

Subject Focus and Argument Structure in Italian and Spanish

Tania Stortini

University of Urbino
 tania.stortini@gmail.com
 0000-0002-4513-661X



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Abstract

The elicitation of Information Focus (IF) remains a central challenge in linguistic research, particularly in crosslinguistic and multilingual settings. The standard method, the Question-Answer (QA) test, while widely employed, suffers from well-documented limitations. Specifically, in QA-based elicitation, fragment answers often obscure the syntactic and prosodic realization of IF (Merchant 2004; Krifka 2006), and even full responses may yield interpretive ambiguities, encoding contrastive or corrective readings rather than purely informational ones, thus reducing the reliability of the collected data. To address these methodological issues, Cruschina & Mayol (2022, 2024) propose the Question with a Delayed Answer (QDA) test, an adaptation of the Discourse Completion Task (DCT) used in prosodic research on Romance languages. By inserting intervening material between the *wh*-question and the response, the QDA encourages the spontaneous production of full, congruent sentences, thereby yielding syntactically transparent data. Building on this methodological innovation, the present paper investigates how IF interacts with argument structure in two pro-drop Romance languages, Italian and Spanish. Focusing on transitive and unaccusative verbs, we show that QDA-elicited data reveal systematic crosslinguistic differences: while Italian exhibits stronger constraints on postverbal subjects under IF, Spanish allows more flexibility. These findings have implications not only for the empirical description of Romance focus strategies but also for theoretical models of the syntax-information structure interface.

Keywords: information structure; information focus; transitive verbs; unaccusative verbs; romance languages; QDA

Resum. *Focus de subjecte i estructura argumental en italià i espanyol*

L'elicitació del Focus Informatiu (FI) continua sent un repte central en la recerca lingüística, especialment en contextos translíngüístics i multilingües. El mètode estàndard, la prova de Pregunta Resposta (PR), tot i que s'utilitza àmpliament, presenta limitacions ben documentades. Concretament, en l'elicitació basada en PR, les respostes fragmentàries sovint oculten la realització

sintàctica i prosòdica del FI (Merchant 2004; Krifka 2006), i fins i tot les respostes completes poden donar lloc a ambigüitats interpretatives, ja que poden codificar lectures contrastives o correctives en lloc de lectures estrictament informatives, cosa que redueix la fiabilitat de les dades recollides. Per tal d'afrontar aquests problemes metodològics, Cruschina i Mayol (2022, 2024) proposen la prova de Pregunta amb Resposta Endarrerida (PRE), una adaptació de la Tasca de Compleció de Discurs (TCD) emprada en la recerca prosòdica sobre les llengües romàniques. En introduir material que intervé entre la pregunta i la resposta, el PRE afavoreix la producció espontània d'oracions completes i congruents, i proporciona així dades sintàcticament transparents. Partint d'aquesta innovació metodològica, aquest article investiga com el FI interactua amb l'estructura argumental en dues llengües romàniques de subjecte nul, l'italià i l'espanyol. Centrant-nos en els verbs transitius i inacusatius, mostrem que les dades obtingudes mitjançant PRE revelen diferències translingüístiques sistemàtiques. Mentre que l'italià presenta restriccions més fortes sobre els subjectes postverbals en contextos de FI, l'espanyol permet una flexibilitat més gran. Aquests resultats tenen implicacions no sols per a la descripció empírica de les estratègies de focus en les llengües romàniques, sinó també per als models teòrics de la interfície entre la sintaxi i l'estructura informativa.

Paraules clau: estructura informativa; focus informatiu; verbs transitius; verbs inacusatius; llengües romàniques; subjectes preverbals; subjectes postverbals; PRE

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1. Introduction

The investigation of Focus has been central in linguistic theory, engaging scholarship across semantics, pragmatics, syntax, and prosody (see, among many others, Büring 1997; Jackendoff 1972; Krifka 2008; Lambrecht 1994; Rooth 1985, 1992). Within this broad domain, Information Focus (IF), the neutral, non-contrastive type that canonically answers a wh-question, has proven particularly challenging to delimit conceptually and to study empirically. Despite being considered the *default* form of Focus, IF resists straightforward theoretical characterization and presents significant methodological challenges, especially in crosslinguistic research where subtle differences in grammar, discourse pragmatics, and word-order flexibility interact in ways that complicate the identification of robust generalizations (see, among many others, Cruschina 2012; Frascarelli & Stortini 2019; Jiménez-Fernández 2015b; Uth 2014; Uth & García 2018).

Studies on IF have typically relied on the Question-Answer (QA) test, a method in which participants are presented with a wh-question and expected to produce an appropriate answer. Although appealing in its simplicity and its apparent alignment with formal definitions of focus, the QA test has been shown to suffer from serious limitations (Cruschina & Mayol 2022, 2024; López 2009; Merchant 2004;

Krifka 2007; van der Wal 2016). Fragment answers, the most natural responses in spontaneous dialogue, obscure the syntactic position of the focused constituent. Full responses, when produced, may be felicitous but non-congruent with the triggering question and may instead realize contrastive, corrective, or exhaustive interpretations. These shortcomings are especially problematic, and the limitations of QA-based elicitation are particularly evident in languages where focus realization is tightly linked to syntax. Fragment answers in QA tasks obscure whether the subject would surface preverbally or postverbally in natural discourse, while incongruent or ambiguous answers risk contaminating the dataset with instances of non-informational focus. Consequently, QA-based studies often yield conflicting findings and have limited capacity to advance theoretical debates.

In response, recent work has explored alternative elicitation methods that balance naturalness and syntactic transparency. Among these, the Question with a Delayed Answer (QDA) test, introduced by Cruschina & Mayol (2022), represents a significant innovation. The QDA adapts the logic of Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), long employed in pragmatics and prosody (cf. Brown 2001; Kasper & Dahl 1991; Vanrell et al. 2018), to the study of focus. By inserting an intervening event between the question and the answer, the QDA encourages participants to produce full, congruent sentences rather than fragments. This simple adjustment has important consequences: it allows researchers to collect data that are simultaneously naturalistic, structurally complete, and directly aligned with the intended *wh*-constituent.

The present study builds on this methodological advancement and applies it to a specific comparative domain, namely the interaction between information structure and argument structure in two pro-drop languages, Italian and Spanish. Although both languages belong to the Romance family and share key typological properties such as the null-subject parameter, relatively flexible word order, and the availability of postverbal subjects, previous research reports systematic differences in focus realization. Broadly speaking, Spanish is often described as more permissive in allowing postverbal subjects (Cruschina 2022; Leonetti 2017; López 2009; Zubizarreta 1998), whereas Italian, by contrast, is considered more restrictive (Belletti 2001, 2004; Bianchi & Bocci 2012; Cardinaletti 2004; Frascarelli & Stortini 2019).

Indeed, the role of verb type adds further complexity. Since Perlmutter's (1978) Unaccusative Hypothesis and Burzio's (1986) reformulation, the distinction among transitive, unergative, and unaccusative verbs has been recognized as central to argument structure. This structural asymmetry has clear implications for focus realization. For instance, unaccusative verbs frequently license VS order under IF, reflecting the postverbal position of the internal argument. With transitive verbs, by contrast, the realization of a postverbal focused subject may require additional syntactic operations.

Despite the centrality of these patterns, their empirical foundation remains fragile. Much of the evidence comes from researcher intuitions, corpus examples whose discourse context is only partially recoverable, or QA-based experiments vulnerable to the methodological concerns mentioned earlier.

