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The social meaning of subject pronouns in Italian conversation*

ALESSANDRO DURANTI

Abstract

From the point of view of their referential function, Italian subject pronouns do not seem to add any information to that already displayed by the verb morphology. From the point of view of sentence grammar, subject pronouns are said to convey contrast or emphasis. In this paper, it is claimed that the function of Italian subject pronouns must be studied within the discourse context of their use. Their function can be understood if we take the notion of 'social meaning' into consideration. On the basis of extensive use of transcripts of spontaneous conversations, it is here suggested that Italian subject pronouns are devices through which speakers define main characters in a narrative and/or convey empathy or positive affect toward certain referents. Inanimate objects, minor characters and people with whom the speaker is displaying lack of empathy or negative affect are instead often referred to by demonstratives. On the basis of this analysis, the allegedly inappropriate use of personal pronouns such as 'lui' in formal written registers is explained as a feature of objective 'scientific' style, which should not convey or reveal the author's feelings toward a given referent.

1. Introduction

Personal pronouns tend to be seen almost exclusively as referential expressions, that is, expressions that identify a particular referent or class of referents in the on-going discourse or surrounding world. Whereas verbs and adjectives are thought of as describing events and defining properties of objects and people in the world, pronouns are seen as indexes, pointers, or

variables (cf. Quine, 1960; Reichenbach, 1966), used in verbal communication with basically two kinds of functions: anaphoric and deictic (cf. Lyons, 1977).

In this paper, I will show that the use of subject pronouns in Italian does not conform to the traditional characterization. On the basis of a detailed analysis of conversational data, I will argue that the meaning and contexts of use of subject pronouns in Italian can be fully understood only if we integrate a study of their referential functions with a study of their discourse and social functions. As I will show, Italian subject pronouns such as *lui* and *lei* not only identify a referent, they also provide a perspective on that referent.

An increasing number of researchers have come to realize, in the last ten years or so, that in recounting events, and in referring to the participants in those events, speakers normally provide particular perspectives or 'frames' (Bateson, 1972; Fillmore, 1975), 'keyings' (Goffman, 1974), or 'cues' (Gumperz, 1982) on how to interpret what they say. Speakers also have ways to stress the more salient information and shade off the less important details (cf. Bates and MacWhinney, 1979; Chafe, 1976; Kuno, 1976; MacWhinney, 1977), define attitudes and expectations, assess each other's viewpoints and social values. By choosing one word over another, speakers define social relationships and social identities.

This aspect of verbal communication is what some linguists and anthropologists have called the SOCIAL FUNCTION of language (cf. Halliday, 1973; Hymes, 1974; Romaine, 1981; Silverstein, 1976b, 1977). In this perspective, speakers are seen as social actors, who talk not only to tell each other about some event or state of affairs in the world, but also to create or renegotiate crucial dimensions of that very world they talk about.

My goal in this paper is to show that this perspective on the use of language in social life can shed some light on a *locus classicus* of Romance syntax, namely, the functions and contexts of use of subject pronouns in Italian tensed clauses.

I will show that the presence of subject pronouns in Italian conversation must be understood not simply in terms of their referential function, that is, their role in identifying referents, but also in terms of their work in defining the role of a given character in a story and in suggesting particular attitudes and value judgements that the speaker may be making on such a character.

This paper is organized in the following way: after a brief introduction to the problem (in Section 2), I will discuss, in Section 3, the function of subject pronouns in maintaining 'discourse continuity' (cf. Givón, 1983). I will show

that subject pronouns like *io*, *tu*, *lui*, *lei* are typically used for human referents who have already been established as part of the current narrative frame, but have not been mentioned in the immediately prior discourse. In Chafe's (1976) terminology, we could say that subject pronouns are used for referents that are OLD, but NOT GIVEN information. In Givón's (1983) more recent terminology, we could say that subject pronouns tend to be used for referents that are out of the 'register' or 'active file'. This is true not only for third person referents, but also for first and second ones. This suggests that full pronouns are not simply used for 'identifying' referents, but also, and crucially, for drawing attention to them (cf. Atkinson, 1979). Despite the information displayed in the verb morphology, which would make it possible, for instance, to uniquely identify the speaker, we often find the first person pronoun *io* when there is no evidence for the speaker to assume that he is one of the characters in the addressee's consciousness at the time of the utterance (cf. Chafe, 1976).

More generally, from the point of view of what Givón (1983) calls 'discourse continuity', subject pronouns tend to occur when there is a change either in the 'topic continuity', or in the spatio-temporal setting of a narrative.

In Section 4, I will discuss the function of subject pronouns in defining the relative prominence of a character in a story. I will show that whereas any referent in discourse may undergo zero anaphora and therefore may not be mentioned, only certain kinds of human referents are referred to by personal pronouns. I will argue that they tend to be MAIN CHARACTERS. In contrast, minor characters are either identified as full nouns or as demonstratives. In Section 5, I will suggest that in choosing a personal pronoun over a demonstrative (or vice versa) the speaker commits himself to a particular attitude toward a given referent/person. Personal pronouns tend to be used for people with whom the speaker displays empathy or positive affect, that is, people with whom he either identifies or sympathizes. Demonstratives, on the other hand, are used for people who are socially or emotionally distant, or people with whom the speaker displays lack of empathy or negative affect. The deictic nature of demonstratives is thus extended from indicating relative physical distance to expressing relative emotional distance. The fact that certain referents must be located 'somewhere in space' suggests their not being already present or close to someone's mind (or heart).

2. The issue

It is a well-known fact about Italian syntax that from the point of view of their descriptive meaning or truth-value conditions, the sentences in (a) below are identical to the sentences in (b):

- (1a) Ho mangiato troppa pasta.
 (1b) Io ho mangiato troppa pasta.
 'I ate too much pasta.'
- (2a) Sei in ritardo.
 (2b) Tu sei in ritardo.
 'You are late.'
- (3a) E' arrivato dopo di me.
 (3b) Lui è arrivato dopo di me.
 'He arrived after me.'

Subject pronouns simply repeat (some of) the information that is contained already and obligatorily in the verb inflection.¹ A question that grammarians have often asked themselves is 'under what conditions does the subject pronoun appear?' or 'What is the function of such a pronoun?'

