

Responsibility attribution in gender-based domestic violence: A study bridging corpus-assisted discourse analysis and readers' perception

Abstract

This paper investigates how argument structure constructions are used by Italian newspapers to portray gender-based violence (GBV), how their usage affects responsibility attribution to perpetrators, and how such usage is perceived by Italian readers. The assumption is that constructions critically affect meaning: constructional choices prompt different viewpoints of the same event. For the corpus study, we collected 40 articles from local newspapers and annotated 720 constructions denoting GBV events. Constructions suppressing/backgrounding the perpetrator or depicting the event as a bare happening were the most frequent. Building upon these results, for the perception study, 274 participants read an author-constructed news report portraying GBV and answered four speculative questions about the identity of the perpetrator and the victim. Respondents were divided into groups and each group was presented with a stimulus article containing different constructions of the GBV event surrounded by the same information frame. In line with previous studies, it was found that the perpetrator was assigned less responsibility when the passive and nominal constructions were employed.

Keywords: media discourse, gender-based violence, cognitive grammar, corpus studies, perception studies

1 Introduction¹

A 2018 ANSA report reveals that “56.8% of boys and 38.8% of girls believe that *she* is at least *partly co-responsible* for the violence” (our translation and emphasis).²A 2019 ISTAT report suggests that GBV in 2018 crossed fewer demographic and

¹This research was carried out within the crowdfunded project *Words Matter* (<https://sites.google.com/unipv.it/wordsmatter/>). All authors are equally responsible for the content of the paper. However, for academic purposes, C. Meluzzi is responsible for 4, 4.2, 4.3, 5.2, 6 and 7; E. Valvason for 4.1 and 5.1; E. Pinelli for 3.2 and 3.3; and C. Zanchi for 1, 2 and 3.1.

² The *Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata* is the leading wire service in Italy. The cited report can be read here: http://www.ansa.it/canale_salutebenessere/notizie/stili_di_vita/2018/11/30/violenza-donne-per-4-giovani-su-10-dipende-anche-da-lei_b834f656-fdf2-4a0c-8de5-2d6c6dfcfc82.html.

social boundaries than before: the percentage of agreement with at least one among the GBV stereotypes under consideration decreases with decreasing age, increasing levels of education, and female gender.³ The persistence of gender-based stereotypes, however, is mirrored in the sexual power asymmetries described in the *Gender Gap* report, which examines the gap between women and men in four key social areas: health, education, economics, and politics.⁴

If females represent a weaker social group with respect to males, they are also likely to undergo misrepresentation in media discourse, as happens with other weak social groups in asymmetric power relationships experiencing personalized violence (Coates & Wade 2007). The pervasive repetition of biased 'storytelling patterns' - or 'discursive frames', in Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) terminology - results in the creation or strengthening of expectations regarding how a certain event happens in the public sphere (e.g. Fagoaga 1994). Since Lakoff's (1973, 1975) seminal work on gendered language, it has been argued that language creates and mirrors sexual inequality (Graddoll & Swann 1989; Goddard & Saunders 2000), resulting in what Mills (2008: 22) calls "indirect sexism": a set of indirect linguistic strategies, which construct discourses entailing an unbalanced power relationship between men and women. Such misrepresentation may well result from a combination of factors other than the persistence of gender-based stereotypes, including institutionalized professional imperatives and commercial interests. All these factors may contribute to driving media toward the use of well-worn, routinized, and frequently unjust formulas to report GBV events.

Previous studies of how GBV is depicted in media discourse mostly employ the CDA methodology and concentrate on lexical items and collocations as prompts for unjust discursive frames: see, among others, Erlich (2003), O'Hara (2012) and Tranchese & Zollo (2013) on English; Fagoaga (1994) and Santaemilia & Maruenda (2014) on Spanish; Abis & Orrù (2016), Formato (2019), and Busso et al. (forthc.) with references on Italian. As Hart (2018) notes, the latest CDA practice emphasizes the need to use multiple means of inquiry to avoid a subjective selection and reading of textual data: he recommends triangulation. The CDA research ventures with

³ISTAT is the *Italian National Institute for Statistics* (<https://www.istat.it>); the 2019 report on GBV can be consulted here <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/235994>.

⁴http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf.

triangulation have gone in different directions, including corpus (O'Halloran 2007; Gabrielatos & Baker 2008) and cognitive linguistics (Charteris-Black 2004; Hart 2015). Nevertheless, it is still relatively rare to find investigations in which CDA is complemented with experimental methodologies. Yet, Henley et al. (1995) provide a corpus and a psycholinguistic study of the usage and perception of passive constructions in U.S. media reports of GBV. More recently, Bohner (2001) has carried out a perception study on German native speakers focusing on the effects of the passive voice in sexual assault reports. Hart (2018) combines CDA and perception studies to investigate how the selection of transitive vs. reciprocal constructions can produce differences in how news reports of political protests are interpreted in terms of blame apportionment and perception of social actors' level of aggression.

Along with Hart (2018), this is one of the first studies that apply the cognitive approach of constructions to a specific case study, in order to investigate the actual consequences of constructional choices in discourse. This paper also combines a CDA corpus and an experimental study. From this two-fold perspective, we first investigated the constructional usages in a corpus of GBV reports to understand if and how grammatical constructions have the potential to relieve perpetrators of their responsibility in GBV events. Second, we carried out two perception studies exploring whether different grammatical constructions imply different responsibility attributions on the readers' part. Our hypothesis was that readers more definitely attribute responsibility to perpetrators in events described with active constructions and constructions in which perpetrators are overtly expressed.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 frames argument structure and nominal constructions within a cognitive approach and describes their effects on readers' discourse perception. Section 3 reports on the methodology and results of the corpus study. Sections 4 and 5 contain the methodology and results of two related perception studies. In Section 6, the results of both analyses of Sections 4 and 5 are jointly discussed. Finally, Section 7 offers brief concluding remarks.

2 Argument structure constructions

2.1 Argument structure constructions in theory

In cognitive approaches (Goldberg 1995; Langacker 2006; Croft 2012), constructions are understood as units pairing form with meaning. Constructions can be filled by different lexemes, which share a degree of semantic solidarity both with one another and with the abstract meaning of the construction. Among constructions, the subclass of argument structure constructions is highly relevant for humans' conceptualization and interpretation of reality, as it "provides the basic means of clausal expressions" (Goldberg 1995: 3). As CDA analysts put it, "transitivity ... is the way the clause is used to analyze events and situations as being of certain types" (Fowler 1991: 71).

Events are conceptualized as relationships among entities, i.e. participants, that interact with one another (Langacker 2006: 116-117). Crucially, language users have different options, *construals*, to describe the same event/relationship among entities (Croft 2012: 13). Though *construals* may refer to the same relationship, they give prominence to, or *profile*, different participants or aspects of it, as illustrated in Figure 1a-c (adapted from Langacker 2006: 119). In figures, circles indicate participants, arrows represent relationships, and thicker lines highlight profiles.

