Non-canonical postverbal subjects

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1. The construct 'subject'

The study of the grammatical relation 'subject' has a long history in linguistics. Over time different definitions have been provided, depending on properties of the languages under examination or on the theoretical perspective adopted. There is consensus that 'subject' is a central grammatical function in a great deal of languages, where a cluster of morphosyntactic properties (syntactic position, case morphology, control of person and number agreement on the verb, etc.) have a number of pragmatic and semantic correlates: on the one hand, the AUTONOMY PROPERTIES (see Keenan 1976), such as independent existence, autonomous reference, topicality and high referentiality, and, on the other hand, the semantic roles AGENT or EXPERIENCER. However, even though many of the said properties emerge from the analysis of a wide range of related and unrelated languages, it is by no means the case that the subject exhibits exactly the same set of features across all languages (see Keenan 1976, Falk 2006). Moreover, the construct under discussion is to be understood differently depending on whether one deals with nominative-accusative or ergative-absolutive alignment (Comrie 1973, Anderson 1976, Sasse 1978, Van Valin & LaPolla 1997). The question of whether subject is a syntactic primitive (Perlmutter & Postal 1974) and a linguistic universal, or neither, is, thus, still open (Van Valin 1981, LaPolla 1993, Dryer 1997, Van Valin & LaPolla 1997, Farrell 2005, Van Valin 2005, Bickel 2011). Some scholars go as far as to claim that the notion of subject ought to be conceived of in gradient terms (Haspelmath & Caruana 2000, among others), whereas others explicitly reject such claims, advocating a discrete notion of subject (Barðdal & Eythórsson 2016).

In the last few decades, a great deal of progress in the understanding of subjecthood has been made by investigating non-canonical subjects, i.e. predicate arguments of a given language – or of a construction of a given language – that only share some patterns of grammatical cod-

ing and behaviour with the subject of that language (see Bossong 1998, Aikhenvald *et al.* 2001, Barðdal & Eythórsson 2003, 2009, Bhaskararao & Subbarao 2004, Barðdal 2006, Cennamo 2011, Seržant & Kulikov 2013, Cennamo & Fabrizio *in press*). To give but few examples, the thematic argument of thetic (Sasse 1987), sentence focus (Lambrecht 1994), intransitive constructions occurs in a postverbal position in both Italian and the Gallo-Italian dialects of Northern Italy. However, in Italian, this argument controls number agreement on the conjugated form of the verb (cf. (1a-b)), whereas this agreement varies in accordance with several parameters, including verb class, in the corresponding constructions of Gallo-Italian (cf. (2a-b), Bentley 2018).

(1) Italian
  a. *Sono   morti tanti   soldati.*
     be.3PL died   many soldiers
     'There died many soldiers.'

  b. *Hanno   chiamato   tanti   pazienti.*
     have.3PL called   many   patients
     'Many patients have called.'

(2) Milan, Lombardy
  a. *Gh' è   mort   tanti   suldà.*
     CL be.3SG died   many.M.PL soldier.M.PL
     'There died many soldiers'

  b. *An   ciamà   tanti   malà.*
     have.3PL called   many.M.PL patient.M.PL
     'Many patients have called.'

   This evidence suggests that individual coding and behavioural properties that are generally associated with the subject may actually be sensitive to specific semantic or pragmatic correlates of this function. If the required conditions do not obtain, then the relevant coding and behavioural properties are not exhibited by the argument, which can be claimed to be a non-canonical subject (cf. (1a-b), (2b)) or not to be a subject (cf. (2a)).
   A different kind of issue emerges from the analysis of the experiencer argument of a class of psych-verbs, which fails to bear nominative case and to control number agreement in Italian, while occurring preverbally (cf. (3a)). The experiencer of another class of psych-verbs, instead, exhibits canonical subject behaviour (cf. (3b)).

(3) Italian
  a. *A me   piacciono i   dolci,   ma   a   te   no.*
     to me.SG please.3PL the sweet.PL but   to   you   no
     'I like sweets, but you do not.'

b. *Io   amo   i   dolci,   ma   tu   no.*
I.NOM.SG love.1SG the sweets   but you   no
'I love sweets, but you do not.'

Scholars sometimes refer to the experiencer argument of the verb class exemplified in (3a) as *logical subject* or *subject of predication*, capturing its semantic and pragmatic role as 'what the predication is about'. In addition, this type of evidence has led some to differentiate between a syntactic projection or position associated with the *subject of predication*, or the argument which the predication is about, and another syntactic position, which is instead associated with grammatical subject features such as case as well as person and number agreement (Cardinaletti 2004). We should note, however, that the properties that underlie the distribution of psych-verbs in the two verb classes exemplified above in (3a) and, respectively, (3b) remain to date a moot point (see Belletti & Rizzi 1988 and Bentley 2006: 93-120 for some relevant analyses).

