

Fronting, Background, Focus

A comparative study of Sardinian and Icelandic*

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Abstract

There is a superficial similarity between fronting phenomena attested in Sardinian and Icelandic. Nevertheless, the two languages are radically different as for the pragmatic interpretation associated with fronting. It will be argued that the differences and similarities alike can follow from an account that takes pragmatic features, that is, features encoding elements of information structure, to be syntactically projected and checked. In particular, Sardinian fronting creates narrow focus on the fronted element, whereas the remaining part of the clause is in the background; in Icelandic the clause falls under maximal focus, out of which the fronted element has been back-grounded. From this basic difference it follows that the languages are each other's mirror reflex with respect to some fundamental patterns, including the definiteness effect and locality restrictions encountered in Icelandic but not in Sardinian. Furthermore, it follows that the languages are alike in that they disallow fronting of purely functional elements such as auxiliaries. Lastly, the languages are superficially similar in the sense that fronting obeys to a subject gap condition, which however comes from different sources. The last section of the paper is dedicated to a general discussion on language variation.

1. Introduction

This study is concerned with two constructions normally referred to as "fronting". Sardinian fronting is illustrated in (1), whereas an example of Icelandic so called stylistic fronting is given in (2).

- (1) Srd. Certu_i esti t_i ka teneus abbisungiu de prus dinai.
obvious is _ that (we)have need for more money

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- (2) Ic. Greinilegt_i er t_i að okkur vantar meiri peninga.
 obvious is _ that we need more money
 ‘It’s obvious that we need more money.’

Despite the superficial similarity of the examples in (1)-(2), it is argued here that the two constructions are essentially different pragmatically as well as syntactically, given the assumption that pragmatic interpretation is reflected in syntax.

From the earliest accounts onwards (e.g. Maling 1980, Blasco Ferrer 1986), most studies have converged in claiming that Icelandic fronting is not associated with any semantic effects (or not necessarily so; this point will be addressed in section 5), whereas Sardinian fronting, on the other hand, is known to have very clear semantic consequences which will shortly be described in more detail. The claim of this paper is that the two constructions can be better understood in relation to each other, as, in many ways, one appears to be the mirror reflex of the other. In particular, it will be argued that, while Sardinian fronting is an instance of focusing, Icelandic fronting, from a pragmatic perspective, can be understood as back-grounding. The former claim is quite in line with the dominant view in the literature on Sardinian, whereas the second claim diverges from standard treatments of Icelandic hitherto.¹

Importantly, this paper is limited to the issue of fronting of nonfinite verbs. Fronting of other elements is quite possible and also frequent in both languages, but the comparison is difficult because of independent differences.²

The Sardinian variety taken into consideration is *Campidanese*, and in particular the subvarieties *Cagliaritano* (the dialect of the regional capital

¹ For the general description of these constructions, the reader is referred to Blasco Ferrer (1986), Jones (1993: chapter 7), and Mensching & Remberger (2010) for Sardinian. Recent overviews of fronting in Icelandic are given in Holmberg (2006) and Thráinsson (2007: chapter 7). Other references to the (quite extensive) literature will be given as we proceed.

² To mention a couple of such complications: fronting of the negative element *ekki* is grammatical in Icelandic but ungrammatical in Sardinian presumably because of the clitic status of Sardinian negation. The fronting of DP:s in Sardinian is to some extent similar to focusing in Romance generally, an issue which goes far beyond our present concerns. As for the fronting of particles, it is not possible to find comparable evidence given that Sardinian does not have particles comparable to those of Germanic languages.

Cagliari), and *Sulcitano* (a south-western dialect spoken in Sulcis). The transcription of the examples attempts to follow the orthographic standard proposed in SDT (2005).

The paper is organized as follows: after some introductory remarks on back-grounding in section 2, and the relation between pragmatics and syntax in section 3, the comparison between fronting phenomena in Icelandic and Sardinian follows in section 4. The last part of the paper, which is more speculative in nature, is concerned with the question of language variation in terms of the double basis theory originating in Kroch (1989).

2. Syntactic back-grounding

Before proceeding with the discussion on Sardinian and Icelandic, I will begin with a basic comment on what is intended by “syntactic back-grounding” in this article. In this section, the phenomenon will be illustrated with Swedish data.

The background of an utterance can be structurally realized in different ways. The most obvious case of informational background, which will not interest us in the following discussion, is one in which the utterance immediately mimics a part of the discourse: – *Where did you bring your friends yesterday?* – *(I brought my friends) to a museum (yesterday)*. The bracketed parts of the answer, retrieving the formula of the question, constitute the background to its information focus: *to a museum*.

In contrast to this, the focus in this paper is on back-grounding that is signalled by syntactic means. This can come about in at least two ways: One common strategy is that of dislocation of the back-grounded element in a peripheral position: *John, I met him yesterday*. Dislocation does not involve the nuclear clause; for instance, it has been analyzed as base generation in the left periphery (Cinque 1990) or as displacement at PF (Erteschik-Shir 2006). The other strategy is that of syntactic movement, or fronting, of the back-grounded element from a lower position to a higher projection which can be in the left periphery or in the midfield, as a matter of cross linguistic variation. Consider the following Swedish example:

[Ministern reste igår till Norge för ett tre dagars besök...]

‘The minister yesterday went to Norway for a three-day visit...’

- (3) Sw. Han blev [i Oslo]_i mottagen av en stor välkomstkommitté t_i
 He was in Oslo received by a large welcoming committee _

In (3), the PP *in Oslo* has been moved from its basic position to a position in the midfield that for present purposes does not have to be specified. Such a movement is entirely optional in a case such as (3). However, movement of the PP to the midfield yields a deviant result in a context where the PP is interpreted under contrastive focus (4) and is unacceptable if the PP receives information focus (5):

[I BERGEN passerade hans besök obemärkt men ...]

