

Raúl Aranovich

Impersonal reflexives in Romance and Slavic: Contact effects in the Balkans

Abstract: In the well-known analysis of Cinque (1988), the generalization that a language will form impersonal reflexives of unaccusatives if and only if it can have accusative pivots follows from Parameter Theory. But the Balkans provide a two-way exception to this prediction. First, impersonal reflexives of unaccusatives are found in Standard Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian in spite of the fact that these are nominative-pivot languages. Second, in Slovene, impersonal reflexives of unaccusatives are disallowed, even though Slovene has accusative pivots. I offer an areal solution to this problem, suggesting that anomalous languages are affected by features from the *Čakavian* dialect of Croatian. I furthermore argue that this is possible because of the relative superficial nature of case marking in these languages.

Keywords: impersonal reflexive, case, unaccusative, Croatian dialects, language contact, Parameter Theory

1 Parameter Theory and Language Contact

There is a broadly accepted theory about substantive language universals, stating that the Language Acquisition Device provides learners with predetermined choices. These parameters, as they are called, may be so fundamental as to affect all kinds of linguistic phenomena (Baker 1996 calls them *Macro-parameters*), or they can be more parochial and subordinate.¹ Often parameters express themselves as clusters of grammatical properties. A classic example is the correlation of null subjects and rich agreement in pro-drop languages. However, in well-defined linguistic areas, a certain feature may come to be shared among neighboring languages that are typologically distinct, resulting in unexpected feature combinations. In Early Modern Irish English, for instance, we find null subjects (from the Irish substratum) but without rich agreement morphology (as discussed in Corrigan 2010).

¹ Macro-parameters come close to capturing the “genius” of a language, defining a language type (Baker 1996). I return to the matter of parameters in the conclusions.

Raúl Aranovich, University of California Davis, raranovich@ucdavis.edu

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110375930-006>

In this paper I argue that the distribution of impersonal reflexives in the languages of the Balkans (notice the choice of term here) offers another case in which language contact comes into conflict with Parameter Theory. Evidence from Romance and Slavic languages supports the generalization that unaccusative intransitive verbs can form impersonal reflexives² if and only if reflexive passives of transitive verbs retain the accusative marking on the object. Cinque (1988) proposed a parameter to account for this clustering of properties. But two-way exceptions to this generalization can be found among the languages of the Balkans: impersonal unaccusatives alongside nominative objects, and accusative objects without impersonal unaccusatives. I argue that these examples do not constitute a real exception to Cinque's parameterization of impersonal reflexives, but rather superficial phenomena due to intense language contact among varieties with different settings for the parameter.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces the most common types of impersonal reflexives, showing that when the verb is transitive the object can be realized in the nominative or the accusative. Section 3 shows that there are languages in which unaccusatives can also form impersonal reflexives, but these are the ones that also have accusative marked objects in impersonal reflexives with transitives. Section 4 discusses Cinque's (1988) account of the generalization in terms of two distinct reflexive pronouns, each with its own properties regarding argument structure. Exceptions to the generalization accounted for by Cinque (1988) are presented in Section 5. Section 6 discusses several possible scenarios under which language contact could have produced the mixed type languages found in the Balkans. The conclusion is that these mixed type languages do not reflect deep exceptions to the parameterization, but the distribution of superficial morpho-syntactic properties, due to contact.

2 Impersonal Reflexives

Impersonal reflexives can be found in Romance and Slavic languages (among others), and share some general characteristics. In impersonal reflexives, the topmost argument is interpreted as an arbitrary human actor, and is not overtly expressed as a subject (hence the term "impersonal"). The construction is formally marked by the presence of a reflexive pronoun (glossed as SE). The examples

² In this paper, the term "impersonal reflexive" is used with reference to the reflexive marker which occurs in the morphological make-up of the impersonal constructions at issue here.

in (1a-b) show some typical impersonal reflexive clauses, from Bulgarian and Romanian

- (1) a. *Tuk se raboti cjal den.* (Bulg)
 here SE work.3SG all day
 ‘One works all day here.’
- b. *Se muncește.* (Rom)
 SE work.3SG
 ‘It is worked.’
 (Dobrovie-Sorin 1994)

The predicates in (1a-b) are intransitive (unergatives, to be more specific). But impersonal reflexives can also be formed with transitive predicates. The examples in (2) show that in Bulgarian and Romanian the patient, or logical object, is realized as a nominative argument. As such, it triggers verb agreement, and it cannot be supplemented by any sort of object markers. I refer to this argument as the “pivot”, for reasons that become evident soon. There is a long debate in the literature as to whether these nominative pivots in impersonal reflexives are subjects or not, and, if they are, whether it is still acceptable to call these constructions “impersonal” (see Aranovich 2011 for a summary of the arguments, circumscribed to Romance). Here I assume they are subjects, but I still use the term impersonal, because the agent is still an arbitrary human subject.

