

A Cartesian dream:
A geometrical account of syntax
In honor of Andrea Moro

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Guglielmo Cinque

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A CARTESIAN DREAM

A geometrical account of syntax

In honor of Andrea Moro

Edited by

Matteo Greco & Davide Mocchi



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To our *Maestro*
(Matteo and Davide)

Contents

Introduction

Matteo Greco & Davide Mocci 1

The Miracle Creed and SMT

Noam Chomsky 17

Notes on half, all, both, each & of

Richard S. Kayne 41

The importance of anomaly in neurolinguistic research

Valentina Bambini 81

‘Sono Andrea’: Some reduced (cleft) answers in Italian

Adriana Belletti 91

“Moro’s Problem”: Finding grammar in the brain

Robert C. Berwick 99

Dynamic antisymmetry and type-driven interpretation

Valentina Bianchi 113

Was Pierre Marie right? Not really

Stefano F. Cappa & Eleonora Catricalà 121

On the imperialism of the copula: Addressing some puzzling properties of reduced structures in Italian

Carlo Cecchetto & Caterina Donati 129

Some WISE advice

Cristiano Chesi 139

Brief notes on the semantics of copular sentences

Gennaro Chierchia 149

Selective grammatical encoding of emotions in language	
Guglielmo Cinque	161
Linear Order, Labeling and the Language Design	
Denis Delfitto	171
Agreeable predicate nominals	
Marcel den Dikken	183
Functional categories, the determinacy of merge, and principles of computational efficiency	
Anna Maria Di Sciullo	191
The antisymmetry of syntactic structure: a view from auto-morphisms	
Robert Frank, William Min, Abhisar Mittal & Billy Zhong . . .	209
Headlines, the grammar of omission and the grammars in the human mind	
Maria Teresa Guasti	223
Lost in translation: Subject drop in Christie's Easy to Kill	
Liliane Haegeman	227
Grammatical Parameters from a Gene-like Code to Self-Organizing Attractors: a research program	
Giuseppe Longobardi & Alessandro Treves	237
Form Sequence meets the Romance adjective	
M. Rita Manzini	253
Andrea Moro at the speed of 60	
Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini	269
Negative concord as doubling	
Cecilia Poletto	279
A note on a typology of merge-based systems	
Luigi Rizzi	287

Generalised Dynamic Antisymmetry & Smuggling Derivations

Ian Roberts 297

Are humans the only animal who makes “I”?

Andrea Serino 303

***Suonano le campane – Es läuten die Glocken – ‘Z laiütan=da di klokkn.* On rightward agreement with a post-verbal subject**

Alessandra Tomaselli 311

Form Sequence meets the Romance adjective

M. Rita Manzini

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1 Basic data and theoretical assumptions

In Romance languages, prenominal adjectives are a subset of postnominal ones. Some classes of adjectives must be postnominal, like the relational *A electric* in (1), while other adjectival classes can be pre- or post-nominal, e.g. *new* in (1).

- (1) a. *una nuova elettrica macchina
 a new electric car
 b. una nuova macchina elettrica
 a new car electric
 c. una macchina elettrica nuova
 a car electric new
 ‘a new electric car’

In addition, prenominal adjectives and postnominal ones often have different interpretations, the exact nature of which is subject to debate. In any event, the intuition is that prenominal adjectives are again set apart by having a subset of the interpretations of postnominal ones (see especially Cinque 2010). For instance, the participle in (2) can be prenominal or postnominal – but it can be prenominal in only a subset of the examples where it is found postnominally. This restriction seems to be bound to interpretation (though see below).

- (2) a. un testimone/un flacone agitato
a witness/a bottle shaken
b. un agitato testimone
a shaken witness
c. *un agitato flacone
a shaken bottle

Next, the question arises of the relative order of adjectives and PP modifiers. PP modifiers not only follow N, but must also follow the string of its adjectival modifiers (see especially Adger 2013). Interpolation of a PP between N and A or between two As is impossible, as illustrated in (3). Despite their basic nature, it is difficult to see how to derive these facts in an LCA/cartographic approach, since As and PPs are both just Specs of functional projections, and they should therefore interleave at least to some extent.

