Standard Italian is known not to mark lexical direct objects through use of a preposition. This is in contrast with southern varieties, in which lexical direct objects are typically introduced by preposition a, as an instance of the Differential Object Marking/DOM phenomenology, found in several languages. In the closely related standard Spanish, to mention a well known case, lexical direct objects are introduced by the same proposition a, with constraints depending on the nature of the direct object (such as e.g., its specificity and animacy). Thus, speakers of standard Italian judge sentences like (1) as ungrammatical, or else they typically attribute to these sentences a clear “southern” flavor:

(1) a Ho salutato a Maria
   b Hanno arrestato al colpevole

When a (typically, animate) lexical direct object is realized as a left peripheral topic, however, also standard Italian allows it to be introduced by preposition a. This is specially clear when the object is an Experiencer object. Belletti & Rizzi (1988) report examples like those in (2)a, b pointed out by Paola Benincà (also reviewed in Berretta 1989):

(2) a A Gianni, questi argomenti non l’hanno convinto
to Gianni, these arguments him-CL have not convinced
   b *A Gianni, la gente non lo conosce
to Gianni, people him-CL do not know
   (Belletti & Rizzi 1988, footnote 27)

Whereas (2)a is considered rather acceptable by speakers of standard Italian, (2)b is judged as deviant, thus indicating that the possibility of a-marking of the direct object is preferably limited to Experiencer objects. Interestingly, in the CLLD structures of the type in (2), presence of the a-marked topic does not have any effect on the type of resumptive clitic in the following clause, which remains an accusative clitic (lo in 2a); hence, a-marking does not transform the pre-posed object into a dative Experiencer, of the type found with, e.g., the piacere class in Italian. With this class the resumptive pronoun in CLLD structures is a dative clitic:

(3) a A Gianni, questi argomenti non gli sono mai piaciuti
to Gianni, these arguments to-him-CL have not liked

The impossibility of both (4)a and (4)b following indicates an interesting property of the Italian a-marking of direct objects: not only is it preferably limited to Experiencer objects, it also is only available when the object is a left peripheral topic. Thus, a-marking of the clause internal Experiencer object in (4)a is felt as impossible as the a-marking of the object in (4)b. (4)a and (4)b are as ungrammatical for speakers of standard Italian as the examples in (1), with no distinction due to the thematic interpretation of the object.

(4) a *Questi argomenti non hanno convinto a Gianni
   these arguments have not convince to Gianni
   b *La gente non conosce a Gianni
   people do not know to Gianni

Thus, the a-marking available in standard Italian does not appear to be a property exclusively related to the argument structure of the verb and the Th-role of the object.
In this paper, I will explore a hypothesis according to which a-marking is a property of the Left Periphery that may be associated with pre-posed, left dislocated (animate) direct objects filling a peripheral topic position in CLLD structures. As discussed in Leonetti (2004), a tight relation between a-marking and topicality emerges in the Spanish DOM phenomenology, to the effect that left dislocated direct objects in CLLD are always obligatorily a-marked. A particularly interesting illustration is provided by verbs allowing for optional DOM of clause internal objects; if the object is left dislocated, however, a-marking becomes obligatory with the same verbs (see also Laca 1987). Relevant contrasts are illustrated in (5), (6):

(5)  
a Ya conocía (a) muchos estudiantes  
(already (I) knew many students)  
b Habían incluido (a) dos catedráticos en la lista  
(they) had included two professors in the list  

(6)  
CLLD:  
a *(A) muchos estudiantes, ya los conocía  
many students, (I) already knew them(cl)  
b *(A) dos catedráticos, los habían incluido en la lista  
two professors, (they) had included them(cl) in the list  

Recent experimental results presented in Belletti & Manetti (2016) on the realization of overt direct object topics by Italian speaking young children have revealed a significant use of a-marking of topics in CLLD structures. Since the tested children were all speakers of Tuscan varieties of Italian, such marking cannot be simply assimilated to a manifestation of DOM of the southern variety type. In children’s productions, a-marking is limited to objects when they are pre-posed into the Left Periphery; indeed, never is the direct object a-marked in the children’s productions when it is a clause internal direct object. Although a-marking of topics is characteristically instantiated by Experiencer objects, as illustrated above, preliminary results indicate that adult Italian speakers tend to find the CLLD structures produced by children relatively acceptable, irrespective of the thematic interpretation of the object. Thus, the acquisition data support the view that a-marking in standard Italian is a Left Peripheral phenomenon, characteristically affecting pre-posed object topics. Further results from a larger adult population are currently under collection. It may be speculated that young children are somewhat overextending a-marking of pre-posed object topics, which in turn may indicate a step toward a change eventually leading to DOM in standard Italian, in perspective (see also Berretta 1989 for relevant considerations on possible development of DOM in standard Italian). Some speculations will be offered in the paper on a-marked object topics compared to bare object topics and their different value at the interface.

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References


