Oral Examinations in EMI:
A Focus on Pragmatic Competence

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Abstract
The oral examination is an area of EMI in which students' language difficulties often come to the fore, and studies from different countries have shown that inadequate language competence may negatively impact on exam results. However, very little research has been done on oral examination interaction in EMI contexts. The aim of this paper is to help fill this gap by comparing the performance of students with different language backgrounds and levels of English. Attention was devoted to those linguistic structures spanning different levels of language description that reveal pragmatic competence, and, in particular, register awareness. These include features like premodification in complex nominals – which are typical of English, and even more so of ESP, but not so common in other languages – and information structure, with the attendant range of syntactic choices (active/passive, cleft constructions, extraposition, inversion and existential *there*).
Keywords: EMI oral exams, pragmatic competence, information structure.

1. Introduction

English Medium Instruction (EMI) has been spreading ever further in the last few decades among higher education institutions, as they compete with each other to offer curricula in English for their degree courses, to the point where, by 2014, 60% of postgraduate courses in Europe were estimated to be taught through EMI (Macaro, 2014).

EMI has attracted the interest of researchers since its early days, and a number of studies have tackled different aspects of

the phenomenon. On the one hand, researchers have tracked the evolution of EMI over time and mapped its general practices (Wächter and Maiworm 2014; Smit and Dafouz 2012; Coleman 2006); on the other, research has focused on comparing it with other phenomena, such as English as a Lingua Franca (ELF; Kirkpatrick 2014, Mortensen 2014, Björkman 2014, 2011) or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL; Smit and Dafouz 2012, Lasagabaster and Sierra 2009). As EMI has been shown to develop in context-specific ways, several studies have focused on examining regional differences (Costa and Coleman 2013, Cots 2013, Doiz *et al.* 2012, Airey and Linder 2006, Lassegard 2006, Sercu 2004). There have ensued interesting ideological debates aimed at improving understanding and description of the phenomenon and at stimulating discussion around policies and practices (Philipson 2015, Bolton and Kuteeva 2012, Jensen and Thøgersen 2011, Ferguson 2007).

However, there are still relatively unexplored areas of EMI implementation. One such area is that of oral examinations, which is especially relevant from an academic point of view because it is often during oral examinations that students' language difficulties come to the fore (Dearden 2014). Previous studies have shown that such difficulties may negatively impact on their exam results (Al Bakri 2013, Chapple 2015, Sagucio 2016). At the same time, a perception study has shown that a linguistic bias may affect assessment in the opposite way, with the examiner perceived as unduly marking up students with low-quality English (Berdini 2016). The lack of research on oral examinations is partly due to the fact that examinations in traditional EMI subjects (Engineering, Economics, Medicine) are frequently conducted in writing. Nonetheless, oral examinations represent the main form of assessment in the academic traditions of several countries. Italy, for example, has a long tradition of oral examination at all levels of the education system, a tradition that some have traced back to the so-called *Gentile Reform* of 1923 (Pastore and Pentassuglia 2015), which set out to improve the country's education system by making it more rigorous and demanding.

In recent years, major changes have affected higher education institutions all over the world, putting strain on traditional national systems. The re-conceptualisation of knowledge as a commodity has brought to the fore new necessities and criteria for universities to match, resulting in a 'run for internationalization' that has appeared

to be closely linked to a process of 'Englishization' (Bull 2012). This process has not been devoid of complexities, especially for countries with a generally lower level of English proficiency; Italy is a well-documented case in the literature (Costa and Coleman 2013; Grandinetti, Langellotti and Ting 2013; Pulcini and Campagna 2015; Broggini and Costa 2017). At the same time, internalisation has brought to the fore the culture-boundedness of teaching and testing practices. What is the norm in one country, for a given discipline, is not necessarily the norm elsewhere: students with different backgrounds entering a national education system at university level may thus experience difficulties in adjusting to the country's practices.

