

CP-licensing of DOM: evidence from northern Italian and beyond?¹

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Abstract: An emergent system of differential object marking (henceforth, DOM) in spoken northern Italian (henceforth, SNI) has been well-documented at a descriptive level as early as Benincà (1986) but very few thorough studies have examined the exact parameters that license DOM in this variety. Following the findings of this study looking at the syntactic distribution of this incipient DOM in this variety, I will argue that the DOM in SNI is inherent accusative Case assignment. First licensed by so-called type-two psych verbs *à la* Belletti & Rizzi (1988) with topical pre-verbal objects, I will show that the parameters under which DOM is licensed go beyond those reported in the literature. Rather, I propose that we are seeing the development of innovative parameters, which I will argue must be obligatorily licensed in [object]+[subject]+[V] orders *via* the left periphery in order to mirror the structure of the original licensors of DOM in this variety: type-two psych verbs. Moreover, it will be shown that the activation of the Topic field in the CP is no longer a requisite in SNI - topicalization or focalization now suffice in licensing DOM. Finally, this will be shown to mirror data from those Indic languages in which DOM is a feature.

Keywords: DOM (i.e., differential object marking), Italian, topicalization, Case

1. Background:

Differential object marking, as in (1a)-(c) has been attested in both old and present-day varieties of Romance, although their respective distribution is not well understood at a syntactic or semantico-pragmatic level:

- (1) a. *Am văzut-o *(pe) Maria aseară.* (Romanian)
 have.1SG seen= her *(DOM) Maria last-night
- b. *Vi *(a) María anoche.* (Spanish)
 seen.1SG *(DOM) María last-night
 ‘I saw Maria last night.’
- c. *Dove tu a me per moglie non mi vogli* (Old Tuscan, Berretta 1989:24)
 where you DOM me for wife NEG me=want.2SG
 ‘Where you do not want me to be your wife’

As early as Benincà (1986) (see also Benincà 1988; Berretta 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1991, 1992, 2002; Iemmolo 2010; Lombardi Vallauri & Suzuki 2013; Ferrazzi 2017; Belletti 2018; Belletti & Manetti 2018), the emergence of an incipient system of DOM has been observed in spoken northern Italian (also referred to as *northern italiano regionale* and *neostandard Italian*). In the literature, it has been argued to be licensed by three parameters:

- **the verbal parameter, whereby the licensing verb must be:**
 - (i) a type-two psych verb *à la* Belletti & Rizzi (1988): those ‘psychological’ verbs with a theme subject and experiencer object. The authors propose that these experience objects are not deep objects but are structurally born as subjects in what is the assignment of inherent accusative Case. They argue that these

¹ Special thanks for this go to my supervisor Professor Adam Ledgeway, the informants of this study, and Ștefania Costea for her Romanian grammaticality judgements.

structural subjects then surface as objects through a mapping of the theta grid through syntactic relations/configurations. Note the example in (2) below:

- (2) *a. A noi la soluzione ci soddisfa.* (SNI, own data²)
 DOM us the solution us=satisfies.3SG
 ‘The solution satisfies us.’/ ‘As far as we are concerned, the solution satisfies us.’

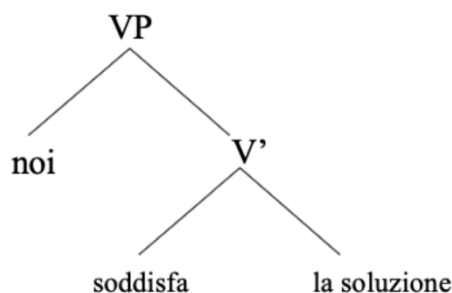


Diagram 1: the underlying structure of psych verbs following example (2), according to Belletti & Rizzi (1988)

If we look at diagram (1), Belletti & Rizzi argue the theta-grid of a predicate like *soddisfare* ‘to satisfy’ in Italian to be: [Experiencer, Theme]. They propose that a surface subject such as *la soluzione* ‘the solution’ is first-generated in the complement projection of the finite lexical verb. The surface object (*a noi* (lit. ‘(DOM) us’)) is argued to be first-generated in the [SpecVP], i.e. what is traditionally the subject position. They propose that this is the assignment of inherent accusative Case by the lexical verb whereby the syntax skips the Theme and assigns accusative Case to the argument occupying the subject position, the thematic Experiencer. Notably, in what they refer to as “Principle 119” (cf. below), the Experience must project to a higher position than the theme:

PRINCIPLE 119: *Given a theta-grid [Experiencer, Theme], the Experiencer is projected to a higher position than the Theme* (Belletti & Rizzi 1988:344).