Italian grammars usually list a number of grammatical contexts in which the full pronoun MUST be used. Thus, for instance, Battaglia and Pernicone (1968) point out that the pronouns *lui*, *lei*, and *loro* are obligatory after *come* and *quanto* – example (4) and (5) –, when they are part of the predicate phrase, example (6) and (7) –, in elliptical exclamations – example (8) and (9):

- (4) Sei fortunato come LUI.
 'You are as lucky as he is.'
- (5) Siamo preoccupati quanto LORO.
 'We are as worried as they are.'
- (6) Se tu fossi LUI.
 'If you were him.'

- (7) Ma noi non eravamo LORO.
 'But we were not them.'
- (8) Contento LUI, contenti TUTTI!
 '(I) HE is happy, (then) EVERYONE is happy.'
- (9) Disgraziati LORO!
 'Too bad for them!' (lit. 'Unfortunate they!')

To explain the use of pronouns in those cases in which they seem optional, namely, in the great majority of cases in which they are subjects, grammar books usually resort to reasons of 'style' or, more commonly, to the notions of 'contrast' or 'emphasis'. These notions, however, are never clearly defined. Within generative grammar, an interesting proposal was made by Cinque (1977), who suggested that full subject pronouns appear in Italian when conveying 'contrast', which he interpreted, probably following Jackendoff (1972), as 'new information'. As I will show, this explanation does characterize SOME of the contexts in which subject pronouns appear in conversation. There are other cases, however, for which this hypothesis does not hold. Thus, for instance, the subject pronoun may be used in utterances where the contrast or emphasis is on the predicate (the new information) rather than on the subject, as in (10) below (for more contextual information, see example (18) below):

- (10) → M: Prima domanda, lui ce l'ha detto.
 first question HE to-him it he-said
 'First question, he DID answer.'

There are also discourse segments in which the personal pronoun appears repeatedly in contexts where the 'new information hypothesis' would predict zero anaphora. An example is provided below:

- (11) → A *invola*: 12.
 → R: Infatti quando LUI ha trovato qualche superiore che lo ha
 in fact when HE found some superior who him has
 'As a matter of fact, when HE found some higher ranking officer
 who'

(1.5) *stimato*::: *che lo ha ritenuto: valevole per come è apprezzato who him has believed valid for how is appreciated him who has believed him valid for the way*'

→ fatto lui eccetera, lui è stato sempre bene.

done HE eccetera HE is been always well

'he is and so on, he was always fine'

→ Il periodo che lui è stato con NAME-1 co::m- (1.0)

the period that he is been with with

'the period that he was with NAME-1 with -(1.0)'

As I will discuss below, in order to explain cases such as those presented in this last example, we must take into consideration the social meaning of pronouns, and their use in providing a perspective on a given character.

3. Introducing and keeping track of referents in discourse

From the point of view of the informational structure of discourse, in constructing discourse, speakers must introduce referents, keep them in play for the time they are needed, get rid of them, and reintroduce them when necessary. Those who have studied discourse know that these tasks are usually accomplished in an efficient way. That is, speakers tend not to waste too many words or too much time/attention on referents that are easily identifiable or recently introduced in the discourse, but spend more energy on referents that are unknown to the addressee or which need to be brought into the conversation from a different 'frame' or 'discourse universe'.

In fact, Sacks and Schegloff (1979) have pointed out that, in English conversation, speakers have a preference for what they call 'recognitionals', that is, forms of reference that invite and allow the addressee to find who or what is being referred to.

Something similar can be found in Italian conversations. Usually, speakers use short definite descriptions such as *il padre* 'the father', *la madre* 'the mother', *gli amici* 'the friends', first names (*Roberto, Giorgio*), last names (*Berlinguer*), or a combination of any two of the former (*la signora Di Giovanni, zia Rosa, Enrico Berlinguer*). The preference for recognitionals is also manifested by the attempts to start from a definite description rather than from an indefinite one. Thus, for instance, in (12) below, R tries to start

by offering a recognitional (*quella ragazza là* 'that girl there'). When the recognition is unsuccessful, she proceeds by identifying the referent through an indefinite (referential) description (*una ragazza italiana* 'an Italian girl'). Let us look closely at this sequence, because it will show us a typical use of zero anaphora or null subject. We will see that, once the referent has been introduced, the following two sentences have no NP expressing the referent of the subject (although, of course, the verb is inflected for person (third), number (singular), and, in this case, even for gender (fem.)).

(12) *A tavola: 9.* (Context: during dinner, talking about customs in different countries, what you can and what you can't do)²

G: *E infatti alla frontiera — alla dogana A NOI c'hanno and indeed at the border at the customs TO US to — us they have 'And as a matter of fact at the border — at the customs WE were'*

chiesto se portavamo animali.

asked if we — brought animals

'asked if we had any animals with us'

(1.5)

S: Mh.

'Mh'.

(1.5)

→ R: *Embe' non te ricordi il fatto di quella ragazza là? well not you reminded the fact of that girl there 'Well don't you remember the story of that girl?'*

(1.0)

(G goes on with his story until he is interrupted by S)

G: *Stanno facendo tutta quanta una campagna Oontro la rabbia (they) are doing whole a campaign against the rabies 'They are doing a whole campaign against rabies'*

che // stanno facendo no,

that (they) are doing TAG

'that // they are doing aren't they?'

S: Quale ragazza?
which girl
'Which girl?'

→ R: Una ragazza italiana. (1.5)
a girl Italian
'An Italian girl. (1.5)'

→ E' andata in vacanza in America.
is gone in vacation in America
'She went on vacation in the States'

→ S'è portata il gatto. (1.5)
REFL is brought the cat
'She brought her cat with her. (1.5)'

Il gatto dentro la borsa. (5.2)
the cat inside the bag
'her cat inside her bag. (5.2)'

Alla dogana gli hanno messo il Gatto in quarantena (1.5)
at the customs to-her they-have put the cat in quarantine
'At the customs they put her cat in quarantine (1.5)'

Gli hanno messo una multa (3.0) di circa trecentomila lire
to-her they put a fine of about 300,000 lire
'they gave her a fine (3.0) of about 300 dollars'

(2.0) (e) l'hanno fatta tornare indietro.
and her-they made return back
'(2.0) 'and they made her come back.'

