Accounting for asymmetries in cleft sentence use: Syntactic and functional preferences in L1 and L2 Italian and French

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Abstract

Cleft constructions exhibit variations in their frequency of usage, influenced by different constraints and preferences at various levels, such as syntax or function. Additionally, these constraints and purposes may differ across languages. This study aims to clarify the factors influencing the use of cleft constructions among speakers of two closely related languages, Italian and French. By analyzing the behaviors of native speakers, we also formulate hypotheses regarding how these factors manifest in the speech of second language (L2) learners of these languages. Our findings highlight a difference in how native speakers handle the functional parameter in the use of clefts, with Italian speakers (but not French speakers) distinguishing between identification and correction. The linguistic proximity between Italian and French facilitates the acquisition of this complex structure among learners. However, other factors contribute to differing receptions of asymmetries in L2, including acquisitional

phenomena such as the predominance of communicative need and the difficulty in incorporating the functional parameter.

Keywords: cleft constructions, information structure, second language acquisition, cross-linguistic influence, Romance.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to investigate the usage patterns and underlying factors influencing the use of it-cleft constructions among native speakers of Italian and French, as well as second language (L2) learners of these languages. Specifically, we focus on two crucial parameters: the syntactic and the pragmatic function of the clefted (and focused) constituent. The first section of the paper will provide an overview of the structure under examination, and the linguistic constraints pertinent to this structure in Italian and French. In the second section, we will outline the methodology established to experimentally test the effects of the two aforementioned parameters of variation. Following this, in the third and fourth sections, we will present the results obtained from the productions of native and non-native speakers of French and Italian, aiming to identify the factors influencing the use of the target structures among speakers of these four different groups. The concluding section will summarize the results and interpret them in relation to the research questions, attempting to account for the observed asymmetries in terms of functional and acquisitional factors.

1.1. Cleft sentences: intra- and interlinguistic asymmetry in native speakers' use

The study of cleft sentences has garnered considerable attention in recent research, focusing on their informational properties, frequency, and constraints across different languages (Katz, 2000; Doetjes et al., 2004; De Cesare, 2017; among many others; for a review of current issues see also Bonan & Ledgeway, 2024). To identify and describe the structure, we adopt De Cesare's definition: "A cleft construction is a biclausal sentence structure, consisting of a copular clause and a relative(-like) clause. [...] Pragmatically, clefts can play a variety of functions, which are mostly related to focusing" (De Cesare, 2017: 536). According to the literature, the primary functions attributed to it-cleft structures are identification and correction, illustrated respectively by examples (1) and (2):

(1)   French
        a. Qui a sonné à la porte?
           'Who rang the bell?'
        b. C'est Jean qui a sonné à la porte.
           'It's Jean who rang the bell'

(2)   French
        a. Jules a sonné à la porte.
           'Jules rang the bell'
        b. Non, c'est Jean qui a sonné à la porte.
           'No, it's Jean who rang the bell'

As the examples show, in both cases, the cleft sentence serves to specify the identity of a referent concerning a given predication, which remains in the background; in both cases, the identity of the referent is the new and focused information of the sentence. Both sentences are therefore narrowly focused, but the sentence in example (2) has the additional function of correcting a previous statement, meaning it carries a corrective focus[1].

The informational attributes, frequency of use, and constraints pertaining to it-cleft constructions exhibit both intra-linguistic and inter-linguistic variation. Intra-linguistic disparities may concern the frequency of cleft employment across constituents with distinct syntactic functions (e.g., subjects versus objects or adverbials), or frequency among constituents carrying divergent pragmatic functions within a given communicative context (e.g., identification versus correction). The asymmetry in use for subject or non-subject phrases has been examined from both functional and formal perspectives. Functionally, the prevalence of it-cleft constructions with subjects can be understood through principles of information organization in discourse: focus subjects, placed in utterance-initial position, require additional syntactic markers to convey their informational function, as their initial position by default should be linked to topical or given information, rather than new or focal (Givón, 1989; Lambrecht, 1994). From a purely syntactic point of view, instead, the difference in usage frequency between subjects and non-subjects in cleft constructions can be attributed to variations in sentence structure complexity. This complexity, in fact, influences both syntactic accessibility and cognitive processing demands. For instance, according to the Accessibility Hierarchy (Keenan & Comrie, 1977; Keenan & Hawkins, 1987), subjects are more accessible than non-subjects within a sentence, and this makes them easier to extract and manipulate syntactically. A higher accessibility leads to a more frequent relativization and use in cleft constructions. Moreover, intervention effects (as discussed by Belletti, 2005, 2015; and Friedmann et al., 2009) further influence the clefting of non-subjects. Quantitative corpus analyses, like those conducted by Samo and Merlo (2021, 2024), provide empirical support for these theoretical claims.

The second, pragmatic, asymmetry between two types of narrow focus has been described in terms of degree of contrast (cf. Destruel & Velleman 2014), with the hypothesis that speakers would associate these different degrees of contrast with different expressive solutions (Cruschina, 2021). To the best of our knowledge, though, this hypothesis has not yet been empirically verified on a wide cross-linguistic level.

Concerning inter-linguistic distinctions, it has been noted that, although it-cleft structures are available in most Romance and Germanic languages, certain languages, such as French, exhibit a more frequent use of this construction. Several studies have

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[1]   It is also acknowledged that, in specific contexts, cleft constructions can bear distinct textual functions, for example serving a cohesive role (ex. 'And it was during that same year that the transformation began to unfold'), or occurrences of formulaic type ('It is with great pleasure that we announce the commencement of this endeavor', cf. De Cesare 2017). Nevertheless, such instances are comparatively infrequent when juxtaposed with the two predominant types delineated earlier, and typically find employment within written discourse, and/or elevated registers of communication. Given their divergence from the scope of materials designated for our experimental inquiry, we decided not to incorporate elaborations on these variants within the present work.

reported a higher frequency of clefts in French than in other Romance languages, particularly in oral communication (De Cesare et al. 2016, Dufter 2009, Roggia 2008, Van den Steen 2005). Studies conducted on acquisition also show that these structures emerge very early in L1 French (Lahousse & Jourdain, 2024). This discrepancy can be attributed to the relative scarcity of alternative structures available in French to express narrow focus, and in general by the lesser syntactic and prosodic flexibility of this language compared to, for example, Italian or Spanish (Lambrecht, 2001; Belletti & Bocci, 2024; Bertollo, 2024). In Italian, narrow focus effects, especially subject focus, can be achieved by other means, such as verb-subject order (3) or focus fronting (4), two structures that are subject to limitations in French (Cruschina & Remberger 2017, Authier & Haegeman 2019) – see examples (5) and (6).

