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On *a*-marking of object topics in the Italian left periphery

1 Introduction

Standard Italian is known not to mark lexical direct objects through use of a preposition.[1] 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 phenomenon, found in several languages (Manzini and Franco 2016 for recent assessment of the phenomenon). In the closely related standard Spanish, to mention a well-known case, lexical direct objects are introduced by the same preposition *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*
(I) have greeted to Maria
'I have greeted Maria'
b. *Hanno arrestato al colpevole*
(they) have arrested to the guilty
'They have arrested the guilty'

However, when *a* (typically, animate) lexical direct object is realized as a left peripheral topic, also standard Italian allows it to be introduced by preposition *a*, at different levels of marginality for different speakers. This is especially possible when the object is an Experiencer object. Belletti & Rizzi (1988) report examples like those in (2)a, b originally pointed out by Paola Benincà (Benincà 1986, also reviewed in Berretta 1989):

(2) a. ? *A Gianni, questi argomenti non l'hanno convinto*
to Gianni, these arguments him-CL have not convinced
'Gianni, these arguments have not convinced him'

1 I will use the term Standard Italian throughout having in mind the variety of Italian that is most widespread. This is utilized and taught in school and to L2 learners, used on television and in written or formal communication and which is historically based on (literary) Tuscan.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501506734-016

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 relatively acceptable by speakers of standard Italian, although at different levels of marginality depending on the speaker as mentioned, (2)b is judged as deviant by all speakers, thus indicating that the possibility of *a*-marking of the direct object preferably goes with Experiencer objects. Interestingly, in the Clitic Left Dislocation/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 of the topic does not transform the pre-posed object into a dative Experiencer, a possibility found in Italian with, e.g., the *piacere/like* class of psych-verbs. With the *piacere/like* class the resumptive pronoun in ClLD structures is a dative clitic:

(3) *A Gianni, questi argomenti non gli sono mai piaciuti*
to Gianni, these arguments to-him-CL have never liked
'Gianni never liked these arguments'

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 as impossible as the *a*-marking of the object in (4)b, which is not an Experiencer. Both (4)a and (4)b are ungrammatical for speakers of standard Italian at the same level as the examples in (1), with no difference 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

The *a*-marking available in standard Italian for Experiencers of the *piacere/like* class, can sometimes extend to verbs of the *preoccupare/worry* class, which normally mark the Experiencer with accusative. For instance, this is the case for a verb like *interessare/interest*, as is indicated in (5) a,b where both the *a*-marked option and the accusative option for the Experiencer are possible

for the majority of standard Italian speakers.[2] However, this is not the case for the verb *preoccupare/worry* in (6)b below, much as for the verb *convincere/convince* in (4)a above, for which the *a*-marked Experiencer is not an option for any speaker:

(5) a. *Questa idea interessa gli studiosi*
this idea interests the researchers
b. (?)*Questa idea interessa agli studiosi*
this idea interests to the researchers

(6) a. *Questo comportamento preoccupa i responsabili*
this behavior worries the responsibles
b. **Questo comportamento preoccupa ai responsabili*
this behavior worries the responsibles

The contrast between (5) a, b on the one side and (6) a, b and (4)a on the other thus indicates clearly that *a*-marking is not a property associated exclusively with the Experiencer role and it is not directly associated with the argument structure of the verb nor with the Th-role of the object.

Hence, something different than just a property of the object Experiencer must be at play with Left-peripheral *a*-Topics of the type in (2)a. The following pages highlight some (of the) interpretive property (-ies) that *a*-Topics may express as well as some aspects of their syntax. Recent results from acquisition will also inspire and guide the investigation.

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2 Note that the dative *a*-Experiencer of the *piacere* type can be pre-posed as a Topic with no resumptive dative clitic in the following clause, an option always available when the pre-posed topic is a PP (PP-pre-posing):

(i) a. *A Gianni, questa idea interessa*
to Gianni this idea interests
b. *A Gianni, questa idea piace*
to Gianni, this idea likes

No such option is available for the *a*-Topic possible with verbs of the *preoccupare* class, as illustrated by the impossiblity of ii., in contrast with the (marginal) possibility of (2)a in the text:

(ii) **A Gianni, questi argomenti non hanno convinto*
to Gianni, these arguments have not convinced

This further indicates that the *a*-Topic remains a direct object DP and is not a PP: direct object topics obligatorily require an accusative clitic in the clause following the pre-posed topic, in ClLD structures.

2 *a*-Marking of Object Topics as a property of the Left periphery: Aspects of their distribution

I would like to explore the hypothesis according to which *a*-marking is primarily a property of the (Italian) Left Periphery that may be associated with pre-posed (animate) direct objects when they fill the peripheral topic position in ClLD structures.

