lexical noun phrase. Note that the two options, VOS and VSO with O a full lexical noun phrase, can be ruled out on UG principled grounds in Italian (see Belletti (2001; 2002) for detailed discussion). Interestingly, in cases which would yield one of these

two orders, the L2 speaker rather omits the object altogether. Indeed, while clitics are omitted in 13% of the cases in the clitic elicitation task (Leonini & Belletti (2003) and Appendix 1), they are omitted up to 75% in the inversion task<sup>16</sup>, in this subject. We tentatively interpret this result as reflecting the effort to avoid the UG incompatible VOS/VSO options.

### **5. Comparing VS and null subjects in L2 speakers**

In this section we take up the issue raised in the introduction and provide a close comparison of the performances of the L2 subjects with regard to their ability to produce the VS order and to utilize null pronominal subjects in tensed clauses. As mentioned, a clear dissociation shows up. This is illustrated by the following Tables 10 and 11, reporting the percentages of productions of VS and null subjects by the L2 speakers of the German and of the French group, respectively. Table 12 reports the same percentages for the L2 speakers whose L1 was neither French nor German. Finally, Table 13 provides a summary of the percentages of the different L2 groups in comparison with the behavior of the control group. Null subjects have been counted taking into account the productions of all finite verbal utterances in the Clitic elicitation test referred to above, which was independently administered to the L2 subjects and to the control group.

**Table 10. Comparison VS/Null Subjects in the German group**

Subjects L1 German	VS ok	Null Subjects
1	(24/40) 60%	(19/43) 44%
2	(6/40) 15%	(18/42) 43%
5	(6/39) 15%	(7/32) 22%
6	(4/39) 10%	(16/31) 52%
7	(5/39) 13%	(26/33) 79%
9	(6/39) 15%	(17/33) 52%
14	(5/39) 13%	(3/32) 9%
15	(35/39) 90%	(32/36) 89%
18	(19/39) 49%	(30/36) 83%
20	(5/39) 13%	(15/36) 42%
21	(16/39) 41%	(28/36) 78%
22	(5/39) 13%	(20/36) 56%
23	(5/39) 13%	(25/36) 69%
24	(9/39) 23%	(26/40) 65%
25	(12/39) 31%	(24/33) 73%
26	(5/39) 13%	(7/39) 18%
<b>Total</b>	(167/626) 27%	(313/574) 55%

**Table 11. Comparison VS/Null Subjects in the French group**

Subjects L1 French	VS ok	Null Subjects
11	(11/39) 28%	(30/32) 93%
12	(6/39) 15%	(18/37) 49%
17	(8/39) 21%	(25/35) 71%
<b>Total</b>	(25/117) 21%	73/104 70%

**Table 12. Comparison VS/Null Subjects in L2 groups with L1 different from French and German<sup>17</sup>**

L2 Subjects other than French and German	VS ok	Null Subjects
3 (Russian)	(33/39) 85%	(35/38) 92%
4 (Polish)	(36/39) 92%	(33/35) 94%
8 (Dutch)	(27/39) 69%	(13/35) 37%
10 (Polish)	(36/39) 92%	(35/36) 97%
13 (Bosnian)	(33/39) 85%	(34/38) 89%
16 (Albanian)	(38/39) 97%	(36/36) 100%
19 (Greek)	(37/39) 95%	(36/37) 97%
Total	240/273 88%	223/256 87%
Total excluding Dutch subject	213/234 91%	209/220 95%

**Table 13. VS/Null subjects in the control group and in comparison with different L2 groups**

Subjects	VS ok	Null subjects
Control group	<b>98%</b> 381/390	<b>95%</b> 333/352
L2 German	<b>27%</b> 167/626	<b>55%</b> 313/574
L2 French	<b>21%</b> 25/117	<b>70%</b> 73/104
L2 different from French and German (excluding Dutch)	<b>91%</b> 213/234	<b>95%</b> 209/220

