The Lexicalization of Aboutness: Expletive *chiru* in Cilentano and *a* in Fornese

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Expletive-like elements are often found in null-subject languages (see Hinzelin and Kaiser 2007, Carrilho 2008, Nicolis 2008, Kaiser and Remberger 2009 a.o.), in which the expletive seems, at prima facie, to function as a syntactic placeholder for the subject position. The paper analyses the syntactic-pragmatic behaviour of two expletive-like elements in two null-subject Romance languages, namely Fornese (cf. 1), spoken in the North-Eastern part of Italy, and Cilentano (cf. 2), spoken in Southern Italy.

(1)   A   riva   las   feminas
        EXPL   arrive.3SG   the.F.PL   woman.F.PL
        "There arrive the women"

(2)   Chiru   a   muortu   mariti   e   muglieri
        EXPL   have.3SG   die.PTCP   husband.M.PL   CONJ   wife.FPL
        "There died husband and wife"

In examples (1) and (2), the finite verb agrees with the preverbal place holder *a/chiru*, rather than with the plural only argument of the unaccusative verb 'arrive', suggesting that, in these examples, *a* and *chiru* behave like an expletive proper. The use of *a* and *chiru* is currently expanding to all canonical syntactic environments in which non-null subject languages require an expletive subject (i.e., weather, presentational, existential, impersonal and extraposition, see Williams 2000, Biberauer and Roberts 2010, Pescarini 2014). *Chiru* and *a*, in fact, seem to be robustly established with weather verbs (due to their quasi-argumental nature, see Bolinger 1977, Levin 2015).

Whist it may be argued that the presence of expletive-like *a* in Fornese is linked to the hybrid status of Northern Italian Dialects (abbreviated NIDs) as non-consistent null-subject languages (Cardinaletti and Repetti 2010), the status of *chiru* in Cilento is more puzzling, as Southern Italian Dialects generally behave as null-subject languages proper.

In the paper, we argue that both Fornese and Cilentano are developing comparable expletive-like elements from the same type of discourse-pragmatic marker, which lexically marks an "empty" aboutness/shift topic position. In different syntactic environments, *chiru* and *a* are in fact optional and can co-occur with pronominal or lexical subjects (see Sornicola 1996 and Ledgeway 2010 for chillo in Neapolitan). In other NIDs, *a* has been described as marking the following material as novel information (Benincà 1994, see also Poletto 2000), generally in broad focus. With reference to invariant expletive-like *chillo* in Neapolitan (i.e., closely related to *chiru* in Cilentano), Sornicola (1996) and Ledgeway (2010) also claim that it is generally followed by new information, and it is incompatible with other topicalizations and focalizations.

The striking similarities in the syntactic and discourse-pragmatic properties of *chiru* and *a* led us to conclude that these two elements are a pragmatic place-holder for an "empty" aboutness/shift topic position. In line with Erteschik-Shir (1999), the truth value of the propositional content of all clauses in

broad focus must be checked against a topic (in the sense of Reinhart 1981), and hence possess a topic-comment articulation. In the absence of an overt or null aboutness/shit topic, *a* and *chiru* surface as a syntactic-pragmatic placeholder. We claim that the innovation in Fornese and Cilentano then lies in the fact that these elements are reanalysed as TP-internal expletive elements (see Faarlund 1990 for an account of the phenomenon in Germanic).

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