

Topics and expletives inthetic VS sentences: The case of early Romance varieties of northern Italy

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In this paper we discuss the function of topics and the emergence of expletives inthetic VS constructions from a corpus of early Romance texts of northern Italy. The sources date from the 13th to the early 16th centuries and are thus characterized by a 'verb second' (V2) syntax. We observe that ABOUTNESS and REFERENTIAL topics are distributed differently in the medieval vernaculars of northern Italy, as they are coded in pre- and post-verbal position, respectively. We also note thatthetic VS structures without an overt aboutness topic exhibit an expletive pronominal form in preverbal position and lack V-S agreement. We propose that the expletive spells out the implicit, context-dependent topic thatthetic VS sentences presuppose, signalling the contextually understood spatio-temporal coordinates of the event or situation presented by thethetic construction. The evidence drawn from the written domain of the historical data suggests that there cannot be topicless sentences, as has been observed for the contemporary Romance varieties spoken in northern Italy.

KEYWORDS: topics, expletives, V2 syntax.

1. Introduction: *theticity, broad focus, and VS order*

Thetic sentences are propositions that introduce an event or an entity into the universe of discourse, thereby asserting some informationally new state of affairs. Traditionally, in logical and philosophical terms, theticity is a functional category comprising any judgement whose entire propositional content does not predicate something about, nor does it attribute a property to, a given or presupposed element of the discourse (Brentano 1874; Marty 1918; Kuroda 1972; Kuno 1973; Sasse 1987; Ladusaw 1994; Venier 2002). Given thatthetic judgements do not express a structured contrast between presupposed and non-presupposed information, they are often viewed as 'all-comment' propositions (Sasse 1987; Gundel 1988; Gundel, Hedberg & Zacharsky 1993; Gundel & Fretheim 2004), which lack the standard 'topic-comment' partition of their counterpart judgements, that is, categorical statements. In this respect, theticity ties in with sentence focus (Lambrecht 1994: 221-238), insofar as no previously introduced subject matter constitutes the topic of the assertion, and the whole proposition occurs out of the blue.

This traditional view, however, is not uncontroversial, as the notion of theticity raises the question of what it means for a predication to be topicless.

As proposed by Erteschik-Shir (1997), all utterances have a topic. This insight is captured in the definition of topic as an inherently relational discourse unit (Bentley 2023: 461-463), that is, the matter of interest or concern in the utterance in relation to which new information is requested to increase the addressee's knowledge (Van Valin 2005: 68). Under this view, the establishment of a referent as the matter at issue, on the one hand, and the predication about the established subject matter, on the other hand, need not be contrasted referentially, in terms of old (presupposed) vs new (non-presupposed) information. Rather, this partition holds relationally, insofar as any kind of subject matter, whether old or new, can be brought about in discourse, expressing the topical unit in relation to which an increase of knowledge is expected. However, topics that are introduced into discourse as a new matter at issue ought to be distinguished from topics that refer to a previously mentioned discourse element. Indeed, scholarship on information structure (Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl 2007; Cruschina 2012, 2015; Bentley *et al.* 2016; Frascarelli 2017; Bentley 2023; among others) captures this insight by positing a distinction between ABOUTNESS and REFERENTIAL topics. Aboutness topics are referentially new, as they are newly introduced, newly changed or newly returned to (Givón 1983: 8; Götze *et al.* 2007; Cruschina 2015: 63), but they are topics in the relational sense (Bentley 2023: 462), in that they are the subject matter about which the utterance increases the addressee's knowledge. Referential topics, on the other hand, are referentially old, as they are fully accessible, contextually given, and anaphorically linked with previously mentioned elements of the discourse (Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl 2007; Cruschina 2012: 19). In light of this distinction, thetic statements can be said to comprise an aboutness topic in their actual focus domain. Put differently, thetic judgements can be equated with broad-focus structures, in that both the (aboutness) topic and the comment are introduced into discourse with no special presupposition, conveying all-new, non-derivable information. The available data from early Romance varieties of northern Italy provide evidence in support of the discourse-pragmatic distinction between aboutness and referential topics. As we shall see, in these vernaculars topical subjects can be pre- or post-verbal. This distribution, however, is not unconstrained, as subjects occur before the verb when they are aboutness topics, but they follow it when they are referential topics (Ciconte 2018a: 127-129).¹ Observe the examples in (1) from two early Venetan texts.²

- (1) old Venetan
- a. [*Un homo*]_{AboutTop} *fexe* *una* *grande* *cena*
a man make.PST.3 a big dinner
‘A man arranged a big dinner’.
(*Vang. venez.*, Luc., 14, 262, 6)
- b. *Molto onor fexe* [*Texeo*]_{RefTop} *a quele* *done*
much honour make.PST.3 Theseus to those women
‘Theseus paid great honour to those women’.
(*Armannino, Fiorita*, 119.15)

We will discuss the interplay of subject distribution and topic function in Section 2, where the examples will be analysed in context. Suffice it to point out for now that the subject referent in (1a), *Un homo* ‘a man’, is introduced into discourse for the first time and is part of the whole event-reporting structure, whereas the subject referent in (1b), *Texeo* ‘Theseus’, has been mentioned in the immediately preceding text. Therefore, the sentence in (1a) is in broad focus, yielding athetic statement, whereas the sentence in (1b) is a predicate-focus structure (in the sense of Lambrecht 1994: 223), displaying the standard topic-comment partition of categorical statements, although the comment precedes the topic here, as is allowed by the V2 syntax of medieval Romance.

