

# Cleft Sentences with Narrow Focus in Chinese and Italian: A Preliminary Comparative Study

Alessia Iurato<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper compares Chinese *shì...de* proper clefts (PC) and Italian standard prototypical cleft sentences (IC), i.e., cleft sentences with narrow focus on a single constituent in Chinese and Italian. The study reveals that while syntactic differences are notable, pragmatic contexts of use are similar in both languages. Syntactically, both PCs and ICs share a biclausal structure with a main clause and a cleft subclause. These clefts appear in three main types: subject-focus clefts, adjunct-focus clefts, and object-focus clefts. However, differences arise between the two languages. The most striking difference between PCs and ICs is that the event described in the presupposition of PCs is completed and has reached its endpoint exclusively in the past, whereas this restriction does not apply to ICs. From a pragmatic perspective, the paper shows that both types of clefts can have contrastive and non-contrastive uses.

**Keywords:** Italian cleft sentences; Chinese *shì...de* cleft sentences; narrow focus; comparative analysis

**标题：**汉语和意大利语中焦点狭窄的分裂句：初步对比研究

**摘要：**本文对比分析了汉语的“是……的”分裂句和意大利语的分裂句，即两种语言中针对单一成分的狭窄焦点分裂句。研究表明，尽管两者句法不同，但在语用环境方面具有相似性。从句法角度看，两者均由主句和分裂从句构成，并可分为主语焦点、状语焦点和宾语焦点三类。然而，它们在具体结构上有所不同。例如，“是……的”分裂句的预设事件必须是已完成的，仅限于过去时，而意大利语的分裂句则无此限制。从语用角度看，尽管意大利语分裂句的研究较丰富，而“是……的”分裂句的研究相对较少，本文表明，两者均可用于对比性和非对比性语境。

**关键词：**意大利语分裂句；汉语是……的分裂句；狭窄焦点；比较分析

---

<sup>1</sup> **Alessia Iurato**, 威尼斯大学, 博士后研究员, 研究方向: 中文作为第二语言习得、汉语语言学、语料库语言学、对外汉语教学。电邮: [alessia.iurato@unive.it](mailto:alessia.iurato@unive.it)。

## 1. Introduction

This paper offers a comparative study of Mandarin Chinese *shì...de* “proper clefts” (Paul & Whitman, 2008, p. 423) and Italian “standard prototypical cleft sentences” (Pinelli, 2017, p. 12), i.e. cleft sentences with narrow focus on a single constituent in Chinese and Italian, similar to the English *it*-cleft, as shown in Example (1).

(1) a. 我是昨天去的威尼斯。<sup>1</sup>

wǒ	shì	zuótiān	qù	de	Wēinísī
1SG	SHI	yesterday	go	DE	Venice

‘It was yesterday that I went to Venice.’

b. È ieri che sono andato a Venezia.  
 be.PRS.3SG yesterday that be.PRS.1SG go.PTCP.PST to Venice  
 ‘It was yesterday that I went to Venice.’

This study aims to contrast cleft sentences in these two languages, highlighting their key syntactic differences and their main contexts of pragmatic use. The lack of comparative research on clefts between Italian and Chinese motivates this preliminary study, which could pave the way for future comparative investigations into cleft structures. The following sections provide theoretical notions on cleft sentences, focus and presupposition, as well as different types of focus. I will then examine Chinese proper clefts and Italian clefts, followed by a comparative analysis of the syntactic and pragmatic properties of narrow-focus cleft sentences in Chinese and Italian.

## 2. Cleft sentences

Cleft sentences are a well-known structure that serves as a focus-marking device in most of the languages (Hartmann & Veenstra, 2013). They are a particular type of focus structures with marked word order, sensitive to information structure, i.e., the complex process of “information packaging” that refers to the speaker’s choice and ability to structure sentences by syntactic, prosodic, or morphological means to convey distinct pragmatic functions (Halliday, 1967; Chafe, 1976; Vallduví, 1993; Lambrecht, 1994; Van Valin & LaPolla, 1997; Foley, 2007). This process considers (i) the need to meet the communicative needs of the interlocutor in the specific discourse context, and (ii) cognitive assumptions about the mental states of both the speaker and the hearer regarding the event/state of affairs and its participants at the time of an utterance (Vallduví & Engdahl, 1996; Dik, 1997; Krifka, 2007). For this reason, cleft sentences are also referred to as “information-packaging constructions” (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 1365).

Lambrecht (2001, p. 467) defines a cleft construction as a complex sentence structure that includes a matrix clause led by a copula and a relative or relative-like clause. In this structure, the relativized argument is coindexed with the predicative argument of the copula. The linear structure of the cleft construction in English proposed by Lambrecht can therefore be generalized as illustrated in Example (2):

(2) Pronoun — copula — focused constituent — restrictive relative clause

It was yesterday that I went to Venice.

Similarly, Hartmann and Veenstra (2013, p. 1) describe the cleft construction as “a biclausal copulative construction consisting of an impersonal pronoun (the *cleft pronoun*), a copular verb, the informationally

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the glosses adhere to the Leipzig Glossing Rules, with the addition of SP for ‘structural particle’, SHI for ‘copular verb *shì* functioning as a focus marker’, DE for ‘perfective aspect marker *de* in *shì ... de* proper clefts’, and SFP for ‘sentence final particle’.

prominent phrase (the *cleft phrase*) and an embedded relative clause (the *cleft clause*). This analysis refers to the fact that, pragmatically, cleft sentences are generally considered biclausal structures consisting of two parts: the focus, i.e. the clefted constituent, and the presupposition, i.e. the cleft clause (Prince, 1978), see Example (3).

(3) Pronoun — copula — focus — presupposition  
It was yesterday that I went to Venice.

Focus is generally defined as the core of information that contains the new and most salient information of a sentence or utterance in a specific communicative context (Halliday, 1967; Jackendoff, 1972; Rochemont, 1986; Vallduví & Engdahl, 1996; Krifka, 2007). The presence of focus, described as “the non-presupposed information in the sentence” (Lambrecht, 1994, p. 207), refers to the new asserted information introduced by the speaker with special prominence to direct the listener’s attention toward it. This presence implies the existence of a presupposition, which is “the information in the sentence assumed by the speaker to be shared by both speaker and hearer” (Lambrecht, 1994, p. 207). The focus represents the discourse-new information, i.e., the “informative” part of the sentence, while the presupposition is the discourse-given information, or the presupposed and “non-informative” part of the sentence (Badan, 2015; Morbiato, 2020). Therefore, focus is complementary to presupposition.

## 2.1 Types of focus

From a pragmatic perspective, there are two main types of focus: Informational Focus and Contrastive Focus (Rochemont, 1986; Kiss, 1998; Vallduví & Vilkkuna, 1998). These two types of focus are typically categorized based on whether the focused item contrasts with other contextually given or inferable alternatives in a limited set (Callies, 2009). Informational focus introduces new, unpredictable information to the hearer and highlights it as a salient information in the discourse. Conversely, contrastive focus has a distinct contrastive value and works by singling out a particular option from a limited set of alternatives provided by the context. Thus, its role goes beyond simply drawing the listener’s attention to new information; it achieves this by juxtaposing the said information with other elements that are either established or inferable within the context (Callies, 2009).

Various taxonomies categorize informational focus and contrastive focus differently. For instance, Kiss (1998) distinguishes between informational focus and identification focus, Vallduví and Vilkkuna (1998) differentiate between rheme and contrast, and Roberts (1998) contrasts informational focus with operational focus. Here, I will broadly use the terms *contrastive focus* and *non-contrastive focus*, depending on whether the focused element contrasts with other options within a defined set determined by the discourse context.

The focus is contrastive if it meets three main criteria: the focused element must contrast with other contextually given or inferable alternatives within a limited set, as mentioned above, and satisfy the Exhaustiveness and Exclusiveness Conditions (Halliday, 1967; Chafe, 1975; Declerck, 1984; Kiss, 1998). The Exhaustiveness Condition requires the focused element to constitute a complete set of entities that make the proposition true. The Exclusiveness Condition requires that only the entities under contrastive focus make the proposition true, excluding all others. Sentences not meeting these criteria lack contrastive focus and are non-contrastive (Chafe, 1975; Declerck, 1984; Kiss, 1998).

Other categories of focus are identified according to the specific part of a sentence or utterance where focus is placed. There are two main types of focus: narrow focus, which highlights a single constituent like an NP, and broad focus, which encompasses more than one constituent (see Lambrecht, 2000; Morbiato, 2020). Lambrecht (1994) classifies broad focus into two types: predicate focus, where the new information is the entire VP, and sentence focus, where the entire sentence serves as the new asserted content.

In Chinese *shì...de* proper clefts and Italian prototypical cleft sentences, the structures discussed in this paper, the focus is of a narrow type on a single constituent, see Example (4). However, the clefts in the two languages are not equivalent, as discussed in the following sections.

(4) a. 他是在北京学的历史。

tā shì zài Běijīng xué de lìshǐ  
3SG SHI at Beijing learn DE history  
'It is in Beijing that he studied history.'  
(Zhao, 1979, p. 59; my glosses and translation)

b. È a Pechino che ha studiato storia.  
be.PRS.3SG at Beijing that have.PRS.3SG study.PTCP.PST story  
'It is in Beijing that he studied history.'

### 3. Chinese *shì...de* cleft sentences

In Chinese, the cover term '*shì...de* cleft' generally refers to two main types of cleft sentences: proper cleft (PC) and propositional assertion pattern (PAP) (Paul & Whitman, 2008, Hole, 2011, Liu, 2023), see Examples (5) and (6) respectively.

(5) 我们是骑车去的图书馆。

wǒmen shì qí chē qù de túshūguǎn  
1PL SHI ride bike go DE library  
'It was *by bike* that we went to the library.'  
(Zhao, 1979, p. 58; my gloss and translation)

(6) 我是赞成这种做法的。

wǒ shì zànchéng zhè zhǒng zuòfǎ de  
1SG SHI approve this CLF approach SFP  
'I *do* approve *this approach*.'  
(Cui & Sung, 2021, p. 697)

These two clefts differ significantly both syntactically and pragmatically, due to the distinct functions of the morpheme *de*, which is an aspect marker in PCs and a sentence final particle in PAPs (Zhao, 1979; Liu, 2023; Iurato, 2024b). The main difference between PCs and PAPs is that while the former can be used to create a narrow focus on a single constituent in the preverbal position, the latter can create narrow focus, predicate focus, and broad sentence focus (see Hole, 2011; Iurato, 2024a). Furthermore, in the PC, narrow focus can be syntactically realized only on NPs and PPs, and not on *v*Ps, whereas the PAP can create narrow focus on *v*Ps, as well as predicate focus and broad sentence focus (see Paul & Whitman, 2008; Cheng, 2008; Hole, 2011; Iurato, 2024b). Another fundamental difference is that the PC can only focus on a detail of an event that is discourse-given and completed in a past context, whereas the PAP has no aspect and tense restrictions (see Liu, 2023; Iurato, 2024b).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In addition to *shì...de* clefts, there is also another type of Chinese cleft: the '*shì* cleft', also known as the 'bare *shì* sentence' (see Ross, 1983; Shi, 1994; Lee, 2005; Paul & Whitman, 2008; Shyu, 2015; Iurato, 2024a), see Example (1).

(1) 我是喜欢他。

wǒ shì xǐhuan tā  
1SG SHI like 3SG  
'I do like him.'

(Li & Thompson, 1981, p. 154)

In this type of cleft, the focus marker *shì* can create narrow focus on a single constituent, which can be syntactically realized as an NP, PP, or *v*P, as well as predicate focus and broad sentence focus. For instance, Example (1) present a predicate focus. However, if the element receiving prosodic prominence is only the verb, the sentence could present a narrow focus on the verb. In addition to *shì* clefts, Chinese also has 'bare *de* sentences', considered related structures to *shì...de* clefts (see Paul & Whitman, 2008; Hole, 2011; Liu, 2023; Iurato, 2024a). Nonetheless, the aim of this paper is not to analyze all cleft sentences in Chinese. For an overview of different types of cleft sentences, see Paul and Whitman (2008), Hole (2011), Liu (2023), Iurato (2024a).

