Objects and Subjects in the Left Periphery: The case of a-Topics.

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Abstract

A parallel is highlighted between the linguistic behavior of young Italian-speaking children as emerged in recent experimental work (Belletti and Manetti 2017) with comparative data from other Romance languages such as Balearic Catalan and (previous stages of) Spanish in the domain of a-Topics. A possible path from a-Topics to DOM is drawn, building on previous proposals in Belletti (2017a). a-Marking of topics concerns direct object DPs. A proposal is sketched out as to why subject DPs could not be a-marked when they are also topics in terms of a possibly conflicting requirement arising from the simultaneous satisfaction of both the Topic criterion with a-marking and the Subject criterion (in the sense of Rizzi 2006).

1. Introduction

In (non southern, central variety of) Italian, which is not a Differential Object Marking/DOM language, full lexical direct object DPs may sometimes be introduced by preposition 'a' when they are left dislocated topics. This is, however, a severely constrained and limited possibility, only very marginally allowed by many speakers. The most felicitous cases involve left dislocated object experiencers of psych verbs (of the *worry* class, Benincà 1986, Belletti & Rizzi 1988, Berretta 1989; Belletti 2017a for recent discussion). a-Marked left dislocated topics are instead felicitously allowed by (non southern, central variety) speakers of Italian when the left dislocated object is a personal (strong) pronoun. Experimental results have brought to light the fact that developing children speaking the same variety of Italian appear to make a larger use of a-marking of left dislocated direct object topics by overwhelmingly a-marking left dislocated direct objects which are full lexical noun phrases and which are not object experiencers. Hence children have overextended a limited possibility of adult Italian. After reviewing the main properties of children's a-Topics, crosslinguistic and diachronic parallels with the Italian speaking children's somewhat creative linguistic behavior are illustrated in section 2.[1] One main distributional property that generally characterizes a-Topics is further discussed: they are objects they are not subjects. To the extent that this is a correct descriptive generalization, the question that arises is why it should be so. A possible proposal is sketched out in section 3.

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[1] Belletti & Manetti (2017), (Belletti 2017a, b) for detailed description and discussion.

[2] This "grammatically creative" behavior is typically due to some pressure conditioning children's immature grammatical system. The point is addressed in the references quoted where the pressure is identified in this case with the difficulty in handling an intervention computation in which the lexical direct object is moved across an intervening lexical subject along the lines of the system developed in Friedmann et al. (2009) in terms of featural Relativized Minimality (Rizzi 1990, 2004). See Belletti (2017)b for detailed discussion of this point and Belletti & Manetti (2017)

2. a-Topics
2.1. a-Topics in Italian during development

Recent experimental findings on the acquisition of Italian presented and discussed in detail in Belletti & Manetti (2017) have revealed that when the production of a ClLD is elicited in which the direct object of a transitive verb occupies a left dislocated peripheral topic position and an accusative resumptive clitic is present in the sentence following it, young (4 to 6) Italian speaking children tend to realize the lexical direct object in the form of an a-Topic as illustrated in (1):

(1)   Il coniglio a i' pinguino lo tocca
      The rabbit to the penguin him.Cl touches

                              (Adele 4;9 – *Picture described: Rabbit touching penguin*)

Note that in (1) not only the direct object has been left dislocated, the subject as well is in a left peripheral topic position as it precedes the left dislocated direct object yielding the order SOClV. Italian is a language that allows for multiple topics (contrary to e.g. English, Rizzi 2013) and children appear to master this option quite well at the age investigated.

In the references quoted (footnote 1) it is argued in some detail that the left peripheral direct object a-Topic of productions like (1) is not the manifestation of the Differential Object Marking/DOM phenomenology as direct objects in clause internal object position are not a-marked in the Tuscan variety of Italian that the tested children spoke. And indeed this is confirmed by the fact that the same children who produced a substantial amount of ClLDs of the type in (1) never a-marked the direct object when it had not been left dislocated yielding the production of a simple SVO declarative. The production in (2), reproduced from the quoted references, illustrates this robust fact:

(2)   La giraffa sta leccando la mucca, e il coniglio al pinguino lo sta grattando.
      The giraffe is licking the cow and the rabbit to the penguin him-Cl is scratching
      'The giraffe is licking the cow and the rabbit the penguin is scratching him.'   (Omar, 5)

The fact that a-marking of direct objects is a left peripheral phenomenon affecting left dislocated direct object topics is not a weird and isolated fact concerning Italian speaking children during their development. Rather, children's behavior is robustly attested both crosslinguistically and diachronically. As it is often the case in acquisition, during their development children typically adopt grammatical options that are manifested in the grammar of some existing language.[2]

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It is also worth pointing out that children also used a-marked topics in non-intervention configurations and often with a generic plural null subject, as discussed in Belletti & Manetti (2017). This indicates that a-marking is not simply a strategy to disambiguate between the subject or the object interpretation of the two DPs.

