

The acquisition of postverbal subjects in heritage Italian

How timing of L1-acquisition modulates the acquisition of syntax-discourse interfaces

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Interface phenomena in HL-acquisition

In HL acquisition, there are different acquisition processes and outcomes for:

formal syntactic properties of a language

→ possibility of convergent, native-like competence

linguistic properties at the interface between syntax and discourse (or cognition)

→ divergent, optional competence

No differentiation is made between linguistic phenomena at the interface (they should all involve divergent, optional competence)

(Montrul 2008; Rothman 2009; Sorace 2011)

Differentiation of interface phenomena

Does **timing of L1-acquisition** modulate the acquisition of interface phenomena?
(e.g., distinction between late and very late interface phenomena)

(Tsimpli 2014; Schulz & Grimm 2019)

Other factors to be considered:

Dominance

Language-combination

Overview

Introduction

- Postverbal subjects in Italian as an interface phenomenon
- L1-Timing of acquisition of different postverbal subject structures (unaccusatives vs. transitives)

The study

- Participants
- Methodology
- Results
 - VS structures (in general)
 - VS structures (with unaccusatives)
 - VS structures (with unergatives/transitives)

Discussion

Word order with unaccusatives in Italian

The alternation between SV and VS with unaccusative verbs is sensitive to information-structure:

VS with **focused** subjects (e.g., broad-focus contexts → unmarked option)

(1) Viene **un elefante** con la rete.
comes an elephant with a net

SV with **given** subjects (to mark its topicality)

(2) Poi **l'elefante** viene di nuovo.
then the elephant comes again

(Belletti 1988)

Word order with transitives and unergatives in Italian

With transitive and unergative verbs, SV is the unmarked option (e.g., broad-focus contexts)

- (3) L' elefante ha preso la rete
the elephant has taken the net

However, post-verbal subjects are used to mark the subject as **new or contrastive focus**:

- (4) **Chi** ha preso la rete?
who has taken the net?

(La rete,) l' ha presa **l'elefante**
(the net,) it has taken the elephant

(Belletti 2001, 2004)

L1-Timing of acquisition of VS vs. SV with unaccusatives

Italian monolingual children

master the distribution of subjects with unaccusatives vs. unergatives/transitives at **age 1;6**

→ Distinction of verb classes as an early acquired phenomenon

master the marking of **givenness** with subjects of unaccusatives at **age 4**

→ **Late acquired phenomenon**

(Lorusso et al. 2005; Vernice & Guasti 2015)

L1-Timing of acquisition of VS with unergatives and transitives

Italian monolingual children

have difficulties with postverbal subjects of transitives and unergatives (e.g., focused subjects in O_{clit}VS) still at **age 4;6**

→ **Very late acquired phenomenon**

(5) L'ha baffato il cane
it-has baffed the dog

(Abbot-Smith & Serratrice 2015)

The Interface Hypothesis and post-verbal subjects

The Interface Hypothesis (Sorace 2011) predicts divergent, optional competence among heritage speakers with both:

- The alternation of pre- and post-verbal subjects of unaccusative verbs;
- Post-verbal subjects of transitive and unergative verbs

However, if L1-timing of acquisition modulates the acquisition of interface phenomena, we expect a different outcome for these two phenomena.

Research questions

Q1: Do heritage Italian children (with German as majority language) show sensitivity to the discourse conditions related to verb-subject order in Italian?

Q2: Is there a different pattern for VS with unaccusatives and VS with transitives/unergatives, which reflects the different timing of acquisition in L1?

Q3: Is the production of pragmatically appropriate VS structures modulated by dominance?

Participants

42 Italian heritage children living in Germany (age range: 7;4-14;1. M: 10;6)

33 out of 42 were born and raised in Germany

AoO to German: before 4 years

Background questionnaire:

Dominance score:

- differential scores in the cumulative amount of input in Italian and German across three age spans (0-3, 3-6 and at 6) – range +/-100%

Data collection

Story retelling task - ENNI stories (Schneider et al. 2005)



Data analysis

421 units (98 VS occurrences)

All units classified according to:

- Position of the subject (preverbal vs. postverbal)
- Verb type (unaccusative, transitive, unergative, copular)
- DP-subject complexity (Listanti & Torregrossa, submitted)
- Informational features of the subject (based on Riester & Baumann 2013)
 - given
 - focus (new + contrast)

Annotation of information structure features (with unaccusative verbs)

- (6) Poi **il palloncino** cadde (S=preverbal, given)
then the balloon fell
- (7) Arriva **un'altra elefanta** (S=postverbal, new)
arrives another elephantess
- (8) [context: Ci sono la cagnolina e il suo amico]
there are the doggy and her friend
- Ed è venuto pure **un coniglio** (S=postverbal, contrast)
and has come also a rabbit

