

# **The transitivization of unaccusatives in spoken Italian.**

## **A case study in the Agro Pontino.**

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Giulia Cerullo  
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Gutachterinnen:

Prof. Dr. Susann Fischer

Prof. Dr. Domenica Romagno (Universtà di Pisa)

*To my sister Laura*

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# 1. Introduction

This dissertation investigates the phenomenon of **Transitivized Unaccusative Constructions** (TUCs) in spoken contemporary Italian, focusing on the formal features that characterize these structures, particularly at the **syntax-semantics interface**. The relevance of this inquiry lies in the fact that these constructions have been scarcely investigated in spoken Italian (Romagno 2021, 2023, 2025; Busso & Romagno 2021). Furthermore, the valency alternation patterns that give rise to TUCs offer valuable insights into broadly discussed issues such as the realization of templatic meaning, the division of labor between syntax and the lexicon, and the current sociolinguistic interactions between dialectal and standard Italian proficiency, among other aspects.

By **Transitivized Unaccusative Construction** we refer to clauses featuring a canonical unaccusative verb employed within an **active, transitive argument structure**, wherein an agent — realized as the syntactic subject — transfers a motion onto a patient — realized as the syntactic direct object. The verb displays active morphology, and the clause is interpreted as prototypically transitive, as the semantic properties attributed to the subject are those of a prototypical agent: animacy, agentivity, volition, definiteness, among others. Similarly, the patient displays prototypical patient properties: low animacy, low agentivity, low volition, and full affectedness. A typical TUCs is exemplified below<sup>1</sup>:

(1) Esci                      la    carne   dal                      frigo!                      (non-standard)  
    go.out.IMP            the    meat   from.the                      fridge

Literally: ‘go out the meat from the fridge!’. Intended meaning: ‘take the meat out of fridge!’

(Accademia della Crusca, Paoli, 5/2/2016)

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<sup>1</sup> Examples presented in this work are mostly extracted by a corpus of utterances (GC2021) gathered between 2020 and 2025 from both spoken and written informal communication. Other sources are documented below the examples.

One common semantic interpretation of TUCs subjects is that of causers, as agentive roles and high degrees of transitivity are canonically associated with causative meaning. Indeed, both corpus data (GC2021) and the results of our experimental study (Chapter 5) show that causative interpretations are most frequently associated with TUCs. For this reason, Romagno (2021, 2023, 2025) and Busso & Romagno (2021) refer to these structures as instances of **caused motion constructions**.

The predicates most frequently involved in TUCs are **directed-motion** verbs, namely unaccusative verbs whose root meaning encodes motion along a specified path, lexicalized by the root itself (Rothstein 2004; Rappaport Hovav 2014).

The use of TUCs in Italian is restricted to informal, spoken registers and geographically associated primarily with southern regions, although instances are also attested in the North. Nevertheless, Italian speakers generally recognize that TUCs are more widespread and productive in southern varieties, and normative sources such as dictionaries confirm their regional marking. Their acceptability is shaped by both semantic and sociolinguistic parameters.

The main research questions motivating this dissertation are the following:

- What are the **formal constraints** governing the production and acceptability of Transitivity Unaccusative Constructions?
- Are Transitivity Unaccusatives instances of dialectal interference, or do they also constitute a phenomenon within general spoken Italian (at nationwide level)?

Several further questions arise from these inquiries, particularly regarding the role of syntax in argument structure realization, the possible encoding of templatic meaning in roots, the morphological and semantic properties of this causative alternation, and the sociolinguistic variables involved in this phenomenon.

## 1.1 Theoretical background

As transitives, the predicates involved in TUCs do not follow the split intransitivity pattern canonically associated with unaccusatives (Burzio 1986; Sorace 2000), meaning they select the auxiliary HAVE rather than BE, as canonical transitives do.

In particular, TUCs challenge classical accounts of unaccusativity, a notion first systematically theorized by Perlmutter (1978) and subsequently refined by Burzio (1986), where unaccusative verbs are associated exclusively with an internal argument and lack an external argument. The **valency augmentation** leading to the insertion of an external argument – typically precluded in unaccusative templates – can be defined as **labile causative alternation**, given the absence of overt morphological markers of derivation.

Diachronic analyses by Cennamo (2007, 2012, 2015), Giannollo (2014), Hoffmann (2016), Inglese (2021), Migliori (2016), and Vincent (2016), among others, have mainly focused on Latin and Early Romance detransitivizing expressions, highlighting the loss of the middle voice – represented by the deponent verb class – and the emergence of morphological strategies to mark anticausativity. The literature thus points to a general lack of transitivizing strategies already in Latin, within a verb system characterized by rich morphology for person, number, mood, and tense, but rare (split) intransitivity relations. The subsequent loss of nominal case marking may have created a gap in the expression of causativity, prompting the rise of various alternative strategies with distinct outcomes across the Italo-Romance varieties.

Synchronic models applied in this dissertation are predominantly syntactic (generative) in orientation, although more lexicalist approaches (e.g., Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995; Rappaport Hovav & Levin 1998, 2010) are also considered. The role and position of the agent argument, as well as the realization of argument structure, have become central topics in linguistic research over the past decades. Linguists advocating for the lexicalist approach attribute causation to the inherent meaning of the verb. Within this framework, some scholars have argued that causative meaning arises from argument augmentation (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995).

Following the model of **Grammatically Relevant Ontological Categories** – which posits that the ontological categories encoded in root meaning predict grammatical behavior

and argument realization – Alexiadou (2010) and Alexiadou et al. (2006) have conducted crosslinguistic studies on (anti)causative alternations. While this approach considers ontological implications relevant to argument structure realization, in its more syntactic interpretations it maintains that argument expression and structural behavior are ultimately encoded within syntax (Ramchand 2008).

Hopper and Thompson's (1980) **Transitivity Theory** provides the primary framework for analyzing the degrees of Transitivity expressed in TUCs and the properties that motivate their use.

Here, Transitivity is understood not as a binary property, but rather as a scalar phenomenon (Hopper & Thompson 1980), wherein verbs and clauses can exhibit varying degrees of transitivity according to semantic parameters such as agency, volition, and affectedness.

**Causativity**, i.e. the encoding of cause-effect relations within verbal structures, often interacts with transitivity patterns and plays a key role in TUCs, where canonical intransitive verbs are reanalyzed within active, causative frames. Haspelmath's (1993) typological work on the expression of (anti)causative alternations informs our classification of the phenomenon observed here as a case of labile alternation (Letuchiy 2009).

Assumptions regarding argument structure realization are based on work by Alexiadou et al. (2006, 2015), Alexiadou (2010), Ramchand (2008), and Schäfer (2012, 2017), which propose that arguments are introduced and realized in the syntax, and that roots may exhibit selectional tendencies based on their ontological class, though they do not directly determine templatic structures. This view contrasts both with strictly syntactic approaches, which deny any role for roots in shaping verbal meaning (e.g., Borer 2003; Acedo-Matellán & Mateu 2015), and with root-driven selection models, which postulate that roots inherently encode templatic meaning (Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2021; Ausensi 2024).

## **1.2 Contribution of this work**

The theoretical analysis is complemented by empirical data gathered over recent years through an *ad hoc corpus*, as well as through an experimental study conducted in the **Agro**

**Pontino**, a region in the province of Latina (South Lazio) between 2021 and 2024. This area is largely understudied (Stefinlongo 2003) and offers a unique context of contact between varieties that permit and those that disallow Transitivity Unaccusatives.

The first part of the study replicates, with a focus on Italian, a study conducted by Lara Bermejo (2018, 2020) in Western Spain, investigating the active production of transitivized predicates. The study employs syntactic priming techniques and examines the role of verbal mood as a potential variable influencing the acceptability of TUCs.

The second part builds upon previous experimental inquiries conducted in Calabria by Romagno (2021, 2023, 2025) and at a national level by Busso & Romagno (2021). These authors focused on **object animacy**, demonstrating that *substratum* dialectal interference affects the principles governing the use and reception of TUCs. Notably, their studies show that perfect bilingualism, typical of older Italian generations, imposes stricter constraints on TUCs acceptability, favoring lower object animacy – and thus lower potential agentivity. In contrast, imperfect dialectal proficiency, often found in younger speakers, correlates with reduced constraints regarding TUCs acceptability. Busso & Romagno (2021) thus argue, for the first time regarding Italian TUCs, that imperfect bilingualism has facilitated the integration of dialectal *substratum* features into spoken Italian, after perfect bilingualism and normative pressures had previously inhibited their diffusion (Benincà & Poletto 2006, 2009; Poletto 2009).

The second part of the experimental study focuses specifically on the reception and acceptability of TUCs in Latina, particularly regarding the role of **subject animacy**. The main research questions motivating the experimental portion of this dissertation are the following:

- Is the acceptability of TUCs influenced by variables such as age and/or speakers' dialectal proficiency?
- Does the distinction between animate and inanimate subjects impact the reception and acceptability of TUCs?

The results obtained from the study provide some interesting partial answers to these two main questions, as well as to others, while also shedding light on possible directions for future research. In particular, the difficulties encountered in designing an appropriate study suggest

that the phenomenon of TUCs is peripheral, though present, in spoken Italian production and reception, and that it is, being an interface phenomenon, influenced by multiple, partly interconnected factors and variables, some of which remain largely understudied.

### 1.3 Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 provides an overview of Transitivity Unaccusative Constructions (TUCs), introducing the distinction between canonical unaccusatives and their causative-labile counterparts. A selection of **directed-motion predicates** frequently involved in TUCs is presented, based on examples drawn from our *corpus*, primarily collected in South Lazio. The chapter also offers a brief account of additional non-standard transitivity processes, including cases where past participles of intransitive verbs acquire a passive interpretation, as well as instances of **transitivity unergatives**. In the latter case, it is argued that these unergatives exhibit unaccusative-like behavior, insofar as they permit the introduction of an external causer. Chapter 2 concludes with a contrastive analysis of comparable constructions across several Romance varieties. This comparative overview reveals that non-standard TUCs are generally more acceptable in French than in Italian; that Western Spanish TUCs tend to correlate with lower degrees of volition on the part of the subject; that Catalan TUCs show both convergences and divergences with Italian, depending on the predicate involved; and that Romanian TUCs exhibit a particularly high degree of productivity. Brazilian Portuguese, by contrast, emerges as the Romance variety displaying the lowest rates of TUC production and acceptability, possibly as a consequence of the loss of obligatory overt anticausative marking.

Chapter 3 constitutes the core of the theoretical framework underpinning this study. Its first part is devoted to a diachronic analysis of causation and transitivity expression from Latin to Early Romance, highlighting the relatively limited availability of direct causative strategies alongside a general tendency towards anticausative marking. The second part discusses in detail the synchronic properties of TUCs, engaging with several formal topics that have been the focus of considerable attention in linguistic research. Specifically, the class of directed-motion verbs is defined (§3.2.1); Hopper and Thompson's (1980) **Transitivity Theory** is outlined and

applied to Italian TUCs (§3.2.2); **causative alternations** and the phenomenon of **labiality** are examined (§3.2.3); recent findings by Romagno (2021, 2023) and by Busso and Romagno (2021) concerning the role of **object animacy** in TUCs are reviewed (§3.2.4); the role of **argument realization** and the introduction of external arguments is discussed (§3.2.5), alongside different theoretical proposals (Alexiadou 2006; Alexiadou et al. 2015; Pylkkänen 2008; Ramchand 2008, among others); the principal theoretical model adopted in this study — based on Ramchand’s **First Phase Syntax** (2008) and previously applied to Spanish TUCs by Jiménez-Fernández and Tubino (2014) and to Catalan by Pineda (2018, 2021) — is presented in detail (§3.2.6); a brief excursus on Busso’s (2020) constructionist perspective is provided (§3.2.7); finally, the **role of roots** in the construction of templatic meanings, and competing views concerning the division of labor between syntax and the lexicon, are discussed (§3.3).

Chapter 4 addresses the complex sociolinguistic context in which TUCs are attested. Section 4.1 discusses the specific sociolinguistic features of the province of Latina, while Section 4.2 examines the development of regional Italian, its interaction with both the standard variety and local Italo-Romance dialects, and the incorporation of *substandard* features into spoken Italian within the broader process of *neo-standardization* (Berruto 1987).

Chapter 5 presents the empirical study carried out in the province of Latina, representing the first systematic linguistic investigation of the area. Section 5.3 outlines the **spoken production task**, together with its methodology and principal findings; Section 5.4 discusses the design and results of the written **acceptability judgement task**; Section 5.5 integrates the empirical data within the framework of Ramchand’s (2008) model.

Finally, Chapter 6 summarizes the principal findings of the dissertation and outlines directions for future research. The overall aim of the dissertation is to advance our understanding of non-standard causative structures in Romance varieties, particularly within the framework of First-Phase Syntax.

## 2. Transitivized unaccusatives in spoken Italian

This dissertation is to insert in an ongoing debate, involving both scholars and non-academic speakers, regarding the spread and acceptability of transitive unaccusative constructions (henceforth: TUCs). These structures are often categorized as "popular" and "substandard" by some dictionaries and normative sources: the transitive uses of *scendere* (lit. ‘go down’) and *salire* (lit. ‘go up’) are listed as "popular" in the GRADIT (*Grande Dizionario dell'Italiano dell'Uso*) and the Sabatini-Coletti dictionary. On the other hand, transitive uses of *uscire* (lit. ‘go out’) and *entrare* (lit. ‘go in’) are either absent from these dictionaries or described as southern *substandard* features.

In the last decade, the most prominent Italian linguistic institution, the *Accademia della Crusca*, has published a series of online articles (for example, Paoli, 5/2/2016<sup>2</sup>) addressing a current linguistic issue: the transitive use of verbs such as *entrare* (‘go in’), *uscire* (‘go out’), *salire* (‘go up’), and *scendere* (‘go down’).

The article by Matilde Paoli (2016) begins by quoting some questions and concerns received by the linguistic consultant and author from perplexed readers and speakers, who questioned the acceptability of sentences like the following:

- (1) Scendimi                                    le    chiavi  
Go.down-IMP.2SG-CL.DAT the    keys

lit. “go me the keys down” = “bring down the keys for me”

(Atlante della Lingua Italiana Contemporanea)

Some of the readers, on the other hand, were far from concerned, and insisted on the importance of accepting these constructions as valid. They believe that some expressions deserve to be recognized as correct, since their use is widely accepted.

Academic work has already provided some insights into this phenomenon, which Romagno (2021, 2023) has referred to as "**caused motion constructions**". These constructions, when compared to their intransitive canonical counterparts, appear to convey a high degree of

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<sup>2</sup> Paoli, M., *Entrare, uscire, salire e scendere: transitivi a furor di Popolo?*, Accademia della Crusca, 5th Februar 2016, <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/entrare-uscire-salire-e-scendere-transitivi-a-furor-di-popolo/1047>. Access: September 2021.

causativity. Since they resemble active transitive constructions, we define them as transitive unaccusatives to distinguish them from canonical, pure intransitive unaccusatives.

This first chapter describes the phenomenon of transitivized unaccusatives in contemporary, informal Italian, starting with some general assumptions about the main features of unaccusatives in general, and focusing specifically on the causative use of pure unaccusatives.

Canonical unaccusatives generally present a **monoargumental** structure, where the subject is the undergoer of change but not the agent or causer. The subject (or undergoer) is generated in postverbal position, inside the VP. They do not display external agents, meaning they do not express arguments in the semantic role of actor (agent/causer; Burzio, 1986).

The canonical use of these unaccusative verbs of motion is illustrated in the following examples:

(2) Mario            esce            (con    il        cane)  
       Mario            goes-out        with    the        dog

(adapted from Paoli 5/2/2016)

In (2), the monoargumental clause displays intransitivity, lack of an external argument, and medio-passive or inchoative voice. The cause of change or location and/or motion is not given and unspecified.

Some common cases of transitivization of a motion verb and/or caused motion construction in contemporary substandard spoken Italian are shown in the next examples:

(3) a. Mario        esce            il        cane  
       Mario        goes.out        the        dog  
       lit. 'Mario goes out the dog' = 'Mario takes out the dog'

b. Gianna ha        salito            la        spesa  
       Gianna has        gone.up        the        groceries  
       lit. 'Gianna has gone up the groceries' = 'Gianna has taken up the groceries'

(adapted from Paoli 5/2/2016)

c. Mi            scendi            le        chiavi?  
       CL            go.down-2SG the        keys  
       lit. 'Do you go down the keys to me?' = 'Could you take down the keys for me?'

(Atlante della Lingua Italiana Quotidiana)

d. Ho                   avanzato       della pasta al       pomodoro  
     have-1SG         be.left-PTCP some pasta at.the tomato

(GC2021.17)

lit. 'I have advanced some pasta with tomato sauce' = I left over some pasta with tomato sauce

These constructions are considered to be derived from monoargumental structures and display two arguments: the internal argument, which functions as the direct object, generated inside the VP in postverbal position and generally not moved; and the **subject** or **actor**, either an agent or causer motivating the change of location, generated externally in preverbal position, in the Specifier position of TP (Burzio 1986; Belletti 1988).

TUCs fall under the category of **labile** forms, as there are no morphologically overt derivational markers. The intransitive (or inchoative) and transitive (or causative) forms are used without any formal modification or visible morphological derivation markers (Letuchiy 2009:223). Lability can also be defined as a semantic derivation that causes two structures to differ in their syntactic transitivity degree and in the semantic role of their subjects (Letuchiy 2009:240).

The status of TUCs in spoken Italian is controversially discussed by normative scholars as well as speakers. It seems that their use has possibly gained more attention as a result of written informal communication spread on social and digital media. As highlighted by some articles from the *Accademia della Crusca* published in recent years (Paoli, 5/2/2016), the use of TUCs is rare and even stigmatized in spoken Italian, although some regional varieties show a higher acceptability, mostly due to dialectal interference. Nevertheless, the spread of *neo-standard* Italian (Berruto 1987), which causes the standard norm to be affected by substandard features, could have led to the promotion of these constructions into the national colloquial norm, increasing their acceptability and frequency.

The present chapter is structured as follows: sections 2.1 briefly summarized the main formal features of canonical unaccusatives as intransitive predicates; section 2.2 introduces the phenomenon of TUCs in spoken Italian and illustrates some examples from our *corpus*. Section 2.3 presents similar constructions with unergatives and some cases of secondary predication through active past participles.

## 2.1 Canonical unaccusatives

Following Burzio's Generalization (1986), which is based on Perlmutter (1978), scholars have identified unaccusatives as verbs that do not assign accusative case or external theta roles. Their surface subjects behave similarly to the objects of transitive verbs, as they are generated inside the VP and may, but do not necessarily, move from postverbal to preverbal position, as shown by several diagnostic tests. According to Belletti (1988), the theme object of unaccusatives is originated inside the VP, in a postverbal pivot position, and does not receive case unless it is moved to the SpecIP position to be assigned nominative.

Romance null-subject languages show a flexible order with unaccusative constructions, since the theme argument may appear either in preverbal or in postverbal position (so-called *free inversion*, see also Rizzi 1986).

In (Romance) varieties that employ both BE and HAVE as auxiliaries, the former is typically selected with unaccusatives, while the latter is used with unergative verbs. However, well-known crosslinguistic differences and varying degrees of split intransitivity may also influence auxiliary selection in a more complex manner (Sorace 2000). The selection of BE as an auxiliary triggers agreement on the past participle in compound tenses, whereas HAVE does not:

- (4) a. Maria è partita (unaccusative)  
Maria BE left-FEM  
'Maria has left'
- b. Maria ha giocato (unergative)  
Maria has played
- c. Gianni ha visto Maria (transitive)  
Gianni has seen Maria

Unaccusatives pass the test for bare plural Noun Phrases subjects, as in the case of objects:

- (5) a. Arrivano (dei) ragazzi (unaccusative)  
Arrive.PL some boys  
'Some boys arrive'

- b. #Giocano (dei) ragazzi (unergative)  
 play.PL some boys

Entailing only a theme object, canonical unaccusatives disallow *-er* nominalization (*\*arrivatore*, see Fischer 2016:309). Partitive *ne* cliticization as a means of pronominal substitution of the subject DP, and impossible passivization are further diagnostics for unaccusatives (Burzio 1986; Fischer 2016):

- (6) a. Sono arrivate delle/le ragazze<sup>3</sup> (unaccusative)  
 are arrived some/the girls
- b. Ne sono arrivate due  
 CL are arrived two
- c. \*Le ragazze sono state arrivate  
 the girls BE.PL been arrived

Unaccusatives also license absolute participial constructions, as in (7a) (Vega Vilanova 2016), and their past participles can also function as adjectives, similarly to the objects of passive constructions (7b):

- (7) a. Arrivato a casa, Gianni ha chiamato Maria  
 Arrived at home Gianni has called Maria

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<sup>3</sup> Standard Italian, being a null-subject language, licenses both definite and indefinite DPs in postverbal position. The so-called definiteness restriction, i.e. the ungrammaticality of definite DPs in this position, is only given in existential constructions, but not in unaccusatives. See Fischer (2016) for further insights.

- b. Un bambino scomparso  
 a child disappeared-PTCP

Semantically, unaccusative predicates of change of state and change of location canonically receive telic interpretation (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995; Fischer 2016).

**Anticausativity**, i.e., the absence of an external force or agent causing the event, is signaled by the selection of BE as an auxiliary in compound tenses. The main anticausative strategy in Romance is the use of SE, a polyfunctional marker that indicates the absence of a specified causer. SE appears in verbs that denote events which could be caused by external forces, although these forces remain semantically unspecified and syntactically unexpressed. Conversely, intrinsically motivated events, such as *fiorire* ('blossom'), typically lack SE:

- (8) a. Mario ha rotto il bicchiere (standard)  
 Mario has broken the glass  
 'Mario broke the glass'
- b. Il bicchiere si è rotto  
 the glass SE is broken  
 'The glass broke'

The phenomenon in which the causative and the anticausative constructions are both unmarked, i.e. morphologically identical, is known as **lability** and also recurrent in Italian, although less frequent. Furthermore, auxiliary selection in compound tenses acts as a marker of transitivity relations, since lability is only given in simple tenses:

- (9) a. Il nemico ha affondato la barca (standard)  
 the enemy has sunk the boat  
 'The enemy sank the boat'
- b. La barca è affondata  
 the boat is sunk-FEM  
 'The boat sank'

Furtherly, intransitive verbs which may at a first look appear as transitive often only allow for the so-called internal objects, i.e. lexically or semantically related objects which do not carry additional lexical meaning, but build a predicate similar to a *do*-type predicate (Ramchand 2008:1003):

- (10) a. Piangere lacrime amare  
 cry-INF tears bitter  
 ‘To cry bitter tears’
- b. Vivere una vita felice  
 Live-INF a happy life  
 ‘To live a happy life’

Further canonical argument structure constructions which preserve intransitivity, but display direct objects, entail a directed-motion verb which takes a **path** as a complement. This object is not introduced by a preposition and encodes the path along which the motion encoded by the predicate takes place:

- (11) Salire/ scendere le scale/le montagne  
 go.up-INF go.down-INF the stairs/mountains

This behavior is partly due to the evolution of Italo-Romance varieties from Latin, which displayed a rich nominal morphology including accusative motion case (3.1). Similar path complements are not common to all motion verbs, but only to a subclass corresponding to *salire* (‘go up’), *scendere* (‘go down’) and synonymic predicates. According to some authors of the Accademia della Crusca and scholars in linguistic research (Busso & Romagno 2021), the availability of these constructions with direct objects may represent a positive productive model for TUCs in substandard Italian, as reported in the next section.

## 2.2 Valency alternations with Italian unaccusatives

### 2.2.1 Preliminary notions

While the constructions discussed in the previous section involve canonical intransitive verbs and are considered normatively acceptable, transitivized unaccusative structures are generally recognized as **substandard** and characterized by varying degrees of acceptability.

The syntactic structure of a TUC involves a theme object generated within the VP – similarly to monoargumental unaccusative verbs – and an additional argument introduced higher in the derivation. This higher argument functions as a canonical agent, receives nominative case later in the derivation, and qualifies as an external argument, since it is not part

of the predicate's inherent semantics (Schäfer 2012, 2022). Structurally, TUCs exploit the flexibility inherent in the **mismatches** between thematic roles and structural positions (Busso 2020). Such flexibility can be traced back to historical changes in word order patterns in Early Romance (Fischer 2002a; Schifano 2018). In this context, the rich morphological marking of Romance varieties facilitates frequent verb movement to higher syntactic positions, giving rise to systematic variation and alternative strategies for argument realization and thematic role assignment. TUCs thus exemplify an informal, alternative expression of valency based on **structural flexibility**.

Semantically, canonical unaccusatives of motion, while excluding the expression of an external argument, do not rule out causative readings. In other words, if the predicate is inserted into an intransitive structure, external causation remains unspecified or unexpressed, but it is not entirely excluded. In *Mario esce* ('Mario goes out'), the degree of volition of the subject undergoer is unclear, and it remains unspecified whether this motion is induced, caused, forced, or conceded. According to Romagno (2023:882), this underspecification may semantically allow for alternative constructions that introduce an explicit causing argument. Transitivity unaccusative structures, though normatively ruled out, thus represent the realization of additional arguments beyond the undergoer, which may be semantically involved in the (caused) motion.

Recent research on TUCs in regional and spoken Italian (Romagno 2021, 2023; Busso & Romagno 2021) suggests that these constructions convey causative meaning. Causatives can be defined as verbs that refer to a causative situation, i.e., a causal relation between two events, one of which is believed to be caused by the other (Kulikov 2001:886). A causative construction always entails an embedded base verb and a causative verb,  $V_o$ , so that the meaning of the verbal construction corresponds to 'Cause to  $V_o$ ' or 'make  $V_o$ ' (Haspelmath 1993; Schäfer 2009, 2012; Kulikov 2001; Lehmann 2016, a.o.). Notably, depending on the denotation of the verbal root, the causative construction may involve two distinct verbs or a single verb fulfilling both functions. This depends not only on the agentive nature of the verbal semantics, but also on the cognitive prototypical meaning encoded by the verb (Haspelmath 1993:106). Some examples of causative TUCs from our corpus are listed below and in the following subsection:

- (12) Quando uscite, rimanete le chiavi vicino alla porta  
when go.out-2PL stay-IMP the keys next to-the door  
'When you go out, please leave the keys near the door.'

(GC2021.18)

Caused motion constructions, i.e., those TUCs that entail causative meaning, are **prototypically agentive** (Romagno 2021, 2023:882), which makes them suitable for carrying both meanings. This dual function is encoded in a single verb form, without periphrases.

In other words, the predicates used in TUCs structures do not exhibit any overt morphological derivational traits when compared to their intransitive, monoargumental counterparts. For this reason, TUCs are considered labile forms: the directionality of the derivation is structurally invisible (Letuchiy 2009:223), making it impossible to overtly determine which form is underived and which is derived.

Lability can also be defined as a semantic derivation that causes two structures to differ in their degree of syntactic transitivity and in the semantic role of their subjects (Letuchiy 2009:240). Lability, as the alternation in the valency pattern of the same verb stem without morphological markers, is favored in languages with reduced verbal morphology, such as English, on the one hand, which has a considerably high number of labile verbs. Romance languages and Italo-Romance varieties, on the other hand, statistically prefer the anticausative alternation. This alternation involves a derivation in which arguments – such as the external argument, which is syntactically the subject and semantically the agent of the active causative clause – are not expressed, and their absence is morphologically marked by an anticausative morpheme, typically SE in Romance languages.

Canonical pure unaccusatives are intransitive verbs that are not expected to participate in the anticausative alternation, i.e., they do not alternate with respect to their valency. These predicates can normatively only appear in intransitive structures, i.e., constructions that categorically lack an overt external argument such as an agent. While some intransitive predicates, particularly change-of-state verbs such as *aumentare* ('increase' intr.), can also appear in transitive constructions (with or without derivational morphology), the Italian predicates *entrare* ('go in') and *uscire* ('go out') are ungrammatical when inserted in transitive constructions, at least in the standard national norm.

Prototypically, intransitive motion constructions entail a syntactic subject that is the undergoer of the motion or change of location. This syntactic subject corresponds to a theme rather than a true agent (Romagno 2021:290; Cennamo 2015) and is structurally generated in postverbal position. The fact that English has a greater number of caused motion verbs that participate in the labile alternation (as in *John kicked the dog into the bathroom*; Romagno 2023:875, (1)) than Italian has been attributed to the distinction between satellite-framed (English) and verb-framed (Italian) languages (Talmy 1985; Romagno 2023:875). In satellite-framed languages, lexical and semantic information relevant for encoding motion, such as manner or path, is mostly conveyed by particles such as prepositions, which form phrasal verbs. In verb-framed languages, such information is encoded in the lexical entry, i.e., in the verbal stem, and phrasal verbs are rarer (although northern Italian dialects exhibit more satellite-framed-like properties; see Benincà & Damonte 2009). It has also been claimed that satellite-framed languages offer a greater number of manner verbs, whereas the lexical expression of manner within the verb is more restricted in verb-framed languages (Piccione & Rainsford 2024).

## 2.2.2 TUCs in contemporary Italian: some examples

This subsection illustrates some examples of TUCs extracted from our *corpus*, which has been collected from both oral and written informal Italian in the last years. The data was produced by speakers from different Italian regions, although most of them were from the province of Latina, in which our empirical study takes place (Chapter 5).

While we focus on directed-motion transitivized unaccusatives such as *entrare* ('go in'), *uscire* ('go out'), *salire* ('go up') and *scendere* ('go down'), it is worth noting similar structures occasionally appear with other unaccusative predicates that do not encode motion or path semantics, but states of change:

- (13) Hanno scoppiato petardi pesanti<sup>4</sup>  
 Have-3SG exploded heavy firecrackers

‘They have fired loud firecrackers’

(GC2021.2)

The most frequent and common examples of TUCs entail the use of the four directed-motion predicate pairs *entrare/uscire* (‘go in/out’) and *salire/scendere* (‘go up/down’), although several other motion verbs can participate in the labile alternation.

### Entrare, salire, uscire *and* scendere

When pure unaccusatives are transitivized, as in the case of substandard Italian, their behavior resembles the one of transitive constructions. The main difference from their intransitive use is the selection of HAVE as auxiliary, triggered by their transitive status. In fact, auxiliary selection in Italian follows transitivity patterns, and transitive active verbs select HAVE in their compound tenses, while intransitive canonical unaccusatives would expect BE:

- (14) a. Gianni è salito (a casa) (*intr. unaccusative*)  
 Gianni is gone.up to home  
 b. Ho salito il pacco (*TUC*)  
 have-1SG gone.up the package

(GC2021.29)

A further distinction between canonical and transitivized unaccusative verbs of motion is the word order we find in TUCs. The flexibility shown in word order by canonical unaccusative constructions (free inversion) is more restricted in active transitive constructions, since the absence of case marking imposes a SVO structure in order for the sentence to be semantically plausible:

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<sup>4</sup> Source: Facebook group “cittadini di Pontinia”. Access: 28/10/2024.

- (15) a. Mario esce il cane  
 Mario goes.out the dog  
 b.\*Il cane esce Mario  
 The dog goes.out Mario

If we exclude Contrastive Focus marking after a left dislocation (as in *IL CANE esce Mario*, ‘it is the dog - *and nothing else* - that Mario takes out’), it is impossible to accept the same reading in both sentences – namely, that is Mario who takes out the dog in both cases, and not the other way around.

In comparison to pure unaccusatives such as *entrare* (‘go in’) and *uscire* (‘go out’), which only allow BE as auxiliary in the standard norm, *salire* (‘go up’) and *scendere* (‘go down’) canonically select HAVE as an auxiliary in standard Italian (and also in other Romance varieties) with path complements, as already mentioned. These complements morphologically behave as direct objects and are introduced without prepositions. They lexically represent paths such as stairs, hills and floors of a building:

- (16) Ho sceso, dandoti il braccio,  
 have.1SG gone.down giving-CL.2SG.DAT the arm  
 almeno un milione di scale  
 at.least one million of stairs

lit. ‘I have gone down, giving you the arm, at least one million stairs’

‘I descended, with you on my arm, at least a million stairs...’

(standard Italian)

(E. Montale, *Satura 1962-70*. Milan, Mondadori 1971)

According to Paoli (Accademia della Crusca, 5/2/2016), as well as Busso and Romagno (2021), constructions may facilitate transitive variants that semantically present objects themes such as patients and undergoers:

- (17) a. Quando torni sali acqua naturale  
 when come.back-2SG go.up-IMP water plain  
 ‘When you come home, take some plain-water bottles upstairs’

(GC2021.4)

- b. È arrivato il pacco. L’ho salito  
 is arrived the package CL have-1SG gone.up

lit. ‘The package has arrived. I have gone it up’ = ‘I took it upstairs’

(non-standard)

(GC2021.29)

Both the GRADIT (Grande Dizionario dell’Italiano dell’Uso) and the Sabatini-Coletti, for example, define the transitive use of *salire* (‘go up’) and *scendere* (‘go down’) with theme objects as popular and/or typical of southern varieties, while they either do not classify any transitive use of *entrare* (‘go in’) and *uscire* (‘go out’), or consider it regionally restricted. This implies that speakers are more used to accusatives following the pairs *salire/scendere* than with *entrare/uscire*.

Examples (16) and (17a-b) differ semantically in that the direct object of the former is a path, while the direct objects of the latter are themes. This difference is detectable in the ungrammaticality of correspondent passive constructions:

- (18) a. \*Le scale sono state salite  
The stairs are been gone.up  
‘The stairs have been climbed’
- b. Il pacco è stato salito<sup>5</sup> (non-standard)  
the package is been gone.up  
‘The package has been brought upstairs’

*Salire* (‘go up’) originated from Latin *salire*, which means ‘jump’, and is listed as transitive in the definition by Treccani only with direct path objects, similarly to what we find in contemporary Italian.

*Scendere* (‘go down’) follows a similar path in its diachronic stages, originating from Latin *descendo* (‘go down’). While transitive uses of *salire* are not listed by Treccani, transitive *scendere* with direct object themes, as in TUCs, is registered as regionally marked.

Structures displaying an agent and a theme object with unaccusative predicates are encountered with a series of verbs which are canonically expected not to participate in the causative alternation. For example, *uscire* (‘go out’) can be often used with specific theme objects such as *il cane*, ‘the dog’, or *l’immondizia*, ‘the garbage’, indicating a caused motion from inside a house to the outside:

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<sup>5</sup> Note that passive conversion is not always an effective diagnostic tool, as passive constructions are rare and/or extremely formal in some regional Italian varieties, and thus possibly ruled out in spoken contexts, where TUCs are used (for a similar phenomenon in peninsular Spanish, see Lara Bermejo 2020).

- (19) a. Mario esce il cane ogni mattina  
 Mario goes.out the dog every morning
- b. Mario esce l'immondizia ogni sera  
 Mario goes.out the garbage every evening

(non-standard Italian translation from French (Lara Bermejo 2018:118))

While some commentators recognized a sort of calque from the English “walk the dog” for sentence (19a), the existence of other contexts of use and the high productivity of similar structures signaled that it could not only be a case of language contact. This evidence is confirmed by the fact that TUCs are also produced by speakers with scarce or no proficiency in English as a foreign language.

Furthermore, digital communication and the spread of social media seem to have determined another context of use for this predicate, which can assume the metaphorical meaning of ‘post’, ‘publish’, ‘send’. The first sentence appeared on a Facebook group dedicated to soccer, after a player had scored with an overhead kick<sup>6</sup>, while the latter was pronounced on a YouTube cooking channel:

- (20) a. Uscite la rovesciata di D'Ambrosio  
 go-out.IMP-2PL the overhead-kick of D'Ambrosio  
 lit. ‘go out D'Ambrosio's overhead kick’ = ‘post/send/show us D'Ambrosio's overhead kick’

(GC2021.50)

- b. Se YouTube potesse uscire l'odore di questa torta...  
 If YouTube could go-out the scent of this cake

lit. ‘If YouTube could go out the scent of this cake’ = ‘If YouTube could transmit to you the scent...’

(GC2021.24)

In (20a), the user, a young speaker from South-East Italy, was asking the others to find and post a video of that epic action. Sentence (20b) was produced by a young speaker from Turin illustrating a receipt on her YouTube channel. At the end of the video-receipt, when the cooker shows the final result, she wishes that the enjoyable fragrance of her food could get

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<sup>6</sup> [www.facebook.com/groups/755629284634563/?ref=share](https://www.facebook.com/groups/755629284634563/?ref=share): Il caffè di Interisti esistenzialisti, access 08/09/2020.

transferred through the spectators’ screen. *Uscire* is also informally used as a synonym of “showing something with pride”:

(21) a. Esci                                    il        napoletano    Clara!<sup>7</sup>  
           go.out-IMP.2SG    the    Neapolitan    Clara  
 lit. ‘Go out the Neapolitan [*dialect*], Clara!’ = ‘Use your Neapolitan accent, Clara!’  
(GC2021.23)

b. Di’                    ad        Anzanidi        stare    calmo    perché        altrimenti  
       tell-IMP        to        Anzanito        stay    calm    because        otherwise  
       ne    esco                    uno<sup>8</sup>  
       NE    go.out-1SG        one  
 lit. ‘tell Anzani he should remain calm because otherwise I go one (of them) out’ =  
 ‘...because otherwise I will give him one (*yellow card*)’  
(GC2021.21)

Example (21b) was uttered by a volleyball referee born in Northwestern Italy during a match. Thanks to a microphone placed near his high chair, TV spectators were able to hear his conversation with the captain of one of the teams. When a player began to behave inappropriately, the referee instructed the captain to calm his teammate down, implicitly threatening him with a yellow card. The object theme “yellow card” was never explicitly mentioned. Instead, the referee employed the transitive predicate *uscire* (‘to take out’) along with the pronoun *uno* (‘one’). The partitive pronoun *ne* refers to the type of object the referee intended to “extract”. Its interpretation as a yellow card for inappropriate behavior is left to inference.

This utterance is particularly noteworthy, as it occurred in a context where the speaker aimed to assert his authority. Moreover, the referee’s Northern accent and origins suggest that TUCs such as *uscire* can also be found outside Southern varieties, especially in specific communicative settings.

In her article for the *Accademia della Crusca*, Paoli (2016) discusses similar regional constructions from Southern Italian varieties, such as *uscire la carne dal frigo* (lit. ‘take the

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/3887937781887673/>: *Gli attori di un posto al sole*, access 12/05/2024.

<sup>8</sup> Rai Sport, Volleyball semifinals, livestream 28/3/21.

meat out of the fridge’) and *salire la spesa* (lit. ‘bring the shopping bags upstairs’). Similarly, Piredda (2017) reports that Sardinian varieties allow human direct objects as internal arguments of *uscire*, as in *uscire il bambino* (lit. ‘take the child outside’), which the author describes as an "all-Italian" usage (2017: 499). According to both authors, everyday activities such as those illustrated in these examples favor the use of TUCs, particularly in the imperative mood.

Paoli furtherly reports that the majority of messages expressing doubts about the acceptability of these structures came from the North, where such expressions appear to be less common. Readers from the South, by contrast, were primarily interested in understanding whether TUCs belong to Standard Italian or to their local dialects (see Figure 1). A significant number of readers writing from Turin and Milan – the two major Northern cities – explicitly mentioned having heard these constructions from parents and older relatives who had migrated from the South, or from friends who had moved northward for work or study. This reflects a

well-known sociolinguistic phenomenon, whereby Southern accents and dialects signal the migratory background of speakers and families who relocated to the North (see also section 4.2).



Figure 1 Results for "unacceptable and not used" for *scendimi le chiavi*, lit. ‘go down the keys for me’ – *Atlante della Lingua Italiana Quotidiana (ALIUOT)*

Figure 1 and 2 present the results of an online survey conducted by the *Atlante della Lingua Italiana Quotidiana* (ALIQUOT). Participants were asked to evaluate the sentence *scendimi le chiavi* (lit. ‘go down the keys to me’, meaning ‘bring me the keys downstairs’) by specifying whether they considered it ‘acceptable and used’ or ‘unacceptable and not used’. The results reveal a clear geographic divide: speakers from Northern Italy largely rejected the



Figure 2 Results for "acceptable and used" for the same sentence - ALIQUOT

sentence, with a few exceptions in major urban centers, likely due to internal migration, as previously discussed. In contrast, Southern speakers predominantly accepted the construction, reinforcing the idea that TUCs are originally a regional phenomenon. Responses from Central Italy were mixed. As this subsection will demonstrate, only certain directed-motion predicates elicit similar patterns of acceptability when used in TUCs.

In other words, not all TUCs are generally more acceptable to Southern speakers than to Northern ones; rather, the semantics of the predicate involved in the transitivization strategy appears to influence its geographic distribution.

*Entrare* (‘to go in’) and *uscire* (‘to go out’) are etymologically pure unaccusatives, and they have remained intransitive throughout their diachronic development. In Latin, these verbs were also intransitive, occurring with accusative complements that denoted [PATH], but not [UNDERGOER]. The Treccani dictionary reports transitive meanings for *entrare* in Old and poetic Italian, though the cited examples involve accusative complements expressing paths rather than patients.

- (22) Disse, e la casa entrò Leito  
 said-3SG and the house entered-3SG Leito  
 ‘Leito said, and he entered the house’

(G. Pascoli, *Poemi conviviali* 1904-05)

In (22), the direct object *la casa* (‘the house’) is not an undergoer, as it does not undergo the caused motion of entering, but rather indicates the path or endpoint of Leito’s motion. The subject Leito is therefore the actual undergoer of the non-agentive predicate and appears in postverbal position, which, according to Burzio (1986), is the canonical position for pure unaccusatives.

The Treccani dictionary does not list any transitive path complements for *uscire* (‘to go out’) and specifies that its transitive use is regional and conveys causative semantics. The Latin predicate *exire*, formed from the preposition *ex* (‘from’) and the verb *ire* (‘to go’), is likewise a pure unaccusative. It does not co-occur with accusative path complements, as these typically express motion toward a goal, whereas *exire* denotes motion from a source, which is instead encoded through prepositional complements.

### Avanzare *and* rimanere

While the examples discussed so far are typical of central and southern regions, as confirmed by dictionaries and articles by the Accademia della Crusca, it would be inaccurate to assume that only speakers of southern dialects use TUCs. Transitive uses of the verb *avanzare*, meaning ‘to leave uneaten’ or ‘to leave over,’ are found in the northern region around Milan (Accademia della Crusca, Paoli 12/5/2016), in expressions such as *avanzare del prosciutto* (‘to leave some ham over’). A similar construction also appears in our *corpus*:

- (23) a. Ieri ho avanzato della pasta al pomodoro<sup>9</sup>  
 Yesterday have.1SG left.over some pasta at.the tomato  
 ‘I left over some pasta with tomato sauce yesterday’

(GC2021.18)

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<sup>9</sup> Source: tiktok, @cookergirl. This young speaker is from Alessandria, Piedmont. Access: October 2021.

b. Quanta pizza avanza chi non mangia il  
 how.much pizza leaves.over who not eats the  
 cornicione?  
 edge

‘How much pizza does one leave over if they do not eat the outer edge?’

(GC2021.51)

The Treccani dictionary provides several definitions of this verb, which selects either have or be as an auxiliary, depending on its valency. When used as an active transitive predicate, it typically occurs with animate, agentive human subjects and conveys the meaning of “to move something forward”, both in literal and metaphorical contexts:

(24) a. Napoleone ha avanzato un’ ipotesi (standard)  
 Napoleon has moved.forward a hypothesis  
 ‘Napoleon has moved forward a hypothesis’

b. Napoleone ha avanzato le truppe  
 Napoleon has moved.forward the troops

‘Napoleon has moved the troops forward’

c. La fermata dell’ autobus è stata avanzata  
 the stop of.the bus is been moved.forward-F

‘The bus stop has been moved (forward)’

Intransitive *avanzare* can be rendered as ‘pop out’, ‘be left over’ (often with quirky subjects such as dative personal pronouns), ‘progress’, ‘be owed’. Notably, while these uses are illustrated by the dictionary *Treccani*, their acceptability may in some cases vary from one speaker to the other, mostly depending on their origin:

(25) a. L’ osso che avanza fuori della giuntura del braccio  
 the bone that pops.out out of.the joint of.the arm  
 (Leonardo da Vinci quoted in *Treccani* under “avanzare”)

b. (Mi) è avanzato un po’ di formaggio  
 CL.DAT is left.over-M a bit of cheese

Lit. ‘Some cheese has been left over (by me) [*default reading: unintentionally caused*]

c. La sua carriera è avanzata rapidamente  
 the his/her career is progressed-F quickly

‘His/her career has progressed quickly’

- d. Maria        avanza        dieci    euro    da       Sergio  
       Maria       is.owed       ten     euros   by       Sergio  
       ‘Sergio owes Maria ten euros’

(GC2021.8)

- e. Così        avanzi        del     tempo   per     andare a     giocare<sup>10</sup>  
       So         have.left-2SG PART    time    for     go        to     play  
       ‘So that you have some time left to play’

(GC2021.9)

Diachronically, transitive uses of *avanzare* beyond those recognized as canonical today are attested in Medieval Tuscan, notably in the works of Brunetto Latini (Tesoretto I, 8, vv. 7-8) and Dante Alighieri (Vita Nova XIX, 13, v. 58), where the verb conveys the meanings ‘to overcome (someone, in virtue)’ and ‘to send out (a poem),’ respectively. This root is not attested in Classical Latin, but it did appear in Late Latin, as well as in both Provençal and Medieval Tuscan, in its intransitive sense. The multiplicity of meanings associated with this verb may point to a case of polysemy. A more detailed diachronic and etymological investigation would be necessary to clarify the various contexts of its use.

The acceptability rates of the example sentences discussed here may be subject to considerable regional – and even idiolectal – variation. A similar degree of variation can be observed in the semantic interpretation of expressions like *avanzare da mangiare* (‘leave food over’). An additional article by the Accademia della Crusca (Zenoni, 27/11/2009), which addresses the transitive uses of *avanzare*, cites another Italian dictionary, the Devoto-Oli, which reports that the verb may also be used regionally as a direct causative, agentive, volitional predicate meaning ‘(purposely) leave food for someone else (to eat)’<sup>11</sup>:

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Un posto al sole’, soap opera. The character speaking is from the North. 25/03/2024.

<sup>11</sup> Zenoni, V. *Avanzare transitivo*. Accademia della Crusca, 27th November 2009. <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/avanzare-transitivo/251>. Access: September 2024.

- (26) Ho avanzato del prosciutto (così ti fai  
 Have-1SG left.over some ham so REFL make-2SG  
 un panino)  
 a sandwich  
 ‘I left you some ham so that you can make yourself a sandwich’

(GC2021.48)

Another TUCs that, according to Matilde Paoli (Accademia della Crusca, 2/5/2016), is common in the North (specifically Romagna), is *rimanere* (‘stay’), used transitively with the meaning ‘to leave something behind,’ similarly to *avanzare*. While *avanzare* with the specific meaning ‘to leave food over’ is attested as transitive primarily in northern varieties, transitive *rimanere* is also used in other regions of Italy. The following examples are drawn from our data and were produced by speakers of a central variety (27a, Latina, Lazio) and a southern one (27b, Caserta, Campania):

- (27) a. Avete rimasto qualcosa nello spogliatoio?  
 have-2PL stayed something in.the locker-room  
 ‘Have you left something in the locker room?’

(GC2021.27)

- b. La padella la volete rimanere qua?  
 the pan CL want-2PL stay here  
 ‘Do you want to leave the pan here [and come pick it up later]?’

(GC2021.28)

As confirmed by Romagno (2023), transitive *rimanere* is also attested in southern varieties, where it can take human direct objects and convey the meaning of ‘to have seen someone for the last time somewhere or in a certain state’:

- (28) a. Gianni l’ ho rimasto al bar  
 Gianni CL have-1SG stayed at.the bar  
 ‘When I left the bar, Giovanni was still there’

(Romagno 2023:882)

b. A Maria l' avevo rimasta bambina  
 To Maria CL had-1SG stayed-F child-F

'Last time I had seen Maria, she was still a child'

(GC2021.49)

In the case of *rimanere* and its transitive use in Southern varieties, it can be hypothesized – following Lara Bermejo (2018, 2020), who investigated its Spanish counterpart *quedar* (intransitive 'to stay', transitive 'to leave') – that speakers already familiar with commonly transitivized TUCs with predicates such as *entrare* and *uscire* may more spontaneously produce transitive constructions with other motion verbs. In other words, Lara Bermejo's proposal for Western European Spanish suggests that the availability of causative structures with specific predicates facilitates the extension of this pattern to other directed-motion verbs. Given the sociolinguistic complexity and linguistic/dialectal fragmentation of Italian, however, a comparable hypothesis for spoken Italian would require additional empirical support (see also Chapter 4).

Neither the Latin Olivetti dictionary nor the Italian Treccani dictionary report transitive usages of the verb *rimanere*. Given that transitive *rimanere* is widely attested in both Northern and Southern varieties but absent from recorded written language, it can be assumed that its transitive use stems from dialectal features that have not (yet) been incorporated into informal standard Italian (see also 4.2). Furthermore, its semantics appear to be more limited than those of more frequently transitivized motion verbs such as *entrare*, *uscire*, *salire*, and *scendere*. These four verbs occur more commonly and with a wider range of arguments, both in our corpus and in previous studies (Ledgeway 2000; Piredda 2018, 2020, 2021; Busso & Romagno 2021; Romagno 2021, *inter alia*).

Interestingly, synonymous predicates of *rimanere* do not necessarily display similar transitivity behavior across varieties. For example, *restare*, which can be considered a near-synonym of *rimanere* in most contexts, is not attested in transitive use in varieties that use transitivized *rimanere*. For example, in Southern Lazio regional Italian, *restare* is not known in transitive constructions (at least based on my native-speaker judgement as well as informants from the region):

(29) \*Ho restato la macchina in garage  
 Have-1SG stayed the car in garage



‘I gave back the present’

(Pineda 2018:248, ex. (9), from Ledgeway 2000:301, fn.23))

*Tornare* represents another instance of the coexistence, within the same grammar, of an underived form (*tornare*) and a derived counterpart (*ritornare*), the latter formed through the addition of the reiterative prefix *ri-*, similarly to the pair (*re*)*stare*. Notably, *ritornare*, the derived form, appears to be absent from the attested transitive uses documented in the available *corpora*. This second evidence furtherly supports the hypothesis that the reiterative prefix blocks possible transitivization patterns.

### *Economy strategies and alternatives to TUCs*

In her online article for *the Accademia della Crusca*, Paoli ultimately suggests that the transitivizations reported by readers may reflect "**economical**" strategies. TUCs can thus be interpreted as a kind of linguistic shortcut, aimed at avoiding analytical constructions, modal verbs, or more complex and/or overly formal causative structures.

According to Paoli, these transitivized verbs often replace combinations involving two or more lexical elements – most typically, a light verb such as *fare* (‘let’, ‘make’) followed by a lexical verb in the infinitive. Another common alternative to TUCs is the use of canonical phrasal constructions, i.e. verb–preposition combinations. It has been argued that the geographical and linguistical proximity of northern varieties to Germanic satellite-framed languages determines a preference toward phrasal verbs in these regions, while southern varieties rely on simple verbal roots (Talmy 1985; Piccione & Rainsford 2024). This difference could represent one possible explanation why TUCs are more common in southern varieties, as their use seems to be partly incompatible with phrasal verbs.

As the examples discussed in this chapter illustrate, speakers often prefer the transitivization of unaccusatives over either analytical constructions or excessively formal lexical items such as *innalzare* (‘raise’) or *estrarre* (‘extract’). Importantly, the alternatives to TUCs do not always correspond to identical semantic content. (Table 1):

TUCs	Phrasal verb	Canonical trans. (non-directed motion)	Formal trans.	<i>Fare</i> + inf.
<i>uscire la carne (dal frigo)</i> lit. ‘go out the meat (from the fridge)’	<i>tirare fuori la carne (dal frigo)</i> lit. ‘pull out the meat out (of the fridge)’	<i>prendere la carne (dal frigo)</i> lit. ‘take the meat (from the fridge)’	<i>estrarre la carne (dal frigo)</i> lit. ‘extract the meat (from the fridge)’	<b>no equivalents</b>
<i>uscire il cane</i> lit. ‘go out the dog’	<i>portare fuori il cane</i> lit. ‘take out the dog’	<b>no equivalents</b>	<i>condurre il cane a passeggio</i> lit. ‘conduct the dog to a walk’	<i>Far uscire il cane</i> lit. ‘let the dog go out’
<i>uscire le foto (della festa)</i> lit. ‘go out the pictures (of the party)’	<b>no equivalents</b>	<i>mandare/pubblicare le foto (della festa)</i> lit. ‘send/publish the pictures (of the party)’	<i>trasmettere le foto (della festa)</i> lit. ‘transmit the pictures (of the party)’	<b>no equivalents</b>

Table 1 Some alternatives to transitive *uscire*, lit. ‘go out’

Table 1 illustrates three distinct semantic contexts in which transitive *uscire* can assume specific meanings. The difference between *uscire la carne* (lit. ‘go the meat out’) and *uscire il cane* (lit. ‘go the dog out’) lies in the degree of affectedness of the subject agent. In the former example, the agent is not directly involved in the motion denoted by the predicate but merely causes the theme to undergo this motion. In contrast, in the latter case, the agent itself performs the motion denoted by the verb, transmitting the same motion and direction onto the undergoer or theme.

It is important to note that the alternative constructions presented in this table are not synonymous with the TUCs, and speakers may choose one or the other depending on the context of utterance. For example, *fare* + infinitive typically indicates indirect causation (Romagno 2023:881), as it implies low involvement of the subject in the denoted motion. While *uscire il cane* presupposes movement by the agent, *far uscire il cane* (lit. ‘let the dog go out’) could indicate that the agent merely allows the event of the dog leaving the house to happen, without participating in the motion itself (for instance, by opening the door for the dog).

A further observation suggested by Table 1 is that TUCs can cover a broad range of semantic contexts, some of which may not be captured by alternative constructions.

The alternation between TUCs and phrasal verbs is not limited to transitive constructions. In some regional southern varieties, phrasal intransitive verbs can be used to explicitly signal that the predicate is not being employed transitively. In other words, speakers proficient in a regional variety that permits transitive unaccusatives may resort to prepositional constructions to specifically mark that the predicate is intransitive:

- (32) a. Esco            il        cane  
           go.out-1SG the     dog
- b. Esco                    fuori in     giardino  
           go.out-1SG            out    in     garden

Note, however, that transitivizations are available when the motion verb is accompanied by a preposition, indicating high variation. Consider the following example from the data<sup>12</sup>:

- (33) Basta            che    mi    manda un    messaggino    e    io  
       is.enough        that    to.me    sends a    message        and    I
- glielo                                    scendo        giù,    capito?  
       CL.DAT3SG-ACC3SG            go.down-1SG down    understood
- lit. ‘It is enough that she sends me a message and I go it down to her, understood?’ =

‘...and I take it downstairs to her’

(GC2021.7)

Examples (32b) and (33) show that phrasal verbs can either indicate intransitivity, especially for those speakers that accept TUCs, or also be transitivized.

Contemporary journalistic style also presents some features of colloquial Italian which allow these structures to surface: *C'è chi si affaccia alla porta con le mani che penzolano nell'acqua putrida e chi tenta di uscire un'auto<sup>13</sup> finendo per restare bloccato nella melma*, lit. ‘there are the ones who look out the door with their hands hanging in putrid water and the ones who try to go out a car ending blocked in the mud’ (Alfio Sciacca, *Corriere della Sera*, written text – 30/5/2023). However, this example could also fail to represent a case of TUC if we assume that the orthographic mistake of the missing apostrophe in *un'auto* is due to a typing error: perhaps the writer had intended to type *uscire in auto* (‘to leave by car’) and ended up

<sup>12</sup> Speaker from Southern Italy, and not from South Lazio. Personal conversation.

<sup>13</sup> The correct orthography would require an apostrophe between the indefinite article and the substantive, which is probably missing due to the urgency with which the breaking news were written.

typing a *u*, which is placed next to the *i* a QWERTY keyboard. As is often the case, one-time written utterances can be hard to interpret if we consider that typing errors may occur.

Compound passive tenses can also be encountered, as in the case of the following gerund passive tense:

- (34)      Tantissime      gare                      stanno vedendo      essere entrati  
               Many                matches                are    seeing-GER    be        entered-M.PL  
               portieri            di      riserva<sup>14</sup>  
               goalkeepers    of      reserve

lit. ‘lots of matches are seeing being gone in reserve goalkeepers’ = ‘In many matches, we are watching reserve goalkeepers being let in’

(GC2021.12)

### 2.3 Further transitivization patterns: resultatives and unergatives

This subsection briefly presents additional features of substandard valency alternations: the active past participle as a possible case of strong secondary predication, and transitivized unergatives. This overview aims to place TUCs structures within a potentially broader pattern of transitivization strategies that are not part of the normative standard but are commonly found in regional and dialectal varieties.

#### 2.3.2 Non-standard resultative participle constructions

The first phenomenon observed in spoken regional Italian involves the active use of past participles in structures that would normatively only allow a passive reading. Past participle forms of non-active predicates typically follow the auxiliary BE and agree in number and gender with the noun they refer to. Active predicates, on the other hand, build compound tenses with HAVE and an uninflected past participle, typically with the default ending *-o*. However, as previously mentioned, auxiliary selection is sensitive to varying degrees of (split) intransitivity (Sorace 2000) and particularly subject to diatopic variation in Italo-Romance varieties (Cennamo 2007).

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<sup>14</sup> Rai Italia 23/5/21, spoken commentary



b. Ci andiamo però già un po' mangiati<sup>15</sup>  
 there go-1PL but already a little eaten-M.PL  
 lit. 'but we go there already a little eaten' = 'But we eat a little before we go there'

(KIParla corpus, 555204.95.BOA3019)

The interpretation of (37a) and (37b) is similar: the speaker inquires whether it is necessary to eat before leaving or reaching a destination. In this case, the use of the past participle indicates the temporal antecedency of the eating action in comparison to the motion denoted by the main predicate. While the past participle agrees with the subject of the finite verb, its meaning remains active.

It is noteworthy that non-standard active past participles are intransitive, as they cannot take object themes as arguments.:

(38) \*Ci andiamo mangiati la pasta  
 there go-1PL eaten-M.3PL the pasta  
 lit. 'We go there already eaten the pasta'

Similar constructions can also entail past participles with passive meaning and are common in spoken (regional) Italian, but also in written, informal communication. The existence of a passive construction is a hint at transitive meaning. The following examples are ungrammatical in standard Italian, but accepted in non-standard varieties:

(39) a. Sentirmi pensata (...) è fonte di gioia  
 feel-INF.REFL thought-F.SG is source of joy

lit. 'to feel myself thought is a reason of joy' = 'to feel myself considered is a reason of joy'

(GC2021.6<sup>16</sup>)

b. Sono stato consigliato di posticipare il volo  
 am been recommended of postpone-INF the flight

'I have been recommended to postpone my flight'

(GC2021.46<sup>17</sup>)

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<sup>15</sup> According to the information provided by the *KIParla* (online corpus for spoken informal production), the speaker who used this construction is under 25 years of age, and comes from Emilia Romagna.

<sup>16</sup> Published in July 2024. The writer, a young woman from Latina, has a Masters degree in Linguistics.

<sup>17</sup> This Instagram post by Olympic gold medalist Gianmarco Tamberi was published in August 2024.

c. La mail non mi è stata risposta  
 the e-mail.F-SG not CL.DAT.1SG is been-F-SG answered-F.SG

‘My e-mail has not been answered’

(GC2021.26)

d. Pijaveno le ragazze e le remaneveno morte  
 took-3PL the-F.PL girls-F.PL and them-F.PL stayed-3PL dead-F.PL  
 (GC2021.25<sup>18</sup>)

lit. ‘They used to take the girls and stay them dead’ = ‘They used to take the women  
 [to rape them] and leave them dead [afterwards]’

e. Ma chi? Quello che hai trovato sparato?  
 but who the.one-M that have-2SG found shot-M

‘Who? The one you found shot [dead]?’

(GC2021.17<sup>19</sup>)

A possible explanation for this phenomenon could be the influence of English on the spontaneous production of younger speakers with high proficiency in foreign languages (as in both cases seen in (39a) and (39b)). English displays greater flexibility and a different grammatical expression of subject experiencers, offering more cases of grammatically canonical subject expression, whereas Italian typically prefers so-called quirky subjects (as in *mi è stato consigliato di posticipare il volo*, lit. ‘to me it was recommended to postpone the flight’).

Nevertheless, even among speakers with low or no proficiency in English, it is not uncommon to observe patterns of valency expression that differ from the standard norm. Sentence (39d), assuming that the older speaker is not proficient in both standard, normative Italian and English, is a further example of transitive *rimanere* (‘stay’), as confirmed by data from northern Calabria (Romagno 2021, 2023) and southern Lazio (Colasanti 2023), where the speaker is from.

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<sup>18</sup> Bettina, an older speaker from the province of Frosinone, reporting the atrocities of the so-called *Marocchine* during World War II, whose story inspired the novel *La ciociara* (A. Moravia, 1957) and the homonymous movie directed by V. De Sica (1960). Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWemxrsFkDo>. Access: September 2021.

<sup>19</sup> *Il commissario Montalbano: la luna di carta*, TV show set in Sicily and broadcast on Rai.

The first distinction to be made is between passive (*stare mangiati* in the sense of ‘having been fed’) and active (*stare litigati* as ‘the status of having had an argument’, or *andare mangiati* in the sense of ‘having already eaten before going’) usage. While *stare* (‘stay’) seems to semantically introduce either passive meaning or the status held at the end of a process, *andare* (‘go’) and *venire* (‘come’) in their full lexical, deictic sense suggest an active and dynamic reading. Thus, the different interpretations appear to depend on the distinction between stative and dynamic predicates (see also Schäfer 2017). Particularly, passive readings suggest the existence of transitive meaning (Hopper & Thompson 1980).

In general, the examples presented in this subsection, both in their passive and active interpretations, can be considered part of an ongoing discussion regarding the status of **resultatives** in standard and non-standard Italian, as well as in Romance languages more broadly (Rodríguez Arrizabalada 2014; Bigolin & Ausensi 2021; Ramchand 2018; Martin 2021; Romagno 2023). In fact, the behavior of these participles in some cases resembles **secondary-predication** constructions.

While it goes beyond the scope of this work to engage in a detailed discussion on the presence or absence of resultatives in Italian and Romance languages (see Rodríguez Arrizabalada 2014 and Bigolin & Ausensi 2021 for plausible strong resultatives in Spanish), we can assume that the past participles observed in these examples behave similarly to adjectives used in (Germanic) resultatives and secondary-predication constructions<sup>20</sup>.

