Language change and information structure: Parametric resetting in the history of German and Italian

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In older stages of Italian (OI) and Old High German (OHG), null subjects are much more frequent in main than in embedded clauses. Benincà (1984) for OI and Axel (2007) for OHG propose that null subjects are licensed syntactically by the movement of the finite verb to C° which is possible in main but not in embedded clauses. Schlachter (2012) claims for OHG that null subjects are a discourse phenomenon and are licensed by a Topic antecedent. By analysing the distribution of overt and null subjects in the OHG and the OI Diatessaron, I show that in both languages the licensing and the interpretation of referential null subjects depend on both discourse and syntactic factors, which are similar, though not identical, to those licensing null subjects in present-day Italian (cf. Frascarelli 2007, 2018).

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