

Article

Dative Experiencer Psych-Verbs in Italian and Spanish

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Abstract

This study investigates how argument structure interacts with Information Structure (IS) in Dative Experiencer (DE) psych-verbs of the *piacere/gustar* type in Italian and Spanish. These verbs display non-canonical mapping between thematic and grammatical roles, in which the Experiencer surfaces as a dative object and the Theme as the subject. Through a semi-spontaneous production experiment based on the Question with a Delayed Answer (QDA) methodology, the study elicited natural utterances to investigate how speakers encode Information Focus (IF) on the Theme. The results show a consistent pattern across the two languages, with a strong preference for postverbal realizations of the Theme and frequent overt expression of the Experiencer, interpreted as a Familiar Topic. Preliminary prosodic data further support this interpretation, showing that the Experiencer bears a low tonal contour typical of given material, whereas the postverbal subject has included in the prosodic boundary of the sentence. Taken together, these findings suggest that DE psych-verbs encode a grammar-internal mechanism that links thematic and informational hierarchies, where morphosyntactic structure, case, position and prosody jointly contribute to the interpretability of discourse relations.

Keywords: Information Focus; Dative Experiencer verbs; Subject; Pro-drop languages; Argument Structure; Information Structure; Topic; Focus

1. Introduction

This study experimentally investigates how argument structure and Information Structure (IS) interact at the syntax–discourse interface, focusing on Dative Experiencer (DE) psych-verbs of the *piacere/gustar* type in Italian and Spanish, examining how morphosyntactic structure encodes the distinction between given and new information.

Psych-verbs have long attracted attention in generative syntax because they challenge standard assumptions about the mapping between thematic roles and syntactic structure.

Many approaches assume that argument realization is constrained by general principles such as the Uniform Theta Assignment Hypothesis (UTAH), according to which identical thematic roles are associated with identical structural positions across constructions (Baker, 1988). This assumption presupposes an underlying *Thematic Hierarchy*, whereby roles such as Agent and Experiencer are structurally more prominent than Themes and are closely related to alignment-based proposals such as the Universal Alignment Hypothesis (UAH), which capture the tendency for thematic prominence to correlate with syntactic prominence (Perlmutter & Postal, 1984).

Verbs of the *piacere/gustar* ('to please') type (cf., Belletti & Rizzi, 1988) display a non-canonical mapping between thematic and syntactic roles, in which the Theme (or Stimulus) surfaces as the grammatical subject and the Experiencer is realized as a dative object



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(Section 2). This configuration provides an ideal testing ground for exploring how grammatical structure makes information-structural distinctions interpretable at the syntax–discourse interface.

Within the cartographic framework (cf., among many others, Belletti, 2001, 2004; Bocci, 2013; Cinque & Rizzi, 2008; Frascarelli, 2000; Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl, 2007; Rizzi, 1997), IS is regarded as an interpretive component that interfaces with both syntax and argument structure. In this view, the formal articulation of the clause provides dedicated positions for discourse-related features such as topic and focus, allowing informational distinctions to be syntactically encoded.

Following Rooth (1985, 1992) and Krifka (2007, 2008), Information Focus (IF) is defined as the constituent introducing new information in the discourse, contrasting with presupposed material (Section 3). In DE psych-verbs, the inversion between Experiencer and Theme creates a misalignment between semantic and informational prominence. In the configurations investigated here, in which IF targets the Theme, the Experiencer, though semantically central, is typically interpreted as a given or discourse-anchored participant, whereas the Theme provides the new information (cf., Belletti & Rizzi, 1988; Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl, 2007; Landau, 2010; Leonetti, 2004).

The hypothesis proposed here is that the dative marking of the Experiencer does not arise merely as a consequence of the Theme occupying the subject position, but reflects the Experiencer’s inherent status as a given participant. The dative case can thus be understood as a formal correlate of informational accessibility, marking both morpho-syntactically and discursively as a relevant argument that is semantically involved but informationally given (Section 4).

To test this hypothesis, a semi-spontaneous production experiment was conducted, following the Question with a Delayed Answer (QDA) methodology (Cruschina & Mayol, 2022, 2024), specially designed to elicit natural information-structural strategies. Fifty-three native speakers of Italian and sixty native speakers of Spanish participated in the task. Each participant produced responses to questions targeting subject (Theme) Focus (e.g., *Cosa piace al cane?* / *¿Qué le gusta al perro?* ‘What does the dog like?’), providing evidence of semi-spontaneous morphosyntactic strategies for IF realization (Section 5).

The results (Section 6) show that speakers favour structures in which the focused constituent appears postverbally (Belletti, 2001, 2004, 2008; Cardinaletti, 2004; Zubizarreta, 1998). At the same time, the relatively high proportion of overt Experiencers indicates that dative is fully compatible with topicality and that overt Experiencers contribute to maintaining referential continuity. Following Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl (2007), overt Experiencers can be analyzed as Familiar Topics, namely arguments that are given but overtly realized to ensure discourse anchoring. In addition to syntactic distributions, we provide preliminary prosodic evidence to support the information-structural analysis proposed (Section 6.3).

Overall, the study provides empirical and theoretical evidence that, in Italian and Spanish, DE construction in psych-verbs reflects a grammar-internal encoding of informational accessibility, whereby case marking, argument position and word order correlate with discourse status.¹ Morphological case marking encodes the interface between syntactic alignment and discourse prominence: the DE is the syntactic realization of an argument that is semantically involved but informationally given, while the nominative Theme surfaces as the locus of IF.

2. An Introduction to Psych-Verbs

Psych-verbs form a well-established semantic class describing mental or emotional states and have long attracted attention in generative syntax because they challenge stan-

dard assumptions about argument realization. Their recognition as a distinct semantic class dates back to Postal (1971), who first used the term *psychological predicates* and observed that such verbs exhibit unexpected behaviour with respect to reflexivization and argument linking.

According to Landau (2010, fn. 2), a psych-verb is ‘any verb that carries psychological entailments with respect to one of its arguments (the Experiencer). A psychological entailment involves an individual being in a certain mental state’. As Landau (2010) highlights, Experiencers are ‘grammatically’ special.

Psych-verbs have long been recognized as posing challenges for linguistic theory, as they display a range of non-canonical properties with respect to argument realization and linking, departing from standard expectations about the alignment between thematic roles and syntactic positions (cf., Grimshaw, 1990; Pesetsky, 1995; Landau, 2010). This special status is reflected in the behaviour of verbs such as *fear*, *frighten* or *please*, which appear to depart from standard syntactic generalizations concerning the mapping between thematic prominence and syntactic position, as formalized by UTAH and UAH (Perlmutter & Postal, 1984; Baker, 1988). In these configurations, Experiencers may surface either as subjects (SE verbs) or as objects (OE and DE verbs), as shown in 1 and 2:

- (1) a. The boy (*Experiencer*) fears the storm (*Theme*).
b. The storm (*Theme*) frightens the boy (*Experiencer*).
- (2) a. The dog (*Experiencer*) likes the bone (*Theme*).
b. The bone (*Theme*) pleases the dog (*Experiencer*).

Starting with Postal (1971), scholars proposed a psych-movement rule, according to which there exists underlying structures where subject and object are reversed. Because psych-verbs fail to conform to expected syntactic patterns of argument alignment, the syntactic account was soon challenged and this gave rise to semantically oriented approaches to the lexicon–syntax interface, based on thematic relations and hierarchies. Jackendoff (1972), adopting the Extended Lexical Hypothesis, rejected the idea of syntactic movement and proposed instead that the special properties of psych-verbs result from the interaction between their thematic roles and a universal *Thematic Hierarchy*. These early accounts thus embody two contrasting perspectives, syntactic (Postal, 1971) vs. semantic (Jackendoff, 1972), which have both influenced subsequent work (Belletti & Rizzi, 1988; Pesetsky, 1987, 1995, Arad, 1998a, 1999; Landau, 2010; Jiménez-Fernández & Rozwadowska, 2016, 2017; Bondaruk, 2020).

Modern analyses often integrate elements of both approaches, focusing on how semantic roles are linked to syntactic realization and how this explains the behavioural and morphosyntactic properties of psych-verbs. While Subject Experiencer (SE) verbs (e.g., *fear*, *know*) resemble other stative transitive verbs, Object Experiencer (OE–DE, cf. *infra*) verbs (e.g., *frighten*, *please*) show non-canonical argument structure and deviate from standard transitivity patterns.