‘In BERGEN his visit passed unnoticed but ...’

- (4) Sw. ??Han blev [I OSLO]_i mottagen av en stor välkomstkommitté t_i
 He was IN OSLO received by a large welcoming committee_
 [Q: Where was he received?]
- (5) Sw. *Han blev [I OSLO]_i mottagen (av en stor välkomstkommitté) t_i
 He was IN OSLO received (by a large welcoming committee) _

Given the contexts of (4) and (5), the PP *in Oslo* is unacceptable in the midfield.

The semantic effect of movement of the PP as in (3) is quite subtle. Preferably, the content of the PP is understood as contextually familiar or perhaps even retrievable from context by implicature. Introducing the discourse with a structure such as (6) is possible, but it still brings about an interpretation in which the content of the moved PP is understood to be somehow contextually

natural or generally familiar to the speaker. This is the only difference with respect to (7), where the PP stays in situ and where no familiarity with its content is implied.

(6) Sw. *Ministern blev [i Oslo]_i mottagen av en välkomstkommitté* _{t_i}
 the minister was in Oslo received by a welcoming committee _

(7) Sw. *Ministern blev mottagen av en välkomstkommitté i Oslo*
 the minister was received by a welcoming committee in Oslo

The movement of the PP to the midfield in Swedish is an instance of syntactic back-grounding. By this I intend back-grounding resulting from syntactic displacement as opposed to the case in which an element receives a background reading by purely contextual means. In (6), the PP is raised from the focus domain and appears at its edge, where it is interpreted as “context-linked” in a broad sense. The examples given in (3)-(7) only serve the purpose of illustration and will not be discussed further. However, they are obviously strongly reminiscent of scrambling, an issue to which I will return briefly in section 5, f.n. 10.

3. Pragmatics and syntax

This paper explores some consequences of the assumption that pragmatic features are projected in syntax. There are different ways to spell out such an intuition. For concreteness, assume the frame work proposed in Erteschik-Shir (2006). To put it briefly, in this theory, pragmatic features are assigned pre-syntactically as part of the lexical array, analogous to ϕ -features. The assignment of such pragmatic features yields a representation projected in syntax and then valued in relation to the context. Whereas the pre-syntactic assignment of pragmatic features is optional, the syntactic evaluation of the features is not. This is a technical device to do away with syntactic optionality, thus overcoming a potential conflict with Chomsky (1995) and subsequent

work. The analysis of Erteschik-Shir does not involve movement of elements for checking in specific functional projections such as TopicP or FocusP, as in Rizzi (1997). Such a movement, she argues, is uncalled for given that the very same element can, in some languages and in some contexts, receive a topical reading both in a derived position and in situ. This argument is not compelling, however, precisely because of the analogy to ϕ -features. Consider that, in some languages, the checking of nominative optionally triggers overt displacement: in Italian, a nominative-marked subject appears at the surface in the canonical subject position, say [Spec, I], or alternatively stays in a lower position under VP (Rizzi 1982). The same holds true for the checking of morphological agreement features in many languages. In fact, even if Erteschik-Shir does not assume functional projections corresponding to pragmatic features, her basic idea does not in principle exclude such syntactic projections. I suggest that the pragmatic approach can be adapted to a theory in which features corresponding to topical and focal interpretations are indeed pre-syntactically assigned to lexical items, and then checked in functional projections during the course of syntactic derivation. Whether such checking applies overtly or covertly, hence does or does not trigger displacement at the surface, is a matter of cross-linguistic variation, as appears to be the case with ϕ -features quite generally. In particular, this is a way to make Erteschik-Shir's theory compatible with much recent "cartographic" work on the left periphery in Romance. The fronting phenomena studied in this paper are all assumed to be instances of pragmatically motivated overt displacement.

4. The properties of fronting

In this section, we discuss the main characteristics of fronting in Sardinian and Icelandic. It will be argued that the patterns encountered are related to information structure.

4.1 *Focusing and back-grounding*

In Sardinian, fronting of an element is the normal strategy used to form a yes/no-question, as in (8a) as well as to answer such a question (8b) (e.g. Jones 1993: 339, Mensching & Remberger 2010: 264).

- (8) a. Srd. [Arregordaus]_i si funt t_i?
 remembered REFL (they)are _ ‘did they remember?’
- b. Srd. Nou, [scarèscius]_i si funt t_i.
 no forgotten REFL (they)are _ ‘no, they forgot’

In addition, Sardinian fronting is used to express contrast, emphatic affirmation or exclamation. (9) can be uttered out of the blue, as for instance in a setting where I see John showing up very late at a party.

- (9) Srd. [Arribau]_i est t_i!
 arrived (he)is _ ‘He came! (at last)’

Hence, we can see that Sardinian fronting creates a narrow focus reading. Given a question such as *what happened?*, only the answer in (10a), where fronting has not applied, is felicitous. Fronting gives rise to unacceptability (10b).

[Q: *What happened?*]

- (10) a. Srd. Giuanni ari perdiu su trenu.
 John has missed the train
- b. Srd. *[Perdiu su trenu]_i ari t_i Giuanni.
 missed the train has _ John

The unacceptability of (10b) is due to the fact that the question requires a maximal focus. Arguably, Sardinian fronting precludes maximal focus.

On the other hand, a question such as *what did you do for his birthday?*, can be answered with the fronting of the VP as in (11).

