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Discourse cohesion and Topic discontinuity in native and learner production: Changing Topic Entities on Maintained Predicates

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Discourse cohesion and Topic discontinuity in native and learner production

Changing Topic Entities on Maintained Predicates

Abstract

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

1. Introduction

1.1. Information flow in narratives

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

The *Quaestio* of a narrative text would be:

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

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

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

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

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

Cohesion devices in narratives have been mostly studied in relation to this prototypical information flow, whereby topic continuity can be signaled in the domain of entities or time.

In the following narrative, the time shift is left unmarked (being the default movement concerning the domain of time in narratives), whereas the topic entity continuity is marked with anaphoric pronouns and zero anaphora: the anaphoric pronoun system is indeed a common linguistic means to mark such a referential movement in the domain of entities.

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

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

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

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

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

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

adverbs, connectives and anaphoric predicates to mark the change / maintenance of entities and predicates. Moreover, they also use morpho-syntactic means to change the canonical topic/focus value of information units, thus indirectly signaling the non canonical discourse information flow through a change in the information structure of the utterance. The study seems to confirm Slobin's "thinking for speaking" hypothesis: due to differences in their linguistic repertoires, speakers refer to the same semantic content by adopting the perspective more easily accessible by their language:

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

2. The study: research questions and design

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

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

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

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

education and an age ranging from 20 to 50: in these respects, they are comparable to the native speakers analyzed by Dimroth *et al.* (in press).

Table 1. The learners' groups

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

The video “the Finite Story” (Dimroth 2006) has been used for data collection. Speakers had to retell the video, broken up into 31 short segments, immediately after each segment: this fragmentation produced some redundancy in the retellings, but had also the advantage of enhancing comparability, as it avoided summarizing effects or different event orderings in the retellings.

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

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

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

Configuration I. “Change of entity / same situation”

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

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

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

Configuration II. “Change of entity + opposite situation”

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

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

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

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

Given the preceding hypothesis on adult language acquisition, we expect that L2 advanced learners present target-like grammatical structures, but that their L1 still influences their preferences, both in terms of the information units highlighted and of the linguistic means used. In the next paragraphs, we present the results for the two information configurations that we will further compare and discuss in section 5.

3. Configuration I: change of entity + same situation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- (12) GE: Auch Herr Rot ist vom Fenster gesprungen
Also Mr.Red did jump out of the window
- (13) GE: Herr Rot ist AUCH vom Fenster gesprungen
Mr.Red did ALSO jump out of the window

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

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

- (14) FR : M. Rouge aussi s'est couché
Mr.Red too has gone to bed
- (15) FR : M. Rouge s'est couché aussi
Mr.Red has gone to bed as well
- (16) FR : M. Rouge est aussi allé se coucher
Mr.Red has also gone to bed

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

- (17) FR : M. Rouge est allé lui aussi se coucher / M. Rouge est allé se coucher lui aussi
Mr. Red went him too to bed / Mr.Red went to bed him too
- (18) IT: Il sig. Rossi anche lui è andato a dormire / Il sig. Rossi è andato a dormire anche lui
Mr.Red also him went to bed / Mr.Red went to bed also him

Dimroth *et al.* (in press) provisionally consider all these cases as having scope over the entity. 3. Further linking devices are occasionally adopted, such as the explicit mention of the current topic situation (see Klein, 2008), which is contrasted with the previous one:

