

THE INFLUENCE OF CONTEXTUAL FACTORS ON DIRECT OBJECT CLITIC PLACEMENT IN SPOKEN ITALIAN

NADINE RENTEL
UNIVERSITY OF DUISBURG-ESSEN

Abstract: *Direct object clitics can, if they are combined with an auxiliary + infinitive, be placed before the auxiliary (preposition) or after the infinitive (postposition). It is often claimed that in the spoken variety of Italian, clitic preposition is more frequent due to the characteristics of spoken discourse in general that favour the preposition of clitics. However, we have to deal with a phenomenon of spoken Italian that is subject to changes and that therefore needs further and detailed investigation. For this sake, we have carried out an analysis that is based on a large electronic corpus of spoken Italian, the L.I.P. corpus (Lessico di Frequenza dell'Italiano Parlato). On the one hand, the study aims at finding out whether the pre- or the postposition of clitics is predominant. On the other hand, it aims at establishing a systematic categorisation of contextual factors that influence the clitic position.*

Keywords: spoken language, Italian, syntax, direct object clitics, clitic placement.

Resumen: *Los clíticos de objeto directo pueden colocarse antes del auxiliar (preposición) o tras el infinitivo (posposición), si se combinan con un auxiliar + infinitivo. Frecuentemente, en la variedad hablada del italiano la preposición clítica es más frecuente debido a las características del discurso hablado en general, que favorecen la preposición de clíticos. Sin embargo, vamos a tratar con un fenómeno del italiano hablado que está sujeto a cambios y que, en consecuencia, requiere una investigación más profunda. Con esta intención, hemos llevado a cabo un análisis basado en un amplio corpus electrónico del italiano hablado, el corpus L.I.P. (Lessico di Frequenza dell'Italiano Parlato). Por un lado, con este estudio tratamos de averiguar si la preposición o la posposición de clíticos es predominante y, por otro, queremos establecer una categorización sistemática de factores contextuales que influyen en la posición clítica.*

Palabras clave: lengua hablada, italiano, sintaxis, clíticos de objeto directo, posición clítica.

1. Introduction

Direct object clitics in Italian can, if they are combined with an *auxiliary* and an *infinitive*, be placed either before the *auxiliary (clitic preposition)* or after the *infinitive (clitic postposition)*: *lo devo fare* vs. *devo farlo*. Under *auxiliaries* we sum up not only *modal verbs (potere, volere, dovere)*, but also a variety of *aspectual verbs (stare + gerund, stare per/a, incominciare a, finire di, cercare di, etc.)* and *movement verbs (andare a, venire a, tornare a)*.

It is often claimed that in the spoken variety of Italian, the *syntactic type lo devo fare*, e.g. the placement of the *clitic* before the *auxiliary*, was more frequent due to the characteristics of spoken *discourse* in general (P. KOCH/ W. OESTERREICHER 1995: 195; M. BERRETTA 1985). Characteristics of spoken communication that might favour *clitic preposition* are the following: the degree of planning, *intonation* factors, the *information structure* and *syntactic simplification* (P. KOCH/ W.OESTERREICHER 1995: 8ff.).

Under a *cognitive* point of view, *clitic preposition* requires a lesser extent of planning because the end of the *preposition* with the *clitic* positioning does not have to be anticipated entirely by the speaker when she or he utters the *clitic pronoun* in first place. This meets the

needs of spontaneous spoken communication. *Clitic preposition* makes it also possible to avoid long and complex word combinations, especially if there appear two *clitics* in the same *proposition*, e.g. *direct* and *indirect object*: *te lo voglio dire* vs. *voglio dirtelo*. Furthermore, *clitics* can, under a *pragmatic* perspective, be characterised as *thematic*, that means as to their *text-structuring* function in *discourse*, they refer *anaphorically* to contents that have been mentioned previously. In contrast, the new, relevant and *rhematic* information of a *proposition* containing *direct object clitics* is provided by the *main verb* in the *infinitive* (BERRETTA 1986a: 71). By preponing the *thematic clitic*, the speaker signals new and *semantically* relevant information to come at the end of the *proposition*, and by this means, the *semantic/pragmatic* focus is laid on the *main verb* by its *syntactic* final position as well as by its *phonetic stress*. Finally, *clitic preposition* meets the tendency of spoken communication of *syntactic simplification*.

