

59th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea

Call for Abstracts

Workshop title: Clitics, clitic placement, and cliticisation

Convenors: Marc Olivier-Loiseau (Trinity College Dublin)

Keywords: *clitics, deficiency, weak forms, complex clitics, morphology, syntax-prosody mapping, interface, typology, word order, grammaticalisation, crosslinguistic variation*

Call for abstracts: We invite abstract submissions for a Workshop on ‘Clitics, clitic placement, and cliticisation’ as part of the 59th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea (26-29 August 2026, Osnabrück University). Each oral presentation will be assigned a 25-minute slot (20 min. presentation, 5 min. discussion, 5 min. room change).

Submission: Provisional abstracts should be **no longer than 300 words** and focus on an aspect relevant to the study of clitics. The deadline submission is **November 17th 2025**. Abstracts should be sent to the convenor: marc.olivier-loiseau@tcd.ie.

1. Clitics

Linguistic research on clitics is vast and has given rise to the production of significant empirical and formal studies (Zwicky 1977; Borer 1984; Martineau 1990; Sportiche 1998; Cardinaletti & Starke 1999; Pancheva 2005; Bouzouita 2008; Russi 2008; Mavrogiorgos 2010; Tortora 2014; Gallego 2016; Pescarini 2021; Olivier 2025; to list just a few – see also those listed throughout the call). Simply put, these elements qualify neither as ‘words’ nor as ‘affixes’ and, as a result, they showcase striking characteristics across morphology, syntax, prosody, and phonology.

The hallmark of clitics is their deficient nature, which can be tested in several ways. Yet, some well-known tests like “a clitic cannot be stressed” or “a clitic cannot be coordinated” only capture broad generalisations and fail to capture micro-issues: indeed, the literature offers evidence of stressed clitics (1) (Laenzlinger 1994; Peperkamp 1997; Ordóñez and Repetti 2006; 2014; Manzini and Savoia 2017; Pescarini 2018; Russo 2019; Torres-Tamarit and Pons-Moll 2019; Zingler 2022) and clitics with disjunction (2) (Sportiche 1999, 2011; Rizzi 2000).

- (1) [kom.prə.'lo]
buy-inf=it
‘to buy it’ (Mallorca Catalan, Torres-Tamarit and Pons-Moll 2019: 9)

- (2) Tu le ou la verras.
you him= or her= see-fut.2sg
‘You will see him or her.’ (French, Sportiche 2011: 95)

It follows that the usual tests need to be refined to better understand what constitutes a clitic, unless the notion of a coherent ‘clitic category’ is not as neat as one would expect (Haspelmath 2023). If not all clitics are clitics in the same way, then the discussion opens to the notion of

cliticness and potentially requires the assumption that we are dealing with a spectrum. Are there clitics that are more clitic-y than others? How can we approach this? Evidence for the complexity of the answer draws from non-European data: Makassarese (Austronesian) appears to differentiate ‘affixal clitics’ from ‘free clitics’ (Basri et al. 1999; Jukes 2006: 151), while Mapudungun (Araucanian) has morphemes dubbed ‘anti-clitics’ that syntactically incorporate into a host yet maintain some phonological dependence (Zúñiga 2014).

The questions above connect to the issue of what clitics are, structurally. Some authors analyse them as heads, some as phrases, and some as both simultaneously (Chomsky 1995). Does that vary across languages? Is it only a formal question, or is it supported by empirical evidence? Focusing on the morpheme itself, approaches differ. A Romance pronominal clitic is built around person, gender, and number features according to Roberts (2010), while Cardinaletti (2008, 2010) suggests that they must also include a determiner element (at least for third person clitics). Should we take a third person plural feminine clitic like Spanish *las* to include three morphemes, *l-* for [+D], *-a* for [+FEM], and *-s* for [+PL]? What about the French *me*, whose vowel is epenthetic, is it only [+1] realised as *m-*? Whether clitics are simplex or complex elements intersects with typological questions raised and partly answered in a variety of studies that distinguish weak forms from clitics, and complex clitics from simple clitics (Cardinaletti & Starke 1999; Déchaine & Wiltschko 2002; Ordóñez and Repetti 2014).

From a diachronic perspective, clitics are the result of weakening. In the Romance languages for instance, the Latin strong pronouns *MĒ*, *TĒ*, etc. gave rise to the clitics *m’/me/mi*, *t’/te/ti*, etc. (Vincent 1997). Interestingly, pronominal clitics exist in a wide variety of unrelated languages, which therefore leads to the question of the birth of clitics: why are pronouns susceptible to become clitics, and how does it happen? The question naturally extends to non-pronominal clitics too. From the viewpoint of language change, therefore, clitics must also be considered in the light of grammaticalisation.

2. Clitic placement

The most striking observation pertaining to the syntax of clitics is that they appear in a derived position across a wide range of languages: for instance in Standard Modern Greek and most Romance varieties, full objects follow the finite verb whereas object clitics precede it. In Old Hittite and in the diachrony of Bulgarian, however, clitic elements necessarily appear in second position of the clause. The generative literature has been particularly fruitful in this domain, and we can broadly distinguish three approaches that, according to some authors, combine:

- **The base generation approach** (Strozer 1976; Rivas 1977; Jaeggli 1982; Borer 1984): clitics are generated in the position in which they appear.
- **The movement approach** (Kayne 1975; Martineau 1990; Martins 1994; Uriagereka 1995; Tortora 2010; Nevins 2011; Gallego 2016): clitics are generated in an argumental position and move to the position in which they appear.
- **The Agree approach** (Roberts 2010): clitics are generated in an argumental position and are realised as agreement morphemes.

