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# The expletive interpretation of the Ethical Dative: a syntactic approach to a non-argumental clitic

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**Abstract:** Natural languages contain elements that do not contribute to the propositional meaning of a sentence. Among these, certain forms, such as the Ethical Dative (ED), are less studied. The ED serves the specific function of identifying a person who is affected by the event described in a sentence. This is exemplified by the Italian sentence *Tommaso **mi** ha camminato fino al parco da solo* (literally, ‘Thomas **ED** has walked to the park alone’, meaning ‘Thomas walked to the park alone’). ED does not change the truth conditions associated with the sentence in which it occurs, thus being ‘expletive’/‘pleonastic’ in a sense, even though it adds an “affectedness” semantic property that would otherwise be absent. In this article, I argue that the interpretative nature of these expletive elements depends on their syntactic configuration. More specifically, I describe key aspects of ED and propose a syntactic analysis for it. I argue that this non-core/non-argumental dative is introduced as the head of an Applicative Phrase generated outside the thematic domain of the syntactic tree, in the Complementizer domain. This hypothesis accounts for its expletive nature as well as various other properties.



**Keywords:** Ethical Dative; non-argumental datives; Applicative Phrase; speech act phrases; CP-domain

## 1 Introduction

Languages display two different types of dative DPs: those that are part of the thematic grid of predicates – i.e., the core/argumental dative DPs – and those that are not – i.e., the non-core/argumental datives – which do not seem to participate in the sentential semantics, being expletive/pleonastic (Hale and Keyser 2002; Horn 2008). The former can realize an argument of ditransitive constructions, such as with verbs like *give*, while the latter are usually freely added to sentences, referring in some way

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to an entity which takes part in the event described by the sentence. Non-core/argumental datives can therefore be considered a type of dative that is not directly involved in the core syntactic structure of a verb's argument representation (Marantz 1984, 1993). Among the non-core datives, one of the most puzzling cases is the Ethical Dative (ED), which is a clitic pronoun occurring in several languages (Jaeggli 1982; Perlmutter 1971; Rivas 1977). It is usually considered an instance of dative case and has the specific function of identifying a person affected by the event expressed by a sentence (Renzi et al. 2001; Roberge and Troberg (2009)), encoding the role of affectee (Berman 1982).

The origin of the term “Ethical Dative” is Latin. It was designated “dative” due to the grammatical case it typically accompanied (Ernout and Tomas 1953: 72). However, the reasoning behind the term “ethical” remains unclear.<sup>1</sup> For example, in a sentence like (1), *mihi* is the Latin realization of the 1st person dative clitic.<sup>2</sup>

- (1) ‘Quid *mihi* Celsus agit?’ (Latin; Roberge and Troberg (2009): 255)  
 how me.Dat Celsus.Nom act.3SG  
 ‘How does Celsus do? (and this affects me).’

Even though the pragmatic meaning of ED is cross-linguistically similar, i.e., encoding the role of affectee (Berman 1982), its occurrence varies across languages. Let's consider some examples:<sup>3</sup>

- (2) a. Tommaso *mi/ti/gli/le/ci/vi* ha vinto il primo  
 Thomas ED.to me/you/him/her/us/you has won the first  
 premio! (Italian)  
 prize  
 ‘Thomas won the first prize (and this affects me/you/him/her/us/you).’  
 b. Juanita ya *le* camina. (Spanish, Cuervo 2003: 27)  
 Juanita already ED.to her walks  
 ‘Juanita can already walk (and this affects her).’  
 c. Dan ne’elam *li* pit’om me ha  
 Dan disappeared ED.to me suddenly from the  
 ófek. (Hebrew, Berman 1982: 36)  
 horizon  
 ‘Dan’s gone and disappeared all of a sudden (and this affects me).’

<sup>1</sup> I attempted to trace the use of the term “ethical” back to Latin but was unsuccessful. The choice of this term remains puzzling, as it does not appear in many etymological dictionaries, including those by Ernout and Tomas (1953) and de Vaan (2008), among others.

<sup>2</sup> The particular abbreviations which I will use in this paper are: PL = plural; SG = singular; CL = clitic; Ben = Benefactive; Dat = dative case; Nom = nominative case.

<sup>3</sup> It has been claimed that also varieties of Vernacular American English (Christian 1991) display some structures resembling the ED, such as “I drank **me** a German beer” (Franco and Huidobro 2008). See the original work for the discussion. See also Horn (2008) for a detailed discussion.

- d. Je te bois dix pastis en trois minutes. (French, Leclere 1975)  
 I ED.to you drink ten pastis in three minutes  
 'I can drink ten Pernods in three minutes (and this affects you).'
- e. Ziya:d biʔad'd'i:-li/lak kil waʔt-o ne:yim.  
 Ziad spend-me.Dat/you.Dat all time-his sleeping  
 'Ziad spends all his time sleeping (and this affects me/you).'
- Arabic; Haddad 2014: 65)

As the examples above show, the occurrence of ED does not affect the compositional propositional meaning of a sentence and, therefore, can be omitted without changing that propositional meaning. However, ED concerns speakers' subjective evaluation of the event described in a sentence, highlighting the perspective of the affectee. These datives, termed *non-actantial* by Delbecque and Lamiroy (1996: 106–107), do not directly contribute to the verb's valency either but serve an expressive purpose by establishing a connection between the event and the participants in the conversation, representing an exterior onlooker (see also Berman 1982; Leclere 1975). For instance, in (2a) the fact that Thomas won the first prize has a certain relevance for the hearer of the utterance, or any other patient of the event depending on the grammatical person of the ED. In what follows I use the terms "expletive" and pleonastic" for elements that does not impact the truth conditions associated with a sentence, even though they do add semantic and pragmatic information of their own. This does not, in principle, mean that expletive elements do not exhibit their own features, or interact with other syntactic phenomena. In fact, it is well known that syntax includes many expletive items, such as 'there' or 'it' in English, and these items have their own locality conditions, among other syntactic features.

Italian ED seems to display some properties that distinguish it from instances of ED in other languages. For example, Italian ED can occur in bare intransitives – where the direct object of a transitive construction is missing – contrary to what happens in languages like French (Boneh and Nash 2012):

- (3) a. Helene lui chante \*(sous ses fenetres).  
 Helene ED.to him/her sang (beneath his windows)  
 'Helene sang beneath her/his window (and this affects his/her).'
- b. Maria mi ha finalmente cantato!  
 Maria ED.to me has finally sang  
 'Mary finally sang (and this affects me)!'

In this paper, I focus on ED in Italian, due to its unique features and the lack of extensive studies on the topic. Specifically, I present several syntactic and semantic features of Italian ED (Section 2.1) to distinguish it from other types of non-argumental datives in the rich Italian dative system, such as Benefactive and Co-referential datives

(Section 2.2). I then demonstrate that ED exhibits distinctive grammatical behavior that warrants its own syntactic analysis, adapting the Applicative Phrase framework (Section 3), i.e., a syntactic framework used to analyze constructions in which an extra argument (often a beneficiary, goal, or instrument) is introduced into a sentence without being a core argument of the verb (Cuervo 2020; Marantz 1993; Pykkänen 2002, 2008). More specifically, I propose a syntactic hypothesis where ED is introduced as a head in the Complementizer Phrase (CP) domain of the sentence (Section 3.1), from which it can interact with the pragmatic references to the speaker and hearer of the sentence, involving the respective Speech Act Phrases.

## 2 Description and identification of ED

The primary goal of this section is twofold: (i) to describe ED and (ii) to identify tools for distinguishing ED from other types of non-core dative clitics in Italian. It is well known that Italian is a language rich in clitics (Renzi et al. 2001; Russi 2008) and it is challenging to determine which clitics are Ethical Datives and which are instances of other non-core dative clitics, such as Ben and those co-referential with the subject (CD). Consider the examples in (4):<sup>4</sup>

- (4) a. Tommaso *ti* ha vinto il primo premio! (ED)  
 Thomas ED.to you has won the first prize  
 ‘Thomas won the first prize (and this affects you)!’
- b. Laura *ti* ha stirato le camicie. (Ben)  
 Laura Ben.for you has ironed the shirts  
 ‘Laura has ironed the shirts (for you).’
- c. *Ti* sei bevuto una birra. (CD)  
 CD.you are.2SG drunk a beer  
 ‘You have drunk a beer.’

As these examples show, the 2nd person singular clitic *ti* (‘to you’) can occur with three different meanings: Ethical, Benefactive, and Co-referential. The question that arises is how to determine whether a dative clitic is ethical or not. To address this question, I will first analyze these three types of dative clitics and then compare them with each other, as a basis of identifying instances of the Ethical Dative (for a similar line of reasoning, see Masini 2012).

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<sup>4</sup> There are many types of non-core datives in different languages. Consider, among others, the case of Polish. According to Wierzbicka (1988), Polish has 31 different subtypes of non-core datives. I will not discuss them here, as it is beyond the scope of this paper. For a comprehensive list of functions of dative clitics in Italian, see Russi (2008).

