

Italian background: Links, tails, and contrast effects

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1 Introduction

In this paper, I analyze the properties of background material in Italian, assuming Vallduví's partition of the background in Link and Tail (Vallduví 1992).¹ According to Vallduví, 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). A tail further specifies how the information must be entered under a specific address. That a link and a tail have different discourse roles is shown by the following Italian example from the LIP corpus (DeMauro et al. 1993), where the same expression *il tempo* ‘the time’ is present in initial position in the first sentence, with the function of a link, and in final position in the second sentence, with the function of a tail.²

- (1) Non è questione che **il tempo** non te l'ho DATO, io te l'ho
not is question that the time not to-you it I-have given I to-you it I-have
DATO *il tempo*.
given the time
‘The point is not that I didn't give you time. I DID give you time.’

I make the following assumptions on the distribution of links and tails in Italian. Links are always sentence initial (as Vallduví 1992 argues for Catalan) and tails are always outside the IP, namely right dislocated (as argued by Vallduví 1993 for Catalan). Starting from these assumptions, the goal of this paper is twofold. On one hand, I will show that a contrastive interpretation of links is a consequence of their presence in certain specific discourse contexts (parr. 2.1–2.3). On the other hand, I will show that the properties of tails belong also to backgrounded material that linearly follows the focus when the focus occupies a sentence initial position (parr. 3, 3.1).

2 Links and tails

Links are frequently preverbal subjects (see (2)). In fact, non-focused preverbal subjects always have a link-like interpretation. However, other syntactic elements can be links. In such cases, the link is expressed by a Clitic Left Dislocated expression (from now on, CLLD), as shown in (3). Note that in both examples, the link occupies a position at the beginning of the sentence.

- (2) Sai? **Un mio amico** ha vinto la lotteria.
you-know a my friend has won the lottery
‘Did you know? a friend of mine won the lottery’

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² This example has been selected by Frascarelli (2000). From now on, I indicate links with boldface, and tails with boldface italics. Small caps indicate focal stress.

- (3) Sai? **A mio fratello** gli hanno rubato la moto.
 you-know to my brother to-him they-have stolen the moto
 ‘Did you know? My brother’s moto was stolen.’

I will remain agnostic on whether it is the CLLD position that triggers a link-like interpretation, or rather it is sufficient that the topic be in sentence initial position in order to be interpreted as link. This means that I will leave open the question whether preverbal subjects occupy a canonical specIP position or rather a higher, left dislocated position (as claimed for instance by Vallduví (1993) for Catalan and Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou (1998) for Greek and Spanish, a.o.).

A link does not have to be discourse old, and this is clear from the fact that the sentences in (2) and (3) can be uttered without previous mentioning of *un mio amico* or *a mio fratello*. A tail, instead, is always discourse old. This means that a tail must always be recoverable from the previous discourse or at least from the situational context (cf. Ziv & Grosz 1994). A sentence like (4), which is the same as (3) except for the position of the dislocated element, cannot be uttered ‘out of the blue’:

- (4) ?? Sai? Gli hanno rubato la MOTO, **a mio fratello**.
 you-know to-him they-have stolen the moto to my brother

I will return to this characteristic of tails in par. 3.

2.1 Contrast effects

Another important difference between links and tails is that a link can be contrastive, while a tail cannot. This is illustrated by the Italian example below (see also Frascarelli 2000):

- (5) a. Che cosa hai dato ai tuoi fratelli?
 ‘What did you give to your brothers?’
 b. **A Leo** (gli) ho dato un cd, e **a Ugo** (gli) ho dato un libro.
 to Leo to-him I-have given a cd and to Ugo to-him I-have given a book
 c. *(Gli) ho dato un CD, **a Leo** e (gli) ho dato un LIBRO, **a**
 to-him I-have given a cd to Leo and to-him I-have given a book to
Ugo.
 Ugo

In (5b), *Leo* and *Ugo* are the two members of the set of brothers mentioned in (5a). The answer is not about the set of brothers as a whole, but rather it is split into two answers in which something different is stated on each member of the set. A contrast/comparison is made between the two members of the set. In (5c), a contrast/comparison between the two members of the set cannot be made, and the sentence results ungrammatical.