Given all these thoughts and hypotheses about *clitic* placement, one could ask why a topic that has already been studied under different perspectives (BERRETTA 1985, 1986a, 1986b; CALABRESE 1980, 1985; CARDINALETTI 2004; KOCH/ OESTERREICHER 1995; WANNER 1977, 1999, only to mention a few) should need re-examination. The publication dates of the studies centered around the field of *clitic* placement show a wide chronological range (mid 80s up to the present) as well as a great methodological variety, which reflects the necessity of a permanent reinvestigation. We must also keep in mind the extreme complexity of the *syntax* of *clitics* as well as the variety of contextual factors on which it depends. Furthermore we must also not forget that we deal with a phenomenon of spoken Italian that is dynamic and subject to changes and that for this reason requires continuous research activity in order to provide updated approaches and results. A systematic analysis of contextual factors that have an impact on *clitic* placement, based on a large electronic *corpus*, has not yet been carried out.

My study aims, first of all, at verifying or falsifying the hypothesis concerning the frequency, more precisely the predominance of *clitic preposition*. Furthermore, the focus is laid on establishing a systematic categorisation of contextual features, e.g. the choice of the *auxiliary* or the *clitic*, the *syntactic pattern* etc. that have an influence on the position of *clitics*. For this sake, I have carried out an empirical analysis which is based on a large electronic *corpus* of spoken Italian. In order to study the phenomenon in depth, I have limited the analysis to the *paradigm* of *direct object clitics* («mi, ti, lo/ la, ci, vi, li/ le»), leaving out the reflexive «si». Thus, propositions with combinations of *clitics* are not taken into account.

The outline of the paper is as follows: After this short introductory section, I will describe the *corpus* on which the empirical study is based. I will then present my analysis model before I discuss the results of the empirical analysis that are going to be illustrated by selected examples from the linguistic database. Finally, I will sum up central results and discuss the need of future research.

2. Description of the corpus

The linguistic database that underlies the empirical analysis is the L.I.P. *corpus*, the *Lessico di Frequenza dell'Italiano parlato* (T. DE MAURO ET AL. 1993). This important *corpus* of spoken Italian that has been recorded between 1990 and 1992 contains about 500.000 words that are represented in 469 spoken texts. The linguistic data has been collected in four Italian cities, namely Milan, Florence, Rome and Naples, and it therefore covers a wide range of *diatopic* varieties. It also takes into account the *diastratic/sociolinguistic* differentiation of spoken Italian because speakers that belong to different professional groups and degrees of education have been integrated. It is also important to note that the L.I.P. *corpus* takes into consideration the *diaphasic* variation; it is stratified in five categories, depending upon the communication situation. Factors that are important for the *diaphasic* stratification are *face-to-face-communication* (+/-), *self-determined turn taking* (+/-), *bi-directionality* (+/-). This *diaphasic* or situational classification leads to a stratification in the five categories A to E, each group containing 100.000 words, 25.000 from each city.

3. The analysis model

From figure 1 you can gather the selected contextual factors that are investigated as to their relevance for *clitic* placement. The question is whether one of these categories might have a statistically significant influence on the *syntax* of *clitics*.

- (1) Questions
- (2) Adverbs
- (3) Negation
- (4) Dislocation
- (5) Passato prossimo
- (6) Subordinate clauses
- (7) Conditional clauses
- (8) Choice of the clitics
- (9) Choice of the infinitive

Figure 1: The analysis model

4. The frequency of clitic preposition

The analysis of the *L.I.P. corpus* confirms the hypothesis concerning the predominance of *direct object clitic preposition* in spoken Italian. The *corpus* contains 718 *direct object clitics* in total (belonging to the list that has been mentioned in the introduction and that are not combined with other *clitics*), 423 cases of *clitic preposition* (58.91%) and 295 cases of *clitic postposition* (41.08%) (see the detailed quantitative results in figures 2, 3 and 4). There is a statistically significant difference of nearly 20% points between the two *syntactic* structures, so *clitic preposition* seems to be characteristic for spoken Italian in general.

If one investigates the different types of *auxiliaries* that are combined with an *infinitive* and a *direct object clitic* more in detail, it becomes evident that *modal verbs* are very frequent for *clitic preposition* as well as for *clitic postposition*: 381 (90.07%) of the 423 *auxiliaries* appearing together with *clitic preposition* are *modal verbs*, their percentage for the *clitic postposition* amounts to 61.36% (181 cases) (see figures 2, 3 and 4). It is interesting to note that the *modal verb* *dovere* is the most frequent one in this *auxiliary* group (47.5%).

