

**Expletive vs discourse marker:**  
**Sardinian *ello* and Balearic Catalan *ell***  
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## 1. Introduction

In our paper, we show that neuter ‘personal’ pronouns, like Catalan *ell*, and similar pronouns of other Romance varieties, like Dominican Spanish *ello* or European Portuguese *ele*, lend themselves to different kinds of pragmatic interpretations, implying the loss of some of their original features or even their class membership as pronouns. We also show that these elements are not comparable to other neuter ‘personal’ pronouns in impersonal constructions, like e.g. *il* in French, which have been described as expletives typical for non-null subject languages, although, at first sight, they seem to appear in the same environment. However, the languages under discussion, in contrast to French, are null subject languages. We first concentrate on Balearic Catalan *ell*, discussing previous studies and investigating its use in corpus data. The results show that *ell* only rarely appears in impersonal constructions and can also be dropped without causing ungrammaticality. Furthermore, it does not need to be adjacent to and does not necessarily agree with the verb, therefore it cannot be analysed as a subject. It almost always appears in sentence-initial position, primarily in dialogues. Thus, based on the data available, *ell* has to be interpreted as a discourse marker that is dependent on information structure and indicates the speaker’s attitude to the propositional content in a particular speech situation.

The second part of our study focusses on Sardinian, which has several idiosyncratic particles in the left periphery, one of them being *ello*. This element has never been termed expletive or a neuter pronoun in contrast to Balearic Catalan *ell*. This is also due to the fact that the third person subject pronoun in Sardinian is clearly phonologically different from *ello*, namely *isse, issu*.<sup>1</sup> *Ello* is frequently employed in interrogative constructions, especially in polar questions in negated contexts but also in wh-questions; these are not canonical but biased insofar as they are rhetorical questions, which do not require an answer. *Ello* has also been characterized as an affirmative particle (e.g. by Blasco Ferrer 1994). However, *ello* (which is

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<sup>1</sup> Forms derived from Lat. *ILLU* in Sardinian are found in the system of the clitic personal pronouns, whereas the tonic pronouns are derived from Lat. *IPSE, IPSU*, cf. also fn. 13.

Logudorese) or its Campidanian variant *ellu/ellus* has an ‘affirmative’ value only in some of its uses and its meaning can more adequately be translated as ‘hence’, ‘so’, ‘then’, i.e. as an adverb of the higher functional field, which mainly concerns discourse related phenomena: it conveys emphasis on what is said or asked in a particular speech situation, which is a consequence derived from the context of the discourse. We claim that *ello*, which is highly dependent on information structure and also often appears in combination with other discourse markers, is a discourse marker similar to Balearic Catalan *ell*.

We also claim that the origin of Sardinian *ello* may be found in language contact with Catalan. It has been noted (also by Wagner 1997 [1950] and, before, by Meyer-Lübke 1935) that *ello* with an intervocalic geminate lateral [ll] cannot be a lexical item inherited from Latin in the Sardinian lexicon, since this nexus should have changed to the voiced plosive retroflex geminate so characteristic of Sardinian. The parallel use of Sardinian *ello* and Balearic *ell* seems to ask for an explanation that relies on historical factors in the development of the Sardinian language, i.e. the long-lasting influence of Catalan (and often also insular Catalan) on Sardinian. We suggest that *ell* must have been in use at some point in the Catalan varieties spoken in Sardinia from 1326 until at least the beginning of the 18th century. The influence of Catalan on the Sardinian varieties – the Southern Campidanese varieties are even more subject to it than the Northern Logudorese varieties – is proven especially in the area of the lexicon (cf. Wagner 1997 [1950]: 184). If we have a look at Catalan loanwords in Sardinian, the nexus <ll> /ʎ/ is either maintained or changed, compare, e.g., Catalan *cullera* ‘spoon’ > *kuʎera* (central, Cagliari), *kullera* (Camp.) (Wagner 1960–1964: 425), hence (Balearic) Catalan *ell* /eʎ/ > Sardinian *ello/ellu*. And indeed, it may well be that Catalan *ell* was borrowed into Sardinian as an emphatic discourse particle that belongs to the left periphery. Since borrowed items rarely have exactly the same properties as their originals (cf. § 4.3), the function of borrowed *ello* does not exactly correspond to the function of Balearic *ell*. This would also explain the syntactic independence of Sardinian *ello*. In contrast to Balearic Catalan *ell*, Sardinian *ello* seems to be a more independent item, since it can appear in isolation to represent an emphatic affirmation or negation. Furthermore, it is most commonly used in questions.

In the concluding part of the paper, we discuss the question whether the discourse particle discussed in this paper, *ell* in Balearic Catalan and *ello* Sardinian, is a phenomenon of insular Romance, since we find similar uses also in Corsican (*ellu*, cf. Firruloni 1985) and Sicilian (*illu*, Sornicola 1996; also in Calabrian, cf. Rohlfs 1969).

## 2. Uses of neuter pronouns in (Ibero-)Romance

As mentioned above, in this paper, we discuss a particular linguistic element in Catalan and Sardinian that is originally derived from a subject pronoun but has nevertheless gained new functions. As has already been shown in previous work by Hinzelin & Kaiser (2006, 2007) and Hinzelin (2006, 2009, 2010), neuter ‘personal’ pronouns like (Balearic) Catalan *ell* and similar pronouns of other Romance varieties lend themselves to different kinds of uses, implying the loss of some of their features or even their class membership as pronouns. It has also been shown that the functions of these former pronouns are different from the neuter ‘personal’ pronouns that have been described as expletives found in impersonal constructions. In the course of this paper, we do not only argue for Balearic Catalan *ell* behaving more like a discourse marker, but we also present some data for a cognate of Catalan *ell* in Sardinian, namely *ello*, which has not yet gained much attention in the literature on this topic (but see Remberger & Hinzelin 2009, quoted e.g. by Bartra-Kaufmann 2011, Corr 2017<sup>2</sup>). We show that Sardinian *ello* exhibits a behaviour similar to Balearic Catalan *ell* and we also present an explanation for this correlation.<sup>3</sup>

The development of Romance third person subject pronouns from the Latin demonstrative presupposes a grammatical and pragmatic shift already by itself, since the former demonstrative loses deictic force and even syntactic independence, e.g. in the case of Gallo-Romance clitics. In some constructions, the Ibero-Romance pronouns given in Table 1, at first glance, seem to be used similar to the expletive pronouns of French (*il*) and English (*it*).