While oral exams in Italian universities do not seem to have received extensive scholarly attention (c.f. Ciliberti 2007, an exception being Anderson 1999), whether in native or in EMI contexts, other genres of academic discourse have. A case in point is the genre of conference presentations in the science domain, which has been investigated from the perspective of native language influence on discursive choices (Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas 2005). This research on conference presentations highlights that NNS generally show a lower extent of diamesic variation, i.e. they fail to adapt their discourse to the oral mode of communication, sticking to forms that are characteristic of written scientific English. Of course, differences exist between oral examinations and conference presentations. However, there are similarities as well, first of all in terms of topic – hard sciences – and mode of discourse – orality. In addition, oral exams tend to start with sequences in which the examiner shows that s/he expects the student to produce a narrative (Bowles 2017a), creating favourable conditions for extended turns of speech on the part of the student. These long stretches of speech have been described as actual monologues (Anderson 1999) and are thus in a way comparable to the sustained monologue of conference presentations. Previous research has concluded that appropriateness in their oral expositions allows for students being assessed to be construed as knowledgeable and competent members of their academic community (Anderson 1999) and, indeed, their ability to discursively organise the content of their answers has been shown to have an influence on the outcome of examinations (Bowles 2017a).

In light of developments in higher education and the need for reflection on the conditions which might hamper (or facilitate) success in international degree courses, this paper aims to fill the gap left by research around the analysis of oral examinations in EMI programmes. The focus of the present study is on comparing the performance of students with different language backgrounds and levels of English, devoting attention in particular to their pragmatic competence. Data are analysed in an attempt to better understand whether students with different native languages express content differently, selecting different structures or using them with a different frequency, and what kind of impact this can have on the communicative event.

Our research questions are as follows:
1) Is there any difference in the way native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of English manipulate information structure?
2) Can a failure to handle information structure adequately (i.e. a lack of rhetorical appropriacy) impair effective communication?

2. Method

The data analysed in this paper were collected in collaboration with a small group of graduate students from the University of Tor Vergata, under the guidance of Professor Hugo Bowles, whose collaboration we gratefully acknowledge. Data collection took place at the University of Sapienza in Rome, Italy, over several oral examination sessions for the course of Immunology, third year of Medical School. The recorded exams involved 2 examiners and 19 students for a total of 6 different nationalities, including 2 English native speaker students from the UK. The corpus includes transcriptions of 30 oral exams spanning a range from a minimum of 4 minutes to a maximum of 20.50 minutes. Students were examined twice, first by one of the examiners, then by the other, on different topics from the course programme.

The transcriptions were carried out in compliance with the conventions of Conversation Analysis (for a relatively recent and comprehensive account see Ten Have 2007), representing both contents and interactional features. The latter included pauses, continuity between two turns, overlaps, non-verbal sounds, lengthened and shortened syllables, audible inspiration/expiration,

acceleration or slowing down, volume variation, stress, tone, and laughter. The performances of the two native speakers, a minority in our dataset, were compared to the performances of the larger group of non-native speakers. Due to this imbalance, the results can only be regarded as an initial attempt at tackling the problem.

Corpus statistics for the two sub-groups are provided in Table 1:

TABLE 1
Corpus statistics

	Tokens	Tokens used for wordlists*	Types	TTR	STTR
Native	4.441	3.501	711	20,31	26,20
Non-native	36.462	28.835	2.495	8,65	23,54

* While "tokens" refers to the running words in the texts (where by "word" is meant any string of letters/ numbers separated by spaces), "tokens used for wordlists" excludes numbers. In our corpus numbers feature in line indications and pause length annotation, following Conversation Analysis transcription conventions.

A qualitative corpus analysis was conducted on this dataset, limited to structures that are retrievable through corpus interrogation routines, since there was no specific mark-up. Suitable grammatical indicators were identified for each of the investigated structures and the concordance lists thus obtained were then manually cleaned, retaining only the occurrences of the targeted structure. Attention was devoted in particular to those structures that reveal pragmatic competence and particularly register awareness, allowing speakers to manipulate the information structure by playing with the focus of their utterances and the related notions of given-new information, theme-rheme position, and emphasis. More specifically, the analysis focused on information structure as conveyed by four syntactic choices: active/passive voice, cleft constructions, extraposition, and existential 'there' (Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas 2005) The frequencies of each structure in NS and NNS turns were then compared, based on data extracted through Wordsmith Tools 6.0 (Scott 2012). While raw frequency data are provided for completeness, we focus specifically on the per-thousand-word normalised frequencies calculated automatically by Wordsmith Tools 6.0, which allow for the comparison of differently sized data sets.