- (3) a. una macchina elettrica nuova di Gianni
a car electric new of Gianni
b. *una macchina elettrica di Gianni nuova
a car electric of Gianni new
c. *una macchina di Gianni elettrica nuova
a car of Gianni electric new

There are two further complicating facts concerning (3). The Romance languages have a number of PP modifiers embedding bare NPs rather than DPs. These PPs, which often are equivalent to adjectives, freely interweave with adjectives, as in (4) (see especially Fàbregas 2017).

- (4) una macchina da corsa nuova/nuova da corsa di Gianni
a car for race new/ new for race of
'a new racing car of Gianni's'

Vice versa, adjectives with internal structure freely interweave with referential PPs; comparatives are an obvious case in point, as in (5a), as are adjectives which themselves take a PP modifier, as in (5b).

Note that (5b) involves a relational N, fully natural only when cooccurring with a PP.

- (5) a. una macchina di Gianni più nuova della mia / più
 a car of Gianni more new than mine / more
 nuova della mia di Gianni
 new than mine of Gianni
 ‘a car of Gianni’s newer than mine’
- b. uno zio di Gianni contento di lui / contento di
 an uncle of Gianni happy with him / happy with
 lui di Gianni
 him of Gianni
 ‘an uncle of Gianni’s happy with him’

Any attempt at accounting for these data is hampered by the lack of a standardized minimalist theory of modification structures. In the model defined by the Linear Correspondence Axiom (LCA, Kayne 1994) modifiers are assimilated to Specs. By contrast, according to Chomsky 2004, modification is modelled by Pair Merge. Recently, Chomsky 2021 construes Pair Merge as the limit case of a more general operation of Sequence Formation (SF). The theoretical implications of the structure of modification are therefore of a certain importance. On the one hand, the LCA hypothesis, embraced by cartography, demands the postulation of a great deal of abstract heads – since multiple Specs are barred. It also implies movements with no semantic import, since linearization is syntax-internal. On the other hand, Chomsky’s hypothesis requires that Merge can create sets (Set Merge) or ordered pairs/sequences (Pair Merge/SF) (see Chomsky this volume for more recent developments). Other aspects of the theory remain invariant across models including complementation (via Set Merge) and movement, perhaps to be modelled in terms of dynamic antisymmetry as in Moro 2000.

The cartographic analysis of Romance adjectives has been worked out in great detail by Cinque 2010, 2014, according to whom “the fundamental syntactic and semantic divide is between predicative and non-predicative adjectives, which adnominally corresponds to the divide between APs in reduced RCs (only predicative) [and]

APs in direct modification (only non-predicative)” (Cinque 2014: p. 26). At the end of the derivation, sketched in Fig.1, some direct modification APs and all reduced RCs are in postnominal position. The higher direct modification APs are in prenominal position. Therefore predicative readings (intersective, stage level, restrictive) are uniquely associated with postnominal position (reduced RCs) – while both prenominal and postnominal (direct modification) As can have non-predicative (subselective, non-intersective, individual) readings.

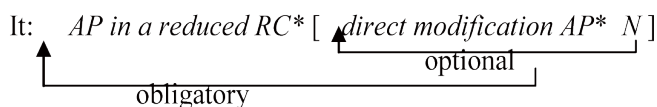


Figure 1: Cinque 2014: p. 19

Nevertheless, counterexamples (or classes of counterexamples) can be found for the predictions of the model. Prenominal *grande/piccolo* ‘big’ are intersective (though context-dependent) according to the very same semantic literature (Kamp & Partee 1995: p. 142) on which Cinque bases his typology. The same is true for the fact that they can be restrictive (e.g. *una piccola/grande valigia* ‘a small/big bag’ in a lost property notice). Prenominal participial adjectives like *agitato* ‘shaken’ in (2) are furthermore generally stage level.

