

Diachrony and Deficiency
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Roberts (2006) (following Mavrogiorgos (2006) and, very indirectly, Marantz (2001)) points out that, since they are non-distinct from maximal categories in terms of bare phrase structure, minimal categories can be phasal. As such, they can attract material to their left edge, and that left edge, unlike all other material inside the minimal category, may be accessible to elements outside the minimal head. This observation provides a basis for accounting for the puzzling property of clitics: that they act in some respects like affixes, i.e. as parts of the words that host them, and in some respects as syntactically autonomous items.

More concretely, Roberts redefines the notion of minimal category such that a minimal category is able to dominate material, so long as that material is not distinct from the category itself. This allows for head-movement in a highly restricted set of cases, one of which is cliticisation, as long as clitics are themselves minimal categories (Muysken (1982)), and defective in that they have no features distinct from those of their host. Suppose (following Cardinaletti & Starke (1999), Déchaîne, R. & M. Wiltschko (2002) and many others) that Romance clitics are bundles of person/number/gender features and nothing else, i.e. ϕ Ps rather than DPs, like “full” pronouns (e.g. those of English). Since the label of (active, transitive) v^* contains ϕ -features, in fact, unvalued versions of the very ϕ -features that make up the clitic, the clitic’s features are not distinct from v^* ’s. Thus the clitic can incorporate to v^* and form a derived minimal head. Copying the features of the clitic exhausts its content of the goal. Therefore the operation is not distinguishable from the copying involved in movement, and so the clitic appears to move to its host.

This approach has one very desirable consequence: if only phase heads are true probes (Chomsky (2005)), then clitics will only be attracted to phase heads. The phase heads (in the clausal domain) are C and v . So we predict that these are the only loci of cliticisation (in the clause). Many authors have observed that clitics may be either “C-oriented” or “V-oriented” (although in the latter case, the term “I-oriented” or “T-oriented” is often used): see, among others, Benacchio & Renzi (1987), Cardinaletti & Starke (1999:196), Renzi (1989), Halpern (1995) and Rivero (1997). Taking “V-/I-/T-orientation” to mean that the clitics target v , we see that this is exactly what is expected if clitics target phase heads. In general, C-oriented clitics are 2nd-position clitics. This leads to two questions: what causes clitics to move to this position in to the C-system? and How are clitics in these languages able to avoid cliticisation to the closer potential host v ? The answer is that second-position clitics may “escape” v P because they are Ds, rather than ϕ s. Because of this they are, like English and Scandinavian pronouns, distinct from v and so unable to incorporate to it. They escape the v P-phase by object-shift/scrambling, operations always found in clitic-second languages. But, assuming that the relevant position in C in these languages has D-features in addition to ϕ -features, then D-clitics will be attracted to C. So we see that C-oriented clitics are Ds, while v -oriented clitics are ϕ s. Now, assuming that feature-loss is a mechanism of diachronic change, we may think that the categorial change $D > \phi$ results from natural diachronic processes of attrition. This then predicts that clitics will shift their “orientation” from C to v . In fact, we observe a diachronic shift from second-position to adverbial cliticisation in a range of languages, including most of the Romance languages (as well as Greek and Bulgarian).