## 2.1 What Ethical Dative is: some core features

Italian ED is attested in the first novel written in Modern Italian, i.e., *I Promessi Sposi* (Manzoni 1842):

- (5) “Che *ti* fanno i bergamaschi? Spediscono a Venezia  
 What ED.to you did the people.from.Bergamo They.send to Venice  
 Lorenzo Torre, un dottore, ma di quelli!”  
 Lorenzo Torre a Doctor but of those  
 ‘What did the people from Bergamo do (and this affects you)? They send  
 Lorenzo  
 Torre, a great doctor, to Venice!’

The first core feature of ED is that it does **not change the propositional meaning** of a sentence, as it does not belong to the thematic grid of the verb (Franco and Huidobro 2008). This can be observed in examples such as (2a) and (5), where the presence of an ED does not affect the truth conditions of the sentence and, can be removed without changing the meaning. Accordingly, I assume that ED does not contribute to the compositional propositional meaning of a sentence. Rather, it adds extra semantic and pragmatic information beyond the propositional meaning as an instance of an expletive/pleonastic phenomenon,<sup>5</sup> as witnessed by the following sentences with and without ED:

- (6) a. Ieri *ti* ho incontrato Gianni in dipartimento.  
 Yesterday ED.to you I.have met John in department  
 ‘I met John in the department yesterday (and this affects you).’  
 b. Ieri ho incontrato Gianni in dipartimento.  
 Yesterday I.have met John in department  
 ‘I met John in department yesterday.’

Since ED does not represent any argument of the verb, realizing an expletive function in a sense, it cannot undergo any form of A'-movement (Michelioudakis and Kapogianni 2013), such as *wh*-fronting (7):<sup>6</sup>

- (7) a. Ieri *ti* ho incontrato Gianni in dipartimento.  
 Yesterday ED.to you I.have met John in department  
 ‘I met John in department yesterday (and this affects you).’  
 b. \*A chi ieri ho incontrato Gianni in dipartimento?  
 to whom yesterday I.have met John in department

<sup>5</sup> ED can also be interpreted as a marker of mirativity. See Di Caro et al. (2025).

<sup>6</sup> Roberge and Troberg (2009: 266) discusses Italian data where *wh*-movement in ED constructions is allowed. However, my Italian informants do not agree with this judgment, indicating that ED cannot undergo such movements.

As indicated above, ED identifies a person who is affected by the event described in a sentence. It is noteworthy that while the 3rd person sing. is not categorically excluded (2), it is less accepted by some scholars (Delbecque and Lamiroy 1996; Roberge and Troberg (2009); see Michelioudakis and Kapogianni 2013 for an overview). According to these scholars, ED is restricted to the speaker and the hearer in the 1st (*mi*) and 2nd (*ti*) person. Some Italian cases seem to confirm this preference, as witnessed by the following exclamative sentences with an expletive negation (see the discussion on surprise negation sentence):

- (8) a. E non *mi/ti* ha incontrato Maria in stazione?!  
and NEG CL.to me/you has met Mary in train.station  
'S/he met Mary in the train station! (and this surprised me/you and affects me/you)'
- b. <sup>2</sup>/\*E non *gli* ha incontrato Maria in stazione?!  
and NEG CL.to him has met Mary in train.station

Thus, the second peculiarity of ED is a slight preference towards the **1st and the 2nd person singular**.<sup>7</sup>

Another peculiarity of the ED is **its obligatory clitic nature** (Renzi et al. 2001). As is well known, clitics can also be expressed by means of a corresponding noun, pronoun, or prepositional phrase (D'Alessandro 2017). This can be seen in both core (9a–b) and non-core (9c–d) dative clitics:

- (9) a. Gianni *gli* ha regalato un orologio.  
John CL.to him has gave a clock  
'John gave him a clock.'
- b. Gianni ha regalato un orologio *a lui*.  
John has gave a clock to him  
'John gave him a clock.'
- c. Laura *gli* ha stirato le camicie.  
Laura CL.to him has ironed the shirts  
'Laura has ironed the shirts for him.'
- d. Laura ha stirato le camicie *a lui*.

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<sup>7</sup> As noted by an anonymous reviewer, some grammaticality judgments regarding the occurrence of ED exhibit a certain degree of variation. This behavior aligns with what has been observed for functional words interpreted as expletives, such as negation, whose occurrence often displays a high degree of variation (see Greco 2021; Tubau et al. 2017, among others). In this paper, I primarily refer to grammaticality judgments drawn from published works, where available, or rely on judgments provided by informants for newly constructed sentences. All the informants are native Italian speakers from Lombardy, a region in northern Italy.

Laura has ironed the shirts to him  
 ‘Laura has ironed the shirts for him.’

In (9c), the presence of *gli* suggests that Laura has ironed the shirts for the benefit of someone that is not either the hearer or the speaker of the utterance, instantiating a case of a Ben clitic. Benefactives introduce an applicative argument, which is the beneficiary or maleficiary of the action described by the verb (Folli and Harley 2006; see Section 2.2). Typically considered a non-core dative – a type of dative argument that is not directly involved in the core syntactic structure of a verb’s argument schema – it is one of the most common uses of a dative clitic in Italian. However, this possibility is ruled out if the clitic is an ED:

- (10) a. Tommaso *ti* ha vinto il primo premio!  
           Thomas ED.to you has won the first prize  
           ‘Thomas won the first prize (and this affects you)!’  
       b. \*Tommaso ha vinto il primo premio *a te*!  
           Thomas has won the first prize to you

The ungrammaticality of (10b), in which ED *ti* is realized by an overt PP, stems from such a constraint (see Lo Cascio 1970 for the Italian case). It is worth noting that Italian just misses a clitic form for the 3rd person plural dative – which must be realized by the pronoun *loro* (‘they’) or PP *a loro* (‘to them’) – and, as expected, ED is not allowed in these cases (Masini 2012), further showing that ED is strictly dependent on the clitic nature of the pronoun:

- (11) \*Tommaso ha vinto *loro/a loro* il primo premio!  
       Thomas has won *they/to them* the first prize

The clitic constraint is also attested in other languages belonging to different families, such as, among others, Hebrew (12a–b) (Borer and Grodzinsky 1986), French (12c–d) (Kayne 1975), and Spanish (12d–e) (Cuervo 2003) (see also Boneh and Nash 2012; Jaeggli 1982; Michelioudakis and Kapogianni 2013; Strozer 1976: 145):<sup>8</sup>

- (12) a. *ha-yalda xatza lo et ha-kviš.* (Hebrew; Cuervo 2003: 182)  
           the girl crossed CL.DAT.M ACC the-street  
           ‘The girl crossed the street on him’ (when he was babysitting her, for instance).’

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<sup>8</sup> Non-core full à-DPs are acceptable only in non-canonical positions in French, such as those involving movement (i.e., interrogatives, A-bar positions, etc.). However, in their original work, Boneh and Nash focus solely on certain cases of Benefactive and not on ED. See the original work for a detailed discussion.

- b. \**ha-yalda xatza le-Roni et ha-kviš t.*  
 he-girl crossed Roni.DAT ACC the-street  
 'The girl crossed the street on Roni.'
- c. Elle *lui* a démolì sa maison. (French; Kayne 1975: 169–170)  
 'She demolished his house on him.'
- d. \*Elle a démolì sa maison à *lui*.  
 'she demolished his house on him.'
- e. *Me le* dieron un helado al niño. (Spanish; Cuervo 2003: 175)  
 CL.1.DAT CL.DAT gave an ice-cream the kid.DAT  
 'They gave the kid an ice-cream on me.'
- f. \**Me le* dieron un helado al niño *a mí*.  
 'They gave the kid an ice-cream on me.'

Thus, the third peculiarity of the ED is its obligatory clitic nature.

Another feature of the ED is the **non-obligatory co-reference** between the ED and the grammatical subject of the sentence. This can be observed in (10), where the 3rd person singular subject of the sentence, *Thomas*, is not co-referential with the 2nd person singular of the ED *ti* ('to you').<sup>9</sup> Moreover, ED seems to be banned from co-referring to the subject of the sentence, yielding ungrammaticality in cases such as (13a), unless the auxiliary is changed to 'be' (13b):

- (13) a. \**Tu<sub>i</sub> ti<sub>i</sub> hai vinto il primo premio!*  
 you ED.to you have.you won the first prize
- b. *Tu<sub>i</sub> ti<sub>i</sub> sei vinto il primo premio!*  
 you ED.to you are.you/have.you won the first prize  
 'You won the first prize (and this affects you)!'

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9 However, there are some cases where co-referentiality with the subject appears to be mandatory, as demonstrated in the following sentence:

- i. a. (Le vacanze) Giovanni<sub>i</sub> *se/\*mi/\*ti* ... le sogna.  
 (the vacation) John to-himself /myself/yourself Cl.them dreams.  
 'As for a vacation) John dreams about it.' (Burzio 1986: 41)

However, according to Burzio (1986), "it may not seem too implausible to treat these cases as idiosyncratic, essentially like idioms". Moreover, he suggests that they display a sense of benefactive value. Unfortunately, it is not clear how *se* can add a benefactive sense to the sentence above and, therefore, I want to suggest to treat these cases as special cases of ED. As a proof, the clitic cannot be realized as a full DP, contrary to what happens in benefactive constructions (see below), but in line with ED:

- ii. \*(Le vacanze) Giovanni<sub>i</sub> le sogna *a se stesso*. (Burzio 1986: 41)  
 (the vacation) John Cl.them dreams to himself.



