SUBJECT CLITIC / VERB INVERSION

IN NORTH EASTERN ITALIAN DIALECTS

Cecilia Poletto
University of Padova/ University of Venice

1. Introduction

The general aim of this paper is to show that a quite complicated mass of data, which at first sight appears contradictory, can be traced back to the interplay of a quite restricted set of principles and parameters. A comparative approach to the problems of language analysis gives us a direct insight into universal grammar, helping us to trace the limit between variation and constant syntactic features of natural languages.1

In particular we will try to provide an analysis of the distribution of the phenomenon known as subject clitic/verb inversion, present in a lot of Northern Italian Dialects as (a) illustrates:

(a) Quando vien-lo?
   When comes-he?

Inversion will turn out to be an instance of a principle that applies to interrogative sentences in all languages. In particular it will be shown that the structure of examples like (a) is exactly the same as that postulated for French cases of subject clitic/verb inversion as (b):

(b) Quand vient-il?
   When comes-he?

Three different dialects will be taken into consideration in section 2: Paduan, Venetian and Triestino, which share the same subject clitic system in assertive contexts but differ with regard to the way in which a main question is expressed. The differences noted will be traced back to the combination of a general principle about

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interrogative structures with a parametric choice regarding the syntactic head that can be marked as [+wh], namely [+interrogation] in root questions.

The examination of five cases of apparently exceptional behaviour of interrogative structures in section 3, will confirm some distinctions already noted in the literature as for instance, the asymmetry between ergative and unergative verbs, or the one between yes/no-questions vs. wh-questions. Many problems will be only mentioned but will serve as a starting point for further research or will be left open for closer examination, as they lie beyond the scope of this paper.

In order to explain the inversion phenomenon of the inflected verb with a subject clitic, I will make use of a recent theory proposed in Rizzi (1990) for interrogative sentences. Rizzi examines a well known puzzle of English grammar: subject auxiliary inversion in interrogative contexts.

(1) a. What did John eat?
   b. *What John ate (did eat)?
   c. I wonder what John ate
   d. *I wonder what did John eat

(1) illustrates the distribution of the inversion phenomenon: in (1a) an auxiliary verb appears in front of the subject NP John. If inversion does not apply in main contexts the sentence is ungrammatical, as in (1b). The situation is reversed in embedded questions: if inversion applies, the sentence is excluded, as (1c-d) show.

The distribution of interrogative inversion in (1) is reminiscent of the asymmetry between main and embedded contexts noted for verb second phenomena in other Germanic languages such as German and Mainland Scandinavian, in which the inflected verb is rigidly placed in second position only in matrix clauses. The contrast between matrix and embedded contexts is currently analyzed as movement of the inflected verb to the head of the CP projection, as in (2):

(2) a. Gestern hat Hans angerufen
   Yesterday has John telephoned
   b. 
   
   \[ \text{Spec} \quad \text{C}^o \quad \text{C}' \quad \text{IP} \quad \text{I}' \quad \text{I}^o \]
   \[ \text{Gestern} \quad \text{hat} \quad \text{Spec} \quad \text{Hans} \quad \text{VP} \quad \text{angerufen} \]

   In embedded contexts the inflected verb cannot move to C, because the position is already filled by a complementizer, hence it has to stay in Infl as in (3):
The contrast between (1a-b) and (1c-d) parallels the contrast between (2) and (3), and can be treated in the same way: in English main interrogatives the auxiliary moves to C, while in embedded questions it cannot, because the position is already filled by the complementizer. English differs from other Germanic languages because the movement of the inflected verb (which can only be an auxiliary or a modal verb) to C is restricted to interrogative contexts, and not obligatory in every main clause.

In order to capture this fact, Rizzi proposes that a wh-criterion is considered universal grammar. It states that a wh-operator and a wh-head must be in a Spec-head configuration at the relevant grammatical level which can be S-structure or LF, depending on the language:

(4) A. a wh-operator must be in a Spec-head configuration with a head marked [+wh]

B. a head marked [+wh] must be in a Spec-head configuration with a wh-operator

The principle in (4) guarantees that a wh-operator moves to SpecC and the head marked [+wh] moves to C in order to enter the relevant Spec-head configuration. In English main interrogatives the head marked [+wh] is Inflection, therefore the inflected auxiliary (which is in I) moves to C and the wh-item moves to SpecC. Both clauses of the wh-criterion are thus satisfied by the Spec-head configuration at the CP level be tween the wh-item and the inflected auxiliary.

In English, only auxiliary verbs can move to C in interrogative sentences, because only auxiliaries occupy Infl: main verbs never move to Infl (cf. Pollock (1989) for a detailed analysis and an explanation). Hence, they are never marked as [+wh].

In embedded contexts the head marked [+wh] is not Inflection, but C, through selection by the matrix verb. Hence only the wh-item needs to move to SpecC, and both clauses of the wh-criterion are satisfied.

The auxiliary does not move to C in embedded contexts. It need not because C already meets the wh-criterion. What is more, it must not because the movement would cover the selectional features in C, violating the projection principle, which
states that a feature generated at D structure cannot be cancelled.2 The asymmetry between main and embedded interrogatives results thus from the interplay between the wh-criterion and the projection principle. In section 2 we will see that a parameter regarding the head which can be marked with the feature [+wh] in root questions is necessary to explain the data of some Northern Italian Dialects.

The wh-criterion functions at S-structure in other European languages exactly as described for English. In French there is evidence that the head of IP moves to C only in main interrogative sentences (cf. Kayne (1972) and Rizzi and Roberts (1989)). The French construction known as Inversion can be analyzed as movement of I to C, plus the incorporation of a subject clitic from the subject position SpecIP into C:

(5) a. Quand est-il venu?
When is-he come?
b. Quand
    Spec
    CP
    C'
    IP
    Spec
    t1
    I'             
    t2
    VP

c. *Quand est-Jean venu?
When is John come?

In (5) the inflected verb moves to C to be in a Spec-head configuration with the wh-item quand, leaving the trace t2 in Infl.

The subject clitic moves from the subject position SpecI to C and incorporates into the inflected verb, leaving the trace t1 in SpecI.

In Rizzi and Roberts’ (1989) analysis this process of incorporation is necessary in order to satisfy the condition that every NP must be "visible" at S-structure. In French, contrary to what happens in English, the relevant configuration for Nominative case assignment is only Spec-head agreement. In other words the head of IP cannot assign Nominative through government from C, but only through Spec-head agreement from I.3 In root interrogative structures this configuration is destroyed by the movement of the inflected verb to C.

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2 Rizzi (1990) admits a strong version of the projection principle, for which every feature generated at D structure cannot be erased in the course of the derivation.
3 Roberts (1990) formulates the difference between English and French as a parameter on the assignment of Nominative which can apply through government or through Spec-head agreement: English exploits both possibilities while French permits only the second one.
This is the reason why (5c) is excluded: the Subject NP Jean does not receive Nominative from the verb est which has moved to C, as the relevant configuration of Spec-head agreement is not satisfied. In French root interrogatives the visibility principle must be met through another mechanism, namely incorporation of a subject clitic.

Complex inversion allows a subject NP to appear between the wh-item and the verb, as in (6a). In Rizzi and Roberts' analysis, the coalescence between the head C and the head I permits the creation of a new argumental CP-Specifier where the subject NP can receive case through Spec-head agreement with the head of Infl, as in (6b):

(6) a. Quand Jean est-il venu?
   When John is-he come?

   b.  
      \[ \text{Spec} \rightarrow \text{CP/IP} \]
      \[ \text{quand} \rightarrow \text{Spec} \rightarrow \text{CP/IP} \]
      \[ \text{Jean} \rightarrow \text{Spec} \rightarrow \text{C'/I'} \rightarrow \text{IP} \rightarrow \text{Spec} \rightarrow \text{I'} \rightarrow \text{VP} \]

In Complex Inversion the CP/IP has two Spec positions: one non-argumental and one argumental, the non-argumental Spec is occupied by the wh-item, the argumental Spec is occupied by the subject NP. Northern Italian Dialects also show inversion of the inflected verb and a subject clitic. This phenomenon is nevertheless different from the French one, because only a sentence like (5a) but not one like (6a) (but cf. Roberts (1990)), is grammatical. In the following presentation of the inversion conditions in some eastern varieties, we will assume that subject clitics in the Northern Italian Dialects are not true NPs as French subject clitics are, but heads adjoined to the head of Inflection, as proposed by Brandi and Cordin (1981) and (1989), and by Rizzi (1986). Updating their analysis we will assume that the structure of the verbal inflectional features can be split into two distinct syntactic heads: Tense, and Agreement (cfr. Pollock (1989)), which have both their own maximal projection. AgrP is higher than TP (as proposed by Belletti (1990)) in the syntactic structure of the sentence; subject clitics are adjoined to the head of the higher functional projection, AgrP, as in (7):
Northern Italian Dialects are pro drop languages like Standard Italian: as can be seen in (7), a pro occupies the subject position, SpecAgr.

