A syntactic innovation? The case of multiple interrogatives in Italian

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This study explores the acceptability of multiple interrogatives (MIs) in Standard Italian from an experimental and a theoretical point of view. Contrary to previous studies on the topic (e.g. Calabrese, 1982; Rizzi, 1997; Stoyanova, 2008; a.o.), it shows that MIs are at least marginally acceptable in Neo-Standard Italian (cf. Berruto, 1987) and that they are analyzable as language-contact phenomena.

WhPs and contrastive focus have been shown to be in complementary distribution and to give rise to weak crossover effects (Rizzi, 1997), which has led to an analysis of Italian MIs as unacceptable. In particular, for Rizzi (1997; et seq.), this unacceptability derives from the postulation that whPs are licensed by the unique and non-recursive focus phrase (FocP) in CP. In terms of feature-checking, it can be argued that both whPs and contrastive foci raise to spec,FocP to check a strong [FOC] feature. Conversely, Berruto (2017) argues that Italian MIs are recent productive calques from English.

For the current study, I am adopting experimental syntax for the investigation of the acceptability of Italian MIs, an approach that has already been fruitfully employed in the study of English MIs by Clifton, Jr. et al. (2006). In a preliminary experiment, whPs were manipulated in terms of Superiority Violation and position with respect to the verb. The results showed that the 131 participants rated the type of structure illustrated in (1b) an average of 3 on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = unacceptable; 5 = acceptable). Based on these results, I am delivering an ongoing experiment, whose design manipulates the lower whP, as in (1). There is an unacceptable floor condition (1a), a fully acceptable ceiling condition (1c), and a condition deploying the type of structures previously mentioned (1b):

(1) a. Chi   ha   mangiato   cosa diavolo?
       who have.3SG.PRES.IND eat.PAST.PART what devil
       'Who ate what the hell?'
    b. Chi   ha   mangiato   cosa?
       who have.3SG.PRES.IND eat.PAST.PART what
       'Who ate what?'
    c. Chi   ha   mangiato   questo?
       who have.3SG.PRES.IND eat.PAST.PART this
       'Who ate this?'

This experiment also involves acceptability judgments on a 5-point Likert scale task and its results should indicate the current level of acceptability of these structures in Neo-Standard Italian.

Since aggressively-non-D-linked whPs cannot occur *in situ* (Pesetsky, 1987), I argue that the unacceptability of (1a) derives from this property, and that the lower whP should be analyzed as *in situ*, similarly to its English counterpart. I therefore suggest that, since these MIs are better analyzed as language-contact phenomena, their feature-checking requirements differ. Studies dealing with language contact (cf. D'Alessandro, 2020) and language acquisition (cf. Serratrice et al., 2004) show that in such circumstances, interface features like [FOC] either weaken or disappear. Consequently, if the strong [FOC] feature which seems to characterize Italian whPs weakens, it is possible to satisfy their feature-checking requirements by only fronting the higher whP, while the lower one can recur to long-distance Agree to check them *in situ*. If on the right track, my analysis accounts for the preliminary results of the experimental component without discharging previous analyses of Italian wh-structures.

These ongoing empirical results indicate that structures analyzed as unacceptable can have at least a certain degree of acceptability. The study also shows that in such cases, previous accounts do not necessarily have to be contradicted, but only broadened to account for more recent syntactic phenomena.

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