Within generative approaches, the mapping between thematic roles and syntactic positions is commonly assumed to be constrained by general principles regulating argument realization. A central assumption is the UTAH (Baker, 1988), according to which identical thematic roles are associated with identical structural positions across constructions. This hypothesis presupposes an underlying *Thematic Hierarchy*, whereby roles such as Agent and Experiencer are structurally more prominent than Themes. Closely related to this view is the UAH (Perlmutter & Postal, 1984), which captures the tendency for thematic prominence to correlate with syntactic prominence, such that higher thematic roles are expected to surface in higher syntactic positions. Under these assumptions, Experiencers

They assign inherent dative, realized by the preposition/case marker *a* (i.e., *a* + DP/NP), and select *essere*, unlike *preoccupare* type verbs, which assign inherent accusative case and select *avere* auxiliary.

The Experiencer does not function as an external argument in *piacere*-type psych-verbs, since its inherent case is θ -dependent and is required to be licenced within the VP by the verb (Belletti & Rizzi, 1988; Landau, 2010; Pesetsky, 1995). Hence, in *piacere*-type psych-verbs, both the Experiencer and the Theme are generated within the VP, consistent with their unaccusative status (Burzio, 1986). Moreover, Belletti and Rizzi (1988) propose the following statement:

- (8) Given a θ -grid [Experiencer, Theme], the Experiencer is projected to a higher position than the Theme.

(Belletti & Rizzi, 1988, p. 344)

According to (8), the Experiencer occupies a structurally higher position inside the VP than the Theme. This structure is illustrated in Figure 1 (extracted from Belletti & Rizzi, 1988, p. 335) and updated in Figure 2 below following Larson's (1988) VP-shell analysis.²

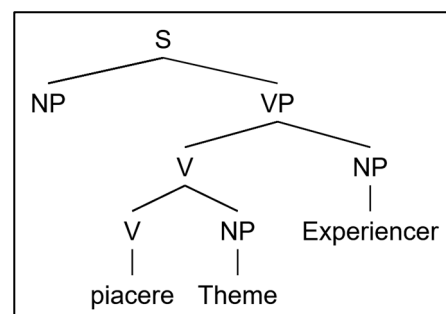


Figure 1. D-structure of DE verbs (Belletti & Rizzi, 1988).

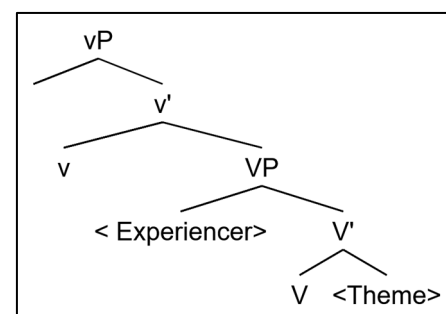


Figure 2. D-structure of DE verbs.

In light of these observations, the arguments of *piacere*-type verbs are assumed to be generated within the VP domain, and their syntactic realization follows from case requirements and unaccusative movement.³ As illustrated in Figure 2, the configuration creates subject–object asymmetries at the syntax–semantics interface as the Experiencer (the object) occupies a structurally higher position than the Theme (the subject). This asymmetry gives rise to subject–object mismatches at the syntax–semantics interface and has been extensively discussed in the literature from different perspectives, including Grimshaw (1990) and Pesetsky (1995) for semantic accounts; Arad (1998a, 1998b) for lexical decomposition; Rozwadowska (1988, 2017) for event-structure analyses; and Reinhart (2002), Marín and McNally (2011), and Landau (2010) for argument structure and stativity.

In the present study, we adopt a syntactic, movement-based unaccusative analysis, based on Belletti and Rizzi (1988), which provides a shared comparative baseline for Italian and Spanish *piacere*-type psych-verbs.

Importantly, this choice does not entail a commitment to specific assumptions concerning the base-generated position of the Theme. While alternative analyses, particularly for Spanish, have argued for a specifier position on the basis of constraints on bare nominal Themes (e.g., [Suñer, 1982](#); [Cuervo, 2003](#)), the present study abstracts away from these issues, focusing instead on the interaction between argument structure and information structure, rather than on fine-grained differences in VP-internal configuration.

3. Focus and Its Elicitation

3.1. Background on Focus

Focus is a discourse category that has received attention in the study of the interface between syntax, semantics, and information structure. For [Halliday \(1967, p. 205\)](#), focus marks what ‘is presented by the speaker as being new’. [Jackendoff \(1972, p. 230\)](#) characterizes it as the information that ‘is assumed by the speaker not to be shared by him and the hearer,’ while [Lambrecht \(1994, p. 213\)](#) defines it as ‘the semantic component of a pragmatically structured proposition whereby the assertion differs from the presupposition.’

Within formal semantics, two main frameworks have shaped the understanding of focus, namely, the Structured Meaning Approach ([von Stechow, 1981](#); [Krifka, 1992](#)) and the Alternative Semantics ([Rooth, 1985, 1992](#)). In the former, a focused sentence is analyzed as consisting of two parts, a *background*, which expresses a property, and a *focus*, which denotes the element that satisfies this property. In the latter, focus introduces a set of alternatives against which the asserted proposition is interpreted.

The literature distinguishes several subtypes of focus based on their formal, semantic, and discourse properties, including Information Focus, Contrastive Focus, Corrective Focus, Exhaustive Focus, and Mirative Focus (cf., among others, [Bianchi & Bocci, 2012](#); [Bianchi et al., 2015](#); [Brunetti, 2004, 2009](#); [Cruschina, 2012](#); [Kiss, 1998](#); [Krifka, 2007](#); [Frascarelli, 2000](#)). Within this broad typology, different focus constructions have been proposed in the literature on the basis of crosslinguistic variation and syntactic realization (cf., [Kiss, 1998](#); [Frascarelli, 2010](#); [Cruschina, 2011](#); [Bianchi et al., 2015](#)).

The present study concentrates on Information Focus (IF), understood as the focus type that introduces discourse-new information and evokes a set of alternatives ([Krifka, 2007, 2008](#), [Rooth, 1985, 1992](#)). Unlike Contrastive or Corrective Focus, IF does not involve contrast among alternatives, nor does it trigger the evaluative or exhaustive interpretations typically associated with Mirative or Exhaustive Focus (cf., [Kiss, 1998](#); [Cruschina, 2021](#); [Bianchi et al., 2015, 2016](#)).

In this study, the crucial point is that IF, from a formal perspective, can be identified as the constituent that corresponds to the relevant congruent answer to a question, through the selection among alternatives, as illustrated in (9) and (10) below:

- (9) a. Who read Pinocchio?
b. JOHN⁴ read Pinocchio.

- (10) a. What is Mario eating?
b. Mario is eating AN APPLE.

Crosslinguistic evidence suggests that, although typically IF introduces alternatives in the sense of Alternative Semantics ([Rooth, 1985, 1992](#); [Krifka, 2007](#)), the strategies employed to mark it vary considerably across languages. In some languages, such as English and German, IF is typically expressed through prosodic prominence alone, without any change in word order (cf., [Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl, 2007](#); [Samek-Lodovici, 1996, 2005](#); [Stortini, 2024](#)). In others, notably the Finno-Ugric group, it is syntactically encoded in a dedicated projection within the left periphery ([Kiss, 1998](#); [Vilkuna, 1995](#)). In contrast, null-subject

Romance languages such as Italian and Spanish often encode IF through word-order alternations (Belletti, 2001, 2004; Belletti & Leonini, 2004; Cardinaletti, 2004; Leonetti, 2017, 2018; Zubizarreta, 1998).⁵

In particular, in null-subject Romance Languages such as Italian and Spanish, IF is most commonly realized in a postverbal position (cf., Buring & Gutiérrez-Bravo, 2001; Cruschina & Mayol, 2022, 2024; Gutiérrez-Bravo, 2006, 2008; Ordóñez, 2000; Zubizarreta, 1998, on Spanish; Benincà, 1988; Belletti & Shlonsky, 1995; Belletti, 2004, 2008 on Italian). The impact of IF on syntactic configuration is most clearly observed with focal subjects, whose realization typically involves postverbal inversion.⁶ As reported in Cruschina and Mayol (2024, p. 4), examples (11–12) illustrate a well-attested postverbal realization of focal subjects in Spanish and Italian.

- (11) a. *¿Quién te regaló la botella de vino?* (Spanish)
 who cl. DAT.2SG give.PST.3SG the bottle of wine
 ‘Who gave you the bottle of wine (as a present)?’
 b. *#María me regaló la botella de vino.*
 Maria cl. DAT .1SG give.PST.3SG the bottle of wine
 b’. *Me regaló la botella de vino María.*
 cl.1SG.DAT give.PST.3SG the bottle of wine Maria
 ‘Maria gave me the bottle of wine (as a present).’

