Some notes on clefting and fronting[*]

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"Ad Adriana,
con gratitudine e riconoscenza per avermi guidato nei primi passi da linguista: il tuo
lavoro continua ad essere per me una grande fonte di ispirazione"

1. Introduction

In her (2008) paper, Adriana Belletti refines her analysis of cleft sentences (Belletti 2005) by proposing that different kinds of focalization lead to two distinct CP structures (see also Belletti 2009, 2012, 2013, 2014). Based on the assumption that left peripheral focalization involves contrastive/corrective focus (Rizzi 1997), while the Focus projection within the vP periphery specializes for new information focus (Belletti 2004), she claims that subject clefts that may be used as an answering strategy (e.g. in French) exploit the latter position, while non-subject clefting corresponds to left peripheral focalization. She speculates that "this clear distinction should not hold in languages where both new information focus and contrastive focus are realized in the left periphery of the clause. Should languages of this type exist, all other things being equal, in these languages both subject and non subject clefts should qualify as possible answering strategies to questions of information". She leaves "the development of this parametrical option open for further study" (Belletti 2008: 198), but, in a footnote, she mentions Hungarian and Sicilian as two languages worth investigating in this perspective.

In this paper I put the predictions of this conjecture to the test by examining the distribution of the cleft construction (CC) in a language where focus fronting (FF) to the left periphery is not limited to a specific contrastive/corrective interpretation, namely, Sicilian. I will discuss the results of an experiment specifically designed to test the acceptability rate of CC in comparison and in correlation with FF. In order to test the distribution of information focus and contrastive focus in both CC and FF, I took into account two contexts: answers to questions (to elicit information focus) (cf. 1), and contrastive environments (to elicit contrastive/corrective focus) (cf. 2). The target sentences were further distinguished according to the grammatical category of the focus constituent (subject, object, and PP), and each sentence was presented in four versions, obtained by combing the two structural conditions [±CC] and [±FF].

(1) CONTEXT
Maria aviva accattatu na buttiglia di vinu bona p'a purtari a festa di compleannu di n'amica, ma un sapi siddru nni ddra casa vivunu vinu. Allura ci addumanna all'amica [Mary had bought a good bottle of wine to bring it to the birthday party of a friend of hers, but she doesn't know if they drink wine in that family. So she asks her friend]

    A: Cu s'u vivi u vinu dintra nni tìa?
          'Who drinks wine in your house?'

    B1:   **Ma maritu** jè ca s'u vivi.   (+CC, +FF)
          my husband is that it drinks
    B2:   Jè **ma maritu** ca s'u vivi.   (+CC, –FF)
          is my husband that it drinks
    B3:   **Ma maritu** s'u vivi.   (–CC, +FF)
          my husband it drinks
    B4:   S'u vivi **ma maritu**.   (–CC, –FF)
          it drinks my husband
          'My husband drinks it'

(2) CONTEXT
Au ristoranti a Mariu ci portanu un piattu di calamari friùti, ma iddru u(g)n'è cuntentu [At the restaurant they bring Mario a dish of a fried squids, but he's not happy]

    B1:   **U pisci spata** jè ca ordinavu, no i calamari friùti.   (+CC, +FF)
          the sword fish is that I-ordered, not the squids fried
    B2:   Jè **u pisci spata** ca ordinavu, no i calamari friùti.   (+CC, –FF)
          is the sword fish that I-ordered, not the squids fried
    B3:   **U pisci spata** ordinavu, no i calamari friùti.   (–CC, +FF)
          the sword fish I-ordered, not the squids fried
    B4:   Ordinavu **u pisci spata**, no i calamari friùti.   (–CC, –FF)
          I-ordered the sword fish, not the squids fried
          'I ordered sword fish, not fried squids'

2. Experimental results

The analysis of the experimental results confirms an interesting correlation between fronting and clefting. Languages resorting to FF as a generalized focus strategy only marginally admit CC (Lambrecht 2001). Further results can be summarized as follows (see Tables 1 and 2 for the acceptability scores on a scale of 0 to 100):

a) In answers to questions, Sicilian native speakers never accept clefts (not even reduced clefts, which are possible in the same context in Italian, cf. Belletti 2005). With contrastive focus, instead, CC obtained scores above the threshold of marginality, but only when the clefted constituent was the subject, and when a past tense was used. Non-cleft focalization is decisively preferred in any case, thus representing the main strategy adopted by native speakers to mark narrow focus, to the expenses of alternative structures such as CC.

b) A syntactic possibility that is generally overlooked is the fronting of the focus constituent in CC (i.e. [+CC, +FF]). This option is possible in Sicilian, although limited to the contexts described in (a).

c) FF (i.e. [–CC, +FF]) and postverbal focalization (i.e. [–CC, –FF]) obtained almost identical scores. FF is preferred only when an additional interpretation of surprise or unexpectedness is intended or is triggered by the discourse conditions (this interpretation however was not directly tested in this experiment).

d) FF and postverbal focalization are not sensitive to the focus type: both information and contrastive focus are possible in the left periphery of the sentence, as well as in the clause-internal focus projection. Clefts, on the other hand, have specialized for a contrastive focus with a strong specificational function (mainly, with respect to the subject).

These results show that the association of a given focus-marking construction with a specific interpretation and pragmatic environment must be language-specific. On the one hand, the interpretive distinction posited for Italian in Belletti's analysis does not seem to extend to Sicilian; on the other, these data endorse the necessity, at the basis of Belletti's analysis, to distinguish between subject and non-subject clefts as two different structural types.

Table 1: Average of acceptability rate in answers to questions

	+CC,+FF	+CC, –FF	–CC, +FF	–CC, –FF
Subject	27.81	20.43	86.85	81.22
Object	21.21	17.06	83.16	86.03
PP	27.8	23.7	84.47	85.91
TOT.	25.60	20.39667	84.82	84.38

Table 2: Average of acceptability rate with contrastive interpretation

	+CC, +FF	+CC, –FF.	–CC, +FF	–CC, –FF
Subject	55.68	59.61	72.88	68.94
Object	37.36	40.52	73.5	77.87
PP	39.78	52.48	76.47	73.3

TOT.	44.27	50.87	74.28	73.37

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