In this paper, I will analyze only the PC, comparing it with prototypical Italian cleft sentences, since the PC is a very specific pattern with various usage restrictions. I leave for future studies the comparative analysis between the two types of *shì...de* clefts and the corresponding cleft patterns in Italian. Furthermore, the prosodic aspects of clefts are outside the scope of this study. Instead, this work focuses exclusively on analyzing the syntactic properties of cleft sentences with narrow focus in Chinese and Italian, as well as their primary communicative contexts.

#### 4. The Chinese proper cleft with narrow focus

The Chinese PC is a focus structure governed by the principles of information structure. This pattern is marked by two morphemes, which embed the focus, namely *shì* and *de*. Following Iurato (2024b), I consider *shì* as a copula functioning as a focus marker and *de* as an aspect marker. The former occurs in a preverbal position and is adjacent to the focused element, while the latter appears in a postverbal position and can precede or follow the object (see Section 4.1.3), see Example (7).

(7) a. 我们是昨儿进的城。

wǒmen	shì	zuóer	jìn	de	chéng
1PL	SHI	yesterday	enter	DE	city

‘It was yesterday that we went to the city.’

b. 你们是什么时候去颐和园的？

nǐmen	shì	shénme	shíhòu	qù	Yíhéyuán	de
2PL	SHI	what	time	go	Summer Palace	DE

‘When was it that you went to the Summer Palace?’  
(Zhao, 1979, pp. 21-23; my glosses and translation)

The PC structure is employed to highlight an unknown detail (discourse-new information), such as time, place, or manner, about a concluded event in a past context, which is presented as presupposed content (Yuan, 2003; Jing-Schmidt, 2017; Cui & Sung, 2021; Liu, 2023). Similar to the English *it*-cleft, PC features a biclausal structure that separates focus and presupposition (Li, 2008; Xu, 2014; Jing-Schmidt, 2017; Liu, 2023).

The following sections provide a description of the syntactic and pragmatic features of PC.

##### 4.1 The morphemes *shì* and *de*

The nature of *shì* and *de* has been debated extensively in the literature, with no consensus reached. Regarding *shì*, most studies identify it as a copula (Paris, 1979; Ross, 1983; Li & Thompson, 1981; Cheng, 2008; Paul & Whitman, 2008). Some consider it as an intensifier adverb functioning as an emphasis marker (Han, 2005; Yip & Rimmington, 2016) or as a modal verb (Shi, 1994). This article, following Li (2008), Hole (2011), Xu (2014), Liu (2023) and Iurato (2024b), analyzes *shì* as a copula that functions as a focus marker.

The nature of *de* is even more debated. Many studies (e.g. Paris, 1979; Ross, 1983; Li & Thompson, 1981; Xu, 2014) treat *de* as a nominalizer of a headless relative clause preceded by the copula *shì*. Cheng (2008) interprets *de* as a generalized  $\lambda$  operator but struggles to explain why it appears exclusively in sentences with a past interpretation. This limitation is also evident in studies that identify PCs as instances of nominalization (e.g. Paris, 1979; Li & Thompson, 1981; Lee, 2005), which do not clarify how *de* can function as a nominalizer when followed by an object. This issue remains unresolved and requires further investigation.

Since PCs refer exclusively to past events, some studies identify *de* as an enclitic past tense marker (Song, 1978; Simpson & Wu, 2002). However, this analysis is open to criticism, since Chinese lacks a

grammatical category for tense, relying instead on aspectual markers (Soh, 2015). Tense information is conveyed by the overall sentence structure, influenced by elements such as past-oriented temporal adverbials, conjunctions, or auxiliary modal verbs (Abbiati, 1998; Soh, 2015). Consequently, I align with research identifying *de* as an aspect marker (see Zhao, 1979; Lü, 1982; Shi, 1994; Cui & Sung, 2021; Liu, 2023), as discussed in Section 4.1.2.

#### 4.1.1 The optional use of *shì*

Several studies suggest that *shì* can generally be omitted without changing the meaning of PCs (e.g., Song, 1978; Lü, 1982; Shi, 1994; Xie, 2012). However, there are instances where its presence is necessary, such as when demonstrative pronouns appear in the subject position (Zhao, 1979; Cui & Sung, 2021) (8a), or when *shì* is preceded by adverbs (Feng 2016) (8b), including the negation adverb 不 *bù* (Liu, 2001) (8c). Furthermore, the use of *shì* is mandatory when the element to be highlighted is the cause of an action and the subject describes the result (Cui & Sung, 2021), as shown in Example (8d).

- (8) a. 这是今年写的，那是去年写的。

<i>zhè</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>jīn-nián</i>	<i>xiě</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>nà</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>qù-nián</i>	<i>xiě</i>	<i>de</i>
this	SHI	this-year	write	DE	that	SHI	last-year	write	DE

‘This one was written this year, that one was written last year.’

(Cui & Sung, 2021, p. 694)

- b. 他们都是在北京语言学院学的汉语。

<i>tāmen</i>	<i>dōu</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>zài</i>	<i>Běijīng yǔyán</i>	<i>xuéyuàn xué</i>	<i>de</i>
3PL	all	SHI	at	Beijing language	institute study	DE

*Hànyǔ*

Chinese

‘Is it in the Beijing Language Institute that they all studied Chinese’

(Zhao, 1979, p. 25; my gloss and translation)

- c. 他不是来参观的，是来开会的。

<i>tā</i>	<i>bù</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>lái</i>	<i>cānguān</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>lái</i>	<i>kāi-huì</i>	<i>de</i>
3SG	NEG	SHI	come	visit	DE	SHI	come	attend-meeting	DE

‘It was not to make a visit that he came; it was to attend a meeting that he came.’

(Abbiati, 1998, p. 164)

- d. 我脸红是喝酒喝的。

<i>wǒ</i>	<i>liǎn hóng</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>hē</i>	<i>jiǔ</i>	<i>hē</i>	<i>de</i>
1SG	face red	SHI	drink	wine	drink	DE

‘It was because I drank wine that my face turned red.’

(Cui & Sung, 2021, p. 694)

#### 4.1.2 The aspect marker *de*

Liu (2023, p. 191) claims that *de* indicates perfectivity by describing an event that has been completed and is informationally complete. Such an event reaches its endpoint exclusively in the past. This interpretation is extensively supported in the literature, as any future-oriented temporal adverbials or expressions that conflict with the past interpretation of PC are consistently rejected (Zhao, 1979; Paul & Whitman, 2008; Hole, 2011). PC is generally opposed to the canonical unmarked *-le* suffixed sentence. However, there are important differences between PCs and *-le* sentences and the aspect markers they include. Compare the sentences in Example (9):



(9) a. 张三昨天吃了三个苹果。

*Zhāngsān zuótiān chī-le sān ge píngguǒ*  
Zhangsan yesterday eat-PFV three CLF apple  
'Xiao Wang ate three apples yesterday.'

b. 张三是昨天吃的三个苹果。

*Zhāngsān shì zuótiān chī de sān ge píngguǒ*  
Zhangsan SHI yesterday eat DE three CLF apple  
'It is yesterday that Xiao Wang ate three apples.'

The *-le* sentence in (9a) introduces the occurrence of an event to the interlocutor for the first time; in this case, the entire VP constitutes the new information (see Zhao, 1979; Lü, 1982; Liu, 2023). In contrast, in the PC sentence in (9b), the aspect marker *de* is used to highlight a specific detail - specifically, the time indicated by the temporal adjunct - of an event already known to the interlocutor. Thus, in the PC, the verb serves as discourse-given information, while the focalized constituent represents discourse-new information.

Previous research has also characterized the aspect marker *de* as an anaphoric variant of the aspect marker *-le* (see Sugimura, 1999; Yuan, 2003). It has been observed that *-le* is used to indicate the occurrence of an event, whereas *de* serves to further specify or modify the same event, as illustrated in (10a). Consequently, this phenomenon has been named “*xian le hou de*” (*'de after le'*; Sugimura, 1999, p. 6; Liu, 2023, p. 198). In essence, the *VdeO* pattern presupposes *VleO* (see Yuan, 2003, p. 10; Liu, 2023, p. 199). In such cases, *de* is required and cannot be substituted by *-le*, as shown in (10b).

(10) a. 我买了一本书。是在市场买的。

*wǒ mǎi-le yī běn shū shì zài shìchǎng mǎi de*  
1SG buy-PFV one CLF book SHI at market buy DE  
'I bought a book. It is at the supermarket that I bought it.'

b. 我买了一本书。#是在市场买了。

*wǒ mǎi-le yī běn shū shì zài shìchǎng mǎi-le*  
1SG buy-PFV one CLF book SHI at market buy-PFV  
'I bought a book. It is at the supermarket that I bought it.'

(Liu, 2023, p. 198)

In (10a), *-le* serves to notify the listener about the occurrence of an event as new information, whereas *de* is subsequently employed to introduce further information pertaining to this event, directing the listener's attention to it. This is not the case in (10b). The second statement in (10b), when taken out of its context, is not grammatically incorrect; it stands as a bare *shì* sentence (see Section 3). However, the use of *-le* in this context is pragmatically inappropriate because the speaker's intent should be to provide supplementary details about an already acknowledged completed event. Hence, the principle of “*xian -le hou de*” is missing in this instance.

Although *de* can be seen as the anaphoric form of *-le*, the two perfective aspect markers are not identical. They exhibit both similarities and differences, which are also evident in the distinctions between *-le* sentences and PCs. PCs present the following three features: [+perfective], [+dynamic], and [+given]. The [+perfective] feature indicates that *de* marks an event that has reached its endpoint. The [+perfective] feature is also present in *-le* sentences, as *-le* indicates the “actualization of a situation with respect to a past, present, or future reference time and presents the situation as a single whole” (Xiao & McEnery, 2004, p. 91).

The [+dynamic] feature indicates that in PCs, the verb is constrained by aspectual restrictions, allowing only dynamic verbs to be included in the presupposition, whereas stative verbs are excluded (see Section

4.4). This characteristic is also evident in *-le* sentences, as *-le* encompasses the [+dynamic] feature, being predominantly (though not exclusively) applied to dynamic situations in terms of frequency of use (Xiao & McEnery, 2004, pp. 95-105).

Although *de* and *-le* share the [+perfective] and [+dynamic] features, they differ in the [ $\pm$ given] feature. In PCs, the VP is discourse-given information, while in *-le* sentences, the VP introduces new information. Thus, the information focus of PCs and *-le* sentences differs (Lü, 1982). In *-le* sentences, the goal is to report an event (new information), whereas in PCs, the aim is to highlight a new detail about a presupposed, concluded event (Lü, 1982). Consequently, the VP in PCs carries the [+given] feature, while in *-le* sentences, it carries the [-given] feature. Therefore, in *-le* sentences, the new information is the entire VP, while in PCs, it is the focalized constituent.

#### 4.1.3 The placement of *de* in relation to the object

It is widely known that in PCs, the object can either precede or follow *de*. Nevertheless, the various principles that determine the position of *de* in relation to the object, whether direct or indirect, are less well-known and certain. Regarding the direct object, the origin of Chinese speakers is generally identified as one of the determining factors for the position of *de*. Indeed, some studies (e.g., Li et al., 1998; Paul & Whitman, 2008; Cui & Sung, 2021) claim that *de* in sentence-final position is typically preferred by southern Chinese speakers, while *de* before the object is preferred by northern Chinese speakers. However, there are two other main factors that can determine the position of the object in relation to *de*: (i) the nominal or pronominal nature of the object, and (ii) the syllabic structure of the verb. Regarding point (i), if the object is a noun, it usually follows *de* (see Niu, 1991; Cui & Sung, 2021), see Example (11); if it is a pronoun, *de* usually follows the object (Zhao, 1979; Liu, 2001), see Example (12).