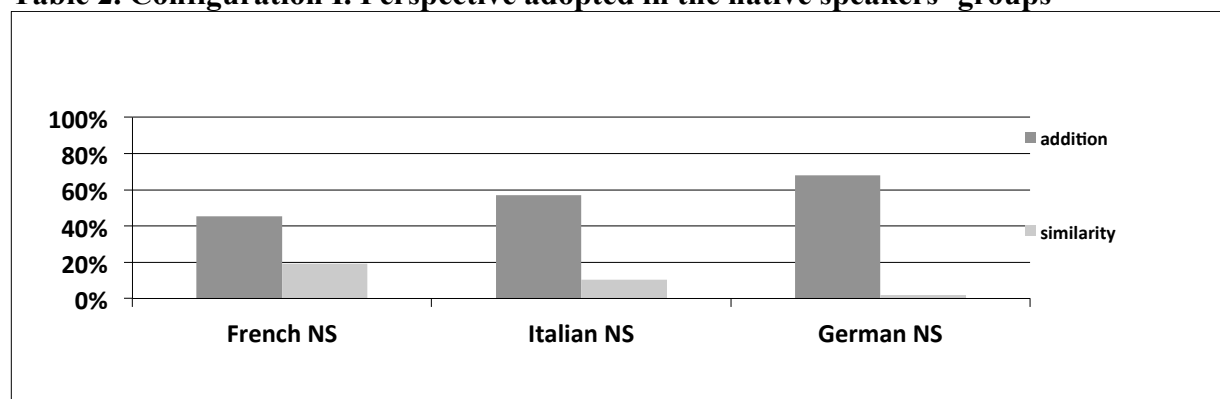
- (19) FR: Là c'est M.Rouge qui a l'air de se coucher
Here/now is Mr.Red who seems to go to sleep

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

3.1. Native speakers' preferences

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

Table 2. Configuration I. Perspective adopted in the native speakers' groups



Clear differences emerge between the two Romance languages and German in the perspective taken. German speakers only rely on the additive perspective and only rarely adopt the similarity perspective. Addition is the most frequent perspective in Romance speakers too, but both French and Italian speakers also apply the similarity perspective. French speakers in particular choose to highlight the similarity of the predicate to a greater extent (30% of the marked contexts in French and 16% in Italian)ⁱ.

Other differences concern the means used to express addition. In particular, German speakers use the additive particle *auch* mostly in postfinite position (65%), whereas the prenominal position is less frequent (35%): this means that German speakers mostly mark addition within the polarity domain. In Italian it is not the case: the additive particle *anche* always precedes the NP or the anaphoric pronoun referring to the entity, so that addition clearly operates in the domain of entities. French speakers do not show a clear orientation in this respect: all the possible positions of the additive particle *aussi* are attested but also a variety of alternative means is found, such as the adverbials *également* and *à son tour*.

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

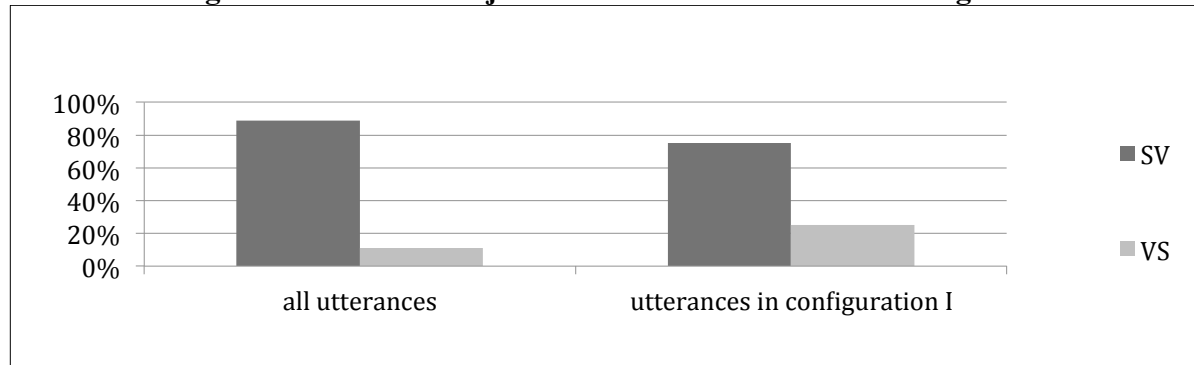
(20) IT: Si lancia anche il signor Verdi
Jumps also Mr.Green

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

With inversion, the entity in subject position shifts to focus position. The subject postposition highlights the fact that, contrary to prototypical cases, the subject, and not the predicate, contains newer, less accessible informationⁱⁱ.