On the other hand, Pair Merge (Chomsky 2004) has only occasionally been exploited by the literature regarding adjectival modification (e.g. Abels & Neeleman 2012). Following Chomsky 2004 on Pair Merge, element β , say NP, is introduced in the derivation by Set Merge and therefore has a position (a context of occurrence) in the Set Merge tree; “adjunction then applies to replace β by $\langle \alpha, \beta \rangle$ ” (Chomsky 2004: p. 118), where α here is an ADJ, cf. (6a). Chomsky 2019 briefly discusses sequences in relation to adjectival modification, proposing that As enter Pair Merge with the nominal phase head n (the Link of the sequence). A Pair Merge sequence is then constructed from Pair Merge couples, each including the Link L, here n , cf. (6b). On the other hand, for Chomsky 2021, SF applies directly to elements

$\alpha_1 \dots \alpha_n$, in the Workspace, here Adjectives (As), yielding an ordered set interpreted as a conjunction (6c).

- (6) a. [DET <ADJ, NP>] (Chomsky 2004: p. 118)
 b. <CONJ, < S₁, L₁ >, . . . , < S_n, L_n >>
 (Chomsky 2019: p. 50)
 c. <&, X₁, . . . , X_n > (Chomsky 2021: p. 31)

Following Chomsky 2013, precedence order (linearization) is defined at Externalization. Chomsky 2004 for Pair Merge only proposes that the position of β , i.e. NP in (6a), is the position where the ordered pairs/sequences are linearized. Presumably, the linear order of elements of the sequence reflects the internal order of the sequence itself.

In this note I try to work out what an implementation of the general guidelines concerning Pair Merge/SF may look like for a Romance language, more specifically for the basic examples in Italian (1)-(5). My main goal is to take Chomsky's recent work as a spur to reconsider the ordering facts summarized in (7).

- (7) *Order of Romance NPs*
 $\dots A^* - N - A^*/(P-NP)^* - AP^*/(P-DP)^* \dots$

2 Postnominal modifiers

Obligatorily postnominal As in Romance, including relational As, as in (1), are closest to N in typologically based adjectival hierarchies (Sproat & Shih 1988, Cinque 1994, and references quoted there), suggesting the conclusion that they are merged lowest in the DP. If we keep our functional inventory maximally simple, it is natural to conclude that obligatorily postnominal As in Romance enter Pair Merge/SF with $N^{(\min/\max)}$. In other words, I propose that the structure of the postnominal A in (1b) is as in (8a). If we extend Pair Merge/SF with N to postnominal As in general, we obtain structures like (8b) for example (1c), under the intermediate conception of SF in (6b).

- (8) a. ... [_{NP} *n* [_{NP} <elettrica, macchina>]]
 b. ... [_{NP} *n* [_{NP} <<macchina, elettrica>, <macchina, nuova>>]]

The order of As with respect to one another, e.g. in (8b), is based on semantic class (relational, color, shape etc.). Cinque 1994 encodes the relevant order into a cartographic hierarchy. In present terms, the relevant order restriction is imposed directly on Pair Merge sequences. A stipulation seems to be involved in either instance, and therefore the matter seems largely theory independent. I disregard it here.¹

Recall next that PP modifiers follow not only N, but must also follow the string of its adjectival modifiers, as illustrated in (3). Set Merge of the complement of N, namely the possessor PP yields the NP constituent in (9), hence the right order with A's closer to N and PP more peripheral.

- (9) ... [_{NP} *n* [_{NP} <<N, elettrica>, <N, nuova>> [_{PP} di Gianni]]

Further data need however to be taken into account. First, it is not only genitive/possessor PPs that are positioned externally to the N-A* sequence, but any PP modifiers, including several that cannot reasonably be construed as complements of N, e.g. (10).

- (10) una macchina vecchia con il motore nuovo / *con il
 a car old with the motor new / with the
 motore nuovo vecchia
 motor new old
 'an old car with a new motor'

In other words, PPs such as that in (10) which are clearly not arguments of N are external to the A sequence. An important part of the explanation is provided by Adger 2013, who convincingly argues against N complementation, here against (9). For Adger, even genitives restricting relational Ns (cf. (5b) above) or eventive Ns are to be construed as modifiers (see also Cecchetto & Donati 2019 on Italian).

1. Recently, Larson 2021 proposes that the relevant order is imposed by a single ordering relation, namely SUBJECTIVITY (cf. Scontras 2023 for an overview).