(11) 我是在火车上洗的脸。

wǒ	shì	zài	huǒchē	shàng	xǐ	de	liǎn
1SG	SHI	at	train	on	wash	DE	face

‘It was on the train that I washed my face.’  
(Song, 1978, p. 76; my gloss and translation)

(12) 我朋友是来看我的。

wǒ	péngyǒu	shì	lái	kàn	wǒ	de.
1SG	friend	SHI	come	see	1SG	DE

‘It is to visit me that my friend came.’  
(Zhao, 1979, p. 23; my gloss and translation)

Regarding the syllabic structure of the verb, it can affect the position of the direct object (Niu, 1991). Specifically, a direct object (whether a monosyllabic or disyllabic noun or an NP) that follows a monosyllabic verb typically appears to the right of *de*, see Example (13):

(13) 你是什么时候学的这套本领?

nǐ	shì	shénme-shíhòu	xué	de	zhè	tào	běnlǐng
2SG	SHI	what-time	study	DE	this	CLF	skill

‘When it was that you learn this skill?’  
(Niu, 1991, p. 36; my gloss and translation)

Furthermore, Niu (1991) states that *de* appears in sentence-final position when the verb is disyllabic or followed by directional resultative verb compounds. However, this claim is disputed by Feng (2016), who demonstrates that Chinese native speakers find sentences acceptable where *de* precedes the direct object,



even when the VP contains a disyllabic verb or a directional resultative compound, as shown in Example (14).

(14) 我们是在领导的支持下完成的这项工程。

wǒmen	shì	zài	lǐngdǎo	de	zhīchí	xià	wánchéng	de
1PL	SHI	at	leader	SP	support	under	complete	DE
zhè	xiàng	gōngchéng						
this	CLF	project						

‘It was under the support of our leader that we completed this project.’  
(Feng, 2016, p. 102; my gloss and translation)

Finally, it is commonly recognized that *de* usually precedes the object in cases where the VP consists of a separable verb-object compound (Niu, 1991; Cui & Sung, 2021), see Example (15).

(15) 我是去年结的婚。

wǒ	shì	qù-nián	jié	de	hūn
1SG	SHI	last-year	knot	DE	marriage

‘It was last year that I got married.’  
(Niu, 1991, p. 37; my gloss and translation)

In summary, several factors can influence the position of *de* in relation to the direct object. However, these rules apply only to subject focus clefts and adjunct focus clefts, as both can display the *VdeO* and *VdeO* patterns (see Section 4.2). Conversely, object focus clefts can only occur in the *VdeO* order, meaning the aspect marker will always precede the object (see Paul & Whitman, 2008; Hole, 2011; Long, 2013; Liu, 2023) (see Section 4.2).

As far as the indirect object is concerned, some studies (e.g., Cui & Sung, 2021) claim that it must precede *de* when the direct object occupies the thematic position, see Example (16).

(16) a. 那个问题，是白老师问我的。

nà	ge	wèntí	shì	Bái	lǎoshī	wèn	wǒ	de
that	CLF	question	SHI	Bai	professor	ask	1SG	DE

‘It was Professor Bai who asked me that question.’  
(Cui & Sung, 2021, p. 692)

Nonetheless, other corpus-based studies (e.g. Feng, 2016) show that Chinese native speakers often use *de* before the indirect object, see Example (17). Due to the lack of consensus in the literature, further research is needed to investigate the placement of *de* in the presence of the indirect object.

(17) 那个消息他是昨天通知的我。

nà	ge	xiāoxi	tā	shì	zuótiān	tōngzhī	de	wǒ
that	CLF	news	3SG	SHI	yesterday	inform	DE	1SG

‘It is yesterday that he informed me of that news.’  
(Feng, 2016, p. 102; my gloss and translation)

#### 4.2 Three different types of PC

Depending on the constituent that receives narrow focus, three types of PC can be identified: subject-focus clefts, adjunct-focus clefts, and object-focus clefts (Paul & Whitman, 2008; Hole, 2011; Long, 2013; Liu, 2023). In subject focus clefts, the focused element is the subject, see Example (18).

(18) a. 这些书是他买的。

zhè xiē shū shì tā mǎi de  
this CLF book SHI 3SG buy DE  
'These books, it was him to buy (them).'

(BCC corpus, my glosses and translation)<sup>1</sup>

In adjunct focus clefts, the focus is on a preverbal adjunct, see Example (19).

(19) a. 我是在书店遇见他的。

wǒ shì zài shūdiàn yùjiàn tā de  
1SG SHI at bookstore meet 3SG DE  
'It was in a bookstore that I met him.'

b. 我们是骑车去的颐和园。

women shì qí chē qù de Yíhéyuán  
1PL SHI ride bike go DE Summer Palace  
'It was by bike that we went to the Summer Palace.'  
(Zhao, 1979, p. 58; my gloss and translation)

In object focus PCs, the element receiving focus is the object, which can be either direct or locative (Iurato, 2024a), see Example (20a) and (20b) respectively.

(20) a. 我是吃的饺子，不是吃的面条。

wǒ shì chī de jiǎozi bù shì chī de miàntiáo  
1SG SHI eat DE dumplings NEG SHI eat DE noodles  
'It was dumplings that I ate, not noodles.'  
(Lü, 1982, p. 24)

b. 我是去的北京的三甲医院。

wǒ shì qù de Běijīng de sānjiǎ yīyuàn  
1SG SHI go DE Beijing SP highest.level hospital  
'It is to Beijing top-tier hospital that I went.'  
(BCC corpus, my gloss and translation)

The Examples from (18) to (20) illustrate two main differences between the three types of the PC. First, while subject focus PCs and adjunct focus PCs can occur in both *VdeO* and *VOde* patterns, object focus PCs consistently position the object after *de*, thus exclusively appearing in the *VdeO* form (Paul & Whitman, 2008; Hole, 2011; Long, 2013). This form is also considered natural for southern Chinese speakers (Paul & Whitman, 2008).

The second important difference concerns the position of the focused element. In subject focus PCs and adjunct focus PCs, narrow focus is syntactically marked by the adjacency of the constituent receiving focus to the focus marker in a preverbal position (Cheng, 2008; Hole, 2011; Liu, 2023). In contrast, in object focus PCs, the object in the postverbal position is not syntactically clefted but receives focus through phonological prominence (Cheng, 2008). For this reason, two types of focus can be distinguished: “cleft focus” for constituents syntactically marked by adjacency to the focus marker, and “prosodically marked focus” (Hole, 2011, p. 1711) for constituents that receive focus through phonological marking rather than syntactic

<sup>1</sup> BCC corpus is available at: <http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/> (last accessed on February 10, 2025).

marking. Therefore, in subject focus clefts and adjunct focus clefts, the focused constituents represent the cleft focus, while in object focus clefts, the object receiving focus is the prosodically marked focus.

### 4.3 Syntactically cleftable constituents in PC

Objects in object focus PCs are not syntactically focused because PCs impose restrictions on the constituents that can be adjacent to *shì* in the focus position: only subjects and adjuncts can be clefted, while post-verbal constituents cannot (Luo, 2009; Hole, 2011; Long, 2013). This limitation is rooted in Chinese syntax, where the linear placement of *shì* before the main verb is crucial (Paul & Whitman, 2008; Luo, 2009). Luo (2009) claims that in Chinese sentences with the SVO order, where direct objects typically appear post-verbally, the focus marker *shì* must precede the main verb linearly. If *shì* is placed after the main verb, the sentence becomes unacceptable. All post-verbal constituents in PCs are subject to these Chinese language linear constraints and cannot be clefted. This is evidenced by the sentences in Example (21). Sentence (21a) is a post-verbal frequency phrase in focus cleft position; (21b) features a direct object adjacent to *shì*. Both sentences are ungrammatical.

(21) a. \*张三找了你是两次的。

<i>Zhāngsān</i>	<i>zhǎo-le</i>	<i>nǐ</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>liǎng</i>	<i>cì</i>	<i>de</i>
Zhangsan	look.for-PFV	2SG	SHI	two	time	DE

Intended: ‘It is twice that Zhangsan has looked for you.’  
(Luo, 2009, p. 69)

b. \*我买是书的。

<i>wǒ</i>	<i>mǎi</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>shū</i>	<i>de</i>
1SG	buy	SHI	book	DE

Intended: ‘It was a book that I bought.’  
(Liu & Kempson, 2017, p. 4)

PCs with *VdeO* order not only cannot create syntactic focus on post-verbal elements, but they also cannot create narrow focus on the verb (22a), broad focus on the VP (22b), or broad sentence focus (22c) (see Lee, 2005; Paul & Whitman, 2008; Hole, 2011). In the case of focus on the verb and VP, the reason lies in the linear constraints in Chinese syntax explained earlier. Regarding broad focus, however, it is because PCs are used specifically to create narrow focus on a single constituent (i.e. subjects, adjuncts or objects) (discourse-new information) of a presupposed realized event in the past (see Section 4.1.2). Therefore, the entire sentence cannot convey new information.

(22) a. \* 张三是写的诗。

<i>Zhāngsān</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>xiě</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>shī</i>
Zhangsan	SHI	write	DE	poem

Intended: ‘Zhangsan WRITES poems.’

b. \* 张三是写的诗。

<i>Zhāngsānshì</i>	<i>xiě</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>shī</i>
ZhangsanSHI	write	DE	poem

Intended: ‘It was WRITING POEMS what Zhangsan did.’

c. \* 是张三写的诗。

<i>shì</i>	<i>Zhāngsān</i>	<i>xiě</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>shī</i>
SHI	Zhangsan	write	DE	poem

Intended: ‘(It is the case that) Zhangsan wrote poems.’  
(Hole, 2011, p. 1710; emphasis in original)

#### 4.4 Restrictions on the use of PCs

PCs exhibit specific restrictions in their usage. Firstly, the direct object cannot be preceded by indefinite modifiers, such as the indefinite [one-CLF] construction (Liu, 2023, p. 57) (23a) or the indefinite modifier 几 *jǐ* ‘some’ followed by a classifier (Cui & Sung, 2021, p. 691) (23b), which indicates an indefinite or small quantity. Instead, the object in PCs must be definite, typically being preceded by demonstrative modifiers (Long, 2013; Cui & Sung, 2021; Liu, 2023), see Example (24). However, as Liu (2023, p. 57) points out, “the source of these definite effects remains an open question.”

(23) a. \*是我在图书馆看的一本书。

*shì wǒ zài túshūguǎn kàn de yī běn shū*  
SHI 1SG at library read DE one CLF book

Intended: ‘It was I who read a book in the library ok.’

(Long, 2013, p. 422)

b. \*是小黄写的几封信。

*shì Xiǎohuáng xiě de jǐ fēng xìn*  
SHI Xiaohuang write DE some CLF letter

Intended: ‘It was Xiao Huang who wrote some letters.’

(24) 是小黄写的那几封信。

*shì Xiǎohuáng xiě de nà jǐ fēng xìn*  
SHI Xiaohuang write DE that some CLF letter

‘It was Xiao Huang who wrote some letters.’

(Cui & Sung, 2021, p. 691)

Secondly, the verb in PCs is subject to aspectual restrictions. Only dynamic verbs are allowed in the presupposition of PC, while stative verbs are rejected (see Cheng, 2008; Li, 2008; Paul & Whitman, 2008; Mai & Yuan, 2016), see Example (25):

(25) \*他是昨天很高兴的。

*tā shì zuótiān hěn gāoxìng de*  
3SG SHI yesterday very happy DE

Intended: ‘It was yesterday that he was happy.’

