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Edited by Roberta D'Alessandro, Adam Ledgeway and Ian Roberts

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## Syntactic variation and the dialects of Italy: an overview

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*Roberta D'Alessandro, Adam Ledgeway and Ian Roberts*

### 1. Introduction

This collection of articles is a spin-off from the first Cambridge Italian Dialect Syntax Meeting (CIDSIM), held at Downing College, University of Cambridge, 22–3 April 2005. This now-annual event and the present volume it spawned bear witness to the fact that, over recent decades, researchers working on the syntax of the dialects of Italy have figured heavily in much of the generative literature, coming to assume a central role in setting and shaping the research agenda through their investigations of such topics as auxiliary selection, subject and object clitics, negation, *wh*-movement and the functional architecture of the clause. One need only think of the pioneering work of such linguists as Paola Benincà, Anna Cardinaletti, Richard Kayne, Michele Loporcaro, Rita Manzini, Nicola Munaro, Cecilia Poletto, Leonardo Savoia, Nigel Vincent and Raffaella Zanuttini, to name just a few, who have shown how the dialects offer fertile, and often virgin, territory in which to profitably study, among other things, parametric variation. While neighbouring dialects tend to be closely related to each other, manifestly displaying in most cases a high degree of structural homogeneity, they do nonetheless often diverge minimally in significant and interesting ways which allow the linguist to isolate and observe what lies behind surface differences in particular parametric settings across a range of otherwise highly homogenized grammars. By drawing on such microvariation, it is possible to determine which phenomena are correlated with particular parametric options and how such relationships are mapped onto the syntax.

Furthermore, many of the dialects boast rich and long literary traditions (dating back as far as the late tenth century) which, coupled with an abundance of diachronic and synchronic variation, offer the historical linguist a rare opportunity to explore the structural evolution of a vast number of lesser-known Romance varieties. The historical evidence of the dialects has therefore often been subject to in-depth study in recent years (cf. research by, among others, Benincà, Cennamo, La Fauci, Loporcaro, Parry, Vanelli, Vincent),

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insofar as it affords the historical linguist an invaluable body of data to investigate many of the mechanisms involved in language change.

Besides their role in shaping and informing theories of generative syntax and language change, it is also widely recognized that, with such a profusion of variation concentrated into so limited a geographical area, the dialects constitute a remarkable observatory for synchronic and diachronic variation in all aspects of linguistic structure. As such, the dialects have a valuable role to play in investigating and testing typological variation, frequently revealing how the extent of structural variation within Romance, and indeed even within Indo-European and further afield, can prove to be considerably greater than is traditionally assumed.

From the above, it is therefore clear that Italy's unique *patrimonio dialettale*, although frequently overlooked in the past, has a great deal to contribute to research into such areas as linguistic theory, historical linguistics and typological variation. Nonetheless, the syntax of the dialects still represents a relatively poorly understood area of Italian dialectology, to the extent that there still remains a considerable amount of fieldwork to be done in recording and cataloguing the linguistic diversity within the Italian territory, as well as in bringing such facts to the attention of the wider linguistic community as part of a more general endeavour to bridge the gap between the familiar data of standard Romance and those of lesser-known Romance varieties. With this in mind, the present volume offers a number of valuable insights into the syntax of the dialects, including those of the South, which historically have tended to be eclipsed by the dialects of the North (cf. Ledgeway 2007a), highlighting how the dialect data present the linguist with a fertile test-bed in which to investigate, challenge and assess orthodox ideas in the literature about language structure, language change and language variation.

In particular, the book brings together a rich and varied collection of essays on a number of topics in Italian dialect syntax written by leading researchers in the field of Italian dialectology and, in many cases, also in the field of syntactic theory. The seventeen essays, which fall into three thematic areas of the nominal domain, the verbal domain and the left periphery of the clause, present data from the dialects of northern, central and southern Italy, as well as the islands (Sardinia, Sicily), that directly bear on a range of diachronic and synchronic issues and problems. While admittedly the individual approaches to the three thematic areas often embrace a number of quite different perspectives, ranging from the purely descriptive to the more formal (including enlightening analyses of novel dialectal data in terms of such frameworks as Minimalism, Optimality Theory, Cartography and Relational Grammar), this variety of approaches duly reflects the extraordinary breadth and diversity of interests that issues in Italian dialectology hold for the wider linguistic community. It is thus our firm conviction that such eclecticism should not be viewed as a weakness of the present

volume, but rather as a strength, insofar as it illustrates how clear and systematic descriptions of the dialect data can consistently be exploited to yield and test empirically robust generalizations, as well as profitably inform and challenge a rich and diverse set of theoretical assumptions.

