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THE ITALIAN AND ENGLISH PERSPECTIVES IN NARRATIONS: EVIDENCE FROM RETELLINGS OF NATIVE SPEAKERS AND L2 LEARNERS

ABSTRACT

This study aims at illustrating some peculiarities of the Italian and English narrative perspectives in semi-spontaneous retellings produced by native speakers of either language. The native narrations will then be compared to the ones produced by Italian learners of L2 English in order to identify the potential similarities and differences between the three groups. Our results have typological, acquisitional and cognitive implications. For the typological implications, we shall demonstrate that languages with similar tempo-aspectual markings can work very differently in the way information is 'packaged' and organised in narrations, due to reasons going beyond grammar. As to the Second Language Acquisition domain, we shall show that learners cannot capture some of the peculiarities of the L2: this triggers either a transfer from their L1 narrative perspective in the L2 or a "mixed" narrative perspective combining both elements of the L1 and the L2. As to cognitive implications, we shall suggest that perspective is shaped and moulded not only by grammatical facts but also by the way individuals of a specific community conceive and formulate interactions and textual genres.

I. INTRODUCTION¹

From the Seventies up to the late Nineties, most of the scientists of the second language acquisition (SLA) field essentially focused on lexical, morphological and syntactic problems of initial learners. Even when interested in textual organization, their works were concerned with low levels of competence (cf., for instance, Bernini and Ramat 1991; Klein and Perdue 1992; Dietrich et al. 1995). A stage that they were very much concerned with was the *basic variety* (*ibid.*), namely a stage based on neutral and universal mechanisms of pragmatic and semantic nature, which allows a learner to "survive" – from a communicative viewpoint – in a foreign society, but still far from the grammar of the target language.

The new millennium has begun with an interest in high levels of competence in L2, sometimes by authors previously concerned with the basic variety. This new wave of studies has focused on different types of oral textual productions, most of all on narrations (cf., Andorno and Benazzo 2010; Benazzo and Andorno 2015; Carroll and von Stutterheim 2003; Carroll et al. 2004; Carroll and Lambert 2006; Carroll et al. 2008 a/b; Chini 2003, 2005, 2008; Giuliano 2012; Giuliano and Musto 2016, 2018; von Stutterheim and Klein 2002; von Stutterheim et al. 2003), less frequently on descriptions (cf. Carroll et al. 2000; Giuliano and Di Maio 2007). So in the last 20 years several authors in Europe have created a new wave of studies in the SLA field, that is concerned with the way advanced learners *select, correlate and package information* from different referential domains (entities, time, space, predicates, modality) *when building a specific text* in a L2. Authors define this complex interweaving of cognitive, linguistic and cultural processes as *perspective*.

The concept of perspective owes a lot to the meaning that Dan I. Slobin has provided in his several works on the *thinking for speaking* hypothesis since the late Eighties (cf., among his works, his studies of 1987, 1996, 2003): speakers of a given language exploit different *rhetorical styles* as reflex of their different ways of looking at reality when they have to talk about it. In particular, Slobin's hypothesis is referred to the rhetorical stratagems that an individual picks up when he/she has to translate his/her thoughts into verbal language, so they have to do with *online processing mechanisms* intervening in daily talking activity. The *thinking for speaking* hypothesis is a modern revised version of linguistic relativity, thanks to which Slobin tries to explain the impact of a given language on cognition since early childhood. Supporting this same hypothesis, several scientists of the SLA field (cf. works quoted above) have explored the possibility for adult learners to revise or drop the L1 *thinking for speaking* when acquiring a new language, especially for learners who have reached advanced and almost native competences.

The acquisition of a new way of thinking – a new "perspective" – in order to express themselves in a new linguistic system is a real challenge for adult L2 learners. The grammatical interface of these principles is exhaustively described by grammars (both for native speakers and learners) with respect to the level of sentence. But linguistic relativity is "encapsulated" in textual and pragmatic variables as well in a complex way (cf. Gumperz and Levinson 1996), that can vary deeply across languages. In the last two decades second language scientists have very much focused on textual dissimilarities as determined by grammars but much less on enunciative and pragmatic variables (cf., nonetheless, Giuliano and Di Maio 2007; Giuliano and Musto 2016, 2018).

Supporting the *thinking for speaking* hypothesis, our present study will explore the following research objectives: to identify the perspectives taken on by Italian and English native speakers when executing an online narrative experiment; to compare them with the perspectives exploited by Italian learners of L2 English with respect to the same experiment.

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON THE NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

2.1. The viewpoint of native speakers

In their several studies on English, German and French (cf. *supra*), Carroll, Lambert and von Stutterheim proposed a 15 minute long video stimulus with no words called *Quest* (by T. Stellmach 1996), in which a single protagonist moves across different worlds searching for water. This same stimulus has been exploited in the present research (cf. § 3.1). As to Italian, Chini (2003, 2005, 2008) employed a short video withdrawn from Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* having a duration of 20 minutes. Concerning Andorno and Benazzo (2010) and Giuliano and Musto (2016, 2018), they used a third stimulus for Italian, French and German (*The Finite Story* by Dimroth, 2006). Altogether these studies have pointed out some relevant peculiarities of the narrative perspective in the languages concerned, both as L1s and L2s, but the different stimuli that they used do not permit a direct comparison, and they have not otherwise focused on the same aspects.