Athetic sentences with a transitive verb, like those in (1a), exhibit an overt aboutness topic as part of their informationally new propositional content. Therefore, even transitive predications can bethetic, albeit not inherently, if they are uttered out of the blue (or if they are the opening line of a tale, a new section of the story, etc., as is the case in the written text of (1a)). A group of structures is instead specialized for the expression oftheticity, namely existentials and presentative (unaccusative) VS constructions. In this paper we restrict our analysis to VS presentative constructions only, and we do not deal with existentials (Bentley *et al.* 2015, and references therein), which have been argued to differ from presentatives in several ways (Bentley & Ciconte 2024: 5-6). A comparison of the similarities and differences between existentials and presentative VS constructions is needed (see Bentley & McLellan in this issue), but it would go beyond the scope of this article.

Athetic (presentative) sentences with an intransitive verb are characterized by VS order, the postverbal noun phrase being part of the focal domain together with the verb. Since presentative VS constructions do not have an overt topic, they appear to be topicless, all-comment propositions. However, we note that an expletive pronominal form occurs in subject position. Observe the examples below.

- (2) old Romance of northern Italy³
- a. *el* *vene* *dui* *angeli* *he* *disse...*
 EXPL come.PST.3 two angel.M.PL and say.PST.3
 ‘There came two angels and (they) said...’
 (*Legg. sacre Ashb.* 395, 186.16)
- b. *el* *vene* *una* *vose* *he* *dissi-ge...*
 EXPL come.PST.3 a voice.F.SG and say.PST.3-to.him
 ‘There came a voice and told him...’
 (*Legg. sacre Ashb.* 395, 175.13)

In the examples in (2a-b), the pronoun *el*, which is in the third masculine singular person, is not coreferential with the postverbal subjects *dui angeli* ‘two angels’, which is masculine plural, and *una vose* ‘a voice’, which is feminine. We will discuss the nature and the function of this expletive pronominal form in Section 3. For the moment, we note that these broad focus VS sentences are anchored to a non-referential preverbal unit, which does not carry informational content or refer to a referent within or outside the predication. We propose that the expletive is the expression of the implicit topic ofthetic VS constructions.

Evidence such as that of the examples in (2) sheds some light on the development of sentence-focus structures without an overt topic. In the modern Romance varieties of northern Italy, broad-focus VS predications also exhibit an expletive pronominal form in subject position and a postverbal noun phrase, which lacks canonical subject-coding properties. The presence of the expletive has been argued to spell out the implicit or ‘silent’ topic that sentence-focus structures presuppose (Benincà 1994; Bernini 2012; Pescarini 2016: 745-747; Bentley & Cennamo 2022). This insight builds upon the view that there cannot be a topicless proposition and thatthetic statements of this kind require a stage topic (Erteschik-Shir 1997: 26-29) or, in syntactic accounts, a subject of predication (Benincà 1988; Calabrese 1992; Saccon 1992; Bianchi 1993; Parry 2013; Bentley & Cruschina 2018). The subject of predication expressed by the expletive is understood as an unspecified context-dependent location, which defines the implicit spatio-temporal parameters of the event or situation presented by thethetic construction.

The scrutiny of the extant early texts offers twofold empirical evidence with regard to the view that all sentences have a topic. On the one hand, the data suggest that, in information structural terms, a distinction between aboutness and referential topics ought to be drawn, as is testified by the differential syntactic coding of these two discourse roles in the early stages of Italo-Romance. On the other hand, the emergence of the expletive in broad focus VS constructions suggests thatthetic sentences without an overt topic are predications of an implicit, spatio-temporal topic, which is spelled out by the expletive form.

The data (over 800 examples from 12 texts) date from the 13th to the early 16th century and have been collected both electronically, from the OVI (*Opera del Vocabolario Italiano*),⁴ and manually, from three recently edited texts, which have not yet been digitalized. The examples from OVI are referenced as they are tagged in the corpus. All the examples have been checked in ample portions of text to ensure the adequate understanding of the context.⁵ Only VS matrix clauses are considered in this study.

2. Pre- and post-verbal topical subjects in the ‘verb second’ (V2) syntax of early Italo-Romance

The early Italo-Romance varieties are characterized by a ‘verb second’ (V2) syntax (Vanelli 1986; 1999; Salvi 2001, 2004, 2016: 997-1012; Fesenmeier 2003; Benincà 2006, 2010; Poletto 2006, 2014; Benincà & Poletto 2010: 28-75; Ledgeway 2012: 140-180; Ciconte 2018b; Wolfe 2018). The V2 clause structure is configured as an [XVX] system, in which the first position can be accessed by any syntactic category bearing pragmatic relevance. Therefore, the preverbal position is not restricted only to topical subjects, as is the case with the SVO order of modern Italo-Romance, but it can be occupied also by focal (non-contrastive) and topical objects, as well as by any predicative prepositional, adjectival or adverbial phrase. Even though subjects can occur both pre- and post-verbally, their distribution is not unconstrained, their placement depending on the discourse role they take in context (Ciconte 2018b: 111-118). With respect to topicality, the aboutness and referential functions are encoded differently, that is, in pre- and post-verbal position, respectively. Observe the contrast between (3a) and (3b) (cf. also (1a-b)).

