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# Contrastive focus and contrastive topics in Greek

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**Abstract**

This paper puts forward the idea that in Greek contrast is an independent feature, represented in syntax by a preverbal position. Contrast can be assigned to different sorts of entities, topics and foci, once a set/list of contrasting alternatives/entities has been introduced or directly implied by the discourse. Evidence for an independent treatment of contrast is provided by similarities in the distribution of contrastive topics and focus. The asymmetries between the two are explained as a result of general differences between topics and focus.

## 1 Contrastive focus

Consider the following data:[1]

(1) A: *who did you see?*

B: *I saw John*

Example (1b) can be divided into two parts in terms of information packaging (Valduvi 1993). The first part, *I saw* consists of the old information or ground of the utterance. *John* is the new information, or focus. This is a case of narrow and presentational/non-contrastive focus. Consider now the following contexts:

(2) A: *Did you see John or Peter?*[2]

B: *I saw John*

Now, imagine a context of misunderstanding where one of the interlocutors utters (3) in order to solve the misunderstanding

(3) *I saw John, not Peter*

[1] I would like to thank my first supervisor Caroline Heycock for helping me formulate vague intuitions about the data presented here into more concrete ideas. I would also like to thank my second supervisor Ronnie Cann for useful comments and the State Scholarships Foundation of Greece for its financial support.

[2] Keith Mitchell pointed out to me that (2a) is ambiguous between 'did you see any one of the two, Peter or John' and 'which one of the two did you see, Peter or John'. I use (2a) with the second reading.

As in (1b), the ground part of (2b) and (3) is *I saw* and the focus part is *John*. However, the context in which (2b) and (3) appear is slightly different from that of (1a-b). Example (2a) builds an overt contrast between *John* and *Peter*, restricting the set out of which one would seek an answer. Thus, the focus part *John* of (2b), rather than simply providing new information, it in fact picks one of the two candidates contrasted in (2a) as the valid one. In a similar way, the speaker in (3) picks *John* as the one he saw and not *Peter*. This is a case of narrow, (as in case of (1b)), but contrastive focus. In English both cases are structurally token identical. As it will be shown in Section 3, in Greek the distinction between presentational/non-contrastive and contrastive focus is realised structurally by the fronting of contrastive focus.

## 2 Contrastive topics

Consider now the following data:

(4) a. *What did Mary do?*

b. *Mary bought a car*

In (4b) the ground part of the utterance is *Mary* and *bought a car* is in focus. *Mary* can be thought of as the topic[3] of (4b) in the sense of being what the rest of the utterance is going to provide information for as well as being old information in the discourse, shared by both speakers. Compare (4a-b) to the following:

(5) a. *where did they go?*

b. *Mary went to the cinema, John to Kalpna and...*

Imagine a conversation in which speaker A (5a) knows that a list of people (*they*=Mary, John...) have been to several places individually and he would like to know where each one of them went. In (5b) *Mary* is again the topic of the utterance, in the sense of being ground information, shared by both speakers. However, *Mary* is part of a list reading, somehow contrasted to the rest of the members of the list (*John...*). This is a case of contrastive topic. Note that, once a contrastive topic is introduced, contrast is directly implied in the focus part of the utterance. Thus, *to the cinema* is contrasted to *to Kalpna*, etc. However, the contrast is not exclusive as in the case of (2b) and (3b) (where Peter is excluded as a valid answer). As it will be shown in Section 4 in Greek, contrastive topics as in (5b) appear in the same structural position contrastive that focus does.

In the following sections our discussion will be based on the following assumption:

*Contrastive topics and contrastive focus can appear once contrast is overtly introduced (2a & 5a) or directly implied (3a) by the discourse.*

[3]In Valduvi's (1993) partition the ground part of an utterance, i.e. old information, can be preceded by a link. His link is what has been described here as topic.

