

# Clitics

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## Key points

- Clitics are stressless linguistic items that are bigger and more independent than affixes and at the same time smaller and less independent than words.
- Clitics are very common crosslinguistically, but can behave very differently in different languages.
- Clitics are functional elements, perform a number of grammatical functions, and are (probably) never lexical elements.

## Abstract

Clitics are phonologically dependent, stressless functional elements (typically a single morpheme) with a relatively fixed position within a sentence. They differ from affixes in that they do not have a permanent host and can form a prosodic unit with words of different categories.

## 1 Introduction

While there might be disagreement as to what is the length of the minimal word, it seems rather intuitive that minimally a (prosodic) word needs a stress and indeed prosodic words do carry minimally one stress. Taking this as a condition for wordhood, we can start looking at linguistic elements that are different in this respect. The elements that have many properties of words, but do not carry stress of their own are called clitics.

## 2 Definition and Characteristics

Traditionally a clitic is a phonologically dependent morpheme with syntactic and semantic independence. As such it occupies a unique position in the spectrum between independent words and affixes. Oftentimes, clitic is used as a cover-term for a number of different elements in various languages which might not have all that in common, and even within a single language the term clitic can cover a number of very different elements with not necessarily overlapping properties. This comes out of the fact that clitics are typically defined in a negative way as the elements that are neither integrated into the sentences in the way “normal” words are nor into words in the way affixes are (Anderson, 2005).

Like affixes, clitics form a prosodic word with their host, but unlike affixes, they can attach to various types of words. The English indefinite determiner /ə/ is pronounced with whatever word follows it, e.g. a noun in ‘a horse’, an adjective in ‘a tall horse’, or an adverb in ‘a very tall horse’. The Czech stressless preposition /s/ ‘with’ is pronounced to-

gether with the first word of the noun phrase it introduces, regardless of whether that word is a noun, an adjective, a numeral, a demonstrative etc., as shown in (1).

- (1) a. s tímto nožem [s=tímto] (Czech)  
with that.dem knife  
b. s jedním nožem [s=jedním]  
with one.num knife  
c. s ostrým nožem [s=ostrým]  
with sharp.adj knife  
d. s nožem [s=nožem]  
with knife

Even though clitics are of various grammatical categories, the term clitic is often used exclusively for the stressless forms of pronouns in opposition to full and weak pronouns.

Found in many of the world’s languages, clitics are important in linguistics as they provide valuable insights into the interface of syntax, morphology, and phonology (Spencer & Luís, 2012), precisely because they occupy an area in between two very intuitive classes of syntactic elements, words and affixes.

## 3 Types of Clitics

Based on their phonological attachment clitics can be classified into proclitics, enclitics, mesoclitics, and endoclitics.

Proclitics precede their host word and thus attach to the beginning of a word. For instance, The English indefinite determiner /ə/, the Czech preposition /s/ ‘with’, or the French definite articles /le/, /la/, /les/ are proclitics that attach to the first word of (the rest of) the noun phrase:

- (2) la= vache — le= booléen — les= veaux (French)  
the cow the bool the calves

Enclitics attach to the end of a host word. The English possessive /’s/ attaches to the last word of the phrase it modifies (not everyone takes /’s/ to be a clitic). In Latin, the question marker /-ne/ is an enclitic that attaches to the end of the first word of the sentence and the coordinator /-que/ attaches to the end of the first word of the second conjunct:

- (3) a. Videt =ne? (Latin)  
see.3p.sg q  
‘Does he/she see?’  
b. Fames sitis=que  
hunger thirst-and  
‘hunger and thirst’

Most of the clitics in world languages are either proclitics or enclitics, but there are also clitics that break up a word. Mesoclitics appear between the head of its host and affil-

iated affixes, thus at a morpheme boundary within a host word. In European Portuguese, the pronominal clitic attaches between the root and the future and/or conditional morpheme, as in (4) (Anderson, 2005).

