

## Properties of Fronted Direct Object in Italian

The work presented in this paper is based on a corpora I constituted to study different object constructions in Italian, and focuses on a comparison of various occurrences of the same syntactic sequence in Italian : Object-Verb (OV). In this kind of utterance, the object occupies a “not canonical” position (preverbal position) and assumes the syntactic function of an object (no clitic is present) :

- 1) IL DOLCE ha mangiato.  
THE CAKE he ate  
'(It is) THE CAKE (that) he ate / He ate THE CAKE.'

Classified among the so called “marked” (non canonical) structures in Italian grammars (cf. *Grande Grammatica Italiana di Consultazione*, 1988), OV order receives various names and descriptions from the linguists. In relation to the object initial position and the communicative status of the argument, the structure is often called *rhematic* (Stammerjohann, 1986) or *contrastive* (GGIC, 1988; Graffi, 1994; Ferrari, 2003) *topicalization*, *left rhematisation* (Berretta, 1998), *focus-background structure* (Brunetti, 2009), or more simply *NP preposing* (Abeillé, Godard & Marandin, 2008). Retained as relatively unfrequent in Italian by these linguists, OV order is described as limited to spoken dimension (Berretta, 1998; Brunetti, 2009), associated with a specific prosodic structure (peak of intensity on the object and fall of the height after this argument, cf. Tamburini, 1998) and at a communicative level, the object is described as assuming a contrastive focus function (Sornicola, 1981).

The number of OV utterances available in my corpora confirmed the weak degree of use of this order and the distribution of the occurrences proves that there is a close link between OV, spoken language (8/11 occurrences are oral) and informality (10/11 occurrences are present in naturally occurring data). The analysis of the occurrences allowed me both to widen the domain of use of this structure (the informative contribution of the OV utterance is not inevitably conveyed by the object only, a fronted object does not necessarily lead to the introduction of a contrast...) and also to distinguish different prosodic structures according to the kind of OV utterances (part of speech represented by the object, kind of referent, informational structure...).

To illustrate the kind of occurrences I have worked on and the analysis I have proposed, let's take three examples. The first one (2) represents the “prototypique” OV utterance (the object is a contrastive focus), the second one (3) is a case of non contrastive fronted object and the last one (4) a case of OV utterance that is all focus.

- 2) A : L'albero con la carta igienica, eri tu?  
'The tree with the toilet paper, it was you ?'  
B : Albero??? Di carta igienica?????  
'Tree??? Of toilet paper?????'  
A : Claudio mi ha detto che l'hai fatto tu.  
'Claude told me that it is you who made it.'  
B : Noooooooooo UNA TORRE avevo fatto io.  
'Noooooooooo it is a tower that I had made [A TOWER (accusative) I had made].'

The contrastive value of the fronted object is undeniable here : to describe the same object, A introduced the notion of tree and B replaced it by the concept of a tower, kind of contrast called *replacing focus* by Dik (1997 : 331-332) :

A says that B built a tree → Assertion = to make a tree (B)

B rejects part of A assertion → Assertion = neg. to make a tree (B) & to make a tower (B)

3) A: Ma è la “f” che non capisco.

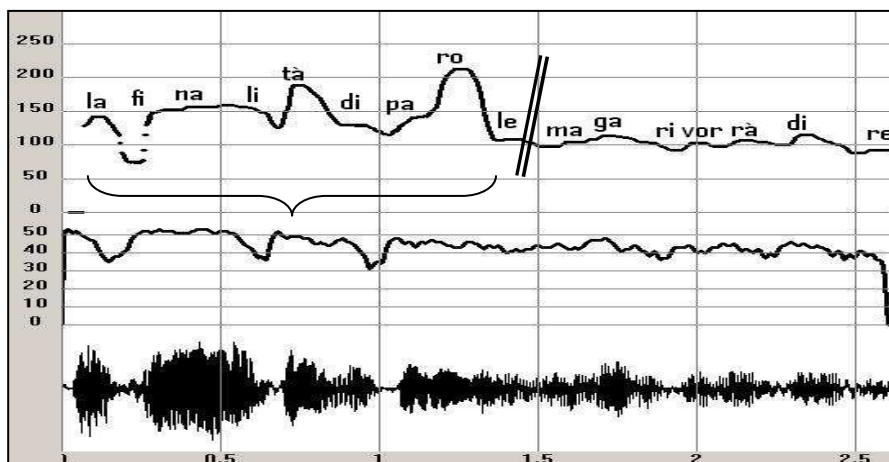
But is the “f” that I don’t understand

‘But it is the “f” that I don’t understand.’

B: LA FINALITÀ DI PAROLE magari vorrà dire.

The finalità of words maybe it should mean

‘Maybe it should mean the finalità of words [THE FINALITÀ OF WORDS (accusative) maybe it should means].’



With respect to the linguistic context, the fronted object (la finalità di parole / ‘the finalità of words’) is here the informative contribution of the utterance (its focus) but doesn’t introduce any contrast as in the previous example. At prosodic level, we can note that the object is more prominent than its right linguistic context, whether at height level (that falls after the object), at intensity level (values superior to 50 Db on finaliTÀ) or at duration level (tonics of both preverbal nouns, finaliTÀ and paROle, occupy more space than the other syllables of the utterance).

4) Hanno fatto anche il lavoro di trascrizione // naturalmente non su tutto perché // UN PO’ facevano anche in classe // guidati dagli insegnanti (OF)

‘They also have made the work of transcription // naturally not on everything because // they have made little (of this work) also in class [A LITTLE (accusative) they also have made in class] // helped by the teachers.’

This last occurrence is an example of an OV all focus utterance : the referent of the object is contextually new and the fronted argument is the anchor of a completely informative utterance. In fact, the utterance informs that a part of the work has been made in class but presents the proportion realized (un po’ / a little) as a major indication, thanks to the initial position of the object and to its height with regard to its right context.

The occurrences of OV utterances I have studied led me to reconsider the equivalence established between OV order, cleft sentence and narrow focus, which is only relative in

reality, and at the same time, to widen the range of context possibilities for the structure, and to distinguish pragmatic values and prosodic structures that can be associated to this kind of utterance.

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