

**Focus constructions:
a cross-linguistic study of clause
and information structure**

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Introduction

We comparatively examine the clause and information structure of Greek, Italian, Spanish, English, and German, drawing our attention to focus constructions and the various word order patterns that result from them.

Languages

- **Greek** (Philippaki-Warburton 1985, Tsimpli 1990, 1995, 1998, Lascaratou 1998, Georgiafentis 2004)
- **Italian** (Rizzi 1997, Cardinaletti 2001, Belletti 1999, 2001, 2004, Bocci 2013)
- **Spanish** (Zubizarreta 1998, Ordóñez 1998, 2000, Zagona 2002, Ortega-Santos 2016)
- **English** (Guéron 1980, Birner & Ward 1998)
- **German** (Fanselow 1988, 2008, Abraham & Molnárfi 2002, Frey 2005, Krifka 2007, Fanselow & Lenertová 2011)

Choice of languages

- language family
- basic clause structure
- the possibility of subject pronoun omission (*pro-drop*)
- word order flexibility
- the inflectional (verbal and nominal) system

Aim

- Trace the similarities and the differences of the languages with respect to the types of focus (information and contrastive) and the specific characteristics of the languages.
- The findings are expected to shed light on word order variation in relation to focus structures and the mechanisms involved in its cross-linguistic realisation.

The road ahead

1. roughly sketch some notions of information structure
2. briefly present the characteristics of the languages under investigation
3. refer to the mechanisms of realisation of information and contrastive focus in each language
4. some concluding remarks that result from the comparison of the languages

Information structure...

- describes the way in which information is formally packaged within a sentence
- has been investigated by different frameworks within the linguistic community
- involves the interaction of different linguistic levels.

Focus types

- ‘broad’ vs. ‘narrow’ focus
- ‘information’ vs. ‘contrastive’ focus
- **Information focus** may simply convey new information, whereas **contrastive focus** may express identification/contrast by selecting the member of a subset that makes the assertion of the sentence true.

Focus mechanisms 1

- *Phonological rules*

The focused element has the main stress/accent, realised by:

a) the Nuclear Stress Rule (NSR): the most embedded constituent receives the main stress of the sentence/phrase (Jackendoff 1972);

b) the rule “assign stress to the focus constituents” (Erteschik-Shir 2007), which covers also stressing elsewhere.

Focus mechanisms 2

- *Syntactic mechanisms*

Word order plays the role, such as the position of the element in the base structure or in a derived structure, either through movement of the focused element to a (potential) focus position or through movement of other elements.

Focus mechanisms 3

- *Pragmatic-informational rules*

In neutral or Topic-Comment structures, old/given information (topic) precedes new information (focus), which tends to appear in sentence final position.

Characteristics of the languages	ENGLISH	GERMAN	SPANISH	ITALIAN	GREEK
language family	Germanic	Germanic	Romance	Romance	Greek
basic order	S-V-O	S-O-V, but S-V-O in main clauses (V2 language)	S-V-O	S-V-O	S-V-O and V-S-O (since V→T)
pro-drop	no	no	yes	yes	yes
word order flexibility	no (only S-V-O)	yes (with restrictions concerning the position of the verb)	yes	yes	yes (great flexibility; all variants are possible)
inflectional system	poor inflection in both verbal and nominal systems	rich verbal and nominal system	verbal rich / nominal less rich	verbal rich / nominal less rich	very rich verbal and nominal system
other characteristics	no clitics, no left periphery (marginally one topic or focus before S)	V2 language, V→T→C, no clitics, no rich left periphery (one left dislocated topic above CP), scrambling	V→T, clitics, post verbal subjects (S in V-internal position), left dislocated topic at the left periphery, scrambling/p- movement in the VP/IP-domain	V→T and Subject→ SpecTP, clitics, rich left periphery (topics and focus in the C-domain), movement in the VP/IP-domain	V→T, clitics, post verbal subjects (S in V- internal position) rich left periphery (topics and focus in the C-domain)

Nuclear Stress Rule

Out-of-the-blue contexts

English

(1) What happened? John sold the car. (S-V-O)

German

(2) Was hat Karl gesagt? / Was ist passiert?

a. ..., dass Hans sein Auto verkauft hat. (S-O-V)

b. Hans hat sein Auto verkauft. (S-V-O)

Spanish

(3) ¿Qué pasó? José fue a casa. (S-V-O)

Italian

(4) Che succede? Giovanni ama Maria. (S-V-O)

Greek

(5) Τα ἔμαθες τα νέα;

a. Ο Γιάννης παντρεύτηκε τη Μαρία. (S-V-O)

b. Παντρεύτηκε ο Γιάννης τη Μαρία. (V-S-O)

Information focus – English

English: S-V-O language

a) Via the Nuclear Stress Rule for the object:

(6) What did John sell? He sold the car. (S-V-O)

b) By stressing *in situ* for the subject (7) or the verb (8):

(7) Who sold the car?
John sold it. (S-V-O)

(8) What did John do with his car?
He sold it. (S-V-O)

Contrastive focus – English

a) By stressing the constituent *in situ* for the subject (9) and the object (10):

(9) JOHN bought the book, not Peter. (**S-V-O**)

(10) John bought a **BOOK**, not a magazine. (**S-V-O**)

b) Marginally, English allows fronting of the DO (SpecCP), where it takes emphatic stress (11) (Birner & Ward 1998); otherwise, it is interpreted as a topic (12):

(11) **RED** wine I prefer, not white. / **COFFEE** I drink / **NATURE** I like.

(12) Red wine, I like. / That kind of thing, I don't think I'd ever do.

c) Alternatively, it is realised as an it-cleft sentence:

(13) It was John that bought the book.

Information focus (a) – German

German: S-O-V with respect to its base structure and the structure of subordinated clauses, and a V2-language with respect to main clauses.

a) Via the NSR, which means that the DO carries the main stress in transitive or ditransitive constructions in subordinated and main clauses. Since German is a SOV-language, thus left branching with respect to VP, main prominence is on the left (see Cinque 1993).

(14a) ..., dass Hans dem Lehrer das Buch gegeben hat. (S-IO-**DO**-V)

(14b) Hans hat dem Lehrer das Buch gegeben. (S-V-IO-**DO**)

Information focus (b) – German

b) Focus is also marked *in situ*, by stressing the focused element (Hermann Paul 1880, in Krifka 2000):

- (15) Karl ist gestern nach Berlin gefahren.
- a. A: Wer ist gestern nach Berlin gefahren?
B: Karl ist gestern nach Berlin gefahren.
 - b. A: Wann ist Paul nach Berlin gefahren?
B: Karl ist gestern nach Berlin gefahren.
 - c. A: Wohin ist Karl gestern gefahren?
B: Karl ist gestern nach Berlin gefahren.
 - d. A: Wie ist Paul gestern nach Berlin gereist?
B: Karl ist gestern nach Berlin gefahren.

Information focus (c) – German

c) *Scrambling* leaves one constituent as the most embedded on both subordinated (16) and main clauses (17):

(16) a. ..., dass Hans das Buch dem Lehrer gegeben hat. (S-DO-IO-V)

b. ..., dass dem Lehrer das Buch Hans gegeben hat. (IO-DO-S-V)

(17) a. Hans hat das Buch dem Lehrer gegeben. (S-V-DO-IO)

b. Gestern hat dem Lehrer das Buch Hans gegeben. (XP-V-IO-DO-S)

Regardless of how scrambling is analysed, as A- or A-bar movement or movement within vP/VP (via Adjunction) or in the IP area, it is assumed that scrambled elements target topic positions (Fanselow 1988, Haftka 1995, Meinunger 2000).

Information focus (d) – German

d) In wh-questions, also by topicalizing the DO to SpecCP (and the Verb to C), leaving the Subject in SpecTP or vP-internal, where it gets the main stress (18), or by fronting the focused constituent to SpecCP (19):

(18) Wer hat gestern den Chef getroffen?

Den Chef hat gestern Hans getroffen. (O-V-S)

(19) Wen hat Hans gestern getroffen?

Den Chef hat er gestern getroffen. (O-V-S)

Contrastive focus – German

a) By stressing *in situ*:

- (20) a. HANS hat den Chef getroffen, nicht Peter. (**S-V-O**)
b. Hans hat DEN CHEF getroffen, nicht den Koch. (**S-V-O**)

b) By fronting the focused constituent to SpecCP and the Verb to C:

- (21) DEN CHEF hat Hans getroffen. (**O-V-S**)

c) By topicalizing or scrambling other constituents:

- (22) Karl hat den Gästen die Wahrheit gesagt.
Nein, die Wahrheit hat den Gästen (wohl) HANS gesagt.
(**DO-V-IO-S**)

d) Also by paraphrasing:

- (23) Es war HANS, der dem Lehrer das Buch gegeben hat.

Information focus – Spanish

Spanish: S-V-O language

a) By applying the NSR (Zagona 2002):

(24) ¿Adónde fue José?
José fue a casa. (S-V-O)

b) By moving other elements through scrambling (Ordóñez 1998, 2000) or p-movement (Zubizarreta 1998), leaving the focused constituent as most embedded (Zagona 2002, Zubizarreta 1998):

(25) ¿Quién fue a casa?
Fue a casa José. (V-O-S)

*José fue a casa.

