

## A *verum* focus expletive: The case of Sovramontino *lu*

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This paper investigates the discourse-pragmatic expletive *lu* in Sovramontino, a conservative Gallo-Italic variety spoken in the northeastern part of Italy. Building on cross-linguistic research, the data suggest that *lu* functions as a dedicated marker of *verum* focus to emphasise the truth value of a proposition. *Lu* surfaces in clause-final position in contexts lacking a referential subject, such as weather verbs, impersonal and presentational constructions, and existential clauses. In contrast, in transitive and unergative clauses, *verum* focus is instead marked by a prosodically prominent pronominal copy of the subject in clause-final position. The analysis seems to support the Lexical Operator Thesis on *verum* focus, positing that *lu* is a semantically vacuous lexical operator inserted to encode polarity emphasis. The paper proposes a syntactic account involving polarity fronting and TP-remnant movement, locating *lu* in the left periphery of the clause. The investigation contributes to our understanding of how null-subject languages encode discourse-pragmatic information structurally; more specifically, it raises the broader questions about the interaction between subjecthood and *verum* focus, offering insights into the typology of discourse-related expletives across Romance and beyond.

**KEYWORDS:** aboutness, discourse-related expletives, Northern-Italian Dialects, *verum* focus.

### 1. Introduction

In null-subject languages, seemingly genuine subject expletives can encode various discourse-pragmatic functions, which pertain to the syntax-pragmatics interface (Hinzelin & Kaiser 2007; Carrilho 2008; Nicolis 2008; Kaiser & Remberger 2009; Bartra-Kaufmann 2011; Greco *et al.* 2017; Booth & Groothuis 2024, among others). For example, in some pro-drop languages, in the absence of an overt syntactic mechanism comparable to the EPP, expletives can signal the absence of a topic (Faarlund 1990; Rögnvaldsson & Thráinsson 1990; Holmberg & Nikanne 2002; Poletto 2005; De Cia & Cerullo 2024, among others). Along with topic-related expletives, in their cross-linguistic survey of discourse-related expletives, Booth & Groothuis (2024: 3) discuss the behaviour of focus-related expletives like Somali *waxa(a)* (Svolacchia *et al.* 1995; Lecarme 1999; Frascarelli 2010), Basque affix

*ba-* (Elordieta & Haddican 2016), Sardinian *ite* (Mensching 2016) and Hungarian *azt* (de Cuba & Ürögdi 2009). They argue that these focus expletives are related to prosodic requirements (e.g. *waxa* in Somali marks a heavy focused XP outside its canonical focus position; *-ba* in Basque marks prosodic stress on an empty focus position), focus and interrogative force (*ite* in Sardinian), or factivity and contrast (*azt* in Hungarian). By investigating the syntactic behaviour of the expletive-like pronoun *lu* in Sovramontino and its interplay with information structure, this paper aims to contribute to this line of inquiry. The paper aims to shed light on the type of discourse-pragmatic information that can be encoded by discourse-pragmatic expletives in null-subject languages, and how these elements are represented in syntax. I will explore the syntactic behaviour of discourse-pragmatic expletive *lu* in Sovramontino, and put forward the claim that *lu* surfaces as a *verum* focus marker in those sentences that lack a referential theta-marked subject. Sovramontino is a North-Eastern Italian Dialect spoken in the south-western part of the province of Belluno (Italy), which features a variety of idiosyncratic strategies of focalisation that range from the systematic fronting of contrastive focal elements to *wh*-in-situ (see De Cia 2018; 2019; 2020).<sup>1</sup> Sovramontino is a null-subject conservative Gallo-Italic variety, which belongs to the Romance language family, and exhibits a basic SVO constituent order.

Booth & Groothuis (2024) claim that focus- and topic-related expletives tend to occur as fillers for a dedicated information structure position (i.e. related to the C-domain). In this position, they are semantically vacuous in the sense that they do not contribute towards any truth-conditional meaning; nevertheless, they contribute to the overall interpretation of the clause at discourse level. This seems precisely to be the case with Sovramontino *lu*, which represents a prosodically-prominent focus-related subject expletive that marks *verum* focus.<sup>2</sup> Consider sentences (1) and (2):

- (1) a. SPEAKER A: *Ere-lo come el temp ier?*  
 be.PST.3SG-3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub> how the weather yesterday  
 ‘How was the weather yesterday?’  
 b. SPEAKER B: *Ier l a piovest*  
 yesterday 3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub> have.3SG rain.PTCP  
 ‘Yesterday it rained.’
- (2) a. SPEAKER A: *Sta setemana qua no l a piovest*  
 this week here NEG 3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub> have.3SG rain.PTCP  
 ‘This week it hasn’t rained.’

b. SPEAKER B: *Ier*            *l*            *a*            *piovest*    *LU*  
 yesterday    3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub>    have.3SG    rain.PTCP    EXPL  
 ‘Yesterday it DID rain.’

The minimal pair in (1b) and (2b) shows that discourse expletive *lu* is optional and its distribution is constrained by discourse-pragmatics. More specifically, in (2), Speaker B denies the truth value of the previous utterance (2a) by asserting the opposite polarity. Gutzmann *et al.* (2020) argue that this is one of the main discourse contexts where *verum focus* is marked cross-linguistically through different strategies. It is important to note that the interrogative pronominal element *-lo* and its affirmative counterpart *el/l* in examples (1) and (2) are not proper expletive subjects, but subject clitic expletives (see Pescarini 2014). Subject clitics (abbreviated SCLs) across Northern Italian Dialects (abbreviated NIDs) are treated as rich agreement markers between the overt or null subject and the finite verb, and not as *bona fide* pronominal subjects (see Rizzi 1986 for a comparison with French subject clitics; Brandi & Cordin 1989; Poletto 2000; De Cia 2021 for the complete SCL paradigm in Sovramontino).

By taking Sovramontino *lu* as case study, this paper aims to shed light on the cross-linguistic syntactic strategies that are available to express *verum focus* and, in turn, exemplify a specific type of discourse-pragmatic information that discourse expletives can encode. The data that will be presented in this paper comprise naturally occurring data (roughly 9 hours) collected between 2015 and 2017, as well as questionnaire-based elicitation (roughly 2 hours) collected in 2024. Given the relatively low frequency of the target construction in naturally-occurring data, questionnaire-based elicitation included data manipulation and subsequent acceptability judgements, as well as semi-staged acts of communication (Chelliah & de Reuse 2011). Data collection focused on speakers ranging between 67 and 84 years of age, which is the age-range in which Sovramontino is most vital. To maximise the naturalness of the elicited discourse-pragmatic data, elicitation was carried out in two small groups of four speakers each. All informants were bilingual from birth in Sovramontino and Italian. Note that all patterns found through elicitation were also attested in natural occurring speech. Sovramontino, like most Italian dialects, is an exclusively spoken variety. The data presented in the paper is mostly gathered through elicitation, unless specified that the example comes from a naturally occurring setting.

In section 2, I will discuss the notion of *verum focus*, and outline how Sovramontino realises *verum focus* in transitive and unergative

clauses that do not involve the surfacing of discourse-expletive *lu*, but a pronominal copy of the theta-marked subject. In section 3, I will show that the surfacing of discourse-expletive *lu* marks *verum* focus in exactly those syntactic contexts that would require an expletive subject proper in a non-null-subject language like English. Section 4 will propose an analysis for the syntactic behaviour of discourse-expletive *lu*, where I will argue that *verum* focus marking in Sovramontino is different from the marking of narrow focus. In brief, I will argue that *verum* focus marking involves A-bar movement of expletive *lu* to PolarityP (Laka 1990) and subsequent remnant movement of the I/TP-layer to a higher topical left peripheral projection. Section 5 concludes the paper.

