

An investigation into Caused Motion constructions with configurational motion verbs in southeastern Basilicata¹

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Italian Caused Motion constructions with the configurational motion verbs *salire*, *scendere*, *entrare*, and *uscire* which, although not part of the standard language, are widely used in some varieties of regional Italian. In detail, we investigate the ongoing standardisation of these constructions in regional Italian spoken in two towns of Basilicata, in southern Italy, and explore the effect of object animacy and sociolinguistic variables on their acceptability. Our findings show that acceptability is influenced by the semantic properties of the object noun, albeit with variations depending on individual verb. Additionally, a sociolinguistic analysis of the data suggests that fluent dialect speakers play a crucial role in the spread of these constructions.

Keywords: regional Italian, transitive vs. intransitive, construction grammar, sociolinguistics, acceptability judgment

1 Introduction

Motion events are traditionally conceived as macro-events consisting of a framing event, which provides the temporal and spatial reference, and a supporting event, which offers further circumstantial details (Talmy 1991). Basic motion events feature four main conceptual components: Figure, Ground, Path, and Motion. The Figure is the object that moves or is located with respect to another object called Ground, the Path represents the course of movement followed by the Figure, whereas the Motion refers to “the presence *per se* in the event of motion or location” (Talmy 1985: 61), as in:

- (1) The cat jumped onto the table
 [Figure] [Motion] [Path] [Ground]

¹ The present paper presents a re-worked version of the first author's master dissertation, supervised by the third author as first supervisor and by the second author as second supervisor. Although the study here presented is the result of the collaboration of all authors, KL is responsible for paragraphs 1, 2, 3. LB is author of paragraph 4. Paragraph 5 is a collaboration between KL and LB. DR contributed to 1, 2, and 5, and to the ideation of the experiment, as first supervisor. All authors have also contributed to the revising of the present paper, each contribution in line with author ordering.

These components provide the setting for the framing event; supporting events, on the other hand, bear with framing events so called S-relations, of which the most common are Manner and Cause (Talmy 1991).

The way in which languages tend to map semantic information about motion events onto morphosyntax is at the core of Talmy's (1991) famous typological distinction between verb-framed languages and satellite-framed languages, which is extensively used in studies on motion events.

The main difference between verb-framed languages, like – typically – Italian and other Romance languages, and satellite-framed languages, like – typically – Germanic languages, lies in the mapping of the Path.² The first tend to encode the Path into the main verb, while in the latter the Path is usually specified outside the main verb, through the use of satellites – like verb prefixes and particles or other constituents such as prepositional phrases – as can be seen in the following sentences, respectively in Spanish and English:

- (2) a. *La botella entró flotando a la cueva*
 b. The bottle floated into the cave
 (Talmy 1991: 488)

In (2a) the Path is conflated into the main verb – *entró* “went in” – while in (2b) it is expressed outside the main verb, in this case through the prepositional phrase “into the cave”. This distinction can also be extended to the way in which the two language types map what Talmy calls S-relations. As shown in the example (2), in verb-framed languages like Spanish, the realisation of Manner is often less central and therefore expressed through an adjunct, generally a gerundive constituent or prepositional phrase; whereas, in satellite-framed languages like English, the Manner is usually conflated into the main verb (*flotando* vs floated).

As in the case with Manner, Cause can also be mapped in different ways; the conflation of Cause into the main verb gives rise to Caused Motion constructions. Caused Motion constructions are defined as transitive constructions in which an Agent (the syntactic subject) causes the movement of a Theme (the syntactic object) along a Path, to or from a point in space – which, respectively, represent the Goal or Source of the movement – that may be encoded in syntax by a prepositional phrase, like in:

- (3) Mary kicked the box into the storeroom
 [Agent] [Cause] [Theme] [Goal]

Although many studies focus on the presence and use of these constructions in English, both from a theoretical point of view (Goldberg 1995, 2006, 2019) and with a corpus-based approach (inter alia Hwang et al. 2014), in recent years there has also been a significant breadth of research in typologically diverse languages, such as French (Chenu & Jisa 2006), Spanish (Torres-Martinez 2021), Italian varieties (Busso & Romagno 2021; Romagno 2021, 2023), German

² It is worth noting, even at this point, that this typological distinction is far from being dichotomous (cf. Beavers et al. 2010; Croft et al. 2010; Benincà & Poletto 2006; Simone 2008; Iacobini & Masini 2009, Iacobini 2012, among many others): cf. below, in the main text.

(Wiliński 2015), Finnish (Leino 2010), Turkish (Furman et al. 2010) and Uygur (Tusun & Hendricks 2022), among others.

This suggests that lexicalisation patterns may be divergent from traditional typological classifications. In fact, many studies have shown the importance of cultural, pragmatic, and encyclopaedic factors in the creative expression of motion events. The expression of motion events in different languages should then be conceived as disposed on a typological continuum rather than being classified into typological groups (Berman & Slobin 1994; Slobin 2003; Ibarretxe-Antuñano 2004, 2009, among many others).

This more nuanced understanding of motion events configuration is fundamental to the study of Caused Motion constructions in Italian. In fact, despite traditionally belonging to the group of verb-framed languages, Italian also displays several characteristics typically attributed to satellite-framed languages, such as a large number of phrasal verbs, which are also used in many Italian dialects, especially northern ones (Benincà & Poletto 2006; Iacobini 2009; Iacobini & Masini 2009). Moreover, recent scholarship in cognitive linguistics has shown that Italian exhibits some degree of flexibility in the way in which verbs and argument constructions can combine (Busso, Lenci & Perek 2020; Busso, Perek & Lenci 2021).

Following this area of research, Busso & Romagno (2021) take a cognitive linguistics perspective in analysing a non-standard type of Caused Motion construction with intransitive motion verbs. This study builds on their results (see §2.1 below) and adopts Construction Grammar (Goldberg 2019) to further investigate the ongoing standardisation of Caused Motion constructions with intransitive directional motion verbs. Taking the same stance as Busso & Romagno (2021), we interpret these constructions as currently undergoing standardisation, moving from dialect to regional varieties, to (sub)standard Italian. That is, we aim to position ourselves within the still understudied area of research at the crossroads between sociolinguistics and cognitive linguistics. Scholars have become increasingly aware of the necessity to include dialectal and sociolinguistic information in Construction Grammar (Morin, Desagulier & Grieve 2020; Ungerer & Hartmann 2023) and in cognitive linguistics at large (Geeraerts, Kristiansen & Peirsman 2010; Kristiansen et al. 2022). However, despite a growing interest in this topic (Hoffmann 2015; Morin, Desagulier & Grieve 2024), sociolinguistics is still not a habitual component of constructionist studies.

