

A contrastive analysis approach to the teaching of auxiliary selection in L2 Italian

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Abstract: Auxiliary selection (AS) with those Italian intransitive verbs (IVs) that can use both *essere* 'to be' and *avere* 'to have', but with a change in meaning (e.g. *È/Ha corso al parco* 'He ran *to/at* the park'), represents one of the major challenges in the acquisition of Italian as L2. In this paper we argue that this is so largely because this phenomenon has not been treated adequately in relevant grammars, dictionaries and textbooks. In order to prove our argument we present a case study of AS with the IV *correre* 'to run' involving university students of L2 Italian who are native speakers of Serbian. The results indicate that a contrastive analysis approach to the teaching of AS with IVs is more efficient than the traditional one, and it is suggested that it should be used more frequently in order to facilitate the acquisition of AS by learners of L2 Italian.

Key Words: auxiliary selection, L2 Italian, contrastive analysis

1. Introduction

There are two auxiliary verbs (AVs) used in analytic forms of Italian verbs: *essere* 'to be' and *avere* 'to have'. Italian grammars traditionally explain auxiliary selection (AS) in the Active Voice by the verbs' (in)transitivity. Namely, all transitive verbs take *avere*, whereas most intransitive verbs (IVs) take *essere*. However, many IVs take *avere* (e.g. *esitare* 'to hesitate', *tossire* 'to cough', *divorziare* 'to divorce'), including some verbs of motion (e.g. *camminare* 'to walk', *nuotare* 'to swim', *gattonare* 'to crawl'). Additionally, some IVs can take both AVs, but in some cases the AS does not cause any change in meaning (e.g. *piovere* 'to rain', *nevicare* 'to snow'), whereas the meaning of others (e.g. *correre* 'to run', *volare* 'to fly', *saltare* 'to jump') is determined by the selection of one or another AV (e.g. *È corso al parco* 'He ran *to* the park', but *Ha corso al parco* 'He ran *at* the park').

As far as the last group of IVs is concerned, in order to explain the differences in meaning caused by the use of one or another AV, most grammars traditionally just give a small number of unclear examples for both AVs, with the additional comment that more detailed explanations should be sought in monolingual dictionaries. However, monolingual dictionaries provide insufficient examples that cannot account for all the different meanings, and bilingual dictionaries completely neglect the problem of AS with these verbs. Similarly, most L2 Italian textbooks do not take this issue into consideration leading to a low level of learner awareness of the problem. Therefore, since AS with those Italian IVs that can take both AVs has not been treated adequately in grammars, dictionaries, and textbooks, this phenomenon represents one of the major challenges in the acquisition of Italian as L2.

The aim of this paper is to present a case study proving that a contrastive analysis approach to the teaching of AS with the described Italian IVs is more efficient than the traditional one, and consequently to suggest that it should be used more frequently in order to facilitate the acquisition of this phenomenon by learners of L2 Italian.

2. Auxiliary selection in grammars, dictionaries and textbooks

In Radojević (to appear) we analysed the most important grammars, dictionaries and textbooks of Italian as L2, usually used by learners in Serbia, in order to investigate to what extent and in what way AS of the IV *correre* 'to run', as a representative of its group, is described in them. In this chapter we will give a brief overview of our findings and conclusions.

2.1. Auxiliary selection in Italian grammars

Italian grammars differ from each other in that most of them completely neglect the problem of AS, while among those that deal with this phenomenon some of them traditionally do it very superficially and without success, whereas others give more precise and thorough explanations.

An important step for the explanation of this problem was made by Jernej (1965: 200; 1999: 94), who explicitly put the IV *correre* among those verbs that can take both complements expressing motion towards or from a place, and those expressing motion at or inside a place. However, he failed to emphasise the way in which that distinction affects the AS, i.e. that *correre* takes *essere* to express motion towards or from a place, and *avere* in order to express motion at or inside a place.

The most systematic and thorough approach was applied by Salvi & Vanelli (2004: 50, 52), who introduced *Aktionsart*'s categories into their explanation of the AS. They claim that *correre* takes *avere* when it is intransitive, durative, continuous, and atelic, whereas it takes *essere* when it is unaccusative, non-durative, resultative, and atelic.⁶⁹ In Radojević (to appear: Chapter 2.2.5) we argued that their durative vs. non-durative and telic vs. atelic distinctions could be very useful for the contrastive approach to the teaching of L2 Italian to native speakers of Serbian because of the fact that the same distinctions exist in Serbian. Namely, on the basis of their distinctions we claimed that the Serbian equivalent of *correre* with *avere* is only the verb *trčati* 'to run', whereas the corresponding equivalents of *correre* with *essere* are different prefixed derivatives of *trčati* (e.g. *utrčati* 'to run into', *istrčati* 'to run out' etc.), but not *trčati* itself. Although Salvi & Vanelli made a considerable contribution to the explanation of AS with *correre*, they still failed to place sufficient emphasis on the importance of the type of motion and the complement of place that influence the phenomenon of AS, which would have made their contribution more complete.

