From modern to old Romance:
The interaction between information structure and word order

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The articulation of information structure and word order is fairly well-studied in the modern languages. The same can hardly be said about historical linguistics. The aim of this paper is to investigate the interaction between syntax and information structure in the history of the Romance languages. (NB: The discussion of information structure and word order is restricted to prototypical null subject varieties thus Old French is excluded from the present discussion) However, this kind of objective may seem, at least *prima facie*, to face insuperable methodological difficulties given the incomplete knowledge of the prosody of Old Romance (OR) languages, the nature of the texts, the impossibility of experiments on intonation, etc. We intend to circumvent those problems by using 'the window into the past' technique: we will use the pattern of two Modern Romance (MR) languages, namely Sicilian and Sardinian, as a way of 'unlocking' the information package of OR. Our account essentially relies on two major tenets: (a) information structure is encoded in the syntax and movement is driven by discourse-related features (as in the cartographic approach); (b) the word order of 'relatively free' languages, such as MR is directly determined by the information structure of the sentence whereby discourse-related categories (e.g. topic, focus) are syntactically marked.

In the majority of the MR languages, the informational focus of the sentence stays *in situ* in a postverbal position (cf. Zubizarreta 1998) or in a specialised position in the left periphery of the VP (cf. Belletti 2004). Only contrastive focus can undergo movement to the left periphery of the sentence to a dedicated functional projection (cf. Rizzi 1997, Zubizarreta 1998):

(1) a. MANZANAS compró Pedro (y no peras). *Spanish*
apples buy.PAST.3SG Pedro (and not pears)
'Pedro bought apples (and not pears).' (Zubizarreta 1999)
b. ¿Qué compró Pedro?
what buy.PAST.3SG Pedro
'What did Pedro buy?'
c. Pedro compró **manzanas**.
Pedro buy.PAST.3SG apples
'Pedro bought apples.'
c'. #**Manzanas** compró Pedro.
apples bought Pedro

By contrast, in OR the preverbal focus position is not restricted to a specific interpretation of the focus constituent therefore, either informational or contrastive focus can appear preverbally:

(2) a. **molti drappi di seta** fanno ... *Old Italian*
'They make many silk cloths.' (*Il Milione* 147-3)
a'. **Danaio** non aveva da comperare da costui. *Old Italian*
'He didn't have any money to buy anything from this man.' (*Il Novellino* VIII II-I2)
b. **Tot aizo** vendet Guirberz. *Old Occitan*
'Guirberz sells all this...' (*Chartes* 15, 27)
c. **Daqueste miragre** diz San Gregorio que … *Old Portuguese*
'Saint Gregory says of this miracle that …' (Ribeiro 1995)
d. **Tod esto** cuenta en este sobredicho libro q<ue>... *Old Spanish*
'All this he recounts in the aforementioned book that ...' (*General Estoria* 3R, 27)

Interestingly, out of all MR, only Sicilian (3) and Sardinian (4) have 'preserved' the OR information package in terms of focus fronting (FF) since a contrastive interpretation of the focus constituent is not necessary; thus, informational focus also commonly appears within the left periphery (cf. Cruschina 2008).

(3) Iddu **picciliddu** è. *Sicilian*
he child be.PRES.3SG
'He is a child.' (Rohlfs 1969)

(4) **Maláidu** ses? *Sardinian*
sick be.PRES.2SG
'Are you sick?' (Jones 1993)

Examining the characteristics of FF in Sardinian, Sicilian and OR, many similarities emerge: FF mainly occurs in copular sentences and in interrogatives, and it mostly, albeit not exclusively, involves quantifiers and quantified phrases (5a), as well as predicates, and, in particular, predicative modifiers with a gradient meaning (5b):

(5) a. **tre battaglie** di campo ho poi fatte. *Old Italian*
years three battles of field have.PRES.1SG then do.PP
'I have then fought three battles.'
b. Maestro, **di grande scienza** ti credo.
master of great science you.CL believe.PRES.1SG
'Master, I consider you of great knowledge.' (Vanelli 1999)

On the basis of these and other similarities, we extend our analysis of FF as movement to a designated peripheral projection from Sicilian/Sardinian to OR. Therefore, on our analysis, the so-called V2 character of OR (cf. Benincà 1984; Ribeiro 1995; Salvi 2000) is shown to be an epiphenomenon: the mere result of syntactic operations related to the information structure packaging, and in particular, FF. Additionally, since our account does not preclude additional operations, such as the topicalisation, V3/4 word orders which are typically labelled as marginal –despite their robustness (cf. Kaiser 2004; Sitaridou 2006) – now receive a straightforward account.

The diachronic implications of our analysis are multiple: (a) the otherwise typologically unattested evolutionary path from Latin OV to OR V2 to MR (S)V(S) is dispelled; (b) what can be dubbed OR stylistic fronting can now be related to FF; (c) the diachronic variation found in Romance with respect to the placement of informational focus can be ascribed to the parametric variation and the relevant change in the activation and specialisation of the focus projections in the clause: the clause-external left peripheral projection for OR, Sardinian and Sicilian, and the clause-internal projection for the rest of MR languages; (d) FF is related to remnant object preposing (Latin setting) and is lost when OV is completely eliminated from the grammar.

Selected References: Benincà, P. (1983/84). 'Un' ipotesi sulla sintassi delle lingue romanze medievali', *Quaderni Patavini di Linguistica 4*, 3-19; Reedition in P. Benincà (1994): *La variazione sintattica. Studi di dialettologia romanza*, Bologna: Il Mulino, p. 177-194. **J**ones, M. A. 1993. *Sardinian Syntax.* London/New York: Routledge. **R**izzi, L. 1997. The fine structure of the left periphery. In *Elements of Grammar: Handbook in Generative Syntax*, L. Haegeman (ed.), pp. 281-337. Dordrecht: Kluwer. **R**ohlfs, G. 1969. *Grammatica Storica della Lingua Italiana e dei suoi Dialetti, Vol. 3. Sintassi e Formazione delle Parole*. Torino: Einaudi. **R**ibeiro, I. (1995). 'Evidence for a verb-second phase in Old Portuguese'. In Battye, A. & I. Roberts (eds.), *Clause Structure and Language Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 110-139. **S**alvi, G. (2000). 'La formazione del sistema V2 delle lingue romanze antiche'. *Lingua e Stile 35*. **V**anelli, L. 1999. Ordine delle parole e articolazione pragmatica dell'italiano antico: la 'prominenza' pragmatica della prima posizione nella frase. *Medioevo Romanzo* 23 (2): 229-246. **Z**ubizarreta, M.L. 1998. *Prosody, Focus, and Word Order*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.