

## Information structural interfaces: An introduction

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This special issue of *Italian Journal of Linguistics* aims to shed light on the notion of grammatical interface through the study of the encoding of discourse pragmatics in a number of Romance languages. The novel data and analyses featured in the issue illustrate how the temporary mind state, the knowledge and the informational intentions of the interlocutors (Halliday 1967, Chafe 1976, Reinhart 1981, Lambrecht 1994, Kiss 1998, Buring 1999, Erteschik-Shir 2007, Krifka & Musan 2012, a.o.) can be encoded through many different grammatical strategies. Thus, topicality need not be marked in morphosyntax and may instead have sensorimotor manifestations, as argued by Colasanti & Marchetiello in their contribution to the issue. In turn, verum focus and mirativity can be expressed through lexical insertion (Cruschina, De Cia), while contrastiveness is not only signalled by prosody but also through lexical reduplication in the Venetan varieties discussed by Badan & Padovan. Lastly, the contributions authored by Parry, Ciconte, and Bentley & McLellan shed light on different paths of diachronic development of the marking of theticity in Romance.

Regardless of the specific strategies privileged by individual languages, all grammatical systems must be assumed to comprise interacting components that encode and express linguistically relevant meaning. It is the interplay of such components that is under scrutiny in the study of the grammatical interfaces. Broadly speaking, we can distinguish derivational approaches to the study of the interfaces (e.g. Minimalism and Cartography, Chomsky 1995 *et seq.*, Rizzi 1997, Cinque 1999 a.o.) from models that operate with parallel representations (e.g. Lexical Functional Grammar, see Bresnan 2001, Asudeh & Toivonen 2015, Dalrymple 2023, a.o., and Role and Reference Grammar, see Foley & Van Valin 1984; Van Valin & LaPolla 1997; Van Valin 2005, 2023; Bentley *et al.* 2023).

In the derivational approaches, which are syntactically driven (cf. Jackendoff 2002: 40), the interfaces are essential components that ensure the convergence of a syntactic derivation. In Minimalism, for example, each syntactic operation, particularly internal merge (or movement), must be motivated as a last-resort strategy to satisfy an interface

requirement. The two primary interfaces in this framework are Logical Form (LF) and Phonological Form (PF). LF, also known as the conceptual-intentional (CI) interface, involves ‘thought’ and, hence the interpretation of meaning. PF, the sensorimotor (SM) interface, is responsible for the externalization of ‘form’ in speaking or signing. The CI interface is considered to be primary, insofar as the syntactic computation primarily functions to support the conceptual-intentional system; in contrast, the SM interface is secondary, in that structures that successfully converge at spell-out are always interpreted by the CI system, but they do not necessarily need to be externalized, since much of language use occurs internally (Chomsky *et al.* 2023: 1, 12). Narrow syntax comprises a set of basic syntactic operations (e.g. Merge, Agree) and is understood to be blind to the interfaces, with all other aspects of syntactic derivation being derived from interface conditions and properties of the lexicon (cf. Svenonius 2021: 4-7). The hierarchically structured objects computed by the narrow syntax are handed over to the interfaces at spell-out for their phonetic realization (PF/SM) and semantic interpretation (LF/CI).

In relation to information structure, one point that has been debated in the literature is whether discourse features (i.e. those features that are responsible for the syntactic configuration of discourse-related notions) are part of the narrow syntax. Within Minimalism, in the effort to reduce the core syntactic apparatus to a single operation, Merge, Chomsky (2020: 44) argues that, unlike external merge, internal merge (i.e. movement) is often driven by “discourse-oriented or information-related properties or scopal properties,” thus suggesting that there must be space for the formalization of discourse-oriented information in the derivation of a linguistic object at the pre-spell-out stage (see Ojeda 2017 for relevant insights and implementation). Thus, if we consider PF and LF as independent components of the grammar, the mapping between LF meanings and PF realizations must be necessarily mediated by the syntax. This is evident in much of the work presented in this issue; for example, Colasanti & Marchetiello claim that gestural topic markers are aligned with the syntactic distribution of objects that are interpreted as topical elements. Similarly, De Cia argues that the *verum focus* marker *lu* receives prosodic prominence at PF from a precise syntactic configuration, which maps directly onto a specific discourse-pragmatic interpretation.

As for the parallel architecture approaches (Jackendoff 2002: 107-151), they conceive of the different components of the grammatical architecture as separate levels of representation, each endowed with its own formalism. These different modules are correlated through interface principles, which are normally subject to coherence and completeness

constraints. These are key to the well-formedness and successful parsing of linguistic structure.

The parallel-architecture framework that figures in this collection is Role and Reference Grammar (henceforth **RRG**). RRG represents discourse pragmatics and lexical meaning separately from syntax and seeks explanation for the striking similarities and differences between languages in the mapping of these different levels of representation. The mapping is governed by a linking algorithm (Van Valin 2023: 116-125), which relates the lexical phase of clause formation to the morphosyntactic phase. The former phase builds the lexical meaning of the clause, starting from the lexical meaning of the predicators in the clause, and assigns generalized semantic roles to the arguments, following universal and explicit principles. The morphosyntactic phase determines the morphosyntax of the clause: the assignment of grammatical relations, case, voice alternations, alignment, etc. Much of the bewildering morphosyntactic differences that are observed between languages are analysed in RRG as consequences of the selection of different options in the linking from the lexical phase to the morphosyntactic phase, and vice versa.

