Contrastive Focus: Only one? Some tips from Cognitive Psychology.*

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The introduction of the label “Focus” in the inventory of projecting categories in transformational theories of syntax (see Horvath (1986), Kiss (1987) and Brody (1990)) has opened the door for information structure to be expressed at the syntactic level. Recent developments within the Cartographic approach (Rizzi (1997) and Benincà and Poletto (2004) among others), have identified the upper portion of the left periphery of the clause as an interface area, encoding discourse properties relating both to sentence type and information structure. The new-given dimension finds expression in two discrete projections, Focus and Topic respectively. Within the former, a further distinction has been recognized: C(ontрастive) F(ocus) and N(ew) I(nformation) F(ocus), roughly performing the functions of introducing a contrast and presenting new information. The two are interpreted as distinct projections, either occupying adjacent positions in the left periphery, as in Benincà and Poletto (2004), or placed in separate domains, as in Rizzi (1997) and Belletti (2004). This syntactic representation makes two assumptions: firstly, that NIF and CF are discrete and distinct, and do not combine with each other; secondly, that there is no further differentiation within the CF.

I challenge the idea that there is only one type of CF, and propose that, in fact, there are degrees of contrastiveness. The idea per se is not novel (see for example, Molnár (2002) and Hajičová and Sgall (2004) among recent contributions); the way I implement it, is.

Although the label “Contrastive Focus” has been widely used in the literature, this has been often done in contradictory ways, creating a halo of fuzziness around the term. There are few properties that seem to be largely agreed upon as characteristic of its nature. Semantically, CF phrases are nonpresupposed and have scope over a narrow¹ set of possible

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¹We will not devote any space here to defining and quantifying ‘narrow’. See Bolinger (1961:87) who views CF and NIF as the end points of a continuum: when for the value
alternatives. At the prosodic level they are generally foregrounded by means of stress. Pragmatically they are perceived by the speaker to be the most important part of their utterance, providing the hearer with essential elements of knowledge in the form of a correction of a previous statement, usually in the immediately preceding conversational turn. Syntactically, CF phrases display properties of moved elements, hence are subject to weak cross over constraints and license parasitic gaps. It is interesting to notice how from a syntactic point of view contrastiveness is considered and understood in isolation, in other words focusing only on the properties of the element expressing the contrast.

At its core, contrastiveness is undeniably a relational property, being the result of the interaction between two alternatives: no individual element may be contrastive on its own. It would therefore make sense that the feature specification of a CF phrase should include not only its own properties but also those of the element with which the contrast is established.

The nature of these properties is what is of interest here. Let us consider the following exchange (in Italian) which provides a well known examples of CF:

1. a. A: Giorgio ha rotto il vaso di cristallo.
   Giorgio has broken the vase of crystal
   ‘Giorgio has broken the crystal vase’

   b. B: IL FERMACARTE DI VENEZIA ha rotto (non il vaso di cristallo).
   the paper-weight of Venice has broken (not the vase of crystal)
   ‘It’s the paperweight from Venice that he has broken (not the crystal vase)’

In this exchange, A communicates to B that Giorgio has broken something, and this something is a crystal vase. B corrects A: the something that Giorgio has broken is not the vase but a paperweight. Here, the element with which il fermacarte di Venezia ‘the paperweight from Venice’ contrasts, il vaso di cristallo ‘the crystal vase’, has been explicitly assigned to a variable x there is an unlimited number of alternatives, the reading is not contrastive; the narrower the number of alternatives, the more likely the contrastive interpretation. Also interesting are Halliday (1967) and Chafe (1976) who identify the dividing line between a closed and an open set of entities.
mentioned. CF has the typical structure of ‘It’s Y, not X’ with which we are most familiar from the discussions in the literature.

Consider now the following conversation in one of the so-called Italian dialects, from the North eastern city of Triest:

2. a. A: Dove *te* ga conprà sti ninzoi?
   
   where SCL have bought these sheets
   
   ‘Where did you buy this bed linen?’

   b. B: Da Monti *li* go ciolti.
   
   from Monti CL have bought
   
   ‘I got them at Monti’s’

(2b) is of interest because it features the fronting to a sentence initial position of the constituent that expresses the narrow scope of the sentence, Da Monti ‘At Monti’s’. In Triestino, similarly to Italian, the canonical word order of an answer to a question follows the known-new articulation, reserving to the phrase expressing new information a postverbal position, as in (3), answer to (2a):