(Mai & Yuan, 2016, p. 249)

Finally, PCs have restrictions in the tense, aspect, and modality domains (i.e., TAM restrictions) (Paul & Whitman, 2008; Hole, 2011; Long, 2013). Regarding the tense domain, since PCs can only highlight actions realized in the past, the presence of future-oriented temporal adverbials, expressions, or material contradicting the past interpretation of PCs results in the ungrammaticality of sentences (Simpson & Wu, 2002; Paul & Whitman, 2008; Long, 2013), see Example (26).

(26) \*他是明天坐火车成功到达北京的。

*tā shì míngtiān zuò huǒchē chénggōng dàodá Běijīng de*  
3SG SHI tomorrow by train successfully arrive Beijing DE

Intended: ‘It is tomorrow that he will arrive at Beijing by train successfully.’

(Long, 2013, p. 419)

Concerning the aspect domain, aspect markers such as the perfective aspect marker *-le* or the experiential aspect marker *-guo* cannot follow the verb in PCs (Paul & Whitman, 2008; Hole, 2011; Long, 2013), as shown in Example (27a). As far as the modality domain is concerned, the verb in the presupposition of PCs cannot be modified by modal auxiliaries (Paul & Whitman, 2008; Yang & Ku, 2010; Hole, 2011; Long, 2013), see Example (27b):

(27) a. \*他是坐火车去了/过的北京。

<i>tā</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>zuò</i>	<i>huǒchē</i>	<i>qù-le/guò</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>Běijīng</i>
3SG	SHI	by	train	go-PFV/EXP	DE	Beijing

Intended: 'It is by train that he went to Beijing.'

(Long, 2013, p. 420)

b. \*小弟是上个星期必须去的台北。

<i>Xiǎodì</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>shàng</i>	<i>ge</i>	<i>xīngqī</i>	<i>bìxū</i>	<i>qù</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>Táiběi</i>
Xiaodi	SHI	last	CLF	week	must/have to	go	DE	Taipei

Intended: 'It was last week that he had to go Taipei.'

(Yang & Ku, 2010, p. 426)

#### 4.5 Pragmatic contextual use of PCs

PCs have received limited analysis from a pragmatic perspective, in contrast to the extensive body of syntactic research. Some studies (e.g. Li & Thompson, 1981; Shi, 1994; Jing-Schmidt, 2017) argue that PCs convey only contrastive focus and serve to clarify situations by correcting false assumptions previously introduced into the discourse. On the other hand, a smaller subset of studies (e.g., Yuan, 2003; Li, 2008; Cui & Sung, 2021) suggests that the focus of PCs can be either contrastive or non-contrastive. Xu (2014), however, rejects the binary contrastive versus non-contrastive dichotomy and instead proposes a unified 'emphasis' function for analyzing PCs. She argues that these sentences function as epistemic expressions that convey subjectivity and stance-taking. In her framework, PCs act as emphatic expressions of attitude, offering the speaker's subjective evaluation based on personal experience or knowledge as evidence for his/her argument.

Iurato (2024a) demonstrates that PC can be utilized in both contrastive and non-contrastive contexts, based on the principle that cleft constructions do not inherently have a contrastive focus as a default and that, in general, focus does not necessarily imply contrast (see Section 2.1). Building on the research of Yuan (2003) and Li (2008) and grounded in the principles of contrastiveness (see Section 2.1), Iurato (2024a) suggests that PCs convey a contrastive focus when the element in focus is chosen from a limited set of alternatives and meets the criteria of exhaustiveness and exclusiveness. Referencing the various types of contrastive focus proposed by Dik et al. (1981) and Berretta (1994), Iurato (2024a) identifies three distinct uses of contrastive focus in PCs: (i) corrective focus, (ii) expanding focus, and (iii) restricting focus. PCs exhibit a corrective focus when they are used to reject a wrong assumption in order to correct and clarify it, see Example (28). The contrastive focus is expanding when used to broaden previously introduced statements or restricting when used to restrict previously introduced statements, see Examples (29) and (30) respectively.

(28) a. 他不是开车来的, 是坐火车来的。

<i>tā</i>	<i>bù</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>kāi-chē</i>	<i>lái</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>zuò</i>	<i>huǒchē</i>
3SG	NEG	SHI	drive-car	come	DE	SHI	by	train

*lái*      *de*

come      DE

'It was not by car that he came, but by train.'

b. A: 我听说他去年去了北京。

*Wǒ tīngshuō tā qù-nián qù-le Běijīng*  
1SG hear 3SG last-year go-PFV Beijing  
'I heard that he went to Beijing last year.'

B: 你听错了! 他是今年去的!

*nǐ tīng-cuò-le tā shì jīn-nián qù de*  
2SG listen-wrong-PFV 3SG SHI this-year go DE  
'You heard wrong! It was this year that he went.'  
(Yang, 2011, pp. 206-210; my glosses and translation)

(29) 不只是他去的, 是他和王同事一起去的。

*bù zhǐ shì tā qù de shì tā hé Wáng tóngshì*  
NEG only SHI 3SG go DE SHI 3SG and Wang colleague  
*yīqǐ qù de*  
together go DE  
'It wasn't just him who went; it was him and his colleague Wang.'

(30) 不是高先生和老板一起去的, 是老板一个人去的。

*bù shì Gāo xiānshēng hé lǎobǎn yīqǐ qù de*  
NEG SHI Gao Mr. and boss together go DE  
*Shì lǎobǎn yī ge rén qù de*  
SHI boss one CLF person go DE  
'It wasn't Mr. Gao and the boss who went there together; it was just the boss who went there.'  
(BCC corpus, my glosses and translation)

PCs exhibit a non-contrastive focus if the requirements for contrastiveness are not met and if no alternative exclusion or overall contrast is conveyed (Iurato, 2024a). Non-contrastive focus fulfils the complete function of marking the “original” focus (Korzen, 2014, p. 232). It directs the listener's attention to a specific piece of information about a completed event without aiming to create contrast. Rather, its purpose is to reinforce a previously introduced piece of information by bringing it back to the foreground of the discourse. A typical case of non-contrastive PC is found in *wh*-questions and their corresponding answers (Li, 2008; Cui & Sung, 2021; Iurato, 2024a), see Example (31).

(31) a. Q: 是谁告诉你的?

*shì shéi gào su nǐ de*  
SHI who tell 2SG DE  
'Who told you (that)?'

A: 是他告诉我的。

*shì tā gào su wǒ de*  
SHI 3SG tell 1SG DE  
'He told me (that).'

(Li, 2008, p. 765)

This applies to polar questions as well (Iurato 2024a). In sentences such as (32), the interlocutor's aim is not to generate a contrast, but simply to ask about an event that occurred in a past context.



(32) 你是昨天动手术的吗?

<i>nǐ</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>zuótiān</i>	<i>dòng</i>	<i>shǒushù</i>	<i>ma</i>
2SG	SHI	yesterday	take	operation	Q

‘Was it yesterday that you had an operation?’  
(Shi, 1994, p. 85)

Inspired by the taxonomy proposed by Dik et al. (1981) and Berretta (1994), Iurato (2024a) argues that non-contrastive PCs can create either assertive or completive focus, depending on the speaker’s communicative goals. Example (33) could be used in both cases. When it has an assertive value, the speaker’s purpose is to highlight the truth of their statement. Conversely, it can be considered completive if, in the given context, it aims to provide the hearer with missing information.

(33) 我知道他是在北京三甲医院动的手术。

<i>wǒ</i>	<i>zhīdào</i>	<i>tā</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>zài</i>	<i>Běijīng</i>	<i>sānjiǎ</i>	<i>yīyuàn</i>
1SG	know	3SG	SHI	at	Beijing	highest.level	hospital

<i>dòng</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>shǒushù</i>
have	DE	surgery

‘I know that it was at a top-tier hospital in Beijing that he had surgery.’  
(BCC corpus, my gloss and translation)

Finally, applying Berretta’s (1994) taxonomy for non-contrastive focus in cleft sentences, Iurato (2024a) demonstrates that non-contrastive PCs can also fulfill a textual function by aiding in anaphoric recovery. In these instances, the cleft constituent references something previously mentioned, effectively bringing an element from the background to the foreground of the discourse. For example, in sentence (34), the PC is employed to highlight a detail that had been in the background, specifically the instrument 开车 *kāi-chē* ‘drive-car, by car’.

(34) 那天他们开车去看展览。[...] 后来发生了意外事故，但是他们的父母不知道他们是开车去的。得知他们在那次事故中去世，令人震惊。

<i>nà</i>	<i>tiān</i>	<i>tāmen</i>	<i>kāi-chē</i>	<i>qù</i>	<i>kàn</i>	<i>zhǎnlǎn [...]</i>	<i>hòulái</i>	<i>fāshēng-le</i>
that	day	3PL	drive-car	go	visit	exhibition [...]	later	happen-PFV

<i>yìwàishìgù</i>	<i>dànshì</i>	<i>tāmen</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>fùmǔ</i>	<i>bù</i>	<i>zhīdào</i>	<i>tāmen</i>	<i>shì</i>
accident	but	3PL	SP	parents	NEG	know	3PL	SHI

<i>kāi-chē</i>	<i>qù</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>dézhī</i>	<i>tāmen</i>	<i>zài</i>	<i>nà</i>	<i>cì</i>	<i>shìgù</i>
drive-car	go	DE	hear.of.sth	3PL	at	that	CLF	accident

<i>zhōng</i>	<i>qùshì</i>	<i>lìngrén</i>	<i>zhènjīng</i>
center	die	cause.sb.to	shock

‘That day, they drove to the exhibition. [...] Later, there was an accident, but their parents didn’t know they had gone by car. Finding out that they died in that accident was shocking.’  
(BCC corpus, my glosses and translation)

## 5. Italian cleft sentences with narrow focus

Italian is generally classified as an SVO language (Sabatini, 1985; Andorno, 2003; Grandi, 2011). However, the SVO order exhibits a degree of flexibility; it can be altered to emphasize particular sentence constituents, as seen in non-canonical syntactic constructions where there is no fixed constituent order (Berretta, 1994; Sabatini, 1985; Frison, 1982; Grandi, 2011). Italian narrow-focus clefts, i.e. standard prototypical clefts

(hereafter ICs),<sup>1</sup> are among these syntactically marked constructions. They permit the modification of the linear order of sentence constituents to highlight a specific constituent (Roggia, 2009; Panunzi, 2011; Garassino, 2016). Similar to English *it*-clefts, ICs are focusing devices that separate an informative narrow focus from a presupposed background (Panunzi, 2011; Garassino, 2016; Pinelli, 2017), as shown in Example (35):

- (35) È stato Mario a chiamarlo, non Dario.  
 be.PRS.3SG be.PTCP.PST Mario to call.INF.3SG.M.OBJ NEG Dario  
 ‘It was Mario who called him, not Dario’.

### 5.1 Syntactic features

ICs have a biclausal structure consisting of a main clause and a subordinate clause (Roggia, 2009; Garassino, 2016). The main clause is a copular sentence constructed with the verb *essere* ‘to be’ and the clefted constituent. The subordinate clause, known as the cleft clause, has been analyzed in various studies as either a restrictive relative clause or a pseudo-relative clause introduced by the generic complementizer or subordinator *che* ‘that’ (see Berretta, 1994; Roggia, 2009; Korzen, 2014; Garassino, 2014; De Cesare & Garassino, 2018), as shown in Example (36):

- (36) È ieri che sono stato al teatro.  
 be.PRS.3SG yesterday that be.PRS.1SG be.PTCP.PST.SG.M to.ART.SG.M theatre  
 ‘It was yesterday that I went to the theatre.’

