Expletives in old Venetan

In a C14th Venetan text, *La navigazione di San Brendano*, edited by Grignani (1975), we note the optional presence of a non-referential pronominal form in sentence-focus structures (1). We claim that the emergence of this kind of expletive spells out anaphoric agreement with the implicit (spatio-temporal) Topic that VS sentence-focus structures presuppose.

(1) a. **elo**   li   aparse   una isola   piziola
       EXPL   to-him   appeared.3   a   island small
       'There appeared to him a small island' (26-27, p. 180)

  b. *un dì, sì   li   aparse   una nivola molto granda*
     one day thus to-him appeared.3   a   cloud very   big
     'One day there appeared to him a very big cloud' (29-30, p. 108)

  c. *Qua   aparse   a li   frari   tre   puovoli*
     here appeared.3 to the friars three   populations
     'Here there appeared three communities of people to the friars' (10, p. 126)

  d. **elo**   vene   una gran   nivola blanca
     EXPL   came.3   a   great   cloud white
     'There came a great white cloud' (22-23, p. 130)

  e. *ora vene   uno frar de lo   monestier*
     now came.3   a   friar of the monastery
     'Now there came a friar from the monastery' (2-3, p. 94)

Observe that spatio-temporal reference is explicit in the absence of the expletive (*un dì* in 1b, *Qua* in 1c, *ora* in 1e), but need not be overtly expressed if the expletive occurs (1a, 1d), suggesting that the expletive spells out anaphoric agreement (Bresnan and Mchombo 1987, Bentley 2018) with an implicit Topic that is non-referential and non-presupposed in the co-text.

All the sentences in (1) exhibit a syncretic verb form that lacks inflectional number features in the third person (see 1a-b vs 1c). The emergence of the expletive may be indicative of the lack of agreement for any phi feature of the focal postverbal subject. However, in the V2 syntax of this medieval text, subjects that express a Continuing/Referential Topic can, too, be postverbal, as is shown below.

(2) a. *e trovà   li frari lo monestir de san   Abeo*
       and found.3 the friars the monastery of saint Abba
       'And the friars found the monastery of saint Abba' (27-28, p. 88)

  b. *Qua fe   li frari la Zena Domino*
     here made.3 the friars the supper to-God
     'Here the friars held the (Mass of) Lord's Supper' (25, p. 66)

Thus, the V-S agreement pattern with the syncretic verb form obtains also in predicate-focus structures (2), but the expletive is not found in this type of information structure. By contrast, only sentence-focus structures exhibit the non-referential pronominal form, albeit optionally, as is shown below.

(3) a. **elo**   li   vene   munegi incontra
       EXPL   to-him came.3   monks   across
       'There came monks towards him' (13-14, p. 92)

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vene   altri   frari   incontra questi
came.3   other   friars   towards   these (monks)
'There came other friars towards these monks' (1, p.98)

In (3a-b), the focal subjects *munegi* 'monks' and *frari* 'the friars' cannot be said to fail (or not to fail) to control grammatical agreement more distinctively than the topical subjects *li frari* in (2a-b) do (or do not). Also note that subject clitics appear at a later stage, i.e. after 16th (Benincà 1995, Poletto 1995).

The Venetan text under examination testifies to the earliest stage of the grammaticalization of subject agreement, when an expletive form starts to appear, though not consistently, to spell out anaphoric agreement with the implicit Topic of sentence-focus structures with a postverbal subject. This supports the view that VS sentence-focus constructions are predications of an implicit, semantically unspecified, discourse-dependent Topic (Saccon 1992, 1993, Erteschik-Shir 1997, Pinto 1997, Tortora 1997, 2014, Manzini and Savoia 2005, Parry 2013, Bentley and Cruschina 2018).

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