Romagno’s (2023; 2025) research on Northern Calabrian regional Italian, as well as other dialectal varieties, has shown that strong resultative constructions are possible. Therefore, while standard Italian is considered to lack adjectival resultative structures like *to hammer the metal flat*, strong resultative combinations with *portare* (‘carry’) as the main finite predicate and the participial adjective *finito* (lit. ‘finished’) are encountered in southern varieties. Romagno considers this expression a strong resultative, as the meaning of the adjective is

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<sup>20</sup> This issue is not meant to deny (nor confirm) Bigolin & Ausensi’s (2021) assumption, against Rodríguez Arrizabalada (2014), that Spanish apparent resultative constructions with *hasta la muerte* (‘to death’) are not actually complements nor syntactic resultatives, but delimitative adjuncts, external to the argument structure of the predicate. The investigation of this issue, as well as of its Italian counterpart with *fino alla morte*, must be left unanswered and dealt with in further research.

independent of and not entailed by the meaning of the predicate. Secondary predication with *portare* is not a fixed lexical expression, as different types of predicatives are possible, both as participial and non-participial adjectives, with varying degrees of object animacy:

(40) Non dirlo a mamma, altrimenti mi porta finito (regional Italian)

Lit. ‘Do not tell mum, otherwise she’ll drive me up the wall [literally: carries me finished]’

(Romagno 2020:435 (13a))

The use of passive participles in non-standard constructions such as *il bambino sta mangiato* (lit. ‘the child stays eaten’) is also reported in some Spanish varieties<sup>21</sup>. These structures resemble TUCs in that they presuppose the presence of an actor (agent or causer) responsible for the result state attained by the object theme. Active participial constructions, such as *andarci mangiati* (lit. ‘go there eaten’), could be the result of economy strategies, as they are shorter and more efficient than constructions like *andarci dopo aver mangiato* (‘go there after having eaten’). In this respect, they also follow the pattern of TUCs as economical formulations, which also allow the avoidance of infinitive clauses. The agreement of the active past participle with the subject contradicts normative grammar, and these utterances should be considered non-standard, although they are well-established in informal spoken language.

For the purposes of this work, it is worth noting that unaccusative predicates commonly found in TUCs structures, such as *entrare* (‘go in’), *uscire* (‘go out’), *salire* (‘go up’), and *scendere* (‘go down’), do not seem to be attested in this type of construction:

(41) a. \*Il cane sta uscito  
the dog stays gone.out

intended meaning: ‘the dog has already been taken outside’

b. \*La spesa sta salita  
the groceries stays gone.up

intended meaning: ‘the groceries have already been taken upstairs’

c. \*La macchina sta entrata  
the car stays gone.in

intended meaning: ‘the car has already been driven into the garage’

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<sup>21</sup> Thanks to Jorge Vega Vilanova and Mario Navarro for these insights.

d. \*Le chiavi stanno scese  
the keys stay gone.down

intended meaning: ‘the keys have already been taken downstairs’

e. \*La pasta sta avanzata  
the pasta stays left.over

intended meaning: ‘the pasta has been left over’

For this reason, a first analysis leads us to suppose that participles of directed-motion predicates do not participate in this phenomenon. Possible implications missing here, which have not been mentioned or illustrated, must be dealt with in further research.

### 2.3.3 Transitive Unergatives

The transitivization of unergatives is not uncommon across world languages. English, being one of the languages with the highest number of labile verbs, also contains examples of the so-called **ergative causativization** of intransitives (Davidse & Geyskens 1998). Whether the derivation is observable through morphological markers, labiality, or suppletive strategies depends on the morphological richness and lexical availability of a given language (see also 3.2.3).

(42) a. Aba heexil et Danny bananot (Modern Hebrew)  
Dad CAUS-eat ACC Danny bananas  
‘Dad made Danny eat bananas’

(Alexiadou 2010:19 fn 16)

b. The nurse burped the baby

(Davidse&Geyskens 1998:163, ex. 26)

c.?(To) erepses to moro? (Greek)  
it.CL burped-2SG the baby.ACC  
‘Did you make the baby burp?’

(Kwon 2013:99, (16a), originally from Roussou & Tsimpli 2007:149, (13a))

It is interesting to note that the examples mentioned here share the same direct object: a child. This is not a coincidence and supports Romagno’s (2021, 2023, 2025) and Busso & Romagno’s findings regarding the potentially low agentivity attributed to the object theme. In other words, a high degree of animacy of the object would trigger a higher potential agentivity, which seems to weaken or even block the use of transitive strategies with unaccusatives and

unergatives. In the case of babies or small children, we encounter human objects that are low in agentivity, as they are semantically understood as having limited intentionality and independent movement.

Nursing terms consistently offer transitive or causative structures with (un)ergatives, particularly when the object theme is semantically weak in volition (such as a baby, an animal, or an adult with strongly limited freedom of motion). Crosslinguistically, words for bodily emissions are often used transitively when the person being cared for is a baby:

(43) He'd be in nappies for other carers who wouldn't wish to pee him.

(Kwon 2013:99, (17b))

Nevertheless, ergativizations can also be found in specific jargons with potentially highly agentive objects, such as the English expression "to play somebody", which refers to sport opponents, both teams (e.g., "Italy will play France on Sunday") and individual athletes (e.g., "Musetti will play Sinner on Sunday"). The productivity of this construction is limited to the specific context of sports, matches, and tournaments (Kwon 2013).

Similarly, some Italian vernaculars and idiolects, particularly those influenced by a strong dialectal substratum, also allow for analogous constructions with the verb *giocare* ('play'). On the one hand, internal objects are generally acceptable, as in *giocare una partita* ('play a game'). On the other hand, some peculiar uses of *giocare* in non-standard Italian may also be considered examples of transitivized unergatives:

(44) Gioca            il        bambino!  
       Play-IMP    the     child

'Play the child!' = 'entertain the child!'

(GC2021.43)

The transitivization of unergatives encountered in some Southern Italian regional varieties is analyzed by Romagno (2025; see also Dixon & Aikhenvald 2000) as the result of **applicative** constructions. Valency-increasing applicative derivation happens when a peripheral argument is taken into the core of VP, thus becoming a direct object (see also Ramchand 2008 and section 3.2.6).

In the analysis by Davidse & Geykens (1998), English transitivized unergatives retain their original meaning of lacking external causation. In other words, the transitivization of these

predicates expresses a lower degree of control, effectiveness, and volition of the agent/subject than in the case of unaccusatives, and a corresponding lower degree of affectedness and passivity of the object. The Italian data, however, suggest a higher degree of transitivity, with volitional human agents and fully affected theme objects (see also 3.2.4).

In general, the fact that we find crosslinguistic evidence for both unergatives and unaccusatives in causative structures can also be considered as supporting those theories that claim a discrete separation between unaccusativity and unergativity. Considering the complexity of auxiliary selection in Italo-Romance varieties (Cennamo & Sorace 2007; Sorace 2000; Cennamo 2007), among other examples of flexibility on the continuum between the two poles of intransitivity, we assume that **transitivity can arise in every context**, as confirmed by the considerations found in Jiménez Fernández & Tubino (2014), which suggest that unergatives can also be transitivized, as long as they partly function like unaccusatives.

Nevertheless, the ergativization of intransitives must follow specific acceptability patterns, mostly based on semantic constraints rather than structural ones, as not all contexts are permitted:

(45) #Cerco            seggiolone    per    mangiare    mia    figlia<sup>22</sup>  
           seek-1SG        high-chair    to     eat-INF     my    daughter

Lit. ‘I am looking for a high chair to eat my daughter’ = ‘...to feed my daughter’

Or ‘... for my daughter to eat’

(GC2021.38)

The interpretation of sentence (45) is partly ambiguous. Speakers of southern varieties have suggested a case of personal infinitive, with the daughter being the agentive subject of the infinite verb *mangiare*<sup>23</sup>. The postverbal position of this subject could confirm this interpretation, furtherly reinforced by the geographical origin of the speaker – since personal infinitives are only found in some specific varieties. Alternatively, example (45) can be seen as another **‘improvised’ causativization** of the ergative verb *eat* (Davidse & Geyskens 1998), where the grammatical meaning of eating someone corresponds to the semantically more

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<sup>22</sup> Found on Facebook Marketplace and written by a middle-aged female speaker of Southern Italy.

<sup>23</sup> Thanks to Luigi Andriani for this fundamental observation.

plausible and pragmatically appropriate meaning of feeding someone. This case can further be analyzed as an extemporaneous labile alternation in the absence of a productive suppletion, such as the English *eat/feed*. To avoid periphrastic causatives, speakers extend the valency of some predicates by forcing them to structurally behave as transitives.

While some of these valency coercion strategies are regularly used and acceptable in non-standard Italian, especially in the cases of TUCs seen in this work, some other instances as the one seen in (45) are to consider rather improvised. Example (45) thus probably sounds more unnatural than the utterances with TUCs seen before. Nevertheless, it remains understandable, likely due to the low potential agentivity of the direct object and the implausibility of its literal interpretation. In other words, world knowledge informs us that it is highly improbable for the speaker to be eating their daughter. Instead of interpreting the direct object as a consumption target, we understand it as the undergoer of a caused event, namely the act of eating. The action of eating is thus transferred to the object theme (the daughter), which is brought to perform it.

Since spoken Italian lacks a transitive lexical counterpart to *mangiare* ('eat'), the speaker resorted to a highly marked, almost unacceptable, but still understandable expression. We cannot rule out, however, the possibility that the author simply omitted one or more words in this written utterance.

While it clearly emerges from this subsection that the transitivization of unergatives is a compelling topic that warrants more attention than it has received thus far, the primary focus of this work remains on the transitivization of unaccusatives. We will refer to unergatives only briefly in the remaining sections, leaving a more detailed investigation to future research.

## **2.4 Other Romance varieties**

This section offers a brief comparison between the transitivization patterns observed in colloquial Italian and similar phenomena found in other Romance national varieties. In the case of Italian, the focus is on spoken informal language, including non-standard but well-documented utterances. The Spanish examples are taken from studies by Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino (2014) and Lara Bermejo (2018, 2020), while the Catalan data is drawn from Pineda (2018, 2021). A brief overview of Romanian, French, and Portuguese transitivization patterns

has also been included, for which I am especially grateful to colleagues and informants with native or near-native proficiency.

Where relevant, Italian translations are provided, particularly when they highlight noteworthy similarities or contrasts that can contribute to developing a typology of verb classes that either allow or reject transitivization in spoken Italian. The final part of this section summarizes the main crosslinguistic similarities and differences, with special attention to possible stages of language change.

For a more comprehensive account of causativization strategies in Romance, readers are referred to the literature cited.

Causativity in Romance languages has been the subject of extensive scholarly investigation (see Schäfer 2009, 2012, 2022; Folli 2014; Martin & Schäfer 2014; Martin 2023, among others), with a particular focus on contrasts between Romance and Germanic languages in the expression of causation.

Romance languages typically differ from Germanic languages in their treatment of indirect causation, often relying on inference rather than overt morphosyntactic marking – similar to the pattern already noted for Latin (see Section 3.1). In particular, some frequent constructions in Romance exhibit transitive active structures where the subject functions simultaneously as agent and experiencer. By contrast, English and German tend to favor lexical alternatives that explicitly encode indirect causation or delegation of the action to another agent:

- (46) a. La settimana prossima mi opero al cuore/mi taglio i capelli  
(Standard Italian)
- b. Na semana que vem vou fazer cirurgia ao coração/cortar meu cabelo  
(Brazilian Portuguese)
- lit. ‘Next week I will operate my heart/cut my hair’
- c. Nächste Woche lasse ich mich am Herz operieren/ mir die Haare schneiden.  
(German)
- lit. ‘I will let me operate at the heart/ let my hair cut’  
‘I will have a heart surgery/have my hair cut next week’

While Romance languages exhibit notable similarities when compared to typologically different language groups, relevant differences also emerge in the expression of transitivity and

causation – particularly in the case of caused motion constructions. These differences may concern the realization of argument structure, the status and volition of the subject-as-actor, or even the acceptability and frequency of transitivized forms.

The codification of split-intransitivity meanings differs among Romance varieties, as shown by auxiliary selection patterns: while Portuguese and Spanish nowadays only select HAVE, French and Italian varieties alternate BE and HAVE, with structural consequences on the use and reception of TUCs.

One particularly influential factor appears to be the speakers' perception – whether objective or subjective – of how conservative their national linguistic norm is. This perception affects both the acceptability and the diffusion of TUCs.

In non-standard French, for example, which is often perceived as less conservative than Standard Italian, these constructions appear more frequently (Heidinger 2014; Lara Bermejo 2020). By contrast, the normative pressure exerted on the spontaneous speech of Italian speakers seems to be stronger, especially when considering the historical development and standardization process of Italian (see also Chapter 4). Many Italian speakers – particularly those who are aware of their own degree of dialectal and standard Italian proficiency – may feel the need to monitor their spontaneous speech, aligning it more closely with the prescriptive national standard. This often includes a tendency to "purify" their spoken Italian from dialectal influences.

### *Spanish*

Informal standard and regional Italian are not the only Romance varieties in which causative uses of unaccusative verbs are attested. Indeed, similar patterns have been observed in Spanish varieties across both Europe and South America. To the best of my knowledge, scholars working on Peninsular Spanish and Catalan have so far provided the most detailed accounts of this phenomenon within the Romance linguistic literature.

Formally, Jiménez-Fernández and Tubino (2014) were the first to apply Ramchand's syntactic framework to Spanish data (see Section 3.2.6). Some of the Spanish examples discussed in their work are reported below:

- (47) a. Juan entró las sillas en la casa  
 Juan went the chairs in the house

Lit. ‘Juan went the chairs into the house’ = ‘Juan brought the chairs in the house’

(Peninsular Spanish)

(Jiménez Fernández & Tubino 2014:8, ex. (2b.))

- b. Juan sentó al niño  
 Juan sat to.the child

Lit. ‘Juan sat the child’ = ‘Juan put the child to seat’

(JF & T 2014:9, (8c.) from Mendikoetxea (1999:1606))

Jiménez-Fernández and Tubino (2014:199), adopting the framework of Rappaport Hovav and Levin (1995), provide a classification of the verb classes that can trigger causative alternation in substandard varieties of Spanish. These include inherently directed-motion verbs (*caer(se)* ‘fall’, *entrar* ‘go in’, *trepase* ‘climb’), internally caused change-of-state verbs (*saltar* ‘jump’), verbs of change of position (*agacharse* ‘crouch’), verbs of appearance (*aparecer* ‘appear’), verbs of emission (*sonar* ‘sound’), and stative verbs (*quedarse* ‘stay’).

Following Mendikoetxea’s (1999) classification, they exclude verbs of existence and spontaneous apparition from participating in the causative alternation.

A brief comparison between the grammatical status of these constructions in Spanish and their more restricted acceptability in spoken Italian will help to highlight some fundamental differences:

- (48) a. Niño, que me trepas  
 Boy that me climb-2SG

(non-standard Spanish)

‘Watch out boy, you’re going to make me fall’

- b. \*Ragazzino, guarda che mi arrampichi (Italian)

- c. No te apoyes en mamá, que la vas  
 NEG REFL-2SG lean-2SG on mom that her go-2SG  
 a agachar  
 to crouch

(Spanish)

‘Don’t lean on mom or you’ll make her crouch’

- d. \*Non ti appoggiare a mamma che l’accovacci (Italian)

- e. Los ladrones saltaron la cerradura  
 the burglars jumped the lock  
 ‘The burglars popped the lock (e.g. by kicking the door open)’ (Spanish)  
 (Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino 2019:199-200, ex. (21a,b, g))
- f. \*I ladri hanno saltato la serratura<sup>24</sup> (Italian)

There seems to be a relevant semantic difference between the grammatical Spanish data and its ungrammatical Italian translation (examples (48a-e)): the degree of **volition** of the actor seems to determine whether the transitivization of unaccusatives is allowed in non-standard Italian.

The most significant difference between the Italian and Spanish data lies in the presence, in certain geographically restricted areas of the Spanish Peninsula, of transitivized verbs occurring with scarcely agentive subjects. These constructions contrast sharply not only with the Italian data but also with the more widespread patterns found in other Spanish varieties, including those spoken in Latin America, as they appear to encode a fundamentally different semantic interpretation.

As shown by examples in Lara Bermejo (2018, 2020), in some western regions of the Spanish Peninsula – namely Burgos, León, Ávila, Zamora, Salamanca, Valladolid, Cáceres, Badajoz, Toledo, and Ciudad Real (Lara Bermejo 2018:94) – which correspond to the "Ruta de la Plata", one finds transitivized uses of verbs such as *caer* ('fall') and *quedar* ('stay') involving non-agentive or non-volitional subjects that accidentally cause the event denoted by the verb. In rarer cases, these constructions yield an ambiguous reading, allowing for either a volitional agentive or a non-volitional causer interpretation:

- (49) a. Caí el vaso  
 fell-1SG the glass  
 lit. 'I fell the glass' = 'I caused the glass to fall'
- b. (Me) quedé los libros en la mesa  
 REFL-1SG stayed-1SG the books in the table  
 lit. 'I stayed the books on the table' = 'I left/forgot the books on the table'

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<sup>24</sup> *Saltare*, 'jump', is transitive in standard Italian with the metaphoric meaning of 'skip', as in *saltare il pranzo*, 'skip lunch'.

(Lara Bermejo 2018: 93. ex. (4a) and (4b))

These uses seem to support the hypotheses put forward by Ramchand (2006) and Givón (2001), according to which events triggered by a strongly direct cause tend to be expressed through lexical strategies – either labile or suppletive – whereas indirectly caused events are typically encoded by means of periphrastic or analytic causative constructions (see also Shibatani & Pardeshi 2002).

What is particularly noteworthy in these examples is that their Italian, Catalan, and Argentinian counterparts would be considered unacceptable, at least based on the literature and on my informants. This suggests that, outside the varieties documented by Lara Bermejo, the same predicates involved in these transitivization strategies are generally only used in contexts involving more prototypical agentive subjects, i.e. strong in volition.

In fact, it appears that both accidental causers and volitional agents are more likely to be expressed through lexical strategies when a higher degree of involvement in the event is conveyed. Furthermore, Lara Bermejo reports in his fieldwork that speakers who use *caer* and *quedar* transitively also necessarily extend this usage to *entrar*, whereas the reverse is not always true (Lara Bermejo 2018:117).

This observation suggests that non-volitional subjects may have emerged by analogy, following the expansion of transitivized motion verbs with volitional agents. The author therefore posits the existence of a **hierarchy** – both in terms of diachronic development and geographic diffusion (and even within individual speakers' idiolects) – that begins with transitive motion verbs whose subject encode volition, and proceeds unidirectionally toward the inclusion of accidental causers with other unaccusatives:

(50) *entrar* > *quedar* > *caer*

In other words, speakers who accept the transitivization of *caer* necessarily also accept transitive uses of *quedar* and *entrar*, whereas some speakers may only use – or find acceptable – the transitive form of *entrar*, and not the others.

It is therefore unsurprising that speakers who accept *caer* with an inanimate causer also accept transitive *entrar* with human agents, confirming the unidirectional nature of the extension. An utterance such as the one exemplified in (51) is only supposed to be acceptable

if the other predicates *entrar* and *quedar* are given within one grammar, especially with agentive human subjects:

- (51) El viento ha caído la calabaza  
The wind has fallen the squash  
'The wind let the squash fall'

(Lara Bermejo 2020: 129)

On the opposite, if a speaker accepts only one of these verbs in its transitive use, it is necessarily *entrar* with a volitional human agent. Similarly, if only two of the verbs are acceptable to the speaker, they will be *entrar* and *quedar*, as these are more likely to require, respectively, human agents and animate subjects (Lara Bermejo 2020:124; see also Romagno 2021, 2023).

The precedence of strong volitional subjects on causers in transitivization strategies, which is confirmed by Lara Bermejo's data, also reinforces the assumption reported by Hopper & Thomson (1980) that strong agents tend to trigger transitivity more than accidental agents, natural forces, and causers, and that is why only speakers who are already familiar with volitional subjects of causative unaccusatives will also use causers in the same structures in their grammar.

A further element that could represent a significant variable in the selection of use of causative unaccusatives may be the telicity distinction: as pointed out by Lara Bermejo (2018: 104), atelic constructions of the verb *entrar* are more often acceptable. In his study, the author found out that transitive atelic uses of *entrar* were overall accepted, while telic constructions involving the same verb were restricted to the South-Western provinces and had an acceptability rate of about 20%:

- (52) Ha entrado el folio en el sobre (telic)  
Has entered the sheet in the envelope  
'She put the sheet into the envelope'

(Lara Bermejo 2018:104, ex. (15))

In telic contexts, most speakers preferred canonical transitive verbs such as *meter* ('put in') over transitivized motion verbs. These findings suggest that telicity may influence root selection, thus supporting Hopper and Thompson's (1980) claim that telic predicates tend to yield highly transitive interpretations.

A further and crucial observation must be highlighted: neither Spanish nor Catalan allow for the transitive use of ‘go out’ – that is, *salir* and *sortir*, respectively – whereas both accept the transitive use of *entrar* (‘go in’/‘put in’). The same pattern holds for Romanian, as we will illustrate in this section. This represents a significant difference from spoken Italian and French, where both *uscire* and *entrare* can appear in non-standard transitivized structures:

- (53) a. Esco l’immondizia tutti i giorni. (Italian)  
 b. Je sors la poubelle tous les jours (French)  
 c. \*Salgo/saco la basura todos los días (Spanish)  
 d. \*Surto/trec les escombraries tots els dies (Catalan)

lit. ‘I go out the trash every day’ = ‘I take out the trash every day’

The most plausible explanation for this phenomenon is that Spanish and Catalan do not need to employ a transitivization strategy for these unaccusative predicates, as they already have fully acceptable transitive counterparts: *sacar* in Spanish and *treure* in Catalan (‘bring/take out’). Indeed, Spanish, Catalan, and Portuguese differ from Italian in that they possess a causative semantic counterpart to the deictic pair *go/come*, with predicates such as *sacar* (Sp.), *trazer* (Port.), and *treure* (Cat.) for the *ventive* meaning (causative *come*; see Ricca 1993:22).

Finally, Lara Bermejo (2018:100ff.; 2020) suggests the existence of a cluster of properties that make Western Peninsular Spanish peculiar in comparison to other Spanish varieties. Distinctive phonetic and morphosyntactic phenomena – such as divergent clitic selection strategies, the use of the future tense to express hypotheses, the use of the present tense to express future events, the preference for postverbal unaccusative subjects, and the frequent use of reflexives, among others – characterize this **cluster** typical of Western Spanish. These features may thus serve as predictors for the presence of TUCs among speakers of this variety.

### *Catalan*

The synchronic and diachronic investigation, as well as the formal analysis of transitivized verbs of motion in Catalan (but also in other substandard Romance varieties, such

as Aragonese) has been most prominently conducted by Pineda (2018, 2021). Some Catalan examples are reported here:

- (54) a. La Maria entrà el cotxe al garatge  
the Maria went the car in-the garage

lit. ‘Maria went the car into the garage’ = ‘Maria took the car into the garage’

- b. El Pau puja/baixà el vi del/ al celler  
the Pau went.up/down the wine from-the/ to-the cellar

lit. ‘Pau went up/down the wine from/to the cellar’ = ‘Paul brought the wine up/down from/to the cellar’

(Pineda 2018:245(2a-b))

Significantly, Pineda (2019:232-233) observes that the causative use of motion verbs is not an innovation of Modern Catalan, but already existed in the corpora of Old Catalan. The inventory of verbs that allowed transitive constructions was even broader in Old Catalan than it is today, showing more flexibility in causativization strategies. Adopting Jiménez-Fernández and Tubino’s (2014) syntactic explanation for TUCs, based on Ramchand’s (2008) model (see also 3.2.6), Pineda’s diachronical analysis evidences that Old Catalan made a broader usage of SE with motion verbs, confirming their occurrence in causative labile constructions still nowadays. Pineda confirms that the presence of SE EN as anticausative marker in the intransitive counterpart of TUC predicates may signal possible transitivization patterns (see also 3.2.6 and 5.5). Catalan SE EN, which is realized as SE in Spanish, indicates complex predicates which can be divided into subevents, thus signaling that the event is big enough to host different subject DPs, including an external agent. This intuition, which confirms Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino’s (2014) syntactic approach to TUCs, is discussed in detail in our formal proposal (5.5).

### *French*

Lability is a well-established phenomenon in Modern French, statistically more common than in other Romance languages (Heidinger identifies around 300 labile verbs in present-day French, 2014:1022), although the most frequent anticausative strategy remains the insertion of SE. Lability is also thought to have resisted the spread of this anticausative marking strategy. In informal, regional varieties, SE and labile verbs seem to coexist with anticausative

derivations without substantial semantic differences. In only a few cases are labile alternations preferred over anticausative markers; the replacement of labile alternations with marked anticausatives is a relatively slow process.

Some of the verbs already encountered in the Italian constructions examined in this work are canonically labile in spoken French or appear in substandard spoken production (*descendre* 'go/lead down', *sortir* 'go/take out', *entrer* 'go/take in', *monter* 'go/take up'). For spoken informal French, we observed that the acceptability of some transitive motion verbs is not problematic and has become standard, at least since the lexical shift in motion verbs highlighted by Piccione & Rainsford (2024).

- (55) a. Je tombe la chemise sur le sole  
 I fall-1SG the shirt on the floor  
 'I drop the shirt on the floor'

(Lara Bermejo 2018:108, ex. (28))

- b. Je sors le puovelle tous les jours  
 I exit-1SG the trash all the days

(*ibid.*, ex. (24))

It is interesting to report that *tomber*, ('fall') is also found as transitive predicate in child speech, in particular in so-called “**error causativizations**”, i.e. normatively unacceptable constructions that children produce in their spontaneous speech when acquiring their native language. These structures are cases of TUCs, although they might not be repeated after some stages of language acquisition. Nevertheless, the fact itself that they are produced represents, once more, the flexibility and creativity allowed by constructional synonymic strategies:

- (56) Il va tomber le château?  
 he will fall the castle  
 lit. 'He's gonna fall down the castle?'

(BEN, 1:10.21, Sarkar 2002, *apud* Martin 2023:35, ex. (63))

If we compare the lexicon of motion verbs of Old French and Modern French, we notice that the Old French items are nowadays found in modern Italian (adapted from Piccione & Rainsford 2024):

(57)	<b>Italian</b>	<b>Old French</b>	<b>Modern French</b>	
	<i>uscire</i>	<i>issir</i>	<i>sortir</i>	‘go out’
	<i>camminare</i>	<i>cheminer</i>	<i>marcher</i>	‘walk’
	<i>trarre</i>	<i>traire</i>	<i>tirer</i>	‘pull’

In other words, starting in the sixteenth century, French motion verbs underwent a lexical process that led to the substitution of some of the most commonly used verbs with other lexical entries. This process is believed to be linked to the shift in Modern French toward a strong verb-framed language, thus resembling other Romance varieties. The typological shift from a satellite-framed to a verb-framed language is attributed to the lexicalization of prefixes, which causes the expression of path to be encoded in the reanalyzed verb root rather than in the particles. This process also resulted in the loss of particles, as the crucial meanings of path and manner are now encoded in the verbal root rather than in the particles (Piccione & Rainsford 2024). Some of the verbs that were typically accompanied by a preposition before 1500 saw a decline in frequency after this period and were replaced with new lexical entries. For example, the verb *issir* ('to go out') was replaced by *sortir*, which, in contemporary French, is commonly used with a transitive meaning, as we have seen. Therefore, we can claim that the lexical reorganization of motion verbs in the transition from Old to Modern French may also indicate that the new lexical entries exhibit a more flexible use in transitive constructions.

Modern Italian, which did not undergo such a broad reorganization of the lexical paradigms of motion verbs, confirms its more conservative nature, as evidenced by the more stringent restrictions on transitive caused motion constructions

### *Portuguese*

While the acceptability of the Italian constructions under investigation seems to strongly depend on dialectal and regional *substrata*, information gathered from Brazilian Portuguese informants appears to vary on an idiolectal basis, which presents interesting challenges that we leave for further research.

Labiality is a well-known phenomenon in Portuguese, particularly considering that the anticausative and reflexive marker SE, whose phonetical realization is mandatory in many other

Romance languages, has been losing frequency in almost all of its various functions (see below). In some Brazilian varieties, lability arises as the causative, anticausative, reflexive, or even reciprocal counterparts, when SE is omitted, are phonetically identical. When SE is originally expected – and indeed realized in other varieties – but omitted in some contexts, it is possible to trace the derivation of lability, with the intransitive form being the derived one and the transitive form the default one, either conceptually or grammatically (Ignácio 2001). In most cases, Brazilian Portuguese presents examples of **patient-preserving lability**:

- (58) a. Maria abriu a porta (transitive)  
 Maria opened the door
- b. A porta (se) abriu (anticausative)  
 the door SE opened

In this form of lability, the argument preserved in the intransitive construction is the undergoer of change, and not the actor (58b).

European and Brazilian Portuguese partly pattern with the data already seen for spoken Italian, Catalan, French and Spanish. Nevertheless, TUCs are significantly rarer, and involve different predicates than in the Romance varieties seen until now. Transitivity of *chegar*, ‘arrive’, with the meaning of “bringing closer to the speaker” can be found:

- (59) Chega a mesa pra cá (non-standard)  
 arrive-IMP the table to here

lit. ‘Arrive the table to here’ = ‘Move the table closer’

The transitivity of *caminhar*, ‘walk’ and *passar*, ‘walk’, appears to be limited to the object theme *o cachorro*, ‘the dog’, indicating a possible English calque rather than a productive pattern. These transitivity constructions involving the same object theme seem to be a general crosslinguistic feature (Kwon 2013:299), for which the possible explanation of the English calque should describe its spread but also semantic and combinational limitation.

Interestingly, Brazilian Portuguese is also known for a similar form of causativization which has been defined as *tópicos sujeitos*, ‘**subject topics**’. Here, the patient topic is moved through left dislocation and topicalized, becoming the grammatical subject of an active sentence whose agent is not expressed. Consider the following examples:

- (60)
- a. O ponteiro do relógio quebrou  
the pointer of.the watch broke
- b. Nessa casa bate sol  
in.this house hits sun  
'The sun hits (on) this house'
- c. O pé do jogador torceu  
the foot of.the player sprained  
'The player's foot sprained'
- d. Neste carro sobe ladeira  
in.this car goes.up ladder  
'A ladder fits in this car'

(adapted from Avelar & Galvez 2011:50ff.)

The topicalization of the whole whose part broke (the watch in (60a)), the locative where the sun shines (the house in (60b)), and the body whose part is injured (the one of the player in (60c)) causes these topics to be moved to the left periphery, i.e. to the canonical subject position, triggering agreement with the active verb:

- (61)
- a. O relógio quebrou o ponteiro  
the watch broke the pointer  
lit. 'The watch broke the pointer'
- b. Essa casa bate sol  
this house hits sun  
lit. 'This house hits sun'
- c. O jogador torceu o pé  
the player sprained the foot  
lit. 'The player sprained the ankle'
- d. Este carro sobe ladeira  
this car goes.up ladder  
lit. 'This car fits a ladder'

In these examples, we notice the scrambled word order *Patient – Adjunct – Verb* to *Adjunct – Verb – Patient*. This left-dislocation grammatically gives rise to an apparent active transitive sentence in which the possessor becomes the grammatical subject, and occupies the agent position, but is semantically not an agent (a phenomenon known as “pseudotransitivity”, see Ignácio 2001; Avelar & Galves 2011). As seen with example pair (60b) and (61b), this is also the case of locatives (*nessa casa*, ‘in this house’) and instruments. As shown by the examples, we sometimes face a case of possessor raising, especially with monovalent verbs,

and sometimes the extraction of a locative from bivalent predicates, thus generating a new small clause with locatives as arguments (De Andrade & Galves 2014). Schäfer (2022) analyses similar expressions, such as ‘the gas planet increased its volume’, as further evidence for expletive Voice (see also 3.2.5). All constructions share the same need that motivates the left dislocation, i.e. topicalization<sup>25</sup> (Galves 1998; Munhoz & Naves 2012; Nunes 2021, a.o.).

Similar cases of topicalization, only to find in Brazilian Portuguese among the Romance varieties, do not present a pseudotransitive structure, but an apparently intransitive, active structure with a **pseudoagent**, i.e. causative verbs with only the theme as subject:

- (62)     A     camiseta     está   lavando  
           the    shirt            AUX   washing  
           lit. ‘The shirt is washing’ = ‘The shirt is being washed’

It is relevant to highlight that this kind of topicalization, also known as object raising (Cyrino 2007:87), compared to simple left dislocation, triggers agreement between the predicate and the new grammatical subject, the dislocated DP<sup>26</sup>:

- (63)     Essas casas batem sol  
           These houses hit-3PLsun

It is immediately clear that these topicalizations, though structurally similar to the caused motion constructions we analyze in this work, function semantically differently, since their subjects are not properly actors or initiators of the caused actions. In fact, the primary trigger for these topicalizations is the absence of an external argument. Further differences stem from this main aspect, such as the acceptability of anaphoric and clitic pronouns in Italian caused motion constructions, in contrast to their unacceptability in Brazilian subject topics (Avelar & Galves 2011). Some of the scholars who formally investigated Brazilian topic subjects also attempted to diachronically illustrate how Brazilian Portuguese has come to be the

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<sup>25</sup> Some scholars consider Brazilian Portuguese a discourse-oriented or topic-oriented language, and not a subject-oriented language (Negrão & Viotti 2000; Cyrino 2007:86). This induces the need of an intermediate projection between C and T (named  $\alpha$ P in Munhoz & Naves 2012, PersP in Avelar & Galves 2011). Case remains unchecked, which triggers default nominative to be assigned.

<sup>26</sup> This subject position is peculiar in Brazilian Portuguese and differs from both European Portuguese and Italian, as it is an A'-position and does not depend on  $\phi$ -features. When the derivation reaches COMP, SpecTP is already filled with a null argument (in this case, a topic). It is only when C is inserted that  $\phi$ -features are checked. C checks its  $\phi$ -features directly with the topic in SpecTP, without needing to transfer them to T (for a more detailed description, see Avelar & Galves 2011).

only Romance (and Indo-European language, Cyrino 2007:90) which accepts these constructions.

The use and optional realization of SE in its different functions is connected to the phenomena mentioned. Cyrino (2007) highlights the connection between the loss of the medio/passive construction and the rise of impersonal SE on the one hand, and object raising triggering verbal agreement on the other. In her diachronic analysis, the author emphasizes how impersonal SE without agreement between the verb and internal argument replaced passive SE, which triggers agreement between the verb and its internal argument. By the end of the nineteenth century, passive SE had practically disappeared (Cyrino 2007:90), following a broader process that led to the loss of weak pronouns, passive SE, and even mandatory SE in its various other functions (see below).

As Cyrino (2007) reports, reflexive, reciprocal, impersonal, and anticausative SE can be phonetically omitted in Brazilian Portuguese in cases where other Romance varieties require its mandatory realization:

- (64) a. Marta e Maria (se) beijaram ontem na festa  
 Marta and Maria SE kissed yesterday in.the party  
 ‘Marta and Maria kissed (each other) yesterday at the party’ (reciprocal)
- b. João (se) machucou a perna (reflexive)  
 João SE. injured the leg  
 ‘João injured his leg’
- c. Nos domingos (se) vai no estádio<sup>27</sup> (impersonal)  
 on-the Sundays SE goes in.the stadium  
 ‘On Sundays you go to the stadium’

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<sup>27</sup> Brazilian Portuguese has shown a strong tendency towards phonetically full subjects instead of null subjects (Duarte 2000, a.o.). Among other aspects related to this issue, Duarte has also identified an increasing preference for personal constructions with *você* (‘you’) instead of impersonal *se*.

d. O pnéu (#se) furou<sup>28</sup> (anticausative)  
 the tyre SE punctured

This peculiarity of some Brazilian varieties is relevant to our purposes, as the relationship between event decomposition, the anticausative marker SE and TUCs has proven to be crucial (see sections 3.2.6 and 5.5). Therefore, the lower acceptability of caused motion constructions in Portuguese is unlikely to be attributed to a more conservative path (which is not the case for Brazilian Portuguese), but rather to this morphophonetical feature of optional SE.

Although Brazilian Portuguese shows some flexibility and tolerance toward transitivization strategies, it is exactly agentive caused motion constructions which are less acceptable than in other Romance varieties. For this and other reasons, we consider the data from Brazilian Portuguese as confirming the importance of overt SE for the conversion of canonical unaccusatives into TUCs, while leaving other syntactic peculiarities mentioned in this subsection to further research.

### *Romanian*

Romanian verbs of motion show a higher acceptability and a broader distribution of transitivized forms than in standard Italian<sup>29</sup>. Similarly to the spoken Italian construction *scendere le braccia*, lit. ‘go down the arms’ (‘lower the arms’), the Romanian verbs *a coborî*, ‘go down’ and *a urca*, ‘go up’, usually intransitive, can be used as transitives with the meaning of ‘lift and ‘lower’:

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<sup>28</sup> In spoken Italian, you can translate ‘I’ve punctured a tyre’ with *ho bucato una gomma* or simply *ho bucato* (lit. ‘I pierced’). Once again, an apparent active construction bears a grammatical subject which is not the semantic initiator, or at least not (fully) volitional. If a thug punctured a tyre on purpose, the structure would stay the same, so that no structural difference could be visible.

<sup>29</sup> I am deeply thankful to Roberto Merlo for his precious insights on the Romanian data. Any erroneous information is only to ascribe to my research and analysis.

(65) a. Într-adevăr, mașina cealaltă opri nu după mult timp la gară.

‘Indeed, after a while another car stopped at the station’

Acolo băiatul                    **coborî**                    **valizele.**  
there boy.the                    went.down                    suitcase-the.PL

lit. ‘there, the boy went down the suitcases’ = ‘the boy took out the suitcases’

(Haralamb Zincă, *O crimă aproape perfectă*, Ed. Cogito, 1991)

b. Șoferul [...]                    urcă                    valizele                    grele                    în                    mașină<sup>30</sup>  
driver.the                    goes.up suitcases-the.PL                    heavy-the                    in                    car

lit. ‘The driver goes up the heavy suitcases in the car’

The same applies to transitive reflexives, which are ungrammatical in spoken Italian:

(66) a. În cât timp iese alcoolul din organism.

‘How long it takes for the alcohol to leave the organism’

La                    câte                    ore                    poți                    să                    te                    urci                    din                    nou  
at                    how.many                    hours                    can.2SG COMP                    REFL go.up                    of                    new  
la                    volan<sup>31</sup>  
the                    wheel

lit. ‘after how many hours you can go yourself up again at the wheel’ = ‘after how many hours you can get behind the wheel again’

b. \*Dopo quante ore puoi salirti di nuovo al volante. (Italian)

Furthermore, paths as internal objects can also be realized as grammatical direct objects, similar to the Italian constructions:

(67) *a-coborî/a-urca*                    *scările/*                    *munții/*                    *culmile*  
go.down go.up                    stairs.the                    mountains.the                    summits.the  
‘descend/climb the stairs/the mountains/the summits’

The *MDA – Micul Dicționar Academic* indicates for *a urca* (‘go up’) exclusively transitive uses with the meaning of “moving a being or an object to a higher point”. In this case, the given example also resembles another example already reported here from standard Italian, which we repeat here for comparison:

(68) a. L-a urcat în odaia ei (Romanian)

lit. ‘He has gone it up in his bedroom’

<sup>30</sup> Source: <https://life.ro/viata-in-miami-ce-sa-vizitezi-si-de-ce-sa-te-feresti/>. Access: July 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Source: <https://www.libertatea.ro/lifestyle/timp-iese-alcoolul-organism-la-cate-ore-poti-urci-volan-4757972>. Access: July 2024.

b. L'ho salito

(non-standard Italian)

lit. 'I have gone it up' [*the package*]

As for a *coborî*, the *Dicționarul limbii române literare contemporane* (Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, 1955-57) reports a transitive use with the meaning of 'bring someone or something down from a given height,' but also in expressions involving body parts, such as a *coborî ochii* ('lower the eyes').

Interestingly, the Romanian translations of motion verbs *a ieși* ('go out') and *a intra* ('go in') do not allow transitive use, whereas spoken Italian does. Recalling the Spanish data, we can again explain this difference by the availability of either concurrent, informal, canonically transitive verbs such as *a scoate* ('to extract') or phrasal verbs like *a duce înăuntru* ('to bring in'). This evidence seems to reinforce our proposal that, for a construction to be used – even rarely – it must offer either some economy of expression, a specific semantic use, or a social connotation that helps define a group or its geographical origin and spread (see 2.2.2)

### *Summary*

This subsection presented a brief comparison of the phenomenon of TUCs (Transitive Use of Caused Motion) and similar uncanonical cases of transitivity in national Romance languages and their non-standard varieties. The formal analysis of these features has primarily been conducted for Spanish by Jiménez-Fernández and Tubino (2014), Lara Bermejo (2018, 2020), and Pineda (2018, 2019, 2021), and for Catalan by Pineda (ibid.). Their syntactic analysis has highlighted a connection between the anticausative alternation with the marker SE (NE) and the availability of transitivity strategies (applied to the Italian phenomenon in section 5.5), while the semantic analysis of Western Spanish TUCs by Lara Bermejo (2018, 2020) suggested a hierarchical distribution of the acceptability of different predicates based on the status, agentivity, and volition of the actor subject. Furthermore, Lara Bermejo's insight into the existence of a **cluster** of properties favoring the use of TUCs in a specific (substandard) variety seems to hold for the Italian data, as we will further discuss in the sociolinguistic section (Chapter 4).

Our contrastive analysis revealed common structural transitivization strategies and lexical similarities, since some of the verbs most involved in the labile alternation are the same across all Romance languages. Nevertheless, the availability of canonical transitive underived roots in Spanish, Catalan, and Romanian, compared to Italian, determines a different lexical paradigm for TUCs, as seen in the Spanish predicate *sacar* or the Catalan *treure* ('put out'), which do not have an Italian translation that reflects the same economy and neutral register. Thus, the possibility or impossibility of a root participating in the labile alternation is confirmed to depend on its concurrency with other synonymic roots normatively more acceptable.

The behavior of Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, French, and Romanian regarding the spread and acceptability of TUCs patterns aligns with other known properties of language change and conservative language policies. Thus, TUCs structures in French appear less restricted and more acceptable, at least in substandard varieties, than in Italian. The same applies to Catalan and some Spanish varieties, both in the Iberian Peninsula and in Latin America.

The status of standard Italian as a conservative register, which began its *neo-standardization* process later than other national spoken norms due to its peculiar history, seems to determine a slower development towards the acceptability of regionally marked and dialectal features.

Such normative pressure is likely heightened in specific contexts, particularly when speakers are asked to produce metalinguistic judgments in controlled environments (see Chapter 5). Since TUCs are rooted in dialectal usage and were excluded from the Florentine-based standardization process that led to the rise of Standard Italian, speakers may have felt compelled to avoid them in written registers. This could explain their absence from written corpora as well as from elicited spoken data.

This pattern aligns with the broader conservative tendencies observed in the Italian national standard and confirms Italy's reputation for maintaining more conservative morphosyntactic norms compared to other Romance languages.

Through this brief overview of the phenomenon of TUCs in other Romance (substandard) varieties, the low frequency and productivity of these structures in Portuguese varieties emerge as the most striking data, especially when compared to apparently similar structures, such as the so-called subject topics, which differ in their semantic composition, as

they lack a volitional agent. This phenomenon may be connected to the loss of the compulsory overt anticausative marker SE in (Brazilian) Portuguese.

Completing Pineda's (2018:250) tables on the acceptability of transitivizations depending on the presence of *se (en)* in the anticausative counterpart, we include Italian and dialectal judgments (the examples reported here are from Privernese, a dialect of the Central-Northern Latian group):

<b>Standard Spanish</b>	<i>Ir</i>	<i>Caer</i>	<i>Subir</i>	<i>Bajar</i>	<i>entrar</i>
<i>Se</i> -intransitive?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Causative transitive?	No	No	Yes	Yes	no

<b>Southern Pen. Spanish</b>	<i>Ir</i>	<i>Caer</i>	<i>Subir</i>	<i>Bajar</i>	<i>entrar</i>
<i>Se</i> -intransitive?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	yes
Causative transitive?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	yes

<b>Catalan</b>	<i>Anar</i>	<i>Caure</i>	<i>Pujar</i>	<i>Baixar</i>	<i>entrar</i>
<i>Se</i> -intransitive?	Yes	No	No	No	No
Causative transitive?	No	No	Yes	Yes	yes

<b>Standard Italian</b>	<i>Andare</i>	<i>Cadere</i>	<i>Salire</i>	<i>Scendere</i>	<i>Entrare</i>
<i>Se-ne</i> -intransitive?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Causative transitive?	No	No	No	No	no

<b>Regional Italian (Lazio)</b>	<i>Anda'</i>	<i>Cade'</i>	<i>Sali'</i>	<i>Scende</i>	<i>Entra'</i>
<i>Se-ne</i> -intransitive?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Causative transitive?	No	No	Yes	Yes	yes

<b>Privernese</b>	<i>I'</i>	<i>Cade'</i>	<i>Azzecca'</i>	<i>Cala'</i>	<i>Ndra'</i>
<i>Se-ne</i> -intransitive?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Causative transitive?	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 2 Some unaccusatives and their transitivization

As clearly illustrated by Table 2 and confirmed by Pineda (2018), the availability of the anticausative alternation with SE is a necessary, but not sufficient condition to justify the grammaticality of TUCs. In other words, there exists no univocal correspondence between the

two interrelated phenomena. A thorough analysis of syntactic-semantic interface properties governing the causative alternation seen in Italian TUCs is strongly necessary in order to better understand this phenomenon, and is given in Chapter 3.

## 2.5 Summary

This introductory subchapter has outlined some of the key features distinguishing TUCs (Transitivized Unaccusative Constructions) from canonical unaccusatives. Transitivized pure unaccusatives unexpectedly display a **biargumental** structure, comprising an **agent subject**, which may or may not perform the motion denoted by the verb, and a direct **theme object** that undergoes the caused motion.

Since there are no morphological derivational markers, the causative alternation in this case falls under the label of **labile** alternation. Lability, a phenomenon widely found in English, is also observed in Italian and other Romance varieties, albeit less frequently. Anticausativity, i.e., the absence of an external causer or agent, is generally expressed with the anticausative marker SE, whereas causativity, as seen in TUCs, follows different patterns and structures.

TUCs are often categorized by normative sources as ‘**popular**’ and ‘**regionally marked**’. Their status, spread, and acceptability are subjects of debate among speakers from various regions of the Italian peninsula, as well as among scholars. Linguistic inquiry has particularly focused on the role of (potential) object animacy in the acceptability and productivity of TUCs structures.

Examples from my corpus data demonstrate that transitivized canonical directed-motion verbs, such as *entrare* (‘go in’), *uscire* (‘go out’), *salire* (‘go up’), and *scendere* (‘go down’), are primarily found in southern regional Italian varieties. However, other roots, such as *avanzare* (‘leave over’) and *tornare* (‘give back’), can also appear in transitive forms in northern varieties. This indicates that different varieties of Italian accept – and reject – transitivizations of different verbs. This behavior appears to be linked to both sociolinguistic and formal/grammatical factors, as shown by normative commentaries (Paoli 5/2/2016 for the Accademia della Crusca) and previous linguistic studies (Romagno 2021, 2023; Busso & Romagno 2021). On the one hand, the geographical complexity of the Italian sociolinguistic landscape (summarized in Chapter 4) seems to determine which roots can be inserted into agentive structures. In particular, the preference toward phrasal verb in the North appears to

block the use of TUCs, which may be used in southern varieties with or without prepositions (*esco fuori la macchina* or *esco la macchina*, lit. ‘I go out the car’).

On the other hand, specific structural properties – such as the frequency of phrasal verbs, the preference for verbal prefixation, the telic/atelic distinction, the degree of volition and effectiveness of the subject, the definiteness of the arguments, and many other features – also govern the restrictions and usage of TUCs (see Chapter 3).

Furthermore, the predicates involved in this causative alternation in the South tend to represent more **prototypical** directed-motion meanings, as they align more closely with the semantic notions of movement along a specified path and agentivity.

Southern varieties also appear to be more accepting of other non-standard transitivity strategies, including past participle constructions with an active meaning, resultative predicative participles, and **transitivized unergatives**, although further factors such as literacy and age of the speakers might also have an influence.

Comparison with other Romance varieties have evidenced that TUCs mainly belong to non-standard partly regionally restricted registers. Conservative tendencies observed in Italian might slow down the development of TUCs from regionally marked, substandard to pan-Italian features. Formal properties such as subject animacy, volition, topicalization strategies, and causative relations are expressed in different ways in the Romance area. Syntactic event decomposition, signaled by anticausative marker SE, seems to play a role in the spread and acceptability of TUCs, with Brazilian Portuguese presenting the lowest frequency of agentive caused motion constructions, while permitting other transitivity strategies. The formal features mentioned in this Chapter, as well as the formal analysis of TUCs, are illustrated in the next Chapter.

### 3. The relevant features of transitivized unaccusatives

#### 3.1. Diachronical evolution: causativization strategies in Latin and Early Italo-Romance varieties

The current subsection briefly summarizes some outcomes of the diachronic evolution of standard Italian as an Italo-Romance variety from (Late) Latin until contemporary Italian. We will focus on some central topics which are helpful to understand the insights of transitivization strategies alongside the historical evolution of Italian, such as the expression of voice and the spread of the anticausative marker SE as detransitivization strategy.

There is agreement within the current literature in considering Latin as a **detransitivizing** language (Inglese 2019:10). Thus, Latin uses some productive anticausative strategies and has means of morphologically marking low transitivity, such as some deponent forms, but lacks an effective and productive transitivization pattern (Gianollo 2014). Anticausativity, intended as the semantic and/or grammatical absence of an external argument such as an actor, was encoded in three different morphosyntactic strategies in Late Latin (Heidinger 2014:1007): deponent forms, SE particle, and labile forms, in which the anticausative interpretation was left to inference. In the latter case, there is no overt marking signaling the underspecification of a causer, and it is only the semantic interpretation of the clause which suggests an unmotivated change or event.

While the expression of anticausativity finds productive derivational strategies, transitivizing strategies as well as causative morphology are rarer. Following Lehmann's (2013:1) typological classification of different causativity marking strategies in different languages, Latin relies on its rich nominal case morphology to express causative relations on the actants. Verbal roots are inflected for tense, person and number, but rarely for transitivity degrees or causativity. In Classical Latin, the causative semantic interpretation could be left to **inference** strategies:

- (1) Caesar ..... se in Galliam recepit pontemque rescidit  
Cesar.NOM SE in Gaul withdrew bridge-ACC-and pulled.down  
lit. 'Cesar withdrew into Gaul and pulled a bridge down', intended meaning: '... had the bridge pulled down'

(Hoffmann 2016:37, ex.3 (Cesar, *De Bello Gallico* 4.19.4))

Two interesting (anti)causative strategies are noticeable in this example from Classical Latin. First of all, the reflexive marker *se* indicating anticausativity. In this interpretation, Cesar is not induced to withdraw by an external force, as his movement towards Gaul is intrinsically motivated. SE thus marks the absence of an external actor causing the motion or change of location denoted by the predicate. The second feature we encounter is the direct causative *recepit*, ‘he pulled down’, which literally means that Cesar himself tears down the bridge with his own hands. Through world-knowledge information, it can be inferred that Cesar, being the chief of the military operations, *orders* to pull down the bridge rather than performing the action himself. In this case, while the literal interpretation of the transitive clause suggests direct causation, the more plausible interpretation is that Cesar **indirectly** caused the bridge to be pulled down by ordering it.

According to Lehmann, this preference towards case marking on the nominals rather than on verbal morphology confirms the Latin aversion towards verbal derivational morphology (2013:2). In other words, Latin tendentially prefers to express valency, aspect and thematic relations on the nominals, using its broad declination system (five declination classes and six cases), rather than on the verb (Lehmann 2013). Being a language that prefers relying on obligatory case marking than on valency operations, Latin rarely chooses to affect verbal valency to encode changes in transitivity and in causativity (Lehmann 2013:18).

Nevertheless, some cases of verbal affixation are common, such as the suffix *-isc-* indicating inchoative readings – i.e., underlining the beginning of an action: *ferv-* (‘boil’, intr.) can be suffixed to become *ferv- ē-sc-o* (‘boil’ - thematic vowel - inchoative suffix -1SG), which means ‘start to boil (intr.)’.

Causative constructions imply the composition of an adjective or a noun and the causative verb *facere*, “to make”, indicating induced causative change, such as in *fervefacere*, ‘make boil’. Thus, although this construction cannot be considered productive nor grammaticalized until Late Latin (Vincent, 2016:294), it is still possible to find paradigms such as:

(2) <i>ferv-e-o</i>	‘boil’ (intr.)
<i>ferv-e-sc-o</i>	‘start to boil’ (intr.)
<i>ferv-e-fac-i-o</i>	‘make boil’

These structures resemble the causative strategies used in standard Italian with the causative verb *fare*, ‘do’, ‘make’ and an infinitive base verb, a strategy which was a means of word formation inherited from Protoindoeuropean (Vincent 2016:294). Synthetic causatives, formed with *facio* (‘I make, I let’), did not evolve into a productive pattern and did not offer a recurrent causative strategy. Although some examples of this word-formation strategy still survive in Romance and even in the English language (*magnify* from *magni-facio* ‘make big’ – rather a factitive than a direct causative), they were not productive in Classical Latin.

The monoclausal combination of *fare* + infinitive in Italian and in Romance is neither common nor productive in Early and Classical Latin. A more common causative construction involves the verb *facio* as the head of a complex phrase containing a finite verb and being introduced by a conjunction, as seen in (3). The finite subordinate sentence is introduced by the completive conjunction *ut*, ‘so that’, ‘in order to’, and the whole sentence is biclausal:

- (3) *Facito*            *ut*            *sciam*  
 Do-2SG-IMP    so-that    know-SUBJ.1SG  
 lit. ‘Do (IMP.) so that I would know’ = ‘Let me know’

(Vincent 2016:294)

Latin also knows some strategies of **lexical causative alternation**, i.e. the existence of two different stems for causative and anticausative meanings. Nevertheless, this predicate alternation is rare and scarcely productive:

- (4) *fio*            ‘become’            *facio*    ‘make’  
*disco*           ‘learn’            *docēo*    ‘teach’  
*accidit*    ‘it happens’      *efficio*    ‘bring about’

These oppositions are lexically restricted and even the anticausative-causative verb pair *fio-facio*, as already seen, did not become productive until Late Latin.

### *Deponent verbs and middle voice*

One of the most significant differences between the Latin and Italian verbal systems is arguably the expression of voice. Italian essentially distinguishes between active and passive verbal morphology, whereas Latin, having inherited the **middle voice** from Indo-European, saw its usage decline and eventually disappear in its later stages.

The middle voice, which indicates a subject that is not in control of the event and does not act as an agent, is expressed through passive morphology and constituted the most common anticausative expression for centuries before the particle SE (in forms such as *sese, sibi*, etc.) took over and eventually became the default anticausative marker in Romance.

**Deponent** verbs denote the distinction known as split intransitivity (Sorace 2000; Lara Bermejo 2020), as it allows the verb to mark the presence of a subject that shares more properties with an object (SO) than with an agent (SA). Consequently, some typical motion verbs are found within the class of deponents (*proficiscor*, ‘depart’), as well as verbs of change of state (*morior*, ‘die’).

Sharing the same endings as passive morphology, the Latin middle voice is characterized by the absence of an active conjugation while still conveying an active meaning. In fact, the deponent conjugation shares with the passive voice the property of non-agentivity, yet it either excludes the need for an external causer or leaves it unexpressed. By contrast, passivization always implies the presence of an agent or causer, even if not explicitly stated in the sentence. Morphologically, the conjugation common to both the middle and passive voice is also known as the *-R*-conjugation, named after the typical passive ending of the first-person singular.

Proficisc -o- r
depart 1SG PASS
proficisc-ě-ris
proficisc-ĩ-tur
proficisc-ĩ-mur
Proficisc-i-mĩni
Proficisc-u-ntur

Table 3 Conjugation of Lat. *proficisc-or* ‘depart’

In her corpus analysis, Gianollo (2014) highlights that a complex reorganization of the voice system began in Late Latin. This process was primarily triggered by the instability of the middle voice and deponent forms, which facilitated the spread of so-called **patient-preserving** labiality, in which the subject is the only argument and semantically corresponds to an undergoer

rather than an agent (see example (5) below). Although lability was already present in Classical Latin, it was in the 3rd and 4th centuries that its expansion became more systematic. Within this framework, active endings, which had previously been used to mark high transitivity, replaced the *-R* conjugation and acquired anticausative meaning (Gianollo 2014: 945).

The decline of the middle form must be understood and analyzed within the broader context of the transition from the Latin voice system to the Romance one (Migliori 2016). The crisis affecting the *-R* conjugation was likely also driven by the fact that its morphemes encoded multiple meanings and functions. Speakers had to contend with three competing functions, all expressed by the same ending:

- Anticausative/inchoative                      *moriōr* ‘die’
- Passive    *amor* ‘be loved’
- Impersonal                                         *exitur* ‘it shows’

In other words, speakers were confronted with the challenge of interpreting a morphological passive ending as either a true passive or a deponent (i.e., active). Furthermore, at this stage, Latin also expressed anticausative, impersonal, and reflexive meanings through the *-R* conjugation (Gianollo 2014: 958). It was likely the need for greater differentiation, combined with the broader decline of the middle voice – also observed in other languages – that led to the increased use of patient-preserving lability within the anticausative alternation:

- |        |                                 |         |               |       |                                      |
|--------|---------------------------------|---------|---------------|-------|--------------------------------------|
| (5) a. | Venti                           |         | coguntur      |       | Classical Latin (1 <sup>st</sup> BC) |
|        | winds                           |         | assemble-PASS |       |                                      |
|        | ‘The winds assemble’            |         |               |       |                                      |
| b.     | In                              | fulmine | cogunt        | venti | Late Latin (3 <sup>rd</sup> BC)      |
|        | in                              | storm   | assemble-ACT  | winds |                                      |
|        | ‘The winds assemble in a storm’ |         |               |       |                                      |

(Gianollo 2014: 947, 3a-b).

As the examples illustrate, natural forces (such as the winds in (5)) and spontaneous events could be expressed through the anticausative labile forms of active, transitive verbs (*cogo* can be translated as ‘drive together’ in its causative meaning). These types of subjects were, in fact, the first to be associated with lability. At a later stage, lability also began to be used in anticausative constructions with human subjects and was eventually extended to telic contexts.

The reorganization of the voice system between Late Latin and Old Italian determined the promotion of HAVE as an auxiliary and the spread of analytic past tense compounds. In comparison the standard Italian, HAVE is not an auxiliary in Classical Latin. Its functional use as a sort of modal verb was already known in Classical Latin:

(6) In ea provincia pecunias magnas colocatas  
 in that province money-ACC big-ACC invested-ACC  
 habent  
 have-3PL

‘They have huge amounts of money invested in that province’

(Migliori 2016:49, Cic.Man.10,17,18)

In contemporary Standard Italian, HAVE alternates with BE depending on split intransitivity relations (Sorace 2000; Cennamo & Sorace 2007; Cennamo 2007). In some Italian dialects, such as Neapolitan, as well as in Spanish and Portuguese, among others (Migliori 2016: 98), HAVE is the only available auxiliary. In Old romance, the need for a new strategy for aspectual marking, particularly in terms of telicity, led to the grammaticalization of HAVE – first as an aspectual marker (non-telic), then as a perfective marker, and eventually as an auxiliary in compound tenses (Migliori 2016: 116).

As for deponents, it is noteworthy that the loss of the middle voice led to a transition to active morphology in those deponents expressing agentivity or, at the very least, mental participation of the subject, while most change-of-state verbs denoting spontaneous events retained BE as their auxiliary (Migliori 2016: 98).

(7) a. *meditor* I wander (Latin)  
       *meditatus sum* I wandered (Latin)  
       *ho meditato* I wandered (Italian)  
 b. *nascor* I am born (Latin)  
       *natus sum* I was born (Latin)  
       *sono nato* I was born (Italian)

According to Migliori (2016: 9), this shift stems from the transition from an active-inactive alignment, which coexisted with the nominative-accusative one, to a predominantly nominative-accusative alignment typical of Romance varieties.

This phenomenon can also be attributed to the tendency of synthetic languages to develop an analytic structure, as described by Comrie (1989), and it also affected future tense formations.

### *Anticausative marker SE*

Until the Late Latin period, the middle voice and *se*-constructions were used with distinct connotations, forming an alternation that declined alongside the disappearance of the middle voice. *-R* forms originally marked atelic verbs, in which the participants typically lacked control, such as unaccusatives (*proficiscor*, ‘depart’), whereas *SE* was employed with telic verbs and reflexives, which still denoted some degree of agency (Inglese 2019: 6). This distinction was eventually lost in Late Latin.

The polysemous usage of *SE* is a Romance innovation, although this particle was already present in Early and Classical Latin with strict semantic and syntactic constraints. Specifically, *SE* was used in true reflexive clauses and only in those anticausative contexts where the subject necessarily had control over the verbal action (Cennamo 1999: 127):

(8) <i>Istae</i>	<i>veteres,</i>	<i>quae</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>unguentis</i>	<i>unctitant</i>
these	old.-F.PL	who	SE	ointments-ABL	smear-3PL

‘These old ladies, who smear themselves with ointments’

(Cennamo 1999.114, (6), from (Plaut. Most. 274))

In other words, *SE* was originally a marker encoding the presence of an unexpressed causer (Cennamo 2012; Bentley 2024). Although this causer remained unspecified, the change of state or position denoted by the predicate was interpreted as being motivated or caused by an external force.

It was probably not until the 4th century that *SE* began to be used in all cases of external causation, establishing a passive-like pattern that entered into competition with some readings previously encoded by the middle voice. The reorganization of the voice system, with the disappearance of the deponent class, also created the need for a morphological alternative to mark non-agentive events such as emotions and mental states, which had previously been

expressed by the *-R* conjugation. From the 4th century onward, SE also took over these readings.

(9) Ubi	vades,	paenitebis	te
wherever	go-2SG	repent-2SG	ANTIC.2SG
‘Wherever you go, you will repent’			

(Cennamo 1997: 128, 41a (Sort. Sang. 2,10))

In sentence (9), SE is expressed as second-person reflexive (*te*). Interestingly, this development also reaches transitive mental processes verbs in the 5<sup>th</sup> century:

(10) Putabam	me	quia
thought-1SG	SE.1SG	that
‘I thought that...’		

(Cennamo 1997:130 46b (Sermo de Conf. Diab. 107v))

While the distinction between the functions of deponents and those of *se*-constructions was lost in Late Latin due to the disappearance of the middle voice, two different realizations of SE began to encode the distinction known as split intransitivity (Cennamo 1995, 1997). *Sibi*, the dative/ablative form of the reflexive pronoun, became established in Late Latin to refer to telic, dynamic events in which the subject functions as the undergoer of an active sentence (SO, i.e., a direct theme or object) but lacks control over the event or action. This particle thus marked the subject of an unaccusative expression, sharing non-agentivity with the object of an unaccusative sentence, as seen in most change-of-location verbs.

By contrast, *se*, the accusative form, was used for agentive subjects (SA), for example, in unergative contexts. *Se* was thus employed in pure reflexives, mental states, experiencers, and agentive contexts, indicating external causation. The opposition was therefore one between high unaccusativity, primarily expressed by *sibi*, and low unaccusativity/unergativity, encoded by *se* (Cennamo 1997: 136).

In Latin, the distinction between *sibi* and *se* got lost, according to Cennamo (1997:132) probably due to contaminations from the vulgar language.

The loss of the middle voice triggered a prolonged phase of reorganization and coexistence of competing forms. Eventually, even the distinction between labile forms and reflexives disappeared, with the latter taking over and becoming the default anticausative form in Early Romance. Thus, while Late Latin still distinguished between telic, volitional, fully

controlled events encoded with SE and spontaneous, atelic events expressed by labile verbs, this distinction may have already been lost between the 3rd and 4th centuries (Gianollo 2014: 987).

