

Focus type influences subject position: evidence from Romance languages

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Background: While subject position varies considerably across languages, most display predominantly preverbal subjects (SV), whereas fewer allow postverbal subjects (VS) (e.g. Dryer, 2013: SOV 41%, SVO 35%, VSO 7%). Romance languages are predominantly SVO (Ledgeway, 2012). However, they also allow VS order, the factors underlying this variation remaining under debate. Some prominent accounts (Giurgea, 2017; Cruschina & Mayol, 2025) relate this variation to information structure, proposing that information focus constructions license VS more readily than broad focus in Romance languages (Fábregas 2016). This is in line with prosodic constraints on focus marking, predicting the most prominent accent on the rightmost element (Zubizarreta, 1998). Our study investigates how information structure influences word order (SV vs VS) and how far constraints vary across languages, examining in particular Catalan, Italian, Romanian, and Spanish. Authors (2025) confirmed that VS is more frequent with information focus than with broad focus in Catalan, Italian, and Spanish. However, Romanian showed the inverse pattern with more VS for broad focus. This paper extends this work comparing information focus and corrective focus where predictions in the literature are inconsistent. Cruschina (2022) suggests that corrective focus subjects may be fronted in Romance languages while other proposals claim that they typically occur postverbally (Samek-Lodovici, 2015). In fact, we may expect the prosodically more prominent corrective focus (Ladd, 1996) to evoke more VS choices. **Method:** The aim of the crosslinguistic study presented here is to resolve this question empirically in fully parallel studies. In four binary choice experiments, 194 participants (50 Romanian, 47 Italian, 48 Spanish, and 49 Catalan native speakers) chose between an answer with SV or VS (20 items, 20 fillers). Each item was constructed as a dialogue between two speakers, A and B, with a statement from A, a question (with information / corrective focus) from B, and two possible answers. All answers in our items had intransitive verbs (half unaccusative as in (1), half unergative as in (2)), following the suggestion that unaccusatives allow VS more easily than unergatives (Belletti, 2001). **Results + discussion:** Fig.1 shows that Spanish (*gImer*, $\beta = 1.48$, $sd = .25$, $z = 5.78$, $p < .001$), Italian (*gImer*, $\beta = .58$, $sd = .27$, $z = 2.12$, $p < .05$), and Catalan (*gImer*, $\beta = .73$, $sd = .22$, $z = 3.20$, $p < .01$) favor VS and even more so in corrective contexts, while Romanian favors SV with no clear preference based on focus type. Furthermore, we found that verb class affected subject position (*gImer*, $\beta = .81$, $sd = .34$, $z = 2.36$, $p < .05$) similarly across languages: in unaccusative constructions, VS was more frequent (Fig. 2). We conclude that focus interpretation strongly impacts subject position in Romance languages, however with some crosslinguistic variation. In Spanish, Italian, and Catalan, the even stronger preference for VS with corrective focus may reflect the prosodic constraint requiring the most focused element to appear rightmost (Zubizarreta, 1998). Romanian, however, appears less sensitive to this constraint, likely due to deaccenting in postfocal constituents (Ladd, 2008).