It turns out that the percentage of *modal verbs*, compared to *aspectual* (1.89%) and *movement verbs* (8.03%), is significantly high for the *clitic preposition*: the corpus reveals 30% points more *modal verbs* compared to *clitic postposition* where the quantitative difference to the other categories of *auxiliaries* is not that high.

The number of *movement verbs* is nearly the same for both *syntactic* types (8.03% for the *clitic preposition*, 7.11% for the *clitic postposition*), and in most cases, speakers use the *verb andare a*. But the results differ again significantly concerning the *aspectual verbs*. Those kinds of *verbs* are only in 1.89% of the *auxiliaries* used together with *clitic preposition* whereas their occurrence seems to be characteristic for *clitic postposition* (31.52% of the *auxiliaries*). Predominant for the *aspectual verbs* with *clitic preposition* are the structures *stare per/a* and *stare + gerund* while this is relatively seldom found for the *clitic postposition*. Concerning the *semantic* differentiation of different *aspectual verbs*, the analysis shows that there exists a wide range of different *verbs* for the *postposition*, i.e. *riuscire a*, *cercare di*, *(in)cominciare a*, but that there is only one single occurrence of *risucire a* for the *clitic preposition* for which the structure mentioned above (*stare per/a*) is characteristic (see figures 2, 3 and 4). We can sum up that concerning *aspectual verbs*, the *verb semantics* plays an important role for the *clitic* placement.

	Total	%
<u>Clitic preposition</u>	423	58.91
Modal verbs	381	90.07
dovere	152	39.89

potere	148	38.84
volere	81	21.25
Movement verbs	34	8.03
andare a	20	58.82
venire a	12	35.29
tornare a	2	5.88
Aspectual verbs	8	1.89
stare per/a	4	50
stare + gerundio	3	37.5
riuscire a	1	12.5
(in)cominciare a and others	0	0
Clitics total	718	

Figure 2: Clitic Preposition in the L.I.P. corpus

	Total	%
<u>Clitic postposition</u>	295	41.08
Modal verbs	181	61.35
dovere	86	47.5
potere	49	27.07
volere	46	25.41
Movement verbs	21	7.11
andare a	13	61.9
venire a	8	38.09
tornare a	0	0
Aspectual verbs	93	31.52
riuscire a	24	25.8
cercare di	23	24.73
(in)cominciare a	10	10.75
provare a	9	9.67
continuare a	7	7.52
sperare di	5	5.37
stare + gerund	4	4.3
intendere a	3	3.22
tendere a	2	2.15
convenire	2	2.15
rifiutarsi di	1	1.07
convincere a	1	1.07
finire per	1	1.07
stare per/a	1	1.07

Figure 3: Clitic postposition in the L.I.P. corpus

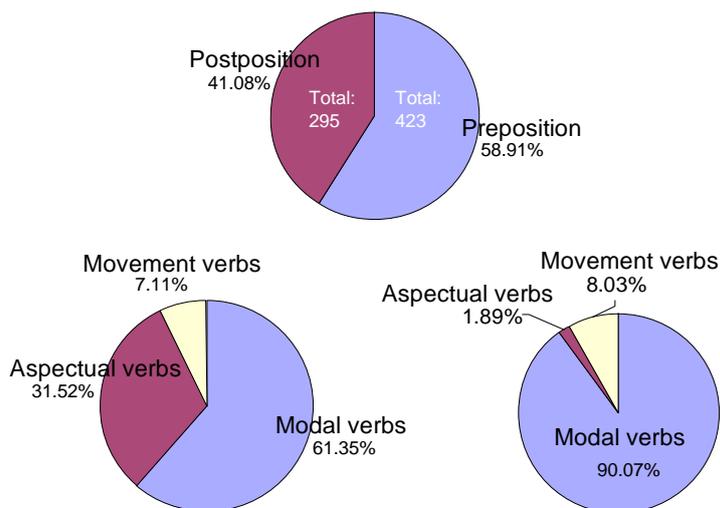


Figure 4: Results of the quantitative analysis of the L.I.P. corpus

5. Contextual factors for the preposition of clitics with modal verbs

Due to the high number of *modal verbs* that the analysis has shown, I have investigated this category of *auxiliaries* more in detail in order to know which contextual factors have an influence on *clitic* placement. For some criteria the analysis reveals significant tendencies whereas other factors do not produce any preference for the *pre- or postposition* of *clitics*. In this paper I will concentrate on the contextual factors that favour in a statistically relevant way one of the two possible *syntactic patterns* by providing some illustrating examples from the *corpus*. Categories without any clear preference for one *syntactic* type are not discussed. Contextual factors that frequently cause *clitic preposition* are *questions*, *conditional se*, *negation*, *subordinate clauses with che*, *dislocations*, *stare + gerund*.