(0.5)

We have just seen a case in which a new referent is introduced into discourse, and, immediately afterwards, a series of propositions are made about the same referent. The use of zero anaphora or null subject is fairly common for this kind of context. As shown in the following examples, zero anaphora is typically used when a predication is made about a referent that has been mentioned in the immediately prior discourse (usually one or two clauses back). In this context, zero anaphora is found with any kind of referent: (i) human (example (13)), inanimate objects (example (14)). Furthermore, zero

anaphora can follow the mention of a referent as an indefinite description (cf. (12) above), as a definite description (example (13)), or as a proper noun (example (15)).

(13) *A tavola*: 10. (Talking to his mother (R) and his cousin (G), S makes a comment about his father, who is in another room.)

→ S: Hai visto oggi papà come s'è dato da fa' a pranzo?
you-have seen today daddy how REFL-is given to do at lunch
'Have you noticed daddy today, how he helped with lunch?'

?: ((Laughing)) Hehe.

→ S: S'è Al-zato. Ha preso i piatti.
REFL-is got up has taken the dishes
'He got up (from the table). He took the dishes away.'

Influenza:: (eh,) anglosassone?
influence anglosaxon
'Anglosaxon influence?'

R: Bo:?
'Who knows?'

(14) *A cena*: 10. (Mother and son (Franco) are eating, while Father is at the phone. The son looks at the tape recorder, which is next to the table.)

→ Franco: Lo sai che 'sto registratore è potentissimo,
it you-know that this tape recorder is very powerful
'Do you know that this tape recorder is very powerful?'

(2.0)

→ Mother: Che fa, sta registrando?
what does, is recording
'What is it doing, is it recording?'

(15) *Un amico*: 7.

→ F: Ma Roberto, ah io gli ho chiesto quanti esami aveva fatto
but Roberto I to-him asked how many exams had taken
'But Roberto, y'know I asked him how many exams he had given'

→ ha detto "zero"
has said zero
'he said "none"'

In the next section, I will compare the informational context of subject (personal) pronouns to that of full nouns/definite descriptions and zero anaphora.

3.1. *Discourse continuity: The informational context of subject pronouns*

As pointed out by Givón (1983), speakers of all languages have at their disposal a whole set of different forms of reference and various syntactic constructions that can be used for keeping track of referents in discourse. Such discourse tools or discourse strategies include: indefinite nouns, definite descriptions, left- and right-dislocation, proper nouns, full pronouns, clitic pronouns, verb agreement, zero anaphora (in the Italian case, the last two strategies coincide).

One way of characterizing the use of subject pronouns in Italian with respect to discourse continuity is that of comparing their informational context, or 'givenness' (cf. Chafe, 1976; Duranti and Ochs, 1979), to that of full noun phrases and zero-anaphora (i.e. mere verb-agreement).

When we look at their use in spontaneous conversation, we find that subject personal pronouns like *io*, *tu*, *lui*, *lei* tend to be used, very much like short definite descriptions, for A REFERENT THAT HAS BEEN ALREADY ESTABLISHED AS PART OF THE CURRENT NARRATIVE FRAME BUT CANNOT BE ASSUMED TO BE IN THE ADDRESSEES' WORKING MEMORY' OR (in Givón's terms) 'ACTIVE FILE'. One way to assess such a status for a given referent is to see whether it has been mentioned in the immediately prior discourse. Typically, the referent of a subject full pronoun was not mentioned in the immediately prior context (viz. one or two clauses back).³ In Chafe's (1976) terminology, we could say that subject pronouns tend to be used for referents that are NOT GIVEN, but OLD; that is, for referents whose existence and identity have been already established in prior discourse, but cannot be assumed by the speaker to be in the addressee's consciousness. This tendency suggests that subject pronouns in Italian are used as ATTENTION-GETTING DEVICES; they draw the addressee's attention to a particular referent, before or after a predication about that referent is made.

Within a story, a subject pronoun often seems to bring back a character who was 'around' but who may have been momentarily left out of the scene. Very much like left-dislocations (cf. Duranti and Ochs, 1979), pre-verbal subject pronouns tend to co-occur with or signal a SUB-TOPIC SHIFT. In this regard, third person pronouns *lui*, *lei* are not very different from first and second person pronouns. Speaker and hearer, like third parties, may need to be reintroduced into the discourse when they have been momentarily left out of the current 'scene'. In (16), for instance, Stefania uses *io* when introducing herself in Giusi's story:

(16) *Fuorisede*: 3. (Context: young women in a dormitory complaining about one of them not waking up in the morning.)

Giusi: Stavo sognando quando (entra) Francesca e fa

I was dreaming when enters Francesca and says

'I was dreaming when Francesca (comes in) and says'

Franc.: Se: "stavo sognando"

if I-was dreaming

'What? "I was dreaming"' (meaning: you weren't dreaming)

Giusi: Qualcuno ha suonato?

someone has rang

'Has someone rung?'

→ Stefania: Io stavo in bagno mi sono rivestita

I was in bathroom I-got dressed

'I was in the bathroom and got dressed'

(...)

In (17), *tu* 'you' is used when G moves from talking in general terms about electric current in the States to what S, in particular, can do with his Italian hair-drier:

(17) *A tavola*: 6. (Context: talking about electric current systems in different countries. After talking about England, the speakers move on to America.)

G: L'America ce l'ha diversa?

the America pro it has different

'Does America have a different (current)?'

(1.)

S: (Pentisa) che è diversa pure da noi.i.

think that is different even from us

'Imagine that it is even different from ours (= Italy)'

(1.)

S: (Capito?)

understood

'Can you imagine?'

→ G: Per esempio tu puoi attaccare il tuo fon:?

For instance YOU can attach the your hair-drier

'Can you for instance use your hair-drier?'

(meaning: Can you use your Italian hair-drier in the States?)

(8)

S: Non lo so.

not it I know

'I don't know.'

(1.)

G: Hai mai provato?

you-have ever tried

'Have you ever tried?'

S: No.

'No.'

In (18), again, we find *lui* 'he' when the speaker moves from general information and considerations about an oral test to what his friend did.

(18) *Esami*: 4, transcribed by D. Palumbo. (Context: male students talking about what happened to one of their friends when he took a law exam.)

