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Existential Definiteness in Italian Speakers of L2 Spanish

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Abstract This study investigates how Italian-speaking learners of Spanish acquire the properties of the Definiteness Effect (DE) in existential sentences. In an oral production task, 33 Italian learners showed relatively early control of the Spanish *haber/estar* contrast but initial difficulties with definiteness restrictions. Findings support the interpretation of the DE as governed by universal principles and conform to interface-based theories, suggesting that the integration of semantic and pragmatic features into syntactic structures may develop later than morphosyntactic knowledge.

Keywords Existential Sentences. Definiteness Effect. Spanish as a Second Language. Italian as a First Language. Locative Paradigm. Ser/Estar/Haber.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Theoretical Background. – 3 Method. – 4 Results. – 5 Discussion.

1 Introduction

The Definiteness Effect (DE) is a cross-linguistic restriction that prevents definite Noun Phrases (NPs) from appearing in existential constructions (Jenkins 1975). In English, *There is a man in the room* is acceptable, while *There is the man in the room* is not. This phenomenon reflects a complex interplay between syntax, semantics, and discourse pragmatics. In Spanish, when introducing a definite theme, a locative construction with *estar* is used instead

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of the existential *haber*. Conversely, Italian and other Italo-Romance languages allow existential constructions with *essere* (or *stare* in some regional varieties) to introduce both definite and indefinite NPs, making Italian a valuable domain for studying DE restrictions.

Research on L2 acquisition indicates that speakers of languages that do not always obey the DE, such as Russian and Turkish, acquire it easily in English, suggesting that universal principles might govern it (White et al. 2012). In Spanish, L1 speakers of English, Arabic, and Catalan produce existential constructions with low error rates (Perpiñán 2014; 2015). However, cross-linguistic variation and verb alternations (*ser/estar/haber*) add complexity to the task.

This study investigates whether Italian speakers learning Spanish as an L2 can adjust their L1 locative paradigm to include the Spanish DE restriction in existential constructions. It addresses morphosyntactic and semantic-pragmatic aspects, contributing to ongoing discussions on feature reassembly (Lardiere 2008) and the syntax-pragmatics interface in L2 acquisition (Sorace 2011).

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Existential Sentences

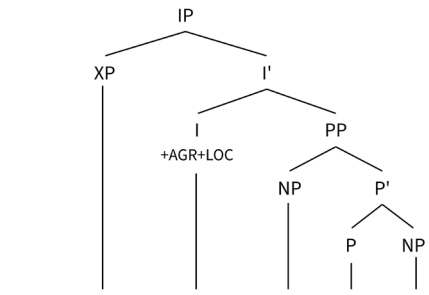
Existential sentences (ES) express propositions about the existence or presence of someone or something in a context. They are characterized by non-canonical word order, usually consisting of the following structure:

(1)	a.	There	is	a man	in the room	*English*
	b.		Hay	un hombre	en la habitación	*Spanish*
	c.	C’	è	un uomo	nella stanza	*Italian*
		PROFORMA	COPULA	PIVOT	CODA	

The PIVOT, i.e., the NP that in (1) occurs in post-copular position and is semantically identified as the *theme*, is universally available; in contrast, the presence of other components may vary across languages (Bentley, Ciconte, Cruschina 2015). This is the case of the PROFORMA, which is productive in Italian but grammaticalized (*y*) and no longer productive in Spanish (1b). The PIVOT can be followed by a CODA, which is typically a locative expression (1). Linear word order is another source of variation across and within languages. In languages with no fixed word order, existential word-order variation correlates with information-structure variation (Bentley, Ciconte, Cruschina 2015).

Being the sole obligatory element, the PIVOT has been used to interpret the nature of ES. In this study, we adopt the *locative hypothesis* (Freeze 1992), which posits the existence of a unified universal locative paradigm. It proposes a D-structure (2) that underlies three possible S-structures: existential (2a), predicate locative (2b), and possessive (2c).

