

# The Lexicon-Syntax Interface in L2 Italian: *Ne*-Cliticisation with Intransitive Verbs

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## 1. Introduction

Recent empirical investigation of end-state second language (L2) grammars (Belletti et al. 2007, Sorace & Filiaci 2006, Tsimpli & Sorace 2006) has led to the hypothesis that purely syntactic phenomena and phenomena relating to internal interfaces, which connect syntax and other domains *within* the language faculty (e.g. the lexicon), can be completely acquired in the L2. On the other hand, this may not be possible for phenomena pertaining to external interfaces, where syntax and other domains *outside* the language faculty (e.g. discourse-pragmatics) meet each other (Sorace 2005, Sorace & Filiaci 2006, Tsimpli & Sorace 2006, White 2006). This view has come to be known as the Interface Hypothesis. The present paper investigates whether a phenomenon at the lexicon-syntax interface, an internal interface, can indeed be fully acquired in the L2, as the Interface Hypothesis predicts.

The phenomenon under investigation is an unaccusative diagnostic in Italian, *ne*-cliticisation with intransitive verbs. In a previous study, Sorace (1992) has shown that adult near-native speakers of Italian whose first language (L1) is English or French are sensitive to subtle lexical-semantic properties of this phenomenon to a similar extent as native speakers. In the same study, the same L2 learners have also been shown to be highly sensitive to the syntactic and lexical-semantic properties of another unaccusative diagnostic in Italian, auxiliary selection with intransitive verbs<sup>1</sup>. The study presented in this paper uses the same methodology as Sorace (1992), i.e. an acceptability judgement task with Magnitude Estimation<sup>2</sup> (ME) (Bard et al. 1996) as the elicitation procedure, but a different task design and a different set of test items. Its aim is to find out whether highly proficient Croatian adult L2 learners of Italian are able to make syntactic and lexical-semantic distinctions relevant for *ne*-cliticisation with intransitive verbs, similarly to their English and French counterparts. A positive answer to this question would constitute further evidence for the ability of L2 learners of different L1 backgrounds to acquire this phenomenon. Together with findings from studies into related phenomena in Italian and other languages, this would additionally suggest that phenomena at the lexicon-syntax interface are acquirable in the L2.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 provides the theoretical background necessary for understanding different aspects of the current study. In particular, it contains a description of *ne*-cliticisation with intransitive verbs in Italian and an overview of the studies dealing with the L2 acquisition of this phenomenon and related phenomena. It also contains brief remarks concerning the relevant properties of Croatian. The methodology and the results of the current study are presented in Section 3, while Section 4 comprises the discussion.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. *Ne*-cliticisation with intransitive verbs in Italian and the relevant properties of Croatian

*Ne*-cliticisation can be defined as the pronominalisation of the quantified postverbal NP subject in the form of the clitic pronoun *ne* ('of it, of them'), stranding a quantifier element, such as *molto*, *poco*,

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<sup>1</sup> The aspect of this study pertaining to auxiliary selection and L2 ultimate attainment has been published in Sorace (1993a).

<sup>2</sup> In this technique, the subjects have to express numerical acceptability judgements relative to the first sentence they rate, i.e. the so-called modulus.

*alcuno, due, tre* ('much/many, little/few, some, two, three') (Burzio 1986:22). It is regarded as a test for unaccusativity in Italian given that unaccusative verbs allow it, while unergative ones do not. This applies primarily to compound tenses as Lonzi (1986) has shown that some unergative verbs do permit *ne*-cliticisation in simple tenses<sup>3</sup>. Different behaviour of unaccusative and unergative verbs with respect to *ne*-cliticisation in compound tenses is illustrated in (1).

- (1) a. (Turisti), *ne* sono venuti molti.  
 tourists QCL are come many  
 'Of tourists, many (of them) came.'  
 b. \*(Vicini), *ne* hanno gridato alcuni.  
 neighbours QCL have shouted some  
 'Of neighbours, some (of them) shouted.'

