Incidental Clauses in Spoken Catalan:
Prosodic Characteristics and Pragmatic Function

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Abstract

This paper is an investigation of incidental clauses in spoken Catalan. Our aim is to define the prosodic characteristics of incidental clauses and their functions in the discourse.

After an analysis of a sample of incidental clauses in spoken Catalan (taken from semispontaneous argumentative and narrative productions), the following conclusions are reached: incidental clauses are often produced between silences; they are produced in a lower register than the principal utterance in which they are inserted, with less intensity, with a compressed pitch range, and they tend to be followed by a noticeable tonal reset at the beginning of the continuation of the main utterance. Usually, the incidental clause is produced with a final falling tone, but clauses which have a modalisation value tend to finish with a rising tone.

Finally, we present a pragmatic interpretation of the insertion of an incidental clause within the discourse as a rupture of conversational principles, since it complicates the listener's information processing task. In the interests of successful communicative cooperation, a) the incidental clause function must have a benefit for the listener that surpasses the cost, and b) the incidental clause must be emitted with a sufficient number of clues (prosodic, gestural, syntactic, lexical, or semantic) for the listener to be able to identify it as a supplementary piece of the discourse.

1. Introduction

Speech has certain spatial and temporal limitations that inevitably mean that its production is linear. In writing, we have time to decide how to express ourselves, but in spoken production, and above all in spontaneous spoken production, there is little time available for the mental planning of the content. As a result, we may forget to give our interlocutor important information; we may rush the emission of an assertion, or may not plan the best place to introduce examples. Incidental clauses are used to introduce information at a second discursive level. This information, as we will see below, has certain special prosodic characteristics.

Incidental clauses, like parenthetical structures, have been largely neglected in linguistic studies. The majority of studies refer to the written form: many focus either on literature (cf. Forget, 2000) or on syntax, as in the case of some grammars (cf. Borgato and Salvi, 1995). So against a background in which oral production in general has never been examined, it is surprising that it is the prosodic aspects of incidental clauses that grammarians see as their defining characteristic.

2. Incidental clauses

Neither incidental clauses nor parenthetical structures have been widely studied, and a clear theorisation of these areas is lacking. Incidental clauses have sometimes been treated as types of parenthetical structures, and sometimes vice versa: parenthetical structures have been considered as incidental forms. On other occasions, the two types have been treated as a single structure. Alongside the term *parenthetical and incidental structures*, we find other related terms such as *parenthetical insertions* (cf. Tenani, 1996), *parenthetical clarifications* and *parenthetical comments*.

The last two cases in particular show that a certain confusion between the structural characteristics of these clauses and their function in the discourse is sometimes reflected in the designation of the term itself. In addition, parenthesis is often considered in terms of written texts, often literary, and starting from punctuation conventions; these conventions cannot always be transferred to spoken language, especially when we are dealing with spontaneous prosody.

We consider incidental clauses as prosodically autonomous linguistic structures, which tend to be syntactically autonomous as well. They are inserted in the middle of a main utterance, and they often constitute a unit of meaning that is complementary to this main utterance, or to one of its parts, either prior to or following the production of the incidental clause. Incidental clauses can range from very simple syntagms to long, complex constructions, and they can be inserted at any point of discourse, unlike other structures such as vocatives or dislocated elements, which can only be inserted in marginal zones of the utterance and which cannot break its prosodic integrity, as Borgato and Salvi (1995) have established.

In an analysis of intonational and syntactic characteristics of incidental clauses in French, Delomier and Morel (1986) concluded that the phenomenon is produced when an utterance E_1 is in the process of enunciation, and another utterance E_2 suddenly appears at a different intonational level. They use the term E_3 to refer to the continuation of discourse after E_2. We will also use the terms E_1, E_2 and E_3 (E from the French term *énoncé*) in our study.

We start from the assumption that the different linguistic levels and verbal forms are produced together, that these structures are normally both prosodically autonomous and syntactically and semantically stable and that they may have a specific function inside the discourse.

3. Analysis

3.1. Methodology

This study is the result of a corpus analysis of 17 semispontaneous conversations from the COD interviews (a Dialectal Oral Corpus compiled by the Departament de Filologia Catalana at the Universitat de Barcelona).