(2) Locative paradigm (adapted from Freeze 1992), with English as a sample of SVO languages with a locative PROFORMA.



a. $[_{IP}[_{SPEC}\text{There}]_i$ $[_{I'}$ are] $[_{PP}[_{SPEC}\text{keys}]$ $[_{P'}$ on $[_{NP}\text{the table}]]_i]]$ *Existential*
b. $[_{IP}[_{NP}\text{The keys}]_i$ $[_{I'}$ are $[_{PP}t_i$ $[_{P'}$ on $[_{NP}\text{the table}]]]]]$ *Predicative locative*
c. $[_{IP}[_{NP}\text{Paul}]_i$ $[_{I'}[_{IP}\text{has}]_i$ $[_{NP}\text{some keys}]$ t_i $t_i\,]]$ *Possessive*

Assuming the *theme* and *location* arguments within a predicate PP, the XP position, initially empty, is filled by syntactic movement of either the *theme* or the *location* argument, leading to three possible structures. Movement is governed by the [±definiteness] feature of the *theme*. In the framework of the locative hypothesis, ES are locative structures with an indefinite PIVOT as the *theme* and a CODA as the locative argument. They arise when the locative PP moves to the IP-Spec position, while the *theme* remains in the post-copular position, which is reserved for indefinite NPs (2a), which in Spanish require *haber*. A definite NP in the post-copular position is typically ungrammatical (3a, b). Thus, the definite *theme* moves to the subject position, resulting in a *predicate locative* (2b), which is marked in Spanish by the verb *estar*. If the locative argument has human features, it moves to the subject position, yielding a possessive structure (2c), with the verb *tener* in Spanish.

2.2 Definiteness Effect

The locative paradigm assumes definiteness as a crucial point of syntactic variation for ES. According to the Definiteness Effect (DE),

only weak-definite expressions[1] can occupy the ES post-copular position (Milsark 1977). Definite NPs are typically excluded from ES[2] and instead found in locative predications. Languages like English and standard Spanish[3] are subject to this constraint (Milsark 1977). In contrast, languages like Italian and Catalan do not appear to be constrained by it (3).

(3)	a.	*There	are	the keys	on	the	table	*English*
	b.		*Hay	las llaves	sobre	la	mesa	*Spanish*
	c.	Ci	sono	le chiavi	sopra	il	tavolo	*Standard Italian*
	d.	Hi	ha	les claus	sobre	la	taula	*Catalan*

Standard Spanish employs three different verbs for predicate locatives and ES, depending on the semantics of the theme: *estar* to locate objects or individuals (4a); *ser* to locate events (4b); *haber* for ES (4c).

(4)	a.	*Las llaves*	*están*	*en el*	*hotel*
		the keys	$estar_{\text{3rd-plur-pres}}$	in the	hotel
		The keys	are	in the	hotel
	b.	*El discurso*	*será*	*en el*	*hotel*
		the speech	$ser_{\text{3rd-sing-fut}}$	in the	hotel
		The speech	will be	in the	hotel
	c.	*Hay*	*unas llaves*	*en el*	*hotel*
		$haber_{\text{imp-sing-pres}}$	some keys	in the	hotel
		There are	some keys	in the	hotel

Italian uses only a *be* copula (5), realized as *essere* in standard Italian or as *stare* in Rome and other central/upper-southern Italian varieties. The *stare* variant is typically used to locate objects (5a) and for ES (5c), but not to locate events (5b).

(5)	a.	*Le chiavi*	*sono / stanno*	*in*	*camera*
		the keys	$essere / stare_{\text{3rd-plur-pres}}$	in	bedroom
		The keys	are	in the	bedroom

1 Weak-definite expressions include indefinite markers such as *a*, *some*, cardinal numerals, and bare plurals, or definite expressions with no requirement of uniqueness. Strong-definite expressions typically consist of definite markers like *the*, *all*, *every*, *each*, possessives, personal pronouns, and proper names.

2 DE does not apply to list readings.

3 For minimal diatopic variations in European Spanish, see Agulló 2023.

b.	*Il discorso*	*sarà / *starà*			*nella*	*sala conferenze*
	the speech	*essere / *stare*$_{\text{3rd-sing-fut}}$			in-the	room conference
	The speech	will be			in the	conference room
c.	*Ci*	*sono / stanno*	*delle chiavi*		*nel*	*cassetto*
	there	*essere / stare*$_{\text{3rd-plur-pres}}$	some keys		in-the	drawer
	There	are	some keys		in the	drawer

The copula *avere* (have), however, is present in some dialects of southern Italy, specifically in Salento and Calabria (6), as well as in Logudorese and Nuorese Sardinian (Cruschina 2015; 2016).

