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Acquiring constituent questions in Italian as a second language

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1. Constituent questions

In Levelt's Model, the speaker must decide early whether the message to be conveyed is declarative, imperative, or interrogative (Levelt 1989: § 3.5), so indicators of mood are already present when the message generated in the conceptualizer reaches the formulator, and activates functional processing and positional processing (cf. § 2.1, ch. 1, this volume). In constituent questions the information the speaker wants to receive from the addressee is expressed by one (or more) question phrase (QP from now on) or word (QW), which fills the gap left by the focal constituent (or constituents) of the corresponding declarative sentence (Van Valin 2001: 185). We can tell that the interrogative phrase fills this gap by the fact that we cannot put another phrase of the same type in the same sentence. For example, the sentence in (1) is ungrammatical, because V can govern only one GF per type, with the exception of the ADJ function (Darlymple 2001: 11). Here the V *kiss* governs the OBJ function, and the presence of two OBJ arguments in the same sentence (*whom* and *the girl*) is ungrammatical. On the other hand, (2) is grammatical because each QP (*what* and *where*) fills the two required GFs (OBJ and OBL respectively) governed by the V *put*.

(1) [John kissed the girl]   *whom did John kiss the girl?

(2) [John put the book onto the table]   what did John put where?

Constituent questions are used to request some piece of new information, the focus of the sentence. Focality is not a prerogative of interrogatives, but in interrogatives FOC is obligatory (Choi 1999), and undergoes specific constraints. These vary cross-linguistically: all languages can satisfy the communicative need of requesting information, but different languages do it using different linguis-

tic strategies. A derivational approach describes these strategies in terms of syntactic movement of QPs (cf. Chomsky 1977, as well as Cheng & Corver 2006; Rizzi 1997), and assumes a typological division between languages that formulate constituent questions by placing interrogative phrases in initial position (simple- or multiple-fronting languages), and those that leave them in the same position of their non-interrogative equivalents (in-situ languages). In the non-derivational framework of LFG, constituent questions are described as a particular kind of 'filler-gap structures' (Falk 2001; Kroeger 2004). These structures imply the existence of a missing element at the 'gap' position, which is the actual specific piece of information required, and of a 'filler' bearing two functions: (i) the DF FOC, associated with the interrogative phrase; and (ii) the GF, associated with the gap. In (2) above, for example, we can see the double status of the filler (*what*), bearing both the DF FOC, associated with the interrogative phrase, and the GF, in this case OBJ, associated with the gap. In LFG's f-structure, abstract GFs and features try to capture universal syntactic principles that vary cross-linguistically at other levels of representation. Hence, the f-structure of constituent questions is independent from language-specific connotations like, for instance, word order: "since the pragmatic function of constituent questions is much the same in all languages, the functional structure of constituent questions in various languages is likely to be quite similar even when phrase structure configuration is very different" (Kroeger 2004: 171; cf. also Bresnan 2001: 45).

According to Mycock (2007), both these approaches – the derivational approach and the functional one – as previously formulated, fail to explain crucial aspects of constituent questions such as prosody. That is, they can capture only those principles that underlie the formation of constituent questions in languages like English that realize the focusing of QPs syntactically. However, in languages like Japanese, the QP appears in situ, that is, in the same position it occupies in the equivalent declarative sentence, and the focusing of the interrogative phrase is realized only prosodically. Because the DF FOC is not indicated at f-structure, or indeed at c-structure, Mycock (2007) maintains that constituent questions can be reduced neither to their word order nor to their f-structure, but must be described in terms of both the informational distribution at i-structure level, and the ways in which their i-structural status (i.e., FOC) is marked in syntax and/or in prosody. She demonstrates convincingly that the only universal feature of constituent questions is the focusing of the QP, and that what varies cross-linguistically is how it is focused: syntactically, and/or prosodically. For the theoretical development of incorporating within LFG the possibility of at least three other structures, besides a-structure, c-structure and f-structure, see Choi (2001), Falk (2001: 22ff), and more recently Dalrymple & Nikolaeva (2011).

