

Subjects in Italian: Distribution and Interpretation

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0. Introduction

In this paper I will be concerned with the possible connection between the syntactic distribution and interpretive properties of subjects in Italian.¹ In section 1 I will argue against the generally adopted view that Italian has free inversion and, contrary to Belletti (1988), I will show that the constraint on subject inversion cannot be reduced to a definiteness effect. The data I present in section 2 and discuss in section 3 reveal the important role played by a locative argument in these constructions. In section 4 I will analyze subjects in terms of their interpretive properties and in section 5 I will show how semantic/informational conditions interact with syntactic wellformedness constraints, with the ultimate goal of reducing the process of inversion to an artifact.²

1. Free Inversion

Belletti (1988) claims that there are two possible positions for inverted subjects in Italian. The first one is the position adjoined to the right of VP, as assumed in traditional analyses such as in Rizzi (1982) and in Burzio (1986). The subject adjoined to VP is licensed either by Case transmission by the preverbal *pro* (Rizzi's analysis) or by direct government by Infl (Belletti's proposal). The second position, the one argued for by Belletti, is the object position, where subjects of unaccusative and passive verbs are generated. Subjects are licensed in this position by the partitive Case assigned by the unaccusative verb. Belletti claims that partitive Case imposes a semantic condition on the selection of the NP it licenses: the NP must be indefinite. This constraint on postverbal subjects, which I will call the Indefiniteness Requirement (henceforth, IR), is particularly clear in, among others, *there*-constructions in English and *il-y-a*-constructions in

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² In my approach postverbal subjects occupy the position in which they are base-generated and are not the result of movement to the right. However, I will use the terms 'inversion' and 'inverted' throughout this article for ease of exposition.

French, which do not allow a definite NP in postverbal position. Belletti shows that this constraint also holds in Italian. Consider (1):

- (1) a è entrato un uomo dalla finestra
 is entered a man from the window
 b *è entrato l'uomo dalla finestra
 is entered the man from the window

The unaccusative verbs in (1) optionally select a PP-complement which is projected inside the VP. This makes it possible to check the subject's behaviour in base position. (2) shows a schematic representation of the examples in (1):

- (2) [_{VP} Spec [_V V subject PP]]

The IR accounts for the ungrammaticality of (1b). The subject remains in object position and is assigned partitive Case. However, the semantics of this Case is not compatible with the definite nature of the postverbal subject, hence the sentence is ruled out.

These data illustrate the restrictive role played by the IR with respect to subject inversion in Italian. Note, however, that this approach still predicts that inversion remains an operation which can apply almost freely in Italian. In fact, there is no restriction in using the VP-adjoined position for definite NPs. In what follows I will show that there is empirical evidence against this conclusion. The asymmetries in the distribution of postverbal subjects cannot be explained with Belletti's partitive Case analysis. However, her basic insight that there is also an interpretive factor at stake will be retained and further developed.

2. *Locatives in Inversion Contexts*

Let us briefly go back to the examples in (1). Belletti states that the PP *dalla finestra* 'through the window' is selected by the verb *entrare* 'enter'. It seems to me that an *into*-PP would be the most natural complement selected by the verb *entrare*. Consider the revised examples in (3):

- (3) a *è entrato un uomo nel negozio
 is entered a man into the shop
 b *è entrato l'uomo nel negozio
 is entered the man into the shop

In both sentences the subject is in its base position and, according to Belletti, it receives partitive Case. (3b) could be ruled out by the IR, as a definite NP in the object position of an unaccusative is not compatible with the semantics of the Case it receives. However, in (3a) the IR does not seem to play any role. Then,

what is the reason for the ungrammaticality of this sentence? Before suggesting a possible answer to this problem, I want to present some interesting and unexpected data on inversion. Compare the examples in (3) with the following sentences which show an unaccusative verb with postverbal subject but no PP-complement:

- (4) a è arrivato un uomo
is arrived a man
b è arrivato il postino
is arrived the postman

What seems to distinguish (3) from (4) is the presence of the locative PP. Remember that this PP is a complement selected by the verb. The fact that a locative complement might play a special role in inversion was first pointed out by Benincà (1988). The crucial data she gives are summarized in (5):

- (5) a Gigi è arrivato
Gigi is arrived
b è arrivato Gigi
is arrived Gigi
c Gigi ha telefonato
Gigi has called
d ha telefonato Gigi
has called Gigi

Unexpectedly, the meaning of the sentence changes depending on whether the subject is in pre- or postverbal position. (5a) means that Gigi arrived somewhere, without specifying the place of the arrival. (5b), however, can only have the meaning that Gigi arrived at our place. The same happens with the pair (5c) and (5d). Whereas (5c) has the ambiguous meaning that Gigi called somewhere or that he made some telephone calls, (5d) can only mean that he called us, at our place.