(3)   Italian
       a. Chi ha   comprato   il   giornale?
          who AUX.PRS.3SG buy.PTCP   the.M.SG   newspaper.SG
          'Who bought the newspaper?'
       b. L'=ha   comprato   [Gianni]F
          it.M.SG=AUX.PRS.3SG buy.PTCP   Gianni
          'Gianni bought it'

(4)   Italian
       a. Gianni ha   comprato   un   libro.
          Gianni AUX.PRS.3SG buy.PTCP   a.M.SG book.SG
          'Gianni bought a book'
       b. No, [un   giornale]F   ha   comprato
          no   a.M.SG newspaper.SG AUX.PRS.3SG   buy.PTCP
          'No, he bought a newspaper'

(5)   French
       a. Qui a   acheté   le   journal ?
          who AUX.PRS.3SG   buy.PTCP the.M.SG   newspaper.SG
          'Who bought the newspaper?'
       b. *L'=a   acheté   [Jean]F.
          it.M.SG =AUX.PRS.3SG   buy.PTCP   Jean
          'Gianni bought it'

(6)   French
       a. Jean a   acheté   un   livre.
          Jean AUX.PRS.3SG buy.PTCP a.M.SG   book.SG
          'Jean bought a book'
       b. *Non, [un   journal]F   il a   acheté.
          No   a.M.SG newspaper.SG   he AUX.PRS.3SG buy.PTCP
          'No, he bought a newspaper'

In this perspective, variations in the frequency of it-cleft usage across languages have been attributed to systemic and structural differences among Romance language systems. A less explored but relevant possibility for explaining these discrepancies involves asymmetries in how cleft sentences are used based on the pragmatic function of the focus constituent. As discussed, narrow focus marking can

serve either identification or correction purposes. While both functions are theoretically possible for it-cleft sentences, languages with a broader range of narrow focus marking devices (such as Italian) may use cleft sentences for specific functions within this range. In contrast, languages with fewer alternative structures (such as French) may use clefts in a less specialized manner (see for example Destruel & Velleman, 2014, comparing French to English).

1.2. Symmetries and asymmetries in learner varieties

The intra- and interlinguistic asymmetries in the use of it-cleft sentences among Romance languages, along with the interlinguistic similarity observed at the formal level, raise interesting issues from the perspective of L2 varieties.

On the one hand, as we have seen, the asymmetry observed in the frequency of clefts involving the subject has been explained on the basis of higher syntactic accessibility of subjects if compared to non-subjects (see section 1.1), as well as stronger communicative needs (i.e. it is more "urgent" to highlight a focus subject, by default in a topic-like position, than to highlight an object or an adverbial). From an acquisitional perspective, these factors are bound to affect how quickly and easily learners acquire and use it-clefts: consequently, we should expect to see similar asymmetries in the distribution of clefts in learner varieties.

On the other hand, additional insights can be gained by examining the acquisition of formally similar constructions that may serve different functions. As observed earlier, Italian and French it-cleft sentences share structural resemblances, but frequency data reveal asymmetries in usage across the two languages. This quantitative difference may stem from observed systemic asymmetries, such as the limited availability of alternative structures in French for conveying narrow focus, if compared to Italian. Crucially, the difference may also result from functional asymmetries, indicating a distinct functional specialization of it-cleft structures in each language: this discrepancy between formal symmetry and functional asymmetry provides a compelling backdrop for L2 learners. While the existence of similar structures in source and target language pairs is generally considered a facilitative factor for the acquisition of such structures, the issue becomes more intricate when moving from merely recognizing the presence of the structure in the L2 to understanding and acquiring its function in use. In this respect, the presence of formally similar structures that serve different functions in the source and target languages may lead to inappropriate mapping of form-function pairs onto the target language. Consequently, phenomena such as overuse or underuse of target structures, either as a whole or in specific functional contexts, may emerge (Benazzo & Andorno, 2017; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2007).

Moreover, overcoming these differences can be asymmetrically difficult from an acquisitional perspective: in fact, it has been largely observed that negative evidence – that is the non-occurrence of a structure in specific contexts of use – is more difficult to notice than positive evidence – the occurrence of the structure in specific contexts (Gass & Mackay, 2002; Schwartz & Goad, 2017). Consequently, from a crosslinguistic perspective, learning not to use in an L2 a construction used in the L1 can be more difficult than learning to use a construction in the L2, when it is less, or not at all, used in the L1. In our case, this means that French learners might find it more difficult to notice the non-use of it-cleft structures in Italian, than Italian learners would find it to notice the frequent use of it-cleft structures in French.

Existing studies on the acquisition of clefts suggest that the overall frequency of such structures tends to mirror the usage patterns of the source language (Belletti, 2005; Destruel & Donaldson, 2016), particularly when the repertoire of narrow-focusing strategies differs between the L1 and the L2, as is the case for Italian and French. However, there is no information regarding the outcome of functional asymmetry in L2, as no study, to our knowledge, has experimentally tested this specific aspect.

1.3. Research questions

Building upon the considerations outlined thus far, we can formulate two research questions, pertaining to both L1 and L2 data.

1.   Does the use of cleft constructions in Italian and French L1 confirm the syntactic asymmetries observed in the literature between subject vs. non-subject clefts, and eventually reveal (further) functional asymmetries between identification vs. correction focus, that account for the quantitative differences observed in corpus data?

2.   Do the patterns of cleft construction usage in Italian and French L2 mirror the asymmetries found in the source languages or the target languages, or do they exhibit common acquisitional tendencies?

We will try to answer these questions on the basis of a production study that tests the use of cleft sentences in a controlled (and thus comparable) task in native and non-native varieties.

2. The experimental study

In the following sections, we will outline the study's methodology. We will begin with a description of the participant sample, then detail the task used for data collection. Following this, we will discuss the strategies and tools employed for annotating, preparing, and analyzing the dataset.