The discourse-pragmatic dimension can in principle intervene at each and every step in the linking (Bentley 2023). However, it has recently been argued to be intertwined with lexical-decompositional meaning through a privileged interface relation (Balogh *et al.* 2026). Thus, pre-communicative linguistic meaning is represented in purely Vendlerian and Dowtyan terms, while the knowledge and informational intentions of the interlocutors at each moment in discourse are encoded in enriched lexical-decompositional representations, which keep track of the evolving discourse status of referents and events.

An important facet of Role and Reference Grammar is that while relying on universals of lexical-semantic decomposition and on general principles for the linking of the lexicon with syntax, it also proposes a notion of Constructional Schema (**CS**). CSs are constellations of instructions, which characterize language-specific structures and must be assumed to be part of the language-specific competence of speakers and signers. In Bentley & McLellan's contribution, it will be argued that a feature of the existential construction of Reunion Creole has been borrowed by other constructions that are interpreted as propositions on a stage topic (Erteschik-Shir 1997).

The issue includes seven contributions, which we briefly introduce hereafter. Colasanti & Marchetiello (*this issue*) explore how interface requirements related to information structure can be mediated through the visual modality. Focusing on southern Italo-Romance varieties, the authors investigate the interaction between a co-speech gesture and

syntax in the encoding of information-structural features. They explore the distribution of the gestural topic marker [FINGER-BUNCH-OPEN-HAND] (abbreviated as **FBO**) and its association with different types of topicality. The authors argue that, when assigned both a semantic interpretation and a phonological representation (within the sensorimotor system), gestures like FBO are the output of syntactic computation. This leads to the broader claim that the relationship between gesture and information structure operates at the syntax-phonology interface, mirroring the mechanisms observed in spoken language. In fact, the temporal alignment of the FBO gesture with the spoken topic reflects the scopal relations of its syntactic domain. The FBO can only be paired with topicalized constituents. Distributionally, it can be found across a range of topic types and positions, which include aboutness topics, contrastive topics, and given topics appearing in left- or right-dislocated positions. The authors conclude that the gestural topic marker syntactically encodes a generalized [+TOP] feature that must be read by LF. The authors' theoretical framework aligns with Wiltschko's (2021) model of the 'syntacticization of speech acts'. This places the interaction between gesture and information structure within the broader architecture of a syntax-LF interface. To some extent this approach is similar to Badan & Padovan's, further reinforcing the idea that discourse-related features are syntactically encoded, and, hence, interface-sensitive.

Cruschina (*this issue*) examines the morphosyntactic properties and pragmatic functions of the invariant discourse particle *talé* in Sicilian. This particle functions primarily as an attention-getter and, in its most grammaticalized pragmatic use, encodes mirativity, highlighting the unexpected nature of the propositional content of the clause. *Talé* does not contribute to propositional content but instead serves a pragmatic function at the level of discourse organization. It expresses the speaker's stance toward a given state of affairs in an emotional and evaluative manner. Insofar as the syntax-pragmatics interface is concerned, the author adopts a cartographic approach, proposed by Speas & Tenny (2003), in which the roles of speaker and hearer are syntactically encoded in the higher portion of the left periphery of the clause. Depending on its structural position, *talé* functions either as an attention-getting device or as a mirative marker. The cartographic approach thus sheds light on the role of *talé* in information structure.

De Cia (*this issue*) investigates the interface between syntax and information structure through the lens of verum focus marking in Sovramontino, a null-subject Gallo-Italic variety spoken in the North-Eastern part of Italy. Discussing the discourse-pragmatic expletive *lu*, the author shows how semantically vacuous elements can occupy structur-

ally defined positions to encode discourse-level meaning. The analysis reveals that *lu* surfaces in clause-final position in the absence of a referential subject, marking the polarity of the proposition as contextually salient. In contrast, in clauses with referential subjects, verum focus is expressed via the insertion of a prosodically prominent pronominal copy of the subject. The author puts forward the idea that the expression of verum focus is linked to the discourse-pragmatic notion of ‘aboutness’ mediated by the syntactic realization of the formal features of the structural subject of the clause. De Cia argues that, in the syntactic realization of verum focus in Sovramontino, the syntactic mechanism at play involves polarity fronting to PolarityP, followed by TP-remnant movement. The two respectively encode discourse-givenness and polarity emphasis as necessary conditions for the realization of verum. By disentangling verum focus from narrow focus, the author also supports the Lexical Operator Thesis (LOT), showing that verum is syntactically encoded independently of focus alternatives. The findings hence contribute to our understanding of how syntactic structure mediates information-structural interpretation, offering new insights into the typology of discourse-related expletives.