M: Prima domanda: domanda (3) facile ma molto generale
first question question easy but very general
'First question, easy question but so general'

dove ti si possono inculcare a piacimento
where you REFL they-can screw at libidum
'that they can screw you as much as they like'

definizione di e- a: ordinarmento giuridico=
definition of system legal
'definition of - uhm legal system=?'

A: =Buona notte.

good night

'That's it!'

→ M: Prima domanda, lui ce l'ha detto.

first question HE to-him it he-said

'First question, he DID answer.'

(..)

Prior mention is not a necessary condition for considering a referent to be old or shared information. This holds not only for first and second person (always shared, definite information), but also for some third person referents that are not present. We find third person subject pronouns used without prior identification, when their existence is implied or evoked by the previous identification of a set, such as *famiglia* in (19), or when they refer to one member of a well-known (unique) set, such as the woman in a couple, as in (20):

(19) *A tavola*: 10-11. (Context: At dinner-time, the lunch-time/event is mentioned, when some people had come over. All the speakers here were also participants in the lunch.)

R: Comunque una famiglia simpatica. Me sembra. No,

Anyhow a family pleasant to-me seems TAG

'Anyhow a nice family. It seems to me. Or not?'

(1.0)

S: ((Falsetto)) Mbe'. Intsomma.

well. sort of

'Well. Actually.'

→ G: Lui non è che sia un gran parlatore // e:;

HE not is that be a great speaker TAG

'He's not such a great talker, is he?'

G: non è // un gran oratore.
not is a great orator
'he is not a great orator'.

S: No.
'No'.

R: No.
'No?'

(2.0)

S: LUI?
he
'HIM?'

?R: Mm.
'Mh'.

?S: Mm.
'Mh'.

G: Mm.
'Mh'.

→ S: Lei se nun-nun parlasse sarebbe meglio.
SHE if not not spoke would be better
'If SHE didn't talk it would be better'.

?G: Mm.
'Mh'.

R: Mbe-
'Well?'

S: La BAMBINA è simpatica.
the girl is nice
'The GIRL is nice'.

G: Eh.
'Right?'

(20) *A cena: 7.*

Mother: lo quando ho sentito "Elisabetta" pensavo che:

I when I have heard Elisabetta I thought that
'Me when I heard "Elisabetta" I thought that'

adesso Franco va a cena: (.5)

now Franco goes to dinner

'now Franco will go for dinner'

forse con qualcuno del (suo) lavoro.

maybe with someone of his work

'may with someone from his work'.

Franco: No. Lui stava fuori.

no HE was out

'No. He (=Elisabetta's husband) was away'.

3.2. *Other kinds of discontinuity*

There are some cases in which a pronoun is used despite the fact that the referent has just been mentioned. These are cases in which, although there is continuity in the referents that are being talked about, there is discontinuity in some other dimension of the discourse, such as the temporal or the spatial coordinates of the narrative frame. An example of this kind of discontinuity is provided in (21) below, where F has just been talking about one of Roberto's friends, but uses *lui* while moving from a general characterization of the person to an actual event in which he was present:

(21) *Un amico* 1:4.

F: e questo è uno molto PRATICO cioè
and this is one very practical that is
'and this guy is a very practical person that is'

c'ha il problema del lavoro e così via

has got the problem of the work and so on

'he's got the problem of what job (to have) and so on'

allora una sera siamo saliti in macchina

so one evening we went into car

'so one night we got into the car'

- c'era lui e mi fa "sai" dice (. . .)
 there was HE and to-me says "you know" says
 'He was there and says to me "you know" he says (. . .)'

Within this more general category of discontinuity, one might also include those cases in which the speaker moves from foregrounded to backgrounded information or from direct to reported speech. An example of this kind of context is provided in (22):

- (22) *Fuorisede*, transcribed by Caporale and Casacca. (Context: Talking about Giusi's boyfriend)
- Giusi: No già oggi m'ha detto che-
 no already today to-me said that
 'No he's already told me today that-'
 oggi ha detto "sai penso proprio che
 today has said y'know I-think really that
 'today he said "you know I really think that
 → tu non mi ami"
 YOU not me you-love
 you don't love me"
 → dopo che io avevo fatto tutte quelle cose
 after that I had done all those things
 'after I had done all those things'
 j'ho detto "a: si'?"
 to-him I-have said yes
 'I said to him "is that right?"'
 → Lui m'ha de- ((LG)) m'ha detto // "si è logico".
 HE to-me has sai- to-me has said yes is logical
 'He said to me- ((LG)) he told me // "yes it's obvious".'

That the presence of a pronoun can be related to a switch from background to foreground information was also suggested by Li and Thompson (1979) for Chinese, a language that also allows zero anaphora (without subject-verb agreement). This fact indicates that the phenomena discussed here might indeed be part of a universal set of strategies used by languages for handling

discourse continuity as well as other aspects of discourse structuring (cf. also Clancy, 1980; Hopper, 1979).

In this section, I have shown that subject pronouns are a powerful resource that speakers can use for drawing attention to a referent for a number of different reasons. To borrow a metaphor from film techniques, one could say that pronouns are like close-ups or fast zooms, they 'focus' on a character, while giving us some important information about him.

In the next section, I will show that, despite the fact that personal pronouns are, in Sacks and Schegloff's terms, IDEAL 'recognitionals', — they are only ONE word — there are semantic and pragmatic restrictions on referents to be identified by subject pronouns. To understand the likelihood of a given referent being expressed by a subject personal pronoun, we must take into consideration the ROLE or PART of a given character in a narrative, and the particular ATTITUDE that speakers display toward such a character.

