

LIGHT VERB CONSTRUCTIONS VS BASIC VERBS IN THE SPEECH ACT OF REQUEST: USE AND PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS

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Abstract. This paper explores the pragmatic functions of Light Verb Constructions (LVCs) in Italian within the speech act of request, comparing the production of native speakers (L1) and learners (L2). In asymmetric academic contexts characterized by a power imbalance and social distance, the choice between an LVC (e.g., *fare una richiesta*, ‘to make a request’) and its synthetic counterpart (e.g., *richiedere*, ‘to request’) is not merely a stylistic or aspectual variation but serves specific pragmatic goals. Through a multi-layered analysis of a corpus of approximately 100,000 words, including academic emails and interviews, the study investigates whether LVCs function primarily to foreground the event (Foregrounding Hypothesis) or to mitigate the imposition of the request through syntactic backgrounding. Findings reveal a “pragmatic-syntactic gap” in L2 learners: while they successfully show the informational focus of LVCs in rhematic position, they fail to utilize the native-like strategy of embedding LVCs in subordinate clauses for illocutionary mitigation.

Keywords: Light Verb Constructions, Italian, Speech Act of Request, Pragmatic Mitigation, L2 Acquisition, Information Structure.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of Light Verb Constructions (LVCs) in Italian presents a significant challenge for linguistic theory, particularly when moving beyond purely morphosyntactic or semantic descriptions toward a pragmatic understanding of their use in interaction. Defined as analytical verb sequences comprising a semantically “light” verb (such as *fare*, ‘to do’, *prendere*, ‘to take’ or *dare*, ‘to give’) and a deverbal noun phrase, LVCs operate as single predicates characterized by monopredicativity (Nash and Samvelian 2016). A central question driving current research is the functional motivation behind the speaker’s selection: if a synthetic equivalent, such as *passeggiare* (‘to walk’) exists, why would a speaker opt for the more complex analytical form *fare una passeggiata* (‘to give a walk’)?

This paper addresses this question by examining the speech act of request within the academic domain. This environment is characterized by a high degree of imposition due to the inherent power asymmetry ([+POWER]) and social distance ([+SOCIAL DISTANCE]) between students and professors. Within this framework and following the politeness

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framework of Brown and Levinson (1987), speakers must engage in mitigation work (Sifianou 1999, Economidou-Koetsidis 2012) to protect the recipient's negative face and ensure the success of the directive act.

The primary aim of this study is to observe whether linguistic patterns in Italian reveal a correlation between the use of LVCs and specific pragmatic strategies, namely backgrounding and illocutionary mitigation. Specifically, the study investigates whether LVCs are selected to highlight the event as the informational Rheme (Foregrounding Hypothesis) or are utilized as a syntactic-pragmatic tool to soften the imposition through backgrounding. By comparing native Italian speakers (L1) with Italian learners (L2) across written (academic e-mails) and oral (academic interviews) data, this research identifies a critical pragmatic and syntactic gap in L2 competence regarding the interface between syntax and pragmatic interactional goals.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 provides the theoretical framework, discussing the functional debate on LVCs and their role in the speech act of request within the context of pragmatic mitigation. Section 3 outlines the methodology, describing the corpus of academic e-mails and interviews and the participant profiles. Section 4 presents the analysis of the study, moving from the quantitative distribution of LVCs (4.1) to their relationship with information structure (4.2) and syntax (4.3), followed by a qualitative discussion of the “pragmatic-syntactic gap” in L2 learners (4.4, 4.5). Finally, Section 5 summarizes the findings, acknowledges the study's limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Light verb constructions

LVCs belong to the broader class of analytical verbs, which Nash and Samvelian (2016, 1) define as “multiword sequences acting like a single predicate”. Structurally, these constructions consist of a light verb and a nominal phrase, exhibiting phrase-like properties while maintaining the status of monopredicative lexical units. The paradigmatic relation between these analytical forms and their synthetic counterparts is a defining feature: *fare una passeggiata* (‘to take a walk’) corresponds to *passeggiare* (‘to walk’), *prendere una decisione* (‘to make a decision’) to *decidere* (‘to decide’), and *dare un calcio* (‘to give a kick’) to *calciare* (‘to kick’).