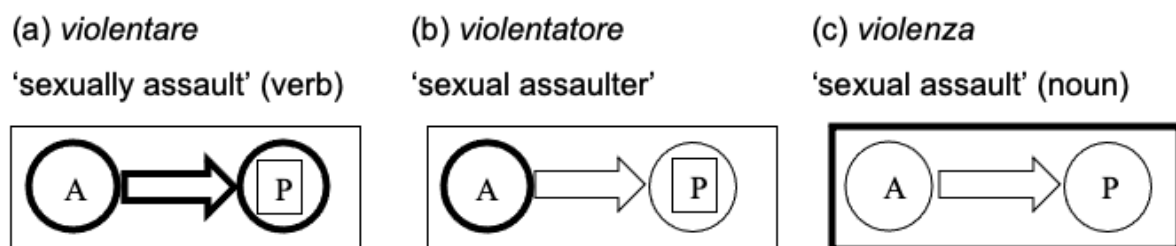


Figure 1. Same event, different profiles

In Figure 1a, *violentare* profiles a relationship in which an agent (A) intentionally exercises violence upon a patient (P). In Figure 1b, the agent noun *violentatore* only profiles the A, while backgrounding other aspects of the event. In Figure 1c, the action noun *violenza* profiles an abstract entity obtained by conceptual reification (Dunmire 2007; van Dijk 2008a; Sansò 2016), while backgrounding the participants in the event and the actual relationship between them. For this reason, action nominals are said to carry an inherent mystifying potential (Fowler 1991).

Despite having the same profile, relationships can be conceptualized from different perspectives, which in turn has consequences in terms of salience, as represented by the grey-filled shapes in Figure 2a-c:

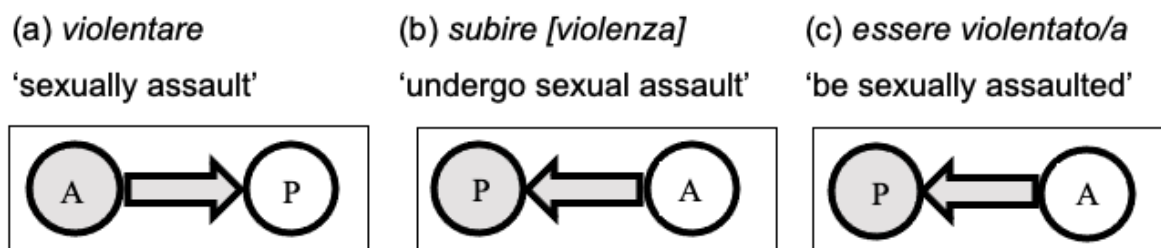


Figure 2. Same profile, different perspectives

The active verbal expressions in Figure 2a-b profile the same relationship. However, the relationship is mentally accessed via the agent in Figure 2a and via the patient in Figure 2b. The same relationship is likewise accessed via the patient with a passive construction (Figure 2c). The expressions in Figure 2a and in Figure 2b-c respectively highlight the agent's activity and the core process which the patient thereby undergoes (Langacker 2006: 127). Sansò (2006: 267) contrasts A-oriented (e.g. Figure 2a) with P-oriented (Figure 2b-c) events, the latter being characterized by high topical Ps and discourse peripheral, though easily recoverable As. In fact, psycholinguistic research has demonstrated that voice selection can guide the addressees toward conceptualizing the agent or the patient as the primary actor in the event (Clark & Begun 1968; Johnson-Laird 1977; Tannenbaum & Williams 1968; Turner & Rommetveit 1968; see also Rueschemeyer & Gaskell 2018: ch. 22). Thus, pragmatic factors such as prominence and perspective prove to be pivotal for the characterization of argument structure constructions (Langacker 2006; Sansò 2006, 2016).

Similar figures can model other argument structure constructions, such as the anticausative, the reflexive, and the reciprocal constructions of Figure 3.⁵

⁵ As Figure 3 represent three less obvious argument structure constructions, we added examples for each of them. Examples from our corpus are reported in Section 3.2. Note that, in Italian, these three different constructions can be marked through the same morpheme *si*, which is also used to encode passives and impersonals (e.g. Cennamo 2015).

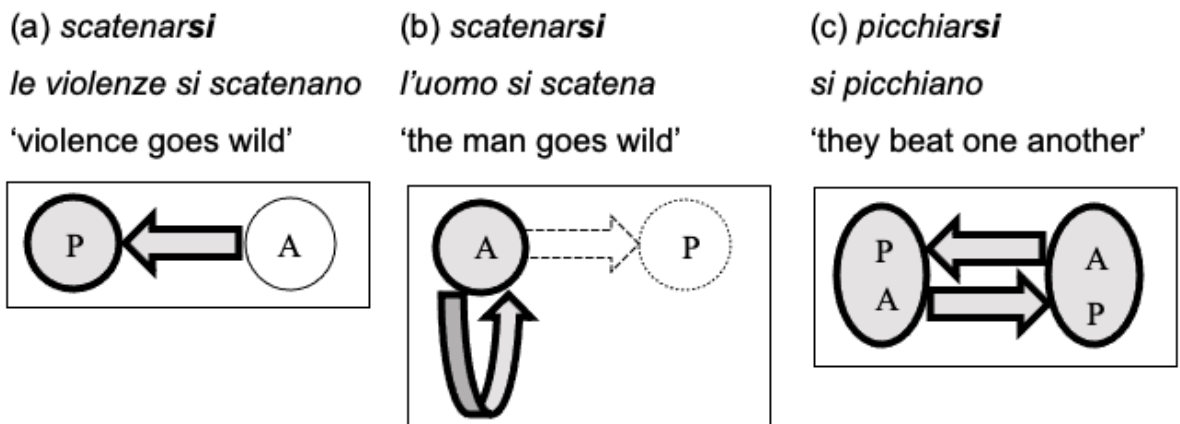


Figure 3. Representing anticausative, reflexive, and reciprocal constructions

The construction in Figure 3a depicts the event as a bare happening: the second participant of a causal transitive verb (such as *violenze* in *scatenare le violenze* '[lit.] make violence wild') becomes the sole participant of a noncausal intransitive verb (Sansò 2006). The profile of 3a does not include the instigator of the event: violence is described as an entity that spontaneously transits from a state of non-being into a state of being. Thus, passives and anticausatives are both P-oriented, but they differ in that they respectively background and suppress the agent. Sansò (2006) also argues that anticausative constructions conceptualize events as naked facts in a holistic fashion; in this respect, anticausatives are also functionally close to action nominals. As represented in Figure 3b, reflexive constructions are used to describe events in which a participant, typically an agent, is simultaneously the initiator and the endpoint of an event (Croft 2012: 236), which can optionally include another participant (*l'uomo si scatena contro la compagna* 'the man goes wild **against his partner**'). The dashed arrow and patient participant of Figure 3b model such optional patient participant. Reciprocal constructions (Figure 3c) depict situations that feature at least two participants that are in an identical reverse relation to each other and perform two identical semantic roles each (Kemmer 1993: 95-127).