Some dialects and regional varieties of Italian commonly employ pleonastic reflexives with transitive verbs of thought. As observed by Cennamo (2015), some central Italo-Romance dialects insert the reflexive marker whenever a construction lacks an external causer, resorting to the anticausative marked alternation with SE more frequently than standard Italian does.

- (11) a. S' è partorita mia cognata  
 SE is given.birth-F my sister-in-law  
 'My sister-in-law has given birth to a child'

(Cennamo 1999:141, (56a))

- b. Se l' ape te pizzica, se more  
 if the bee you.ACC stings SE dies  
 'If a bee stings you, it will die'

(South Lazio, GC2021.57)

- c. Me pensava ca...  
 SE.1SG thought-1SG that  
 'I thought that...'

(Privernese, South Lazio)

### *Early Italo-Romance varieties*

The transition from Classical to Late Latin, as well as the early stages of Proto-Romance, was marked not only by a reorganization of the voice system, but also by the loss of morphological case marking on nominals. This process affected multiple aspects of transitivity and causativity, leading to a reanalysis of argument structure, word order, and information structure.

One of the most significant changes in Late Latin was the shift from a dependent-marking system, in which syntactic relations were primarily expressed on nominals, to a **head-marking system**, where these relations began to be encoded on the verb (Cennamo 2009: 307). The accusative became the default case that persisted after case loss in most contexts, except for pronouns. The loss of case marking and the rise of head marking—initially observed with

non-active and unaccusative predicates, such as change-of-state verbs – likely began in African Latin as early as the 2nd or 3rd century (Cennamo 2009: 312).

Until SE was established as the default anticausative marker, Latin exhibited a stronger tendency toward lability, as seen in verbs such as *fugere* (‘to escape’ / ‘to run from something’) and *tacere* (‘to keep quiet [about something]’), both of which took accusative direct objects. Interestingly, this accounts for the survival of specific idiomatic uses of these verbs in modern Italian, such as *fuggire la fatica* (lit. ‘to escape labor’) and *tacere il nome* (‘to withhold the name’; Rohlfs 1969: 10).

In addition to marking direct objects, Latin also employed the accusative in several cases to indicate movement through a natural element or toward a goal, in a manner similar to German.

- (12) a. *navigare maria*  
 sail-INF sees-ACC  
 ‘to sail the seas’
- b. *intrare domum*  
 enter-INF house-ACC  
 ‘to enter the house’

Italian partly inherited these **accusative path constructions** and commonly allows for sentences such as *viaggiare l’Europa* ‘travel Europe’, *girare il mondo*, ‘go around the world’, in which direct objects are introduced without prepositions. Internal objects of unergatives and accusative path complements of unaccusatives are also possible; in this case, the predicates receive the auxiliary HAVE:

- (13) a. Maria ha corso una maratona  
 Maria has run a marathon
- b. Mario ha salito le scale  
 Mario has gone.up the stairs

The loss of morphological case led to different outcomes across the various Italo-Romance languages that developed from Late Latin. As a result, while some dialects favor accusative objects, standard Italian requires the use of prepositions or the oblique case:



b. La barca \*Ø/s' ha<sup>32</sup> affondata (Privernese, southern Lazio)  
 the boat SE has sunk

Old Tuscan showed free variation in simplex tenses (such as the simple past *bruciò*, ‘[it] burnt’), encoding telicity both with and without *si*. In compound tenses such as the past participle *è bruciato*, ‘has burnt’, *si* only appeared in highly telic contexts (Cennamo 2012: 413).

Old Neapolitan showed more constraints on this alternation. The reflexive marker was already obligatory with accomplishments and achievements, and almost always with gradual completion (Cennamo 2021: 414). As for compound tenses, it is in this stage that a drift towards HAVE as the only possible auxiliary begins to show in Old Neapolitan.

Although the transitivization of unaccusatives is typically described as a phenomenon of informal spoken Italian, transitive uses of canonically intransitive verbs are already attested in the literature of Medieval Italian – even in nothing less than the Divine Comedy. Rohlfs (1969: 11) records a particular use of the past participle of *morire* (‘die’) in Dante’s *Purgatorio* (7.95): *sanar le piaghe che hanno Italia morta*, lit. ‘heal the wounds that had Italy dead’, as well as in Boccaccio’s *Filocolo* (I.46): *il credette averlo morto*, lit. ‘he thought he had him dead (killed)’.

So-called path accusatives, already present in Latin, also appear in Early Modern Italian, notably in Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* (1516), as in *entrare un sentiero* (‘enter a path’). Similar constructions are attested three hundred years later in Giosuè Carducci’s *Levia gravia* (1881), *entrare un bosco* (‘enter a wood’), and Giovanni Pascoli’s *Poemi conviviali* (1904), *entrare una casa* (‘enter a house’).

Transitive unaccusative constructions are also found in several varieties, and linguistic data from Neapolitan confirm their use across different diachronic stages. Ledgeway (2009: 850–852) lists a considerable number of examples where unaccusative predicates occur in transitive or causative constructions. Some of those identified as transitives are reported here:

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<sup>32</sup> Auxiliary selection is mostly person-driven in Southern Lazio, see Colasanti (2023).

(17) a. Un viadante          havendo          andata          multa-F          via-F  
           a traveller          having          gone-F          much          way

‘A traveller having gone a long way’ [*path accusative rather than undergoer object theme*]

(Brancati 1 161.10)

b. pe no          farese          arrivare  
    to not          be.INF-REFL arrive-INF

‘To avoid being reached’

(Basile 132)

c. doppo                  ascèterro          ’e          ssacicce  
    afterwards          went.out-3PL the          sausages

‘Then, they took out the sausages’

(Ruocco 49)

d. Hanno          la funa già          calata  
    have-3PL          the-F rope-F already          gone.down-F

‘They have already lowered the rope’

(Cortese 4 4.9)

e. Omne          altra cosa che          aveano          descesa          in terra  
    every          other thing that          had-3pl          gone.down-F in ground

‘Every other thing they had put down on the ground’

(LDT 55.28–29)

f. Come          encze          le porte de          Napole  
    how          go.out-2SG the gates of          Naples

‘As soon as you go out the gates of Naples’

(De Rosa 59r.3)

Among the canonical intransitives used with causative meaning, Ledgeway (*ibidem*) lists following examples:

(18) a. L’          ha          ‘mparata          a          leggere e          scrivere?  
           her.ACC          has          learned          to          read and          write  
           lit. ‘has (s)he learned [*taught*] her how to read and write?’

(Di Giacomo1 137)

b. E poy che l' appero tutti muorti  
 and then that them.ACC had-3PL all dead-PL  
 lit. 'After they had died [*'killed'*] them all'

(LDT 122.36)

TUCs are also found in the Italian literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>33</sup>: *il bambino non deve avercela con me perché l'ho uscito con quest'acqua*, lit. 'the kid should not be mad at me because I went him out with such a rain', ('The kid should not be mad at me because I took him out in such a rain'; Beppe Fenoglio, Battaglia 1961-2009: 588; *I ventitrè giorni della città di Alba*, Torino 1952, p. 85); *un avvocato aveva uscito un giornale*, lit. 'a lawyer had gone out a newspaper' ('a lawyer had extracted a newspaper'; Italo Calvino, *Impiccagione di un giudice*, 1949); *lo saliscono e lo scendono di casa due forti facchini*, lit. 'two strong porters go him up and down his house' ('two strong porters take him up and down his house'; Battaglia 1961-2009: 410; Carteggio Vigo-Pitrè, Acireale 1989, p. 278); *Volevo scenderle giù quella gonna, povera cugina mia!*, lit. 'I would have liked to go down her skirt, poor cousin of mine!' ('I would have liked to pull down her skirt'; Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*, Milano: Adelphi 1958 p. 66); *Di nuovo, scendendo le sue valigie, l'uomo sedicente impiegato del Catasto (...) mi salutò*, lit. 'and again, going down his luggage, the self-styled cadaster employee greeted me' ('Taking his luggage downstairs, the self-styled cadaster employee greeted me'; Elio Vittorini, *Conversazione in Sicilia*, Milano 1958, p. 44); *ti addormenterò*, lit. 'I will fall you asleep' ('I will bring you to bed'; G. D'Annunzio, *L'innocente* 1892, p.67).

### *Summary*

This introductory subsection on Latin (de)transitivization strategies has highlighted that the Early Romance scenario was characterized by a clear, long-term shift – from transitivity (Indo-European) to **detransitivizing** strategies – that affected all of Western Europe (Inglese 2019:10). The older transitive morphology inherited from Indo-European soon ceased to be

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<sup>33</sup> Partly adapted from bibliographic research by Matilde Paoli in her article for the Accademia della Crusca, <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/entrare-uscire-salire-e-scendere-transitivi-a-furor-di-popolo/1047>.

productive, leaving speakers without grammaticalized causative strategies. As Hoffmann aptly puts it, “Latin has no productive formation of causative verbs” (Hoffmann 2016:35), with causativity being “either scarcely or not at all marked in Latin” (ibid., p. 33). Lehmann’s research further confirms that Latin lacked a productive, systematic morphological formation of causative constructions, and its documented history does not display any regular causative derivation strategy (Lehmann 2013:3ff.).

The reorganization of the voice system resulted in a morphological distinction between passive and anticausative forms, leading to developments such as the spread of patient-preserving lability, which progressively replaced the -R conjugation before ultimately giving way to the reflexive marker SE. Furthermore, the decline of the middle voice and the loss of the deponent conjugation also contributed to the emergence of analytic forms for expressing present passive tenses. This shift ultimately led to a transition from synthetic to analytic present-tense passive forms and compound tenses.

The abandonment of the middle voice gave rise to a default, productive anticausative marking strategy (SE) on the one hand, and to an analytic set of causative constructions, such as *facio* + accusative, on the other. This loss may have created a kind of “gap” in the expression of causation, which Late Latin and Proto-Romance filled through the adoption of monoclausal *facio* + infinitive constructions and, less frequently, through labile alternations. However, analytic causative constructions were not the only strategy available for expressing causativity; lability, already attested in Classical Latin, increased in frequency following the disappearance of the deponent verb class.

While anticausativity acquired its prototypical morphological marker with the grammaticalization of SE, transitivization strategies followed a less systematic pattern, encompassing not only labile alternations but also other competing constructions. As Proto-Romance and Italo-Romance varieties began to develop, the codification and expression of causativity and transitivity took various forms, depending on the consequences of case marking loss in nominals and the reorganization of the verbal system.

The presence and use of labile causative strategies, such as TUCs, have been attested in the literature from Medieval Italian varieties onward. Therefore, contemporary attestations of this phenomenon should be regarded as **archaic features** rather than an innovation. Their

penetration into spoken Italian from regional and dialectal varieties might be considered the result of recent ongoing processes such as *neo-standardization* (Berruto 1987, see also Chapter 4), but their presence in Old Italian varieties is well attested and possibly classifiable as the result of the reorganization of valency expressions during the centuries.

## 3.2 Synchronical analysis

The aim of this chapter is to provide a theoretical discussion of some preliminary topics in the relevant literature that are fundamental for understanding and formally analyzing TUCs. Additionally, we present the formal proposals by Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino (2014) and Pineda (2018) for Spanish and Catalan TUCs, which are partially based on general models already established in the literature (e.g., Ramchand 2008). Given the vast scope of theoretical areas related to verbal semantics, argument realization, and the expression of causativity, it would be impossible to cover them in full detail. Instead, this chapter revisits well-known assumptions with the aim of offering new insights into the debate and contributing to broader ongoing discussions, such as the **expression of transitivity and causativity**, the **status of external arguments**, the **realization of argument structure**, and the **nature of roots**.

It is important to highlight that our analysis is strongly based on the assumption that transitivity, ergativity, causativity, and unaccusativity are **discrete categories**. As discussed by several scholars (Sorace 2000; Haspelmath 1993; Hopper & Thompson 1980), there is always a *continuum* between two poles, meaning that variation in the degree of causativity can occur at any point, even within the idiolect of a single speaker. This flexibility in assigning greater or lesser (in)transitive value explains the significant variation observed in the production and acceptability of TUCs within a linguistic community.

### 3.2.1 The class of directed-motion verbs

In order to analyze the main formal and typological features of TUCs, we rely on fundamental concepts from the literature on verb classes, verbal semantics, and the interaction between root meaning and syntactic argument realization. The following sections outline common assumptions found in the literature and present relevant Italian examples.

Numerous studies have addressed the number and nature of verb classes, verbal denotation, event structure, and the expression of (a)telicity, aspect, and templatic meaning. Our analysis begins with the four verb classes identified by Vendler (1957) based on the two criteria [ $\pm$ telic] and [ $\pm$ stages], namely **states**, **activities**, **achievements**, and **accomplishments**.

According to Rothstein’s (2004:5) definition, a telic VP denotes identifiable, countable atoms, which implies that telic VPs presuppose a natural stopping point and contain subparts that differ from the denotation of the verb itself. Cumulative or atomic predicates may contain subparts, but each of these subparts still corresponds to the denotation of the predicate. For instance, while the action of running is cumulative and atelic – since two or more subevents of this action still correspond to the main action of running – eating three apples is non-cumulative and telic, as two subevents of eating three apples differ from eating two apples (in the latter case, you would eat six apples instead of three; Krifka 1998:207):

- (19) a. Mary runs.  
 b. Mary eats three apples

As pointed out by Rothstein (2004:10), each subevent of running is identical to the others and has the same proximity of the others to its starting or endpoint, while the starting point and the final point of eating three apples are different stages of a dynamic development. The four verbal classes identified by (a)telicity and (lack of) dynamicity can be summarized in the following table<sup>34</sup>:

	Telic	Stages	Example
states	-	-	<i>Know</i>
activities	-	+	<i>Run</i>
achievements	+	-	<i>Recognize</i>
accomplishments	+	+	<i>Eat three apples</i>

Table 4 Verb classes in Rothstein (2004)

The existence of these four verb classes allows us to make certain predictions about argument structure and aspectual classification. Verbs that identify stages, such as activities and accomplishments, can appear in progressive forms, whereas states and achievements, being non-dynamic and instantaneous, cannot:

- (20) a. \*John is knowing the answer. (state)

<sup>34</sup> Smith (1991) adds semelfactives such as “jump” as a fifth verb class. We accept Rothstein’s (2004) proposal that these verbs can still fit into the class of activities or achievements, depending on argument structure.

- b. \*John has been recognizing Mary for twenty minutes. (achievement)
- c. John is running. (activity)
- d. John is eating three apples. (accomplishment)

Non-stages predicates are built through an operation which Rothstein (2004:9) calls “S-cumulativity”, in which the sum of subparts corresponds to the denotation. Furthermore, achievements and accomplishments are events of change, while states and activities do not presuppose change.

The difference between achievements and accomplishments is that the former denote “an event of change from  $\varphi$  to  $\neg\varphi$ ”, while the latter are “a change from  $\psi$  to  $\varphi$ , where  $\psi$  entails  $\neg\varphi$ ” (Rothstein:2004, 188). The kind of change denoted by achievements such as *recognize* only involves two instants, as it can be defined as an instantaneous change, while accomplishments such as *eat three apples* denote an extended change.

While a minimal length of extension is not necessarily given, Rothstein claims that we still must perceive accomplishments as lasting long enough to build incremental change, thus being bigger than achievements (2004:193). In terms of complexity, defined by Levin and Hovav (1998:105) as the number of basic components and subevents identified in argument structure, accomplishments are more complex than achievements, since they usually involve a combination of an activity and a change of state and/or the presence of two arguments (for example, causer and patient):

- (21) a. [[BECOME] [y <STATE>] achievement  
 b. [[x ACT] CAUSE [BECOME][y <STATE>]] accomplishment

The main prediction that follows from the categorization of these four verb classes is that membership in a particular class appears to be an inherent property of the verb, whereas the expression of telicity and aspect is determined at the VP level. Achievements and accomplishments “naturally head telic VPs, while states and activities head atelic VPs” (Rothstein 2004:183).

This assumption is particularly relevant to our analysis, as the same verb can belong to two different classes and exhibit distinct behaviors depending on whether it is used transitively or intransitively.

Shifts between verb classes, as well as changes in event structure, are possible, as illustrated by incremental theme verbs such as eat:

- (22) a. John eats (activity, atelic, intransitive)  
b. John eats three apples (accomplishment, telic, transitive)

Incremental theme verbs can be measured by their direct object, and thus receive an atomic, telic denotation. As an accomplishment, the action of eating three apples implies that, at any given moment, there will be a different quantity of apples, and that the eating will be completed as soon as the third apple is consumed (Rothstein 2004:21). Patient arguments are gradually involved in the event denoted, which is why these verbs are called incremental theme verbs.

As we will see, motion verbs, when used as accomplishments, behave similarly in that they can be marked for telicity when a path is specified, for instance, by a prepositional phrase (Rothstein 2004:33):

- (23) John pushed the cart [to the store]<sub>PP</sub>

Nevertheless, a fundamental distinction must be made between generic motion verbs and **directed-motion verbs**, since the typology of verbs involved in the transitivity process described so far seems to fit only in one category: that of directed motion. Transitivity in spoken Italian typically involve motion verbs and seem to exclude incremental theme verbs, which are typically either intransitive or standard transitives. Verbs of manner, such as *walk*, and change-of-state verbs, such as *melt*, are also excluded.

Motion verbs are defined as those that carry a meaning of motion, which derives from a highly structured, templatic component and a non-linguistic part linked to world knowledge (Tenny 1995:31). Outside the templatic meaning, the relationship between the object and the measuring scale entailed by the verb acts as a gap-filler for templatic information. The main difference between motion verbs and incremental-theme verbs is that the measuring scale is primarily entailed in the verbal root, rather than provided by the direct object. While objects – whether themes or paths (e.g., “to the store”) – still contribute to telic readings, directed-motion verbs are highly specified in terms of **linearity**, as they inherently contain a specific path or manner of motion (Tenny 1995:38).

Among motion verbs, further distinctions are necessary. Verbs of manner of motion, such as *walk*, do not presuppose an endpoint, and therefore do not necessarily entail a starting and/or endpoint. However, they can still receive telicity from their complements:

- (24) a. John walked  
 b. John walked to the store

Motion verbs form a vast and heterogeneous class traditionally divided into manner-of-motion and path verbs. The concept of motion seems to be a primitive notion, especially if we consider that infants demonstrate spatial perception (Pruden et al. 2008). At 7 months old, preverbal infants are shown to be able to distinguish between path and manner (Pulverman et al. 2013). Similarly, the notion of movement from a starting point to an endpoint can also be considered a universal concept, thus extralinguistic and acquired during the preverbal stage, with consequences and constraints on linguistic development.

Manner-of-motion verbs do not necessarily presuppose a change of location (Martin 2023:21):

- (25) Maria balla            senza            spostarsi  
 Maria dances            without            displace-INF-REFL

‘Maria dances without displacing’

Path verbs of motion, on the other hand, entail a directionality and in some cases an endpoint, as we will describe in detail in this section. Some manner-of-motion verbs are rigid, i.e. do not optionally lexicalize a result (Ramchand 2008), while some others can project a result state and thus admit path as a meaning (Folly & Harley 2005)<sup>35</sup>:

- (26) Gianni è            \*camminato/ corso    in            spiaggia  
 Gianni is            walked            run            to            beach

‘Gianni walked/ran to the beach’

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<sup>35</sup> Some complex prepositions such as *fino a* (‘up until’) allow rigid manner-of motion verbs such as *camminare* to be combined with directed motion constructions, as in *camminare fino a casa*, ‘walk up until (you are) home’ (Martin 2023:23, ex. (41)). In this case, these prepositions are part of adjuncts, and not complements.

Among Italian motion verbs, it seems that only those whose root encodes a path can be transitivity in non-standard varieties:

- (27) a. Maria esce l' immondizia / il cane  
 Maria goes.out the trash the dog
- b. <sup>??</sup>Maria passeggia<sup>36</sup> il bambino / il cane  
 Maria walks the baby the dog
- c. \*Il generale marcia l' esercito  
 the general marches the army

In particular, among path verbs, only verbs of directed motion seem to allow for transitivity. Formally, the so-called verbs of directed motion (Rappaport Hovav 2014) substantially differ from manner verbs in that they always entail (at least) an endpoint, which is the result of a change of location. Similar to verbs denoting change of state, such as *melt*, directed-motion verbs entail a stative **scalar attribute** as their **semantic core** (Rappaport Hovav 2014:259). While change-of-state verbs lexicalize property scales, directed-motion verbs lexicalize location (Ausensi 2024:31). As a further distinction, as becomes clear with the examples in this section, directed-motion verbs are **prototypically agentive** (Romagno 2023:882).

According to Beavers & Koontz-Garboden (2012:37), there is a triple relation at the base of scales:

$\delta$  denotes property or proximity to the Reference Object.

S is the set or interval of degrees for having property  $\delta$ .

R denotes an ordering of members of S, determining directionality.

Thus, in *scendo l'immondizia* (lit. 'I go down the trash', meaning 'I take the trash downstairs'), the reference object would be the Outside,  $\delta$  would entail a position along the path that ends with the Reference Object (also called Ground in Busso & Romagno 2021:1), S would denote the extension and different degrees of the path, and R would determine the direction of motion, which needs to be from an upper to a lower point. The Figure is the entity involved in the change of location (Busso & Romagno 2021:1).

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<sup>36</sup> Probably only acceptable as an English calque from 'walk the dog'. See also Chapter 5 for some examples from our empirical study.

As seen in the case of incremental theme verbs, directed-motion verbs also presuppose a scale and can be measured out, but this scale is contained within the **denotation of the verb** itself, rather than being introduced by a direct object. Thus, scalar change is specifically lexicalized by the verb. Lexicalized components are easy to identify, as they are present “in any use of the verb” (Rappaport Hovav 2014:264). The change of motion described by the verb is a change in the value of the scalar attribute already entailed in the verbal meaning. For example, a verb like *descend* already implies a change of location from a higher to a lower position. No complements are needed to establish this path, as the scalar attribute is already given. Nevertheless, both telicity and the measurement of the scalar change still depend on complements:

- (28) a. The plane descended for ten minutes (before gaining altitude)  
 b. The plane descended 100 meters in/\*for three seconds

(Rappaport Hovav 2014:262, ex. (3a-b))

As pointed out by the examples, atelic readings describe an unspecified change along the path, while telic ones measure out the change of location precisely. While change-of-state verbs are associated with property scales, and their attributes vary in intensity (for example, the action of melting presupposes variation in consistency or texture), directed-motion verbs define changes of location along a path. Since the direction of motion and its resulting position are encoded within the verbal root, any negation of the final position would be unacceptable, as shown by the “but he/she/it is not somewhere else” test (Ausensi 2024: 34, fn. 9a and 10a):

- (29) a. John just descended (to the cave), #but he is not somewhere else.

(scalar change)

- b. John just jogged for hours, but he is not somewhere else.

(nonscalar change)

The scale of movement established between a theme (mostly the subject of movement) and a reference object (the lower bound of the scale or starting point) might be a two-point scale, such as in *uscire* (either you are inside or outside), or a multi-point scale as in *scendere* (you can go down the stairs but still stop in the middle). The nature of the scale also has effects on telicity, gradability and durativity (Ausensi 2024: 32):

- (30) a. Mario è uscito #ma è rimasto dentro. (standard Italian)  
 ‘Mario has gone out but he is still inside’  
 b. Mario è sceso ma è rimasto al primo piano.  
 ‘Mario has gone down but he is still on the first floor’

It is interesting to point out that a scale might have both a specific starting and an endpoint, or only entail one of them, most often the endpoint. While *cadere* (‘fall’) presupposes a given directionality (from an upper to a lower position), *arrivare* (‘arrive’) only involves a specific position at the endpoint of motion (‘here’), but does not determine any specific starting point. In our view, *arrivare* should be listed among directed-motion verbs, which explains why we find transitive utterances with some predicates. However, due to having a less specific scale than other directed-motion verbs, these utterances are rather rare, not always acceptable, or more idiolectally/dialectally restricted than others.

In other words, we can identify some directed-motion verbs that act as prototypical representatives of their class, if we accept Ricca’s (1993:16) definition of “prototypical” as *maggiormente rappresentativo e cognitivamente prioritario*. Predicates such as *scendere* (‘go down’) canonically represent their class better than others, because they entail all the features characteristically associated with directed-motion verbs, such as directionality and agentivity. Being frequent and stylistically neutral, these predicates are easier to find in their transitivized non-standard form.

It is relevant to clarify that directed-motion verbs may or may not be deictic. Although *descend* and *ascend* both lexically encode a given path, they cannot be considered deictic, since their interpretation is not specifically dependent on the spatial collocation of the participants involved in the communicative act in which they are used (Ricca 1993: 15). In fact, if we define deixis as a linguistic codification of spatio-temporal information about the place or time of enunciation (Ricca 1993:13), only so-called *itive* and *ventive* predicates (‘go’ and ‘come’, respectively) appear as strictly connected to the place and time of enunciation. As pointed out by Ricca (1993), *Mario è uscito* (‘Mario has gone out’) can be said independently of the position of the actants of the communication in which the utterance is produced. Deictic motion predicates are more rarely used in TUCs in informal Italian, or restricted to certain regional varieties that accept transitivizations more readily, or used in a metaphoric sense:

- (31) a. T’aggio arevato (Neapolitan)  
 Lit. “I arrived you (ACC.)” = “I caught up with you”  
 (Ledgeway 2000: 301, fn. 23)
- b. Arrivami il sale (Tuscan)  
 Lit. “Arrive me (DAT.) the salt” = “Pass me salt”  
 (Rohlf’s 1954b: 859)

*Arrivare*, ‘arrive’ presents some issues when encountered in TUCs. As previously seen, in Calabrian and Campanian varieties it is used transitively with human objects with the meaning of “reach someone” (31a), while in Tuscan and other Romance languages it is found with inanimate theme objects with the meaning of “bring something closer” (31b). Ramchand (2008) classifies the predicate as punctual, which means that it has to undergo a class switch in order to be transitivized (see section 5.5).

Note that the accusative and the dative personal pronoun – *te* and *ti* respectively – might be homophonous in some Italian varieties, especially when their vocal ending is dropped, as in (31a). Nevertheless, Ledgeway claims that the utterance in (31a) entails indeed an accusative pronoun, probably due to the fact that the valency *arrivare* does not include oblique complements with the same reading. Furthermore Romagno (2025) clarifies this possible doubt with some Calabrian examples entailing a proper noun instead of a name, in which a differential object marker (realized as the preposition *a*) indicates direct object:

- (32) Arriva a Ciccio!  
 Arrive.IMP DOM Ciccio  
 ‘Reach/Run to Ciccio!’  
 (Romagno 2025, in press)

Interestingly, the same labile alternation between anticausative and causative meanings is also present in other unrelated world languages, such as St’at’imcets (a Salish language spoken in North America):

- (33) √t’q ‘arrive’  
 √t’q-s ‘arrive-CAUS’ = ‘bring’  
 (Alexiadou 2010:194, (32a))

Note that also verbs of lack of motion can be found in transitivized structures: *rimanere*, ‘stay’, a prototypical intransitive verb, has resulted available for caused motion or transitive constructions in southern varieties. The following examples (b-c) are extracted from our corpus:

(34) a. Gianni è rimasto al bar (intransitive)  
Gianni is stayed at.the bar

‘Gianni stayed at the bar’

b. Avete rimasto qualcosa nello spogliatoio?  
PST-2PL stayed something in.the locker-room

‘Have you left something in the locker room?’

(GC2021.27)

c. La padella la volete rimanere qua?  
the pan CLIT3SG.ACC want-2PL stay-INF here

‘Do you want to leave the pan here [*and come pick it up later*]?’

(GC2021.28)

In Caucasian languages, for instance, this verb also assigns the ablative or lative case, which also expresses directionality, as in other motion verbs. This verb shares prototypical agentivity with the other verbs of motion. The causative use found in spoken Italian is primarily the one encoding direct causation, although some varieties also register indirect causation with *rimanere*, as already mentioned in the same section:

(35) a. Ho rimasto il pane in dispensa  
Have-1SG stayed the bread in pantry

‘I left the bread in the pantry (*and I did not bring it to the table, so that we don’t tuck in*)’

b. – Dov’è Luigi?  
‘Where is Luigi?’

– L’ ho rimasto al bar  
him have-1.SG stayed at.the bar

‘When I left the bar, he was still there’

(both examples and translation to Italian from northern Calabrian by Romagno 2023:881)

In sentence (35a), a subject high in agentivity triggers a direct causative reading; in sentence (35b), the subject is [-agentive], and the clause might present either a [-agentive] or a

[+agentive] object, with an indirect causative reading (Luigi did not stay at the bar as a consequence of a direct causation initiated by the agent).

So far, we have described directed-motion verbs as lexicalizing paths of scalar change of location, but we have not yet specified whether these entailments are contained in the roots or given within the event structure. It has been argued that this entailment of change need not be lexical, as it could also derive from a syntactic decomposition, thus being syntactically given. Following Moro (1997) and Irwin (2012), directed-motion verbs have been considered decomposable into a root and a locative morpheme, which is expressed through incorporation of a small clause into a V node. This approach excludes the role of roots in lexicalizing entailments of change, since the roots of directed-motion verbs would simply modify a *v* that carries a scalar meaning.

Other approaches (Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020; Ausensi 2024) predict that the scalar change of location entailed in directed-motion is a property given by the root, which carries lexical meaning destined to generate the constraints we see in event structure. Since this division of roles between roots and event structure represents a fundamental issue that deserves a broader analysis, we dedicate this topic to a more in-depth discussion in the next sections (see 3.3).

The semantic analysis of directed-motion verbs is typically based on the assumption that their roots entail a motion specified as a path. If we consider, for example, the Italian motion verb *uscire* ('go out'), we can state that it entails a specific path, which cannot differ from the meaning of <GOING FROM THE INSIDE TO THE OUTSIDE>. We agree with Hovav (2014:263) in describing the root-meaning as **prepositional content** derived from world knowledge of what is "inside" and "outside." In other words, the change in the value of the scalar attribute is expressed prepositionally. We argue that associating the root of *uscire* with the prepositional meaning of <IN → OUT> is part of the acquisition of lexical entries in the given language to which one is exposed, deriving from **external world knowledge** and non-linguistic evidence. While acquiring language, and simultaneously world knowledge, we learn that there is an "inside" and an "outside," and one can start from the inside and move to the outside. This knowledge gets associated with a root in the form of phonological material during lexical acquisition, and the acquired root can be described as a prepositional function.

Levin and Rappaport Hovav’s idea of **incrementally built verbal meaning** (1998:106) seems particularly applicable to TUCs: I have already pointed out in this subsection that shifts through the four classes of states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements are possible, and this seems to depend on the **augmentation** – or deletion – **of arguments**. In Haspelmath’s (1993) description of anticausative alternations, it is held as usually easier to simplify argument structure than to add arguments. We can now implement the idea that verbs belonging to the class of **accomplishments are easier to use in a rich structure**, as their specifications are already lexically saturated (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1998). Their structures are also harder to expand apart from the arguments which are usually available (e.g., resulting state). Less complex predicates, on the other hand, must be modified in order to admit expansion. This assumption is confirmed by the data given in our corpus, which only **presents transitivized accomplishment predicates**. Only these verbs can be modified from intransitive to transitive: their denotation already admits some “space” for more than one argument, although they canonically appear as monoargumental verbs.

The data presented up to now from my corpus (GC.2021) and the articles in the Accademia della Crusca (Paoli 5/2/2016 and Zenoni 27/11/2019) can be categorized in the light of the verb classes and their properties illustrated in this section. Some motion predicates are presented, and their availability in transitivized structures is indicated in a sort of typological classification:

	Accomp.	Punctual	Durative	Dir.Mot.	Manner	<b>Evidence for transitiv.</b>
<i>Entrare</i> (‘go in’)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	<b>yes</b>
<i>Uscire</i> (‘go out’)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	<b>yes</b>
<i>Salire</i> (‘go up’)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	<b>yes</b>
<i>Scendere</i> (‘go down’)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	<b>yes</b>
<i>Rimanere</i> (‘remain’)	Yes	Yes	yes	no	No	<b>yes</b>
<i>Tornare</i> (‘come back’)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	<b>Yes</b>
<i>Restare</i> (‘stay’)	Yes	Yes	Yes	no	No	<b>no</b>

<i>Arrivare</i> (‘arrive’)	No/shifts	Yes	Yes	yes	No	<b>yes</b>
<i>Partire</i> (‘depart’)	no	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	<b>no</b>
<i>Camminare</i> (‘walk’)	no	No	Yes	no	yes	<b>no</b>
<i>Passeggiare</i> (‘go for a walk’)	no	no	Yes	no	yes	<b>yes</b>
<i>Andare</i> (‘go’)	No	no	yes	no	yes	<b>no</b>

Table 5 Non-standard transitivizations based on predicate typology

Based on this categorization, we can observe that the class of prototypical directed-motion verbs provides the most frequent examples of transitivization. Predicates expressing lack of motion or permanence in the initial position, such as *rimanere*, also appear in similar constructions. We have already noted that *restare*, which is generally synonymous with *rimanere*, does not exhibit the same behavior. This difference may be attributed either to stylistic choices or, more likely, to a distinct semantic status. Specifically, *rimanere* carries a more literal meaning of permanence in the initial location, whereas *restare* is more commonly used in a metaphorical sense. Moreover, verbal roots built with the reiterative prefix seem to be excluded from causative alternations (see section 2.2.2)

Furthermore, *arrivare* seems to appear in TUCs only with a metaphorical meaning, and when it undergoes a class-shift from achievement to accomplishment. In contrast, *partire*, its semantic counterpart, is not found in our transitivization corpus. *Camminare* and *passeggiare* are generally excluded from the data in the corpus, with transitivizations involving *passeggiare* being limited to a restricted class of theme objects – specifically, animate objects with low perceived animacy, as suggested by Romagno (2021). Additionally, the transitive use of *passeggiare* is further analyzable as an English calque (from "walk the dog"), and thus appears to be less productive than other predicates.

### 3.2.2 The Transitivity *continuum*

The concept of transitivity, i.e., the valency of a predicate that displays two macroroles – an actor and a theme – is closely interrelated with complex semantic and even pragmatic principles, such as causativity, telicity, punctuality, volition, intentionality, potency,

affectedness, kinesis, as well as foregrounding and speaker motivation within both the phrase and discourse. The outcomes of the interaction between morphosyntactic features related to transitivity are central to most natural languages, as they seem to describe universal principles found at both the phrase and discourse levels (Hopper & Thompson 1980). Therefore, transitivity must be viewed as a cluster of interrelated properties, some of which are also grounded in universal world knowledge. For instance, the concept of causation – i.e., the transfer of an action from one discourse element to another – refers to extralinguistic factors such as hierarchies of force, authority, strength, and potency, and is linguistically and morphosyntactically expressed in various ways across world languages.

In this section, we will summarize some of the main assumptions about transitivity from different authors (Hopper & Thompson 1980; Haspelmath 1993; Alexiadou et al. 2015, among others), focusing on the transitivity degree of Italian TUCs.

As previously mentioned, transitivity can be graphically represented as a scale of interacting features, all present at the sentence level, ordered from high transitivity at one pole to low transitivity at the opposite extreme:

	HIGH	LOW
A. PARTICIPANTS	Two or more participants, A and O	One participant
B. KINESIS	Action	Non-action
C. ASPECT	Telic	Atelic
D. PUNCTUALITY	Punctual	Non-punctual
E. VOLITIONALITY	Volitional	Non-volitional
F. AFFIRMATION	Affirmative	Negative
G. MODE	Realis	Irrealis
H. AGENCY	A high in potency	A low in potency
I. AFFECTEDNESS OF O	O totally affected	O not affected
J. INDIVIDUATION OF O	O highly individuated	O non-individuated

*Table 6 Transitivity Scale (Hopper & Thompson 1980:252)*

As seen in Table , not only verbal semantics, verbal morphosyntax, and verb meaning are at stake, but also argument expression and its semantics, transitivity must be considered a **property of the entire clause** (Hopper & Thompson 1980:251). Universally, world languages distinguish different degrees of how an event is transferred from an agent (A) to a patient (or object, O), also displaying different ways of marking degrees of transitivity.

If we analyze the most salient points from Hopper and Thompson's table, we find two columns representing high transitivity on the left and low transitivity on the right. These two points should be imagined as the poles of a *continuum*, as the scale separating default intransitivity from high transitivity is discrete, with nuances in between and interdependent factors that constantly influence the degree of transitivity conveyed in each clause (Haspelmath 1993).

Point B on the scale, KINESIS, refers to the observation made by Hopper and Thompson (1980:252) that activities tend to generate high transitivity. This is because it is universally more plausible that activities can be transferred from one argument to another, unlike states. Following their examples, something happens to Sally in "I hugged Sally," but not in "I like Sally." Moreover, Kinesis, understood as physical movement and **manipulation**, is also higher in transitivity than metaphorical senses or less immediate and visible physical activity. When the degree of directed physical activity, the agent's consciousness in causing the movement, and their volition are clearly high, this will also trigger high transitivity (Hopper & Thompson 1980:264). The verbs participating in the labile causative alternation with TUCs seem to denote a change of location in a non-metaphorical, concrete way. They do not entail a manner of motion but instead describe a simple direction, usually with an endpoint that is easy to locate in both time and space. This closeness to the real world is a strong element favoring high transitivity, which is why these verbs are used as easily understandable, economical utterances.

Point C, ASPECT, refers to the difference between telic and atelic events. High telicity denotes the expression of a distinct endpoint, either of motion or of state, while atelicity leaves unspecified whether or which endpoint is involved.

According to Hopper and Thompson's crosslinguistic analysis, an action with an endpoint is more likely to be effectively transferred from an agent to an object than one without. In this case, **aspect** also resembles the internal structure of directed-motion verbs: just as directed-motion verbs always entail an endpoint of motion and favor a more plausible transfer of activity from one argument to another, verbs marked for **telicity** also establish a clearer pattern in both time and space, as well as in the effectiveness of the agent's action.

A similar approach applies to the notion of D. PUNCTUALITY: if there is no (long) transitional phase between inception and completion of the action, **effectiveness** will be higher and so will Transitivity (Hopper & Thompson 1980:252).

As for point E., VOLITIONALITY, Hopper & Thompson (1980) observe that the **intentionality** of the agent to transfer an action to an Object raises the degree of Transitivity of the clause. The distinction between intentional and non-intentional causers is particularly clear in those languages that mark ergative or absolutive case on their subjects based on them being actively and intentionally involved in transferring the action, or just happening to cause it by chance. Italian, as other (Romance) languages, displays strategies of encoding low volitionality of animate arguments when their semantic role is not the one of an agent, but of an experiencer or undergoer, as in the case of the so-called *quirky subjects* or subjects of psych-verbs (Belletti & Rizzi 1988):

- (36)    Mi                    piace            la      cioccolata            (standard It.)  
           CL.DAT.1SG        delights        the      chocolate  
           ‘I like chocolate’

In this example, the canonical subject position is occupied by the semantic experiencer, which is expressed with an oblique clitic. The syntactic subject of the sentence is the theme, *la cioccolata* (‘chocolate’). According to Hopper & Thompson (1980), structures which overtly differ from the canonical word order and case assignment are strategies of marking low transitivity.

The case of unintentional causers in Western peninsular Spanish as observed by Lara Bermejo (2020) seems to include both volitional and non-volitional agents, since the transitivization of *caer* with the meaning of ‘accidentally letting fall sth.’ is used and accepted, although hierarchically less high than the other two verbs analyzed in the study:

- (37)    Caí                    el      vaso  
           fell-1SG            the      glass  
           lit. ‘I fell the glass’ = ‘I dropped the glass’

(Lara Bermejo 2018: 93. ex. (4a))

The Italian examples from our corpus suggest volitional agents for canonical motion verbs which are transitivized, though further evidence is needed (see Chapter 5), while the

peculiar uses of *avanzare* ('leave over') with the meaning of 'leave some food over' seem to oscillate between a volitional and a non-volitional interpretation:

(38) a. Ieri ho avanzato della pasta al pomodoro  
 yesterday have.1SG left.over some pasta at.the tomato  
 'I left over some pasta with tomato-sauce yesterday'<sup>37</sup>  
 (GC2021.18)

b. Ho avanzato del prosciutto (così ti fai  
 Have-1SG left.over some ham so REFL make-2SG  
 un panino)<sup>38</sup>  
 a sandwich  
 'I left you some ham so that you can make yourself a sandwich'  
 (GC2021.48)

F. AFFIRMATION is also an interesting point that must be considered when evaluating the degree of Transitivity found in discourse. Affirmative sentences are higher in Transitivity than negative ones.

As for G. MODE, *realis* corresponds to higher Transitivity than *irrealis* (Hooper & Thompson 1980:252). If we describe events that actually take place, their effectiveness is higher than it would in other possible worlds or hypothetical contexts. The transfer of an action in real-world terms is more plausible and tangible than in hypothetical constructions, hence the higher degree of Transitivity. Since TUCs are a phenomenon of the spoken language, which typically favors indicative mood, their appearance in *irrealis* contexts, i.e. with conditional or subjunctive mood, is to expect as rare.

The following point along the 1A-J scale, H. AGENCY, is one of the most significant ones when it comes to mapping Transitivity factors onto morphosyntactic features. The **ergative-absolutive alignment** of languages such as Hungarian and Finnish used to exemplify Hopper and Thompson's hypothesis clearly shows a preference towards ergative case whenever the subject is stronger in agency, while subjects lower in agency and volition are often marked with absolutive case. In Tongan, when objects are expressed in form of bare nominals, which

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<sup>37</sup> The context of the video-receipt suggests a non-volitional interpretation of this utterance. Source: tiktok, @cookergirl. This young speaker is from Alessandria, Piedmont. Access: October 2021.

<sup>38</sup> The agent in this use suggested by Zenoni (27/11/2009) in this case is interpreted as volitional. <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/avanzare-transitivo/251>. Access: September 2024.

are low in referentiality and considered to be incorporated into the verbal stem, the agent is marked in the absolutive case and the verb phrase with intransitive morphology (Hopper & Thompson 1980:295). Furthermore, the DEGREE OF PLANNED INVOLVEMENT OF A also affects the degree of Transitivity found in the clause.

When agents are interpreted as strong in volition, intentionality, physical affectedness (in the sense that they also carry out the movements entailed in verb meaning) and degree of involvement, the Transitivity degree increases. Their action is carried out through their direct physical manipulation, and thus more completely, successfully, conclusively and permanently than in anticausatives sentences or in sentences with unintentional causers. Furthermore, their participation in the action is more direct than in those utterances with causative/factitive *fare + infinitive*:

- (39) a. Mario esce il cane  
           Mario goes.out the dog
- b. Mario fa uscire il cane  
           Mario lets go.out the dog

In sentence (39a), the subject is necessarily interpreted as performing the same action that is transferred to the object (in other words, Mario moves to the exit with the dog and directly causes the object theme to do the same). In (39b), by contrast, the subject merely permits or causes the action performed by the object (for example, by opening the door for the dog to exit, without necessarily leaving the room himself).

A similar pattern is observable in object morphology, leading us to the final two aspects: AFFECTEDNESS and INDIVIDUATION OF O. Given that actions performed more effectively correlate with higher Transitivity, it follows that objects that have already been introduced and identified in discourse are more likely to undergo the change initiated and transferred onto them by an effective subject (Hopper & Thompson 1980:252).

**Definite** DPs exhibit a higher degree of Transitivity compared to **indefinites**, bare NPs, and non-individuated objects, which tend to be categorized in the right column of Table . In an ergative-absolutive alignment, such objects are assigned absolutive case and behave similarly to the subjects of intransitive clauses. Moreover, the TOTALITY with which the object is affected and the agent is involved plays a crucial role in the expression of Transitivity: the agent of a fully transitive verb is interpreted as completely and profoundly affecting its object. Thus,

the COMPLETION of the action – visible in the endpoint of the change undergone by the object – is a strong indicator of high Transitivity, whereas partial affection and change suggest lower transitivity properties.

If the object reaches an endpoint where it is entirely physically altered, moved, or transformed, a high Transitivity reading is triggered (Hopper & Thompson 1980:261). In Finnish, for instance, the accusative case encodes a telic reading, indicating full participation and affectedness of the object, while the partitive marks an atelic, imperfective reading and partial affectedness (Hopper & Thompson 1980:263). The same principle applies to the INTENSITY of the change process affecting the object.

By adapting the list presented here in accordance with Hopper & Thompson's classification of highly transitive and low-transitive linguistic interactions, as well as by considering the examples provided, it becomes evident that Italian – like other languages – employs morphosyntactic strategies to mark different degrees of Transitivity within its clauses. If we assume a *continuum* of Transitivity, with High and Low Transitivity at opposite ends – where the highest level is characterized by all factors (A–J) being positioned in the left column, and the lowest by all being in the right column – we obtain the TRANSITIVITY HYPOTHESIS formulated by Hopper & Thompson (1980:254).

(40) *If two clauses (a) and (b) in a language differ in that (a) is higher in Transitivity according to any of the features 1A–J, then, if a concomitant grammatical or semantic difference appears elsewhere in the clause, that difference will also show to be higher in Transitivity.*

In other words, whenever an obligatory pairing of two features from the left column of Table (1A–J) occurs within the morphosyntax of a clause, both features will either be positioned in the High-Transitivity column or in the Low-Transitivity column.

A particularly compelling piece of evidence comes from certain ergative-absolutive languages, where nominal case marking and verbal morphology sometimes form an obligatory pair of features that must belong to the same column within the Transitivity scale described thus far.

For instance, in Mandarin, the highly transitive morpheme *ba* must co-occur with perfective morphology (Hopper & Thompson 1980:272). More broadly, a common feature

among ergative languages is that ergative marking tends to be associated with perfective aspect, further supporting the TRANSITIVITY HYPOTHESIS. Even in English, perfective verb particles can only appear with highly referential objects:

- (41) a. I ate up the sandwich  
 b. ?I ate up a sandwich  
 c. I ate up a sandwich that somebody left behind

(from Hopper & Thompson 1980:275)

If we rewrite one example of TUCs using perfective aspect, the contrast in acceptability between referential and non-referential object DPs appears even more striking:

- (42) a. Ho           uscito           il       cane                               (non-standard)  
           have-1SG gone.out       the     dog  
       b. ?ho           uscito           un     cane  
           have-1SG gone.out       a       dog

A final aspect of Hopper & Thompson’s framework concerns the implications of their hypothesis for another field of research: discourse analysis. Their central claim is that Transitivity should be regarded as a **discourse-level property**, one that pertains to entire clauses and their interrelations rather than merely to individual verbal constructions.

As a discourse property, Transitivity analysis can also provide insights into certain diachronic developments, such as the saliency hierarchy, which governs the selection of accusative versus dative object markers:

- (43) humanness > change of location/state > definiteness > totality

(Hopper & Thompson 1980:263)

The higher these parameters, the more likely that accusative case will be used instead of dative. The Transitivity scale helps illuminate how languages choose to represent and mark their arguments based on transitivity properties. The implications of the hierarchy outlined in (43) may also shed light on certain diachronic developments as well as crosslinguistic differences, such as the dative marking of human objects in specific German verbs like *helfen* (‘help’) or *vertrauen* (‘trust’), or the phenomenon of quirky subjects.

It is a well-documented crosslinguistic tendency that languages employ morphosyntactic strategies to reflect the degree of Transitivity in their clauses (Hopper & Thompson 1980:280). In pragmatic research, it has been observed that clauses with a high

degree of Transitivity tend to belong to the **foreground** – that is, to the portions of discourse that convey the main content and the most relevant information the speaker intends to communicate.

Foreground information is typically presented in chronological order and encoded in the *realis* mood, in affirmative form, with high referentiality. In contrast, background information includes the speaker's commentary on the content and often contains low-transitive, less referential clauses, hypothetical constructions, and other elements that serve a supporting role in discourse.

### 3.2.3 Causativity and causation strategies

Section 2.1 already introduced the notions of causativity and causative alternations, presenting TUCs as labile forms which alternate with the intransitive canonical counterpart. This section illustrates some relevant properties of causative strategies as discussed in literature.

Following Lehmann (2016:921), a situation C is causative iff:

- There is a situation B such that C includes B
- There are at least two participants, a, b...n
- C includes a, b...n
- B includes b...n; a is not an element of B
- a controls C
- b is the part that has more control in B
- the participation of a in C can be more or less peripheral
- the influence of a on B (and on b) can be more or less mediate

We can associate a with the causer, b with the causee, B with the base situation and C with the caused situation. Thus, in *Mario esce il cane*, lit. 'Mario goes out the dog', a is Mario, b is the dog, B is the action of the dog going out, and C is the situation in which Mario causes the dog to go out. Depending on the level of (direct) involvement of the causer in the caused event, and on the degree of (potential) agentivity and/or volition of the causee in executing the activity, we can distinguish different forms of causation:

- a forces B: coercion
- a lets B happen: permission

- b still has control: b remains the agent in B, with a's permission (indirect causation)
- a directly involved in B: a causes B
- a less involved in B: a induces B

The prototypical causative clause exhibits **active diathesis and high transitivity**. As discussed in the previous section, causation and transitivity are interconnected through a reciprocal relationship: the more plausible it is for an activity to be effectively transferred from an agent to a patient, the higher its degree of transitivity and direct causation will be.

Less canonical causative clauses may involve *theta* roles beyond those considered thus far, yet they can still be grouped into **macroroles**, such as *actor* and *undergoer* (Chomsky 1981; Dowty 1991). The former corresponds to the semantic roles of causer and/or agent, conveys volition, sentience, and/or perception, instigates movement, and identifies a referent that exists independently of the action denoted by the predicate (Ramchand 2008:12). The latter encompasses the roles of (incremental) theme, patient, and experiencer – entities that are causally affected, undergo a change of state or position denoted by the verb, and may or may not exist as independent referents (*ibidem*).

Syntactically, the canonical position for the causer is the subject, while causees are expected to appear in object position. This construction is also cognitively canonical, as it largely reflects the unmarked information structure. As previously mentioned, the prototypical causative clause is typically characterized by transitive morphology (in Hopper & Thompson's terms, high Transitivity), strong agency of the subject, and strong affectedness of the (inanimate or non-agentive) object. However, the strategies used to encode these relationships in terms of argument realization vary crosslinguistically.

The insertion of a causer – i.e., the transformation of an independent B-clause into a C-clause that entails B – causes the subject of the base verb to be displaced, effectively becoming the object of the causative verb. Consequently, the causative verb becomes the core of the causative construction. From a semantic perspective, causative forms are often considered more complex than their inchoative counterparts, as they involve the expansion of a base verb into a structure that encodes both a caused event and a basic event (Haspelmath 1993).

The **lexicalist approach** (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995, 1998, among others) attributes causative meaning to the verb itself. Under this approach, causation results in valency

augmentation, as it introduces an additional argument in the subject slot (Hoffmann 2016:36ff.; Martin 2023:3). Whether causatives – comprising two combined events and at least two arguments – are necessarily “bigger”, i.e., cognitively and semantically more complex than their anticausative counterparts, remains an open debate in the literature.

**Neo-constructionist approaches** challenge the assumption of greater complexity in causatives, arguing that the lexicalist perspective predicts an excessive number of scoping ambiguities (Marantz 1997; Borer 2003; Folli & Harley 2005; Pytkänen 2008; Ramchand 2008; Martin & Schäfer 2014; Acedo-Matellán & Mateu 2015; Martin 2023, among others). According to Ramchand (2008), for instance, the number of events remains constant between causatives and anticausatives. Moreover, the alleged higher semantic complexity of causative structures does not necessarily correspond to greater cognitive complexity, nor does it always require a more marked morphosyntactic strategy than in inchoative, anticausative, or non-causative constructions (Haspelmath 1993).

Another key factor in determining the degree of causation is the directedness of the relationship between the causer and the causee. This relationship can be direct or indirect. **Direct causation** involves a causer/agent that immediately brings about a change of state or position in the causee (i.e., the object), typically through physical manipulation. This manipulation occurs directly, meaning that it takes place within the same spatiotemporal context as the caused event, making it impossible to distinguish between the causer’s activity and the resulting manipulation.

**Indirect causation**, by contrast, introduces a distinction between the causer’s activity and the caused event. These two elements may be separated in space and time, involve different degrees of agency, and display a lower degree of agentivity in the causer while granting the causee a higher degree of agentivity (Romagno 2023:881).

Consider the following opposition:

- (44) a. Mario        esce        il        cane  
                   Mario        goes.out    the     dog

‘Mario takes the dog out’

b. Mario        fa        uscire il        cane  
           Mario        lets        go.out the        dog

‘Mario lets the dog go out’

In (44a), Mario himself performs the action of moving toward the outside, actively engaging in the directed motion indicated by the verb. Within the same **spatiotemporal** unit, the dog is compelled to do the same. In (44b), by contrast, Mario may simply have opened the door and is waiting for his dog to exit the room. The dog may refuse to go outside or take a certain amount of time before doing so, but its action does not necessarily occur within the same spatiotemporal unit as the causer’s (Mario’s) action (see also Shibatani & Pardeshi 2002). In this case, the subject exhibits lower agentivity (Mario is not necessarily performing the action of going out), while the object (the dog) demonstrates greater agentivity, as it may or may not leave the room, exhibiting a higher degree of volition.

Crosslinguistic and typological research reveals significant variation in the expression of causation relations. In many languages, morphological derivation serves as an indicator of semantic derivation: the derived form introduces additional meaning components to the base form, often through derivational morphology (Haspelmath 1993:87). This process aligns with the universal principle of **diagrammatic iconicity**, which dictates that conceptually marked meanings tend to be expressed through marked formal features (ibidem). However, the assumption that the higher semantic complexity of causatives necessarily entails greater morphological complexity and markedness is challenged by numerous counterexamples across the world’s languages.

In fact, causative forms are not always the morphologically derived ones. On the contrary, many European languages display a preference for overt anticausative markers (Haspelmath 1993:102), though other strategies also exist, such as the morphophonemic alternation found in German, e.g., *sinken* (‘sink’, intransitive) vs. *senken* (‘sink’, transitive).

Causative and anticausative derivations form alternations, i.e., pairs of forms that share the same basic meaning but differ in their degree of causativity (causative vs. inchoative). However, the directionality of the derivation – that is, the identification of the basic form versus the derived form – is neither universal nor unambiguous. For instance, in Russian, the anticausative form is often derived from the causative one (Haspelmath 1993:89):

- (45) *rasplavit'* 'melt' (tr.)  
*rasplavit'-sja* 'melt' (intr.)

This example illustrates that semantic derivation does not necessarily correspond to formal derivation, and that **conceptual meaning**, rather than objective meaning, plays a central role in diagrammatic iconicity (Haspelmath 1993:89). In particular, the plausibility of an event occurring due to an external force appears to favor less marked causative strategies and an anticausative alternation. Conversely, when an event is highly likely to occur spontaneously or without external initiation, languages tend to exhibit unmarked anticausative forms and marked causative constructions (Haspelmath 1993:90).

This assumption is further supported by the near impossibility of anticausative derivation with verbs denoting highly spontaneous events, such as *laugh* (Haspelmath 1993:105). At the same time, causative alternation remains possible through the use of complex periphrastic constructions indicating indirect causation.

- (46) a. Mario (\*si) ride  
Mario ANTIC laughs
- b. \*Mario ride Gianni  
Mario laughs Gianni
- c. Mario fa ridere Gianni  
Mario lets laugh Gianni

It is not always possible to determine the directionality of a derivation. Following Inglese (2021:134), we can distinguish between **oriented** and **non-oriented** causativization strategies. The former allow for the identification of a morphological derivation in either direction (from anticausative to causative or vice versa), while the latter do not exhibit clear derivational directionality or any derivational morphology at all.

Whether a language predominantly employs detransitivizing or transitivity strategies depends largely on how causativity is encoded. Some languages systematically mark it on actants, others on verbal morphology, while some rely primarily on lexical alternations (Lehmann 2016:917). If a language tends to add arguments to more basic valencies, it follows a transitivity pattern, as seen in languages with rich verbal derivational morphology, such as Turkish. Conversely, English displays a high proportion of labile alternations, where causative

and anticausative forms are formally identical, likely due to its limited overt morphological marking (Haspelmath 1993:102).

A language that exhibits a higher number of cases in which causation is not overtly marked – either on verbs or on nominals – tends to favor a detransitivizing strategy. As noted in our brief diachronic overview of valency patterns (see also 3.1), Latin is considered a detransitivizing language. The loss of a rich case system in the transition from Old Latin to Romance languages led to the shift from a dependent-marking system to a head-marking system (Cennamo 2009), while preserving rich verbal inflection and reinforcing the use of prepositions. In Italian, the preference for detransitivizing strategies remains evident in the frequent use of the anticausative particle *SE*, which signals the absence of an external causer, whereas morphologically marked causative alternations are less frequent (Inglese 2021).

Although languages may show a tendency toward one strategy over the other, it is important to note that both alternation patterns are typically present to some extent in all languages. Moreover, language change can shift a language's preference between transitivity and detransitivizing strategies over time.

Non-oriented strategies, i.e., those without clear directionality, may exhibit neutral alternations (termed "**equipollent**" in Haspelmath 1993:91), where causative and anticausative forms do not appear to be derived from each other. Alternatively, they may be **indeterminate**, meaning that no direct relation exists between the stems (as in cases of suppletion), or **non-derivational**, as seen in labile alternations (Inglese 2021:134ff.). Some examples are provided in Table (adapted from Inglese 2021:135).

<b>1. <u>Oriented</u></b>			
<b>1.1 Transitivity</b>			
(47)	a. Orhan Orhan 'Orhan died'	öl-dü die-PST.3SG	(Turkish)
	b. Ali Hasan-i Ali Hasan-ACC 'Ali killed Hasan'	öl-dür -dü die-CAUS-PST.3SG	
			(Kulikov 2001:886, ex. (3))
<b>1.2 Detransitivizing</b>			(non-standard Italian)
(48)	a. Il papà addormenta il bambino the dad falls.asleep the baby 'The dad puts the baby to sleep'		
	b. Il bambino si addormenta the baby SE falls.asleep 'The baby falls asleep (on his own)'		(da solo) (of alone)
<b>2. <u>Non-oriented</u></b>			
<b>2.1 Neutral</b>			
(49)	a. atum-aru 'gather' (intr.)		(Japanese)
	b. atum-eru 'gather' (tr.)		
			(Haspelmath 1993:91)
<b>2.2 Indeterminate</b>			
<b>2.2.1 Suppletive</b>			
(50)	a. morire 'die'		(Italian)
	b. uccidere 'kill'		
<b>2.2.2 Labile</b>			
(51)	a. Scendi! Go.down-IMP		
	b. Scendimi le chiavi! Go.down-IMP-CL.DAT.1S the keys		

Table 7 Some (anti)causative strategies and their derivations

When there are no clear morphological markers of directionality – neither in phonetic form nor through explicit morphemes – to distinguish between the anticausative and causative

forms, and the same verbal stem is used unmodified in both cases, we encounter **lability**. In other instances, a language may employ two entirely different stems, without any lexical derivation, to express the causative and anticausative meanings of a verb. This phenomenon is known as **suppletion**, as seen in the Italian pair *morire* ('die') / *uccidere* ('kill'), where the causative strategy follows a lexical principle. According to Haspelmath (1993), one of the most common lexical alternations in the typology of the world languages is the one between *kill/murder* (causative) and *die* (anticausative). Standard Italian differentiates between *insegnare* ('teach') and *imparare* ('learn'), while some Italo-Romance dialects only use the stem *imparare* for both meanings (labile alternation).

**Syntactic** alternations, on the other hand, involve periphrastic constructions, in which a verb introduces a small clause, as in the Italian *fare* + infinitive (e.g., *fare entrare* 'let in'), which typically encodes indirect causation.

The three main strategies for encoding causative alternations – morphological, syntactic, and lexical – are all present in Standard Italian, albeit with some variation across regional dialects. For instance, Cennamo (2009) reports that Central Italian varieties show a higher tendency to use SE as an anticausative marker, even in cases where Standard Italian prefers labile alternations. This preference for overtly marked anticausativity in certain Italo-Romance and regional Italian varieties reflects a greater need to explicitly signal the absence of an external causer. As a result, the number of labile verbs is significantly lower in these varieties compared to Standard Italian.

In Arabic, causative meaning is often conveyed through gemination of the second consonant of the verbal root, as exemplified by Hopper & Thompson (1980:264, ex. (39)):

(52)	<i>birik</i>	'kneel'	<i>birrik</i>	'force to kneel'
	<i>kasar</i>	'break' (intr.)	<i>kassar</i>	'smash'
	<i>jamad</i>	'freeze' (intr.)	<i>jammad</i>	'freeze' (tr.)

Nearly every verb of Hindi/Urdu, including unergatives and base transitives, can likewise assume causative meaning when combined with the suffix *-aa*, for direct causation, and *-vaa*, for indirect causation and only with active/volitional instigators (from Ramchand 2008:179):

(53)	<i>baith-naa</i>	‘sit’	<i>bith-aa-naa</i>	‘seat’
	<i>bujh-naa</i>	‘go’	<i>bujh-aa-naa</i>	‘put out’
	<i>gir-naa</i>	‘fall’	<i>gir-aa-naa</i>	‘cause to fall’

In the case of motion verbs, the source and cause of motion may remain unspecified, either because they are unmotivated or because their specification is unnecessary. The absence of an explicit causer/agent is typically realized through intransitive constructions, which, in most languages, including Italian, yield prototypical unaccusatives. The fact that Italian directed-motion verbs sometimes derive from Latin deponents, combined with their frequent occurrence as intransitives, suggests that the intransitive/anticausative form represents the basic, non-derived variant.

Moreover, unaccusativity tests, as defined by Burzio (1986), confirm a low degree of causativity for unaccusatives in standard Italian. Therefore, if one were to determine which form is derived, the liable causative form would be the marked variant, derived from the intransitive one. In other words, in languages such as Italian and Spanish, where the anticausative alternation with SE is common, expressing the opposite meaning would require the addition of further phonological material, such as a light verb and a small clause. This less economical strategy becomes necessary only when the speaker intends to convey a degree of transitivity and causativity significantly higher than that of the prototypical intransitive form. In the absence of a specified external argument, the clause is typically interpreted as lacking an actor, being internally caused, externally caused but unspecified, or occurring spontaneously, as in the case of canonical unaccusatives.

Notably, the verbs under investigation in this study – namely, directed-motion causatives – are **inherently agentive** in their denotation (Romagno 2023: 882), which facilitates their transitive liable counterpart.

The degree of involvement, volition, and agentivity of the subject ultimately determines the distinction between direct and indirect causation, as demonstrated by the contrast between a regional Italian and a northern Calabrian utterance from spontaneous speech:

- (54) a. Ho rimasto il pane in dispensa  
 have-1SG stayed the bread in pantry

‘I left the bread in the pantry (and I did not bring it to the table, so that we don’t tuck in)’

- b. – Dov’è Luigi?  
 ‘Where is Luigi?’

- L’ ho rimasto al bar  
 CLIT.3SG.ACC have-1.SG stayed at.the bar

‘When I left the bar, he was still there’

(Romagno 2023: 881)

In sentence (54a), a subject with a high degree of agentivity triggers a direct causative interpretation. In contrast, in sentence (54b), the subject is [-agentive], and the clause may contain either a [-agentive] or a [+agentive] object, leading to an indirect causative reading (i.e., Luigi did not stay at the bar as a result of direct causation initiated by the agent’s departure).