## 2. The lexicalisation of the subject: A *verum* focus marking strategy

Höhle (1988, 1992) labels *verum* focus a focus-related phenomenon, observed for German, whereby the speaker through a particular syntactic-prosodic configuration affirms the truth of his thought and the truth value of the proposition is highlighted. In English, this type of polarity focus causes the emphatic lexicalisation of the tensed element of the clause (Halliday 1967: 24), as shown by the presence of emphatic *do* in the free translation for sentence (2b) above. In example (2b), the *verum* focus reading is achieved by lexicalising the discourse expletive *lu* in sentence final position, where it is assigned focal stress. Höhle (1988, 1992) originally defines *verum* focus as a type of focalisation marked by sentence stress on an element which is hosted in a dedicated functional projection in the higher portion of the clause (CP or TP). Höhle's original definition neatly captures what happens in Sovramontino with the lexicalisation of discourse-expletive *lu*. Prosodic prominence seems to be a key characteristic of *verum* focus (see also Giurgea 2021), although Gutzmann *et al.* (2020) argue that focal stress is not necessarily a requirement of *verum* focus cross-linguistically. Later in this section, I will further discuss the distinction between *verum* focus and generalised narrow focus marking in Sovramontino. There is general agreement that clauses in *verum* focus are incompatible with all-new-information clauses. The content of the proposition of the *verum*-focused clause must be discourse-given (Büring 2006; Leonetti & Escandell-Vidal 2009), whereby context-linking must be understood as 'givenness' (Pesetsky 1987; Bianchi & Frascarelli 2010). Richter (1993) notes that clauses exhibiting *verum* focus cannot be produced entirely out of the blue; while not all lexical material must be previously known, at least some of it must be contextually given.

Lohnstein (2015: 294) points out that in those languages where *verum* is segmentally localised in the clause, it assumes a well-defined syntactic position (i.e. a functional projection that bears a [Verum] syntactic feature). Sovramontino *lu* seems to be only able to surface in a fixed clause-final position, bearing prosodic prominence. In this paper, I adopt Booth & Groothuis (2024: 4) definition of (discourse-related) expletive “a non-referential, semantically vacuous element which is invariable in form and acts as a placeholder for a specific position at phrase structure”. Booth & Groothuis (2024: 18) point out that, since expletives are by definition non-referential (i.e. semantically vacuous elements), a potential problem which all topic- and focus-related expletives (including *verum focus expletive lu*) share is the assumption that only semantically contentful, referential expressions can be topics or foci. Nevertheless, if we adopt Booth & Groothuis’s (2024) definition of expletives above, we acknowledge that these elements lexicalise structural topic and/or focus positions rather than being topics or foci *per se*. In this perspective, syntactic structure plays an integral role in information-structure encoding: the presence of discourse expletives in specific syntactic configurations contributes towards the encoding of discourse properties, even though the expletives are semantically vacuous and, hence, not interpretable. Cross-linguistic *verum focus* strategies seem to achieve the same result and, therefore Sovramontino’s expletive strategy is not surprising. Gutzmann & Castroviejo Miró (2011: 145) stress that, in the licensing of *verum focus*, neither the meaning of the stressed expression nor its form matter, but what matters is the meaning of the entire proposition. In this respect, I assume that *lu* is indeed semantically vacuous, but its presence in the clause triggers a *verum focus* reading on the entire proposition. Along the same lines, Leonetti & Escandell-Vidal (2009: 173) observe that *verum focus* constructions in Spanish, which are achieved via XP fronting, result in an informational structure where fronting forces a *verum* interpretation on the overall utterance with “no partition among its constituents”.

Gutzmann & Castroviejo Miró (2011: 144) argue that *verum focus* cross-linguistically can be realised through different strategies, many of which are characterised by special kinds of lexical insertions to instantiate the ‘*verum operator*’. This view on *verum focus* encoding is known as the Lexical Operator Thesis (LOT) in the literature, whereby *verum focus* is a conversational operator that is not directly related to focus. According to the LOT, the *verum focus* accent is one way to realise a lexical *verum* expression, which happens to be prominent in languages such as English and German (see Gutzmann *et al.* 2020). The LOT claims that the lexical operator alone is responsible for the *verum* effect without

the need to resort to focus mechanisms. This view contrasts with the Focus Accent Thesis (FAT), which claims that *verum* focus is a type of focus on a covert expression of *verum*. According to the FAT, the *verum* focus accent is a proper focus accent that focalises the *verum* predicate (i.e. syntactic realisation of *verum*), thus emphasising the truth value of the proposition. According to the FAT, the contribution that *verum* focus makes is in relation to focus alternatives. Krifka (2007) defines ‘focus’ as an expression with a semantic value representing a set of alternatives that are relevant for its interpretation. In the FAT view of *verum* focus, this would correspond to the polarity of the proposition and its inverse polarity (see also Leonetti & Escandell-Vidal 2009: 177). Against the FAT, Gutzmann *et al.* (2020) stress that cross-linguistically there is no one-to-one correspondence between *verum* focus marking and narrow focus marking. This crucially includes different constraints on the co-occurrence of *verum* and focus in languages that allow multiple foci. Within this debate, *verum* focus marking in Sovramontino seems to lend support to the LOT where a *verum* operator (cf. *lu* in (2b)) is inserted in the clause. In section 4, I will show that the syntax of *verum* focus marking is different from the syntax of narrow focus marking in Sovramontino, as the former involves a strict linear-order constraint whereby the *verum* operator must be in clause-final position. However, if we consider *lu* in (2b) above, the element is prosodically prominent by virtue of receiving focal stress, and, as will be pointed out, unable to co-occur with a focal element. These characteristics seem to align with the FAT, although Gutzmann *et al.* (2020) argue that these properties do not preclude the LOT *per se*.

As shown in (2) above, Sovramontino seems to mark *verum* focus through lexical insertion. In those syntactic contexts that would require an expletive subject proper in a non-null-subject language like English, *verum* focus is marked by the surfacing of discourse expletive *lu* in sentence-final position. These include clauses containing weather verbs, presentational and existential constructions, impersonal constructions, and extraposition (see Williams 2001; Biberauer & Roberts 2010; Pescarini 2014). In transitive or unergative clauses, *verum* focus is instead achieved by obligatorily spelling out a pronominal copy of the referential subject of the clause in sentence-final position, where it is given prosodic prominence. In such cases, this pronominal copy acts as *verum* operator and can co-exist with the lexical referential subject of the clause (if present in canonical or topic position); this is shown in (3c), as a possible alternative response to Speaker A in (3a):

- (3) a. SPEAKER A: *La me femena, no la magna tant*  
 the my wife NEG 3SG.F.SCL eat.3SG much  
 ‘My wife, she doesn’t eat much.’
- b. SPEAKER B: *La a magnà tut ancui ELA*  
 3SG.F.SCL have.3SG eat.PTCP everything today she  
 ‘She DID eat everything today.’
- c. SPEAKER B: *La to femena, la a magnà tut ancui ELA*  
 the your wife 3SG.F.SCL have.3SG eat.PTCP everything today she  
 ‘She DID eat everything today.’

The co-existence of the ‘*verum* operator’ *ela* with the lexical subject *la to femena* is not perceived as ungrammatical. The question now is to establish that such contexts map onto *verum* focus and are not other cases of information structural prominence, such as narrow informational or contrastive focus (Lambrecht 1994). Before discussing *lu* as a *verum* focus expletive in section 3, I will claim that the lexicalisation of the pronominal subject of the clause is indeed a *verum* focus strategy in Sovramontino. This will serve as a foundation to argue that *lu* is not just a discourse-related expletive, but a discourse-related subject expletive (i.e. linked to the base-generated subject position of the clause).