2.2 Argument structure constructions in (discursive) practice

In Section 2.1., we discussed how, in theory, argument structure constructions differ in terms of construal, by assigning varying prominence to different aspects of and

participants in events, named profiles, and representing the profiles from varying perspectives. Therefore, the intentional or routinized selection of one construal over another one in discourse can have the (unwitting) effect of profiling or backgrounding certain aspects of the depicted event (Fowler 1991: 71). As CDA has pointed out, such construals can be crucial in media discourse to diminish perpetrators' responsibility for the GBV, by suppressing and backgrounding them in discourse or by representing the event as a bare happening (Tranchese & Zollo 2013).

Concrete discursive usages of each construction presented in Section 2.1. outline a more intricate picture. In Section 2.1 (Figure 2a-b), we have seen that transitive constructions can be used to encode opposite events in terms of perspective, owing to the meaning of the verb instantiating the construction, e.g. *violentare* 'sexually assault' and *subire* 'undergo'.

In fact, since Hopper & Thompson's (1980) seminal work, transitivity in discourse is acknowledged to be a scalar notion, which varies according to a number of parameters including (a) the number of linguistically expressed participants; (b) the agent's degree of agentivity and intentionality; (c) the patient's degree of affectedness and individuation.

Concerning parameter (a), for example, two-place verbs can be used intransitively: these usages do not profile the patient, thus making transitive verbs closer to intransitive ones in discourse:

(1) a. ...**spara all'ex moglie** (GSApr2019)

'...[he] shootshis ex-wife'

b. ...**ha estratto la pistola e ha sparato** (GSApr2019)

'...he pulled out his gun and fired [it].'

c. ...**ieri pomeriggio il 48enne sarebbe uscito di casa** (GSNov2018)

'...yesterday afternoon the 48-year-old man allegedly left home'

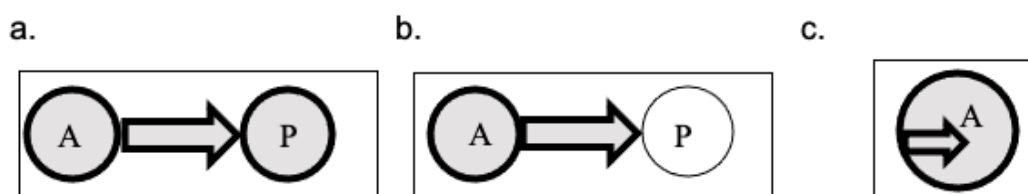


Figure 4. Transitivity in discourse

Example (1)a (Figure 4a) contains the two-place verb *sparare*. The patient 2nd participant is expressed by the full PP *all' ex moglie*. Example (2)b (Figure 4b), from the same report as (2)a, contains a periphrastic past form of the same verb. The patient is obviously present in the reality, but it is not linguistically expressed and, thus, not profiled. Therefore, the profile of example (1)b includes a single participant, as holds for (1)c (Figure 4c), which features an intransitive motion verb, *uscire*.⁶ Note that the sole participant in the event expressed through the intransitive construction of (1)c is a sentient human entity, an agent. In an intransitive construction, however, an action nominal can also occupy the same slot, as in (2), where *aggression* is the sole participant of the intransitive verb *avvenire*.

(2) *La drammatica aggressione è avvenuta lunedì pomeriggio* (PPJan2019)

'The dramatic aggression occurred on Monday afternoon.'

The construction in (2) is probably employed to introduce the setting of the GBV event but has nevertheless the side-effect of representing the aggression as something that simply occurred. Thus, this active intransitive construction has a profile similar to the anticausative (Figure 3a).

Finally, while analyzing constructional usages in discourse, one should take into account how the prominence and perspective effects inherent to each argument structure construction interact with the concrete way participants are referred to in discourse. For example, given that the passive construction allows for the omission of passive agents, their explicit mention through an oblique phrase must suggest saliency in discourse. The same holds for nominal constructions of the type of *aggression* 'aggression': the overt expression of participants through adnominal modifiers is optional, and therefore their overt mention must indicate saliency as well.

3 Responsibility attribution in GBV reports: a corpus study

3.1 Data and methodology

⁶ In Figure 4c, the arrow represents the temporal unfolding of the event, which is not a state like *the 48-year-old was out of his home*.

To investigate argument structure constructions in Italian GBV reports, we compiled a corpus (GBV Corpus) of 40 articles from four Italian local daily newspapers: *L'Éco di Bergamo* (EB) and *La Provincia Pavese* (PP), published in Northern Italy, and *Corriere Adriatico* (CA) and *Gazzetta del Sud* (GS), published in Central and Southern Italy. From each newspaper we selected ten articles using keywords such as *femminicidio* 'femicide' and *violenza contro le donne* 'violence against women'. We included in GBV Corpus only news reports in which perpetrators' guilt was certain.

Using UAM Corpus Tool (<http://www.corpustool.com/>) we annotated the GBV Corpus according to an *ad hoc*-built annotation scheme. We tagged all constructions denoting events in which, in reality, perpetrators perform actions related to GBV, presumably exercising intentionality and control. By contrast, we did not annotate events with the victim as a principal initiator. Thus, sentences such as *il sessantenne aveva tentato di strangolarla* 'the 60-year-old man had tried to strangle her' (EBNov2018) and *I comportamenti dispotici erano peggiorati* 'despotic behavior had worsened' (EBNov2018) are annotated, whereas sentences such as *la donna era uscita di casa* 'the woman had left home' (CADec2018) are not. Table 1 displays the annotated constructions, an example for each of them, and its translation.

Construction	Example	Translation	Source
1. Active	<i>il sessantenne aveva tentato di strangolarla</i>	the 60-year-old man had tried to strangle her	EBNov2018
2. Causative	<i>fa prostituire la compagna</i>	(he) makes his partner prostitute	CAApr2019
3. Reflexive	<i>si sarebbe scagliato... contro la convivente</i>	(he) allegedly hurled himself against his spouse	EBApr2017
4. Passive	<i>è stata con forza caricata in auto dall'uomo</i>	(she) has been forcefully loaded into the car by the man	EBFeb2017
5. Anticausative	<i>la furia omicida si è scatenata</i>	the murderous fury has raged	GSMar2017
6. Reciprocal	<i>i due hanno iniziato a discutere</i>	the two began to discuss	PPJuly2017
7. Nominal	<i>aggressione del 28enne ai danni della moglie 26enne</i>	assault of the 28-year-old man against his 26-year-old wife	EBOct2018

Table 1. Annotated constructions with examples

Besides the construction type, we annotated the argumental participants, i.e., participants encoded as part of verbal valency, and the victim and the perpetrator even if encoded by non-argumental participants (for example, we annotated the perpetrators when expressed by passive agents; cf. *dall'uomo* 'by the man' in Table

1, example 4). Each participant was assigned a tag for its role in reality, its linguistic expression, and its semantic role. Figure 5 shows the annotation scheme:

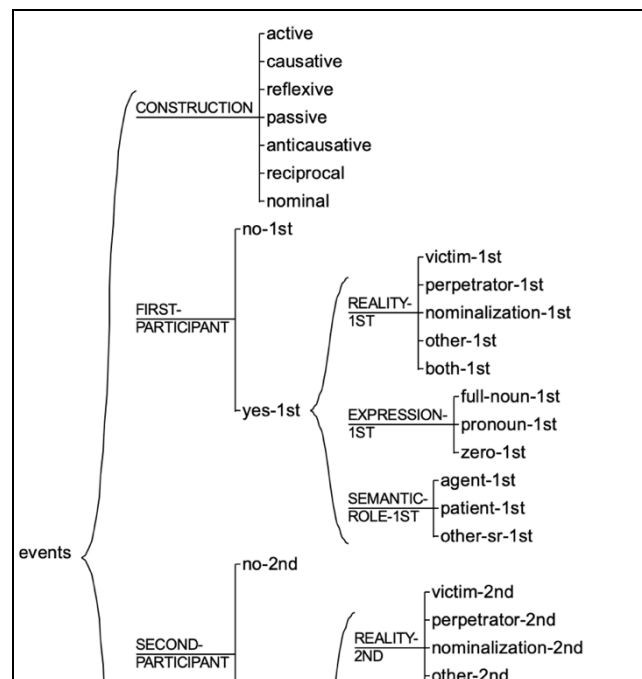


Figure 5. Annotation scheme

The semantic role annotation was coarse-grained: the labels ‘agent’ and ‘patient’ are given to agents and patients proper and also to agent-like and patient-like participants (e.g. in Table1, example 3, *contro la convivente* is properly an animate goal participant, which is nevertheless given the label ‘patient’). When two PPs modify a nominal construction (e.g. Table 1, example 7), the participant expressed by the lighter PP is annotated as a 1st participant (*del 28enne*), the participant encoded with the heavier PP as a 2nd participant (*ai danni della moglie 26enne*). Constructions containing a light or modal verb (e.g. *tentare di* ‘try to’, *iniziare a* ‘begin to’) count one event (Table 1, examples 1 and 6), whereas coordinated verbs count two events:

(3) *L'uomo...ha accoltellato e ucciso la consorte.* (CAFeb2019)

‘The man...stabbed and killed his wife.’

In (3), the perpetrator and the victim are expressed by two NPs that function as a shared subject and object of two coordinated verbs. Both are tagged twice, once as full nouns and once as zeros.

The annotation process was independently performed by two annotators, who later compared, discussed, and found an agreed annotation. Table 2 contains the results of the final annotation ordered by frequency.

Construction	Final
Actives	343 (47.6%)
Nominal	249 (34.6%)
Passive	75 (10.4%)
Anticausative	24 (3.3%)
Reflexive	19 (2.6%)
Causative	7 (1%)
Reciprocal	3 (0.5%)
TOTAL	720

Table 2. Final annotation results

3.2 *Corpus study*

This section examines the results regarding the three most frequent constructions in the GBV Corpus, i.e., actives (3.2.1), passives (3.2.2) and nominal constructions (3.2.3), which were also taken into account in the perception studies (Sections 4 and 5). The remaining annotated constructions, i.e. anticausatives, causatives, reciprocals, and reflexives, are discussed in relation to the mainly attested constructions, as they proved to cover similar functional domains with them.

3.2.1 Active constructions and their participants

Active constructions can trigger quite varied conceptualizations of the same event depending on the verbs instantiating them, their participants, and the overall degree of transitivity of the denoted event.

Table 3 contains data concerning the three most frequent first participants of active constructions, which are paramount as they constitute the mental access point to the denoted event (Section 2.1).

Active constructions	1 st participant
Perpetrator	265 (77.2%)
Nominal	44 (12.8%)
Victim	29 (8.4%)
Other	4 (1.1%)
Both	1 (0.2%)
Total	343

Table 3: First participants of active constructions

Table 3 shows that the first participant of active constructions was most frequently the perpetrator, who always played the role of agent (265/343, viz. 77.2%). The 2nd argument slot can be taken by different participants or left unexpressed, resulting in different degrees of transitivity.

Prototypically transitive events, that is, events in which an intentional agent causes a change of state upon a linguistically expressed patient (Section 2.1), were only 234.⁷ In these passages, the patient(-like) role was played by the victim:

(4) *Picchia e minaccia convivente per anni* (EBNov2018)

‘[He] has **hit** and **threatened** the cohabitant for years.’

In (4) the construction profiles both participants and is instantiated by verbs that denote highly transitive events with volitional agents and highly affected patients, specifically, *picchiare* ‘beat’ and *minacciare* ‘threaten’.

By contrast, in four passages containing transitive verbs used intransitively or intransitive verbs, the agent-perpetrator was the only participant profiled (see the

⁷ From a functional perspective of profiling/backgrounding perpetrators and victims, this count should also include cases in which the victim is syntactically a 3rd patient(-like) participant (e.g. *procurandole una frattura scomposta* ‘giving **her** a compound fracture’). For the same reason, causatives (7 events) and reflexives (7 events) with agent-perpetrator and patient-victim expressed should be added.

discussion of examples(1)a-b in Section 2.2).⁸ In passages such as (1)b, the transitive verb is used intransitively, thus making the overall denoted event less transitive (Hopper & Thompson 1980).

Similarly, in 26 active constructions, the victim was not mentioned as related to the construction itself but only elsewhere in discourse, and the second participant of the construction was a noun phrase, as in (5):

(5) *Ha vibrato una ventina di fendenti che non le hanno lasciato scampo*
(PPMay2019)

‘[He] **vibrated** about twenty slashes that did not give **her** a way out.’

In (5), the noun *fendenti*, taken by *ha vibrato*, in turn plays the role of agent in the relative clause containing the verb *lasciare scampo*, which has the victim as a second argument.⁹

A number of active constructions (44/343, viz. 12.8%) were instantiated by intransitive verbs taking nominals as first participants. These constructions result in a low degree of transitivity, as shown in (6).

(6) *...i comportamenti dispotici erano peggiorati.* (EBNov2018)

‘...despotic behavior **had worsened** over time.’

In (6), due to the NP *I comportamenti dispotici* and the noncausal verb *peggiore*, the event is represented as a bare happening. This type of active constructions is functionally similar to morphological anticausatives (24/720 events, viz. 3.3%, cf. Table 2), whereby the GBV is described as a spontaneous event (see Table 1, example 5).

Finally, the victim can also occur as a first participant of an active construction (29/343 events, viz. 8.4%): due to the meaning of the instantiating verbs, the victim

⁸ For the general count of functionally similar constructions in terms of perpetrators’ profiling/backgrounding, reflexives with no overt expression of patient-victims (11 events) should be added.

⁹ In GBV corpus we counted four active constructions in which the agent is played by an entity other than the perpetrator, such as *fendenti* in (5).

either plays the role of patient with transitive verbs such as *subire* ‘suffer’ in (7) or a patient-like role with intransitive verbs such as *scompare* ‘disappear’.¹⁰

(7) ...*ai danni della malcapitata giovane ascolana che ha subito, inerme, le percosse del suo fidanzato.* (CAJan2019)

‘...against the unfortunate young woman from Ascoli who **suffered**, defenseless, her boyfriend’s blows.’