We will see that not all non-core datives can circumvent the constraint on coreferentiality with the subject of the sentence in this way.

The fifth feature is the possible occurrence of the ED in sentences with **ditransitive constructions**. Typically, it is impossible to have both a dative clitic and an indirect object in Italian ditransitive constructions (14a) unless they refer to each other (14b). However, ED constitutes an exception to this pattern (14c):

- (14) a. \*Laura *le<sub>i</sub>* ha regalato un libro a *Giulio<sub>k</sub>* (a *lei*).<sup>10</sup>  
       Laura CL.her.3<sup>rd</sup>SG.Dat has gave a book to Giulio to her  
       b. Laura *gli<sub>i</sub>* ha regalato un libro a *Giulio<sub>i</sub>*.  
       Laura CL.him.3<sup>rd</sup>SG.Dat has gave a book to Giulio  
       c. *Ti<sub>i</sub>* ho regalato io le scarpe nuove a *Giulia<sub>k</sub>*!  
       ED. to you I.have given I the shoes new to Giulia  
       ‘It was me who gave new shoes to Giulia (and this affects you)!’

The sixth characteristic is that ED is restricted in its distribution. It cannot be embedded in **relative clauses** (15a) and it cannot undergo any form of **A'-movement** (Michelioudakis and Kapogianni 2013; see sentences in (7)). Other types of dative clitics, such as benefactives, are permitted in these contexts (15b):

- (15) a. \*Il postino che *ti* ho incontrato ieri è Gianni. (\*ED)  
       the mailman that ED.to you I.have met yesterday is John  
       b. Le camicie che *mi* hai stirato sono perfette. (Ben)  
       the shirts that Ben.to me you.have ironed they.are perfect  
       ‘The shirts you ironed for me are perfect.’

Finally, an interesting pattern emerges when examining the interaction between **passives** and dative clitics specifically investigating whether they can appear before the verb and whether the movement of the theme to the preverbal position is influenced by the dative clitic itself. On the one hand, when the theme is left *in situ*, ED is not as grammatical in passive constructions (Naudé 1997), whereas both core datives and Ben are allowed (Boneh and Nash 2012; Folli and Harley 2006; Rooryck 1988):<sup>11</sup>

- (16) a. Lucia *mi* ha vinto il primo premio. (ED\_Active)

<sup>10</sup> I include here a prepositional phrase “a lei” (‘to her’) that is coreferential with the Benefactive clitic “le” (‘to her’) to enforce a reading of the clitic distinct from the ED interpretation. For a detailed discussion on Benefactive clitics, see Section 2.2.

<sup>11</sup> According to Folli and Harley (2006), the interaction between the movement of the theme to the subject position in passive constructions and the presence of dative clitics degrades the grammaticality of the sentence in the case of benefactives. As this issue does not impact the argumentation in this paper, refer to the original work for a detailed discussion.

- Lucia ED.to me has won the first prize  
 'Lucia won the first prize (and this affects me).'
- b. <sup>?</sup>*Mi* è stato vinto il primo premio da Lucia. (ED\_Passive)  
 ED.to me is been won the first prize by Lucia  
 'The first prize was won by Lucia.'
- c. Lucia *mi* ha consegnato la posta. (core dative\_Active)  
 Lucia CL.to me has delivered the mail  
 'Lucia delivered the mail to me.'
- d. *Mi* è stata consegnata la posta (da Lucia). (core dative\_Passive)  
 CL.to me is been delivered the mail (by Lucia)  
 'The mail was delivered to me by Lucia.'
- e. Il giardiniere *gli* ha tagliato l'erba. (Benefactive\_Active)  
 the gardener CL.to him has cut the.grass  
 'The gardener cut him the grass.'
- f. *Gli* è stata tagliata l'erba (dal giardiniere). (Benefactive\_Passive)  
 to.him is been cut the.grass (by.the gardener)  
 'The grass was cut to him (by the gardener).'

On the other hand, when the theme appears at the beginning of the sentence, i.e., in the preverbal subject position, the sentence results in degradation in benefactive (17a),<sup>12</sup> whereas it gets better in ED construction (17b):

- (17) a. <sup>?</sup>*L'erba gli* è stata tagliata dal giardiniere. (Folli and Harley 2006: 127)  
 the.grass.to.him is been cut (by.the gardener)
- b. Il primo premio *mi* è stato vinto da Lucia! (ED)  
 the first prize ED.to me is been won by Lucia  
 'The first prize was won by Lucia (and this affects me)!'

To summarize the main features of Italian ED, we can state the following: (i) ED does not alter the propositional meaning of a sentence, as it does not belong to the thematic grid of the verb; (ii) ED predominantly appears in the 1st and 2nd person singular, although it also occurs in the 3rd person singular; (iii) ED obligatorily displays the clitic form and therefore cannot occur in the 3rd person plural, as Italian lacks a corresponding clitic for this; (iv) ED is not required to be co-referential with

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<sup>12</sup> The acceptability of the sentence appears to improve when the theme is moved to a focus position. Refer to Folli and Harley (2006: 125–27) for the grammatical judgments. As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, some Italian speakers do not consider this sentence ungrammatical. I referred to the data presented in Folli and Harley (2006: 127), but it is possible that geographic factors influence the different interpretations of benefactives. Since this does not affect the core proposal discussed in this paper, I leave this discussion for future research, signaling this alternation by the diacritic ? at the beginning of the sentence.

the grammatical subject of the sentence; (v) ED can appear in sentences with ditransitive constructions; (vi) ED does not undergo A'-movement, such as wh-fronting, and, finally (vii) ED can appear in passive structures where the theme moves across the dative clitic to a preverbal subject position, but is not as grammatical when the theme remains *in situ*. A comprehensive analysis of ED should consider all these features and derive them in a unitary way. Section 3 contains a proposal for an analysis that achieves this. Before we get there, further examination is needed to distinguish ED from other non-core dative clitics, such as Ben and CD, which show the same morphological shapes.

## 2.2 What Ethical Dative is not: a comparison with benefactive and Co-referential Datives

Italian displays a complex system of non-argumental dative clitics that serve various functions (Renzi et al. 2001; Russi 2008). Among these, the ED, as discussed above, stands out. However, ED often creates confusion due to its morphological and pragmatic similarities with other non-argumental dative clitics, such as Ben and CD. As seen in examples from previous sections, ED has distinctive characteristics. In this section I systematically discuss them, also considering some additional data that support the distinction between ED and other non-argumental datives.

Let us begin with the examples previously examined that distinguish ED from the benefactive. For instance, in sentences (9c–d) – repeated here as (18) – I observed that only ED must be expressed with a clitic, whereas the benefactive can also occur with a full prepositional phrase introduced by 'a' ('to') or 'per' ('for') (see Masini 2012 for Italian and Boneh and Nash 2012 for French):

- (18) a. \*Tommaso ha vinto il primo premio *a te!* (\*ED)  
       Thomas has won the first prize to you  
       b. Laura ha stirato le camicie *a lui.* (Ben)  
       Laura has ironed the shirts to him  
       'Laura has ironed the shirts for him.'

Recall that benefactive clitics introduce an applicative argument representing the beneficiary or maleficiary of the action described by the verb (Folli and Harley 2006). A clitic with a Ben function can represent all singular and plural persons. This can be explained by the intuitive assumption that the action described by a verb can benefit or damage anyone. In fact, the benefactive can also be realized using the 3rd plural pronoun "loro" ('to them'), which is not possible for ED.

- (19) a. Laura *mi/ti/le/gli/ci/vi* ha stirato *loro* le camicie.  
 Laura Ben.for me/you/her/him/us/you has ironed Ben.to.them the shirts  
 'Laura ironed the shirts for me/you/her/him/us/you/them.'
- b. \*Tommaso ha vinto *loro/a loro* il primo premio!  
 Thomas has won *they/to them* the first prize

The Ben is also compatible with left or right dislocation (Cecchetto 1999), whereas ED is not:

- (20) a. Laura *mi/ti/...* ha stirato le camicie *per me/per te*.  
 Laura Ben.for me/you... has ironed the shirts for me/for you  
 'Laura ironed the shirts for me/for you.'
- b. \*Tommaso *mi* ha vinto il primo premio *per me!*  
 Thomas ED.tome has won the first prize to me

Moreover, Ben can also appear in relative clauses (21b) and undergo forms of A'-movement (Michelioudakis and Kapogianni 2013), appearing in wh-fronting (21d), unlike ED (21c) (I here repeat the sentences in (15)):

- (21) a. \*Il postino che *ti* ho incontrato ieri è Gianni. (\*ED)  
 the mailman that ED.to you I.have met yesterday is Jonh
- b. Le camicie che *mi* hai stirato sono perfette. (Ben)  
 the shirts that Ben.to me you.have ironed they.are perfect  
 'The shirts you ironed for me are perfect.'
- c. \*A chi hai camminato fino al parco giochi? (\*ED)  
 to whom you.have walked until the ground.park
- d. A chi hai stirato le camicie ieri? (Ben)  
 to whom you.have ironed the shirts yesterday  
 'To whom did you iron the shirts yesterday?'

