Question-answer word order and narrow focus

Nicoleta SAVA
Ovidius University of Constanta

Abstract: *Narrow focus constituents, such as those contained by answers to wh-questions, have been claimed to undergo movement to syntactic positions in either the low vP periphery or the left of the sentence in some languages, mainly based on the existence of non-contrastive readings of narrow-focus ex situ (undergoing movement). This paper uses experimental data from an elicitation test involving wh-questions to investigate the strategies employed by Romanian speakers in producing this kind of structures, more specifically the word orders present in answers to wh questions and the reasons behind the possible variations in word order. Based on the data it will conclude that there is no evidence of movement triggered by purely syntactic reasons (such as feature checking) in this kind of structures in Romanian.*

Keywords: *information structure, focus, wh-questions, narrow-focus, clause periphery, scrambling*

1. Introduction

The information structure-related concepts of *focus* (described as encoding new/ non-presuppositional or contrastive information, depending on the theory and the classification, or as performing certain semantic operations such as exhaustive identification or introducing variables) and *topic* (defined as old or presuppositional information, or discourse-linked referents or the constituent on which a comment is provided, expressed by the remaining part of the sentence) have received a lot of attention in the linguistic literature of the past decades, their role and impact on linguistic structures receiving many, and sometimes contradictory, analyses. Part of the reason is the fact that, cross-linguistically, these categories are marked by different means: by movement to dedicated positions in the syntactic structures in the so-called discourse-configurational languages, such as Hungarian (Kiss, 1998), by insertion of specific morphological markers, such as the marker *wɛ* in the Kwa languages (Aboh, 2007), by changes in the phonological contour of the sentence triggered by the shift in the pitch accent, in languages marking focus phonologically, such as Spanish or Romanian (Zubizarreta, 1998), among other strategies.

In syntactic theories, a difference is usually made between (at least) two types of focus, which have received various labels such as *informational*

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

and *identificational* (Kiss, 1998) or *contrastive* and *presentational* (Drubig, 2000) partially overlapping with the labels *broad* and *narrow* focus proposed in prosodic theories (Ladd 1980). The first category has been described by Kiss (1998) as involving a quantificational operation consisting in creating a set of entities for which the proposition expressed by the predicate may be true and (exhaustively) identifying the entity/value for which it is true and triggering movement to a dedicated position, at least in some languages. The latter is described as expressing new or non-presupposed information, marked prosodically by pitch accent and not involving any movement operation. The two types are exemplified below for English.

(1) It was **a hat** that Mary picked for herself.
(2) Mary picked for herself a HAT[1]. (Kiss 1998: 249)

The first sentence would be uttered in a context where Mary had a selection of items that she could pick for herself, a hat being the only item picked, while the second sentence is interpreted as a description of an event whose protagonist is Mary, for example as an answer to the question *What did Mary do yesterday*. Such examples were unambiguously assigned to each of the two categories and are recognized as exemplifying two different types of foci by the studies that propose such distinctions. A problem for the informational-identificational distinction is the behaviour of answers to wh-questions, which are generally used as a diagnostic test for establishing the focus of a sentence (Erteschik-Shir 1986 among others), given that the constituent representing the answer carries or contains the main stress in languages that mark focus prosodically and, semantically, it represents the value that holds for the proposition expressed by the question. As Kiss acknowledges, answers to wh-questions may occupy either undergo movement, a diagnostic test for identificational focus, or they can stay in situ, a property of informational focus.

(3) a. Hol jártál a nyáron?
where went.you the summer.in
'Where din you go in the summer?'

[1] Following the convention in the literature on focus, capitals are used to mark the constituent carrying the pitch accent. Kiss uses the two types of marking, bolding and capitals to distinguish between the two types of focus, the bolded phrases representing the identificational focus while capitalized words represent the prosodically prominent constituent in identificational focus. Throughout this paper I will use bolded words to identify the focused constituent.

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

b. Jártam OLASZORSZÁGBAN.
went.I Italy.to
c. **Olaszországban** jártam
'I went to Italy.' (Kiss 1998:250)

According to the linguist, there is a difference in the interpretation of the two answers, (3b) implying that other places except Italy have been visited while (3c) being acceptable if the only place visited is Italy. This analysis is refuted by Szendrői (2004) and Wedgwood (2005), among others, the latter claiming that fronting does not result in exhaustive identification, seeing as narrow-focus constituents representing the answer to wh-questions are assumed to be exhaustive in all cases (unless explicitly denied to be exhaustive), by application of pragmatic principles such as Grice's maxim of quantity (Grice, 1975) requiring answers to be maximally informative.

