

## **Impact of cross-linguistic divergences on the acquisition of it-cleft sentences in L2 Italian and L2 French: an experimental study**

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Cleft sentences, such as “C’est Marie qui achète le journal” and the Italian equivalent “è Maria che compra il giornale”, are part of the inventory of marked word-orders in Italian and French. These structures fulfill specific functions, mostly related to focus (De Cesare, 2017 and Katz, 2000 among others), and they cross-linguistically show asymmetries as per their frequency with different types of constituents, delineating distinctions among subjects, objects, and adverbials (see Samo & Merlo, 2021 and references therein).

Despite these shared traits, several studies highlight noteworthy variations in the overall frequency of it-clefts between Italian and French (Roggia, 2008). Scholars widely attribute this dissimilarity to divergent levels of word-order flexibility (Lambrecht, 2001) and typological parameters, such as pro-drop vs non pro-drop tendencies (Belletti, 2008). In addition, insights from recent studies (Garassino, 2022 and De Paolis, 2023) have highlighted another layer of diversity: in French, it-clefts emerge as the default strategy for focus in both identification and correction contexts, while in Italian, their specialization leans more towards correction.

Motivated by these linguistic disparities, our study delves into the impact of these differences on the acquisition of cleft sentences by learners of L2 French and L2 Italian. The investigation encompasses three key facets: the overall frequency of it-clefts (H1); the distribution of it-clefts based on the type of target constituent (subject, object, or adverbial) (H2); and the prevalence of it-clefts relative to focus subtype (identification or correction) (H3).

To conduct this analysis, we built a corpus of task-elicited speech, drawing from two native groups—15 native French speakers and 15 native Italian speakers—as well as two learner groups—15 French speakers of L2 Italian and 15 Italian speakers of L2 French. Both non-native groups are made up of adult speakers, acquiring their L2 through non-guided learning; L2 proficiency levels span from beginners (A1-2) to advanced (C1-2). The resulting dataset comprises a total of 1500 utterances (375 for each group).

Our results show that both learner groups demonstrate an approximation to the target language as for the overall frequency of it-clefts (H1). However, nuances surface for hypotheses (H2) and (H3), indicating an influence from the L1s. Learners, in fact, exhibit a discernible sensitivity to the constraints of their native languages, particularly regarding the role of focus subtype (identification vs correction).

Adding a layer of granularity to the analysis, the examination of sub-groups based on different proficiency levels reveals intriguing subtleties. This finer exploration offers insights into how proficiency levels impact the learners' adoption of it-cleft structures, outlining a non-linear path: as one moves towards more advanced levels, the behavior of learners is more homogeneous and compact, but not necessarily more target-like. In early stages, cleft structures' complexity may in fact hinder usage, regardless of their pertinence to the information context. Proficiency development diminishes this complexity barrier, leaving space for cross-linguistic influences to emerge in terms of frequency and context of use of clefts.

### **References**

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