

What is sentence? Problem solved!

Intro. Our first goal in this talk is proposing an approach to reduced structures in Italian which builds on Chomsky's (2019) claim that syntactic objects, crucially including sentences, can be exocentric, namely they have no head such as T, Agr, etc. By doing that, we step in the debate between those who argue that all reduced clauses must have a full clause base and are thus elliptical (Morgan 1973; Merchant 2004) and those who argue that at least some of them are base-generated as such (cf. Barton 1990; Progovac 2013). We will focus on 5 different participle reduced structures in Italian, which all have in common the fact they involve the past participle of unaccusative and passive verbs only, which agrees in gender and number with the internal argument. They are clearly reduced: they display no external argument, no case, no tense, no negation, no wh-movement or focus. However they can have illocutionary force, as they can be interrogative, declarative or exclamative.

A premise on labeling (Chomsky 2019). A syntactic object α can be labeled if (i) it contains a simpler element, i.e. a head, that can be found by doing a minimal search or (ii) α is formed by merging β and γ , where β and γ agree and share a feature (labeling by feature sharing).

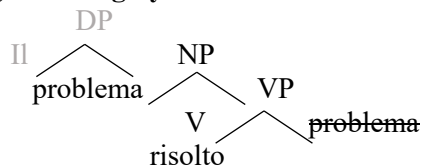
We push this further assuming that labeling by feature sharing is the mechanism which identifies sentences, hence objects with illocutionary force, no matter their category. We make the hypothesis that, if feature sharing is responsible for the establishment of a subject-predicate relation (and whence of illocutionary force) at what we can call for convenience the T level, this should also happen with agreement with the internal argument in a smaller portion of the clause. This means that there should be reduced structures with illocutionary force. This is what happens in the reduced structures we will explore in this talk.

Reduced relatives and bare noun reduced: no Case assigner and two different labels. (1) illustrates the first two reduced structures that we shall discuss:

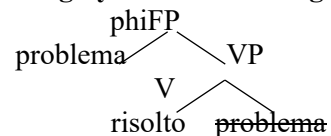
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|-----|---|-------------------|
| (1) | Il problema risolto (era facile)
the-SING-MASC problem-SING-MASC fixed-SING-MASC was easy
'The problem that has been solved was easy' | REDUCED RELATIVES |
| (2) | Problema risolto!
problem-SING-MASC fixed-SING-MASC
'Problem solved!' | BARE NOUN REDUCED |

In both cases only a VP is projected, where the unaccusative verb assigns a theta role to its sole argument, which, being a bare NP (as opposed to a DP), does not need case. This NP moves to the edge of the VP as the result of the probing of the past participle and they share phi-features. It is only at this stage that the two derivations diverge: if the shared phi-features provide the label, as in (4), the resulting object is a sentence; if the N provides the label, as in (3), the output is a nominal expression that can merge with a D and get case from it.

(3) Labeling by Minimal search



(4) Labeling by Feature Sharing



Dislocated reduced: Topic as an alternative to Case-The radically reduced structure in (5), which contains a right dislocated DP and is ungrammatical without the intonational break signaled by the comma, shares all other properties listed in the introduction: only unaccusatives are allowed, it has full illocutionary force, but there is no tense, negation or focus; agreement with past participle is obligatory. Given these analogies, we maintain that these structures are as small as VP and we extend to them the analysis proposed above: the internal argument (here a DP) moves to the periphery of the VP being probed by the past participle. Here, labeling by feature sharing mechanism takes place, and the structure is identified as a sentence, much like in (4). The derivation involves a further step, namely the topicalization of the internal argument.

- (5) Risolto, il problema
 fixed-SING-MASC the-SING-MASC problem-SING-MASC
 ‘As for the problem, it has been solved’

DISLOCATED REDUCED

A question arises, though. Given the absence of *v*, accusative case cannot be assigned. If so, how can the topicalized DP be licensed without a case? We shall argue, based on a number of observations going from the incompatibility of case and topic markers in Japanese to the crosslinguistic distribution of CLLD and clitic doubling, that topicalization provides an alternative to Case marking for DP visibility/licensing.

Fully reduced. What we call fully reduced structures are illustrated in (6).

- (6) a. Risolto! b. Risolto?

FULLY REDUCED

They display the usual set of properties. The analogies with DISLOCATED REDUCED are striking and call for a unified analysis. We propose that here the DP that surfaces in DISLOCATED REDUCED is topic-dropped.

Absolute unaccusative reduced. Absolute clauses as (7), just like the other structures, a) contain the agreeing participle of an unaccusative verb and no further inflectional head and b) overtly show only an internal argument. What is different is that this construction cannot be a sentence, i.e. it cannot have an illocutionary force on its own: it has only an adverbial distribution, somehow juxtaposed to the main clause, hence the term “absolute” it traditionally receives. This correlates with the lack of movement to the edge of the participial, as expected if internal Merge is a prerequisite to labeling by feature sharing.

- (7) Morto Gianni, tutti cominciammo ad avere paura
 dead-SING-MASC Gianni tutti began to having feared
 ‘After Gianni’s death, we all started being scared’

A natural hypothesis is that this is yet another instance of the bare VP structure that stands alone as a radically reduced structure. But how can the full DP be licensed here? It is not a bare NP which does not need case, as in (1-2); there is no topicalization which can provide an alternative to Case marking, as in (5-6). Suppose the entire structure is in topic: it is indeed dislocated, separated by an intonational break from the main clause, in a position that reminds that of a hanging topic. Furthermore, it introduces background information against which the informational content of the main clause is understood. Granted its topic-like status, the hypothesis is that the internal argument in (7) receives a topic marking by long distance agreement with the past participle, namely the category that labels the participial clause (in traditional terms “the head”). The proposal is that the topic-hood status can be shared via agreement. We shall argue that this reduced unaccusative structure is not to be confused with has been described by Belletti (1990), that corresponds to a larger structure including an external PRO (as in *Licenziati gli operai, il padrone festeggiò, lit. fired the workers the manager run-a-party*).

Conclusion. Building on the idea that Internal Merge of two complex syntactic objects that share phi-features can create an exocentric phrase, labeled by those phi-features, which in turn is identified with predication and receives a sentential interpretation, we assume that this can happen at the level of VP, if the internal argument agrees with a past participle and is internally merged to its edge. Although the internal make up and the size of the structure which is created varies, it can be a *sentence*. So, we think to have shown that having an illocutionary force, and a related simplified left periphery, can be dissociated from the vast cartography of complex tensed clauses, and can result from the labeling by feature sharing operation applied to a structure as small as the VP. If we are right, there could be two ways of building a sentence: either by labeling a structure through simple phi-features sharing, or by piling up functional projections probing for criterial positions of various kinds, producing fully-fledged clauses. How can the two strategies coexist? We shall speculate that reduced structures in adults are a sort of fossil from the first syntactic phase of language acquisition.