- (2) a. *S’au prins hoții* (Rom)
 SE has.3PL caught thieves.def
 ‘The thieves have been caught.’
 (Dobrovie-Sorin 1994)
- b. **In școala asta se pedepsește prea des pe elevi.* (Rom)
 in this school SE punish.3SG too frequently ACC students
 ‘Students are punished too frequently in this school.’
 (Dobrovie-Sorin 1994)
- c. *Starcite se pogrebat/*pogrebva vâv grobiștata.* (Bulg)
 old.men.def SE bury.PL/bury.SG in cemeteries.def
 ‘One buries the old men in the cemetery.’

In other languages, however, the pivot can be realized as an accusative complement. In that case, it does not trigger verb agreement with the verb, and it is unquestionably not the subject of the clause. The examples in (3) show some sentences with accusative pivots from the Čakavian dialect of Croatian, and also from Venetian (which is included here for reasons that become clear later). The impersonal nature of these sentences is beyond dispute.

- (3) a. *Se stavi nuter juhu* (Čak)
 SE put.3SG in rennet.ACC
 ‘One puts in the rennet (ACC).’
 (Houtzagers 1985)
- b. *kat se lūpi trukinjo* (Čak)
 when SE peel.3SG maize.ACC
 ‘when the maize is peeled’
 (Kalsbeek 1998)
- c. *dó’po avę’r kolgá, me’so su la me’fa stę majále, se lę sbúfa* (Ven)
 after having stretched, put on the table this pig, SE it.ACC punctures
 ‘after stretching, setting the pig on the table, one punctures it...’
 (Zamboni, 1974, p. 85)

3 Unaccusatives

So far I have said nothing about substantive universals. To see an interesting clustering of features, one needs to consider impersonal reflexives of unaccusative predicates. While all the languages under consideration seem to have impersonal reflexives with unergatives like *work*, as in (1), unaccusatives like *die*, *arrive*, or stative and adjectival passives are restricted to occur in impersonal reflexives of languages that have accusative pivots. This generalization is summarized in the Impersonal Unaccusative Condition.

- (4) **Impersonal Unaccusative Condition (IUC):** *A language has Impersonal reflexive passives of unaccusatives if and only if it also has accusative pivots in impersonal reflexives of transitives.*

Thus, in Romanian and Bulgarian, impersonal reflexives of unaccusatives/adjectival passives are disallowed, as in (5), but in Venetian and the Čakavian dialect of Croatian they are allowed.³ This is shown in (6) and (7).

³ Not all “unaccusatives” are excluded from this construction. Verbs like *xodja* ‘go, walk’ can form an impersonal reflexive, as the following example shows. This example is in contrast with (5a), with the verb *pristigam* ‘arrive’ (a reviewer suggests this may be an effect of the generic aspect in these sentences, a matter that I must leave for further research).

- (A) *na učilište se xodi peša.* (Bulg)
 to school SE go.3SG on.foot
 ‘One goes to school on foot.’

- (5) a. **Na učilište se pristiga peša.* (Bulg)
to school SE arrive.3SG on.foot
'One arrives to school on **foot**.'
- b. **Ot seljanite se e uvažavan*
by peasant.PL.DET SE is respected
'One is respected by the peasants.'
- c. **Nu se este niciodată mulțumit.* (Rom)
not SE is ever satisfied
'One is never satisfied.'
(Dobrovie-Sorin 1994)
- (6) a. *i se je stalo odzât va cr'ekve* (Čak)
and SE is stand.PAST back of church
'and one would stand at the back of the church.'
(Kalsbeek 1998)
- b. *se mučĩ*
SE be.silent.3SG
'people ar not speaking.'
- c. *i anke kad bi se někamor šlō*
and also when would SE somewhere go.PAST
'and also when one would go somewhere.'
- (7) *...ki a g e' đa maĩâr bėn, e še sta bėn!* (Ven)
here it there is of eating well, and SE is well
'Here there are good things to eat, and one is well!'
(Zamboni 1974)