2.2 a-Topics in a comparative perspective

For instance, according to the insightful discussion in Leonetti (2004 and related work), modern Spanish is a DOM language in which direct objects are generally a-marked when they fill the clause internal object position (and are definite, specific etc.).[3] In some cases, however, depending on both the nature of the object (typically an indefinite) and the type of verb, a-marking may be optional when the object is in clause internal position. It becomes obligatory though if the same type of direct object is left dislocated in a ClLD structure. Hence, clitic left dislocated lexical direct object topics are always and obligatorily a-Topics in Spanish (Belletti 2017a). The same strong requirement on a-marking of left dislocated direct object topics is found crosslinguistically in various other (Romance) languages manifesting DOM to some extent, as is the case for example of the Sicilian variety described in Iemmolo (2007, 2010).

The case that most closely resembles the described behavior displayed by Italian speaking developing children is provided by the Balearic variety of Catalan. According to Escandell-Vidal (2009) Balearic Catalan is not a productive DOM language. In particular lexical direct objects, differently from pronominal ones, are not a-marked when they fill the clause internal direct object position. However, they are typically, though not strictly obligatorily, a-marked when they are left dislocated.[4] The following examples from Escandell-Vidal (2009) illustrate the difference between SVO declaratives, with no a-marked object (3), and the a-marked object in ClLD (4):

(3)　　　　Balearic (Arxiu, Maó. Minorca)
　　　　　a. He　　　　anát　a agafar　es　　　qui　ha　vist
　　　　　　 have.Pres.1SG　gone　to catch　the (one)　who　have.Pres.3SG seen
　　　　　　 com　matava　　　　<u>en Fulano　o　en　Sutano</u>
　　　　　　 how　kill.Pst.3SG　　the Fulano　or　the　Sutano
　　　　　　 'I went to catch the one who has seen how he killed the Fulano or the Sutano'
　　　　　b　I　　va　　　　anar ja　　　a amenaçar　<u>es　general</u>
　　　　　　 and　have.Pst.3.SG　go　already　to menace　the general
　　　　　　 'So he went to threaten the general'
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Escandell-Vidal, 2009: 24a, b)

 (4)　　　　Balearic (Arxiu, Sant Josep, Ibiza)
　　　　　a. An aquella al.lota no　la deixaven　　parlar amb　so　que ella volia
　　　　　　 to that　　girl　　not her let.Pst.3PL talk　with　the who she want.Pst.3SG
　　　　　　 'That girl was not allowed to talk to the one she wanted'
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Escandell-Vidal, 2009: 27)

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[3] The interesting literature on DOM that tries to identify the crucial features of the phenomenon is quite extensive, especially in the typological tradition (Bossong (1991 and much subsequent work); Iemmolo (2010) for discussion and an overview, and Manzini & Franco (2016) for a novel assessment. No attempt will be made here to provide an exhaustive characterization of the articulated phenomenology for both space reason and in the interest of a focused presentation. Only those crucial and robust patterns that are found both crosslinguistically and diachronically will be considered as the leading descriptive factors in the discussion in the text.

[4] And also when they are right dislocated. For space reasons I will concentrate my discussion on left dislocated direct objects, which are also those robustly present in the children's productions of the Belletti & Manetti 's (2017) experiment.

Balearic (Majorcan)
    b. An aquesta darrera [frase] noltros la diríem   així
          to   this   last [sentence] we   it say COND.1PL like that
          'This last sentence, we would say this way'

(Escandell-Vidal, 2009: 36) [5]

Also in the Italian speaking children's ClLDs, left peripheral lexical object topics were preferably a-marked and overwhelmingly so (in 88% of their ClLDs: Belletti 2017b, Belletti & Manetti 2017). Some were not, though. They were expressed as a simple DP, with no introducing preposition much as in the adult target language. One example is given in (5) as an illustration (with a null subject *pro* in the clause following the a-Topic):

(5) Il re   lo   sta pettinando
    the king *pro* him-Cl is combing
    'The king, he is combing him'   (Alice, 4 – *Picture described: Kid combing king OproClV*)

Hence, Italian speaking children's productions illustrate a favored, though not obligatory, process of a-marking of direct object left peripheral topics which parallels the distribution of a-Topics in the described variety of Balearic Catalan. Modern Spanish is one step further, with a-marking always obligatory in ClLD, as has been clarified in Leonetti's description mentioned above.