The present study builds on and expands the research of Busso & Romagno (2021) and Romagno (2021, 2023), by investigating how sociolinguistic factors affect the standardisation of these Caused Motion constructions within a restricted area of southern Italy, in the region of Basilicata. The primary objective of this study is to examine the acceptability and spread of these constructions in the regional Italian spoken in the area. Specifically, since Caused Motion constructions with configurational motion verbs are a feature of southern dialects and regional Italian varieties (see §2.1), we aim to assess whether dialectal proficiency influences the production of these constructions in regional Italian with all the verbs investigated. In other words, we are interested in determining whether they are considered acceptable by speakers with varying competence in the local dialectal varieties. Additionally, we aim to explore whether production is affected by diastatic features such as age and educational background of speakers. Finally, we address the effects of object animacy on the acceptability of Caused Motion constructions and the distribution of arguments with each verb.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this study contributes to the literature on the ongoing standardisation of Caused Motion constructions in Italian, as it supports the findings by Busso & Romagno (2021) regarding the possible sociolinguistic origins of this trend. Moreover, from a Construction Grammar perspective, this is both a study on constructional creativity in Italian – a relatively underexplored area – and an investigation into how sociolinguistic factors interact with constructional change and acceptability. The fact that our results are replicated in a more controlled dataset than the one from previous studies constitutes – we believe – a significant result.

In §2, we introduce the syntactic and semantic features of Caused Motion constructions and compare the structures that English and Italian use to convey the Caused Motion meaning; while in §2.1, we describe the peculiar usage of Caused Motion constructions with four configurational motion verbs in regional Italian. Next, we introduce the area of our investigation (§2.2), the survey (§3.1), and data collection (§3.2). In §4, we describe the data and the methodology of our analysis and in §5, we discuss our results and make our closing remarks.

2 Caused Motion constructions between typology and creativity

Because of its high degree of flexibility, English is considered a typologically peculiar language, since it allows the creative usage of a large number of verbs that can be inserted in novel construction frames, even more than other related languages (Perek & Hilpert 2014). This is indeed the case with Caused Motion constructions, as they occur with a plethora of verbs, not all of them necessarily transitive or entailing motion or causation (Goldberg 1995: 153). In other words, English argument constructions – and specifically the Caused Motion construction – allow perfectly grammatical novel coinages in which the construction coerces the main verb into a transitive and locative interpretation, as long as they retain at least a partial semantic and pragmatic compatibility with the other arguments (Barak & Goldberg 2017; Goldberg 2019; Yoon 2016). This “partial productivity” of constructions therefore legitimates a degree of syntactic and semantic mismatches between a verb and its arguments, as in the famous examples below:

- (4) a. I sneezed the napkin off the table
 b. They laughed the poor guy out of the stage
 (Goldberg 1995: 173)

In (4a) the verb “to sneeze”, which denotes a partial non-agentive bodily activity, occurs in a prototypical Caused Motion argument construction, and its meaning is very easily interpreted by any proficient speaker of English as having the agentive causative meaning of directly causing the movement of the Theme argument (the syntactic object). Moreover, (4b) shows how animate entities may also occupy the direct object slot of the construction, although they do not embody a typical Patient or Theme (Silverstein 1976; Timberlake 1977; Van Valin & LaPolla 1997): this is due to one of the semantic and pragmatic constraints of Caused Motion constructions as outlined in Goldberg (1995), which involves the absence of a cognitive decision mediating between the causing event and the

entailed motion. Consequently, an imbalance of agentivity can be detected between the animate Agent argument that causes the movement³ and the animate Theme argument that is moved, regardless of its potential agentivity.

In Italian, the cause of movement is prototypically expressed outside the main verb, usually with a prepositional phrase, as in other verb-framed languages, as in (5):

- (5) *Luca spinge la porta con un calcio*
Luca pushes the door with a kick
'Luca kicks the door'

Italian is also less "tolerant" than English – to use Perek & Hilpert (2014)'s terminology – to valency coercion. As a matter of fact, the literal translation of the sentences in (4a) and (4b), below in (6a) and (6b), would be generally considered not completely acceptable (Busso, Pannitto & Lenci 2018; Busso, Lenci & Perek 2020).

- (6) a. ?*Ho starnutito il tovagliolo (giù) dal tavolo*
b. ?*Hanno riso il ragazzo (giù) dal palco*

The acceptability of (6b) does not change significantly even if the corresponding applicative verb *deridere* "to mock" is used instead of *ridere* "to laugh" (7):

- (7) ?*Hanno deriso il povero ragazzo giù dal palco*

These examples are of dubious acceptability because in standard Italian Caused Motion constructions occur with a very limited and fixed set of verbs, such as *spingere* "to push". Alternatively, Italian uses a circumlocution with the light verb *fare* "to make", which marks the hierarchical relationship between the instigator of the Action and the Theme argument, and another verb conjugated in the infinitive form which describes the type of action that affects the Patient (Torre 2012). The causative force that instigates the movement is encoded separately, in a gerundive form or a prepositional phrase, as in examples (8) and (9) below:

- (8) *Ho fatto cadere il tovagliolo dal tavolo starnutendo*
/ con uno starnuto
I make-PRF fall-INF the napkin from the table sneeze-GER./
with a sneeze
'I sneezed the napkin off the table'
- (9) *Hanno fatto scendere il povero ragazzo dal palco a causa delle loro risate*
They make-PRF get off-INF the poor guy off the stage because of their laughing
'They laughed the poor guy off the stage'

³ Other than prototypical Agents, the syntactic subject slot of Caused Motion constructions may also be occupied by some inanimate entities, namely natural forces (Goldberg 1995: 165), like wind, rain, storms and so on. Although they lack some of the prototypical properties of the Agent Proto-Role like "volitional involvement in the event or state or sentience" (Dowty 1991: 572), they in fact possess an intrinsic physical force that can instigate the movement of the Theme argument.

The presence of readily available and productive alternatives hinders the productivity (and hence the acceptability) of the coinages in the example above, a phenomenon generally called “statistical pre-emption” (Boyd & Goldberg 2011; Perek & Goldberg 2017).

While this holds true for standard Italian at different registers, a new subtype of Caused Motion construction has been emerging in the last years from the so-called “popular Italian” (Sabatini 1985; Busso & Romagno 2021). This construction uses prototypically intransitive motion verbs to encode causative events and emerges – we claim – directly from Italy’s southern dialects into the (sub)standard variety (Busso & Romagno 2021). More specifically, the Caused Motion construction seems to be opening to a new set of path-encoding motion verbs. These verbs encode a directional component in configurational terms⁴: from an ‘outside’ to an ‘inside’ and vice versa (*entrare* “to go in”, *uscire* “to go out”) and from the top down and vice versa (*scendere* “to go down”, *salire* “to go up”). Therefore, following Busso & Romagno (2021)’s terminology, we refer to these verbs as “configurational motion verbs” (henceforth: CMVs).

