

The Limiting Topic

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Abstract In the literature, different types of Topics have been identified and studied in detail (cf. Chafe 1976; Reinhart 1981; Lambrecht 1994; Büring 1997, 2003; Frascarelli, Hinterhölzl 2007), while others have been less considered by scholars. This is the case of the *Limiting Topic* (LT), whose function is to limit the validity of a propositional content in a specific *frame*. We investigate in detail the characteristics of this type of Topic in order to answer four major questions: 1) Which types of frame can be activated by LTs? 2) What are the constituents most frequently associated with this type of Topic? 3) Is there a prosodic contour systematically associated with LTs? 4) Following the idea of CG as a file-card system (cf. Reinhart 1981), which role do they play in discourse dynamics? Based on corpus evidence, it is shown that: (i) the most common frames activated by LTs are spatial and temporal ones; (ii) LTs, although sharing some properties with Büring's C-Topics, show the specificity of an independent category. In particular, it is claimed that LTs create a 'subfolder' in Reinhart's sentence Topic (considered as a *file-card*), with a specific conversational function, namely, a faster retrieval of information.

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1 Introduction

Topic is a discursive element that, since the Seventies, has received great attention by scholars. It has been defined as «the part of the sentence which constitutes what the speaker is talking about» (Hornby 1971, p. 1976); «the ENTITY which the proposition is about» (Lambrecht 1994, p. 127); «un elemento che viene proposto e assunto come “il punto di partenza” della predicazione»¹ (Puglielli, Frascarelli 2008, p. 204). Moreover, nowadays several types of topic have been identified: 'English style Topic – Chinese style Topic – Topic as premature subject' (Chafe 1976); 'Sentence Topic – Discourse Topic' (Reinhart 1981); 'Aboutness Topic – Contrastive

1 An element, which is proposed and assumed as the 'starting point' of the predication.

Topic - Familiar Topic - Aboutness Shift Topic' (Frascarelli, Hinterhölzl 2007).² However, there is also a kind of topic that, although being rather common in several languages, has been often neglected by scholars. In the literature, it has been defined in different ways: 'Chinese style' Topic (Chafe 1976), 'scene-setting' Topic (Lambrecht 1994) or 'frame-setter' (Krifka 2007). This kind of topic does not constitute 'what the sentence is about', but has the function of limiting the validity of the main predication (comment) to a precise and well-defined context (frame). For this reason, we refer to this discourse category as Limiting Topic³ (LT). The aim of this work is to describe in detail the main characteristics of this particular kind of topic.

We will begin with a brief exposition of the few authors who have dealt with this issue. Then, we will proceed with data analysis, using the *Corpus Bonvino* (a corpus that was created in 2006 by Elisabetta Bonvino for her PhD thesis), in order to answer four key questions: 1) what are the types of frame (temporal, spatial, modal etc.) which are most frequently introduced by LTs? 2) What kind of constituents are associated to this topic variety? 3) Is there any prosodic contour, which can be systematically associated with it? 4) Are LTs an instruction for the hearer? And, if they are, what is their role in the cognitive process of storing and retrieving information?

2 The Existing Literature

2.1 Chafe and the 'Chinese Style' Topic

One of the first authors to identify an element having similar characteristics to the TL is Wallace Chafe, in his article *Givennes, Contrastiveness, Definiteness, Subjects, Topics, and Point of View*, written in 1976. The author provides some examples from Mandarin Chinese, in which the Topic does not have a relation of aboutness with the proposition, carries no contrastive function and neither introduces any shift.

(1) *nèi-xie shùmu shù-shēn dà.*

those tree tree-trunk big

(2) *nèi-ge rén yáng míng George Zhang.*

that person foreign name George Zhang (Chafe 1976, p. 50)

2 From here on, F&H (2007).

3 This definition seems appropriate to the carried function, if we consider that both Chafe (1976) and Krifka (2007) refer to it as 'limiting the predication to a restricted domain'.

In (1) and (2), using Chafe's words, «what the topics appear to do is to limit the applicability of the main predication to a certain restricted domain. [...] the topic sets a spatial, temporal, or individual frame work within which the main predication holds» (p. 50).

The same function is performed by some constituents (DP, PP, AdvP) having an adverbial function:

(3) **Tuesday** *I went to the dentist.*

(4) **In Dwinelle Hall** *people are always getting lost.* (p. 51)

2.2 Lambrecht and the 'Background Sentences'

Chafe's theory was then resumed by the famous linguist Knud Lambrecht who identifies as one of the topic functions the delimitation of the predication area: «Topic has sometimes been defined as a 'scene-setting' expression, or as an element which sets 'a spatial, temporal or individual framework within which the main predication holds' (Chafe 1976)» (Lambrecht 1994, p. 118).

He then describes a particular type of sentences, which perform exactly this function:

(5) *After the children went to school, he had to clean the house and go shopping for the party.* (p. 121)

According to Lambrecht, in (5), the sentence 'after the children went to school' provides the temporal background for the matrix clause, which is construed according to the context introduced by the adverbial clause. In Lambrecht's words: «the entire adverbial clause 'after the children went to school' functions as a 'scene-setting' topic for the matrix clause» (p. 125).

2.3 Krifka and the 'Frame Setters'

Chafe's theory was then extended by Manfred Krifka, who in his 2007's article *Basic notions of information structure*, dedicates an entire paragraph to the concept of 'frame-setting'. Firstly, the author specifies that frame-setters do not constitute the 'file-card'⁴ in which the information expressed

⁴ The concept of *file-card* was first introduced by Karttunen (1976), and then developed by Heim (1982) who describes it through the following example: «Imagine that A is talking, while B is listening and trying to understand what A says as they go along. For 'understand,' we could say: extract and retain the information that A's utterances contain. Metaphorically

by the sentence should be stored: «Statements like ‘{Healthwise / As for his health}, he is [FINE]_F’ certainly should not be entered under a file card about the health situation» (Krifka 2007, pp. 48-49). Therefore, he proposes a distinction from the sentence-topic described in Reinhart (1981).

Krifka also develops the concept of delimitation, which Chafe attributes to this kind of topic, that is to limit the applicability of the main predication to a certain restricted domain» (Krifka 2007, p. 4). He then provides a few examples:

(6) A: *How is John?*

B: *{Healthwise / As for his health}, he is [FINE]_F.*

(7) A: *How is business going for Daimler-Chrysler?*

B: *[In GERmany]Frame the prospects are [GOOD]_F, but [in AMERica]Frame they are [losing MOney]_F. (Krifka 2007)*

Krifka implements this theory by stating that the aim of such expressions as in (6) and (7) is selecting a frame from a set of alternative frames,⁵ in order to limit the scope of the truth-value expressed by the comment, even by contrasting different frames (as in (7)). To further reinforce his proposal, he provides the following example:

(8) *As for his health situation, he had a bypass operation recently. (p. 49)*

In (8), the predication ‘(he) had a bypass operation recently’ can be limited only to the domain of his ‘health situation’, for obvious semantic reasons. In such cases, when there are no considerable alternatives, an explicit frame-setter seems not to be necessary. Indeed, example (9) would have the same value of (8):

(9) *He had a bypass operation recently.*

After that, Krifka resumes the idea of ‘Common Ground’ (CG) (Stalnaker 1974, Karttunen 1974, Lewis 1979) - which concerns the information shared by speakers and the way it is continuously modified throughout the conversation - by distinguishing two sub-types of CG:

speaking, B’s task is to construct and update a file which, at any point in the conversation, contains all the information that A has conveyed up to that point, [...] according to the following rule: For every indefinite (NP), start a new card; for every definite (NP), update a suitable old card». (Heim 1982, pp. 178-179).

