Trinity Forum on Formal Linguistics (TriFFL) 2025
Trinity College Dublin

Date & Time: 28 February 2025, 13:00 – 18:00

Venue: TRiSS Seminar Room, Arts Building C6.002, 6th floor (see fn.[1] for directions)

Theme: Formal approaches to Italo-Romance languages

Organizer: Craig Sailor (craig.sailor@tcd.ie)

Program (see further below for abstracts):

12:50 – 13:00	*Welcome*
13:00 – 13:45	**Simone De Cia (University of Manchester)** Sovramontino *lu*: A verum focus expletive
13:45 – 14:30	**Paolo Acquaviva (University College Dublin)** Non-canonical definiteness
14:30 – 14:45	*Coffee break*
14:45 – 15:30	**Valentina Colasanti & Craig Sailor (Trinity College Dublin)** Some formal properties of gestural polar response markers
15:30 – 16:15	**Chiara Marchetiello (Trinity College Dublin)** Parasitic NPI licensing in the visual-gestural modality
16:15 – 16:30	*Coffee break*
16:30 – 17:15	**Silvio Cruschina (University of Helsinki)** 'Nobody' has lost gender: the transformations and evolution of the negative indefinite *nuddu* 'nobody' in Sicilian
17:15 – 18:00	**Bruno Spadi (Trinity College Dublin)** *Manco* 'not even' as a focaliser: new evidence from Sicily

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[1] For the location of the Arts Building on Trinity's campus, click here. For the location of the TRiSS Seminar Room within the Arts Building, click here.

Sovramontino *lu*: A verum focus expletive

Simone De Cia (University of Manchester)

An increasing number of studies have shown that, in null-subject languages, seemingly genuine subject expletives primarily encode various discourse-pragmatic functions, which pertain to the syntax-pragmatics interface (Hinzelin and Kaiser 2007; Carrilho 2008; Nicolis 2008; Kaiser and Remberger 2009; Bartra-Kaufmann 2011; Greco et al. 2017; De Cia and Cerullo 2024 a.o.). The paper discusses the syntactic behaviour of discourse-pragmatic expletive *lu* in Sovramontino, a North-Eastern Italian Dialect spoken in the south-western part of the province of Belluno (Italy). *Lu* surfaces as a *verum focus* marker in those sentences that lack a referential subject. *Verum focus* is a type of narrow focus on sentence polarity, where emphasis is placed on the truth value of the proposition (Leonetti and Escandell-Vidal 2009). In Sovramontino, *verum focus* is achieved by obligatorily spelling out the referential subject of the sentence (i.e., in its lexical or pronominal form) in sentence final position, where it is assigned focal stress. In thetic sentences (cf. Sasse 1987) where a referential subject is not available to mark *verum focus*, Sovramontino resorts to expletive *lu*, which surfaces in sentence final position.

I will put forward an analysis of the phenomenon whereby the *verum focus* interpretation is achieved through a composite syntactic operation, which targets the C-domain. The discourse-pragmatic expletive *lu* moves from its base-generated position in SpecvP to the specifier of FocusP. This movement operation satisfies [uPol] on Foc (or Pol see Laka 1990). Given that, in the case of *verum focus*, the subject of the sentence must always be spelled out in its pronominal or lexical form, I will also claim that [uPol] probes in tandem with an unvalued set of phi-features. The satisfaction of [uPol] will make sure that the subject is interpreted as a marker of *verum focus* at LF (i.e., semantics interface), whereas the bundle of unvalued phi-features will ensure that the subject is always phonologically realised at PF (i.e., phonological interface). I claim that once focus movement has taken place, the rest of the sentence then undergoes remnant movement to a lower projection of the topic field (Benincà & Poletto 2004), namely GroundP, where the propositional content is interpreted as background information (i.e., linked to discourse). This yields the sentence final position of the discourse-pragmatic expletive *lu*.

Non-canonical definiteness

Paolo Acquaviva (University College Dublin)

The distribution of the definite article goes well beyond classic definite descriptions corresponding to *the author of Waverley* or kind-denoting expressions corresponding to the English *bears* or *water*. Building on work that has decisively extended the empirical domain of the use of definite articles in Romance, this discussion aims to bring into greater descriptive focus two families of phenomena from Italian (with occasional forays into other Italoromance varieties): the use of the definite article with proper names, and so-called 'indefinite definites' like *nelle cantine ci sono i topi* (contrasting with *(# the) mice*). The former domain has too often been accounted for by means of a dubious notion of 'expletive' article. I argue against this and propose instead that the article modulates various types of anchoring to the communicative context defined by the speaker as deictic centre. This perspective leads us to consider definite vocatives like the French *allons, les enfants!* which appear to be systematically absent from Italian. I would like to qualify this view, in particular considering the construction *caro il mio Masetto*. As for indefinite definites, their kind-level reading should be made more precise with reference to similar, but non-identical uses of 'weak definites' (*I took the train* as true even when I actually took two). Their key trait, I suggest, is a contextual 'givenness' which also associated with definite names. The existence of these kinds and their multiple instantiations is presupposed, but not asserted, in the shared universe of discourse (not relative to a situation); what is asserted is the involvement of such multiple but unidentifiable instances in the event. The deeper theoretical question is why this construction is much more restricted in other languages with apparently similar distribution of definite articles.