4. Likelihood of being expressed by a subject personal pronoun

The fact that some referents are expressed/identified by subject pronouns more often than others (as opposed, say, to a noun, a definite description, or zero anaphora) reaffirms something that has often been discussed under various versions of the so-called 'topicalization hierarchy'. The idea captured by such a hierarchy is that the nature of the referent of a given linguistic expression — e.g. whether it is the speaker, the hearer, someone else, a human being or an object, etc. — matters with respect to the ability or likelihood of that particular expression to 'undergo' or 'trigger' certain grammatical processes (e.g. passivization, pronominalization, left-dislocation, topicalization) (cf. Givón, 1976, 1979; Hawkins and Hyman, 1974; Kuno, 1976; Silverstein, 1976a; Duranti, 1979). Also with subject pronouns, the nature of the referent mattered a great deal. Thus, for instance, whereas speaker and hearer can always be referred to by the personal pronouns *io* and *tu*, only some of the third person referents are referred to as *lui* or *lei*.⁴ Such a restriction applies to a subset of the human referents — given that inanimate referents are either expressed by full nouns or by demonstratives — namely, to referents that have a PROMINENT ROLE in a story. Furthermore, by contrasting a personal pronoun with a demonstrative, a speaker can also express empathy or affect toward a given character in a story.

4.1. 'Main' characters and 'minor' characters

By looking at the different third person human referents in terms of their role or importance in a story, I found that those who are referred to by personal pronouns are people who, in a script or in a story, would be called 'main characters'. In fact, **THE MORE IMPORTANT THE CHARACTER, THE MORE OFTEN IS HE/SHE REFERRED TO BY MEANS OF A FULL PRONOUN**. Minor characters, 'bit players', are referred to by 'full NP's' (indefinite or definite descriptions) or by demonstratives. That these categories, however difficult to define, have direct bearing on nominal and pronominal choice in natural languages is further supported by the fact that similar distinctions have been found relevant in a number of unrelated languages (cf. Clancy, 1980; Ennulat, 1978; Marchese, to appear).

As typical 'bit players', minor characters in a story in conversation usually do not even have a name. They are 'a man', 'a woman', or 'the policeman', 'the plumber', etc. After they have been introduced into the discourse, minor characters may be referred to by demonstratives such as *quello*, *quella* 'that one', *questo*, *questa* 'this one', or any combination of the former with deictic particles such as *il* 'there' and *qui* 'here'. Examples (23) and (24) illustrate the use of *quello* for minor character people whose identity is either unknown to the speaker himself or irrelevant for the participants:

(23) *Fuorisede*: 8. (Context: Telling a story about the inconveniences of having too many possible first names.)

F: *Be' Mari//a Francesca Rita.*
well Maria Francesca Rita
'Well Maria Francesca Rita.'

G: *Maria Francesca Rita.*
'Maria Francesca Rita.'

S: *Un giorno tele//fona uno e fa "pronto c'è Maria?"*
one day calls one and does "hello there's Maria
'One day someone calls and says "hello is Maria there?"'

e io faccio "un attimo"
and I do one moment
'and I say "one moment"'

F: *So' nomi normali.*
are names normal
'They are normal names.'

(.5)

S: *Vado da Carolina e gli dico*
I-go to Carolina and to-her say
'I go to Carolina and say to her'

"Carolina già gli stavo dicendo ha sbagliato numero"
already to-him I was saying has mistaken number
'"Carolina I was about to tell him he got the wrong number"'

perché lei chi la chiama Maria chi la chiama Francesca
because SHE who her calls Maria who her calls Francesca
'because some people call her Maria and others Francesca'

c'ha una doppia identità.
has got a double identity
'She's got double identity.'

(1.)

→ S: *e infatti quello aveva // sbagliato numero*
and in fact that had mistaken number
'And as a matter of fact the guy had the wrong number.'

è andata lei e fa "pronto c'è Maria",
is gone SHE and does hello there is Maria
'She went (to the phone) and (he) says "hello is Maria there?"'

"sono io" "COME sei tu?"
am I how are you
'"It's me" "WHAT is it you?"'

G: *Doppia vita.*
'double life.'

G: *((LG)) Era un'altra.*
was another
'It was another one.'

(1.5)

C: Cercavano un'altra Maria.
look for another Maria
'They were looking for another Maria.'

(24) *A cenn*: 14. (Context: Mo(ther) telling a story about Father going to look for someone who could fix the motor of a pump for the hot water tank.)

Mo: Abbiamo portato ad aggiusta' il nostro poi.
we-have taken to fix the our then
'We then took ours to be fixed.'

Quando finalmente hanno riaperto (.5)
when finally they-have re-open
'When they finally reopened'

questi stabilimenti.
these plants
'those factories.'

(4.)
Mo: No so a quale kilometro. (1.) Della Prenestina.
Not know to which kilometer. of-the P. (way)
'I can't remember at which kilometer (1.) of Prenestina

Non so che intomma. Tuo padre pensa che
Not know which that is your father you-think that
'I don't remember what. Your father imagine that'

quando è arrivato là (1.)
when is arrived there
'when he arrived there (1.)'

quello gli ha detto "ritorni domani"
that to-him has said return tomorrow
'the guy told him "come back tomorrow"'

gli ha detto "no. Guardi. Io aspetto qua perché —"
to-him has said no Look I wait here because
'he told him "no. Look. I wait here because —"'

Non so. S'è fatto quaranta chilometri a anda'
not know REFL is done 40 kil. to go
'I don't know. He went 40 kilometers one way'
e quaranta a torna'. (1.) Capito, (3.) EH. (5.)
and 40 to return understand
'and 40 to come back. (1.) You know, Ah',

4.2. *Becoming a main character*

In any given context, certain referents are, by their very nature, potential MAIN CHARACTERS. Thus, for instance, in a conversation between good friends, their common friends, their parents, spouses, children, etc. are potential main characters. People who are instead known to only one of the speakers are less likely to be main characters. However, in the course of the conversation, they can BECOME main characters. I will illustrate this process with some examples from a transcript of a conversation between two friends (F and A), in which F recounts to A his recent visit to a common friend, Roberto, who lives now in a different city, and has a new life-style. Throughout the transcript, their friend Roberto, who clearly is the main character in the story, is referred to as 'Roberto' and 'lui'. Roberto's parents (who are also known to both participants in the conversation) are referred to as *il padre* and *la madre*, and, occasionally, as *lui* and *lei* respectively. When there is potential conflict, however, there seems to be a preference for reserving *lui* for Roberto rather than his father. Here is an example of a repair, viz, self-correction, which illustrates this point:

(25) *Un amico*: 2.