Further support for this distinction comes from the **passive transformation** of sentence 54a), following the type of test originally employed by Haspelmath (1990) and later adapted by Romagno (2023: 882) for non-standard Italian:

- (55) a. Il pane è stato rimasto in dispensa  
 The bread is been stayed in pantry
- b. \*Luigi è stato rimasto al bar  
 Luigi is been stayed at.the bar

This contrast confirms the direct-causational meaning (55a), along with all the factors associated with it, in comparison to sentence (55b). Passive transformation serves as a diagnostic tool for detecting the agentivity of an active sentence, highlighting the conceptual and semantic distinctions between causative and anticausative constructions.

In order to predict a possible directionality of the (anti)causative derivation, Haspelmath (1993) mentions events that are more likely to happen when caused by an external force and those which are more likely to happen spontaneously. Among different proposals for the classification of event denotations based on this distinction, Alexiadou et al. (2006:203ff.) categorize verbal roots in the following ontological classes:

(56)	√AGENTIVE	<i>murder</i>
	√INTERNALLY CAUSED	<i>blossom</i>
	√EXTERNALLY CAUSED	<i>destroy</i>
	√CAUSE UNSPECIFIED	<i>open</i> (and TUCs)

**Agentive roots** are not expected to participate in the (anti)causative alternation, as they inherently presuppose the presence of an external argument. The most significant crosslinguistic differences arise in how languages encode the arguments of externally caused roots. For instance, while in German and English only passives can be formed from such roots, Greek (and, to some extent, Italian) also allows anticausative alternations. A typical agentive root, *destroy*, functions as an anticausative in Greek (see Alexiadou et al. 2006:204).

For roots that semantically require an agentive reading, such as *murder*, anticausative formation is blocked in most languages (see also Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020; Ausensi 2024, a.o., on the argument structure of this verb class). Moreover, conceptual alternations that are socially more salient and marked across different speaker groups are more likely to be expressed through lexical suppletion – such as *kill/die* – rather than through morphological derivation or (anti)causative alternation (Haspelmath 1993). In fact, *murder*-type verbs and agentive predicates generally do not alternate.

If a highly agentive predicate is marked with an anticausative morpheme, its interpretation may be either anticausative or reflexive, but it is usually less plausible than its causative counterpart:

(57)	a. I	Francesi	decapitarono	il	Re
	The	French	beheaded	the	King
	b. #Il	Re	si	decapitò	
	The	King	ANTIC/REFL	beheaded	

Roots belonging to the class of **cause-unspecified** verbs, such as *break*, are more likely to alternate. Once again, lability appears to fall under the category of unspecified caused events, as in the case of Italian TUCs. Nevertheless, since their default valency is intransitive, their purely unaccusative counterpart does not take the anticausative marker SE. This proposal should help categorize the cognitive principles which then drive argument selection and syntactic realizations (see section 3.3).

### 3.2.4 Object animacy

TUCs have been scarcely investigated in contemporary Italian. To the best of our knowledge, the studies by Romagno (2021, 2023) and Busso & Romagno (2021) are among the few investigations aiming to define the distinctive formal properties of TUCs.

All three studies by Romagno (2021, 2023) and Busso & Romagno (2021) focus on the role of object animacy as an **epiphenomenon of agentivity** in licensing and influencing the spread and acceptability of TUCs in spoken (regional) Italian. Agentivity can be defined as the property of controlling a given event (Romagno 2021:298). The authors demonstrate that the distribution of caused motion constructions depends, among other factors, on the **degree of (potential) agentivity** attributed to the direct object, which is semantically the undergoer of the caused motion (Romagno 2021:289).

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the presence of a dialectal *substratum* influences not only the appearance and acceptability of these constructions on a simple statistical basis but also the **organization of the principles** governing their distribution. The studies conducted by Romagno with bilingual dialect/Italian speakers show that dialect proficiency constitutes a pattern of regularities that could help explain the ongoing standardization of these constructions in contemporary spoken Italian.

Romagno's (2021, 2023, 2025) investigations focused on regional Italian in Northern Calabria. The tokens chosen for the target utterances involved the four pure unaccusatives *entrare* ('go in'), *uscire* ('go out'), *salire* ('go up'), and *scendere* ('go down'). The empirical investigations were conducted through acceptability judgment tasks, induced spoken production, recorded spontaneous conversations, and translation tasks from Italian to dialect (or vice versa). The results show that low object animacy favors the acceptability of TUCs, while high object animacy triggers more severe restrictions and lower acceptability rates.

The reason why low animacy is linked to a higher degree of spread and acceptability of the constructions under investigation is its prototypical semantic meaning of low agentivity. If an object is inanimate, it has no control over the event; if it is animate, it might **potentially** assume some control over the event. This second option contrasts with the prototypical role of objects: while prototypical subjects of the transitive, active clause are agents, their (direct)

objects are usually themes or undergoers. Their animate nature could clash with the low agentivity typically attributed to them. Thus, the potential agentivity of an object contrasts with its syntactic and semantic function (Romagno 2021:299). In caused motion constructions, it is less plausible that an undergoer can move by itself than that it is moved by the agent.

The perception of a direct object as a **weak potential agent** favors causation strategies such as TUCs (Busso & Romagno 2021; Romagno 2021, 2023, 2025). For instance, sentence (58a) was found to be more acceptable than (58b) in Romagno’s empirical studies:

- (58) a. Entra il bambino nell’ incubatrice!  
 enter the baby in-the incubator  
 ‘Put the baby in the incubator!’
- b. Entra la zia in cucina!  
 enter the aunt in-the kitchen  
 ‘Let the aunt in the kitchen!’

(Romagno 2021:302, Table 3)

While the baby in (58a) is perceived as unable to determine his/her own motion, the aunt in (58b) is seen as having a greater potential for self-established movement capacity. The speakers who evaluated these tokens accepted sentence (58a) but mostly rejected sentence (58b). Romagno’s findings also highlighted that those speakers who provided more acceptable responses to (58b) – and, in general, to constructions with potentially more agentive objects – belonged to a younger age group. Her explanation lies in the ongoing *neo-standardization* process in Italy since the 1980s (Berruto 1980). According to the author, with regionally marked features entering the national spoken norm, younger generations have been importing dialectal constructions into their regional Italian production, sometimes unaware of their geographical markedness.

Note that dialectal interference is considered by Romagno not only as a repertoire of highly frequent TUCs influencing Italian production and reception, but also as a formal model for organizing and guiding **parameter setting**. Romagno (2021:304; 2023:879) clarifies that it is not only the frequency with which these constructions appear in dialect that favors their adoption in regional Italian production, but also their abstract role, which directly involves the organization of principles guiding the use of TUCs.

The principles operating at the syntactic-semantic interface, derived from the dialectal *substratum* of proficient speakers, rely on the prototypical association between agentive object themes and caused motion constructions (ibid.). The **innovation** found in the regional Italian of younger speakers shows a **less restrictive use and reception** of caused motion constructions, with an expansion toward less prototypical objects.

Busso & Romagno (2021) furtherly confirmed this tendency with experimental studies involving acceptability judgment tasks by younger speakers from different Italian regions. Speakers who self-identified as **imperfect dialect speakers** gave higher acceptability judgments to TUCs than older participants who self-identified as proficient dialect speakers (see also 4.2.2).

Further examples from our corpus, involving unaccusative and unergative verbs with semi-volitional or scarcely (potentially) agentive animated objects such as babies and non-self-sufficient persons, are also possible:

(59) a. Addormento                      Lorenzo<sup>39</sup>  
           fall.asleep-1.SG                Lorenzo  
 lit. ‘I fall asleep Lorenzo’ = ‘I bring Lorenzo to sleep’  
(GC2021.32)

          b. Siedi                                il        bambino!  
               sit.down-2.SG.IMP    the     child  
 lit. ‘Sit down the child’ = ‘put the baby to seat’  
(GC2021.53)

          c. Gioca                                il        bambino!  
               play-2.SG.IMP        the     child  
 lit. ‘Play the child’ = ‘Entertain the child’  
(GC2021.43)

### 3.2.5 Argument structure and external arguments

It is well known that the nature and expression of argument structure constructions is a debated topic in the field of verbal semantics, as some linguistics advocate for a role of roots in

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<sup>39</sup> “Un posto al sole”, soap opera. Lorenzo is a baby and the character speaking is Neapolitan.

building templatic meanings (Rappaport Hovav & Levin 1998, 2010; Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2021; Ausensi 2024, a. o.) and assume that causation is built through **valency augmentation**, whereas other authors argue for **syntactic composition** as the basis of argument realization (Borer 2003, Ramchand 2008, Alexiadou et al. 2006, among many others). This subsection briefly summarized some of the most eminent positions found in the literature, and applies some proposals to the case of TUCs.

### *Voice and CAUSE*

Alexiadou et al. (2006) and Alexiadou (2010: 178) reject the idea that anticausative and causative verbs correspond to distinct lexical entries or that one entry is ‘frozen’ in the lexicon while the other is always derived. Instead, they propose that lexical entries are not inherently classified as causative or anticausative in terms of morphosyntactic behavior, nor do they necessarily stand in a derivational relationship. Their hypothesis suggests the existence of ontological root classes (shown in section 3.2.3) that predict which syntactic structure – causative or anticausative – will be the unmarked one. Opposing both detransitivization and causativization approaches, they argue that it is often impossible, in crosslinguistic analyses, to identify a default directionality. Instead, they propose a syntactic decomposition between causation (CAUS) and agentivity (Alexiadou et al. 2006: 187ff).

The need to distinguish between causation and agentivity is supported by crosslinguistic evidence showing that while agents are permitted in passives, they are not in anticausatives, although anticausatives still allow for the presence of causing events introduced by *from*. Specifically, anticausatives disallow *by*-phrases and instruments but permit causers<sup>40</sup>. This distinction contradicts detransitivization theories, which claim that the anticausative form

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<sup>40</sup> The literature about (anti)causative alternations and passive morphology offers a wide range of tests and examples to differentiate anticausatives from passives (Migliori 2016; Alexiadou et al. 2006; Alexiadou 2015, a.o.). For example, anticausative disallow *by*-phrases, as already mentioned, cannot control PRO, are incompatible with agentive adverbs, and do not license instrumental PPs (Migliori 2016:54ff.).

necessarily entails the absence of implicit causers – despite the fact that implicit causers remain possible in passives:

- (60) a. \*The window broke by John / with a stone  
b. The window broke from the storm.

(Alexiadou et al.2006:195, ex. (24ff.))

The examples show the need of separating causation and agentivity, and highlight that is it not possible to distinguish between passives and anticausatives only based on the presence or absence of implicit arguments. Since agents are only allowed in passives, but not in anticausatives, a theory of how to represent causatives must account for the difference between agentivity and causation. In particular, the head responsible for introducing causation in both causatives and anticausatives is Voice:

- (61) [Voice [CAUS [Root]]]

(Alexiadou et al. 2006:201)

Thus, in the case of change-of-state verbs, the combination of a root and a theme expresses the resultant state of a causing event (CAUS); the same principle applies to verbs of caused motion, whose roots select themes that undergo a caused change of location. Voice introduces an external argument and expresses agentivity (Alexiadou et al. 2006: 202), thereby inducing transitivity in an otherwise intransitive or mono-argumental syntactic structure (Migliori 2016: 53). Consequently, the default interpretation of Voice is typically an agentive one.

However, distinct features of **Voice** account for the differentiation between anticausatives and passives. For instance, **agentive Voice** (VOICE [+AG]) introduces agents and agentive prepositional phrases in passive constructions, whereas **non-agentive Voice** (VOICE [-AG]) selects causers and *from*-phrases in anticausatives. The Specifier position of Voice hosts either a causer DP or an agent DP, meaning that this position is where the semantic roles of agent, causer, or instrument are assigned.

The causative construction with verbs of directed motion – i.e., the transitive structure analyzed in this study – seems to be conceptually marked. Although it is morphologically labile, and therefore formally unmarked, this markedness arises due to the competition with

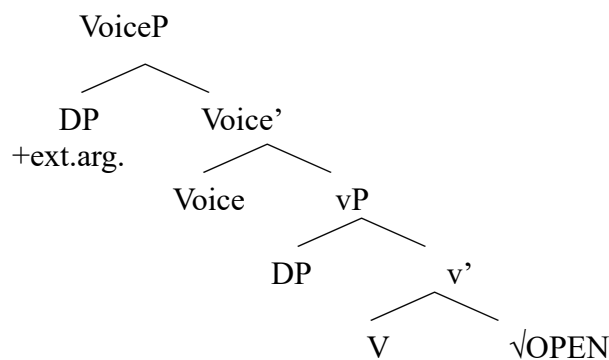
comparable structures, as well as sociolinguistic factors such as prestige, register, and geographical markedness. Additionally, its relatively low frequency of use contributes to its marked status.

Revisiting the crosslinguistic differences in how languages encode the realization of arguments for externally caused verbs, Alexiadou (2010) proposes a classification of the world's languages into two groups (2010:179ff.).

- Group A includes English and other languages where root type determines the behavior of possible alternations. In this group, only cause-unspecified roots alternate.
- Group B comprises languages such as Hindi and Greek, where alternations do not depend on root type but are built through morphological marking. All verb classes may alternate, except agentive ones.

Structurally, the main difference between the two groups depends on the presence of a Voice head, which is responsible for introducing the external argument (Kratzer 1996). Change-of-state verbs, which typically alternate in both groups, share the same underlying structure:

(62) **Change of state** (*open*)

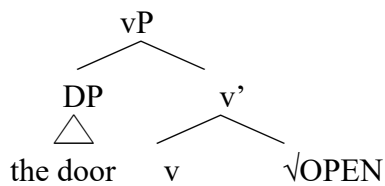


(Alexiadou 2010:180 (8))

It is important to keep in mind that *v* does not entail CAUS and that CAUS and Voice are two distinct heads. *v*, an eventive head, takes a stative root as its complement and is then merged into Voice, which establishes two different relations: R(Caus), which introduces the causer or causing event, and R(Agent), which introduces the DP anchoring the occurrence of the event (Alexiadou 2010:180).

While this structure is common to both groups, the reason why other verb classes in Group A cannot participate in the (anti)causative alternation lies in the absence of Voice in these languages. This absence prevents the insertion of an external argument or anticausative morphology:

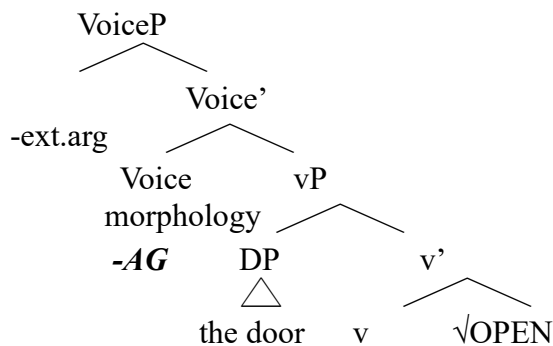
(63) **Intransitive  $\sqrt{\text{OPEN}}$  without Voice (English)**



(Alexiadou 2010:180 (9))

Greek, on the other hand, exhibits an anticausative structure for the same argument realization, i.e., non-active morphology is inserted in the position of the external argument provided by Voice in its Specifier position:

(64) **Intransitive  $\sqrt{\text{OPEN}}$  with Voice (Greek)**



(Alexiadou 2010:180 (10))

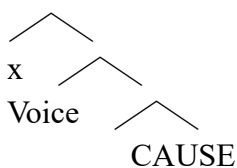
Note that this structure is the same as the one found in Italian anticausatives, given that the same [-AG] morphology – typically realized by the anticausative or polyfunctional marker SE – also occupies the Specifier position of VoiceP, becoming the overt instantiation of a missing external argument. The main difference between this construction and that of passives lies in the interpretation: anticausatives convey a non-agentive meaning, whereas passives still imply agentivity, regardless of whether it is explicitly expressed by an agentive *by*-phrase or remains implicit.

Synchronically, languages with reduced morphology and a large inventory of lexically distinguished roots exhibit greater reliance on suppletion – for instance, English *cause to arrive* = *bring* (see also Ricca 1993). In contrast, languages with a smaller lexical inventory depend more heavily on morphological strategies, as seen in Japanese, where the same root is used for *disappear* and *erase*, with causative meaning indicated solely by morphological markers (Alexiadou 2010:198). In Italian, the predominance of anticausative SE reflects a tendency toward detransitivization, i.e., a preference for leaving arguments unexpressed and explicitly marking their absence. Labiality is a less common phenomenon than in English and competes with analogous strategies – such as *fare* + infinitive – when forming causative alternations.

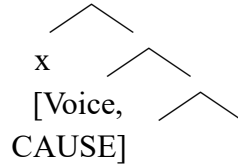
Returning to the (anti)causative alternation and the verbs that participate in it, the existence of a Specifier position in VoiceP – responsible for assigning causative meaning and introducing external arguments such as agents and/or causers – accounts for two key observations. First, it explains why certain constructions remain grammatical when the valency of the verb is saturated (e.g., by inserting an external argument in a construction with a directed-motion verb, as in the case of our TUCs). Second, it clarifies why some transitivized unergatives are largely ungrammatical (as in *\*John sang Mary*, Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino 2014). In the latter case, Voice is not given and there is no space for a Specifier position in which causers could be realized.

Following a similar proposal by Alexiadou et al. (2015, among others), which highlights the necessity of separating Cause and Voice, Pylkkänen (2008: 16) explains crosslinguistic variation as stemming from the size of CAUSE complement and its syntactic dependence on Voice. Pylkkänen’s (2008: 76) analysis of the relationship between Voice and CAUSE also accounts for crosslinguistic variation in how Voice bundles with its complements. According to her framework, CAUSE can function either as a distinct syntactic head or as an element bundled with Voice. The former configuration is observed in Japanese and allows for lexical unaccusative causatives (Pylkkänen 2008:78), while the latter characterizes English:

(65) a. **Non-Voice-bundling Causative** (Japanese)

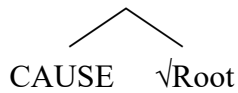


**b. Voice-bundling Causative (English)**

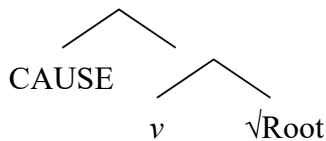


Another explanation for crosslinguistic variation lies in the size of the complement selected by CAUSE. Causative heads can combine with constituents containing an external argument (so-called phases), with VPs lacking an external argument, or with category-neutral roots, which are structurally smaller than verbs (Pylkkänen 2008: 77). The consequences of these selection strategies are reflected in the various ways languages morphosyntactically mark arguments and predicates. When root selection occurs, as illustrated in (66a), no verbalizing morphology intervenes between CAUSE and the root. In cases of verb selection (66b), verbal morphology must intervene, as the root must first be verbalized before the causative head can take it as a complement; however, verbal morphology cannot introduce external arguments. With phase selection (66c), high applicatives are permitted, and most restrictions are lifted (Pylkkänen 2008: 96).

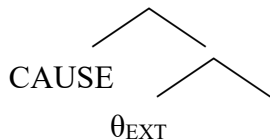
(66) **a. Root-selecting CAUSE** (example: Japanese root causatives)



**b. Verb-selection CAUSE** (example: English causatives with *make*)



**c. Phase-selecting CAUSE** (example: Hindi causatives)



(Pylkkänen 2008:77, (147))

The fact that English unergatives cannot participate in the causative alternation can be explained, in Pylkkänen's terms (2008:109), by the bundling of Voice and CAUSE, which leaves no room for phase selection, but only for root selection. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that transitivized unergatives are not impossible but merely less common, and they do occur when they partially behave like unaccusatives. In such cases, their structure would align with that observed for unaccusatives, featuring a free Spec position in VoiceP and possibly a non-bundling nature of Voice and CAUSE.

Schäfer (2017) predicts that the causative relation, being neither syntactically nor semantically encoded, emerges as a **pragmatic inference** when the *v* head combines with a **state-denoting expression** (see below). The author (2017, 2022, among others) argues that the intransitive variants of causative verbs retain the same causative meaning as their transitive counterparts, with the only difference being the absence of Voice (see also Martin 2023). In Romance languages, when the anticausative marker SE is present, Voice is overtly realized, and SE occupies the Specifier position of an expletive Voice head.

Folli & Harley (2005) attribute the transitive/intransitive distinction to different flavors of *v*, which selects a small clause (SC) containing the theme subject/object as its complement. All these neo-constructionist approaches share the assumption that causation and anticausativity are **compositionally derived** (Martin 2023), with their meaning arising when a light functional head selects a non-decomposable root as its complement.

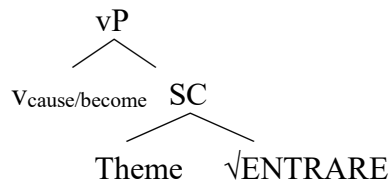
Within lexicalist approaches, the transitive meaning is semantically motivated and syntactically constructed via the addition of a CAUSE predicate to a completed intransitive vP (Kwon 2013), in a manner reminiscent of Pylkkänen's (2008) phase-selecting mechanism. This analysis presupposes that the underlying form of the verb is intransitive, and that the transitive variant is a derived structure.

Although, as previously noted, the directionality of derivation is not always straightforward to establish (Haspelmath 1993), the rarity and markedness of improvised causatives like *the nurse burped the baby* suggests that these constructions are indeed derived, and not primary. In syntactic terms, Kwon (2013: 311) maintains that improvised causativization does not align with the standard split intransitivity, as it affects both unergative and unaccusative predicates alike. Since the CAUSE head is introduced after the vP is fully

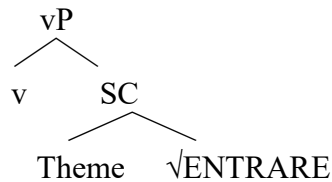
assembled, by that stage both unergatives and unaccusatives behave identically (Kwon 2013: 315). This observation is important, as it confirms that unergatives can also undergo transitivization – as our data also suggest (see section 2.3.3) – even though this phenomenon is not central to the analysis of TUCs. Some classes of roots intuitively allow for more natural causativizations, while others do not permit any expansion of argument structure.

To conclude this section, the main approaches formalized in the literature can be summarized as follows (adapted from Martin 2023:4):

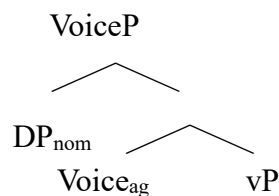
- (67) a. **Transitive/Intransitive  $\sqrt{\text{ENTRARE}}$  ('go in') according to Folli & Harley (2005)**



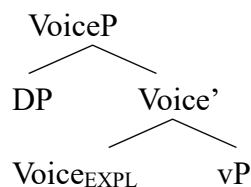
- b. **Intransitive  $\sqrt{\text{ENTRARE}}$  according to Alexiadou (2015)**



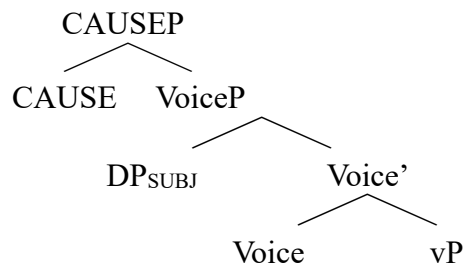
- c. **Transitive  $\sqrt{\text{ENTRARE}}$  according to Alexiadou (2015), Schäfer (2017, 2022)**



- d. **Intransitive  $\sqrt{\text{ENTRARE}}$  according to Pylkkänen (2008)**



e. Transitive  $\sqrt{\text{ENTRARE}}$  according to Pylkkänen (2008)



*The status of the external argument*

Several scholars concur that transitivity can emerge in almost any context (“la transitividad puede surgir en cualquier verbo,” Lara Bermejo 2020:60), and that all anticausatives can, in principle, generate causatives (Alexiadou 2010:195). This assumption suggests that properties such as transitivity and causativity, as well as unaccusativity and unergativity, are introduced in syntax rather than being inherent in the lexical representation of roots. Some cases of improvised causativization, or ergativization (Kwong 2013) are rarer and less productive than typically transitivized unaccusatives, but still possible, as the examples (68a-d) show. This indicates that some extent of valency coercion and uncommon argument expression are generally possible, mostly without interpretational difficulties. In other words, even scarcely acceptable constructions might still offer semantically clear interpretations, which include the insertion of an external argument as actor with predicates which would usually only elicit internal arguments:

- (68) a. Gianni gioca il bambino Regional Italian (Apulia)  
 Gianni plays the child

‘Gianni entertains the child by playing with him’

- b. Cerco seggiolone per mangiare mia figlia<sup>41</sup> (Calabria)  
 seek-1SG high.chair to eat my daughter

‘I am looking for a high chair to feed my daughter’

(GC2021.38)

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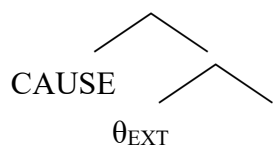
<sup>41</sup> Found on Facebook Marketplace and written by a middle-aged female speaker of Southern Italy.



Pykkänen (2008:11) also follows an assumption shared by both semantic and syntactic approaches, namely the **Immediate Cause Linking Rule**, which states that the argument of a verb denoting an immediate cause must be the external argument of that verb. Conversely, the **Directed Change Linking Rule** posits that the argument of a verb introducing the entity undergoing the directed change must be the internal argument of that verb. Both rules seem to apply in our case: verbs of directed motion take DPs as internal arguments (the undergoers and subjects of the intransitive counterpart), while a higher position linked to the predicate introduces external arguments, i.e., causers or agents.

Voice establishes a thematic relation between the event participant (‘actor’) and the event denoted by the verb. This feature depends on the complements of Voice, assuming that external arguments are not merely semantic complements of the verb, but rather syntactic heads that can also bear complements (Pykkänen 2008:75ff.), as already observed in this section. In the case of causative motion verbs in spoken Italian, external arguments are selected by a phase-selecting CAUSE head, which introduces a *theta*-role:

(69) **Phase-selecting CAUSE**



Whether the external argument carries meanings of intentionality, causality, agentivity, and so on depends on different flavors of *v*. Various Voice heads have also been proposed: Kratzer (1996) introduces a Voice<sub>AGENT</sub> head, which introduces agents for dynamic verbs, and a Voice<sub>HOLDER</sub> head for stative verbs. Similarly, Folli & Harley (2005) distinguish between *v*<sub>DO</sub> and *v*<sub>CAUSE</sub> to differentiate between functional heads that require an agentive external argument (the DO-type) and heads with fewer restrictions, which only introduce a potential cause (Folli & Harley 2005:96). Alexiadou et al. (2015) propose a Voice<sub>CAUSE</sub> head that does not impose an agentive theta role, aiming to separate causality and intentionality (see also Ausensi 2024:76), while Ramchand (2008) suggests an Initiator Position for both agents and causers (see also 3.2.6).

Kratzer (1996), Alexiadou et al. (2010, 2015), and many other scholars maintain that external arguments, such as causers and agents, arise within event structure, with intentionality,

causation, and agentivity being introduced by **functional heads** such as Voice. Recent approaches (Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020; Ausensi 2024) challenge this well-established view that external arguments are not introduced by the lexical semantics of roots. The Root-Determined Argument Realization Hypothesis, proposed by Beavers & Koontz-Garboden (2020) and supported by Ausensi (2024), posits that some roots may entail intentionality in their lexical semantics and, therefore, represent their external argument **internally** (Ausensi 2024:74; see section 3.3.3). For instance, *murder*-verbs such as *guillotine*, especially in contrast to *kill*-type verbs, exhibit specific restrictions on the external argument they allow in syntax, compelling some authors to postulate the existence of **root-internal constraints** and **root-determined templates**; otherwise, we would observe fewer restrictions in their event structure.

- (70) a. #John murdered Tom by accident.  
 b. John killed Tom by accident.  
 c. #Cancer murdered every patient in that hospital.  
 d. Cancer killed every patient in that hospital

(Ausensi 2024:79, ex. 10 and 11)

While this approach seems convincing, as it explains the main semantic difference between *murder* and *kill* verbs and their representations, because it accounts for the fact that at least some classes present more lexical restrictions on their (external) arguments, we argue that other roots, such as directed-motion verbal roots, do not lexically entail their external arguments. Moreover, it does not seem sufficient that predicates such as *murder* implicate a strong agentive meaning to demonstrate that they “must” represent their actor internally. In given contexts, *murder* can also assume the meaning of “killing by accident”:

- (71) a. Tom was murdered by accident. The murderer wanted to murder someone else.  
 b. The patients in the hospital were murdered by a cancer caused by an irresponsible chemical company.

Similar considerations apply to spoken Italian. Some predicates which conceptually expect human volitional agents might still appear with inanimate causer subjects. Consider, for instance, a scenario in which an unfortunate driver crashes their car into a tree. A branch, positioned at head level, causes the driver's death. In spoken Italian, the cause of death might be expressed as follows:

- (72) Il ramo ha decapitato l' automobilista  
 The tree.branch has decapitated the driver

Similarly, if an unfortunate adventurer falls in a river or a lake with a heavy backpack and is not able to stand up, the accident could be described as follows:

- (73) Lo zaino troppo pesante ha affogato l' avventuriero  
 the backpack too heavy has drowned the adventurer

Note that, in this second case, the transitive use of the verb *affogare* ('to drown') has the same status of the causative verbs of directed motion we find in this work: while it is fully acceptable to use it transitively in with human agents and animate objects, or in some restricted semantic uses<sup>44</sup> (*affogare il gelato*, 'to drown the ice-cream', means to pour coffee on it when serving it), the sentence presented here may sound as odd as the TUC cases discussed in this work. Nevertheless, its acceptability suggests that non-agentive, non-intentional subjects of *murder*-verbs are indeed possible. This flexibility supports the idea that, even within verb classes traditionally considered more restrictive, the selection of external arguments follows the structural path outlined above – namely, generation in functional heads rather than root-internal selection.

In other words, it is plausible that context specificities can determine a non-canonical semantic interpretation of highly agentive predicates, a phenomenon which is better explained by syntactic and compositional flexibility rather than templatic root structures.

Finally, we can apply the models seen in this section to the case of Western Spanish constructions that allow subjects of transitivized motion verbs to be causers, but not agents—such as *caer el vaso* (lit. 'fall the glass', Lara Bermejo 2018, 2021): in Pykkänen's (2008) terms, for example, one can argue that these constructions are motivated by a different Voice head, namely a CAUSE head. In Ramchand's (2008) First Phase Syntax, agents and causers

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<sup>44</sup> Once again, as confirmed by the definition found in the dictionary Treccani, the labile verb *affogare* is used transitively with the canonical meaning of killing someone by holding them in a liquid, and in the intransitive meaning of accidental death for drowning. The anticausative construction with *si*, *affogarsi*, denotes intentional drowning against oneself, i.e. suicide by drowning. Note that the same reflexive verb may have both anticausative and intransitive (unintentional) meaning in those Central varieties that make a larger use of *si*, marking the lack of an external argument in general, independently of intentionality (Cennamo 2007). In regional Lazio Italian, *Gianni s'è affogato* means both 'Gianni drowned' (accidentally) and 'Gianni drowned himself' (intentionally).

occupy the same syntactic position, namely the SpecDP of the Initiator Projection, being interpreted in semantically different ways depending on the ontological nature of their roots, as exposed in the next section.

### 3.2.6 Ramchand's (2008) First Phase Syntax

Among the formal proposals encountered in literature and aimed at a description of argument expression, valency patterns, and argument augmentation, Ramchand's (2008) so-called First-Phase Syntax, a verbal decomposition model, has been applied to multiple phenomena, including TUCs. Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino (2014), as well as Pineda (2018) have adopted Ramchand's syntactic model and found regularities within the patterns associated with these constructions.

These authors have found a direct relation between the Romance polyfunctional particle SE and the possibility of causativizing intransitive verbs, especially unaccusatives.

#### *SE and SE NE*

The particle SE is the most common strategy of introducing anticausatives in Italian, as we have seen, but it also embodies some other crucial functions (Cennamo 2015; Armstrong & Kempchnisky 2021). When it stands alone, it is phonetically realized as *si* in the national norm and as *se* or *sə* in a consistent number of Italo-Romance varieties, accomplishing following functions:

- Reflexive marker

(74) Gianni *si* lava  
Gianni REFL washes

'Gianni washes himself'

- Reciprocal marker

(75) Gianni *e* Maria *si* salutano  
Gianni and Maria RECP greet.3PL

'Gianni and Maria greet each other'

- Impersonal marker

(76) Si parla solo di calcio  
REFL talks only of soccer

‘You (imp.)/People only talk about soccer’

- Passive marker

(77) In questo negozio si vendono scarpe  
In this shop PASS sell.3PL shoes

‘Shoes are sold in this shop’

- Causative/Factitive marker

(78) a. Gianni si è tagliato i capelli  
Gianni REFL is cut-PTCP the hair

‘Gianni had his hair cut [*by someone*]’ but also ‘Gianni cut his own hair’

b. Gianni si è operato alla spalla  
Gianni REFL is operated at.the shoulder

‘Gianni had a shoulder surgery’

Additionally, SE has been analyzed and described as an **aspectual marker** by several scholars over the past decades (Folli 2002; Cennamo 2012; Pineda 2018, among others). Linguists classify modern Italian verbs based on whether the presence of SE in their intransitive counterpart is obligatory, optional, or ungrammatical. Some verbs require obligatory SE, such as *sparpagliarsi* (‘scatter’, intr.), particularly accomplishments and achievements that lexicalize a specific result state. A second class of verbs allows for optional SE, as in *riscaldare/riscaldarsi* (‘heat’ / ‘heat’-SE, intr.), where the presence of SE determines whether the verb has a telic reading. A third class includes verbs that participate in the anticausative alternation without SE, such as *fiorire* (‘blossom’, intr.), which entails a goal but does not lexicalize a specific result state (for a recent detailed classification of causative alternations with and without SE, see Bentley 2024: 225).

The examples do not include verbs of (directed) motion, which are indeed rarely used with this particle. As previously mentioned, directed-motion verbs do not often specify whether the cause of motion is internal or external. When they participate in the causative alternation as TUCs, they are considered labile verbs, and their intransitive form typically lacks overt anticausative markers. Nevertheless, prestigious predecessors of contemporary Italian did use unaccusative motion verbs with SE:

- (79) (...) Ella si va, sentendosi laudare (...)  
 She REFL goes hearing-REFL praise-INF  
 ‘She walks while hearing how she is praised’  
 (Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, 1293-94)

This tendency finds correspondences in the Old Catalan data analyzed by Pineda (2018), which attest to an abundance of clitics with verbs of motion, some of which have been crystallized in folk storytelling and proverbs. As previously mentioned, in some areas of central Italy, the frequency of SE with intransitive verbs is higher than in the national norm, extending to the general meaning of the absence of external causation (e.g., *Gianni s’è morto* ‘Gianni has died’ vs. standard *Gianni è morto*).

When compared to Portuguese and Spanish, Italian and Catalan share the presence of an additional overt clitic often associated with SE: the **ablative-source clitic** NE (realized as *en* or *n* in Catalan and phonologically covert in other Romance varieties). Originally a lexical ablative clitic, NE has lost its locative meaning, especially with verbs of motion, becoming part of the reflexive marker alongside SE (Pineda 2018: 261). Phonetically, the combination of these particles results in *se n(e)* in Italian. Its function may vary from locative adverb, to partitive pronoun.

What is particularly relevant for our discussion is the combination of SE and NE. Pineda (2018) points out that it is not only the presence of SE, but that of SE NE that works as diagnostics for the possibility of valency augmentation into a TUC. Our data suggest that only accomplishments, but not achievements, can be involved in causative constructions with verbs of directed motion. Following Rothstein (2004), we argue that accomplishments are intuitively ‘larger’ than achievements, as we cognitively associate them with more complex event structures, typically including a starting point, an endpoint, and various entities within the verb’s denotation that contribute to a cumulative meaning. This does not hold for achievements, which are characterized by greater punctuality and lower structural complexity. Furthermore, SE NE signals the presence of a **result state**, which is precisely the factor in the internal composition of the predicate that triggers causation (see also Schäfer 2012).

NE is considered an aspectual marker “denoting bounded events” (Pineda 2018: 259). The semantic functions of SE NE are exemplified in the following cases:

- Marker of the initial point of an event:

(80) Maria se n' è andata dal bar  
 Maria SE NE is gone.away from.the bar

‘Maria got into the car’

- Marker of movement from or to a place, particularly with the meaning of a definitive, irreversible action:

(81) a. Maria è andata a Milano  
 Maria is gone to Milan

‘Maria has gone to Milan (but not necessarily for ever)’

b. Maria se n' è andata a/da Milano  
 Maria SE NE is gone to/from Milan

‘Maria has left to Milan (to live there) / has left Milan (forever)’

- Marker of permanence in the final state:

(82) Maria se n'è scesa in giardino (#ma non è rimasta)  
 Maria SE NE is gone.down in garden but not is stayed

‘Maria has descended into the garden (#but she did not stay there)’

As expected in the complex landscape of Italo-Romance varieties, the behavior of SE NE is not uniform across all varieties of the peninsula. Vernaculars that exhibit a more widespread use of the anticausative marker SE also tend to extend the use of SE NE to purely intransitive verbs, sometimes even resulting in a different denotation compared to the verb without these markers:

(83) a. Maria ha caduta dallo scali (Privernese)  
 Maria has fallen from.the stairs

‘Maria has fallen down the stairs’

b. Mariasə n' ha caduta pella fame  
 Maria SE NE has fallen for.the hunger

‘Maria has fainted of hunger’

While *cadersene* (the infinitive form of *cadere*, ‘fall’, with the markers SE NE) exists in Italian, it can only assume the meanings we have just outlined (83a) – most notably, an initial permanence in a higher position before falling – while still conveying the general sense of

moving from a higher to a lower point. In Privernese, a dialect of the Agro Pontino in South Lazio, however, *caderesenne* takes on the meaning of ‘faint’ (83b).

It is worth noting that the existence of this verb with reflexive markers, as with other verbs of motion, might lead us to predict that *cadere* could also be transitivized, as occurs in Western Peninsular Spanish (*caer el vaso*, ‘to drop the glass/to let the glass fall’; see Lara Bermejo 2018, 2020). However, this is not the case in either spoken Italian or dialectal varieties:

- (84)        \*Maria        ha        caduto il        bicchiere  
               Maria        has       fallen the       glass

In other words, if we adopt the formal assumption put forward by Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino (2014) and Pineda (2018) that only intransitive predicates with anticausative SE NE can be transitivized, it is important to keep in mind that this constitutes a **necessary**, but not a sufficient condition for transitivization. Not every predicate displaying overt anticausative morphology can be transitivized, and crosslinguistic differences appear to be driven by additional factors, such as semantic implications related to subject volition, agentivity, and telicity.

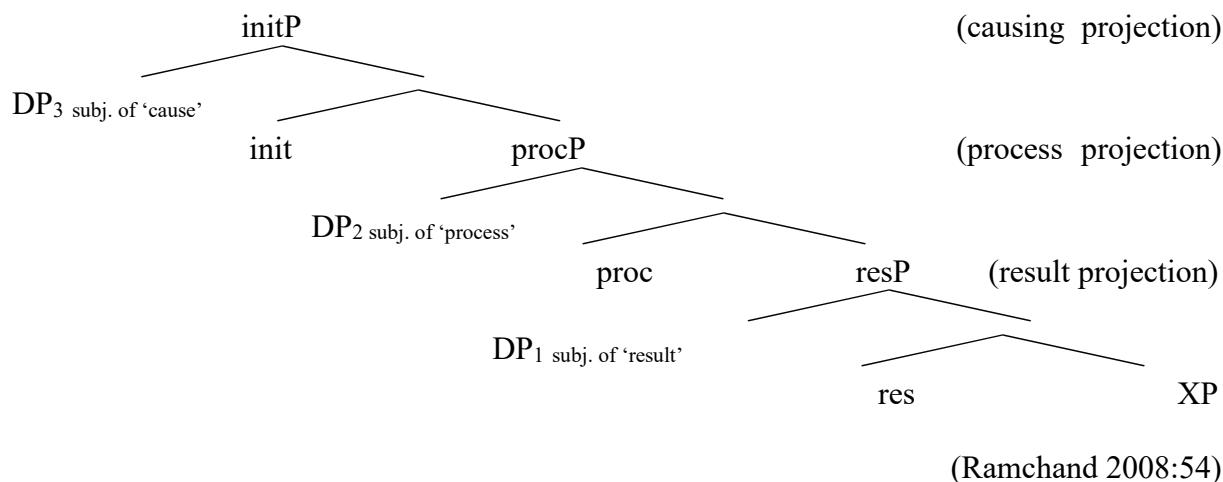
### *Event decomposition in First-Phase Syntax*

Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino (2014) and Pineda (2018, 2021) argue that the **complexity** of a predicate can be revealed by its grammaticality when combined with SE NE, thus allowing for a **decomposition** in the sense proposed by Ramchand (2008). Ramchand’s model is part of the theoretical framework put forward by linguists who postulate the existence of **grammatically relevant ontological classes** that drive argument selection and realization (see also 3.3.2).

Scholars advocating for more strictly syntactic approaches, such as Ramchand, propose that syntactic thematic roles do not (only) derive from the semantic content of the arguments, but rather from their **structural position**.

In this perspective, events can be decomposed into smaller syntactic **subevents** whose arguments correspond to the same event participants identified in verbal semantics. The abstract structure proposed by Ramchand is as follows:

(85) **Event decomposition in three subevents**



Some terminological classifications are needed to better comprehend this proposal. Ramchand adopts the term *initiator* to define the thematic role typically attributed to actors, but in its structural entity. Thus, the initiator is the entity whose properties or behavior bring about the existence of the eventuality (Ramchand 2008:31). These properties are either directly or indirectly responsible for the realization of the event. This argument is an external argument, i.e., it does not belong to the internal path structure of the verb – for instance, the spatial direction in verbs of directed motion. DPs introducing the external argument occupy the Specifier position of the *Initiator Projection*, which introduces the functional heads responsible for causation and agentivity. Internal arguments, on the other hand, belong to the structure denoted by the verb.

Notably, this assumption does not require presupposing that roots inherently entail templatic meaning, as posited in the Root-Determined Argument Realization approach (see also 3.3.3). Instead, Ramchand’s model aligns with the syntactic approach to Grammatically Relevant Ontological Classes, which states that grammatical behavior is syntactically determined, though selectional information may derive from the ontological classes of roots (as proposed by Alexiadou et al. 2006). In fact, within Ramchand’s model, the semantics of event structure must be directly interpreted from syntactic structure rather than from information encoded in lexical items (Ramchand 2008:49).

Internal arguments, semantically identifiable as patients, experiencers, themes, etc., occupy the *Undergoer* position, i.e., the Spec position of the Process Projection (Ramchand 2008:34). The existence of two distinct projections – *process* and *result* – serves to differentiate between changes (whether of state or position) that are completed and lead to a final state, and those that do not presuppose the attainment of a final state. This distinction also accounts for telic versus atelic readings. Furthermore, these projections help distinguish between PATH, which is not the undergoer of change but defines its trajectory (as in creation and consumption verbs), and UNDERGOER, which is the actual subject of change.

The DP<sub>1</sub> position, located in the Spec position of the Result Projection, is occupied by objects that attain a final state (Ramchand 2008:40ff.).

Turning now to the three projections, it is Ramchand herself who draws a comparison between the Initiator Projection and the *v*P in Chomsky's framework (1995, followed by Kratzer 1996, Marantz 1997, among others), as well as with the VoiceP projection in Alexiadou (2010) and Alexiadou et al. (2006, 2015). Thus, the core assumption of Distributed Morphology regarding a functional head introducing causation, agentivity, and the external argument is maintained: *init*P introduces the causation event and its external subject, the INITIATOR or 'subject' of cause (Ramchand 2008:48ff.). The Process Projection is "the heart of the dynamic predicate" (Ramchand 2008:47), as it describes the change denoted by the predicate, specifies the nature of the change or process, and identifies the UNDERGOER or 'subject' of the process. The Result Projection typically denotes the attainment of a final state or position, characteristic of telic constructions. It represents the *telos* of the event and licenses the entity that holds the final state, i.e., the RESULTEE or 'subject' of the result. The result projection also entails so-called applicatives, which are responsible for valency augmentation phenomena such as the transitivity of unergatives, since they promote a peripheral argument to the direct-object position (Romagno 2025).

Participant relations are constructed **recursively** and **incrementally** through the embedding of event descriptions and subject predications (Ramchand 2008:47). The three projections identified by Ramchand correspond to the subevents that constitute macro-events, i.e., complex surface predicates. Projections may, but do not necessarily, appear in event decomposition. The presence of *init*P, for instance, is required only when causative meaning is

introduced; in other words, an INITIATOR is present only if there is a causing subevent (Ramchand 2008:32). The ability to decompose a macro-event into subevents is what distinguishes verb classes, as analyzed by Rothstein (2004). States, for instance, intuitively lack a process component and often an external argument, thereby displaying fewer subevents than change-of-state verbs with an external causer. This intuition can be formally captured by the so-called Event Composition Rule, a fundamental principle of event composition:

(86) **Event Composition Rule**

$e = e_1 \rightarrow e_2$ : e consists of two subevents,  $e_1$ ,  $e_2$  such that  $e_1$  causally implicates  $e_2$   
 (where  $\rightarrow$  stands for “leads to”, and represents a causal embedding relation)

(Ramchand 2008:51)

Furthermore, two general primitive predicates corresponding to basic subevents can be identified:

(87) a. State (e): e is a state

b. Process (e): e is an eventuality that contains internal change

Basic eventualities corresponding to the initial eventuality and the result are STATES, and their role interpretation depends on their hierarchical position in the structure. Thus, DPs in the  $\text{Spec}_{initP}$  position are assigned causation reading, while the  $\text{Spec}_{resP}$  position expresses the implication of Result and possibly *telos*. Telic pairs are built via the merging of *resP* as a complement of *procP*, so that the DP becomes the argument or “predicate” of the verb. In this case, we would obtain a Resultative projection.

In alternative, a PP or DP may act as Rheme or PATH (as in *Karina jogged two miles*, Ramchand 2008:42, (38)). No *resP* is given, and only a telic reading is associated to the Process projection. A PP or PATH-DP does not stand as an independent subevent, but only modifies Proc, since a Rheme cannot by definition occupy the  $\text{SpecDP}$  position of an eventive phrase, and is non-aspective. A PP only gives rise to quantization properties of the known event.

If a projection is merged as argument and a DP becomes the ‘subject’ of this projection, the Event Composition Rule applies:

(88) ‘defuse-the-bomb’(e) where  $e = e1 \rightarrow (e2 \rightarrow e3) : [\text{initiate-defuse}(e1) \ \& \ \text{process-defuse}(e2) \ \& \ \text{result-of-defusing}(e3)]$

(Ramchand 2008:51, (4))

Turning again to the ‘subjects’ of the subevents, the hierarchical position of a DP assigns semantic roles:

- (89) a. Subject (x, e) and Initiation(e) entails that x is the INITIATOR of e.  
b. Subject (x, e) and Process(e) entails that x is the UNDERGOER of the process.  
c. Subject (x, e) and Result(e) entails that x is the RESULTEE.

(Ramchand 2008:52)

Since the *Spec<sub>initP</sub>* position assigns causativity, canonical psychological INITIATORS must also entail intentionality, whereas psychological RESULTEES are, on the other hand, experientially affected (Ramchand 2008:63). Notably, a single DP can be coindexed in multiple *Spec* positions through the operations *Merge* and *Move*. Agents might be both INITIATORS and UNDERGOERS, as they are simultaneously psychologically and experientially involved in the process, whereas causers function as pure INITIATORS. It is also not uncommon for the same DP to be **coindexed** in both *procP* and *resP*, acting as both the UNDERGOER and the RESULTEE, i.e., the entity that serves as the ‘subject’ of change and the one that attains the final state.

For our purposes, it is also crucial to highlight that, at least based on this initial overview of Ramchand’s model, there is no structural distinction between causers and agents, unlike in the frameworks proposed by Alexiadou (2010) and Alexiadou et al. (2006, 2015), among others. In Ramchand’s First-Phase Syntax, semantic properties such as volitionality and agentivity do influence differences within the macro-role of INITIATOR, but these subclasses

still occupy the same structural position, namely that of the external argument (Ramchand 2008:31). Nevertheless, Ramchand acknowledges that “agency might be relevant for felicity in certain circumstances” (p. 32), although it does not determine syntactic class membership. This assumption is fully consistent with Ramchand’s model, as the only structurally relevant information is that provided by First-Phase Syntax, and the SpecDP position of *init*P is assigned causation meaning. Semantic differentiation among agents, causers, instruments, and sources is thus attributed neither to flavors of *v* (as in Harley 1995), nor to the distinction between non-cumulative and cumulative Voice heads (Pylkkänen 2008), nor to the [ $\pm$ agentive] feature in *Voice* (Alexiadou 2010), but to “the **encyclopedic content** of the root, or whatever lexical element fills that position” (Ramchand 2008:32).

Lara Bermejo’s (2020) data from Western Peninsular Spanish shows that some Romance varieties allow the transitivization of unaccusatives with both volitional and non-volitional causers (the latter as in *caí el vaso*, Sp. ‘I caused the glass to fall’), while other varieties exhibit higher acceptability rates when the causer is strongly volitional (as in certain Italo-Romance varieties, as indicated by our corpus data analyzed so far). In Ramchand’s terms, the hierarchical structural position of causers and agents is identical, and variation in acceptability rates is solely due to lexical restrictions arising from the interaction between the verbal root and the lexical item filling the INITIATOR position.

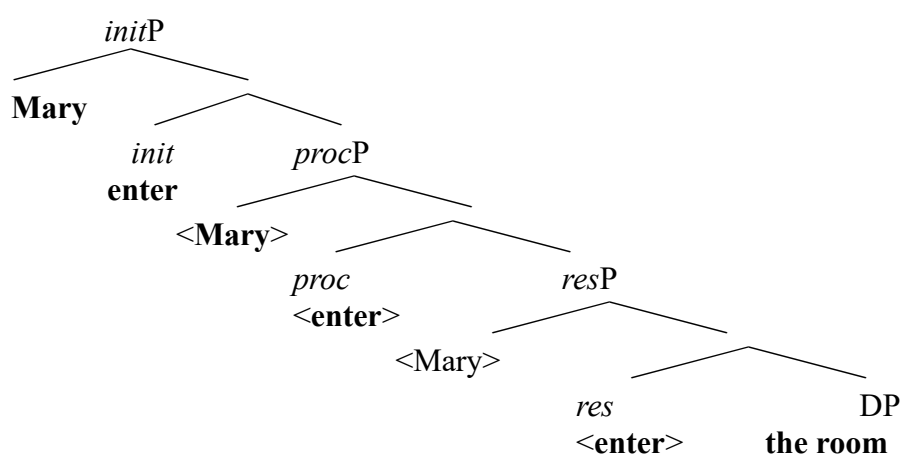
This assumption directly contrasts with the Root-Determined Argument Realization Hypothesis, which predicts the existence of root-internal templates (Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2021; Ausensi 2024), while still presupposing the influence of ontological meaning on felicitous argument realization.

Event decomposition does not necessarily yield three subevents. If it did, verb classes would not differ in their structural composition. States, for instance, lack both a *Process* projection and an UNDERGOER, as they do not exhibit dynamicity. States introduce only non-aspectual internal arguments (i.e., arguments that cannot occupy the Spec position of a dynamic subevent) and include only the *Initiator* projection, with an external argument functioning as the holder of the state. Additional complements of *init* take the form of rhematic material (Ramchand 2008:63). Here, *v* merely corresponds to *init*, and only accusative case is assigned. More complex predicates, such as accomplishments, typically involve two or three subevents,

depending on their transitivity status. Intransitive predicates often feature the same DP as both INITIATOR and UNDERGOER.

For example, in *Mary enters the room*, the DP *Mary* is coindexed across all Spec positions in *initP*, *procP*, and *resP*, functioning as INITIATOR, UNDERGOER, and RESULTEE, respectively, while *the room* serves as a PATH:

(90) **Mary enters the room**



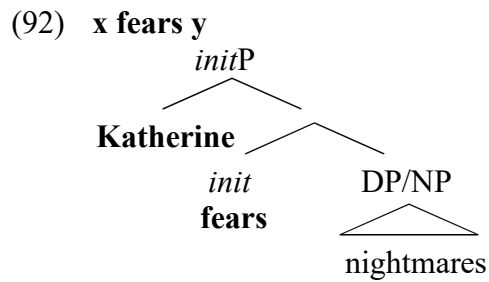
If the DP<sub>1</sub>, the RESULTEE, and the DP<sub>2</sub>, the UNDERGOER, are coindexed, i.e. identify one and the same referent, the action is understood as punctual:

(91) Ariel has entered the room \*for two minutes

(Ramchand 2008:85, (33d))

Unergative verbs have a null *init* head, meaning they lack the assignment of causativity. The same applies to labile verbs in their intransitive form. These predicates do not bear an *init* feature in their selectional specifications and instead fill a null lexical item in the Initiator Projection. Notably, the presence of a null lexical head still presupposes the existence of an *initP*, which, in turn, allows for transitivization.

If the predicate is stative, the *init* head selects rhematic material instead of *Proc*, as *Proc* would necessarily entail a dynamic reading.



(Ramchand 2008:115)

Romance languages typically favor the anticausative alternation, inserting the marker SE (NE) in this Spec position to indicate the absence of a causing force or agent. English, by contrast, with its high number of labile alternations, more frequently leaves the head lexically empty.

The verb classes which emerge from the various combinations possible in Ramchand's model can be illustrated as follows:

	<i>[init, proc]</i>		
I	Transitive Transitive	INITIATOR, UNDERGOER INITIATOR, PATH	<i>drive, push, paint</i> <i>eat, read, paint</i>
II	Intransitive	INITIATOR <sub>i</sub> , UNDERGOER <sub>i</sub>	<i>run</i>
	<i>[init, proc, res]</i>		
III	Transitive  Transitive	INITIATOR, UNDERGOER <sub>i</sub> , RESULTEE <sub>i</sub> INITIATOR <sub>i</sub> , UNDERGOER <sub>i</sub> , RESULT- RHEME	<i>throw, defuse</i> <i>enter</i>
IV	Intransitive	INITIATOR <sub>i</sub> , UNDERGOER <sub>i</sub> , RESULTEE <sub>i</sub>	<i>jump, arrive</i>
V	Ditransitive	INITIATOR, UNDERGOER, RESULTEE	<i>give, throw</i>
	<i>proc</i>		
VI	Intransitive	UNDERGOER	<i>melt, roll, freeze</i>
	<i>proc, res</i>		
VII	Intransitive	UNDERGOER <sub>i</sub> , RESULTEE <sub>i</sub>	<i>break, tear</i>
	<i>init, proc, N</i>		
VIII	N-conflation <sup>45</sup>	INITIATOR <sub>i</sub> , UNDERGOER <sub>i</sub>	<i>dance, sleep</i>
	<i>init, proc, A</i>		
IX	A-conflation	UNDERGOER	<i>dry, clear</i>

Table 8 English lexical verb types in Ramchand (2008:118)

Canonical accomplishments represent the most complex event structures, encompassing two or more subevents, where at least one has a ‘subject’ that is not coindexed with the others. In contrast, states and activities consist of a single subevent or involve a single ‘subject’ (i.e., a DP in the Spec position of the *init*, *proc*, or *res* projections) that is coindexed across multiple positions. Achievements, though composed of multiple subevents, display coindexation of their DP<sub>1</sub>, DP<sub>2</sub>, and DP<sub>3</sub> through *Merge* and *Move* operations. Denominal and deadjectival verbs form distinct categories (classes VIII and IX).

A comparison between canonical verb classes (as outlined in Rothstein 2004) and Ramchand’s lexical verb classification reveals the following correspondences:

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<sup>45</sup> Conflation verbs are denominal (N-conflation) or deadjectival (A-conflation) predicates arisen from rhematic material being incorporated from complement position into a head by copying of the so-called p-signature (Ramchand 2008:103). Since we are not dealing with these verbs, we address the interested reader to the relevant literature (Hale & Keyser 2000, 2002, a.o.)

- **States:** Class I (only *init* is lexically filled, with rhematic material or PATH providing additional information).
- **Activities:** Classes I, II, and VI (lacking a result projection, with agentivity derived from the initiator projection).
- **Achievements:** Class IV (punctuality arises from the coindexation of the same DP across all positions).
- **Accomplishments:** Classes III, V, VII, or potentially any other class, provided that two or more non-coindexed DPs are introduced.

Ramchand's classification of English lexical verb classes underscores that class shifts are a purely syntactic phenomenon, with crosslinguistic variation emerging from the way different languages populate the SpecDP positions within the subevent structure of a predicate. This syntactic framework provides an elegant explanation for verbs like *jump*, which have been variously classified as semelfactive, activity, or achievement verbs depending on their structural context.

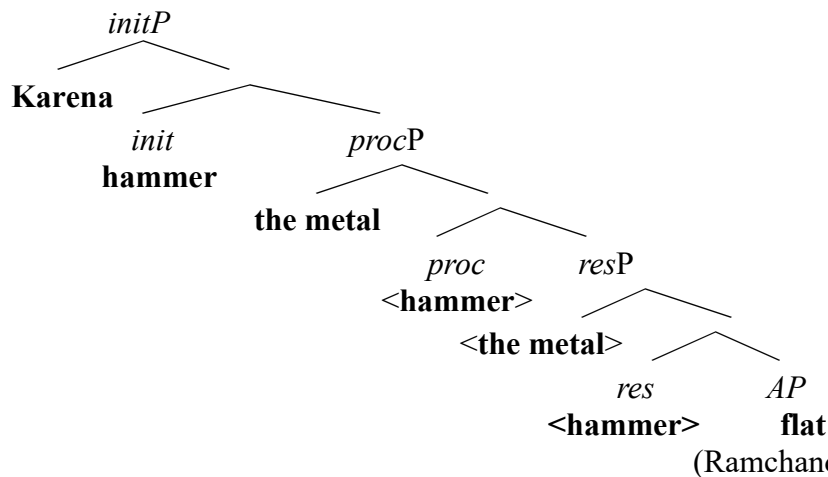
Moreover, Ramchand's model clarifies the **syntactic mapping of transitivity**, demonstrating that any verb can acquire transitivity if it functions as the predicate of a class associated with accomplishments, provided that the Spec<sub>initP</sub> is lexically filled. This holds under the condition that DP<sub>3</sub> is not simultaneously coindexed with both DP<sub>1</sub> and DP<sub>2</sub> when *resP* is present. When causative morphology is realized, the causative morpheme attaches closer to the root than tense or modality, i.e., within vP (Ramchand 2008:183). A causative relation between subevents (Init-Proc or Proc-Res) emerges when they are perceived as temporally and lexically distinct, allowing for the inference of an intermediary (p.186).

The model also accounts for the distinction between unaccusative and unergative verbs. Unaccusatives lack an *init* head in English but can be augmented via the default null *init* head (Ramchand 2008:118). This head is not null in Romance languages, which fill this position with SE. Telic unaccusatives, such as canonical motion verbs, share the same argument as both UNDERGOER and RESULTEE while lacking an INITIATOR. Unergatives, by contrast, possess an INITIATOR as their sole argument or a coindexed argument for both INITIATOR and UNDERGOER if the predicate is dynamic, regardless of whether additional participant

entailments are present. This structural distinction explains the divergent syntactic behaviors observed in diagnostic tests differentiating unaccusatives from unergatives.

**Resultative augmentation** occurs when an unselected object appears, which would not otherwise be licensed by the verb alone. Secondary predication arises when *Proc* heads combine with motion verbs containing goal-denoting particles, taking a *Res* complement that generates a telic interpretation. In such cases, the extra object results from a stative condition determined by the particle, as seen in English phrasal verbs or, more generally, in satellite-framed languages where prepositions within phrasal verbs carry strong lexical properties. The objects introduced via secondary predication function as RESULTEE-UNDERGOERS of the secondary predication.

(93) **Karena hammered the metal flat.**



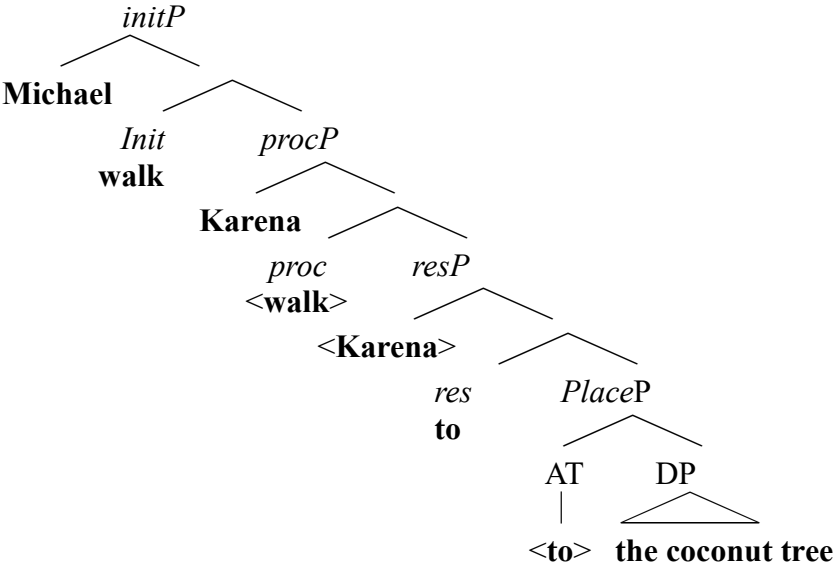
(Ramchand 2008:93, 42a))

Ramchand also describes those verbs of motion that allow transitive constructions in English. She observes that INITIATOR and UNDERGOER can be identical with motion verbs and under certain circumstances particularly **relaxed**, especially in two cases: “either when the UNDERGOER is a coercible animate in a conventionalized process (...) or when the lexical encyclopædic requirements on the motion verb are relaxed/abstract enough to be applicable to inanimates” (2008: 128). The former case refers to the highly conventional, crystallized expression “walk the dog” in English, that is only grammatical under specific pragmatic/socially established situations (the animal must be a dog, the manner of movement must be walking, and so on); the latter case refers to metaphoric/non-literal meanings of the

verb *run*, such as in “Mary runs the company”. In both cases, the low agentivity of the theme object favors acceptability, as already noticed in the case of (Southern) Italian caused motion constructions by Romagno (2021, 2023) and Busso & Romagno (2021). The same possibly applies to the denotation of the Italian verb *uscire* (lit. ‘to go out’) we have defined as metaphoric, when the direct object of these TUCs is digital content, as in *uscite la rovesciata di D’Ambrosio* (“send us a video of D’Ambrosio’s overhead kick”).

PathPs and PlacePs are also an instrument of conveying a meaning of motion in which an INITIATOR initiates and/or influences someone else’s motion, if an *initP* is realized, similarly to the case of caused motion constructions analyzed in this dissertation.

(94) **Michael walks Karena to the coconut tree**



(Ramchand 2008:129, (25))

Based on Ramchand’s model, transitivity and intransitivity emerge **syntactically**, rather than being encoded in the lexical information of the root. This is because event structure and its participants are directly represented in syntax (Ramchand 2008:211). This assumption strengthens our argument, as it follows that transitivity can potentially arise in any construction, and that the restrictions and low acceptability judgments on transitivized structures are not inherently syntactic. Transitives and intransitives are not derived from one another; in other words, intransitivity does not arise from the suppression of CAUSE, as proposed by Levin & Rappaport Hovav (1995), nor does transitivity emerge from a "frozen" version of the

intransitive, canonical valency, as in Reinhart (2002). According to Ramchand (2008:66ff.), the lexical item contains category features, which explain the "rigidity" of usage observed crosslinguistically. However, this rigidity is a result of the selectional work performed by category features within lexical items, not of structural constraints imposed *a priori*.