[Q: *What did you do for his birthday?*]

(11) Srd. [Arregallau unu libru]_i dd' appu t_i
 given a book to-him (I)have _

If, however, the question is *what did you give him for his birthday?*, then fronting of the VP is deviant, as shown in (12a). Rather, the felicitous answer is (12b), where the object DP is fronted leaving the VP in situ. Of course, the focused constituent in isolation yields an equally appropriate answer, as in (12c).

[Q: *What did you give him for his birthday?*]

- (12) a. Srd. ^{??}[Arregallau unu libru]_i dd' appu t_i
 given a book to-him (I)have _
- b. Srd. Unu libru dd' appu arregallau.
 a book to-him (I)have given
- c. Srd. Unu libru.
 a book

That is to say, only the focused element can be fronted. In (12), the predicate itself is part of the background. In brief, Sardinian fronting implies that an element is raised from the nuclear clause in order to create a narrow focus. Fronting constructions with similar properties are attested in Old Romance (e.g.

Fischer & Alexiadou 2001, Benincà 2006, Franco 2009) and among modern Italian dialects (e.g. Cruschina 2010, Paoli 2010), however with some differences that will be briefly mentioned below.

In the literature on Icelandic fronting (e.g. Maling 1980, Jónsson 1991, Holmberg 2006), it is normally held that fronting is not associated to any semantic effects. By this, it is generally meant that the fronted element itself does not receive any focal or topical reading. The term “stylistic” fronting has been justified precisely by this observation. This paper will explore the intuition that the pragmatically “informative” part is not the fronted element but rather the part of structure being left behind. Suppose, in particular, that Icelandic fronting is the reverse case with respect to Sardinian, namely back-grounding of an element: an item located within the focus domain is raised from this domain without altering it essentially. The back-grounded element itself does not receive any focal or topical reading. While it appears at the left edge, a focal reading still falls on the remaining part of the sentence. Halldór Sigurðsson (p.c.) finds (13) acceptable, where the verb has been fronted in an impersonal sentence where information focus falls on the object *nýja brú* ‘a new bridge’.

- (13) Ic. [Byggja]_i má t_i nýja brú ef viljinn væri fyrir hendi
 build may _ new bridge if will-the is at hand
 ‘a new bridge could be built if there is willingness’

Such a fronting is less felicitous in (14), where a question forces focus on the fronted element itself.

[Q: *Is there no bridge to the mainland?*]

- (14) Ic. *Nei, en [byggja]_i má hana t_i
 no but build may it _
 ‘no, but they/we could build one’

Interestingly, Sigurðsson has suggested that fronting can be acceptable in a sentence uttered out of the blue, such as (15), as for instance introducing the news broadcasting.

- (15) Ic. [Smyglað]_i hefur verið t_i miklu magni af áfengi
 [smuggled] has been _ large amount of alcohol
 til landsins frá í haust.
 to country-the in autumn

Example (16), where fronting has not applied, is equally acceptable and does not receive a different interpretation.

- (16) Ic. Miklu magni af áfengi hefur verið smyglað
 large amount of alcohol has been smuggled
 ...til landsins frá í haust.
 ...to the country this autumn

However, only (16), and not (15), can be the felicitous answer to a question such as *what happened?*

[Q: *What happened?*]

- (17) a. Ic. *[Smyglað]_i hefur verið t_i miklu magni af áfengi ...
 b. Ic. Miklu magni af áfengi hefur verið smyglað ...

This contrast suggests that fronting indeed alters the focus domain of the utterance, though in a different way to what has been observed for Sardinian.³

We will return shortly to the question of the position of the subject in the above examples.

4.2 *The expletive subject in Icelandic*

It has been many times observed that Icelandic fronting is in complementary distribution with the occurrence of an expletive subject. The examples (18a)-(c) are from Sigurðsson (2010). In (18a), the participle is fronted and the expletive subject is left out. In (18b), the participle stays in situ and the expletive is merged in subject position. The two cannot co-occur, as in (18c).

- (18) a. Ic. þegar [komið]_i verður t_i heim ...
 when [come] will-be _ home ...
 ‘when I/we/they will get (back) home’
- b. Ic. þegar það verður komið heim ...
 when there will-be come home (= (18a))
- c. Ic. *þegar það [komið]_i verður t_i heim ...
 when there [come] will-be _ home

³ In the particular style of news broadcasting, back-grounding is sometimes used as a means of presenting “new” information as “given”, as for instance when the topic is supposed to be generally or at least vaguely familiar to the listener. The following sentence introduced a news commentary on the situation in Egypt broadcasted by Swedish Television on February 11th 2011:

i. Förtryck, riggade val, tortyr, fattigdom, brott mot mänskliga rättigheter – men också fred och säkerhet. Till sist fick han kasta in handduken, Hosni Mubarak.

‘Oppression, fake elections, torture, poverty, violations of human rights – but also peace and security. At the end he had to throw in the towel, Hosni Mubarak.’

The back-grounding strategy in this example is right dislocation of a DP (Mubarak) which in this way is presented as given or “theme”, though Mubarak has not actually been mentioned in previous discourse. Hence, the fact that an element undergoes some process of back-grounding does in no way exclude that the utterance introduces discourse.

A back-grounding approach to fronting might shed light on this restriction. Consider that the back-grounded element closes off the left periphery, ensuring that the rest of the sentence receives a focal reading. From the view point of information structure, this operation is similar to that of an existential or impersonal construction. In such environments, it is the expletive that closes off the left periphery leaving the rest of the sentence in focus. This amounts to saying that Icelandic fronting is indeed “expletive movement” of sorts, as suggested by Holmberg (2000), although in a sense slightly different from that assumed by Holmberg. Under the present view, the stylistically fronted element does the work of an expletive and is in competition with the expletive for precisely this reason. This intuition will be made more precise in the following section.