However, the most precise explanation of the AS with *correre* was provided by Maiden & Robustelli (2004: 266-267), who were the first to explicitly introduce the concept of change of location, as that expressed by the AV *essere* with *correre*, into the explanation of AS. In Radojević (to appear: Chapter 2.2.8) we suggested a completion of their explanation by introducing the concept of motion at a location as that expressed by the AV *avere* with *correre*. Although they are not expressed by AVs as they are in Italian, both concepts still exist in Serbian, where they are marked by the distinction between the bare verb and its prefixed derivatives, as described in the previous paragraph, as well as by different cases in prepositional phrases (PPs) even with the same preposition. Namely, many Italian PPs expressing space can have two Serbian equivalents, e.g. *al parco* can mean both *u park* 'to the park' (accusative – change of location) and *u parku* 'at the park' (locative – motion at a location), depending only on the AV used with *correre*.⁷⁰

Therefore, the conclusion is that the introduction of the concept of motion at a location, as well as the aforementioned contrastive remarks, finally shed some light on the explanation of AS with those Italian verbs that can take both AVs, but with a change in meaning, thus making it complete and clear.

2.2. Auxiliary selection in Italian dictionaries

An analysis of the following monolingual Italian dictionaries: Zingarelli (2010), *Garzanti italiano* (2009), Devoto–Oli (2007), Sabatini–Coletti (2005), and De Mauro (2000) showed that all of them provide every meaning of *correre* with the respective AV, but they do not pay enough attention to adequate complements of place nor do they insist sufficiently on the distinction between the different types of motion (change of location and motion at a location) affecting the AS. Therefore, their explanations and examples are neither complete nor clear-cut for learners of Italian as L2.

Bilingual Italian-Serbian (Klajn, 1996) and Italian-Croatian or Serbian (Deanović–Jernej, 1984) dictionaries completely neglect the problem of AS. Although we are aware of the lack of space in dictionaries, in Radojević (to appear: Chapter 3.2) we suggested that they should take into account this problem with all Italian verbs and especially with IVs that can take both AVs, but with a change in meaning, and that they should illustrate them with adequate simple examples, which would facilitate the acquisition of this phenomenon by Serbian learners of L2 Italian.

2.3. Auxiliary selection in L2 Italian textbooks

Most L2 Italian textbooks treat the problem of AS in general very superficially and completely ignore the AS with IVs like *correre*. An analysis of: Bali & Rizzo (2002, 2003), Bidetti, Dominici & Piccolo (2009), Chiappini & De Filippo (2002, 2005), Marin (2008), Marin & Magnelli (2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009), Mazzetti, Falcinelli & Servadio (2002, 2003), Mezzadri & Balboni (2000a, 2000b, 2001a, 2001b, 2002a, 2002b), Chiappini & De Filippo (2002), Ziglio & Rizzo (2001), and Stojković & Zavišin (2010), which are the most frequently used L2 Italian textbooks in Serbia from level A1 to C1, showed that the AS with the IV *correre* occurred only five times.⁷¹ We consider this fact to be a crucial contributory factor in the unsatisfactory awareness of the problem in learners of L2 Italian, because textbooks are the learners' primary source of

⁶⁹ For more details see Salvi & Vanelli (2004: 50, 52).

⁷⁰ For more details about other relevant grammars see Radojević (to appear: Chapter 2).

⁷¹ For a more detailed analysis of these examples see Radojević (to appear: Chapter 4).

information, whereas grammars and dictionaries are often only occasionally consulted and not always available to the majority of learners.⁷²

3. Case study

3.1. Participants

In order to prove our arguments we conducted an experiment involving eighty students from the Italian Department of the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philology, who are native speakers of Serbian. They were divided into four groups that consisted of twenty students belonging to the same undergraduate year of study. At the time the experiment was conducted the first year students had already reached the A1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and they were heading towards the A2 level, the second year A2 towards B1, the third year B1 towards B2, and the fourth year B2 towards C1.