As with passives, the active constructions with the victim as a first participant profile the event from the patient’s viewpoint, thus highlighting the core process undergone by the patient rather than agents’ activities (Section 2.1). Moreover, when the second participant is a nominal, as *percosse* in (7), the construction has paramount discursive consequences. While passive constructions instantiated by the corresponding passive verb (e.g. *essere percossa* ‘be beaten’) directly refer to the violence as a process, in active constructions with a nominal as a second participant, the event is reified as an abstract entity: this occurred in 17/29 (58.6%) active events with the victim as first participant. Moreover, while passive constructions allow to represent perpetrators as agents proper (e.g. *essere percossa dal fidanzato* ‘be beaten by her boyfriend’), this type of active constructions does not. The perpetrator is mentioned as an optional adnominal NP only in three passages, and he was not construed as an agent proper, but as a possessor, as *del suo fidanzato* in (7).

3.2.2 Passive constructions and their participants

We now present the analysis of passive constructions that, as discussed in Section 2.1, profile the core process that the patient thereby undergoes.

Passive constructions	1 st participant
Victim	56 (74.6%)
Nominal	16 (21.3%)
Other	3 (4%)
Total	75

¹⁰ One functionally similar reflexive event with the victim expressed as a first participant should be added to this count (*se lo ritrovava davanti* ‘(she) found herself in front of him’ PPJuly2018).

Table 4: First participants of passive constructions

As shown in Table 4, passive constructions most frequently take the victim as a first participant (56/75, viz. 74,6%). She always played the role of patient, as in(8)-(9).

(8) *Picchiata brutalmente dal fidanzato all'alba del primo dell'anno.* (CAJan2019)

'[She was] brutally **hit by** [her] boyfriend at dawn on New Year's Day.'

(9) *Lo scorso luglio la donna **era stata scaraventata** a terra, al culmine di un violento litigio.* (EBNov2018)

'Last July, the woman **was thrown** to the ground at the height of a violent argument.'

As passives are a P-oriented construction (Section 2.1), they conceptualize an event that has the patient-victim as a mental access point. This constructional feature of passives interacts with the discourse properties of passive agents (Section 2.2). As a valency decreasing strategy, passives allow for agents' omission: as non-obligatory participants, passive agents must be discursively salient when overt. In GBV Corpus, in 14/56 (viz. 25%) passive constructions with the victim as a first participant, the perpetrator was overtly expressed and encoded as an agent, as in (8), whereas in 38/56 events (viz. 67.8%) the passive was agentless, as in (9).¹¹

Besides the victim, the first slot of passive constructions could be occupied by nominals (16/75 events, viz. 21.3%), as in (10).

(10) *...per segnalare aggressioni e violenze **compiute da parte del coniuge.***
(CAOct2017)

'...to report *assaults and abuses* **perpetrated by her husband.**'

Again, nominals, such as *aggressioni e violenze* in (10), profile a reified entity rather than a process (as, instead, do the corresponding verbs *aggredire* 'assault' and *violentare* 'sexually assault'). Moreover, in passive constructions with nominals as

¹¹ In the remaining four passives, the agent is played by another entity (see (13)).

first participants, passive agents are more frequently omitted, as in (11) (11/16, viz. 68.8%), rather than expressed, as in (10) (4/16, viz. 31.2%).¹²

(11) *La donna si era dovuta rivolgere al Pronto Soccorso per le botte **patite**.*
(EBNov2018)

‘The woman had to go to the emergency room because of the **suffered blows**.’

Passive events in which the first slot was occupied by other nouns (3/75 events, viz. 4%), as (12), are always agentless:

(12) *...per la vittima a cui **era stato sottratto** anche il relativo cellulare.*
(EBFeb2017)

‘...for the victim, who **was also deprived** of her the cell phone.’

Table 5 summarizes data concerning passive agents in GBV Corpus.

Omitted agent	Expressed agent	
	Perpetrator	Other entity
52 (69.3%)	18 (24%)	5 (6.6%)

Table 5. Passive agents

Finally, perpetrators’ backgrounding was also achieved by encoding other entities, such as instruments, as agents. This is the case of *da un pugno* in (13):

(13) *...**era stata colpita da un pugno** alla schiena.* (EBNov2018)

‘...[she] **was hit by a punch** at her back.’

3.2.3 Nominal constructions and their participants

¹² In a single passage (*Due colpi di arma da fuoco **sparati da un revolver*** ‘Two gunshots **shot by a revolver**’ GSApr2019), the agent is possibly another entity, i.e. the revolver, which however might be also analyzed as a source.

Nominal constructions discursively reify the event and background participants' relationship (Section 2.1). This is confirmed by the fact that, as displayed in Table 6, the participants in the event were most frequently (196/249, viz. 78.8%) omitted with these constructions.

NOMINAL CONSTRUCTION	1 st participant	2 nd participant	Total
Victim	16	3	19 (7.6%)
Perpetrator	19	1	20 (8%)
Other	12	-	12 (4.8%)
Both	6	-	6 (2.4%)
None	196		196 (78.7%)
TOTAL	249		

Table 6: Participants of nominal constructions

However, as with passive agents (Section 3.2.2), we can say that, since optional, the expression of participants tends to put them under focus. Only in 20/249 (viz. 8%) of nominal constructions, the perpetrator was mentioned. Furthermore, as discussed in Section 3.2.1, even if mentioned, the perpetrator was encoded as an agent proper only in 6/249 (viz. 2.4%) events, as in (14), while as a possessor in 14/249 (viz. 5.6%) events, as in (15), in which the heavier PP was used to codify the victim-patient.

(14) *...era stata vittima di una violenta **aggressione** da parte del suo ex compagno.* (CAMar2014)

'...[she] was victim of a violent **assault** on her former partner's part.'

(15) *...dopo l'ennesima **aggressione** del 28enne ai danni della moglie 26enne.* (EBOct2018)

'...after the umpteenth **assault** of the 28-years-old man against his 26-years-old wife.'

Finally, it is interesting to describe nominal constructions in which both the victim and the perpetrator were mentioned conjunctively: both participants played the same role each and, thus, agentivity was equally assigned to both of them, as in (16).

(16) *Prima un acceso **litigio** tra i due fidanzati ...* (CAJan2019)

‘At first a heated **fight** between the two spouses...’

This is similar to what happens in reciprocal constructions (3/720 events, viz. 0.42%), in which the two participants play the same semantic role each, and are attributed the same agentivity, as in (17).¹³

(17) *...genitori che **stavano litigando** violentemente.* (CAFeb2018)

‘...parents, who **were** vehemently **fighting**.’

3.3 Overall results of the corpus study

The analysis of Section 3.2 shows that different constructions can describe the same event from different perspectives. Moreover, the overall process, its participants, and their relation can be profiled, backgrounded or suppressed. In this section, we propose to directly correlate two scalar values, specifically, the degree of agentivity and transitivity, on the one hand, and the degree of responsibility attributed to perpetrators, on the other. We ordered the attested constructions along a continuum of agentivity/responsibility, which we carved up into three macro-values, whose corresponding constructions and characteristics are described in Table 7.

¹³ Similarly, in one active event the victim and the perpetrator are both 1st patient participants (*entrambi hanno riportato lievi contusioni* PPJuly2017 ‘both suffered minor contusions’), thus depicted as similarly affected by the reported event.