F: [...] perché chiaramente il padre ha detto
because clearly the father has said
'... because of course his father said'

"ah vengo subito (ah come?)" dall'ufficio no,
"I-come immediately (what?)" from the office TAG
"Hei I'll come right away (of course)" from his office, y'know'

allora è venuto e m'è toccato aspettarlo,
so is come and me-forced wait-him
'so he came and I had to wait for him',

quindi a Roberto⁵ l'ho fatto aspetta' un'ora
hence to Roberto him-made wait one hour
'therefore Roberto I had to make him wait an hour'

un'ora un quarto (per) l'appuntamento, no,
one hour one quarter (for) the appointment TAG
'an hour an' a quarter (for) (our) appointment, y'know',

A: Perché il padre era venuto pe- per vedere a te=
because the father had come to- to see to YOU
'Because his father had come to- to see YOU='

→ F: =Sì per vedere a me. Chiaramente lui già se-
yes to see to ME clearly HE already REFL
'Yes to see ME. Clearly he was already-'

→ il padre già se immaginava la cena.
the father already REFL imagine the dinner
'his father was already imagining the dinner'.

In the same conversation, Roberto's new friends, who are known to F but not to A, are identified by means of full noun phrases or demonstratives. However, when considerable information has been exchanged about one of Roberto's friends and this person is brought to the foreground, we do find the pronoun *lui* used. *Lui* in fact first appears when the friend is contrasted with another minor character (his father), and then again when he is about to speak (in the story) and exchange opinions with F. Once he starts talking and expressing concerns about Roberto, he stops being a 'bit player' and becomes a main character. This sequence is illustrated in (26):

(26) *Un amico*: 3.

F: Ma 'st' amici poi. Uno. Quello lì almeno
but these friends then One that there at least
'But these friends anyhow. One. At least that one'

è uno molto pratico.
is one very practical
'is someone very practical'.

A: Ma l'hai visto?
but him you-have seen
'But did you meet him?'

F: Sì l'ho conosciuti tutti (da me) e:.
Yes them I-have known all by me
'Yes I met all of them (by myself) I'll tell you'.

A: ((CL)) (Che fa?)
what does
'What does he do?'

F: E: questo qui che fa- che coltiva le rose
well this here who doe- who cultivates the roses
'Well this one who does- who cultivates roses'

quello che c'ha . . . te lo ricordi no,
that who has REFL him remember TAG
'that one who's . . . you remember him don't you?'

A: Chi è?
who is
'Who is he?'

F: Il figlio di De Rossi quello che fa le canzoni.
the son of that who does the songs
'The son of De Rossi the one who writes the songs'.

Quello che fa le canzoni per [NAME OF ITALIAN SINGER].
that who does the songs for NAME
'that one who writes songs for [NAME]'

A: Mbe'?
well
'So?'

F: E.: E.: Quello è:- coltiva le rose no,
well that is cultivates the roses TAG
'Well. That guy is- cultivates roses y'know'

e quindi c'ha // la sua
and thus has the his
'and so he's // got his'

A: Cloè di mestiere?
that is as job
'You mean that's his job?'

F: Sì è una sua attività'. Il PADRE la- la faceva
yes is a his activity the father it it did
'Yes it's one of his activities. His father did it'
per hobby no, // lui c'ha cominciato a guadagnà 'sopra
as hobby TAG HE has started to earn on
'as a hobby y'know // he started to make money on it'
e quindi adesso lo commercia no, // le rose.
and so now it deals TAG the roses
'so that now he sells them y'know // roses'.

A: Mm.

A: Mm.

(Pause)
F: E questo è uno molto PRATICO cioè c'ha il problema
and this is one very practical that is has the problem
'And this guy is someone who is very practical that is he's got the
problem'

del lavoro e così via allora una sera quando
of job and so on so one evening when
'of what to do for a job and so on so one night when'
siamo saliti in macchina c'era lui
were got on car there was HE
'we got into the car he was there'

mi fa dice "sai" dice "io (a) Roberto l'ho conosciuto
to me does says "y'know" says "I Roberto him I have known
'he goes he says "y'know" he says "I met Roberto'

tre anni fa:..". (. . .)
three years ago
'three years ago" .

Another interesting case in the same conversation is provided by the way in which Roberto's new girlfriend, who is known only to F but not to A, is identified. She is usually referred to as *la donna sua* (which becomes *la donna mia* in Roberto's reported direct speech), *la donna*, or *quella*. She 'becomes' *lei*, however, when A finally asks F to give his assessment of her 'as a person'. After a whole series of attributes and events related to her have been mentioned by F, she is referred to as *lei*:

(27) *Un amico*: 10-11.
(0.6)

A: Ma com'è 'sta donna?
but how is this woman
'But how is this girlfriend?'
(1.6)

F: A me non me piace pe' NIENTE.
to ME not to-me pleases at all
'I don't like her at ALL.'

A: Sì. Ma pa- (e come) PERTSONA. Non dico fisicamente.
Yes but ? and as person not (I) say physically
'Yes. But as a PERSON. I don't mean physically'.
F: Come pertsona. Dunque. Come pertsona è una che-
as person well as person (she) is one who
'As a person. Well, as a person, she is someone who-'
... molto dolce probabilmente (cioè) molto così no,
very sweet probably that is very like that TAG
'... (is) very sweet probably (that is) very what can I say?'

però
however
'however-'

A: Cioè vuoi dire "accondiscendente"
that is (you) mean condescending
'That is, you mean "condescending" .

- F: No. Dolcetta. Così. Hai capito, cioè
 no little sweet like that (you) understand that is
 'No. A little sweetie. Like that. You know, that is'
 "Roberto-cosi-cola-cola" no,
 "Roberto-this and that" no
 '(she goes) "Roberto-this, Roberto-that" y'know',
 però dev'essere anche una (mo-) abbastanza attiva
 but (she) must be also one ve- quite active
 'but she must be also quite active'
 sotto certi aspetti cio- a-:!
 under certain aspects that is-oh!
 'in some respect -oh!'
 Adesso in parte era incazzatissima
 now in part (she) was very pissed off
 'Now she was partly (?) very pissed off'
 perché l'avevano licenziata. No, dal la //voro.
 because her- (they) had fired no from work
 'because she had been fired. Y'know from her job'.
- A: Che fa lei?
 what does SHE
- 'What does she do?'
- F: Lavorava a un'azienda di queste macchine qua
 (she) worked at a firm of these machines here
 'She used to work in a factory making this kind of machine'.
 ((Points to a picture on a magazine)) ((Cont.))