(3) old Venetan

- a. *Et atanto la dona sì taxe. Ma Tristan se*
 and then the woman thus fall.silent.PST.3 but Tristan REFL
fexe amantinente portar in una finestra...
 make.PST.3immediately bring.INF in a window
 ‘And then the woman thus fell silent. But Tristan had himself carried to a window right away...’
 (*Tristano veneto*, 80, 99.27)
- b. *E li ministri fecero sì [come] comandò loro*
 and the ministers do.PST.3PL thus as command.PST.3SG them
Yhesu, e disse Yhesu ai servidori [...]. Questo miracolo fexe Yhesu...
 Jesus and say.PST.3SG Jesus to.the servants this miracle make.PST.3 Jesus
 ‘And the ministers did thus as Jesus ordered them, and Jesus said to the servants [...].
 Jesus made this miracle...’
 (*Diatessaron veneto*, 17, 35.15-21)

In (3a) the subject of the second sentence, *Tristan* ‘Tristan’, is introduced as the new matter at issue, breaking the local thematic chain with the subject of the previous sentence *la dona* ‘the woman’, as is also witnessed by the disjunctive conjunction *ma* ‘but’. To be sure, *Tristan* is the protagonist of the tale, and is repeatedly mentioned in the text, but it is a distant referent in this context, which focuses on the *dona* ‘woman’. Rather, here, *Tristan* is newly returned to (in the sense of Givón 1983: 8). As we shall discuss, previously mentioned referents can have an aboutness function in some contexts. Thus, the informational role of *Tristan* is that of an aboutness (or shifting) topic, i.e., it is an active element of discourse that is newly introduced, newly changed or newly returned to (Givón 1983: 8; Cruschina 2015: 63), and as such it occurs in preverbal position. By contrast, in (3b) the subject *Yhesu* ‘Jesus’, which first occurs in the subordinate clause, does not break the local thematic chain, but keeps topic continuity, and in fact it is restated in the following sentences (*disse Yhesu...* ‘Jesus said...’, *fexe Yhesu...* ‘Jesus made...’).⁶ Therefore, the informational role of *Yhesu* is that of a referential (or continuing) topic, that is, an element of discourse that is fully accessible, contextually given, and anaphorically linked with topics previously mentioned in the discourse (Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl 2007; Cruschina 2011: 19). As such, *Yhesu* occurs in postverbal position. Observe in passing that, in the last sentence of the example (3b), the non-contrastive focal object *Questo miracolo* ‘This miracle’ occurs in preverbal position, yielding the frequently attested OVS order of the medieval varieties.

The examples in (3a-b) show that preverbal subjects are, as aboutness topics, part of the sentence focus (cf. (3a)), whereas postverbal subjects are not necessarily part of the focus domain, as they can be referential topics (cf. (3b)). Thus, at this stage, VS order is not exclusively restricted to marked or specialized constructions, namelythetic structures without an aboutness topic (cf. (2)). In fact, VS constructions can also license the unmarked binary topic-comment partition of categorical sentences with a referential topic (cf. (3b)).⁷

The correlation between subject distribution and type of topic function also holds in predications with intransitive (unaccusative) verbs. Observe the examples below.

- (4) old Venetan
 a. *L'emperadore se parì e misser Gibedeo romase*
 the emperor REFL leave.PST.3 and sir Gibedeo remain.PST.3
in gran foco d'amore
 in great fire of-love
 ‘The emperor left and sir Gibedeo remained in a great fire of love’.
 (*Leggende sacre del Magl.*, 7, 500.16)

- b. *Lo abado desmontà in tera solo e dise a li*
 the abbot disembark.PST.3 in land alone and say.PST.3 to the
frari che lo aspetase, e andà l'abado solo
 friars that him wait.PST.SUBJV.3 and go.PST.3 the abbot alone
per tuta l'isola
 across all the island
 'The abbot disembarked to the land alone and said to the friars that they waited for him, and the abbot went across the island alone'.
 (*San Breandano ven.*, 138.11-12)

In (4a) the subject of the second sentence, *misser Gibedeo* 'sir Gibedeo', is the new subject matter of the situation-reporting statement (*romase in gran foco d'amore* 'remained in a great fire of love'). The local topic chain with the preceding subject, *l'emperadore* 'the emperor', is thus broken by the following subject, *misser Gibedeo*, which, as the new aboutness topic, shifts the matter at issue, and occurs in preverbal position.⁸ In (4b), the VS sentence *andà l'abado* '(lit.) went the abbot' is not a broad focus construction, as the postverbal subject *l'abado* 'the abbot', which has already been mentioned in the immediately preceding text, is a referential (continuing) topic, thus occurring in postverbal position. Therefore, the last sentence in (4b) is an unmarked predicate-focus structure, displaying the topic-comment partition of categorical sentences, although the comment precedes the topic here.⁹

We should mention that referential topics can also be the matter of interest about which the sentence increases the addressee's knowledge. Thus, it could be argued that the distinction between aboutness and referential topics should be subsumed altogether under the ABOUTNESS function (Bentley 2023: 462-463). However, the evidence from the early vernaculars suggests that the notions of referential and aboutness topic must be kept apart. In fact, previously mentioned referents are not necessarily coded in postverbal position (the position that the V2 syntax assigns to referential topics – cf. (5a)), when they have an aboutness function. In the latter case, they can be found before the verb (cf. (5b)).

(5) old Tuscan-Emilian

- a. *E 'l papa disse a meser Giani: «Va dala mia*
 and the pope say.PST.3SG to sir Giani go.IMP.2SG from.the my
parte al Palioloco et in Cicilia [...]. Allora se
 part to.the Palioloco and in Sicily then REFL
movò messer Giani de Procita et andoe in
 move.PST.3SG sir Giani from Procida and go.PST.3SG in
Cicilia [...]. Vene el dito messer Giani
 Sicily come.PST.3SG the say.PST.PTCP.M.SG sir Giani
per mare e giunse i Napoli.
 through sea and reach.PST.3SG in Naples
 'And the pope told sir Giani: Go on my behalf to Palioloco and in Sicily... Then sir Giani from Procida departed and went to Sicily. The said sir Giani came by sea and reached Naples'.
 (*Liber Jani de Procita*, cap. 26, 115.2.34-117.4)

b. *E quando lo re udiu questo fue a consiglo*
 and when the king hear.PST.3SG this be.PST.3SG a council
coli suoi baroni. E messer Giani di Procida si
 with.the his barons and sir Giani from Procida REFL
levò e disse «Per Dio...
 get.up.PST.3SG and say.PST.3SG for God
 ‘And when the king heard this, he was in council with his barons. And sir Giani from
 Procida got up and said: For God’s sake...’
 (*Liber Jani de Procida*, cap. 67, 165.2.9)

