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Adult L2 Acquisition of Italian Clitic Pronouns and ‘Subject Inversion’/VS Structures

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1. Introduction

In this paper we will be primarily concerned with the acquisition of object clitic pronouns by a group of adult L2 learners of Italian with different L1s¹. The ultimate aim of our research is the adult L2 acquisition of Italian subject inversion structures displaying the VS order. However, since ‘subject inversion’/ VS structures, V a transitive verb, typically realize the direct object as a clitic pronoun in Italian, as the examples in (1) illustrate:

- (1) a. Chi ha portato i fiori?
“Who brought the flowers?”
b. Li ha portati Silvia
Them(cl) brought Silvia
“Silvia brought them”

the study of the level of acquisition of object clitics comes logically first. Hence, we will primarily analyse here the interlanguage grammars of the L2 group with respect to the ability in producing object clitics in different contexts. An elicitation task procedure will be used, described in section 3.1. Finally, a similar experimental procedure will be introduced to detect the mastering of subject inversion/Vs structures.²

The paper is organized as follows: in section 2 a detailed description of the population taking part into the experiments is provided; section 3.1 supplies methodological information about the experiment on clitics production; the results of this experiment are analysed in section 3.2; section 4 focuses on the experiment on the elicitation of subject inversion VS structures; section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Participants

The population participating in the experiment was constituted in the vast majority by visiting students (24 out of 26) of the University of Siena; their age ranged between 19 and 34 y.o. The subjects had had from a minimum of 6 months to

¹ The investigation of adult L2 learners’ developing grammars has been the centre of much recent research and has largely contributed to the field of L2 acquisition. Of key interest has been the question whether adult L2 acquisition exhibits patterns similar to L1 acquisition and to child L2 acquisition as well as whether the L1 grammar influences L2 acquisition. White 2003; Schwartz 1998 and references cited therein especially relevant for the issue on the influence of the L1 on the L2.

² See Belletti and Leonini (2003), (ms. University of Siena, (submitted)) for a more detailed analysis and discussion of this experiment.

a maximum of 63/72 months of study of Italian in their native country (the latter in three cases only). None of the subjects, however, had had any early exposure to Italian. Their permanence in Italy ranged from 1 month to 5/6 years (two cases).

The 26 L2 learners of Italian had different L1s. The biggest group was constituted by native speakers of German.

The whole population consisted of: 16 Germans (G); 3 French (F); 2 Polish (P); 1 Dutch (D); 1 Russian (R); 1 Greek (Gr); 1 Albanian (Al); 1 Bosnian (Bo).

More detailed information on the L2 subjects are summarized in Table 1 in the Appendix. 10 adult native speakers of Italian served as a control group. They came from different regions in Italy; all of them were living in Siena, where they have been tested. Their age ranged between 22 and 33 y.o.

3. The elicitation of clitic pronouns

3.1. Experimental design

19 videos describing different scenes were shown to the 26 subjects. At the end of each video a question was asked concerning the scene; the subjects had been instructed to always answer with a full sentence containing the verb, in the way they felt most natural. Some distractor scenes were also inserted³. To exemplify, object clitics have been elicited through questions related to the scenes of the type in (2):

- (2) a. Il ragazzo che cosa ha fatto con la carta?
The boy what has done with the paper?
“what has the boy done with the paper?”

Expected answer:

- b. L’ha buttata nel cestino
It(cl) has thrown away in the basket
“he has thrown it away in the basket”

An object clitic was expected in 23 contexts.

3.2. Results

Table 1 below illustrates the general results on the clitic elicitation experiment. As shown in the Table, use of clitics is not acquired properly: clitics are often omitted and, even more often, the complement is realized as a full lexical noun phrase; use of a strong pronoun in place of the clitic appears to be quite limited. We interpret the use of a full lexical noun phrase as a complement in place of the clitic as a strategy to avoid use of a clitic pronoun which the elicitation task brings to light in a sharp way.⁴

³ Subjects were tested individually. They took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete each task. Their responses were recorded and then transcribed. Only full sentences containing a verb were considered, while repetitions were discarded.

⁴ The elicitation procedure makes the strategy emerge in a clearer way than simple natural production data (see Duffield et alii for related discussion on this point).