As can be seen in the above examples, in clauses with *ne*-cliticisation, the quantified noun phrase is realised by *ne* and the quantifier. The quantifier refers to a focal element of information and is typically placed in the immediately postverbal position (Burzio 1986). The quantified noun refers to a topical element of information and may or may not be expressed. If expressed, it is placed in a detached position outside the clause.

Sorace (1992, 2004) has shown that not all unaccusative and unergative classes (dis)allow *ne*-cliticisation with equal consistency. She observed a similar type of behaviour for auxiliary selection. She argues that the consistency of syntactic behaviour with respect to these two phenomena depends on lexical-semantic properties of the verb/predicate, i.e. on telicity and agentivity encoded in it. Variation in consistency is, thus, systematic and orderly and can be characterised as gradience. According to Sorace (2004), gradience in *ne*-cliticisation can be captured by the same descriptive model that she proposed for gradience in auxiliary selection – the Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy (ASH) (Sorace 2000). This model is given in (2):

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|--|--|
| (2) Change of location (CL)                | Compatibility with <i>ne</i> (least variation)   |
| Change of state (CS)                       |  |
| Continuation of a pre-existing state (COS) |  |
| Existence of state (ES)                    |  |
| Uncontrolled process (UP)                  |  |
| Controlled motional process (CMP)          |  |
| Controlled non-motional process (CNMP)     | Incompatibility with <i>ne</i> (least variation) |

The model distinguishes between seven lexical-semantic classes of intransitives. The two classes at the ends of the Hierarchy, the so-called core verbs, encode telicity (correlating with unaccusative properties) or agentivity (correlating with unergative behaviour) to the highest degree and are the most consistent in their syntactic behaviour. The classes distributed between the two extremes, known as peripheral verbs, encode telicity or agentivity to variable degrees and exhibit different degrees of inconsistency. The cut-off point between unaccusative and unergative classes is placed between existence of state and uncontrolled process verbs<sup>4</sup>. These general properties of the model are reflected in *ne*-cliticisation in such a way that the acceptability of *ne*-cliticisation gradually decreases from the unaccusative towards the unergative end of the ASH. Verbs of change of location are thus the most compatible with *ne*-cliticisation and verbs of controlled non-motional process the least compatible with it. Strictly speaking, however, only the four unaccusative classes are grammatical with *ne*-cliticisation (at least in compound tenses). With respect to auxiliary selection, which coincides with *ne*-cliticisation in compound tenses, the acceptability of *essere* ('be') and *avere* ('have') gradually decreases from the unaccusative and the unergative core respectively towards the periphery of the ASH.

<sup>3</sup> Bentley (2004) argues that this does not undermine the status of *ne*-cliticisation as a valid unaccusative diagnostic in Italian as there are principled reasons that could explain these cases.

<sup>4</sup> This particular cut-off point holds for Italian, even though the model (i.e. the ASH) itself has been shown to apply to some other languages as well.

Gradience consistent with the ASH seems not to be a unique property of the two unaccusative diagnostics in Italian, as different phenomena sensitive to unaccusativity in a number of languages have also been shown to exhibit similar systematic variation. These phenomena include auxiliary selection in French (Sorace 1993b) and German (Keller & Sorace 2003), impersonal passivisation in German (Keller & Sorace 2003), preverbal and postverbal subjects, participial absolutes, bare plurals and passives in Spanish (Montrul 2005), postverbal subjects in Chinese (Yuan 1999) and quantifier floating in Japanese (Sorace & Shomura 2001).

It is difficult to say whether and to what extent potential unaccusative diagnostics in Croatian manifest the ASH gradience. The main reason for this is that, given the relatively covert status of unaccusativity in this language, it is not clear which phenomena qualify as unaccusative diagnostics. While focus projection (Gođevac 2000) and impersonal passivisation (Aljović 2000) seem promising to us in this respect (see Kraš 2008 for a discussion as to why some other phenomena that have been proposed in the scarce existing literature on the topic cannot serve the purpose), their reliability remains to be tested empirically. Regardless of this issue, what concerns us most in the context of the present study is the fact that *ne*-cliticisation is not instantiated in Croatian. As shown in (3), the use of a postverbal quantifier is perfectly possible without the topical noun being represented in the form of a pronominal clitic. This applies to verbs with both typically unaccusative and unergative semantic properties.

