Micro-variation in subject agreement: The case of existential pivots with split focus in Romance

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In the light of the findings of extensive fieldwork on existential constructions, we provide an account of the micro-variation in finite (number) agreement in Italo-Romance and Sardinian. Starting from the assumption that this type of agreement is a subjecthood diagnostic, we claim that the said micro-variation is the result of the interaction of a structural constraint promoting agreement, which is sensitive to the markedness of the potential controller as a subject, and a principle of structural economy (Samek-Lodovici 2002). An important role in our analysis is played by existential pivots with INDE-cliticisation, which fail to control agreement in a number of dialects. We capture this tendency in terms of the combined effect of the markedness of these pivots as subjects (Beaver et al. 2005, Bentley 2010, in press, Mikkelsen 2002) and their split focus structure.[*]

1. The problem

In this article we analyse the findings of extensive fieldwork on Italo-Romance and Sardinian existential constructions to provide an account of the micro-variation in finite (number) agreement in these dialects.[1] Following a tradition which is well established in the semantics literature, we use the term pivot to refer to the noun phrase which, in English existential constructions, occurs in immediately post-copular position (see unicorns in (1)).

(1) Thr are unicorns[2]

From our findings there emerges a wide range of variation in the behaviour of the pivot as a controller of agreement on the finite form

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of the copula, i.e., the form which carries the person and number features of the pre-copular argument in copular constructions other than existentials.

(2) a. I tuvagli su nt'u casciuni[3] (Mussomeli)
the towels be.3PL in-the drawer

b. Li sciucamani stannu intru lu cassette (Soleto)
the towels stay.3PL inside the drawer
'The towels are in the drawer'

Whereas in some dialects existential pivots would seem to control finite verb agreement consistently (cf. (3a-b)), this is not the case with other dialects. Compare the copula in (4a), which carries the same person and number features as the post-copular pronominal pivots, with the copula of (4b-c), which does not. Details on the cross-dialectal variation of finite copula agreement in existential constructions are provided in section 2.

(3) a. Nni sta frutta ci su ossa assà (Mussomeli)
in this fruit PF be.3PL seeds many
'In this fruit thr are many seeds'

b. Ntra sta frutta ce su tanti semi (San Tommaso)
inside this fruit PF be.3PL many seeds
'In this fruit thr are many seeds'

(4) a. Ghe semu nui atri / ghe sun gli atri[4] (Genova)
PF be.1PL we others / PF be.3PL the others
'Thr's us' / 'Thr's them'

b. Nu puremmu divursià: u gh'è i matti
NEG can.1PL.COND divorce.INF E.SBJ.CL PF be.3SG the children
'We could not divorce: thr are the children'

c. Sta attenta che inte sta früta
stay.2SG.IMP careful that in this fruit
u gh'è tanti ossi
E.SBJ.CL PF be.3SG many seeds
'Be careful that thr are many seeds in this fruit'

A class of existential pivots which is particularly resilient to the control of finite verb agreement is that which exhibits cliticisation with an outcome of Latin INDE (for INDE-cliticisation see Burzio 1986, La Fauci & Loporcaro 1997, Perlmutter 1978, 1983, 1989, Rizzi & Belletti 1981, among others). In semantic terms, such pivots can be partitive, in the sense of Enç (1991), when their head (*tre* 'three' in

(5a)) introduces a subset of a set which has been established in discourse. Otherwise, they simply quantify over a set (cf. (5b)).

(5) a. (Di quelle ragazze,) ce ne sono tre (Italian)
of those girls PF INDE be.3PL three
'Of those girls, thr are three'

b. (Problemi,) ce ne sono tanti
problems PF INDE be.3PL many
'(Problems,) thr are many'

In syntax, these pivots are split between a post-copular quantifier, and, on the other hand, a dislocated prepositional or noun phrase (in Cardinaletti & Giusti's 1991 analysis, this is the noun phrase complement of a quantifier head). This syntactic split parallels a split in information structure between a focal information unit (the quantifier) and a topical one (the dislocated phrase). The quantifier can be understood, rather than being spelled out, although, following Bentley (2004a), we assume that it is nonetheless part of the assertion, and hence focal.[5]

We found that finite agreement with an INDE-cliticised pivot can be optional or missing even in dialects which otherwise exhibit agreement of the copula with the pivot.

(6) Talìa quanti ova ci su nt'u frigoriferu.
see.2SG.IMP how.many eggs PF be.3PL in-the fridge
Mi pari ca ci nn' è / nni su ùattu (Mussomeli)
to.me seem.3SG that PF INDE be.3SG / INDE be.3PL eight
'Look how many eggs thr are in the fridge'
'I think that thr are eight (of eggs)'

(7) Vide quant' ova ce su ntr'o frigoriferu.
see.2SG.IMP how.many eggs PF be.3PL inside-the fridge
Mi pare ca ci nd' è uattu (San Tommaso)
to me seem.3SG that PF INDE be.3SG eight
'See how many eggs thr are in the fridge'
'I think that thr are eight (of eggs)'

We start from the assumption that, in the languages under investigation, the control of finite verb agreement is a diagnostic of subjecthood, or a grammatical relation in the construction-specific sense of Van Valin & LaPolla (1997: 242-309) and Van Valin (2005: 94-101). To analyse agreement in feature-specific terms (Samek-Lodovici 2002: 63), we focus on number agreement. Building upon

Beaver et al. (2005), Bentley (2010, in press) and Mikkelsen (2002), we claim that the micro-variation in the control of number agreement by the existential pivot is to be analysed with reference to the dialect-specific tolerance of subject markedness. Following a tenet of Optimality Theory (Aissen 1999, 2003, Prince & Smolensky 1993), we take markedness to be a relation. In the case of the subject, markedness is a relation between a syntactic function and its semantic and pragmatic correlates. Existential pivots are marked candidates to subjecthood on the following grounds: their lack of lexical entailments, and hence of semantic roles and macroroles (see Francez's 2007, 2009, 2010 claim that existential pivots are predicates, not arguments), as well as their lack of topicality (Lambrecht 1994) and of specificity (Enç 1991). The crossdialectal variation in number agreement amounts to the variation in the interaction of the structural requirement of agreement, which is sensitive to the markedness of the potential controller as a subject, and, on the other hand, a principle of structural economy (Samek-Lodovici 2002). We capture the widespread tendency for INDE-cliticised pivots to fail to control number agreement in terms of the combined effect of their markedness as subjects and their split focus structure.