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 1: Production of Clitic pronouns in L2 Subjects

A total lack of misplacement errors of clitics in the provided answers should also be pointed out; it contrasts with some findings in the (child and adult) L2 acquisition of object clitics in French (Belletti & Hamann (in press), Granfeldt & Schlyter (in press), Hamann & Belletti (in prep), Hulk (2000), and references cited there). With the L2 subjects investigated here, when produced, clitics are always located in the appropriate pro-clitic position (with tensed verb forms). Of course, more data on adult L2 acquisition of clitics in Italian is necessary to determine the general character of this result.

Overall, our findings appear to be directly compatible with the so called 'No Impairment' hypothesis (Duffield et alii (2002), Schwartz & Sprouse (1996), Schwartz (1998), White (2003)), particularly relevant in the case of the German subjects, all at a relatively non-advanced level in the acquisition of Italian (with the only exception of subject 18).

Table 1 sharply contrasts with Table 2 reporting the responses of the control group to the same elicitation test.

Subjects	Clitic present	Clitic omitted	Lexical NP	Strong Pronoun	Incomplete answers
1	87% 20;2*	0	13% 3	0	0
2	100% 23;2*	0	0 0	0	0
3	87% 20;2*	0	9% 2	0	4% 1
4	83% 19;2*	0	13% 3	0	4% 1
5	83% 19;2*	0	13% 3	0	4% 1
6	91% 21;2*	0	9% 2	0	0
7	96% 22;2*	0	4% 1	0	0
8	100% 23;2*	0	0 0	0	0
9	96% 22;2*	0	4% 1	0	0
10	87% 20;2*	0	13% 3	0	0

Table 2: Production of clitic pronouns in control subjects

Note the total lack of clitic omissions and use of strong pronouns in the control group. Use of full lexical noun phrases is also extremely limited. This indicates that use of a full lexical noun phrase as a complement can be interpreted as an effect of the experimental design only to a very marginal extent. This in turn supports our interpretation above for the “overuse” of lexical noun phrases in the L2 (German) subjects as an avoidance strategy.

As not all subjects show clitic omissions, we can group them accordingly. We obtain the results summarized by the percentages in Table 3, visualized by Figure 1. Table 4 and the related Figure 2 illustrate the very different performances of the control group.

Subjects	Clitic present	Clitic omitted	Lexical NP	Strong Pronoun	Incomplete answers
With clitic omiss	28%	20%	45%	2%	6%
With no clitic omiss	64%	0	30%	1%	5%
All subjects	39%	14%	40%	1,7%	5,5%

Table 3: Total of percentages of clitic use in L2 subjects

Subjects	Clitic present	Clitic omitted	Lexical NP	Strong Pronoun	Incomplete answers
Control	91%	0	7,7%	0	1,3%

