Ma non era rosso? (But wasn't it red?): On certain counter-expectational surprise questions in Italian

Introduction
In this paper I investigate the nature of tenses and temporal relations instantiated in Italian in counter-expectational (see Vicente, 2009) surprise yes-no questions, and contrast it with the properties found in surprise exclamations. Rethorical/surprise questions and exclamations have been recently investigated under several points of views, both in semantics and in syntax (see, among the others Munaro and Obenauer, 2002; Zanuttini & Portner, 2003; Obenauer, 2004; Delfitto & Fiorin, 2014, 2015). However, so far there has been no systematic investigation of the peculiar tenses introduced in these constructions, most notably, the presence of the imperfect in the interrogative constructions, vs. non-imperfective indicative forms in the exclamative clauses. I 'll show that such a distribution is due to the properties of the syntactic structure instantiated in the two constructions and propose a syntactic representation which takes into account also the discourse properties of their occurrence.

The data
Here I analyze some examples, beginning with surprise questions. Consider the following scene: Mary calls me on the phone and tells me that she has a fine new red dress to wear at tonight's party. When I meet her at the party, I see that she has a blue gown. I might then ask:
(1) (Ma) non era rosso?
    (But) not be-IMPF red
    '(But) wasn't it red?'
Where the adversative particle *ma* (but) is optional – even if in my competence its presence is highly flavored. Compare these examples with exclamations. Imagine the following situation: Mary informs me that she is going to buy her wedding dress. Later she shows me her purchase and I see that it is a red gown, an unusual color for this kind of dress. I may react by saying:
(2) (Ma) è rosso!
    (But) it's red!
These sentences exhibit several interesting properties. They are in both cases associated with a characteristic intonation and are introduced – or can be introduced – by the particle *ma*, which in normal cases cannot introduce main clauses or interrogatives. Moreover, these sentences cannot be embedded, with or without the complementizer *che* (that):
(3) *Gianni ha detto che ma è rosso
    Gianni said that but it is red
(4) *Gianni ha detto ma è rosso
    Gianni said but it is red
(5) *Gianni ha detto che ma non era rosso
    Gianni said that but it wasn't-IMPF red
(6) *Gianni ha detto ma non era rosso
    Gianni said but it wasn't-IMPF red
The particle *ma* (but) is an adversative coordinating particle. Without entering in much detail, let me just point out that all these sentences are counter-expectational, adopting a term used by Vicente (2009), in that the speaker expresses her surprise at a state of things different from what she expected. The contribution of *ma* to this yield this effect is crucial.

The verb forms
Let's consider example (1). As proposed above, the particle *ma* signals the counter-expectational character of the utterance, which is associated to the interrogative intonation. Analogously, in example (2), *ma* signals counter-expectation in association with an exclamative intonation.

Interestingly, in these pairs a surprise negation appears – cf. Delfitto and Fiorin (2014a and 2014b). Here I focus on the analysis of the verbal forms

Note that the usage of the present tense would be inappropriate in the situation described for (1):

    (7) #Ma non è rosso?
       But isn't it red?

Sentence (7) would not be appropriate in case the speaker's expectation was of a red dress and sees a dress of another color. Sentence (7) can still be a rhetorical/surprise question to be uttered for instance in the following situation: Mary, pointing to a dress exposed in a window, tells Paul: "How beautiful that blue dress!" and Paul might answer: "But isn't it red?", because he is seeing it as red and not as blue. Hence, for the speaker in this case the redness of the dress is a fact, whereas in the case of example (1) it is an expectation.

Conversely, the usage of the imperfect in a situation where sentence (2) is appropriate yields unfelicitous results:

    (8) #Ma era rosso!
       But it was-IMPF red!

By uttering (8) the speaker wants to convey the idea that the dress she is looking at is not red in that moment, but it was red at some previous time, implying that in some way it changed color, for instance by dying.

Analysis

In previous works (ref. omitted), I proposed that the imperfect, though instantiated in indicative contexts, corresponds to a syntactic structure in which the speaker's temporal coordinates are not – and cannot – used *directly* for anchoring, but only *indirectly*. This property – or better to say, this cluster of properties – shows up very clearly in the contexts created by fictional verbs, such as *dream* (ref. omitted). It is possible to show that the structure present in (1) is exactly the same of *dream* contexts, as opposed to the one instantiated in (2).

Furthermore, I'll argue here in favor of an analysis of the left periphery able to explain the observations that the counter-expectational particle *ma* must precede all other items in the clause and cannot be embedded, both in exclamative and interrogative contructions. The proposed explanations will also carry over to account for expression such as *macchè* (lit: but that) – which is an emphatic, counter-expectational negative answer, or similar expressions such as *ma sì* (lit: but yes), or *ma no* (but no), used for emphatic positive or negative answers. I'll discuss Poletto and Zanuttini (2013) and, also considering their observations, I'll propose a syntactic representation for these cases, which also takes into account the discourse properties eliciting their occurrence.

References

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