Finally, Ben cannot occur in sentences with ditransitive constructions, even though we can imagine a situation where someone gives a gift to another person for the benefit of a third party. However, this is not grammatically possible, whereas ED can occur in such constructions, as discussed in (14):

- (22) a. \*Laura *le<sub>i</sub>* ha regalato un libro a *Giulio<sub>k</sub>*. (*a lei*) (Ben)  
 Laura CL.her.3SG.Dat has gave a book to Giulio to her
- b. *Ti<sub>i</sub>* ho regalato io le scarpe nuove a *Giulia<sub>k</sub>*. (ED)  
 ED. to you I.have given I the shoes new to Giulia  
 'It was me who gave new shoes to Giulia (and this affects you).'

The examples given above should be sufficient evidence for considering ED and Ben two distinct phenomena<sup>13</sup> – I do not repeat the differing behaviors in passive structures already observed in (16) and (17). Let us now consider the differences between ED and other non-argumental dative constructions, specifically CD.

In Co-referential Dative (CD) constructions, the dative clitic refers to the subject of the sentence (Boneh and Nash 2011). Similar to ED and Ben, CDs are a type of non-core dative. One of their primary characteristics is that they do not change the truth conditions of a proposition (I here repeat the sentence (4c) as (23)):

- (23)    *(Ti)*        sei        bevuto una birra.  
          Cor.to you are.2SG drunk a     beer  
          ‘You have drunk a beer.’

Similar to ED, CD has a restriction on the clitic form, resulting in ungrammaticality when expressed through a corresponding prepositional phrase:

- (24)    \*Hai        bevuto una birra *a te/a te stesso*.<sup>14</sup>  
          you.have drunk        beer to you/to yourself

Unlike ED, CD must be co-referential with the grammatical subject. This requirement makes a sentence like (25) ungrammatical, where the CD *ti* (2nd person singular) is not co-referential with the 3rd person singular subject. In contrast, ED does not exhibit this restriction, as illustrated by the sentence in (10a), repeated here as (25b):

- (25)    a. \*Luca<sub>i</sub>        *ti<sub>k</sub>*        è bevuto una birra.  
                 Luca.3<sup>rd</sup>.SG Cor.you.2<sup>nd</sup>.Sin is drunk a     beer  
                 b. Tommaso *ti*        ha vinto il     primo premio!

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<sup>13</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing to my attention data that point towards another distinction between EDs and benefactives. Benefactives modify the characteristic function of the predicate. Consider the following minimal pair:

- iii.    a. Gianni ha guardato i bambini tutto il giorno.  
                 John has looked after the children all the day  
                 (i) \*/? ‘John looked after my children all day long.’  
                 (ii) ‘John saw (my) children all day long.’  
                 iv.    a. Gianni mi ha guardato i bambini tutto Il giorno (per/a me).  
                 John **Ben.for me** has looked after the children all the day **(for/to me)**  
                 (i) ‘John looked after my children all day long.’  
                 (ii) \*/? ‘John saw (my) children all day long.’

It is not entirely clear to me why benefactives behave in this way, but clearly EDs do not, as evidenced by the sentences above, where the occurrence of EDs does not change the function of the predicate.

<sup>14</sup> For the change of the auxiliary from *to be* to *have* see Burzio (1986).

Thomas ED.to you has won the first prize  
 ‘Thomas won the first prize (and this affects you)!’

CD also differs from ED in other respects, such as the behavior in combination with ditransitive verbs. While ED is permitted in such contexts (see above), CD is not (I here repeat the sentence (14c) as 26b):

- (26) a. \*Tu *ti* sei regalato un libro a Laura.  
           you CD.to you you.are given a book to Laura  
       b. *Ti*<sub>i</sub> ho regalato io le scarpe nuove a *Giulia*<sub>k</sub>.  
           ED. to you I.have given I the shoes new to Giulia  
           ‘It was me who gave new shoes to Giulia (and this affects you).’

Finally, CD can occur in relative clauses, while ED cannot:

- (27) La birra che ti sei bevuto era buona.  
       the beer that CD.to you you.are drunk was good  
       ‘The beer that you drank was good.’

Based on these differences, I conclude that Co-referential Datives cannot be considered instances of Ethical Datives.

In this section I discussed various types of data that help us to distinguish ED from other types of non-argumental dative clitics. ED exhibits its own distinct characteristics, as shown above. It is important to note that the comparative focus of this section was primarily on identifying ED, rather than providing a comprehensive description of other dative clitics, which display a complexity only briefly touched upon here. Undoubtedly, ED possesses a unique grammatical identity, distinct from any other clitic. In the next section, I will thus present a comprehensive analysis of ED, with the goal of considering all their features and deriving them in a unified manner.

### 3 A syntactic proposal for ED: the Applicative Phrases approach

We have seen that ED is a non-core element – i.e., it is not directly involved in the core syntactic structure of a verb’s argument schema – that can be added to a sentence without affecting its compositional propositional meaning, thus being an expletive item in the current definition of ‘expletive’/‘pleonastic’ (Section 1). Recall that ED introduces a new individual into the sentence, preferably either the speaker or the hearer of the utterance, providing its own semantic and pragmatic contribution

beyond strict grammatical meaning. Previous analyses attempted to explain the licensing conditions of non-core datives in the absence of semantic selection or theta-role assignment. More specifically, it has frequently been proposed that this additional individual is introduced into the syntactic spine by an applicative head, which selects and licenses the non-core dative (Cuervo 2020; Marantz 1984, 1993; Pylkkänen 2002, 2008). Consider, for example, the following sentences (Pylkkänen 2008: 1):

- (28) a. John melted the ice.  
 b. John melted *me* some ice.

The sentence in (b) introduces a new argument, realized as the indirect object and interpreted as the beneficiary of the melting event. According to the Applicative Phrases hypothesis, this additional argument is introduced by a syntactic head known as the applicative head. Based on the semantics of applicative heads, Pylkkänen (2002, 2008) proposed that they can be classified into two types: high and low Applicative Phrases (ApplPs) (see Baker 1996 for a similar approach).<sup>15</sup> High ApplPs describe a relationship between an individual and an event (29a); low ApplPs describe a relationship between two individuals, one of which is introduced by the applicative, while the other is the direct object of the verb, such as in ditransitive constructions (29b):

- (29) a. *Gli* ho disegnato il primo premio.  
 Cl.dat.to him has designed the first prize  
 'I has designed the first prize for him.'  
 b. *Gli* ho regalato una macchina.  
 Cl.dat.to him has gave a car  
 'I gave him a car.'

A high applicative introduces external arguments by simply adding an additional participant to the event described by the verb. In contrast, low applicative arguments have no direct semantic connection to the verb; instead, they establish a transfer-of-possession relationship with the direct object: for example, the possession of the car being transferred to the referent of the dative pronoun in (29b). High and low ApplPs can be distinguished based on their relationship with stative and unergative constructions. More specifically, Pylkkänen (2002) shows that only high ApplPs are compatible with these two types of constructions: (i) low applicative heads cannot occur if the direct object is absent, since they denote the relationship between the direct object and the indirect object of a verb; (ii) low applicative heads cannot occur

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<sup>15</sup> I do not address the numerous proposals in the literature regarding the syntactic and semantic nature of high and low applicatives here. For further discussion, see McGinnis (2008) and Wood (2015), among many others.

with verbs that are completely stative since they imply a transfer of possession.<sup>16</sup> High applicative heads do not have these limitations.

Going back to ED, since it introduces a new individual into the sentence, it has been argued to constitute an instance of ApplP. For instance, Cuervo (2003)<sup>17</sup> proposes that Spanish dative arguments are always licensed syntactically and semantically by applicative heads. Similarly, Boneh and Léa (2010) and Roberge and Troberg (2009) adopt a comparable approach to French. Consequently, the first hypothesis that I want to pursue is that ED is an instance of an Applicative Phrase. Following Pykkänen (2002), I assume that such an element is indeed a syntactic head (see also McGinnis 2008; Roberts 2010). From this assumption I will consider ED as the Head of an ApplP getting the dative case associated with these heads (Cuervo 2020; McFadden 2004; Pykkänen 2008).