2.3 a-Topics in a diachronic perspective

Indeed, looking at the development of Spanish may be very instructive and inspiring. Following von Heusinger (2008, also relying on Laca's 2006 analysis of the Cid corpus) the picture very clearly emerges that no DOM was present in old medieval Spanish. In contrast, DOM is systematic in Modern Spanish as is also clearly revealed by the translation of same stretch of text. Translation is often an effective magnifier: The following examples taken from von Heusinger (2008) offer a straightforward minimal comparison:

(6) Old Spanish:
    a En braços tenedes   mis fijas   tan blancas commo el   sol   (Cid, 2333)
       in arms   have-2PL my daughters as white   as   the sun
       'In your arms you hold my daughters, as white as the sun'
    b Escarniremos   las fijas   del   Campeador   (Cid, 2551)
       will-humiliate the daughters of the Battler
       'We shall humiliate the Battler's daughters'

(von Heusinger 2008: 18a, b)
(7) Modern Spanish:
    a tenéis   a   mis hijas,   tan blancas come el   sol, en vuestros brazos
       have-2.PL DOM my daughter as white   as   the sun in your arms
       (*Cantar de mio Cid,* Translation A.Reyes. Madrid: Espasa Calpe 1976)

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[5] The example in (4b) is especially interesting in that it shows that the left dislocated object does not need to be animate in order to be a-marked. This suggests that a-marking is a feature in the left periphery that can be associated with topics independently of their animacy, a property often associated to classical DOM.

'In your arms you hold my daughters, as white as the sun'
b y   podremos escarnecer <u>a   la hijas del Campeador</u>
   and will-can1PL humiliate   DOM the daughters of the Battler
              (*Cantar de mio Cid,* Translation A.Reyes. Madrid: Espasa Calpe 1976)
       'We shall humiliate the Battler's daughters'
                                                    (von Heusinger 2008: 19a, b)

In the same text, however, hence in the same stage of the history of Spanish, von Heusinger (2008, reporting results from Laca 2006: 455) points out that in Cid 80% of (animate) definite direct objects were not not a-marked, whereas 73% of (animate) definite direct objects were a-marked <u>and</u> preposed and doubled by a clitic (in ClLD), as in the following example:

(8)   <u>A   las sus fijas</u>   en braço las   prendia   (Cid, 275)
         DOM the his daughters in arm   them hold-3.SG
         'He gathered his daughters in his arms'
                                                    (von Heusinger 2008:19'b)

In other words, a-marking of left dislocated lexical direct object topics is widespread in Cid independently of DOM, which was not available in Spanish at the time. This is a picture that converges in a striking way with the behavior of the Italian speaking children illustrated in (1) and (2).

A final concluding remark concerns the further fact presented in von Heusinger (2008) according to which direct object strong pronouns were systematically a-marked in Cid, instead. This is the same situation holding in the non-DOM contemporary Balearic Catalan according to Escandell-Vidal's (2009) description. As mentioned in the introduction, in present day Italian strong personal pronouns allow/require (in the 1st and 2nd person in particular, Beretta 1989, Renzi 1988) a-marking when they are left dislocated, as illustrated in example (9) and similar ones (Beretta 1989, Belletti 2017a):

(9)   A te/*?te ti licenziano di sicuro
        to you/you they you-CL fire for sure

