

Two Ways of Articulating Sentence Focus in Italian and Spanish Unaccusative Sentences: A View from Corpora

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The purpose of this paper is twofold: (a) to show that the subject-verb (SV) order, previously correlated with PREDICATE FOCUS (PF) category 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 conducting two corpus studies.

There is general consensus across different frameworks that the VS order in Italian/Spanish unaccusative sentences instantiates the SF category (Gutiérrez-Bravo 2007; Marandin 2010; *inter alias*), as shown in (1) and (2). Lambrecht (2000), upon characterizing the SF construction as lacking the topic-comment relation between the subject and the predicate, explains that the VS word order in Italian/Spanish unaccusative sentences is the result of a “detopicalization” process, which assigns object-like properties to a non-agentive subject. Under this proposal, the SV order is not allowed to instantiate the SF category. However, data from corpora reveal that this order extensively occurs in SF contexts in both Italian and Spanish, as shown in (3) and (4).

In order to uncover differences between these two SF constructions, two corpus studies were conducted. First, using two verbs from each language (*arrivare/llegar* ‘to arrive’ and *morire/morir* ‘to die’), a total of 671 tokens of SV and 999 tokens of VS sentences in SF contexts, extracted from online corpora, were submitted to a statistical analysis (binominal logistic regression) with respect to several linguistic (clause types; subject properties; adverbial placement) and extralinguistic properties (genres and whether or not appeared in headlines). For both languages, the most decisive factor distinguishing SV from VS sentences was the presence of pre- and postV adverbials: while odds of occurrence for SV sentences significantly decrease when the former is present, they substantively increase when the latter is present. Also significant was clause types; in adverbial relative clauses, the SV order was strongly disfavored (cf. Gutiérrez-Bravo 2003).

The follow-up study took a close look at pre- and postV 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 729 tokens of SV and 883 tokens of VS sentences. We found that VS sentences typically occur with a topical preV adverbial (81%), i.e., a “stage topic” (Erteschik-Shir 1997), which provides a spacio-temporal bound for the event, as shown in (1) and (2), or relates the event depicted in the VS sentence to the previous discourse, as in (5). These facts support that a VS sentence does not present an absolute discourse initial event uttered “out of the blue” but one in relation to a particular spacio-temporal frame/context, which may be implicit and interpreted as ‘then&there’.

Conversely, SV sentences have a strong tendency to not to co-occur with a topical preV adverbial (85%), indicating that they are primarily used to present discourse initial events “out of the blue.” SV sentences lack the implicit stage topic ‘then&there’ proposed for VS sentences in which an explicit stage topic is absent. Furthermore, SV sentences predominantly (91%) contain 1~2 non-topical postV adverbials including diverse types of modifiers (cf. (3) and (4)) and do not simply present a new event or nominal referent as VS sentences are assumed to do; rather, they provide descriptive details of the event as part of new information, presumably in order to create a more complete visual image of the event depicted. We postulate that the subject in this case is

placed in the preV position for ease of processing by separating a verbal argument from “heavy” adverbial modifiers.

In sum, our corpus-based study attests that both VS and SV unaccusative sentences in Italian and Spanish may instantiate sentence focus; however, they differ in the way they articulate it: [[XP_{stageTOP} [FOC **V S** ...]] (XP may be Ø) for the former [FOC **S V** YP*] for the latter. Between the two languages, Spanish shows this distinction more strongly.

DATA: All data come from CORIS/CODIS for Italian (http://corpora.dslo.unibo.it/coris_ita.html) and CREA for Spanish (<http://corpus.rae.es/creanet.html>)

- (1)a. *A La Anita* [_v *morirono*] [_s *circa centoventi uomimi*].
‘In La Anita almost 120 men died.’
b. *Durante el día de ayer* [_v *murieron*] [_s *tres personas*].
‘During the day of yesterday three people died.’
- (2)a. *Stamattina* [_v *sono arrivati*] [_s *due pacchi*].
‘This morning there arrived two packages.’
b. *A Francia* [_v *llegan*] [_s *los corredores que han dominado en España y en Italia*].
‘In France there arrive the runners that have dominated in Spain and in Italy.’
- (3)a. [_s *Quattro persone*] [_v *muoiono*] ***per la caduta di una slavina sul monte Tantanè***.
‘Four people die for the fall of an avalanche on mount Tantanè.’
b. [_s *Dos jóvenes*] [_v *mueren*] ***arrastrados por una fuerte riada en Huesca***.
‘Two young men die dragged by a strong flood in Huesca.’
- (4)a. [_s *Centinaia di messaggi*] [_v *arrivano*] ***da tutta Italia al sito della società, il Chievo, fenomeno calcistico dell’anno***.
‘Hundreds of messages arrive from all over Italy to the website of the club, Chievo, soccer phenomenon of the year.’
b. [_s *Cientos de mujeres*] [_v *llegan*] ***a Moscú en una de las escalas del tren de mujeres que va a Pekín***.
‘Hundreds of women arrive in Moscow in one of the stopovers of the women train that goes to Pekin.’
- (5)a. ***Successivamente***, [_v *arrivò*] *all’albergo* [_s *una persona alta e corpulenta*].
‘Subsequently, a tall and hefty person arrived at the hotel.’
b. ***Un minuto después*** [_v *llegan*] [_s *los bomberos del aeropuerto*].
‘One minute later airport firemen arrive.’

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