Note first of all that the availability of the VS order and that of null subjects is virtually identical in the control group, both occurring in roughly all relevant contexts in the elicited production test for VS and in presence of finite verbal morphology for null subjects. The L2 group containing speakers whose L1 is different from French and German, and who also are the most fluent/advanced ones in Italian, essentially conforms to the control group. This is not the case for the other two L2 groups containing the less fluent/advanced L2 speakers, whose L1s are French and German. In the latter two groups, there is a very clear difference, with VS sharply less available than null subjects: 27% vs. 55% for the Germans; 21% vs 70% for the French. It should be pointed out that this difference occurs in virtually all speakers of the two groups (Cfr. Tables 10 and 11).

Consider now the fact that the L1s of the L2 group behaving as the control group are all null subject languages which allow omission of a pronominal subject in tensed clauses and where the VS order is also the appropriate word order in pragmatic contexts equivalent to the ones elicited by our test (see also the discussion surrounding Diagrams 3 and 5). The non-German non-French speakers in

our group are also the most fluent ones in Italian, as we said. Hence, their performances can be interpreted as both a function of their level of advancement in the knowledge of Italian and of the properties of their L1s as to what pertains the parametric choice related to the null subject parameter.

The L2 groups containing speakers whose L1 is either French or German are characterized by subjects with a not very fluent/advanced level of Italian<sup>18</sup> and whose L1 is not a null subject language. Thus, the French and German groups are the relevant ones which make explicit a dissociation of the properties usually linked through the null subject parameter that we reviewed in section 2: possibility of leaving the pronominal subject unrealized in the presence of tensed verbal morphology and availability of subject inversion producing the VS order. The results show that while the former property is largely available to both groups, the latter is much less so (from half to less than that).

## **6. Conclusive remarks**

Beside its intrinsic interest, the data discussed in the previous section opens up the obvious question as to why it should be so. We now elaborate on possible interpretations. In section 2, and throughout this paper, we discussed the typical pragmatic discourse value of the subject inversion phenomenon in Italian, which yields the order VS, namely the status as Focus of new information of the postverbal subject.<sup>19</sup> The discourse conditions created in our videos were meant to precisely elicit a new information focalized subject. It is then natural to assume that the problem that the L2

groups under consideration have encountered lies precisely in their ability to meet these discourse conditions in the relevant structural position active in Italian. According to our approach, this position is the Focus position in the VP periphery, linearly corresponding to the order VS. As noted in section 4, in the discourse conditions created by the test, the French and the German L2 groups tend to utilize the strategy and word order adequate in their native L1: a cleft sentence on the subject for the French speakers, the SV order for the German speakers. The data of the previous section 5 neatly indicate that the problem with VS cannot be related to unavailability of null subjects, as these are produced by the same group at a fairly good rate. We conclude that, although these speakers do not seem to have particular problems in licensing a null subject “pro” in the preverbal relevant subject position, they do have particular problems in activating the clause internal VP peripheral position which should host the postverbal lexical subject.<sup>20</sup> As their L1 has a different way of meeting the discourse conditions created by the test, the L2 speakers tend to adopt it. Hence, transfer abundantly occurs in this area at the interface with pragmatics.

Notice that the fact that transfer occurs, as is unequivocally particularly visible with the group of the French speakers,<sup>21</sup> clearly indicates that the L2 subjects do not have any problem in identifying the informational value of the elicited construction. Rather, their difficulty must be a grammatical in nature: a formal difficulty which pertains to the computational system; in particular, those aspects of the computational system at the interface with pragmatics, as in the adopted approach to inversion.

