

Topical constraints in the verbal agreement of spoken Italian (Tuscan variety)

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The different properties which characterise the Subject in written Standard Italian form a hierarchy with the control over verbal agreement as its main feature. In spoken Tuscan Italian, however, the government of the verbal Predicate depends on the pragmatic role played by the Subject: agreement occurs only if the Subject is topical and preverbal. This rule holds true also for the impersonal sentences with the reflexive pronoun *si*, where previous Subjects have been reanalysed as Objects.

14th- and 15th-century written records belonging to the popular Tuscan literature show the same pattern as contemporary Tuscan Italian, at least with intransitive and impersonal verbs. In this historical perspective Topic agreement is only but one aspect of the drift from Latin to Italian, whose continuity was maintained in the spoken variety and interrupted in the standard language by the intervention of grammarians.*

1. *The subject in written Standard Italian*

The category of subjecthood is one of the most debated matters because of its multidimensional nature. This is the reason why theoretical linguistics, or at least its functionalist branch, instead of pursuing a universal definition of the Subject, has concentrated its efforts on the elaboration of a set of criteria including the properties shown by subjects in the languages of the world. A list of these properties, provided by E.L. Keenan (1976), has met a wide acceptance among the linguists of the functionalist branch together with critical comments, adjustments and refinements.¹ Keenan's list, as was soon pointed out by D.E. Johnson (1977), does not determine which criteria are necessary and sufficient for a universally valid definition of the Subject. It enables us, however, to find a definition specific to each language.

As regards written Standard Italian (SI), the properties listed by Keenan were soundly pointed out and analysed by R. Sornicola (1992) in a paper whose essential points are summarised below.

The main properties of the Subject may be reduced to four:

- (i) it governs verbal agreement (government = G);
- (ii) it is placed before the verb (position = P);

- (iii) it plays the pragmatic role of Topic (or Theme) (Topic = T);
 (iv) it plays the semantic role of Agent (Agent = A).

Since these properties have an independent distribution according to the different sentence patterns, the definition of Subject may range from a prototypical one with all the properties (G, P, T, A) to a minimal one with only G, as in the following examples:

- (I) *I bambini guardano spesso i cartoni animati* [Subject: G, P, T, A]
 'Children often watch cartoons'
 (II) *Il prezzo della benzina è stato aumentato dal governo* [Subject: G, P, T]
 'The price of petrol has been increased by the Government'
 (III) *A te nessuno proibisce di parlare* [Subject: G, P, A]
 'Nobody forbids you to speak'
 (IV) *A me le sue scarpe non piacciono* [Subject: G, P]
 'I do not like his/her shoes'
 (V) *I cartoni animati li guardano anche i grandi* [Subject: G, A]
 'Adults too watch cartoons'
 (VI) *Arrivano i primi turisti* [Subject: G]
 'The first tourists are arriving'

It appears that G, i.e. verbal agreement, which occurs in all the patterns, is the dominant property of the Subject in SI: 'Ciò che comunemente si definisce 'Soggetto' in italiano presenta un campo di dispersione di proprietà, il cui centro è la concordanza' (Sornicola 1992: 269).²

We add that the four properties form the hierarchy:

$$G > P > T > A$$

where $P > T$ because every Topic is pre-verbal but not every pre-verbal constituent is a Topic, and $T > A$ because the Subject of every verb can be a Topic, but only the Subject of a transitive verb can be an Agent. As a consequence of $P > T$, Subjects with the properties (G, T, A) or simply (G, T), i.e. Subjects as non-preverbal Topics, occur only in afterthought sentences, a case that we do not take into consideration here. Moreover, there is an evident affinity between P and T. In order to separate them, in (III) we have placed a 2nd person pronoun

contrasting with a non-referential indefinite pronoun, which represent the highest and the lowest degrees respectively in the scale of topicality.

At a closer examination we find that it is questionable to consider the Subject in (IV) as non-topical, as being definite and belonging to a possessor known by the hearer. It is necessary, at this point, to devise an unambiguous definition of Topic.

As Topic (or Theme) we mean the pragmatic role played by given, shared, presupposed information in a Topic-Comment (or Theme-Rheme) pattern. This definition encompasses the main senses usually assigned to the notion of Topic, which, according to J. Gundel, are:

'[...] a relational sense, in which topic is taken to be given in relation to comment and comment is taken to be new in relation to topic, and two referential senses, where given/new describes the status of the referent of a linguistic expression *vis-à-vis* a cognitive state of the speaker or addressee' (Gundel 1988: 211-212).

While subjecthood is a set of properties, each of which may be distributed among the different nominal (or pronominal) arguments of the sentence, topicality is a gradual property, which can be shared by more than one argument at a different degree. Therefore, while in a sentence there is necessarily one (and only one) Subject, Topic is neither unique nor necessary. Such sentences as (VI) are topicless and have only a rhematic section. On the contrary, (IV) has a thematic section including two topics, a referential one (*a me* 'to me') and a relational one (*le sue scarpe* 'his/her shoes'), which is referred to by the Comment.

Focus is a further notion that needs a definition. With Focus we mean the illocutive role played by what is singled out as the most remarkable argument and is usually marked by dislocation and suprasegmental features.³ Subject, Topic and Focus may be represented by three different arguments in a sentence, like the following pattern:

- (VII) A te che cosa ha portato Babbo Natale?
 [Topic] [Focus] [Subject]
 To you what brought Father Christmas?
 'What did Father Christmas bring to you?'

