

## Subject clitics in *Bisiac*: current system and diachronic evolution

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Based on whether (third person) subject clitics double syntactically complex subjects (strong pronoun, DP, QP, wh- operator), Poletto (1993, 2000; see also Casalicchio, Frasson 2018) identifies five types of Northern Italo-Romance dialects depending on the syntax of subject clitics.

(1)	Type	Strong pron.	DP	QP	Operator	Examples
	I	+	+	+	+	Friulian
	II	+	+	+	-	Rovereto, TN
	III	+	+	-	-	Bologna
	IV	+	-	-	-	Central Venetan
	V	-	-	-	-	Venetian, Trieste

Poletto (2000) hypothesizes that the combination of the syntactic properties defined in the matrix in (1) can be captured in the clitic doubling implicational hierarchy in (2).

- (2) wh- operator  $\supset$  QP  $\supset$  DP  $\supset$  strong pronoun

According to this hierarchy, if a subject clitic co-occurs with a wh- operator (in relative clauses, direct and indirect interrogatives, cleft sentences), then it also co-occurs with a QP subject, a DP subject, and with a strong subject pronoun; if it co-occurs with a QP subject, then it also co-occurs with a DP subject and with a strong pronoun, etc.

At least since the 1970s, implicational scales have been seen as predictive with respect to the times and modalities of linguistic change (cf. Hawkins 1978, Kiparsky 2008). Applying this idea to the implicational hierarchy in (2), it is expected that, in a system of clitics undergoing change (whatever the motivation), change will abide by the implicational hierarchy: in type I systems the subject clitic will be dropped when it co-occurs with an operator before it is dropped when it co-occurs with QP subjects, shifting the system from a type I to a type II; it will be dropped when it co-occurs with a QP subject before it is dropped when it co-occurs with a DP subject (instantiating a change from type II to type III), and so on. At the same time, it has been pointed out that contact may trigger a change that skips intermediate stages (Ledge-way, Schifano, Silvestri 2024).

In this presentation we investigate this hypothesis using as a test bench the syntactic behavior of subject clitics in *Bisiac*, a previously not studied dialect spoken in Friuli in the area between the lower course of the Isonzo river and the Karst plateau. *Bisiac* has been defined as a “fundamentally Venetan” variety (Frau 1984) resulting “from the incomplete fusion of Venetan with the Friulian substratum” (Pellis 1930). Since Friulian and Venetan belong to different types (see the table above), one may expect that, as far as the syntax of subject clitics is concerned, *Bisiac* falls into an intermediate typology, and therefore does not display subject clitic doubling in all the contexts in which Friulian displays it, but that it displays it in a greater number of contexts than Venetan; at the same time *Bisiac* is nowadays subject to pressure from Italian and Trieste dialect, also a Venetan variety, and this may have pushed its evolution even further in the direction of type V.

Data we collected from written texts ranging from the 1960s to the 1980s show that subject clitic doubling occurs in subject relative clauses (see (3)), but crucially not when the subject is a quantifier (see (4)); moreover, subject clitics are not obligatory when the subject is a full DP (see (5), (6)), but they co-occur obligatorily with strong pronouns (see (7)).

- (3) *na femmena che la ga...*  
a woman that CL has...
- (4) *nissun parla più soto vose*  
nobody speaks anymore quietly
- (5) *La stradela la se perdeva ta i trozi*  
The little-road CL REFL lost in the paths
- (6) *la bareta xe in casa*  
the hat is at home
- (7) *Ela la se veva sintu tremar le gambe*  
She cl refl had felt shake the legs

Thus, *Bisiac* does not belong to any of the five classes identified in the literature, as the table below shows.

(8)	<b>Strong pron.</b>	<b>DP</b>	<b>QP</b>	<b>Operator</b>
	+	±	–	+

Field research we have conducted in recent months shows a further evolution in the system, where clitic doubling tends to disappear in subject relative clauses, or when a DP subject or a strong pronoun is present in the sentence.

- (9) *la 'mula ke (la) ze ri 'vada ieri...*  
the girl that (CL) is arrived yesterday
- (10) *nissun saveva*  
nobody knew
- (11) *la pu 'tela (la) 'maja al 'pomo*  
the girl (CL) eats the apple
- (12) *Ela (la) 'riva do 'man*  
she (CL) arrives tomorrow

These data seem to show that *Bisiac* is moving towards type V. Returning now to the hypothesis of a gradual process leading to the evolution from type I to type V, the data seem to suggest that linguistic contact may play a role in establishing “leaps” in processes of otherwise gradual change (see Ledgeway, Schifano, Silvestri 2024); this leads to systems incompatible with the implicational hierarchy in (2), and it triggers their further evolution towards more stable systems.

## References

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