

## **Let's Delay the Answer!** **A Novel Method for Eliciting Information Focus in Crosslinguistic Research**

The elicitation of Information Focus (IF) is a crucial yet challenging task in linguistic research, particularly in crosslinguistic and multilingual contexts. The standard method, the question-answer (QA) test, while widely used, presents several well-documented limitations (Cruschina & Mayol, 2022). Specifically, QA-based elicitation often leads to interpretive ambiguities, where responses may encode not only IF but also Mirative or Exhaustive Focus. Additionally, speakers frequently provide fragment answers (Merchant, 2004; Krifka, 2006), which, although natural, obscure crucial syntactic and prosodic properties of IF, thus limiting the reliability of the collected data.

To address these methodological challenges, Cruschina & Mayol (2022) propose an innovative approach: the **Question with a Delayed Answer (QDA) test**, an implementation of the Discourse Completion Task (DCT) commonly used in prosodic research on Romance languages, and consist of a questionnaire with different scenarios designed to elicit a specific speech act or structure. The participants complete the task by taking a turn of dialogue (Kasper and Dahl, 1991; Brown 2001). The QDA test strategically delays the answer by inserting intervening material between the wh-question and the response, fostering the spontaneous production of full sentences rather than elliptical fragments.

In this study, we assess the effectiveness of QDA through a controlled experimental design. By engaging participants in a role-playing setting, this method enhances naturalness while minimizing experimental artifacts. We investigate IF strategies in three languages —Italian, Spanish and English— considering both syntactic and typological variables. All participants are L1 speakers of their respective languages. Specifically, we explore the impact of: (i) the **pro-drop parameter** (non pro-drop vs. pro-drop languages), and (ii) the **argument structure in the vP shell**, analysing transitive, unaccusative, and psych-verbs (Larson 1988; Belletti & Rizzi, 1988).<sup>1</sup>

The **Working Hypothesis** is that structural interaction between subjects and objects in these configurations influence fronting strategies and intervention effects in IF realization across languages (cf., among others, Villata et al. 2016; Rizzi 2000, 2018).

The experiment involved 180 participants (60 per language), completing 24 QDA scenarios (8 per verb type, divided into two lists). A representative example for is outlined in (1) below. A total of 2,160 responses were collected and analysed using Conditional Inference Trees (CIT) and Fisher's exact test for post-hoc analyses. Results confirm that verb type significantly affects IF strategies, particularly in psych-verbs, where VS orders dominate in Italian and Spanish ( $p < .001$ ) but not in English, which favours an unmarked SVO pattern across all verb types. Additionally, while cleft constructions are preferred in Italian transitive contexts (26.2%), Spanish allows greater variability between SV and VS structures. Notably, QDA significantly reduced the production of fragment answers (average 8% of responses), ensuring a richer dataset for syntactic and prosodic analysis, as shown in Figure1-3 below.

Given these findings, we can consider the QDA as a robust methodological tool for IF elicitation, with potential applications extending to various aspects of language acquisition. By minimizing elicitation biases and fostering naturalistic responses, QDA holds promise for future research on focus strategies in different linguistic populations.

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<sup>1</sup> Different verb types arrange their arguments in the vP shell in such a way that the 'subject' is merged in different positions:

- (i) Transitive verbs: the Agent Subject is merged in Spec,vP, while the Patient DO is merged in Spec,VP;
- (ii) Unaccusative verbs: the Theme Subject is merged in Spec,VP, while the Locative IO is merged in Compl,VP;
- (iii) Psych-verbs of the *piacere* class (cf. Belletti and Rizzi, 1988): the Theme Subject is merged in Spec,VP, while the Experiencer IO is merged in Compl,VP.

(1) Unaccusative Verb *to fall*

[A recorded voice reads what follows]

‘You are in your office and hear a big thud coming down the stairs. Your colleague says:

‘The noise is coming from outside and I can't see. Who is falling down the stairs?’

‘You get up from your chair, open the door, step out onto the landing... and say:’

[at this point a new slide appears, with a man falling down from the staircase]



Figure 1. IF Strategies, Italian



Figure 2. IF Strategies, Spanish

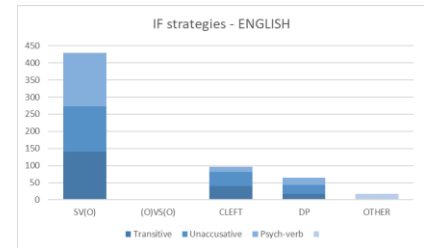


Figure 3. IF Strategies, English

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