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<sup>2</sup> In the overview on discourse markers in Romance by Remberger (2021), *ello* is mentioned as follows: “*ello* (probably a loan from Catalan *ell* < Latin *ILLU*) is a sentence particle used for (often rhetorical) questions, both constituent and polar (cf. Hinzelin & Remberger 2009).” There, *ello* is furthermore characterized as a modal marker in the sense of the modal markers analysed by Coniglio (2008), since it mainly appears in a particular sentence type, of which it modifies the illocution.

<sup>3</sup> This article is dedicated to Cecilia Poletto. Although we argue that the elements discussed here, Balearic Catalan *ell* and Sardinian *ello*, clearly do not have the status or function of subject expletives – subjects, especially in non-null subject languages as the Northern Italian dialects, being a topic very dear to Cecilia – in our analysis they nevertheless belong to another area of expertise in her work, namely the higher functional field (cf. Poletto 2000).

	'personal' pronouns
CAT	<i>ell</i>
SPA	<i>ello</i>
GAL	<i>el / il</i>
POR	<i>ele</i>

Table 1: Neuter 'personal' pronouns in Ibero-Romance languages<sup>4</sup>

As for neuter or expletive pronouns, they seem to be used mainly in impersonal constructions (henceforth ICs), e.g. with weather verbs (1a) or impersonal expressions (1b), in non-null subject languages like French, German, and English. Their use in these contexts is obligatory and they do not have any referential meaning, i.e. they are semantically empty.

- |     |    |   |     |
|-----|----|---|-----|
| (1) | a. | <i>Il pleut.</i>  | FRE |
|     |    | <i>It rains.</i>  | ENG |
|     | b. | <i>Il semble qu'il y a deux manières de classifier.</i>     | FRE |
|     |    | <i>It seems that <b>there</b> are two ways to classify.</i> | ENG |

In null subject languages (e.g. the Ibero-Romance languages Catalan, Spanish, and Portuguese), the use of a subject pronoun is impossible in these contexts (for Catalan, cf. Todolí 1998: 27, Wheeler et al. 1999: 459–461), see (2a/b):

- |     |    |   |     |
|-----|----|---|-----|
| (2) | a. | <i>*<b>El</b> plou.</i>   | CAT |
|     |    | <i>*<b>Ello</b> llueve.</i>                                     | SPA |
|     | b. | <i>*<b>El</b> sembra que hi ha dues maneres de classificar.</i> | CAT |
|     |    | <i>*<b>Ello</b> parece que hay dos maneras de clasificar.</i>   | SPA |

It has been long shown that the null subject or *pro-drop* parameter is not a clear-cut binary distinction but that a considerable amount of microvariation may be observed (e.g. Camacho 2013, Roberts 2019), although properties tend to cluster together. Haider (2001: 285)

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<sup>4</sup> When necessary, we refer to the languages in this article as , BAL-CAT = Balearic Catalan, CAL = Calabrian, CAT = Catalan, COR = Corsican, DOM-SPA = Dominican Spanish, ENG = English, EP = European Portuguese, FRE = French, GAL = Galician, GER = German, POR = Portuguese, SIC = Sicilian, SPA = Spanish, and TUS = Tuscan.

comments on the *clustering* of properties of the *pro-drop* parameter that “only the correlation of *pro-drop* and the absence of subject expletives holds without exception”<sup>5</sup>; so we can presume that in *pro-drop* languages like Catalan and Spanish (and also Sardinian) there should not exist any subject expletives.

However, occurrences of subject pronouns in precisely the same ICs are found in some non-standard varieties of null subject languages, e.g. colloquial or regional European Portuguese, Galician, Dominican Spanish, and Balearic Catalan (3):

- (3) *Ele chovia tanto que as ruas eram ribeiras.* EP  
 'It rained so much that the streets were rivers.'  
 (Academia das Ciências de Lisboa 2001: 1340)
- El chove.* GAL  
 'It rains.'  
 (Álvarez Blanco et al. 1986: 169)
- Ello estava lloviznando un poco.* DOM-SPA  
 'It was drizzling a bit.'  
 (Jiménez Sabater 1975: 165)
- Si ‘m demànas ¿Qui n‘ hora es? /  
 et respòng; éll es estàda: /  
 S‘ hòra que señyjà ‘s passàda, /  
 de mòdo quejà no ‘s res.* BAL-CAT  
 'When (you) ask me: what time is (it)? /  
 and (I) answer: it has been: /  
 the hour that (I) show already has passed, /  
 in the way that (there) already is not anything.' (quartet for a sundial)  
 (Amengual 1858: 609)

So, this seems to contradict the correlation of the absence of expletives and the null subject property of a language. However, we show that the referential meaning of these elements (i.e. ‘apparent’ expletives) has not completely vanished, but developed into a discourse referential function. In what follows, we first illustrate our claim by data from Balearic Catalan (see § 3). In Section 4, we then concentrate on its cognate in Sardinian.

<sup>5</sup> “[...] einzig die Korrelation von *pro-drop* mit dem Fehlen von Subjektsexpletiva ausnahmslos gilt”.