(6)	a.	*Ave*	*soruta*	*intru*	*la cucina*	(*Soleto, Salento*)
		Avere$_{\text{imp-sing-pres}}$	sister-your	inside	the kitchen	
		There's	your sister	in	the kitchen	
	b.	*Ave*	*doi cristiani*	*alla*	*porta*	
		Avere$_{\text{imp.sing-pres}}$	two Christians	at-the	door	
		There are	two people	at the	door	

In languages that use an expletive subject (e.g., *there* in English, *ci* in Italian) for ES, this is generally considered a locative element, too, and is in complementary distribution with a locative argument subject (see note 1).

The DE has been interpreted from pragmatic (Lumsden 1988), semantic (Milsark 1977), and syntactic (Safir 1985) perspectives. From a pragmatic standpoint, ES serve to introduce new entities in the discourse; these entities must be discourse-new and not previously identifiable, that is, indefinite (Holmback 1984). However, *there*-sentences do not always require indefinite NPs (7), but *brand-new* or *hearer-new* NPs (Prince 1992). These are a subset of discourse-new entities that are not assumed to be in the addressee's long-term memory store (Abbott 1997) or culturally copresent (Clark, Marshall 1981).

(7) a. There were the same people at both conferences
b. There was the usual crowd at the beach
c. There was the stupidest article on the reading list

Lyons (1999) characterizes DE as a semantic-pragmatic constraint rather than a syntactic one, noting that it has broad cross-linguistic representation but varies in strength across languages. He distinguishes between *definiteness*, which refers to identifying a unique referent shared by both speaker and hearer, and *specificity*, which refers to a particular element that may not be identifiable to the

hearer. These distinctions are particularly relevant to understanding why some languages seem not to be subject to the DE.

Cruschina (2016) analyzed the locative paradigm in Italo-Romance languages and argued that Italian ES with definite NPs are not *existential proper* but locative sentences. He recognized three types of locatives: *inverse locatives* (8a) result from post-verbal focalization of the (pseudoexistential) subject and clitic resumption of a dislocated or implicit topic (locative) constituent; *deictic locatives* (8b) are characterized by a deictic and locative interpretation of the proforma *ci* (there) that differs from the existential; *presentational sentences* (8c) introduce a new NP referent in the discourse that, unlike ES, has no locative anchoring but is intended to be available for subsequent predication rather than to predicate an argument or property.

(8) a. *C'è tuo fratello in salotto*
there's your brother in the living room
Your brother is in the living room
b. *C'è il treno!*
There's the train!
c. *C'è il sig. Rossi che chiede di te*
There is Mr. Rossi, who is asking for you

Pseudoexistential sentences would be characterized by a common underlying locative predication, whereas existential proper structures would be characterized by a possessive predication, which allows for their recognition despite their common surface features (Cruschina 2015).

2.3 DE and L2 Acquisition

The DE has been rarely investigated in L2 acquisition. Research on determiner acquisition shows that even fossilized L2-English speakers with Chinese (Lardiere 2004) or Turkish (White 2003) as L1 do not exhibit particular issues with DE, despite frequent determiner omission. Additionally, studies involving L1-Turkish and L1-Russian speakers of L2 English (Belikova et al. 2010; White et al. 2012) indicate that they can appropriately reject definite NPs in affirmative and negative ES, though Russian and Turkish do not feature the DE in negative constructions. White et al. (2012) explain this in terms of a universal principle that governs DE

and its relatively straightforward acquisition. Catalan-dominant[4] bilingual speakers (Catalan-Spanish) moderately accepted existential sentences with definite NPs, which are ungrammatical in Spanish (Perpiñán 2015). From a semantic-pragmatic perspective, Perpiñán explains ungrammatical acceptance in terms of fluctuation between parameter settings (Ionin, Ko, Wexler 2004), particularly between *definiteness* and *specificity* (see Section 2.2). Catalan definite NPs in ES may not have the same definite and specific referent as in Spanish because definite *themes* in Catalan may only have a *specific* reading, not necessarily a *definite* one, so they may not be identifiable to the hearer. From a syntactic perspective, she also considers that *themes* in Catalan ES may escape the existential closure domain if it is smaller than in Spanish, hence subjects could move more freely; as a result, the *theme* could be interpreted as indefinite in meaning, not violating the DE.