The material used is argumentative or narrative discourse in the Catalan of Barcelona, almost soliloquised, semiguided by the interviewer. We consider that this type of text is well suited to the study of incidental clauses. The interviews were recorded on DAT (Digital Audio Tape) and then digitalised. We selected 30 clear oral utterances, which were suitable for analysis by a sound program. Of these utterances, 20 presented curves that were suitable for study (the rest were not sufficiently clear, or were too long). We isolated the incidental clauses with the sound reproduction and edition programs CoolEdit 2000 and Creative WaveStudio, and analysed their F_0 contour with the intonational analysis program PitchWorks. The use of these tools enabled us to combine instrumental and auditory analysis.

3.2. Incidental clauses characterisation

The incidental clauses selected from the spoken Catalan corpus highlighted a number of constant prosodic characteristics. Most of them have been described by other authors (cf. Delomier and Morel, 1986):

- E_2 is produced between silences (there can also be aspirations, sounds indicating doubt, etc., in this case in front of E_2)
- E_2 has a falling tone in relation to E_1
- E_2 often appears at a greater speed than E_1
- in E_3 the production slows down
- at the beginning of E_3 there is a rising tone

Initially, we thought that incidental clauses (henceforth E_2) would have a lower register than the main utterance, a very compressed pitch range and a final falling tone. However, although most cases studied present these characteristics, there are also examples in which E_2 presents little difference in register vis-à-vis E_1, or there is no important silence before E_2, or E_2 has greater pitch range than expected and has a final rising tone. This is probably in agreement with Borgato and Salvi (1995)'s proposal of *parenthetical intonation* or *particular suspension intonation* with reference to parenthetical structures. Those authors define these intonational forms as a falling tone at the approach of the main stressed syllable in the parenthetical clause and then a rise as far the end of the clause.

The example in figure 1[1] shows a construction with an incidental clause that is atypical, although it occurs more often than we expected: in fact, we found a number of examples of this construction in our corpus:
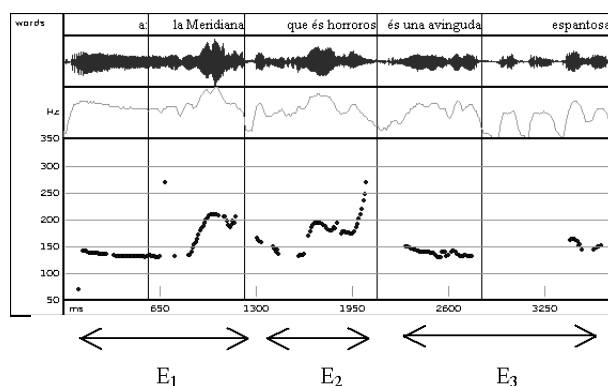
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[1] The transcription system is an adaptation from Du Bois *et al.* (1993), based on tonal groups. The sign «_» designs a maintenance intonation at the end of the tonal group; the mark «\» means a final descending intonation; «- --» represents a group truncation.

Fig. 1 E_1 *a:_ la Meridiana_*
          E_2 *que és horrorosa_*
          E_3 *és una avinguda_ espantosa_*

('mhm, the Meridiana [an avenue in Barcelona], which is horrible, it is an ugly avenue...')

The melodic pattern of this production — which, in the written form, is not recognisable as an incidental clause — makes us think of certain enumerations that can be produced with this prominent final rising tone and with a closer relationship between the items: there are no important silences before or after E_2 (indeed there are hardly any silences subsequent to E_2), and the melodic continuity with E_1 is perfect. In this case, contrary to our expectations, E_3 seems more autonomous than the others. So we can only recognise E_2 as an incidental clause through acoustic perception.

Obviously, there must be a reason for the prosodic differences between the utterance in figure 1 and the other cases. E_1 and E_2 present greater prosodic cohesion, but there is also a closer syntactic relationship (E_2 constitutes a subordinate phrase that refers to the noun immediately previous to it, the last element of E_1). E_3 has a certain prosodic autonomy and an unusual tonal fall because it constitutes an apposition to E_2 and it acts as an incidental clause of the incidental clause. Finally, we need to study whether E_2's final rise is related to the modalising value of the comment in the discourse, because these patterns can be caused by emotional externalisation.

3.3. Functions of incidental clauses inside the discourse

If, as we have said, the different linguistic levels are closely connected in the production of incidental clauses, then it is possible that discursive and contextual elements also play an important role. For this reason, we will examine the function of the incidental clauses inside the discourse context. Borgato and Salvi (1995) distinguish between two types of parenthetical phrases: modalising, and subordinate. Delomier and Morel (1986) do not formulate a typology, but they speak of the role of incidental clauses as introducers in the discourse of referential precision, modalisation, explicative help, and metadiscursive comment.