Gutzmann *et al.* (2020: 10-14) outline a set of syntactic-pragmatic contexts to diagnose the presence of *verum* in a language. First, they claim that *verum* focus marking is awkward in all-new-information contexts (see also Lohnstein 2015). Gutzmann & Castroviejo Miró (2011: 159) stress that, in order to be pragmatically felicitous, a *verum* focus sentence must feature at least part of the lexical material that makes up its propositional content as ‘given’ in discourse. This is shown by the infelicitous use of the pronominal copy of the subject *ela* in (4) below:

- (4) CONTEXT: What happened?  
 #*La a catà to sorela a-l marcà ELA*  
 3SG.F.SCL have.3SG find.PTCP your sister at-the market she  
 #‘She DID meet your sister at the market.’

In this context, spelling out a pronominal copy of the referential subject results in a pragmatically infelicitous sentence, which suggests that *ela* indeed functions as a *verum* operator, marking (4) as a sentence in *verum* focus. Gutzmann *et al.* (2020) point out that *verum* focus is normally licensed in the affirmation of a preceding truth value. In Sovramontino, this is a context where the surfacing of a pronominal copy of the referential subject is indeed pragmatically felicitous. Consider the naturally occurring data in (5) and (6) below. In (5) the positive polarity previously uttered by Speaker A is affirmed by

the same Speaker A; in example (6), the same *verum* focus strategy is employed but with negative polarity.

- (5) SPEAKER A: *Ela, dighe che l-era pi vecia de me mare*  
 she say.1SG that 3SG.F.SCL-be.3SG.PST more old of my mother  
 ‘Her, I’d say that she was older than my mother.’  
 SPEAKER B: *No so*  
 NEG know.1SG  
 ‘I don’t know.’  
 SPEAKER A: *No, l-era pi vecia ELA*  
 NEG 3SG.F.SCL-be.3SG.PST more old she  
 ‘No, she WAS older.’
- (6) SPEAKER A: *No o vist gnent*  
 NEG have.1SG see.PTCP nothing  
 ‘I haven’t seen anything.’  
 SPEAKER B: *A-tu vardà ben?*  
 have.2SG-2SG.SCL look.PTCP well  
 ‘Have you looked properly?’  
 SPEAKER A: *No o vist gnent MI*  
 NEG have.1SG see.PTCP nothing I  
 ‘I HAVEN’T seen anything.’

*Verum* focus can also be used in an answer to a yes/no question. Gutzmann *et al.* (2020: 11) argue that in such cases *verum* fixes the uncertain polarity of the question and adds emphasis on the polarity of the answer. By spelling out a pronominal copy of the referential subject in the answer, Sovramontino also allows this type of discourse-pragmatic reading, as shown in example (7) below:

- (7) SPEAKER A: *A-la magnà?*  
 have.3SG-3SG.F.SCL eat.PTCP  
 ‘Did she eat?’  
 SPEAKER B: *Sì, l a magnà tut ELA*  
 yes 3SG.F.SCL have.3SG eat.PTCP everything she  
 ‘She DID eat everything.’

Another type of context where *verum* focus is found is in opposite polarity contexts, where the truth value of a previous utterance is denied or corrected (Gutzmann *et al.* 2020). The naturally-occurring example in (8) shows that the lexical insertion of the pronominal copy of the subject *mi* yields a *verum* focus reading in Sovramontino:

- (8) SPEAKER A: *Vi-tu gli impegni che te tol, no?*  
 see.2SG-2SG.SCL the commitments that 2SG.SCL take.2SG NEG  
*Quan che te tol un impegno*  
 When that 2SG.SCL take.2SG a commitment

*e dopo g-ol che te-l fae,*  
 and then LOC.CL-need.3SG that 2SG.SCL-3SG.M.OCL do.2SG  
*no g-ol mai tor impegni.*  
 NEG LOC.CL-need.3SG never take.INF commitments  
 ‘You see the commitments that one takes on? When you take something on  
 then you need to do it. You shouldn’t take anything on.’  
 SPEAKER B: *No o mia tolt nesun impegno MI*  
 NEG have.1SG even take.1SG no commitment I  
 ‘I DIDN’T take any commitment on.’

Finally, Gutzmann *et al.* (2020) argue that another context that triggers *verum* focus is questions containing explicit alternatives that make both the positive and negative alternative salient. This is again possible in Sovramontino, as shown in example (9), where *verum* focus marking with *ela* is felicitous given the two alternatives in Speaker A’s question:

(9) SPEAKER A: *Insoma, cante-la o no cante-la?*  
 so sing.3SG-3SG.F.SCL or NEG sing.3SG-3SG.F.SCL  
 ‘So, does she sing, or doesn’t she sing?’  
 SPEAKER B: *Par cantar, la canta la domenega in cesa ELA*  
 for sing.INF3SG.F.SCL sing.3SG the Sunday in church she  
 ‘As for singing, she DOES sing at Sunday masses.’

Examples (4) to (9) show that, with regards to transitive or unergative clauses, *verum* focus in Sovramontino is marked through the lexical insertion of a pronominal copy of the referential subject of the clause in sentence-final position, where it is assigned focus stress. Since the prosodic prominence of the lexicalised *verum* operator resembles the prosodic stress assigned to XPs in narrow focus, I will now provide evidence which rules out that this syntactic strategy is compatible with those discourse-pragmatic contexts in which narrow informational or contrastive focus is triggered. Example (10) shows that the Sovramontino *verum* focus construction is incompatible with a narrow informational focus reading on the sentence-final pronominal subject:

(10) CONTEXT: Who ate the bread?  
 a. *#L a magnà l pan ELA*  
 3SG.F.SCL have.3SG eat.PTCP the bread she  
 #‘She DID eat the bread.’  
 b. *L a magnà ELA l pan*  
 3SG.F.SCL have.3SG eat.PTCP she the bread  
 ‘SHE ate the bread.’

Despite carrying prosodic prominence, the construction in (10a) is unsuitable as a reply to the question in (10). In Sovramontino, narrow informational focus on the subject can either be expressed by placing the lexical or pronominal subject in immediate post-verbal position (cf.

10b), or, optionally, by clefting the focal subject (see De Cia 2018). The *verum*-strategy lexicalised pronominal subject also cannot bear a contrastive/corrective narrow focus interpretation, as shown in (11a):

- (11) a. #L        a            magnà l        pan        ELA,        no        LU  
           3SG.F.SCL have.3SG eat.PTCP the        bread    she        NEG        he  
           #‘She DID eat the bread, not him’
- b. ELA        l            a            magnà l        pan,        no        LU  
           she        3SG.F.SCL have.3SG eat.PTCP the        bread    NEG        he  
           ‘SHE ate the bread, not him.’

The adoption of the *verum* focus strategy does not indicate that the lexicalised subject should be singled out from a discourse set of competing alternatives (see Krifka 2007), but rather a syntactic strategy to assign a *verum* focus interpretation to the clause. As shown in (11b), a contrastive focal reading on the subject is instead achieved by fronting the lexical or pronominal XP in immediate pre-verbal position (see De Cia 2018).