4.3 *The subject gap condition*

In both languages, fronting is associated with a subject gap condition in the sense that no subject can appear in the canonical subject position as in the a-examples of (19)-(20). In both languages, a low subject is acceptable as in the b-examples of (19)-(20). Whether the low subject position is VP-internal or in some way right adjoined is immaterial for this discussion ((20b) from Thráinsson 2007: 372).

(19) a. Srd. *[Perdiu su trenu]_i Giuanni ari t_i ?

missed the train John has _

b. Srd. [Perdiu su trenu]_i ari t_i Giuanni?

missed the train has _ John

‘Did John miss the train?’

(20) a. Ic. *[Komið]_i margir stúdentar höfðu t_i á bókasafnið og...

come many students had _ to library-the and...

- b. Ic. [Komið]_i höfðu t_i margir stúdentar á bókasafnið og...
 come had _ many students to library-the and...

Although the two languages are superficially similar on this point, the subject restriction observed in (19b) and (20b) presumably has different sources. Consider that, in some Romance languages as, for instance, standard Italian, *wh*-movement of arguments blocks the subject position as illustrated in (21a). Only a low subject is acceptable (21b) (Rizzi 1996).

- (21) a. It. *Che cosa Gianni ha fatto?
 what John has done
 b. It. Che cosa ha fatto Gianni?
 what has done John

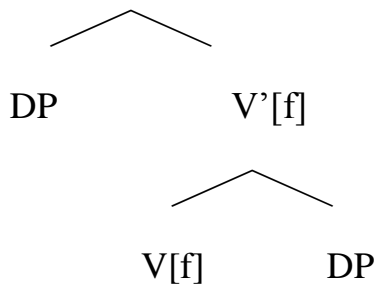
I assume that the Sardinian subject gap condition derives from such a restriction and hence is a case of Rizzi's "residual V2", as previously suggested in Mensching & Remberger (2010: 266). The precise landing site of the fronted element in Sardinian is to be identified with a Focus Phrase, as in Rizzi (1997), or any of the Information Focus P and Contrastive Focus P, if such a syntactic distinction is assumed (for discussion, e.g. Benincà & Poletto 2004, Cruschina 2010, Paoli 2010). For present purposes, the choice can remain open.

The Icelandic case is substantially different. In many approaches, from Platzack (1987) to Holmberg (2006), it has been assumed that Icelandic fronting targets the canonical subject position [Spec, I] or, alternatively, the projection containing such a position, thus blocking merge of the subject itself. Translating this claim in present terms, I propose that the fronted element as well as the expletive subject both target a projection associated to "stage predication" in the sense of Erteschik-Shir (2008: 16-17). Such an analysis allows us to maintain the basic insight of Platzack (1987) and subsequent work,

while abandoning the slightly counterintuitive assumption that the verb moves into the canonical subject position [Spec, I].

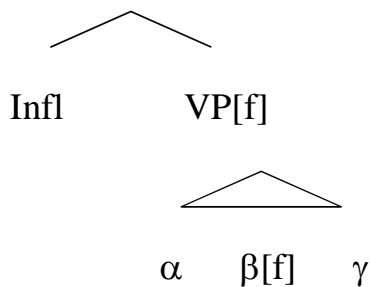
Now, consider that Erteschik-Shir (2006) assumes that pragmatic features percolate within lexical projections, from the lexical head X to the XP. If, in (22), the verb is focused, its maximal projection inherits the focus feature through percolation within the VP.

(22) VP[f]



Suppose this assumption is extended to the clause: when the IP is focused (in the case of a maximal focus), the f-feature does not come from the head Infl, but rather from one of IP's members (β in the structure of (23)) through percolation.

(23) IP[f]



Furthermore, in Erteschik-Shir (2008: 43), the back-grounding of an element corresponds to the case in which neither *topic* nor *focus* is assigned. Elaborating this idea, suppose that background translates into unspecified features, rather

than radically absent ones. Consider the consequences of this assumption for the present analysis: in the Icelandic fronting structure, information focus falls on the entire clause, for concreteness say the IP. This does not imply that each and every category contained in the subordinate carries its independent focus feature: rather, the IP receives the focal value from one of its members through percolation, as illustrated in (23). Suppose then that all categories but one within the subordinate clause are unspecified for focus. At the edge of this proposition, dominating the structure, is the projection corresponding to the “stage predication phrase”. This projection requires evaluation and triggers either of two options: 1. raising of one of the unspecified elements, which is then backgrounded in relation to the remaining part of structure (i.e. fronting of either α or γ in the structure (23)); 2. insertion of the expletive subject. In the latter case, the resulting reading will be one of “null” or unspecified background, which I take to be the intuitively correct characterization of existential and impersonal constructions (assuming that the background of such sentences is contextually given). One consequence of this line of reasoning is that fronting in Icelandic is triggered not only by a property of the target, but in a sense also by a property of the category being moved. On this point, the present account diverges from Holmberg (2006: 548). Another consequence is that locality effects are predicted: assuming that all categories but one are unspecified for focus, they are all eligible for raising to the edge. It follows from minimality that the closest candidate, i.e. the highest one, will be attracted. If, in (23), α c-commands γ , only α can be fronted. This analysis provides the means for deriving the “accessibility hierarchy” (e.g. Maling 1990: 81-82, Jónsson 1991, Holmberg 2006: 538-540) without reference to an EPP feature.^{4 5}

I have not been able to attest any similar locality effects among my consultants of Sardinian. This is indeed expected if Sardinian fronting targets the one and only category carrying the focus feature.