2. The evidence

Both in Italo-Romance and in Sardinian the existential construction consists of four components, which are illustrated in (8a-c).

(8) a. (± pro-form) + copula + pivot + (locative phrase)

b. Ci sono due bar (in quella strada) (Italian)
PF be.3PL two cafés (in that road)
'Thr are two cafés (in that road)'

c. (In quthu qaminu) bi sunis duos tzilleris (Fonni)
in that road PF be.3PL two cafés
'(In that road) thr are two cafés'

Whereas the copula and the pivot are obligatory components of the existential construction in these dialects, the locative phrase is optional (cf. (8b-c)). The pro-form, in turn, is absent from the existential construction of some dialects.[6]

(9) Testi frutti qua l' é tanti semi (Belluno)
in these fruits here E.SBJ.CL be.3SG many seeds
'In this fruit thr are many seeds'

Within this broadly uniform existential pattern, the dialects under investigation exhibit a wide range of micro-variation in the behavioural and coding properties of the pivot (stress, case, syntactic position, control of copula agreement). In this article, we focus on the behaviour of the pivot as the controller of number agreement on the finite form of the copula. This, as was mentioned above, is the form which carries the same person and number features as the pre-copular argument in copular constructions other than existentials.[7] In Corbett's (2006: 10-26) terms, the finite form of the copula is thus the target, or locus, of agreement with the pre- or post-copular argument, the controller. The agreement domain which we deal with here is the clause.

A range of variation in number agreement is attested in Italo-Romance and Sardinian existential constructions. First, there are dialects which would at first sight appear consistently to require number agreement on the finite form of the copula.

(10) a. Ci sìamu nuantri / ci su iddri (Mussomeli)
PF be.1PL we-others / PF be.3PL they
'Thr's us' / 'thr's them'

b. Un nni putìamu spartiri: ci su i picciliddri
NEG REFL can.1PL divorce.INF PF be.3PL the children
'We cannot divorce: thr are the children'

c. Nni sta frutta ci su ossa assà
in this fruit PF be.3PL seeds many
'In this fruit thr are many seeds'

(11) a. Ngə simə nujə / ngə so lorə (Potenza)
PF be.1PL we / PF be.3PL they
'Thr's us' / 'Thr's them'

b. Nun putimmə divurzià pirché ngə só rə creaturə
NEG can.1PL divorce.INF because PF be.3PL the children
'We cannot divorce because thr are the children'

c. Ində sta frutta ngə só tantə nuzzələ
inside this fruit PF be.3PL many seeds
'In this fruit thr are many seeds'

(12) a. Ce simu nue / ce su illi (San Tommaso)
PF be.1PL we / PF be.3PL they
'Thr's us' / thr's them'

b. Un potimu divorziare: ce su li quatriarialli
NEG can.1PL divorce.INF PF be.3PL the children
'We cannot divorce: thr are the children'

c. Ntra sta frutta ce su tanti semi
inside this fruit PF be.3PL many seeds
'In this fruit thr are many seeds'

Secondly, there are dialects in which agreement is optional with all classes of pivot but pronominal ones.

(13) a. Ci siamo noi / ci so' loro (Siena)
PF be.1PL we / PF be.3PL they
'Thr's us' / 'thr's them'

b. Un si pò divorzià: c' è / ci sono i figlioli
NEG IMPS can.3SG divorce.INF PF be.3SG / PF be.3PL the children
'We cannot divorce: thr are the children'

c. In questa frutta c' è / ci so' tanti semi
in this fruit PF be.3SG / PF be.3PL many seed
'In this fruit thr are many seeds'

There are also dialects in which only particular classes of pivot control person and number copula agreement. Thus, a subgroup of dialects only requires agreement with definite noun phrases (cf. (14a)), proper names (cf. (14b)), and personal pronouns (cf. (14c)). The remaining classes of pivot do not trigger agreement (cf. (14d)). The copula may alternate in accordance with agreement. In particular, in the Sardinian dialect of Bono, agreeing 'be' alternates with invariant 'have'. The latter is the non-agreeing copula in a number of dialects.

(14) a. Bi sun sas piseddas (Bono)
PF be.3PL the girls
'Thr are the girls'

b. Bi sun Juanne, Foricu, Pedru
PF be.3PL Juanne Foricu Pedru
'Thr are Juanne, Foricu, Pedru'

c. Bi sun eo
PF be.1SG I
'Thr's me'

d. B' at piseddas
PF have.3SG girls
'Thr are girls'

In another subgroup of dialects, finite copula agreement is only controlled by pivots which are personal pronouns (observe that *nui atri* and *gli atri* translate first and third person plural, respectively):

(15) a. Maria l' è no sola: ghe semu nui atri /
Maria SBJ.CL be.3SG NEG alone PF be.1PL we others /
ghe sun gli atri (Genova)
PF be.3PL they
'Maria is not alone: thr'us / thr's them'

b. Nu puremmu divursià: u gh'è i matti
NEG can.1PL.COND divorce.INF E.SBJ.CL PF be.3SG the children
'We could not divorce: thr are the children'

c. Inte sta früta u gh' è tanti ossi
inside this fruit E.SBJ.CL PF be.3SG many seeds
'In this fruit thr are many seeds'

The type of existential construction where the pivot consistently fails to trigger agreement is well-known in the Romance literature because it is exemplified by French. In Italo-Romance, we have found this pattern in the dialect of Soleto.

(16) a. Ave a nui / ave quiddhi (Soleto)
have.3SG to we / have.3SG those
'thr's us / thr's them'

b. No potimu divorziare: ave li piccinni
NEG can.1PL divorce.INF have.3SG the children
'We cannot divorce: thr are the children'

c. Intru a sta frutta ave tanti samenti
inside to this fruit have.3SG many seeds
'In this fruit there are many seeds'

Table 1 summarises the micro-variation in number agreement on the copula which has been discussed thus far.

Table 1. Micro-variation in existential copula agreement (I).