Consider first the observation due to Leonetti (2004), according to which a tight relation between *a*-marking and topicality emerges in the Spanish DOM phenomenon, to the effect that left dislocated direct objects in ClLDs are always obligatorily *a*-marked. A particularly interesting illustration of this relation is provided by verbs allowing for optional DOM of the direct object when it is clause internal; if the object is left dislocated, however, *a*-marking becomes obligatory with the same verbs with the same type of object (see also Laca 1987). Relevant contrasts are illustrated in (7)–(8). The indefinite direct object is interpreted as a specific topic in (8):

(7) 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

(8) *CLLD:*
a. **(A) muchos estudiantes, ya los conocía*
many students, (I) alreadu knew them(cl)
b. **(A) dos catedráticos, los habían incluido en la lista*
two professors, (they) had included them(cl) in the list
(Leonetti 2004: (12)a, b)

It is tempting to propose that the Italian *a*-marking of topics illustrated in (2)a, manifests the same option available in Spanish.[3] In the latter language *a*-marking is obligatory in the left-peripheral position, whereas in Italian it is only an option, often a marginal one. Examples like those in (9)a, b, d below, also discussed in

3 Indeed, as pointed out by a reviewer to whom the following example i. is due, *a*-marking of a non-specific indefinite object topic is excluded in Italian as well also with object experiencers in cases similar to (2):

(i) *(*A) un mulo, non lo convincerai di certo con questi metodi*
(*to) a mule, (you) will not convince it-CL with these methods
'You will certainly not convince a mule with these methods'
Only possible if the intended referent is a specific mule.

Berretta (1989) (see also Renzi 1988), in which the topic is a first or second person pronoun constitute an exception, as the *a*-marking is in fact quasi-obligatory in these cases in (non southern varieties of) standard Italian; a bit more marginally, also a third person pronoun can tolerate *a*-marking (9c). In (9)a the left dislocated object is an Experiencer object. In the other examples in (9) it is not, yet *a*-marking is possible in fact much favored thus confirming that relation with the Experiencer role is not a necessary condition for *a*-marking:

(9) a. *A me/*?Me non mi si inganna*
to me/me one does not me-CL cheat
'Nobody cheats me'
b. *A te/*?te ti licenziano di sicuro*
to you/you they you-CL fire for sure
'They will certainly fore you'
c. ?*A lui/✓lui lo rispettano tutti*
to him/him they him-CL respect all
'Everybody respects him'
d. *A noi sul lavoro non ci assume più nessuno*
to us on work nobody us-hire anymore
'Nobody will hire us anymore'

As pointed out in Berretta (1989) the above sentences without the *a*-marking of the pronoun have the flavor of a northern regional variety of Italian, in which *a*-marking is excluded from the left peripheral topic position in the core possible case of personal-pronoun-Topics (and not just with lexical noun phrases, or in the clause internal direct object position as an instance of DOM); northern varieties are, in this respect, a kind of mirror image of southern varieties. Be as it may, the proper description of the phenomenon for standard Italian (corresponding to central-northern varieties) is then that *a*-marking of left peripheral topics with a lexical noun phrase is marginal, *a*-marking of left peripheral topics that are personal pronouns, especially first and second person ones, is perfectly acceptable in fact required. It would then seem that *a*-marking of lexical left peripheral topics is an extension of the standard option at work for first and second personal pronouns.

2.1 Only topic, never focus

In concluding this descriptive section, it should also be noted that *a*-marking is indeed an option that solely concerns topics. Consider in this respect the very clear contrasts in (10):

(10) a. *TE assumeranno __ (non Maria)*
YOU they will hire (not Maria)
b. **A TE assumeranno __ (non Maria)*
TO YOU the will hire
c. *TE questi argomenti convincono (non certo me)*
YOU these arguments convince (not me for sure*)*
d. **A TE questi argomenti convincono (non certo me)*
TO YOU these arguments convince (not me for sure)
e. *A te, questi argomenti non ti hanno mai convinto*
to you, these arguments you-CL have never convinced

(10)b (with a non-psych verb) in which the contrastive/corrective fronted focus is introduced by prepostion *a* contrasts with (10)a in which there is no such preposition, similarly (10)d (with a psych-verb) contrasts with (10)c; (10)b and (10)d are just ungrammatical for all speakers of standard (non southern) Italian, also those who tend to accept *a*-Topics with object Experiencers, as in (2)a; (10)d contrasts in turn with the perfect status of (10)e, with a second person pronominal *a*-Topic.

2.2 Same distribution and interpretive possibilities as simple left peripheral non-*a*-marked topics

As for the distribution of *a*-Topics, the examples in (11) indicate that the *a*-marker can be associated with the different Topic positions of the Italian Left Periphery, above and below Focus (hence possibly different types of topics, along the lines of Bianchi and Frascarelli 2010, Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl 2007, appear to be compatible with *a*-marking).

(11) a. *Al bambino, LA MAMMA, (con la giacca) lo vestirà*
to-the kid, THE MUM (with the jacket) him-CL will dress
b. *(con la giacca), LA MAMMA, al bambino lo vestirà*
(with the jacket) THE MUM, to-the kid, him-CL will dress

Long distance *a*-Topics are also possible:

(12) *Al bambino la ragazza pensa che la mamma lo vestirà con la giacca*
to the kid the girl thinks that the mother him-CL will dress with the jacket

Since a crucial property of an *a*-Topic is that of being associated with a direct object, it follows that there can be just one *a*-Topic per clause/per verb. Hence,

there cannot be iteration of *a*-Topics even in a multiple topic language like Italian (Rizzi 1997).