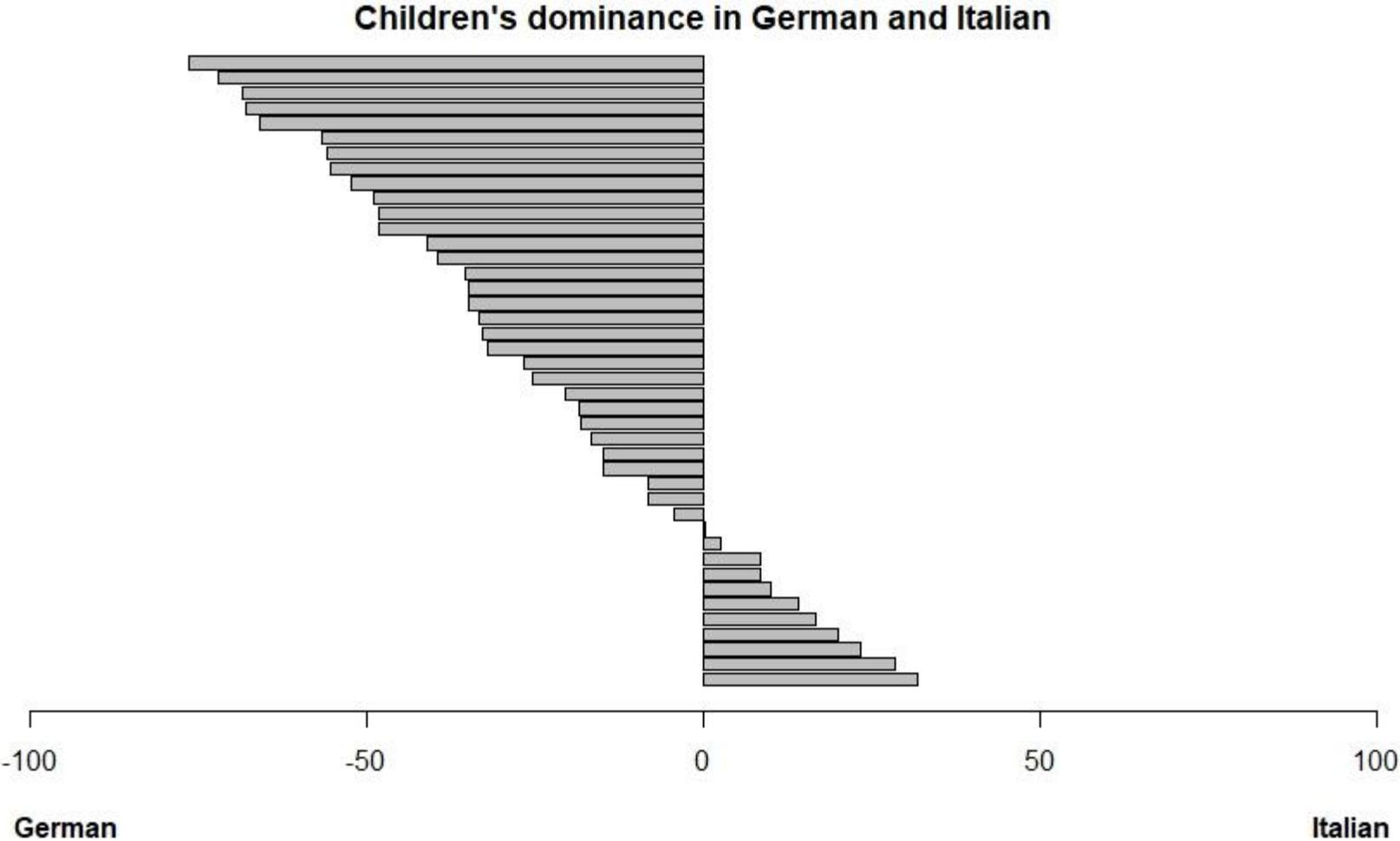
Annotation of information structure features (with transitive/unergative verbs)

- (9) **L'** **elefante** prende il aereo (S=preverbal, given)
The elephant takes the plane
- (10) L'ha venduto **un coniglio** (S=postverbal, new)
it-has sold a rabbit
- (11) [context: La sua amica ha un palloncino]
his friend has a balloon
- E lo vuole tenere **anche lui** (S=postverbal, contrast)
and it wants to hold also he

Annotation of DP-complexity

- (12) Elefante vuole andare anche (bare noun)
elephant wants to go as well
- (13) Poi arriva il papà (DP)
then arrives the dad
- (14) Poi è venuto il chef della piscina (complex DP)
Then has come the chief of the pool