In the textual sequence in (5a), after being mentioned in the immediately preceding text (*E ’l papa disse a meser Giani...* ‘And the pope told sir Giani...’), the subject *messer Giani* is a referential topic in the following sentences, and it is thus placed in postverbal position. Being a referential topic, the subject *messer Giani* can also be omitted in the coordinated verbs (*andoe* ‘went (Ø)’ and *giunse* ‘reached (Ø)’). As is clear from the title of the text, *Liber Jani de Procida* ‘The book of Jani (Giani) from Procida’, the referent *mes(s)er Giani* found in the examples in (5) is the main character of the story. However, in (5b) the subject *messer Giani* is not coded in postverbal position as a referential topic. Rather, here, *messer Giani* constitutes the new subject matter of the event-reporting sentence, *si levò...* ‘(He) got up...’, and breaks the local topic chain instantiated by the previous subject, *lo re* ‘the king’. Thus, even though it is highly referential and mentioned throughout the book, the subject *messer Giani* is an aboutness topic in this context, and as such is placed in preverbal position.

Furthermore, whilst referential topics can be omitted (cf. (5a)), aboutness topics cannot (Cruschina 2012: 19, 2015: 46). The textual sequence in (5b) would be informationally ambiguous without the explicit mention of *messer Giani* as the subject of the coordinated verbs, *levò* ‘got up (Ø)’ and *e disse* ‘and said (Ø)’. In fact, the controller of the predications could be construed as being *lo re* ‘the king’, which has set the course of this part of the plot in the preceding text. As discussed in Bentley (2023: 462-463), both referential and aboutness topics are relational, ‘insofar as a topic is never identified in terms of its information content, but rather by virtue of its relation to the information provided in the sentence or in the broader text or discourse’. The examples in (5) show that, even though highly referential or previously mentioned elements are normally coded in postverbal position as referential topics (cf. (5a)), they can also occur before the verb in an aboutness function (cf. (5b)), depending on their relation to the information carried by the sentence in a given context. In sum, the available data point to a clear distinction between aboutness and referential functions, which are coded

differently in the V2 syntax of early Italo-Romance, that is, respectively, pre- and post-verbally, regardless of the informational content of the referent.

With respect to the presence of the expletive pronominal form (cf. (2)), in the data under scrutiny, not only is the expletive never attested in predicate-focus VS structures, whether these are transitive (cf. (1b) and (3b)) or intransitive (cf. (4b)), but is also never found inthetic sentences with an overt aboutness topic (cf. (1a), (3a), and (4a)). This suggests that the emergence of the expletive is restricted only to broad focus presentative VS constructions without an overt topic. We will discuss this issue in the next section.

3. The emergence of expletives in broad focus VS constructions

As mentioned at the outset, in the early Romance vernaculars of the North of Italy, sentence-focus constructions with a postverbal noun phrase exhibit an optional expletive form in preverbal position (cf. (2)). We provide further examples below.

- (6) old Venetian ¹⁰
- a. *el vene là grandissimi cani*
 EXPL come.PST.3 there very.big dog.M.PL
 ‘There came there very big dogs’.
 (*Legg. ss. Piero e Polo*, 17, 50.1)
- old Paduan
- b. *el vene tante tenebrie sopra la terra de Egypto*
 EXPL come.PST.3 many darkness.F.PL above the land of Egypt
 ‘There came darkness on the land of Egypt’.
 (*Bibbia istoriata padov.*, cap. 10, 58, 30.1.4)
- early Romance of northern Italy (see note 3)
- c. *el vene una çovene la quale...*
 EXPL come.PST.3 a young.girl.F.SG who
 ‘There came a young girl who...’
 (*Legg. sacre Ashb.*, 395, 162.35)
- old Ligurian
- d. *Ello basta ben delli piè*
 EXPL suffice.3SG well of.the feet
 ‘Some feet are well enough (lit., it suffices well some feet)’.
 (*La Passione*, 30, 23-24)

The sentences in (6) are broad-focus presentative VS constructions, as the postverbal referents are introduced into discourse for the first time, as is also suggested by their indefiniteness. In all the examples in (6) the pronominal form *el/ello*, which is in the third masculine singular

person, is not co-referential with the postverbal subjects, that is, respectively, the masculine plural *grandissimi cani* ‘very big dogs’, the feminine plural *tante tenebrie* ‘(lit.) many darknesses’, the feminine singular *una çovene* ‘a young girl’, and the masculine plural *delli piè* ‘some feet’. In these contexts, the pronoun *el/ello* is unequivocally a non-referential expletive.¹¹

The sentences in (6a-c) exhibit an invariant form of the unaccusative verb, that is, *vene* ‘came’. In the early vernaculars of some areas of northern Italy (Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, Veneto), verb morphology undergoes phonological erosion, resulting in syncretic forms that lack inflectional number features in the third person. Thus, in these early varieties (cf. (6a-c)), one cannot tell whether the verb agrees in number with the postverbal noun phrase, which can of course be plural (cf. (6a-b)), or with the expletive, which is always singular. However, in the example (6d), which is found in a vernacular that does not undergo verb syncretism, namely old Ligurian, the third-person singular verb *basta* ‘suffices’ does not agree with the postverbal noun phrase *delli piè* ‘some feet’, which is plural. In our scrutiny, V-S agreement pattern (e.g., hypothetically, **Ello bastan(o).3PL delli piè* ‘some feet suffice’) is not attested. In fact, in the data from the vernaculars which do not have syncretic verb forms, presentative VS constructions invariably exhibit the verb in the third person singular (cf. (6d)). The emergence of the expletive in broad focus VS constructions like (6a-d) may thus be indicative of the lack of agreement with any ϕ -feature of the postverbal subject. Accordingly, in these contexts, the expletive can be construed as agreeing with the implicit, semantically unspecified, discourse-dependent topic that broad focus constructions presuppose (Benincà 1988; Calabrese 1992; Saccon 1992; Bianchi 1993; Parry 2013; Bentley & Cruschina 2018), defining the implicit spatial (or temporal) parameters in which the event or the situation are presented by thethetic construction. This type of agreement can be described as ‘anaphoric’ (Bresnan & Mchombo 1987, and references therein).¹²