2.1 Caused Motion constructions with configurational motion verbs in regional Italian

In standard Italian, the four prototypical CMVs *scendere* “to go down”, *salire* “to go up”, *entrare* “to go in”, and *uscire* “to go out” are one-argument predicates (Cennamo 2015). They typically occur in intransitive motion constructions, in which the syntactic subject corresponds to the Theme argument that moves to a different point in space, which may be expressed by a prepositional phrase:

- (10)
- a. *Il gatto è sceso dal tetto*
The cat descended from the roof
‘The cat climbed down the roof’
 - b. *Luigi è salito sulla montagna*
Luigi ascended on the mountain
‘Luigi climbed up the mountain’
 - c. *Il cane è entrato in cucina*
The dog entered in the kitchen
‘The dog entered the kitchen’
 - d. *Mario è uscito dalla stanza*
Mario exited from the room
‘Mario walked out the room’ / ‘Mario left the room’

However, the couplet of antonymic verbs *scendere* / *salire* can also be used transitively, in which case the direct object represents the Ground which measures out the event:

⁴ These configurational templates defining an inward/outward and an upward/downward movement may be associated, in certain cases, to the contextual template of deictic verbs of motion (cf. Ricca 1993, Hijazo-Gascón 2017). However, the Italian verbs *entrare* ‘enter’, *uscire* ‘exit’, *salire* ‘go up’, *scendere* ‘go down’ cannot be considered as deictic themselves, since the representation of the event does not specifically rely on contextual features of the participants in the speech act (Fillmore 1966, 1997; Ricca 1993).

- (11) a. *Maria ha sceso le scale*
 Maria descended the stairs
 ‘Maria went down the stairs’
 b. *Maria ha salito le scale*
 Maria ascended the stairs
 ‘Maria went up the stairs’

Other than these standard grammatical uses, the four above-mentioned CMVs are also used in Caused Motion constructions in some diatopic varieties of contemporary colloquial Italian spoken in different regions (called “regional Italian”, see Cardinaletti & Munaro 2009; Cerruti 2011), which are heavily influenced by dialectal and sub-standard Italian traits (Berruto 2005; Cerruti 2018; Dal Negro & Vietti 2011; Romagno 2021, 2023, among others). In this configuration, the verb acquires a transitive causative meaning: the syntactic subject encodes the Agent, and the Theme is expressed by a direct object that is moved along the Path specified by the main verb. The Source or Goal can optionally be specified through a prepositional phrase.

- (12) *Fabio ha sceso la spesa in cantina*
 Fabio descended groceries in the basement
 ‘Fabio brought groceries (down) to the basement’

Many dictionaries (including the *Grande Dizionario Italiano dell’Uso*, GRADIT, De Mauro 1999-2007 and Devoto and Oli 2014) report this usage as a colloquialism pertaining to southern Italian regions, whereas in central and northern regions and standard Italian it is generally deemed unacceptable (ALQUOT, *L’Atlante della Lingua Italiana QUOTidiana* ‘The Atlas of the everyday Italian Language’; Paoli 2016).

While this construction has long remained a “submerged” phenomenon of southern regional Italian, in the last few years the interest towards this construction has increased, giving rise to debates about its acceptability among the general population. This suggests that the construction is part of the general process of on-going (re)standardisation of contemporary Italian, caused by the mutual relationship between written and oral language (Cerruti 2011), whose boundaries are less clear than in the past. However, speakers of standard Italian tend to still reject the transitive use, due to diatopic and diastratic connotations (as registered by Frenguelli 2020).

Interesting evidence of the conflict between the real every-day usage of CMVs in Caused Motion constructions and the observance of linguistic norms can be found in an article which appeared in the local news section of the Sicilian online newspaper *CataniaToday*,⁵ on June 17, 2022. The first version of the article featured the verb *uscire* in a Caused Motion construction. As we can see in figure 1, here the verb *uscire* in the gerundive form was used in the typical Caused Motion construction configuration, in which the direct object, *le pistole* “the guns”, represent the Theme argument that is “moved” by an Agent argument, *vicini di casa* “neighbours”. In this case, the author meant to describe a violent event in which the people involved used guns that they initially kept hidden, hence the usage of *uscire* in the sense of “taking out”.

⁵ <https://www.cataniatoday.it>.

However, the article was soon corrected and the verb *uscire* (non-standard) was replaced by the transitive verb *tirare* in the gerundive form plus the adverb (or satellite, using Talmy's terminology) *fuori*, a standard particle verb construction with the same meaning ("to take out").



Figure 1: (a). the first version of the headline can be literally translated as: "Neighbours argue about a driveway exiting guns, police get involved". (b). the most recent version of the article, without the verb *uscire* in the headline.

In recent years, research about the on-going standardisation of Caused Motion constructions with CMVs (Busso & Romagno 2021) confirmed the influence of the diatopic dimension and dialectal fluency in their distribution and acceptability. The study tested over 100 university students from all over Italy and found that while acceptability rate was undoubtedly higher among speakers from southern regions, acceptability in central and northern regions' speakers was more layered, depending on the verb being examined. Acceptability of these constructions was also found to be affected by object animacy (and its related agentivity): in fact, inanimate entities in the Theme argument slot were generally judged more acceptable, in contrast to animate and more agentive entities, which are perceived as more atypical in the same semantic role. Results of further studies on these constructions in southern Italian varieties of northern Calabria corroborated the findings about the effect of object animacy on the distribution of the constructions and showed how the role of object animacy is directly related to the potential agentivity of the referent of the object noun. Moreover, they detected no discrepancy between the dialectal version of the sentences and the regional Italian one (Romagno 2021, 2023).

Since Caused Motion constructions with these verbs, as mentioned, do not currently belong to the norm of standard Italian, it is possible that some people could deem them as unacceptable despite living in an area in which they are part of the local linguistic repertoire. As Eckert (2017) points out, adults are in fact typically more conservative in their linguistic behaviour than younger generations, who generally lead linguistic changes. Therefore, younger people are usually more innovative in their language use. This is reflected in contemporary Italy, where young generations tend to speak a "mixed" regional Italian, which incorporates traits from different regional Italian varieties, that helps to reduce the markedness of diatopically and diastratically marked constructions (Cerruti 2011). In the present study, we focus on a diatopically restricted region in the southern Italian dialectal area to gather further data on the acceptability of Caused Motion constructions and investigate how the local dialectal varieties affect their production in regional Italian.