2.4 Research Questions and Learnability Tasks

The difference in ES between Spanish, which employs *haber*, and Italian, which apparently does not obey the DE and generally employs only a *be* copula (*essere/stare*, depending on regional variation) for both ES and locative constructions, may significantly affect L2-Spanish acquisition. The present study asks *(1)* whether Italian learners of Spanish can restructure their locative paradigm semantically and pragmatically, by avoiding definite NPs in ES; and *(2)* how they restructure it syntactically, by limiting the use of *essere/stare* and incorporating *haber*.

Assuming that DE is governed by universal principles, DE restrictions could be present in other areas of the Italian language. In Italo-Romance languages, these areas have been viewed as the reflection of formal properties continuing or overlapping with a source construction, i.e., the locative predication when *be* copula is selected, or possessive predication when the existential proper copula *have* (5) is selected (Cruschina 2015). This means that, contrary to traditional assumptions, there may be no true exceptions to DE in Italian, and L1-Italian learners should possess the semantic-pragmatic principles that rule DE. Building on a feature-based approach (Chomsky 1995, 2001), we posit that semantic features are universal but can be grammaticalized differently across the languages involved (Slabakova 2008). In second language acquisition, learners must therefore reconfigure features as they are encoded in the first language into novel formal arrangements, potentially

4 Recall that Catalan behaves very similarly to Italian with respect to DE.

associated with distinct lexical or morphological items in the L2 (Lardiere 2009, 173). This perspective entails full transfer from the L1 while simultaneously allowing for the reorganization of the interlanguage grammar, a process plausibly guided by Universal Grammar. Consequently, L2 learners are required to identify, select, and, when necessary, (re)assemble the relevant semantic features within the appropriate functional lexicon. Assuming the *Full Transfer/ Full Access Hypothesis* (Schwartz, Sprouse 1996) and the *Feature Reassembly Hypothesis* (Lardiere 2008, 2009), our L2 learners need to select the feature [±temporal boundedness] that determines the use of the *ser/estar* copula in locative [+temporally bounded] constructions (Perpiñán, Marín 2021); the feature [± definiteness] as for the semantics of the *theme*, together with the appropriate pragmatic conditions of introducing [new/old information], which determine the use of *estar* (locative, i.e.: definite, old) or *haber* (existential, i.e.: indefinite, new). In short, L2 learners need to restrict Spanish *haber* to ES and *estar* to locative structures and learn that *haber* cannot combine with definite NPs.

If *Full Transfer* (Schwartz, Sprouse 1996) occurs, we would expect beginner learners to use *ser* (or *estar,* depending on their variety) for all locative and existential uses. As they advance in their development, they may realize that locative constructions, which are typically [+temporally bounded], require *estar* in Spanish. This task is expected to develop earlier, since our learners' variety (*Romanesco*) already employs *stare* for locatives. Later, we predict that L2 learners would realize that *estar* in Spanish is in complementary distribution with another functional item, *haber*, and that their distribution is determined by a combination of semantic [± definiteness] and pragmatic [new/old] information. According to the *Feature Reassembly Hypothesis*, acquiring a new category (*haber*) may be easier than reassembling an already existing category (*estar*).

3 Method

3.1 Participants

A total of 54 individuals (age range=17-66, *M*=32, *SD*=11) participated in the study: 33 Italian learners of Spanish enrolled at the *Instituto Cervantes* in Rome, and 21 monolingual native Spanish speakers.

