

WHERE DOES REANALYSIS START?  
DISCOURSE INFERENCES AND MEANING  
VARIATION IN THE SEMANTICS OF FOCUS  
PARTICLES

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**ABSTRACT** Recent research has criticized the concept of *reanalysis* questioning both its theoretical soundness and its empirical status as an abrupt mechanism of change, showing that it can be broken down into more basic (and gradual) mechanisms of change. Along this line of research, this paper describes the various uses of three focus particles in Italian (*anche* and *pure* ‘also’, *solo* ‘only’). Besides their largely lexical function of selecting one item out of a set, they also show illocutive functions connected to the speech act domain (modification of the illocutionary force of an utterance and speech act specification in an interpersonal perspective). Investigating their meaning variation in different contexts, the suitability of the concept of reanalysis to describe the emergence of new uses is discussed as well as the role of discourse inferences in shaping them. Particular attention is paid to the first stages of reanalysis, using survey data to investigate the blurry boundary between the contextual emergence of new functions and the process of conventionalization.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the functional domain of Italian focus particles in order to discuss the concept of *reanalysis* and issues in connection with it. In the last years, the concept of reanalysis has been thoroughly criticized and its usefulness has been questioned both from a theoretical and from an empirical viewpoint (De Smet 2009, 2014). The issues that have been raised mostly centre around the question of whether reanalysis is a mechanism of change identified by a precise set of defining features or rather the observable re-

sult of other lower-level mechanisms.<sup>1</sup> Questions concerning the dramatic vs gradual nature of reanalysis, the identification of constraining factors and the role of ambiguity in the process round off the debated points.

In this respect, focus particles appear to be an interesting case study. Focus particles prototypically operate as markers of information structure and contribute in different ways to the propositional content of a sentence. In some cases, they may extend their scope over the illocution, acting as operators on the illocutionary force of an utterance and specifying how it must be interpreted according to the interactional common ground. Their variable syntactic scope and the range of functions they can express represent a suitable test bench to investigate structural indeterminacy and the factors favouring their reanalysis from markers of focus structure to illocutionary operators.

This paper focuses especially on the initial stages of reanalysis – exploring cases where the process of change has not yet been fully completed. Describing non-prototypical contexts of occurrence of focus particles, it investigates contextual meaning variation and the role played by discourse inferences in the emergence of new functions. This encourages further reflection about the onset of reanalysis in interaction and the social dimension of reanalysis (spread and conventionalization of innovations throughout the speech community).

The paper is structured as follows: after this introduction, Section 2 sets the theoretical framework used in the present research, introducing key issues of the debate about reanalysis (structural indeterminacy, reanalysis vs. actualization) and discussing the role of inferences in interaction in triggering hearer-based reanalysis. Section 3 investigates the functional space of three Italian focus particles (*anche* and *pure*, both meaning ‘also’; *solo* ‘only’) to further discuss these ideas through specific examples. In Section 4, the topic is empirically explored through a questionnaire on the illocutive uses of *solo* ‘only’, which combines data on reported language use and meaning evaluations. The analysis of the answers brings new insights on the emergence of illocutive functions and their distribution across different conversational contexts. Section 5 contains an overview discussion of the main issues explored throughout the paper, bringing the focus back to reanalysis and the semantics of focus particles. Finally, our conclusions appear in Section 6.

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<sup>1</sup> A similar debate evolved around grammaticalization at the time (see Fischer, Norde & Perriodon 2004).

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## 2 THEORETICAL ISSUES ABOUT REANALYSIS

### 2.1 *The debate about reanalysis*

Classical and much-quoted definitions see reanalysis as “a change in the structure of an expression or class of expressions that does not involve any immediate or intrinsic modification of its surface manifestation” (Langacker 1977: 58) or “a mechanism which changes the underlying structure of a syntactic pattern and which does not involve any modification of its surface manifestation” (Harris 2003: 532). Apart from denoting a mechanism of syntactic change, the label has come to be used in a much broader way in the literature. In a recent contribution, Waltereit (2018: 56) separates two interpretations of reanalysis: “reanalysis as a type of language change among other ones, and reanalysis as the recognition or ‘ratification’ of any kind of change”. According to the first view – as reflected by the two quotes above – reanalysis is a type of language change different from others, for example grammaticalization, with its own features and peculiarities. According to the second view, reanalysis does not identify a specific mechanism of language change, but it broadly refers to the fact that something has changed and – in this way – it is applicable to any kind of language change, as a retrospective recognition. Waltereit (2018: 60–61) goes on to say that “taken together, these two readings suggest that reanalysis is not a phenomenon in the empirical domain, but an analytical category on the theoretical plane”.

This conclusion must be viewed within the broader context of an on-going debate about reanalysis: following intensive discussion about its relationship with grammaticalization (see Haspelmath 1998, Detges & Waltereit 2002), the suitability and the explanatory value of the concept itself have been questioned both on a theoretical and on an empirical level. Specifically, the works of De Smet (2009, 2014) have aimed at integrating the concept of reanalysis in usage-based models of grammar, which tend to be reluctant to recognize discrete language structures and abrupt changes. In this respect, the idea of reanalysis as a uniform mechanism of language change has been criticized, showing that it can be broken down into more fundamental mechanisms with greater explanatory power.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that the traditional concept of reanalysis insufficiently accommodates gradience in grammar and is often conceived as an abrupt change represents the main criticized point. This relates to the necessity of includ-

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<sup>2</sup> De Smet (2009: 1748–1751) identifies three broad types of lower-level mechanisms of change: *categorical incursion*, *gradual category-internal change*, *automation*. In a later paper (De Smet 2014: 37–43) *innovation through analogy*, *syntactic blending* and changes connected to *structural indeterminacy* are discussed.

ing some degree of structural indeterminacy in synchronic grammar, a staple of usage-based approaches to language (see for instance [Bybee & Beckner 2010](#)). Among the examples of structural indeterminacy that undermine the idea of reanalysis as an abrupt change, De Smet discusses syntactically underspecified patterns, observable when constructions undergo “minor semantic changes, which manifest themselves in new instances, but not necessarily in a new category” ([De Smet 2009](#): 1749) – and hybrid forms that “manifest conflicting behavioural features, providing evidence that some surface forms instantiate different underlying structures at the same time” ([De Smet 2014](#): 31). In this way, [De Smet \(2009, 2014\)](#) builds a model of gradual – in a way, barely noticeable – change where a new function evolves through a sequence of small shifts across slightly different contexts. The crucial consequences of this view are a downgrading of the role and stability of syntactic structure and a critique of the posited abruptness of reanalysis, which can no longer be seen as a direct leap from one structure interpretation to another:

In general, the less systematic and pervasive one holds syntactic structure to be, or the more one sees structure as epiphenomenal to function, the narrower the niche for syntax in a model of language becomes. Starting from different theoretical assumptions, many changes can be seen to give rise not so much to novel syntactic structures as to patterns that are syntactically underspecified. ([De Smet 2014](#): 42)

In yet another contribution, [De Smet \(2012\)](#) develops the reasoning in a different direction, discussing the concept of *actualization*, defined as “the process following syntactic reanalysis whereby an item’s syntactic status manifests itself in new syntactic behaviour” ([De Smet 2012](#): 601).<sup>3</sup> He highlights how the spread of a newly reanalysed construction to new syntactic contexts will first affect those contexts that most resemble the original usage contexts of the construction, showing that actualization proceeds from one environment to another on the basis of similarity relations between them. Moreover, the dismantling of the idea of reanalysis as an abrupt category shift and the general downsizing of the role of abstract syntactic generalizations – supported by the uncertainty about the categorial status of items under actualization – leads to the conflation of these two notions: “If reanalysis can be gradual in this way, the temporal primacy of reanalysis over actualization is no longer

<sup>3</sup> A partial synonym of actualization is *conventionalization*, which indicates the progressive inclusion of emergent contextual functions in the coded meaning of a linguistic expression. Conventionalization is commonly used in studies about semantic change (see for instance [Traugott & Dasher 2002](#)).

