

On the status of preverbal indefinite subjects in Romance languages: what Francoprovençal reveals

1. The puzzle. In this paper, we show that indefinite subjects with a “partitive article” (PA) in French and their counterparts in Francoprovençal (FrPr), an endangered Gallo-Romance language, differ in acceptability when they are preverbal: in French, they are accepted (cf. § 2) whereas in FrPr they are generally not accepted, although there is some variation (cf. § 3). To account for these results, we propose that the key factor is the *status* of the subject, i.e., whether it is a topic/theme or new information, and postulate a fine-grained typology of Romance languages with unmarked indefinite preverbal subjects (cf. § 4), building on Dobrovie-Sorin/Laca (2003) and Gundel’s (2003) notion of referential givenness.

2. The data. We focus on two constructions in which French allows preverbal subjects headed by a PA, that is, *du, de la, de l’, des* ‘of.the’, a combination of *de* ‘of’ and the definite article, whose interpretation is usually indefinite (Storto 2003, a.o.). Although the PA is more common in complements (*J’ai acheté des livres* ‘I have bought (some) books’) than in subjects in French, it may introduce a subject in restricted contexts: for e.g., with a stage-level predicate (1) or in generic ‘emphatic’ constructions (2) (cf. Kupferman 1979; Vogeleeer/Tasmowski 2005; Ihsane 2018):

(1) *De la farine recouvrait toute la table.* ‘Flour (of.the flour) was covering the whole table.’

(2) *De la biERE coûte moins cher que du vin.* ‘BEER (of the beer) costs less than wine.’

The FrPr data we discuss were gathered in fieldwork in 2017, in the Aosta Valley in Italy, via a translation task (French-FrPr), and produced by 17 participants (Stark/Gerards 2020). These varieties have an invariant counterpart to the French PA, an **invariable DE** (in contrast to some Swiss FrPr varieties which have a PA like French; cf. Kristol 2016; Stark 2016).

3. The results. The results clearly show that the participants dislike preverbal DE-subjects in FrPr, even if some variation is possible. Most participants reformulated the sentences with a stage-level predicate (1), thus avoiding DE-subjects. As a result, only 15 replies, with a DE-subject, were, in principle, valid in the sense that they were not semantically reinterpreted or syntactically reformulated. Of the 15 DE-subjects, 11 were plural (73% = 11/15). As for the generic ‘emphatic’ context (2), we will show that it was misinterpreted as kind-reading (like *La bière coûte moins cher que le vin* ‘Beer costs less than wine’), which explains why the participants used a definite article instead of DE in the subjects.

4. The proposal. To account for the sharp difference between French and FrPr and for the role of number in the results (cf. § 3), we build on Dobrovie-Sorin/Laca (2003) and propose a more fine-grained typology of languages with unmarked indefinite preverbal subjects. Dobrovie-Sorin/Laca’s (2003) classification is based on several languages (Romance but also English), some of which have bare subjects, and can be formulated as follows:

(i) **Type a:** unmarked preverbal subjects can only be topics/themes (e.g., Italian/Spanish).

Type b: unmarked preverbal subjects may be topics/themes or part of the comment/rheme, i.e., new information (e.g., French/English).

In (1) and (2), the subjects represent new information as both constructions arethetic (Dobrovie-Sorin 1999, Vogeleeer/Tasmowski 2005), i.e., there is no topic-comment articulation. Since in French, subjects can represent new information (Type b), (1) and (2) are fine. FrPr, which differs from French, can however *not* be of Type a: if it was, preverbal DE-subjects should be completely impossible, contrary to fact (cf. § 3): some DE-subjects were accepted by our informants, although they are not topics/themes. To account for this variation, we propose that FrPr falls between the two types in (i): its preverbal subjects are generally topical, as in Italian/Spanish, but it also allows some subjects representing new information, like the DE-subjects in our translation task (= Type c); the possibility to have preverbal subjects representing new information is however restricted in FrPr, in contrast to

French. In FrPr, only nominals that reach a certain degree of referential givenness (Gundel 2003) can be preverbal indefinite subjects. Referential givenness, which differs from relational givenness (topic-comment), involves concepts like (in)definiteness, (non-)specificity or (non-)referentiality (cf. Gundel 2003), none of which is binary (e.g., Farkas 2000 for (in)definiteness, von Heusinger 2011 for (non-)specificity, etc.). The crucial notion to account for our data is individuation, which is needed for counting and pluralizing. This is why plural subjects are more acceptable in FrPr than mass ones: count nouns are higher on the relational givenness scale and hence less restricted in their distribution.

That FrPr differs from Types a and b in (i) is supported by syntax: the classification in (i) is due to a syntactic property built in the analysis, namely, free inversion of the subject or absence thereof (Dobrovie-Sorin/Laca 2003, slightly adapted):

(ii) Type a: In a language **with free** inversion of the subject, an unmarked preverbal subject (non-detached) is a topic/theme.

Type b: In a language **without free** inversion of the subject, there are two analyses for the unmarked preverbal subject: topic/theme or part of the comment/rheme, i.e., new information.

FrPr does not have free inversion of the subject but freer inversion than French, as will be shown in our presentation. The language type FrPr belongs to can be formulated as follows:

(iii) Type c: In a language **with partial free** inversion of the subject, a preverbal subject (non-detached) is a topic/theme, but it can be part of the comment/rheme, i.e., new information, when referentially given.

(iii) is in agreement with the typology of Null Subject (*pro*-drop) Languages, often associated with free subject inversion (Robert/Holmberg 2010; Camacho 2013; Lobo/Martins 2017): FrPr differs from French/English (non-*pro*-drop) and from Italian/Spanish (*pro*-drop), being a Partial Null Subject Language (Heap 2000; Diémoz 2007; Hinzelin/Kaiser 2012 on varieties in the Aosta Valley; Olszyna-Marzys 1964 on varieties in Valais). Partial free inversion is expected to vary across languages, just like partial null subject languages have different properties (e.g., which pronoun(s) are difficult to omit: 2sg, 3sg, etc.).

5. Conclusion. Our study of FrPr data shows that a classification like (i), which has only two language types when it comes to the status of unmarked preverbal indefinite subjects, is too simple: at least a third option is required to account for the facts.

Selected References

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