As we have discussed in Section 2, in the V2 syntax of early Italo-Romance both focal and referential topical elements can be coded post-verbally. Thus, VS order is not exclusively restricted to sentence focus, but it can also license predicate focus (cf. (1b), (3b), (4b), (5a)). Therefore, it is conceivable that the expletive pronoun may have appeared to differentiate the VS constructions with a subject within the focal domain, that is,thetic sentence-focus structures, from those in which the postverbal subject is a referential topic, that is, categorical predicate-focus sentences. Observe the contrast between (7a) and (7b-c).

- (7) old Venetan
- a. *elo li vene XI munegi incontra*
 EXPL to.him come.PST3 eleven monk.M.PL across
 ‘There came eleven monks towards him’.
 (*San Brenadano ven.*, 92.14)
- b. *e dietro eli sì andava li santi abadi*
 and behind them thus go.PST.3 the saint abbots
 ‘Thus the holy abbots went behind them’.
 (*San Brendano ven.*, 96.14)
- c. *Qua trovà li frari lo monestir de san Abeo*
 here find.PST.3 the friars the monastery of saint Abba
 ‘Here the friars found the monastery of saint Abba’.
 (*San Brendano ven.*, 88.27)

In (7a), the postverbal noun phrase, *XI munegi* ‘eleven monks’, is part of the focal domain of the sentence, since the referent it expresses is introduced into discourse for the first time, as is suggested by the analysis of the context. In fact, in context, the statement bears a novelty or surprise flavour in the on-going narration, as the protagonist of the tale, Saint Brendan (here anaphorically resumed by *li* ‘to.him’), did not expect to find other monks on the little island where he was stranded with his fellow friars. The sentence with the expletive in (7a) is clearlythetic. By contrast, in (7b-c) the postverbal subjects, *li santi abadi* ‘the saint abbots’ and *li frari* ‘the monks’, are referential topics, since they have been previously introduced into discourse.¹³ Therefore, the sentences in (7b-c) are predicate-focus structures, exhibiting the standard topic-comment partition of categorical sentences, even though the comment precedes the topic here.

Leaving aside transitive predications (cf. (7c)), which always exhibit a topic-comment partition, the available data show that unaccusative VS structures appear to be undifferentiated at this stage, insofar as referential topical subjects can follow the verb (cf. (7b), see also (5b)) on a par with subjects which are part of the focal domain (cf. (7a)). However, whilst the expletive is found in the latter type of structure, it is never attested in the former one. Since, at this stage, the same VS pattern obtains with all kinds of postverbal subject, the expletive can be argued to differentiate the structures with a subject that is part of the focal domain (7a) from those with a referential topical subject (7b-c), disambiguating broad focus statements from predicate focus sentences.

The expletive is also found inthetic VS sentences in which the postverbal noun phrase expresses a discourse referent already mentioned in the text. This suggests that referential elements can be part of the focus domain, as long as they yield informationally new content, increasing the addressee’s knowledge (Cruschina 2012; Bentley *et al.* 2015; Ciconte

2018a). In such cases, the context is key to the construal of the discourse role of the postverbal subject, particularly in the written domain. Observe the contrast between (8a) and (8b).

- (8) old Romance of northern Italy (see note 3)
- a. *el vene i apostuli he disse...*
 EXPL come.PST.3 the apostle.M.PL and say.PST.3
 ‘There came the apostles and (they) said...’
 (*Legg. sacre Ashb.* 395, 197.20)
 old Venetian
- b. *Iesù, lo qual era [...], sì se partì da la turba.*
 Jesus who be.PST.3 thus REFL depart.PST.3 from the crowd
Po’ vene Iesù in lo templo et disse...
 then come.PST.3 Jesus in the temple and say.PST.3
 ‘Jesus, who was..., thus left the crowd. Then Jesus came to the temple and said...’
 (*Vang. venez.*, 322.14-15)

In (8a) the referent *i apostuli* ‘the apostles’ has been previously mentioned in the narration, although not in the immediately preceding text. In fact, the part of the text in which *i apostuli* ‘the apostles’ is last mentioned is distant from the point of the story where the sentence in (8a) occurs, and several changes of topic precede this informationally new structure.¹⁴ Therefore, the subject matter of the statement in (8a) is not expressed by an overt topic, but is understood as the point of the on-going narration about which the whole event-reporting sentence adds new information. This implicit subject of predication is spelled out by the expletive. By contrast, in (8b) the postverbal subject of the second sentence, *Iesù* ‘Jesus’, is a referential topic, as it keeps topic continuity with its first mention in the immediately preceding text. The contrast between the examples in (8a) and (8b) suggests that the sentence in (8a) is athetic construction with an implicit topic, which is spelled out by the non-referential pronominal form, whereas the sentence in (8b) is categorical statement with a referential topic.¹⁵

In structures like those in (8b), the predicate focus is split by the referential topic, which occurs after the verb but before the next predicative element, typically a prepositional phrase (cf. *in lo templo* ‘in the temple’). In the data under consideration, the expletive is never found in VSX structures with an unaccusative verb and an X topical element, since these have a topic (cf. (8b)). Rather, the expletive is attested in VS(X) constructions where the unaccusative verb is followed by a focal element, for example a postverbal noun phrase (cf. (8a)). This evidence supports the claim that seemingly topicless sentences do require a stage topic (Erteschik-Shir 1997: 26-29).