3. Results

3.1. Passive voice and existential 'there'

Scientific communication is primarily about conveying facts, data, and results, with much of the semantic load shifted onto the noun phrase (Halliday and Martin 1993 – see especially p. 84*ff.* for the notions of lexical density and grammatical metaphor). This has several effects on the syntax: verbs tend to lose their prominence in the clause, or are nominalised; the subject slot is often occupied by noun phrases referring to the object of an action performed by scientists, who are not represented at all in the transitivity process, and the verb is in the passive. In this way the receiver's attention is drawn directly to the thematised concept (i.e. the item placed in theme position), with the effect of impersonality, a much-valued rhetorical trait in a field that pursues objectivity. In terms of information structure, the thematised concept is presented as given information (either because it was mentioned in a previous statement, or because it is considered as easily recoverable by the receiver), while the rest of the clause conveys new or newsworthy information.

In a similar fashion, existential *there* allows the speaker to focus attention on the information contained in the rheme, conventionally reserved for new/newsworthy information, while filling the theme slot with a semantically empty placeholder.

Frequency data for the two structures are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Frequency of passive verbs and existential *there*[*]

	NS		NNS	
	raw fq.	ptw fq.	raw fq.	ptw fq.
Passive verbs	29	6,59	208	7,48
Existential there	15	4,99	84	2,73

* Occurrences of passive verbs were retrieved using all the possible inflected forms of the main auxiliaries used to form them (*are/is/were/was/been/be/get/gets/got/'s/'re*); and then cleaned manually. Occurrences of existential *there* were searched for starting from *there* as a node word.

As shown in Table 2, there is only slight variation in the frequency of passive structures between NS and NNS, suggesting that the use of passive structures may not be a problem for the latter during EMI oral exams. In some cases, they get the passive grammatical structure wrong (e.g. "which can be activate"), but the context makes their intention clear.

Existential *there*, on the other hand, shows greater differentiation, with NNS using it less than NS, possibly because it is not perceived as formal enough for the context of an oral exam. This interpretation seems to receive backing from the analysis of the co-text in which the node word occurs. In NS turns, existential *there* is often associated with informal syntax, especially with a lack of verb/subject agreement (e.g. "there's so many", "there's strong second signals", "there's fetal proteins"), and is always followed by the contracted form of the verb ("there's" "there'll be", "there's gonna be"). NNS, on the other hand, use it mostly followed by the strong form of the verb ("there is", "there are") and with subject-verb agreement ("there are also other important cells", "There is a direct recognition").

3.2. Cleft/pseudo-cleft, and extraposition

These structures contribute to the manipulation of information structure by modulating emphasis, and hence signalling newsworthiness. The cleft sentence gives both thematic and focal prominence to a particular element of the clause, thus making the division between given and new information explicit. Most cleft sentences start with *It* followed by the verb BE, and then by the element on which the focus falls (Quirk *et al.* 1992: 951). Starting from the declarative sentence "John wore his best suit to the dance last night", an example of cleft structure would be "it was John who/ that wore his best suit to the dance last night". Unlike clefts proper, pseudo clefts, sometimes called *wh*-clefts, follow the rules of main and subordinate clauses. They in fact follow the SVC order, with a nominal *wh*- relative clause as subject ("what you need most is a good rest") or complement ("A good rest is what you need most", Quirk *et al.* 1992: 954). With extraposition, *it* is used as a pro-form "substituting for a clause that is positioned finally" (p. 633), as in "It is obvious that you have been misled". As a result, the predication

(naturally occurring in rheme position) is fronted, while a complex subject, often in the form of a non-finite clause (e.g. "It would be unwise *to interfere*"), is disclosed at the end of the utterance, a phenomenon known as 'end-weight' (Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas 2005: 43).

The three structures, generally not very frequent in the corpus, occur almost exclusively in NN exams, as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Frequency of cleft/pseudo-cleft and *It* extraposition structures[*]

	NS		NNS	
	raw fq.	ptw fq.	raw fq.	ptw fq.
Cleft sentences	-	-	2	0,07
Pseudo-cleft When/ what where/who why/all	-	-	17	0,55
This/that's	1	0,23		
It- Extraposition	-	-	22	0,72

[*] For clefts and *it* extraposition concordances were extracted using *it* as a node word; pseudo-clefts were retrieved using all the *wh*-words shown in the table. For pseudo-clefts introduced by *this/that's* (Collins 1991: 198) the two strings *this* and *that's* were used as search strings. To these the string *that is* was added, even though it was not included in Collins' list. The outputs were then cleaned manually. The only example of such type of pseudo-cleft used in our corpus is "This is how acute happens" (NS).