As to English, authors have described the English native perspective as a *deictic* or *camera* perspective, because anchored to a reference time coinciding with *now* and the point of view of an external narrator. Let's observe the following extract from Carroll et al. (2004: 200), where a native informant of English is narrating what he has just watched but is not watching any more:

(1) English native speaker

// he's waking up from his fall // he looks in front of him // and there's this big piece of paper // coming straight for him // and he jumps up onto his knees // and the piece of paper misses him // alright // so he stands up // and he's walking along [...] through this plane // and he hears the drip again // so he starts running // and he sees this moist area on this piece of paper

The authors think that native speakers of English select a perspective in which time spans marked by the *present simple* are included into time spans marked by the progressive aspect, which leads to a continual alternation of *-ing* forms and simple forms. In the temporal structure originated

from such narrations, anaphoric relations play a secondary role since the completion of an event is not explicitly stated but rather inferred. The reason why native speakers of English select such a temporal perspective when organizing narrative information would lay in the crucial role played by the progressive verb aspect in their language. Languages lacking grammaticalized progressive aspect, such as German or French, tend to select alternative perspectives but not necessarily the same. German native speakers, for instance, opt for an *anaphoric* perspective, in which each event is anchored to the completion of the previous event (this perspective is also said to be *holistic*), as the adverb *dann* ('then') clearly points out (cf. Carroll et al. 2004: 203 for ex. 2).

(2) German native speaker

Dann sieht ersich plötzlich auf einem grossen Steinberg
 'then all at once he finds himself on a big stone mountain'
 Und kann dann nicht mehr runter ohne sich was anzutun
 'and he can't go down anymore without getting hurt'
 Er schaut sich um
 'he looks around'
 Und hört dann plötzlich wieder diesen Wassertropfen
 'and then all at once he hears this dripping again'
 Der auf die Steine fällt
 'that falls on these stones'
 Und versucht daneben von dem Steinturmab zusteigen
 'and then he tries to jump down from the stone tower'...

As far as the Italian language is concerned, it has been much less studied in terms of perspective and the available works are not easy to compare, as we pointed out above. Moreover, the authors analyse completely different aspects of narrations: Andorno and Benazzo, Giuliano and Musto focus on assertive markings such as German *Doch*, Spanish *Síque* and English *do* auxiliary; Chini is interested in the reference to the protagonists and the function of subordination, for which she points out its high frequency and hierarchic intra-connections (cf. Chini 2008: 145-146):

(3) Italian native speaker

Charlot arriva a un incrocio
 'Charlot arrives at a crossing'
 si ferma
 'He stops'
 Per lasciar passare un camion
 'to let a truck pass'
 Dal quale cade una ban/ una bandiera

'from which a flag falls'
 Che indicava
 'which indicated'
 Che il materiale
 'that the stuff'
 che era appoggiato su questo camion
 'which was on this truck'
 Era più lungo del camion
 'was longer than this truck'.

As a result, the relationship between time and processes has been less explored in Italian with respect to studies on German, English and French.

2.2 The viewpoint of L2 learners

The studies quoted above for native perspectives in English, French, German and Italian also contain analysis concerned with L2 learners of these same languages. By a comparison between L1 and L2 data, the various authors identify the similarities and divergences between the rhetorical styles adopted by the native and learner groups and evaluate the possible transfer of the L1 *thinking for speaking* into L2 narrations.

The acquisition of the rhetorical styles of a given language and all of the textual peculiarities going along with them is not an easy task for a learner – either in an institutional or natural environment – since the patterns involved in the construction of a complex text often skip a systematic linguistic analysis. The 'grammar of texts' – according to our terminology and those of the authors above – is not so strict as the grammar of sentence, since it is based on preferential cohesion patterns rather than *stricto sensu* rules; these patterns are driven by optimisation principles (i. e. the greater or lesser accessibility to progressive aspect, the verb or satellite framed character of a language etc.), that in their turn are the consequence of the most habitual concepts and relationships in a given language. Grammar books (either for native speakers or learners) describe the grammar of sentence in a very detailed way but that of texts, by very general rules of assembling (for instance, for a narrative text, by universal organising criteria such as *introduction, triggering event, main structure, side structures*, etc.). As a final complication, according to some authors (Giuliano and Di Maio 2008; Giuliano and Musto 2016, 2018) the grammatical facts are not enough to explain the functioning of textuality in a language: the enunciative and interactional habits specific to a community are equally crucial.

The acquisition of the grammar of texts is in many ways implicit and unconscious for the native speakers of a given language, who interiorize it during childhood by the supporting roles of both family and school. Its use

is quite automatic and can be very resistant to restructuring, which explains the transfer of the L1 *thinking for speaking* into L2 texts (narration or other).

3. THE STUDY

3.1. The stimulus and the informants

The stimulus that we used to collect our L1 and L2 data is a ten minute long film titled *Quest*, produced by T. Stellmach in 1997 and already used in studies about perspective in L1 and L2 (cf., for instance, Carroll, Lambert and von Stutterheim 2003, 2006, 2008a). Since in the past it was exploited very infrequently for Italian, our present study makes a confrontation with other works possible.

The story is about a man made of sand moving through different worlds in order to search for water. The film opens up with the protagonist being in a sandy world from which he moves to a paper world and from there to a world made of rocks and finally to another one populated by industrial machines. Each of these places involves several dangers for the sand man. The leitmotif during the passage from one world to another one is given by a sound of water dripping, that the protagonist continually tries to reach but never succeeds.

