

# Revisiting the cartography of (Italian) postverbal subjects from different angles with reference to canonicity considerations

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The article revisits some previous results from different Italian speaking populations (adult L1, adult L2, heritage, attrited, developing monolingual children) on the acquisition of the VS order in new information focus contexts and with unaccusative verbs. It is shown that the same word order corresponds to different discourse values and its availability varies depending on the lexical class to which the verb belongs, with unaccusatives and indefinite postverbal subjects singled out in the different populations investigated. It is also shown that in the same question-answer context the postverbal subject can act as the focus of new information only when it is a full argument cartographically analyzed in the specifier of the clause internal low focus position, once again singling out the postverbal subject of unaccusatives. These results suggest some reflections to the effect that both the SV and VS order can be considered canonical in their own respects, once different discourse values and lexical properties of the verb are taken into account.

## 1. Introduction

A well-known descriptive fact about standard Italian is that the subject of a finite clause can either linearly precede or linearly follow the inflected verb, with which agreement in person and number invariably holds. Thus, as a shortcut, Italian can be said to allow for both SV and VS orders, with S defined as the noun phrase agreeing in person and number features with the finite verb. In the tradition of generative grammar, especially within the Principles & Parameters approach, this possible grammatical option has received much attention and has been interpreted as strictly correlating with the Null subject property of the language.<sup>1</sup> Later work has articulated the picture somewhat, in that it has shown, also based on experimental evidence, that although the null subject property of the language constitutes the necessary condition to allow for the possible postverbal location of the subject, yet it is not a sufficient property: both discourse and lexical factors also play a crucial role in making VS a possible and in some conditions also a preferred order in Italian.

Specifically, the postverbal location of the subject in Italian is known to be characteristically related to the interpretation of the post-

verbal subject as the focus of new information (Belletti 2004a), both as the narrow focus, or as part of an all new clause, and this holds across all verb classes. Moreover, if the verb of the clause belongs to the unaccusative class, the postverbal location of the subject may also correspond to the linear order that directly reflects the merge of the noun phrase as the internal argument of the verb; in this case an indefiniteness requirement constrains the nature of the postverbal subject, yielding the so called Definiteness Effect (DE) (Belletti 1988; Belletti & Bianchi 2016 for recent discussion; Belletti & Guasti 2015 on the issue in acquisition).<sup>2</sup> Finally, if a characteristic downgrading prosody is associated to it, in appropriate discourse conditions the postverbal subject can also be attributed the interpretation of a given topic, as a right dislocated topic, or a ‘marginalized’ argument (Antinucci & Cinque 1977). Although this last instance of postverbal subject will not be discussed in detail here, its mention completes the picture and contributes to highlight the fact that the very same linear order VS may correspond in fact to very different discourse values. In the light of syntactic cartography,<sup>3</sup> this naturally leads to say that the same linear order VS may correspond to different syntactic structures.

Section 2 of the present article is dedicated to a revision of the main background analytical proposals assumed here and to a summary of some of the main results from previous experimental studies aiming at eliciting the production of new information postverbal subjects in answering questions on the identification of the subject. Section 3 illustrates the fact that answering with the VS order may be crucially conditioned by the lexical class to which the verb belongs, with unaccusative verbs singled out when the postverbal S is indefinite. Section 4 concludes the article and also takes up the issue of canonicity pointing to the conclusion that each of the SV and VS orders reviewed here – from the perspective of the different angles considered taking into account different populations – are in fact both canonical in their own respect. Specifically, it is not the case that SV is ‘more canonical’ than VS, given appropriate discourse and lexical conditions.

## *2. Backgrounds*

### *2.1. Background 1: Analytic assumptions*

In the classical literature on the null subject parameter the possibility of the VS order is often referred to as free inversion. The crucial point of departure here is the observation that, instead, ‘inversion’ is not

free as it is both discourse related and related to lexical properties of V. Specifically, the VS order displaying a postverbal subject<sup>4</sup> does not identify a unified phenomenology. This holds true even looking at it from the perspective of one single language, i.e. Italian, the language that will be (mainly) considered here.

As for the discourse value of the VS order, consider the following Question-Answer pairs; for ease of presentation, (1)-(3) answers all contain an unergative verb (see note 2).