The possibility for narrow-focus constituents to appear in various positions, undergoing movement to a periphery position, either the vP periphery or the left periphery, has also been proposed for other languages. Most of these studies are based on the existence of sentences containing non-contrastive focused constituents in periphery positions in the language. However, such examples are, in some cases, submitted to acceptability judgement tests, not to elicitation/production tests. The aim of this research is to investigate the strategies used by Romanian speakers in answers to wh-questions by using an elicitation experiment and to determine whether narrow non-contrastive focused constituents undergo movement to periphery positions in Romanian.

2. Types of focus and focus positions in Romance

In the most recent version of the Generative theory, the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995) information-structure categories such as topic and focus are not assumed to represent syntactic features requiring checking and, therefore, triggering movement. When such movement occurs, for example in case of left or right dislocation, this movement is assumed to take place at the syntax-phonology interface, being motivated by phonological constraints.

A different position is assumed by the cartographic approach developed in Cinque and Rizzi 2010 and earlier work by both linguists as well as many other linguists assuming this line of research, in which the discourse features of Focus and Topic have a prominent role. Studies on the syntactic structure of Italian sentences have proposed that the left periphery hosts dedicated focus and topic projections targeted by constituents carrying these features. Early studies proposed that contrastively focused constituents undergo movement to the specifier of the functional projection containing such features located in the left periphery, feature checking being assumed to take

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

place in a specifier-head configuration. The structure proposed for the left periphery of Italian by Rizzi (1997) is indicated below.

(4) ForceP > TopP > FocP > TopP* > FinP >IP

With the advent of the phase theory (Chomsky, 2001) a structure similar to the left (CP) periphery is proposed by Beletti (2004) for the lower vP periphery, which is assumed to contain Focus and Topic positions.

(5) ……..[$_{\text{TopP}}$ Top [$_{\text{Foc}}$ Foc [$_{\text{Top}}$ Top ……VP]]]

The FocP position located in the vP periphery is assumed to host infomational focus, therefore this position would be targeted by narrow focus constituents contained by answers to wh-questions.

For Spanish, Zubizarreta (1998) proposes that narrow focused constituents, which are marked prosodically, must occupy a position at the right edge of the sentence, which would ensure them maximum prosodic prominence. According to her, nuclear stress (main pitch) is assigned in Spanish to the most deeply embedded constituent of the sentence. Therefore, answers to subject-wh questions are assumed to exhibit an (O)VS word order, the focused subject occupying a sentence-final position. According to most analyses of the Spanish clause structure, only contrastively focused constituents may occupy a preverbal position. However, Cruschina (2019:123) claims that recent empirical work has thrown some doubt on these judgements, showing that the preverbal position is not necessarily restricted to contrastive focus or emphasis, for subjects as well as other constituents.

(6) a. ¿Quién invitaron a la fiesta?
whom invite.PST.3PL to the party
'Who did they invite to the party?'
b. Invitaron a MARcos, a la fiesta.
invite.PST.3PL ACC Mark to the party
'They invited Mark to the party.'
(7) A MARcos invitaron.
ACC Mark invite.PST.3PL
'(It was) Mark (that) they invited.' (Cruschina 2019:124)

The example above shows that non-contrastive narrow focused constituents could target a left-periphery position when producing certain pragmatic effects indicated at the end of section 4. Similar analyses have been proposed by

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

preverbal constituents carrying narrow non-contrastive focus in Sicilian and Romanian, as will be shown in the next section.

3. Word order in Romanian and focus

Romanian is generally assumed to be a free-word order language, in the sense that the subject and the object can occupy both a postverbal and a preverbal position, in any order. The VS word order is possible both in case of intransitive and transitive structures and irrespective of the features of the subject such as definite or indefinite.

Although no word order is banned, they would only be appropriate in certain contexts. Post-verbal subjects are natural in presentational (wide focus/ all focus) sentences exemplified below. In the unmarked order, postverbal subjects are typically placed before the object.

(8) a. Ce se întâmplă afară?
what refl. happen.3.sg outside
'What's happening outside'
b. A stricat vecinul/ cineva gardul.
has damaged neighbour.def/ somebody fence.def
c. #A stricat gardul vecinul/ cineva.
has damaged fence.def neighbour.def/ somebody
'Our neighbour/somebody damaged the fence.

Based on such examples, VSO was assumed to be the basic word order in Romanian in many syntactic studies such as Dobrovie-Sorin (1994), Cornilescu (1997), Alboiu (2002)[2], the verb moving out of the VP to the inflectional domain. However, as pointed out by Giurgea (2017: 280) Romanian is not VSO statistically, most sentences exhibiting an SV order.