Hence, object strong pronouns tend to be more readily accessible to a-marking. In Italian this only happens in the periphery (with the 1st and 2nd person in particular) and not in the clause internal object position, in the other languages mentioned personal strong pronouns are the first to undergo DOM.[6]
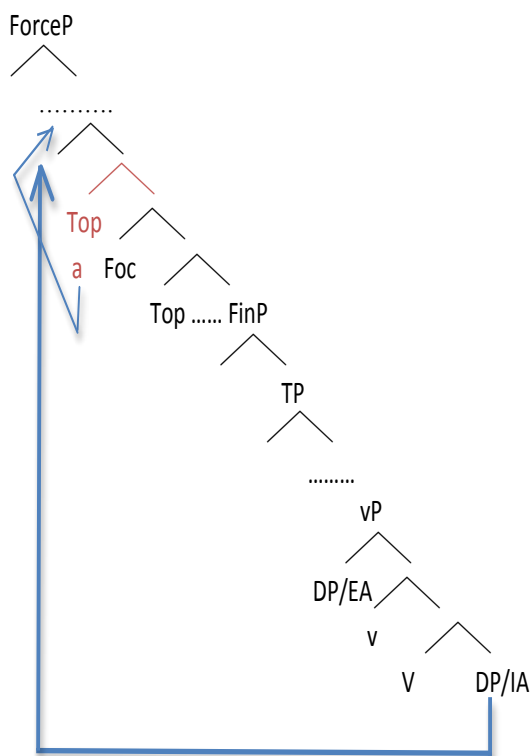
2.4 The development of a-marking

Building on the proposal presented in Belletti (2017a), a diachronic developmental path for a-marking may be identified such that the first instance crucially involves the Topic head in the Left

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[6] According to Rohlfs (1971), reported in Iemmolo (2010), in the Brussels variety of French and in Languedoc French a-marking is also present and typically affects left dislocated pronouns and only sporadically left dislocated lexical noun phrases in ClLD structures. According to the description in Rohlfs (1971), the Valais-Geneva variety of French is a variety most closely resembling standard Italian in that a-marking is limited to left dislocated personal pronouns only in ClLD structures.
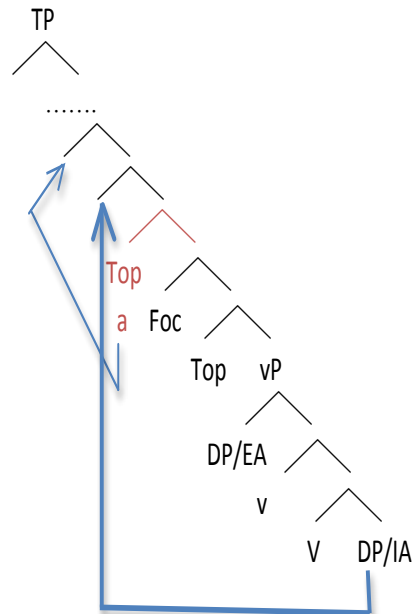
Periphery; a-marking can then affect the lower Topic head in the vP-periphery of the clause and then become a fully grammaticalized marker, expressed in the functional zone of the vP as a *v* component of (accusative) Case marking. This path can be expressed in cartographic terms along the following lines in (10). In (10) the Topic head is endowed with the marker 'a', expressing some interpretative feature that adds up to the Topic/given one. In Belletti (2017a) the proposal is sketched out that left peripheral a-marking adds some affected/involved type interpretation to the topic. For the space reasons I will not further elaborate on the exact characterization of the interpretive value added by 'a' (see reference quoted). Let us simply refer to it as the feature [+a]. Such feature attracts the object noun phrase into its Spec where the relevant interpretation is implemented in criterial terms (Rizzi 1997). As illustrated in (10)a, b, the head 'a' then moves to a higher head position thus re-establishing the prepositional order of Italian.
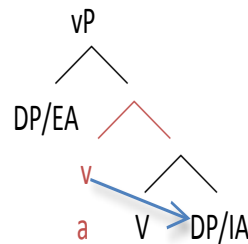
(10)

a

ForceP

....

Top

a   Foc

Top …… FinP

TP

………

vP

DP/EA

v

V   DP/IA

b

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                    TP
                   /  \
                 .......
                 /  \
                /    \
              Top    \
               a  Foc \
                  Top   vP
                      /    \
                  DP/EA    \
                     v      \
                         V   DP/IA
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c

