UNAGREEMENT BETWEEN ITALIAN
AND SOUTHERN ITALIAN DIALECTS[1]

Georg F.K. Höhn
University of Cambridge

Giuseppina Silvestri
University of Cambridge

Maria Olimpia Squillaci
University of Cambridge

Abstract: *This paper discusses new data from two southern Italian dialects, northern Calabrese and southern Calabrese, which contrast with standard Italian in exhibiting the flexible agreement patterns with definite plural subjects characteristic of the unagreement phenomenon of Spanish and Modern Greek. We highlight a problem that this raises for recent proposals connecting the availability of unagreement to the obligatory presence of a definite article in adnominal pronoun constructions like "we children". Adopting the distributed morphology framework, we suggest that the contrast between standard Italian and the southern varieties may be due to variation in the feature specification of the vocabulary items realising the D head.*

Keywords: *unagreement, pronominal determiners, demonstratives*

1. Introduction

This paper presents new data concerning a contrast between standard Italian, where definite plural subjects cannot co-occur with non-third person agreement as illustrated in (1), and the availability of such constructions in two southern Italian dialects (SIDs), northern Calabrese of Verbicaro (Cosenza) and southern Calabrese of Bova Marina (Reggio Calabria), illustrated in (2) and (3).

(1)   *I bambini giochiamo.   [Standard Italian]
        the children play.1PL
        intended: 'We children are playing.'

---

(2)   I quatrarə iucamə.   [Northern Calabrese]
        the children play.1PL
        'We children are playing.'

(3)   I figghioli iocamu.   [Southern Calabrese]
        the children play.1PL
        'We children are playing.'

Taking the data from the SIDs to be instances of unagreement (Hurtado 1985), we argue that they pose a problem for recent analyses of this phenomenon by Choi (2013, 2014) and Höhn (in press). Both accounts postulate a correlation between the availability of unagreement and the presence of a definite article in adnominal pronoun constructions (APCs), e.g. Spanish *nosotros los estudiantes* 'we students'. The SID data discussed here appear to defy that correlation.

Adopting the framework of distributed morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993, Embick 2010), we argue that the contrast in (un)agreement patterns between standard Italian and non-standard southern varieties is related to a difference in whether personal pronouns carry a demonstrative feature. The lack of unagreement in standard Italian arises because personal pronouns are underspecified for demonstrativity and compete for insertion with the vocabulary items for the definite article as proposed in Höhn (2016). Due to the difference in the vocabulary, no such competition arises in the SIDs.

The paper is articulated as follows. Section 2 introduces the unagreement phenomenon and sketches the previous analyses. Relevant data from northern and southern Calabrese will be described in section 3 and, in the light of this evidence, our proposed analysis will be put forward in section 4. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Unagreement

This section introduces the unagreement phenomenon (Hurtado 1985) and outlines the analyses proposed for it by Choi (2013, 2014) and Höhn (2016). Definite plural subjects in languages like Standard Modern Greek (SMG), Spanish, Catalan and Bulgarian are compatible with all three plural forms of the verb, as illustrated in (4) for SMG.

(4)   Oi foitites diavaz(-oume/-ete/-oun) kathe mera.   [Standard Modern Greek]
        the students study-1PL/-2PL/-3PL every day
        'We/you/the students study every day.'

This conflicts with the common assumption that definite noun phrases such as *oi foitites* 'the students' are inherently third person, which would predict only third person verbal agreement to be allowed. The availability of first and second person plural verb forms in this context (*diavazoume, diavazete* in (4)) implies an apparent feature mismatch, or *unagreement*, between subject and verb.

It seems that languages allowing unagreement generally also have null subjects (Choi 2013, Höhn 2016). However, not all null subject languages allow unagreement

configurations.[2] This was illustrated for Italian in example (1) of section 1, and (5) provides a further example from European Portuguese:

(5)   *Os portugueses bebemos bom café.   [European Portuguese]
        the Portuguese drink-1PL good coffee
        intended: 'We Portuguese drink good coffee.'   (Höhn 2016:547)

Simply put, it seems like definite noun phrases obligatorily behave as third person in languages like Italian and European Portuguese, but are underspecified for person in unagreement constructions in languages like SMG (4) or similar constructions in Spanish.

Both Choi (2013, 2014) and Höhn (2016) suggest that this correlates with crosslinguistic variation in the presence of a definite article in APCs, as illustrated in (6) based on Höhn (2016:559f). In null subject languages lacking unagreement, adnominal pronouns are in complementary distribution with definite articles, see (6a). In languages with unagreement, on the other hand, an adnominal pronoun matching the verbal agreement marking may optionally *precede* the mandatory definite article as illustrated in (6b).