The selection of the supporting light verb is not arbitrary but depends on the underlying semantics and dynamism of the noun. For instance, *fare* (‘to do’) is typically associated with dynamic events, such as *fare una passeggiata* (‘to take a walk’), whereas verbs like *avere* (‘to have’) denote stative conditions, such as *avere freddo* (‘to be cold’). Pompei and Piunno (2023) argue that this selection process reflects a systematic attempt to manage the inherent morphosemantic irregularity of Romance light verbs.

2.2. The functional debate: aspect and modifiability

The linguistic literature has extensively debated the functional distinction between LVCs and synthetic verbs, focusing on aspectual properties and syntactic flexibility.

Two main interpretative frameworks characterize the aspectual debate. On the one hand, the Telic Hypothesis, supported by scholars such as Bonial and Pollard (2020), suggests that LVCs represent a bounded, telic version of an event. According to this view, constructions such as *fare una nuotata* ('to go for a swim') denote a single, discrete instance of action, contrasting with the synthetic verb *nuotare* ('to swim'), which represents a general or unbounded activity. Conversely, the Atelic/Anti-Durative Hypothesis, supported by scholars such as Wierzbicka (1982) and Gaeta (2000), characterises certain LVCs as 'agentive, experiencer-oriented, antidurative and atelic'. This distinction is best illustrated by the contrast between *nuotare* ('to swim') and *fare nuoto* (lit. 'to practise swimming'), where the latter describes a regular habit or quality that is unbounded in duration, even when considered iterative. However, it is important to distinguish these habitual periphrases from true eventive LVCs, in order to avoid analytical ambiguity regarding their *Aktionsart*.

From a syntactic perspective, LVCs offer a distinct advantage in terms of modifiability. The presence of a noun allows for direct adjectival modification, which is often easier and more precise in terms of meaning than the adverbial modification required by synthetic verbs. For instance, the expression *prendere una decisione difficile* ('to make a difficult decision') specifically qualifies the noun denoting the action, whereas the synthetic alternative '*decidere difficilmente*' in Italian conveys a different meaning, specifically, that the event of deciding is unlikely to occur rather than the decision being inherently arduous.

2.3. Pragmatic perspectives: backgrounding vs foregrounding

While formal explanations of aspectual values and syntax are robust, they often fail to consider the pragmatic reasons behind the use of LVC in real-time, synchronous interactions. This study is based on two complementary pragmatic hypotheses that aim to explain the speaker's strategic choices. According to the Backgrounding Hypothesis (BH), using an LVC shifts the focus away from a semantic participant or the speaker's agency. By adopting an analytical structure such as *dare un calcio alla palla* ('to give a kick to the ball'), the speaker can either omit the direct object or express it through an oblique phrase (*alla palla*), whereas the synthetic verb *calcciare* ('to kick') strictly requires a direct object. This attenuation of agentive prominence is achieved through action nominalization, which, as noted by Givón (2001), reifies the event into a static entity, thereby distancing the agent from the immediate impact of the action. This process potentially serves as a sophisticated tool for illocutionary mitigation within the speech act of request.

Conversely, the Foregrounding Hypothesis (FH) suggests that LVCs highlight the nominal component, making the event itself more salient as the Rheme or new information. This pragmatic focus is deeply rooted in the semantic selection of the light verb. As argued by Pompei and Piunno (2023), the choice of the supporting verb is not random but follows a systematic agreement of aspectual and dynamic traits. Specifically, they identify a class of LVCs (dynamic verb + dynamic noun), such as *fare una passeggiata* or *dare un consiglio*, where the light verb supports the inherent dynamism of the event.