Cuervo moreover proposes that the variety of meanings displayed by a dative clitic relies on (i) what the complement of the applicative head is, and (ii) what the ApplP is a complement of. In the syntactic framework adopted here, this is equivalent to asking whether ED represents an instance of either high or low ApplP. Crucially, ED seems to depart from such a two-fold pattern, since it cannot occur in stative constructions with both the verbs *to have* and *to be* (30a–b) – following the low applicatives – but it can occur in unergative ones (30c)<sup>18</sup> – following the high applicatives (see Folli and Harley 2006; Boneh and Nash 2011 for similar considerations).<sup>19</sup>

- (30) a. \*Luca *mi/ti/gli/le/ci/vi* ha due macchine.  
       Luca ED.to me/you/him/her/us/you has two cars  
       b. \*Luca *mi/ti/gli/le/ci/vi* è affamato.  
       Luca ED.to me/you/him/her/us/you is hungry  
       c. Tommaso *mi/ti/gli/le/ci* ha dormito tutto il pomeriggio.  
       Thomas Ben.for me/you/him/her/us has slept all the afternoon  
       ‘Thomas slept all afternoon long for my/you/his/her/our/your benefit.’

<sup>16</sup> I will not explore here the reasons why the compatibility with stative and unergative verbs is a test to distinguish high and low ApplP (see Pykkänen 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Many other works follow the ApplP hypothesis, see, among many authors, Boneh and Léa (2010); Roberge and Troberg (2009), etc.

<sup>18</sup> This observation seems contradict what Masini (2012) observes on the distribution of ED in Italian. She affirms that ED is compatible with almost any type of argument structure, but the following data seem to contradict it.

<sup>19</sup> It is indeed a notable observation that some languages have been found to deviate from the traditional high–low ApplP paradigm. A prime example of this is the work of Wood (2015), which proposes the concept of high–low applicatives in Icelandic. For a more in-depth examination of this phenomenon, I recommend consulting the original research.



This departs from what Cuervo (2003) observes in Spanish, where ED is accounted for as a high applicative taking a dynamic agentive event (e.g., *caminar* ‘walk’, *bailar* ‘dance’) as its complement, being supported in stative constructions as well. Capitalizing on the difference between Spanish and Italian,<sup>20</sup> we can observe that ED in Italian is only restricted by the kind of actionality the verb assumes (*statives*, *activities*, *accomplishments*, and *achievements*) (Vendler 1957) – being unacceptable only in combination with stative predicates.<sup>21</sup>

- (31) a. \*Luca *mi* è affamato. (\*stative)  
       Luca ED.to me is hungry  
       b. Tommaso *mi* ha camminato tutto il pomeriggio. (activities)  
       Thomas ED.to me has walked all the afternoon  
       ‘Thomas slept all the afternoon long (and this affects me).’  
       c. Lucia *mi* ha digerito tutto senza problemi. (accomplishments)  
       Lucia ED.to me has digested all without issues  
       ‘Lucia digested everything without issues (and this affects me).’  
       d. Lucia *mi* è partita all’alba. (achievements)

20 Note that Italian and Spanish display other differences in clitic’s domain. For example, it is well known that the 3rd dative singular person precedes the impersonal clitic in Italian whereas it follows it in Spanish (see Pescarini 2011 and the references therein):

- v a. Le si parla. (Italian) (Pescarini 2011: 1)  
       CL.to-her CL.one speaks  
       ‘One speaks to her.’  
       b. Se le habla. (Spanish)  
       CL.one CL.to-him/her speaks  
       ‘One speaks to him/her.’

21 No limitations are found with regard to the temporal reference (the *tense*), or to the different aspectual condition (perfective and imperfective). See Bertinetto (1994) and Bertinetto (1999) for the distinctions, and sub-distinctions, between actionality temporal reference and aspectual condition):

- (vi) a. Tommaso *mi* ha studiato tutta notte. (past tense)  
       Thomas ED.to me has studied all night  
       ‘Thomas has studied all night long (and this affects me).’  
       b. Tommaso *mi* studierà tutta notte. (future tense)  
       Thomas ED.to me will.study all night  
       ‘Thomas will study all night long (and this affects me).’  
       c. Tommaso *mi* stava studiando la poesia quando... (imperfective)  
       Thomas ED.to me being studying the poem when  
       ‘Thomas was studying the poem (and this affects me) when...’  
       d. Tommaso *mi* ha studiato la poesia in sole due ore. (perfective)  
       Thomas ED.to me has studied the poem in just two hours  
       ‘Thomas has studied the poem in just two hours (and this affects me).’

Lucia ED.to me is left at.the.dawn  
 ‘Lucia left at the dawn (and this affects me).’

According to Beavers (2011, 2013), predicates denoting activities, accomplishments and achievements can be traced back to the interaction between two properties: the notion of affectedness and two types of mereological complexity. These predicates can be regarded as a transition of a theme along a scale that delineates the change. Such a change is absent from stative predicates, thereby restricting the occurrence of ED. It is worth noting that ED is not restricted by other distinctions that these predicates may exhibit, such as telicity, i.e., the endpoint of the event described. ED can occur in both atelic and telic predicates.

- (32) a. Lucia *mi* ha corso *per un’ora/in un’ora*. (atelic)  
 Lucy ED.to me has run for an.hour/in an.hour  
 ‘Lucy run for an hour (and this affects me).’  
 b. Tommaso *mi* ha finito il Lego *?per un’ora/in un’ora*. (telic)  
 Thomas ED.to me has ended the Lego For an.hour/in an.hour  
 ‘Thomas has built the Lego in an hour (and this affects me).’

Such a limitation forces us to dismiss Boneh and Nash’s (2012) analysis of French non-core datives as well, in which these are treated as secondary subjects to a stative predication. It’s worth noting that their analysis mostly focuses on cases of Benefactive and cannot in fact be extended to cases of ED. All in all, it seems that the Italian case displays some unique properties. To the best of my knowledge, the limitation with the stative predicate has not been observed in the earlier literature, including Masini’s (2012) work, which investigates in depth the distribution of such clitics.

Considering ED, it is therefore not possible to apply Pytkänen’s distinction between high and low applicatives. Pytkänen’s tests have been devised for ApplPs inside VP; the fact that they cannot be applied to sentences with ED may suggest that they are not in such positions. Here I want to follow this intuition, suggesting that ED is generated in a higher position, namely in the CP domain, above TP. Boneh and Nash (2011) made a similar proposal when discussing some French clitics. They suggest that there are two different types of high ApplPs: one that is upon RootP and one that is upon VoiceP, both being outside VP – the domain of high and low ApplP described by Pytkänen. A similar proposal has been advanced by Michelioudakis and Kapogianni (2013), where ED is merged above v\*P/VoiceP. My analysis proposes that ED can be even higher than this, namely outside the thematic domain of the sentence, giving a formal analysis to what Masini (2012) alludes to when she states that “the Ethical Dative and Conversational Dative assign the trait of involvement (affectedness) to a ‘higher’ level, presumably at the level of the clause, linguistic act,

or even conversational exchange” (Masini 2012; my translation). The next section is dedicated to the discussion on the advantages of this approach.

### 3.1 Ethical Dative and the CP-domain

The assumption that ED is the head of an ApplP generated in the CP domain of the clause can provide a unitary analysis for the numerous features characterizing ED, which are: (i) ED does not alter the compositional meaning of a sentence, as it does not belong to the thematic grid of the verb; (ii) ED predominantly appears in the 1st and 2nd person singular, although it also occurs in the 3rd person singular; (iii) ED obligatorily displays the clitic form and therefore cannot occur in the 3rd person plural form, as Italian lacks a corresponding clitic for this; (iv) ED is not required to be co-referential with the grammatical subject of the sentence; (v) ED can appear in sentences with ditransitive constructions; (vi) ED does not undergo A'-movement, such as *wh*-fronting, and, finally (vii) ED can appear in passive structures where the theme moves across the dative clitic to a preverbal subject position, but it is not as grammatical when the theme remains *in situ*. Let us consider these features in turn.

It has been proposed in the literature that non-core datives may be merged outside the thematic domain of the syntactic tree, specifically outside and above the *v/V* phrases (Boneh and Nash 2011; Wechsler 2020 and the references therein). From there, the ApplP “cannot introduce a new argument, and its function is restricted to assigning the interpretable feature [affectedness]” (Boneh and Nash 2011: 13). I will draw inspiration from this proposal, suggesting that the Italian ED is located even higher, being externally merged in the CP domain, once all predicative relations have already been established (see Moro 2020 and references therein):

(33) [CP ED [TP ...]]

Assuming that CP consists of an array of functional heads, as in the cartographic approach (see Rizzi 1997 and subsequent works; Cinque and Rizzi 2010), I propose that ED is merged in a position inside such a complex field, more exactly, in a position between FinP and TP (I consider here a simple version of the CP-domain):<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Another possibility is that ED is introduced as the head of a Focus Phrase (FocP) or Topic Phrase (TopP). However, I will not pursue this route, as it fails to explain the origin of the dative case, unlike the Applicative Phrase (ApplP) hypothesis. Moreover, it has been recently proposed by Di Caro et al. (2025) that ED is introduced even higher in the structure, adjoined to the left peripheral head JP. The essence of this hypothesis is closely aligned with the principles underlying the current proposal, as both emphasize the high position of ED. For a more comprehensive analysis, please refer to the original work. Here, I adopt a simplified version of the cartography of the left periphery, focusing on

(34) [<sub>CP</sub> ForceP ... (TopP\*) ... FocP ... (TopP\*) ... FinP .... **ApplP**...[<sub>TP</sub> ...]]