### 3. Neuter pronouns in Balearic Catalan: A corpus study

Synchronic occurrences of ‘neuter’ *ell* are best known and frequently documented in Balearic Catalan: There are early modern documentations, e.g. in Amengual’s (1835, 1858) grammar and dictionary of Majorcan, and *ell* is quite frequently used in *rondaies* (folktales) and folk songs of the Balearic Islands. This could indicate that a frequent use of *ell* is predominantly a feature of spoken language, probably in rural areas.

(4) *Ell tanmateix és gros, això!*

'It still is big, that!'

(Men.; *DCVB* IV: 701)

(5) *Ell això no acaba mai!*

'It that not ends ever! (= it never ends)'

(Mall., Men., Eiv.; *DCVB* IV: 701)

(6) *A Pollença vaig anar / a dur una pollencina, / i la volia fadrina; / varen dir:*

*Ell no n’hi ha!*

'To P. (I) went / to take a girl from P., / and (I) wanted her maidenly; / (they) said:  
there not of-it there has! (= there is not anyone)'

(cançó pop. Mall.; *DCVB* IV: 701)

#### 3.1 Previous proposals for the analysis of the use of ‘neuter’ *ell* in impersonal constructions

*Ell* was analysed as a kind of expletive pronoun by Amengual (1835), Barnils (1916), Spitzer (1917, 1918, 1920, 1941), and, more recently, by Silva-Villar (1998) using examples from these and other sources from the literature and comparing its use to the other Ibero-Romance languages. A debate between Tallgren (1914: 77–78, 1918: 87–88, 1920) and Spitzer (1917: 715–716, 1918: 69–70, 1920, 1941) about the status of *ell* is documented in the research literature; Tallgren already proposed an analysis of *ell* as an adverb.

#### 3.2 Analysis of six modern Balearic corpora

The description of the synchronic usage of the ‘neuter’ pronoun *ell* in Balearic Catalan reveals strikingly frequent occurrences of *ell* in *rondaies* (folktales). Therefore, the investigation focussed on the analysis of Balearic Catalan folktales. A corpus study of five collections of *rondaies* from all Balearic Islands has been conducted and, in addition, an account of the

Christmas feasts has been analysed.

The results are presented in Table 2.

	total	eS	nS	oS	na	na / opr
<i>salom</i>	4	<b>1</b>	*	*	3	*
<i>mall</i>	56	<b>2</b>	15	21	17	1
<i>nadal</i>	29	<b>6</b>	*	7	14	2
<i>men</i>	31	<b>7</b>	*	5	16	3
<i>eiv</i>	14	<b>2</b>	*	5	7	*
<i>form</i>	8	<b>3</b>	*	*	4	1
total	142	<b>21</b>	15	38	61	7

Table 2: Function of non-referential *ell* in Balearic texts<sup>6</sup>

Neuter *ell* appears only rarely in the (apparent) subject position of impersonal constructions, i.e. in only 21 of 142 cases.

The following examples of *ell* occurring as an (apparent) subject in impersonal constructions are very rare:

- (7) – *¡Jo 't posaré a sa presó! li diu es Bal-le.*  
 – *¡Ell no hu provará! s' exclama En Salom. An es qui creu es Bal-le, no 'l posen dins sa presó.*  
 '– I'll put you in the prison! the Mayor says to him.'  
 '– (That) won't prove it! exclaims Salom. To the one who believes the Mayor, they don't put him in the prison.'

(*salom*, 154)

<sup>6</sup> For the first column, see the primary sources in the references; eS = (apparent) expletive subject; nS = *ell* cannot be the subject of the sentence considering its meaning, even though the verb is in the 3SG and no other subject is realized; oS = other, non-pronominal subject realized; na (/ opr) = no agreement with the verb (or no (finite) verb present) (and another pronoun is realized). \* = construction not found in the text.

- (8) *¿Què me'n direu? Ell era sa mateixa murtera a on s'eren enredonides ses seues germanes; [...]*  
 'What will you tell me about it? There was the same myrtle where her sisters made themselves round;' (mall, 133)
- (9) – *Ell no hi haurà perill que patesca gaire fam!*  
 'There won't be (any) danger that (He [Jesus]) would suffer much hunger!' (nadal, 102)
- (10) – *Ell va de lo bo a millor!*  
 '– It goes from the good to better!' (nadal, 153)
- (11) – *No, ell és ben cert –deia En Pere–; i si no, mirau.*  
 '– No, it is quite certain, said Pere; and if not, look.' (men, 20)
- (12) *Ell no hi ha qui la confongui.*  
 'There isn't (anyone) who would confound her.' (men, 67)
- (13) – *Ell és veritat!*  
 '– It is truth! (= it is true)' (eiv, 74)

*Ell* seems to be used as an (apparent) subject in these rare cases (21 of a total of 142 tokens), it is almost always sentence-initial and it is never obligatory in impersonal constructions. But most of the time *ell* occurs in other constructions:

- (14) *Ell no me'n puc avenir!*  
 'not me of-it (I) can convince! [expression of astonishment]' (eiv, 132)
- (15) *I comensa a fer-se en fora i en fora, i es pareier darrera ell; i ell revolts d'aquí i d'allà; i assetsuaixí sonava a rompre, [...]*  
 'And (he) begins to make himself further and further (= to remove himself further), and the farmhand after him; and strained from here to there; and suddenly it sounded to break,' (salom, 151)



- (16) – [...] *No he fet més que lo que vostè m' ha dit.*  
 –*jEll no poren fer una berba amb tu, segons veig! diu es Bal·le.*  
 '– (I) haven't done more than that what you have said me.'  
 '– (They = one) can't do a joke with you like (I) see! says the Mayor.'  
(salom, 153)
- (17) *Ell aquella dona no maltractà pus Na Catalineta; [...]*  
 'That woman didn't mistreat anymore Catalineta;'  
(mall, 26)
- (18) – *Ell ja torn esser jo, es descuidat!*  
 '– Already (I) turn (to) be me, the heedless!'  
(mall, 43)
- (19) – *Ell ja ho hauríem d'esser! — contesta Na Catalina.*  
 '– Then (we) would have to be it! answers Catalina.'  
(mall, 145)

In these constructions, either a non-pronominal subject is realized (17) or *ell* does not agree with the verb ((14-19), except (17)). *Ell* is almost always – like in the impersonal constructions – sentence initial. It occurs primarily in dialogues. Its adverbial character is obvious and it is used to mark emphasis (indicated by the frequent use of exclamation marks in the examples) or the speaker's attitude. It is clear that adverbs are an extremely heterogeneous class, since they may have scope over very different linguistic elements and serve also discourse-related functions. In the case of *ell*, in its left-peripheral position, it seems that it is somehow anchoring the speech act to the speaker's attitude, frequently at the start of a turn.