Preverbal subjects are analysed either as topics or as contrastive foci in Cornilescu (1997) and Alboiu (2002). If both categories are present in the preverbal field, the preverbal position adjacent to the verb is reserved to quantificational elements (quantifiers, wh-phrases and contrastive focus). Topics may not intervene between these elements and the verb in Romanian.

(9) a. ***GARDUL**, vecinul l-a stricat, (nu poarta).
fence.def neighbour.def cl.3.sg.Acc-has damaged (not gate.def)
b. Vecinul, **GARDUL** l-a stricat, (nu poarta).
neighbour.def fence.def cl.3.sg.Acc-has damaged (not gate.def)

[2] A different account is proposed in Motapanyane 1994, according to whom preverbal subjects do not necessarily undergo A-bar movement as a result of focus fronting or topicalization

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

'It is the fence (not the gate) that our heighbour has damaged.'

Giurgea (2017) and Giurgea and Mîrzea (2017) show that the VS order may also correspond to narrow focus on the subject and well as a certain type of focus on the verb labelled as verum focus.

(10) Ştie băiatul cum să obţină ce vrea!
knows boy.def how subj. get what wants
'The boy definitely knows how to get what he wants.'
(Giurgea and Mîrzea 2017:323)

Moreover, they show that the SV order is not always associated with topics or contrastive focus, given that existential quantifiers such as *cineva* or *ceva* can occur as preverbal subjects. It follows then that, as proposed by many linguists, Romanian is not a discourse configurational language, that is the Romanian clause structure does not contain specific positions associated with discourse features such as topic or focus. Contrastively focused constituents can occur both preverbally and post-verbally (Alboiu 2004).

Narrowly focussed non-contrastive constituents, on the other hand, are expected to occur in a post-verbal position. Romanian is a prosodic language, focus being marked phonologically by nuclear stress (or pitch stress). As proposed by Zubizarreta (1998), nuclear stress is assigned to the most deeply embedded element in the VP, so focused constituents are expected to occupy this position if phonological considerations are given preference. However, it has been shown by Winkler and Gobbel (2002) that prosodic prominence may also be ensured by distressing strategies such as local deaccentuation, so narrow focused constituents could also be targeting a vP periphery position, as proposed for Italian, or even a left-periphery, as shown for certain non-contrastive focus types in Spanish, seeing that the preverbal position is not restricted to topics or contrastive foci. An experiment was carried out to determine the strategies employed by Romanian speakers in answering wh-questions and the positions occupied by the narrow focus.

4. Experimental data on the position of information narrow focus

Design and participants:

In order to elicit data on the position of narrowly focused non-contrastive constituents, a picture experiment was designed. As previously mentioned, the aim was to test whether speakers show a preference for a sentence-initial position of focused constituents in answers to wh-questions, or they use an in-situ position as the main strategy in this kind of contexts. An elicitation task was used instead of a grammaticality judgement task seeing as the latter would not allow an assessment of the speakers' preference for one strategy over the

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

other. The participants in the experiment were presented with a set of pictures, each with an associated question, and were asked to answer the question based on the image in the picture. There were 24 respondents, both male and female, aged 11-80. The adult participants had different academic backgrounds and were chosen from various geographical areas to avoid a potential bias for a certain word order in the language variety used by the speaker.[3] The informants were asked to use full sentences only.[4] A sample answer was provided to ensure that the participants understand this request.

(11) Femeia s-a întâlnit cu prietenii în parc.
woman.def refl.3.sg-has met with friends.def in park
'The woman met her friends in the parc.'

The sentence provided as a model contains an unmarked word order in Romanian, with the subject preceding the verb, followed in turn by the prepositional object *cu prietenii* and the adjunct *în park*. In order not to create a bias for the word order in the elicited answers, the question for this model-answer was not provided. Thus, it is not indicated if the sentence is uttered as an answer to the question *Where did the woman meet her friends*, exhibiting an in-situ and sentence-final position of the focused constituent or to the questions *Who met their friends in the park* or *Who did the woman meet in the park*, in which case the answer would indicate an in-situ preference, requiring destressing of the remaining presupposed part of the sentence, for the answer to the subject-question, or of the sentence-final constituent *în park* that would normally carry the pitch stress, in case of an answer to a question targeting the direct object.

[3] Studies on other Romance languages, particularly Italian and Spanish, have revealed different acceptability judgements on possible positions of non-contrastive narrow focus constituents from speakers using different dialects and varieties of the language. While it is controversial whether contemporary Romanian has dialects, some syntactic differences between the varieties of Romanian spoken in different parts of the country or preference for certain constructions has been observed in the literature (see, for example Giurgea and Mîrzea Vasile (2017) on the absence of number agreement in the 3rd person singular in the dialect spoken in Brașov, as recorded by Pușcariu 1924-1926.

