Spatial Prepositions in Italian L2 as Constructions:  
a Working Hypothesis

Our working hypothesis is that spatial prepositional usages are “constructions”, in the sense of Goldberg (2006): form-function pairings learned on the basis of the input.

In the cognitive framework there is an ongoing debate about the semantic organization of spatial language: some scholars hold that there is a restricted list of primitive, universal and innate topological notions, shared by all human beings and coded more or less directly by adpositions; others claim that spatial language and cognition are conditioned in several ways and to several degrees by cultural conventions, spatial semantic information being distributed among the various element in a sentence.

Moreover, according to pedagogical grammars and second language teaching, prepositional usages are so arbitrary and idiomatic that they just has to be learned (usually by memorization). Still, children of young age succeed in mastering spatial prepositions and it is widely acknowledged that space is one of the most important conceptual domains of human thinking and speaking.

Constructionist approaches have never been applied to spatial prepositions in spatial language studies nor in SLA studies. Yet we will propose that a constructionist model can be an interesting key to interpret and analyze interlanguage data.

We analyzed two corpora of university learners of Italian L2:
1) written and oral description by 12 Spanish speakers and 12 German speakers;
2) written paragraphs by American English students.

Our investigation revealed a fundamental consistency of the data elicited from the three groups of learners, whose interlanguage has the following main characteristics:

- in (in/into/at), a (at/to) and su (on/above) are the most frequent prepositions uttered by learners, while the so called “locuzioni preposizionali” (e.g. di fronte a, in front of; dietro a, in the back of) are rarely used - though semantically more transparent - exactly like in the data from the check sample contained in the first corpus;
- linguistic context (i.e. both VP and the Landmark entity) plays a crucial role in learners’ usage of spatial prepositions, both in choosing the prepositions to be uttered (e.g. what we call “Landkark-Type Primacy”) and in failing to utter the TL preposition (e.g. overextension of a);
- Landmarks are not real entities, but geometrical abstractions of real entities, that are conceived as points, lines, surfaces, volumes; geometrical abstractions are associated with prototypical functions, typically expressed by the topological prepositions in, a, su.

Moreover, data show that some general principles operate in learners interlanguages: for instance, in the process of geometrical abstraction of entities used as Landmarks, or in the (re)construction of the system of spatial prepositions. Although these outcomes have to be tested with other analyses, we will propose that these principles are derived from more general cognitive processes.

Summarizing, after presenting our data we will show how a constructionist model can account for similarities of the frequency of spatial prepositions uttered by learners and native speakers, for the distribution of the spatial meaning among various element in a sentence, for mismatches in learners’ interlanguages and for how “regular” usages of Italian spatial prepositions are acquired.