(6) a. *No unagreement*   b. *Unagreement*
         noi (*gli) studenti   [Italian]   emeis *(oi) foitites   [Greek]
         nós (*os) estudantes   [Eur. Port]   nosotros *(los) estudiantes   [Spanish]
         mi (*a) diakók   [Hungarian]   nie studenti-*(te)   [Bulgarian]
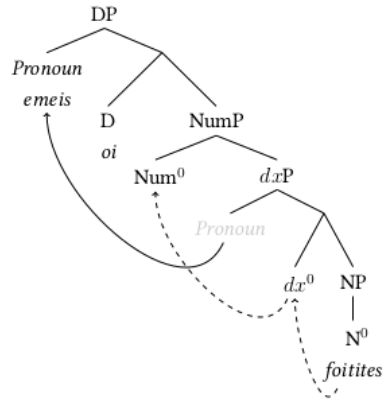   we (*DEF) students   we *(DEF) students/students-*(DEF)

Choi (2013, 2014) rejects the classical pronominal determiner analysis (Postal 1969, Abney 1987), illustrated in (7) for Italian *noi studenti* "we students", as it cannot accommodate the co-occurrence of definite articles and adnominal pronouns in the languages in (6b). To provide a unified analysis, he argues that rather than realising the head D, adnominal pronouns are phrases that move to SpecDP as sketched in (8a) for Greek with an overt definite article in D, and in (8b) for Italian with a covert one.

(7) Pronominal determiner structure (e.g. Abney 1987)

```
        DP
       /  \
      D    NP
     noi  studenti
```

---
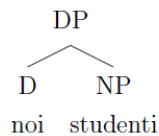
2 This marks a problem for Longobardi's (2008: 204) brief discussion of unagreement, where he suggests that languages with strong Person allow unagreement (for the strong vs. weak Person distinction see fn. 3). Having strong Person may be a necessary condition for unagreement, although, insofar as strong Person seems to correlate with the availability of null subjects, one may wonder which of them is the crucial factor. However, neither of them can be a sufficient condition, since the difference between SMG and standard Italian with respect to unagreement would remain unaccounted for, as both are strong Person languages with null subjects.

(8)   a. Choi (2014:141) for Greek   b. Corresponding structure for Italian
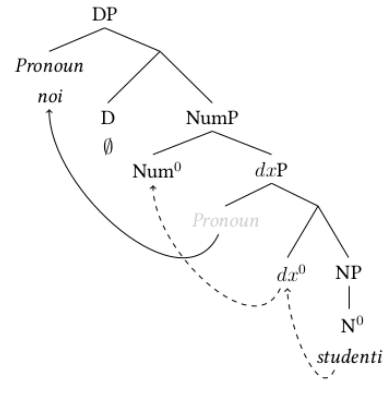

Choi treats unagreement as a form of pro-drop which requires licensing and identification by a fully specified T in the clausal domain, following Rizzi's (1982, 1986) classical analysis, but pro-drop has to be additionally licensed by the D head as per the Condition on D^0 in (9).

(9) **Condition on D^0**: D^0 must be overtly realized by a definite article (but, being a
    mediating pro-drop licenser, may not be as fully specified with its phi-features as T^0).

(Choi 2013, (20))

On this view, there is no structural difference between languages with and without unagreement. Instead, their different behaviour results from the phonological properties of D in interaction with the condition in (9).

Since we adopt the alternative account of Höhn (2016) below, we provide a slightly more detailed overview of that approach here. Höhn retains the pronominal determiner analysis (7) for languages without definite article in adnominal pronoun constructions, like standard Italian or European Portuguese, but proposes that there is crosslinguistic variation in the structural position of person to the effect that grammatical person occupies a position independent from the article in unagreement languages as illustrated in (10).

(10)
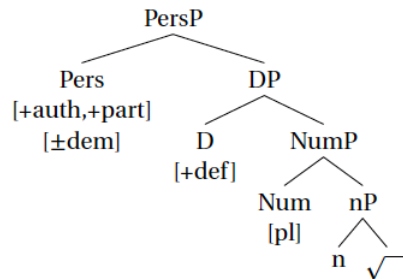
Adopting the general framework of distributed morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993, Embick 2010), Höhn proposes that the minimal difference between APCs and unagreeing DPs is the spell-out of the Pers head in (10).[3] Unagreement results if Pers receives null spell-out, the same process which is arguably responsible for pro-drop. The realisation of Pers is argued to depend on the specification of a [±dem(onstrative)] feature on Pers as illustrated by the Greek vocabulary items (VIs) in (11). The practice of decomposing person into two binary features [±part(icipant)] and [±auth(or)] follows Nevins (2007, 2011).