(Zubizarreta, 1998, pp. 125–126)

- (12) a. *Chi ha parlato?* (Italian)
 who AUX.PRS.3SG speak.PP
 ‘Who spoke?’
 b. *Ha parlato Gianni.*
 AUX.PRS.3SG speak.PP Gianni
 ‘Gianni spoke.’
 b’. *# Gianni ha parlato.*
 Gianni AUX.PRS.3SG speak.PP

(Belletti, 2004, p. 21)

As shown in (11b) and (12b), a preverbal subject is typically not acceptable in an IF context,⁷ since the preverbal position is often associated in the literature with correction or contrast (for discussion of Contrastive, Corrective and Focus Fronting, cf., Bianchi et al., 2015, 2016; Bianchi & Bocci, 2012; Cruschina, 2012, 2021; Frascarelli & Stortini, 2019; Frascarelli et al., 2022).

However, the postverbal realization of subjects in an IF context has been questioned by other studies in which preverbal subjects have been considered a main alternative for focusing subjects in an IF context. These works employed a variety of methodologies, including both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Different methodologies have been used to elicit IF, such as production tasks, acceptability judgments on pre-formed sentences, picture-based tasks, or Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) (cf., Gabriel, 2010; Jiménez-Fernández, 2015a, 2015b; Leal et al., 2018; Vanrell & Fernández-Soriano, 2013, 2018; Vanrell et al., 2018, for Spanish; Frascarelli & Stortini, 2019; Stortini, 2024 for Italian). The issue is, therefore, how we should account for such divergent results regarding IF.

3.2. Eliciting IF

In elicitation contexts, *wh*-questions are particularly relevant because they inherently target discourse-new information. For this reason, they have long been used as a natural diagnostic for identifying IF. In crosslinguistic research, the question–answer (QA) test is regarded as the most reliable and widely accepted diagnostic for focus (van der Wal, 2016, p. 265). In such tests, the focused element in the answer corresponds to the *wh*-phrase in the question. Although the QA paradigm is intuitive and widely used, it poses several methodological challenges.

Cruschina and Mayol (2022, 2024) identify three potential problems in the use of Q–A tests for eliciting IF, as shown in (13) below:

- (13) a. Only congruent answers contain a narrow focus.
 b. The most natural answers are fragments.
 c. Not all foci in answers to *wh*-questions are information foci.

(Cruschina & Mayol, 2022, p. 6)

According to (5a), only congruent answers should be considered valid, that is, those in which the elicited focus directly corresponds to the *wh*-element in the question. Answers that differ from this type of congruence must therefore be excluded. It is in fact possible to answer a *wh*-question with an appropriate but incongruent answer, as illustrated in (14) and (15) below:

- (14) a. Where is Pinocchio from?
 b. Pinocchio is the most famous ITALIAN book character.
- (15) a. Who did Mary invite to the meeting?
 b. Mary found out that JOHN was already attending.

In (14b), the answer is contextually appropriate but not congruent with the *wh*-question in (14a). Although felicitous in discourse, the answer does not correspond syntactically or semantically to the *wh*-element and cannot therefore be classified as a genuine instance of IF. In carefully selected datasets, such answers should not be considered valid instances of IF.

Similarly, in (15b), the reply is pragmatically appropriate and provides a plausible continuation of the discourse, yet it does not constitute a congruent answer to the *wh*-question in (15a). The focused element (*John*) appears as the subject of an embedded clause rather than as the direct object of the matrix verb, and the predicate type also changes from transitive (*invite*) to intransitive (*attend*). Therefore, despite being pragmatically appropriate in context, in carefully selected datasets such answers should not be considered valid instances of IF.

Even when congruence between the *wh*-element and focused constituent is maintained, a second issue arises, as noted in (13b). Fragment answers are typically the most natural answers to questions, since the background information is fully recoverable from the question context (cf., Merchant, 2004; Krifka, 2007), as shown in (16) and (17) below:

- (16) a. Who is falling from the stairs?
 b. PAUL (is falling from the stairs).
- (17) a. What did Mary wash yesterday?
 b. (Mary washed) THE CAR (yesterday).

Fragment answers are indeed problematic in eliciting focus, especially when the study concerns the interaction between focus and argument structure, and the verb should not be omitted in the response. From the point of view of focus elicitation, fragment answers obscure important evidence, since they do not reveal whether the subject would appear before or after the verb in a complete sentence. Fragments are the most natural form of response in spontaneous speech, but they offer limited information about the syntactic realization of IF. This may account for the variation observed in studies based on QA tests, depending on whether fragments are accepted, reconstructed, or excluded from the analysis.

As noted by Cruschina and Mayol (2024, p. 6), the presence of focus in an answer to a *wh*-question is not by itself a sufficient condition for defining IF (see 5c). According to the authors, *wh*-questions can also elicit a Mirative Focus, that is, a type of focus expressing

contrast with other alternatives in the speaker's common ground, such as prior knowledge or an unexpected event (for further discussion on Mirative Focus, see [Bianchi et al., 2015, 2016](#), [Cruschina, 2019, 2021](#)). Examples are provided in (18) and (19) below:

- (18) a. Who won the lottery?
b. (That's incredible) JOAN won the lottery!
- (19) a. What did Marina wear yesterday?
b. (You won't believe it) she wore an ARMANI dress!

In both (18b) and (19b), the focused constituent provides a valid answer to the *wh*-question and is not a fragment. Although the sentences share the same background, the resulting interpretation is mirative (and potentially contrastive), rather than informational.

To overcome these limitations, [Cruschina and Mayol \(2022, 2024\)](#), tried to address the problem by proposing a novel elicitation technique. Instead of instructing participants to produce full sentences, an approach that may lead to unnatural responses, or using QA tests where fragment answers are an issue that can invalidate the result obtained, they designed a novel methodology based on the manipulation of the question itself. The technique, called the Question with a Delayed Answer (QDA), adapts the logic of the DCTs (cf., [Brown, 2001](#); [Kasper & Dahl, 1991](#)) consisting of a questionnaire containing different scenarios created to elicit a specific speech act or structure. In QDA, the *wh*-question is embedded in a scenario that provides the relevant context. After the *wh*-question, a brief digression or an irrelevant element is introduced before the participant is asked to reply. Consider the scenario in (20), provided by [Cruschina and Mayol \(2022\)](#):

- (20) 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](#), p. 10)

As shown in (20), this short delay encourages participants to produce full sentences rather than fragments, without being explicitly instructed to do so. This methodology therefore provides data that are both spontaneous and syntactically informative, in a semi-elicited but controlled context. Moreover, it allows researchers to control the discourse context and syntactic environment, which is particularly relevant when investigating the syntactic position of elements and word-order variation in different verb types, such as psych-verbs, an idiosyncratic verb class where syntactic realization and information structure are tightly interrelated.

4. Research Question and Predictions

The present study examines how argument structure and IS interact in DE psych-verbs of the *piacere/gustar* type in Italian and Spanish, focusing on how speakers realize IF when the Theme is the new information in the discourse. The structural configuration of DE psych-verbs, in which the Theme surfaces as grammatical subject and the Experiencer is realized as a dative argument, offers an ideal testing ground for investigating how morphosyntactic alignment and informational roles interact. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- (i) What are the preferred word orders and morphosyntactic strategies employed by native speakers of Italian and Spanish to express IF on the Theme subject in DE psych-verbs?
- (ii) What are the preferred word orders and morphosyntactic strategies to realize DE in psych-verbs under IF conditions, and are there crosslinguistic differences between Italian and Spanish?

When IF targets the Theme, speakers are expected to prefer VS word orders, in which the focused constituent appears postverbally within the VP domain. Such configurations are predicted to be the most natural response to questions eliciting Theme focus, in line with well-established patterns in Romance languages that associate informational newness with postverbal position (Belletti, 2004; Cardinaletti, 2004; Leonetti, 2017, 2018; Zubizarreta, 1998).

With respect to the realization of the Experiencer, it is predicted that the dative argument will be informationally backgrounded, while nonetheless being overtly realized in a substantial proportion of cases. Following Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl (2007), such overt Experiencers are expected to function as Familiar Topics, maintaining discourse continuity and anchoring the new information structurally introduced by the Theme. Crosslinguistically, Italian and Spanish are expected to display largely parallel strategies in the realization of IF.

