

# On the threefold typology of *Scheinsubjekte*: from Karl Brugmann to Cimbrian syntax

Alessandra Tomaselli and Ermenegildo Bidese

## 1. The typology of lexical expletives in Cimbrian

The Cimbrian lexicon presents two expletive forms:

- (i) 'z / -z, which corresponds to German *es* (English *it*) and
- (ii) *-da*, which approximately corresponds to English *there*.

Whereas the morpho-syntax of 'z / -z depends on either [+V2] or [-NSP], the occurrence of enclitic *-da* strongly interacts with Nominative Case Assignment and, hence, Subject Syntax.

### 1.1 Expletives required by the negative value of the NSP

#### 1.1.1 The expletive 'z/-z

In connection to [-NSP], the lexical expletive 'z obligatorily occurs on either the left (1a) or the right of the finite verb (1b) in the root declarative sentence in impersonal construction with weather verbs. It behaves like its German counterpart *es* (cf. 2) and **corresponds to the notion of "freie Impersonalia" in Brugmann's (1917) typology.**

- (1) a. 'Z **snaibet** haüt atz Lusérn  
it snows today at Luserna
- b. Haüt **snaibet=z** atz Lusérn  
today snows=it.cl at Luserna  
'It is snowing today in Luserna'
- (2) a. *Es* **schneit** heute in Lusérn  
it snows today at Luserna
- b. Heute **schneit** *es* in Lusérn  
today snows it at Luserna  
'It is snowing today in Luserna'

Furthermore, this expletive occurs to the right of the lexical complementizer in the embedded clause, for instance, *bal* 'when' (cf. 3a), *az* 'that' (cf. 3b) or *be* 'if' (cf. 3c):

- (3) a. Bal=z **snaibet** starch atz Lusérn, stea=bar dahuam  
when=it.cl snows hard at Luserna, stay=we.cl at=home  
'When it snows heavily in Luserna, we stay home'
- b. I sperar, az=(z) **snaibe** starch haüt atz Lusérn  
I hope that=it.cl snow.conj hard today at Luserna  
'I hope that it will snow heavily today in Luserna'

- c. I vors=mar, be=z **snaibet** starch häüt atz Lusérn  
 I ask=me.DAT.CL if=it.CL snows hard today at Luserna  
 'I'm wondering if it is snowing heavily today in Luserna'

These examples reveal the same structural position as in German. Compare (3a, b, c) with (4a, b, c) modulo OV and the position of the adverb 'heavily':

- (4) a. Wenn *es* in Lusérn stark **schneit**, bleiben wir zu Hause  
 when=it.CL in Luserna hard snows, remain we at home  
 'When it snows heavily in Luserna, we remain home.'
- b. Ich hoffe, dass *es* heute in Lusern stark **schneit**  
 I hope that it today in Luserna hard snows  
 'I hope that it will snow heavily today in Luserna.'
- c. Ich frage mich, ob *es* heute in Lusern stark **schneit**  
 I ask me if it today in Luserna hard snows  
 'I'm wondering if it is snowing heavily today in Luserna.'

Lastly, the lexical expletive *-z* obligatorily occurs to the right of the finite verb in the direct interrogative context (cf. 5), as in the German equivalent sentence examples (cf. 6):

- (5) a. **Snaibet=z** häüt atz Lusérn?  
 Snows=it.CL today at Luserna  
 'Is it snowing at Lusern today?'
- b. Bo **snaibet=z** häüt?  
 where snows=it.CL today  
 'Where is it snowing today?'
- (6) a. **Schneit** *es* heute in Lusérn?  
 Snows it today in Luserna  
 'Is it snowing in Lusern today?'
- b. Wo **schneit** *es* heute?  
 where snows it today  
 'Where is it snowing today?'