To summarize, I conclude that the subject gap condition has entirely different sources in Sardinian and Icelandic and proceed to explore the

⁴ Also, note that an expletive inserted in [Spec, I] in (23) will itself be a candidate for checking of the stage predication, hence blocking fronting of any other element.

⁵ On the other hand, this account admittedly fails to derive the subject extraction data discussed in Holmberg (2006: 541-542)

consequences of the assumed analogy between Icelandic fronting and existential/impersonal constructions.

4.4 *The definiteness effect*

As has become clear above, the Icelandic fronting construction allows for a low subject which, however, needs to be an indefinite (e.g. Holmberg 2006). The contrast between (24a) and (24b) shows this effect (examples from Sigurðsson 2010).

- (24) a. Ic. þegar [komnir]_i verða t_i hvolpar ...
 when come will-be _ puppies
 ‘when puppies will have arrived’
- b. Ic. *þegar [komnir]_i verða t_i hvolparnir ...
 when come will-be _ puppies-the

The definiteness effect observed in (24b) provides one of the reasons to believe that Icelandic fronting indeed correlates with the conceptual interface and is not to be accounted exclusively in the phonological component (for discussion, see Holmberg 2006: 551-554). In the present approach, however, the definiteness effect is related to the assumption that Icelandic fronting has a similarity with existential / impersonal constructions. Recall that, under this view, the informationally important part of the structure is not the element being fronted but rather what is left behind and falls under focus. Definite DPs are “given” information, hence interpreted as part of the background.

The correctness of this conjecture is further supported by the fact that no definiteness effect is observed in Sardinian. For instance, R-expressions are allowed in a question formulated as in (25a) as well as in the answer (25b).

- (25) a. Srd. - [Arribaus]_i funt t_i Giuanni e Maria?
 arrived are _ John and Mary
- b. Srd. - [Arribaus]_i funt t_i (Giuanni e Maria)
 arrived are _ (John and Mary)

Again, this contrast between the languages is expected if the basic difference lies in the information structure associated to fronting.

4.5 *Heaviness and lightness*

In Icelandic, there is a heaviness restriction on fronting, as recognized by Ott (2009) who refers to Hrafnbjargarson:

- (26) The notoriously ill-understood notion of heaviness clearly plays a role here: In general, “heavy” constituents resist SF more strongly than “lighter” constituents (Gunnar Hrafn Hrafnbjargarson, p.c.). (Ott 2009: 149)

Under the view discussed here, the notion of heaviness is a relative one: what needs to be considered is the informational (rather than the phonological) “weight” of the fronted element in relation to what is left behind. Clearly, such a notion cannot be precisely defined but is still helpful to understand the general patterns of fronting in the two languages. If indeed a fronted element in Icelandic tends to be informationally “light” in relation to the remaining part of the sentence, this is quite in line with the assumption that the fronted element is back-grounded while the remaining part of structure is in focus. Not unexpectedly, Sardinian fronting displays the opposite pattern: the fronted element is informationally “heavy” in relation to what is left behind. The contrast is shown in (27a-c). Imagine a setting where shops are closed because of a holiday. I could then make an utterance such as (27a). The appropriate reply

could be as in (27b), where fronting has not applied, while (27c), with fronting of the participle, is deviant.

- (27) a. Srd. - Spereus ca si siant arregordaus de fai sa spesa ariseru.
 (we)hope that Refl (they)are remembered to buy food yesterday
 ‘let’s hope they remembered to buy some food yesterday’
- b. Srd. - Nou, si funt scarèscius ca oi est dì de festa.
 no, Refl (they)are forgotten that today is holiday
 ‘no, they forgot that today is a holiday’
- c. Srd. ^{??} - Nou, [scarèscius]_i si funt t_i ca oi est dì de festa.
 no, forgotten Refl (they)are _ that today is holiday

Following our line of reasoning, this effect stems from the fact that, given the context, the focus domain in (27c) appears to be split in two. In other words, not only the fronted element (*scarèscius*), but also the non-fronted part of (27c) (*ca oi est dì de festa*) is focal. Hence, the part left in situ is too heavy, informationally speaking, in relation to the fronted part. On the other hand, an appropriate reply to (27a) could be as in (28):

- (28) Srd. - Nou, [scarèscius]_i si funt.
 no forgotten REFL (they)are
 ‘no, they forgot’

But of course, the implicit complement in (28) is (*they forgot*) to buy food.

Also, consider the example (1) used to illustrate Sardinian fronting and repeated here as (29):

- (29) Srd. Certu_i esti t_i ka teneus abbisungiu de prus dinai.
 obvious is _ that (we)have need for more money

Example (29) could be the reaction to an utterance such as *Do we really need more money? I don't think so.* In such a case, the subordinate clause can be repeated as in (29), but can equally well be left out. In fact, speakers find (30a) more natural where the subordinate is cancelled. As expected, the equivalent Icelandic structure (the example in (2) here repeated and modified as (30b)) is unacceptable.

- (30) a. Srd. Certu_i esti t_i ~~ka teneus abbisungiu de prus dinai.~~
 obvious is _ ~~that we need more money~~
- b. Ic. *Greinilegt_i er t_i ~~að okkur vantar meiri peninga.~~
 obvious is _ ~~that we need more money~~

To summarize briefly, I suggest the following generalization holds true: elements eligible for fronting are informationally light in Icelandic and heavy in Sardinian, where the “weight” of the element fronted is understood in relation to the part of structure left in situ. This is expected under a pragmatic approach such as the present one.

4.6 V- and VP-fronting

There is a further difference between the languages that at this point may have become obvious to the reader: Sardinian fronting moves the VP including its

complements, whereas in Icelandic the fronted predicate leaves its complements behind.⁶ Although this difference certainly is related to the conclusions we have already reached, there are independent factors playing a role as well.