### 3.3 *Are the neuter pronouns 'true' expletives? – Ell as discourse marker*

Many examples of *ell* with unspecific reference do not occur in impersonal constructions but in sentences where they cannot be analysed as subjects (and therefore not as expletives either), as the following examples taken from the *DCVB* (IV: 701) illustrate:

- (20) *Ell tu saps que crides!*  
 'You know that (you) (are) yell(ing)!'  
(Eiv.; DCVB IV: 701)

(21) *Ell sabeu quina al·lota que és!*  
'(You-PL) know what(-kind-of) girl that is!'

(Alcover Cont. 2; *DCVB* IV: 701)

These instances of *ell* cannot function as subjects because they do not occupy the subject position, which is filled by another overt subject pronoun, or there is no agreement. The analysis of *ell* as discourse marker or ‘topic expletive’ (cf. Faarlund 1990, Silva-Villar 1996, 1998) seems more appropriate here.

Trask (1993: 84) describes a “discourse item” as having the following properties:

Any lexical item or grammatical form which typically serves to relate one utterance to another in a discourse, or to relate the utterance in a particular way to the discourse as a whole.

As for a more recent and more specific definition of discourse markers (DMs), we quote Heine (2013: 1211):

[T]he main function of DMs is to relate an utterance to the situation of discourse, more specifically, to speaker-hearer interaction, speaker attitudes, and/or the organization of texts.<sup>7</sup>

These descriptions cover the functioning of *ell* in examples (20) and (21). Discourse markers are not a word class proper (see the adverbial character of *ell* mentioned above), but defined by their pragmatic function.<sup>8</sup> The arguments for an analysis of *ell* as a discourse marker and not a subject expletive are the following:

- The missing agreement of presumed ‘pronoun’ and verb in some sentences is a telltale clue – *ell* simply cannot be the subject of these sentences. The matching agreement in other sentences is always only the default agreement, i.e. the third person singular. This apparent ‘agreement’ is only superficial as these sentences would exhibit the same verb

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<sup>7</sup> This wide definition does not distinguish between *discourse markers* and *modal particles*, as some researchers do (cf. Remberger 2021: 4).

<sup>8</sup> For a systematic overview on discourse and pragmatic markers in Romance, see Remberger (2021).

form without *ell*.

- The distribution of *ell* shows peculiarities in comparison with ‘true’ expletives in French, English, and German: It is almost always realized in sentence-initial position.<sup>9</sup> ‘True’ expletives also appear in other positions and in embedded clauses.
- The realization of *ell* in front of the preverbal subject (see (17)) is possible. Then it is not verb-adjacent and does not agree with the finite verb.
- The frequency of use of *ell* does not correlate with the use of other subject pronouns. With weather verbs, the prototypical expletive construction, *ell* is not found in the analysed corpora. The only example with weather verbs featuring *ell* (from the DCVB IV: 701) is at least extremely marginal and not from Balearic Catalan.
- In impersonal constructions, *ell* is not obligatorily used. In languages with ‘true’ expletives like French, English, and German, this is not possible:

(22) [...] *que* \_\_\_ *era un gust*; [...]  
'... that (it) was a pleasure'

(*men*, 15)

(23) *Però* \_\_\_ *no hi va haver remei*; [...]  
'But (there) was no remedy (= that was not possible)'

(*men*, 20)

The difference in sentences with or without *ell* consists in the speaker’s attitude to the described events: emphasis, surprise, consternation, doubt, etc. These are clearly characteristics of a discourse marker.

*Ell* is an element without pronominal features like person and number, its use depends on the information structure only, not on the grammar or syntax. This applies also to cases where an analysis as an expletive would be possible superficially. *Ell* is only an *apparent* expletive in those cases. *Ell* is therefore best analysed as a discourse marker, in the sense defined above (cf. Hinzelin 2006, 2009).

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<sup>9</sup> Only in very rare cases *ell* is not sentence-initial but occurs after other sentence-initial adverbs or discourse markers or extraposed at the end of the sentence (one example in *nadal*).

#### 4. Sardinian *ello*

Sardinian has several idiosyncratic particles in the left periphery, one of them being *ello*, an affirmative discourse particle. *Ello* has never been termed an expletive or a neuter pronoun, as it was, in contrast, for Balearic Catalan *ell*. This is also due to the fact that the third person subject pronoun in Sardinian is clearly phonologically different from *ello*, namely *isse*, *issu*. In the following Sections 4.1 and 4.2 the semantics, pragmatics and syntax of *ello* are exemplified, whereas Section 4.3 discusses the origin of this particle.

##### 4.1 *The semantics of ello*

*Ello* is an adverbial element meaning approximately ‘thus, then, so, surely’. It might be compared to Italian *allora*, although it does not have exactly the same flavours of pragmatic meaning. It is frequently employed in questions, especially in rhetorical questions, which do not require an answer, see the statements in (24) and (25):

- (24) **èllo**, avb: **ellu**, **ellus** peràula chi prus che àteru serbit pro dare prus fortza a una dimandha, mescamente candho no b'at de ispetare risposta peruna, candho sa risposta, siat chi ei o siat chi nono, est una cosa chi azummai no est mancu de dimandhare, chi si podet cumprendher gai etotu: segundhu comente, si narat fintzas in su sensu de “nono própiu!, mancu a bi pessare!”