5 «They choose one out of a set of frames and state that the proposition holds within this frame» (Krifka 2007, pp. 36-37)

- CG 'content': the shared information actually contained in the CG, consisting of a series of propositions which are taken as mutually accepted, and a series of entities that are (explicitly, implicitly or through accommodation of presupposition) previously introduced in the discourse;
- CG 'management': the constant evolution of the CG-content, which, during the conversation, is continuously modified through linguistic expressions that convey the intentions and the communicative goals of the speakers.

Based on these considerations, Krifka compares frame-setters to Contrastive Topics (C-Topics) which also belong to the CG management «as they imply that there are other aspects for which other predications might hold» (Krifka 2007, p. 50).

In order to confirm his thesis, Krifka mentions Daniel Büring's theory on C-Topics (Büring 1997, 2003), who defines them as elements that introduce a set of alternatives in addition to the one that is already introduced by the focus of the predication.⁶ Doing so, 'sets of sets of alternatives' will be obtained.

According to Büring, a C-Topic is an element expressing a 'CT-value': a set of alternative questions that originate from the following algorithm, which the linguist calls 'CT-value formation':

(10) CT-value formation:

step 1: *Replace the focus with a wh-word and front the latter; if focus marks the finite verb or negation, front the finite verb instead.*

step 2: *Form a set of questions from the result of step 1 by replacing the contrastive topic with some alternative to it.*

(11) FRED_{CT} ate the BEANS_F

a. CT-value formation:

step 1: What did Fred eat?

step 2: What did Fred eat? What did Mary eat? What did... eat?

b. [[FRED_{CT} ate the BEANS_F]^{ct} = {{x ate y y E De} I x E De}

(Büring 2003, p. 519)

As shown in (12), Krifka resumes this particular scheme:

(12) A: Which subjects do your siblings study?

⁶ As noted by Frascarelli, Ramaglia: «when talking about contrast we refer to different and complex operations, which, however, always involve a selection from a set of alternatives». (2013, p. 3).

B: [My SiSter]_{Contrastive Topic} [_{Comment} studies [PoMOlogy]_{Focus}]]
 = {{x STUDIES y | y ∈ {POMOLOGY, OLERICULTURE, ...} | x
 ∈ {SISTER, BROTHER, ...}}}
 = {{SISTER STUDIES POMOLOGY, SISTER STUDIES
 OLERICULTURE, ...}, {BROTHER STUDIES POMOLOGY, BROTHER
 STUDIES OLERICULTURE, ...}}

(Krifka 2007, p. 51)

As it can be noted, in (12) there are two sets of alternatives: the first one is introduced by the focus 'pomology', and includes all the possible alternative subjects; instead, the second is the one introduced by the C-Topic 'my sister' and includes all the possible alternative topics. Krifka believes that Büring's definition of C-Topics could also be valid for frame-setters and, based on the above considerations, he attributes the same function to frame-setters and C-Topics, namely the 'limiting' function:

A Delimitator α in an expression [... α ... β _{Focus}...] always comes with a focus within α that generates alternatives α' . It indicates that the current informational needs of the CG are not wholly satisfied by [... α ... β _{Focus}...], but would satisfy it by additional expressions of the general form [... α' ... β' _{Focus}...]. (Krifka 2007, p. 51)

Following this proposal, in the example (12), the delimitator 'My sister' helps the hearer to infer that the answer is incomplete and that, probably, the CG will be later updated with further information on the subject.

2.4 Frame Setters and C-Topics

According to the above, it appears that, semantically, LTs could be subsumed under the more general definition of C-Topics (among others, Büring 1997, 2003; Wagner 2012). However, there seems to be some important differences between the two, which suggest that they are not, in fact, the same discursive element. From the semantic point of view, C-topics are related to entities,⁷ while LTs to frames (i.e., specific contextual coordinates). Indeed, according to Krifka:

With contrastive topics, the current CG management contains the expectation that information about a more comprehensive, or distinct, entity is given; contrastive topic indicates that the topic of the sentence diverges from this expectation. With frame setters, the current CG management contains the expectation that information of a different, e.g.

7 As Büring says: «an S-Topic can be used to move the conversation away from an entity given in the previous discourse. This is called a contrastive Topic» (1999, p. 145). C-topics indeed move the conversation from an entity to another one.

more comprehensive, type is given, and the frame setter indicates that the information actually provided is restricted to the particular dimension specified. (Krifka 2007, p. 50)

In other words, a C-Topic is an 'aboutness' topic which is put in contrast with another one, as far as a specific propositional content is concerned. An LT, instead, is the domain to which a specific propositional content related to a specific 'aboutness' topic is limited. In my opinion, this is already a good reason to distinguish between LTs and C-Topics; however, in the next chapter (cf. § 3.2.2.2) further evidences of this significant difference will be provided.

As shown in this chapter, the three mentioned authors have identified the same kind of topic, naming it in different ways. All of them attribute to it the 'limiting' function, that is to limit the validity of the main predication (comment) to a precise and well-defined context (frame). From a discursive point of view, this function is completely different from that of indicating that the sentence, which contains the topic, should be construed as 'being about' the topic referent. However, their analysis stops at describing these discursive features, avoiding an in-depth analysis of its formal (syntactic and prosodic) properties. The second chapter will be dedicated to this analysis, attempting to better describe the main formal properties of LTs.

3 The Analysis of the Corpus

As mentioned before, the present analysis has been conducted on the 'Corpus Bonvino' (2006). This is a group of original audio tracks, with their transcriptions, where different speakers,⁸ among which the author herself, talk about several subjects in a friendly context. Notably, the following four tracks have been taken into exam: 'Aurelia',⁹ 'Chiacchiere',¹⁰ 'Ipnosi'¹¹ and 'Pc',¹² for a total of fifty minutes of conversation and almost nine thousand words.

8 They are all Italian native speakers and they use the standard regional variety of Italian which is spoken in Rome.

9 Lasting: 00:06:50, for a total of 245 clauses. A woman tells to the author how she once got lost in a highway.

10 Lasting: 00:15:51, for a total of 406 clauses. The author and another woman chat about various things.

11 Lasting: 00:04:59, for a total of 128 clauses. The author and another woman discuss on the medical application of hypnosis.

12 Lasting: 00:22:42, for a total of 569 clauses. A student tells the author and a researcher her experience with the linguistic lab.

3.1 Types of Frames and Most Frequent Constituents

On a total of 1348 sentences, 202 occurrences of LT have been identified.¹³ (a single LT every six and a half sentences, on average). These LTs perform different functions and belong to different categories. Based on the collected data, hereinafter, the first two questions will be answered (cf. § 1), namely, which types of frame can be activated by LTs? What are the constituents most frequently associated with this type of topic?