Participants' dominance



Data analysis

Logistic regression model

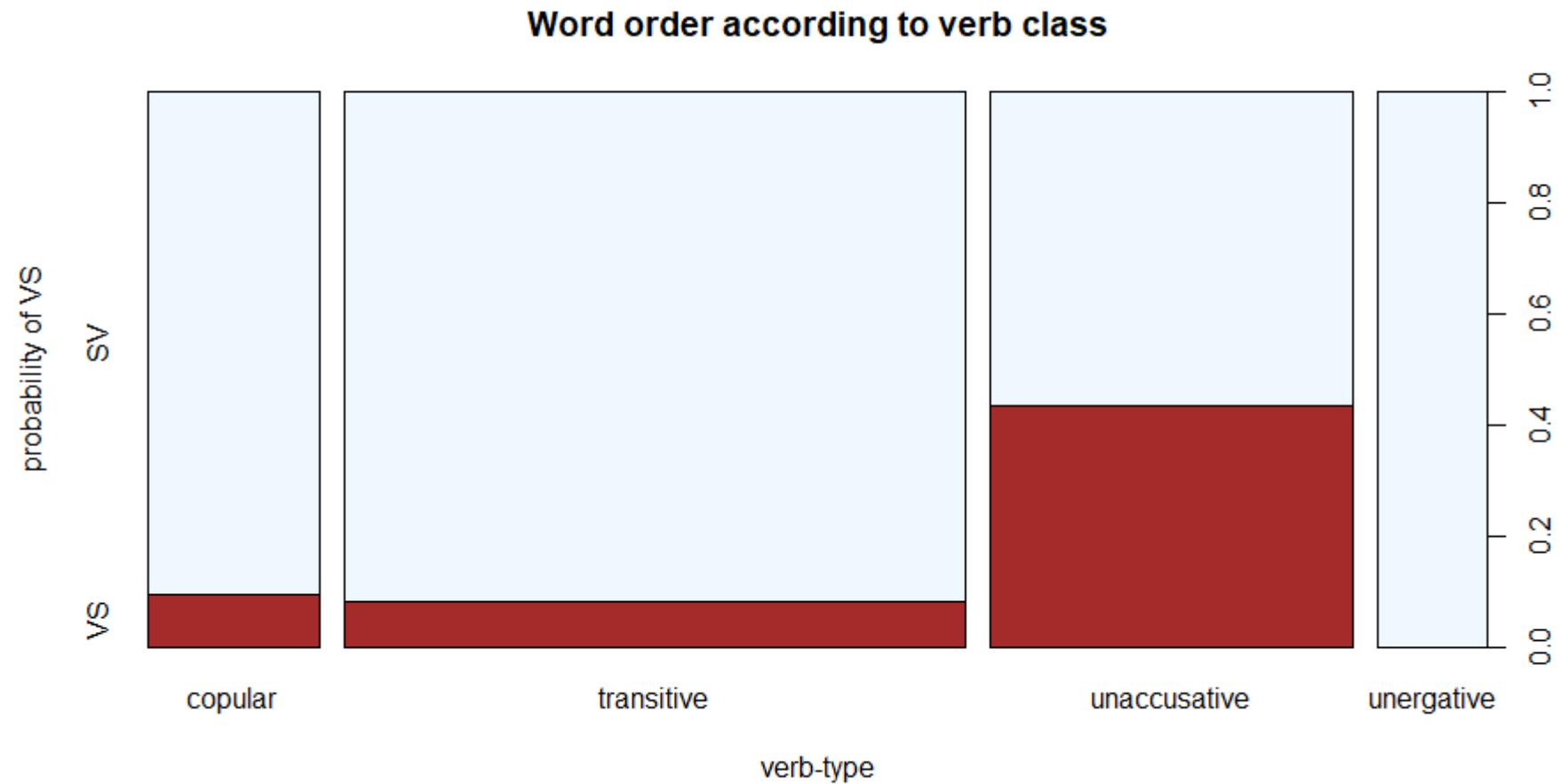
Outcome variable:

- VS order
- SV order

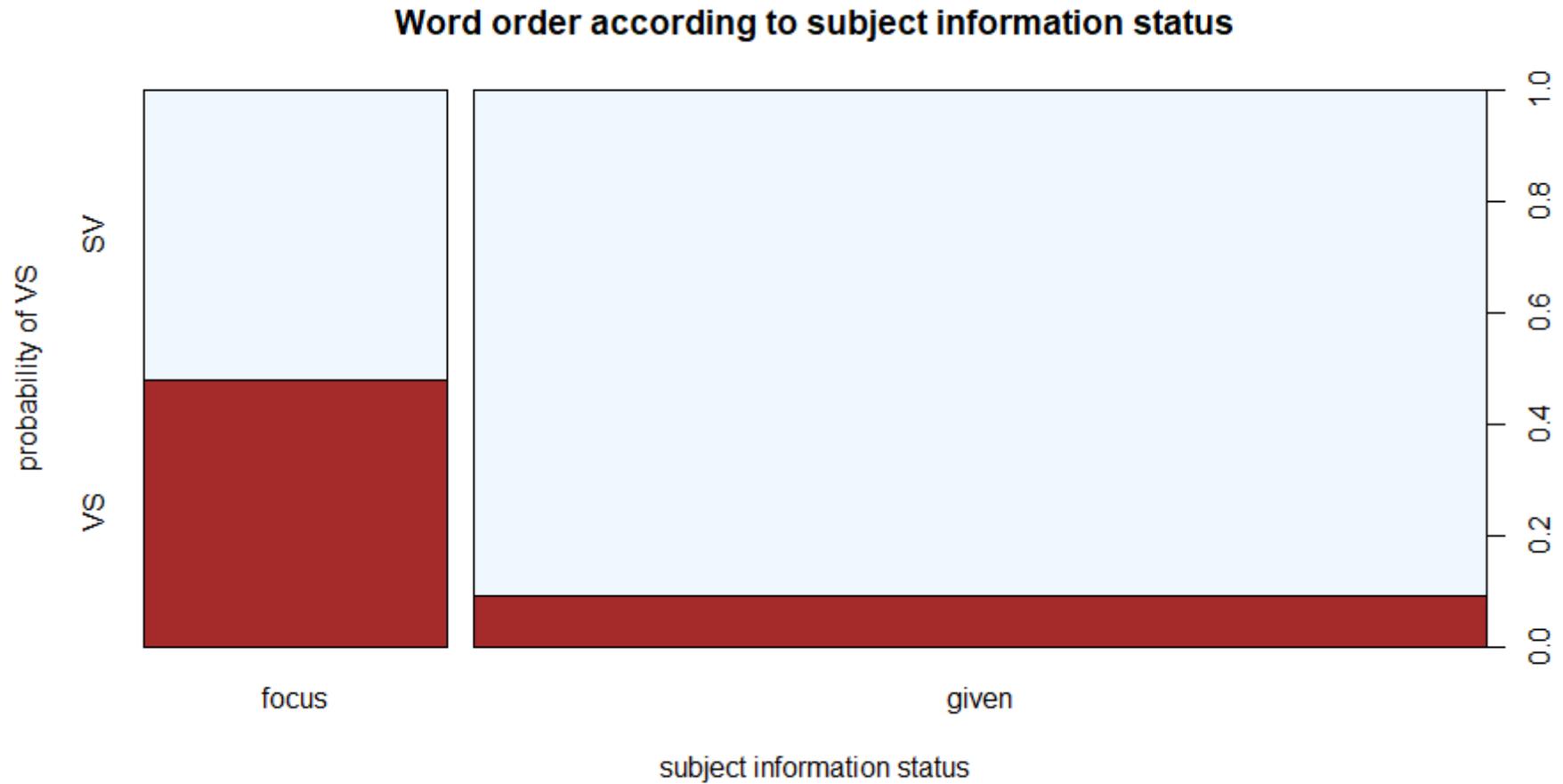
Predictors:

- Verb type (unaccusatives, transitives, unergatives)
- Information status of the subject (given, focus)
- DP-complexity (bare noun, DP, complex DP)
- Dominance

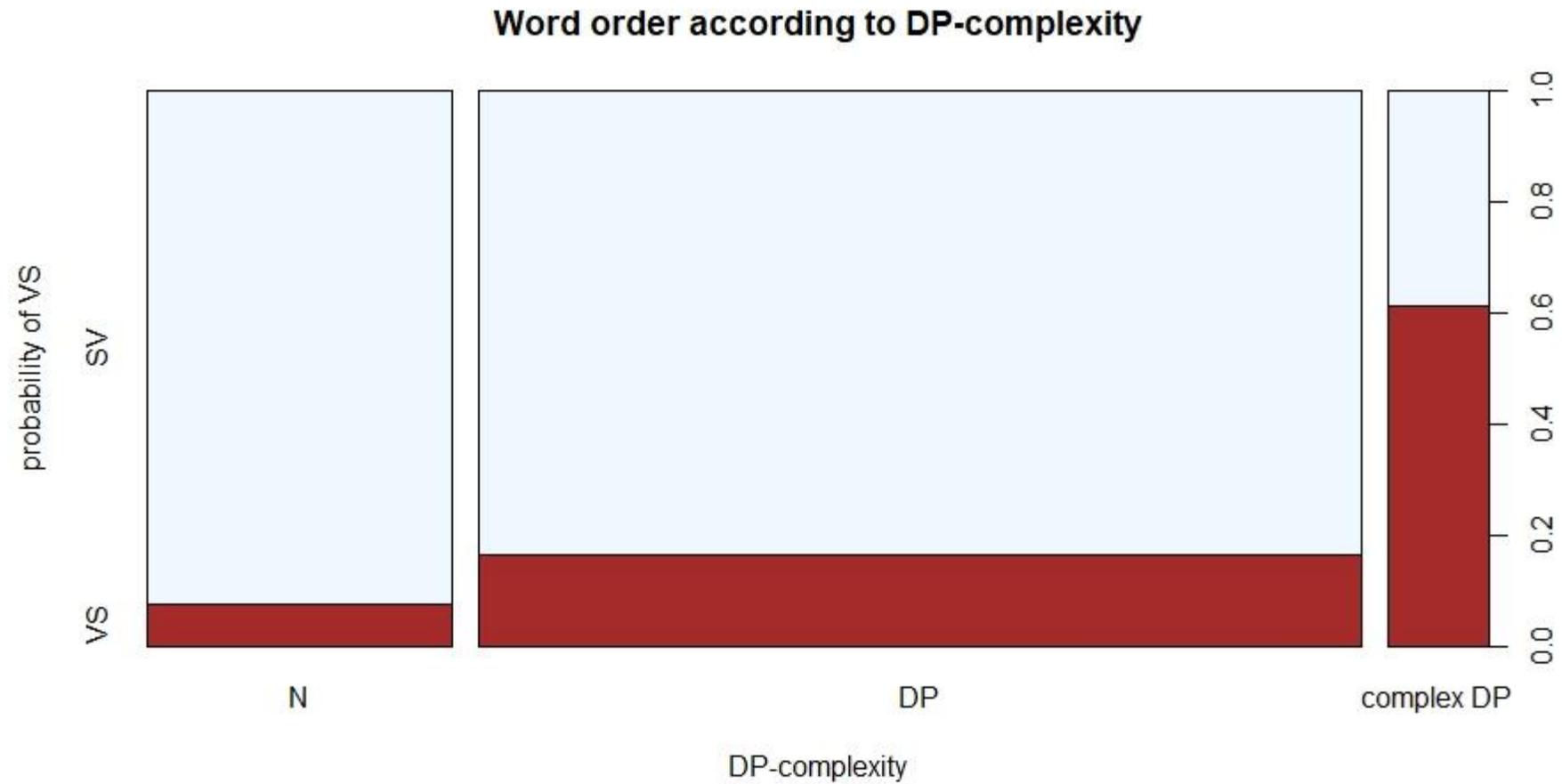
Results: VS vs. SV across verb-types (general)



Results: VS vs. SV based on the information status of the subject (general)



Results: VS vs. SV based on the complexity of the DP (general)



Results: VS vs. VS (general model)

	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	Pr(> z)
Intercept	-1.71	.66	-2.59	<.005
S=given	-1.58	.36	-4.41	<.001
V=transitive	-.02	.57	-0.03	.97
V=unaccusative	1.47	.54	2.71	<.01
Subject DP=complex	1.58	.63	2.50	.01
Dominance	.27	.17	1.62	.10