Lohnstein (2015) points out that typologically there seems to be a variety of grammatical strategies to mark *verum* focus in main clauses. The data presented so far show that Sovramontino marks *verum* focus in an idiosyncratic way, which involves copying the phi-features of the subject of the clause onto a prosodically salient pronominal copy that is placed sentence-finally. In section 4, I will argue that similarly to Romanian, Spanish and Sardinian (see Leonetti & Escandell-Vidal 2009; Giurgea & Remberger 2012; Giurgea 2021), *verum* focus marking in Sovramontino involves fronting material to the left-periphery of the clause (see Rizzi 1997). This raises the question of why *verum* focus marking in Sovramontino involves the lexicalisation of what seems to be a pronominal copy of the subject of a clause. We could try to answer this question in a principled way, by considering the information-structural properties of subjects. If we assume that subjects often encode ‘aboutness’, being the default aboutness topic of a clause (Rizzi & Shlonsky 2006, 2007; Bentley & Cruschina 2018), the link between Sovramontino *verum* focus strategy and subjecthood may lie in this core discourse-pragmatic property of subjects.<sup>3</sup> Erteschik-Shir (1999) in fact claims that the truth-value of the propositional content of all clauses must be checked against a topic (in the sense of Reinhart 1981 – i.e. what the sentence is about); if this aboutness topic is by default the subject of the clause, it then could explain Sovramontino’s *verum* focus strategy: emphasising the polarity of the clause by making the element that validates the truth-value of its propositional content (i.e. the subject) syntactically and prosodically salient. Evidence in favour of a link between aboutness and *verum* may come

from the realisation of *verum* focus in Romanian and Sardinian. Giurgea & Remberger (2012: 25) argue that *verum* focus in Romanian is the result of polarity fronting. In cases of empathic and contrastive *verum* focus in polar questions, they argue that, in the syntax, the attracting functional left-peripheral head carrying the relevant [Verum] feature is FinitenessP (abbreviated FinP). In cases of polarity informational focus and VS *verum* focus declaratives, the authors argue that there is no fronting *per se* associated with a [Verum] feature on FinitenessP, but the verb itself bears focal stress and raises to Fin head (via the incorporation of Laka's 1990 Polarity head). Interestingly, the authors point out that FinP is also the position of overt preverbal subjects in Romanian, which is hence linked with the satisfaction of an [Aboutness] feature. As for Sardinian, Giurgea & Remberger (2012: 30) claim that polarity focus does not solely involve head movement, but also phrasal movement of the entire "non-finite or non-verbal predicative projection". The authors note that the fronted constituent is hence a phrase headed by a non-finite verb or by a non-verbal predicate. The finite verb/auxiliary moves to the Focus head while the fronted constituent is in SpecFocusP. Similarly to Romanian *verum* focus, the authors claim that the raising of T-to-Foc incorporates Laka's (1990) polarity head. There is therefore a strong adjacency condition between the fronted predicate and the inflected verb/auxiliary. Interestingly, the fronted constituent cannot contain the subject.

Returning to *verum* focus in Sovramontino, the sketched syntactic analyses of *verum* focus in Romanian and Sardinian seem to suggest that structurally subjecthood interacts with the expression of *verum* focus. This raises the question of whether this is cross-linguistically true, or, more specifically, applies to Romance and null-subject languages. More cross-linguistic data are needed to further corroborate this claim. Nevertheless, if the relation between subjecthood and *verum* focus seems to be mediated by the discourse-pragmatic notion of 'aboutness' (Bianchi & Frascarelli 2010; De Cia & Cerullo 2024), this would argue in favour of the LOT, and against the idea that *verum* focus is a type of narrow focus. In the next section, I will argue that discourse-expletive *lu* surfaces in those syntactic contexts that, by definition, lack a referential subject, as a last resort strategy to encode a *verum* focus reading.

### 3. *Sovramontino lu*: A *verum focus* subject expletive

In the previous section, I have shown that, in transitive and unergative clauses, *Sovramontino* marks *verum* focus by inserting an emphatic pronominal copy of the referential subject of the clause in sentence-final

position. Across null-subject languages, there are, however, some syntactic contexts in which the (structural) subject of the clause must be null (i.e.  $pro_{expl}$  in the sense of Rizzi 1990) and the presence of an overt subject makes the sentence ungrammatical, as shown in examples (12) to (15):

(12) Italian

- a. *Nevicava*  
 snow.IMPERF.3SG  
 ‘It was snowing.’  
 b. \**Esso nevicava*  
 it snow.IMPERF.3SG

- (13) a. *È meglio arrivare in orario*  
 be.3SG better arrive.INF in time  
 ‘It’s better to arrive on time.’  
 b. \**Esso è meglio arrivare in orario*  
 it be.3SG better arrive.INF in time

(14) Sovramontino

- a. *El neveghea*  
 3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub> snow.IMPERF.3SG  
 ‘It was snowing.’  
 b. \**Lu el neveghea*  
 EXPL 3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub> snow.IMPERF.3SG

- (15) a. *L è mejo rivar in temp*  
 3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub> be.3SG better arrive.INF in time  
 ‘It’s better to arrive on time.’  
 b. \**Lu l è mejo rivar in temp*  
 EXPL 3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub> be.3SG better arrive.INF in time

Examples in (12) to (15) feature a clause with the weather verb ‘to snow’ and an example of extraposition. In these two contexts, a non-null-subject language like English would feature obligatory subject expletives, which are ungrammatical if present in null-subject languages like Italian or Sovramontino. The syntactic contexts in which subject expletives would normally surface in a non-null-subject language also include presentational and existential constructions, impersonal clauses and raising predicates (see Williams 2001; Biberauer & Roberts 2010). In such contexts, null-subject languages cannot lexicalise the expletive null subject (i.e.,  $pro_{expl}$ ). As previously mentioned, it is important to note that *el/l* in the Sovramontino examples in (14) and (15) is not a proper expletive subject, but a subject clitic expletive (see Pescarini 2014).

We have shown that Sovramontino ‘focalises’ the truth-value of the proposition by inserting a pronominal copy of the referential sub-

ject sentence-finally; this raises the question of how Sovramontino encodes *verum* focus in ‘thetic’ sentences (in the sense of Sasse 1987) where a referential subject is not available. I claim that, in these contexts, Sovramontino indeed resorts to the *verum* focus subject expletive *lu*, which surfaces in sentence-final position as shown in the naturally-occurring examples in (16) and (17):

- (16) SPEAKER A: *Ma l a nevegà però su par le thime*  
 but 3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub> has.3SG snow.PTCP but on for the mountain.tops  
 ‘It snowed on the mountain tops though.’  
 SPEAKER B: *L a nevegà LU*  
 3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub> has.3SG snow.PTCP EXPL  
 ‘It DID snow.’
- (17) SPEAKER A: *No so se o da ciamar-la*  
 NEG know.1SG if have.1SG from call.INF-3SG.F.OCL  
 ‘I don’t know if I should call her.’  
 SPEAKER B: *El sarie mejo che*  
 3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub> be.3SG.COND better that  
*te la ciamese LU*  
 2SG.SCL 3SG.F.OCL call.PST.SUBJ EXPL  
 ‘It WOULD be better for you to call her.’

The surfacing of discourse-pragmatic expletive *lu* is hence a last-resort syntactic strategy at the syntax-pragmatics interface to satisfy *verum* focus. Gutzmann & Castroviejo Miró (2011: 145) stress that, in the licensing of *verum* focus, neither the meaning of the stressed expression nor its form matter, but the meaning of the entire proposition. In this respect, we could assume that subject expletive *lu* is semantically vacuous by definition, simply spelling out a tonic pronoun made up of the default phi-features of *pro*<sub>EXPL</sub>, namely third-person masculine singular. Examples (18), (19) and (20) exemplify the use of *verum* focus expletive *lu* in an impersonal construction, a clause containing a raising predicate, and an existential construction respectively:

- (18) *Se se vede poc LU*  
 IMPERS REFL see.3SG little EXPL  
 ‘One DOES see one another very little.’
- (19) *El me par che te se ingrasà LU*  
 3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub> 1SG.DAT.CL seem.3SG that 2SG.SCL be.2SG gain.weight.PTCP EXPL  
 ‘It DOES seem that you have gained weight.’
- (20) *(Mi) pensea che ghen fusse carieghe LU*  
 I think.1SG.PST that LOC.CL be.3SG.IMPERF.SUBJ chairs EXPL  
 ‘I thought that there WOULD be chairs.’