Also from the point of view of their possible coreference possibilities, *a*-Topics behave like simple non *a*-marked topics. As observed by Calabrese (1986) a left dislocated Topic cannot easily co-refer with a null *pro* subject of the clause following it. This is illustrated by the following Calabres's example:

(13) *Poiché a Mario$_j$, Carla$_i$ gli ha dato un bacio, pro$_{i/*j}$ è felice*
since to Mario Carla gave a kiss, (she) pro is happy
(Calabrese 1986: 32, example 28)

An *a*-Topic, has the same interpretive possibilities as a left dislocated topic not introduced by preposition *a*. Consider (14) in this respect, with the same structure as (13) above:

(14) a. *Poiché Mario$_j$/lui$_j$, Carla$_i$ l'ha convinto, pro$_{i/*?j}$ è felice*
since Mario, Carla him-cl has convinced, (she) *pro* is happy
b. *Poiché a Mario$_j$/a lui$_j$, Carla$_i$ l'ha convinto, pro$_{i/*?j}$ è felice*
since to Mario, Carla him-cl has convinced, (she) *pro* is happy

Dative experiencers of the *piacere* class behave as subjects, in fact as so-called Quirky subjects (Belletti & Rizzi 1988). They have a number of subject-like properties. Among these properties, we find that, as noted again by Calabrese (1986), they can co-refer with a silent null subject *pro* in the following clause. The examples in (15) illustrate this possibility:

(15) a. *Poiché a Gianni$_i$ piace Maria $_j$, pro$_{i/*j}$ va sempre nel bar dove si sono conosciuti*
Since (to) Gianni likes Maria, (he) *pro* always goes to the bar where they first met
b. *Poiché ad Andrea$_i$ interessa l'iconografia, pro$_i$ abbandonerà con piacere la linguistica*
since Andrea is interested in iconography, (he) *pro* will abandon linguistics with pleasure (Calabrese 1986: 28, ex. 10)
c. *Quando a Lori$_i$ è venuta voglia di gelato, pro$_i$ si è messa a tremare*
when Lori got the urge to eat an ice cream, (she) *pro* began to tremble
(Calabrese 1986: 28, ex. 11)

Therefore, an *a*-Topic does not behave as a dative experiencer. This interpretive fact is consistent with the Case property already noted: an *a*-Topic is not a dative.

Having established some basic distributional properties of *a*-Topics and (some of) their interpretive possibilities, in the following section some salient features of their discourse value will be highlighted. In the analysis that will be sketched out the somewhat privileged status of Experiencers as the most felicitous *a*-Topics (even when lexical) as well as the privileged status of first and second person pronouns as the best instances of *a*-marked Topics will find a natural *raison d'être*.

3 On the nature of left peripheral *a*-Topics

I would like to entertain the hypothesis that *a*-Topics express some psychological affectedness/involvement of the object in the action/feeling/overall event expressed by the verb. This involvement may also result in the expression of a certain amount of "empathy", in the sense of Kuno and Kaburaki (1977) and subsequent work. More specifically, according to this idea, *a*-Topics are psychologically affected/involved objects that express an empathic point of view; this is done by means of use of the overt marker *a*.[4] If a psychologically affected empathic point of view is expressed, it is not surprising that *a*-marking of topics be a property of the left periphery, as is generally the case for properties characteristically connected with the discourse context: the closest area at the interface with the contextual discourse is precisely the left periphery of the clause (Rizzi 1997 and much subsequent work on the syntactic cartography of this area of the clause). Quoting Kuno and Kaburaki (1977):

(16) "Empathy is the speaker's identification (which may vary in degree) with a person/thing that participates in the event or state that he describes in a sentence."

(Kuno and Kaburaki 1977:3)

The difference between a simple topic and an *a*-Topic, would then be that the latter involves an empathic point of view.[5] Hence not just a topic, with the specificity and giveness that the topic interpretation carries along, but a topic with respect to which the speaker feels a certain empathy.

4 In Italian *a* is the same preposition utilized to express a dative experiencer, a goal and also a benefactive, the additional argument of a transitive action (as in e.g. ho letto una storia ai bambini/ *I have read a story to the children*). The benefactive interpretation expresses a similar type of affectedness/involvement as the one outlined in the text for *a*-Topics.

5 Thanks to V. Bianchi for suggesting a possible relation with "empathy" in these cases.

To the extent that this is a good enough approximation to an appropriate characterization of some crucial aspect of the interpretation of *a*-Topics, two of the distributional properties singled out in the previous descriptive sections may find a natural account: i. Object Experiencers are the most preferred *a*-Topics in standard Italian probably because an Experiencer is, by definition, psychologically affected/involved by the event described by the verb; ii. first and second person pronouns are the most likely *a*-Topics as first and second person pronouns directly participate in the speech event and express the point of view of the speaker/hearer (Speas & Tenny 2003). In this case, it is an empathic point of view, according to the characterization above (Sigürdhsson 2004, Bianchi 2006 for the role of the feature person in the left periphery of the clause).[6]

Some recent results from acquisition, presented in the following section, lend support to a characterization along these lines.