- |     |   |   |
|-----|---|---|
| (1) | Q: <i>Chi ha parlato?</i><br>who has spoken?<br>'Who spoke?'                          | A: <i>Ha parlato Gianni.</i><br>has spoken Gianni<br>'Gianni spoke.'  |
| (2) | Q: <i>Che cosa ha fatto Gianni?</i><br>what has done Gianni?<br>'What did Gianni do?' | A: <i>Ha parlato, Gianni.</i><br>has spoken Gianni<br>'Gianni spoke.' |
| (3) | Q: <i>Che cosa è successo?</i><br>what is happened<br>'What happened?'                | A: <i>Ha parlato Gianni.</i><br>has spoken Gianni<br>'Gianni spoke.'  |

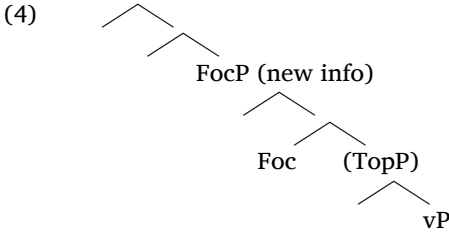
The same VS word order in (1)-(3) corresponds to different discourse values and interpretations, as well as to different associated prosodies.<sup>5</sup> In (1A, where A stands for answer) the postverbal subject is the new information focus that the question is asking about; in (2A) the postverbal subject is given in the previous question, hence it counts as a given topic; in (3A) the postverbal subject is part of an all new sentence answering a 'what happened' question.

Following the cartographic analysis presented in Belletti (2004a) and related references, the noun phrase that linearly follows the verb and agrees with it in phi-features – i.e. the postverbal subject – fills a different position in (1) and (2) and, at least in part, in (3), all located in the low area of the clause at the periphery of the vP. In a nutshell:

- In (1A) it occupies a vP-peripheral position associated with the new information focus interpretation.
- In (2A) it occupies a vP-peripheral position associated with the given/topic-like interpretation.
- In (3A) the postverbal subject is part of an all-new vP counting as the new information focus, hence it is also indirectly interpreted as new. Let us illustrate with (1A) first and then with (3A).

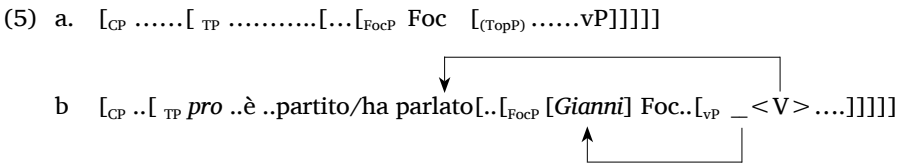
Let us assume the cartographic analysis referred to above, according to which the the low part of the clause contains a vP-periphery with

a discourse related position dedicated to the new information focus interpretation (and to the given-topic interpretation), illustrated in (4):<sup>6</sup>



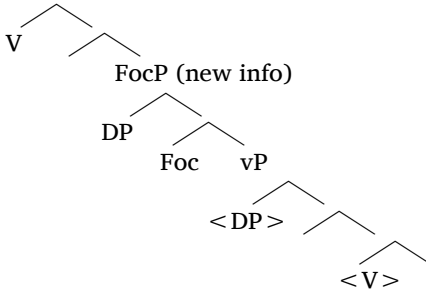
(The vP-periphery: Belletti 2004a and related work)

The postverbal subject is thus outside its first vP-internal merge position as the external argument of the verb, in (1A) (and (2A)). As shown in previous work, the position that the postverbal subject occupies is low; e.g. it is lower than the position of the lowest adverbs in Cinque’s (1999) hierarchy, lower than the position of floating quantifiers (which are in fact higher than low adverbs, cf. also *tutto* ‘all’ higher than *bene* ‘well’...). The postverbal subject linearly follows all these elements. According to the assumed analysis, the discourse related postverbal subject of (1A) (and (2A)) leaves the vP to reach the relevant Spec/FocP discourse related position and be interpreted at the interfaces. The linear order VS is obtained through V raising to a higher inflectional head position. (5) schematically illustrates the derivation of (1A), with the postverbal subject as the focus of new information:

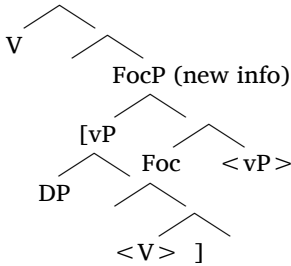


The postverbal subject occupies the given Spec/TopP position in cases like (2A). In cases like (3A), in which the clause has an all new interpretation, it is the entire vP that occupies the low new information focus position, as is illustrated in (6b). The linear order VS is again obtained through V raising to a higher inflectional head position. (6a) and (6b) offer a comparison of the assumed cartographic analyses of the narrow focus vs the all new focus interpretation of clauses with a postverbal subject, both displaying the same VS order:

(6) a. Postverbal new information subject (1A):

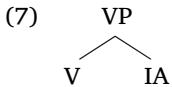


b. All new clauses (3A):



The analyses in (6a) and (6b) hold with verbs of all classes, transitive, intransitive/unergative and also unaccusative: with the narrow focus interpretation the DP fills the new information low (Spec./)focus position; in all new clauses it is the whole verb phrase that fills the same position.<sup>7</sup>

Only with unaccusative verbs, however, a further option is available which also yields the order VS: the order may just reflect the merge position of the nominal argument of the unaccusative verb merged as its internal argument:<sup>8</sup>



