

Prosody and focus in French and Occitan statements and yes-no questions

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Focus is a concept related to the salience of a constituent that introduces new information [1]. A focused constituent is syntactically and/or prosodically highlighted, and its prominence may be marked in different ways. Even if Romance languages (like Germanic) allow to prosodically focalize a constituent *in situ* associating the nuclear accent to it and deaccenting post-focal material [2], the nuclear accent's default position is rightmost, and syntax is supposed to move the focused element to the end of the matrix sentence. Whereas this is easily done in Southern Romance languages [3], word order is more restricted in Gallo-Romance, and constituents that follow the element to be focalized have to be dislocated out of the main clause.

(1) Your neighbor asks you what you did with the tangerines and bananas she gave you.

Fr: Les mandarines, je les ai MANGÉES, et les bananes, je les ai DONNÉES À MÉLANIE.
The tangerines, I them have EATEN, and the bananas, I them have GIVEN TO M.
(I have EATEN the tangerines, and I have GIVEN MELANIE the bananas.)

Focus may also be associated with clause-final nuclear accent by clefting: given information follows in a subordinate clause separated by a prosodic break and realized in a compressed pitch range.

(2) You have asked for a kilo of oranges, but the shopkeeper is a little bit deaf and starts to give you tangerines instead. Tell her that what you want is oranges.

Oc: Son D'IRANGES que vòli, pas de mandarinas.
They-are of ORANGES that I-want, not of tangerines.
(I want ORANGES, not tangerines.)

Moreover, the initial accents of French and Occitan, often described as “accents d’insistance”, may be associated to the expression of contrast or narrow focus; as they hit lexical items *in situ*, no syntactic movement is involved.

(3) Same situation as in example (1)

Fr: J’ai MANGÉ les mandarines, et j’ai DONNÉ les bananes À MÉLANIE.
I have EATEN the tangerines, and I have GIVEN the bananas to MÉLANIE.

The present study aims at characterizing and comparing the prosodic correlates of focus marking in three Gallo-Romance varieties: Occitan, Southern French (in close contact with Occitan) and Northern French. The data were elicited by means of a situation questionnaire as in the examples above: speakers were asked to imagine themselves in a set of everyday-life situations and to respond to them in a natural way. We looked at two types of statements with corrective focus and two yes-no questions with a narrow focus, and compared them to a neutral broad focus statement and a neutral yes-no question respectively. After separating the syntactic structures we analyzed the different prosodic realizations (nature and type of pitch accents and/or prosodic breaks) in order to compare the strategies our three varieties apply for syntactic and prosodic focus marking.

In Occitan as in French, the relative salience of a focus constituent is achieved by a pitch accent, and it is generally followed by a prosodic break instantiated by lengthening and a boundary tone, while the other constituents are often deaccented or display a reduced pitch range. Whereas in all three varieties yes-no questions show a great consistency in realizing all pitch accents as sharp rises, many different pitch contours, corresponding to different pragmatic meanings, may be used to highlight focus in statements.

References

- [1] Lambrecht, Knud (1994): *Informational Structure and Sentence Form*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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- [3] Vallduví, Enric (1990): *The Information Component*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Pennsylvania.