Information Structure and its Interfaces

Lunella Mereu · Editor
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Contents

Aknowledgements ............................................................. vii
Introduction ........................................................................ 1

Section 1
Interfaces of information structure
Topic accent and prosodic structure ...................................... 15
Claudia Crocco
The prosodic annotation of C-ORAL-ROM and the structure of
information in spoken language ......................................... 51
Antonietta Scarano
Universals of information structure ................................... 75
Lunella Mereu

Section 2
Grammar and information structure in Italian and some of its dialects
Constructions with preposed infinitive: Typological and
pragmatic notes .............................................................. 105
Giuliano Bernini
Negation and “Focus Clash” in Sardinian ............................. 129
Franck Floricic
Do-support in a Sicilian variety, an Italian pseudo-cleft, and the
packaging of information ............................................... 153
Ignazio Mauro Mirto
Clitics and anaphoric relations in informational patterning: A corpus-
driven research on spontaneous spoken Italian (C-ORAL-ROM) .... 169
Emanuela Cresti
The informational structure and the scope of lexical modality
in spoken Italian (C-ORAL-ROM) ..................................... 203
Ida Tucci
Section 3
Diachronic aspects in Italian

On two functions of verb-subject order in Old Italian ....................... 229
Ludwig Fesenmeier

Between thematicity and grammaticalisation: The diachronic rearrangement of information structure and the position of clitic pronouns in Italian ................................................................. 269
Shingo Suzuki

Section 4
Pragmatically oriented languages

Information structure in Slavic languages ................................. 307
Lucyna Gebert

Position, function and interpretation of topics in Somali ............ 325
Mara Frascarelli and Annarita Puglielli

Section 5
Some more aspects of information structure

Acquiring the grammar of topicality in L2 Italian:
A comparative approach ......................................................... 351
Marina Chini

“Appendix” or “postposed Topic”: Where does the difference lie? ..... 387
Edoardo Lombardi Vallauri

Contributors ................................................................. 413

Index of subjects .......................................................... 415
Index of languages ......................................................... 421
Index of persons ......................................................... 423
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Lunella Mereu
Introduction

This volume features a selection of papers presented at the Conference “Giornate su La Struttura dell’Informazione” held at the Università Roma Tre, Rome, 23–24 June 2006. The conference, organized by Giorgio Banti (Dipartimento di Studi e Ricerche su Africa e e Paesi Arabi of the Università di Napoli “L’Orientale”) and by Lunella Mereu (Dipartimento di Linguistica dell’Università Roma Tre), aimed at discussing recent results in the field of Information Structure as emerging from research on Italian and Italian dialects, and from Italian studies on typologically different languages including Italian.

Ever since a pragmatic organization of the sentence has been recognized, this has been one of the main topics of study in Linguistics. The number of studies produced in almost a century of work is huge and rich both in terms of theory and descriptions of information structure systems represented by different languages. This has of course also created some confusion as to the choice of the theories and the terminology used, making it often difficult to draw a common denominator from all the material produced. For this reason we will not discuss the state of the art reached up to now, as it would take a good part of the publication. However, some background about the foundational work done from the 1930s onwards will be useful to characterize the theoretical and methodological choices included in the present volume.

It goes without saying that the systematic study of the pragmatic organization of discourse at the sentence level started with the work by the Prague School and its theory on Functional Sentence Perspective (Mathesius 1929; Firbas 1964) and continued with the studies by Halliday (1967) to whom we owe the term ‘information structure’. Next, Chafe (1976) made a number of semantic distinctions and introduced the term ‘information packaging’ which was also adopted by Vallduvì (1992) in a formal context.

What soon became clear in these studies is that intonation, morphosyntax and discourse interact in determining the identification of the pragmatic notions of information structure. Empirical evidence in this direction has come from the important work by typologists who, in exploring the morpho-syntactic structure of the languages of the world, have identified a series of languages that grammaticalize sentence-related discourse functions such as Topic and Focus. We are referring to Li and Thompson’s distinction
between subject-oriented and topic-oriented languages in their studies on Mandarin Chinese, or Givón’s concept of word order variation as “controlled by discourse-pragmatic considerations pertaining to new vs. old, topical vs. non-topical, discontinuous vs. disruptive information” (Givón 1984: 204).

This has led all linguistic approaches, both formal and non-formal, to overlap a topic – comment/focus structure with the NP – VP syntactic structure. In addition, in the 1980s, this has created much interest in focus structure under the assumption that there are many focus-prominent languages (Abraham and De Meij 1986). Consequently there were a number of descriptions of languages in terms of the single different focus structures they realize (Puglielli 1981; Horvath 1986; Kiss 1987; Lecarme 1991) and theoretical works, primarily but not exclusively formal, on focus (Dik et al. 1981; Rooth 1985; Sasse 1987; Rochemont 1986; Brody 1990; Horvath 1995).

