

The twists and shakes of pro drop: On the licensing of null topics in Old Italian varieties

1. The problem

One of the phenomena traditionally analyzed through the notion of government is the licensing of null subjects in Old French and Old (Northern) Italian. Since Adams (1987), Roberts (1993), Benincá (2006) and others, the empirical observation that subject *pro* is only possible in main clauses and those (limited) embedded clauses that display V to C movement was interpreted as a typical case of licensing of a null category in SpecP (i.e. SpecTP) through government by the inflected verb in C°. Recent work (see Zimmermann 2012, Wolfe 2015) has shown that the empirical observation is actually correct for Old French and Old Northern Italian. As for Old Florentine (i.e. the variety spoken in Florence in the XIII century), the number of null subjects in embedded clauses is too high and not restricted to clauses embedded under bridge verbs, so that one might be led to assume that Old Florentine was a symmetric V2 language like Icelandic or Yiddish. However, the problem about the unexpected amount of null subjects in embedded contexts cannot be solved so easily, as it can be proved that Old Italian was indeed an asymmetric V2 language like Old French and modern German on the basis of a) the fact that the Tobler-Mussafia law, which establishes proclisis/enclisis alternations is almost exclusively active in main clauses b) the absence of CP-expletives of the German *es* type (Old Italian *sí*) in embedded domains.

2. The proposal

In this talk I will propose an alternative analysis and will try to show that the government relation between C° and SpecTP proposed in traditional work in the eighties can be reread as a Spec-head agreement relation between a null Topic and the inflected verb plus an Agree relation between the null Topic and *pro*. In this way the notion of government can be dispensed with. In order to explain the complex distribution of null subjects in Old Italian, I will capitalize on recent work done on null topics in the Germanic and the Romance languages (see Frascarelli (2007), Bianchi and Frascarelli 2010, Cognola 2016, Sigurdsson, 2011 Walkden 2013). I will propose that *pro* is licensed through an Agree relation with a null Topic in the left periphery. Since there are at least two different types of Topics, i.e. a) aboutness/shift topics, which are typical main clause phenomena (see Benincá 1988, Benincá and Poletto 2004, Bianchi and Frascarelli 2010) and b) familiarity topics, which are not, I will propose that these two different types of null topics can be licensed through two different mechanisms. I will show that null shift and aboutness topics can be licensed in Old Florentine through movement of the inflected verb to the left periphery (as attested by the Tobler-Mussafia effect of enclisis) in main clauses. Continuity topics are licensed by other means, i.e. without V to C and were thus possible in both main and embedded clauses. This means that we expect to find more null subjects in main clauses, where all types of null topics i.e. shift, aboutness, continuity and familiarity null topics are possible. In embedded clauses, where only continuity and familiarity are possible, we expect to find fewer null subjects. This explains the asymmetry between main and embedded clauses, but also the fact that in embedded clauses there are more null subjects than we would expect under the traditional analysis, since only one type of null topics is sensitive to the V to C property.

3. Arguments in favor of the analysis

A strong argument against the idea that *pro* drop directly depends on V to C in Old Romance is that in Old Venetian there is a striking asymmetry between main declaratives, in which *pro* drop is allowed, and

main interrogatives, where pro drop is not found even though main interrogatives are the prototypical context for V to C (even in non-V2 languages). The pro drop rate found in embedded declaratives in the text “Tristano Veneto” (Venetan Tristan) is about 8,5%, while the rate found in main interrogatives is 4,5%. Furthermore, this 4,5% can be further reduced if cases of clausal coordinations or so called special questions (see Obenauer 2006 for a definition) are excluded, for which I will propose alternative analyses. This shows that V to C is definitely neither necessary (since embedded declaratives have a certain amount of pro drop) nor sufficient (since main interrogatives do not have pro drop) to license null subjects. Another related problem can also be solved by the null topic account proposed here, i.e. the occurrence of lexical full pronouns in main clauses where in the modern language there is none: I will show that also the pronominal system has changed in the terms of the amount of pied piping that the null topic allows moving to the left periphery, so that the remnant containing the pronoun doubling the null topic could also be a bigger category, not simply a clitic.

4. Summary

In sum: analyzing in detail the distribution of null subjects in Old Italian varieties, we find some discrepancies that are not expected if the licensing of pro is directly connected to V to C. If we disconnect the licensing of null subjects from the structural relation of government and assume that pro is the secondary effect of the licensing of different types of null topics in the left periphery of the clause, one of which requires V to Topic° movement, i.e. Spec-head agreement, we can reduce the need of the government relation to the other typical structural relation licensing null elements, i.e. spec-head agreement between the verb and the null topic plus an agree relation between the topic and the null subject.

References

- Adams, Marianne (1987). ‘From Old French to the Theory of pro-drop’, *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 5: 1-32.
- Benincá, Paola (1988). ‘L’ordine degli elementi della frase e le costruzioni marcate’, in Lorenzo Renzi, Giampaolo Salvi and Anna Cardinaletti (eds.), *Grande grammatica italiana di consultazione, vol. I*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 115-95.
- (2006). ‘A Detailed Map of the Left Periphery of Medieval Romance’, in Raffaella Zanuttini, Héctor Campos, Elena Herburger and Paul Portner (eds.), *Negation, Tense and Clausal Architecture: Cross-linguistics Investigations*. Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 53-86.
- Benincà, Paola and Cecilia Poletto (2004). ‘Topic, Focus and V2: defining the CP sublayers’, in Rizzi (ed.), 52-75.
- Bianchi, Valentina, & Frascarelli, Mara. (2010). Is topic a root phenomenon? *Iberia* 2:43–88.
- Frascarelli, Mara (2007). Subjects, Topics and the Interpretation of Referential pro. An interface approach to the linking of (null) pronouns. In *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*, 25, 4: 691-734.
- Roberts, Ian (1993). *Verbs and Diachronic Syntax: a Comparative History of English and French*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Sigurðsson, H. Á. 2011. Conditions on argument drop. *Linguistic Inquiry* 42:267–304.
- Walkden, George (2013). Null subjects in Old English. *Language Variation and Change* 25(2): 155-178
- Wolfe, Sam, 2015b. Microvariation in Medieval Romance Syntax: A Comparative Study. PhD Thesis. University of Cambridge.
- Zimmermann, M. (2012) The evolution of expletive subject pronouns in French. PHD Thesis University of Konstanz.