**èllo**, avb: **ellu**, **ellus**: word that is needed to give more emphasis to a question, especially when no answer is expected, when the answer, be it yes or no, is something understood without asking; besides it is used in the sense of “not indeed”, “not at all”

(Puddu 2000: s.v.)

- (25) „ELLO“ impreau in cada occasione pro affortzare una frase chin dimanda: „Oh, compa’, ello in bidda che sezis?!“; „Ello comente s’impreat custa cosa?“; „Deo so-e sardu“ „Ello deo, itte so-e?“

“ELLO” applied in all occasions in order to reinforce a clause with a question: “Oh, companion, are you still here in town?!”; “And how do you use this thing?”, “I’m Sardinian” “So what am I?”

(Sa-Limba 1999–2008)

As (24) states, questions marked with *ello* often do not require an answer. In (25), the micro-dialogue translated as “I’m Sardinian” “So what am I?”, where *deo* ‘I’ is topic-fronted and

preceded by *ello*, also shows a rhetorical illocutionary act that does not expect an answer, but yields an interpretation similar to ‘I am Sardinian, too!’

In the research literature on Sardinian, the element has been characterized in several ways: Blasco Ferrer (1994) e.g. maintains that it is an affirmative particle, typical of Sardinian and similar to *yes*. However, *ello* (Logudorese) or its Campidanian variant *ellu/ellus* has an ‘affirmative’ value only in some of its uses and its meaning can more adequately be translated (if it can be translated at all) as ‘hence’, ‘so’, ‘then’, i.e. as an adverb of the higher functional field, which mainly concerns discourse related phenomena: It conveys emphasis on what is said or asked, which is a consequence derived from the context of the discourse.

#### 4.2 *The syntax and pragmatics of ello*

As for the syntax of *ello*, as said above, it is most frequently found in questions, i.e. in polar questions, see (26), especially in negated contexts, see (27)–(28), as well as in wh-questions, see (29)–(31):

(26) *Ello ieo non l'aco menzusu?*

ELLO I not it'I-make better

'And don't I make it better?'

(Archivi del Sud, II, 60)

(27) *Ello no sunt parte de s'Unione Europea?*<sup>10</sup>

ELLO not they-are part of the Union European

'And are they not part of the European Union?'

(sc.monediplo.com)

(28) *Ello, non t'a datu nudda mama?*

ELLO not you'she-has given nothing mummy

'And your mummy hasn't given you anything?'

(Archivi del Sud, II, 42)

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<sup>10</sup> One reviewer notes that examples like (28) could be rendered by the question particle *che* in spoken Italian:

(i) Che, non fanno parte dell'EU?

In German, in fact, the corresponding modal particle appearing in such rhetorical questions would be *etwa*. This modal particle, in German, appears in polar questions that need a contextual embedding and convey a flavour of unexpectedness, sometimes even undesirability (cf. Thurmair 1996: 170-175).

(29) *Ello aite ses tristu, coro 'e mama?*  
 ELLO why you-are sad, heart of mummy  
 'And why should you be sad, heart of your mother?'  
 (Puddu 2000)

(30) *Ello a ue sese andande?*  
 ELLO to where you-are going  
 'And so where are you going?'  
 (Archivi del Sud, II, 46)

(31) *Balla! Ello in ue s'est cuadu su malaitu?*  
 Wow! ELLO in where himself'he-is hidden the sick  
 'Wow! So where did the sick guy hide himself?'  
 (Sa-Limba 1999–2008)

*Ello* also appears in clauses that have an exclamative flavour, see (32), similar to Balearic Catalan *ell*. These constructions are sometimes hidden rhetorical questions and thus not marked by a question mark, see (33):

(32) *Disgrasciadu, anima mala, anima niedda, ello a Deus furas!*  
 disgraced soul bad soul black ELLO to God you steal  
 'Disgraced, bad soul, black soul, you even steal from God!'  
 [as a question: 'So you steal even from God?']  
 (Masala 2000:45)

(33) *Ello fàula est!*  
 ELLO lie it-is  
 'This is surely true!' [Originally: 'Is this a lie?!']  
 (Puddu 2000)

Therefore, the exclamative flavour is the result of the interpretation of rhetorical questions, as can be seen especially in the original meaning of (33). The frequent appearance of *ello* in rhetorical questions seems to hint at similar uses of modal particles in German, e.g. *denn*:<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> German *denn*, in contrast to *etwa*, can appear in both polar and constituent questions.

(34) *Bin ich denn ein Unmensch?*

GER

am I DENN a brute?

'I'm not a brute!'

(Thurmair 1996: 165)

For German, Thurmair (1996) characterises the modal particle *denn* by the features [+connection] and sometimes also [unexpected for the speaker] (see her overview in Thurmair 1996: 200), i.e. an effect of surprise. The feature [+connection] surely is valid also for *ello*, in the sense that it creates a connection to the speech situation and the topic of the speech act.

However, *ello* also appears in isolation, see (35) and (36), either as a positive affirmation, in the sense of Blasco Ferrer (1984) mentioned above, or in the context of an emphatic negation, see (37) :

(35) *Ello! Gai est!*

ELLO so it-is

'Surely! So it is!'

(Falconi 2002:121)

(36) *Ello!! E itt'aias krefidu?*

ELLO and what had-you believed

'Certainly!! What did you think?'

(Sa-Limba 1999–2008)

(37) *a bi cres tue, in Deus? – ellonono?!*

A-particle there you-believe in God – ELLO no

'Do you believe in God? How couldn't I?! [=certainly]'

(Puddu 2000)

As can be noted, also these apparent cases of *ello* in isolation are tightly connected to emphasis (35) or a interrogative surprise effect in (36) and (37), thus here *ello* does not function as a canonical affirmative particle as claimed by Blasco Ferrer (1994). This can also be seen in the combination of *ello* with the negation in one word in (37), where the affirmation is yielded by *ello* together with the negation, which again is interpreted as rhetorical.