Within this framework, the verb *dare* is particularly significant for communication acts, as it selects events where the "Recipient/Experiencer is foregrounded" (Pompei & Piunno 2023: 142). In the context of a request, this semantic foregrounding of the recipient (the professor) works in tandem with the pragmatic foregrounding of the nominalized act (the request). While a synthetic verb like *rispondere* ('to answer') tends to prioritise

the explicit propositional content, the LVC *dare una risposta* ('to give an answer') focuses on the interactional event itself. This strategic shift allows the propositional content to be deferred or omitted entirely, the sociopragmatic norms that rule the exchange over mere information transfer.

In the asymmetric discourse of academic interactions, these two hypotheses are often interconnected: a speaker may use the nominalization to clarify the communicative intent (FH) while simultaneously exploiting the complex syntax of the LVC to reduce the directive force (BH).

2.4. The act of request

In the context of interactions between instructors and students, the speech act of requesting has been identified as the most frequent (Lee 2004). According to Searle's (1976, 182) taxonomy of speech acts, requests are categorised as directives, acts through which 'the speaker attempts to get the hearer to do something' (Nuzzo 2007, 55) for their own benefit, whether in terms of material or immaterial goods (e.g. information). The perlocutionary effects of a request favour the speaker, implying an asymmetrical distribution of costs between the requester and the addressee; it is indeed the latter who must sustain the effort required by the requested action.

Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs), requests are among the acts that threaten both the addressee's negative face and the requester's positive face. By issuing a request, the speaker exposes themselves to potential rejection and consequent loss of positive face, while the addressee's freedom of action is constrained. Furthermore, the weight of the threat is determined by the power dynamics, the social distance between participants, and the rank of imposition: a request becomes increasingly face-threatening as the degree of imposition, social distance, and power imbalance between the interlocutors intensifies.

Due to the imperative nature of the request, research in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics has demonstrated that different languages use various pragmalinguistic formulations to express the illocutionary force with varying degrees of directness. Consequently, numerous studies have focused on developing taxonomies categorising request strategies according to their level of directness (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989, Olshtain and Cohen 1983, Ferrara 1985, Trosborg 1995). This analytical framework has characterised the majority of empirical speech act studies conducted since the 1980s, most notably the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) project (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989). Subsequent research in the field has built on this landmark project, albeit with modifications and refinements (Sifianou 1999, Achiba 2003, Barron 2003, Nuzzo 2007, Alcón-Soler and Martínez-Flor 2008, Pan Ping 2012).

2.5. Mitigation and politeness in asymmetric contexts

In the asymmetrical context of academic interactions, the realization of requests requires a sophisticated use of mitigation to manage the inherent threat to the interlocutors' face. This study adopts a taxonomy of mitigation that distinguishes between internal and external modification, a division that serves as the foundation for the multi-layered coding of the corpus. Internal modification refers to the use of linguistic elements within the request's

head act to soften its illocutionary force. Within this category, a critical distinction is made between syntactic mitigators - such as the use of conditional mood, imperfect tense, or negation - and lexical or phrasal mitigators, including politeness markers (e.g., *per favore*, 'please') and downtoners (e.g., *forse*, 'maybe'). As Economidou-Kogetsidis (2012) argues, internal modification, particularly of a syntactic nature, involves high pragmalinguistic complexity and requires significant cognitive processing effort. This observation is central to the present analysis of Light Verb Constructions (LVCs): while native speakers may utilize the syntactic flexibility of LVCs for backgrounded mitigation within subordinate clauses, L2 learners often lack the necessary repertoire to employ these internal structures, resulting in requests that are grammatically accurate but pragmatically "bare."

Conversely, external modification consists of supportive moves that occur outside the head act to justify the request or prepare the hearer for the imposition. In the specific context of Italian university students communicating with professors, Pagliara (2018) observes a marked preference for external modification over internal modifiers. Specifically, students rely heavily on "grounders" – reasons and explanations – to compensate for the use of direct request strategies. This preference for external moves is a key variable in the methodology, as it allows for evaluating whether L2 learners use LVCs as part of a complex internal mitigation strategy or whether they rely on external moves to manage the face-threat, treating the LVC merely as a lexical item for informational foregrounding.

