

On the expression of themes and information foci

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This talk will discuss the expression of themes and information foci in Catalan. Themes are defined as the utterance fragment which replicates content already present in the Question Under Discussion. Since, by definition, themes encode highly salient material, one may wonder why they are uttered at all. Following Vallduví (2016), we will explore the idea that themes signal that what is being addressed is not the maximally prominent QUD, but a related one. Two discourse-completion studies will be presented showing that utterances with theme often signal that the QUD being addressed is broader than the maximally prominent one. As for information focus, its realization in Catalan, as well as in Spanish, has been the object of considerable debate in the literature. While, based on introspection, most scholars claim that information focus, including subjects, must appear at the end of the sentence, others have questioned this claim on the basis of experimental data, arguing that information focus can occur preverbally, especially in the case of focal subjects. These experimental studies, however, adopt an elicitation technique that often forces participants to produce a full sentence as an answer to a question in a context in which the most natural answer would have been a focal fragment. Two experiments (a production task and an acceptability judgment task) will be presented in which the stimuli were designed so that participants would spontaneously utter a full sentence instead of a fragment, without being explicitly instructed to do so. In the production task, participants in both the Catalan and Spanish versions of the experiment overwhelmingly produced postverbal foci both with subjects and with objects, along with a marginal number of preverbal and clefted foci. The acceptability judgment task confirmed that postverbal focus is always preferred over preverbal focus. However, a focal interpretation of preverbal subjects cannot be totally excluded, particularly in Spanish. We interpret this cross-linguistic difference in the light of the hypothesis formulated in Leonetti (2017), according to which Catalan is more restrictive than Spanish with respect to the mapping between syntax and information structure.