In Example (36), the clefted constituent *ieri* ‘yesterday’ is placed next to the copula *essere* ‘to be’ and assumes the status of the asserted content (focus), while the rest of the proposition conveys the presupposed information (presupposition) (Garassino, 2016). A notable language-specific feature of ICs is the absence of a pronominal subject for the copula ( $\emptyset$ ), attributable to the pro-drop parameter of Italian (Berretta, 1994; Garassino, 2014), as seen in Example (37a). In non-null-subject languages, the initial position of clefts is occupied by expletives that serve as pronominal subjects for the copula (Pinelli, 2017). For instance, in English, the subject pronoun *it* fills this position, as shown in Example (37b).

- (37) a. È in nave che siamo andati.  
 $\emptyset$  be.PRS.3SG by ship that be.PRS.1PL go.PTCP.PST.PL.M  
 b. It is by ship that we went.  
 3SG.N be.PRS.3SG by ship that 1PL go.PST

Based on the syntactic function of the clefted constituent in relation to the VP of the cleft clause, three types of ICs can be distinguished: subject focus clefts, adjunct focus clefts, and object focus clefts (Garassino, 2016; De Cesare & Garassino, 2018).

### 5.2 Subject focus clefts

In subject focus clefts, the syntactic element under narrow focus is the subject, which is realized as an NP. A distinctive feature of ICs, also observed in other European languages such as Portuguese (see Reichmann, 2005), is that the subclause in these clefts can be either explicit or implicit. In the explicit form, the clefted subject is followed by the complementizer *che* ‘that’, ‘who’, which introduces the cleft clause with the verb in finite form (38a). In the implicit form, the subject is followed by the preposition *a/ad* ‘to’, which acts as

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of convenience, I will use the term ‘IC’, which stands for ‘Italian clefts’, to refer to the Italian standard prototypical cleft sentences.

the connective for the subclause, and the verb in the cleft clause is in the infinitive form (38b) (Roggia, 2009; Garassino, 2014). Despite these structural differences, there are no interpretative differences between these two forms of subject focus clefts (Frison, 1982; Berretta 1994).

- (38) a. È Gianni che ha partecipato alla festa.  
 be.PRS.3SG.M Gianni that have.PRS.3SG attend.PTCP.PST to.ART.SG.F party  
 ‘It is Gianni that attended the party.’
- b. È Gianni ad aver partecipato alla festa.  
 be.PRS.3SG.M Gianni to have.INF attend.PTCP.PST to.ART.SG.F party  
 ‘It is Gianni that attended the party.’  
 (Garassino, 2014, p. 104; my glosses)

A key characteristic of the explicit form is that the copula agrees in person and number with the focused subject (Frison, 1982; Berretta, 1994; D’Achille et al., 2005), as demonstrated in Examples (39) and (40). Moreover, gender agreement is necessary when a past participle appears in the main copular clause. This is illustrated in Examples (41) and (42), where *stata* and *state* ‘been’ are the feminine singular and plural forms, respectively, of the past participle of *essere* ‘to be’ (Garassino, 2014).

- (39) Sono Gianni e Lucache hanno partecipato  
 be.PRS.3PL Gianni and Lucathat have.PRS.3PL attend.PTCP.PST  
 alla festa.  
 to.ART.SG.F party  
 ‘It is Gianni and Luca that attended the party.’
- (40) Siete voi che avete partecipato alla festa.  
 be.PRS.2PL 2PL that have.PRS.2PL attend.PTCP.PST to.ART.SG.F party  
 ‘It is you that attended the party.’  
 (Garassino, 2014, p. 105; my glosses)
- (41) È stata Lucia che ha partecipato  
 be.PRS.3SG be.PTCP.PST.SG.F Lucia that have.PRS.1SG attend.PTCP.PST  
 alla conferenza.  
 to.ART.SG.F conference  
 ‘It was Lucia who attended the conference.’
- (42) Sono state Lucia e Gloria che hanno  
 be.PRS. 3PL be.PTCP.PST.3PL.F Lucia and Gloria that have.PRS.3PL  
 partecipato alla conferenza.  
 attend.PTCP.PST to.ART.SG.F conference  
 ‘It was Lucia and Gloria who attended the conference.’

Examples (39) to (42) show that in the explicit form, both the verb *essere* ‘to be’ in the main clause and the verb in the cleft clause undergo verbal inflection. Conversely, in the implicit form, only the initial verb *essere* is inflected, while the predicate includes verbs in the infinitive form. Nevertheless, according to Berretta (1994), in the explicit form, *essere* tends to remain in the present tense even when the verb in the predicate is in the past or future tense, see Example (43a) and (43b) respectively. In contrast, in the implicit form, *essere* must be inflected in the appropriate tense, as in Example (44).

- (43) a. È lei che ha cucinato.  
 be.PRS.3SG 3SG.F that have.PRS.3SG cook.PTCP.PST  
 'It is she who cooked.'
- b. È lei che cucinerà.  
 be.PRS.3SG 3SG.F that cook.FUT.3SG  
 'It is she who will cook.'
- (44) a. Sono stato io a distruggere questo.  
 be.PRS.3SG be.PTCP.PST. 1SG to destroy.INF this  
 'It was me who broke this.'
- b. Sarò io a distruggere questo.  
 be.FUT.1SG 1SG to destroy.INF this  
 'It is me who will destroy this.'

Although the tense and aspect characteristics of the main verb are generally transferred to the copula in implicit clefts, there are instances where the infinitive verb in the cleft clause may take on past tense characteristics in sentences with a past interpretation (*infinito passato*, 'past infinitive'), see Example (45).

- (45) a. È Elisabetta ad aver tagliato l'erba.  
 be.PRS.3SG Elisabetta to have.INF mow.PTCP.PST ART.SG.F lawn  
 'It was Elisabetta who mowed the lawn.'
- b. È stata Elisabetta a tagliare l'erba.  
 be.PRS.3SG be.PTCP.PST-SG.F Elisabetta to mow.INF ART.SG.F lawn  
 'It was Elisabetta who mowed the lawn.'

D'Achille et al. (2005, p. 265) demonstrate that in Italian, implicit cleft sentences with reversed order are frequent, and occasionally, the copula is omitted, see Example (46). However, such instances of omission are infrequent and primarily found in journalistic contexts, for example, in newspaper headlines.

- (46) A guidare la manifestazione radicale,  
 to guide.INF ART.SG.F rally radical.SG.F  
 Marco Pannella ed Emma Bonino.  
 Marco Pannella and Emma Bonino  
 'Leading the radical rally, Marco Pannella and Emma Bonino.'  
 (D'Achille et al. 2005, p. 265)

Lastly, several studies (e.g. Berretta, 1994; Belletti, 2015; Garassino, 2016) show that subject focus clefts are more commonly utilized in Italian compared to adjunct and object focus clefts. This trend is attributed to the phenomenon where "in languages which strongly associate grammatical subjects with sentence topics, the use of cleft sentences is more frequent when the subject is being focalized and less common otherwise (in case of object and adverbial focus)" (Garassino, 2016, p. 185).

### 5.3 Adjunct focus clefts

Adjunct focus clefts highlight adjuncts as their narrow focus. These constructions involve adjunct adverbials as constituents that can be clefted (Garassino, 2014). Among the semantic categories of adjunct adverbials,

the three most commonly encountered types include time (time adjuncts) (47), space (space adjuncts) (48) and manner (manner adjuncts) (49) (De Cesare & Garassino, 2018). Adjunct adverbials can take syntactic forms such as NPs, PPs, AdvPs, and sentence-level projections (De Cesare & Garassino, 2018). Notably, in adjunct focus clefts, the clefted constituent does not show agreement with the copula (Pinelli, 2017)

- (47) È a febbraio che sono andato lì  
 be.PRS.3SG in February that be.PRS.1SG go.PTCP.PST there  
 ‘It was in February that I went there.’
- (48) È a Bologna che ferma il treno.  
 be.PRS.3SG in Bologna that stop.PRS.3SG ART.SG.M train  
 ‘It is in Bologna that the train stops.’
- (49) È con rispetto che devi trattare i  
 be.PRS.3SG with respect that must.PRS.2SG treat.INF ART.PL.M  
 tuoi genitori.  
 2PL.POSS.M parent.PL.M  
 ‘It is with respect that you must treat your parents’.

#### 5.4 Object focus clefts

In object focus clefts, the constituent under focus can be either a direct or an indirect object (Garassino, 2016). Direct objects are typically syntactically represented as NPs, see Example (50a). In such cases, the copula agrees in number with the object. However, there are instances where agreement in number between the NP serving as the object and the copula is not obligatory (see Pinelli, 2017), as shown in Example (50b):

- (50) a. Sono loro che dovete criticare!  
 be.PRES.3PL 3PL that must.PRS.2PL criticize.INF  
 ‘It is them that you must criticize!’
- b. È loro che dovete criticare!  
 be.PRES.3SG 3PL that must.PRS.2PL criticize.INF  
 ‘It is them that you must criticize!’

When the object is an object pronoun, two scenarios can occur: if the pronoun is in the nominative form, the copula agrees in number with it, see Example (51a). Differently, if the pronoun is in the accusative form, no agreement is observed (Garassino, 2014), as Example (51b) shows.

- (51) a. Sei tu che vogliono.  
 be.PRS.2SG 2SG that want.PRS.3PL  
 ‘It is you that they want.’
- b. È te che vogliono.  
 be.PRS.3SG 2SG that want.PRS.3PL  
 ‘It is you that they want.’  
 (Garassino 2014, p. 105)

The focused direct object can also consist of a sentence-level projection with an implicit predicate formed by a verb in the present infinitive mode (D’Achille, 2005, p. 259), see Example (52).

- (52) È passeggiare di sera che amo.  
 be.PRS.3SG walk.INF at night that love.PRS.1SG  
 ‘It’s walking at night that I love.’

Finally, indirect objects are syntactically represented as a PP. In such cases, the copula does not show agreement with the clefted constituent (Pinelli, 2017), as shown in Example (53).

- (53) È a loro che devi restituire questo documento.  
 be.PRS.3SG to 3PL that must.PRS.2SG return.INF this.SG.M document  
 ‘It is them that you must return this document to.’

### 5.5 Pragmatic contextual use

Extensive research (e.g. Berretta, 1994; Roggia, 2009; Garassino, 2014; 2016; De Cesare & Garassino, 2018) has shown that ICs can be used to establish both contrastive and non-contrastive focus. Berretta (1994) identifies three types of contrastive focus for ICs: correcting (54a), expanding (54b), and restricting (54c):<sup>1</sup>

- (54) a. Non è ieri che è andato Luca, ma due giorni fa.  
 ‘It was not yesterday that Luca went, but two days ago’.
- b. Non è solo ieri che è andato, ma anche due giorni fa.  
 ‘It is not only yesterday that he went, but also two days ago’.
- c. Non sono stati Luca e Mario ad andare, ma solo Giovanni.  
 ‘It was not Luca and Mario who went, it was only Giovanni who went.’

Garassino (2016) shows that in ICs, contrast can be conveyed either explicitly or implicitly. The contrast is explicit when the alternative set opposite the focal element is well-defined and restricted. For instance, in (55), it narrows down to two elements: Obama and his political opponents. On the other hand, the contrast is implicit when an identifiable set of alternatives opposing the focal element is suggested but not explicitly provided in the text. In (56), the presupposition conveyed by the cleft is that “there is a reason why they are looking for experts”, but the negation adverb with narrow scope over the clefted constituent excludes that the reason expressed by the clefted constituent is true. However, the actual reason is not explicitly asserted (Garassino, 2016).

- (55) Per la prima volta da quando si discutono questioni di bilancio, è Obama ad avere in mano le carte migliori e non i suoi oppositori.  
 ‘For the first time since debating budgetary points, it is Obama who holds all the cards, not his political opponents.’
- (56) Il segretario del Pdl sgrana gli occhi: “Ma no, non è per questo che vogliamo i tecnici!”  
 ‘The Secretary of the Pdl party opens his eyes wide: “No, it is not for that [reason] that we are looking for experts!”’

