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Romance clitics and the Minimalist Program

The core problems of Romance clitics, in particular, clitic placement, are reducible to the interaction of properties of Merge and Economy principles (Minimal Link Condition, Procrastinate, Full Interpretation) with the formal features of clitics and their hybrid status as X^0 's/ XP 's (KAYNE 91, CHOMSKY 94).

As it is well known, clitic placement is not uniform across Romance: in French, clitics are always proclitic, assuming weak pronouns are present in affirmative imperatives (CARDINALETTI & STARKE 94); in Spanish and Italian the finite/non-finite distinction plays a role in triggering proclisis vs enclisis; in standard European Portuguese (=SEP), enclisis is the basic pattern both in finite and in non-finite clauses, proclisis being triggered by the presence of overt operator-like elements c-commanding the verbal host of the clitic:

- (1) (a) O João viu-a. (João saw her-ACCUS)
- (b) O João pensa vê-la mais tarde. (João intends to see her-ACCUS later)
- (2) (a) Todos os amigos a felicitaram. (All the friends congratulated her-ACCUS)
- (b) Não a vendo, o João fica triste. (Not seeing her-ACCUS, J. is sad)

We will try to derive the different patterns of clitic placement from the difference in the morphologic status of clitics: whereas in SEP clitics entered a diachronic process leading to their reanalysis as "affix-like" elements not blocking strong feature checking when they intervene between a V-head and a functional head (RIZZI 93, BELLETTI 93), in the other Romance languages mentioned above clitics still count as full X^0 heads, thus blocking strong feature checking in the relevant contexts.

Language acquisition and development data provide an argument for this claim. In EP, children systematically produce enclisis until around 48 months and younger generations, as well as illiterate adults, increasingly produce enclisis in the presence of proclisis triggers, thus suggesting that the process of reanalysis is going on, in the sense of converting these "affix-like" elements into V inflectional features.

We will show that enclisis is the most economic derivation in EP: the one where as little as possible is moved (only the D clitic head) to the closest target (the AgrO head), followed by V-to-AgrO for checking purposes ([AgrO V [AgrO D_{cl} AgrO]]); the reverse order V-to-AgrO then D_{cl}-to-AgrO would prevent checking of the strong N features of AgrO by the D_{cl} due to the intervening V-head, thus yielding a derivation which would crash at PF ([AgrO D_{cl} [AgrO V AgrO]]). The most economic derivation in EP is not a convergent one in the other Romance languages, due to the head status of D clitics in those languages: whenever AgrO has both strong V- and N-features, there must be Pied-Piping of the DP to Spec AgrO for checking purposes, prior to D_{cl} movement; V -to-AgrO and then to T will be followed by D_{cl}-to-T ([_T D_{cl} [_T [AgrO V AgrO] T]]) for checking purposes of the clitic. So, the only convergent derivation yields proclisis.

The pattern opposing French to Italian and Spanish in non-finite clauses will be shown to derive from the presence vs absence of strong V features in AgrO.

Proclisis in SEP will be shown to act as a Last Resort operation to prevent derivations from crashing at LF due to Full Interpretation — selection requirements of functional heads will not be met and assignment of scope domain of operator-like elements will not succeed. We will show that proclisis in SEP has a different structure from the one we found in other Romance languages, a claim that finds empirical support in the possibility of ATB clitic climbing of proclitics in EP vs its impossibility in French/Spanish/Italian:

- (3) (a) Não te compro nem ofereço esse livro.
 (b) *Je ne t' achèterai ni offrirai ce livre.
 (c) *No te compro ni doy este libro.
 (d) *Non te compro ni dono questo libro.

Since UG is supposed to model a component of the human mind, the choice between competing linguistic analysis should take into account, besides internal coherence, the predictions they make and the support they get from language acquisition and development data. Since our approach only relies on differences in the formal features of functional heads and on properties of Merge and Economy Principles and finds empirical support in language acquisition and development data, it strongly argues for the form of the Language Faculty sketched in the Minimalist Program.