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logically necessary, and the process of reanalysis can be reconceived as simply part of actualization (which then becomes something of a misnomer)" (De Smet 2012: 629). This is the 'non-definition' of reanalysis on which this paper is based. We should now temporarily suspend this line of reasoning and turn the attention to the conditions which make reanalysis possible.

## 2.2 *Inferences in interaction and reanalysis*

Why does reanalysis lend itself to more than one interpretation and can alternatively be seen as a specific kind of language change, an epiphenomenal ensemble of more fundamental mechanisms or even a theoretical category useful at most to describe commonalities among different kinds of change? Waltereit (2018: 60) points out that the reason for such an overlapping of different readings of reanalysis may be that they all involve the hearer's inferring activity, and specifically an inference on part of the hearer that is not specifically prompted by the speaker.<sup>4</sup> In this way, a parallelism can be established between hearer-based reanalysis and hearer-based inferencing. Inferencing relates to comprehension rather than production and – in a similar way – reanalysis is normally seen as a hearer-driven change (see Detges & Waltereit 2002): they both pertain to the hearer's sphere of activity, which therefore provides a link between the two.

Inferences refer to the cognitive processes by which participants figure out meaning beyond what is said. Inferences arise in context and are responsible for the difference between literal meanings (*what is said*) and communicative meanings (*what is meant*, which corresponds to what is said plus what is implicated by the speaker – that is, to be inferred by the hearer). They are cued by indirectness and they often represent a grey area in communication: in the dynamics of conversations, inferred meanings can be rejected or accepted as relevant in that specific context. Considering the role of inferences in discourse helps to better understand how certain meanings are intentionally suggested on the one side of and how additional meanings are inferred by the other side, shedding light on the process of meaning negotiation between the interlocutors.

Inferences also have a central role in explaining meaning change. Examining the relationship between inferencing, interaction and language change,

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<sup>4</sup> In the case of reanalysis as a kind of language change the hearer makes an inference that reflects the original innovation; in the case of reanalysis as recognition that something has changed, the hearer makes an inference that validates the change at the level of the conventions in the speech community: "In both cases the speaker simply applies new conventions and doesn't specifically invite the hearer to recognize them: this recognition is something that the hearer does of their own accord" (Waltereit 2018: 60).

Ehmer & Rosemeyer (2018) argue for an approach to language change which takes proper account of conversational dynamics, aimed at describing the interactional conditions which favour the emergence of new meanings.<sup>5</sup> They highlight that a close examination of the management of discourse inferences in context can be very fruitfully applied to explain processes of reanalysis/actualization. Concerning processes of semantic change, the crucial point is when – irrespective of the speaker’s original intent – inferred meanings are accepted by the hearer as the most salient ones in a specific context. The pairing of inferred meanings with specific linguistic expressions represents the interactional situation in which contextual reanalysis can start to take place. In this respect, the reanalysis of a new construction in a specific context of use – and the expansion to new ones – can be explained in terms of the degree of expectedness of hearer-based inferences. As a result, the reanalysis of a construction across contexts proceeds as discourse inferences progressively conventionalize:

We could thus expect scenarios such as the ones described above in which the original reanalysis is highly unexpected (and consequently, salient) in discourse. However, once reanalysis has taken place, the same inference becomes much less unexpected in those usage contexts that most resemble the original reanalysis context. These contexts are favored in the actualization process because of cognitive ease; the hearers can use an already established reanalysis pattern based on a more or less conventionalized inference to deal with this new utterance type. (Ehmer & Rosemeyer 2018: 548)

### 2.3 *Reanalysis in the light of language variation*

In order to refine our definition of reanalysis, yet another element must be added to the discussion and, taking a step back and, we should widen the perspective and link reanalysis to more general ideas about language variation and change. According to the view of De Smet (2012) and Ehmer & Rosemeyer (2018), the distance – and the theoretical distinction – between the original innovation and its diffusion through the speech community must be revised: the concept of reanalysis as abrupt structural manipulation is set aside and the process of selection and diffusion of morphosyntactic and semantic variants through the speech community gains prominence (see also Waltreit 2018: 57–60). In this perspective, we should think about speech

<sup>5</sup> This admittedly recalls the notion of *emergent grammar* (see Hopper 1987, Harder 2012).

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interactions as a pool of synchronic variation: lexical items and grammatical constructions appear in discourse coupled with often-changing contextual inferences. As a consequence, hearer-based reanalysis represents one of the possible outputs of the process through which hearers filter this contextual variation and build a mental representation of the meaning of utterances.<sup>6</sup> When they don't directly recognize a specific use of a construction, they can rely on inferential clues to adjust it to the context of utterance – which in turn have the potential to give rise to subtle variation of meaning. At this point – if that construction comes to appear regularly in that context – that variant has the possibility to increase its frequency of use, to spread to new contexts and finally to be recognized as part of the language conventions by a speech community.

This approach to reanalysis – broadly inspired by ideas on sociolinguistic variation (see for instance [Labov 1994](#) and [Milroy & Milroy 1997](#)) – seems particularly suitable to describe emergent functions in the different configurations of a construction<sup>7</sup>: this means – among other things – to identify the typical contexts where discourse inferences are involved, to assess to which extent they are (un)expected and to follow how they are progressively integrated in the coded meaning of the relevant construction. In this scenario, the role of an abrupt structural reanalysis is definitely downsized, in favour of a dynamic view of synchronic variation. This reflects the gradual conventionalization of new uses/constructions, which takes place across different contexts and different speech events. In my view, this point has not only theoretical but also empirical motivations and implications: in the synchronic landscape, variation in usage is something observable and to some extent – however difficult and questionable – measurable, while this is not the case with reanalysis. In this regard, [Ehmer & Rosemeyer \(2018\)](#) introduce the useful concept of *degrees of conventionalization*:

While the use of a construction in a novel context leads to an ad-hoc inference by the hearer (corresponding to a particularized implicature on the speaker side), repeated exposure to the same novel usage will lead to the conventionalization of this inference. The degree of conventionalization of an inference has an important influence on the perception and man-

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<sup>6</sup> This view comes from the analogy that has been established by some researchers between current models of sound change – specifically the work by [Ohala \(1981, 1993\)](#) – and other phenomena of language change, including reanalysis. [Croft \(2000, 2010\)](#) has discussed in depth these arguments, which have been taken up also by [Waltereit \(2012\)](#), [Grossman & Noveck \(2015: 145-146\)](#) and [Ehmer & Rosemeyer \(2018\)](#).

<sup>7</sup> On this, see for instance [Petré \(2019\)](#) and the concept of *assembly*.

agement of inferences, as conventionalized inferences are arguably drawn on a less conscious level and are more robust. This may impact the usage contexts of the constructions that the inferences are associated with. [...] This means that assuming degrees of the conventionalization of an inference and observing the reflexes of this process in interaction can be useful in determining at which point an inference has become part of the encoded meaning of a construction. (Ehmer & Rosemeyer 2018: 548)

In summary, reanalysis should not be interpreted as a phenomenon clearly distinct from the diffusion of a newly reanalysed construction, but as an integral part of it. As discussed above, this echoes the conclusion formulated by De Smet on actualization (De Smet 2012: 629). In this way, reanalysis does not represent an autonomous mechanism of change, but it relates to the gradual emergence of new usage patterns mediated by the conventionalization of discourse inferences. The typical cases are those where – during this process – the syntactic status of a construction changes, and through this reanalysis could be described as a phenomenon at the discourse/syntax interface.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the degrees of conventionalization of inferences should not be seen as levels consequent to the reanalysis of something, but rather as degrees of acceptability of constructions which are more or less present in the competence of speakers as a consequence of the natural variation in the use of grammatical constructions and lexical items.<sup>9</sup>

### 3 FOCUS PARTICLES: A CASE IN POINT

In what follows, we will elaborate on these ideas to analyse various uses of Italian focus particles, dealing specifically with the uncertain categorial status of occurrences that show contextual meaning variation. This will lead to further reflections on the paths of development they can follow, the suitability

<sup>8</sup> However, this largely relies on the initial idea we adopt about syntactic structures and different frameworks can sharply diverge on this (see De Smet 2014: 42).

