On the prosodic marking of contrast in Romance sentence topic: evidence from Neapolitan Italian

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In this paper new prosodic data are presented in Neapolitan Italian that contribute to the understanding of the notion of sentence topic and of its linguistic correlates in Romance languages.

Two theoretical notions of sentence topic are given in the litterature: topic as an *entity* and topic as an element evoking a *set of alternatives* (McNally 1998). According to the first notion (Reinhart 1982, Vallduví 1992) a topic is the entity about which the sentence provides information (the *comment*). The *topic-comment* partition is neatly represented by a 'Clitic left dislocation' (ClLD), which is a typical construction of Romance langages. In a ClLD, the entity that functions as topic is the argument that occupies the left-peripheral position and is resumed by a clitic pronoun within the clause (cf. *il capo* in the Italian exemple in (1)).

(1)   Il capo, non lo disturberei.
       the boss not himcl I-would-bother
       (As for) the boss, I would not bother him'

According to the other notion (Büring 1997, 2003), a topic is rather a *question*, namely an element that introduces a set of sets of alternative propositions (cf. *Fred* in (2)). A topic so-defined is generally illustrated in the litterature by means of English and German data, and is represented by a particular accent, the so-called 'B' accent for English (see Jackendoff 1972), which is in fact a rise-fall-rise tune analyzed as a L+H* accent plus a L-H% edge tone (cf. also Calhoun 2005, and Braun 2004 for German).

(2)   a. A: What did Fred eat? B: **Fred** ate the BEANS.
       b. {{*Fred ate the beans, Fred ate the peas, Fred ate the carrots, etc.};*
       {*Mary ate the beans, Mary ate the peas, Mary ate the carrots, etc.};*
       {*John ate the beans, John ate the peas, etc.}}*

Many scholars (e.g. Vallduví and Engdahl 1996, McNally 1998, Lee 1999, Mólnar 2002, a.o.) assume that the 'B' accent in Germanic and the ClLD in Romance express the *same* discourse function. Some attempts have been made in the litterature (see Arregi 2003, Brunetti 2009) to provide support to this assumption by defining the topic function of a ClLD in terms of contrast, namely to show that even a ClLD introduces a set of alternatives, analogously to the 'B' accent. Empirical support for this idea comes from the Italian example in (3) (but the same holds for Spanish and Catalan). Following Büring (1997), when an answer is not congruent to its question (e.g. it is *partial*, as in (3)), the presence of an alternative in the semantic computation makes the answer become congruent. In those cases, English requires a 'B' accent, while in Italian, Spanish or Catalan, a ClLD is required (rather than a Clitic *Right* Dislocation or ClRD, as in (3C)).

(3)   A: Chi porta le bibite per la festa? Italian
        'Who is bringing the drinks for the party?'
        B: La birra, la porta MARIA. _ CLLD
        the beer itcl brings Maria
        'MARIA is bringing the beerB-acc'
        C: # La porta MARIA, la birra. _ # ClRD
        itcl brings Maria the beer
        'MARIA is bringing the beer'

Nevertheless, these data do not take into account the *prosody* of a ClLD in both the answers that require an alternative set (such as partial answers) and those that do not (exhaustive answers). The distinction generally made in the literature between languages that prefer a syntactic encoding of informational categories (Romance) and languages that prefer a prosodic encoding (Germanic) has diverted the attention from the *prosodic* properties of topic expressions in Romance. The prosody of a ClLD has indeed received some analyses (cf. Feldhausen 2008 for Catalan and Frascarelli & Hinterhoelzl 2007 for Italian, where the ClLD is assumed to be set apart in its own phrase), but no clear comparison has ever been made, to the best of our knowledge, between a ClLD in answers that require alternatives (such as partial ones) and answers that do not.

In this paper we present data in Neapolitan Italian (NI) that show a clear phonological difference in intonation between a ClLD-ed object topic in an exhaustive answer (Fig. 1) and in a partial answer (Fig. 2). The data have been elicited through question/answer dialogues between the experimenter and 10 subjects. A transcription of a subset of these data shows that the topic expression in a partial answer is set aside in its own prosodic phrase, made of a rising accent (H*) followed by a !H- boundary tone, while exhaustive answers do not show such phrasing pattern. The data present an identical phonological pattern than the one observed with preverbal *subject* topics by D'Imperio, Cangemi & Brunetti (2008), D'Imperio & Cangemi (2009, to appear), where pre-boundary lengthening measures at the end of the target word showed a stronger break in the partial answer cases.

The finding of a 'partial' tune in Romance provides a solution to the problem of defining topic in a uniform way, by supporting a *bi*-dimensional model of Information Structure such as the one proposed by Vallduví & Vilkuna (1998), Steedman (2000). Within this model, both the notion of topic as an entity and that of topic as evoking a set of alternatives become relevant. In fact, these notions correspond to two distinct dimensions of Information Structure: the *Theme-Rheme* dimension (corresponding to the Topic-Comment distinction), and the orthogonal dimension of *Contrast*, which can combine with both Theme and Rheme. Contrast on a Theme introduces a set of alternatives in the semantic computation, such that if a property holds for the Theme, a different property holds for the other alternatives of the set. For instance, (3B) implies that the other drinks that are not beer will not be brought by Maria.

Within this model, the 'partial' tune in Neapolitan Italian marks Contrast, as well as the corresponding tune does in English and German. Note that if we assume contrast to be a discourse notion (Roberts 1996, Büring 2003), then prosody is confirmed as an aspect of grammar dedicated to express discourse phenomena. A ClLD, on the contrary, represents the Theme of the sentence (namely, the entity about which the sentence provides some information), and has then no role in evoking alternatives. As for a ClRD, it represents discourse given material that is part of the Rheme.

From these results, we suggest a different picture concerning the marking of informational categories in Romance and Germamic languages: the difference between the two language groups is not in the use of syntax vs prosody (both groups mark contrast by prosodic means), but in the explicit marking of the Theme, which is accomplished through syntax in Romance (the ClLDed expression), while only non-syntactic means seem to be available to Germanic for the same purposes.

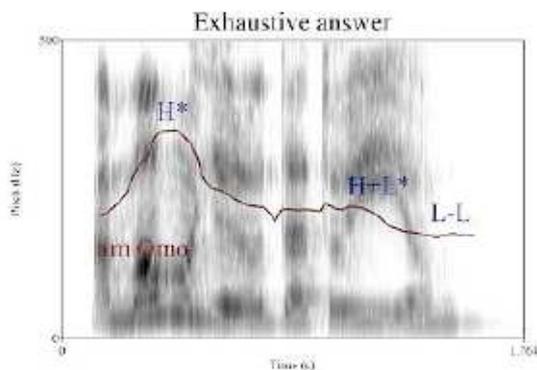F0 curve and tonal labelling for the utterance: *A Momo gliel'ho dato io 'I gave it to Momo'*
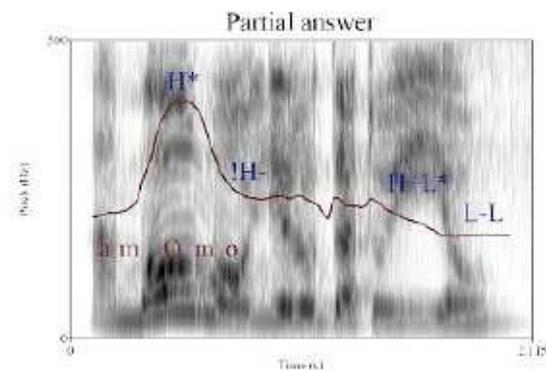

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

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