

School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies

***Linguistic travels in time and space:
Festschrift for Liz Pearce***



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Volume 23, 2017***

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A note on the typology of topic and focus markers

Luigi Rizzi

1. Introduction

Cartographic research on the left periphery led to the conception of the complementizer system as a sequence of functional heads with distinct syntactic and interface functions (Rizzi 1997 and much subsequent work). The Force-Finiteness system expresses properties of illocutionary force, clause-typing, and other global properties of the clause, such as its finite or non-finite character. This system also delimits the complementizer zone, hosting other heads, organized in subsequence, and expressing scope-discourse properties. Such heads, Top, Foc, Q, Rel, Excl and the like, have a dual function: in syntax, they attract phrases endowed with the appropriate features of topicality, focus, etc. to their Specs; at the interfaces with sound and meaning, such heads guide the assignment of the appropriate prosodic contour (Bocci 2013) and of the interpretation, also expressing conditions for felicitous use in discourse (Belletti & Rizzi 2017). These analytic guidelines define the so-called “criterial approach” to scope-discourse semantics, a program which aims at “syntacticizing” this important interpretive domain (Cinque & Rizzi 2010). Fundamental scope-discourse properties are transparently encoded in syntactic representations by a sequence of criterial heads; each head generates the familiar Specifier – Head – Complement configuration, which constitutes the configurational skeleton for expressing the fundamental scope-discourse articulations: topic – comment, focus – presupposition, operator – scope domain.

2. Criterial head is overt?

This structural approach to scope-discourse semantics is made immediately plausible by the fact that some languages overtly express the system of criterial heads through special morphemes. For instance, in the Kwa language Gungbe, topics and foci are accompanied by special morphemes which Aboh (2004) plausibly argues to lexicalize the Top and Foc heads, respectively.

1. a. [dan lo **yà** [Kofi hu ì]] (Gungbe)
snake the TOP Kofi killed it
‘The snake, Kofi killed it.’
- b. [dan lo **wè** [Kofi hu ___]]
snake the FOC Kofi killed
‘THE SNAKE Kofi killed.’ (Aboh 2004)

In contrast, the corresponding Italian (and English) examples do not have overt morphological markers.¹

2. a. Il serpente, Gianni lo ha ucciso (Italian)
 the snake Gianni it has killed
 'The snake, Gianni killed it.'
- b. IL SERPENTE Gianni ha ucciso, non il topo
 the snake Gianni has killed, not the mouse
 'THE SNAKE Gianni killed, not the mouse.'

Under plausible guidelines of cross-linguistic uniformity, a reasonable initial hypothesis is that the underlying syntax is the same in the two types of languages, with criterial heads Top and Foc which have an analogous role (they attract a constituent in syntax and guide interpretation at the interface systems), but are not pronounced in Italian (and English). The minimal difference can be expressed by the following spell-out parameter:

3. Criterial head H is overt?

3. Criterial head moves?

Pearce (1999), in the first explicitly cartographic study on an Austronesian language, argues that in Māori, topics and foci occur in the left periphery in a fixed order Top > Foc, much as in Gungbe. In Italian the situation is more complex, as certain types of topics (familiarity topics, according to the typology in Frascarelli & Hinterhoelzl 2007; Bianchi & Frascarelli 2010) can follow the left-peripheral focus position, but other kinds of topics (aboutness-shift and contrastive topics, according to the same typology) necessarily precede the focus position. The following example illustrates a topicalized object and a focalized subject (thus yielding the OSV order from the unmarked VSO order) in Māori:

4. *Ko* te hipi *nā* Pita I fihore (Māori)
ko the sheep *nā* Pita T/A fleece
 'As for the sheep, it was Pita who fleeced it.' (Pearce 1999, ex. (5))

Ko and *nā* appear to be directly linked to topic and focus. In this respect, the language looks like Gungbe w.r.t. parameter (3). On the other hand, Māori differs from Gungbe in that the markers precede topic and focus, rather than following them, so that in the pronounced string these functional elements cannot be in a Spec-head configuration with topic and focus, respectively. In the case of *ko*, Pearce explicitly considers the hypothesis that the unexpected order may follow from movement from the criterial