The main motivation of this model is an attempt to generate a high number of possible combinations from a **small set of primitives**, all derived from syntax and basic lexical associations, aided by the role of Specifiers: “specifiers are interpreted as the semantic subject of the head-complement complex, and embedded eventuality descriptors are interpreted as unified by a generalized ‘cause’ or ‘leads-to’ relation” (Ramchand 2008:211).

Ramchand’s assumptions can be summarized as follows: “the first-phase syntax is **freely built up by Merge**, subject to the interpretational principles at the **interface**” (Ramchand 2008:67). Grammatical features are initially established in syntax (in other words, no event structure is defined outside of syntax). Canonical thematic roles result from structural hierarchy, and verb classes are identified based on the number of subevents that make up a construction. The only grammatically relevant information encoded in lexical items is the category features, understood in a primitive sense (in a fashion similar to the ontologically-based classification of Alexiadou et al. 2006). Transitivity arises when the Spec position of the Initiator Projection is filled by a lexically full DP, while anticausativity is achieved when the same position is occupied by an anticausative marker (such as SE NE in Italian) or *null* head (English), which signals the absence of external causation.

### 3.2.7 Constructional Semantics

Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino (2014), as well as Pineda (2018), are not the only scholars who have applied theoretical models to the case of TUCs. Busso (2020) analyzes the intermediate acceptability associated with TUCs in different studies involving Italian participants, interpreting the phenomenon through the lens of constructional semantics theories. Busso’s analysis situates TUCs within the broader framework of **valency coercion patterns**, understood as a novel and creative interaction between verb meaning and argument structure constructions.

Similarly to Ramchand's (2008) First-Phase Syntax, constructional semantics also assumes that meaning arises **compositionally** and that constructions determine different interpretations. The main difference between Ramchand's syntactic model and constructional semantics analyses is that the former presupposes the existence of a universal, abstract syntax, whereas the latter relies on usage-based models, without necessarily assuming the universal nature of syntax. Thus, according to constructional semantics, new patterns emerge due to cognitive, pragmatic, and communicative pressures rather than strictly syntactic rules. A further distinction between generative models and Construction Grammar is that the former emphasize hierarchical syntactic rules, while the latter views language as a structured inventory of form-meaning pairings, called **constructions** (Goldberg 2006). Constructions are also the fundamental units of language.

A key principle of constructionist theories is that syntax and semantics are inseparable: the meaning of a construction is not solely derived from the individual words it contains, but emerges from the interaction between lexical items and the constructional pattern itself (Goldberg 1995).

Busso (2020) explores constructional creativity in different Italian coerced constructions, including caused motion constructions entailing TUCs, focusing on how speakers extend and manipulate existing constructions to create new meanings. In this light, valency coercion reflects the **creative nature of linguistic flexibility**, while still accounting for language-specific constraints that determine which constructions are unacceptable. Michaelis (2004) considers coercion a top-down process in which constructional meaning overrides lexical semantics. Coerced constructions are thus understood as partially acceptable **mismatches**, where a verb appears in an argument structure construction that does not fully align with its default valency (Busso 2020:19).

One of the key points in Busso's analysis is the assumption that the compatibility between verbs and argument structure constructions is gradient, as some coerced structures appear more acceptable than others. Although Perek & Hilpert (2014) classify Germanic languages as more constructionally tolerant – with English representing the maximal degree of constructional flexibility – and Romance languages as more valency-driven, Busso (2020:21)

identifies a certain degree of freedom in Italian coerced structures, distinguishing Italian from other Romance varieties.

A key aspect of Busso's analysis is the role of **analogy and context** in shaping constructional extensions. She argues that meaning is not solely compositional (i.e., derived from individual lexical items) but emerges from broader patterns of usage. This perspective is particularly relevant to the transitivity of unaccusative verbs, which illustrates how argument structure can shift depending on the constructional frame. Busso & Romagno's (2021) findings on the spread of TUCs from regional dialectal features to pan-Italian substandard usage provide evidence for a lexicalization process driven by valency coercion effects (Busso 2020:29). This process is significantly influenced by sociolinguistic factors, such as age and dialectal proficiency (see section 4.2.2 and Chapter 5).

### 3.2.8 Summary

This subchapter has outlined some of the main formal features of TUCs, drawing on foundational concepts from generative syntax, verbal semantics, and valency theory. First, I identified the verb class of **accomplishments** as the one involved in the labile causative alternation central to this study. I summarized the characteristics of motion verbs, with a particular focus on the distinctive properties of **directed-motion verbs**. The predicates implicated in TUCs uniformly encode motion along a defined path, with varying degrees of telicity affecting their acceptability in causative clauses.

The introduction of Hopper and Thompson's (1980) Transitivity Theory first presented its general framework and subsequently applied it to our *corpus* data. TUCs emerge as highly transitive clauses, whose acceptability is enhanced by features such as **high subject animacy**, definite and individuated object themes, strong kinesis, implications of **direct causation**, and discourse-level factors such as foregrounding.

The expression of causativity across languages was also discussed. Haspelmath's (1993) typological framework provided a classification of the main strategies used to encode (anti)causative alternations. Within this typology, TUCs are identified as a form of **labile causative alternation** that entails argument augmentation. This possibility has been explained

by the fact that directed-motion predicates belong to the class of accomplishments, which is cognitively “big” enough to offer space for the insertion of an actor as external argument. The fact that most directed-motion verbs do not specify the source and/or cause of motion leaves some space for the specification of the cause bringing about the event of motion.

Empirical studies by Romagno (2021, 2023) and Busso & Romagno (2021) demonstrate that lower object animacy significantly increases the acceptability of TUCs, with dialectal interference and speaker age emerging as key factors influencing their distribution and usage.

A subsequent literature review compared major formal representations of argument structure, particularly in relation to the position and status of the external argument. Different approaches regarding the expression of arguments were presented (Alexiadou 2010; Alexiadou et al. 2006; Pykkänen 2008; Schäfer 2009, 2022). This section highlighted both convergences and divergences among proposals from lexicalist approaches (e.g., Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995; Rappaport Hovav & Levin 1998) and generative frameworks (e.g., Alexiadou 2010; Alexiadou et al. 2006, 2015; Chomsky 1995, 2001; Folli 2005; Kratzer 1996; Marantz 1997; Martin 2023; Martin & Schäfer 2014; Pykkänen 2008; Schäfer 2009, 2022, among others).

Our section on argument structure then focused on Ramchand’s (2008) First Phase Syntax, a model previously applied to Spanish (Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino 2014) and Catalan TUCs (Pineda 2018). This framework posits that the **syntactic position** of arguments determines the **semantic interpretation** of the clause. According to Ramchand, event structure is directly mapped onto syntactic structure: arguments are assigned specific roles at distinct structural layers (InitiatorProjection, ProcessProjection, ResultProjection), and the verbal root merges with one of these layers, contributing its lexical content. This model enables fine-grained distinctions in argument structure and successfully accounts for crosslinguistic variation in verb classes, causativity, and aspect. It provides a compelling explanation for both the flexibility and constraints observed in Italian TUCs, being also in continuity with Fischer’s (2000) and Schifano’s (2018) proposals about verb movement patterns in (Early) Romance varieties. The model is applied to our empirical data in Section 5.5.

Finally, a subsection was dedicated to Busso’s (2020) constructional approach, which analyzes TUCs (alongside other argument structure constructions) as instances of **valency coercion**. Drawing on theories of Constructional Semantics, Busso argues that TUCs arise from

**creative mismatches**, whereby Italian speakers innovate new meanings by extending and manipulating pre-existing (standard) constructions.

### 3.3 The status of roots and the role of syntax in argument structure

This chapter has introduced some brief considerations about the **role of roots** in building verbal meaning and their relation to syntax. Over the years, scholars have proposed various theories of verbal meaning, differing in particular with regard to how much of verbal meaning and event structure is mapped onto syntax. In other words, numerous answers have been offered to the question of whether syntactic properties are determined by verbal meaning as mapped onto roots. In what follows, we will limit ourselves to those theories – or aspects of them – that help shed light on the phenomena discussed so far, referring readers interested in more in-depth analyses to the relevant literature.

A basic assumption shared by many theories is that grammatically relevant structure arises from **event structure templates**, which describe how argument realization, temporal or causal relations, aspect, change, and agency are to be syntactically expressed (Ausensi 2024: 1). One of the most debated issues in the literature is whether root meaning conveys only **idiosyncratic information**, or also includes templatic predictions and restrictions on grammatical behavior (Chomsky 1995, 2000; Marantz 1997; Hale & Keyser 2000, 2002; Borer 2003; Pylkkänen 2008; Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2012, 2020; Levinson 2014; Acedo-Matellán & Mateu 2015; Ausensi 2024, among others).

Since the late 1960s, verbs have typically been described as carrying semantic properties that trigger specific syntactic realizations, guided by so-called **linking rules**. Early proposals (Jackendoff 1972) introduced constraints on verb structure based on *theta*-roles such as Agent, Patient, Experiencer, and Theme. In this framework, **verb meaning** determines syntactic structure – semantic selection (s-selection) precedes categorical selection (c-selection) (Chomsky 1986).

In subsequent decades, scholars have sought to classify verbal predicates in order to explain why one and the same root may allow for multiple readings and syntactic structures. Within **Distributed Morphology**, surface verbs are analyzed as phrase structures, with event

templates derived from **functional heads** such as *v*. This is evident in constructions involving overt derivational morphology, as in the suffix *-ed* marking *v*<sub>BECOME</sub> in "the rug flattened" (see upcoming examples). In this model, *v* takes the root as its categorical complement (Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020: 12).

Syntactic approaches thus claim that grammatical properties are determined by the light verb and the event template, rather than the root. Conversely, semantic approaches argue that templatic meaning is already encoded in the root, imposing restrictions on the types of syntactic templates it may appear in. According to the **Free Distribution Approach** (Borer 2003; Acedo-Matellán & Mateu 2015), roots entail no grammatically relevant restrictions; any root can, in principle, be inserted into any event structure template. Ungrammaticality results from world knowledge and plausibility constraints, not from formal grammatical properties (Ausensi 2024: 134).

Mid-way between these poles are approaches such as those by Marantz (1997), Alexiadou et al. (2006, 2015), and Ramchand (2008), which propose intuitive semantic verb classes – e.g., the distinction between internally and externally caused events. This so-called **Grammatically Relevant Ontological Categories** (GROC) approach posits ontologically grounded root classes that do influence grammatically relevant properties and event structure (Ausensi 2024: 135).

While projectionist theories allow multiple syntactic options based on a range of semantic representations, constructionist theories generally admit only one root that may appear in multiple syntactic environments, with many theoretical proposals lying somewhere in between. Regarding unaccusativity, syntactic approaches predict that it cannot be semantically determined, whereas semantic theories claim it is not syntactically encoded (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995: 5).

The existence of verb classes is similarly treated either syntactically or semantically. According to one of the most influential accounts (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995), membership in semantically coherent verb classes determines a verb's argument structure and syntactic behavior. However, "the verb classes cross-classify in intricate ways in terms of their syntactic behavior, and this extensive cross-classification suggests that verb classes themselves are not primitive, but arise because their members share certain basic components of meaning"

(Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995: 22). As these authors emphasize, building a theory of verb meaning is a complex task, since the range of possible meanings and structures associated with predicates often resists neat generalizations.

Recent work has moved toward **hybrid theories** of verb meaning, incorporating both structural and idiosyncratic elements. According to Beavers and Koontz-Garboden, “an adequate theory of verb meaning must (...) be able to identify (a) the broader aspects of verbal meaning that grammar is sensitive to and (b) the principles that relate them to the grammar while (c) admitting some degree of individual semantic variation on a verb-by-verb basis” (2020: 4–5).

We will now turn to a brief presentation of the Free Distribution (FD) and Grammatically Relevant Ontological Categories (GROC) approaches, before discussing why, in Ausensi’s (2024) view, both models present certain issues. Finally, we will outline the Root Determined Approach developed by Beavers & Koontz-Garboden (2020) and Ausensi (2024).

### 3.3.1 Free Distribution Approach

(Neo)constructionist theories (Borer 2003; Acedo-Matellán & Mateu 2014, among others), as well as syntactic approaches more generally, adopt a **minimalistic** perspective on the role of roots. According to the Free Distribution approach, verbal roots lack templatic or structural meaning and function merely as phonological placeholders, serving as “only a repository of **idiosyncratic** information” (Borer 2003: 33). Grammatically relevant properties – such as argument realization, (im)possible verb meanings, manner/result interpretations, aspectual features, and event structure – are derived entirely from syntax. In this framework, argument structure does not emerge from the lexicon but refines the interpretation of lexical items; outside of syntax, roots carry only **encyclopedic, argument-less content**.

Nevertheless, these encyclopedic entries are phonologically “faithful” – to use Borer’s term (2003: 43) – meaning that they maintain a stable phonological form across uses. However, how languages encode and maintain this faithfulness is arbitrary and takes place outside the domain of syntax. This arbitrariness can account for suppletive alternations such as *eat/feed* and *go/bring*, as well as for certain cases of transitive alternations in directed-motion verbs in Standard Italian.

According to Borer’s model, roots are simply correspondences between a phonological identity – anchored in a relatively stable form – and an encyclopedic meaning grounded in world knowledge and idiosyncratic associations, entirely lacking in grammatical or categorical content. The Free Distribution approach predicts that constraints on possible argument realization are not syntactic in origin but arise from real-world plausibility. Incompatibility, then, is pragmatic rather than grammatical (Ausensi 2024: 135). In other words, the reason we do not observe all conceivable constructions with every root is not due to grammatical restrictions, but rather because some combinations are incompatible with our understanding of the world (Acedo-Matellán & Mateu 2014).

Furthermore, since no structural restrictions are posited outside of syntax, there is no principled reason why a verbal root should act solely as either a modifier or a complement a priori. As a result, this model does not require a classification of verbs into distinct classes, not even the basic distinction between manner roots (event modifiers) and result roots (complements) proposed in lexicalist theories such as Rappaport Hovav & Levin’s (2010). Any root may theoretically appear in any syntactic position and be integrated into any event structure template. Ungrammaticality arises only from **implausibility** or interpretative oddness grounded in **extralinguistic knowledge**. Thus, syntax alone is responsible for generating grammatically relevant information and determining argument structure.

### 3.3.2 Grammatically Relevant Ontological Categories

The *Grammatically Relevant Ontological Categories* (GROC) approach, based on work by Alexiadou et al. (2006, 2015), Ramchand (2008), Levinson (2014), among others, posits greater constraints on possible event structure templates by assuming that roots do in fact encode grammatically relevant information. According to this view, the distribution of roots across event structures is not free but determined by their **ontological nature**.

Various proposals for the classification of verbal roots have been put forward in the literature. For instance, while Ramchand (2008) does not explicitly define fixed root classes, she maintains that some grammatically significant information must originate from the root’s semantics. In her framework, the construction of syntactic terminals is generative and unconstrained in principle, but it is mediated by encyclopedic knowledge – encoded in roots –

which serves to evaluate whether a particular lexical item may be felicitously inserted into a given syntactic structure (Ramchand 2008: 11).

Alexiadou et al. (2015) more explicitly propose ontological root classes, including:

- (95)     √AGENTIVE – *murder*  
          √INTERNALLY CAUSED – *blossom*  
          √EXTERNALLY CAUSED – *destroy*  
          √CAUSE UNSPECIFIED – *open*

From a more lexicalist standpoint, Levinson (2014) argues that roots must bear semantic specifications, as they must be able to compose meaningfully with the syntactic structure. Without such specifications, composition would be blocked (Ausensi 2024: 12). Ramchand (2008), while maintaining that event structure is derived in syntax, nonetheless assigns formal features to roots that restrict which syntactic heads they can merge with. For example, verbal heads may re-merge with  $v$  categories such as  $v_{\text{ACT}}$  or  $v_{\text{CAUS}}$ . These functional heads determine which event templates are licensed, along with the argument structure, causative or inchoative readings, temporal properties, and even morphological realizations (Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020: 23).

Two main strands fall under the GROC umbrella. The first is the **lexicalist** line, exemplified by Levin & Rappaport Hovav (1998), where roots are assigned a templatic role and are responsible for encoding core event structure. This approach partly resembles recent proposals entailed in the Root Determined Argument Realization Hypothesis, although some fundamental differences are observable (see next subsection). The second line is the syntactic approach, associated with authors such as Alexiadou (2010), Alexiadou et al. (2005, 2013), Schäfer (2022), and Ramchand (2008). Here, ontological features associated with lexical entries merely influence selectional strategies, but argument realization itself is handled entirely in syntax.

Both strands agree, however, that verbal meaning is **compositional** and **decomposable**. It consists of a constant – typically a verbal head that undergoes Head Movement into an abstract V position (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1998: 107) – and a lexical semantic template or event structure template. These templates, as Beavers & Koontz-Garboden (2020: 9) show, are semantically paraphrasable in terms of their basic components via analytic constructions (see

examples 13–17 in their text). Light verbs (e.g., *do*, *cause*, *become*) introduce core grammatical meanings such as **causation**, **change**, and **activity**, and interact with root semantics in generating verbal meaning.:

- |      |   |        |
|------|---|--------|
| (96) | a. Mary flattened the rug.                | CAUSE  |
|      | b. Mary caused the rug to become flatten. |        |
| (97) | a. The rug flattened.                     | BECOME |
|      | b. The rug became flattened.              |        |
| (98) | a. Mary jogged.                           | ACT    |
|      | b. Mary did jogging actions.              |        |

CAUSE, BECOME and ACT are **universal primitives** expressing causation, change and action and represent the first part of basic compounds; the second one is the idiosyncratic, verb-specific root describing single actions, causes, or changes (Beaver & Kooontz-Garboden 2020:10). Specifically,  $v_{\text{BECOME}}$  introduces change and selects the internal argument, while  $v_{\text{CAUSE}}$  introduces causation and selects the external argument (Ausensi 2024:17).

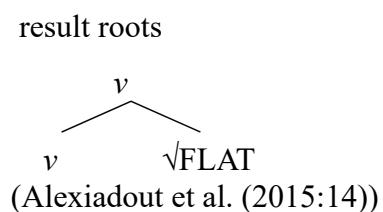
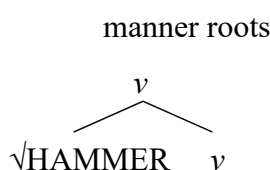
Different structures appearing with one and the same verb are linked to different templates. For the verb “flatten” (tr.) we would have:

- (99) a. TEMPLATE: [[ x ACT] CAUSE [BECOME [y <STATE>]]  
 b. CONSTANT: [[ x ACT] CAUSE [BECOME [y <FLATTENED>]]

(adapted from Levin&Rappaport Hovav 1998:108)

The lexicalist GROC approach has proposed the Lexicalization Constraint (Rappaport Hovav & Levin 1998), predicting that roots are either modifiers or arguments, and the Manner/Result Complementarity (Rappaport Hovav & Levin 2010), assuming that a root might encode either manner or result meanings. The distinction between these two classes of roots is marked in event structure, since manner roots always are event modifiers higher attached to a Spec position of a  $v$ -Head, while result roots are complements of a functional head.

(100) **Manner/Result Complementarity Hypothesis**





which verb classes participate in lexical versus improvised causativization, while still sidestepping the overgeneralization risk posed by the Free Distribution approach (see next section).

### 3.3.3 Root Determined Argument Realization Hypothesis

Recent approaches by Beavers & Koontz-Garboden (2012, 2020) and Ausensi (2024) have questioned the adequacy of both the Free Distribution Approach and the GROC model. According to Ausensi, the former – by excluding any grammatical restrictions on the role of roots in event structure templates – **overgenerates** structural flexibility, while the latter – by postulating the existence of ontologically based classes of roots and two Constraints – **undergenerates** it (Ausensi 2024:134).

According to those scholars who defend the role of roots in building templatic meaning, the Free Distribution model fails to account for some clear and recurrent crosslinguistic restrictions. For instance, the subject of *murder*-type verbs must always be agentive and intentional, whereas *kill*-type verbs do not require such intentionality (Ausensi 2024:157). According to the Root Determined Argument Realization (RDAR) Hypothesis, this contrast is better explained if we assume that certain structural, grammatically relevant information is semantically encoded within the root itself. As Ausensi puts it: “Not all roots appear in the same event structures, a phenomenon I (J.A.) relate to the fact that only some classes of roots introduce structural components of meaning by themselves, making them compatible in turn with additional event structure templates” (Ausensi 2024:157). Instead of postulating an infinite number of possible root-template combinations, constrained only by plausibility judgments, the RDAR model proposes a more systematic and constrained framework that should capture both regularity and flexibility in argument realization.

In addition to the subject selection contrast between *murder* and *kill*-type verbs, Ausensi also highlights a specific class of roots – deadjectival ones such as *open*, *cool*, *thin* – which always occupy the position of complement to a functional head. This contradicts the assumption made by the Free Distribution approach that any root can appear in any structural position<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See Ausensi 2024, Chapter 4 for detailed diagnostics and further evidence.

(Ausensi 2024:134). In other words, the observation that certain roots consistently occur in a specific syntactic slot challenges the view that all event structures are equally available, with ungrammaticality resulting merely from plausibility constraints.

While the Free Distribution model overgenerates by licensing implausible event structures, the GROC model, according to Ausensi (2024:147 ff.), undergenerates. Through a set of empirical diagnostics, Ausensi shows that the Manner/Result complementarity does not hold universally: some result-denoting roots can function as event modifiers, occupying a higher syntactic position typically reserved for manner roots. This challenges claims by Rappaport Hovav & Levin (2010) and Alexiadou et al. (2015) that only manner roots exhibit such behavior.

Consider the following example:

(102) With a few slices of her claws, she tore him free.

(Ausensi 2024:41, ex. (17a))

This sentence demonstrates not only that roots of the  $\sqrt{\text{BREAK}}$ -type are compatible with non-selected objects, but also that the object of a result root need not always be the undergoer of the result state (“he” is not torn). Furthermore, the existence of a result phrase in the complement position implies that the verb tear must occupy a higher modifier position.

According to Beavers & Koontz-Garboden (2020), the variation, class-switching, and semantic complexity observed across verbs can be explained by positing **multiple combinable templates** and a potentially **large inventory of verbal heads**. The authors maintain that “the high, potentially endless number of idiosyncratic meanings of a verb is a direct consequence of the fact that roots do entail templatic meaning” (2020:159). For instance, if a root entails a notion of change, it must encode a BECOME-template, which in turn constrains its grammatical behavior (Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020:30). They reject the Bifurcation Thesis of Roots (Embick 2009), which holds that grammatical behavior is determined either by templates or by roots, but never by both simultaneously. Similarly, they question the Manner/Result complementarity (Rappaport Hovav & Levin 2010), arguing that certain verbs – e.g., *guillotine*, *drown* – encode both manner and result:

(103) The French guillotined the King #but he didn’t die

(Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020:159)

Contrary to Rappaport Hovav & Levin’s (2010) claim that verbs expressing both manner and result must be derived, polymorphemic, and decomposable, Ausensi’s (2024) diagnostics<sup>47</sup> reveal that verbs like *drown* and *rob* encode both meanings within a simplex, monomorphemic, underived root. Ausensi further proposes that intentionality alone can induce manner readings: “intentionality actions are sufficient to induce manner properties” (2024:40). Thus, having an intentional causer is enough to yield manner interpretations, without excluding result meanings.

Challenging the widely held view that intentionality and external arguments are always introduced by event structure rather than roots, Ausensi (2024:169) argues that *murder*-type roots encode their external argument **internally** – i.e., within their templatic root meaning. This, he contends, accounts for the consistent crosslinguistic constraints these verbs exhibit in contrast with more neutral *kill*-type predicates.

These findings also support the claim that roots can encode multiple layers of meaning – including causation and agentivity – and that “there are potentially no limits to the number of idiosyncratic meanings a root can have” (Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020:159). While this view helps explain the semantic richness and variability of verbs, it raises concerns about syntactic generalizability. If roots are allowed to encode an unbounded amount of semantic information, syntactic regularities become harder to capture, and crosslinguistic comparisons may suffer, as each event structure would be determined by idiosyncratic lexical entries rather than structural or parametric constraints.

The RDAR model attempts to explain both the regularities and ungrammaticalities found at the interface of roots and event structure templates. Rather than adopting an overgenerating theory like Free Distribution or an undergenerating one like GROC, RDAR posits that “root meaning is more complex than we think” (Ausensi 2024:163). This should allow for a more integrated view, dissolving the sharp division between lexicon and syntax, and between roots and event templates: “the semantics of roots must be compatible with the meaning of the event structure” (ibid.:170).

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<sup>47</sup> For example, Ausensi shows that sublexical modification in simplex, monomorphemic roots of *manner-of-stealing* verbs using “again” is not possible, since these adverbs do not scope over the result at the cost of manner, indicating an undecomposable unity (Ausensi 2024: 40).

Finally, this approach should offer a principled way to predict which roots can combine with which structures and why certain combinations fail – namely, due to semantic mismatches between root content and structural templates (Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020; Ausensi 2024). The RDAR model thus supports the view that **root-specific templatic meaning** plays a crucial grammatical role, with verbal classes emerging from basic eventive primitives – such as causation, action, and change – which are encoded directly in the root (Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020:11).

### 3.3.4 Summary

In this Section dedicated to some of the verb theories encountered in literature, we have sorted three different approaches mainly based on their chronological appearance in linguistic research, but also on the increasing templatic role given to roots. Since this is not a work about verb theory in general, but about a specific syntactic and semantic property of some verbs of directed-motion in a given variety (*neo-standard* Italian), we abandon the attempt of a new theory of verb meaning, and adopt the approach that better suits our case. Nevertheless, the criticisms moved to the GROC approach by the RDAR hypothesis’ defenders are founded, and we take them into account when sketching our description of the structures of transitive unaccusatives.

Each one of the three models proposed here entails assumptions that help describe the case of TUCs investigated in this work. The Free Distribution approach postulates that lexical entries *per se* are in Borer’s sense the expression of world knowledge and “real-world details” (Ausensi 2024:3) encoded into some phonological material, giving truth-conditional meaning. Encyclopaedic content is not linguistic, in the sense that it is non-language specific, and reflects a given vision and knowledge of the world (Ramchand 2008:8). Classes of words, verbs and their event structures, (in)transitivity, aspect, argument realization and all grammatical properties arise in syntax, which is as narrow syntax a specific faculty of the human language. We agree with Borer’s assumption that lexicon contains arbitrary combinations of sounds, since the link between phonetics and meaning is **unmotivated**. Nevertheless, the existence of constraints on event structure templates we find cross-linguistically seems to suggest that not every structure is possible with any verb, as we have seen with Italian TUCs.

Instead of admitting that lexical plausibility as the only restriction on syntactic event structure realization, as in Borer (2003) and Acedo-Matellán & Mateu (2015), both the GROC and the RDAR approaches suggest that syntactic restrictions must come from the lexicon. The main difference between these two models is that the GROC approach, on the one hand, only relates the influence of roots on argument realization to **ontologically based categories**. In its more syntactic assumptions, this model does not assign any further structural role to roots (Ramchand 2008). The RDAR Hypothesis, on the other hand, tries to overcome the dichotomy between syntax and lexicon (Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020; Ausensi 2024) by assuming that roots entail templatic meaning, and that the expression of argument structure we see derives from **structural templates included in roots**. This should also hold for the selection of agents in some verb classes, i.e. for the internal selection of external arguments (as anomalous as this may sound). Recent work by RDAR defenders rejects both the Manner/Result complementarity and the Bifurcation Hypothesis.

While all three approaches offer interesting and valid insights into a theory of verb meaning, the recent RDAR assigns roots a more or less infinite power of influence on argument realization, which has been otherwise considered a syntactic process. From the point of view of syntactic analysis, admitting functional material to enter the lexicon would could go beyond the overcoming of the conflict between syntax and lexicon, and represent a threat to the generalization potential structural analysis brings. To use Ramchand's words, "lexical encyclopaedic information must be sharply distinguished from compositional semantic information" (Ramchand 2008:216). As ambitious and fair it is to want to solve the issue of the division of labor between syntax and the lexicon, it seems counterproductive for our goals to discharge syntactic analysis by giving up on crosslinguistic and grammar-internal structural comparison and generalization.

Once we question the legitimacy of the Manner/Result Complementarity and the Bifurcation Hypothesis, the GROC approach seems to gain new validity. The syntactic implications of GROC predicting that ontological classes drive argument realization allows to explain restrictions within possible templatic expressions while avoiding the risk of transferring argument structure templates inside the lexicon. As for external arguments, the question whether they might be originated internally with specific classes of verbs, as Ausensi (2024)

proposes, has to be furtherly (and carefully) investigated, since it challenges many other theories of argument realization.

This chapter is by no means a comprehensive outlook at the current situation of linguistic research on such a complex topic as verbal composition and argument realization may be, and we look forward to further evolutions in this thrilling field of research. Some of the notions illustrated in this section will be part of our formal description of some data from our corpus and experimental study entailed in Chapter 5.

## 4. Sociolinguistic background

This chapter offers a sociolinguistic account of the complex linguistic landscape of the Italian peninsula, particularly concerning the interaction between the national standard variety, regional varieties, and dialectal *substrata*. Given that the geographical focus of our research is the **Agro Pontino** area, in the province of Latina (South Lazio), we begin with a brief historical background and a linguistic overview of some of the salient features found in the varieties spoken in this region.

Standard Italian and the Italo-Romance varieties have been investigated from various perspectives and with different goals. Some frameworks have focused more strictly on linguistic and specifically morphosyntactic aspects (Benincà & Poletto 2006; Ledgeway 2000; Ledgeway et al. 2020; Colasanti 2023, among others), while others have adopted a Contact Linguistics framework (Berruto 2006), and still others have taken a Sociolinguistic perspective (Berruto 1987, 2003, among others). In addition, geolinguistic, folk linguistic, and dialectological approaches have also been widely employed (Cerruti 2011:11).

The Chapter is structured as follows: section 4.1 contains historical and geographical information about the region interested by our investigation, the Lazio southern coastal province of Latina. After this brief outlook, some (socio)linguistic peculiarities of the regional variety spoken in the province are listed, especially in contrast with the main regional variety, i.e. the Roman one. Section 4.2 is dedicated to the sociolinguistic diachronic and synchronic description of the complex interrelation between standard Italian, regional Italian varieties and Italo-Romance dialects. Section 4.3 offers a summary of the chapter.

### 4.1 Southern Lazio and the Agro Pontino

To the best of our knowledge, the study presented in Chapter 5 constitutes the first semantic-syntactic investigation of linguistic features ever carried out in this province. While sociolinguistic research has previously been conducted (Stefinlongo 2003), and some structural aspects of geographically and typologically related dialects have been examined – both diachronically and synchronically (Cennamo 2007, 2015; Colasanti 2023; D’Alessandro &

Ledgeway 2010, among others) – the varieties spoken in this southern area of Lazio remain underdocumented and relatively unexplored.

In particular, the dialects of the province of Latina exhibit **hybrid features** that lie at the crossroads between central and upper-southern Italo-Romance varieties (Colasanti 2023), making them a promising yet still marginally investigated field of research.

The province of Latina is one of the five provinces in the central Italian region of Lazio, which also includes the capital city of Rome. Latina is located in the southern part of the region, extending from the province of Rome in the north to the border with Campania in the south, and following the Tyrrhenian coastline (Figure 3).



*Figure 3 Location of Latina in Italy*

The province of Latina is a relatively recent administrative creation, established in 1932. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, part of its territory, historically known as the Agro Pontino, was reclaimed from a vast marshland of approximately 76,000 hectares. The presence of a swamp in the low-lying area between Rome and Naples was well known to the ancient Romans, as well as to the Latins and Volsci, who inhabited the nearby Lepini, Aurunci, and Ausoni mountain ranges even before the foundation of the Roman Republic (5th century BC).

For centuries before the reclamation of lands, few families lived under precarious conditions in this malaria-prone area. Shepherds from the surrounding mountains practiced *transumanza* (transhumance), moving their livestock from the Apennines to the marshes when the water levels partially receded. Linguistically, the dialects of the pre-Apennine areas east of the marshes were thus among the first to be spoken in the region.

Although Roman activity in the area was already evident by the 4th century BC – with the construction of the Via Appia – various attempts to reclaim the marshland throughout history consistently failed. In the 1930s, the reclamation of lands became a fundamental piece of propaganda for the Fascist regime. The project took over some works already started in 1922, and should have been completed in a few years. In reality, Mussolini's reclamation of land had enormous bureaucratic costs and was not finished until decades after World War II. The four cities founded in the 1930s in the former swamp were inaugurated only a few months after their foundation, although only few buildings were finished.

The land reclamation in the Agro Pontino was also portrayed by Fascist propaganda as a means of creating employment, particularly for families and workers from Italy's **northeastern** regions who remained jobless or economically unstable following World War I. These settlers were later allocated small plots of land and livestock as part of the regime's rural colonization program<sup>48</sup>. Thus, the 1930s and 1940s represented an interesting phase of language contact between **autochthonous** and **imported** dialects, which were mostly mutually non-intelligible.

From a geological and ecological perspective, the land reclamation dramatically reduced the extent of one of Europe's richest and most diverse wetland ecosystems<sup>49</sup>. The introduction of non-native plant and animal species and irreversible changes to the natural environment had long-term negative consequences for soil fertility, water distribution, and ecological balance –

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<sup>48</sup> The families coming from the Northern regions of Polesine, Ferrara and Vicenza belonged to the ONC, Opera Nazionale Combattenti (Lit. "National Fighters Organization"), an institution from WWI, and were mostly sharecroppers.

<sup>49</sup> Geologist and TV-host Mario Tozzi has often openly expressed criticisms about the consequences of the drainage of the wetlands, a stolen territory that would nowadays be of fundamental impact on contrasting global warming and water crises on continental level: <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2023/02/La-Nuova-Amazzonia---Sapiens-un-solo-pianeta---Puntata-del-18022023-b02398d3-e6e9-415d-8dfb-45e059bd4a3a.html>. Access: 19/03/2024

many of which are still visible today. Architecturally, the **four new towns** founded during the 1930s under Mussolini now stand as examples of rationalist architecture, with Latina – home to around 126,000 inhabitants – serving as the provincial capital.

Anthropologically, the Agro Pontino today represents a unique "melting pot." The land reclamation attracted not only northern settlers engaged in canal digging and urban construction, but also inhabitants of the nearby pre-Apennine towns, who abandoned their hilltop villages in favor of broader, more fertile lowland areas. In the second half of the twentieth century, the transition from small family farms to industrial agriculture brought significant economic and social changes. Large investors acquired extensive tracts of land, favoring intensive farming practices aimed at maximizing profit. As a result, the modern landscape is characterized by vast expanses of open fields and rows of white-roofed greenhouses stretching from the hills to the Tyrrhenian Sea.

In recent decades, the province has faced new social and economic challenges due to migration. Workers from Eastern Europe – particularly Romania – as well as from the Indian region of Punjab, have arrived to support the labor-intensive agricultural sector. However, many of these migrants have become subject to exploitative and often illegal systems of labor organization and segregation<sup>50</sup>. The integration of these new communities, alongside the persistent phenomenon of Italian youth emigration (the so-called brain drain), represents one of the most pressing challenges facing the province today.

From a linguistic perspective, the multicultural and multi-regional population that has formed in Latina over the last century constitutes a highly compelling yet understudied subject of linguistic research (Stefinlongo 2003). The settler families from the North brought with them their native dialects, which have functioned as **heritage languages** in the region (Cerruti 2011). Over time, interactions among speakers from different northern cities led to the emergence of a kind of *interlingua* – a hybrid linguistic variety shaped by features of northern dialects, further influenced by contact with local varieties.

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<sup>50</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240625-indians-march-to-end-slavery-after-worker-death-shakes-italy>. Access: 27/06/2024

Antonio Pennacchi (1950–2021), the most prominent writer from Latina and himself a descendant of northern settlers, described this phenomenon in his most famous novel *Canale Mussolini* (2010, Mondadori Editore). In a philological note (p. 473), he explains that the variety he grew up speaking is a blend of various northern dialects and diverges significantly from the original dialects still spoken by his relatives who remained in the North:

*(...) quando, per esempio, ci incontriamo con le mie cugine che sono rimaste lassù, qualche volta facciamo fatica a capirci. Il nostro è un impasto di rovigotto, ferrarese, trevigiano, friulano eccetera – contaminato da influssi laziali – privo di strutturazione grammaticale fissa, con le vocali ora aperte ora chiuse e le desinenze che cambiano da podere a podere e da situazione a situazione, anche spesso nello stesso parlante.*<sup>51</sup>

Nowadays, dialects from Veneto and Emilia-Romagna are spoken almost exclusively by older generations, while younger people tend to either understand them passively or have entirely lost their heritage varieties.

Dialects from the nearby province of Frosinone, historically known as Ciociaria, have long been present in the area – partly due to the historical practice of transhumance – and are still spoken by younger speakers, especially in rural areas, albeit with strong influence from regional Italian. The southern edge of the Pontine Marshes borders the cities of Formia, Itri, and Gaeta, among others, where typical upper Campanian dialectal traits emerge. In recent decades, the city centers have also seen an influx of speakers from Naples and nearby areas in southern Campania, as well as residents of Rome who mainly spend their summers in holiday homes in the coastal towns of Terracina, San Felice Circeo, and Sabaudia, or in the Pontine Archipelago.

Second-generation speakers of Indian origin from the Punjab region and from Romanian parents are mostly bilingual.

When considering linguistic differences across generations, a pattern emerges that is consistent with other rural peripheries. The first generation to settle in the newly developed

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<sup>51</sup> “For example, when we meet the cousins who stayed up there [*in the North*], we sometimes have some trouble understanding each other. Ours is a mixture of *rovigotto, ferrarese, trevigiano, friulano* and so on – contaminated by influences from Lazio – lacking a fixed grammatical structure, with vocals being sometimes open, sometimes closed and the endings varying from estate to estate, from situation to situation, oft even within the same speaker”.

areas and cities largely consisted of **monolingual dialect speakers**, often with little or no formal education. Their exposure to the national standard language began in the 1920s or even later. As a result, these second-language speakers developed idiolects shaped by regional varieties, especially since their native dialects were not mutually intelligible.

The high number of speakers and their relatively low educational background contributed to a significant linguistic shift, which can be interpreted through Labov's (2001) concept of "change from below" (cf. Busso & Romagno 2021). This **imperfectly** and gradually **acquired national language** then became the native language of subsequent generations – namely the post-WWII "boomer" generation. Strictly speaking, they were the first to acquire regional Italian as their mother tongue while maintaining high dialectal proficiency. Their initial exposure to formal standard Italian typically came through school, starting at around six years of age. In turn, the next generations began to lose proficiency in local dialects, as their parents predominantly spoke regional Italian to them, becoming **imperfect dialectal speakers**.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, a *restandardization* of regional Italian has been underway, as will be discussed in the next section. Today, adult speakers living in the Agro Pontino predominantly speak the regional variety of Lazio, which closely resembles **Roman Italian**, with some residual phonetic traits from the Venetan and Ciociaro *substrata*. Although the Venetan dialects brought by settlers in the 1930s have nearly disappeared, some sociolinguists still identify northern dialectal interference in the pronunciation of certain phonemes. According to Stefinlongo (2003), the raising of the open-mid front unrounded vowel /ɛ/ (typical of Roman Italian) to /e/ in words such as /insala'tjera/ ("salad bowl") resembles phonetic phenomena found in northeastern dialects, from which the settlers originated.

In our view, this hypothesis remains difficult to confirm or refute, since a similar phonetical trait is also attested in the dialects of nearby Ciociaria. We suggest that this phonetic feature – differentiating regional Italian spoken in Latina from its Roman counterpart – may instead originate from neighboring varieties rather than from northern dialects. Overall, Ciociarian influence appears to be the most prevalent and consistent in the area, aside from the regional standard, which is mainly shaped on Roman Italian.

The group of Italo-Romance dialects spoken in the older cities of the region developed independently from Tuscan, and were already attested during the Papal State era across the

former territory of Campagna e Marittima. These dialects can be further subdivided into northern and southern Lazio varieties. Northern Lazio dialects are more widely represented in the province of Latina and constitute the main dialect group.

Today, younger speakers in smaller towns tend to speak the regional variety with *substratum* influences from local dialects, while speakers in larger urban centers or from families where dialect is no longer spoken tend to use a variety more closely resembling Roman Italian. Some young speakers continue to use or are at least exposed to pre-Ciociarian dialects, which are typical of the Amaseno Valley and the Lepini–Ausoni mountain areas. (Priverno, Sezze, Sonnino a.o., see Figure 4).

Some traits distinguishing Latina regional Italian from the Roman variety are illustrated below (partly adapted from Vignuzzi: 1997):

- Stressed vocal [e] is realized as closed in opposition to Roman open /ɛ/: /'je:ri/ or /'λje:ri/, 'yesterday', instead of /jɛri/;
- Voiced consonants may replace voiceless ones: /'tando/ for *tanto*, 'much', /'borza'/ for *borsa*, 'bag';
- Dropping and neutralization of unstressed vowels is common, even at word onset: /'nzje:me/ or /'nzje:mə/ for *insieme*, "together" (Ciociaro *nzembra*);
- Postalveolar fricatives replace correspondent alveolar ones, as in /'paʃta/ for /'pasta/;
- Prosodic realization affects production and is immediately detected, with the most common example being a Ciociaria dialect called Sezzese;
- Latina's variety (still) presents nominative *tu* ('you', nom.) in subject position, similarly to the standard norm, although acceptability towards Roman *te* (default acc.) in subject position is growing among younger generations;
- The third singular/plural and first plural person of the oblique personal pronoun are homophonous: *ci* (oblique 'her, him, us, them') instead of Roman *je* (oblique 'him', 'her', 'them') and *ce* (oblique 'us') respectively: *a lei/loro ci dico* (Latina) vs. *A lei/loro je dico* (Rome), lit. 'to her/them I tell her/them' (clitic doubling is standard in Lazio);
- The verb *stare* (lit. 'stay') as an auxiliary may replace *essere* ('to be'): existential constructions *ci sta* instead of *c'è*, but also as copula such as in *sto stanco* instead of *sono stanco* ('I am tired');

- Lexical interference brings to the insertion of originally exclusive dialectal terms into production regional Italian: *mammoccio* (generalized), *vaglione* (Sonnino), *utro* (Priverno) instead of Roman *regazzino* or Italian *ragazzino* for ‘kid (male)’, *bia* (Priverno) for *solo* (‘only’), *addormirsi* for *addormentarsi* (‘to fall asleep’).

Further influences on the regional norm are found in bilingual communities speaking non-Italic languages such as Romanian or non-Romance languages such as Punjabi.



Figure 4 The Pontine land and its surrounding mountains nowadays

## 4.2 Regional Italian and Standard Italian: historic evolution and current situation

It is well known that the sociolinguistic landscape of Italy represents one of the most challenging and intriguing fields of study in relation to linguistic and dialectal variation. Since an in-depth analysis of (socio)linguistic variation across the Italian peninsula falls outside the scope of this dissertation, we will limit ourselves to a brief overview of the complex linguistic situation currently attested in Italy. Nevertheless, the interaction among social classes, age groups, geographical variation, and registers is essential for understanding the current acceptability and distribution of TUCs in spoken language.

The poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) – whose language, the literary Florentine of the fourteenth century, was later deemed the “highest” and most suitable candidate for the national language – had already identified fourteen distinct dialects, which he grouped into two clusters corresponding geographically to Western and Eastern Italy, divided by the Apennine mountain range. Over the following centuries, Florentine was gradually adapted and came to be used by the Italian intellectual elite.

The Italo-Romance dialects still spoken in Italy are coeval with Florentine, and evolved independently from each other from Late Latin. In this sense, standard Italian is an artificial construct: it was consciously selected from among various dialects based primarily on literary prestige. At the beginning of the twentieth century, non-educated citizens had virtually no access to the formal language and were usually monolingual dialect speakers. During the second half of the century, increasing numbers of speakers began to acquire regional Italian varieties as their native language.

Today, fifteen Italo-Romance dialect groups and fifteen historical linguistic minorities are officially recognized (Cerruti 2011:9). The most prominent linguistic boundary is the La Spezia–Rimini isogloss, which separates the northern Gallo-Romance dialects from the central and southern varieties. A second important boundary, the Rome–Ancona isogloss, marks the division between central and southern vernaculars. Pellegrini (1977) proposes a classification of Italian dialects into five major groups: Northern, Tuscan, Central, Southern Continental, and Extreme Southern dialects.

Historically, the concept of a geographical and cultural unity called Italy had already existed for centuries, although the political unification of Italy did not happen until 1861. By this time, “Italian” as a spoken language barely existed: still at the beginning of the 20th century, when Italy joined World War I, communication issues among soldiers from different regions were common, since some of them could simply not understand each other (Cerruti 2011:11). Italian was the language of written and formal language, spoken by a dozen of intellectuals, who alternated it with dialect, used for everyday communication, in a relation known in sociolinguistics as *diglossia* – i.e., a sociolinguistic situation in which two distinct varieties of the same language are used by a single speech community in different social contexts.

To facilitate the evolution of a national feeling, but also to improve communication on national scale, social measures such as massive school education and obligatory military service were promoted at the beginning of the twentieth century. During the Fascist regime, that lasted two decades and ended in 1943, the interest towards diatopic variation that had started to spread in linguistic research was substituted by policies of language pureness, with experts and institutions, especially schools, prescriptively trying to refine the national language in the pursuit of linguistic centralism. The urge to establish a national norm based on Tuscan “purity” was called “linguistic axis Rome-Florence” (Cerruti 2009:18). As would turn out soon, especially in the decades between the two World Wars, the development of Italian as a **popular language**, spoken by a first generation of dialectal monolinguals, would give no chance to this policy of purism. Still to this day, if we consider the phonological aspects, there is no geographically or regionally marked pronunciation that could be elevated to the national norm (Berruto 1987:96), in the sense that a neutral, nationwide homogeneous pronunciation of standard Italian does not exist.

During the rest of the first half of the twentieth century, the late advent of the industrial revolution, the development of industrial cities such as Milan and Turin and the spread of mass communication on national scale helped increase the use of standard Italian as a **national language**. This *Fiorentino emendato* (“amended” Florentine) was acquired by the first generation of Italian speakers as a second language, that had to be learned years after the acquisition of a dialect. These speakers reproduced traits of their dialectal *substratum* when speaking standard Italian (SI), and often preferred this new variety when talking to their children, mostly because of its **prestige** in comparison to dialects, but also due to (internal) migration. With the north-western industrial cities becoming more and more attractive for workers from the South, many families moved to the so-called “industrial triangle” (Genoa, Milan, Turin). Some of these speakers refused to speak dialect to their children and preferred Italian to facilitate integration and avoid social stigmatization.

The second generation of Italian speakers got exposed to SI with strong *substratum* interference, and did not prescriptively and systematically learn SI until the first year of school education, usually at around age six. Thus, the first available language was the result of successive and sometimes imperfect language acquisition, mostly driven by *substratum*

influence. In this first stage, when Italian started to be acquired also by uneducated speakers, the relation between the national norm and the dialects was one of diglossia without bilingualism (Sobrero 1997:412), since speakers generally spoke dialect and only in some occasions imperfect SI. This imperfect acquisition of SI was the beginning of **regional Italian** (RI) varieties, that nowadays represent the main informal and spontaneous variety for most Italian speakers. This diglossia of Italian speakers who master both SI and a dialect is also known as *lingua cum dialectis* (“language with dialects”, Cerruti 2011:12).

Starting from the third generation of Italian speakers, youngsters sometimes acquired dialect from their grandparents while speaking RI with their parents and peers. This phenomenon of younger, sometimes educated speakers code-switching to dialect when interacting with older generations is known as “olderspeak” and common in Italian families (Cerruti 2011:20). It is also common to still find older, non-educated speakers of dialects who developed an imperfect, low registered Italian for formal situations. This *Italiano popolare* (“popular Italian”), resulting from fossilized secondary acquisition (Berruto 1987:106), represents an attempt at mastering the national norm, presents strong *substratum* influence and has little to no variability (Cerruti et al. 2017: 7).

It is interesting to notice that, strictly speaking, “there are no native speakers of Standard Italian, especially with regard to phonetics, phonology and prosody” (Cerruti 2011:12, see also Cerruti et al. 2017). Benincà & Poletto (2006:9) have already noticed that monolingual Italian speakers and bilingual dialect/Italian speakers “have **different roles** in the spreading of the interference through the linguistic community”. They assume that the introduction of regionally marked features into regional Italian must start with **bilingual dialectal/Italian speakers**, but their permanence in the new variety and their transference into more formal contexts is completed by **monolingual Italian speakers** (Benincà & Poletto 2006:21; Poletto 2009).

To summarize the process that led to the current situation, we will list the main stages of the spread of RI (based on Cerruti 2011:13), a process that has also been labelled as *koineization* by Sobrero (1996):

- 1) Dialect monolingual speakers face the challenge of learning a language that has been otherwise only used for formal, written communication. They establish an idiolect, changing the recipient language mostly because of *substratum* interference;

- 2) The idiosyncratic features become fossilized. The *interlingua* is available for the next generation;
- 3) The next generation is exposed to the new grammar and acquires it as regional and dominant variety;
- 4) Educated speakers use the regional variety on a day-to-day basis, transforming a “folk” variety into an “educated” one which is the shared language of the community.
- 5) Speakers from different regions understand each other mutually, with the exception of some lexical choices which are not similar to the inventory of SI. At any moment, the origin of the speaker is clear, since phonology and prosody strongly reveal the *substratum*.

If we follow the Coserian classification (Coseriu 1980), Italo-Romance dialects are not derived from the standard language and must thus be considered as primary dialects (see also Cerruti et al. 2017). Some vernaculars that came into contact with “polished” Florentine such as Roman Italian, that was “tuscanized” already in the Renaissance (Cerruti et al. 2017:5), show less distance from the national norm, and are not necessarily considered “real” dialects by the speakers, although Roman pronunciation is still easily detectable.

Regional Italian (RI) falls into the category of tertiary dialect: it temporally followed the evolution of Fiorentino and other Italo-Romance dialects and results from the geographical differentiation of the national language following its spread in the early 20th century. While Italo-Romance dialects evolved in the same period and independently of the Tuscan variety destined to be polished to become SI, RI first arose as the result of successive and imperfect language acquisition and then became the standard native variety for most Italians (Cerruti 2011:10).

#### 4.2.1 The features of Standard and regional Italian(s)

Sociolinguistic research has proposed various models and labels to account for the high degree of variation observed in Italian, including **diatopic, diastratic, diamesic, and diaphasic** dimensions. The first major proposal was put forward by Pellegrini (1975), who identified four

varieties of Italian: dialect, regional *koiné*, regional Italian, and Standard Italian. In the following decades, several other models have been developed, all grappling with the challenge of representing diatopic variation – arguably the primary dimension of variation – while also accounting for the numerous combinations of varieties, idiolects, speech contexts, and microvariational features.

It is important to highlight that, regardless of the model adopted, the boundaries between varieties are never clear-cut. Most speakers regularly engage in code-switching between them (Berruto 1987:25)<sup>52</sup>.

Standard Italian is considered one of the most (if not the most) conservative Romance languages (Cerruti 2011:17), largely due to the historical developments outlined in the previous section. Today, it coexists in a diglossic relationship with informal, spoken regional vernaculars. Although Standard Italian has undergone some degree of *restandardization*, which has slightly lowered its register, it continues to be perceived as the most prestigious variety. Consequently, Standard Italian tends to evolve more slowly along the language-change *continuum* than other Romance languages. This may result in both a slower pace of change and a more prescriptive attitude among speakers toward the national norm.

By contrast, informal regional Italian is significantly less conservative than Standard Italian and sometimes shows greater affinities with other Romance languages.

It is crucial to note that *stratum* influence is not always unidirectional: while it is true that phonological and intonational traits are transferred from dialects to Italian, Italian also influences dialects, particularly in terms of morphological, syntactic, and lexical features (Cerruti 2009:36). In this sense, the relationship between dialects and Italian is largely bidirectional.

As this brief overview shows, linguistic innovation is more likely to emerge first in spoken regional Italian than in Standard Italian. Phonetical differences are always to perceive in any Italian register and variety<sup>53</sup>.

Some features of regional northern Italian can be summarized as follows:

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<sup>52</sup> For a brief summary of the main models proposed in the 1970s and 1980s to describe Italian varieties, see Berruto (1987:13-16). For the following decades, see Cerruti (2009), Cerruti et al. (2017).

<sup>53</sup> Interested readers can consult the *Atlante Linguistico Italiano*.

- The use of a partitive article *dei, degli, delle* ('some'), as plural indefinite, also common in national SI and generally accepted in most regional Italian varieties;
- The presence of expletive articles before proper names (*la Carla*, 'the Carla') in some Northern regions;
- The use of expletive subject clitics (see Pescarini 2022);
- The preference for compound past tense instead of the simple past;
- A distinctive tendency towards **phrasal verbs**, probably an influence of geographically near satellite-framed German languages (Masini 2005; Poletto 2009; Cerruti 2011:17; Busso & Romagno 2021:2). Some examples are those verbs of motion whose directionality gets reinforced with a preposition, as in *scendere giù* (lit. 'to descend down'), *salire su* (lit. 'to ascend up'), *uscire fuori* (lit. 'to exit out')<sup>54</sup>.

Regarding this latter point, it is noteworthy that the examples involving transparent phrasal verbs may include directed motion verbs, those we have previously identified as permitting transitivization. Given that transitive unaccusative constructions (TUCs) are less accepted in Northern varieties, we can hypothesize a correlation between phrasal verbs, where the preposition often pleonastically reinforces a directionality already encoded in the verb (Poletto 2009), and the lower acceptability of TUCs. Additional examples reveal a general preference in Northern varieties for phrasal verbs over prefixes, as in *dare indietro* ('to give back'), which is more frequently realized as *ridare* ('to give back', with the reiterative prefix *ri-*) in other regions (Cerruti 2011:17).

Although the fragmentary complexity characterizing Central and Southern vernaculars is comparable to that observed in Northern varieties, certain shared features link Southern varieties together. Some features of Central Italian varieties are listed below:

- Case assignment may vary from the standard norm. In southern Lazio, preposition drop causes direct objects to substitute prepositional objects. *menare a* (lit. 'to beat at') can be realized without preposition: *Mario lo (acc.) mena* instead of *Mario gli (dat.) mena*

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<sup>54</sup> See Benincà & Poletto (2006) for a detailed study distinguishing between transparent and non-transparent phrasal verbs in Venetan.

(‘Mario beats him’). Campanian varieties accept accusative human objects for *pensare* (‘to think of someone’) and *volere bene* (‘to love someone’), as in *Mario non la (acc.) pensa* instead of *Mario non le pensa* (‘Mario does not think of her’);

- Use of differential object marking, with a preposition before human or animate direct objects, as in Spanish: *Gianni ha visto a Maria* instead of *Gianni ha visto Maria* (lit. ‘Gianni has seen TO Maria’ instead of ‘Gianni has seen Maria’);
- Clitic doubling, which is ruled out in Standard Italian, is in some cases the default option. For example, southern Lazio Italian strongly prefers utterances such as *ce l’ho dato a Maria* (lit. ‘to her I have given it to Maria’);
- Preference for clitic climbing instead of *in-situ* clitic, for example with infinitives. Some varieties such as the Roman RI one consistently drop the infinitive ending *-re* of all three verb classes, forcing clitic climbing: Roman *lo devo vede’(-re)* instead of *devo vederlo* (‘I want to see it/him’);
- For a similar reason, preference for *stare a + INF* for progressive periphrases instead of more standard *stare + GER*: Lazio Italian *sto a scherza’(-re)* instead of standard *sto scherzando* (‘I am joking’);
- Indicative simple future tense used as hypothetical mood instead of the conditional, and without its canonical lexical meaning of indicative future: *Maria starà a casa* (lit. ‘Maria will be at home’) instead of *Maria potrebbe/dovrebbe stare a casa* (‘Maria could/should be at home’);
- In some varieties, preference for indefinite adjectives rather than the partitive article, the latter being a northern feature;
- Pronominal use of *avere* as *averci*<sup>55</sup> (‘to have’) in its full lexical meaning: *c’ho fame* instead of standard *ho fame*, ‘I am hungry’ (lit. ‘there I have hunger’);
- Less periphrastic verbs and more prefixes, such as in *ridare* vs. *dare indietro* (‘to give back’)

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<sup>55</sup> For a brief summary of clitic uses of *ci* associated to a verb, see Berruto (1987:76).

- Auxiliary selection with HAVE as only auxiliary in Campanian varieties, and BE in central Italian varieties, or person-driven (Southern Lazio, see Colasanti 2023).

As this introduction suggests, the primary source of variation in Italian is diatopic. While other languages, such as English, tend to exhibit more diastratic variation, and others, such as French, show greater diaphasic variation, the most significant differences among Italian varieties stem from geographical differentiation (Cerruti 2011:19). Moreover, Italian varieties also follow a path of diachronic variation, given that Italo-Romance dialects and Standard Italian emerged much earlier than Regional Italian (Cerruti 2009:28).

#### 4.2.2 Restandardization, *neo-standard* Italian, demotization, and *dilalia*

In this section, we first introduce and clarify several terms commonly used in Italian sociolinguistic research to describe the interference between two or more linguistic varieties. The remainder of the section is dedicated to the phenomenon of *restandardization*, which has been occurring since at least the 1980s (Berruto 1987), following a broader trend observable in several European language communities.

Applying the well-known model proposed by Thomason and Kaufman (1988) to the Italian context reveals a scenario that differs significantly from the more typical one in which a national language coexists with regional languages. In Italy, there was no minority shift from a source language (i.e., dialects) to a majority language, simply because no majority of speakers originally used the target language (Cerruti 2011:12). What occurred instead was a so-called **unilateral convergence** (ibid.) or *advergence* (*Advergenz*, in Mattheier 1996:34) from dialectal varieties toward Italian. Notably, *advergence* fosters diversification rather than unification (Cerruti 2011:12). At the same time, geographical varieties also diverged from the national standard, a phenomenon Berruto (2003:83) terms the *dialectization* of Italian. A closely related concept, *demotization* (from Ancient Greek *demos*, meaning “people”), refers to the process whereby a linguistic norm – initially restricted to limited domains and used by a small, often educated elite – becomes widespread among the general population, including non-educated speakers, without any corresponding shift in status or ideology (Cerruti 2017:16).

In other words, after functioning primarily as a literary and written language for centuries, the Italian national standard came under increasing pressure to serve as a tool for daily communication across the entire State. As a result, it underwent significant transformations, evolving into a multifunctional language (Cerruti et al. 2017:17). Over the past few generations, broader access to Standard Italian (SI) under dialectal influence has contributed to the gradual acceptance of regional elements within the standard.

This shift toward more regionalized and informal usage is known as *restandardization*, or spoken *neo-standard* Italian (Berruto 1987:23) – a variety akin to *Umgangssprache* and commonly used by educated speakers in both speech and informal writing (Berruto 1987:55 and 140ff.). *Neo-standard* Italian arose from the **diminishing geographical markedness** of regional vernaculars (Cerruti et al. 2017:3) and from a movement whereby the traditional central standard (the "norm" in a prescriptive sense) began to approximate the periphery (Berruto 1987:24). Importantly, *neo-standard* Italian is not limited to the spoken domain; it is also widely attested in journalistic language (Cerruti et al. 2017:15). As Cerruti and colleagues (2017) observe, this tendency toward de- and restandardization is part of a broader pattern common to several European languages.

Sociolinguistic scholars prefer the term *restandardization* in order to specify that the *neo-standard* variety does not threaten to substitute formal Italian, as in the *destandardization* that has been taking place in Norway<sup>56</sup> (Cerruti et al. 2017). *Neo-standard* and formal SI co-exist in a mutual relation (*dehomogenization*), with SI in a position of *dilalia*, as defined by Berruto (1989): the national norm can be used in either formal or informal conversation [*informalization* of the norm (Cerruto et al. 2017:18)]. Italian speakers can thus choose among three or more vernaculars and registers along a diamesic and diaphasic continuum: SI, *neo-standard*, RI and dialect.

As previously noted, the boundaries between linguistic varieties in Italy are not always clearly defined, and code-switching is a pervasive phenomenon. Berruto (1987) observes that

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<sup>56</sup> Here, according to Coupland & Kristiansen [2001 (*apud* Cerruti et al. 2017)], the national Norwegian norm is no longer “the one” nor “the best” anymore.

certain varieties found across the Italian peninsula carry more sociolinguistic weight than others, either because they are more widely disseminated on a national scale or because they are spoken by a greater number of individuals across a broader range of contexts. To account for this asymmetry, Berruto introduces the notion of a *continuum with densifications* (continuum con “addensamenti”, Berruto 1987:19). In this framework, the principal “thickenings” of the system correspond to two central varieties – *neo-standard* and regional Italian – that occupy a neutral, everyday position across all dimensions of variation.

Other varieties such as family language, idiolects, youth language, scientific or technical registers, as well as endangered or minority dialects are represented as less “dense” within the *continuum*. Importantly, the Italian linguistic *continuum* differs from that of creole *continua*: its varieties and boundaries are non-discrete, non-linear, and multidimensional; they are oriented but not polarized, with the densifications not necessarily located at the extremes of the *continuum* (Berruto 1987:29ff.).

Contemporary spoken Italian incorporates and legitimizes a greater number of regional features than in the past, with some traits now widely shared across the national territory (Cerruti 2011:13). For this reason, we follow Busso & Romagno’s (2021) hypothesis that certain geographically marked features and constructions, initially excluded from Standard Italian, are likely to gain acceptance in Regional Italian. Additional examples of informal features – some of them once excluded from the national norm, but later reintegrated into *neo-standard* Italian – are listed below (adapted from Cerruti et al. 2017:14 and Berruto 1987:65ff.):

- Reorganization of the verbal system, with the indicative mood taking over the conjunctive (almost “endangered” in spoken language)<sup>57</sup> and the conditional mood;
- Within the indicative, the imperfective tense is used to express not only imperfectivity, but also requests (*volevo un chilo di mele* ‘I wanted a kilogram apples’), possible worlds (*io facevo il dottore e tu il malato* ‘I was the doctor and you were the patient’, in child speech), description of dreams (*ho sognato che affogavo* ‘I dreamt I was drowning’). The

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<sup>57</sup>The verbal conjugation system inherited by Romance languages from Latin is highly complex. Therefore, simplifications in spoken language are easy to predict. In particular, Berruto (1987:71) assumes that lower classes who do not master the formal language have morphological reasons to avoid the thematic vocalic alternation needed to use the conjunctive.

imperfective indicative is also used to replace both the conjunctive and the conditional mode in hypothetical constructions and the future tense in the indirect speech (*ha detto che veniva* (lit. ‘he said he came’, meaning ‘he said he would come’);

- The past participle has replaced the simple past in almost every region (with the exception of some southern varieties);
- The future tense is used less and less as a lexical future and more often as hypothetical;
- General acceptability of Differential Object Marking;
- Simplification and reorganization of the pronominal system with syncretic and homonymous/polysemous forms<sup>58</sup>;
- Reorganization of the normative SVO word order and information structure through left and right dislocations, clitics and presentative *c'è* (‘there is’);
- Polyvalent *che* (“that”) used in nearly every relative construction, completives, presentative readings, being a real universal connective (see Berruto 1987:69 on the complexity of investigating the uses of *che* and Berruto 1987:128 ff. on the *continuum* of the relative clause in standard and spoken Italian);
- Clitic doubling generally accepted on national level; clitic climbing spreading from the Centre-South to the rest of the peninsula;
- Spread of an insistent, sometimes redundant use of doubled pronominal clitics *ci* and *ne*, which are losing pronominal value and sometimes simply belong to the verb as a semanticized morpheme, as in *di questo tema ne ho già parlato*, literally translatable as ‘of this topic I have already spoken of this’;
- Presence of double-focused interrogatives, formerly excluded in standard Italian, clearly an influence of English *wh*-structures: *chi fa cosa?* (‘who does what?’) – or, more generally, of shared continental preferences that Berruto calls *Standard Average European* (1987:90);
- Lexical agreement instead of grammatical agreement, in both directions: *un gruppo di ragazzi hanno visto* (plural) instead of singular *ha visto* (‘a group of boys have seen’ instead

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<sup>58</sup> The Italian personal pronoun system is considered to be the most complicated and unstable within the Romance scenario (Cerruti 2009:65 ff.; Berruto 1987:74), because of the coexistence and overlapping of many different forms. Nearly every regional variety and *neo-standard* utterances tend to a simplification of the pronominal system, usually selecting the masculine form for the two genders and/or for the same singular and plural person.

of ‘has seen’), but also *sono una di quelle persone che si alza presto* (singular) instead of plural ‘si alzano’ (‘I am one of those people who gets up early’ instead of ‘people who get up early’);

- Preference for paratactic instead of hypotactic sentential structures, while written (formal) Italian has shown a strong tendency towards long, hierarchically articulated sentences for centuries. A general impoverishment in the lexicon of conjunctions has been noticed (Berruto 1987).

