

## Research Project

### Italian Constituent Order in a Contrastive Perspective (ICOCP)

#### Third-party funded project

**Project title** Italian Constituent Order in a Contrastive Perspective (ICOCP)

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**Organisation / Research unit**

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Italian is an SVO language generally assumed to have free or semi-free constituent order. Yet, at the same time, typical syntactic features of contemporary (neostandard) Italian include dislocations (*la Traviata, la canta Stella*) and cleft sentences (*è Stella che canta la Traviata*), which are traditionally explained as a compensation mechanism to a rigid constituent order. In respect to constituent order variability Italian thus resembles both languages with relatively free constituent order, such as Spanish, Portuguese and German, and languages with relatively rigid constituent order, such as French and English, which compensate a fixed order with the use of special syntactic constructions. The goal of the ICOCP Project is to better understand the complexity and contradictions of constituent order in contemporary Italian and to highlight its distinctive properties by adopting a contrastive perspective. Italian will be compared to three other major European languages: English, French and German. Specifically, the study will provide an in-depth account of two sets of non-canonical marked syntactic constructions in Italian - English/French/German: constructions based on clause-internal rearrangement of basic sentence constituents (VS, SOV, OVS etc.) and more complex constructions, which involve additional morphosyntactic material (cleft sentences and dislocations). In contrast to much of the research currently available on these syntactic constructions, which favor spoken over written communication, the ICOCP research will focus on written texts. The data will be drawn from both authentic original and translated written texts belonging to different registers and genres. In addition, while current contrastive studies tend to focus on either the formal or functional properties of these syntactic constructions, the ICOCP Project will provide a comprehensive account of both their formal and functional properties as well as of their distribution and frequency across different written text types. Special attention will be given to constituent order in main declarative clauses. A contrastive study of Italian constituent order has many relevant theoretical and descriptive benefits. It will lead to a better understanding of phenomena which are unclear and which are difficult to analyze if we look at the Italian language alone. In particular, it will provide (a) an account of the *raison d'être* of typical syntactic constructions of contemporary Italian; (b) a thorough description of the main similarities and differences between Italian and English, French and German and an integrated account of non-canonical sentence patterns in the four languages (while to date we have some good accounts of specific syntactic constructions in Italian, English, French and German individually, we lack a detailed cross-linguistic description); (c) a description and explanation of the unique specificities of constituent order in contemporary (written) Italian; (d) a deeper knowledge of the mechanisms underlying constituent ordering across the four languages compared; (e) a consideration of the influence of English on Italian syntactic structures and (f) a reconsideration of a widely held linguistic theory about the existence of special syntactic constructions, in particular cleft sentences. In addition to providing an important contribution to both Italian Linguistics and Contrastive Linguistics more generally, the ICOCP Project's results will be relevant to a number of practical-oriented linguistic disciplines as well (in partic-

ular translation and interpreting and teaching Italian as a first and second language) and will provide a sufficiently detailed descriptive foundation to foster a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying the acquisition of canonical and non-canonical syntactic structures in Italian as a foreign language. The ICOCP work-corpus of texts and examples will be made available at the end of the project for future research and to train future translators and interpreters.

**Keywords** Contrastive linguistics; Italian in a contrastive perspective; Italian-French; Italian-English; Italian-German; Constituent order; Canonical and non canonical constituent order; Functional perspective; Language Typology; Clefts sentences and dislocations

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