

Luserna Cimbrian and semi-speakerness

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1. What is Cimbrian? What is a “semi-speaker”?¹

Cimbrian is a Germanic minority language (ML) formerly spoken in an area crossing the border of three adjacent Italian provinces, namely the Province of Trento, in the Region Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol, and the provinces of Verona and Vicenza in the Veneto Region. The small enclave in the Province of Trento, i.e. Luserna, preserves the remainder of Cimbrian speakers as the varieties of Cimbrian spoken in the Veneto area have practically died out: nowadays just a small bunch of older speakers are found in Giazza-Ljetzan (in the Lessinia, northern Province of Verona) and Roana in the Asiago Plateau (Province of Vicenza).

In this paper some data concerning the variety of Luserna are presented: differently from the other Cimbrian varieties, Luserna Cimbrian is the only one it is possible to carry out extensive research on, as a *full proficiency continuum* is found, i.e. from full-fledged fluent speakers to the so-called “semi-speakers”, i.e. those speakers who have an imperfect competence of the ML: this means that they display “impairments” in their grammar, i.e. their morphological array can be strongly reduced (just 2 or 3 persons instantiated out of 6 in their paradigms) and their syntax normally shows strong idiosyncrasies, as we will see throughout the paper.

Before examining the features that characterize semi-speakerness a few words on the sociolinguistic biases that should be taken into account before approaching the data are in order here: first of all, even if semi-speakers were born and brought up in Luserna, most of them were deliberately exposed to either Italian or the local Romance dialect having thus just

1 Heartfelt thanks to my friends and colleagues Gildo Bidese and Federica Cognola for long and fruitful discussion on the matter presented here. All errors are my own.

a partial exposure to Cimbrian. This might have happened for various reasons: for instance, just one of the parents is a speaker of the ML; both parents are speakers but they preferred to raise children speaking just Italian, etc. In other cases, early fluency in Cimbrian might have been blotted out later on, e.g. when the Cimbrian-speaking child begun attending primary school and was basically exposed to Italian only.

As Dorian (1981; 1989) among others has pointed out in her work on East Sutherland Gaelic, the phenomenon of semi-speakerness is quite widespread in language islands, especially when in small communities a stronger standard come to exert a huge pressure on the ML. Thus, the contexts where the ML is actually spoken are more and more restricted and the preference for standard Italian increases year by year despite the thorough linguistic policy to uphold the minority in every possible way.

At this point the question arises as to why studying semi-speakerness turns out to be useful for linguistics in a broader sense, although such a phenomenon might be expected to be more relevant for Sociolinguistics. First of all, focussing on semi-speakerness allows to abstract away from the competence of the so-called “ideal speaker-hearer” who is basically unaffected by factors only relevant to particular conditions/situations. On the contrary, semi-speakers actually manifest grammatical idiosyncrasies that simply cannot be ascribed to their performance yielding random ungrammatical structures: the manifestation of such malformed sentences appears to be regularly distributed among speakers. In particular, the idiosyncrasies found in both matrix and embedded clauses display the same features in all my consultant, i.e. it could be argued that in most cases different kind (or stages) of eroded grammars display the same characteristics. Notice that I am not making reference to self-evident facts like contraction of the lexicon or the like: I am arguing that within clause structure the same functional nodes seem always to be affected by “erosion”, which manifests itself in the inactivation of projections i.e. in the impossibility of merging or moving material in a particular position. As we will see, the identification of the inactivated (= “impaired”) nodes of the structure is just the first step: in fact, there turned out to be different degrees of erosion according to the actual number of syntactic operation viable for each semi-speaker. In other words there is space of variation allowed for by eroded grammars, provided that the impaired nodes are always the same.

For the reasons I mentioned above, semi-speakerness has often been compared to

other language “impairments²” such as: (i) (some types of) aphasia, (ii) particular stages of language acquisition (L1, L2), (iii) pidginization.

1.2 Identifying semi-speakers.

When one surveys a small village where a ML is spoken trying to spot the people whose characteristics correspond to those of a semi-speaker one may face different kinds of problems. This has very little to do with the fact that the ML might be perceived by the speakers themselves as a low prestige variety: this happens to be a sociolinguistic variable that affects MLs in general. Semi-speakers have a more “ghostlike” nature since they don’t use the ML neither when talking with one another nor when they meet the speakers they perceive as fluent, as they feel their competence to be utterly inferior to their co-villagers’. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that in the villages where a ML is spoken there are actually people who do *not* speak that language at all and use just the standard (Italian in this case). This aspect further entangles the whole story, since “true” semi-speakers are very well hidden among these monolingual speakers.

