

Existential Constructions in Early Italo-Romance Vernaculars

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I claim that not all existential pro-forms are locative by definition. I examined a corpus of early Italo-Romance texts from the 13th to the 16th century and noticed that in Tuscan the pro-form *ci* (or *vi*) cannot co-occur with a locative phrase within the clause; this would corroborate Freeze's (1992) view that existentials are locative. However, in other Italo-Romance varieties (Sicilian, Campanian and Roman), the pro-form and the locative phrase can co-occur. It can therefore be said that whereas in Tuscan the pro-form appears to be the spell-out of a locative argument, in Sicilian, Campanian and Roman, as well as in Modern Italian, it can be said to be a marker of existentiality which joins with the copula to spell out an existential predicate (Bentley 2006).

1 Introduction

Cross-linguistic research suggests that, typically:

- (i) The existential construction asserts existence.
- (ii) The argument whose existence is asserted (the pivot) exhibits the definiteness effect.
- (iii) The construction serves to introduce a new discourse referent.
- (iv) The pivot does not behave as a canonical subject (position and verbal agreement).
- (v) The construction exhibits a special copula.
- (vi) There can be a locative pro-form or a locative phrase in the construction.

In this paper I will discuss point (vi). In particular, I will test the view that all existential pro-forms are invariably locative, as existentials are locative (Freeze 1992). As proposed by Freeze, there are three types of existential constructions:

- (1a) Locative phrase + Copula + Noun phrase
- (1b) Pro-form + Copula + Noun phrase (+ Locative)
- (1c) Noun phrase + Copula + Locative

It is then claimed that the patterns in (1a), (1b) and (1c) derive from the same underlying structure: (1a) originates from movement of the locative phrase to subject position, and (1c) from movement of a *definite* noun phrase to the same position (hence the *definiteness effect*). The pro-form in (1b) is the spell-out of a [+Loc] feature of the construction, and therefore it is locative by definition. It is

also claimed that the pro-form is locative because of its etymological value, which bears traces of a locative meaning (in Italian, the pro-form *ci* derived from Latin ECCE HIC), and because of its deictic function in other constructions (e.g. *ci arrivo con l'autobus*, 'There I arrive by bus'). In the varieties of vernaculars under examination, existential constructions, and particularly the status of the pro-form, reveal both geolinguistic and diachronic discrepancies. From the data collected there is satisfactory evidence that existential constructions display different linguistic features through time and space. The watershed of such variation is the complementary distribution of the pro-form and the locative phrase, which ultimately brings to light two interesting implications: geolinguistically, the contrast between, on the one hand, Tuscan and, on the other hand, the southern and central varieties, especially Sicilian; diachronically, a significant change in the existential constructions of sixteenth-century Tuscan.

2 The Analysis of the data

In the Tuscan texts dating from the 13th to the 14th century, the pro-form occurs in complementary distribution with the locative phrase:

- (2a)¹ *Nel reame di Francia fu un gentile uomo* (*Decameron*)
 In.the kingdom of France be.3SG.PST a kind man
 'In the kingdom of France (there) was a kind man'
 [Locative phrase + Copula + Noun phrase]
 [- Pro-form]

which contrasts with:

- (2b) *Ci sono abitanze* (*Decameron*)
 Pro-form be.3PL habitations
 'There are habitations'
 [Pro-form + Copula + Noun phrase]
 [- Locative phrase]

The contrast between (2a) and (2b) would corroborate the view that the existential pro-form in (2b) is locative, as it cannot occur with a locative phrase within the clause. In fact, in the data collected from the Tuscan texts there are no examples of existential constructions displaying both the pro-form and the locative phrase within the same clause; imagining (2a) and (2b) with, respectively, the pro-form *ci* in (2a) and any locative phrase in (2b) would be ungrammatical for the 13th and 14th century Tuscan (i.e. *Nel reame di Francia (*ci) fu un gentile uomo* and *Ci sono abitanze (*in Firenze)*). Furthermore, the order of the constituents, and particularly the position of the locative phrase, do not seem to trigger the complementary distribution of the pro-form and the locative phrase:

¹ The following abbreviations are used in this paper: 3SG = third singular person; 3PL = third plural person; PST = past; Fem = feminine; NEG = negation; CL = clitic.

