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Syntactic transfer in New York City Italian

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1. Introduction

Over the few last decades, the study of clitics has led to considerable ink-spilling in the attempt to understand their status in grammar, and their placement and occurrence in the clause (for useful overviews, see Sitaridou et al. 2015: 250-261 and Jiménez-Gaspar et al. 2017). The probably least studied aspect of this grammatical category, however, is the way clitics behave in language contact and in particular, their vulnerability. The proposed project aims to examine the effects that language contact might have on clitics. The specific object of investigation is the phenomenon known as ‘clitic climbing’, and the empirical evidence is drawn from Italian as spoken in New York City, in the context of different layers of migration. The results of an *in situ* investigation conducted on both heritage speakers and long established and more recent migrants will provide unprecedented insights into this understudied area of research.

2. The phenomenon

The term clitic climbing describes the phenomenon whereby a clitic pronoun selected by a complement verb moves out of its local domain and climbs to the matrix clause attaching to a host verb. Clitic climbing occurs in languages from different families (see Andrade & Bok-Bennema 2017), and within the Romance languages, it figures prominently in standard Italian (Monachesi 1993; Cinque 2004). Let us consider the following data from Italian.

(1) a. *Marco vuole comprare=lo*

Marco wants buy.INF=DO

‘Marco wants to buy it.’

b. *Marco lo=vuole comprare*

Marco DO=wants buy.INF

‘Marco wants to buy it.’

The sentences in (1a) and (1b) are identical in meaning. In both sentences the direct object (abbr. DO) ‘it’ is expressed by the element *lo*, which qualifies as a clitic. While, however, *lo* is enclitic (i.e., suffixed) to the non-finite verb in (1a), it procliticizes to (i.e., precedes) the finite verb in (1b). Object clitic climbing occurs in (1b) because the clitic object pronoun occurs on a verb head, viz. the inflected verb *vuole* ‘wants’, of which it is not an

argument—*lo* is, in fact, the argument of the embedded infinitive (abbr. INF) *comprar(e)* ‘to buy’.

3. The sociolinguistic facts

The United States of America is the nation that scores highest among the destinations of Italian emigrants. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2017, 16,650,674 American individuals over 5 year old identify themselves as Italian American. (Of these, 527,123 live in the New York metropolitan area.) However, the 2009-2013 American Community Survey released in October 2015 estimates that the Italian language is spoken in the U.S.A. by 708,966 (of which 191,724 speak English “less than very well”), as a result of full linguistic assimilation to English by the third generation. While exact figures are not known, we can assume that for most of these speakers, Italian is a heritage language, while they are fully proficient in the dominant language, English. For those who migrated to the United States more recently, Italian might still be the dominant language, depending on the migration background. The most significant difference between these two main groups (viz. heritage speakers vs recent emigrants) is a mainly linguistic one: while for heritage speakers, the ancestry’s language is predominantly an Italo-Romance dialect, recent migrants are most likely to be dominant in standard Italian or a regional variety thereof or both (for details, see Haller 1987; Haller 1993; Fina & Fellin 2012).

4. The hypothesis

In language contact, certain areas of grammar are known to be more vulnerable than others: in the first place the vocabulary but also prosody are more prone to borrowing than the syntax, for example (see Thomason & Kaufman 1988). Both in language acquisition and in language contact, the source of change is the (individually or socially) dominant language, which might encroach upon the structure of the recipient language in a systematic way. Although some dedicated studies exist (e.g., Klee 1990; Montrul 2010a, 2010b; Larrañaga & Guijarro-Fuentes 2012; Chan 2014; Souag 2017), the behavior of clitics in language contact is largely under-researched.

The case of Italian spoken in the U.S.A and more specifically New York City (NYC) is particularly interesting, because Italian and English diverge structurally, with respect to clitic climbing. This phenomenon, exemplified in (1b) with Italian data, is absent from English. As English is the first contact language for speakers of Italian in NYC, the question arises whether the absence of object clitic climbing in the dominant language, English, has affected the syntax of the non-dominant language, Italian, and to what extent a change has occurred.

The present project pursues the hypothesis that a syntactic transfer occurs from English into Italian in terms of pattern weakening or loss (i.e., negative transfer). Specifically, I hypothesize that (a) the influence of English inhibits object clitic climbing in speakers of Italian, and (b) the degree of inhibition of object clitic climbing correlates with different sociolinguistic profiles of Italian speakers. Despite a *prima facie* resemblance, the proposed research hypothesis differs considerably from Chan's (2014) study on the acquisition of clitic

placement in heritage speakers of Italian: first, Chan focuses on the acquisition of object clitic placement in standard Italian only by heritage speakers of non-standard Italian dialects (across which the occurrence of clitic climbing vary considerably) who learn standard Italian as an L2/L3; second he investigates the influence of the substrate, that is, the Italian dialects of the speakers' families, rather than the influence of the contact language, English, on Italian.

5. The data

With the Italian Academy of Columbia University based in Manhattan, the natural geolinguistic constraint of my investigation is NYC, which incidentally is the world's best example of sociolinguistic 'superdiversity' (Vertovec 2007). The historical-demographic composition of the Italian-origin community sketched in §3 allows to establish different types of speakers of Italian, along a fine-grained classification based among other things on the degree of exposure to English. The test groups will include heritage speakers who are not fluent in Italian, heritage speakers who are fluent in Italian, English-Italian co-dominant speakers, and Italian-dominant speakers (e.g., recent migrants). The fellow will conduct fieldwork with balanced test person groups and elicit naturalistic speech samples, derived from retelling of narratives, and semi-spontaneous oral texts via picture stories. Linguistic online tests will provide a third source of empirical evidence.

6. Conclusion

The proposed project on the influence of English on NYC Italian and the ensuing loss of a syntactic pattern in the non-dominant language is a timely contribution to current interdisciplinary research on contact-induced grammatical change in the context of migration and superdiversity. The project promises to spawn remarkable synergistic effects between the fellow and the host institution not only because an investigation into the Italian language matches the natural scope of the Academy, but also because the empirical evidence will be elicited *in situ* and the proposed topic fits in perfectly into the Academy's current focus on migration.

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