The stimulus was shown to our informants according to the same methodology followed by the authors above: first the informant watched the whole film; then he/she watched it again in three different fragments, one for each world. The first visualization was just meant to acquaint the informant with the whole plot; the fragmented visualization was used for linguistic production, so the informant was asked to tell a listener what he/she had just seen after each fragment. The question he/she was posed was: "what have you just watched?". The listener did not know the film, so the task was based on a lack of shared knowledge.

The informants who took part in the investigation are divided into three groups: two reference groups formed by Italian and English native speakers; a group of Italian learners of L2 English. Each group is composed of 16 informants. The Italian reference group comes from the Naples area; eleven out of sixteen have a university degree, the others have a high school diploma. For the English L1 group, almost all of them are American and work for the US Navy or the NATO base in Naples; they have a university degree excepted one. Concerning learners, finally, only three of them don't have a university diploma. For all learners the C1 level of the European Framework for Languages was ascertained by appropriate written and oral tests.

3.2. Theoretical framework and research questions

Our theoretical framework is functional and textual. It has already been described partly in § 1, where we presented the *thinking for speaking* hypothesis proposed by Slobin and the debate about the *perspective-taking* when building a text in a L1 or a L2. As we stated previously, in the last two decades several studies have shown that advanced L2 learners master the grammar of the target language *at utterance level but not at discourse level*, since their way of establishing anaphoric linkage and textual cohesion still reflects their mother tongue perspective-taking. Those works will be our reference point along with the *Quaestio* model of textual analysis by Klein and von Stutterheim (1989, 1991). According to the *Quaestio* theory, a text is wholly shaped and informationally organized with respect to an unconscious question individuals learn to formulate since early childhood. The prototypical question, or *Quaestio*, concerned with a narrative text is *what happened to the protagonist in time X?*, where the event is the information segment to specify, or focus, and the protagonist and the time span the segments in topic. But the *Quaestio* is influenced by the formal and conceptual patterns a certain language has available (core grammatical features), which explains the possibility for individuals of different native languages to conceive, for the same type of text, relatively different *Quaestiones*: for instance, for English, the appropriate *Quaestio* could be *what is happening to the protagonist now?*, in which the deictic perspective is emphasized; for German, a *Quaestio* such as *what happened to P after event X* seems more pertinent, and so on. This internal question dictates the discourse principles coherence and cohesion are based on. The direct answers to the *Quaestio* give place to the *foreground* or *main structure* of a narration; information other than these answers, such as opinions, explications, is said to form the *background* or *side structures*. The *Quaestio* theory can be easily combined with Slobin's *thinking for speaking hypothesis*, since the *Quaestio* itself forges the way thoughts must be assembled when individuals express themselves by words.

For Italian – a much less studied language with respect to perspective than English, French and German – it is not clear by what type of *Quaestio* its native speakers will mould their answers while building a fictional narration such as *Quest*. Since Italian is a language that has grammaticalized morphemes to express progressive aspect (auxiliary *essere*: 'to be' + gerundive; ex. *Sto mangiando*: 'I am eating'), we can wonder whether its native speakers:

- a. will ever select a deictic perspective such as the one picked up by English native speakers or will prefer an alternative perspective;
- b. will encode the alternation between main structure and side structures by similar morphological and/or syntactic principles.

As to our L2 data (Italian learners of English, cf. § 4.2), we shall finalize our exploratory analysis concerning the two basic research questions:

- c. have learners identified the *thinking for speaking* of the language they have acquired?
- d. is there any conceptual and linguistic transfer from L1 into L2?

We shall answer these questions by considering – as Giuliano and Di Maio (2008) and Giuliano and Musto (2016, 2018) propose it – that grammars as such are not able to explain all the textual facts observable and that the enunciative and interactional context is equally crucial in shaping any type of text.

4. THE DATA

4.1. The analysis of the reference groups

4.1.1. The selection of verb morphology

In many ways, our English native data confirms the results of the studies discussed in § 2.1, since the progressive morphology seems to play a crucial role in the retellings of the stimulus *Quest*. In most of these cases (cf. ex. 4-5), the progressive aspect is used in contexts giving information about the circumstances where the actions of the protagonists take place, as in the following passages, where the *-ing* form events always belong to the background of narrations.

(4) English native speaker1

The sand person falls into a new landscape (FG)² // which is covered with paper (BG) // and paper is blowing around (BG) // there is also a tornado shape (BG) // with paper blowing in it and # (BG) // he's continuing to search for water (BG)

(5) English native speaker2

they went from sand to paper to rocks (FG) // which is basically showing (BG) // the challenge is evolving (BG) // so it's getting tougher (BG) // it's not getting any easier... (BG) // he's having to push harder (BG) // to get to what he's trying to find (BG)

In our data, nevertheless, the *-ing* form can go along with the time adverb *then* – which prototypically marks foreground events (namely the chronological events) – in such a way as to create a *contrast* between the bounded processes demanded by the adverb and the progressive aspect furnished by the verb morphology³.