As hard as it may seem, there is a way out, fortunately. Personally, I followed the path of Nancy Dorian’s work, (in particular, Dorian 1981) which is based on simple, yet crucial, sociolinguistic assumptions concerning the speakers of a small community.

First of all – as Dorian points out – one should resort to fluent speakers to get a first, rough scenario. In fact, the fluent speakers of the community can “classify” all the other speakers according to the “proficiency continuum” I made reference to above. Consequently, taking their advice I managed in putting together a group of speakers whom I administered a first assessment questionnaire to. This questionnaire was devised exploiting Dorian’s experience in assessing the target group of semi-speakers and focussed basically on morphophonological aspects of Cimbrian.

Concentrating on morphophonology allows to test what Dorian considers distinctive features of semi-speakerness, such as:

- morphological leveling in nominal and verbal classes (e.g. the usage of a unique morpheme for plural forms)

2 I use ‘impairment’ as shorthand: semi-speakerness and language acquisition are clearly no impairments but they resemble actual language impairments in their features.

- overgeneralization of phonological rules (e.g. umlaut in nominal classes, ablaut in verbs etc.)
- deficient verbal paradigms (e.g. just 1st, 2nd, 3rd person sing. and 3rd person pl. attested)
- overgeneralization of functional morphemes and functional items (like modal verbs)

For instance, as far as nominal morphology is concerned, I picked out the NPs with an “overspecified” plural: “overspecified” simply means that a lexeme is characterized by more than one morphophonological feature, e.g. when both ending and vowel harmonization show up in the same stem. This is often taken to be a general diagnostics for semi-speakerness, as semi-speakers are expected to display an active competence in one phonological rule but not in both³.

For instance, plural forms like *beldar* (‘woods’) w.r.t. singular *balt* and *ödjar* (‘eggs’) w.r.t. sing. *oa* were chosen⁴. This rule holds even for the plural form of a lexeme like *narântz* (‘orange’), pl. *narentze* which is an Italian loanword perfectly assimilated into the Cimbrian morphophonological system.

Another class of lexemes under investigation is represented by those forms whose plural exhibits only vowel harmonization but no ending, like *maüs* (‘mice’) w.r.t. singular *maus*, and *biskott* (‘cookie’) which has an umlaut plural *biskött*.

Since verbs display similar phenomena one can quickly assess speakers according to whether their morphophonological system manifests a rule or not. Take the verb for ‘talk’, *redan*, which belongs to a class of verbs involving assimilation between stem and ending in some persons of the paradigm, like the I p. plur. in ‘*red-* + *-n* = *ren*’ or the verb *sbimmen* ‘swim’ that presents assimilation in the III p. sing. *sbimp* (‘swims’) cf. ‘*sbim-* + *-t* = *sbimp*’. Again, semi-speakers are not expected to use assimilated forms since they are generally believed (Dorian 1981) to overgeneralize morphophonological rules discarding all phenomena typically associated with fluent-speakerness, i.e. assimilation, coarticulation, metathesis etc. Thus, independently from the actual form elicited (i.e. **redn*/**redän*/**reden*, etc.), this diagnostic has proven to be very useful in identifying semi-speakers.

After I could identify the group of semi-speakers by means of the assessment questionnaire, I went on to administer other questionnaires targeting the morphosyntactic features of semi-speakers in order to tackle what kind of properties the (often-referred-to-as)

3 This is not always true, though. Some skilled semi-speakers might display a rich morphology, at least in some lexemes.

4 Notice that the plural form *ödjar* also involves suppletion. The actual form elicited was *öala*.

“eroded” grammar typical of the semispeakers displays.

For the present purposes, I will skip the data coming from the intermediate questionnaires I had been administering in the first year of the project, going straight to most interesting array of facts concerning the complementizer layer, whose structure has proven to be the most revealing as far as the “erosion of the grammar” is concerned.

2. The data.

The data from (1) to (13) focus in particular on complementation (declarative sentences), *wh*- items, relative clauses, pragmatically marked sentences (left dislocation and focalization). For each sentence the standard translation provided by my control group (three fluent speakers) will be given as comparison and a short comment on Cimbrian fluency will be added as well.

