

# THE TWISTS AND SHAKES OF PRO DROP: ON THE LICENSING OF NULL TOPICS IN OLD ITALIAN VARIETIES

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# Setting the problem

- I investigate a classical problem of medieval Romance syntax, namely the licensing of null subjects in Old Italian.
- I will show that the traditional analysis which assumes that pro drop is licensed through government by V to C is not tenable, not only for theoretical reasons.
- The new analysis captures not only the distribution of null subjects but also the distribution of lexical pronouns.
- The idea in a nutshell is that a) a null subject is always licensed by a null Topic
- b) the partial asymmetry found between main and embedded clauses has to do the distribution of null Topics
- c) since there are different types of topics, null subjects vary according to the type of null topic licensed in a given language (Aboutness/given)

## Empirical aims: which pro drop in OI?

- Old Romance can be split into two groups: North-Western Romance (NWR, French, Northern Italian Dialects) and Southern East and Western Romance (Hiberoromance and Southern Italy) with respect to the licensing of pro.
- In NWR pro is essentially found only in main clauses (and in a very restricted set of embedded clauses starting with elements corresponding to 'because') but not in regular embedded clauses. See Adams (1987).
- The situation of Old Italian (OI) is "transitional" because it does not seem to fit either of the two types.

# Theoretical problem of the work: what substitute for government?

- I will show that a typical case of government can be translated into a more modern framework by means of already existing devices, namely a) Spec-head agreement b) downward agree c) sentence type d) pied piping.
- Although the new analysis might seem more complex, it can account for facts that had gone unnoticed up to now and is empirically more precise.

## State of the art

- The notion of government was used in the traditional explanation of licensing of null subjects in Old Romance languages:
- Since null subjects only occur in main clauses and main clauses typically display V to C, then pro is licensed by I in C through government. Adams (1987), Roberts (1993), Vance (1997), Benincá (1984).

(1) E così ne provò \_ de' più cari ch'elli avea. (Testi fior., 74)

and so of-it tested3sg \_ of-the most dear that-he had

“So he tested some of the best friends he had.”

# What do we do without government?

- A. Is it really empirically correct that pro drop only occurs in T to C contexts, even including embedded V2 clauses in OI as traditionally assumed (see Benincà 2006)?
- B. Since we know that both Old French and Old Italian developed a new system which goes in opposite directions with respect to null subjects, are there other phenomena that might be related to this opposite change already present during the medieval stage?

# An empirical problem

- If the government account were correct, the prediction is that whenever V moves to C, null subjects are licensed, i.e. we expect to find the usual main/embedded asymmetry in all types of clauses.
- This means that also in interrogative clauses we should find pro drop in main interrogatives and no pro drop in embedded interrogatives.
- Old Venetian (OVen) is a language in which the same constellation of phenomena should hold.

# Microvariation: another asymmetry

- OV-en has the well known asymmetry between main and embedded declarative clauses with respect to pro drop licensing (see Wolfe 2015, GRAVO project).

	Main declaratives absolute numbers	Embedded declaratives absolute numbers	Main clauses percentages	Embedded clauses percentages
Lexical pronoun	171	331	54,11%	91,5%
Pro	145	29	45,89%	8,5%

- However, this is not the case in interrogative clauses

# Subject inversion in main interrogatives

In **main interrogatives** in OVén there is **no pro drop**, and the subject is always inverted

- a. «Signor, avé **vui** oldido queste novelle? » (479)  
Sir, have you heard these news?
- b. Dama, como hè **questo sangue** vignudo? (132, 12)  
Lady, how is this blood come?