5.1. Subordinate clauses with *che*

Among the *modal verbs* combined with *direct object clitics* there are 44 *subordinate clauses* that are introduced by the *relative pronoun che*. 37 of these *subordinate clauses* occur with *clitic preposition* (84.1%), only 7 (15.9%) produce *clitic postposition*, which represents a statistically significant difference. This *syntactic* pattern is the most frequent in the corpus to produce *clitic preposition*.

The original Italian fragments of longer *propositions* taken from the *corpus* are followed by an English *gloss* (word-for-word translation as close as possible to the original) in square brackets to make the examples comprehensible also for those readers who are not familiar with Italian. As for the abbreviations in round brackets that can be found in the examples, the first capital letter refers to the place where the data has been collected (Florence, Milan, Naples, Rome) while the second reflects the social stratification (A to E) of the corpus. The files are then numbered chronologically.

Examples:

- (1) *perché lei ha intenzione di dire che non la posso sfrattare da una cantina!* (FA10)
[because she intends to say that I cannot chase her/ it out of a (wine) cellar.]
- (2) *giornalmente io direi che lo posso collaudare e lo posso.* (MD7)
[daily I would say that I can check him/ it and I really can.]

5.2. Questions

The *preposition of clitics* occurs in 44 of 56 *interrogative sentences* containing *modal verbs* in total (78.57%). In contrast, the percentage for the *clitic postposition* is only 21.42% (12 cases), so *questions* seem to be combined predominantly with *clitics* placed in front of the *modal verb*.

Examples:

- (3) *Madonna un aiutino me lo puoi dare?* (FB14)
[Madonna can you give me a little help?]
- (4) *sotto quale forma lo possiamo gestire tutto questo materiale?* (ND2)
[under which form can we manage all that material?]

5.3. Dislocation

There are 79 occurrences of *syntactic dislocation* in the corpus of *modal verbs* combined with *clitics*. In 61 cases (77.21%) *dislocation* causes *clitic preposition*, whereas in only 18 cases (22.78%) it favours *clitic postposition*.

In most of the cases, the *dislocation* is realised as a *left-dislocation*, that means the *noun* or another element with *direct object* function is removed from its original position in the sentence and placed at the beginning of the sentence while it is repeated and followed by a *clitic pronoun*. This might be explained by the characteristics of spoken communication in general: the *thematic* element tends to be introduced first before speakers convey more detailed and *rhetic* information about it (KOCH/ OESTERREICHER 1995: 89 ff.). By means of the *clitic placement*, the listeners' attention is drawn to this central information.

Furthermore, from a *syntactic* point of view, the *preposition of clitics* with a *left-dislocation* needs less planning than the *postposition*. The *noun* (or another element with *direct object* function, i.e. a *demonstrative pronoun*) and the *clitic* stand in immediate *syntactic* neighbourhood and are not separated by from each other by the *verb* or by another elements of the *proposition* (*questo lo posso fare* vs. *questo posso farlo*).

Examples:

- (5) *per esempio il latte non lo posso prendere.* (FB14)
[for example milk I cannot take it.]
- (6) *le scelte le deve fare su indicazione di una legge.* (RD7)
[the choices he/ she must make them following the instructions of a law.]

5.4. Negation

The quantitative analysis of the *modal verbs* used together with *clitic pronouns* results in 74 cases of *negation* in total, 51 (68.91%) with *clitic preposition*, 23 (31.98%) with *clitic postposition*. The percentage for the *preposition* is more than twice as high as for the *postposition*.

Examples:

- (7) *lui non lo vuole dire non ha paura quasi di niente.* (FB16)
[he doesn't want to say it he is almost afraid of nothing.]
- (8) *il venerdì non lo devo più prendere eh non posso venire.* (RB8)
[on Friday I don't have to take him/ it any more er I can't come.]

