Embedded Stripping in Italian and Complementizer Deletion

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This study investigates the interaction between embedded stripping and complementizer realization in Italian, focusing on whether Complementizer Deletion (CD) facilitates ellipsis licensing in embedded clauses. Stripping, also known as Bare Argument Ellipsis, had been thought to pertain exclusively to coordinative contexts. However, studies carried out in the last decade (Konietsko 2016; Wurmbrand 2017) suggest that the construction may be allowed in embedded contexts in some languages. The present study builds on Wurmbrand (2017), where a typological bipartition of languages with regard to embedded stripping licensing is postulated. In fact, the author argues that English only allows Embedded Stripping in the absence of the complementizer (Embedded Stripping Generalization), whereas other languages, such as Spanish, do not require CD in order to allow this structure. Beyond attempting to assess the availability of Embedded Stripping in Italian, the study here presented examines whether this language abides to the Embedded Stripping Generalization, given the peculiar behavior of Italian as a Romance language with respect to CD and its restriction to subjunctive or non-indicative contexts.

In order to do so, an experimental acceptability judgment task was conducted using a 6-point Likert scale, with 58 native speakers rating 40 Italian sentences (20 test items and 20 control items) systematically varying in mood (indicative vs. subjunctive) and complementizer presence (Table 1). Once the acceptability judgments were collected for each item, a quantitative analysis of the values was carried out, by comparing the means of the four variables under scrutiny, as well as calculating the Standard Deviation (SD) for each condition. As can be seen from Table 2, sentences where the complementizer was deleted were rated as significantly more acceptable than sentences where the complementizer was overtly realized. The mean acceptability rating for sentences without a complementizer was 2.89, while sentences with the overt complementizer had a much lower mean of 1.46. Similarly, the analysis examined the effect of verbal mood on acceptability ratings. Stimuli in the subjunctive mood received higher acceptability ratings (2.30) compared to those in the indicative mood (1.80). After this, the analysis turned to the interaction between the two variables: complementizer presence and verbal mood. This interaction was found to be quite revealing. In fact, when the complementizer was overtly realized, the acceptability ratings remained low across both verbal moods. Specifically, sentences in the indicative mood received a mean rating of 1.42, whereas those in the subjunctive mood received a slightly higher mean of 1.57. This demonstrated that, in the presence of an overt complementizer, mood did not significantly influence acceptability ratings. However, a striking difference emerged when the complementizer was deleted. In this case, there was a notable improvement in acceptability, with the indicative context showing a mean rating of 2.60, and the subjunctive context showing an even more favorable mean of 3.17, which was the highest mean across all conditions. This suggests that the deletion of the complementizer had a more pronounced positive effect in both moods, but the improvement was more substantial in the subjunctive mood.

Results appear to indicate that embedded stripping in Italian is more acceptable when the complementizer is absent, even in indicative contexts where CD is typically ungrammatical. Subjunctive clauses without the complementizer received the highest ratings, suggesting that ellipsis licensing is facilitated when the complementizer is either genuinely deleted or elided along with the TP. The data are interpreted through a morphosyntactic lens, drawing on the proposal by Giorgi and Pianesi (2004) and Giorgi (2010) that the Italian complementizer *che* has a dual status: it is a lexical marker of temporal anchoring in indicatives and a morphological realization of mood in subjunctives. In stripping environments, the absence of *che* correlates with improved acceptability, possibly because its interpretive function is recoverable through identity with the antecedent clause. These findings position Italian alongside languages like English and German with respect to the Embedded Stripping Generalization, and suggest that complementizer absence plays a crucial—though not exclusively sufficient—role in licensing embedded ellipsis. Given the preliminary nature of the study, further research on the topic is being carried out, with an implementation of psycholinguistic methods and a more rigorous experimental design.

| Item	Mean	Compl.	Mood	Remnant	Focalizer	Conjunction
26	0,7	yes	subj	obj	yes	Ma
12	1	yes	ind	obj	yes	e
2	1,3	yes	ind	subject	yes	e
34	1,3	yes	ind	subject	yes	e
9	1,4	yes	subj	subject	yes	/
10	1,4	yes	subj	obj	yes	ma
18	1,5	yes	ind	subject	yes	ma
25	1,5	yes	subj	obj	yes	e
17	2	yes	ind	subject	no	ma
8	2,1	no	subj	subject	yes	ma
20	2,1	yes	subj	obj	yes	ma
36	2,1	no	ind	subject	yes	e
39	2,1	yes	subj	subject	yes	ma
15	2,4	no	subj	obj	yes	ma
22	2,4	no	ind (fut)	obj	yes	ma
4	2,9	no	ind	obj	yes	e
23	3,1	no	subj	obj	yes	ma
32	3,2	no	subj	subject	yes	ma
38	3,5	no	subj	subject	yes	e
29	4	no	subj	obj	yes	e

Table 1. Item classification
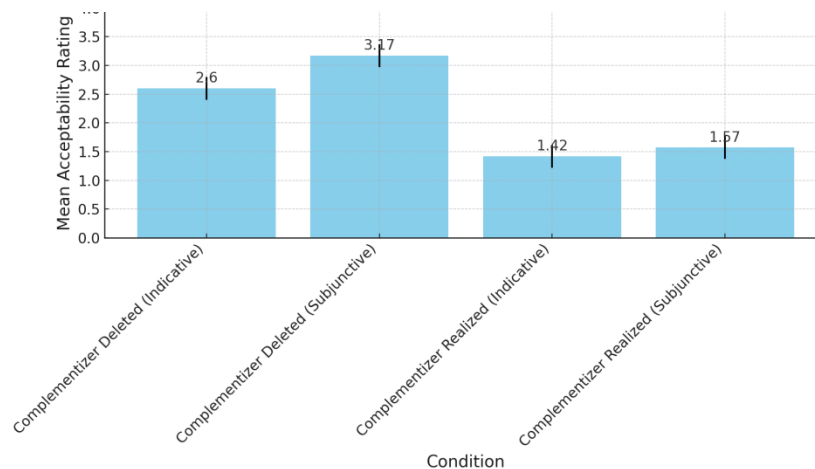
Table 2. Interaction of conditions

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