2.1 Complement clauses.

- | | | | |
|-----|---|--|--------------------|
| (1) | a | Pensi che sia necessario? “Do you think that it is necessary?” | (St.) ⁵ |
| | b | Gloabas-to az ’z sai necessario? | (FS) |
| | c | Gloabas-to Ø z’iz bar?
think-you Ø it is “true”? | (SS) |
| (2) | a | I bambini hanno detto che vanno a giocare a pallone.
“The children said that they are going to play football” | (St.) |
| | b | Di khindar hân khött ke da gian z’spila in balun | (FS) |
| | c | Di khindar hân khött Ø gia-sa spilan in palun | (SS1) |
| | d | Di khindar ha... # hân-sa khött ke # gean-aa zo spila in palun ⁶
The children have said (that) go-they (to) play the ball | (SS2) |

– Fluent speakers:

Presence of two different complementizers (as attested in the Cimbrian Grammar, cf Panieri 2006) namely **ke**, the declarative one, which triggers matrix word order, i.e. [**ke** XP/Subj. Pron. **V_{fin}**-Obj. Pron. Neg. (DP Obj.)] and **modal az** often referred to as the modal

5 St. = stimulus sentence given in Italian; FS = Fluent Speaker belonging to the control group; SS = Semi-speaker; # = pause, hesitation (<â> = [ɔ]/[&]).

6 This sentence was elicited twice with the same informant, remarkably with two different results.

complementizer, which is selected by volitional, interrogative and factive verbs and triggers embedded word order, i.e. [**az** XP/Subj. Pron.-Obj. Pron. Neg **V_{fin}** (DP Obj.)], cf. (3a-b)⁷:

- (3) a I boaz **ke** du *geast* **net** ka Tria
I know that you go not to Trento
b I bill **as-to** **net** *geast* ka Tria
I want that-you not go to Trento

– Semi-speakers:

The complementizer *az* is virtually⁸ absent; complement clauses are introduced by a null complementizer randomly substituted for *ke* in some contexts.

2.2 Dislocated elements.

- (4) a Ti ho detto che il libro, Mario l’ha letto. (St.)
“I told you that this book Mario has already read”
b I hân-dar khött ke [**in libar**]_i dar Mario hatt-**en_i** za gelest (FS)
c I khü-dar-s Ø Mario hattar # gelest [**disar libar**] (SS)
I say-you-it Mario has-he read this book_{NOM}
- (5) a Ti ho detto che non lo voglio il gelato (St.)
“I told you that I don’t want ice cream”
b I hân dar khött ke i bill-**en_i** net [**in gelato**]_i (FS)
c I hân khött [**disar gelato**] i bill das net (SS)
I have said this_{NOM} ice cream I want ‘this’ not

– Fluent speakers:

As in Romance varieties, Cimbrian left dislocated elements require resumptive pronouns.

⁷ Examples taken from Panieri et al. 2006

⁸ I say ‘virtually’ here, since in some sentences *az* actually showed up, like in *i boaz net az...* ‘I don’t know *az...*’ where *az* stands for ‘whether’ (Italian interrogative ‘se’). However these erratic manifestations proved to be formulaic expressions betraying no active competence of this complementizer.

– Semi-speakers:

Dislocated elements are really hard for semi-speakers to elicit: in fact we often find translations where all pragmatic markings are removed, rendering thus the sentence totally unmarked. However, there are other cases in which the semi-speaker struggle to maintain the original Italian structure and all that he or she can come up with is a sort of “bare” thematization (hanging topic-like element) without resumptive pronouns at all or with an idiosyncratic resumptive element

2.3 Wh- items.

- (6) a Quando è stato eletto il nuovo sindaco? (St.)
“When has the new mayor been elected?”
- b *Benn iz*-ta khent augelekk dar näige burgermaister? (FS)
- c *Benn z’iz* augelekk dar näige bürgemaister? (SS)
When is-it elected the new mayor?
- (7) a Chi hanno visto a scuola? “Whom have they seen at school?” (St.)
- b *Ben hân*-sa gesekk ka schual? (FS)
- c *Ber* ha... # *hân*-sa gesekk in di schual, di khindar? (SS)
Who ha... have-they seen at the school, the children?
Ber hat # gesett... # (SS2)
who has ... “seen”...
- (7') a Non so chi hanno visto a scuola (St.)
“I don’t know whom they have seen at school”
- b I boaz ’z net *ben*-da *hân* gesekk ka schual (FS)
- c I boaz net *ber hân*-sa gesekk in di schual (SS)
I know not who have-they seen at school
- (8) a Quando va a scuola il bambino? (St.)
“When does the kid go to school?”
- b *Ben geat*’z ka schual ’z khinn? (FS)