*Ello* is in the very left periphery, i.e. higher than focus fronted elements, see *macu* in (38), or wh-elements, see (29), (30) and (31) above, and even higher than topicalized items, see *custa vinza* in (39), which seems to underpin its function as a 'topic connector':

- (38) *Su fogu brusiat: ello macu ses a lu tocare?!*  
the fire burns ELLO crazy you-are to it touch  
'Fire burns: So, are you so crazy to touch it?!'

(Puddu 2000:664)

- (39) *Ello custa vinza aitte la tener goi?*  
ELLO this vineyard why it keep like-this  
'Why should this vineyard be kept like this?'

(Archivi del Sud, II, 46)

However, it also can appear on the right of a topic (*su ministru frantzesu* in (40)):

- (40) *Su ministru frantzesu de sos afares internatzionales ello no at [...] acusadu s'Iran ...*  
the minister French of the affairs international ELLO not he-has accused the Iran  
'So didn't the French minister of foreign affairs accuse Iran ...!'

(sc.monediplo.com)

Moreover, *ello* often appears in combination with other discourse markers, like *e* 'and, thus', *tandho* and *edducas* (both more or less meaning 'then', cf. Puddu 2000), i.e. markers that all have a similar meaning:

- (41) *ello e tue times su fritu de maju?!*  
ELLO E you you-fear the cold of May  
'And thus you are really afraid of the cold of May?!'

(Puddu 2000)

- (42) *Ello tando, proitte narrer [...] chi semus iscriende in sardu?*  
ELLO TANDO why say that we-are writing in Sardinian  
'So why at all should we say that we write in Sardinian?'

(Sa-Limba 1999–2008)

- (43) *ello edducas comente depo presentemente viver in cust'istadu?*  
ELLO EDDUCAS how should-I presently live in this state  
'So how could I thus presently live in this state?'

(Spano 1999:415)



The fact that *ello* is often found in combination with these discourse markers strengthens its status as a discourse marker itself.

#### 4.3 *The origin of ello*

Until now, the etymology of Sardinian *ello* was either left unclear, see the *DES* (Wagner 1960–1964), who suggests that it being an “imitative interjection” (44), or it was not very convincing, cf. Porru (2002), who derives it from a Greek verb of unclear origin, see (45). In any case, it has been noted (also by Wagner and, before, in the *REW* by Meyer-Lübke (1935), see (46)) that *ello* with an intervocalic geminate lateral [ll] cannot be a lexical item inherited from Latin in the Sardinian lexicon, since this nexus should have changed to the voiced plosive retroflex geminate so characteristic of Sardinian, as found in the place name *Casteddhu* ‘Cagliari’ (< CASTELLU), the verb *faeddhare* ‘talk’ (< FAVELLARE), the suffix *-eddhu* (< -ELLUS) etc. and also in the clitic personal pronoun *ddhu* [d̥d̥u] (< ILLU), which represents a direct parallel to Balearic Catalan *ell*.

- (44) *ello* log.; *èllu* camp. 'dunque' (*ello gási* 'dunque così'; *ell'inòke sès* (Orani); *elleíta* barb. (voce di affermazione); 'Ellu e dunces?'; Scomúniga, v. 620); non può essere ELLUM (C[orpus]G[lossariorum]L[atinorum] II, 330, 57: *ellum*: ἰδοῦ ἐκεῖνον), *REW* 2851, come dice anche il Meyer-Lübke (a causa di *-ll-* e *-o*). La voce è una interiezione imitativa [...]  
[... cannot be ELLUM ... as stated also by Meyer-Lübke (because of *-ll-* and *-o*). The word is an imitative interjection ...]

(Wagner 1960–1964: 488)

- (45) **Ellu** avv. di affermazioni, de (ελλω affirmo) *dunque*  
[... affirmative adverb, from (ελλω I affirm) *thus*]

Porru (2002)

- (46) *ëllum* “sieh ihn da”.  
(Log. *ello* “also”, “gewiß” kann wegen *-ll-* und *-o* nicht hierher gehören [...])  
[Log. *ello* “thus”, “certainly” cannot belong to this entry because of *-ll-* and *-o* ...]

(Meyer-Lübke 1935: 254)

As we have seen in the previous paragraphs, the function of *ello* seems to be very close to the one for Balearic Catalan: Sardinian *ello* is a discourse marker which mainly appears in spoken

discourse and, as a topic connector, is highly dependent on information structure as well. In contrast to Balearic Catalan, it is most commonly used in questions but not restricted to these. As in Balearic Catalan, it conveys speaker attitudes, like surprise or astonishment. Furthermore, it seems to be a more independent item, since it can appear in isolation to represent an emphatic affirmation or negation. The parallel use of Sardinian *ello* and Balearic *ell* seems to ask for an explanation that relies on Sardinian language history, i.e. the long-lasting influence of Catalan, and more specifically insular Catalan in many instances, on Sardinian.

If we have a look at Algherese, the Catalan dialect of the Sardinian town of Alghero, no other use of *ell* but as a personal pronoun has been reported there (cf. Pais 1970: 106f). However, Algherese Catalan did not have but little impact on the surrounding Sardinian varieties (cf. Wagner 1997 [1950]:188). We suggest that *ell* must have been in use at some point in the other Catalan varieties spoken in Sardinian from 1326 until at least the beginning of the 18th century. The influence of Catalan on the Sardinian varieties – the Southern Campidanian varieties are even more subject to it than the Northern Logudorese varieties – is proven especially in the area of the lexicon (cf. Wagner 1997 [1950]: 184). And indeed, it might be that Catalan *ell* was borrowed into Sardinian not as the functional element exhibiting neuter (or masculine) pronominal features but rather on account of its function as an emphatic discourse particle belonging to the left periphery. This would also explain its syntactic independence.

