

# The ASIS enterprise: a view on the construction of a syntactic atlas for the Northern Italian dialects

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## Abstract:

In this article we intend to illustrate how the ASIS (*Atlante Sintattico dell'Italia Settentrionale* “Syntactic Atlas of Northern Italy”) project has been created and developed. We discuss the theoretical, empirical, and practical problems that we encountered working on such an enterprise, and the choices we made in order to solve them. We have created a layered methodology, which has proved useful in gathering more and more detailed data in an interplay between theoretical analysis and field work. As no method is perfect, we will here also outline some of the problematic aspects of our project.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

There are several theoretical reasons why we decided to create a dialectal syntactic Atlas. In the generative perspective the external language is the manifestation of the internal language, and when investigating minimal variation, in a certain sense, we look at the product to discover how the “machine” is made. Variation is, from our point of view, a natural state for language; due to the acquisition process, which can vary in minimal ways, each person has a slightly different setting of formal (or lexical) properties of functional elements. Therefore, it is straightforward to assume that there exists a very high number of minimally different languages. Using a metaphor, we could assimilate microvariation to the differences found in the DNA of a family of bacteria, all causing the same disease, but still minimally distinct from one another. Nevertheless, the method of linguistic research forces us to make an abstraction and consider a speaker not just a representative of himself, of a single individual grammar, but of a set of

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<sup>1</sup> Although this article is signed only by the two initiators of the project, we would like to underline that the research group behind our enterprise is made up by many more people, first of all the other two co-founders, Richard Kayne and Laura Vanelli, and the main collaborators, Nicoletta Penello, Chiara Polo and Nicola Munaro; we all have been supported by the work of the doctoral students: we want to mention at least Linda Badan, Marco Cuneo, Federico Damonte, Jacopo Garzonio, Federico Ghegin, Silvia Guidolin, Roberta Maschi, Andrea Padovan, Sandra Paoli, Barbara Patruno, Diego Pescarini, Sabrina Rasom, Martina Secci, Marinela Sotiri, Laura Sgarioto, Massimo Vai, Daria Valentin, Milena Vegnaduzzo. Invaluable help has been provided by our colleagues Mair Parry, Piera Rizzolatti, Christina Tortora, Raffaella Zanuttini, who generously commented questionnaires or provided informants and data.

minimally different grammars constituting a dialect. If dialectal variation is the natural way in which language manifests itself, this means that the choices made inside a single grammar follow a rational path which can reveal its internal structure, but also language variation can itself be conceived as the result of processes that follow logical patterns, and produce only grammars that are submitted to general principles, thus revealing the universal grammar lying behind it. Moreover, dialects are interesting because in general (depending on the extra-linguistic situation) there is no formal pressure towards a “non-natural system,” as is often the case for standard languages, which are forced into rules by grammarians trying to design a coherent rational system, but being unaware of the real mechanisms through which language changes and varies.

Dialectology constitutes a privileged observation point for determining language variation, just because it studies minimally different systems. As such, it is as close as possible to a scientific experiment where variables (intended as differences in grammar) are controlled and few independent factors interfere with the study of a single grammatical property. If the sample is wide and detailed enough, we can conclude that where a theoretically possible choice is absent, it is in all probability not possible for principled reasons.

Related to the fact that dialectal variation maintains certain basic features of a grammatical system as a constant and variation seems to be concentrated on specific domains, there is a potentially far-reaching question concerning variation in general. We might find that dialectal variation is different from typological variation in a very deep sense: no “macroparameters” are ever changed in microvariation. Basic choices like constituent order, or inflectional versus agglutinative systems, never appear affected when we compare dialects. The differences found here are always of a subtler kind, so to say; this can shed light on the question whether there are or not clusters of properties (parameters) that (always or frequently) go together; this means that the choice of +A would induce the child to hypothesize that the language also has +B and +C, and –B and –C are either impossible or somehow marked and require strong positive evidence to be triggered.