Ott (2009: 156-162) argues that Icelandic fronting of verbs is remnant VP-movement (for discussion, see also Holmberg 2006: 554-556 and references cited therein). In a first step of the derivation, the complements move out of the VP. Subsequently, the remnant VP containing the V is fronted, hence “stranding” its complements. Let us assume this. Take an example such as (31) (from Holmberg 2006: 535). The derivation is as indicated in (32): the DP object *hjólinu* is moved out from the VP, then the VP containing only the head *V stolið* is fronted.

(31) Ic. Hver heldur þú að stolið hafi hjólinu?
 who think you that stolen have bike-the

(32) Ic. ... að [stolið t_j]_i hafi hjólinu_{t_i}?
 ... that stolen have bike-the

Ott accounts for how the complements move out from the VP, but no reason is given as for why the complements must move out from the VP. A back-grounding approach provides at least an intuitive explanation for this, namely along the above line of reasoning: the entire VP is informationally too heavy to be fronted.

Again, the Sardinian case is the exact opposite: stranding of the verb’s complements is not accepted by my consultants.⁷

⁶ It will also have become obvious that VP fronting in Sardinian is associated with a broader array of functions and interpretations than is the case of VP preposing elsewhere among Romance and Germanic languages (e.g. Ward 1990). This is certainly related to some independent property distinguishing Sardinian from other related languages.

⁷ Jones (1993: 342) gives examples of VP fronting with stranded objects which, however, are not accepted by my consultants. The contrast between Jones’ consultants and mine is perhaps

- (33) Srd. *[Perdiu]_i ari t_i su trenu.
 missed (he)has _ the train

This however, must also be related to an independent difference between the languages. In Icelandic, the crucial premise for remnant VP-fronting is, by assumption, the object shifting property, which is absent from the Sardinian variety under examination.⁸

4.7 *The restriction on fronting of auxiliaries*

In both languages there is a ban on fronting of auxiliaries. The restriction is illustrated in (34a-c) for Sardinian, and in (35a-c) for Icelandic ((35a-c) from Jónsson 1991). Fronting of the participles is grammatical as in the b-examples of (34)-(35), whereas fronting of the auxiliary *been* is unacceptable as in the c-examples of (34)-(35).

- (34) a. Srd. Sa domu esti stètia abbruxiara.
 the house is been burned
 ‘the house was burned down’
- b. Srd. [Abbruxiara]_i esti stètia t_i sa domu.
 burned is been _ the house

due to a general difference between the Logudorese and the Campidanese varieties referred to here (but see also Mensching & Remberger 2010: 265 for further examples and discussion).

⁸ Sardinian differs on this point from various fronting phenomena attested in Old Romance, where structures similar to (33) are found (e.g. Benincà 2006, Franco 2009). Egerland (1996: 95-96) puts this observation in relation to the fact that Old Romance allows for overt object shift and proposes a remnant VP-analysis for fronting of the single participle V and stranding of the object DP in Old Italian examples.

c. Srd. *[Stètia] esti t_i abbruxiara sa domu.
 been is _ burned the house

(35) a. Ic. Þettaer versta bók sem hefur verið skrifuð
 this is worst bookthat has been written

b. Ic. Þettaer versta bók sem [skrifuð]_i hefur verið t_i
 this is worst bookthat written has been _

c. Ic. *Þetta er versta bók sem [verið]_i hefur t_i skrifuð
 this is worst bookthat been has _ written

This is a further solid reason to believe that fronting phenomena cannot be reduced to a PF operation in either of the languages. The contrast between the b-examples and the c-examples of (34)-(35) suggests that fronting cannot apply to functional elements. The contrast is accounted for if presyntactic assignment of pragmatic features, as in Erteschik-Shir (2006), can only apply to elements with lexical content. Auxiliaries are not eligible for such assignment. In brief, just as they cannot be focused, neither can they be defocused.

4.8 *Locality*

A further difference between the two languages concerns extraction possibilities. In Sardinian, fronting is not clause bound: the participle in (36b) has been fronted from the subordinate to the main clause. In Icelandic, on the other hand, fronting is strictly clause bound as shown in (37a-b) (e.g. Maling 1980; Sigurðsson 1989: 58; Thráinsson 2007: 374).

(36) a. Srd. Creu ka esti arribau.

(I)think that (he)is arrived

‘I think he arrived’

b. Srd. [Arribau]_i creu ka esti t_i

arrived (I)think that (he)is _

(37) a. Ic. Þeir sem halda að [farið]_i verði t_i á morgun

they who think that left will-be _ tomorrow

eru bjartsýnir.

are optimists

‘they who believe that they will leave tomorrow are optimists’

b. Ic. *Þeir sem [farið]_i halda að verði t_i á morgun ...

they who left think that will-be _ tomorrow ...

This follows on traditional and fairly common assumptions about dependencies. In the present view, Sardinian fronting creates an A'-dependency and, hence, is not clause bound. Icelandic fronting, which is triggered by feature checking, is an instance of A-movement and cannot escape the subordinate clause.

4.9 *Summary*

I conclude that a unified account of fronting phenomena can be reached under the assumption that fronting is governed by pragmatics in both Sardinian and Icelandic. However, as for the pragmatic values triggering fronting, the two languages are diametrically opposed: in Sardinian, the fronted element creates narrow focus, whereas the remaining part of the clause is in the background; in Icelandic the clause falls under maximal focus, out of which the fronted element

has been back-grounded. From this basic difference it follows that the languages are each other's mirror reflex with respect to some fundamental patterns, including the definiteness effect and locality restrictions encountered in Icelandic but not in Sardinian. Furthermore, it follows that the languages are alike in that they disallow fronting of purely functional elements such as auxiliaries, if functional elements are not subject to pragmatic assignment of any sort. Lastly, the languages are superficially similar in the sense that fronting obeys to a subject gap condition, which however, presumably comes from different sources.

