A framework for the study of Romance wh-questions, with special reference to Italo-Romance

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Interrogatives are complex objects that have animated a four-decade debate in theoretical linguistics. Many aspects of the computation of Romance questions are nonetheless still obscure to date, both cross-linguistically and language specifically. What do we know about the cartography of wh- and cleft- interrogatives and what can we learn from other languages? This chapter tries to answer this question by reorganising and discussing existing data and theories, and suggesting suitable trajectories for future investigations.

1. Introduction

Following Chomsky’s (1977) seminal work on interrogative wh-movement, content questions became among the most widely studied structures in formal linguistics.[[1]](#footnote-2) Nonetheless, many aspects pertaining to interrogative morphosyntax still constitute a theoretical challenge. The wide array of question-formation strategies attested in Romance makes the languages of this family a fertile territory for an investigation of the morphosyntax of answer-seeking questions, and a goldmine for those interested in a painstaking cartographic mapping of micro- and macro-variation in the way wh- and focus-projections are merged and realised across the functional spine. For these reasons, this contribution will focus mainly on Romance, although cross-family comparisons will be made regularly to illustrate and support the crucial points of a theory of interrogatives that aims at being universal.

The goal of this contribution is to show that there exist theoretical and empirical reasons in favour of an amendment of the existing cartography of Romance content questions. The areas of potential improvement, I shall argue, are the way [q] is checked, the understanding and distribution of focus projections in the spine and, consequently, the received cartography of *it*-clefts.

The chapter is organised as follows: in §2, I outline basic considerations on cleft and non-cleft wh-questions, and overview the standard theory of non-cleft interrogatives. Intentionally, I delay the overview and discussion of clefts until §5 because my claims will be dependent on the considerations that I lay out in §4. In §3, I provide formal and empirical evidence in support of the integration of Q-particles à la Cable (2010) in the computation of Romance wh-questions, and in §4 I utilise Italo-Romance data to demonstrate that the standard understanding whereby only Rizzi’s (1997) FocusP is used to derive wh-interrogatives and shifted focalisations is not tenable on empirical grounds.

2. Cleft and non-cleft content questions

Content questions can be cleft or non-cleft. Non-cleft wh-questions are commonly understood to feature a dependency between a copy of the wh-element in the base position and the wh-element itself. In the case of wh-fronting, the wh-element surfaces in a derived position, as in (1):

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| (1) | [ | Who | did | you | invite | <who> | to | the | party | ]? |

Cleft-questions are syntactically different from non-clefts because they are systematically bi-clausal (Haegeman et al. 2014, Belletti 2015, *pace* Meinunger 1997, Frascarelli & Ramaglia 2013, a.o.). Accordingly, the dependency is formed across clause boundaries, as in (2):

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| (2) | [ | Who | is | it | that | [ | you | invited | <who> | to | the | party | ]]? |

Wh-clefts such as the one in (2) are under-studied with respect to their non-cleft counterparts. In general, clefts are understood as quantificationally equivalent to their non-cleft equivalents, although the two structures cannot be used interchangeably in all contexts (Karssenberg & Lahousse 2018). While all types of content questions encode a focalisation (Chomsky 1977; Kiss 1998; Abels & Muringi 2005; Haegeman et al. 2014; Den Dikken 2013, Belletti 2015, a.o.), the focalisation expressed by wh-clefts conveys an ‘exclusiveness’ feature that is uncommon in non-clefts (Boliger 1972, Hedberg 1990;2000, Kiss 1999, Lambrecht 2001, Delin & Oberlander 2005, a.o.).

This contribution will only deal with *it*-clefts, which are composed of a high clause that features a dummy pronoun (an equivalent of English *it*, see Reeve 2010;2011 on this topic), the copula and the focussed element, and of a relative-like lower clause that contains the copy of the displaced focussed constituent or wh-element, as illustrated in (3):

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| (3) | [ | Wh-element/focus | copula | it | COMP | [ | < wh-element/focus > | ]] |

*It*-clefts can display two relative orderings between the focused element and the copula: cop>foc (**regular cleft**) and foc>cop (**inversed cleft**). This is true of both declarative and interrogative clauses. In interrogatives, the inverse ordering previously seen in (2) for English is also attested in languages such as spoken French, as illustrated in (4a), European and Brazilian Portuguese (Kato & Ribeiro 2009, Lobo et al. 2019, a.o.), (4b), and Eastern Trevisan, (4c):[[2]](#footnote-3)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| (4) | a. | *Qui* | *c’est* | *que* | *t’as* | *invité* | *à* | *la* | *fête* | *?* |
|  |  | who | ce=is | that | you=have | invited | to | the | party |  |
|  |  | ‘Who is it that you invited to the party?’ | | | | | | | | |
|  | b. | *O que* | *é* | *que* | *você* | *bebe* | *?* |  |  |  |
|  |  | what | is | that | you | drink |  |  |  |  |
|  |  | ‘What is (it) that you drink?’ | | | | | | | | |
|  |  | Kato & Ribeiro 2009:131(38) | | | | | | | | |
|  | c. | *Ki* | *ze-o* | *ke* | *te-o* | *gà* | *contà* | *?* |  |  |
|  |  | who | is=it | that | you=it | has | told |  |  |  |
|  |  | ‘Who is (it) that told you so?’ | | | | | | | | |

Declarative inversed clefts are not possible in all Romance languages but are nonetheless attested in some of them, such as Eastern Trevisan, as in (5a), European Portuguese (Kato & Ribeiro 2009, Lobo et al. 2019, a.o.), as in (5b), but also Brazilian Portuguese and some Southern Italian dialects (Cruschina 2015) like the variety of Sicilian spoken in Corleone in (5c).

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| (5) | a. | *Toni* | *ze* | *ke* | *me* | *gà* | *dato* | *el* | *capel* | *!* |
|  |  | toni | is | that | me | has | given | the | hat |  |
|  |  | ‘It’s Toni who gave me the hat!’ (Lit: ‘Toni is who gave me the hat!’) | | | | | | | | |
|  | b. | *O* | *éstudante* | *é* | *que* | *o* | *professor* | *ajudou* | *.* |  |
|  |  | the | student | is | that | the | teacher | helped |  |  |
|  |  | ‘It’s the student that the teacher helped’ (Lit: ‘The student is that the teacher helped’) | | | | | | | | |
|  |  | Lobo et al. 2019:4(9) | | | | | | | | |
|  | c. | *Tu* | *si* | *ca* | *m’ha* | *cuntari* | *qualchi* | *cosa* | *.* |  |
|  |  | you | is | that | me=have | told | some | thing |  |  |
|  |  | ‘It’s you who are telling me something’ (Lit: ‘You is who are telling me something’) | | | | | | | | |
|  |  | Retrieved from ASIt, Atlante Sintattico d’Italia | | | | | | | | |

The pragmatics and syntax of inversed clefts are understudied compared to that of their regular counterparts, and the alternations between regular and inversed structures have mostly been attributed to register (Mathieu 1999 for French, Kato & Ribeiro 2009 and Lobo et al. 2019 for Portuguese). Although much work is still needed to understand why and when clefts are licensed, the morphosyntax of inversed (declarative and interrogative) clefts is crucial for the redefinition of the cartography of Romance clefts, as I outline in §5. Detailed accounts of the morphosyntax of Romance clefts have already been proposed in Berretta 1994, Kato & Raposo 1996, Kato & Ribeiro 2009, Dufter 2009, Roggia 2009, Cardoso & Alexandre 2013, De Cesare 2014, Garassino 2014, Belletti 2009, Valentini 2016, Sánchez Candela 2017, Destruel et al. 2019, although these offer morphosyntactic accounts that are almost completely monolingual, to the effect that crucial cross-linguistic properties discussed throughout this chapter are involuntarily neglected. Moreover, only few of these works approach the issue from a cartographic point of view and when they do, they embrace a very orthodox version of the cartography of focus which is not tenable under empirical grounds that I outline and discuss in §4.

2.1 Types and theory of non-cleft wh-questions

Superficially, languages vary substantially in the ways they realise wh-movement in answer-seeking single wh-questions. Languages are traditionally divided into two types: wh-fronting languages, and wh-in situ languages. Standard English constitutes a famous instantiation of the first type, as it displays compulsory overt wh-shifting in genuine questions. Wh-in situ is possible in the language but mainly carries an ‘echo/repetition’ interpretation, as illustrated in (6):

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| (6) | a. | who | did | you | talk | to | ? | (✓genuine, ✓echo) |
|  | b. | You | talked | to | who | ?! |  | (✗genuine, ✓echo) |

Conversely, a language like present-day Mandarin Chinese instantiates the second type, i.e., **pure** wh-in situ, as its wh-elements virtually always surface in the base position.[[3]](#footnote-4) This is illustrated in (7):

(7) pure wh-in situ (Mandarin Chinese, Huang 1982: 253)

a. Ni kanjian-le shei?

you see.asp who

b. \* sheii ni kanjian-le \_\_\_i?

who you see.asp

‘Who did you see?’