3. B: Li go ciolti da Monti.
   
   CL have bought from Monti
   
   ‘I got them at Monti’s’

(2b) violates such a constraint, and yet, it is grammatical. Although both (2b) and (3) provide the information sought by a genuine question, they have different communicative functions, as the interpretation of (2b) includes an element of contrast, absent in (3). Monti’s is a rather upmarket shop in Triest, where quality goods do not come cheap; speaker B is well known for being rather thrifty, usually shopping at outdoor markets or chain stores, but not, crucially, in exclusive shops such as Monti’s. To the question (2a), B replies knowing that the
information they are about to give will be unexpected by A: and they signal it by fronting the relevant constituent to a prominent sentence initial position.

The alternatives to Monti’s (i.e. outdoor markets, chain store, etc) are implicit, or, in other words, inferrable\(^2\): they belong to the world knowledge that is common to hearer and speaker but which, crucially, has not been mentioned in that particular stretch of discourse. CF traditionally assigns a new value to the variable whose (incorrect) value has already been assigned in the preceding turn. The critical difference is not, though, a matter of old versus new. The way we treat a piece of discourse is not just in terms of what is already known and what is new: we rely also on the level of consciousness at which referents\(^3\) are held. At any given time, only a limited amount of information can be in the focus of consciousness, or, in Chafe’s (1987:22ff) terms, active: the rest distributes itself, shifting constantly from level to level, between the semiactive and inactive states. Here is a table summarizing these distinctions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of activeness</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Referent is</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Active</td>
<td>Focus of consciousness.</td>
<td>Explicitly mentioned in the conversation;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Semi-active</td>
<td>In peripheral consciousness, speaker has background awareness of it.</td>
<td>a. Demoted from an earlier active state; b. Inferrable;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(accessible)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Inactive</td>
<td>Neither focally nor peripherally active.</td>
<td>a. Demoted from an earlier accessible state, in long-term memory; b. Never present, hence completely new.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 - Levels of Activeness

\(^2\)They become available as information related to B, along the lines of a file-card system (in the sense of Heim (1982) and Vallduví (1992)). In our mental store every referent that is part of our knowledge of the world is represented as a card containing all the relevant information about it.

\(^3\)The term ‘referent’ here is used to indicate the element that corresponds to the specific linguistic expression under examination, be it an individual or a state of affairs.
The crucial difference between (1b) and (2b) is due to the state of activeness of the referent with which the contrast is established, *un vaso di cristallo* ‘a crystal vase’ in the previous turn for (1b) and the information that is known about B in (2b). While in (1) the alternative to *Il fermacarte da Venezia* ‘a paperweight from Venice’, *un vaso di cristallo* ‘a crystal vase’ is active, having just been mentioned, the alternative to *Da Monti* ‘At Monti’s’, an open market or a chain shop, are semiactive being inferrable from what is known of B.

The contrast that is established with a referent that is active, as in the case of CF, may therefore be conceived of as E(xplicitly) C(ontrastive) F(ocus); the case of (2b), in which the contrast obtains with a referent that is not active could be referred to as I(mplicitly) C(ontrastive) F(ocus). Notice, incidentally, that the Triestino data also calls into question the impossibility of new information and a contrast to be expressed simultaneously in the same phrase, the other assumption on which the division made between NIF and CF by the Cartographic approach rests.

So far I have remained deliberately vague about whose consciousness is relevant when referring to the status of a referent: is it the speaker’s or the hearer’s? A piece of discourse is a river in constant fluctuation and in order to communicate successfully each speaker constantly negotiates the way they treat the information they provide based on their monitoring of their interlocutor’s mind: more specifically, a speaker organizes what they want to say on the basis of their assessment of the listener’s consciousness (see Chafe (1994:73ff)).

Consequences of cognitive processes have enabled us to draw the distinction between two types of CF, the implicit and the explicit type. We need to establish whether such a distinction is encoded at all at the syntactic level, in other words whether there is a syntactic difference between ICF and ECF.