3.1 Some reflections from acquisition

Recent experimental results presented in Belletti & Manetti (2017) on the elicited production of overt direct object topics by Italian speaking young children (4;1 to 5;11) have revealed a significant use of *a*-marking of topics in their ClLD structures. Indeed, children's vast majority of the produced ClLDs (88% of the cases) had the left dislocated object realized as an *a*-Topic rather than as a simple non-*a*-marked topic (12% of the cases). Since the tested children were all speakers of Tuscan varieties of Italian, such marking cannot be assimilated to a manifestation of DOM of the southern variety type.

A further crucial feature of children's productions in the elicitation experiment is that *a*-marking is limited to object topics 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. The following example of a sentences produced by one child in the elicitation experiment presented in the reference quoted, offers a kind of natural minimal pair: the pre-posed object topic in the answer in (17)A is marked with *a* in the second sentence of the child's answer in which it is left dislocated, but it is not marked by *a* in the first sentence of the same answer in which it is realized in the object position. The first sentence of the child's answer is expressed in the form of a simple SVO declarative clause with no ClLD:

6 In the case of first person *a*-Topics the empathy reaches in a sense its highest degree, given the coincidence between the speaker and the *a*-Topic.

(17) Q: *Che cosa succede ai miei amici, il pinguino e la mucca?*
what happens to my friends, the pinguin and the cow
A: *La giraffa sta leccando* ***la mucca****, e il coniglio* ***al pinguino***
the giraffe is licking the cow and the rabbit to the penguin it-CL
lo sta grattando
is scratching

(Omar, 5 y.o.)

Hence, children's *a*-marking of topics is a property of the left periphery much as is the case in adult standard Italian and it is not the manifestation of DOM (as seen in e.g. Spanish).

We have seen in section 2 that *a*-marking of topics is characteristically realized with Experiencer objects in adult standard Italian (when the topic is a lexical noun phrase). However, preliminary results have indicated that adult speakers of Italian who have been asked to judge the ClLD sentences produced by children containing the pre-posed *a*-Topics tended to find them relatively acceptable, irrespective of the thematic interpretation of the object, which was never a psychological Experiencer in the experimental stimuli. Further results from a larger adult population are currently being collected. It is natural to speculate that in their productions young children have somewhat overextended the possibility of a-marking of pre-posed object topics, also available in standard Italian to a certain degree, as described in the previous section. And such an extension is relatively accepted by adult speakers in spite of the fact that non-Experiencer *a*-Topics are only acceptable with first and second person pronouns in the adult language.

As indicated in (17), in the experimental setting of Belletti and Manetti (2017), children answered patient oriented questions of the type "what happens to X?". These patient-oriented questions aimed at favoring the production by children of an overt left dislocated object topic (and they indeed succeeded in this aim). The questions always referred to a situation that was described to the children by the experimenter with the help of pictures illustrating some animal (e.g. a giraffe and a rabbit, the subjects/agents) performing an action (wash, dry ...) over another animal (e.g. a cow and a penguin, the objects/patients) and ending with the question, e.g. "What happens to my friends the penguin and the cow?". It is reasonable to think that children, who actively participated in this type of game setting, tended to identify themselves with the pre-posed left dislocated topic (the patient of the described event), or that they felt involved in the event that affected it. Thus, children may have found themselves in a situation in which the expression of an empathic point of view was particularly natural for them. In other words, the experimental setting appears to have created a situation in which the expression

of the topic in the form of an *a*-Topic was particularly appropriate. As discussed in detail in Belletti and Manetti (2017) use of the *a*-Topic also allowed children to cope with a ClLD in which the object A'-dependency between the left dislocated topic and the clitic in the following sentence had to be established across an intervening lexical subject, an intervention situation that is known to be hard for children to properly master at that age (along the lines of Friedmann, Belletti, Rizzi 2009; Manetti et al. 2016). This aspect of the children's use of *a*-Topics in the described experiments, although crucial in other respects, is not relevant to the present discussion. For all details concerning both the experimental design and the articulated results the reader is referred to the reference quoted.