3.2. Input

All the groups had been exposed to the same traditional input regarding auxiliary selection in Italian, described in 1, during their education, independently of our experiment. However, in addition to the traditional input the second year group had also been given an explicit contrastive input on two separate occasions one month before the experiment. The additional input they received focused on the following three points: 1. *correre* uses *essere* to express change of location, whereas it uses *avere* to express motion at a location; 2. the Serbian equivalent of *correre* with *avere* is *trčati*, whereas the corresponding equivalents of *correre* with *essere* are different prefixed derivatives of *trčati*, but not *trčati* itself; 3. many Italian PPs expressing space can have two Serbian equivalents, e.g. *al parco* can mean both *u park* 'to the park' (accusative – change of location) and *u parku* 'at the park' (locative – motion at a location), depending only on the AV used with *correre*. These explanations were illustrated by several clear-cut examples in both languages.

3.3. Hypothesis

Consequently, our hypothesis was that the second year group would show significantly better knowledge of AS in L2 Italian compared to all the other groups since it was the only one that received the type of input that had taken into account not only the traditional explanation of AS in Italian, but also all the other relevant criteria important for such a phenomenon (described in 3.2), as well as the corresponding contrastive explanations and examples, which make AS more transparent to learners of L2 Italian, and, therefore, hopefully facilitate its acquisition. Among the remaining three groups we expected the fourth one to be the best, the third one the second best and the first one to be the worst because that order would correspond to their level of L2 Italian. Additionally, we expected the second year group's error percentage to be significantly lower compared to that of the other three groups.

3.4. Experiment

For the purposes of our experiment all the students were given the same test consisting of ten sentences in Italian that they had to translate into Serbian. The tense used in all the sentences was the *Passato Prossimo* (the most frequently used Past Perfect Tense and the first analytic verb form taught to learners of L2 Italian) of the IV *correre*: five sentences had the AV *essere* and five *avere*. As described in 2.1 and 3.2, the Serbian equivalent of the Italian IV *correre* with the AV *avere* is *trčati*, whereas the corresponding equivalents of *correre* with *essere* are different prefixed derivatives of *trčati*. Every correctly translated sentence was assigned one point so that the maximum was ten points per student.

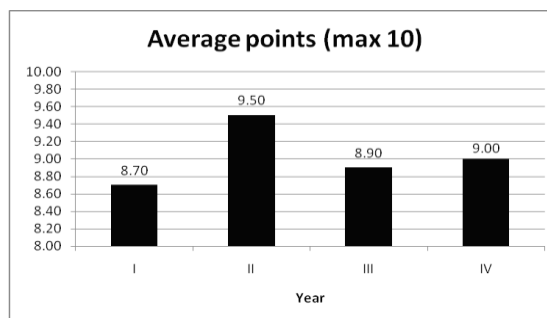
The correct use of Serbian prepositions and cases expressing space was not assigned any points because the choice of correct verbs in Serbian logically led to the correct choice of corresponding prepositions and cases, whereas the use of incorrect verbs necessarily caused the choice of incorrect prepositions and cases. Or, if we look at it from the other way around, incorrectly understood Italian PPs led to the wrong choice of both verbs and prepositions and cases in Serbian. Therefore, these points would not have had any effect on the results.

3.5. Results

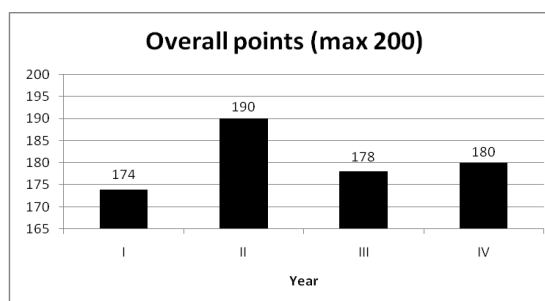
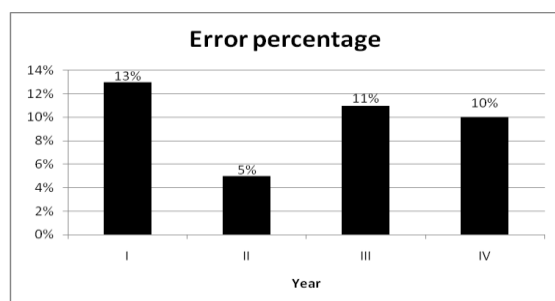
⁷² In Radojević (to appear: Chapter 4) we also gave some suggestions regarding possible ways of representing the problem of AS with the IV *correre* in L2 Italian textbooks in order to facilitate its acquisition even at the lowest levels. Future L2 Italian textbook authors might find them useful.

The results of the test are shown in the following table and chart. The numbers in the table represent how many students had the respective number of points, whereas the chart shows the average points of each of the four years of study.