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              vP
             /  \
         DP/EA   \
             v    \
              a  V  DP/IA
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According to this proposal, initially there is a crucial link between a-marking and topicality. Since Topics are characteristically expressed in the left periphery, a-marking is a left peripheral phenomenon in its core manifestation. This is indeed the case for child Italian, old Spanish, Balearic Catalan.[7] This is the case illustrated by (10)a. When the low topic is involved as in (10)b, a-marking is present also on non left peripheral preposed objects, hence it is displayed in the SV(a)O word order as in DOM. Still, some residual topic interpretation is maintained as a-marking of direct objects/DOM is often, characteristically described as marking of a specific/definite object noun phrase. Finally the presence of a-marking is wider and generalized in the fully grammaticalized third stage corresponding to (10)c. Following Leonetti's description assumed here, Modern Spanish seems to be in between the latter two steps. It cannot be excluded – nor can it proved though for obvious reasons – that the wide resort to a-Topic emerged in the Italian children's productions could be a sign of a possible language change on the way, eventually leading to some form of DOM in Italian as well.[8] Be it as it may in this respect, the path explicitly describes both the relation with topicality correlating with a-marked preposed objects and its privileged left peripheral realization.

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[7] Similarly for Sicilian as described in Iemmolo (2007). On the low vP periphery of the clause see Belletti (2004) and references cited there.

[8] Lighfoot (1999) on the leading role of developing children in triggering language change, in this case in the domain of morphosyntax.

2.5 When objects are Topics

In a language like Italian in the SVO order direct objects are typically the focus of new information (e.g. in narrow focus answers on a question bearing on the object) or part of the focus in a whole new focus sentence (e.g. in the answer to a *what is happening* type question). It is tempting to see a-marking as the way to mark the object when it is not a focus, but rather a topic, in combination with the added left peripheral feature [a], a proposal that I develop in some detail in Belletti (2017a; see also Iemmolo 2010 for related ideas).

It is furthermore tempting to relate the robust fact mentioned in the preceding sections according to which personal strong pronouns are among the first nominal elements to undergo a-marking and then DOM to a property of the Romance pronominal system: in Romance Clitic languages strong pronouns are typically used when the pronoun is focalized (Cardinaletti & Starke 1999). In discourse situations in which the strong form of the pronoun should be preferred (e.g. to put more emphasis on it) while keeping the given/topic interpretation of it, a-marking could again be the process resorted to mark the strong pronoun when it is associated with the topic, non-focus, interpretation in the low vP-periphery.

3. a-Marking on lexical object Topics, not on lexical subject Topics.

Italian is a multiple topics language: more than one topic can be present in the left periphery of the clause. For instance a subject DP can be left dislocated together with an object DP:

(11)   Gianni Maria la conosce bene
        Gianni Maria her-Cl knows well
   'Gianni knows Maria well'

The possibility of allowing for multiple topics is acquired early on, as seen in connection with children's productions of sentences like (1).

In ClLD the sentence following the topic contains a clitic pronouns that refers to it and the clause predicates a property of the topic. Assume for concreteness a doubling type derivation for ClLD whereby a big-DP containing both the lexical DP and the clitic is merged clause internally. The lexical portion of the big DP is moved into the relevant topic position in the left periphery and the stranded remaining clitic part cliticizes into the relevant Clitic head inside the clause (Belletti 2005, Cecchetto 2000, Kayne 2005). The movement+stranding analysis alluded to is schematically represented in (12)

(12) [……… [[Top]….. [$_{TP}$…….. Cl …. [$_{DP}$<DP$_{lex}$> <Cl>]]]]
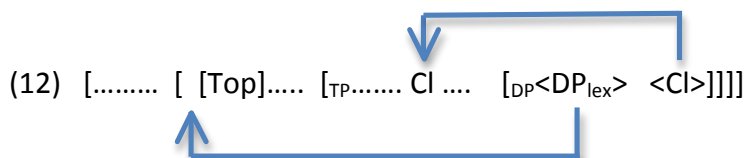
When the DP attracted to Topic is the subject of the clause, the stranded pronominal portion, i.e., the resumptive pronoun, corresponds to a silent *pro*, the analogue of an object clitic in a null subject language like Italian (Cardinaletti 2004). (13)a illustrates a derivation in which the DP$_{lex}$ portion of the big DP is moved from a low position of the clause (Rizzi 1982 and 3.1 below), e.g. the position in which it is merged as the external argument of the verb; the stranded portion

containing *pro* is moved into the subject position.[9] In (13)b the other possible derivation is illustrated in which the DP_{lex} portion of the big DP is extracted from the big DP in subject position and the portion containing *pro* is stranded in this position.

