

## HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

### Masaryk University

**Applicant**

**Habilitation thesis**

**Reviewer**

**Reviewer's home unit,  
institution**

**Egle Mocciaro**

Paths of modality and beyond. The grammaticalisation of modals and directive markers in Sicilian

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I am delighted to provide my evaluation of Dr Egle Mocciaro's habilitation thesis entitled *Paths of modality and beyond. The grammaticalisation of modals and directive markers in Sicilian*. The topic of the thesis is directly within my areas of specialisation: I hold the Chair in Romance Linguistics at the University of Manchester and I have worked extensively on the expression of modality and related semantic domains in Sicilian from both a synchronic and a diachronic perspective. I will state from the outset that, in my opinion, the thesis makes an original and important contribution to the fields of Romance and theoretical linguistics and thus my evaluation is entirely positive. In what follows I will first outline those that I consider to be the principal strengths of the work reported in the thesis. Secondly, I will comment on the methodology adopted and the formal presentation of the work. I will conclude with some broader observations on the standing of Dr Mocciaro and her potential in academia.

The Romance scholar is in the privileged position of being able to rely on evidence from diachronic and diatopic variation. Dr Mocciaro does precisely this in her thesis. On the one hand, she observes Sicilian modals and directives over time, availing herself of philologically reliable and diatopically varied sources provided by the Archivio Testuale del Siciliano Antico and the Atlante Linguistico della Sicilia project. On the other hand, she draws appropriate parallels with other Romance languages throughout the thesis. The empirical basis of her study is, therefore, extremely rich, revealing the research to be truly usage-based, in accordance with the requirements of the cognitivist approach to the study of language. The discussion also demonstrates that Dr Mocciaro is intimately familiar with the specialist literature, and both able and willing to consider theoretical perspectives other than her own cognitivist approach, a rare quality indeed in the contemporary linguistics.

The principal strength of Dr Mocciaro's thesis is that it brings together various strands of research on the morphosyntax of Sicilian modals and directives, demonstrating that far from being expressions of disparate semantic domains, they fit in a single, if articulated, semantic network. While taking a cognitivist approach to the study of language, Dr Mocciaro draws an important distinction between the cognitive space, or the universal conceptual structures which modals and directives pertain to, and the semantic patterns that they form in individual languages. Therefore, the semantic network that she proposes for Sicilian modals and

directives is a representation of how these notions are encoded in the Sicilian language. This representation, which relies on seminal work by van der Auwera and Plungian, is the single most important output of the thesis, a key contribution to the current understanding of the encoding of modals and directives in language and a solid basis for micro- and macro-comparative synchronic analysis, as well as further diachronic analysis. With her habilitation thesis Dr Mocciaro has, therefore, outlined a convincing and promising research programme, demonstrating that she is a serious academic with an original research profile.

Moving on to more specific matters, drawing on five articles published in specialist collections and journals in the period between 2016 and 2021, the thesis investigates the development of modal expressions from expressions of possession and volition, the formation of modal passives with volition verbs, the rise of intersubjective functions from both modal and motion verbs, and, finally, the relation between participant-external modality (in the sense of van der Auwera and Plungian) and directivity. Dr Mocciaro's work is an excellent example of the importance of the study of underrepresented languages to enhance knowledge and understanding of, on the one hand, the Romance language family, and, on the other, important theoretical questions. Rather than discuss the specifics of each topic, I will offer some general comments on the importance of the author's findings and observations.

First, the enquiry pursued in the thesis highlights the significance of lexical meaning and how this meaning is related to and develops into grammatical meaning. Thus, whilst challenging the idea of a rigid boundary between the lexicon and grammar, the investigation conducted by the author also highlights the importance of the lexicon as a module of grammar, a module which plays a role of paramount importance in language variation and change. Rooted in the time-honoured tradition of grammaticalization studies, this contribution is of great importance in current linguistic debate, given that nowadays there exists a tendency towards denying the lexicon the status of an object of linguistic investigation. Otherwise put, there exists a tendency to place in syntax all that it is possible to know and study about the lexicon. Dr Mocciaro's contribution demonstrates that the source of grammaticalizations paths like those mentioned above is in the lexicon and that these paths cannot be properly understood unless the lexicon is part of a module of the architecture of grammar. Thus, it is not by coincidence that both expressions of possession and of volition develop into expressions of deontic and then epistemic modality, but only expressions of volition develop into deontic passives. It is the attribution of volition to the argument of 'want' verbs, first animate ones and then, in the more grammaticalized structure, inanimate ones, which enables the change from volition to passive, a change which would not naturally occur starting from possessive lexicon. Similar considerations hold true of the study of the two constructions with *iri* 'go' ([*va V*] and [*iri a V*]), for which the author outlines precise selectional restrictions on the verb following *va/iri*.