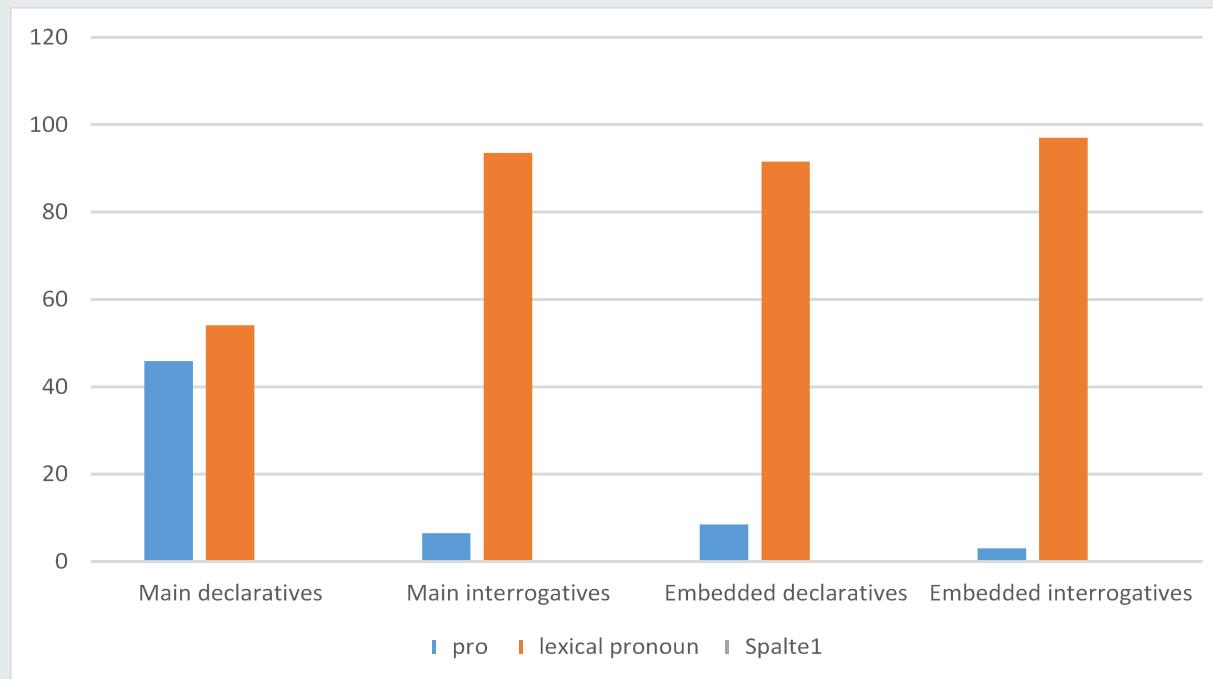
In **embedded interrogatives** there is no inversion, and **no pro drop**:

qu'elli non saveva che conseyo **elli** devesse prendere, (14, 6)

that he not know which advice he should take

That he did not know which advice he should accept

# Comparison between interrogatives and declaratives



# The government approach is not tenable

- There is a second asymmetry in addition to the one between main and embedded declaratives.
- OVen displays an asymmetry between interrogatives and declaratives.
- This means that even in the typical context of V to C as interrogatives there is no licensing of pro from the V in C.
- Hence, the traditional account is not tenable even in empirical terms.

# Ol is a mixed system

- If we now turn to Old Italian = Old Florentine, we see that even here there are cases that require further explanation.
- The problem of null subjects cannot be solved without taking into account that the distribution of lexical pronouns is different with respect to the modern language.
- Furthermore, also the licensing of null topics has changed.

## More (full?) pronouns than we expect

che s' **io** allora non perdessi ardire, farei parlando innamorar la  
that if I then not lose courage, I.would speaking make.fall.in.love  
gente. E **io** non vo' parlar sì altamente, ch' **io** divenisse per  
the people. And I not want to.talk so highly, that I became for  
temenza vile;  
fear coward (cap. 19parr. 4-14)

# Fewer pronouns than we expect: Null Topics

(Uno cavaliere pregava un giorno una donna d'amore e diceale intra l'altre parole com'elli era gentile e ricco e bello a dismisura, "e 'l vostro marito è così laido comevoi sapete"; e quel cotal marito era dopo la parete della camera.)

(Once a knight was courting a lady and telling her how he was noble, rich and measurelessly handsome, "and your husband is ugly as you know". And that husband was behind the wall of the room).