Having outlined the basic features of a pragmatic approach to fronting, we now turn to the question of language variation, and the proper understanding of the notion "stylistic" often invoked in the literature. In this regard, too, the two languages in question will turn out to be each other's opposite though in a different sense.

5. Speculations on language variation: the double basis of stylistic fronting

One fundamental difference that strikes the reader of the literature on fronting in Sardinian and Icelandic lies in the fact that some amount of variation between speakers, and in some cases disagreement on grammaticality judgements among scholars, is a recurrent feature in the discussion of Icelandic data but is virtually absent in the accounts of Sardinian. I believe this difference cannot only be ascribed to the fact that Icelandic has been more thoroughly studied, but has some deeper origin. Thráinsson (2007) addresses the variation issue in Icelandic and argues that, at least in part, this is due to the fact that different views can be taken as for the defining properties of fronting. Whereas for most scholars, the distinguishing factor of fronting is the subject gap condition, an alternative view is that of assuming the pragmatic interpretation as the defining property: "Every time a constituent is fronted for focusing purposes it is an instance of Topicalization. If the fronting has no focusing effect it is an instance of S[tylistic] F[ronting]." (Thráinsson 2007: 369) Still, the divergences cannot entirely be reduced to a definition problem. Hrafnbjargarson (2003, 2004) takes

issue with the standard view (e.g. Jónsson 1991), arguing that Icelandic fronting displays scope reconstruction effects. Furthermore, Hrafnbjargarson argues that fronting is compatible with reduced weak pronouns in apparent violation of the subject gap condition (for discussion, see also Thráinsson 2007: 387-390). This suggests that variation among authors and speakers goes beyond the choice of factors distinguishing Icelandic fronting.

Nothing will be said here on the empirical issues as such, but rather on the (socio-)linguistic situation underlying the variation. I believe it is useful to recall the truism that standard languages are social constructs. They have many registers, some of which are purely spoken while others conserve features of historical stages that are relegated to written style. When I say that a form is acceptable in “Icelandic”, what I mean is that the form is acceptable in a Grammar X which for conventional reasons I assume to correspond to the national standard language commonly referred to as “Icelandic”. I of course recognize, even if tacitly, that the identification of the abstract object X with the socio-historical construct “Icelandic” is a fundamentally problematic one.

These facts lend themselves to a description in terms of variationism or the Double Basis Hypothesis, originating in works of Kroch (1989). The leading idea of this school of thought is that two or more grammatical systems may be present not only within a language community, which is obvious, but also within a single speaker, which clearly is a more intricate claim but still intuitively appealing. In brief, the speaker exposed to contradictory evidence, as will be the case in which there is variation in the language community, can incorporate, and then use, more than one grammatical system. This can be the case when at a given stage of historical development the same author is seen to alternate between SOV and SVO patterns (e.g. Pintzuk 1991). Under given circumstances, two such systems can be in competition, in which one will eventually replace the other. There are situations in which the two systems do not compete and may coexist. There will then be a situation of (more or less) stable variation over time.⁹

⁹ For the speaker, it is normally obvious that a foreign language comes with a different system. It is less obvious that a different variety of what is perceived of as one’s own language is associated to a different system. Still, from the acquisitional view-point, the idea is feasible. Santorini (1989) makes explicit the claim that the acquisition of different

Rethinking the above analysis in these terms, the following possibility suggests itself. In section 4, two abstract grammars have been described: 1. a Grammar X in which fronting to a left periphery position is associated to focussing, and 2. a Grammar Y in which fronting to the left periphery is associated to back-grounding. The description of Grammar Y does not directly correspond to the standard language Icelandic, because Y is but one of the abstract grammars underlying Icelandic. What is seen in actual usage, and then reflected in the linguistic literature on the topic, is the co-existence of two (or more) grammatical systems. The grammar Y, in which fronting is associated to back-grounding, can probably be traced to an older stage of the language, given that fronting processes are common generally in Old Scandinavian (e.g. Falk 1993). This, in essence, is a way of expressing the intuition that Icelandic fronting is a complex phenomenon and that a unified analysis overarching all occurrences of fronting is not expected to be possible and, in fact, is uncalled for.¹⁰

To further illustrate the point, let us turn for a moment to standard Italian. Cardinaletti (2003) gives new input to the fronting debate by claiming that structures such as (38) are indeed grammatical in modern Italian ((38) from Cardinaletti 2003: 50)

grammatical systems underlying one's mother tongue can be thought of as parallel to the acquisition of a foreign language: "... Kroch explicitly assumes that language learners are not constrained to abduce a single grammar from the primary data when the positive evidence that they hear contains evidence for more than one grammatical system. This assumption is clearly independently motivated by the fact that bilingual and multilingual children successfully acquire more than one grammar." (Santorini, 1989: 13)

¹⁰ Presumably, this provides the key to understanding of the Swedish data in section 2 as well. There is general agreement that Swedish lacks scrambling in the German sense. The examples (3)-(6) seem to disconfirm this, but represent at the same time a relatively isolated phenomenon. Swedish "scrambling", if this is the correct label, is strictly limited to adjunct PP:s and is furthermore stylistically marked: the well-formed examples (3) and (6) have a strong flavor of written style. I suggest the notion of stylistic markedness is understood in terms of the double basis theory, that is, speakers have access to more than one grammar: the dominant one does not allow for scrambling, while in a secondary one scrambling is an option. The second grammar is in a way fragmentary, allowing scrambling only with adjunct PP:s and only at a certain register. Intuitively, there are two possible sources for the second grammar: either it constitutes the residual part of something that in Old Swedish was a more complete option, or it arises as the result of a grammatical borrowing from German. I ignore which option is the better.