After listing some of the main traits that distinguish *neo-standard* Italian from the standard written norm of the early twentieth century, two important observations must be made. First, the term *simplification*, often used to describe the linguistic developments of recent decades, does not imply a loss of prestige or expressive capacity. Several of the tendencies observed – such as the reorganization of the pronominal system, the grammaticalization of clitics, and shifts in word order – are part of broader language change phenomena also attested in other Romance languages. In fact, spoken French is often seen as a "trailblazer" for many such innovations (Berruto 1987:84). In this sense, the emergence of *neo-standard* features does not threaten the prestige of the standard language, particularly as they coexist with Standard Italian within the *continuum* previously outlined.

Secondly, it is important to emphasize that *non-standard* features entering the national language rarely represent genuine innovations. On the contrary, they are typically ancient, endogenous, and often pan-Italian or pan-Romance structures that had previously been excluded from the standard (Cerruti 2009:35). This exclusion was due to the perception of Standard Italian as a **formal**, sometimes even unfamiliar variety, and to the **prescriptive attitudes** of earlier generations of speakers (Cerruti 2017:14; Berruto 1987:101). The innovation lies not in the features themselves, but in the change in their *acceptability* and perceived *neutrality*, both of which are consequences of restandardization and the decline of formality (Cerruti 2011:18).

The re-emergence of non-standard features is also due to the blurred boundaries between standard and non-standard forms. A *continuum* exists between formal, written Standard Italian and the more colloquial forms of Regional Italian, allowing speakers to fluidly draw on

expressions and structures from across the spectrum (Cerruti 2011:14; Berruto 1987:27ff.). Interestingly, younger speakers are often unaware that they are using regionally marked features when speaking Standard Italian – especially if they lack proficiency in dialect. Unlike their parents and grandparents, they do not always have a dialect as a clear *substratum* source, having instead acquired a regional variety that is itself a hybrid between dialect and the standard. As Cerruti notes, “all things being equal, the older speakers are obviously more aware of *substratum* interferences, while the younger speakers are less so. As a result, the former tend to avoid using these [regionally marked, GC] features, especially in formal style, while the latter may not reject their usage even in formal style” (Cerruti 2011:21, see also Poletto 2009).

Sombrero (1997:412) makes a useful distinction between *bilingualism with diglossia*, in which speakers are consistently aware of the differences and boundaries between Standard Italian, dialect, and/or Regional Italian, and *bilingualism without diglossia*, characteristic of industrial centers, where both codes are widespread but lack functional differentiation. This latter phenomenon is particularly relevant for our case study, as it may account for the increased acceptance – especially among younger speakers – of regionally marked features and constructions such as transitive unaccusatives (TUCs): “(...) alcuni tratti precedentemente marcati per colloquialità o per stigma sociale sono stati catturati dalla norma ed hanno perso, o stanno perdendo, marcatezza<sup>59</sup>” (Berruto 1987:24). This phenomenon has already been highlighted in Busso & Romagno’s (2021) empirical study on TUCs, which shows that speakers who are not proficient in dialect tend to mix grammars, keeping RI and SI grammars both activated and thus allowing for regionally marked constructions to enter production in SI.

This assumption is confirmed if we observe that **regional markedness is decreasing**, due to the fact that younger speakers are less aware of what is “standard” and what is “regional,” and show a higher acceptance for regional traits (Cerruti 2011:23).

Some regional varieties have been elected to national languages in specific contexts, following diamesic and diaphasic variation. As an example, Roman regional Italian has become the language of young Internet users: especially on social media, younger speakers use the

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<sup>59</sup> ‘Some traits previously marked for colloquiality or social stigma have been seized by the norma and have lost, or are losing, markedness’.

Roman variety to interact in chats, comments and posts as an informal, nation-wide variety (Scholz 2003:135)<sup>60</sup>. Similarly, certain idiolects have emerged among young speakers in industrial and metropolitan contexts, particularly in cities that experienced significant internal migration flows, such as Turin. In these settings, the children of southern Italian migrants have consciously adopted selected phonological features of their heritage varieties and integrated them into their personal speech as a way to signal their origin. From a variationist perspective, these idiolects, which are often shared within small peer groups as markers of identity (and sometimes as a means of excluding outsiders from communication), are characterized by a high degree of instability, limited or no grammatical codification, and considerable variability (Berruto 1987:25).

As Berruto (1987) points out, it is extremely rare for *neo-standard* Italian to incorporate structures that run counter to general pan-Italian preferences. Almost every accepted feature aligns with and reinforces Italo-Romance patterns of word formation, information structure, topicalization, clitic placement, pronominal restructuring, and so on. A notable exception is the increasing incorporation of foreign words into the lexicon without adaptation to Italian morphophonological rules (Berruto 1987:90).

Additional factors facilitating *substratum* retention have been outlined by Cerruti (2011:16) and Busso & Romagno (2021:6), among others, and include the following:

- **Naturalness and transparency;**
- **System adequacy;**
- **Broad coverage**, in the sense that the phenomenon retained in one variety must already be present in near/similar contexts;
- **Congruity with innovational tendencies** of the recipient language (SI), in the sense that coinage must be semantically compatible and effortlessly understandable by the community of speakers;
- **Low statistical competition** with equivalent structures;

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<sup>60</sup> Youth idiolects are not only an Italian phenomenon: several studies have been carried out involving *Kiezdeutsch* (lit. “neighborhood German”, see Freywald et al.2011, a.o.) in Berlin and other German metropolises, as well as a Spanish-Romanian variety arisen in the last years among youngsters with Romanian parents living in Spanish cities (Buzila 2016).

- **Filling of structural gaps** in the inventory of the recipient language.

### *Transitive Unaccusative Constructions and their sociolinguistic background*

With the notions we have just summarized in this subchapter, we can analyze the case of TUCs in the light of the sociolinguistic background and the high variational complexity they appear in. In particular, the aforementioned idea that *substratum* interference can serve as a means of filling a morphosyntactic gap appears to apply well to our case. As discussed earlier (see §3.1), Latin was a detransitivizing language that expressed argument structure primarily through case marking on nominals. When case inflection and the system of deponent verbs were lost, the reflexive marker SE came to be adopted across the Romance languages as the default means of expressing anticausativity. By contrast, the opposite derivation – namely, the (direct) causative – was, in some instances, left without a clear morphosyntactic expression.

While Northern varieties likely compensated for this gap through their tendency to employ phrasal verbs (Poletto 2009), it is plausible that speakers in the South resorted to borrowing transitive unaccusatives from their *substratum* languages. This strategy may have been perceived as a more immediate and economical alternative to lengthier or more formal constructions, such as periphrastic expressions (*fare* + INF, ‘let’ + INF), or lexically marked verbs (*estrarre*, “extract” instead of *uscire*, “go out”). In informal contexts, these alternative constructions were statistically less competitive in the South than in the North. Furthermore, the proximity to regional varieties in which such constructions were already grammatical likely facilitated the promotion of TUCs to a supraregional level (Busso & Romano 2021:5).

The diffusion of these constructions was also supported by their relative **transparency**, **economy**, and **immediacy**. They rely on **familiar syntactic strategies** for argument realization and do not violate existing meanings or introduce entirely new semantic content. In the case of transitive uses of *scendere* and *salire* (‘go down’ and ‘go up’), the presence of canonical and fully acceptable path-denoting direct objects in the standard language (e.g., *salire le scale*, ‘climb the stairs’) may facilitate the extension of transitive patterns to new objects in informal registers, as suggested by the Accademia della Crusca and by Busso & Romagno (2021:8).

The availability of such structures, which are fully grammatical in Standard Italian and other Romance languages, may support the emergence of structurally analogous forms in colloquial usage. This observation confirms that the presence and accessibility of comparable constructions can serve as a model for the integration of *stratum* features into national varieties.

The ideas presented in this section may be integrated into the framework of “high-dimensional conceptual spaces,” which represent the conceptual distribution of transitivized directed motion verbs across interdependent varieties of Italian grammar (Busso & Romagno 2021:117, Figure 1):

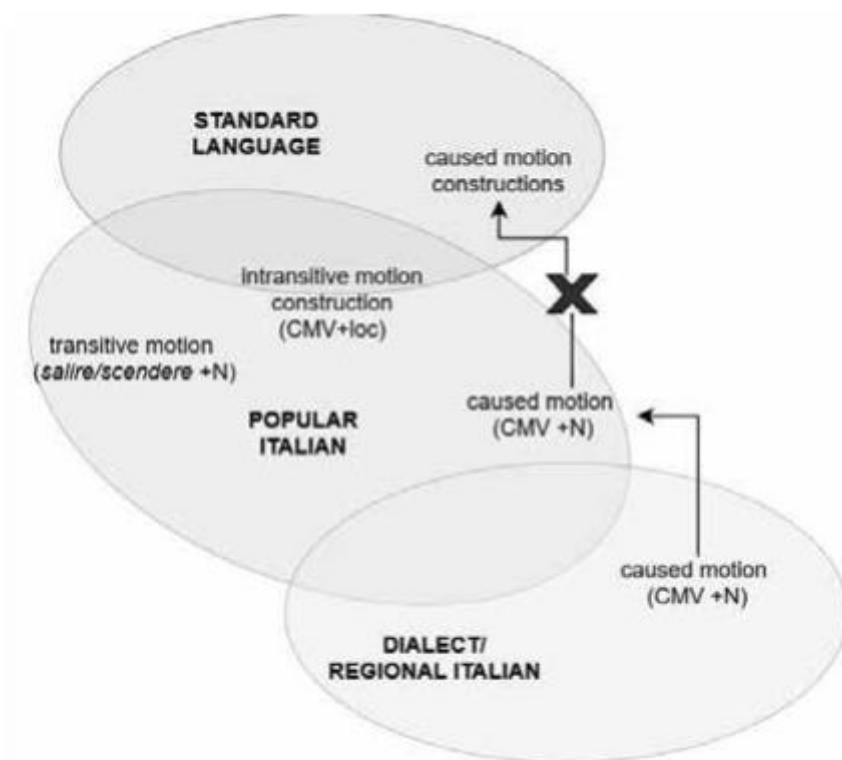


Figure 5 Conceptual spaces illustrating the coverage for caused motion constructions (apud Busso&Romagno 2021)

The overlapping areas represent the *continuum* between different varieties, indicating that the transmission of features from one variety to the other (in this case from the bottom to the top) is indeed possible, and follows the principles we have listed.

Romagno's investigations (2021, 2023) into regional Calabrian also explored the role of dialectal proficiency and sociolinguistic change across speaker generations. In these studies, all stimuli involving inanimate object themes were consistently judged as acceptable, while animate object themes were rejected by middle-aged and older participants (see §3.2.4). Only the youngest age group accepted animate objects in caused motion constructions. This generational shift may be interpreted as evidence of innovation within contemporary spoken Italian: an existing **archaic dialectal pattern** is being transferred into the regional norm, not merely through lexical calquing, but through an extension to novel semantic and interpretive contexts. This is consistent with Benincà & Poletto's (2006) observations on dialectal proficiency and its influence on the spread of regionally marked features in spoken Italian.

Busso & Romagno (2021) further show that younger southern speakers who self-assess as **imperfect dialect speakers** are those who engage most frequently in code-mixing between dialect and Italian, thereby introducing *substandard* features into their standard Italian production. As they note: "this [caused motion] construction has entered substandard Italian from the code-mixing of proficient speakers of southern dialects" (Busso & Romagno 2021:19). By contrast, fully balanced bilinguals – speakers who acquired both dialect and standard Italian through parallel and independent processes – tend to maintain a clearer separation between the two grammatical systems and are more effective in avoiding code-mixing. Younger speakers, however, often lack full dialectal competence or live in environments where standard Italian is dominant. For them, the prevailing everyday variety is regional Italian, which is particularly susceptible to both bottom-up influence (from dialect to the standard language) and top-down influence (from the standard to the local variety), fostering hybrid forms and increased code-mixing.

In this sociolinguistic context, young southern speakers encounter structures such as TUCs in their dialectal *substratum* and transfer them into spoken Italian. The increasingly blurred boundaries between dialect and standard varieties facilitate this process, enabling the integration of such features into regional norms of spoken Italian

### 4.3 Summary

To conclude, this brief overview of the sociolinguistic aspects of Italian variational complexity has shown that contemporary Italian registers and varieties are primarily shaped by diatopic variation, but also significantly influenced by diamesic and diastratic factors. The vast majority of Italian speakers command regional varieties that are becoming progressively less regionally specific due to ongoing processes of **restandardization**. Today's spoken Italian can be described as a form of *Umgangssprache*, often referred to as *neo-standard* Italian, which results from “a process of downward convergence that rests on the expansion of Italian as a spoken language” (Cerruti et al. 2017:16).

The imperfect acquisition of Standard Italian (SI) at the beginning of the 20th century led to the emergence of regional varieties acquired by subsequent generations under strong *substratum* influence. At the same time, dialect use began to decline, especially in urban centers. The spread of regional Italian (RI) as a native language resulted in a lower degree of metalinguistic awareness among younger speakers, allowing regionally marked features to be unconsciously incorporated into spoken national Italian, where they now enjoy greater acceptance than in the past.

Phonetic and phonological variation is widely accepted even in formal contexts, as a truly neutral pronunciation of SI does not exist. Interestingly, while morphosyntactic and lexical features tend to lose their geographical markedness over time, there is no unified phonological center (Berruto 1987:96). Regional phonetic traits remain stable and are broadly accepted at the national level, largely because they rarely hinder mutual intelligibility or cause communication issues.

Although the expansion of a national language over a territory previously characterized by dialect monolingualism is a phenomenon observed in several European contexts, the speed at which this process unfolded in Italy is unique. In less than a century, Italian speakers transitioned from dialect monolingualism to bilingualism (Italian–dialect), and eventually to Italian monolingualism – at least in major urban centers (Berruto 1987:55). This rapid sociolinguistic shift placed significant pressure on literary, formal, *ancien régime* Italian (Berruto 1987:55), which, after centuries of relative stability, was suddenly required to serve as the everyday spoken language of millions. This led to the processes of *demotization*, *restandardization*, and *dialectization* described in this chapter.

Restandardization has produced a less formal spoken and written Italian, with certain regional features being promoted to the national level. The emergence of the *neo-standard* does not pose a threat to formal Standard Italian; rather, a relationship of *dilalia* exists between the two. A speaker's degree of proficiency in one or more varieties, including dialects, is a good predictor of the extent to which interference may occur. Younger speakers, in particular, tend to code-switch more frequently, and to import an increasing number of geographically specific features into the national language without being aware of the process.

The micro-comparative approach proposed by Berruto (2009) and Benincà & Damonte (2009) seems to perfectly account for the coexistence of two (or more) microgrammars within the speaker's idiolect. This model posits that "variation regards specificities between two otherwise identical grammars" (Cerruti 2011:16). This is particularly applicable to younger speakers with imperfect dialect proficiency, who simultaneously activate and mix dialectal and Italian grammatical systems. Standard Italian remains more conservative and has exhibited greater resistance to linguistic change than Romance languages, Italo-Romance dialects, and regional varieties (Cerruti 2011:17). For this reason, it is likely that variation first arises within regional or dialectal grammars – which enjoy greater prescriptive flexibility – and is subsequently integrated into the national language through the processes of restandardization.

The integration of formerly geographically marked features, such as TUCs, does not necessarily indicate that these features are innovations *per se*, as confirmed by the fact that similar structures are present in every historical stage in the development of Italo-Romance varieties. Rather, they often represent archaic structures that are now being incorporated into less marked, more informal registers. This process is shaped by a range of morphosyntactic factors, including perceived naturalness, compatibility with pan-Italic models, strategies of economy, and the presence of structural gaps in the inventory of available constructions. The **accommodation of TUCs** into informal spoken Italian is thus governed by these and other constraints, and it follows a broader pattern observed in the integration of various features within the ongoing *restandardization* of the language.

## 5. Empirical investigation

### 5.1 Introduction

The final chapter of this dissertation is dedicated to an empirical study conducted with the aim of identifying whether the production and acceptability of TUCs relies on positive reinforcement from **dialectal proficiency**. Furthermore, some independent variables such as age and city of origin, as well as more strictly linguistic variables such as **perfectivity** and **subject animacy**, and their correlation to the acceptability rate of TUCs, are considered.

Our formal analysis of some salient features of transitivized verbs of directed motion has highlighted some variables enhancing their acceptability. Thus, Romagno (2021, 2023, 2025) as well as Busso & Romagno (2021) have pointed out in their empirical studies that the low potential agentivity attributed to the theme object favors acceptability and production of caused motion constructions in regional and dialectal varieties, but young speakers of Italian show a new tendency of extending this acceptability to theme objects with higher potential agentivity (see also 3.2.4). Our analysis, based on the Transitivity Theory (Hopper & Thompson 1980), furtherly investigates the Transitivity degree of transitivized unaccusative clauses and their sensitivity to subject animacy and effectiveness, degree of control over the object, directedness of the caused event, affectedness of the object, individuation of the participants (i.e. definiteness, a.o.), etc.

The data gathered for the tasks presented here are mostly from the province of Latina, which presents some peculiarities from (socio)linguistic perspective (see 4.1). To the best of our knowledge, the only inquiry ever conducted in the province is the one described by Stefinlongo (2003), which contains a sociolinguistic questionnaire of perceived dialectal influence in the province, but does not entail the examination of formal features. The Agro Pontino offers an almost unknown, intriguing field of research because of its past and present history of (internal) migration.

Two tasks were chosen for this study: a **spoken production task** based on Lara Bermejo's (2018, 2020) empirical investigation of caused motion constructions in western Spanish, and a **written acceptability task** resembling Busso's (2021, 2023) and Busso &

Romagno's (2021) tests for dialectal and spoken Italian grammaticality judgments. For the first task, we focused on **perfective vs. imperfective aspect**, with the aim of finding out which one favors the production of caused motion constructions (Lara Bermejo 2020).

For the second task, the variable tested was **subject animacy** as a means of confirming our hypothesis that TUCs are high in Transitivity. The data was analyzed quantitatively. Both studies focused on the production and evaluation of constructions with the main four verbs of directed motion encountered in our analysis: *entrare*, 'go in', *uscire*, 'go out', *salire*, 'go up', and *scendere*, 'go down'.

## 5.2 Hypotheses

The main two questions faced by this empirical investigation can be summed up as follows:

- Is the acceptability of TUCs also possible **without positive dialectal influence**? I.e. have TUCs possibly become a feature of *neo-standard* Italian, or are they still marked as dialectal feature with a clear geographical origin?
- Which formal variables dictate and influence the degree of production and acceptability of TUCs? Specifically, do features such as **verbal aspect** and **subject animacy** have an effect on the reception, production and acceptability of TUCs?

The former question can also be formulated as follows: do we find speakers in the province of Latina who are not proficient in dialect and accept TUCs? To answer the latter question, two different parts of the empirical investigation have been developed, which are illustrated in the next pages. Different hypotheses surge from the research questions:

- Speakers with lower dialectal proficiency may evaluate the target sentences as less acceptable due to a lack of dialectal reinforcement, or
- No significant differences may emerge based on dialectal proficiency, suggesting that the TUCs phenomenon has already been integrated into (or excluded from) informal spoken Italian and has lost its geographical markedness.

Regarding participants' age, the study may reveal:

- Higher acceptability rates among younger speakers, indicating an ongoing linguistic change and the incorporation of *substandard* features into regional Italian, or
- Lower acceptability rates among younger speakers, suggesting the loss of geographically restricted features in favor of pan-Italian alternatives, together with lower dialectal proficiency in the last generations, or
- No significant differences across age groups, indicating neither an innovation nor a loss of features.

Another factor that may influence results is the distinction between speakers proficient in both the national standard and the regional variety - these being relatively similar - and those who are also proficient in an Italo-Romance dialect typologically further from the adapted Tuscan variety. Given that multiple varieties are attested in the province - including regional Italian, Venetan dialects, and Ciociarian dialects, among others - the typological differences among these varieties may also play a role in shaping individual idiolects.

Additionally, the province offers insights into the differentiation between **perfect diglossic speakers**, i.e., those who are balanced Italian-dialect bilinguals, and **imperfect dialect speakers**.

The transitivization of unaccusatives as dialectal southern feature is not an innovation, but an archaic feature first excluded from the national norm modeled on Florentine during centuries. The re-appearance of substandard features caused by the spread of *neo-standard* Italian (Berruto 1987) in the last four decades has brought to the requalification of dialectal features to regional informal standards, with the loss of geographical markedness. If this is also the case of caused motion constructions, we should expect younger speakers, who are not proficient in dialect at all or not proficient in a dialect which tolerates these structures, to find them acceptable.

Further questions develop and can be specified starting from these two main investigation quests, and will be discussed in the next sections.

## 5.3 Part 1: Syntactic priming in induced spoken production task

### 5.3.1 Method

The first task, aimed at registering spoken production, is built on simple videos recorded with a smartphone. The evaluation of the results follows qualitative analysis purposes, as the answers on the videos were part of a broader conversation held in informal, spoken Italian. The speakers were partly asked to (metalinguistically) comment some choices heard in the scenes they had seen.

The maximal length of a single video did not exceed thirty seconds. Five videos were shown to the participants, who were anonymously recorded. The videos, showed on an iPad, presented the participants with one basic activity at a time. The scenes were registered with a high-definition mobile-phone camera with the help of a few volunteers. Two of the five videos were mute, two contained a short dialogue with a phrasal verb such as *portare fuori*, ‘take out’, and one contained a priming transitivized unaccusative such as *entrare la macchina*, lit. ‘go the car in’. The registered dialogues were composed of short sentences expressed in the present tense form, which is a *default* one for aspect in spoken Italian (i.e., can express both progressive or habitual reading). Compared to Lara Bermejo’s (2018, 2020) investigation, the videos in this empirical study presented the participants with spoken dialogues, one of which including a **syntactic priming**. This choice depended on the peripheral status and the rare use of TUCs in spoken Italian in the province. In fact, without a priming there had been no confirmation whether speakers who do not produce TUCs also rule them out in their variety. The principle of research which uses syntactic priming is that speakers can only repeat structures they find acceptable (more on this in the next subsection).

In order to avoid too various answers, the participants were shown one to two written tokens, which were common substantives, to use in their sentences. The content of the videos, shown in random order, is reassumed in the following Table.

<b>Content of dialogue</b>	<b>Represented Scene</b>	<b>Given tokens</b>
Mute	Young woman opens the fridge; takes some meat out of it; puts it on a plate	<i>carne</i> ('meat')
Mute	Young woman climbs the stairs with a grocery bag and a pasta box in her hand	<i>spesa</i> ('groceries'), <i>scale</i> ('stairs')
Canonical transitive	Woman goes down the stairs; stops; asks a young woman to bring down ( <i>portare giù</i> ) the keys; young woman descends the stairs with keys and handles them to first woman; first woman walks away with keys	<i>chiavi</i> ('keys'), <i>scale</i> ('stairs')
Canonical transitive	Man asks woman with a dog where she is headed; woman answers she will take out ( <i>portare fuori</i> ) the dog for ten minutes; woman leaves with dog	<i>cane</i> ('dog')
Transitive unaccusative	Woman receives a call in her car; answers she will 'go the car in' ( <i>entrare la macchina</i> ) and then call back; car enters the garage	<i>macchina</i> ('car'), <i>garage</i>

Table 9 Content of the videos – Part 1

Before the session started, some basic information about the participants was registered. After anonymous personal information such as gender, age, and educational level, few questions were dedicated to the assessment of dialectal and Italian proficiency. These questions were formulated as follows:

- Which city are you from?
- Do you speak a dialect or more than one? If yes, which?
- In which language or dialect do you speak with your family and friends?

- In which language or dialect do you think, count and dream?

The normative **proficiency in standard** Italian was evaluated through the educational level, but also through oral communication with the interviewer, as the conversations lasted longer than the minimal length needed to watch the videos and answer some basic questions. Especially with older participants, the interview lasted longer, since small talk and small anecdotes were usually included. **Dialectal proficiency** was considered medium-high when the participants referred to actively speak one or more dialects in their informal everyday communication, and when they think or dream.

Since the variable we wanted to examine in the test was (im)perfectivity, after each video the interviewer asked what the person in the video had done or was doing, alternating these two formulations from participant to participant. The tokens given for the participants' answer mainly described some objects seen in the videos, and were meant to semantically concentrate the participants' attention on the action performed by the actor in the video. Our pilot tests had revealed that, without these tokens, some participants would have described other objects in the scene without producing any utterance about the action performed in the video, i.e. any evidence either for or against the target constructions. The target questions alternatively asked by the interviewer in the piloting phase (June 2021-July 2022) were:

- (1) a. Cosa ha fatto la ragazza/la persona nel video?  
'What has the girl/the person in the video done?'
- b. Cosa sta facendo la ragazza/la persona nel video?  
'What is the girl/the person in the video doing?'

The pilot studies revealed some problems concerning the methodology, mainly due to the register and geographical area in which the investigation took place. Recall that spoken Italian, especially in southern and central regions, has been considered a low-prestige variety for decades, and **normative pressure** can in some cases still lead to a more controlled and less spontaneous production when speakers perceive that their language is being analyzed. Thus, although the interviewer specified before beginning the sessions that our interest lied in spoken, informal production, especially for older people the presence of a device showing them the videos and another device recording them may have automatically activated their "controlled" and more formal Italian grammar.

During the piloting, it also emerged that the progressive construction with *stare* + *GERUND* as in *sta facendo* ('[she] is doing') automatically triggered more formal production, since this construction is perceived as much more standard and normatively correct than the one with *stare a* + *INFINITIVE* typically used in the province of Latina and in Lazio in general. The same applies to the lexical choice between *cosa* and *che*, 'what', the former being more formal:

- (2) a. Cosa sta facendo la ragazza? (standard Italian)  
       what is doing the girl  
       b. Che sta a fa' la ragazza? (regional Italian)  
       what is at do the girl  
       'What is the girl doing?'

For this reason, the structure normally and canonically employed to encode durativity, i.e. the gerundive construction in (2a), had to be excluded from the methodology of the study.

### *Methodological note on syntactic priming*

The two parts of the study presented in this work rely on two different methods, and also on two different perspectives regarding the investigation of the mental representation of knowledge on language. Since Chomsky (1980) has brought about the need of clarifying how mental representation works in order to better understand knowledge of language, the debate about proper methodologies has been vivid. Chomsky proposed grammaticality judgements, as used in our written survey, as a mean of excluding the bias of language processing from the analysis of knowledge of language, understood as the expression of the uniquely human faculty of language (1986, a.o.).

In the last decades, studies about semantic priming (Sweklej & Balas 2024) have inspired the investigation of the effects of syntactic priming and their adequacy to inform about knowledge of language. A priming is considered to be syntactic when it triggers the **repetition of a syntactic structure**, even if the lexical items, phonetic realizations or even some grammatical categories such as tense are changed or replaced by others. It has been demonstrated that utterances with prepositional objects (such as 'the teacher gives the book to the student') prime further production of prepositional objects, while double-object sentences prime the realization of utterances with double-object sentences ('the teacher gave the boy the

book’). This evidence should confirm that speakers are familiar with the syntactic and processing difference between the two structures, and maintain the one already given for economic, computational and adaptational reasons (Pickering & Branigan 1999:140). Furtherly, the reproduction of one primed structure instead of the unprimed implies that knowledge of language presupposes the difference between the two.

Structural priming is considered to be an effective method of investigating uncommon or **marginally grammatical constructions** (Vega Vilanova & Fischer 2025: 13), such as valency coercion and improvised causation strategies (Busso 2020), as it furnishes input that would otherwise mostly be absent in speakers’ production and thus impossible to investigate.

The oral task of our study entailed priming, since one of the dialogues in the videos shown to the participants directly presented a caused motion construction (*un attimo, entro la macchina e ti richiamo*, lit. ‘just a second, I go the car in and then call you back’) together with the scene of a woman driving her car into the garage just after answering the phone. As highlighted by several scholars, it is not always possible to clearly distinguish a semantic from a syntactic primer (Pickering & Branigan 1999). Syntactic priming relies on the assumption that the act of processing a particular structure facilitates processing a subsequent utterance with a similar or related form (Pickering & Branigan 1999:136). This sort of priming regards the so-called “lemma” stratum, i.e. the encoding and decoding of syntactic information. When an utterance is primed, the computational load is considered to be less challenging, and the participants in a dialogue are brought to coordinate their language, especially in the short term (in which case we can consider syntactic priming as a sort of local syntactic consistency, Pickering & Branigan 1999:137).

Cognitive science furtherly distinguishes between those theories that keep comprehension and production apart as two different procedures, and those which establish a correspondence between producing and receiving and utterance, thus sharing the same syntactic form. Syntactic priming would confirm the latter theory, since the repetition of a given structure shows resemblance and acceptability of one and the same shared process, both in encoding and decoding. In other words, syntactic priming would cause the language processor to recognize a **relationship** between two sentences, thus being informative about **categorization** (Pickering & Branigan 1999:140).

The adequacy of both syntactic priming and grammaticality judgements as a mean of investigating language processing is a debated topic in cognitive linguistics (Fischer et al. 2022; Vega Vilanova & Fischer 2025). Chomsky's theories rely on grammaticality judgements as the most effective investigation of knowledge of language, thus excluding the punctuality of single processing effects, which are not informative about knowledge of language. On the opposite, some cognitive linguists who rely on syntactic priming (Pickering & Branigan 1999:140) discard grammaticality judgements, believed to be also influenced by language processing, and favor priming as the most suitable strategy for different reasons. Firstly, syntactic priming does not activate any explicit knowledge, while the context in which grammaticality judgements are collected may provoke conscious strategies which are "obviously prone to bias" (Pickering & Branigan 1999:140); secondly, a grammaticality judgment on one utterance would not say enough about the acceptability of related sentences.

The first part of our empirical study involves priming as the only possible chance of triggering the production of TUCs. As we have described, these structures are **peripheral** in spoken Italian, and undergo massive concurrence by synonymic constructions considered both less marked and more generally acceptable. The choice of priming TUC utterances thus relies on the high availability of alternatives which are at any time given to the speakers and active in their spontaneous production, such as causative periphrases, phrasal verbs and canonical transitive predicates. This high number of concurrent structures could determine a total absence of evidence either for or against TUCs.

### 5.3.2 Participants

The first part of the experimental study registered the participation of twenty-seven speakers. They were recruited mostly through personal communication and common acquaintance. Younger participants were interviewed mostly in Pontinia and Latina in the late afternoon hours among groups of teenagers and young adults chatting on the streets or in the queue for the hairdressing salon. Older participants were mostly interviewed in senior centers, or at home. Middle-aged participants were interviewed in bars and restaurants, or at home. A small part of the interviews took part in touristic hotspots, such as the ferry to Ponza.

The participants were mainly balanced for gender (15 women, 12 men) and their age range varied from 9 years to 79 years of age, with a mean of 43 years. Since the main background question motivating this work was to establish whether the use of transitive unaccusatives in the spoken (over)regional norm is an innovation, the participants were divided into four age groups:

Age Group	Number of participants
20 years or younger	8
between 21 and 29	7
Between 50 and 69	6
Over 70	6

Table 10 Age groups - Part 1

Almost all the participants were born and/or raised in the province of Latina, with some exceptions:

- Two young speakers (23 and 19 years old) from the near province of Frosinone, of which only the older actively spoke the *ciociaro* dialect;
- Three 27-year-old speakers from Rome, all with academic degrees, one of which was an Italian-Chinese bilingual;
- Three participants (63 years of age or older) respectively from Tuscany, Naples and Sicily, had moved to the province at a later age.

As for the dialects spoken by the participants, only two young female participants declared to not actively speak any variety other than (regional) Italian; all other participants reported at least one dialect they considered themselves proficient in. Nevertheless, the dominant variety for most speakers, i.e. the one in which they think, count, dream, and spontaneously speak with their families and friends, was **regional Italian**. It is interesting to notice that speakers from bigger centers such as Latina and Aprilia considered themselves as specifically dominating the **Roman** variety, while speakers from the rural areas, especially the ones from those cities which existed far before the reclamation of lands of the 1930s, declared to speak the *lepino* or *laziale* variety, which corresponds to the regional variety of Southern Lazio, strongly influenced by Ciociaria dialects.

In general, speakers from the more recent cities, the ones founded by the Fascist regime in the 1930s, tend to **identify** with the Capital city and imitate its phonetical features, while speakers whose families already spoke a different dialect before settling in the province tend to define their (linguistic) identity with their more ancient origins.

### 5.3.3 Results

Out of the twenty-seven participants whose data was registered from the comments on the videos and the informal (metalinguistic) communication that followed, only **one** clear construction with a TUC was produced. The sentence had been primed by a token heard in a video, i.e. by the scene of the woman driving her car into the garage after speaking to someone on the phone. The priming sentence was formulated as follows:

(3) Pronto?... sì, entro la macchina e ti richiamo.

Lit. ‘Hello... yes, I’ll go in the car and then call you back’

The participants saw a video in which the woman, already sitting in her car, answers the phone, produces the priming utterance, and then drives the car into the garage. The elements given to formulate the answer were the words “car” and “garage”. The participant who produced a TUC had been asked the question “what does the woman in the video do?” with a simple present tense. She was our youngest participant, 8.5 years old at the time of the survey, living in a rural area in Pontinia, with frequent exposure to Privernese (a dialect close to the Ciociaria group, with grammatical TUCs) through her grandmother. The young participant declared to not actively speak dialect herself. The speaker only hears dialect from older relatives, but speaks regional Italian with her mother and other younger relatives, and peers. Her utterance was formulated as follows:

(4) Che... questa signora stava parlando al telefono... però ha detto che doveva richiamare l’altra persona dopo aver entrato la macchina dentro al garage.

Lit. ‘that... this lady was talking on the phone... but she has said that she had to call back the other person after having entered the car into the garage’

(15721.1a)

The whole utterance contains some of the traits that we have listed as typical of *neo-standard* spoken Italian, such as the use of connective *che* as polyfunctional discourse marker, the use of the imperfect tense for short storytelling, and the complex preposition *dentro a*.

The TUC is inserted into an infinitive construction built with the preposition *dopo* ('after') and a past tense with auxiliary have (*aver*), which also signals the high transitivity of the construction. If we consider that the speaker has an passive dialect knowledge, since she is exposed to a dialect which allows TUCs but only dominant in standard (regional) Italian, we could suppose that the primed evidence shows a *substratum* dialect interference in her standard production of which she herself is not completely aware. When asked about this utterance at the end of the interview, the speaker reported that such a construction is not strongly marked in her everyday language, and that she often hears similar constructions from both older and younger speakers.

Another interesting utterance, produced by a 69-year-old participant, was recorded: after watching the same scene, i.e. the primed car-scene, he used the verb *entrare* but then quickly corrected himself, substituting it with a transitive phrasal alternative. The question had been formulated with a past participle:

- (5) Ha risposto al telefono al marito... che forse il marito gli avrà chiesto “dove sei”... ha detto “entro la -- metto dentro la macchina e ti chiamo”... ha detto “ti richiamo”.  
Lit. ‘She has answered her husband on the phone.... That perhaps her husband will have asked her “where are you”... she has said “I enter the – put the car inside and then call you”... she has said “I’ll call you back”

(22724.6)

Once more, features of the informal communication are identifiable as the speaker chooses the default oblique masculine pronoun *gli* referring to the lady in the video, and uses the indicative future tense as hypothetical. The transitive alternative *metto dentro* (lit. ‘(I) put inside’) phonetically followed the first choice *entro la* (lit. ‘go in the[feminine]’) without pauses and lets us suppose that *entro la* was going to be followed by the direct object *macchina* (‘car’ [feminine]), although this speculation could not be confirmed. This participant had high-school education and descended from a Venetan family, i.e. had been exposed in his childhood to a dialect in which it is not common to use *entrare* as a transitive verb. That fact that he had not a

Venetan, but Lazio accent, and admitted that he hears TUCs in his everyday life, could mean that the exposure to the Venetan dialect of his parents has been less dominant than the Lazio varieties of the province where he grew up and lived for almost 70 years.

Apart from the TUC produced by the youngest participant and from this quick re-formulation by the older speaker, not even primed tokens were reproduced or repeated by the speakers. This evidence confirms that TUCs are **not the first choice** of speakers when it comes to the description of caused motion activities, and that only priming could represent a (minimal) trigger to observe possible transitivizations of unaccusatives in active production.

It must also be kept in mind that, although the interviewer maintained an informal and colloquial register during the interview, and the tone and context were also unmarked and typical of the lower register, the fact that the participants were recorded and had to use the given lexical tokens in their utterances must nevertheless have produced an unnatural (though not too artificial) feeling for the speakers. For those who were not fully aware of the boundaries between high and low register, and between standard and dialectal features, such as the 8-year-old girl, changing the formulation and the lexicon of the given utterance (the primed sentence) was not necessary, since it must have sounded familiar. On the opposite, those older speakers and/or those with higher education, the context of the interview they were a part of could have activated a more careful and prescriptive, normative production, thus ruling out the active repetition of the syntactic priming. As for the variable we try to test, the perfective/imperfective distinction, the results are unclear, since only one positive utterance was produced. In general, speakers tended to **maintain** the given aspect in their answers, independently of the transitivity degree of the expressions.

Interestingly, in the metalinguistic “chat” that followed the videos, most speakers admitted that TUCs are indeed frequent in their everyday informal communication. When asked whether they happen to hear similar TUCs as the one found in the video, all speakers of the province answered positively. It is interesting to notice that the speaker from Tuscany specifically mentioned that she first started to hear them when she moved to the province, as they are not part of her original dialectal grammar (Carrarese). The Roman speakers reported to not use/hear them in the capital city, and associated them with southern dialects.

A 20-year-old speaker from Priverno (an ancient city which already existed before the reclamation of lands) who works in Pontinia (a new founded town) reported that he only uses TUCs in his Italian production when he code-switches from dialect to Italian speaking to fellow dialect speakers, both young and old fellow citizens, but not when he speaks (regional) Italian at work, i.e. outside the dialectal context. In his own words, he only uses TUCs when he speaks Italian, “but thinks in dialect”. On the opposite side, speakers with low dialectal proficiency, especially in the newer cities, seemed less aware of the interference between their (passive) dialectal skills and their informal Italian production. In particular, younger speakers (under 20 years of age) highlighted that the use of transitive *uscire* referred to the online sharing of digital media is especially frequent, while older speakers did not recognize this specific semantic meaning.

Further insights emerge from the social background of speakers who descend from Venetan settler families. The highest educational level was reached by the second age group (aged 21 to 49), while most speakers in the third age group (50 to 69 years old) had accomplished high-school education. Interestingly, the older participants (70 or older) were clearly divided per gender with respect to their education: while some of the men had a high-school degree and reported having lived and worked in other Italian regions, all female participants had only elementary education and had never left the province to work or study. This difference in education emerged in their oral production, since their informal Italian was perceived by the interviewers as phonetically more regionally marked than the variety spoken by the male participants. Especially those women who were born from Venetan families still partly retained phonetical traits typical of the North-East varieties. The same was not encountered in male participants of the same age group whose parents were originally from Veneto or Emilia Romagna.

#### 5.3.4 Discussion

As for the formal variable investigated in this first part of our study – perfective vs. imperfective aspect – the results did not produce any clear evidence about a possible correlation between perfectivity degree and the production of TUCs.

A first possible source of bias could be a stylistic property of colloquial Italian. The method used in this empirical study possibly triggered a story-telling style in the participants' production, which is usually associated to **imperfective** morphology in spoken Italian. In this case, the Italian data seem to be partly biased by the context and methods chosen for the investigation. Nevertheless, participants maintained the form given in the questions, i.e. used perfective forms after a perfective input and imperfective ones after imperfective input, although not reproducing the given syntactic priming.

This first part of the empirical study resembled Lara Bermejo's (2018, 2020) investigations in Western Spain. Lara Bermejo's (2020) studies had evidenced a preference toward imperfective predicates when TUCs were produced in Western Spanish. Since only one clear case of TUCs was produced, there is not enough data to confirm a correlation between imperfective aspect and TUCs. This first attempt thus show that it might be more difficult to apply the design used in the Wester-Spanish study to the case of this regional Italian phenomenon. The reasons are various, and are to be found both in some fundamental formal differences between non-standard Spanish and Italian TUCs and the status and **perceived prestige** of each regional substandard variety of the areas under consideration.

As mentioned in the subsection dedicated to Spanish TUCs (see 2.4), the fact that Spanish universally uses HAVE as unique auxiliary for past perfect tenses implies a different expression of the gradients of split intransitivity (Sorace 2000) than in standard and regional Italian. Italian and regional or dialectal varieties present more complex strategies of auxiliary selection based on intransitivity gradients – for example, with a fully person-driven selection in Ciociaria (Colasanti 2023) – with some crucial consequences on the acceptability and production of TUCs. Furthermore, the alternation of BE and HAVE as auxiliaries implies some crucial differences in the expression of telicity and perfectivity which do not find a correspondence in Spanish, for the reasons we just outlined. The replication of Lara Bermejo's (2020) Spanish investigation for the Italian case might be less effective because of these formal properties and differences.

A second relevant difference is the complexity of the Italo-Romance mosaic of varieties, which determines, especially in areas such as the Agro Pontino, the coexistence of more than one dominant dialect, and the rise of peculiar regional varieties under the influence of different

vernaculars. Historically, the evolution and status of the varieties attested in Western Spain show little similarity to our case. This might determine, as we have observed, a different status of *substandard* varieties, and the metalinguistic perception of non-standard expressions as incorrect. In other words, normative pressure has shown to be particularly high although the study was designed to induce informal, spontaneous colloquial language.

The normative pressure possibly influencing the participants' production had already emerged in the pilot phase of the investigation, when the two possible questions used to induce imperfective interpretations were tested. In order to decide which non-perfective markers to use – either the standard gerundive, progressive construction (*sta facendo*) or the regionally marked infinitive periphrases (*sta a fa'*) – both possible versions of the input questions were tested. While the normative one had as a consequence a more controlled speech, and participants repeated it in their utterances, the more informal, regional alternative given in the input question was not replicated by the speakers. This could demonstrate that normative pressure is still active in the context of production. Speakers seemed to rule out perfectly grammatical constructions in their everyday regional variety they had just received as input, because they did not correspond to equally acceptable structures in standard Italian, although the conversation was being held in colloquial regional Italian. Thus, the only option left was the default present tense as opposite to the past participle of the other question. The habitual reading could be excluded by the fact that the participants were presented with each video only once (or twice, in case of technical problems or sudden noises), and had no evidence for recurring frequency of action.

The impressions collected in our interviews confirm some of the data and intuitions exposed in the last chapters. First of all, speakers of the cities founded in the 1930s **identify** themselves as linguistically close to the Roman scenario (some answered to speak “**Romanesco**” when asked about their dialect). Historically, the province is divided into recently found cities, which built their identity and pride on the work of Venetan and Emilian settlers, and more ancient cities which were not into marshland territory, which identify with their own local dialect. The main difference between these two types of centers is that Latina and the more recent cities have turned into a melting pot during the last nine decades, nowadays hosting families from all over Italy, while the ancient centers are still less interested by immigration phenomena. This confirms that, while ancient centers maintained their dialectal

identity, the newer cities of the Agro Pontino linguistically self-identify with Rome. Interestingly, the majority of the participants reported that they are not speakers of dialect, except for the Roman variety.

As a consequence, the role of (linguistic) identity in the current status of TUCs and their reception might influence the speakers' choices, as Roman and *supraregional* varieties tend to reject these constructions, which are commonly used in the local Ciociaria dialects. The perception of the linguistic status in terms of prestige – as already analyzed in sociolinguistic research by Labov (1966), Trudgill (1997) Berruto (2006), a.o. – might also prove to be among the decisive factors.

The status of Venetan heritage dialects and their speakers needs some specific attention, more than we can possibly pay in this work, as there seem to be crucial sociolinguistic factors determining the survival or extinction of these vernaculars in the province. In particular, higher education levels and contact with families and groups without northern origins have proved to limit the influence of the heritage dialects acquired from the families in the 1930s and following decades.

A further consideration regards the connection between the *neo-standard* features collected within the data and the partial acceptability of TUCs could confirm the existence of a cluster of properties that favor or disfavor the presence of the constructions we focus on in this work, similarly to the findings of Lara Bermejo's (2018, 2020) investigation in Western peninsular Spanish. We discuss these insights furtherly at the end of this Chapter, as the influence of local dialects which present some common formal properties seems to enhance the production of TUCs.

Another conclusion driven by our findings regards the status of the interaction between dialectal and Italian proficiency and confirms the results of Busso & Romagno's (2021) study. Those speakers with high dialectal proficiency, i.e. perfect dialect/Italian bilinguals, could identify the use and acceptability of TUCs as a dialectal feature and were **aware** of the origin of these constructions, furnishing detailed metalinguistic comments on the materials and inputs shown in the videos. This (small) groups of speakers are aware of their bilingual status and have some notions and self-perception of their own **code-switching** tendencies, demonstrating to knowingly choose the dialect or variety they speak depending on the communicative context.

This is not true of imperfect dialect speakers, who show less awareness of the interactions of **micro-grammars** that lead both their language codification and their metalinguistic considerations.

This qualitative evaluation of the data has partly shown that both the age of the participants and the interaction between dialectal *stratum* and regional Italian grammars may play a role in the production of TUCs. In particular, younger speakers with imperfect *diglossia* could be considered as the most involved speakers in importing former dialectal features into regional spoken varieties, confirming Benincà & Damonte's (2009) transfer model, among others.

To sum up, the first part of the empirical study confirmed the difficulty of finding proper methods to investigate the case of TUCs, which is influenced by both its formal nature of syntax-semantic **interface manifestation** and the complex sociolinguistic factors characterizing this and other areas. The limitations discussed in this section, as well as the proposals highlighted and addressed, should serve as a first suggestion of investigation for future research.

## 5.4 Part 2: Grammaticality judgments in written task

The second part of the empirical study focused on **subject animacy** and consisted of a written task available on the online platform Google. Participants were required to complete a survey containing various utterances after anonymously providing some personal data.

Two main questions motivated the experiment:

- Is the acceptability of TUCs influenced by variables such as age and/or the speakers' dialectal proficiency?
- Does the distinction between animate and inanimate subjects impact the reception and acceptability of TUCs?

The first question reflects the sociolinguistic complexity of the province and is based on the idea that some of the main dialects spoken in the area, potentially influencing the regional varieties of Italian, allow these constructions. Furthermore, considering participants' age as an additional variable could help determine whether the reception of TUCs in spoken Italian should be regarded as an **innovation** or rather as an **archaism**.

Regarding the formal investigation of the role of subject animacy in the use and reception of TUCs, we present notable findings on semantic interpretations and their implications. Since subject animacy is associated with properties such as intentionality, kinesis, direct causation, volition, and varying degrees of transitivity, changes in animacy levels also lead to different evaluations of TUCs.

### 5.4.1 Method

The survey was distributed digitally via social media and through QR codes placed in bars and public locations. Additionally, to ensure sufficient data collection from younger speakers, the survey link was emailed to various schools after its content had been reviewed by teachers for appropriateness for underage students. The survey remained online from early 2024 until the beginning of 2025.

The aim of the survey was to assess the acceptability of caused-motion constructions based on the animacy of the subject. The task contained a total of 32 tokens, including 8 target sentences and the rest as fillers. All sentences were approximately the same length, and the

target sentences followed a consistent structure: subject – transitivized unaccusative verb – direct object – prepositional phrase.

The study received considerable attention, gathering responses from 131 participants across Italy. The results were divided into two major groups: one comprising 71 speakers from the province of Latina and another including 60 participants, mostly from Southern Italy, serving as a control and comparison group. The primary focus remained on the results from Latina.

Before beginning the survey, participants were instructed to anonymously provide personal information, including details about their education, place of origin, and dialectal proficiency. The latter was assessed through **self-evaluation questions**, similar to those used in the spoken production task. Since this part of the empirical study was analyzed quantitatively, each participant was assigned an index from 0 to 3 to describe their level of *dilalia*. This index was designed to capture the interaction between dialect and standard Italian in each speaker’s grammar and was used to statistically address the main research question: whether participants with little or no dialectal grammatical *substratum* tend to accept TUCs.

The three questions used to assess participants’ dialectal proficiency are as follows:

- **Q1:** *Parli un'altra lingua o dialetto oltre all'italiano? Se sì, quale?*  
'Do you speak another language or dialect? If yes, which one?'
- **Q2:** *Quale lingua o dialetto parli solitamente con i tuoi amici e familiari?*  
'Which language or dialect do you usually speak with your friends and family?'
- **Q3:** *In quale lingua o dialetto sogni, pensi e conti a mente?*  
'In which language or dialect do you dream, think, and count in your head?'

The first question aimed to determine whether participants actively spoke another language. Some respondents indicated passive comprehension of a dialect but no active production and were therefore classified as having low proficiency. The second question assessed the use of dialectal structures in informal spoken interactions. The third question targeted unconscious and spontaneous language use, such as the automatic activation of one linguistic system over another without social interaction.

Participants provided open-ended responses to these questions. Most either wrote “No” or “Yes,” specifying an additional spoken language for the first question. Those who answered “No” were assigned the lowest value (0) for dialectal proficiency. If they answered “Yes” but only mentioned a foreign language (e.g., English, Romanian, Chinese) without referencing an Italo-Romance dialect, they were also assigned a 0. Participants who reported proficiency in an Italo-Romance dialect were assigned a 1. Those who indicated that they regularly used their dialect or regional variety in response to the second question were assigned another 1, while those who stated a preference for Italian in everyday communication received a 0. Finally, participants who reported thinking and counting in dialect or a regional variety were assigned an additional 1, while those who did so in Italian received a 0. This first classification does not take into account the difference between Italo-Romance dialects and regional varieties such as the Roman variety, which is commonly considered particularly close to the national norm. Nevertheless, a specific observation of the results in the light of this difference is given in the results section (5.4.3).

At the end of the evaluation process, participants were categorized as follows:

- Those who received a total of 3 were classified as **highly proficient** in dialect.
- Those with a total score of 2 were categorized as **partly proficient**.
- Those who reported being exposed to a dialect, but preferring Italian in informal communication and mental activities, received a score of 1 and were classified as **minimally proficient**.
- Participants with a total score of 0 were considered **non-proficient** in dialect.

Table 11 illustrates this classification:

Quest Dial. Prof.	Q1: dialect(s) spoken	Q2: everyday communication in dialect	Q3: internal language	Total
High proficiency	1	1	1	3
Medium proficiency	1	1	0	2
Low proficiency	1	0	0	1
No proficiency	0	0	0	0

*Table 11 Possible levels of proficiency of participants - Part 2*

As expected, speakers who declared that they did not speak any dialect also reported using only Italian in informal communication with friends and family, as well as in their internal language for “mental” processes. Some participants indicated dialectal proficiency but preferred Italian for both informal communication and internal language. Others reported speaking dialect with family and friends but stated that they dream and think in Italian. The highest degree of dialectal proficiency was found among those who also think and dream in dialect.

Of course, this type of self-assessment is subject to inevitable biases. The validity of self-evaluations regarding the language of internal thoughts and dreams remains a debated issue in linguistics. In our case, the questions were designed to distinguish between speakers who are only passively exposed to dialect and those whose internal grammar can be considered a combination of two micro-grammars - (regional) Italian and dialect - as discussed in Benincà & Damonte (2009).

The target tokens consisted of simple sentences featuring four verbs: *entrare* ('to go in'), *uscire* ('to go out'), *salire* ('to go up'), and *scendere* ('to go down'). These predicates were chosen due to their relatively high frequency in the *corpus* used for this study and their relevance in previous research (e.g., Romagno 2021, 2023 for Calabrian/Italian; Busso & Romagno 2021 for Italian; Lara Bermejo 2018, 2020 for Western Peninsular Spanish). Additionally, these verbs have attracted increasing attention from speaker communities in recent years. They can be considered prototypical directed-motion verbs, making them **representative** of the entire verb class. Furthermore, they allow for the construction of sentences with both volitional agents and non-volitional (inanimate) causers.

The study examined the role of subject volition in the acceptability of TUCs. This feature was selected to establish a parallel analysis with Romagno's (2021, 2023) and Busso & Romagno's (2021) studies on object animacy, potential agentivity, and acceptability rates of similar constructions. Human agents were chosen to represent high-volition subjects, whereas natural forces, inanimate or accidental causers represented lower volition. Analyzing whether the actor functions as an animate agent or an inanimate causer provides valuable insights into the degree of transitivity in TUCs and how acceptability rates vary accordingly.

It is crucial to emphasize that the study focuses on **perceived** agent animacy and degree of volition. Although inanimate subjects are typically low in volition and agentivity, shifts in the semantic role assigned to sentence subjects may occur, influencing acceptability judgments. In other words, participants' interpretations could transform an inanimate subject into a highly animate, volitional agent due to semantic reanalysis.

The survey tokens and their translations are presented in the following Table:

<b>Animate subject (prototypical interpretation: highly agentive)</b>	<b>Inanimate/non-volitional subject (prototypical interpretation: scarcely agentive)</b>
Carla entra il fango in casa con gli stivali ogni volta che torna dall'orto. Lit. 'Carla enters the mud in the house every time she comes back from the garden.'	Il vento entra la polvere in salotto se lasciamo la portafinestra aperta. Lit. 'The wind enters dust into the living room if we leave the French door opened.'
A quest'ora Mario esce il cane, quindi se telefoni a casa non lo trovi. Lit. 'At this time Mario goes out the dog, so if you call him on his house phone you won't find him.'	Google esce sempre un risultato strano se cerchi una parola con l'accento. Lit. 'Google always goes out a weird result if you use accents to search a word.'
Martina sale la spesa per le scale perché ha paura dell'ascensore. Lit. 'Martina goes up the groceries through the stairs because she's afraid of the elevator'	La gru sale l'armadio solo fino al terzo piano quindi dobbiamo trovare un'alternativa per il trasloco. Lit. 'the crane goes up the wardrobe only up to the third floor so we need an alternative for our move.'
Luigi scende la bici dalla soffitta solo quando fa bel tempo. Lit. 'Luigi only goes down the bike from the attic when the weather is good.'	L'ascensore scende la biancheria usata direttamente nella lavanderia dell'albergo. Lit. 'the elevator goes down used bed sheets into the hotel's laundry'

Table 12 Target tokens of Part 2

Following the notion of potential agentivity proposed by Romagno (2021, 2023), it is crucial to identify cases in which an inanimate causer can be interpreted as highly agentive despite its low animacy. The same applies to prototypically animate subjects, such as human agents, who may not always be perceived as highly agentive in a given context. To illustrate this variation, sentences with human subjects were constructed to reflect different degrees of agentivity. For instance, *Carla entra il fango con gli stivali* (lit. 'Carla goes in the mud with her

boots’) contrasts with *Mario esce il cane* (lit. ‘Mario goes out the dog’). In the former case, although the subject is human, the context may suggest lower intentionality than in the latter, where the subject appears to act more deliberately.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in inanimate subjects that are perceived as possessing a higher degree of volition than their usual semantic role as causers would imply. Furthermore, inanimate causer subjects which are perceived as directly and physically **manipulating** their theme object are proved to be more prototypical, and thus more acceptable, than causers which indirectly transfer motion on their objects (Hopper & Thompson 1980; Romagno 2025). Since volition is typically associated with animates, higher acceptability rates for certain constructions may indicate a shift in the interpretation of the causer’s agentivity.

Participants were instructed to provide their spontaneous acceptability judgments for each token using a ten-point scale ranging from 0 (completely unacceptable) to 10 (completely acceptable). The introduction to the study emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers and encouraged instinctive responses. To avoid biases, participants were not informed about the specific aim of the study, but were simply told that it focused on the spoken language of their province.

Additionally, participants had the option to rewrite each sentence. Their comments varied: some focused on improving the syntactic structure, while others commented only on the pragmatic interpretation of the sentence. Responses that included general remarks about the context but no structural or grammatical modifications were considered just as informative as those that altered the sentence itself. In some cases, this indicated that a structure was perceived as grammatically acceptable but was pragmatically marked or socially unacceptable.

### *Fillers and Their Role in the Study*

The fillers included both ungrammatical and pragmatically anomalous sentences, such as:

(6) L’Italia ha 29 regioni e 125 province.  
the Italy has 29 region and 125 provinces

In this case, the singular form *regione* is incompatible with the numeral 29, and the numbers themselves are incorrect, as Italy does not have 29 regions and 125 provinces. Some participants corrected both the plural form and the numbers, others corrected only one of these

errors, and some accepted the sentence as it was. Since completing the entire survey was mandatory, but rewriting the tokens was optional, not all participants provided comments for each sentence. Some rejected sentences without further remarks.

Other fillers contained sentences whose acceptability varies depending on the regional variety spoken. A notable example is the agreement of the past participle with the auxiliary *avere*:

(7) Perché non mi hai chiamata?  
 Why not me called-2SG called-F

Some participants rejected the feminine past participle ending *-a*, while others accepted it. Standard Italian typically requires the uninflected *-o*, yet in some varieties, particularly in spoken contexts, the inflected form is common. During the pilot study, an elderly participant rejected the sentence, stating that it was “too rude a formulation,” demonstrating how responses ranged from grammatical corrections to broader social and pragmatic considerations.

### *Regional Markers and the Transitivity of avanzare*

Another token involved the transitivized use of the verb *avanzare*, as found in our *corpus*. This construction is particularly typical of Northern Italian varieties, as confirmed by the presence of a partitive direct object:

(8) Ieri ho avanzato della pasta al pomodoro.  
 Yesterday have-1SG left.over PART pasta at.the tomato.sauce

Both the transitivization of *avanzare* with this specific lexical meaning and the use of the partitive article (*della*) are considered regionally marked features – although partitive articles are fully grammatical and common in Standard Italian as well, as discussed by Zenoni for the Accademia della Crusca (Zenoni, 27/11/2009). Participants’ responses to this token provided insights into their regional linguistic background and proficiency.

### *Reformulated Research Questions*

Now that we have described the methodological categories used in this part of the study, we can refine the experimental research questions as follows:

- Does perceived subject animacy (and potential agentivity) influence the reception, interpretation, and acceptability of TUCs?

- Do speakers with lower or no dialectal proficiency (grouped within indexes 0 and 1 in Table 11) exhibit acceptability rates for TUCs similar to those of proficient dialectal speakers?

If similar acceptability rates emerge among speakers regardless of their dialectal background, this could indicate a standardization of spoken regional Italian, integrating TUCs. Conversely, if speakers with lower dialectal proficiency show lower acceptability rates, this would suggest that a dialectal *substratum* plays a key role in determining the acceptability of these structures.

### *Methodological note on Acceptability Judgement Tasks (AJTs)*

Both parts of the empirical investigation presented in this work reflect the complexity of the phenomenon of TUCs. As shown in the chapter dedicated to their formal features (Chapter 3), TUCs exemplify **interface** phenomena. This definition is used by scholars to refer to linguistic manifestations that go **beyond core grammatical relations** and involve multiple levels of analysis (Fischer et al. 2022: 68).

In our case, TUCs result from complex interactions between syntax, semantics, argument realization strategies, and valency expression. They are also shaped by sociolinguistic mechanisms such as dialectal influence, considerations of register and prestige, and metalinguistic awareness – particularly relevant when evaluating methods for empirical testing. Moreover, interface phenomena are often subject to variable interpretations of information structure when speakers are asked to assess grammaticality (*ibid.*), making it difficult to determine which interpretation underlies their judgements.

Various methods for testing linguistic competence have been proposed and discussed in the literature, each based on differing models and definitions of linguistic competence. While the Government and Binding framework (Chomsky 1981) supported a clear-cut distinction between grammatical and ungrammatical utterances, the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995, 2000, 2001) shifted focus towards the derivational processes behind these utterances, introducing the idea of **degrees of grammaticality** (Vega Vilanova & Fischer 2025: 2). As a result, the role of Grammaticality and/or Acceptability Judgement Tasks (AJTs) has been widely

debated, with some scholars arguing that these methods are ill-suited for certain types of linguistic phenomena (Fischer et al. 2022).

AJTs are generally considered reliable and consistent for investigating core grammatical phenomena – those involving a single linguistic domain, such as syntax. However, interface phenomena – such as TUCs – are thought to demand greater cognitive resources and to be acquired later in language development. Compared to core phenomena, they also tend to show greater **instability** in language contact settings, which is particularly relevant in the Italian context, where dialectal, regional, and national varieties interact.

For these reasons, Grammaticality Judgement Tasks are considered inadequate for investigating interface phenomena when consistent results are the goal (Fischer et al. 2022: 54; Vega Vilanova & Fischer 2025: 3). This inadequacy stems from their inability to account for the optionality and variation inherent to such structures. GJTs are more suitable for constructions that allow for categorical judgements – that is, core grammatical phenomena with low variability (Fischer et al. 2022: 68). In contrast, when applied to optional, infrequent, or marginal constructions, GJTs often fail to accurately reflect speakers' linguistic competence.

Furthermore, Grammaticality and Acceptability Judgement Tasks do not offer a clear distinction between linguistic competence and performance, or between comprehension and production. They cannot determine whether a construction belongs to a speaker's underlying competence if it is not actively produced (Fischer et al. 2022: 68).

Empirical studies on clitic doubling in Romance languages (Fischer et al. 2014, 2019, 2022; Vega Vilanova & Fischer 2025) show that participants tend to accept more constructions than they would naturally produce. This is due either to interpretative adjustments made to render the stimulus acceptable, or to response shifts driven by perceived researcher expectations (Fischer et al. 2022: 69). Such metalinguistic awareness plays a significant role in Romance languages, especially in Italian, where speakers are subject to strong normative pressures linked to the prestige and dissemination of the standard variety. Consequently, their responses may unconsciously align with prescriptive norms regarding register and prestige (Fischer et al. 2022: 69; see also Chapter 4).

In light of these considerations, any Acceptability Judgement Task designed to investigate TUCs is likely to be biased by both the inherent complexity of this interface

phenomenon and the extralinguistic and metalinguistic factors that come into play when speakers respond to stimuli.