¹ Topic and focus constructions are sharply differentiated by intonational contour and pragmatic conditions for felicitous use in both Italian and English; moreover, at the syntactic level, in Italian the (object) topic is obligatorily resumed by a clitic, whereas a focalized element is not. The focal example illustrates corrective focus, in terms of the typology introduced in Bianchi, Bocci, & Cruschina (2015).

position to a higher head. Such a movement option has also been explicitly assumed for another case in which a scope-discourse marker precedes the corresponding criterial element, the focus marker *a* in Jamaican Creole:

5. A di bami Piita nyam (... nutn muor) (Jamaican Creole)
A the bammy Peter eats (... nothing more)
'It's the bammy that Peter ate (nothing else).' (Durrleman 2008: 74)

Durrleman assumes that *a* moves from the head of the FocP to a higher head position. So, there appears to be the following parameter:

6. Criterial head H moves?

Here, "moves" actually means "moves to the next higher head", under familiar assumptions of structure preservation and locality on movement. Pearce conjectures that the host head of *ko* movement may be Force because topic-marking *ko* is the initial element in the Māori clause, and moreover it can be dropped, recalling C-drop phenomena in other languages;² the landing site of *a* movement could not be Force in Jamaican creole, Durrleman argues, because it can be preceded by a topic and co-occurs with an overt complementizer in embedded clauses. So, the landing site may well be different, but both languages appear to share the positive setting of parameter (6) (for Top and Foc, respectively), as opposed to the negative setting of Gungbe-type languages, which overtly preserve in the surface string the criterial Spec-head configuration.

4. Criterial head movement and freezing

Much work has been devoted to the freezing effects that arise in criterial positions, a simple manifestation of which is the fact that a *wh*-phrase cannot be further moved from the C-system of an embedded question (see Rizzi 2006; 2014; Boskovic 2008, a.o.).

7. a. Bill wonders [what book Q [John should read ___]]
b. *What book does Bill wonder [___ Q [John should read ___]]

The freezing effect also holds if the *wh*-phrase carries an independent criterial feature, e.g., a corrective focus feature on the lexical restriction. In such cases, the corrective focus feature is unable to pied-pipe the *wh*-phrase to the main complementizer system, as in (8)b, because the whole phrase is frozen in the embedded criterial position.

8. a. Bill wonders [what BOOK Q [John should read ___]] (not what paper...)

² An alternative analysis that Pearce (1999) considers is that *ko* may be the realization of Force when the CP zone contains a TopP, a selectional property between two heads, rather than a movement relation. Both alternatives are consistent with the mechanism for leaving the edge of the clause unpronounced developed in De Lissier et al. (2016).

classical terminology) for the status of morphological markers of scope-discourse properties. See Rizzi (2013) for the discussion of possible diagnostics to determine if a given language opts for (10a) or (10b) for a particular scope-discourse construction.

A genuine parameter, though, is the following, expressed in the microparametric format adopted for (3) and (6):

12. Criterial feature F is overtly expressed in the DP?

Under Durrleman's analysis, (12) has a positive value in Jamaican creole for F=Top, and under Pearce's analysis (12) has a positive value for F=Foc in Māori.

A priori, the two options of (3) and (12) are not mutually exclusive, i.e., a language could have overt morphological markers for topicality or focus both within the nominal expression and on the criterial head. I do not know of any such case of double marking for topic or focus. Nevertheless, a close enough analogue is the co-occurrence of the wh-marked operator and an overtly expressed Q head, a case excluded in many languages (the so-called "doubly filled COMP effect"), but possible in other languages, e.g. the Dutch varieties admitting *wie of* ("who if") sequences in embedded questions. Further research is needed to determine whether such cases of double overt morphological marking extend to other cases of criterial configurations, beyond the case of wh-constructions.

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