Theoretical reasons of this kind lead us to think that a syntactic dialectal Atlas is a theoretically revealing enterprise.

## **2. The state of the art in 1990**

There were several reasons behind our choice of the area of investigation. The first one is that Northern Italy is linguistically speaking a homogeneous domain as the varieties of Romance spoken in this region share important grammatical and lexical properties and as such constitute a

proper subset of the Romance languages significantly distinct from other Italian areas. They had uniform syntactic properties already in the medieval period, and shared the same system of verb second and pro drop licensing, which was later lost; they then developed subject clitics and subject clitic inversion in interrogatives in a way that is very similar to the one found in standard French. The parallel diachronic path that main questions follow in French and Northern Italian dialects (NIDs) is attested for example by a number of constructions, which are still developing, going from cleft sentences to *wh-in situ*.

There were already a number of descriptive studies and texts, mainly reporting lexical, phonological, and morphological differences, which also included non-systematic observations concerning word order as well, and, although no systematic enterprise on the syntax of these dialects had ever been conceived, there was enough material to provide us with a “launching base” to start with such a project. A systematic study of subject clitics in 30 dialects had already been made by means of a questionnaire by Renzi and Vanelli (1983) and this was the first phenomenon we took into account when preparing our first general questionnaire.

A project of this type requires a number of choices on the methodological side, which in our case have been driven from the theoretical point of view sketched above. A theoretical investigation on syntactic variation requires:

- Comparable data (minimal pairs if possible)
- Control of ungrammatical data
- Access to optional phenomena
- Access to interface with phonology and morphology
- Access to the etymology of a word
- Access to the interface with semantics and pragmatics

Comparable and ungrammatical data are necessary for any generative analysis and access to the various interfaces and etymology (which often sheds light on the diachronic evolution of the system) are also required in order to be able to sort out whether a given phenomenon belongs to syntax or to some other component of grammar. Syntactic phenomena can be related to phonological phenomena by conditioning a phonological rule, and they can be related to semantics as some syntactic phenomena only occur with a special semantics. In studying a system, it is not possible to ignore the relations among its components. Data of this kind are best obtained through a layered methodology of the type we will illustrate in the following section.

### 3. The layered methodology

One of the first problems the syntactician is confronted with is not only that of gathering comparable data<sup>2</sup>, but also of discovering new interesting phenomena.

Our first inquiry was conducted by means of a written questionnaire, which contained about 100 sentences. They were primarily set for testing subject clitics in different syntactic domains; we considered negative, interrogative, exclamative, and relative clauses, main and auxiliary verbs and, given that subject clitics can be combined with an overt subject, we inserted sentences with various types of subjects: *wh*-traces, tonic pronouns, definite and indefinite DPs, and quantifiers, in pre and postverbal position. Note that, although we started with a single phenomenon, our sample was construed in such a way that it would indirectly gather data on the following phenomena as well:

- Sentence typing
- Syntax and morphology of *wh*-items
- Negation syntax
- Quantifiers lexicon and syntax
- The system of verbal tense and mood

Therefore, through a questionnaire originally designed to systematically test variation of a single phenomenon, we were able to discover a number of important new phenomena such as the following:

- Sentential particles and clause typing
- *Wh-in situ* and *wh*-doubling
- *Do*-support in main interrogatives
- Different types of pre- and postverbal negative markers

Two further general questionnaires of the same type were prepared with the same method; they contained sentences designed to test the following phenomena:

- Object clitics and clitic clusters
- Auxiliary selection
- Modals and modality
- Complementation

Once a number of new phenomena had been discovered, they still had to be investigated individually. In the first questionnaire there was obviously no systematic research on them, since it was impossible for practical reasons

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<sup>2</sup> On the advantages and the problems connected to our choice see Cornips and Poletto (2004).

