

# Negative and Infinitival Imperatives in Italian: A Rare Phenomenon in Early Child Speech

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Previous research (Salustri & Hyams, 2003, 2006) has shown that Italian children go through a developmental stage analogous to the Root Infinitive Stage (Rizzi, 1993, a.o.), during which they overproduce positive imperatives in the 2nd person singular (2SG)—uninflected forms consisting only of the verb root and a thematic vowel (ex. *Parl-a!* speak-IMP.2SG).

Little is known about the acquisition of other imperative forms in Italian. This corpus study aims at filling this gap by focusing on Italian imperatives with infinitival morphology (Table 1). Spontaneous production data from four Italian children (Table 2) were extracted from CHILDES (MacWhinney, 2000) and analyzed using CLAN. Results (Table 3) show only five instances of Negative Imperatives (2SG), and no occurrences of Imperatives with Generic Subjects or A-imperatives. In contrast, prior research (Table 4), documented 519 positive imperatives (SG) in the same children’s production.

The scarcity of infinitival imperatives suggests that they are more computationally demanding than canonical 2SG imperatives. Following Rossi (2023), Shlonsky (2004), a.o., imperatives are reduced structures, raising the question of why even minimal differences in structural size between canonical and infinitival imperatives result in such a sharp contrast in rate of early production. Negation is harder to process (Dale & Duran, 2011, a.o.), and the limited discursive uses of infinitival imperatives (c.f. Table 5) may explain their infrequent occurrence in early speech. Instead, developing children prefer the non-inflected 2SG positive imperative as a versatile, low-cost form, enabling them to express a wider array of directive uses and possibly other speech acts.

Tables.

❖ **Table 1:** The types of imperatives discussed in this work, along with their gloss, translation, paraphrase, and relevant references.

Imperative Type	Example	Gloss	Translation	Paraphrase	Reference
<b>Negative Imperative (2SG)</b>	<i>Non mangiare!</i>	NEG eat-INF	‘Don’t eat!’	I order you not to eat / I forbid you from eating.	(Kayne, 2000; Zanuttini, 1997)
<b>Imperative with Generic Subject</b>	<i>Allacciare le cinture!</i>	fasten-INF the seatbelts	‘Fasten your seatbelts!’	Passengers are instructed to fasten their seatbelts.	Example by Salvi & Borgato (1991, p. 153)
	<i>Montare le tende!</i>	set.up-INF the tents	‘Set up the tents!’	The older scout leader exhorts all the younger scouts to set up the tents.	

	<i>Svitare il coperchio!</i>	unscrew-INF the lid	‘Unscrew the lid!’	The user (i.e., whoever reads the guide) is instructed to unscrew the lid.	Example by Salvi & Borgato (1991: 153)
	<i>Rispettare l’ambiente!</i>	respect-INF the environment	‘Respect the environment.’	Whoever reads the sign is instructed to respect the environment.	
	<i>Indossare la mascherina protettiva!</i>	wear-INF the protective mask	‘Wear a protective mask.’	Whoever reads the sign is instructed to wear a protective mask.	Example by Pak et al. (2024: 2)
<b>A-imperative</b>	<i>A mangiare!</i>	to eat-INF	‘Time to eat / Let’s eat!’	I peremptorily announce that it’s time to start eating and command that the interlocutors go and start eating.	
	<i>A montare le tende!</i>	to set.up-INF the tents	‘Get to setting up the tents! / Start setting up the tents!’	I peremptorily announce that it’s time to set up the tents and command that the interlocutors go and start setting up the tents.	

- ❖ **Table 2:** Spontaneous production data from the Calambrone Corpus (Cipriani et al., 1989) in the CHILDES database (MacWhinney, 2000).

Corpus	Child	Age - 1st transcript	Age - Last transcript	# of analyzed transcripts	# of child’s utterances
Calambrone	Raffaello	1;7,07	2;11;20	17	3812
Calambrone	Martina	1;7,18	2;07,15	12	6,666
Calambrone	Viola	1;11,16	2;10,03	10	6,280
Calambrone	Diana	1;08,05	24;00.02	9	3,812

- ❖ **Table 3:** Production rate of Negative Imperatives in the second person singular, Imperatives with generic subjects (both positive and negative) and A-imperatives.

	Age																											
Child's name	1;03	1;04	1;05	1;06	1;07	1;08	1;09	1;10	1;11	2;0	2;1	2;2	2;3	2;4	2;5	2;6	2;7	2;8	2;9	2;10	2;11	3;0	3;1	3;2	3;3	3;4	3;5	
Diana					0		0	0	0	0						1	4											
Martina					0	0	0	0	0		0		0	0	0		0											
Raffaello					0		0	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0	0	0	0		0							
Viola									0	0	0			0	0		0	0		0								

- ❖ **Table 4:** Production rate of positive 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular imperatives (canonical imperatives) in Italian (c.f. Rossi, 2023).

	Age																											
Child's name	1;03	1;04	1;05	1;06	1;07	1;08	1;09	1;10	1;11	2;0	2;1	2;2	2;3	2;4	2;5	2;6	2;7	2;8	2;9	2;10	2;11	3;0	3;1	3;2	3;3	3;4	3;5	
Diana						2		23	8	22	29					39	X											
Martina					4	12	14	11	26		29		61	X	X		X											
Raffaello				0		0	1	3	3	6			8	4	11	13	15	9	X			X						
Viola									6	3	54				12	23		20	21		X							

❖ **Table 5:** Summary of the uses different imperative forms have, based on the taxonomy by Condoravdi & Lauer (2012).

Imperative Use	Positive Imperative (2SG)	Negative Imperative (2SG)	Generic Imperative	A-Imperative
<b>1. Directives</b>				
→ Command	✓	✓	✓	✓
→ Warning	✓	✓	✓	?
→ Request	✓	✓	?	X
→ Advice	✓	✓	X	X
→ Plea	✓	✓	X	X
<b>2. Wish-type Uses</b>				
→ Well-wish	✓	X	X	X
→ Curse	✓	X	X	X
→ Addressee-less Wish	✓	✓	X	X
→ Absent Wish	?	✓	X	X
<b>3. Permissions &amp; Invitations</b>				
→ Permission/Concession	✓	✓	X	X
→ Offer	✓	X	X	X
→ Invitation	✓	X	X	X
<b>4. Disinterested Advice</b>				
	✓	X	X	X

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