2. Constituent questions in Italian

Most grammatical descriptions of Italian interrogatives indicate syntax as the key feature in the formation of constituent questions (e.g., Lepschy & Lepschy 1981; Fava 1995; Serianni 1996; Dardano & Trifone 1997; Salvi & Vanelli 2004; Schwarze 2009). This does not mean that prosody does not play a role in Italian, but only that the most important aspect of Italian constituent interrogatives is syntax. Leaving prosody for future investigations, we will deal here with the syntactic strategies that in Italian allow for the focusing of the new information enclosed in QPs.[1]

(3) F-structure and c-structure of cosa beve Luigi? *(what does Luigi drink?)*

_____
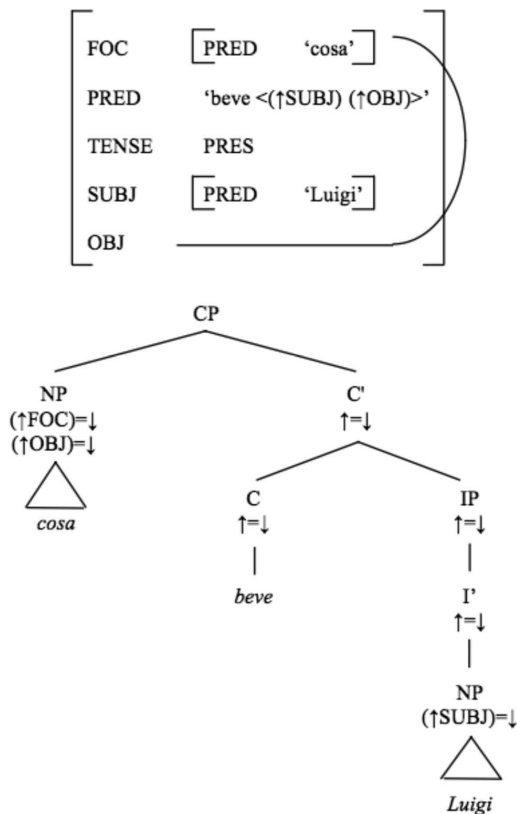
1   In his taxonomy of Focus, Dik's (1997: 331ff.) distinction between Questioning Focus and other types – notably Completive (New) Focus – is insightful.

Typologically, Italian is a headmarking language located towards the less configurational end of the typological spectrum (cf. fig. (1), part II, this volume). Although its canonical order is SVO, word order is relatively free, regulated by discourse and pragmatic choices (cf. § 3.1, ch. 3). In constituent questions, word order is marked, because the QP appears initially in the sentence rather than in the position typical of its GF. The initial position then, in interrogatives, is associated with the DF FOC. Because Italian is a language with syntactic focusing, FOC is grammaticalized and indicated at f-structure, where it bears also the GF specified by the argument list of the verbal predicate. Consider the sentence in (3), for example, with the illustration of its f- and c-structures. Here word order is marked in two ways. First, the interrogative phrase bearing the FOC function – co-referential with the OBJ gap after the V *beve* – appears clause-initially, that is, not in the position associated with its GF. Secondly, SUBJ appears postverbally, that is, not in its canonical preverbal position.

The only exception to the markedness of word order in interrogatives is when the focal QP itself bears the GF SUBJ, as in (4). In this case, SUBJ is questioned in situ, clearly showing its special status as the only core GF which, in LFG, is also a DF – FOC, in this case. Also in English SUBJ is the only constituent that is questioned in situ and does not require AUX, as in *who drunk the wine?* vs *what did he drink?* (cf. Falk 2006 for a different approach to the notion of SUBJ in LFG which reassesses this apparent anomaly and discusses thematic roles, a-structure, GFs, and the mappings between them).

(4) chi   beve   il vino?
     who.SUBJ   drink-3.SG   the wine?
     [who drinks the wine?]

Word order of Italian constituent questions can be marked in yet a third way if the interrogative sentence is itself pragmatically marked, and there is a topicalised constituent in first position. Consider the sentence in (5), for example, where also TOP=OBJ appears in a noncanonical position, besides FOC=OBL$_{GOAL}$ and SUBJ. The complexity of this structure is further increased by the fact that in Italian the topicalization of OBJ requires the use of a clitic as morphological marker of OBJ onto V, as shown in §§ 3.1-3.2, chapter 3, this volume.