As I have already noted in Brunetti (2006), a contrast effect arises also when a link (but not a tail) occurs in an answer to a question. See the example below:

- (6) a. **Dante**, lo boccerai? ‘Will you fail Dante?’
 b. No, **Dante** non lo boccerò. (Ma Ugo e Leo sicuramente sì)
 no Dante not him I-will-fail but Ugo and Leo surely yes
 ‘No, Dante, I won’t fail him (but Ugo and Leo, I surely will)’

- c. No, non lo boccerò (*Dante*).
 no not him I-will-fail Dante
 ‘No, I won’t FAIL Dante’

(6b) is naturally interpreted as if it were followed by a sentence like the one given in parentheses. In other words, the answer sounds like a partial one, and you expect to know more about the destiny of other students apart from Dante. Such an interpretation does not arise in (6c), where *Dante* is actually preferably omitted.

The difference between b and c was already noted by Arregi (2003) for Spanish. According to him, the CLLD in this context is a contrastive topic as defined in Büring (1997).³ Arregi makes the strong claim that the semantic interpretation of a CLLD is *always* that of a contrastive topic. His claim, however, is not supported by the data. A contrastive interpretation does not arise each time a CLLD is present in a sentence. If the referent is introduced in the discourse for the first time, like in (3), there is no contrast effect. Thus, what triggers a contrastive interpretation cannot just be the fact that an expression is a CLLD. The contrastive interpretation is triggered by the fact that the expression was already uttered in the preceding question. In order to explain the reason for such behavior, it is necessary to open a parenthesis on what governs the presence or absence of links in a discourse in Italian.

2.2 Non-realized links

The claim I make is that, whenever a link is introduced in the discourse, it is not overtly realized (if it is a subject) or it is realized with a clitic (if it is an object) in subsequent sentences, as long as it represents the *same* discourse topic. The link can be realized again only if the ‘topic continuum’ is interrupted (cf. Brunetti 2006). This is shown by the example below, taken from a spontaneous narration of one of Mercer Mayer’s wordless ‘frog stories’ (English glosses are rather free):

- (7) Ok dunque **il bambino** si prepara per andare a... Ø è davanti allo
 ok so the boy is getting ready to go to... he is in front of the
 specchio e Ø si prepara Ø si mette la cravatta per andare al
 mirror and he is getting ready he puts on the tie to go to-the
 ristorante (...)e **i suoi amici** lo guardano tristi perché sanno che
 restaurant and his friends look at him sad because they-know that
 non andranno con lui. Allora poi **il bambino** saluta il cane...
 they won’t go with him so then the boy says hello to the dog...

The link *il bambino* represents the discourse topic, until *i suoi amici* is introduced as a new topic and the topic continuum is interrupted. In the subsequent sentence, *il bambino*

³ According to Büring (1997), the meaning of a sentence with a contrastive topic is a set of sets of propositions (or put it otherwise, a set of questions). For instance, an exchange like: ‘What did the pop stars wear?’ ‘**The female pop stars** wore caftans’, where *the female pop stars* is a contrastive topic, has the following semantic representation: *((the female pop stars wore caftans, the f. p. s. wore dresses, the f. p. s. wore tuxedos ...);((the male pop stars wore caftans, the m. p. s. wore dresses, the male pop stars wore tuxedos...))*, where the inner brackets represent the alternative sets created by the focus, and the external brackets represent the alternative set created by the topic.

represents the discourse topic again and therefore it is overtly expressed. In other words, whenever a link is given in the sentence, a topic shift occurs (cf. Brunetti 2006).⁴