Here the following considerations should be highlighted: the frequent use of *a*-Topics in children's productions was somewhat unexpected since the phenomenon is rather limited in adult standard Italian, as seen in the previous sections. At the same time, children's productions do not sound so deviant to the adult Italian speakers' ear, as was also confirmed by the (preliminary results on) judgments provided by adults on the children's productions mentioned above. Hence, once again, also viewed from this angle, children appear to have adopted a possibility available in standard Italian, and to have overextended it (Belletti 2017). They have done so in two respects: they have *a*-marked direct objects that were not Experiencers and they have *a*-marked direct objects that were always lexical noun phrases (as opposed to being first or second person pronouns). Children's productions are reminiscent of the Spanish examples quoted in (7) and (8) from Leonetti (2004); in those Spanish examples (obligatory) *a*-marking of left dislocated objects was dissociated by their (optional) *a*-marking in the direct object position, as an instance of DOM. Also in those cases, as underscored by Leonetti (2004), *a*-marking can be primarily seen as a property of the left periphery associated with the topicality of the direct object. We have hypothesized that psychological affectedness and empathy can be added as features linked to *a*-marking. Furthermore, Spanish seems to have gone one step further compared to child-Italian: whereas *a*-marking of the left peripheral topic is favored in Italian speaking children's productions (also for the locality reasons hinted at above), it is not obligatory (12% of children's CLLDs contain a simple non-*a*-marked Topic) contrary to Spanish; and *a*-marking of the direct object is never an option when it remains in sentence internal position, as is instead the case in the Spanish examples in (7).

As seen in (17), in the experimental setting of Belletti and Manetti (2017), children answered patient oriented questions of the type "what happened to my friends, X and Y?". The question always contained a dative Experiencer. It cannot be excluded that this also contributed to somehow prime the use of *a*-marking of the topic in the children's answers. However, it is a fact that the left dislocated object topic was treated as a direct object by children and not as a dative as shown

by the fact the resumptive clitic in the following clause was systematically an accusative clitic.[7] In contrast to the children, in the first informal pilot grammaticality judgment task mentioned above, the Italian speaking adults interviewed had been given no context for the expression of their judgment; in particular there was no question-answer setting; hence there was no "primed" a-dative Experiencer. Nevertheless, they did not generally rule out the children's ClLDs containing the *a*-Topics. Again this confirms that the *a*-marker has an autonomous status in the Left periphery of standard Italian and that an a-Experiencer argument does not need to be present in the immediate context to (more or less directly) license it. Overall, the acquisition data reviewed in this section, combined with the adults' reactions to them support the view that *a*-marking is a Left Peripheral phenomenon in standard Italian, characteristically affecting pre-posed object topics.

3.2 Why only objects

But why is it that only objects can be *a*-Topics? In this section we offer some speculative considerations relevant to this question.

One issue is: Why couldn't a PP argument also be an *a*-Topic? Since PPs can be clitic left dislocated as illustrated in (18), one should wonder why (18)a is possible but (18)b is not; this would be parallel to the (marginal according to the description above) possibility of the left dislocated object as an *a*-Topic in (18)c as compared to the simple topic in (18)d:

(18) a. *Con Gianni, ci parlo domani*
with Gianni, (I) with him-CL will speak tomorrow
'With Gianni I will speak tomorrow'
b. **A con Gianni, ci parlo domani*
to with Gianni, (I) with him-CL will speak tomorrow
c. *A Maria, non la convince nessuno*
to Maria, nobody her-CL convince
d. *Maria, non la convince nessuno*
Maria, nobody her-CL convince
'Maria, nobody convinces her'

7 The clitic was (correctly) a dative clitic only if the verb of the sentence was realized by children with a periphrastic expression requiring a dative goal, as in "dare un bacio a . /give a kiss to..." instead of "baciare/kiss". In many cases the verb of the sentence was realized as a simple transitive verb requiring an accusative object, which the children correctly realized through use of an accusative resumptive clitic in the sentence following the *a*-Topic.

The contrast between (18)a and (18)b in a sense already contains the answer to the question: a PP cannot be or be introduced as the complement of a further preposition. Whatever the precise characterization of this constraint turns out to be in terms of its expression in the clause structure (e.g. along the lines of an approach à la Kayne 2004), the described major violation is clearly responsible for the complete impossibility of (18)b.[8]

Direct objects are not introduced by a preposition, hence no analogous problem arises for them in this respect: a DP can be introduced by preposition *a* with no problem, as indicated by the possibility of (18)c, and, more generally, the existence of datives introduced by *a*. The following discourse related property of direct objects can also be observed. Characteristically, direct objects constitute the focus of new information in a clause containing a transitive verb: they either express the narrow focus, or, alternatively, they are part of the focus of new information expressed by an all-new clause. The two possibilities are illustrated by examples like (19)a and b respectively, uttered in the contexts indicated:

(19) (Context: *Chi hanno convinto*?/Whom have they convinced?)
   a. *Hanno convinto Maria*
      they have convinced Maria
   b. (Context: *Che cosa è successo*?/ What happened?)
      Hanno convinto Maria
      they have convinced Maria

It is tempting to suggest that *a*-marking on an overtly realized object is a way to mark it when it is not the focus or part of the focus. In other words, objects are(/can be) marked through *a*- when they are topics (cf. Leonetti 2004 quoted above on the relation between *a*-marking and topicality).

When an object is mentioned in the previous context and hence qualifies as a topic, it is normally expressed by a pronoun. Consider the simple discourse exchange in (20):

(20) (Context: *Che cosa è successo a Maria*?/What happened to Maria?)
   L'hanno convinta
   they her-CL have convinced

8 So called "complex prepositions" are a different case. They are typically formed by an adverbial element + a (light) preposition (*a/to, di/of, da/from* in Italian), e.g. *vicino a/next to*, *sopra di/above of, lontano da/far from*, etc. (see Rizzi 1988 for systematic description).