[4] While full sentences may not be the preferred answer to wh-questions in Romanian, an elliptical sentence preserving only the focused constituent expressing the new information requested by the question being the most frequently used strategy, as noted by one conference participant, elliptical answers provide no clue as to the position occupied by the focused constituent in the structure of the sentence. Full sentences are necessary in order to be able to determine the syntactic position of the constituent representing the narrow information focus. Cruschina (2019) notes that, although it is not the most natural answer, a full clause is not pragmatically infelicitous in such contexts.

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

The experiment included 14 questions, of which 9 were test items and 5 were filler items. The test items were wh-questions addressed to both arguments and adjuncts. The filler items were either wh-questions with a VP focus answer, such as *What is the woman doing* or constituent wh-questions derived from two-argument sentences whose answers would predictably not exhibit any word order variations, such as copulative structures of the type *What is the object in the image*.

Most of the wh-questions targeting post-verbal constituents contained two post-verbal constituents, both arguments and adjunct, in various constructions, in order to be able to determine, for post-verbal focus, whether the focused constituent representing the answer to the wh-question occupies a sentence-final position triggering a change in the basic position of the post-verbal constituents or an in-situ position. The results for each type of question are presented below.

Results:

- Subject wh-questions

As indicated in the previous sections, the subject predominantly occupies a preverbal position in Romanian. Therefore, answers to wh-questions targeting the subject, such as *Who met their friends in the park* would, unsurprisingly, contain the focused constituent in preverbal position. The sentence produced as an answer to such questions is, however, uninformative with respect to the position occupied by the subject, if we assume that unfocused preverbal subjects and preverbal focused constituents occupy different positions in the left periphery. To avoid this problem the subject wh-questions contained locative/existential constructions in which the subject occupies a postverbal position.

(12) Ce se află pe masa?
what refl. find on table
'What's there on the table?'
(13) Câte femei sunt în imagine?
how many women are in picture
'How many women are there in the picture?'

The answers to these questions could, in principle, exhibit three different word orders:
a) the subject (the focused constituent representing the answer to the question), followed by the existential verb and the prepositional phrase. Possible answers would include

(14) **Două farfurii, un pahar și tacâmuri** se află pe masă
two plates, a glass and cutlery refl. find on table

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

(15) **Șase femei** sunt în imagine.
three women are in picture

Locative constructions, uttered in an out-of-the-blue context, that is with no additional information structure constraints that might affect the order of the constituents, are all-focus constructions, i.e. the subjects of such constructions are not considered to be topics (understood here as old information). The typical position of subjects in such constructions, as previously mentioned, is post-verbal, therefore a preverbal subject in such sentences represents evidence of focus fronting.
b) the existential verb, followed by the narrowly focused subject and the prepositional phrase. This word order would be exhibited in answers such as the ones provided below:

(16) Se află **două farfurii, un pahar și tacâmuri** pe masă
refl. find two plates, a glass and cutlery on table
(17) Sunt **șase femei** în imagine.
are three women in picture

For the question in (13) an answer such as (17) would reflect the basic word order of the constituents, with an in-situ focused constituent, the post-verbal subject, followed by the PP. While locative existential constructions built with an indefinite DP as subject and the verb *a fi* (*to be*) are generally verb-initial, locative constructions involving the verb *a se afla* (*to be* - lit. *to find oneself*) and an indefinite subject contain the locative expression in preverbal position, as a topic, so order b) is not expected, for construction-specific reasons, independent of the focused subject.
c) the prepositional phrase, followed by the existential verb and the narrowly focused subject and. Answers exemplifying this order of the constituents would be the following

(18) Pe masa, se află **două farfurii, un pahar și tacâmuri.**
on table refl. find two plates, a glass and cutlery
(19) Sunt **șase femei** în imagine.
in picture are three women

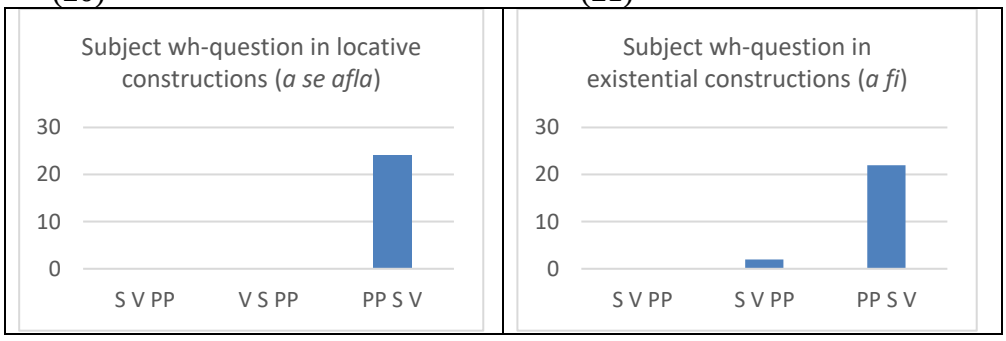
As already mentioned, the answer in (18) would involve the standard word order for the *a se afla* construction, while for the *a fi* structure the fronting of the PP would suggest a movement operation motivated by prosodic constraints concerning the assignment of nuclear pitch in a sentence. As previously mentioned, the focused constituent is marked phonologically in Romanian, by carrying the pitch stress in a prosodic unit. In other words, it is the constituent

