

Clitic Pronouns, Production Pressures, and Syntactic Change

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This paper argues that the shift from Latin free constituent word order and lack of clitic pronouns to the diverse Romance clitic systems with their rigid ordering relative to each other and to the verb can be seen as calcifications of alternative strategies for structure building that were the underpinning of Latin free word order effects, as driven at each stage by the ever-present dialogue constraint that production costs have to be minimised. I shall start by sketching a Dynamic Syntax grammar for Latin, and then sketch the transition stages from Medieval to Modern Spanish. The account turns on the Dynamic Syntax assumption that central to syntax (hence to both parsing and production) are concepts of structural underspecification and update, with syntax licensing the construction of unfixed nodes to be updated into tree representations of denotational content, with lexical specifications equally being in terms of tree-growth. Diachronic changes can then be seen as a shift in balance from general tree growth processes to lexically stored sequences of actions, via routinisations that may lead to apparent syntax-semantics opacity, allowing heterogeneous systems to develop. I shall first argue that initial positioning of pronouns in finite clauses (Latin), subsequent lexicalisation of morphologically distinct weak pronouns early in the clause (Medieval Spanish) and subsequent change to a strictly pre-verbal position (Modern Spanish) are all due to sequenced steps of (re)-routinisation. I shall then suggest that the varying Romance cross-language clitic distributions can be seen as calcifications of the alternative tree-growth processes freely available in the earlier system (eg. some clitics decorating unfixed nodes (some reflected in syncretic morphology), unambiguous clitics decorating fixed nodes, some clitics in paired sequences inducing clustered argument nodes, each an alternative tree-construction strategy in free word order languages). The result is a formal re-telling of the functionalist stance that language change is a reflection of interacting pragmatic and structural constraints.