By way of an introduction to the volume, we sketch below a general overview of the state of the art in Italian dialect syntax according to the three thematic areas identified above, outlining the principal aspects of diatopic, diachronic and typological variation, as well as a critical assessment of the role of Italian dialect data in informing and shaping recent developments in linguistic theory.

## 2. The pronominal domain: DP-NP structure, clitics and null subjects

### 2.1. Introduction

Here I will concentrate on clitic pronouns in particular, as well as the silent pronoun that has been proposed as central to the analysis of null subjects. I will not discuss nominalizations or complex nominals. Throughout, I adopt the DP-hypothesis, and briefly speculate on the internal phasal structure of DP.

The study of clitic pronouns in generative grammar takes its lead from Kayne's (1972; 1975) work on French. Kayne (1975) analysed the 'special' positioning of French complement clitics (in the sense of Zwicky 1977) and proposed a movement account of this which had the important property of obeying the Specified Subject Condition (SSC), one of the conditions on transformations proposed in Chomsky (1973). Thus, clitic-movement cannot move across the null PRO subject of the subordinate clause in such examples as (1):<sup>1</sup>

- 1 a \*Paul la veut [ PRO manger (la) ]  
 Paul it= wants eat.inf. it  
 'Paul wants to eat it'
- b \*Paul l' a décidé d' [PRO acheter (l') ]  
 Paul it= has decided of buy.inf. it  
 'Paul has decided to buy it'

Rizzi (1976; 1978)<sup>2</sup> observed that Italian complement clitics differ from their French counterparts in not obeying the SSC when contained in the complement of a lexically defined class of verbs. This class of verbs includes *volere* 'to

<sup>1</sup> In this respect, northern Italian dialects behave like French (Benincà 1994c: 130–5; Poletto 1997: 142):

i Koñéde ve regolèr  
 you-must yourselves= dress.inf.  
 'You must get dressed' (Fas., Benincà 1994c: 134)

<sup>2</sup> The latter republished as Rizzi (1982: ch. 1) and Rizzi (2000a).

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want', but excludes *decidere* 'to decide'; hence Italian shows the contrast in (2), while, as (1) shows, French does not distinguish these examples:

- 2 a Paolo la vuole mangiare  
Paul it= wants eat.inf.  
b \*Paolo l' ha deciso di comprare  
Paul it= has decided of buy.inf.

Rizzi proposed a 'restructuring rule' for the infinitival complements of verbs of the *volere* class, which effectively voided the effects of the SSC in just these cases.

Kayne (1972) analysed French subject clitic pronouns as part of his general analysis of the various subject-inversion phenomena found in French: subject-clitic inversion, complex inversion and stylistic inversion. The three types of inversion are illustrated in (3):

- 3 a Quand est-il arrivé? (subject-clitic inversion)  
when is=he arrived  
'When did he arrive?'  
b Quand ton père est-il arrivé? (complex inversion)  
when your father is=he arrived  
'When did your father arrive?'  
c Quand est arrivé ton père? (stylistic inversion)  
when is arrived your father  
'When did your father arrive?'

Kayne distinguished these types of inversion on a number of grounds. For example, stylistic inversion can apply in indirect questions, while subject-clitic and complex inversion cannot, and stylistic inversion cannot occur in yes/no-questions (direct or indirect), while subject-clitic and complex inversion can. Most importantly, stylistic inversion cannot affect clitics, but subject-clitic inversion and complex inversion must:

- 4 a \*Quand est arrivé-t-il?  
when is arrived=he  
b \*Quand est ton père arrivé?  
when is your father arrived

Standard Italian lacks a series of atonic subject pronouns comparable to the French *je*-series. Correspondingly, Italian appears to lack an obvious counterpart to subject-clitic inversion and complex inversion. Both subject clitics and subject-clitic inversion (and, much more rarely, complex inversion) are attested in northern Italian dialects, though, as we shall see in §2.3.