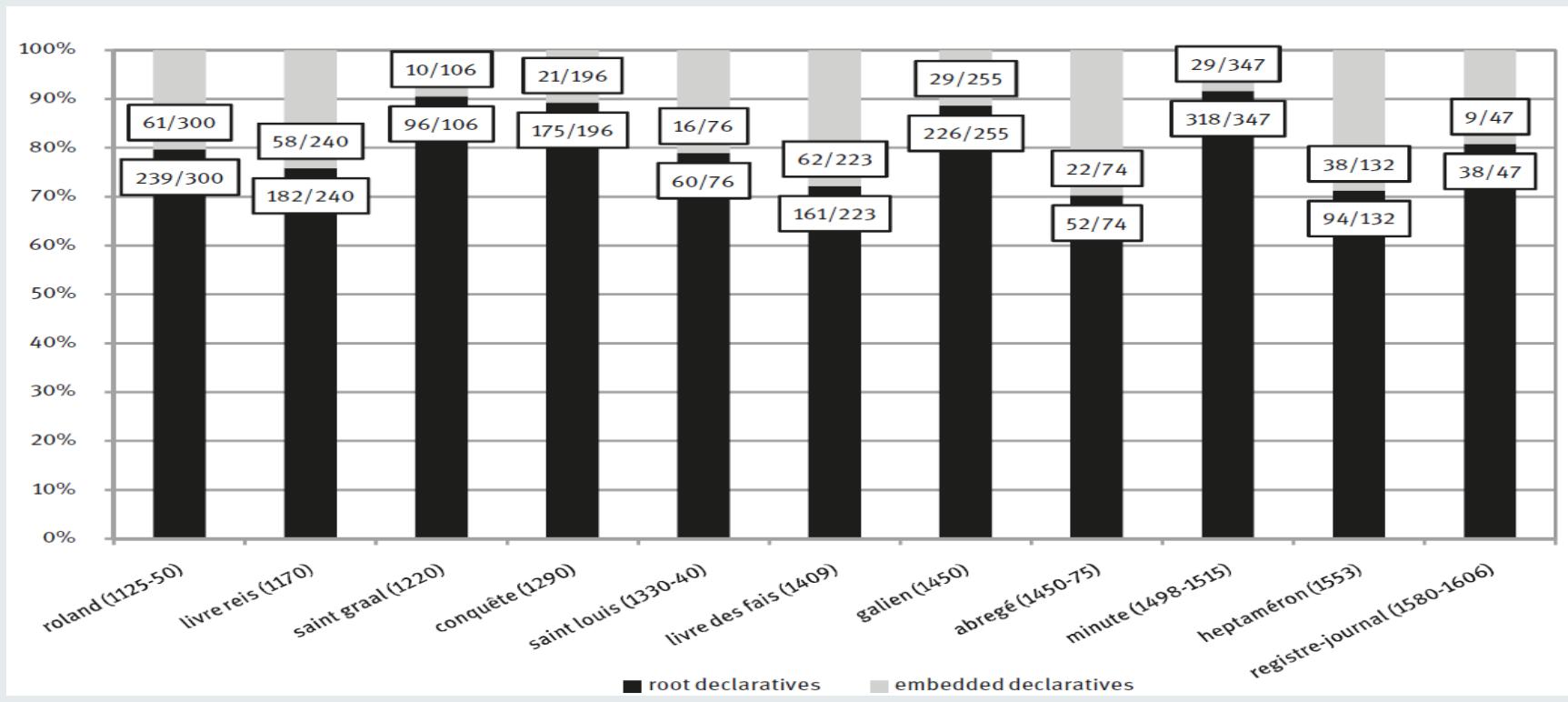
**Ø Parlò e disse:** "Eh, messer, per cortesia: accomodate li fatti vostri  
spoke.3sg and said.3sg sir for courtesy grace.imp the facts your  
e non isconciate li altrui".  
and not disgrace.imp the others

'He spoke and said: "Sir, please grace your facts  
and do not disgrace the others' ones' (Nov. XLVII, 231)

## A blurred picture

- The traditional view only considers those null subjects licensed through government by I to C and those lexical pronouns that appear in non V2 contexts (i.e. most embedded clauses).
- The situation is more complex than that, since we find
  - a) null pronouns where there should be lexical pronouns and
  - b) lexical pronouns where there should be null pronouns.