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

that is most prominent phonologically. Seeing as the pitch stress is assigned, by default, to the most deeply embedded constituent, which corresponds to the final constituent the test answers.

The results of the experiment are presented in the two graphs below:

(20) (21)



The results unequivocally indicate a preference for the sentence-final position of the focused constituent, both in the *a se afla* construction, which, as previously mentioned, reflects the standard word order of the construction, and in the *a fi* construction, for which 92% of the answers involved the fronting of the locative PP *în imagine* ensuring prosodic prominence to the post-verbal focused subject, which, after the movement of the PP, is the final constituent of the sentence. Therefore, for stress assignment, a syntactic operation (fronting) is preferred to a phonological operation (deaccenting), which is required in the PP-final construction present in 8% of the answers. It is worth noting that none of the answers involved focus fronting, the in-situ strategy being in 100% of the answers for both questions.

- Object wh-questions

The basic position of objects in Romanian is post-verbal, as indicated in the previous sections. The target of the experiment was to determine whether non-contrastive narrowly focused objects are fronted, occupying a preverbal position, or they remain inside the vP, following the verb. Furthermore, as mentioned in the description of the experiment, 3 of the object wh-questions also contained another post-verbal constituent, both objects and adjuncts being included, in order to test, in addition to the position of the object with respect to the verb, the order of the constituents inside the vP for post-verbal focused constituents. The questions in (22) and (23) targeted the direct object with the verb *a ține* (*to hold*) that also selects an additional internal argument, typically a PP headed by *in*, in the test items *în mână* (*in her hand*) and în brațe (*in her arms*). The variation consisted in the position of the subject, which, in question (22), is in final position, after the construction *ține în mână* (*hold in her hand*), while in question (23) intervenes between the verb and the PP. The third

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

question contained a post verbal adjunct, a locative PP, in addition to the questioned direct object. The questions are indicated below:

(22) Câte creioane ține în mână persoana?
how many pencils hold.3.sg in hand person.def
'How many pencils does the person hold in her hand?'
(23) Ce ține femeia în brațe?
what hold.3.sg. woman.def in arms
'What does the woman hold in her arms'
(24) Ce poartă femeia pe cap?
what wear.3.sg. woman on head
'What does the woman wear on her head'

The possible word orders for the answers provided for the object-questions would be the following:
a) the focused direct object, followed by the verb, the subject and the prepositional phrase. Possible answers would be:

(25) **Patru creioane** ține (femeia) în mână (femeia).
four pencils hold.3.sg (woman.def) in hand (woman.def)
(26) **Un cățel** ține (femeia) în brațe (femeia).
a dog hold.3.sg (woman.def) in arms (woman.def)
(27) **O pălărie** poartă (femeia) pe cap (femeia)
a hat wear.3.sg (woman.def) on head (woman.def)

This word-order would require focus fronting of the DO and demoting the subject to a post-verbal position, vP-internal or higher, as a result of the focus-verb adjacency condition indicated before. The PP could precede the subject if the latter stays inside the vP and the PP moves to a high vP-peripheral position, or it could follow it if the subject occupies a higher position, Spec Fin, Spec S, depending on the sentence structure assumed. If the answer mirrors the structure of the question, the expectation would be that the answers to question (23) should contain the subject immediately following the verb.
b) the subject, followed by the verb, the focused direct object, and the prepositional phrase, exemplified in:

(28) Femeia ține **patru creioane** în mână.
woman.def hold.3.sg four pencils in hand
(29) Femeia ține **un cățel** în brațe.
woman.def hold.3.sg a dog in arms
(30) Femeia poartă **o pălărie** pe cap
woman.def wear.3.sg a hat on head

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

This word order reflects the basic order of the constituents if the sentences were uttered in an out-of-the-blue context, with the focused constituent in-situ. Since the DO in not in sentence-final position, it requires an additional phonological operation of shifting the stress that would standardly fall on the PP, as the most deeply embedded constituent, to the object, by local deaccenting.