→ In the alternation between pre-verbal and post-verbal subject, heritage children show sensitivity to verb-type, information status of the subject and DP-complexity

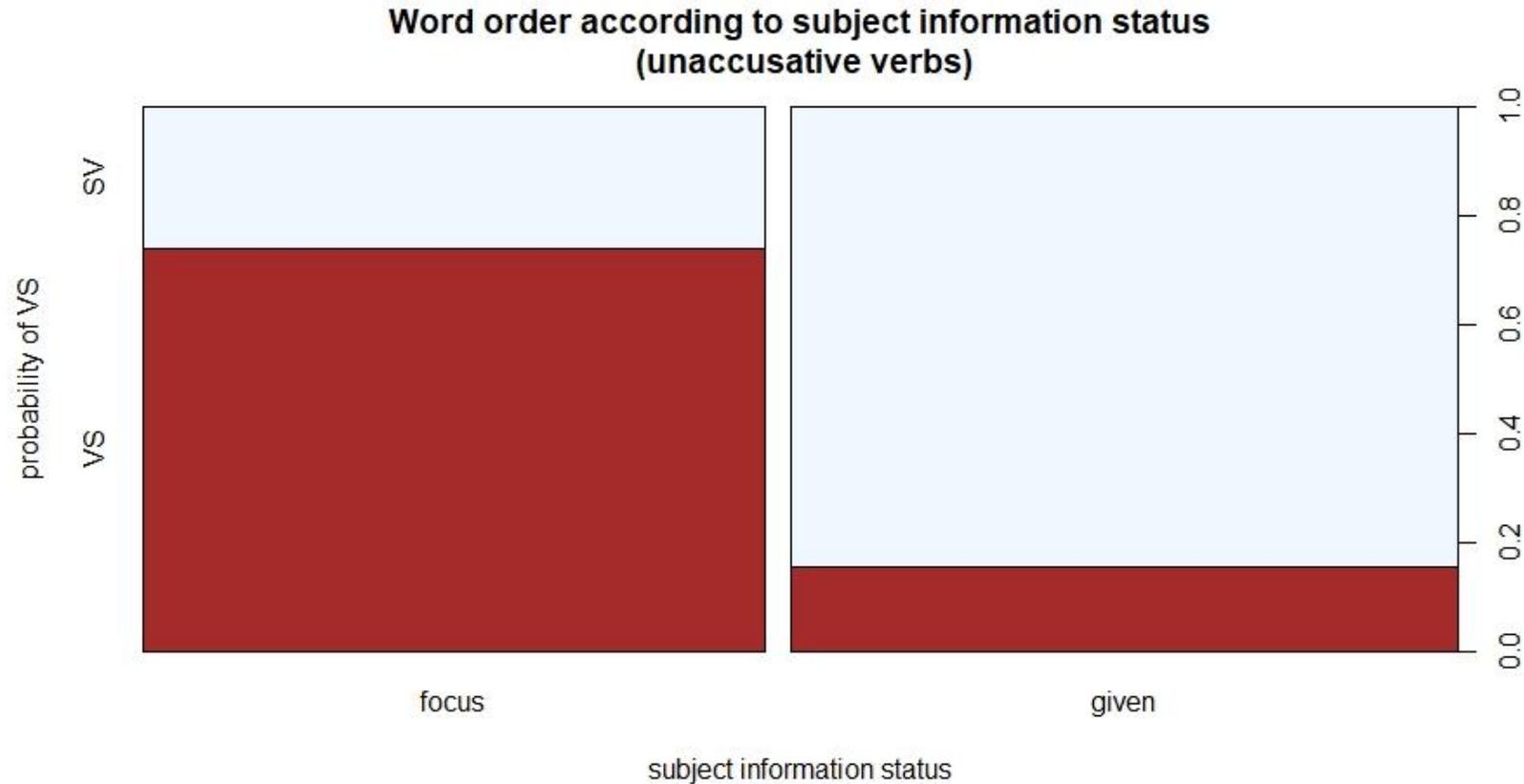
Separate analyses for unaccusatives and transitives/unergatives

We perform the same analysis with two subsets of units:

- units with **unaccusative verbs**;
- units with **transitive/unergative verbs**