The data in (5) suggest that postverbal subject constructions in fact select a covert locative with a deictic interpretation. On the basis of these facts, Benincà proposes the following generalization: subject inversion is allowed only with verbs that can select an implicit deictic locative. Note also that what seems to distinguish the constructions we saw above in (3) and (4) is the presence of an overt and a covert locative respectively. I will return to this observation below.

The examples in (5) are instances of unaccusative and unergative verbs. Whereas the class of unaccusative verbs is quite homogeneous with respect to inversion, unergative verbs allow inversion under more restricted conditions. Selection of an implicit deictic locative is one of these conditions. For ease of exposition, I will call the group of unergatives that pattern in this way, the *telefonare*-type verbs. Below we will see that unergatives also have another

strategy in order to allow inversion. Transitive verbs, however, do not seem to have any subject inversion at all in similar contexts.

Transitive and unergative verbs other than the *telefonare*-type show a different pattern. Compare the examples in (5) with those in (6):

- (6) a il gatto ha rubato la bistecca
the cat has stolen the steak
b *ha rubato la bistecca il gatto/un gatto
has stolen the steak the cat/a cat
c Gigi ha riso
Gigi has laughed
d *ha riso Gigi/un bambino
has laughed Gigi/a child

(6b) and (6d) are ungrammatical with inverted subjects. The definite or indefinite nature of the postverbal subject does not seem to affect the grammaticality of the sentence. Note that Belletti's approach does not account for these data. In order to explain (6b), Belletti has to assume an additional condition on Case assignment, adjacency. Accordingly, (6b) is ruled out because the subject, not being adjacent to the verb, cannot get nominative Case. This, however, cannot account for the ungrammaticality of (6d), where the subject in VP-adjoined position is adjacent to the verb. On the contrary, Benincà's generalization on the implicit locative can account for these facts. The verb *ridere* 'laugh' and the verb *rubare* 'steal' do not select (due to their intrinsic meaning) a locative argument, so inversion is not allowed. Before trying to formalize this generalization, let us look at some more interesting data on locative arguments in inversion contexts.

There is a group of unergative verbs that quite naturally select a locative complement. These are verbs such as *lavorare* 'work', *abitare/vivere* 'live', *giocare* 'play', etc. Surprisingly, these verbs allow subject inversion. Consider (7):

- (7) a *hanno lavorato molte donne straniere/Rita e Anna
have worked many foreign women/R. and A.
b in questo albergo hanno lavorato molte donne straniere/Rita e Anna
in this hotel have worked many foreign women/R. and A.
c *ha vissuto un poeta/Leopardi
has lived a poet/L.
d in questa casa ha vissuto un poeta/Leopardi
in this house has lived a poet/L.

The grammaticality of the examples in (7) appears to depend on the presence of an overt locative in preverbal position. (7) also shows that the indefinite nature of the subject does not seem to play any role here. There are, however, certain requirements which apply to the selected locative. The first condition is that the

locative must be overt. Contrary to the unaccusative verbs in (5b) and (5d), this group of unergatives cannot select an implicit locative (cf. 7a,c). These sentences cannot be rescued by a deictic meaning of an implicit locative.

The second condition is that the locative must be referential and, apparently, have a deictic meaning.

- (8) a *in albergo hanno lavorato molte donne straniere
in hotel have worked many foreign women
b *in casa ha vissuto Giacomo Leopardi
in home lived G.L.

In (8) the locatives *in albergo* 'in/at hotel' and *in casa* 'in/at home' are not referential and can be interpreted as part of the respective predicates.