Dialects	Pattern (i)	Pattern (iia)	Pattern (iib)	Pattern (iii)
	+ agreement	± agreement (optional + by class)	± agreement (by class)	– agreement
Potenza Mussomeli S. Tommaso	√			
Siena		√		
Bono Genova			√	
Soleto				√

We now come to existential pivots with INDE-cliticisation (see section 1). The dialects with pattern (iii) from Table 1 are expected not to treat partitive pivots as controllers. Since the dialect of Soleto lacks INDE-cliticisation, we report here a French existential construction with INDE-cliticisation of the pivot, in addition to its counterpart in Soletano without INDE-cliticisation. As expected, in neither case is the pivot a controller.

(17) Tu sais combien d'oeufs il y a encore
you know.2SG how many of eggs E.SBJ PF have.3SG still
dans le frigo?
inside the fridge
Je crois qu' il y en a huit (Spoken French)
I believe.1SG that E.SBJ PF INDE have.3SG eight
'How many eggs thr are in the fridge do you know?'
'I believe that thr are eight (of eggs)'

(18) Viti quante ove ave intru lu frigoriferu.
see.2SG.IMP how many eggs have.3SG inside the fridge
Crisciu ca ave ottu (Soleto)
believe.1SG that have.3SG eight
'See how many eggs thr are in the fridge'
'I believe that thr are eight (of eggs)'

The dialects with pattern (iib), i.e., agreement by pivot class, do not exhibit agreement in existentials with INDE-cliticisation, either.

(19) A bind'at, fiores, in sa tanca? (Bono)
Q INDE have.3SG flowers in the meadow
'(Of flowers), are thr any in the meadow?'

(20) Mira quante euve u gh'è int u frigu.
look.2SG.IMP how many eggs E.SBJ.CL PF be.3SG inside the fridge
Credu c' u ghe ne secce euttu (Genova)
believe.1SG that E.SBJ.CL PF INDE be.3SG.SBJV eight
'Look how many eggs thr are in the fridge'
'I believe that thr are eight (of eggs)'

The dialects with pattern (iia), i.e., optional copula agreement with most classes of pivot, exhibit this pattern in existentials with INDE-cliticisation.

(21) Guarda quant' òva ci so' in frigo.
look.2SG.imp how many eggs PF be.3PL in fridge
Penso che ce ne sia / siano otto (Siena)
think.1SG that PF INDE be.3SG.SBJV / be.3PL.SBJV eight
'Look how many eggs thr are in the fridge'
'I think that thr are eight (of eggs)'

Among the dialects where pivots are normally agreement controllers (pattern (i)), we found some that exhibit obligatory agreement with INDE-cliticised pivots (cf. (22)), others which exhibit optional agreement with such pivots (cf. (23)), and, lastly, some which do not have agreement with these pivots (cf. (24)).

(22) Virə quanda ovə ngə só ində a u frigoriferə.
see.2SG.IMP how many eggs PF be.3PL inside to the fridge
Penzə ca ngə nə só ottə (Potenza)
think.1SG that PF INDE be.3PL eight
'See how many eggs thr are in the fridge'.
'I think that thr are eight (of eggs)'

(23) Talia quanti ova ci su nt' u frigoriferu.
see.2SG.IMP how many eggs PF be.3PL in the fridge
Mi pari ca ci nn' è / nni su ùattu (Mussomeli)
to me seem.3SG that PF INDE be.3SG/ INDE be.3PL eight
'Look how many eggs thr are in the fridge'
'I think thr are eight (of eggs)'

(24) Vide quant' ova ce su ntr' o frigoriferu.
see.2SG.IMP how many eggs PF be.3PL inside the fridge
Mi pare ca ci nd' è uattu (San Tommaso)
to me seem.3SG that PF INDE be.3SG eight

'See how many eggs thr are in the fridge'
'I think that thr are eight (of eggs)'

The findings on finite agreement in existential constructions with INDE-cliticised pivots combine with the results reported previously as shown in table 2.

Table 2. Micro-variation in existential copula agreement (II).

	OBLIGATORY CONTROL	OPTIONAL CONTROL / CONTROL BY CLASS	LACK OF CONTROL
Potenza	pattern (i) / INDE (i)		
Mussomeli	pattern (i)	INDE (iia)	
S.Tommaso	pattern (i)		INDE (iii)
Siena		pattern (iia) / INDE (iia)	
Bono Genova		pattern (iib)	INDE (iii)
Sp. French			pattern (iii) / INDE (iii)
Soleto			pattern (iii)

Our findings bring to light the following implicational pattern. If agreement is obligatorily controlled by pivots with INDE-cliticisation, it is also obligatorily controlled by other pivots; optional control by INDE-cliticised pivots entails optional or obligatory control by other pivots. Finally, lack of control by INDE-cliticised pivots does not entail lack of control by other pivots. Assuming that agreement is sensitive to a condition (Corbett 2006: 26), i.e., in this case, a property or set of properties of the controller, it would seem that INDE-cliticised pivots do not satisfy this condition to the same extent as other pivots. In the account which we propose in section 4, the split focus structure of INDE-cliticised pivots combines with their markedness as subjects to yield the implicational pattern identified here. Before we move on to our analysis, however, we will introduce the theoretical background of this analysis.

3. Theoretical background

The foundation of our analysis is a proposal by Beaver et al. (2005), which in turn originates in Mikkelsen (2002). Beaver et al. (2005) observe that, across languages, existential constructions differ from other copular sentences in several ways: word order, copula selection, locative pro-forms, verb agreement, etc. These differences

correlate with a contrast between the semantic properties of the pivot and those of the subject of canonical copular constructions (i.e., in English, copular constructions with a pre-copular subject). In accordance with subject properties which are well attested crosslinguistically, the subject of canonical copular constructions tends to be topical, specific, local, referential, and animate (Aissen 2003: 445, Foley & Van Valin 1987: 115, Givón 1976, Jespersen 1924: 145-56, Keenan 1976). Existential pivots instead tend to lack these properties.

Beaver et al. (2005) thus claim that existential constructions are in competition with copular constructions with a canonical subject. The noun phrases which have properties associated with subjecthood tend to occur in subject position in canonical copular constructions, whilst the noun phrases which do not exhibit these properties are attracted to the pivot function of existential constructions.