3.1.1 Types of Frames

From the analysis of the corpus, three main LT groups can be detected. We will refer to these as 'Micro-types', distinguishable depending on the different type of *frame* activated by the topic: a) temporal, b) locative and c) domain frames.

Table 1. Percentage of occurrence in the Corpus of the different LT Micro-types

Type of frame	Occurrences	Percentage
Temporal (Temp)	115	56,93%
Locative (Loc)	45	22,27%
Domain (Dom)	42	20,79%
TOT	202	100%

According to the data shown in table 1, the temporal frame results to be the most frequent, with the absolute majority of occurrences (60,19%). In this type of LT, a specific frame is activated that provides the temporal coordinates within them the predication is limited.

¹³ All the identified occurrences are dislocated elements, either in the left and or the right periphery of sentences. Though some authors (among others, Roberts 1996, Neeleman et al. 2007 and Torregrossa 2012) argued that in-situ elements can also act as topics, in our corpus, all frame-setting expressions occurring in-situ have been identified as focal elements (both for discursive and prosodic reasons). In any case, this is still a controversial issue, especially for Italian (cf. Frascarelli 2007), and it is mostly concerned with the canonical 'aboutness' topic. Therefore, in this paper we will assume that frame-setters can be LTs only when dislocated, leaving a more in-depth analysis of the matter to a future work. On the basis of our current knowledge, we hypothesize that they have a dedicated functional projection in the CP, located after the AS-topic (of which LT represent a subfolder, cf. § 2.3) and either before or after the C-Topic (as shown by corpus data, cf. (27)-(28)) However, for reasons of space, a more in-depth analysis of this matter would be conducted in a future research.

- (13) [*dopo un po'*]_{LT Temp} [*ho capito, sostanzialmente, che quest-, che la Roma-Civitavecchia mi aveva portato sull'Aurelia*]¹⁴_{Comment}
- (14) [*una volta capito il sistema*]_{LT Temp}, *insomma, [ho impiegato nemmeno cinque minuti]*¹⁵_{Comment}
- (15) [*la settimana prima*]_{LT Temp} [*avevamo avuto un'intervista con uno*]¹⁶_{Comment}

According to the occurrences frequency, the second type of frame is the locative one¹⁷ of which 44 occurrences has been detected (21,36%). The locative frame sets the spatial coordinates in which the action expressed by the predication occurs:

- (16) [*nella radio*]_{LT Loc}, *chiaramente, [sono tutti professionisti]*¹⁸_{Focus}
- (17) *però veramente, [me la so' vista brutta]*_{Comment}, *sulla Ci-, [sulla Roma Civitavecchia]*¹⁹_{LT Loc}
- (18) [*sul computer*]_{LT Loc} [*ci sono state delle attività che ci ho messo di meno*]²⁰_{Comment}

As it can be inferred, the so-called 'domain' frame, instead, refers to those cases in which the frame introduced by the topic limits the predication into a specific domain. Traditional grammars (Treccani 2012) attribute this function - usually introduced by such expressions as 'As concerns X' or 'as far as', etc. - to the subordinate clauses that are defined, indeed, 'limitative'. This type of frame has been detected in 38 cases (18,45%). The followings are some examples:

- (19) [*con l'inglese*]_{LT di Dom} [*mi sono trovata sempre a disagio*]²¹_{Comment}

14 'And after a while, I actually understood that the highway (Roma-Civitavecchia) had brought me on 'via Aurelia'.

15 'Once understood the system, it took me less than five minutes'.

16 'The week before, we've had an interview with a guy'.

17 This confirms the importance that speakers attribute to space-time coordinates.

18 'At the radiostation, obviously, they are all experts'.

19 'No, really, I had a really bad time on the highway'.

20 'On the computer, there were some activities which took me less time'.

21 'With English, I never felt at ease'.

(20) [*come ti trovi*]_{Comment} [*con i film*]_{LT di Dom}²²?

(21) [*è un po' pesantona*]_{Comment} [*Silke*]_{Topic} [*per 'ste cose*]_{LT di Dom}²³

3.1.2 LT's Most Frequent Constituents

The 202 occurrences detected in this analysis belong, as already underlined, to different categories. The obtained data are shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Percentage of occurrence in the Corpus of the different LT categories²⁴

Category	Occurrences	Percentage
PP	104	51,48%
AdvP	51	25,24%
DP	26	12,87%
Temporal CP	19	9,40%
Modal CP	1	0,49%
Limitative CP	1	0,49%
TOT	202	100%

As it can be noted, the relative majority of occurrences (49,51%) are prepositional phrases shortly followed by adverbial ones (29,13%). Then it comes nominal phrases (10,69%) and the last are subordinate clauses, mainly temporal (9,23%), but also modal, final and limitative ones, which present a single occurrence per type (0,48%).

3.2 LT's Intonational Properties

After having answered the first and the second questions, it is now possible to focus on the third one: is there a prosodic contour that is systematically associated with LTs? In order to shed light on this subject, we proceeded with the prosodic analysis of the LT's occurrences identified in the corpus

22 'How do you deal with the movies?.'

23 'Silke is a bit annoying for this things'.

24 These data on the limitative subordinates seem to contradict or at least correct what is claimed by traditional grammars (cf § 2.1.1). Even if the latter ones attribute the 'domain' limitative function only to 'limitative' clauses, only a single occurrence of this type of subordinates (used as LT) has been identified in the corpus. According to the corpus data, the 'domain limitative function' is performed mainly (97,36%) by phrasal constituents (PP – AdvP – DP).

adopting the specific criteria described in the following paragraph, for labelling and describing the analysed intonational profiles.

3.2.1 Labeling Criteria for Intonational Profiles

The prosodic analysis of LTs occurrences was conducted according to the ToBI (Tones and Break indices) system. This system was developed by Pierrehumbert (1980) for the transcription and the description of intonational contours and of other prosodic aspects of English language. This system considers the prosodic contour as a sequence of high (H) and low (L) tones, which determine the pace of the fundamental frequency (F0). According to this system, phrase-final syllables are also associated with specific tonal events (high or low) called 'boundary tones'. These are labelled with the symbol 'ˉ' (after the relevant tone), if they mark the end of Intermediate Phrases, and with the symbol '%', if they mark the end of an Intonational Phrase.

More precisely, this analysis follows the research conducted in F&H (2007) which identifies three main tonal events for Italian and German topic constituents, namely H*+L, H* and L*, and associates these to just as much topic varieties according to their discourse roles, in a cross-linguistic perspective.