If we have a look at Catalan loanwords in Sardinian, the nexus <ll> /ʎ/ is either maintained or changed as follows:

(47) Catalan loanwords with <ll> /ʎ/ in Sardinian

- a. Cat. *cullera* 'spoon'  
> *kuʎera* (central, Cagliari), *kullera* (Camp.)
- b. Cat. *burrumballa* 'confusion, riot'  
> *burrumbaʎa* (Orani), *burrumballa* (central, Camp.)
- c. Cat. *ulleres* 'glasses'  
> *ulleras* (Camp.), *uʎeras* (Perdas de Fogu, Busachi, S. Antioco)
- d. Cat. *orenella* 'swallow' (type of fish/ray)  
> *orineʎa* (Camp.), *oniella* (Cabras)
- e. Cat. *canadella* 'cruet'  
> *kanaðeʎa* (Camp.), *granaðellas* (Orgósolo)

- f. Cat. *carceller* 'jailor'  
> *kartselleri* (Camp.)
- g. Bal. Cat. *cintell* 'measurement of a mason'  
> *suntellu* (Camp.)
- h. Cat. *cascavell* 'little bell'  
> *kaskavellu* (Nuor., Camp.), *kaskaveḷu* (Camp.)
- i. Cat. *escorcollar* 'rummage, search'  
> *skrukullai* (Camp.), *iskurkulljare* (Ghilarza, Norbello.)
- j. Cat. *esquella* 'little bell'  
> *izkiḷa* (Log.)
- k. Bal. Cat. *rallar* 'gossip'  
> *arrallai* (Camp.)
- l. Cat. *tavella* 'crease, plait'  
> *tavella* (Camp.), *taveḷa* (Log.) *tavedḡa* (Log.)
- m. Cat. *camella* 'plough stilt'  
> *kamedḡa* (Log.)

(Wagner 1960–1964: s.v.)

As these examples show, the normal outcome of Catalan /k/ in Sardinian is either /k/ or /ll/ whereas /qd/ is rare (see (47l), (47m)). Thus, especially considering the outcome of the examples in (47g) and (47k), the following etymology would indeed not be implausible:

(48) (Balearic) Catalan *ell* /eḷ/ > Sardinian *ello/ellu*

It is well-known and has been stated in research literature that discourse markers, although being somehow functional elements, are easily borrowed from one language to another, especially for their pragmatic functions. They can be compared to other paralinguistic phenomena, like e.g. gestures, and are very salient in discourse because of their high degree of “pragmatic detachability” (Matras 1998, 2009: 153f; Stolz 2008: 23). In borrowing scales in the literature on language contact (Haugen 1950: 224, Thomason & Kaufman 1988) they occupy a relatively high position in the hierarchy (cf. also Curnow 2001; Stolz & Stolz 1996: 97–99, as well as Remberger 2021: 20–21).

Note, however, that a borrowing is never exactly the same item as its original, cf. also Johanson (2008), who more correctly uses the expression “copy” for all kinds of borrowing,

since also in language contact “copies are never true replicas of their models”.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, we also find substantial differences in the functions of Balearic Catalan *ell* and Sardinian *ello*: E.g. (13) from Balearic Catalan has the same interpretation as Sardinian (33), but the latter is derived from a rhetorical question, whereas the former is not (Sardinian *faula* ‘lie’ is the antonym of Catalan *veritat* ‘truth’). That means that Sardinian *ello*, taking its origin from Balearic Catalan *ell* as a discourse marker with a connection to topics, has somehow specialized to the context of rhetorical questions in Sardinian. As for its use in isolation, this can be explained by the fact that even as an affirmative marker, *ello* is never neutral but conveys surprise, irony, astonishment, etc. This originates probably in its use in rhetorical questions.

It would be extremely interesting to investigate the first appearance of *ello* in the history of the Sardinian language. In the corpus of Old Sardinian, ATLiSO (*Archivio testuale della lingua sarda delle origini*), there is no example for *ello* (nor *ell*),<sup>13</sup> which would be compatible with the idea that it was imported only with the beginning of the presence of Catalan speakers on the island. Even Blasco Ferrer (2003) contains no mention of *ello*. However, since discourse markers belong to the spoken language, it is hardly expected to find them in non-oral written texts anyway.

## 5. Perspectives for future research

Elements similar to Balearic Catalan *ell* and Sardinian *ello* are also found in Corsican and Sicilian. So, a legitimate question is the following: Is the discourse particle discussed in this paper, *ell* in Balearic Catalan and *ello* Sardinian, a phenomenon of insular Romance? Although we do not discuss this topic in detail, we introduce some data as presented in the literature, first from Corsican (and Tuscan, which is related to it), then from Sicilian (and its areal neighbour

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<sup>12</sup> “The term copying, which covers what is otherwise called ‘borrowing’, ‘diffusion’, ‘transfer’, ‘interference’, ‘replication’, etc., is chosen to stress that copies are per definition not identical to their models. Copies are never ‘imported’ or ‘transferred’ foreign elements and never true replicas of their models. There are always dissimilarities in substance, meaning, contextual applicability and frequency between models and copies. [...] identity between models and copies is in principle excluded, all similarities being partial” (Johanson 2008: 62–63).

<sup>13</sup> There are a number of hits for *illu*, but this form either represents the accusative masculine singular clitic (which then became *lu* or *ddhu*) or an oblique masculine singular pronoun introduced by a preposition (forms with oblique *ille* were still possible in Medieval Sardinian, cf. Blasco Ferrer 2003: 209, whereas Modern Sardinian has *isse* in these cases). *Illu*, in the early documents, is never found as a subject (with the exception of maybe one example where *illu* is clearly referential).