To address the challenges of studying features at the syntax-semantics interface, some researchers have proposed and tested the use of Translation Tasks (Romagno 2021, 2023; Vega Vilanova & Fischer 2025). In bilingual and contact settings, such tasks involve translating primed utterances into a target language. The underlying principle is based on syntactic (or more broadly, structural) priming, as discussed earlier in this chapter: speakers are likely to translate a primed structure literally only if it is grammatical in the target language (Vega Vilanova & Fischer 2025: 13). Ungrammatical interface structures tend to be reformulated into grammatical equivalents during translation, a process that appears to require **greater cognitive effort** than translating core-grammar structures (*ibid.*).

Designing and implementing such a study in the Agro Pontino region, where dialectal influence is highly variable and individual idiolects differ in their balance between dialectal and (regional) Italian competence, is particularly challenging. Given that the results from self-assessment questionnaires indicate that few speakers in the province demonstrate proficiency in local dialects (see below), a uniformly designed Translation Task for all participants would be extremely difficult – if not impossible – to carry out.

For this and other reasons, the empirical investigation in this study relies on the more manageable framework of the Acceptability Judgement Task, while acknowledging and addressing the methodological biases discussed in this section.

#### 5.4.2 Participants

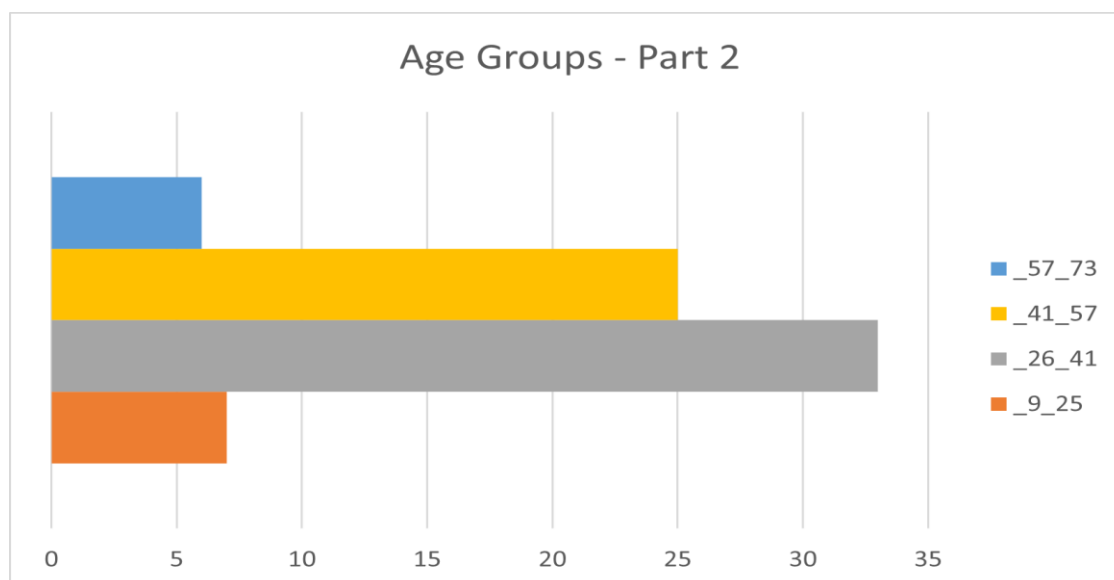
The participants in this second task were not the same as those who took part in the first study. Participants were recruited through personal acquaintance or online (on forums, social media, etc.). Since the survey was distributed digitally across multiple groups, speakers from other regions also had the opportunity to participate. The first step in data analysis involved differentiating between speakers from the Agro Pontino and those from other regions of Italy, who served as a comparison group. Moreover, the inclusion of speakers from various regions

provided insights into the status of caused-motion constructions on a national scale, although further research is needed to explore this aspect in greater depth.

### *Participant Classification*

The group of participants from other Italian regions was further divided into two subgroups based on major sociolinguistic isoglosses, specifically the Rimini-La Spezia line. Although the actual sociolinguistic landscape is highly complex, for the purposes of this study, a broad distinction between these two macro-areas was deemed sufficient. The sample included 12 participants from Northern Italy and 47 from Central and Southern Italy.

The distribution of age groups is illustrated in the next chart, with a mean participant age of 39 years.



*Figure 6 Age classes of the main group for Part 2*

The primary focus of this study was the group of speakers from the province of Latina. An effort was made to involve as many younger speakers as possible; however, this was partially hindered by the low response rate from school principals and teachers. As a result, despite contacting multiple high schools in Latina, only five participants were minors.

Nevertheless, 38 participants under the age of 40 were included in the sample, allowing for an investigation of linguistic innovation trends. Since *neo-standardization* has been

identified as an ongoing process since the 1980s (Berruto 1987), speakers currently around age 40 were considered representative of *neo-standard* Italian features.

The participants were balanced for gender. Additionally, they were classified based on their educational background, using four levels:

- Lower school education (assigned coefficient 1)
- Higher basic school education (assigned coefficient 2)
- High school education (assigned coefficient 3)
- Academic and/or professional higher education (assigned coefficient 4)

These categories reflect the structure of the Italian school system, which distinguishes between primary education (ages 5–10) and lower secondary education (ages 10–13), followed by high school enrollment.

### *Dialectal Proficiency*

It was almost surprising that, in a rural area with small centers such as the Agro Pontino, the majority of speaker self-assessed as not speaking any dialect (Figure 7):

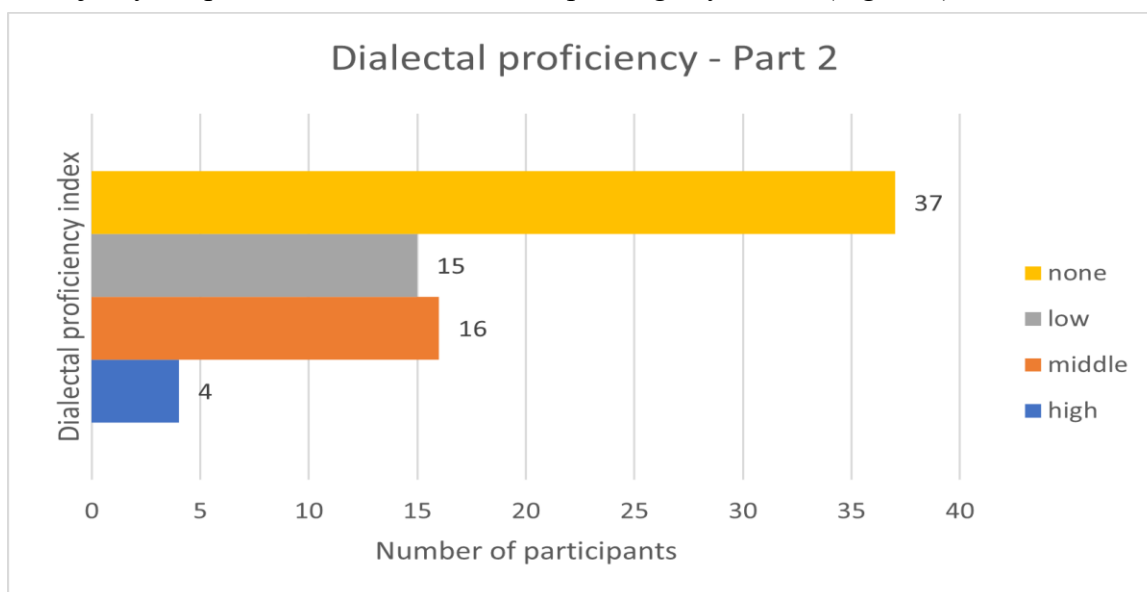


Figure 7 Dialectal proficiency of participants - Part 2

Among the 12 Northern Italian speakers, only two self-assessed as proficient dialect speakers.

Among the 47 Central and Southern Italian speakers, only four self-assessed as balanced bilinguals, while almost the half (44%) defined their dialectal proficiency as low.

Among the 14 participants from Rome, 4 reported not speaking any dialect while the remaining 10 identified Roman or Lazio dialect as their second variety.

As previously discussed (see 4.2), the status of Roman as a dialect is often debated. While it exhibits phonological and lexical peculiarities, it remains structurally close to standard Italian and is widely intelligible across Italy. For this reason, it is often considered a supra-regional variety rather than a regionally restricted dialect. The same applies to the regional variety spoken in the province of Latina (see 4.1) and to other major regional varieties.

In both comparison groups (Northern and Central-Southern speakers), dialectal proficiency was not age-dependent: all levels of proficiency were found across all four age groups. Additionally, almost all participants had obtained (or were in the process of obtaining) a university degree or professional higher education, preventing any meaningful correlation between educational level and other variables.

In terms of educational background, more than half of the participants (52%) held an academic degree, a master's degree, or a higher professional qualification, indicating an overall high level of education within the sample. Additionally, 35% of participants had completed high school, while approximately 10% had attained lower secondary education. Two children were still attending elementary school.

The high educational level observed in the sample can be attributed to the greater availability of highly educated individuals and their more positive attitude toward participation in academic research. This trend suggests that individuals with a higher level of education may be more inclined to engage in linguistic studies and research-related activities.

Given the central role of dialectal proficiency in this study, it was essential to determine whether the acceptability of TUCs stems from a positive influence of the dialectal *substratum* or represents an innovation within *neo-standard* Italian, independent from dialectal influence.

We have illustrated the phenomenon of *neo-standardization* in Chapter 4, referring to Berruto's (1987) description of the loss of regional markedness in the development of an all-Italian spoken register. For this reason, it was relevant to our study to investigate any correlation

between participants' age and their dialectal proficiency index, as determined through the self-assessment questions.

To evaluate the existence and strength of this correlation, we conducted a linear correlation test. Although an initial graph suggested a slight increase in dialectal proficiency among older participants, the dispersion along the trend line was considerably high:

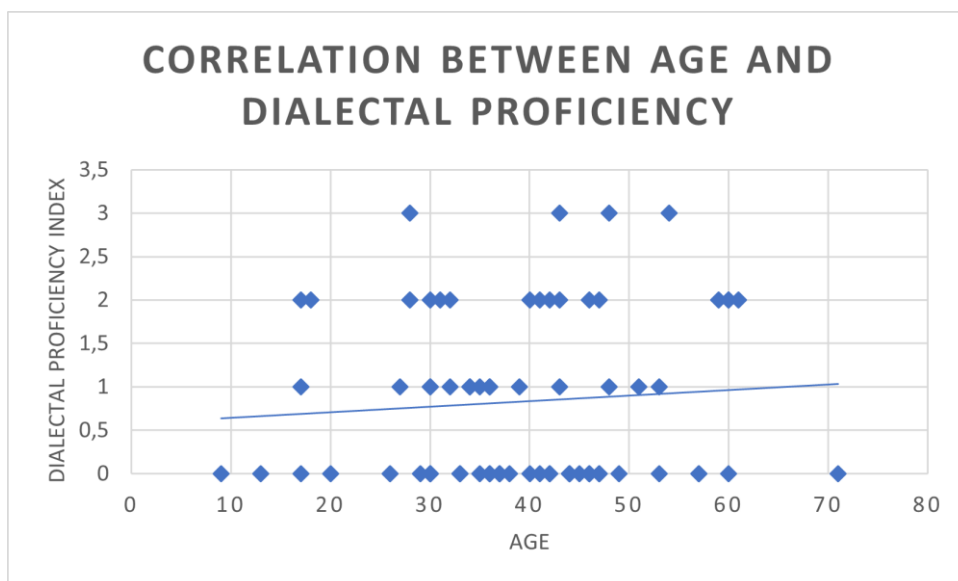


Figure 8 Correlation between age and dialectal proficiency - Part 2

Chi-square tests and linear correlation using Pearson's coefficient did not confirm any hypothesis of a linear correlation between age and dialectal proficiency. In other words, age was not found to be a directly correlated variable influencing dialectal proficiency, at least in our sample ( $p > 0.05$  with a significance level of 0.05).

The relationship between city of origin and dialectal proficiency followed an expected pattern: while no direct correlation between age and dialectal proficiency could be detected, the highest dialectal proficiency indexes were observed among speakers from cities in the province that existed before the land reclamation of the 1930s. This data suggests that speakers are more proficient in dialect if they come from cities where a specific dialect (e.g., Privernese in Priverno, Sezzese in Sezze, Sonninese in Sonnino) has been historically established and spoken for centuries before the spread of Standard Italian, regardless of their age.

The city with the highest number of participants (37) was Latina, the provincial capital, founded in 1932 and also the most populated city in the province. An additional 19 speakers

were from recently founded cities (Pontinia, Sabaudia, and Aprilia, all established less than a century ago), while the remaining 15 were from cities that historically belonged to the province of Frosinone before Latina was established. This distinction was considered relevant because speakers from recently founded cities exhibited lower dialectal proficiency and reported mainly speaking Italian or Lazio varieties, which, as mentioned, are closely related to the national norm. In contrast, the Italo-Romance dialects spoken for centuries in older cities are typologically more distant from Standard Italian and are almost never fully intelligible to speakers from other regions.

A stronger direct correlation between city of origin and dialectal proficiency can therefore be hypothesized, as speakers from older cities seem to have a higher level of dialectal proficiency.

In conclusion, dialectal proficiency appears to be more strongly related to **city of origin** than to participants' age. This finding suggests that dialects are better preserved in cities that existed before the transformation of the marshlands and are more effectively transmitted to younger generations in these areas, where they continue to play a role in everyday communication. This result is not surprising, considering that cities founded in the 1930s attracted speakers from different Italian regions, fostering a greater need for mutual understanding and consequently promoting the use of Standard Italian. In contrast, older cities retained their dialects due to lower levels of migration and repopulation, as well as a distinct sense of social identity. This factor is taken into account in the analysis of the results from our acceptability judgment test for TUCs.

### 5.4.3 Results

The results of this second part of the empirical investigation were complex and provided interesting insights into the acceptability of TUCs in relation to the perceived animacy of their subject.

#### *The Transitivity of avanzare*

The filler sentence with *avanzare* ('leave over') did not contain any of the four verbs *entrare*, *uscire*, *salire*, and *scendere*, but instead featured a transitivity described in the

literature as being restricted to the northern area. The token *Ieri ho avanzato della pasta al pomodoro* ('I have left over some pasta with tomato sauce yesterday'), taken directly from our *corpus*, received a mean acceptability rating of 2.9 on the 0-to-10 scale. This result indicates general unacceptability, although 5 out of 72 participants assigned it a score higher than 6.

More than half of the participants corrected the auxiliary, transforming the utterance into an intransitive structure with a so-called quirky subject, realized as an oblique personal pronoun: *ieri mi è avanzata della pasta al pomodoro* (lit. 'Some pasta with tomato sauce remained left to me yesterday').

Another marked feature in the sentence, the partitive direct object *della pasta*, is also identified as a northern trait and is not originally found in southern Lazio varieties, if we exclude the Venetan dialects surviving among older speakers who descend from the 1930s settlements. Five participants replaced the partitive article. While partitive articles are common in standard Italian, they are less frequently used by speakers who actively maintain both dialectal and (regional) Italian grammar. However, their passive reception appears to be less problematic than the transitive usage of *avanzare* in this specific context.

Only a few speakers fully accepted the utterance without modifying either the partitive article or the verb's transitivity.

### *A First Look at the Results*

The mean acceptability ratings for the eight target tokens are presented in the following Table. These results refer exclusively to speakers from the Agro Pontino (Latina):

<b>Predicate</b>	<b>Mean accept.judgment (1-10)</b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>	<b>Number of evaluations</b>
<i>Uscire</i> animate subject	2.07	2.88	71
<i>Uscire</i> inanimate subject	2.24	2.65	71
<i>Entrare</i> animate subject	1.80	2.65	71
<i>Entrare</i> inanimate subject	1.55	2.55	71
<i>Salire</i> animate subject	2.79	3.19	71
<i>Salire</i> inanimate subject	3.87	3.39	71
<i>Scendere</i> animate subject	3.94	3.81	71
<i>Scendere</i> inanimate subject	2.90	3.30	71

Table 13 Results of Part 2 - Latina

The most immediate observation is the generally **low acceptability** expressed by the participants. The marginal acceptability of TUCs is thus confirmed by these results. Significant standard deviation values indicate that participants assigned widely varying scores to the given tokens: for each sentence, almost every value on the 0-to-10 scale was recorded, with both extreme poles (0 and 10) always present. The fact that both the highest and lowest acceptability rates were registered for each target token suggests that TUCs hold a controversial status among Latina's speakers.

A preliminary analysis of the general results seems to partially confirm Busso & Romagno's (2021) findings regarding a slight preference for the transitivization of *salire* and *scendere* compared to *uscire* and *entrare*. Both these authors and the Accademia della Crusca suggest that speakers are more accustomed to direct objects with these predicates due to path

constructions such as *salire/scendere le scale* (‘climb/descend the stairs’), which do not exist in standard Italian with *entrare* and *uscire*. *Salire* and *scendere* are semantically directed-motion verbs that may allow gradients along the motion path — that is, they can denote a multi-point scale of motion, according to Rappaport Hovav’s (2004) classification — whereas *entrare* and *uscire* denote only two possible points along a path: the inside and the outside. The four tokens featuring transitive *salire* and *scendere* received slightly higher ratings than those with *entrare* and *uscire* and were characterized by higher standard deviation values.

*Entrare* was the least acceptable transitivized predicate, receiving a mean score of 1.50 in the context of an inanimate subject, specifically a natural force (*il vento entra la polvere in salotto se lasciamo la portafinestra aperta*, lit. ‘The wind enters dust into the living room if we leave the French door open’).

The counterpart featuring an animate subject, *Carla entra il fango in casa con gli stivali ogni volta che torna dall'orto* (lit. ‘Carla enters the mud into the house every time she comes back from the garden’), received the lowest acceptability rating for animate subject constructions. Interestingly, this was also the utterance with the **least volitional animate subject**. While the [+human] feature of the subject typically indicates a high degree of animacy and intentionality, the most natural interpretation of the sentence suggests that the agent acts as an unintentional causer, accidentally determining the movement of the mud from the outside to the inside. The presence of an uncountable nominal (‘the mud’) in the direct-object position furtherly weakens the potential acceptability of the sentence, since it conveys a lower transitivity level. As noticed (see 3.2), TUCs seem to be more acceptable when interpreted as highly transitive, and such interpretation is in this case biased by both the scarcely volitional subject and the uncountable direct-object nominal.

The slightly higher acceptability of transitive *uscire* with an animate subject compared to *entrare* may be attributed to the more favorable general perception of *uscire il cane* (lit. ‘go out the dog’), a frequently used expression in informal colloquial Italian. Further research involving similar constructions with *entrare*, such as *entrare la macchina* (‘enter the car’), is needed to determine whether they would receive comparable acceptability ratings. *Entrare la macchina* appears in our corpus as well as in the first part of our experimental study, and similar examples have been documented by Pineda (2008), Lara Bermejo (2018, 2020), and Jiménez-

Fernández & Tubino (2014) for Catalan and Spanish. A key crosslinguistic difference is that the Catalan and Spanish counterparts of *uscire* are not transitivized in these Romance languages. As previously discussed, the existence of canonical transitives such as *treure* (Catalan) and *sacar* (Spanish) may block this transitivization, whereas spoken Italian does not offer an equally economic and stylistically neutral alternative.

The relatively high mean rating for the inanimate subject construction with *salire*, *la gru sale l'armadio solo fino al terzo piano quindi dobbiamo trovare un'alternativa per il trasloco* (lit. 'The crane goes up the wardrobe only up to the third floor, so we need an alternative for our move'), could be due to the generally higher acceptability of transitive *salire* as well as the more active interpretation of the inanimate subject. The crane may be perceived as visibly moving on its own while transferring movement through active manipulation onto the direct object, and this high degree of *kinesis* could explain the higher acceptability compared to other inanimate subject constructions.

This assumption aligns with Hopper & Thompson's (1980) Transitivity theory, which posits that a higher degree of subject animacy generally corresponds to greater volition, intentionality, *kinesis*, and direct involvement of the subject. Additionally, **direct causation** — a factor that increases transitivity — is present in this sentence, as the subject is directly responsible for transmitting movement to the object, and this transmission occurs within the same spatiotemporal unit (Romagno 2025). These features place the construction towards the highest transitivity pole on the transitive *continuum*. Consequently, the general acceptability of TUCs seems to be enhanced by higher degrees of subject animacy due to the properties associated with this feature.

We now turn to the analysis of the variables considered in this study, focusing on dialectal proficiency and participants' age. These two variables are crucial to our research questions, as they can help determine whether the status of TUCs depends on dialectal *stratum* influence and whether these constructions can be considered an innovation in spoken Italian.

### *The relation between Age and Acceptability Ratings*

Based on participants' age, the first results we consider show a decreasing tendency among older participants in the acceptability of transitive *uscire* with human agents:

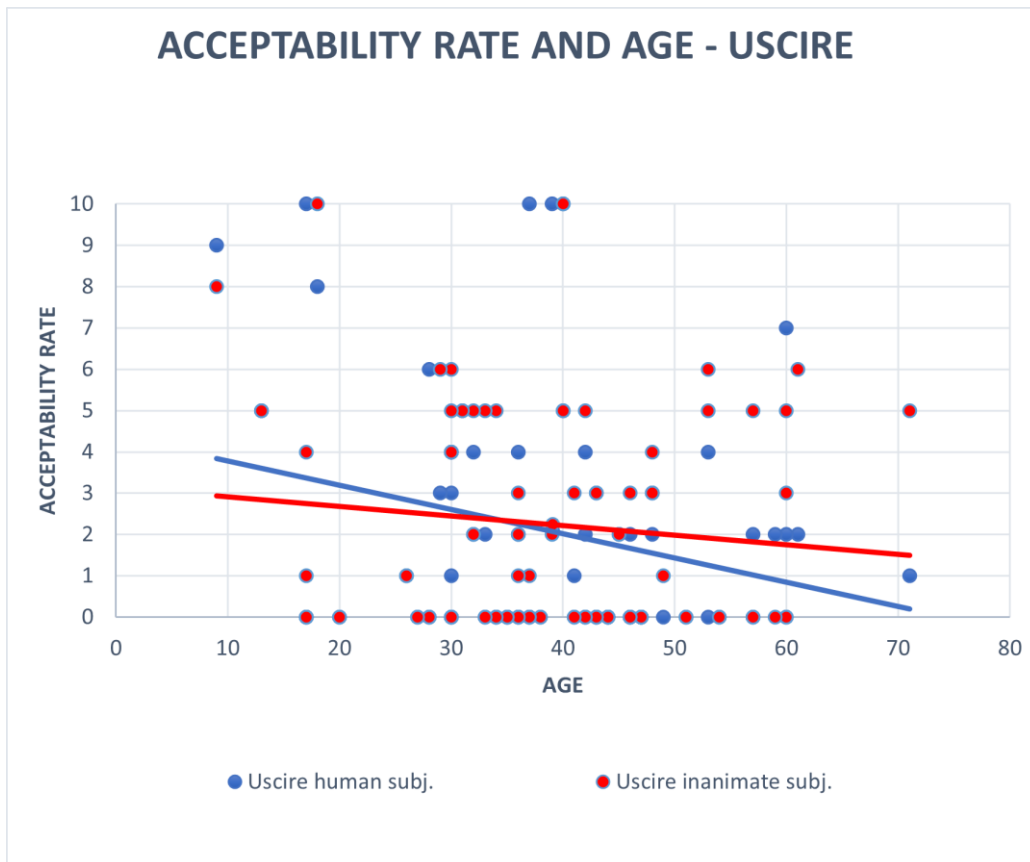


Figure 9 Age and acceptability rates for uscire

Figure 9 illustrates the individual ratings given by participants for transitivized constructions involving prototypical agents versus inanimate subjects. The trend line indicates a more favorable response from younger participants toward human agents. Specifically, the youngest participants (aged 9 and 13) exhibit medium to high acceptability. A high degree of variation is observed among middle-aged participants, positioned at the midpoint of the age spectrum.

The verb *uscire*, used with the inanimate subject Google to convey the production of digital content, also received more positive judgments from younger speakers—albeit to a lesser extent than when the same verb was used with an animate subject, as shown by the red trend line. The slightly higher acceptability of *uscire* with Google as a subject among younger participants reinforces some of the statements in the first part of this empirical study, where participants reported using the verb with this specific meaning. Once again, the lowest acceptability was recorded among middle-aged participants.

Finally, the construction involving *entrare* with an inanimate subject received the lowest overall ratings, showing virtually no correlation between age and acceptability scores.

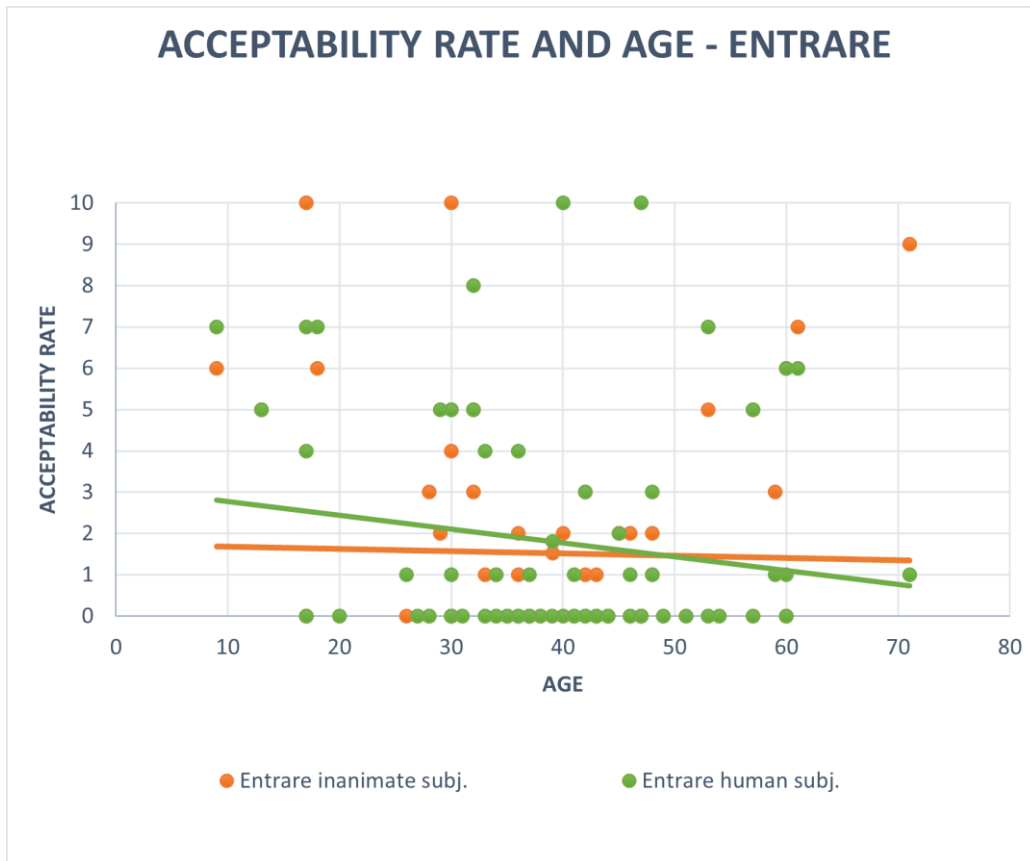


Figure 10 Age and acceptability rates for *entrare*

Figure 10 confirms that younger speakers tend to give slightly more favorable ratings to TUCs with human subjects compared to older speakers, with the lowest ratings once again coming from middle-aged participants. The token featuring the inanimate subject *il vento* (‘the wind’) received the most negative ratings among all target sentences, suggesting that natural forces may be excluded as subjects in TUCs.

Considering the other two predicates analyzed in this study, *salire* and *scendere*, which generally received more positive judgments, the most noteworthy age-related finding is the opposite trend in the acceptability of animate and inanimate subjects. Human subjects do not

appear to significantly influence age-dependent differences in the acceptability of transitive *scendere*:

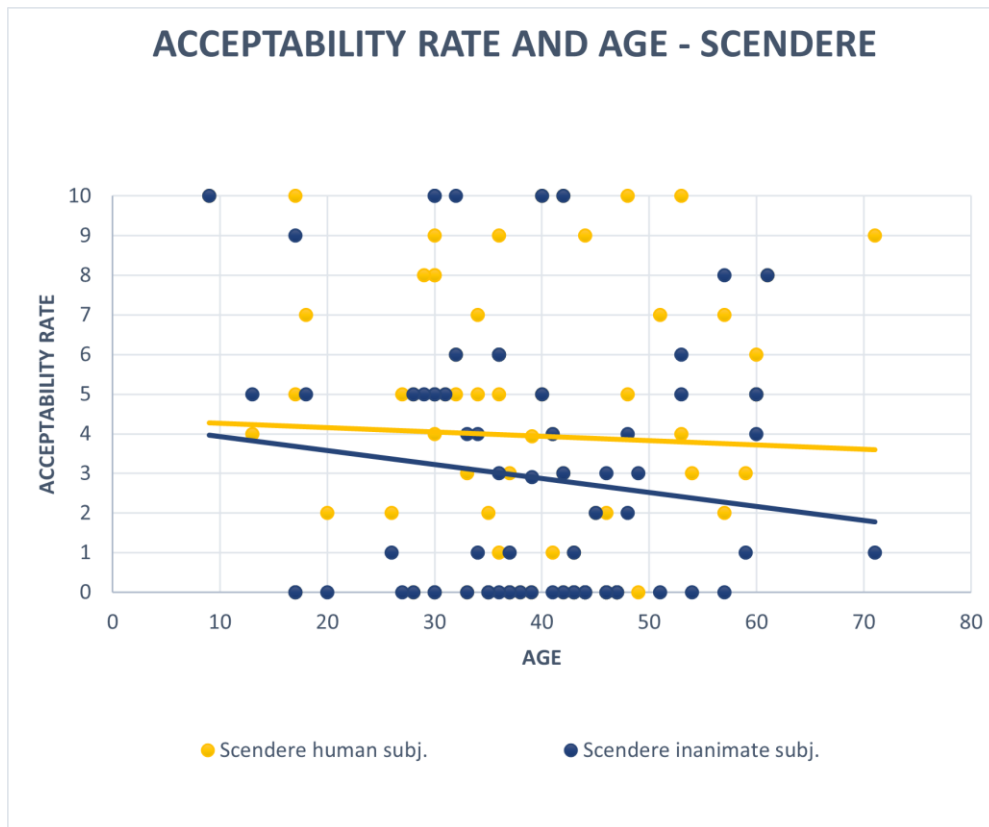


Figure 11 Acceptability rates and age for *scendere*

The blue line in Figure 11 represents the decreasing acceptability of transitive *scendere* with an inanimate subject as participants' age increases, while the white lines indicate a stable mean acceptability rating for transitive *scendere* with a human subject. In the latter case, age does not appear to influence acceptability ratings.

This may be due to the fact that canonical transitivizations of *salire* and *scendere*, where the path functions as a direct object, are statistically more frequent and semantically more plausible with human subjects. For instance, *salire le scale* ('climb the stairs') typically describes a human (or animate) action. The presence of this pattern in the standard norm likely

contributes to a generally more positive evaluation of transitivizations with a human subject, regardless of the participants' age.

Conversely, the acceptability of *scendere* with inanimate subjects deviates from this pattern and may cautiously be interpreted as part of an ongoing innovative process, given that younger speakers show higher acceptance than older ones. This trend is illustrated by the blue line in Figure 11.

Similar results were observed for *salire* (Figure 12).

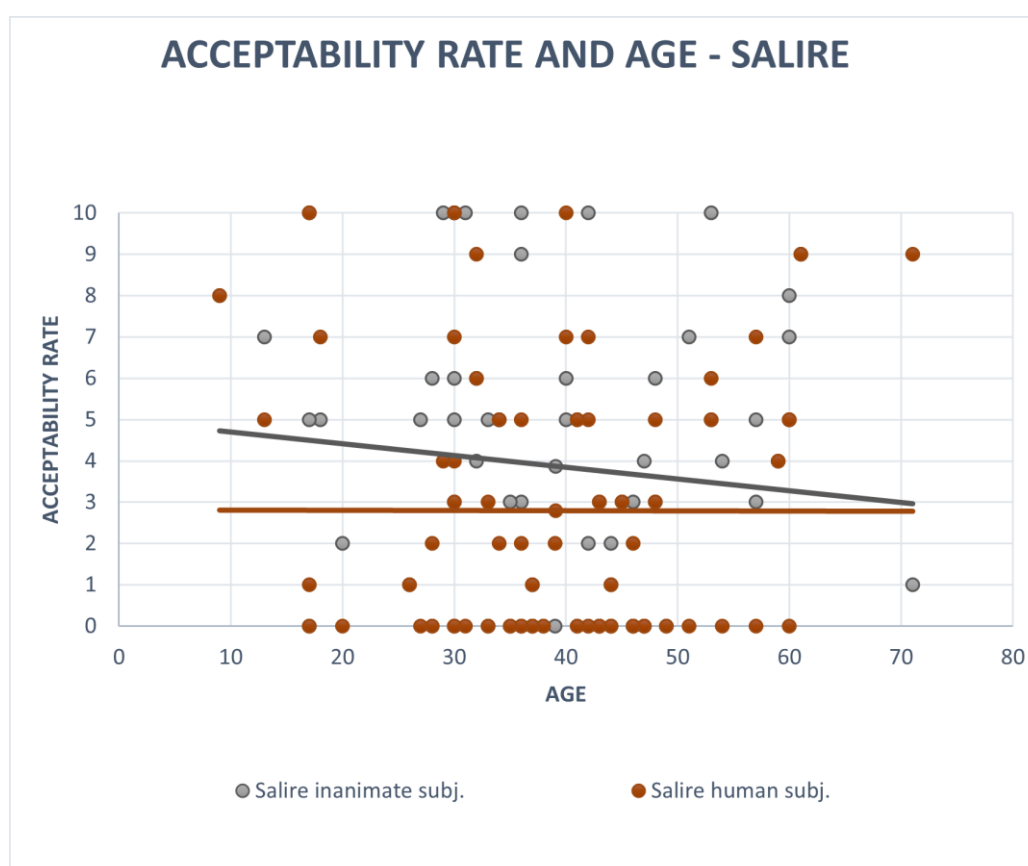


Figure 12 Age and acceptability rates for salire

In this case, the grey trend line illustrates a decline in acceptability for inanimate subjects as age increases, while the brown line, representing the token with a human subject, indicates no correlation between acceptability ratings and participants' age.

The results of the correlation tests confirm that transitive *entrare* with a natural force as the subject is generally unacceptable for most speakers, regardless of age. Additionally, they show that the acceptability of *salire* and *scendere* with animate subjects does not depend on this

variable. The p-values (significance level  $\alpha = 0.05$ ) for the eight target tokens further suggest that any hypothesis establishing a relationship between age and acceptability rate must be formulated with caution: while a correlation is sometimes present, it is not necessarily significant. Further research is needed to clarify this relationship.

These results partially align with Romagno's (2021, 2023) empirical studies on the interaction between dialectal competence and the acceptability of different theme objects in regional Italian spoken in northern Calabria. Her findings indicate that only younger speakers tend to accept object themes with higher animacy - and higher potential agentivity - in spoken Italian caused-motion constructions. Older participants, by contrast, adhere to dialectal organizational principles that impose stricter constraints on caused-motion constructions based on the potential agentivity of the object (see 3.2.4). In other words, prototypicality seems to drive parameter setting for older speakers more strictly than it does for younger ones.

Consequently, we could cautiously interpret our results as both confirming and expanding the existing hypothesis that younger generations are incorporating patterns from geographically restricted varieties into their regional speech, thereby relaxing and partially attenuating semantic constraints on these constructions. In fact, prototypical subjects of active transitive constructions are agents, high in animacy, volition and intentionality, as illustrated in Hopper & Thompson's (1980) Transitivity Theory. Inanimate causers are less canonical subjects in that they are associated to lower potential agentivity. Older speakers appear to have more restrictions on less prototypical subjects of TUCs, just as in Romagno's studies with direct objects of caused-motion constructions.

The results of the investigation based on the age variable partially align with Busso's (2020) observations regarding the intermediate acceptability of valency coercion in TUCs structures and other mismatches between verbal lexical semantics and argument structure constructions. Busso (2020) presents a first attempt at analyzing valency coercion patterns in relation to Italian sociolinguistic factors, particularly age.

The findings from various studies summarized in her analysis of constructional causativity (2020:28), partially based on Busso & Romagno's (2021) study, confirm a V-shaped curve resulting from the interaction between participants' age and acceptability rates. Marked features, such as caused-motion constructions, are most readily accepted by adolescent

speakers, significantly less accepted by adult speakers – likely due to normative pressure – and once again show higher acceptability among older speakers, following an **age-grading curve** (Wagner 2012).

### *The Relation between Dialectal Proficiency and Acceptability Ratings*

We now turn to the second variable considered central to our research questions: dialectal proficiency and its relationship with the acceptability ratings recorded. Participants' dialectal proficiency is expressed as a coefficient based on their self-assessment. A score of 0 represents the lowest level of dialectal proficiency, indicating no competence, while a score of 3 is the highest coefficient, assigned to speakers who actively use dialect in daily communication and as an internal language.

The first transitivity under examination is the token with *uscire*:

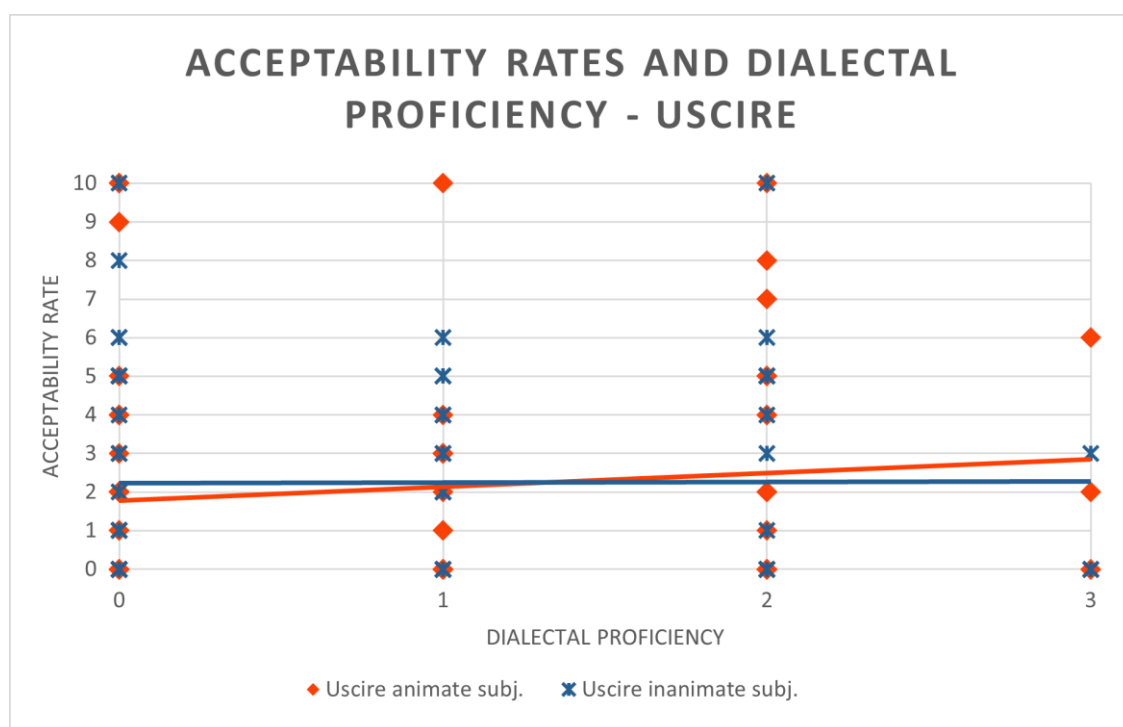


Figure 13 Dialectal proficiency and acceptability rates for *uscire*

Figure 13 shows that the tendency toward higher acceptability of transitive *uscire* among proficient dialect speakers is not significantly greater than among monolingual Italian speakers. In other words, the acceptability of this predicate in the given transitivized

construction does not appear to be strongly linked to the participants' level of dialectal proficiency.

Regarding the type of subject in the utterance, the animate subject is slightly more acceptable to proficient dialect speakers than to non-proficient dialect speakers or monolinguals, although the correlation between these two variables is not statistically significant. Furthermore, dialectal proficiency has no direct effect on the acceptability of *uscire* with an inanimate subject.

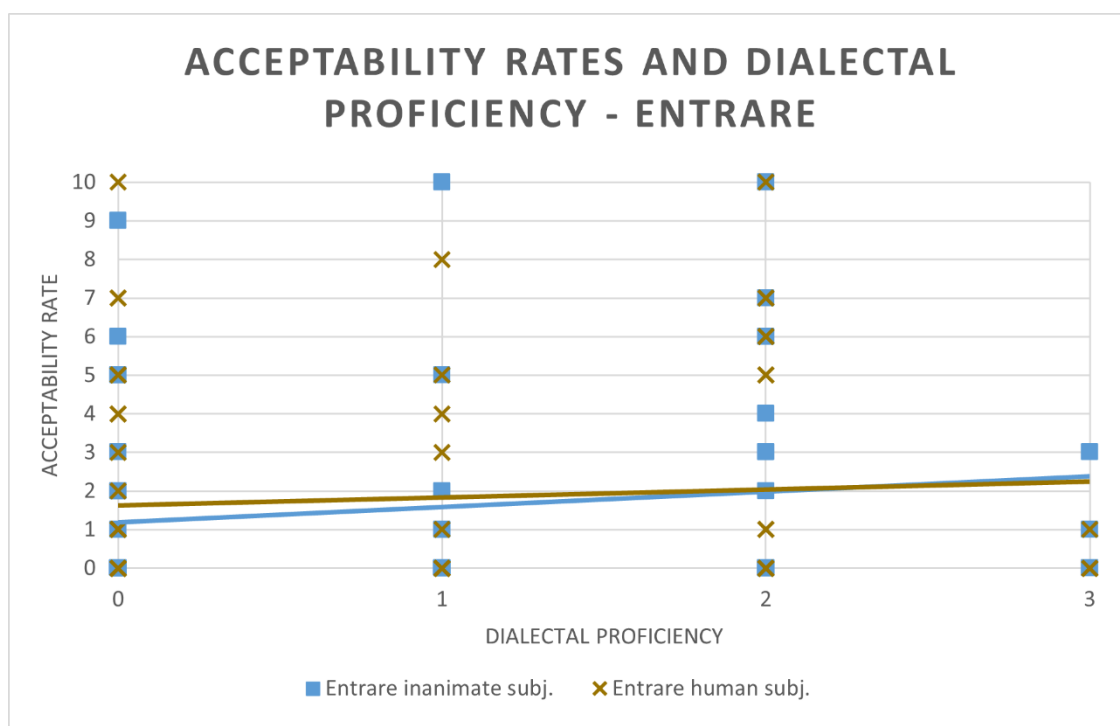


Figure 14 Dialectal proficiency and acceptability rates for *entrare*

The results for *entrare* (Figure 14) resemble the pattern already seen for *uscire*, with a minimal increase of the acceptability ratings within the evaluations of proficient dialect speakers. Since the two tokens with either an inanimate or an animate subject with this predicate were the least acceptable ones in general, there seems to be no influence of possible dialectal evidence from the *substratum*.

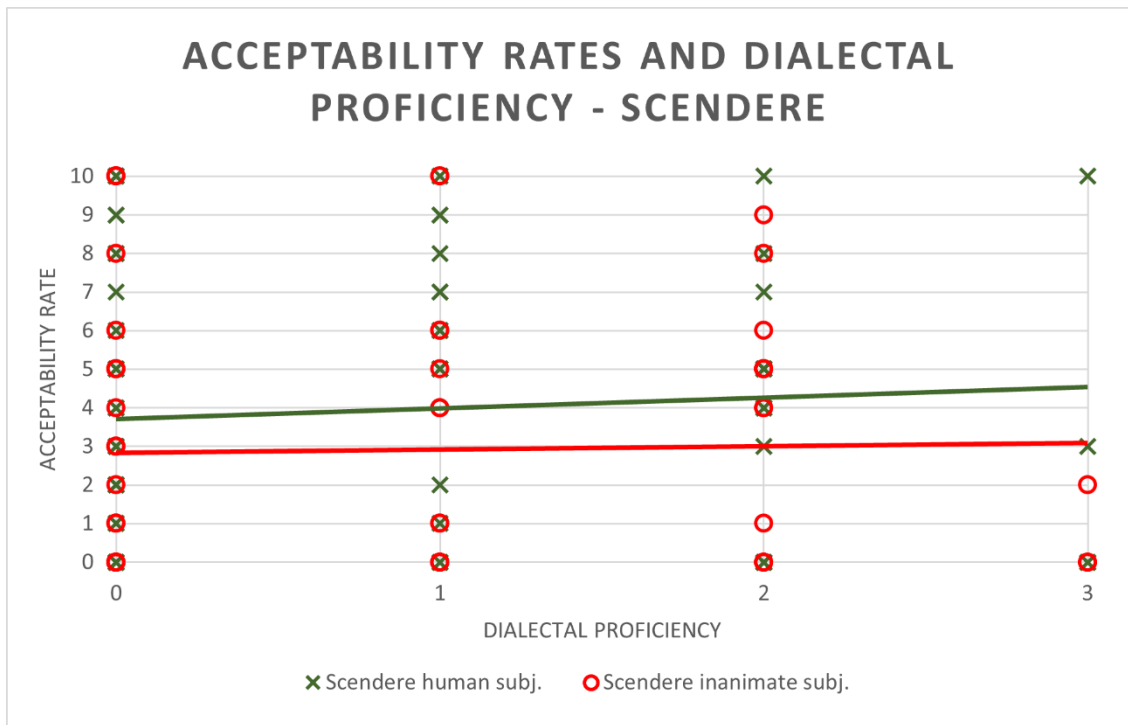


Figure 15 Dialectal proficiency and acceptability rates for scendere

*Salire* and *scendere* received more positive evaluations, with a slight increase in acceptability for both animate and inanimate subjects among **more proficient** dialect speakers. The inanimate subject of *salire*, *la gru* (‘the crane’), was rated more positively on average than its counterpart with *scendere* (*l’ascensore*, ‘the lift’), likely due to its stronger direct causal meaning.

The sentence *salire la spesa per le scale* (lit. ‘carry up the groceries through the stairs’), represented by the blue trend line in Figure 16, received lower ratings than *scendere la bici* (lit. ‘take down the bike’), represented by the green line in Figure 15. The reason for this difference remains unclear, but it may be related to the path complement in the former sentence, which could impose constraints on the interpretation of movement transmission.

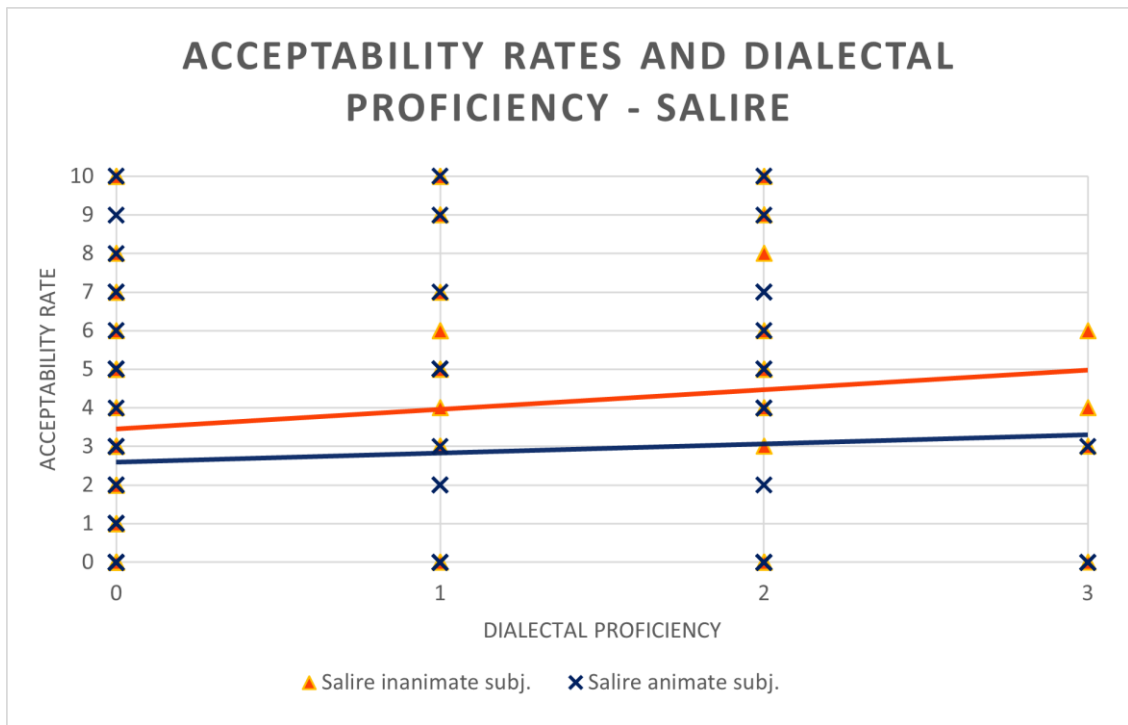


Figure 16 Dialectal proficiency and acceptability rates for salire

While this data seems to partially challenge our initial hypothesis of a correlation between dialectal proficiency and the acceptability of TUCs, a further consideration of the peculiar geographical distribution of dialect speakers in the province could provide a more nuanced analysis of the results. As previously described, the province presents a complex interaction between dialects and (regional) spoken Italian. The various centers in the province were either founded recently (in the 1930s) or have ancient origins, with some cities predating the founding of Rome (8th century BC; see also 4.1).

The status of ancient Italo-Romance dialects is better preserved in older cities, which are predominantly located in the Pre-Appennini mountains, historically situated outside the marshlands. These dialects belong to the Ciociaria group (the nearby province) and are characterized by the use of TUCs. In contrast, the varieties spoken in cities founded in the 1930s show fewer distinctive dialectal features and are closer to Roman regional Italian, although they also retain some peculiarities due to contact with other varieties, primarily Venetan and Ciociaria dialects. Roman Italian appears to exclude TUCs, at least based on the data collected from our control group.

The main difference between the two varieties is thus that Roman-like regional Italian does not accept TUCs, while Ciociaria dialects do. This distinction between regional Italian and Pre-Ciociaria dialects is reflected and partly confirmed by our data:

<b>City of origin</b>	<b>Mean acceptability rate</b>
<u>Latina</u>	1,98
<u>Pontinia</u>	2,80
<u>Sabaudia</u>	2,88
Priverno	4
Sonnino	2,88
Sezze	5,5
Terracina	4,38
<i>other</i>	1,97

*Table 14 City of origin and mean rates - Part 2*

The cities underlined - Latina, Sabaudia, and Pontinia - were all founded in the 1930s, while Priverno, Sonnino, Sezze, and Terracina are (pre-)Roman cities. The highest acceptability rates were recorded among speakers from the more ancient towns.

The two most representative groups are, on the one hand, Priverno and Terracina, with their respective dialects, Privernese and Terracinese, and on the other hand, Latina and Pontinia. We selected these cities because they had a higher number of participants. The data can be categorized as follows:

City	Uscire human subj.	Uscire inanimate subj.	Entrare human subj.	Entrare inanimate subj.	Salire human subj.	Salire inanimate subj.	Scendere human subj.	Scendere inanimate subj.
<u>Latina</u>	1,75	1,75	1,08	0,76	2,32	2,73	2,92	2,14
<u>Pontinia</u>	2,18	2,75	2,5	1,56	2,69	3,56	4,12	3,5
Terracina	3,67	3,67	3,5	3,5	5	6,5	6,34	4,84
Priverno	3	5,67	3,02	4	6,34	8,34	7	6,34

Table 15 Mean acceptability rates for single token, based on city of origin

The results suggest that speakers from cities where a southern Lazio dialect is commonly spoken tend to evaluate the tokens slightly **more positively** than speakers from areas without a long dialectal tradition. Although Terracina and Priverno are geographically distant – since the former is located on the coastline and the latter in the Pre-Appennini mountains – speakers from both cities showed similar average results. For every utterance considered in the empirical study, a dialectal background appears to lead to higher acceptability rates. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) for transitivized *salire*, for example, returned a p-value of 0.015, which is significant at the significance level ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ). The data then suggest that the **city of origin** is the most significant variant in influencing the reception of TUCs. This could partly be due to dialectal proficiency, since speakers from more ancient centers seem to be more proficient in dialect, but also to **identity** and self-awareness as local inhabitants rather than descendants of settlers.

As evidenced by Stefinlongo (2003), citizens of Latina (city) tend to identify as Romans and prefer to express themselves in the Roman regional variety. This could determine a general **rejection of dialectal features** associated with local dialects, such as TUCs. Citizens from older towns, in which dialects have been spoken for centuries, speak a regional variety with a clearer dialectal influence, and do not identify with Rome as much as Latina citizens do (Stefinlongo 2003). The issue of (linguistic) identification with either the capital city Rome or the smaller

towns in the province emerges in the self-assessment answers given by the speakers about their dialectal proficiency: all of the ten participants who declared to speak Roman were from either Latina (8) or Pontinia (2). No participants from ancient towns with local Ciociaria dialects identified with Rome and its variety. Two thirds of the participants from former Ciociaria towns declared to be speakers of local dialects.

We can summarize the results presented so far as follows: the first variable considered, age, shows a weak correlation with the acceptability of TUCs, with younger speakers giving slightly more positive evaluations than older speakers. Specifically, *uscire* and *entrare* with a human subject were less acceptable to older age groups. *Salire* and *scendere* were generally more acceptable across all age groups, though older participants showed a decrease in acceptability for tokens with inanimate subjects.

Dialectal proficiency, as a variable, does not show a clear correlation with the acceptability of the tokens offered in the empirical study, although a slight increase in acceptability rates was observed for proficient speakers. In this case, dialectal proficiency is influenced by the historical demographic evolution of the province. Newly founded towns in areas reclaimed from the marshlands are characterized by the use of a regional variety resembling Roman regional Italian. Participants from these cities gave more negative evaluations than those from older centers, which were never located in the marshes and where dialects using TUCs are spoken by the vast majority of the population, across all age groups. This factor appears to influence the participants' linguistic choices in their reception task.

A further aspect indirectly related to dialectal proficiency is the interaction between dialectal *substratum* and competence in Italian within the speaker's internal grammar. This phenomenon is challenging to investigate and is partly linked to the simultaneous activation of one or more (micro-)grammars during language processing. We conducted a correlation test to examine the influence of perfect diglossia on the participants' ratings. Perfect diglossia is characterized by the selection and exclusive activation of either one grammar or the other, depending on the context of use and the means of communication. Considering educational level as an indicator of formal Standard Italian competence, we assigned four main educational degrees to four coefficients – the higher the degree, the higher the coefficient: 1 corresponds to

elementary education, while 4 corresponds to academic education. The correlation coefficients between educational background and acceptability ratings proved weak but consistent:

	Uscire human subj.	Uscire inanimate subj.	Entrare human subj.	Entrare inanimate subj.	Salire human subj.	Salire inanimate subj.	Scendere human subj.	Scendere inanimate subj.
Correlation	-0.3	-0.22	-0.26	-0.3	-0.3	-0.3	-0.4	-0.4

Table 16 Correlation between educational level and acceptability rates

The data presented in Table 16 suggest that as participants' educational level increases, their evaluations of the acceptability of given tokens decrease. If we interpret this finding as an index of speakers' ability to deactivate their dialectal grammar when evaluating Italian sentences, we can cautiously hypothesize an indirect relationship between perfect diglossia and the acceptability of TUCs. This phenomenon might indicate that speakers with higher educational levels, who are more accustomed to formal Italian, are less likely to activate dialectal structures, thus evaluating constructions that deviate from the standard norm as less acceptable.

### *Comments and Improvements written by the Participants*

Most of the comments provided by participants after each token involved changing the transitivized unaccusative into a **periphrastic construction** with *fare* + infinitive. While this alternative likely enhances the acceptability of the utterance from a prescriptive standpoint, it alters the semantic content of the predicate, as *fare* + infinitive canonically expresses indirect causation. This reading does not necessarily imply direct involvement of the subject in the caused motion, nor the performance of the denoted motion by the agent. The realization of a caused-motion construction with this combination was the main distinction between tokens with animate and inanimate subjects: utterances with an inanimate agent (such as the bulldozer, Google, etc.) were more frequently corrected with the causative periphrasis (*fare* + *uscire*, *entrare*, *salire*, or *scendere*).

Utterances involving an animate agent as the subject of the caused-motion construction were more often rephrased with **canonical transitive predicates**, such as *portare* ('bring'), *mostrare* ('show'), or *prendere* ('take'), removing the semantic component of directed motion compared to the original token. When speakers wanted to maintain the meaning of motion, they inserted **phrasal verbs** (e.g., *portare giù* 'bring down').

When comparing the pair *Mario esce il cane* (lit. 'Mario goes out the dog') vs. *Google esce un risultato strano* ('Google goes out a weird result'), it is notable that participants inserted the causative periphrasis *far uscire* twice as often in the latter case, i.e., with the inanimate subject. In the first utterance, the meaning conveyed was that Mario himself performs the action of moving from the inside to the outside, causing the dog to do the same. In the second utterance, however, Google as a search engine is unlikely to function as an animate agent performing the action of moving. Thus, while the former agent can be perceived as more directly involved, the latter, though possibly humanized or more agentive than a typical inanimate causer, could only play the role of an indirect causer, as it cannot plausibly perform the motion denoted by the predicate. Furthermore, the metaphorical meaning associated with *uscire* with Google as a subject rules out a prototypical motion reading, thus shifting the clausal interpretation toward the low-transitivity pole. Note that both theme objects, *il cane* and *un risultato strano*, are referential, although the former is definite as pragmatically interpretable as given information, while the latter is indefinite and interpretable as new information.

The directed-motion interpretation of tokens with a human agent is furtherly confirmed by the use of the preposition *con* often inserted between the agent and the object in animate subject utterances, such as in *Mario esce con il cane* ('Mario goes out **with** the dog'), found in nearly one fourth of the comments following this sentence (23%). This construction turned the transitive sentence into an intransitive one while maintaining the original implication of the agent moving in the same direction as the object that is caused to move. This option was not available for the inanimate counterpart.

The data show a weak but consistent correlation between age and the acceptability of metaphorical *uscire* with the meaning of producing digital data. Of the seven participants who evaluated the sentence as moderately to completely acceptable (6 to 10), all were under 40, with the exception of a 61-year-old from Priverno who had high dialectal proficiency and generally

gave more positive evaluations than the average. This participant's rejection of the token containing the transitive *avanzare*, typically used in the North, could be interpreted as active dialectal interference.

In some cases, a participant rated a token as unacceptable but corrected another element of the sentence, such as a complement, rather than the transitivized verb. This allowed us to evaluate whether it was the caused construction or another sentence element that was considered (fully) ungrammatical. For example, one participant only commented on the lexical content of the sentences, as in the case of transitive metaphorical *uscire* with the subject Google. The participant, a 71-year-old from Pontinia with a high-school degree and no dialectal proficiency, commented, "Non mi è mai capitato!" (lit. "This has never happened to me!"), rating the sentence a 5/10 but not correcting its form. Similar reactions to the tokens were particularly common among older participants.

Other speakers provided **metalinguistic judgments** and comments in their notes. Some explicitly stated that they did not accept transitive uses of the predicates in question, while others commented that transitive constructions with canonical unaccusatives are "common sayings," suggesting that the status of TUCs can also be perceived as typical of crystallized expression.

### *Rest of Italy*

The comparison of data from the province of Latina with results from other regions of Italy reveals some interesting observations. Northern speakers evaluated the token with the transitive *avanzare* referring to the direct object of food more positively, as expected. The mean rate was 5.3/10, whereas the average in the main group was 2.9. Some older participants from the North corrected the sentence by treating the food as a patient subject and selecting the auxiliary *essere* (BE). Participants from Southern Italy evaluated the sentence more negatively, with a mean score of 2.1, similar to the results from Latina. Almost all participants rephrased the sentence by using the food as a patient subject, the quirky subject as a dative pronoun, and the auxiliary *essere* (*mi è avanzata della pasta*).

In both the northern and central/southern groups, younger participants showed a higher acceptability of this transitivity, while dialectal proficiency did not appear to be related to the acceptability pattern.

The mean evaluations for the eight target sentences in the other two groups (Northern and Southern Italy) are summarized in Table 17:

<b>Predicate</b>	<b>Mean rate LATINA</b>	<b>Mean rate NORTHER N IT.</b>	<b>Mean rate CENTRAL/ SOUTHERN IT.</b>
<i>Uscire</i> animate subject	2,07	0,91	2,38
<i>Uscire</i> inanimate subject	2,24	0,23	1,64
<i>Entrare</i> animate subject	1,80	0,38	1,83
<i>Entrare</i> inanimate subject	1,55	0,69	1,21
<i>Salire</i> animate subject	2,79	0,77	2,68
<i>Salire</i> inanimate subject	3,87	<b>2</b>	2,68
<i>Scendere</i> animate subject	3,94	1,08	3,25
<i>Scendere</i> inanimate subject	2,90	0,77	2,70

Table 17 Mean rates in the three groups - Part 2

Table 17 reflects the closer alignment of the varieties spoken in Latina with southern dialects rather than with northern varieties, as expected. Although traces of Venetan varieties may be present, particularly in the grammar of some older speakers, the regional Italian spoken in the province of Latina is predominantly influenced by local vernaculars and general regional traits common to central Italy as a whole. The evaluations from northern speakers confirm that the acceptability of directed-motion constructions is lower in the North.

The highest mean rating in the Northern group was assigned to the token with transitive *salire* and an inanimate subject (*la gru sale l'armadio*, lit. 'the crane goes up the wardrobe'), which received more favorable evaluations than other tokens with similar subjects. Results from

the Southern group confirmed that *salire* and *scendere* are generally more acceptable than *uscire* and *entrare* when used in transitivized active constructions.

Regarding the two variables considered in the main group, age showed a more significant influence on the acceptability of TUCs, as younger speakers consistently evaluated the sentences more positively than older speakers, both in the northern and the central/southern groups.