In sum, the expletive spells out the subject of predication, that is, the implicit (spatio-temporal) topic that broad focus presentational constructions presuppose (Benincà 1988; Calabrese 1992; Saccon 1992; Bianchi 1993; Parry 2013; Bentley & Cruschina 2018).

At the beginning of this section, we mentioned that the occurrence of the expletive inthetic VS constructions is optional. We will discuss this matter in the next section, where the diamesic dimension of the early written texts is taken into account. We claim that the expletive need not occur when explicit spatio-temporal logodeixis is provided in the co-text.

3.1 The topic of broad focus VS constructions in the logodeixis of the written domain

In the written domain, the organization of discourse varies from that of the spoken domain, where information can be retrieved instantaneously from the deixis of the communicative situation, that is, the extra-linguistic environment shared by the speakers. In the written texts information is built (or recovered) with poor or no reference to the extra-linguistic context. In fact, the informational value of the elements involved in the narratives relies mostly on intra-textual deixis, or logodeixis (Fillmore 1975: 70), that is, the spatio-temporal coordinates that the author has in mind and that need to be made explicit for the reader. Thus, the linguistic environment that surrounds a portion of text is the main source of its meaning, and it determines the informational role of the discourse referents. This kind of linguistic environment is often referred to as 'co-text' (Conte 1983: 96), that is, the organized linguistic material that provides the interpretative features of a written text (Van Dijk 1977; Petöfi 1979; Conte 1988; Givón 1995; Andorno 2003). Since we deal with early written sources, the informational value of the extant examples can only be captured within their co-text.

Broad focus VS constructions introduce all-new, non-derivable information that, whilst carrying no special presupposition, is brought about into discourse by implicit reference to the spatio-temporal coordinates available in the context. These coordinates need not be overtly expressed in the spoken domain, as they are understood in the deixis of the communicative situation. In contrast, since these coordinates need to be made explicit in the written texts, they often surface in the co-text of the narratives. In the data under scrutiny, we note that the overt expression of spatio-temporal reference is strikingly frequent in broad focus VS constructions with unaccusative verbs. We provide but a few examples below.

- (9)
- a. *Adoncha vene la voxe de Cielo*
 in.that.moment come.PST.3 the voice from sky
 ‘In that moment there came the voice from the sky’.
 (*Vang. venez.*, 12, 350.21)
- b. *Et allora vene un masano*
 and then come.PST.3 a peasant
 ‘And then there came a peasant’.
 (*Vang. venez.*, 29.20)
 old Romance of northern Italy (see note 3)
- c. *E poi ço vene un folgor da cielo*
 and after this come.PST.3 a lightning from sky
 ‘And after this there came a bolt of lightning from the sky’.
 (*Legg. sacre Ashb.* 395, 10, 175.31)
 old Ligurian
- d. *E depoe non molto tempo aparse terribili segni in cel*
 and after not much time appear.PST.3 terrible signs in sky
 ‘And after not much time there appeared terrible signs in the sky’.
 (*Sam Gregorio in vorgà*, 215.24)
 old Venetian
- e. *Et in quella fiada aparse a questo desperado una ombra*
 and in that time appear.PST.3 to this desperate a shadow
 ‘And in that moment there appeared a shadow to this desperate man’.
 (*Legg. ss. Piero e Polo*, 46, 60.25)
 old Venetan
- f. *Qua aparse a li frari tre puovoli*
 here appear.PST.3 to the friars three groups.of.people
 ‘Here there appeared three groups of people to the friars’.
 (*San Brendano ven.*, 126.10)

In the examples in (9), all the event-reporting sentences are anchored to temporal or spatial expressions, which provide the co-textual coordinates of the on-going narration. These coordinates serve as the overt stage topic of the sentence-focus VS constructions, that is, the situation or the moment in the plot in relation to which the event is presented. Therefore, the testimony of the early written texts supports the view that broad focus VS constructions are predications of an implicit spatio-temporal topic (Benincà 1988; Saccon 1992, 1993; Erteschik-Shir 1997, 2007; Pinto 1997; Tortora 1997, 2014; Parry 2013; Corr 2016; Bentley 2018; Ciconte 2018a). Whereas in the spoken domain the implicit topic need not be overtly expressed, and it can be left ‘silent’, its deixis being understood from the discourse context, in the co-text of the written texts, which lacks extra-textual reference, this is spelled out by spatio-temporal coordinates in which the all-new information is embedded. Since the stage topic that broad focus sentence presuppose is not retrievable from the extra-linguistic context, in the written domain this must first be explicitly defined by spatio-temporal adverbials (or scene-

setting clauses), which ensure that the conditions of textual coherence and cohesion are met (Conte 1988, 1993). In this respect, the (early) written texts are particularly revealing, in that they show features that may be phonologically null, or silent, in the spoken domain.

Importantly, we observe that, if the broad focus VS construction lacks the overt expression of the spatio-temporal coordinates, whether these are provided by an adverbial expression or a preceding scene-setting clause, the expletive occurs. We sketch this generalization below.

- (10) a. [+ spatio-temporal coordinates] [± expletive] [verb] [subject]
 b. [- spatio-temporal coordinates] [+ expletive] [verb] [subject]

The contrast between (10a) and (10b) indicates that in the presence of spatio-temporal reference the expletive may be absent (10a) but, if the spatio-temporal coordinates are not overt, the expletive occurs (10b). This combines well with our claim that the expletive spells out an implicit, context-dependent, spatio-temporal stage topic, that is, the subject of predication that broad focus VS constructions presuppose. We also found, although rarely, the co-occurrence of a spatio-temporal reference with the expletive, as in the following example: *Poi no gran tempo, el vene una mortalitae* ‘After not much time, there came death’ (old northern Italo-Romance, *Legg. sacre Ashb.* 395, 222.16). Here, the expletive resumes the overt stage topic expressed by the preceding temporal unit, *Poi no gran tempo*, which is dislocated, as witnessed by the comma.