to test all the variables for all the fields of inquiry listed above. At the second stage of our inquiry we prepared special questionnaires designed to test each phenomenon, trying to find out what its “domain of variation” was, i.e. to determine which factors influence its occurrence. For instance, in the case of *do*-support discovered in the Lombard dialect of Monno, we found that the phenomenon is only possible (i) in main interrogative clauses (not in embedded ones), (ii) when the *wh*-item is not the subject (in which case the verb does not move), and (iii) when the verb is not an auxiliary or a modal. Given that the phenomenon is strikingly similar to English *do*-support, it was relatively easy to find the factors that influence its occurrence and to underline the differences.<sup>3</sup> In other cases, as with sentential particles, the domain of variation was much harder to determine, and required at least three different stages of inquiry with predetermined contexts, as the phenomenon is semantically conditioned (see Poletto and Zanuttini 2003).

We had two types of special questionnaires, either concentrated on a single construction (interrogatives, imperatives, exclamatives, negatives), or on phenomena that are only found in some dialects.

Special questionnaires do not only serve to determine the domain of variation of a single phenomenon, but also the variation of this phenomenon depending on the dialect and in relation to the semantic values of different structures.

As mentioned above, the first general questionnaire was a written one, and was preliminarily tested with a number of linguists, who served as first informants and provided us with feedback, helping us to refine the sentences (often a lexical choice is not the right one, for instance, or what is a transitive verb in a dialect is intransitive in another, so that you will not get an object clitic through that sentence, etc.). Some constructions were moreover not present at all in several dialects, and were therefore discarded since this rendered comparability of data less complete. In other cases sentences were potentially ambiguous, and they were modified according to the comments we received.

The special questionnaires have often been performed orally, especially those in which a special semantic or pragmatic context was supposed to be involved. Written questionnaires are perfectly adequate to investigate obligatory phenomena, but optional phenomena do not always surface in written questionnaires, or they may surface in a non-systematic

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<sup>3</sup> Differently from English, for example, no *do*-support is found in Monnese in emphatic contexts, in negative clauses, and VP-ellipsis constructions; notice that these contexts are considered a preliminary stage towards the development of the ‘support status’ of the verb in English (see also below).

way. In other words, optionality needs to be resolved before firm empirical generalizations can be drawn.

In many cases more than one stage of fieldwork was required, as the ungrammatical sentences to be tested evidently depend on the theoretical hypotheses that are made about a phenomenon. Therefore, there was a constant feedback between data and analysis, which often required interviewing the same informant several times with more and more detailed contexts.

At this stage, the best informants were selected to serve as actual collaborators. They helped us to find new differences that were not included in our questionnaires, to define special semantic contexts in which a syntactic phenomenon occurs (this happened, for example, with sentential particles), and to interpret data from other informants in order to solve ambiguities or apparent contradictions. The role of these selected informants has been crucial to discover new phenomena since informants who are bilingual can easily find out whether some constructions also exist in standard Italian or not. This aspect was particularly important when we decided to widen our area of investigation and approach central and Southern Italian dialects.<sup>4</sup> While both of us and many of the members of the ASIS group are native speakers of some northern dialect, we lacked the basic intuitions when approaching central and southern dialectal systems.

In the next section we concentrate on some problems we had in revising the general questionnaire and use it for Southern Italian dialects.

#### **4. Good luck and bad luck**

As in other enterprises, good luck and bad luck have been crucial ingredients of the ASIS project as well. In this section we examine a couple of concrete cases we have been dealing with when working on the first phase of the project on Southern Italian dialects. In the first case, the questionnaire turned out inadequate, because the questions we had prepared were of no use in order to show the phenomenon we were looking for. In the second case on the other hand, we were lucky enough to find an unexpected construction worth investigating.

The general questionnaire for southern dialects was prepared after a survey of the traditional and generative literature on these areas; a number of phenomena were selected to be tested and sentences were prepared in which the relevant phenomena were supposed to occur. The phenomena selected are the following:

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<sup>4</sup> We take the opportunity to thank the colleagues that helped us at this preliminary stage with Southern Italian dialects, in particular Michela Cennamo, Robert Hastings, Adam Ledgeway, Rosanna Sornicola, Massimo Vai.