5. Materials and Methods

5.1. Participants

Two groups of adult native speakers participated in the experiment, 53 Italian and 60 Spanish speakers, for a total of 113 participants. The Italian group was recruited in the Rome area and consisted of speakers of Central Italian varieties, while the Spanish group was recruited in the Madrid area and included speakers of standard Castilian Spanish. All participants were native speakers of the target language, aged 20–30.

Recruitment was conducted via the Prolific online platform.⁸ Participation was voluntary and the study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical standards. All participants gave informed consent and received a monetary compensation for their participation. Table 1 summarizes the main socio-demographic characteristics of the sample (N, mean age, SD, gender distribution).

Table 1. Socio-demographic data for participants⁹.

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

The participant pool partly overlaps with that of a companion study on transitive and unaccusative verbs. No additional testing sessions were carried out for the present experiment, which specifically targets psych-verbs of the DE type, addressing a distinct research question concerning the realization of IF on the Theme argument.

5.2. Design and Materials

The experiment adopts the QDA technique (Cruschina & Mayol, 2022, 2024), further developed in Stortini (2024). This method elicits spontaneous speech under controlled pragmatic conditions, allowing the researcher to examine the effects of information-structural configurations while minimizing metalinguistic awareness and task-induced biases.

In the present design, stimuli comprised a broader set of experimental items targeting different predicate types, among which eight *piacere*-type psych-verbs (i.e., DE verbs) constituted the critical items for the present study. The contexts were specifically engineered to licence IF on the Theme.¹⁰ Each participant was exposed to four DE psych-verb items, distributed across two lists, yielding a balanced dataset across verbs and fillers.

Each verb occurred in a context with an animate Experiencer (dative), and an inanimate Theme (subject), generating controlled minimal pairs as (21) for Italian and (22) for Spanish.

- (21) *Che cosa piace al cane?* (Italian)
 what please.PRS.3SG to DEF.M.SG dog.M.SG
 ‘What does the dog like?’
- (22) *¿Qué le gusta al perro?* (Spanish)
 what DAT.3SG please.PRS.3SG to.DEF.M.SG dog.M.SG
 ‘What does the dog like?’

Each item was embedded in a QDA scenario, a short narrative context leading to the target *wh*-question. After the question, a brief interruption occurred before participants were asked to respond, effectively discouraging fragment answers. Examples of a full QDA scenario in Italian (23a) and Spanish (23b) are provided below:

- (23) a. *Sei a casa con il tuo cane e un tuo amico che ti dà una mano mentre prepari un esame. È l'ora della pappa e il tuo amico ti chiede:*
 ‘Che cosa piace al cane?’
Suonano al citofono e tu vai ad aprire. Poi torni da lui. . . e dici:
- b. *Estás en casa con tu perro y un amigo tuyo que te echa una mano mientras preparas un examen. Es la hora de comer y tu amigo te pregunta:*
 ‘¿Qué le gusta al perro?’
Llaman al portero automático y tú vas a abrir. Después vuelves donde está él. . . y dices:
 You are at home with your dog and a friend of yours is helping you while you are preparing for an exam. It's time to eat, and your friend asks you:
 ‘What does the dog like?’
 Someone rings the bell and you open the door. After that, you walk back to him. . . and you say:

All stimuli were constructed to maintain syntactic and lexical parallelism across items and across languages. Sentences were presented in an SVO order, with psych-verbs in the present (or present progressive tense), ensuring crosslinguistic comparability and limiting morphological variation. By combining naturalness with experimental control, QDA provides a reliable balance between spontaneity and replicability, thereby strengthening the validity and consistency of the collected data.

5.3. Procedure

The experiment was set up on the Pavlovia platform¹¹ and participants were recruited online on Prolific. Each session lasted approximately 20 min and was completed individually. Every scenario was presented through a pre-recorded dialogue, ensuring uniform prosodic and discourse cues across participants. Following the dialogue, a visual prompt appeared on screen, providing the relevant information. Participants were invited to provide a spoken response, which was audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis (see Section 6.3 for details on the prosodic analysis).

To enhance naturalness, the task was framed as a role-play in which participants respond freely, without explicit mention of grammaticality or sentence structure. Although no instruction required full sentences, the QDA format led participants to produce complete, pragmatically well-formed utterances, with only a minimal proportion of fragmentary answers.

5.4. Coding and Exclusion Criteria

Before presenting the results, we outline the criteria adopted for data coding and exclusion. The dataset was categorized on the basis of participants' responses. Each response was analyzed for syntactic structure and contextual congruence. The initial dataset consisted of 452 responses (4 experimental items per participant, distributed across two lists; N = 113), all fully transcribed and annotated.

Fragment answers represented only a minor portion of the data (4.6%) and were therefore excluded from further analysis. Their infrequency confirms that the QDA setup effectively promotes the production of full sentences containing a finite verb together with the focused element. This pattern further supports the robustness of the task, as participants consistently produced context-appropriate, non-elliptical utterances despite the absence of explicit instructions. Examples of fragment answers to the target question in (21) and (22) are given in (24) and (25) below.

- (24) a. *Cosa piace al cane?* (Italian)
 what please.PRS.3SG to.DEF.M.SG dog
 ‘What does the dog like?’
 b. *l’osso*
 DEF.M.SG bone
 ‘The bone’
- (25) a. *¿Qué le gusta al perro?* (Spanish)
 what DAT.3SG please.PRS.3SG toDEF.M.SG dog
 ‘What does the dog like?’
 b. *Los huesos*
 DEF.M.PL bones
 ‘The bones’

In addition to fragments, null or non-congruent answers were excluded (15.5%). Null responses included missing or unintelligible productions (e.g., due to audio quality), whereas non-congruent responses involved contextually inappropriate answers, such as those employing a different predicate or misplacing the focus element, as illustrated in (26–27). These exclusion criteria follow established practices in previous QDA-based studies (e.g., [Cruschina & Mayol, 2022, 2024; Stortini, 2024](#)).

- (26) a. *Cosa serve al bambino?* (Italian)
 what need.PRS.3SG to.DEF.M.SG child.M.SG
 ‘What does the child need?’
 b. *Mettigli il bavaglino così non si sporca*
 put.IMP-DAT.3SG DEF.M.SG bib so-that NEG REFL dirty.PRS.3SG
 ‘Put a bib on him so he doesn’t get dirty’
- (27) a. *¿Qué le gusta al perro?* (Spanish)
 what DAT.3SG please.PRS.3SG to DEF.F.SG dog
 ‘What does the dog like?’
 b. *Está comiendo un hueso de jamón.*
 be.PRS.3SG eat.PROG INDF.M.SG bone of ham
 ‘(He/She) is eating a ham bone.’

In (26b), the participant’s reply introduces a non-target sentence, while in (27b) the answer is related to the discourse, but employs a non-congruent predicate. These cases correspond to responses that are pragmatically acceptable yet structurally incompatible with the elicited focus condition (see also [Cruschina & Mayol, 2022, 2024; Stortini, 2024](#) for similar data).

Responses were then categorized on the basis of the semi-spontaneous sentences produced by the informants, according to the syntactic realization of IF, as shown in (28b–f) for Italian and in (29b–f) for Spanish.