In Romance, all attested varieties display the question-formation strategy of total wh-fronting, while the **pure** in-situ strategy of present-day Mandarin Chinese is never attested. Interestingly though, numerous Romance languages display **optional** wh-in situ, i.e., an apparently free alternation between total wh-fronting and wh-in situ. Noteworthy accounts on the topic are Mathieu 1999, Starke 2001, Baunaz 2005 and Faure & Palasis 2021 for French; Poletto 2000, Manzini & Savoia 2011 and Bonan 2021a for Northern Italian dialects; Jiménez 1997, Etxepare & Uribe-Etxebarria 2005, Bíezma 2018 for Spanish; Cheng & Rooryck 2000 and Kato 2013 for Portuguese. Optional wh-in situ languages are quite common also outside Romance (Ancash Quechua, Cole & Hermon 1994; Albanian, Turano 1998; Persian, Kahnemuyipour 2001; Archaic Chinese and Old Japanese, Aldridge 2009;2010, a.o.), and constitute a full-fledged, yet often neglected third type in the classification of wh-interrogatives. An example from contemporary spoken French is given in (8).[[4]](#footnote-5)

(8) Contemporary French (Bonan 2021b: 3(2))

a. T’as vu qui?

you.sg=have seen who

b. quii t’as vu \_\_\_i?

who you.sg=have seen

‘Who did you see?’

In recent works, I have also demonstrated that a fourth interrogative type exists in Romance, i.e., the ‘low fronting’ type. This type, exemplified by Eastern Trevisan (Bonan 2021a;2021b), features a low movement of the wh-element that constitutes a robust phenomenon in Indo-Aryan (Hindi-Urdu, Manetta 2011, Dayal 2017) and Dravidian languages (Malayalam, Jayaseelan 1996), but also in modern languages of the Indo-European (Persian, Kahnemuyipour 2001), Niger-Congo (Bantu, Aboh 2007), Sino-Tibetan (Old Japanese, Aldridge 2009) and Japonic families (Ancient Chinese, Aldridge 2010). Unfortunately, despite the large availability of languages with low interrogative movement, the existence of this interrogative type was never acknowledged in the Romance literature before Bonan (2019). (9) illustrates the low movement under consideration:[[5]](#footnote-6)

(9) low wh-movement in romance (Eastern Trevisan, Bonan 2021b: 7(7))

ghe gatu dato a kii a teʧa \_\_\_i ?

3.dat have=you.sg given to who the saucepan

‘Who did you give the saucepan to?’

To sum up, languages can be of four types with respect to their distribution of wh-elements in non-cleft wh-questions: fronting languages (English, Standard Italian), pure wh-in situ languages (Mandarin Chinese), optional wh-in situ languages (most Northern Italian dialects, spoken French), and low movement languages (Eastern Trevisan). Theoretically, both wh-in situ languages of the pure and of the optional type pose challenges: the correct binding configuration whereby the wh-element determines its scope is *not* obtained in overt syntax, and the phonetic string is not sufficient to understand whether the wh-element is unmoved or moved covertly. The situation is even further complicated in the case of optional wh-in situ, since non-semantically-motivated optionality is theoretically difficult to account for.

In this chapter, I shall review the existing literature, and single out crucial empirical evidence for the understanding of the morphosyntax of Romance interrogatives. My goals are to show that there exists a viable alternative to a parametrization of wh-movement à la Huang (1982) as a pure ‘covert vs overt movement’ alternation, to redefine the functional projections involved in the derivation of cleft and non-cleft questions, and to encourage a refinement of the existing cartography of ‘focus’.

**2. the cartographic literature on wh-interrogatives**

The cartography of syntactic structures attempts at drawing precise and detailed maps of syntactic configurations (Cinque & Rizzi 2009). Structural maps came to fame following the formalisation of numerous functional heads during the first decade of the Principles and Parametersframework (Chomsky 1981), which led to the isolation of the VP first, an IP, and then a CP, as in (10).

(10) clausal functional layers

[CP C° [IP I° [VP V° ]]]

The layered structure in (10) was motivated by the idea that clauses are composed of a lower lexical structure and a higher functional structure, like phrases. A further, crucial development then followed the observation that functional projections are different from lexical projections in that they consist of more than one single head: Pollock (1989) and Belletti (1990), the preliminary investigations into the core functional structure of the clause, led to the ground-breaking definition of IP as a layer. The same logic then led to a splitting of the CP into articulated hierarchical sequences of functional projections known as the **high** Left Periphery (HLP, Rizzi 1997, Rizzi 2001 and related works). A similar claim was made in Cecchetto (1999), Villalba (1998, 2000) and then Belletti (2004) and López (2009), according to whom there also exists a reduced periphery right above *v*P, the **low** Left Periphery (LLP). I discuss the HLP and Belletti’s version of the LLP, which are fundamental for my theory of interrogative wh-movement, in §2.1.

2.1 the low and high peripheries

Throughout this chapter, two functional layers are discussed extensively: Rizzi’s HLP and Belletti’s LLP. These are widely acknowledged to have the forms in (11) and (12), respectively.

(11) the hlp (as in Rizzi & Bocci 2017:8(29))

[ Force [ Top\* [ Int [ Top\* [ Focus [ Top\* [ Mod [ Top\* [ Qemb [ Fin [ IP ... ]]]]]]]]]]]

(12) the llp (as in Belletti 2004)

[ Top [ Foc [ Top [ VP ... ]]]]]

The HLP of the clause consists of strictly ordered projections encoding functional information such as force, finiteness, etc. This functional field is delimited by ForceP, where a connection is established between the clause and the discourse (or a selecting verb), and FinP, which is in direct contact with IP. Focused constituents and fronted wh-elements are commonly assumed to compete for SpecFocusP, while the low QembP has been argued to host wh-elements in focus-containing indirectwh-questions (Rizzi 2004, Rizzi & Bocci 2017). The LLP is reduced, and minimally features a focus projection surrounded by topic projections. The presence of a focus projection in the LLP, Foc, was originally posited to host of post-verbal subject in Italian VS structures such as that in (13b); note that the ordering in (13a) is excluded from these contexts but not ungrammatical in the language.

(13) vs orderings in standard italian (Belletti 2004)

Question: Chi è arrivato?

who is arrived

‘Who arrived?’

a. # Gianni / Un ragazzo è arrivato.

Gianni / a boy is arrived

b. È arrivato Gianni / un ragazzo.

is arrived Gianni / a boy

‘Gianni / a boy arrived’ (Lit: ‘Arrived Gianni / a boy’)

In a context such as that of (13), in which a speaker is unable to identify the subject of the utterance while their interlocutor has the relevant information, the ordering in (13b) is attested in Italian with all verb classes and irrespective of the definite or indefinite nature of the post-verbal subject (Belletti & Rizzi 2017). This uniform VS order for Italian new information foci is what led Belletti to postulate that, in narrow focus environments, the subject of all verb classes moves systematically in Italian.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Because of the ungrammaticality of the wh-in situ strategy in Standard Italian (Calabrese 1984, Rizzi 1997, a.o.), Belletti’s Focwas at originally believed to only attract foci, not wh-movement. However, further studies have proposed that Focis available as the target of Romance clause-internal wh-elements; these include Kato (2003, later published as Kato 2013) for Brazilian Portuguese, Belletti (2006) for French, Manzini (2012) for Northern Italian dialects. The idea of wh-in situ and clause-internal foci targeting Foc, refined on the basis of robust data from non-Romance languages (Mahajan 1990, Manetta 2010;2011, Jayaseelan 1996, Aboh 2007, Sinopoulou 2008, Cheng & Bayer 2017, a.o.), was then adopted in Bonan (2021a, 2021b) to account for Easter Trevisan data.

In §2.2 and §2.3, I discuss why a simple parametrisation of wh-movement à la Huang is not tenable, and then overview the mainstream approaches to Romance wh-questions and argue that neither can be maintained in the light of robust Romance and non-Romance low movement phenomena.

2.2 against a simple ‘overt vs covert movement’ parameter

The term wh-movement refers to the transformational analysis of the early days of generative grammar whereby wh-expressions appeared in their canonical position at deep structure, as in (14a), and then moved leftward into a derived clause-initial position at surface structure, as illustrated in (14b):

(14) a. Your brother ate [ all of my chocolates ]

b.[ What ]idid your brother eat \_\_\_i ?

Consequently, wh-elements have been widely understood as operators which bind variables at the level of Interpretation, and wh-movement is commonly thought of as a syntactic solution to a semantic problem: wh-operators must be split across two positions to be interpretable, one position serving as the operator itself and one serving as the variable. The implication of this hypothesis is that regardless of whether the movement of wh-elements is detectable in the phonetic string, all wh-elements move to create the relevant operator-variable configuration before interpretation occurs. Consequently, the different cross-linguistic distributional properties of wh-elements are often assumed to be the result of the fact that wh-movement occurs either overtly or covertly.

