

# The Syntax of Contrastive Topic-Focus Association in the Middle Field of Brazilian Portuguese

Renato Lacerda

## 1. Introduction

Brazilian Portuguese (BP) allows for dislocated topics to appear both in the left periphery of the clause and in the (postverbal) middle field, as is illustrated by the PP *do Chomsky* in (1).<sup>1</sup>

- (1) a. *Do Chomsky*<sub>TOP</sub>, eu li três livros. *Left periphery*  
of-the Chomsky I read three books  
b. Eu li, *do Chomsky*<sub>TOP</sub>, três livros. *Middle field*  
I read of-the Chomsky three books  
'I read three books *by Chomsky*<sub>TOP</sub>.'

This paper investigates the interface between syntax and information structure in sentences involving middle-field topicalization, such as (1b), under a contrastive interpretation (in Büring's 2003, 2016 sense). Contrastive topics require the presence of an independent (associated) focus (see also Wagner 2012). The goal of this paper is to determine the syntactic conditions governing the (proper) relative positioning of contrastive topics and their associated foci, a relation I call *Contrastive Topic-Focus Association* (CTFA), to distinguish it from the traditional *Topic-Comment Articulation* (which I reserve for aboutness topics). In doing so, I argue against the existence of topic- and focus-dedicated cartographic projections in the middle field of BP. The constraints on CTFA I will present here are better accounted for by a *configurational approach* to the mapping from syntax to information structure.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Contrastive Topic-Focus Association

While traditional aboutness topics (Reinhart 1981) must be related to (and overtly c-command) a full proposition, forming the so-called *Topic-Comment Articulation*, as in (2), contrastive topics (CTs) are licensed based on their relative positioning with respect to an independent focus (F), whose presence is obligatory. Büring's (2003) examples in (3B) and (4B) show that a relation can be established between a CT and a F when both elements are in their canonical positions (e.g. subject and object positions) and that a CT may in principle either precede or follow its associated F.<sup>3</sup> The immediate question is then why dislocation of CTs is allowed at all, as is illustrated by the BP sentence (5B1), in a scenario where its canonical-order counterpart (5B2) is also perfectly grammatical and felicitous.

- (2) [*That book*<sub>AT</sub>]<sub>Topic</sub>, [I really liked (it)]<sub>Comment</sub>.  
(3) A: Well, what about *Fred*? What did *he* eat?  
B: *Fred*<sub>CT</sub> ate *the beans*<sub>F</sub>. (Büring 2003: 511)  
(4) A: Well, what about the *beans*? Who ate *them*?  
B: *Fred*<sub>F</sub> ate *the beans*<sub>CT</sub>. (Büring 2003: 512)

---

\* University of Connecticut, renato.lacerda@uconn.edu. I thank Željko Bošković, Jairo Nunes, Ian Roberts, Susi Wurmbrand, and the WCCFL 36 reviewers and audience for valuable comments.

<sup>1</sup> Translations are given in the canonical order for English. The informational values of the relevant elements are indicated by the diacritics TOP (topic), CT (contrastive topic), AT (aboutness topic), G (discourse-given topic), and F (focus). Rising intonation is indicated by forward slashes /.../ and falling intonation by backslashes \...\  
<sup>2</sup> See Lacerda (in preparation) for a more detailed discussion and Lacerda (2016b) for related issues.

<sup>3</sup> See Büring (2003, 2016) and Wagner (2012) for semantic and pragmatic properties of contrastive topicalization.

- (5) A: Pra quem você deu o livro do Pinker?  
 ‘Who did you give Pinker’s book to?’  
 B1: /O livro do Chomsky<sub>CT</sub>/, eu dei /pro João<sub>F</sub>/. ✓ *Left periphery*  
 the book of-the Chomsky I gave to-the John  
 B2: Eu dei /o livro do Chomsky/CT /pro João<sub>F</sub>/. ✓ *Canonical order*  
 I gave the book of-the Chomsky to-the John  
 ‘I gave *Chomsky’s book*<sub>CT</sub> to *John*<sub>F</sub>.’