However, Standard Italian (and, as far as we are aware, all central and southern Italo-Romance dialects) allows a finite sentence with no surface subject present to be interpreted as if it has a definite pronominal subject, unlike French:

- 5 a Je mange la pomme  
     I= eat the apple
- b Mangio la mela  
     I-eat the apple

(5b) illustrates what has become known as the ‘null-subject’ property of Standard Italian. There is a long-standing intuition that languages like Italian mark the pronominal subject ‘in the verb’, namely by the person-number agreement inflection on a finite verb. In this connection, Roberts and Holmberg (in press) quote Jespersen (1924: 213):

In many languages the distinction between the three persons is found not only in pronouns, but in verbs as well ... in Latin ... Italian, Hebrew, Finnish, etc. In such languages many sentences have no explicit indication of the subject, and *ego amo, tu amas* is at first said only when it is necessary or desirable to lay special stress on the idea I, thou.

The idea here is that, since a pronominal subject can be expressed ‘in the verb’ in such languages as Italian, there is no general requirement to pronounce the subject separately as a nominative pronoun. Languages like French, and English, on the other hand, lack the inflectional means to express the subject ‘in the verb’, and so subject pronouns must appear in the relevant environments. There is a sense, then, in which the Italian counterpart of French *je* in (5a) is the ending *-o*. This notion persists in the many recent analyses of null subjects.<sup>3</sup> Northern Italian dialects, many of which appear to exhibit some ‘null-subject’ phenomena while requiring the presence of subject clitics in many contexts as well, clearly present an interesting challenge to this view (see §2.3 below, and Cardinaletti and Repetti this volume).

Perlmutter (1971) linked the possibility of null subjects to another important syntactic property, the possibility of moving a subject from a position immediately following an overt complementizer by means of an operation such as *wh*-movement:

- 6 a \*Who did you say that – wrote this book?
- b \*Qui as-tu dit qu’ – a écrit ce livre?
- c Chi hai detto che – ha scritto questo libro?  
     who have.2sg.(=you) said that – has written this book

In null-subject languages, as Perlmutter observed, it appears that ‘complementizer-trace effects’ of the kind shown in (6a–b) are not found.

<sup>3</sup> See, among others, Fassi Fehri (1993), Barbosa (1995; in press), Nash and Rouveret (1997), Ordoñez (1997), Pollock (1997), Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou (1998), Platzack (2004), Manzini and Savoia (2005; 2007), Holmberg (in press).

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Rizzi (1982: ch. 4) relates this to the much greater availability of postverbal subjects in declaratives in null-subject languages:

- 7 a Hanno telefonato molti studenti  
     b \*Ont téléphoné beaucoup d' étudiants  
        have telephoned many (of) students  
        'Many students have telephoned'

Once again, evidence from northern Italian dialects has proven essential to the theoretical and typological debate here.

The early work of Kayne, Perlmutter and Rizzi on clitics and null subjects was extremely influential, both in comparative Romance syntax and in syntactic theory more generally. Accordingly, I will concentrate my discussion on these topics here. In §2.2 I discuss complement clitics; in §2.3 I turn to subject clitics and the null-subject parameter. Finally, in §2.4 I will consider the relation between the 'microparametric' approach to comparative syntax that naturally lends itself to the analysis of closely related systems such as the Italian dialects, and the 'macroparametric' approach that, arguably, was the earlier approach in principles-and-parameters theory (and is well exemplified by Rizzi 1982), and whose validity has recently been defended by Baker (2008a, b). Drawing on proposals sketched in Roberts and Holmberg (in press), I will suggest a link between the two.

## 2.2. Complement clitics

The principal motivation for a movement analysis of the position of clitic pronouns in most Romance varieties comes from paradigms like the following from Neapolitan:

- 8 a Giuanne faceva 'a pizza  
     Giuanne was-making the pizza  
     'Giuanne was making the pizza'  
     b Giuanne 'a faceva  
        Giuanne it= was-making  
        'Giuanne was making it'  
     c \*Giuanne 'a pizza faceva  
        Giuanne the pizza was-making  
     d \*Giuanne faceva 'a  
        Giuanne was-making it

(8a) illustrates the VO order, the usual neutral order in all contemporary Romance varieties where the object is a non-pronominal DP. In (8b), however, we observe that a clitic object must move to an immediately preverbal position. The ungrammaticality of (8c) shows us that comparable movement

of a non-pronominal DP is impossible, and (8d) shows that non-movement of the clitic is impossible.