Since Huang (1982), pure in situ languages like Chinese and Japanese have been argued to have real wh-in situ. Wh-elements such as that in example (7a) are thus commonly considered to be in their external-merge position. Notably, Huang argued that the operator-variable configuration is obtained in covert syntax in these languages: the interpretation of the wh-element occurs after Spell-Out. Consequently, while overt wh-fronting is ruled out in pure in situ languages, as seen in (7b), covert wh-fronting *does* take place, as sketched in (15):

(15) covert wh-fronting (Mandarin Chinese, Huang 1982:253(160))

LF: [[ *Shei* ]]i[ ni kanjian-le \_\_\_i]] ?

whoyou see-asp

Huang’s highly influential idea that the choice between wh-ex situ and wh-in situ is parametrised was supported by numerous subsequent investigations of wh-in situ languages (Lasnik & Saito 1992, Watanabe 1992, Aoun & Li 1993, Tsai 1994, Soh 2005, Pan 2014 for Chinese; Beck & Kim 1997, Ko 2005 for Korean; Bruening & Thuan 2006 for Vietnamese; Cole & Hermon 1994 for Ancash Quechua; Cole & Hermon 1998 for Malay; Kishimoto 2005 for Sinhala, Downing 2018 for Bantu, a.o.).

However, Cheng (2003) demonstrated that there exist at least three large-scale problems with this influential proposal. First, wh-elements moved at LF, such as that in (15), share the interpretation and scope as overtly moved wh-elements, yet appear to be constrained differently in terms of sensitivity to islands and intervention effects (for detailed discussion, Watanabe 1992, Reinhart 1998, Pesetsky 2000, Richards 2000, a.o.). Second, while Chinese and other wh-in situ languages lack any traces of overt wh-movement, full-fronting languages such as English *require* wh-in situ in certain contexts, and hence cannot be said to manifest the negative setting of an overt/covert movement parameter (wh-in situ is the only permitted option in multiple wh-questions). Third, free variation between wh-movement and wh-in situ is not expected by a parametric approach to wh-in situ, contrary to facts.It has therefore become clear that Huang’s parametrisation of wh-movement is not sufficient to account for the cross-linguistic data on wh-interrogatives gathered in the last four decades.

An alternative theory of wh-in situ was then started by Poletto & Pollock (2000) on the basis of Romance data and developed over the years, which I shall call the ‘remnant-IP movement approach’. This theory, which has become popular among Romance scholars, is equally unable to account for all four interrogative types singled out in §2. I review and discuss the theory in §2.3.

2.3 an influential yet empirically challenged theory

A pioneering piece of research into the syntax of Romance wh-movement, based on French data, was Kayne (1972). Two decades later, Kayne’s (1994) antisymmetry provided a framework for the study of French interrogative inversion by promoting strict binary branching and banning rightward movement. Following this influential work, Poletto & Pollock (2000) developed their famous approach to Romance wh-interrogatives, which they based on the interrogative syntax of French and northern Italian dialects. Accordingly, wh-in situ in northern Italian dialects is an instance of **masked** wh-in situ: clause-internal wh-words undergo wh-movement to a low Spec in the HLP, which is masked in the phonetic string by further movements that displace the whole remnant-IP into the HLP. Accordingly, the derivation of a Bellunese (Munaro 1997) question such as (16) is as in (17):

(16) bellunese wh-in situ (Poletto & Pollock 2000:118(5))

Ha-tu parecià *che*?

have=you prepared what

‘What did you prepare?’

(17) derivation of bellunese masked wh-in situ[[7]](#footnote-8);[[8]](#footnote-9)

Input: [IP tu ha parecià *che* ]

1. First step: Wh-movement to a functional projection higher than IP (here, XP)

[XP *che*i X° [IP tu ha parecià \_\_\_i ]]

1. Second step: Movement of the remnant-IP to a higher functional projection (YP)

[YP [IP tu ha parecià \_\_\_i ]j Y° [XP che X° \_\_\_j ]]

This analysis was heavily criticised by Manzini & Savoia (2005;2011), who claimed that northern Italian clause-internal wh-elements are unmoved from their first-merge position until after Spell-Out. While I do not agree that Manzini & Savoia’s conclusion is right for all languages, data from numerous Romance varieties strongly support their claim that Poletto & Pollock’s analysis is undesirable for Romance wh-in situ, at least empirically (cf. Bonan to appear). I overview the data in §2.3.1.

2.3.1 against remnant-ip movement

Poletto & Pollock’s approach to wh-in situ was founded on the observation that in Bellunese clause-internal wh-words do not seem to surface in their external-merge position. The language is indeed claimed to require clause-internal wh-words to surface in clause-final position, and everything that follows directly has to constitute an independent intonational phrase. Observe (18):

(18) Bellunese (Poletto & Pollock 2015: 139(2))

a. Al ghe a dat al libro a so fradel

he 3.dat has given the book to his brother

‘He gave the book to his brother’

b. \* Ghe ha-lo dat che a so fradel?

3.dat has=he given what to his brother

‘What has he given to his brother?’

c. Ghe ha-lo dat che, a so fradel?

3.dat has=he given what to his brother

In (18), the declarative ordering in (a) is not reproduced in interrogatives, as in (b). This, for the authors, is to be attributed to the fact that the wh-element moves to a low wh-projection in the HLP, while what follows is right-dislocated, as in (c). Curiously, it is argued that the language is unable to front bare wh-words, as in (19), and to have D-linked wh-elements clause-internally, as in (20).[[9]](#footnote-10)

(19) Bellunese (Munaro 1999: 50 (1.56))

a. À-tu parecià che?

have=you prepared what

b. \* Che à-tu parecià?

what have=you prepared

‘What did you prepare?’

(20) Bellunese (Munaro 1999: 14 (1.2))

a. Che vestito à-tu sièlt?

what dress have=you chosen

b. \* À-tu sièlt che vestito?

have=you chosen what dress

‘Which dress did you choose?’

This is a highly unusual feature, and while many wh-words are known to have special distributions (e.g., French *que* vs *quoi*), in no other Romance language D-linking systematically influences the distribution of wh-elements to this extent. Additionally, while it is claimed that Bellunese wh-in situ is impossible in indirect wh-questions and within islands for extraction, Munaro (1997) reported that the phenomenon was attested in long-distance wh-questions in the language, as in (21). This piece of evidence argues against a derivation à la Poletto & Pollock strongly, as claimed in Bonan (2021).

(21) Bellunese (Munaro 1999: 72 (1.100-102)

a. À-tu dit che l’à comprà che?

have=you said that he=has bought what

‘What did you say he bought?’

b. À-tu dit che l’é ‘ndat andé?

have=you said that he=is gone where

‘Where did you say he went?’

The interrogative syntax of Bellunese is not attested in any other language. Bonan (2021:183-194) showed that a clause-final requirement à la Bellunese is never observed in widely studied Romance languages such as contemporary spoken French (Baunaz 2011, Baunaz & Patin 2011), Spanish (Biezma 2018), European Portuguese (Cheng & Rooryck 2002) and Brazilian Portuguese (Kato 2013) at the very least, despite numerous previous attempts to explain the grammar of some of these languages à la Poletto & Pollock (Obenauer 1994, Ambar & Veloso 2001, Munaro et al. 2001, Etxepare & Uribe-Etxebarria 2005, a.o.). Similarly, no other northern Italian dialect has been claimed to have a restriction of the sort (Manzini & Savoia 2005; 2011, Manzini 2014). Wh-in situ has also been proven widely felicitous in various non-matrix contexts, with most known Romance languages able to licence it in long-distance environments (Contemporary spoken French, Baunaz 2011; Spanish, Etxepare & Uribe-Etxebarria 2005, Brazilian Portuguese, Kato 2013; European Portuguese, Pires & Tylor 2009, Cheng & Rooryck 2000; numerous NIDs, Manzini 2014; Eastern Trevisan, Bonan 2021a, etc.), and some even in indirect questions (Spanish, Suñer 1991, Etxepare & Uribe-Etxebarria 2005; numerous Northern Italian dialects, ‘NIDs’, Manzini & Savoia 2005; Belgian French, Boeckx et al. 2012; Eastern Trevisan, Bonan 2021a). Manzini & Savoia also argued that NIDs have different sensitivities to islands but are always at least able to have wh-in situ within weak islands. Bonan (2019) argued that island-trapped wh-in situ is legitimate also in Eastern Trevisan. Similarly, contemporary spoken French can license wh-in situ within islands (Mathieu 1999), whereas out-of-island extraction is banned from strong islands (Obenauer 1994, Starke 2001, Shlonsky 2012), thus witnessing that in-island wh-in situ is not only possible in Romance, but even compulsory in some cases. Similar phenomena are observed in Spanish (Reglero 2007, Alcalà 2014) and Brazilian Portuguese (Pires & Tylor 2009, Figueiredo Silva & Grolla 2016).

Bellunese is thus an outlier in the Romance domain (and well beyond), and no universally valid theory can be founded on its puzzling interrogative syntax. While one could argue that also Eastern Trevisan is the only Romance variety with documented low focus/wh-movement, similar low movements are attested robustly in languages of Indo-European, Indo-Aryan, Dravidian and Niger-Congo origin at the very least (Bonan 2021b:12-18). The existing theory of Romance wh-interrogatives is therefore unable to account for low instances of movement such as those observed in Eastern Trevisan, and fails to take into account the bigger picture. In §3, I shall discuss a first important implementation that I believe ought to be made to the theory of Romance non-cleft content questions and provide supporting evidence in its favour from Eastern Trevisan.