The three varieties that we will examine share the same subject clitic system: they have only three subject clitics out of six persons: only second person singular, and third person singular and plural present subject clitics as in (8):

(8) a. Vegno
    (I) come
b. Te vien
    You come
c. El vien
    He comes
d. Vegnemo
    (We) come
e. Vegni
    (You+plur) come
f. I vien
    They come

We will assume that the mechanism for the licencing of a null subject is identical to Standard Italian, namely Spec-head agreement with the head of AgrP for the persons that do not show any subject clitic. In the case of second person singular and third person singular and plural, subject clitics have the same function that agreement morphology has: they are needed for pro.

This amounts to saying that a subject clitic is the element that identifies the person and number features of the pro through Spec-head agreement in these dialects, because the verbal morphology does not have enough features to do it.

The parallel between agreement morphology and subject clitics is nevertheless incomplete. While agreement morphology is always present, even if SpecAgr is filled by a subject NP and not by a pro, subject clitics are in complementary distribution with phonetically realized subject NPs. As shown in Poletto (1990), they cannot cooccur with another thematic subject in an argumental position, as a subject NP in Spec Agr, or a variable, trace of a wh-subject as (9a/c) show:

(9) a. *Nisun el vien
Subject clitic / verb inversion

Nobody cl. comes
b. *Chi credo che el veagna?
   Who believe+you that cl. comes?
c. *El puto che el vien vanti
   The boy that cl. comes along
d. *El pare che...
   Cl seems that...

Moreover, a subject clitic as the ones described here, cannot occur if a theta role has not been assigned to the subject, as for instance with weather verbs, as in (9d).

Subject clitics are similar to object clitics because they are arguments, even if they are heads, because they absorb a theta role. The pro-drop of these dialects is thus partially different from the pro-drop in Standard Italian, because it is the subject clitic that identifies the pro in SpecAgr and not Agreement itself.

This characterization of subject clitics as argumental heads that identify the pronominal empty category in SpecAgr (as in (7)), will be relevant to understanding the distribution of subject clitics in interrogatives of Paduan, Venetian and Triestino.

2.1. Paduan: A case of Generalized inversion. As mentioned, Paduan has inversion of the subject clitic with the inflected verb in interrogative contexts:

   (10) a. Vienlo?
       Comes-he?
   b. *El vien?
       He comes?

   (11) a. Quando zelo vegnuo?
       When has-he come?
   b. *Quando el ze vegnuo?
       When he has come?

In (10) and (11) only the sentences in which the subject clitic appears on the right of the inflected verb are grammatical. (10b) and (11b) are ungrammatical as true interrogative sentences. They can be interpreted only as echo-questions. The phenomenon of inversion recalls the English interrogative subject auxiliary inversion and the French inversion cases which can be analyzed through Rizzi’s wh-criterion. It is tempting to assume that subject clitic/verb inversion in Paduan is an

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4 Echo questions have a different structure; for instance wh-items in situ are permitted in Standard Italian only in echo contexts but not in normal questions:
(i) Gianni ha fatto COSA? ("John has done what?") (i) can only be interpreted as an echo-question with a pitch accent on the wh-item. We will concentrate here on normal questions or correction contexts.
effect of the same principle of the grammar which induces the inflected verb, that carries the feature [+wh], to move to the head of the CP projection in order to be in a Spec-head configuration with the wh-operator in SpecC. If the wh-criterion is the source of the inversion phenomenon in Paduan, we predict that it applies only in root contexts because, as seen in 1.2, in embedded sentences the wh-criterion is already met by the C head through selection and the inflected verb is not marked [+wh]:

(12) a. Me domando cosa che el fassa
    Me (I) ask what that he does
  b. *Me domando cosa (che) falo
    Me (I) ask what (that) does he

Inversion is a root phenomenon in Paduan too, as (12) shows. In an embedded interrogative as (12a) the subject clitic is on the left of the inflected verb and the sentence is grammatical. A complementizer is phonetically realized in C, even if the SpecC position is filled by a wh-word. In (12b) the subject clitic is inverted on the right of the inflected verb, and the sentence is ungrammatical, no matter whether the complementizer is realized or not. The contrast between (11) and (12) leads us then to assume that inversion in Paduan is a reflection of the same principle that triggers inversion in English and French, namely the wh-criterion.\(^5\)

If inversion in Paduan parallels the corresponding French construction in (5), then the analysis could be exactly the same as for French: when the inflected verb moves to C, the context of Nominative case assignment is destroyed. Hence, a subject NP cannot be realized in SpecAgr and only a subject clitic can occupy that position, and be incorporated into the inflected verb in C, becoming visible at S-structure. In fact sentences like (13), in which a subject NP remains in SpecAgr, while the inflected verb goes to C, are excluded both in French and in Paduan (cf. Kayne (1972)):

(13) a. *Quand est Jean venu?
    When is John come?
  b. *Quando ze Nane vegnuo?

The only difference between Paduan and French would be that in Paduan no argumental SpecC is created, and a sentence like (6a) (here repeated as (14a)) is ungrammatical (but see fn. below for discussion).\(^6\)

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5 Paduan represents an even clearer case of complementary distribution in C between the inflected verb and the complementizer because che (that) must always be realized in embedded questions, even if the SpecC is filled by a wh-item. This option is not open in Standard Italian, French and English.

6 Here we are following Rizzi and Roberts (1989).
(14) a. Quand Jean est-il venu?
   When John is-he come?
   b. *Quando Nane zelo vegnuo?
      When John is-he come?

We could admit that Paduan is exactly like French, apart from this difference, and that a structure like in (5b) is valid in Paduan too:

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(5b)  b. CP
     ___________
      Spec
         |     C'
         |   IP
         | V+cl. t1
         | est-il
      ___________
       C°  Spec  I°  I°  VP
            |    |    |
            t1  t2  venu

In a structure like (5b) the trace of the subject clitic is in SpecAgr, hence the clitic is a true NP. In section 1.2 we mentioned the fact that Northern Italian Dialects, differently from French, are pro-drop languages, and subject clitics are heads adjoined to the head of Agr as in (7) (here repeated), hence not true subject NPs:

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(7)  AgrP
     ___________
      Spec
        |     Agr°
        |   Agr'
        |  TP
        |  ___________
        |  clit.Agr
        |  V+agr

If we want to maintain the structure of the language in general and subject clitics in particular as a constant, and this seems the most natural thing to do, we have to admit that Paduan is a pro-drop language in interrogative main contexts too, and that the subject clitics that appear in interrogative main clauses are heads exactly as subject clitics in assertive contexts are. Thus, a structure like (5b), which is formulated for a non pro-drop language like French, cannot be used for Paduan.

The structure (5b) can be modified as (15) in which the subject clitic does not incorporate from the SpecAgr position but from an adjunct position to Agr:
In (15), t1 is the trace of the subject clitic that has incorporated into C from the Agr-adjunct position and t2 is the trace of the inflected verb (V+agr) moved to C. Both the movement of the inflected verb and that of the subject clitic are instances of head to head movement. A pro is realized in SpecAgr, as in assertive contexts. A structure like (15) seems to be a plausible candidate for explaining sentences like (10)-(11): it holds constant the characterization of Paduan subject clitics as heads and the possibility of a pronominal null subject in SpecAgr.

Let’s verify if this hypothesis is true: are interrogative subject clitics identical to assertive subject clitics and is Paduan pro drop in interrogative contexts too? As mentioned in section 1.2, in Paduan the series of subject clitics is not complete: there are only three subject clitics for second person singular, third person singular and plural in assertive sentences, as the schema in (16a) illustrates:

(16) a. 1 2 3 4 5 6  
   -te el/la -- i/le
b. 1 2 3 4 5 6  
   ito lo/la io li/le

If interrogative subject clitics are the same as assertive subject clitics, the number and the morphology of the two series should be the same. The series of subject clitics in interrogative matrix sentences is as in (16b).

A comparison between (16a) and (16b) immediately reveals that assertive clitics are different from interrogative clitics: the number and the morphology of subject clitics in main interrogatives are distinct from those unassertive contexts.

While in assertive sentences as (17a) (18a) and (19a) first person singular and plural and second person plural do not show any subject clitic, neither at the right nor at the left of the inflected verb, in main interrogative sentences with first person and second person plural, a subject clitic at the right of the verb is obligatory:

(17) a. Go da fare na roba
   (I) have to do something
b. Cossa goi da fare?
   What have I to do?
c. *Cossa go da fare?

(18) a. Ghemo da fare na roba
   (We) have to dodo something
b. Cossa ghemoi da fare?
   What have we to do?
c. *Cossa ghemo_ da fare?

(19) a. Gavi da fare na roba
   (You+plur) have to do something
b. Cossa gavio da fare?
   What have you (plur.) to do?
c. *Cossa gavi_ da fare?