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

Table 3. Configuration I. Verb-subject inversion in Italian L1 retellings



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

3.2. L2 Italian

In this section we compare the results of Italian native speakers with the two groups of Italian L2 learners (L1 German and L1 French). Two main reasons lead us to choose Italian over French as the target language for this configuration. As we have seen in the preceding section, Italian native speakers use a restricted set of options in comparison to French native speakers, especially when the additive perspective is concerned; they draw a clearer picture against which we can compare learners' results. Moreover, Italian native speakers, unlike French speakers, also resort to a syntactic marking of the configuration, i.e. VS order. Analysis of Italian as a target language will allow us to observe how learners make use of both syntactic and lexical (particles and anaphoric predicates) devices to realize text cohesion in this configuration.

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

Besides that, both groups of learners also have to learn the syntactic marking of the configuration through VS order.

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

Table 4. Configuration I. Perspective adopted by German learners of Italian

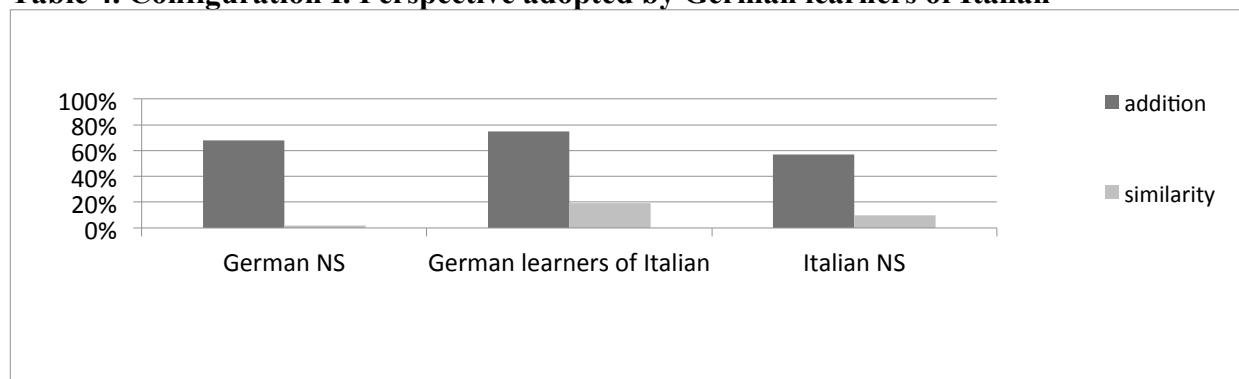
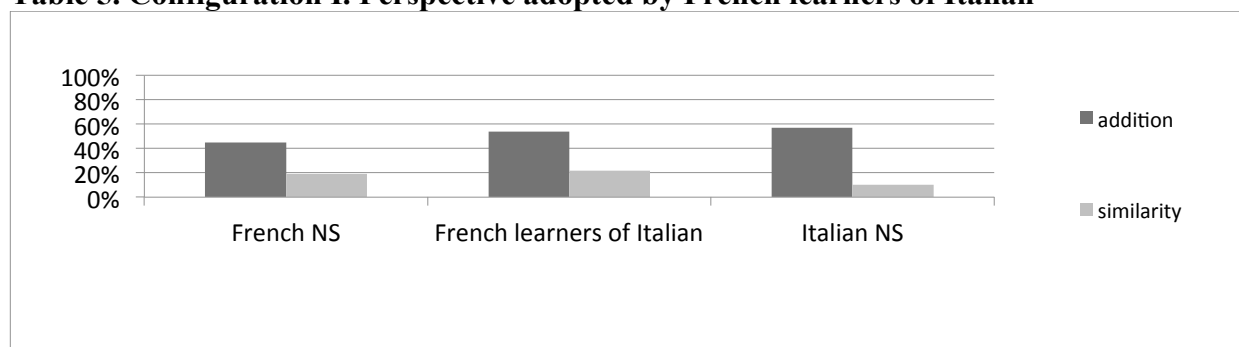


