Subjects and Topics: a complicated relationship

The problem of the position of lexical subjects in the pro drop Romance languages has often been addressed by arguing that since pro always occupy the SpecT position, the lexical subject occurs in a Topic position. Arguments in favor of this analysis are: a) subjects are often doubled in the languages that have subject clitics similar to agreement markers (Northern Italian and colloquial French) b) the Subject criterion proposed by Rizzi in various articles is similar to other criteria, all of the occurring in the left periphery. On the other hand, the idea that subjects are automatically topic elements, and as such occur in a left dislocation position cannot be correct since quantifiers, which are notably not prone to become topics, can be perfectly well-formed preverbal subjects. On the other hand, various authors have proposed that the higher subject position SubjP is located in the high IP area, but this hypothesis is not corroborated by the fact that in some Romance languages like Occitan, Guascon, Piedmontese and Ligurian lexical subjects must indeed occur higher than complementizers. Furthermore, there is clear evidence from Germanic agreeing complementizers that some subject features must reside in the left periphery.

In this talk I propose that subjects are located in the CP area, as the data on complementizer ordering clearly show, but are not necessarily in the typical Topic positions where left dislocated elements are. Furthermore, I will show that preverbal quantificational subjects have a different agreement pattern (both in terms of subject clitic doubling and verbal agreement) with respect to definite subjects and are located in the same left peripheral subfield where wh-items and Focus are re-merged. To explain these fact, I will propose an analysis similar to the one originally proposed by Beghelli and Stowell (1997), who show that the position of quantifiers is related to their semantic interpretation, with definite nominal expressions raising higher than all types of quantifiers. The same can be shown to be the case for different types of subjects, so there is not only one SubjP, there are several positions where different types of subjects are semantically interpreted. This will open up the possibility that all nominal expressions have different positions, mirroring their distinct interpretation, as has already been noticed for DOM objects in SOV languages like Turkish, which are higher than non-DOM objects or quantifier objects like "was" in languages like German and Dutch, which must remain lower than definite objects. This will pave the way to reconsidering Case and Agreement as highly ambiguous categories, which blur semantic distinctions that are indeed reflected in the various positioning of different types of subjects/objects. Nonetheless, Agreement can be ultimately considered to be related to the interpretation of subject/objects and is not a procedure void of any meaning which cannot project its own functional projection.