(28)	a.	<i>Che cosa</i> what 'What does the dog like?'	<i>piace</i> please.PRS.3SG	<i>al</i> to.DEF.M.SG	<i>cane?</i> dog		
	b.	<i>L'osso</i> DEF.M.SG bone 'The dog likes the bone'	<i>piace</i> please.PRS.3SG	<i>al</i> to.DEF.M.SG	<i>cane.</i> dog		(SVO)
	c.	<i>Al</i> to.DEF.M.SG 'The dog likes the bone'	<i>cane</i> dog	<i>piace</i> please.PRS.3SG	<i>l'</i> DEF.M.SG	<i>osso.</i> bone	(OVS)
	d.	<i>Gli</i> DAT.3SG '(he) likes the bone'	<i>piace</i> please.PRS.3SG	<i>l'osso.</i> DEF.M.SG bone			(cl-VS)
	e.	<i>È</i> COP.3SG DEF.M.SG 'It's the bone that the dog likes'	<i>l'osso</i> bone	<i>che</i> COMP	<i>piace</i> please.PRS.3SG	<i>al</i> to.DEF.M.SG	<i>cane.</i> dog (cleft)
	f.	<i>L'osso,</i> DEF.M.SG bone 'The bone, the dog likes it'	<i>gli</i> DAT.3SG	<i>piace</i> please.PRS.3SG	<i>al</i> to.DEF.M.SG	<i>cane.</i> dog	(CLLD-VS)
	g.	<i>C'è</i> exist.PRS.3SG 'There is a bone.'	<i>un</i> INDF.M.SG	<i>osso.</i> bone			(Presentative Construction)
(29)	a.	<i>¿Qué</i> what 'What does the dog like?'	<i>le</i> DAT.3SG	<i>gusta</i> please.PRS.3SG	<i>al</i> to.DEF.M.SG	<i>perro?</i> dog	
	b.	<i>El</i> DEF.M.SG bone 'The dog likes the bone'	<i>hueso</i>	<i>le</i> DAT.3SG	<i>gusta</i> please.PRS.3SG	<i>al</i> to.DEF.M.SG	<i>perro.</i> dog (SVO)
	c.	<i>Al</i> to.DEF.M.SG dog 'The dog likes the bone'	<i>perro le</i> DAT.3SG	<i>gusta</i> please.PRS.3SG	<i>el</i> DEF.M.SG	<i>hueso.</i> bone	(OVS)
	d.	<i>Le</i> DAT.3SG '(he) likes the bone'	<i>gusta</i> please.PRS.3SG	<i>el</i> DEF.M.SG	<i>hueso.</i> bone		((cl)VS)
	e.	<i>Lo</i> DET <i>es</i> COP.3SG 'What the dog likes is a bone'	<i>que le</i> that DAT.3SG <i>un</i> INDF.M.SG bone	<i>gusta</i> please.PRS.3SG	<i>al</i> to.DEF.M.SG	<i>perro</i> dog	(Pseudo-Cleft)
	f.	<i>El</i> DEF.M.SG bone <i>al</i> to.DEF.M.SG dog 'The bone, it is what the dog likes'	<i>hueso, es</i> COP.3SG DET that DAT.3SG <i>perro.</i>	<i>lo</i>	<i>que le</i>	<i>gusta</i> please.3SG	(CLLD-Cleft)
	g.	<i>Hay</i> exist.3SG 'There is a bone.'	<i>un</i> INDF.M.SG	<i>hueso.</i> bone			(Presentative Construction)

Productions displaying a preverbal Theme (SV/SVO) were classified as preverbal subject realizations, as in (28b) and (29b). When the Theme was realized postverbally, the Experiencer was fronted, yielding an OVS configuration, as in (28c) and (29c). Instances of clitic resumption of the dative object, mandatory in Spanish and optional in Italian, were grouped under (cl)VS, as in (28d) and (29d). Clefting strategies, including it-clefts, pseudo-clefts and reduced clefts, were identified when the Theme was singled out by a copular focus construction, as shown in (28e) and (29e). Finally, topic-related configurations, including topic + clitic resumption (as in 28f) or topic + cleft (as in 29f), were treated as a distinct category, alongside a small number of presentative sentences of the *c'è/hay* type, reported in (28g) and (29g).

After the application of the exclusion criteria in (24–27), a total of 91 responses were discarded (35 from the Italian dataset, corresponding to 16.5%, and 56 from the Spanish dataset, corresponding to 23.2%) (Table 2 below). The final corpus therefore consisted of 361 contextually congruent and syntactically complete sentences (177 Italian and 184 Spanish), which form the empirical basis of the quantitative and qualitative analyses presented in the next section.

Table 2. Distribution of syntactic patterns across Italian and Spanish datasets.

	SV		OVS		(cl-)VS		Cleft		CLLD + Other		Other		DP		Null/Non-Congr.	Tot	
	Counts	% Within Row	Counts	% Within Row	Counts	% Within Row	Counts	% Within Row	Counts	% Within Row	Counts	% Within Row	Counts	% Within Row	Counts	Within Row	
Italian	10	4.7%	97	45.8%	58	27.4%	8	3.8%	3	1.4%	1	0.9%	3	1.4%	32	15.1%	212
Spanish	9	3.8%	93	38.8%	43	17.9%	29	12.1%	2	0.8%	8	7.1%	18	7.5%	38	15.8%	240
Total	19	4.2%	190	42.0%	101	22.3%	37	8.2%	5	1.1%	9	8.0%	21	4.6%	70	15.5%	452

6. Results and Discussion

6.1. Results

Table 2 summarizes the distribution of syntactic patterns obtained across the two languages. The quantitative results reveal a clear crosslinguistic consistency in the realization of IF in DE psych-verbs, with a marked preference for postverbal Theme and sentence-initial realization of the Experiencer, showing that Italian and Spanish display a broadly similar pattern.

Crosslinguistically, the two languages exhibit parallel strategies. In both Italian and Spanish, OVS and (cl)VS configurations prevail overwhelmingly, whereas SVO sentences are marginal. Specifically, Italian shows 45.8% OVS and 27.4% clitic-VS structures, compared to 4.7% SV(O) realizations. Spanish displays a similar profile with 38.8% OVS, 17.9% clitic-VS, and 3.8% SVO. These findings indicate that, when the Theme functions as the IF, speakers consistently favour structures in which the focused constituent appears postverbally within the vP domain (Belletti, 2004; Belletti & Leonini, 2004; Cardinaletti, 2004; Zubizarreta, 1998; Cruschina, 2012).

The data further show that the Experiencer, although informationally backgrounded, is frequently realized overtly as a full DP, rather than as a clitic pronoun.¹² The higher rate of overt Experiencers in Italian indicates that dative marking is compatible with topicality and contributes to discourse continuity. These findings align with the proposal in the literature that topics occupy left-peripheral positions, while IF is realized in the postverbal domain (cf., among others, Belletti, 2004; Benincà & Poletto, 2004; Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl, 2007; Rizzi, 1997 and subsequent works; Zubizarreta, 1998).

To examine the distribution of syntactic configurations associated with overt DE realization in Italian and Spanish, separate multinomial Generalized Linear Models (GLMs) were run for each language. This type of model is suitable for categorical dependent variables with more than two levels, in this case, the variable *Order* (OVS, clitic-VS, SV, Cleft, Topic-related structures, and other structures). The analyses were intercept-only, with no predictors entered, so that the estimated coefficients indicate the relative likelihood of each syntactic configuration within the language. All analyses were conducted in Jamovi 2.6.44 (The Jamovi Project, 2024) and R 4.4 (R Core Team, 2024). Data for Italian are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. GLMs for Italian.

Parameter Estimates (Coefficients)—Italian								
Response	Name	Estimate	SE	Exp(B)	Exp(B) 95% Confidence Intervals		z	p
					Lower	Upper		
(cl)VS—OVS	(Intercept)	−0.514	0.166	0.5979	0.43089	0.8297	−3.10	0.002
SV(O)—OVS	(Intercept)	−2.272	0.332	0.1031	0.05352	0.1986	−6.84	<0.001
Cleft—OVS	(Intercept)	−2.495	0.368	0.0825	0.03990	0.1705	−6.78	<0.001
Top+—OVS	(Intercept)	−3.476	0.586	0.0309	0.00972	0.0984	−5.93	<0.001
Other—OVS	(Intercept)	−4.575	1.005	0.0103	0.00142	0.0750	−4.55	<0.001

As shown in Table 3, the GLM analysis with OVS as the reference category confirmed OVS as the dominant realization in Italian. All alternative configurations were significantly less likely than OVS. In particular, clitic-VS occurred at about 60% the rate of OVS (OR = 0.60, $z = -3.10$, $p = 0.002$), whereas SV(O) (OR = 0.10, $p < 0.001$), clefts (OR = 0.08, $p < 0.001$), topic + different structures (OR = 0.03, $p < 0.001$), and other structures (OR = 0.01, $p < 0.001$) were markedly rarer. These contrasts identify OVS as the dominant realization of DE psych-verbs in Italian, when the Theme functions as the IF, with clitic-VS emerging as the only productive alternative, while all remaining patterns occur only marginally.

Data for Spanish are reported in Table 4.

Table 4. GLMs for Spanish.

Parameter Estimates (Coefficients)—Spanish								
Response	Name	Estimate	SE	Exp(B)	Exp(B) 95% Confidence Intervals		z	p
					Lower	Upper		
(cl)VS—OVS	(Intercept)	−0.771	0.184	0.4624	0.32134	0.6653	−4.18	<0.001
SV(O)—OVS	(Intercept)	−2.336	0.349	0.0968	0.04859	0.1927	−6.69	<0.001
Cleft—OVS	(Intercept)	−1.165	0.213	0.3118	0.20496	0.4745	−5.48	<0.001
Top+—OVS	(Intercept)	−3.839	0.715	0.0215	0.00525	0.0881	−5.37	<0.001
Other—OVS	(Intercept)	−2.453	0.369	0.0860	0.04156	0.1779	−6.66	<0.001

As shown in Table 4, the analysis with OVS as the reference category reveals the same general pattern. All other configurations were significantly less likely than OVS ($ps < 0.001$). Clitic-VS structures occurred at about 46% of the rate of OVS (OR = 0.46, 95% CI [0.32, 0.67], $z = -4.18$, $p < 0.001$), while SV(O) was only 31% as frequent (OR = 0.31, $p < 0.001$). Cleft constructions were rare (OR = 0.09, $p < 0.001$), as were topic-related structures and other patterns (ORs < 0.10). These results confirm that, in Spanish (as in Italian), the Experiencer is most frequently realized overtly in sentence-initial position, with OVS emerging as the dominant syntactic configuration and clitic-VS representing the main alternative strategy, while all other configurations remain marginal.