In essence, an adnominal PP introduces a relation between the object of P and the noun phrase to which it attaches – the most typical such relation being part/whole.

Independently of whether linear order is defined in the syntax (Kayne 1994) or, like here, it is assumed to be part of Externalization (Chomsky 2013), it reflects underlying dominance relations. In head-initial languages like Italian, this means that the complement of a head X is positioned to its immediate right, while further modifiers of the head and of its projections are linearized further to the right. Modifiers closer to the head in terms of dominance/c-command are closer to it linearly. If so, the obvious conclusion to be drawn from the (unmarked) word order in (10), or in (3) above, is that PPs are attached higher than N and its modifiers. Since I tentatively adopt the Pair Merge/SF formalization, it is natural to model modification by postnominal complex PPs via Pair Merge/SF with (a projection of) *n*. Pursuing this line of analysis, example (3a) has the structure in (11), rather than in (9).

(11) [_{DP} una [_{NP} <<[_{NP}], [di Gianni] >>]]

Now recall from (4) above that some PPs freely intersperse with As, occurring lower than possessor PPs. These are of the form [P NP], excluding those PPs, like possessor PPs in (1), that embed a referential DP. On the evidence of their interspersing with As, appearing closer to N than possessors, they enter Pair Merge/SF with N, as in structure (12) for example (4) above.

(12) ... [_{NP} *n* [_{NP} <<N, da corsa>, <N, nuova>>]]

Assuming that structures like (11)-(12) adequately depict the relative closeness to N of its various modifiers (i.e. their dominance order), the question is why such a state of affairs would hold. I assume that P heads are relational predicates introducing elementary relations such as part/whole (cf. again Adger 2013).² The genitive P heading the

2. Adger 2013 argues that the relational head is abstract, taking the whole PP as one of its arguments. I do not see the necessity of this extra structure. The elementary relator treatment of Ps is discussed by Manzini, Franco & Savoia 2019.

PP possessor in (11) takes as one of its arguments a full referential DP. Its other argument is the phrase that it modifies. I surmise that the latter must be at least as complex as *nP*. On the other hand, a [P NP] modifier like *da corsa* ‘racing’ in (12) “provides further properties that define the kind denoted by the head noun” (Fàbregas 2017: p. 797). In other words the P relates properties/kinds rather than referential expressions.

We can now consider one last piece of data left over from section 1, namely the fact that complex APs, for instance those embedding modifiers or involving comparison or other degree relations freely intermix with referential PPs. Given the basic skeleton of the NP sketched in (11)–(12), the conclusion is forced that complex APs enter Pair Merge/SF with *nP*, as in structure (13) for example (5a) above.

- (13) [_{DP} una [_{NP} <<[*nP*], [di Gianni]>, <[*nP*], [più nuova della mia]>>]]

The motivation for high attachment in (13) is that the AP is embedded in a Degree phrase implying a relation (with respect to the scale of newness) between two referential DPs.

In short, we get the desired order with respect to the N head, by assuming that N(P) enters SF with simple As and non-referential PPs, while *nP* enters SF with complex APs/DegPs and with referential PPs. But the order considered so far is a dominance order. What about linear order? Recall that according to Chomsky 2004 the position of the members of a sequence in the Set Merge tree is the position of what Chomsky 2019 calls the Link of the sequence. I assume a classical definition of position of β as context of occurrence of β , i.e., dominance relations entertained by β . In (8), As enter Pair Merge/SF with N, which has the context of occurrence [_{NP} *n* ____]. Therefore, the same is true of As.

Italian is a head-initial language, which means that the labeling head is leftmost, hence *n* precedes its NP complement and the various As that have the same context of occurrence. I assume that by the same linearization rule, the As in the sequence are ordered to the right of N (the labeling head). Furthermore I assume that they are ordered among themselves according to the order of the sequence. Thus the A closest to N in the sequence is to the immediate right of

N and the A farthest away from N in the sequence is rightmost. To simplify processing of the structures I already displayed the resulting order in the structure in (8), cf. (14).

(14) ... *n* > macchina > elettrica > nuova ...