- (4) a. dar=me=á (European Portuguese)  
give-2sg-fut  
'He will give me.'  
b. dár=te=íamos  
give-2sg-1pl.cond  
'We would give it to you.'

Mesoclitics are found also in some Italian dialects (Manzini & Savoia, 2012), Sorani Kurdish (Samvelian, 2007), etc. The rarest are endoclitics (for which some linguists still claim they do not exist and should be really analyzed as mesoclitics, e.g. Smith 2014). These are clitics that split the morphemes inside the host word regardless of its morphological composition. Endoclitisis has been argued to exist in some dialects of Pashto (Tegey, 1977), Udi (Harris, 2002), Degema (Kari, 2002), Gban and a few other languages (Zimmerling, 2016).

- (5) pasčay-un yar-en gölö be=ne=y-sa  
king-gen boy-erg much look1-3sg-look2-pres  
met'a-laxo (Udi)  
this.gen-on  
'The prince looks at this for a long time.'

Certain clitics are always either proclitics or enclitics, for example the Czech prepositions and French definite articles, mentioned above are always just proclitics, but certain clitics can also switch between left or right attachment depending on the syntactic environment.

Functionally, clitics can represent various grammatical categories, various function words that either are clitics or have a clitic form in addition to a fully fledged form. Pronominal clitics frequently appear in Romance, Slavic, Austronesian, Algonquian languages etc. For instance, in Italian example (6) /lo/ is an object clitic, while in Tagalog example (7) /ka/ is a subject clitic.

- (6) Lo= vedo con gli occhiali. (Italian)  
him see.1sg with the glasses  
'I see him with glasses.'  
(7) Kailan sa= Maynila ka= p<um>unta?  
when obl Manila 2sg.nom av.pfv-go  
'When did you go to Manila?' (Tagalog)

Clitics can function as auxiliary verbs, often marking tense or aspect. An example are the English contracted forms of auxiliary verbs like /'m/, /'ve/, or /'re/ in 'I'm done'; 'I've seen it'; 'You're all set.' Clitic tense markers are also found in Passamaquoddy-Maliseet, where the future marker /-hc/ is a proclitic on the main verb as in (8) (Bruening, 2024).

- (8) kt-oqeci=hc nehpu-h-uku-k. (Passamaquoddy)  
2-try Fut kill-TA-Inv-Pl  
'... they will try to kill you.'

Clitics are also very frequently prepositions, as in Czech in (1) above, coordinators, as in Latin in (3) above, definite

articles, as in French in (2) above, complementizers, as in (9), negation, as the French proclitic /ne/ in (10), particles, etc. but they are probably never lexical words.

- (9) Peter trdi, da= mu= ga= bo= dal.  
Peter claims that him.dat him.acc aux.3p.fut give  
'Peter says that he will give it to him.' (Slovenian)  
(10) Je ne= sais pas. (French)  
I neg know not  
'I do not know.'

## 4 Placement Rules

Clitics can appear in variable positions within a sentence principally governed by their syntactic role, but also by various phonological and pragmatic factors. Especially the clausal clitics (the term 'clausal clitics' typically refers to auxiliary verbs and pronominal clitics), have two very common ways of positioning, either selecting a specific host, e.g. the verb, or else a specific position, e.g. the second position within a clause.

In Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian (BCMS) for example, clitics consistently appear in the second position of a clause or phrase, regardless of the syntactic structure of the clause and the type of the grammatical word or phrase in the first syntactic position. This phenomenon, known as Wackernagel's Law, is found in languages like Ancient Greek, a number of other Slavic languages (Franks & Holloway King, 2000), Austronesian (Billings & Kaufman, 2004) etc.:

- (11) a. Iva =ga =je jučer vidjela. (BCMS)  
Iva him aux yesterday saw  
'Iva saw him yesterday.'  
b. Jučer =ga =je vidjela Iva. (BCMS)  
Yesterday him aux saw Iva  
'Iva saw him yesterday.'

