Romance clitics in diachrony. An integrated approach

Apart from their prosodic deficiency (e.g. inability to bear stress), Romance weak pronouns evince a number of properties that make them manifestly distinct from other classes of linguistic signs. Over time, they have evolved leaving speakers with virtually no choice as to their forms, the element to which they are attached, and their exact placement. Thus, the erstwhile syntactic freedom of clitic pronouns has been nearly lost. As a consequence, they more resemble verb affixes (e.g. person / number endings) than separate full-fledged words.

The present proposal aims to ascertain why the drift towards lesser autonomy actually came about and to reconstruct how it proceeded. The phenomena to be investigated have been relatively understudied thus far. They comprise: the decline of interpolation in European Portuguese (the separation of clitic and verb by some other element), the disappearance of mesoclisis in Occitan (presence of clitic pronouns between infinitive and auxiliary in future and conditional forms) and Portuguese multi-verb constructions enabling speakers to insert pronouns interchangeably at different slots within linear structure of sentences (root declaratives).

The study will be conducted with the aid of original language data: European Portuguese (13 by 19th century) and old Occitan (12 by 15th centuries). Examples are going to be retrieved from specialized corpora. Their size requires the tasks to be performed collectively rather than individually. The analyses to be carried out have an essentially diachronic character: rather than characterizing a single bygone state of Romance grammar, they focus on how clitics were different in particular phases of their development.

The significance of this research programme is tied to problems recurrently discussed in theoretical linguistics: what is the basic unit in speech processing (roughly understanding and production) – words, parts of words or combinations of many elements bearing a single stress? Are these basic units likely to change in the course of language's history?

On a methodological level, the phenomena brought under discussion are supposed to be a testing ground for the adequacy of theoretical models accounting for how grammatical shifts are triggered. Two seemingly contradictory frameworks, generative grammar and functional / typological linguistics, are demonstrated to provide equally satisfactory explanations.