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evidence from acceptability judgements on Italian argumental compounds

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Compound internal anaphora: evidence from acceptability judgements on Italian argumental compounds

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INTRODUCTION

The particular properties of argumental compounds in Italian pose interesting theoretical challenges, and investigations of possible syntactic operations within this type of complex words have resulted in conflicting conclusions. Regarding compound-internal anaphora, some researchers exclude this possibility (Scalise 1992; Bisetto & Scalise 1999; Lieber & Scalise 2006) while others do not (Bisetto 2004; Grandi 2006; Gaeta & Ricca 2009; Radimský 2015). However, these findings have been based on researchers' intuitions and on occurrences in language corpora, and while intuitions have been shown to give contrasting results, the absence of a grammatical structure in a corpus should not be taken as evidence that the structure is not possible.

THIS STUDY

This study aims to experimentally determine the possibility of compound internal pronominal reference based on structural properties of compounds and referential expressions.

METHODS

Participants

140 Italian native speakers

Task

Acceptability judgments on an ordinal five point scale

Materials

30 sentences containing compound-internal anaphora to:

- 10 VN compounds (5 null pronouns; 5 overt pronouns)
- 10 N_HN compounds (5 null; 5 overt)
- 10 NN_H compounds (5 null; 5 overt)

Plus:

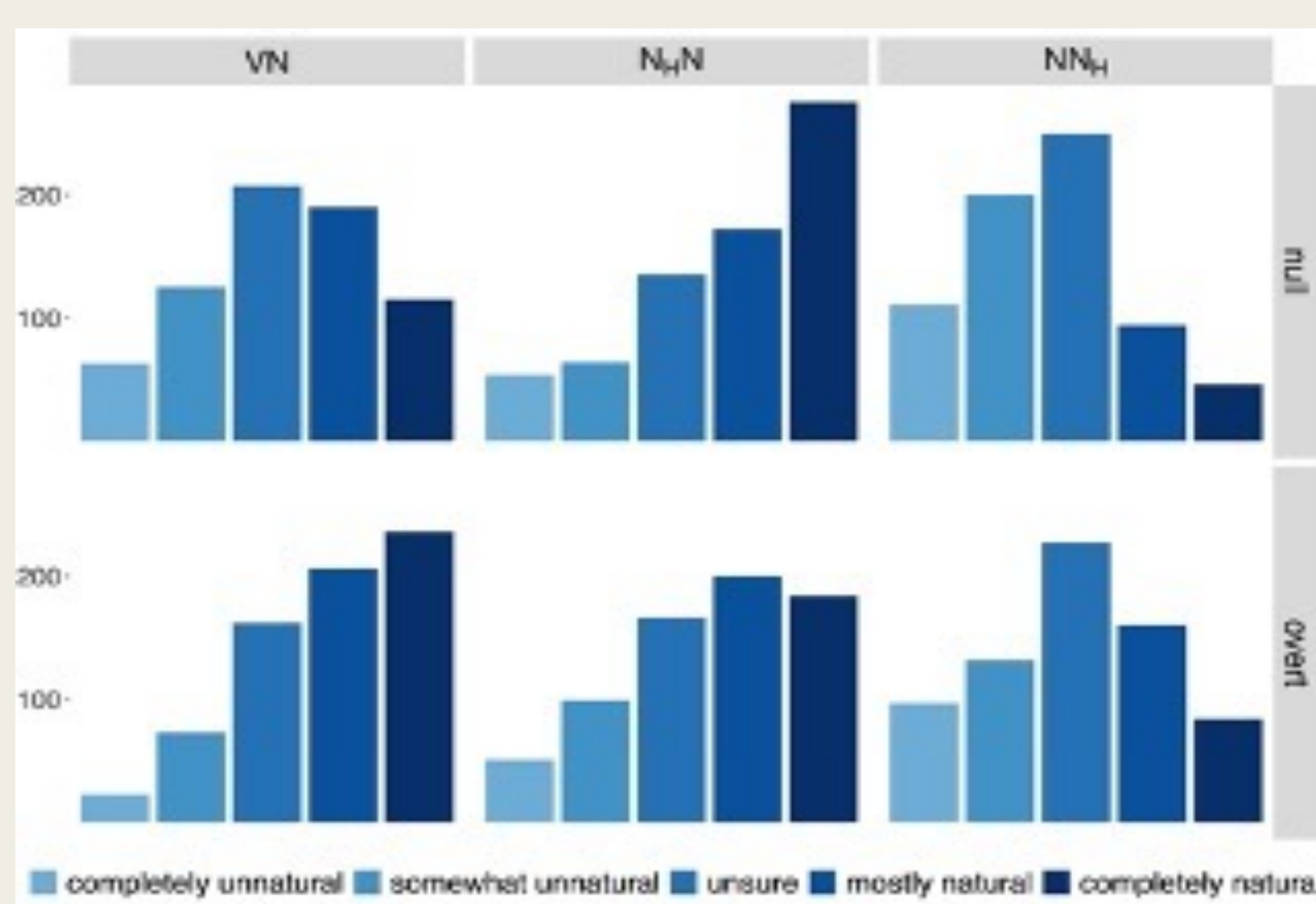
- 10 grammatical distractors
- 10 ungrammatical distractors