Note furthermore that, as the two L2 groups under discussion appear to be able to license a personal null “pro” in subject position, for them licensing of a null expletive “pro” in the same position in VS structures should not be problematic. Hence, difficulty with VS could not be due to unavailability of expletive “pro”. This is coherent with the typological observation that there do not seem to be languages which license a referential “pro” but do not license an expletive null “pro”. Interestingly, the opposite alternative is attested and German is precisely a language of the latter type (cfr. Cardinaletti (1991), Tomaselli (1991)). It would seem unlikely that in their L2 productions in Italian the German speakers should perform better with the licensing of a referential “pro” subject than of an expletive one, the latter being the only option in their L1 and the option available to a larger extent across languages.

How can we characterize the source(s) of the difficulty with VS? We speculate that the mismatch in null subjects and VS productions could partly be due to the following conspiracy of factors: while the possibility of licensing a pronominal null subject in tensed clauses is both overwhelmingly instantiated in the input data available to the L2ers and is also certainly taught in foreign language classes so that it acquires a semiconscious saliency, the same is not true for the availability of VS structures in the relevant discourse conditions. We may also add that the Italian input data displaying VS are fairly complex and not unambiguous in that, as mentioned in footnote 19, given different discourse conditions and a different intonation, the VS order can also involve a topic/known subject. This is a possible source of confusion and uncertainty with respect to this order. Thus, L2 speakers could be in a sense primed to reset their value for the null subject parameter as

for the core null subject property, but they would not be equally primed to do the same for the subject inversion property. Hence, adequate activation of the relevant VP periphery takes longer.

Furthermore, some peculiar intrinsic difficulty with the acquisition of structures directly involving conditions at the interface, as is typically the case with VS structures, may also be held responsible for the uncovered difficulty. This is suggested by the following considerations. Our findings appear to converge with findings on “attrition” in near native (White & Genesee (1996)) speakers of English with L1/Italian or Greek, recently discussed in Tsimpli et alii (2003), as well as with other L2 (written) production data, by near native speakers of Italian with L1/English, presented in Bennati (2002). Both works identify an area of difficulty with VS structures which persists in time and which leads to persisting “optionality” (Sorace (2000)) in the production of the VS order. No comparable difficulty is documented with the licensing of null pronominal subjects. Tsimpli et alii’s (2003), Bennati’s (2002) and our empirical conclusions then converge in identifying the grammatical options which most directly involve conditions at the interface with other cognitive systems, such as those concerning the pragmatics of conversational exchanges yielding VS, as those which turn out to be, in a sense, the most “fragile” ones: they are both harder to acquire in L2 acquisition as the data discussed in this paper have shown, and they are harder to become stable in the long run as the data presented in the quoted works indicate. It so appears that, in cases like those studied here concerning VS, where different grammatical structures and computations in the L1 and in the L2 are compatible with the very same pragmatic conditions, both structures and computations tend to be accessible in the course of the L2 acquisition and tend to remain accessible in time. This

is so independently of the appropriate resetting of the core grammatical property associated to the null subject parameter, i.e. licensing of a null subject “pro”, as in the case studied here. These conclusions may provide a contribution towards a better understanding of the relation of the computational language system with other cognitive systems, an issue which has acquired priority in the agenda put forth by the Minimalist Program. Moreover, the fact that both computations active in the L1 and in the L2 (tend to) remain accessible to the L2 speakers, does not give rise to an impossible UG incompatible interlanguage. Rather, as mentioned at the outset, the (possibly persisting) stage where VS is not (readily) available but null pronominal subjects are, characterizes a possible UG compatible combination which some languages possibly exploit. The two often related properties are indeed partly dissociated in principle, as the account formulated in this paper has made explicit on a formal ground.

The Tables below are taken from Leonini & Belletti (2003) and refer to the results of the experiment on the elicitation of clitic pronouns.

