

8. Topics

The notion of topic is perhaps as important as the notion of focus, and the two notions have sometimes be treated as contraries to each other, e.g. by Czech linguists like Firbas, Sgall and Hajicová.

The introduction follows in part Reinhart (1982).

8.1 Discourse Topic and Sentence Topic

The notion of topic is used in different ways. One important distinction is the one between **discourse topic** (what a part of a discourse is about) and **sentence topic** (what is predicated about an entity in a sentence). (cf. van Dijk 1977).

- (1) Mr. Morgan is a careful researcher and a knowledgeable Semiticist, but his originality leaves something to be desired.
Sentence topic: Mr. Morgan.
Discourse topic: Mr. Morgan's scholarly abilities.

8.2 Approaches to Sentence Topics

Classical definition in Hockett (1958):

- (2) The most general characteristic of predicative constructions is suggested by the terms 'topic' and 'comment' for their ICs [immediate constituents]: the speaker announces a topic and then says something about it.

8.2.1 Identification of Topics

The notion of topic obviously plays an important role in language, but it is difficult to identify.

Topics are often subjects:

- (3) a. Felix goes out with Rosa.
b. Rosa goes out with Felix.

Notice also that these sentences are truth-conditionally equivalent. Topichood appears to come in addition to truth conditions.

But topics don't have to be subjects:

- (4) Kracauer's book is probably the most famous ever written on the subject of cinema. Of course, many more people are familiar with the book's catchy title than are acquainted with its turgid text.

Topics can be expressed in various ways, for example by special syntactic movement (a), by diatheses like passivization (b), by specialized syntactic constructions as in (c), in languages with freer word order like German by sentence-initial position (d), or by deaccentuation (e).

- (5) a. This article, Mr. Morgan has written when he was still young.

- b. This article was written by Mr. Morgan when he was still young.
c. As for this article, it was written by Mr. Morgan when he was still young. Regarding this article, it was written by him when he was still young.
d. Diesen Artikel schrieb Mr. Morgan, als er noch jung war.
e. Mr. Morgan WROTE this article when he was still still YOUNG.

Other languages have explicit morphological or syntactic marking of topichood, as e.g. Japanese *wa*.

Topichood was identified at the end of the 1800's by linguists like Hermann Paul; it was called the **psychological subject**, which may or may not be identical with the grammatical subject.

Sometimes topics are defined by way of linguistic features, like sentence-initial position, low accentuation, definiteness, etc. This all correlates with topics, but not necessarily. It is important to distinguish between the nature of topics and the way how topics are expressed.

8.2.2 Pragmatic Aboutness

One common definition of topics, e.g. Kuno (1972): The topic is the expression that denotes the thing that the sentence is about. Important philosophical discussion of this notion in Strawson (1964):

- Principle of the presumption of knowledge: Assertions are not independent, self-sufficient units, but "commonly depend for their effect on knowledge assumed to be already in the audience's possession".
- Principle of relevance: Discourse does not proceed arbitrarily but relates itself to what is known, "intends, in general, to give or add information about what is the matter of standing or current interest or concern".

An expression is the topic if the assertion is understood as expanding our knowledge of this topic.

The aboutness theory of topics sees topics as a part of the more general notion of **predication**. The predicate applied to a topic is typically called **comment**.

Strawson claims that topic choice may be truth-conditionally relevant:

- (6) a. The King of France visited the exhibition.
b. The exhibition was visited by the King of France.

(6.a) has no truth value because the topic expression does not refer; it is unclear what the sentence is about. (6.b) has a truth value (false); it is clear what the sentence is about (the exhibition), but what is predicated of it is false.

8.2.3 Old Information

Alternatively, topic is described as the old (given) information of a sentence, that is, expressions that refer to entities that were mentioned before or are supposed to be

known by the interlocutors by their world knowledge (e.g., Firbas; Sgall, Hajicová; Gundel (1974); Chafe (1976).