The goal of this paper is to address these questions by applying the QDA method to a controlled comparison of Italian and Spanish, focusing on transitive

and unaccusative verbs. In so doing, we aim to provide both a more reliable empirical basis for the study of IF and a methodological contribution to research on the syntax–information structure interface.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides the theoretical background, covering the semantic, pragmatic, and syntactic dimensions of focus, with particular attention to Italian and Spanish and to the role of argument structure in IF. Section 3 discusses the methodological challenges of eliciting IF, focusing on the limitations of the QA test, before introducing the QDA method and motivating its adoption in the present study. Section 4 presents the research questions and predictions, followed by the experimental design in Section 5. Section 6 reports the analysis and discusses the theoretical and methodological implications of the results, and Section 7 concludes.

2. Background on Focus

Focus is widely recognized as a discourse-related category, traditionally defined as the part of an utterance that introduces new or non-active information to the common ground (Halliday 1967; Jackendoff 1972; Lambrecht 1994). Over the last decades, it has been the subject of extensive investigation across theoretical frameworks and empirical domains (cf., among many others, Belletti 2008; Bianchi et al. 2015, 2016; É. Kiss 1998; Frascarelli 2010; Rizzi 1997; Rooth 1992). Two influential frameworks have provided formal accounts of focus. In the Alternative Semantics approach (Rooth 1985, 1992), focus is modelled as the introduction of a set of alternatives that can be exploited by operators such as questions, negation, or contrast. The Structured Meaning approach (Krifka 2007, 2008), by contrast, analyses focus as partitioning the sentence into a focused constituent and a background predicate. Both approaches converge in recognizing that focus systematically interacts with the semantics of questions and presuppositions, but they diverge in whether alternatives are represented as sets, or as structured pairs.

Among the various focus types identified in the literature, IF is generally regarded as the canonical subtype, since it introduces new information and directly provides a congruent answer to the question under discussion, serving as the baseline against which contrastive, corrective, or mirative foci are distinguished (É. Kiss 1998; Féry 2007; Bianchi & Bocci 2012; Bianchi et al. 2015, 2016; Cruschina 2012; Krifka 2007). For the purposes of our study, the crucial point is that IF is the type of focus that provides a congruent answer to a *wh*-question by selecting among alternatives.

Crosslinguistic studies confirm that while IF universally introduces alternatives, its formal realization varies widely. It can be encoded by prosodic prominence without word order change (as in English and German, cf. Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl 2007; Samek-Lodovici 1996, 2006; Stortini 2024) or it can be associated with dedicated syntactic positions in the left periphery (as in Finno-Ugric languages, cf. É. Kiss 1998, Vilkuna 1995), whereas it can be realized through word-order alternations (as in null-subject Romance varieties such as Italian and Spanish, cf. Belletti 2001, 2004; Belletti & Leonini 2004; Cardinaletti 2004; Leonetti 2017; Zubizarreta 1998).

These typological differences underscore the need to examine language-specific configurations rather than assuming a uniform mapping between focus and syntax. It is generally assumed that in null-subject Romance languages, focus is canonically realized in postverbal position (cf. Biberauer et al. 2010; Belletti 2004, 2005, 2008; Burzio 1986; Jaeggli & Safir 1989; Rizzi 1986; Zubizarreta 1998). The syntactic effects of postverbal placement are particularly evident with focal subjects, which typically trigger subject inversion,¹ as illustrated in (1) for Italian (adapted from Belletti 2004) and (2) for Spanish (adapted from Zubizarreta 1998).

- (1) a. *Chi è partito / ha parlato?* (Italian)
 who be.PRS.3SG leave.PP / have.PRS.3SG speak.PP
 ‘Who has left / has spoken?’
- b. *È partito / ha parlato GIANNI*
 be.PRS.3SG leave.PP / have.PRS.3SG speak.PP Gianni
 ‘Has left / has spoken GIANNI.’
- b’. # *GIANNI è partito / ha parlato*
 Gianni be.prs.3sg leave.pp / have.prs.3sg speak.pp
 ‘GIANNI has left / has spoken.’ (Belletti 2004: 7)
- (2) a. *¿Quién comió una manzana?* (Spanish)
 who eat.PST.3SG A.F.SG apple.F.SG
 ‘Who ate an apple?’
- b. *Comió una manzana JUAN.*
 eat.PST.3SG A.F.SG apple.F.SG Juan
 ‘Juan ate an apple.’
- b’. # *JUAN comió una manzana.*
 Juan eat.PST.3SG A.F.SG apple.F.SG
 ‘Juan ate an apple.’ (Zubizarreta 1998)

In the earlier literature, Focus Fronting to a preverbal position (i.e., FF) was largely considered unavailable for IF, as illustrated by the infelicity of preverbal subjects in examples such as (1b’) and (2b’). FF was instead primarily associated with non-informational focus types and was assumed to require additional discourse-related support. In particular, preverbal foci have been linked to corrective or contrastive interpretations (Rizzi 1997; López 2009; van Leusen 2004; Bianchi & Bocci 2012; Vallduví & Vilkuña 1998; Frascarelli & Stortini 2019; Frascarelli et al. 2022), to mirative interpretations (DeLancey 1997, 2001; Cruschina 2019; Bianchi et al. 2016), or to exhaustive readings (Brody & Szendrői 2011; Casentini & Stortini 2025; É. Kiss 1998; Horvath 2013).

More recent quantitative and experimental research has challenged this categorical view, suggesting that preverbal focus may also be compatible with IF, particu-

1. In this paper, the term *inversion* is used as a surface-descriptive label to refer to postverbal subjects, without committing to a specific derivational analysis.

larly with focal subjects, while remaining subject to language-specific constraints and exhibiting variation across languages. (cf. Gabriel 2010; Jiménez-Fernández 2015a, 2015b; Leal et al. 2018 for Spanish; and Frascarelli & Stortini 2019; Stortini 2024, 2026 for Italian). In Romance, the realization of IF interacts closely with word order, creating a natural testing ground for examining how argument structure conditions the syntax–information structure interface.²

2.1. Focus and argument structure

Within generative grammar, argument structure refers to the mapping between the thematic roles assigned by the verb and the syntactic positions occupied by its arguments.

Transitive verbs are bi-argumental, introducing an external argument, typically an <agent> merged in Spec,vP, and an internal argument, usually a <patient> merged in Spec,VP. The external argument is licensed by *v*, which is also responsible for the licensing of accusative Case on the internal argument (Arad 1998; Chomsky 1995; Larson 1988), as shown in Figure 1.

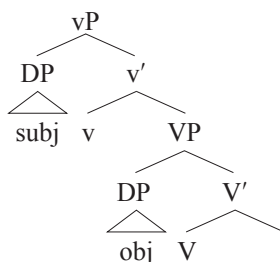


Figure 1. Argumental structure for transitive verbs

The canonical order is SV(O), with the subject in preverbal position. From the perspective of IF, this configuration raises a well-known issue: if IF is canonically associated with postverbal position in null-subject Romance languages, the realization of a postverbal subject is not structurally uniform across predicate types. In particular, with transitive verbs, postverbal subject realization involves a non-canonical realization of the external argument and therefore requires additional syntactic operations and specific discourse conditions. In Italian, postverbal subjects with transitive verbs are accordingly subject to tighter constraints: the external argument is canonically anchored in a preverbal position (Burzio 1986;

2. The analysis assumes that the realization of subject focus involves a syntactic derivation, without committing to a specific derivational implementation. Even though this issue is not directly addressed in the present paper, we assume that focused subjects are not interpreted as remaining *in-situ*. Accordingly, when an SV order is realized, even if prosodically marked as focal, preverbal subjects are assumed to involve movement (FF) to a dedicated projection (cf., among many others, Bocci 2013; Cardinaletti 2004; Frascarelli & Stortini 2019).