6.2. Discussion

The results of the production experiment reveal a robust and systematic pattern in the realization of IF on the Theme subject with DE psych-verbs in Italian and Spanish. In both languages, speakers overwhelmingly favour configurations such as OVS and (cl)VS. The predominance of VS structures supports Belletti's (2004) low focus hypothesis, according to which postverbal subjects when interpreted as IF in Romance are associated with a low focus position in the vP periphery.

Although preverbal Theme realizations (SVO) are marginal in the present data, their occasional occurrence deserves brief consideration. This result is not at odds with previous experimental findings showing a higher availability of SVO orders in IF contexts with transitive and unaccusative predicates (cf., Frascarelli & Stortini, 2019; Stortini, 2024). The difference can be attributed to the internal argument structure of DE psych-verbs. Unlike simple unaccusatives, DE constructions involve an Experiencer argument occupying a higher structural position, which is systematically interpreted as discourse-given and functions as a Familiar Topic. In such configurations, preverbal realization of the Theme competes with a strong topic-focus asymmetry, making SVO a dispreferred, though not excluded, option for encoding IF. By contrast, in predicates lacking a competing topical argument, preverbal subjects may remain compatible with IF without triggering interpretive conflicts, and therefore emerge as a viable option in production data (cf., Gabriel, 2010;

Jiménez-Fernández, 2015a, 2015b; Leal et al., 2018 for Spanish; Frascarelli & Stortini, 2019; Stortini, 2024 for Italian).

The Experiencer, by contrast, typically occupies a structurally higher position, realized as a dative DP fulfilling a discourse role rather than a purely syntactic one. This suggests that DE are generated in a position that allows movement to a higher domain without violating locality or causing intervention effects (Rizzi, 1990, 2004, 2018).

These findings align with Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl's (2007) cartographic model of the left periphery, which distinguishes between Aboutness, Contrastive, and Familiar Topics.¹³ According to the authors, the Experiencer functions as a Familiar Topic, anchoring the clause to the discourse. Within this typology, the Experiencer in DE psych-verbs corresponds to a Familiar Topic (G-Topic), an argument that is already activated in the discourse and serves to maintain referential continuity rather than to introduce new domains of predication.

In the structural hierarchy proposed by Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl (2007), G-Topics occupy the lowest TopP, immediately above FinP and adjacent to the focus field, precisely the position predicted for arguments that function as discourse anchors to new information. In this sense, the DE provides the informational background against which the postverbal Theme is interpreted as new information. Importantly, the high rate of overt Experiencers shows that topical continuity and morphosyntactic visibility co-occur: rather than optional, overt dative expressions play a key role in discourse anchoring.

In Jiménez-Fernández and Rozwadowska (2016, 2017) (cf., also Jiménez-Fernández, 2020) it is claimed that whenever the experiencer comes first, it functions as a G-Topic. We follow Jiménez-Fernández and Rozwadowska (2017, p. 107) who argue that 'the subject properties of DEs are derived from the connection between the syntactic position occupied by the DE and its discourse interpretation'.

While Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl (2007) capture the interpretive nature of this configuration, Jiménez-Fernández and Miyagawa (2014) offer a complementary account of the underlying formal mechanism. Within the feature-sharing approach to the syntax-discourse interface, they propose that discourse features such as [Top] and [Foc] are not confined to the CP domain but can be *inherited* or *lowered* to lower functional heads, specifically to T and V.

We thus follow Jiménez-Fernández and Rozwadowska (2017, p. 117), who, in line with Jiménez-Fernández and Miyagawa (2014), propose that in Spanish 'when DE is a G-Topic, it moves to Spec-TP, and its [Top] feature is valued via AGREE with T'.

In Spanish and Italian, the [Top] feature can be lowered from C to T, enabling a DE functioning as a G-Topic. Likewise, the [Foc] feature can be inherited by V and valued by the postverbal constituent realizing IF. This mechanism yields precisely the surface configuration attested in the experimental data and accounts for the asymmetry between the high, topical Experiencer and the low, focalized Theme.¹⁴

This account also explains why the DE, despite not bearing nominative case, can appear in a structurally high position such as Spec-TP, a position independently shown to be available to non-nominative arguments in Spanish (cf., Masullo, 1992; Fernández Soriano, 1999; Tubino Blanco, 2007; Fábregas et al., 2017).¹⁵ In Jiménez-Fernández and Miyagawa's model, Spec-TP can host a topical argument when T inherits a [Top] feature from C. Thus, the Experiencer moves to Spec-TP not for Case or ϕ -agreement, as in canonical subjects, but to value [Top] discursively. The Theme, by contrast, remains in the low vP domain and values [Foc] in situ, in line with Belletti's (2004) low Focus hypothesis. The two arguments therefore realize distinct discourse features within different syntactic domains, and their morpho-syntactical visibility reflects this informational asymmetry.

The combination of Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl's (2007) and functional typology and Jiménez-Fernández and Miyagawa's (2014) perspectives provides a coherent model for

interpreting the Italian and Spanish data. The Familiar Topic status of the Experiencer, realized morphologically through dative marking, and the postverbal position of the Theme, associated with IF, emerge as two sides of the same interface mechanism: syntax and morphology cooperate to make informational contrasts visible.

In this light, the present findings lend empirical support to the hypothesis that morphological case and word order serve as formal cues contributing to the interpretability of syntactic structures. The results suggest that DE psych-verbs instantiate a grammar-internal configuration that maps Thematic Hierarchies onto informational ones, allowing for interpretability within the vP–TP domain.

6.3. Prosodic Evidence

Although the primary focus of this study is syntactic, a brief prosodic analysis was conducted to assess whether prosodic realization converges with the proposed information-structural interpretation. The analysis is intended as preliminary and exploratory, and does not aim to provide statistical confirmation, but rather to examine how prosodic prominence and contour shape align with the identification of focus and (G-)Topic in DE constructions.

A subset of representative utterances ($n \approx 20$ per language) was selected in Italian and Spanish. Prosodic contours were analyzed within the ToBI annotation framework (Pierrehumbert, 1980) in which intonational structure is represented as a sequence of low (L) and high (H) tones associated with pitch accents and boundary tones.¹⁶ The ToBI system was later expanded to include discourse-level phenomena and adapted to several languages (see Jun, 2005, 2014; Marotta, 2000; Munson et al., 2005). In the present study, the prosodic transcription follows the convention proposed by Gili Fivela et al. (2015), with particular attention to the tonal realization of the DE and the postverbal subject Theme.

Following Belletti (2004), the low vP field is not expected to host independent prosodic prominence, as the nuclear accent of the intonational phrase aligns with the constituent carrying focus. This prediction is supported by the data shown in Figures 3 and 4, for Italian and Spanish, respectively. In both cases, the pitch contour remains relatively flat across the verb and adjacent material, while the nuclear accent consistently aligns with the postverbal Theme. This pattern is consistent with the interpretation of IF being realized within the low syntactic domain (cf., Belletti, 2004) as illustrated in (30) and (31):

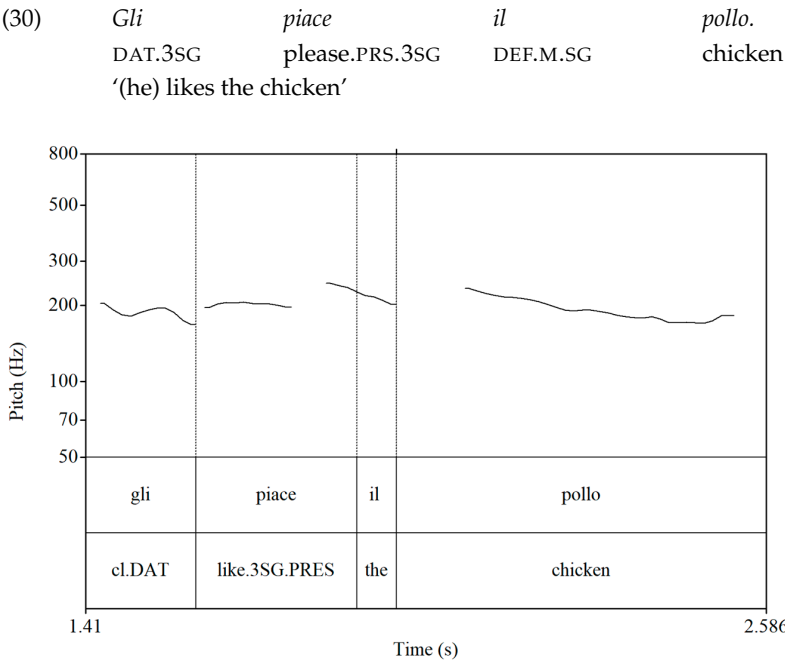


Figure 3. VS order for IF—Italian (participant code: 217047-6).

