

Topic chains and the interpretation of null subjects.
A parametric approach to consistent and partial pro-drop languages

Mara Frascarelli
University of Roma Tre

1. Introduction and goal. This paper explores the licensing conditions governing the realization of referential null subjects in a consistent pro-drop language like Italian, comparing the interpretation of null and overt pronouns in different clausal types. A comparison is also offered with some ‘partial’ pro-drop languages (cf. Holmberg et al 2009) like Finnish and Russian.

2. Background for the analysis. Based on Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl’s (2007) interface analysis of Topics, Frascarelli (2007) provides evidence that in a language like Italian a thematic *pro* in preverbal position receives a value (i.e., a referential index) from the local A[aboutness-Shift]-Topic. A *Topic Criterion* is thus proposed that correlates core grammar with discourse requirements. Following this Criterion, the high Topic field in the C-domain contains a position in which the [+aboutness] feature (an “extended EPP feature”) is encoded and matched (via Agree) by the local (3rd person) null subject.

Crucially, Topic maintenance across sentences implies the existence of *Topic chains* and *silent A-Topics*: when continuous the A-Topic is not overtly realized; rather, a silent (1b) or low-toned (1c) G[iven]-Topic matches the [+aboutness] feature and enters an Agree relation with the local *pro*:

- (1) a. *Gianni_k, ha detto che pro_k/lui_k (L*) ha comprato una casa.*
‘John_k said that (he_k)/he_k bought a house.’
b. [_{ShiftP} Gianni_k [_{IP} pro_k ha detto [_{ForceP} che [_{FamP} <Gianni_k> [_{IP} pro_k ha comprato una casa]]]]]]
c. [_{ShiftP} Gianni_k [_{IP} pro_k ha detto [_{ForceP} che [_{FamP} lui_k [_{IP} pro_k ha comprato una casa]]]]]]

Later investigation on the interpretation of different types of Topics in diverse clause types led Bianchi & Frascarelli (2010) to propose an *Interface Root Restriction* (IRR), according to which IS-phenomena that affect the conversational dynamics (CG management, Krifka 2007) must occur in clauses endowed with illocutionary force that implement a conversational move. This is exactly the case of A-Topics, as they trigger an update of the discourse context. The prediction is that A-Topic chains can only be started from a root (-like) C-domain.

3. Silent A-Topics. Assuming the Topic Criterion and the IRR, this paper deals with new data as, for instance, the apparent possibility that a *pro* can take as its antecedent an element that is not a Topic but, rather, a DP that is in the Comment (or the Focus) of the previous sentence:

- (2) *Vorrei presentarti Leo_k, pro_k è il mio migliore amico.*
‘I’d like to introduce Leo to you. (He) is my best friend.’

It will be argued that cases like (2) do not challenge the Topic Criterion; rather, they show that in a consistent NS language like Italian an A-Topic can be silent not only if continuous, but also when heading a Topic chain. Hence, in (2) a silent A-Topic <Leo> must be assumed in the local C-domain of the juxtaposed sentence.

4. The parametric approach. Based on the data analysed, the Topic Criterion will be reformulated in the form of a “Macroparameter” (cf. Biberauer et al 2010) of NS languages, attributing cross-linguistic variation to mesoparameters dependent on interface restrictions.

References.

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