Some examples of these structures are discussed below. Example 1 features a cleft sentence, in which only the first part is uttered ("it's not the tumour cell that"), leaving the sentence unfinished, as is frequently the case in the corpus. This is possibly due to the high extent of shared knowledge between the examiner and the student, associated with the relatively limited time allocated to each exam.

```
(1) 254  E1: So is it any (.) relevance that the tumor antigen
    255      ()
    256 S15: No
    257  E1: Why is not relevant
    258 S15: Em because it's not the tumor cell that-
    259  E1: Yeah (.) so, who cares, if ()
    260 S15: ()
```

Whatever the content of the relative clause, what is relevant here is that the student wants to emphasise the negation, so as to rectify what s/he had previously said. In example (2), the cleft sentence occurs again in the proximity of a wrong answer.

```
(2) 27 E1: [My question is eh eh
    28     regarding the eh germinal center I mean follicular
    29     dendritic cells [()
    30 S8: [Ok ok
    31 E1: Ok is ok
    32 S8: So anyway T cell eh::: produce the:: antibodies ()
    33     response
    34 E1: Mh
    35 S8: So it's (starting) the T follicular cells
    36 E1: Start=
    37 S8: =start from (.) start from () presentation of antigen to
    38     B cells in the lymph nodes [()
    39 E1: [Who's presenting antigen to B 40 cells? ()
    41 S8: No no no no [()
    42 E1: [Ok, it's you that you want to say no ok now
    43     say i(h)t correctly because I wanted just [() dendritic
    44     cells
```

A problem emerges clearly at line 36, where the examiner repeats the verb used by the student ("start"), to signal her perplexity. The student replies by expanding on the verb ("start from presentation of antigen to B cells..."), but the use of the nominalised form 'presentation' begs the examiner's question as to the agent of such a process ("Who's presenting antigen to B 40 cells?"). The question does not seem bona fide, but is rather a strategy to show the student that by embarking on that line of reasoning s/he is heading in the wrong direction, a clue which is correctly grasped by the student (line 41). With her reply ("no, no, no") the student clarifies that the issue has not been framed correctly, prompting, in turn, the examiner's comment "it's you that you want to say...". Even though the form is not correct (as the second 'you' should not be there[1]) the examiner's intention is clear. The cleft sentence places emphasis on 'you' (syntactic emphasis

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[1] Some speakers may object also that the verb should be in the 3rd person ("it is you that wants to say..."), even though the norm in a cleft sentence is that "a relative pronoun subject is usually followed by a verb in agreement with its antecedent: *It is I who am to blame*" (Quirk *et al.* 1992: 367). However, as Quirk et al point out, in informal English third person concord may prevail (*ibid.*).

that would be lost with the linear SVO structure 'you want to say') as opposed to 'me', referring to the examiner herself. As has been noted, in a cleft sentence "the highlighted element has the full implication of contrastive focus: the rest of the clause is taken as given, and a contrast is inferred with other items which might have filled the focal or 'hinge' position in the sentence" (Quirk *et al.* 1992: 951). Cleft sentences are particularly suitable to express emphasis in writing where, in the absence of the intonation clue, they allow one to mark the information focus syntactically. Therefore the examiner's choice of using a cleft here, instead of simply resorting to contrastive intonation, is per se meaningful. It suggests a willingness to unambiguously make clear that the wrong framing of the issue is being blamed on the student, and not the examiner, who was simply pretending to accept the answer in order to build on it. In this way she re-establishes her professional identity as an expert in the field, distancing herself from the propositional content of the utterance at line 39.

Pseudo-clefts are definitely more frequent than clefts in the present sample, confirming their mode-dependent distribution as observed in several studies (cf. Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas 2005: 56). However, contrary to Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas' findings (i.e. lack of pseudo-cleft in NNS presentations), in the present data pseudo-clefts are predominantly used by NNS. This could be a result of the overrepresentation of NNS in the corpus, but another explanation may also be related to pragmatic and typological reasons (see below).