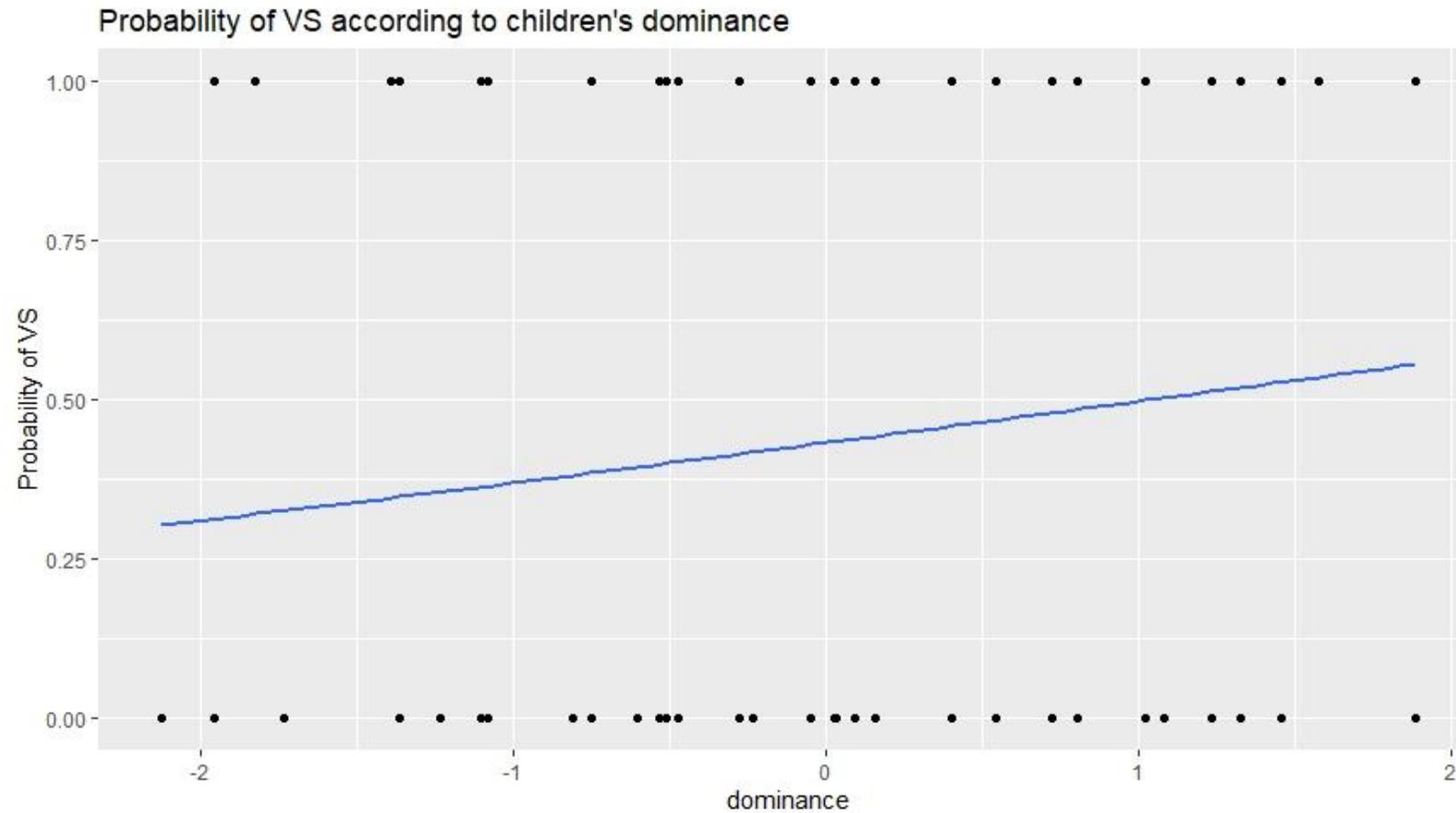
to better understand the role of verb type and information status of the subject on the choice of VS vs. SV

Results: VS vs. SV based on the information status of the subject (unaccusatives)



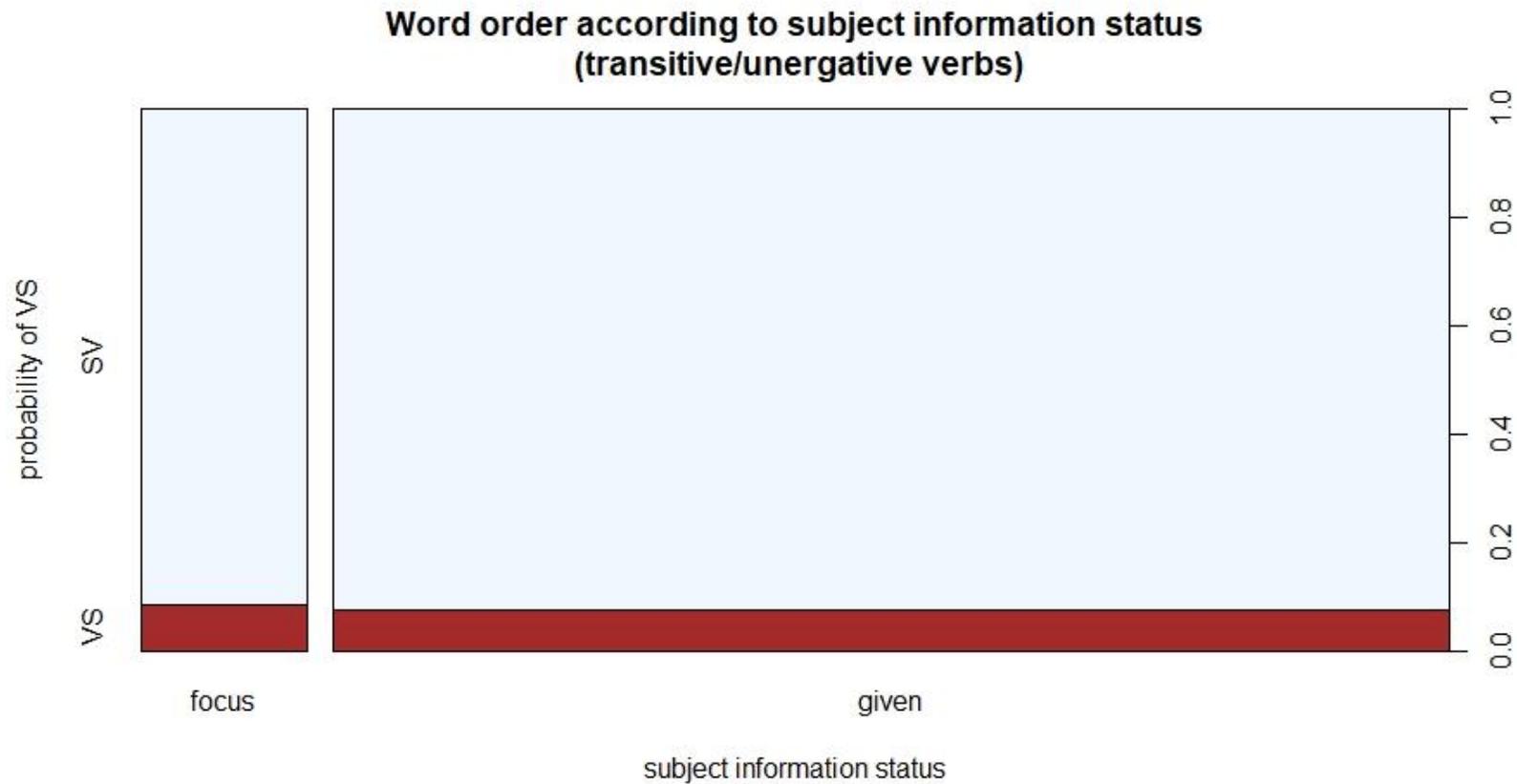
Subject information status (given): [$\beta = -3.01$, $SE = 0.62$, $z = -4.99$, $p < .001$]