I maintain that dislocation of CTs, when syntactically available, allows for the creation of a new relative configuration between the CT and the F. When the base-generated order does not fulfill all the CTFA requirements, dislocation in fact becomes obligatory. I will now illustrate one simple but crucial requirement. In Buring’s dialogues above in (3) and (4), the CT is introduced already in speaker A’s question, which I claim allows for either ordering of CT and F in B’s answers (note the dislocated counterpart of (4B): *The beans*<sub>CT</sub>, *Fred*<sub>F</sub> ate them). Turning back to BP, now compare the scenario in (5) with (6). In both cases, *do Chomsky* is introduced as an alternative to *do Pinker* by speaker B, precisely by virtue of their uttering a contrastive topicalization structure. In this case, the CT must precede the F. In (5), the canonical order already places the direct object CT in a higher position than the indirect object F; both (5B1) and (5B2) thus comply with that requirement. In (6), however, the CT *do Chomsky* is more deeply embedded than the F *três livros*; here dislocation of the CT becomes obligatory — note that dislocation to either the left periphery (6B1) or the middle field (6B2) places the CT higher than the F.<sup>4</sup> For control, note that the scenario in (7) is like Buring’s (3)–(4), in that *do Chomsky* is introduced as an alternative to *do Pinker* previously in the discourse, making (7B) a felicitous answer (with *do Chomsky* being less accented than in (6B1)–(6B2), for being second-occurrence here), as would be (6B1)–(6B2).

- (6) A: Quantos livros do Pinker você leu (esse ano)?  
 ‘How many books by Pinker did you read (this year)?’  
 B1: /Do Chomsky<sub>CT</sub>/, eu li /três livros<sub>F</sub>/. ✓ *Left periphery*  
 of-the Chomsky I read three books  
 B2: Eu li, /do Chomsky<sub>CT</sub>/, /três livros<sub>F</sub>/. ✓ *Middle field*  
 I read of-the Chomsky three books  
 B3: #Eu li /três livros<sub>F</sub>/ /do Chomsky<sub>CT</sub>/. ✗ *Canonical order*  
 I read three books of-the Chomsky  
 ‘I read *three books*<sub>F</sub> by *Chomsky*<sub>CT</sub>.’
- (7) A: Você leu cinco livros do Pinker. E *do Chomsky*?  
 ‘You read five books by Pinker. What about *Chomsky*?’  
 B: Eu li /três livros<sub>F</sub>/ /do Chomsky<sub>CT</sub>/. ✓ *Canonical order*  
 I read three books of-the Chomsky  
 ‘I read *three books*<sub>F</sub> by *Chomsky*<sub>CT</sub>.’

We have seen above that CTs are not subject to the same requirements as aboutness topics. Rather, their licensing depends on their (structural and interpretive) relation with an associated F, the *Contrastive Topic-Focus Association*. With that in mind, we can probe further into the constraints on CTFA to investigate the nature of contrastive topicalization in the mapping from syntax to information structure.

### 3. The locality constraint on middle-field CTFA

In this section, I will present a previously unobserved locality constraint on middle-field CTFA. I will then argue that this constraint is unexpected if the middle field of BP contains cartographic topic- and focus-dedicated projections (unlike what Belletti 2004 proposed for Italian). The facts thus provide evidence for a configurational, non-cartographic analysis of middle-field topicalization in BP. First note in (6B2) above that the middle-field CT may be associated with a direct object F. Additionally, note in (8B) that an indirect object may be focalized in situ (the base order being DO–IO). Now let us observe in the paradigm in (9) what happens when we try to associate the same CT *do Chomsky* with the focalized

<sup>4</sup> Sentence (6B3) is acceptable with readings other than contrastive topicalization, which is orthogonal to the present discussion. Judgments are assigned to the relevant readings, with the IS values and intonational patterns indicated.