Specifically, we examine the effects of object animacy on these constructions, particularly in the distinction between inanimate and animate objects, both animal and human. Moreover, we explore whether the dialectal diversity of the area (see §2.2) has an effect on speakers' judgment. Since speakers come from families with diverse diatopical background, they may tend to avoid constructions perceived as "too dialectal" when speaking their variety of regional Italian with people whose families speak a different dialect. The peculiar linguistic and sociolinguistic situation of the area, therefore, makes it a prime candidate to investigate the use of this emerging construction.

2.2 Area of investigation

Our area of investigation includes two towns, Scanzano Jonico and Policoro, situated in the region of Basilicata in the province of Matera. This geographical area belongs to the upper southern area (Loporcaro 2009; Ledgeway 2016). Here, according to ALIQUOT (see §2.1), Caused Motion constructions with configurational motion verbs are widely accepted and used.

However, Basilicata is a highly linguistically diversified region, with many dialectal varieties that have distinct phonetic/phonological, morphological, and syntactic features. This linguistic richness has attracted the interest of dialectologists throughout the decades, who described its linguistic idiosyncrasies (Lausberg 1939; Rohlfs 1966-69, among others) and the relationship between its dialectal varieties and other southern varieties, like Neapolitan and Sicilian (Fancullo 1997, 2013; Del Puente 2010, 2014).

Within this heterogenous linguistic landscape, the two towns of Scanzano Jonico and Policoro are particularly interesting for their history. They are in fact defined as *paesi nuovi*, "new towns", since they were founded in relatively recent times, with the agrarian reform of 1950 (Minicuci 2012): their territory was assigned by the government to day labourers and farmers coming from other parts of Basilicata and from the neighbouring regions of Calabria and Apulia. This distinctive situation has clearly repercussions on the linguistic composition of the area, as people from different dialectal areas of southern Italy have converged in Scanzano Jonico and Policoro. Not surprisingly, then, the local dialectal varieties are peculiar from a lexical and morphological point of view (Del Puente 2010).

We believe that studying the productivity of Caused Motion constructions with CMVs (which originate from Italian southern dialects) in an area where several dialects converged and, therefore, influenced regional Italian offers an interesting perspective into their emergence and sociolinguistic implications.

3 Data⁶

3.1 Survey and participants

To assess the acceptability of the constructions under investigation, we devised an acceptability judgment task. The stimuli for the experiment were created and selected by the first author, who is a resident of the area of investigation and a native speaker of the relative regional Italian varieties. While largely based on

⁶ Our dataset and analysis script is available at the following link: <https://osf.io/nk4t3/>

native intuition, previous materials (Busso & Romagno 2021; Romagno 2021) were also consulted for their creation.

The task was presented as a survey, and comprised 40 stimuli, 10 for each prototypical CMV (*scendere*, *salire*, *entrare* and *uscire*). Stimuli were controlled for character length (mean: 39.25, SD = 3.38).⁷ To reduce extraneous variation as much as possible, all stimuli share the same morpho-syntactic structure: 3rd person singular subject, main verb in the *passato prossimo* tense (finite form of the auxiliary *avere* “to have” and main verb in past participle form), and a prepositional phrase with a locative meaning. Moreover, stimuli within the two couplets *scendere/salire* and *entrare/uscire* only differ in the main verb, leaving all other linguistic material unchanged (see examples in 12).

Since our focus is on the animacy of the object, the stimuli were also balanced for this feature: for each verb, stimuli included 5 animate (human and animal) and 5 inanimate Theme arguments. In this way, we balanced out possible extraneous variation due to human vs non-human referents. The referent of the Agent argument was human in every sentence. Some examples of the stimulus set are outlined below:

- (13)
- a. *Mario ha sceso il cane in giardino*
Mario descended the dog in the garden
‘Mario brought the dog in the garden’
 - b. *Il papà ha salito le scatole dal garage*
Dad ascended the boxes from the garage
‘Dad brought the boxes (up from the garage)’
 - c. *Mario ha entrato i cavalli nel recinto*
Mario entered the horses in the fence
‘Mario brought the horses in the fence’
 - d. *Lo zio ha uscito la moto dal garage*
Uncle exited the bike from the garage
‘Uncle took out the bike from the garage’

The survey was administered to 53 participants (29 f, 24 m) who were all born and had lived most of their lives in the investigated area. Most of the participants’ (83%) families (parents or grandparents) were from Basilicata (both provinces of Matera and Potenza were represented), while some were originally from Apulia (11,3%, from the provinces of Bari, Taranto, and Lecce) and Calabria (5,7%, from the province of Cosenza). The participants included speakers between 20 and 85 years of age (mean = 49.09; SD = 19.04) and had varying levels of education (university degree: 7.5%, high school: 52.8%, middle school: 22.6%, elementary: 17%). This sample aimed to be as representative as possible of the sociolinguistic distribution of the population.

3.2 Data collection

The stimuli were presented to the participants in-person through a printed questionnaire and also read aloud by the examiner. We adopted a within-subject design, in which all subjects were presented with the same set of stimuli in randomised order. Participants were asked to rate acceptability of the stimuli

⁷ Average length of characters in sentences per verb: *scendere*: 38.4, *salire*: 39.6, *entrare*: 38.5, *uscire*: 41.3.

through a binary choice (yes/no). Despite recognising that grammaticality and acceptability are not Boolean concepts but rather continuous, we decided to simplify the grading scale in line with Marty et al. (2020). We acknowledge that the binary format represents a limitation of the study, because it overlooks finer-grade distinctions. However, given the length of the questionnaire and our goal of maximising engagement for all participants, we opted for the “unacceptable” vs “acceptable” binary format.

This simplified format allows to minimise cognitive load of participants, and - despite losing nuanced information - is a sufficient approximation for a preliminary and exploratory study such as this.

Before the survey, a sociolinguistic questionnaire including age, gender and level of education was presented. Following Busso & Romagno (2021), after the survey, participants were asked about their dialectal competence (“How much do you understand the dialect spoken in your area?”) and fluency (“How do you use your local dialect in speaking with family or friends?”). For both questions, five different level of proficiency were given: “native competence/fluency” (I understand/speak my dialect perfectly“/all the time), “proficient competence/fluency” (I understand/speak my dialect well/very often), “medium competence/fluency” (I understand/speak my dialect with some uncertainties), “low competence/fluency” (I understand/use only some words or phrases) and “no competence/fluency” (I do not understand/speak my dialect).

The results of this self-assessment confirm that the majority of our participants has a high degree of dialectal competence (98.1%) and fluency (56%).⁸

4 Analyses and results

The data was statistically analysed in relation to the research questions highlighted in the introduction.