Table 5. Configuration I. Perspective adopted by French learners of Italian



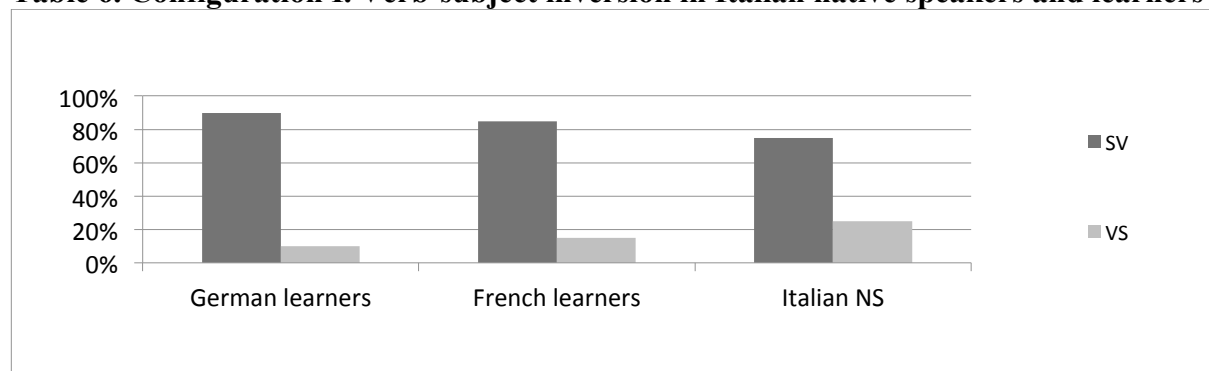
Both groups of learners show a shift from source language preferences towards target language preferences. But the source language influence can still be perceived: German learners still adopt the additive perspective in most contexts (91% of the marked contexts), and the identity perspective is mainly used as an additional marking, together with the additive particle^v; French learners adopt the additive perspective to a much lower extent (70% of the marked contexts) and the similarity to a much higher extent (33% of the marked contexts) than both Italian native speakers and German learners^{vi}. To sum up, both groups of learners show the influence of their source language in that, with respect to Italian native speakers, German learners are still more “addition oriented” and French learners still more “similarity oriented”.

As for the linguistic means used, both groups of learners only show target-like structures: structures used in the source language but not allowed in the target language are discarded, as is the case for the post-finite and the utterance final position of the additive particle. Their choices among alternative structures show some more differences. In the additive perspective, German learners always use the particle *anche* in the prenominal position, whereas French learners use it in different positions: prenominal, postnominal (*lui anche non è d'accordo*, ‘he also does not agree’) and with an anaphoric pronoun (*il signor verde anche lui è andato a dormire*, ‘Mr.Green also him went to bed’). Moreover, only French learners also use other means to mark addition, such as the adverbial *a sua volta* (*in turn*), which is attested in source language (*à son tour*) but never so in the target language. Concerning the similarity

perspective, German learners mostly use the verbal periphrasis *fare lo stesso / la stessa cosa* ‘(do) the same’, whereas French learners use a variety of means: verbal periphrasis, adverbials (*in modo molto simile*, ‘in the very same way’); nominal periphrasis with anaphoric adjectives of similarity (*identica risposta per...*, ‘same answer for...’; *stesso tentativo da parte di...*, ‘same attempt on behalf on...’). Once again, learners seem to prefer the linguistic means typical of their L1: the prenominal additive particle for German learners as compared to the different positions found in French learners; the very poor variety of linguistic means to mark the similarity in German learners as compared to the very rich marking, even richer than in native speakers, attested in French learners.

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

Table 6. Configuration I. Verb-subject inversion in Italian native speakers and learners



Globally, both groups of learners use the VS order, but to a lesser extent than native speakers (16% of marked contexts for German and 15% for French compared to 25% for Italian NS)^{vii}. Moreover, some qualitative differences arise, as learners only use it with the additive particle and with pronominal subjects:

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

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

Only one German speaker adopt the VS order also with a nominal subject, as attested in Italian native speakers:

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

We can now draw some conclusions along the following lines. Both learners groups only use target-like structures, both at lexical and at syntactic level. However, they still differ from native speakers in the preferred perspectives in discourse organization and in the linguistic means to mark them: in these respects, they are mid-way from their source language and target language preferences. The source languages seem to have a greater influence on French learners than on German learners, both in the perspective adopted (similarity over addition)