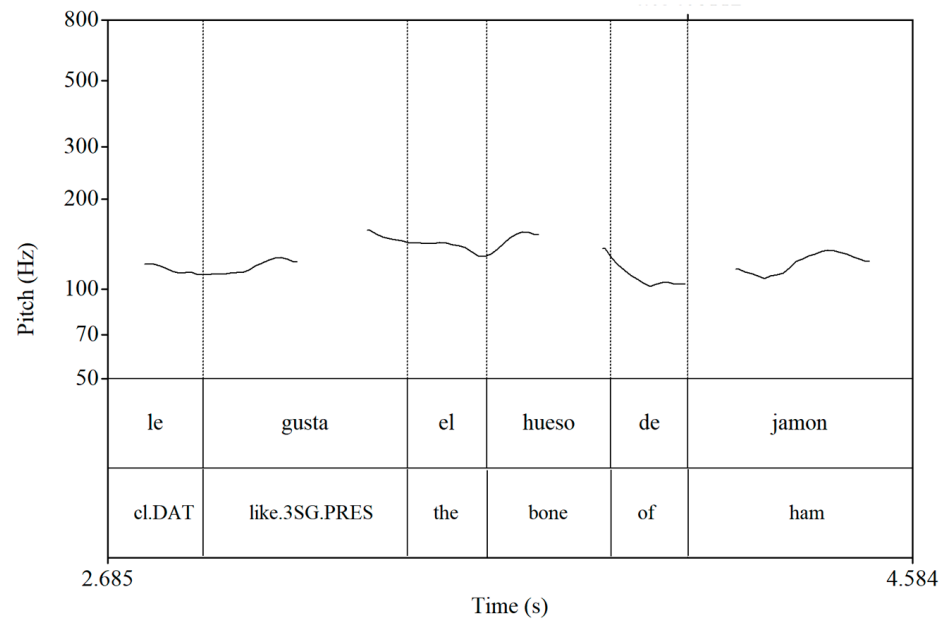


Figure 4. VS order for IF—Spanish (participant code: 725000-6).

- (31) *Le gusta el hueso de jamon.*
 DAT.3SG like.PRS.3SG DEF.M.SG bone of ham
 '(he) likes the chicken'

Moreover, according to Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl (2007), Familiar Topics are associated with a low L contour aligned with the tonic vowel. As shown in (32) and Figure 5 and (33) and Figure 6, in both Italian and Spanish the Experiencer DP displays a low and flat contour, supporting its interpretation as a G-Topic.

- (32) *Al cane piace l'osso.*
 to.DEF.M.SG dog please.PRS.3SG DEF.M.SG bone
 'The dog likes the bone'

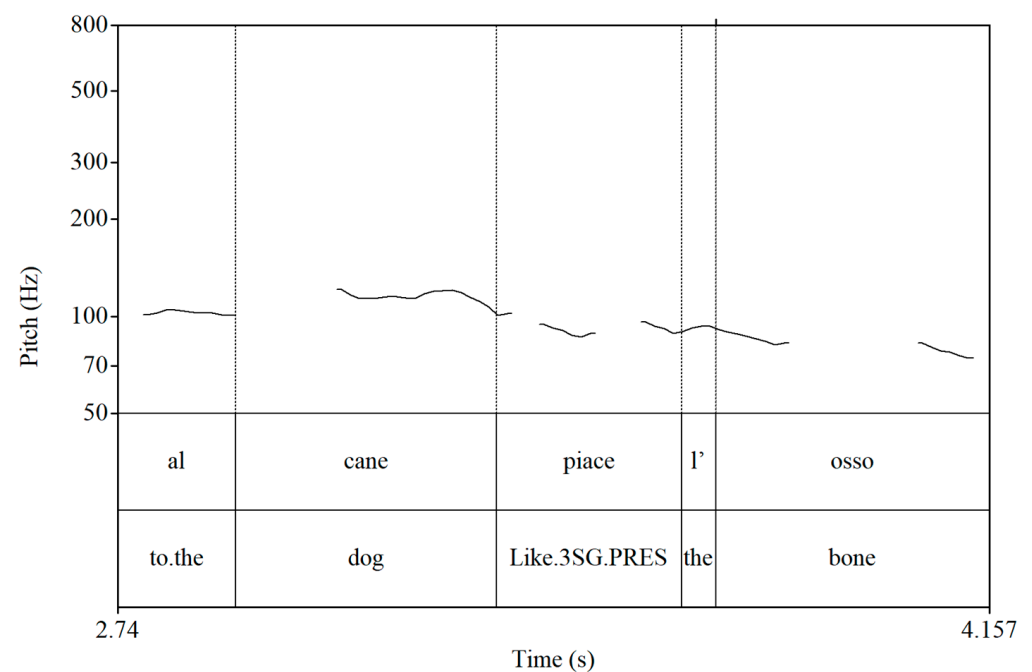


Figure 5. OVS order for IF—Italian (participant code: 348999-6).

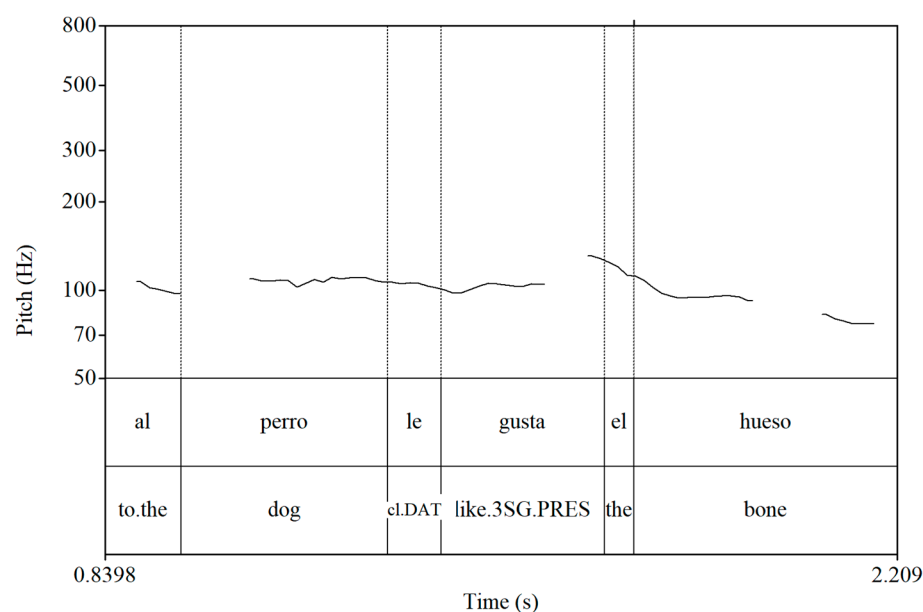


Figure 6. OVS order for IF—Spanish (participant code: 224640-6).

- (33) *Al perro le gusta el hueso.*
 to.DEF.M.SG dog DAT.3SG please.PRS.3SGDEF.M.SG bone
 ‘The dog likes the bone’

Overall, while limited in scope, the prosodic patterns observed align closely with the syntactic and information-structural analysis proposed above. The Experiencer consistently displays a low tonal profile characteristic of background or given material, whereas the Theme bears the nuclear pitch accent marking IF. The crosslinguistic similarity of these patterns suggests that, in DE psych-verbs, syntax, morphology, and prosody jointly contribute to the encoding of discourse relations.

7. Conclusions

This study examined how argument structure interacts with IS in DE psych-verbs of the *piacere/gustar* type in Italian and Spanish. These verbs display a non-canonical alignment between thematic and grammatical roles, in which the Experiencer surfaces as a dative object and the Theme as the subject. This configuration provides a suitable domain for exploring how formal structure makes informational distinctions accessible to interpretation.