(26) Comió una manzana Juan. (V-O-S)

Contrastive focus – Spanish

a) Movement to a fronted position, possibly to SpecFocusP, for both the subject (27) (Zagona 2002), and the object (28) (Domínguez 2004):

(27) MARÍA compró esos tomates en el mercado, no José. (**S**-V-O)

(28) LA MESA ha roto Javi. (**O**-V-S)

b) As for contrastive focus *in situ* V-**O**, Domínguez (2004) proposes that it involves covert movement at LF:

(29) Ha roto LA MESA. (V-**O**)

Spanish...

- allows V-S-O, with an XP in the preverbal position (30a)
- allows for more than one topic (30b)
- Emphatic-V and Focus-V are possible (31)
- while Emphatic-XP-V or Focus-XP-V are excluded (32)
(Zubizarreta 1998)

(30) a. Todos los dias compra Juan el diario. (XP-V-S-O)

b. Todos los dias, Juan compra el diario. (XP-S-V-O)

(31) (Estoy segura que) Pedro, las ESPINACAS trajo (y no las papas).

(32) *Las ESPINACAS, Pedro trajo (y no las papas).

Information focus (a, b) – Italian

Italian: S-V-O language

a) through the NSR for the object:

(33) Chi ama Giovanni?
Giovanni ama Maria. (S-V-O)

b) the NSR applies to the final position, i.e. either the verb (34a), or the subject (34b) becomes the focused constituent (Cinque 1993), which means *in situ* stressing is not available (34c):

(34) a. Truman è morto. (S-V)
b. È morto Johnson. (V-S)
c. *Johnson è morto.

Cardinaletti vs. Belletti

Cardinaletti (2001): in the V-O-S order, the subject can be an information focus, as the most embedded constituent in the clause, and be assigned main prominence via the NSR:

- (35) Chi porterà la macchina?
Porterà la macchina Mara.

Cardinaletti: Subject remains vP/VP-internal vs.

Belletti (1999, 2001, 2004): the VO sequence constitutes the given part of the information provided by the sentence, so that the subject has moved to a clause internal SpecFocusP and the given constituent moves to a SpecTopicP, which is located right above the clause internal FocusP.

Italian...

Italian lacks V-S-O (Zubizarreta 1998):

(36) *Ieri ha dato Gianni un libro a Maria.

Zubizarreta (1998) claims that the Subject in Italian checks nominative case in SpecTP, while it does not in Spanish; it can remain vP/VP internal, where SpecTP is a syncretic position.

Contrastive focus (a) – Italian

Generally assumed, it involves movement.

a) preverbal and postverbal subjects must necessarily move to FocusP, i.e. they fill the clause external focus position (see Belletti 1999, 2001, 2004):

(37) GIANNI ha capito il problema (non tutta la classe). **S-V-O** (**S** in FocP)

A low contrastive focus (Belletti 1999, 2001, 2004) involves overt movement of the subject to the Spec of the high FocusP, and subsequent remnant movement of the IP to the Spec of a higher TopP, which makes the subject postverbal:

(38) Ha capito il problema GIANNI (non tutta la classe). **V-O-S** (**S** in FocP)

Contrastive focus (b) – Italian

b) The same operation holds also for the object (Belletti 2004, Bocci 2013):

- (39) a. – A: Mi hanno detto che hai incontrato Lucia Domenica.
Come l'hai trovata?
b. – B: VERONICA ho incontrato Domenica (NON Lucia)!
O-V (O in FocP)

Alternatively (see Bocci 2013), a direct object can undergo a purely prosodic focalization strategy, i.e. it can be contrastively stressed *in situ*:

- (40) Ho incontrato VERONICA Domenica (NON Lucia)! V-O (O in situ)

Greek

Greek exhibits great flexibility with respect to word order.

- Traditionally classified as an S-V-O language (Tzartzanos 1963)
- Within the generative framework, the analyses are divided:
 - a) a V-S-O language, obligatory V to T movement (Philippaki-Warburton 1982, 1987, 1990, Tsimpli 1990, Alexiadou 1997, 1999, Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 1998, 2000, Spyropoulos & Philippaki-Warburton 2001)
 - b) an S-V-O language (Horrocks 1992, 1994, Drachman 1991, Drachman & Klidi 1992, Roussou & Tsimpli 2006, Spyropoulos & Revithiadou 2007).

Information focus – Greek

a) In (42) the object is the most embedded constituent in the clause, and as such it can be assigned main prominence via the NSR:

(42) Τι έφαγε ο Γιάννης; (S-V-O)
Ο Γιάννης έφαγε την τούρτα.

b) However, we find SVO patterns where the subject carries main prominence, i.e. it is informationally focused. In this case, information focus is realized *in situ*:

(43) Ποιος έφαγε την τούρτα; (S-V-O)
Ο Γιάννης έφαγε την τούρτα.