(11)   Pers [-dem] ↔ Ø   [Standard Modern Greek]
        Pers [+dem, +auth, +part, pl] ↔ *emeis*

In languages like standard Italian with the pronominal determiner structure in (7), simple pro-drop is essentially the result of the same process of null spell-out applying to the head encoding person. Due to the structural difference between (7) and (10), however, the relevant head in this type of language is D. Consequently, the mechanism responsible for pro-drop, namely null spell-out of the head carrying person features, cannot derive an output comparable to unagreement in this language. The application of this process to a D head with a lexical NP complement would predict the existence of definite bare nouns with first or second person interpretation in Italian, contrary to fact. Indeed, both Italian and Greek require overt definite articles even in generic DPs in subject position.[4] Höhn (2016) suggests that the only context in which a definite D can circumvent this overtness requirement is if DP does not contain any other overt material, e.g. an adjective or a noun, so effectively definite D can only be silent in pro-drop. For illustration, consider the sample list of VIs in (12):

(12)   D [+def, -dem] ↔ Ø / _]$_\varphi$ [Standard Italian]
        D [+def, +auth, +part, pl] ↔ *noi*
        D [+def, -auth, -part, pl, masc] ↔ *(gl)i*[5]

---

3 This framework distinguishes between the featural content of a syntactic node (e.g. person features) and its phonological realisation. The significance of this distinction for the present analysis lies in the way it allows a simple mechanism of accounting for syncretisms. Concerning the null-realisation of Person features in (11) and (12), it overcomes the need to postulate individual silent lexemes for each person-number combination.

4 Longobardi (1994, 2008) analyses this as a requirement for a connection between N and D in argumental DPs, terming languages that need an overt reflex of this connection *strong D* or *strong person languages* (as opposed to *weak person languages* like English where this connection can be established covertly, i.e. at LF). Possible ways of establishing this connection are N-to-D movement, notably in the case of proper names, or overt definite articles.

5 In standard Italian the definite plural article has a phonologically conditioned allomorph *gli* that is used before words beginning with vowels, glides, certain consonants (/ts/, /dz/, /ɲ//) and some consonantal clusters (/s/+C, /p/+/n/, /p/+/s/, /k/+/s/) (Marotta 1993). Since *i* is the elsewhere form, we will refer to this non-restricted vocabulary item throughout. The existence of the contextually restricted, competing form *gli* is silently assumed and changes nothing in the current discussion. The same reasoning applies for *quei*, the masculine plural of the demonstrative *quello*, *quegli* being its allomorph.

The first VI in (12) can realise a [-dem] D head as null if it is located at the right edge of the spell-out domain φ (in the sense of Embick 2010), that is only if none of the material in its complement domain is phonologically realised. The relevant configuration can be sketched as [$_{DP}$ D [$_{NumP}$ Ø]]. Notice that while the syntactic structures serving as input for spell-out are featurally fully specified, this VI with null realisation is underspecified for person, number and gender. This means that one VI is sufficient to regulate the null realisation of D, obliterating the need for a dedicated silent lexical item *pro* for each person number combination, as assumed by Choi (2013, 2014).

If the above structural and phonological conditions are not met, the null VI for D cannot be inserted. Consequently, another VI wins the competition for insertion and definite D is spelled out overtly according to its feature specification, e.g. by one of the other two VIs in (12). The fact that in the realisation of a pronominal determiner structure like (7) the definite plural article *i* competes for insertion with the pronouns accounts for the lack of unagreement. When D is specified as non-third person in typical APCs, the definite article loses out, irrespective of whether we assume that the vocabulary items realising it are underspecified for person or specified for third person ([-auth], [-part]) as in the third VI in (12). Remember that the input for vocabulary insertion consists of featurally fully specified syntactic structures, so that the D head in a typical APC would carry some non-third person feature specification. Consequently, the definite article would lose the competition against the VI of a non-third person pronoun either because the latter represents a better, more specific fit to the (person) features of the input (if the definite article lacks person features) or, if the VI(s) for the definite article are specified as [-auth, -part], because the third person definite article VI is incompatible with the non-third person syntactic input. In either case, this yields a plain adnominal pronoun construction with a pronominal determiner. A plain definite plural subject DP, the hallmark signature for unagreement, would not be derivable from a syntactic context that gives rise to non-third person verbal agreement on the assumption that this implies a structure with non-third person features on D.