In the available data we also note that the broad focus VS sentences in which the expletive occurs are never found at the beginning of a tale or at the start of a new section or paragraph. In fact, unless they are set and introduced by spatio-temporal expressions, VS constructions with the expletive are attested only within on-going narrations, where they are preceded by a temporal, situational or scene-setting subordinate clause, as is shown below.¹⁶

- (11) old Romance of northern Italy (see note 3)
 a. *quando elo entrava dentro el vene da cielo*
 when he enter.PST.3 inside EXPL come.PST.3 from sky
una gran luse
 a great light
 ‘When he entered inside there came a great light from the sky’.
 (*Legg. sacre Ashb.* 395, 10, 229.8)
 old Venetan
 b. *E como eli manzava, elo vene la osiela*
 and how they eat.PST.3 EXPL come.PST.3 the bird
 ‘And as soon as they ate, there came the bird’.
 (*San Brendano ven.*, 114.25)

Examples such as those in (11) suggest that the broad focus VS constructions are anchored to the co-textual spatio-temporal dimension of the on-going narration. Indeed, the expletive encapsulates this dimension, when this is not explicit, spelling out the stage topic required by thethetic sentence.¹⁷

Finally, as pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, the expletive can also occur in a cataphoric function, as shown in the example below.

- (12) old Bolognese
El se trova in le sante scripture, che l'ubidincia si
EXPL REFL find.3SG in the saint scriptures that the obedience thus
è una dele maore virtù...
be.3SG one of.the major virtues
'It is found in the holy scriptures that obedience is thus one of the major virtues...'.
(*Dicerie*, cap. 9, 329, 17-18)

Example (12) is another illustration of the possibility for the expletive to co-occur with an overt prepositional phrase. Here the prepositional phrase (*in le sante scripture* 'in the holy scriptures') is not dislocated, however, but is interpolated after the conjugated verb, and it is thus cataphorically anticipated by the expletive.

4. Conclusions

In this paper we examined thetic VS sentences in a corpus of early Romance texts from northern Italy. The sources under scrutiny are characterized by a 'verb second' (V2) syntax, which allows multiple configurations of the matrix clause. However, we observed that the distribution of the discourse elements is not unconstrained. The analysis of the data suggested that ABOUTNESS and REFERENTIAL topics are coded differently at this stage, that is, respectively, in pre- and post-verbal position.

While transitive SVO predications, which can also be thetic in some contexts, exhibit an overt pre-verbal aboutness topic that is part of the sentence broad focus, thetic (unaccusative) VS constructions do not have an overt topic, thus appearing to be topicless, all-comment propositions. We observed that such VS constructions are anchored to a non-referential pronominal from in pre-verbal subject position. The historical data indicate that this kind of expletive occurs when no other spatio-temporal reference is explicit, whether this is provided by an adverbial or by a preceding scene-setting clause. We proposed that the expletive spells out the implicit, context-dependent topic that thetic VS sentences presuppose.

In our study, we took into account the written domain of the early sources, which proved to be particularly revealing. In fact, co-textual spatio-temporal reference must be explicitly defined in the narratives to

ensure text cohesion and coherence, whereas in the spoken domain the contextual coordinates can be phonologically null, or left 'silent', as they are understood in the deixis of communicative situation. The written texts patently show that the expletive occurs in the absence of lexical spatio-temporal reference.

The paper discussed the emergence of the expletive on evidence from historical data which span within a limited chronological period, namely from the 13th to the early 16th centuries. In our future research we aim to outline further the diachrony of the development of the expletive.

In some contemporary Gallo-Italic and Venetan varieties of northern Italy broad focus VS constructions exhibit, too, a non-referential pronominal form in preverbal position and a postverbal noun phrase which lacks the coding properties of canonical subjects. However, the expletive form found in these varieties is the particle *a*, and it is no longer the third person masculine singular *el/elo* attested in the early vernaculars.

We speculate that, once *el/elo* is re-functionalized as a referential pronoun only (that is, the pronoun which carries the subject features for the third person masculine singular in the contemporary varieties), the expletive function, which spells out the topic of thetic VS sentences, is taken by the particle *a*. The particle *a* is argued to have derived from the first-person singular pronoun (*a* < *ia* < *ieo* 'I.NOM.SG' (Rohlf 1968: 140-141; Bernini 2012: 270) or from vowel lowering in the same pronoun, that is, *a* < *e* < tonic *eo*, *eu* 'I.NOM.SG' (Vanelli 1998: 97)). One might think that *a* is the best candidate for the expression of the spatio-temporal coordinates that VS sentences presuppose, in that *a* indexes the highest deixis among the subject pronouns, being a vestige of the first-person singular pronoun. Thus, one might speculate that *a* is well apt to lend itself as the (speaker-oriented) *origo* of the indexical field where the stage topic of the thetic utterance derives its spatio-temporal coordinates. This is of course a tentative and conjectural hypothesis, which we hope to verify in our future research on evidence from data from the 16th century onwards.

Notes

¹ In the SVO order of modern Italo-Romance, the distinction between aboutness and referential topics is neutralized for syntactic purposes, as the subject occurs before the verb in any topic function. Preverbal subjects have been argued to be dislocated (Benincà & Cinque 1985; Giupponi 1988). Although this holds true for subjects in referential topic function, aboutness topic subjects are distinguished from referential ones prosodically, occurring within the prosodic contour of the sentence without an intonational break.

² Note that the verb's third person singular and plural are syncretic in some Romance varieties spoken in northern Italy. We gloss these verb forms only for person (.3) and we address this issue in Section 3.