3.2.1.1 The L*+H Contour

This particular prosodic contour has been associated by the authors to the topic variety called Aboutness-shift Topic (or AS-Topic),²⁵ whose discursive function is to newly propose or reintroduce a topic in the discourse making a topic-shift in the conversation. The complex tone L*+H is characterized «by a rise in the F0 contour that is aligned with the tonic vowel in its full extension and reaches its peak on the post tonic syllable». (F&H 2007, p. 91) An illustration of this prosodic contour is provided in Figure 1:

25 As showed in Bianchi, Frascarelli (2010), the AS-Topic actually correspond to Reinhart's sentence-topic.

22) *L'ultima unit la sto facendo.*²⁶

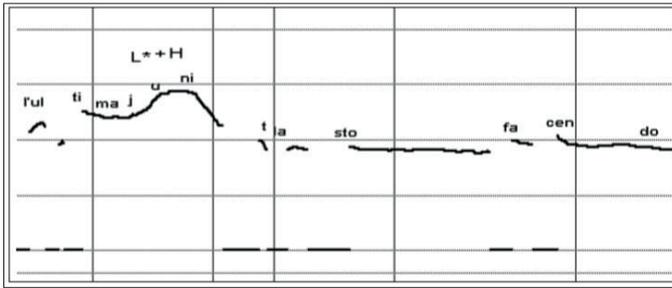


Figure 1. The L*+H contour

In (22) the speaker introduces a new topic in the discourse (the DO *l'ultima unit*) and, as it can be seen in Figure 1, this element is prosodically realized with a rise of the F0 that is aligned with the tonic syllable [ju] and reaches its peak on the post-tonic syllable [ni]. This is a prototypical case of L*+H contour.

3.2.1.2 The H* Contour

The H* contour has been instead associated with C-Topics, that is when a sentence contains «a contrast between two (or more) topics as far as some specific (new) information is concerned» (p. 92). This particular contour is characterized by a sharp rise of the F0, which reaches its peak on the tonic vowel, extending all over it. Consider example (23):

(23) *In inglese ho avuto sempre problemi con i professori.*²⁷

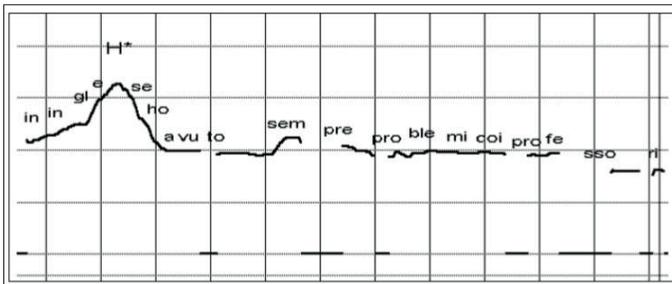


Figure 2. The H* contour

26 'I'm working on the last unit.'

27 'In English, I always had problems with professors'.

In (23) the speaker talks about her problems with English, contrasting it to her situation with French (mentioned in the previous discourse²⁸). Figure 2 shows that this contrast is signalled by a sharp rise of the F0, which reaches its peak on the tonic syllable [e] and extends all over it, representing a good example of a typical H* contour.

3.2.1.3 The L* Contour

The last contour identified by the authors for topic constituents is the L* Tone and it has been associated with Familiar Topics (or Fam-Topics), that is, «with elements which are part of the already established familiar information. They are introduced at some point of the conversation and then repeated for topic continuity or as an afterthought» (p. 93). This tone is characterized by a low and flat profile just above the speaker's baseline. Figures 3 shows an example of this particular contour:

(24) *Non riesco a darmela da sola la conferma.*²⁹

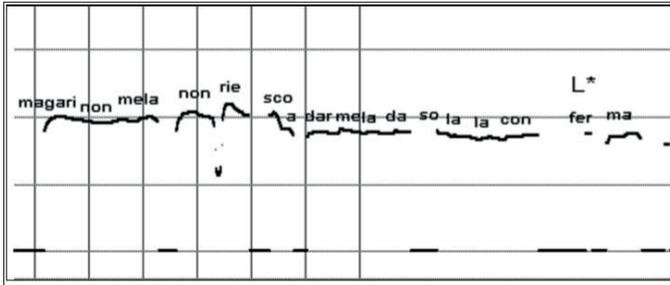


Figure 3. The L* contour

In the example (24), the speaker repeats a previously introduced topic, 'la conferma', realizing it at the right edge of the sentence. As shown in Figure 3, the tonic syllable of this element, [fer], presents a low and flat contour, which corresponds to a L* tone.

28 Cf. F&H (2007, p. 92)

29 'I cannot make this check on my own'.

3.2.2 Prosodic Analysis

Following the abovementioned criteria, we analysed the prosodic contour of 172 out of the total 202 occurrences of LT's identified.³⁰ The results are resumed in the Table 3:

Table 3: LTs' prosodic contours

Prosodic contour	Boundary Tone	Position	Occurrences	Percentage
H*	L%	Left dislocated	152	88,37%
L*	L%	Right dislocated	20	11,63%
TOT			172	100%

The absolute majority of LTs (88,37%) presents an H* tone. In all these cases, LTs are located in the left periphery of the sentence. However, there are some cases (11,63%) in which LTs occur in the right periphery of the sentence and, in that case, they always present an L* tone. In addition, all the analysed LTs show a low boundary tone (L%) at their right edge, regardless of their position. After each pitch accent, the F0 comes very close to the speaker baseline, marking the end of the relevant Prosodic Phrase.

30 30 sentences containing a LT were excluded from the analysis, namely i) those examples in which the LT is realized as a subordinate clause and ii) interrogative clauses. The former, because their prosodic contour derives from the illocutive force of the main clause. The latter because the analysis has been limited to declarative sentences, for reasons of space.

3.2.2.1 Left Dislocated LTs

First, we will focus on the description of LTs which occur in a left peripheral position; consider the following examples:³¹

(15) [*la settimana prima*]_{TL Temp} [*avevamo avuto un'intervista con uno*]_{Comment}³²

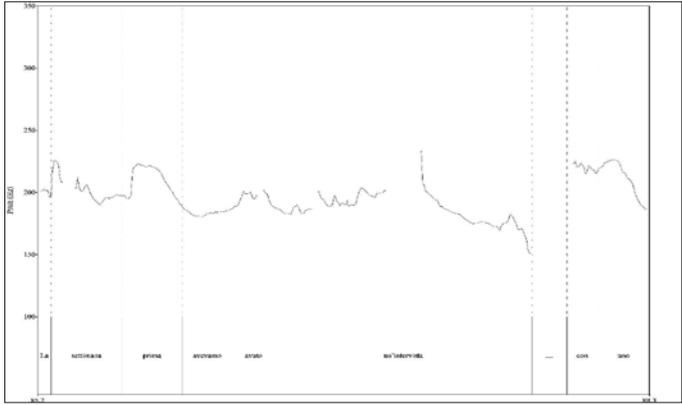


Figure 4. Total prosodic contour of example (15)

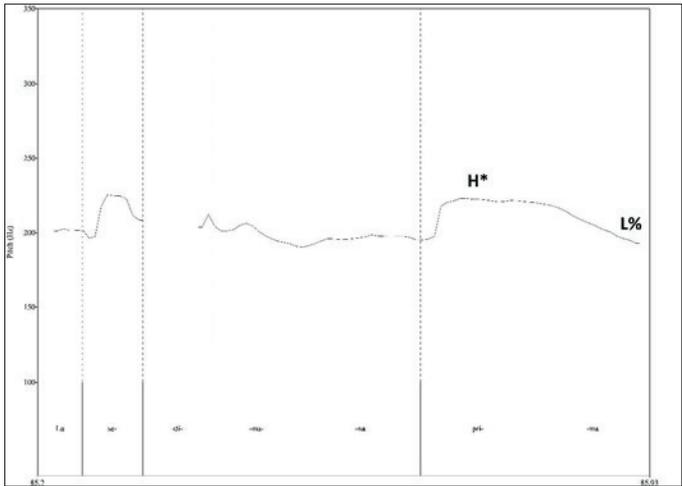


Figure 5. Prosodic contour of the LT 'la settimana prima'

31 For convenience, the relevant sentences are illustrated in the first Figure, while the second one zooms in on the LT.

32 'The week before, we've had an interview with a guy'.

