

Clitics in Northern Italian Dialects: Phonology, Syntax and Microvariation

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There has been much discussion in the literature on subject clitic pronouns in the northern Italian dialects. Most of these studies have focused either on the phonology or on the syntax of these structures from a cross-linguistic perspective, trying to formulate empirical generalizations in this area of great microvariation. In this paper we take a different path. We provide an in-depth analysis of both the phonology and syntax of clitics in one northern Italian dialect, Donceto (prov. of Piacenza), and we show that (i) a thorough understanding of clitics is possible only if we consider both their phonological and syntactic behavior, and (ii) microvariation can be understood only after establishing the correct nature of what has been called "subject clitics". While some of our findings confirm previous analyses, other important aspects of our analysis are quite different from current ones. Based on our analysis of the dialect of Donceto, we make two new proposals regarding the nature of clitics, and we show that these proposals allow us to account for microvariation which has until now remained poorly understood or completely unexplained.

Our first conclusion is that not all the preverbal material in (1) and (2) can be considered subject clitics, as assumed in current analyses for other northern Italian dialects (cf. Poletto 2000).

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|-----|-------------|------------------------|---------------|------------------------|
| (1) | (´) be:v | 'I drink' | (´) bu'vum | 'we drink' |
| | ´ t be:v | 'you:sg drink' | (´) bu'vi | 'you:pl drink' |
| | ´ l be:v´ | 'he drinks' | i 'be:v´n | 'they drink' |
| (2) | (´) be:v-j´ | 'am I drinking?' | (´) bu'vum-j´ | 'are we drinking?' |
| | (´) be:v-´t | 'are you:sg drinking?' | (´) bu'vi:-v | 'are you:pl drinking?' |
| | (´) be:v´-l | 'is he drinking?' | (´) be:v´n-j´ | 'are they drinking?' |

The preverbal schwa in the 1st pers. sg. and the 1st and 2nd pers. pl. in (1) is a 'subject-agreement vowel', realising a functional head of the subject-agreement field; the preverbal vowel in (2) is an 'interrogative vowel', realising a functional head of the Comp field (cf. Benincà's (1983) original analysis of Padovano [a]); the preverbal schwa in the 2nd and 3rd pers. sg. in (1) is an epenthetic vowel (cf. Vanelli 1984 for the 2nd pers. sg.). The only true subject clitics are the preverbal consonants in the 2nd and 3rd pers. sg. in (1), the preverbal vowel in the 3rd pers. pl. in (1), and all of the postverbal non-schwa elements in (2). Evidence in support of our analysis comes both from crosslinguistic data and from neurolinguistic data (Chinellato 2001).

Our second conclusion concerns the relationship between the preverbal and postverbal clitics in (1) and (2). Current analyses take them to belong to different paradigms. Proclitics are considered subject pronouns, while enclitics are variably taken to be agreement markers (cf. Friedemann 1995), morphological affixes on the verb (cf. Sportiche 1999), or a series of subject pronouns occurring in a special functional position, AgrC (cf. Poletto 2000). We show that preverbal and postverbal subject clitics belong to one and the same paradigm. The differences can

be accounted for in phonological and / or syntactic terms. Evidence in support of our analysis comes both from crosslinguistic data and from diachronic data.

Our analysis shows that the very nature of the preverbal material in (1) and (2) has been misinterpreted and must be reconsidered. Since the dialect of Donceto is typical of one of the many types of systems we find in northern Italian dialects, our conclusions can be extended to other northern Italian dialects. Once the nature of the pre- and postverbal material in (1) and (2) is correctly established, the question of microvariation can be addressed successfully, and we provide four such cases.

(1) The dialect of Donceto differs from the dialect of Schio (prov. of Vicenza) in one significant respect: in (1) the preverbal schwa in the 1st pers. sg., 1st pers. pl. and 2nd pers. pl. forms is always optional, while in Schio the vocalic counterpart [a] is not optional: its presence conveys the interpretation that the sentence is new information (Chinellato 2001). This means that the two vocalic segments realise different functional heads. If the vocalic segments in the two dialects were subject clitic pronouns, there would be no way to account for this difference in meaning.

(2) In the dialect of Donceto, we can account for the different allomorphs of the clitics by considering the constraints on phonological structure active in the language. For instance, the 2nd pers. sg. form is realized as [t] if it can be adjoined to an adjacent syllable ([t E bu'vi:d 'you have drunk', [vE-t] 'are you:sg going?'), or as [´t] if epenthesis is necessary ([´t be:v 'you:sg drink', [be:v-´t] 'are you:sg drinking?'). In other dialects, however, the allomorphs cannot be accounted for in such a straightforward manner. For example, in Paduan the proclitic and enclitic forms display different vowels: proclitic [te], [el] vs. enclitic [to], [lo] (Poletto 2000). While the vowel [e] in the proclitic forms might be considered epenthetic, the vowel [o] in the enclitic forms cannot. Instead of resorting to the hypothesis that the proclitic and enclitic forms are different paradigms, we show that enclitic [to]/[lo] belong to the same paradigm as proclitic [te]/[el], and that the differences can be accounted for in phonological terms via an interesting interplay of phonology and morphology.

(3) The dialect of Donceto is very similar to a related Piacentine dialect spoken in the nearby village of Gazzoli, with one crucial difference. In Gazzoli, the 3rd pers. masc. sg. proclitic pronoun is [õ], while the enclitic counterpart is [l]. The two pronouns are clearly unrelated phonologically. Again, should we resort to the different-paradigm hypothesis? Again, the answer is "no", and we propose a syntactic solution. Preverbal [õ] is not a clitic pronoun, but a weak pronoun (in the sense of Cardinaletti and Starke 1999). Postverbal [l] is a clitic pronoun, regularly displaying the [l] consonant of 3rd pers. clitic pronouns in Romance languages.

(4) Another well-known instance of microvariation concerns the number of subject clitics found in preverbal vs. postverbal position, which varies from dialect to dialect. While in Donceto three persons have preverbal subject clitics (/t/, /l/ and /i/) and all six persons are represented postverbally, this is not the case in all dialects. However, the data are not random, and the generalization can be summarized as follows: *if interrogative sentences display enclitic pronouns*, (i) the number of enclitic pronouns found in interrogative sentences is equal to or greater than the number of proclitic pronouns in declarative sentences, and (ii) the subject pronouns found in proclitic position are also found in enclitic position (cf. Renzi & Vanelli's (1983) 'Generalization 9'). While there is no account of this microvariation in the literature, we suggest that the number of clitics in postverbal position depends on the scope of verb movement. This is rather straightforward, given that enclitic pronouns are usually found in interrogative sentences, and the verb in interrogative sentences is usually taken to move to a higher position than the verb in declarative sentences. If enclitic pronouns were agreement markers, morphological affixes, or a

different series of pronouns, there would be no way to account for the generalization stated above: we might expect fully regular paradigms or enclitic paradigms with arbitrary differences with respect to the proclitic paradigms, something which is not found across languages.