Normally in a question-answer situation like (20), the topic (*Maria*) is not repeated in the answer, where it remains silent. However, if more than one object is present in the relevant context, the left dislocated topic is expressed; this is in fact the only way to solve the contrast, as in e.g. the contrastive topic situation in (21).[9]

(21) (Context: *Che cosa succede a Gianni e Maria*?/What happens to Gianni and Maria?)
(a) Gianni lo assumono e (a) Maria la promuovono
(to) Gianni him-CL they hire and (to) Maria her-CL they promote
'They will hire Gianni and they will promote Maria'

In these cases the topic can be expressed in the form of an *a*-Topic, with the described constraints holding in standard Italian, i.e preference for Experiencers when the object is a lexical noun phrase and in a more general fashion if it is a first or second person pronoun.

What about a subject DP? Subjects cannot be *a*-marked, even if they are Experiencers, as in (22):

(22) **A Maria teme me*
to Maria fears me

(22) is totally ungrammatical in standard Italian under any condition. A way to characterize the clear impossibility of (22) may be the following: although the subject of the psych-verb *fear* can be considered psychologically affected by her/his fear, *a*-marking reduces this noun phrase to a Quirky subject, making the *a*-Topic analysis unavailable. If the *a*-marked DP is a Quirky subject introduced by preposition *a*, this means that it is analyzed as a dative, hence the verb is analyzed in turn as a verb of the *piacere/like* class in Italian, whose object is nominative. This amounts to claiming that *a*-marking of the DP subject in a preverbal position leads to a Quirky subject analysis of this DP, hence it must be clause internal and fill (the relevant) subject position.[10]

This excludes the alternative possible analysis of the subject as a left peripheral *a*-Topic, with a resumptive null *pro* in the following clause. In the latter analysis *pro* would be the equivalent of the resumptive object clitic present when the

9 Note that the contrastive topic situation is precisely the discourse condition of the acquisition experiment described in section 3.1 and indeed the object topics were overtly expressed in the answers provided by the children, as discussed.

10 See Cardinaletti (2004), Rizzi and Shlonsky (2007), Bianchi and Chesi (2014) for considerations and proposals on different properties of subject positions in the clause structure (within TP).

a-Topic is the object.[11] Essentially, the analysis in (23)a is excluded. This contrasts with the possibility of (23)b, the analysis of a ClLD with an object *a*-Topic:

(23) a. **A Maria*$_i$, *pro*$_i$ *teme me*
to Maria fears me
b. *A Maria*$_i$, *la*$_i$ *convinceranno presto*
to Maria, (they) her-CL will convince soon

Subjects are distinct from topics (Calabrese 1986). Subjects are the argument about which the sentence predicates a property (Rizzi 2005, this volume, Reinhart 1981). From the discourse point of view, there is an *aboutness* relation between the subject and the following clause, which is close to the one between a topic and the following clause. Subjects are not necessarily also topics, though: They need not be given in the previous context in the same way as topics. This, however, does not exclude the possibility for a subject to also be a topic, given appropriate discourse conditions (cf. Belletti & Manetti 2017 for relevant discussion). For instance, in the discourse fragment in (24), the subject is also a topic. (24)a answers the question and could in principle be analyzed as in (24)b:

(24) Q: *Che cosa temono Gianni e Maria*?
What do Gianni and Maria fear?
A:
a. *Gianni teme il terremoto e Maria teme il caldo*
Gianni fears the earthquake and Maria fears the heath
b. *Gianni*$_i$, *pro*$_i$ *teme il terremoto e Maria*$_j$, *pro*$_j$ *teme il caldo*
Gianni pro fears the earthquake and Maria pro fears the heath

If our reasoning concerning the impossibility of (23)a is on the right track, it suggests that the analysis in (24)b is in fact not selected for an *a*-DP subject; an *a*-DP subject is rather analyzed as the argument about which the sentence predicates a property even when it is also a discourse topic. Hence, from the point of view of *a*-marking, a subject tolerates the marker only if it can be interpreted as a dative Experiencer, i.e. as a Quirky subject.[12]

11 There are no overt resumptive subject clitics in null subject Italian.

12 Thus, *a*-marking is just excluded in cases in which marking the subject with *a* is incompatible with its thematic interpretation, i.e. when it is not an Experiencer (e.g.: **A Gianni legge il libro*/To Gianni reads the book). In this situation a possible different analysis of the structure (in which the *a*-DP is a dative in subject position, with the verb reanalyzed as belonging to the *piacere/like* class and *a* as the marker of dative) is not available.