Those among the said subject properties which will be relevant to our analysis are topicality and specificity. Following Lambrecht (1994: 131), we define topic as follows: the proposition is construed and understood as being about this argument and increases the addressee's knowledge of it. The existential pivot is by default focal, in that it is in the domain of the assertion, and it is not part of a proposition which is construed and understood as being about it (Bentley et al. 2012, Francez 2007, among others). Following Enç (1991: 9-10), we define specificity as a relationship of identity with or inclusion in a set of individuals whose referents have previously been established in discourse. The existential pivot is by default non specific (Enç 1991). Since Milsark (1974, 1977, 1979), the lack of specificity of existential pivots has been known as the Definiteness Effect.

Observe further that subjects are arguments. The predicate imposes lexical entailments on arguments, on the basis of which thematic roles and macroroles are assigned, and the lexical entailments of arguments play a key role in their syntactic realisation (Dowty 1991, Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 113-158). If we assume with Francez (2007, 2010) that the existential coda (i.e., the adjectival or prepositional phrase which can follow the pivot) is not a predicate, but rather a modifier, there is no predicate imposing any lexical entailments on the existential pivot.[8] This is another characteristic which makes the pivot a marked candidate to subjecthood (Bentley, in press).

Our account departs from Beaver et al.'s (2005) proposal, in that we do not purely define subject in terms of syntactic position, but rather we break this notion down into diagnostics, which can vary across languages. This theoretical choice is based on Van Valin &

LaPolla's (1997: 242-309) and Van Valin's (2005: 94-101) claim that grammatical relations are construction-specific neutralisations of semantic contrasts for syntactic purposes, while subject is the generalized grammatical relation of languages which consistently assign grammatical relations to the most agent-like argument available, typically the argument which bears the macrorole actor (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 139-158).

In the dialects under investigation, number agreement classifies as a grammatical relation, and as a subjecthood diagnostic, in that it neutralises the contrast between actor (proto-agent, in Dowty's 1991 sense) and undergoer (proto-patient), privileging the actor as the default controller. The neutralisation of the actor-vs.-undergoer contrast is seen in intransitive constructions (cf. (25a-c)), where the macrorole, whether actor or undergoer, is pressed into service as the controller, whereas other thematic roles (for example, the locative one in (25c)) cannot be controllers (cf. 25d)). The privileging of the actor is testified by transitive constructions (cf. (25e)), which, in the contemporary varieties of these dialects, have no passive counterparts.

(25) a. Luca e Maria anu arrubbatu (San Tommaso)
Luca and Mary have.3PL stolen
'Luca and Mary stole / have stolen'

b. Luca e Maria se su spagnati
Luca and Mary REFL be.3PL scared
'Luca and Mary got scared'

c. Luca e Maria su juti alla scola
Luca and Mary be.3PL gone to-the school
'Luca and Mary went to school'

d. *Alla scola è jutu Luca e Maria
to-the school be.3SG gone Luca and Mary
'(Lit.) To school is gone Luca and Mary'

e. Luca ha arrubbatu e caramelle
Luca have.3SG stolen the sweets
'Luca stole / has stolen the sweets'

In the cognate languages which do have a passive, for example Italian, the selection of the marked controller (the undergoer) in the passive is flagged by passive morpho-syntax: the passive auxiliary essere 'be' plus the past participle, and the by-phrase which encodes the actor. We return to this point in section 6.

A fully-fledged analysis of subject markedness in Romance should aim to offer a unified account of the variation in the assignment of each of the construction-specific grammatical relations found in these languages.[9] It is, however, beyond the scope of the present work to provide a comprehensive analysis of subjecthood in Romance. Section 2 shed light on a wide-range of crossdialectal micro-variation in number agreement, and our goal in the next section will be to capture this variation.

4. A formal account of micro-variation in agreement

We start our analysis from the assumption, which will have to be assessed in the analysis of each dialect, that the subjecthood properties discussed in section 3 are not solely relevant to position (Beaver et al. 2005), but rather, more generally, to the various language-specific subjecthood diagnostics. Drawing upon Aissen (1999, 2003) and Mikkelsen (2002), we formalise this claim in terms of harmonic alignment. In its original formulation (Prince & Smolensky 1993: 136), harmonic alignment is a technique which captures the alignment of structural scales (for example, the binary – peak vs. margin – scale of syllable structure) with substantive ones (sonority). In this context, we are concerned with the alignment of the discrete agreement scale with a scale constituted by one of the pragmatic and semantic properties discussed above, or a combination thereof. The agreement scale is binary, in that it contrasts control with lack of control. The substantive scales can, in principle, be broken down into a range of sub-scales. Indeed, this will turn out to be necessary with respect to specificity. To begin with, we propose the markedness scales in (26a-c).

(26) a. AGR / topical > AGR / non topical

b. AGR / specific > AGR / non specific

c. AGR / argumental > AGR / non argumental

In (26a-c), AGR stands for the discrete grammatical relation defined by the control of number agreement on the finite form of the verb. According to (26a), a topical controller of agreement is more harmonic – or less marked – than a non-topical one; according to (26b), a specific controller of agreement is more harmonic than a non-specific

one; lastly, (26c) states that an argument is more harmonic than a controller that is not an argument. By argument, we mean a canonical argument, which is part of the argument structure of a predicate, and receives its lexical entailments from it. We will point out below that, in order to extend our analysis of agreement to transitive constructions, it is necessary to break down the notion of argument into the two macroroles actor and undergoer (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 139-158).

From (26a-c), we derive the constraint hierarchies in (27a-c), where the symbol >> stands for 'is more marked than', while * is the avoid operator.

(27) a. *– AGR / topical >> *– AGR / non topical

b. *– AGR / specific >> *– AGR / non specific

c. *– AGR / argumental >> *– AGR / non argumental

*– AGR is a constraint on outputs, namely the requirement of control of number agreement.[10] The hierarchy in (27a) states that an output in which a topical potential controller fails to control agreement is less optimal than an output in which a non-topical potential controller fails to do so. The hierarchies in (27b-c) are explained in the same way.

Potential agreement controllers belong to the input, which is a predicate-argument structure where arguments bear semantic roles and macroroles (Aissen 2003). The input is also informed by discourse (Grimshaw & Samek-Lodovici 1998: 195). The copulas which are dealt with in this work are mere spell-outs of agreement, and therefore do not figure in the input, but rather only in outputs. *Gen* is the component of grammar which maps an input on to an infinite set of candidate output forms. In our analysis, we will only consider a limited set of candidate outputs for each input. *Eval*, on the other hand, is the component which evaluates the candidate output forms by a set of constraints, which are ranked in a language-specific way. *Eval*, therefore, is concerned with the steps in semantic-syntax mapping which are subject to crosslinguistic variation (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 177).