3. **the grammar of q-particles and its relevance for romance**

The cartographic approach assumes that the hierarchies of functional projections observed in the languages of the world are universal, even though these differ in the type(s) of movements that they allow and/or in the extent to which they realise functional heads and Specs overtly. The universality comprises not only the type of heads and Specs contained within the functional layers, but also the number of those heads and Specs and their relative order (Cinque 2006, Kayne 2008, a.o.). This implies that if a language provides evidence for the existence of a particular functional head or Spec, that projection exists in *every* natural language, independently of the presence or absence of overt evidence for it. Because of this, it is a priority to start looking for a universal explanation, not language-specific ones, to the phenomenon of interrogative wh-movement.

Accordingly, the first implementation needed by the theory of Romance wh-questions is that of Q-particles à la Cable (2010). In this chapter, I shall adopt the classic parallelism between focus movement and wh-movement (Horvath 1986, Rizzi 1997, a.o.), and then suggest that the Romance languages have Q-particles, and that these are what is probed by the HLP in answer-seeking interrogatives. Here, I first overview Cable’s work on Q-particles briefly, trying to underline the main reasons behind the universal need for Q-particles (§3.1). Then, I present Eastern Trevisan data that support the need for Q-particles in Romance empirically (§3.2).

3.1 the role of q-particles

A solution to the theoretical puzzle of wh-in situ was presented in Cable (2010), but Romance specialists have so far resisted adopting his theory of interrogatives. Here, I show that an implementation of Cable’s theory is necessary to find a valid explanation to the phenomenon of Romance wh-in situ.

Cable demonstrated that all languages have Q-particles, regardless of whether these are phonetically-realised or silent. For the author, the structural relationships that these entertain with the wh-element (projection vs adjunction), and the choice between overt vs cover movement, predict the existence of minimally four types of wh-movement in languages. Contrary to common consensus, Cable’s understanding entails that what is triggered by the HLP is not the wh-element itself but the Q-particle, to the effect that in those configurations in which the wh-element and the Q-particle cannot be separated, the wh-element is piggy-backed to the HLP by [q].

That cross-linguistically, wh-fronting targets the features of the Q-particle is demonstrated by Tlingit wh-questions, whose felicity depends upon the locality of the Q-particle to the HLP (the locality of the wh-element being irrelevant). This can be seen in (22a), where the Q-particle *sá* attached outside of the island to extraction makes it possible for the wh-word *wáa* (‘how’) to surface within the island. Conversely, *sá* in a more embedded position gives rise to ungrammaticality, as in (22b):

(22) Tlingit (Cable 2010: 7-8(10))

a. [[ wáakwligeyi CP] xáat NP] **sá** i tuwáa sigóo ?

how it.is.big.rel fish Q your spirit it.is.glad

‘How big a fish do you want?’

b. \* [[ wáa **sá** kwligeyi CP] xáat NP] i tuwáa sigóo ?

how Q it.is.big.rel fish your spirit it.is.glad

Contrasts like those in (22) suggest that only the features of the Q-particle are referenced by the rules for forming wh-questions. Accordingly, pied-piping of wh-elements is rather an overt movement that targets Q and can result in the parasitic movement of a wh-element to the HLP.

For Cable, two different configurations exist: Q-projection and Q-adjunction.[[10]](#footnote-11) To understand the former, observe (23), in which the fronted wh-word *wáa* is followed directly by the Q-particle *sá*:

(23) Tlingit (Cable 2010: 3(1), from Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer 2000: 138))

wáa **sá** sh tudinookw i éesh?

how Q he feels your father

‘how is your father feeling?’

Cable claims that the Tlingit wh-elements can have the structure in (24), where in the case of (23) Q is *sá* and the wh-word is *wáa* (Q appears to the right here because Tlingit is head-final):

(24) q-projection

Diagram

Description automatically generated

In configurations such as the one in (24), the Q-particle projects a QP and selects the wh-word as its argument. Without going into detail, note that the Q-particle and the wh-word are inseparable in this configuration, and attraction of [q] to the HLP entails that the entire QP is moved, as illustrated in (25):

(25) wh-fronting as an effect of q-movement (Cable 2010: 39(53))

Diagram

Description automatically generated

Cable explains that the analysis in (25) is true of all total-fronting languages, also those which lack phonetically realised Q-particles (e.g., English). Based on the timing of QP-movement, Q-projection languages can display wh-in situ: in such languages, the structure of wh-elements is the same as in Tlingit, but QP-movement takes place at the moment of interpretation, as in the diagram in (26):

(26) covert qp-movement as a source of wh-in situ (Cable 2010: 86(3))

Diagram

Description automatically generated

An example of a Q-projection **in situ** language is SOV Sinhala. This can be seen in (27), where the QP constituted by *monawa* (‘what’) and *da* (Q) surfaces in its external-merge position:

(27) Sinhala (Cable 2010: 31(32), originally in Kishimoto 2005: 3)

Chitra monawa**da** gatte?

Chitra what Q buy

‘What did Chitra buy?’

The second type of configuration is that of Q-adjunction. In Q-adjunction, the node that immediately dominates the Q-particle and its sister is of the same type as the wh-word, as in (28):

(28) q-adjunction

Diagram

Description automatically generated

The main property of Q-adjunction is that the Q-particle and the wh-word are not inseparable, so when the Q-particle is probed it moves alone to the HLP, stranding the wh-word clause-internally. Q-adjoining languages are thus always in situ languages because wh-words stay in their first-merge position. An example from Japanese is reported in (29):

(29) Japanese (Cable 2010: 89(12))

John-ga nani-okaimasita **ka**?

John-nom what-acc bought.polite Q

‘What did John buy?’

The derivation of this type of wh-in situ is sketched in (30), which was inspired by Hagstrom’s (1998) analysis of Japanese wh-questions.

(30) stranding of the wh-element and overt movement of q (Cable 2010: 39(52))

Diagram

Description automatically generated

To summarise, Cable’s analysis originally led to the establishment of a new typology of wh-in situ that comprises at least two distinct syntactic types:

1. Q-projection languages: languages where QP-movement occurs covertly (Sinhala);
2. Q-adjunction languages: languages where the Q-particle moves to the HLP alone (Japanese, or Korean).

Cable consequently singled out the existence of three main Parameters responsible for most cross-linguistic variation in the morphosyntax of wh-questions, namely:

* the **projection parameter**: Q-projection vs. Q-adjunction;
* the **q-movement parameter**: overt movement vs covert movement;
* the **q-pronunciation parameter**: phonetically-realised vs silent.

Bonan (2021b) demonstrated that the Eastern Trevisan data support that Cable’s (2010) classification ought to be modified to include the possibility to have languages that are able to both project and adjoin Q, and languages that have low focus-movement of the wh-word in addition to the movements that occur when Q is triggered. I discuss this briefly in §3.2.

3.2 further evidence in support of cable’s model

Cable provided multiple reasons in support of the existence of Q-particles in languages like Standard English in which these particles are silent. Additionally, authors such as Aboh & Pfau (2011) also explicitly dissociate wh-movement from interrogative force, and demonstrate that wh-words are not inherently interrogative and do not participate in clause typing. Accordingly, wh-words in content interrogatives are cross-linguistically required only for the identification of the content of the question.

The legitimacy of these claims is supported by the syntax of languages such as Chinese, whose wh-words lack quantificational force (Huang 1982), or Albanian, where ‘k-words’ need moving into a focal projection to be interpreted as interrogative (Turano 1998). It is also important to acknowledge that wh-words are not exclusively employed in interrogative sentences, as exemplified in (31):

(31) a. Where did you two meet?

b. This is the restaurant where Anna and I met.

For Rizzi (1990), wh-words are associated with both [+wh] and [+q] features, and their specification changes depending on the context, to the effect that *where* is [+wh;+q] in the interrogative (31a) and [+wh;-q] in the relative in (31b). To say that wh-words are inherently associated to a single feature and the the Q-particle is independently merged in wh-questions in undeniably more elegant, and in line with the cross-linguistic evidence discussed above.

In Bonan (2021b), in line with Horward (1986) and much related literature, I suggested that the feature encoded by wh-words is not [wh] but [focus].[[11]](#footnote-12) Accordingly, languages like Eastern Trevisan which display low wh-movement are Q-adjoining languages in which the derivation is done in two steps: first, focus-movement into a low focus-projection, and second, Q-movement probed by the HLP. The first step is illustrated in (32):

(32) low movement of wh-elements (Bonan 2021b: 29(67))

Diagram

Description automatically generated

An understanding of the low movement of wh-elements such as the one in (32) entails that Rizzi’s (1996) Wh-criterion is twofold and encompasses a Focus-criterion and a Q-criterion.[[12]](#footnote-13) Accordingly, at least all languages that have Q-adjunction check [focus] in the LLP, and the difference between languages that have low movement such as Eastern Trevisan and languages that do not, like for instance present-day Mandarin Chinese, lies in the fact that the former requires both agreement and movement, while the latter dispenses with movement.[[13]](#footnote-14) In this theory, the implementation of an adjoining Q-particle as seen in (32) results in an elegant and effortless explanation of how low wh-movement is possible, and not in violation of Rizzi’s (2016) Criterial Freezing: the low movement is triggered by the [focus]-feature within the wh-word, and satisfies a Focus-Criterion; subsequently, the HLP probes for Q, which moves into the HLP to satisfy the Q-Criterion. While it could be argued that the use of silent Q-particles in the derivation of Eastern Trevisan interrogatives is an *ad hoc* strategy, there exists empirical evidence to demonstrates that this is not the case, as I argue in what follows.