- Prepositional accusatives
- Information Focus in Comp/Aux to C
- Complementation
- Verbal system: future tense, and mood
- Auxiliaries and modals
- Clitic clusters
- Quantifiers and negation
- Sentence typing

Prepositional accusative is reported in the literature for the southern area; here is an example (from Vico Equense, Naples):

- (1) Ènne kjammate a Bicjentse. Vico Equense, Naples  
*(they) have called to Vincent*  
 ‘They called Vincent.’

Given that it is always necessary to start with hypotheses concerning the factors that rule the distribution of each phenomenon, we decided to select the following factors, on the basis of the discussion found in the literature concerning the same phenomenon in Spanish:

- +/- animate/human
- +/- bare quantifier
- +/- quantified NP
- +/- definite (specific)

Prepositional accusatives are also reported in the literature concerning Southern Italy and have been analyzed in detail by Ledgeway (2003) for Neapolitan. In fact, in that area they occur quite often in the sample, but in other areas, as for instance Sardinia, they seem to be quite rare. Many of the general questionnaires for the Sardinian area did not report the phenomenon, which was only attested in very few sentences, all containing a kinship noun. The first hypothesis we could make on the basis of available data was that the phenomenon is not present in some dialects, and therefore exclude areas like Sardinia from the special questionnaire investigating the prepositional accusative in detail.

After an oral interview with a native speaker coming from Baunei (in the North-Eastern part of the island), we found out that prepositional accusative indeed do exist. The reason why it was represented only by a couple of examples in our data is that in Sardinian prepositional accusative is sensitive to variables that have not been considered in the first general survey, so the factors listed above, based on the literature on Spanish and Neapolitan, do not trigger prepositional accusative. In Sardinian the phenomenon is not sensitive to the [+human] or [+specific] features, but

rather to the presence of a relational thematic role, as shown by the following example:

- (2) Appu idiu (a) calleddu. Baunei, Sardinia  
*(I) have seen (to) puppet*  
 ‘I have seen a puppet.’

In (2) the presence of the preposition induces the reading in which the puppet belongs to someone, so there is an implicit relational theta role only when the preposition is there. That this is correct is shown by the fact that intrinsically relational DPs like kinship nouns require the P.

- (3) Appu idiu \*(a) mamma. Baunei, Sardinia  
*(I) have seen (to) mum*  
 ‘I have seen my mother.’

This shows that before drawing the conclusion that Sardinian does not have prepositional accusative on the basis of the first survey, it is better to check with an informant in order to be sure that the phenomenon does not appear simply because it obeys different requirements. Therefore, when creating a questionnaire we have to remember that the variables selected are not necessarily valid for all the dialects.

In other cases, investigating a given phenomenon provides us with new and interesting clues about its analysis or about general topics discussed in the syntactic literature. The general questionnaire on Southern Italian dialects contained several examples with negative quantifiers in various argument positions and negative adverbials like *mai* ‘never’ and *più* ‘anymore’: in the dialect of Lizzano (a Salentino dialect in the province of Taranto) postverbal negative quantifiers and more generally negative polarity items not only trigger the presence of a preverbal negative marker (as is generally the case for negative concord languages) but also cooccur with a locative clitic *nci* /ntʃi/, which in the sample is always present when the quantifier is postverbal, but is not when the quantifier is preverbal; therefore, we can hypothesize that the locative is obligatory in the context in which it is present without exception, namely when the quantifier is postverbal:

- (4) a. Non nci spicciava mai di turmeri. Lizzano  
*not LOC.CL stopped never of sleeping*  
 ‘She continued sleeping.’  
 b. ca nun nc’ è statu vistu nisciunu  
*that not LOC.CL has been seen nobody*  
 ‘that nobody was seen’

- c. Non nc' eti anima viva.  
*not LOC.CL is living soul*  
 'There is not a living soul.'
- d. Non nci mi passa mancu pi la capa.  
*not LOC.CL me goes not.even through the head*  
 'I do not even think about it.'
- e. No nci l'hogghiu vistu chiù.  
*not LOC.CL it have seen anymore*  
 'I never saw it again.'
- (5) Nu sacciu ci è arrivatu.  
*not know who is arrived*  
 'I don't know who has arrived.'

