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Yes-no question/marking in Italian dialects : a typological, theoretical and experimental approach

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1. Introduction

The goal of this dissertation is to provide an account of polar questions in Italian dialects from a typological, theoretical and empirical perspective. Special attention is given to Tuscan, Central and Southern Italian dialects, as they have often been neglected in favor of Northern Italian dialects in the past¹.

Polar questions, a.k.a. yes/no questions, are those interrogatives whose expected answer is either *yes* or *no*. Since the late 1970's, scholars have proposed various typological classifications of yes/no questions in the world's languages (Ultan, 1978; Sadock & Zwicky, 1985; Dryer, 2005; Miestamo, 2007). Despite the high degree of variation, it was shown that they can be reduced to eight main categories:

- Question Particle;
- Interrogative intonation;
- Interrogative verb morphology;
- QP + interrogative verb morphology;
- Interrogative word order;
- Disjunction (A-not-A);
- Absence of declarative morpheme;
- No distinction between declarative and yes/no question.

Although much work has been done on question marking in recent and less recent years (cf. Poletto, 1993, 2000; Poletto & Vanelli, 1995; Obenauer, 2004; Damonte & Garzonio, 2008, 2009; Garzonio, 2012; Cruschina, 2008, 2012), no attempt has been made to build such a typological classification for the Italian dialects. The present work aims at filling this gap by exploring whether the variation in polar question-marking attested in the Italian dialects can be accounted for along (some of) the eight categories listed above.

It is shown that Italian dialects display a relatively large number of typologically diverse yes/no question-marking strategies, as opposed to Standard Italian and Romance. Furthermore, Several Tuscan, Central and Southern Italian dialects display a construction that poses a challenge for standard typological classifications of polar questions. In these dialects, yes/no questions are introduced by *che*, a question particle homophonous with the *wh*-word corresponding to *what*, followed by a finite form of the verb *fare* 'do'. An example contrasting a declarative sentence with the corresponding yes/no question is provided in (1.a-b).

¹ As far as Tuscan dialects are concerned, this is mainly due to their close relatedness to Standard Italian.

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- 1) a. Vai al mare.
go-PRES.2.Sg to-the sea
'You are going to the sea.'
- b. Che fai vai al mare?
che do-PRES.2.Sg go-PRES.2.Sg to-the sea
'Are you going to the sea?'

[Sienese]

The question in (1.b) is problematic because it seems to display a biclausal structure, as two finite verbs occur. At first sight, it may look like a biclausal discourse containing two questions: *What are you doing? Are you going to the sea?*

In order to shed some light on the nature of this construction in Sienese and related dialects, a detailed analysis of its syntactic properties is proposed. Several syntactic tests are developed to show that it should be analyzed as a monoclausal construction rather than as a biclausal discourse containing two questions. A possible derivation is provided to account for the underlying structure of *che fare* questions in Sienese and related dialects.

Additional evidence for analyzing *che fare* questions as monoclausal constructions comes from the results of empirical testing. A production experiment was carried out to investigate the phonetic realization of *che fare* questions and the corresponding biclausal discourses in Sienese.

1.1 The structure of this dissertation

This dissertation is divided in two parts. Part one provides a typological overview of yes/no question-marking in Italian dialects, showing that one construction poses a challenge for standard typological classifications of polar questions à la Dryer (2005). Part 2 singles out this construction and accounts for its syntactic properties from a theoretical and experimental perspective.

1.1.1 Part one – Chapter 2

Chapter 1 deals with yes/no question-marking from a typological perspective. First, an overview is provided of the yes/no question-marking strategies attested in the world's languages. Then, the discussion is narrowed down to Latin and Romance languages. Eventually, a typological classification of yes/no question-marking in the Italian dialects is proposed. The focus of the discussion lies on the grammatical choices made by these languages among the strategies available in the world's languages. The main research questions tackled in this chapter are the following:

- i. Can the yes/no question-marking strategies attested in the Italian dialects fit into a broader typology of polar questions as proposed by Ultan (1978), Sadock & Zwicky (1985) and Dryer (2005)?

- ii. Are there any correlations between the distribution of the strategies available in the Italian dialects and other parameters?
- iii. What can yes/no question-marking in the Italian dialects tell us about the structure of natural language?

