Asymmetries in narrow-focus cleft sentences: a study on Italian and French L1 and L2

The use of cleft constructions in spoken language is linked to the interaction of numerous pragmatic and discursive functions. Aside from certain discursive variables, like for example channel and register (see studies cited in De Cesare 2017), the literature identifies at least two relevant parameters for describing asymmetries (in terms of acceptability or frequency) in the use of cleft sentences. The first one is the syntactic category of the clefted constituent, viz. subject or direct/indirect object, see examples in (1); the second one is the pragmatic function of the clefted (and focussed) constituent, viz. identifying or corrective, see examples in (2).

(1)   a. clefted subject: *C'est [Marie]$_F$ qui donne le journal à son frère*
        b. clefted object: *C'est [un journal]$_F$ que Marie donne à son frère*

(2)   a. identification focus:
            Qui donne le journal à son frère?
            C'est [Marie]$_F$ qui donne le journal à son frère
        b. correction focus:
            Julie donne le journal à son frère, n'est-ce pas?
            Non, c'est [Marie]$_F$ qui donne le journal à son frère

Asymmetries on both parameters may have a functional motivation: signaling a focus through a specific syntactic constructions is a much urgent need for a constituent that is not linearly in the rightmost position (i.e. the subject) and a corrective focus is more relevant to be recognised, as it signals not only a piece of information to be added to the common ground, but also that a previous piece of information has to be erased from it (Cruschina 2021). For Belletti (2015), in effect, the two parameters allow two different underlying structures to be described.

In terms of cross-linguistic comparison, several corpus studies have pointed to a higher frequency of clefts in French than in other languages, including Romance languages (Lambrecht 2001, Dufter 2009, De Cesare 2017). Some of these studies have suggested that this higher frequency in French is linked to specific conditions, including the parameters mentioned above. In particular, the syntactic role of subject appears to be the the most relevant in favoring the use of clefts in French (Destruel 2012), in line with the functional reasons given above: because of its greater rigidity in word order, French does not dispose of a wide range of alternatives to signal the focal nature of the subject. The same parameter has been found to be relevant for the asymmetries in the use of clefts observed in comparative studies with Spanish (Van den Steen 2005) and Italian (Roggia 2008). The role of the pragmatic function has been analyzed in some experimental studies: while in French it does not seem to play a role in the frequency of cleft constructions (Destruel 2012), in Argentinian Spanish (Gabriel 2010) it has an important effect in the frequency of use of subject clefts.

This paper compares Italian and French speakers regarding their responsiveness to these two parameters - syntactic role (subject vs object) and pragmatic function (identification vs correction) of the focussed element - in the use of clefts and observes L2 speakers of the same language pairs, in order to identify whether and how native language asymmetries have an effect in L2 use and how they interact with each other.

The study was conducted on a corpus of task-elicited speech. The task is adapted from Gabriel's (2010) model: the speaker is shown a *PowerPoint* presentation containing two

short comic strip stories, accompanied by a caption, followed by written questions. The questions are formulated in such a way as to elicit answers with a broad, identifying and corrective focus on different syntactic components of the sentence: subject, object, verb, other arguments. A total of 60 participants took part in the experiment: 15 native speakers of Italian, 15 native speakers of French, 15 Italian speakers of L2 French, 15 French speakers of L2 Italian; all groups are mixed and the age range is 19-40. Productions in French (L1 and L2) were recorded in Paris and productions in Italian (L1 and L2) were recorded in Turin. Each speaker produced, according to the protocol, 29 sentences, resulting in a final dataset of 29x45=1305 analysable utterances.

Our results confirm that the syntactic role is the only relevant parameter for determining the use of clefts in native French: focussed subjects are systematically clefted, regardless of their function. In native Italian, as already found in native Spanish, both parameters (syntactic and functional) play a role: focussed subjects are more often clefted than objects, but both subjects and objects are preferably clefted in corrective-focus utterances. This could be due to the fact that Italian, unlike French and similarly to Spanish, has a wider repertoire of possibilities to rearrange word order in order to signal marked information structures, and thus pragmatically specialize cleft structures for contrastive functions. In L2 productions, a partial approximation to the target language is observed in terms of frequency, but asymmetries crucially adhere to the model of the mother tongue. French speakers of Italian L2, in fact, reduce the use of clefted subjects in all pragmatic contexts, thus keeping the syntactic role as the only active parameter, in line with their L1. Italian speakers of French L2, on the other hand, increase the use of clefts, but only in those pragmatic contexts that would be also typical in their L1, namely corrective focus.

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