Dialectal proficiency proved to have a more significant effect in the central/southern group than in the other two. Since TUCs are accepted in several southern dialects, their acceptability increased with higher dialectal proficiency. Interestingly, tokens with animate subjects received more positive judgments from proficient dialect speakers (except for transitivized *entrare*), as shown in Figure 17:

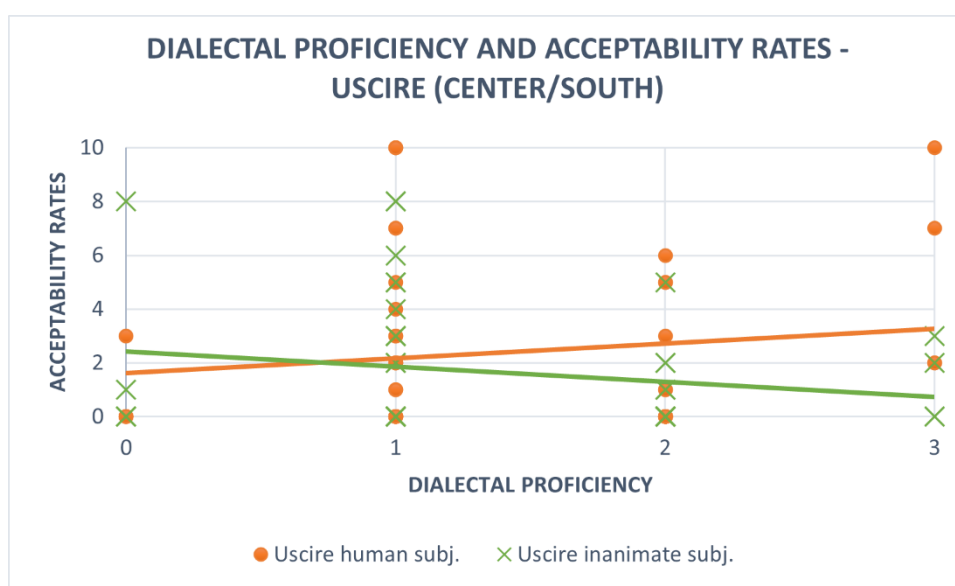


Figure 17 Dialectal proficiency and acceptability rates for *uscire* in the central/southern group

The results reveal that the acceptability of the transitive construction with *uscire* decreases as the dialectal proficiency coefficient increases when the subject is inanimate, while it increases when the subject is animate. This intriguing result supports Romagno’s (2021) findings, which suggest that proficient dialect speakers rely on **stricter constraints** when integrating dialectal patterns into spoken Italian production or reception. Similar to Romagno’s study on object animacy, this result appears to confirm that prototypical semantic roles typically associated with the subject position – such as animacy, intentionality, *kinesis*, and direct

causation – enhance the acceptability of these constructions in grammars with a strong dialectal *substratum*.

Conversely, speakers with lower or no dialectal competence evaluate both versions of the same transitivized predicate more similarly (as indicated by the two tendency lines in Figure 17 being closer to each other on the left side of the x-axis). When comparing these results to those of the main group (shown in Figure 13), the tendency remains similar, but the gap between evaluations by dialectally proficient and non-proficient participants is more pronounced in the central/southern group. This suggests that the influence of dialectal patterns is more significant in this group.

Northern speakers, as anticipated, used more phrasal verbs as replacements for the transitivized predicates found in the given tokens. These corrections involving phrasal verbs only applied to tokens with human subjects that were characterized by high volition. For example, northern speakers used phrasal verbs like *portare fuori* ('take out') or *portare giù* ('take down') only for the three utterances with a human subject intentionally and directly causing the object theme to move. The token with a human agent interpreted as having low volition – *Carla entra il fango con gli stivali* (lit. 'Carla goes in the mud with the boots') was corrected by half of the participants with a canonical transitive predicate, *portare*, without particles.

Tokens presenting a transitivized unaccusative with an inanimate subject were corrected using synonymous, canonically transitive predicates like *sollevare* ('lift'). The metaphorical use of transitive *uscire* was often rendered with transitive verbs such as *mostrare* ('show'), *proporre* ('propose'), *presentare* ('present'), and *produrre* ('produce'), with indirect causation typically realized through the addition of *fare* and a periphrastic causative construction.

Among some metalinguistic comments from participants, a young speaker with an academic background from Puglia remarked on *Mario esce il cane* (lit. 'Mario goes out the dog'): "Ho sentito 'esco la spazzatura', uscire in senso transitivo lo userei in modo molto colloquiale e solo con un oggetto inanimato" ('I heard "I go out the trash", I would use *uscire* in a transitive sense only in a very colloquial way and only with an inanimate object'). This insightful comment aligns with Romagno's (2021) findings on the restrictions of caused motion constructions in relation to age and perfect diglossia among southern speakers. Romagno's

study in Calabria demonstrates that older dialect speakers tend to reject caused motion constructions when the theme object is perceived as animate, and thus potentially more agentive than canonical objects. The higher acceptability of the same constructions with animate objects by younger speakers suggests a potential innovation in the patterns governing the production and reception of TUCs in spoken Italian, especially when younger speakers are not as proficient in their dialect as older ones.

Metalinguistic comments from central and southern speakers were significantly more frequent than those from the northern group. Roman and Tuscan participants reported hearing these constructions from southern speakers, recognizing their geographical origin. Some southern speakers, aware of the dialectal nature of these constructions, commented, similarly to participants from Priverno in the main group, that their dialect permits these constructions but that they would only use them in extremely colloquial contexts. Interestingly, all these speakers were highly proficient in their dialects and had high educational levels.

A young participant from Brindisi (Puglia) with minimal dialectal proficiency – passive competence, according to the self-assessment questions – corrected a TUC predicate by inserting another non-standard transitivization, possibly influenced by an English calque:

- (9) Mario    passeggia    il    cane  
      Mario    walks        the    dog

#### 5.4.4 Discussion

The results of the second part of our empirical study, presented here, provide several noteworthy observations regarding the reception and status of TUCs in the province of Latina, and to some extent, across the entire national territory.

The most immediate observation is that the status of TUCs does not reflect full acceptability, as evidenced by the **low mean ratings** given by participants. There is significant variability in the speakers' reception of TUCs, as indicated by high standard deviation values and substantial **variation** within individual idiolects.

Furthermore, formal semantic properties of the subject, such as its perceived potential agentivity, appear to influence acceptability rates. In active transitive motion predicates, the

subject's role is traditionally associated with high animacy, most prominently represented by human subjects, as well as further attributes like high volition, self-determined movement, and direct involvement in caused motion. These characteristics seem to impact the dialectal patterns underlying regional Italian competence, which in turn shapes the reception of TUCs, particularly among older speakers. It appears that the weakening of these semantic restrictions has begun within younger groups, though further research is needed to substantiate this initial observation.

Consequently, the distinction between direct and indirect causation could influence whether a periphrastic alternative, such as *fare* + infinitive, is considered acceptable. Tokens with lower subject animacy were more frequently modified in favor of this alternative construction, while TUC predicates involving animate subjects were more often replaced by canonical transitives (without the connotation of directed motion), reflecting different degrees of perceived transitivity.

The two sociolinguistic variables analyzed, age and dialectal proficiency, did not show a strong direct correlation with participants' choices, although weak correlations were identified. Younger speakers, as well as those with higher dialectal proficiency, generally evaluated the tokens more positively.

Statistical analysis of the data did not reveal strongly significant results. In other words, the potential correlations between the acceptability rates and the two independent variables (age and dialectal proficiency) were either weak or non-existent. Note that this result might partly be biased by a large scale of possible evaluations – ranging from 0 to 10 – determining high variation levels, since speakers were given ten different possible answers to each token. However, light tendencies emerged regarding the acceptability of *salire* and *scendere* with inanimate subjects, which was slightly higher among younger participants. This trend, which could be interpreted as an innovation in the semantics of TUC agents, may suggest that inanimate subjects are gaining **greater** acceptability in the most recent generation. Further research is needed to confirm or refute this hypothesis.

These findings lead us to partially reject our initial hypothesis that a strong dialectal *substratum* – particularly in regions where the local dialects use the four analyzed predicates transitively – would directly correlate with higher acceptability of the same pattern in spoken

Italian. The lack of a strong correlation between dialectal proficiency and TUC acceptability rates may be attributed to the methodological approach used in the experiment, or alternatively, could reflect an outcome of the *neo-standardization* process described in sociolinguistic studies (see also Section 4.2.2). Notably, our sample revealed that younger speakers self-assess their dialectal proficiency as lower than their older counterparts.

Sociolinguistic research (Cerruti 2011; Cerruti et al. 2017) has shown that perfect diglossic speakers – those whose Italian and dialectal competences are balanced – belong to the middle-aged group identified in our experiment. These speakers are typically the most conservative when it comes to the standard norm, likely due to their heightened awareness of the distinctions between the norm and dialect. They also represent the social group that gained access to higher education in the national standard, acquiring both colloquial and formal varieties of Italian.

Younger speakers, particularly those with imperfect dialectal competence, are recognized in sociolinguistic literature as the **main agents of language change**. Their spontaneous production incorporates dialectal features into *neo-standard* varieties, often without their awareness (Busso & Romagno 2021). This leads to the erosion of geographical markedness and semantic restrictions on originally dialectal constructions (Benincà & Damonte 2009; Romagno 2021).

A preliminary interpretation of the tendency lines in Figure 9-14 (age and acceptability rates) in comparison with Figure 13-17 (dialectal proficiency and acceptability rates) allows us to cautiously hypothesize that age may have a greater impact on the acceptability of TUCs than dialectal influence. This suggests that TUCs may be at a stage where they are losing their geographical markedness and becoming more prevalent in regional Italian, particularly through the younger generations. Further data is needed to confirm this hypothesis, which aligns with insights already provided in the existing literature (Busso & Romagno 2021).

The results of Table 13, illustrating the mean overall rates received by each target token, lead us to the following acceptability hierarchy:

- (10) *Scendere* (animate subj.) > *salire* (inanim. subj.) > *scendere* (inanim. subj.) > *salire* (anim.) > *uscire* (inan.) > *uscire* (anim.) > *entrare* (inan.) > *entrare* (anim.)

The most interesting insight about this hierarchy is that it is not (only) the animacy that determines the differences registered in the acceptability rates of the tokens, but the semantic properties canonically associated with agents. In other words, subjects which are animate (such as Carla in *Carla goes in the mud with her boots*) are not necessarily associated with higher acceptability degrees, since their interpretation is one of low volition and low agentivity. In fact, as already highlighted, the subject Carla does not willingly cause the event in which mud is transported into the house, and is therefore much more a causer than an agent. This interpretation is one phenomenon that places this token at the lowest position for registered acceptability rates. Similarly, the wind in the transitivized *entrare* construction (lit. *the wind goes in dust into the living room*) is the second least acceptable token, since natural forces are canonical causers, but not agents. The results confirm the general higher acceptability of *scendere* and *salire*, which are available in standard Italian with direct path objects (Busso & Romagno 2021). Furthermore, inanimate subjects which display semantic features associated with high transitivity degrees, such as direct involvement in motion and direct causation potential, are as acceptable as tokens with human subjects. This is the case of both the crane in *the crane goes up the wardrobe up to the third floor* (literal translation) and digital search engine Google in the token with metaphorically transitivized *uscire* with the meaning of “post”, “send”, “publish”.

Regarding the type of task selected for the investigation, the Acceptability Judgement Task, the results confirm that this method is affected by both the nature of the phenomenon under examination, namely TUCs as an **interface phenomenon**, and by participants’ metalinguistic awareness as a potential confounding factor (Fischer et al. 2022: 69). The lack of consistent results may therefore be attributed to the variability, low frequency and marginal grammaticality of TUCs, which are influenced by a wide range of factors. Testing all of these simultaneously would likely require a number and complexity of stimuli that exceed what participants can process attentively and reliably within a single session.

Moreover, participants from the Agro Pontino region who took part in the study appear to self-assess as either dialectal or monolingual Italian speakers based not only on their actual linguistic competence, but also on issues of **identity**. The unique historical background of the province – characterized by waves of migration from various regions over the course of the

twentieth century – has resulted in significant differences between speakers from newly established towns and those from rural areas and older settlements. Speakers from the former group tend to self-identify as monolingual Italian or Roman speakers. This self-perception may lead them, perhaps unconsciously, to align their acceptability judgements with either the standard Italian norm or the Roman dialect norm – both of which typically exclude TUCs. The geographical distribution of TUCs defined at the beginning of this work thus seems to be particularly hard to describe in the case of the Agro Pontino: as a land which has been a frontier between politically, linguistically, and socially different instances for centuries, the province still represents a permeable borderline between southern and central Italy, with linguistic consequences on the phenomena observed in this investigation. The scarce, but still marginally given acceptability of TUCs, which appear to be ruled out in the closest bigger city and linguistic innovation pole – Rome – is an example of this peculiar context.

Future research should take these factors into account by expanding the scope of the investigation to include additional variables, such as linguistic identity and self-perceived language competence, which are particularly relevant in this complex geographical and sociolinguistic context. Formal variables such as definiteness, telicity, and semantic properties of the object theme, but also patterns of syntactic coercion and argument structure constraints also deserve some attention.

The design of possible further investigation patterns should also suit the complexity of the phenomenon. A shorter scale with fewer possible responses to input – for instance, 1 to 4 – could be easier to use for the participants, especially when they perform the study digitally on a small screen.

Furthermore, a higher number of tokens per predicate – one with a canonical agent directly manipulating the object, one with an animate subject as indirect causer and one with an inanimate subject, at least – could offer more specific insights about the role of semantic interpretations. In order to administer such longer tests, both in the number of tokens and the temporal extent of the investigation, motivated participants must be found who are willing to spend a longer time concentrating on the task, or perform more repetitions. This level of attention cannot be expected from all possible participants, and academic attendants and students could be one possible target for future investigations. As for the participation of even

younger speakers, the response given by schools and similar institution has been low, and further projects should seek a more effective cooperation.

While Translation Tasks with elicited priming have been successfully employed in bilingual contexts where participants share the same (or closely related) dialect or second language, the high degree of linguistic variation observed in the Agro Pontino region makes such an approach considerably more difficult to conceptualize, design, and implement effectively. Given that an unexpected number of participants self-assessed as imperfect or non-proficient dialect speaker, Translations Tasks would only apply to a small portion of potential participants, thus being less predictive of the broader population.

## 5.5 Proposal of formal analysis

The aim of this section is to propose a theoretical representation of how TUCs found in spoken Italian may be syntactically analyzed. This analysis attempts to account for the syntax of the data gathered both in our *corpus* and in the studies presented thus far. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first formal attempt to describe TUCs in the context of spoken Italian.

The theoretical framework adopted for analyzing the data from our *corpus* and the results of the experimental studies is Ramchand's First-Phase Syntax, as applied to Spanish and Catalan TUCs by Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino (2014) and Pineda (2018), respectively. Several factors justify the choice of this approach. We have already expressed our preference for considering lexical behavior as a consequence of syntactic behavior rather than as the result of lexicon-internal processes (Ramchand 2008). In Ramchand's words (2008:11 ff.), the lexicon contains no grammatically relevant information, but merely selectional properties that guide the free construction of syntactic terminals. Under this approach, (in)transitivity is determined syntactically. However, this does not imply, as predicted by the Free Distribution Approach, that every structure is syntactically possible and that only real-world knowledge accounts for ungrammaticality.

It is important to clarify that the approach adopted in this section is not intended to refute Busso's (2020) analysis of valency coercion patterns within the framework of Constructional

Semantics (see 3.2.7). In fact, First-Phase Syntax shares with this approach the fundamental assumption that meaning arises not only from lexical items but, crucially, from constructional properties. Moreover, usage-based regularities, empirical evidence, and sociolinguistic factors play a key role in reinforcing and shaping the production and acceptability of constructions such as TUC strategies.

However, while Constructional Semantics provides valuable insights into the mechanisms of coercion and the gradient nature of acceptability, I argue that a theoretical model that also accounts for the role of universal syntax and hierarchical structure remains necessary. For this reason, Ramchand's (2008) model has been chosen as the main structural framework, as it allows for a principled representation of event structure and argument realization while still being compatible with language-specific variation.

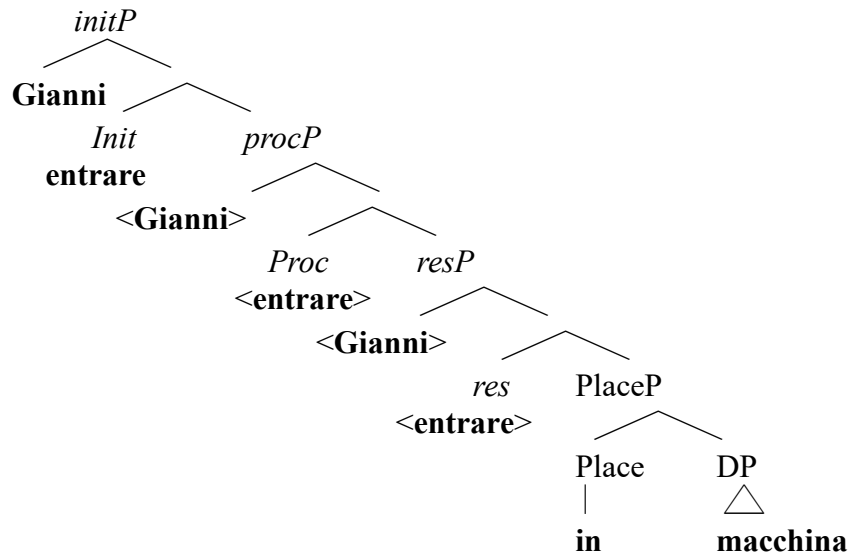
Turning to the main topic of this study – caused-motion constructions involving directed-motion verbs – our primary goal is to develop a syntactic theory explaining why certain verbs appear resistant to causativization, at least in normative terms and in some regional grammars or even idiolects. Ramchand's First-Phase Syntax allows for a **flexible** model that explains why and how shifts within verb classes – namely, from intransitive to transitive – are possible and under what conditions. This approach offers sufficient generalization without overextending the concept of argument realization, as it still considers **constraining** semantic properties such as the degree of intentionality. In fact, the Grammatically Relevant Categories Approach, if freed from outdated concepts such as Manner/Result Complementarity, remains the most suitable framework for describing a phenomenon like TUCs, which exhibits both syntactic flexibility and semantic constraints.

Ramchand's First-Phase Syntax model successfully accounts for Italian canonical unaccusatives. Intransitive motion predicates correspond to the second class identified by the model, where only the *Initiator* and *Undergoer* projections are realized, with both Spec<sub>DP</sub> positions occupied by the same coindexed DP. The Undergoer projection can extend to a Result projection in telic readings and may also include rhematic material such as Paths.

Crucially, clauses containing a Result Phrase (*resP*) combine with Place Phrases (PlacePs) through event-complement composition, where the semantics of *Res* generate a telic interpretation in which the Place functions as the goal of motion (Ramchand 2008:124). This is

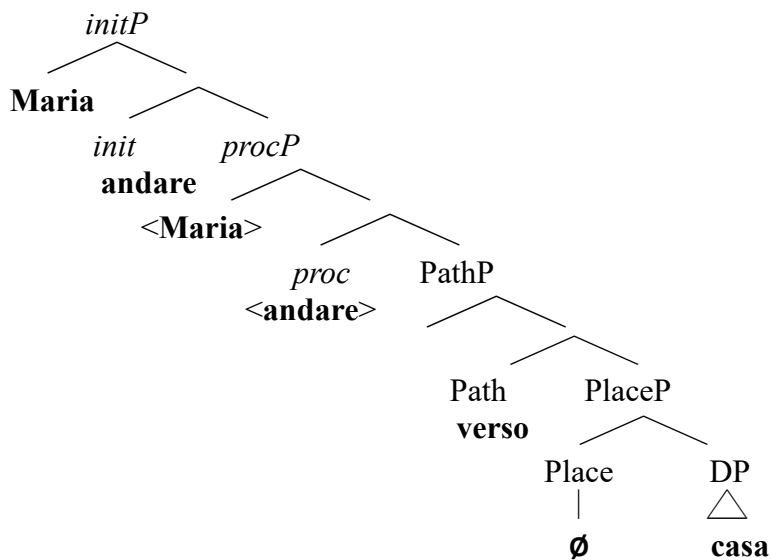
typically the case for directed-motion predicates, which being inherently telic always entail a Result Projection.

(11) **Gianni entra in macchina** (lit. ‘Gianni enters in (the) car’)



Verbs which only entail *procP* – represented by non-directed motion predicates – must combine with PathPs for directed-motion interpretations (Ramchand 2008:125):

(12) **Maria va verso casa** (‘Maria walks/goes to the house’)



I have already reported Jimenez-Fernández & Tubino's 2014 necessary condition for a canonical unaccusative to be used as a (caused) transitivized predicate. I will formalize this assumption and confirm its validity for our case:

(13) **Rule of unaccusative predicate transitivization**

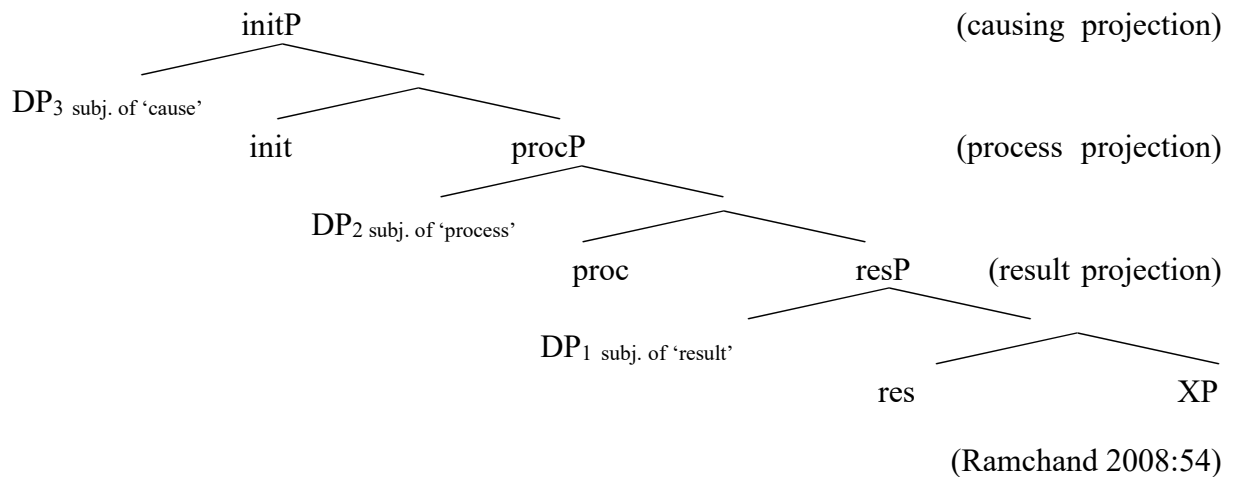
*An unaccusative predicate can be transitivized iff the event is decomposable into three distinct subevents and the DP in the Spec of InitP is not coindexed with that of ResP.*

Furtherly, the argument occupying the SpecDP<sub>3</sub> position of *initP* must be an actor, i.e. carry semantical properties associated with these arguments. The difference between agents and causers is not given syntactically, as they occupy the same position.

Recalling Ramchand's classification of verb classes (3.2.6), it follows from this assumption that only predicates that are structurally "large" enough provide sufficient space for the realization of all three projections and for the presence of two distinct, non-coindexed DPs. These predicates correspond to the class canonically labeled as **accomplishments**.

From this perspective, the transitive clause with an unaccusative predicate represents an alternative way of filling the SpecDP<sub>3</sub> position with a semantic actor rather than with SE. The possibility of inserting an unaccusative verb into a causative construction can thus be detected through the presence of SE (in Italian: *se ne*) in the anticausative counterpart. An overview of the three possible projections resulting in three subevents **saturating the valency** of a predicate is repeated here:

(14) **Event decomposition in three subevents**

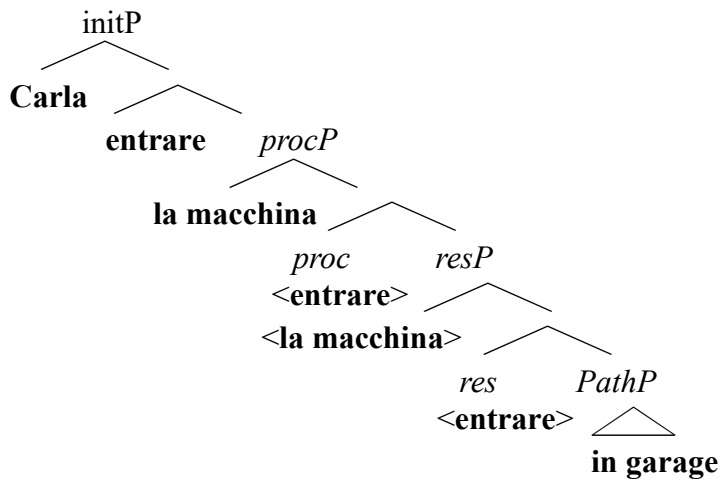


The Spec position of DP<sub>3</sub> is occupied, in anticausative constructions, by Romance SE, and filled by an actor, either causer or agent, in caused transitive constructions.

The Event Decomposition Rule can be applied as follows: the event *e* in *Mario sale la spesa* (lit. 'Mario goes up the groceries') consists of a subevent *e*<sub>1</sub>, in which Mario's motion causally implicates *e*<sub>2</sub>, a second subevent in which the groceries are caused to move in the same direction.

According to Ramchand's organization of verb classes, we can list TUC predicates into under the class indicated as III: transitive verbs with an overt INITIATOR which is a distinct argument than the RESULTEE. The First-Phase-Syntax model can be applied to non-standard Italian TUCs as follows:

(15) **Carla entra la macchina in garage** (lit. 'Carla enters the car into the garage')



The possibility of an anticausative clause with SE (*Carla se ne entra in garage*) confirms that this predicate is decomposable into three different subevents, with the DP in the Spec position of *initP* being Carla – as an agent – in the transitive counterpart. The car as UNDERGOER is caused to move, and the *PathP* conveys the telic meaning in which the car is also the RESULTEE of this directed motion, acquiring a specific final state.

A crucial distinction must be drawn between an INITIATOR that both induces and performs the motion denoted by the verb and an INITIATOR that induces the motion but does not personally execute it. This distinction is evident in the following examples:

- (16) a. Mario esce il cane  
lit. ‘Mario goes out the dog’
- b. Mario esce la carne (dal frigo)  
lit. ‘Mario goes out the meat (of the fridge)’

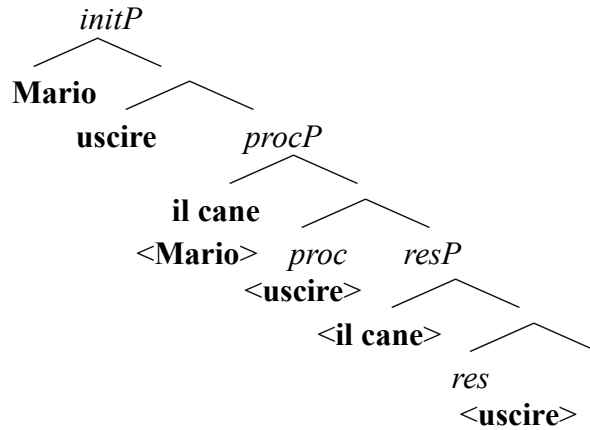
Thus, while the agent in (16a) also performs the action of leaving the building, the same agent in (16b) does not physically exit the fridge but merely causes the meat to do so. Semantically, the implication that the agent moves together with the direct object depends on the potential agentivity of the object theme, as both arguments are perceived as potentially capable of performing the same action simultaneously. Conversely, an inanimate object is intuitively understood to move in a manner distinct from that of an animate agent, leading to the less direct reading observed in the second example. We can attempt to adapt this semantic distinction to the model. While it is straightforward that the Specifier position of *InitP* and that

of *ResP* must host two different DPs in order to allow for transitivity, the SpecDP position of *ProcP* can be occupied by both the Initiator and the Resultee DP, depending on animacy relations. This implies that the UNDERGOER of TUCs can be either the actor or the theme object.

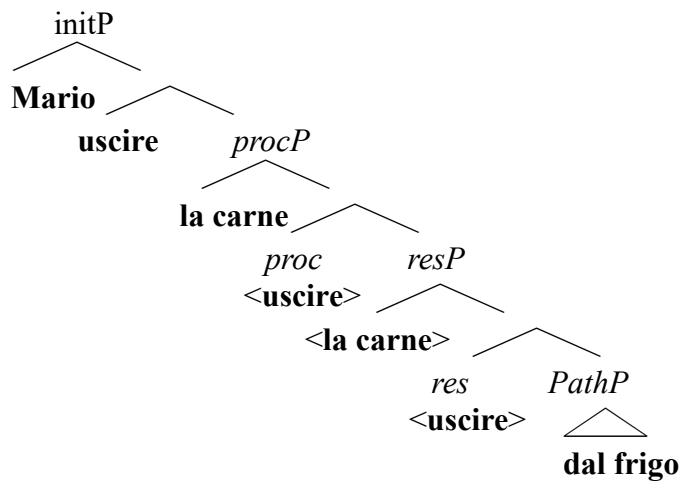
Structurally, we can assume that in Mario going out the dog, Mario functions as both the INITIATOR and the UNDERGOER of the predicate (in this case, we have two animate UNDERGOERS, Mario and the dog). In contrast, in the second case, Mario serves solely as the INITIATOR of the action, in which the meat, as the UNDERGOER and RESULTEE, exits the fridge.

This eventuality is accounted for by Ramchand, who observes that transitive verbs of induced motion entail at least one UNDERGOER as the subject of process but may also involve two UNDERGOERS. The distinction between a kinetic agent and an initiator that does not perform the initiated action can be represented as follows:

a. **Mario esce il cane**, lit. ‘Mario goes out the dog’

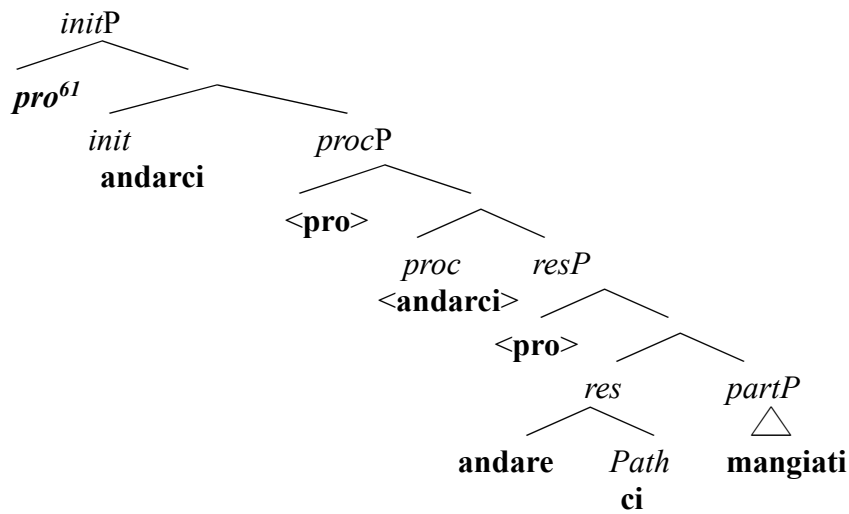


b. **Mario esce la carne (dal frigo)**, lit. ‘Mario goes out the meat from the fridge’



Although we do not focus on resultatives – except for the brief *excursus* on participles (see 2.3), we can analyze a typical non-standard predicative participle construction as follows, also applying Ramchand’s model:

(18) **Ci andiamo mangiati** (lit. ‘we go there eaten’ = ‘we go there after we have eaten’)



As previously outlined, the presence of an overt anticausative marker in the Spec<sub>DP3</sub> position of *initP* is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the transitivization of unaccusatives in spoken Italian. Additional factors, such as the semantic properties of both the subject and the theme object in the transitive clause, appear to influence the acceptability of these constructions. Specifically, the acceptability of TUCs increases when the direct theme object exhibits a low degree of animacy, thereby minimizing its perceived agentivity (Romagno 2021, 2023). However, this semantic constraint seems to have weakened in the grammar of younger speakers, who tend to evaluate TUCs with more animate objects more favorably than older speakers.

Our data partially indicate that higher subject animacy may enhance the acceptability of TUCs, supporting the interpretation of these clauses as highly transitive constructions. The canonical semantic properties associated with the subject of a transitive active clause – such as high volition, definiteness, direct causation, and direct involvement – favor the acceptability of these structures. Notably, crosslinguistic comparisons reveal relevant differences in this regard. For instance, data from Western Peninsular Spanish (Lara Bermejo 2018, 2020) indicate high acceptability for constructions involving unwilling causers transmitting motion onto their

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<sup>61</sup> Standard Italian is a null-subject language. See Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou (1998) for the notions of EPP-checking, licensing of null subjects, and Agreement features.

objects (e.g., *caer el vaso*, lit. ‘fall the glass’). In contrast, spoken Italian follows a more conservative pattern, as canonical subject properties remain crucial for enabling these transitivization strategies.

Note that while Ramchand’s classification is crosslinguistically suitable for our descriptive purposes, it still requires some adaptation to account for certain data from Italian. The predicate ‘arrive’, classified by Ramchand as punctual in English, appears to retain a certain degree of decomposability in Italian, as evidenced by its grammatical acceptability in transitive constructions in some regional varieties. As previously mentioned (see 2.2), dialectal utterances from Southern vernaculars (Neapolitan) and Tuscan varieties attest to transitive forms of *arrivare* with different meanings. A brief *corpus* analysis of Old Italian further supports this observation.

From an etymological perspective, Treccani reports that this verb derives from Vulgar Latin *arripere*, meaning ‘to bring to the shore.’ Indeed, several pronominal and/or transitive uses of *arrivare* are documented, some of which still retain their original lexical meaning of approaching (or bringing something close to) a shore. Below, we provide a selection of relevant examples<sup>62</sup>:

- (19) a. Ohimè, a che m' ar[r]ivo! *Intr.*  
*pronominal use*  
 dear.me to what REFL arrive.1SG  
 ‘Dear me! What am I getting to!’

[Neri de' Visdomini (ed. Contini), XIII sm. (Flor.), 54, p. 369]

- b. (...) e 'l vizio della gola fa gli uomini molto impronti; *Pronominal (se ne)*  
 ‘and the vice of gluttony makes men very importunate...’  
 ma rade volte se ne arrivabene<sup>63</sup> (...)  
 but rare times SE NE arrive-well  
 ‘...but only rarely you can be successful about it’

[Sacchetti, Trecentonovelle, XIV sm. (Flor.), 51, p. 119.5]

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<sup>62</sup> From *TLIO – Tesoro della Lingua Italiana delle Origini*, online *corpus*.

<sup>63</sup> According to the *corpus* definition, *arrivare bene* (either with or without spacebar) is an expression with the meaning of ‘succeed in sth’.

c. (...) E quella sozza imagine di froda / sen venne, *Trans.*  
 ‘and that filthy image of fraud approached us...’

e arrivò la testa e 'l busto,  
 and arrived the head and torso

‘...and stuck out his head and torso’

(Dante, *Commedia*, a. 1321, Inf. c. 17.8)

d. (...) a questo porto Amor m' ha arrivato *trans. (metaph.)*  
 to this harbor Love me has arrived

‘Love has brought me to this harbor’

[Muscia da Siena, XIII ex. (Tuscan), D.2.11, p. 95]

Clearly, the occurrence of transitive constructions with *arrivare* in contemporary regional and dialectal varieties is not an innovation. Rather, these constructions were initially excluded as part of the historical process that led to the transformation of Florentine first into a literary language and later into a national language for everyday use. However, they persisted at the regional level and may have re-entered informal communication “from below” during the *neo-standardization* of 20th-century Italian (see 4.2.2). Pineda (2018) finds some parallel evidence in Old Catalan, reporting that more verbs of motion appeared in a pronominal structure with SE than they do nowadays.

The fact that transitivizations with *arrivare* are both statistically rarer and semantically more restricted than those involving other verbs of directed motion can once again be explained by structural properties. Intuitively, we can assume that such an eventive structure is not as complex as that of other directed-motion verbs. This relatively “smaller” structure, from a cognitive perspective, makes *arrivare* less suitable for transitivization, as evidenced by its low acceptability in combination with *se ne*.

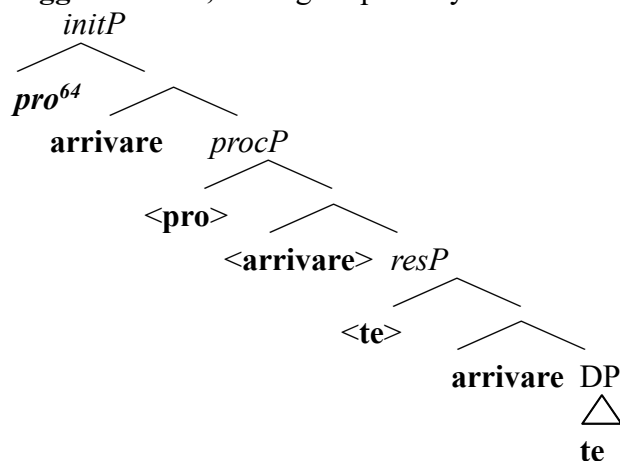
(20) ?Gianni se n'è arrivato da Roma senza dire niente a nessuno

‘Gianni has arrived from Rome without telling anyone’

To fit *arrivare* into Ramchand’s verb classes, we have to change its class from punctual to non-punctual. Recall that Ramchand’s definition of a punctual event corresponds to a decomposition in subevents in which the DP<sub>1</sub>, DP<sub>2</sub> and DP<sub>3</sub> positions (i.e. Spec<sub>resP</sub>, Spec<sub>procP</sub> and Spec<sub>initP</sub>, respectively) are occupied by one and the same coindexed DP, which implies that

the INITIATOR, the UNDERGOER and the RESULTEE denote the same entity. Thanks to the “relaxed” properties of the model, a different referent can be introduced as INITIATOR (DP<sub>3</sub>), thus turning the predicate into a non-punctual and transitive one. Since the utterance is telic, the endpoint of the event will be the theme object which has been reached:

(21) **T’aggio arevato**, ‘I caught up with you’



(Ledgeway 2000: 301, fn. 23)

As already observed in the cases of *uscire il cane* (lit. ‘to go out the dog’) and *uscire la carne* (lit. ‘to go out the meat’), whether the subject of the initiator projection is also the UNDERGOER depends on whether it merely initiates the caused action or also performs it. In *t’aggio arevato* (Neapolitan, lit. ‘I arrived you’), the agent also moves to reach the RESULTEE, meaning that the subject of initiation undergoes a change of location. In *arrivami il sale* (Tuscan, lit. ‘arrive me the salt’), by contrast, only the salt (the RESULTEE) moves, caused by the INITIATOR to reach the tablemate who requested it. Once again, in Romagno’s (2021, 2023) framework, the degree of transitivity of the entire sentence is determined by the potential agentivity of the theme object.

The same distinction applies to the Western Peninsular Spanish constructions analyzed in Lara Bermejo (2020), where the INITIATOR functions as a causer rather than a volitional

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<sup>64</sup> This *pro* will check for first person singular agreement, as indicated in Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou (1998).

agent, as in *caer el vaso* (lit. ‘to fall the glass’). In this case, the causer does not actively participate in the action of falling but merely brings about the object’s accidental descent. A similar principle applies to constructions in northern Italian varieties involving the transitivization of *avanzare* (in this context, ‘to leave over’), where the causer instigates a situation in which food is unintentionally left over. In central and southern varieties, the synonymous verb *rimanere* can express either an unintentional or a volitional meaning, depending on the context.

The ambiguity of the subject of *avanzare* and *rimanere*, which may be interpreted as both a causer and an agent, aligns with Ramchand’s model, as the distinction between volitional and non-volitional actors is **not syntactically** encoded.

A brief excursus on transitive unaccusatives in (Brazilian) Portuguese further clarifies the status of this phenomenon in a cognate language. In Brazilian varieties, the presence or absence of SE is undergoing a transitional process, seemingly leading to the optionality of its phonetic realization (Cyrino 2007). We assume that the syntactic structure observed in Italian anticausative and causative constructions remains unchanged in Portuguese. The only difference lies in the fact that the **phonetically** empty Spec position of the initiator projection in Portuguese intransitive constructions blocks the insertion of an external argument in their transitive counterparts. Interestingly, the expansion of subject topics, as discussed in the subsection on Portuguese, demonstrates considerable flexibility, leading to transitive-like constructions. The most significant difference between Brazilian Portuguese and other Romance transitivizations thus lies in the fact that while (non-standard) Italian, Spanish, Catalan, Romanian, and French TUCs involve the insertion of an actor in subject position, Brazilian topic subjects exemplify topicalizations that lack a canonical agent subject. As already argued (see 2.4), the status of SE and the expression of subjects appear to follow different patterns in Brazilian Portuguese as they do in other Romance languages, since the former can be considered to partly act as a topic-oriented rather than a subject-oriented language. This difference can be claimed to trigger a series of properties which block the grammatical realization of TUCs. A more detailed investigation of this phenomenon will be left to future research.

To summarize, the formation of a caused-motion construction in spoken Italian requires several syntactic and semantic conditions to be met:

- The event denoted by the verb must be **decomposable** into subevents, as evidenced by its compatibility with SE in its intransitive counterpart.
- The verb cannot be fully punctual, given the necessary internal complexity.
- The verb must be a directed-motion verb.
- The predicate must denote an accomplishment rather than an achievement.
- The subject must be an **actor**, either an agent or a causer, and must at least partially exhibit the canonical semantic properties of a subject.
- The object must, to some extent, embody the canonical semantic properties of a theme object (i.e., low potential agentivity).
- The clause must convey a generally high level of transitivity, characterized by definite arguments, realis mode, telic aspect, high subject potency, among other factors.

## 5.6 Summary

The results from both the productive and the reception task can be summed up as follows:

- The development, execution and distribution of a study which aims at investigating the acceptability status of TUCs in spoken Italian is a complicated task, mostly due to logistic factors such as the use of written media to record a peripheral, rare spoken phenomenon;
- The high availability of more common and better acceptable alternative constructions significantly reduces the spontaneous production of TUCs, even with syntactic priming;
- TUCs receive low acceptability rating and are only minimally sensible to syntactic priming. This may be due to prescriptive tendencies, especially in written contexts, as well as to more favorable alternatives usually available (periphrases, phrasal verbs, canonical transitive predicates, etc.);

- Young participants of the first empirical part of our study confirmed this transitive use of *uscire*, while older participants did not. For this reason, we were led to hypothesize that this specific meaning must be an innovation.

Furthermore, we could cautiously interpret the results of our study as confirming and expanding the already existing hypothesis that younger generations are importing patterns from geographically restricted varieties into their regional production, relaxing and partly attenuating semantic constraints on these constructions.

Some points of interest emerge as potential topics for further research. In particular, the notion of **identity** and the subjective closeness to either the capital city of Rome or the local small towns with their own dialects seems to play a crucial role in the province of Latina. The self-assessment of participants as either dialect speakers or Roman speakers could have a significant impact on their responses to TUCs, and not solely for purely linguistic reasons.

Further investigations are needed to improve the methodologies suitable for this complex phenomenon. Since acceptability degrees are possible and TUCs are a marginally grammatical manifestation, alternative methods have to be tested.

Further data must be analyzed in the light of the syntactic proposal adapted here from Ramchand's (2008) First-Phase Syntax, in order to check the accommodational properties of the model.

## 6. Conclusions

This dissertation has examined the formal features of Transitivity Unaccusative Constructions (TUCs), taking into account sociolinguistic factors influencing their geographical distribution, as well as semantic properties and syntactic principles that determine their usage and acceptability. The empirical study focused on four prototypical directed-motion predicates – *entrare* ('to go in'), *uscire* ('to go out'), *salire* ('to go up'), and *scendere* ('to go down') – investigating both their productivity and their acceptability rates within the province of Latina. This underexplored area presents a particularly interesting case, encompassing both recently established cities – with less deeply rooted dialectal traditions and varied cases of language contact – and older towns, where autochthonous dialects are still spoken.

Chapter 2 introduced TUCs and the features that distinguish them from canonical unaccusatives. **Causative labile alternations** were illustrated using tokens from an *ad-hoc* corpus and informal online Italian corpora, with a particular focus on causative directed-motion constructions. Additional transitivity strategies, such as active past participles and transitivity unergatives, were briefly presented. The chapter concluded with a contrastive analysis of similar constructions in other Romance varieties.

Chapter 3 began with a brief diachronic overview of transitivity strategies in Latin and Early Italo-Romance, revealing a preference for the anticausative marker SE, but an overall scarcity of overt morphosyntactic causative markers. The main section of the chapter was devoted to describing the formal properties of transitive and causative structures. After characterizing **directed-motion verbs** and their core properties, we surveyed key theoretical approaches to **Transitivity, Causativity, and Argument Structure**. Early indicators of high Transitivity in transitive directed-motion verbs were identified. Previous research by Romagno (2018, 2020) and Busso & Romagno (2021) on the role of **object animacy** was reviewed. We then addressed the status of the **external argument** and the realization of argument structure as a reflection of verbal semantics. Ramchand's (2008) **First-Phase Syntax** model – together with its applications to Spanish and Catalan TUCs – was presented as our structural framework. The chapter concluded with an excursus on the theoretical **role of verbal roots** in the construction of templatic meaning, as proposed by various authors.

Chapter 4 introduced key notions in Italian sociolinguistics, emphasizing how the country's complex patterns of variation are crucial for understanding the distribution and status of TUCs in spoken Italian. A brief excursus recounted the historical and linguistic characteristics of the Latina area. Core concepts such as the properties of **Regional Italian**, its coexistence with dialects, the emergence of *neo-standard features*, and their correlation with sociolinguistic variables (e.g., age and dialectal competence) were introduced as contextual background for our empirical study.

Chapter 5 presented the first empirical investigation ever conducted in the province of Latina (Agro Pontino), located in South Lazio. Both components of the study focused on *entrare* ('go in'), *uscire* ('go out'), *salire* ('go up'), and *scendere* ('go down'). The first part, a spoken production task based on **syntactic priming**, revealed subtle differences among participants, primarily correlated with age and city of origin. The second part was a written **grammaticality judgment task**, targeting the role of subject animacy in the acceptability of TUCs. Results from both tasks confirmed that TUCs are peripheral, **marginally grammatical** constructions, highly sensitive to normative pressure and not easily primed. Although overall acceptability was low, it was higher with animate subjects – particularly when these were interpreted as prototypical agents, displaying traits such as volition, direct causation, and simultaneous motion with the theme object. **Age** and **geographical origin** proved to be influential variables: younger speakers tended to assign more positive judgments and were less sensitive to subject animacy (corroborating Romagno's 2021 and 2023 findings on object animacy), whereas middle-aged speakers – representing a generation of balanced *diglossia* – showed the lowest tolerance for TUCs. The reception of TUCs appears to be influenced by dialectal *substrata*, with participants from older towns assigning more positive judgments than those from cities founded in the 1930s. While it may be cautiously hypothesized that younger speakers are importing dialectal features into their spoken Italian, dialectal competence itself still seems to play a role in this phenomenon.

Furthermore, the discussion that concluded the exposition of the empirical investigation presented the biases of the chosen methods. As for the spoken-production task, stylistic factors such as the induced story-telling character of the task and the normative pressure of being recorded while speaking must have had a decisive influence on the speakers' spontaneous

speech. In the case of the Acceptability Judgement Task, the nature of TUCs – an interface phenomenon that includes syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic issues – implies the risk of being left with inconsistent results, as this kind of task has proven to be completely suitable and effective only for investigating core-grammatical phenomena (Fischer et al 2022).

At the end of Chapter 5, we have proposed a model to explain the flexibility in TUCs valency augmentation, relying on the syntactic realization of argument expression entailed in Ramchand’s First-Phase-Syntax (2008). We have thus identified the possibility of splitting a predicate into three **subevents**, whose Specifier positions are occupied by at least two different DPs, as the necessary condition to transitivize unaccusatives.

The results of our empirical study allow us to revisit and refine some of the theoretical assumptions outlined in the previous chapters.

Chapter 3 presented a set of formal tools designed to describe the syntactic and semantic properties of Transitive Unaccusative Constructions (TUCs). From this formal perspective, we can confirm that TUCs encode highly transitive relations within the clause. Hopper and Thompson’s (1980) Transitivity Scale can therefore be applied to our data in the following way:

A. PARTICIPANTS	Two, A and O
B. KINESIS	Directed motion
C. ASPECT	Mostly Telic
D. PUNCTUALITY	Mostly Punctual
E. VOLITIONALITY	Agent highly Volitional
F. AFFIRMATION	Mostly Affirmative
G. MODE	Realis <sup>65</sup>
H. AGENCY	A high in potency
I. AFFECTEDNESS OF O	O totally affected
J. INDIVIDUATION OF O	O highly individuated

Table 18 High Transitivity features in TUCs

The high-transitivity nature of Transitive Unaccusative Constructions (TUCs) helps account for the higher acceptability rates associated with the following features:

- **Definite** arguments;
- Scarcely agentive theme object;

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<sup>65</sup> As already pointed out, *neo-standard* Italian does not often employ conjunctive mode. Since TUCs are typical of the spoken register, their appearance with *irrealis* mode is almost impossible.

- Use of the imperative mood;
- **Direct-causation** meaning;
- Direct involvement of the actor;
- Highly volitionality associated with the actor.

As shown by the tokens analyzed in our empirical study, acceptability tends to decrease when the subject is prototypically animate and agentive (typically a human subject), but the overall interpretation of the clause suggests low intentionality. An example is *Carla entra il fango in casa* ('Carla brings the mud into the house'), where the subject is human, yet the causation appears unintentional. This misalignment between agentivity and intentionality likely contributes to lower acceptability ratings.

In line with the Transitivity Hypothesis, it is also reasonable to assume that TUCs in spoken Italian typically occur within foregrounded discourse contexts. This factor may further explain the definiteness effects observed in the acceptability of these constructions.

In Section 3.2.5, we discussed relevant literature on argument structure, with a particular focus on the status of external arguments. For the purposes of the present study, we do not assume that the agents of caused motion constructions are internally generated. It may be argued, moreover, that the expression of agents in "murder-type" verbs is not as constrained as often claimed: unintentional or non-agentive subjects are also possible, and not exclusively in metaphorical contexts or roles that approximate agentivity.

These considerations lead to a final evaluation of the discussion in Section 3.33.2.8 regarding the role of roots in the construction of verbal meaning. While we concur with Beavers & Koontz-Garboden (2021) and Ausensi (2023) in rejecting the Free Distribution Approach due to its overly generalizing stance on argument structure and realization, we do not consider it necessary – at least for our purposes – to abandon the Grammatically Relevant Ontological Categories (GROC) approach. On the contrary, our data can be more economically and effectively accounted for within the GROC framework as developed by Ramchand (2008), Alexiadou et al. (2006), and Alexiadou (2010). Specifically, we argue that it is more parsimonious to posit that the **ontological content of roots** influences selectional properties, rather than or attributing primitives such as ACT, CAUSE, BECOME and/or causativity relations to roots themselves.

From a sociolinguistic perspective (Chapter 4), the data confirm that TUCs involving the four prototypical verbs of directed motion – *entrare*, *salire*, *scendere*, and *uscire* – are more frequently attested in Central and Southern varieties than in Northern ones. These constructions are observed, for instance, in the province of Latina, although their acceptability ratings remain generally low. We therefore support the hypothesis that the Northern tendency to prefer phrasal verbs – possibly a result of contact with satellite-framed languages (Benincà & Poletto 2006) – may inhibit the use of TUCs in those areas.

First of all, the acceptability and spread of the most representative predicates of directed-motion seems to be geographically distributed as illustrated in Table 19. This table does not account for the internal variation found among northern varieties, nor for the significant differences between center and southern varieties, but relies on the main isogloss La Spezia-Rimini.

<b>Predicate, example</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>Center/South</b>
<i>Avanzare</i> ( <i>ho avanzato della pasta</i> , ‘I left over some pasta’)	accepted	not accepted
<i>Rimanere</i> ( <i>ho rimasto del prosciutto</i> , ‘I left (you) some ham’)	accepted <sup>66</sup>	accepted
<i>Uscire</i> , <i>entrare</i> , <i>salire</i> , <i>scendere</i> (‘go out’, ‘go in’, ‘go up’, ‘go down’)	not accepted	accepted
<i>Tornare</i> ( <i>tornami la penna</i> , ‘give me the pen back’)	accepted	not accepted

Table 19 Acceptability of TUCs in the Italian peninsula

However, TUC structures are not entirely absent in Northern varieties. For example, the transitivization of *avanzare* (‘to leave over’) in contexts involving food shows some productivity and allows both volitional and non-volitional agents. In this case, though, the

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<sup>66</sup> According to our informants who are proficient in northern varieties, only acceptable when the direct object refers to the consumption of a meal.

semantic contexts are more constrained, and it is plausible to interpret transitivized *avanzare* as a case of polysemy rather than systematic transitivization.

Volitionality also appears to influence acceptability gradients across regions. For example, transitive constructions with non-volitional subjects – such as *ho rimasto Gigi al bar* (“when I left the bar, Gigi was still there,” with transitive *rimanere*, ‘stay’) – are accepted in Calabria (Romagno 2021), but not in southern Lazio. Additional evidence of further transitivization phenomena – such as the transitivization of unergatives (*gioco il bambino*, lit. “I play the child”) observed in Puglia – along with the overall higher incidence of TUCs in the South – suggests that the integration of TUCs into *neo-standard* Italian may be at a more advanced stage in Southern varieties than in Central ones.

We can thus expect that the ongoing process of *restandardization* may lead to a progressive northward diffusion of these constructions. The pattern identified by Lara Bermejo (2020:60) for other Romance languages appears applicable to the more complex Italian situation, provided that we assume a gradual decrease in the number of predicates involved in causative labile alternation – as well as in their acceptability and contextual flexibility – when moving from South to North. The cline would then be as follows:

- (1) Animacy of the subject > Volition of the agent > Degree of (manipulative) direct control by the subject and prominence of the causee/theme/patient

Lara Bermejo’s (2018, 2020) notion of “**cluster** of properties” can further serve as a predictive model for identifying whether a given variety is likely to employ TUCs. Typical features of Southern varieties – such as limited use of phrasal verbs, clitic-doubling patterns, overextension of anticausative SE, deletion of prepositions and oblique arguments, the use of tense morphology to express doubt and hypothesis, and the use of the present tense to convey future reference – may all signal a broader strategy of labile transitivization with unaccusative predicates.

Our results seem to confirm that the speakers most likely responsible for transferring these dialectal features into informal spoken Italian are **younger, imperfect bilinguals**, often unaware of the geographical markedness of their linguistic choices (see also Busso & Romagno 2021:5 for similar claims).

To sum up, this dissertation has aimed to contribute to the growing field of research on valency alternations, particularly the transitivization of canonical intransitive predicates in Romance languages. Our proposals have built upon the work of Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino (2014), Pineda (2018), Lara Bermejo (2020), Romagno (2021, 2023, 2025), and Busso & Romagno (2021). We have identified TUCs as highly transitive constructions that may have been integrated into spoken national Italian from southern dialectal *substrata*, following a path of *restandardization* (Berruto 1987).

These results certainly require further confirmation, and additional linguistic research should be conducted. Designing effective methodologies to investigate TUCs has proven particularly challenging, given their peripheral, marginally grammatical status and specific context of use. As an interface phenomenon, TUCs involve many other features – such as verbal tense and mood, the semantic properties of the arguments, causative interpretations, productivity patterns, and various sociolinguistic variables – that deserve further investigation.

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## 8. ANHANG

### I. Abstract

This doctoral dissertation explores non-standard transitivization strategies in spoken Italian, within the framework of research on syntactic-semantic interfaces. In particular, it focuses on causative transitive constructions involving unaccusative predicates, analyzing both their formal properties and their sociolinguistic status. Transitive Unaccusative Constructions (TUCs) feature the insertion of an agentive, volitional external argument that imparts motion to an undergoer or theme object, which is thus caused to move. A typical non-standard example is provided in (1):

(1) Quando torni sali acqua naturale  
when come.back-2SG go.up-IMP water plain

‘When you come home, take some plain-water bottles upstairs’

(GC2021.4)

These caused unaccusative constructions alternate with their canonical intransitive counterparts in a labile alternation, as no overt phonological markers of causativity are present. Their distribution appears to follow a geographical pattern, being frequently associated with southern Italian varieties. One of the goals of this study is to provide a more precise classification of the predicates that participate in this alternation and to map their geographical distribution.

In addition, this work offers a detailed analysis of the formal features of such constructions, a phenomenon that has received limited attention in the linguistic literature (see Busso & Romagno 2021; Busso 2020; Romagno 2021, 2023, 2025 for Italian; Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino 2014; Lara Bermejo 2018, 2020 for Spanish; Pineda 2018 for Catalan). In particular, transitivized unaccusative constructions appear to be sensitive to degrees of transitivity: high-transitivity interpretations and associated semantic features seem to promote their acceptability.

The majority of the examples discussed in this dissertation are drawn from an *ad hoc corpus* compiled between 2020 and 2025, based on spontaneous colloquial conversation in both spoken and informal written forms (referred to as GC2021).

Furthermore, the dissertation presents the results of an empirical study conducted in the Agro Pontino, a specific area in the province of Latina (Southern Lazio), which has received little attention in linguistic research. This region's uniqueness lies in its historical context: it was a site of internal migration from Northern Italy in the 1930s. The founding of new urban centers during the early twentieth century, along with the coexistence of heritage dialects brought by settlers and pre-existing local vernaculars, makes this area a compelling case for linguistic inquiry.

In this context, the distribution, acceptability, and production rates of TUCs appear to be influenced by several interrelated factors, including dialectal substratum interference, speaker age, identity perception, and formal semantic features affecting syntactic realization – such as subject and object animacy, transitivity degree, definiteness, and the presence of direct causation.

As one of the first studies to address this complex phenomenon, the dissertation aims to provide a formal account of the syntactic properties that underlie both the flexibility and constraints of transitive unaccusative constructions. Moreover, it offers methodological reflections that may inform future research on similar interface phenomena.

## II. Kurzfassung

Diese Dissertation befasst sich mit nicht-standardisiert Transitivitystrategien im gesprochenen Italienisch im Rahmen der Forschung zu Schnittstellen zwischen Syntax und Semantik. Im Mittelpunkt stehen kausative transitive Konstruktionen mit unakkusativen Prädikaten, die sowohl in Bezug auf ihre formalen Eigenschaften als auch auf ihren soziolinguistischen Status analysiert werden. Transitive Unakkusativ-Konstruktionen (TUCs) zeichnen sich durch die Einfügung eines agentiven, volitionalen externen Arguments aus, das eine Bewegung auf ein *Undergoer*- oder Themenobjekt überträgt, welches dadurch in Bewegung versetzt wird. Ein typisches nicht-standardsprachliches Beispiel ist in (1) zu sehen:

(1) Quando torni sali acqua naturale  
wenn zurückkommst geh.hoch-IMP Wasserstill  
,Wenn du wiederkommst, trage bitte stilles Wasser hoch‘

(GC2021.4)

Diese kausativen unakkusativen Konstruktionen alternieren mit ihren kanonischen intransitiven Gegenstücken in einer labilen Alternation, da keine morphologisch markierten Indikatoren von Kausativität vorhanden sind. Ihre Verbreitung folgt offenbar einem geografischen Muster und wird häufig mit süditalienischen Varietäten in Verbindung gebracht. Ziel dieser Arbeit ist eine genauere Klassifikation der Prädikate, die an dieser Alternation teilnehmen, sowie eine kartographische Erfassung ihrer geografischen Verteilung.

Darüber hinaus bietet die Dissertation eine detaillierte Analyse der formalen Merkmale dieser Konstruktionen – ein Phänomen, das in der bisherigen linguistischen Forschung kaum behandelt wurde (vgl. Busso & Romagno 2021; Busso 2020; Romagno 2021, 2023, 2025 für das Italienische; Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino 2014; Lara Bermejo 2018, 2020 für das Spanische; Pineda 2018 für das Katalanische). Insbesondere scheinen TUCs empfindlich auf Transitivitygrade zu reagieren, wobei Interpretationen mit hoher Transitivity und damit verbundene semantische Merkmale ihre Akzeptabilität begünstigen.

Die Mehrheit der in dieser Arbeit analysierten Beispiele stammt aus einem eigens erhobenen Korpus, das zwischen 2020 und 2025 auf der Basis von spontaner gesprochener und informell geschriebener Alltagssprache erstellt wurde (GC2021).

Darüber hinaus präsentiert die Arbeit die Ergebnisse einer empirischen Untersuchung im Agro Pontino, einer Region in der Provinz Latina (Südlatium), die bislang wenig sprachwissenschaftlich erforscht wurde. Die Besonderheit dieses Gebiets liegt in seiner Migrationsgeschichte: In den 1930er Jahren war es Ziel interner Migration aus Norditalien. Die Gründung neuer Städte und das Nebeneinander von mitgebrachten Dialekten und lokalen Varietäten bieten ein komplexes soziolinguistisches Untersuchungsfeld.

Die Verbreitung, Akzeptabilität und Produktionshäufigkeit von TUCs in dieser Region scheint von mehreren interagierenden Faktoren beeinflusst zu werden, darunter dialektaler Substratkontakt, Alter und Identitätswahrnehmung der Sprecher\*innen sowie semantisch-syntaktische Merkmale wie Belebtheit des Subjekts, Transitivitätsgrad, Definitheit und das Vorliegen direkter Kausalität.

Als eine der ersten Arbeiten zu diesem Themenfeld bietet diese Dissertation eine formale Beschreibung der syntaktischen Eigenschaften, die sowohl die Flexibilität als auch die Beschränkungen transitiver unakkusativer Konstruktionen bestimmen. Zudem liefert die empirische Untersuchung methodologische Anregungen für die zukünftige Erforschung ähnlicher Schnittstellenphänomene.

### **III. Tokens of Acceptability Judgement Task**

#### *Dialectal proficiency self-assessment questions*

Quanti anni hai?

Qual è il tuo titolo di studio?

Parli un dialetto oltre all'italiano? Se sì, quale?

Quale lingua o dialetto parli solitamente con i tuoi familiari e amici?

In quale lingua/dialetto conti a mente e sogni?

Da quale città provieni?

#### *Items for evaluation*

Quando Marta trova delle mele rosse al mercato, le compra sempre.

Marco ha detto di non prendere la tangenziale perché oggi c'è troppo traffico.

Ieri ho avanzato della pasta al pomodoro.

Hai preso l'ombrello? Dovrebbe venire a piovere.

A quest'ora Mario esce il cane, quindi se telefoni a casa non lo trovi.

Se continua a tirare questo vento forte è inutile che apparecchiamo il tavolo fuori.

Perché non mi hai chiamata?

Il vento entra la polvere in cortile se lasciamo la portafinestra aperta.

Marco ha corso a casa a prendere il portafogli perché l'aveva dimenticato.

I politici italiani non sanno mai cosa fare, sanno solo litigare tra loro.

Non posso mangiare il gelato confezionato perché sono allergico alle mele.

La gru sale l'armadio solo fino al terzo piano quindi dobbiamo trovare un'alternativa per il trasloco.

Quando hanno visto che avevano sbagliato, sono andati subito a chiederli scusa.

Visto che facciamo la lasagna tira fuori la carne dal freezer così intanto si scongela.

Luigi scende la bici dalla soffitta solo quando fa bel tempo.

Il gatto di Marco perde un sacco di pelo, ogni volta bisogna spazzolare il divano.

Al supermercato ci siamo andati già ieri notte.

Google esce sempre un risultato strano se cerchi una parola con l'accento.

Ci incontriamo nel bar o nel ristorante?

L'Italia ha 29 regione e 125 province.

Ogni estate fa lo scirocco e si fa tutto di sabbia.

Carla entra la macchina in garage quando torna tardi.

La raccolta differenziata è inutile, tanto poi i camion dell'immondizia mischiano tutto insieme.

Non ho più avuto tempo per guardarmi quella serie che tu mi aveva consigliato.

Prima di prendere un medicinale bisogna sempre leggere il bugiardino.

Mi si è impallato il pc, sai a chi posso andare a farlo aggiustare?

L'ascensore scende la biancheria usata direttamente nella lavanderia dell'albergo.

Lo spritz non si può proprio bere nel bicchiere di plastica!

Quanto spesso vai in palestra?

Martina sale la spesa per le scale perché ha paura dell'ascensore.

Per favore, dicci a tuo padre di non parcheggiare più davanti al cancello.

Domani mette sole tutto il giorno e 32 gradi di massima.

#### **IV. Eidesstattliche Erklärung**

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