(5) il vino   a chi   lo   offre Luigi ?
     the wine-TOP.SG.MASC   to whom-FOC$_{OBL}$ it-Cl.ACC.SG.MASC offers Luigi-SUBJ
     [the wine to whom does Luigi offer it?]

3. A developmental hypothesis

For the development of Italian constituent questions by L2 learners, we take as our starting point PT's hierarchy presented as the Prominence Hypothesis in (34)-(35), § 4.2.1, chapter 1, this volume, and implemented for Italian declarative sentences in (23), § 3.1 in chapter 3. Our hypothesis is illustrated by the hierarchy in (6).

(6) Developmental stages hypothesised for Italian L2 syntax based on the Prominence Hypothesis: interrogatives (after Bettoni & Di Biase 2011)

STAGE	STRUCTURE	EXAMPLE
NONCANONICAL WORD ORDER	TOP$_i$ FOC$_{WH-}$ Cl$_i$-AUX V–*to$_i$* SUBJ?	*i libri a chi li ha dati Pia?* [the books, to whom has Pia given them?]
	TOP$_i$ FOC$_{WH-}$ Cl$_i$-V SUBJ?	*i libri a chi li dà Pia?* [the books, to whom does Pia give them?]
	FOC$_{WH-}$ VS	*che cosa mangia Piero ?* [what eats Piero]
XP$_{DF}$ CANONICAL WORD ORDER	FOC$_{WH-}$ SV	*che cosa Piera mangia ?* [what Piera eats ?]
		che cosa mangia ? [what (he) eats ?]
CANONICAL WORD ORDER	SV FOC$_{WH-}$	*Paola mangia cosa? [Paola eats what?]*
		Paolo va dove? [Paolo goes where?]
LEMMA ACCESS	single words	*cosa? quando? [what? when?]*
	formulas	*come stai? [how are you?]]*

Studies within the PT framework on the acquisition of Italian simple, pragmatically neutral, minimally presuppositional declarative sentences (e.g., Di Biase & Kawaguchi 2002; Di Biase & Bettoni 2007; Bettoni, Di Biase & Ferraris 2008; Bettoni, Di Biase & Nuzzo 2009; cf. also § 3.1, ch. 3, this volume) report that initially learners can produce only sentences with canonical word order whose structure has a fixed correspondence between arguments (such as agent, patient) and c-structure. Also questions go through this canonical word order stage. However, soon after learners have the lexical means to convey an interrogative message and the morphological means to distinguish between Ns and Vs, the canonical word order stage is quickly overtaken. In fact, constituent questions, as we have seen, are sentences marked pragmatically, whose very essence is the focalisation of QP.

Thus, at this early stage, fronted QP FOC is followed by canonical word order. Having yet to learn to assign GFs to verbal arguments independently of position, learners do not master the means to free up the canonical order sequence, as required by Italian constituent questions. The outcome is then ungrammatical, as in (7)-(8), when SUBJ (expressed referentially or pronominally) is in preverbal position without being questioned (that is, when FOC ≠ SUBJ).

(7) *che sport   Alberto   fa?
      which sport   Alberto   do-3.SG?
      [which sport does Alberto do?]

(8) *dove   tu   trovi   questi fiori?
      where   you   find-2.SG   these flowers?
      [where do you find these flowers?]

On the other hand, the outcome is grammatical in either of two cases: when the sentence is null SUBJ, as in (9), or the QP in initial position bears itself the SUBJ function, as in (10) or (4) above.

(9) cosa   studia?
      what   study-3.SG?
      [what does (she) study?]

(10) chi   ha   questa borsa?
      who   have-3.SG   this bag?
      [who has this bag?]

At this same XP canonical order stage, as well as fronted focal QWs or QPs, learners can also produce topical words or phrases. The resulting sentences can then vary in terms of grammaticality, depending on the GF associated with TOP. When it bears the ADJ function, which is an ungovernable noncore function, the outcome is ungrammatical, as in (11)-(12), or grammatical, as in (13)-(14), not because of the presence of ADJ (which in the target language does not require any adjustment in the following sequence), but for the same reasons we have just seen regarding the examples in (11)-(14).