However, examples such as (9) show us that clitics are sensitive to the argument structure of the verb. An intransitive like Neapolitan *rurmì* 'to sleep' cannot take a direct object. Hence, as (9a) shows, it cannot take a non-pronominal object, and, as (9b) shows, it cannot take a clitic object:

- 9 a \*Giuanne    *rurmiva*            'a    notte  
       Giuanne    was-sleeping    the    night
- b \*Giuanne    'a    *rurmiva*  
       Giuanne    it=    was-sleeping

There is a clear sense in which (9a–b) reflect a single property of *rurmì*: namely, that it cannot take a direct object. The simplest way to capture this is to posit that 'a and 'a notte both originate in the same structural direct-object position in (9). This position is not sanctioned by *rurmì*,<sup>4</sup> but is by a transitive verb like *fà* 'to do' in (8); hence the grammaticality, *modulo* clitic-movement, of (8) as opposed to (9). Let us suppose, then, that there is a stage of the derivation where the order of (8b) is like that in (8d). The clitic-placement rule moves the complement pronoun to the immediate left of the verb. This operation also applies to other kinds of complement, as shown in (10), taken from Neapolitan:

- 10 a Piero    m'    ha    rato    €5  
       Piero    me=    has    given    €5  
       'Piero gave me €5'
- b Piero    ce    ha    miso    'o    libro  
       Piero    there=    has    put    the    book  
       'Piero put the book there'

Further support for the idea that clitic placement is a genuine movement operation comes from the fact that it is subject to conditions on movement, such as the SSC, as illustrated in (1) and (2) above.<sup>5</sup>

Let us now review some of the other properties of (Italo-)Romance complement clitics. First, complement clitics strongly tend to be attracted to the verb. In finite clauses, they are typically attracted to the left of the verb, while there is

<sup>4</sup> This idea can be expressed in a variety of partially redundant ways: by s-selection, c-selection, subcategorization or  $\theta$ -role-assignment. I will leave the details aside here. Note, however, that I am assuming that grammatical functions are structurally instantiated, in fact structurally defined; see Chomsky (1965: ch. 2; 1981: 10).

<sup>5</sup> In recent versions of generative theory, the SSC is superseded by a condition requiring movement, and other relations, to be maximally local. In examples like (1), the lower clause will always contain a target for the object-clitic movement which is closer to the initial position of the object than any target in the higher clause, and hence the locality condition requires the clitic to stay in the lower clause. 'Clitic-climbing', as in the Italian (2a), requires the assumption that the lower target is missing and that there is a higher one in the main clause.

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much more variation in placement in non-finite clauses (in Standard Italian and Spanish, for example, enclisis is usual in non-finite clauses). There are Italian dialects, however, in which complement clitics can appear to the right of the verb, separated from it by a low adverb. Tortora (2002; this volume) gives such examples as the following from Borgomanerese (NO):<sup>6</sup>

- 11 a I        porti        mi-        lla  
       scl    I-bring    neg.    =it  
       'I'm not bringing it'
- b I        vangumma        già-        nni        da        dü        agni  
       scl    we-see        already    =us    from    two    years  
       'We've already been seeing each other for two years'

In Standard Italian, French and Spanish, clitics cannot be separated from the verb except by another clitic:

- 12 a \*Gianni    la,        penso,        mangia.  
       Gianni    it=    I-think    eats
- b Gianni    gliela        dà  
       Gianni    him=it=    gives  
       'Gianni gives it to him'

Clearly this is not the case in the Piedmontese variety shown in (11). Ledgeway and Lombardi (2005) also show that this is not the case in Cosentino, where orders such as the following are found:

- 13 a Un        vi        mancu        parranu  
       not    you=    not-even    they-speak  
       'In any case they won't speak to you'
- b Rosina    purtroppo        ci        sempre        fatica  
       Rosina    unfortunately    to-it=    always    works  
       'Rosina is unfortunately always working on it'

In nearly all Romance varieties, clitics cluster in a fixed order, which varies somewhat cross-linguistically:

- 14 a \*Jean    lui l'        a        donné  
       John    him=it=    has    given
- b Gianni    gliel'        ha        dato  
       John    him=it=    has    given  
       'John has given it to him'

<sup>6</sup> European Portuguese and Galician allow for enclisis of complement clitics to finite verbs under complex conditions relating to the nature of the initial (topicalized) constituent. This appears to be a phenomenon distinct from the Piedmontese one illustrated in the text.



- 15 a Ils me le donnent  
 they me= it =give  
 b Me lo danno  
 me= it= they-give  
 c U mi ðanu  
 it= me= they-give  
 'They give it to me'

(S. Nicolao (Corsica), Manzini and Savoia 2005, II:172)

Furthermore, clitic pronouns tend to be marked (to some extent at least) for morphological case, at least in the 3rd person. Hence in Standard Italian, we can distinguish the (historically) dative 3sg. clitic *gli* from the (historically) accusative *lo*, for example, and similarly in French, Spanish and many dialects (e.g. Calvello (PZ) dative *l'* vs accusative *lu*). Whether this historical residue of the case system has any synchronic significance, however, is hard to say.

