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Discourse cohesion and Topic discontinuity in native and learner production

Changing topic entities on maintained predicates

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In order to realize text cohesion, speakers have to select specific information units and mark their informational status within the discourse; this results in specific, language-particular perspective-taking, linked to typological differences (Slobin 1996). A previous study on native speakers' production in French, Italian, German and Dutch (Dimroth et al., in press) has highlighted a "Romance way" and a "Germanic way" of marking text cohesion in narrative segments involving topic discontinuity. In this paper we analyze how text cohesion is realized in the same contexts by advanced learners of L2 French (Italian and German L1) and L2 Italian (French and German L1). Our aim is to verify the hypothesis of an L2 advanced stage where learners manage the target language utterance grammar whereas their discourse organization still reflects L1 preferences. The results confirm the persistent presence of L1 influence, but they also show learner-specific tendencies (favouring lexical means over morphosyntactic ones), which are independent of their source language.

1.   Introduction

1.1   Information flow in narratives

Following Klein & von Stutterheim (1991), the basic information organization of a text can be described by conceiving the text as an answer to a specific question, the Quaestio of the text. The Quaestio characterizes the information units expected to be in the text utterances, their organization in terms of information structure at utterance level and their movement within the discourse flow. The Quaestio of a narrative text would be:

(1)   "What happened to entity-E at time-T ?"

Therefore, the main structure of a narrative text consists of information units referring to time spans, entities and events. As for the information organization of the utterance, time spans and entities are usually part of the topic component, while the events the entities are involved in represent focus information:

(2) At time-T   Entity-E   did-X
     topic component   *focus component*

Moreover, the main structure of a narrative text would present a prototypical information flow, represented in (3), where the temporal interval constantly shifts, as each newly introduced event shifts forward reference time, whereas topical entities are maintained from an utterance to the next; entities are expected to be the most stable pieces of information, about which new pieces of information are added regarding the subsequent events they are involved in.

(3) At time-T1 Entity-E did-X
     At time-T2 Entity-E did Y
     At time-T3 Entity-E did Z

Cohesion devices in narratives have mostly been studied in relation to this prototypical information flow, whereby topic continuity can be signaled in the domain of entities or time. In the following narrative, the time shift is left unmarked (being the default movement concerning the domain of time in narratives), whereas the topic entity continuity is marked with anaphoric pronouns and zero anaphora; the anaphoric pronoun system is indeed a common linguistic means to mark such a referential movement in the domain of entities.

(4) 0.   The house of Mr Red, Blue and Green is on fire.
     i.   Here comes Mr Red
     ii.   <u>he</u> calls the fire brigade
     iii. then <u>he</u> jumps out of the window
     iv.   and ø tries to warn his neighbours

The study we present in this paper is concerned with narrative segments presenting a less prototypical information flow, where discontinuity occurs in the domain of entities while maintenance can be observed in the domain of events. This happens when speakers have to express that a previously mentioned state or event, occurring in a previous time span for an entity, later applies or does not apply to another entity. In (5) this is the case for the situation "jumping out of the window", which first applies to the entity Mr. Red (5i), later applies to the entity Mr. Blue (5ii) but does not apply (5iii) to other entities.

(5)   0.   The house of Mr Red, Blue and Green is on fire.
    i.   Mr Red jumps out of the window
    ii.   Mr Blue does the same / jumps as well
    iii. Mr Green on the other hand does not want to jump

In (5) ii–iii, anaphoric pronouns cannot be used to mark text cohesion, as the entities continuously change. Other means are used instead in order to highlight which information unit is maintained or contrasted with respect to previous utterances; in (ii) both the anaphoric predicate *doing the same* and the particle *as well* signal that the current predicate applied for a different entity within some previous state of affairs; in (iii) *on the other hand* signals that a predicate opposite to the current one holds for a different entity within some previous state of affairs. *Doing the same, as well, on the other hand* are then anaphoric means which can be used to strengthen text cohesion among utterances.

1.2   Cohesion marking in the "Finite Story": German vs. Romance way

A study on the anaphoric means used in non prototypical information contexts such as in (5) has been recently carried out, involving native speakers of Germanic (Dutch, German) and Romance (French, Italian) languages (Dimroth et al., in press). Story retellings of 20 speakers for each language were collected with the stimulus "the Finite Story". Because of the plot of the cartoon (during a fire episode, three people perform similar or opposite actions at different time spans), text cohesion in the retellings cannot be achieved with the marking of the topic entity continuity, but can only be obtained by highlighting the entity discontinuity or the occurrence of the same or of an opposite predicate (that is, the maintenance/change of the predicate polarity). The study aimed to look at the speakers' preferences with respect to the semantic domains (entities, predicates, time spans, polarity) and at the linguistic means used to highlight such information flow. The results showed significant crosslinguistic differences in the perspective taken by native speakers, leading the authors to call for a "Romance way" and a "Germanic way" to reinforce text cohesion. Speakers of Germanic languages tend to highlight the change/maintenance of polarity, thanks to a specific repertoire of particles (German *doch, auch;* Dutch *toch, wel, ook*) available in their systems. Speakers of Romance languages use a restricted repertoire of particles, but also produce other lexical means such as adverbs, connectives and anaphoric predicates to mark the change / maintenance of entities and predicates. Moreover, they also use morphosyntactic means to change the canonical topic/focus value of information units, thus indirectly signaling the non-canonical discourse information flow through a

change in the information structure of the utterance. The study seems to confirm Slobin's "thinking for speaking" hypothesis; owing to differences in their linguistic repertoires, speakers refer to the same semantic content by adopting the perspective more easily accessible by their language:

> In my own formulation: the expression of experience in linguistic terms constitutes thinking for speaking – a special form of thought that is mobilized for communication. […] "Thinking for speaking" involves picking those characteristics of objects and events that (a) fit some conceptualization of the event, and (b) are readily encodable in the language. I propose that, in acquiring a native language, the child learns particular ways of thinking for speaking.   (Slobin, 1996:76)

2.   The current study: Research questions and design

The present study aims to test the interplay of source and target language strategies in building text cohesion in advanced L2 learners, when faced with the less prototypical information flow depicted in 1. Previous studies have actually highlighted a stage in L2 acquisition where learners successfully master the regularities of the target language at utterance level, but still show a discourse organization differing from native speakers' (cf. Perdue 1993 on adult L2 acquisition of the target language rhetorical style and Bartning's 1997 definition of *quasi-bilinguals*). Systematic differences have been attested in L2 discourse, for instance, with respect to the aspectual perspective applied (von Stutterheim, Nüse & Serra 2002), semantic units used for anaphoric linkage (Carroll & von Stutterheim 1997, Lambert, Carroll & von Stutterheim 2008), the role of the subject (Ahrenholz 2005) and distribution of new (rhematic) vs. given (thematic) information in the utterance (cf. Bohnacker & Rosén 2008). This foreign "accent" has been interpreted as reflecting a persistent L1 influence in the way of selecting and organizing information in discourse, despite the achieved mastery of target language grammatical structures.