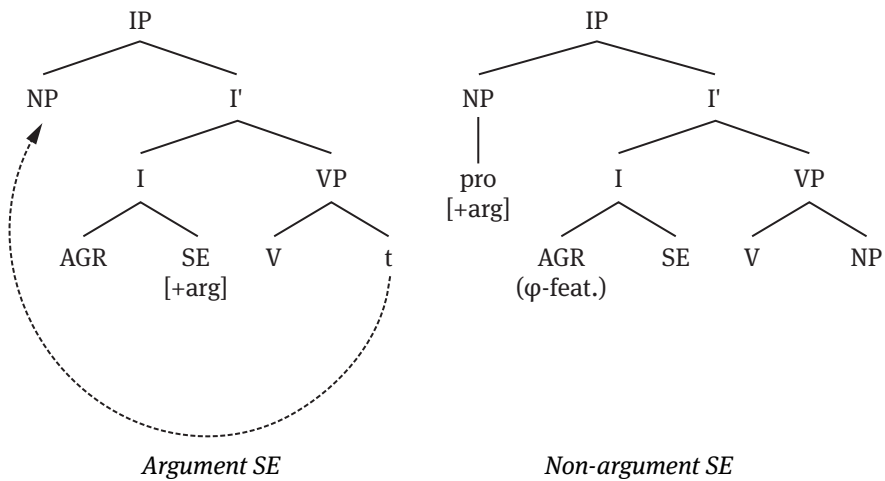
4 Impersonal reflexives and syntactic theory

The IUC is the kind of clustering of grammatical properties that Parameter theory is meant to explain. One approach to the phenomenon within formal theories of grammar is developed in Cinque (1988). Cinque suggests that universal grammar makes available two types of impersonal SE, based on the different modules of the theory: argument SE, and non-argument SE.

Argument SE absorbs an external semantic role. This allows the patient to move to the position of the external argument to receive nominative case, if the predicate is transitive. The leftmost sentence diagram illustrates the properties of Argument SE. Since argument SE cannot absorb an internal role, the reflexive

clitic cannot occur with unaccusatives, copulatives, or periphrastic passives. Non-argument SE, on the other hand, licenses a null pronoun with arbitrary reference (pro_{arb}) in subject position, without absorbing a semantic role. If the predicate is transitive, the pivot remains in object position, receiving accusative case. This is shown in the rightmost sentence diagram. Since pro_{arb} can also be an internal argument, unaccusative verbs (and similar predicates) can combine with non-argument SE.

In this way, the clustering of properties summarized in the IUC is accounted for. Nominative-pivot languages have argument SE, while accusative-pivot languages have non-argument SE.



5 Exceptions

The UIC work reasonably well for the Romance and Slavic languages at large, but things take an interesting turn when the languages from the Balkans are considered. Here we observe a two-way exception to the UIC. On the one hand, we have the Štokavian dialect of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian. Descriptions of the standard (prescriptive or normalized) varieties of these languages classify them as nominative-pivot languages (but according to Belaj 2003 non-standard forms of these languages may have accusative pivots). This is shown in (9a-c). Descriptions of the same register, however, show that impersonal reflexives of unaccusatives like *die* are found, as in (10).

- (8) *Qvde se dobro spava.* (BCS)
 here SE well sleep.3SG
 ‘One sleeps well here.’
 (Bidwell 1965–6)
- (9) a. *Himna se svira svaki dan.* (BCS)
 anthem.NOM SE play.3SG every day.ACC
 ‘The anthem is played every day.’
 (Leko 1988)
- b. **Svira se himnu svaki dan.* (BCS)
 play.3SG SE anthem.ACC every day.ACC
 ‘The anthem is played every day.’
 (Leko 1988)
- c. *Jede se samo bela riba.* (BCS)
 eat.3SG SE only white.NOM fish.NOM
 ‘One only eats white fish (NOM)’
 (Djordjević 1988)
- (10) *Umiralo se za otadžbinu.* (BCS)
 die.PAST SE for country
 ‘One died for their country.’
 (Djordjević 1988)

Parenthetically, the Kajkavian dialect of Croatian also has nominative pivots.