3.2.1 on eastern trevisan ‘why’

Numerous contributions on Romance wh-in situ embrace the widespread assumption that there exists a connection between clause-internal wh-elements and a null operator in the HLP (Munaro 1997, Poletto & Pollock 2000, Munaro et al. 2001, a.o.). Empirically and conceptually, it is challenging to distinguish between the overt movement of a silent particle into the HLP (as in Cable’s work) from the licensing of a silent left-peripheral Op. However, there is empirical evidence that the realisation of subject clitic inversion, which is compulsory in the answer-seeking questions of Eastern Trevisan, is closely linked to the presence of overt interrogative movement into the HLP, as discussed in Bonan & Shlonsky (2021). This supports the idea that what checks [q] in the HLP is base-generated within the IP.

Bonan & Shlonsky (2021) claimed that Eastern Trevisan *parké* (‘why’) is a regular why-word in the sense of Rizzi (2001) and Stepanov & Tsai (2008), as it can only surface in the HLP, and is incompatible with subject-inversion, as in (33):[[14]](#footnote-15)

(33) Eastern Trevisan (Bonan & Shlonsky 2021)

a. *parké* te sì ndaa al marcà ?

why you= are goneF to.the market

‘Why did you go to the market?’

b. \* te sì ndaa *parché* al marcà?

you= are goneF why to.the market

c. \* parké si-tu ndaa al marcà?

why are=you goneF to.the market

Interestingly, Bonan & Shlonsky demonstrated that, in the context of long extraction of *parké*, subject clitic inversion is obligatorily realised when *parké* is long-construed, as in (34).

(34) Eastern Trevisan (Bonan & Shlonsky 2021)[[15]](#footnote-16)

a. parké te dizi [ ke a te ga ʧamà ]?

why you= say that she= you has called

‘What is *x*, *x* a reason, you say [that she called you] because *x*?’

b. parkéidizitu [ ke \_\_i a te ga ʧamà ]?

why say=you that she= you has called

‘What is *x*, *x* a reason, you say [that she called you because *x*]?’

Given the incompatibility of matrix *parké* in constructions with subject clitic inversion, it is unexpected for (34b) to be felicitous. Bonan & Shlonsky argued that in the absence of interrogative movement through FinP, i.e., in matrix questions in which *parké* is externally-merged directly in the HLP, interrogative subject clitic inversion is not triggered. In contrast, when *parké* is externally-merged in the embedded HLP and subsequently extracted into the matrix HLP, the passage through SpecFin triggers subject clitic inversion. For the authors, empirical evidence of this type witnesses that overt interrogative movement through SpecFin is needed to have subject clitic inversion: in Eastern Trevisan matrix wh-questions with a clause-internal wh-element, the requirement for subject clitic inversion thus supports the existence of overt interrogative movement of a silent element to the HLP, as that in (35).

(35) **Q**j ghe gatu dato [ \_\_j a kii ] a teʧa \_\_i ?

dat have=you given to who the saucepan

Lit: ‘Q you gave to whom the saucepan?’

To sum up, to not posit the cross-linguistic presence of Q-particles in the computation of wh-interrogatives is conceptually wrong, as these are widely attested, and there also exists substantial cross-linguistic evidence to support that Q ought to be implemented also in languages that do not have phonetically realised Q-particles. Additionally, the low movement observed in the wh-interrogatives of Eastern Trevisan witnesses that the link with the HLP is not done by moving the wh-element at LF but by a different element, identified here as the Q-particle: to move a frozen-in-place wh-element out of the LLP would constitute a violation of Criterial Freezing. I thus maintain that the implementation of Q-particles is a much-needed amendment in the cartography of Romance wh-questions, and one that should not be overlooked further in the literature.

**4. the need for a redefinition of the field of focus**

In Rizzi (1997), the existence of a HLP was posited in the functional space that was previously known as the CP. Among all projections in the highly split HLP, FocusP is the one that has received the most attention, and many scholars have based their investigations on the assumption that SpecFocusP is the landing site for both fronted wh-elements and foci. However, the syntax of Italo-Romance foci suggests that ‘focus’ cannot be accounted for by means of one single projection and that cross-linguistically, focus projections are numerous and not necessarily always merged at the same structural height.

4.1 the received cartography of focus

In Rizzi’s HLP, FocusP is commonly understood to host shifted foci. Observe (36), in which B corrects the utterance in A by shifting the DO into SpecFocusP.

(36) Standard Italian (Bianchi 2013: 193(1))

A: Gianni ha invitato Lucia.

John has invited Lucy

‘John invited Lucy.’

B: marina ha invitato \_\_\_!

Marina (he) has invited

‘marinahe invited.’

In Rizzi’s framework, shifted foci compete for FocusP with fronted wh-elements such as the one in (37), which is believed to account for the incompatibility of the two structures within the same sentence:

(37) Standard Italian

chi ha invitato Marina?

who has invited Marina

‘who invited Marina?’

In Belletti (2004:9), the existence of a LLP was posited, which has the structure seen in (12). This low periphery includes a less widely recognised focus projection, FocP, whose existence was needed to host the subject in Italian non-canonical VS orders observed in the answers to questions bearing on the subject. An example is provided in (38):

(38) Standard Italian

A: Chi è arrivato?

who is arrived

‘Who arrived?’

B: È arrivato gianni / un ragazzo.

is arrived john / a young man

B′: # Gianni / un ragazzo è arrivato

John a young man is arrived

‘John/a young man arrived’

The ordering in B′, although grammatical in the language, is not felicitous in linguistic contexts such as the one in (38), where the subject needs to surface in a low position identified as SpecFoc by Belletti. Bonan (2021a) provided further empirical evidence from Eastern Trevisan that informational focus is encoded in Belletti’s FocP. Observe for instance the low moved IO in (39):[[16]](#footnote-17)

(39) Eastern Trevisan

A: A chi ghe gatu dato el me reojo?

to whom 3.dat have=you given the my watch

‘Who did you give my watch to?

B: Ghe go dato a giani el to reojo

3.dat have given to John the your watch

‘I gave your watch to John’ (Lit: ‘I gave to John your watch’)

B’: # Ghe go dato el to reojo a Giani

3.dat have given the your watch to John

‘I gave your watch to John’

Bonan (to appear) argued that Belletti’s (2004) claim that Standard Italian informational foci are shifted into SpecFocP is rather difficult to maintain, given that the language does not display any overt shifting such as the one observed in Eastern Trevisan in (39). The Eastern Trevisan facts nonetheless support that FocP can be associated to low focalisations. As seen in the context of low movement of wh-elements, the difference between Standard Italian and Eastern Trevisan is, in this respect, that only the latter requires movement on top of agreement. A low, unmoved focalisation is indeed possible in Standard Italian also in contrastive contexts, as in (40):

(40) Standard Italian (Bianchi 2013: 193(1))

Ha invitato marina.

he.has invited Marina

‘He invited marina (as opposed to Lucia).’

The property in (40) makes contrastive foci different from interrogative wh-elements in Standard Italian, which are considered incompatible with wh-in situ. The fact that contrastive foci can surface either in situ or shifted, while interrogative wh-elements require shifting, suggests that the two types of focalisation are governed by different projections, not just by FocusP. Although works that I discuss in §4.2-3 have demonstrated the existence of numerous focus projections and the possibility for these to be realised at different heights cross-linguistically, many contributions still make a canonical use of FocusP that I try to discourage in the following sections.

4.2 more than just focusp

Rizzi (2001) himself singled out an additional, purely interrogative projection, IntP. Then, in Rizzi (2018), he split FocusP into two projections surrounding IntP, one specialised for D-linked wh-words and the other for non-D-linked ones, as in (41):

(41) … [FP2 F2°[+N;+Q] [IntP Int° [FP1 F1°[+Q] ]]]

However, these amendments to the original theory are hardly ever considered in the literature.

We have seen that in Standard Italian, contrastive foci alternate between the high and the in-situ surface position, wh-elements are only compatible with the high surface position, while informational foci can only surface in-situ. The latter is true also of corrective foci, i.e., foci that correct the content of a polar question, as illustrated in (42):

(42) Standard Italian (Bianchi 2013: 198(7)):

A: Gianni è andato a Londra?

Gianni is gone.M.SG. to London

‘Did Gianni go to London?’

B: No, è andato a BerLIno (non a Londra).

No, he.is gone.M.SG. to Berlin (not to London)

‘No, he went to berlin(not to London).’

B′: # No, a BerLIno è andato (non a Londra).

No, to Berlin he.is gone.M.SG. (not to London)

‘No, to berlinhe went (not to London).