Let us then turn to PP modification in (11). On the basis of the principle that heads go to the left and phrases to the right in Romance, the head D precedes its complement *n*P. In turn, the head *n* is leftmost in *n*P, preceding its complement N-A*, as in (15a), where the shaded portion of the string corresponds to (14). PPs that enter Pair Merge/SF with *n*P surface rightmost in the complex nominal, as in (15b), since they follow the *n* > N head sequence and all of the lower modifiers of the head(s), cf. also the discussion immediately above (11).

- (15) a. una > *n* > macchina > elettrica > nuova ...
 b. una > *n* > macchina > elettrica > nuova > di Gianni

3 Prenominal As

If the discussion that precedes is correct, there is a correlation between As entering Pair Merge/SF with N and their being postnominal. This correlation holds both for As that are obligatorily low/postnominal, and of those that can also be prenominal. For the latter we may consider what happens if they enter Pair Merge/SF with a higher constituent than N, hence here with *n*P. From an empirical point of view there are arguments that this may be correct. Recall that I argued that possessive modifiers must be attached at least as high as *n*P. I take pronominal possessives to be personal pronouns inflected with oblique case, hence oblique KPs.³ In standard Italian they

3. They also agree with the head N – which represents a residual form of generalized agreement of genitives with N in many Indo-European languages; see Plank 1995 for a crosslinguistic survey, Manzini, Franco & Savoia 2019 for discussion consistent with the adjunct/modifier treatment of genitive possessors.

are found in prenominal position and can be as high as the position immediately below determiners. However they can also be merged as low as the position immediately to the left of N, and here they follow prenominal adjectives, as in (16). I conclude that prenominal As, being interspersed with possessive pronouns, are merged in the same structural areas of the DP – namely they modify nP, not N(P).

- (16) a. un breve/bel/nuovo suo articolo
 a short/nice/new his article
 a short/new/nice article of his'
 b. un breve suo nuovo articolo
 a short his new article

A second important syntactic property of prenominal As in Romance concerns branching. As in English, Romance prenominal As are prohibited from embedding right-branching structure, a constraint formulated by Williams 1982 as the Head Final Filter (HFF, cf. also Emonds 1976, Giorgi & Longobardi 1991 for Italian). However, Romance As display severe constraints on left branch modifiers as well, as exemplified in (17). Lexically based variation among degree modifiers seems to be involved, as in (17a). Some variation on the other hand is clearly not lexical; comparatives, as in (17b), are generally excluded, even if the second term of comparison is implicit; extraposition is also impossible. On the other hand, relative superlatives, as in (17c), are fine, though they are formed with *più* 'more/most' as are comparatives.

- (17) a. Gianni è un assai/*molto/*veramente famoso linguista
 Gianni is a quite/very/truly famous linguist
 b. *Gianni è un più/meno famoso linguista (di Piero)
 Gianni is a more/less famous linguist (than Piero)
 c. Il più famoso linguista qui è Gianni
 the most famous linguist here is Gianni

Consider then the example in (18a). The Pair Merge sequence with nP takes the form in (18b).

- (18) a. una nuova macchina di Gianni
 a new car of Gianni
 b. [_{DP} una [_{nP} <<nP, nuova > <nP, di Gianni >>]]

As before, I assume with Chomsky 2004 that the position of Spell-Out of the As in the sequence is the position of nP. In (18b), nP has the position, i.e. context of occurrence, [_{DP} D ____]. Since heads precede phrases, D of course precedes nP. If As entering Pair Merge/SF with nP have the same position as nP, they also follow D. Apart from these well-established orders, intuitively, adjunction of A to nP results in ordering of As comparable to that of functional heads, e.g. *n*. In other words, members of the nP sequence are flipped left if they are heads and right if they are phrases, as in (19).