Cardinaletti 2004; Belletti 2004, 2008), and VS orders with transitive verbs have been reported to be less frequent and more discourse-dependent in informational contexts (Bentley 2006, 2018). By contrast, Spanish licenses postverbal subjects more freely, including in transitive clauses (Leonetti 2018).

Intransitive verbs, by contrast, do not form a uniform class. Perlmutter’s (1978) Unaccusative Hypothesis established that unergative verbs and unaccusative verbs differ in the origin of their subjects. Unergative subjects are external arguments like those of transitive verbs (i.e., merged in Spec,vP), whereas unaccusative subjects originate internally, within the VP, before raising to subject position (Arad 1998; Burzio 1986; Chomsky 1995; Larson 1988).

Prototypical unaccusative verbs include verbs of change of location (*arrivare/llegar* ‘arrive’), change of state (*sbocciare/florece*r, ‘bloom’), and existence (*vivere/vivir* ‘live’).³ Moreover, unaccusative verbs are often compared to bi-argumental transitive verbs without the <agent>, highlighting their affinity with internal-argument structures. Consider sentences in (3-5) below:

- (3)

I go (to Rome).

(location)
- <theme>

<location>
- (4)

The bomb explodes (in the air).

(change of state)
- <theme>

<location>
- (5)

The girl is sitting (on a chair).

(existence)
- <theme>

<location>

In (3-5) the second element can be more than an adjunct, particularly when it functions as a locative argument (cf., among others, Bresnan 1994; Rizzi 2004b; Rizzi & Shlonsky 2007). Building on this line, Manning et al. (1999) and Bouma et al. (2001) argue that constituents traditionally analysed as adjuncts with unergatives and unaccusative verbs can in fact be realized as internal arguments. Within this approach, the present work assumes that IOs of unaccusative verbs⁴ can be

3. In a thematic and aspectual framework, Sorace (2000) identified specific sub-categories of intransitive verbs. Sorace’s purpose is to demonstrate that these categories constitute an ordered hierarchy concerning auxiliary selection behaviours in Western European languages, namely, the Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy (ASH), as shown in Table I.

Table I. Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy (ASH), according to Sorace (2000)

Unaccusative	↓	Change of location	↓	selects BE (least variation)
		Change of state		
		Continuation of pre-existing state		
		Existence of state		
		Uncontrolled process		
		Controlled process (motional)		
Unergative	↑	Controlled process (nonmotional)	↑	selects HAVE (least variation)

4. Also, in unergative verbs, but they will not be considered in the present analysis.

considered syntactically equivalent to arguments merged in *Compl,VP*. The corresponding unaccusative verb structure is schematized in Figure 2.

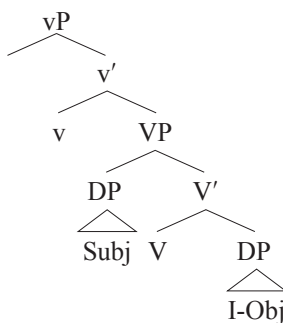


Figure 2. Argument structure for unaccusative verbs with argument IO

In sum, the distinction between transitive, unergative, and unaccusative verbs has direct consequences for focus realization. Transitive verbs and unergative verbs, whose subjects are external arguments and thus structurally predisposed to topic-like interpretation, favour preverbal subjects and restrict postverbal subjects to marked contexts. Unaccusative verbs, lacking an external argument, provide a setting for IF in postverbal position. The asymmetry thus reflects a deeper interaction between argument structure and information structure, one that varies across languages and requires careful empirical testing.

3. Methodological challenges in eliciting Information Focus

The interaction of focus with argument structure makes methodological considerations particularly critical. In order to determine the syntactic position of the subject under IF, it is essential to elicit complete sentences rather than fragments. This raises a central challenge: how can researchers elicit IF while at the same time ensuring that the syntactic realization of the clause is fully observable?

In crosslinguistic research, the QA test has been the most widespread method used to elicit IF (cf., among others, van der Wal 2016; Cruschina & Mayol 2022, 2024).⁵ Nevertheless, as convincingly argued in Cruschina & Mayol (2022), although simple and intuitive, the QA test suffers from well-documented limitations that can bias the results. In particular, the QA test can be easily misunderstood since the foci elicited are not necessarily instances of IF (for instance, Mirative Foci or Exhaustive Foci may be produced instead), and the focus in the answer may not be congruent with the wh-question. For example, it is possible to reply to a wh-question with a felicitous but non-congruent answer, as in (6-7) below:

5. Answer to a wh-question is also a classical method of establishing the size of focus (cf., among others, Rooth 1992; Lambrecht 1994; Krifka 2007; Beaver & Clark 2008).

- (6) a. Where is Nike from?
 b. Nike is the most famous AMERICAN brand.
- (7) a. Who did Mary see yesterday?
 b. Mary saw that LEO was going to work.

The sentence in (6b) is a pragmatically felicitous answer to (6a). Nevertheless, it is not a structurally congruent answer, since the DP *Nike is the most famous American brand* does not directly correspond to the wh-constituent. It therefore cannot be classified as IF. As discussed in Section 1, IF represents one of the possible answers within the set of alternatives generated by a question, aiming to identify the relevant wh-constituent. A similar issue arises in the answer in (7b). While the focused element corresponds to the wh-constituent, there is no exact correspondence, since the wh-question targets the DO of the verb *see*, while the answer refers instead to the subject of the embedded clause.

Even when congruence is respected, a second limitation emerges. When a congruent IF is realized, speakers overwhelmingly prefer fragments, which are the most natural answer to a wh-question. Because the background is recoverable from the question, it is natural to omit the presupposition and respond with a bare constituent, as in (8-9) below:

- (8) a. Who ate pasta for lunch?
 b. JOHN ~~ate pasta for lunch~~.
- (9) a. What did John eat for lunch?
 b. ~~John ate~~ PASTA ~~for lunch~~

From the perspective of focus elicitation, however, fragments obscure the crucial evidence, namely, whether the subject would surface in preverbal or postverbal position in a full sentence. While fragments are the most natural form of answer in spontaneous speech, they are the least informative for understanding the syntax of IF. This explains why studies using QA tests often report heterogeneous results, depending on whether fragments are accepted as valid, reconstructed, or excluded altogether.

We may therefore conclude that while the QA test is a useful starting point for identifying focus, it must be adapted to ensure both congruence and the avoidance of fragments, without compromising the naturalness of the answer.

In response to these limitations, Cruschina & Mayol (2022) proposed a novel elicitation technique, namely the Question with a Delayed Answer (QDA) test. QDA adapts the logic of DCTs long used in prosodic research (cf., Kasper & Dahl 1991; Brown 2001; Vanrell et al. 2018), consisting of a questionnaire with different scenarios designed to elicit a specific speech act or structure.⁶ Along the

6. In the DCT technique, the participants complete the task by taking a turn of dialogue. In the studies on IF, the DCT involved the question-answer test.

same lines, the QDA consists of a context followed by a *wh*-question. However, instead of proceeding immediately with the answer, the QDA introduces an intervening element, typically a brief digression, between the *wh*-question and the participant's answer.

This delay makes fragment answers pragmatically odd and favours the production of full, congruent sentences without participants being explicitly instructed to do so. Consider the scenario in (10), extracted from Cruschina & Mayol (2022: 10):

- (10) You go to your parents' place. You show your mum a watercolour portrait of yourself. She asks "Who drew it?". At that point you get a phone call. Somebody got the wrong number. You hang up and, to answer your mum, you say:
(Cruschina & Mayol 2022: 10)

In (10), the interruption increases the likelihood that the speaker will repeat the entire sentence rather than respond with a single constituent.

