

TOWARDS A SCALE OF CONTRASTIVE TOPICS:  
A VIEW FROM TOPICALIZATION AND PREDICATE CLEFTS IN ITALIAN

According to Büring (2003), the use of a contrastive topic (CT, cf. Krifka's 2008 delimitation phrases) signals a strategy of answering a question which is given or implicated in discourse. Suppose we have a context with three individuals (John, Mary and Sue) and three types of vegetables (potatoes, carrots and beans) and the question is who ate what. The speaker has two options: either to go by people and make John/Mary/Sue the CT and potatoes/carrots/beans the focus, or vice versa to go by food and make the vegetables the CT and people the focus. To date little is known about the factors that make the speaker choose one or the other strategy. Some possible preferences for CT are GIVEN > NEW, AGENT > PATIENT, SUBJECT > OBJECT, but neither of these factors affects consistently the choice of CT vs. F. In this paper we concentrate on semantic type as another possible factor that affects the "topichood potential" of a semantic entity. We propose the following hierarchy:

(1) INDIVIDUALS/GROUPS > (DESCRIPTIONS OF) EVENTS > TRUTH VALUES

Speakers prefer to sort information by individuals than by representations of events (or states, processes, activities etc.) and rather by representations of events than by truth values. This generalization will allow us to account for some properties of sentences with verbal predicates as CTs.

The paper builds on data drawn from Italian, which exemplifies the full range of possibilities for topicalization of entities of different types, i.e., individuals by means of clitic left dislocation (2a), events by means of predicate clefts (characterized by the fronting and doubling of the main predicate of the sentence) (2b) and (3a), and truth-values by means of *sì che/no che* (yes that/no that) sentences (3b) (Poletto & Zanuttini 2013).

(2) a. [Le patate,]CT le ho [PELATE]F.

As for potatoes, I peeled them.

b. [Pelare,]CT ho pelato [le PATATE]F.

As for peeling, I peeled the potatoes.

(3) a. [Pelare le patate,]CT le ho PELATE [POS]F

As for peeling the potatoes, I peeled them / I did it.

b. [Sì]CT [che ho pelato le patate]F.

Yes that I peeled the potatoes.

After a question like: 'What did the speaker do to which vegetable?', (2a) is more likely to be produced than (2b). This, we claim, is because (2a) is in line with the scale in (1). (2b) is not impossible, but requires a more involved context, e.g. one where peeling and other alternative activities are strongly activated. Likewise, in a context introducing a list of things to do (peel the potatoes, cut the carrots, etc.) and the question whether or not the speaker did it, sentence (3a), which contains a topicalization of an event is preferred to (3b), in which the polarity operator is promoted to topic. Again (3b) – uttered with the so-called continuation contour and not with an emphatic intonation – is not impossible, but preferred in contexts in which it is the truth-value of the contextually relevant sentences to be at stake in discourse.

This line of argumentation will be further used to explain why some languages (Russian, Catalan) show a preference for polarity focus in predicate clefts, as well as for the preference for OV over VO order in Russian predicate clefts previously handled in the syntax (Abels 2000, Aboh & Dyakonova 2009):

- (4) a. ?? Počistit'-to on počistil kartošku. Peel-PRT he peeled potatoes.  
b. Počistit'-to on kartošku počistil. Peel-PRT he potatoes peeled.