# Old French: a well behaved asymmetric language? (Zimmermann 2012)



# A pilot survey

- In what follows I will present a pilot investigation that shows that OI does not belong to either type of pro drop.
- Since OI is Old Florentine, and Florentine has developed subject clitics, one might expect there to be a distinction among the different persons, since the subject clitics Florentine presents today are of different types.
- The present situation: First person singular and plural are pro drop, the other persons have an obligatory clitic.

# Distribution of referential subjects in embedded clauses (Fiori e Vita de Fil.)

Null pro	Lexical PRO	Lexical DP
178	72	145

# Referential subjects in main and embedded clauses (Dante's Vita Nuova)

	DP	PRON	pro
Embedded clauses	23	7	12
Main clauses	25	7	15

# Lexical expletive subjects

(5) **s' elli** avvenisse che molti le potessero audire. (V.N cap. 20 parr. 1-2)

if it came that many them could hear

'If it happened that many people could hear them'

(6) **Ellì** era tale a veder mio colore, che facea ragionar di morte altrui (V.N. cap 23 parr17/18)

It was such to see my color, that made think of death others

'My face color was such that everybody thought of death'

- In the whole Vita Nuova by Dante there are only two examples of lexical expletives, contrary to Old French, where lexical expletives are rather frequent.

# Null expletives

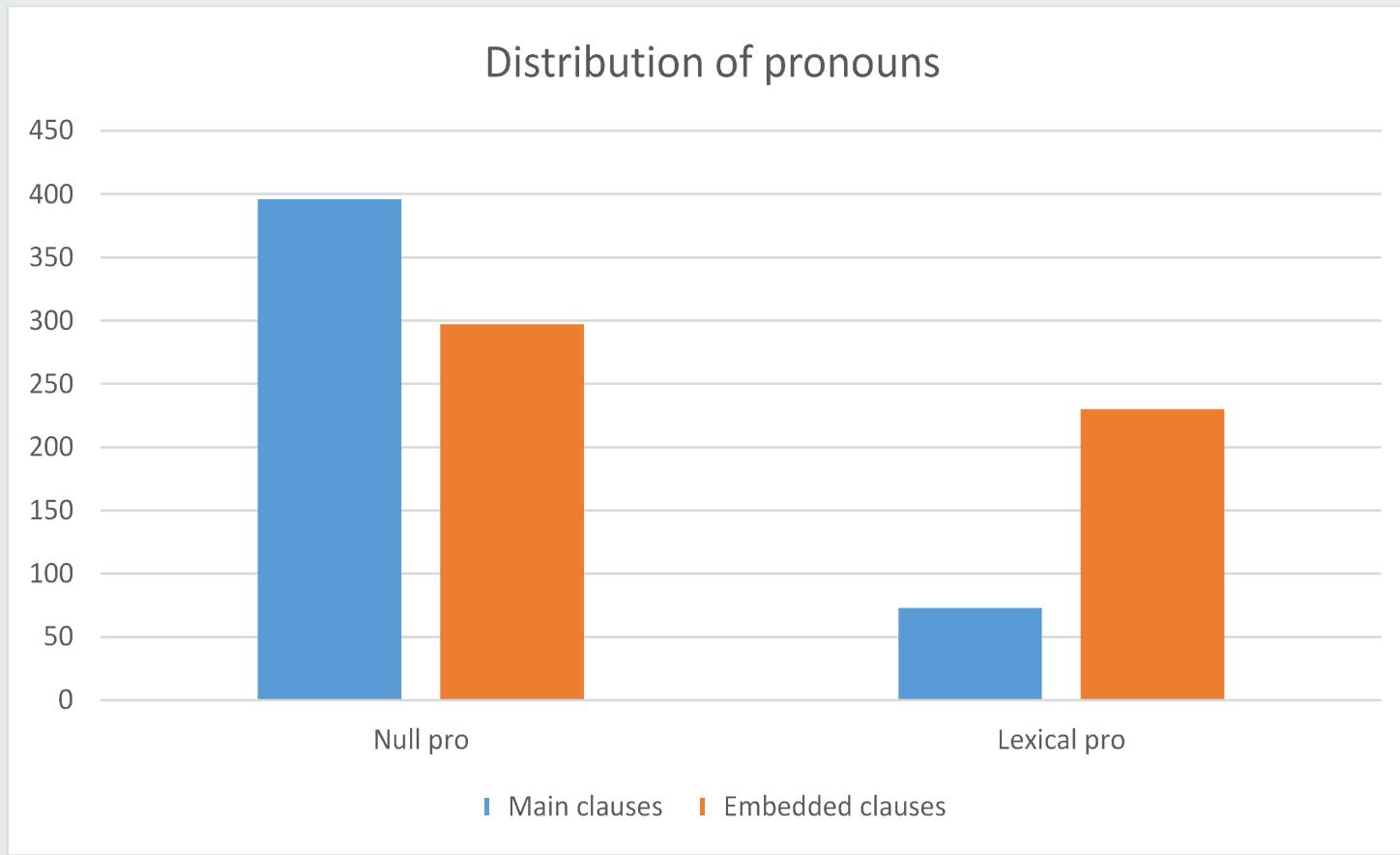
(7) E per questa cagione, cioè di questa soverchievole voce che **parea** che...