# 3 Contrastive focus in Greek

Consider the question-answer pairs in (6a-b) and (7a-b) which build a non-contrastive context:

(6) a. *pios ide ti Maria*
who saw-3SG the Maria-ACC
'Who saw Maria?'

b. *ti Maria tin ide o Petros*
the Maria-ACC her-CL saw-3SG the Petros-NOM
'Petros saw Maria'

(7) a. *pion ide i Maria*
whom saw-3SG the Maria-NOM
'who did Maria see?'

b. *i Maria ide ton Petro*
the Maria-NOM saw-3SG the Petro-ACC
'Mary saw Petros'

In (6b) and (7b) *o Petros* and *ton Petro* are in focus (narrow-presentational/non-contrastive), appear postverbally and bear nuclear accent. Their grammatical functions, subject and object respectively, are realised by their cases (nominative and accusative). Compare (7b) to (8b) and (9a):

(8) a. *pion ide i Maria, to Yani i ton Petro?*
whom saw-3SG the Maria-NOM the Yanis-ACC or the Petro-ACC
'who did Maria see, Yanis or Petros?'

b. *ton Petro ide i Maria*
the Petro-ACC saw-3SG the Maria-NOM
'Maria saw Petros'

(misunderstanding environment)

(9) a. *ton Petro ide, ohi to Yani*
the Petro-ACC saw-3SG, not the Yanis-ACC
'S/he saw Petros, not Yanis'

b. *ide ton Petro, ohi to Yani*

In (8b) and (9a), *ton Petro* is in focus like in (7b), but it appears preverbally. What has changed here, is the fact that in (8b & 9a) the focused phrase (*ton Petro*) is in addition contrasted to another entity (*to Yani*). The preposed phrase bears nuclear accent, which in the case of (9a) is emphatic as well. In (9a) the contrast built by the context is stronger than in (8a-b), being somehow a form of correction resulting in a more emphatic utterance. In addition, example (9a) could also be rendered as (9b). In other words contrastive focus can appear in situ. However, this does not hold vice versa. Presentational/non-contrastive focus cannot be preposed. To sum up, it appears that presentational/non-contrastive focus should appear postverbally, whereas contrastive focus can appear preverbally or in situ.

Fronting of contrastive focus (CF henceforth) seems to obey several syntactic restrictions:

**i) Adjacency with the verb:**

(10a) below is ungrammatical, despite the fact that the phrase intervening between CF and the verb is the subject:

(10) a. **to YANI i Maria ide*
the Yanis-ACC the Maria-NOM saw-3SG
'Maria saw Yanis'

**ii) Extractions:**

CF can be extracted out of 'oti-clauses' (that-clauses) as in (10b) and out of indirect clauses as in (10c):

(10) b. *to YANI ipe oti ide sto sinema*
the Yanis-ACC said-3SG that saw-3SG at-the cinema
'S/he said that she saw Yanis at the cinema'

Note that in (10b) adjacency with the matrix verb is still a requirement and that CF (*to Yani*) could also appear immediately before or after the complementiser 'oti'.

(10) c. *rotise to YANI pios ide*
asked-3SG the Yanis-acc who-nom saw-3SG
'S/he asked who saw Yanis'

In (10c) *to Yani* can also appear immediately before the matrix verb (*rotise*).

**iii) No extraction out of a strong island:**

As (10d-e) show CF cannot be extracted out of adjunct clauses or complex noun phrases:

(10) d. **ta ekane ola afta to YANI ya na efharistisi*
them-CL did-3SG all these the Yanis-ACC in-order to please-3SG
'S/he did all this to please Yanis'

e. **ksero to YANI afton o opios ide*
know-1SG the Yanis-ACC him-ACC the who-NOM saw-3SG
'I know the one who saw Yanis'

# 4 Contrastive topics in Greek

Contrastive topics (CT henceforth) seem to appear in the same position CF does:

(11) a. A: *pu tus ide*
where them-CL saw-3SG
'where did s/he meet them?'

B: *to Yani ton ide sto sinema, ti Maria sto*
the Yanis-ACC him-CL saw-3SG at-the cinema, the Maria-ACC at-the
*stathmo...*
station...
'S/he saw Yanis at the cinema, Maria at the station...'

b. B: ??*ide to Yani sto sinema...*

In (11b) *to Yani* is a CT and appears preverbally. In (11b), unlike 8b, the preposed object does not bear nuclear accent and in addition the clitic (*ton*) is compulsory. Example (11c) is grammatical, but quite bad as an answer to (11a). Thus, topics cannot have a contrastive reading unless they are preposed, unlike CF which can appear in situ.