and in the linguistic means used (alternative positions of the additive particle; variety of means to mark addition and similarity). This could be due to the relative proximity between the source and the target languages. French learners possibly expect that French and Italian do not differ in their linguistic means; this expectation is reinforced by the availability in the target language of the same linguistic means used in the native language: therefore, when speaking the target language, they can simply stick to their source language strategies. On the other hand, faced with unavailable resources in the TL to express their L1 preferred preferred strategy (the postverbal additive particle), they tend to pay more attention to the structures typical in the target language. Exposure to Italian input has different effects on the two learners groups. The absence of post-verbal additive particles provides German learners with the negative evidence required to dismiss this structure; they also receive positive evidence of the use of the similarity perspective in Italian. French learners also, when faced with some clear negative evidence (unavailability of utterance final additive particles), dismiss the structure. But, in most cases, French learners do not receive neither positive nor negative clear-cut evidence, as almost the same strategies are available in French and Italian, and only frequency of use differentiate their productions. Overuse and underuse of target-like structures due to L1 influence can be difficult to overcome, as the cognitive task for learners consists in perceiving the relative weight of different structures in target language discourse organization.

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

4. Configuration II: change of entity + opposite situation

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

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

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

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

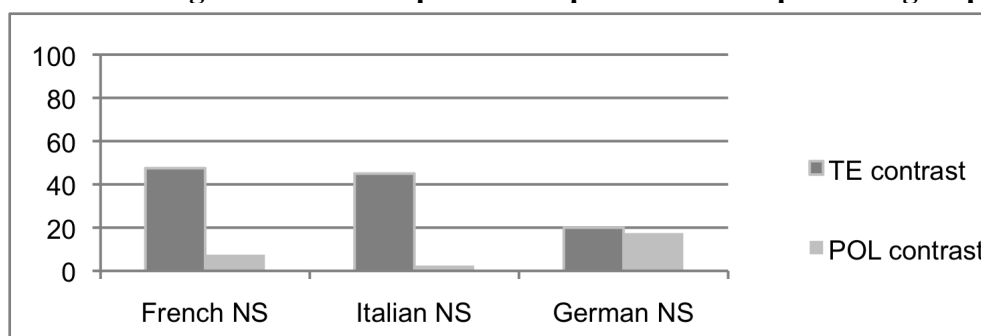
2. The other option is to highlight the change of polarity, as in English *Mr Blue DOES jump*, but significant differences apply crosslinguistically for the expression of this relation. First, Germanic languages have specific particles to do so, like German *doch* (and Dutch *toch/well*), whereas Romance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

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

4.1. Native speakers' preferences

To study this information configuration Dimroth *et al.* (in press) analyze native speakers' production (20 speakers for each language) in scene 9 and 26, i.e. 40 contexts for each language. A comparable number of marked utterances are attested in each of them, but there are significant differences as for the linguistic means used and the perspective adopted. Table 7 reports the relevant results for French, Italian and German^{viii}: once again, bars indicate the percentage of utterances marked for a specific relation out of the overall possible contexts.

Table 7. Configuration II. Perspective adopted in native speakers' groups



Clear differences appear between Romance and Germanic languages as for the choice of the information unit selected to highlight a contrast. Speakers of Romance languages mainly signal a contrast in the domain of topic entities, the polarity contrast being a marginal option, whereas both options are equally used by German speakers^{ix}.

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

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

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

(26) FR: en revanche Monsieur Bleu a bien voulu sauter

on the other hand Mr.Blue did PART want to jump

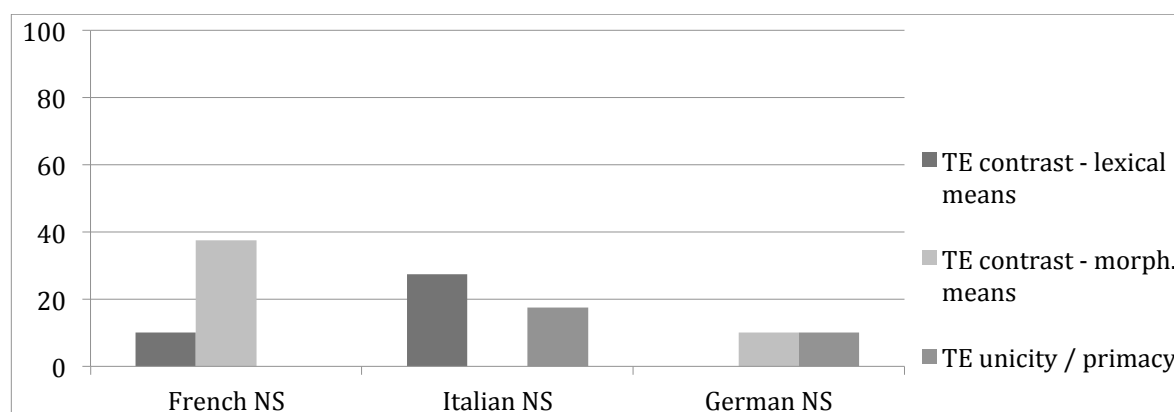
Let's turn to the expression of Topic Entity contrast in the three languages. A closer look at the means used reveals subtle differences even between the two Romance languages.

