

## OPTIONAL SUBJECT CLITICS, PRO LICENSING AND NULL TOPICS

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The traditional view of a unitary subject position has been increasingly cast into doubt in recent years, first by the discovery that there is both a VP-internal (alias 'theta') position in addition to an EPP/Case position, and more recently by the mounting evidence that even the EPP/Case position must be viewed as a plurality of positions associated with different features (McCloskey, 1997.) Much of the evidence to this effect has come from the detailed comparative study of North Italian dialects (NIDs) which manifest elaborate systems of subject clitics (SCLs) (Poletto, 2000.) These SCLs sometimes appear as a juxtaposition or bundle of pronominal features but in many dialects, negation and other material appear interspersed between them, strongly suggesting that they do not form a single syntactic head but rather constitute distinct heads arrayed in a hierarchical order.

Although some robust cross-dialectal generalizations emerge from the study of NIDs, there is also a substantial amount of microvariation among very closely related varieties, both in terms of the number and variety of SCLs manifested as well as with respect to their ordering. However, one aspect of variation has been somewhat neglected: It concerns the status of SCLs as obligatory, optional or impossible. The present paper presents the results of a study of one Franco-Provençal variety (Gruyèrian; spoken in the canton of Fribourg, Switzerland, henceforth GFP), which exhibits a complex array of data relating to this particular issue.

The gist of our argument is as follows. The presence of a SCL indicates that there is a null subject in the sentence (referential or expletive) which is licensed by the SCL. When a SCL is absent, two scenarios are possible. Under the first, there is some other (more economic) means to license the null subject, rendering the SCL redundant (cf. the logic behind standard accounts of Do-Support). Under the second scenario, the null subject is not pro but a phonetically unrealized topic (of the Germanic null topic variety).

Restricting ourselves to one of several SCLs (phonetically realized as [i], representing 1<sup>st</sup> person, 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular and 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural,) the basic distributional facts are the following: [i] is *possible* though not obligatory in root declaratives, *impossible* in embedded clauses under an overt complementizer and *obligatory* in root wh-questions and in sentences with climatological predicates.

First, we need to establish that [i] is indeed a SCL in (1), namely a functional head and not the subject itself. If [i] were the (pronominal) subject, then *nyon* would be a topic ((1) would be manifesting clitic left dislocation,) but negative quantifiers cannot be (clitic) left dislocated (cf. \*nobody he saw Mary). Hence, *nyon* is a bona fide subject and [i] is an Agr or Agr-bearing head.

(1) Nyon (i) vè Marie.

*Nobody SCL sees Mary*

'Nobody sees Mary'

[i] is optional in (2). We take its *presence* to imply there is a pro in the structure. This pro is formally licensed by [i] while its  $\phi$  features are assigned/retrieved/identified by coindexation with the head(s) associated with verbal inflection. We take Rizzi's notion of 'formal licensing' to be fully reducible to formal feature checking (perhaps of a Case feature).

(2) (I) medzo/medzè na findia ou Vatsérin.

*SCL eat-1S/ eat-3S a fondue with Vacherin*

'I am/(s)he is eating a Vacherin fondue.'

Since [i] can also co-occur with a lexical subject (as in (1)), the pro which it licenses can be referential (as in (2)) or expletive (as in (1)), the latter reminiscent of French Complex Inversion in that two subject positions are simultaneously filled. Following Cardinaletti (1997) among others, we make the structural hypothesis embodied in (3): Pro is the head of the higher subject position and it licenses a null subject via local c-command in the spec of [i]'s sister constituent (the labels Agr1, Agr2 are merely heuristic, as are the bar levels.)

(3) [Agr1P (lexical subject) [Agr1' [Agr1° [i]] [Agr2P pro.....

We attribute the case where [i] is *absent* in (2) to the option – available in GFP, perhaps in some NIDs but not in Modern French – of moving pro to a Topic position. Null (subject) topics in e.g., German, are only licensed in the root and cannot occur in interrogatives.

(4) a. Ø habe es gestern gekauft.

*(I) have it yesterday bought.*

'I bought it yesterday.'

b. \*Wann habe es gekauft?

*when have it bought.*

'When did I buy it?'