After posing these theoretical premises, we shall face the question of verbal agreement in spoken Italian.

2. The synchronic perspective: data from colloquial sources

2.1. Patterns with presentative, eventive and intransitive verbs

The examples quoted in this paper are drawn from a small corpus of informal spontaneous conversations that I have casually recorded in the eastern part of Tuscany, including Florence. It is the area where I often have the chance of collecting data from native speakers and I shall refer to this variety of spoken Italian as 'Tuscan Italian (TI)'.

This narrow spatial delimitation has two advantages. On the one hand, the divergence between language and dialect in this area is minimal, while, on the other hand, historical continuity is maximal. Thus, we do not run the risk of comparing and connecting varieties or registers which belong to different Romance substrates.

Let us examine now the examples of the first section. The corresponding forms of SI are put in brackets and a word-to-word translation is provided when necessary:

Section 1. Patterns with presentative, eventive and intransitive verbs:

- (1) C'è dimolte persone che la pensano diversamente (ci sono)
There is many people who it think differently
'There are many people whose opinion about it is different'
- (1) a Molte persone la pensano diversamente
Many people it think differently
'Many people have a different opinion about it'
- (2) Mi è capitato certe cose che te le devo raccontare
To-me has happened such things that to-you them I must tell
'I must tell you such things that happened to me'
- (3) C'è rimasto pochi pezzi, l'ho venduti tutti (ci sono rimasti)
There is left few pieces them I have sold all
'There are only few pieces left, I've sold them all'
- (4) Qualche volta succede dei fatti incredibili
Sometimes it-happens some incredible facts
'Sometimes, incredible facts happen'
- (5) A lui gli piace dimolto i bomboloni (piacciono)
To him to-him it-likes a lot the krapfen
'He likes krapfen a lot'

- (6) Li ci va tutti quelli che non hanno niente da fare (vanno)
There there it-goes all those who have nothing to do
'All those who have nothing to do go there'
- (7) Non gli basta mai i soldi (bastano)
Not to-him suffices never the pennies
'Money is never enough for him'
- (8) Stasera viene le tue amiche a trovarti (vengono)
Tonight it-comes your friends to see you
'Your friends are coming to see you tonight'
- (8) a Stasera viene le tue amiche a trovarti?
Tonight it-comes your friends to see you?
'Are your friends coming to see you tonight?'
- (8) b Stasera vengono le tue amiche a trovarti?
Tonight they-come your friends to see you?
'Are your friends coming to see you tonight?'
- (9) Mi manca cinque bollini per arrivare a venti (mancano)
To-me it-lacks five labels to get to twenty
'I need five labels to get to twenty'
- (9) a Quanti bollini ti manca per arrivare a venti?
How many labels to-you it-lacks to get to twenty?
'How many labels do you need to get to twenty?'
- (9) b I bollini che mi manca sono cinque
The labels that to-me it-lacks are five
'The labels that I need are five'
- (10) Con quest'umido nasce i funghi (nascono)
With this dampness it-grows the mushrooms
'Mushrooms grow with this dampness'
- (10) a Lo sai con quest'umido quanti funghi nasce...
It you-know with this dampness how many mushrooms it-grows...
'I bet there are going to be a lot of mushrooms growing with this dampness...'
- (10) b Quanti funghi che nasce con quest'umido!
How many mushrooms that grows with this dampness!
'How many mushrooms are growing with this dampness!'

The first case, although very common, is the less probative and was dealt with by G. Berruto (1986). It may correspond to the sentence (1a) in SI, where all the constituents are rhematic. In the same way, such SI sentences as *nessuno parla così forte* 'nobody speaks so loud' are replaced in TI by *non c'è nessuno che parla così*

forte 'there is nobody who speaks so loud', where the syntactic structure matches with the pragmatic pattern. The scope of the sentence is not to give new information about a generic topic, but, actually, to deny the existence of the referent identified through the relative clause.

Example (8) is by far more interesting. If we turn the statement into a question, we have two possible solutions: (8a) with the verb in the singular and (8b) with the verb agreeing in the plural. The difference between the two questions is pragmatic. In (8a) the underlying question is 'who is coming, your friends or somebody else?' with a rising pitch on *amiche* 'friends'. In (8b) the underlying question is 'are your friends coming or not?', with a rising pitch on *vengono* 'are coming', which is the focus of the question. Verbal agreement in (8b) can be explained by assigning a topical function to the Subject of the sentence (*le tue amiche* 'your friends'), which is not the focus, like in (8a), but a piece of shared information.

If our analysis is correct, the occurrence of a post-verbal topical Subject is possible and therefore the relation between the properties P and T is to be reconsidered. Since what is challenged here is the dominance of P over T and not their affinity, we shall change the hierarchy $P > T$ into $P \& T$.