(17b-c), (18b-c) and (19b-c) show that in main interrogative sentences the subject clitics are six, and not three, as expected. This observation leads us to admit that subject clitics in interrogative sentences belong to a different series from assertive clitics. Paduan has thus two distinct series of subject clitics: one for assertive and embedded interrogative contexts, and one for main interrogative sentences. A structure like (15) is based on the assumption that assertive subject clitics and interrogative subject clitics are the same, which is not true. Thus (15) cannot explain why a distinct series of subject clitics is necessary in main questions, and what are the features that distinguish them from assertive clitics may be. Hence it is not the right structure for Paduan main interrogatives.

A step in the right direction can be made observing that interrogative subject clitics are a complete series: six clitics out of six persons, just like in a non pro drop language as French.

If we put these observations together with the fact that interrogative subject clitics are morphologically distinct from assertive subject clitics, we come to the conclusion that the difference between assertive and main interrogative contexts in Paduan is the same as that found between two languages such as Standard Italian and French, namely pro-drop. In other words, our hypothesis is that Paduan ia a pro-drop language only in assertive and embedded interrogative clauses: in direct questions the structure is such that a pro results ungrammatical.

At the beginning of this section we noted that inversion in Paduan seems to parallel French inversion structures:

(20) a. Quando zelo vegnuo?
   When has-he come?
b. Quand est-il venu?
   When has+he come?
We are thus claiming that Paduan main questions have the same structure that French inversion has, namely (20c).

This amounts to saying that the Paduan series of interrogative subject clitics is parallel to French subject clitics: they are not heads adjoined to Agr, as assertive subject clitics are, but NPs in SpecAgr. These are then incorporated into C because the SpecAgr position does not get Nominative case assigned through government (as proposed by Rizzi and Roberts (1989) for French cf. 1.2.) The visibility condition is satisfied through incorporation of the subject clitic and the sentence is grammatical because the trace in SpecAgr is properly governed by its antecedent in C. Through the assumption that inversion in Paduan is parallel to French (5b) we can explain why the interrogative series has to be complete for all persons, and why it is morphologically different from the assertive series: interrogative clitics are not heads, but NPs. The series is complete because no pro can be licensed. Hence a subject pronoun must always be expressed as in all non pro-drop languages.

But why should the mechanism of pro-drop be blocked only in direct interrogatives? It seems plausible to try to connect this effect with the movement of the inflected verb to C.

In interrogative main clauses the wh-criterion forces the movement of the inflected verb to C, in order to create the Spec-head configuration between the wh-item and the head marked [+wh]. In Rizzi and Roberts' analysis this movement destroys the context of Nominative case assignment in French: no subject NP can occupy the SpecAgr position because it would violate the visibility condition.

As noted in section 1.2, this analysis is based on the assumption that the relevant configuration for Nominative case assignment in French is only Spec-head agreement between the subject NP and the inflected verb and not government from C. Spec-head agreement is the relevant structural relation for pro-drop too: as mentioned in section 1.2 assertive sentences in Paduan are pro-drop, even if the mechanism of identification of the features of the null element are different from Standard Italian (cf. Poletto (1991)). The relevant configuration for pro-drop in Paduan is thus Spec-head agreement, as it is for case assignment.

We are thus making the hypothesis that in Paduan the domain of Nominative case assignment is coextensive with the domain of pro drop (cf. Chomsky (1982)). Only the Spec-head configuration is relevant for a null pronominal subject, as it is for a phonetically realized subject NP. If the element that is coindexed with the pro
moves up to C, the relevant configuration of licencing, namely Spec-head agreement, is destroyed as is Nominative case. Hence, the movement of the inflected verb to C makes it impossible to realize a subject NP in SpecAgr, both in French and in Paduan. It also makes it impossible to licence a pro in that position: only subject clitics can fill the SpecAgr position and then incorporate into C.

Consider now cases such as (21):

(21) a. Cossa bisogna far?
   What needs to do (fut)?
   What is necessary?

b.  
   CP
   Spec
   C
   Cossa
   bisogna Spec
   AgrP
   Agr'
   pro

c. *Quando vien?
   When comes?

In (21a) the subject of the verb bisognar (to be necessary, which does not assign an argumental theta role, is not phonetically expressed. Hence, in the structure of a sentence like (21a) there must be a pro in SpecAgr: we must admit that an expletive pro is grammatical in main questions.

Our first hypothesis is too strong: Paduan is indeed pro drop in interrogative sentences too, but only for expletive subjects. In the case of a personal subject, structure (21b) is banned, as (21c) shows. The contrast between (21a) and (21c) indicates that the ungrammaticality of structures like (21c) must depend on a special characteristic that only an argumental pro has. The difference between an expletive pro and an argumental pro is that an expletive pro does not need any identification of its number and person features, because it has none, while an argumental pro needs person and number features, because it has a content to be recovered.

On the basis of the contrast between (21a) and (21c), we can state that the ungrammaticality of (21c) is due to the impossibility of identifying the features of the personal pro: the configuration of government is a possible configuration for the licencing of the empty category pro. Hence the acceptability of (21a), where the expletive pro only needs to be licensed.

Nevertheless the person and number features cannot percolate down along the tree from C to SpecAgr. Only through Spec-head agreement can an argumental null subject be assigned its contentive features. The result is that the distribution of an argumental pro coincides with that of Nominative case assignment. The necessity of a subject clitic for all persons in interrogative main clauses in Paduan is ultimately due to the fact that government is not an appropriate configuration for assigning its
identification features to a null pronominal argumental subject. This hypothesis relates the particular configuration which can be found only in main interrogative sentences to the complete paradigm of subject clitics: when the inflected verb is moved to a higher projection, a pro cannot be identified in SpecAgr.

This is the reason why an assertive subject clitic cannot appear in interrogative contexts, as in (22b). A structure like (15) (here repeated as (22a)) is ungrammatical because the element that should assign its contentive features to pro, namely the verbal inflection or the subject clitic, has been moved to C:

(22) a. 

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{CP} \\
\text{Spec} \\
\text{wh} \\
\text{C} \\
\text{AgrP} \\
\text{Spec} \\
\text{V+agr+cl} \\
\text{pro} \\
\text{Agr} \\
\text{t1 Agr} \\
\text{t2} \\
\end{array}
\]

b. *Quando vieni?  
When comes+assertive clitic?

Our assumption correctly excludes (22) which is ungrammatical because the content of the argumental pro cannot be recovered.

Another possibility which comes to mind and is not realized in Paduan, corresponds to a structure like (23b), in which the verb moves to C with the clitic at its left. (23b) could be a plausible configuration but it has to be excluded, as (23a) shows. In other words, why can’t the higher Agr projection containing both the inflected verb and the subject clitic be moved to C as in (23b)?

(23) a. *Quando el ze vegnuo?  
When he is come?

b. 

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{CP} \\
\text{Spec} \\
\text{wh} \\
\text{C} \\
\text{Agr} \\
\text{Spec} \\
\text{cl Agr} \\
\text{V+agr} \\
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{AgrP} \\
\text{Agr'} \\
\text{Spec} \\
\text{Agr} \\
\text{TP} \\
\text{t}
\end{array}
\]

There is no universal principle of the grammar that prevents such a movement of the higher head of Agr, hence we have to attribute the unacceptability of (23) to a particular choice that the grammar of Paduan makes.
In (23b) a pro appears in SpecAgr, and it must be identified by an element in C through government. This is just the configuration that we excluded for Paduan: government is not relevant for the identification of a pro. Only Spec-head agreement is a relevant configuration for the transmission of the person and number features to the null subject. Our hypothesis excludes (23b) on a par with (22) without any additional condition. An explanation in these terms entails that another possible structure, that has not been taken into account up to now, must be excluded too: the verb could move alone from Agr to C leaving the subject clitic in its adjunct position to Agr:

(24) a.

```
CP
  Spec
  wh
C
  AgrP
  Spec
V+agr
  pro
  Agr
  cl Agr
TP
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b. *Quando ze el vegnuo?
    When is he come?

In this way, the wh-criterion would be satisfied by the inflected verb moved to C, and the pro would be identified through Spec-head agreement by the clitic that has remained in Agr.

Is there a reason why the clitic cannot stay in its position, when the verb moves to a higher head? The question is controversial: a configuration like (24a), in which the clitic intervenes between the verb and its trace t in Agr, should be excluded because it has a minimality effect, being a nearer head to the trace then the verb, thus preventing it from being correctly identified as the trace of the verb. (cfr. Baker (1988)) I won’t go into detail now, mentioning only the fact that the ban against a structure like (24) does not seem to be a peculiarity of Paduan, because, to my knowledge, no Northern Italian Dialect (nor French) admits (24b) as a possible sentence. If this is true, then (24a) has to be excluded in terms of a general condition, and not as an idiosyncratic property of the dialect in question.

Paduan results thus to be much more similar to French than one would presume: the structure of Paduan inversion is exactly parallel to French inversion. The only difference is that in French the coalescence between C and I permits the formation of an A SpecC position, that in Paduan is not found. This is clearly a

7 There are in fact dialects that exploit this possibility, as, for instance, some Romagnolo varieties.
marked mechanism that French exploits, and it is not surprising to find that it is not realized in Paduan. There is nevertheless a principled reason to exclude Complex Inversion in Paduan: subject clitics in Paduan are always argumental, in the sense that they absorb a theta role. In section 1.2 we considered the case of assertive clitics, that, being similar to object clitics, require a theta role to be assigned by the verb. Interrogative subject clitics are arguments too, as can be seen from examples as (25):  

(25) a. *Vienlo qualcheduni?
    Comes+cl somebody?
    Vien qualcheduni?
    Comes somebody?

In (25a) the interrogative subject clitic and the subject NP *qualcheduni* are incompatible, because they absorb the same theta role. In fact, if the interrogative subject clitic is not present, a subject NP can be realized in an interrogative as (25b). Hence, interrogative subject clitics are arguments in Paduan as their assertive counterpart are. At this point it is easy to see why a Complex Inversion structure like the French one is impossible: Rizzi and Roberts' hypothesis is crucially based on the fact that the inverted subject clitic is an expletive, while the subject NP in the argumental SpecC gets the subject theta role assigned. If Paduan has only argumental interrogative subject clitics which absorb the subject theta role, then a subject NP cannot be realized in any position inside the sentence because it would be left without a theta role, thereby violating the theta criterion. Complex Inversion can thus be excluded for a principled reason: in Paduan it would lead to a violation of the theta criterion.

The fact that interrogative subject clitics are arguments is important for another reason: looking at inversion in sentences like (10) and (11) it could be proposed that the subject clitic is totally clustered inside the verbal morphology, constituting a sort of interrogative inflectional paradigm as in many African languages. The question now is: can a part of inflection absorb a theta role? This would be a very strange situation: a part of the morphological features of a verb should be sensible to the theta criterion. On the contrary, it seems to me that the fact that subject clitics behave as arguments shows that they are not analyzed by the speakers as verbal morphology, but as syntactic elements, thus submitted to syntactic and semantic constraints such as the theta criterion.

2.2 Venetian: Losing inversion. Venetian is a dialect spoken in the town of Venice and in surrounding areas. It has to be distinguished from the rest of the Veneto dialects, because it is losing inversion.

Let's render this affirmation more precise: inversion is nowadays restricted to a limited number of verbs, which do not seem to share any syntactic property. On the
contrary they can be defined in morphological terms as a natural class (as P. Benincà pointed out to me) They are all athematic verbs as in (26) and (27): 9

(26) a. Dove valo?
   Where goes+he
b. Cossa falo?
   What does+he
(27) *Cossa magnelo?
   What eats+he?

Inversion seems to be restricted by a morphological condition sensitive to the class of the verb. (26a-b) are grammatical because the verb belongs to the relevant morphological class, while (27) is out, because the verb is not an athematic verb. Even if restricted, inversion shows the same asymmetry between main and embedded contexts noted for Paduan in section 2.1. Only in matrix sentences can the verb appear at the left of a subject clitic as in (28a), inversion being excluded from embedded sentences as (28b):

(28) a. Cossa falo?
   What does+he
b. *Me domando cossa (che) falo
   (I) ask me what (that) does+he

If Venetian shows the same asymmetry that verb second structures typically reveal, then it obeys the same principle to which Paduan, French and English are submitted: the inflected verb marked [+wh] has to move to C, in order to be in a Spec-head configuration with the wh-item. This happens only in matrix clauses because there is no selection from a matrix verb that attributes the wh-feature to C, as is the case in embedded contexts (cfr. section 1.2). The only condition that distinguishes Venetian from Paduan and from French is a morphological restriction that limits the domain of inversion to a specific morphological class of verbs. 10

We will then assume that the wh-criterion is active in Venetian too, under the same conditions under which it is in English, French, Standard Italian and Paduan. If

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9 An athematic verb can approximately be defined as a verb which lacks the thematic vowel.
10 Venetian was exactly like other Paduan varieties till approximately the last century: inversion was the normal way to express a direct question. The following examples, drawn from Goldoni plays, show that inversion was identical to Paduan, as described in section 2.1
(i) Cossa diseu de si spassi che vemo vuo? (Goldoni, I Quattro Rusteghi 1,3)
   What say+you of the fun that we have had? During the last century, the grammar of Venetian has changed, so as to limit inversion to a very restricted number of verbs for which the option in Paduan is still available. Hence, the inflected verb moves to C and an interrogative clitic appears on its right.
this is true, all inflected verbs have to move to C in Venetian direct questions too: so, what happens with verbs that do not belong to the restricted morphological class described above?

In Venetian normal interrogative sentences are construed as clefts:

(29) Cossa ze che el magna?
     What is that he eats?
(30) Quando ze che el parte?
     When is that he leaves?

It is interesting to note that clefts show the same asymmetry noted for inversion structures between main and embedded contexts:

(31) a. *Ghe go domandà cossa ze che el magna
     Him (I) asked what is that he eats
b. *Ghe go domandà dove ze che el ze ndà
     Him (I) asked where is that he is gone

Sentences like (31a) and b, in which the cleft structure is embedded, are ungrammatical. On the contrary (29) and (30) are the most natural way to ask a question.

This contrast between main and embedded interrogative structures suggests that the \(wh\)-criterion is once again at work in these structures: the spreading of a cleft structure exclusively in main interrogative sentences in Venetian must depend on the need to move the inflected verb to C.

In order to explain why the movement of the inflected verb to C should require a cleft structure in Venetian, we have to take into consideration what the consequences of this movement are.

In section 2.1. it has been shown why Paduan needs an interrogative subject clitic series. When the verb moves to C, it destroys the context of Nominative case assignment, hence a subject NP is ungrammatical in the SpecAgr position. Moreover it destroys the context of \(pro\) identification. Hence, an argumental \(pro\) also is banned from that position. The only argumental subjects that can appear in such a structure are subject clitics, that start from SpecAgr, and incorporate onto the inflected verb in C, thus satisfying the visibility principle through incorporation. There is only another element that can remain in SpecAgr in Paduan: it is an expletive \(pro\) that does not need any identification, because it has no content to be recovered.

In Venetian the mechanism of inversion is not available because interrogative subject clitics are restricted to the morphological class specified above. Hence the only element that can occupy the SpecAgr position is an expletive null subject. A cleft structure exploits just this possibility. In a cleft sentence the inflected verb that moves to C is the copular verb be, and not the main verb:
In (32) the copula *ze* has moved to C, destroying the context of Nominative case assignment and of identification of an argumental *pro*. In the SpecAgr position of the copular clause there is a non argumental *pro* that does not need any identification, hence it is grammatical in the SpecAgr position.\(^{11}\) The interrogative sentence is embedded under the copular structure. This prevents the inflected verb (magna in (32)) from moving to C, because, as in any embedded question, the C position is already filled by a [+wh] marked complementizer (namely *che*).

If the verb does not move, the context of Nominative case assignment and of *pro* identification is not destroyed: a *pro* or a subject NP can occupy the SpecAgr position of the embedded interrogative. In short: clefting is a way to embed the sentence avoiding the necessity of verb movement to C.

A cleft structure does not violate the *wh*-criterion, because an inflected verb, the copula, has been moved to C to satisfy the Spec-head condition for *wh*-items and *wh*-items. Clefting can satisfy the visibility principle too which requires a case for a phonetically realized subject NP, or identification features for an argumental subject *pro* because the inflected verb that assigns them through Spec-head agreement has not moved to C.

Both the *wh*-criterion and the *pro* identification require the same structural configuration, namely a Spec-head relation with the inflected verb. If there is only one inflected verb in the sentence, it will never satisfy both principles because it can be in a Spec-head configuration either with the *wh*-item or with the subject, never with both.