<sup>9</sup> Even with the reference to a *natural variation of use*, (almost) nothing is determined just by chance – of course. The distributional and structural features of constructions and lexical items represent constraints to their variation of usage and, as consequence, to their possibility of being involved in language change. I quote once more Waltereit (2012: 65), who argues: “If anything, items lend themselves to particular uses more than to others, thereby constraining, to a certain extent, their further diachronic trajectory”. Further constraints are possibly represented by cognitive factors (in the process of inferencing) and sociolinguistic factors (in the process of diffusion and conventionalization of variants). This is an interesting topic, but it would require a separate and in-depth treatment.

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ity of the concept of reanalysis to describe the emergence of new uses and the role of discourse inferences in shaping them. Through these examples I wish to contribute in particular to a better understanding of the first stages of reanalysis, that is the stages which precede full change on some underlying structural level.

### 3.1 *Focus particles: marking of information structure and illocutive uses*

At least since König (1991), a basic distinction has always been drawn between additive and exclusive focus particles, prototypically identified by items like English *also* (additive) and *only* (exclusive). The focus particles taken into consideration here represent the prototypical members of these two categories in Italian: *anche* and *pure* for additive focus particles, *solo* for exclusive focus particles.<sup>10</sup> As far as their contribution to the meaning of a sentence is concerned, the essential property of focus particles is their interaction with the information structure of an utterance, that is with a structured proposition analysed in terms of focus and background (König 1991: 29–37). Focus particles are associated with the focus of a sentence, and by this they evoke alternatives to its denotation. These alternatives are not simply given in the external world but are selected by speakers as relevant for their arguments. On the hearer’s side, the alternatives evoked are part of the contextual inferences that allow the right interpretation of focus particles in a specific utterance. The meaning of focus particles can generally be described in terms of the contribution they make either to the truth conditions of a sentence or the presuppositions of a sentence. I will give an example for exclusive focus particles.

- (1) (a) *Giorgio ha comprato solo delle mele.*  
Giorgio have.3SG bought only ART apples  
'Giorgio only bought apples.'
- (b) *Giorgio ha comprato delle mele.*  
'Giorgio bought apples.' [presupposition]
- (c) *Giorgio non ha comprato nient'altro.*  
'Giorgio didn't buy anything else.' [assertion]

A sentence like (1a) can be described as the sum of two propositions, represented here by sentences (1b) and (1c). The sentence *Giorgio ha comprato solo delle mele* 'Giorgio only bought apples' (1a) builds on the presupposition that

<sup>10</sup> With reference to Italian, some of the most important contributions on focus particles are Ricca (1999), Andorno (1999, 2000) and De Cesare (2010, 2015).

*Giorgio bought apples* (1b) and activates the entailment that *Giorgio didn't buy anything else* (1c). Focus particles, then, contribute quantificational force to the meaning of a sentence – they quantify over the set of possible alternatives to the value of the focused expression.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, the meaning contribution of *solo* ‘only’ is to exclude these alternatives as possible values for the open sentence in its scope.

Focus particles show synchronic and diachronic overlap with other linguistic categories, and some of their uses are better described as functional developments of focus particles: in this case, concerning their syntactic scope, they don't operate on sentence constituents but on other units and, concerning their semantic contribution, they don't have an effect of quantification: no set of alternatives is opposed to a focused sentence constituent.<sup>12</sup> In the following, we will deal with illocutive uses of focus particles, functional expansions towards the domain of common ground management and illocutionary modification. These are exemplified for instance by the refutational use of *too* found in some varieties of American English (2) and the independent use of German *auch* in exclamations (3):

(2) A: *You did not do your homework!*

B: *I did **too**!*

(3) *Das IST **auch** ein Problem!*

‘Hey, that's a real problem!’

(Schwenter & Waltereit 2010: 83)

This kind of items has been discussed especially in the German linguistic tradition – where they are called *modal particles* or *Abtönungspartikeln* ‘shading particles’ (Weydt 1969, 1979, Abraham 1991, Meibauer 1994, König 1997, Waltereit 2001, 2006). Another possible label is *illocutionary operators*, used for instance by Hengeveld & Mackenzie (2008: 83) to refer to grammatical items that emphasize or mitigate a specific illocutionary act. Although their semantics is a well-known matter of debate, these uses share the fact that the marker seems to be associated with a verbal focus (König 2017: 37). However, the alternatives they evoke are not denotations of other verbs, and so the more

11 There is however a structural asymmetry in the meaning of the two sub-classes distinguished: additive particles operate on a presupposition; exclusive focus particles contribute to truth-conditional meaning (König 1991: 52–56).

12 The issue of the development of focus particles and, more generally, focus-marking constructions is an underexplored topic, at least from a typological perspective. A promising approach is represented by Eckardt & Speyer (2014: 504–508) where they mention *bleached focus constructions* in a posited *focus cline*.

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plausible analysis is that these particles – scoping on the whole utterance – operate on the illocution carried by the verb, rather than on a specific overt constituent.

In the literature, at least two macro-functions are mentioned that we will use as guidelines for our analysis. On the one hand, illocutionary operators operate on the management of the information flow with respect to what has been explicitly mentioned in the discourse but also considering what can be indirectly inferred from previous discourse elements (Squartini 2017). On the other hand, they contribute to fine-tuning of speech acts (Waltereit 2001, 2012, Detges & Gévaudan 2018), emphasising or mitigating the illocutionary force and facilitating the interpretation of speech acts in an interpersonal perspective. We move now to the analysis of some contexts where Italian focus particles show a non-prototypical behaviour, since it is not clear whether they operate as modifiers of focus at the level of information structure or rather as modifiers of the illocutionary force of the speech act. These conversational contexts may favour the reanalysis of focus particles and lead to the emergence of illocutive uses.

### 3.2 *Focus particles: anche and pure in Italian*

The first example is represented by the use of *anche* in (4), taken from a television advertising of some years ago and discussed by Andorno (2003: 185–186). To correctly contextualize the utterance, we must imagine the following scenario. At night-time, from the inside of a bank, a robber states his terms with a megaphone to the police. During the negotiation, a man in his pyjamas looks out of a window and warns the police to shut up and let the people sleep. Replying to the disapproving look of the police chief, an inspector says with a conciliatory tone:

- (4) *Sono anche le tre.*  
be.3PL too DET three  
'It's three in the morning.'

In this example, *anche* has a mitigating effect. Normal focus-particle interpretation is excluded, since it is not possible to identify alternative values to a constituent in focus (as suggested by unacceptable paraphrases like 'It's three a.m. and it's also some other time' or 'It's three a.m. and it's cold'). Although *anche* keeps its value of additive particle, the additive value serves a function of argumentative operator. Depending on the context, it can support the arguments of the man in pyjamas ('We have good reason to go on with our

work, but we have to consider it's three in the morning') or accept the possible reasons of the detective ('Actually it's three in the morning, but this is only one of the facts we should consider in such circumstances'). In this way, *anche* does not evoke alternative focus values, but alternative utterances and a rough paraphrase of the utterance could be: 'Among the different things we can say, we have to say that it's three in the morning'.