indirect object *pra Ana*. The left-peripheral topicalization in (9B1) shows that this is in principle possible. Given that *do Chomsky* is a good middle-field CT (cf. (6B2)) and *pra Ana* is a good in situ focus (cf. (8B)), the unacceptability of (9B2) is rather puzzling. I maintain that it is precisely their association (i.e. CTFA) that is disrupted in the structure in (9B2). For now, let us take the contrast between the good (6B2) and the bad (9B2) to indicate that the middle-field CT and the F must be “accessible” (i.e. local) to each other (in a way to be defined in the next section). If there were a FocusP position in the middle field (presumably under a TopicP hosting the topic), as in (10), one would expect it to be able to attract the indirect object closer to the topic. However, movement of the focalized indirect object past the direct object into the middle field is independently degraded, as in (9B3) (in Lacerda in prep. I argue that there is in fact no focus-driven movement in BP), and crucially does not salvage (9B2) — on the contrary, (9B4) is even worse than (9B2)–(9B3).

- (8) A: Pra quem você recomendou livros do Pinker?  
 ‘Who did you recommend books by Pinker to?’  
 B: Eu recomendei livros do Pinker *pra Ana<sub>F</sub>*.  
 I recommended books of-the Pinker to-the Ana  
 ‘I recommended books by Pinker *to Ana<sub>F</sub>*.’
- (9) A: Pra quem você recomendou livros do Pinker ontem?  
 ‘Who did you recommend books by Pinker to yesterday?’  
 B1: /*Do Chomsky<sub>CT</sub>*/, \eu recomendei livros\ /*pra Ana<sub>F</sub>*/ (ontem).  
 of-the Chomsky I recommended books to-the Ana (yesterday)  
 B2: ??Eu recomendei, /*do Chomsky<sub>CT</sub>*/, \livros\ /*pra Ana<sub>F</sub>*/ (ontem).  
 I recommended of-the Chomsky books to-the Ana (yesterday)  
 B3: ??/*Do Chomsky<sub>CT</sub>*/, \eu recomendei\ /*pra Ana<sub>F</sub>*/ \livros\ (ontem).  
 of-the Chomsky I recommended to-the Ana books (yesterday)  
 B4: \*Eu recomendei, /*do Chomsky<sub>CT</sub>*/, /*pra Ana<sub>F</sub>*/ \livros\ (ontem).  
 I recommended of-the Chomsky to-the Ana books (yesterday)  
 ‘I recommended books *by Chomsky<sub>CT</sub> to Ana<sub>F</sub>* (yesterday).’
- (10) [<sub>TP</sub> subject verb [<sub>TopicP</sub> *topic* [<sub>FocusP</sub> *focus* [<sub>VP</sub> ] ] ] ]

The facts observed in (6) and (9) thus suggest that only the highest internal argument of the verb is a suitable F for a middle-field CT (note that nothing in principle prevents an oblique internal argument from being focalized in the presence of a middle-field CT, as (11B) shows). This odd restriction is unexpected under a cartographic approach to topicalization and focalization.

- (11) A: Em quantos alvos os atletas atiraram no campeonato de tiro?  
 ‘How many targets did the athletes shoot at in the shooting championship?’  
 B: Os atletas atiraram, /*na prova final<sub>CT</sub>*/, /*em dois alvos<sub>F</sub>*/.  
 the athletes shot in-the round final in two targets  
 ‘The athletes shot *at two targets<sub>F</sub> in the final round<sub>CT</sub>*.’

In the next section, I will provide an analysis for the distribution of topics and foci in the middle field of BP and provide further evidence for a (non-cartographic) *configurational* approach to CTFA.