A third condition is that in subject inversion contexts the locative must occupy the preverbal position. Consider the examples in (9):

- (9) a *hanno lavorato molte donne straniere in questo albergo
worked many foreign women in this hotel
b *ha vissuto Giacomo Leopardi in questa casa
lived Giacomo Leopardi in this house

A quite plausible assumption is that not only overt but also covert locative arguments occupy the preverbal position in inverted contexts.³

Summarizing, the observations made so far point to a first descriptive conclusion. The contexts that allow subject inversion invariably show the presence of an overt or covert locative complement. In the next section I will try to translate this conclusion into more formal terms.

3. *The Role of the Locative in Syntax*

In previous work (Delfitto and Pinto, 1992) I explored the hypothesis that lack of Case could be the constraining factor for subject inversion. Under a very restrictive version of Case theory, where Spec-Head agreement is the only configuration for Case licensing, I proposed that the ungrammatical cases of subject inversion (those with transitive verbs and with many unergatives) are due to the impossibility of assigning Case to the inverted subject. Conversely, unaccusative verbs and the *telefonare*-type verbs do have inversion, as these constructions can be reanaly-

³ These facts can account for the ungrammaticality of (3). In (3) the locative argument appears to be realized twice. First in preverbal position, as implicit argument of the unaccusative verb. Then as overt PP in sentence final position. If both are interpreted as truly arguments of the verb, they would result in a violation of the Theta Criterion.

zed as verbs which select a small clause as their complement (see Moro 1989; Hoekstra and Mulder 1990), as is shown in (10) with an empty PP predicate:

- (10) V NP (PP) → reanalysis → V [_{sc} NP pro]

The postverbal subject is the subject of the small clause and the implicit PP argument, *pro*, is the predicate. The locative moves to Spec,IP, leaving behind a trace. Via this chain-relation Case is transmitted to the postverbal subject. This is shown in the structure in (11):

- (11) pro_i V [_{sc} NP t_i]

This approach gives a satisfactory account of the distributional asymmetries of inverted subjects and appears to fit into the more restrictive framework of the minimalist program. However, contrary to one of the most important requirements of minimalism, this system allows optionality. Consider the examples in (12):

- (12) a il postino è arrivato
the postman is arrived
b è arrivato il postino
is arrived the postman here
c due donne Italiane hanno lavorato in questo albergo
two women Italian have worked in this hotel
d in questo albergo hanno lavorato due donne Italiane
in this hotel have worked two women Italian

The generalization I proposed above can account for the grammaticality of these sentences but cannot explain why in (12) both the subject and the (covert or overt) locative can satisfy the Case checking requirement by moving to the preverbal position. What should be the reason for the locative in (12b) and in (12d) to move to a higher position? An analysis of subject inversion in exclusively syntactic terms does not seem to be able to give a satisfactory answer to this question. It seems reasonable to assume that (12a) and (12c) and their inverted counterparts differ at the interpretive interface.

4. Interpretive Data

In this section I will explore some interpretive properties of inversion constructions. Consider the examples with an unaccusative verb in (13):

- (13) a *tre invitati sono arrivati*
 three guests are arrived
 b *sono arrivati tre invitati*
 are arrived three guests

Quite unexpectedly, the subject in (13a) has a different interpretation than the subject in (13b). In (13a) the preverbal subject *tre invitati* 'three guests' has a strong interpretation. A set of guests has already been introduced into the discourse and (13a) says that three elements of this set arrived. The subject in (13b) has a weak/existential reading. (13b) means that some persons arrived and that these persons are three guests. Nothing is known about the guests, they are introduced into the discourse for the first time.

In (13) and in some examples below I deliberately use a certain class of determiners. Indefinite determiners such as cardinals, *many*, *some*, etc. are ambiguous and according to the context in which they appear they trigger either the strong or the weak reading. The presence of these determiners helps to detect the relevant reading selected by a given configuration.

The examples in (13) show that unaccusative verbs have a very clear pattern with respect to the interpretation of indefinite subjects. The preverbal position is associated with the strong interpretation whereas the postverbal position is associated with the weak/existential interpretation. The next step is to look at how these differences in subject interpretation pattern with the other verb classes.