As clearly shown in example (20), *verum* focus is not limited to root contexts, but, as Höhle (1992) points out for German, it can also be found in embedded contexts. Observe that, in (20), if the truth-value of the root clause is instead ‘focalised’, the resulting sentence is (21), where a pronominal copy of the subject, *mi*, is spelled out in sentence-final position and assigned prosodic prominence. Like in (20), (21) can also feature a preverbal subject.

- (21) (Mi) *pensea*            *che*    *ghen*            *fusse*                            *carieghe* *MI*  
 I    think.1SG.PST    that    LOC.CL    be.3SG.IMPERF.SUBJ    chairs    I  
 ‘I DID think that there would be chairs.’

The contrast between (20) and (21) gives us some insights into the syntax of *verum* focus in Sovramontino, where it seems that, regardless of its base-generated position, the lexical operator encoding *verum* must always surface in sentence-final position.<sup>4</sup> In section 4, we will argue that this is achieved by moving the lexical operator to SpecPolarityP, and, subsequently, the remaining TP-material undergoes remnant movement to a low-topic left peripheral position, where it is interpreted as ‘given’ or background information. The analysis that I have just sketched and that I will further develop in the next section is based on two important aspects of the syntax of NIDs and of the discourse-pragmatic nature of *verum* focus. First, Sovramontino is a null-subject language, and, therefore, can license null referential, as well as null non-referential subjects, which structurally occupy the subject position and satisfy the [EPP] feature (Rizzi 1982, 1986; Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 1998). This means that, although the *verum* lexical operator is a pronoun made up of the exact same phi-features as the subject of the clause, it is not constrained to appear in subject position, as this can be structurally filled by *pro*. Second, there is agreement in the literature that *verum* focus requires that the content of the proposition be contextually active as part of the background of the conversation and hence ‘given’ information (e.g. Romero & Han 2004; Gutzmann & Castroviejo Miró 2011; Giurgea 2021). In section 4, I will argue that this is achieved via remnant movement of the TP-material to a low left peripheral topic position.

The null-subject status of Sovramontino, as well as the incompatibility of *verum* marking with broad focus, is relevant in understanding how *verum* focus is encoded in presentational VS unaccusative structures. Sovramontino does not license agreement and, hence, the presence of a subject clitic in inverted VS constructions featuring core unaccusative verbs (see Burzio 1986; Belletti 1988; Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995) as shown in (22):

- (22) CONTEXT: What happened?
- a. È            *caiest*    *Maria*  
 be.3SG    fall.PTCP    Mary  
 'Mary fell.'
- b. \**L*                    è            *caiest*    *Maria*  
 3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub>        be.3SG    fall.PTCP    Mary  
 'Mary fell.'

Core unaccusative verbs like *gner* 'come', *morir* 'die', *caier* 'fall' obligatorily undergo verb-subject inversion in sentence focus contexts (i.e. all-new information) and do not allow the surfacing of a subject clitic. However, a subject clitic expletive surfaces in their interrogative counterparts, as shown in (23) below; this therefore suggests that, structurally, expletive *pro* is present in the sentence (see Bentley & Cruschina 2018 for an alternative to expletive *pro*). Example (24) instead shows that, in such structures, a pre-verbal referential subject would yield an ungrammatical sentence, unless the subject is interpreted as topical and agrees with the verb (cf. (25)).

- (23) *Gnene-lo*                    *le*            *femene?*  
 come.3SG-3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub>    the            women  
 'Are the women coming?'
- (24) CONTEXT: What happened?  
 \**Maria*            è            *caiest*  
 Mary            be.3SG    fall.PTCP  
 'Mary fell.'
- (25) CONTEXT: What happened to Maria?  
*Maria*,            *l*            è            *caiest-a*  
 Mary            3SG.F.SCL be.3SG    fall.PTCP-F  
 'Mary fell.'

Core unaccusative verbs have a reduced argument structure: they lack an external argument and their only thematic argument is base-generated in VP-complement position, syntactically behaving like an object (Burzio 1986; Belletti 1988). In out-of-the-blue clauses (cf. (22a)), the internal argument must then be realised in-situ where it is base-generated, namely in VP-complement position. In (22a) and (23), the verb is in 'default' third person singular masculine morphology and does not agree with the post-verbal subject in gender and number. I therefore argue that the agreement is between a null third-person masculine (or 'default') expletive subject, namely *pro<sub>expl</sub>* (Rizzi 1986; Rizzi & Shlonsky 2006) and the unaccusative verb. In this type of presentational structures, we would thus expect *lu* to surface in *verum focus*

contexts (as a spell-out of the features of expletive *pro*), as shown in (26):

- (26) ??È            *caiest*    *Gemma*    *LU*  
 be.3SG        fall.PTCP   Gemma    EXPL  
 ‘Gemma DID fall.’

Although speakers do not find this structure completely ungrammatical in an elicitation setting, it was never attested in naturally-occurring data. The *verum* focus strategies that are instead found in this syntactic context in natural speech are shown in (26) and (27) below:

- (27) *Gemma,*    *l(a)*        è            *caiest-a*    *LU*  
 Gemma        3SG.F.SCL be.3SG    fall.PTCP-F    EXPL  
 ‘Gemma DID fall.’

- (28) *Gemma,*    *l(a)*        è            *caiest-a*                    *ELA*  
 Gemma        3SG.F.SCL be.3SG    fall.PTCP-F                    she  
 ‘Gemma DID fall.’

These strategies are further exemplified by the naturally-occurring data in (29) and (30) below:

- (29) CONTEXT: Talking about the provenance of tinned mushrooms, which are processed in a nearby factory.

SPEAKER A: *Rusia*    *no*            *pense*  
 Russia    NEG            think.1SG  
 ‘Russia? I don’t think so.’

SPEAKER B: *Ades no so,*  
 now NEG know.1SG

*pero in quei ani là i gnea da là entro LU*  
 but in those years there 3SG.M.SCL come.IMPERF.3PL from there inside EXPL  
 ‘Right now, I don’t know, but, back in the day, they DID come from there.’

- (30) CONTEXT: Talking about the guests at a party.

SPEAKER A: *E-li*                    *già*            *qua?*  
 be.3PL-3PL.M.SCL already here  
 ‘Are they already here?’

SPEAKER B: *Sì, i è riva-i da un bel toc LURI*  
 yes 3PL.M.SCL be.3PL arrive.PTCP-M.PL from a nice piece they  
 ‘Yes, they HAVE arrived a while ago.’