To capture the crosslinguistic differences we distinguished the following categories:

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

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

Table 8. Configuration II. Topic Entity contrast: native speakers' groups (+unmarked)



In French, this relation is mainly expressed by morphological means (78% of marked utterances), in particular by using the contrastive pronoun *lui* as in (27).

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

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

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

(28) IT: Il signor Blu invece si sveglia

Mr. Blue instead wakes up

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

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

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

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

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

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

(31) GE: Nur herr Blau wird wach
 Only Mr Blue wakes up

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

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

(33) GE: und DER springt runter
 and HE jumps down

(34) GE: DIEser überlegt nicht lange...lässt sich fallen...
 THIS ONE does not reflect for a longtime... lets himself fall...

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

4.2. L2 French

In this section we focus on the relation of Topic entity contrast and compare the results obtained in the French native speakers' group with the two groups of French L2 learners (L1 Italian and L1 German). The choice of French as a target language for this relation is motivated by the following reasons.

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

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

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

Table 9. Configuration II. Perspective taken by German learners of French

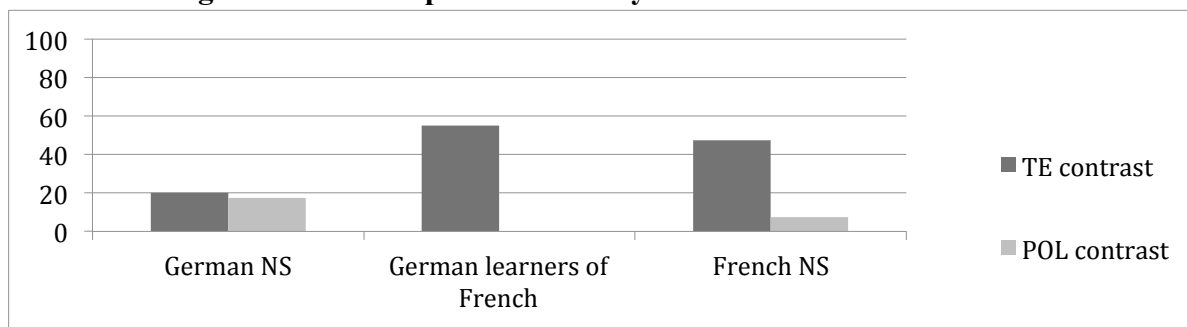
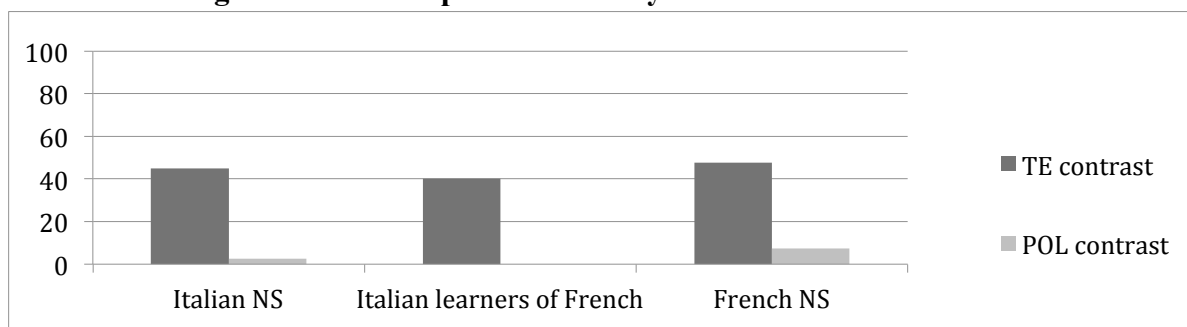