Among L2 speakers, 24 held a university degree (one of which was a doctoral degree), and 9 had secondary education (3 of whom attended technical schools). All of them had Italian as their L1 and reported knowing English, with 19 listing it as their best-known L2. For 14 L2 participants, Spanish was their 2nd best-known L2

after English; for 5, it was their 3rd best-known L2 after English and French; for 2, it was their 4th best-known language after English, French, and other non-declared languages. In addition, 3 of them stated that they spoke German, 3 spoke Portuguese, and 2 spoke Catalan; 4 also declared that they spoke an Italian dialect. The L2 speakers were divided into two proficiency groups based on the results they obtained in a reduced version of the *DELE* test: upper-beginners (n=14, *M*=50%) and upper-intermediates (n=19, *M*=75%). For details on L2 group formation, see 4.1.

3.2 Materials and Procedures

3.2.1 Task 1: Proficiency Test

A 25-item multiple-choice test from the vocabulary and grammar sections of *DELE*[5] superior tests was administered online to assess general Spanish proficiency. No items related to *ser/estar/haber* were included.

3.2.2 Task 2: Oral Production Task (OPT)

The expression of Spanish ES and locative constructions was analyzed through an elicited OPT. It consisted of a *spot-the-difference* game with five pairs of almost identical pictures **[fig. 1]** presenting differences in the existence/inexistence of certain animals or objects, or in some elements' position, color, size, etc. (Perpiñán 2014; 2015; Perpiñán, Marín 2021). Participants were instructed to localize and verbally describe the differences. Oral production was audio-recorded.

Utterances were transcribed and coded by two native Spanish speakers through CLAN from the CHILDES[6] system. Predicates expressing location or existential meaning, as well as the theme semantics, were coded as follows:

- *Haber* with an existential meaning
- *Estar/ser* + locative adverb or a prepositional phrase expressing location
- *Llevar* (to carry/wear) and *tener* (to have/possess) as possessives,
- Other
- Semantics of the THEME: definiteness/quantification/negation.
- Information structure: first or second mention.

5 *Diploma de Español como Lengua Extranjera*.

6 `https://talkbank.org/childes/`.



Figure 1 Elicited OPT task sample item

4 Results

4.1 Task 1: Proficiency Test

Results of the proficiency test are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 Proportional results of the Spanish proficiency test for Spanish native speakers (L1), upper-beginners (L2-up-beg), and upper-intermediate (L2-up-int) L2 learners

Group	*M*	*SD*	min	max
L1	.94	.06	.83	1
L2-up-beg	.50	.09	.36	.60
L2-up-int	.75	.07	.68	.92

A *Kruskal-Wallis* test revealed a significant group effect ($\chi^2(2, 54)=44.99$, $p<.001$). Dunn's post-hoc comparisons indicated that the mean rank of L1-Spanish speakers ($R=43.38$) was significantly higher than that of both L2-up-beg ($R=7.50$, $p<.001$) and L2-up-int ($R=24.68$, $p<.001$) groups, and that the mean rank of the L2-up-int group was significantly higher than that of the L2-up-beg group ($p=.01$).

4.2 Task 2: OPT

We analyzed a total of 2,582 locative or existential tokens. The L1 group produced 869 tokens ($M=43.45$, $SD=42.5$), L2-up-begs produced 673 tokens ($M=48.071$, $SD=45$), and L2-up-ints produced

1,040 tokens (M=54.737, SD=52). All of these were included in the subsequent analysis of locative and existential patterns.

Figure 2 displays the proportions of verbs used to express locative and existential constructions across groups.