In the conversations analysed, incidental clauses are used with very diverse functions: to rectify, to qualify information, to add an example, to look for information, or to introduce a subjective comment. To systematise the diversity that we have found, we grouped incidental structures into two basic functions, the most frequent in our corpus: reformulative and modalising.

3.3.1. The reformulative function

One of the main functions of incidental clauses is reformulation. When we speak, we often make mistakes, we speak too soon, and we forget information, so it is sometimes important to interrupt the discourse and add this information in an incidental clause. Our corpus provides many examples of this type of incidental clauses:

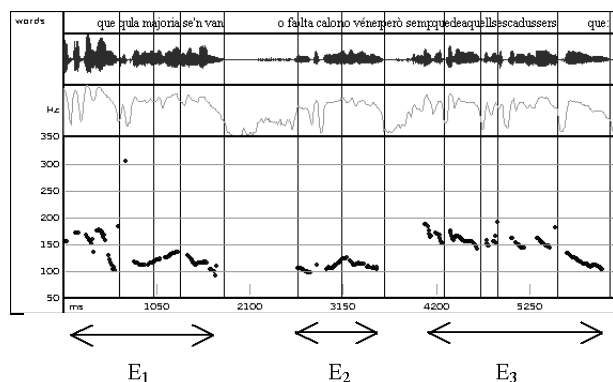a) to qualify an excessively categorical affirmation (cf. fig. 2):

Fig. 2 E_1 *hi ha poca gent_ que es quedin\
la majoria se'n van*
         E_2 *o fa molta calor i no vénen*
         E_3 *però sempre queden el- --
aquells escadussers_ que:_*

('not many people are staying, most of them are leaving, or it's too hot and they are not coming, but some always stay..., the few people who...')

b) to correct a mistake:

E_1 fa dies_   que voldria- --
E_2 ai fa dies\
E_3 fa temps que_ penso que m'agradaria_
      anar a Praga\

('for some days I've thinking of..., not for some days, for quite a long time, I've been thinking of going to Prague')

c) to remember information that we have forgotten:

E_1 ara han fet tres o quatre:_
E_2 e_ com es deia allò\
E_3 a la Fabra i Coats_

('now they've made three or four..., mhm, what was it called? In the Fabra i Coats...')

d) to illustrate with an example:

E_1 però_ les noies_ que_
E_2 com nosaltres potser\
E_3 que als quinze anys_

('but, the girls who, like us perhaps, at the age of 15...')

e) to add some forgotten information that we consider important for the interpretation of the message:

E_1 dos o tres anys_ acaben de vendre un pis_
E_2 o sigui\ ja de segona mà\
E_3 per trenta-tres millons\

('two or three years..., they've just sold an apartment, I mean, a second hand one, for 33 million...')

f) to check whether the previous information is known to the listener:

E_1 tota aquesta zona_ fins a arribar a:_
E_2 bueno\ no sé si ho coneixes\
E_3 però fins a arribar a la plaça_ tot és peatonal\

('all this area, up to that part..., well, I'm not sure if you know it, but all the way to the square is for pedestrians only are')

In the majority of incidental clauses classified as reformulators, the prosodic characteristics are as mentioned above, in figure 2: the presence of an utterance E_1, produced with a final falling tone followed by a pause, which may be a silence, an aspiration or a sound expressing doubt; the presence of an incidental clause E_2, often produced in a compressed pitch range, in a lower register; the clause E_2 may reproduce the melodic shape of the previous utterance (though not necessarily) and its final tone is often falling; finally, we find the utterance E_3, usually preceded by a silence, beginning with a very marked tonal reset, with a strong F_0 rise that may coincide with a lexical item (usually a discourse marker: *però, i, o, doncs...* — 'but, and, or, so...') that often involves vowel lengthening and helps to mark the utterance reset after the incidental clause.

3.3.2. Modalising function

Another important function of incidental clauses is modalisation. Speakers always adopt a position, an attitude, an opinion, in the discourse that they emit; they can express themselves explicitly in subjective discourse, or they can avoid individual marks in objective discourse. Incidental clauses can be a useful resource as a modalising mark, since the intonational and syntactic level change seems to be an optimal opportunity for making a key change as well: an objective discourse can be interrupted by a subjective stroke in the incidental clause (cf. fig. 1).

