

Focalisation and Degrees of Contrast in Italo-Romance

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It is widely acknowledged that focalisation plays a crucial role in the variation of word order across languages. Within the cartographic approach, two positions have been identified as syntactic correlates of focalised constituents: a higher focus position (HFP) within the left periphery of the sentence (Rizzi 1997) and a lower focus position (LFP) at the left periphery of the VP (Belletti 2004). The traditional view is that in Italian, as well as in other Romance languages, the HFP is dedicated to contrastive foci only, while a contrastive interpretation is not necessary for the focalised constituents appearing in the LFP. The present paper examines the pragmatic interpretation associated with the HFP in different Italo-Romance varieties, providing evidence for significant variation with respect to the activation and specialisation of this position. First, we show that in Sicilian (cf. Cruschina 2006) and in Sardinian (cf. Jones 1993, Mensching and Remberger 2007) non-contrastive focalisation to the HFP is a peculiar feature of both languages, which exhibit an extensive use of this position irrespective of contrastiveness. Conversely, Turinese (cf. Paoli 2003) exclusively exploits the LFP, representing the mirror image of Sicilian and Sardinian in that HFP is completely inactive.

Second, we challenge the traditional view that in Italian an explicit mention of the contrasted antecedent is necessary to allow fronting of the focalised constituent. We show that implicit contrast is a sufficient condition for fronting to apply in instances of contrast against expectations and/or shared knowledge, as well as contrast within the quantitative dimension evoked by quantifiers and quantificational phrases, and contrast within the scalar meaning of focalised modifiers, typically adjectives and adverbs with a predicative function. This variation is accounted for by considering contrastiveness as a gradient notion and assuming that languages differ according to the degree of contrast they set as a necessary pragmatic condition for the focalised constituent to move to the HFP. A hierarchical interpretation of contrastiveness, characterised by the gradual narrowing of the antecedent (explicitly present > implicitly presupposed > evoked within a quantificational dimension > evoked within a scalar reading > absent/informational foci), straightforwardly explains other different syntactic properties observed in the literature, in particular adjacency to the verb: while noncontrastive focalised constituents hosted in the HFP need to be adjacent to the verb (cf. Jones 1993), focalised constituents featuring a higher degree of contrast need not (cf. Rizzi 1997, Cruschina 2006).

References

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