Agentivity/responsibility	Constructions	Freq.	Total
High			
A-oriented; overt agent-perpetrator	- Active/causative/reflexive, 1 st part.: agent-perpetrator, 2 nd /3 rd part.: patient-victim	249	290 (40.2%)
	- Active/reflexive, 1 st part.: agent-perpetrator, victim-patientless	41	
Middle			
A-oriented; perpetrator ≠ agent	- Active, 1 st part.: agent-other entity	4	49 (6.8%)
P-oriented; overt agent-perpetrator	- Passive, 1 st part.: patient-victim/nominal, 2 nd /3 rd part.: agent-perpetrator	18	
	- Active/reflexive, 1 st part.: patient-victim, 2 nd part.: perpetrator/other entity	11	
Symmetric	- Reciprocal/active/nominal, 1 st part.: agent/patient-both	10	
Reified nominals; overt agent-perpetrator	- Nominal, overt agent-perpetrator	6	
Low			
P-oriented; perpetrator ≠ agent	- Passive, 1 st part.: patient-victim/nominal/other, 2 nd : agent-other entity	5	381 (53%)
	- Active, 1 st part.: patient-victim, 2 nd part.: nominal, 3 rd part.: possessor-perpetrator	3	
Reified nominal; perpetrator ≠ agent	- Nominal, 1 st part.: possessor-perpetrator	14	
P-oriented; agentless	- Passive, 1 st part.: patient-victim/nominal/other, perpetrator-agentless	52	
	- Active, 1 st part.: patient-victim, 2 nd part.: nominal/other entity, perpetrator-agentless	16	
Reified nominal; agentless	- Nominal, perpetrator-agentless	223	
Bare happening	- Active, 1 st part.: nominal	44	
	- Anticausatives	24	
Total			720 (100%)

Table 7: Correlation between the degree of transitivity/agentivity and responsibility

Table 7 shows that, in the GBV corpus, conscious or routinized constructional options favor a conceptualization of the GBV event in which the degree of responsibility assigned to perpetrators-agents is relatively low.

4. Perception experiment – Test 1

The outcome of the corpus study was empirically tested with two experimental tests, with the aim of assessing whether and to what degree individuals perceived the responsibility of both perpetrator and victim of GBV according to the syntactic and semantic features of the constructions denoting the deed.

The purpose of the first experimental test was two-fold. First, it aimed to replicate for Italian a combination of CDA and perception studies that allows observation of the reaction of readers to the reporting of GBV events in media discourse that had already been adopted for other languages (cf. Henley et al. 1995; Hart 2018). Second, it aimed to assess whether the same methodology used in previous studies could be replicated for Italian or whether other variables ought also to be considered. These preliminary observations were used to decide which variables should be included in a second, broader test on the perception of GBV (see section 5).

4.1 Methods and data

The first perception study recruited participants among the researchers' acquaintances, via personal invitation or posts published on social media. These acquaintances were then asked to invite other participants, aiming for a *snowball effect*, which might improve the socio-demographic richness of the participant's pool in a qualitative investigation (Noy 2008). The experiment was distributed online through the Google Modules platform. A computer-based release was chosen over a paper-based distribution for this first experiment, both for feasibility reasons and also to boost the intrinsic motivation of the participants engaging in a test that did not provide any extrinsic reward (Buhrmester et al. 2011).

The experiment was administered to 159 participants (113 females, 44 males, 2 genderqueers) with an average age of 30, all native speakers of Italian. Participants were randomly allocated one of five questionnaires, as can be seen in Table 8. Each questionnaire tested one of five different syntactic variables, namely, actives, passives with agent, agentless passives, agentless nominal constructions, and nominal constructions with agent.

Questionnaire	Syntactic variable	Participants
1	Active construction	27
2	Passive with agent	36
3	Agentless passive	33
4	Agentless nominal construction	40
5	Nominal construction with agent	23
Total		159

Table 8. Number of participants per questionnaire.

When starting the perception test, participants were informed about the experimental conditions and the general goal of the experiment, i.e. the study of the perception of violence in the media. The description of the goal was intentionally not too detailed in order to avoid biasing the answers of the participants. Participants were advised they would be allowed to fill in the questionnaire if they were between 18 and 60 years old, and that their participation was anonymous and voluntary. The possible risks (i.e. exposure to violence lexicon) and advantages of taking part in the experiment (i.e. contributing to scientific research) were also explained, and participants were advised that they could leave the questionnaire at any time if they felt uncomfortable. The structure of the experiment and the tasks were broadly outlined: participants were asked to read the texts provided and then to continue to answer three related questions without referring back to the text. This decision was made to reduce the chances of participants overthinking their responses.

The perception test consisted of six brief texts, including two stimuli and four distractors. Both stimuli and distractors were allegedly taken from the media, but actually, they were each author-constructed to include one of the five syntactic variables considered for the study (see Table 9). The stimuli appeared as texts 2 and 5, and they “reported” a case of abuse of a woman and a case of a woman’s murder respectively, as was done previously in Henley et al. (1995). The stimuli were structured with an unchanging frame comprising two sentences surrounding a variable proper stimulus, as shown in (1). The first sentence of the frame set the scene for the GBV while the last sentence reported the epilogue of the event.

(1) *La polizia è intervenuta ieri notte in una piccola frazione di campagna e si è trovata di fronte a una scena già vista: [STIMULUS] L'ultima telefonata alle forze dell'ordine è partita dai vicini di casa che hanno sentito le urla.*

'Police intervened last night in a small country suburb and they faced a previously seen scene: [STIMULUS]. The last phone call to the police came from the neighbors who had heard the screams.'

Table 9 presents the five stimuli used in the two scenarios (abuse and murder) according to the aforementioned five syntactic variables. The latter were independently tested in the five different experimental types; each experimental type evaluated both situations (i.e. abuse and murder).

Syntactic variable	Stimulus 1: Abuse	Stimulus 2: Murder
Active	<i>Un uomo picchiava ripetutamente la moglie a causa della gelosia. [A man repeatedly beat his wife out of jealousy.]</i>	<i>Un uomo ha ammazzato la moglie al culmine di una lite causata dalla gelosia. [A man killed his wife at the peak of an argument caused by jealousy]</i>
Passive with agent	<i>Una donna veniva ripetutamente picchiata dal marito a causa della sua gelosia. [A woman was repeatedly beaten by her husband because of his jealousy.]</i>	<i>Una donna è stata ammazzata dal marito al culmine di una lite causata dalla gelosia. [A woman was killed by her husband at the peak of an argument caused by jealousy]</i>
Agentless passive	<i>Una donna veniva ripetutamente picchiata a causa della gelosia del marito. [A woman was repeatedly beaten because of her husband's jealousy.]</i>	<i>Una donna è stata ammazzata al culmine di una lite causata dalla gelosia. [A woman was killed at the peak of an argument caused by jealousy]</i>
Agentless nominal construction	<i>un pestaggio ripetuto verso la moglie a causa della gelosia. [a repeated beating of the wife out of jealousy.]</i>	<i>l'omicidio della moglie al culmine di una lite causata dalla gelosia. [The murder of the wife at the peak of an argument caused by jealousy]</i>
Nominal construction with agent	<i>un pestaggio ripetuto verso la moglie da parte del marito a causa della gelosia. [a repeated beating of the wife by the husband out of jealousy.]</i>	<i>l'omicidio della moglie da parte del marito al culmine di una lite causata dalla gelosia. [The murder of the wife by her husband at the peak of an argument caused by jealousy]</i>

Table 9. Syntactic manipulation for the construction of the stimuli.