It is important to note that the theoretical framework adopted does not affect the core essence of this proposal. For instance, within a minimalist approach, there is no impediment to the presence of a functional head that takes the TP as its complement, which is indeed the case in standard transitive affirmative sentences (Chomsky 2001).

Since Ethical Datives are clitics, they inherently function as heads (see Roberts 2010, and references therein). More interestingly, if ED is generated directly outside the TP, it becomes clear why it is not an argument of the verb and, consequently, why it does not affect the propositional meaning of the sentence – behaving like an expletive in this respect. On the other hand, it still plays a role in the interpretation of the sentence, introducing an “affectedness” relation between an individual and an event (see below), since it is merged in the layer where the discourse properties are established (Moro 2020). It should be noted that, assuming the theory of phases as formulated by Chomsky (2001, 2008, 2013), EDs are merged in a different phase than vP. This further explains why they do not affect the thematic core of the verb. As a matter of fact, the expletive interpretation of the dative clitic in the current proposal is due to its syntactic position inside the sentential spine.

Another direct consequence is that ED can co-occur with ditransitive verbs. In fact, if a verb cannot select more than two internal arguments and one external argument (Hale and Keyser 1993), ED can exist in a ditransitive construction only if it does not introduce any argument, since the verb has already saturated its maximal valency.

Assuming that EDs are heads of ApplPs (*à la* Roberge and Troberg (2009)), their clitic behavior follows (EDs can't be PPs or overt pronouns) and, at the same time, we can also explain why they get Dat case (McFadden 2004; see below). In Cuervo's approach, EDs cannot be represented as full dative PPs (or DPs in her analysis) due to their “defective” nature: they are heads that take an argument without projecting a specifier (hence the unavailability of a full dative DP). In my analysis there is no need to introduce such an ad hoc stipulation, since the ED has similarities with some other functional heads populating the left periphery of the sentences (cfr. Rizzi 1997). This is similar to what Jaeggli (1982: 18) proposes on ED, i.e., it represents a category of clitics that does not originate in object position, challenging Kayne's (1975) movement theory of clitics – where clitics are initially generated in NP position and then moved obligatorily to the verb. Accordingly, ED does not exhibit alternations with any other post-verbal object position, providing compelling evidence that they are generated “by the base in their clitic position” (Jaeggli 1982: 18). The non-argumental status of a dative is

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the crucial aspect that the CP is a complex field. See Greco (2020b: chapter 5) for a more detailed discussion.

also highlighted by the impossibility to be doubled by a full DP (Franco and Huidobro 2008, in line with Jaeggli 1982; Strozer 1976) (I here repeat the sentence (10)):

- (35) a. Tommaso *ti* ha vinto il primo premio!  
           Thomas ED.to you has won the first prize  
           ‘Thomas won the first prize (and this affects you)!’  
       b. \*Tommaso *ti* ha vinto il primo premio *a te!*  
           Thomas ED.to you has won the first prize to you

Moreover, this also takes into account the impossibility of having an ED of the 3rd person plural form, since Italian does not display any clitic of this category, but only the stressed pronouns “*loro*”.

Treating EDs as heads of high(er) ApplPs also allows us to consider their inability to occur in stative constructions (see sentences in (31)). More specifically, EDs maintain the core property of high applicatives as discussed by Pyllkkänen (2002, 2008) – namely, (i) being merged (somewhere) above the VP and (ii) linking an entity to an event by some relation. However, if there is no event to be related to, as in stative constructions, ED cannot appear in such contexts. Assuming that “affectedness” is the semantic relation introduced by ED between an individual – such as the speaker or the hearer of the utterance – and an event (see Berman 1982; Masini 2012; Michelioudakis and Kapogianni 2013; Shibatani 1994 among many others),<sup>23</sup> ED can be interpreted as follows:

- (36) ED: Appl<sub>affectedness</sub> =  $\lambda x.\lambda e.$  affectedness (e, x)

This condition can only be applied if there is an eventive verb phrase complement that ED can take. Following a well-established tradition (Ramchand 2008), I assume that stative predicates do not display such an event and, accordingly, “there is no dynamicity/process/change involved in the predication, but simply a description of a state of affairs” (Ramchand 2008: 33). ED can therefore not select them, as evidenced by copular sentences (Greco et al. 2020; Moro 1997): ED can never occur in either canonical (37a) or inverse copular sentences (37c). In contrast, ED does occur with other raising verbs, such as *become* (37b–d), which display an eventive predicative structure absent from copular constructions.

- (37) a. \*Gianni *mi* è il presunto colpevole.  
           John ED.to me is the alleged culprit  
       b. Gianni *mi* è *diventato* il presunto colpevole.  
           John ED.to me is become the alleged culprit  
           ‘John became the alleged culprit.’

<sup>23</sup> A detailed semantic analysis of ED is beyond the scope of this paper, which primarily focuses on its syntactic aspects. For a more comprehensive discussion, readers should refer to the extensive literature on ED cited here.

- c. \*Il presunto colpevole *mi* è Gianni.  
       the alleged culprit ED.to me is John
- d. Il presunto colpevole *mi* è **diventato** Gianni.  
       the alleged culprit ED.to me is become John  
       ‘The alleged culprit became John.’

This restriction does not apply to predicates denoting activities, accomplishments or achievements, as they do involve some change (Beavers 2011, 2013), which allows ED to be added (see the sentences in (31)).

The hypothesis proposed here also accommodates the behavior involving both the missing coreferentiality requirement on ED-subjects and passivization. Let’s start with the latter, even though the two phenomena are linked. We discussed above that ED appears in passive constructions regardless of the position of the theme, either *in situ* or in preverbal position, with a better result in the latter condition. It is worth noting that benefactives are ruled out in this condition, whereas the ED is still available (I here repeat the sentences (17) as (38)):<sup>24</sup>

- (38) a. \*L’erba *gli* è stata tagliata  
       the.grass to.him is been cut  
       dal giardiniere. (Ben\_Folli and Harley 2006: 127)  
       by.the gardener
- b. Il primo premio *mi* è stato vinto da Lucia! (ED)  
       the first prize ED.to me is been won by Lucia  
       ‘The first prize was won by Lucia (and this affects me)!’

According to Folli and Harley (2006), when the theme moves beyond the dative clitic in the case of a benefactive, it causes a locality violation because the dative intervenes between the subject position and the theme. This follows from the fact that the base position of the dative in benefactives c-commands the theme’s base position. According to the current analysis, this does not happen with ED, where there is no such crossing violation. This is possible only if the clitic is merged above the subject position. More specifically, two distinct pre-verbal landing sites for Italian subjects have been proposed in the literature in order to accommodate both their structure requirements (ex. EPP) and their discourse properties: one high position linked to specific discourse properties – such as “D-linking” in Pesetsky (1987), “pre-suppositionality” in Diesing (1992), or as “criterial” in Rizzi’s 1997 framework (yet below the CP field) – and one low position associated with agreement (“AgrS” as per Cardinaletti’s 2004 definition). Leaving aside the disputes regarding these proposals, if ED is merged above the subject positions – particularly above AgrS, or whatever

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion on the grammaticality judgments of this sentence, see footnote 11.

head is responsible for the subject agreement, this implies that ED is not constrained to being coreferential with the grammatical subjects. In that configuration, ED is not c-commanded by the subject and, therefore, an agreement relation is not available, resulting in the absence of a coreferentiality requirement. Moreover, given the discourse conditions usually associated with the preverbal higher subjects, such as the “quasi-topicality” effect noted by Chomsky (2002), this may account for the preference of ED to be associated with the preverbal subject, in contrast to what happens with the postverbal subject, as shown in passive constructions – when the theme is left *in situ* (I reported the sentences discussed in (16–17)):

- (39) a. [Il primo premio <sub>i</sub>] *mi* è stato vinto [<sub>t<sub>i</sub></sub>] da Lucia! (pre-verbal subj.)  
 the first prize ED.to me is been won by Lucia  
 ‘The first prize was won by Lucia (and this affects me)’  
 b. <sup>?</sup>\**Mi* è stato vinto il primo premio da Lucia. (post-verbal subj.)  
 ED.to me is been won the first prize by Lucia  
 ‘The first prize was won by Lucia.’

This relation with the preverbal subject can be further strengthened by the co-occurrence of ED and topic constructions, such as Clitic Left Dislocation (Cecchetto 1999), where the topicalized element is signaled by the co-reference with a resumptive clitic *lo* immediately following the ED clitic:

- (40) Il primo premio *me lo* hanno dato a Lucia.  
 the first prize ED.to me Cl.it they.have given to Lucia  
 ‘They gave the first prize to Lucia (and this affects me).’