In many languages, clitics must attach to a verb or occur in its immediate vicinity, sometimes called the Tobler-Mussafia law. This is common in Romance languages, where clitics are typically preverbal or postverbal depending on the syntactic environment, but is found also in a number of Austronesian languages. In Spanish, object clitic procliticizes onto the main finite verb, but encliticizes onto the embedded non-finite verb:

- (12) a. Yo te= veo en el bar. (Spanish)  
I you see in the pub  
'I see you in the pub.'  
b. quiero ver =te en el bar.  
want see.inf you in the pub  
'I want to see you in the pub.'

When there is more than one clausal clitic in the same clause, e.g. in case the verb takes two pronominal arguments, clausal clitics form a cluster which follows the same positional restrictions as if there was a single clitic. Within the cluster, clitics follow a particular order, which varies considerably between languages. The Slavic second-position clitics for example, typically have the order (AUX1 >) DAT

> ACC > GEN (> AUX2), but the position of reflexive clitics differs between individual languages. While in e.g. Slovenian both dative and accusative reflexive clitics precede non-reflexive pronominal clitics, in BCMS, pronominal clitics precede the accusative reflexive clitic /se/, as shown in (13) (cf. Franks & Holloway King, 2000; Marušič et al., 2024):

- (13) a. Spalo=se =mi =je. (Slovenian)  
 sleep refl.acc me.dat aux  
 ‘I felt like sleeping.’  
 b. Spavalo=mi =se. (BCMS)  
 sleep me.dat refl.acc  
 ‘I felt like sleeping.’

In Austronesian languages, there is even more variety in the cluster internal order. Case, thematic role, person, and prosody all can determine the internal order within the clitic cluster, but in individual languages it is typically just one of these factors that determines the actual order and it is not always the same (C. Lee & Billings, 2005; C. C. Y. Lee, 2006). In Cebuano, for example, the determining factor is prosody, where prosodically light clitics precede prosodically heavy clitics, while in Mamanwa the main determining factor is case, where genitive clitics precede nominative clitics.

Assuming a syntactic analysis of clitic placement, one would expect syntactic rules would dictate also the internal order of clitics within the clitic cluster, but in this case, prosodic heaviness of clitics should not be a factor determining their order. What seems to be the case is that clitic placement rules and rules determining cluster internal order, differ (significantly) between languages.

Pronominal clitics sometimes double the noun phrase arguments, like in Bulgarian example (14) (Franks & Holloway King, 2000) or in Lebanese Arabic example in (15).

- (14) Decata ja= obiĉat neja. (Bulgarian)  
 children.def her.acc love.3pl her.acc  
 ‘The children love her.’  
 (15) iltilla la-immi (Lebanese Arabic)  
 I-said-to-her to-my-mother  
 ‘I told my mother.’

Bošković (2008, 2016) claims clitic doubling is restricted to languages with verb adjacent clitics, which makes it very natural to see clitic doubling as a type of object agreement, but clitic doubling exists also in languages with second position clitics, as in western Slovenian dialects (Marušič & Žaucer, 2010), southern Serbian dialects (Živojinović, 2021), and probably also in some Austronesian languages.

Clitic doubling is sometimes used as a cover term for a number of related constructions such as Clitic right dislocation, Hanging topic dislocation, and Clitic left dislocation, which involve movement of a noun phrase to either the left or the right periphery of the clause with an extra resumptive clitic inside the clause (cf. Cinque, 1990).

## 5 Challenges in Analysis

Clitics pose challenges for linguistic theory due to their intermediate nature. Independent words are subject to syntactic rules, while affixes are traditionally assumed to be ordered outside of syntax proper, either in morphology or else phonology. Given that clitics behave like independent words, trying to understand them within syntax makes sense, but as clitics are also not fully independent (they need a prosodic host in order to be pronounceable), morphology and phonology also seem to play a role in their placement. Approaches that assume syntactic structure within words like Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz, 1993) or Nanosyntax (Starke, 2009) can treat clitics like other morphemes, except that they do not merge directly with roots to form complex words, but maintain some independence and merge with already formed or spell-out words.