When the verb vacates *vP/VP*, we assume that the Theme subject raises above the verb to [Spec, TP]. Given that the Experiencer rises to the CP, this still satisfies Principle 119, as we see in diagram (2), below:

² Arguably DOM with topicalised objects is a pan-Italian construction in that its acceptability is not limited to spoken northern Italian.

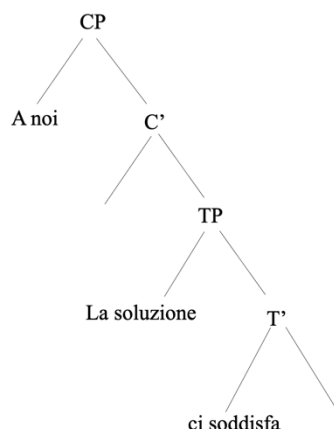


Diagram 2: the structure of psych verbs after vacating the vP/VP, following Belletti & Rizzi (1988)

- (ii) a causative verb with athematic *fare* ‘to make’ or *lasciar(e)* ‘to let’, as in (b):

b. *A te ti hanno fatto entrare.* (own data)
 DOM you you=have.3PL made enter
 ‘They have let you in.’

- (iii) an unclassified category of transitive verbs, including *chiamare* ‘to call’, *aspettare* ‘to wait’, *vedere* ‘to see’, as in (c):

c. *A te ti ho visto in centro.* (own data)
 DOM you you=have.1SG seen in centre
 ‘I saw you in the city centre.’

- **the clausal parameter:** the object DP must be fronted to the CP. Post-verbal DOM is not accepted and is marked as being ‘southern’ in flavour.
- **the grammatical person parameter:** mostly/only accepted with 1/2p, very marginal with 3p.

(3) Aims

The aim of my study is to investigate whether there were the licensing parameters for DOM in SNI were limited to those reported in the literature. Given that the literature reports DOM in SNI in constructions in [object]-[subject]-[V] alignments, my study aimed to test other similar constructions for acceptability of DOM, namely small clauses and verbs of perception, exemplified in (3a)-(b), respectively:

- (3) a. *A te ti considero intelligente.*
 DOM you you=consider.1SG intelligent
 ‘I consider you clever.’
- b. *A te ti ho già sentito cantare.*
 DOM you you=have.1SG already heard sing
 ‘I (have) already heard you sing(ing).’

Using the data collected from the native speakers of this variety, I aim to shed light on the precise syntactic distribution of DOM in SNI and see if there were any parallels that could be drawn across Romance and beyond.

(4) Methodology

The data for this paper was taken from a study involving 13 L1 SNI speakers from 18-40 years of age mainly from the regions of Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, and Veneto, in which they had to decide upon the grammaticality and acceptability of 75 utterances. Aside from the verbal parameters discussed above, I also tested other parameters that had not been discussed or analysed in the literature, namely: the acceptability of pronouns vs. lexical DPs, contrastive focal constructions and the acceptability of [-human, +animate] DPs.

(5) The quantitative data:

4.1. Verb type

	Acceptable	Unacceptable	Doubtful
Psych verbs	58.96%	37.96%	3.08%
Causative verbs	49.75%	48.20%	2.05%
Non-psych verbs	27.41%	71.63%	0.96%
Small clauses	26.92%	71.43%	1.65%
Verbs of perception	35.02%	64.43%	0.55%

Table 1: the acceptability of verb types in the licensing of DOM in SNI

The expectation that those verbs whose internal structures project the object in a position higher than the subject is partially borne out. Namely, DOM with type-two psych and causative verbs was largely deemed acceptable. However, in small clauses and verbs of perception, whilst DOM was deemed unacceptable, there was some degree of acceptability of the structures; this was mostly with 1/2p. Moreover, the expectation that the non type-two psych verbs would be the least accepted licensing verbs is borne out³.