DiEugenio (1990), DiEugenio (1998) accounts for the presence or absence of subject pronouns in Italian within the framework of Centering Theory (Grosz et al. 1995). She shows that subjects in Italian are null when the center transition between the two sentences is a CONTINUE — that is, roughly, when there is no shift of center of attention from one sentence to another —; an overtly expressed subject pronoun is instead realized if the center transition is a RETAIN or a SHIFT — that is, roughly, when the center of attention is not the one expected, given the previous sentence. The phenomenon Di Eugenio describes is very similar to the one I describe above, despite the fact that she analyses the data by taking centers of attention into account, while I do it by referring to the notion of discourse topic. However, Di Eugenio only restricts her analysis to null *subjects*. In my analysis, on the contrary, what is omitted is the link that would represent the current discourse topic; it does not matter if the link is a subject or not. As I said above, links are usually subjects, but that is not necessarily always the case. In (3), for instance, the subject is arbitrary and therefore it could not represent the topic (cf. Murcia-Serra 2003). The topic is then represented by the CLLDed indirect object. Another example where the subject does not coincide with the discourse topic is given below. The example is taken again from a narration of a wordless ‘frog story’.

- (8) (...) e **il cane** casca, dalla finestra, col barattolo infilato nella
 and the dog falls from-the window with-the canister wedged in-the
 testa e **gli** si rompe il barattolo e così Ø se ne può liberare
 head and to-him SI breaks the canister and so SI of-it he-can get-rid

The subject *Il cane* ‘the dog’ is introduced as a link in the first sentence and it represents the discourse topic of the whole discourse segment considered. In the second sentence, however, it is the dative clitic that refers to the dog, not the subject, while in the third sentence the null subject again refers to the dog. The predicate in the second sentence is the unaccusative verb *rompersi* ‘to break’, and its subject refers to an inanimate entity. An inanimate entity is less apt to represent a topic in the discourse, because a topic is preferably animate and with an agent role. For this reason, the subject does not coincide with the discourse topic. Still, the discourse topic remains the dog, and the argument representing it is expressed by a reduced form, the dative clitic *gli*.

2.3 Contrast effects again

Consider now again the exchange (6a–b) given above. What triggers a contrastive interpretation is not the fact that Dante is a CLLD (contra Arregi), but rather that *Dante* was already present in the preceding question. In the light of what I said in the preceding paragraph, the explanation for this behavior is the following. If *Dante* represented the topic of both (6a) and (6b), its omission would be expected in (6b), given that a link is not realized if it represents the same discourse topic as the preceding link, as we have seen in (7–8). But in (6b), *Dante* does not represent the same discourse topic as in (6a). Rather,

⁴ The same behaviour is observed by Butt & King (1997) for Hindi, a language that allows null arguments. Butt and King describe the phenomenon basically in the same way as I do: “Arguments which function as a topic within their clause, but which simultaneously indicate a change (switch) in topic from the preceding utterance cannot be realized as null”. They also say that “continuing topics, i.e., entities that are the topic of the current utterance and of the previous utterance, can be dropped and in general do not occur overtly”.

in (6b) the discourse topic is a set that constitutes the complete answer to the question ((6b) is a partial answer), and Dante is just a member of that set, which is formed by, say, Dante, Ugo and Leo. Thus, the topic in (6b) is not the same as the one in (6a), and omission of the link does not have to occur. The contrastive interpretation in (6b) is the result of an accommodation that allows the hearer to interpret the topic as *different* from the previous topic.

Summarizing, a contrastive interpretation for links then arises in the following two cases. The first case is when the link is explicitly compared with another one, and both are members of a set, as in (5). In that example, *Leo* and *Ugo* are two members of the same set and are contrasted/put in parallel with each other. Contrast is explicit here, in the sense that the contrasting elements are both present in the discourse. In the second case, a contrastive interpretation arises as a consequence of the fact that a link has always to be interpreted as a shifting topic. In contexts where no topic shift apparently occurs, namely when the same link is repeated in two subsequent sentences (see (6)), the discourse topic expressed by the second link is interpreted as different from the discourse topic expressed by the first link. More precisely, it is interpreted as a set including the entity expressed by the link. The contrast effect arises in that the entity expressed by the link is implicitly compared with the other members of that set. This also explains the fact that a sentence like (6b) is interpreted as a partial answer. The answer (unlike the question) is not about Dante, but rather about a set of individuals including Dante, so we expect that something else will be said about the other members of the set.