5.5. Conditional *se*

The detailed investigation of *clitics* combined with *modal verbs* reveals 33 *conditional clauses* in total. 22 of them are used with the *clitic preposition* (66.66) while only 11 examples are characterised by *clitic postposition* (33.3%). The percentage for the *preposition* is exactly

twice as high as for the *postposition*, so *conditional clauses* seem to be another relevant factor that causes *clitic preposition*.

Examples:

(9) *no perché una cosa tonda se tu la puoi disegnare. (ND1)*

[no because a round thing if you can draw it.]

(10) *che insomma non lo so se lo dovessi conoscere. (RA1)*

[that after all I don't know if you should know him/ it.]

5.6. The aspectual verbs *stare* + *gerund* and *stare per/a*

The structure *stare per/a* and *stare* + *gerund* appears in 7 of the 8 occurrences of *aspectual verbs* with *clitic preposition* whereas the use of these *aspectual verbs* can be observed relatively seldom for *clitic postposition* (one single case of altogether 93 *aspectual verbs*). Concerning this category of *auxiliaries*, the *aspectual verbs*, I do not restrict myself to *modal verbs* on which the analysis model is applied in order to classify the contextual features influencing *clitic* placement. Nevertheless, these two *aspectual verbs* reveal a clear tendency of *auxiliaries* in favour of *clitic preposition* and therefore need to be mentioned.

Examples:

(11) *ora le sto facendo recitare. (FA13)*

[now I let them being recited.]

(12) *per fantasia per poesia se lo sta facendo diventare un. (FD16)*

[for fantasy for poetry if he/ she lets him/ it become a.]

(13) *me fai rivenire giù l'altro me lo controllo mentre lo sta a comprare. (RB29)*

[Bring me back the other I will check it while I am going to buy it.]

6. Contextual factors for the postposition of clitics with modal verbs

I have indicated some of the most salient contextual factors that lead to a *preposition* of *clitics* that appear together with *modal verbs*. In this chapter I discuss a selection of contexts that favour *clitic postposition*. Reasons for the use of *clitic postposition* that usually is assigned to the written language might be found in the normative influence of the educational system. As the *postposition* is marked as a more prestigious variety from a *diastatic* point of view, the written norm finds its way into spoken Italian, despite its characteristics that widely differ from the traditional, written grammar.

As for *clitic preposition*, the list is not exhaustive and should be completed through more empirical analyses. Contextual factors that cause *clitic postposition* are *aspectual verbs*, the *infinitive of sapere*, the *use of the clitic pronoun ci*, the *passato prossimo*.

6.1. Aspectual verbs

In the present study, the detailed classification of factors that have an influence on *clitic* placement is limited to the quantitatively predominant *modal verbs*. However, the analysis of the type of *auxiliaries aspectual verbs* leads to interesting results concerning the *syntax* of *clitics*. As it has already been indicated in chapter 4, the percentage for the *aspectual verbs* differs significantly: 8 *aspectual verbs* (1.89%) occur with *clitic preposition* (here mainly the structure *stare per/a*) whereas the majority (93 cases; 31.52%) is combined with postponed *clitics*. So, *clitic postposition* seems to be characteristic for and produced by *aspectual verbs* in general. For the *clitic postposition*, the *corpus* reveals a large *semantic* variety of different *aspectual verbs* such as *riuscire a*, *cercare di*, *(in)cominciare a* etc.

Examples:

(14) *ecco questo i giornali chiaramente non riescono a coglierlo. (ND11)*

- [that's it this one the newspapers don't succeed to understand him/ it.]
(15) *cerca di convincerlo a curarsi perché la malattia potrebbe.* (MD1)
[he/ she tries to convince him to look after him/ her because the illness could.]
(16) *prova dirlo con un'altra maniera.* (FC6)
[he/ she tries to say it in another way.]

6.2. The *passato prossimo* and other analytic verbal past tenses

The empirical analysis leads to 9 occurrences of the *analytic tense passato prossimo*. In 8 cases (88.8%) the *clitics* stand in *postposition* to the *infinitive* whereas there is only one single case of *clitic preposition*. A possible explanation can be found in *intonation* matters because speakers might tend to avoid the direct neighbourhood of two *vowels* that would occur if the *clitic* was preponed. Examples (17) and (18) illustrate the *syntax* of *clitics* for two different *analytic verbal tenses* (*passato prossimo* and *condizionale II*).