Although the two strategies seem to be in free variation, a more fine-grained investigation of the discourse-pragmatics of each strategy might constrain this alternation, which might be associated with either maintaining topic continuity (i.e. with the agreeing form) or introducing a topic shift with *lu* (Givón 1983; Frascarelli 2017). This is, however,

beyond the scope of the present paper. The reason why (26) is perceived as awkward, and hence not found in naturally-occurring speech, is not syntactic *per se* but relates to the semantics of *verum focus*. In order to be pragmatically felicitous, *verum focus* can only be licensed if the proposition is contextually active as part of the background of the conversation. *Verum focus* is thus incompatible with all-new-information contexts (Gutzmann & Castroviejo Miró 2011; Lohnstein 2015). In (27) to (30), *verum focus* is felicitous because part the propositional content of the utterances is discourse-linked, namely the logical subject. In the next section, we will argue that the defective argument structure of core unaccusative verbs allows for the syntactic insertion of the discourse-related expletive *lu* in the external argument position. In this respect, the realisation of *verum focus* in presentational constructions (cf. (27-30)) has important implications for the overall syntax of *verum focus* in Sovramontino. In particular, these structures help us better understand the relation between the pronominal clause-final lexical operator, which spells out the phi-features of the subject, and the structural subject of the clause itself. Subject-verb agreement in examples (27) and (29) shows that the structural subject of the clause does not match the phi-features of the *verum focus* lexical operator *lu*. This suggests that, syntactically, the *verum focus* lexical operator (e.g. *luri* in (30)) and the structural subject of the clause are independent elements. In fact, in presentational constructions, the *verum focus* operator can either be the pronominal spell-out of the phi-features of the syntactic subject (e.g. *lu* in (29) – the expletive external argument) or of the logical subject (e.g. *luri* in (30) – the referential internal argument that is promoted to subject position). The independent status of the syntactic subject of the clause from the pronominal clause-final subject copy in *verum focus* constructions (i.e. the *verum focus* lexical operator) can be explained by the fact that, as previously discussed, Sovramontino is a null-subject language. Therefore, *pro* is available to be merged in the subject position to satisfy the ‘subject criterion’ (in the sense of Rizzi & Shlonsky 2006). In the next section, I will further expand on this point by proposing a syntactic analysis of the *verum focus* subject expletive *lu* in Sovramontino.

#### 4. Towards a syntactic account: Polarity fronting and remnant movement

The data presented in the previous sections support an analysis of the phenomenon whereby a *verum focus* reading is achieved through a composite syntactic operation, which targets the C-domain. This seems to be comparable to the expression of *verum focus* in Sardinian, which

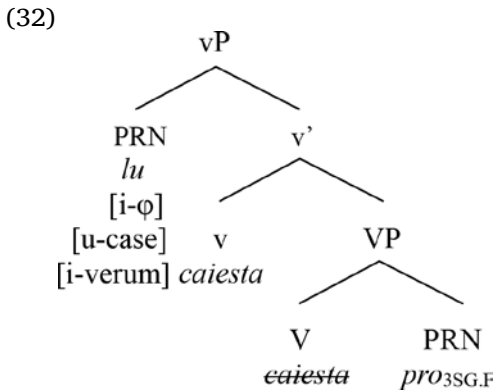
involves two interlinked syntactic operations, namely head movement and phrasal movement to the left-peripheral FocusP position (Giurgea & Remberger 2012: 30). I will argue that, similarly to Sardinian, *verum* focus in Sovramontino is the result of two composite syntactic operations, but these are both two instances of phrasal movement, namely polarity fronting and TP-remnant movement.

As previously mentioned, Höhle (1992) argues that *verum* focus is associated with the presence of a semantic VERUM operator located in the left periphery of the clause, which takes the entire proposition of the clause as its argument. If we assume that, in Sovramontino, the *verum* focus operator is lexicalised as a stressed pronominal copy of the subject of the clause, in (31) below *lu* must be syntactically located in the C-domain:

- (31) *L*            *é*            *mejo*    *che*    *te*        *vae*        *LU*  
          3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub>   be.3SG   better    that    2SG.SCL   go.2SG   EXPL  
          ‘It IS better that you go’

Since *lu* appears in sentence-final position, it means that all the material that precedes it is also located in the left periphery of the clause. Our syntactic analysis must capture these facts and justify any movement operation in generating the constituent order in (31) as LF (i.e. logical form) or PF (i.e. phonological form) interface requirements (Chomsky 1995, 2001, 2004). The first step is to determine whether the discourse-expletive *lu* is base-generated in a C-related position or moved to that position. The presentational sentences in (27) and (29), as well as the fact that *lu* only surfaces with predicates that feature a defective argument structure strongly suggest that at some stage of the derivation there must be a close relation between the predicate and the discourse-pragmatic expletive. This would be impossible to achieve if *lu* were directly base-generated in the left periphery of the clause. The natural position for the *verum* focus expletive *lu* to be base-generated in relation to a defective predicate is within the verbal phrase (see D’Alessandro & Roberts 2008). By virtue of not featuring an agent/experiencer argument for theta-role assignment in the specifier position (see Chomsky *et al.* 2023), I argue that the defective vP (i.e. not with a phasal v head) can license an expletive subject to be externally merged in the external argument position (see also Kratzer 1996; Biberauer 2008; Deal 2009 on the possibility of expletive subjects proper to be base-generated in SpecvP).<sup>5</sup> Since expletives do not have lexical referential meaning, they cannot be structurally theta-marked, but can still undergo A-movement in those languages like English that require the satisfaction of the [EPP] with an overt syntactic element (Chomsky 1981, 1995).<sup>6</sup> In Sovramontino, I

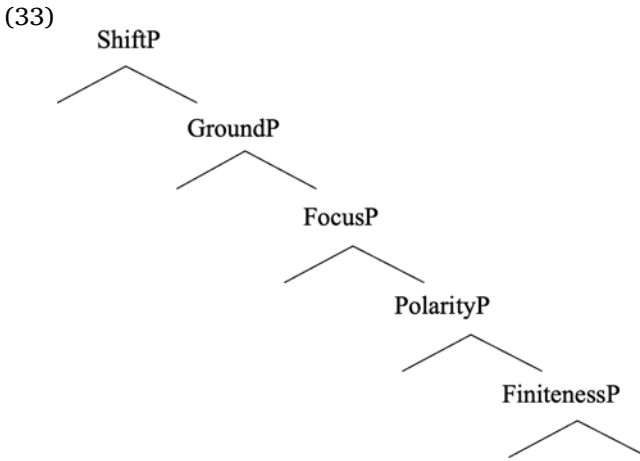
argue that, if expletive *lu* is externally merged, it encodes a *verum* focus reading to be read at LF. *Lu* is therefore merged with a valued and interpretable [i-verum] feature, a set of valued but uninterpretable phi-features (i.e. default third person, singular, masculine). These phi-features are uninterpretable as they belong to an expletive element and, hence, are non-referential. Finally, since *lu* is a (pro)nominal expression, it also carries an unvalued and uninterpretable [u-case] feature (Chomsky 2000, 2001). The tree in (32) below shows the first part of the derivation of the *verum* focus sentence in (27) above, and, hence, the proposed base-generated structure for the unaccusative predicate *caer* ‘fall’:



In light of the syntactic operation *Agree* in Chomsky’s (2001, 2004) probe-goal model, by virtue of being uninterpretable, both [i-φ] and [u-case] on *lu* make the syntactic element an active *goal* that can be probed by a c-commanding functional head (i.e. the *probe*). As soon as the relevant left-peripheral functional head equipped with an uninterpretable [u-verum], a bundle of unvalued phi-features [u-φ], and an [EPP] feature is merged in the syntactic derivation, *lu* is moved to the specifier position of that left peripheral head, where it is correctly interpreted as *verum* operator at LF and assigned prosodic prominence at PF. The features [u-verum] and [u-φ] on the left-peripheral head are valued and deleted via *Agree*. The [EPP] feature is also deleted since *lu* is internally merged in the specifier position of the left-peripheral head. As for the *goal*, its valued uninterpretable (i.e. default) phi-features are deleted via *Agree*, and the [u-case] feature is valued with default [nominative-case] since no case assigner is available in c-commanding position (Chomsky 2001). This raises the question of why [u-case] on *lu* does not cause it to move to SpecTP once the T head is merged in the

derivation. The reason is that, if *lu* were to move to SpecTP/subject position, it would be subject to ‘criterial freezing’ (Rizzi & Shlonsky 2007) and, hence, subsequently unable to move again to satisfy [u-verum] on the relevant C-domain head, making the derivation crash. Since Sovramontino is a null-subject language, *pro* is instead always available to be merged in subject position (i.e., externally, if non-referential, and, internally, if referential and theta-marked), rescuing the derivation by allowing the *verum* expletive *lu* to be internally merged in the left periphery of the clause.