Table 4: Total of clitic use in the Control Group

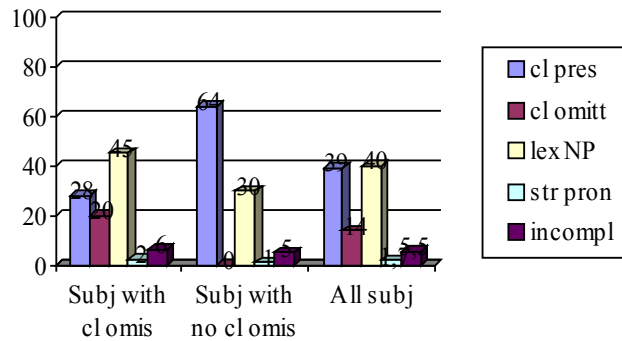


Figure 1: Clitic use in L2 Subjects

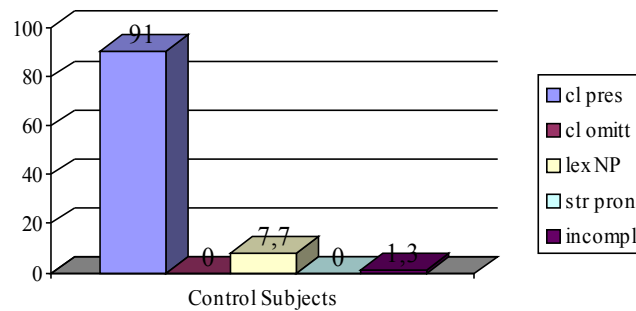


Figure 2: Clitic use in Control Subjects

We first note the sharp difference in the behaviour of the control group with respect to the first group of Figure 1 as no clitic omission is produced by control subjects. Second, we point out interesting differences in the shape of Figure 2 with respect to the second group of Figure 1. Although the second group of Figure 1 has a relatively high percentage of clitic use, still this use remains lower than the one of the control group; on the other hand, use of full lexical NP-complements is much higher in the second group of Figure 1 than in the control group. This again suggests that use of a full lexical NP-complement qualifies as a strategy to avoid use of a clitic pronoun to a certain extent (note that the almost 30% difference in clitic use between the control group and the second group of Figure 1 corresponds to the percentage of use of full lexical NP complements in the latter group).

Finally, it should be pointed out that the shape of the first group of Figure 1 essentially corresponds to the behaviour of the German group, as is illustrated by Table 5 and Figure 3:

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

Table 5: Percentages of clitic use in Subjects with L1 German

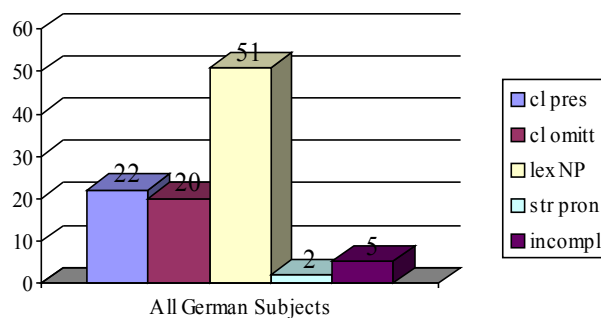


Figure 3: Clitic use in Subjects with L1 German

4. The elicitation of ‘subject inversion’/VS structures

4.1. The experimental design

To the same 26 adult subjects a further experimental task has been proposed in order to elicit structures with ‘subject inversion’, displaying the VS order. 22 videos have been shown to the subjects. As usual, distractors were interspersed among the relevant scenes. The structures were elicited by asking questions containing verbs of different verb classes of the type illustrated in (3). The subjects were asked to answer with a full sentence containing the verb, in the way they felt as the most natural one⁵. Some examples of the elicited answers are given in (4):

- (3) a. Chi è arrivato? unaccusative
Who has arrived?
b. Chi ha tossito? intransitive
Who has coughed?
c. Chi ha preparato il caffè? transitive
Who has prepared the coffee?
d. Cosa c’è sopra il tavolo? existential ‘ci’
What is on the table?

- (4) a. E’ arrivato Francesco
is arrived Francesco
“Francesco arrived”

⁵ The current experiment differs from the previous one for the fact that this time the subject was instructed to answer first to a question asked at the end of each scene by one of the characters of the video and then to some other questions related to the scene proposed by the presentation after each video. The subjects were asked to answer with a full sentence containing the verb, in the way they felt the most natural one.

- b. Ha tossito la ragazza
has cough the girl
“the girl cough”
- c. L’ha preparato la mamma
it(cl)has prepared the mother
“the mother prepared it”
- d. C’è un piatto
there is a plate

In all the elicited answers the postverbal subject is interpreted as the Focus of new information. With this interpretation, the subject is assumed to fill a clause internal dedicated position in the VP periphery in Italian along the lines proposed in Belletti (2001, 2002, and references cited there).⁶ As before, the same elicitation test has been proposed to the 10 control subjects, native speakers of Italian.

4.2. Results on ‘subject/inversion’/VS structures

The general very neat result is that the L2 subjects do not master the VS order. The following Table 6 and the related Figures 4 comparing the performances of the L2 group with the performances of the control group show it very clearly. While the subject inversion structures are produced in almost 100% of the elicited contexts by the control group, they are produced at a roughly chance level by the L2 group who produces the SV order to a comparable extent.