A subject does not tolerate *a*-marking if it can only be analyzed as a left peripheral topic. This is confirmed by the fact that in a multiple topics situation in which both subject and object are topics, to the extent that *a*-marking is available it necessarily goes on the object:

(25) a. *Gianni a Francesco l'ha convinto, Piero a Filippo l'ha deluso*
Gianni to Francesco him-CL has convinced, Piero to Filippo him-CL has deceived
b. *a Francesco Gianni l'ha convinto, a Filippo Piero l'ha deluso*
to Francesco Gianni him-CL has convinced, to Filippo Piero him-CL has deceived

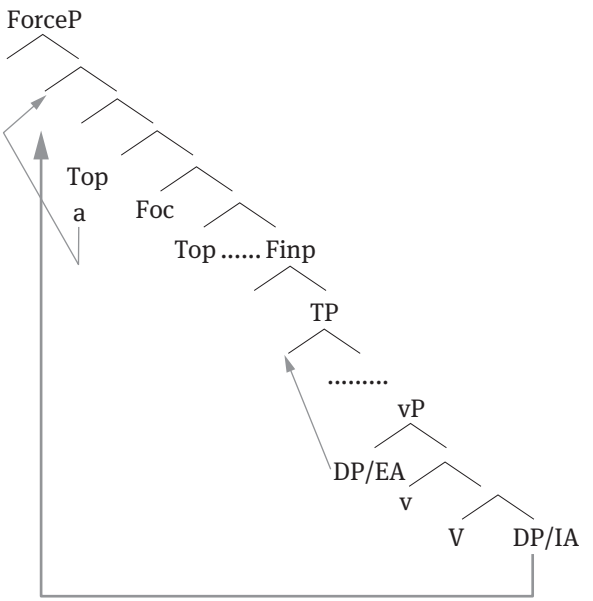
Gianni and *Piero* are interpreted as the subject in both (25)a and b . With the order in (25)b, *Gianni* and *Piero* could be analyzed as filling a clause internal subject position. However, this is not the case in (25)a, where both the DPs and the a-DPs are necessarily pre-posed into the left periphery. Thus, (25)a is particularly relevant for our discussion as in this sentence both *Gianni* and *Piero* unambiguously occupy a high topic position in the left periphery, which is above the one of the left dislocated *a*-Topic in an iterated multiple topic construction. As noted, the only interpretation of the sentence (25)a is one in which *Gianni* and *Piero* are the subject of the respective following clause; they cannot be interpreted as the object, with *a Francesco* and *a Filippo* consequently interpreted as the subject. This confirms that that *a*-marking is indeed generally excluded for subjects in the left periphery. As discussed, *a*-marking of subjects is only limited to subject Experiencers in a clause internal subject position, in which *a*-marking is in fact dative marking (of a Quirky subject). Taken together (25)a, b indicate the impossibility of *a*-marking a subject in a left peripheral topic position, clearly external to TP. So, when there is *a*-marking with a subject, it is a clause internal Quirky subject.

The conclusion is that, indeed, *a*-marking of topics only concerns objects, when they are topics.[13] As topics are primarily expressed in the left periphery,

13 The only instances of *a*-marking of a subject we are aware of are presented in Manzini and Savoia (2005, examples 256), quoting Rohlfs (1969). The relevant cases are all cases of long distance wh-extraction of an embedded subject, in languages with systematic DOM. See Chomky (1981), Kiss (1987), quoted by Manzini and Savoia in this respect for comparable data in English and Hungarian (in which accusative appears on a long-distant moved subject). The crucial property common to these cases is the long distance extraction process, and, related to that, the wh- nature of the subject. *a*-Marking thus appears to be a feature of long wh-extraction. Although extremely interesting and worth further investigation, this type of *a*-marking has (at least in part) a different nature from the one we have been investigating: in the case of *a*-Topics, the *a*-marker typically appears on a

a-marking is a left peripheral phenomenon in its core manifestation, as discussed in section 2. This is the case in standard Italian, as we have described it here. The following representation schematically illustrates the derivation of an *a*-Topic object moved to the Topic position in the articulated left periphery (Rizzi 1997, Rizzi and Bocci 2016 for recent developments) from its merge position as the Internal Argument/IA of the verb. In (26) the further movement of the preposition into a higher (Case?) head is also illustrated as a way to express the pre- positional order of the *a*-marker, which precedes the topic (Kayne 2004); movement of the DP External Argument/EA is also indicated in (26):

(26)



We conclude this section with a further speculative consideration, which deals with the phenomenon of *a*-marking in perspective. In section 3.1 we interpreted children's use of *a*-Topics as an extension of the *a*-marking that is possible to a much more limited extent in present day adult standard Italian. It is tempting to suggest that this behavior by children may indicate a step toward a possible syntactic change, which may eventually lead to a wider use of *a*-marking and

locally pre-posed topic. We have seen that the *a*-marker can also appear on a long distance extracted topic (example 12), but the point is that an *a*-marked topic need not have undergone long-distance movement, in contrast with the *a*-marked wh-extracted subjects quoted by Manzini & Savoia (2005). The issue is left open for future research. See Manzini and Savoia (2005) for a first proposal.