Furthermore, the "request perspective" is integrated into the adopted analytical framework as it dictates how the imposition is framed: through the speaker (e.g., "I would like"), the hearer (e.g., "Could you"), or an impersonal stance (e.g., "Would it be possible"). Economidou-Kogetsidis (2012) highlights that low-proficiency learners tend to over-rely on a speaker-oriented perspective due to its lower pragmalinguistic demand. In this analysis, the interaction between request perspective and the choice of LVCs versus basic verbs provides insights into for the "pragmatic-syntactic gap". By identifying whether LVCs are embedded in impersonal or speaker-oriented frames, the study can determine if the learner is attempting to mitigate the directive force or is simply using the LVC to emphasize the event itself, thereby confirming the Foregrounding Hypothesis versus the syntactic backgrounding function.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research questions and dataset

This study is structured around two fundamental research questions, which are based on the observed functional versatility of light verb constructions (LVCs) in Italian. These questions aim to bridge the gap between formal syntax and pragmatics. Firstly, the study aims to observe whether selecting an LVC over a synthetic verb in requestive speech acts serves to foreground information (highlighting the event as the informational rheme) or mitigate the illocutionary force of the request. Secondly, the study will investigate whether L2 learners of Italian employ LVCs with the same interactional sophistication as native speakers, particularly with regard to hedging and mitigation. Alternatively, does a pragmatic-syntactic gap exist whereby learners acquire the lexical form of the LVC, yet fail to master its distribution within complex syntactic structures?

The empirical basis of this research is a specialized corpus of approximately 100,000 words. The dataset is stratified to allow for a comparative analysis of written and oral registers, as well as a contrastive study between native and non-native production.

The corpus is divided into two primary sub-corpora to account for variation in discourse planning:

1. Academic e-mails: this sub-corpus contains naturally occurring emails sent by students to faculty members. This medium represents unplanned, asynchronous discourse where the strategic selection of linguistic forms (LVCs vs. synthetic verbs) is most visible as a tool for register-alignment and politeness.
2. Academic interviews: this section of the *corpus* consists of transcriptions of face-to-face interactions, such as office hour consultations and oral examinations. This allows for the observation of LVC usage in spontaneous, synchronous speech where pragmatic pressure is high.

3.2. Participant profiles

The participants include a control group of Italian native speakers (L1) and an experimental group of Italian learners (L2) at intermediate to advanced proficiency levels (B2-C1). While the L2 sub-corpus is currently smaller in volume than the L1 component, this disproportion reflects the documented lower frequency of LVCs in learner production. Consequently, this study adopts a primarily qualitative and descriptive approach: the granularity of the data are sufficient for identifying recurring patterns of usage and functional “gaps” in pragmatic competence.

3.3. Analytical procedure

In the analysis, firstly, the speech act of request was identified as the primary unit of observation, from which all occurrences of LVCs and their synthetic equivalents were extracted to establish a comparative baseline. The analytical mapping follows a bidirectional “function-to-form” and “form-to-function” process, where each instance is categorized according to its syntactic position and its informational status within the Topic-Comment framework. By distinguishing between occurrences in main clauses, such as the direct *Le faccio una richiesta* (‘I make a request to you’), and those embedded in subordinate structures, for instance, the final clause *Le scrivo per farLe una richiesta* (‘I am writing to you to make a request’), it is possible to evaluate the degree of syntactic backgrounding and illocutionary softening applied by the speaker. This dual categorization further codes each LVC based on its informational status to determine whether it functions as a Rheme, providing the main new information of the utterance (e.g., *La mia è una richiesta di chiarimento*, ‘Mine is a request for clarification’), or as a Theme, where the request is treated as given or presupposed information (e.g., *Riguardo alla mia richiesta di ieri...*, ‘Regarding my request from yesterday...’). Such a distinction allows for a precise determination of whether the LVC is being used to foreground the request as the primary focus or to background it within a mitigated framework. Ultimately, the qualitative phase focuses on identifying “minimal pairs” to highlight the pragmatic consequences of choosing an analytical structure over a synthetic one; for example, contrasting the bare illocutionary force of *Le chiedo di spostare l'esame* (‘I ask you to postpone the exam’) with the more nominalized and distant *Le rivolgo /faccio la richiesta di spostare l'esame* (‘I address a request to you for postponing the exam’).

