EDITORIAL NOTE

ION GIURGEA

Information-structural notions are a key element in understanding word order variability. Research on the interface of syntax with information structure has been extensive in the past three decades (see the recent overview in Féry and Ishihara 2016), with new discoveries opening new problems and new directions of research.

A particular domain in which information structure is crucial is the syntax of the periphery of the clause. Romance languages, whose periphery is very rich, have figured prominently in the research on the syntax – information structure interface, one foundational article in this area, Rizzi (1997), even leading to a special syntactic school, the so-called “cartography” (which was extended to other aspects of clause structure). Yet, open issues remain in this field, and this volume constitutes a proof of this fact.

The languages discussed are Romanian and Italian, which are both null-subject languages in which the word order at the clausal level is quite free and, consequently, strongly dependent on information structure. Some papers employ the technical notions of cartography (Bianchi, Bocci and Cruschina; Cotfas) whereas others use or discuss a slightly different implementation, devised in the general minimalist framework, but departing from cartography on some points (Giurgea; Giurgea and Mirzea-Vasile). All articles insist on empirical generalizations, rather than technical issues regarding the syntactic analysis. Moreover, they aim at an understanding of the phenomena independent of the chosen theoretical framework. Thus, in Bianchi et al., the special behavior of why with respect to other simple wh-words is justified by the difference in the focus structure between interrogatives with why and other interrogatives, which has a semantic explanation. In this way, what was a mere encoding of an observation in previous cartographic studies (see Rizzi 2001, where perché ‘why’ is placed in a higher peripheral position than other simple wh-phrases) receives a more illuminating explanation. Cotfas’s account of the preferences for the presence or absence of the complementizer ca in subjunctive clauses with an active left-periphery relies on the interplay of prosodic factors and economy principles. Giurgea’s paper tries to motivate the apparent exceptions to the topic-orientation of Romanian by

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the special information-structural properties of certain clause types (interrogatives, clauses with focus fronting), as well as by the irrelevance of overt topic marking in cases of topic continuity.

I will now briefly present the novel findings of the four articles contained in this volume. In “Two Types of Subject Inversion in Italian Wh-questions”, Valentina Bianchi, Giuliano Bocci and Silvio Cruschina provide experimental evidence for the distinction in subject placement, noticed by Rizzi (2001), between why-questions and other interrogatives with bare wh-words in Italian. They show that in why-questions, the subject occurs pre- or postverbally depending on information structure, the postverbal position being preferred with narrow focused subjects and dispreferred (although possible) in unmarked contexts, whereas in questions in dove ‘where’ and come ‘how’, the preverbal placement (i.e. between the wh-word and the verb) is ruled out. They explain this difference by the special semantics of why-sentences, as opposed to other interrogatives: whereas why operates on the focus structure of the sentence, requiring, thus, a clausal sister with a focus/background partition (as independently argued in van Fraassen 1980, Shaheen 2010), other wh-sentences disallow a focus operator at the clausal level, for semantic reasons.

In the article “On the Left Periphery of Independent Subjunctives in Romanian: Topics, Foci and Complementizer Deletion”, Maria Aurelia Cotfas examines the left-periphery of subjunctive complements of volitional verbs, which are characterized by a full CP structure, with independent tense and no obligatory control. It is well-known that in addition to the subjunctive particle să, which is part of the verbal clitic cluster, subjunctive complements may use a special complementizer, ca, which mainly appears when să is preceded by preverbal material. Her most interesting new finding is that, contrary to previous claims in the literature, the lexicalization of the complementizer position by ca is not obligatorily triggered by the presence of preverbal elements, and is even dispreferred if the preverbal element is contrastive. The explanation she suggests is that the demarcative function of ca can also be realized by the special prosody involved in contrastive elements, which renders the use of ca superfluous. Furthermore, Cotfas shows that the left periphery of these subjunctives accommodates contrastive and given topics (only disallowing aboutness-shift topics in the sense of Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl 2007, Bianchi and Frascarelli 2010), as well as contrastive and mirative foci.

Ion Giurgea’s article “Preverbal Subjects and Topic Marking in Romanian” addresses the much debated issue of the status of preverbal subjects in Romanian. Against the view according to which preverbal subjects are always topical or focal, Giurgea presents evidence that sometimes preverbal subjects are neither topics nor foci, but are raised by virtue of being the highest argument (therefore, in configurations with oblique experiencers it is the oblique rather than the nominative subject which undergoes this type of movement). Based on attested
data, he establishes the minimal requirements a constituent has to fulfill in order to be topicalizable, and shows that subjects and oblique experiencers that do not comply with these requirements can nevertheless appear preverbally without being focal. Nevertheless, non-topical subjects can also remain postverbal, and are even forced to do so in certain cases. Giurgea argues that the VS order is compulsory in thetic contexts if the verb is sentence-final or at most followed by certain adjuncts. He proposes that the ban on the SV order here is due to conflicting prosodic requirements: the verb must undergo prosodic integration with an argument and is less prominent than an argument in the same prosodic phrase (as in English and German), but, in addition, the last new constituent must carry main prominence. Therefore, whereas VSX and SVX are equally allowed with X an argument, VS is the only possible order if S is the only argument. Giurgea’s article also addresses the issue of the frequency of preverbal subjects in Romanian, which is unexpected given the fact that the language is described as VSO in most generative studies (see Dobrovie-Sorin 1989, 1994 and subsequent literature), in the sense that the subject does not raise for case marking reasons: he argues that VS orders are only felicitous in a subset of all-new contexts, namely, in those in which the spatio-temporal coordinates of the situation can function as a topic, the so-called ‘stage topic’ (Erteschik-Shir 1997, 2007). The article discusses several possible ways of formalizing the generalizations concerning subject placement (which also include the unavailability of an intervening preverbal subject in cases of focus- and wh-fronting): Giurgea and Remberger’s (2012) multifunctional position account (the idea of an always present attracting head in the preverbal field, which can be associated with various probes – uAbout, uFoc, uWh, uD) is compared to other possible accounts. The tentative conclusion is that overt topic marking is required except in cases of topic continuity, which supports the view of Romanian as topic-oriented, at least to a certain extent.

The last article, “Syntactic Effects of Verum Focus in Romanian”, by Ion Giurgea and Carmen Mîrzea-Vasile, rounds off the discussion of subject placement in Romanian by investigating contexts in which VS orders appear to be licensed by verum focus. To the types already discussed in Giurgea and Remberger (2014), they add another pattern, which consists of the use of an unstressed subject pronoun immediately after an emphatically stressed verb in contexts which could have allowed the use of pro: they propose that an overt pronoun is used instead of pro in order to signal that the sentence has an active focus probe, which checks verum focus. As subjects are in principle postverbal in cases of focalization, the use of an overt subject shows that it is the verbal complex, which carries verum focus, that satisfies a uFoc probe, instead of pro satisfying a uAbout probe, as in run-of-the-mill V-initial orders with no overt subject. The authors also argue that this construction is the historical source of the so-called ‘double subject’ construction (Olsen 1928, Byck 1937, Cornilescu 1997). This latter construction, only found in regional varieties of Romanian, is also characterized by verum focus interpretations, but has a clearly expletive postverbal pronoun, which can double a thematic subject.
REFERENCES