(11) *adesso che sport   Alberto   fa?
      now which sport   Alberto   do-3.SG?
      [now which sport does Alberto do?]

(12) *in giardino   dove   tu   trovi   questi fiori?
      in the garden where   you   find-2.SG   these flowers?
      [in the garden where do you find these flowers?]

(13) all'università   cosa   studia?
     at the university   what   study-3.SG?
     [at the university what does (she) study?]

(14) questa mattina   chi   ha   comprato   il pane?
     this morning   who   have-3.SG   bought   the bread?
     [this morning who has bought the bread?]

On the other hand, if TOP bears the OBJ function and its coreferential OBJ clitic marker on V is missing, the TOP function is left unmarked and the outcome is ungrammatical, as in (15) – cf. Bresnan's (2001: § 4.8) notion of 'functional uncertainty'.

(15) *la cartolina   dove   hai   comprato?
     the postcard   where   have-2.SG   bought?
     [where have you bought **the postcard**?]

In this example, even if the sentence is ungrammatical, the meaning is quite clear lexically, just as it is clear with topicalised ADJ. This is because the listener is unlikely to take the inanimate OBJ *postcard* as SUBJ doing the action of buying. Likewise, when TOP is ADJ, the fact that this GF is usually expressed by a circumstantial adverb or a PP rules out the possibility for the listener to take it as SUBJ, which by default occupies the first position in canonical order. Problems of comprehension, however, do arise when both OBJ and SUBJ have animate referents. In this case, if the coreferential clitic marking the first constituent as OBJ is missing on V, the reader will indeed take it as SUBJ (cf. (19)-(21), ch. 3, this volume).

   One stage further up in the developmental path, at the noncanonical word order stage, having learned the necessary morphology to assign GFs to constituents (cf. § 4.2.1, ch. 1, this volume), learners can now mark them by means other than position, and thus free up canonical word order. By placing SUBJ in postverbal position, as in (16), they will codify grammatical constituent questions also when there is a pronominal or referential SUBJ and the fronted QP bears GFs other than SUBJ.

(16) che cosa   compra   Paolo?
     what   buy-3.SG   Paolo?
     [what does Paolo buy?]

Also at this stage, like at the previous stage, besides focalising QP, learners may wish to topicalise constituents with a variety of GFs. When TOP is ADJ, as in (17), the

sentence is grammatical because no further adjustment is required. On the other hand, when TOP is OBJ, should the missing coreferential OBJ clitic leave the GF unspecified, the sentence would be ungrammatical, as in (18). The agreement between TOP and the clitic obviously increases the cognitive load of the production of a topicalised constituent question. Thus, although technically still within the noncanonical word order stage, our hypothesis is that the sentence in (19) will appear after that in (18).

(17) ieri   cosa   ha   fatto   Alberto?
      yesterday   what   have-3.SG   done   Alberto?
      [yesterday what did Alberto do?]

(18) *i libri   dove   compra   Pino?
      the books   where   buy-3.SG   Pino?
      [where does Pino buy **the books**?]

(19) i libri   dove   li   compra   Pino?
      the books-MASC.PL   where   them-MASC.PL   buy-3.SG Pino?
      [where does Pino buy the books?]

In this type of sentence, not only FOC QP, but also both the TOP_{OBJ} and SUBJ core functions appear in noncanonical position. The progress now occurs not only because learners manage, first, to identify the DF and GF of each NP, but also because they manage, secondly, to mark OBJ morphologically onto V with the clitic coreferential with TOP – cf. (5) above. At this same stage there is one further step to go in the learning process. When V is inflected analytically, Italian requires that the past participle agree in number and gender with the clitic. This adds a further burden to the online production of the sentence. Our hypothesis, then, is that there will be yet another step within the stage when learners first produce ungrammatical sentences with a default masculine singular past participle, as in (20), and finally fully grammatical topicalised interrogative sentences, as in (21).

