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The syntactic distribution of information focus in Romance

The availability of preverbal focus in Romance is still the subject of controversy in the relevant literature. This seems to depend on several factors, including the pragmatic interpretation of the preverbal focus (i.e. corrective, mirative, or information focus; cf. Cruschina 2021), the syntactic category of the focal constituent (e.g. subject vs. object), and the adopted methodology to report data and judgements (e.g. introspection vs. experimental methods). In this talk, which is based on joint work with Laia Mayol (*Universitat Pompeu Fabra*, Barcelona), I will report the experimental results on the distribution of information focus in three Romance languages: Catalan, Spanish and Italian. The main goal of these experiments is to understand if and to what extent information focus can occur preverbally in these three languages. To this end, we applied a new technique (*Questions with Delayed Answers*, QDA) to elicit both production data and acceptability judgements (cf. Cruschina & Mayol 2022 on Catalan). This technique is based on the question-answer test to elicit information focus and has been conceived as a development of the *discourse completion task* used in prosodic studies on the Romance languages (see Vanrell et al. 2018).

Using the QDA technique, we carried out both a production and a rating experiment in the three Romance languages. Our results show that preverbal foci are almost never produced in free speech under elicitation (in the production experiment) but are judged as acceptable by native speakers in rating tasks (in the rating experiment). The acceptability of preverbal foci, however, is subject to variation: they are more acceptable in Spanish, but less so in Catalan and Italian. Moreover, preverbal subjects are more acceptable than preverbal objects in Spanish and in Italian, but not in Catalan, which is instead insensitive to this grammatical distinction. We interpret this difference across the three Romance languages in the light of the hypothesis formulated in Leonetti (2017), according to which Catalan and especially Italian are more restrictive than Spanish with respect to the mapping between syntax and information structure. While all languages resort to the dedicated word order with a more transparent information-structure partition for a focal subject (i.e. VS), Spanish is more permissive in also allowing a narrow focus interpretation of the subject in an SV order.

REFERENCES

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