Adopting a semi-spontaneous QDA methodology (Cruschina & Mayol, 2022), the study elicited natural productions in both languages to identify the preferred syntactic (and prosodic) realizations of IF on the Theme. The results reveal a consistent crosslinguistic pattern: speakers overwhelmingly favour VS orders as the preferred strategy, while overt DP Experiencers frequently occur in sentence-initial, discourse-related positions.

The postverbal Theme realizes focus within the low vP domain (Belletti, 2004; Cardinaletti, 2004), whereas the DE occupies a structurally higher position, functioning as a Familiar Topic (Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl, 2007). Following Jiménez-Fernández and Miyagawa (2014) and subsequent work (Jiménez-Fernández & Rozwadowska, 2016, 2017), the high position may be analyzed as corresponding to Spec-TP, where the Experiencer values a [Top] feature. Both Italian and Spanish display the same underlying morphosyntactic configuration linking argument structure and information-structural encoding.

Preliminary prosodic evidence supports this interpretation. In both languages, the postverbal Theme bears nuclear prominence, while the DE displays a low contour characteristic of background material. These patterns are compatible with the feature-sharing

framework proposed by Jiménez-Fernández and Miyagawa (2014) and Jiménez-Fernández and Rozwadowska (2017), where [Top] and [Foc] features are valued locally, yielding the pattern observed here.

Taken together, the structural and prosodic findings suggest that DE psych-verbs encode a grammar-internal mechanism for mapping Thematic Hierarchies onto informational ones. Morphological case, argument position and prosodic prominence emerge as convergent formal cues contributing to the interpretability of discourse relations.

More generally, these results support the view that formal properties are not redundant but constitute an integral component of the interpretive architecture of grammar. Future research may extend this investigation to other Romance languages and to a wider range of focus contexts, offering further insight into how grammatical structure, information organization and prosody interact in shaping discourse interpretation.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: In accordance with European and Italian data protection and research regulations, this type of study does not require approval by an institutional ethics committee. Specifically, the study falls under the scope of Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (General Data Protection Regulation) and Italian Legislative Decree No. 196/2003, as amended by Legislative Decree No. 101/2018, which allow the processing of anonymous data for scientific research purposes without the need for prior ethics committee approval. Since the data were collected in fully anonymous form and the study involved no physical, psychological, or social risk for participants, no ethical approval was required.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Written informed consent has been obtained from the patient(s) to publish this paper.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

DE	Dative Experiencer
DCT	Discourse Completion Task
IF	Information Focus
IS	Information Structure
OE	Object Experiencer
QDA	Question with a Delayed Answer
SE	Subject Experiencer

Notes

- ¹ This does not imply that informational accessibility is unavailable in other languages. Rather, languages differ in the grammatical devices they employ to encode discourse distinctions. For instance, English lacks DE psych-verbs and typically realizes Experiencers as nominative subjects, relying primarily on prosody, rather than morphosyntactic alternations, to encode focus and givenness (cf., Pesetsky, 1995; Landau, 2010; Zubizarreta, 1998; Samek-Lodovici, 2005).
- ² The restriction against bare nominal Themes in Spanish DE psych-verbs has often been taken to support an analysis in which the Theme occupies a specifier position (e.g., Suñer, 1982; Cuervo, 2003; Tubino Blanco, 2007). However, this restriction does not uniquely diagnose the base-generated position of the Theme. Alternative accounts derive the DP requirement from independent licensing conditions on nominal expressions in Spanish, without requiring displacement to a specifier position (e.g., Torrego, 1998; Zubizarreta, 1998; Leonetti, 2004). Since the present study does not hinge on the internal VP position of the Theme, we remain agnostic on this issue.

- 3 As discussed by Arad (1998b), the Spec-VP position hosts participants that are structurally interpreted as affected by the event. Given that the Experiencer denotes the entity undergoing an emotional state, its affected status follows naturally from its semantic role. Pesetsky (1995, p. 59) further refines this view by suggesting that the Theme in such verbs functions as a *target of emotion*, a type of Goal argument within the event structure.
- 4 In this work, the focused element is highlighted in uppercase.
- 5 In broad-focus or out-of-the-blue contexts, word order remains unaltered.
- 6 In Spanish, certain unaccusative predicates display postverbal subjects as the unmarked order independently of information-structural factors (e.g., *falta café* vs. *?café falta*). In such cases, postverbal realization does not reflect inversion triggered by IF or focus in general, but rather lexical and morphosyntactic properties of the predicate. Moreover, the distribution of postverbal subjects in these configurations is subject to restrictions on bare nominal expressions in Spanish, commonly discussed under the Naked Noun Phrase Constraint (Suñer, 1982; see also Masullo, 1992; Fernández Soriano, 1999; Leonetti, 2004; Tubino Blanco, 2007; Fábregas et al., 2017). We thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to this point.
- 7 In several studies, it has been proposed that IF may occur in sentence-initial position, particularly when it corresponds to the subject (see Gabriel, 2010; Vanrell & Fernández-Soriano, 2013, 2018; Jiménez-Fernández, 2015a, 2015b; Frascarelli & Stortini, 2019; Stortini, 2024).
- 8 Prolific: <https://www.prolific.com/> (accessed on 18 February 2026).
- 9 The EQF (European Qualification Framework) is an 8-level learning outcomes-based framework for all types of qualifications that serves as a translation tool between different national qualifications frameworks. <https://europass.europa.eu/en/description-eight-efq-levels> (accessed on 18 February 2026).
- 10 The experimental set includes canonical *piacere*-type psych-verbs as well as a small number of closely related predicates, such as *faltar* ('to miss'), which occur in a DE configuration and are commonly discussed in the literature in connection with this domain. Predicates like *faltar* may differ with respect to certain lexical and distributional properties in individual languages, including the licencing of bare nominal Themes in Spanish (Suñer, 1982; Cuervo, 2003; Tubino Blanco, 2007). Crucially, however, these differences do not affect the structural position or discourse role of the DE, which is the focus of the present study. Since our analysis targets the realization of IF and the discourse accessibility of the Experiencer, rather than fine-grained lexical classifications among psych predicates, these predicates are grouped together in the experimental design on the basis of their shared (dative) Experiencer–Theme configuration (cf., Belletti & Rizzi, 1988; Landau, 2010; Rozwadowska, 2017).
- 11 Pavlovia: <https://pavlovia.org/> (accessed on 18 February 2026).
- 12 This pattern is not trivial, as previous work on transitive predicates has shown that preverbal realization of non-subject arguments in IF contexts does not straightforwardly licence overt DP realization, which is instead often clitic in such configurations (Cruschina & Mayol, 2022, 2024).
- 13 Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl (2007) provide evidence for three structurally distinct types of topics within the left periphery. Aboutness-shift Topics (A-Topics) occupy the highest TopP and introduce a new discourse domain, Contrastive Topics (C-Topics) induce alternatives that are independent of the sentence's Focus value and create oppositional pairs with other Topics (Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl, 2007, p. 88), and Familiar Topics (G-Topics) are realized in the lowest TopP, immediately above FinP. G-Topics are used to maintain topic continuity or to resume background information that has not been previously introduced as an A-Topic. The resulting hierarchy is shown in (i):
- (i) [ForceP [TopP[+aboutness-shift] [TopP[+contrastive] [FocP [TopP* [+familiar/ +background] [FinP [TP
- 14 They also observe that in English, Experiencers behave as real subjects: they move to Spec-TP through agreement, but may also raise to Spec-CP when functioning as topics. This aligns with the experimental findings reported in Stortini (2024), where English psych-verbs are not subject to inversion and consistently display the Experiencer as grammatical subject.
- 15 It is relevant to consider Cardinaletti's (2004) proposal, according to which the Experiencer in Italian and Spanish psych-verbs of the *piacere* class may occupy the preverbal subject position within the subject field. In her analysis, AgrSP is the projection where nominative DPs check agreement-related features, while SubjP hosts the projection in which the 'subject of predication' feature is checked. Within this framework, Dative Experiencers are located in SubjP, thus occupying a structurally high position in the preverbal domain. In the present study, the high position of the Dative Experiencer is formalized from the valuation of a [Top] feature in the TP domain. The Experiencer and the Theme are thus associated with distinct formal features, [Top] and [Foc], whose distribution determines the structural asymmetry observed in the clause.
- 16 Pitch accents correspond to local pitch movements aligned with phonological units perceived as prominent or stressed, such as the tonic vowel in Italian. Boundary tones mark phrase-final syllables and indicate prosodic phrasing.

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