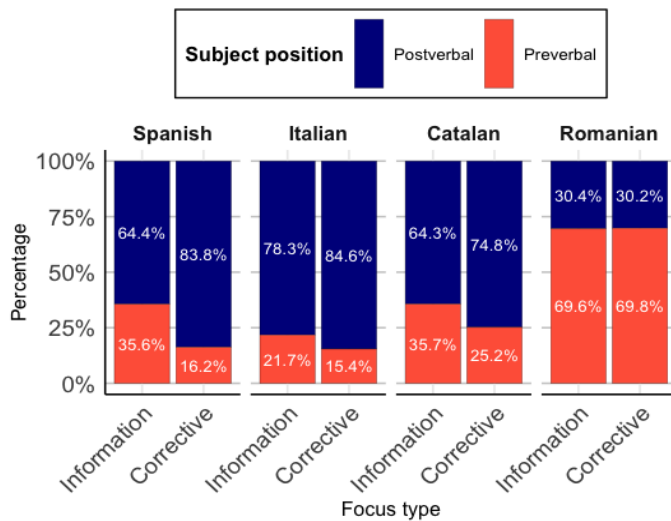


Fig. 1. Subject position & focus type

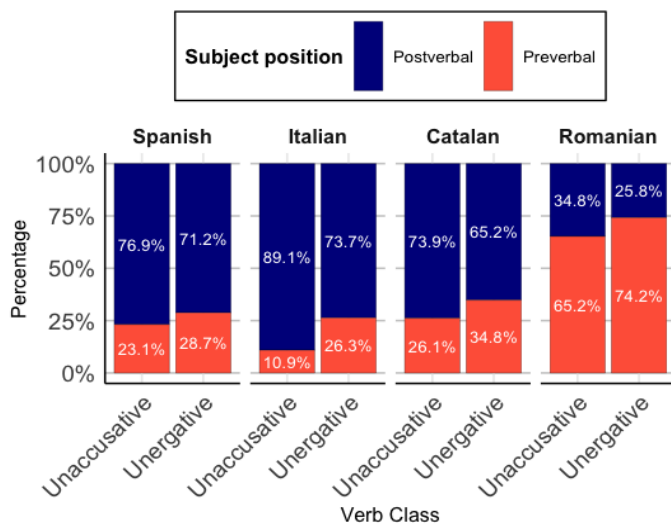


Fig. 2. Subject position & verb class

Selected references

- [1] Belletti, A. (2001). "Inversion" as focalization. *Subject inversion in Romance and the theory of Universal Grammar*, 60-90.
- [2] Giurgea, Ion. (2017). Preverbal subjects and topic marking in Romanian. *Revue roumaine de linguistique* 63(3). 279–322.
- [3] Cruschina S, Mayol L. (2025). The distribution of focus and the mapping between syntax and information structure. *Journal of Linguistics*. doi:10.1017/S0022226724000264.

Examples of experimental items

- (1) Persoana A: - Am făcut o cursă cu bicicletele, dar nu prea am fost atenți când am trecut pe lângă terenul de fotbal.

'Speaker A: - We went for a bike ride, but we weren't paying much attention when we passed the soccer field.'

[Information focus]:

Persoana B: - *Cine s-a rănit tocmai lângă teren?* Îmi amintesc că zona aceea nu prea e ideală pentru mersul cu bicicleta.

'Speaker B: - *Who got injured near the field?* I remember that area is not ideal for cycling.'

a. [Preverbal subject]: **Raluca** s-a rănit. 'Raluca got hurt.'

b. [Postverbal subject]: S-a rănit **Raluca**. 'Raluca got hurt.'

[Corrective focus]:

Persoana B: - *Cine s-a rănit tocmai lângă teren? Irina?* Îmi amintesc că zona aceea nu prea e ideală pentru mersul cu bicicleta.

'Speaker B: - *Who got injured near the field? Irina?* I remember that area is not ideal for cycling.'

Ce răspuns va alege persoana A? 'What answer will speaker A choose?'

[Unaccusative construction]

a. [Preverbal subject]: Nu. **Raluca** s-a rănit. 'No. Raluca got hurt.'

b. [Postverbal subject]: Nu. S-a rănit **Raluca**. 'No. Raluca got hurt.'

- (2) Persoana A: Am găsit un club de karaoke și, deși aveam chef să ne distrăm, parcă ne era teamă să urcăm pe scenă.

'Speaker A: We found a karaoke club and although we wanted to have fun, we were afraid to go on stage.'

[Information focus]:

Persoana B: - *Cine a cântat primul?* Eu n-am fost niciodată la karaoke.

'Speaker B: - *Who sang first?* I've never been to karaoke.'

a. [Preverbal subject]: **Filip** a cântat. 'Filip sang.'

b. [Postverbal subject]: A cântat **Filip**. 'Filip sang.'

[Corrective focus]:

Persoana B: - *Cine a cântat primul? Mihai?* Eu n-am fost niciodată la karaoke.

'Speaker B: - *Who sang first? Mihai?* I've never been to karaoke.'

Ce răspuns va alege persoana A? 'What answer will speaker A choose?'

[Unergative construction]

a. [Preverbal subject]: Nu. **Filip** a cântat. 'No. Filip sang.'

b. [Postverbal subject]: Nu. A cântat **Filip**. 'No. Filip sang.'