Year	I	II	III	IV
Points				
10	6	12	8	10
9	8	6	5	3
8	2	2	4	4
7	2	0	3	3
6	2	0	0	0
5 or less	0	0	0	0
Average points	8.7	9.5	8.9	9



Generally speaking, all the groups showed a satisfactory knowledge of AS in Italian, the average points ranging from 8.70 to 9.50 out of 10 points. However, the second year group is significantly better than all the others, as can be seen in the chart representing the average points. The difference between the second year group and all the others is even more obvious in the following chart, showing the error percentage for each year of study.



While the error percentage for the first, second and third year ranges from 10% to 13%, the second year group's error percentage is significantly lower at 5%. This means that out of 200 sentences 20 second year group students made mistakes only in 10 of them and the remaining 190 were correct (as shown in the chart with the overall points), whereas the fourth year group students made twice as many mistakes despite there being a difference of two CEFR levels between them, as mentioned in 3.1.

3.6. Some examples

The distribution of the two AVs in the test was equal, i.e. there were as many sentences with *essere* as with *avere*, as described in 3.4. The error percentage per sentence shows that there were slightly more mistakes concerning sentences with *essere* (52.56%) than with *avere* (47.44%). This means that the students overgeneralized the Serbian verb *trčati* and used it even in those contexts where its prefixed derivatives should have been used in order to correctly translate *correre* with *essere*. Generally speaking, in a large number of translations from Italian into Serbian made by Serbian learners of L2 Italian we have noticed this tendency to neglect the prefixation of verbs although it is a very productive morphological process in Serbian, but since we have not conducted any research into that phenomenon yet, we will not make any further claims about it.

In order to illustrate the test, we will show only two sentences in which the students made the largest number of mistakes:

	Sentence 1		Sentence 2	
Italian	<i>Ho corso al parco</i>	<i>avere</i>	<i>Sono corso allo stadio</i>	<i>essere</i>
Serbian	<i>Trčao sam u parku</i>	<i>trčati; u + locative</i>	<i>Otrčao sam na stadion</i>	<i>otrčati; na + accusative</i>
English	I ran at the park	motion at a location	I ran to the stadium	change of location

The students' mistakes stemmed from the fact that they did not recognize that sentence 1 expressed motion at a location, so that their translation into Serbian was *Otrčao sam u park* as if in Italian it were *Sono*

corso al parco 'I ran to the park'; and similarly in sentence 2 they did not understand the change of location, so that they translated it as *Trčao sam na stadionu* as if the original Italian sentence were *Ho corso allo stadio* 'I ran at the stadium'. Our opinion is that the reasons for these mistakes are twofold. First of all, since in Serbian different cases are used to mark different types of motion (motion at a location – locative; change of location – accusative) although both cases can use the same preposition (e.g. *u parku*, *u park*), it is logical for our students to look for the type of motion in the Italian PPs. However, since most Italian PPs do not mark the type of motion, the students were not able to find it in them, and consequently they were likely to make mistakes. Secondly, since the first, third and fourth year students had not been exposed to the input suggested in this paper, they were not used to taking into account the distinctive contrastive features (i.e. that the Serbian equivalent of *correre* with *avere* is *trčati*, whereas its equivalents with *essere* are its prefixed derivatives), so they did not look for the type of motion in the AV used, which would have led them to the correct choice of the respective Serbian verb.

4. Conclusion

On the basis of the results of our experiment we can conclude that our hypothesis was correct. The second year group had significantly better results compared to all the other groups. Among the remaining three groups the fourth year group was the best, the third one the second best and the first one was the worst, which also corresponds to our hypothesis and to their level of L2 Italian. Additionally, the second year group's error percentage was significantly lower compared to that of the other three groups. Our conclusion is that the reasons for such results are that the second year group was the only one that received the type of input that had taken into account not only the traditional explanation of AS in Italian, but also all the other relevant criteria important for such a phenomenon (described in 3.2), as well as the corresponding contrastive explanations and examples. All these remarks made the AS much clearer to the students and, therefore, facilitated its acquisition.

By taking into account only translations from Italian into Serbian, in this paper we have only examined the receptive abilities of Serbian learners of L2 Italian concerning the AS of the Italian IV *correre*. However, for further investigations we recommend an examination of productive abilities regarding the same problem because it might lead to some interesting and useful conclusions that could explain the phenomenon in question in greater depth and make its acquisition by learners of L2 Italian, independently of their mother tongue, much easier and more efficient. In addition, there are also some other Italian IVs belonging to the same group as *correre*, as far as the AS is concerned, such as *volare* 'to flow' and *saltare* 'to jump', that might be interesting for further research into this subject.

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