2.1. Participants

To examine the production of native and non-native speakers of Italian and French and investigate potential effects of L1 influence, we opted for an inter-individual, multi-group, fully crossed design. We recruited four groups of participants: two native groups, 15 native French speakers with little or no competence in Italian (FRL1) and 15 native Italian speakers with little or no competence in French (ITL1), along with two non-native groups, 15 French learners of L2 Italian (ITL2) and 15 Italian learners of L2 French (FRL2). The L2 groups consist of adult speakers residing in the foreign country, not enrolled in any formal language courses, and acquiring the target language through immersion in their work, studies, and everyday interactions. The samples are balanced in terms of gender, and the age range (19-40) is homogeneous across all four groups. Special care was taken to circumscribe the speakers' areas of origin, in order to minimize the impact of diatopic variation. Our two points of inquiry are the area of

Turin (Piedmont) for Italian L1 and Italian L2 groups[2], and Paris and Île de France for French L1 and French L2. Table 1 provides an outline of the sample.

Table 1. Population sample of the study

Group	CEFR level	N. of participants	Total
ITL1	-	15	15
FRL1	-	15	15
FRL2	A B C	2 6 7	15
ITL2	A B C	4 6 5	15

Some issues concerning proficiency assessment must be acknowledged. In our study, the primary goal of learners' assessment was not as much observing acquisitional paths in different second languages, but rather to compare native speakers' and learners' behavior in a cross-linguistic perspective: our primary need was therefore to obtain two learners' groups comparable in proficiency. A key issue, commonly acknowledged yet often overlooked in studies involving L2 proficiency assessment, is the choice of tests. Defining linguistic competence is inherently complex, and accurately capturing the variability in each speaker's linguistic experience is challenging, whether through a single test or a battery of tests (see Leclerq et al., 2014 for a review). To assess our learners' competence comprehensively, we considered multiple parameters. Each speaker (both L1 and L2) completed a linguistic background questionnaire at the time of recording. Additionally, L2 learners took a written test to certify their proficiency in morphology, lexicon, and syntax, according to CEFR indicators (CEFR, 2020). For Italian L2, we used the Vedder (2008) cloze test, and for French, the Tremblay and Garrison (2010) cloze test. The results of these written tests were compared and integrated with evaluations of oral productions performed by two expert evaluators, who are language teachers at the CLA (*Centro Linguistico di Ateneo*) of the University of Turin. Overall, the written test results and the teachers' evaluations were generally consistent for most speakers, with only minor discrepancies, not exceeding one CEFR level. As shown in Table 1, the proficiency levels of the two learner groups are almost comparable, with the Italian L2 group being slightly more advanced.

Another issue is the relatively small number of participants in each CEFR level sub-group and the uneven distribution of levels among them. While this imbalance is less problematic when comparing learner groups to native speakers (as discussed in
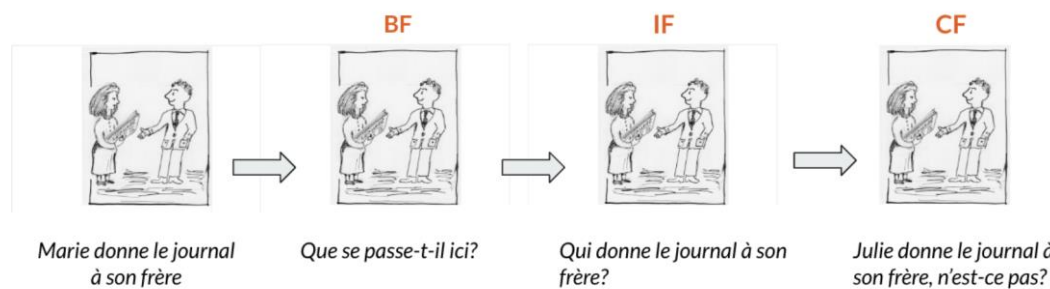
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[2]   Maintaining the same data collection points for both L1 and L2 Italian (as well as for L1 and L2 French) is crucial to avoid overlooking regional variations in usage, a common risk when studying L2 learning varieties of Italian. However, existing literature (Cerruti 2009) does not suggest that the proximity of Turin to France significantly affects the Turin variety compared to other Italian varieties in terms of marked word order constructions. Specifically, as we will illustrate later, our study's results closely align with those of previous studies on L1 Italian speakers, such as Roggia (2008) and Garassino (2014), revealing no meaningful variations. In further research, a closer investigation into potential differences among regional varieties would certainly be of interest.

section 4.1), it limits our ability to draw definitive conclusions about potential acquisition paths. This uneven distribution stems from the limited sample size and the difficulty in recruiting beginner French learners, as most Italian-speaking adults studying or working in a French-speaking country have typically had at least three years of mandatory French instruction in middle school. Given these challenges, we will exercise caution in drawing conclusions from our data. Nonetheless, some interesting insights have emerged that we believe remain valid despite these issues. Certain observations are promising and suggest potential directions for future research, although further investigation is needed. We will revisit these methodological considerations when discussing our hypotheses on L2 results in section 4.2.

2.2. Task

Following the protocol created by Gabriel (2007, 2010), participants engaged in a task where they were presented with a PowerPoint presentation featuring two short picture stories, each accompanied by a caption, and followed by questions related to the depicted scenes. Examples are visible in Figure 1; the full version of the stimuli can be found in Appendix.

Figure 1. Slides from the picture-story (French version), with questions targeting the subject in different focus conditions: broad foc. (bf), identification foc. (if), correction foc. (cf)

BF	IF	CF

Marie donne le journal à son frère   *Que se passe-t-il ici?*   *Qui donne le journal à son frère?*   *Julie donne le journal à son frère, n'est-ce pas?*

The questions are designed to elicit responses with three types of focus: broad focus (bf), narrow identification focus (id), and narrow corrective focus (cr). Identification focus is prompted through partial questions, while corrective focus is induced through assertive statements accompanied by tag-questions, aimed at soliciting the speaker's reaction, specifically a corrective one. The targeted focus constituents encompass various syntactic functions, including subjects, verbs, verb arguments, and adverbials. Participants are instructed to respond to the questions aloud, providing a "complete sentence" and avoiding elliptical responses (they are encouraged to include a verb in their responses). Aside from that, no other instructions are given, allowing speakers to formulate their sentences as they see fit, without specific guidance on word order or syntactic structure. During L2 recordings, a translation of certain lexical items was provided only in rare cases upon request[3]. Apart from these few instances, native speakers and learners of all levels were able to complete the task without additional clarification.