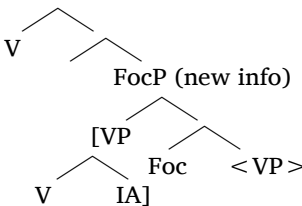
As is well known, with this analysis an indefiniteness requirement constrains the nature of the nominal internal argument, which has to be a (weak) indefinite noun phrase. The related phenomenon, known as the Definiteness Effect (DE) (Milsark 1974), holds crosslinguistically and constitutes one of the characteristic signatures of the

unaccusative class, a property that contributes to identify it. It thus also holds, not surprisingly, in a language like Italian (Belletti 1988; Belletti & Bianchi 2016). In this language, however, the phenomenon may be obscured by the possible widespread occurrence of postverbal subjects, which are overwhelmingly present with all verb classes in particular with the new information focus interpretations illustrated in (6a) and (6b). This syntactic option, which is ultimately made possible by the null-subject nature of the language as established since the classical literature on the null subject parameter, does not constrain the nature of the focal subject and no indefiniteness requirement constrains the nature of the external argument of transitive and intransitive/unergative verbs. DE with unaccusatives is thus ultimately and exclusively the reflex of a lexical property.<sup>9</sup> In Italian it is optimally visible in sentences like the following in which the postverbal indefinite subject remains internal to the verb phrase, where it is immediately followed by a PP argument of the verb:

- (8) a. *È entrato un ladro dalla finestra.*  
 is entered a thief from-the window  
 ‘A thief entered from the window.’  
 b. *\*È entrato il ladro dalla finestra.*  
 is entered the thief from-the window

Thus, when the verb is unaccusative and the postverbal subject is indefinite, the order VS may in fact correspond to the analysis in (7), with the postverbal subject in its merge position as the Internal Argument (IA) of the verb. A sentence like (8a) may be the answer to a ‘what happened’ type question as 3Q (where Q stands for question). Correspondingly, the VP in (7) moves to the low Spec/FocP with the derivation along the lines in (6b). This additional analysis of all new clauses containing an unaccusative verb and an indefinite IA is illustrated in (9):

- (9) All new clauses with unaccusative verbs and indefinite subjects:



The IA of unaccusatives possibly has less structure than a full DP. As is proposed in Belletti & Bianchi (2016) (who have dubbed it NumbP) this may be a way to express the property that the indefinite IA of unaccusatives is in fact not a full saturating argument, but it is rather part of the predicate (in a kind of abstract incorporation structure). The relevance of this aspect is taken up again in section 3.

## *2.2. Background 2: Some experimental results*

In this section the main findings from experimental results on the acquisition of the VS order in Italian, in different modes and populations, are briefly reviewed. For detailed presentation on specific results the reader is referred to Belletti & Guasti (2015, chapter 7) and to references cited there and to the additional references cited below.

### *2.2.1 VS in adult L2, in heritage and in attrited Italian speakers: S new information (narrow) focus*

The acquisition of access to the VS order in the appropriate discourse condition exemplified by question-answer pairs of the type in (1)/derivation (6a) with the subject focus of new information, has been first analyzed in the experimental study of Belletti & Leonini (2004) in adult L2 non-advanced speakers of Italian.<sup>10</sup> The experiment consisted in 22 short videos depicting everyday situations; a number of questions were asked at the end of each video about the event and the content of the video itself. Hidden among distractor questions, one of the questions concerned the identification of the subject: it was a question of the type in (1Q), with verbs of different classes – transitive, intransitive/unergative, unaccusative – corresponding to the event depicted in the video. The same video task has been tested over the years with different adult populations, non-advanced L2, near-native L2, attrited and heritage speakers.<sup>11</sup> The overall main results are assembled and summarized in Table 1:

	VS	SV	OTHER
L2 (L1: GERMAN, L2: NON ADVANCED ITALIAN) (FROM BELLETTI & LEONINI 2004)	27%	68%	5%
L2 (L1: ENGLISH, L2: NEAR NATIVE ITALIAN) (FROM BELLETTI, BENNATI & SORACE 2007)	29%	71%	-
ATTRITED SPEAKERS (L1: ITALIAN, L2: GERMAN; ATTRITED LANGUAGE ITALIAN) (FROM CALOI, BELLETTI & POLETTI 2018)	61,1%	26,1%	12,9%
HERITAGE SPEAKERS (HERITAGE LANGUAGE: ITALIAN; COMMUNITY LANGUAGE: GERMAN) (FROM CALOI, BELLETTI & POLETTI 2018)	53,4%	42%	4,6%
L1 (ITALIAN MONOLINGUAL SPEAKERS) (FROM BELLETTI & LEONINI 2004)	98%	1%	1%
L1 (ITALIAN MONOLINGUAL SPEAKERS) (FROM BELLETTI, BENNATI & SORACE 2007)	93%	7%	-