Results: VS vs. VS based on dominance scores (unaccusatives)



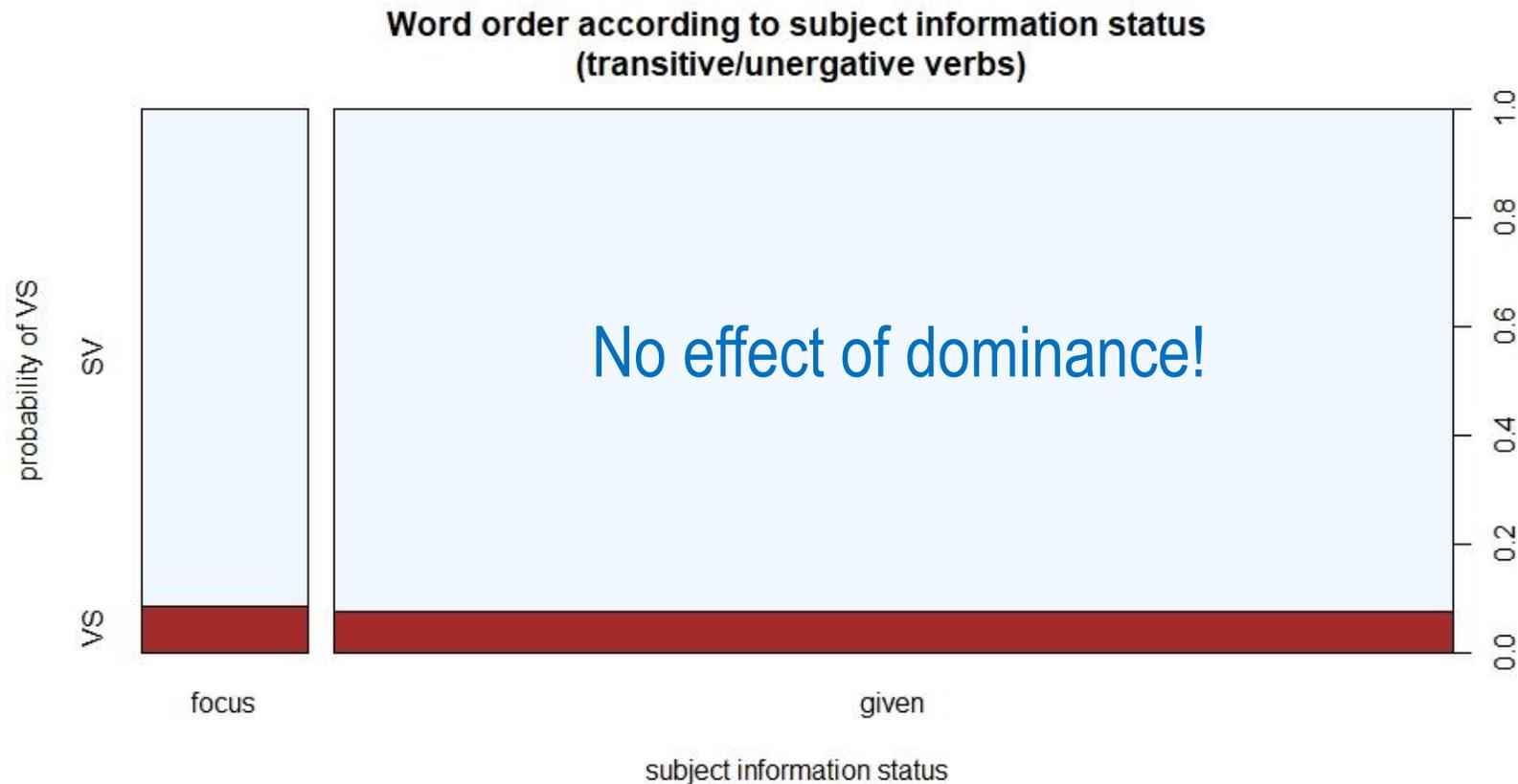
Dominance: [$\beta = -3.0076$, $SE = 0.28$, $z = 2.55$, $p = 0.01$]

Results: VS vs. VS based on the information status of the subject (transitives/unergatives)