- (11) *zě,mja kat sę zörję onda sę puvlăči* (Kaj)
 ‘when you plough the soil, you pull.’
 (Houtzagers 1999)

Slovene, even though not quite within the Balkan language area, provides another intriguing combination of features. Slovene has accusative pivots alongside nominative pivots, as shown in (12). But impersonal reflexives of adjectival passives (or statives/unaccusatives) are disallowed, as seen in (13).

- (12) a. *Starše se uboga.* (Slo)
 parents.ACC SE obey.3SG
 ‘One obeys parents.’
 (Rivero & Sheppard 2003, p. 102)

b. *Starši se ubogajo.* (Slo)

parents.NOM SE obey.3PL

‘Parents are obeyed.’

(Rivero & Sheppard 2003, p. 96)

(13) **Od časa do časa se je kaznovano od prijateljev* (Slo)

from time to time SE is punished by friends

‘From time to time one is punished by friends.’

(L. Marušič, p.c.)

As usual, however, there is some disagreement in the literature about these facts. In their impressive survey of impersonal reflexive constructions across the Slavic languages, for instance, Fehrmann et al. (2010) state that Slovene does have unaccusative impersonal reflexives. We now know that some unaccusatives are more unaccusative than others, a fact that needs to be controlled for in studies of this kind. Here I have taken some of those predicates as proxies for the whole class, but I am aware that this is not the best practice. Hopefully more research will clarify disagreements one way or another.

6 Areal explanations

The nice clustering of features that Cinque’s (1988) theory of the two SE predicts, then, falls apart in the Balkans. And here is where the issue of the universal and the particular in Balkan syntax comes to the fore. If we are talking about the Balkan languages, properly speaking, it is apparent that the feature that characterizes the Balkan Sprachbund is the presence of argument SE (I have no data on Greek, Macedonian, or Albanian, however). The Čakavian dialect of Croatian is outside the Sprachbund, in this respect, but there are other instances in which the Balkan isoglosses do not seem to extend to the Dalmatian coast. One could speculate that the non-argument SE of Čakavian is due to a Venetian substrate effect (that is the reason why I have Venetian in my sample), but this is difficult to prove without hard diachronic evidence.

Figure 1 shows the geographical location of the three main dialects of Croatian, while figure 2 is a schematic distribution of the two isoglosses that are coming apart in this region. We find impersonal reflexives with accusative pivots in Slovene and Čakavian, and impersonal reflexives of unaccusatives in Čakavian and Štokavian. Only in Čakavian does the clustering of features correspond to a stable universal type, according to the parameters set up in Cinque (1988). The features of the cluster “leak” (so to speak) into neighboring dialects, but in a selective way.

