

From Latin to Romance: Deconstructing (non-)configurationality

Adam Ledgeway (anl21@cam.ac.uk), University of Cambridge

Among Romance linguists of all theoretical persuasions, there is general recognition that, in the passage from Latin to Romance, the morphosyntax of the emerging languages underwent significant changes in three fundamental areas of the grammar involving the nominal group, the verbal group, and the sentence. The impact of such changes is most immediately observable in the emergence of a series of functional categories (including determiners, auxiliaries, and complementizers) and in the gradual rigidification of word order in these same groups. Now, while the specific details of the complex morphosyntactic changes affecting the three key areas of the grammar are relatively well known, scholars are still very much divided as to their correct interpretation, and how they are to be integrated within the overall typological changes witnessed in the passage from Latin to Romance. Traditionally, the principal typological difference between Latin and Romance has been taken to involve a distinction between morphology and syntax: while Latin predominantly makes recourse to synthetic structures (with concomitant so-called free word order), the morphologically poorer Romance varieties make greater use of analytic structures (with concomitant fixed word order). In this talk I shall reconsider this traditional theme of Romance linguistics, showing that the predominant analytic patterns of Romance are nothing more than the partial reflex of a more deep-rooted structural change.

According to one view, this change involves a move from non-configurationality to full configurationality: whereas in Latin grammatical relations are encoded by the forms of words themselves through case and agreement morphology, so-called lexocentricity (Bresnan 2001:109-112), in Romance grammatical relations are encoded through the syntactic context of individual words organized into distinct hierarchical phrase structure configurations. Indeed, as Vincent (1998:423f.) observes, Latin presents all of Hale's (1983) classic tests for non-configurationality originally established on the evidence of Warlpiri (see also Ledgeway 2011:§3.4). On this view, the emergence of functional categories in Romance can be seen as a concomitant of the emergence of hierarchical constituent structure in the nominal, verbal, and sentential domains which makes available a position for functional elements such as determiners (DP), auxiliaries (IP/TP) and complementizers (CP), thereby reflecting the traditional intuition popularized within the synthesis-analysis approach which highlights the emergence in Romance of articles and clitics, auxiliaries, and a whole host of finite and non-finite complementizers, all generally absent from Latin.

Despite the merits of this view of the Latin-Romance development in terms of the rise of (full) configurationality, I shall develop an alternative approach to the changes in word order and argument realization from Latin to Romance which assumes the presence of both configurational and functional structure already in Latin. On this view, the unmistakable differences between Latin and Romance, most notably observable in the replacement of an essentially pragmatically-determined word order with an increasingly grammatically-determined word order and the concomitant emergence of functional categories, can now be explained by formal changes in the directionality parameter and the differential role of functional structure in the two varieties. Adopting this view, the perceived non-configurationality of Latin can be broken down into two main ingredients: i) grammatically-free word order resulting from an ongoing change in the head directionality parameter (ultimately interpreted as the progressive loss of Complement-to-Specifier roll-up movement), which *a priori* allows dependents/complements to occur on either side of their head; and ii) pragmatically-driven word order, often producing discontinuous structures, resulting from the greater accessibility of topic- and focus-fronting to positions situated in the left edge of individual functional projections. Interpreted in this manner, the apparent emergence of configurationality in Romance is to be understood as the surface effect of the rigidification of the directionality parameter and the restricted accessibility of edge-fronting to left-peripheral positions within the functional structure. In short, it is these formal changes in the directionality parameter and the differential role of functional structure in the two varieties which conspire to give the superficial impression of differences in configurationality and functional structure in Latin and Romance.

References

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