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[3]   The few cases in which learners struggled with the comprehension of the *stimuli* involved terms that are non-transparent between Italian and French, such as "edicola" ("kiosque" in French, *newsstand*), or "cruciverba" ("mots croisés" in French, *crossword puzzles*).

The task was administered in Italian to participants in ITL1 and ITL2 groups, and in French to those in FRL1 and FRL2 groups. An excerpt from the French version is provided below, along with examples of expected answers.

(7)   French
    (bf)   a. Que se passe-t-il ici?
            'What's going on here?'
        b. Marie est en train de donner le journal à son frère.
            'Marie is giving the newspaper to her brother'

    (id)   a. Qu'est-ce que Marie donne à son frère?
            'What is Marie giving to her brother?'
        b. Marie donne [un journal]$_F$ à son frère.
            'Marie is giving a newspaper to her brother'

    (cr)   a. Marie donne à son frère des mots croisés, n'est-ce pas?
            'Marie is giving her brother a crossword puzzle, right?'
        b. Non, Marie donne [un journal]$_F$ à son frère.
        'No, Marie is giving a newspaper to her brother'

The total number of questions posed to each participant was 29, including 3 fillers, 4 broad focus questions, 11 narrow-identification focus questions, and 11 narrow-correction focus questions (targeting subjects, prepositional and non-prepositional objects, adverbials, and verbs). For this study, we exclude broad-focus questions and narrow-focus questions targeting verbs. Table 2 shows the number of items retained for analysis, divided by syntactic and functional categories.

Table 2. Questions in the picture-story task.

Target constituent	Focus type	N. occurrences
Subject	Identification	3
	Correction	3
Direct object	Identification	2
	Correction	2
Indirect object	Identification	2
	Correction	2
Adverbial	Identification	2
	Correction	2
Total		**18**

The total number of collected tokens is 1080 (18 questions x 15 speakers x 4 groups). To create the final dataset, we excluded a small number of 'ill-formed' utterances with respect to our goals (20 tokens). Sentences were excluded for two

possible reasons. The first reason is related to non-compliance with the delivery: in the task, the request was to answer the questions by formulating "complete sentences," i.e., including a reference to the whole predicate; cases where speakers answered with single phrases (e.g., Q. "À qui Marie donne-t-elle le journal?"; A. "À son frère") or clefts without relative clauses ('reduced clefts' according to Belletti 2008; e.g., Q. "Qui donne le journal à son frère?"; A. "C'est Marie") were excluded from the analysis, leading to the exclusion of 14 tokens. The second reason is related to the semantic coherence of answers: if the utterance is not felicitous or does not express disagreement with an incorrect description of the story, then it is ruled out of the analysis (e.g., Q. "Julie donne le journal à son frère, non?"; A. "Oui, Marie donne le journal à son frère" instead of correct answer A. "Non, c'est Marie qui donne le journal à son frère"). This second factor leads to the exclusion of 6 tokens. The final dataset included 1060 sentences.

Table 3. Number of responses considered for each group of speakers

Group	N. of tokens
FRL1	265
ITL1	270
FRL2	263
ITL2	262
Total	**1060**

2.3. Transcription and annotation

All the speaker's productions were manually transcribed and labeled. Syntactic and word-order level phenomena were annotated using a specific tagset, adapted from Brunetti et al. (2011). Table 4 presents a selection of labels from the protocol, illustrating the abbreviations for the structures encountered in our corpus that will be referenced in the following paragraphs. For information on other labels, please consult the aforementioned article. Although additional layers of segmentation and annotation were applied to analyze prosodic phenomena, these aspects will not be covered in the present work[4].

Data visualization and statistics were conducted using R (R Core Team, 2022). For the statistical tests, we used generalized linear mixed models with the package *lmer* (Bates et al., 2015).

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[4]   We acknowledge that syntactic and prosodic aspects are fundamental and closely interrelated in marking informational structure. However, due to space constraints and the scope of the study, we have chosen to exclude prosodic measures from this discussion for clarity. Nonetheless, prosodic data have been meticulously annotated and analyzed, and they offer valuable insights. We encourage readers to refer to related work on the same corpus for further details (De Paolis et al., 2022; De Paolis, 2024). See also the considerations proposed in section 5.

Table 4. Abbreviations for non-canonical constructions with examples from our dataset (adapted from Brunetti et al., 2011)

Label	Structure	Example
sbjinv	subject inversion	*Il giornale lo compra <u>Maria</u>.*
clld	clitic left dislocation	*Il giornale lo dà a <u>suo fratello</u>.*
clrd	clitic right dislocation	*Lo compra <u>in edicola</u> il giornale.*
obj-sep	separation of the (postverbal) direct object from the verb	*Marie donne à son frère <u>le journal</u>.*
focfr	focus fronting: a fronted element bearing focal stress.	*<u>Il giornale</u> compra Maria.*
cleft	it-cleft sentence	*C'est <u>Marie</u> qui achète le journal.*
noncl-d	the same as clrd or clld, but without a resumptive clitic.	*Marie au kiosque achète <u>un journal</u>.*
na	not applicable: canonical order (SVOA)	*Marie achète <u>un journal</u> au kiosque.*

3. Results: native speakers

In the preliminary analysis, we assessed the marked structures employed to indicate narrow focus, and their respective frequencies, for all target constituents mixed (subjects, objects, adverbials). Figure 2 represents the outcome of this first survey.

Figure 2. Word orders used for narrow focus marking in L1 French and Italian (all target constituents mixed)
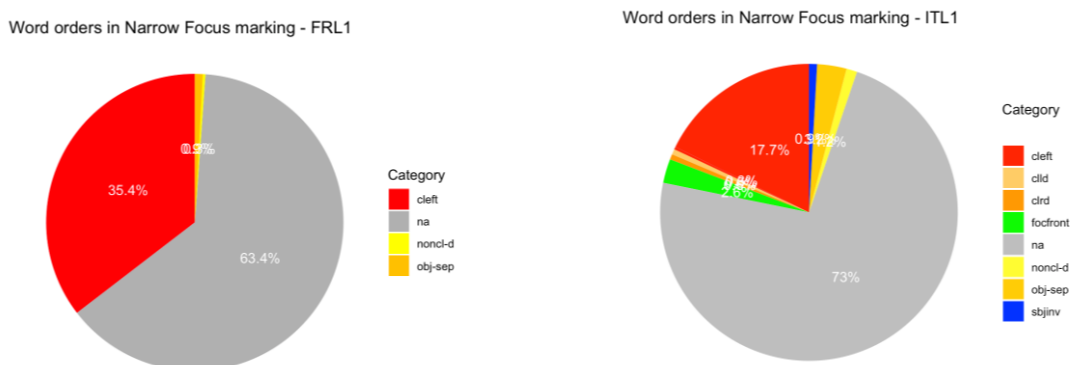
The analysis of the speakers' responses indicates that it-cleft sentences are the most used structure for narrow focus in both Italian and French. Native speakers of the two languages tend to use either it-cleft constructions or a canonical SVO order

without dislocations to convey narrow focus. These two structures—cleft and unmarked—account for 95% of the total dataset[5].