The advantage of the QDA is twofold. It elicits semi-spontaneous data that preserve naturalness, while ensuring syntactic transparency by discouraging fragments. Moreover, it allows researchers to control both the discourse context and the syntactic setting of the target constituent, thereby avoiding incongruent or ambiguous answers. Compared to QA tests, acceptability judgments, or corpus data, QDA strikes a balance between validity and experimental control, making it particularly suited for crosslinguistic research on IF in Romance languages.

4. Research questions and predictions

The theoretical discussion in Sections 2–3 has underscored the complex interplay between IF, argument structure, and word-order in Romance languages. Previous studies have shown that Italian and Spanish display both convergences and divergences in the realization of IF, particularly with subject position (cf. Gabriel 2007, 2010; Jiménez-Fernández 2015a, 2015b; Leal et al. 2018 for Spanish; and Frascarelli & Stortini 2019; Frascarelli et al. 2022; Stortini 2024, 2026 for Italian). Yet methodological limitations (most notably those associated with the QA test) leave open the question of how robust these patterns are when investigated through elicitation techniques that minimize fragments and ensure full-sentence realization.

In this study, we address this gap by combining a fine-grained distinction of verb classes (transitives vs. unaccusatives) with the QDA methodology. Three main research questions guide our investigation:

- (i) Do Italian and Spanish converge in their strategies of IF realization with transitive verbs? In particular, is the postverbal subject under IF equally available in both languages?
- (ii) How do unaccusative verbs behave under IF in the two languages? Do both Italian and Spanish license VS order systematically, or are there gradience and acceptability differences?

- (iii) Besides preverbal and postverbal realizations, do speakers resort to other strategies (e.g., clefts, passives, or presentational constructions) to encode IF?

On the basis of existing literature and our theoretical assumptions about argument structure, we propose the following expectations.

First, with transitive verbs, Spanish is expected to accept postverbal subjects more readily than Italian, where the presence of an external argument tends to stabilize canonical SV order (Leonetti 2018; López 2009; Zubizarreta 1998). In Italian, postverbal subjects with transitive verbs are therefore expected to be judged as marginal, and licensed only under restricted pragmatic conditions, partially diverging to the pattern reported in Cruschina & Mayol (2024) (see also Belletti 2004; Bentley 2006, 2018; Frascarelli & Stortini 2019).

Second, with unaccusative verbs, both languages should allow postverbal subjects, since the argument originates in an internal position (Burzio 1986; Sorace 2000, 2011). However, we anticipate that Spanish speakers will show greater flexibility and higher acceptability for VS configurations, whereas Italian speakers may still show a preference for SV in certain contexts (Bentley 2006, 2018).

Third, when postverbal subject is disfavoured or unavailable, as may be the case with transitive verbs, speakers are expected to resort to alternative strategies to encode IF. Specifically, we expect a non-negligible but limited use of cleft constructions. Overall, Spanish is expected to rely less on such alternative strategies, given its broader tolerance of VS.

Finally, if these asymmetries are confirmed, they would suggest that while Italian and Spanish share the same underlying grammar of focus licensing, Spanish exploits postverbal positions more freely for IF, consistent with its broader word-order flexibility (Leonetti 2017). Italian, by contrast, may rely more heavily on prosody (cf. Frascarelli & Stortini 2019 on prosody and IF) or discourse-based strategies to encode IF in transitive contexts.

By testing these predictions with the QDA method, we aim not only to refine the empirical comparison between Italian and Spanish, but also to demonstrate the methodological value of elicitation techniques that target full sentences. In this way, the study contributes both to theories of the syntax–information structure interface and to the methodological foundations of crosslinguistic research on focus.

5. The experiment

5.1. Design

The data discussed in this article come from materials were developed within a broader experimental project, which also includes a companion study employing different experimental tasks and focusing on different predicates. The experimental materials for the present analysis consisted of 16 items, distributed across two lists. Each participant was assigned to one list and completed 8 experimental scenarios, namely 4 transitive and 4 unaccusative items.

The design can therefore be described as a 2×2 factorial design with the factors Language (Italian, Spanish) and Verb Class (Transitive, Unaccusative). The

dependent variable was the realization of subject position under IF, coded as preverbal (SV) vs. postverbal (VS). A secondary outcome of interest was the proportion of fragment answers (coded as bare DPs), in order to assess the effectiveness of the QDA method. Since the task was a semi-elicited oral production task, other spontaneous productions and additional sentence types were also recorded and annotated, such as passives, clefts, pseudoclefts, and presentative sentences.

5.2. Participants

A total of 113 participants took part in the study, 53 native speakers of Italian and 60 native speakers of Spanish. Italian participants were recruited in the Rome area, and were all speakers of the local central Italian variety. Spanish participants were recruited in the Madrid area and were speakers of standard Castilian Spanish. All participants were monolingual speakers of the target language, aged between 20 and 30 years, and reported no history of speech, hearing, or neurological impairments. None had resided extensively in a country where the other Romance language is spoken. Participants provided informed consent and received monetary compensation for their participation. The experiment was implemented on Pavlovía platform⁷ and participant recruitment was carried out via the online platform Prolific.⁸

Table 1 below reports socio-demographic information, including number of participants, mean age, standard deviation (SD), and gender distribution.

Table 1. Socio-demographic data for participants⁹

		Age		Sex			Education (EQF)			Social status		Area
Experiment	Participants	Mean	Std. Dev.	F	M	Other	lv. 4	lv. 5-6	lv. 7-8	Student	Worker	
Italian	n = 53	21.8	2.3	42	13	0	49	4	0	44	9	Rome Area
				79.2%	24.5%	0.0%	92.5%	7.5%	0.0%	83.0%	17.0%	
Spanish	n = 60	24.2	3.4	32	28	0	45	14	1	40	20	Madrid Area
				53.3%	46.7%	0	75.0%	23.3%	1.7%	66.7%	33.3%	

7. Pavlovía is an online platform for hosting and running behavioral and psycholinguistic experiments, allowing the integration of experimental scripts and the remote collection of response data, including audio recordings. Pavlovía website: <<https://pavlovía.org/>>

8. Prolific is an online participant recruitment platform widely used in behavioral research, which enables targeted recruitment based on demographic and linguistic criteria and provides controlled compensation procedures. Prolific website: <<https://www.prolific.com/>>

9. The EQF (European Qualification Framework) is an 8-level learning outcomes-based framework developed by EU to make (inter)national qualifications more comparable. The EQF provides descriptors for the three cycles for higher education. Descriptors for the first cycle correspond to EQF level 4 (High School Diploma). Descriptors for the second cycle correspond to EQF level 5-6. Descriptors for the third cycle corresponds to EQF level 7-8 (Council of the European Union 2017).

5.3. Materials

Stimuli consisted of 16 experimental items (balanced across verb classes and lists). Transitive verbs included predicates such as *colpire/golpear* ('to hit') and *disegnare/dibujar* ('to draw'), with a [+animate] agent and a [-animate] patient. Unaccusative verbs included verbs of change of location (*venire/venir* 'come'), change of state (*sbocciare/floreecer* 'bloom'), and existence (*vivere/vivir* 'live'), consistent with Sorace's (2000) classification.

Each item was embedded in a QDA scenario, consisting of a short discourse context culminating in a wh-question. An intervening element, typically a short digression such as a phone call or an interruption, was inserted before the target response to discourage fragments, as shown in examples (11) and (12) below, in which the target sentence is in bold. Once the scenario had been presented, the corresponding visual prompt was displayed, and participants were asked to provide their response. The visual prompts associated with items (11) and (12) are reproduced in Figures 3 and 4, respectively.¹⁰

(11) a. Transitive Italian (*disegnare*, 'to draw')

Passeggi con un'amica fuori da una scuola e stanno facendo un murale. È un po' distante e lei non vede bene. Così dice:

'Che bello! Chi sta disegnando l'arcobaleno?'

