The effects of language contact on the use of subject clitics in Venetan

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In this paper we discuss the results of a quantitative study on the use of subject clitics ('SCL') in a group of Venetan dialects. The data show that there is a tendency towards a simplification of the system: while the original system is rather complex to acquire, since the use of subject clitics is governed by both syntactic and pragmatic factors, younger speakers younger (often with Italian as dominant language) tend to base their judgements only on syntax. These results are in line with acquisitional studies that show that bilingual speakers have more difficulties in acquiring phenomena at the external syntactic-pragmatic interface.

SCLs are used in a subset of Romance languages, and their study has been one of the main topics in Italian generative analyses since the early 1980's, starting from Brandi & Cordin (1981) and Rizzi (1982). In particular, a large number of analyses consider Venetan varieties (Renzi & Vanelli 1983, Benincà 1983, 1986, 1994, Poletto 1993, 2000, Vanelli 1998, Penello 2003, Chinellato 2005, Manzini & Savoia 2005, Cardinaletti & Repetti 2010a,b, Cardinaletti 2012, Pescarini 2014). These studies show that the inventory of Venetan SCLs includes proclitic subject pronouns for the 2nd person singular and the 3rd person singular and plural, and enclitic subject pronouns for all persons. In these varieties, an SCL is used when there is no other subject. In addition, they can double an XP-subject (a full pronoun or DP), but only when the latter is topicalised (dislocated in CP). On the other hand, if it is in Spec,TP, it can never be doubled by an SCL (Benincà 1983, Poletto 1993). This means that the use of a SCL is determined by both syntactic and pragmatic factors. Note also that these accounts show that Central Venetan (CV) lacks an expletive clitic with impersonal and meteorological verbs.

While these studies have provided a neat picture of the overall SCL system in CV, in our research we aim at investigating if the system is stable or not, and if there are changes in the use of SCLs by the younger speakers that have been exposed to more intensive contact with Italian than the previous generations. Therefore, we decided to start a large data collection in the provinces of Padua, Treviso, Venice and Vicenza through an online questionnaire that consisted of totally 53 questions (including fillers). Each question contained a sentence formulated in the local Venetan variety (informants could choose between Paduan, Trevigiano, Venetian and Vicentino), and informants were asked to judge the grammaticality of the sentence ("yes", "no", or "acceptable but not perfect"). Moreover, they could add comments or their own version of the sentence.

We tested the grammaticality of SCLs in different syntactic environments, such as interrogatives, declaratives with an overt subject (cases of doubling), meteorological verbs. The questionnaire was filled in by 819 informants, whose age range was from 12 to 75. The majority of informants was between 20 and 40 years old. From these informants, we excluded those that declared to have a low knowledge of Venetan (3 or below on a scale from 1 to 7).

After this preliminary refinement, we examined 730 questionnaires (222 in Paduan, 114 in Trevigiano, 147 in Venetian, and 247 in Vicentino). Overall, we observed that the system outlined in the literature to date is still valid for all four varieties. However, there are some environments in which a part of the speakers did not answer as expected. In particular, we note that (see Table 1 for examples and percentages):

- While SCLs usually do not appear when there is a postverbal XP-subject, a number of speakers accepts them in these contexts (1);
- When there is an overt subject pronoun or DP, a part of the speakers tends to judge doubling ungrammatical, even when the subject DP is clearly dislocated. This holds mainly for proclitic pronouns, but the same phenomenon is accepted, albeit by less speakers, in interrogatives with a doubling enclitic pronoun (2);

- Several speakers accept the use of a default 3rd m.sg. SCL with meteorological verbs (3);
- In cases of SCL-finite verb inversion (mainly interrogatives, but we tested also "interrogative-like" exclamatives and counterfactual optative sentences, see Munaro 2010), the SCL can be dropped for various speakers if there is a strong pronoun or DP subject. Note that this seems to be a more stable phenomenon, since older and younger speakers give the same judgements (4).
- On the other hand, the 2nd person singular proclitic pronoun and the enclitic pronouns of the 1st and 2nd person (singular and plural) don't seem to be affected by undergoing changes.

		Yes	Marg.	No	Max (variety)	Min (variety)	Age < 25	Age > 55
(1)	*I riva i me parenti* (PD) They.CL arrive the my relatives	62,7	23,9	13,4	64,9 (VI)	59,2 (PD)	73,5	54,9
(2)	*Marco, el gelato, el lo ga za magnà* (VI) Marco, the ice-cream, he.CL it.CL has already eaten	60,3	23,3	16,4	71,1 (VI)	53,7 (TV)	50	73
(3)	*El ze drio piovar* (VE) It.CL is behind rain ("It is raining")	42,1	28,8	29	56 (TV)	30 (VI)	45	31
(4)	*La Maria ze za tornà?* (TV) The Maria is already come.back?	65,2	20,6	14,2	74,4 (VI)	38,2 (TV)	64	63,5
Table 1: examples of some sentences of the questionnaire and percentages of "yes"								

If we consider all the main deviations from the rules described in the literature, we can individuate a general tendency towards a simplification of the system, regarding the third person SCLs. Descriptively, the generalisation that can be drawn from the tendencies described above is:

(5) For all verbs in the 3rd person: insert always one, and not more than one, overt subject.

(5) suggests that: (i) 3rd person SCLs tend to be reanalysed as weak pronouns (since they allow no doubling); (ii) the Venetan varieties studied here are drifting towards a partial pro-drop status, since all verbs in the 3rd person tend to have an overt subject (also meteorological and impersonal verbs).

This development, which probably should be connected to the increasing contact with Italian, shows us that Venetan is "turning back" in the evolution of SCLs: the usual grammaticalisation path is from weak to clitic pronoun, while here we apparently find the reverse development. Furthermore, the observed tendencies seem to go towards a simpler syntax: the (Central) Venetan system of clitic pronouns is more complex than that of other Northern Italian Dialects, because it is based not purely on syntactic factors, but it is at the syntax-pragmatics interface. As shown by several acquisition studies, phenomena at the interface are more complex to process, and more difficult to acquire for bilingual children, even in the language in which they are dominant (cf. the *Interface Hypothesis* of Sorace 2006, Serratrice & Sorace 2009 *et seq.*); thus, a way of simplifying the system is to turn it into a purely syntactic phenomenon, eliminating the pragmatic factor.

To sum up, we identify some tendencies in the use of the SCLs in Venetan: in all four varieties we can observe a similar path towards a simplification of the system, which affects especially younger speakers. We suggest that this process is due to the complexity of interface phenomena (as is the case of the distribution of SCLs in Venetan), especially in contact situations. Thus, this analysis shows that contact with Italian does not result in a complete adoption of the Italian system (no SCLs at all), as a "naïve" theory of contact would predict; rather, it leads to an internal reorganisation of the Venetan SCL system. This is fundamental for the study of contact-induced change in general.