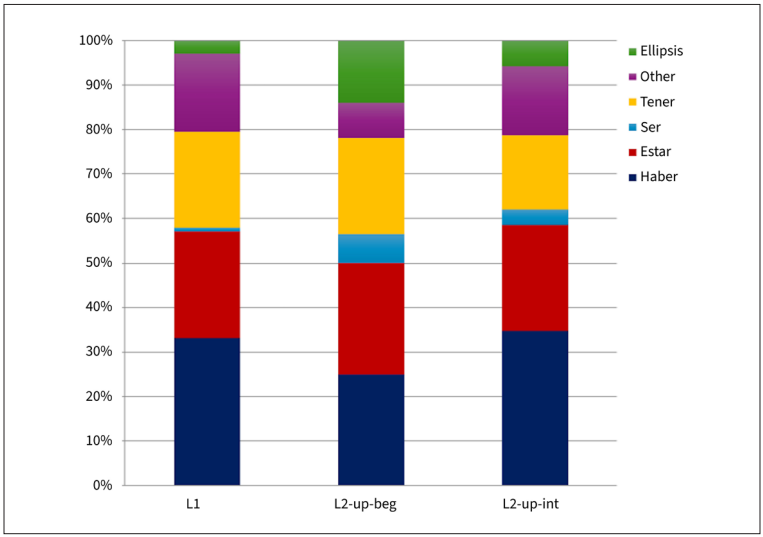


Figure 2 Proportions of verb type by each group

The L1 and L2-up-int groups showed comparable proportional distributions, producing *haber* in 34% of cases and *estar* in approximately 24%, with numerically higher use of *haber*. In contrast, L2-up-beg learners produced an equal proportion of predicates with *haber* and *estar* (24% each), 6.5% with *ser,* and a large amount of acceptable ellipsis (14%), as in (9), which could be considered an avoidance strategy. L2-up-begs used significantly less *haber* than L2-up-ints (χ^2(2, 53)=7.914, p=.02; *Bonferroni* p=.02).

The proportion of *ser* was minimal across all three groups, but L2-up-begs and L2-up-ints produced it significantly more often than L1 speakers (χ^2(2, 53)=12.01, p=.002; *Bonferroni* p=.01). Ellipsis was significantly more frequent in L2-up-begs than in both L1 speakers and L2-up-ints (χ^2(2, 53)=11.33, p=.003; *Bonferroni* .004<p<.02).

(9) *antes* *está* *el gato* *davanti*$_{_IT}$ *a la mujer* [L2-up-beg#307]
before estar the cat in-front to the woman
y ahora ***no más***
and now no more
Before there is a cat, in front of the woman, and now there isn't

Inappropriate/Ungrammatical Uses

The L1 group did not produce inappropriate sentences. L2-up-begs produced errors in 19.3% of their total productions, and L2-up-ints errors in 7.4% of their total productions. There were three types of inappropriate/ungrammatical uses, in order of frequency: the use of *estar* as a presentational verb to introduce indefinite NPs (where Spanish requires *haber*); the use of *ser* as a locative; and the use of *haber* with a definite DP.

Figure 3 displays the error distribution in the two groups.

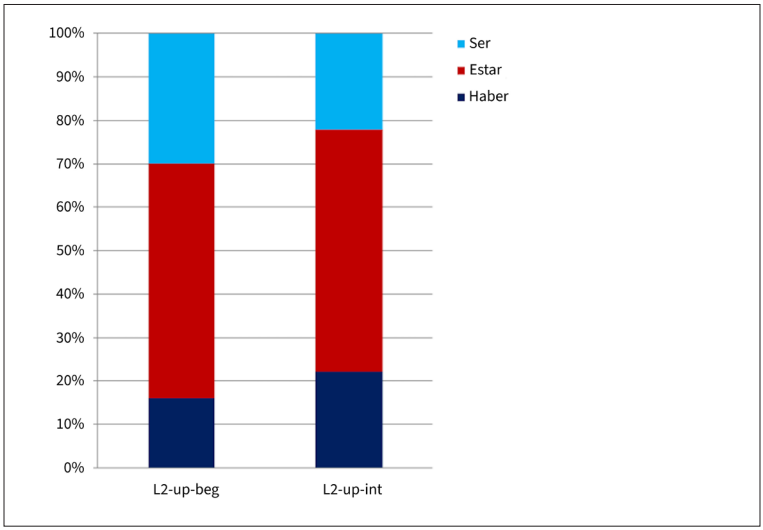


Figure 3 Distribution of verb types across inappropriate/ungrammatical L2 productions

Existential *estar*

In the L2-up-beg group, 41.42% (k=70/169) of *estar* occurrences were inappropriate, as they were used with existential meaning (10).

(10) *Aquí* ***#está un pájaro*** *y aquí no está el pájaro* [L2-up-beg#303]
Here #*estar* a bird and here not *estar* the bird
Here there is a bird, and here there is no bird

In the L2-up-int group, the proportion of existential *estar* was 17.34% (k=43/248). The distribution of these uses is displayed in Figure 4.