## 4. A phase-based configurational account of middle-field CTFA

### 4.1. The mapping rule

In order to account for the contrast between (6B2) and (9B2)/(9B4), I will now argue that the following constraint is operative: If an element dislocated to the middle field of BP is interpreted as a contrastive topic, it must be associated with a focus in the same Spell-Out Domain. Without resorting to a cartographic TopicP above vP, I propose that middle-field topics are adjoined the uppermost projection in the extended domain of vP, represented as XP in the structure in (12). XP (whose precise category is immaterial) is similar to an “object shift” projection, in that its specifier hosts the highest internal argument of the verb. Observe the scenario in (13), where (13B1)–(13B2) are to be interpreted as all-new, broad-focus sentences. The (discourse-neutral) direct object *uma história* in (13B1) may freely precede or follow low adverbs (e.g. manner *direito*) — that is, it may surface outside or within vP —,

whereas the indirect object in (13B2) can only follow the low adverb (*pra Maria* can only precede *direito* if it is interpreted as a contrastive or given topic). Moreover, while the direct object can be independently focalized in either position, the indirect object can only be focalized in the lower position. I thus conclude that the movement of the direct object to Spec,XP is independent of information structure (as I argued in Lacerda 2016a, where quantifier floating data provide further evidence for XP). Since XP closes off the vP domain, I take it to be a phase (assuming with Wurmbrand 2013, Bošković 2014 that the highest projection in a domain is phase), with X<sup>0</sup> thus triggering Spell-Out of the vP. Being at the edge of the XP phase, the CT in (12) is thus part of the higher SOD, and when it is transferred to the interfaces, only YP (in Spec,XP) can be identified as its associated F. There being no focus-driven movement to that area of the clause (cf. (9B3)–(9B4)), it follows that in a ditransitive construction only the direct object (which we have seen can independently escape the vP) is a suitable associated F for the middle-field CT.

(12) *Contrastive Topic-Focus Association* (descriptive mapping rule)

In the configuration [<sub>CP</sub> [<sub>TP</sub> [<sub>XP</sub> **WP** [<sub>XP</sub> **YP** [<sub>X'</sub> X [<sub>vP</sub> ... ] ] ] ] ] ],

if WP is a contrastive topic, then YP is its associated focus.

(13) A: O que aconteceu? ‘What happened?’

B1: O João não explicou [<sub>XP</sub> {uma história} [<sub>vP</sub> direito [<sub>vP</sub> {uma história} pra Maria] ] ].  
the John not explained {a story} right {a story} to-the Maria

B2: O João não explicou [<sub>XP</sub> {#pra Maria} [<sub>vP</sub> direito [<sub>vP</sub> uma história {pra Maria} ] ] ].  
the John not explained {#to-the Maria} right a story {to-the Maria}  
‘John didn’t explain a story to Mary well.’

I take CTFA (as descriptively represented in (12)) to be a configurational (mapping) rule, in the sense of Neeleman and van de Koot (2008, 2010). The structure in (12) is independently created by syntax by resorting to object shift of YP and edge movement (an independently available operation) of WP, which expands the c-command domain of WP (expanding its “domain of contrast”, in N&K’s 2010 terms). When the structure reaches the interfaces, assignment of CT interpretation to WP forces its association with a c-commanded F (by CTFA). As CTFA, when applied to a middle-field CT, is phase-sensitive in the manner discussed above (which I will not deduce here), YP must be focalized, which is independently possible in that position. Being phase-based, CTFA is therefore expected to be computed derivationally, a prediction that is borne out. Let us look at the scenario in (14), where (14B2)–(14B3) are alternative questions to (14B1) and *do Chomsky* is introduced as a CT, whose associated F is the *wh*-element *quantos livros*. Being the direct object, *quantos livros* in (14B2) passes through Spec,XP on its way to Spec,CP, in the position indicated by *t<sub>F</sub>* (in boldface). When *do Chomsky* reaches the interfaces and is assigned CT interpretation, CTFA identifies *t<sub>F</sub>* as its associated F (*wh*-elements being suitable foci). Note that in (14B2) the CT linearly follows the F and still can be (newly) introduced as an alternative (contrastive) topic (cf. discussion of (6) above), since the relevant F (for the purposes of CTFA) is the lower copy/trace in Spec,XP, which is c-commanded by the CT adjoined to XP. Since BP allows for *wh*-elements to stay in situ, (14B3) is a natural alternative to (14B2).