Finally, Romance clitics are subject to a number of constraints, most of them first pointed out for French by Kayne (1975: 81f.). Complement clitics cannot be conjoined or appear in isolation in elliptical contexts:

- 16 a \*Gianni lo e la vedrà  
 Gianni him and her will-see  
 b Chi hai visto? \*Lo  
 who you-have seen him

Clitics also lack word stress, although they can bear phrasal stress, as in many southern Italian imperative forms such as Papasidero (CS) *mangiatillu!* eat.imp. =yourself=it ('eat it!').

In contrast, tonic or disjunctive pronouns in most Romance varieties have many of the properties clitics seem to lack. Firstly, they do not undergo clitic-placement:

- 16 c Gianni ha visto lei  
 John has seen her

(Note also that the clitic must have an animate interpretation here; *lei* cannot pick out a grammatically feminine inanimate referent such as 'pizza' or 'car'; see Cardinaletti and Starke (1999) for an interesting discussion and analysis of this.) These forms also appear in isolation:

- 17 Chi hai visto? Lui  
 who you-have seen him  
 'Who did you see?' 'Him'

These forms are typically reflexes of historically dative forms, but their form does not change as a result of their position or grammatical function; in other words, they do not inflect for case.

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Cardinaletti and Starke (1999) propose a tripartite division of pronouns into strong, weak and clitic. The division boils down to a structural distinction between a 'full' category – strong pronouns – and then two degrees of 'structural deficiency', with weak pronouns lacking the highest layer of structure and clitics a further layer. Cardinaletti and Starke treat strong pronouns as full DPs and clitics as the nominal equivalent of the IP. One way to think of this, in terms of Chomsky's recent proposals regarding phases, is to take the nominal to have at least the following structure:

18  $[_{DP} D [_{\varphi P} \varphi [_{nP} n [_{NP} N \dots ]]]]$

This parallels the simplest version of clause structure, as assumed in Chomsky (2000; 2001) and elsewhere:

19  $[_{CP} C [_{TP} T [_{vP} v [_{VP} V \dots ]]]]$

Both structures divide into two phases (the basic unit of cyclic derivation; see Chomsky 2001; 2008): a 'lexical' phase  $nP/vP$ , and an 'inflectional' phase  $CP/DP$ . The  $n/v$  head controls the realization of the lexical argument structure of the lexical head (which may have no intrinsic category; Marantz 1997), while  $D/C$  controls the interaction between the whole category and external forces (case, agreement, selection properties, along with discourse (speech act, definiteness) properties).<sup>7</sup> Returning to clitics, we can think that some pronominals lack the 'lexical phase' and so have the structure  $[_{DP} D [_{\varphi P} \varphi ]]$ ; this may be the case for weak pronouns, for example. Clitics, following Cardinaletti and Starke, may then lack the  $D$ -layer, being simply  $\varphi$ -elements. This and similar ideas are developed by Déchaîne and Wiltschko (2002), Harley and Ritter (2002) and Roberts (to appear). Although the details differ, there is some consensus on the fact that clitics are structurally or featurally deficient; in different ways, this idea is pursued in the present volume by Manzini and Savoia, Savoia and Manzini, Egerland (for the diachrony of indefinite pronouns), and Cardinaletti and Repetti.

If clitic-placement is movement, what kind of movement is it? A number of analytical possibilities are made available in current and recent syntactic theory. Since clitics are deficient in structure, a natural suggestion is that

<sup>7</sup> Of course, the familiar tension arises between the adoption of simplified structures like those in (18) and (19) and the evidence from cartographical work on both  $DP$  and  $CP$  for considerably more complex structures (see in particular §4 of this Introduction for an indication of the nature of the full, cartographic structure of  $CP$ ). What we may need to allow for is iteration of each part of the structure in (18)–(19), forming a 'field' of the abstract form  $\dots [X [X [X [X \dots (X \in \{C, T, v, D, \varphi, n\})]]]]$ . This is the cartographic structure without the addition of specific labels individuating and ordering the functional heads in each field. This idea is similar, but not identical, to Chomsky's (2006) speculation that the cartographic structure represents 'the linearization of features of phase heads' (of course, what remains completely unclear is why the linearization is as it is, i.e. why the heads are ordered as they are).