The same lexical item occurs with the same distributional pattern in co-occurrence with subject clauses (cf. 7 and 8), reproducing and even reinforcing the occurrence of correlative *es* in German (cf. 8) (see **Brugmann's 1917 "gebundene Impersonalia"**):

- (7) a. 'Z **hatt=en** gevallt, [az=ta dar Luca sai(be) khent afn vairta]  
 it has=him.CL pleased that=da the Luca is.CONJ come to=the party  
 'He was pleased that Luca came to the party.'
- b. Gestarn **hatt=z=en** gevallt, [az=ta dar Luca sai(be) khent afn vairta]  
 Yesterday has=it=him.CL pleased that=da the Luca is.CONJ come to=the party  
 'Yesterday, he was pleased that Luca came to the party.'

- c. **Hatt**=z=en gevallt gestarn, [az=ta dar Luca sai(be) khent afn vairta]  
 has=it=him.cl pleased yesterday that=da the Luca is.CONJ come to=the party  
 'Yesterday, did he like yesterday that Luca came to the party?'
- (8) a. **Es hat** Hans gefallen, [dass Lukas zum Fest gekommen ist]  
 it has Hans pleased that Lukas to=the party come is  
 'Hans was pleased that Lukas came to the party.'
- b. Gestern **hat** (es) Hans gefallen, [dass Lukas zum Fest gekommen ist]  
 yesterday has it Hans pleased that Lukas to=the party come is  
 'Yesterday, Hans was pleased that Lukas came to the party.'
- c. **Hat** (es) Hans gestern gefallen, [dass Lukas zum Fest gekommen ist]?  
 Has it Hans yesterday pleased that Lukas to=the party come is  
 'Was Hans pleased yesterday that Lukas came to the party?'

### 1.1.2 The expletive -da

The expletive particle **-da** is excluded in all the preceding contexts, and it never plays the role of an **impersonal subject**, as the following example clearly shows:

- (9) a. \*Haüt **hatt**=ta gesnibet atz Lusérn  
 today has=da snowed at Luserna
- b. \*Haüt **iz**=ta khent atz Lusérn \*(*moi nono*)  
 today is=da come to Luserna my grandpa

The occurrence of the enclitic particle **-da** is required in the root clauses **whenever the nominal subject is not fronted to the left of the finite verb** (compare 10a with 10b), as already noted by Bidese & Tomaselli (2018):

- (10) a. *Moi nono iz khent atz Lusérn haüt / \*Moin nono iz=ta khent atz Lusérn ...*  
 My grandpa is come to Luserna today  
 'My grandpa came to Luserna today.'
- b. Haüt **iz**=ta khent atz Lusérn *moi nono / \*Haüt iz khent atz Lusérn moi nono*  
 today is=da come to Luserna my grandpa  
 'Today, my grandpa came to Luserna.'

The same holds for V1 sentences (= polarity questions):

- (11) **Iz**=ta khent atz Lusérn *moi nono* haüt?  
 Is=da come in Luserna my grandpa today  
 'Did my grandpa come to Luserna today?'

In subordinate clauses introduced by *bal*, *be*, or *az*, enclitic **-da** is always realized on the lexical complementizer (12a-c) independently of the position of the DP-subject with respect to the finite verb.

- (12) a. Bal=da {*moi nono*} iz khent {*moi nono*} atz Lusérn, soi=bar gánt huam  
 when=da.cl my grandpa is come my grandpa at Luserna, are=we.cl gone home  
 'When my grandfather came to Luserna, we went home'

- b. I sperar, **az=ta** {*moi nono*} sai(be) khent atz Lusérn {*moi nono*} haüt  
 I hope, that=da.CL my grandpa is come in Luserna my grandpa today  
 'I hope that my grandpa came to Luserna today.'
- c. I vors=mar, be=*da* {*moi nono*} iz khent atz Lusérn {*moi nono*} haüt  
 I ask=me.DAT.CL if=da.CL my grandpa is come in Luserna my grandpa today  
 'I'm wondering if my grandpa came to Luserna'

The German translation of the preceding examples reveals that Cimbrian *-da* does not find any lexical counterpart in Standard German (cf. 13):

- (13) a. Heute **ist** (\**es*) in Lusérn *mein Großvater* gekommen  
 today is (it) to Luserna my grandpa come  
 'Today, my grandpa came to Luserna.'
- b. Ich hoffe, **dass** (\**es*) heute in Lusérn *mein Großvater* gekommen ist  
 I hope, that (it) today in Luserna my grandpa come is  
 'I hope that my grandpa came to Luserna today.'
- c. **Ist** (\**es*) heute in Lusérn *mein Großvater* gekommen?  
 is (it) today in Luserna my grandpa come  
 'Did my grandpa come to Luserna today?'

