Is there any difference between contrastive focus and information focus in Italian?

- A focused item in Italian occupies naturally a low position in the clause, where the sentence stress falls. However, it can also move and fill a high position, where it bears a particular pitch accent. It is commonly assumed in the literature (Rizzi 1997, Belletti 2001, among others) that in the low position focus can either carry new information or be used in contrast/correction contexts (cf. (1a,b)); in the high position, instead, it can only be used in contrast/correction contexts (cf. (2a,b)).

  The aim of this talk is to show instead that there are no differences between the two focus positions, neither from a semantic nor from a syntactic point of view.

- From the semantic side, my main concern is to show that É. Kiss’s (1998) distinction in Hungarian between ‘identificational’ and ‘information’ focus cannot be held for Italian. According to É. Kiss, identificational focus expresses uniqueness, more precisely ‘exclusion by identification’; information focus merely conveys non-presupposed information. She suggests that ‘contrastive’ focus in Italian corresponds to identificational focus. I will show with several examples that Italian contrastive focus doesn’t entail exclusion. For instance, focus on the left in Italian (but not in Hungarian) is compatible with the focus operator anche ‘also’, which cannot express exclusion (cf. (6a)). Anche is instead incompatible with a cleft, as it is shown in (6b). I will therefore suggest that exclusion is required by cleft constructions in Italian, as also claimed by É. Kiss for English.

  If there is no semantic distinction between the two kinds of foci, the next step is to demonstrate that the syntactic difference mentioned above (cf. (1) and (2)) can be eliminated as well. In fact, my idea is that the absence of movement to the left with new information focus in Italian is only apparent.

  A moved focus to the left cannot answer a wh question, as shown in (3A2). However, a possible answer is the focused DP alone, as in (3A3). I shall propose that the elliptical structure in (3A3) derives from (3A2), namely, the focused DP has moved to the left, and then deletion of the rest of the sentence has applied (a case of bare-argument ellipsis, see (4)). Ellipsis couldn’t take place if the focused DP didn’t move, because then the focused DP would be within the same constituent as the part to be deleted. A support to this idea comes from NPIs: when the focused item is an NPI, the elliptical answer patterns like the answer with leftward focus movement wrt grammaticality, as it is shown in (5).

  As for (3A2), I shall argue that its unacceptability does not derive from the fact that focus is contrastive, and hence it is not an appropriate answer to a wh question. Rather, the unacceptability is related to lack of ellipsis. I will in fact propose that ellipsis of the presupposed part of the sentence is required, whenever possible.

  As for the acceptability of contrastive sentences without ellipsis, like (2a), it can be explained as a result of a contextual difference between an answer to a question and a contrast. Whereas an answer takes for granted what is ‘given’ in the question, and only adds new information to it, a contrastive sentence rejects the previous sentence in the discourse, and fully replaces it. As a consequence, a contrastive sentence can be pronounced entirely without any redundancy effect.

- Summarizing, from a semantic point of view, along the lines of works like Rooth 1992, I support a unified account for focus in Italian. Whether focus carries new information or is contrastive will depend on contextual factors.

  From a syntactic point of view, I would like to suggest that a focused DP in Italian is associated to a null focus operator, which is the same whatever the contextual use of the focused item. Either the association occurs by overt movement of the focused DP, or the DP remains in situ and is bound by the operator through ‘unselective binding’ (cf. the account for wh-in-situ given by Pesetsky 1987 and more recently by Reinhart 1995).

Data:
Q: Che cosa ha scritto Gianni?
A: Gianni ha scritto [un libro].

Q: Ha scritto un articolo, Gianni?
A: No, Gianni ha scritto [un libro].

Q: Che cosa ha scritto Gianni?
A: Gianni ha scritto [un libro].

A: Ieri Gianni ha scritto un articolo.

B: [Un libro] ha scritto, non un articolo!

Q: Che cosa scriverà Maria?
A1: Scriverà [un articolo].
A2: [Un articolo] scriverà.
A3: [Un articolo].

Q: Che cosa si aspetta Maria?
A1: Non si aspetta alcunche’.
A2: *Alcunche’ si aspetta.
A3: *Alcunche’.

A: Ha comprato anche [un cappello] per sé Maria.
B: *E’ anche [un cappello] che si è comprata Maria.

References