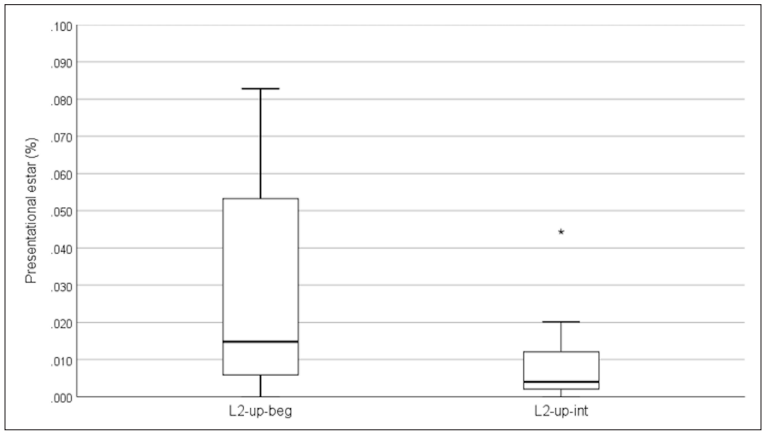


Figure 4 Distribution of inappropriate existential uses of *estar*

The difference between L2-up-beg and L2-up-int speakers in the inappropriate use of *estar* was significant at the Mann-Whitney test (U=82.50, Z=-1.86, p=.04).

Haber+Definite Nominal Phrases (DP)

In the L2-up-beg group, 12.5% (k=21/168) of *haber* occurrences violated the DE, as they were used with definite DPs (11).

(11)		***hay**	*siempre*	***la** chica*	[L2-up-beg#301]
		haber	always	the girl	
	there	is	still	a girl	

The percentage decreased to 4.7% (k=17/362) in the L2-up-int group. The distribution of these uses is displayed in Figure 5.

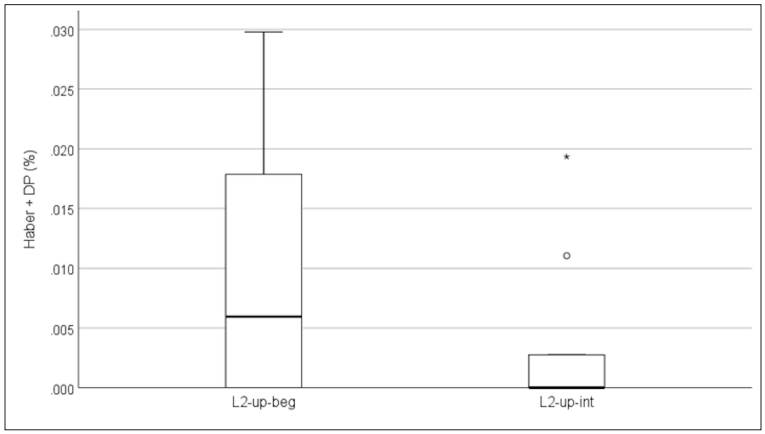


Figure 5 Distribution of (ungrammatical) uses of *haber*+DP

The difference between L2-up-beg and L2-up-int speakers in the ungrammatical use of *haber* was significant at the Mann-Whitney test (U=89.000, Z=-1.731, p=.044).

A Generalized Linear Mixed Model with total locative expressions as the outcome, *estar*/*haber*/*ser* auxiliaries and groups as single and combined fixed effects, and individuals as a random effect correctly predicted locative expressions (F(7, 21)=5.203, p=.001), accounting for 96.7% of the total variance. *Estar* was the only significant predictor of total locative expressions (*Coeff*=1.010, *SE*=.299, t(1, 21)=3.378, *CI*[.388, 1.633]).

5 Discussion

The OPT proved to be effective in eliciting both locative and existential sentences. The L1 and more advanced L2 group (L2-up-int) showed comparable intra-group proportional distributions of *haber/estar* productions, and L2-up-begs produced an equal proportion of predicates with *haber* and *estar*. However, the use of *haber* was underdeveloped among L2-up-begs.

The minimal use of *ser* in the interlanguage suggests that these L2 learners may have moved beyond an initial *Full Transfer* state (Schwartz, Sprouse 1996) and are in the process of restructuring their grammars. However, given that they are from Rome, one would not necessarily expect transfer from standard Italian *essere*. Indeed, *ser* occurred mainly with quantified NPs, which were not considered in Figure 3 or counted as errors since they are appropriate in this context (12).

