

Cognola, Federica. 2015. How to define relaxed V2 languages and how to distinguish them from non-V2 languages: A reply to Brandtler (2014). *Nordic Journal of Linguistics* 38(1), 93–100.

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## SHORT COMMUNICATION

# How to define relaxed V2 languages and how to distinguish them from non-V2 languages: A reply to Brandtler (2014)

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This paper provides evidence for the idea that relaxed verb-second (V2) languages exist and exhibit specific properties which distinguish them from both strict V2 and non-V2 languages. The identification of the relaxed subtype of V2 languages implies that V2 should not be understood as a linear restriction, but as an abstract rule involving the movement of the finite verb to a head of the left periphery in all main clauses.

**Keywords** competing grammars, Mòcheno, subject–verb inversion, syntax, verb movement

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In his review of Cognola (2013), Johan Brandtler (Brandtler 2014) highlights the importance of its empirical contribution and raises some problems with the proposed analysis. In this reply, I would like to address these problems and respond to some of Brandtler's comments and criticisms.

Cognola (2013) is a study the syntax of the finite verb in Mòcheno, a German dialect spoken in three villages of the Fersina valley (Northern Italy). Due to its peculiar sociolinguistic situation (speech island, all speakers are bilingual), most of the research on Mòcheno has highlighted its differences from modern German varieties, explaining them as the result of contact with the surrounding Italian varieties, or as conservative traits (see Rowley 2003 and previous work). As far as syntax is concerned, the only explanation of the facts available in the literature is in terms of contact/competing grammars (see Rowley 2003 and references cited there). According to this model of grammar, different word orders (such as OV and VO, or verb second (V2) vs. non-V2) co-exist and are in free variation in the same language as a consequence of the availability to speakers, typically in situations of bilingualism, of two competing grammars, each featuring one of the competing orders.

In Cognola (2013:67–74), the predictions of the contact hypothesis are tested in a series of contexts which had not been considered before and lead the author to the conclusion that it does not hold in the specific case of Mòcheno. This conclusion is not based on a commitment to a particular theoretical framework, but it is the result of the empirical work carried out to test the predictions of the contact hypothesis.

There are two types of arguments which challenge the validity of the contact hypothesis for Mòcheno. The first has to do with the nature of optionality. Svenonius (2000:280) claims that the competing grammars hypothesis is appealing only when optionality is ‘rampant’, i.e. when it is found in all syntactic environments. The empirical facts of Mòcheno are shown not to be captured by the definition of optionality given by Svenonius, since both syntactic and information-structure factors rule the distribution of the word orders in competition. Therefore, optionality is only apparent in this language.

Let us take, for instance, the possibility of having both (i) OV and VO word orders, and (ii) V2 and V3 orders in X–V sentences with a DP subject (i.e. absence vs. presence of subject–finite verb inversion). For both phenomena, the two options are available in declarative main clauses, but not in interrogative main clauses, where only one of them is grammatical/felicitous (Cognola 2013:73, 159–162). The fact that optionality disappears when the syntactic context is changed, and that this happens unlike in the grammars of German and of the surrounding varieties of Italian (which are OV and VO; V2 and non-V2 coherently in all contexts) runs counter to the predictions of the contact hypothesis. Moreover, a closer investigation of the data which considers not only whether sentences are grammatical but also whether they are felicitous shows that, when two options are available, they have specialized for different functions connected with information structure. For instance, DP subject–finite verb inversion does not take place when the subject is a topic, whereas the subject must follow the verb when it is a new-information focus (Cognola 2013:154–162).<sup>1</sup> Again, this is something not predicted by the contact hypothesis.

The second type of arguments challenging the contact hypothesis for Mòcheno concerns the presence of autonomous developments, i.e. phenomena which are absent from the contact languages: Trentino dialect and regional Italian. One clear example of this is found in the morphology and the syntax of subject pronouns. Mòcheno exhibits three morphologically distinct classes of subject pronouns, each of which has specific syntactic and discourse properties, which, crucially, differ from those of the neighbouring German varieties and of the surrounding varieties of Italian. Moreover, the syntactic and discourse properties of subject pronouns in the German and the Italian varieties are systematically excluded by all consultants, i.e. the autonomous development is the only available option in this area of Mòcheno grammar (see Cognola 2013:79–94, 102–109).