then possibly to the introduction of DOM in standard Italian.[14] A possible way to express this idea could be the following. If, as is proposed in various analyses (Belletti 2004, Jayaseelan 2001, Tsai 2015), the low part of the clause contains a vP-periphery with discourse related positions similar to those found in the clause external left periphery, it is tempting to suggest that also the low topic position could be endowed with the *a*-marker. If this is the case, a clause internal direct object could be *a*-marked in the low vP-periphery. This might express the core property of the DOM phenomenon: *a*-marking of direct objects in their topic interpretation (hence, affected, typically human/animate and specific). The syntax of this (clause internal) *a*-marking would be the same as that of the clause external one, but the process would occur lower down in the structure, as sketched out in (27):[15]

14 Thanks to Ian Roberts for pointing out this possibility, in line with Lightfoot's (1999) approach to syntactic change as a process induced by innovative children's behaviors. The described experimental findings may have spotted a change on its way. See also Berretta (1989) for comparable considerations on a possible under way development of DOM in standard Italian. It is a fact that the phenomenon of *a*-marking described here already shares a number of features with classical DOM, often expressed through scales in the relevant literature, e.g. animacy, person, specificity (Bossong (1991), Leonetti (2008), Aissen (2003), a.o.).

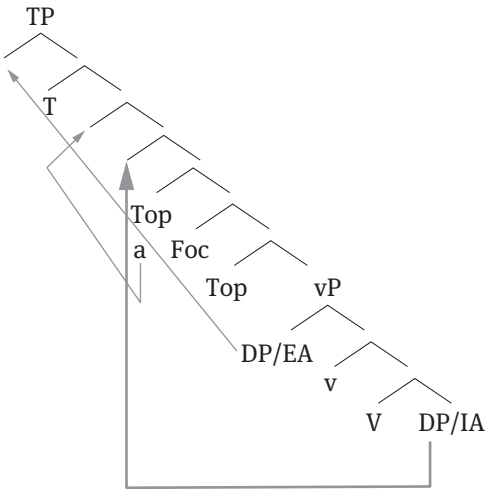
15 I assume that movement of the DP/IA over the DP/EA (either in Spec-vP or in Spec-TP) in both (26) and (27) does not yield a violation of (featural) Relativized Minimality/fRM as the target position of the direct object is precisely endowed with the Topic feature. On the featural interpretation of the locality principle RM, Starke (2001), Rizzi (2004); for its relevance in acquisition, also mentioned in section 3.1, Friedmann, Belletti, Rizzi (2009) and much subsequent literature. See also Snyder & Hyams (2015) for related considerations on the development of passive in children.

Note that cases like the following in i. and ii. can be analyzed as instances of right peripheral *a*-Topics exploiting the low vP-periphery. Interestingly, also in these cases, much like in the left-peripheral ones, (first and second) personal pronouns require *a*-marking semi-obligatorily, whereas lexical *a*-marked low topics remain rather marginal, possibly more so than the left peripheral ones, even when they correspond to object experiencers:

(i) *Non mi si inganna, a me/?*me*
one does not me-CL cheat, to me/me
(ii) *L'abbiamo convinto, Gianni/??a Gianni*
we have convinced him-CL, Gianni/to Gianni

Possibly, overall *a*-marking of personal pronouns may be at a more advanced stage of grammaticalization. This is an interesting question, in need of further elaboration. Thanks to a reviewer for pointing out the comparison with right topics.

(27)



We leave the hypothesis, currently under investigation, at this speculative level, as a worth exploring route of a possible (ongoing) language change.[16]

4 Concluding remarks

In this article a characterization of the possibility of *a*-marking object topics in standard (non-southern) Italian has been proposed. The possibility is somewhat marginal for adult speakers of Italian, as it depends on the thematic interpretation of the object and on its lexical or pronominal nature; in contrast, it appears to be widely adopted by young Italian speaking children, as has emerged under eliciting experimental conditions. Despite this difference, *a*-marking for both children and adults is a process only involving direct objects when they are topics (and not focus or part it) and fill a topic position in the Italian left periphery. We have speculated that children may be overextending the recourse to *a*-Topics compared to adults and that this may be the symptom of a possible linguistic

16 The change could then go even further, making the relation with the topic interpretation (correlating with animacy, specificity....) less strict. This would give rise to a more widespread use of *a*-marking of direct objects. This is a possible way toward a characterization of the current situation of *a*-marking in Spanish, and of *o*-marking of objects in Japanese (as described by Leonetti 2004 and related literature quoted therein). It is also possible that, in the described situation of grammaticalization, the *a*-marker may end up being located lower down in the structure, ultimately realizing (one of) the functional small *v* head(s). See Belletti (2004) for a proposal relating the latter option to an account of the possible VSO order of Spanish - an order that is not equally allowed in standard Italian. See Belletti (forthcoming) for further elaboration of this point.

change under way eventually leading to a more extended use of differentially marking direct objects in standard Italian.

Acknowledgments: The research presented here was funded in part by the European Research Council/ERC Advanced Grant 340297 SynCart – "Syntactic cartography and locality in adult grammars and language acquisition" which is here acknowledged.

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