Specifically, we expect – based on previous research in Busso & Romagno (2021) that:

1. Caused Motion constructions with CMVs will be overall considered acceptable by speakers of the investigated southern varieties.
2. The acceptability of Caused Motion constructions with CMVs will be higher when the direct object is animate than when it is inanimate, consistent with processing constraints and previous findings by Busso & Romagno (2021), which suggest that inanimate objects more naturally fill the Theme role in these constructions.
3. The acceptability of Caused Motion constructions will be affected by sociolinguistic variables such as age, level of education, competence, and fluency of local dialects. Given that these constructions are common in dialectal varieties but not used in standard Italian, we expect that speakers who are more proficient in or regularly exposed to dialects will both use these constructions more frequently in their variety of regional Italian and consider them to be more acceptable.

⁸ Competence: “native”: 39.6%; “proficient user”: 58.5%; “low-competence user”: 1.9%.

Fluency: “native”: 26.4%; “proficient user”: 30.2%; “medium user”: 28.3%; “low-competence user”: 13.2%; “no competence”: 1.9%.

4. Individual verbal constructions will have slightly different behaviour based on distributional and grammatical properties.

A first inspection of the raw data suggests that the results of our investigation support our hypotheses. Figure 2 shows percentages of 0 and 1 in participants' answers (i.e., respectively, "is not acceptable" and "is acceptable"). The first trend we can see is that *scendere* and *entrare* have been deemed acceptable by the majority of speakers. *Salire* is considered acceptable by just slightly over 50% and *uscire* is the only one just below the threshold of 50%. Object animacy also has a visible effect on acceptability. Figure 3 shows the percentage of "acceptable" (1) and "not acceptable" (0) answers in the two conditions (animate object/inanimate object) per each verb. It is immediately clear that the inanimate condition seems to be more acceptable overall, confirming Busso & Romagno (2021)'s and Romagno (2021, 2023)'s findings.

Figure 4, instead, depicts variation in the two choices ("acceptable" - "not acceptable") across the sociolinguistic variables considered. Overall variation appears to be rather small, but this first impression changes once we consider individual verbs: once again (figures 5A-5D), patterns of variation in acceptability emerge only when examining individual verb behaviour. Particularly, education does not seem to affect acceptability much, but ratings are overall higher for lower education levels (figure 5a).

Parallely, figure 5b reveals that older speakers appear to judge CMV constructions as more acceptable.⁹ Interestingly, figures 5c and 5d show that participants who self-assessed as having neither competence nor fluency in their local dialect judge *entrare* and *scendere* as acceptable almost unambiguously.

These considerations overall suggest that interaction between CMV type and sociolinguistic variables should be included in the statistical analysis.

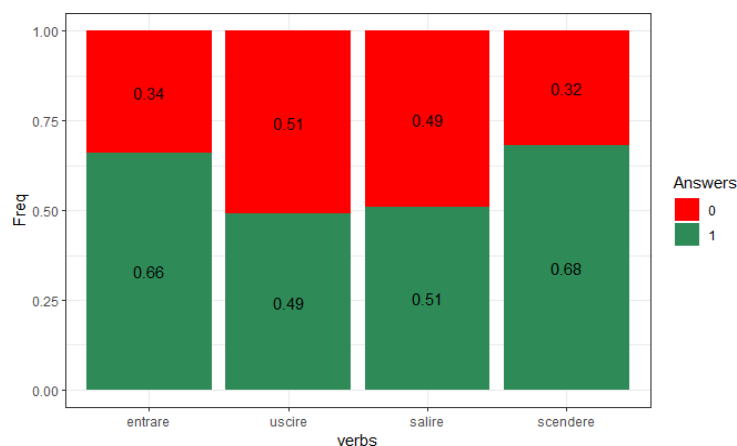


Figure 2: percentages of positive and negative answers in the survey per each verb.

⁹ The two variables correlate, as older participants were educated only to the level of primary school, as compulsory schooling was introduced in recent decades.

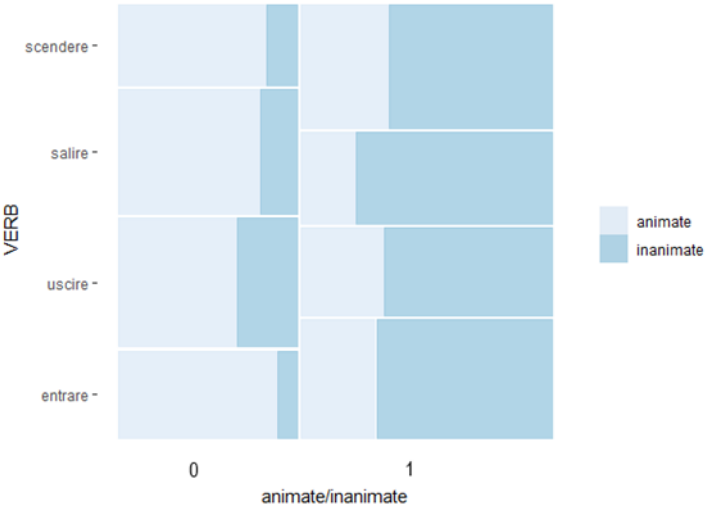


Figure 3: percentages of negative and positive answers per each verb in the two conditions of animate and inanimate object