After concentrating on focus in the 1980s, interest shifted to topic structure as well (Reinhart 1982; Lambrechts 1994; Kiss 1995; Dik 1997; Büring 1997, 1999) and, finally, complete descriptions of the topic – focus architecture in different languages (Aissen 1992; Payne 1987; King 1995; Choi 1999; Lombardi Vallauri 1996, 2001; Frascarelli 2000; Mereu 2004; Bernini and Schwartz 2006) appeared.

Important results have come from all these works. Let us summarize the most significant ones.

First, information structure is not an exclusive matter of syntax as generative grammar seems to imply with the architecture of the left periphery in the recent ‘cartographic’ literature (Rizzi 1997, 2004). Rather it is an interface issue including “the interaction between the syntactic and phonological component … and the syntactic and semantic component” although “the question as to the actual division of labor between the components and their interaction is still controversial” (Molnár and Winkler 2006: 1–2). Secondly, topic and focus are not “complementary” or “mutually exclusive” (Molnár and Winkler 2006: 5; Erteschik-Shir 2007: 27f.), as most literature in the 1980s seemed to claim. As a matter of fact, languages such as Korean (Choi 1997, 1999) or Wambon (Dik 1997) use the same morphological means to express topic and contrastive focus. There are also languages which use the same phonological means, that is pitch accent, to mark topics and contrastive focus (Mereu and Trecci 2004; Mereu and Frascarelli 2006; Molnár 2006).

Although the importance of prosody has been associated with the study of information structure since the beginning, only recently have we started
to understand that this means finding ways to correctly measure prosodic data investigating the intonational contours of utterances.

This leads us to focus on two more issues which have recently emerged: I) information structure cannot be studied in isolated sentences, and II) we need samples of spoken language to extract chunks to be analysed phonologically, syntactically and pragmatically. Both of these issues were not clear in most works in the past century, at least up until the 1980s, as these were based more on the analysis of single sentences, or even question-answer pairs, rather than on a systematic study of actual language use. And of course the work in formal syntax, based on the grammaticality judgements of single ‘laboratory’ sentences, did not encourage a change of perspective.4

Chafe (1980) with his ‘pear stories’ was among the first to encourage typologists to have informants tell stories in order to draw data out of the discourse. To analyze data of this kind is important because they are contextualized. Context allows linguistic behaviour which can be considered ‘out’ on the basis of grammaticality judgements, but which is acceptable for the speakers or writers of utterances in discourse as this responds to communicative needs and efficiency. Therefore, it is no longer possible to trust the speaker’s intuitions about single isolated sentences; instead we need to use data from spontaneous or semi-spontaneous production of any kind, either conversations or monologues, formal or informal, written or spoken, even if our aim is to study the information structure of single utterances.

One final point we would like to note is the importance of cross-linguistic studies, as it is only through the comparison of different systems that we can detect the actual range of phenomena connected with information structure and hope for generalizations in terms of universals. This means that we have both to provide deep analyses of information structure coding in single languages and to look carefully at variation registering the different ways to express topic and focus in languages. We also have to abandon “… the accepted principle that topics tend to precede foci” (Erteschik-Shir 2007: 214) in the unmarked information structures of all languages, as different, even opposite, pragmatic strategies might be at work in single languages. This has often been observed in typological studies and it is a point that needs to be reinforced. We have already hinted at this when we mentioned the distinction by Li and Thompson (1976) between subject-oriented and topic-oriented languages; more in general we might speak of syntactically-based and pragmatically-based languages as does Mithun (1987) and of different pragmatic principles operating at the sentence level in different languages.
After this short overview of the current state of information structure, we can now address the papers collected in the present volume. The papers are primarily based on actual speech or written documents. Most of them concentrate on Italian or Italian dialects, mainly, but not exclusively, from a synchronic perspective. However, a cross-linguistic perspective is also taken into account, as there are also papers on a few pragmatically-oriented languages. Some papers are specifically oriented towards aspects of information structure interfaces, while others examine the relationship between syntactic and semantic aspects of Italian grammar and information structure under the hypothesis that the different coding of the individual phenomena investigated is conditioned by information structure.

The papers are grouped into five sections: I. Interfaces of information structure; II. On the interaction between grammar and information structure in Italian and in some of its dialects; III. Diachronic aspects of information structure in Italian; IV. Information structure in pragmatically-oriented languages; V. Some more aspects of information structure.

The first section is primarily concerned with the interface between information structure and prosody but also the search for universals of information structure in terms of its interfaces. The first paper by Crocco deals with topic accent and its realization in Neapolitan Italian. After providing a summary of both theoretical and empirical results on topic accents in Italian and English, the paper concentrates on data from Neapolitan showing how variation in the prosodic topic marking depends on the syntactic position of this discourse function. While Crocco’s paper is based on a hypothesis of the interaction between prosody, syntax and pragmatics, Scarano’s is meant to demonstrate that syntax plays no role in the segmentation of the utterances from a pragmatic point of view. An isomorphism between the information structure of utterances and intonation is the premise on which data on Italian, drawn from the C-ORAL-ROM corpus (Cresti and Moneglia 2005), are analysed. However, rather than describing tonal events, the paper is based on the parsing of speech in prosodic units and aims to show that it is possible to identify utterances from a semantic and pragmatic point of view on the basis of their prosodic structure. Finally Mereu’s paper analyses morpho-syntactic variation in the languages of the world in terms of two opposite pragmatic principles and shows prosodic and morpho-syntactic evidence in favour of a distinction between syntactically-oriented and pragmatically-oriented languages.