After reading the texts, participants answered three questions, according to a protocol adapted for Italian from Hart (2018: 412):

- (Q1) Who should be accused of the violence?
(Q2) How guilty is the person responsible for the action?
(Q3) How guilty is the person who suffers the action?

The first question was answered through a set of five multiple-choice answers, with the option of entering other values in an additional *other* section. For the target stimuli, the possible choices were: *definitely the man*, *the man*, *nobody*, *the wife*, *definitely the wife*. The last two questions were answered with a 7-point Likert scale with the following values: *extremely guilty* (7), *very guilty* (6), *somewhat guilty* (5), *guilty* (4), *not very guilty* (3), *barely guilty* (2), *not guilty at all* (1).

The distractors were the same for all experimental types and they appeared as texts 1, 3, 4, and 6. Their structure was similar to those of the stimuli so that they could reasonably be followed by the same questions posited for the stimuli. They were all related to criminal activities, but not about events of GBV. Therefore, the set of multiple-choice answers for Q1 varied slightly with respect to the two target stimuli but maintained the same overall structure.

After completing the experiment, participants were asked for personal data including age, gender, sexual orientation, birth province, residence province, level of education, and political orientation.

4.2 Analysis

As shown in Table 8, different numbers of subjects responded to each of the five questionnaires. For this reason, we decided to proceed with a qualitative investigation, in order to use these data to refine our methodology in respect to the questions asked and the variables used.

First, we investigated who was perceived to be the culprit of abuses against a woman in the different questionnaires. The results presented in Table 10 show that the man was almost always indicated as the culprit. In a single instance of agentless nominal construction, *jealousy* was regarded as the culprit of the abuse. Since *jealousy* was not listed among the possible answers, it was added by the participant in the *other* section, as also occurred in other cases.

	Active	Passive with agent	Agentless passive	Nominal construction with agent	Agentless nominal construction
Surely the Man	22 (81.5%)	30 (83.3%)	18 (52.9%)	16 (69.6%)	26 (65%)
The Man	5 (18.5%)	6 (16.7%)	14 (41.2%)	7 (30.4%)	13 (32.5%)
Jealousy	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)

Table 10. Identification of the culprit of abuses according to syntactic constructions.

As for the stimuli in the cases of murder, Table 11 shows that, although the victim in the texts was clearly a female, in some questionnaires with nominal constructions and in one case with active, the dead woman was still deemed to be the culprit. With nominal constructions, *jealousy* was also indicated as the culpable agent, and in two instances the man and the woman were both designated culprits. In the comments to these last two answers, the respondents explained that the woman should be considered as guilty as the man because she had probably done something to cause her partner's violent reaction. Finally, one respondent of the questionnaire featuring agentless passive constructions opined that nobody should be blamed for the murder.

	Active	Passive with agent	Agentless passive	Nominal construction with agent	Agentless nominal construction
Surely the Man	18 (66.7%)	26 (72.2%)	23 (67.6 %)	17 (73.9%)	24 (60%)
The Man	8 (29.6%)	10 (27.8%)	10 (29.4%)	5 (21.7%)	12 (30%)
Jealousy	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)
The Woman	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)
Surely the Woman	1 (3.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)
Nobody	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Both the man and the woman	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.3%)	1 (2.5%)

Table 11. Identification of the culprit of female murder according to syntactic constructions.

We also checked to see if there was any variability associated with respondents' gender, age or other sociolinguistic variables considered, but the dataset was too small to allow reliable analysis of these kinds of comparisons.

4.3 Summary of the results

These first results showed that the main difference in the attribution of agentivity to the perpetrator was to be found in the different grammatical constructions and not in

the semantics of the verb, with an opposition among active, passive, and nominal forms. However, no difference seemed to emerge between the expression of the agent in the passive and in the nominal constructions. Secondly, the unforeseen emergence of *jealousy* among the possible culprits for both abuses and murders convinced us to also consider this agent, which had not been among the multiple-choice answers offered, and to include it in the second stage of research with the same contextual design.

Moreover, another interesting consideration emerged by comparing the results associated with the two stimuli: contrary to the findings of Henley et al. (1995), the abuse and the murder topics triggered similar answers, although in the killing articles a greater variety of answers emerged. It was also evident that the number of respondents to the different questionnaires needed to be balanced more carefully in order to properly compare the different construction types.

5. Perception experiment – Test 2

All the observations that emerged in the first stage of the empirical study were integrated in the design of a second perception test, by narrowing the goal solely to cases of female murders. Setting aside the cases of abuse allowed us to avoid a potential priming effect caused by presenting two target stimuli in the same questionnaire. Furthermore, in line with the results of the first perception study, the number of constructions tested was reduced to three, with an opposition just among active, passive, and nominal constructions, both with expressed agent.

5.1 Methods and data

Participants in the second experiment were recruited among the first-year students of the course of *Language and Communication* at the faculty of *Communication, Information, Multimediality* (CIM) at University of Pavia (Italy). The experiment was distributed to 115 participants (80 females, 35 males). They ranged between 18 and 43 years in age, with an average age of 20.44. All participants were native speakers of Italian. Participants were randomly distributed across six experimental types (see Table 12). The tests were handed out in paper form at the beginning of a class held by one of the investigators. Participants were told in advance that they would be

taking a test for research purposes, and they were alerted that they were neither obligated to participate nor would they be offered any reward for their contribution.

Questionnaire (n°)	Syntactic variable	Participants (n°)
1A	Active	19
1B	Active	19
2A	Passive with agent	19
2B	Passive with agent	19
3A	Nominal construction with agent	20
3B	Nominal construction with agent	19
Total		115

Table 12. Number of participants per experiment type.

Participants were asked to fill in the test anonymously and to write down only their age and gender as personal data. They were asked to complete the experiment in 10 minutes, reading the text and answering the related questions carefully but without too much pondering. Each experimental type consisted of a 75-word text, followed by five questions. The texts were similar to the ones of the first experiment. The variable stimulus was preceded by a sentence that introduced the GBV event and it was followed by two sentences that further described the deed. The stimulus reported the killing of a woman by her husband out of jealousy. This killing was presented alternatively with an active construction (*A man killed a woman out of jealousy*), with a passive construction with agent (*A woman was killed by a man out of jealousy*), and with a nominal construction with agent (*The killing of a woman by a man out of jealousy*).

The experiment tested only three syntactic variables, namely (1) actives, (2) passives, (3) nominal constructions. Each syntactic variable was investigated by ordering the answers to the related questions in two different ways, thus reaching a total of 3X2 sets. The reason for the variation in sequencing lies in the concepts of visual foregrounding and backgrounding: the position of the answers might influence the salience they acquire for the reader (Kress & van Leeuwen 2002).