Table 10. Configuration II. Perspective taken by Italian learners of French

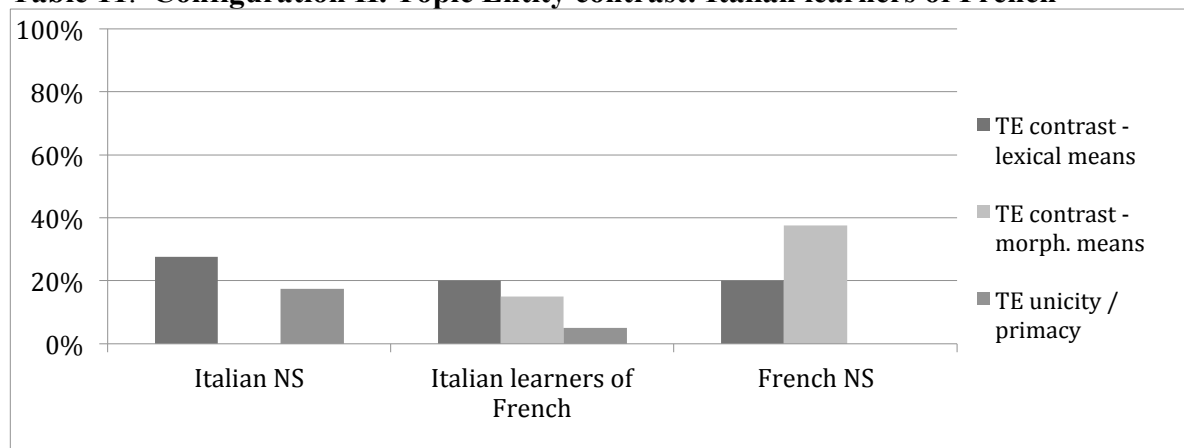


As shown by the figure, despite the different preferences attested in their L1, no clear marking of polarity has been remarked in both learners' groups: German learners seem to have successfully adopted the topic entity contrast perspective, which is even slightly more marked

than in the Italian group. A *caveat* should however be made on these results, given the small size of the population analyzed. In fact we noticed that, throughout her the retelling, one German subject sporadically uses *enfin* in several contexts corresponding to those where the polarity contrast is typically expressed in German. These markings have not been counted here because of their temporal nature and marginal number, but represent a further domain of research to be tested with larger populations representing different stages: attempts to express the polarity contrast could be typical of German learners of an intermediate level.

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

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



The above graph shows that, in order to contrast the topic entity Mr Blue with the previously mentioned ones, Italian learners of French L2 seem to prefer lexical means: they correspond to the marker of opposition *par contre* (ex. 35), which is preposed or postposed to the corresponding entity.

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

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

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

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

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

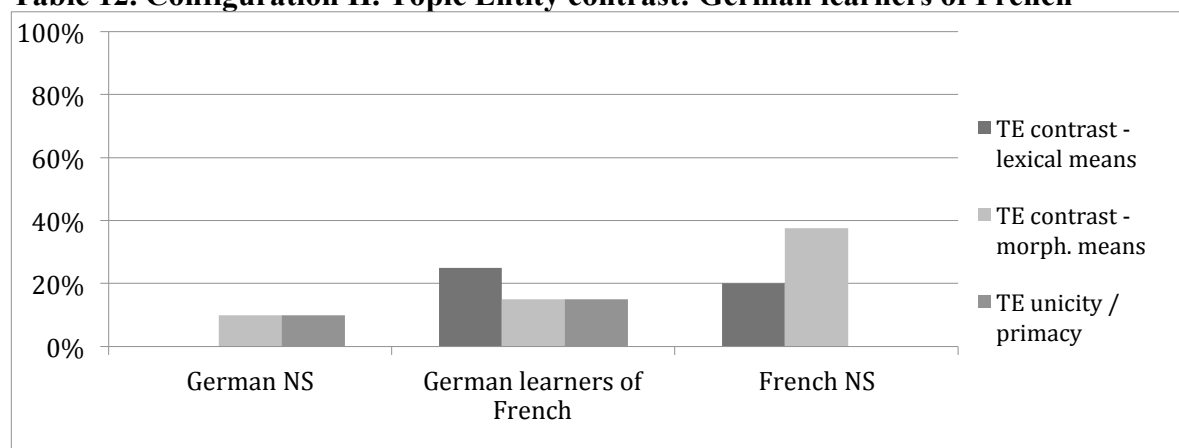
(37) IT: Monsieur Bleu lui se lance par la fenêtre
Mr Blue him (strong pro) jumps out of the window