**Table A: Production of Clitic pronouns in L2 Subjects**

Subjects	Clitic present		Clitic omitted		Lexical NP		Strong Pronoun		Incomplete answers	
1	4%	1*	13%	3	65%	15	4%	3;1*	4%	1
2	4%	1*	22%	5	70%	16;1*	0	0	4%	1
3	91%	21;1*	4%	1	0	0	0	0	4%	1*
4	91%	21;1*	4%	1	0	0	0	0	4%	1*
5	0	0	0	0	91%	21;2*	0	0	9%	2
6	0	0	17%	4;1*	56%	13	4%	1*	22%	5
7	35%	8;2*	26%	6	26%	6	9%	2	4%	1
8	22%	5	9%	2	56%	13;1*	0	0	13%	3;1*
9	0	0	48%	11;1*	39%	9	0	0	13%	3;1*
10	96%	22;2*	0	0	0	0	0	0	4%	1
11	70%	16;2*	0	0	30%	7	0	0	0	0
12	9%	2*	0	0	83%	19	4%	1	4%	1
13	74%	17;1*	13%	3;1*	9%	2	0	0	4%	1
14	9%	2*	26%	6	65%	15	0	0	0	0
15	87%	20;2*	0	0	13%	3	0	0	0	0
16	96%	22;2*	0	0	0	0	0	0	4%	1
17	78%	18;2*	0	0	9%	2	4%	1	9%	2
18	69%	16;2*	9%	2	13%	3	0	0	9%	2
19	52%	12;1*	9%	2	35%	8	0	0	4%	1*
20	4%	1*	13%	3	69%	16	0	0	13%	3;1*
21	78%	18;2*	0	0	13%	3	0	0	9%	2
22	13%	3;2*	30%	7	52%	12	4%	1	0	0
23	17%	4;2*	35%	8	48%	11	0	0	0	0
24	9%	2*	26%	6	65%	15	0	0	0	0
25	9%	2;1*	17%	4	74%	17;1*	0	0	0	0
26	0	0	35%	8;1*	61%	14;1*	4%	1	0	0

\* = Clitic present in the question

**Table B: Percentages of clitic use in Subjects with L1 German**

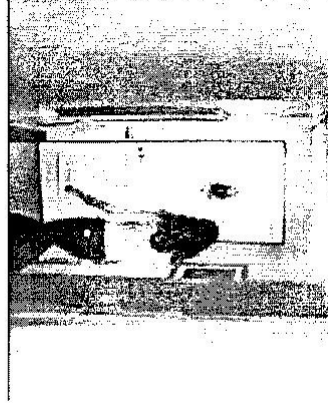
Subjects	Clitic present	Clitic omitted	Lexical NP	Strong Pronoun	Incomplete answers
German	22%	20%	51%	2%	5%

## Appendix 2

Some examples of the proposed scenes are given below:



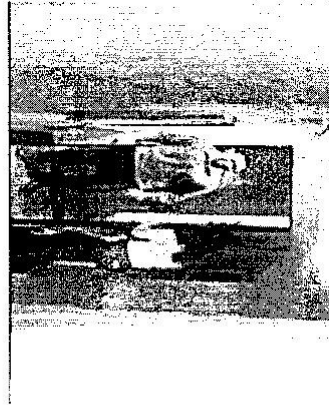
Mom is eating an apple



The bell rings



Mom goes away



They say "Hello" to each other



The girl comes and asks:  
"Chi ha mangiato la mela?"  
("Who has eaten the apple?")



The girl comes and asks:  
"Chi è arrivato?"  
("Who has arrived?")

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<sup>1</sup> White (2000, 2003); Schwartz (1998) and references cited therein on the issue of the influence of the L1 on the L2 in particular.

<sup>2</sup> A point also recently taken up in Bel (2003) who draws partly similar conclusions to ours, on the basis of an analysis of natural production data in child L1 acquisition of Spanish and Catalan. See also Bennati (2002) for empirical findings and conclusions very close to ours, based on a study on a written test of elicited production of subject inversion structures by near native (White and Genesee (1996)) L2 speakers of Italian with English as their L1. See also section 6.

<sup>3</sup> The acquisition of subject inversion in child L1 does not indicate a similar dissociation according to the discussion in Bel (2003).