- c Ben **geat**-ar das khinn # ka schual? (SS)
When goes-he the kid ... to school?
- (9) a Non so chi ha comprato le mele (St.)
b I boaz net *ber*-[sa]_i **hat** gekoaft [di öpfln]_i (FS)
c I boaz net *ber* **hat** gekoaft di öpfl (SS)
I know not who has bought the apples

Fluent speakers:

Embedded interrogative clauses display no T-to-C movement. This amounts to having the (typically Germanic) asymmetry in word orders between main and embedded *wh*- clause.

Semi-speakers:

They display no asymmetry between main and embedded *wh*- cl.

2.4 Relative clauses.

- (10) a I bambini che giocano molto sono più felici. (St.)
“The children who play a lot are happier”
b Di khindar **bo-da** spilan vil sain mearar kontent (FS)
c Di khindarn # Ø spilan-sa vil soin-sa zo luste (SS)
The children ... play-they a lot are-they ‘too’ happy
- (11) a Le mele che ha comprato la Maria sono buone.
“The apples that Maria bought are delicious”
b Di öpfln **bo-sa** hat gekoaft di Maria sain guat (FS)
c di öpfln vo # **bo-da-r** hat gekoaft Maria soin-sa guat (SS)
the apples ... that-DA-her has bought Maria are-they good
- (12) a Il bambino che arriva adesso è il figlio di Mario (St.)
“The kid who’s arriving right now is Mario’s son”
b ’z kinn **bo-da** rift est iz dar sun vo Mario (FS)

- c dar khinn # \emptyset es khint dar khind v... Mario (SS)
 the child ... it arrives the child ... ‘of’ Mario
- (13) a Il libro che abbiamo letto è molto bello “The book we read is very nice” (St.)
 b Dar libar **bo-bar** hân gelest is gânz schumma (FS)
 c ## Dar# z libar ## \emptyset ha-bar gelest z’ is schumma (SS)
 ... the ... the_{NEUT} book ... have-we read it is nice
- (14) a Gianni, che è una brava persona, ci aiuta nel lavoro (St.)
 b Dar Hâns, **ke** z’iz a guatz mensch helft-as in di arbat (FS)
 c no elicitation (SS)

– Fluent speakers:

As for restrictive relative clauses we observe a generalized use of the relative complementizer *bo* with clear differentiation between subject relativization vs object relativization. In the former case *bo-* shows up with the invariable particle *-da*; in the latter *bo-* is always connected to a weak subject pronoun e.g. *bo-bar*, lit. ‘that-we’.

– Semi-speakers:

Relative clauses are introduced by either the null complementizer, as is the case of declarative clauses or, less frequently, by a crystallized form *bo-da* which is undifferentiated between subject and object relative clauses.

3. The structure of the “eroded” CP

The comparison between semi-speakers and the control group has led me to assuming that on the one hand the Cimbrian spoken by fluent-speakers might have the same features as an Old Romance V2 language (in the sense of Benincà 2006) with a “full-fledged” CP (cf. also Grewendorf & Poletto 2011), on the other hand the Cimbrian spoken by semi-speakers displays a partially inactivated CP with (i) a zero complementizer, (ii) just one “thematized”

XP⁹, (iii) no V movement to the CP layer in declarative clauses since enclisis to V_{fin} is not to be taken necessarily as evidence per se of V-to-C movement.

For now, I have tentatively put forward two different versions of the analysis of Cimbrian left periphery displayed in eroded competence:

(a) *Strong version*: left periphery contains **one and only one** element (complementizer/thematized DP/wh-/V_{fin}).

(b) *Weak version*: left periphery contains **at least one** element (e.g. cooccurrence of wh- and V_{fin})

Why infer two versions of the same proposal? Are they assumed to coexist in the grammar of the same speaker w.r.t. each particular context or do they represent different grammars belonging to different (semi-)speakers?

