

## **Topic accent and prosodic structure**

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### **Abstract & References**

This paper aims to contribute to the debate concerning the prominence of the topic by focussing on the general properties of prosodic structure. The perspective I will adopt combines the findings concerning topic accents with general research on prosody.

Topic accents have been studied in several European languages, such as English, German, French, Greek and Italian among others. This paper deals with a regional variety of Italian, Neapolitan Italian, although a number of general considerations could be equally applied to other languages in principle.

In this paper I suggest that the study of topic-related prosodic phenomena should be integrated with the results of the general investigation of prosody, in order to develop an integrated approach. Taking the preceding findings on the prosody of topics and on the phonology of Neapolitan Italian as a starting point, it is argued that topic is not simply associated with a unique accent, rather with a bundle of melodic and rhythmic phenomena.

Furthermore, it is claimed that topical accentual prominences can be seen as part of the general phenomenology of the prosodic structure. In fact, the actual realisation of the prosodic marking is affected by syntagmatic factors: topic accentuation appears to vary according to the different position occupied by the topic with respect to the prosodic nucleus.

Finally, a functional perspective is proposed for the interpretation of the topic-related prosodic events. This perspective is meant to provide a general frame for the analysis of the relationship between the prosodic level and topicality. I propose considering the *pragmatic function* of topic corresponding, to an *abstract prosodic form*, which may have several actual *realisations* according to the actual linear position of the topic in the utterance. By adopting a functional perspective it is possible to take for granted the structural autonomy of prosody and information organisation while analysing the interactions between the two linguistic levels.

The paper is composed of two main parts. The first (§§ 2, 3) presents the theoretical background of this research; the second (§§ 4, 5) analyses and discuss some data from Italian task-oriented speech.

In the first sections a number of studies on topic accent in English and Italian are reviewed (§ 2). The following section (§ 3) sums up several studies providing the theoretical background for the analysis of Neapolitan Italian intonation. Section § 4 is devoted to the analysis of the tonal contour of a number of utterances with and without sentence topics. Finally, in the last sections (§§ 4.4, 5) the results are summarised and discussed and the general conclusions are drawn.

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