An equally notable aspect is the distinct difference in the frequency of it-clefts between the native groups: cleft sentences occur significantly more often in the French group (35%) compared to the Italian group (17%). Alternative sentences with a marked word order make up 9.7% in Italian but only 1.1% in French. These findings align with similar percentages reported in previous studies. Regarding the distribution of it-cleft sentences (123 in French and 57 in Italian) across different syntactic constituents and pragmatic conditions, noticeable asymmetries are evident in both groups, though not in the same proportions. As shown in Figure 3, the percentage of it-cleft sentences is substantially higher when the focal constituent is a subject (94% in French and 55% in Italian) compared to other syntactic constituents (18% in French and 0.5% in Italian for all other target constituents).

Figure 3. It-clefts produced by native speakers in narrow-focus context, by syntactic function of focus constituent: subject (sbj), direct object (obj), prepositional object (ind), adverbial (adv)
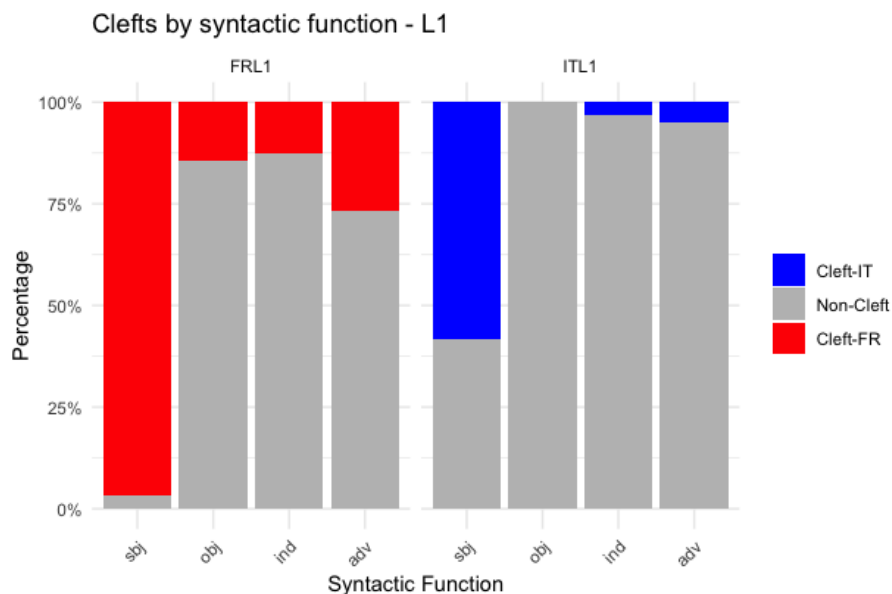
The pragmatic function of focus (identification vs. correction) also influences it-cleft production, though not equally across both languages. This difference is especially noticeable when the focus constituent is a subject. In Italian, the frequency of it-clefts varies significantly between the two focus types: identification, which is less contrastive, leads to a lower frequency of clefts compared to the more contrastive function, i.e. correction. Opposedly, the degree of contrast does not appear to affect it-cleft usage in French, where cleft sentences are the default strategy for both focus types. This asymmetry, for each syntactic function of focus, is illustrated in Figure 4.

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[5]   As described in 2.2., the term "complete sentence" was used in the prompt. This specification aimed to prevent elliptical answers such as "Maria", or reduced clefts such as "c'est Marie" / "è Maria". A possible unintended consequence of this prompt is the fact that participants understood it as an obligation to produce "canonical sentences", leading to an avoidance of non-SVO orders. Namely, in comparison to other task-based studies (see for example Belletti 2008), our dataset exhibits lower occurrences of post-verbal subjects, dislocations, fronting, and other structures deviating from the canonical SVO order.

Figure 4. It-cleft structures produced by speakers of the native groups for different target constituents in the two focus conditions: correction (cr) and identification (id)
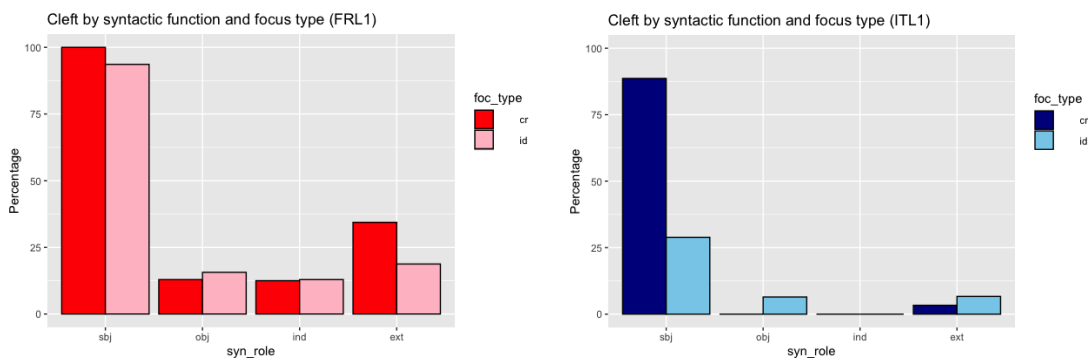
Considering these results, it becomes evident that the two parameters—syntactic function of the target constituent and type of focus—interact differently in the two languages. The first factor, the syntactic function, exhibits a similar effect in both languages. On the other hand, the other factor, the degree of contrast, has an effect only in Italian, and notably, it is only visible on a certain syntactic function, namely the subject. To test these impressions about the two native languages, we fitted our data into a generalized linear mixed-effects model with two interacting factors: target constituent and information-structural context, with the speaker included as a random factor.

glmm_model <- glmer(cleft ~ focus_type * syntactic_role + (1 | speaker))

The results in Italian L1 are highly significant for the predictor 'syntactic function' alone, as well as for the interaction 'focus type * syntactic function'. In other words, the difference between the two focus conditions, identification vs. correction, is strongly marked by Italian speakers, but the fact can be appreciated only when the focus constituent is a subject—hence the interaction. The same doesn't stand for French, for which the only valid predictor is the 'syntactic function'. In this second case, the interaction is not significant, since variation in none of the two predictors influences the other one. Results for group ITL1 and FRL1 are summarized in Table 5 and 6.