As was shown above, there are two groups of unergatives that do allow subject inversion. Let us first look at the *telefonare*-type verbs in (14):

- (14) a *alcuni invitati hanno telefonato*
 some (of the) guests have called
 b *hanno telefonato alcuni invitati*
 have called some guests here

The pattern found in (13) also holds for these verbs. The preverbal subject in (14a) has a strong reading whereas the postverbal subject in (14b) can only receive the weak interpretation. Let us now consider the unergative verbs which show an overt locative in preverbal position. Recall that these constructions allow subject inversion. Consider (15):

- (15) a *in questo albergo hanno lavorato molte donne straniere*
 in this hotel have worked many foreign women
 b *molte donne straniere hanno lavorato in questo albergo*
 many foreign women have worked in this hotel

According to the pattern detected in (14) and in (13), we expect that the postverbal subject in (15a) has a weak interpretation. The expectation turns out to be

true. *Molte donne straniere* 'many foreign women' has an existential interpretation in (15a). With respect to the preverbal position, these verbs pattern like the unaccusatives and the *telefonare*-type verbs. The preverbal subject in (15b) has the strong interpretation.

At this point a first descriptive generalization is possible. Verbs that allow inversion show the following interpretive pattern with respect to indefinite subjects: in preverbal position they have the strong reading, in postverbal position they have the weak reading. The next question is: What are the interpretive properties of indefinite subjects of verbs without inversion? The examples given in (6) showed that transitive verbs and unergative verbs without a locative argument do not allow subject inversion. Let us consider some more constructions with these verbs:

- (16) a alcuni gatti hanno rubato le bistecche
 some cats have stolen the steaks
 b molti bambini hanno riso
 many children have laughed

Given the lack of the postverbal subject configuration, we expect that these constructions pattern differently from the verbs we saw above. In fact it turns out that the indefinite preverbal *alcuni gatti* 'some cats' and *molti bambini* 'many children' have an ambiguous interpretation. The strong reading seems to be the more natural, but in appropriate contexts the weak reading also emerges, cf. (17).

- (17) molti turisti hanno scelto di passare le vacanze in Italia
 many tourists chose to spend their holidays in Italy

Summing up the interpretive data so far, with inversion verbs the postverbal position is associated with the weak reading, the preverbal position is associated with the strong reading. With verbs that do not allow inversion the preverbal subject has both the strong and the weak reading. This is summarized in Table 1:

Table 1

	PREVERBAL	POSTVERBAL
TRANSITIVES (-loc.)	weak/strong	-
UNERGATIVES (-loc.)	weak/strong	-
UNERGATIVES (+loc.)	strong	weak
UNACCUSATIVES	strong	weak

The data discussed above show that the optionality detected in syntax corresponds to two different interpretations of the sentence at the semantic level. The generalization is that verbs that allow inversion make use of the two positions for the subject in order to eliminate the ambiguous interpretation. Following Reinhart (1993), I will assume that optionally derived differences in word order should be justified in terms of interpretive differences at LF.

5. *Definite Subjects*

Table 1 represents the interpretive differences of indefinite subjects in Italian. Definite subjects show the same syntactic distribution as indefinite ones. With transitive and unergative verbs they appear only in preverbal position. With unaccusatives and with unergatives that select a locative, they can also appear in postverbal position.

The strong/weak distinction of Table 1 cannot be applied to definite subjects as definite NPs or proper names are incompatible with an existential reading.

There is, however, a subtle interpretive difference between the preverbal and the postverbal definite subject of an inversion verb. Consider (18):

- (18) a *il postino* E' ARRIVATO
 the postman ARRIVED
 b *è arrivato* IL POSTINO
 THE POSTMAN arrived

The elements in upper case are focused. The interpretation of (18a) is that *il postino* 'the postman' is old information whereas the predicate *è arrivato* 'arrived' is new information. (18b) is exactly the reverse, the predicate is known and the subject is new. The generalization that seems to emerge from these facts is that definite subjects in postverbal position are interpreted as new information (informational focus), definite subjects in preverbal position are interpreted as old information (presupposition) (cf. also Cinque 1993). Table 2 summarizes the distribution and interpretation of definite subjects.⁴

⁴ I use the term 'informational focus' in order to distinguish it from 'contrastive focus', which, in my view, is a different phenomenon (cf. Calabrese 1992). I will not deal with the latter here.