\(^{11}\) The subject in this structure is not a true expletive, but probably a quasi-argument as defined in Chomsky (1981).
Splitting the structure in a copular and in an embedded clause meets at the same
time all requirements imposed by the \textit{wh}-criterion and by the visibility principle
because there are two inflected verbs, one in a Spec-head configuration with the
\textit{wh}-item, and the other with the subject.

If the strategy used in Venetian consists in the embedding of the question, it
should not be surprising that another way to formulate a direct question parallels the
structure of indirect interrogative sentences:

\begin{enumerate}
\item[(33)] Cossa che la magna?
\hspace{1cm} What that she eats?
\item[(34)] Me domando cossa che la magna
\hspace{1cm} Me (I) ask what that she eats
\end{enumerate}

As noted in section 2.1, in Paduan (and Venetian too) the complementizer is
always obligatory, even in interrogative sentences where a \textit{wh}-item occupies the
Spec\textit{C} position. In (33) the complementizer che appears in the C position as in (34),
therefore direct questions are parasitic on the structure of indirect questions. Sentences
like (33), in which C is filled by a complementizer, constitute the natural evolution of
this system, that already exploits clefting as a way to embed the question. (33) is nota
problem for the \textit{wh}-criterion in itself, because the Spec-head configuration between a
\textit{wh}-head and the \textit{wh}-item is met by the complementizer in C, which is compatible
with the feature [+\textit{wh}], as (34) shows. (33) poses a problem regarding the difference
between Venetian on the one hand, and other languages as for instance, French and
English on the other. Why is a sentence like (33) not possible in these languages too,
as (35) shows?

\begin{enumerate}
\item[(35)]
\begin{enumerate}
\item a. *What (that) she eats?
\item b. *Quoi (que) elle mange?
\end{enumerate}
\end{enumerate}

In the case of English and French one could assume that the complementizer
\textit{that} or \textit{que} is not compatible with the feature [+\textit{wh}].

Then (35a) and (35b) should be grammatical without the complementizer, but
they are not. It seems that only Venetian can exploit the structure of an indirect
question to render a direct one.

This difference can be quite easily captured assuming that only in Venetian is
there a choice open about the selection of the head marked with the feature [+\textit{wh}] in
main questions: both Inflection or C can be marked [+\textit{wh}] in a direct interrogative
sentence. Expressing this observation through the means of a parameter that rules the
choice of the [+\textit{wh}] marked head in main questions, we obtain the following
possibilities:\footnote{Within the hypothesis adopted here, the head marked with the feature [+\textit{wh}] can be Agr or T,}
(36) a. Infl is marked [+wh]
    b. C is marked [+wh]

A language like French or English, chooses (36a), hence the inflected verb must move to C in main interrogatives in order to be in a Spec-head relation with the wh-item.

Venetian has both opportunities open: if Inflection is marked [+wh], the inflected verb has to move to C. In this case a cleft structure is realized, in which the inflected verb that moves to C is the copula. If the verb is an a thematic verb, inversion applies (but a cleft is not excluded either). If C is marked [+wh], a complementizer occupies the head of CP, realizing a structure like (33) parallel to an embedded question. A parameter like (36) leaves a third possibility open: that of a language that chooses only C as the head marked [+wh]. In the next section we will see that Triestino is such a language.

Till now we have examined examples of questions; looking at yes/no questions in the perspective of the parameter in (36), we should expect to find the same possibilities that questions show, namely a cleft structure of the type est-que as in French, or a Complementizer expressed in C:

(37)  *Ze che el vien qua?
       Is that he comes here?

(38)  *Che el vien qua?
       That he comes here?

Both (37) and (38) are excluded in Venetian, even though they are perfectly comprehensible. The normal way to ask a yes/no question is equivalent to an assertive sentence with a raising intonation:

(39)  El vien qua?
       He comes here?

This is completely unexpected under the wh-criterion and parameter (36): a sentence like (39) violates the Spec-head relation requirement, because neither the inflected verb nor the complementizer are marked [wh+]. The inflected verb remains in fact in its position, and does not show any inversion or clefting phenomenon. The

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13 In Fiorentino this possibility is realized:
   (i) che tu vieni?
       That you come?
   (Are you coming?)
complementizer is not phonetically realized, hence it is not present at all in the structure, given that a [wh+] marked complementizer must be obligatorily realized in embedded questions. (cf. fn. 6.)

It is tempting to assume that in Venetian there is no null operator in yes/no question that triggers the necessity of a head marked [wh+], and this is the reason why the verb does not need to move to C, and no complementizer is realized in C. But, as L. Rizzi pointed out to me, this assumption would raise the question of how this structure can be interpreted as an interrogative at LF. If we are compelled to assume that there is a null operator even in sentences like (39), where no difference from an assertive sentence is visible, then the null operator in SpecC must be different from a phonetically realized wh-item because it is not submitted to the wh-criterion. In fact no head marked [wh+] is visible in C: the inflected verb does not move, no clefting is permitted, and no complementizer is realized in C.

We will leave the problem open, here, noting that the study of other languages may help us to choose between the two possibilities, namely to differentiate null operators from wh-items or to assume that null operators can be absent in the structure of yes/no questions. However Venetian shows that yes/no questions are different from questions, hence we expect that this asymmetry would emerge in other languages too. In the next section we will examine Triestino, a dialect that makes the third possible choice regarding (36): only C is marked [wh+] in both main and embedded questions.

2.3 Triestino: A [wh+] C. Triestino is another dialect diacronically related to Venetian, spoken in the town of Trieste, which does not show any phenomenon of inversion between the inflected verb and a subject clitic at all:

(40) a. Cossa la dise?
    what she says?
  b. Dove la iera?
    where she was?

On the basis of the discussion about Paduan and Venetian, we can formulate two hypotheses regarding the examples in (40a) and (40b). The first one is to admit that Infl is marked [+wh] in Triestino as in Paduan. Hence the inflected verb has to move to C, to be in a Spec-head configuration with the wh-item.

Given that the subject clitic appears on the left of the verb, Triestino will have structure (23b), (here repeated as (41)) which we excluded for Paduan:
The contrast between (40) and the correspondent Paduan example (23a), which is ungrammatical, depends on the different conditions of identification of an argumental pro in Paduan and in Triestino. In (41) there is an argumental pro in SpecAgr, that needs to be identified by an element, which is in C: the clitic, when the person of the verb has one, or the inflected verb itself en there is no subject clitic (as for first person singular and plural and second person plural).

In Paduan (41) is excluded because government is not the right configuration for the transmission of the person and number features to the null pronominal subject in SpecAgr. If (41) is the correct structure for the sentences in (40), government must be a possible configuration of identification for a pro in Triestino. This amounts to saying that in this dialect the domain of identification of a pro does not coincide with the domain of Nominative case assignment. This hypothesis codes the difference between Triestino on the one side and Paduan and Venetian on the other as a consequence of different pro-drop conditions. A second hypothesis, which is compatible with the word order in (40), attributes the missing inversion in Triestino to the fact that the verb has not moved to C. In other words, we can imagine that Triestino constitutes the third case predicted by the parameter in (36), in which only C can be marked [+wh], hence the inflected verb never moves to C. If this is true, the sentences in (40) should have the structure (42):

In (42) the inflected verb does not move to C, because it is not marked [+wh] by the language, which chooses C as the [+wh] marked head, as in embedded contexts. The wh-criterion is satisfied only by the movement of the item to SpecC,
because the Spec-head relation is established with the head C, and not with the inflected verb.

Inversion or clefting are not present in Triestino, because they are not necessary: the context of Nominative case assignment and of identification of an argumental pros are preserved by the Spec-head agreement relation between the inflected verb and its Specifier.  

We are now faced with two possible explanations of the examples in (40), which both appear to be plausible.

The choice between the two solutions is thus an empirical question, because both structures (41) and (42) generate the correct string of words of example (40). There is a simple way to test which the correct structure for Triestino is: if the inflected verb has not moved to C, the SpecAgr position can be filled by a subject NP, generating the string \textit{wh-item - subject NP - inflected verb} as in structure (43):

\begin{equation}
(43) \quad \text{Spec} \rightarrow \text{CP} \rightarrow \text{C'} \rightarrow \text{AgrP} \rightarrow \text{Spec} \rightarrow \text{Agr'} \rightarrow \text{TP} \rightarrow \text{V^o}
\end{equation}

On the contrary, if the verb has moved to C the string \textit{wh-item - subject NP-inflected verb} should be impossible, because there would be no position available to the subject NP between the in SpecC and the inflected verb in C.  

At this point, we have a way to discriminate between the two solutions represented by (41) and (42): if the correct structure is (41), the sequence \textit{wh-item - subject NP - verb} must be ungrammatical. If the correct structure is (42), the sequence \textit{wh-item - subject NP - verb} must be possible:

\begin{equation}
(44) \quad \text{Cossa la mamma dice?} \\
\text{what the mummy says?}
\end{equation}