(20) i libri   dove   li   ha   *comprato   Pino?
      the books-MASC.PL   where   them-MASC.PL   have-3.SG   bought-MASC.SG   Pino?
      [where has Pino bought the books?]

(21) i libri   dove   li   ha   comprati   Pino?
      the books-MASC.PL   where   them-MASC.PL   have-3.SG   bought-MASC.PL   Pino?
      [where has Pino bought the books?]

4. The study

In order to verify the developmental hierarchy hypothesized in § 3, we analyse cross-sectional data pertaining to 12 learners with different levels of competence in Italian. All learners are European students in their early twenties attending Italian L2 courses at the University of Verona: five of them (Ve, Pe, Jh El, Me) are Czech, two (Cr, La) are German, and one each among Lu, Ni, Ju, Ma, and Ev is respectively Dutch, English, Russian, Spanish and French – their names of course having all been changed. The study also includes one native speaker control (Ga). Because most of the structures tested are optional, this inclusion allows for comparison between the learners' and the native speaker's production in the same situations. All subjects were recorded in March and April 2008.

The data elicitation tasks for this study are partly inspired by those used for English questions (cf., e.g., Pienemann 1998: 280; Keatinge 2008), and partly specifically devised for Italian, which, unlike English, is a null-SUBJ language. Learners are prompted to produce interrogative sentences in order to gather information on two different items or events (e.g., two mysterious objects, two types of weddings). Because SUBJ position is of great relevance in the grammatical codification of Italian constituent questions (cf. §§ 2-3), the presence of two items encourages the use of explicit SUBJ rather than the more common null SUBJ. In order to make sure that learners do use it, they are not allowed to collect all the information they require to play the game first on one item and then on the other, but must ask questions about them alternatively, thus specifying an item each time. In our study, five tasks were specifically targeted to elicit constituent questions, other tasks served as distractors.

Out of the whole corpus thus collected, we analyse here constituent questions encoded in full sentences with lexical Vs whose a-structure maps canonically onto f-structure, such as *dare* (give) and *comprare* (buy). In other words, we do not consider passives or sentences with unaccusative and so-called exceptional Vs (Pinker 1984), as well as copular and presentative sentences (for these 'nonverbal predicates', cf. Kroeger 2005: ch. 10). Furthermore, in this study we consider only sentences in which the focal element bears an argument GF or the nonargument GF ADJ. This means that we leave for future analysis those with *perché* ('why') and *come* ('how'), which may involve subordination (regarding *why* in English L2, cf. § 3.1, ch. 2, this volume). Finally, formulas such as *quanto costa?* ('how much is it?') have been discounted. Altogether, we analyse 372 constituent questions, corresponding to an average of circa 29 for each of the 12 learners, compared to 33 by Ga, the native speaker of Italian.

5. The analysis

The empirical support for the interlanguage development of Italian constituent questions hypothesised in (6) is presented cross-sectionally in (22).

(22) Cross-sectional study of the development of Italian constituent questions based on the Prominence Hypothesis: interrogatives

STRUCTURE	VE	PE	LU	LA	JU	CR	JH	NI	EL	MA	EV	ME	GA
TOP$_i$ QP Cl$_i$-AUX V–*to$_i$*										-1	-2	1	1
TOP$_i$ QP Cl$_i$-V											2		
TOP QP V SUBJ							1	3					2
QP V SUBJ	7	23	6	6	6	12	14	15	8	6	1	13	8
TOP QP V	1							1					3
QP SUBJ V	12	6	4	4	5	4	6						
QP V	7	7	4	16	12	16	9	12	21	20	11	32	16
(SUBJ) V QP	1			1				1				2	3

As shown in (22), in-situ questions belonging to the canonical word order stage are few and produced by only some of the learners, as in (23)-(24), as well as by Ga, the native speaker.

(23) Ve   tu   preferisci   quale musica?
           you   prefer-2.SG   which music?
           [which music do you prefer?]

(24) La   resta   all'università   a che ora?
           stays-3.SG   at university   at what time?
           [until what time does he stay at university?]