ARGUMENTAL COMPOUNDS IN ITALIAN

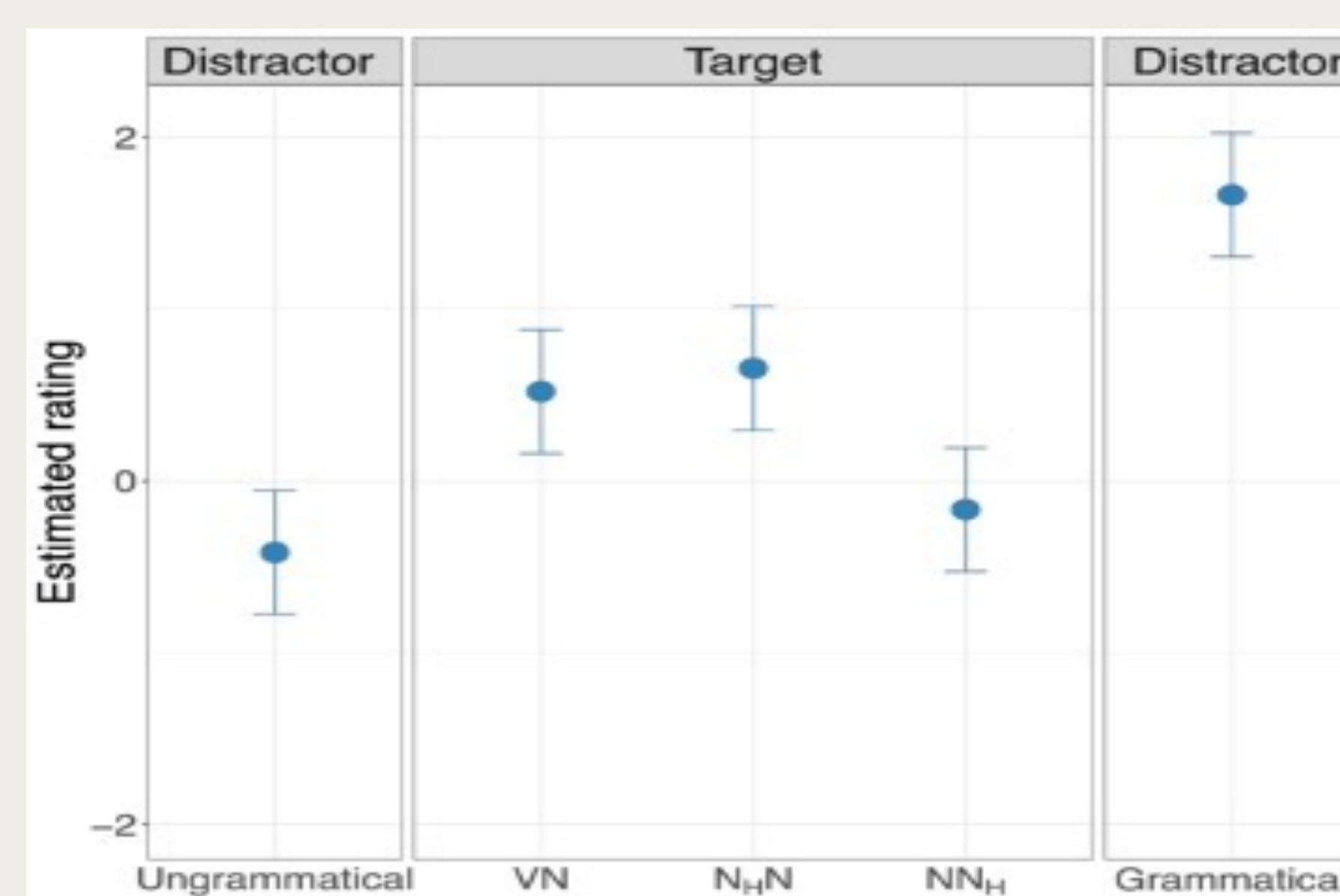
VN	N _H N	NN _H	
apri.scatole	trasporto	latte	autonoleggio
open _{TR} .cans _{F.PL}	transportation _{M.SG}	milk _{M.SG}	car _{F.INV} .rental _{M.SG}
'can opener'	'milk transportation'		'car rental'