Table 5. Regression results for group ITL1

Coefficients	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(>|t|)
foc type	-0.03333	0.07418	-0.449	0.65491
synt role	0.24444	0.07418	3.295	0.00171 **
foc type * synt role	0.61111	0.10491	5.825	2.92e-07 ***

Table 6. Regression results for group FRL1

Coefficients	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(>|t|)
foc type	0.04167	0.06767	0.616	0.54039
synt role	0.76042	0.06767	11.237	< 2e-16 ***
foc type * synt role	-0.02083	0.09570	-0.218	0.82840

Italian speakers respond to both parameters: focused subjects are more frequently clefted than objects, yet both subjects, objects and adverbials are preferably clefted in corrective-focus contexts. French speakers only respond to the syntactic parameter, i.e. subjects are more often clefted than objects and adverbials, irrespective of their function, identification or correction.

## 4. Results: L2 speakers

4.1. French L2 vs Italian L2

The first step of this analysis is to inventory the marked structures used by learners to express narrow focus. As shown in Figure 5, it-cleft sentences are, as with native speakers, by far the most used construction. The chart also indicates a strong similarity in the two groups' situations. It-clefts emerge as the most frequent marked construction among both groups of learners: among Italian L2 speakers, they are used in 25% of the sentences, and among French L2 speakers, 23% (as a whole, cleft sentences amount to 70 in Italian L2, 70 in French L2). The situation thus reflects an intermediate status between the two native groups. Our initial observation from these findings is that, despite its complexity, the formal resemblance between Italian and French clefts facilitates learners' acquisition and use of the structure at a rate similar to – although slightly lower than – native speakers.

Figure 5. Word orders used for narrow focus marking in L2 French and Italian (all target constituents mixed)
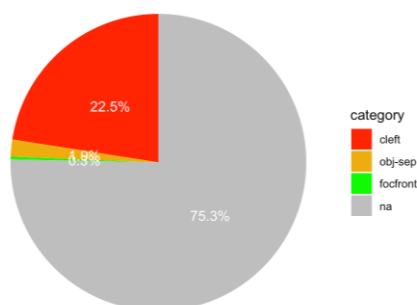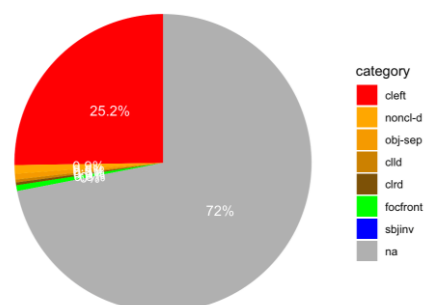
We come now to the analysis of the syntactic and pragmatic parameters that proved to cause asymmetries within and between the two native speakers' groups. Figure 6 shows the frequency of clefts for the different syntactic functions. Similar to the native groups, it-cleft sentences almost exclusively involve target subjects: this constituent type is clefted in 81% of cases in Italian L2, and 75.3% in French L2. Clefts are less common for other syntactic functions, which is expected given the reasons outlined in the introductory sections and observations made among L1 speakers. The more complex syntactic reorganization required for non-subject it-clefts, as described for L1 speakers, may further discourage their use in L2.

Figure 6. It-cleft structures produced by speakers of the L2 groups in narrow-focus context, by syntactic function of focus constituent: subject (sbj), direct object (obj), prepositional object (ind), adverbial (ext)
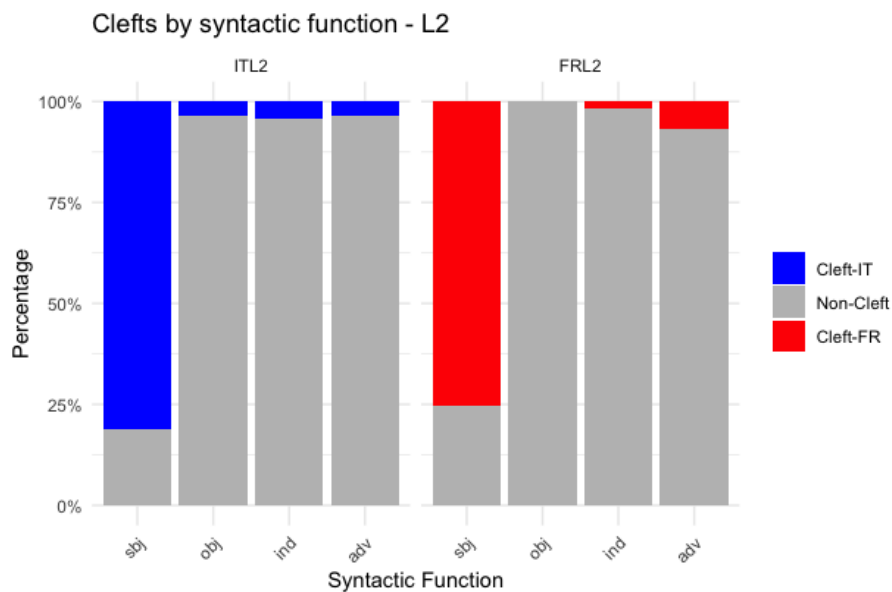
From a qualitative viewpoint, it's also worth noting a phenomenon within the FRL2 learner group: 5% speakers' responses begin with the copula + pivot part of the cleft structure, but are then interrupted and rephrased into unmarked sentences. An example of this is provided in example (8):
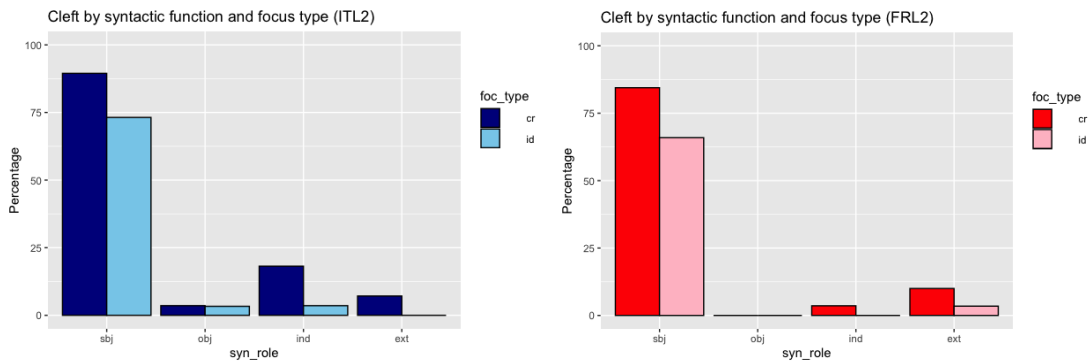
(8)   French
        a. Marie donne le journal au frère de Julie, n'est-ce pas?
           'Marie gives the newspaper to Julie's brother, right?'
        b. Non, ce n'est pas le frère de Julie, c'est le frère de Marie
           // Marie est en train de donner le journal à son frère, pas au frère de Julie.
           'No, it's not Julie's brother, it's Marie's brother
            // Marie is giving the newspaper to her own brother, not to Julie's brother'