³ There is no agreement among philologists on the exact provenance of the *Leggende sacre del ms. Ashburnham 395*, or on its author or copyist. It is nonetheless clear that the linguistic features of this source are from the northern area of Italy.

⁴ The OVI, <www.ovi.cnr.it>, is a research institute established in 1985 as part of the *Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche* 'National Research Council'. Currently directed by Paolo Squillaciotti, the OVI relies on the philological and linguistic expertise of many researchers and scholars.

⁵ The first words of the examples are reported in upper- and lower-case letters, depending on the context in which the sentences are found. The lower-case letter signals that the example is part of an on-going narration unit or section, and it is embedded in a cohesive thematic portion of the plot.

⁶ In the example, the first occurrence of *Yhesu* is also postverbal, but this is due to subordination, regardless of the discourse role, showing the well-known matrix-subordinate asymmetry of subject placement in the V2 syntax of early Italo-Romance (Benincà 2006; Benincà & Poletto 2010: 28-75; Poletto 2014).

⁷ Cartographic studies posit that the V2 system overlaps with an underlying [SVOX] default order, from which the verb is attracted to the sentence-initial position, that is, it moves from its original position in the VP to the C-domain, namely the Head of CP, that is, the C° complementizer position (Benincà 2006; Poletto 2014; among others). Under this analysis, VS order with a referential topic is an unmarked result of verb movement. Note that in modern Italian the VS sentences in (3b) would be rephrased with a preverbal subject, this being topical (*Gesù disse ai servitori* 'Jesus said to the servants', *Gesù fece questo miracolo* 'Jesus made this miracle').

⁸ The two subjects in (4a) can also be construed as contrastive topics (Büring 1999), but this does not prevent them from having an aboutness function.

⁹ Note that the rephrasing in modern Italian of the last sentence in (4b) would be [*L'abate*]_{RefTopic} [*andò solo per tutta l'isola*]_{Comment}, as is also true of the translation in English.

¹⁰ Venetian is a distinct vernacular of the Veneto area and varies significantly from the other Venetan varieties (see Zamboni 1979; Tomasin 2010, among others).

¹¹ We note that, at this stage, *el* (and its allomorph *elo*) is also found as a proper, fully referential subject pronoun, as can be seen in the following examples: (i) *El navegà in Ytalia [...] e con gran pericolo el vene a Roma...* 'He sailed to Italy [...] and he came to Rome with great danger' (old Venetian, *Legg. ss. Piero e Polo*, 37, 59.11); (ii) *Poi ste parole el fo menao a recevoir la morte. E andà elo...* 'After these words he was dragged to receive death. And he went...' (old northern Italo-Romance, *Legg. sacre Ashb.*, 395, 172.26). Observe in (ii) the postverbal position of *elo*, which is a referential topic.

¹² Note that grammatical agreement with the syncretic verb forms occurs at a later stage, that is, after the 16th century, concomitantly with the loss of the V2 syntax. In fact, at this stage there emerge subject clitics (Haiman 1974; Benincà 1995; Poletto 1995; Parry 2013), which gradually become, in most northern varieties, extended exponents of finite (person and number) agreement (Rizzi 1986; Brandi & Cordin 1989; Poletto 2000; among others). This later type of agreement is grammatical, in that it involves agreement with subject ϕ -features. Diachronically, grammatical agreement is derived from anaphoric agreement (Givón 1976; Siewierska 1999; Corbett 2003; Mithun 2003, among others). However, synchronic tension between anaphoric agreement and grammatical agreement is still found in the VS structures of the modern Romance varieties of northern Italy (Bentley 2018).

¹³ We provide here the full contexts of (7b-c), showing that the postverbal subjects

are referential (continuing) topics, as they have been previously mentioned in discourse. (7b): *e tuti li frari insenbre con gran silenzio se levà su da tola e andà innanti li santi abadi infina la gliesia e driedo eli si andava li santi abadi, zoè san Brandan e l'oltro* 'and all the friars together, in great silence, got up from the table and went up to the church before/in front of the (two) holy abbots, and the (two) holy abbots went behind them, that is, saint Brendan and the other (abbot)' (*San Brendano ven.*, 96.12-15). (7c): *Qua trovà li frari lo monestir de san Abeo con xxiii munesi e fe la festa de nadal.* 'Here the friars found the monastery of saint Abba and celebrated the festivity of Christmas.' (*San Brendano ven.*, 88.27-28). This is the title of Chapter 14 in the text *San Brendano ven.* Besides having been repeatedly mentioned in the previous chapter, *li frari* 'the friars' must be a referential topic in this context. The title would in fact make no sense, and lack textual coherence, if the referent *li frari* were not presupposed, keeping topic continuity in the course of the narration.

¹⁴ In the absence of context, the postverbal subject *i apostuli* 'the apostles' could be construed as a referential topic by virtue of its definiteness.

¹⁵ The temporal adverb *Po* 'then' is an aboutness topic. However, this does not prevent the occurrence of the referential topic *Iesù* 'Jesus', as sentences can have one aboutness topic and (more than) one referential topic (Cruschina 2012: 19, 2015: 46).

¹⁶ Recall that in all the examples provided so far the first word is reported with a lower-case letter, which indicates that the construction follows a portion of text.

¹⁷ It can be argued that broad focus VS constructions with an expletive are not proper out-of-the-blue sentences, since they always follow a preceding portion of text. However, this is due to the diamesic dimension of the written texts. In the spoken domain, out-of-the-blue utterances need not be overtly anchored to any discourse frame or setting, because the spatio-temporal coordinates are understood in the deixis of the communicative situation. Instead, in the written domain such coordinates must first be explicitly defined, which also explains whythetic sentences with an expletive are never found to be the opening line at the beginning of a tale.

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