**Table 1.** Percentages of VS and SV (across verb classes) in different adult populations

The salient feature of these results is that VS is the overwhelmingly preferred answer by monolingual Italian speakers (98% and 93%); Italian attrited speakers have a much lower proportion of VS answers (61,1%) compared to SV ones and heritage speakers an even lower one (53,4%). L2 speakers are those whose VS answers have the lowest proportion compared to the SV ones and this holds irrespective of the level of attainment of their L2 Italian, with no substantial difference between non advanced (27%) and near-native speakers (29%). These results are interesting and illuminating as for what they may reveal us on the different modes of acquisition (see e.g. Caloi, Belletti & Poletto 2018 for recent discussion on the ultimately unimportant role of nativeness). They also shed a clear light on the existence of preferred answering strategies (VS vs SV) in different languages, through the lenses of L2 and multilingualism, e.g. VS in Italian, SV in German and English.<sup>12</sup> All the references quoted contribute a detailed discussion of these aspects. In



the context of the present article the results summarized in Table 1 are inspiring as they clearly indicate that the VS order is not easily acquired in adult L2 and more generally in a bilingual situation such as in the heritage one and that the production of new information subjects seems to be influenced by the preferred strategy of the other language. Since the same VS word order may correspond to different discourse values – as illustrated in (1)-(3) of the previous section 2.1 – and consequently different syntactic analyses – as illustrated in (6) – it is not especially surprising that its opacity may constitute an obstacle for an effective access to it and possibly be among the reasons of its relatively poor acquisition and of the persistence of the L1 strategy over time.

To the extent that the Italian VS order illustrated is a property necessarily related to the null subject nature of Italian, it has previously been noted (Belletti, Bennati & Sorace 2007) that the production of VS is in principle unexpected in L2 English in the same discourse conditions of the production experiment reviewed here. Given the necessity to overtly realize the (pronominal) preverbal subject, to the extent that the non-null subject nature of English is set, VS would yield the production of ungrammatical English sentences (such as e.g. *\*Spoke John*). Even if the L1 is Italian, VS answers should thus be rarely produced. In other words, it is not the case that the L2 situation should simply lead to the transfer of the L1 strategy to the L2. That this is indeed the case has been shown by the results in the same task run in English with L1 Italian speaking adults who were L2 English speakers (data presented in Belletti 2013: 314, reporting data collected by Bellucci in 2010, cf. note 11). In their L2 English the L1 Italian speakers produced 72% of SV answers and virtually no VS (1%) (27% were other/no answer); this compares with 91% of SV answers by native English L1 controls (9% other/no answer). It should be noted that in the SV answer, with S interpreted as the focus of new information as was required by the elicitation conditions, S is necessarily associated with a peculiar prosody in English, different from the one of simple (all new) declaratives. However, the L2 English speakers who did access the correct English SV word order in their answers did not associate the appropriate prosody with the new information subject. It thus seems that they were just producing a descriptive grammatical English sentence and not the appropriate answer to the question asked. This point will be taken up again in the concluding section 4.

### *2.2.2 VS in young children: S new info (narrow) focus*

Difficulty with VS seems to only affect adult L2 acquisition as well as the special situations of constant contact such as the heritage and attrited ones. The proper acquisition of VS, with S a new information

subject does not appear to be problematic for young monolingual children acquiring Italian. Systematic experimental data on precisely this question are scarce as it is not easy to design an experimental task naturally leading young children to the production of a full clausal answer containing the verb and the subject.<sup>13</sup> However, results from different eliciting experiments clearly confirm this conclusion in an indirect way. This is for instance the case of Belletti & Contemori's (2012) results testing the production of object relative clauses in presence of a lexical subject: children had no difficulty in producing the relevant structures in which the subject was postverbal (and pronominal; 65% age 3-3;11, 74% age 4-4;11, 90% age 5-5;11). Given the contextual discourse situation, the postverbal location of the subject was most appropriate and the subject was naturally interpreted as the focus of new information. One example of this type from one child's production is given in (10) (example 32 of the quoted reference):

- (10) *Quello che ha ricevuto lui*  
the one that has received he  
'The one that he received' P.R. (4;3)

Moreover, the search from the Childes database (MacWhinney 2000) presented in Belletti (2007) also showed an early access to the VS order by young Italian speaking children in appropriate discourse conditions, in which the subject is associated with the new information focus interpretation. The analysis in (6a) thus seems rather unproblematic for monolingual Italian speaking children.