In all the statements (2-10) the loss of number and gender agreement between the verb and its Subject apparently depends on the property (P&T). In fact, if the Subject occurs in post-verbal position and in the rhematic section of the sentence, agreement is suspended; if, on the contrary, it is both preverbal and thematic, agreement is regularly recovered:

- (2') Certe cose **capitano** a tutti
'Such things happen to everybody'
- (3') Alcuni pezzi **ci sono rimasti**
'Some pieces are left'
- (4') I fatti incredibili qualche volta **succedono**
'The incredible facts sometimes happen'
- (5') I bomboloni gli **piacciono** dimolto
'He likes krapfen a lot'
- (6') Tutti quelli che non hanno niente da fare **vanno** lì
'All those who have nothing to do go there'

- (7') I soldi non gli **bastano** mai
'Money is never enough for him'
- (8') Le tue amiche **vengono** a trovarti stasera
'Your friends are coming to see you tonight'
- (9') I bollini **mancano** ancora
'The labels are still lacking'
- (10') I funghi **nascono** con l'umido
'Mushrooms grow with dampness'

If we transform the example (9) into a WH-question, we obtain (9a), which at first sight seems to refute our hypothesis, because the noun-phrase *quanti bollini* 'how many labels' occurs in initial position and hence is to be considered as given information. Nevertheless, in this case, *quanti bollini* is the focus of the question, which in turn has not a Topic-Comment (or Theme-Rheme) pattern, like, e.g., the declarative sentence (9'), where the Topic *i bollini* governs the verbal agreement of the Comment *mancano*. What is pointed out in (9a) is the focal (hence non-topical) function of *quanti bollini*, which consequently does not govern verbal agreement. This explanation cannot account for (9b), where the initial NP *i bollini* is the Topic of the sentence. Why is the verb of the main sentence in the plural and the verb of the relative clause in the singular? A possible explanation is to be sought again in the pragmatic roles. While the verb of the main sentence *sono* is part of the Comment (or Rheme), the verb of the restrictive relative clause belongs to the Topic and the whole sequence *i bollini che mi manca* fulfills the same pragmatic function, identifying a unique referent. The consequence is that a verb agrees with its Topic only if it is part of the Comment or, in a negative formulation, non-rhematic verbs do not agree with their Subject.

Finally, let us transform the example (10) into (10a) and (10b). In (10a) it is noteworthy that the verb occurs last in the sentence and yet, notwithstanding its placement, it plays no rhematic role. In fact, none of the two sentences (10a) and (10b) displays a Topic-Comment pattern. In both of them, the noun-phrase *quanti funghi* 'how many mushrooms' is the focus and hence does not govern verbal agreement. The difference between the two sentences is represented by the focusing pattern. In (10a) it is realised through an indirect rhetoric question and in (10b) through a process of clefting.

2.2. Patterns with impersonal / reflexive verbs

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- (11) Di notte **si sente** tutti i rumori (**si sentono**)
In the night REFL hears all the noises
'In the night, one hears all noises'
- (11) a Di notte **si sente** i rumori?
- (11) b Di notte **si sentono** i rumori?
- (12) **Si considera** i figlioli come se fossero sempre bambini
REFL it-considers the children as if they were always babies
'We consider our children as if they were always small'
- (13) **Si può capire** le sue reazioni (**si possono**)
REFL it-can understand his reactions
'One can understand his reactions'
- (14) Oggi giorno **si compra** le macchine come si comprerebbe un paio
di scarpe (**si comprano**)
Nowadays REFL it-buys the cars as if REFL it-would buy a
'Nowadays, one buys a car as if it were a pair of shoes'
- (15) **Si prende** le polpette e si mettono a friggere
REFL it-takes the meat balls and REFL they put to fry
'Take the meat-balls and fry them'

The examples of this section raise some problems of interpretation about the syntactic role of the argument and the diathesis of the verb. Is the argument an object or a subject? Consequently, is the verbal diathesis active or passive? This is one of the most debated matters of the grammar of Italian and linguists of different schools show divergent opinions on this account.⁴

In one of the first attempts to draw a systematic picture of the Italian *si*-constructions, G.C. Lepschy (1978) provided, among others, the following patterns with the same meaning, i.e. 'one eats ripe apples':

- (VIII) **si mangia** le mele mature [active]
[REFL + Vsing]

- (IX) le mele mature **le si mangia** [active]
[PRON-obj + REFL + Vsing]
- (X) **si mangiano** le mele mature [passive]
[REFL + Vplur]
- (XI) le mele mature **le si mangiano** [passive]
[PRON-obj + REFL + Vplur]

In all the patterns verbal agreement is considered the crucial test to establish the diathesis, but in (XI) this test is evidently inconsistent with the occurrence of the clitic pronoun *le*, which is a copy of the Object, like in (IX). The difficulty is avoided by G. Salvi (1988: 102-113) by excluding (XI), which is replaced by (Xa):

- (VIII) **si mangia** le mele mature [active]
[REFL + Vsing]
- (IX) le mele mature **le si mangia** [active]
[PRON-obj + REFL + Vsing]
- (X) **si mangiano** le mele mature [passive]
[REFL + Vplur]
- (X) a le mele mature **si mangiano** [passive]
[REFL + Vplur]

Salvi's interpretation of (X) as passive was challenged by De Boer (1991: 269) and Cennamo (1993: 92), who claim that in such cases the verb agrees with its Object, as normally happens to past participle of compound tenses when the Object is preposed, like in the following sentence:

- (XII) le mele mature **le** abbiamo **mangiate**
[PRON-obj] [PAST PART- plur-fem]

Since the whole question is too complex to be dealt with extensively in this paper, my contribution will necessarily be limited to some remarks, which I have in part already made in a paper on Italian passive (Nocentini 1992: 429-431):

a) in the patterns (X-XI) with the verb in the plural, agreement cannot be considered the crucial test to establish the diathesis: in other words, more than an *explanans*, it is an *explanandum*;

b) not all the patterns (VIII-XI) can be regarded as SI. Therefore, self-contradictory descriptions are obvious consequences of an inconsistent grammatical system;

c) the synchronic description alone cannot account for Italian *si*-constructions, which show a multi-stage development in the course of time.