- (3a) *Nelle parti di Grecia ebbe² un signore* (Novellino)
 In.the parts of Greece have.3SG.PST a sir
 ‘Somewhere in Greece (there) was a sir’
 [Locative phrase + Copula + Noun phrase]
- (3b) *Era in costui signoria* (Novellino)
 be.3SG.PST in him lordship
 ‘(There) was Lordship in this man’
 [Copula + Locative phrase + Noun phrase]
- (3c) *Era una guasca in Cipri* (Novellino)
 be.3SG.PST a Gascon.Fem.SG in Cyprus
 ‘(There) was a woman from Gascony in Cyprus’
 [Copula + Noun phrase + Locative phrase]
- (3d) *Uno re fu nelle parti d’Egitto* (Novellino)
 A king be.3SG.PST in.the parts of Egypt
 ‘(There) was a king somewhere in Egypt’
 [Noun phrase + Copula + Locative phrase]
- (3e) *Fue un filosofo molto savio* (Novellino)
 be.3SG.PST a philosopher very wise
 ‘(There) was a very wise philosopher’
 [Copula + Noun phrase]
- (3f) *Un medico fu, lo quale...* (Novellino)
 A doctor be.3SG.PST, who...
 ‘(There) was a doctor, who...’
 [Noun phrase + Copula]

which, again, contrast with:

- (3g) *V³ era dovizia* (Novellino)
 Pro-form be.3SG.PST wealth
 ‘there was wealth’
 [Pro-form + Copula + Noun phrase]

Further evidence, which supports the data provided above, is also found in the large corpus of 12th century Tuscan texts edited by Castellani (1952). Therefore, it can be stated that, in 13th and 14th century Tuscan, the complementary distribution of the pro-form and the locative phrase allows only three variants in the existential constructions:

² Unlike Modern Italian, existential constructions of the early Italo-Romance varieties under investigation may use *avere*, ‘to have’, as a copula.

³ In the texts here analysed, as well as in Modern Italian, there is no significant difference between the two pro-forms *ci* and *vi*, which can be used interchangeably. Both *ci* and *vi* (also, with elision, *c’* and *v’*) are found in all varieties. It seems that the choice of one pro-form over the other is determined by stylistic or euphonic reasons rather than by syntactic constraints.

- 1) [- Pro-form] [+ Locative phrase]: *Fu nella nostra città un cavaliere*
 be.3SG.PST in.the our town a knight
 ‘(There) was a knight in our town’
 (*Decameron*)
- b) [+ Pro-form] [- Locative phrase]: *V’ era la via*
 Pro-form be.3SG.PST the road
 ‘There was the road’
 (*Castellani*)
- c) [- Pro-form] [- Locative phrase]: *Uno medico fu, lo quale...*
 One doctor be.3SG.PST who...
 ‘A doctor (there) was, who...’
 (*Novellino*)

Interestingly, however, 14th century Sicilian does display the co-occurrence of the pro-form and the locative phrase within the same clause. In contrast with Tuscan, the complementary distribution does not operate in Sicilian, with significant consequences on the status of the pro-form, i.e. whether the pro-form is still locative or, as it appears, it starts to exhibit a distinctive existential markedness, so that the pro-form seems to have lost its original deictic function. Furthermore, the order of the constituent and the position of the locative phrase do not pose any constraints to the co-occurrence of the pro-form and the locative phrase:

- (4a) *In Deo non ch’ è magis et minus* (*Sposizione*)
 In God NEG. pro-form be.3SG the more and the less
 ‘In God there is not the more and the less’
 [Locative phrase + Pro-form + Copula + Noun phrase]
- (4b) *Chi fu in Sicilia grandi fami* (*Conquista*)
 Pro-form be.3SG.PST in Sicily great hunger
 ‘There was great hunger in Sicily’
 [Pro-form + Copula + Locative phrase + Noun phrase]
- (4c) *Lo Conti non ci era in la citati* (*Conquista*)
 The Count NEG pro-form be.3SG.PST in.the town
 ‘(There) was not the Count in town’
 [Noun phrase + Pro-form + Copula + Locative phrase]

There are also examples of existential constructions which display the pro-form without the locative phrase:

- (4d) *Non ch’ è Deu* (*Sposizione*)
 NEG. pro-form be.3SG God
 ‘There is not God’
- (4e) *Erachi unu signuri chi...* (*Conquista*)
 be.3SG.PST + CL.pro-form a sir who...
 ‘There was a sir who...’

Sicilian also exhibits existential constructions without the pro-form, although it must be noted that the type of existential [- Pro-form][+ Locative phrase], unlike Tuscan texts, is scarcely attested:

- (4g) *In Syragusa era unu grandi Sarrachinu* (Conquesta)
 In Syracuse be.3SG.PST a great Saracen
 ‘In Syracuse (there) was a great Saracen’

Most importantly, there are also other Italo-Romance varieties - namely Campanian and Roman - which exhibit existential constructions where the pro-form can co-occur with the locative phrase:

- (4h) *Dentro a quillo palazzo nce fo una sala* (Campanian:
 Inside in that palace pro-form be.3SG.PST a hall *Troya*)
 ‘Inside that palace there was a hall’
 [**Locative phrase** + **Pro-form** + Copula + Noun phrase]

- (4i) *Infra ille ince nd’ era una che...* (Campanian:
 Among those pro-form partitive be.3SG.PST one who *Ricordi*)
 ‘Among those there was one of them who...’
 [**Locative phrase** + **Pro-form** + Copula + Noun phrase]