RESULTS

Response distribution

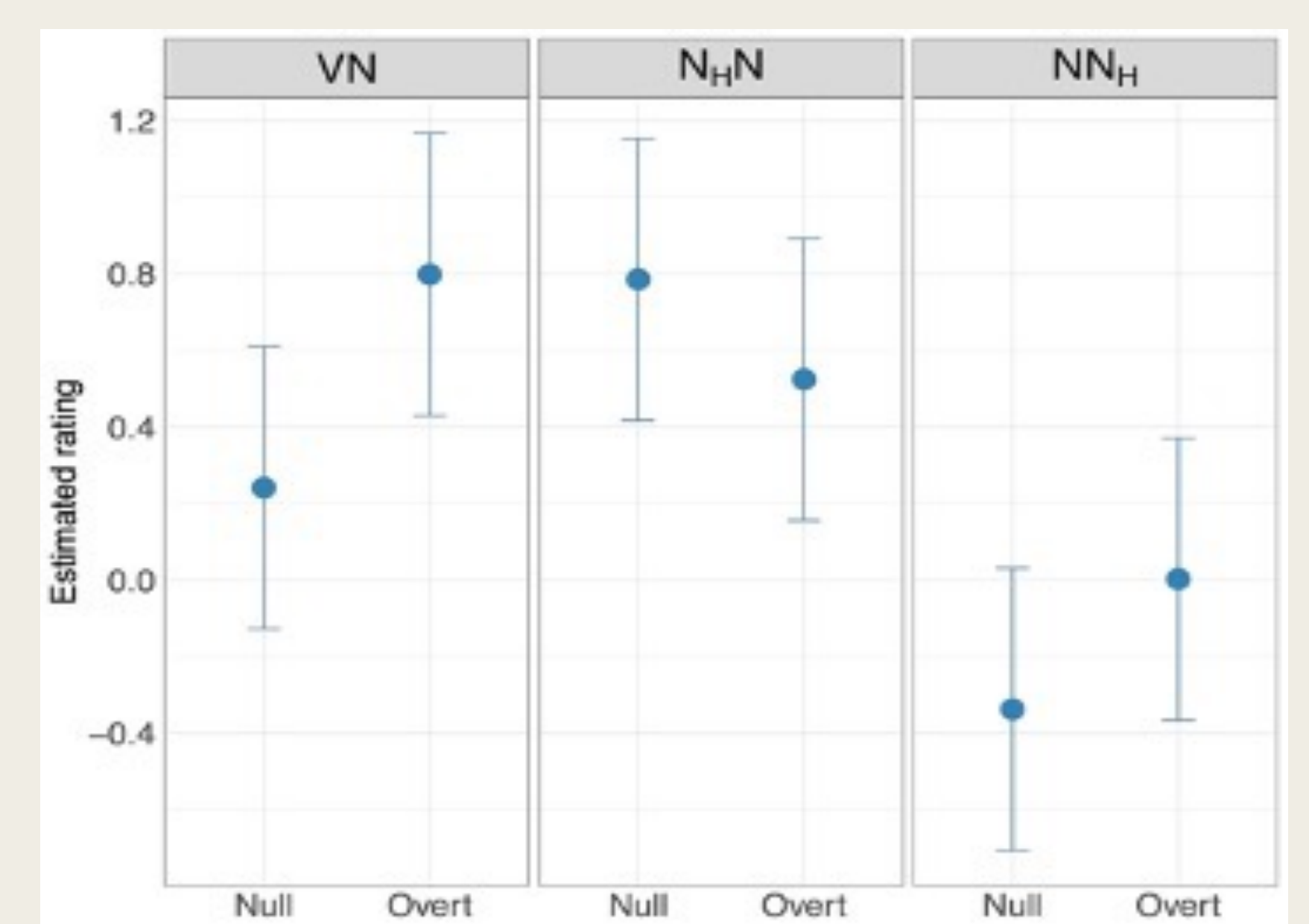


Analysis 1: targets vs. distractors



Overall effect of item category ($\chi^2 = 53.174$, $df = 4$, $p = .000$).

Analysis 2: effect of null vs. overt pronoun



Overall effect of compound ($\chi^2 = 15.131$, $df = 2$, $p = .001$).

SUMMARY

- compound-internal anaphora is largely acceptable for VN and N_HN but not for NN_H compounds
- N_HN more acceptable with null pronouns while VN with overt pronouns

CONCLUSIONS

The results corroborate the theoretical considerations by Di Sciullo and Williams (1987) according to whom N_HN and VN compounds show a lexicalization of syntactic structures ('flat representation'), while NN_H represent true morphological objects (hierarchical representation). This is also in line with psycholinguistic evidence (El Yagoubi et al. 2008; Marelli et al. 2009; Arcara et al. 2013).

Regarding the role of null vs overt pronouns, the interplay between information structure and syntactic role is not clear. N_HN compounds might possess a more syntactic reading, while the higher lexical cohesion of VN compounds may reflect differences in the autonomy, and hence referential capacity, of the argument element.

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