Thus, patterns (VIII) and (X) are inconsistent because the former belongs to a sub-standard variety,⁵ which has undergone syntactic change. The passive patterns (X) and (Xa) arose in Old Italian through a reanalysis of a reflexive pattern, as argued by Cennamo (1991), and *si*-forms of the verb were commutable into the formal passive with auxiliary *essere* 'be' and could be followed by an agentive complement, like in the following example:

- (XIII) Le mele mature **si mangiano** da tutti
'Ripe apples are eaten by everyone'

Such patterns still occurred in 19th-century written prose (Serianni 1988: 362), but during the last century a new reanalysis took place in the spoken variety. The passive structure of (X) was reinterpreted as impersonal/active thanks to the cooccurrence of three contextual conditions, namely the absence of the Agent, the active morphology of the verb and the non-thematic position of the Patient. This seems to be the probable explanation of the occurrence of (VIII) in the sub-standard variety.⁶

In TI, on the other hand, the status of *si*-constructions appears to be less complex and ambiguous than in SI and can be represented by three patterns:

- (VIII) **si mangia** le mele mature [active with non-topical Object]
(X) **si mangiano** le mele mature [active with topical Object]
(Xa) le mele mature **si mangiano** [active with topical Object]

In all the patterns the diathesis of the verb is active and, consequently, its nominal argument is an Object. In this case the application of the test of the clitic replacement would not be correct, because forms like **le si mangia** never occur in TI.⁷ The active diathesis of the verb, however, is proved by the fact that the impersonal form **si mangia** 'one eats' can stand for the first person plural with the perfect semantic equivalence (*not*) *si mangia* = (*not*) *mangiamo* 'we eat'. This shift is possible by presupposing the active interpretation of the impersonal forms.

Coming again to our purpose, we notice that sentences (11-15) conform to (VIII), where the argument following the verb does not govern number agreement. The lack of agreement, however, does not depend on the objective role of the argument, because, if it occurs before the verb, agreement is regularly recovered according to (Xa), as happens in (15), where the verb of the coordinate clause *si mettono* 'one puts' is in the plural.⁸

Again, the property relevant to verbal agreement appears to be (P&T). Moreover, as we have observed above about the sentences (8 a-b), topicality does not depend necessarily on position. In the interrogative sentence (11a), where the argument *i rumori* 'noises' bears a rising pitch and is part of the rhematic section, agreement is suspended. In (11b), on the contrary, where the verb *si sentono* 'one hears' is the focus bearing the rising pitch and the argument *i rumori* is topical, agreement is recovered according to (X).⁹

2.3. Patterns with transitive verbs with two arguments

Section 3. Patterns with transitive verbs with two arguments:

- (16) Queste patate me le mangia tutte i cinghiali (mangiano)
These potatoes to-me them eats all the wild boars
'My potatoes are all eaten by wild boars'
- (16) a Le patate le mangia i cinghiali?
b Le patate le mangiano i cinghiali?
- (17) Sa delle cose che non le sa neanche i suoi professori (sanno)
He-knows some things that not them knows not even his teachers
'He knows things that even his teachers don't know'
- (18) Questo vestito non lo metterebbe neanche gli zingari (metterebbero)
This dress not it it-would-wear not even the gypsies
'Not even the gypsies would wear this dress'
- (19) Oggi le case le compra quelli che ci hanno dimolti soldi (comprano)
Today the houses them buys those who have a lot of money
'Today, houses are bought by people with a lot of money'
- (20) Queste bizze le fa i bambini piccini, (fanno)
These tantrums them makes the small children,
quelli grandi come te non le fanno più
those big like you not them make any more
'Only small children make all this fuss, big children like you don't anymore'

Examples (16-20) do not raise interpretative problems. It is evident that the Subject, although represented by an animate Agent, does not govern verbal agreement, because it does not play a topical role. In (20), while the verb *fa* 'makes' occurring before the Subject is in the singular, the verb of the coordinate clause *faranno* '(they) make' is in the plural.

Moreover, examples (16 a-b) show that topicality does not depend necessarily on position. In (16a), where the Subject bears a rising pitch and is rhematic, agreement is suspended, while in (16b), where the verb *mangiano* '(they) eat' is the focus bearing the rising pitch and the Subject is thematic, agreement is recovered.

To sum up, on the basis of the examples of the three sections above, we conclude that in TI verbal agreement depends on topicality. As for the Subject, the hierarchy of its properties is to be changed into (P&T) > G > A, and, consequently, topicality turns out to be the dominant property of the Subject in TI.

3. Role assignment in Tuscan Italian and in French

Our conclusions about the properties of the Subject in TI raise some theoretical difficulties concerning role assignment in the sentences (1-10). Since the argument of the intransitive verb is not an Agent, it does not govern verbal agreement and plays a non-topical role, none of the four properties (P, T, G, A) identifies the Subject of the sentence. In order to overcome this difficulty, it is necessary to resort to a fifth property, which has not been taken into consideration so far. It combines the properties of morphological unmarkedness and syntactic indispensability, listed by Keenan (1976: 313, 320) and defines the Subject as the obligatory unmarked argument implied by the verb or simply as the first argument (first = F).