Examples:

- (17) *va bè avete potuto chiamarla forse.* (MB4)
[okay you could have called her perhaps.]
(18) *avrei dovuto scriverlo su tutte le pellicole a mano.* (MA27)
[I should have written it on all of the films by hand.]

6.3. The infinitive of *sapere*

The analysis of the *modal verbs* employed with *clitics* results in a clear preference for the *postposition of direct object clitics* when the *modal verb* occurs with an *infinitive* of the verb *sapere* (85.7% cases of clitic postposition).

Example:

- (19) *non dovresti saperlo.* (NB29)
[you should not know that.]

6.4. The clitic pronoun *ci*

Modal verbs are used in 23 cases altogether with the *direct object clitic ci*. Preference is given to the *postposition of ci* (18 of the 23 examples (78.26%)). This leads to the conclusion that besides the *syntactic* structure of a *proposition*, the choice of the *direct object clitic* itself may influence its position.

Examples:

- (20) *potete chiamarci per dire la vostra sul conto della.* (FE18)
[you can call us for telling your opinion about.]
(21) *io credo dobbiamo confrontarci e quindi anche eh creare.* (MC9)
[I think that we must compare ourselves to each other and therefore also er create.]

7. Conclusion and outlook

To conclude, I want to sum up the main factors that influence *clitic* placement in the analysed *corpus*. The analysis has shown that *direct object clitics* in spoken Italian tend to be placed before the *auxiliary* (58.91%). Relevant factors for the *syntax* of *clitics* can be observed on different linguistic levels of description, e.g. the *syntactic pattern* of the *proposition*, the choice of the *clitic*, the *verb semantics* etc. although it seems to be mainly the *syntactic* context (in particular for *clitic preposition*) that influences *clitic placement*. The present analysis does not claim to be exhaustive and is restricted to a small choice of factors, so perhaps studies that will be carried out in the future will reveal a variety of relevant *prosodic* or *semantic* features.

The analysis has furthermore revealed features that favour the *preposition of clitics*, especially when they are combined with *modal verbs: questions, conditional clauses, subordinate clauses, dislocation, stare + gerund*. On the other hand, there exist some factors that produce *clitic postposition: aspectual verbs, the infinitive of sapere, the use of the direct object clitic ci, the passato prossimo*. The use of *clitic postposition* in spoken Italian might be assigned to the influence of the written norm conveyed by the educational system, but this hypothesis should be studied more in depth to see whether there really exists a development. Furthermore it seems interesting to compare a corpus of written texts with spoken Italian and to study the factors that determine *clitic* placement in the written language, in order to see in which way these two medial realisations of one single language differ from each other.

It has turned out that in most of the cases the contextual factors that influence the *clitic* placement are combined with each other. This leads to a difficulty of a clear distinction and determination of the most relevant and decisive factor. The question is how we can assign the main influence to one single contextual factor in a *proposition* that combines, for example, a *question* with a *negation*. This is also relevant from a methodological point of view because the decision can influence the research results: Should those cases be left aside in the analysis (which does not seem practicable because of their high number) or should the features be included separately?

In the present paper I have only discussed categories of the analysis model that show a clear tendency either to cause *clitic pre- or postposition*. It is however interesting to note that some tendencies that can be found in previous studies on the *syntax* of *clitics* in spoken Italian are not confirmed by the present study. M. BERRETTA, for example, claims that there exists a predominance of *clitic postposition* when there is an *adverb* placed between the *modal verb* and the *infinitive* (M. BERRETTA 1968a: 74 f.). Concerning this *syntactic* context, the quantitative results based on the *L.I.P. corpus* are neutral and do not reveal any statistically relevant or significant result.

In the future, more detailed and quantitative analyses should be carried out for the spoken variety of Italian, also under a *contrastive* perspective. This does not only concern its *syntax*, but also its *phonetic, lexico-semantic* or *pragmatic* description. The need of *comparative* approaches is also claimed by A. CRESTI (1997) and was reinforced by C. BLANCHE-BENVENISTE on a conference centered around spoken communication (*LA COMUNICAZIONE PARLATA, Naples, Italy, February 23rd to 25th 2006*). As to the *syntactic* phenomenon of *clitic placement* in spoken language that also exists in Spanish, it could be interesting to investigate whether it depends on the same contextual factors in another *Romance language*. In order to compare the *syntax* of the spoken realisation of two *Romance languages*, namely Italian and Spanish, I intend to apply the analysis model on the Spanish *CORLEC corpus*.

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