

TOPICS AND CODAS IN ROMANCE EXISTENTIALS

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A common assumption about existential sentences is that they are thetic or all-focus constructions. Several authors point out that the internal DP position, i.e., the ‘pivot’, must be focal (Erteschik-Shir 2007, Francez 2007). In certain languages, pivots seem to be incompatible with topic marking (for instance, Topicalization or Left Dislocation):

- (1) *Un livre, il y a sur la table. (French)
A book, it CL has on the table

However, in some Romance languages (Italian, Catalan, Spanish) pivots can appear as dislocated topics under certain restrictive conditions. The contrast between (2) and (3) shows that such restrictions have to do with information structure: if the locative adjunct in the existential sentence i.e., the ‘coda’, is inside the VP and thus inside the projection of wide focus, dislocation of the pivot is usually excluded; it is acceptable, in contrast, when the coda is itself dislocated, or implicit (or receives a narrow focus reading).

- 2) a. *{Tre / Alcuni} errori, ci sono nelle prime pagine. (Italian)
{Three / Some} mistakes, CL are in-the first pages
b. *Un estudiant, hi havia al bar. / *Hi havia al bar, un estudiant. (Catalan)
A student, CL had in-the bar
c. *Una serpiente, hay detrás de ti. (Spanish)
A snake, has behind of you
- 3) a. {Tre / Alcuni} errori, ci sono, (nelle prime pagine).
b. Un estudiant, hi havia, (al bar).
c. Una serpiente, (sí que) había, (detrás de ti).

The contrast suggests that, at least in the languages under discussion, dislocation is constrained by the same factors that limit the distribution of definite DPs in existentials (Leonetti 2008): it is excluded when the pivot position and the coda are inside wide focus. This raises a number of questions. I intend to address three of them: 1. How can an inherently focal expression such as the pivot of an existential sentence be compatible with topic status? 2. Why is information structure –in particular, the status of the coda– relevant for the acceptability of dislocation and of definite/anaphoric DPs as pivots? 3. To what extent do the patterns of acceptability for dislocation and definite DPs provide us with clues for a more precise distinction between proper existential sentences and locative/pseudo-existential sentences?

As for question 1, the answer is that dislocation of pivots does not produce prototypical ‘aboutness’ topics, but a marked kind of topic, namely, a contrastive topic, with quite restrictive conditions of use. Question 2 is about the nature of the Definiteness Restriction and its dependence on information structure: my point is that definite DPs are excluded when focus projection covers the whole existential construction, since in this case the pivot denotes an entity that has been introduced into the discourse by means of the information expressed by the locative coda, and this gives rise to a clash between definite/anaphoric pivots and codas. Finally, question 3 concerns the typology of existential constructions. The analysis of Romance data shows that wide focus (theticity) is a central feature of proper existentials: it prevents pivots from being dislocated, and distinguishes proper existentials from other related constructions.

References

- Erteschik-Shir, N. 2007. *Information Structure. The Syntax-Discourse Interface*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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- Leonetti, M. 2008. "Definiteness Effects and the Role of the Coda in Existential Constructions". *Essays on Determination*, ed. by A. Klinge and H. Hoeg-Müller. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 131-162.