

Minimizing minimizers' structure: Jespersen's cycle and focus

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Northern-Italian dialects provide a fertile testbed to investigate diachrony and linguistic theory. As is noted in the literature (Pescarini and Penello 2008), the diachronic renewal of negation with the emphatic negative polarity adverb *miga/mia* is more advanced in some varieties spoken in the Western part of Veneto (e.g. the province of Verona), though Jespersen's cycle is in its early stages in the rest of the region. For example, more oriental varieties (Venice and Padua) are less advanced in the grammaticalization process and use *miga* in some peculiar pragmatic contexts. *Miga* started its life as minimizer, denoting the lowest endpoint on a pragmatic scale, but now serves the function of denying already activated information in the Eastern varieties. On the contrary, *mia* in the area of Verona can surface anywhere, regardless of the informational state of affairs. In this paper, we aim to deploy such microvariation to reach a better understanding of Jespersen's cycle: if the locus of parametric variation is encoded within the features of functional heads (Borer-Chomsky conjecture), then we might be able to trace the different stages in terms of formal features and their syntactic behaviour. For Venetian *miga*, we adopt Frana and Rawlins' (2019) model of Italian *mica*. This emerging adverb stands as a Speech Act operator, *Falsum*, which, contrary to *Verum Focus*, denies old information belonging to the common ground, explaining why *mica* must meet discourse-linked information in order to be pragmatically felicitous. We argue that such pragmatic use is encoded lexically through a focus feature that evokes and exhaustifies the alternatives of truth of a proposition (*cf.* Lohnstein 2006). Moreover, this focal feature is held responsible for the covert movement of *mica* in LF at the left periphery. Some consequences follow: first, as Frana and Rawlins show, *mica* must scope over deontic obligative modals, yielding an unnecessary meaning (1); vice versa, simple negation can retain both the prohibitive and unnecessary meaning (2) (*cf.* Cormack and Smith 2002).

(1) *No ti ga miga da meterte na cravata* (Venetian)

NEG you have.2SG *miga* to wear a tie
'You do not have to wear a tie' NEG > MOD

(2) *No ti ga da meterte na cravata* (Venetian)

'You must not / do not have to wear a tie' MOD > NEG, NEG > MOD

Besides these, we provide further evidence of its peripheral positioning: first, *wh-movement* is banned with *miga* (3). Interestingly, *miga* can undergo overt focus fronting and be positioned at the beginning of the sentence (4), but this leads to incompatibility with other focused constituents (5), since multiple foci are banned.

(3) *Cossa no ti ga (*miga) fatto?* (Venetian)

What NEG you have.2SG *miga* done?
'What did you not do?'

(4) *Miga go comprà na cravata* (Venetian)

Miga have.1SG bought a tie
'I haven't bought a tie'

(5) **NA CRAVATA miga go comprà* (Venetian)

A TIE *miga* have.1SG bought

‘I haven’t bought a tie’

Second, *miga* is ungrammatical in restrictive relative clauses (6) and in central conditional antecedents (7) since these have a more reduced left periphery (Haegeman 2010).

- (6) **Serco na cravata che no sia miga curta* (Venetian)
Search.1SG a tie that NEG be.SUBJ miga short
‘ I am looking for a tie that is not short’
- (7) **Se no piove miga, vegni da nialtri?* (Venetian)
If NEG rains miga, come.2PL by us?
‘ If it does not rain would you come over?’

We can then compare a more advanced variety, the dialect spoken in Gazzolo (Verona). Here, *mia* is free to appear in out-of-the-blue contexts (i.e. it does not represent a Falsum operator any longer, but standard negation). By adopting Breitbarth (2014)’s theory, where negative reinforcers of Jespersen’s cycle have richer internal structure than the fully grammaticalized sentential negation, and Garzonio (2019)’s proposal, which argues for an additive focus feature in the lexicalization of *mica*, we propose the idea that such internal complexity is lost in later stages of the cycle in Veneto. In particular, we argue that the additive focus feature is not inherently specified anymore, in a similar process as *Minimize Structure* (Van Gelderen 2008) or *Structural Deficiency* (Cardinaletti & Starke 1999) (but see also Simpson and Wu 2002 for French *pas*). The reduced *mia* in Veronese, deprived of its focal feature, does not move to CP and hence does not retain the restrictions presented above. Its new status would give it the freedom to scope over or under modals, to be compatible with relatives, central conditionals, and in combination with other focus- and *wh*-movement. However, it cannot be overtly fronted at the beginning of the sentence, which suggests the loss of focal discourse properties, typically encoded in CP. To conclude, from this microparametric comparison, we are able to identify the role of functional projections in the diachronic process of negation renewal. In particular, the internal specification of minimizers and their change is reflected both in meaning and syntactic behaviour. Outside the core syntactic realm, these findings may also shed more light on interface phenomena: if focus is elaborated by the syntax-phonology interface, then we might expect a change in the prosody, as well. Preliminary evidence for such intuition is already found in the prosodic analysis proposed by Magistro et al. (acc.), where the different status of *miga* in Venice and Gazzolo is mapped into distinct prosodic contours.

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