Cognola (2013) takes these arguments as evidence in favour of the fact that the notion of optionality predicted by the contact hypothesis does not stand up to a more detailed investigation of the data, and proposes an alternative explanation for the observed variation – one that treats it as the result of rules internal to a SINGLE Mòcheno grammar, which is similar to that of a number of languages considered in the literature to be relaxed V2 languages (see e.g. Poletto 2002, Benincà 2006, Holmberg 2015).<sup>2</sup>

Brandtler (2014:108) writes: ‘the initial classification of Mòcheno as a V2 language is based more on theoretical reasoning than on undisputable empirical facts’. He notes in particular:

The obvious problem, from both typological and theoretical points of view, is then how to distinguish V2 languages from non-V2 languages – especially if the ‘correlated’ properties of V2 are relaxed as well. While some of these issues are briefly mentioned, Cognola does not address the greater theoretical implications of her theory in any detail. (Brandner 2014:111)

Brandtler’s point is conceptually correct, and Cognola (2013) addresses it in connection with both Old Romance and Mòcheno (see Cognola 2013:113–138). Drawing on the literature on relaxed V2 languages, it is shown that V2 should not be considered as a linear restriction, but as a rule forcing the finite verb and one XP to move to CP in all main clauses due to the presence of an EPP feature on a C head (see e.g. Roberts 2004). What is special about relaxed V2 languages is that these movements take place in an articulated left periphery (see Rizzi 1997, Benincà & Poletto 2004) and only a subtype of constituents, typically foci, ‘count’ for V2, i.e. are able to create a Spec/head configuration with the finite verb. In relaxed V2 languages constituents that do not count for V2 can be combined with XPs unable to satisfy the EPP feature, typically topics, leading to V3 word order. Crucially, the order of the constituents in the left periphery of relaxed V2 languages is fixed, with topics always preceding foci.

Given this, how can we establish whether a language is a relaxed V2 or a non-V2 language, i.e. whether or not it requires V-to-C movement in all main clauses? A relaxed V2 language has the correlated properties of V2 languages, typically subject–verb inversion and asymmetries between main and embedded clauses (see den Besten 1983). Mòcheno, for instance, allows subject–verb inversion, and also has an asymmetric distribution of subject pronouns in main vs. embedded clauses, which is caused by the position of the finite verb ( $C^\circ$  in main clauses vs.  $T^\circ$  in embedded interrogatives, see Cognola 2013:194–211). Further evidence in favour of the obligatory movement of the finite verb to  $C^\circ$  in the main clauses of relaxed V2 languages comes from the syntax of pronouns. As discussed in detail by Benincà (2006) for Old Romance and Cognola (2013:Chapters 3

and 4) for Mòcheno, relaxed V2 languages display a high level of syntactically-triggered (movement of the finite verb to C°) enclisis of pronouns, which does not occur in non-V2 varieties. Therefore, the fact that the enclisis of the subject pronoun is restricted to all main clauses with the order X–V in Mòcheno is a clear indication of its V2 character, and contrasts sharply with the surrounding Trentino dialect, which is non-V2 and has subject clitics, and in which enclisis occurs only in *wh*-main interrogative clauses (residual V2 in the sense of Rizzi 1996:64).

Although many relaxed V2 languages are also *pro*-drop or partial *pro*-drop languages, the connection between V2 and *pro*-drop has only been partially investigated in the literature on V2.<sup>3</sup> Cognola (2013) suggests for Mòcheno that the V2 property, i.e. the movement of the finite verb and of one XP to CP, co-occurs with the possibility of having a null category in Spec,TP, where NP subjects can never appear, unlike in German and English. That is, preverbal NP subjects appear in the left periphery (Spec,TopicP or Spec.FocusP), whereas NP subjects in inversion contexts are always new-information foci that appear in Spec,vP (i.e. below sentential adverbs and negation). It is assumed that *pro* is an expletive null category, which is licensed by the subject clitic pronouns (see de Crousaz & Shlonsky's 2003 analysis of Romance clitics and references cited there) or simply by the finite verb in C°.