*Nci* does not occur in simple negative clauses, therefore it is not required by the negative marker itself, except in the two following cases:

- (6) a. No nci mi ne ste scappu.  
*not LOC.CL me CL stay go*  
 'I am not going away.'
- b. No nci l'avu spittata.  
*not LOC.CL her have waited*  
 'We did not wait for her.'

In both cases there seems to be an implicit element triggering the presence of the clitic: the first example was the translation of the standard Italian postverbal negative marker *mica*, which is a presuppositional marker in its nature. This dialect (as in general the whole southern area) does not use an overt postverbal negative marker, but seems to render the presuppositional value with the mere presence of the clitic. We can hypothesize that the structure indeed contains an empty postverbal negative marker similar to standard Italian *mica*. The second example has to be interpreted as suggested by the Italian stimulus sentence 'we did not wait for her *anymore*.' Notice that (4c) includes the negative polarity item 'living soul' and thus suggests that it is not only N-words that require the presence of the locative clitic. Therefore, the phenomenon of the locative clitic insertion is interesting for the following theoretical reasons: a) it seems to treat negative polarity items and N-words as a unique class, thus providing a possible argument in favour of these two types of elements belonging to the same class (contrary to the analysis that treats N-words like universal quantifiers), b) it seems to suggest that negative concord is a syntactic phenomenon, not just a semantic one, c) once its analysis is precise enough

it might be used as a test to verify whether a given structure contains a null negative element.

These hypotheses clearly have to be tested with a special questionnaire on this phenomenon. The new questionnaire should (i) include further cases of negative polarity items, (ii) test whether the clitic is present with all negative polarity items, or some subset of them, (iii) contain more cases of preverbal and postverbal N-word and negative adverbs, (iv) test whether the clitic is obligatory with all N-words (and phrases) in all argumental positions, (v) include sentences with other object clitics, to test whether the locative clitic is located in the same position where it usually serves as a locative marker; moreover, it should (vi) list different sentence types, in particular interrogative sentences, and (vii) test whether the phenomenon is sensitive to the presence of an operator different from negation.

### **5. On determining the “domain of variation”**

Some comments on how we formulated our hypotheses in the domain of variation of single phenomena are in order. The first thing to do when preparing a questionnaire centered on a single phenomenon is to select the variables according to which the sample sentences have to be prepared. In some sense, preparing a questionnaire of this type means that we have to have a very detailed hypothesis — or alternative hypotheses — on how the phenomenon works, which is evidently not feasible. Often the first examples that come from the general questionnaire and descriptive grammars do not help us to figure out what the domain of variation of the phenomenon might be. However, the amount of theoretical work that has been done on the syntax of Romance languages (and on other languages as well) can help us: there is a number of possible common factors that are known to influence the distribution of several phenomena. For instance, if we are investigating negation, it is worthwhile testing with imperatives and other modal forms since we know that negative elements are sensitive to modality in some languages. The position of negation with respect to the verb (including auxiliaries and modals) and to different adverbial classes will also have to be tested, as well as its possibility to occur in the CP domain.

So, although finding out the variation domain of a given phenomenon might seem a difficult enterprise, we have tools provided by previous and ongoing research. Below follows now a list of possible variables that are often relevant to a wide number of phenomena.

- Sentence/clause type

Clause type is often a variable influencing phenomena located in the higher portion of the clause. The example that follows shows the influence of

sentence type on the possibility of inversion of a subject clitic, which is never found in declarative clauses (unless the enclitic has become a stable inflectional morpheme), while it is obligatory in some varieties in interrogatives:

- (7) a. El va casa. Padova  
*he goes home*  
 b. Va-lo casa?  
*goes-he home*  
 c. \*Va-lo casa.