The latter hypothesis seems to me on the right track: the strong version of the theory is more appropriate to the semi-speakers who exhibit the lowest level of competence: making more than one operation, either merge within or move to C, is supposed to be too costly. The weak version seem to be suitable for the semi-speakers belonging to the highest levels of the proficiency continuum.

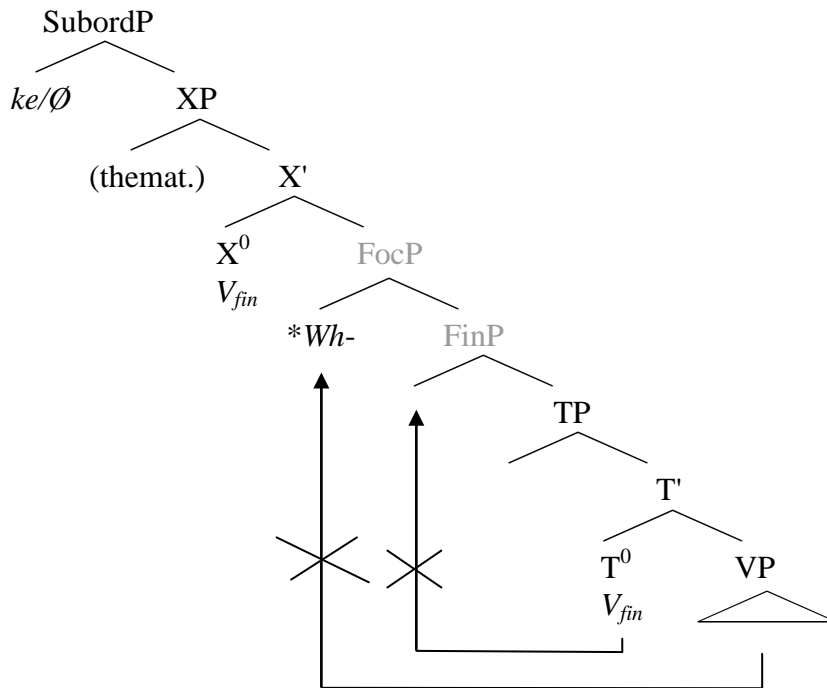
Thus, it could be hypothesized that an “eroded” CP is made of a position dedicated to the complementizer (where subordination and clause-typing coalesce) and another functional projection (dubbed XP here) whose specifier is targeted by thematized elements in general. In some grammars (corresponding to the highest level of competence) its head may contain V_{fin}. The other nodes of the layer are taken to be inactivated or inaccessible.

In (18) all these proposal are arranged schematically; notice that impaired/inactivated nodes are indicated in grey and a Subordinator Phrase is assumed for its simple subordinating nature: in fact, in the spirit of Bhatt and Yoon (1991) Subord(inator)P is the topmost C-projection which is active in those languages that do not conflate subordinating and clause-typing: thus, languages displaying embedded V2 (e.g. like Yiddish) are believed to split¹⁰ the Comp category in (at least) a Subordinator and a Mood head that allows for V_{fin} movement to CP:

9 Possibly a “Hanging Topic-like” element.

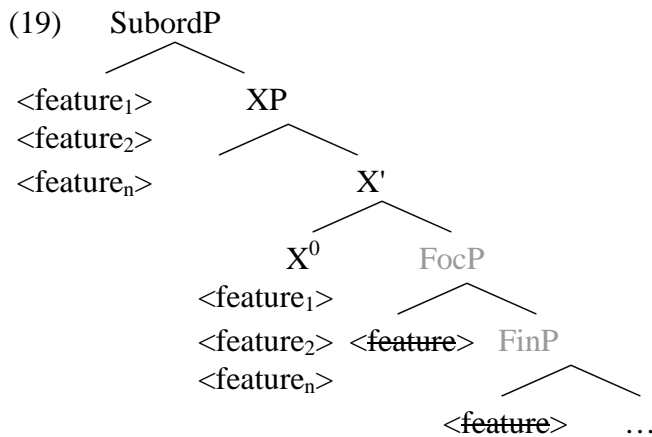
10 Recall that Bhatt & Yoon (1991) came much earlier than Rizzi’s assumptions on the split CP.