The expletive particle *-da* partially corresponds to English *there* in subject inversion constructions in both root and embedded clauses:

- (14) a. *There arrives a man.*  
 b. A few years ago, *there lived* in this house *a lonely old man* (Curme 1922)
- (15) a. Vor ettlane djar **hatt=(d)a** gelebet in ditza haus *a altar mânn* alùà  
 b. \*Vor einigen Jahren lebte (\**es*) in diesem Haus ein einsamer alter Mann

Two main differences can be seen between Cimbrian *-da* and English *there*: (i) *-da* is not sensible to the definiteness effect as in English (cf. 16a with 16b), and (ii) it is not limited to a specific verbal class (i.e., unaccusative verbs) (cf. 17a with 17b). The following comparison of the same sentences in English and in Cimbrian demonstrates the two main differences:

- (16) a. \*... (that) there arrives *Mary* (definiteness effect)  
 b. <sup>ok</sup>... **az=ta** khemm *di Maria* haüt atz Lusérn
- (17) a. \*... (that) there has **read** a book my mother / my mother a book (transitive verbs)  
 b. <sup>ok</sup> ... **az=ta** *moi mamma* habe gelest an libar

**The occurrence of *-da* represents one of the most peculiar aspects of Cimbrian subject syntax with respect to German; it is required by Nominative case assignment (NOM) whenever the nominal subject is not raised to the structural subject position, ie. Spec-Fin (see Bidese / Padovan / Tomaselli 2020).**

1.2 V2 expletives (*Brugmann's "syntaktisches es"*)

Cimbrian is considered a structural V2 language that has lost the well-known linear restriction characterizing all other Germanic languages with the exception of Modern English:

- (18) a. Haüt in balt hatt=*ar* gesek in has  
 today in=the wood has=he.CL seen the.ACC rabbit  
 'Today, he saw the rabbit in the wood.'
- b. [<sub>CP</sub>[Haüt] [in balt] [<sub>FinP</sub>hatt=*ar* .... [<sub>VP</sub>gisek [<sub>DP</sub> in has]]]]

If the position on the left of the finite verb is not lexicalized by at least one constituent, either the subject or a complement, the sentence becomes grammatical only as a Yes/No question (cf. 19):

- (19) Hatt=*ar* gesek in has haüt in balt?  
 has=he.CL seen the.ACC rabbit today in=the wood  
 'Did he see the rabbit in the wood today?'

In order to maintain the declarative/assertive modality, a V2 positional expletive can occur in the first position on the left of the finite verb in the CP domain, like *Vorfeld-es* in German:

- (20) 'Z hatt=(*t*)a gesek in has dar djunge in balt haüt  
 it has=*da* seen the.ACC rabbit the boy in=the wood heute  
 'Today, the boy saw the rabbit in the wood.'
- (21) Es hat der Junge den Hasen im Wald heute gesehen  
 it has the.NOM boy the.ACC rabbit in=the today seen  
 'Today, the boy saw the rabbit in the wood.'

V2 positional expletive 'z diverges from the impersonal subject 'z / -z, with respect to the following aspects:

- (i) the morphological realization: it only occurs on the left of the finite verb (i.e., it refuses enclisis);
- (ii) the co-occurrence with enclitic *-da*: while V2 'z requires the co-occurrence with *-da* (cf. 22), impersonal 'z is incompatible with *-da* (cf. 23):

- (22) 'Z laütan=*da* di klokkn  
 it ring.PL=*da* the bells  
 'The bells are ringing.'
- (23) \*'Z hatt=(*t*)a gesnibet lai ka Tria, (ma nèt ka üs atz Lusérn)  
 it has.PL=*da* snowed only in Trento, (but not here at Luserna)