By comparing L1 and L2 data collected with the same stimulus presented in para. 1.2, we wish, therefore, to address the following research questions:

– do advanced L2 learners still show L1 preferences in their discourse organization?
– how does source/target language proximity vs. distance affect L2 learners' performance?
– does their production also reflect the presence of common tendencies, irrespective of their L1, in the use of linguistic means to reinforce text cohesion?

In order to compare the effect of proximity and distance between L1 and L2, we selected L2 learners of two Romance languages (French and Italian) with a Romance and with a Germanic native language (10 Italian and 10 German learners for French L2; 10 French and 10 German learners for Italian L2). All subjects are late learners with an advanced competence level in L2: they have lived in the country where the language is spoken for years and show a high level of fluency, complexity and accuracy in L2 oral production. Their retellings show the presence of a stabilized target language-like inflectional morphology and a high degree of syntactic complexity (various forms of subordination). In other words, there are no grammatical errors in their production and their oral competence seems to correspond to the C1/C2 level in terms of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, or to vary between *stade avancé moyen* and *stade avancé supérieur,* as described for French L2 by Bartning & Schlyter (2004). Moreover, they all have a high level of education and their age ranges from 20 to 50; in these respects, they are comparable to the native speakers analyzed by Dimroth et al. (in press).

Table 1. The learners' groups

French L2	Age	Length of stay in the foreign country	Education
10 Italian learners	24–40	80% more than 4 yrs 20% less than 4 yrs	University degree
10 German learners	27–48	90% more than 4 yrs 10% less than 4 yrs	University degree
Italian L2	Age	Length of stay in the foreign country	Education
10 French learners	31–59	90% more than 4 yrs 10% less than 4 yrs	University degree
10 German learners	23–50	70% more than 4 yrs 30% less than 4 yrs	University degree

The video "the Finite Story" was used in the data collection. Speakers had to retell the video, broken up into 31 short segments, immediately after each segment; this fragmentation produced some redundancy in the retellings, but, on the other hand, had the advantage of enhancing comparability, as it avoided summarizing effects or different event orderings in the retellings.

The oral data were later transcribed and the relevant scenes were coded in terms of the information units and the linguistic devices used to mark the information flow. We selected two relevant contexts which involve a discontinuity in the domain of topic entities. A systematic description of the two contexts and the corresponding flow of information are given in the following schema:

I. "change of entity / same situation". In this configuration, an event previously applying to one of the protagonists, applies later to another protagonist.

E.g.: (At time-1) Mr. Blue jumps out of the window (to escape the fire)
(At time-n) Mr. Green jumps out of the window

Configuration I. "Change of entity/same situation"

Information units	Time	Entity	Polarity	Predicate
	At T1	Mr. Blue	does	jump out of the window
	At Tn	Mr. Green	does	jump out of the window
Information movement	≠	≠	=	=

II. "change of entity + opposite situation". In this configuration, two opposite events occur to two different entities in different time spans.

E.g.: At time-1 Mr. Red doesn't jump out of the window (he is afraid)
At time-n Mr. Blue jumps out of the window

Configuration II. "Change of entity + opposite situation"

Information units	Time	Entity	Polarity	Predicate
	At T1	Mr. Red	Does	jump out of the window
	At Tn	Mr. Blue	does not	jump out of the window
Information movement	≠	≠	≠	=

For each context, we compared the production of the two groups of learners with the native speakers' production illustrated in the study by Dimroth et al. (in press). The comparison includes two levels:

– the information units selected to highlight such an information flow (the "perspective" adopted);
– the linguistic means used to this end.

Note that the present study deals with Italian L2 for the first information configuration, and French L2 for the second. As will be explained more in detail in the following sections, this choice is linked to the target language-specific means observed in native speakers' production: in fact, although Italian and French are both Romance languages, Italian presents more complex (grammaticalized) means to express the first information configuration, whereas for French this holds for the second configuration.

Given the preceding hypothesis on adult language acquisition, we expect that L2 advanced learners will present target-like grammatical structures, but that their L1 will still influence their preferences, both in terms of the information

units highlighted and of the linguistic means used. In the following paragraphs, we present the results for the two information configurations that we will further compare and discuss in Section 5.

3.   Configuration I: Change of entity + same situation

In this configuration, the canonical information flow of narratives is reversed: the situation described by the predicate is already available from the preceding discourse and the identity of the entity involved is the only relevant changing information unit (as shift in the temporal domain is a default change). This applies in many video fragments: for instance, in scene 3 Mr. Blue goes to bed and in scenes 4 and 5 Mr. Green and Mr. Red go to bed; in scene 24 Mr. Green refuses to jump through the window into the rescue net and in scene 25 Mr. Red also refuses. How is text cohesion realized in these contexts? A first option would be to leave the context unmarked, that is simply to mention the two situations, as in *Mr. Red goes to bed* or *Mr. Red does not jump through the window*. But, Dimroth et al. (in press) found that native speakers use the following linking devices:

1.   They highlight the similarity of the situation described by the predicate with respect to the previous one. This can be done with anaphoric predicates such as *do the same* (FR *faire de même, faire la même chose, idem, c'est pareil*; IT *fare lo stesso, ripetere la stessa cosa*), with comparatives such as *like* (IT *come*) or adverbials such as *in the same way* (IT *allo stesso modo, esattamente*; GE *genauso, ebenfalls*):

> (6)   FR: M. Rouge fait de même
> *Mr. Red does the same*

> (7)   IT: Il sig. Rosso, esattamente come il sig. Verde, dice che lui non salterà di sotto
> *Mr. Red, exactly like Mr.Green, says that he will not jump*

> (8)   GE: Der springt genauso heraus wie Herr Blau
> *He jumps out in the very same way as Mr. Blue*

2.   They highlight the availability of a new entity for which the previously mentioned situation holds. This can be done with additive particles such as *also* (IT *anche*, FR *aussi*, GE *auch*, DU *ook*) or other adverbials such as FR *également* (lit. *equally,* meaning *as well*) or *à son tour* (*in turn*), which have in their scope the NP referring to the new entity to which the predicate applies. In this case, cohesion is realized in the domain of entities:

> (9)   IT: Anche il signor Rossi è saltato dalla finestra
> *Also Mr. Red has jumped out of the window*

(10) GE: Auch Herr Rot möchte nicht ins Tuch springen
           Also Mr. Red did not want to jump into the wrap

(11) FR: M. Rouge aussi est allé se coucher
           Mr. Red too has gone to bed

Dimroth et al. (in press) further differentiate between pre-nominal, non-stressed and post-finite, stressed additive particles:

(12) GE: Auch Herr Rot ist vom Fenster gesprungen
            Mr. Red too jumped out of the window

(13) GE: Herr Rot ist AUCH vom Fenster gesprungen
           Mr. Red ALSO jumped out of the window

In the first structure the particle has scope over the entity, whereas in the second it has scope over the assertion operator ("finiteness" in terms of Klein 2006), as it is the case for other assertion-related particles such as *doch, noch, nicht* in the same position. Cohesion in this case is not realized in the domain of entities but in the domain of finiteness, namely in the polarity value of the assertion: speakers stress the availability of a new assertion, concerning a new topic situation, with the same assertive value of the previous one.

