

# A multimodal approach to markedness in spoken French

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## Abstract

This study aims at examining the links between marked structures in the syntactic and prosodic domains (fronting and focal accent), and the way the two types of contrast can be reinforced by gestures. It was conducted on a corpus of 1h30 of spoken French, involving three pairs of speakers in dialogues. Results show that although the tendency is for marked constructions both in syntax and prosody not to be reinforced by gestures, there is still a higher proportion of gesture reinforcing with prosodic marking than with syntactic fronting. The paper describes which eyebrow and head movements as well as hand gestures are more liable to accompany the two operations. Beyond these findings, the study gives an insight into the current models proposed in the literature for gesture–speech production. © 2013 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Contrast; Fronted syntactic constructions; Prosodic emphasis; Gesture reinforcement; Gesture–speech production models

## 1. Introduction

Since the introduction of the concept by Halliday (1967), quite a large body of research described *Information Structure* in discourse, which refers to “the partitioning of sentences into categories such as focus, background, topic, comment etc...” (Büring, 2007:445). Information focus has been described by Halliday as “one kind of emphasis, that whereby the speaker marks out a part (which may be the whole) of a message block as that which he wishes to be interpreted as informative” (1967:204). In this paper, we are especially interested in the expression of focus on parts of message blocks in what can generally be termed *marked structures*. Dooley and Levinson (2000:38) describe unmarked utterances as “configurations [which] are susceptible to a variety of interpretations, [and] hence become general-purpose, default constructions”, whereas “marked constructions are used only for specific discourse-pragmatic purposes”. Lambrecht, in a more specific way, describes the difference between marked structures and

unmarked ones saying that “while the marked member [of a sentence] is positively specified for some pragmatic feature, the unmarked member is neutral with respect to this feature” (1994:14) and that “given a pair of allosentences, one member is pragmatically unmarked if it serves two discourse functions while the other member serves only one of them” (op. cit.). He explains that in syntax for instance, whereas a sentence showing regular SVO constituent order can be interpreted as an all-new sentence type (in broad focus), it may also be the case that only one constituent of the sentence is informative and therefore under (narrow) focus. Such a sentence is unmarked in terms of its interpretation. On the contrary, a clefted sentence for instance only permits the narrow-focus reading and is therefore marked insofar as it establishes some sort of contrast which has been defined as the way “each entity, predication, etc. in an utterance refers back to, alters and/or updates the existing discourse model” (Calhoun, 2009:56).

In speech, contrast can be operated in different modes. In the verbal mode, one way of establishing contrast is by using fronted constructions – also termed elsewhere *thematic* or *topicalized constructions* (Combettes, 1999) – such as clefted sentences, for instance. Lambrecht (1994) distinguishes three focus-structure types in the syntactic domain which all express some sort of contrast: *predicate focus*,

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*argument focus* and *sentence focus*. The three types of contrast will be described in Section 2.1 of this paper.

In the vocal mode, contrast is operated by the production of accents that “stand out as perceptually more prominent than newness accents” (Krahmer and Swerts, 2001:391). By *newness accents*, the authors mean accents produced in unmarked utterances with a broad focus interpretation, i.e. in which all the information is new and no particular item is discursively salient. We will see in Section 2.2 of this paper that, similarly to what is found in the syntactic domain, different types of contrasts can also be expressed through prosodic means that play different functions in discourse.

In the visual mode, some co-speech gestures are not necessarily linked to the semantic content of the speech they accompany. For instance, unlike iconic gestures, hand beats do not carry semantic features. They are produced as a way of drawing the listener’s attention to some element of speech, i.e. contrast this item with surrounding information, although it remains to be known what type of gesture exactly may establish such a contrast. One way of enquiring into this question is to look at the type of gesture produced together with marked utterances in other modes. In previous work (Ferré et al., 2007), it was observed that reinforcing gestures tended to be produced together with degree adverbs and connectors (discourse markers which introduce a conversational sequence). This is not surprising if we consider that degree adverbs are more emphatic in nature than other types of adverbs and that connectors are used to distinguish the sequence they introduce from previous discourse and therefore establish a contrast. We are not aware of other studies in which the relationship between gesture and (morpho-)syntactic units are looked into. However, quite a number of studies enquired into the relationships between gestural and prosodic marking and they will be described in Section 2.3.

Much in the same line of research, the working hypothesis developed in this paper is that utterances may be – but are not necessarily – marked in several modes simultaneously, and that this potential combination of marking strategies enables to “distinguish different degrees of focus in utterances which show variable discursive saliency”<sup>1</sup> (Lacheret-Dujour, 2003:159). In a corpus of conversational French described in Section 3, we therefore examine the links – or absence of links – between utterances which are marked in the syntactic domain – namely fronted constructions – and utterances marked in the prosodic domain believing that “kontrast can be predicted by syntactic and prosodic features and their interaction” (Calhoun, 2009:53). We also look at the gestures which systematically accompany contrast in the two modes. In the final discussion, we show how the findings of this study are in (dis)agreement with current gesture–speech production models proposed in the literature.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Syntactic fronting

Considering marked constructions in the syntactic domain, Lambrecht (1994) distinguishes three types of focus structures that show similarity in form – fronting – but assume different functions: *predicate focus*, *argument focus* and *sentence focus*. As summarized in Lacheret-Dujour (2003:137–138), the three types of focus have the following functions:

#### 2.1.1. Predicate focus

It corresponds to dislocations and topicalizations and its role is to introduce a new topical referent in the mental representation of the listener (left dislocations and topicalizations) or maintain a topical referent in the mental representation of the listener (right dislocations – which were not considered in the present paper). Dislocated elements, according to Dooley and Levinson (2000:37), have “their own intonation contours, are intermediate in phonological prominence, and their task of relocating a cohesive tie is intermediate in newsworthiness between focus and presupposition”. An example of left dislocation in French<sup>2</sup> is “**Les ânes**, c’est vraiment insupportable” (*The donkeys, they are terrible*). In this example, the dislocation is of a full Noun Phrase, which is co-referent with the pronoun in the matrix clause. However, dislocation may also be made with a pronoun as in “**nous**, ça nous barrait” (lit. *Us, we were bored*). One must note that pronominal dislocation is much more frequent in spoken French than it is in spoken English, and that all personal pronouns may be detached. This type of dislocation is generally used in its contrastive value in written French. Gregory and Michaelis (2001) made the same observation for English and even observed that this type of dislocation is also dependent on genre and familiarity. Topicalization is very close in form to dislocation, the difference between them being that “TOP contains a gap in the clause which corresponds to an argument position that the pre-clausal NP can be construed as filling, whereas LD [left dislocation] contains an argument-position pronoun which is coreferential with the pre-clausal NP” (Gregory and Michaelis, 2001:1667). In speech, topicalizations are almost always introduced by a topic marker (like *concerning*, *about*, ...). An example of topicalization is “**Au niveau animaux**, c’est tout ce qu’ils ont” (lit. *Concerning animals, it is all they have* = *These are the only animals they have*).

#### 2.1.2. Argument focus

It corresponds to cleft and pseudo-cleft constructions. It aims at “identifying an argument for a given proposition” (Lambrecht, 1994:336). Simple focus establishes a contrast between the argument and any other type of information

<sup>1</sup> Our translation.

<sup>2</sup> The examples provided in this section are from the CID corpus of spoken French described in Section 3.

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