The syntax of lexical expletives represents a strong argument for the assumption that Cimbrian is characterized by both structural V2 and the negative value of the NSP. Hence, Cimbrian syntax reinforces the divide between COMP dominant languages and INFL dominant languages introduced by Hulk and Kemenade (1995): **V2 languages are COMP-dominant languages that do not allow referential null subjects; in contrast, null-subject languages are INFL-dominant languages, which do not allow V2 (i.e., mandatory finite verb movement to C in the root clause).**

### 1.3 First summary

The data discussed in the previous paragraphs are summarized in the following table:

(24) Table 1: a first typology of lexical expletives compared with Brugmann's (1917) typology

	ENGLISH	CIMBRIAN	GERMAN	ITALIAN	Brugmann (1917)
TP expletives	it	'z/-z	es	<i>pro</i>	<i>freie und gebundene Impersonalia</i>
	there	-da	<i>pro</i>	<i>pro</i>	( <i>there</i> ≠ <i>syntaktisches es</i> )
CP expletives	/	'z	es	/	<i>syntaktisches es</i>

## 2. The comparison with the northeastern Italian dialects

**The comparison with the Italian dialects of the northeastern region provides us with new insights concerning the syntax of subject clitics.** Although we would expect the absence of V2 expletives, we would not exclude a potential distinction between impersonal subjects and expletive pronouns that co-occur with post-VP subjects (= free subject inversion), i.e. the two classes of TP expletives.

### 2.1 The typology of lexical expletives in the Trentino dialects

It is well known in the literature that expletive clitic subjects with weather verbs like *nevegar/fiocar* ('to snow') are still **well attested in the Trentino dialects**:

- (25) a. *El piòve* (Casalicchio and Cordin 2020: 93)  
 it rains  
 'It's raining.'
- b. *L'a nevegà tuta la nòt*  
 it.cl-has snowed all the night  
 'It snowed all night.'

A glance at the data recently collected by VinKo, a platform based on crowdsourcing, strongly confirms this observation. The translation of the Italian sentence n. 136 (*è nevicato* 'it snowed') in the VinKo platform (cf. here 26), as follows,

- (26) *È nevicato*  
 is snowed  
 'It snowed.'

has been recorded by 14 informants from 11 different locations in Trentino, with the following results:

- 12 maintain the subject clitic 'l (3<sup>rd</sup> Person Singular Masculine) independently of both lexical choice (*nevegar* versus *fiocar*) and auxiliary selection:

- (27) a. *L'a fiocà* (U0409, Lavis)  
 it.CL-has snowed  
 'It snowed.'
- b. *L'è nevegà* (U0411, Cinte Tesino)  
 it.CL-is snowed  
 'It snowed.'
- c. *L'a nevegà* (U0451, Trento)  
 it.CL-has snowed  
 'It snowed.'

Just two young speakers do not realize the subject clitic:

- (28) a. *È nevegà* (U0565, Levico)  
 is snowed  
 'It snowed.'
- b. *A fiocà* (U0569, Mori)  
 has snowed  
 'It snowed.'

Even the second type of TP expletive, the one that co-occurs with postverbal subject, is attested in Trentino, even if in specific contexts:

(a) post-verbal [-hum] subjects in declarative sentences do not to realize the clitic (36 cases versus eight in VinKo) (cf. 29a) (data taken from Kruijt et al. in press):

- (29) a. *è scominzià la scola* (Brentonico, S0134, U0049)  
 is started the school  
 'School has started.'
- b. *(I) è riva i popi*  
 they are come the children  
 'The children arrived'

(b) post-verbal [+hum] subjects in indirect interrogative sentences almost always require a clitic (18 cases vs. 1):

- (30) *Non so miga ndo che=l sia nà el Marco* (Brentonico, S0115, U0088)  
 Not know not where that=he.CL is.CONJ gone the Mark  
 'I don't know where Mark has gone.'

