‘Cimbrian syntax: a case study in macro- and micro-parametrization’

Cimbrian is a heritage language spoken in the North-East of Italy whose syntax is stuck between an original German(ic) and a contact-induced Romance type, with respect to several phenomena. In particular, Cimbrian represents a very special key-study for the theoretical correlation between V2 and pro-drop (two mutually exclusive macro-parameters).

In the recent literature devoted to Cimbrian syntax, there is general consensus on the following descriptive generalizations:

- Cimbrian does not display the canonical V2 linear restriction (allowing for YP XP Vfin…) maintaining some syntactic aspects which typically correlate with V2 such as (i) pronominal subject inversion (… Vfin+pron…) and (ii) a residual root versus embedded word order asymmetry;
- Cimbrian allows free subject inversion (VP-NP) and does not show any that-trace effect (similar to Italian), although it maintains a fully articulated class of expletives, in coherence with the negative value of the Null Subject Parameter.

This very specific entanglement of macro- and micro-parametrization allows us to revisit the role of micro-variation with respect to both language contact and Parameter-resetting (ultimately language change).

On one side language contact seems to favor the linear convergence of word order patterns without changing the “core” structural aspect of a given phenomenon:

i) the loss of V2 as linear restriction does not imply the loss of mandatory V to C movement;

ii) free subject inversion and subject extraction out of the subordinate clause co-exist with the maintenance of an articulated class of lexical expletives

On the other side, from a diachronic point of view we can argue that phenomena of micro-variation play a crucial role in the process of both losing and acquiring the ‘core’ aspect of a given parametric choice. In particular:

(i) Pronominal subject inversion with the finite verb ‘survives’ (/disappears later than) the loss of the core manifestation of the V2 parameter (i.e.: the loss of the linear V2 restriction);

(ii) Free subject inversion precedes the core phenomenon of pro-drop (i.e. the potential development of a referential null subject), and crucially implies the mandatory co-occurrence with a lexical expletive (-da).

At this stage of evolution, the coexistence of epiphenomena correlating with two mutually exclusive parameter values (+V2, +Null Subject) determines a ‘syntactic impasse’ in the grammar of Cimbrian which will be resolved only through the resetting of one of these parameter values.
In this perspective we should discharge a Theory of contact based on the hypothesis of a gradual process of approximation to the model language (continuity approach):

\[ A \rightarrow A'' \rightarrow (A'' = B'') \rightarrow B' \rightarrow B \]

\([-]\) \arrow{\rightarrow} [+]

But rather interpret contact induced phenomena as the superficial (/linear) convergence at the peripheries of two systems which may induce (but does not presuppose) a process of parameter-resetting along two distinct developmental paths:

\[ A \leftrightarrow A' \rightarrow A'' \rightarrow A''' \rightarrow \leftrightarrow B''' \rightarrow B'' \rightarrow B' \rightarrow B \]

**Selected Bibliography**