How can this specific use of *anche* be explained? We could posit a process of syntactic reanalysis, from focus modifier to utterance modifier and a pragmatic re-use of the adverb for argumentative purposes. However, it doesn't appear strictly necessary to posit a second meaning for the adverb since its mitigating effect could be explained through the interaction of its additive semantics and the particular context of interaction, more precisely the background of possible propositions at issue in the common ground and the inferences that the interlocutors can draw about the respective mental states. In this perspective, echoing De Smet (2014: 31–33), example (4) could be better described as a hybrid use of *anche*, supported by some degree of structural indeterminacy.

A second illocutionary context in which *anche* shows a non-prototypical use is exemplified by the directive in (5), taken from a chat group:

- (5) A: *Rob, passo a prenderti?*  
 'Rob, should I pick you up?'  
 B: *Ok! Mi faccio trovare a pozzo per le 9 e venti circa*  
 'Ok! I will be at the Pozzo metro station around twenty past nine'
- A: *Fai anche 25 che Mic tanto 5 min*  
 do.IMP.2SG also 25 COMP Mic anyway 5 minutes  
*ritarda*  
 be\_late.3SG  
 'You can also be there at twenty-five past nine. Mic is 5 minutes late anyway'

In this case too, a normal focus-particle interpretation is excluded, since it is not possible to identify alternative values to a constituent in focus. In example (5) *anche* does not add a new alternative (it rather replaces the previous one) and it modifies the whole directive without having scope over a single sentence constituent. In this context, a figure/ground shift between meanings occurs (Koch 2001): additivity is still part of the semantics of *anche*, but it is backgrounded – while the mitigating effect comes to the foreground. Typically, this happens in contexts where an inference of invitation or permission

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for the interlocutor to do something is at play and the semantic contribution of *anche* spans from suggesting a generic set of actions that the interlocutor can do (for instance, to come a bit later) to the mitigation of the directive. In this way, a contextual inference is profiled as the main meaning component of the construction. Like for the previous example, we can ask ourselves how to explain this use of *anche*, if it is necessary to hypothesize a full syntactic reanalysis or we can leave room for structural indeterminacy.

In the case of additive focus particles in Italian, a further perspective can be found by comparing the behaviour of *anche* with the behaviour of *pure*, which is an additive particle as well (6a), but also shows an independent use as an illocutionary operator (7a). While the two adverbs are fully equivalent in their use as focus particles (6a–b), they behave differently as regards their illocutive uses. In this case, *pure* shows a much broader distribution than *anche*, which for instance cannot appear in simple imperatives with a mitigating effect (7a–b):

- (6) (a) *Viene pure Giorgio stasera.*  
come.IND.3SG also Giorgio tonight  
'Giorgio is also coming tonight.'
- (b) *Viene anche Giorgio stasera.*  
come.IND.3SG also Giorgio tonight  
'Giorgio is also coming tonight.'
- (7) (a) *Vieni pure!*  
come.IMP.2SG also  
'Please come in!'
- (b) \**Vieni anche!*  
come.IMP.2SG also  
\*'Please come in!'

As an illocutionary operator *pure* appears (mainly) in directive speech acts: it mitigates a directive, assigning to it the function of a permission or invitation. It is important to stress that, in the case of *pure*, the specification of the speech act is not mediated by contextual inferences, but autonomously coded in the semantics of the adverb: in (7a), the reading of *pure* as an illocutionary operator is the only one possible. In contrast to *anche* – which can appear with illocutive functions only in few contexts and specific verbs – the use of *pure* as an imperative particle is widely attested in contemporary Italian (and

easily retrievable in corpora).<sup>13</sup> In this way, *pure* covers a broader – fully conventionalized – functional space and this difference is also reflected by clear formal differences between the two elements. In other words, it provides a clear example of polysemy (use as a focus particle vs. use as a modal particle in imperative sentences) and double syntactic representation (propositional level vs illocutive level). In other words, that is an example of full reanalysis.<sup>14</sup>

### 3.3 Focus particles: *solo* in Italian

We move now to the focus particle *solo* ‘only’. The prototypical use of *solo* is its use as an exclusive focus particle, but a small set of illocutionary uses is attested as well in two types of contexts that correspond to different kind of speech acts: directive speech acts and assertive speech acts (see Favaro 2020 for a detailed analysis).<sup>15</sup> In these contexts, the adverb operates on the illocution and it doesn’t show quantificational force with exclusive meaning: there is no set of alternatives opposed to a focused sentence constituent. The meaning of *solo* in such constructions is twofold: on the one hand, it operates on the illocutionary force marking emphasis on the speech act; on the other hand, it contributes to the common ground management, signalling a contrast between the speech act and some proposition that is assumed to be present in the common ground (and thus also entertained by the addressee). These two facets of meaning, which in principle seem to exist side by side, not always have the same weight in every context. This can be illustrated by two examples, one for each kind of speech act:

13 More broadly, while *pure* can substitute *anche* in most contexts where the latter expresses illocutive functions – for instance the directive in (5) above – the opposite does not hold true, as shown by (7a–b). It could also be the case that *anche* and *pure* in directives activate different inferences, whereby the first operates rather on the part of the speaker (*invitation* to do something) and the second on the part of the addressee (*permission* to do something). This distinction is however not clear at all and it would need more research.

14 This is further confirmed by diachronic corpus data. In a study of the meanings of *pure* in Old Italian (1200–1375), Ricca (2017: 46 fn3) deliberately excludes the description of the use of *pure* postposed to imperatives with permission/mitigation function “since they arose after the period covered here”. This may be not completely true – as few examples of illocutive *pure* can also be found for the Old Italian stage – but it is certain that their increase in frequency and diffusion represents a later development (see Favaro 2021).

15 These uses are quite uncommon and unevenly distributed in contemporary Italian – due to sociolinguistic markedness (regional and diaphasic variation) – a topic that this paper will not deal with (see however Section 4 for some more hints).

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(8) [Roberta asks Anna about her commitments the following day]

- *Hai tanto da fare domani?*  
have.2SG a lot to do.INF tomorrow  
'Are you very busy tomorrow?'
- *Lascia solo stare, sono piena tutto il giorno!*  
let.IMP.2SG only stay.INF be.1SG full all ART day  
'Don't even ask, I'm busy all day.'

(Favaro 2020: 123)

In the first subset of illocutive uses, *solo* occurs in directives. In example (8) the illocutionary force dimension prevails and the adverb marks emphasis on the directive. However, the common ground dimension is not completely excluded, as the directive marked by *solo* seems to explicitly contrast some assumption at issue in this context. The speaker attributes some proposition to the addressee's mind (*We could arrange something together*) and she contrasts this proposition with the directive, presenting it as the obvious action the addressee should do.

(9) [Giorgio, annoyed by a long discussion with friends]

*In effetti, prima di parlare informati, ha*  
actually before to talk.INF inform-yourself.IMP.2SG have.3SG  
*solo ragione Ceci a dire che ti inventi certe*  
only reason Ceci to say.INF COMP REFL make\_up.2SG some  
*cose!*  
things

'Actually, before you talk inform yourself, Ceci is absolutely right saying that you make up things!'

(Favaro 2020: 124)

In the second subset of illocutive uses, *solo* occurs in assertions. In the context of example (9), a proposition like *Someone thinks that Ceci is (not) right* is active in the common ground.<sup>16</sup> The speaker corrects this proposition with an emphatic assertion, presenting it as the obvious proposition one should take into account. In this case, the common ground dimension seems to prevail, but the illocutionary force dimension is also at play and the adverb contributes to the specification of the speech act by emphasizing its illocutionary force.

<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that in this case both the affirmative and the negative proposition could be at issue, depending on the context. In fact, what the speaker wants to exclude is the possibility that their emphatic assertion could be challenged or questioned, and not necessarily one of the two versions (that largely depend on the communicative situation).