To contextualize these pragmatic choices, the analysis incorporates the parameters of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989), the interactions analyzed are strictly delimited to asymmetric social contexts characterized by: [+POWER], the status differential between speaker and listener (in academic context, the inherent hierarchy between the student and professor); [+SOCIAL DISTANCE]: the level of familiarity or closeness between participants, in this case oriented by institutional roles. These variables are critical because they trigger “mitigation work” (Sifianou, 1999) to navigate the intrinsically face-threatening nature of requests within the university setting.

4. ANALYSIS AND DATA

4.1. Quantitative distribution: LVCs as a marked choice

Before analyzing the specific pragmatic function of LVCs, it is necessary to establish their overall incidence within the context of the request corpus. For this purpose, I isolated two macro-categories: the Light Verb Construction (LVC), and its alternative, the Synthetic Verb (SV). The quantitative survey, visualized in Table 1, reveals that synthetic verbs remain the default option for expressing requests across nearly all sub-corpora, with a prevalence ranging from 78% to 86% for L2 groups and L1 written. Specifically, Table 1 shows that L1 written production employs the synthetic verb in 86% of cases, while L2 oral and written show a preference of 78% for the same form.

Sub-corpus	Synthetic Verb (%)	LVC (%)	Total (%)
L1 Oral	52%	48%	100%
L1 Written	86%	14%	100%
L2 Oral	78%	22%	100%
L2 Written	78%	22%	100%

Table 1.

Distribution of synthetic verbs vs LVCs across sub-corpora

This suggests that the synthetic verb is the most frequent choice for both native and non-native speakers, whereas LVCs are selected to achieve specific, non-default communicative goals. However, a significant deviation is observed in the L1 Oral sub-corpus, where the difference in frequency between the two forms is negligible: the synthetic verb is used in 52% of requests, while LVCs rise to 48%. Given that synthetic forms are often considered the simpler and more frequent structural defaults (Givón, 2001), this analysis aims to focus precisely on the pragmatic conditions that compel a native speaker to abandon this baseline form and adopt the LVC in nearly half of their spontaneous spoken requests. This high presence in spontaneous native speech indicates that LVCs are not merely “stylistic traits” of written Italian but are flexible interactional resources deployed in real-time to navigate the pragmatic pressures of academic consultations. This marked context provides the baseline to proceed with the first layer of analysis: information structure.

4.2. LVCs and information structure

The analysis of information structure reveals a clear functional convergence between native speakers and L2 learners. As shown in Table 2, the LVC is utilized to convey new information in virtually all analyzed cases, consistently occupying the rhematic position of the clause (94.1% in oral and 100% in written production). Both L1 and L2 speakers demonstrate the ability to encode the core of the request into a nominal entity, thereby foregrounding the event itself. At this level of pragmatic competence, that is the ability to focus the informational core of the message, there is no significant gap between the two groups; the LVC serves as a reliable informational anchor for both.

Category	LVC - Oral (L1/L2)	LVC - Written (L1/L2)
New information (Focus)	88.2%	100%
Rheme (Core of the Request)	94.1%	100%

Table 2.

