

Indefinite *man*-constructions in ancient Italian dialects

Grammaticalization and areality

In this paper, we describe the distribution of indefinite *man*-constructions in ancient Italian dialects, and evaluate their degree of grammaticalization (in both syntactic and semantic terms). Indefinite *man*-constructions are impersonal active constructions in which the subject position is filled by (an element deriving etymologically from) a noun meaning ‘man’ (cf. (1)-(3)). Syntactically, this element may pattern like a full pronoun, or it may retain some or all of the syntactic properties of a noun. Semantically, the construction is an agent-defocusing strategy, i.e. it is used when the speaker wants to background the agent of an action (either because it is generic/non-identifiable, or because it is specific but unknown).

- (1) ...quando **uomo** truova la donnola nella via... (Novellino, 32, rr. 7-8)
‘When **one** finds a weasel on his way’
- (2) ...in questo ch’è detto puote **uomo** bene intendere che... (Brunetto Latini, *Rettorica*, p. 152, rr. 13-14)
‘In (i.e. from) what has been said **one** can well understand that...’
- (3) *Quanno li ambasciatori fuoro entrati in Verona, tutta Verona curre a vederli. Così li guardava omo fitto como fussino lopi* (Anonimo Romano, *Vita di Cola di Rienzo*, 8, 10)
‘When the ambassadors entered Verona, the whole town hastens to see them. So, people fixed their gaze on them as if they were wolves’

The *man*-element in these constructions conveys different semantic nuances, ranging from a species-generic interpretation (*man* meaning ‘mankind’ or ‘human race’) to a non-referential indefinite interpretation (*man* as an equivalent of ‘one’, ‘anyone’), and finally to a referential indefinite interpretation (*man* as an equivalent of ‘someone’). These three meanings form a grammaticalization path, which correlates with changes in formal properties: in the more grammaticalized stages of *man*-constructions the *man*-element is more likely to behave as a full pronoun.

Man-constructions are a widespread phenomenon across Europe: they show up consistently in the so-called “Charlemagne area”, and must be considered as a (yet unnoticed) areal feature of this area. They are, however, a recessive areal feature, as their distribution in older times included more languages than today. In ancient Italo-Romance varieties, *man*-constructions are robustly attested. They are generally held to be weakly grammaticalized, and to depend on the French influence on these varieties. Our data (retrieved from the OVI corpus, geographically balanced, and coming from both literary and nonliterary documents) challenge these (often implicit) assumptions in two respects. Firstly, the constructions in point display different degrees of grammaticalization in different varieties. Secondly, the hypothesis of a French influence, while being perfectly reasonable in some cases (e.g. Old Tuscan, Old Sicilian, Old Northern Italian varieties), should be downplayed to some extent as the construction type appears to be well-established in varieties which were neither in direct nor in indirect contact with French.