In conclusion, in question/answer pairs like (6a–b), it is the very presence of an overtly realized link that yields a contrastive interpretation. Whenever a link is realized in the sentence, a topic shift occurs, so the sentence must be interpreted as having a different discourse topic than that of the previous sentence. This is possible only if we interpret the sentence as a partial answer, as described above.

Remember that the contrast effect described above only pertains to expressions that are sentence initial, namely that are links. An expression representing the discourse topic can be iterated in a subsequent sentence if it occupies a Clitic Right Dislocated position (from now on, CLRD), namely, if it is a tail. This is shown in (1), where the second occurrence of *il tempo*, which is a CLRD, iterates the link of the previous sentence. This means that a tail cannot represent a shifting topic. Consequently, a tail cannot have a contrastive interpretation either, as it is illustrated by the ungrammaticality of a sentence like (5c), and by the fact that in a sentence like (6b), the right dislocated element cannot be interpreted as contrasting with something else. In (5), *Leo* and *Ugo* represent two members of the set of brothers, rather than the whole set, so they represent a different discourse topic than that of the question. Therefore, they are interpreted as shifting topics. But this is possible because they are in initial position, namely because they are links. If they are right dislocated, they cannot be interpreted as shifting topics, and the sentence results ungrammatical. In (6), we don't necessarily have a topic shift, because *Dante* is uttered in the question *and* in the answer. The second *Dante* must be interpreted as a shifting topic if it is in initial position, and we can do it by assuming that it is part of a set, as explained above. But if *Dante* is a tail, the interpretation will be the most obvious in that context, namely that *Dante* just expresses the same discourse topic as *Dante* in the question. Indeed, the sentence in (6b) is not ungrammatical as (5c), it simply cannot be interpreted as a partial answer.

3 Tails and sentences with initial focus

I have said above that tails occupy a position outside the clause, and we have seen that an expression with the properties of a tail is always CLRD in Italian (see (1), (6c)). In this paragraph I will provide some data showing that the Post-Focal Background in a sentence with initial focus (from now on, PFB) shares the same tail-like properties with CLRD. By PFB, I mean backgrounded material that linearly follows a focus occupying a left peripheral position. An example is given in (9), where the PFB is *ho prestato gli appunti* ‘I have lent the notes’, which follows the focus *a Clara*.

- (9) A CLARA ho prestato gli appunti.
to CLARA I-have lent the notes

I have said above that a tail is always discourse old. More precisely, a tail in Italian can refer to: an entity present in the situational context, but not mentioned; an entity mentioned in the discourse context, but not recently; an entity mentioned in the previous sentence (cf. Ziv & Grosz 1994). The example below from the LIP corpus shows that a CLRD can refer to an entity that is situationally implicit. The excerpt is taken from a conversation between a parent and a teacher concerning a student’s performance at school. The student is the topic of the conversation, but she is never explicitly mentioned. In (10), she is eventually mentioned, and the expression appears as a CLRD:

- (10) Non è soltanto buona volontà (...) ma c’è proprio un miglioramento (...);
not is just good will (...) but there is really an improvement (...)
sì, cioè, c’è da farci qualche CONTO **su questa ragazza**
yes that is there is to give-her some confidence, to this girl
‘It’s not just good will; that is, I think it’s worth COUNTING on this girl’

The PFB can be situationally recoverable as well. This is shown in (11). The speaker in (11a) has given something to the speaker in (11b), so the action of ‘giving something to speaker a’ is implicit in the situational context.