Information structure: LVC as rheme/new information

This functional alignment is further illustrated by the contrast between the synthetic verb *rispondere* ('to answer') and the LVC *dare una risposta* ('to give an answer'). While the synthetic form primarily focuses on the propositional content, implying that the speaker is prepared to provide specific information, the LVC shifts the focus to the communicative act itself. By nominalizing the event, the speaker highlights the fulfillment of the interactional commitment. This convergence is clearly observable in the following examples:

- (1) [L1_ORAL_042]: *Volevo solo farLe una domanda riguardo all'esame*
(‘I just wanted to ask you a question about the exam’)
- (2) [L2_WRIT_237]: *Per favore, mi dia una risposta per risolvere il problema*
(‘Please give me an answer so that I can resolve the issue’)

In both instances, the LVC *fare una domanda* ('to ask a question') and *dare una risposta* ('to give an answer') occupies the final, rhematic position of the clause. In (1), the native speaker uses the nominalization to package the request as the main information of the utterance. Similarly, in (2), the learner correctly identifies the LVC as the structural anchor to focus on the interactional act of providing a solution (the 'answer'), explicitly marking the desired outcome of the request.

The slight discrepancy observed in the oral corpus between the LVC as a structural rheme (94.1%) and as new information (88.2%) is further clarified by instances where the learner uses the construction as an interactional 'frame'. This is exemplified in the following excerpt from the L2 oral sub-corpus:

- (3) [L2_ORAL_19]: “Eeeh, posso fare una domanda [sul compito]?”
(‘Eeeh, can I ask a question [about the assignment]?’)

In this case, while the LVC *fare una domanda* occupies the rhematic position of the main clause, it functions pragmatically as a Topic or Theme. Rather than providing the core 'new' information of the request (which follows in the subsequent discourse), the LVC serves as a metadiscursive framing device. As noted in the analytical coding, the learner utilizes the nominalized form to explicitly label and 'pre-announce' the upcoming speech act. This confirms that for L2 learners, the LVC is not only a tool for informational foregrounding (FH; § 2.3) but also an instrument for interactional preparatory moves, allowing them to manage the opening of an asymmetric exchange even when the complex syntactic backgrounding typical of native speakers is not yet present.

In these asymmetric academic contexts, the LVC functions as a metadiscursive device (Bazzanella 2001) used to project the speaker's next conversational move. By nominalizing the act (e.g., *fare una domanda*), the speaker explicitly labels the type of interaction that is about to occur before delivering the specific propositional content. This strategy serves to prepare the interlocutor for the upcoming request, managing the transition between the introductory phase of the exchange and the core information transfer. As noted by Bazzanella (2011), such metadiscursive devices are crucial in Italian for monitoring the interactional flow and clarifying the speaker's intent. The data suggests that L2 learners successfully adopt this 'projection' strategy, demonstrating they have mastered the LVC's role in framing the interactional flow, even if their formal execution sometimes lacks the idiomatic precision of native speakers. Consequently, the LVC operates as a framing device that prepares the communicative act before the immediate delivery of the propositional content

4.3. LVCs and syntax

The most striking divergence between L1 and L2 production emerges when examining the syntactic distribution of LVCs, specifically, whether they appear in the main clause or are "hidden" within a subordinate clause. As illustrated in Table 3, a pattern is observed between the two groups, revealing a profound difference in how requests are structurally managed.

Group	Main Clause (N)	Main Clause (%)	Subordinate Clause (N)	Subordinate Clause (%)	Total LVC (N)
L1 Oral	7	28%	18	72%	25
L1 Written	2	28.57%	5	71.43%	7
L2 Oral	10	90.91%	1	9.09%	11
L2 Written	9	81.82%	2	18.18%	11

Table 3.

Syntactic distribution of LVCs: main vs subordinate clauses

For native speakers (L1), approximately 72% of LVCs are embedded within subordinate clauses. Conversely, L2 learners exhibit an overwhelming tendency to place the LVC in the main clause (between 80% and 90% of cases). This fundamental structural contrast is clearly illustrated by the following pairs extracted from the corpus:

- (4) [L2_ORAL_018]: *possiamo fare un altro appuntamento?*
(‘Can we arrange another appointment?’)