From tables 1 and 2, recall that there are dialects in which the existential pivot controls agreement obligatorily (pattern (i)), dialects which exhibit a combination of agreement by class and optional agreement (pattern (iia)), dialects with sole agreement by class (pat-

tern (iib)), and, finally, dialects in which the existential pivot does not control agreement. Obligatory control of agreement by pivots with INDE-cliticisation entails obligatory control by other pivots, optional control by INDE-cliticised pivots entails optional or obligatory control by other pivots, and lack of control by INDE-cliticised pivots does not entail lack of control by other pivots. To understand how we obtain the crossdialectal variation discussed in section 2, let us start from pattern (iii) of table 1, which is defined by lack of agreement with all classes of pivot.

(28) a. Ci ave cu me iuta? (Soleto)
who have.3SG who.REL me help.3SG
Ave a mie
have.3SG to me
'Who is thr to help me?'
'Thr's me'

b. No potimu divorziare: ave li piccinni
NEG can.1PL divorce.INF have.3SG the children
'We cannot divorce: thr are the children'

c. Intru ddra famiglia ave tanti problem
inside that family have.3SG many problems
'Thr are many problems in that family'

Recall that we define specificity as a relationship of identity with or inclusion in a set of individuals whose referents have previously been established in discourse (Enç 1991: 9-10). The evidence in (28a-c) suggests that specificity is not a relevant property in the assignment of agreement in the dialect of Soleto, since the existential construction lacks number agreement regardless of whether the pivot is in a relationship of identity or inclusion with an established set: this relationship would seem to characterise the pivot of in (28a-b), but not that of (28c).

Recall now that we define topic as follows: the proposition is construed and understood as being about this argument and increases the addressee's knowledge of it (Lambrecht 1994: 131). The evidence in (29) might at first sight suggest that the lack of topicality of the pivot is to blame for its failure to control number agreement. In (29a) the proposition is not construed and understood as being about the discourse referent spelled out by the pivot, as indicated by the contexts in which this structures can occur felicitously (which we mark with √) and infelicitously (marked with #).

(29) a. Ave le pantofole, sott a lu iettu (Soleto)
have.3SG the slippers under at the bed
'(Lit.) Thr are the slippers, under the bed'
b. √Cce ave sotta lu iettu?
what have.3SG under the bed
'What is thr under the bed?'
c. #Addhu stannu le pantofole?
where stay.3PL the slippers
'Where are the slippers?'

On further inspection, however, the above hypothesis turns out to be unfounded. The structure in (30) would only be felicitous as an out-of-the-blue utterance. Therefore, it introduces the argument encoded post-verbally as part of the assertion. The proposition is not construed and understood as being about the post-verbal argument, which does not qualify as a topic.

(30) Mannaggia! Me cadera li piatti (Soleto)
damn to me fall.3PL.PST the plates
'Damn! The plates fell on me'

The contrast in agreement between (29a), on the one hand, and (30), on the other, leads us to think that, in the dialect of Soleto, the subjecthood property which is relevant to the control of finite agreement is argumentality, rather than topicality. As was pointed out above, pivots lack properties of canonical arguments which are crucial to the syntactic behaviour of arguments. We claim that the failure of the pivot to control agreement in Soleto is a morpho-syntactic consequence of its non canonicality as an argument.

Evidence from constructions with a topicalised pivot supports this hypothesis, since agreement is missing in these constructions, regardless of topicality.[11]

(31) Li sciucamani stannu intra lu cassettu? (Soleto)
the towels stay.3PL inside the drawer
No, non l' ave
NEG NEG 3.OBJ.CL have.3SG
'The towels, are they in the drawer? No, they aren't'

To capture agreement in Soleto we propose that the constraint hierarchy in (27c) interacts with NOFEATS (Samek-Lodovici 2002), a constraint exerting a limiting influence on morphological structure (see note 9). We thus formulate the constraint hierarchy in (32),

where *– AGR / non argumental turns out to be redundant, and hence will not be reported in the tables.

(32) *– AGR / argumental >> NOFEATS >> *– AGR / non argumental

Tableau 1. AGR in Soleto (cf. (30)).

	*– AGR / arg	NOFEATS
a. + AGR, arg		*
b. – AGR, arg	*!	

Tableau 2. Lack of AGR in Soleto (cf. ave in (29) and (28a-c)).

	*– AGR / arg	NOFEATS
a. + AGR, – arg		*!
b. – AGR, – arg		

Each of the above tableaux shows the evaluation of two candidate outputs. Candidate a exhibits agreement, thus violating NOFEATS in both cases. This turns out to be a fatal violation in tableau 2, where the potential controller is not argumental, in that it has no lexical entailments. By contrast, in tableau 1, this violation is less serious than the violation of *– AGR / argumental. Since the latter constraint dominates NOFEATS, candidate a is the winner in this table.

To be sure, the constraint hierarchy in (32) does not capture agreement in constructions with two or more arguments. We will address this problem focusing on two types of argument, actor and undergoer, since we have no evidence of agreement control by non-macrorole arguments in Soleto. This leads us to the reformulation of (32) as (32').

(32') *– AGR / actor >> *– AGR / undergoer >> NOFEATS

As we mentioned in passing above, in the contemporary varieties of the dialects under investigation the passive is, at best, odd. Accordingly, (32') predicts that actors will always be preferred to undergoers as controllers. In section 6, we shall briefly examine evidence from a cognate language, Italian, which does have a productive passive structure, and we will suggest how the passive could be captured in our account of agreement.

To return to Soleto, we noted above that this dialect does not have INDE-cliticisation. The lack of agreement in the existential structures which would require this cliticisation in other dialects (cf. (18)) is captured by (32'), in that, on a par with all existential pivots, the

pivots of these structures are not canonical arguments to which a macrorole is assigned.

We defined pattern (iib) as agreement by pivot class. In Genova, number copula agreement is only controlled by pronominal pivots (cf. (15a-c)), whereas in Bono, agreement is controlled by pivots which are definite noun phrases, personal pronouns, and proper nouns (cf. (14a-d)). Specificity is a clearly relevant subjecthood property in these dialects, since crosslinguistically established discourse referents are spelled out by personal pronouns, proper names, and definite noun phrases (Enç 1991). However, specificity plays different roles in the two dialects, as only a subclass of specific pivots, personal pronouns, are agreement controllers in the dialect of Genova.