And for this reason, i.e. of this widespread rumor that seemed that...

‘And for this reason, i.e. for the widespread rumor that it seemed that...’

- In Dante's *Vita nuova* there are 20 examples of null expletives only with the verb ‘seemed’.  
→ Either Old Italian has null expletives licensed through a different mechanism which is not government or Old Italian was a symmetrical V2 language like Yiddish or Icelandic.

# A larger investigation: *Vita nuova*



## Data by person

	Embedded clauses pro	Embedded clauses lexical pro	Main clauses pro	Main clauses lexical pro
<b>Raw numbers</b>	297	230	386	73
<b>Percentages</b>	56,35	43,64	84,09	15,9

# Is Old Italian like Icelandic?

- Since Old Italian had vP internal subjects, subject inversion is not a good test to determine whether embedded V2 was possible outside bridge verbs complements, because we get a lot of ambiguous sentences where the subject might be in vP.
- I used another test, namely the presence of the CP expletive *sí*. If Old Italian is a symmetric V2 language, we should find it in both main and embedded clauses.

## Applying the test

- In Dante's *Vita nuova* the number of relevant examples is 12 in main clauses, and only 2 in embedded clauses: one of the two embedded examples occurs after the verb 'say' (reported here as (8) and one after the verb 'happened':

(8) Dico che in questo tempo che questa donna era schermo di tanto amore, quanto da la mia parte, **sì** mi venne una volontade di volere ricordare lo nome di quella gentilissima

I say that in this time that this woman was screen of such love, as.wel from the my part, so me came a will to want to.remember the name of that very.gentle (V.N. cap. 6 parr.1-2)

# The particle *sí* in embedded clauses

- On the other hand, in embedded clauses the particle *sì* occurs very frequently in front of the complementizer (36 examples) or in front of the element *come* 'how' (40 examples).

(9) Queste parole fa che siano quasi un mezzo, **sì** che tu non parli a lei immediatamente

These words make that are almost a means so that you not talk to her immediately (V.N. cap. 12 parr. 1-9)

# Distribution of *sí* in main and embedded clauses

	Main clauses	Embedded clauses	Embedded clauses before che	Embedded clauses before come
<b>Fiori de Filosofi</b>	14	3	36	40
<b>Vita nuova</b>	12	2	21	13
<b>Total</b>	26	5	57	53

# Old Italian is not like Icelandic

- *Sí* is found before the complementizer in embedded clauses but immediately before the verb in main clauses.
- The same type of result is provided by another typical phenomenon related to the V2 phenomenon, namely the Tobler Mussafia law (the Romance version of Wackernagel's second position rule) that rules the distribution of enclisis and proclisis of object clitics.
- Enclisis is virtually non-existent in embedded domains (except for coordinated clauses with *e* 'and' and *ma* 'but'), thus confirming the idea that OI was indeed an asymmetric V2 language.

## Back to square one

- If OI is not a symmetric V2 language, where do all those null subjects come from in embedded clauses?
- Why do we find subject pronouns in typically pro-licensing contexts that are not allowed nowadays?
- Also object full pronouns are allowed in contexts in which today we only have clitics, which means that the **pragmatic conditions** on the licensing of full pronouns must have changed.