- (19) una > nuova > nP > di Gianni

The account of linear order proposed here is trivial, but not empty. Consider possessive pronouns of the type illustrated in (16). Semantically, they are entirely equivalent to *of*-DP possessors. Under the present approach, they actually have the same structure of merger – they just have a different linear order.⁴

Many questions arise at this point. A question brought to the fore by Cinque 2010, is the different interpretation associated with the same A in prenominal and in postnominal position. In present terms, the different interpretation should depend on one of the two properties that distinguish prenominal and postnominal As, namely height of attachment and head/phrasal status. Consider for instance *agitato* ‘shaken’ in (2). The interpretation associated only with postnominal ‘shaken’ depends on a complex internal structure, inclusive of a Voice projection hosting an implicit agent. By contrast, the interpretation available in prenominal position is that of a property. The

4. It is well-known that in South Italo-Romance varieties possessive pronouns are ordinarily postnominal; but in the same varieties, adjectives that are prototypically prenominal in Italian (French etc.) like *bello* ‘nice, beautiful’ are also postnominal (Manzini & Savoia 2005, III: 557-569). An appropriate parameter needs to be defined, but there is no immediate contradiction with the text. South Italo-Romance seems to be very close to the pure postnominal modification described for Celtic by Adger 2013: and references quoted there

difference is rather like that between a causative and anticausative predicate (*agitare* ‘to shake’ vs. *agitar-si* ‘become shaken’). I assume that the eventive participle must be postnominal because it is phrasal (e.g. AP). The psych state participle can be postnominal or prenominal depending on whether it modifies N(P) or nP, respectively. This is because I assume that it can be a simple A, implying no phrasal structure.

As for height of attachment, it is perhaps worth recalling that there is a very restricted set of adjectives that can appear only in prenominal position (e.g. *mero* ‘mere’), or that in any event have a prenominal meaning not available in postnominal position. One example is provided by privative *falso* ‘false’, as exemplified in (20), from Cinque 2014.

- (20) Quello è un falso problema / *problema falso
 that is a false problem / problem false
 ‘That is a false problem (= not a problem)’

In (20) the adjective is essentially equivalent to the negation operator, i.e. ‘not a problem’. It is reasonable to assume that this interpretation requires the adjective to be attached in the functional domain of the DP, hence nP or higher.

A further problem is how to explain that a small subset of the data in (17) are grammatical, undermining the generalization that prenominal As are heads. One possibility is that what is crucial is not necessarily head status, i.e. the lack of any internal structure, but rather the lack of internal Set Merge structure. In other words, degree modification of prenominal As is possible in (17) to the extent that the degree modifier is itself Pair Merged to A – along the lines of (21) for example (17a). We have already seen that degree modifiers that imply Set Merge structure are excluded from prenominal position. This is clearly so for comparatives, as in (17b), on the assumption that they need to embed a complement corresponding to the second term of comparison. Therefore, structures like (21b) only occur postnominally, cf. (13) above.

- (21) a. un [_{NP} «assai, famoso >, nP>]
 b. ... [NP < [_{AP} [_{DegP} più] famoso], NP> ...

In short, Degree modifiers (*very*, *more* etc.) may be Pair Merged, as in (21a), or Set Merged as in (21b) in part according to their lexical specifications, including (near) synonyms like *assai* and *molto* ‘quite/very’. More interestingly, the same lexical item, e.g. *più* ‘more/most’, is able to enter Set Merge configurations, as in comparative (21b), or Pair Merge configurations, as implied by example (17c) – though further implementations are left open here.

4 Concluding remarks

In this note, I have adopted a simplified categorial inventory for NP, reduced essentially to the lexical head N and to one functional category, namely the phase head *n*. At the same time, I have tried to implement Chomsky’s (2004, 2019, 2021) various proposals for a Merge rule forming ordered pairs or sequences (i.e. Pair Merge/SF), in order to model Romance modification structures. At this point, a question arises as to the actual contribution made by Pair Merge/SF to the analysis. Chomsky 2023 himself suggests that SF should be abandoned in favor of Set Merge, based in part on empirical motivations. In fact, the structures I have proposed in the text can be construed in terms of classical adjunction. i.e. Set Merge, provided the well-known problem of labeling can be overcome. As a parting note, I would like to observe that extensive agreement takes place within the NP crosslinguistically (cf. also fn. 3), so that the option of labeling by Agree (Chomsky 2013) should perhaps be given more serious consideration. I leave this issue for future research.

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