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Invariance and variation in the ordering of Topic and Focus.

Abstract.

The search for invariant properties and the observation of variation and its limits are two essential components of cartographic studies and, more generally, of comparative syntax. The identification of such properties is of fundamental importance for nourishing the construction of theoretical models and improving our understanding of the language faculty. The aim is, as usual, to identify the principles ruling linguistic computations, and to deductively connect them to the empirical facts, thus providing explanations for the observed generalizations.

Certain ordering properties observed in cartographic studies appear to be invariant across languages. For instance, much of the hierarchical structure of the IP, as identified in Cinque (1999) and much related work, appears not to vary across languages. But certain properties manifest variation also in this structural domain, as Cinque points out: for instance, the position of overt negation markers can vary considerably across languages, much as the positions expressing morphological agreement with subjects or other arguments. Clearly, here as elsewhere, we need principles and parameters, in order to capture invariance and variation in a restrictive setting.

The invariant properties of cartographic representations call for principled explanations. The structure of principles involved may concern principles operating within the syntactic box (principles of locality, of labeling, etc), and principles operating at the interfaces with sound and meaning. In previous work I appealed to the interpretive principles associated to criterial heads to explain the uniqueness of the left peripheral focus position, systematically observed across languages, as opposed to the possible occurrence of more than one topic, which is permitted in many languages (Rizzi 1997, 2013).

In this presentation I would like to address the fact that, in many languages, the topic position (or positions, in case of multiple topics), obligatorily occurs higher than the focus position. E.g., the following Gungbe example (1) (with the Top marked element preceding the Foc-marked one) is well-formed, whereas subverting the order, as in (2), would give rise to deviance):

(1)   Un lìn   [[wémà éhè **yà**   Súrù **w**   [--   -ná   xíá-   ]]]
       1SG think   that   book DEM **TOP**   Suru **FOC**   have-to read-3SG
       'I think that this book, SURU should read.'

(2) * Un lìn   [[Súrù   **w**   wémà éhè **yà** [--   -ná xíá-   ]]]
       1SG think   that   Suru   **FOC**   book DEM **TOP** have-to read-3SG
       'I think that SURU, this book, should read.'   (Gungbe, E.O.Aboh, p.c. 22-5-2018)

The hypothesis I would like to make here is that this ordering follows from a simple and natural assumption about the interpretation of comments in Topic – Comment structures, i.e., the hypothesis that a comment must contain a Focus position. This requirement is satisfied in (1) but not in (2).

In the presentation, I would like to argue for an approach to the interpretive properties of criterial configurations which specifies this requirement, and address various issues that arise in this connection. In particular:

-   Some languages appear to admit topic positions following left peripheral foci (e.g. Italian, which led me to an initial approach to the LP not incorporating the ordering constraint, in Rizzi 1997). How can we express this form of cross-linguistic variation?
-   What ordering constraints do we observe in the lower scope-discourse zone in the vP periphery (Belletti 2004)? How are the orderings in the two peripheries related?