- (3) a. (Turisti), došli su mnogi.  
       tourists came are many  
       ‘Tourists, many (of them) came.’  
    b. (Susjedi), vikali su neki.  
       neighbours shouted are some  
       ‘Neighbours, some (of them) shouted.’

Given the non-instantiation of *ne*-cliticisation in Croatian, we predict that Croatian native speakers cannot directly transfer morphosyntactic properties of their L1 in the process of acquiring *ne*-cliticisation with intransitive verbs in Italian. We cannot, however, exclude the possibility that they might be transferring some of their L1 semantic properties, especially if future research shows that the ASH gradience characterises unaccusativity in Croatian.

## 2.2. L2 acquisition of *ne*-cliticisation with intransitive verbs in Italian and related phenomena

To our knowledge, the only study that tested knowledge of *ne*-cliticisation with intransitive verbs in Italian on the part of L2 learners is Sorace (1992). In the same task (see above), this study in fact tested properties of L2 grammars with respect to both *ne*-cliticisation and auxiliary selection. In addition to adult native speakers, participants in the study were adult L2 learners whose L1 was English or French. The proficiency of English L2 learners ranged from beginner to near-native, while French L2 learners were all at the near-native level. To test these speakers’ sensitivity to the gradience in the two unaccusative diagnostics in Italian, Sorace used an earlier version of the ASH, which consisted of separate hierarchies for unaccusative and unergative verbs. The Unaccusative Hierarchy differed from the unaccusative part of the current ASH in that it contained two additional classes that were considered to be the most peripheral: verbs with a transitive alternant and verbs with an unergative alternant. The Unergative Hierarchy contained the same number of verb classes as the unergative part of the current ASH (i.e. three), but not all of these classes were the same. Specifically, instead of uncontrolled process verbs, the most peripheral class were motional activity verbs with an unaccusative alternant.

The results of the study show that L2 learners are sensitive to the gradience in the two unaccusative diagnostics in Italian. This sensitivity is, however, a function of L2 proficiency and only at the near-native level approximates the degree to which it is manifested by the native speakers. What is interesting is that the intuitions of both native and non-native speakers on *ne*-cliticisation are less consistent with the two hierarchies than their intuitions on auxiliary selection. More specifically, their judgements on unergative verbs and the two most peripheral classes of unaccusatives do not show the

expected pattern of orderly gradience<sup>5</sup>. This casts some doubt on the appropriateness of usage of the (earlier version of the) ASH as a model of gradience in *ne*-cliticisation.

One remark is in order here. All Sorace's test items on *ne*-cliticisation featured verbs in compound tenses. For each verb, there were two sentences: one in which the correct auxiliary was used to form the compound tense and the other in which the incorrect auxiliary was used. In reporting Sorace's findings on *ne*-cliticisation here, we have taken into consideration only half of the items – those with the correct auxiliary (i.e. the sentences with unaccusative verbs and *essere*, and the sentences with unergative verbs and *avere*). The reason is that in the sentences with the incorrect auxiliary, it is impossible to tease apart the effect of auxiliary choice and the effect of the use of the clitic *ne* on the sentence rating.

The studies on unaccusativity in L2 grammars of Spanish which adopted the current version of the ASH as a model of gradience in unaccusativity in this language are also relevant to the present study. Montrul (2005) used an acceptability judgement task with a 5-point ranking scale to test the knowledge of unaccusativity in Spanish on the part of adult English L2 learners, classified as low intermediate, intermediate and advanced<sup>6</sup>. She showed that the judgements of these learners on preverbal subjects, postverbal subjects, participial absolutes, bare plural postverbal subjects and the passive in Spanish are consistent with the ASH to the degree that is proportional to their proficiency level. Montrul (2004) showed that not only the knowledge, but also the processing of unaccusative and unergative verbs in Spanish by adult English L2 learners is conditioned by the ASH. She used an on-line probe recognition task<sup>7</sup> to test the learners' sensitivity to the presence/absence of the trace in the syntactic configuration of unaccusatives and unergatives<sup>8</sup>. In the analysis of the learners' response times, she discovered that the learners are sensitive to the syntactic distinction between unaccusatives and unergatives, and to the lexical-semantic distinction between core, non-core and peripheral verbs in the ASH.

