From VPR to VO through German linguistic islands in the North East of Italy

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In this work we investigate the structure of the vP in some German linguistic islands spoken in the North-East of Italy and try to establish a diachronic path from the more conservative OV variety to the most progressive VO one. This investigation in real time can shed new light on the debate about the factors that play a role in word order change. Plodarisch (Sappadino) is a poorly investigated variety spoken in the Northernmost part of the Veneto region, which can be shown to have preserved the so called bracket-structure (i.e. the OV basic order) in both main and embedded clauses, as the following examples clearly attest:

(1) a.   Hainte **òt** de mamme de aalan me mork **gekaft**.   (Avv **Aux** S O **V**)
        Today has the mother the eggs at.the market bought
    b.   I bin vroa **benn** der Mario pit ins in tonz **kimnt**   (**C** S PP PP **V**)
        I am happy if the M. with us to dance comes

In this respect Plodarisch is different from Cimbrian, which is a completely VO language and from Mòcheno, where OV is a pragmatically marked possibility (see Cognola 2013). On the other hand, the examples in (2) show that Plodarisch has both verb raising (VR) and verb projection raising (VPR) already discussed for Dutch and Swiss-German varieties since Haegeman&Riemsdijk (1986):

(2) a.   I hoff as hainte der Peater de schkottl der vrau **òt gebn**   **VR**
        I hope that today the P. the box to.the lady has given
    b.   I hoff as der Peater **òt's** der vrau **gebn**   **VPR**
        I hope that the P. has=it the lady given

The fact that examples like (2b) are real cases of Germanic VPR and not examples of a syntactic borrowing of V to T from the contact Italian varieties can be shown by the fact that VPR (i.e. auxiliary fronting) occurs within the vP, i.e. to the right of: a) low aspectual adverbs like *schon* ´already´ (3a), n-words like ´icht´ ´nothing´ (3b) and separable verbal prefixes like *auf* ´up´ (3c):

(3) a.   … as der Mario **schon òt's** gemuisst tuin
          … that the M. already has=it must do
    b.   I baass as der Mario **icht** òt gemuisst tuin / **icht** òt geton
        I know that the Mario nothing has must_PP do / nothing has done
    c.   I baass as du **auf** pischt geschtean
        I know that you up have stood

Notice furthermore, that Plodarisch VPR can contain object (en)clitics, as already shown in (2b). Nevertheless it still remains within the vP, as shown in (3a) by the position of the adverb *schon*. This means that in Plodarisch there must be a layer for clitics inside the vP (or at its edge), as already proposed by Shlonsky 2004 on the basis of Romance data. We hypothesize that VPR including enclitics might be the first step from an OV to a VO structure, which is already well established in Mòcheno and even more in Cimbrian. However, if we consider Cimbrian, we see that the type of VO it has developed is of the low English type, i.e. the inflected verb does not raise to T in non-V2 contexts: Not surprisingly this is true of main verbs but not of auxiliaries/modals, as the following sentences show (cf. Grewendorf&Poletto 2011 for (4a,b) and Panieri 2006 for (4c,d)):

(4) a   … azz-e **net** vortgea
       … that=I not away-go
  b. *… azz-e vortgea **net**
  c. … azz-e (nèt) hån (nèt) giböllt vortgian
     … that I (not) did (not) want to go)
  d. Bal dar (nèt) bill (nèt) gian, schikhen vort!
     If he (not) want (not) to go, send=him away!

This means that Cimbrian confirms Pollock's (1989) generalization with respect to verb raising in English and Romance.

Interestingly, in Plodarisch VPR is not the only possibility to be considered for Vf fronting in the embedded clause, since inflected modals can indeed raise higher than aspectual adverbs and presumably reach T°, as shown by:

(5)   (I pin sicher) as Mario **muist**'*s schon* hobn geton
       (I am sure) that Mario must=it already have done

Notice that it is possible to have both V to T and VPR in the same sentence: in (8) the modal *muist* is higher than the adverb *schon*, and the auxiliary *hobn* is higher than the object *di compiti* ´the homework' which precede the past participle preserving the OV type.

(6)   (I pin sicher) as Mario **muist** *schon* **hobn** di compiti **gemocht**
       (I am sure) that Mario must already have the homework done

This indicates that Plodarisch is following the same path that Cimbrian must have already undergone (the first attestations are of the beginning of the XVII century and at this point, Cimbrian was already a VO language). So, we can trace the path from OV to VO on the basis of the following steps:

      a)   Pure OV / no VR nor VPR (standard German)
      b)   VR possible / no VPR (middle Bavarian varieties, …)
      c)   VR possible / VPR possible (West Flemish/Swiss German/Southern Bavarian/…)
      d)   VPR with enclitics / Modal to T in non-V2 contexts (Plodarisch)
      e)   Low VO / Aux to T in non-V2 contexts (Cimbrian)

All the work done on Old English and Old Romance on OV/VO alternations until now has underlined the role of Topic and Focus in changing the word order type. However, as soon as the change can be observed in real time on the basis of these dialects in contact situation, we observe that also purely syntactic phenomena like VPR, the position of enclitics (a low sequence within vP) and more generally verb raising have to be taken into account at least for the first phase of the change. This does not mean that Topic and Focus do not play a role in the change from OV to VO, but they are probably not the only factors that have contributed to "push" the VO structure. As it is often the case, syntactic change is the result of a complex constellation of factors weakening the original structure. We hope to have identified through a close examination of Plodarisch and Cimbrian one more piece of the puzzle related to the conspiracy that provoked the change of one of the most stable syntactic configurations (see Biberauer et alii (2010)).