

Data Meet Theory: The Acquisitional Complexity of Auxiliary Selection in L2 Italian and Syntactic Theory

Federico Piersigilli (Università per Stranieri di Perugia)

Auxiliary selection (AS) in Italian (and other Romance and Germanic languages) has been a growing field of research in generative grammar in the last forty years (Burzio 1986; Cocchi 1995; D'Alessandro & Roberts 2010; Bjorkman 2011; Amato 2021, 2022; Olivier 2025). The traditional view of Italian AS as an argument-structure-based system (HAVE for transitives/unergatives, BE for unaccusatives) cannot really capture all instances of BE selection: one particular case is that of reflexives, exemplified in (1-c) and (1-d).

- (1) a. Maria ha mangiato (la zuppa).
 b. Maria è caduta.
 c. Maria si è lavata.
 d. Maria si è lavata le mani.

Such instances of BE selection have been integrated in general theories of AS, more or less straightforwardly, according to different mechanisms: valency reduction (Cocchi 1995; Reinhart & Siloni 2005 a.o.), identity relation (Vikner 2024; Olivier 2025), or structural defectivity (Amato 2021, 2022), all of them stressing the triggering role of the reflexive clitic *si* in BE selection. Performance data emerged from the ongoing project *Promoting multilingual competence in different contexts* (PRIN 2022M4T9SB), show that, as far as written production is concerned, AS with reflexives is particularly tricky for Italian L2 learners, including advanced levels. These difficulties reveal an interesting parallel with the struggle to fully explain BE selection in syntactic theories of AS. The aim of this talk is to address the main developments of theories of AS in the Minimalist framework and relate them to the data emerged in AS-related tasks so far as part of the project advancement.

Selected references: Amato, I. (2021). *Auxiliary Selection in Italo-Romance - A Nested-Agree Approach*. Leipzig University; (2022). Auxiliary selection is Agree: person-driven and argument-structure-based splits. *Isogloss*, 8(2):1–20. Bjorkman, B. A. M. (2011). *BE-ing default: The morphosyntax of auxiliaries*. PhD diss. MIT. Cocchi, G. (1995). *La selezione dell'ausiliare*, Unipress. D'Alessandro, R. & Roberts, I. (2010). Past participle agreement in Abruzzese: Split auxiliary selection and the null-subject parameter. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, 28(1):41–72. Olivier, M. (2025). A syntactic account of auxiliary selection in French. *Probus*. Reinhart, T. & Siloni, T. (2005). The lexicon-syntax parameter: Reflexivization and other arity operations. *Linguistic inquiry*, 36(3):389–436. Vikner, S. (2024). Perfect auxiliaries with reflexive objects: have vs. be. *Workshop on the Syntax and Morphology of Danish, English, and Related Languages*.