3. Problems raised by northern and southern Calabrese

The data observed at the outset from northern and southern Calabrese, (2) and (3) respectively, clearly suggest that these languages allow unagreement in contrast with standard Italian. In spite of this difference, however, the SIDs under discussion do not allow the definite article in APCs, just like standard Italian, see (13).

(13)   a.   Noi (*i) bambini giochiamo.   [Standard Italian]
             we the children play.1PL

        b.   Nua (*i) quatrarə iucamə.   [Northern Calabrese]
             we the children play.1PL

        c.   Nui (*i) figghioli iocamu.   [Southern Calabrese]
             we the children play.1PL

This is problematic for the correlation between definiteness marking and unagreement proposed by Choi (2013, 2014) and Höhn (2016). In particular, the second part (14b) of

Höhn's generalisation in (14) as well as Choi's Condition on D^0 in (9) above are contradicted by the SID data:

(14)   Null subject languages with definite articles
        a. show unagreement if they have a definite article in APCs, and
        b. do not show unagreement if they have no definite article in APCs.

In the next section, we propose a modification to Höhn (2016) to account for the variation between standard Italian and the SIDs based on the hypothesis that the difference is morphological in nature.

4. A morphologically based analysis

In section 2 we pointed out that the specification of a [±dem] feature accounts for the difference between APCs and unagreement in Höhn's (2016) proposal. Following Sommerstein (1972) and Rauh (2003), we observe a similar distinction between regular and 'demonstrative' uses in languages with classical pronominal determiners.
A 'demonstrative' pronominal determiner is illustrated in the examples in (15) adapted from Sommerstein (1972).

(15)   a. YOU troops will embark but the other troops will remain.
        b. He said that (those/*the) troops would embark but the other troops would
          remain.

The pronominal determiner *you* in an utterance like (15a) cannot be reported by an observer using the definite article but only by a demonstrative. In Höhn's terms, this is suggestive of the pronominal determiner in (15a) carrying a [+dem] feature.

Against this background, we can observe a contrast between standard Italian and the SIDs under discussion with respect to how demonstrative and non-demonstrative pronominal determiners show up in reported speech. Similar to what we saw for English in (15), standard Italian adnominal pronouns can have a demonstrative reading in addition to their simple pronominal determiner use.

(16)   a. NOI bambini giochiamo.
        we children play.1PL
        'We children are playing.'

        b. Ha detto che quei bambini giocano.
        has.3SG said that those children play.3PL
        'S/he said that those children are playing.'

(17)   a. Noi bambini giochiamo.
        we children play.1PL
        'We children are playing.'

    b. Ha detto che i bambini giocano.
      has said that the children play.3PL
      'S/he said that the children play.'

The difference between (16) and (17) is very subtle and can be captured only if the context behind the examples is explained. Suppose that in (16) there are two groups of children, one is playing and the other is not. The group of children who plays produces the sentence in (16a) using a contrastive focus on the adnominal pronoun *noi* 'we' so as to differentiate themselves from the other group of children. As a consequence and for the same reason, the demonstrative *quei* 'those' must be used to report this utterance, as illustrated in (16b). A simple definite expression like in (17b) would not represent a proper report of (16a) in the sketched context. By contrast, in the second example, (17a), there is only one group of children (probably opposing to a group of adults). Since there is no need to differentiate between groups, in this case the demonstrative *quei* is not required.

Therefore, in Italian, on a par with the English examples, the contrastive adnominal pronoun in (16a) has to be reported using the demonstrative *quei* as in (16b), whereas a plain adnominal pronoun can be reported using the definite article *i* as shown in (17). Although there are intonational differences between the adnominal pronouns in (16a) and (17a), they are segmentally identical. Insofar it is fair to say that pronominal determiners in standard Italian can but need not be used as demonstratives.

Adnominal pronouns in the Calabrese SIDs pattern differently insofar as they have to be reported using demonstratives. Consider the examples below:

(18)   a. NUA quatrarə iucamə.   [Northern Calabrese]
        we children play.1PL
        'We children are playing.'

        b. Ha dittə ca quiddə quatrarə iocənə.
          has said that those children play.3PL
          'S/he said that those children play.'