Corrective foci thus pair with informational foci distributionally, although quantificationally they are closer to contrastive foci. Conversely, mirative foci alternate between the low and the high surface position (Cruschina 2012, Dal Farra 2018, a.o.), like contrastive foci, despite being quantificationally closer to informational foci. I show the alternation in (43):

(43) Standard Italian (Dal Farra 2018 : 45(7))

a. Pensa te! DI VENTI KILI è dimagrito!

think you of twenty kilos he.lost.weight

b. Pensa te! È dimagrito DI VENTI KILI!

think you he.lost.weight of twenty kilos

‘Guess what! He lost twenty kilos!’

The distribution of focal projections in Standard Italian is sketched in (44):

(44) focus projections in standard italian (Bonan to appear: XX(XX))

[Force [Focus+N+Q [Focus+Q [Fin [IP [FocINF [FocCOR [FocMIR [*v*P ]]]]]]]]]

In (44) and in Bonan (to appear), for quantificational reasons that exceed the scope of this chapter, it was posited that contrastive foci pair with D-linked wh-elements in being attracted to Focus+Q+N (Rizzi’s FP2), while mirative foci are attracted into Focus+Q, on a par with non-D-linked wh-element. We are thus confronted with more ‘focus’ projections than we originally thought existed; additionally, evidence from Italo-Romance supports that these are also not always merged at the same structural height (§4.3).

4.3 the cases of sicilian and eastern trevisan

Cruschina’s (2011) data from the Italo-Romance Sicilian variety spoken in Mussomeli supports that cross-linguistically, not all types of foci have the same distribution. Observe (45):

(45) Sicilian(Cruschina 2012: 58 (33))

A: Chi scrivisti?

what write.past.1sg

‘What did you write?’

B: Scrissi n’articulu.

write.past.1s an=article

(45B) illustrates that in Sicilian, an informational focus can occur clause-internally, as in Standard Italian. This variety however also allows focus shifting, as in (46B’), an operation disallowed in Italian:

(46) Sicilian(Cruschina 2012: 58 (33))

B′: n’articulu scrissi!

an=article write.past.1sg

‘I wrote an article.’

Cruschina demonstrated that the HLP of Sicilian is different from that of Standard Italian, as it merges the projection for informational foci (IFoc) in the HLP. Accordingly, in the Sicilian HLP there is a high CFocP that hosts either contrastive foci or D-linked wh-elements, and a lower IFocP which is responsible for the attractions of informational foci, QPs, mirative foci, and for the low fronting of non-D-linked wh-elements.[[17]](#footnote-18) Cruschina’s work was completed before Rizzi (2018) split FocusP, but it seems plausible to understand Cruschina’s CFocP as the highest projection proposed by Rizzi, FP2, and IFocP as the lowest, FP1. The Sicilian FP1, differently from the Italian one, is here taken to also attract informational foci, although in more modern terms a split of Cruschina’s IFocP would probably be needed, resulting in one projection for non-D-linked wh-phrases, FP1, and a projection for informational foci, IFocP. The respective position of the two projections, as well as the status of mirative fronting and QP-fronting therefore need to be re-evaluated.

Bonan (2021a,b) demonstrated that Eastern Trevisan is of yet another type with respect to Standard Italian and Sicilian, as it merges most projections associated to focus in the LLP. Additionally, the variety shows low clause-internal movement with all focal types, from wh-elements as seen in §1 to all sorts of prosodically-marked foci: informational foci as discussed in §2, contrastive focalisations such as the one in (47), corrective foci such as (48).

(47) Eastern Trevisan (Bonan to appear)

A: ‘I believe I heard they gave the prize to John!’

B: i ghe gà dato a toni el premio \_\_!

they 3.dat have given to toni the prize

(48) Eastern Trevisan (Bonan to appear)

A: ‘Have they already given the prize to John?’

B: i ghe gà dato a toni el premio \_\_\_!

they 3.dat have given to toni the prize

‘They’ve given the prize to toni, not to John!’

Bonan (to appear) demonstrated that a low focalisation is always attracted into a low functional Spec and never properly in-situ in Eastern Trevisan. Accordingly, all functional projections related to focus are systematically merged within the LLP in this variety, to the effect that Belletti’s (2004) FocP is to be considered a full-fledged ‘focus field’, not a single projection.

To summarise, what was originally understood as a single, high-left peripheral FocusP can now be understood along the lines of (49).

(49) Functional portions for focal projections (Bonan to appear)[[18]](#footnote-19)

Diagram

Description automatically generated

(49) is a visualisation of the different portions of the spine where FocPs are merged in the three varieties of Italo-Romance mentioned in this chapter. Bonan divided the HLP into three macro-areas: the high HLP, i.e., the portion that is structurally higher than IntP; the central HLP, the portion right below IntP where Rizzi (2018) posited the existence of FP1 (here, Focus+Q); and the low HLP, a less well-defined functional portion lower than Rizzi’s FP1 and higher than FinP, where Cruschina (2011) posited the presence of what he called IFoc. The diagram in (49) clearly further discourages also an understanding of cleft structure as in Belletti (2015), i.e., one that utilises Rizzi’s (1997) FocusP and Belletti’s (2004) FocP in the derivation, both in the exact position where they are merged in Standard Italian. For the sake of descriptive ease, I call languages like Eastern Trevisan ‘low focus languages’ and languages like Sicilian ‘high focus languages’ – the importance of this distinction will become clearer in §5.

**5. the cartography of clefts**

In the cartographic approach, clefts are understood to make use of two focus projections in the derivation, Rizzi’s (1997) FocusP, in the HLP, and Belletti’s (2004) FocP in the LLP. Because clefts are biclausal (Belletti 2009, Haegeman et al. 2012, a.o.), the available focus projection are four in total. The relative position of these projections is sketched in (50):

(50) [α/ForceP … [F2b [FinP [TP copii [**F1b** {focus}i [*v*P \_ii [β/**F2** {focus}i [FinP [TP [F1 [*v*P … \_i ]]]]]]]]]

In Belletti’s account, F1b, in the matrix LLL, is understood to be specialised for informational focus, while F2, in the embedded HLP, is for contrastive/corrective foci. For the author, there is a subject/non-subject asymmetry and while all constituents can move to F2, only subject clefts utilise F1b. The reason for this asymmetry is believed to be syntactic: in the framework of Relativized Minimality (Rizzi 1990), the movement of an object out of TP into PredP would cross over the subject, giving rise to a violation. However, the asymmetry on which Belletti’s account is founded is weak, as in §5.1.

5.1 a weak asymmetry

Bonan (to appear) argued that there exist at least two empirical problems with Belletti’s asymmetry. The generalisation indeed only works in answers to questions, while cleft structures are licenced in a variety of contexts. Moreover, the generalisation works only partially: it is indeed possible to answer a question by means of a subject cleft in the language, as in (51), and not with a non-subject cleft, as in (52), but the felicity of the latter is clearly improved when the question is also a cleft, as shown in (53):

(51) Standard Italian (Bonan to appear)

A: Chi gioca a calcio in giardino?

who plays at football in garden

‘Who’s playing football in the garden?’

B: È Marco (che gioca a calcio)

(52) Standard Italian (Bonan to appear)

A: Chi hanno licenziato?

who they.have fired

‘Who did they fire?’

B: # È Gianni (che hanno licenziato)

is John that they.have fired

‘It’s John (that they fired)’

(53) Standard Italian (Bonan to appear)

A: Chi è che hanno licenziato?

who is that they.have fired

‘Who is it that they fired?’

B: È Gianni (che hanno licenziato)

is John that they.have fired

‘It’s John (that they fired)’

It therefore appears that the observed asymmetries should rather be attributed to pragmatic rather than structural reasons, in line with Larrivée (2002) recent comparison of focus in French and Italian. Additionally, it has been demonstrated that non-subject clefts are also perfectly fine in out-of-the-blue informational contexts in Standard Italian. Observe (54):

(54) Standard Italian (Bonan to appear)

a. Context: Rumours have been circulating that someone from the second-floor offices was fired. However, no one knows who. Your colleague Marina comes into your office and says:

(È) Gianni (che) hanno licenziato…

is John that they.have fired

‘They fired John’ (Lit: ‘It’s John that they fired / John they fired’)

b. Context: Rumours have been circulating that someone from your office will be given a pay rise. However, no one knows who. Your colleague Marina comes into your office and says:

(È) a Gianni (che) daranno l’aumento…

is to John that they.will.give the’pay rise

‘They gave the pay rise to John’ (Lit: ‘It’s to John that they gave the pay rise’)

It is clearly undesirable to adopt a theory in which a violation in terms of RM in syntactically identical structures only occurs in certain contexts, as illustrated by (52B) and (54a). Additionally, the discussed asymmetry does not function in French, which allows informational non-subject clefts in non-answer contexts, and also non-subject clefts in answers to questions (Bonan to appear). Belletti’s asymmetry, on which her theoretical model is based, can thus not be maintained, and her proposed derivation needs refining on the basis of properties of the involved projections that I overview in §5.2.

5.2 on the parametric settings for focusp and focp

The discussion in the previous sections aimed at demonstrating that the phenomenon of non-cleft nominal focalisations in Italo-Romance is so composite that a traditional understanding of it as being governed by just two focus projections, Rizzi’s FocusP and Belletti FocP, is insufficient and cannot account for all empirical facts. The legitimacy of Belletti’s (2015) understanding of clefts as being derived using merely these two projections in their ‘canonical’ merge positions is thus worth discussing.

