Telling clitics from affixes: the morphological realization principle as a criterion

There is no agreement among linguists regarding the locus of Romance pronominal clitics in the architecture of grammar. According to the generative tradition, they are minor syntactic constituents (Perlmutter 1971, Kayne 1975, Rizzi 1986, Brandi & Cordin 1989). Since Zwicky (1977, 1985) and Zwicky & Pullum (1983), it has also been claimed that they are inflectional affixes (see Kaiser 1992 for French, Monachesi 1999 for Italian, Luis 2004 for European Portuguese, among others). Monachesi (1999: 21-22) summarizes the following criteria for identifying affixes, following Joseph (1990):

- Selectivity in combination
- Idiosyncratic behaviour
- Parallel to morphophonological process
- Ordering
- Phonological dependence

We assume that today's clitics have gone through a grammaticalization process, moving from one locus to another in the architecture of grammar and that forms with a common origin may be (syntactic) clitics in one language and affixes in another (Haiman 1991). We hypothesize that there is a further criterion, which enables us to tell, for a given language, whether its "clitics" belong to syntax or to morphology, we call it the morphological realization principle (MRP). According to MRP, inflectional features must be realized if, loosely speaking, a morphological realization is available. More precisely, MRP requires that a feature be realized in a given paradigmatic cell, if

- the feature is specified for that cell
- the realization is not systematically defined as zero
- the particular stem does not idiosyncratically reject the realization.

Hence, MRP is not violated in the following examples:

- Italo-Romance dialects have canta 'sings', 'sing', with no Number affix because Number is not specified for the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Person.
- In It. (and other languages), the feature [TENSE = PRESENT] is systematically realized by "zero", i.e. by the unaffixed stem.
- It. "non-inflecting" nouns such as film or yogurt are idiosyncratically unable to accept the Number-affix.

Clitics and affixes can be distinguished on the basis of MRP. If a given dependent form does not satisfy MRP, it is not an inflectional affix. Thus the Friulian and standard French "subject clitics" actually are clitics, because they ignore MRP. In Friulian, subject clitics are obligatory in some contexts, but ungrammatical in others. Thus the negation no must not be followed by a vocalic subject clitic (not *no e cianta, but no cianta 'she does not sing'). Notice that this constraint is not merely a phonological one; it also involves (morphological) syncretism avoidance (Gaglia 2010). In standard French, the subject clitic does not occur with unspecified subjects such as qui 'who' or tout le monde 'everyone'. Analogously, the ungrammaticality of a resumptive object clitic in It. contrastive focus constructions shows that forms like lo 'it' are clitics; cf. Il Tuo LIBRO ho comprato 'I bought YOUR BOOK' vs. Il tuo libro, lo ho comprato 'your book, I bought it'. If lo were an affix, MRP would be violated.

Besides being an efficient criterion for the distinction between clitics and affixes, MRP is a general characteristic of (inflectional) morphology and, hence, an argument for the autonomous status of morphology in the architecture of grammar.
References