(18) [sul computer]_{TL,Loc} [ci sono state del...delle attività che ci ho messo di meno]

33
Comment

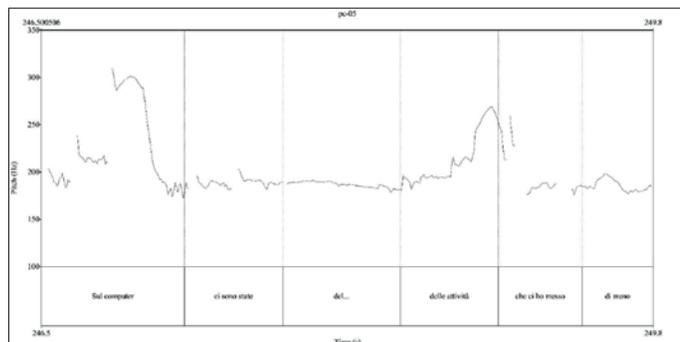


Figure 6. Total prosodic contour of example (18)

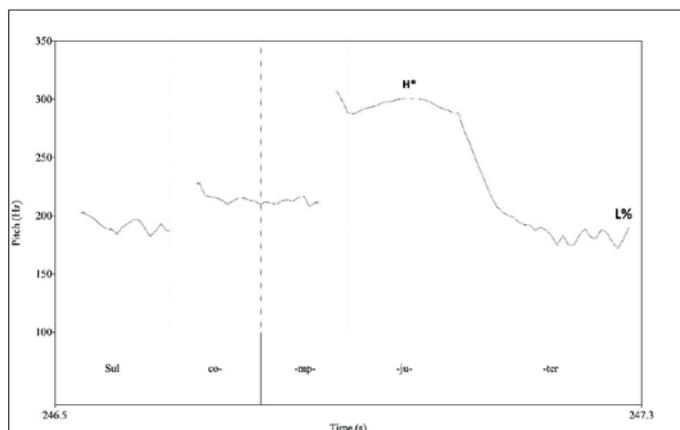


Figure 7. Prosodic contour of the LT 'sul computer'

33 'On the computer, there were some activities which took me less time'.

(19) [*con l'inglese*]_{TL Dom} [*mi sono trovata sempre a disagio*]_{Comment}³⁴

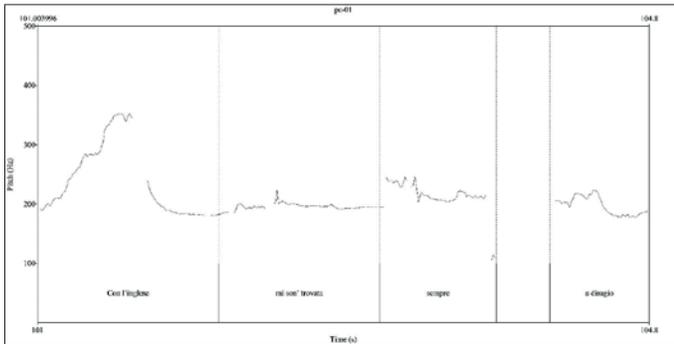


Figure 8. Total prosodic contour of example (19)

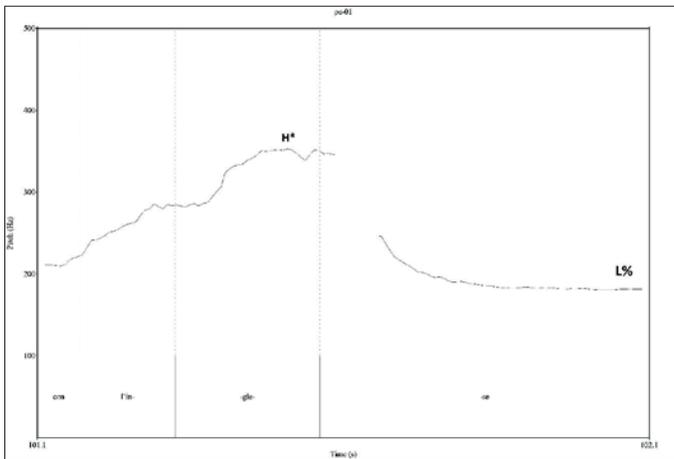


Figure 9. Prosodic contour of the LT 'con l'inglese'

As it can be noticed, the LTs illustrated in these Figures present the distinctive H* tone. Figures 5, 7 and 9 clearly show the typical 'hat-shaped' contour of H* tones, perfectly aligned with the tonic syllable of the phonological word heading the Prosodic Phrase. However, it could be argued that the H* contour is pervasive in prefocal contexts and is not peculiar of C-Topics and left dislocated LTs. In order to verify this possibility, we

34 'With English, I never felt at ease'.

analysed the intonational profiles of other left dislocated constituents, such as AS-Topics,³⁵ C-Topics and adverbs; consider the following examples:

(25) [Magari]_{Adv.} [nel computer]_{LT} se so che c'è il vocabolario sono portata più a cercarla subito.³⁶

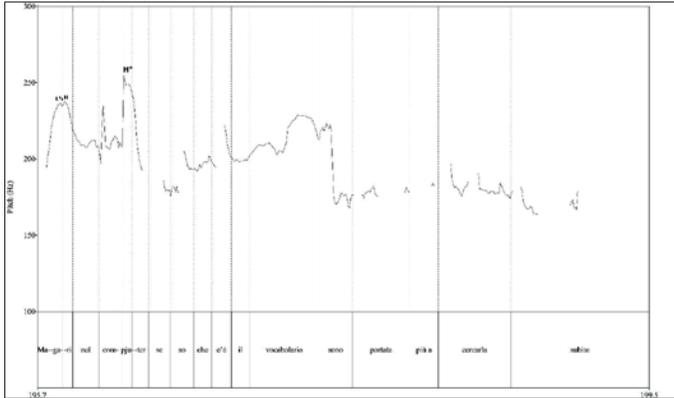


Figure 10. Total prosodic contour of example (25)

(26) [Io]_{AS-T} [a un certo punto]_{LT} dicevo: è possibile che non c'è un'inversione di marcia?³⁷

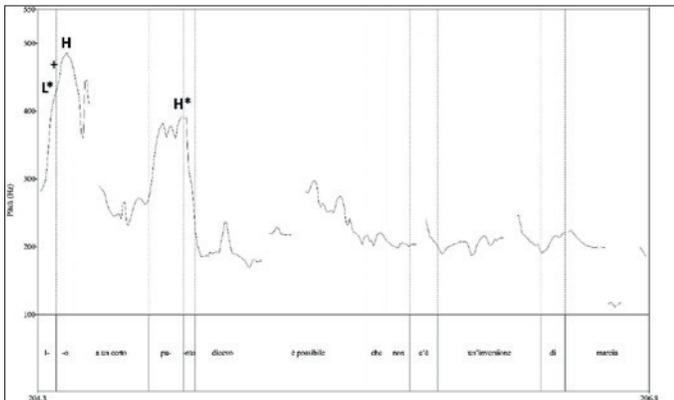


Figure 11. Total prosodic contour of example (26)

35 Which, as already mentioned, are equivalent to Reinhart's sentence-topics.

36 'Maybe, with the computer, if I know that there is a dictionary, I'm more inclined to immediately look it up'.