5. Expressing empathy toward a referent

This last example brings us to another important feature of *lui/lei* versus *questo-quel/quello-a*, namely, the tendency to use personal pronouns for characters with whom the speaker empathizes. Demonstratives, on the other hand, are used for characters with respect to whom the speaker wants to maintain a certain emotional distance, people with whom he/she does not

want the hearer to sympathize, people with whom the speaker displays NEGATIVE AFFECT. In (27), for instance, speaker F not only keeps Roberto's girlfriend in the background, he also shows that he is not fond of her. A, on the other hand, displays some interest in her 'as a person'. He does not accept F's definition of Roberto's girlfriend and wants to know more about her. In talking about her 'as a person', about her problems (she lost her job), Roberto's girlfriend becomes not only a more important character, she also becomes someone with whom one can start to empathize. That's when *lei* is used. Another, perhaps clearer example of the different attitudes evoked by the two types of pronominal reference is reproduced in (28) below, in which R (S's mother) is telling her son S about his father's misfortunes as an army officer, giving reasons why he did not have a brilliant career. S's father is again and again referred to as *lui*. From an informational point of view, all these *lui* seem redundant. If we look at this interaction, however, from the point of view of what R is trying to accomplish in telling this story, we may start thinking that R uses *lui* as a way of winning her son's sympathy with his father's unjust misfortunes. This hypothesis is reinforced by the way R handles other characters in the story. She reserves the demonstratives *quello* and *questo* for those characters who were somehow thought responsible for S's father's lack of success or who did not display respect or admiration for him at some crucial time.

(28) *A tavola*: 12-13.

- R: Infatti quando LUI ha trovato qualche superiore che lo ha
 in fact when HE found some superior who him has
 'As a matter of fact, when HE found some higher ranking officer
 who'
 (1.5) *stimato*:... che lo ha ritenuto: valevole per come è
 appreciated who him has believed valid for how is
 'appreciated him who has believed him valid for the way'
 fatto lui eccetera, lui è stato sempre bene.
 done HE eccetera HE is been always well
 'he is and so on, he was always fine'.
 → Il periodo che lui è stato con NAME-1 co::m- (1.0)
 the period that he is been with with
 'the period that he was with NAME-1 with -(1.0)'

- NAME-2 eccetera. Sono (0.5) solamente interessati
eccetera they-are only interested
'NAME-2 eccetera. They (.5) are only interested'
- ad avere un ufficiale intelligente SENZA (2.5)
to have an officer intelligent WITHOUT
'to have an intelligent officer WITHOUT (2.5)'
- quest'altre fresacce, lui è stato bene. (1.0)
these other stupid things HE is been well
'these other stupid concerns, he was fine. (1.)'
- Lui è stato male quando è stato co' coso là.
HE is been bad when is been with thing there
'He was (feeling) bad when he was with what's-his-name.'
- Co' NAME-3. (2.5) e quando è stato co: -
with and when is been with-
'With NAME-3 (2.5) and when he was with-'
come se chiama quello, NAME-4.
how is called that one.
'what's HIS name, NAME-4'
((Several lines skipped))
- Allora 'sto generale NAME-3 non tso che doveva offri' (1.0)
So this general not I-know what had offer
'So this general NAME-3 I don't know what he wanted to offer
(1.0)'
- (1.0) Allora (0.5) ma:nda: (.3) (un) maresciallo lì. Addetto.
so he sends a sergeant there in charge
'(1.0) So he sends (.3) a sergeant there. In charge'. (0.5)
- Il deus ex machina de: de sala men(s)-
the deus ex machina of of mess
'The deus ex machina of the- the mess'
- (1.0) del reparto: (.8) Come se chiama? Ristorante di Fregene.
of the detachment how REFL called restaurant of Fregene
'of the detachment (.3) What is it called? The restaurant in
Fregene'.

- Son: Mm.
'Mm'.
Mo: Dice: (1.5) "Il signor generale NAME-3 (1.) dice: (2.) se"
says the mister general says if
'(he) says (1.5) "General NAME-3 (1.0) says if-"
che poi questo 'nvece a papà non lo conosceva per niente no,
that then this instead dad not him knew at all TAG
'and actually this guy did not know your dad at all y'know'
(...)

→* One way of explaining this social function of pronouns and their complementary relationship with demonstratives is to remember that demonstratives are also (or more typically) used for inanimate objects, for 'things'. There is nothing more effective for creating social distance, and humiliating someone than to treat a person as a thing. Once we understand this, we can also understand the derogatory or ironic use of demonstratives for referents that are potential main characters or characters with whom the speaker may be expected to sympathize. In the last example below, we find that G, in telling her girlfriends a story about a boy named Adamo who is known to some of the participants, refers to him as *questo*. A few turns later, she makes clear her opinion of him: *E' scemo* 'he is stupid', and then, again, *E' proprio tanto* 'he is really dumb'.

(29) *Fuorisede: 7.*

- G: Dovevo prendere la macchina. Allora mi ha detto
I had to take the car so to-me he-said
'I needed the car. So he said to me:
"guarda sai devo andare all'università
look y'know I-must go to the university
"look y'know I have to go to the university"
te l'ho spiegato devo pigliare le frequenze."
to-you it I-have explained I-must take attendance
'I explained to you I need to get proof of attendance''

bene (1.) allora io ho pensato viene all'università
 good then I have thought he-comes to the univ.
 'Good (1.) then I thought he was coming to the university'.

→
 ho detto questo c'avra la macchina=
 I-have said this must have the car
 'I thought he/this guy must have a car'.

nossignore (.5) sono andata all'università
 no sir I went to the university
 'no way. (.5) I went to the university'

ho preso le chiavi della macchina (.5)
 I took the keys of the car
 'I brought with me the car keys (.5)'

dopodiché m'ha detto "guarda che la macchina
 after which to-me he said "look that the car
 'at that point he told me "look the car'

sta sotto casa (.1) e quindi sono dovuta ritornare indietro
 is under house and so I-had to come back
 'is in front of your house (1.) so I had to come back'

(...)

F: Adamo:..