Un conoscente che passa di lì ti saluta e tu lo risaluti. Poi, torni a parlare con la tua amica... E dici:

b. Transitive Spanish (*dibujar*, 'to draw')

Paseas con una amiga fuera de la escuela y veis un mural. Está un poco distante y ella no ve bien. Entonces, dice:

'¡Qué bonito! ¿Quién está dibujando el arcoíris?'

Un conocido que pasa por allí te saluda y tú le devuelves el saludo. Después, vuelves a hablar con tu amiga...y dices:

'You are walking with a friend outside the school, and you see a mural. It is a bit far away and she cannot see well. She says: 'How nice! Who is drawing the rainbow?'

An acquaintance walks by and greets you, and you greet him back. Then you return to your friend and say:'

10. In the present experiment, the use of images was carefully controlled through a role play configuration involving two distinct characters (cf. Stortini 2024). Unlike Cruschina & Mayol (2022, 2024), the present task did include visual support. However, participants were not asked to respond on their own behalf, but as a character who was in a position to identify the relevant referent, reducing speaker ignorance effects (Farkas 2020; Cruschina & Mayol 2022).

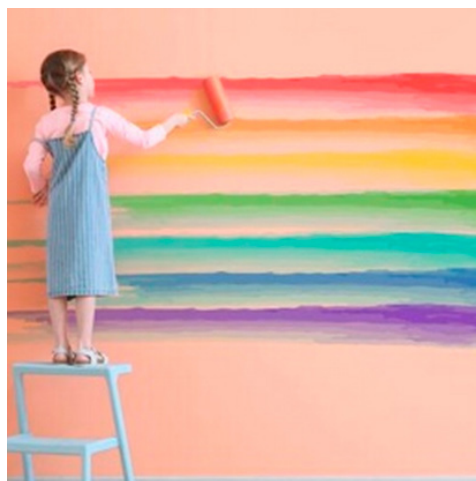


Figure 3. Visual prompt associated with item (11)

(12) a. Unaccusative Italian (*vivere*, ‘to live’)

Stai guardando con un tuo amico una serie tv sulle dinastie reali della Francia, ma ad un certo punto lui si addormenta. Quando spegni la tv lui si sveglia e chiede:

‘Chi vive nel castello? Mi sono perso proprio l’ultima parte e non ho intenzione di rivederlo su Netflix!’

Tu dici:

b. Unaccusative Spanish (*vivir*, ‘to live’)

Estás mirando una serie de televisión con un amigo tuyo sobre dinastías reales de Francia, pero en un momento dado él se duerme. Cuando apagas la televisión él se despierta y te pregunta:

‘¿Quién vive en el castillo? Me he perdido la última parte y no tengo intención de verlo de nuevo en Netflix.’

Tú dices:

‘You are watching a TV series about French royal dynasties with a friend, but at some point, he falls asleep. When you turn off the TV he wakes up and asks you: ‘Who lives in the castle? I missed the last part and I don’t want to watch it again on Netflix.’ You say:’



Figure 4. Visual prompt associated with item (12)

For the sake of logical sentence construction and to maintain a uniform structure across items, relevant sentences were designed to be as structurally parallel as possible, thereby limiting variation and controlling for the formulation of the wh-questions. All stimuli were presented in SVO order, with verb tenses consistently in the present or present progressive tense, and sentences were counterbalanced across lists.¹¹

5.4. Procedure

Sessions were conducted individually online on Prolific and lasted approximately 20 minutes. Each scenario was presented through a pre-recorded voice that read the dialogue aloud. After the dialogue, a contextual image related to the dialogue appeared on screen, providing a visual cue with the relevant information about the context already introduced.¹² At that point, participants were asked to reply freely. The task was presented as a role-play to enhance naturalness, and the instructions encouraged participants to provide complete answers without explicitly forbidding fragments or requiring the production of a full sentence. All responses were audio-recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis.

11. All the items for both experiments, Italian and Spanish are available at <https://osf.io/b2ua9/overview?view_only=503095dae9f74467820495066a7a6877>.

12. The visual cue was intended to elicit a specific and contextually constrained response, which also makes the data suitable for future prosodic analysis.

6. Results

Before presenting and discussing the outcomes, it is necessary to outline the main criteria used to classify the answers. The dataset was categorized on the basis of the responses provided by the participants. Each sentence was coded for the realization of focus: preverbal subject (SV), postverbal subject (VS), cleft, other strategies, fragment answers (bare DPs), and null responses. Categories are illustrated in Table 2 below:¹³

Table 2. Categories according to occurrences¹⁴

Word-order		
1.	SV	a. SVO b. SV
2.	VS	a. VS b. VSO c. OVS d. CliticVS e. VOS f. CLLD-VS and CLRD-VS
3.	CLEFT	a. Full Cleft b. Reduced Cleft c. Pseudo Cleft
4.	DP	a. DP
5.	OTHER	a. Passive b. Presentative construction
6.	NULL	a. Null b. Non- congruent

The experiment yielded a total of 904 answers (8 items per participant, 113 participants), which were fully transcribed and annotated. Examples of target responses are provided in (13-16). These correspond to the scenarios introduced in (11-12) in Section 5.3.

(13) Transitive Italian (*disegnare*, ‘to draw’)

- a. Una bambina disegna l’ arcobaleno. (SV)
a.F.SG girl.F.SG draw.PRS.3SG def.M.SG rainbow
‘A girl is painting the rainbow.’

13. It should be noted that in the present analysis the term O(bject) is used to refer to both direct (DO) and indirect objects (IO), including locative ones. Furthermore, in this study we consider broad macro-categories (i.e., SV, VS, Cleft, DP, and other strategies such as passives and presentative sentences) without engaging in a finer-grained analysis of the (un)marked objects.

14. *CLLD* (Clitic Left Dislocation) and *CLRD* (Clitic Right Dislocation) indicate constructions in which an object DP is dislocated and resumed by a clitic, while the focused subject surfaces postverbally.

- b. *È una bambina che disegna l' arcobaleno.* (Cleft)
 be.PRS.3SG a.F.SG girl.F.SG that draw.PRS.3SG def.M.SG rainbow
 'It's a girl that is painting a rainbow.'

(14) Transitive Spanish (*dibujar*, 'to draw') (SV)

- a. *Una niña está dibujando el arcoíris.*
 a.F.SG girl.F.SG be.PRS.3SG draw-PROG def.M.SG rainbow
 'A girl is painting the rainbow.'
- b. *El arcoíris lo está dibujando una niña.* (CLLD-VS)
 def.M.SG rainbow 3SG.M.ACC be.PRS.3SG draw-PROG a.F.SG girl.F.SG
 'The rainbow, a girl is painting it.'

(15) Unaccusative Italian (*vivere*, 'to live')

- a. *Il re vive nel castello.* (SV)
 def.M.SG king live.PRS.3SG in+def.M.SG castle
 'The king lives in the castle.'
- b. *Nel castello vive il re.* (VS)
 In+def.M.SG castle live.PRS.3SG def.M.SG king
 'In the castle live the king.'

(16) Unaccusative Spanish (*vivir*, 'to live')

- a. *El rey vive en el castillo.* (SV)
 def.M.SG king live.PRS.3SG in def.M.SG castle
 'The king lives in the castle.'
- b. *Quien vive en el castillo es el rey.* (Cleft)
 who live.PRS.3SG in def.M.SG castle be.PRS.3SG def.M.SG king
 'Who lives in the castle is the king.'