Factors of old information (cf. Prince 1979):

- Predictability: the present mention can be predicted from previous discourse.
- Saliency, immediate awareness: the referent of a topical expression can be expected to be in the immediate consciousness of the participants
- Shared knowledge: the referent of topical expressions is known, even if it cannot be assumed to be in the immediate consciousness of the participants.

Problem with the description as “old information”: Information is a propositional concept (can be true or false), but referring constituents like *Mr. Morgan* are not propositional.

Another problem: Not all “old information” constituents need to be topical:

(7) I, personally, like hamburgers. But as for my father, he detests them.

But as a matter of fact, topical expressions (even according to the aboutness criterion) typically are old information, so there is a strong correlation in one direction.

8.3 Tests for Topichood?

One test for topichood may be to paraphrase a sentence using a known topic construction, and check whether there is any change in meaning:

- (8) a. I haven't seen Felix for ages.
b. As for Felix, I haven't seen him for ages.

But all types of topic are not the same, and specialized constructions typically are used to express a **change of topic**. Hence they cannot really be used as paraphrase tests for topichood, as was sometimes suggested.

- (9) Kracauer's book is probably the most famous ever written on the subject of the cinema. #As for the title of the book, many more people are familiar with its catchy title than are acquainted with its turgid text.

A better test for topichood that works quite well (and is consonant with the aboutness theory of topics) are descriptions of acts of communication, where the topic is identified by *say about*:

- (10) Original utterance: *Rosa is going out with Felix.*
Utterance report: *He said about Rosa that she is going out with Felix,*
not: *He said about Felix that Rosa is going out with him.*

8.4 Restrictions for Topics

8.4.1 Possible Topics

Not every constituent can act as topic; indefinite NPs or certain quantifiers are difficult to be construed as topics.

- (11) a. There is fly in my tea.
b. *As for a fly, it is in my tea.
?He said about a fly that it is in my tea.

Presumably topical constituents have to be able to refer to an entity; indefinites are non-referring. Alternatively, indefinites are new, and hence cannot be topics according to the theory that topics are old-information expressions.

But NPs that are specific-indefinites or generic can act as topics:

- (12) When she was five years old, a child of my acquaintance announced a theory that she was inhabited by rabbits.
Cf.: He said about a child of my acquaintance that she...

- (13) A lion has a mane. / Lions have manes.
Cf.: He said about lions (?a lion) that they have manes.

Quantified NPs can act as topics, especially universal quantifiers that can be understood as expressions about a set of entities:

- (14) Parents don't understand. But all grownups, they do it to kids, whether they your own or not.

8.4.2 Possible Comments

The predication on a topic (comment) must be understood as something that can be a possible property of the topic. This is awkward with predicates that express the coming into existence / appearance (presentational sentences):

- (15) At this moment, a giant orang utan appeared / became visible in the mist.
Cf. ?He said about a giant orang utan that it appeared.

These predicates do not “affect” the subject constituents, hence the subject constituents cannot be topics.

Other examples, cf. Kuno (1976):

- (16) Speaking of Marilyn Monroe, I bought / read / ?lost a book about her.

8.5 Topics and Aboutness

Reinhart (1982) defends the view that topics are the entities that a sentence says something about. She reconstructs aboutness in an (early) framework of dynamic interpretation.

Dynamic interpretation, following Stalnaker (1978): The current shared knowledge of speaker and hearer is expressed by a proposition (set of possible worlds). A new utterance expressed by the speaker that is accepted by the hearer adds to this body of information:

- (17) c + = c the meaning of

Reinhart's proposal: We don't just add one proposition after the next, but we tend to center propositional information around individuals. Reinhart introduces the metaphor of a subject catalogue in a library:

“The propositions admitted in a context are classified into subjects of propositions, which are stored under defining entries. (...) NP sentence topics, then, will be referential entries under which we classify propositions in the context set and the propositions under such entries in the context set represent what we know about them in this set.”