- (4l) *Anche ce erano fra essi molti armati* (Roman:
 Also pro-form be.3PL.PST among them many armed *Cronica*)
 ‘Also there were many armed (men) among them’
 [**Pro-form** + Copula + **Locative phrase** + Noun phrase]

At this stage, Sicilian, Campanian and Roman appear to be more progressive than Tuscan, as they show the same syntactic patterns which can be found in the existential constructions of Modern Italian, where the existential pro-form can co-occur with the locative phrase:

- (5a) **(Ci) sono due gatti nel giardino*
 Pro-form be.3SG two cats in.the garden
 ‘There are two cats in the garden’
**sono due gatti in giardino*

which differs from:

- (5b) **(Ci) vado a scuola*
 Pro-form go.1SG to school
 ‘I am going (*there) to school’
**ci vado a scuola*

The syntactic role of the pro-forms *ci* is different in (5a) and (5b): whereas in (5a) *ci* occurs as a marker of existentiality, in (5b) it clearly is a locative pro-form which cannot co-occur with a locative phrase within the clause. It may thus be assumed that in 13th and 14th century Tuscan the pro-form *ci* had not yet differentiated as a distinctive marker of existentiality but, rather, it preserved its locative function. The contrast between early-Tuscan and Modern Italian indicates that, in the existential constructions, there must have been a reanalysis of the locative pro-form *ci*. This crucial moment towards the ‘existentialization’

of the pro-form is witnessed by fourteenth-century Sicilian, Campanian and Roman, where *ci* may have lost its deictic value to become uniquely an existential marker of the construction. A locative *ci* has remained in other syntactic constructions of Modern Italian, as shown in (5b) or in constructions such as *ci vado*, ‘I go there’; *ci stiamo tutti*, ‘we all fit in here’. However, as far as the existential constructions are concerned, the contrast between, on the one hand, the early-Tuscan data and, on the other hand, the early-Sicilian, Campanian, Roman and Modern Italian data suggests that not all existential pro-forms are necessarily locative, and thus the locative analysis of existential constructions must be reconsidered. In the early stages of the history of Italo-Romance, the existential pro-form exhibits geolinguistic discrepancies: whereas in Tuscan it appears to be the spell-out of a locative argument, in Sicilian it can be said to be a marker of existentiality which joins with the copula to spell out an existential predicate (Bentley, 2006).

The synchronic contrast of the early Italo-Romance varieties, i.e. Tuscan vs Sicilian, Campanian and Roman, and the subsequent comparison with Modern Italian allow also some diachronic observations. Firstly, it can be said that Tuscan – or at least thirteenth-century literary Tuscan – seems to be rather conservative, both because it adheres to the Latin-type of existentials (where the pro-form never occurs, e.g.: *est puellā in viā*) and because it contrasts with Sicilian, Campanian and Roman, which turn out to be more progressive than Tuscan, since they already exhibit the existential pattern of Modern Italian, i.e. they allow the co-occurrence of the pro-form and the locative phrase. Secondly, in Tuscan the reanalysis of the locative *ci* as an existential marker appears to have happened before the sixteenth century. Precisely, in the data collected, a sixteenth century Tuscan *volgarizzamento*⁴, *La navigazione di San Brendano*, shows that not only does the pro-form start to occur increasingly in almost all existential constructions, but also, and most importantly, it can occur even in those existentials which have a locative phrase:

- (6a) *V' era la stanza di San Brandano* (Navigatio)
 Pro-form 3.SG.PST the room of Saint Brendan
 ‘There was the room of Saint Brendan’
 [Pro-form + Copula + Noun phrase]

But, most significantly, type [+ pro-form][+ locative phrase] is now introduced:

- (6b) *E non v' era erba in niuno luogo* (Navigatio)
 And NEG pro-form 3.SG.PST grass in no place
 ‘And there was not grass in any place’
 [Pro-form + Copula + Noun phrase + Locative phrase]

⁴ *Volgarizzamenti* were adapted translations from Latin texts into early Italo-Romance vernaculars.

In conclusion, both the synchronic and diachronic analyses of the pro-form *ci* seem to witness a certain level of morpho-syntactic homogeneity among the early vernaculars of Italy (Vincent 2004), in contrast with the traditional view that the medieval linguistic scenario of Italy was highly fragmented. Interestingly, only Tuscan turns out to be exceptional at this early stage, thus challenging the idea of a Tuscan-centred formation of Modern Italian. From the data collected there is satisfactory evidence that in some early Italo-Romance varieties, as well as in Modern Italian, the pro-form is not locative by definition. This also suggests that, when dealing in synchrony with an existential construction, the pro-form should not be assumed to be deictic because of its etymological value or because of the locative function it may have in other constructions.

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