### 2.2.3 VS with S indefinite subject of unaccusatives in adult L2 Italian and in young children

No special difficulty emerges in the appropriate mastering of the VS order in cases in which the verb is an unaccusative verb and the postverbal subject is an indefinite subject, neither for young children nor for adult L2 speakers. Results on production through a repetition task by young Italian speaking children (Vernice & Guasti 2015) and from a story telling task by adult L2 speakers of Italian (Belletti, Bennati & Sorace 2007) clearly indicate this. In the first case, children correctly repeated all new sentences with the order VSPP in a significant higher number of cases when the verb was unaccusative and the postverbal subject was indefinite (up to 52% identical repetitions in this condition).<sup>14</sup> In the latter case, adult L2 speakers of Italian described a short silent movie by using the same unaccusative verbs as Italian speaking controls, and also selected the VS order, with S indefinite to the same proportion (16% L2 speakers, 15% controls).

Taken together with the results of the previous section, these results clearly show that the status of the VS order is not uniform and that when it corresponds to an analysis like (7)/(9) it is smoothly accessed by both children and adults. Hence, when VS ultimately reflects a crucial lexical property which contributes to the characterization of the unaccusative class, such order is unproblematic. The crucial property is the requirement that the postverbal subject be indefinite, i.e. DE, with the VS order corresponding to the order of merge as in (7) and to an all new interpretation of the sentence, hence to an analysis as in (9).<sup>15</sup>

### 3. On the opacity of VS: Answering VS is not always possible

Given the analyses of the VS order in (6a,b) and (7, 9), we concluded that a postverbal subject in Italian can correspond to:

- i. The focus of new information (narrow)<sup>16</sup>
- ii. The focus of new information as part of an all new clause (part of a focal verb phrase)
- iii. The internal argument of an unaccusative verb (part of a focal verb phrase)

In the latter case the clause is all new and an indefiniteness requirement holds to the effect that the internal argument must be (a weak) indefinite. No such requirement holds for the new information postverbal subject in Spec/FocP in case (i), in which the focal subject can be, and typically is, a definite noun phrase as it identifies the new information constituent which the question is about (as in the exchange in 1). A question like (11Q) (same as (1Q)) can also be answered with an indefinite DP which is the external argument of the verb, as in the exchange in (11):

- |                                |                                  |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| (11) Q: <i>Chi ha parlato?</i> | A: <i>Ha parlato un ragazzo.</i> |
| who has spoken                 | has spoken a boy                 |
| ‘Who spoke?’                   | ‘A boy spoke.’                   |

The present section addresses the following interrelated questions:

Can the indefinite postverbal subject *qua* IA of an unaccusative verb count as a new information subject?

Can the internal argument of an unaccusative verb be merged as a definite DP? If yes, is there any consequence on the availability of its discourse interpretation as a postverbal subject?

Let us address question (i) first.<sup>17</sup> Consider the following question-answer pair:

(12) Q: *Cosa è successo?*  
what is happened  
'What happened?'

A: *È entrato qualcuno dalla finestra.*  
is entered somebody from-the window  
'Somebody entered from the window.'

This is a characteristic exchange of the type discussed in the previous sections, in which the answer is an all new sentence; the DE is met in (12A), with an indefinite IA, inside the verb phrase, as in the analysis in (7). The well-formedness of (12A) contrasts with the impossibility of the same sentence in (13A) given the following question-answer pair:<sup>18</sup>

(13) Q: *Chi è entrato?*  
who is entered  
'Who entered?'

A: *#È entrato qualcuno dalla finestra.*  
is entered somebody from-the window  
'Somebody entered from the window.'

The contrast between (12A) and (13A), i.e. the same sentence utilized as the answer to a different question, indicates that this sentence cannot function as the appropriate answer to a question like (13Q), which is a question on the subject. The answer to such question requires a postverbal subject focus of new information, as in the felicitous exchange in (14):

(14) Q: *Chi è entrato?*  
'Who entered?'

A: *È entrata Maria.*  
is entered Maria  
'Maria entered.'

In (14A) the postverbal subject is the new information constituent. This leads us to an answer to the question raised in (ii). As the new information constituent, the definite postverbal subject can fill the Spec of the low focus position with an analysis along the lines of (6a), modulo the fact that it originates as the IA of the unaccusative verb, and not as

the EA, due to the fundamental property of the unaccusative argument structure.

Let us now concentrate on (13A) in better detail. Its inappropriateness in the given context indicates that the weak indefinite IA cannot function as the focus of new information. This answers question (i). Following the analysis in Belletti & Bianchi (2016) this impossibility is expected, as the indefinite IA is assumed there not to be a real saturating argument. It is rather assumed to be a reduced nominal expression which is part of the predicate (in an abstract incorporation type structure). Then, since it is not a real argument, the indefinite IA cannot undergo the same syntax as that of a saturating argument: this includes the impossibility for it to function as the focus of new information. As discussed throughout, such interpretation is cartographically expressed with the argument filling the specifier of the low new information focus position, as in (6a). Hence, we conclude that the indefinite IA of an unaccusative verb cannot move and then be interpreted in this position. This is in sharp contrast with the case in which the IA of an unaccusative verb is a definite argument as in (14A) (or an indefinite with argument status, note 18). In this case, the noun phrase is a real saturating argument. As such it is assumed to necessarily vacate the internal argument position, whence the possibility for it to function as the focus of new information in the specifier of the low new information focus projection, along the lines in (6a).<sup>19</sup>