- (18)
- | | | | | | | | |
|-----|------------------------------|------------|-----------------------|------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| | [SubordP | [XP | [X⁰ | [Foc [Fin | [TP | [T⁰ | [VP]... |
| (a) | | ∅/Top | {V _{fin} } | | {V _{fin} } | | |
| (b) | <i>ke/∅</i> | ∅/Top | {V _{fin} } | | {V _{fin} } | | |
| (c) | | <i>Wh-</i> | {V _{fin} } | | {V _{fin} } | | |
| (d) | <i>umbromm</i> ¹¹ | | | | | | |
| (e) | <i>bo(-da)</i> | | | | | | |



Our proposal somehow reminds the *Tree Pruning Hypothesis* (Friedmann&Grodzinsky 1997) but unlike it, it takes inaccessible low nodes (the pruned ones in Friedmann&Grodzinsky's terms) i.e. FocP and FinP not to impair the upper projections (the Subord/XP layer). Put it in another way, language decay manifests itself (i) in the erosion of functional layers which takes place in a way less linear than the one assumed by Friedmann&Grodzinsky and (ii) in deleting the features belonging to the impaired heads rather than simply blocking upper branching as can be seen in (19):

¹¹ *Umbromm* being the causal subordinator meaning 'as, for'.



3.1 Tackling V1 structure

As we have seen main and embedded clauses appear to share the same structure, the only difference boiling down to the presence of SubordP on top of the latter.

The fact that no word order difference is ever found can be interpreted as the inactivation of the low CP field. In fact, on the one hand focalized items are never present in semi-speakerness (at least in my data) and on the other neither V2 phenomena nor subjunctive morphology in the embedded clause are ever found (cf. Grewendorf & Poletto 2011; Padovan 2011). Moreover, although X^0 is a potential position that V_{fin} can target, there is no evidence in favor of V movement to C – at least in *some* grammars – even when sequences resembling V2, like *hån-sa* (‘have-they’) in (4) repeated here as (20), are found.

- (20) (Penso che) questa cosa non l’abbiano mai detta “I think that this thing they have never said” (St.)
 (I glöabe Ø) diza # sachandar hån-sa net # khött (SS)
 I think this ... things have-they not ... said

Sticking to the hypothesis that dislocated XPs do not cooccur with an overt head in CP amounts to assuming that V_{fin} is confined in TP; *hån* only moves out of VP incorporating onto the clitic form *-sa* hosted in a low Clitic position:

- (20) ... [_{SubordP} Ø [_{XP} (dizta sachandar) [_{X°} _ [... [_{TP} [_{CliticP} [_{Clitic} hån-sa [net khött [_{VP} hån...

V1 structures are a statistically relevant phenomenon in the grammar of speakers with low

levels of competence: if we maintain the idea that V1 can but need not imply verb movement to C (recall that we are dealing with an eroded grammar here; thus, this peculiar form of V1 is only partially comparable to what we find in “real” V1 languages) we can assume different grammars with different degrees of erosion (G_1, G_2, \dots, G_n) much like the different jargons in pidginization processes. Semi-speakerness could hence be thought of as a sum of all the different grammars, i.e. different jargons which, however, never end up converging, as is the case of stable pidgins.

We expect that semi-speakers equipped with G_1 display both head movement of V_{fin} and XP movement to CP:

(21) [SubordP [XP [X⁰ [... [TP [T⁰ [VP ...
 \emptyset /Top V_{fin}

Semi-speakers equipped with G_2 display just one movement, say, XP movement:

(22) [SubordP [XP [X⁰ [... [TP [T⁰ [VP ...
 \emptyset /Top { V_{fin} }

alternatively, they might display head movement, revisiting V1 structures as follows:

(23) [SubordP [XP [X⁰ [... [TP [T⁰ [VP ...
 \emptyset { V_{fin} }

and so on.

4 Conclusion.

To give a proper account of semi-speakerness I propose that a deficient left periphery should be assumed. Deficiency turns out to be twofold: on the one hand complementation seems to be restricted to clause-typing only, all other syntactic features of subordination having gone lost; on the other hand all sorts of pragmatically marked items coalesce in a unique type of “thematization”. Therefore, I have proposed that some functional projections

must be inactivated, i.e. syntactic operations involving them are not viable.

At any rate, the fact that the features connected to a particular functional projection are lost is not to be subsumed under a generalized diachronic phenomenon. In fact, (a) we do not find traces of it in the production of younger fluent speakers; (b) grammars G_1 , G_2 , etc. coexist in the same generation of speakers; in other words they are to be intended as different instantiations of eroded grammar and not developmental stages of the same one.

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