Italian polarity fragments and the nature of nonsententials

Approaches to nonsententials or fragments differ as to whether the seemingly absent syntactic structure is indeed present at some level of representation or not. Merchant (2004) adopts a deletion approach to simple XP fragments according to which subsentential utterances are the result of constituents moving to a left peripheral position (namely a Focus position), with an [E](llipsis) feature on a functional head triggering non-pronunciation of its complement. Evidence for this analysis was twofold: connectivity effects support full sentential structure and island effects support movement. Both kinds of evidence for Merchant’s original examples have been contested (Casielles 2006, Valmala 2007, Barros 2012).

Here I discuss the class of Italian fragments in (1), that I argue to support an analysis à la Merchant.

The interpretation is as expected under the assumption of a theory of Contrastive Topics (CTop) like Büring (2003). A sentence with a CTop addresses a question that belongs to a set of questions that are part of a strategy to answer a superquestion currently under discussion. In the relevant cases, the set includes polar questions such that alternatives for the CTop substitutes for it, see (2). In analogous contexts, on the other hand, a simple fragment (interpreted as an information focus) is infelicitous: see the contrast in (3). Unlike in Büring’s examples, here the subquestions are not wh-questions on a constituent, but polar questions. To the extent that the two can be assimilated, one can regard answers with sì and no as expressing polarity focus (Cf. Krifka 2001).

As for syntactic analyses, Spanish equivalents of these fragments have been studied by Depiante (1999) and Vicente (2006). Unlike the former, I argue that the XP is a Contrastive Topic rather than in a Focus position. Unlike the latter, I propose that no is in a Focus position. See my proposal in (4).

The fragments are degraded when extracted out of islands (5), which is evidence for the view that at least this class of fragments is derived via movement and deletion (Cf. Merchant 2004). In Italian, the topicalization process called clitic left dislocation is known to be island-sensitive (Cinquè 1990), so I propose that the clitic left dislocation of CTop across an island boundary is what makes (5) unacceptable.

This deletion analysis is consistent with cartographic studies that assume that in the left periphery a CTop is rigidly ordered before a Foc as in (6) (Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl 2007). Opinions diverge as to whether this FocP is bound to be contrastive (Rizzi 1997) or not (Brunetti 2004), or different Foc positions exist in Italian or in related languages (Cruschina 2011). I will argue that this turns out to be immaterial to my analysis, since the domain of polarities trivially satisfies the properties attributed to contrastive focus: membership in a finite set, saliency, exhaustivity (Molnár 2002).

Examples

(1) a. Gianni sì.
   Gianni yes.
   b. Il libro sì.
      The book yes
   c. A casa no.
      At home yes
   d. Andare al mare no.
      Go to the beach no

(2) a. Gianni è venuto alla cena sociale?
Did Gianni come at the social dinner?

b. Gianni Sì (= Gianni è venuto alla cena sociale).

c. [Gianni Sì (= Gianni è venuto alla cena sociale)]* = {{ [Gianni è venuto alla cena sociale], [Gianni non è venuto alla cena sociale]}}, {[Maria è venuta alla cena sociale], [Maria non è venuta alla cena sociale]}}, {[Luca è venuto alla cena sociale], [Luca non è venuto alla cena sociale]} ...

(3) a. I dottorandi sono venuti alla cena sociale?
   ‘Did the grad students come to the social dinner?’
   b. #Gianni.
   ‘Gianni.’
   c. Gianni sì.
   ‘Gianni came.’

(4) [CTop Gianni [ Top [FocP si [ Foc [ ... [w è venuto]]]]]]

(5) i. a. Conosci i compagni che hanno fatto un regalo a ognuno dei ragazzi?
   ‘Do you know the friends that gave a present to each of the kids?’
   b. #A Gianni no.
   To Gianni no

ii. a. Avverti tua madre prima di andare da qualche parte?
   ‘Do you tell your mother before you go somewhere?’
   b. #In palestra no.
   To the gym no

(6) [ShiftP A-Topic [ContrP C-Topic [FocP [FamP* G-Topic [FinP [IP ... ]]]]]]

References