Calabrian<sup>14</sup>). For a thorough investigation of these phenomena, more data would be needed and the research context should be extended to a wider context that goes beyond the historically affirmed language contact between Catalan and Sardinian.

5.1 *Corsican ellu and Tuscan gli*

- (49) *ch'ell'un si vega ellu mài più* COR  
 'that one sees him never again'  
 (Firroloni 1985: 495)
- (50) *ma s'ellu vene Petru* COR  
 'if Petru came'  
 (Firroloni 1985: 495)
- (51) *quand'ellu piuvía, tuccava à ella à arricoglie l'acqua piuvana ...* COR  
 when ELLU rained it-touched to her to collect the water of-the-rain  
 'when it rained it was her task to collect the rain water'  
 (www.gbatti-alinguacorsa.fr)

As for these examples, it usually is claimed that Corsican *ellu* is a third person subject or expletive pronoun that is used in subordinate clauses. Tuscan *gli* is used as an expletive pronoun, too, but also in main clauses:

- (52) *Gl'è venuto delle ragazze.* TUS  
 GLI is come of-the girls  
 'There came some girls.'  
 (Brandi & Cordin 1989: 115)

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<sup>14</sup> An anonymous reviewer adds Neapolitan to the list of varieties that show similar expletive elements: in Modern Neapolitan, the neuter form *chell* has the function of an expletive subject, in particular with impersonal predicates. In Old Neapolitan texts, there are also forms like expletive *illu* but they do not seem to be very frequent, which leads Ledgeway (2009: 293-294) to conclude that these might be due to the influence of Middle and Northern Italian varieties.

- (53) *Gli* è piovuto tanto.  
GLI is rained a-lot  
'It rained a lot.'

TUS

(Rohlf's 1968 [1949]: §446, 141)

## 5.2 *Sicilian iddu and Calabrian illu*

As for Sicilian, examples like (54) look more related to the discourse markers analysed in our paper:

- (54) *iddu* è vveru  
IDDU is true  
'It is really true.'

SIC

(Sornicola 1996: 338)

However, since more data are needed, it remains unclear whether Sicilian *iddu* is a subject expletive or rather an exclamative particle. Note, however, that Sicilian *iddu*, contrary to Sardinian *ello*, was indeed subject to the regular sound change, also found in Sicilian, from [ll] to [dd]. As for Calabrian, the data found in the literature seem to be a bit clearer:

- (55) *illu* tu non veni a la marina?  
ILLU you not you-come to the sea shore  
'Do you really not come to the sea shore?'

CAL

(Rohlf's 1969 [1964]: §757, 159)

- (56) *illu* non mangi?  
ILLU not you-eat  
'Don't you eat?'

CAL

(Rohlf's 1969 [1964]: §757, 159)

- (57) *illu* è lu veru ca tu te 'nzuri?  
ILLU is the truth that you yourself marry  
'It is really true that you get married?'

CAL

(Rohlf's 1977: 327)

According to Rohlfs, Calabrian *illu* seems to be an interrogative particle expressing astonishment (Rohlfs 1977: 327).<sup>15</sup> Note also that in all the examples given here Calabrian *illu* occurs in questions. Both the pragmatic effect of surprise as well as the occurrence in a particular sentence type draws this use of Calabrian *illu* near to Sardinian *ello* and Catalan *ell*. As an outlook for further studies, we give an overview over the different elements mentioned in this paper in Table 3.

Variety	Element	Properties	Origin
Balearic Catalan	<i>ell</i>	emphatic discourse marker	< Latin ILLU(D)
Sardinian	<i>ello / ellu(s)</i>	emphatic discourse marker mainly in questions also in isolation	< Balearic Catalan <i>ell</i> ?
Corsican	<i>ellu</i>	3rd person masculine subject pronoun, obligatorily used only in certain subordinate contexts / expletive pronoun	< Latin ILLU(D)
Tuscan	<i>gli, egli</i>	expletive / 3rd person subject pronoun	< Latin *ILLI
Sicilian	<i>iddu</i>	expletive?/ exclamative particle?	< Latin ILLU(D)
Calabrian	<i>illu</i>	mirative question particle	< Latin ILLU(D)

Table 3: Overview of elements in different Romance varieties

The function of Sardinian *ello* is clearly different from Corsican *ellu* (an obligatory subject or expletive pronoun in subordinate contexts) or Tuscan *gli* (a subject or expletive pronoun), for an overview see Table 3. Sardinian *ello* cannot be derived directly from ILLU(D) through regular sound change, which is the undisputed etymon of Balearic *ell*, Sicilian *iddu*, and Calabrian *illu*. However, it is also impossible to derive Sardinian *ello* from Latin ELLUM (like Calabrian *allo*, mentioned by Rohlfs). Thus, it seems to be conclusive to explain the existence of Sardinian

<sup>15</sup> Rohlfs also refers to Calabrian *allu* (Rohlfs 1977: 71): “av. eccolo [l. vl. ellum id.]”; *ellum* is explained by the development *em illum* or *en illum* > *ellum* – but in the *DECat* Coromines (1982: 266–267) expresses his doubts about a continuation of this Latin contraction into Romance.

*ello* as a direct loanword from Balearic Catalan, more precisely the emphatic discourse marker *ell*. This analysis has the advantage of explaining both its functional meaning and its phonological form without having to resort to unusual sound changes or postulated semantic shifts.

In this study, we have shown that *ell* in the initial position of certain constructions in Balearic Catalan is not an expletive subject but has a very different function, i.e. the encoding of sentence pragmatics. Sentences in which an overt subject is used or the verb does not agree with the apparent expletive suggest an analysis as a discourse marker in all examples – even in those superficially ambiguous sentences in which both interpretations – as a subject expletive as well as a discourse marker – are possible. This function of *ell* as a discourse marker in Balearic Catalan is parallel to the use of *ello* in Sardinian, which thus most probably constitutes a loan from Balearic Catalan.

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