The first and third questions (Q1 and Q3) asked who or what were, respectively, the perpetrator and the victim of the violence. For each question, the five predetermined answers included *the woman*, *jealousy*, *the man*, *nothing/nobody*, and *other*, thus allowing participants to freely indicate the perpetrator of the violence. The second and fourth questions (Q2 and Q4) asked how responsible the perpetrator of the violence or the victim were; much as in the first experiment, the possible answers were arrayed on a 7-point Likert scale from *Not at all* to *Definitely*. Finally, an open question was added asking for cumulative comments on the texts and/or motivations for the given answers.

5.2 Analysis

Prior to the analysis of the results of the second perception study, data previously collected through Google Modules were processed in a matrix with the software IBM SPSS 20. We first considered each question separately, in order to reduce the variability of the answers for the first and third questions to four main variants: *the man*, *the woman*, *jealousy*, *other*. The *other* option included multiple answers: for instance, some respondents marked both *the woman* and *jealousy* and other respondents wrote down something pertinent to the text but not included among the multiple-choice answers (e.g. *the one who committed the crime*). Our initial plan was to investigate this *other* category further, but our univariate analysis showed that this variant was chosen only in 5 cases for the first question (4.3%) and in 3 cases for the third question (2.6%). Furthermore, we noticed that Q3 presented the most unbalanced distribution of answers among our four questions, since in 95.7% of the cases the woman was indicated as the victim of the crime. Conversely, the perpetrator of the violence was indicated as the man in 73% of the cases, with jealousy selected as the responsible agent in 21.7% of the answers.

Then, we proceeded by testing to determine whether the syntactic construction of the different stimuli played a role in identifying the responsible agent for the crime. The correlation between the answers to the first question and the construction was statistically significant, and it proved quite strong as indicated by Cramer's V value ($\chi^2(6)=20.769$, $p=.002$, Cramer's $V=0.3$). It should be noted that no differences emerged regarding the order of presentation of the answers (i.e. between questionnaires A and B).

	Active	Passive	Nominal constructions
The man	36 (94.7%)	26 (68.4%)	22 (56.4%)
The woman	0 (0%)	1 (2.6%)	0 (0%)
Jealousy	1 (2.6%)	8 (21.1%)	16 (41%)
Other	1 (2.6%)	3 (7.9%)	1 (2.6%)
TOTAL	38 (100%)	38 (100%)	39 (100%)

Table 13. Variation in the identification of the responsible of the violence according to the syntactic construction.

Data in Table 13 shows that the man was indicated as responsible for the violence in 94.7% with actives, but this value decreased to 68.4% with passives and to 56.4% with nominal constructions. Conversely, responsibility was attributed particularly to jealousy with nominal constructions (41%) followed by passives (21.1%); with actives only one respondent indicated jealousy as responsible for GBV. Finally, the only case of responsibility being attributed to the woman (i.e. the victim) was found with a passive construction.

We also checked whether the respondents' gender played a role in the attribution of responsibility in the three different constructions. The results presented in Table 14 are statistically significant for both the male ($\chi^2(6)=15.529$, $p=.017$, Cramer's $V=0.471$) and the female ($\chi^2(6)=7.835$, $p=.009$, Cramer's $V=0.221$) subgroups.

	MALE			FEMALE		
	Active	Passive	Nominal construction	Active	Passive	Nominal construction
The man	10 (100%)	7 (50%)	3 (27.3%)	26 (92.9%)	19 (79.2%)	19 (67.9%)
The woman	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Jealousy	0 (0%)	5 (35.7%)	8 (72.7%)	1 (3.6%)	3 (12.5%)	8 (28.6%)
Other	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	0 (0%)	1 (3.6%)	2 (8.3%)	1 (3.6%)
TOTAL	10 (100%)	14 (100%)	11 (100%)	28 (100%)	24 (100%)	28 (100%)

Table 14. Variation in the identification of the responsible of the violence according to the syntactic construction, divided by the respondents' gender

In both subgroups, the active construction is associated with the man's responsibility in almost all cases. Conversely, male respondents are more prone to attribute the responsibility to jealousy in case of nominal constructions (72.7%) and with passives (35.7%), whereas for female respondents the primarily responsible still remains the man. However, albeit statistically significant, these data derive from only a small

sample and should be verified by further enquiry with more subjects balanced by gender.

Finally, we checked to see whether there was a variation in the degree of responsibility attributed to the culprit (Q2) or the victim (Q4) of the violence according to the syntactic construction used to describe the event. Neither correlation proved statistically significant. However, for future investigations, it should be noted that in all constructions, the culprit was always indicated as very or dramatically responsible (degrees 6 and 7 on the Likert scale), with a slight decrease for the nominal constructions. In contrast, the answers for the fourth questions were more widely distributed across the 7-point scale: for all constructions, the victim was still recognized as partially (12 total cases) or seriously (9 cases) responsible for the violence.

6. Discussion

Following the lead of previous works on construction grammar and CDA, this work analyzed GBV as reported by Italian media and perceived by Italian readers. The results of the two studies suggest a common emerging pattern, confirming previous findings in the literature on this topic.

Our analysis of the GBV corpus demonstrated that GBV in Italian local daily newspapers is frequently represented through constructions that promote agent-perpetrator backgrounding/suppression or that depict the events as bare happenings. This is consistent with the findings in previous studies of media representation of GBV for other languages: the role of the perpetrator tends to be diminished through agentless nominal or passive constructions, resulting in a suppression or backgrounding of the real culprit (cf. Tranchese & Zollo 2013; Bohner 2001).

Our perception tests confirmed these findings. In both tests, but particularly in test 2, the perpetrator was perceived to be less responsible than the victim, or his culpability was attributed to an abstract emotion (i.e. jealousy), especially in nominal and passive constructions. This finding suggests that the backgrounding strategy produces a focus-change that alters the perception both of the real GBV perpetrator and of his degree of guilt. These findings for Italian strongly support what has been noted for other languages (e.g. Henley et al. 1995; Hart 2018). In contrast to

previous studies, our first perception study showed that abuses appear to be perceived as more serious than murders. However, since the comparison was only indirect, further studies focusing specifically on abuses will help confirm or reject the findings of this study vis-a-vis the topic of GBV and readers' perception of guilt.

7. Conclusions and future perspectives

Through an integrated approach combining corpus analysis and perception studies, this paper offers a first investigation into how grammatical constructions contribute to representing GBV events in Italian news language and to readers' perception of the degree of perpetrators' guilt. The analysis of the corpus of local daily newspapers confirmed that GBV events are frequently represented by constructions that put the perpetrators in the background and reduce the directedness of their responsibility through leaving the agent unexpressed or depicting the events as bare happenings. These constructions are connected with different perceived degrees of responsibility: within the limits of our study, it was confirmed that nominal and passive constructions diminish the responsibility of perpetrators and shift it toward a third inanimate entity, that is, jealousy.

Further studies on this topic should include larger numbers of respondents for the perception tests, and investigate variation in the attribution of GBV responsibility both according to the syntactic constructions and also according to sociolinguistic variables such as readers' age and education level. From a corpus linguistic perspective, more data from local newspapers should be employed to confirm the analysis, together with data from other genres, including, for example, samples of testimony from trials concerning GBV.

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