- (5) [L1_ORAL_042]: “*non so se posso farle una domanda.*”
(‘I’m not sure if I can ask you a question’)

In Example (4), the L2 learner places the LVC (*fare un appuntamento*², ‘to make an appointment’) directly within the assertive main clause. The request is expressed in full evidence, resulting in a high degree of interactional directness. In contrast, Example (5) shows how the native speaker deliberately triggers the Backgrounding Hypothesis (H; see § 2.3) by burying the LVC inside a nested subordinate clause (*se posso farle una domanda*). This syntactic-pragmatic interface gap finds its justification in the pragmatic demands of the high-stakes academic context (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Native speakers utilize syntactic backgrounding to foreground the event (FH) while simultaneously mitigating its directness to protect the professor’s “face.” L2 learners, however, demonstrate a pragmalinguistic misalignment: they identify the “what” (the request) but lack the “how” (the mitigation through subordination), potentially resulting in requests that are perceived as overly direct in asymmetric academic interactions.

4.4. Qualitative analysis of LVCs in the L2 sample

The qualitative analysis of the L2 sub-corpus reveals a significantly narrower range of LVC types and a more restricted syntactic distribution compared to native speech. While L1 speakers utilize a diverse array of analytical predicates, L2 learners at intermediate and advanced levels tend to rely on a small set of highly frequent “lexical labels” – specifically *fare una domanda*, *fare una richiesta*, and *fare un colloquio* – which account for over 80% of their production. This suggests that for the learner, the LVC often functions as a “formulaic lexical” unit used to identify the action, rather than a flexible tool for modulating illocutionary force.

This lack of idiomatic precision is further evidenced by frequent interlingual interference, where learners aim for a formal analytical structure but fail to retrieve the correct Italian collocation. As shown in the following excerpts, L2 production is often characterized by lexical transfers from the learners’ L1 (English or Spanish):

- (6) [ITAL_L2_SCR_243]: *è possibile che Lei mi proporzioni³ le informazioni necessarie?* (‘Could you please provide me with the necessary information’)
(7) [ITAL_L2_SCR_225]: *Le dispiacerebbe fare⁴ un appuntamento con me?*
(‘Would you mind making an appointment’)

² In Italian, the idiomatic LVC for ‘to make an appointment’ is *prendere un appuntamento*. The use of *fare* in this L2 oral excerpt represents a typical interlanguage stage, where the learner correctly identifies the required analytical structure (LVC) but applies a lexical overgeneralization of the high-frequency light verb *fare*. This confirms that while the pragmatic function of the LVC is acquired, its specific collocational precision remains a challenge for L2 speakers (for the collocation competence in Italian L2 learners see La Russa *et al.* 2024).

³ Lexical transfer from Spanish *proporcionar* (to provide). In Italian, *proporzionare* means ‘to proportion/scale’, whereas the required verb would be *fornire* or *dare*.

⁴ Lexical overgeneralization of the light verb *fare* instead of the idiomatic *prendere* (see § 4.3, note 1).

- (8) [ITAL_L2_OR_037]: ...*vorrei fare un altro appuntamento per capire bene le istruzioni*. ('I'd like to arrange another appointment so that I can fully understand the instructions')

These instances are strategically remarkable: the learner perceives that an LVC (or an analytical structure) is the pragmatically appropriate choice for a formal academic request, yet they lack the collocational competence to select the idiomatic verb (e.g., *prendere* or *fissare*).

Beyond the lexical level, the most significant gap concerns the mechanism of mitigation. In native production, the LVC is typically "hidden" within a complex syntactic hierarchy, triggering the Backgrounding Hypothesis (BH). In contrast, L2 learners, as seen in examples (7) and (8), tend to produce LVCs in main clauses or simple structures. Even when preceded by a modal verb (*vorrei fare*), the LVC remains the illocutionary core of the sentence, failing to activate the syntactic backgrounding required by native-like sociopragmatic norms.

However, the rare instances of LVCs in L2 subordinate clauses (9.1% in the oral corpus) represent an emerging developmental strategy. The learner has begun to perceive that, for maximum politeness in asymmetric contexts, the LVC must be embedded within the syntax, even if this association has not yet been fully systematized. In summary, L2 acquisition of LVCs appears limited to the semantic-lexical level, while the mastery of the syntactic-pragmatic interface remains in a developmental phase.