These contexts of use allow us to posit for *solo* an ongoing process of change, which again shows the features of what De Smet (2009) defines as *gradual category-internal change*. In fact, although the adverb in these constructions shows new functions, the link with its use as a focus particle is still clear and – from a syntactic point of view – it is not easy to assess if it operates on the propositional or on the illocutionary level. In particular, part of the new meaning is linked to contextual factors and discourse inferences. As a consequence, the question arises what inferences appear in which context and in which order – and how to include them in a model of change. In the next section, through the analysis of survey data about *solo*, we will try to follow the conventionalization paths of the inferences, which reflect the gradual reanalysis of *solo* from focus particle to illocutionary operator.

#### 4 AN EMPIRICAL CASE-STUDY: A LOOK INTO THE EMERGENT USES OF *SOLO*

Combining the theoretical reasoning of Section 2 and the discussion about illocutive uses of focus particles of Section 3, I will now apply this model to the emergent uses of Italian *solo*. The relationship between discourse inferences, meaning change and structural reanalysis will be further explored in order to better describe the on-going process of reanalysis. At this stage of the process, it would maybe go too far to define the adverb as a fully-reanalysed item and the illocutive uses of *solo* can still be interpreted as shaped by contextual inferences. Nevertheless, these early developments give insights into the issue of where reanalysis starts, allowing us to closely investigate what kind of contexts favour it and how discourse inferences are managed by interlocutors in interaction.<sup>17</sup> We can moreover seek to capture not only subtle meaning variations but also their position on the conventionalization route.

##### 4.1 *The questionnaire*

The research instrument used to investigate this topic is a sociolinguistic questionnaire, aimed at collecting speakers' judgments on the illocutive uses of *solo*. It consists of 12 stimuli: 6 utterances where the adverb appears in a directive construction and 6 utterances where it appears in assertions. Two stimuli of each category were inserted as controls (prototypical uses of *solo* as a focus particle). Most of the stimuli have been proposed in the form of

<sup>17</sup> In this perspective, sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic and experimental synchronic studies have the advantage of enabling the investigation of the actual mechanisms through which inferences are dealt with in the actions of the participants. This is because, compared to diachronic data, we can count on a better understanding of the contextual meanings and of the inferences that can be drawn in conversation.

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adapted cartoons, so that there was enough context to clarify what reading we wanted to suggest.

The questionnaire is divided in two parts. In the first one, for each stimulus, the respondents are invited to comment on the use of specific constructions. Concerning this task, the label *reported language use* has been used to refer to the (reported) familiarity with these uses – expressed through a personal evaluation of them. This parameter includes an evaluation concerning the ‘passive familiarity’ with a construction (‘Have you ever heard such a sentence?’) and an evaluation concerning the ‘active familiarity’ (‘Do you use such a sentence?’).

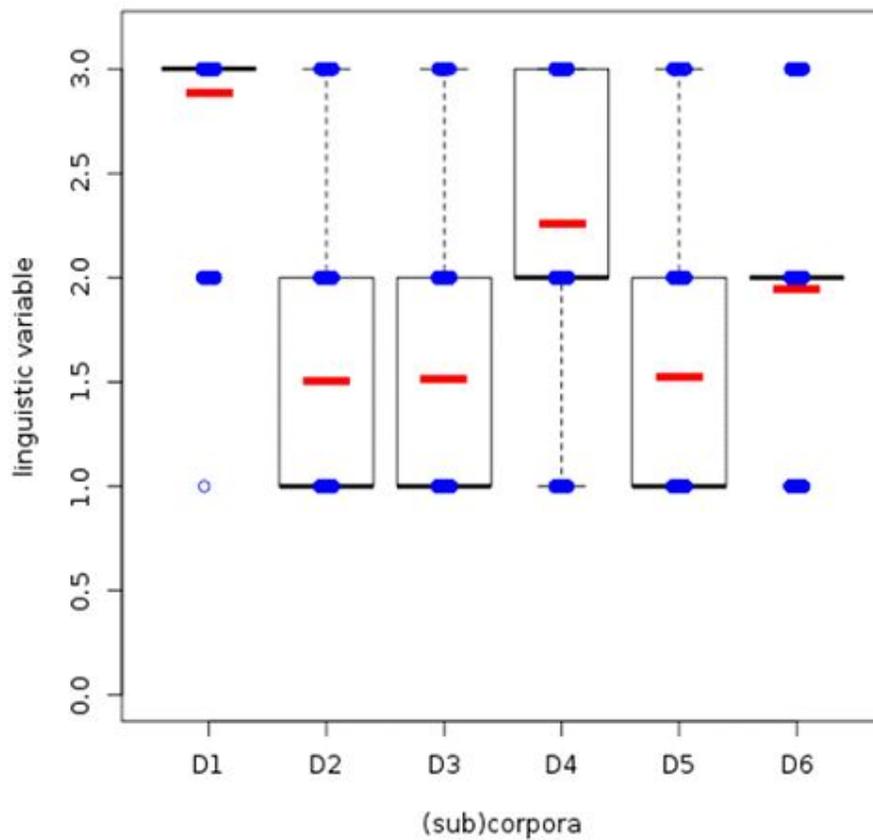
In the second part – which represents the most relevant one for the present study – the kind of meaning attached to the utterance was investigated. It consists of two questions which cover eight stimuli (three directives, three assertions plus the two controls). The first one is an open question (‘Would it make a difference if the sentence were without *solo*?’) where the respondents can provide a free reading of the proposed stimulus, thus suggesting what kind of inferences and secondary meanings they link to it. This is useful to test if the speakers’ insights match our own hypotheses. The second one is a multiple-choice question with three possible answers: a paraphrase expressing emphasis on the illocutionary force, a paraphrase expressing management of the common ground, and finally the possibility to choose both meanings for the proposed stimulus or something else.

#### 4.2 Overall reported language use

We collected 570 answers from different regions in Italy. Even if this issue is not at the centre of the present research, it can be useful – as a preliminary overview – to consider the answers concerning the reported language use (first part of the questionnaire).<sup>18</sup> The boxplots in Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the overall results of the passive familiarity of the two illocutive contexts. In the graphs, the labels D1–D6 and A1–A6 on the horizontal axis (labeled *(sub)corpora*) correspond to the proposed stimuli<sup>19</sup> and the numerical values on the vertical axis (labeled *linguistic variable*) to the possible answers. Numerical values have been associated to each of the possible answers for the purposes of a quantitative evaluation of the results: 1.0 counts as ‘never’,

18 A more in-depth and detailed study about the reported language use of these constructions – discussed against the background of sociolinguistic variation and language contact – can be found in Favaro & Gorla (2019).