This differentiation is particularly relevant in Germanic languages, as both structures are available. Post-final position of additive particles is marginal in Italian: native speakers occasionally use it in informal speech, but they perceive it as not fully acceptable in metalinguistic judgments (see Andorno, 2008). In French, several positions – post-nominal, post-finite and utterance final – are possible (cf. Benazzo, 2005):

(14) FR: M. Rouge aussi s'est couché
           Mr. Red too has gone to bed

(15) FR: M. Rouge s'est couché aussi
           Mr. Red has gone to bed as well

(16) FR: M. Rouge est aussi allé se coucher
           Mr. Red has also gone to bed

For both Italian and French, the particle not directly preceding the NP can be accompanied by an anaphoric pronoun referring to the entity it has scope over:

(17)   FR : M. Rouge est allé lui aussi se coucher / M. Rouge est allé se coucher lui aussi
           Mr. Red went, he too, to bed / Mr. Red went to bed, he too

(18) IT: Il sig. Rossi anche lui è andato a dormire / Il sig. Rossi è andato a dormire anche lui
           Mr. Red, he too, went to bed / Mr. Red went to bed, he too,

Dimroth et al. (in press) provisionally consider all these cases as having scope over the entity.

3.   Further linking devices are occasionally adopted, such as the explicit mention of the current topic situation (see Klein, 2008), which is contrasted with the previous one:

(19)   FR: Là c'est M. Rouge qui a l'air de se coucher
             Here/now it is Mr. Red who seems to go to bed

Owing to their marginal status in the data, we will not consider these cases for the time being.

3.1   Native speakers' preferences

For configuration I we analyzed the native speakers' productions in six scenes: the results refer then to 120 contexts for each language (20 speakers x 6 scenes). Table 2 shows the preferences of French, Italian and German native speakers. The bars indicate the percentage of contexts in which a specific perspective is marked out of the overall number of possible contexts

Table 2. Configuration I. Perspective adopted in the native speaker groups
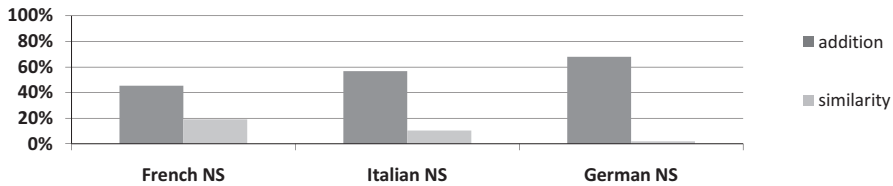
Clear differences emerge between the two Romance languages and German in the perspective taken. German speakers rely on the additive perspective and only rarely adopt the similarity perspective. Addition is the more frequent perspective among Romance speakers too, but both French and Italian speakers also apply the similarity perspective. French speakers in particular choose to highlight the similarity of the predicate to a greater extent (30% of the marked contexts in French and 16% in Italian)[1].

Other differences concern the means used to express addition. In particular, German speakers use the additive particle *auch* mostly in post-finite position (65%), whereas the pre-nominal position is less frequent (35%): this means that German speakers mostly mark addition within the polarity domain. In Italian this is not the case: the additive particle *anche* always precedes the NP or the anaphoric

pronoun referring to the entity, so that addition clearly operates in the domain of entities. French speakers do not show a clear orientation in this respect: all the possible positions of the additive particle *aussi* are attested but also a variety of alternative means is found, such as the adverbials *également* and *à son tour*.

Besides lexical means, certain syntactic devices may also mark the particular information structure of the utterances. Specifically, Italian speakers use verb-subject inversion, both with the addition and with the similarity perspective:

(20)   IT: Si lancia anche il signor Verdi
             Jumps also Mr. Green

(21)   IT: Lo stesso fece il signor Verdi
             The same did Mr. Green

With inversion, the entity in subject position shifts to focus position. The subject post-position highlights the fact that, contrary to prototypical cases, the subject, and not the predicate, contains newer, less accessible information[2].

Table 3 shows that Italian speakers use verb-subject inversion in 25% of the utterances within configuration I, compared to 11% of verb-subject inversion of all utterances in the retellings.[3]

Table 3. Configuration I. Verb-subject inversion in Italian L1 retellings
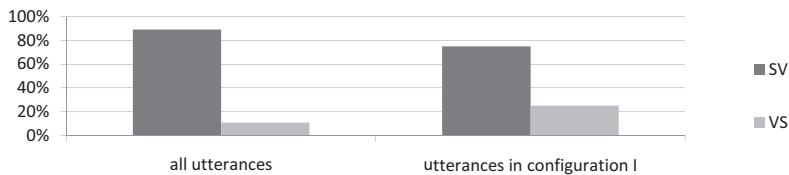
To sum up, although all three languages offer similar repertoires, native speakers of the three languages differ both in the perspective adopted and in the linguistic means used to mark this information configuration. Speakers of Romance languages differ from German speakers in the adoption of the similarity perspective: French and German show the greatest difference on this point. Other differences emerge between Italian and both German and French, in that (a) additive particles mostly operate in the polarity domain in German and always operate in the entity domain in Italian; (b) only Italian speakers make use of a syntactic device (the verb-subject inversion) to signal the non-topical status of the entity in subject role.

3.2   L2 Italian

In this section we compare the results of Italian native speakers with the two groups of Italian L2 learners (L1 German and L1 French). Two main reasons lead

us to choose Italian over French as the target language for this configuration. As we have seen in the preceding section, Italian native speakers use a restricted set of options in comparison to French native speakers, especially when the additive perspective is concerned; they draw a clearer picture against which we can compare learners' results. Moreover, Italian native speakers, unlike French native speakers, also resort to a syntactic marking of the configuration, i.e. VS order. Analysis of Italian as a target language will allow us to observe how learners make use of both syntactic and lexical (particles and anaphoric predicates) devices to realize text cohesion in this configuration.