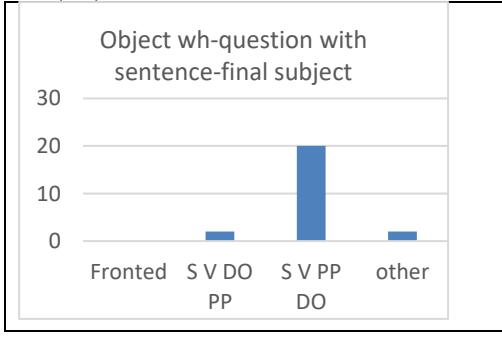
c) the subject, followed by the verb, the prepositional phrase and the focused direct object.

(31) Femeia ține în mână **patru creioane**.
woman.def hold.3.sg in hand four pencils
(32) Femeia ține în brațe **un cățel**.
woman.def hold.3.sg in arms a dog
(33) Femeia poartă pe cap **o pălărie**
woman.def wear.3.sg on head a hat

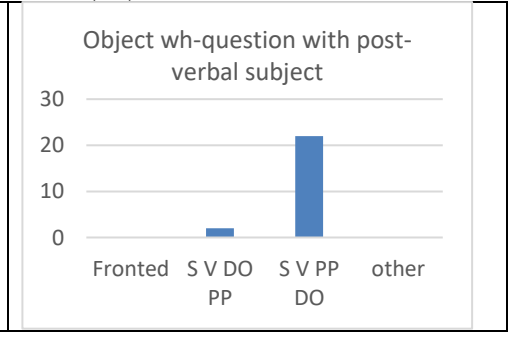
The final position of the focused constituent also exemplifies an in-situ focus strategy, with the additional operation of scrambling the PP past the object to a vP-periphery position. This word order would ensure maximum prosodic prominence to the focused object, in accordance with the stress assignment rules operational in Romanian. Syntactically, it would come at the cost of a movement operation involving a change in the position occupied by the PP.

The answers provided by the participants are shown below.

(34)



(35)



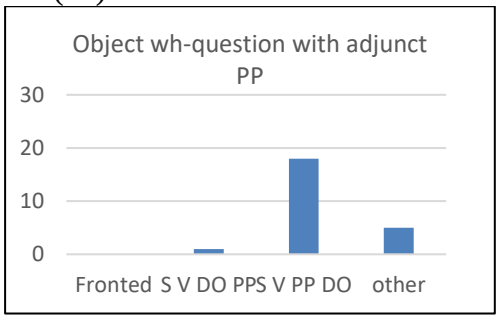
Similarly to the results obtained for subject wh-questions, the answers indicate a marked preference for the sentence-final position of the focused object in the two questions involving the verb *a ține*, the DO PP order being used in 83% of the answers to the subject-final question and 96% of the answers to the post-verbal subject question. The position of the subject in the question did not influence its position in the answer, i.e. none of the answers provided containing post-verbal subjects in correlation with a fronted focused object.

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

Local syntactic movement (the scrambling operation) is preferred to deaccenting, which is used in 0.8% and 0.4% of the answers, respectively. Other strategies involved omitting the PP, ensuring final position and maximum prosodic prominence to the DO.

Expectedly, the results obtained for the third test question involving a DO and an adjunct PP were similar.

(36)



The final position of the DO with the scrambling of the adjunct PP to a position in the vP periphery was preferred in 75% of the answers. The strategies labelled as *other* all ensured a sentence-final position to the object, so over all the DO was the final constituent of the sentence in 96% of the cases. Compared to the examples involving argument PPs, a larger number of answers involved the omission of the adjunct PP (17%), while one answer included the topicalization of the PP, i.e. movement to the left-periphery of the sentence. Thus, there appears to be a difference between the treatment of unfocused adjuncts and unfocused internal arguments in answers, with the former being elided more frequently even when respondents were instructed to give full answers. None of the answers involved the fronting of the focused constituent.

The SVO order was present in all the answers to the question containing a single object, the questioned constituent.

- Adjunct wh-questions

In many languages, adjuncts are the most mobile constituents, occupying various positions in the structure of the sentence, and Romanian is no exception. While this is generally true for adverbs, adjuncts expressed by prepositional phrases tend to occupy a sentence-final position, following any internal objects. The target answers to all the test items involving adjunct-questions were PPs. All the questions had an expressed subject and they also contained an internal argument, a direct object or a prepositional object, in addition to the questioned adjunct.

(37) Din ce bea femeia apă?
from what drink.3.sg woman.def water

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

'From what is the woman drinking water?'

(38) Cu ce și-a legat femeia părul?
with what refl-has tied woman.def hair.def
'What did the woman use to tie her hair?'