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14 In Triestino a complementizer is not obligatory in embedded interrogatives, as is the case with Paduan and Venetian: (i) No so dove là va
Therefore, it is not surprising that it is not realized in main interrogatives even if C is marked [+wh].

15 (44) cannot be considered a case of Complex Inversion because there is no subject clitic at the right of the inflected verb.
The fact that (44) is grammatical shows that (42) is the correct structure for Triestino. Hence, the inflected verb does not move to C. Given that Triestino must be submitted to the wh-criterion as any other language, there must be a head marked with the feature [+wh], which is in a Spec-head configuration with the wh-item. (44) proves that this head is not Inf. Therefore, it must be C, as in embedded clauses.

A sentence like (44) is possible in Triestino, but it is ungrammatical in Standard Italian, and in Paduan (respectively (45a) and (45b):

(45) a. *Cosa la mamma dice?
    b. *Cosa la mama dise?

The contrast between (44) and (45) reinforces our claim about the existence of a parameter which has to be expressed in terms of a choice regarding the head that is marked with the feature [+wh]. In fact, the difference between (44) and (45) is captured by parameter (36): in Standard Italian and in Paduan the inflected verb is marked [+wh], and it has to move to C. Hence the ungrammaticality of a sequence like (45). In Triestino C is marked [+wh], the inflected verb stays in its position in Agr, then the sequence wh-item - subject NP - verb is grammatical.

It is interesting to note how Triestino has developed through a stage similar to Venetian during the first half of the last century: in written Triestino of this period it is possible to find examples as (46b), parallel to the actual Venetian example (28a), here repeated as (a):

(46) a. Cossa falo?
    what does+h he
    what has she?

The three dialects here examined constitute then three stages of the same evolitional tendency: Paduan is the most conservative one, with obligatory inversion in all direct questions. Venetian is the intermediate stage, in which inversion is morphologically restricted, cleft structure being the most current form for questions, but direct questions with the structure of indirect questions are possible too. Triestino is the final stage, in which no inversion can be found, and the head marked [+wh] is C.

If we consider the movement of the verb to C in direct questions as a residual verb second phenomenon, as Rizzi (1990) does, then we have to state that Northern Italian Dialects are eliminating the last verb second context through the change of a parametric choice from (36a) to (36a).

The research on inversion in Northern Italian Dialects is by no means exhausted by at we have been discussing here. More extensive work is needed especially with regard to the varieties which are losing inversion in order to check either they pattern with Triestino, and if parameter (36) correctly describes the distributional variation.
3. Cases of missing inversion

In this section we will examine four cases of missing inversion in Paduan. Our theory predicts that inversion is obligatory in this dialect, because the inflected verb is the head marked [+wh] and must move to C in order to be in a Spec-head configuration with the item. The cases in which inversion does not apply are particularly interesting, because they pose potential problems to the analysis proposed in section 2.1. We will try to reduce these apparent exceptions to other intervening factors that block the movement of the inflected verb to C and/or inversion.

3.1 Interrogation of the subject. In section 2.1 no example has been given of subject interrogation. Subject interrogation in Paduan has a quite complicated distribution that deserves closer examination. It is exceptional with respect to interrogation of other elements, because no inversion can take place in the sentence:

(47) a. *Chi vienlo
    o comes+he?
 b. Chi vien?
    o comes?
 c. Vienlo?
    Comes+he?

Example (47a) is excluded because a subject clitic appears on the right of the inflected verb. In fact, if no interrogative subject clitic is present, the sentence is grammatical, as (47b) shows. The contrast between (47a) and (47b)-(47c) could be interpreted as evidence that the inflected verb does not move to C, when the item corresponds to the subject. This hypothesis entails that there is a one to one correspondence between movement to C and inversion. This may not be true; the ungrammaticality of (47a) may be due to the fact that the inversion phenomenon itself is blocked by some other factor.

There is in fact quite a simple way to exclude (47a) without recourse to a violation of the wh-criterion, or to any ad hoc assumption. In section 2.1 it has been shown on the basis of example as (48) that, interrogative subject clitics are arguments because they absorb a theta role:

(48) a. *Vienlo qualchedun?
    comes+cl somebody?
 b. Vien qualchedun?
    Comes somebody?
In (48a) the cooccurrence of a subject clitic with a subject NP is impossible, because they compete for the same thematic role. In example (47a) the subject leaves a variable trace in the basic position of the subject. This trace absorbs the theta role of the subject which the subject clitic needs too. The impossibility of (47a) can thus be attributed to a violation of the theta criterion because there are two thematic subjects that compete for the same theta role.

We do not need to assume that (47) constitutes a counterexample to the *wh*-criterion, because inversion is not possible. The occurrence of an interrogative subject clitic is already excluded by the theta-criterion, hence only a sentence like (47b) can be grammatical, in which the inflected verb moves to C, but no subject clitic appears on its right. Hence, missing inversion does not mean necessarily that the inflected verb has not moved to C.

Our hypothesis assumes that (47a) has to be excluded on a par with (48a), tracing back the ungrammaticality of both examples to the fact that in Paduan subject clitics are arguments, and as such they need a thematic role. This is confirmed by the fact that no subject clitic appears in expletive and quasi-argumental contexts, where the subject does not get any argumental theta role assigned:

(49) a. *Piovelo?
   Rains+cl?
   b. Prove?
   Rains?

If our reasoning is correct, these three contexts, exemplified in (47), (48) and (49) must always go together: if a subject clitic is grammatical in one of these three contexts, it must also be permitted in the other two. The prediction is that, if in some dialect (47a) is a possible sentence, then (48a) and (49a) must be grammatical too.

Such a dialect exists. It is Bellunese, spoken in a northern area of the same region, Veneto. In Bellunese a subject clitic appears in all the three contexts considered here:

(50) a. Chi magnelo qua?
   who eats+he here?
   b. Vegnelo qualchidun?
   Comes+he somebody?
   c. Piovelo?
   Rains+cl?

---

16 We will refer to this variety as to Bellunese, because the dialect of the town of Belluno has been used for the examples. The area in which the phenomenon of *in situ* has been observed is a larger one, and it includes all the varieties spoken around the town of Belluno.
In Bellunese subject clitics are not sensitive to the presence of a subject theta-role: they do not need it and do not absorb it, if it is present. Hence they can cooccur with a thematic subject as the variable subject in (50a), the quantifier in (50b), or appear when no argumental theta-role is assigned to the subject as in (50c).

As for the reason why the subject clitic in (50) is obligatory, we leave the question open, noting that this fact could be connected with the licensing of an expletive null subject in this variety. Bellunese minimally differs from Paduan and Venetian because it needs a subject clitic also for the licensing of an expletive pro in Spec.Agr.

We can conclude that a distinction between argumental subject clitics and expletive subject clitics, in the sense that they absorb a theta-role or not, is correct. The ungrammaticality of inversion in Paduan main interrogatives on the subject is not to be attributed to a violation of the wh-criterion but to the argumental nature of subject clitics in this dialect.

The distribution of wh-subjects in Paduan is even more complicated than in (47), because a direct interrogation of the subject is possible only with ergative verbs, as in (47b), in which the verb venire (to come) has been used. As (51) shows, a subject of an unergative verb cannot be directly extracted:

(51) a. *Chi ga un corteo?
   who has a knife?
   b. Chi ze che ga un corteo?
   who is that has a knife?

This asymmetry does not exist in Standard Italian, in which every subject can be directly extracted, hence there must be some parametric choice regarding the subject involved in these structures. The difference between Standard Italian and the dialect under consideration may be captured on the basis of a parameter regarding the way the case is assigned to the postverbal subject position, which, according to Rizzi (1982), is the extraction position of a subject (cf. Poletto in preparation).

In Paduan, the grammatical sentence corresponding to (51a) is a cleft, as in (51b). In the light of the discussion about clefting in Venetian, (51b) can be considered as a means not to move the inflected verb to C. Recall that this movement destroys the Nominative case assignment context which is needed by the variable left by the moved to SpecC.

Hence (51a) is ungrammatical because the subject variable trace does not receive Nominative case assigned. The cleft structure allows the inflected verb to remain in its position, and to assign case to the trace of the subject; at the same time the wh-criterion is not violated, because there is a [+wh] marked inflected verb, namely the copula, in a Spec-head configuration with the wh-item.

What about (47b)? If the context of Nominative case assignment is destroyed by the movement of the inflected verb from Agr to C in the case of transitive and intransitive verbs, why is the structure correct with ergative verbs?
According to Belletti (1988), the class of ergative verbs, syntactically defined in Burzio (1986), assigns partitive case to its subject which is structurally a deep object. The asymmetry between ergative vs. unergative verbs can be described in these terms: ergative verbs have two possibilities to assign case to their subject: Spec-head agreement with the head of AgrP, and partitive case assigned directly by the verb in the deep structure subject position. Unergative verbs only assign case through Spec-head agreement with the head of AgrP.