By the same token, a null topic is ruled out in (5) and only pro-drop is possible, whence the *obligatory* status of [i].

(5) Portyè \*(i) medzo/medzè na findia ou Vatsérin?

*why SCL eat-1S/ eat-3S a fondue with Vacherin*

'Why am I/is (s)he eating a Vacherin fondue?'

We follow Rizzi (2000) to the effect that the restriction of null topics to the root or, more precisely, to the highest specifier in the clause, is due to the fact that the highest spec is, by definition, not c-commanded by

anything and therefore cannot be grammatically licensed. Null topics are only possible in the highest position in the clause where discourse factors but not grammatical ones determine its interpretation.

Note, in this context, that [i] is optional in an in-situ wh question (possible non-echoically, as in French.) The grammaticality of (6) without [i] shows that what is relevant is the position of the topic relative to the wh-word and not the interpretation of the clause as e.g., an interrogative.

(6) (i) *travayè kan?*

*SCL works when*

‘When does he work?’

[i] is obligatory with weather predicates since the subject of such predicates is non-referential and hence cannot be a (null) topic; compare (7a) and (2). (7a) is the GFP analogue of German (7b), in which Topic-drop is equally impossible.

(7) a. *\*(i) pyà.*                      b. *\*Ø regnet gerade.*

*it rains*

*it rains now*

‘It is raining

‘It is raining now.’

Given that (subject) topic drop is impossible in embedded clauses in German, Cardinaletti (1990) (since the topic is not in the highest Spec,) one expects [i] to be obligatory (since only pro-drop is possible.) Paradoxically, [i] is obligatorily *absent* under a filled declarative or interrogative C°. Contrast (2) with (8a,b).

(8) a. *Mè moujo ke \*(i) medzè na findia ou Vatsérin.*

*I-REFL think that SCL eat-3S a fondue with Vacherin*

‘I think that s/he is eating a Vacherin fondue.’

b. *Mè dèmando che \*(i) medzè na findia ou Vatsérin.*

*I-REFL wonder whether SCL eat-3S a fondue with Vacherin*

‘I wonder whether s/he is eating a Vacherin fondue.’

We argue that GFP C° has retained and generalized the option of Middle French to license pro by local c-command from C° (viz. e.g., Roberts, 1993.) A complementizer locally c-commanding pro renders [i] redundant and since [i] does no other work it must be unprojected (or remain unchecked.)

When an overt topic or a fronted adverb (by assumption, a TopicP) intervene between C° and pro, [i] becomes obligatory, since local c-command of pro by C° is interrupted and [i] is needed to license pro.

(9) *Mè moujo k’ ora \*(i) medzè na findia ou Vatsérin.*

*I-REFL think that now SCL eat-3S a fondue with Vacherin*

‘I think that now s/he is eating a Vacherin fondue.’

A verb in the conditional, future or imperfect form also takes over the role of pro-licensing and [i] cannot appear. Compare present tense (10a) with obligatory [i] and (10b) with the conditional, where [i] cannot appear. We argue that the Tense/Modal suffixes on conditional, future and imperfect verbs are associated with functional heads attracting the verb. Schematically and simplifying somewhat, a present tense verb raises no higher than Agr2° in (3) while the verb in (10b) is at least as high as Agr1°, from where it c-commands pro. Data from French inversion around the 1S pronoun *je* confirm this view.

(10) a. *Portyè \*(i) modon?*

*why SCL leave-PRES-3PL*

‘Why are they leaving?’

b. *Portyè \*(i) moderan?*

*why SCL leave-COND-3PL*

‘Why would they leave?’

To conclude, GFP pro is licensed by local c-command from a licensing head. This variety manifests- on the synchronic level - the three mechanisms of pro-licensing available diachronically in Romance. These are (a) association with rich verbal inflection, (b) government by a complementizer and (c) doubling by a clitic. These are not distinct formal relationships but can be reduced to a basic locality relation between a head and an XP. The particular parametric choice made by GFP is one where a head X° asymmetrically c-commands YP. Standard Italian seems to have opted for the opposite choice, namely, c-command of X° by XP (cf. Rizzi 2001.)

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