The distribution of patterns across languages and verb classes is summarized in Table 3.

As show in Table 3, fragment answers were not frequent, representing only 5.8% of the dataset (Spanish: 45, 9.4%; Italian: 7, 1.7%) (cf. Cruschina & Mayol 2024, who report comparable proportions). These were excluded from further analysis. The low rate of fragment answers confirms that the QDA task design strongly favoured the production of full sentential answers, namely, utterances containing a finite verb together with the focused element. Participants' spontaneous preference for full sentences, despite the absence of explicit instruction to that effect, also facilitated the assessment of congruence with the discourse context.

Incomplete (null) or non-congruent responses were likewise excluded from the dataset (see Section 3). Null answers included missing responses, unintelligible productions (e.g., due to sound quality), or answers non-congruent with the target

Table 3. Distribution by Language and Verb Class

		SV		VS		Cleft			
		% within row		% within row		% within row			
	Counts			Counts		Counts			
Italian	TRA	70	33.0%	21	9.9%	77	36.3%		
	UNA	55	25.9%	78	36.8%	57	26.9%		
	TOT	125	29.5%	99	23.3%	134	31.6%		
Spanish	TRA	75	31.3%	76	31.7%	41	17.1%		
	UNA	27	11.3%	126	52.5%	45	18.8%		
	TOT	102	21.3%	202	42.1%	86	17.9%		
Total	TOT	227	25.1%	301	33.3%	220	24.3%		

		Other		DP		Null		Tot	
		% within row		% within row		% within row		% within row	
	Counts			Counts		Counts		Total	
Italian	TRA	17	8.0%	3	1.4%	24	11.3%	212	100%
	UNA	5	2.4%	4	1.9%	13	6.1%	212	100%
	TOT	22	5.2%	7	1.7%	37	8.7%	424	100%
Spanish	TRA	6	2.5%	18	7.5%	24	10.0%	240	100%
	UNA	0	0.0%	27	11.3%	15	6.3%	240	100%
	TOT	6	1.3%	45	9.4%	39	8.1%	480	100%
Total	TOT	28	3.1%	52	5.8%	76	8.4%	904	100%

question. Congruent responses were excluded whenever the background information diverged from that provided in the context, for instance, when a different predicate was used or when the focus did not fall on the subject (cf. Leal et al. 2018, Hoot & Leal 2020, Hoot et al. 2020). In total, 76 null or non-congruent responses were excluded (Italian 37, 8.7%; and Spanish 39, 8.1%).

Examples of excluded answers are provided in (17-19). In (17) the participant answers with a different move; in (18) the answer is related to the discourse, but not congruent with the context or the target predicate (see also Cruschina & Mayol 2022, 2024 for similar data); in (19), the answer is a fragment:¹⁵

- (17) a. *¿Quién viene del espacio?* (Spanish)
 ‘Who’s coming from space?’

15. In the examples we report only the target sentence, omitting the full linguistic context and the QDA material.

- b. *¿Tú quien crees que es?*
 you who believe.PRS.2SG that be.PRS.3SG
 ‘Who do you think it is?’
- (18) a. *Chi cade dalle scale?* (Italian)
 ‘Who’s falling from the stairs?’
- b. *Eh no guarda ci sta il nostro collega*
 eh no look.PRS.2SG there be.PRS.3SG def.M.SG our colleague
Roberto.
 Roberto
 ‘Uh no, look, our colleague Roberto is there.’
- (19) a. *Chi legge il libro?* (Italian)
 ‘Who’s reading the book?’
- b. *Un dinosauro*
 a.M.SG dinosaur
 ‘a dinosaur’

After exclusions, the final dataset included 776 complete and congruent sentences (Spanish=396; Italian=380).

In general, participants produced preverbal subjects more frequently with transitive verbs while postverbal subjects were more frequent with unaccusative verbs. Cleft sentences were also attested and will be analysed in detail in Section 6.2. By contrast, other strategies such as passive constructions in transitive clauses or presentational sentences were only marginally represented and thus quantitatively negligible.

6.1. Internal composition of SV and VS orders and DP object realization

While the main analysis focuses on the contrast between preverbal and postverbal subject realization and shows an overall preference for SV orders, previous work has emphasized that VS configurations are not uniform, especially in transitive clauses. In particular, the acceptability and discourse status of postverbal subjects have been argued to depend also on the realization of the object, with VS orders being more acceptable when the object is cliticized rather than realized as a full DP (Belletti & Shlonsky 1995; Gabriel 2007, 2010; Ordóñez 2000; Domínguez 2002; Samek-Lodovici 2015; Dufter & Gabriel 2016).

In order to address this issue and to facilitate comparison with previous QDA-based studies, we conducted an additional descriptive analysis of both SV and VS responses, distinguishing between configurations with an overt DP object and configurations with a non overt realization. For the purposes of the present analysis, clitic and null realizations were collapsed into a single non overt category. This classification makes it possible to distinguish responses in which the subject co-occurs with an object that is realized as an overt DP from those in which it

is not overtly realized, a contrast that has been argued to correlate with different syntactic and discourse properties.¹⁶

Table 4. Distribution of SV and VS responses by DP realization, language, and verb class

Word order	Language	Verb Class	Overt DP	Non DP	Total
SV	Italian	Transitive	67	3	70
		Unaccusative	52	3	55
	Spanish	Transitive	75	0	75
		Unaccusative	24	3	27
VS	Italian	Transitive	0	21	21
		Unaccusative	37	41	78
	Spanish	Transitive	8	68	76
		Unaccusative	68	58	126

Table 4 reports the distribution of SV and VS responses by DP realization across languages and verb classes. A first clear pattern concerns SV orders, which are overwhelmingly associated with overt DP realization in both languages and across both verb classes, while non overt realizations remain marginal. A different pattern emerges in VS orders. With transitive verbs, VS responses are strongly associated with non overt realization (i.e., clitics), categorically so in Italian and predominantly so in Spanish. This confirms that DP realization is an important component of the internal composition of VS orders, especially in transitive contexts. At the same time, however, the distribution observed with unaccusative predicates shows that VS responses are attested not only with non overt realizations, but also with overt DPs, which remain robustly represented.

Taken together, these results indicate that DP realization contributes in an important way to the distribution of SV and VS orders. In particular, while transitive VS configurations strongly favour non overt realization, unaccusative predicates display a broader distribution, including a substantial number of VS responses with overt DPs. This asymmetry already points to a residual effect of verb class, which is tested more directly in the statistical analysis in 6.2.

16. *VS with clitic object* includes VS configurations in which the internal argument is realized as an object clitic, regardless of additional dislocation phenomena (e.g. cl-VS, CLLD-VS, CLRD-VS). *VS with overt DP object* includes configurations in which the object is realized as a full DP, independently of its linear position with respect to the subject (e.g. VOS, VSO, OVS). *VS without an overt object* includes bare VS constructions in which no object is syntactically realized, as well as constructions involving non-argumental uses of *se* in Spanish.

6.2. Statistical analysis

The results obtained were analysed using a generalized linear mixed-effects model (GLMM) with a binomial logistic link, fitted in Jamovi (2024)¹⁷ and R (R Core Team 2024). The dependent variable (DV) was the realization of subject focus in preverbal (SV = 0) and postverbal (VS = 1) position. Fixed effects included Language (Italian vs. Spanish), Verb Class (Transitive vs. Unaccusative) and their interaction. Random intercepts for participants and items were included. Parameter estimates are reported in Table 5.