When the context of Nominative case assignment through Spec-head agreement between Agr and SpecAgr is destroyed by the movement of the inflected verb to C, the variable trace of the subject cannot get a case assigned from unergative verbs, hence the structure is filtered out. On the contrary ergative verbs can assign case to the variable trace of the subject, and direct questioning of the subject is possible. Direct movement of a subject to SpecC, which triggers movement of the inflected verb to C, is permitted only when another case, which is not Nominative through Spec-head agreement, is available. Only ergative verbs have this option, hence the contrast between (47b) and (51a).

It is interesting to note that this asymmetry surfaces only in Paduan, and not in Bellunese, which has expletive interrogative subject clitics:

(52) a. Chi vegnelo?
   who comes +he?
   b. Chi magnelo qua?
   who est+he here?

It seems that the expletive subject clitic that appears on the right of the inflected verb enters somehow into the Nominative case assignment process to the trace of the subject. The subject clitic is rendered visible through incorporation, and it is coindexed with the subject variable: in Bellunese contributes to render the subject NP visible. The chain established through coindexing between the variable and the subject clitic is sufficient for the variable trace to be visible too, even though it does not get Nominative case assigned through Spec-head agreement. (see Dobrovie Sorin (1990) for a recent discussion) In Paduan a chain between the subject clitic and the variable trace, as in the one of Bellunese, is not possible, because they are both arguments and they both absorb the subject theta-role. This is the reason why in Paduan the deep asymmetry between the case assignment conditions to ergative vs. unergative subjects comes to light, while it does not emerge in Bellunese.

17 The case assigned to the ergative subject in its basic position could be Nominative case too. There is evidence that in some languages, as, for instance, German, ergative subjects are marked with Nominative even if they are inside the VP.
3.2 Wh-items in situ. In this section we will examine a case first noted in the literature by Benincà and Vanelli (1982) of wh-items in situ in a variety of Veneto introduced in the preceding section as Bellunese. The distribution of wh-items in situ seems to represent a counterexample to the wh-criterion:

\[
(53) \begin{align*}
\text{a. } & \text{ Alo fat che?} \\
& \text{Has+he done what?} \\
\text{b. } & \text{*Alo fat cossa?} \\
& \text{Has+he done what?} \\
\text{c. } & \text{Cossa alo fat?} \\
& \text{what has+he done?}
\end{align*}
\]

In (53a) inversion applies even if the wh-item has remained in its argumental position, hence the Spec-head relation condition between the head marked [+wh] and the wh-item is not respected. Examining the wh-items that can remain in situ, we find that the phenomenon is restricted: only some wh-items can remain in situ. In (53a) the wh-item che ("what") remains in its basic object position. In (53b) the cossa which means what too cannot remain in situ, it has to move to SpecC as in (53c).

Furthermore, the phenomenon is restricted to direct interrogative sentences:

\[
(54) \begin{align*}
\text{a. Valo ndond?} \\
& \text{Goes+he ere?} \\
\text{b. } & \text{*Me domando che el va ndond} \\
& \text{(I) ask me that he goes ere} \\
\text{c. } & \text{Me domando ndond che el va} \\
& \text{(I) ask me ere that he goes}
\end{align*}
\]

Only (54a) is grammatical, in which the verb has moved to C triggering inversion of the subject clitic. In embedded contexts the wh-item has to move to SpecC, as (54b) and (54c) show.

The possibility of leaving a wh-item in situ seems thus related to inversion, hence to the movement of the inflected verb to C. If the wh-criterion were simply not valid in this dialect we would not expect to find any asymmetry between main and embedded contexts, on the contrary the wh-item should appear in situ in embedded questions too.

This fact can give us a clue to solve the problem we are faced with. A tentative solution to bring these data inside the frame adopted here, could be the assumption that this dialect has a null operator in SpecC, which is licenced by the presence of the inflected verb in C. As Rizzi (1990) observes, the wh-item is not considered as an operator until it moves from its argumental position. Hence in (54a), the operator is not the wh-word ndond, but the null operator is SpecC, which is in a configuration of Spec-head agreement with the inflected verb marked [+wh]. The wh-criterion is thus respected in Bellunese too.
As for the reason why only the inflected verb can licence a null operator while the [+wh] marked complementizer in C cannot, we do not have any conclusive proposal. It can only be noted that this fact must be connected with the way in which the head is marked [+wh], hence with the distinction of [+wh] marking through selection and [+wh] marking through the choice given by a parameter as (36).

It is interesting to note that the asymmetry between ergative and unergative subjects noted in Paduan emerges in this dialect too, even though in a different context. In Bellunese unergative wh-subjects have to move to SpecC, while ergative subjects can behave as objects and remain in situ (cfr. Benincà and Vanelli (1984)):

\[(55)\]
\begin{align*}
&\text{a. Elo vegnest chi?} \\
&\quad \text{Has+he come who?} \\
&\text{b. *Alo magnà chi?} \\
&\quad \text{Has+he eaten who} \\
&\text{c. Chi alo magnà?} \\
&\quad \text{who has+he eaten?}
\end{align*}

The distribution in (55) can be explained as a reflection of the same problem of Nominative case assignment mentioned in the preceding section to explain the Paduan data. The ergative subject in (55a) gets Partitive case assigned directly by the verb in its structural deep object position, and does not need to move. The unergative subject in (55c) must move to SpecC in order to form a chain with the interrogative subject clitic and satisfy the visibility condition through this chain, as no Partitive case can be assigned to the subject of a transitive or intransitive verb.

Bellunese does not represent a counterexample to the theory. On the contrary, it shows that the distribution of the wh-item in situ obeys the general principles of the grammar.

3.3 Per-ché. Another puzzling case of missing inversion is evident in (56):

\[(56)\]
\begin{align*}
&\text{a. Parché Carlo el sta casa?} \\
&\quad \text{why Carlo cl. stays at home?} \\
&\text{b. *Parché stalo casa?} \\
&\quad \text{why stays+he at home?}
\end{align*}

The ungrammaticality of inversion in (56) can be interpreted as deriving from a condition on inversion itself, as it was the case of subjects in section 3.1, or it can be a true violation of the requirement to move the inflected verb to C.

A test to prove if the verb has moved to C has been mentioned in section 2.3 for Triestino. It regards the possibility of realizing a subject NP directly after the wh-item. If the inflected verb moves to C the Nominative cannot be assigned to SpecAgr and a subject NP in that position is ungrammatical. If the inflected verb
remains in its position, the Nominative is available in SpecAgr, and a subject NP is grammatical.

(57)  Parché Nane ze stà casa?
       why John is stayed (at) home?

(57) shows that a subject NP can intervene between the wh-item parché and the inflected verb. Hence the structure of the sentence must be (58) in which the verb has not moved to C:

(58)     Spec    CP    C'    AgrP     Agr'
                  Spec    Agr'     TP
                     NP    V

(57) shows then that (56) is a true violation of the wh-criterion, because the inflected verb is not in a Spec-head configuration with the wh-item parché.

In Paduan there exists another word for why, which is parcossa. This item, on the contrary to parché behaves completely regularly with respect to the wh-criterion, because it triggers inversion in main interrogatives, and it is followed by a complementizer in embedded questions:

(59) a. Parcossa zelo stà casa?
       why has+he stayed home?
   b. *Parcossa el ze sta casa?
       why he has stayed home?

(60) No so parcossa che el ze stà casa
     (I) not know that he has stayed home

The problem noted with regard to (56) seems to depend by some idiosyncratic property of the word parché in itself, because another item with exactly the same meaning regularly triggers inversion in main questions.

Parché behaves exceptionally not only with regard to inversion, but also in embedded interrogatives:

(61) a. No so parché el ze sta casa
     (I) not know why he has stayed home
   b. *No so parché che el ze sta casa
     (I) not know why that he has stayed home
When *parcò* is present the embedded question cannot be introduced by a complementizer *che*, as the contrast between (61a) and (61b) shows. As mentioned in section 2.1, a complementizer is always obligatory in Paduan embedded questions, with all *wh-*items. In fact, if the complementizer is omitted all the sentences in (62) are excluded:

(62) a. No so chi *(che) ga magnà qua
   (I) not know who (that) has eaten here
b. No so quando *(che) te si vegnuo
   (I) not know when (that) you have come
c. No so parcossa *(che) el ze sta casa
   (I) not know why (that) he has stayed home

The contrast between (61) and (62) parallels the contrast between (56) and (59), here repeated as (63):

(63) a. Parché el sta casa?
   why he stays at home?
b. *Parché stalo casa?  
   why stays+he at home?
c. Parcossa zelo stà casa? 
   why has+he stayed home?
d. *Parcossa el ze sta casa? 
   why he has stayed home?

Hence *parcò* is exceptional both in main and in embedded contexts. This idiosyncratic feature must depend on the word *parcò* itself. Looking at its internal form, we find that it consists of a preposition par (or) and of a complementizer *che* (that). If we make the hypothesis that the speakers analyze it as a preposition plus a complementizer, the exceptional behaviour of *parcò* follows as a consequence.

If *parcò* constitutes the coalescence of a preposition and a complementizer, and they are both analyzed as such in the syntax, then both positions of the CP projection are occupied: the SpecC position by the preposition and the C position by the complementizer. (cfr. Kayne (1989) and Benucci (1990) that analyze prepositions as SpecC elements) If C is already occupied, no other item can fill the position: the inflected verb cannot move to C, and a complementizer cannot appear after parcò. On the contrary parcossa does not contain any complementizer (the word cossa corresponds to what, not to that), hence the C position can be filled by something else: the inflected verb in main interrogatives and the complementizer in embedded ones. *Parché* is thus a special case of *wh-*item, because it is able to saturate the entire CP projection, and it vacuously satisfies the *wh-*criterion: the head *che* and a item par are in a Spec-head configuration at the CP level.