(Garassino, 2016, p. 193)

Furthermore, Berretta (1994) argues that the focus in non-contrastive ICs can serve two different purposes, depending on the communicative needs of the speaker. Thus, a sentence such as Example (57) can convey an ‘assertive’ focus if the goal is to highlight specific information within the sentence and draw the listener’s

<sup>1</sup> In ICs aimed at analyzing pragmatic functions, syntactic glosses are not included, since the goal is to observe the pragmatic functions of sentences rather than the syntactic functions of individual constituents.



attention to the new information. Alternatively, it can convey a ‘completive’ focus if it is used to introduce new information that fills a gap in the listener’s knowledge.

- (57) È stata la mafia a uccidere Calvi.  
 ‘It was the Mafia who killed Calvi.’  
 (Berretta, 1994, p. 98; my gloss and translation)

Although ICs can indicate either contrastive or non-contrastive focus, several studies (e.g. Berretta, 1994; Roggia, 2009; Garassino, 2016) have shown that ICs are mainly used non-contrastively. Berretta (1994) explains this tendency by showing that in spoken Italian, clefts serve to highlight an already focal element, such as *wh*-elements in interrogative cleft sentences (see also Pinelli, 2017). In written contexts, however, non-contrastive clefts occur more frequently than contrastive clefts because they fulfil a textual function and facilitate anaphoric recovery: the cleft sentence moves an element from the background to the foreground of the text. In these cases, therefore, the cleft sentence functions primarily as a syntactic tool that marks discourse articulation and draws the listener’s attention to previously backgrounded information (Garassino, 2016; Berretta, 1994).

## 6. Comparative analysis between Chinese and Italian narrow-focus cleft sentences

### 6.1 Syntactic comparison

Syntactically, PCs and ICs share similarities in their biclausal structure, consisting of a main clause with a copula (*essere* in Italian and *shì* in Chinese) and a cleft subclause. In ICs, this subclause is typically viewed as a pseudo-relative clause, or a restrictive relative clause introduced by the generic subordinator *che* (see Section 2.1). Conversely, in PCs, there is no consensus regarding its syntactic function. Some studies classify it as a free relative clause with *de*, seen as a nominalization marker (see Section 4.1.2). However, this interpretation has been rejected by several studies that propose *de* not as a nominalizer but as an aspect marker (see Section 4.1.2). Consequently, the syntactic analysis of the subclause in PCs remains an unresolved issue necessitating further investigation.

In ICs, a notable distinction lies in the absence of a pronominal subject for the copula ( $\emptyset$ ), whereas PCs explicitly include the subject. Other significant syntactic differences between ICs and PCs include the following:

- (i) In PCs, the copula can generally be omitted (except in specific cases) (see Section 4.1.1). In contrast, in ICs, the copula cannot be omitted as it functions as the main verb of the copular clause.
- (ii) The focused constituent is positioned adjacent to the copula in both ICs and PCs, except for the object in Chinese object-focused clefts (see Sections 4.2 and 5.4).

The most striking difference between PCs and ICs is that PCs contain a perfective aspect marker, indicating that the action of the presupposition has been completed.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, this action must necessarily reach its endpoint in the past. Such a restriction is absent in ICs, where the verb of the presupposition is not required to describe an action completed in a past context. Given the absence of an aspect marker in ICs, another difference between PCs and ICs is that in PCs with *VdeO* order, the object follows the aspect marker *de*.

### 6.2 Contrasting subject, adjunct, and object focus clefts

Both PCs and ICs occur in three main types of sentences: subject-focus clefts, adjunct-focus clefts, and object-focus clefts. However, these categories exhibit differences between Chinese and Italian. Regarding

<sup>1</sup> The presence of an aspect marker in PCs highlights another significant difference between Chinese and Italian regarding the encoding of aspect and tense. Chinese lacks a grammatical category for tense, relying instead on a series of markers that convey aspectual information (Soh, 2015; Arcodia & Basciano, 2021). In contrast, Italian lacks grammatical elements that specifically indicate aspect, and expresses perfective aspect through the selection of verb tense rather than the use of specialized affixes (Bertinetto, 1986; Grandi, 2010).

subject focus clefts, the focused element is syntactically expressed as an NP in both languages. The main difference between ICs and PCs lies in the structure of the cleft clause. In ICs, the cleft clause can be either explicit (introduced by the generic complementizer *che*, with the verb in finite form) or implicit (introduced by the preposition *a/ad*, acting as a subordinator with the main verb in infinitive form) (see Section 5.1). This distinction does not apply to Chinese, which is an isolating language without verbal inflection (Li & Thompson, 1981; Arcodia & Basciano, 2021).

Adjunct focus clefts in Chinese and Italian are similar in that clefted adjuncts can convey information about time, place, manner etc. However, there are differences with regard to temporal cleft sentences including temporal adjuncts. Chinese temporal adjuncts can only specify the exact time of an action, a feature also observed in their Italian counterparts, see Example (58).

(58) a. 我是昨天去的北京。

<i>wǒ</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>zuótiān</i>	<i>qù</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>Běijīng</i>
1SG	SHI	yesterday	go	DE	Beijing

‘It was yesterday that I went to Beijing.’  
(Zhao 1979, p. 61; my gloss and translation)

b. È                      ieri                      che                      sono                      andato                      a                      Pechino.  
be.PRS.3SG                      yesterday                      that                      be.PRS.3SG                      go.PTCP.PST                      to                      Beijing  
‘It was yesterday that I went to Beijing.’

However, PCs cannot accommodate adjuncts describing the frequency of the action, whereas Italian clefts can, see Example (59). This discrepancy arises because Chinese expresses the frequency of an event through post-verbal frequency phrases, as Example (60) shows. Furthermore, as post-verbal elements, these phrases cannot occupy the focal position adjacent to *shì* in PCs (see Section 4.3), thus PCs with temporal adjuncts indicating frequency are ungrammatical.

(59) a. \*我是三次去的北京。

<i>wǒ</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>sān</i>	<i>cì</i>	<i>qù</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>Běijīng</i>
1SG	SHI	three	time	go	DE	Beijing

Intended: ‘It’s three times that I have been to Peking.’  
(Luo, 2009, p. 69)

b. È                      tre                      volte                      che                      sono                      stato                      a                      Pechino.  
be.PRS.3SG                      three                      time.PL.F                      that                      be.PRS.3SG                      be.PTCP.PST                      to                      Beijing  
‘It’s three times that I have been to Beijing.’

(60) 我去了北京三次。

<i>wǒ</i>	<i>qù-le</i>	<i>Běijīng</i>	<i>sān</i>	<i>cì</i>
1SG	go-PFV	Beijing	three	time

‘I have been to Beijing three times.’

Similarly, temporal adjuncts in PCs cannot express duration, see Example (61). In Chinese, duration is indicated by duration expressions normally positioned post-verbally as complements, see Example (62) (Cui & Sung, 2021: 135). Conversely, in Italian temporal clefts, it is possible to have focalized temporal adjuncts that indicate duration, as in Example (63) (Benincà, 1978; De Cesare & Garassino, 2018; Pinelli, 2017).

(61) \*我是两年学的中文。

wǒ shì liǎng nián xué de zhōngwén  
1SG SHI two year study DE Chinese  
Intended: ‘It is for two years that I studied Chinese.’

(62) 我学了两年(的)中文。

wǒ xué-le liǎng nián de zhōngwén  
1SG study-PFV two year SP Chinese  
‘I studied Chinese for two years.’  
(Cui & Sung, 2021, p. 135)

(63) È per due anni che ho studiato cinese.  
be.PRS.3SG for two year.PL.M that have.PRS.1SG study.PTC.PST Chinese  
‘It is for two years that I studied Chinese.’

Finally, in Italian adjunct focus clefts, the adjunct can be expressed through sentence-level projections with an implicit predicate formed by a verb in the present infinitive mode (D’Achille, 2005: 259; see Section 5.3), such as a verb in the simple gerund form (64a). A similar structure can be found in Chinese adjunct focus clefts. Adjuncts indicating manner can be verbs marked by the durative aspect marker 着 *zhe*, functioning as adverbial modifiers to “express overlapping actions and provide background information” (Xiao & McEnery, 2004, p. 182), as shown in (64b). The presence of this aspect marker, observable in data extracted from corpora (see Example (64b)), rejects the theory that aspectual markers cannot be found in the presupposition of PCs (cf. Paul & Whitman, 2008).

(64) a. È cantando che è arrivato.  
be.PRS.3SG sing-DUR that be.PRS.3SG arrive.PTCP.PST  
‘It is by singing that he came.’  
(Pinelli, 2017, p. 18; my glosses and translation)

b. 离婚路上，他是唱着去的。  
Líhūn lù-shang tā shì chàng-zhe qù de  
divorce road-on 3SG SHI sing-DUR go DE  
‘On his way to divorce, it was singing that he went.’  
(BCC corpus, my gloss and translation)

Concerning object focus clefts, these differ significantly between Chinese and Italian. In Chinese object focus clefts, due to the linear constraints of Chinese syntax, objects cannot be syntactically clefted following the copula (65a). Consequently, PCs with objects adjacent to *shì*, as shown in Example (65b), are ungrammatical. Such restrictions are absent in ICs. In fact, in Italian object focus clefts, the object is syntactically marked by its adjacency to the copula, as Example (65c) shows.

(65) a. 他是吃的肉，不是吃的鱼。  
tā shì chī de ròu bù shì chī de yú  
3SG SHI eat DE meat NEG SHI eat DE fish  
‘It is the meat he ate, not the fish.’  
(Lü, 1982, p. 24; my gloss and translation)

- b. \*他是肉吃的，不是鱼吃的。

<i>tā</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>ròu</i>	<i>chī</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>bù</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>yú</i>	<i>chī</i>	<i>de</i>
3SG	SHI	meat	eat	DE	NEG	SHI	fish	eat	DE

Intended: 'It is the meat he ate, not the fish.'

- c. È *la* *carne* *che* *ha* *mangiato*, *non*  
 be.PRS.3SG ART.SG.F meat that have.PRS.3SG eat.PTCP.PST NEG  
*il* *pesce*.  
 ART.SG.M fish

'It is the meat he ate, not the fish.'

### 6.3 Restrictions concerning the use of clefts

A primary difference between PCs and ICs is the definiteness of the object. In PCs, indefinite modifiers cannot precede the object (see Section 4.4). In contrast, ICs have no such restrictions. Compare sentences in Example (66).

- (66) a. \*是小黄写的几封信。

<i>shì</i>	<i>Xiǎohuáng</i>	<i>xiě</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>jǐ</i>	<i>fēng</i>	<i>xìn</i>
SHI	Xiaohuang	write	DE	some	CLF	letter

Intended: 'It was Xiao Huang who wrote some letters.'

(Cui &amp; Sung, 2021, p. 691)

- b. È *Xiaohuang* *che* *ha* *scritto* *alcune* *lettere*.  
 be.PRS.3SG Xiaohuang that have.PRS.3SG write.PTCP.PST some letters

The TAM restrictions observed in PCs (see Section 4.4) are not present in ICs. First, while future-oriented temporal adverbials or elements that contradict the past interpretation of the sentence cannot occur in PCs, as Example (67a) shows, this restriction is not observed in ICs. ICs can contain both future tense verbs and future-oriented temporal adverbials, see Example (67b).

- (67) a. \*她是明天会去的米兰。

<i>tā</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>míngtiān</i>	<i>huì</i>	<i>qù</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>Milán</i>
3SG	SHI	tomorrow	will	go	DE	Milan

Intended: 'It is tomorrow that she will go to Milan.'

(Hole 2011, p. 1713; my gloss and translation)

- b. È *domani* *che* *lei* *andrà* *a* *Milano*.  
 be.PRS.3SG tomorrow that 3SG.F go.FUT.3SG to Milan  
 'It is tomorrow that she will go to Milan.'