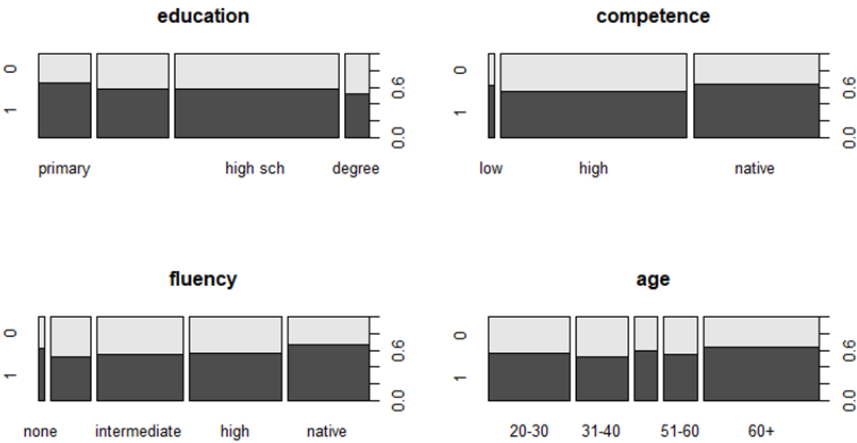


Figure 4: mosaic plots of the investigated sociolinguistic variables

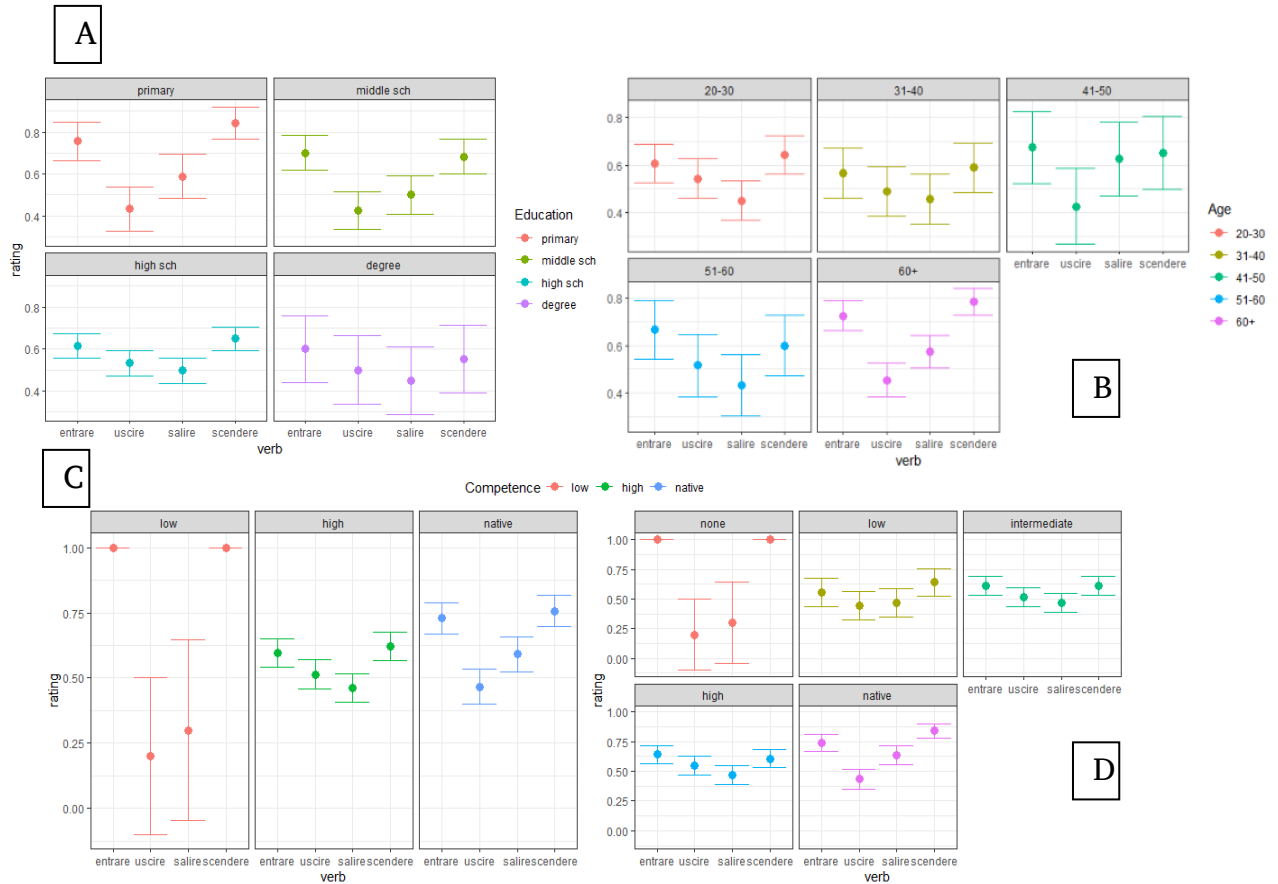


Figure 5a-d: from the top, in figure A we have the effect of education on individual CMVs acceptability. In figure B the effect of age, in figure C the effect of competence, and in figure D the effect of fluency.

Statistical significance was assessed with logistics mixed effect modelling, using the R package *lmerTest* (Bates et al. 2015; Kuznetsova et al. 2017). This family of models are used to model binary outcome variables (in our case “acceptable/non-acceptable”) on one or more independent variables. Inspection of the data revealed no significant multicollinearity effects (*Variance Inflation Factor* below 2 for all variables and interactions).

For model selection, we followed an automatic stepwise procedure implemented in the R package *afex* (Singmann et al. 2021). Satterwhite approximations for degrees-of-freedom were used, as this method of model selection provides the best control for Type 1 errors for GLMMs (Luke 2017).

The final model selected with this procedure includes CMV type in interaction with animacy, age, and education level. In this way we test for the effect of the latter three variables on how individual verbal constructions are assessed, in line with our hypotheses and research questions. We also include fluency and competence with no interaction terms, as the interaction with other variables did not add to the model. For the statistical model, we treat both of these variables as numerical (using dummy coding, “none” = 0, “native” = 4).

The intercept was set by sum coding CMV type and by using the level “degree” of education as a reference level. In this way, all other variables are compared against the averaged value of all verbs in the animate condition for speakers between 20 and 30 years old with a university degree, a subset comparable to Busso & Romagno (2021) sample – which only included young university students.

The final model (in R syntax) is reported in (14) below:

(14) `glmer(Acceptability ~ object animacy * CMV + competence + fluency
+ age * CMV + education level * CMV + (1| subject) + (1 | object),
family = binomial)`

Marginal (R2m) and conditional (R2c) R2 values were calculated following Nakagawa & Schielzeth (2013), by using the R package *SjPlot* (Ludecke 2018). The R2m of the model – i.e., proportion of variance explained by the predictors – is 0.4, and the R2c – i.e., proportion of variance explained by adding random factors – is 0.61. Predictors for the model are reported in table 1, and fixed effects are plotted in figure 6 below.

Results from the model confirm trends already present in Busso & Romagno (2021), i.e., the effect of animacy of the direct object and the influence of dialect fluency but not passive competence on acceptability. Particularly, *uscire* is significantly less acceptable in the inanimate object condition, and fluency positively affects acceptability. Additionally, we found effects for sociolinguistic variables of age and education level.