ED is indeed natural in such contexts, further suggesting its involvement in the discourse properties of the sentence. In a similar vein, the analysis proposed above also predicts that ED does not appear in causative constructions, since they exhibit an infinitival complement characterized by an “impoverished functional structure”, i.e., lacking the C-I phase (Roussou and Manzini 2024). This impoverishment also affects pronominal clitics, causing their inability to remain in the subordinate clause (41b) and forcing them to climb to the matrix causative verb (Guasti 1993, 2006) (41c):

- (41) a. Ho fatto vincere il primo premio *a Lucia*.  
 I.have make.1SG to.win the first prize to Lucia  
 ‘I make Lucia win the first prize.’  
 b. \*Ho fatto vincer-*le* il primo premio.  
 I.have make.1SG to.win.Cl.to her the first prize  
 c. *Le* ho fatto vincere il primo premio.  
 Cl.to her I.have make.1SG to.win the first prize

‘I make her win the first prize.’

ED cannot appear in causative constructions at all (42a), whereas other dative clitics, both argumental (41c) and non-argumental (benefactive) (42b), can:

- (42) a. \**Ti* ho fatto vincere il primo premio a Lucia.  
 ED.to me I.have make.1SG to.win the first prize to Lucia  
 b. *Le* ho fatto stirare le camicie dalla mamma.  
 Ben.to her I.have make.1SG to.iron the shirts by.the mom  
 ‘I make mam to iron the shirts for her.’

This patten can be easily taken into account if ED is introduced in the CP domain directly: if the structure is CP-lacking, as in causatives (Roussou and Manzini 2024 and the references therein), there is no space for ED at all, and the movement to the matrix clause is not available as a rescue operation. On the other hand, this does not affect other cliticizations, for example Ben or argumental ones.

The hypothesis explored in this paper aligns with the spirit of Jouisseau and Rezac’s (2008) proposal for French ED, despite the latter’s lack of a formal analysis. Specifically, both studies posit that these constructions originate outside the domains responsible for thematic roles and syntactic movement (Case/A-movement). Pursuing this line, ED cannot control PRO, as Jaeggli (1982: 31) shows for Spanish (a) and Jouisseau and Rezac (2008: 104) for French (b):

- (43) a. [PRO\*<sub>i/ARB</sub> cuidarla tanto ] **me<sub>i</sub>** le arruino la vida  
 Look.after.her so.much ED.to me 3S.DAT ruined the life  
 a mi hija. (Spanish)  
 to my daughter  
 ‘The fact that one (PRO-ARB) took so much care of her ruined my daughter’s life.’  
 \* ‘I taking so much care of her ruined my daughter’s life.’  
 b. [PRO\*<sub>ARB/\*i/\*j/\*k/1</sub> trop se protéger] **te<sub>i</sub>** **me<sub>j</sub>**  
 too much 3SE protect ED.to you ED.to me  
 nous<sub>k</sub> *lui<sub>i</sub>* a ruiné le caractère. (French)  
 CL.2P S.DAT has ruined the nature  
 ‘Protecting herself too much ruined her character.’  
 c. [PRO\*<sub>ARB/\*i/k</sub> Proteggendola troppo] loro<sub>k</sub> **me<sub>i</sub>** l’hanno rovinata,  
 pretec.her too much they ED.to Cl.her.have ruined  
 me  
 la mia bambina. (Italian)  
 the my daughter  
 ‘They ruined her protecting her too much, my daughter.’



Note that other clitics, either dative or accusative, can control PRO. Only ED fails in this respect:

- (44) a.  $Gl_i$  ho regalato un libro da  $PRO_i$  leggere in estate. (core\_dat)  
 Cl.to him I.have given a book to to.read in summer  
 'I gave him a book to read during summertime.'
- b.  $L_i$ 'ho visto  $PRO_i$  mangiare la pasta. (core\_acc)  
 Cl.him.I.have seen to.eat the pasta  
 'I saw him eating the pasta.'

Assuming that ED is outside the thematic domain takes into consideration this fact as well.

The high position of ED also predicts the impossibility of it undergoing any type of A'-movement (Michelioudakis and Kapogianni 2013), such as wh-movement, since the high position of ED does not provide any coherent contexts where locality conditions on movement can be fulfilled (such as selection or similar principles<sup>25</sup>).

Finally, this is also consistent with the enclitic nature of ED in infinitival clauses:

- (45) 'Mi è capitato di incontrar-ti Gianni al mercato.'  
 Cl.to.me is happened to meet-you.ED Gianni in the market  
 'It has happened to me to meet Gianni in the market (and this affects you).'

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<sup>25</sup> Italian displays several elements proposed to be externally merged in the CP domain, such as "perchè" (Eng. 'why'). Rizzi (2001) proposes and supports the idea that "why" is externally merged in the specifier of an Interrogative Head (INT°), which is intrinsically endowed with a Wh-feature and located in the CP-field. Note that the interrogative adverb can move to other CPs, as illustrated in the following sentence:

- (vii) Mi chiedo perchè hai detto che Luca è arrivato.  
 Cl.to me wonder.1SG why you.have. said that Luca is arrived  
 a. 'I wonder why you have said that Luca has arrived.'  
 b. 'I wonder why<sub>i</sub> you have said [<sub>t<sub>i</sub></sub> that Luca has arrived].'

In this sentence, *why* can refer to either the matrix verb *say* or the embedded verb *arrive*, via movement to the higher CP. This demonstrates that elements merged in the CP can indeed move, contrary to what I proposed for ED. However, it is important to note that *why* has a different syntactic status, being a maximal projection adjoined to the CP. In contrast, ED cannot move in such a manner and is interpreted only within the clause where it is merged:

- (viii) Ti ho chiesto a Gianni che cosa ha preso.  
 ED.to you I.have asked to John that thing has got  
 'I asked John what he did get (and the fact that I asked John affects you).'
- ED can only refer to the matrix clauses, where it appears, and not to the subordinated one.

If ED serves as the head of an ApplP, it may become a suffix of the infinitive verb through Head-to-Head movement, wherein the non-finite verb moves towards the Fin°, preceding the ED: [<sub>ForceP</sub> ... [<sub>FinP</sub> [<sub>incontrar</sub><sub>i</sub>- [<sub>AppP</sub> [<sub>ti</sub>]] ... [<sub>TP</sub> <sub>ti</sub>]]].

Consider that the “high” position of ED should not be viewed as an isolated phenomenon in Italian. In fact, it has been independently proposed for other expletive functional words, such as (i) negation – in both ‘Surprise’ negative sentences (Greco 2020b; Halm and Huszár 2021) and negative exclamatives (see, among others, Delfitto and Fiorin 2014; Espinal 1997; Villalba 2004; Zanuttini and Portner 2003) – and (ii) coordination structures (Poletto 2005). Specifically, the following Italian surprise negative sentence simultaneously exhibits all these expletive elements (in italics), i.e., coordination, negation, and ED.

- (46) *E non mi* è scesa dal treno Maria?! (Greco 2020a: 776)  
 and NEG CL.to me is got off-the train Mary  
 ‘Mary got off the train! (and this surprised me and affects me)!’

The meaning of this sentence can be fully paraphrased as ‘That Maria got off the train is a surprise.’ Despite the presence of the negative marker *non*, the sentence remains affirmative and negation must therefore be considered *expletive* – according to the definition I gave in Section 1 – since it does not make a contribution to the truth conditions associated with the sentence. Moreover, the sentence is introduced by a coordination that lacks a left-branching phrase and does not seem to coordinate anything (Poletto 2005), instantiating another case of expletive item since it fails in its propositional role. In Greco’s analysis of surprise negative sentences, negation is externally merged in the CP-domain after the v\*P-phase has closed and the entire TP has raised to focalization. This accounts for the sentence’s affirmative meaning, as negation loses its ability to reverse the polarity of the proposition (see the original works for a more detailed discussion). Similarly, Poletto (2005) proposes that the expletive coordination can appear in the fronting position as a topic marker occupying a functional projection in the CP field that is parasitic on focalization. Note that these elements interact with the presence of ED. Specifically, although ED is optional, it makes surprise negation sentences more natural (Greco 2020a) and seems to enforce the expletive reading of negation in negative exclamatives.

- (47) a. Quanto non ha camminato Gianni! (Exclamative\_no ED)  
 how.much neg has walked John  
 ‘How much John has not walked!’ (he refuses to walk for most of the time)  
 ‘How much John has walked!’ (he walked for most of the time)  
 b. Quanto non *mi* ha camminato Gianni! (Exclamative\_with ED)  
 how.much neg ED.to me has walked John

‘\*How much John has not walked!’ (he refuses to walk for most of the time)

‘How much John has walked!’ (he walked for most of the time)

The negative exclamative in (47a) is ambiguous between a standard negation reading, where it reverses the polarity of the sentence, and an expletive negation reading, where it does not reverse the polarity but instead provides a universal evaluation of an event (e.g., ‘John walked a lot’). This ambiguity arises because standard and expletive negation in Italian share the same negative morpheme *non* (‘not’). However, in the negative exclamative in (47b), the presence of ED forces the interpretation towards the expletive negation reading, ruling out the standard one. According to Greco (2021), the different readings in negative exclamatives can be traced back to the twofold derivation of negation: when the negative marker ‘not’ is integrated into the TP-domain – as traditionally assumed in the literature (Zanuttini 2001 and references therein) – it results in a standard negation reading; when it is positioned higher, specifically in the CP-domain, it results in an expletive negation reading, as seen in the surprise negation sentence above.<sup>26</sup> All in all, the activation of the CP field appears to be crucial for deriving the expletive reading of functional words and the analysis proposed here for ED aligns well with this tendency. Note that dative clitics, negation, and coordination seem to fail in their usual semantic contributions, but they do not lose their syntactic nature.