4.2. Grammatical person

	1s	2s	3s	1pl	2pl	3pl
Acceptability	71.77%	70.76%	13.34%	78.44%	67.68%	22.99%
Unacceptability	27.28%	29.24%	83.84%	21.56%	30.78%	75.86%
Doubtfulness	0.85%	0.00%	2.82%	0.00%	1.54%	1.16%

Table 2: the acceptability of grammatical persons in the licensing of DOM in SNI

On the whole, the third person was the least accepted grammatical person. There was a great deal of variation with regard to verb type and pronominal vs. lexical DPs. (4a), an example of a psych verb with a lexical DP *Gianni*, had an acceptability of 86.40%. Compare this to (4b), whereby the utterance with pronominal form *lui* had an acceptability of 23.10%.

- (4) a. *A Gianni quella scena lo ha colpito tanto.*
 DOM Gianni that scene him=has.3SG struck much
 ‘That scene really got to Gianni.’

³ The non-psych verbs used were the following: *vedere* ‘see’, *chiamare* ‘call’, *aspettare* ‘wait’, *picchiare* ‘hit’, *trovare* ‘find’, *interrogare* ‘question’, *proteggere* ‘protect’, *abbracciare* ‘hug’, *fotografare* ‘photograph’, and *addormentare* ‘put to sleep’. These verbs were picked specifically based on their usage in previous studies (namely Berretta 1989 and Ferrazzi 2017’s respective studies), and because of the high frequency of their usage with [+human] objects.

- b. *A lui l' abbiamo convinto che è una buona idea.*
 DOM him him=have.1PL convinced that is.3SG a good idea
 'We convinced him that it is a good idea.'

Similarly, common nouns and kinship terms were mostly deemed acceptable, provided that they were licensed with psych verbs or causatives, as in (5a)-(d):

- (5) a. *Al postino l' abbaiare del cane l' ha spaventato.*
 DOM=the postman the=bark of=the dog him=has.3SG scared
 'The dog's barking scared the postman'
 b. *Alla mamma la sporczia la innervosiva.*
 DOM=the mum the=dirt her=make-nervous.3SG
 'Dirt makes my mum nervous.'

With the rest of the verb types, lexical DPs (common names, common nouns, kinship terms) were not accepted, with an acceptability of less than 50%.

Moreover, [+animate, -human] nouns were deemed largely unacceptable, with no distinction between the tested parameters of [\pm domesticated]:

- (6) a. *Al cane l' ho visto in giro*
 DOM=the dog him=have.1SG seen in turn
 'I've seen the dog about.'
 b. *Al leone l' ho fotografato.*
 DOM=the lion him=have.1SG photographed
 'I photographed the lion.'

4.3. Contrastive focus⁴

Iemmolo (2010) argues that contrastive focus is avoided with DOM whereby speakers of SNI prefer cleft constructions. Similarly, Berretta's (1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1991, 2002) work claims that focal fronting with DOM is ungrammatical in SNI. In contrast, the findings of this study found a higher level of acceptability for these constructions than expected, as shown in Table 3 and example (7):

	Psych verbs	Causatives	Small verbs	Verbs of perception
Average acceptability	69.2%	76.9%	53.8%	69.2%

Table 3: the acceptability of contrastive focus structures with DOM in SNI

- (7) *A me questa situazione preoccupa ma non a Maria*
 DOM me this situation worries but NEG DOM Maria
 'This situation worries ME, not Maria.'

The youngest of the informants (18 years old) accepted all four utterances, whilst this was not the case with the oldest of the informants (38-40 years old).

Moreover, the acceptability of these constructions would seem to imply that topicalization is not the only way of satisfying Principle 119, given that activation of the contrastive Focus projection also satisfies its requirement that the object precede the subject.