Predictors	Estimate	Std. Error	Z value	Pr(> z)
(Intercept)	-2.04	.96	-2.1	<.005
Competence	-.12	.34	-.37	.7
Fluency	.34	.2	1.7	.05*
Entrare* Inanimate Obj	.85	.68	1.25	.2
Uscire Inanimate Obj	-1.35	.65	-2.07	<.05*
Scendere* Inanimate Obj	-.15	.66	-.23	.8
Salire* Inanimate Obj	.66	.65	1.01	.31
Entrare* Primary School	.22	.5	.4	.6
Uscire* Primary School	-1.16	.44	-2.6	<.05*
Scendere* Primary School	1.28	.5	2.5	<.01**
Salire* Primary School	-.34	.48	-.7	.47
Entrare* Middle School	.31	.47	.66	.5
Uscire* Middle School	-.85	.41	-2.10	<.05*
Scendere* Middle School	.7	.44	1.6	.1
Salire* Middle School	-.17	.45	-.375	.7
Entrare* High School	-.29	.45	-.63	.53
Uscire* High School	-.35	.39	-.9	.37
Scendere* High School	.68	.42	1.6	.1
Salire* High School	-.04	.44	-.09	.9

Entrare*AGE 31-40	.036	.35	.1	.9
Uscire*AGE 31-40	-.09	.30	-.3	.7
Scendere*AGE 31-40	-.25	.33	-.75	.4
Salire* AGE 31-40	.3	.33	.9	.36
Entrare*AGE 41-50	.26	.45	.57	.56
Uscire*AGE 41-50	-.9	.4	-2.3	< .05*
Scendere*AGE 41-50	-.4	.43	-.93	.35
Salire* AGE 41-50	1.04	.43	2.4	.01**
Entrare*AGE 51-60	.4	.4	.96	.3
Uscire*AGE 51-60	.1	.35	.27	.78
Scendere*AGE 51-60	-.4	.38	-1.1	.2
Salire* AGE 51-60	-.07	.38	-.18	.86
Entrare*AGE 60 +	.07	.35	.2	.84
Uscire*AGE 60 +	-.75	.30	-2.5	.01**
Scendere*AGE 60 +	.27	.3	.8	.4
Salire* AGE 60 +	.4	.33	1.215	.22

Table 1: fixed effects of the logistic mixed effect model in (1) above.

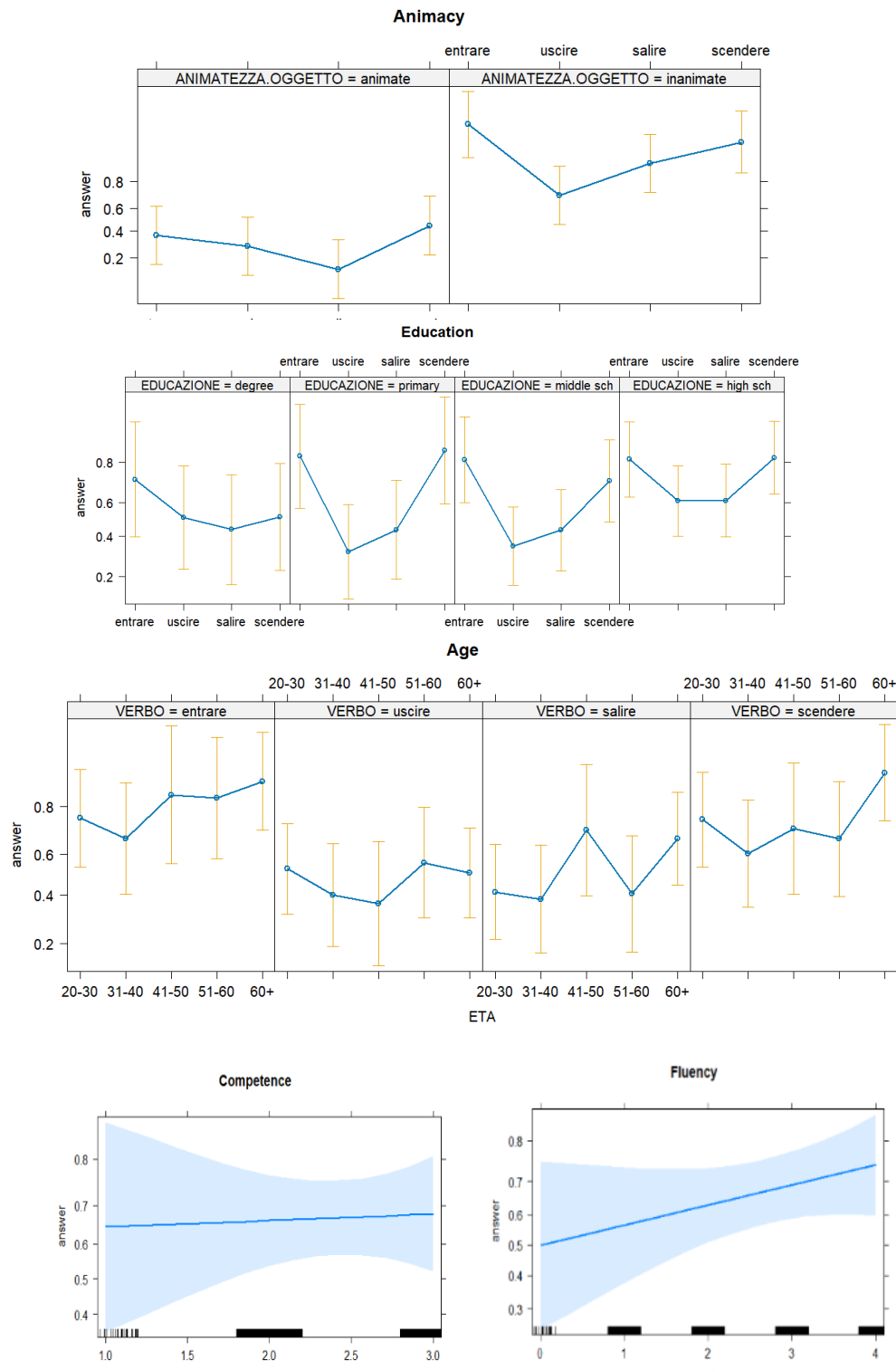


Figure 6: plots of the fixed factors under analysis: interaction of verb and animacy, verb and age, verb and education, competence, and fluency.

5 Discussion and conclusions

We presented a study that employs an acceptability judgment design to investigate the interaction of sociolinguistic factors (such as provenance, education, and age) and Construction Grammar theories of language. In fact, more recent definitions of Construction Grammar agree that since language is an emergent complex adaptive system (Diessel 2019), social and cognitive aspects interact in its acquisition and use (Schmid 2020). Furthermore, the need to include sociolinguistics into acceptability judgment design is not new and had already been noted by Van Dijk (1977). The present paper explores how different classic variationist sociolinguistic factors affect the acceptability of Caused Motion constructions with CMVs in a specific geographical and dialectal area of southern Italy, the “new towns” of Scanzano Jonico and Policoro, in Basilicata.

The varieties spoken in this area were selected as the different influences that converged in them from other southern dialects and regional varieties make them a particularly interesting linguistic crossroad. Our analysis builds upon Busso & Romagno (2021) and Romagno (2021, 2023)’s findings. Consequently, we explored the role of object animacy and the effect of sociolinguistic variables, such as age, level of education, and dialectal fluency, in the acceptability of the constructions involving CMVs.