Obviously it is not the case that every clitic needs a special rule. Prepositions are standardly taken to be heads and in languages where they are stressless (and thus clitics), they can be simply pronounced where they are located in the syntactic structure and later phonologically grouped with the first available prosodic word. Something similar can be thought of for complementizers, coordinators, negation and other similar functional elements which can be analyzed as heads in syntax also because they do not show any morphological complexity. But pronominal clitics appear to be different also in their internal structure.

Cardinaletti & Starke (1999) propose a comprehensive analysis of three types of pronominal elements that appear in natural languages: strong pronouns, weak pronouns, and clitics, arguing all relevant properties of these three elements and the differences between them are a consequence of their structural make-up. Strong pronouns are full syntactic constituents that behave similarly to full noun phrases and can occur in a wide range of syntactic environments. Weak pronouns are slightly deficient elements and clitics are the most deficient elements lacking the key functional projections which give weak and full pronouns their independence.

The syntax of (clausal) clitic placement has received a number of different analyses, ranging from purely phonological approaches (e.g. Radanović-Kocić, 1996) to approaches arguing syntax alone is responsible for their positioning (e.g. Ćavar & Wilder, 1999). Most of these analyses are designed for a specific type of clitics in a specific language so that ultimately, different approaches are best fitted for different clitic elements and different languages. This further means, rather than trying to unify everything under a single theory, we should accept that the term clitic is used for a number of very different elements with vastly different behaviour, as was already pointed out (cf. Halpern, 1995).

Nevertheless, an influential analysis argues clitics are phrasal affixes (e.g. Anderson, 2005), which makes sense for clitics like the case markers in some Australian languages or the English possessive /’s/. Such clitics indeed behave like affixes to a phrase, as they modify the phrase both in interpretation and in production.

Given their ambiguous nature (between affixes and words), it is natural to see clitics as structurally ambigu-

ous between heads and phrases (although it is not clear how this is compatible with the approach arguing for structural deficiency by Cardinaletti & Starke (1999) given that they see clitics as structurally minimal, yet still complex). Bošković (2001) building on this structural ambiguity, proposes (Slavic second-position) clitics start off as phrases in the regular argument positions, but then move as heads in syntax proper. Their surface position is in the end determined by a phonological filter, so that in the end, it is phonology that determines what is the appropriate final landing site for a clitic (cf. also Franks, 2016). Another influential analysis argues (Romance pronominal) clitics are base generated as heads higher in the clausal structure (Sportiche, 1999) and that it is not the clitic that moves but rather other elements in the clause.

## 6 Exceptions

Part of the definition of clitics is that they are stressless, yet there are clitics which attract stress from the host word, as in the BCMS example in (16), or receive stress in specific structural environments as in the Slovenian example in (17) (cf. Marušič et al., 2024). By some standards, the stressed variants (16)–(17) are not really clitics, given that they are stressed, but they are at the same time morphologically indistinguishable from true stressless clitics.

- (16) u= kuču [úkuču] (BCMS)  
in house  
'in the house'
- (17) Si= ga= videl? Sem= gá. (Slovenian)  
aux him saw aux.2sg him  
'Did you see him? I did.'

## 7 Conclusion

Clitics are fascinating and complex linguistic elements that illuminate the interplay between phonology, morphology, and syntax. As the term is oftentimes used as a coverterm for everything in between two well-defined categories, clitics exhibit great variability, but also present a problem for those seeking a unified explanation. The study of clitics continues to be a vibrant area of research, contributing to our understanding of the nature of human language.

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See Also: Affix, Word

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