Even phenomena that apparently have nothing to do with the left periphery can be sensitive to sentence type: the agreement pattern with postverbal subjects in relative and embedded interrogative clauses is different with respect to the agreement pattern found in declarative clauses:

- (8) a. l'rya l pu'sti. Monno  
*it comes the postman*  
 b. l salta zœ le fœe.  
*it jumps down the leaves*  
 'The leaves are falling.'  
 (9) a. I m a domandà ngo **la** fus andata la Maria.  
*they me have asked where she were gone the Mary*  
 b. La menestra ke **la** fa la tua mama l è buna.  
*the soup that she does the your mother it is good*

(8a, b) are declaratives, and the postverbal subject is accompanied by an expletive subject clitic, while (9a, b) involve *wh*-elements in CP ((9a) a relative clause, (9b) a dependent interrogative); here the postverbal subjects are accompanied by a fully agreeing subject clitic.

## 6. Main — embedded clauses asymmetry

The distinction between main and embedded clauses also influences subject clitic inversion, a phenomenon related to the CP layer:

- (10) a. No so quando che el va casa. Padova  
*(I) not know when that he goes home*  
 b. \* No so quando va-lo casa.  
*(I) not know when goes-he home*

Another phenomenon that is sensitive to the main versus embedded distinction is the presence of certain sentential particles, which can only be found in main clauses. This fact can also provide a clue for the analysis of these elements, for instance suggesting that they must somehow be

connected to the left periphery even if they sometimes happen to appear in final position.

(11) Cossa fa-lo ti? Venice  
*what does-he PARTICLE*  
 ‘What does he do?’

(12) \* No so cossa che el fa ti.  
*(I) not know what that he does PARTICLE*

- Presence of auxiliaries

The presence of auxiliary verbs can influence various phenomena. An example of this can be drawn from cleft versions of interrogative clauses in the Scorzè dialect. The cleft version is obligatory when the verb is in a simple form and optional when the inflected verb is a form of *be* (as in compound tenses of ergative verbs):

(13) a. Chi ze ndà via? Scorzè (Veneto)  
*who is went away*  
 b. Chi ze che ze ndà via?  
*who is that is went away*  
 c. Chi zé?  
*who is*

(14) a. ??Chi va via?  
*who goes away*  
 b. Chi ze che va via?  
*who is that goes away*

- Verb classes

The syntactic or semantic class of the verb can be relevant for phenomena located in the lower portion of the sentence structure. Postverbal subjects appear to be sensitive to syntactic verbal class in many languages; the following example from Venice can illustrate a case:

(15) \*Ga pianto me mama. Venice  
*has cried my mother*

(16) Ze rivà me mama.  
*is arrived my mother*

This is not simply due to the distinction between unaccusative and unergative verbs. Tortora (1997) shows that the possibility of a postverbal subject cuts across the class of unaccusative verbs, and that non-focused postverbal subjects are only possible with inherently directed motion verbs.

Moreover, within the class of intransitives the presence of an implicit locative argument also licenses non-focussed postverbal subjects.

- (17) a. %Ze ndà via me mama. (only focussed subjects)  
*is gone away my mother*  
 b. Ga telefonà me mama. (ok without focus)  
*has phoned my mother*

- Type of nominal

The type of nominal elements used to test the sentences can also influence some phenomena. Subject clitic doubling is sensitive to the type of nominal element they double, and there exists an implicational scale among elements that can be doubled (which could possibly extend to other arguments as well, such as for example datives):

- (18) a. If DP subjects are doubled in a given dialect, tonic pronoun subjects are also doubled.  
 b. If QP subjects are doubled, both DPs and tonic pronouns are doubled.  
 c. If variables in *wh*-contexts such as relative, interrogative, and cleft structures are doubled, then doubling is always obligatory with all other types of subjects.
- (19) a. TI te magni sempre. Venice  
*you SCL eat always*  
 b. \*TI magni sempre.  
*you eat always*
- (20) a. Nane (el) magna.  
*John (SCL) eats*  
 b. Nisun (\*el) magna.  
*nobody (SCL) eats*
- (21) a. Nissun (\*el) me capìs. Montesover (Trentino)  
*nobody (SCL) me understands*  
 ‘Nobody understands me.’  
 b. El popo \*(el) magna el pom.  
*the child (SCL) eats the apple*  
 ‘The child eats the apple.’
- (22) a. El fjœ \*(el) mangia l pom. Milan  
*the boy (SCL) eats the apple*  
 ‘The boy eats the apple.’

