

On *links* and *tails* in Italian

In this paper, I analyze the properties of background material in Italian. I assume Vallduví's (1992) partition of the background in Link and Tail. I use the word 'topic' to refer to an unspecified part of the background.

A link 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 Italian, a topic of this kind is typically expressed by a Clitic Left Dislocated element (CLLD) (cf. 1; the link is indicated in boldface).

(1) Sai? **Dante** lo hanno bocciato all'esame di chimica.

(you) know, D. him (they) have failed at-the exam of chemistry
'Did you know? Dante failed at the chemistry exam'

A link can have a contrastive effect, and this has led some scholars to formally distinguish between a contrastive topic (CT) and a non-CT (cf. e.g. Lee 1999). Büring 1997 proposes that the meaning of a sentence with a CT corresponds to an alternative set (cf. Rooth 1992 for focus) and associates that meaning with a particular accent (called 'B accent' for English). An example of CT in Italian is (2).

(2) A: *What did you give to your brothers?*

B: **A Leo** (gli) ho regalato un cd, e **a Dante** (gli) ho regalato un libro.
to Leo to-him (I) have given a cd and to D. to-him (I) have given a book
'I gave a cd to Leo, and a book to Dante'

A tail encompasses ground material that does not display link-like behavior. I also assume that it is always discourse old (in the sense of Prince 1992). In Italian, it is typically represented by a Clitic Right Dislocated element (CLRD), as the second occurrence of *il tempo* below (from Frascarelli 2000):

(3) Non è questione che il tempo non te l'ho dato, io te l' ho dato **il tempo**

not is question that the time not to-you it (I)have given I to-you it have given the time
'The point is not that I didn't give you time. I DID give you **time**.'

A tail is present in the sentence only when its referent is too deeply embedded in the discourse to be easily recovered by the hearer. When the referent has been mentioned in the previous sentence, omission preferably occurs. This specially happens in an answer to a question. I ascribe this to the Q-A congruence requirement (cf. Krifka 2004, Büring forth.).

In this paper I make the following claim on the distribution of links and tails in Italian:

(4) Links and tails occupy mutually exclusive positions in Italian: links are always pre-focal position, while tails are always post-focal.

(4) is supported by the fact that, if a topic is a CLLD but post-focal, it is still interpreted as a tail. In (5), a CLLD that is a new discourse referent results unacceptable in post-focal position:

(5) A: 'Did you give some music as a present for Christmas this year?'

B1: * Beh, un MASTERIZZATORE a un mio amico (gli) ho regalato.

well a CD-burner to a my friend (to-him) (I) have given
 B2: ? Beh, a un mio amico un MASTERIZZATORE (gli) ho regalato.
 well to a my friend a CD-burner (to-him) (I) have given

Moreover, a pre-focal topic can never be a tail. By means of data from spoken corpora, I show that whenever a topic is introduced in the discourse as a link, in pre-focal position, it can only be iterated in post-focal position. The topic can be iterated in pre-focal position only if the ‘link continuum’ is interrupted by the insertion of a different link. In other words, a topic shift creates a barrier for the topic to see its antecedent, and the topic is therefore interpreted as a shifting one (cf. Walker et al. 1998, Di Eugenio 1990, 1998).

It is actually possible that a topic *does* iterate even if no different topic intervenes in between. In that case, though, the topic gets a contrastive interpretation (cf. Arregi 2003 for Spanish).

(6) A: Dante, lo boccerai? ‘Dante, will you fail him?’

B: No, **Dante** non lo boccerò. (Ma Aldo e Leo sicuramente sì)
 no Dante (I) not him will-fail but A. and L. surely yes
 ‘No, I won’t fail Dante’(But Aldo and Leo I surely WILL).

(6B) can be followed by a sentence like that given in parentheses. This means that *Dante* is interpreted as contrastive. Note that a contrastive interpretation does not arise if the referent is introduced in the discourse for the first time (cf. 1). I therefore propose that the contrastive interpretation in (6B) arises as a consequence of the fact that **an overt pre-focal topic must always be a link**, namely it must always be interpreted as shifting. In order to interpret *Dante* as shifting, it has to be considered as part of a different set of alternatives than the topic in (6A) (not just the set of all students, but e.g. the set of Dante, Aldo and Leo). Hence, the contrastive interpretation arises.

Other CTs that do not have an explicit entity in the discourse to contrast with can receive the same explanation. Consider for instance Büring’s example below:

(7) A: Which book would Fritz buy? B: Well, **I** would buy *The Hotel New HAMPSHIRE*.

Büring says that the topic *I* bears a B accent, and this makes the sentence acceptable as an answer to A because it evokes an alternative set that also includes the proper answer to A. I argue instead that the absence of the B accent would make the answer incongruent for the following reason. The question ‘is about’ Fritz, so the link of the answer should also be *Fritz*, or better, an unstressed pronoun that refers to *Fritz* (e.g. *He would buy War and Peace*). But in (7B) a topic shift occurs. This means that speaker B does not really answer the question. His exchange can be interpreted as: “As for Fritz, I cannot / do not say anything; as for myself, on the contrary, I say that...”. In this sense, *I* is interpreted as implicitly contrasting with the link of the question. Again, it is the topic shift that triggers a contrastive effect. The B accent simply indicates that the subject pronoun is phonetically strong, as a link must be, given its ‘newness’. In a pro-drop language like Italian, the subject pronoun is present in the sentence corresponding to (7B) (**Io** *comprerei...* ‘I would buy...’), while it is dropped if the answer has the same topic as the question (*pro comprerebbe...* ‘(He) would buy...’).