(14) A: Eu li vários livros pro curso de linguística.

‘I read several books for the linguistics course.’

B1: Quantos livros você leu (pra esse curso)?

‘How many books did you read (for this course)?’

B2: /*Quantos livros*<sub>F</sub>/ \você leu/, /*do Chomsky*<sub>CT</sub>/ ***t<sub>F</sub>*** (pra esse curso)?  
how.many books you read of-the Chomsky (for this course)

B3: Você leu, /*do Chomsky*<sub>CT</sub>/, /*quantos livros*<sub>F</sub>/ (pra esse curso)?  
you read of-the Chomsky how.many books (for this course)  
‘How many books<sub>F</sub> by Chomsky<sub>CT</sub> did you read (for this course)?’

#### 4.2. There is no fixed (contrastive) topic position

The account proposed above dispenses with topic- and focus-dedicated projections in the extended domain of vP. I will now provide further evidence that elements that are interpreted as CTs in the postverbal position are not located in a fixed, unique topic position, rendering a cartographic analysis untenable. In other words, the CT interpretation and/or licensing of elements dislocated to the middle



Alternations of this sort are expected if these topics are adjoined to some independent projection in the clausal spine (such as XP in the middle field) — which means they can be freely ordered with respect to one another —, and if these topics have their interpretive needs met configurationally (the dislocation of both contrastive and given topics is licensed based on their relative position with respect to a focus). It is important to point out that both (19B5) and (19B6) comply with the locality constraint on middle-field CTFA: In both cases (represented in (20)), regardless of the position of the given topic, the CT and the F are in the same SOD. Note that the given topic *pro departamento* in (19B5)/(20a) does not interfere with the association between *do Chomsky* and *dez livros*, since it is not a suitable focus in that position (dislocation to the middle field of BP being licensed by topicalization but not focalization), whereas *dez livros* can be independently focalized in Spec,XP, as we have seen above.

- (20) a. [<sub>XP</sub> *of the Chomsky*<sub>CT</sub> [<sub>XP</sub> *to the departament*<sub>G</sub> [<sub>XP</sub> *ten books*<sub>F</sub> [<sub>X'</sub> [<sub>VP</sub> ] ] ] ] ] (19B5)  
 b. [<sub>XP</sub> *to the departament*<sub>G</sub> [<sub>XP</sub> *of the Chomsky*<sub>CT</sub> [<sub>XP</sub> *ten books*<sub>F</sub> [<sub>X'</sub> [<sub>VP</sub> ] ] ] ] ] (19B6)

Under a cartographic approach, the topics in (19) should be located in hierarchical fixed-position specifiers. While such an analysis could leave room for (19B3)–(19B4), which employ different areas of the clause, no fixed hierarchy is observed in either the left periphery (19B1)–(19B2) or the middle field (19B5)–(19B6). The paradigm in (19), especially the acceptability of (19B5), thus advocate for the configurational analysis of *Contrastive Topic-Focus Association* proposed here.

## 5. Final remarks

Due to their position in the clause, middle-field topics do not c-command full propositions and therefore cannot form the traditional *Topic-Comment Articulation* (ruling out aboutness interpretation; see Lacerda in prep.). Having observed that they can have contrastive interpretation, in this paper I tackled the issue of their relation with respect to their associated foci — the *Contrastive Topic-Focus Association*, which encompasses both interpretive and structural requirements. Focusing on syntactic constraints on middle-field CTFA, I provided an analysis for novel data that favor a (non-cartographic) configurational approach to the mapping from syntax to information structure in Brazilian Portuguese.