The second section concentrates on the interaction between grammar and discourse and specifically shows how grammatical behaviour, syntactic or semantic, is conditioned by the communicative efficiency or the discourse
patterning of utterances. The paper by Bernini is concerned with constructions with an initial infinitive followed by an inflected form of the same verb. After presenting a typological survey of these constructions in many languages, Bernini shows that the split between the lexical-semantic component, the infinitive predicate, and the grammatical component, the inflected finite form of the verb, encodes the topic – comment structure. He argues that the construction is used to focus semantic functions such as assertion and epistemic modality as they are expressed by inflection. The next two papers are about two dialects of Italian, Sardinian and Sicilian. The paper by Franck is about the Logudorese variety of Sardinian, and it deals with the incompatibility between negation and the interrogative marker *a*, and between this marker and fronting in yes/no questions. The reason for this conflict is given by the informational and semantic properties of negation and total questions: the two modalities clash because of the focalization value of both. Cross-linguistic data showing the incompatibility of both modalities in similar constructions in other languages is provided as further evidence that confirms their pragmatic nature. Mirto’s paper examines a construction with the verb *fari* ‘do’ which is used in an area of Sicily. Formally the construction includes a *do*-verb and an uninflected verbal form that is an infinitive, and is compared to a pseudo-cleft with a *do*-verb in standard Italian. In this construction the information contained in the lexical verb is broken down into two distinct components, the existence of an unspecified event and its denomination, the former corresponding to the utterance theme while the latter to the rheme or the unit with higher prominence. The two final papers in this section, like Scarano’s in the preceding one, share data drawn from the Italian C-ORAL-ROM corpus and are based on the same theory, known as Language in Act Theory and Informational Patterning Hypothesis (Cresti 2000). Cresti’s paper deals with anaphoric clitics, their distribution in different information units to be distinguished and the constraints they show. After summarizing the theory and showing the information units the utterance may contain, Cresti describes the clitics and their head of reference in relation to the different information units in which they may occur. In this way she demonstrates how the relation between clitics and their antecedent is constrained by illocutionary and informational factors. Tucci’s paper, on the other hand, is concerned with the relation between modality and the information structure of spoken language. From the corpus analysis it emerges that lexical modality cannot be only a semantic matter, as only specific types of information units can bear modal lexical indexes and specific modal values are associated with different types of information unit.
The third section is devoted to analysing the articulation of information structure in old Italian texts and therefore it is exclusively concerned with written documents from the 13th and 14th centuries Tuscan vernacular as in both Fesenmeier’s and Suzuki’s paper, although in the latter they are compared to modern Italian. Fesenmeier deals with the occurrence of VS order in Old Italian showing how postverbal definite subjects can receive different pragmatic interpretations. While a definite preverbal subject is by default a topic, a postverbal subject can be interpreted as a topic or not in relation to a number of parameters, in particular the state of affairs the utterance expresses and its relation to the context, textual structure or extralinguistic reality. Interestingly, the author shows that even in old texts the preverbal subject is a stressed topic or a cognitively salient topic, while the postverbal one, if a topic, is unstressed or unemphasized. While Fesenmeier is exclusively interested in written language use, Suzuki uses these documents to draw data on spoken language too, being interested in clitics, their position before or after the verb, and their function. He observes clitic behaviour in the diachronic evolution of Italian in relation to the development of the SVO structure from the old XVS. He concludes that I. the process towards the pre-verbal position of the thematic S and the process of the disappearance of the enclisis in declarative clauses occurred over a long period of time, II. both processes influenced each other, and III. gradually the clitic has undergone a grammaticalisation process determining its final grammatical agreement function.

The fourth section contains two papers on typologically different but pragmatically-oriented languages. Gebert’s paper provides an interesting contrast between two groups of Slavic languages in their realization of information structure contents. In particular, she focuses on some morphosyntactic properties associated with marked word orders, ascribing the differences to the fact that Russian and Polish express Case morphologically, while Bulgarian and Macedonian have lost this type of noun inflection. Frascarelli and Puglielli deal with the formal and pragmatic properties of topics in Somali from a generative perspective. They analyse the intonational, syntactic and discourse realization of topics in a cartographic approach drawing from Rizzi’s (2004) recursive structure of the left periphery, a recursive array of CPs each with distinct functional projections such as Topic or Focus Phrase. They show that topics in Somali are associated with different projections of Topic Phrase in distinct positions in the left periphery, each with its own formal and discourse properties.

The last section contains two papers dealing with two issues of a different nature, but both relevant for information structure. The first, by Chini,