To summarise, previous L2 studies have shown that adult L2 learners of Italian and Spanish whose native language is English or (in the study of Italian) French are able to make relevant lexical-semantic distinctions along the ASH while judging and processing different unaccusative phenomena in the two languages. Their ability to do this improves as their L2 proficiency increases and approximates that of the native speakers at the near-native level.

### 3. The present study

#### 3.1. Research question and hypothesis

The question addressed by the present study is whether *ne*-cliticisation with intransitive verbs, a phenomenon at the lexicon-syntax interface, can be fully acquired in the L2. Following the predictions of the Interface Hypothesis concerning internal interfaces and based on the findings of the previous L2 studies, we hypothesised that complete acquisition of this phenomenon is indeed possible in the L2.

The acquisition of this phenomenon involves knowledge of both its syntactic and lexical-semantic properties. The syntactic properties of *ne*-cliticisation are reflected in the fact that, strictly speaking, only unaccusatives are compatible with *ne*-cliticisation. Its lexical-semantic properties are embodied in the fact that the acceptability of *ne*-cliticisation decreases more or less gradually from the unaccusative towards the unergative end of the ASH.

#### 3.2. Participants

The study included 28 participants, divided into two groups: L1 ( $n=12$ ) and L2 ( $n=16$ ). All the subjects were studying at Italian universities and were residing in Italy at the time of the experiment. All the native speakers were students of translation and interpreting in Trieste, while the group of non-

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that, due to an experimental error, the values pertaining to the change of state class were excluded from the analysis.

<sup>6</sup> The study also included English-dominant heritage speakers, divided into the same proficiency groups.

<sup>7</sup> In this task, the participants had to read sentences on a computer screen and decide whether a word (i.e. a probe) had appeared in the sentence.

<sup>8</sup> According to the GB analysis that she adopted, it is the argument of unaccusatives that leaves a trace in the object position, as opposed to the argument of unergatives.

native speakers was less homogenous in this respect as it included students of architecture ( $n=6$ ), translation and interpreting ( $n=4$ ), communication studies ( $n=2$ ), diplomacy ( $n=1$ ), electrical engineering ( $n=1$ ), film studies ( $n=1$ ), and modern languages and literature ( $n=1$ ) in Bologna, Rome, Trieste and Venice. The native language of the L2 learners was Croatian, with the exception of 3 subjects whose L1 was Serbian<sup>9</sup>. The non-native speakers had reached a very high (potentially near-native) level of proficiency in Italian, mainly due to the fact that they had been immersed in the language for a prolonged period of time, i.e. for an average of 6.5 years. All of them were considered to be adult L2 learners, with both the age of immersion and the age of first exposure to Italian (which took place in the classroom context in their home countries prior to immersion) typically after puberty<sup>10</sup>. There were two proficiency criteria that they had to satisfy in order for their data to be included in the analysis: they had to achieve a minimum 76% accuracy score in a non-standardised C-test (for procedure, see Klein-Braley & Raatz 1984), used as a measure of general language proficiency<sup>11</sup>, and they had to leave an impression of near-nativeness on the experimenter, a highly proficient non-native speaker of Italian, in terms of accuracy, fluency and lexical choice during the experiment. More details on the participants are given in Table 1.

Group	Age of testing		Age of first exposure		Age of immersion		Proficiency score (%)	
	Mean	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	Range
L1	24.5	21-34	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	97.25	92-100
L2	25.38	21-30	15.44	10-19	18.88	15-24	90.63	79-99

**Table 1.** Information on the participants

### 3.3. Materials and procedure

As stated above, the methodology used in the study was the same as in Sorace (1992), i.e. an acceptability judgement task in which the judgements were elicited by ME. The task contained 56 test items and 164 distractors. The items were divided into 4 lists. Among the test items, there were 8 sentences with each of the 7 verb classes in the ASH. Each verb class was represented by 4 verbs. The verb classes did not differ in their overall lexical frequency, as confirmed by a Kruskal-Wallis test. Lexical frequencies of individual verbs were obtained from the lemmatised version of CoLFIS (*Corpus e Lessico di Frequenza dell'Italiano Scritto*, 'Corpus and Frequency Lexicon of Written Italian') (Bertinetto et al. 2005), a 3-million word corpus of contemporary written Italian.

