

## Early merge in impersonal *si* constructions: how semantics determines agreement.

**Introduction.** The two Italian impersonal *si* constructions in (1a) and (1b) have always been considered semantically equivalent. The two differ in that (1a) exhibits a Nominative object agreeing with the verb, whereas (1b) shows a 3rd person default ending agreeing with an Accusative object. It is a common assumption that the alternation between (1a) and (1b) is due to optionality (see Belletti 1982, Burzio 1986, Manzini 1986, Cinque 1988, and Dobrovie-Sorin 1998 for various proposals on such optionality).

In this paper, I show that (1a) and (1b) are not semantically equivalent: (1a) denotes an accomplishment and (1b) denotes an activity predicate (Vendler 1967, Dowty 1979). Assuming that verb semantics is reflected in the syntactic structure of a VP, I claim that the semantic difference between (1a) and (1b) is responsible for their different agreement patterns. Moreover, given the assumption that syntax reflects semantics, I argue that (1a) and (1b) also have a different syntactic structure.

**Agreement in telicity.** Applying Dowty's (1979) tests for accomplishment vs. activity predicates to the examples in (1), we get the following results:

- (1a) may take an *in*-phrase but not a *for*-phrase, which is typical of accomplishments, while (1b) presents the reverse situation, which characterizes activities (2)
- Only (1a) may appear as a complement of the verb *finire* (to finish), which characterizes accomplishments (3)
- The adverb *quasi* (almost) triggers different entailments on (1a) and (1b): *quasi*-(1a) may mean both that the event in (1a) has not taken place or that it has not been completed (as happens with accomplishments), whereas *quasi*-(1b) entails that the event has not taken place (as happens with activities)
- (1a) exhibits scope-ambiguity with *for*-phrases: the event may be interpreted both as a repetitive event or as a result-state event, as with accomplishments. (1b) does not show this ambiguity.

These tests clearly show that we are not dealing with two semantically equivalent constructions, and that (1a) denotes an accomplishment while (1b) denotes an activity.

**The analysis.** Following Travis (1994, in prep.) among others, I assume that accomplishments have a different syntactic structure than activities. In particular, the structure of an accomplishment verb contains an inner aspectual projection, call it AspP(4). Activities, such as (1b), lack this projection (5). Building on Travis (1994) and Chen (1995), I argue that *si* in accomplishment constructions of the (1a) type is merged in the specifier of the AspP projection, and there it receives a theta-role. In other words, the Agent DP is merged in AspP and does not need to wait until *v* is merged (early-merge). *Si* is in fact an Agent, as it resists the insertion of a *by*-phrase, which is instead possible with passives. The derivation of (1a) is as follows: the DP object is merged with the verb. The inner Asp head is merged with the VP and *si* is merged in the specifier of AspP, where it gets its theta-role. *v* is then merged with AspP, and does not assign the Agent theta-role because such a role has been assigned earlier, in Spec, AspP. *v* needs to have its uninterpretable phi-features valued (Chomsky 1999). *Si* is phi-complete (Cinque 1988, Manzini 1986). Locality constraints being expressed in terms of 'closer c-command', *si* intervenes between *v* and the DP object. *Si* thus Agrees with *v* and gets Accusative. The DP object stays without Case. When T is merged, it Matches and Agrees with the DP object assigning it Nominative Case (6).

The lack of the Asp projection in the activity construction (1b) forces *si* to be merged in Spec, *v*: this results in a lack of *si* intervention and in the assignment of Accusative to the DP object (7).

On this view, *si* may be merged in a position lower than Spec, TP, and then raise to Spec, TP. Moreover *si*, being a clitic, displays the double nature as a head and a DP (Chomsky 1995). It follows that *si* may be merged in any available DP position. In other words, if there is a DP position available in Spec, AspP, *si* may be merged there. Otherwise, it needs to be merged in a higher position. Thus, the difference between (1a) and (1b) is caused by the different merging sites of *si*, which in turn are determined by the semantic-syntactic structure of the clauses.

- (1) a. Si leggono i giornali  
 impers. read-3rd pl the newspapers-masc pl Nom  
 ‘ People read newspapers’  
 b. Si legge (i) giornali  
 impers. reads-3rd sg the newspapers-masc pl Acc  
 ‘ People read newspapers’
- (2) a. Si sono letti i giornali in/ per un’ora  
 impers are read-pp pl the newspapers in/for an hour  
 ‘People have read the newspapers in/for an hour’  
 b. . Si è letto (i) giornali \*in/ per un’ora  
 impers. is-3rd sg read the newspapers in/ for an hour  
 ‘ People have read newspapers in/for an hour’
- (3) Si è finito di leggere i giornali/ \*di leggere giornali  
 impers is finished of to-read the newspapers of to-read newspapers  
 ‘People have finished reading the newspapers’
- (4) [<sub>VP</sub> ... [<sub>ASP</sub> ... [<sub>VP</sub> ... ]]] (5) [<sub>VP</sub> ... [<sub>VP</sub> ... ]]
- (6) [<sub>TP</sub> si<sub>j</sub>- leggono<sub>i</sub> [<sub>VP</sub> v [<sub>ASP</sub> t<sub>j</sub> [<sub>VP</sub> t<sub>i</sub> i giornali]]]]
- (7) [<sub>TP</sub> si<sub>j</sub>- legge<sub>i</sub> [<sub>VP</sub> t<sub>j</sub> v [<sub>VP</sub> t<sub>i</sub> i giornali]]]]

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