

On preverbal new information subjects

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Language variation may concern the availability of preverbal and postverbal subject positions and/or their grammatical and discourse-related features.

In languages like Italian, both preverbal and postverbal subjects are allowed; they differ with respect to the properties they encode. Preverbal subjects are subjects of predication, postverbal subjects are (part of) the predication. Preverbal subjects are typically topic(-like), postverbal subjects are typically (part of) the focus of the sentence.

Things are however different in languages where postverbal subjects are not allowed and preverbal subjects may be foci themselves or part of the focus.

In this paper, a case of syntactic variation is discussed which concerns the position of subject noun phrases that represent the new information of the clause. While in Italian, a new information subject obligatorily follows the verb, it may precede the verb in the variety of Italian spoken in Veneto. A preverbal subject which is a narrow focus is characterized by a special intonation which recalls similar patterns in languages like English and French.

This instance of syntactic variation is presumably due to the contact between Italian and the dialectal varieties spoken by the same community. As in other cases (Sorace 2003, 2005), language contact affects a word order motivated by discourse considerations and gives rise to unexpected optionality in the speakers: they allow both preverbal and postverbal new information subjects.

The interest of the construction also lies in the fact that it enters the debate on the properties of pro-drop languages. According to the first formulation of the pro-drop parameter (Rizzi 1982), a correlation exists between the availability of null subjects and the possibility of postverbal subjects. In this context, it is important to note that Veneto dialects, on a par with other northern Italian dialects, are not full pro-drop languages like Italian, but display overt pronouns in some persons of the paradigm (Cardinaletti and Repetti 2010). They expectedly display a syntax of subjects partially different from Italian. In bilingual communities and speakers, these dialectal properties influence the syntax of subjects in Italian too.

Preverbal new information subjects differ from preverbal Foci in both syntactic, semantic, and prosodic properties and presumably occupy the canonical subject position (Belletti 2009). Dative and locatives phrases, i.e. “non subjects” which can be moved to the canonical subject position, can appear in the narrow focus construction, showing that the subject position at stake is specSubjP (Cardinaletti 2004), and not the lower specTP where phi-features are encoded. The Subj head can therefore encode other features in addition to the “subject-of-predication” feature. Being a narrow focus and being the subject of predication are not incompatible properties.

This observation also holds for left-peripheral focalized and topicalized subjects and raises the question as to how the subject-of-predication feature can be checked without moving the subject DP to the subject position, which would give rise to Criterial Freezing (Rizzi 2006, 2007) and prevent its further movement to the left periphery.