Example (3) follows the ordinary cleft pattern, even though it deviates from the norm, as the verb 'to be' is missing.

```
(3) 026 S13: no what I mean that the auto-antibody might be
    027      either trying to do its normal function which is
    028      [eliminating
```

Again, the cleft sentence co-occurs with expressions signalling a failure in the communication flow, in this case the negative adverb "no", followed by the metadiscursive expression "I mean", introducing a reformulation of a previous statement which had not been felicitous. As shown by the concordance output in Figure 1, pseudo-clefts often co-occur with indicators of a crisis in the communicative exchange.

FIGURE 1
Cleft sentences

```
N    Concordance
1    7: Yes. 123 E1: Ok, this is what a CTL cell recognise. This
2        M.? 359 E1: Yes this is what I'm saying saying(.) for me
3    fferent from kar 125 that's what I'm asking (.) Some partner
4     which microhms 026 S13: no what I mean that the auto-antibo
5    er [tha 253 S13: [yes eh () what I remember that it is very
6    .) but in this case, is not what (.) (I saw 133 you think) 1
7    gn antigen (.) this is 126 (what i- sorry) 127 E1: It's not=
8    o not do it. 199 Anyway (.) what I was just saying that it's
9    s 194 in the medulla and so what really happens is that 195
10   n with low avidity actually what the TCR 244 combine to is n
11   osition 334 E1: Yes this is what we are trying to do but we
12   1: () 407 E2: the effect is what we want, the effect 408 S1:
13   in 411 order to be mild old what we want to do is either 412
14   ic(.) type of tumor, is not what you (.) actually 106 w- we'
15   8 E2: Ok (.) Ok (.) this is what you should be said (.) 259
16   le the antigens) is that 109 who have three main antigen pat
17   tive function and that's 075 why we have multiple diseases c
```

Such indicators include different expressions and structures, some of which are explicitly adversative, while others take their oppositional value from the context: metadiscursive expressions with verbs of saying ("What I'm saying", "What I'm asking", "What I mean", lines 2-4), negation ("Is not what" lines 6 and 14), concessive structures ("Yes…but" line 11), adverbs with an adversative function ("Really", line 9 ; "Actually", lines 10 and 14) and deontic modals ("What you should", line 15).

Cleft sentences normally start with *wh*-words but other structures can also be used. A case in point is the use of "expressions with 'thing'" (Swan 1980: 107), as illustrated in example (4).

```
(4) 224 E1: How you arrive to this position of the basomembre
    225 S10: Ok in it's first of all we have eh eh the imbition
    226 of eh antibodies
    227 E1: Sorry(.) we have the immune complex that is
    228 positing on the surface and the first thing it
    229 adapts is imbition I-I-I'm not(.) I don't understand
```

Here the pseudo cleft places emphasis on "the first thing" and once more the use of such marked structure is functional to correcting

wrong information. At line 225 the student starts to describe a process by saying that the first thing is the "imbition of the antibodies", a formulation that is not satisfactory for the examiner who corrects it ("Sorry ..." 227-229). By using a pseudo-cleft sentence, the examiner highlights "it adapts", preceded not by a *wh*-word, as would commonly be the case with pseudo-clefts, but by an expression which mimics that used by the student ('the first thing'), thus enhancing the relevance of his own remark in relation to the student's statement. These strategies, together with the full contrastive implication carried by cleft sentences, reinforce the relation of opposition between the student's wrong formulation and its correct version produced by the examiner.

In some cases, the cleft structure can depart even more from the prototypical *wh*-form. In (5) the *wh*-word is replaced by a lexical word ("a reaction"), which does not have the formulaicity of "expression with *thing*", as discussed in the previous example, but follows the same pattern.

```
(5) 18   S1: Ok, the rejection of the transplant it's a
    19   reaction that we don't want () uhm:
```

The structure in this case is that of the reversed pseudo-cleft (X is WH-p'), as is made clear if 'a reaction' is replaced with 'what'/'something': A rejection of the transplant is WHAT/SOMETHING we don't want.

Finally, coming to the last feature considered, extraposition is quite frequent in the corpus, with two recurring patterns: *what does it mean that_CLAUSE; is/was it possible_CLAUSE*, as shown in Figures 2 and 3.