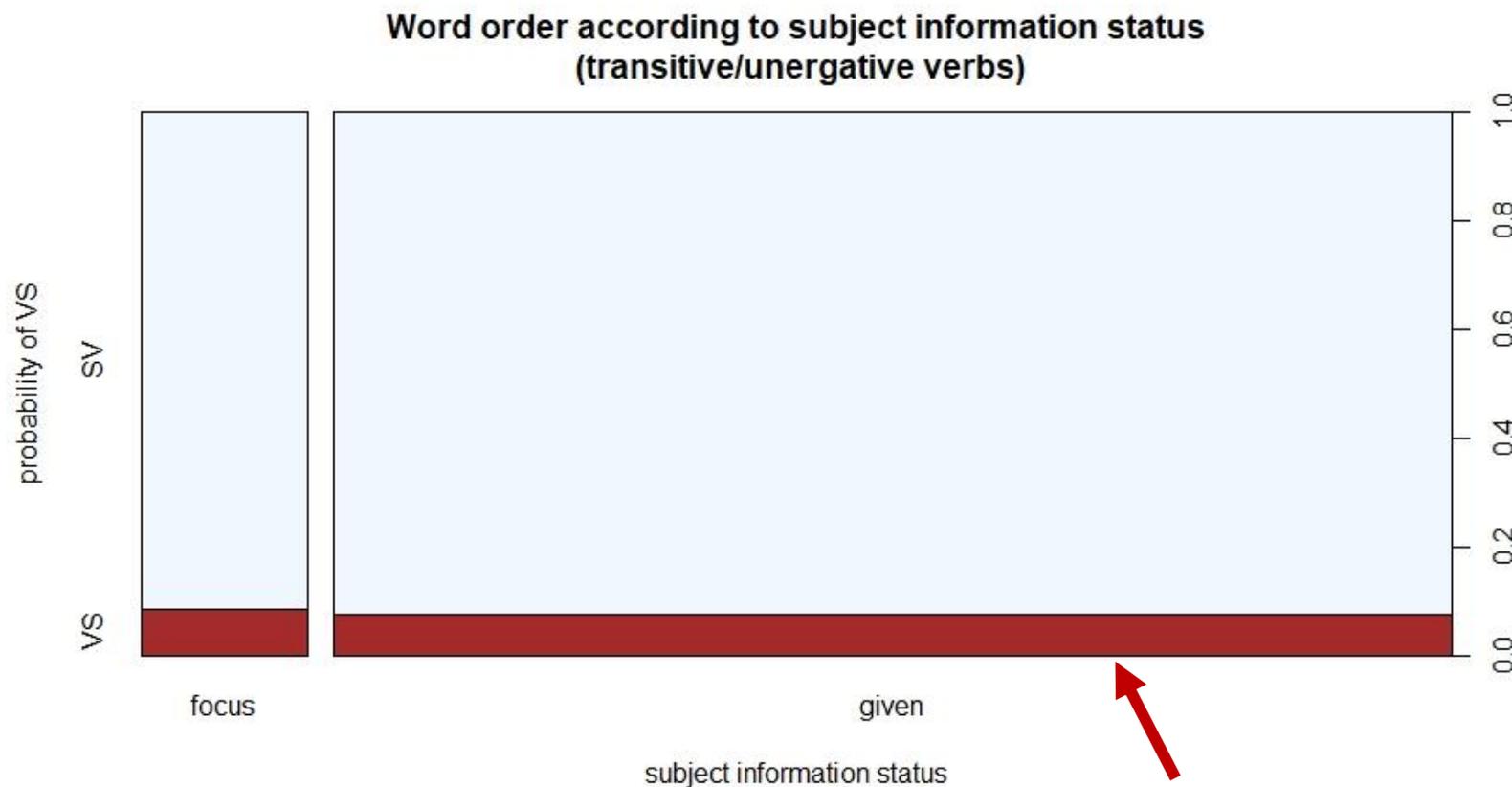
Subject information status (given): [$\beta = 0.02$, $SE = 0.68$, $z = 0.03$, $p = 0.98$]

Results: VS vs. VS based on the information status of the subject (transitives/unergatives)



Dominance: [$\beta = 0.04$, $SE = 0.23$, $z = 0.19$, $p = 0.85$]

Results: VS vs. SV with different subject information status (transitives/unergatives)



pragmatically inappropriate **given** postverbal subjects...

Cross-linguistic effect from German to Italian

Possible transfer of the V2-constraint from German:

(15) #E poi aveva **la giraffa** un giocattolo (ADV-V-S-O)
and then had the giraffe a toy

(16) #Poi vede **l'elefante** a un altro elefante (ADV-V-S-O)
then sees the elephant another elephant

Conclusions

Overall, Italian heritage children show sensitivity to the factors affecting the use of verb-subjects in Italian (verb-type, information structure, etc.).

- They master the alternation between SV- and VS-structures with **unaccusative verbs** (i.e., SV with given subjects and VS with focused subjects), especially under higher degrees of dominance in Italian
 - late phenomenon in L1-acquisition
- They do not master the alternation between SV- and VS-structures with **transitive/unergative verbs** fully.
 - very late phenomenon in L1-acquisition

L1-timing of acquisition modulates the acquisition of interface phenomena among heritage children

Conclusions

A fine-grained analysis of the information structure of post-verbal subject has lead us to the identification of an emergent pattern in heritage grammar

→ use of V2 in heritage Italian

Thank you for your attention!