37 'At some point I said: is it possible that there is no chance of making a U-turn?'

(27) [Col computer]_{LT} [sicuramente]_{Adv.} [quella parte lì]_{C-T} è più scorrevole.³⁸

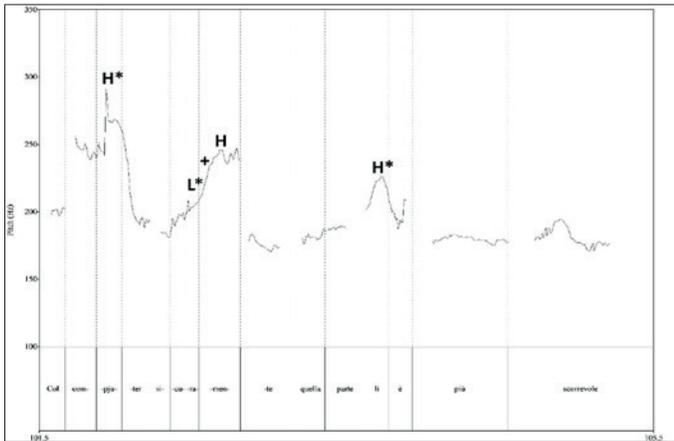


Figure 12. Total prosodic contour of example (27)

(28) [A me]_{C-T} [per il momento]_{LT} m'ha messo a far la speaker.³⁹

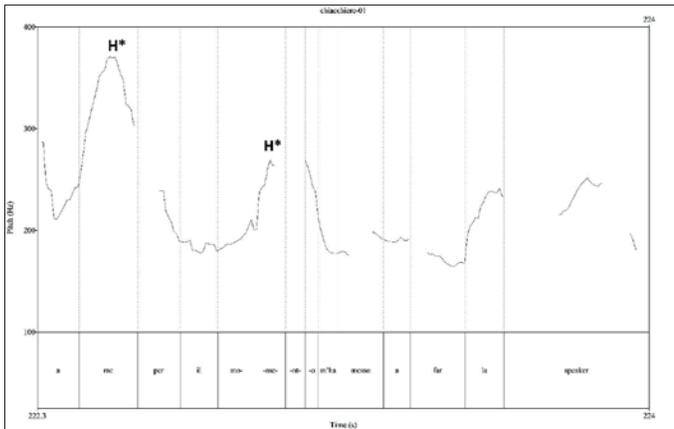


Figure 13. Total prosodic contour of example (28)

38 'With the computer, surely, that part is faster'.

39 'For the moment, he lets me play the speaker'.

Looking at the examples (25)-(28), H* does not appear to be the 'default' tone for left dislocated constituents. Indeed, each constituent located in the left periphery seems to have its own specific contour, which forms a separate prosodic domain and depends on the specific discourse role of the constituent. AS-Topics (*Io* in (26)) which have the function of introducing a topic shift in the conversation, always present a complex L*+H tone.⁴⁰ As stated in Krifka (2007), C-Topics (*quella parte lì* in (27) and *a me* in (28)) and LTs (*nel computer* in (25), *a un certo punto* in (26), *col computer* in (27) and *per il momento* in (28)) have a similar discursive function (cf. § 1.3) which involves the selection of alternatives; hence, they also share the same prosodic contour. Finally, adverbs (*magari* in (25) and *sicuramente* in (27)), which have the function of introducing the speakers personal attitude towards the propositional content at issue, present a complex L*+H tone, like AS-Topics. This prosodic similarity between AS-Topics and left dislocated adverbs is consistent with the analysis made in Frascarelli et al. (2007), which showed that the prosodic realizations of adverbial expressions are the same which have been associated with specific discursive elements (Topic, Focus, Comment, etc.). Therefore, the tonal contour of adverbs depends on their discursive role and it is connected with their syntactic position. We can thus conclude that there is no 'default' tone for left dislocated elements and that each constituent presents a prosodic contour which comes (at least for some part) from its specific discursive properties.

As for the H* tone, the fact that it characterizes both LTs and C-topics seems coherent with the correlation made in Krifka (2007). He indeed compares C-Topics with frame setters (namely, LTs), as both of them «imply that there are other aspects for which other predications might hold» (Krifka 2007, p. 37). This is evident from the above-mentioned examples, where the LT implies that there is another frame, in which the truth-value of the proposition could be different. For instance, in the example (19), the speaker claims to be in an unease situation with English, implying she has less problems with other languages. Lastly, in Frascarelli, Ramaglia (2013), 'contrast' has been described as 'a choice between two alternatives': «The Contrastive Topic (C-Topic), on the other hand, induces alternatives in the discourse which have no impact on the Focus value of the sentence and creates oppositional pairs with respect to other Topics» (Frascarelli, Ramaglia 2013, p. 60). This is analogous to what stated by Krifka concerning frame-setters: «They choose one out of a set of frames and state that the proposition holds within this frame» (Krifka 2007, p. 36-37). In the examples above, the LT seems indeed to present this property: in all of them, the LT implies different alternatives, among which it identifies one and limits to this alternative the validity of the proposition.

40 Coherently to what reported in F&H (2007).

In the example (15), for instance, the LT *'la settimana prima'* implies a set of alternatives that includes all the possible temporal contexts in which the described event could be placed (i.e., yesterday, few minutes ago, last year, the week before, etc.). Among these temporal contexts, the LT selects one in particular, *'la settimana prima'* (the week before), and it limits to this context the truth-value of the main predication, *'avevamo avuto un'intervista con uno'* (we had an interview with a guy). Likewise, in the example (18), the LT *'sul computer'* (on the computer) limits to this (virtual) place the presence of *'attività in cui ci ho messo di meno'* (activities which took me less time), rejecting all the other possible alternatives (i.e., the videos or the tapes which constituted the other parts of the program). In the example (19), instead, the LT *'con l'inglese'* (with English) introduces all the possible subjects of studies and limits the existence of an uneasiness to a single one: English.

According to the above, the fact that LTs and C-Topics present the same intonational contour seems to be consistent with the analogies identified in the literature between these two elements. However, as shown in § 1.4 C-Topics refer to entities, while LTs to frames. Moreover, C-Topics, as showed in F&H (2007, p. 97) «can only be located in the left periphery», while, as already mentioned, we found a small but significant minority of LTs located in the right periphery of the sentence.