As in Sorace (1992), there were two sentences for each verb. However, the two sentences differed in the use of *ne* rather than in the auxiliary. More precisely, while both sentences contained the correct auxiliary, *ne* was used in only one of them. The lexical material used in the two sentences was minimally different. The sentences with *ne* were marked in terms of word order in comparison to the sentences without *ne* as they contained a topicalised NP, placed after the postverbal quantifier and separated by commas from the rest of the sentence. The two types of sentences are illustrated in (4):

- (4) a. Ne sono scappati molti, di nemici, davanti ai fucili.  
 QCL are escaped many of enemies in-front of-the rifles  
 'Of enemies, many of them escaped from the rifles.'
- b. Molti soldati sono scappati davanti al pericolo.  
 many soldiers are escaped in-front of-the danger  
 'Many soldiers escaped from the danger.'

<sup>9</sup> These subjects were included in the study for practical reasons. Given that Croatian and Serbian do not differ in the aspects relevant for this study, the inclusion of Serbian speakers was considered methodologically permissible.

<sup>10</sup> Only 2 subjects were first exposed to Italian before puberty, i.e. at the age of 10. Their responses in the experiment proved to be within the range of the other subjects.

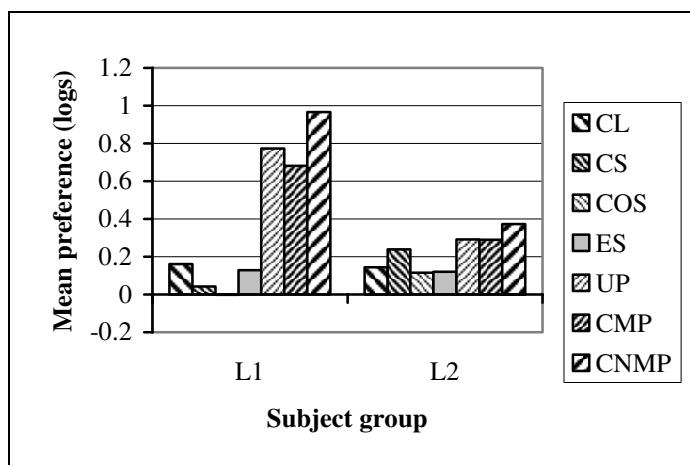
<sup>11</sup> The score of the L2 learners was, however, significantly lower than that of the native speakers, as indicated by the results of the independent-samples *t*-test ( $t = 4.139$ ,  $df = 20.070$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

The task was run on a laptop computer and was implemented with SuperLab Pro 2.0. The sentences were presented in the centre of a 14.4" screen in black font against a white background. The modulus sentence was written on a piece of paper and was shown on top of the screen throughout the task. The sentences were randomised for each subject. The task was self-paced, i.e. the subjects had unlimited time to make a judgement and write it down on an answer sheet. Examples and a practice session preceded the experimental session.

Statistical analysis was performed on normalised and log-transformed judgements. Normalisation was achieved by dividing each numerical value by the value that the subject had assigned to the modulus sentence. Judgements were then transformed by taking the decadic logarithm. The analysis was carried out on the mean differences between the values for the two sentences with the same verb, which represent relative preferences for one of the two sentences. These differences were calculated by subtracting the individual subjects' values for the sentences with *ne* from the values for the sentences without *ne*. Positive values thus indicate a preference for the sentences without *ne* and negative ones a preference for the sentences with *ne*. Bigger values indicate stronger preferences.

### 3.4. Results

Mean differences between acceptability judgements on sentences with *ne* and those without *ne* of both subject groups with all lexical-semantic classes of intransitives are shown in Figure 1.