## An example

**Io** imaginava di guardare verso lo cielo, e pareami vedere  
moltitudine d' angeli.

I imagined to look towards the sky and seemed.me to.see  
wealth of angels

**A me** parea che questi angeli cantassero gloriosamente,

To me seemed that these angels sing gloriously

'I imagined I looked towards the sky and I thought I saw many  
angels...It seemed to me that these angels sang gloriously (V.N.  
cap. 23 parr. 1-16)

# What has changed?

- The pragmatic conditions licensing full pronouns have changed: lexical full pronouns were allowed also in contexts in which today they would be superfluous or infelicitous, i.e. in non-Topic non-Focus contexts.
- The pragmatic conditions ruling the distribution of null Topics have changed, since Old Italian allowed for null Topics of atype that is not found any longer in modern Italian.

## The gist of a new analysis

- Null subjects in SpecT are possible only if licensed by Topics in SpecTop through an Agree relation.
- Old Italian had different types of null Topics than modern Italian, and since null subjects are licensed by null Topics, also the pro drop system was different.
- Null Topics have their own licensing conditions. It is precisely these conditions that have changed through the history.  
→ The distribution of null subjects is only indirectly connected to the V2 property, i.e. only in the sense that verb movement could license one additional type of null Topics.

# The implementation I

- According to Walkden (2013) the logophoric agent and patient as well as null Shift/Aboutness Topics (A-Topics) can bear a probe which looks directly into SpecT and establishes an agreement relation with it.
- Old English null subjects are mainly found in main clauses and are primarily third person because Old English only allows for null A-Topics to directly probe into TP.
- Hence, the licensing of null arguments can only occur in main clauses where A-Topics are possible, and are third person, since A-Topics are third person.

# Walkden's 2013 table 7

Locus of probing feature

	$\Lambda_A P$ , $A_P P$	Null	Aboutness	Topic	Examples
(a)	Yes		Yes		Greek, Italian, Japanese
(b)	Yes		No		Finnish, Hebrew, Marathi
(c)	No		No		English, French, Bambara
(d)	No		Yes		Old English

## First problem

- Modern Italian is classified by Walkden among those languages in which A-Topics and the logophoric agent and patient can probe into TP.
- If this were so, we would expect an asymmetry between main and embedded clauses also in modern Italian third person subjects, since A-Topics are only licensed in main clauses (probably for semantic reasons, see Bianchi and Frascarelli (2010)).
- Since modern Italian does not display any asymmetry, we need an additional mechanism to license third person null subjects in embedded clauses.

## Second problem

- If we adopt Walkden's (2013) typology, OI would be a language of the same type as modern Italian. On the other hand, we know that the distribution of null subjects in OI is different from the one of modern Italian.
- Therefore, the system proposed by Walkden requires further fine-tuning to account for the changes across the history of the Italian system.

# Walkden's 2013 table 7 revised

Locus of probing feature

	$\Lambda_A P, A_P P$	Null	Aboutness	Topic	<b>G-Topic</b>	
(a)	Yes		No		Yes	Modern Italian
(b)	Yes		Yes		Yes	Old Italian
(c)	No		No		No	Modern French
(d)	No		Yes		Yes	?
(e)	No		Yes		No	Old English
(f)	Yes		Yes		No	Old French

# What has changed?

- To understand the change in the licensing conditions of null subjects, we have to look at the licensing conditions of null Topics.
- We have seen the the difference between Old and modern Italian lies in the possibility to have null A-Topics in OI.
- Why are there no null A-Topics in modern Italian?

# Old Italian: licensing null Topics

- OI is a V2 language where the verb can move to Topic°, licensing null A-Topics
- The relevant relation to license the null Topic is a **Spec-head relation**
- This means that OI has two ways of licensing null Topics and in turn null arguments in SpecT:
  - A) the same found in modern Italian for given Topics, which is probably a purely pragmatic one;
  - B) A syntactic one for null Shift/Aboutness topics based on Spec-head with the verb in TopP.