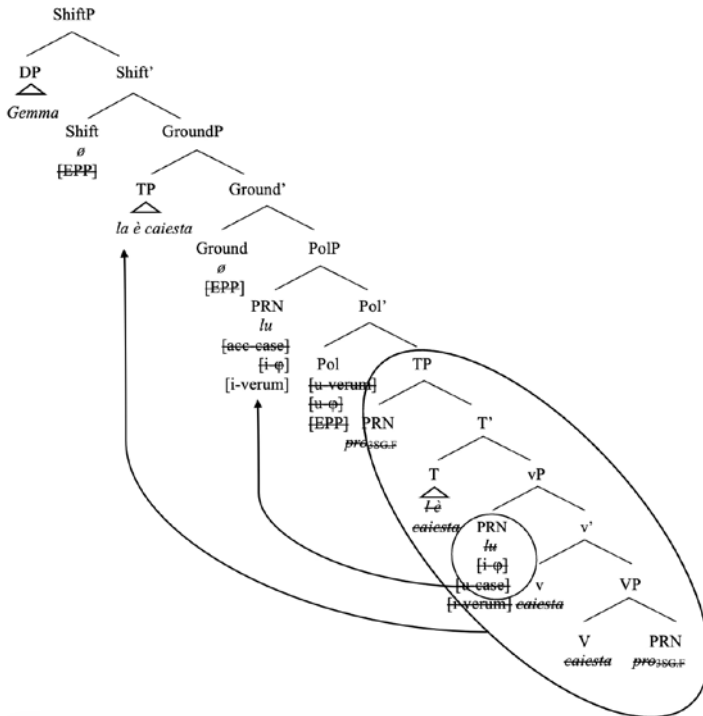
Following Giurgea & Remberger (2012), as well as Leonetti & Escandell-Vidal (2009), I claim that this type of movement is an instance of polarity fronting, which involves Laka’s (1990) PolarityP sandwiched between Rizzi’s (1997) FocusP and FinitenessP. In (33) below, I provide a schematic representation of the left periphery of the clause, which I will adopt in my analysis:



As I will show in the next few paragraphs, in Sovramontino, polarity fronting differs from the focus fronting of an XP, or *wh*-fronting. This seems to suggest that the relevant left-peripheral head that carries [u-verum] is not FocusP, but an adjacent structural projection which triggers different interface requirements, namely PolarityP. In Sovramontino, if the realisation of *verum* focus were only to involve polarity fronting of the pronominal *verum* operator, we would obtain a very different linear order, whereby the pronominal copy of the subject would sit in clause-initial position. I claim that once polarity fronting has taken place, the rest of the sentence subsequently undergoes rem-

nant movement to a lower projection of the topic field, namely GroundP (Benincà & Poletto 2004). This ensures that the propositional content is interpreted as discourse-given background information, which is a key property for the licensing of *verum* focus (Höhle 1992; Romero & Han 2004; Gutzmann & Castroviejo Miró 2011; Gutzmann *et al.* 2020; Giurgea 2021). GroundP must be a low topic position within the topic field, since *verum* focus is also possible in embedded contexts (cf. (20)). In this respect, it can be comparable to FamiliarP in Bianchi & Frascarelli's (2010) architecture of the left-peripheral topic field. Within the same model, ShiftP is instead a higher topic field projection that hosts aboutness/shift topics. TP-remnant movement yields the sentence-final position of the *verum* focus subject expletive *lu* (cf. (31)). The intertwined nature of these movement operations makes it further implausible that *lu* is base-generated in the C-domain via 'last-resort' external merge. The derivation of sentence (27), featuring a presentational construction with the unaccusative verb *caier* 'fall' and *lu*, is represented by the tree diagram in (34) below:

(34)



Note that, in the tree representation, I only overtly indicated with arrows the polarity fronting of *lu* and TP-remnant movement. There is also A-movement of the theta-marked referential *pro* to the structural subject position, and, following De Cia’s (2018, 2020) claim that auxiliaries are clitic-like elements in Sovramontino, v-to-T movement of the past participle *caïesta* ‘fallen’. Finally, *Gemma* is externally merged in a topic position higher than GroundP, which I identified as ShiftP and hosts aboutness/shift topics in the C-domain (see Bianchi & Frascarelli 2010).

Remnant movement involves the topicalisation of an XP, which contains the silent copy of a YP that was previously extracted from it (see Webelhuth 1992; Grewendorf 2015; Bošković 2018). In our case, YP is the *verum* focus expletive *lu* and the XP is the remnant-TP. With reference to a “hierarchy of movement types”, Grewendorf (2003) argues that remnant movement is not licensed in cases where YP vacates XP due to a type of movement that is lower than the remnant-creating movement. In this hierarchy, focus movement as operator A’-movement outranks topicalisation as a non-operator A’-movement. In the case of Sovramontino, polarity fronting (i.e. a particular type of focus movement) hence licenses TP-remnant movement (i.e. topicalisation of the propositional content of the clause). Poletto & Pollock (2015) defend the view that, in Romance, IP-remnant movement can explain a wealth of phenomena surrounding the syntax of French and NIDs.<sup>7</sup> In Sovramontino, TP-remnant movement explains the strict clause-final requirement on the *verum* focus expletive *lu*, as shown in (35) below:

- (35) a. *Ghen era fam entro Forn LU*  
 LOC.CL be.3SG.PST hunger inside Forn EXPL  
 ‘There WAS hunger in the village of Forn.’  
 b. \**Ghen era LU fam entro Forn*  
 LOC.CL be.3SG.PST EXPL hunger inside Forn  
 c. \**Ghen era fam LU entro Forn*  
 LOC.CL be.3SG.PST hunger EXPL inside Forn  
 d. \**LU ghen era fam entro Forn*  
 EXPL LOC.CL be.3SG.PST hunger inside Forn

In relation to the existential construction in (35), the *verum* focus expletive *lu* can only surface in clause-final position. It cannot be placed after the verbal cluster (35b), after the pivot *fam* ‘hunger’ (35c) or in a pre-copular position (35d). It is important to note that Sovramontino also displays apparent *wh*-in-situ. Poletto & Pollock (2015) propose a remnant movement analysis of the phenomenon in Bellunese (i.e. the superdialect area of Sovramontino). Given the specific distributional properties of Sovramontino ‘in-situ’ *wh*-items, a remnant move-

ment analysis of the phenomenon is rejected (see details in De Cia 2020). As shown by the *wh*-question in (36) below, the distribution of Sovramontino ‘in-situ’ *wh*-item *che* is different from the distribution of *lu* in (35):

- (36) a. *Ghen-ere-lo*                      *CHE*    *entro*    *Forn?*  
 LOC.CL-be.3SG.PST-3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub> what    inside    Forn?  
 ‘What was there in the village of Forn?’  
 b. \**Ghen-ere-lo*                      *entro*    *Forn*    *CHE?*  
 LOC.CL-be.3SG.PST-3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub> inside    Forn    what?