Reinhart suggests that information is stored in terms of pairs of an entity and a (set of) propositions that are about the entity: , .

If such a sentence is uttered by one speaker and verified by another, then the knowledge **about the entity** is accessed, not the global knowledge. (Cf. Portner & Yabushita (1998)).

Only entities whose existence has been established (including mythical entities etc.) can bear propositional information. Therefore a sentence like *The king of France visited the exhibition* cannot be integrated, as there is no entity that *the king of France* would identify.

8.6 Various Dimensions of Topichood: Jacobs (1999)

Jacobs (1999a) argues that there is no uniform notion of “topic”; the things that have been classified as topic rather belong to a network related by family resemblances. This is the reason why the core definition of topichood is so difficult – there is none.

Jacobs identifies four dimensions of topic/comment: Informational separation, predication, addressation and frame-setting.

8.6.1 Informational separation

Topic/comment sentences are processed in two steps, they are divided in two chunks of information (cf. Hockett's definition, (2)). In this they contrast with “anti-topic sentences” orthetic sentences that present a piece of information in once chunk. In the following examples, / and \ mark raising and falling intonation.

- (18) a. /PEter ist \EHRgeizig. (topic-comment-structure)
 b. Die Poli\ZEI kommt. (anti-topic sentence)

Informational separation / integration plays an important syntactic role (see Jacobs (1999b)). But this cannot be the whole function of topic/comment structures, as informational separation / integration is also relevant, e.g., for the formation of focus domains:

- (19) a. Hans hat [_F (der Ma\RIa)] (die Halskette geschenkt).
 b. Hans hat [_F (der Ma/RIa)] [_F (die \HALSkette)] geschenkt,
 (... und der Martha das Armband).

Also, informational separation can be found with certain adverbials that presumably cannot be topics, like probability adverbials:

- (20) Mit /SICHerheit wird Peter \ZUstimmen.

Possible generalization: In a topic-comment structure, the topic is always informationally separated from the comment. (Nt: Alll informationally separated constructions constitute topic-comment-structures).

8.6.2 Semantic Predication

Jacobs defines semantic predication as follows:

- (21) In [X Y^h] (where h marks the head of the construction) X is the semantic subject and Y the semantic predicate iff
 (a) X is an argument of Y,
 (b) there is no argument Z of Y that c-commands X (in surface structure)

This identifies *Peter* in (18.a) as a topic, but not *mit Sicherheit* in (20), because it is not an argument.

It cannot be the sole criterion for defining topics, as we also find predication inthetic sentences like (18.b).

The notion of argument can be seen in a general way. It includes for example temporal and locative adverbials (they specify the situation argument of a predicate):

- (22) a. [In der /KÜche [hat Peter das Ge\SCHIRR gespült]].
 IN_THE_KITCHEN(s) PETER(x) THE_DISHES(y) HAS_WASHED(x, y, s)
 b. /VORgestern ist Peter nach \FRANKfurt gefahren.

We find that constructions that presumably are specialized for topic/comment structures can be used in such cases:

- (23) In der /KÜche, da hat Peter das Ge\SCHIRR gespült.

8.6.3 Addressation

This notion captures the aboutness-relation: The comment is about the topic; the topic is the “address” at which a proposition is stored (cf. Reinhart).

- (24) In [X Y^h], X is the **address** and Y is an **entry** iff X marks the point where the information carried by Y has to be stored within the speaker-hearer knowledge at the moment of the utterance of [X Y^h].

The criterion of addressation is independent from the semantic subject criterion, as the address need not be an argument of the predicate.

- (25) Was Goethes 250. Geburtstag betrifft: Das Stadttheater plant eine ungekürzte Faust-Aufführung.

Also, in anti-topic sentences we have predication on a semantic subject, but the subject is not an address (cf. (18.b)).

