Focus and prosodic prominence in Italian wh-questions

This talk tackles the issue of relationship between main prominence placement and focus in whquestions in Italian on the basis of experimental evidence.

A first approach to focus (Jackendoff 1976, Brody 1990, Rizzi 1997) treats it as a feature encoded in the syntax, which at the interfaces calls for the appropriate prosodic marking and the semantic interpretation. According to a second approach (Reinhart 2006, Szendröi 2011, a.o.), the focus interpretation is directly read off the prosodic marking of focus, with no mediating role of the syntax. The location of the nuclear stress and nuclear pitch accent (NPA) determines the focus set of the sentence. This is made possible thanks to the assumption of a direct link between the prosodic structure and the inferential and pragmatic components.

In Italian, the NPA is by default assigned 'rightmost' in Italian (Nespor & Vogel 1986, Gili Fivela et al. 2015, a.o.). In declarative sentences with broad focus interpretation, NPA is assigned to the rightmost phonological phrase, whilst the presence of NPA in a non-final position triggers a narrow focus interpretation. The results of two production experiments (respectively, 478 sentences and 334 sentences) show that Italian direct wh-questions are characterized by a distinct prosodic pattern (cf. also Calabrese 1982, Ladd 1996, Marotta 2001). NPA is neither assigned to the rightmost element (i.e. the default position in declaratives), nor to the wh-element itself (i.e. where one should expected the NPA to fall if wh-elements qualified as focal). In direct wh-questions, NPA systematically associates with the lexical verb (even if non-final, cf. (1)), but, crucially, it does not trigger a focal interpretation of the verb.

NPA

(1) A chi chiede**rai** un aumento? To who ask.fut.2sg a rise 'Who will you ask a rise to?

The experimental results thus show that a direct association between prosodic prominence and focal interpretation must be discarded, since the prosodic correlates of focus are dissociated from the position where focus is interpreted at the C-I interface (i.e., by hypothesis, the position of the wh-element).

Furthermore, NPA assignment proves to be sensitive to the derivational history of the wh-element. In short distance wh-questions, NPA invariantly falls on the matrix verb, while in long distance wh-questions, NPA strongly tends to associate with the embedded verb. Cf. (2) vs. (3).

NPA

(2) A chi hai **det**to che ti hanno rubato la macchina? *short distance* to who have.2sg said that to.you have.3pl stolen the car

NPA

(3) A chi mi hai detto che hanno ru**ba**to la macchina? *long distance* to who to.me have.2sg said that have.3pl stolen the car

To account for these findings, an analysis which relies on a syntactically active [wh/focus] feature that triggers a phase-based successive cyclic derivation. The wh-phrase shares the [wh/focus] feature with every phrase head along its way to the final landing site. Crucially, it is assumed that phonological component is not sensitive to the distinction between interpretable and uninterpretable instances of the [wh/focus] feature. NPA is then assigned to the rightmost occurrence of this feature on a phonologically visible element, which corresponds to the v° head – incorporated to the lexical verb – of the phase from which he wh-element has been extracted. We discuss the implications of this analysis with respect to the architecture of the grammar and the syntax-prosody interface.