(38) IT: ils essaient avec Monsieur Bleu qui lui par contre se décide à sauter

they try with Mr Blue who him (strong pro) instead decides to jump

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

Table 12. Configuration II. Topic Entity contrast: German learners of French



In order to mark a contrast on the topic entity, German learners also produce a majority of lexical markers of opposition (once again *par contre* in all occurrences), even if these are not the most current in German L1 and therefore cannot be attributed to a direct L1 influence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If the above graphs (table 11 and 12), taken separately, seem to indicate that the strategies used in French L2 are in the midway between the preferences of both the target and source language speakers', their comparison also reveals a similar pattern for both groups of learners: despite their different L1, in both cases only a subset of learners succeeds in using the typical target language means, strong pronouns with a contrastive function, while the preferred ones are of lexical nature. Several reasons can be invoked to explain this tendency. In general, lexical items are considered to be perceptually more salient in comparison to morphological ones: therefore, even if widely present in the input, they could be more difficult to perceive for the learner. In addition, it is also possible that the contrastive function of *lui* is more difficult to notice as the same form serves many functions, for example to code an indirect object. Finally, lexical markers of opposition present the advantage of a greater flexibility - they can be used to express a contrast in different semantic domains and are therefore more useful for communicative purposes - whereas the use of contrastive pronouns is restricted to the contrast of entities. Anyway, the use of both kinds of means is attested with similar proportions in the two groups of learners.

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

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

The rarity of polarity marking in the target language must have facilitated German learners to shift from this kind of contrast marking, strongly present in their L1, to the target language perspective focusing on the Topic Entity, even if they do not use the typical target language means. A remnant trace of L1 influence in both groups of learners is however still detectable on the application of the uniqueness perspective. Note that the expression of this relation is perfectly possible and correct in the target language, although not current in the native speakers' group for this informational context.

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

5. Concluding remarks

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

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

5.1. TL utterance grammar vs. non TL discourse organization?

The analysis of (very) advanced L2 learners confirms the presence of a stage where learners have acquired the regularities of the target language system at utterance level, but do not yet fully master its specific discourse organization (cf. Bartning 1997, Perdue 1993), as they are

still partly applying the discourse perspective preferred in their L1 (cf. Ahrenholz 2005; Bohnacker & Rosén 2008, Carroll & von Stutterheim 1997; Lambert, Carroll & von Stutterheim 2008, von Stutterheim, Nüse & Serra 2002).

These results underline the methodological necessity to distinguish the acquisition of the target language specifics at sentence level vs. at discourse level.

For both configurations, all cohesive means adopted do not deviate from the target language sentence grammar. Traces of the relative L1 influence are however detectable in terms of preference for the additive vs. similarity strategy, in the context of Topic Entity addition, and expression of the entity unicity/primacy, in the context of Topic Entity contrast.

We underline however that in our data the L1 perspective is still only “partly” applied, because there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the proportions and means for a given relation attested in L2 production with respect to the ones produced by native speakers of their L1. Learners seem sometimes to be halfway between the two languages, not in the sense that they use some mixed structure but in that they hesitate between the expression of the relation typically encoded in the target language and the one typically expressed in their source language (if its expression is allowed in both). Overuse and underuse of structures are often observed as typical effects of crosslinguistic influence (see references in Ellis 1995, chap.8; Gass & Selinker 2008, chap.5): given the optionality of such markings, the learners’ task is particularly difficult in this respect, as no clear-cut positive or negative evidence but only frequency can be used as an evidence in the input of the target language preferences.

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

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

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

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

native speakers respond to the discourse requirements and can come therefore to a more native-like performance.

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

5.3. Learner-specific tendencies in L2 acquisition

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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