- b. Un quidùn \*(el) riverà in ritart.  
*a somebody (SCL) will-arrive in late*  
 ‘Somebody will arrive late.’
- c. I don che \_ neten i scal in andà via.  
*the women that \_ clean the stairs are gone away*  
 ‘The women who clean the stairs have gone away.’
- (23) a. Al pi \*(al) mangia al pom. Malonno (East Lombardy)  
*the boy (SCL) eats the apple*  
 ‘The boy eats the apple.’
- b. Vargù \*(al) rierà n ritardo.  
*somebody (SCL) will-arrive in late*  
 ‘Somebody will arrive late.’
- c. Le fomne che \*(le) neta le scale e é ndade via.  
*the women that (SCL) clean the stairs SCL are gone away*  
 ‘The women who clean the stairs have gone away.’

This list is obviously not exhaustive. In general we can say that, depending on the location of the phenomenon in the structure, there are different factors that can possibly influence it and need to be tested. However, as seen above, there are some phenomena that appear to be located at the right edge of the sentence structure (such as sentential particles and postverbal subjects) which are nevertheless sensitive to sentence type (main vs. embedded clauses). For the moment, the ASIS project has completed special questionnaires on the following phenomena:

- Exclamatives
- Interrogatives (*wh-in situ*, *do*-support)
- Imperatives
- Negation
- V2 in main and embedded clauses
- Locative constructions
- Germanic varieties in contact with Romance

New phenomena for NIDs:

- Sentential particles
- Topic-Focus distribution in the left periphery of the clause
- Low quantifiers and adverbials
- Clitic doubling and clitic positions
- Auxiliary selection

### 7. An example of the layered methodology: the case of *wh-in situ*

The layered methodology does not stop at the second step with special questionnaires. The fact that we happen to find new phenomena by looking at others is a circular process which narrows down and focuses our perspective on microvariation more and more. An example of this stepwise system can be drawn from the domain of interrogative clauses. In the general questionnaire on NIDs, some cases of *wh-in situ* and some cases of *wh*-doubling were found.

- (24) a. A-lo fat che? Belluno  
*has-he done what*  
 ‘What has he done?’
- b. Sa l’a fat cusè? Lombardy  
*what he-has done what*  
 ‘What has he done?’

Following the analysis of Munaro (1999), a special questionnaire on these phenomena was prepared, and carried out with oral interviews only in the areas where *wh-in situ* and *wh*-doubling were attested. The variables<sup>5</sup> selected for the questionnaire are the following:

- bare *wh*-elements vs. non-bare *wh*-elements
- d-linked vs. non-d-linked non-bare *wh*-elements
- main versus embedded clauses
- auxiliary vs. main verbs
- (presence of negation)

Among these variables, some turned out to be relevant: the distinction between bare and non-bare *wh*-items was confirmed; *wh-in situ* and *wh*-doubling did indeed appear to be sensitive to the main versus embedded distinction since no *wh-in situ* or *wh*-doubling is found in embedded clauses (apart from some well-specified cases).

Auxiliary selection did not show any relevance at all for the phenomenon we were investigating, but helped us to further define a new phenomenon that was discovered in this connection. Consider the next two sentences: in the first one the auxiliary *fa* ‘do’ appears before the infinitival form of the verb *magnà* ‘eat.’

- (25) a. che fa-l majà? Lombardy  
*what does-he eat*
- b. che a-l majà?  
*what has-he eaten*

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<sup>5</sup> The last variable is in brackets because it was not tested systematically.