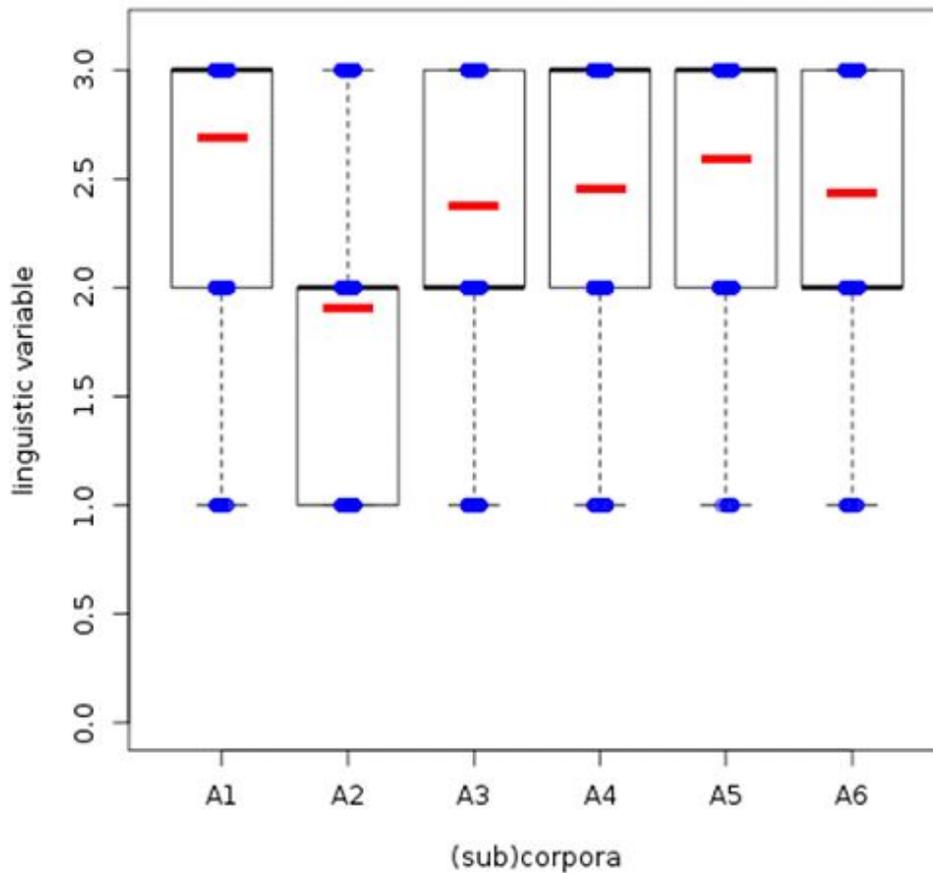
19 The proposed stimuli are utterances along the lines of examples (8) and (9) cited above, which have been modelled after real examples extracted from the web or heard in every-day conversations.



**Figure 1** Directives with *solo*: ‘Have you ever heard such a sentence?’

2.0 as ‘sometimes’ and 3.0 as ‘often’. The box graphically represents the area where most answers are concentrated, and the bold black line of each box represents the median value of each stimulus. Moreover, the red line (which allows a quick comparison of the results) represents the mean value of the answers for each stimulus.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The boxplots have been created with Lancaster Stats Tool online (Brezina 2018) which provides a free-available and user-friendly set of statistic tests and data-visualization tools based on R code. The representation of the mean value – which is quite uncommon for boxplots – represents an in-built feature of the boxplots obtained through the Lancaster Stats Tool online.



**Figure 2** Assertions with *solo*: ‘Have you ever heard such a sentence?’

From the comparison of the two graphs we can make a few important remarks. The first box in each graph corresponds to the control stimulus (prototypical use of *solo* as a focus particle): they are clearly more acceptable than the others, as the mean of the answers ranks higher on the scale, near to the value 3.0 that corresponds to the answer ‘often’. But otherwise, the results are quite different across the two series: the use of *solo* in directives is overall less acceptable than its use in assertions. If we focus on the results of Figure 2, we notice in fact that the proposed stimuli – with the exception of A2 – attain values not too far from the control value, between 2.0 and 2.5 (that is, over the threshold of ‘sometimes’). The picture looks different for the answers of Figure 1: the proposed stimuli attain quite mixed values (D2, D3 and D5 have

1.5, D4 is over 2.0 and D6 just below) and they are overall much lower than the control stimulus. These results allow us to draw a first general conclusion: the non-focusing uses of *solo* are considered more familiar in utterances expressing assertions and less familiar in utterances expressing directives. The illocutive use of *solo* in directives, then, turns out to be more marked than its use in assertions and more clearly separated from the prototypical use of *solo* as a focus particle.

### 4.3 *Open questions: detecting inferences*

We focus now on the results concerning the meaning of the constructions, investigated in the second part of the questionnaire.<sup>21</sup> As a first step we examined the answers to the open questions ('Would it make a difference if the sentence were without *solo*?'). The goal of this part was to provide a space where respondents could give a free reading of the proposed stimulus, using their own categories and expressing their own insights. Examining the answers, the main aim was to identify what kind of interpretation the respondents give to these utterances and their contexts, in order to throw light on what kind of inferences and secondary meanings they link to it. The great majority of answers match rather well the working hypothesis of two 'clouds' of emergent meanings, the first one related to the emphatic marking of the illocutionary force, the second related to the common ground management. In Table 1 some relevant answers (translated into English) are listed:

<sup>21</sup> This part of the analysis builds upon a limited dataset. As it has already been said, the second part of the questionnaire covers only eight stimuli, on which the analysis is based (D1, D2, D4, D5 for the directives, A1, A3, A4, A6 for the assertions). Moreover, we will only consider the 120 answers of respondents from Piedmont – a region in the north-west of Italy – since some of these uses occur only in the regional variety of Italian spoken there.

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Stimulus	Exclusive reading	Illocutionary force reading	Common ground reading
D1	Without <i>solo</i> it would mean that patience is not the only thing you need to do that activity.	Here <i>solo</i> reinforces the concept.	-
D2	-	It has reinforcing value.	With <i>solo</i> we understand that Hobbes has said what Calvin thought.
D4	-	It would be less emphatic.	In this case <i>solo</i> contributes to make sense of the second part of the sentence. Without it, there would be no connection.
A1	-	It would be less emphatic.	-
A3	-	The sentence would be less strong.	Here <i>solo</i> implies an unexpected contrast between the two opinions.
A4	-	Here <i>solo</i> reinforces her stance.	Without <i>solo</i> there would be no direct comparison between what is happening in that moment and what Cecilia says usually happens.

**Table 1** Answer to the open question: ‘Would it make a difference if the sentence were without *solo*?’

As expected, for the context D1 – that is the control stimulus – we find a prototypical exclusive reading (‘Without *solo* it would mean that patience is not the only thing you need to do that activity’) and an emphatic reading (‘Here *solo* reinforces the concept’), suggesting that this inference is the first one to come into play. In the other contexts no exclusive reading is mentioned, and most answers suggest an emphatic reading, related to the marking of the illocutionary force: for example, ‘It has reinforcing value’ for D2 or ‘It would be less emphatic’ for D4. At the same time, however, some respondents suggest a different kind of reading which seems to be related to common ground management, that is a reference to some proposition activated in the context of exchange or attributed to the interlocutor’s mind. An example is the answer ‘With *solo* we understand that Hobbes has said what Calvin thought’ (referring to the two characters in the cartoon) for D2 and the answer ‘In this case *solo* contributes to make sense of the second part of the sentence. Without it there would be no connection [with the first one]’ for D4.

This picture also applies to the answers regarding the assertions with some minor differences. In the context A1 – the control context – the emphatic reading clearly prevails on the exclusive one. In the other contexts, the emphatic reading is always present, but many respondents give answers explicitly attributable to a common ground reading, like ‘Here *solo* implies an

unexpected contrast between the two opinions' for A3 and 'Without *solo* there would be no direct comparison between what is happening in that moment and what Cecilia says usually happens' for A4.