Table 2

	PREVERBAL	POSTVERBAL
TRANSITIVES (-loc)	old/new	-
UNERGATIVES (-loc)	old/new	-
UNERGATIVES (+loc)	old	new
UNACCUSATIVES	old	new

At first sight, Tables 1 and 2 cannot be reduced to a unique generalization on the distribution and interpretation of (definite and indefinite) subjects in Italian. Table 1 makes a distinction with respect to the semantic property of strong versus weak. Table 2 makes a distinction with respect to an informational property, i.e. old vs. new. Consider, however, the examples in (19). These sentences do not seem to fit into the patterns proposed above.

- (19) a ??un uomo è arrivato
 a man is arrived
 b ??è arrivato l'uomo
 is arrived the man

Given Tables 1 and 2, the ungrammaticality of the sentences in (19) is unexpected. A careful analysis of the interpretive properties of these two sentences can provide the key of the problem. The ungrammaticality of (19) does not depend on the nature of the verb but on the nature of the subject NP. If we compare (19a) to (13a) and (19b) to (4b), it turns out that the relevant property is not definiteness but the presence or absence of certain information in the communicative event.

Calabrese (1991) (and other references cited there), independently comes to the same generalization with respect to definite subjects. He observes that if a definite NP has already been introduced into the conversation it is an 'anaphoric definite' and it must occur in preverbal position. Conversely, a definite NP occurs in postverbal position if it is a 'descriptive definite', i.e. if its referent is familiar to the participants of the communicative event but if it is still new with respect to the present topic of conversation. The facts in (19) become clearer now. In (19b) the definite *l'uomo* 'the man' has too little referential content in order to figure as a 'descriptive definite'. This NP can only occur in preverbal position as an 'anaphoric definite', i.e. as an NP which has previously been introduced into the conversation. The property that underlies this distinction is in fact what Pesetsky (1987) calls 'discourse linking'.

I would like to extend this analysis to indefinite NPs as well. The indefinite subject in (19a) is ungrammatical because, with unaccusative verbs, this is the

position of discourse-linked elements. The interpretation of *un uomo* 'a man' as an anaphoric element can be obtained only if we force a context in which 'a man' belongs to a set of men already present in the conversation. Whereas other indefinites easily allow this interpretation (cf. 13,14), the indefinite article is very hard to combine with a non-existential reading.

Tables 1 and 2 appeared to be irreducible to just one common feature. In particular, the existential reading seemed to be incompatible with a definite NP. If the observations above are correct, it is possible to give a slightly different interpretation of the concept of existentiality so that the asymmetries in the distribution of definite and indefinite subjects can be reduced to one relevant property. The crucial point is that the concept of existentiality must not be taken in absolute terms, but considered with respect to its relevance for the conversational context. A definite (non-generic) subject always implies familiarity, so this cannot be the property that explains its syntactic distribution. Still, a familiar NP can contain old (d-linked) or new (non-d-linked) information. This is the relevant difference. A major advantage of this approach is that the distribution of indefinite subjects can also be analyzed in these terms. Indefinite NPs can be completely new (existential/presentational) or can already be present in the communicative event (the strong reading we discussed above).

The present discussion can be captured by a new paradigm on Table 3, based on the property [+/- d-linked].

Table 3

	PREVERBAL	POSTVERBAL
TRANSITIVES (-loc)	+/- d-link.	-
UNERGATIVES (-loc)	+/- d-link.	-
UNERGATIVES (+loc)	+ d-link.	- d-link.
UNACCUSATIVES	+ d-link.	- d-link.

6. Conclusions

The data presented in this paper show that subject inversion is the result of the interaction of wellformedness constraints and interpretive/informational structure. Both types of conditions can be formalized in syntactic terms. I will not go into this topic for lack of space, but I refer to Pesetsky's (1987) analysis of d-linking and de Hoop's (1992) Principle of Contrastiveness.

The most unexpected result of this study is that inversion does not seem to be an isolated, language-specific phenomenon, but fits into a more general strategy of conveying semantic information by syntactic means. More concretely, the distribu-

tional and interpretive facts presented above for Italian show surprising similarities to object scrambling data in Dutch, as analyzed in de Hoop (1992).

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