A Flexible Analysis of Topic Typology and Distribution
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Synopsis: According to Cartography, a topic becomes specified as being Shifting, Contrastive or Familiar as a result of being moved to corresponding dedicated functional projections hosting these features. Drawing on data from a variety of Romance languages, I argue that these types of rigid analyses are unwarranted: if we assume that topics move to escape a domain marked as focus, not only can we account for why the distribution of the different types of topics is extremely flexible, but also for why different topic placements are associated with different focal meanings. We also see that the type of a topic is not a function of its absolute position in the clause, but rather of its relative position with respect to the focus, and of the type of such a focus. Types of Topics: Traditionally, (at least) three different types of topics have been assumed: Shifting (or Aboutness) topics, Contrastive topics and Familiar (or Continuity) topics. Shifting topics (STs) mark a shift in the conversation, whereas Contrastive topics (CTs) create oppositional pairs with respect to other topics. Finally, Familiar topics (FTs) are given, d-linked constituents which are used to simply reiterate an existing sentence topic. The one in (1) the hierarchy of topic projections in the Left Periphery according to Frascarelli (2012:182):

(1) [ForceP [ShiftP [ContrP [IntP [FocP [FamP* [FinP [IP

An inherent problem with (1), or any variation thereof, is that the distribution of the different types of topics is significantly more flexible than what rigid sequences like (1) would suggest. A case in point is represented by the relative distribution of CTs with respect to elements merged in IntP. Interrogative constituents merged in IntP are particularly relevant when testing distribution properties because, in many languages, these are the only wh-constituents which do not trigger fronting of the inflection to C, and which can thus be followed by constituents other than the fronted inflection (Rizzi 1996). According to (1), CTs should precede elements merged in IntP, and yet we see that a CT (underlined) can surface both before and after the wh-word “why” (in bold), which is base-generated in IntP (Rizzi 2001):

(2) ¿Por qué el pan lo vendiste, y el pescado lo regalaste? (Spanish)
   Why the bread it(cl) you-have sold, and the fish it(cl) you-have given for free?
(3) Entiendo por qué quieres estudiar Francés, pero inglés, ¿por qué lo quieres estudiar?
   I understand why you want to study French, but English, why it(cl) you-want to-study?

Note that all examples featuring in this abstract would be equally acceptable regardless of whether the topic is a PP or a DP, which excludes that a given judgment might be due to a hanging topic reading. Topic Movement as Triggered by [Repel Focus]: The flexibility in the distribution of CTs can be accounted for if we resort to a foot-driven account of topic movement. Following an idea originally presented in Platzack (1996) (see also van Craenenbroeck (2006), Neeleman & van de Koot (2008)), I argue in particular that topics move because they must escape domains marked as [+ Focus]. Platzack (1996) argued that, next to Attract F, there is an operation called Repel F: any constituent marked as [repel F] must move out of a domain marked as [+ F]. Assume that topics are marked [repel Focus], i.e. they have to leave the focus domain of the clause: we predict that the material to the right of the landing site of a left-dislocated topic should always be interpreted as being in focus (for topics which appear to the left, but are actually right-dislocated, see Samek-Lodovici (2015)). Indeed, we see that different topic placements might not correlate with different topic types, but they always correlate with different focal meanings:

(4) Cambiando completamente discorso... (=Changing topic...)
   a) Il canestro, perché non lo regali al vicino?
      The hoop, why not it(cl) you-give to-the neighbor?
   b) Perché il canestro non lo regali al vicino?
      Why the hoop not it(cl) you-give to-the neighbor?

What differentiates (4a) from (4b) is not the type of topic: both alternatives can be grammatically preceded by the expression changing topic, hence the hoop qualifies as a ST in both. Whereas (4a) is a neutral question, however, (4b) reads as a specific suggestion to give the hoop to the neighbor. The difference
between (4a-b) follows under the analysis being developed here: under a [repel Focus] analysis, we predict that only the verb and the PP are in focus in (4b), whereas in (4a), it is the whole sentence minus the topic that is in focus. As such, no interpretative effect associated with having only the IP in focus arises in (4a). The main advantage of a foot-driven analysis is that it predicts that the landing site of a moved topic should not be fixed, since movement is triggered by the topic itself, i.e. by the foot, and not the head, of the chain.

**The Material in the Scope of the Topic Determines Its Type:** Although there is no one-to-one correspondence between syntactic projections and topic types, some syntactic positions seem to be more likely than others to host a specific type of topic. To account for this, I propose that just as the distribution of topics is a function of the (size of) the material in focus, so is their type. For example, I argue that the only requirement for a topic to be contrastive is that focused material be in its scope; this follows from the standard assumption that the meaning of a CT is dependent on the presence of a set of alternative predictions (Büring 2003). It follows that topics which scope over foci always can (but need not) be contrastive, whereas post-focal never can. This type of analysis generates a number of predictions. The first is that right-dislocated topics, which necessarily follow both in situ and fronted foci, can never be contrastive, as it has indeed been observed by a number of authors (cf. Benincà & Poletto 2004, Brunetti 2009, Samek-Lodovici 2015). The second prediction is that any topic can be a CT as long as it scopes over material in focus; the relative height of the focus is inconsequential. Indeed, if the focus does not front to the Left Periphery, a CT can surface very low in the structure. Take (5), where the CT follows a fronted modifier, which is merged very low in the LP according to Rizzi’s (2004) hierarchy of the Left Periphery:

(5) Ho detto che **rapidamente** Ugo *il pane* l’ha venDUTO, e che *il pesce* l’ha regaLATO.  (Italian)

*I said that rapidly Ugo the bread it(cl)-has SOLD, and that the fish it(cl)-he-has doNATED.*

**The Size of the Focus Value Primes for Contrast:** In a similar vein, I argue that the size of the focus value determines how likely it is for a corresponding topic to be interpreted as being contrastive. When presented in isolation, constructions like the one in (6), which feature a verum focus, were observed to be statistically more likely (8 out 11 Spanish speakers) to elicit a contrastive continuation than corresponding examples with no verum focus (for which only 5 out 11 speakers produced a contrastive continuation). Similar results were also replicated for languages like Italian and French:

(6) **El pan, Juan sí lo comió ...**  (Spanish)

* The bread, Juan yes it(cl) ate...

Focus value: [[Juan ate x], [Juan did not eat x]]

I contend that this is because the focus value of (6) is a closed set whose members are both limited in number and predictable: by general Gricean reasoning, the hearer will infer that there must be another entity y to which the second proposition in the focus value does apply. This implicature is however cancellable, and indeed, provided an appropriate context, even a topic associated with a restricted focus value can be interpreted as not contrastive. **Shifting Topics and Sentence-Wide Foci** I also argue that the shifting flavor associated with structurally high topics is an artifact of the size of the material in focus. If a topic surfaces as the leftmost element in the sentence, the rest of the sentence is marked as being in focus. This situation is compatible with contexts where a shift in the discourse has taken place: a new topic has been introduced, hence the associated comment is often all in focus. Crucially, sentence-wide foci are not restricted to situations where a shift in the discourse has taken place: indeed, I show that it is possible to find examples where structurally high topics refer to previously introduced, and hence familiar, entities.