In literature, this resource is widely exploited resource to introduce ironic comments. The incidental clause, E_2, can be produced in a different phrasal form to E_1 and E_3. For instance, a question can be inserted in an assertive phrase (but this is not possible vice versa):

E_1 i:_ llavors_ anàvem_
E_2 oi que era fantàstic\
E_3 anàvem_ viatjàvem per tot el món\

('and then we were going, it was fantastic, wasn't it?, we were going, we were travelling around the world')

The most frequently studied modalising resources are the use of subjective lexical elements, such as verbs (to think, to believe, to deserve, to lament...), adverbs (evidently, fortunately, unfortunately, too much...), adjectives (horrifying, marvellous, positive...), or the use of the assertive phrasal form such as interrogatives and exhortative sentences. But sometimes prosodic resources can by themselves constitute a form of modalisation. Castellà (1992) mentions the stressing of a word other than the last one in a sentence, a rising intonation for a positive valuation and for mocking, a falling intonation for negative valuations, and pronouncing a word syllable by syllable. In general, we observed that our examples of incidental clauses have a modalising value in the discourse; E_2 is often produced with a small final rise, as we have seen with the example in figure 1.

It is sometimes not easy to distinguish between the modalising function and reformulative function in incidental

clauses: there are some cases in which the clause has both values, and others in which it has neither. For example, it is common practice to insert tags in an incidental clause, which can be at the same time a device to rethink and rephrase E_1 (i.e. a reformulative value) and to express doubt, hesitation or reservations (a modalising value). Cf. figure 3:
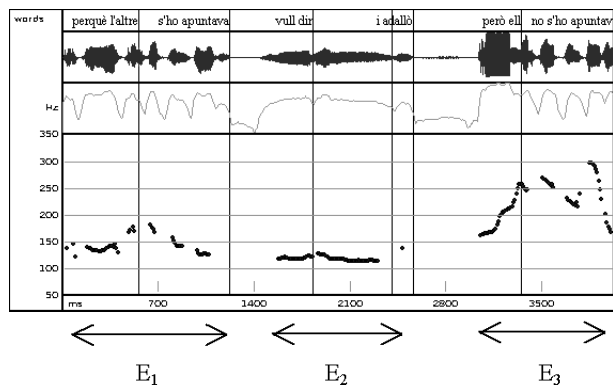

Fig. 3 E_1 *perquè l'altre s'ho apuntava*
          E_2 *vull dir_ i a:_ dallò_*
          E_3 *però ell no s'ho apuntava*

('because the other one was taking notes, I mean, and..., well, but he wasn't taking notes')

4. Discussion and conclusions

4.1. A pragmatic interpretation

In the framework of the communication act, speakers must emit discourse in such a way as to make it easy for interlocutors to decode the message with minimal cost. When the linearity of the exposition is suddenly altered, as in incidental clauses, we believe that the speaker is contravening certain co-operation norms: indeed, the autonomous, marginal and extradiscursive structure of incidental clauses is by itself a transgression of the communicative principles, especially Grice's manner maxim, as these clauses increase the difficulty of processing the information.

It is true that, in general, speakers decide to introduce an incidental clause to help their interlocutors, to provide additional information that may be necessary to decode the message. But, in any case, it is a restorative mechanism; in ideal conditions the information would have been given in the discourse and the linearity would have been maintained.

So, if we accept that the incidental clause is a reparative mechanism of an incomplete or imprecise formulation, and if we also accept that this mechanism may inconvenience the interlocutor, then it must compensate for the infringement not only in content but also in form: a) the function of incidental clauses must be a benefit for the receptor, and must compensate the cost, and b) the incidental clause must be accompanied by clues to help the hearer to recognise it as a supplementary piece in the discourse: syntactic autonomy, prosodic autonomy and gestural marks.

4.2. The gestural marks of incidental clauses

As far as gestural marks are concerned, in this paper we will only advance a number of hypotheses. In future work using suitable corpora and engines the issue should be studied in more depth. As Cruttenden (1986) says, the relationships between intonation and gesture are primary; the falls and lower tones, which are associated with closed meanings, are related to gestures like such as downward head movements, downward glances, and falling hand movements. In contrast, rises and higher tones, which are associated with open meanings, are related with gestures such as raising the head, looking upwards, and upward hand movements.

So it seems evident that in a structure with an incidental clause, there are rising or sustained gestures, but also falling or conclusive gestures as well. It seems clear that the gesture that characterises E_1 is interrupted by the emission of E_2, in which new, autonomous gestural signs are produced — sometimes speakers even represent parentheses or quotation marks iconically with their hands — and that E_3 reinstates E_1's gesture. For this reason, we believe that these phenomena should be studied from a multimodal point of view, so that different verbal forms can be co-ordinated naturally.

5. Acknowledgements

6. References

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