

# On the pragmatics of post-focal material in Italian (left peripheral focus looked at from the other side)<sup>1</sup>

Lisa BRUNETTI

## 1 Introduction

This paper explores the discourse properties of sentences with a left peripheral focus in Italian (see (1) below, where capital letters indicate prosodic prominence), within Vallduví's (1992) framework on the Information Structure of the sentence.

- (1) A CLARA ha dato gli appunti.  
to Clara he-has given the notes  
'It's Clara he gave his notes to'

In par. 2, I present Vallduví's framework and claim that the post-focal background in a sentence like (1) (from now on, PFB) has the discourse function of what Vallduví calls a *tail*, as already suggested by him for Catalan. In par. 3, I describe the characteristics of left peripheral focus and its contexts of occurrence. I show that a sentence like (1) is typically used in contrastive contexts (3.1), in association with focus particles

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(3.2), and in contexts where the information provided by the focus is unexpected to the hearer (3.3). In 3.4 I discuss the unacceptability of (1) as an answer to a *wh*-question. I propose that all these characteristics are a consequence of the tail-like status of the PFB. In par. 4, I finally argue that the difference in frequency of PFB versus a regular tail (a RD) in corpora can again be explained by making reference to the tail-status of the two constructions. In par. 5 general conclusions are drawn.

## 2. The pragmatic function of PFB

Vallduví 1992 proposes that the Information Structure of a sentence is made of a *focus*, which corresponds to the information provided by the sentence and a *background*, which is further divided into what he calls *link* and *tail*.

A link is an expression that directs “the hearer to a given address (...) in the hearer’s knowledge-store, under which the information carried by the sentence is entered” (Vallduví 1992: 59). In other words, the presence of a link always indicates that a topic shift occurred in the discourse. A tail is negatively defined as background material that does not display link-like behavior. A tail “specifies *how* the information must be entered under a specific address” (Vallduví 1992:78).

Both link and tail provide an anchor to the common ground and to the interlocutors’ knowledge store, as background material is supposed to do. However, the anchoring of a tail to the ground is stronger than that of a link. As Vallduví more recently has observed (see e.g. Vallduví 2002), a tail has an anaphoric status, and the antecedent for it must be a proposition that constitutes a *shared belief* among the interlocutors in the conversation.<sup>2</sup> A shared belief can be a proposition mentioned in the previ-

<sup>2</sup> As Vallduví 2002 proposes, within a theory of dialogue like that proposed by Ginzburg 1996, forthcoming, a sentence with a link answers a *new* ‘Question Under Discussion’ (or QUD; see Ginzburg 1996, forthcoming, Roberts 1998), while a sentence with a tail answers a QUD that is created by manipulating a proposition that already constitutes a shared belief among the interlocutors. The linguistic material of

ous discourse and accepted as true by the interlocutors, or it can be part of the interlocutors shared assumptions, or it can be evident from the situational context in which the conversation occurs. It is in this sense that a tail is background material that does not display link-like behavior: a tail never introduces a *new* (shifting) topic. I will return to this property of tails below, when I will explain the properties of left peripheral focus precisely by appealing to it.

In Italian, a link is a sentence initial, left dislocated element that can be resumed by a clitic inside the clause (*gli appunti* in 2). The only exception are subject links, as subjects don't have a clitic form in Italian.

- (2) Gli appunti, li ha dati a CLARA.  
 the notes them he-has given to Clara  
 'As for his notes, he gave them to Clara'

A tail, on the contrary, is a (clitic) right dislocated element (from now on, (CL)RD), as *gli appunti* in the example below.

- (3) Li ha dati a CLARA, gli appunti.  
 them he-has given to Clara the notes  
 'He gave his notes to Clara'

Consider now a sentence with a left peripheral focus, such as (1) above. What informational partition does it have? The focused part is the pre-posed element (the phrase *a Clara*), as prosodic prominence clearly indicates. As for the rest of the sentence, I claim that it is a *tail*, along the lines of what Vallduví 1992 proposes for Catalan, namely the sentence is a *focus-tail* construction.<sup>3</sup> This means that a PFB has the same pragmatic status as a (CL)RD.<sup>4</sup>

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which the tail is made indicates what proposition has to be retrieved from the common ground and transformed into a QUD.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also Brunetti 2006, submitted.

<sup>4</sup> My claim is independently supported by Samek-Lodovici's (2006) syntactic analysis of PFB in Italian. Samek-Lodovici proposes in fact that the PFB has to be *syntactically* analysed as Right Dislocation (see also Brunetti submitted).

