

Right-dislocations: influence of information structure on prosodic phrasing and intonation*

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This study discusses results of three experiments investigating whether right-dislocations are accented in Catalan, and whether they compulsorily form independent units. The latter hypothesis – at least in its stronger version – finds no support in either of the experiments. As for accentuation, results in Experiment 1 and 2 confirm that right-dislocations are mostly deaccented, though Experiment 3 offers contradictory results. Discrepancies are explained in terms of differences in the information structure in the discourse.

1 INTRODUCTION

Right-dislocated sentences are phrases like the clause “those girls” in “I met them yesterday, those girls” and “that vanilla ice-cream”, in “Girls like it, that vanilla ice-cream”.

According to most accounts right-dislocations belong to the class of sentence-external elements which are generally characterised by their not being dominated by any other element higher up in the syntactic hierarchy, with the possible exception of the root, the topmost node. (e.g. Bing 1984, Nespor & Vogel 1986, Truckenbrodt 1995, among others).

Prosodically, the central claim is that any element in this position is uttered as an independent rhythmic unit, set off by pauses, tonal boundaries, or lengthening of the last syllable. However, the picture appears more complicated as it is frequently reported that those phrases do not receive any accentuation at all.

Both claims are in overt contradiction, and pose a theoretical riddle for the most commonly accepted intonational framework, the Autosegmental Metrical system. One of the main tenets of the Autosegmental Metrical (AM) system is that the minimal intonational units should contain at least one pitch accent, and should be delimited by boundaries such as pauses, tonal movements, or lengthening. There is no room in such a system for phrases which are deaccented and separated by clear pauses at the same time.

This theoretical incompatibility would explain why, in the literature, such structures are sometimes described as accented and at others as unaccented. This is the first hypothesis of this study, namely that right-dislocations (and by extension, any other similar structures) are really deaccented, and their apparently erratic behaviour is just an artifact of different theoretical interpretations.

On the other hand, we cannot preclude that, in effect, the same structure can receive an accentual pattern or not depending on its role in the wider context in the discourse. This possibility was pointed out by Liberman (Liberman 1975). This would be in agreement with the repeated observations about the lack of isomorphism between syntactic and phonological structures. It is hardly ever the case that a given grammatical construction corresponds exactly with a particular phonological form. Why should this happen with right-dislocations, sentential adverbs, or any other of the so-called sentence-external elements?

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