We realized that a version of the well-known phenomenon of English *do*-support is also found in this area (as pointed out above), a quite extraordinary discovery in the Romance domain. The presence of *do*-support was then confirmed through a further test specifically designed to define its distribution, (our empirical and theoretical results are reported in Benincà and Poletto 2004).

The special questionnaire on *wh-in situ* and *wh*-doubling provided evidence in favor of the following descriptive generalizations:

- a. If *wh-in situ* is found with a single *wh*-item, this *wh*-item corresponds to ‘what.’
- a'. If *wh*-doubling is found with a single *wh*-item, this *wh*-item corresponds to ‘what.’
- b. If a language allows *wh-in situ* cooccurring with subject clitic inversion (SCLI), the only *wh*-items that can be left *in situ* are those that can become clitics.
- b'. If a language allows *wh*-doubling cooccurring with SCLI, the only *wh*-items that can be left *in situ* are those that can become clitics.
- c. If a language allows a *wh-in situ* strategy, this is applied to *wh*-phrases only if it applies to *wh*-words.
- c'. If a language allows a *wh*-doubling strategy, this is applied to *wh*-phrases only if it applies to *wh*-words.
- d. *Wh*-doubling in embedded contexts is possible in the few cases in which the complementizer is not lexicalized.

Notice that *wh-in situ* and *wh*-doubling have a parallel distribution and are subject to the same restrictions. Therefore, whatever the analysis of the two phenomena turns out to be, it has to take into account each of the descriptive generalizations above and the fact that *wh*-doubling and *wh-in situ* share the same properties. If we are able to formulate descriptive generalizations of this type on the basis of comparative dialectal data, they can drive our theoretical research and exclude analyses which do not account for each of them and for the parallel between the two phenomena (in Benincà and Poletto 2005 we present and analyze generalizations of this type for the Romance languages).

## 8. Some practical questions

After now having outlined the methodology that we have developed for our syntactic atlas, we will briefly outline the practical format used. Inspired by the procedure adopted in the pioneering work of Renzi and Vanelli (1983), we started with a first small net of informants for Northern Italian dialects,

essentially composed of linguists who are also native speakers of a dialect. Once the general questionnaire was checked, the first selection of non-linguist informants was often made on the basis of the chance we had to reach native speakers in each area. No age group was excluded, although data on age, education, the origin of the parents and grandparents were asked in order to control for changes or sociolinguistic variants in our data. The group of informants has since been enlarged, leading to a distinction between close and occasional collaborators.

The same procedure is now being adopted for Southern Italian dialects. Each questionnaire is evaluated during common working sessions of the whole research group, and although it might at first sight seem quite difficult to realize who can be a good informant, we were able to exclude several informants simply on the basis of the written questionnaires: they were very often non-consistent and did not translate what they were asked for (for the features of a good informant, see Cornips and Poletto 2004).

As for the format of the questionnaires themselves, we made sure not to have too many minimally different sentences in a row in order to avoid a well-known psychological adaptation effect. The questionnaires were therefore first prepared according to each phenomenon to be tested and then the sentences were “scrambled.”

Each oral working session with informants was no longer than one hour, including presentation of the test and collection of personal data on the informant.

## **9. Conclusion**

In this article we have presented the way the ASIS project has been set up in the hope that our experience will help other projects to develop. We are very much aware of the fact that the methodological choice we made has influenced the sample we have gathered and that in many cases our work, although stretched throughout a considerable time span, has not been precise enough; we are continuously working to render our methodology more and more refined. The sociolinguistic situation of Italian dialects is very peculiar, dialects are generally quite distinct from the standard language in the perception of native speakers; there is generally no negative bias towards dialects, so that it is very common to find linguists who are native speakers of a dialect and can be used as first informants. This situation has clearly facilitated our investigation, and we know that in other countries the choice we made would turn into a complete failure, especially in those in which dialects are perceived only as a “bad” or incorrect version of the standard language.

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