Patterns of syntactic variation and change in the Latin nominal domain

Starting from the Classical stage of the Latin Language (1 cent. b.C. – 1 cent. A.D.), this talk follows the evolution in the expression of nominal arguments and in the mechanisms of adjectival modification in Late Latin (IV cent. A.D.) and in Old French (XI cent. A.D.).

The source for the diachronic resetting of the core parameters involved in genitive and adjective syntax is recognized in the loss of variation, during the Late stage, within the range of available syntactic constructions (especially with respect to the realization of nominal arguments, which begin to appear almost exclusively in a postnominal position). This causes, in turn, ambiguity in the relevant primary data for first-language acquisition, a fact which triggers a process of reanalysis driven by principles of economy of representation.

The crucial outcome of the resetting operation is the birth of N-raising, a feature which notably distinguishes the subgroup of Romance languages. Furthermore, the new mechanism of argument realization paves the way to a further development, consisting in the rise of adpositional genitive constructions.

However, the restriction in the possibility of multiple syntactic configurations and the subsequent reanalysis in Late Latin are argued to be independent of changes in Case marking, which, in fact, date much later. At the same time, the richer set of syntactic options available during the Classical stage is accounted for without invoking Case morphology as a licensor of syntactic ‘looseness’. It is proposed, instead, that a descriptively adequate theory of principles and parameters of the nominal phrase, which is the outcome of an extensive typological survey over a wide sample of Indo-European and non Indo-European languages, allows one to describe the constituent structure of the Latin DP in terms of a highly restrictive syntactic framework.