(6) English native speaker3

And *then* he's walking along the stone world [...] // And *then* they're being replaced by new steel // And *then* [they're] welding on

(7) English native speaker4

And *then* the sand just kept burying him // and *then* he's crawling

Another contrast is suggested by a sequence of processes as *fall, slip, hit, knock down*, that would demand a telic rather than an atelic realization:

(8) English native speaker5

he seems to have jumped into an even more dangerous situation // There's more machinery more mechanical arms // and he's running away // *he's falling* // *he's slipping ah* // [he's] trying to keep his balance // [he's] trying not to be hit by machinery

(9) English native speaker6

he was trying to find water // but he couldn't get it // *he was getting hit in the face with a piece of paper that's knocking / him down*

The Italian tempo-aspectual system is in some ways comparable to the English one because of the rich temporal and aspectual distinctions that it offers. These distinctions do not necessarily correspond to the English ones in a punctual way, as often happens when comparing two different languages. The following extracts are concerned with the same introducing scenes commented upon for the English native extracts, namely the sequences of the stimulus introducing the type of world the protagonist acts in.

(10) Italian native speaker1

Ora si trova in un secondo ambiente (BG)

'now he's in a second environment'

sempre un ambiente dove c'è mancanza di vegetazione di acqua di qualsiasi cosa (BG)

'still an environment where there's a lack of vegetation, water, anything'

Che però è ricoperto da tanti fogli di carta (BG)

'but that is covered by many sheets of paper'

Che il vento stesso rimuove (BG)

'that the wind itself removes'

Creando vortici di fogli di carta (BG)

'creating vortexes of paper sheets'

Addirittura c'è un foglio di carta (BG)

'even there's a sheet of paper'

Che arriva sul volto di questo pupazzo stesso (FG)

'that reaches the face of the puppet itself'

(11) Italian native speaker2

In questo mondo inferiore diciamo l'aspetto meccanico proprio di una fabbrica (BG)

'in this inferior world # so to speak # the mechanical aspect typical of a factory'

Che lavora il ferro (BG)

'that works iron'

Che tratta il ferro (BG)

'that treats iron'

che lo comprime (BG)

'that compresses it'

Even at a quick reading, the passages above clearly show differences with respect to the extracts that we have shown for English. The first relevant divergence lays in the aspectual choices by Italian speakers, who normally select the *presente semplice* despite the possibility that they theoretically have of opting for the *presente progressivo* as well. The crucial role played by progressive morphology in English as compared to Italian is demonstrated by its percentage of employment in our native data (14.67%) with respect to the total of events produced (1321); the percentage of the *presente progressivo* is significantly lower in Italian retellings (4.55 %) in comparison to the total of events narrated (1360). It is however not impossible to find the *presente progressivo* in the Italian retellings. In the extracts below it has the same function as English *present continuous* in several of the passages proposed above, especially for its employment in a main clause, but extracts 12 and 13 are among the very few English-like occurrences in all our Italian data:

(12) Italian native speaker3

Cerca di rompere il suolo (FG)

'he tries to break through the ground'

Per potervi entrare (BG)

'in order to go in'

ma qui alcune lamiere di ferro lo stanno schiacciando (BG)

'but here some iron plates are smashing him'

(13) Italian native speaker4

Alla fine si rende conto (FG)

'finally he realizes'

Che c'è dell'acqua (BG)

'that there's some water'

Quindi lui sta cercando sta cercando (BG)

'so he's searching he's searching'

According to the many works by Carroll, Lambert and von Stutterheim (2004, 2006, 2008a, 2008b), in a textual framework, the use of the *progressive aspect* would express the selection of a deictic perspective, namely a temporal perspective anchored to deictic *now*, that a speaker would exploit by virtue of the core role played by progressive morphology in his/her L1 grammar (cf. also § 2.1, 3.2). However, we think that this explanation cannot be the reason for the use of Italian *progressivo* in 12 e 13, given its extremely rare – even though *possible* – exploitation. As to the supposed deictic perspective selected by English native speakers, it sometimes evidently contrasts with the selection of the adverb *then* (cf. ex. 6): progressive *V-ing* demands “now” and not an anaphorical adverb such as *then* (cf. § 5 for a detailed discussion of these last points).

4.1.2. The foreground vs background analysis and their reflex in syntax and morphology

Differently from most of the studies about English (cf. 2.1), we have deeply explored the relationship between the foreground and the background of narrations for our English L1 group, and then compared them to the Italian retellings.

Different types of correlations are possible between the notions of foreground/background versus the functioning of morphology and syntax. Regarding syntax, the following table gives information about the independent or subordinate character of clauses in our reference groups’ retellings with respect to their belonging to background or foreground.

	Foreground (main clauses)	Background (main clauses)	Foreground (subordinates)	Background (subordinates)
English L1	371 (28.08%)	422 (31.94%)	29 (2.19%)	481 (36.41%)
Italian L1	441 (32.42%)	297 (21.83%)	56 (41.1%)	607(44.63%)

Table 1. English and Italian L1: main and subordinate clauses in foreground vs background

The most relevant differences between the two groups of narrations are concerned with main and subordinate clauses in the background: English native speakers consistently employ main clauses in this informational domain (31.94%), for which Italian informants definitively prefer subordinates (44.63%). More specifically, the percentages of main vs subordinate clauses in the background are very close to each other for English (31.94% m. cl. vs 36.41% sub. cl.), but relevantly different for Italian (21.94% m. cl. vs 44.63% sub. cl.). In a more general way, Italian speakers mark the organisation of information through subordination more frequently, since subordinates (48.08% out of the total of clauses) are almost as frequent as main

clauses; subordinates are not lacking in English retellings but they amount to 38% (out of the total of clauses). As a consequence, *hierarchizing is cognitively more prominent for Italian than for English L1 informants*.