Although their source language potentially offers the same repertoire, French and German learners have to face partially different tasks when speaking L2 Italian. German learners need to change their preferred perspective, as they have to learn to adopt the similarity perspective within the domain of predicates – a strategy available but not used in their source language. They also have to shift from the "German" use of additive particles (that mostly operate within the polarity domain) to the "Italian" use (that operates only over entities); once again, the target structure is possible but less used in the source language. French learners' main task is to learn to use the additive perspective to a greater extent. Moreover, they have to restrict themselves to the additive structures preferred by the target language (particle in pre-nominal position). In other words, as far as lexical means are concerned, German speakers mainly have to <u>use</u> structures available but not frequently used in their source language; whereas French speakers mainly have to <u>select</u> and <u>overexploit</u> some structures, available and even widely used in their source language. Besides that, both groups of learners also have to learn the syntactic marking of the configuration through VS order.

As we did for native speakers, we analyzed learners' productions in six scenes; our results refer, then, to 60 contexts for each language (6 contexts for 10 speakers)[4]. Tables 4 (German) and 5 (French) show learners' preferences in the perspective adopted, compared with the source and target language native speakers.

Table 4. Configuration I. Perspective adopted by German learners of Italian
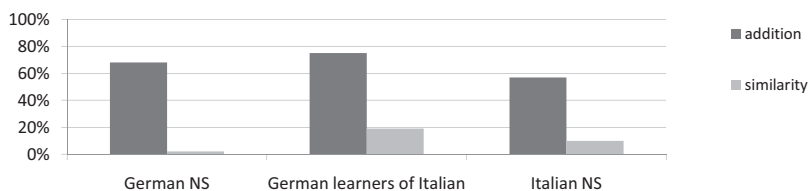
Table 5. Configuration I. Perspective adopted by French learners of Italian
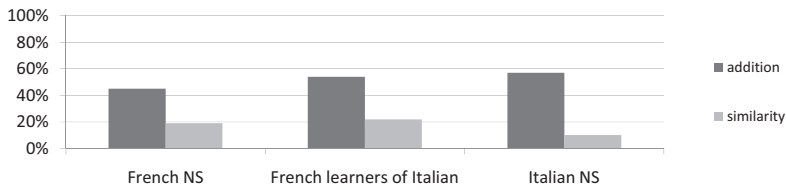
Both groups of learners show a shift from source language preferences towards target language preferences. But the source language influence can still be perceived: German learners still adopt the additive perspective in most contexts (91% of the marked contexts), and the identity perspective is mainly used as an additional marking, together with the additive particle[5]; French learners adopt the additive perspective to a much lesser extent (70% of the marked contexts) and the similarity perspective to a much greater extent (33% of the marked contexts) than both Italian native speakers and German learners[6]. To sum up, both groups of learners show the influence of their source language in that, with respect to Italian native speakers, German learners are still more "addition oriented" and French learners still more "similarity oriented".

As for the linguistic means used, both groups of learners make use only of target-like structures; structures used in the source language but not allowed in the target language are discarded, as is the case for the post-finite and the utterance-final position of the additive particle. Their choices among alternative structures show some more differences. In the additive perspective, German learners always use the particle *anche* in pre-nominal position, whereas French learners use it in different positions: pre-nominal, post-nominal (*lui anche non è d'accordo*, "he also does not agree") and with an anaphoric pronoun (*il signor verde anche lui è andato a dormire*, "Mr. Green, he too, went to bed"). Moreover, only French learners also use other means to mark addition, such as the adverbial *a sua volta* (*in turn*), which is attested in the source language (*à son tour*) but never in the target language. Concerning the similarity perspective, German learners mostly use the verbal periphrasis *fare lo stesso/la stessa cosa* "(do) the same", whereas French learners use a variety of means: verbal periphrasis, adverbials (*in modo molto simile*, "in the very same way"); nominal periphrasis with anaphoric adjectives of similarity (*identica risposta per…*, "same answer for…"; *stesso tentativo da parte di…*, "same attempt on behalf of…"). Once again, learners seem to prefer the linguistic means typical of their L1: the pre-nominal additive particle for German learners as compared to the different positions found among French learners; the very limited range of linguistic means used to mark the similarity perspective among German learners as compared to the very rich marking, even richer than in the case of native speakers, attested among French learners.

The last part of our analysis concerns the syntactic marking of the configuration through word order. As we saw in 3.2.1., in utterances with the configuration of addition/similarity, Italian speakers adopt the VS order more often (25%) than in other utterances (11%). Table 6 comparatively juxtaposes the proportion of cases of SV and VS order in utterances with additive/similarity configuration in the Italian native speakers group and in the two learner groups.

Table 6. Configuration I. Verb-subject inversion in Italian native speakers and learners
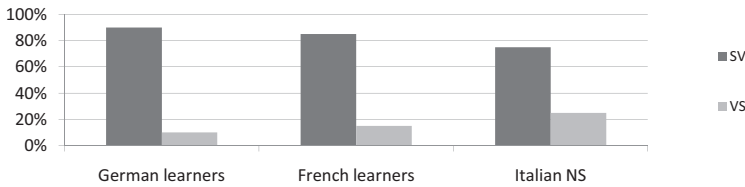
Globally, both groups of learners use the VS order, but to a lesser extent than native speakers (16% of marked contexts for German and 15% for French compared to 25% for Italian NS)[7]. Moreover, some qualitative differences arise, as learners use this only with the additive particle and with pronominal subjects:

(22)   FR: Quindi è saltato anche lui sul lenzuolo
             Therefore jumped also him into the sheet

(23)   GE: Alla fine è saltato anche lui
             In the end jumped also him

Only one German speaker adopts VS order also with a nominal subject, as attested among Italian native speakers:

(24)   GE: Nel frattempo si era svegliato anche il signor Verde
             Meanwhile woke up also Mr. Green

We can now draw some conclusions along the following lines. Both learner groups only use target-like structures, both at the lexical and at the syntactic level. However, they still differ from native speakers in regard to preferred perspectives in discourse organization and in regard to the linguistic means to mark them: in these respects, they are mid-way between their source language and target language preferences. The source languages seem to have a greater influence on French learners than on German learners, both in the perspective adopted (similarity over addition) and in the linguistic means used (alternative positions of the additive particle; variety of means to mark addition and similarity). This could be due to the relative proximity between the source and the target languages. French learners possibly expect that French and Italian do not differ in their linguistic means; this expectation is reinforced by the availability in the tar-

get language of the same linguistic means used in the native language; therefore, when speaking the target language, they can simply stick to their source language strategies. On the other hand, faced with unavailable resources in the target language to express their source language preferred strategy (the post-verbal additive particle), they tend to pay more attention to the structures typical in the target language. Exposure to Italian input has different effects on the two learner groups. The absence of post-verbal additive particles provides German learners with the negative evidence required to dismiss this structure; they also receive positive evidence of the use of the similarity perspective in Italian. French learners also, when faced with some clear negative evidence (unavailability of utterance-final additive particles), dismiss the structure. But, in most cases, French learners do not receive either positive or negative evidence which is clear-cut, as almost the same strategies are available in French and Italian, and only frequency of use differentiates their production. Overuse and underuse of target-like structures due to L1 influence can be difficult to overcome, as the cognitive task for learners consists in perceiving the relative weight of different structures in target language discourse organization.