Subjects	VS ok		*SV		Other	
All L2 subjects	43%	432/1016	45%	458/1016	12%	126/1016
Control group	98%	381/390	1%	5/390	1%	4/390

Table 6: VS/SV

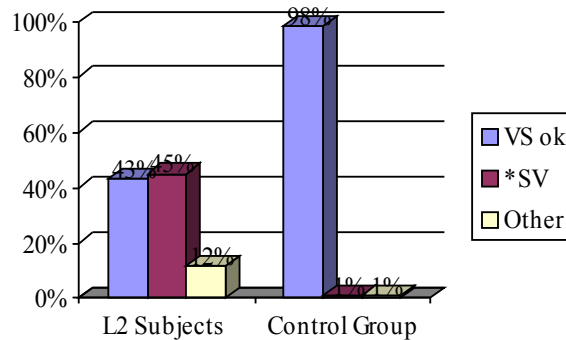


Figure 4: VS-SV in L2 Subjects and in Control Group

⁶ Zubizarreta (1998), Ordoñez (1998) for related discussion.

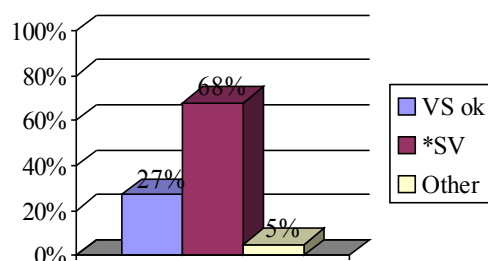


Figure 5: VS-SV in the German group

Let us compare the performances of the different L2ers based on their L1. As illustrated in Figure 5, the German group reproduces in a sharper way the general results of the overall L2 group (cfr. the detailed table in the Appendix):

As a matter of fact, the shape of Figure 4 is primarily affected by the very good performances of L2 subjects with an L1 other than German, whose answers essentially conform to the control group (see Appendix). We divided these speakers into two subgroups: one including the Albanian, the Bosnian and the Greek subjects, the other including the Polish and the Russian ones. The performances of these two groups could be influenced by their L1 in that the VS order would also be likely to be produced in the same pragmatic contexts identified by the elicitation test. This is clearly not the case for the German group, as German lacks any subject inversion phenomenology comparable to the one found in Italian.⁷ This is probably one crucial factor distinguishing the behaviour of the three groups. On the other hand, it should also be pointed out that the L2 speakers of the two subgroups above are by far the most fluent ones in Italian. As for the German group, only a small subset of subjects appears to be comparably fluent.

It is also of interest to compare the percentage of clitic use and the percentage of production of the VS order in some detail in the German group: both are low and they are extremely close to each other (22% and 27%, respectively). This seems to suggest that both domains are more or less at the same stage of attainment in the interlanguage of the German subjects.

That the L1 could influence the L2 performance (of not particularly fluent L2ers) is further illustrated by the peculiar behaviour of the French group, shown in Figure 6:

⁷ Which, as we are assuming, makes use of clause internal dedicated positions.

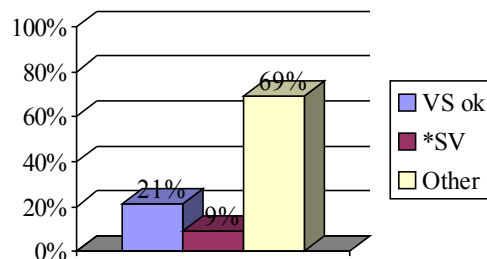


Figure 6: VS-SV in the French Group

The striking fact illustrated by Figure 6 is the high use of what we label ‘other’. In the French group ‘other’ systematically corresponds to a Cleft sentence (79 out of 81 performed utterances = 98% of the cases). A Cleft sentence would precisely be the structure typically produced in French in the same contexts. The answers provided by French subjects to a question like (5) are given in (6):

(5) a. Chi ha mangiato la mela?
Who has eaten the apple?

(6) a. E' una donna che ha mangiato la mela (Subject 11; Subject 17)
it is a woman who has eaten the apple
b. E' la mamma che ha mangiato la mela (Subject 12)
it is the mother who has eaten the apple

If we now consider the different verb classes present in the elicitation task, we observe that this does not appear to be a crucial factor conditioning the performances of the different L2 groups: as pointed out above, VS is generally problematic, independently of the class to which the verb belongs. This is illustrated in some detail in Table 7⁸:

Order	Intransitive	Unaccusative	‘Ci’ existential	Transitive
VS	35% 90/257 8% other	41% 42/102 2% Other	96% 131/137 4% Other	32,5% 169/520 3% other
*SV	51% 132/257 6% other	54% 55/102 2% other	0	52% 271/520 12,5% other

Table 7: VS-SV and different verb classes in L2 group

As for the case of transitive verbs, we may further note that, although the necessity to use a clitic pronoun for the object in VS structures containing verbs of

⁸ 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.

this class may possibly 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.

