Cyclical change and deficient pronouns: a view from Old Italo-Romance datives
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1. It has been proposed (e.g. by Egerland 2010) that the Choice principle introduced by Cardinaletti and Starke (1999) to explain the synchronic distribution of strong, weak and clitic pronouns, can also affect diachronic change. For instance, strong 3sg person Latin pronoun illé becomes weak egli in Old Italian and clitic e’ in some present day Italo-Romance varieties (Egerland 2010). Similarly, the same cline could be argued also for the 3pl genitive/dative pronoun:

(1) a. Alii sibi esse illorum similes expetant (Latin)
others themselves.DA be them.GEN similar expect ‘Others would want to have children similar to those.’ (Plautus, Most.)
b. da che lor non piacessi…. (Old Florentine)
from that them.DAT not pleased.2SG ‘… since they do not like you…’ (1274; Brunetto Latini, Tesoretto, v. 1754)
c. e mai no lo’ volse dare udienza
and never not them.DAT wanted.DAT give hearing (Old Sienese) ‘…but he never agreed to hear them’ (1362; Cronaca senese)

2. The development from the Latin strong form illorum to the Old Sienese clitic lo’ (with a shift from genitive to dative) can be seen as an instance of a cycle from XP to X°. In this talk, we will show that if one assumes that the Head Preference principle (Van Gelderen 2009) is sufficient to explain the cline from strong to clitic functional items, the individuation of a strong-weak-clitic cycle for dative loro is problematic (see also Vedovato 2009 on this as a ‘broken cycle’).

3. We show that the distributional properties associated with weak dative pronouns in Old and Modern Italian are a consequence of more general phenomena, like Verb Second. In the Old Florentine texts (from the second half of the 13th cent. onwards), loro is not a well–behaved weak element in the sense of Cardinaletti (1991) and Cardinaletti & Starke (1999): while it already had the same morphosyntactic and distributional properties as ModIt loro, Old Florentine loro could also appear in positions where only clitics can appear, i. e. after negation and after the Focus particle sì (Benincà 2006):

(2) a. se voi non loro lo date. (Old Florentine)
if you not them.DAT it.ACC give ‘if you do not concede it to them’ (1350, Deca prima di Tito Livio Volgarizzata, b. 7, chap. 14)
b. Sì loro avviene come per ammonestamento di natura, che… (Old Florentine)
So them.DAT happens how by lesson of nature, that…
(1300; Tesoro di Brunetto Latini volgarizzato, b. 5, chap. 54)

Moreover, it appears that pre-T loro occurred in a position close to T like other clitic elements, as cases of a whole constituent separating loro from the tensed verb are extremely rare, if not virtually absent.

4. The clitic lo’ of Old Sienese behaves like proper clitics (see Egerland 2010). Yet it also displays one striking non-clitic property, namely the possibility of violating the Person Case Constraint as it can be in a cluster with 1st/2nd accusative clitics:

(3) Cristo mai non me lo’ parta dall’anima. (Old Sienese)
Christ never not me to.them divide from.the soul
‘May Jesus never take me away from their soul’
(1367; Giovanni Colombini, Lettere, 28)
5. Some Northern Italo-Romance varieties moreover, like for instance Old Venetian, Old Paduan and Old Veronese, do not seem to have clear cases of dative _loro_, as they present already the dative clitic _ghe/ge_ with no gender/number specifications. In other words, these early varieties attest a situation which has become the norm in nearly all the modern Italo-Romance varieties.

(4) Alguni no ge piaxe questo muo' de bruxa(r)la, … (Old Paduan)
Some not to.them pleases this manner of to.burn.it

“All some do not like this manner of burning it, ....”

(1390; _El libro agregà de Serapion_, chap. 28)

6. These facts are rather problematic if one assumes ‘weak’ as something more than a descriptive label. We propose a new account for complex cycles (like the one which affected pronouns in the history of Italo-Romance) based on two mechanisms: (i) re-analysis as higher items in the functional spine (Roberts and Roussou 2003); and (ii), loss of the inner lexical layer, (nP and NP).

(5) a. [DP D°[DeixP [IdentificationP [af illorum [nP Restrictor]]]]] – strong _illorum_
   b. [DP D°[DeixP [IdentificationP [loro [nP Restrictor]]]]] – DOM _loro_ (“well-behaved weak”)
   b’. [DP D°[DeixP [loro [IdentificationP [nP Restrictor]]]]] – clitic-like _loro_ (exx. (2))
   c. [DP D°[lo ] [DeixP [IdentificationP [nP Restrictor]]]] – clitic _lo_
   d. [DP D°[gli] [DeixP [IdentificationP [nP Restrictor]]]] – clitic _gli_ (new cycle; cf. Vedovato, 2009)

The structure in (5a) is for “strong” pronouns, which do not exhibit particular distributional restrictions; (5b) is the internal structure of mildly deficient pronouns that move as XPs and can satisfy V2 in both the peripheries in the sentence structure (Poletto 2014); (5b’), we propose, is the structure for the cases in (2), where _loro_ appears in the clitic area (but crucially never undergoes enclisis); (5c) is the structure of clitic _lo_ which does not have PCC restrictions. Finally, (5d) is the Modern Italian clitic _gli_ or the Old Venetan _ghe/ge_, which do not distinguish Number. We will motivate the labels presented in (5), in particular as regards nP (cf. Leu 2005) and IndentificationP (which we take to be the locus for the interaction between Number and the Human/Inanimate distinction).

7. In conclusion, we maintain Cardinaletti and Starke’s (1999) idea of structural deficiency, but also claim that it should be characterized in a fine-grained way, in the sense that there can be more than two levels of deficiency, and the crosslinguistic variation regarding the clitic/weak divide can be more easily captured under this account. Finally, we argue that structural deficiency begins from the bottom up, rather than the top down (thus maintaining the Head Preference Principle).