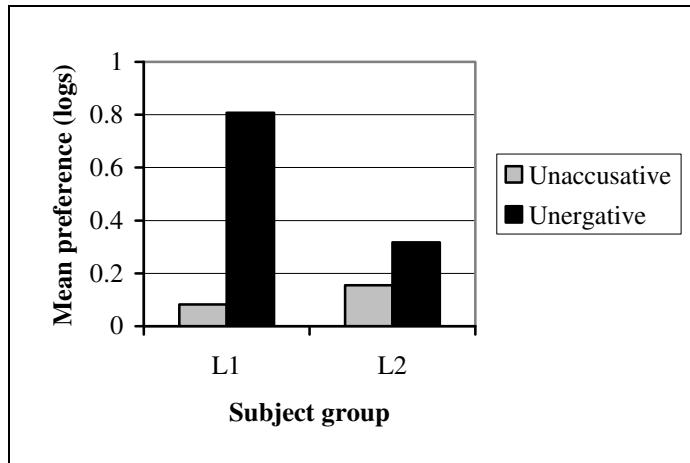


**Figure 1.** Judgements on the seven lexical-semantic classes of intransitives

It can be seen in the above figure that, similarly to the native speakers, the L2 learners prefer the sentences without *ne* with all verb classes. This suggests that they are sensitive to the marked word order of the sentences with *ne*. An exception to the native speakers' overall pattern of preference for the sentences without *ne* are their judgements on continuation of state verbs, for which there is no preference for either type of sentence (the exact numerical value, which is very small, is in fact negative).

Focusing first on the learners' knowledge of the syntactic properties of *ne*-cliticisation, we can see that the learners' preferences for the sentences without *ne* are stronger with unergative than with unaccusative classes. The same pattern is revealed by the native speakers. This is even more obvious in Figure 2, which shows average values for unaccusative and unergative verbs of the two subject groups. The different manner in which the two syntactic classes are judged is confirmed by a significant main effect of syntactic class in a repeated-measures ANOVA conducted on the mean differences between the judgements on the sentences with and without *ne* of both subject groups with unaccusative and unergative verbs ( $F_1(1,26) = 15.317, p < .05$ ;  $F_2(1,26) = 45.259, p < .001$ ). Further confirmation is provided by the fact that the *t*-test conducted on the mean values for the two syntactic classes yields a significant result for the L1 group, both by subject ( $t = -3.063, df = 11, p < .05$ ) and by item ( $t = -6.794,$

$df = 12.590$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and for the L2 group, by item ( $t = -2.110$ ,  $df = 26$ ,  $p < .05$ ). These effects suggest that the learners distinguish between the two syntactic classes in terms of the grammaticality of their usage with *ne*, i.e. that they know that *ne*-cliticisation can be used only with unaccusatives.

