

On the morpho-syntax of existentials in Romance: contextual domains as possessors

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The present paper focuses on the proforms (PF) and expletive subjects characterizing existential constructions in Italo-Romance and in Romance based Creoles. Romance PFs are illustrated in (1).

- (1) a. **Ci** sono i gatti in giardino b. **Hi** ha un gos al jardí
 ‘PF are cats in the garden’ *Italian* ‘PF is a dog in the garden’ *Catalan*

Based on the large corpus of Italo-Romance varieties collected in Manzini & Savoia (2005) (cf. Bentley et al. 2015) we argue that PFs are not characterized by a locative meaning (*contra* Ciconte 2010, cf. Cruschina 2012, Bentley 2017). This notwithstanding the obviously locative meaning introduced by *ci* in examples like the one in (2).

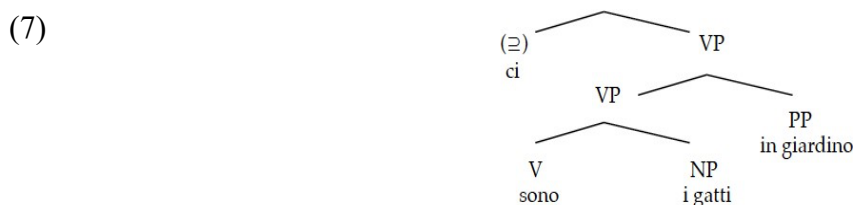
- (2) nella scatola, **ci** ho messo il libro
 ‘In the box, there I have put the book’ *Italian*

Central to this argument is the observation that PFs are typically found not only in locative, but also in 1P plural contexts (3), instrumental contexts (4), certain dative contexts (5) (see Manzini & Franco 2016), as well as in the intransitive version of perception verbs (6). These are generally treated as syncretisms within morphosyntactic approaches, including Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993). These approaches share the idea that the syntax represents a number of properties that find no overt realization in the final string. Morphological readjustments are responsible for opacizing an underlying transparent syntax. Here, however, following Manzini & Savoia (2005), Kayne (2010) our assumption is that so-called syncretic clitics are in fact instances of ambiguity (and what disambiguates them is simply the context of embedding).

- (3) **Ci** telefonano/**ci** mangiano (4) col coltello, **ci** ho ucciso la preda
 ‘they phone us, they eat us’ ‘with the knife, PF I killed the prey’
 (5) **ci**/*lo ho pensato all’incontro
 ‘PF/CL.3S I.though of the match’
 (6) a. **ci** vedo b. lo vedo ‘CL.3S
 ‘PF (I) see’ intransitive ‘see’ ‘it cl (I) see’ I see it

Also in Catalan (cf. 1b) *hi* replaces instrumentals (actually, any phrases introduced by any preposition except *de*), among many other non-locative functions (Hualde 1992). Manzini & Savoia (2011), Franco & Manzini (2017) argue against the implication that the locative meaning is somehow primitive (Freeze 1992, and subsequent literature), while eventive interpretations are contextually determined. We follow this view, because we see no reason why spatial meanings should be primitive with respect to meanings connected to relations between events (or between events and their participants). PF are actually ‘oblique’ clitics. The preposition *con* considered in (4) has the interesting property of expressing no spatial relation at all (cf. Levinson 2011). The various meanings associated with *con* have been reduced by Franco & Manzini (2017) to the primitive content (\supseteq), denoting a predicate which roughly means ‘included by, HAVE, concomitant to’. The clitic replacing the oblique phrases introduced by *con*, i.e. *ci*, reasonably has (or involves) the same basic (\supseteq) content/meaning.

We take PF to encode the ‘contextual domain’ of existentials (see Francez 2007; 2009). Francez precisely assumes that existentials have an implicit argument that can be thought of as a contextual variable. The PF, represented as (\supseteq), says that the event described by the VP predicate has the property of being ‘witnessed’, ‘present in/concomitant with a given context’ (cf. Creissels 2014, Borshev & Partee 2001, 2004) namely it encodes a contextual domain, which is constructed as a set of entities related to this discourse referent by some contextually salient relation. Following Francez (2009, cf. McNally 1992) we assume that coda PPs eventually present in an existential construction are adjoined to VP, as illustrated in (7) for (1a).



We propose that the data from many Southern Italian varieties and Romance based Creoles support this claim: a ‘possession’ meaning seems to be crucially involved in the existential constructions. In the variety of Gerace (and other Calabrian Dialects) both the verb *have* and the proform *nd* are found with existentials and with auxiliary *have*, as shown in (8).

- (8) a. **nd** avi a ffratōma
 pf have.prs.3sg dom brother
 ‘There is my brother’ *Existential Construction*
- b. n a **nd** a’via ca’matu
 neg cl.acc.f pf have.prs.1sg call.ptcp-pst
 ‘I didn’t call her’ *Auxiliary construction*

In Romance Creoles, existentials mimic ‘transitive’ possession: we argue that the pervasiveness of a predicative possession strategy for existentials in Creoles has reflexes in their syntax. In fact, the verb implied in both the existentials and in transitive possessives is the same in French (9), Portuguese (10) and Spanish (10) Creoles.

- (9) a. **Gen** manje sou tab la.
 have food on table def
 ‘There is food on the table.’ *Haitian Creole* (DeGraff 2007: 103)
- b. Mari **gen** kouraj
 Mary have courage
 ‘Mary has courage’ *Haitian Creole* (DeGraff 2007: 115)
- (10) a. **Ten** un radin na menza
 Have det radio.little on table
 ‘There is a little radio on the table.’ *CapeVerdean Creole* (Swolkien 2012)
- c. N **ten** un radin.
 1sg have det radio.little
 ‘I have a little radio.’ *CapeVerdean Creole* (Swolkien 2012)

In essence, we argue that the ‘contextual domain’ of existentials (see Francez 2007; 2009) can be also syntacticized as the implicit ‘possessor’ of a (transitive) HAVE predicate including the pivot as its internal argument (cf. Rigau 1997, Manzini and Savoia 2005). Crucially PFs never shows up in Creoles languages. Indeed, we assume that, in such languages, the contextual domain is rendered via an implicit external argument (eventually lexicalized via an expletive pronoun). Following Manzini et al. (to appear) we assume that HAVE predicates encode a basic relation of ‘inclusion’, that we notate (\supseteq), as for the adposition *con* and the clitic *ci* in (7) (cf. Svenoniuns 2007, Franco & Manzini 2017). Consider the representation in (11). We claim that the event described by the VP predicate has again the property of being ‘witnessed’, i.e. ‘included’ in a relevant discourse universe, representing the set of individuals which can *attend* the event. These individuals can be rendered via either an implicit subject pronoun, as in (11) or as an oblique clitic pronoun (7) in a given grammar. What (11) basically says is that those entities/individuals which represent the (implicit, covert) contextual domain possess/include/witness the pivot.

(11)

