

Syntactic prominence in discourse: A corpus-based analysis of topic-marking constructions in French

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The objective of this talk is to gain insight into the interplay of syntactic and discourse prominence, by comparing sentences containing a referential expression in the left or right periphery (LP/RP) with sentences that have a referring expression in root position (ROOT).

In spoken French, constructions like left dislocation in (1) and right dislocation in (2) allow speakers to refer to a particular referent by placing the referring expression in the periphery of the sentence, and (optionally) taking it up with a resumptive clitic in the clausal root. Those types of constructions are generally assumed to be topic-marking constructions. However, marking the topic in this sense is by no means obligatory, as topics can also be expressed by the ROOT variant, as in (3). From a variationist perspective, the question arises then which factors motivate the choice between the different word-order options.

- (1) Cette fille_i, tu l'_ias pas vue sortir? (LP)
this girl you her-have NEG seen go.out
'This girl, haven't you seen her come out?'
- (2) Tu l'_ias pas vue sortir, cette fille_i? (RP)
you her-have NEG seen go.out this girl
'Haven't you seen her come out, this girl?'
- (3) Tu l'_ias pas vue sortir? (ROOT)
you her-have NEG seen go.out
'Haven't you seen her come out?'

Existing literature on the subject posits that the LP variant can be used to express contrast, topic shift, or serves turn-taking, whereas RP constructions are better suited for disambiguation or turn-closing (Delais-Roussarie et al. 2004; Ashby 1988). Still, those claims are either based on intuitive judgments by informed speakers, or on incomplete empirical observation that fails to systematically contrast LP/RP constructions with the ROOT variant. In order to fill that gap, a pilot study has been conducted on a part of the French sgs subcorpus (www.sgscorpus.com), which consists of task-guided, spontaneous speech from 102 speakers from the Île de France region. So far, 430 referring expressions have been identified and annotated with respect to the construction type (ROOT, LP, RP), ϕ -features, information status, and the referents they are used to refer to. From this data, we calculated indicators of the density of competing referents (those bearing the same person, number, and gender features), an indicator of the density of mentions in previous discourse (backward-looking perspective), and an indicator of referential persistence (forward-looking perspective).

Preliminary results suggest that topic-marking via placement in the periphery is a rather scarce phenomenon, at least in our data, with only 18 instances (4.2 %) of LP and 11 instances (2.6 %) of RP. Moreover, the RP option is characterized by a higher number of competing referents in the context, as predicted by the disambiguation hypothesis. By contrast, our data do not support the view of LP as a shift marker: So far, referents mentioned in LP constructions actually come out as less continuous *and* less persistent than RP mentions, which in turn are less continuous and less persistent than mentions in the ROOT construction.

Overall, our variationist approach shows that LP and RP constructions do have different discourse properties than the ROOT variant, although those differences are much more gradient than assumed in the syntactic literature. In this vein, we discuss LP and RP constructions as possible variants to (re-)direct the hearer's attention, and we argue that broadening the perspective to forward- and backward-looking discourse functions can help sharpen our understanding of variation at the sentence level.

References

Ashby, William J. 1988. The syntax, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics of left- and right-dislocations in French. *Lingua* 75. 203–229.

Delais-Roussarie, Elisabeth, Jenny Doetjes & Petra Sleeman. 2004. Dislocation. In Francis Corblin & Henriëtte de Swart (eds.), *Handbook of French semantics*, 501–528. Stanford, California: CSLI publications.