## References

- Belletti, Adriana. 2004. Aspects of the low IP area. In *The Structure of CP and IP. The Cartography of Syntactic Structures, Vol. 2*, ed. by Luigi Rizzi, 16–51. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bianchi, Valentina, and Mara Frascarelli. 2010. Is topic a root phenomenon? *Iberia* 2: 43–88.
- Bošković, Željko. 2014. Now I'm a phase, now I'm not a phase: On the variability of phases with extraction and ellipsis. *Linguistic Inquiry* 45: 27–89.
- Büring, Daniel. 2003. On D-trees, beans, and B-Accents. *Linguistics & Philosophy* 26: 511–545.
- Büring, Daniel. 2016. (Contrastive) topic. In *The Oxford Handbook of Information Structure*, ed. by Caroline Féry and Shinichiro Ishihara, 64–85. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lacerda, Renato. 2016a. Rebel without a Case: Quantifier floating in Brazilian Portuguese and Spanish. In *Morphosyntax of Portuguese and Spanish in Latin America*, ed. by Mary A. Kato and Francisco Ordóñez, 78–106. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lacerda, Renato. 2016b. Topicalization as predication: The syntax-semantics interface of low topics in Brazilian Portuguese. In *Proceedings of the 33rd West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics*, ed. by Kyeong-min Kim et al., 256–265. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.
- Lacerda, Renato. in preparation. Middle-field syntax and information structure in Brazilian Portuguese. Doctoral dissertation, University of Connecticut.
- Neeleman, Ad, and Hans van de Koot. 2008. Dutch scrambling and the nature of discourse templates. *The Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics* 11: 137–189.
- Neeleman, Ad, and Hans van de Koot. 2010. Information-structural restrictions on A'-scrambling. *The Linguistic Review* 27: 365–385.
- Reinhart, Tanya. 1981. Pragmatics and linguistics: An analysis of sentence topics. *Philosophica* 27: 53–94.
- Rizzi, Luigi. 1997. The fine structure of the left periphery. In *Elements of Grammar*, ed. by Liliane Haegeman, 260–318. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Wagner, Michael. 2012. Contrastive topics decomposed. *Semantics & Pragmatics* 5, Article 8: 1–54.
- Wurmbrand, Susi. 2013. QR and selection: Covert evidence for phasehood. In *Proceedings of the North Eastern Linguistics Society Annual Meeting 42*, ed. by Stefan Keine and Shayne Sloggett, 619–632. Amherst: GLSA, University of Massachusetts.

# Proceedings of the 36th West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics

edited by Richard Stockwell, Maura O’Leary,  
Zhongshi Xu, and Z.L. Zhou

Cascadilla Proceedings Project   Somerville, MA   2019

## Copyright information

Proceedings of the 36th West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics  
© 2019 Cascadilla Proceedings Project, Somerville, MA. All rights reserved

ISBN 978-1-57473-474-4 hardback

A copyright notice for each paper is located at the bottom of the first page of the paper.  
Reprints for course packs can be authorized by Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

## Ordering information

Orders for the printed edition are handled by Cascadilla Press.  
To place an order, go to [www.lingref.com](http://www.lingref.com) or contact:

Cascadilla Press, P.O. Box 440355, Somerville, MA 02144, USA  
phone: 1-617-776-2370, fax: 1-617-776-2271, [sales@cascadilla.com](mailto:sales@cascadilla.com)

## Web access and citation information

This entire proceedings can also be viewed on the web at [www.lingref.com](http://www.lingref.com). Each paper has a unique document # which can be added to citations to facilitate access. The document # should not replace the full citation.

This paper can be cited as:

Lacerda, Renato. 2019. The Syntax of Contrastive Topic-Focus Association in the Middle Field of Brazilian Portuguese. In *Proceedings of the 36th West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics*, ed. Richard Stockwell et al., 237-242. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. [www.lingref.com](http://www.lingref.com), document #3467.