

Disjunction under single referent: voiding the ban on clitic coordination

Irene Amato (*University of Leipzig*) & Adrian Stegovec (*UConn*)

The inability of clitic pronouns to be coordinated is taken to be one of their defining properties (Kayne 1975; Cardinaletti & Starke 1994; i.a.), and is usually directly attributed to their deficient syntactic or prosodic status. In this talk we show, based on new data from Italian, Spanish, and Slovenian, that the coordination ban is not absolute: it can be voided with pronouns in a disjunction if the pronouns share a referent and one of their ϕ -features (e.g. gender) is contrasted. We thus argue that the coordination ban is actually tied to differences in size and interpretation between clitic pronouns and their strong pronoun counterparts.

The coordination ban. In languages like Italian, where pronouns have clitic and strong counterparts, clitic pronouns cannot be coordinated (1a), while strong pronouns can be (1b). We also see in (1) that this asymmetry is observed with both conjunction and disjunction.

- (1) a. *Lo e/o la chiamo. b. Chiamo lui e/o lei.
 him and/or her call.1SG call.1SG him and/or her
 ‘I call him and/or her.’ ‘I call him and/or her.’

This pattern appears to hold universally for languages with clitic and strong pronouns (see Cardinaletti & Starke 1994; we set aside weak pronouns in the abstract for the sake of space).

Voiding the ban. What has not been noted before is that disjunction of clitics becomes fully grammatical when the clitic pronouns share an antecedent, but are contrasted with respect to the value of some interpretable feature, such as gender. For instance, in the context of a competition where we do not yet know the identity and gender of the eventual winner, (2) can be felicitously uttered (the judgments come from a survey of 10 speakers).

- (2) Quando decidono chi e' il vincitore, lo o la chiamano sul palco.
 when decide.3PL who be.3SG the winner, him or her call.3PL on.the stage
 ‘When they decide who the winner is, they call him or her on the stage.’

In (2) the entire disjunction denotes a single individual (‘the winner’) and the pronouns do not require different referents (they can pick out the same person of unknown gender; there could also be a single competitor left after elimination of the other candidates). This becomes clearer if we replace clitics with strong pronouns, as in (3). Then, the interpretation can only be that there are two individuals, where only one of them can win.

- (3) Quando decidono chi e' il vincitore, chiamano lui o lei sul palco.
 when decide.3PL who be.3SG the winner, call.3PL him or her on.the stage
 ‘When they decide who the winner is (of two competitors), they call him or her...’

The singular referent interpretation in (2) is reflected in the impossibility of using a plural pronoun to refer back to the two pronouns, and the infelicity of continuations like *entrambi però riceveranno un premio* ‘both of them, though, will receive a prize’, or *in quanto campioni* ‘as champions’. In contrast, all of the above are felicitous in the case of (3).

Moreover, if a plural antecedent is established in the discourse, like with the conjunction in (4), clitic disjunction is highly degraded and strong pronouns must be used instead.

- (4) Quando Albano e Romina dovranno ritirare il premio,
 when Albano and Romina have.FUT.3PL pick.up the prize
 { ??lo o la } chiameranno { lui o lei } sul palco.
 him or her call.FUT.3PL him or her on.the stage

‘When A. and R. will have to pick up the prize, they will call him or her on the stage.’

We have so far identified the same pattern also in Spanish and Slovenian, so it is not limited to Italian or Romance. Additionally, disjunction of clitic pronouns similar to (2), but where number or person is contrasted, is also possible with the right interpretation (e.g. ‘the winner’ is an individual vs. a team, or the speaker’s vs. the addressee’s team). The only excluded pattern is disjunction of first/second person with third person. The relevant examples will be discussed in detail in the talk, but what is crucial is that in all the grammatical cases the pronouns in the disjunction count as having the same antecedent (cf. ‘the winner’ in (2)).

Proposal. Conjunction of pronouns has to result in the creation of a new plural discourse referent, which is only possible if the conjuncts are distinct referents in the first place. Disjunction, conversely, does not have to create a plural discourse referent (cf. ‘*The soprano_i or the alto_i will sing. She_i will perform Mozart*’; see e.g. Stone 1992, Simons 2000). But the singular referent reading of disjunction is crucially absent when two individuals are identified (cf. ‘*Jane_i or Maud_i will sing. #She_i will perform Mozart*’; Simons 2000). We propose that the distinct behavior of clitic and strong pronouns under disjunction follows from this.

Strong pronouns are semantically more rigid than clitics: they need human referents, cannot be bound variables, and need salient antecedents. This has been linked to extra structure absent in clitics (Cardinaletti & Starke 1994), which we identify as an *index head* (Patel-Grosz & Grosz 2017, Hanink 2018). The index head is what makes strong pronouns only pick out salient linguistic antecedents, and, we argue, marginal with disjunction under the singular referent reading (because disjunction of two pronouns equipped with index heads necessarily create plurality). In contrast, clitics consist of only interpretable ϕ -features (Déchaine & Wiltschko 2002). For this reason, they are semantically more flexible (their reference is achieved via semantic mapping rules, Tomioka 2003, Stegovec 2019). They may also pick out properties rather than specific individuals, which is what distinguishes DPs that allow the singular referent reading under disjunction from those that do not (Simons 2000). Hence, clitics can show up in such disjunctions, but not under conjunction because this needs distinct referents (i.e., indices) as the input to create a new plural discourse referent.

With disjunction of pronouns contrast is always involved, due to the focus-like semantics of disjunction (Simons 2000, Alonso-Ovalle 2006; i.a.): with strong pronouns the antecedents are contrasted, while with clitics the contrast is only between ϕ -feature values and antecedent must be the same for both pronouns. This is because the whole pronoun is focused with strong pronouns, including the index head, while only ϕ -features are focused with clitics, since they do not contain the index head, making the contrast of antecedents impossible. This is because focus can only scope over material that is present in the syntax.

Discussion. Our research also has implications for the relationship between the clitic/strong pronoun distinction and focus. Cardinaletti & Starke (1994) have shown that clitics may in fact be contrastively focused, although they do not identify the conditions under which it is a possibility. Our research suggests that this is possible only if the clitic’s ϕ -features are focused under disjunction, which is only possible when the clitics refer to the same referent or property. Our project also contributes to the debate on the nature of clitics. In particular, the possibility of clitic disjunction provides evidence against the Agree-based approach to cliticization (see Paparounas & Salzmann 2023, among others), which would require the presence of two coordinated probes on T, but only with disjunction under a single referent.