Uneconomical word order in Old Italian: semantics and Information Structure

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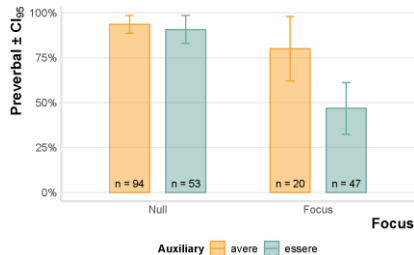andrea.matticchio@uni-goettingen.de

Word order freedom can be considered an uneconomical feature in a language. This is particularly striking if syntax provides multiple word order options that do not clearly correlate with semantic phenomena (such as scope-rigidity) or specific information structures. Old Italian seems to display this kind of syntactic optionality, at least as far as the position of DP arguments is concerned.

From the point of view of Semantics, Old Italian allows for scope configurations that are hardly available in Modern Italian, where "preverbal subjects tend not to reconstruct into the scope of a lower operator" (Bianchi and Chesi 2014). Fox (1995), Wurmbrand (2010) and other works connect the availability of covert operations to economy conditions: languages with more word order possibilities are expected to be scope-rigid, but Old Italian is a counterexample. Subjects can freely occur pre- or post-verbally; nonetheless, preverbal quantified subjects can reconstruct under negation, as in (1).

(1)   Ogni   uomo   che   sa   lettera   non   è   savio.   (*Novellino*)
          every   *man*   *that knows.3SG letter*   NEG   *is*   *wise*
          'Not every man who can read is wise.'

Although free word order is vastly attested among languages and cannot be considered an imperfection that language change tries to eliminate, Old Italian displays an intermediate degree of freedom between Latin and Modern Italian, suggesting that grammaticalization of some configurations was taking place. With a focus on the subject position, I will argue that some aspects of Old Italian grammar are already a glimpse of the stricter constraints of Modern Italian. For instance, non-focused subjects already prefer a preverbal position, as shown in the plot above ($z = -4.27$, $p < 0.05$). However, tendencies are not rules, and Old Italian still allows for free and creative word orders in other cases.

References: • Bianchi, V. & C. Chesi (2014). Subject islands, reconstruction, and the flow of computation. *Linguistic Inquiry* 45(4), 525–569. • Fox, D. (1995). Economy and scope. *Natural language semantics* 3(3), 283–341. • Wurmbrand, S. (2010). Reconstructing the A/A-bar Distinction in Reconstruction. *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics* 16, 245–254.