The results of this study show that the animacy of object (the Theme slot of the constructions) influences the acceptability of creative uses of Caused Motion constructions, with inanimate objects generally being rated as more acceptable. However, *uscire* is the exception to this norm, as it is significantly less acceptable in the inanimate object condition. This result is in line with what Busso & Romagno (2021) found. Also, accordingly with the results from Busso & Romagno (2021), we found a main (positive) effect of fluency, but not of competence: participants with a higher dialectal fluency rated the construction 0.3 points above average, a result which is statistically significant. This finding aligns with the constructionist and usage-based literature, suggesting that frequency of usage of a given construction plays a significant role in its entrenchment and standardisation in the language (Bybee 2006; Diessel & Hilpert 2016).

Regarding the investigated sociolinguistic variables, some interesting findings emerge. First, we found that *scendere* and *uscire* statistically differ in participants with a primary school education. In detail, *scendere* is rated as more acceptable (1.28 points above average), *uscire* is considered less acceptable (1.16 points below average). The same pattern of behaviour for *uscire* is noticeable also in participants that completed middle school (0.85 points below average). Participants with a high school diploma do not show a significant deviation from the average of our intercept – i.e., university educated young adults.

Second, participants between the ages of 41 and 50 found *salire* to be significantly more acceptable than average (1.04 points above average), whereas *uscire* was less acceptable overall not only for speakers in their 40s (0.9 points below average) but also for over 60 (0.75 points below average). As already remarked, age and education partially correlate, because the government mandated compulsory schooling makes it nearly impossible to find people younger than 60 with only a primary school education. Specifically, if we compare the plots of Age and Education in figures 5a, 5b, and 6, we see a similar trend across the two variables: while younger, generally higher educated participants tend to have a more uniform rating for all four verbs in the Caused Motion construction, older and less educated participants show much more internal

variability. The trend of the lesser acceptability of *uscire* is constant in several groups. We suggest that this result could be caused by statistical pre-emption with the transitive verb *cacciare* (“to take out”). This verb, used both in the regional Italian and dialectal varieties spoken in the area of investigation, is a competitor of *uscire*, as it is used in the Caused Motion construction in the same pragmatic and semantic contexts (for instance in sentences like *Pino ha cacciato/uscito le sedie sul balcone* (“Pino took the chairs on the balcony”). However, differently from *uscire*, *cacciare* already profiles a causative event, encodes directional motion, and is therefore much more semantically compatible (Busso, Perek & Lenci 2021) with Caused Motion constructions. Therefore, the availability of the verb *cacciare* could be statistically pre-empting (Boyd & Goldberg 2011) the productivity of *uscire*.

To summarise, results from this study align with Busso & Romagno (2021)’s findings and expand their general analysis by focusing on the under-studied area of Basilicata. This area – as mentioned – is a linguistic crossroads where different influences from various southern Italian varieties have converged in the second half of the XX century (Del Puente 2010). The region’s diverse linguistic landscape is reflected in the acceptability results, especially in the variance in older participants’ judgments. Younger and more educated participants seem to “converge” towards a more unified evaluation of these constructs, which we suggest may be a further support to our claim that this construction is undergoing a fast standardisation process, brought forward by fluent dialect speakers.

On a more general level, we argue that the study of the acceptability of non-standard constructions cannot ignore social and register factors, nor – in the Italian landscape – the inescapable influence of local dialects.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare none.

Data availability statement

The data and analysis scripts for the present paper are available at <https://osf.io/nk4t3/>.

License

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Appendix¹⁰

Section 1: Sociolinguistic information

- Name:
- Gender:
- Age:
- What is the highest level of education you have completed?
 - Elementary school;
 - Middle school;
 - High school;
 - University.
- Place of residence:
 - Scanzano Jonico;
 - Policoro.
- Place of birth of your parents:
- How much do you understand the dialect spoken in your area?
 - Native competence: I understand my dialect perfectly;
 - Proficient competence: I understand my dialect well;
 - Medium competence: I understand my dialect with some uncertainties;
 - Low competence: I understand/use only some words or phrases;
 - No competence: I do not understand my dialect.
- How do you use your local dialect in speaking with family or friends?
 - Native fluency: I speak my dialect all the time;
 - Proficient fluency: I speak my dialect very often;
 - Medium fluency: I speak my dialect with some uncertainties;
 - Low fluency: I use only some words or phrases;
 - No fluency: I do not speak my dialect.

Section 2: Acceptability test

Task “I will now read a series of sentences out loud:¹¹ after each one, please tell me whether the sentence sounds acceptable or unacceptable to you, based on how you would naturally speak Italian in everyday situations.”

SALIRE	SCENDERE
Mario ha sceso il cane in giardino	Mario ha salito il cane dal giardino
Mario ha sceso le valigie dalla macchina	Mario ha salito le valigie in macchina
Anna ha sceso le bottiglie in cantina	Anna ha salito le bottiglie dalla cantina
Anna ha sceso il gatto dall'albero	Anna ha salito il gatto sull'albero
L'operaio ha sceso la statua dal piedistallo	L'operaio ha salito la statua sul piedistallo

¹⁰ The original questionnaire was fully administered in Italian: here, selected portions have been translated into English by the first author for ease of interpretation.

¹¹ The sentences were presented to each participant in randomised order.

La mamma ha sceso il bambino dalla scaletta	La mamma ha salito il bambino sulla scaletta
Il papà ha sceso le scatole in garage	Il papà ha salito le scatole dal garage
Il papà ha sceso la figlia dall'altalena	Il papà ha salito la figlia sull'altalena
Giovanni ha sceso l'amico dall'autobus	Giovanni ha salito l'amico sull'autobus
Giovanni ha sceso la bici dal furgone	Giovanni ha salito la bici sul furgone
ENTRARE	USCIRE
Pino ha entrato le sedie dal terrazzo	Pino ha uscito le sedie sul terrazzo
Pino ha entrato il gatto in cucina	Pino ha uscito il gatto dalla cucina
Sara ha entrato il pacco dal pianerottolo	Sara ha uscito il pacco sul pianerottolo
Sara ha entrato il fratellino in macchina	Sara ha uscito il fratellino dalla macchina
Lo zio ha entrato le piantine dal davanzale	Lo zio ha uscito le piantine sul davanzale
Lo zio ha entrato la moto in garage	Lo zio ha uscito la moto dal garage
Mario ha entrato la sorellina dal balcone	Mario ha uscito la sorellina sul balcone
Mario ha entrato i cavalli nel recinto	Mario ha uscito i cavalli dal recinto
Pietro ha entrato i panni dal balcone	Pietro ha uscito i panni sul balcone
Pietro ha entrato la sorellina in casa	Pietro ha uscito la sorellina da casa