Although both items target the same left peripheral space within the focus field, only the *verum* focus expletive *lu* exhibits a clause-final requirement, which strongly suggests that a different derivation is in place for (35a) and (36a). In the case of *wh*-questions, in fact, the clause features subject clitic inversion with the inflected verb, which is standardly associated with T-to-C movement across NIDs (see Manzini & Savoia 2005; Roberts 2010). Ultimately, the distribution of the *verum* focus expletive *lu* substantially differs from that of apparent clause-internal *wh*-items in that no material can follow the *verum* focus expletive *lu*, hence justifying, in such a case, the adoption of Poletto & Pollock’s (2015) IP-remnant movement analysis. It is hence possible to appreciate how focus marking/fronting of an element in narrow focus (cf. 10b) or a *wh*-item (36a) does not overlap with *lu* polarity fronting. This fact would lend support to the LOT in the debate on the nature of *verum* focus, whereby *verum* focus is a type of conversational operator that is not directly related to focus (see Gutzmann *et al.* 2020). In this respect, given the mismatch in the syntactic realisation of *verum* and narrow focus, it is more descriptively adequate to postulate that the polarity fronting *lu* targets PolarityP, as opposed to FocusP. Nevertheless, in Sovramontino, *verum* focus is incompatible with a *wh*-question, as shown in (37):

- (37) \**A-lo*                      *piovest*    *QUANDO LU?*  
 have.3SG-3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub> rain.PTCP when    EXPL  
 ‘When DID it rain?’  
 (38) \**A-lo*                      *piovest*    *LU?*  
 have.3SG-3SG.SCL<sub>EXPL</sub> rain.PTCP EXPL  
 ‘DID it rain?’

I argue that this is not because *quando* ‘when’ and *lu* compete for the same syntactic position, but because TP-remnant movement is incompatible with the syntax of question formation in Sovramontino (see De Cia 2020). This is further confirmed by the ungrammatical-

ity of (38), which shows that *verum* focus is also impossible in yes/no questions. In brief, since the polarity fronting of *lu* triggers TP-remnant movement, this type of phrasal movement is unsuitable for the satisfaction of the syntactic constraints involved in question formation in Sovramontino. Höhle (1992) claims that, in German, *verum* focus is also possible in non-declarative sentence types such as yes/no questions, *wh*-interrogatives and imperative clauses. Giurgea & Remberger (2012), as well as Giurgea (2021) point out that *verum* focus is possible in questions in Romanian and Sardinian. The possibility of expressing *verum* focus in interrogative clauses seems to be a solid trend cross-linguistically (Gutzmann *et al.* 2020). In this respect, Sovramontino shows an idiosyncratic behaviour. I claim that the inability to adopt the *verum* focus strategy outlined in this paper in interrogative clauses is hence syntactic, and not semantic. A more fine-grained investigation of the discourse-pragmatics of questions in Sovramontino may reveal that, in interrogative clauses, *verum* focus can be expressed through a different, perhaps non morpho-syntactic, strategy altogether. I will leave this point open for future research.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the syntactic behaviour and discourse-pragmatic role of discourse-expletive *lu* in Sovramontino. Through the examination of the information-structural encoding of *lu*, I highlighted how such an expletive, although semantically vacuous, plays a crucial role in marking *verum* focus, by contributing to the overall interpretation of the clause at the discourse level. The findings support Booth & Groothuis's (2024) definition of discourse-related expletives as non-referential placeholders that occupy specific syntactic positions to encode specific discourse properties. By adopting a neo-emergentist approach to language variation (e.g. Ramchand & Svenonius 2014; Biberauer 2019; Wiltschko 2014, 2021) whereby an extremely impoverished Universal Grammar aims to maximise its minimal means, we expect discourse-pragmatic expletives to bear a number of different information structure-related functions cross-linguistically, which are not just limited to 'topic' and 'focus' (see Booth & Groothuis 2024). The discourse-pragmatic expletive *lu* in Sovramontino bears out this prediction, as the surfacing of the masculine third-person tonic pronoun *lu* is specifically linked to the expression of *verum* focus. Future research is needed to investigate the interplay between syntax and pragmatics in other null-subject languages with respect to discourse-expletive elements, expanding our understanding of

the diverse morpho-syntactic strategies through which languages encode various kinds of discourse-pragmatic information. This could start from a more-fine grained investigation of the discourse-pragmatics of questions in Sovramontino to understand how *verum* focus is expressed in those syntactic contexts (i.e. *wh*- and yes/no interrogatives). The analysis put forward in this study also highlights the importance of syntactic structure as an interface requirement in information-structure encoding and provides insights into the cross-linguistic strategies available for expressing *verum* focus. In this respect, the evidence from Sovramontino seems to lend support to the LOT and the dissociation between *verum* and focus mechanisms (Gutzmann *et al.* 2020).

### Abbreviations

1, 2, 3 = first, second, third person; CL = clitic; COND = conditional; DAT = dative; EXPL = expletive; F = feminine; FAT = Focus Accent Thesis; FinP = FinitenessP; IMPERF = imperfect; IMPERS = impersonal; INF = infinitive; LOC = locative; LOT = Lexical Operator Thesis; M = masculine; NEG = negation; NIDs = Northern Italian Dialects; OCL = object clitic; PL = plural; PST = past; PTCP = participle; REFL = reflexive; SCL, SCL = subject clitic; SG = singular; SUBJ = subjunctive.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> These varieties have been traditionally called ‘Italian dialects’ in the literature. However, this label is misleading, as these Italo-Romance varieties are not dialects of Italian. They are instead independent and autonomous continuation of the vulgar Latin spoken in the Italian peninsula around the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and hence sister languages of Italian (see Maiden & Parry 1997).

<sup>2</sup> See also Camacho’s (2019) tentative discussion on the distribution of the optional expletive *eso* in central Colombian and Venezuelan Spanish in relation to marking *verum* focus in an utterance.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that encoding the default aboutness of a clause does not necessarily entail having the syntactic status of an aboutness topic. Subjects can encode default aboutness, but not necessarily be aboutness/shift topics. For a detailed discussion of this distinction see De Cia & Cerullo (2024).

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘lexical operator’ is adopted directly from the LOT on *verum* focus (Gutzmann & Castroviejo Miró 2011). As an anonymous reviewer points out, the pronominal copy of the subject – especially if non-referential – does not encode any lexical meaning *per se*, but it is functional in nature.

<sup>5</sup> In the case of transitive or unergative clauses featuring *verum* focus, we can postulate that the pronominal *verum* lexical operator in clause-final position is also base-generated within the verbal phrase. Since the vP, in such a case, is non-defective and has the same values as the subject in terms of phi-features, we can assume that: (i)

either the pronominal element (i.e. the lexical operator) is base-generated in SpecvP, hence, theta-marked, and, subsequently, a co-referential *pro* is externally merged in SpecTP, or (ii) that referential *pro* and the lexical operator form a big DP argument (see Belletti 2005, Cecchetto 2000, Kayne 2005), which is theta-marked in SpecvP. In the latter case, subsequently the referential-*pro* undergoes A-movement to SpecTP, while the lexical operator is moved to the left periphery of the clause to ensure the correct discourse-pragmatic interpretation (i.e. *verum* focus). Option (i) is probably more economical, as it puts forward fewer movement operations.

<sup>6</sup> Note that this view on the SpecvP base-generated position of some expletives is in contrast with the traditional view that such elements directly originate in SpecTP position (Stowell 1978, Burzio 1986; Lasnik 1995, among others). I will, nonetheless, assume that expletive *pro* is externally merged in SpecTP (Rizzi 1986; Rizzi & Shlonsky 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Note that, in Bellunese (i.e. the supra-dialect area of Sovramontino), a remnant movement analysis is also generally adopted for clause-final sentential and modal particles (Poletto & Zanuttini 2011; Hinterhölzl & Munaro 2015).

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