

The definition of Focus in the framework of the Language into Act Theory: data from C-ORAL-ROM Italian

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The paper will illustrate the definition of Focus according to the Language into Act Theory (LAcT) (Cresti 2000, Cresti & Moneglia, 2010) on the basis of corpus data derived from C-ORAL-ROM Italian, and supported by experimental data carried out at LABLITA.

In the LAcT framework the importance of Focus is strongly rescaled with respect to what is generally assumed by the literature on Information Structure (IS), given that the concepts of Focus and Comment collapse in a lot of influential literature (Chomsky 1971, Jackendoff 1972, Lambrecht 1994). For this reason it must be stressed that in LAcT the two notions must be distinguished, since Comment is based on a pragmatic function (accomplishment of illocution, Austin 1962), while Focus belongs to the locutive act, and it is a semantic function internal to the domain of textual information units (IU) like Comment and Topic.

As a whole, Focus does not constitute the center of IS, but on the contrary it depends on the pragmatic nature of IS. In LAcT the primary information structure of the utterance is the Topic-Comment pattern and both IUs have a pragmatic definition: if indeed the definition of Comment function is the accomplishment of the illocution, also the Topic function is pragmatically defined as the field of application of the illocutionary force of the Comment. Therefore also Topic is determined by the force of Comment and not by a feature like givenness, as assumed by the most part of literature and still depending from the context (Li, 1976; Chafe, 1976; Reinhart 1982; Gundel 1999). Moreover Topic is linked to the Comment by a specific information relation of pragmatic aboutness.

In this sense the IS cannot be interpreted as a semantic structure establishing a certain relation with the Context or Common Ground (Stalnaker, 1974), as in the following variants: a) a new information evaluated with respect to a given one (Halliday, 1976); b) a central information with respect to the background (Lambrecht, 1994) c) a logic structure based on an asserted content with respect to a presupposed one (Chomsky, 1971; Jackendoff, 1972); d) an answer to a covert or overt question in the context (Krifka, 2006; Büring, 2003).

Many reasons lead to refuse the conception of IS as a relation of a focal point with the context. First of all because the origin of IS corresponds to the accomplishment of a whatever illocution, i.e. it is not a matter of semantics. Beside this, all the information functions have a pragmatic nature and are not limited to the relation of the Comment force with Topic. If the Comment can be optionally preceded by its field of application (Topic), it can also be supported by many other IUs with specific textual or dialogical functions. Corpus based research made indeed discover many IUs types, like appendix, parenthesis, locutive introducer, phatic, dialogical connector, which can be hardly explained through semantic principles.

Corpus data allowed also to verify for every IUs type specific prosodic counterparts, morpho-syntactic correlations and even semantic constraints pragmatically motivated. According to LAcT, prosody is a mandatory character of the IS, because IUs taking part to the IS of the utterance are necessarily marked by prosodic cues (terminal and not terminal prosodic breaks), and the information pattern of the utterance is isomorphic with the prosodic pattern. Moreover each IU, signalled by prosody, behaves as "linguistic islands" (Cresti & Moneglia 2010).

More specifically the linguistic filling of both Topic and Comment IUs are performed

respectively through a prefix prosodic unit (PU) and a root PU, and each of them is a local syntactic configuration and a semantic compositional entity. It means that the linguistic material of Topic and Comment IUs is not bound across the IU boundaries by both syntactic and semantic relations.

Actually the semantics of both Topic and Comment implies various levels of compositionality and Focus is a "high level" semantic function. A general definition of the concepts of Focus, belonging to the internal level of the semantic compositionality of Topic and Comment, says that Focus signals the peak of an expression which develops a Topic or a Comment information function. Therefore Focus is a necessary semantic component of both these IUs, and does not characterize the Comment only. Consequently we claim the existence of a Topic Focus and a Comment Focus.

The assumption of the existence of a Topic Focus can be considered new and not shared in literature, anyway corpus data offer a prosodic proof of its existence. It must be stressed, indeed, that if the study of real speech must be carried out, its acoustic counterpart cannot be anymore ignored and specifically its prosodic cues. Most literature assumes that Focus must correlate with a phonetic-prosodic prominence (Ftspatrick-Col e& al., 1997; Lahiri 1999, Avesani 2003, Avesani & Vayra 2003; Butt & al. 2005), so also the existence of prosodic prominences, necessarily signaling a Focus, must be taken into care to identify Focus in speech . Systematic controls on corpus recently carried out on spoken corpora (Gagliardi 2009; Martin 2010) and also in our Laboratory, make us sure that prefix PUs performing Topics, are mandatorily concluded by a perceptual prominence, sometimes more relevant than that in the root PU of Comment. It means that Topic-Comment information pattern, performed with two specific PUs, records two prominences, corresponding to two semantic Foci.

According to their peculiar information nature, Topic Focus can be defined such as the semantic peak allowing the identification of the application field of the illocutionary force, while Comment Focus can be defined such as the semantic apex marking the type of the illocutionary force accomplished.

The paper will present evidences derived from the C-ORAL-ROM Corpus supporting the above assumptions.

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