Greek vs. Spanish and Italian

- Unlike Spanish and Italian, where the V-O-S pattern is the only preferred option as an answer to a “Who-question”, in Greek the preferred patterns are either S-V-O or O-cl-V-S (see Georgiakentis & Sfakianaki 2004; cf. also Keller & Alexopoulou 2001).
- Greek: no need for scrambling or movement, so that the NSR applies for information focusing; the subject can be stressed *in situ*. This is not an option in Italian or Spanish, where an S-V-O pattern with an info focused subject does not exist.

(44) Comió una manzana Juan. (Spanish V-O-S)

(45) Porterà la macchina Mara. (Italian V-O-S)

Contrastive focus – Greek

Tsimplici (1998): two distinct focusing strategies, *in situ* focusing and overt focus-raising (to FocP).

a) object moves to SpecFocP (Tsimplici 1990, 1995; Georgiafentis 2004):

(46) ΤΗΝ ΤΟΥΡΤΑ έφαγε ο Γιάννης (όχι τον μπακλαβά). **O-V-S**

Movement to SpecFocP and subsequent remnant movement of the IP to the Spec of a higher TopP is involved in the **V-O-S** order, where the subject appears clause-final.

(47) Έλυσε την άσκηση Ο ΓΙΑΝΝΗΣ (κανείς άλλος). **V-O-S**

(b) object receives emphatic prominence *in situ* (Tsimplici 1998 for Greek; Bocci 2003 for Italian):

(48) Ο Γιάννης έφαγε ΤΗΝ ΤΟΥΡΤΑ (όχι τον μπακλαβά). **S-V-O**

		LANGUAGE				
TYPE OF FOCUS	MECHANISM	English	German	Spanish	Italian	Greek
Information focus	NSR	√	√	√	√	√
	<i>Stress in situ</i>	√	√	X	X	√
Contrastive Focus	FocusP	X	X	√/X	√	√
	<i>Stress in situ</i>	√	√	X	X	√

Summary – English (Germanic)

- poor inflection in both verbal and nominal systems, which disallows *pro*-drop, restricts word order variation (S-V-O), and limits the left periphery
- only allows for NSR and *in situ* focus for both focus types
- very restricted movement to SpecCP (for contrastive focus) or for topics
- FocP or TopP are thus questionable.

Summary – German (Germanic)

- has a rich verbal and nominal inflectional system but a non pro-drop language and an S-O-V and V2-language, which results in relative flexibility in word order variation
 - a) V2 restricts the left periphery, **but**
 - b) SpecCP is allowed for any constituent (Focus/Topic), and
 - c) scrambling in the VP/IP area allows for reordering of the base structure.

Summary – German (Germanic)

Focus:

- regulated by the NSR
- *in situ*
- topicalizing or scrambling of other constituents and fronting of the focused element to SpecCP

It has a very restricted left periphery, i.e. TopP exists only for left dislocated and hanging topics (FocP is thus questionable).

Summary – Spanish & Italian (Romance)

- rich verbal and less rich nominal inflectional systems
- allow for *pro*-drop and for word order flexibility
- NSR is very strong and both languages lack *in situ* stressing. This is why the languages employ movement (scrambling/p-movement) within the VP/IP area in order for the NSR to apply.

Summary – Spanish & Italian (Romance)

- Spanish permits vP/VP internal subjects, Italian subjects move to SpecTP.
- Italian: the subject reaches a high clausal position, which makes it necessary to have a larger IP area for movement (Belletti 2004) and a richer left periphery (Rizzi 1997) supported by clitics.
- Spanish: the low subject position limits this necessity (Zubizarreta 1998).

Summary – Greek

- a very rich inflectional and nominal system
- allows for *pro*-drop and great freedom in word order variation
- clitics enrich the left periphery (see Rizzi's system).

Summary – Greek

- Information focus: the NSR seems to function but its operation can be superseded by stressing *in situ*...

...unlike Spanish and Italian, where the NSR has a primary function and crucially determines word order variation via scrambling operations.

Summary – Greek

- contrastive focus: movement of the focused XP to [Spec, FocP]
- alongside this mechanism, it appears that *in situ* focusing (via an emphatic / contrastive stress) is possible as well.

Concluding remarks

- The morpho-syntactic properties of the languages affect clause structure and the syntactic operations (movement) involved.
- Since information structure, which includes Focus, is not a purely syntactic phenomenon, intonation also plays a crucial role.

Concluding remarks

- We have two poles, the very restricted one with respect to morpho-syntactic properties, i.e. **English**, where focus is regulated by prosody, and an almost unrestricted one, i.e. **Greek**, which allows for both prosodic and syntactic operations.
- In between stands **German** with a restricted clause structure, where *in situ* stressing is possible, whereas **Spanish** and **Italian** with restricted prosodic properties (lack of *in situ* stress) employ movement mechanisms.

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