In TI only a few verbs occur without a first (i.e. an obligatory unmarked) argument: subjectless verbs like *piove* 'it is raining', which refer to events without participants, and idiomatic verbs like *mi fa freddo* 'I am cold' (lit. 'to-me it-does cold), whose argument is marked as a Beneficiary.

The property F, which holds true in SI too, allows the role assignment of Subject to the argument of the intransitive verbs in sentences (1-10). On the one hand, this class of Subjects turns out to be the least prototypical, displaying only one of the five properties. On the other hand, F occupies the highest place in the hierarchy of the subjective properties, since it is common to all the classes of Subjects. The hierarchy is thus symbolised as follows:

$$F > (P\&T) > G > A$$

It is interesting, at this point, to make a comparison with a language with a rigid word order as, for example, French. Let us consider the following sentences from Lazard (1994b: 6):

(21) Il mange chaque jour une dizaine de personnes dans ce restaurant.
It eats every day about ten people in this restaurant
'Every day about ten people eat in this restaurant'

(21') Une dizaine de personnes mangent chaque jour dans ce restaurant.
'About ten people eat every day in this restaurant'

In (21') the NP *une dizaine de personnes* plays the syntactic role of Subject and displays the prototypical properties of the subjective functions required by the grammar of French:

- (i) it is the unmarked obligatory argument;
- (ii) it governs verbal agreement;
- (iii) it is placed before the verb.

In (21), however, the same NP loses all the subjective properties and acquires the corresponding objective properties, because it is not obligatory, does not govern verbal agreement and is placed after the verb. At the same time, the Subject slot is occupied by the empty pronoun *il*. On the other hand, the NP retains the semantic role of Agent and its transitive relation with the verb remains unchanged, so that it cannot be considered an object.

This kind of constituent, labelled as "actant H" by the French school, is classed by Lazard (1994b: 10) as an intermediate role between Subject and Object.

Our comment is that in a language with a rigid word order, like Standard French, the shift of the Subject to a non-topical position entails the loss of some subjective properties, which are recovered by a dummy Subject. The result is a split subjecthood, where an empty constituent, in this case the non-referential pronoun *il*, is charged with the main subjective functions.

This unnatural situation, however, is consistently changing in the spoken variety, where, on the one hand, the unmarked order SVO is regularly altered to fulfill pragmatic functions, while, on the other hand, as many authors have argued (Ashby 1974, Bosson 1981, Pignatelli 1988, among others), personal pronouns are grammaticalised and converted into personal prefixes marking the verbal inflection.

In this perspective a sentence like:

- (22) Souvent **il arrive** des malheurs
often **it happens** misfortunes
'Misfortunes often happen'

turns out to have the same pattern as (4) with an eventive verb in the third person singular (*il-arrive = succede*) followed by a non-topic al Subject in the plural.

4. The diachronic perspective: data from literary records

4.1. Patterns with presentative, eventive and intransitive verbs

We have now to face the diachronic aspect of the question. We wonder whether the situation we have just outlined is the outcome of a recent development or the continuation of a drift, which has its beginnings in Old Italian. The data of the following sections are provided by F. Brambilla Agno (1964: 159-174) and come from literary records of Tuscan authors belonging to the 14th and 15th century. Sources are put in brackets.

Section 4 - Patterns with presentative, eventive and intransitive verbs:

- (23) **Ebbe** in Velletri due uomini (Pecorone, 5.1.109)
It-had in Velletri two men
'There were two men in Velletri'
- (24) **Evvi** parecchi de' signori (Macinghi Strozzi, 325)
There-is many of the gentlemen
'There are many gentlemen'
- (25) **È ce n'è** venti che me ne servirebbono (Morelli, 240)
It there of-them is twenty that I'd need
'There are twenty of them that I'd need'
- (26) **Poi appari** molte altre cose belle (Pulci, Morg., 27.155.1)
Then it-appeared many other things beautiful
'Then, many other beautiful things appeared'
- (27) **E piacque** sempre a Dio le giuste imprese (Pulci, Morg., 27.226.4)
And it-liked always to God the right deeds
'God always liked the right deeds'

- (28) **L' è entrato** nell'animo certi pensieri (Macinghi Strozzi, 511)
To-her it-is entered in the soul such thoughts
'Thoughts have entered her soul'
- (29) **Al savio suol bastar** poche parole (Pulci, Morg., 1.53.1)
To-the wise-man it-uses to suffice few words
'Only few words suffice to wise men'
- (30) **E poi vi venne** due giganti fieri (Pulci, Morg., 14.30.1)
And then there it-came two giants fierce
'And then, two fierce giants arrived there'
- (31) **Rimase ancora [...]** tre fanciulle femmine (Morelli, 160)
It-remained still three young-maids female
'There still remained three young women ...'
- (32) **Morì tre fratelli** di nostro padre (Morelli, 305)
It-died three brothers of our father
'Three of our father's brothers died'

At first sight, it appears that the differences between these examples and those of Section 1 are negligible, except for **ebbe** 'there was' in (23) instead of the modern **ci fu**, and **evvi** 'there is' in (24), instead of the modern **c'è**. The explanation of the absence of verbal agreement given by Agno Brambilla (1964: 171) is based on (23), where the verb *avere* 'have', although used with intransitive presentative meaning, would retain its transitive value and govern its object *due uomini* 'two men'. In (24), the verb **evvi** 'there is' would be reanalysed according to the pattern of *avere*, triggering all the other intransitive verbs. This analogical argument is obviously untenable. It is far more difficult to presuppose that a whole set of intransitive verbs undergoes a transitive reanalysis on the basis of one pseudo-transitive verb like *avere*, than the opposite. The proper interpretation, on the contrary, will be that the presentative *avere* has adjusted to the pattern of its intransitive synonym *esservi*. In favour of this interpretation there is the fact that transformational analyses usually assign to the verb *have* the same deep structure as *be* and not vice-versa.