Focusing on Genovese, first, it is necessary to verify whether the mentioned subclass of specificity is the only property that is relevant to number agreement. In fact, we have evidence that both argumentality and topicality are also relevant properties. The data in (33) suggest that non topical arguments do control agreement, regardless of specificity. The reader should recall from (30) that this is an out-of-the-blue utterance.

(33) Belin! Me sun keiti di piati (Genova)
swear word to me be.3PL fallen of plates
'[Swear word]! Some plates fell on me'

In turn, the reply in (34) suggest that topicality overrides the lack of argumentality of pivots, determining agreement.

(34) Su questu n'u gh'è dubi (Genova)
on this NEG E.SBJ.CL PF be.3SG doubts
Invece sì, di dubi ghe sun
instead yes of doubts PF be.3PL
'On this thr is no doubt'
'Actually, yes, thr are some doubts'

We are now able to propose a constraint hierarchy for Genovese. As we did with Soletano, we break down *– AGR / argumental into *– AGR / actor >> *– AGR / undergoer, in order to account for agreement in transitive constructions (assuming that there is no productive passive in the contemporary variety of this dialect). We thus propose the constraint hierarchy in (35).

(35) *– AGR / actor >> *– AGR / undergoer >> *– AGR / topic >> *– AGR / pronominal specific >> NOFEATS

The hierarchy in (35) establishes that actors will always control agreement, whilst undergoers will only do so in the absence of an actor. Among potential controllers which are not canonical arguments, all topics will control agreement, but only focal personal pronouns will do so. The hierarchy is put to work in the tableaux from (3) to (6), where we conflate the first two constraints into *– AGR / argumental, for the sake of simplicity.

Tableau 3. AGR with an argument in Genova (cf. (33)).

	*– AGR / arg	*– AGR / top	*– AGR / pro	NOFEATS
a. + AGR, + arg, – top, – pro				*
b. – AGR, + arg, – top, – pro	*!			

Tableau 4. agr with a topicalised non argument in Genova (see the reply in (34)).

	*– AGR / arg	*– AGR / top	* – AGR / pro	NOFEATS
a. + AGR, + top, – arg, – pro				*
b. – AGR, + top, – arg, – pro		*!		

Tableau 5. agr with a pronominal non argument in Genova (cf. (15a)).

	*– AGR / arg	*– AGR / top	*– AGR / pro	NOFEATS
a. + AGR, + pro, – top, – arg				*
b. – AGR, + pro, – top, – arg			*!	

Tableau 6. Lack of agr with a non-pronominal non argument in Genova (cf. (15b-c)).

	*– AGR / arg	*– AGR / top	*– AGR / pro	NOFEATS
a. + AGR, – top, – arg, – pro				*!
b. – AGR, – top, – arg, – pro				

In tableau 3, candidate a is the winner because it only violates NOFEATS, which ranks lower than *– AGR / argumental, the constraint fatally violated by candidate b. Note in passing that *– AGR / topical and *– AGR / pronominal are satisfied vacuously in this case. In tableaux 4 and 5, candidate b violates *– AGR / topical and *– AGR / pronominal, respectively, thus losing out to candidate a. Only in tableau 5 does candidate b classify as the winner, since it satisfies vacuously the first three constraints and, unlike candidate a, it also satisfies NOFEATS.

The hierarchy in (35) captures the lack of agreement in existential constructions with pivots with INDE-cliticisation. Recall from section 1 that these pivots are split between a topical noun or prepositional phrase, which is co-referent with resumptive INDE, and a quantifier that is part of the assertion. Due to this split, we argue, pivots with INDE-cliticisation are neither topical nor non topical, with the result that an output where they do not control number agreement satisfies vacuously *– AGR / top in (35). Given that these pivots are neither argumental nor pronominal, they fail to control agreement in Genoese.

The dialect of Bono differs from Genovese, in that it appears to exhibit the same agreement pattern with existentials as with structures with a canonical predicate. In both cases, specificity determines the control of number agreement or lack thereof (cf. (14a-d)).

(36) a. B' at balladu medas piseddas (Bono)
PF have.3SG danced many girls
'Thr danced many girls'

b. B' an balladu sas piseddas
PF have.3PL danced the girls
'Thr danced the girls'

Bentley (2004b), however, provided evidence from INDE-cliticisation which suggests that the structure illustrated in (36a) is an existential construction with a pivot that is modified by the predicate 'dance': 'thr are many girls who danced'. If this is the case, the evidence in (36a) is not indicative of lack of agreement with a canonical argument. The reader should further note that non-specific topics are avoided by native speakers of this dialect. In particular, we were unable to obtain evidence of the kind illustrated above in (34). In the light of the available evidence, we thus tentatively propose the hierarchy in (37), which is put to work in tableaux 7 and 8.

(37) *– AGR / actor >> *– AGR / undergoer >> *– AGR / specific >> NOFEATS

Tableau 7. Lack of AGR in Bono (cf. (14d, 36a)).

	*– AGR / act	*– AGR / und	*– AGR / spec	NOFEATS
a. + AGR, –top, – arg, –spec				*!
b. – AGR, –top, – arg, –spec				

Tableau 8. AGR in Bono (cf. (36b)).

	*– AGR / act	*– AGR / und	*– AGR / spec	NOFEATS
a. + AGR, –top, + arg, +spec				*
b. – AGR, –top, + arg, +spec	*!		*	

Pattern (iia) (cf. (13a-c)) is comparable to the pattern found in Genova, although here we recorded optional agreement in the contexts which lack agreement in Genova. As is the case with Genovese, all arguments control agreement (cf. (38a)), whilst, among non arguments, only topics and personal pronouns are obligatory controllers. Existential constructions with personal pronoun pivots were illustrated in (13a). In (38a), we illustrate agreement with arguments. In (38b), we illustrate existential constructions with topicalised pivots.