<sup>4</sup> The Bantu languages may be a case in point (L.Rizzi, p.c.).

<sup>5</sup> For the original literature on the topic, cfr. in particular Rizzi (1982), Jaeggli (1982), Burzio (1986), Belletti (1988), cfr. also Pinto (1994), Saccon (1993), for Italian, on the relevance of a fine grained analysis of the lexical properties of the verbs favoring inversion, also including non-unaccusative verbs; on the “associate”-postverbal subject relation Chomsky (1995; 2002a), Bobaljik & Jonas (1996), a.o. and references cited therein.

<sup>6</sup> See Cinque (2002), Rizzi (forthcoming) and the articles collected there for a comprehensive view of the theoretical and empirical findings and proposals formulated within the cartographic approach.

<sup>7</sup> For the centrality of the issue concerning the relation of the computational system with the conceptual-intentional (CI) and the sensory-motor (SM) interfaces, see the Minimalist debate (Chomsky (1995, 2000, 2002a, 2002b.)) See section 6 for relevant considerations directly related to the empirical findings presented in this study.

<sup>8</sup> Note that the clause internal Focus position must be distinguished from the left peripheral one discussed in Rizzi (1997), which is typically associated with a contrastive interpretation/intonation. See the discussion in Belletti (2001, 2002) on this. See also Belletti (2003) for further investigation on the VP periphery.

<sup>9</sup> Part of the material discussed in this section is also presented in Leonini and Belletti (2003).

<sup>10</sup> See Leonini & Belletti (2003) for a detailed analysis of the results of the experiment on the L2 acquisition of object clitic pronouns and Appendix 1 for an overview of some relevant Tables.

<sup>11</sup> Subject 15 who is German but knows Spanish very well; this can have influenced his performance in Italian. The Dutch subject 8 has an intermediate behavior.

<sup>12</sup> Also confirmed in the clitic elicitation test discussed in Leonini & Belletti (2003). See Appendix 1.

<sup>13</sup> Apart from the French group, on which see the discussion related to the examples (7) and (8) above, “other” varies with the other L1 groups; it often corresponds to a passive sentence.

<sup>14</sup> Table 8 contains the production of object clitics with transitive verbs, in sentences displaying both VS and SV. We considered the number of occurrences of clitic pronouns produced by each subject. The total number is 68 for the German group and 24 for the French group of Table 9 below. Note that 16 out of the 30 clitics realized with the order VS in Table 8 have been produced by subject 15, who had a very good knowledge of Spanish.

<sup>15</sup> Subject 12 had a very peculiar behavior in clitic production across the board, probably due to the test situation (Leonini & Belletti (2003)). The low performance here is then independent of the inversion issue.

<sup>16</sup> The subject has produced a postverbal subject with transitive verbs in 8 cases. In 6 out of the 8 cases the object (clitic) was omitted.

<sup>17</sup> We group all L2ers with L1s different from French and German together, as their behavior is rather homogeneous. See the discussion below. The Dutch speaker had a slightly peculiar behavior; hence we consider the counting which does not include this speaker as the most representative one. But note that the picture changes only very marginally, as made clear by Table 12.

<sup>18</sup> We use the term “level” in an informal way. The L2 subjects investigated in this study were not formally assigned to different “levels” in, e.g., language classes.

<sup>19</sup> We have left on the side here the possibility of structures displaying the VS order, with S topic/old information which are associated to a different intonation and occur in different pragmatic conditions than the ones considered here (in the elicited VS structures). See Belletti (2002) for discussion.

<sup>20</sup> Further indication that the null subject parameter has undergone resetting is also provided by the systematic occurrence of null subjects in embedded clauses in the productions of the L2 groups under consideration. See Rizzi (1994) for discussion on the relevance of embedded contexts in revealing the null subject setting of the parameter.

<sup>21</sup> But the point extends to the German group as well, as SV would be the order produced in the elicited conditions in their L1.