

Italian and Spanish unaccusative sentence focus constructions: What corpora tell us about their word order

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The purpose of this paper is twofold: (a) to show that the subject-verb (SV) order, generally correlated with PREDICATE FOCUS (PF) structure in Italian/Spanish unaccusative sentences, is used as well as the VS order for articulating SENTENCE FOCUS (SF); and (b) to characterize the fundamental differences between the two SF constructions on the basis of two corpus studies.

It has been commonly held (Lambrecht 2000; Gutiérrez-Bravo 2007; *inter alias*) that VS is the canonical word order for marking SF for unaccusative sentences in Italian and Spanish, as illustrated by corpus data in (1). However, data from corpora reveal that SV order extensively occurs in SF contexts in both Italian and Spanish, as illustrated in (2). As is clear from the context, the preverbal subject here is neither a topic nor a preposed focus.

- (1) *Dalla strage del 12 aprile sul treno della Val Venosta, in Alto Adige, emergono documenti inquietanti. Nell'incidente sono morte nove persone, una ventina i feriti. (CORIS/CODIS)*
'Disturbing documents emerge from the April 12 massacre on board of the Val Venosta, Alto Adige, train. In the incident, **nine people died**, about twenty were injured.'

- (2) *No tiene ninguna justificación que municipios como Pozuelo carezcan de servicios tan básicos como el de un parque de bomberos. Dos personas murieron en el incendio de una vivienda. Llegaron demasiado tarde, pero no por falta de eficacia, sino por lejanía. (Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual)*

'It has no justification that municipalities like Pozuelo lack services so basic as fire department.

Two people died in a house fire. They [firemen] arrived too late, not for the lack of efficiency but because of the distance.'

That both VS and SV order are possible in Italian and Spanish unaccusative sentences in SF contexts has been claimed in several studies (Pinto 1997; Corr 2016; Sheehan 2016; *inter alia*). These studies, however, focus on the analyses of VS sentences and do not offer an adequate account of how the two SF constructions differ in the way they are used. This is mainly due to the fact that they do not include naturally-occurring sentences embedded in discourse contexts.

In order to uncover differences between the two SF constructions, two corpus studies were conducted. First, using the verbs *arrivare/llegar* 'to arrive' and *morire/morir* 'to die', a total of 671 tokens of SV sentences (203 Italian/Spanish 468) and a total of 999 tokens of VS sentences (430 Italian/569 Spanish), all in SF contexts, were extracted from online corpora and submitted to a statistical analysis (binominal logistic regression) with respect to several linguistic (clause types; subject properties; adverbial placement) as well as extralinguistic properties (genres and whether or not appeared in headlines). Data from each language was analyzed separately. Our results showed that for both languages, the most decisive factor distinguishing SV from VS SF constructions was the distribution of clause-initial and postverbal adverbial modifiers: while odds of occurrence for SV sentences significantly decrease ($p < .0001$) when the former is present, they significantly increase ($p < .0001$) when the latter is present.

The follow-up study, more qualitative in nature, took a close look at clause-initial and postverbal adverbial modifiers occurring in root and complement clauses, where these elements most abound. The data set included two additional verbs, *cadere/caer* 'to fall' and *comparire/aparecer* 'to appear', and consisted of 719 tokens of SV sentences (230 Italian/489 Spanish) and 878 tokens of VS sentences (435 Italian/443 Spanish), all in SF contexts. We found that for both languages, VS sentences typically occur with a presupposed clause-initial XP (81%), i.e., a "stage topic" (STop) (cf. Erteschik-Shir 1997; Texeira 2016), which provides a spacio-temporal bound for the event, as illustrated in (1), and can be implicit, as shown in (3).

(3) *Entro le 14 bisogna abbandonare Valona. Ø Arrivano auto dei rivoltosi: si offrono di trasportare i giornalisti in un vecchio aeroporto militare dismesso al centro della città dove pare che atterrerà l'elicottero italiano.* (CORIS/CODIS)

'By 2pm Valona must be abandoned. **There arrive cars with rebels:** they offer to transport the journalists to an old abandoned military airport in the center of the city where the Italian helicopter is expected to land.' (Ø "implicit" stage topic=by 2pm/in Valona)

Implicit STop is context given, though in the generative framework it is defined as a covert loco/temporal deictic, i.e., speaker oriented PP (Pinto 1997: 24; see also Corr 2016).

Our data, then, indicates that a VS unaccusative sentence does not present new information completely "out of the blue" but always in relation to a presupposed spacio-temporal frame. Since postverbal modifiers are scarce for VS sentences (Means:25), their primary function is to present a new nominal (=subject) referent to the universe of discourse rather than to depict a new event. Conversely, SV sentences have a strong tendency to not co-occur with preverbal adverbial modifiers (86%), as seen in (2); nevertheless, unlike the VS sentence in (3), they lack an implicit stage topic. Furthermore, SV sentences predominantly (91%) contain 1~2 non-topical postverbal adverbial modifiers of diverse types. Based on these results, we postulate that the primary function of SV sentences in SF contexts is not to present a new referent but to depict a new event that includes rich circumstantial details as part of new information. In this case, unaccusative verbs acquire more semantic weight (cf. Maradin 2010), unlike in VS sentences where the verb is "light" and used as a presentational instrument. Structurally, the subject may occupy the preverbal "subject" position generally reserved for the sentence topic, which is now available to be filled, blocking the interpretation of an implicit stage topic, or, in generative terms, to "satisfy the EPP".

To conclude, Italian and Spanish distinguish two constructions for articulating sentence focus in unaccusative sentences: [_{STop} XP [_{FOC} V S . . .]] where XP may be implicit and [_{FOC} S V YP*], which are not interchangeable.

CORPORA

CORIS/CODIS (Italian, <http://corpora.ficlit.unibo.it/>)

Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual (Spanish, <http://corpus.rae.es/creanet.html>)

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