

On variation and change in the system of expletive subject clitics in Opitergino

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Object of study

We investigate the distribution of expletive subject clitics (ESCs) in Opitergino, an understudied Venetan variety belonging to the Liventino dialect group (Zamboni 1974). ESCs are pronominal elements that occur in impersonal contexts with which no individual reference is associated (Manzini & Savoia 2005, I:162), and saliently distinguish northern Italo-Romance from standard Italian, which is the contact language. Since the 1950 years, standard Italian spread as the language of national media (especially TV), leading to a decrease in the use of dialects as sole means of communication from 64.0% in 1955 to 5.4% in 2006 (De Mauro 2014:113). While this decrease only partially affected Venetan varieties (ISTAT 2017), a new situation of diglossia involving standard Italian and local varieties has emerged in Veneto.

Research questions

The existence of divergent structures in languages in contact may lead to change, either in terms of contact-induced change or of secondary internal restructuring. The presence of ESCs in Opitergino and their absence in standard Italian represents such a case. In our case study, we aim to **a)** explore the synchronic variation across Opitergino speakers and **b)** understand whether the contact with standard Italian has affected the ESC system.

Method

Following Pescarini (2012, 2014, 2016, 2022), we considered six impersonal constructions: **1)** subjectless predicative copular (SPC) constructions including existentials (It. *c'è una bambina*); **2)** extrapositions (It. *è ovvio che*); **3)** weather verbs (It. *piove*); **4)** epistemics (It. *sembra che*); **5)** impersonal *si* construction (It. *si dice*); **6)** impersonal deontics (It. *bisogna*).

Given that Opitergino is virtually unstudied (Zamboni 1974, 1979 deal with other Liventino varieties), we extracted a baseline of the use of ESC from the speech of four informants born before the 1940s, with Opitergino as L1, as well as from scarce written documentation. This baseline should represent the conservative Opitergino variety, spoken before the 1950 years: here, in declaratives, ESC is **a)** absent with impersonal *si*, impersonal deontics, and weather verbs; **b)** mandatory with SPCs and extrapositions; **c)** facultative with epistemics. In interrogatives, ESC is mandatory in all six constructions.

We conducted a survey with 100 speakers, well distributed by age group: younger (18-40) = 29; middle-aged (41-60) = 33; and elderly (61-92) = 38. The questionnaire comprised a total of 120 stimuli: 10 declarative sentences and 10 interrogative sentences for each type of impersonal construction, and each sentence appeared once with ESC and once without it. All experimental stimuli were audio-recorded by a native speaker and administered online. After answering questions regarding their sociolinguistic profile, participants were asked to listen to each audio file and rate each sentence on a 5-point Likert scale. Data were analyzed by means of conditional inference trees and random forest (Tagliamonte & Baayen 2012), using the Party package in R (Hothorn et al. 2006; Strobl et al. 2007, 2008).

Results and discussion

As for declaratives (Fig.1), the data obtained through our survey show a partial match with the baseline: **a)** SPCs and extrapositions are more likely to be accepted with ESC, while **b)** impersonal *si*, impersonal deontics, epistemics, and weather verbs are more likely to be accepted without ESC. At the same time, however, SPCs and extrapositions without ESC as well as impersonal *si*, impersonal deontics, epistemics, and weather verbs with ESC were not

rated as impossible. To these types of constructions informants assigned intermediate rates, which points to uncertainty in their assessment.

The direction of change is clearer in interrogatives (Fig. 2). While in conservative Opitergino ESC is mandatory in all contexts, our survey shows that: **a)** the presence of ESC does not impact the acceptability ratings of weather verbs and impersonal deontics, which scored the highest; **b)** the presence of ESC is more likely to positively impact all other constructions, namely impersonal *si*, epistemics, SPCs, and extrapositions; **c)** among the latter, the presence of ESC seems to impact the ratings of epistemics, SPCs, and extrapositions more strongly than those of impersonal *si* constructions.

Our results show no significant impact of sociolinguistic variables such as age; a general weakening of the rules in terms of both overextension and omission of ESC in declaratives; an erosion of the use of ESC in interrogatives likely induced by contact with Italian; an overlay of the impersonal contexts in which ESCs occur in declaratives and in interrogatives, viz. impersonal deontic, impersonal *si*, and weather verbs.

Selected references

- De Mauro, Tullio. 2014. *Storia linguistica dell'Italia repubblicana: dal 1946 ai nostri giorni*. Rome: Laterza. ● Manzini, Maria Rita & Savoia, Leonardo Maria. 2005. *I dialetti italiani e romanci. Morfosintassi generativa*. Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso. ● Pescarini, Diego. 2022. Expletive subject clitics in Northern Italo-Romance. *Languages* 7, 265. ● Zamboni, Alberto. 1974. Veneto. In M. Cortelazzo (Ed.), *Profilo dei dialetti italiani*, Vol. 5. Pisa: Pacini.

Fig. 1. Rating scores across impersonal constructions in declarative sentences (n = 5,220)

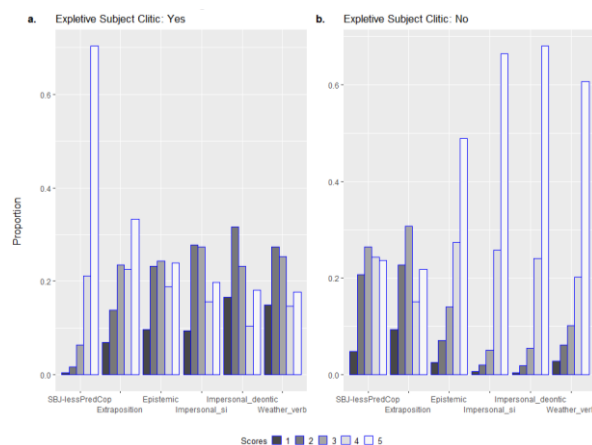


Fig. 2. Rating scores across impersonal constructions in interrogative sentences (n = 5,220)