All our learners have also reached the XP canonical word order stage in so far as they produce 8 or more structures where QPs are clause-initial and fronted, followed by canonical word order. There is also ample evidence that all learners can use a wide range of QWs and QPs – even Pe, for example, as shown in (25). As a matter of fact, in this regard, he displays a range of forms that is already similar to Ga's, the native speaker.

(25) Pe   a. dove   tu   trovi   questi fiori?
            where   you   find-2.SG   these flowers?
            [where do you find these flowers?]

        b. che cosa   fa   in casa   a sera?
            what   do-3.SG   at home   in the evening?
            [what does (he) do at home in the evening?]

        c. chi   ha   questa borsa?
            who   has-3.SG   this bag?
            [who has this bag?]

        d. quanto tempo   tu   conosci   questi amiche amici?
            how long   you   know-2.SG   these friends?
            [how long have you known these friends?]

        e. qualche [quale] artista   preferisce?
            which artist   prefer-3.SG?
            [which artist does (he) prefer?]

There is, however, significant variation among the 12 learners in the distribution of the different structures belonging to this XP canonical word order stage, concerning two factors: (i) the use of SUBJ vs null SUBJ; and (ii) the addition of a topicalised element. First, the less advanced learners – in particular Pe, Lu and Ve – use null SUBJ quite sparingly, and overuse instead pronominal SUBJ in pragmatically unmotivated contexts, as exemplified in (25)-(26): Ve 13 times out of 20, Pe and Jh 6 times out of 13 and 15 respectively, Lu 4 out of 8. In (25b), Ve even uses both a pronominal and a referential SUBJ; needless to say, in this latter case preverbal SUBJ is ungrammatical.

(25) a. Ve   quanto tempo   tu   passi   con Marco?
               how much time   you   spend-2.SG   with Marco?
               [how much time do you spend with Marco?]

     b.   quale ora   lei   Daniela   va   dormire?
               at what time   she   Daniela   go-3.SG   sleep?
               [at what time does Daniela go to sleep?]

(26) Pe   quanto tempo fa   loro   sono   incontrato?
          how long ago   they   be-3.PL   met?
          [how long ago have they met?]

As learners progress, they display a more frequent use of null SUBJ. So, Cr and La already show some progress in two ways: their figures for null SUBJ are high-

er (they both use null SUBJ 4 times out of 16), and their use of SUBJ, although still ungrammatically preverbal, is more pragmatically justified, and referential rather than pronominal, as in (27). Finally, and most proficiently, Ni, El, Ma, Ev, and Me use null SUBJ exclusively, like Ga does. This results in grammatical sentences, as in (28)

(27) Cr   quando   Daniela   deve   iniziare   lavorare?
           when   Daniela   must-3.SG   start   work?
           [when must Daniela start to work?]

(28) El   quante domande   devo   fare?
           how many questions   must-1.SG   make?
           [how many questions must (I) make?]

Still within this stage, the second significant variation among the learners concerns the addition of a topicalised element. Once learners are able to front FOC, the addition of a topicalised constituent in the prominent clause-initial position would not seem very costly, provided TOP bears the ADJ function. Yet only 2 of our 12 learners topicalise ADJ, and do so once each, compared to Ga who does it 3 times. The grammaticality (or ungrammaticality) of the full sentence with this addition is independent of fronted ADJ, and depends exclusively on what follows it: in our corpus the sentences are null SUBJ, as in (29)-(30), so the outcome is targetlike, even for Ve, who is the weakest learner.

(29) Ve   dopo lavorare   che cosa   fe [fa]?
           after work   what   do-3.SG?
           [after work what does (she) do?]

(30) El   adesso   quale   hai   in mano?
           now   which   have-2.SG   in hand?
           [now which one do you have in the hand?]

Although the use of a topicalised ADJ is rare among the learners, it is not altogether rare for some of them to preface their sentences with an external element. We do not consider this element a DF TOP, however, because it is independent of the structure that follows. In fact it is then repeated within the sentence, where it bears a variety of GFs, such as SUBJ in (31)-(34), OBJ in (32), and ADJ in (33). Notice that the following sentence in (31) repeats SUBJ, whereas in (34) null SUBJ follows.

