ABSTRACT

“The Emergence and the Reanalysis of the Pro-form in the Early Italo-Romance Vernaculars”
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Starting from the assumption that existential pivots (in the sense of Milsark 1979) are bad subjects, i.e., arguments which lack pragmatic and semantic properties of canonical subjects (Beaver/Francez/Levinson 2006, Bentley 2009), I consider the realization of these arguments in a fairly large corpus of texts dating from the 13th to the 16th centuries. I note that, while the existential pattern [Copula][INDEFINITE Noun phrase], i.e., for example, *Fue uno filosofo*, ‘(There)was a philosopher’ (Novellino, LXXVIII, p. 89) is frequently attested – in clear continuity with the Latin model of presentationals, i.e., hypothetically, *fuit philosophus* – interestingly, the pattern [Copula][DEFINITE Noun phrase] is never found, unless a locative element also occurs in the construction, be it a locative phrase, i.e., *in quella Alessandria sono le rughe*, ‘in that Alexandria (there)are the alleys’ (Novellino, IX, p. 25), a locative relative pronoun, i.e., *in lu palaczu Lateranu, undi era lu papa*, ‘in the Lateran palace, where (there)was the pope’ (Conquesta, XXIII, 15, p. 107), or, crucially, a pro-form, i.e., *nce èy lo procurato/re*, ‘there is the procurator’ (Ricordi, 18v., 5-6, p. 561). While it is not disputed that the occurrence of a locative phrase (or of a locative relative pronoun) must trigger a locative/existential polarity in the interpretation of the construction, thus allowing an existential reading only if the definite pivot satisfies, contextually, the pragmatic stage-level condition on existential predicates (Carlson 1977), I claim that the emergence of the Romance existential pro-form is motivated by the encoding of definiteness. In other words, the overt marking of definiteness, which differentiates Romance from its ancestor Latin, favours the establishment of an existential pattern where the encoding of putatively canonical subjects (definite pivots) is licensed by a locative anchor. From having the status of locative licenser of definiteness, the pro-form is thereafter reanalysed as an obligatory marker of existentiality and it is extended to all existential types. As such, it arrives and remains in Modern Italian, where the definiteness effects reduce to subtle differences in the semantics and the pragmatics of existential constructions with definite and indefinite pivots. Evidence that *ci* has a locative origin – besides its etymon from Latin ECCE HIC – is also found in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Tuscan, where the pro-form occurs in complementary distribution with the locative phrase, i.e., there is a contrast between, for example, *uno re fu nelle parti d’Egitto*, ‘A king was in some parts of Egypt’ (Novellino, V, p. 19), where the locative phrase does not allow the occurrence of the pro-form, and *Egli ci sono delle altre donne*, ‘(Expletive) there are some other women’ (Boccaccio, Decameron, III, 3,13), where the pro-form seems to ban any further locative predication. This is not found in the existentials of Modern Italian, where the construction can display the co-occurrence of the pro-form and the locative phrase, as in, hypothetically, *(ci) fu un re in Egitto*, ‘there was a king in Egypt’, and *(ci sono delle altre donne (in Firenze)*, ‘there are other women in Florence’. These findings would seem to corroborate Freeze’s (1992) idea that all existential pro-forms are invariably locative, as existentials are locatives, assuming that, in the varieties under consideration, a locative pro-form cannot co-occur with a locative phrase within the clause. Interestingly, the fourteenth-century Sicilian texts show examples of existentials where, as is the case with Modern Italian, the pro-form and the locative phrase do not occur in complementary distribution, i.e., for example, *chi fu in Sicilia grandi fami*, ‘There was in Sicily great hunger’ (Conquesta, XVIII, 3, p. 85). The contrast between, on the one hand, the early-Tuscan data and, on the other hand, the early-Sicilian and Modern Italian data suggests that the existential pro-forms are not necessarily locative, and thus the locative analysis of the existential constructions must be reconsidered. The available evidence indicates that, in the early stages of Italo-Romance, the existential pro-form exhibits diatopic discrepancies, i.e., whereas in Tuscan (and in the varieties of the Centre-North) the pro-form appears to encode a locative argument, thus occurring in complementary distribution with the locative phrase, in Sicilian (and in the vernaculars of the Centre-South), the pro-form undergoes an ‘existential reanalysis’ and it can be said to be a marker of existentiality which joins with the copula to spell out an existential predicate.
(Bentley 2006; La Fauci and Loporcaro 1997), as is the case with Modern Italian. Furthermore, the diachronic analysis allows us to identify the stage in which, in Tuscan, the pro-form ceased to be exclusively locative in all constructions and uses, as it is found in the sixteenth-century Tuscan volgarizzamento of the Latin Navigatio, where the pro-form is attested to co-occur with the locative phrase, i.e., for example, *E non v’era erba in niuno luogo*, ‘And there was no grass in any place’ (Tuscan Navigatio, 7, f.8r, p. 73).

To sum up, (i) while departing from Latin, early Italo-Romance starts to encode definiteness through the introduction of the definite articles; (ii) the deictic anchoring condition constrains the occurrence of the definite noun phrases to the presence of a locative element, hence the locative pro-form is introduced to license existentiality; at this stage, the pro-form still preserves a locative value, as it is confirmed by those varieties which display the complementary distribution of the pro-form and the locative phrase, i.e., Tuscan and the northern vernaculars; (iii) the pro-form is then reanalysed into a marker of existentiality, as it is attested in those varieties in which the pro-form can co-occur with a locative phrase, i.e. Sicilian and the southern vernaculars; (iv) the generalization of the reanalysed existential pro-form is extended to all the existential constructions, regardless of the definiteness of the pivot, thus instantiating the obligatoriness of the pro-form which is found in the existentials of Modern Italian.

**Primary sources**


**References**


