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Exploring focus-contrast mapping mismatch in Romance languages: a comparative study of cleft structures and contrastive prosodic patterns in Italian and French

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Our research investigates the mapping of various information-structural notions — givenness, focus, and contrast — onto syntax and prosody. The study concerns two Romance languages, Italian and French, specifically examining a subset of strategies that are shared and commonly employed to mark discourse prominence in both languages: prosodic emphasis conveyed through vowel lengthening or tonal movements (Delais-Roussarie et al., 2015; Gili Fivela et al., 2015) and it-clefts (Roggia, 2008); see example 1.

(1) C'est Marie qui achète le journal.

È Maria che compra il giornale.

It is Mary who is buying the newspaper.

We aim to explore how these marking strategies interact in contexts displaying varying degrees of contrastiveness and/or newness: background, broad focus, narrow-identification-focus, narrow-correction focus (Repp, 2016; Cruschina, 2021).

The analysis was conducted on task-elicited speech involving 35 native speakers of both languages (18 French, 17 Italian). The data collection protocol included a picture-constrained question-and-answer task, targeting subject constituents (Marie/Maria) in four distinct information-structural conditions. Specifically, the collected dataset comprises 12 utterances per speaker, with three for each of the four target conditions: background, broad focus, narrow-identification focus, narrow-correction focus. In total, the dataset includes 420 utterances. Syntactic phenomena were coded manually, while prosodic ones were measured and labeled using an automatic transcription tool (Polytonia, Mertens 2014). For the quantitative analysis, data were fitted into generalized linear mixed models with informational condition as independent variable and speaker as random factor.

Results reveal a shared pattern in French and Italian groups, where background subjects undergo prosodic de-accentuation, i.e. reduction in duration and pitch span. This result challenges a conventional belief that Romance languages lack prosodic reduction of given elements (Gussenhoven, 2004, Ladd, 1996). However, notable distinctions emerge between the two languages. Among Italian speakers, prosody takes on a default role in marking both new and focal elements, using intonation and durational cues together. As for syntactic marking, Italian speakers resort to it-cleft structures selectively, primarily in higher contrast situations (corrective focus). Conversely, French speakers default to it-cleft structures as the primary narrow-focus strategy, employing prosody, especially on clefts, for more contrastive contexts. Also, they exhibit a preference for tonal over durational cues in implementing prosodic prominence.

Our study underscores a crosslinguistic alignment in marking new and given elements, while highlighting a mismatch between prosody and syntax in the combinations of focus and contrast.

Despite both languages employing increased means for marking contrast, in fact, these devices appear to serve distinct functions. Additionally, the analysis of separate phonetic measures within prosodic marking reveals a disparity between durational and tonal cues, with Italian speakers favoring the former and French speakers favoring the latter. Moreover, our work highlights a crucial observation: apart from language-specific mismatches, results from Italian and French groups point to an additive relationship between syntactic and prosodic strategies in marking different degrees of prominence at the discourse level. This challenges the previous notion of a syntax/prosody trade-off, as proposed in studies on focus in Romance languages (Lambrecht 2001).

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