FIGURE 2
Extraposition, selected lines (what_does_it_mean)

```
N     Concordance
6     membrane= 172 E1: =What does it mean lyse the membrane? I me
7     6 S7: =Ya. 177 E1: What does it mean lyse the membrane? So i
8     l by the 208 E1: [ what does it mean not functional? 209 S13
9     cells (2.0) 96 E1: What does it mean the () tumor cells 97 S
10    here's any= 25 E1: What does it mean they activate informati
11    t doesn't 90 exist what does it mean this epsilon put here?
12    o 318 other I mean what does it means to have good and many
```

FIGURE 3
Extraposition, selected lines (possible)

```
N    Concordance
13   this is my ahhhh 358 S10: Is it possible I do it with profes
14   1: So my opinion was how was it possible that in the 341 stu
15   16 to be responsible< how is it possible that the 317 mechan
16   lways the same so 329 how is it possible(.) that you didn't
17    If you want I-I think(.) is it possible to try 350 to answe
18   c 185 E1: [Mh and that's why it's 186 interesting to know ho
19    is another place where it's it's 77 possible for the B cell
```

In all these cases extraposition occurs in interrogative propositions, and almost exclusively in examiner turns. The first pattern confirms what has been observed so far, i.e. that the need for information manipulation arises particularly when there is a problem, and most often when the examiner does not fully accept the students' contribution. Hence the examiner requests a clarification of meaning, with *it* functioning as a place-holder for the students' expression that needs clarifying or correcting altogether, as shown in more detail in excerpt (6).

```
(6)165 S7: =It penetrates (3.0) so that, wait. The perforins are
   166     first released in the synapse between the target cell and
   168     the CD8 T cell and then the (4.0) perforins (6.0).
   169 E1: [I mean
   170 S7: [Can cause cell, (2.0) not cell lysing, but it can lyse
   171     the membrane=
   172 E1: =What does it mean lyse the membrane? I mean the membrane
   173     is made by lipids=
```

The second extraposition pattern, the one with 'possible', is also related to answers, with some failure on the part of the student to convey the expected information, indicating a certain degree of irritation on the part of the examiner, as illustrated by excerpt (7):

```
(7)305  E1: Who is producing CCL1 in this situation?
   306 S10: Eh:: B eh:: (4)
   307  E1: DO you know that each chemokine is produced by a cell?
   308 S10: Yes
```

```
309  E1: Ok(.) shouldn't you justify the use of chemokine
310      in this situation if you want to propose it as
311      someone that's playing the role of mechanism?
312      (15) I don't think the mechanism of hypersensitivity
313      is clear to you if I must say because chemokine
314      is not involved at all in this situation not they
315      are not good chemo-factor but they are >not there
316      to be responsible< how is it possible that the
317      mechanism one of the 4 hypersensitivity is not
318       clear to you how is it possible? I mean if
```

In other cases, the extraposition used by NNS seems to be due to 'interference' from Italian, the native language of most of the speakers in this corpus, where possibility is often expressed periphrastically, rather than with modal verbs, as is most typically the case in English. Examples 8-10 illustrate this point, with the modal version inserted in square brackets under the speaker's use of extraposition.

```
(8)  358 S10: Is it possible I do it with professor M.?
                  [May I do it with professor M.]
```

```
(9)  349 E1: If you want I-I think(.) is it possible to try
                                        [you can try]
     350     to answer the question in this situation and say
     351     what comes out
```

```
(10) 75 S8: [No
     76 E1: Outside eh where? Where is another place where it's it's
     77      possible for the B cell to initiate activation?
          [the B cell can initiate activation]
     78 S8: No ()
     79 E1: And in the
```

A last point to be made about extraposition is the sub-standard use of this structure by NNS, alongside the standard use. While the standard extraposition has it that the pro-form replaces a clause (e.g. in "It surprises me that you don't write", *it* replaces the clause subject 'That you don't write'), in the sub-standard use, the pro-

form replaces a noun phrase, producing a clause with a double subject. Table 4 shows all the occurrences of extraposition in NNS turns (with identical ones listed just once), divided into standard and non-standard uses.

TABLE 4
Standard vs non-standard uses of extraposition

Clause extraposition	Phrase extraposition
is it clear that B cells do not need …	is it clear my question?
it doesn't matter it's a tissue related antigen	it is also possible an immune deficiency
What does it mean lyse the membrane?	what does it mean not functional?
What does it mean they activate information?	What does it mean the () tumour cells?
what does it means to have good and many tumour antigens?	what does it mean this epsilon put here?
Is it possible I do it with professor M.?	
how was it possible that …?	
is it possible to try to answer the question?	
Where is another place where it's it's possible for the B cell to initiate activation?	