As to the types of subordination, a new table follows.

	Relative	Object	Temporal	Purpose Complex verb constructions 4	Purpose to <i>for</i> + INF	Causal	Modal	Instrumental	Comparative	Subject
English L1	170 33.53%	120 23.66%	63 12.42%	33 6.50%	45 8.87%	32 6.31%	6 1.18%	1 0.19%	18 3.55%	10 1.97%
Italian L1	283 43.27%	110 16.81%	81 12.38%	45 6.88%	39 5.96%	50 7.64%	8 1.22%	10 1.52%	9 1.37%	8 1.22%

Table 2. English L1 vs Italian L1: types of subordinate clauses

The most remarkable difference between the two groups of retellings lies in the higher percentages of relative clauses in Italian. For relative clauses in English narrations – as can be expected –, the implicit *V-ing* type is frequent (10.25%); in Italian retellings, conversely it has just one counterpart (*proveniente* ‘coming from’). In the latter a different type of implicit relative clause emerges, namely that based on past participle (ex.: *un mondo fatto di pietre* : ‘a world [which is] made of stone’). What also seems significant when comparing the two groups of informants is the much higher percentage of *narrative*⁵ relative clauses used by Italian speakers (14.67%) with respect to English L1 speakers (4.93%), who mostly select relative clauses for a general attributive function. As a consequence, in Italian, relativizing seems to play a more crucial role when packaging information for narrations, which is strengthened by the fact that this type of subordination takes up the highest percentage of subordinate clauses (43.27%, followed by completive object clauses with 16.81%).

Regarding the relationship between syntax and progressive morphology and their possible link to the foreground/background distinction, English native informants employ the *continuous* forms in a more or less balanced way in main and subordinate clauses (47.47% in main cl., 28.87% in relative cl., 10.56 in object cl., 6.33% in temporal cl., 7.74% in comparative and causal cl.); conversely, the Italian subjects mostly use the *presente progressivo* in subordinates (11.11% in main cl; 37.03 % in relative cl., the other occurrences equally distributed between temporal, object, subject and comparative cl.). Independently from the syntactical characterization of the

clause, all progressive information belongs to the background level for both languages, excepted few ambiguous clauses (cf. ex. 6-7 for English and ex. 12-13 for Italian).

The lower percentage of syntactic hierarchizing in English retellings with respect to the Italian one is, in our opinion, justified by the more implicit character of English narrating. To fully catch the meaning of this statement it is necessary to analyse the logical relationships exploited by informants in their retellings with respect to main clauses as well: the more or less overt means by which speakers package narrative information units conveyed by independent clauses lay in the types of anaphoric linkage that they exploit to connect this type of clauses. The following table illustrates the most frequent connectors linking main clauses in the two groups of narrations:

	and / e, ed	Adversative (but / ma, però, tutta- via)	Causal (So / così, quindi)	Temporal linkage : (then / poi ; in the end / alla fine etc.)	Juxtaposition 1 (obligatory)	Juxtaposition 2 (selected by the speaker)	Total main clau- ses
English L1	313 (38.45%)	61 (7.49%)	53 (6.51%)	100 (12.28%)	49 (6.01%)	277 (34.02)	814
Italian L1	175 (24.78%)	43 (6.09%)	67 (9.49%)	73 (10.33%)	69 (9.77%)	203 (28.75%)	706

Table 3. English L1 vs Italian L1: connectors in main clauses

The main differences between English and Italian narrations lie in the *and*-type of conjunction, which is definitively more exploited in English, and in the juxtaposition 2anchoring, still more frequent in English, that refers to utterances for which speakers decided not to introduce any explicit link even though possible⁶. These observations take on greater relevance if we also consider the fact that in English the contrast between *present simple* and *progressive -ing form* (with and without auxiliary) can mirror the foreground / background distinction without any overt coordinating or subordinating connector. Let's analyse the following extract:

(14) English native speaker7

The paper is blowing around as the odd sort of tornado shape (BG) // with paper blowing in it ehm (BG) // he's continuing to search for water (BG) [...] // the same person wakes up in a rocky environment (FG) // and a rock nearly falls on his head (FG) // and he stumbles to his feet (FG) // and he finds that part of rock embedded in his arm (FG) // and he then begins to start walking around the rocky environment (FG)

As a result of this way of narrating, coordination becomes a privileged modality to report events, that belong to background or foreground, which

explains the frequent exploitation of juxtaposition and of the conjunction *and*, with respect to main clauses, and the lesser use of subordination in general.

Concerning Italian retellings, coordination and subordination more strictly mirror the foreground / background distinction (cf. table 3). More significantly, Italian speakers show no systematic alternation between different morphological types (note that the progressive is used only in 27 clauses), since they all make a univocal choice: the *presente semplice*. Now, in alternative to syntax and morphology, we can suppose that Italian native speakers exploit *supplementary strategies* in order to signal main clauses as belonging to the foreground or background. The following passages are produced by some of our Italian informants:

(15) Italian native speaker5

Un uomo di sabbia che è assetato (BG)
'a sand man who is thirsty'
e quindi cerca dell'acqua da bere (FG)
'and so he searches for water to drink'
e vicino a lui c'è una bottiglia di vetro (BG)
'and close to him there's a glass bottle' (BG)
è vuota (BG)
'it's empty'
Quindi cerca di scavare nella sabbia (FG)
'so he tries to dig in the sand'
per trovare l'acqua (BG)
'to find water'
ad un certo punto si crea un # come un vuoto (FG)
'at a certain point a sort of # empty space is created'
e quindi viene risucchiato da questo vuoto (FG)
'and so he's sucked in by this empty space'
e quindi scompare diciamo nel deserto (FG)
'and so he disappears let's say in the desert'
Allora il filmato inizia con un pavimento coperto di fogli [...] (BG)
'so the film begins with a floor covered by sheets'
Sul pavimento c'è l'uomo di sabbia privo di conoscenza # (BG)
'on the ground there's the sand man unconscious'
Praticamente ad un certo punto si alza (FG)
'actually at a certain point he wakes up'
e diciamo guarda questi fogli sparsi sul pavimento (FG)
'and let's say he looks at sheets spread on the ground'

(16) Italian native speaker

C'è un alieno (BG)
'there's an alien'

che dorme eh (BG)
 'who sleeps eh'
 diciamo sdraiato su questa sabbia (BG)
 'let's say stretched out on this sand'
 improvvisamente si sveglia (FG)
 'suddenly he wakes up'
 e si guarda intorno (FG)
 'and looks around'
 e c'è accanto a lui una bottiglia [...] (BG)
 'and there's a bottle beside him'
 ma la bottiglia è vuota (BG)
 'but the bottle is empty'
 e comincia a scavare nella sabbia (FG)
 'and he starts digging in the sand'
 [...]
 e mentre scava (BG)
 'and while he digs'
 Improvvisamente lo vediamo sprofondare (FG)
 'suddenly we see him sink'
 e lui annaspava in questa voragine (FG)
 'and grope in thi sgulf'
 che si sta aprendo sotto di lui (BG)
 'which is opening below him'
 per cercare di non sprofondare (BG)
 'to try not to sink' [...]
 e si vede all'improvviso svolazzare tanti fogli di carta (FG)
 'and all of a sudden you see many sheets of paper fly about'

The passages just proposed are narrated by the same tempo-aspectual form, the *presente abituale*, whatever the type of process, but the clauses produced do not belong to the same level of narration. The clauses of the foreground, are often introduced by adverbials such as *ad un certo punto* ('at a certain point'), *all'improvviso* ('all of a sudden') and *improvvisamente* ('suddenly'), namely by strategies that in our opinion highlight the *narrative tension* (Giuliano et al. 2014). These chronological/modal markings push the listener to be particularly attentive to *what he is being told*: that is the reason why we decided to define them as *foreground signalers*. Native speakers of English do not normally have recourse to such means. More specifically, in Italian, the *foreground signalers* are the most frequent temporal markings in the foreground (50.68%), in contrast with the bare 9% of similar means (*suddenly, at a certain point*) exploited in English. Still in contrast with Italian retellings, 72% of English temporal markings used in the foreground correspond to *then*, whose Italian equivalents (*poi, dopodiché*) show up only in 32.87% of chronological markings.

4.2. The learners' retellings in English L2

With respect to the possible correlation between syntax versus the foreground/background distinction, table 4 shows that our learners prefer main clauses for the foreground and subordinates for the side structures (36.2% vs. 31.2%, respectively), as in their L1.

	Foreground (main clauses)	Background (main clauses)	Foreground (subordinates)	Background (subordinates)
English L2	446 (36.2%)	382 (31%)	20 (1.6%)	384 (31.2%)

Table 4. English L2: main and subordinate clauses in foreground vs background

Nevertheless, similarly to English native speakers (cf. table 1), the difference between main clauses and subordinate clauses in the background is minimal (1.2%), which could be interpreted as the learners' ability to master one of the preferential modalities of packaging information in L2.

As to morphology, in this domain as well learners make choices similar to those of native speakers since they basically select the *presente semplice* for the foreground events and the *presente progressivo* to narrate (by subordinate clauses) those belonging to the background (cf. ex. 17-18); however, the progressive is less frequent with respect to native English retellings (9.88% with respect to the total of clauses).

(17) L2 English learner1
 so he looks for this water in this world (FG) // that appear very very hm: bad [ride] //hm so when *he is looking* for this water // he finally find it in another level

(18) L2 English learner2
 And hm now he starts running (FG) // because a: a machine *is following* him and hm // *while he is running* // he falls on a grate

In some very few occurrences (0.8%), the *-ing* form shows up in contexts belonging to the foreground, an interpretation which we are forced to adopt because of the adverb *suddenly*, that by itself demands bounded events (cf. also ex. 15-16).

(19) L2 English learner3
Suddenly two machines *are coming* eh: nearer and nearer to him

As we saw in § 4.1.2, the use of *suddenly* is typical of Italian narrations and is finalized to mark foreground events; this same adverb is rare in English L1 and never associated to *progressive aspect*.

As to the types of subordinates, our analysis demonstrates that learners massively exploit relative ones with respect to other types of clauses, a result that can evidently be compared to the one obtained for Italian native retellings (cf. table 2)

	Relative	Object	Temporal	Purpose Complex verb constructions	Purpose to /for + INF	Causal	Modal	Instrumental	Comparative	Subject
English L2/ 416 clauses	160 38.6%	70 16.8%	57 13.7%	47 11.2%	23 5.5%	35 8.4%	3 0.7%	4 1%	3 0.7%	8 2%

Table 5. English L2: types of subordinate clauses

Still concerning relative clauses, in most cases learners employ those with general attributive function, both with finite (44%) and non finite verb (37%). This last percentage shows that the group of informants in question have perceived the crucial role taken on by implicit *V-ing* clauses in English (cf. ex. 17).

