Topic agreement and the person-agreement split in two North-Eastern Italian varieties

Silvia Schaefer

Goethe University Frankfurt

Introduction. Postverbal subjects cause problems for the standard theories of subject-verb agreement as Spec-Head agreement and nominal licensing. Cross linguistically, we observe two different agreement patterns in inversion structures: (i) full agreement with the postverbal subject, as observed in English and Standard Italian in (1a.) and (1b.), and (ii) lack of agreement, as observed in French in (2a.). The non-agreeing pattern can also be observed in several Italian dialects, see example (2b.) from Piobbico (Marche), taken from Manzini & Savoia (2005: 49).

(1)	a. There have arrived three women.		(English)
	b. Sono	arrivate	tre donne.	(Standard Italian)
	Are	arrived.PL.F	three women
(2)	a. Il	est	arrivé	trois femmes.	(French)
	Expl.	is	arrived.SG.M	three women
	b. ɛ	'mɔrt	lə ga'linə.	(Piobbico, Marche)
	is	died.SG.M.	the chickens.F
	"The chickens died."

Additionally, we observe a person-agreement asymmetry in those Italian dialects, that display non-agreement with the 3rd person postverbal subject: agreement is obligatory for 1st and 2nd person pronouns, as can be observed for Florentine, taken from Brandi & Cordin (1989: 138):

(3)	a. e	vengo	io		d. si	vien	noi
	SCL come.1.SG	I			SCL come.1.PL	we
	b. tu	vieni	te		e. vu'	venite	voi
	SCL come.2.SG	you.SG			SCL come.2.PL	you
	c. **e**	**viene**	**lui/lei**		f. **e**	**vien**	**loro**
	SCL come.3.SG	he/she			SCL come.3.SG	they

I will present data from two North-Eastern Italian varieties that display the (apparent) optionality of agreement with postverbal subjects, providing evidence against Guasti & Rizzi's (2002) claim that the morphological realization of agreement with postverbal subjects is stable within a linguistic system and therefore can be seen to be tied to a parametric option.

Claim. Verbal agreement with postverbal subjects in North-Eastern Italian varieties, which display an apparent optionality of agreement, is determined by givenness of the postverbal DP.

Data. The dialects from Gazzolo d'Arcole (Verona) and Venice display obligatory full agreement with preverbal subjects but (apparent) optionality of agreement with postverbal subjects:

(4)	a. Xe	morto	na toseta.	(Gazzolo)
	Is	died.SG.M	a girl
	b. Xe	morta	na toseta.
	Is	died.SG.F	a girl
	"A girl died."
(5)	a. Xe	morto	na fia.	(Venice)
	Is	died.SG.M	a girl

b. Xe morta na fia.
   Is died.SG.F a girl
   "A girl died."

Both structures are grammatical and deliver new information but trigger a slightly different interpretation. The non-agreeing structure conveys the total unexpectedness of the event and the participant. The agreeing structure also conveys new information, but the DP participant is pragmatically activated and serves as topic-like element that is commented on by the verbal complex. This interpretive difference is well captured by Sasse's (1987) distinction in thetic and categorical utterances. Both deliver new information but while a categorical utterance is composed of a topic-like entity and a comment, a thetic utterance is logically indivisible.

Analysis. Following Sasse (1987), I analyse the utterances in (4a.) and (5a.) as thetic and those in (4b.) and (5b.) as categorical. The difference is therefore pragmatic and results in a morphosyntactic distinction (i.e. agreement). I assume givenness of the postverbal DP to be the decisive property for this distinction. The DP in categorical structures moves to a topic position in the vP-periphery, which is associated to givenness, opposed to left-peripheral topic projections associated to aboutness (Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl 2007). In this position, the DP is available for an agreement relation. The DP in thetic utterances on the contrary remains VP-internal and therefore cannot enter in an agreement relation. This correlates with cross-linguistic facts on the interpretation of DPs inside and outside the VP, as stated by Diesing (1992).

(6)   a. thetic: $[_{TP}$ xè $[_{AspP}$ morto$_i$ $[_{vP}$ $[_{VP}$ t$_i$ na toseta $]]]]$
      b. categorical: $[_{TP}$ xè $[_{AspP}$ morta$_i$ $[_{vP}$ $[_{TopP}$ na toseta$_j$ $]$ $[_{VP}$ t$_i$ t$_j]]]]$

Partial support for givenness as the crucial property for agreement comes from the negative quantifier 'nobody'. Many Venetian dialects display two forms of the negative quantifier, *nesun* and *nisuni,* of which the latter is inflected for plural. As can be seen in (7), the optionality of agreement disappears in Gazzolo as well as in Venetian, since 'nobody' can never function as a topic or topic-like:

(7)   a. No xè   morto   nisuni.
         Not is   dead.SG.M   nobody.PL
      b. *No xè   morti   nisuni.
         Not is   dead.PL.M   nobody.PL
         "Nobody died."

Givenness as decisive property for full agreement equally delivers an explanation for the person-agreement asymmetry. While 3rd person arguments can be entirely hearer-new, 1st and 2nd person pronouns are always in a sense topic-like. Therefore, in my analysis, 1st and 2nd pronouns are expected to move to the vP-peripheral topic position and thus trigger agreement.

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