Finally, the case of the existential 'ci' construction must be singled out: all L2 speakers produce the VS order in this case (131 out of 137 answers = 96%), with no difference depending on the L1.

5. Summary and Conclusion

The investigation undertaken in this work on the L2 acquisition of clitic pronouns and subject inversion/VS structures in Italian has indicated the following:

- as for the German group:

- i. clitic production is limited;
- ii. 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;

- throughout the L2 group:

- i. clitics typically appear to be more readily available in dependence of presence of Romance type clitics in the L1;
- ii. use of a full lexical NP appears to be a prominent strategy to realize the complement of the verb in place of a clitic;
- iii. use of strong pronouns in place of a clitic is extremely limited.

- As for the German and French group:

- i. VS order is produced at a low rate, independently of the verb class (with the exception of "Ci" existential constructions);
- ii. the informational /discourse value of the Italian VS order is typically obtained through resort to the L1 strategy (SV order for the German group; a Cleft sentence for the French group), thus producing an instance of Transfer.

6. Appendix

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 had a very good knowledge of Spanish (15 years of study at school)

Table A: L2 Subjects

The German group, which constitutes the biggest one, is highlighted in Table A.⁹

⁹ Note that, overall, the length of study of Italian in the native country does not necessarily affect the performance in the test, while length of permanence in Italy probably does. This is suggested by the performance of the two subjects who have been living in Italy for the longest periods (subjects 18 and 19).

Subj	L1	VS ok	*SV	Other
1	G	(24/40) 60%	(10/40) 25%	(6/40) 15%
2	G	(6/40) 15%	(34/40) 85%	0
3	R	(33/39) 85%	0	(6/39) 15%
4	P	(36/39) 92%	0	(3/39) 8%
5	G	(6/39) 15%	(33/39) 85%	0
6	G	(4/39) 10%	(31/39) 79%	(4/39) 10%
7	G	(5/39) 13%	(34/39) 87%	0
8	D	(27/39) 69%	(9/39) 23%	(3/39) 8%
9	G	(6/39) 15%	(31/39) 79%	(2/39) 5%
10	P	(36/39) 92%	(1/39) 3%	(2/39) 5%
11	F	(11/39) 28%	(4/39) 10%	(24/39) 62%
12	F	(6/39) 15%	(6/39) 15%	(27/39) 69%
13	Bo	(33/39) 85%	(6/39) 15%	0
14	G	(5/39) 13%	(34/39) 87%	0
15	G	(35/39) 90%	(3/39) 8%	(1/39) 3%
16	Al	(38/39) 97%	0	(1/39) 3%
17	F	(8/39) 21%	(1/39) 3%	(30/39) 77%
18	G	(19/39) 49%	(17/39) 44%	(3/39) 8%
19	Gr	(37/39) 95%	(2/39) 5%	0
20	G	(5/39) 13%	(31/39) 79%	(3/39) 8%
21	G	(16/39) 41%	(23/39) 59%	0
22	G	(5/39) 13%	(32/39) 82%	(2/39) 5%
23	G	(5/39) 13%	(33/39) 85%	(1/39) 3%
24	G	(9/39) 23%	(27/39) 69%	(3/39) 8%
25	G	(12/39) 31%	(24/39) 62%	(3/39) 8%
26	G	(5/39) 13%	(32/39) 82%	(2/39) 5%
Total of all L2 subjects		(432/1016) 43%	(458/1016) 45%	(126/1016) 12%
German		(167/626) 27%	(429/626) 68%	(30/626) 5%
French		(25/117) 21%	(11/117) 9%	(81/117) 69%
Albanian, Bosnian, Greek		(108/117) 92%	(8/117) 7%	0,9%
Russian, Polish		(105/117) 90%	(1/117) 0,9%	(11/117) 9%

Table B. VS - SV in L2 subjects

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