(31) Lu   Roberto   a che ora   Roberto   mangia   in la sera?
           Roberto   at what time   Roberto   eat-3.SG   in the evening?
           [Roberto, at what time does Roberto eat in the evening?]

(32 Ni   i fiori   chi   ha   dato i fiori   a te?
            the flowers   who   have-3.SG   given the flowers to you?
            [the flowers, who has given the flowers to you?]

(33) Me   sul lago   cosa   hanno   fatto   sul lago?
            on the lake   what   have-3.PL   done   on the lake?
            [on the lake, what have they done on the lake]

(34) Ve   Roberto   cosa   fe [fa]?
            Roberto   what   do-3.SG?
            [Roberto, what does he do?]

Further up the developmental hierarchy, at the noncanonical word order stage, learners acquire functional assignment, and can thus free up canonical word order and place SUBJ postverbally. As (22) shows, all our learners have also reached this stage – even Ve and Pe, who still have problems with the lexicon and verbal inflection, as exemplified in (35), where the latter first uses *qualche* instead of the targeted interrogative adjective *quale*, and then variously attempts *preferi*, *preferà* and *preferiscia* instead of the targeted third person singular *preferisce* ('(he) prefers') of the V *preferire*.

(35) Pe   a. qualche cibo   preferi preferà Marco?
                what food   prefer-3.SG   Marco?
                [which food does Marco prefer?]

           b. qualche musica   preferiscia   Marco?
                what music   prefer-3.SG   Marco?
                [which music does Marco prefer?]

However, although all learners can place SUBJ postverbally with what appears to be nativelike online processing, if we look at the distribution of SV and VS, we can see that some learners are more advanced than others. That is, as we move from the left towards Ga on the right in (22), we can see that more beginner learners alternate postverbal with preverbal SUBJ; more advanced learners do it less, in favour of postverbal SUBJ, thus becoming more accurate; until they no longer do so, with Ni, El, Ma, Ev, and Me producing only grammatical sentences.

    Still within the noncanonical word order stage, like at the previous stage, some questions are preceded by topicalized constituents. These can bear the ADJ function as in (36), and do not imply further linguistic constraints in the grammatical codification of the sentence; the outcome is thus grammatical.

(36) Ni   per pranzo cosa ha   fatto   Maurizio ieri?
         for lunch   what have-3.SG done   Maurizio yesterday?
         [for lunch what has Maurizio done yesterday?]

On the other hand, several constraints are operative when the topicalized constituent bears the OBJ function. As we have seen in §§ 2-3, in order to codify the sentence correctly learners must be able, first, to identify the GFs of all NPs and, secondly, to unify the number and gender features of TOP with the clitic, and the past participle if V is in analytical form. Among our 12 learners, three have reached this highest level within the last stage in the developmental hierarchy. Their figures are not robust, but then also Ga produces only one OBJ topicalisaton among his 30 questions. Coupled with the fact that this is a cross-sectional study with only 12 learners, this means that our data does not allow us to have a clear developmental picture of the full range of variation within this last stage. First, all 6 occurrences of OBJ topicalisation are null-SUBJ sentences. This is quite appropriate, but it can tell us nothing about the placing of SUBJ. All we can say in this regard is that, if we look at the figures of VS and SV sequences for these three learners in all their production, we notice that they always place SUB accurately in postverbal position. Secondly, all three learners always mark the TOP function with formally accurate clitics, althought Ma seems somewhat hesitant when she produces *i* and *le* before getting *li* right, as in (37). This means that we do not have enough variation in the data to prove that the default masculine singular *lo* clitic might initially be overused.

(37) Ma i fiori   chi i le ti   li   ha   *dato?
        flowers-MASC.PL who   to you them-MASC.PL have-3.SG given-MASC.SG?
        [the flowers who has given them to you?]

Thirdly, Ma and Me produce only one OBJ topicalisation each, both of them with V in analytical form. Having no synthetic form to compare them with, in order to prove our hypothesis that the number and gender agreement will be marked last on the past participle, it is irrelevant to know that Me marks the past participle correctly in (38), and Ma does not, using *dato* instead of *dati* in (37).