Given the described principled reason for the impossibility of (13A), it is to be expected that, *mutatis mutandis*, the same impossibility should be detected crosslinguistically. This is in fact the case as the following contrast in French indicates. Postverbal subjects are available in a restricted way in a non-null subject language like French. A representative case, most closely resembling Italian sentences like (12A), is provided by the *il*-construction in (15), a type of structure possible on a relatively high register. Sentences like (15) (Kayne 1975; Cardinaletti 1997) are characteristically possible with unaccusative verbs.<sup>20</sup> Not surprisingly, the nature of the postverbal noun phrase is constrained by the DE, a defining property of the unaccusative class, as discussed:

- (15) *Il est arrivé trois filles (/ \*la fille).*  
it is arrived three girls the girl  
'Three girls arrived.'

At the appropriate register, a sentence like (15) (same as 16A) can count as the answer to a 'what happened' type question like (16Q). In contrast, however, it cannot count as the answer to question (17Q), which is a question on the subject (cf. Belletti & Bianchi 2016, footnote 45):

- (16) Q: *Que s'est-il passé?*  
'What happened?'  
A: *Il est arrivé trois filles.*  
'Three girls arrived'
- (17) Q: *Qui est arrivé?*  
'Who arrived?'  
A: \* *Il est arrivé trois filles.*  
'Three girls arrived'

Exactly as in the Italian exchange in (13), in the French equivalent exchange in (17) the *il*-construction with the indefinite postverbal noun phrase cannot serve as the answer to a question on the subject. The reason is to be recognized in the described defining property of unaccusatives according to which the indefinite IA is not a complete argument. Its syntax is thus not that of a real saturating argument, including the (im)possibility of filling the discourse related position of focus of new information. As discussed in previous work (e.g. Belletti 2009, chapter 10 and references cited therein), the way in which the low new information focus position can be exploited in a possible clausal answer to question (17Q) in French is through a kind of postverbal subject in disguise, i.e. through a (reduced) subject cleft (e.g. *C'est Marie* 'It's Marie'). This is a construction compatible with the non-null subject nature of French, which cannot allow for an Italian type VS order. A detailed presentation of this point would take the present discussion too far afield. The quoted reference develops the proposal in detail. In the context of the present discussion the crucial point to highlight is the complete parallelism between the Italian contrast of (12) vs (13) and the French contrast of (16) vs (17). In both cases, the indefinite postverbal subject cannot act as the focus of new information. It can only be part of an all new clause where the focus of new information is the whole verb phrase.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. Concluding remarks and the canonicity of SV and VS

From the review of the background of experimental results in section 2.2., the conclusion can be drawn that the VS order, with a postverbal subject interpreted as the focus of new information is a somewhat difficult word order to implement in various non-monolingual populations.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the same word order in all new clauses with unaccusative verbs and an indefinite postverbal subject is not problematic for the same populations. Young Italian speaking developing children

as well do not manifest difficulties with the VS order, neither in cases in which the subject is the focus of new information nor in cases in which it corresponds to the internal argument of an unaccusative verb and thus satisfies the infiniteness requirement of the DE. Moreover, the VS order with unaccusative verbs may have different discourse values, made explicit by the assumed syntactic analyses in (6a,b) and (7, 9): the postverbal subject can either be a new information focus subject, or it can correspond to the internal indefinite non saturating argument of the unaccusative verb. Only in the latter case is its nature constrained by the DE and the discourse interpretation of the sentence containing it is only that of an all new clause. Specifically, the indefinite postverbal subject of an unaccusative verb constrained by DE cannot function as the subject of new information. Given the assumed analysis this amount to claiming that it cannot be realized in the clause internal Spec/FocP position at the periphery of the verb phrase. Italian speakers have clear intuitions about the different status of sentences like (12A) and (13A) and so do French speakers with respect to sentences like (16A) and (17A). These pairs may further contribute to the opacity of the VS order in Italian, as do the possible different interpretations in (1A)-(3A), which opened our discussion. However, with unaccusative verbs the alleged opacity does not affect any of the populations investigated, who, as noted, make the appropriate distinctions and master the VS order in this case, even when the same word order is not properly mastered with other verb classes. The issue of postverbal subjects so investigated from different angles and with respect to different populations in similar conditions thus suggests some general considerations on the notion of ‘canonicity’ as far as the order of the subject with respect to the verb is concerned, i.e. preverbal or postverbal subject. The following concluding lines are dedicated to some reflections relevant to this point.