3.4. **Negative interrogatives.** The last case of missing inversion is that of negative interrogatives (cfr. Benincà and Vanelli (1984)):

(64) a. Vienlo?
  Comes+he?

b. *No vienlo?
  Not comes+he?

c. Noi vien?
  Not+he comes?

Inversion is impossible if a negative marker appears in front of the verb as in (64b) in the varieties that show only a preverbal negative marker. The grammatical structure corresponds to a normal assertive sentence (with a raising intonative pattern), as in (64c). This blocking effect with respect to inversion is restricted by the type of negative marker that is present in the sentence.

The way to express negation in Paduan varieties has quite a complicated distribution: three types of dialects can be isolated for the present discussion. A first type, which has only a preverbal negative marker (no), a second one ich presents a situation similar to Standard French, with a preverbal and a postverbal negative marker corresponding to *ne...pas (ne...mina)*, and a third type, which has only a postverbal negative marker (mina).

Only a preverbal negative marker can block inversion. Infact a negative question with inversion is grammatical in a variety which has only a postverbal negative element as examples (65a) and (65b) show:

(65) a. Vienlo?
  Comes+he

b. Vienlo mina?
  Comes+he not

c. Ne vienlo mina?
  Not+he not?

We can thus approximately describe the relevant property for the capacity to block inversion as the preverbal status of the negative marker. This is not enough, as can be seen from the data of the varieties ich have both a postverbal and a preverbal negative marker as in (65c). Given that (65c) is grammatical, in which a preverbal and postverbal negative marker are present and inversion has been applied, we must assume that only a preverbal negative marker, which is the only negative element of the sentence, has the capacity to block inversion. Hence there are two properties relevant for the case under discussion: the preverbal status and the "loneliness" of the negative element.
We are now faced with two distinct problems. The first one regards the blocking effect of negation itself. Why does it take place, and how? At first sight it seems tempting to assimilate the blocking effect of the negative marker to the well-known case of minimality between heads (cf. Baker (1988)). The inflected verb must move from the head Agr to the head C, in order to satisfy the wh-criterion. Suppose that the negative head is placed between Agr and C, as recently proposed in Zanuttini (1989) then the inflected verb has to pass through this head in order to reach C. If the inflected verb "jumps" over the negative head, as in (66a), this will constitute a closer governor for the trace of the verb, thus preventing the correct reconstruction of the movement. But even if the verb passes through the negative head the resulting structure is not grammatical, because the verb must adjoin to the left of negation, as in (66b):

(66) a. 
\[
\text{Spec} \rightarrow \text{CP} \rightarrow \text{C'} \rightarrow \text{NegP} \rightarrow \text{Neg}^\circ \rightarrow \text{Spec} \rightarrow \text{AgrP} \rightarrow \text{Agr}^\circ \rightarrow \text{TP}
\]

b. 
\[
\text{Spec} \rightarrow \text{CP} \rightarrow \text{C'} \rightarrow \text{NegP} \rightarrow \text{Spec} \rightarrow \text{Neg}^\circ \rightarrow \text{Spec} \rightarrow \text{Neg}^\circ \rightarrow \text{AgrP} \rightarrow \text{Agr}^\circ \rightarrow \text{TP}
\]

At this point, the head that moves to C is not more Agr, marked [+wh], but Neg which does not have any wh-feature at all. Hence the wh-criterion is violated, because there is no Spec-head relation between the wh-item and the head marked [+wh], ich is not visible in C because it is "covered" by Neg.

The negative projection in any case blocks the movement of the inflected verb to C, no matter whether it skips over the negative head or whether it passes through it. If this analysis is tenable, we have to admit that only the dialects that mark the
negative projection with a preverbal negative marker project NegP between Agr and C. The other dialects, which have a postverbal or a preverbal and a postverbal negative marker, project it in a lower position inside the hierarchy of the functional heads.

It is possible to imagine other ways to prevent the movement of the inflected verb to C when a preverbal negative marker is present. A particularly promising solution appears to be the one developed in a recent work by Tomaselli (1990) on clitics in Old High German. Tomaselli proposes that a clitic adjoined to the head of Agr prevents the Spec-head relation between the wh-item in SpecC and the inflected verb, because it intervenes between the two. It is the more proximate head to the item, but it is not marked [+wh]. Hence the wh-criterion is violated. The intuition behind this is that the clitic, in this case the preverbal negative marker, has a minimality effect because it is the first accessible head to the wh-item and it is not marked [+wh].

I will not adopt a definite solution here because the degree of variation in the dialects is so great that it deserves an intensive study on its own before we can formulate an adequate generalization.

Let’s turn to the second problem raised by the contrast between (64b) and (64c):

(64) b *No vienlo?
    Not comes+he?
 c. No! vien?
    Not+he comes?

If inversion does not apply, does the inflected verb move to C or not? If it does not, how is the wh-criterion satisfied?

In the case of negative interrogatives we do not have any reason to assume that inversion is excluded on its own by some independent principle, as was the case of subject interrogation in 3.1. Hence the equivalence missing inversion - no movement of the inflected verb to C is still valid. If the verb does not move to C, the wh-criterion is violated. Let’s take into consideration cases of negative interrogatives with wh-items:

18 This hypothesis entails that two types of clitics have to be distinguished on the basis of the level of adjunction. Object clitics for instance must adjoin to a level which is low enough not to be visible to the wh-item. Hence they can appear at the left of the verb on C as in (i):
   (i) Quando lo gheto visto?
       when him have+you seen?
       (when did you see him?)
   On the contrary subject clitics and the preverbal negative marker are adjoined to a higher level and produce the minimality effect that prevents the Spec-head relation between the wh-item and the inflected verb marked [wh+].
(67)  *Cossa no galo fatto?
      what not has+he done?

Wh-questions behave parallel to yes/no questions with respect to inversion. As
expected, (67), in which inversion applies, is ungrammatical. But wh-questions are
ungrammatical even if inversion does not apply:

(68)  * Cossa nol ga magnà?
      what not+he has eaten?

(68) is possible only as an echo question, with a perceptible pause after the
item. The normal way to express a negative question is once again a cleft structure:

(69)  Cossa ze che nol ga magnà?
      what is that not+he has eaten?

As discussed in the previous sections, clefting is an escape strategy in order to
avoid a violation of the wh-criterion and at the same time not moving the verb.
Wh-negative questions do not present thus any violation of the wh-criterion. A
sentence like (68), in which the verb does not move to C, is excluded as the theory
predicts. On the contrary, in yes/no questions the verb does not move to C, no cleft
structure is used, and the sentences are good all the same, as (64c) shows:

(64)  c. Nol vien?
      Not+he comes?

The contrast between (68) and (64c) shows that there is an asymmetry between
yes/no questions and wh-questions. In section 2.2, the case of Venetian has been
presented, in which yes/no questions clearly diverge from wh-questions. We noted
this fact leaving the problem of its syntactic aspect open.

Negative questions constitute another context in which yes/no questions diverge
from wh-questions. Hence, Venetian is not an idiosyncratic dialect, with some
particular device in its grammar that permits a violation of the wh-criterion only in
yes/no questions.

What is the primitive property behind this asymmetry? It seems that yes/no
questions can violate the wh-criterion, if there is some conflict with another principle,
while wh-questions can never do that. In section 2.2 we suggested two possible ways
to solve the problem: yes/no questions do not need any operator in SpecC, or the
operator of yes/no questions can use a different type of operator if this is necessary,
while wh-questions are compelled to be interpreted on the basis of the wh-criterion.
The intuition behind both proposals is that wh-items are overt, and as such cannot
escape to the wh-criterion, while null operators are phonetically empty and as such
can be interpreted as a kind of element not submitted to the wh-criterion.
We know that there are operators that are not submitted to the \textit{wh}-criterion in the grammar, for instance operators of topicalized structures. It would not be surprising to discover that null operators of \textit{yes/no} questions are more similar to topicalization operators than to true \textit{wh}-operators, at least in Italian. (cfr. Cinque (1990) and Guasti and Poletto (1990)). This argument deserves a deeper analysis that lies beyond the scope of this work.

4. Conclusion

The present work constitutes a brief example of how interesting a comparative analysis of different, very closely related, languages can be for the study of the grammar in general and syntax in particular. In the light of a new theory about interrogative structures presented in Rizzi (1990), we have examined three dialects which share the same properties with respect to subject clitics in assertive contexts. It has been shown that they differ in the way a main interrogative sentence is expressed, and that this distinction can be captured postulating the existence of a parameter that rules the choice of the head marked with the feature [+\textit{wh}].

In the second part of the work some apparent cases of violation of the theory have been examined. For the most part they can be reduced to the interference of other general principles of the grammar, as the theta-criterion in the case of subjects, or minimality in the case of negation. A lot of problems remain open for further research and investigation, as, for instance, the precise characterization of null operators in \textit{yes/no} questions and in situ structures. Nevertheless, it has been shown that it is possible to interpret the great distributional variation of different languages as being the result of a small number of assumptions regarding universal grammar and parametric choices.
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