- (11) a. Questo è il ticket. ‘This is the ticket’
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; an I.D. you have to give me’

The following example from the LIP corpus shows that a CLRD can refer to an entity mentioned in the discourse context, but not recently. The CLRD *’sta ragazzina* ‘this girl’ is mentioned two exchanges earlier, about seven lines higher up in the dialogue.

- (12) A mia madre gli piaceva TANTISSIMO **’sta ragazzina**
to my mother to-her was-pleasing very-much this girl
‘My mother liked very MUCH, this girl’

PFB can also have an antecedent that is not recently mentioned in the discourse. Consider (13). 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 (13) as a continuation of that prior conversation with Leo:

- (13) 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!’

Since the PFB has tail-like properties, it is discourse old. This lets the hearer imply that there is an antecedent for it in the discourse. The hearer will therefore recall that previous conversation and find the antecedent for the PFB there (see Brunetti 2004).

Finally, the example in (1) shows that a CLRD can refer to an entity mentioned in the previous sentence. The example in (14b) shows that a similar context is also possible for PFB. In fact, the PFB *ho prestato gli appunti* ‘I have borrowed the notes’ has an antecedent in the preceding question.⁵

- (14) a. A Leo gli hai prestato gli appunti?
 ‘Did you lend your notes to Leo?’
 b. No, a CLARA ho prestato gli appunti.
 no to CLARA I-have lent the notes
 ‘No, I lent my notes to CLARA’

Finally, the possibilities for a tail to be unrealized seem to be the same when the tail is represented by a CLRD and when it is represented by PFB. In particular, a CLRD is preferably deleted when it is contained in an answer to a question (see (15b)). In Brunetti (2004) I propose that a fragment answer is a full sentential structure that has undergone ellipsis. More precisely, I propose that the focused element has moved to the left periphery and then ellipsis of the PFB has occurred. Assuming such an analysis, we can see in (15c) that also the PFB in an answer to a question is preferably deleted.⁶

- (15) a. Chi ha comprato il giornale?
 ‘Who bought the newspaper?’
 b. Lo ha comprato CLARA (?il giornale).
 it has bought CLARA the newspaper
 c. CLARA (??ha comprato il giornale).
 CLARA has bought the newspaper

3.1 Conclusions on tails

Concluding, in the second part of this paper I have provided some evidence that the properties of tails pertain not only to CLRD, but also to PFB. Both CLRD and PFB are discourse old expressions, namely they have an antecedent either in the discourse or that is recoverable from the situational context. The antecedent can either be mentioned recently in the discourse or not. If it is mentioned in a question and the tail is in the answer, the tail is usually deleted. When the tail is present in a sentence, a contrastive interpretation of the focus is often given, due to the fact that what is contrasted or corrected must have already been mentioned earlier in the discourse or at least implicitly assumed by the situational context, and this is always true when tails are present, given that they are always anaphoric.

⁵ The focus in sentences containing tails is often contrastive, e.g., in (1), (14) and (11) (cf. also Mayol 2002). The relation between contrastive focus and the presence of a tail has to do with the fact that a tail is always discourse old, namely it is anaphoric material. Indeed, when something is contrasted with something else or a correction is made, what is contrasted or corrected has already been said before, or at least it is implied from the situational context. Therefore, the presence of discourse old background is expected (cf. also Wedgwood forthcoming for Hungarian.)

⁶ A deeper analysis of when exactly the PFB and a CLRD can or must be deleted is not within the scope of this article. For a discussion on that matter, see Brunetti (2004).

Finally, we must note that if the parallelism I have driven between the discourse function of CLRD and PFB is correct, and if one assumes as I said at the beginning of this paper that tails are always out of the clause, then we have to conclude that also the PFB occupies a syntactic position outside the clause. This claim has indeed been made in the literature, for instance by Vallduví (1992) for Catalan and Samek-Lodovici (2006) for Italian. Although I haven't treated syntactic issues in this paper, my comparison of the discourse properties of CLRD and PFB can provide some support for such syntactic analyses.

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