“moi, O, m’en fou” – topic drop in Swiss WhatsApp messages. A cross-linguistic study on French and Italian.

My talk aims to shed more light on verbal argument omission in the most wide-spread form of non-standard electronic writing - WhatsApp messages - in French and Italian. This phenomenon has been analyzed in the syntactic literature either as a truncated structure (see Haegeman (1997, 2013) for English and French diaries), or as an instance of topic drop (see Robert-Tissot (2015) for French text messages). The empirical study is based on the Swiss reference corpus of WhatsApp messages (cf. Stark et al. 2014), analyzed as to the syntactic constraints identified by Haegeman (i.e. 2013) and Robert-Tissot (2015).

Following Robert-Tissot (2015), I argue that verbal argument omission in French and Italian WhatsApp messages is a topic drop phenomenon. First evidence is given by parallel examples (see below) (1). Second, we find robust evidence for the omission of direct objects (2): 8% of direct objects in the Italian and 19% in the French messages. These are clearly cases of familiar topic drop, with given discourse referents being verbalized by zero (cf. Givón 1983), because they are D-linked.

Standard French is neither a pro drop language like Italian, nor a topic drop language like German. Nevertheless, in French WhatsApp messages, there are examples like (3), which shows subject drop.

Similar cases of subject omission have been studied by Haegeman (i.e. 2013) for English and French diaries. Haegeman has shown that the distribution of dropped subjects in diaries is not free, but is restricted to root environments in the strict sense (i.e. it is limited to main clauses without fronted arguments or wh-elements, but it can occur after adjuncts). Furthermore, expletive subjects are easily dropped in Haegeman’s data (cf. Haegeman 2013: 97). Given these syntactic regularities and the fact that “[t]here is no systematic object drop in the diary register”, Haegeman (2013: 97) proposes an analysis of subject drop in diaries in terms of a truncated structure without a CP-layer, called diary drop.

Subject drop in French text messages shows almost the same distribution as diary drop, but Robert-Tissot (2015) finds examples where subject elitics are dropped in the presence of a fronted verbal argument. As contrastive topics sit in a high position in the left periphery (cf. Frascarelli/Hinterhölzl 2007: 89), they cannot be present in a structure with a truncated CP-layer. Therefore, Robert-Tissot proposes an analysis for omitted referential arguments in these text message data in terms of (familiar) topic drop. The dropped arguments are familiar topics (cf. Frascarelli/Hinterhölzl 2007) moved to the left periphery, which leave an empty category in their base position, but cannot be realized overtly for the clitic nature of French topical personal pronouns (cf. Cardinaletti/Starke 1999, Robert-Tissot 2015: 260):

\[
[\text{ForceP \ AS-TopP } \text{moi,} \ [\text{Contr-TopP } [\text{FocP } [\text{Fam-TopP}^* [\text{FinP } [\text{TP mtn t mek sui [vP t b]]]]]]]\]
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In contrary to traditional text messages, the WhatsApp messages corpus offers, for the first time at a large-scale (about 6 mio tokens), sequences of messages in form of chats which show the previous context of the (dropped) arguments and thus allow to check for the D-linking properties of the omitted elements.
Examples:

(1) Fr.: moi, Ø, men, fou [...] me, Ø, REFL.1SG-this, not.care.PRS.1SG

(2) It.: quindi, domani, pro, Ø, vedo then, tomorrow, pro, Ø, see-PRS.1SG

(3) Fr.: Ø, dois, pro, Ø, partir [...] Ø, have.to.PRS.1SG, leave.INF

References:


Haegeman, Liliane (1997): “Register variation, truncation, and subject omission in English and in French”, English Language and Linguistics, 1, 233-270.


Stark, Elisabeth / Ueberwasser, Simone / Göhring, Anne (2014-). Corpus "What’s up, Switzerland?". University of Zurich. www.whatsup-switzerland.ch.