Second, in PCs, the verb cannot be followed by perfective aspect markers. Conversely, in ICs, the presupposition can include a perfective verb form. Compare sentences in Example (68).

- (68) a. \*是他去过的中国。

<i>shì</i>	<i>tā</i>	<i>qù-guo</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>Zhōngguó</i>
SHI	3SG	go-EXP	DE	China

Intended: 'It was she who went to China.'

(Paul &amp; Whitman, 2008, p. 426)

- b. È stato lui che è andato in Cina  
 be.PRS.3SG be.PTCP.PST 3SG.M that be.PRS.1SG go.PTCP.PST to China  
 ‘It was he who went to China.’

Third, unlike ICs where modal verbs are accepted in the presupposition, modal auxiliary verbs cannot precede the verb in PCs, see Example (69).

- (69) a. \*是李思应该开的门。

*Shì Lǐsī yīnggāi kāi de mén*  
 SHI Lisi must open DE door  
 Intended: ‘It was Lisi who had to open the door.’  
 (Paul & Whitman, 2008, p. 425)

- b. È Lisi che avrebbe dovuto aprire  
 be.PST.3SG yesterday that have.COND.PRES.3SG must.PTCP.PST open  
 la porta.  
 art.SG.F door  
 ‘It was Lisi who should have opened the door.’

Finally, while stative verbs are prohibited in the presupposition of PCs (see Section 4.4), ICs do not have such restrictions; stative verbs can appear in the cleft clause, as shown in Example (70).

- (70) a. \*小王是昨天很生气的。

*Xiǎo Wáng shì zuótiān hěn shēngqì de*  
 Xiao Wang SHI yesterday very happy DE  
 Intended: ‘It was yesterday that he was happy.’  
 (Mai, 2013, p. 108)

- b. È stato ieri che Xiao Wang era arrabbiato.  
 be.PRS.3SG be.PTCP.PST yesterday that Xiao Wang be.PST.3SG angry.SG.M  
 ‘It was yesterday that Xiao Wang was happy.’

#### 6.4 Comparing pragmatic features

From a pragmatic perspective, cleft sentences in Chinese and Italian exhibit similar contextual uses. Despite limited research on their pragmatic functions compared to syntactic studies, it emerges that narrow focus cleft sentences can be used both contrastively and non-contrastively in both languages. Clefts conveying contrastive focus share the same contextual uses in both languages: correcting, expanding, and restricting focus. Non-contrastive clefts, on the other hand, aim to highlight specific information without opposing it to previously introduced information, thus serving an anaphoric recovery function by bringing background information to the foreground. Moreover, it has been observed that in both Chinese and Italian, the focus in non-contrastive cleft sentences can be assertive or completive. However, research on Chinese PCs lags behind, particularly in terms of quantitative studies on their use in contrastive versus non-contrastive contexts. It would be valuable to identify which type of proper clefts is most commonly used by L1 Chinese speakers, as it is already established that subject focus clefts are the most common in Italian. Finally, given that similar research has been conducted on ICs (see Garassino, 2016; Section 5.5), studies on Chinese PCs should explore whether, in contrastive focus clefts, what the focal element is contrasted with is implicit or explicit. Moreover, exploring additional potential uses of focus in both contrastive and non-contrastive

contexts across Chinese and Italian would be of considerable interest. Further investigation in this area is warranted.

## 7. Conclusions

This paper compares and contrasts narrow focus clefts in Italian and Chinese. This comparative analysis arises from the desire to determine whether Chinese PCs — a unique and challenging structure for learners of L2 Chinese (Mai, 2013; Mai & Yuan, 2016), particularly for L1 Italian learners of L2 Chinese (Iurato, 2024b) — have a corresponding form in Italian. One of the main difficulties learners face is understanding how to render this construction in the target language and identifying an equivalent structure in Italian. Due to these challenges in grasping the functions of PC and finding corresponding elements in Italian, learners tend to underuse or misuse PC (see Iurato, 2024b).

The study revealed that cleft sentences in these languages differ significantly syntactically, while demonstrating closer alignment at the pragmatic level. Italian clefts consist of a matrix clause led by a copula and a relative or relative-like clause. In Chinese, however, this structure is not universally recognized. Many studies on PCs describe them as involving a copula that has lost its copular function and serves solely as a focus marker, followed by the aspect marker *de*. The rationale behind the theory proposing that proper clefts should also be a matrix clause followed by a copula and a relative clause is not supported by the function of *de* as a nominalizer in clefts with *VdeO* order, where the nominalizer precedes the object. Additionally, this theory does not account for why proper clefts can only denote completed actions in the past.

The primary difference between cleft sentences in Italian and Chinese is that Chinese PCs feature a verb indicating a completed action, marked by the aspect marker *de*, which has reached its endpoint in the past. This feature is absent in Italian clefts. Additionally, the copula in Chinese can be omitted in contrast to its mandatory presence in Italian. Another significant distinction is observed in the cleftability of constituents: in Chinese, syntactic restrictions prevent postverbal elements from being clefted, whereas Italian lacks such restrictions. This distinction is evident in object focus clefts, where the object in Chinese is phonologically marked rather than syntactically clefted, unlike in Italian. Furthermore, the TAM restrictions observed in Chinese PCs are not present in Italian. The same is true for the aspectual restrictions that affect the verb in Chinese PCs, as Italian clefts can contain stative verbs. In addition, objects in Chinese PCs cannot be preceded by indefinite modifiers, whereas this is possible in Italian clefts.

As for pragmatic functions, PCs and ICs do not exhibit differences in their contexts of use; however, further pragmatic studies on PCs are necessary due to their scarcity. For instance, it would be interesting to analyze whether the omission of *shì* in PCs leads to pragmatic changes in the use of focus, and in which contexts L1 Chinese speakers tend to omit it more frequently.

This study could serve as a starting point for various studies. Further comparative research on clefts in Italian and Chinese could explore differences between ICs and other types of Chinese clefts with narrow focus on the verb, such as PAPs and *shì* clefts (see Section 3). These analyses could be advanced through a corpus-based approach, examining data from L1 Italian and L1 Chinese corpora. Additionally, investigating narrow focus sentences at the prosodic level across both languages would be valuable.

Moreover, given the significant interest in L2 Chinese studies in Italy (see Romagnoli & Conti, 2021) and L2 Italian among L1 Chinese learners (see e.g. Scibetta, 2015; Ye, 2019; Feng & Busà, 2022), this study could lay the groundwork for future research on how L1 Italian speakers acquire L2 Chinese or how Chinese native speakers acquire L2 Italian, specifically in relation to cleft sentence usage. The differences observed in narrow focus cleft sentences may pose learning challenges for both Italian learners of L2 Chinese and Chinese learners of L2 Italian.

Finally, this comparative study, which highlights the differences in cleft constructions between the two languages, could inform the development of more effective teaching methods for cleft sentences for L2 Chinese learners who are L1 Italian speakers, and for L2 Italian learners who are Chinese native speakers. It



also provides a foundation for future educational research, allowing for consideration of language differences and anticipation of potential difficulties in cleft sentence acquisition by Italian learners of L2 Chinese and Chinese learners of L2 Italian.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- Abbiati, M. (1998). *Grammatica di cinese moderno*. Venezia: Cafoscarina.
- Andorno, C. (2003). *La grammatica italiana*. Milano: Mondadori.
- Arcodia, G. F., & Basciano, B. (2021). *Chinese Linguistics: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Badan, L. (2015). Focus. In R. Sybesma (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Chinese Language and Linguistics Online*. Leiden: Brill. Retrieved February 8, 2025, from [https://doi.org/10.1163/2210-7363\\_ecll\\_COM\\_00000156](https://doi.org/10.1163/2210-7363_ecll_COM_00000156).
- Belletti, A. (2015). The focus map of clefts. In U. Shlonsky (Ed.), *Beyond Functional Sequence* (pp. 42–59). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Benincà, P. (1978). Sono tre ore che ti aspetto. *Rivista di Grammatica Generativa*, 3(2), 321–345.
- Berretta, M. (1994). Ordini marcati dei costituenti di frase in italiano. La frase scissa. *Vox Romanica*, 53, 79–105.
- Bertinetto, P.M. (1986). *Tempo, aspetto e azione nel verbo italiano. Il sistema dell'indicativo*. Firenze: Accademia della Crusca.
- Callies, M. (2009). *Information Highlighting in Advanced Learner English. The syntax-pragmatics interface in second language acquisition*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Chafe, W. (1975). *Meaning and the Structure of Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chafe, W. (1976). Givenness, contrastiveness, definiteness, subjects, topic and point of view. In C. Li (Ed.), *Subject and Topic* (pp. 25–56). New York: Academic Press.
- Cheng, L. (2008). Deconstructing the *shi...de* construction. *The Linguistic Review*, 25(3–4), 235–266.
- Cui, S., & Sung, K. (2021). *A Reference Grammar for Teaching Chinese. Syntax and Discourse*. Singapore: Springer & Peking University Press.
- D'Achille, P., Proietti, D., & Viviani, A. (2005). La frase scissa in italiano: aspetti e problemi. In I. Korzen, & P. D'Achille (Eds.), *Tipologia linguistica e società* (pp. 249–279). Firenze: Franco Cesati Editore.
- De Cesare, A. M., & Garassino, D. (2018). Adverbial cleft sentences in Italian, French and English. A comparative perspective. In G. M. García, & M. Uth, (Eds.), *Focus Realization in Romance and Beyond* (pp. 255–285). Amsterdam; New York: John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/slcs.201.09dec>
- Declerck, R. (1984). The pragmatics of *IT*-clefts and *WH*-clefts. *Lingua*, 64, 251–289.
- Dik, S. (1997). *The Theory of Functional Grammar I: The Structure of the Clause*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Dik, S., Hoffmann, M. E., de Jong, J. R., & Djiang, S. I. (1981). On the typology of focus phenomena. In T. Hoekstra, H. Van der Hulst, & M. Moortgat (Eds.), *Perspectives of Functional Grammar* (pp. 41–74). Dordrecht: Foris.
- 冯丽娟(2016)。“是...的”(1)中“是”的隐现和“的”的位置研究.海外华文教育, 78(1), 99–103.
- [Feng Lijuan (2016). On the optionality of *shi* and the position of *de* in the ‘*shi...de*’ (1) construction. *Haiwai Huawen Jiaoyu*, 78(1), 99–103.]
- Feng, Q., & Busà, M. G. (2022). Mandarin Chinese-speaking learners' acquisition of Italian consonant length contrast. *System*, 111, 102938.
- Foley, W. A. (2007). A typology of information packaging in the clause. In T. Shopen (Ed.), *Language Typology and Syntactic Description* (2nd ed., vol. I, pp. 362–446). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Frison, L. (1982). Alcune differenze tra l'inglese e l'italiano nel comportamento della frase scissa. *Rivista di grammatica generativa*, 7, 79–121.
- Garassino, D. (2014). Cleft sentences. Italian-English in contrast. In A.M. De Cesare (Ed.), *Frequency, Forms and Functions of Cleft Constructions in Romance and Germanic: Contrastive, Corpus-Based Studies* (pp. 101–138). Berlin; München; Boston: De Gruyter.
- Garassino, D. (2016). Using cleft sentences in Italian and English. A multifactorial analysis. In A. M. De Cesare, & D. Garassino (Eds.), *Current Issues in Italian, Romance and Germanic Non-canonical Word Orders. Syntax-Information Structure-Discourse Organization* (pp. 181–204). Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Grandi, N. (2010). Aspetto. In *Treccani.it – Enciclopedia on line*. Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana. Retrieved June 3, 2024, from [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/aspetto\\_\(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/aspetto_(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano)).