# The OI system

- In OI we have three types of null Topic, hence three types of null arguments
  - A) The logophoric agent and patient (which I equate to scene setting elements)
  - B) Given topics licensed in both main and embedded clauses
  - C) A-Topics licensed in main clauses through V to Top.**
  - D) This explains why we have a weak asymmetry between main and embedded clauses although OI is not a symmetric V2 language.

# What changed

- The only distinction between old and modern Italian is the loss of V2, i.e. the loss of V to Top°, i.e. the loss of null A-Topics.
- What about the change with respect to the usage of lexical pronouns?

## Fine tuning the proposal

- Sigurdsson (2011) assumes that any definite argument, overt or silent, positively matches at least one C/edge linker in its local C-domain, where C/edge linkers include Top(ic) features and speech participant features (“speaker,” “hearer”).
- This means that all pronouns, either null or lexical must be linked to some element in the left periphery in order to be interpreted.
- The number of full lexical pronouns found in Old Italian must be an effect of a change in the link.

# What are pronouns?

A-Topics are

## Future work

- Suppose that null familiarity Topics, like lexical familiarity Topics are moved from within the clause: the change concerning lexical pronouns might have to do with the remnant category left behind when the Topic moves:

$[_{DP} [_{TopP} O [_{FP} \dots [_{NP}]]]]$

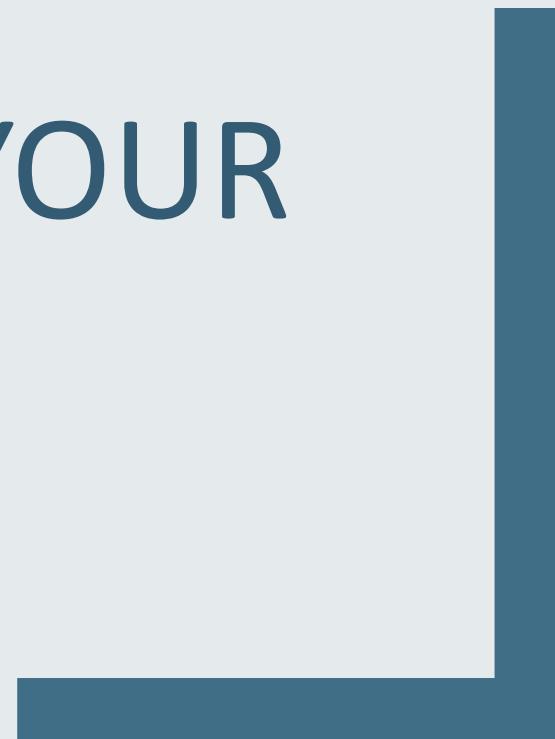
- In modern Italian the remnant is either pro (or an object clitic).
- In Old Italian the remnant could also be lexicalized by a full pronoun.

- A systematic investigation is needed to determine:
- A) the rate of pro drop in main and embedded clauses for all persons
- B) the type of embedded clauses in which pro drop occurs
- C) the types of null topics that can be licensed (continuation topic, null shift topic, etc.)

# Summing up

- It is not necessary to assume government to explain the distribution of pro drop in Old Italian.
- Spec-head agreement between the V in  $\text{Top}^\circ$  and the null Shift/Aboutness Topic in  $\text{SpecTop}$  plus agree with  $\text{SpecT}$  is enough.
- Licensing of null Familiarity Topics occurs in both main and embedded clauses through a purely pragmatic mechanism. This grants the occurrence of pro in embedded clauses.
- This explains why OI only displays a weak main/embedded asymmetry with respect to pro drop while being an asymmetric V2 language.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR  
ATTENTION



## More pronouns that we expect

(2) E **tu** Satanas inimico di Dio rimarra'**ti** **tu** mai di  
and **you** Satan enemy of God will.remain.2sg **you** never of  
trovar novità per torre a Dio l'anime dell'i uomini...?  
find.inf novelty to take.inf from God the souls of.the men

- Lexical pronouns are found in contexts in which pro should be typically licensed, i.e. where the inflected V is in C.
- Subject pronouns are used in contexts in which nowadays they are not, i.e. in contexts in which the subject is neither Topic nor Focus.