The massive use of explicit relative clauses lets us suppose that learners have not dropped the typical Italian modality of hierarchizing information in narrative (cf. § 4.1.2), despite their high interlanguage level in L2 (C1). As far as the other types of subordinates are concerned, table 5 above illustrates percentages of employment very comparable to those noted for English native speakers. Like for native speakers, we also analyzed the connectors that learners use to introduce main clauses.

	And	Adversative (but)	Causal (so)	Temporal linkage (then, after, later etc.)	Juxtaposition 1 (obligatory)	Juxtaposition 2 (selected by the speaker)	Totals main clauses
English L2	340 (18.4%)	81 (4.6%)	107 (6.1%)	101 (5.4%)	198 (10.7%)	72 (3.8%)	1854

Table 6. English L2 Connectors in main clauses

Similarly to the English native group, our learners mostly exploit the connector *and*, both for foreground and background; this result becomes more interesting if associated to what we found with regard to the optional juxtaposition, which is quite rare (3.8%) if compared to the percentages ascertained for native speakers (34.02% for English L1; 28.75% for Italian L1).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1. Our contribution to the scientific debate about perspective in L1 and L2

In this final paragraph we shall try to highlight the contribution of our study to the debate about the linguistic perspective selected by native speakers of Italian and English and L2 (Italian) learners of English when executing a complex verbal task such as the narration of the short film *Quest* (cf. § 3.1). In order to do that, we go back to the research questions (cf. § 3.2). We shall answer the first two concurrently:

- a. will Italian native speakers ever select a deictic perspective such as the one chosen by English native speakers or would they prefer an alternative perspective?
- b. Will they encode the alternation between the main structure and side structures by morphological and/or syntactic principles?

In principle, there is no reason for which Italian native speakers should not opt for the *presente progressivo*, and that even admitting – along with Squartini (1998) and Bertinetto (2000) – that there is an aspectual discrepancy between English and Italian: in modern Italian the *presente progressivo* may be employed only in cases of *strict focalization*, as in the typical ‘incidental scheme’ where the speaker is only concerned with what is going on at a particular point in time (*Giorgio è arrivato mentre Luca stava facendo la doccia*, ‘Giorgio arrived while Luca was taking his shower’)⁷; English progressive form, conversely, admits sentences such as *while you stay here, I’ll be going home*, which typically present a *durative, non-focalized situation* (in modern Italian, this possibility is severely restricted in the case of the habitual meaning). Extracts from Italian narrations, such as ex. 12 and 13, clearly demonstrate that ongoingness can be selected and sound acceptable in main clauses belonging to the background level of retellings. Nevertheless, it is not a preferential narrative means at all for Italians, who definitively select the *presente semplice* more. By doing so, Italian speakers give up any possible deictic perspective, to which they prefer an anaphoric anchoring of events, but with a peculiarity: the most crucial events are highlighted by what we called *foreground signallers* (*ad un certo punto, all’improvviso, improvvisamente*). The latter mark the passage from background processes to foreground events, which implies a series of chronological happenings. So, differently from English narrations, where the morphological opposition between *present continuous* and *present simple* helps the listener to distinguish between background facts and foreground events, in Italian

narrations the opposition between *presente progressivo* and *presente abituale* plays no role at all.

In our opinion, grammatical facts alone cannot explain this state of affairs; the enunciative theory (cf. Gagliardelli 1999, Adamcewski 2002) can conversely give an interesting contribution to our results. If we accept that there are very different ways of interacting across cultures (cf. Gumperz and Levinson 1996), the enunciative theory becomes helpful in clearing up some aspects of our data: English L1 speakers are oriented towards a more subjective narrative modality, with the *present continuous* playing a crucial role in this respect, since it brings listeners to perceive events not as objective facts but rather as characterized through the enunciator's eyes and feelings. *Be+V-ing* (and its Italian counterpart) *describes a subject and not an action at a given (present, past or future) time*; by means of this structure an enunciator does not report facts in an objective way but rather comments on them as a *spectator*. More specifically, *be* marks the link to a given communicative context and the enunciator's personal involvement, so by means of *be + V-ing* a narration is *interrupted* in order to linger on the subject, observe and describe it. In contexts reported in ex.s 4-9 (§ 4.1) and 14 (§ 4.2), the *ing-* form selected by native speakers has no progressive meaning since the video was off and the form can go along with anaphoric adverbs such as *then* (cf. ex. 6-7, in § 4.1).

Concerning the Italian native speakers, by selecting the *presente semplice* they choose a more objective perspective, but also try to establish a direct contact with their co-enunciators thanks to the *foreground signallers*, which have a clear involving role.

Still in Italian – as we saw – subordination contributes massively to the structuring of background, especially through relative clauses. This result has a contact with what Giuliano (in print) and Berman & Slobin (1994) have observed, respectively, in Italian L1 and English L1 of children. In Italian children's narrations, relative clauses emerge earlier with respect to English children's narrations and are more frequent from the age of four, which Giuliano partly explains by some simpler form/function relationships that relativizing pronouns have in the Italian language with respect to English (Italian, for instance, allows the over-extension of *cui* to any type of entity – animate, inanimate, places – and to any grammatical case). So since childhood, the “preferential means” that a specific language makes available would mould the rhetorical style developed by individuals.