(39) Unde vorbește femeia la telefon?
where talk.3.sg woman.def at telephone
'Where is the woman talking on the phone?'

The aim of the adjunct wh-questions was to determine whether there is any difference between the behaviour of focused objects and that of focused adjuncts. Seeing as these constituents tend to occupy a final position in the sentence, which is also the default position for the main pitch assignment, the two expected orders were fronted PP adjunct and in-situ sentence-final PP adjunct, indicated below.

a) the focused adjunct, followed by the verb, the subject and the direct/prepositional object or the focused adjunct, followed by the verb, the direct/prepositional object and the subject

(40) **Dintr-un pahar** bea (femeia) apă (femeia).
from a glass drink.3.sg (woman.def) water (woman.def)
'The woman is drinking water from a glass.'

(41) **Cu un batic** și-a legat (femeia) părul (femeia).
with a scarf refl-has tied (woman.def) hair.def (woman.def)
'The woman tied her hair with a scarf.'

(42) **În pat** vorbește (femeia) la telefon (femeia).
in bed talk.3.sg (woman.def) at telephone (woman.def)
'The woman is talking on the phone in bed.'

The position of the subject, whether it immediately following the verb, the configuration assumed to be the position of the subject in some studies, or sentence-final, with the object scrambling past the subject, creating a verb-object adjacency, does not impact on the position of the focused adjunct in the left periphery of the sentence.

b) the subject, followed by the verb, the direct/prepositional object and the focused adjunct

(43) Femeia bea apă **dintr-un pahar**.
woman.def drink.3.sg water from a glass
'The woman is drinking water from a glass.'

(44) Femeia și-a legat părut **cu un batic**.
woman.def refl-has tied hair.def with a scarf

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

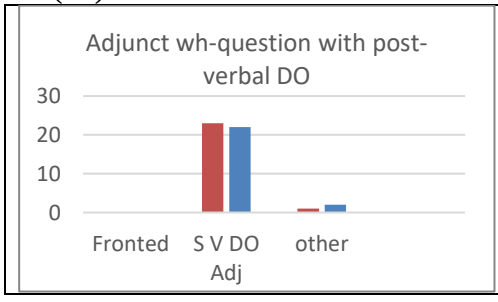
‘The woman tied her hair with a scarf.’

(45) Femeia vorbește la telefon **în pat**.
woman.def talk.3.sg at telephone in bed
‘The woman is talking on the phone in bed.’

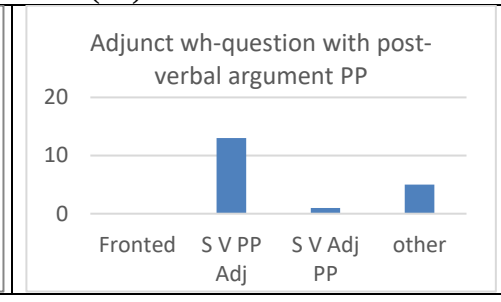
As previously mentioned, the final position of the adjunct would ensure the prosodic prominence, the adjunct being the most deeply embedded constituent in this configuration.

The results confirmed the speakers’ preference for the sentence-final position in case of answers to adjunct wh-questions as well.

(46)



(47)



The results for the two questions containing a DO are very similar, with the focused adjunct PP occupying a sentence-final position in 96% of the answers to question (40), indicated in red, and 92% of the answers to question (41), indicated in blue. The other strategies for question (41) also involved an in situ, final position for the adjunct, the DO occupying the initial position, either as a result of topicalization or of passivization, and the subject *femeia* being omitted in both cases. Therefore, the in situ strategy was present in 100% of the answers. For the question (40) the answer included under *other* contained a construction with a different verb. Similarly, for the answer to the question containing a PP internal argument, the preferred order was the adjunct-final one, the other constructions involving a bi-clausal structure, the fronting of the argument PP as a result of topicalization and the deletion of the argument PP, all containing the focused adjunct in final position. Compared to the first two questions addressed to adjuncts involving a DO, there appears to be a greater tendency to either remove or front the unfocused post-verbal constituent when both the focused and the unfocused constituent are expressed by prepositional phrases. Further research is necessary, though, to determine whether this is the case for all types of phrases and what is the preferred strategy in case the two post-verbal constituents have the same status, i.e. they are both arguments or adjuncts.