Secondly, Dr Mocciaro's thesis brings to light the significance of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in linguistic change. The study of the rise of epistemic meanings from deontic ones makes an excellent case for the role of metonymic reinterpretation in language change. This type of reinterpretation arises in discourse, i.e., from the intersubjective dimension of language, where it is possible to reanalyse deontic expressions as inferences, thus paving the way for the conventionalization of epistemic meanings. The shift from deontic to epistemic modality is a type of subjectification, in that epistemic modality expresses the speaker's stance towards the likelihood of realization of the proposition. Similar considerations can be made for the development of post-modal meanings such as prediction and future from epistemic forms. The study of the rise of directives from motion verbs beautifully illustrates a path from deictic denotation to intersubjective deixis to post-deictic meanings. This study gives clear evidence of Dr Mocciaro's talent for and acumen in the qualitative analysis of the data, since the role of intersubjectivity emerges from the contrastive analysis of the two structures with *iri*, the one, but not the other, being constrained to the imperative and hence to the second person. Otherwise put, the more advanced stage in the grammaticalization of the [*va V*] pattern is

justified by its different role in discourse. This study is also important because it shows the interrelatedness of linguistic and ethnological research, a particularly important piece of evidence being provided by recordings of street vendors advertising their goods to customers and passers-by (the *banniate*).

Lastly, an important contribution of Dr Mocciaro's thesis is that it demonstrates the value of combining the semasiological and onomasiological perspectives in linguistic research. Since the study of language is primarily and inevitably the study of linguistic forms, the semasiological approach comes first, as is indeed the case with the research presented in the thesis. However, a much deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation can be reached if, after studying the forms, and their functions, one applies an onomasiological lense and advances hypotheses on how the functions are related to each other and to other surrounding functions. This is exactly what Dr Mocciaro does in her research. Of course, this is also a necessary step to draw typological generalizations. The methodology adopted in the thesis is therefore fully adequate to the author's aims and, at the same time, allows her to lay the foundations for further empirical and theoretical contributions.

The thesis enhances current knowledge of Sicilian and, more broadly, the Romance language family, while also contributing to the understanding of grammaticalization and of the synchronic and diachronic relationship between the semantic fields investigated. The topic, methodology and findings of Dr Mocciaro's habilitation's thesis are thus relevant and fully adequate to the field of investigation, the linguistics of the Romance languages. The results exceed expectations for a candidate in this field, in that the contribution of the thesis is not only important in Romance linguistics but goes to the very core of current debates on language change and ultimately the faculty of language.

The thesis is structured very well and presented in clear and reader-friendly fashion. The abundance of examples and figures help the reader understand the specific discussions and the general argument built throughout the thesis. Exception being made for very few idiomatic quirks (e.g., in English we would say *Old* Sicilian, not *ancient* Sicilian), the thesis is written in very good English. As I mentioned in passing above, the thesis is contextualized in the relevant literature, which the author is clearly intimately acquainted with. Although we do not require a habilitation thesis here in the UK, having served in probation and promotion committees for over a decade in the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures and the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Manchester, I can confidently state that the thesis and the scientific production which it rests upon, is commensurate with the production of candidates who pass probation at my institution. In as far as research is concerned, a candidate with a similar scientific production would no doubt be confirmed in post (there are of course other criteria, which are not relevant in the present context).

In sum, the thesis reveals Dr Mocciaro to be a serious and promising scholar, with a rising profile in the field of Romance linguistics and clear potential for theoretical research in both the synchronic and the diachronic dimension. I am happy to endorse her habilitation in the highest possible terms.

**Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence** (number of questions up to the reviewer)

- (i) In section 1.3.3 the author talks about the lability of the levels of grammatical analysis and the fundamentally non-modular nature of language. The notion of non-modularity can be understood at least in two ways: (i) the relevant levels of analysis are intricately interwoven; (ii) there is only one module or level of analysis. Does

- one of these interpretations reflect the author's claim? If so, why? If not, could the author elaborate on their claim?
- (ii) In section 1.4.2.2 the author talks about the path from pragmatics to morphosyntax, a classic grammaticalization path. In light of the Sicilian evidence, is pragmatics, or the discourse dimension, a necessary step in grammaticalization, or is a direct path from semantics to morphosyntax also a possibility?
  - (iii) On p. 75 the author mentions Berndt Heine's cautious remarks on the role of constructions in grammaticalization. In light of the Sicilian evidence presented in the thesis, what is the author's own view on the role of constructions in grammaticalization paths?
  - (iv) What is the next step in the author's research and how will it be informed and shaped by the achievements presented in this habilitation thesis?

## Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled Paths of modality and beyond. The grammaticalisation of modals and directive markers in Sicilian by Egle Mocciano fulfils requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Linguistics of Concrete Languages (Roman Languages).

Date:

Signature:

3 April 2023