Consider the following case of ECF, offering a minimal pair to (2b):

   
   these are the sheets that SCL have bought at-the market
   
   ‘This is the bed linen that you bought at the market’
b. B: DA MONTI li go ciolti (no al mercato).

at Monti’s CL have bought (not at the market)

‘It’s at Monti’s that I got them (not at the market)’

Let us now compare it to (2), repeated here for convenience:

2. a. A: Dove te ga ciolto sti ninzioi?

where SCL have bought these sheets

‘Where did you buy this bed linen?’

b. B: Da Monti li go ciolti.

from Monti CL have bought

‘I got them at Monti’s’

Both feature the fronting of the relevant constituent to a sentence initial position. Differently, though, while ECF can also be expressed postverbally, the ICF interpretation relies on the phrase occurring sentence initially: even prosody does not seem to be able to rescue the ICF interpretation when the phrase is in postverbal position.

5. a. A: Questi xe i ninzioi che te ga ciolto al mercato.

these are the sheets that SCL have bought at-the market

‘This is the bed linen that you bought at the market’

b. B: Li go ciolti DA MONTI (no al mercato).

CL have bought at Monti’s (not at the market)

‘It’s at Monti’s that I got them (not at the market)’
6. a. A: Dove te ga ciolto sti ninzoi?  
   where SCL have bought these sheets  
   ‘Where did you buy this bed linen?’

   b. B: #Li go ciolti da Monti (with an ICF interpretation).
   CL have bought from Monti  
   ‘I got them at Monti’s’

Although the differences, if any, between pre and postverbal ECF remain to be investigated in detail, the evidence in (5) and (6) point to a syntactic difference between ECF and ICF in terms of licensing of their interpretation.

It is also of interest that while in a simple answer to a question, as in (7b), the repetition of the verb is unnatural, in the ICF cases (7c), the repetition of the VP is necessary.

7. a. A: Dove te ga ciolto sti ninzoi?  
   where SCL have bought these sheets  
   ‘Where did you buy this bed linen?’

   b. B: (Li go ciolti) Da Monti.
   CL have bought from Monti  
   ‘(I got them) At Monti’s’

   c. B: Da Monti *(li go ciolti).
   from Monti CL have bought  
   ‘I got them at Monti’s’
Finally, in embedded contexts the resulting two left peripheries are not equally available to the two types of CF in cases of clauses embedded under a factive or an epistemic verb. More specifically, with a factive verb such as ricordarse ‘to remember’ as a main verb selecting an embedded clause ECF phrases can equally target the main or the embedded left periphery, while only the left periphery of the main clause is readily available to ICF elements (see (8)). Such an symmetry disappears when the selecting verb is epistemic (e.g. creder ‘to believe’) as in (9). Table 2 summarizes the complete distribution:

8. \[Da Monti \text{ me ricordo che } [(*da Monti) i \text{ li } ga \text{ ciolti}].\]
   from Monti CL remember that SCL CL have bought
   ‘I remember that they got them at Monti’s’

9. \[Da Monti \text{ credo che } [(?da Monti) i \text{ li } ga \text{ ciolti}].\]
   from Monti believe that SCL CL have bought
   ‘I think they got them at Monti’s’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Left periphery</th>
<th>Factive verb</th>
<th>Epistemic verb</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ECF</td>
<td>ICF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedded</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>❌</td>
</tr>
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Table 2 – Availability of positions in main and embedded left peripheries

The idea that the structure embedded under epistemic and factive verbs is different (as suggested in Poletto (2000:121ff) and Benincà and Poletto (2004:61)), offering more projections under the former than the latter, could explain the asymmetry⁴: the fact that there

⁴Evidence from restructuring seems to point in the opposite direction: Wurmbrand (2004) and Dobnik (2003), among others, reach the conclusion that factive verbs take full CPs and therefore never allow restructuring, whereas all other verbs select CPs that are deficient to various degrees. If these conclusions rather than the ones adopted in the text were on the right
does not seem to be a position available for an ICF element in reduced CPs may suggest that they can only be hosted by a more complete CP, in which a bigger array of positions is available.

To conclude, the distinction between different types of CF that I have motivated on the basis of cognitive processes seems to find expression also at the syntactic level, in terms of availability of positions and presence/omission of syntactic material. In view of these observations, it appears that the category CF currently proposed by transformational approaches to grammar is conceived in a rather reductive way. Interface phenomena such as contrastiveness need to be treated as such, drawing on multiple dimensions: important distinctions may go unnoticed if only syntactic properties were considered. What needs to be established is in what form these properties are to be included and represented at the syntactic level.

References


track, the explanation for the asymmetry that I provide would need to be rethought. Nevertheless, the asymmetry itself remains, pointing to distinction between the two types of CF that is of a syntactic nature.