G: //E' scemo.
 is stupid
 'He is stupid'.

F: Rispecchia esattamente la prima::// impressione che m'ha fatto.
 reflects exactly the first impression that me-has given
 'He maintains exactly the first impression I got from him'.

G: E' tonto
 is dumb
 'He is dumb'.
 E' tonto
 is dumb
 'He is dumb'.

G: E' proprio tonto.
 is really dumb
 'He is really dumb'.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, I have discussed the function of Italian subject pronouns. I have shown that there is much more in a simple pronoun like *lui* than the information about a male, human, referent. When we look at the use of subject pronouns in actual conversation, we realize that they are used as attention-getting devices for information that is momentarily out of the memory 'active file' (cf. Givón, 1983) or in Chafe's (1976) terminology, for referents that are old, but 'not given' (as originally proposed by Cinque, 1977). However, this is only a limited part of the picture. When we study subject pronouns from the point of view of their social meaning in constructing discourse 'frames', and in negotiating particular perspectives on the people talked about, we realize that subject pronouns are also used for defining main characters in a story. Minor characters, in turn, are more often identified by means of full noun phrases or demonstratives. Furthermore, personal pronouns show some interesting complementary distribution with demonstratives. The continuous use of a personal pronoun evokes empathy or positive affect for a character, whereas the use of demonstratives often co-occurs with negative affect or clear dislike for a person.

On the basis of the analysis presented here, we can also attempt to explain why the pronoun *lui* is considered inappropriate in scientific writing and newspaper articles, as well as in more formal registers of spoken language. The explanation that is usually given is that *lui* is 'colloquial', but this is only a label for a phenomenon that still needs to be explained. Once we start understanding the social meaning of personal pronouns in terms of such categories as empathy or affect, we can see that *lui* is too 'affect-loaded' for the impartial and objective style required by most academic journals and newspapers. Instead more neutral anaphoric definite descriptions are preferred such as *l'autore* 'the author', *il ben noto linguista americano* 'the wellknown American linguist', *il suddetto* 'the above-mentioned', etc.⁶ Further research should test this hypothesis by comparing the use of pronominal forms in different kinds of written (and spoken) genres. If the analysis presented here is sound, we should be able to predict some of the patterns of variation across genres and contexts.

Notes

- * An earlier version of this paper was given at the 1983 Southern California Conference on Romance Linguistics, organized by Joelle Bailard and Carlos Quicoli at the University of California, Los Angeles, and in a number of seminars at the University of Rome, University of California at Los Angeles, University of Southern California, and University of California at San Diego. I would like to thank the participants in those events for their comments and constructive criticism. I am also grateful to Aaron Cicourel, Annbale Ela, Talmy Givón and Elinor Ochs for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper and to my students at the University of Rome for their interest and enthusiasm, which generated additional transcripts and new ideas. While writing this paper I was supported by a postdoctoral fellowship from the Center for Human Information Processing, at the University of California, San Diego (NIMH Grant no. PHS-MH 14268-08-Mandler).
1. The only case in which the pronoun provides information that is not already available in the verb morphology is in the third person singular, when the verb is not inflected for gender. Thus, whereas (1) is, out of context, ambiguous as to the gender of the subject, (2) and (3) aren't:
 - (1) Legge molto.
'He/she reads a lot.'
 - (2) Lui legge molto.
'He reads a lot.'
 - (3) Lei legge molto.
'She reads a lot.'
 2. From this point onwards, all the examples are taken from transcripts of spontaneous conversation. The title, page of transcript, and, sometimes, contextual information are given at the beginning of the example. The conventions used for transcribing turn-taking are those of Conversation Analysis (see the Appendix in Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson [1974]). In transcribing and translating Italian, I have used the same conventions used in Duranti and Ochs (1979): full pronouns are glossed with capital letters (e.g. *lui* as 'HE'), clitic pronouns with small letters (e.g. *gli* as 'to-him'), subject-verb agreement is sometimes specified with a pronoun connected to the verb, e.g. *ho 'I have'*. Standard Italian orthography has been adapted for phonetic transcription, e.g. *fascile* instead of *facile* characterizes the pronunciation of intervocalic /ç/ as /ʃ/ as typical of Standard Italian as spoken in Rome. 'RETL' means 'reflexive pronoun'. 'Pro' is a pronominal form that has no direct translation in English.
 3. In Duranti (1980), I checked the relative 'givenness' of subject pronouns (i.e. whether their referent had been mentioned one or two clauses back) and I compared the results with 'givenness' of full nouns and zero anaphora. Here are the percentages:

Table 1. *Percentage of prior mention of referents of verb agreement, full pronouns, and full nouns*

Referent of:	verb-agreement	full pronouns	full nouns
already mentioned (tokens)	72.1% (80/111)	34.5% (10/29)	27.4% (17/62)

- For a comparison of these figures with the informational context of left-dislocated nouns and pronouns, see Duranti and Ochs (1979).
4. The reader who is familiar with Standard Italian will have already noticed that I have left out of the discussion pronouns such as *egli* 'he', *ella* 'she', *essi* 'they (masc.)', *esse* 'they (fem.)'. The reason for such an omission is that they never appear in the several hours of audio-recorded material I have used for this study. This is probably due to the rather informal nature of the interactions I have analyzed. In more formal (clearly not typically 'conversational') interaction of university oral exams, for instance, I have several times heard students use the pronoun *egli* (talking about Chomsky, Sussure, Bloomfield). (On the use of *egli* vs. *lui*, see Durante, 1970).
 5. This use of the preposition *a*, usually found with indirect objects and locatives, but here found with a direct object, is typical of Standard Italian as spoken in Rome. The contexts of use of *a* in front of direct objects seem to parallel the use of the same preposition in Spanish, namely, for human referents. In Italian, the preposition seems to be obligatory in front of direct full pronouns (e.g. *me*, *te*), which also tend to have a copy clitic pronoun (cf. Duranti and Ochs, 1979).
 6. Durante (1970) noticed that there is, in fact, an asymmetry between *lui* and *lei* in written Italian. *Lei* is more often found in formal registers than *lui* is. Correspondingly, whereas *egli* in the place of *lui* is quite common across a wide range of written styles, the more formal *ella* is rarely found.

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