These instances suggest that some Italian learners may struggle with the second part of the structure, which includes the relative pronoun and the verbal phrase. Many factors can lead to this result, including the complex internal structure of the NP involved in the cleft. However, the fact that this difficulty is observed almost exclusively in the FRL2 group leads to the hypothesis that the challenge is related to a

specific feature of French that is problematic for Italian learners, rather than a general issue with the syntactic complexity of the clefted constituents. Specifically, the difficulty in choosing between the subject pronoun *qui* and the object pronoun *que* might explain this particular struggle for L2 French learners (see also Helland et al., 2023).

We now move to the observation of it-clefts regarding the distinction between identification and correction focus. Results from the two L2 groups in this respect are shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. It-cleft structures produced by speakers of the L2 groups for different target constituents in the two focus conditions: correction (cr) and identification (id)

As observed in the previous section, French L1 and Italian L1 exhibit substantially different behaviors regarding the distinction between identification and correction. In contrast, L2 groups show a similar pattern: the two focus conditions are distinguishable, but to a much lesser extent than in Italian L1.

For both L2 groups, we fit the same statistical model used for L1 speakers; the results are shown in Tables 7 (L2 French) and 8 (L2 Italian).

Table 7. Regression results for group FRL2

Coefficients	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(>|t|)
foc type	0.03333	0.09148	0.364	0.717
synt function	0.63333	0.09148	6.923	4.64e-09 ***
foc type * synt function	0.16667	0.12937	1.288	0.203

Table 8. Regression results for group ITL2

Coefficients	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(>|t|)
foc type	0.08889	0.10227	0.869	0.388
synt function	0.75556	0.10227	7.388	7.9e-10 ***
foc type * synt function	0.11111	- 0.14463	-0.768	0.446

In both groups, the only significant predictor is the syntactic function of focus constituent, while the variation in focus type does not yield significant changes in

frequency of it-clefts. However, if we compare the two groups, we can see that the *p*-value for the t-test is lower in the FRL2 group, meaning that there still is a stronger tendency among Italian learners to differentiate the two conditions, even if the parameter is not statistically significant[6].

4.2. Considerations on proficiency levels

As anticipated in Section 2.1, before presenting the results concerning the various proficiency levels, we would like to address certain caveats pertaining to statistical analysis. Firstly, due to the small number of participants within the subgroup (only 2) and the high internal variability, we chose to exclude the A level of Italian-speaking learners of French L2. For the other groups, however, the number of observations was relatively small compared to the number of variables. Therefore, unlike the previous analysis, we employed non-parametric chi-square tests instead of mixed models. An overview of the results from this analysis is presented in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Cleft count by focus type and proficiency level for target subject phrases: Italian L2 (left) and French L2 (right)
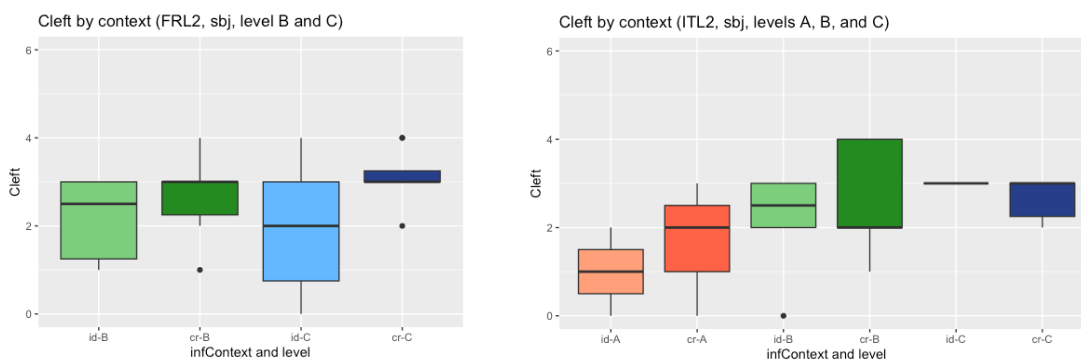
The observation of data from Italian learners of L2 French reveals some distinctions within the proficiency subgroups. As illustrated in the left chart, there exists a slight difference in behavior between the C-level and B-level sub-groups: speakers at the C-level demonstrate a tendency for producing overall more cleft sentences compared to their B-level counterparts, thus suggesting a closer alignment with the target language among more advanced learners. However, the comparison between the B and C groups yields a nonsignificant difference ($p > 0.05$). Furthermore, the examination of cleft use within identification and correction contexts also reveals intriguing findings. While the disparity between identification and correction contexts among B-level speakers fails to reach statistical significance, in fact, C-level speakers exhibit a marginally significant difference between the two focus contexts: this observation suggests a resurgence of functional differentiation, a characteristic feature of Italian, particularly among more advanced learners of French L2.

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[6]   For group FRL2, we fit the same linear model to a database including it-clefts without relative clause. In this case, results are still not statistically significant, but with an even lower *p*-value for the interaction focus type * target constituent (*p*=0.173).