Being a tail, a PFB always needs an antecedent that is made of a proposition representing a shared belief among the interlocutors, as tails require.<sup>5</sup> In the next paragraph, I am going to show that these characteristics of PFB can explain the particular characteristics of Italian left peripheral focus.

### 3 Characteristics of sentences with left peripheral focus

A left peripheral focus in Italian occurs in certain specific contexts and always gets a particular interpretation. The context that most scholars assume to be typical of a left peripheral focus is the one where the focus contrasts or contradicts a previous assumption (cf. Zubizarreta 1998, Belletti 2004, *a.m.o.*). An analysis of corpus data has also revealed that a left peripheral focus often occurs when the focus is associated with an additive focus sensitive particle, like *anche* ‘also’. A left peripheral focus is also used in contexts where the focus provides a piece of information that is unexpected to the hearer. Finally, a sentence with a left peripheral focus is considered as an odd answer to a wh-question. In the following paragraphs I will discuss all these characteristics of sentences with left peripheral focus and explain that they are a consequence of the tail-like status of the PFB.

<sup>5</sup> This definition of PFB is very similar to that given by Prince 1999 (and related papers) for post-focal material in the construction she calls ‘Yiddish Movement’, in Yiddish and in the English dialect spoken by former Yiddish speakers in the United States. A typical example of this construction is Prince’s exchange below:

- (i) a. Hello, Mrs Goldberg. How’s everything? How’s your son?  
 b. Oy, don’t ask. A SPORTSCAR he wants – that’s all I was missing.

In Prince’s terms, the construction in (ib) structures the proposition into a focus (*a sportscar*) and an open proposition (*he wants x*), where the focus instantiates the value of the variable of the open proposition. Prince argues that the information in the open proposition *has to be assumed to be already known or at least plausibly inferrable to the hearer*. The acceptability of (ib) - Prince explains - is due to the fact that in a stereotypical community where this dialect is spoken, it is expected that sons want things from parents.

### 3.1 Contrastive context

A typical context in which a sentence with a left peripheral focus occurs is one where the focus contrasts/contradicts a previous statement or assumption. Consider again (1), repeated in (4). As the tag is meant to indicate, the sentence can be used to correct a previous sentence that stated that the individual to whom the person under discussion gave his notes is Maria.

- (4) A CLARA ha dato gli appunti (non a Maria).  
to CLARA he-has given the notes not Maria  
'It's Clara he gave his notes to (not Maria)'

What is contrasted can be inferred, namely it is not crucial that the sentence be preceded in the discourse by 'He gave his notes to Maria'. The example below from the LIP corpus (*Lessico dell'italiano parlato*, corpus of spoken Italian collected by De Mauro *et al.* 1993) shows a case where the contrasted proposition is implicitly given by the situational context. The dialogue is between a lady (speaker A) and a clerk (speaker B) at an office counter.

- (5) A: Questo è il ticket.  
'Here is the receipt'  
B: No, questo non mi interessa; un DOCUMENTO mi deve dare.  
no this not to-me interests an I.D. to-me you-must give  
'No, I don't need this; it's your I.D. you have to give me'

The lady presumably hands the receipt to the clerk while she says 'Here's the receipt'. Therefore, that the lady gave the receipt to the clerk is 'present' in the situational context.

It is clear that a contrasting sentence requires the existence of an explicit or implicit proposition to contrast. Furthermore, such contrasted/corrected proposition must be a previously shared belief among the interlocutors, otherwise there would be no point of correcting or modifying it. In (4), the focus is used to contrast a previous proposition

(‘he gave his notes to Maria’) which was a shared belief among the interlocutors in previous discourse. The contrasted proposition exactly constitutes the antecedent that the PFB is looking for. In (5), the previously shared belief is that the lady has to give the ticket to the clerk. The clerk utters (5B) in order to modify such a shared belief. Again, we have an appropriate antecedent for the PFB.

In sum, a PFB requires an antecedent of a certain type, and a contrastive context always guarantees the presence of such an antecedent.

