***Syntactic microvariation in Romance: bridging synchrony and diachrony:***
*the case of SI*

Major syntactic differences between the medieval Romance languages and their modern counterparts have been noted for well over a century (Tobler 1875; Diez 1882; Thurneysen 1892; Meyer-Lübke 1889), with a body of more recent work highlighting important synchronic variation amongst the medieval languages (Vance, Donaldson & Steiner 2009; Wolfe 2015, Forthcoming), and diachronic variation observable in texts from different stages of the medieval period (Ledgeway 2009; Labelle & Hirschbühler 2017; Galves Forthcoming). In this talk, I focus on a particular aspect of the syntax of Medieval Romance: the grammar of the particle SI, which abounds across the early textual records, but eludes a satisfying analysis.

Based on a new hand-annotated corpus of seven Old French texts, I show that the numerous and frequently contradictory claims in the literature regarding SI (Marchello-Nizia 1985; Reenen & Schøsler 2000; Ledgeway 2008) can often be reconciled under an account where its formal characterisation, discourse-pragmatic value, and interaction with other areas of core clausal syntax varies markedly, both synchronically and diachronically, within the period conventionally referred to as 'Old French'. Specifically, I sketch a grammaticalisation pathway where SI becomes progressively bleached through a process of upwards reanalysis (Roberts & Roussou 2002). This entails a change from SI (>SIC) as an adverbial encoding temporal succession, to topic continuity marker (Fleischman 2000), then two distinct expletive stages, where SI acts as a last-resort mechanism to satisfy the Verb Second constraint. The core empirical observation is that there is large-scale variation between SI in 12th century and 13th century texts and, furthermore, small-scale variation in the syntax of SI across texts which are conventionally considered contemporaneous.

In the second part of the talk I bring in data from a range of Medieval Italo-Romance varieties, showing that SI in Sicilian, Florentine, Piedmontese and Venetian texts mirrors almost exactly the distribution of SI in 12th century French, but does not show the distributional properties of the highly grammaticalised element found in 13th century French.

The core intuition behind the analysis of Medieval Romance SI is that the element in question can occupy distinct positions within an articulated left periphery (on which see Rizzi 1997, Benincà & Poletto 2004 and Ledgeway 2010) during different stages of the grammaticalisation process. Furthermore, throughout its history, SI cannot be understood in isolation from ongoing changes in the Medieval Romance Verb Second property and its correlates (Wolfe 2016), but may also have a previously overlooked role in shaping a number of the morphosyntactic isoglosses observable within Romance-speaking Europe today. In particular, I suggest that differences in the syntax of Old French SI and its Old Italo-Romance counterparts may account for major contemporary Italo- vs. Gallo-Romance differences in the syntax of topicalisation, focus and the null subject property.

Overall, although SI may seem like a small and parochial area of Medieval Romance syntax, its synchronic and diachronic significance for an understanding of the evolution of Romance grammar cannot be underestimated.

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