Without entering into details, what matters to us is the different situation represented by data collected in Veneto. The dialects spoken in Veneto are coherently characterized **by the absence of subject agreement (no clitic) with postverbal subjects** and the gradual disappearance of the impersonal expletive. This graduated loss seems to follow the flow of the river Adige, starting from the Southwest (Verona), where it is still attested, eastward (Vicenza, Padova, Treviso, Venezia), where it is marginally residual or even completely absent.

### 3. The typology of lexical expletives in the dialects spoken in Veneto

The translation of sentence n. 136 (*è nevicato* 'it snowed') in the VinKo database clearly shows a gradual disappearance of the clitic expletive with meteorological verbs in the dialects spoken in Veneto compared with the situation attested in Trentino, as discussed in the previous paragraph.

The data collected in the province of **Verona**, the southwestern province on the border with Trentino, show that at least a fourth of the speakers maintain the clitic:

(a) examples with the clitic and both auxiliary verbs *a* 'has' and *è* 'is':

- (31) a. *l'a nevegà* (U0420, Verona)  
it.cl-has snowed  
'It snowed.'
- b. *l'è nevegà* (U0439, Verona)  
it.cl-is snowed
- (32) *a ga nevegà* (U0450, Bonavigo)  
PRT has snowed

(b) examples without the clitic:

- (33) a. *a nevegà* (U0403, Verona)  
has snowed  
'It snowed.'
- b. *è nevegà* (U0402, Sona)  
is snowed
- c. *ghe nevegà* (U0408, Bonavigo)  
has snowed
- d. *ga nevegà* (U0300, Legnago)  
has snowed

In the province of **Vicenza**, only two out of ten informants (Schio, Sarego) have the clitic expletive, as exemplified in (34), while the vast majority of speakers (four fifths of the total) do not express it (cf. 35):

- (34) *(e)l ga nevegà* (U0320, Schio)  
it.cl-has snowed  
'It snowed.'
- (35) *ga nevegà* (U0306, Recoaro)  
has snowed  
'It snowed.'

In the province of **Padua**, none of the recording feature the clitic. All speakers use the auxiliary *ga*:



- (36) *ga nevegà* (U0326, Cittadella)  
 has snowed  
 'It snowed.'

The same holds for the province of **Treviso** (cf. 37), with one exception (cf. 38):

- (37) *ga nevegà* (U0302, Castelfranco)  
 has snowed  
 'It snowed.'

- (38) *l'è nevegà (ma no tant)* (U0647, Codognè)  
*it.cl-is* snowed  
 'It snowed.'

Finally, the same holds for the province of **Venice** (cf. 39), with the exception of San Donà del Piave (cf. 40):

- (39) *ga nevegà* (U0454, Venezia)  
 has snowed  
 'It snowed.'

- (40) *l'è nevegà* (U0651, San Donà)  
*it.cl-is* snowed  
 'It snowed.'

#### 4. Conclusion

As a concluding remark, two generalizations can be drawn:

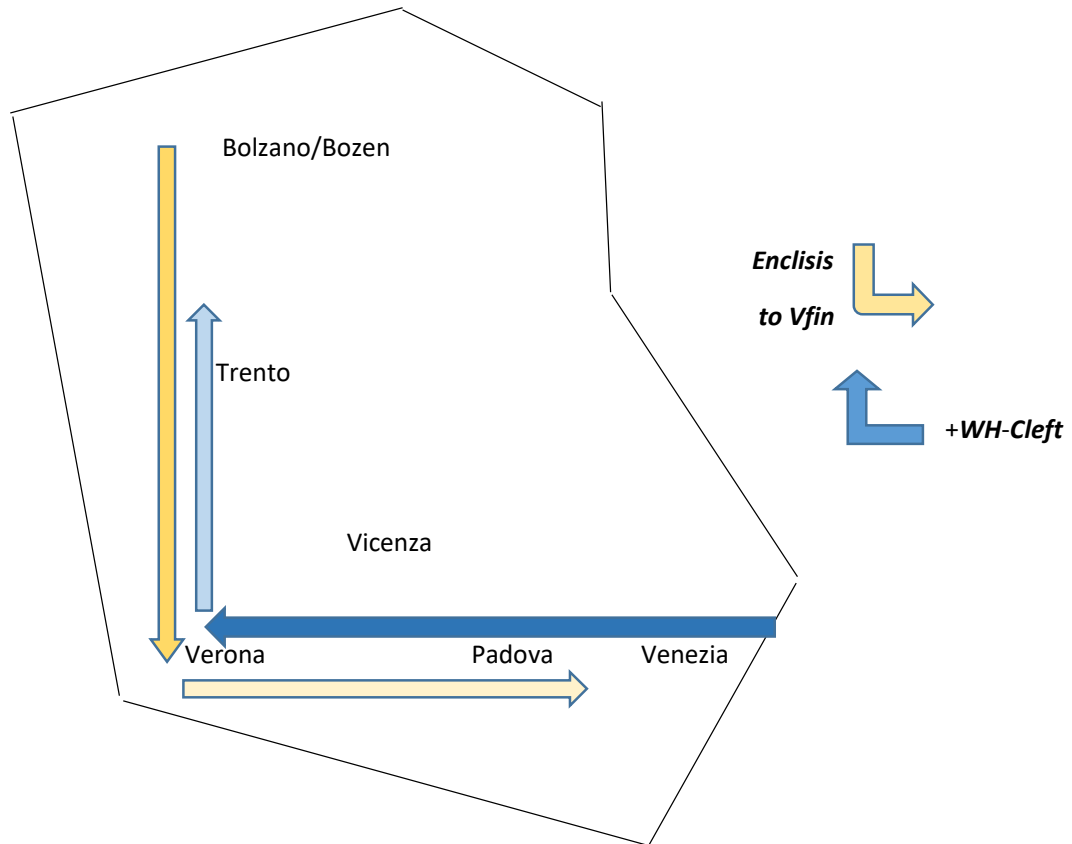
- (a) the maintenance of lexical expletives in the dialects spoken in Trentino is definitely more robust in comparison with the Venetian region with respect to both impersonal subject clitics and the possible co-occurrence with a post-verbal subject;  
 (b) the maintenance of lexical expletives in Veneto exhibits a clear decrease from the southwestern area (the province of Verona) toward the southeastern provinces of Vicenza, Padova, and Venice.

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 (c) In WH-questions, the enclisis of subject clitics (and of the lexical expletive where it is still attested) is maintained even in the Veneto dialects, but there is a strong preference for the cleft construction which is typical for the Romance varieties and whose attestation definitely increases from southwest (Verona) moving eastward (Padua) and represents the only option in Venice:

- (41) a. *Cos'a=lo magnà?* (Verona)  
 what-has he.cl eaten  
 'What did he eat?'  
 b. *Cosa ze che el ga magnà?* / *Cosa ga=eo magnà?* (Cittadella, Padova)  
 what is that he has eaten / what has=he.cl eaten  
 c. *Chi ze che ti ga visto?* (Venezia)  
 who is that you has seen  
 'Who did you see?'

The geographical distribution of the data discussed to this point can be visualized in the following simplified but essential map, where the arrows correspond to the river Adige:

(42) Geographical distribution:



The representation in (42) suggests that the influence of German could have played a role with respect to both the relatively stronger preservation of expletive subjects and the maintenance of German-like patterns, such as pronominal subject inversion (enclisis of the pronominal subject to the finite verb) in the WH root clause damming the preference for the Romance cleft-construction. This convergence applies at the superficial (i.e., linear) level, coherently with the Romance structure of the dialects spoken in Trentino, which remain:

(i) null-subject languages (following Brandi and Cordin 1981, 1989, we analyze the clitic as the manifestation of subject agreement)

(ii) 'residual' V2 languages (i.e., -V2 languages), such as Italian and English, where finite verb movement to C is limited to well-defined contexts.

Ermenegildo Bidese ([ermenegildo.bidese@unitn.it](mailto:ermenegildo.bidese@unitn.it))

Alessandra Tomaselli ([alessandra.tomaselli@univr.it](mailto:alessandra.tomaselli@univr.it))

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