(38) Me Elisa   dove   l'   hai   conosciuta?
        Elisa-FEM.SG where her-FEM.SG   have-2.SG   met-FEM.SG?
        [Elisa where have (you) met her?]

The only learner providing evidence in support of this hypothesis of a step within a stage is Ev, who produces four OBJ topicalisations: two with V in synthetic form

which are fully accurate, as in (39a), and two with V in analytical form which are accurate except for the missing agreement on the past participle, as in (39b).

(39) a. Ev Roberta   da quanto tempo   la   conosci?
             Roberta-FEM.SG   since how long   her-FEM.SG   know-2.SG?
             [Roberta for how long have you known her?]

     b.   i fiori   dove li   ha   *messo   nella casa?
             flowers-MASC.PL   where them-MASC.PL have-3.SG   put-MASC.SG in the house?
             [the flowers where has (he) put them in the house?]

6. Conclusion

In this exploratory study of the development of constituent questions in the Italian interlanguage of L2 learners, our empirical cross-sectional data fully supports the hypothesis presented in § 3. Despite the great care taken in devising suitable elicitation tasks, numbers of occurrences for some of the structures, especially at the highest stage, are low, but this is not surprising, given both their infrequent occurrences also in native speakers' production, and their wide range. This range involves, on the one hand, the presence or absence of SUBJ, and its position when present; and on the other, several different GFs associated with focusing question constituents and topicalisations.

        To summarise our findings, we have seen that all our learners are lexically ready to produce constituent questions in so far as even the weakest among them produce as wide a range of QWs and QPs as the native speaker does. Syntactically, all our learners can focus the question constituent by fronting it. The prime reason for this is that fronted FOC is the Italian way of marking interrogatives, and hence the most pervasive QP position in the input. This also explains why only a few learners in our data appear to traverse the canonical word order stage by producing in-situ questions. In this regard, we draw the reader's attention to a similarity with German L2 in chapter 9 regarding the quick way in which learners appear to disentangle canonical word order thanks to the strength of the FOC position in constituent questions. This may very well show that canonical word order is not as relevant in questions as in declaratives. Or indeed it may even turn out that declaratives and constituent questions have different canonical word orders.

        Besides placing QPs in initial position, all our learners can also place SUBJ postverbally. This means that all of them have reached the noncanonical stage, and are therefore – stagewise – quite advanced. However, if we look at accuracy beyond emergence, we notice fair differences among the learners in terms of the proportion of structures which are pragmatically justified and syntactically accurate, and

those which are not. As we move along the developmental continuum, on the one hand, pragmatically, learners gradually curb their tendency to overuse redundant pronominal SUBJ until their null-SUBJ structures become as frequent as those produced by the native speaker. On the other, syntactically, when referential SUBJs are motivated by discourse or pragmatic reasons, learners gradually reduce their preverbal ungrammatical SUBJs until they produce only targetlike postverbal grammatical ones.

The addition of a topical element in front of the focal QP is an altogether rare occurrence in both the learners' and the native speaker's data. When learners do use it, no progress is discernible among them as long as the added topical element is associated with the ADJ GF and requires no further formal constraints. On the other hand, when the topic is associated with the OBJ function and costly constraints are required, we have a clear indication that, among our 12 learners, only three of them have moved ahead of the others and produce at least one OBJ topicalisation, although with some variation in the accuracy of morphological agreements.

We can conclude that the hypotheses we put forward in (22) are fully supported by the empirical data of this small cross-sectional study. They would have been falsified if they had contradicted the implicational relationship among the predicted stages. But predictions have turned out positively, thus strengthening the case for PT's universal hierarchy presented in (35), chapter 1, this volume. As well as generally confirming the hierarchy for the development of constituent questions in a nonconfigurational language like Italian, this study shows specifically that in such a language it may be easier to move from one stage to the next in terms of emergence of syntactic structures, than to progress in terms of accuracy by either pragmatically discerning when to use alternatives (i.e., null SUBJ vs full SUBJ; fronted vs in-situ QPs) or morphologically increasing the range of inflections within a stage (i.e., default vs nondefault number and gender markers).