There is a relation to informational separation: In an address-entry structure, the address and the entry must be informationally separated.

8.6.4 Frame-Setting

There are cases of topic constructions that cannot be conceived as involving an aboutness (address-entry) relation.

- (26) a. Körperlich geht es Peter gut.
 b. Im Falle eines Sieges wird die Mannschaft eine Extrazulage erhalten.
 c. In meinem Traum war Peter ein Krokodil.

(a) is not about the body, or the body-aspect, (b) is not about the victory. – Not all dedicated topic constructions can be used in this case:

- (27) ?? Was den Fall des Sieges betrifft, so wird die Mannschaft eine Extrazulage erhalten.

But languages with topic marker use the topic marker in such cases (e.g., Korean):

- (28) sunglihal kyóngu-e-nun tim-i taetonglyong-ekeso pyochang-ul pan-ul kosita.
 win case-in-TOP

The function of such topical expressions was described by Chafe (1976) as follows:

- (29) In brief, “real” topics (in topic prominent languages) are not so much “what the sentence is about” as “the frame within which the sentence holds”.

Jacobs calls this the **frame-setting** function of topics. It is different from the addressation function, as the selection of the frame affects the truth conditions:

- (30) Körperlich geht es Peter gut. =/=> Es geht Peter gut.
 Was Goethes 250. Geburtstag betrifft: Das Stadttheater plant eine Faust-Aufführung. ==> Das Stadttheater plant eine Faust-Aufführung.

[But recall Strawson’s argument that choice of aboutness topics can affect the presuppositions of a sentence].

It is still not quite clear how to understand the notion of a “frame” in which “the sentence holds”. Sometimes it appears to be a set of possible worlds, e.g. in (26.b,c). Maienborn (1998) assumes representations like the following one, where s varies over situations:

- (31) IN_MY_DREAM(s) HOLD_AT(CROCODILE(PETER)(s))

In this sense, frame settings could be seen as semantic predications of a predicate HOLD_AT.

But it is doubtful whether this representation can be used in cases where the frame sets a particular aspect under which the predication holds, like (26.a).

- (32) As the president of the company, Mary wants to work 70 hours a week.
 But as the mother of a young child, she wants to be at home as much as possible.

8.6.5 Some Topic-Comment Constructions in German

Different topic constructions are compatible with different types of topics.

Left dislocation (a pronoun in the sentence refers back to the topic), cf. Altmann (1981)

- (33) /PEter, der kommt \MORgen.

Properties: Separation (violated in a), Predication (violated in b), Frame-setting is possible (c), Addressation is possible but not necessary (violated in d – judgement?)

- (34) a. */PEter, der kommt. (contrast with \PEter kommt.)
 b. *Mit /SICHerheit, {da/so} wird Peter \ZUstimmen.
 c. In meinem /TRAUM, da war Peter ein Kroko\DIL.
 d. /KÖRperlich, da geht es Peter \GUT.

Free topic: (no pronoun refers back to the topic)

- (35) Was Peters Ge/BURTStag betrifft, so habe ich noch \KEIN Geschenk.

Properties: Separation (evident in syntax), predication may be violated (35) but can be present (36.a), addressation is necessary (36.b), pure frame-setting is possible only if addressation is involved as well.

- (36) a. Was /PEter betrifft, so habe ich ihn \NICHT eingeladen.
 b. *Was irgendeine Per/SON betrifft, so habe ich sie nicht eingeladen.
 c. *Was /KÖRperlich betrifft, so geht es Peter gut.
 Was seinen KÖRPer betrifft, so geht es Peter gut.

I-topicalization

Marked by special intonation (fall-rise).

- (37) JEDen Freund Peters kenne ich \NICHT.

Predication and addressation not required, frame setting possible but not required:

- (38) a. KÖRperlich geht es Peter \GUT.
 b. Von irgendwelchem NUTzen wird das uns \NICHT sein.

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