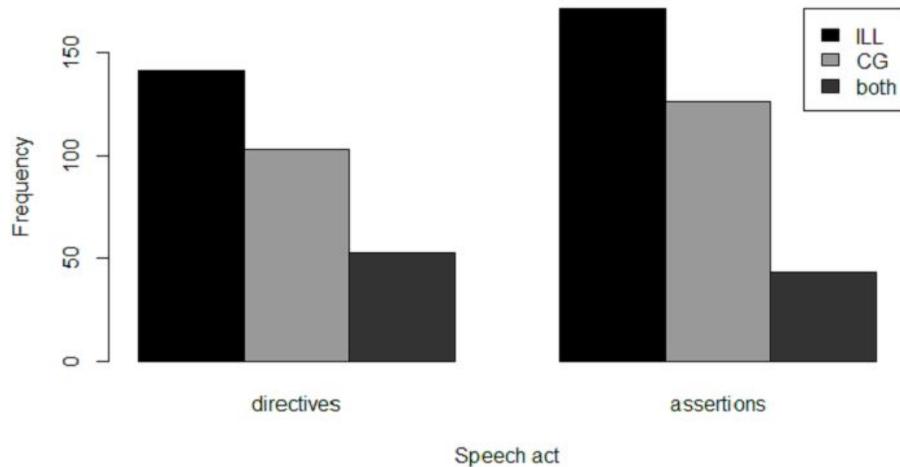
The analysis of the answers to the open question allows us to make some points. First of all, it confirms the starting hypothesis that the emergent functions of *solo* are linked to two different domains, marking of illocutionary force and common ground management. Overall, the first domain clearly prevails in the answers, but it is remarkable that some respondents explicitly mention the common ground domain.<sup>22</sup> We keep on calling them emergent functions because it is almost impossible to identify contexts in which a reading based on the notion of *exclusivity* (the main semantic feature of the prototypical use of *solo* as a focus particle) is totally ruled out. In this respect, the emergent functions appear still to be linked to inferences activated in the context. On the other hand, however – with the self-explaining exception of the control contexts – this kind of reading is never overtly mentioned by the respondents. In this sense, the answers reveal the on-going conventionalization of contextual inferences as coded meanings and the reanalysis of the focus particle as an illocutionary operator. Now, we must figure out at what point along this path they are, if the two inferences can be combined or if they are mutually exclusive.

#### 4.4 Multiple-choice questions: inferences across conversational contexts

Moving to a quantitative view of the multiple-choice questions, we find no major differences in the distribution of the functions across the two broad contexts of use (directive and assertive speech acts). As for the overall frequency of the answers – now excluding the control stimuli D1 and A1 – both in the directives and in the assertions the illocutionary force reading (in Figure 3 labelled as 'ILL', which stands for illocution) prevails over the common ground reading (in Figure 3 labelled as 'CG') nevertheless well covered:<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> This was not necessarily an expected result. Functions related to the common ground management are quite elusive and their identification requires a thorough analysis. By explicitly mentioning it in the answers, the respondents also demonstrate a high degree of linguistic self-awareness.

<sup>23</sup> The exact values are: considering the directives, 141 answers for ILL, 103 for CG and 53 for both; considering the assertions, 171 answers for ILL, 126 for CG and 43 for both.



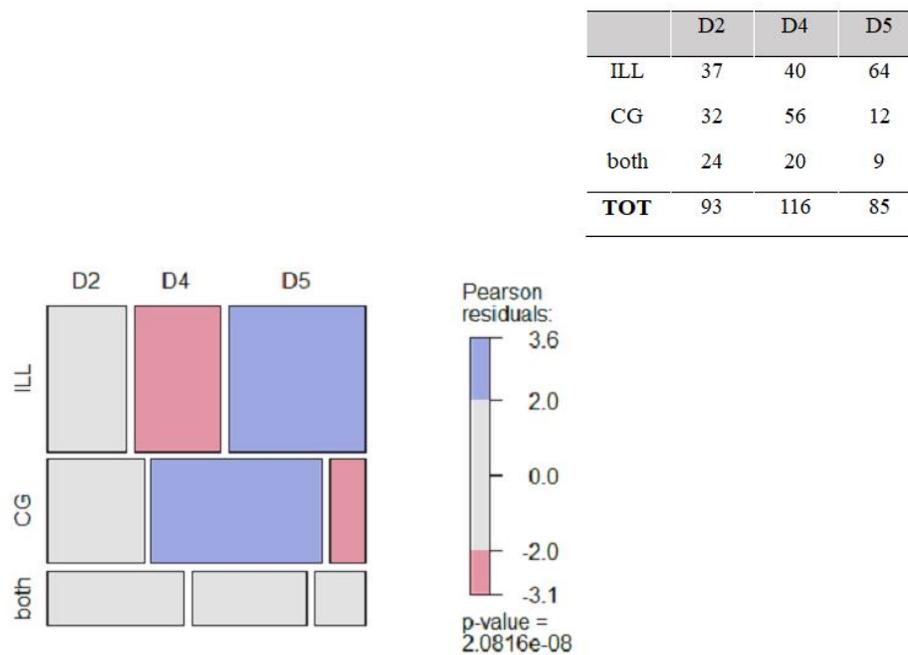
**Figure 3** Bar plot of the functions of *solo* in directives and assertions

For these counts, we cross-referenced the answers regarding the meaning with the answers about reported language use and we have considered only the respondents who affirmed to have heard ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ these constructions. This slightly reduces the amount of answers, but we didn’t want to count and evaluate sloppy answers from respondents who actually don’t recognize the constructions under analysis.

However, a closer look at the single contexts complicates the picture. In fact, we observe an irregular distribution of the three possible meaning options in each context. In the case of directives, for example, the common ground reading dominates in context D4, whereas in context D5 the illocutionary force reading clearly prevails. Context D2 shows a more balanced situation. In the case of assertions too, we observe an irregular distribution. Here the common ground reading dominates in context A3, whereas in context A4 the empathic reading prevails and context A6 shows a more balanced situation. The results are visualized through the mosaic plots in Figure 4 and Figure 5:<sup>24</sup>

In these graphs the colour of shading corresponds to the sign of the residuals, that is the differences between the observed and expected frequency divided by the square root of the expected value. Positive residuals (frequency

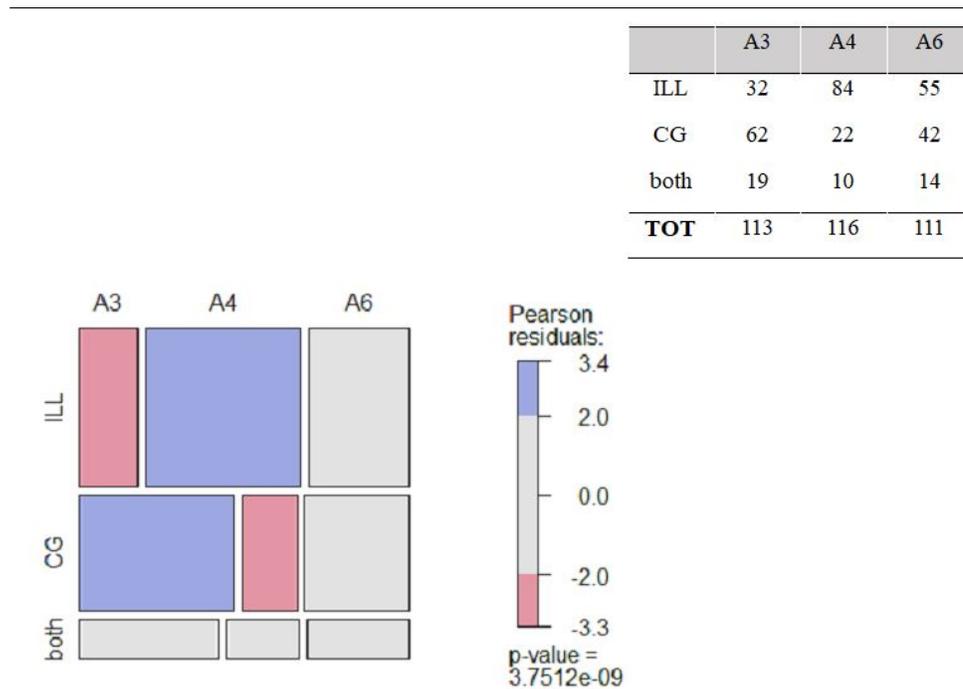
<sup>24</sup> The mosaic plots use a  $\chi^2$ -statistic and have been created through the software of statistical analysis R (R Core Team 2019). See also Levshina (2015: 199–222).