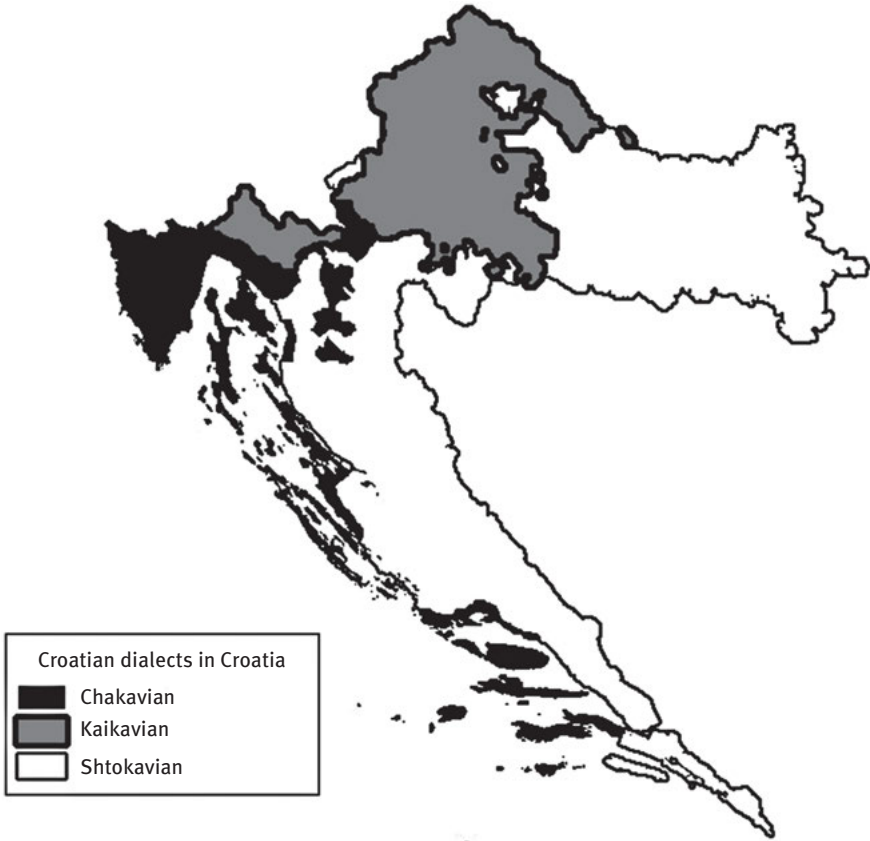


Figure 1: Croatian dialects.

Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Croatian_dialects.PNG

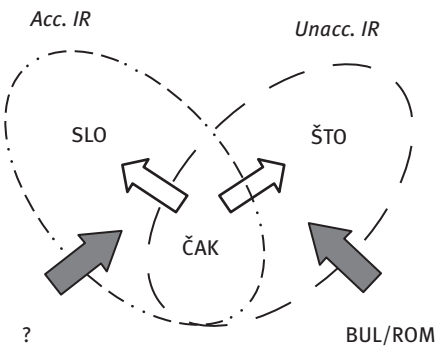


Figure 2: Isoglosses and shifts.

How could such a situation have arisen, and what does this say about the validity of the universal principles of grammar (Theta-theory, Case theory, movement – or their translations into more current terminology) that are behind Cinque’s tale of two SE? First of all, this is where Balkan syntax becomes really interesting. I have not found these “unstable” types outside the Balkans. So this is a case where an investigation into contact syntax goes beyond mere comparative syntax, as Joseph (2001) urged us to do.

Joseph (2001) suggests that changes due to contact will be of a “superficial” nature, not affecting deep (or universal) properties of the grammars in question. So I am going to describe one possible scenario where this could have happened. This is indicated by the white arrows in Figure 2. Assuming that Čakavian is the outlier, some of its features migrate into languages with Argument SE without affecting the deep properties of the construction. On the one hand, Slovene gets “accusative-marked” subjects in impersonal reflexives. That is, only the superficial coding property of the objects in the Čakavian impersonal reflexive are transferred. On the other hand, the situation in Štokavian may arise through transfer or calqueing of individual lexical items and the constructions they occur in. Štokavian, then, would have adopted particular unaccusative predicates, in a piecemeal fashion, in their impersonal reflexive form.

There is, of course, an alternative. It is possible that the shift went in the other direction, as shown by the gray arrows in Figure 2. In this alternative scenario, non-argument SE would have had a wider distribution than its present one. Through a process of attrition, the peripheral areas (Slovene, Štokavian) would have lost some of the superficial features that make up the cluster (but without changing the deep properties of the construction). In Štokavian, accusative marking on pivots is lost due to contact with Romanian and Bulgarian, resulting in “nominative objects”. In Slovene, on the other hand, one has to postulate loss of unaccusatives and passives in impersonal reflexives due to contact with some other language (perhaps Czech or Alpine varieties of Romance). This is a less likely scenario, however, since it would be attrition by negative evidence: a feature is lost because a neighboring language does not have it.

A third alternative mixes and matches from the previous two, getting accusative subjects in Slovene (with non-argument SE), but nominative objects in Štokavian (with argument SE). But of all the alternatives, the first scenario is the most likely, given what we know about language contact in general (Matras 2010). Future work in this area could concentrate on finding hard diachronic evidence, going one way or another. Additionally, research into the specific grammatical properties of impersonal reflexives in the languages of the Balkans should go beyond the coding properties of subjects and objects, and explore their behavioral

properties in these languages (raising and control of infinitives, for instance). This is also a matter for further research.