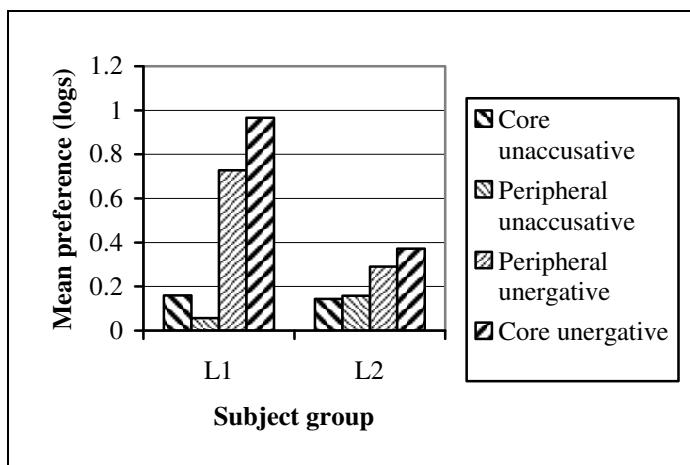


**Figure 2.** Judgements on the two syntactic classes of intransitives

The learners do, however, differ from the native speakers in terms of the degree to which they distinguish unaccusatives and unergatives. This is revealed by a significant interaction between syntactic verb class and subject group ( $F_1(1,26) = 6.132$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $F_2(1,26) = 25.659$ ,  $p < .001$ ) in the above ANOVA. They also differ from the native speakers in their overall determinacy of judgements, as indicated by a main effect of subject group significant by-item ( $F(1,26) = 14.178$ ,  $p < .05$ ) in the ANOVA. We believe that despite these differences between the two groups, the data patterns and statistical effects contained in the learners' judgements provide us with enough evidence to conclude that the learners have acquired the syntactic properties of *ne*-cliticisation.

Turning now to the learners' knowledge of the lexical-semantic properties of *ne*-cliticisation, Figure 1 shows that, similarly to the native speakers, the learners show different levels of preference for the sentences without *ne* with different lexical-semantic classes of intransitives. A repeated-measures ANOVA, conducted on the mean differences between the judgements on the sentences with and without *ne* of both subject groups with different lexical-semantic classes of intransitives, yields a significant main effect of lexical-semantic class ( $F_1(6,156) = 9.429$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $F_2(6,21) = 7.431$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The strength of the learners' preferences for the sentences without *ne* more or less gradually increases from the unaccusative towards the unergative end of the ASH. The learners' judgements roughly follow a linear trend predicted by the ASH, as confirmed by a significant result in Page's *L* test for trends (for procedure, see Page 1963), testing for a trend based on the ASH ( $L = 1911$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The same could be said for the native speakers' judgements, for which the same Page's *L* test is also significant ( $L = 1555$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

However, a look at Figure 3, showing average values for core and peripheral unaccusatives and unergatives of the two subject groups, reveals that, rather unusually, the learners' judgements seem to be more consistent with the ASH than those of the native speakers. More specifically, it can be seen that the native speakers prefer the sentences without *ne* more strongly with core than with peripheral unaccusatives, while, according to the ASH, this should be the other way round. However, the advantage displayed by the learners in this respect is in fact very slight as their preferences for the sentences without *ne* with peripheral unaccusatives are only slightly stronger than their preferences with core unaccusatives. The situation is different with unergatives, where both subject groups prefer the sentences without *ne* more strongly with core than with peripheral verbs, as the ASH would predict. We can thus conclude that the pattern of gradience found in both groups' judgements on unaccusatives is less consistent with the ASH than that contained in their judgements on unergatives.



**Figure 3.** Judgements on core and peripheral unaccusatives and unergatives

A somewhat different way in which the two subject groups judged different lexical-semantic classes of intransitives gives rise to a significant interaction between lexical-semantic class and subject group ( $F_1(6,156) = 3.868, p < .05$ ;  $F_2(6,21) = 4.188, p < .05$ ) in the ANOVA conducted on the mean values for different lexical-semantic classes. The fact that the learners' judgements are overall less determinate than the judgements of the native speakers again gives rise to a significant main effect of subject group ( $F(1,21) = 8.434, p < .05$ ) in this ANOVA conducted by item. As above, we believe that despite these differences between groups, based on the patterns and statistical effects found in the learners' judgements, we are in a position to argue that the knowledge of the lexical-semantic properties of *ne*-cliticisation is in place in the learners' mental grammars.

To summarise, we have seen that the L2 learners proved able to make distinctions between the two syntactic and the seven lexical-semantic classes of intransitives with respect to their acceptability with *ne*-cliticisation in a way that is consistent with the ASH. This leads us to a conclusion that they have acquired both the syntactic and the lexical-semantic properties of this phenomenon. An interesting finding concerning both the native and the non-native speakers is the fact that gradient effects observed in their data cannot be completely captured by the ASH, especially as far as unaccusative verbs are concerned.

#### 4. Discussion

The present study aimed to determine whether *ne*-cliticisation with intransitive verbs, a phenomenon relating to the lexicon-syntax interface, can be fully acquired in the L2. Following the predictions of the Interface Hypothesis concerning phenomena at internal interfaces and based on the findings of the previous L2 studies, we predicted that this should indeed be possible. This prediction was confirmed in the study as we obtained evidence for the L2 learners' knowledge of both the syntactic and the lexical-semantic properties of *ne*-cliticisation.