Similar investigations were conducted with French learners of L2 Italian. At the beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels, there is a noticeable increase in the overall frequency of clefts, likely reflecting growing proficiency in using this structure. When comparing the overall frequency of it-clefts across sub-groups, the C-group's behavior most closely resembles that of native Italian speakers, indicating a closer approximation to target behavior among advanced learners. However, analysis of narrow-focus subtypes reveals a different trend: only the A-group shows a clear distinction between identification and correction contexts, while B and C-level speakers do not. Interestingly, C-level Italian L2 speakers exhibit a higher frequency of clefts in identification contexts than in correction contexts. This suggests a potential influence from the source language, as the lack of functional differentiation is a noted trait of French. Advanced learners of Italian L2 appear to be more influenced by their L1, especially in contexts where source language behavior diverges from the target language.

Thus, while the overall frequency of clefts remains largely unaffected by L1 influence, functional differentiation is indeed impacted, with L1 influence becoming more pronounced among advanced learners in divergent contexts.

5. Discussion

The study has confirmed some trends already observed in other studies, particularly the differing frequency of cleft constructions in Italian and French. It has also provided strong confirmation of the asymmetry in usage between the subject role and other syntactic functions. Moreover, the study has allowed to investigate and discuss two possible parameters explaining these differences:

- *Systemic reasons*, arising from the fact that in Italian, but not in French, alternative structures are available and can be used to express narrow focus. However, in the task used here, such alternative structures do not significantly appear in either language: they only sporadically occur in the Italian data, and do not compensate for the reduced frequency of clefts. Therefore, explanations for the differing frequency need to be sought elsewhere. One possible explanation could be the preference among Italian speakers for *in-situ* prosodic marking, which, instead, has been claimed to be impossible for subjects in French due to language-specific phonological constraints (Clech-Darbon et al., 1999). Other studies, including some conducted on the same corpus, have indeed demonstrated that prosodic emphasis on constituents in syntactically unmarked positions can serve as an alternative strategy to it-clefts in Italian, but only for less contrastive functions, such as identification (De Paolis, 2024).

- *Functional reasons* provide instead a clear explanation: in Italian, it-cleft constructions are less frequent, because they serve a more specialized purpose, signaling contrastive narrow focus; in French, on the other hand, they are systematically used for both identification and correction.

Asymmetries observed among L1 speakers are not symmetrically mirrored in L2 data. What we have observed is that, in terms of absolute frequency, the learners' groups position themselves similarly to each other, and intermediate between the

native groups. Quantitatively, we can imagine an acquisitional process of approximation to the respective target language. However, data concerning the correlation of the syntactic and pragmatic parameters with the use of it-clefts allow for a more complete picture.

Let's initially consider asymmetries that consistently occur across all four learner groups, suggesting resistance to change during the acquisition process. Specifically, the distinct use of it-clefts between subject and non-subject elements remains consistent across all four groups. This consistent behavior can be interpreted according to the two main hypotheses proposed in the literature, which are equally plausible for both native speakers and learners, namely the communicative need and the syntactic complexity arguments. As for the first hypothesis, the utterance-initial position of subjects inherently 'contravenes' information-structural principles, such as given-before-new and topic-first-focus-last; as a consequence, the need to signal the focus role of subjects is stronger than the need to mark the focal role of other (postverbal) constituents. As for the second argument, syntactic complexity, it has been observed that subjects are more readily clefted because they occupy a more accessible position in the syntactic hierarchy. In contrast, clefting and dislocating other types of constituents involve more costly operations, and intervention effects.

The asymmetry concerning the communicative function of the it-cleft sentence – identification or correction – is instead unequally observed within the groups. A tendency to favor the use of it-clefts in corrective contexts is observed, and statistically assessed, in Italian native speakers, but not in French native speakers. A slight tendency in the same direction of native Italian is observed in both learners' groups, but it is not statistically significant in either of them. In this, Italian learners of French L2 show a closer approximation to the target (systematic use of clefts for narrow focus on the subject, regardless of function) compared to French learners of Italian L2 (who should differentiate the use of clefts, particularly for corrective focus). We can invoke several reasons to explain this asymmetry in the acquisition path. Primarily, the imposition of additional constraints poses greater difficulty for learners: in this sense, acquisition of the target model is easier for Italian learners of French L2 than for French learners of Italian L2, since the latter have to consider two variation factors, syntactic and pragmatic function. Moreover, to identify this asymmetry, French learners of Italian L2 have to internalize patterns of non-usage of the structure under consideration; noticing the absence of a structure is inherently more challenging than discerning usage patterns, as speakers have to rely on indirect negative evidence (Gass & Mackay, 2002). For instance, the additional parameter governing the avoidance of cleft constructions for identification purposes in Italian L1, as opposed to their use in French, necessitates a heightened level of cognitive awareness and discernment on the part of the learner, as they must actively recognize and assimilate the absence of a linguistic feature for identification focus, rather than its presence.

6. Conclusions and future directions

In conclusion, this study has shed light on the usage patterns and factors influencing the use of it-cleft constructions among native speakers of Italian and French, as well as L2 learners of these languages. Through the analysis of experimental data, we have provided stronger evidence for observed trends, such as the differing frequency of it-clefts between Italian and French, and highlighted asymmetries in usage, particularly

regarding the syntactic function of the clefted constituent. Moreover, the study contributed to the crosslinguistic examination of possible asymmetries in the pragmatic use (identification vs. correction) of cleft sentences.

Learners' data partially confirmed the observed asymmetries, showing that common communicative needs and syntactic constraints are at play in both native speakers and learner varieties. Learners' data also allowed us to observe further factors at play in acquisition processes, such as the asymmetric impact of crosslinguistic differences in terms of frequency and systematicity.

Moving forward, to further enrich our understanding of these phenomena, it would be beneficial to integrate prosodic data in the picture, as further systemic differences and asymmetries in use could arise at this level and contribute to explain the uneven distribution of clefts in different Romance languages. Incorporating prosodic information could also provide insights into how intonation patterns interact with syntactic structures, potentially revealing nuances in pragmatic functions or aiding in the identification of focus.

Additionally, our results concerning a crosslinguistic divergence in the functional value of clefts provide insights that would be worth exploring in wider corpus studies to be confirmed, compensating for the relative lack of variety in answer strategies observed in this experimental setting.

Acknowledgments

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