Overall, analyzing ED as a higher Applicative Phrase has the beneficial outcome of accounting for many of the characteristic features of ED discussed earlier. However, one property of ED does not seem to follow from the syntactic representation in (34), such as their preference to be realized by the 1st and 2nd person singulars

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<sup>26</sup> One could argue that the occurrence of negation may be problematic for the proposal advanced here, as negation always precedes ED, even when it is standard negation:

(ix) a. Non mi ha camminato un secondo Gianni.  
neg ED.to me has walked a second John  
‘John did not walk at all.’

b. \*Mi non ha camminato un secondo Gianni.  
ED.to me neg has walked a second John  
Assuming the derivation of ED proposed above, (b) should be expected to be grammatical. However, some independent constraints must be considered, such as the clitic-like nature of negation, which requires phonological adjacency to verbs (Zanuttini 1996, 1997). Nothing, except elements already adjoined to verbs, can intervene between them and I assume that this phonological requirement rules out the sequence in (b), but not in (a). Clitics “are word-like in their grammar, but phonologically must lean for support.” (Matthews 1991: 217; Roberts 2010) and this explains why they must be adjacent to the verb.

(i.e., *mi* and *ti*). There is no a priori reason to expect such behavior, as the event described in the sentence can affect any individual, including a third party in addition to the participants in the speech act. In the next section, I will delve into this point.

### 3.2 Ethical Dative and Speech Act Phrases

According to some scholars (Delbecque and Lamiroy 1996; Roberge and Troberg (2009); see Michelioudakis and Kapogianni 2013 for an overview), the 3rd person singular is not as acceptable as ED as the 1st and 2nd persons. As discussed above, some cases seem to confirm this preference, as evidenced by the following negated sentence expressing surprise (I here repeat the sentence in (8) as (48)):

- (48) a. E non *mi/ti* ha incontrato Maria in stazione?!  
 and NEG CL.to me/you has met Mary in train.station  
 ‘S/he met Mary in the train station! (and this surprised me/you and affects me/you)’  
 b. <sup>2</sup>/<sub>1</sub>\*E non *gli* ha incontrato Maria in stazione?!  
 and NEG CL.him has met Mary in train.station

This preference can be traced back to some independent principles. It can be important to consider the relationship between the speaker and the hearer concerning both attention-seeking and bonding. More specifically, it has been suggested (Speas and Tenny 2003) that certain pragmatic information, such as some markers in languages like West Flemish and Romanian (Haegeman and Hill 2013), are syntactically represented by a functional predicative structure, i.e., a Speech Act Phrase (SAP) (Cinque 1999). SAPs dominate the left periphery of a sentence, instantiating the interface between syntax and conversational pragmatic. This realizes what Kratzer (1999) introduced in her famous paper on the “interpersonal” value of some expressions that indicate the speaker’s attitude or commitment towards the utterance’s content and/or their relationship with the interlocutor. They can be described as “conversational”, presupposing direct contact between the speaker and the interlocutor. Therefore, they would be inappropriate in formal discussions. In their seminal work, Speas and Tenny (2003) propose that a SAP comprises at least three sub-phrases: the speaker, the utterance content, and the hearer. Ethical Datives, in this context, function specifically to highlight a person – either the speaker or the hearer – who is affected by the event described by the sentence. An intuitive explanation for the preference of ED towards the 1st and 2nd person singular is to adopt Speas and Tenny’s hypothesis. One can assume that the speaker and the hearer of an utterance are operators capable of binding a variable realized in the [Head,

ApplP] position, which corresponds to our Ethical Dative. If the speaker binds this variable, the ED will exhibit 1st-person agreement; if the hearer binds the variable, the ED will exhibit 2nd-person agreement (see the original work for the binding mechanism underlying SAPs).

(49) [SAP Speaker<sub>i</sub> Hearer<sub>j</sub> [CP ... *mi/ti*<sub>j</sub> [TP ... ]]]

This syntactic explanation could clarify why the ED shows a preference for the 1st and 2nd persons, and why the 3rd person is less acceptable to some speakers. While the ‘affectedness’ property is always conveyed by the ED, the realization of person is constrained by the SAP. As for the 3rd person singular, it can be proposed (Michelioudakis and Kapogianni 2013) that some logophoric operators are present, ensuring the correct interpretation of 3rd-person pronouns as reported speakers or hearers in indirect speech (see the original works for a more detailed description of these operator–variable relationships).

Notably, in the analysis proposed here, ED is introduced by the ApplP rather than by SAP, which differs from the proposals of other scholars (see, among others, Delbecque and Lamiroy 1996). This approach has the advantage of accounting for all the syntactic and semantic phenomena caused by ED, which might otherwise be difficult to consider only from an SAP point of view. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the reference to SAPs is just one hypothesis that can explain the preference for the 1st and 2nd person singular (see, for example, Ross 1970 for a critique of this idea) and the pragmatic interpretation of ED. This further specifies the role that ED plays beyond grammatical meaning. However, regardless of the theory one assumes, it is incontrovertible that there are crosslinguistic differences between the 1st and 2nd person versus the 3rd person (Bloomfield 1938; Halle 1997). As Speas and Tenny (2003: 330) state, “only the participants in the speech act – the speaker and the addressee, represented by 1st and 2nd person – have true grammatical person”.

## 4 Conclusions

Natural languages contain elements that do not contribute to the compositional (propositional) meaning of a sentence. In this paper, I referred to these elements as “expletives”/“pleonastic”. Among these, certain forms, such as the Ethical Dative, are less studied. The ED serves the specific function of identifying a person who is affected by the event described in a sentence. This is exemplified by the Italian sentence *Tommaso **mi** ha camminato fino al parco da solo* (literally, ‘Thomas **ED** has walked to the park alone’, meaning ‘Tommaso walked to the park alone’). In this study, I have described key aspects of the Italian ED, distinguishing it from other non-core datives such as Benefactive and CD, and I have proposed a syntactic analysis for

it. Specifically, I have shown that (i) ED does not alter the propositional meaning of a sentence, as it does not belong to the thematic grid of the verb; (ii) ED preferably appears in the 1st and 2nd person singular, although it also occurs in the 3rd person singular; (iii) ED obligatorily displays the clitic form and therefore cannot occur in the 3rd person plural form, as Italian lacks a corresponding clitic for this; (iv) ED is not required to be co-referential with the grammatical subject of a sentence; (v) ED can appear in sentences with ditransitive constructions; (vi) ED does not undergo A'-movement, such as wh-fronting; (vii) ED can appear in passive structures, where the theme moves across the dative clitic to a preverbal subject position, but is not as grammatical when the theme remains *in situ*; (viii) ED in Italian is restricted by the kind of actionality the verb assumes, being unacceptable in stative predicates; (ix) ED does not control PRO; (x) ED naturally occurs in sentences with expletive functional words, such as negation and coordination and, finally, (xi) ED cannot appear in causative clauses, neither in the matrix clause.

To derive all these features in a unified manner, my analysis relies on the well-known Applicative Phrase framework, proposing the following schema (I here repeat the schema in (33)):

- (50) a. [<sub>CP</sub> **ED** [<sub>TP</sub> ...]]  
 b. [<sub>CP</sub> ForceP ... (TopP\*) ... FocP ... (TopP\*) ... FinP .... **AppIP**...[<sub>TP</sub> ...]]

I have argued that a non-core/non-argumental dative can be introduced as the head of an Applicative Phrase generated outside and above the thematic domain of the syntactic tree, specifically in the CP domain. This positioning accounts for its expletive nature and various other properties. Additionally, I have referenced the Speech Act Phrases theory to explain the preference of the ED for the 1st and 2nd person singular as well as their pragmatic contribution.

From this perspective, I can further confirm that expletive elements – i.e., those that do not contribute to the propositional meaning of a sentence – do not exist in the conventional sense, as their interpretative nature depends on their syntactic configuration, consistent with previous proposals for negation and coordination in Italian. A broader definition of expletiveness should then be considered, i.e., one where an element does not impact the truth conditions associated with a sentence, being merged in the syntactic layer where the discourse properties are established, i.e., the CP. This does not mean that ED does not contribute in any sense to the meaning of the sentence. In fact, ED plays a semantic role in a different domain, beyond grammatical meaning, representing speakers' subjective evaluation of an event described by a sentence highlighting the perspective of the affectee of the situation.

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