(13) a [……….[[Top]…..[$_{TP}$ *pro* …..[$_{DP}$<DP_{lex}> <*pro*>]]]]

       b [… [[Top]…..[$_{TP}$ [$_{DP}$<DP_{lex}> *pro*] ………….]]]
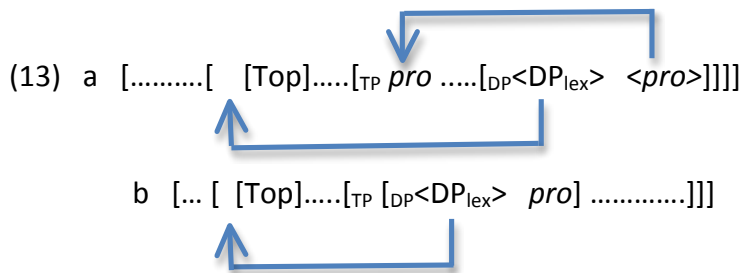
The following considerations apply to both conceivable derivations in (13). Following Rizzi's (2006) and Rizzi & Shlonsky's (2007) approach, a Subject Criterion expresses the interpretive content of an EPP feature in the (relevant, Cardinaletti 2004) subject position in the high portion of the TP.[10] According to the criterial approach this amounts to saying that the clause is about the nominal element filling the subject position.

Topics and subjects have thus much in common: in both cases the sentence following the topic DP and the sentence of which a DP is the subject predicates some property of such DP: the sentence is "about" the DP in both cases. However, subjects and topics differ in one property: only topics are also given in the previous discourse. In other words, a subject DP is not necessarily also a topic (Rizzi 2005 for discussion). Thus, in cases like (13) in which the subject is also a topic in the left periphery the sentence ends up being about the Topic and the resumptive silent *pro*. It is about a subject that is also a Topic.

Clearly this interpretive option must be available and formally allowed by the grammar as it corresponds to all those cases in which the subject is also a topic. The aboutness relation(s) established with the DP in the left peripheral Spec/TopP and the following clause and the one holding between the *pro*-subject and the (same) clause must count as uniform in the relevant interpretive sense. Since under the criterial approach, the Topic/aboutness interpretation of the topicalized DP is expressed through a Topic-criterion and the aboutness interpretation of the related resumptive *pro* is expressed through the Subject-criterion, we can conclude that the combination of the two criteria on the same referential argument is interpretively congruent in the relevant sense. I would like to entertain the proposal that should a topic DP corresponding to a subject be an a-marked topic this congruence would be lost. The reason is that the interpretive feature that 'a' adds to the topic/given interpretation of the DP in Spec/TopP would not also be present on *pro*. The resumptive *pro* would only express the aboutness interpretation always associated with the subject position through the Subject criterion. This would yield a not completely congruent interpretation as the sentence would be about an argument – Topic and subject – that is, in a sense, both 'a' and 'non a'.

No similar problem arises for direct object a-Topics as there is no congruence to be met in this case since there is no Object criterion corresponding to the Subject criterion. Thus, the resumptive object clitic does not satisfy any independent criterion, and the related congruence need with the

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[9] To simplify the representation in (13)a *pro* is moved into the subject position. In fact, the moved constituent could correspond to the remnant big DP.

[10] The EPP feature in clauses (Chomsky 2000) is in fact the formal counterpart of the substantive property that all clauses have a subject (Chomsky 1981).

features expressed by the left dislocated DP in Spec/Top does not arise. In these cases, the 'a' feature is normally expressed on the only criterial head of the relation, the Topic head, and on its specifier, through the Topic criterion.

3.1 Instances of a-marked subjects

Instances of a-marked subjects are only possible in Italian in the form of experiencer quirky subjects (Belletti & Rizzi 1988, Belletti 2017a)[11]. As such, they fill the clause internal subject position and realize a dative, as is also the case in various other languages (e.g. Icelandic, Sigurdsson 2002). Quirky subjects satisfy the Subject criterion exactly as non-quirky ones. A quirky dative subject can also be left dislocated with a resumptive dative clitic present in the following clause. (14)a, b exemplify the non left dislocated version and the left dislocated one of the same dative quirky subject (experiencer) in Italian:

(14) a A Gianni piace la musica
         to Gianni likes the music
         'Gianni likes music'
      b A Gianni   gli   piace la musica
         to Gianni to him-Cl likes the music
         'Gianni likes music'