4.5. Discussion: mitigation through syntactic backgrounding

The marked distribution of the L1-subordinate association (§ 4.3) invites a deeper functional interpretation: what is the pragmatic purpose of this syntactic preference? Within the theoretical framework of this study, I argue that for native speakers, the LVC-subordinate construction is the primary mechanism for pragmatic presupposition and mitigation. In this strategy, the LVC acts as "packaging" for the illocutionary act the nominalization foregrounds the event, while the subordination simultaneously backgrounds its assertive force.

As observed in the L1 sample (e.g., "*Non so se potrei farLe una domanda...*"), the impositive act is the informational rheme, yet it is not the central assertion of the utterance.

Following Givón (2001), this structural embedding reifies the event as a nominal entity but distances the speaker from the immediate impact of the request. By treating the LVC syntactically as secondary or already presupposed information, the native speaker effectively lowers the directive force of the request, meeting the sociopragmatic requirements of the asymmetric academic context.

This mechanism represents the primary point of divergence for L2 learners. While learners successfully utilize LVCs as salient "labels" for the rheme, they do not master the backgrounding function. Their reliance on main clauses creates a syntactic-pragmatic gap. Even when employing modal verbs (e.g., *Vorrei fare un appuntamento*), the request remains syntactically "exposed" because the LVC is not embedded. The learner identifies the "what" (the LVC as a label for the event) but lacks the "how" (the complex syntax required for advanced mitigation). This results in an illocutionary force that remains more assertive than the native norm.

However, the emerging strategies found in the L2 written corpus, such as *Le chiedo se è possibile prendere un appuntamento*, suggest that advanced learners are beginning to approximate the native use. These rare instances indicate a transition from using LVCs as mere lexical items toward their use as tools for interactional management, such as mitigation.

In conclusion, the L2 divergence in the usage of LVCs observed here is not strictly lexical, but rather interfacial. The challenge lies in the high cognitive load required to manage complex subordination and pragmatic presupposition simultaneously. This results in a “flattening” of mitigation strategies, where L2 requests, though lexically formal, may be pragmatically less effective than those of native speakers.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study delineate a pattern in the use of Italian LVCs within the speech act of request, revealing an interplay between informational focus and mitigation.

On one hand, a shared informational focus emerges between native speakers and L2 learners, as both groups utilize LVCs to highlight the nominal component of the predicate, thereby serving the pragmatic function of introducing new information, in the rhematic position.

However, a significant divergence appears in the mitigation strategies employed by the two groups. Native speakers adopt a syntactic backgrounding strategy, embedding foregrounded LVCs within subordinate clauses to mitigate the directive force of the request and balance communicative clarity with social distance. In contrast, L2 learners exhibit a specific pragmatic-syntactic gap; while they have acquired the LVC as a lexical unit, they struggle to embed it within the complex syntactic frameworks necessary to modulate illocutionary force. Although isolated instances in the L2 written corpus point toward an emerging awareness of this strategy, the data suggest that for intermediate and advanced learners, the acquisition of the LVC's functional range is still ongoing, as they have yet to fully internalize the backgrounding mechanisms typical of the native norm.

As previously noted, this research represents a preliminary investigation into the pragmatic dimensions of LVCs, and certain limitations must be acknowledged. Looking forward, this research will expand in three primary directions: first, by increasing the volume of the L2 dataset to allow for more granular quantitative analysis; second, by comparing these academic data with general spoken corpora (such as CORIS, Rossini Favretti *et al.* 2002) to determine if these strategies are register-specific; and third, by conducting longitudinal tracking to observe how and when learners begin to bridge this pragmatic-syntactic gap.

In conclusion, this study suggests that for L2 learners of Italian, mastering the analytical form of a verb is merely the first step; the ultimate challenge lies in mastering the interface between complex syntactic structures and the pragmatic norms that allow these forms to function as sophisticated instruments of polite negotiation.

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