3.2.2.2 Right Dislocated LTs

Let us now turn to the analysis of right dislocated LTs. Consider the following examples:

(21) [è un po' pesantona]_{Comment} [Silke]_{Topic} [per 'ste cose]_{TL Dom}⁴¹

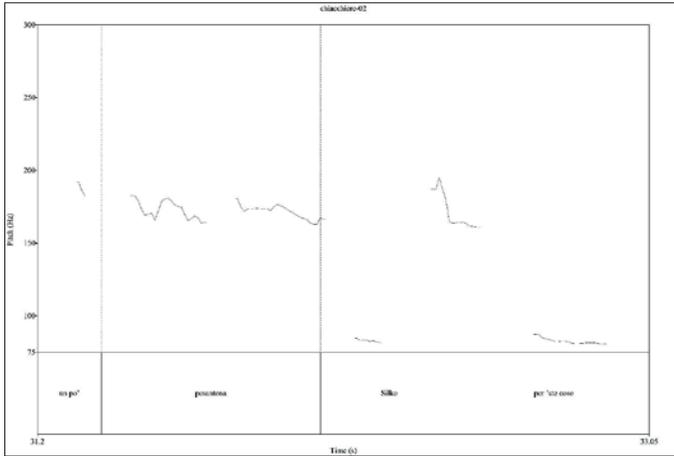


Figure 14. Total prosodic contour of example (21)

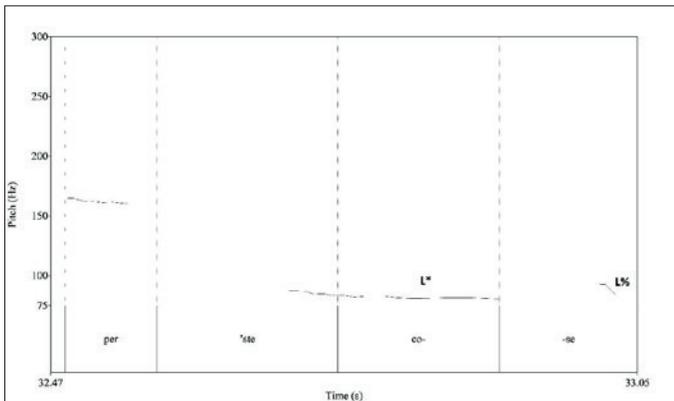


Figure 15. Prosodic contour of the LT «per 'ste cose»

41 'Silke is a bit annoying for this things'.

The LT of example (21), unlike the ones previously described, is located in the right periphery of the sentence and the tonic vowel of the head word presents a L* tone (within a flat intonational contour), which has been associated to Fam-Topics in F&H (2007). This is consistent with what many authors claim, i.e., Lambrecht (1994), for right dislocated topics: «topic expression in right-detached position cannot indicate a new topic or a topic shift. Given that antitopic constituents are always unaccented, any contrasting function is excluded» (p. 204). Therefore, based on Corpus analysis, it seems reasonable to presume that the function of the right dislocated LTs is to evoke an already active frame, or at least an accessible one, in order to recall it to the hearer's attention. Actually, in the example (21), the referent of the anaphoric constituent 'ste cose' (these things) has been introduced in the discourse, as it is clear by the use of the Demonstrative '(que)ste' (these) and of the generic name 'cose' (things), clearly D-linked. All occurrences of right dislocated LTs present an L* contour and they all refer to an already active (or accessible) frame. The followings are some examples:

(29) [mi era presa un po' paura]_{Comment} [quella sera]_{TL Temp}⁴²

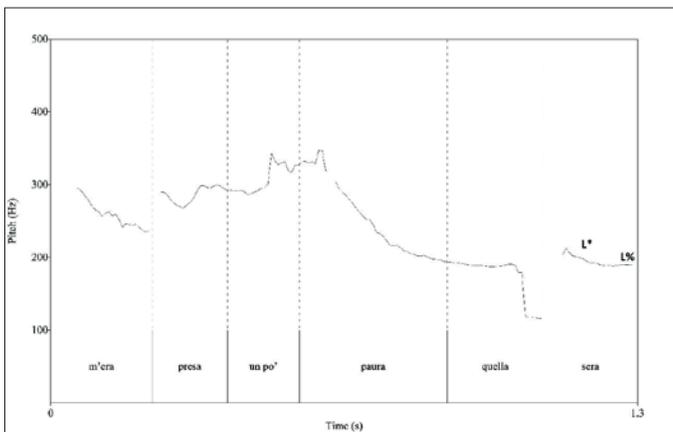


Figure 16. Total prosodic contour of example (29)

42 'I was a little bit scared that night'.

(30) [*ha fatto una parte di un servizio*]_{Comment} [*su questo qua*]_{TL Dom}⁴³

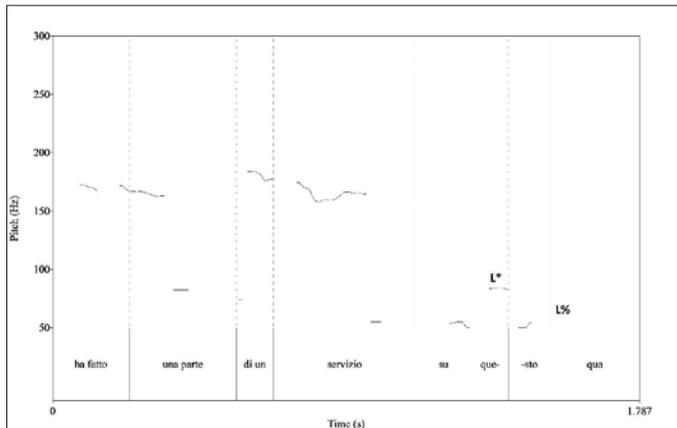


Figure 17. Total prosodic contour of example (30)

(31) [*non ci sta volentieri*]_{Comment} [*là*]_{TL Loc}⁴⁴

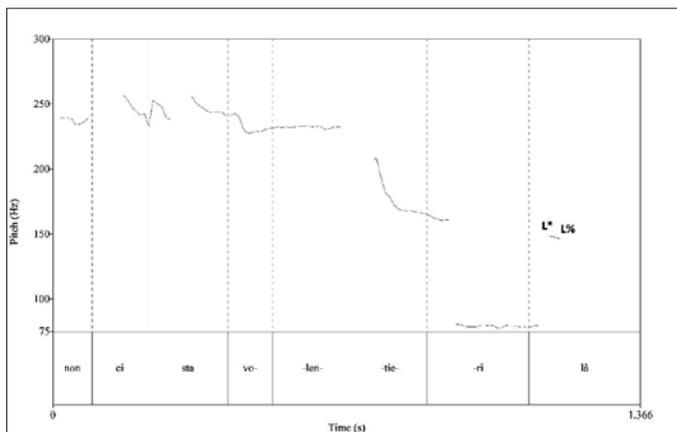


Figure 18. Total prosodic contour of example (31)

43 'He made part of a report on this guy'.

44 'She doesn't like to stay there'.