Contrastive topics seem to behave very much like contrastive focus:

**i) Adjacency with the verb:**

There is a strong tendency for adjacency, but (12a) is more tolerable than (10a):

(12) a. ?*to Yani sto sinema ton ide ke ton Petro...*
the Yanis-ACC at-the cinema him-CL saw-3SG and the Petro-ACC
'S/he saw Yanis at the cinema and Petros at...'

**ii) Extractions:**

CTs can be extracted in exactly the same way CF can, i.e. out of 'oti-clauses' (that-clauses) and indirect questions:

(12) b. *to Yani ipe oti ton ide sto sinema ke ...*
the Yanis-ACC said-3SG that him-CL saw-3SG at-the cinema
'S/he said that she saw Yanis at the cinema and...'

c. *rotise to Yani pios ton ide ke...*
asked-3SG the Yanis-ACC him-CL who-NOM saw-3SG...
'S/he asked who saw Yanis'

**iii) No extraction out of a strong island:**

Examples (12c-d) parallel those in (10d-e):

(12) d. **ta ekane ola afta to Yani ya na ton efharistisi*
them-CL did-3SG all these the Yanis-ACC in-order to him-CL please-3SG
'S/he did all this to please Yanis'

e. **ksero to Yani afton o opios ton ide*
know-1SG the Yanis-ACC him-ACC the who-NOM him-CL saw3SG
'I know the one who saw Yanis'

So, with the exception of a strict adjacency requirement, CTs and CF seem to behave in the same way. In addition, as (13) shows, only one contrastive element can be preposed per clause.[4]

(13) **ipa ta pedia i MARIA oti ta efere ke...*
said-1SG the children-ACC the MARIA-NOM that them-CL brought-3SG and...
'I said that Maria brought the children and...'

The discussion so far leads to the following generalisations:

*a) There is a unique preverbal position hosting contrastive elements, topics or foci.*

*b) Both topics and foci appear there under the same condition, i.e. once a set/list of contrasting alternatives/entities has been introduced or directly implied by the discourse.*

## 5 Asymmetries between contrastive topics and contrastive focus

CTs seem to differ from CF in many ways:

i) CF always bear nuclear accent whereas CTs never do;

ii) CF can appear postverbally as well as preverbally, whereas CTs should obligatorily appear preverbally;

iii) the requirement for adjacency with the verb is looser for CTs;

iv) CT always implies contrast in focus as well, whereas CF does not imply a CT;

v) CTs imply a list reading whereas CF is exclusive (in the sense of picking only one member of the list as the valid one and excluding the rest);

vi) CTs can (marginally) be more than one per utterance, whereas CF should be only one per utterance, as (14) shows:

[4]This is not strictly true of matrix clauses.

(14) **to YANI ide sto SINEMA*
the YANIS-ACC saw-3SG at-the CINEMA
'S/he saw Yanis at the cinema'

vii) preverbal topics are optionally contrastive whereas preverbal focus is obligatorily contrastive.

Many of the above differences could be viewed as a result of different properties topics and focus have in general, irrespective of whether they are contrastive or not. Thus, topics are not-accented in general in Greek, whereas the nuclear accent obligatorily falls on focus or part of focus. Since topics cannot be accented, there is no way they can be marked by means of phonology. Therefore, fronting is compulsory for them. Focus on the other hand can be marked *in situ* by accent placement.

The fact that CTs always imply contrast in focus whereas CF does not necessarily imply a CT follows from general facts about the information packaging of an utterance. An all-focus utterance consisting of new information only is possible, but an all-ground utterance consisting of old information only is impossible. A topic is an entity about which the speaker intends to offer some information. If s/he doesn't, the utterance remains incomplete, whereas an utterance which does not anchor to any shared knowledge (all-focus) is complete and informative.

Both CF and CTs refer to an entity chosen out of an overtly mentioned set or list of similar entities. However, CF presents the entity it refers to as 'this is the valid one and not the others'. CT on the other hand presents it as 'this is the entity to be predicated and not the others', and as a result it is not exclusive with respect to the rest of the entities of the list. Again this asymmetry between CF and CTs could be understood as a result of the different informational role of topics and focus in an utterance. Focus in (1b) (*John*) is as exclusive as in (2b) and (3a). In (2b) and (3a) what is excluded is a known individual (*Peter*) whereas in (1b) what is excluded is any possible individual who could be an answer to (1a). In a similar way *Mary*, a non-contrastive topic in (4b) and contrastive in (5b), is not exclusive in either of these examples.

