Italian *mica* and its use in discourse: An interactional account

Verena Thaler [*]

University of Mannheim, Romanisches Seminar, L15 1-6, 68131 Mannheim, Germany

Abstract

The paper is concerned with the Italian negation particle *mica* and its use in spoken interaction. In particular, it aims to specify the types of contexts and sequential environments in which *mica* typically occurs and to define its functions in discourse. In previous studies, the latter have mostly been linked to emphasis or to specific presuppositions including counter-expectations on the part of the hearer and/or the speaker. More recent accounts have referred to a specific information-structural status of the negated proposition and to the expression of intersubjectivity. I will argue that all of these approaches provide important elements for a detailed analysis of the use of *mica*, but that none of them are sufficient. Contrary to previous studies, the analysis proposed in this paper includes the larger sequential environment of the utterances under examination and is based on naturally occurring conversation data. The study shows that *mica* typically occurs in disaffiliative contexts and in contexts where the speaker signals some kind of emotive involvement. In such contexts the basic functions of *mica* can be defined as relating the current utterance to a particular aspect of context and expressing a kind of metapragmatic instruction directing the hearer to update common ground.
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1. Introduction

The Italian negation particle *mica* is a postverbal negation marker which is used in specific contexts, especially in informal situations. Going back to Latin MICA(M) ('crumb'), its original meaning refers to a minimal quantity, such as French and Catalan *pas* (< Latin PASSU(M) 'step'). It thus originates in a noun which was used to reinforce negation. Its lexical meaning has been bleached in the course of its further development. First evidences of *mica* reinforcing negation can be found in Pre-Classical and Classical Latin, in texts having an oral and/or colloquial tenor (Hansen and Visconti, 2012:458). It can be assumed that its use was first restricted to semantically compatible verbs and was typically used with verbs of eating and giving ('he didn't eat a crumb', 'he didn't give me a crumb') (Hopper, 1991:26). By the medieval period it had lost its nominal properties and had become a polarity item. It was typically used as an emphatic postverbal marker in the sense of 'not at all'[1] and was no longer limited to specific types of verbs. Later, it has become grammaticalized as negative particle and is sometimes also used without preverbal *non* or in clause-initial position (Hansen and Visconti, 2012: 459–466). *Mica* can occur in different clausal types, in declaratives, polarity questions and imperatives (Cinque, 1991).[2]

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* Fax: +49 621 181 2382.
    E-mail address: thaler@phil.uni-mannheim.de.
[1] For example ''nonn era mica la più laida ch'elli avesse veduta, ansi era la più bella ch'elli mai avesse trovata'' ('it [the bag] was not *mica* the ugliest he had seen, it was rather the most beautiful he had ever found') (Trattato di virtù morali, XIII/XIV (tosc.), cap. 10).
[2] Its use in interrogative contexts is not attested before the 19th century (Visconti, 2009:947).

The present-day use of *mica* is sometimes said to be restricted to the northern varieties (Cinque, 1991:311; Hansen and Visconti, 2012:455–456). My data show, however, that it is used in different regions of Italy including the south.

The present study is concerned with the use of *mica* in spoken interaction. In particular, it is interested in the discourse functions of *mica* and in a detailed description of the types of contexts and sequential environments in which *mica* typically occurs. It is based on the assumption that *mica* is not a simple negation marker, but a pragmatic particle which can be related to specific discourse functions. Most authors agree that the bipartite structure *non . . . mica* is pragmatically different from the unmarked preverbal negation with *non*. It is not clear, however, in which contexts the negation with *mica* is used and what particular discourse functions can be attributed to it. Cinque (1976/1991) was the first to give a detailed description of the use of *mica* from a pragmatic perspective. His analysis, however, is not based on naturally occurring interaction and is, as Cinque himself notes, only the beginning of an analysis of *mica*. Other studies, mostly focusing on the syntactic properties of *mica*, on its diachronic development or on negation in Romance languages, have provided ideas of how the basic function of *mica* could be described. It has been linked to emphasis, to specific presuppositions and, more recently, to a specific information-structural status of the negated proposition as well as to intersubjectivity. These approaches will be outlined and briefly discussed in section 2. I will argue that all of these approaches provide important elements for a detailed analysis of the use of *mica* in spoken interaction, but that none of them are sufficient. None of these approaches can account for all cases of the use of *mica* as it appears in natural discourse. Furthermore, they do not consider important contextual information that appears in the larger sequential environment of the utterances under examination. With a few exceptions, the analyses rely on single sentences or small segments of (mostly non-authentic) written or spoken discourse. The aim of the present study is to extend earlier analyses by specifying the types of contexts and sequential environments in which *mica* typically occurs and by defining its discourse functions in a way that it covers all uses of *mica*. The analysis is based on recordings and transcriptions of spontaneous spoken interactions.

The interactional perspective adopted in this paper is based on the idea that linguistic structures emerge in use and are heavily context-sensitive. It is assumed that a detailed analysis of recurrent patterns in the use of linguistic resources must rely on a variety of elements including contextual features and the sequential environment in which the specific structures are produced. In this view, context – and in particular interactional context – has to be an integral part of linguistic analysis (see, for example, the papers in Ochs et al., 1996; Selting and Couper-Kuhlen, 2001; Ford et al., 2002; Hakulinen and Selting, 2005; and for Italian Bazzanella, 2006; Bazzanella and Miecznikowski, 2009; Fuschi, 2015a, 2015b). It will be argued that the use of *mica* depends on a complex interplay of structural and interactional features. It will be shown that *mica* typically occurs in disaffiliative contexts, i.e. in turns that express disaffiliation with prior talk, and in contexts where the speaker signals some kind of emotive involvement.[3] I will argue that in such contexts the basic functions of *mica* are to relate the current utterance to a particular aspect of context and to express a kind of metapragmatic instruction to the hearer.

2. The discourse functions of *mica*: state of the art

Previous studies have tried to trace the development of *mica* from a diachronic perspective (Visconti, 2009; Hansen and Visconti, 2009, 2012). A few studies have also focused on the syntactic properties of *mica* (Parry, 1996; Godard and Marandin, 2006; Garzonio and Poletto, 2009; Pescarini and Penello, 2012). Most of them see *mica* as a negative adverb with reinforcing value and do not give any further characterization of its functions in discourse. This paper will neither focus on the diachronic development of *mica* nor on its syntactic structures, but will be concerned with its functions in spoken interaction. Why is *mica* used in certain discursive contexts and would be infelicitous in others? When looking at previous studies, the basic function of *mica* has been described in at least four ways. It has been linked (1) to emphasis, (2) to a specific presupposition, (3) to a specific information-structural status of the negated proposition, and (4) to intersubjectivity.

(1) Emphasis

The function of *mica* has often been linked to emphasizing or reinforcing negation (Cinque, 1976/1991:311; Ramat et al., 1986:264; Molinelli, 1987; Parry, 1996:229; Serianni, 1989:507–508; Godard and Marandin, 2006; Garzonio and Poletto, 2009:142; among others). Grammars and dictionaries sometimes put it in the same group as *affatto*, *per nulla* and *per niente* ('not at all') as adverbs conventionally used to reinforce negation. As noted by Cinque (1991:311), however, *mica* is clearly different from them, as well in its syntactic distribution as in its function. Schwenter (2003:2001) criticizes

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[3] More precisely, it is used in situations where the speaker expresses a negative evaluative stance toward certain aspects of the current interaction. His negative stance is either due to knowledge asymmetry or to the speaker's belief that the hearer makes a wrong assumption (see section 5.2).