Concerning learners, here are the research questions proposed in § 3.2:

- c. have learners identified the *thinking for speaking* of the language they have acquired?
- d. is there any conceptual and linguistic transfer from L1 into L2?

With respect to the *Quaestio* theory and to the *Thinking for speaking hypothesis*, we suggest that the *Quaestio* mentally internalized through the acquisition of the L1 during childhood is difficult, if not impossible, to be completely restructured. In our opinion, when planning a narrative Italian native speakers have in mind a type of implicit *Quaestio* such as *what crucial events happened?* and not one based on progressive as seems to be the case for native speakers of English (*what is happening?*), and they keep on employing it when learning English as L2, which brings them to mould the whole text in a specific way. This hypothesis seems confirmed by two facts: (a) in English, learners exploit progressive very little and basically in subordinate background clauses; (b) they sometimes employ *foreground signallers* as they do in L1.

These observations lead us to state that the Italian *thinking for speaking* (or *perspective*) has not been completely reconceptualised by learners in favour of the English *thinking for speaking*. That also explains the interferences with Italian L1 that we commented upon in § 4.2. Nonetheless, learners have certainly acquired some important features of the L2 such as the use of non finite *V-ing* clauses. As to other traits that we ascertained, the frequent resort to coordination does not necessarily match a trait of the L2 but could correspond to an acquisitional mechanism of simplification. Concerning the high percentage of subordinates, and especially of relative clauses, conversely, it can depend once again on transfer from L1, namely the Italian preferential way of hierarchizing information in narrative.

5.2. Typological and cognitive considerations

Some scientists have stated that *textual organization patterns is essentially a matter of grammars* and of the impact that the latter have on the way information is selected and packaged in a text (cf. § 2 for a discussion). So, according to them, languages lacking a grammaticalized progressive aspect, such as German or French, tend to select perspectives alternative to the deictic one chosen by English L1 speakers, but not necessarily the same. German native speakers, for instance, opt for an *anaphoric* perspective based on the animate protagonist, in which each event is anchored to the completion of the previous event (this perspective is also said to be *holistic*), as the continual employment of the adverb *dann* (“then”) clearly points out. French native speakers pick up a perspective based both on the protagonist and the narrator at the same time, in which causal relations (often marked by *donc*) are felt as crucial to express: authors explain this “mixed” perspective as the result of two factors: the lack of progressive verb morphology and the subject prominent character of French (Natale 2013).

Now, with respect to the Italian language, we could expect its L1 speakers to select a perspective closer to the English one, since the *presente progressivo* is a “cheap” linguistic means, to which they can employ with a low cognitive cost. But, as we saw, this is not the case, for reasons that seem to be rooted not simply in grammars but in interactional and enunciative facts as well. If grammars could explain everything, we should be able to find a grammatically convincing reason for causal hierarchizing in French as well, but we are not. Our conviction is that human cognition is also deeply moulded by interactive factors and contextualisation. The crucial point of our discussion is made explicit in the following passage from Gumperz and Levinson (1996: 374-383)

[...] to what extent are the discursive processes, by which interpretive frames are invoked and shared interpretations negotiated, themselves linguistically and culturally variable? [...] the variability in contextualization convention is culturally significant.

As a consequence of these considerations, first, we think that it is possible to support a sub-branch of linguistic typology focused on textual genres and on their differences across languages (comparative linguistic typology); second, we suggest that typological studies should also concentrate highly on communicative habits – both synchronically and diachronically – if the purpose is that of giving highly satisfying explanations to the observable textual mechanisms, and on factors driving perspective when packaging information in texts, as some works have already done (cf. Giuliano and Di Maio 2008; Giuliano and Musto 2016, 2018). As of now we are just at the beginning of these trends.

SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

//	clause border;
BG	background;
FG	foreground;
m. cl.	main clauses;
SLA	second language acquisition ;
sub. cl.	subordinate clauses

NOTES

¹ This paper was directed and written by Patrizia Giuliano, excepted paragraphs 2.2 and 4.2 which were written by Simona Anastasio.

² For the acronyms FG and BG cf. the list at the end of the article. They stand for *foreground* and *background*, that in the *Quaestio Theory* refer to the chronological plot and the side descriptive information respectively (cf. also § 3.2).

³ We remind the reader that while the speaker was narrating, the video was off.

⁴ In this study complex verb constructions refers to the periphrasis *try to + Infinitive*, for which we suppose the existence of two processes – 1.*try* + 2.*to Vlexical* – with the infinitive having a purpose function. We also observe that the percentages in table 2 were based on the total of subordinates.

⁵ By *narrative relative clauses* we refer to the categories of relative clauses indicated by Berman & Slobin (1994), i.e. clauses reporting foreground events or justifying a foreground event, synthesizing previous events of the foreground, introducing new protagonists and identifying a referent. To sum up, the narrative functions exclude relative clauses working as attribute and apposition or situating a referent.

⁶ Obligatory juxtaposition (that we describe as juxtaposition 1 anchoring) refers to contexts such as *as he was digging, he fell through*, where the main clause *he fell through* does not admit any link after *he was digging*.

⁷ For Italian progressive, Squartini (1998:72), states that “[it] is simply an aspectual imperfective marker”.

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