In sum, the construct subject can only be properly understood if it is broken down into individual coding and behavioural properties, which do tend to cluster together, but need not do so in all the constructions of a given language, let alone in all languages. Furthermore, the subject properties correlate with more general properties of a language, such as word order, and its interplay with information structure, argument realization and alignment, etc. The contributions to this special issue of *Italian Journal of Linguistics* explore subject canonicality vis-à-vis different types of basic word order and alignment, as well as in construction-specific terms.

2. Non-canonical postverbal subjects

The canonical position of a phrase is normally defined according to the word order that obtains in out-of-the-blue contexts, for example, in pragmatically felicitous answers to the question *What happens?* or *What happened?*. This diagnostic relies on the assumption that, in this type of context, the whole proposition contained in the answer conveys new information and a sentence-focus structure is thus yielded. If we apply this diagnostics to English, the only pragmatically felicitous order with a transitive sentence is SVO, with no topicalization or extraposition of any of the constituents:

(4)   Q: *What happened?*
       A1:   *John broke the vase.*
       A2:   #   *John broke it, the vase.*

A3:	#	*John, he broke the vase.*
A4:	#	*The vase John broke.*
A5:	#	*The vase, John broke it.*

In SVO languages the preverbal position is indeed assumed to be the canonical subject position in all the grammatical theories that rely on a concept of canonical subject position. However, the issue becomes more complex as soon as we take into account the distinction between the base-generated and the derived position of the subject, constructions with expletive subjects, and the evidence of null-subject languages. Ever since Koopman & Sportiche (1991), it has been assumed that the subject generates within the VP as specifier of V and then moves to the specifier of TP to satisfy specific syntactic requirements, in particular, Chomsky's (1982) 'Extended Projection Principle' (henceforth **EPP**). The expression EPP has come to refer generically to the requirement that every clause must have a subject, although the related syntactic issues have undergone revisions in recent theory. Whereas the movement of the subject to SpecTP is obligatory in languages such English, yielding the SVO order, unless the EPP is satisfied by an expletive pronoun such as *it* or *there*, it need not take place in null-subject languages like Italian, where the subject can stay in its VP-internal position, resulting in VS order. Crucially, in the latter type of language, VS order surfaces in sentence-focus contexts. The examination of these constructions both over time (Ciconte *this issue*) and across different Romance languages (Leonetti *this issue*) suggests that it is in this VS structure that the postverbal subject is properly non-canonical, both in the sense that it is in focus and in terms of its role in the argument-*vs*-predication partition. Indeed, factors such as the lexical category, the lexical-semantic properties and the argument structure of the predicate, or the status of the subject in information structure, play a crucial role in the grammaticality or felicity of VS over SV order (Belletti; Cardinaletti; Leonetti; Fominyan; Samek-Lodovici; Serrano & Durand, all in this issue; see also Leonetti 2017, Bentley & Cruschina 2018). However, VS may prove to be the only grammatical order irrespective of the factors just mentioned, as is the case with *wh*-questions in null-subject Romance languages (Bianchi, Bocci & Cruschina; Leonetti, both in this issue). This means that, even in languages that are generally classified as SVO, VS may in fact prove to be the only grammatical order in particular constructions. The question of whether the postverbal subject of these constructions is canonical is addressed in this volume, where several authors reach the conclusion that postverbal subjects in SVO languages are not necessarily non-canonical and that several different canonical positions are available to subjects.

3. The issue

The articles included in this special issue of *Italian Journal of Linguistics* are a selection of the papers presented at the workshop on 'Non-canonical postverbal subjects', which the editors of the issue organized within the programme of the 50th Annual Meeting of the *Societas Linguistica Europaea* (Universität Zürich, 10-13 September 2017). The papers enhance knowledge and understanding of the following aspects of the broader topic of subject canonicality:

(i) The disentanglement of syntactic and pragmatic constraints on VS order, resulting in canonicality and non-canonicality (Belletti; Bianchi, Bocci & Cruschina; Cardinaletti; Fominyam; Leonetti).
(ii) The effect of focus structure on subject canonicality (Cardinaletti; Ciconte; Samek-Lodovici).
(iii) The distribution of subject coding and behavioural properties in constructions with post-copular DPs (Hartmann & Heycock).
(iv) The role of alignment in subject canonicality (Serrano & Durand).

We hope that this volume will be of interest to researchers in syntax and typology, as well as to specialists in Romance, Germanic, Bantu and Arawak, and that it will spark further discussion on the many unresolved issues to do with subject canonicality, such as those mentioned in section 1.

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