- Grandi, N. (2011). Ordine degli elementi. In *Treccani.it - Enciclopedia dell'italiano*. Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana. Retrieved June 16, 2024, from [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ordine-degli-elementi\\_%28Enciclopedia-dell%27Italiano%29/#:~:text=Possiamo%20quindi%20affermare%20che%20il,cio%C3%A8%20con%20testa%20a%20s%20inistra](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ordine-degli-elementi_%28Enciclopedia-dell%27Italiano%29/#:~:text=Possiamo%20quindi%20affermare%20che%20il,cio%C3%A8%20con%20testa%20a%20s%20inistra)).
- Halliday, M. A.K. (1967). Notes on transitivity and theme in English. *Journal of Linguistics*, 3, 37–81;199–244.
- 韩美(2005). ‘是……的’句语法语义分析. *Dongjiang Journal*, 22(2), 97–103.
- [Han Mei (2005). A semantic-syntactic analysis of the ‘shi...de’ pattern’. *Dongjiang Journal*, 22(2), 97–103.]
- Hartmann, K., & Veenstra, T. (2013). Introduction. In K. Hartmann, & T. Veenstra (Eds.), *Cleft Structure* (pp. 1–32). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hole, D. (2011). The deconstruction of Chinese shì...de clefts revisited. *Lingua*, 121, 1707–1733.
- Huddleston, R., & Pullum, G. (2002). *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Iurato, A. (2024a). *The acquisition of the Chinese 是 shì... de cleft construction: Triangulating corpus and experimental data*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Venice; Bremen: Ca' Foscari University of Venice; University of Bremen.
- Iurato, A. (2024b). Exploring the pragmalinguistic knowledge of the 是 shì... de cleft construction in L1 Italian learners' L2 Chinese: Triangulation of corpus and experimental data. In I. Kecskes, & H. Zhang (Eds.), *Chinese as a Second Language Research from Different Angles* (pp. 76–10). Leiden; Boston: Brill.
- Jackendoff, R. (1972). *Semantic Interpretation in Generative Grammar*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.
- Jing-Schmidt, Z. (2017). Grammatical construction and Chinese discourse. In C. Shei (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Discourse Analysis* (pp. 209–230). London; New York: Routledge.
- Kiss, K. É. (1998). Identificational focus versus informational focus. *Language*, 74(2), 245–273.
- Korzen, I. (2014). Cleft sentences. Italian-Danish in contrast. In A.M. De Cesare (Ed.), *Frequency, Forms and Functions of Cleft Constructions in Romance and Germanic: Contrastive, Corpus-Based Studies* (pp. 217–275). Berlin; München; Boston: De Gruyter.
- Krifka, M. (2007). Basic notions of information structure. In C. Féry, G. Fanselow, & M. Krifka (Eds.), *Interdisciplinary Studies on Information Structure* (vol. 6, pp. 15–55). Postdam: Universitätsverlag Postdam.
- Lambrecht, K. (1994). *Information Structure and Sentence Form*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lambrecht, K. (2000). When subjects behave like objects: An analysis of the merging of S and O in sentence focus constructions across languages. *Studies in Language*, 24, 611–682.
- Lambrecht, K. (2001). A framework for the analysis of cleft constructions. *Linguistics*, 39(3): 463–516.
- Lee, H.-C. (2005). *On Chinese Focus and Cleft Constructions*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Beijing: National Tsing Hua University.
- Li, C. N., & Thompson, S. A. (1981). *Mandarin Chinese: A functional reference grammar*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Li, K. (2008). Contrastive focus structure in Mandarin Chinese. In M. K. M. Chang., & H. Kang (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 20th North American conference of Chinese linguistics (NACCL-20)* (vol 2., pp. 759–774). Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.
- 李讷,安珊笛,张伯江(1998).从话语角度论证语气词“的”.中国语文, 2, 16–19.
- [Li Na, An Shandi, & Zhang Bojiang (1998). Analyzing the modal particle ‘de’ from a pragmatic perspective. *Zhongguo Yuwen*, 2, 16–19.]
- 刘月华(2001).使用现代汉语语法.北京: 商务印书馆.
- [Liu Yuehua (2001). *Practical Modern Chinese Grammar*. Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan.]
- Liu, W., & Kempson, R. (2017). Chinese cleft structures and the dynamics of processing. *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 00, 1–26. doi: 10.1111/1467-968X.12106
- Liu, Y. (2023). *Exhaustivity, Contrastivity, and the Semantics of Mandarin Cleft-related Structures*. Oxon; New York: Routledge.
- Long, H.-P. (2013). On the formation of Mandarin VdeO focus clefts. *Acta Linguistica Hungarica*, 60(4), 409–456.
- 吕比松(1982).关于“是……的”结构的几个问题.语言教学研究, 4, 21–37.
- [Lü Bisong (1982). Some issues on the ‘shi...de’ structure. *Yuyan Jiaoxue yu Yanjiu*, 4, 21–37.]
- Luo, C. (2009). *Cleftability in Language*. Wuhan: Wuhan University Press.
- Mai, Z. (2013). Development of multiple interface conditions in adult L2 acquisition of Chinese shì...de cleft construction. In J. Cabrelli Amaro, T. Judy, & D. Pascual y Cabo (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 12<sup>th</sup> Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Conference (GASLA 2013)* (pp. 106–116). Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Projects.
- Mai, Z., & Boping, Y. (2016). Uneven reassembly of tense, telicity and discourse features in L2 acquisition of the Chinese shì...de cleft construction by adult English speakers. *Second Language Research*, 32(2), 247–276.

- Morbiato, A. (2020). *Il tema in cinese tra frase e testo. Struttura sintattica, informativa e del discorso*. Venezia: Cafoscarina.
- 牛秀兰(1991).关于“是……的”结构句的宾语位置问题.世界汉语教学, 3, 24–27.
- [Niu Xiulan (1991). On the position of the object in the “shi...de” sentence structure. *Shijie Hanyu Jiaoxue*, 3, 24–27.]
- Panunzi, A. (2011). Scisse, frasi. In *Treccani.it - Enciclopedia dell'italiano*. Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana. Retrieved June 16, 2024, from [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/frasi-scisse\\_\(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/frasi-scisse_(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano)).
- Paris, M.-C. (1979). *Nominalization in Mandarin Chinese. The morpheme 'de' and the 'shi...de' constructions*. Paris: Université Paris VII, département de recherches linguistiques.
- Paul, W. & Whitman, J. (2008). Shi...de focus clefts in Mandarin Chinese. *The Linguistic Review*, 25(3–4), 413–451.
- Pinelli, M. C. (2017). “Chi è che ha parlato?” *Aspetti teorici e studio sperimentale delle frasi scisse in italiano*. [Unpublished MA dissertation]. Padova: Università degli studi di Padova.
- Prince, E. (1978). A comparison of WH-clefts and it-clefts in discourse. *Language*, 54, 883–906.
- Reichmann, T. (2005). *Satzspaltung und Informationsstruktur im Portugiesischen und im Deutschen*. Frankfurt am Main; New York: Peter Lang.
- Roberts, C. (1998). Focus, the flow of information and universal grammar. *Syntax and Semantics*, 29, 109–160.
- Rochemont, M. (1986). *Focus in Generative Grammar*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Roggia, C. E. (2009). *Le frasi scisse in italiano. Struttura informativa e funzioni discorsive*. Genève: Éditions Slatkine.
- Romagnoli, C., & Conti, S. (Eds.). (2021). *La lingua cinese in Italia. Studi su didattica e acquisizione*. Roma: Roma Tre Press.
- Ross, C. (1983). On the functions of Mandarin de. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, 11(2), 215–246.
- Sabatini, F. (1985). L'italiano dell'uso medio: una realtà tra le varietà linguistiche italiane. In G. Holtus, & E. Radtke (Eds.), *Gesprochenes Italienisch in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (pp. 154–184). Tübingen: Narr.
- Scibetta, A. (2015). Chinese students' development of textual competence in L2 Italian: A corpus-based study. *Quaderni di Linguistica e Studi Orientali / Working Papers in Linguistics and Oriental Studies*, 1, 205–231. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13128/QULSO-2421-7220-16523>
- Shi, D. (1994). The nature of Chinese emphatic sentences. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics*, 3, 81–100.
- Shyu, S. (2015). Shi 是 .....de 的 sentences. In R. Sybesma (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Chinese language and linguistics*. Retrieved July 9, 2024, from [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2210-7363\\_ecll\\_COM\\_00000092](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2210-7363_ecll_COM_00000092).
- Simpson, A., & Wu, Z. (2002). From D to T- Determiner incorporation and the creation of tense. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics*, 11, 169–209.
- Soh, H. L. (2015). Aspect, modern. In R. Sybesma (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Chinese Language and Linguistics*. Retrieved December 17, 2024, from [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2210-7363\\_ecll\\_COM\\_00000024](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2210-7363_ecll_COM_00000024).
- 宋玉竹(1978).关于“是……的”结构的分析: 语法笔记一则.天津师院学报, 39, 75–76.
- [Song Yuzhu (1978). An analysis of the ‘shi...de’ structure – A grammar note]. *Tianjin Shiyuan Xuebao*, 39, 75–76.]
- 杉村博文(1999). “的”字结构, 承旨与分类.在江和侯(主编)中, 汉语现状与历史的研究 (pp. 25–32). Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.
- [Sugimura, Hirofumi (1999). The Structure, the origin and classification of the character ‘de’. In L. Jiang & J. Hou (Eds.), *Hanyu xianzhuang yu lishi de yanjiu* (pp. 25–32). Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.]
- Vallduví, E. (1993). *The Informational Component*. PhD Dissertation. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- Vallduví, E., & Engdahl, E. (1996). The linguistic realization of information packaging. *Linguistics*, 34, 459–519.
- Vallduví, E., & Vilks, M. (1998). On rheme and contrast. *Syntax and Semantics*, 29, 79–108.
- Van Valin, R. D., & LaPolla, R. J. (1997). *Syntax: Structure, Meaning, and Function*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Xiao, R. & McEnery, T. (2004). *Aspect in Mandarin: A corpus-based study*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- 谢成名(2012).从预设看两种类型的“(是)……的”句及其时体特征.世界汉语教学, 26(4), 478–494.
- [Xie Chengming (2012). Two kinds of (shi)...de sentence and their temporal-aspectual features viewed from the point of presupposition]. *Shijie Hanyu Jiaoxue*, 26(4), 478–494.]
- Xu, Y. (2014). A corpus-based functional study of shi...de constructions. *Chinese Language and Discourse*, 5(2), 146–184. 10.1075/cld.5.2.02xu
- Yang, C.-J. & Ku, M. -C. (2010). On the cleft construction in Mandarin Chinese. In L.E. Clemens, & C.-M. L. Liu (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 22nd North American Conference on Chinese Linguistics (NACCL-22) & the 18th International Conference on Chinese Linguistics (IACL-18)* (pp. 417–429). Cambridge (MA): Harvard University.
- 杨玉琳(2011).现代汉语语法问答.北京:北京大学出版社.
- [Yang Yulin (2011). *Modern Chinese Grammar: Questions and Answers*. Beijing: Peking University Press.]
- Ye, F. (2019). Reflections on the study of Italian as an L2 within the context of Chinese universities. A comment on Italian language learning in Chinese universities. *Quaderni di Linguistica e Studi Orientali / Working Papers in Linguistics and Oriental Studies*, 5, 367–379. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13128/QULSO-2421-7220-25973>.

Yip, P.-C., & Rimmington, D. (2016). *Chinese. A Comprehensive Grammar*. London & New York: Routledge.

袁榆林(2003).从焦点理论看句尾的的句法语义功能.中国语文, 1, 3–16.

[Yuan Yulin (2003). On the syntactic and semantic functions of *De* in the sentence final position: From a viewpoint of the modern focus theory. *Zhongguo Yuwen*, 1, 3–16.]

赵淑华(1979).关于“是……的”句式.语言教学与研究, 1, 57–66.

[Zhao Shuhua (1979). On ‘shi...de’ sentences. *Yuyan Jiaoxue yu Yanjiu*, 1, 57–66.]