Each approach opens the door to more formal questions. Are the Clitic Phrases of the base generation approach universal projections of human language, and in a fixed order? If clitics move, do they do so as phrases, heads, or both, and where do they land? What constitutes the featural makeup of clitics that allows them to be realised through agreement? Overall, we may wonder whether we should strive to reach a one-size-fits-all analysis, or whether different approaches are better suited for different languages. Notably, an analysis à la Kayne (1991) according to which the distribution of enclisis and proclisis is the result of verb placement has

been adopted in many studies, yet other approaches are possible (e.g., prosodic inversion, copy deletion, affixation, etc.).

Clitic placement issues are not simply related to the ‘disturbed’ order of constituents within a clause, they also touch on a wide range of phenomena that include, to name but a few:

- **Second-position clitics** (Fontana 1997). What ‘counts’ as second position?
- **Clitic doubling** (cf. Anagnostopoulou 2006 and references therein). Why and how do some languages double their object with a clitic?
- **Clitic climbing** (cf. de Andrade & Bok-Bennema 2017 and references therein). Why do some predicates allow clitics to appear in a different clause than the one they originate in?
- **Clitic reduplication** (Solà 2002; Di Domenico 2022). What leads to the same clitic being pronounced twice?

The workshop therefore welcomes studies that question, revisit, and update the formal mechanisms of clitic placement, as well as new empirical descriptions and generalisations that advance our understanding.

3. Cliticisation

Further prosodic and phonological requirements apply on top of clitic placement rules. Because clitics are dependent elements, they cannot appear on their own and must instead find another element to lean onto. Thus, cliticisation specifically refers to the mechanism(s) through which clitics attach to their prosodic host. The differentiation between clitic placement and cliticisation is crucial, since in some languages the prosodic host and the syntactic host are the same element, whereas in others the two hosts are distinct elements. Contrast French with Romanian, for which we can assume that the finite verb is the syntactic host since clitics must appear before it. In (3), the clitic attaches to the verb, but in (4) it attaches to a prosodic host to its left. Interestingly, French once behaved similarly to Romanian yet its cliticisation shifted from leaning left to leaning right. The reasons for why some clitics ‘look left’ and some ‘look right’ remains a topical one.

- (3) Marie l’attend depuis une heure.
 Marie him=wait-prs.3sg since an hour
 ‘Mary has been waiting for him for an hour.’ (French)

- (4) Maria-l așteaptă de or oră
 Maria=him wait-prs.3sg for an hour
 ‘Mary has been waiting for him for an hour.’ (Romanian, Dobrovie-Sorin 1999: 532)

In languages where clitics must find a prosodic host to their left, clause-initial position is illicit. In the Amazigh languages for instance, clitics are placed in a preverbal position and encliticise (5); but if no prosodic host precedes them, they swap positions with the verb (6).

- (5) da-as-t wɛx.
 fut=him=it give.aor.1s
 ‘I will give it to him.’ (Quebliyeen Tamazight, Ouali 2011: 106)

- (6) wɛx-as-t.
 give-perf.1sg=him=it
 ‘I gave it to him.’ (Quebliyeen Tamazight, Ouali 2011: 106)

Does it mean that cliticisation impacts clitic placement? Several solutions involving a phonological mechanism have been put forward: for Ouhalla (2005), the clitic and the verb undergo prosodic inversion in (6); for Ouali (2011), the interface moves the verb to the left of the clitic if no word precedes it; for El Hankari (2023), there exist several copies of the clitics and the interface decides which one to pronounce. While these approaches differ, they all have in common that they involve phonology/prosody in word order.

But ‘attaching to a host’ might itself be an oversimplification of what clitics do in the real world. Peperkamp (1997) argues that clitics can either attach to a prosodic word or a phonological phrase, which then contributes to crosslinguistic variation. The question is therefore not about the clitic anymore, but about the element it attaches to: what constitutes a host?

4. Potential research questions:

The aim of the workshop is to explore clitics from all possible perspectives, from methodological matters to theoretical ones, and case studies. Both synchronic and diachronic studies are welcome, and those working on under-explored languages are encouraged. We invite abstracts engaging with the following research questions and related issues, as well as those mentioned throughout the call:

1. What is a clitic?
2. Can we strictly define a clitic category? Should we talk about subcategories of clitics?
3. What drives clitic placement? Are there different mechanisms, or is it a universal phenomenon?
4. How do clitics attach to prosodic hosts? Are there different mechanisms, or is it a universal phenomenon?
5. How does cliticisation influence clitic placement?
6. How do current methodological and theoretical advances allow us to approach the study of clitics? What improvements are needed?
7. How does language change give rise to clitics? What about clitic loss?
8. What other linguistic phenomena (broadly defined) do clitics interact with?
9. What can we learn from comparative analyses of clitics?

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