Some general tendencies, independent of L1, can also be stated when comparing lexical and syntactic means. In this respect, both learners groups have similar acquisition patterns, in that syntactic means are acquired later than lexical means, as is shown by the restricted acquisition of the VS order, among both French and German learners.

4.   Configuration II: Change of entity + opposite situation

In the second configuration analyzed, an opposite situation holds for different entities. This configuration applies to two video fragments: in scene 9, where Mr. Blue wakes up and notices the fire (contrary to the other two protagonists, who go on sleeping in scenes 7–8), and in scene 26, where Mr Blue jumps out of the window into the firemen's rescue net, whereas Mr Green and Mr Red had previously refused to do so (scene 24–25).

Because of topic entity discontinuity, the canonical information flow is reversed also in this case; however, contrary to the first configuration, here two relevant information units change: the topic entity and the polarity of the predicate. Given the change of polarity (from negative to positive), it is not possible to create an anaphoric link on the predicate based on its similarity, nor are additive particles appropriate to highlight the change of entity; entities are not added to one another but what did not hold for the first two does hold for the third one.

How is text cohesion realized in this case? Speakers can choose to leave this information context unmarked (as in the previous information configuration), thus producing utterances equivalent to *Mr Blue jumps out of the window*. But according to Dimroth et al. (in press) native speakers tend explicitly to mark this specific context in the following two ways.

1. One approach is to highlight a contrast in the domain of entities. This contrast can be set up by the use of lexical markers expressing a generic opposition, like *on the other hand* (FR *par contre*, IT *invece)*, with a contextual scope over the entity, or by morphological means, like demonstrative pronouns or strong pronouns (for example, *lui* in French, *der* in German) for those languages which provide a double series of them. A weak pronoun, if strongly stressed, can also be considered to express this type of contrast via intonation. In addition, we also took into account the possibility of marking this relation with restrictive particles or other lexical expressions of uniqueness (as in *only Mr Blue does x*, or *Mr Blue is the only one who…*), which single out the present entity from the previously specified entities.

2. The other option is to highlight the change of polarity, as in English *Mr Blue DOES jump*, but significant differences apply cross-linguistically for the expression of this relation. First, Germanic languages have specific particles to perform this task, like German *doch* (and Dutch *toch/well)*, whereas Romance languages lack equivalent elements, albeit some intensifiers (for ex. FR *bien* or IT *proprio*) might be expected in this context. Second, although intonation can in principle be used to convey this information structure in all languages, it clearly plays a greater role in Germanic languages: contrastive stress on the finite lexical verb or on the auxiliary is currently used for the expression of *verum focus* (Höhle 1992). Such a possibility seems to be less frequent in Romance languages.

In sum, in contrast to the previous information configuration, where all the languages considered shared potentially similar linguistic means to mark different possible perspectives, in this case crosslinguistic differences in the repertoire are expected to affect native speakers' production to a greater extent.

4.1   Native speakers' preferences

To study this information configuration Dimroth et al. (in press) analyze native speakers' production (20 speakers for each language) in scene 9 and 26, i.e. 40 contexts for each language. A comparable number of marked utterances are attested in each of them, but there are significant differences with regard to the linguistic means used and the perspective adopted. Table 7 reports the relevant results for

French, Italian and German[8]; once again, bars indicate the percentage of utterances marked for a specific relation out of the totality of possible contexts.

Table 7. Configuration II. Perspective adopted in the native speaker groups
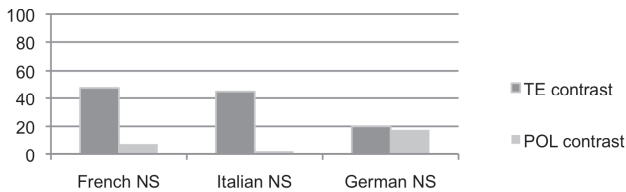
Clear differences appear between Romance and Germanic languages with regard to the choice of information unit selected to highlight a contrast. Speakers of Romance languages mainly signal a contrast in the domain of topic entities, the polarity contrast being a marginal option, whereas both options are equally used by German speakers[9].

The unequal availability of specific means for polarity contrast is thus reflected in the native speakers' data: German speakers use either intonation on the finite verb or specific particles, like *doch*, to highlight the change of polarity (cf. (25) where both are actually present in the same utterance).

(25)   GE: (because of the fire) IST er dann doch wohl auch gesprungen
                    has he then PART PART PART jumped

On the other hand, speakers of Romance languages rarely mark this relation; they infrequently make use of a special intonation contour in the predicate domain or of intensifiers equivalent to *bien*, as in the following example.

(26)   FR: en revanche Monsieur Bleu a bien voulu sauter
   *on the other hand Mr. Blue did PART want to jump*

Let us turn to the expression of Topic Entity contrast in the three languages. A closer look at the means used reveals subtle differences even between the two Romance languages.

To capture the crosslinguistic differences we distinguished the following categories:

– Topic entity contrast by *morphological* means: strong or demonstrative pronouns;
– Topic entity contrast by *lexical* means (markers of generic opposition which have a contextual scope over the NP-entity);
– Marking the Topic Entity's *uniqueness/primacy*, by means of restrictive particles (*only*), and of adjectival or adverbial expressions.

The following table shows in percentage terms the means used and the perspectives taken to mark this relation in French, Italian and German.

Table 8. Configuration II. Topic Entity contrast: native speaker groups
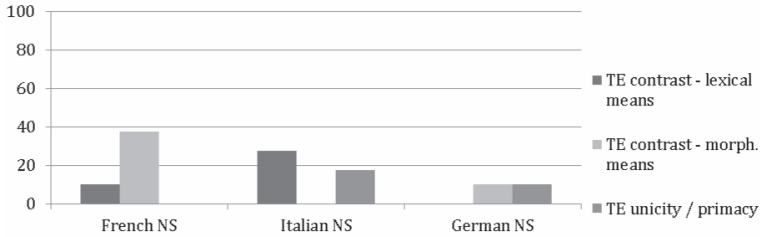
In French, this relation is mainly expressed by <u>morphological</u> means (78% of marked utterances), in particular by using the contrastive pronoun *lui* as in (27).