(38) a. Maremma! Mi so' cascati dei piatti (Siena)
swear.word to me be.3PL fallen.PL.M some plates
'[Swear word]! Some plates fell on me'

b. Su questo un ci sono dubbi. (Siena)
on this NEG PF be.3PL doubts
E invece sì, dei dubbi ci so'
and actually yes some doubts PF be.3PL
'On this thr is no doubt. Actually, yes, thr are some doubts'

We thus propose the following hierarchy for Sienese, where the constraint promoting agreement with non argumental, non topical, non pronominal controllers optionally outranks NOFEATS (the symbol <<>> indicates agreement optionality due to optional constraint ranking). We leave it to the reader to elaborate the relevant tables.

(39) *– AGR / actor >> *– AGR / undergoer >> *– AGR / topic >> *– AGR / pronominal specific >> *– AGR / non pronominal << >> NOFEATS

The constraint hierarchy in (39) captures the optionality of agreement with pivots with INDE-cliticisation in Sienese (cf. (21)) since these are not canonical arguments, topics, or pronouns.

The evidence of pivots with INDE-cliticisation turns out to be crucial, in our account of agreement, when we consider pattern (i), which normally involves agreement (cf. (10a-c) to (12a-c)). In this pattern, *–AGR would seem to rank above nofeats regardless of the properties of the potential controller. However, it was seen above that there is one construction which exhibits optional agreement in Mussomeli and no agreement in San Tommaso. This is the existential construction with an INDE-cliticised pivot. The relevant evidence is repeated in (40) and (41), alongside data which suggest that INDE-cliticised canonical arguments are obligatory controllers in both dialects (cf. (42-43)).

(Mussomeli)

(40) Talia quanti ova ci su nt'u frigoriferu.
see.2SG.IMP how many eggs PF be.3PL in-the fridge
Mi pari ca ci nn' è / nni su ùattu
to me seem.3SG that PF INDE be.3SG / INDE be.3PL eight
'Look how many eggs thr are in the fridge'
'I think that thr are eight (of eggs)' (San Tommaso)

(41) Vide quant' ova ce su ntr' o frigoriferu.
see.2SG.IMP how many eggs PF be.3PL inside the fridge
Mi pare ca ci nd' è uattu
to me seem.3SG that PF INDE be.3SG eight
'See how many eggs thr are in the fridge'
'I think that thr are eight (of eggs)'

(42) Duttura un nni *arriva / arrivanu mai
doctors NEG INDE arrive.3SG / arrive.3PL never
quannu sìarbinu (Mussomeli)
when serve.3PL
'Doctors, they never arrive when they are needed'
(lit. Doctors, (of them) never arrive when needed)

(43) Dutturi un nd *arriva / arrivanu mai
doctors NEG INDE arrive.3SG / arrive.3PL never
quandu servenu (San Tommaso)
when serve.3PL
'Doctors, they never arrive when they are needed
(lit. Doctors, (of them) never arrive when needed)'

The evidence of Mussomeli and San Tommaso indicates that the markedness of the potential controller can surface even in dialects which otherwise require number agreement at all costs, that is, regardless of the markedness of the controller. With particular respect to Mussomeli, we propose that the potential controller will control agreement if (a) it is a canonical argument or (b) it has a single role in information structure, whether this is topical or focal. If the potential controller lacks both of these properties, it may not behave as a controller (cf. (40)).

(44) *– AGR / actor >> *– AGR / undergoer >> *– AGR / topic >> *– AGR / focus >> *– AGR / – focus << >> NOFEATS

The reason why the potential controller may not be treated as a subject, if it has split focus structure, should be investigated with evidence on split focus constructions in languages other than Italo-Romance. We simply note here that subjects are normally topics, or, in the marked case, foci. Thus, the behaviour of potential controllers with split focus structure may fruitfully be dealt with in terms of subject markedness, on a par with behaviour of potential controllers with the other properties discussed in this paper.

The hierarchy in (44) is put to work in tableaux 9 and 10 and 12, where we conflate the first two constraints under the single one *– AGR / argumental, as we did above, and the third and fourth constraints as *– AGR / focus.

Tableau 9. Lack of agreement in Mussomelese (cf. (40)).

	*– AGR / arg	*– AGR / foc	NOFEATS	*– AGR/ – foc
+ AGR, – arg, – focus			*!	
– AGR, – arg,– focus				*

Tableau 10. Agreement in Mussomelese (cf. (40)).

	*– AGR / arg	*– AGR / foc	*– AGR/ – foc	NOFEATS
+ AGR, – arg,– focus				*
– AGR,– arg, – focus			*!	

Agreement in San Tommaso is captured by a constraint hierarchy which differs minimally from (44), insofar as NOFEATS obligatorily outranks *– AGR / – focus.

(45) *– AGR / actor >> *– AGR / undergoer >> *– AGR / topic >> *– AGR / focus >> NOFEATS >> *– AGR / – focus

6. Italian

In the account of finite (number) agreement provided above we assumed that *– AGR / actor invariably outranks *– AGR / undergoer in the dialects under investigation. This assumption was based on the observation that the passive is not a structure of the contemporary varieties of these dialects. In this section, we extend our account to a sister of the dialects investigated, Italian, which does have passive structures. Apart from this, Italian behaves like Mussomelese, in that agreement is only optional with pivots with split focus.

(46) Credo che ce n' è / sono otto (Italian)
believe.1SG that PF INDE be.3SG / be.3PL eight
'I believe that thr are eight (of x)'

Within our account of finite (number) agreement, the passive can be accommodated as a structure found in a language which, while selecting the actor as the default controller, also optionally allows the selection of the undergoer if this is prominent in discourse, i.e., topical. This analysis of agreement in the passive is spelt out in (47), which accounts for both (48a) and (48b).[12]

(47) *– AGR / actor <<>> *– AGR / topic >> *– AGR / undergoer >> *– AGR / focus >> *– AGR / – focus <<>> NOFEATS

(48) a. Luca ha mangiato i dolci (Italian)
Luca have.3SG eaten the cakes
'Luca has eaten the cakes'

b. Chi ha mangiato i dolci?
who have.3SG eaten the cakes
(I dolci) sono stati mangiati da Luca
(the cakes) be.3PL been eaten by Luca
'Who ate the cakes?'
'The cakes/they were eaten by Luca'

In this perspective the passive is allowed by languages which, whilst principally aligning the grammatical relation subject with the macrorole actor, also allow its alignment with a prominent discourse role, regardless of semantic macrorole.

