



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

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Overview

Children acquiring null-subject languages **overproduce positive imperatives** as *passapa-rtout* forms (Salustri & Hyams 2003), paralleling **Root Infinitives (RI)** in non-null-subject languages (Rizzi 1993, Hoekstra & Hyams 1998).

⇒ There is a **developmental and grammatical link** between positive imperatives and infinitives.

Italian offers imperatives with **infinitival morphology**, but acquisition shows a **sharp contrast**:

- Hundreds of **positive imperatives** are produced.
- **Infinitival imperatives** are virtually absent.

⇒ Even minimal **differences in structural size** affect early production, a key point for syntactic theory.

Background

Early speech and non-target forms (Guasti 2016; Rizzi 1993)

- Children's early productions show **systematic deviations** from target adult grammar.
- In **non-pro-drop languages** (French, German, Dutch): overproduction of **RI**s in main clauses.
- In **Italian (pro-drop)**: ⇒ no RIs (verbs are inflected early; Guasti 1990; Belletti & Guasti 2015). ⇒ instead, **overproduction of imperatives** (Salustri & Hyams 2003, 2006).

Imperatives as RI analogues in pro-drop languages (Salustri & Hyams 2003, 2008)

- Children acquiring pro-drop languages (Italian, Spanish, Hungarian, Slovenian) ⇒ overproduce **imperatives**, esp. 2nd person singular.
- Frequency: up to 40% of child utterances (vs. ~15% in child-directed speech, ~6% in adult-adult).
- Evidence from bilingual child (German-Italian, Berger-Morales and Salustri 2003 Corpus): ⇒ RIs in German, imperatives in Italian.

Syntactic parallels between RIs and imperatives

- Both are **root-only**, not embeddable.
- Both show **morphological impoverishment**.
- Both disallow wh-elements.
- ⇒ **Both reflect a developmental universal stage of preference for tenseless forms** (2;0–2;6 y.o.).

Italian Imperatives

True Imperatives (2sg) (Belletti 1999; Di Domenico 2004; Zanuttini 1997)

- (1) *Mangia!*
eat-imp.2sg
'Eat!'

Negative Imperatives (2sg) (Kayne 2000; Zanuttini 1997)

- (2) *Non mangiare!*
neg eat-inf
'Don't eat!'
Paraphrase: I order you not to eat.

Generic Imperatives (Salvi & Borgato 1991; Isac 2015; Pak et al. 2024)

- (3) *Allacciare le cinture!*
fasten-inf the seatbelts
'Fasten your seatbelts!'
Paraphrase: passengers are instructed to fasten seatbelts.

A-imperatives (Rossi, forthcoming)

- (4) *A mangiare!*
to eat-inf
'Go eat now!/Start eating now!'
Paraphrase: speaker orders interlocutors to start eating.

Aim

Given the close link between RI and positive imperatives in acquisition, this study asks:

- Do children produce **infinitival imperatives** in Italian?
- If yes, are they used in a **target-like** way or as **simpler, tenseless** forms?
- How does their production compare to **canonical positive imperatives**?
- What do the results imply for the **syntactic analysis** of imperatives?

Corpus Study: Data and Methodology

Spontaneous speech of four Italian-speaking children was analyzed to compare **positive imperatives** with **infinitival imperatives**.

Child	Age (months)	# of analyzed transcripts	# of child's utterances
<i>Raffaello</i>	19-35	17	3,812
<i>Martina</i>	19-31	12	6,666
<i>Viola</i>	23-34	10	6,280
<i>Diana</i>	20-24	9	3,812

Table 1. Spontaneous production data from 4 children obtained from the Calambrone Corpus (Cipriani et al., 1989) in the CHILDES database (MacWhinney, 2000), covering ages **1;7 to 2;11** across **48 transcripts**.

Methodology: Semi-automatic extraction using **CLAN** and **Online TalkBank**.

Structures analyzed: **Negative imperatives (2sg)**, **Generic imperatives** (affirmative/negative), **A-imperatives**.

Results

- Only **5 negative imperatives (2sg)** found, all in Diana's transcripts.
- **No Generic or A-imperatives** were attested.
- **Rossi (2023):** 519 positive imperatives documented.

⇒ **Infinitival imperatives in Child Italian are extremely rare.**

Negative Imperatives, Generic Imperatives & A-imperatives

Child	Age (months)													
	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32
<i>Diana</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	0	0	0
<i>Martina</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Raffaello</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Viola</i>			0	0	0	0			0	0		0	0	0

Table 2. Negative imperatives, Generic Imperatives, and A-imperatives produced by four children. Heatmap in blue proportional to values.

Positive 2nd Person Singular Imperatives (Rossi, 2023)

Child	Age (months)													
	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32
<i>Diana</i>		2		23	8	22	29				39	X		
<i>Martina</i>	4	12	14	11	26		29		61	X	X		X	
<i>Raffaello</i>	0		0	1	3	3	6		8	4	11	13	15	9
<i>Viola</i>					6	3	54			12	23		20	21

Table 3. Positive 2nd person singular imperatives produced by four children (Rossi, 2023). Heatmap in orange proportional to values. 'X' = missing data.

⇒ **The data reveal a striking asymmetry between positive and infinitival imperatives.**

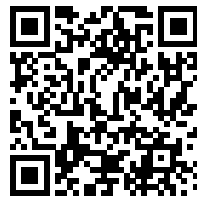
Concluding Remarks and Future Research

- **Infinitival imperatives are extremely rare** in early Italian child speech. They involve an extra syllable compared to positive 2SG imperatives, but **processing difficulty alone cannot explain their scarcity**.
- The only infinitival imperatives observed are **negative**, even though **negation is harder to process** (Dale & Duran 2011). **Generic** and **A-imperatives** are absent, despite children's use of other impoverished verbal forms as *versatile, non-target forms*, showing that **contextual restrictions cannot fully account for their absence**.
- **Implication:** Their absence points to deeper, non-trivial **structural constraints**, possibly involving a **generic operator** (Cherchia 1995) as well as specific aspectual properties.
- **Future research:** Formal modeling of these structural differences to incorporate acquisition patterns into the **syntactic theory of imperatives**.

Selected References

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Further Materials:



https://rossisarah.github.io/infinitival_imperatives/