(32) [mi sa che l'ho già visto]_{Comment} [una volta]_{TL Temp}⁴⁵

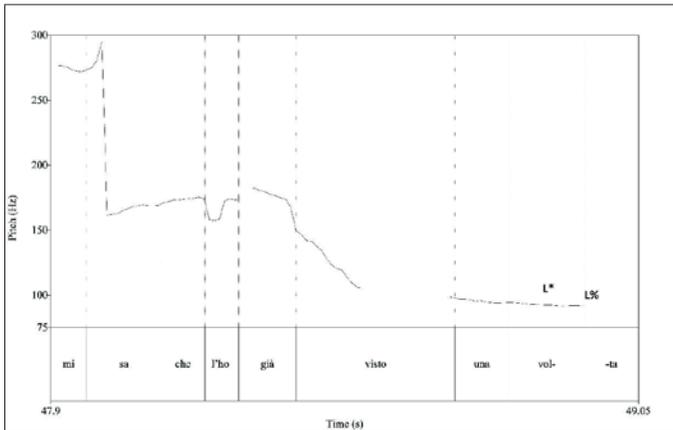


Figure 19. Total Prosodic contour of example (32)

In each of the examples described above, the LT is characterized by an L* tone and its frame is already active (since it has been already introduced in the discourse) or accessible (as it is inferable from the context). In the example (29)-(31), the introduced frames are all active, as *'quella sera'* (that evening), *'questo qua'* (this guy) and *'là'* (there) are anaphoric expressions and, therefore, they have by definition an antecedent in the discourse. In the example (32), instead, the temporal frame linked to the expression *'una volta'* (once) is not active as it is the first time that it is introduced in the discourse. Nevertheless, it is accessible as *'una volta'* (once) is a strongly generic expression that does not need any kind of antecedent in order to be identified by speakers. Of course, it could be argued that right dislocated LTs present an L* tone not because of their peculiar discursive function, but only because this particular contour is consistently associated with post focal elements, regardless of their nature. However, as far as the present analysis is concerned, it is enough to show that LTs, unlike C-Topics, can occur in the right periphery and, in that case, they always present an L* tone. Hence, these two discursive elements cannot be equated.⁴⁶

45 'I think I saw him once'.

46 Another important difference between LTs and C-topics is that there cannot be more than one C-topic in the same sentence: «As far as topic recursion is concerned [...] Contrastive topics are not recursive» (F&H 2007, p. 97). LTs, instead, are recursive; a sentence can contain, in theory, an infinite number of them, as showed by the following example:

(i) Domani, terrò un comizio. (Tomorrow, I will hold a speech.)

3.3 The Creation and Organization of File-cards

According to Reinhart's (1981), CG is composed by sets of propositions, which are organized in 'entries' corresponding to various sentence-topics. However, as stated in Krifka (2007), frame-setters do not represent the entries under which the information of their sentences is stored: «Statements like “{Healthwise / As for his health}, he is [FINE]_F” certainly should not be entered under a file card about the health situation» (Krifka 2007, pp. 35-36). This is a clear difference with respect to Reinhart's sentence-topic, or F&H's AS-Topic, since they have the function of introducing a new (or inactive) topic in the conversation and represent an instruction for the hearer, therefore pertaining to the CG-management: «[it] identifies the entity under which the proposition expressed in the clause should be stored in the CG content» (Bianchi, Frascarelli 2010, p. 55).

Then, if the information expressed by a sentence containing a LT is not organized in a separate file-card, where should it be stored in the CG? In light of this, the fourth question is the following: are LTs an instruction for the hearer? And, if they are, which role do LTs play in discourse dynamics? Indeed, although Krifka's proposal is plausible, it cannot be denied that frames play an important role in the process of storing and retrieving information. Consider the following sentence:

(33) {Healthwise / As for his health}, he is FINE (Krifka 2007, p. 36)

As stated in Reinhart (1981), the file-card system instructs the speakers in the organization and storage of propositional contents, therefore allowing a faster retrieval of information. In addition, as claimed in this paper, LT's discursive function is to limit the validity of the main predication to a specific domain. Hence, it does not seem plausible that the information 'he is FINE', in (32), should be simply stored under the file-card of the referent associated with 'he'. Our proposal is rather that the frame (in this case 'as for his health') creates a 'subfolder' in the file-card corresponding to the sentence-topic (in this case the referent associated with 'he'), in which the information expressed by the sentence is stored.

(33a) File-card = Referent associated with 'he' > His health > fine

This would allow the speakers to express a different, and even opposite, piece of information, on another frame or 'subfolder':

- (ii) Domani, vicino alla biblioteca, terrò un comizio. (Tomorrow, next to the library, I will hold a speech.)
- (iii) Domani, alle quattro, in centro, vicino alla biblioteca, terrò un comizio. (Tomorrow, at 4 p.m., in the city centre, next to the library, I will hold a speech.)

(34) {As for his money}, he is NOT FINE

(34a) File-card = Referent associated with 'he' > His health > fine
> His money > not fine

Indeed, without any subfolder dividing the information into different domains, contradictory situations could arise, as shown in (34):

(35) File-card = Referent associated with 'he' > fine
> not fine

In order to verify this hypothesis, in future researches, a test must be created in which information is sometimes framed under LTs and sometimes it is not. Informants will then be asked specific questions, aimed at confronting their capacity and speed of information retrieval in the two conditions.

4 Conclusions

Based on the illustrated results, we support the existence of the LT as an independent discursive category. Nevertheless, further studies are necessary in order to better describe LTs and verify the hypothesis on their cognitive role.

To summarise, the aim of this study was to investigate in detail the main properties of the so-called 'Limiting Topic'. In particular, we intended to identify what types of frame (temporal, locative, modal, etc.) can be activated by LTs and which types of constituents (DP - PP - CP etc.) are most frequently associated with them. Then, analysing the intonational contour of Corpus occurrences, we wanted to see whether a specific prosodic contour could be systematically associated with this topic variety. Finally, this research investigated the role that LTs play in discourse dynamics, trying to understand if they represent an instruction for the hearers (pertaining to the CG-management).

Based on the analysis of the corpus, we are then able to outline the main properties of this particular kind of Topic.

As previously mentioned, the discursive function of LTs is that of limiting the truth-value of the main predication to a specific and clearly defined frame. This function must be kept distinguished from that of indicating that the sentence, which contains the topic, should be construed as 'being about' the topic referent. Specifically, as shown in Table 1, LTs can introduce three types of frames: 'temporal frames', the most frequent ones, where LTs provide the temporal coordinates within which the predication holds; 'locative frames', where LTs provide the spatial coordinates within which the predication holds; and the so-called 'domain frames', where LTs

limit the validity of the predication to a restricted domain. As for the type of constituents most frequently associated with this topic variety (cf. Table 2), we observed that LTs are mainly realized as PPs and less frequently as AdvPs or DPs, but there are also some cases in which LTs are realized as subordinate clauses (mainly temporal ones).

From a prosodic point of view, we identified a strict correlation between LTs and C-Topics, which confirms their semantic affinity claimed in Krifka (2007) (cf. § 1.3). Indeed, from the analysis of the intonational profiles of corpus occurrences (cf. § 3.2), it has been observed that LTs are always produced with an H* tone when they occur in the left periphery, just like C-topics. However, contrary to C-Topics, LTs refers to frames (and not to entities), they can occur in the right periphery of the sentence always presenting an L* tone and they are also recursive. These represent significant differences between LTs and C-Topics, and support the analysis of LTs as an independent discursive category, which cannot be equated to C-Topics. Finally, as for the role of LTs in discourse dynamics, we elaborated an hypothesis on their influence in the process of information storage. It seems plausible to claim that LTs create a subfolder in the file-card corresponding to the relevant sentence-topic (or AS-Topic), therefore contributing to a better organization of the CG and presumably allowing the speaker for a faster retrieval of information. These results encourage us to continue this research, in order to better understand and describe this particular discursive element.

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