

How does French mark focus and givenness ? A corpus study in a QUD approach

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In flexible accent languages like English or German, focus is said to be marked by a shift of the main prosodic prominence (nuclear pitch accent) of the utterance, and givenness is signaled by deaccenting (Büring, 2016). In contrast, in French, accent placement is constrained by prosodic phrasing, and focus is often claimed to be encoded mainly by syntax (Lambrecht, 1994) or by very different prosodic means than in English, especially phrasing (Féry, 2001).

Specifically, French has a first level of prosodic phrasing, the Accentual Phrase (AP), defined as the domain of occurrence of a compulsory final accent (FA) and an optional initial rise (IR) (Jun & Fougeron, 2000). Two other levels are sometimes assumed: an utterance internal intermediate phrase level (ip), and an utterance final Intonational Phrase level (IP) (Michelas & D'Imperio, 2012). The prosodic marking of focus in French has been said to involve the occurrence of IR (Beysade et al., 2015; German & D'Imperio, 2015) or a separate phrasing of the focused constituent (Féry, 2001, Dohen & Lovenbruck, 2004). Givenness can be signaled by post-focal tonal compression (Jun & Fougeron, 2000), but only on constituents that are at least the size of a phonological phrase (Féry, 2013).

This study aims at examining these claims via the extensive analysis of a 45 mn corpus of political debate. This corpus has been entirely annotated for information structure (IS) and prosody, independently of one another. For IS, we used an annotation procedure consisting in retrieving the implicit question under discussion (QUD) for each utterance, and defining its focus, focus domain(s), as well as its potential contrastive topic(s), topic(s) and non-at-issue content (Riester, to appear; Riester et al., under review). For prosody, we used the French ToBI framework (Delais-Roussarie et al., 2015).

Preliminary results on around 350 utterances show that:

Contra influential and recurrent claims (Lambrecht, 1994), syntax plays a marginal role in signaling IS in this corpus: clefting (focus) is rare and even left-dislocation (topics) is of moderate use.

The main prosodic prominence of the utterance mainly occurs at the end of the focus domain, but not necessarily at the end of the focus constituent. This seems to be a major difference compared to flexible accent languages, which we will explain by the specificity of French intonational phonology.

Prosodic focus marking is essentially due to the enhancement of the IR, of the FA or of both. More precisely, focus constituents often end with at least an ip boundary, if not with an IP boundary. Focus can also be signaled by a multiplication of the number of accents (IR and FA) within the focus constituent.

Most tonal compressions due to givenness are post-focal and at least the size of a phonological phrase, as claimed by Féry (2013). However, we found several examples of prefocal givenness compression. More crucially, it is possible to realize compression inside the PP by using a low FA on the post-focal word after IR on the focus word, hence preserving phrasing (see Figure 1 below).

To conclude, these preliminary results show that, at least in our corpus, prosody plays a more important role than syntax in signaling IS, and that givenness seems to be more regularly marked by prosodic compression than it is sometimes claimed. In sum, prosodic focus marking of IS could be less different from the one of flexible accent languages than it is generally assumed.

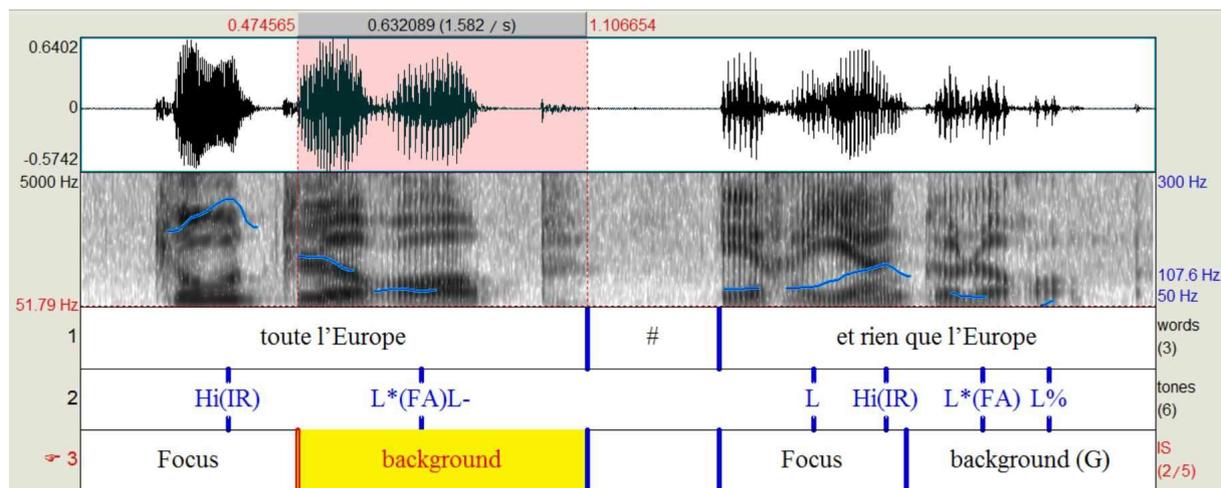


Figure 1. The parallel structure “all Europe, and nothing else than Europe” involving post-focal compression on the word “Europe”. Compression is realized within the Accentual Phrase (or Phonological Phrase) by means of a low FA L* after a high focused IR Hi.

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