(27)   FR: Monsieur Bleu lui il saute
              Mr Bleu him he jumps

Topic discontinuity is thus signaled by the full NP *Mr Blue*, while the strong pronoun expresses an explicit contrast with the entities previously mentioned. Note that the use of *lui* also implies a left dislocation, that is a deviation from canonical word order. Morphological (and partly syntactic) markings of this kind represent the dominant strategy (14 occurrences of *lui* produced by 12 native speakers out of 20). Lexical markers of opposition, like *par contre* or *en revanche*, are also present in native speakers' production, although to a much lesser extent: they represent 21% of the means attested to mark this relation (3 *par contre* and 1 *en revanche,* produced by 4 speakers out of 20).

In the case of Italian speakers, entity contrast is mainly expressed by <u>lexical means</u>: the devices most frequently attested are markers of opposition (61% of marked utterances, distributed over 9 speakers out of 20), in particular *invece* with a contextual scope over the entity.

(28)   IT: Il signor Blu invece si sveglia
              Mr. Blue instead wakes up

As an alternative, they resort to formulations highlighting either the uniqueness of the referent (*Mr. Blue is the only one who ..*), with the adjective *unico* embedded in a cleft construction as in (29), or its primacy, with the adverbial expression *per primo* (equivalent to English *he is the first one to do x*) (Example 30). These represent the remaining 38% of marked utterances, produced by 6 speakers.

(29)   IT: il signor Blu è l'unico che si è accorto…
              Mr Blue is the only one who notices…

(30)   IT: l'omino blu si è buttato per primo
           the blue little man jumped first

The contextual effect is always the same, i.e. to single out the present topic entity from the two previously mentioned, but the perspective applied is different with respect to a pure contrast, as it conveys an additional notion of restriction or of chronological order.

   From the above remarks it follows that, even if the French and the Italian group present a comparable proportion of utterances marked for this relation, they differ (a) in the means used for this purpose (morpho-syntactic vs. lexical) and partly also (b) in the semantic perspective taken: specific contrast on the topic entity vs. generic contrast or singling it out by highlighting its uniqueness/primacy.

   As previously said, the topic entity contrast is less marked in German. Leaving aside such a quantitative difference, the German group appears to share some features with both the Italian and French groups: 50% of the speakers having marked this relation express it by highlighting the uniqueness of the referent (*only Mr Blue …*) by means of the restrictive particle *nur* (3×) or by adverbial expressions (*als einziger* 1x), see (31)–(32). From this viewpoint German and Italian share the same perspective.

(31)   GE: Nur Herr Blau wird wach
           Only Mr Blue wakes up
(32)   GE: Herr Blau wacht anscheinend als einziger auf und schaut aus dem Fenster
           Mr Blue wakes up apparently as the only one and looks out of the window

Similarly to French, but to a lesser extent, the remaining 50% of the markings are realized by morphological means: either the personal pronoun *der* (3×) or the demonstrative pronoun *dieser* (1×), both used with contrastive accent.

(33)   GE: und DER springt runter
           and HE jumps down
(34)   GE: DIEser überlegt nicht lange…lässt sich fallen…
           THIS ONE does not reflect long… lets himself fall...

Note that, in contrast to French and Italian, lexical markers of opposition are virtually absent from this context in German[10].

4.2   L2 French

In this section we focus on the relation of Topic entity contrast and compare the results obtained in the French native speaker group with the two groups of French

L2 learners (L1 Italian and L1 German). The choice of French as a target language for this relation is motivated by the following reasons.

First, the crosslinguistic comparison of native speakers' retellings (cf. Section 4.1) has revealed that speakers of French adopt a rather uniform strategy for this relation, and second, they express it using specific means (contrastive pronouns) which have a more grammaticalized status in comparison to the ones preferred in German and Italian. The study of French allows us therefore to investigate L2 acquisition of both lexical and morphosyntactic devices to mark this relation.

At this point, it is useful to underline that German and Italian learners of French L2 are in principle confronted with a different learning task. German learners have to shift their attention from polarity to entity contrast; both are marked in their source language, whereas in French there is a clear tendency to highlight only the latter. On the other hand, for Italian learners discourse cohesion is in principle based on the same information unit, i.e. the topic entity. In order to adapt to target language use, Italian learners have, however, to express this contrast by morpho-syntactic rather than lexical means. Furthermore, both groups can be expected to dismiss the uniqueness perspective, although it is possible in the target language.

The following tables represent learners' preferences with respect to the information unit used to signal this information context.

Table 9.   Configuration II. Perspective taken by German learners of French
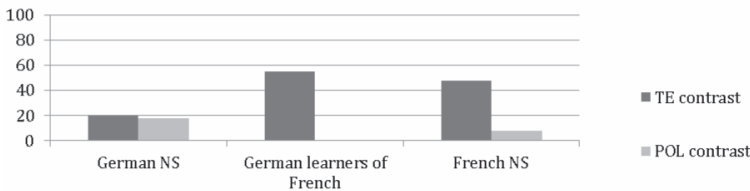
Table 10.   Configuration II. Perspective taken by Italian learners of French
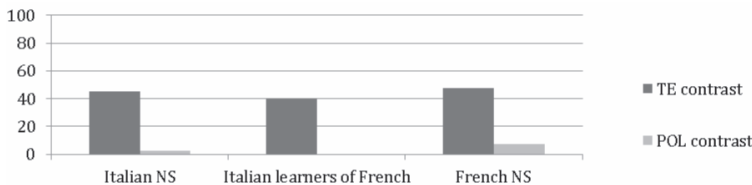
It can be seen that despite the different preferences attested in their L1, no clear marking of polarity is noticeable in either learner group: German learners seem to have successfully adopted the topic entity contrast perspective, which is even slightly more marked than in the Italian group. A *caveat* should, however, be entered in relation to these results, given the small size of the population analyzed. In fact we noticed that, throughout her retelling, one German subject sporadically uses *enfin* in several contexts corresponding to those where the polarity contrast is typically expressed in German. These markings have not been counted here because of their temporal nature and marginal number, but represent a further domain of research to be tested with larger populations representing different stages; attempts to express the polarity contrast could be typical of German learners of an intermediate level.

We turn now to the linguistic means used in French L2 in order to make explicit the Topic Entity contrast and start with the L2 production of the Italian group.