**Figure 4** Mosaic plot of the functions of *solo* in directives

is greater than what can be expected by chance) are indicated by blue rectangles, negative residuals (frequency is smaller than what can be expected by chance) by pink rectangles. The analysis reveals significant differences in the functions assigned to *solo* by respondents in different contexts. Nevertheless, also considering the irregular distribution of the functions across the single stimuli and the two broader illocutionary contexts, it is hard to identify an explanatory variable for this distribution other than the specificities of each context of occurrence: some contexts favour an illocutionary force reading (D5, A4), other contexts favour a common ground reading (D4, A3). For this reason, it is not possible to hypothesize a single path of development. It is probably better to conceive two parallel paths – corresponding to different inferences which both can arise from the use of *solo* as a focus particle in specific conversational contexts – leading to different readings. However, they can co-exist in the same construction as different shades of meaning, which

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**Figure 5** Mosaic plot of the functions of *solo* in assertions

can be foregrounded or backgrounded according to the context of interaction.

## 5 DISCUSSION: STRUCTURAL INDETERMINACY, REANALYSIS AND THE SEMANTICS OF FOCUS PARTICLES

The empirical research conducted through the questionnaire has allowed us to better understand the distribution and the meanings of the illocutive uses of *solo*. We have described the properties of two different emergent functions: an emphatic reading – when the adverb mainly strengthens the illocutionary force of the utterance – and a common ground reading – when the adverb contributes to signal a contrast between its host utterance and some proposition activated in the common ground. The analysis of the answers of the second part of the questionnaire (open questions and multiple-choice questions about the meanings of these constructions) showed that the illocutionary force reading prevails as regards overall frequency. However, the

common ground reading is also well represented and, in some cases, even reaches a higher number of replies. The absence of correlation between the kind of speech act (directives or assertions) and a specific reading supports the hypothesis that the emergent functions differ according to the specific contexts of the stimulus rather than speech act they occur in: different inferences arise in different conversational contexts. The functions of *solo* span from the semantic domain of exclusivity and scalarity (use as a focus particle) to the domain of the illocution and common ground management (use as an illocutionary operator). The emergence of the new functions, then, can be described as the sum of minor semantic changes mediated by the gradual conventionalization of discourse inferences – which correspond to different facets of emergent meanings, those more linked to the expression of the illocutionary force and those more linked to the management of the common ground.

These observations are linked with the discussion on the semantics of focus particles in Section 3, where they have been proposed as an appropriate case study to investigate structural indeterminacy. They prototypically have scope over sentence constituents and act as modifier of focus, but they can also extend their scope on the illocution – projecting the proposition over a background of other propositions activated in the common ground. In specific conversational contexts, some constructions can turn into semi-fixed argumentative routines where the speakers take advantage of slightly deviating uses of a focus particle to index common ground information or to modify the illocutionary force of a speech act. In these contexts, they can be reanalysed as illocutionary operators, linguistic elements that contribute to the modification of the illocutionary force and to manage the relationship between the utterance they have scope over and the common ground. Along the process of conventionalization, these uses spread to new contexts, show an increase in frequency and get entrenched in the speakers' competence. Only in some cases is there structural evidence demonstrating that these particles operate at different grammatical levels, but in the clearest ones (for instance in the case of *pure* cited in (7a – b) above) they show different meanings according to the grammatical level they operate on. And yet the issue of structural evidence is not essential – at least at this point of the analysis. As it has been pointed out by De Smet (2014: 43): “Especially where the evidence is dubious [...] the syntactic structure language users assign may simply leave the problematic aspects of structure unspecified”. In this respect, the ambiguous uses of *anche* and *solo* discussed in Section 3 – characterized by variable syntactic scope – demonstrate how underspecified syntactic patterns are an ideal locus for language change.

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Nevertheless, at some point small shifts do add up to structural differences. In this perspective, structural indeterminacy and contextual meaning variation must be interpreted as steps in an on-going process of change. Such a progression is expected to proceed along specific pathways involving underdetermined contexts, but eventually leading to reanalysis as an observable result. This means, in a way, to point to certain formal differences between source and target construction and to draw a line between them. With reference to the three elements discussed in this paper, one might consider for instance their behaviour in simple imperatives (10a, 11a, 12a) vs their behaviour in imperatives with an object expressed or multi-word imperatives, which often represent semi-conventionalized expressions (10b, 11b, 12b). In the next three couples of utterances, an example for each particle in both contexts is provided:

- (10) (a) *Prendi pure!*  
'Please take it!'  
(b) *Fai pure le 6!*  
'You can also be there at 6!'
- (11) (a) \**Prendi anche!*  
'Please take it!'  
(b) *Fai anche le 6!*  
'You can also be there at 6!'
- (12) (a) ?*Sparisci solo!* [stimulus D2 in Table 1 above]  
'Just get out of here!'  
(b) *Stai solo zitto!* [stimulus D4 in Table 1 above]  
'Just shut up!'

While all particles are acceptable in the second kind of context (10b, 11b, 12b), only *pure* is fully acceptable with a simple imperative (10a). A possible explanation is that contexts of the second type (10b, 11b, 12b) are structurally closer to a normal focus particle use, since the particle has scope over a linguistic element following it (note however that even in these cases the adverbs are better interpreted as illocutionary operators). Conversely, simple imperatives (10a, 11a, 12a) show more prominent structural differences and do not allow a prototypical focus particle reading. The occurrence with simple imperatives is conventionalized in the case of *pure*, partly acceptable in the case of *solo* and ruled out in the case of *anche*. In this way *pure* can be considered a fully reanalysed illocutionary operator, while *anche* and *solo* are better defined

as involved in an ongoing process of reanalysis. Referring again to De Smet (2009, 2014) terminology, they still represent instances of hybrid uses of focus particles, involved in gradual category-internal change. Crucially, these structural differences are reflected in different degrees of conventionalization, that is – according to the results of the questionnaire on the uses of *solo* – in different values of reported language use. In this perspective, the new functions are interpreted as inferences organized along a cline of conventionalization: arising from the use of focus particles in discourse, they are progressively incorporated in the conventionalized meaning.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed specific uses of Italian focus particles to test recent ideas on the concept of reanalysis. Its main goal was to contribute in developing a dynamic model of reanalysis, rooted in current usage-based approaches and inspired at large by research on language variation. Building upon the ideas developed by De Smet (2009, 2012, 2014), Ehmer & Rosemeyer (2018) and Waltreit (2018), a common area was identified where the concepts of reanalysis, inferencing in interaction and conventionalization of contextual meanings intersect. In this perspective, “an item adopts new behavior through a cascade of minor shifts in what is conceivable and acceptable” (De Smet 2012: 630) and the gradual reanalysis of a construction becomes observable through its diffusion into new contexts and its degree of conventionalization. With reference to our case studies, this is what happens when focus particles are progressively reanalysed as operators on the illocution: the syntactic shift from the propositional level to the illocution indicates reanalysis as the result of this change. However – along the steps of this development – drawing a line between the prototypical uses of focus particles and the emergent functions is not an easy task. To investigate this process, we do not have access to the syntactic representations of these constructions as stored in the speakers’ memory, but only to the pool of synchronic linguistic variation that they represent. What we can do is to investigate the relationship between the individual choices of the speakers/hearers and the opportunities provided by the grammatical system – and describe the picture that gradually emerges from it. In this respect, questionnaires that combine reported language use and meaning evaluations may prove to be useful research tools as they provide the possibility of measuring the interplay between the spread of a construction (reported language use) and the different functions expressed by it (meaning evaluation). Future research will have to improve this methodology and apply it to more case studies, further exploring how innovations spread across similar contexts and tackling the issue of at what point new

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syntactic representations come into play.

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