In conclusion, these data show that a formal distinction between CT and non-CT does not hold. I claim instead that **contrast is an epiphenomenon deriving from rules of discourse** (cf. Brunetti 2004 for a single *focus* account). In other words in my analysis, contrary e.g. to Büring’s one, a contrastive interpretation of a topic is not triggered by any prosodic or semantic characteristic of the topic. I claim that Büring’s semantics for CTs pertains to all pre-focal topics, that is links. A link always evokes alternatives. When such alternatives are

explicitly mentioned and compared in the context, a contrastive interpretation arises (cf. 2). Moreover, a topic is interpreted as contrastive when the overt presence of the topic is not expected in pre-focal position, given the rules of discourse. Note that from what I have just said, a tail (a post-focal element) can never be contrastive. This has in fact been repeatedly shown in the literature for Italian (cf. e.g. Frascarelli 2000; cf. also Büring 1997 for German):

(8) A: *What did you give to your brothers?*

B: * (Gli) ho regalato un cd, **a Leo** e (gli) ho regalato un libro, **a Dante**.
to-him (I) have given a cd to Leo and to-him (I) have given a book to D.

In this paper I eventually propose a pragmatic account for sentences with pre-posed focus that is based on my analysis of background material explained above. In particular, I make the proposal in (10) for a sentence like (9):

(9) CLARA ha comprato il giornale

CLARA has bought the newspaper

(10) The discourse properties of post-focal background (PFB) in sentences with focus pre-posing are the same as those of post-focal topics (tails).

Focus in (10) is typically interpreted as contrastive. On the other hand, if it is used as an answer to a question like *Who bought the newspaper?*, it sounds unacceptable. Developing what has been proposed by Brunetti 2004, I argue that these facts are just a consequence of the properties of PFB. Given (10), such properties are: (a) PFB must be discourse old, (b) PFB does not contain links, and (c) PFB can and is preferably omitted when its antecedent is easily recovered in the discourse (which specially happens in Q-A pairs, as I said above).

Consider (11). The sentence is uttered in the following situation. Anna and Leo are talking about a certain book of Anna's. Anna does not remember who gave it to her. Then the conversation is dropped, and after some time, Anna utters (11) as a continuation of that prior conversation with Leo:

(11) Ora ricordo! DANTE mi ha regalato quel libro!

now (I) remember DANTE to-me has given that book
'Now I remember! DANTE gave me that book!'

The fact that the background is post-focal and therefore discourse old lets Leo imply that there is some antecedent in a prior discourse for the background, and consequently, that by uttering (11), Anna is referring to the previous conversation they had. The acceptability of the pre-posed focus does not have to do with it being contrastive (as claimed e.g. by Zubizarreta 1998, Belletti 2004, etc.), but rather with the presence of an antecedent for the background somewhere in a previous discourse, and the fact that such antecedent is too far away to be easily recovered by the hearer.

The properties of the PFB also explain why a fragment answer is better than a full answer with pre-posed focus, and why an answer with a pre-focal background is also accepted:

(12) A: Who bought the newspaper?

B1: CLARA (??ha comprato il giornale).

CLARA has bought the newspaper

B2: Il giornale l'ha comprato CLARA.

the newspaper it has bought CLARA

PFB in (12B1) is perfectly recoverable in A, so it has to be omitted (although there are exceptions to this, as discussed in Brunetti 2004). As for (12B2), pre-focal material, even if discourse old, contains a link - *il giornale* - so it does not have to be elided. Note that since *il giornale* iterates the link in the question, it expresses contrast. In fact, the sentence is interpreted as if the speaker implied that other things other than the newspaper should be bought.

Finally, if a sentence with focus pre-posing is uttered in isolation or is given on a paper without a context, the focus is naturally interpreted as contrastive. I claim that the reason why this happens are again the properties of PFB: if a sentence has a PFB, the hearer/reader knows that the PFB has been mentioned in a previous discourse, because post-focal material is always interpreted as discourse old. Thus, if the antecedent is not explicitly provided, the hearer/reader will *imagine* a context where such antecedent can be recoverable. Crucially, an antecedent can readily be assumed to exist if the focus is imagined to contrast with an other one (cf. Wedgwood to appear on Hungarian).

In conclusion, the pragmatic trigger for a pre-posed focus is the fact that the background has to be post-focal. This conclusion has consequences on the syntax of these sentences, as it favors ‘background-oriented’ syntactic analyses (e.g. Vallduví 1992, Samek-Lodovici forth.) over ‘focus-oriented’ ones such as Brody 1990, Rizzi 1997, a.o.

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