The substandard use can be partly explained as another example of interference from Italian, where it is perfectly acceptable to postpone the subject, and indeed failing to do so would in some cases produce very unnatural utterances. "Is it clear my question", for example, is an obvious transposition of "è chiara la mia domanda", just like "it's possible an immune deficiency" comes from "è possibile un'immuno-deficienza", and "what does it mean not functional?" from "cosa vuol dire 'non funzionale'?". The Italian construction, with the subject in final position, places emphasis on *it*, thus satisfying the speaker's rhetorical need to draw attention to the important part of the message (newsworthy information). In the case of subjects expressed by clauses, the difference between Italian and English is concealed, so to speak, while with phrases used as subjects the difference becomes evident.

On the other hand, interference from Italian might indulge a need that is also felt by native speakers, as the non-standard extraposition is equally used in informal spoken English: "A special type of equivalence involves placing a pro-form earlier in the sentence while the noun phrase to which it refers is placed finally. This construction is restricted to informal spoken English, and is considered by some as substandard, though it is in fact very common" (Quirk *et al.* 1992:632).

4. Conclusion

The main finding of this study is that there are indeed differences in the ways NS and NNS deal with the manipulation of information structure. The analysis of four main linguistic structures (active/passive, cleft constructions, extraposition, and existential '*there*') revealed that manipulation occurs almost exclusively in non-native talk, with the exception of the passive, which NS and NNS use with similar frequency. The use of existential '*there*' was on the other hand not distributed evenly between the two groups: NNS used it less frequently than NS, possibly because of a difference in the perception of the formality of the occasion. Italian students (as well as students from different countries that share similar academic traditions) would have been socialised throughout their educational careers to recognise oral examinations as a formal occasion, one in which they want to show they have good command of the register. Hence, they might judge existential '*there*' as too simple a structure, appropriate for colloquial speech, but not for oral exams, where more formal forms would appear more appropriate. This is all the more likely if one considers that the register of Italian scientific discourse is typically higher than its English counterpart (Laviosa 2008: 120). NS students are likely to be less familiar with oral assessment in higher education (Bowles, 2017a) and as such may not feel the urgency to use a very formal register. Furthermore, their higher language competence allows for a greater variety in the choices of vocabulary (as confirmed by their higher standardised type-token ratio); NNS may stick more closely to the language used in the textbooks they studied. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that in NS turns use of existential *there*' is often associated with other informal linguistic features, such as a lack of verb/subject agreement.

For the remaining linguistic structures, namely clefts, pseudo-clefts and extraposition, results show that when they do occur it is almost without exception in NNS turns. As previously noted, these structures mostly serve the purpose of modulating emphasis. Their use by NNS is largely limited to a renegotiation of contents, made necessary by a failure in communication or a necessity to reinstate responsibility for a certain statement. Indeed, their distribution in the corpus shows that the need for such renegotiation is much more common in NNS turns, pointing to the fact that NNS produce communication failures and misunderstandings more often than NS in this exam setting. The examples of extraposition also occur particularly often in the case of a critical moment, especially in those cases where the examiner rejects a student's statement. However, it should also be noted that the use of extraposition by Italian students can be considered as a case of 'interference' from their L1.

Summing up, the difference in the way NS and NNS in our corpus manipulate the information structure mostly lies in the use of strategies to modulate emphasis as a means to repair failures in communication, which normally arise at the level of content. This suggests that the use of such structures with communication failures (i.e. partly or completely incorrect answers) is genre-specific for EMI oral exams, where the correct answer (or an acceptable version of it) is often co-constructed by the examiner and the examinee, through an extended negotiation of meaning. On the other hand, successful answers do not require much manipulation of information structure. This is probably due to two factors: first, the fact that the students' knowledge is checked either by eliciting very specific answers, with much remaining unsaid thanks to the extent of common ground knowledge shared by the participants. Second, in more open-ended questions, both coherence and salience are catered for by adherence to linear textual patterns based on cause and effect or chronological relations (Bowles 2017b).

These results show a need for more research in the area of oral examinations that, on the one hand, tackles how students from different cultural backgrounds may conceptualise and understand the setting of oral examinations differently (with different outcomes in terms of linguistic behaviours); and on the other hand, investigates what kind of toll (if any) the need for frequent repairing and renegotiation of content can take on NNS students' performances.

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