Badan & Padovan (*this issue*) present an analysis of the Venetan discourse marker *e anca anca* (henceforth **EAA**) at the interface between semantics, pragmatics and syntax. EAA serves a dual function: it corrects the preceding utterance and expresses the speaker’s evaluative stance with respect to a quantificational domain that involves a clear threshold or standard. Thus, EAA behaves similarly to a focus adverb, introducing a set of alternative propositions, which are ordered on a scale, thereby producing either a widening or narrowing effect on the initial domain. Syntactically, EAA is claimed to be located in the Speech Act layer of the clause, following an interface model in which discourse functions are encoded within the syntactic structure – what Haegeman & Hill (2013) term the ‘syntacticization of discourse’. The authors align this approach with the cartographic tradition in generative grammar. The case of EAA also supports the view that contrast should be understood as a continuum (De Cia 2018, Cruschina 2021), with corrective focus representing the highest degree of contrast. Furthermore, the paper explores the interaction between phonology and syntax in shaping discourse-pragmatic interpretation, particularly in relation to Contrastive Reduplication (Travis 2001). EAA is analysed as a reduplicated form of the adverb *anca*, and the authors describe it as an instance of “added-value contrastive reduplication.” They emphasize that reduplication is a productive linguistic mechanism expressing a wide range of syntactic and semantic functions.

Parry (*this issue*) investigates the diachronic development of the etymologically locative clitic *i/-je* of Piedmontese into a syntax-semantic interface device that introduces a new entity or situation into discourse. Relying on a rich scholarly tradition and adducing new evidence from *'L Testament Neuv dë Nossëgnour Gesu-Crist tradout in lingua piemonteisa* (a 19<sup>th</sup> c. Piedmontese translation of the Gospels), the author argues that the Piedmontese presentational clitic originated in sentences with goal-oriented verbs. Through gradual reanalysis, this anaphoric, referential, locative clitic evolved into a non-argumental marker of verbal agreement with an implicit Subject of Predication (in the sense of Bentley & Cruschina 2018). A novel finding of the analysis of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. text is that an intermediate mirative stage emerges in the development from locative argument to presentational marker. As a mirative device, *i/-je* attracts the attention of the hearer/reader to a new appearance, first in a visual sense and then metaphorically. In essence, the locative clitic grammaticalizes as a marker of presentational broad focus via a mirative function, which draws attention to the appearance of a new referent on the scene. Parry's (2025) investigation highlights the importance of the interfacing of discourse-pragmatics with syntax in the explanation of language change.

Analysing evidence from early Romance texts from northern Italy, Cicone (*this issue*) provides evidence in support of the discourse-pragmatic distinction between aboutness and referential topics, claiming that the two topic functions are manifested in different word orders in the said texts. Starting from the assumption that all utterances have an aboutness topic (Erteschik-Shir 1997), Cicone argues that early expletive subjects spell out the implicit topic of broad-focus presentational V-S sentences. The expletive subject is understood as an underspecified, context-dependent location, which encodes the spatio-temporal coordinates of the event or situation presented by thethetic construction. Historically, the expletive may have surfaced to differentiate V-S constructions with a focal subject inthetic sentence-focus structures from those in which the postverbal subject is a referential topic in a categorical predicate-focus structure. Indeed, the expletive need not occur when the spatio-temporal logodeixis is provided explicitly in the co-text. The disambiguation of broad-focus statements from predicate-focus sentences via the insertion of an expletive subject ultimately supports the idea that seemingly topicless sentences require a stage topic (Erteschik-Shir 1997), and this is achieved through different linguistic strategies at the syntax-pragmatics interface.

Lastly, Bentley & McLellan (*this issue*) take issue with the view that existential sentences and cleft presentationals are indistinguishable in

Romance. Drawing on Francez (2007), McNally (2011) and Creissels (2014), among others, the authors pursue the hypothesis that existentials express existence or presence in a context, whereas presentationals introduce new events into discourse. Through corpus analysis of Kréol Rényoné, a French-based creole spoken on Reunion Island, and the findings of interviews with native speakers, they shed light on clear and testable morphosyntactic differences between the two types of construction, while at the same time pointing out that both constructions exhibit a form of NANA ‘have’. This marker occurs obligatorily in existentials, and optionally in presentationals. In the former construction, NANA inflects for tense and is compatible with negation, thus proving to be a verb. In contrast, broad scope negation is problematic with presentationals, where NANA only occurs in the present tense and preferably in the reduced form *na*. Adopting the constructs of Role and Reference Grammar, the authors propose different representations of the two constructions. They argue that the shared formal marking of the two constructions is a direct consequence of how they interface with discourse, and specifically with the Immediate Common Ground (Berio *et al.* 2017, see Krifka & Musan 2012).

### *Abbreviations*

CI = conceptual-intentional; CS = Constructional Schema; EAA = Venetan discourse marker *e anca anca*; FBO = [FINGER-BUNCH-OPEN-HAND]; LF = Logical Form; LOT = Lexical Operator Thesis; PF = Phonological Form; RRG = Role and Reference Grammar; SM = sensorimotor.

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