⁴ Given that these utterances were tested in out of the blue contexts, it is assumed that these utterances are not cases of contrastive topics *à la* Frascarelli (2007).

4.4. Interim conclusions

Type-two psych verbs and causative verbs with 1/2p were found to be the most accepted and least doubted configurations for DOM in SNI. As we have seen, there is some degree of acceptability with lexical DPs, contrastive focus structures, small clauses, and verbs of perception that imply that they are not completely ungrammatical. Arguably, these would seem to constitute innovative parameters for DOM whereby they are most felicitous when licensed (with the exception of lexical DPs) with the first or second grammatical persons and obligatorily in [object]-[subject]-[verb] orders, following from the structures of those verb types that originally licensed DOM in this variety. Notably, the innovative parameters were more readily accepted by the younger informants.

5. Parallels with Romance and beyond

We find parallels with the incipient stages and present-day Romance for obligatory DOM in orders whereby the object is projected higher than the subject:

- (8) a. **(A) muchos estudiantes ya los conocía.* (Spanish)
 DOM lots students already them=knew.1SG
 b. *Ya conocía (a) muchos estudiantes.*
 already knew.1SG (DOM) many students
 ‘I already knew many students’
 c. **(Pe) profesori i- am văzut la facultate.* (Romanian)
 *(DOM) teachers them=have.1SG seen at faculty
 d. *I- am văzut (pe) profesori la facultate.*
 them=have.1SG seen (DOM) teachers at faculty
 ‘I saw the teachers at the faculty’
 e. *O Tyri, a vui pregu ki [...]* (Old Sicilian, Sornicola 1997:70)
 Oh Tyri, DOM you.PL beg.1SG that [...]
 ‘Oh Tyri, I beg that you [...]

Parallels can also be found in the Indic languages of northern India. In both Hindustani and Punjabi, DOM is licensed both pre- and post-verbally with all grammatical persons, by means of the DOM markers *ko* and *nu*, respectively. In a more recent development, DOM may be licensed with non-animate DPs provided that they are topics and left-dislocated.

- (9) a. *Main voh film ko dekha ta* (Hindustani)
 I that film DOM seen have
 b. **Main dekha ta voh film-ko*
 I seen have that film=DOM
 ‘I have seen that film’
 c. *Atte nu changi teri ghun kar!* (Punjabi)
 dough.OBL=DOM well done knead do.IMP
 d. **Changi teri ghun kar atte-nu!*
 well done knead do.IMP dough.obl=DOM
 ‘Knead that dough really well!’

Similar to the data from SNI, this innovative parameter for DOM may only be licensed in configurations in which the object is projected higher than the subject and, specifically to these languages, topical in nature.

6. Proposal

Following the data seen from SNI, with parallels in Romance and the Indic languages, I propose that differential object marking is an instance of non-structural, or inherent, accusative Case assignment. First licensed with the experiencer objects of type-two psych verbs, it has since expanded to more verb types whose underlying structure necessitates the raising of the accusative object to the traditional subject position in order for the object to receive inherent accusative Case assignment. DOM is, thus, the resolution of a semantic vs. structural conflict between the arguments of the transitive verbs that license it. Innovative parameters may be licensed in DOM in SNI provided that they abide by Principle 119, i.e. that they maintain an [object]-[subject]-[verb] order.

7. Conclusion

The incipient system of DOM in SNI has been proposed to be the assignment of an inherent accusative Case first originating with the left-dislocated topicalised objects of type-two psych verbs, whose internal structure necessitates an [object]-[subject]-[verb] configuration. This has since spread to other verb types and, as we have seen, to no longer requiring that the object be a topic. Marking of the object, as we have seen, continues to be a requirement whether it is focal or topical in nature. In other words, DOM has evolved from a system of topic marking to one of general (differential) object marking. In brief, we can conclude that the following parameters are required for the licensing of DOM in SNI across all predicate types: a *subject in disguise* and activation of either the Topic or Focus fields in CP. In this sense, it is clear that DOM is a pan-Italian construction.

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