This analysis implies that Mòcheno should be analysed as a partial *pro*-drop language, a claim that may appear to be controversial, given that referential null subjects cannot be licensed in Mòcheno (the only exception being the second person singular in inversion contexts in the varieties of Fierozzo and Roveda). In fact, Brandtler (2014:110) writes:

The problem is that Mòcheno does not fulfill the core property of consistent null-subject languages, i.e. the possibility of omitting definite subjects. In fact, Mòcheno subjects MUST be overtly realized in all syntactic positions. . . . As was the case with the 'relaxed' V2 rule Cognola instead argues that Mòcheno displays correlated properties (free inversion, *that*-trace violations and expletive null subjects). But not even these correlated properties are straightforwardly supported by the data; the discussion on expletive null subjects is especially unconvincing.

Mòcheno is claimed to be a partial *pro*-drop language on the basis of the fact that, despite its lacking of the possibility of licensing referential subjects in all contexts, it has three out of the four properties ascribed in the literature to *pro*-drop languages, namely (i) free inversion, (ii) absence of *that*-trace effects, and (iii) expletive null subjects. If we take Roberts & Holmberg's (2010:10–12) implicational scale of the properties of *pro*-drop languages, we see that Mòcheno is positioned between a



Cognola (2013) tries to build a theory starting from the empirical data, rather than fitting the empirical data into an existing theory. In doing this, Cognola (2013) mainly applies the inductive method, i.e. making observations, formulating generalization and tentative hypotheses, testing them, and trying to arrive at an account. However, as this is a study of syntax, which has a long tradition in generative grammar, the deductive method is also applied, i.e. the account is grounded in the theory (as in the case of the classification of Mòcheno as a type of V2 language), to the extent that the theory is corroborated by the data.

To sum up, the main achievements of Cognola (2013) are its challenging of the tenets of the received analysis of Mòcheno syntactic variation in terms of contact/presence of competing grammars, and its contribution to an understanding of the nature of the V2 phenomenon through a novel analysis of a relaxed V2 language. Whether this alternative account is worth pursuing will be determined by further research.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Paola Benincà, Ermenegildo Bidese, Jan Casalicchio, Sten Vikner and two anonymous reviewers and for providing useful comments and suggestions. Many thanks to Rachel Murphy for editing the English of the paper. This work is part of the project ‘Mòcheno-in-between’, financed by the Autonomous Province of Trento (BANDI-POST-DOC-PAT-2011). All shortcomings are my own.

## NOTES

1. What we observe in Mòcheno – i.e. that a higher position of the DP subject is connected to topicality, and a lower position to new-information focus – seems to be part of a common pattern of variation; a very similar phenomenon is found in other Germanic languages, see, for instance, the discourse properties of SUBJECT SHIFT in Norwegian (Holmberg 1993).
2. An anonymous reviewer comments that ‘the former hypothesis [the grammar of Mòcheno is consistent with a single grammar, and previous sociolinguistically-oriented explanations can be abandoned] echoes the assumption of “competing grammars” as a theoretical impossibility – [is] a view defended within generative grammar, but not in linguistic research at large’. The present discussion has shown that the possibility of the presence of two competing grammars is not excluded *per se*, but only for the specific case of Mòcheno. Interestingly, Alber (2013) comes to the same conclusion for Mòcheno phonology (i.e. lack of optionality between a German/Tyrolean and Romance phonological systems, plus presence of autonomous developments) and argues for the presence of an independent Mòcheno grammar, too.
3. Much attention has been devoted to the so-called asymmetric *pro*-drop, i.e. to the phenomenon according to which null subjects are much more frequent in main than in

embedded clauses in Old Romance languages as a consequence of the position of the finite verb (see Benincà 2006 and references cited there).

4. The position of Mòcheno in the implicational scale in (1) is assumed to be a consequence of the licensing mechanism of the expletive *pro*, which is always licensed by the finite verb in C° (with or without the mediation of the clitic). Such a mechanism is absent in German, where subject clitics are also absent.

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