(19)   a. I quatrarə iucamə.
        the children play.1PL
        'We children are playing.'

        b. Ha dittə ca i quatrarə iocənə.
          has said that the children play.3PL
          'S/he said that children kids play.'

(20)   a. NUI figghioli iocamu.   [Southern Calabrese]
        we children play.1PL
        'We children are playing.'

        b. Dissi chi ddi figghioli iocanu.
          said.3SG that those children play.3PL
          'S/he said that those children play.'

(21)   a. I figghioli iocamu.

the children play.1PL
'We children are playing.'

b. Dissi chi i figghioli iocanu.
said.3SG that the children play.3PL
'S/he said that the children play.'

The example pairs in (18) and (20) from northern and southern Calabrese respectively illustrate that in both varieties an observer reporting the (a) utterance needs to replace the adnominal pronoun by a demonstrative, whereas the definite article can be retained in cases of reported unagreement constructions as in (19b) and (21b).[6]

We suggest that this contrasting behaviour of adnominal pronouns in standard Italian and the SIDs is due to specific differences in the vocabulary of the different varieties, and that this also accounts for the exceptional availability of unagreement in the SIDs. More specifically, the crucial difference between Standard Italian and the southern varieties lies in the feature specification of personal pronoun. Also, while for standard Italian the question of whether VIs for the definite article are specified for third person is tangential to the availability of unagreement as discussed in section 2, in the southern varieties they are crucially underspecified for person. The crucial differences in the vocabulary between standard Italian and the SIDs are illustrated in (22) and (23) below.

(22)   D[+def, +auth, +part, pl] ↔ *noi*   [Standard Italian]
        D[+def, (-auth, -part,) pl, masc] ↔ *i*
(23)   D[+def, +dem, +auth, +part, pl] ↔ *nua/nui*   [Northern/southern Calabrese]
        D[+def, pl, masc] ↔ *i*

Crucially, the VIs corresponding to personal pronouns are underspecified for [±dem] in standard Italian, while they are specified for [+dem] in the southern varieties. Moreover, the VIs realising the definite article are crucially underspecified for person in the southern varieties, while they may or may not be specified for third person ([-auth,-part]) in standard Italian. This absence of person features in the definite article allows it to appear even if D is specified for non-third person and is therefore a precondition for the appearance of unagreement. However, it is possible that standard Italian definite articles are similarly underspecified. We propose that it is the difference in demonstrative specifications on personal pronouns that accounts for the variation in the availability of unagreement.

Consider the SIDs first. If D has a [+dem] feature, the pronoun with the appropriate person feature specification is inserted, yielding an adnominal pronoun construction. If D is specified for [-dem], the pronominal VIs are incompatible due to their [+dem] specification and the article is inserted instead as the elsewhere case. This yields a plain definite subject DP that is, however, syntactically specified for non-third person. Therefore, we get an unagreement configuration with non-third person verbal agreement.

In standard Italian, on the other hand, the VIs corresponding to personal pronouns are underspecified for [±dem]. This crucially accounts for the lack of unagreement in standard

---

6 Notice that a demonstrative would be possible in the latter case as well depending on the communicative intentions of the observer reporting the (a) utterance. The crucial point is that the overt adnominal pronouns in (18a) and (20a) have to be reported by a demonstrative.

Italian, since it puts them in competition with the definite article VIs for insertion into non-third person D nodes irrespectively of whether those are specified as [+dem] or [-dem]. The definite article VIs lose in all non-third person contexts even if it were underspecified for person because there is always a "pronominal" VI that is specified for the person features present in the syntactic structure. Hence, the definite article cannot be inserted in any non-third person contexts. In other words, unagreement simply cannot arise.

5. Conclusion

We have presented new data from two southern Italo-Romance varieties, northern and southern Calabrese, showing that in contrast to standard Italian they display the unagreement phenomenon, that is, definite plural subjects can agree with first, second and third person. This is theoretically relevant because it presents a problem for previous cross-linguistically based generalisations stating that in order for a language to allow unagreement its adnominal pronoun constructions like *we linguists* require an overt definite article (Choi 2013, 2014; Höhn 2016). Although both varieties differ from standard Italian with respect to unagreement, their adnominal pronoun constructions are like those of the standard language in not allowing a definite article.