Overall, the conclusion can be drawn that postverbal subjects appear to have a ‘canonical’ status. Such status is mastered at different degrees in different populations, and depending on the lexical class of V. VS is the canonical order in standard Italian when S is the focus of new information; it can also be a canonical order in all new clauses with transitive and intransitive/unergative verbs.<sup>23</sup> It is the canonical order in all new clauses with an unaccusative verb and an indefinite postverbal subject in DE contexts. The results reported in section 2.2.2 on the L2 English of L1 Italian speakers indicate that although the SV order is mastered rather well by them, its new information prosody, necessary in the elicitation context, is not. A reasonable conclusion was that SV is accessed from early on by the L2 speakers since VS would yield an ungrammatical output in the non-null subject English; however, its

discourse status is not similarly accessed. In other words, this was not a canonical use of the SV order in the given discourse context in English.

In conclusion, it does not seem to be the case that just the linear location of S with respect to the verb, e.g. SV, should count as overall more canonical compared to the other linear order, VS. Each SV and VS are canonical in their own way and depending on general properties of the different languages considered and on lexical and discourse properties, such as those discussed here. Overall, the results reviewed and the new and old facts (re)discussed suggest that it is not that much a general notion of canonicity of a specific linear word order, e.g. SV, that seems to play a crucial role and may be more or less relevant in different populations. Rather, the crucial role is played by the way the given word order – either SV or VS – is associated with a given discourse interpretation and its related prosody. All of this in turn is affected by properties of the verb class to which V belongs (e.g. unaccusatives vs the other verb classes) as well as by general properties of the languages (e.g. being a null subject language or not). These properties may be more or less easily acquired in different modes of acquisition in different populations.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Rizzi (1982), Jaeggli & Safir (1989) and much subsequent literature.

<sup>2</sup> With transitive verbs the order VS typically correlates with the realization of the object as a clitic pronoun (Calabrese 1992, Rizzi 1996) as VSO, with O a lexical DP, is excluded in Italian and VOS is possible only to a very limited extent (Belletti 2004a for discussion).

<sup>3</sup> See Cinque (2002), Rizzi (2004), Belletti (2004b) and much subsequent work. See also Cinque & Rizzi (2010), Rizzi & Bocci (2017) for more recent assessment and overview.

<sup>4</sup> No preverbal overt element is present in the preverbal subject position: this is the crucial null subject feature of this type of 'inversion'.

<sup>5</sup> Prosodies clearly differ in (1), new information focus subject, vs (2), given topic subject; less clearly so in (1) vs (3), an all new clause with subject also indirectly new. An interesting open question in need of further future investigation.

<sup>6</sup> We illustrate the focus interpretation here and throughout, as the typical discourse related interpretation of a postverbal subject in Italian. The TopP projection is thus indicated in parenthesis in structure (4) to simplify the representation, and it will not be indicated anymore in the further representations throughout.

The position of the focus of new information is subject to some parametric variation as it can also be realized in the left periphery, as is the case in languages like Sicilian (Cruschina 2012); in this case the focal interpretation is typically accompanied by some further feature of emphasis/unexpectedness. A pure new information focus interpretation for the subject is only associated with the low postverbal vP-peripheral position in standard Italian.



<sup>7</sup> In all new sentences with transitive and intransitive/unergative verbs, the subject can also be preverbal, thus expressing the aboutness interpretation that characterizes the preverbal subject position (Rizzi 2005, 2018 for discussion); a preverbal subject can also be a (left peripheral) given topic, but not necessarily (Belletti & Manetti 2018 for relevant discussion based on acquisition data).

<sup>8</sup> The unaccusative verb phrase is in fact reduced as compared to transitive and unergative verb phrases. By assumption, it does not contain the ‘small v’ layer introducing the external argument, which is missing with unaccusatives as illustrated in (7). This crucial lexical property of unaccusatives combines with the indefiniteness requirement on the internal argument, discussed in detail in the text.

<sup>9</sup> Reference is made here to the whole unaccusative class. Distinctions within the class have been identified (Pinto 1997, Sorace 2000, Hale & Keyser 2002, Alexiadou *et al.* 2004), which may in principle influence aspects of the distribution of postverbal subjects with unaccusatives as presented here (see also section 3.1). However, this issue will not be further investigated here and is left for future elaboration.

<sup>10</sup> From different L1, of which the largest group were L1-German speakers, whose results are reported here in Table 1.

<sup>11</sup> The various populations also had different language combinations, e.g. Dal Pozzo (2011) Finnish L1 – Italian L2, Genevska-Hanke (2017) Bulgarian L1 – German L2. Note that when this task is used with L2 populations, the productions of L1 controls show what in the given L1 turns out to be the most natural ‘answering strategy’ for question eliciting the production of a new information (narrow) focus subject (Belletti 2009). See Table 1 on Italian in this respect. The original videos in Italian have also been dubbed in different languages, so that descriptive data on different answering strategies are now available in a number of languages including, beside Italian, Brazilian Portuguese (Guesser 2007), Finnish (Dal Pozzo 2011), English (Bellucci 2010), and are currently being gathered in French.