Table 5. Fixed effects for SV-VS contrasts

Parameter Estimates (Fixed coefficients)							
Names	Effect	Estimate	SE	95% Confidence Intervals		z	p
				Lower	Upper		
(Intercept)	(Intercept)	-0.0515	0.610	-1.247	1.14	-0.0844	0.933
Language1	Spanish - Italian	26.914	1.087	0.561	4.82	24.763	0.013
Verb_Type1	Unaccusative - Transitive	31.999	1.068	1.107	5.29	29.960	0.003
Language1 * Verb_Type1	(spa - ita) * (UNA - TRA)	-13.308	1.848	-4.953	2.29	-0.7201	0.471

As shown in Table 5, both Language and Verb Class yielded significant main effects, whereas their interaction was not significant. Spanish speakers were significantly more likely to produce VS orders than Italian speakers ($\beta = 2.69$, $SE = 1.09$, $p = .013$), and unaccusative verbs favoured VS compared to transitives ($\beta = 3.20$, $SE = 1.07$, $p = .003$). No reliable interaction emerged ($p = .47$), indicating that the unaccusative > transitive asymmetry holds in both languages.

Estimated Marginal Means (EMMs) are reported in Table 6. EMMs represent the predicted proportions of SV and VS orders derived from the statistical model, averaging over random variation due to individual participants and lexical items.

Table 6. EMMs for SV-VS

Estimate Marginal Means - Language * Verb_Type						
Language	Verb_Type	Mean	SE	95% Confidence Intervals		
				Lower	Upper	
Italian	Transitive	0.0346	3%	0.0617	9.54e-4	0.573
Italian	Unaccusative	0.6308	63%	0.1737	0.284	0.881
Spanish	Transitive	0.5067	51%	0.1250	0.278	0.732
Spanish	Unaccusative	0.9283	93%	0.0441	0.779	0.979

17. Statistical analyses were performed using Jamovi and the GAMLj module for general linear models developed by Gallucci (2019, 2020).

EMMs (Table 6) clarify these patterns. In Italian, VS was virtually absent with transitive verbs ($\approx 3\%$) but moderately frequent with unaccusative verbs ($\approx 63\%$). In Spanish, by contrast, VS was the dominant strategy: it reached $\approx 93\%$ with unaccusative verbs and remained common with transitive verbs ($\approx 51\%$).

Random-effects variance indicated that most variability was attributable to participants rather than lexical items, suggesting robust effects across materials. While individual speakers differed in their propensity to produce VS, the fixed-effect estimates remained stable.

In sum, the results show that both languages are sensitive to verb class, but Spanish exhibits a general preference for VS, whereas Italian remains predominantly SV, except in unaccusative contexts where VS is also licensed. These findings establish a robust effect of Language and Verb Class on the distribution of SV and VS orders. The absence of an interaction in the main model indicates that the effect of Verb Class is attested in both languages, although baseline word order preferences differ substantially between Italian and Spanish. These results therefore show that both languages are sensitive to verb class in the distribution of subject position, while diverging in their baseline strategies for encoding subject focus. The role of DP realization is addressed in the additional model discussed below (Table 7).

To assess whether the contrast between Transitive and Unaccusative predicates remained significant once DP object realization was taken into account (cf. Table 4), we fitted an additional mixed logistic model including Language, Verb Class, DP realization, and the interaction between Verb Class and DP realization as fixed effects, with random intercepts for participants and items. Parameter estimates are reported in Table 7.

Table 7. Fixed effects for SV and VS contrasts including DP object realization

Parameter Estimates (Fixed coefficients)

Predictor	Estimate	SE	95% Confidence Intervals		z	p
			Lower	Upper		
Intercept	1.66	0.581	1.69	16.43	2.86	0.004
Language (Spanish vs. Italian)	2.90	0.826	3.59	91.49	3.51	< .001
Verb Class (Unaccusative vs. Transitive)	2.82	0.968	2.51	111.78	2.91	0.004
DP realization (overt DP vs. non overt)	-7.97	1.279	0.0000281	0.00422	-6.24	< .001
Verb Class $\times$ DP realization	6.96	1.730	35.59	31310.38	4.03	< .001

The analysis revealed significant effects of Language ($p < .001$), Verb Class ($p = .004$), and DP realization ($p < .001$), as well as a significant interaction between Verb Class and DP object realization ($p < .001$). Crucially, Verb Class remained significant once DP object realization was included, indicating that the contrast between Transitive and Unaccusative predicates cannot be reduced to this factor alone. At the same time, the significant interaction shows that the effect of DP object realization is not uniform across predicate types, but is especially strong in transitive contexts. More specifically, non overt realization

is especially associated with VS in transitive contexts, whereas unaccusative predicates display a broader distribution, including a substantial number of VS responses with overt DPs. The model including the interaction provided a better fit than the model without interaction.

Taken together, these results show that DP realization contributes in an important way to the distribution of SV and VS orders, but does not eliminate the role of verb class. The higher availability of VS with unaccusative predicates therefore reflects a genuine effect of predicate type rather than a mere by-product of DP object realization. This contrast sets the stage for the analysis of alternative focus marking strategies, in particular cleft constructions, which are discussed in Section 6.3.

6.3. Cleft constructions

We examined cleft constructions by comparing them with canonical SV orders (SV–Cleft) and VS orders (VS–Cleft). This double comparison allows us to situate clefting within the broader set of focus-marking options available in the two languages. Following previous literature (cf., among many others, Belletti 2005, 2008; Declerck 1988; Frascarelli 2010), we assume that clefts represent a marked strategy, which involves structural cost (biclausality, copula insertion) but provides access to a dedicated focus position. The central question is under which conditions Italian and Spanish employ such a strategy. Parameter estimates are reported in Table 8.

Table 8. Fixed effects for cleft contrasts (SV–Cleft, VS–Cleft)

Parameter Estimates (Fixed coefficients)								
	Names	Effect	Estimate	SE	95% Confidence Intervals		z	p
					Lower	Upper		
SV-Cleft	(Intercept)	(Intercept)	–0.271	0.444	–1.142	0.600	–0.609	0.542
	Language	Spanish - Italian	–0.827	0.837	–2.467	0.814	–0.988	0.323
	Verb_Type	Una - Tra	1.408	0.634	0.165	2.651	2.221	0.026
	Language * Verb_Type	(Spa - Ita) * (Una - Tra)	2.650	1.101	0.492	4.808	2.407	0.016
VS-Cleft	(Intercept)	(Intercept)	–0.398	0.519	–1.417	0.620	–0.767	0.443
	Language1	Spanish - Italian	–2.147	0.629	–3.380	–0.915	–3.414	< .001
	Verb_Type1	Una - Tra	–1.279	0.959	–3.158	0.599	–1.335	0.182
	Language1 * Verb_Type1	(Spa - Ita) * (Una - Tra)	2.544	0.964	0.654	4.434	2.638	0.008

Mixed-effects models revealed significant interactions between *Language* and *Verb Type* in both contrasts, as reported in Table 7 above. For SV–Cleft, *Verb Type* was also significant ($p = .026$), whereas *Language* alone was not. For VS–Cleft,

Language was highly significant ($p < .001$), while *Verb Type* alone was not. These results confirm that clefting is not uniformly distributed, but depends on how verb class interacts with the argument-structural profile of each language. EMMs are reported in Table 9.