Table 11. Configuration II. Topic Entity contrast: Italian learners of French
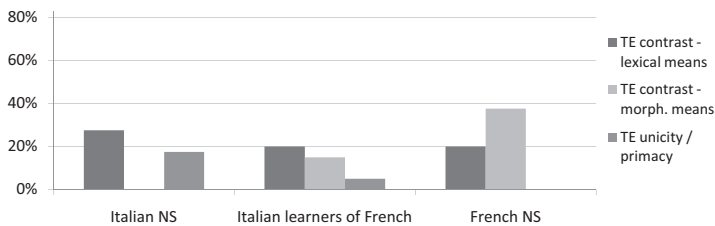

Table 11 shows that, in order to contrast the topic entity Mr Blue with those previously mentioned, Italian learners of French L2 seem to prefer <u>lexical</u> means; these correspond to the marker of opposition *par contre* (Example 35), which is preposed or postposed to the corresponding entity.

> (35) IT: Monsieur Bleu par contre il s'aperçoit du feu
> *Mr Blue on the other hand he notices the fire*

The dominance of the lexical strategy could be attributed to L1 influence, as in Italian the topic entity contrast is mainly realized by means of lexical markers of opposition.

Furthermore, a trace of Italian L1 influence seems also to be reflected in the presence of the uniqueness perspective, in spite of the low numbers; one subject actually uses restrictive constructions to single out Mr Blue's awakening.

> (36) IT: Il n'y a que monsieur bleu qui semble apercevoir l'incendie
> *There is but Mr Blue who seems to notice the fire*

The typical target language marking of this relation, namely contrastive pronoun + left dislocation, is less frequent: only 3 Italian learners produce these constructions (Example 37), and one of them combines it with *par contre* (Example 38).

(37) IT: Monsieur Bleu lui se lance par la fenêtre
      Mr Blue him (strong pro) *jumps out of the window*

(38) IT: ils essaient avec Monsieur Bleu qui lui par contre se décide à sauter
      they try with Mr Blue who him (strong pro) *instead decides to jump*

At first sight, Italian learners' production seems to be strongly influenced by their L1, both in their choice of lexical means and in the residual adoption of the uniqueness perspective, which is absent from French native retellings. The analysis of the German group (cf. Table 12) leads however to a more nuanced picture.

Table 12. Configuration II. Topic Entity contrast: German learners of French
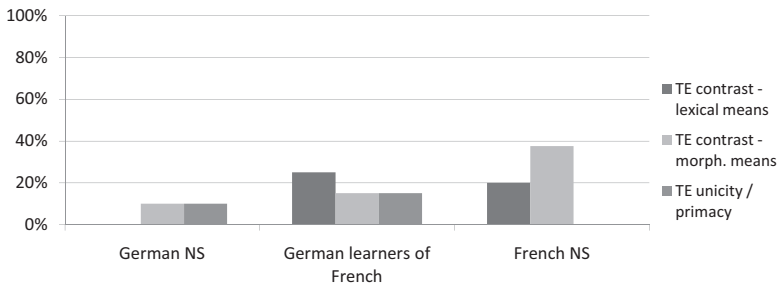
In order to mark a contrast on the topic entity, German learners also produce a majority of <u>lexical</u> markers of opposition (once again *par contre* in all occurrences), even if these are not the most current in German L1 and therefore cannot be attributed to direct L1 influence.

(39) GE: Monsieur Bleu par contre se réveille
      Mr Blue on the other hand wakes up

Similarly to the Italian learner group, German learners also make rather marginal use of morpho-syntactic means (contrastive pronoun + left dislocation), at least in comparison to native speakers' preferences. In fact, only a subgroup of 3 learners produces them in French L2 (cf. (40)–(41)), although in their L1 the use of strong pronouns is possible to mark this context.

(40)   GE: Du coup lui il se décide de sauter
      Suddenly him (strong) *he decides to jump*

(41)   GE: Donc lui il ose, il saute
      Therefore him (strong) *he dares, he jumps*

On the other hand, what seems to be due to source language influence is, as for Italian learners, the tendency to single out the topic entity by applying the uniqueness (Example 40) or primacy (Example 43) perspective:

(42)　GE:　Seulement M.Bleu s'est réveillé… / c'est seulement M.Bleu qui remarque…
　　　　　Only Mr Blue has waken up / it is only Mr Blue who notices the fire

(43)　GE:　Monsieur Bleu finalement saute premier
　　　　　Mr Blue eventually jumps first

If the above tables (Tables 11 and 12), taken separately, seem to indicate that the strategies used in French L2 are midway between the preferences of both the target and source language speakers, their comparison also reveals a similar pattern for both groups of learners: despite their different L1s, in both cases only a subset of learners succeeds in using the typical target language means, strong pronouns with a contrastive function, while the preferred means are lexical in nature. Several reasons can be invoked to explain this tendency. In general, lexical items are considered to be perceptually more salient in comparison to morphological elements; therefore, even if widely present in the input, they may be more difficult for the learner to perceive. In addition, it is also possible that the contrastive function of *lui* is more difficult to notice, as the same form serves many functions, for example to code an indirect object. Finally, lexical markers of opposition present the advantage of greater flexibility – they can be used to express a contrast in different semantic domains and are therefore more useful for communicative purposes – whereas the use of contrastive pronouns is restricted to the contrast of entities. Anyway, the use of both kinds of means is attested with similar proportions in the two groups of learners.

To recapitulate, although the number of learners and of contexts analyzed is rather low and the tendencies identified should be tested with larger populations, these results confirm the general difficulty of L2 learners, even if very advanced, to conform to native speakers' preferences in terms of the selected information unit to be contrasted and in terms of the specific means to adopt in doing so.

In particular, the comparison of retellings made by learners with different L1s has made it possible to specify to what extent these deviations are due to L1 influence.

The rarity of polarity marking in the target language must have facilitated German learners in shifting from this kind of contrast marking, strongly present in their L1, to the target language perspective focusing on the Topic Entity, even if they do not use the typical target language means. A residual trace of L1 influence in both groups of learners is still, however, detectable in the application of the uniqueness perspective. Note that the expression of this relation is perfectly

possible and correct in the target language, although not current in the native speaker group for this informational context.

The factor of L1 influence is, however, largely overtaken by a general L2 tendency, namely to favor lexical means over morpho-syntactic ones. Thus, the dominant use of generic markers of opposition seems to reflect a tendency specific to learners, irrespective of their L1.

5.   Concluding remarks

The aim of our study was to test whether the discourse organization of very advanced L2 learners remains different from native speakers' accomplishing the same task and to what extent this is due to source language influence.

In conclusion, the analysis of the data in Italian L2 and French L2, although referring to two different information contexts, leads to convergent results – concerning respectively the role of the L1, and the existence of specific L2 acquisition principles – that we will discuss in detail below.