<sup>12</sup> Belletti (2007, 2009) on the further answering strategy found crosslinguistically: subject clefts, most notably found in French.

<sup>13</sup> See Dal Pozzo (2012) for a first pilot adaptation of Belletti & Leonini (2004) original design for young children.

<sup>14</sup> In contrast, in 57% of the cases in which the postverbal subject was definite the repeated sentence was changed by children to the SV order. See Vernice & Guasti (2014) for further details, and Belletti & Guasti (2015) for discussion on this early mastery of DE in development.

<sup>15</sup> VS is also unproblematic in the Italian existential clauses produced by the L2 speakers tested, both the non-advanced ones and the near native ones, and was also easily accessed by the heritage and attrited speakers tested through the same design. Assuming with Belletti & Bianchi (2016: 30-36) that the existential *be* is an unaccusative verb, the easiness with VS in these clauses is consistent with the general results with unaccusatives. The literature on the unaccusative status of the existential verb/expression crosslinguistically is rich. The following items can be mentioned over a prolonged period of time: Williams (1984); Lasnik (1999); Deal (2009); Mc Closkey (2014). On existentials and the canonical status of the kind of indefinite (postverbal) subject that they involve, see Bentley (2013). See Cruschina (2016) for a careful disentangling of the locative *vs* existential interpretation of Italian *ci* constructions also in relation to DE and their different discourse values. In the discussion of this article reference will always be made to the unaccusative class as a whole, with no special focus on the existential construction.

<sup>16</sup> Or to a given topic, with the prosody in (2). As mentioned, we concentrate here on the new information focus interpretation, which is the widespread interpretation of postverbal subjects in Italian.

<sup>17</sup> This section develops the remark in footnote 45 of Belletti & Bianchi (2016) on

the French examples to be discussed momentarily in (15). Crucial features of the account of DE with unaccusatives developed in that work are assumed here.

<sup>18</sup> Presence of the PP argument of the verb in sentences like (12A)/(13A) favors the IA analysis of the postverbal subject, as also noted in relation to (8). The judgment in (13A) refers to this reading, with the corresponding continuous prosody and no break between the postverbal subject and the following PP. A sentence like (i) following can be the answer to question (13Q), repeated in (iQ), much as (14A) in the text with a definite DP:

- (i) Q: *Chi è entrato?*  
 ‘Who entered?’  
 A: *È entrato qualcuno (ma non so chi). // Sono entrate tre ragazze.*  
 is entered somebody but not know.1SG who are entered three girls  
 ‘Somebody entered (but I don’t know who). // Three girls entered’

In (iA) the indefinite postverbal subject can function as an argument of the verb and as such as a new information subject which would vacate the IA position, as in (14A). See the discussion surrounding (14) and the French examples in (15)-(17) in the text.

<sup>19</sup> See Belletti and Bianchi (2016) for further discussion on the possibility for a sentence like (14A) to also function as an all new answer to a ‘what happened’ type question. In a nutshell: the IA should vacate the internal argument position moving to a higher position of the verbal extended functional projection. The whole projection including the moved IA would then move to the low Spec-FocP with a derivation along the lines in (6b), yielding the all new interpretation. Note that if a PP is also present, in an answer like in (14A) (i.e.: *È entrata Maria, dalla finestra*, lit. ‘is entered Maria, from-the window’) it would necessarily count as ‘marginalized’ (/extraposed) as an effect of the focus status of the definite postverbal subject (whence the comma).

<sup>20</sup> In a way similar to the *there* construction in English, although the precise status of the two constructions in the two languages may not be overall the same (Milsark 1974; Belletti 1988; and much subsequent literature). In the text, the comparison with Italian is limited to the consideration of the construction in French.

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that there is no agreement in number with the postverbal noun phrase in the French *il*-construction, where agreement goes with the preverbal expletive *il*. On the fact that agreement in phi-features may be weaker in the postverbal position crosslinguistically, hence with postverbal subjects, see the discussion in Guasti & Rizzi (2002). In standard Italian agreement with the subject is systematic in both the preverbal and the postverbal position, as noted at the outset.

<sup>22</sup> The behavior of simultaneous (and balanced) bilingual speakers is yet to be studied experimentally in this domain. This is a topic of current investigation.

<sup>23</sup> With transitive verbs this holds with constraints depending on the nature of the object (Calabrese 1992; Rizzi 1996; see also note 2):

- (i) Q: *Che cosa è successo alla finestra?*  
 ‘What happened to the window?’  
 A: *L’ ha aperta la ragazza.*  
 it-CL has opened the girl  
                 V                S

- vs
- (ii) Q: *Che cosa è successo?*  
 ‘What happened?’  
 A: *La ragazza ha aperto la finestra.*  
 the girl has opened the window  
                 S                        V                        O

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