First, it must be noted Belletti’s model was posited to account also for the French facts. However, French does not utilise focus projections like Italo-Romance languages do: the language lacks prosodically-marked foci almost completely and relies heavily on clefts for all types of focalisations discussed above (see Larrivée 2022 for a thorough discussion). It is therefore unclear how a language that is unable to make use of the focus projections regularly employed for prosodically-marked contrastive and informational foci could be able to use them in clefts.

Bonan (to appear) also claimed that it is counterintuitive to say that languages such as Trevisan, which normally do not encode focus in the HLP, utilise the embedded HLP in the derivation of clefts, or that languages which merge all focus projections in the HLP, such as Sicilian, utilise the matrix LLP in the derivation of these structures. While it is possible for Sicilian to display alternations between shifted foci and foci in-situ, as seen in (45-46), a focalisation moved into the matrix LLP requires the presence of a focus feature which, as the empirical evidence suggests, is extremely unlikely to be found in this portion of the functional spine in the language. One could argue that clefts convey an additional existential meaning with respect to their non cleft-counterparts, carried by the copula, to the effect that the additional meaning justifies the biclausality. Nonetheless, biclausality does not justify the use of functional projections in a language that does not commonly merge them.

The movement properties of prosodically-marked foci with respect to the movement properties of clefted foci also argue that these cannot be governed by the same heads (Bonan & Samo, in prep). Observe the movement properties of focus projections in Standard Italian as in Table I; the labels ‘agree only’ and ‘agree+move’ are used to distinguish between projections that do not attract constituents into their Spec from projections that do, respectively:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Projection | Attraction properties |
| Ifoc | agree only |
| CFoc | agree(+move) |
| Cleft foc | agree+move |
| **Table I**: Italian focus projections: movement properties (Bonan & Samo, in prep). | |

While IFoc does not attract focused constituents into its Spec in Standard Italian, CFoc optionally does. However, there is no such a thing such as an in-situ cleft in Italian. It is therefore untenable to posit that the focus projections at play in non-cleft and cleft sentences are the same, *pace* Belletti.

5.3 clefts in high focus vs low focus languages

Form a pan-Romance perspective, clefting is in complementary distribution with informational focus-fronting, as those varieties that have shifted informational foci are unable to employ clefts productively (Lambrecht 2011, Bianchi et al. 2015, Cruschina 2010;2012, Cruschina & Remberger 2016, etc.).

One such language is Sicilian as described in Cruschina (2012), which Bonan (to appear) characterised as a **high focus** language. The characterisation of Sicilian as high focus languages and the Pan-Romance data suggest that languages of this type are virtually unable to produce cleft because clefts are a low phenomenon, i.e., they are derived using a focus-projection located in the LLP. Remember that I claimed that the case of French argues against the use of ‘regular’ focus projections in the derivation of clefts, and rather suggests that the presence of a dedicated projection(s) should be posited: the case of Sicilian clearly argues that such projection ought to be low left peripheral.[[19]](#footnote-20)

A crucial property that distinguishes prosodically-marked foci from clefts in Romance is **exhaustiveness** (Boliger 1972, Hedberg 1990; 2000, Kiss 1999, Lambrecht 2001, Delin & Oberlander 2005, a.o.). While part of the existential meaning conveyed in clefts could technically be conveyed by the copula, as suggested in Belletti (2009), it seems reasonable to posit that the exhaustiveness feature is encoded by a specialised focus projection which I call ExhFoc in what follows.

5.3.1 regular clefts in low focus languages

If clefts are low phenomena, **low focus** languages such as Eastern Trevisan should productively licence these structures. This is confirmed empirically, as Trevisan has productive clefting in both declaratives and interrogatives. The base asymmetry between subject and non-subject clefts of Standard Italian is observed in the language, as in (55) and (56).[[20]](#footnote-21)

(55) Eastern Trevisan (Bonan to appear)

A: Ki zeo ke zioga a baeon in cortil?[[21]](#footnote-22)

who is=it that plays at football in garden

‘Who (is it that) is playing football in the garden?’

B: Ze Marco (ke zioga a baeon)

is Marco that plays at football

‘It’s Marco (who plays football)’

(56) Eastern Trevisan (Bonan to appear)

A: Ki gai licensià?

who have=they fired

‘Who did they fire?’

B: # Ze Marco (ke i gà licensià)

is Marco that they have fired

‘It’s Marco that they fired’

As in Standard Italian though, non-subject cleft answers become perfectly felicitous when the question that is asked is also a cleft, as in (56’).

(56’) Eastern Trevisan (Bonan to appear)

A: Ki zeo ke i gà licensià?

who is=it that they have fired

‘Who is it that they fired?’

B: Ze Marco (ke i gà licensià)

is Marco that they have fired

‘It’s Marco that they fired’

As in Italian, both subject and non-subject clefts can express focus of new information if uttered out-of-the-blue, as in (57). The contexts are the same seen in (54a) and (54b) for Italian, respectively.

(57) Eastern Trevisan (Bonan to appear)

a. (Zé) Giani (ke) i gà licensià…

is John that they have fired

‘They fired John’ (Lit: ‘It’s John that they fired / John they fired’)

b. (Zé) a Giani (ke) i ghe darà l’aumento…

is to John that they 3.dat will.give the’pay rise

‘They gave the pay rise to John’

Empirically, Belletti’s asymmetry is thus further challenged by the Eastern Trevisan facts, as it only holds partially in answers to questions. Bonan has thus argued in favour of an ExhP (F1b) in the matrix LLP of all languages that are able to merge focus positions in the LLP, and suggested that the structure of Trevisan clefts looks like that sketched in (58), where both contrastive and informational cleft focalisations are attracted into the main LLP. Note that the embedded HLP is unavailable.

(58) [α/ForceP … [F2b [FinP [TP copii [**F1b** **Sfoc/Ofoc**i [*v*P \_ii [β/**F2** [FinP [TP [F1 [*v*P … \_i ]]]]]]]]

One could argue that a derivation along the lines of (58) fails to account for the informational vs. contrastive flavour of clefts. While this is arguably true, it is possible that those features are checked in the embedded LLP (F1) at the beginning of the derivation, thus making the derivation of clefts a two-step process, along the lines of the diagram in (59).

(59) [α/ForceP … [F2b [FinP [TP copii [**F1b** **Sfoc/Ofoc**i [*v*P \_ii [β/**F2** [FinP [TP [F1 \_i  [*v*P … \_i ]]]]]]]]]

In Belletti’s account, the embedded LLP is not exploited, for reasons that are unclear. While I leave the determination of the exact dynamics of the derivation of clefts in low focus languages for future investigations, it is noteworthy that the intermediate step in (59) does not constitute a violation of Rizzi’s (xxxx) Criterial Freezing, because the two movements (the one into SpecIFoc/SpecCFoc and then the subsequent movement into SpecExFoc) are triggered by different criterial features.

5.3.2 the case of inversed clefts

We have seen that the embedded HLP is not used for regular nor cleft foci in Trevisan. There exist however two types of structures which suggest that special focal projections could be merged in the matrix HLP of languages like Trevisan: those responsible for interrogative and inversed clefts. I discuss inversed clefts here, and leave the discussion of interrogatives for §5.3.3. Observe (60):

(60) toni ze ke me gà dato el capel!

toni is that me has given the hat

‘It’s Toni who gave me the hat!’ (Lit: ‘Toni is who gave me the hat!’)

In (60), the focused element precedes the copula. Structurally, the vacant F2b in the matrix HLP seen in derivations such as (59) is a good candidate to host the focused constituent in these inversion structures. While the nature of this projection, which I shall call Inv(ersion)P, remains to be determined, its merge position is higher of the surface position of the copula, i.e., high left-peripheral. This means that inversed clefts encompass an additional step in their derivation: movement into SpecInvP, as in the diagram in (61):

(61) [α/ForceP [F2b/InvP tonii [FinP [TP xeii [F1b/ExhP \_i [*v*P \_ii [β/**F2** [FinP ke [TP [F1 \_i  [*v*P \_i  … ]]]]]]]]]

Note that to posit the presence of a focus projection for inversed clefts in the matrix HLP of Trevisan is not problematic for the discussion developed in this chapter, since this projection is of different nature with respect to the focal projections that are merged in the LLP (those for prosodically-marked foci, or regular clefts). Inversed clefts are attested also in those Southern Romance dialects in which regular clefts are very scarce. Examples are provided in (62)-(64).[[22]](#footnote-23)

(62) Castrignano del Capo, Apulia

Tie si ca te qualcosa mme cunti.

you is that you something me tell

‘It’s you who are telling me something’

(63) Venosa, Basilicata

Piero jè ca non vol’ scè.

Piero is that neg wants leave

‘It’s Piero who doesn’t want to leave’

(64) Catania, Sicily

Petru è ca non voli pattiri.

Pietro is that neg wants leave

‘It’s Piero who doesn’t want to leave’

The presence of inversed clefts in these varieties suggests that the high left-peripheral projection exploited by these structures is of a different type with respect to that used in regular clefts, which are unavailable in Southern Romance. The high step in the derivation of inversed orders is sketched in (65).