5.1   TL utterance grammar vs. non TL discourse organization?

This analysis of (very) advanced L2 learners confirms the existence of a stage where learners have acquired the regularities of the target language system at utterance level, but have not yet fully mastered its specific discourse organization (cf. Bartning 1997, Perdue 1993), as they are still <u>partly</u> applying the discourse perspective preferred in their L1 (cf. Ahrenholz 2005; Bohnacker & Rosén 2008, Carroll & von Stutterheim 1997; Lambert, Carroll & von Stutterheim 2008, von Stutterheim, Nüse & Serra 2002).

These results underline the methodological necessity of distinguishing the acquisition of target language specifics at sentence level from their acquisition at discourse level.

For both configurations, none of the cohesive means adopted deviates from the target language sentence grammar. Traces of L1 influence are however detectable in terms of preference for the additive vs. similarity strategy, in the context of Topic Entity addition, and in expression of the entity uniqueness/primacy, in the context of Topic Entity contrast.

We underline however that in our data the L1 perspective is still only "partly" applied, because there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the proportions and means for a given relation attested in L2 production with respect to the ones produced by native speakers of their L1. Learners seem sometimes to be halfway between the two languages, not in the sense that they use some mixed

structure but in that they hesitate between the expression of the relation typically encoded in the target language and the one typically expressed in their source language (if its expression is allowed in both). Overuse and underuse of structures are often observed as typical effects of cross-linguistic influence (see references in Ellis 1995, Chapter 8; Gass & Selinker 2008, Chapter 5); given the optionality of such markings, the learner's task is particularly difficult in this respect, as no clear-cut positive or negative evidence but only frequency can be used as an evidence in the input bearing on target language preferences.

5.2   The role of relative proximity and distance between source
and target language

Our results do not clearly indicate how language proximity vs. distance affects the acquisitional process. The question probably needs to be addressed in terms of availability of similar/different specific structures, given that typological differences between languages do not always hold for the structures considered. Although in both information configurations Germanic languages differ from Romance languages in the perspective adopted, a more detailed analysis also reveals more complex differences and similarities in the linguistic means put to use, which does not allow us clearly to separate "proximal" from "distant" languages.

In general it seems that structural differences contribute to focus attention on the target language-typical linguistic structures: for the first configuration, German learners notice the unavailability of the post-verbal position for additive particles (thus performing better than French learners in their placement) and their proportion of addition vs. similarity marking is equivalent to that of the native speakers; for the second, they fully adopt the target language perspective based on Topic Entity contrast, instead of highlighting the change of polarity. On the other hand, structural similarities prevent learners from noticing more systematic differences: in the first configuration, French learners stick to the similarity perspective and use lexical resources in a "French-like" manner; in the second, both Italian and German learners maintain the uniqueness perspective, and Italian learners the use of contrastive connectives.

As Ringbom (2007: 1) points out, in analyzing the target input, learners look for similarities rather than for differences (see also the *transfer to somewhere* principle, Andersen 1983); and the similarities are more easily perceived in terms of availability of specific structures than in terms of preferences. When available, similar structures help learners' production, but also prevent them from a further analysis of the input; conversely, when some source language structure is unavailable in the target language, learners need to find out how target language native speakers respond to the discourse requirements and may thus attain a more native-like performance.

As was stated in the introduction, in order to mark text cohesion in this production task learners are faced with two different cognitive operations: the use of acceptable target language linguistic structures and the adoption of specific discourse perspectives. Our results suggest that differences within the first domain can facilitate the second operation.

5.3   Learner-particular tendencies in L2 acquisition

Despite persistent traces of L1 influence, our data reveal also the presence of tendencies particular to L2 learners, which seem to be unrelated to the source language. These can be summarized in the observation that in both Italian and French L2 the use of lexical means precede the use of morpho-syntactic ones:

– for the first configuration: the marking of entity addition in Italian L2 is first realized by the lexical particle *anche,* while the application of verb-subject inversion appears to be a late acquisition, not achieved in all the complexity it manifests in Italian L1;
– for the second configuration: topic entity contrast in French L2 is predominantly expressed by markers of generic opposition (*par contre*), whereas the more specific strong pronoun *lui (*and left dislocation) are still only marginally attested.

The precedence of lexical over morphosyntactic means has already been remarked upon in other domains. Just to give an example, adverbial markers always precede verb inflection for the expression of temporal relations (see Dietrich et al. (1995) for the ESF project data on five different target languages, as well as Bernini & Giacalone 1990 and Banfi & Bernini 2003, for Italian L2). In previous studies, this claim has often been made on the basis of looking at the expression of different semantic concepts in beginners' production. Our study shows that the preference for lexical markers over syntactic markers is still perceivable in the production of advanced learners, at least when they have to use them for discourse construction.

Notes

1.   Some individual differences can be observed: identity is adopted by 13 French speakers and 10 Italian speakers (out of 20). Among these speakers, it reaches 50% of the markings in the French group and 29% in the Italian group.

2.   In other words, the VS order is a de-topicalization strategy. The detopicalization of the subject is also obtained through prosodic devices, see Andorno & Interlandi (2010).

3. We only consider utterances with the protagonist entity as subject. Some individual differences are detected, in that the VS order is adopted by 9 speakers out of 20; among them, the rate of VS order rises to 40%.

4. We are aware of the possible deviating effect of the smaller number of speakers in the learners groups. An increasing of the learner corpus will be carried on in the further research design. For the time being, we have to discard statistic tests on L2 data.

5. Once again, we detect some individual differences: 5 German learners out of 10 adopt the similarity perspective; the rate of use within this group reaches 27%.

6. 6 French learners out of 10 adopt the similarity perspective. The rate of use within this group reaches 51%.

7. As in the native corpus, there are some individual differences in the use of the VS order, which is used only by 6 German and 4 French learners. Among these speakers, the rate of VS inversion reaches 26% for the French group and 21% for the German group (compared with 40% among Italian NS).

8. Among the four languages considered in Dimroth et al. (in press), Dutch represents better than German the preference noticed in Germanic languages to adopt the polarity contrast perspective; in Dutch production, the explicit marking of this relation is attested in 92% of the utterances marked for this information configuration.

9. More precisely, the distribution of marked utterances in the population is as follows: the Topic Entity contrast is expressed by 14 speakers of French and Italian (out of 20), whereas only 3 French speakers and 1 Italian mark Polarity contrasts. In German each of the two relations is marked by 7 speakers.

10. We prefer to say '*virtually*' instead of *totally* absent: in fact we noticed two occurrences of *aber* (equivalent to English *but*), which were not counted in the study of Dimroth *et al.* (in press) because in the relevant context the contrast seems to concern the lexical predicate (Mr Green's sleeping vs. Mr Blue's noticing) rather than the entity.

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