The fact that CTs can be more than one in an utterance, unlike CF, seems to be generally true of non-contrastive topics and non-contrastive/presentational focus as well.[5]

Finally, the asymmetries mentioned in (iii) and (vi) above seem related to the fact that, in matrix clauses, more than one position is available preverbally for topics (one for external and one for internal.)[6] A proper discussion of this lies beyond the scope of this paper.

# 6 Contrast and binding

It has been argued so far that contrastive elements in Greek appear in a preverbal position. This section provides data suggesting that this position has several binding properties.

[5]Evidence for this fact is beyond the scope of this paper.
[6]See King's (1995) account for topics in Russian.

Consider the following:

(15) a. *i mana tu*$_i$ *agapai ton ALEXI*$_{*i/j}$
the mother-NOM his loves the ALEXI-ACC
'his mother loves Alexis'

b. * *i mana tu ton agapai ton ALEXI*
the mother-NOM his him-CL loves the ALEXI-ACC
'his mother loves Alexis'

In (15a) *ton ALEXI* is a case of contrastive focus in situ. The reading 'Alexis is loved by his own mother' is quite hard. Example (15b) is ungrammatical because of the appearance of the clitic.[7] Consider now (15c-d) in which 'ton ALEXI' has been fronted:

(15) c. *ton ALEXI*$_{*i/j}$ *agapai i mana tu*$_i$
the ALEXI-ACC loves the mother-NOM his

d. *ton ALEXI*$_i$ *ton*$_i$ *agapai i mana tu*$_i$
the ALEXI-ACC him-CL loves the mother-NOM his

Both (15c-d) are grammatical.[8] Once the clitic is introduced (15d) the reading is that 'Alexis is loved by his own mother', as the coindexing shows, which is not true of (15c). It thus seems that coindexing is triggered by the appearance of the clitic (compare( 15c-d)) as well as fronting (compare (15b & 15d)).

The picture becomes even more interesting when the above data are compared to the following, which involve wh-questions:

(16) a. *pion*$_i$ *agapai i mana tu*$_{*i/j}$
whom loves the mother-NOM his
'who does his mother love?'

b. *pion*$_i$ *ton*$_i$ *agapai i mana tu*$_i$
whom him-CL loves the mother-NOM his
'who does his (own) mother love?'

Example (16a) displays a case of weak crossover effect. However, binding is possible once a clitic is introduced in (16b). What is even more interesting is the order the answers to (16a-b) display:

(16) c. *i mana tu agapai ton Alexi*

d. *ton Alexi ton agapai i mana tu*

[7] Recall that, when fronting involves objects, topics differ from contrastive-focus in the presence vs absence of a clitic respectively.

[8] Some speakers find (15c) bad, but still much better than (15b).

(16c-d) are the answers to (16a-b) respectively. Recall that preverbal focus (*ton Alexi* in (16d)) should involve contrast. It then seems that (16b) builds some sort of contrast which (16a) does not.[9] In fact (16b) suggests a strong presupposition that the person who is loved by his own mother exists. If the presupposition that the entity we are asking for exists is strong, then it is much more likely that the set/list of entities one would choose from is more apparent. If it is true that (16b) could be uttered in a context where a list of candidates is known, then it resembles (2a) & (8a-b). In effect the order of (16d) is not surprising. Examples (15d), (16b) and (16d) seem to pattern in that they all involve fronting, contrast and a clitic, the interaction of which leads to binding. However, the way these elements interact is quite unclear and remains an open question.

# 7 Conclusions

This paper put forward the idea that contrast is an independent feature in Greek. It can be assigned to topics or focus once a set/list of contrasting entities has been introduced in the discourse. In Greek contrastive elements appear in a preverbal position which seems to be related to binding properties. Further it has been shown that, when fronted, contrastive elements should be adjacent to the verb. Fronting can take place within the boundaries of a clause, but extraction is also possible out of 'that-clauses' and indirect questions. However, similar extractions are not permissible out of strong islands.

# References


King, T.H. 1995. *Configuring Topic and Focus in Russian.* Stanford: CSLI Publications.

Vallduvi, Enric. 1993. Information Packaging: A survey. *HCRC Research Papers.* University of Edinburgh.


[9] Compare (16b) & (16d) to (8a-b).