(12) *Antes había muchísimas flores cerca de la casa y ahora*
before had many flowers near of the house and now
las flores son solo dos
the flowers are$_{ser}$ only two
Before there were many flowers near the house and now there are only two [L2-up-int#326]

L2-up-begs produced more omissions than the other groups. If we consider these an avoidance strategy, they suggest that L2-up-begs may be aware that a different mechanism rules the expression of location in Spanish and definiteness in existential sentences, but they do not yet master the morphosyntactic structures to realize it.

Italian speakers did not underuse *estar*, unlike English and Arabic learners (Perpiñán 2014). In fact, a significant proportion of *estar* productions (41%) in L2-up-begs was inappropriate, as *estar* was used as an existential verb to introduce indefinite *themes* in the discourse. This suggests that L2 learners know that new information in the discourse is introduced through indefiniteness (see examples (10), (13), (14)). Still, they do not yet know that *estar* is not the appropriate auxiliary in this case; that is, they know the discourse condition but not the correct verb mapping. These inappropriate uses decreased significantly in L2-up-ints, though they remained present at a notable proportion (17%). This suggests that *estar* is not delayed but rather overextended. Overextension is confirmed by the fact that *estar* was the only significant predictor of all locative expressions, after controlling for individuals. There are two explanations for this fact, which are not mutually exclusive: *(1)* Italian learners could initially assume Spanish *estar* to be the only locative auxiliary, disregarding the semantic information of the *theme*, and hence using it with both definite and indefinite NPs. *(2)* This overextension may be due to the regional origins of the learners, who transfer into Spanish ESs the phonologically close copula *stare*, used in Rome and other Central and upper-Southern Italian varieties. In both cases, overextension of *estar* yields sentences that are morphosyntactically inappropriate in Spanish and could be considered pseudoexistential sentences with a locative predication. This seems supported by the fact that these structures usually contain focalized locative expressions such as (13) or deictic expressions like (14). In the framework of Cruschina (2016), these would be interpretable, respectively, as *presentational* and *deictic locative* sentences, which in Standard Italian are expressed with *essere*.

(13) *#En el imagen antes está un gato cerca* [Up-Beg #313]
in the image before is$_{estar}$ a cat near
de una chica
of a girl
In the picture before there was a cat close to a girl

(14) *#Aquí está un pájaro* [Up-Beg #303]
here is$_{estar}$ a bird
Here, there is a bird.

L2-up-begs also violated the DE by using *haber* with DPs (11), but the error rate was much lower (13%) than that for inappropriate *estar* uses. This suggests that beginners possess the pragmatics of the DE but are still working on reorganizing their auxiliary paradigm, which is mostly achieved at higher proficiency levels, in line with Lardiere (2009). Indeed, the difficulty is significantly reduced in L2-up-ints, where violations drop below 5%. It is worth noting that the OPT was administered in person on a laptop, so that the administrator was the learners' interlocutor, who shared with them knowledge of the picture stimuli and, consequently, familiarity with the referents of the target NPs produced. For this reason, the participants could have referred to *specific* referents, i.e., familiar, hearer-old (Prince 1992), or culturally copresent (Clark, Marshall 1981) referents, which they assumed to be in the addressee's long-term memory store (Abbott 1997). Within Lyons' (1999) framework, this would be sufficient to consider them *definite* referents, so that the DE restriction would be unnecessary. Thus, this might be a case of *parameter fluctuation* between speaker and addressee, similar to that described by Perpiñán (2014) in L1-Catalan speakers. In this view, the administration modality of the OPT can be considered a possible limitation of the present study to be addressed in future replications.

To conclude, in response to our research questions, Italian learners of Spanish show greater difficulty with the reconfiguration of the semantic and pragmatic features bundled in *estar* [+temporally bounded; old topic] than with the Definiteness Effect restriction encoded in Spanish *haber* [−definiteness]. In line with Cruschina (2016), this asymmetry may suggest a degree of universality in the DE restriction, despite its surface appearance in Italian.

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