7. Conclusion

In this article we have investigated the micro-variation in finite (number) verb agreement in a range of Italo-Romance and Sardinian dialects. Starting from the assumption that this type of agreement is a subjecthood diagnostics, we have claimed that the said micro-variation results from the interaction of a structural constraint promoting agreement, which is sensitive to the markedness of the potential controller as a subject, with a constraint limiting morphological structure (Samek-Lodovici 2002). We have noted the crucial role, in the analysis of number agreement, of existential constructions where the pivot exhibits INDE-cliticisation. These structures indicate that the markedness of the potential controller can surface even in dialects which would otherwise require agreement at all costs, that is, regardless of the markedness of the controller. The widespread tendency for existential pivots with INDE-cliticisation to fail to trigger finite agreement was captured in terms of the combined effect of their markedness as subjects (Beaver et al. 2005, Bentley 2010, Mikkelsen 2002) and their split focus structure.

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Notes

[1] Unless indicated otherwise the findings reported in this article were collected by the authors in the field in the periods from March to July 2009 and from May to November 2011. This fieldwork was financed by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (research grants AH/E506011/1 and AH/H032509/1) which allowed us to collect data in 12 Sardinian villages and in 138 localities in mainland and insular Italy. The following dialects are cited in the paper: Belluno

(Veneto), Bono and Fonni (Sardinia), Genova (Liguria), Mussomeli (Sicily), Potenza (Basilicata), San Tommaso (Calabria), Siena (Tuscany), Soleto (Puglia). We use the term **dialect** to refer to Romance languages which do not have the status of national languages. These dialects are sisters of the better known Romance languages and not varieties of any of them. In reporting our data we have not corrected the evidence of pressure from the more prestigious language spoken in the areas investigated, namely, standard Italian.

[2] Following Lyons (1999: 237) we indicate with thr the English unstressed pleonastic there and its counterparts in the languages under investigation.

[3] The abbreviations used in the glosses follow the Leipzig conventions except in the following cases: CL = clitic; E.SBJ.CL = expletive subject clitic; IMPS = impersonal clitic; PF = existential or locative pro-form.

[4] Note that, in the variety of Genova, the construction with verb agreement may not exhibit the subject clitic (4a), although this is displayed in other Ligurian varieties (Badalucco ***i*** ghe sun eli; Rocchetta Cairo ***i*** i sun kaei 'thr's them'). Interestingly, the construction which lacks agreement (4b) always requires the expletive clitic 'u'. Nevertheless, the same expletive clitic seems to be optional in presentative structures (Badalucco l'è mancau Luigi; Rocchetta Cairo ***u*** l'ae mort Luvìgi, 'Luigi died'), although this alternation may be due to sociolinguistic variation (Parry 2005: 313-314) rather than to structural properties.

[5] Bentley (2004a) provides evidence from intonation in support of this analysis.

[6] In Bellunese, as well as in most North-eastern Italian dialects, the third person singular is generally syncretic with the third person plural. However, we take the presence of an invariant third person singular subject clitic in the existential construction to be evidence that the verbal form must also be interpreted as singular. This assumption justifies the gloss in the relevant examples.

[7] Typically, number agreement is spelled out by a form of the copula (cf. 2a-b). Alternatively, or additionally, it can be spelled out by a subject clitic, which is either missing or invariant in existentials without agreement (we gloss invariant subject clitics as expletive subject clitics). We constrain our analysis to number agreement on the copula for the following reasons. First, agreeing subject clitics are optional in many dialects, and tend to mark some grammatical persons more regularly than others (Renzi & Vanelli 1983, Poletto 2000). Secondly, we have found evidence which might suggest that, in some dialects, subject-clitic agreement is sensitive to discourse properties other those affecting affixal agreement. We therefore analyse copula agreement separately from subject-clitic agreement.

[8] In fact, existential pivots have been claimed to be predicates themselves (Cornilescu 2009, Francez 2007, La Fauci & Loporcaro 1993, 1997, Williams 1984, 1994, Hazout 2004, Zamparelli 2000). Observe in passing that there are seemingly existential constructions in which the coda encodes a locative predicate (Cruschina 2012, Leonetti 2008, Remberger 2009). However, we can safely disregard this point in the present context.

[9] Samek-Lodovici (2002) makes the important observation that agreement never lacks in subject position, whereas it can be missing in post-verbal position. Analysing agreement as a property of syntactic projections, he claims that agreement within local projections is never poorer than agreement within their extended projections. He satisfactorily captures this typological generalisation in terms of the re-ranking of three constraints: AGR_f, which defines agreement of a head within its local projection for the feature f; EXAGR_f, which defines agreement of a head within its extended projection for the feature f, and NOFEATS, which is a constraint exerting a limiting effect on morphological structure, in a similar way to *STRUCT of Prince & Smolensky (1993: 25). Since from our perspective agreement is not a property of a syntactic configuration, but rather a grammatical rela-

tion, on a par with position, the important typological generalization uncovered by Samek-Lodovici (2002) will have to be captured in terms of the combined effect of constraint hierarchies on position and agreement. Observe that Samek-Lodovici's (2002) account of agreement does not consider the micro-variation in post-verbal agreement which our analysis brings to light. We capitalise on the analysis of this variation to capture finite number agreement in Italo-Romance and Sardinian.

[10] A consequence of the breaking-down of the notion of subject into construction-specific grammatical relations is that Grimshaw's (1997) constraint SUBJECT must also be broken down into construction-specific constraints, *– AGR being one of them.

[11] It should also be mentioned that the lack of agreement in the dialect of Soleto is somehow expected on the basis of the fact that the pivot appears to be treated syntactically as a direct object in the accusative case, as suggested by the prepositional accusative in (16a) above, as well as by the accusative resumptive clitic in (31). In this dialect, and in Romance in general, finite number agreement with a direct object is never found.

[12] The hierarchy in (47) also captures passives with a focal undergoer and no actor (Sono stati rubati i libri 'The books were stolen'), but not passives with a focal undergoer and a topical actor (Da Luca, sono stati rubati i libri 'By Luca, the books were stolen'). While we admit that the exact discourse constraints on the passive may not be captured by (47), we note that structures like the latter one provided above are odd, and may only be deemed acceptable if i libri 'the books' bears contrastive focus. Hence these structures are to be analysed in the context of this particular type of focus.

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