### 3.2 Presence of focus sensitive particles

In addition to the contrastive interpretation, the analysis of a spoken-language corpus collected by the author<sup>6</sup> reveals that left peripheral focus in Italian often occurs associated with focus sensitive additive particles, such as *anche* ‘also’. Some examples of sentences with left peripheral focus associated with this particle, taken from that corpus, are given below:<sup>7</sup>

- (6) a. La mamma e la bambina sono molto arrabbiate;  
       the mum and the girl are very angry  
       b. beh, anche il PAPA' è arrabbiato.  
       well also the dad is angry  
       ‘The mother and the girl are very angry; well, the father is angry too’
- (7) a. Allora rigira il sassofono, (...) guarda scrupolosamente dentro,

<sup>6</sup> The corpus was collected by the author with the help of Stella Puig Wertmüller within the Nocando project. The whole corpus is made of oral narrations by native speakers of five different languages (Italian, Catalan, Spanish, English, German) of three of M. Mayer’s wordless ‘frog stories’ (cf. Berman and Slobin 1994, Strömquist and Verhoven 2004).

<sup>7</sup> In all these examples, the focus is a preverbal subject, so it is not *syntactically* evident that the expression associated with the particle is focused. These particles can also be associated with topics (precisely links, in Vallduvi’s terms). Nevertheless, prosody can disambiguate between the two, and the prosodic characteristics of the expressions in these examples make it perfectly clear that we are dealing with foci, not topics.

so he-turns the saxophone he-looks carefully inside  
b. per vedere cosa sia successo; anche gli ALTRI si interrogano.  
to see what is happened also the others themselves wonder  
'So he turns the sax, (...) he carefully looks inside to see what hap-  
pened; the others too are wondering'

- (8) a. La rana decide di entrare nel cestino. "Gnam gnam, vediamo cosa  
the frog decides to enter in-the basket yum yum let's see what  
b. troviamo qua". (...) E contemporaneamente  
we-find here and at-the-same-time  
c. anche la DONNA aveva voglia di mangiare un poco.  
also the woman felt like to eat a little  
'The frog decides to go into the basket, "Yum yum, let's see what is in  
here"; and the woman too felt like eating something'

Additive particles trigger a presupposition that there is an alternative value under consideration for which the proposition holds (cf. König 1991, *a.o.*). A presupposition is a proposition representing a (lexically driven) shared belief among speaker and hearer. Hence, it can perfectly function as the antecedent of a tail. It is therefore expected that a focus associated with a focus particle is in a left peripheral position: the presence of the particle gives the PFB the antecedent it requires.

In (6), the presupposition is that somebody other than the father is angry. Such presupposition can be recovered from the very discourse, precisely from the previous sentence (6a). In (7), the presupposition is that someone other than 'the others' (= the other musicians) is wondering, and that is also given by the previous discourse, although implicitly: the speaker says that the saxophonist is looking inside his sax to understand what happened. In (8), finally, the presupposition is that someone other than the woman felt like eating, and in fact, the speaker has previously described the frog's attempt to eat an insect, and then she says that the frog decides to look for something in a picnic basket.

### 3.3 ‘Surprise’ context

A sentence with a left peripheral focus can also be uttered in a context where the information provided by the focus is somehow unexpected to the hearer and gives rise to a surprise effect. Consider the example below.<sup>8</sup> The speaker has been looking for the keys and then she utters the sentence as a comment after she finds them in the bathroom. The information provided by focus does not meet the hearer’s expectations, as keys are not usually put in the bathroom.

- (9) Ma guarda te! In BAGNO ha messo le chiavi!  
 but look you in bathroom he-has put the keys  
 ‘Look at that! He put the keys in the BATHROOM!’

The presence of the left peripheral focus again is related to the presence of an antecedent for the PFB in this kind of contexts. The antecedent in this case is represented by the shared implicit assumption that keys are put in a place different than the bathroom. Such shared assumption or belief is what makes the information provided by the sentence (that the keys are in the bathroom) unexpected.

The Catalan example below, provided by Vallduví 1992 as an instantiation of left peripheral focus, can be accounted for in the same way.

- (10) S1: Hòstia! S’hem acabat la botella, eh! Que som... que som...  
 My God! We finished the bottle! We are... we are...  
 S2: Les dues botelles ja!  
 The two bottles already!  
 S1: DUES BOTELLES, s’hem polit.  
 TWO BOTTLES, we polished off

Speaker 1 is clearly expressing his surprise after realizing that he and his companion drank a quantity of alcohol greater than the quantity that they - or people in general - are expected to drink in the same circumstances.

<sup>8</sup> This example was suggested to me by Francesca Panzeri.



A perfectly parallel example, with the same interpretation, can also be given in Italian:

- (11) Non ci posso credere! Due BOTTIGLIE ci siamo bevuti!  
not to-it I-can believe two bottles ourselves we-are drunk  
'I can't believe it! Two BOTTLES we drank!