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

Conclusions

The results of the experiment fully support Zubizarreta's analysis for stress assignment and the position of prosodically prominent, hence focused constituents in Romanian. Scrambring of unfocused constituents to the lower periphery or movement to the left periphery (topicalization) have been identified as strategies to ensure prosodic prominence to the focused constituent. We didn't find any evidence for the syntactic moment of the focused constituent to a position in either the lower or the left periphery of the clause, motivated by feature checking. We do not rule out the possibility that such a movement may take place at LF in order to ensure the appropriate interpretation that focus creates, i.e. the partition of the sentence into the focused constituent and a proposition generated by replacing the focus with a variable, the structure proposed as a uniform analysis of focus by semantic theories such as Rooth (1992), Krifka (2001) and subsequent work by both authors, Beaver and Clark (2008), among others. If and when constituents carrying narrow focus move to the left periphery, such movement may be motivated by other semantic effects, possibly mirativity, the property of expressing the speaker's surprise, first identified as a grammatical category by DeLancey (1997), which Cruschina (2019) describes as a (conventional) implicature of surprise and unexpectedness triggering movement to the left periphery.

Bibliography

Aboh, Enoch Oladé. "Leftward focus versus rightward focus: the Kwa-Bantu conspiracy". *SOAS Working Papers in Linguistics* Vol.15 (2007): 81-104.

Alboiu, Gabriela. *The Features of Movement in Romanian*. Bucharest: Editura Universitatii Bucuresti, 2002.

Alboiu, Gabriela. "Optionality at the interface: Triggering focus in Romanian". *Triggers*. Henk van Riemsdijk and Anne Breitbath. Eds.. The Hague: Mouton de Gruyter, 2004. 49-75.

Beaver, David I., Brady Clark. *Sense and sensitivity: How focus determines meaning (Explorations in Semantics)*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.

Chomsky, Noam. *The Minimalist Program*. (Current studies in linguistics 28.) Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995.

Chomsky, Noam. "Derivation by Phase". *Ken Hale: A Life in Language*. Ed. Michael Kenstowicz. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001. 1–52.

Cinque, Guglielmo, Luigi Rizzi. "The cartography of syntactic structures". *The Oxford handbook of linguistic analysis*. Eds. Bernd Heine and

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

Heiko Narrog. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 51–66.

Cornilescu, Alexandra. "The double subject construction in Romanian. Notes on the syntax of the subject". *Revue roumaine de linguistique* 42, 3-4 (1997): 101–147.

Cruschina, Silvio (2019) "Focus Fronting in Spanish: Mirative implicature and information structure". *Probus* 31(1) (2019): 119–146

DeLancey, Scott. "Mirativity: The grammatical marking of unexpected information". *Linguistic Typology* 1 (1997): 33–52

Dobrovie-Sorin, Carmen. *The Syntax of Romanian*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994.

Erteschik-Shir, Nomi. "Wh-Questions and Focus." *Linguistics and Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (1986): 117–49.

Giurgea, Ion, Carmen Mîrzea Vasile. "Syntactic Effects of Verum Focus in Romanian". *Revue roumaine de linguistique* LXII (3) (2017): 323-338.

Giurgea, Ion. Preverbal subjects and topic marking in Romanian. *Revue roumaine de linguistique* LXII (3) (2017): 279-322

Grice, H. Paul. "Logic and Conversation". *Speech Acts [Syntax and Semantics 3]*. Eds. Peter Cole and Jerry Morgan. New York: Academic Press, 1975. 41-58.

Kiss, E. Katalin. "Identification focus and information focus". *Language* 74 (1998): 245– 273.

Krifka, Manfred. "For a structured meaning account of questions and answers". *Audiatur vox sapientia: A festschrift for Arnim von Stechow*. Eds. Caroline Féry and Wolfgang Sternefeld. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001. 287–319.

Ladd, D. Robert. *The Structure of Intonational Meaning*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980.

Motapanyane, Virginia., "On preverbal positions in Romanian", *Revue Canadienne de Linguistique / Canadian Journal of Linguistics* 39 (1994): 15–36

Rizzi, Luigi. "The Fine Structure of the Left Periphery". *Elements of Grammar: Handbook of Generative Syntax*. Ed. Liliane Haegeman. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997. 281–337.

Rooth, Mats. A theory of focus interpretation. *Natural Language Semantics* 1 (1992): 75–116.

Szendrői, Kriszta. "Focus and the interaction between syntax and pragmatic"". *Lingua* 114(3) (2004): 229–254

Wedgwood, Daniel. *Shifting the focus*: *From static structures to the dynamics of interpretation*. Oxford: Elsevier, 2005.

Winkler, Susanne, Edward Gobbel. "Focus, P-movement and the NSR: A view from Germanic and Romance". *Linguistics* 40(6) (2002): 1185-1242.

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)

Zubizarreta, Maria Luisa. *Prosody, Focus and Word Order*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998.

BDD-A33041 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 22:01:44 UTC)