(65) **Inverse clefts in Southern Romance** (Bonan to appear)

Diagram

Description automatically generated

5.3.3 interrogative clefts

Another interesting case of inversion in cleft structures is observed in interrogatives. Interrogative clefts can either have the regular form with the wh-element that follows the copula or display the inverse ordering. I illustrate this in (66) using Eastern Trevisan:

(66) Eastern Trevisan (Bonan 2022: XX(XX))

a. Zeo *ki* ke te o gà contà?

is=it ki that you= it= has told

Lit: ‘Is it who that told you?’

b. *Ki* zeo ke te o gà contà?

who is=it that you= it= has told

‘Who is it that told you?’

Orderings like the one in (62a) feature a clause-internal wh-element, as the interrogative word is moved from its embedded merge site into the matrix LLP. Conversely, the orderings in (62b) are derived through an additional step which displaces the wh-element further into the matrix HLP. The existence of both orderings is unsurprising Eastern Trevisan (but also French), given that the language licences both clause-internal and clause-initial wh-elements. Languages like Standard English, which only licence shifted wh-elements in answer-seeking questions only have inversed clefts, as in (67):

(67) Standard English

a. Who is it that told you this?

b. \* Is it who that told you this?

Bonan (to appear) suggested that the additional step in the derivation of inversed interrogative clefts is to be understood as movement into the Spec of a **high** left-peripheral interrogative projection whose nature remains to be determined. That the functional projections targeted in inversed interrogative and declarative clefts are not the same, i.e., a QP vs an InvP, is empirically supported by French, in which inversed declarative clefts are unavailable, as illustrated in (68):

(68) Q: Qui te l’as raconté?

who you it=has told

‘Who told you this?’

A: \* jean c’est qui me l’a raconté

John ce=is who me it=has told

‘It’s John who told me’ (Lit: ‘John is who told me’)

To sum up, the distribution of prosodically-marked foci and the morphosyntax of declarative and interrogative clefts in Italo-Romance support an understanding of *it*-clefts whereby these structures are derived using a low left-peripheral focus projection in the regular case, or matrix left-peripheral projections for inversed and interrogative orderings. Accidently, this also explains why the Romance varieties that have informational focus fronting into the HLP are virtually unable to licence regular clefts. I thus maintain that the empirical data in our possession support that Belletti’s (2015) model for the analysis of clefts ought to be modified to rather exploit the matrix LLP in the derivation of regular declarative clefts, and specialised high-left peripheral projections in inversed and interrogative clefts.

Conclusions

The received cartography of content questions and focus needs refining based on recent theoretical and empirical advances that have gone vastly unnoticed in the Romance literature.

In this contribution, I highlighted the need for Q-particles à la Cable (2010) in the derivation of Romance non-cleft wh-interrogatives and supported my claims using data from Eastern Trevisan low movement of wh-elements and observations on the syntax of subject clitic inversion in this language made in Bonan & Shlonsky (2018). I have also claimed, and I wish to insist on this, that a framework such as cartography in which all functional heads are taken to be universally represented in the spine cannot dispense with widely-attested functional elements such as Q-particles in the derivation of wh-interrogatives. I then overviewed the cartography of nominal focalisations and utilised existing literature to support my claim that we ought to stop using merely Rizzi’s (1997) FocusP in the derivation of shifted foci, and then demonstrated how the multiple focus projections that have been posited in recent years are merged at different heights in related Italo-Romance languages such as Standard Italian, Sicilian and Eastern Trevisan. Therefore, I wish to encourage a re-evaluation of the respective position of these projections in all other Romance varieties. Finally, I claimed that Belletti’s (2016) understanding of the cartography of it-clefts is untenable on the ground of the new understanding of focus outlined in §4, and suggested suitable amendments for the theory of the declarative and interrogative *it*-clefts of Romance.

While plenty of work still needs to be done to understand the subtilities of the complex phenomena under investigation, the implementation of the amendments suggested in this contribution should already be sufficient to skyrocket the theory of Romance content questions towards new levels of understanding. My hope is that many colleagues will want to join me in this unorthodox, yet overly exciting, linguistic investigation.

Acknowledgements

This work has been supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation, projects # P2GEPI\_184384 and #P500PH\_202764, which I gratefully acknowledge. I owe my interest in interrogative wh-movement U. Shlonsky and G. Bocci, to whom I am wholeheartedly thankful. This chapter would not be the same without many a conversation with my former colleagues G. Samo and L. Tual, or the suggestions of those who have helped me develop my theory of interrogatives over the years: L. Rizzi, A. Belletti, G. Cinque, A. Ledgeway, G. Giusti, N. Munaro, C. Poletto, and M. R. Manzini. I also wish to thank two helpful anonymous reviewers.

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1. Throughout, I use the term **content** questions (as opposed to polar questions) to refer to interrogatives that require an open answer. Although these have commonly been referred to as wh-questions, this term does not normally include cleft questions, which are also part of my discussion. Hence my choice to use an umbrella term instead. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Throughout, I use the label Eastern Trevisan to refer to the central-eastern variety of the Venetan language spoken in the wider Ponte di Piave area, as described in Bonan (2021a: 9-15). ‘Eastern’ is used to make a distinction from the variety of Trevisan spoken in the town of Treviso and immediate surroundings, and does not refer to the varieties spoken in the Eastern-most part of the region, such as Liventino. A better (but completely inaccessible to non-dialectologists) label for this variety would be ‘Immediate Sinistra Piave Trevisan’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. In recent years, wh-fronting has been claimed partially possible in Chinese (Cheung 2014). However, this is by no means the default interrogative strategy of the language. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The variety is attested also in written texts that mimic spoken interactions and in written low-register texts. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Orderings such as the one in (9) are a consequence of a low movement of the wh-element itself, not of a right dislocation or marginalization of what follows it. For empirical evidence and discussion, Bonan (2021b, 2021c). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. An anonymous reviewer correctly points out that unaccusatives might not the best example to show focus effects in VS in Italian, as in this constructions apparent subject inversion results from the patient theta-role assigned to postverbal subject, which is in all respects analysed as a semantic object (Burzio 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. This derivation is oversimplified, and its sole aim is to make the basics of the remnant IP-movement approach easily accessible to the readers who are unfamiliar with it. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See Poletto & Pollock (2019) for a version of this theory that also features the presence of the LLP, albeit in a way that is still incompatible with the low movement data discussed in this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. In Poletto & Pollock’s theory, this property is attributed to the different features encoded by a low vs. a high wh-projection of the HLP. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. The explanation of how to determine whether a language is Q-projecting or Q-adjoining exceeds the scope of this chapter. I invite the reader interested in the subject to read Cable (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. The reasons behind this choice exceed the scope of this chapter. For details, refer to Bonan (2021b). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Since Chomsky (1976), focus has widely been understood as associated to quantifier raising, a movement that applies to focussed constituents either overtly or at LF. Cartographic understandings of focus have traditionally abode by Chomsky’s approach. Although not in line with standard cartographic assumptions, the possibility of interpreting foci in-situ has been largely and successfully explored in the literature (Rooth 1992, Wagner 2020, Samek-Lodovici 2015; 2020, a.o.), hence I maintain that theoretically, the path is worth exploring. The issue is discussed in great detail in Bonan (to appear). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. The status of [focus] in languages where only QP-movement is possible remains to be determined. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. A reviewer correctly points out that, as discussed in Bonan (2021e), Eastern Trevisan does not have subject-clitic inversion *strictu sensu*, in that the language’s subject clitics are agreement heads à la Roberts (2010), not a real phrasal argument of the verb. I nonetheless with to keep the label here to avoid overcomplications. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Note that, as a kind reviewer suggested, Trevisan always excludes subject-clitic inversion from the embedded part of long-distance questions, while it requires it in the matrix clause regardless of where the wh-element surfaces, as in (i) and (ii):

    (i) A-tu dito che l’a comprà cossa?

    have=you said that he=has bought what

    ‘What did you say he bought?’

    (ii) Cossa a-tu dito che l’a comprà?

    what have=you said that he=has bought [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. The IO in (39B) is not literally in situ, as its surface position is derived and results from its leftward movement into the LLP. For empirical evidence and a discussion, cf. Bonan (2021d:106(6-7)). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. I will not indulge in the discussion of all focus projections of Sicilian here, since these exceed the scope of the present chapter. For a thorough discussion, refer to Cruschina (2011, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. The projection for D-linked wh-elements (Foc+Q+N) here is separated from the one for contrastive foci (CorFoc) as their movement properties suggest that these are governed by different heads. Similarly, MirFoc is separated from Focus+Q because the Italian data show that the two can have different distributions (Bonan 2021d). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Refer to Bonan (to appear) for additional data in support of a characterisation of most Southern Italian languages as high focus languages. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Note that Eastern Trevisan does not have a phonetically-realised expletive (\*el piove, ‘it’s raining’, \*el riva Giani, lit :‘It’s arriving John’). Conversely, most speakers including myself have a pronounced expletive form in interrogatives (=o). This can be clearly seen in examples (55-57). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. It is not possible to ask questions that bear on the subject with a non-cleft question in Eastern Trevisan. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Examples retrieved from the ASIt (Atlante Sintattico D’Italia) on 17/03/2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)