### 3.4 PFB in answers to questions

A sentence with a left peripheral focus is usually considered by speakers as an odd answer to a wh-question:

- (12) a. A chi ha dato gli appunti?  
'Who did he give his notes to?'  
b. ?? A CLARA ha dato gli appunti.  
to Clara he-has given the notes  
c. (Li ho dati) a CLARA.  
them I-have given to Clara

Since the possibility to answer a question has often been used as a test to recognize a *non*-contrastive, informational focus, several authors in the transformational framework have claimed that a pre-posed focus cannot be informational (see references quoted in Brunetti 2004). In other words, these authors have proposed that a left peripheral focus is semantically different from a focus *in situ*<sup>9</sup>.

In the preceding paragraphs I have shown instead that the contrastive value of left peripheral focus is not an inherent property of left peripheral focus, but rather a consequence of the tail status of the PFB. In this paragraph, I am going to explain that the minimal pair in (12) is a further piece of evidence for my claim.<sup>10</sup>

I said above that the PFB requires an antecedent that is a proposition constituting a shared belief among speaker and hearer. In (12b), the ante-

<sup>9</sup> For further (critically discussed) details about this view, see Brunetti 2004.

<sup>10</sup> For an alternative, syntactic explanation, see Brunetti 2004.

cedent that the PFB requires should be the shared belief that the person in question gave his notes to a certain other person. In (12a), however, we cannot find that kind of proposition. What we have is just the question ‘Who did he give his notes to?’. But such a question precisely asks what should already be a shared belief among the interlocutors, in order for the PFB to have a suitable antecedent. Therefore, the question cannot constitute an antecedent for the PFB of the answer. In (12c), no such belief must be shared by the interlocutors, as no tail background is present, so the answer is perfectly acceptable.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4 Frequency of occurrence: PFB vs RD

As already noted by Brunetti submitted, corpus data show that a sentence containing a PFB (see 13) is much less frequent than a sentence containing a (CL)RD (see 14).

- (13) A CLARA ha dato gli appunti.  
to Clara he-has given the notes
- (14) Li ha dati a CLARA, gli appunti.  
them he-has given to Clara the notes

I argue that this difference in occurrence of the two constructions does not invalidate the claim I have made in this paper that PFB and (CL)RD have the same discourse function of tail. On the contrary, I claim that the reason for the difference in occurrence can be explained precisely by making reference to the tail-status of the two constructions.

I have said above that a tail requires an antecedent that is a full proposition representing a shared belief among the interlocutors in the conversation. In (13), the interlocutors have to share the belief that the

<sup>11</sup> Within a Ginzburg’s theory of dialogue, following Vallduví’s (2002) analysis (see footnote 2 in this paper), we could say that (12a) represents the QUD that should, instead, have been *derived* from the modification of a full proposition that already constituted a shared belief among the interlocutors.

person in question gave the notes to a certain other person. In (14), on the contrary, the interlocutors have to share the very general belief that a certain property applies to the notes under discussion. In order for this latter belief to be shared by the interlocutors, it is sufficient that they share the truth of a proposition containing *gli appunti*. Clearly, such a belief can be shared in a wide range of contexts. The belief that a certain person known by the interlocutors gave the notes to some other person, on the contrary, is given by a much more restricted number of contexts, because the meaning of the proposition is much more specified. Indeed, the contexts of occurrence are just those seen in the preceding paragraphs: contrastive contexts, contexts where the focus is associated to an additive focus sensitive particle, or contexts where the focus provides unexpected information.

## 5 Conclusions

In this paper I have proposed that the characteristics of left peripheral focus are a consequence of the fact that a left peripheral focus is always accompanied by background material (PFB) with the discourse function of a tail.

The fact that left peripheral focus is often contrastive, that it often occurs with focus particles, and that it can provide unexpected information are all consequences of the fact that the PFB requires an antecedent, and that the antecedent has to be a proposition constituting a previously shared belief among the interlocutors. In fact, it is precisely these contexts that can provide the antecedent that the PFB requires. On the other hand, I have claimed that a sentence with a left peripheral focus is not a good answer to a question because such context cannot provide the appropriate antecedent for the PFB.

The difference in frequency of sentences with PFB vs sentences with ‘regular’ tails ((CL)RD) has been explained as a consequence of the fact that the antecedent for a PFB is usually a more specified proposition than the antecedent for the RD, so the PFB is available in a more restricted number of contexts.

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