Our findings are thus compatible with the findings of the previous studies into the same phenomenon (Sorace 1992) and other unaccusative phenomena in Italian (Sorace 1992) and Spanish (Montrul 2004, 2005), which also detected sensitivity to the ASH gradient in L2 grammars. Cumulative evidence from all of these studies suggests that phenomena at the lexicon-syntax interface are acquirable in the L2. This is consistent with the aspect of the Interface Hypothesis that predicts successful L2 acquisition of phenomena at internal interfaces. The same applies to evidence from a number of recent L2 studies into phenomena pertaining to the semantics-syntax interface in different languages (Borgonovo et al. 2006a, b, Borgonovo & Prévost 2003, Dekydtspotter et al. 1997, 1999/2000, 2001, Dekydtspotter & Sprouse 2001, Montrul & Slabakova 2003, Slabakova 2006, Tsimpli & Sorace 2006, among others).

Contrary to Sorace (1992), we observed gradient effects consistent with the ASH primarily among unergative, and not unaccusative verbs. It should be borne in mind, though, that our findings are not completely comparable with those of Sorace (1992) as they are based on the analysis of the *mean differences* between judgements on the sentences with *ne* and those without *ne*, while the findings of Sorace that we reported here are based only on the mean judgements on the sentences with *ne*. Nevertheless, from the comparison of both sets of findings with Sorace's (1992) findings on auxiliary selection we can conclude that native and non-native intuitions on *ne*-cliticisation are less consistent with the ASH than those on auxiliary selection. The ASH thus seems to serve as a better descriptive model of gradience in auxiliary selection than in *ne*-cliticisation. A theoretical implication of this is that gradience in the two unaccusative diagnostics might not be determined by identical lexical-semantic factors. At the moment, it is not clear which features play a role in gradience in auxiliary selection, although several proposals have been put forward (see Bentley and Eythórsson 2003, Legendre 2007, Mateau 2002, 2004). To our knowledge, no study has yet attempted to investigate gradience in *ne*-cliticisation from a theoretical point of view.

Returning now to the developmental aspect of our study, there is one problem that we see in testing the claim that certain properties of grammar can be fully acquired in the L2, namely that it is not clear what qualifies as 'full' or 'complete' acquisition of a phenomenon on the part of L2 learners. Does this mean that the learners' performance in a certain task should not differ statistically from that of the native speakers in any respect, or that it should not differ in a theoretically meaningful way? In this paper, we adopted the latter, somewhat more flexible approach. In our data, we thus looked for evidence that the learners were able to make syntactic and lexical-semantic distinctions relevant for *ne*-cliticisation to a statistically significant degree and decided to disregard the fact that their judgements differed statistically from those of the native speakers in some respects, primarily in terms of determinacy. While in principle we do agree that higher determinacy implies greater knowledge, we believe that in cases in which we are dealing with properties of grammar as subtle as syntactic gradience, a focus on determinacy might prevent us from gaining a full insight into the *qualitative* aspect of the learners' knowledge, manifested in the learners' ability to make certain theoretically relevant distinctions.

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# Proceedings of the 10th Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Conference (GASLA 2009)

edited by Melissa Bowles, Tania Ionin,  
Silvina Montrul, and Annie Tremblay

Cascadilla Proceedings Project Somerville, MA 2009

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Kraš, Tihana. 2009. The Lexicon-Syntax Interface in L2 Italian: *Ne*-Cliticisation with Intransitive Verbs.  
In *Proceedings of the 10th Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Conference (GASLA 2009)*,  
ed. Melissa Bowles et al., 220-230. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

or:

Kraš, Tihana. 2009. The Lexicon-Syntax Interface in L2 Italian: *Ne*-Cliticisation with Intransitive Verbs.  
In *Proceedings of the 10th Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Conference (GASLA 2009)*,  
ed. Melissa Bowles et al., 220-230. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. [www.lingref.com](http://www.lingref.com), document #2272.