Table 9. EMMs for SV-Cleft and VS-Cleft

Estimate Marginal Means - Language * Verb_Type

Contrast	Language	Verb_Type	95% Confidence Intervals			
			Mean		Lower	Upper
SV - Cleft	Italian	Transitive	0.525	53%	0.2770	0.761
	Italian	Unaccusative	0.546	55%	0.2867	0.782
	Spanish	Transitive	0.114	11%	0.0128	0.560
	Spanish	Unaccusative	0.664	66%	0.4404	0.833
VS - Cleft	Italian	Transitive	0.876	88%	0.4867	0.981
	Italian	Unaccusative	0.354	35%	0.0994	0.732
	Spanish	Transitive	0.187	19%	0.0459	0.525
	Spanish	Unaccusative	0.186	19%	0.0760	0.388

EMMs indicate how often clefts are expected to occur in each Language $\times$ Verb Type condition, according to the model. Table 8 shows that in Italian, clefts are robustly attested. In the SV-Cleft contrast, they occur in about half of the cases, regardless of verb type, while in the VS-Cleft contrast, they are strongly preferred with transitive verbs ($\approx 88\%$) and less frequent with unaccusative verbs ($\approx 35\%$). In Spanish, clefts are overall less frequent. In SV-Cleft, they are not frequent with transitives ($\approx 11\%$) but common with unaccusatives ($\approx 66\%$), while in VS-Cleft, they remain marginal in both verb classes ($\approx 19\%$).

The evidence suggests that clefts are integrated differently into the grammar of the two languages. In Italian, clefts are not peripheral: they systematically emerge in transitive contexts where the postverbal subject is restricted for independent argument-structural reasons, in line with Belletti (2004, 2008). With unaccusatives, clefts are possible but compete with VS, which remains a frequent strategy. In Spanish, clefts are more restricted and do not provide a systematic alternative to VS, which continues to serve as the main focus-marking strategy, in line with Zubizarreta (1998), López (2009), Cruschina (2012) and Cruschina & Mayol (2022, 2024).

In sum, clefting in Italian and Spanish is conditioned by the interaction between argument structure and information structure. In Italian, cleft constructions appear to function as a syntactic strategy for focus realization in contexts where SV order is already preverbal. Alongside clefts, preverbal SV orders may rely also on prosodic marking. By contrast, Spanish speakers rely predominantly on VS and make only limited use of clefts, with somewhat higher rates in unaccusative contexts. A possible explanation is that the difference may lie in the relative role of prosody

across the two languages and in the gradient availability of focus-marking strategies. In Spanish, where prosodic marking appears to play a more limited role in the realization of subject focus, cleft constructions may remain available as a syntactic strategy even when the subject already occupies a postverbal position associated with focus, rather than being categorically excluded.

The results point to systematic asymmetries between Italian and Spanish in the way argument structure constrains the choice between postverbal subject and clefting.

7. Conclusion

The first research question asked whether Italian and Spanish converge in their strategies of subject focus realization with transitive verbs. The results show a clear divergence between the two languages (cf. Table 3). Italian resists postverbal subject in transitive contexts, with VS virtually absent in the dataset. In these contexts, clefting emerges as a systematic alternative in Italian, where inversion is strongly disfavoured. The data show that with transitive verbs Italian speakers produced 33.0% SV and 9.9% VS (cf. Table 3), confirming the prediction that external arguments in Spec,vP reduce the availability of postverbal subjects. This pattern is consistent with Belletti (2004, 2008) and Frascarelli & Stortini (2019), who argue that transitive subjects in Italian are realized in preverbal position. Spanish, by contrast, exhibits a more balanced distribution. With transitive verbs, SV and VS occur with comparable frequency (31.3% and 31.7% respectively). This uniformity indicates that both word orders are viable in Spanish and that the language licenses subjects more flexibly in low postverbal positions (Zubizarreta 1998; López 2009; Leonetti 2017, 2018). Rather than a categorical asymmetry, the results indicate a cross-linguistic contrast in how the grammar of each language regulates the availability of competing configurations. In Italian, the external argument constrains subject inversion, promoting clefting as an alternative realization of focus. In Spanish, by contrast, the same structural configuration allows postverbal subjects without restriction, reflecting a more flexible mapping between argument structure and information structure.

The second research question addressed unaccusative verbs. Here both languages license VS, as predicted, but the distribution differs quantitatively. Italian speakers produced VS in a majority of cases (36.8% VS vs. 25.9% SV, cf. Table 3) indicating that both orders are possible, although postverbal subjects are somewhat preferred, and clefts remained possible although less frequent. In Spanish, VS was more frequent (52.5%) and SV occurred only in a minority of cases (11.3%), revealing a clearer bias toward postverbal subjects, with clefts occurring only marginally. These findings confirm the expectation that unaccusative verbs favour postverbal subjects in both languages due to the absence of an external argument in Spec,vP. At the same time, they point to a gradient cross-linguistic contrast. While both languages are sensitive to verb type, Spanish displays a stronger tendency toward inversion, whereas Italian preserves a residual preference for preverbal subjects even in contexts where inversion is structurally licensed.

The third research question concerned the distribution of clefts. Our results show that clefting is not marginal in Italian but a systematic part of the grammar. With transitive verbs, cleft constructions provide a syntactic strategy to realize subject focus in contexts where postverbal subject placement is strongly constrained, confirming Belletti's (2008) proposal that clefts provide a syntactic alternative strategy for subject focus (cf. also Brunetti 2004, 2009; Frascarelli 2000; Frascarelli & Puglielli 2007; Citko 2011). With unaccusative verbs, clefts remain possible but compete with VS, which remains the more frequent strategy. In Spanish, by contrast, the availability of postverbal subject positions reduces the functional pressure to resort to cleft constructions, which therefore remain peripheral and restricted to specific configurations. This pattern is consistent with López (2009) and Cruschina (2012), who argue that Spanish grammar provides a low focus position that makes clefts unnecessary as a default mechanism. Our findings therefore confirm the prediction that clefts are systematically used in Italian where inversion is blocked, while Spanish relies primarily on VS and employs clefts only in restricted contexts.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that the choice between postverbal subjects and clefting cannot be treated as a matter of stylistic preference but must be explained through the interaction of argument structure and information structure. Italian resorts to clefts whenever Spec,vP is occupied by an external argument, while Spanish relies on postverbal placement of the subject. This comparative evidence offers additional insights into two aspects of the existing literature. Empirically, the present study provides new quantitative support for the view that Italian restricts subject inversion with transitive verbs (Belletti 2004, 2008). At the same time, once the internal composition of VS orders is taken into account, the results are fully consistent with Cruschina & Mayol (2024) with respect to transitive predicates, which in both studies strongly favour object cliticization in VS configurations. Differences between the two sets of results are instead plausibly related to other aspects of the experimental setting, especially differences in task implementation, in the degree of interaction involved, and in the role of visual support. In the present study, participants produced recorded responses in an online environment rather than in direct face to face interaction, and visual support was integrated into the experiment, unlike in Cruschina and Mayol (2022, 2024). These differences may have contributed to the divergent patterns observed.

Theoretically, the findings show that argument-structural configurations directly shape the syntactic realization of subject focus and that closely related languages may differ in how they map information structure onto syntax.

Future research should extend this comparison to a broader range of Italian and Spanish varieties, as well as to other Romance languages, in order to assess whether similar patterns emerge. An equally relevant direction is the integration of prosodic evidence. Since prosody interacts with syntax in the encoding of focus (cf., among many others, Bocci 2013; Frascarelli 2000; Frascarelli & Stortini 2019; Samek-Lodovici 2005, 2015; Zubizarreta 1998), experimental work on intonation patterns could help determine whether preverbal, postverbal or clefts are associated with distinct prosodic patterns. In particular, a systematic analysis of focal stress

on preverbal subjects and cleft constructions would help to further untangle the contribution of syntactic and prosodic strategies in the realization of IF.

By combining syntax, prosody and information structure, future research can refine our understanding of the mechanisms through which languages manage the association between argument structure and discourse needs.

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