We propose an extension of Höhn's (2016) analysis to account for the exceptional behaviour of the southern varieties. Building on observations by Sommerstein (1972) and Rauh (2003) for English pronominal determiners, we argue that while the SIDs and standard Italian share the same nominal structure, encoding person and definiteness on the same head (Postal 1969; Abney 1987), the crucial difference is a morphological one.

Standard Italian pronominal determiners can behave like demonstratives, while in the SIDs they *have to* behave like demonstratives. We propose that this is due to a difference in the specification of Höhn's (2016) [±dem] feature on the vocabulary items realised as personal pronouns. While the pronominal VIs are specified for [+dem] in the Calabrese varieties, their standard Italian counterparts are underspecified for that feature. As a consequence, the pronominal VIs do not compete with the VIs corresponding to the definite article for vocabulary insertion in a D node that is specified as [-dem]. Since the definite article VIs are underspecified for person, they can be inserted in non-third person D nodes, leading to the unagreement configuration. On the other hand, because pronominal VIs are underspecified for [±dem] in standard Italian they compete with the definite article VIs in [-dem] contexts as well and win over them in all non-third person contexts.

If this account is on the right track, it underlines the importance of morphology, in particular of the vocabulary, in the derivation of unagreement structures. An alternative analysis is conceivable that would directly extend Höhn's (2016) analysis of the variation in unagreement as a result of a structural difference. On such a view, the SIDs would share the structure proposed for Spanish and Greek in (10) above, with definiteness and person encoded on separate heads.

The advantage of such an approach would be a unified structure underlying the unagreement phenomenon. However, it would raise questions as to why D would receive zero spell-out in adnominal pronoun constructions in northern and southern Calabrese, in contrast to other unagreement languages. We leave further elaboration of such an approach and its comparison to the one presented here to future research.

References

Abney, Steven. 1987. *The English noun phrase in its sentential aspect*. PhD dissertation: MIT.

Choi, Jaehoon. 2013. "Pro-drop in pronoun-noun constructions". In *North East Linguistic Society* (NELS) 42, ed. by Stefan Keine and Shayne Sloggett, 119–128. Amherst: GLSA

Choi, Jaehoon. 2014. *Pronoun-noun constructions and the Syntax of DP*. PhD dissertation, University of Arizona.

Embick, David. 2010. *Localism versus globalism in morphology and phonology*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Halle, Morris, and Alec Marantz. 1993. "Distributed morphology and the pieces of Inflection". In *The view from building* 20, ed. by Kenneth Hale and Samuel Jay Keyser, 111–176. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Höhn, Georg F.K. 2016. "Unagreement is an illusion. Apparent person mismatches and nominal structure". *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 34 (2): 543-592. Available at: <http://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/001790>

Hurtado, Alfredo. 1985. "The unagreement hypothesis". In *Selected papers from the Thirteenth Linguistic Symposium on Romance Languages*, ed. by Larry King and Catherine Maley, 187-211. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Kayne, Richard. 1994. *The Antisymmetry of Syntax*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Longobardi, Giuseppe, 1994. "Reference and proper names: a theory of N-movement in syntax and logical form". *Linguistic Inquiry* 25, 4:609-665.

Longobardi, Giuseppe. 2008. "Reference to individuals, person, and the variety of mapping Parameters". In *Essays on Nominal Determination: from morphology to discourse management* ed. by A. Klinge & H. Müller, 189-211. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Marotta, Giovanna. 1993. "Selezione dell'articolo e sillaba in italiano: un'interazione totale?". *Studi di Grammatica Italiana* 15: 255-93.

Nevins, Andrew. 2007. "The representation of third person and its consequences for person-case effects". *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 25 (2): 273–313.

Nevins, Andrew. 2011. "Multiple agree with clitics: Person complementarity vs. omnivorous number". *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 29: 939–971.

Postal, Paul. 1969. "On so-called "pronouns" in English". In *Modern studies in English: Readings in Transformational Grammar*, ed. by David A. Reibel and Sanford A. Schane, 201–226. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Rauh, Gisa. 2003. "Warum wir Linguisten "euch Linguisten", aber nicht "sie Linguisten" akzeptieren können. Eine personendeiktische Erklärung". *Linguistische Berichte* 196: 390-424.

Rizzi, Luigi. 1982. *Issues in Italian syntax*. Dordrecht: Forris.

Rizzi, Luigi. 1986. "Null Objects in Italian and the Theory of *pro*". *Linguistic Inquiry* 17.3 501-557.

Sommerstein, Alan H. 1972. "On the so-called definite article in English". *Linguistic Inquiry* 3: 197-209.