

On the interaction between syntactic prominence and discourse functions. A corpus study of Italian and English left marked structures in online newspapers

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Left marked structures in Italian and English, such as Left Dislocations (*La torta, l'ho mangiata/The cake, I ate it*) and Frontings (*A Maria, non ho parlato/To Maria, I didn't speak*) have been claimed to be multifunctional. More precisely, studies devoted to real texts have described left marked structures as performing functions ranging, for example, from topic-marking, to presentative (see, among many others, Benincà et al. 1988, Bonomi et al. 2002, De Cesare 2011, for Italian; Prince 1998, Birner&Ward 1998, Lambrecht 2001, for English).

The aim of this contribution is twofold. Firstly, to provide a corpus-based account of Italian and English left marked structures' discourse functions in online newspapers. Secondly, to show that the interaction between syntactic prominence and discourse functions is the same in both languages. Following a contrastive and corpus-based approach, 200 occurrences of Italian and English Left Dislocations and Frontings have been manually extracted from a small corpus of online newspapers (ca. 500'000 words). Their information properties and discourse functions have been analyzed in the frame of a multilevel and multidimensional model for the segmentation of written texts, the so-called Basel Model (Ferrari et al. 2008, Ferrari 2014). The parameters considered relevant for the analysis describe both information properties of the left marked structures – e.g., topicality (à la Lambrecht) and givenness (à la Chafe) – and discourse properties– e.g., their connections with the thematic progression (Ferrari&De Cesare 2009) and presuppositions in the texts (Prince 1986).

The results provide evidence that Left Marked Structures in Italian and English online newspapers perform at least five different functions (topicalising, focalizing, presentative, expressive and cognitive), pertaining not only to the topical but also, at least, to the logico-semantic dimension of the text. Moreover, there is a direct relation between the syntactic prominence of the left marked structures and the functions they perform. In other terms, left marked structures that exhibit a higher degree of syntactic articulation are able to perform a wider variety of functions. Finally, the contrastive perspective allows clarifying which traits of this interaction vary across the languages examined.

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