The Topic criterion and the Subject criterion are satisfied in both such cases. in (14)a the Subject criterion is satisfied by the dative 'a Gianni'; in (14)b the dative 'a Gianni' satisfies the Topic criterion. As for the Subject criterion two analyses are possible for (14)b depending on the position from which the dative a-DP is moved. I sketch out the two possible analyses, leaving open for the time being the choice between the two as it would require more elaborate discussion: If the dative 'a Gianni' is moved from the high subject position, then according to one analysis the Subject criterion my be assumed to be satisfied by the stranded dative clitic.[12] This analysis is the same as the one illustrated in (13)b, modulo the dative nature of the dislocated noun phrase and of its resumptive pronominal. If the dative 'a Gianni' instead is moved from the lower position in the vP domain where it is first merged, then the remnant DP would move into the subject position and the Subject criterion would similarly be satisfied by the stranded dative clitic (see foonotes 9 and 12).[13]

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[11] The external argument of Italian/Romance causatives can also be a-marked and result in a dative. 'a' is here part of the functional verbal spine realizing a small 'v' that, according to Belletti (2017c) recent discussion is selected by the causative head.

[12] Which should then cliticize on the relevant Clitic head in the same way as a subject clitic (Manzini & Savoia 2005, Poletto 2000).

[13] The latter derivation would most closely resemble cases of subject extraction in a null subject language like Italian following the classical analysis of Rizzi (1982), Rizzi & Shlonsky (2007). In these cases a silent expletive *pro* is assumed to satisfy the Subject criterion. According to Rizzi & Shlonsky (2007) subjects can never be moved from the criterial subject position for principled reasons precisely related to the criterial nature of the Subj head. Following the classical analysis of Rizzi (1982), in null subject languages like Italian movement takes place from the low merge position and an expletive null *pro* satisfies the criterion.

Manzini & Savoia (2005) point out a further instance of a-marked subjects also reported in Rohlfs (1969) occurring in cases in which the subject is long extracted as in the example quoted in (15), taken from the list presented in Manzini & Savoia (2005) as an illustration:

(15)   (S.Agata Feltria)
                (ma) ki t' kre:d ke 'venga
                [(a) chi ti credi che venga __ (It)]
                (to) whom do you think that will come

To the extent that this type of cases only involves long extraction as in all the quoted examples in Manzini & Savoia's list a natural account interprets these instances of a-marking as the manifestation of (grammaticalized) DOM holding in an ECM-type derivation (along the lines of Chomsky 1981). Manzini & Savoia (2005) propose a somewhat different account, with one main insight that is retained in the analysis just sketched out: despite the fact that a-marking typically affects objects, under some particular circumstances it may, however, also affect a subject. We have just sketched out one such situation. Interestingly, in this situation the a-marked DP is not also interpretively an a-Topic, but rather a DOM-marked DP.

One other instance of an a-marked subject I am aware of is reported in Iemmolo (2007), quoting work on Campidanese Sardinian by Putzu (2008). The example quoted is the following:

(16) A chi   ariidi urtimu, arriidi mellus
     to whom laughs first,   laphs better

Of course, nothing much can be concluded on the basis of one single example that may be the residual manifestation of a *figée* proverb-like expression. However, one property of (16) is potentially revealing: The fact that the Topic subject is here the (free) relative pronoun *chi*. One may then tentatively propose that the gap linked to the a-wh Topic is low in the clause structure, in the vP-merge position; in this position no Subject criterion needs to be satisfied. Hence no interpretive clash arises in this case (an expletive *pro* in the subject should satisfy the Subject criterion, along the lines referred to in footnote 13).

4. Conclusion

After reviewing the main properties of a-Topics in a non-DOM language like (non southern-central) Italian, the interesting parallel has been highlighted between the linguistic behavior of young Italian speaking children emerged in recent experimental work and comparative data from other Romance languages such as Balearic Catalan and (previous stages of) Spanish. A possible path from a-Topics to DOM has been drawn, building on previous proposals in Belletti (2017a). a-Marking of topics affects direct object DPs. A proposal has been outlined as to why subject DPs could not also be so a-marked when they are topics. According to the proposal subjects can be topics but cannot be a-topics for interpretive reasons ultimately due to the need of simultaneous satisfaction of the Topic criterion and the Subject criterion by the same DP argument. The conclusion is that a subject can be a topic, as made visible in multiple topic languages like Italian, but it cannot be an a-Topic in the general case. Some speculative remarks have been offered in conclusion on some apparent/residual instances of a-marking on subjects, beside those reducible to instances of (dative) quirky subjects.

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