Some formal properties of gestural polar response markers

Valentina Colasanti & Craig Sailor (Trinity College Dublin)

There is a long tradition of work in descriptive and comparative linguistics on the strategies that languages employ for marking fragmentary polar responses, e.g. in response to polar questions (Ultan 1969, Moravcsik 1971). This topic has received comparatively little attention within formal linguistics in that time; however, the last 15 years or so have seen a flurry of work focusing on *polar response markers (PRMs)* in particular (Kramer & Rawlins 2011, Holmberg 2016, Wiltschko 2021: ch. 6). The emerging consensus in this literature is that PRMs such as *yes* and *no* (and their crosslinguistic analogues, including verb-echo responses) are deceptively simple, in that they are the product of rich syntactic derivations involving, among other things, an elided representation of the question that licenses them.

Mostly absent from this formal literature on PRMs is a study of their gestural counterparts (e.g. HEAD-NOD and HEAD-SHAKE). Given the mounting evidence that at least some gestures in otherwise-spoken languages are the product of normal grammatical derivations (Esipova 2019, Colasanti 2023a,b), the following question arises: to what extent are the formal properties of gestural PRMs consistent with those of their spoken counterparts? Relatedly, to what extent are they analyzable using the same theoretical tools?

In this talk, we first exemplify some of the relevant formal properties of gestural PRMs with data from Italo-Romance and English. We show that the various functions of gestural PRMs are amenable to analysis with Wiltschko's (2021) *Interactional Spine Hypothesis*, including certain functions not exhibited by spoken PRMs. Then, drawing on the results of a small crosslinguistic survey as well as data from both the generative literature (e.g. Esipova 2021) and the interactional literature (e.g. Yoon 2010), we draw some preliminary typological generalizations about PRMs across modalities.

Parasitic NPI licensing in the visual-gestural modality

Chiara Marchetiello (Trinity College Dublin)

In this talk, I argue that the grammar of Neapolitan (southern Italo-Romance) includes a particular Negative Polarity Item (NPI), which is externalised as a co-speech gesture, i.e., [CHIN-FLICK] ([CF]; Figure 1).

The novel contributions of my paper are twofold. First, to the best of my knowledge, [CF] is the first reported example of a co-speech NPI (cf. co-speech question markers, focus-markers, etc.). Second, this NPI provides novel support for the *Grammatical Integration Hypothesis* of Colasanti (2023a,b), which claims that some gestures are morphemes (in the Distributed Morphology sense) which can be externalised at PF in the visual-gestural modality rather than the auditory-spoken modality.

Figure 1: [CHIN-FLICK] in De Jorio 1832, Tav. 21

During my talk, I propose a formal account of [CF], showing how this NPI is *parasitically* licenced by other spoken NPIs. In particular, I show how the morphosyntactic behaviour of [CF] is similar to other parasitic polarity items found in languages such as Greek and Dutch (Den Dikken 2002; Hoeksema 2007).

'Nobody' has lost gender:
The transformations and evolution of the negative indefinite *nuddu* 'nobody' in Sicilian

Silvio Cruschina (University of Helsinki)

In this talk, I will analyse the morphosyntactic consequences of the loss of inflection that has historically affected the negative pronoun and determiner *nuddu* in Sicilian. I will first present data on the diachronic development of this pronoun, which has resulted in a gradual but unequivocal decline of the inflected forms of *nuddu*. Then, I will show that the loss of the gender inflection is best viewed as a type of grammar complication rather than simplification. Finally, I will concentrate on a special syntactic use of this negative quantifier. Alongside its normal use as a negative pronominal quantifier ('no one, nobody'), this element can be employed as a floating quantifier ('none of us/you/them'). In this function, *nuddu* is not the subject of the sentence and, despite the semantic similarity, it cannot be analysed as the pronominal head of a partitive configuration. I will discuss both syntactic and semantic arguments in favour of an adverbial analysis of this floating quantifier, according to which *nuddu* involves predicate modification.

Manco 'not even' as a focaliser: new evidence from Sicily

Bruno Spadi (Trinity College Dublin)

In this talk, I describe and analyse the placement of the adverb *manco* 'not even' in a selection of southern Italo-Romance languages spoken in Sicily (Italy). Rohlfs (1969:294) observes that in southern Italy, hence including Sicily, MANCO > Latin MANCU(S) 'maimed' is employed as a negative adverb meaning 'not even'. I take *manco* to lexicalise the specifier of $\text{Neg}_{\text{Presuppositional}}P$ in the LAS, together with e.g., Northern Regional Italian *mica*, Cosentino *mancu*, and Sicilian *neca* (Cinque 1999; Ledgeway & Lombardi 2005; Cruschina 2010). This adverb displays a rather interesting behaviour syntactically: it can appear in a low or high clausal position – in addition to Spec $\text{Neg}_{\text{Presuppositional}}P$ – where it takes scope over the constituent it precedes. More precisely, *manco* exhibits the property of focalisers/focusing adverbs, which explains why this negative adverb seems to appear in distinct positions. I argue that *manco*, together with other adverbs which display similar distribution (e.g., Spanish *siempre* 'always'), can be base-generated in the specifier of a FocP in either the High Left Periphery or the Low Left Periphery.