It is shown that not all yes/no question-marking devices found in the Italian dialects can fit into standard typological classifications as proposed by e.g. Dryer (2005).

To answer question (ii), it is shown that there is a correlation between the availability of subject clitics and strategies such as sentence-initial question particles, Interrogative Intonation alone and the use of a question particle in combination with interrogative verb morphology. In particular, the data suggest that an isogloss should be added to the Massa-Senigallia line, namely one that separates the dialects that display a sentence-initial question particle homophonous with the *wh*-word *what* and those that don't.

Finally, it is shown that most yes/no question-marking strategies employed in the Italian dialects are used in a number of different non-veridical contexts, such as hypothetical, concessive and optative clauses. This suggests that veridicality (or the absence thereof) may be marked morphologically in these varieties rather than clause type. Despite the availability of typologically diverse morphosyntactic devices, interrogative intonation seems to be the only dedicated strategy to mark yes/no questions in the Italian dialect.

1.1.2 Part two – Chapter 3 and 4

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 deals with the syntactic properties of *che fare* questions in Siennese and other Central and Southern Italian varieties. The main research question tackled in this chapter is the following:

- i. What is the underlying structure of polar questions headed by *che fare* in Siennese?

First, some restrictions on the occurrence of *fare* in Siennese are presented. Then, a comparison is made with other Central and Southern Italian dialects, with particular reference to Sicilian. Eventually, four syntactic tests are developed in order to show that *che fare* questions should be analyzed as monoclausal yes/no questions rather than as biclausal discourses containing two questions. These tests involve:

- a) Phi-, Tense, Mood and Aspect feature-sharing between *fare* and the lexical verb of the question;
- b) the possibility of having more than one negation;
- c) the positions available for the subject;

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- d) the possibility for *fare* and the lexical verb to assign different theta-roles to their subject.

These tests show that many restrictions that apply to biclausal discourses do not apply to *che fare* questions, suggesting that they should be analyzed as two different constructions.

A derivation is proposed for *che fare* questions in Sienese, where the lexical verb moves to T and *fare* is merged in C. I argue that the agreement morphology showing up on *fare* and the lexical verb is the result of two AGREE relations. Once the phase head *fare* is merged in C, AGREE takes place: both *fare* and the lexical verb simultaneously establish an AGREE relation with the subject, as it is the only element with the appropriate features in their c-command domain.

Finally, a working hypothesis is explored that may account for the different syntactic and semantic properties of Sienese and Sicilian *che fare* questions from a diachronic perspective.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 deals with the phonetic realization of *che fare* questions in Sienese. The aim of this chapter is to provide empirical evidence for the theoretical claims made in chapter 3, where I argue that *che fare* questions should be analyzed as monoclausal yes/no questions rather than as biclausal discourses containing two questions. The main research questions tackled in this chapter are the following:

- i. Do speakers use grammatical cues, other than morphosyntactic ones, to distinguish between *che fare* questions and the corresponding biclausal discourses?
- ii. How can the distinction between *che fare* questions and biclausal discourses be established when they form a minimal pair?

To answer the questions in (i-ii), a production experiment was conducted. Eleven Sienese speakers were asked to pronounce a sample of 35 sentences, including several minimal pairs of *che fare* questions and biclausal discourses. The recordings were stored in a database and digitally analyzed with the *Praat* speech processing software (Boersma & Weenink, 2005). Duration, intensity and pitch curve measurements were automatically extracted with the help of a *Praat* script. Eventually, a statistical analysis was performed on these measurements with SPSS, including descriptive statistics, paired-samples t-tests and Linear Discriminant Analysis. The results of the statistical analysis provide evidence in favor of a sharp distinction between *che fare* questions and their corresponding biclausal discourses, even in the absence of any morphosyntactic cues. Specifically, they show that Sienese speakers produce a significant difference between minimal pairs of *che fare* questions and biclausal discourses when it comes to duration.

As expected, biclausal discourses containing two questions are subject to pre-boundary vowel lengthening, which affects the duration of *fare*. The fact that the mean duration of *fare* is significantly shorter in *che fare* questions than in their corresponding biclausal

discourses suggest that *che fare* questions do not contain a clause boundary, and hence that they are monoclausal yes/no questions.