Therefore we can conclude that these literary records of the 14th and 15th century exactly correspond to the examples of our corpus given in Section 1.

Example (25) shows a peculiarity that is worthy of comment, namely the occurrence of the partitive clitic pronoun **ne** 'of-them' with the existential/presentative verb **c'è** 'there is'. According to the current descriptions of Italian grammars (see *inter alios* A. Calabrese

in Renzi 1988: 562-572), partitive **ne** refers to the Object of transitive verbs and to the Subject of intransitive verbs. These, though, are divided into two classes, that is verbs with auxiliary *essere* 'be' and verbs with auxiliary *avere* 'have'. Partitive **ne** can occur with the former but not with the latter, according to the following examples:

- (33) *ne vedono pochi* (vedere 'see': transitive)
 'They see a few of them'
 (34) *ne arrivano pochi* (arrivare 'arrive': eventive/intransitive with aux. *essere*)
 'Few of them are arriving'
 (35) **ne camminano pochi* (camminare 'walk': active/intransitive with aux. *avere*)
 'Few of them are walking'

In the first case **ne** refers to the object while the subject is not expressed, while, in the second case, **ne** refers to the subject and in the third case is unacceptable or, at least, it sounds odd. The question was dealt with by L. Lonzi (1986: 111-114), who demonstrated that the occurrence of **ne** does not depend on the lexical properties of the verb, but on syntactic structure. A verb like *camminare* admits the partitive **ne** in an eventive sentence as

- (35) a **Ne cammina** tanta, di gente, su quei marciapiedi
 of-them it-walks a lot, of people, on those pavements
 'A lot of people walk on those pavements down there, don't they?'

According to our point of view, what is considered by Lonzi the syntactic structure of the sentence is indeed its pragmatic pattern, but it is noteworthy that the relevance of the pragmatic categories is recognized also in a generative framework. Since intransitive verbs occur with partitive **ne** only in eventive/presentative sentences, they regularly precede their first argument and this entails that in spoken Italian intransitive verbs are always in the singular: *ne arriva pochi* 'Few of them are arriving'.

A possible alternative is obtained through a process of focusing, where the first argument is shifted before the verb and receives a stress and a rising pitch: *pochi ne arriva* (lit. few of-them it-arrives). This sequence, despite its word order, does not correspond to a Topic-Comment pattern.

4.2. Patterns with impersonal / reflexive verbs

Section 5. Patterns with impersonal/reflexive verbs:

- (36) *Qui si fa molti arnesi d'arme e da cavalieri*
 Here REFL it-does many tools for weapons and knights
 'Here, many war tools are made' (Marco Polo, 124.166)
 (37) *Vi si pianse molte lagrime*
 There REFL it-cried many tears
 'Many tears were cried there' (Colombini, 89.216)
 (38) *Non si costuma tradimenti in Francia*
 Not REFL it-uses treacheries in France
 'Treachery is not a common practice in France' (Pulci, Morg., 22.97.1)
 (39) *Col tempo si vede delle cose*
 With time REFL it-sees some things
 'As time passes, some things may be seen' (Macinghi Strozzi, 500)
 (40) *E fecesi fuochi ne' luoghi santi*
 And it-did-REFL fires at the holy sites
 'Fires were lit at the holy sites' (Morelli, 520)
 (41) *Fecesi camarlinghi e altri ufficiali*
 It-did-REFL squires and other officers
 'Squires and other officers were elected' (Morelli, 469)
 (42) *Qui si tenne molti consigli*
 Here REFL it-held many meetings
 'Many meetings were held here' (Morelli, 381)
 (43) *Che mai più se ne senti novelle*
 That never more REFL of-him it-heard news
 'Nothing was heard of him anymore' (Morelli, 387)
 (44) *Nel Mugello si sarebbe tratto*
 In Mugello REFL it-would be enrolled ten thousand armed men
 'In Mugello, ten thousand armed men would be enrolled' (Morelli, 102)
 (45) *Si potrebbe narrare molte buone e vertuose operazioni*
 REFL it-could tell many good and virtuous deeds
 'One could tell many good and virtuous deeds' (Morelli, 184)

As for the literary records of this section, too, the first impression is that they correspond to the examples of our corpus given in

Section 2. Here, though, it is even more difficult to assign a role to the nominal argument of the verb because we have no control over native competence. Ageno Brambilla (1964: 168) is inclined to interpret the verb as impersonal/reflexive with active diathesis and to assign the objective role to the argument. Indeed, the following examples, which are not included in the Section, seem to confirm her hypothesis:

- (46) E' gli fu recato alle manimolti buoni piati di parentado
It to-him was yielded at hand many good rows of his relatives
'Many rows he had with his relatives' (Morelli, 111)
- (47) E' gli fu assegnato provvigioni
It to-him was given commissions
'He was given commissions' (Morelli, 395)
- (48) Con tutte quelle virtù che a' contadini si richiede
With all those virtues that from the peasants REFL it-requires
'With all those virtues that one requires from the peasants' (Morelli, 98)
- (49) E furono delle belle nozze si facesse in quell'anno in Firenze
And were beautiful nuptials REFL it-did that year in Florence
'It was a beautiful marriage which was done that year in Florence' (Morelli, 184)

In (46) and (47) the impersonal verb is provided with a dummy subject, represented by the 3rd person pronoun *e'*, while in (48) and (49) the verb is the predicate of a relative clause (the relative *che* is dropped in (49)). Since the text is the chronicle of a family coming from the countryside of Florence and was written in the first decades of the 15th century, it can be inferred that in this colloquial variety the role of the object was assigned to the nominal argument of an impersonal/reflexive verb already in the late Middle Ages. At any rate, however, the constraints that block verbal agreement are again of pragmatic nature: in (46-47), it is the non-thematic role of the argument and in (48-49) the non-rhematic role of the verb.

4.3. Patterns with intransitive and impersonal/reflexive verbs and preposed argument

Examples corresponding to Section 3 with transitive verbs are not recorded. On the other hand, Ageno Brambilla points out a score of cases, where the verb follows its first argument in a Topic-

Comment pattern without number and gender agreement. The most evident of them are reproduced in Section 6.

Section 6. Patterns with intransitive and impersonal/reflexive verbs and preposed argument:

- (50) E' colpì e le gran cose che facta,
The hits and the great deeds that he-did,
per non tediare chi legge, non si conta (Pulci, Morg., 12.27.5-6)
not to tire who reads, not REFL it-tells
'So as not to tire the reader, one cannot tell his deeds'
- (51) Per le moschee molti uffici si fa
In the mosques many offices REFL it-does
'Many offices are done in the mosques' (Pulci, Morg., 17.133.5)
- (52) Ed urla e strida per tutto si sente (Pulci, Morg., 27.242.7)
And cries and shrieks everywhere REFL it-hears
'Cries and shrieks are heard everywhere'
- (53) E innanzi alla sua morte segni apparse
And before his death signs it-appeared
'Signs appeared before his death' (Pulci, Morg., 28.111.11)
- (54) Padiglioni e trabacche s' apparecchia (Pulci, Morg., 17.25.7)
Pavilions and tents REFL it-prepares
'Pavilions and tents are built'
- (55) Tante trabacche e padiglioni si spande (Pulci, Morg., 18.20.3)
Many tents and pavilions REFL it-spreads
'Many tents and pavilions are spread'
- (56) Tanto che pochi drento vi rimase (Pulci, Morg., 12.29.6)
So that few people inside there it-remained
'So that few people remained there'
- (57) Tanto che pochi di sua man ne scampa
So that few people from his hands of-them it-escapes
'So that only few people manage to escape from him' (Pulci, Morg., 27.89.8)
- (58) Non dimandar che risa fuor si caccia (Pulci, Morg., 7.24.7)
Not ask what laughs out REFL it-gives
'Do not ask one to laugh'
- (59) Che pochi se ne truova de' suo' pari
That few people REFL of-them it-finds of his peers
'That few people can be found like him' (Macinghi Strozzi, 250)

According to Ageno Brambilla (1964: 169) such patterns are the result of metrical constraints. Indeed the verb in the singular regularly occurs at the end of the verse in rhyming position and nine out of ten examples are verses of Pulci's *Morgante*, so that the pattern seems to be a peculiar stylistic device. The unique case recorded in a prose text is (59), but the anticipation of *pochi* 'few' which occurs before the verb is the result of a focusing process and not of a topicalization. The same argument explains the singular in (57), while in (58) *che risa* 'what laughs' is the focus of the indirect question and can be compared to (9a).

Ten more examples of the same kind were recorded by M. Martelli (1972: 77) from poems of the 14th and 15th century, written partly by unknown partly by famous authors like Boccaccio and Lorenzo de' Medici. The last four, directly quoted from their manuscript sources, are particularly interesting:

- (60) L'infime sette che i pianeti alberga (Leon Battista Alberti)
 "The mean sects that the planets harbour"
- (61) Sospiri escie del core, degli occhi onde (Leon Battista Alberti)
 "Out of the heart come sighs, out of the eyes waves"
- (62) E che le nube asconda l'alte stelle (Leon Battista Alberti)
 "And that the clouds hide the high stars"
- (63) ...Alcuni cortigiani con torchi passava (Buonaccorso Pitti)
 "... Some courtiers were passing carrying presses"

In (60) and (62) the transitive verbs **alberga** 'harbour' and **asconda** 'hide' occur in the singular with a proposed subject (*i pianeti* 'the planets', *le nube* 'the clouds') and should be compared with the examples of Section 3. In (61), (62) and (63) the verb in the singular cannot be explained with metrical constraints, because (63) is a prose text and in (61-62) the corresponding plural forms would be metrical-ly equivalent. In fact the editor of Leon Battista Alberti amended the text and replaced the plural *sospiri* 'sighs' by the singular *sospir* in (61) and the subjunctive singular *asconda* 'hide' by the plural *ascondan* in (62). These cases are too scanty and isolate to allow a satisfactory explanation, nor can they represent the basis of a new syntactic rule.