7 Conclusions

To conclude, I have shown that in the Balkans (and its surroundings) the clustering of properties that characterize two deeply distinct impersonal reflexive constructions falls apart. But I also have argued that deep principles of UG can be preserved if, as suggested in Joseph (2001), we take some of these properties to constitute superficial transfers from one language into others, due to the intense contact situation that characterizes a Sprachbund. The exceptions to the IUC that I have discussed here, then, support the view of the Balkans as a linguistic area, and let us speculate on the kind of grammatical features that are likely to be transferred.

In Baker's (1996) approach to parameter setting, linguistic structures are never impacted directly, since parameters capture those properties of a grammar that are most general and abstract. The effects of a parameter may be obscured by other lexical properties or syntactic principles of the language. This also applies to the effects of language contact, as I have argued in this paper. When evaluating the empirical validity of a parameter, then, linguists need to carefully evaluate superficial properties of a language, often having to look past them.

Recently, however, some authors have dealt with exceptions to parameters by postulating "micro-parameters" (Adger et al. 2009). The micro-parametric approach questions the assumption that a language must satisfy a predetermined checklist of grammatical properties to belong to a given type, and that a macro-parametric setting is responsible for such properties. But as I have argued in Aranovich (2013), this is an approach that ends up proposing as many types as there are languages, therefore explaining nothing. By looking at broad classifications, and then trying to pinpoint the sources of apparent departures from those general types, we can gain some insight into the relationship between the general and the particular in syntax. The languages of the Balkans give us a natural setting to develop this line of inquiry.

References

- Adger, David, Daniel Harbour, and Laurel J. Watkins. 2009. *Mirrors and microparameters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Aranovich, Raúl. 2011. Shifty objects in Romance. In Rodrigo Gutiérrez-Bravo, Line Mikkelsen and Eric Potsdam (eds.), *Representing Language: Essays in honor of Judith Aissen*. Santa Cruz: UCSC Linguistic Research Center. 1–14.

- Aranovich, Raúl. 2013. Transitivity and polysynthesis in Fijian. *Language* 89(3): 465–500.
- Baker, Mark C. 1996. *The Polysynthesis Parameter*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Belaj, Branimir. 2003. On some peripheral types of accusative direct object in Croatian: A cognitive analysis. *Jezikoslovlje* 4 (2): 263–78.
- Bidwell, Charles. E. 1964. The reflexive construction in Serbo-Croatian. *Studies in Linguistics* 18: 37–47.
- Bidwell, Charles. E. 1965. Serbo-Croatian syntax. *Language* 41(2): 238–59.
- Cinque, Guglielmo. 1988. On *si* constructions and the theory of arb. *Linguistic Inquiry* 19: 521–581.
- Corrigan, Karen P. 2010. Language Contact and Grammatical Theory. In Raymond Hickey (ed.) *The Handbook of Language Contact*, 106–127. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers
- Djordjević, Radmila. 1988. The Reflexive Pronoun/The Verbal Particle 'se' in Serbo-Croatian and its Correspondents in English. *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* 21–38.
- Dobrovie-Sorin, Carmen. 1994. *The Syntax of Romanian*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Fehrmann, Dorothee, Uwe Junghanns, and Denisa Lenertová. 2010. Two reflexive markers in Slavic. *Russian Linguistics* 34: 203–238
- Houtzagers, H. Peter. 1985. *The Čakavian Dialect of Orlec on the Island of Cres*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Houtzagers, H. Peter. 1999. *The Kajkavian dialect of Hidegség and Fertőhomok*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Joseph, Brian D. 2001. Is Balkan Comparative Syntax Possible? In: María Luisa Rivero and Angela Ralli (eds.), *Comparative Syntax of Balkan Languages*, 17–43. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kalsbeek, Janneke. 1998. *The Čakavian Dialect of Orbanići near Žminj in Istria*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Leko, Nedžad. 1988. Case of Noun Phrases in Serbo-Croatian and Case Theory. *Folia Linguistica* XXIII. 27–54.
- Matras, Yaron. 2010. Contact, Convergence, and Typology. In Raymond Hickey (ed.) *The Handbook of Language Contact*, 66–85. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers
- Rivero, María Luisa and Milena M. Sheppard. 2003. Indefinite reflexive clitics in Slavic: Polish and Slovenian. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 21(1): 89–155.
- Zamboni, Alberto (1974). *Veneto*. Pisa: Pacini Editore.