- (38) It. Mi hanno detto che [risolto]_i non è t_i ancora.
 me (they)have said that solved not (it)is _ yet
 ‘They told me that it isn’t solved yet’

The resemblance to Icelandic stylistic fronting is convincing. It is beyond doubt, however, that an example such as (38) has a striking similarity to the fronting constructions frequently attested in the literary style of Old and Renaissance Italian. Interestingly, Cardinaletti also accepts a DP subject in the construction, such as *il problema* ‘the problem’ in (39).

- (39) It. La ragione per la quale si può dire che
 the reason for which Refl can say that
 il problema [risolto]_i non è t_i
 the problem solved not is _
 ‘the reason for which one can say that the problem isn’t solved’

In Cardinaletti’s analysis, the reason why Italian fronting does not obey the subject gap condition is due to the fact that modern Italian is not a V2 language. In her view, the V2 property of modern Germanic translates into the lack, or inertness, of a layer in the Comp-field, in the case at hand the Focus Phrase of Rizzi (1997). Since in Italian such a layer is indeed projected, it can host the subject DP which then appears higher than the fronted participle. Hence, the Italian type of fronting is not associated to a subject gap condition.

To my mind, Cardinaletti’s treatment of modern Italian fronting applies straightforwardly to cases such as (40), which is an example of 16th century literary usage (cit. in Egerland 1996: 97):

(40) It. ma che un qualche dio con le proprie mani
 but that a some god with the own hands
 [formati]_i gli abbia t_i
 shaped them has _
 ‘but that some kind of god has shaped them with his own hands’
 (Castiglione, *Il Libro del Cortegiano*, ed. Longo, Garzanti, 1981)

From the earliest stages of Italian, the left periphery has properties rather similar to those of the modern language, hence allowing for focussing as well as (multiple) left dislocation, in subordinate as well as in main clauses (e.g. Benincà 1994, 2003). I assume, without discussing the details of context, that the subject *un qualche dio* ‘some god’ in (40) carries focus, while the PP *con le proprie mani* ‘with his own hands’ is dislocated. As can be seen from (40), the language at this stage (as well as in literary language in more recent times) still retains the possibility to front the participle V.

In summary, Cardinaletti (2003) provides a convincing analysis of fronting in Old and Renaissance Italian, as exemplified in (40). Whether it is the accurate description of *modern* Italian, however, is a matter of controversy. Franco (2009: 67) objects to Cardinaletti’s fronting examples, claiming that “I personally do not share Cardinaletti’s judgments and many of the examples she proposes sounds to my ear ungrammatical ... I accept only some cases as instances of (old) literary style”.

Now, consider that Icelandic and Italian have in common a remarkable continuity in the written language which sets them aside from most if not all other European standard languages. While today’s speakers of Swedish or English can understand a 13th century text in their languages only after receiving explicit instruction, normally not prior to university education, the archaic versions of Italian and Icelandic are accessible to modern language users. Not only are medieval texts relatively transparent to Italians and Icelanders, the reading of such has long been an integrated part of mother-

tongue teaching in compulsory education. Thus, speakers receive a written input of an archaic version of their language at a relatively young age, with the natural consequence that they can relate to registers extraneous to spoken usage, or even use such registers actively. By hypothesis, an old grammatical system is continuously reinforced in the language community if the speakers are exposed to evidence for it, along with evidence for a new system. Of course, the degree of stylistic markedness may vary: in Icelandic, fronting structures appear to be frequently used (as shown by Sigurðsson 2010), whereas fronting in Italian is conceived of as archaic and quite marginal to some speakers. It must be stressed, however, that “stylistically marked” by no means have to mean “uncommon”.¹¹

At this point, the comparison with Sardinian again becomes interesting. For the vast majority of native speakers, Sardinian is an exclusively spoken language. The fact that the earliest attestations date to the 11th century is unimportant for the question at hand. Until very recently, Sardinian has not been explicitly taught in any form but entirely confined to a local or domestic context, the official language being standard Italian. Consequently, there has been no process of codification, little or no editing of Sardinian literary texts, and furthermore no Sardinian teaching at school until rather recently. Given such premises, it is safe to conclude that the sociolinguistic stratification of Sardinian is rather flat in comparison to standard languages, in particular Icelandic and Italian. In brief, whereas the Grammar Y (“fronting is back-grounding”) does not correspond exhaustively to Icelandic, the Grammar X (“fronting is focus”), on the contrary, corresponds to Sardinian in a relatively uncomplicated fashion as it seems. This is a way of capturing the insight that Sardinian – an exclusively spoken language – is stylistically restricted. Unlike Icelandic and Italian, Sardinian usage is not based on several underlying grammatical systems.

In conclusion, a unified account of fronting phenomena can be attempted in an approach that considers pragmatic interpretation as part of syntax proper. Fronting in Sardinian and Icelandic is, then, the result of pragmatically motivated syntactic movement. The fundamental differences

¹¹ The tacit implication of this way of reasoning is that, would the reading of ancient texts be taken away from compulsory education, Icelandic fronting would change character. “Stylistic fronting” in particular would eventually disappear. Moreover, were such a change to already be in process, a difference is expected to occur between generations.

between the two languages derive from a single difference concerning the pragmatic features involved in the derivation. The fact that the languages differ also with regard to the complexity of the variation in fronting constructions can partly be related to the socio-historic context in which the languages are acquired and used.

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