5. Concluding remarks

Recapitulating the main points of our description, we stated that in SI the Subject is defined through the hierarchy of properties $G > (P\&T) > A$, where G, namely verbal agreement, is the dominant one. Consequently, the morpho-syntactic relation between Subject and (verbal) Predicate is independent of the other functions of the sentence.

In TI, on the contrary, the hierarchy of properties changes into

$$F > (P\&T) > G > A$$

where (P&T), namely the topical or thematic function associated with position, dominates G. Therefore, the morpho-syntactic relation between Subject and (verbal) Predicate depends on the pragmatic pattern Topic-Comment (or Theme-Rheme), which governs verbal agreement.

Moreover, in the literary records quoted from Tuscan writers of the 14th and 15th century, too, topicality appears to be the relevant function to verbal agreement. It is worthy of attention that these records are either private writings or pieces of popular literature – first of all Pulci's *Morgante* – which belong to the same environment and show a register close to the spoken language.

There is evidence for the assumption that the dominance of topicality in contemporary TI is the continuation of a development that started in the late Middle Ages.

This development is a stage of the grammatical change from Latin to Italian. In Latin the dominant property of the Subject was case marking: the Subject was marked by Nominative, which governed verbal agreement. After the loss of case marking, position and topicality (P&T) became the dominant properties and the control over verbal agreement shifted from the Subject to the Topic. This shift does not mean a change from a Subject-prominent to a Topic-prominent language, according to the typology proposed by Li and Thompson (1976). It is rather a change from role-related to reference-related properties, according to the terminology introduced by P. Schachter (1977), which determines the priority of the pragmatic roles within subjecthood, although, on commenting the examples of Section 2, we have concluded that the control of the Topic over verbal agreement goes beyond the domain of subjecthood. In sentences (11-16) the previous Subject, reanalysed as an Object, retains, if topical, the government of verbal agreement.

The development started in Old Italian was interrupted from the

16th century onwards. Like for other aspects of Italian, the normative intervention of grammarians and writers restored the priority of the morpho-syntactic properties of the Subject, according to a logical model close to the grammar of Latin, as if the Nominative case were still extant. In spite of this, the spoken language, like every natural phenomenon, carried on its underground drift.

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Notes

- * A provisional draft of this paper was delivered at the pre-inaugural meeting of the Association for Linguistic Typology, held at Konstanz, November 28th-December 1st, 1994.
- ¹ Among the rich literature we remember Schachter (1977), Andrews (1985), Faarlund (1988), Lazard (1994a).
- ² 'What is commonly called 'Subject' in Italian displays a dispersion field of properties, whose center is agreement'.
- ³ For a detailed definition of the notions of Topic, Theme and Focus in a functional framework see Dik (1989).
- ⁴ Among the remarkable contributions to the question see the whole issue 2 (1976) of *Italian Linguistics*, some papers in Borer (1986) and the book by Wehr (1995).
- ⁵ Salvi (1988: 102) is aware of that and recognises that (VIII) "è accettabile solo per una parte degli italofofoni" ('it can be accepted only by a part of the Italian speakers'). A consistent picture of si-constructions is given by L. Serianni (1988: 326), who admits only (X) and (Xa) with passive interpretation.
- ⁶ The gap between the different stages of the development of si-constructions is even more evident in such common notices as *vendesi appartamenti* 'flats on sale' (lit. 'one-sells flats'). Here, the old-fashioned verbal form with postposed clitic pronoun is still retained, but the diathesis of the verb has become active according to the pattern (VIII).
- ⁷ In this case the pattern occurring in TI is (Xa). A peculiar situation is found in the Florentine vernacular, as reported by R. Stefanini (1983: 109-110), where the corresponding pattern would be *le mele mature le si mangiano*. The impersonal verb *si mangiano* stands for the first person plural *mangiamo* 'we eat', while agreement is governed by the object clitic pronoun *le* 'them'.
- ⁸ Our data on TI are confirmed by dialectological enquiries. The Atlas by Jaberg and Jud (1928-40) records a sentence with two coordinated impersonal verbs: *dopo cena si rigovernano le stoviglie nell'acqua calda e poi si asciugano con un cencio* 'after dinner one washes the dishes with warm water and then wipes them with a cloth'. The two impersonal verbs *si rigovernano* and *si asciugano* are recorded in maps 946 and 949 respectively. The first one, which is placed before its

argument, occurs in the singular in Middle and East Tuscany (*si rigovernano* or *si lava*), while the verb of the coordinate clause occurs in the plural (*si asciugano*) in the same area, which roughly corresponds to the domain of TI, as indicated in § 2.1.

I must add that, when I submitted the examples of this section to the members of the Florentine Linguistic Circle, the pure Florentine native speakers found them unacceptable, even in the spoken variety. Someone expressed a different degree of acceptability for the examples of the other sections too, particularly for those showing the loss of gender agreement. My comment to this kind of remarks is that, although the reactions of the native speaker are never negligible, there is a gap between theory and practice, that is between the language one believes to speak and the language one actually speaks. During a public conversation on a scientific matter I recorded such sentences as *nella società si sviluppa differenzialmente le capacità linguistiche* (instead of *si sviluppano*) 'In society, the linguistic abilities develop with various degrees' and *allora si è avuto le prime forme di linguaggio* (instead of *si sono avute*) 'Thus, we had the first linguistic forms', uttered by a pure Florentine colleague.

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