

The Typology of Focus and Topic: A New Approach to the Discourse-Syntax Interface

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This project aims at providing a fine-grained typology of focus and topic that a theory of discourse-syntax interface can build on. It has long been observed that speakers treat elements of conversation in various ways. Whether an element is in focus (i.e., new or important), or whether it is already the topic of conversation (i.e., old, known information) may affect word order, intonation, and the forms of words. This project investigates how focus/topic interact with each other and with the structure of the sentence.

One reason for investigating the interaction between focus/topic and language structure is that focus and topic are determined by external factors. These are based on the context in which the conversation is taking place and/or what the conversation is about. Yet, focus- and topic-related effects, such as word order differences, intonation patterns, and the forms of words are determined by properties that are internal to the language. We are therefore in a situation where it seems that external factors, such as context, may have access to, or interact with factors that are internal to language. If this account is correct, then the study of the interaction between focus and topic, and the structure of language might teach us more about the points of contacts between pragmatics and the structure of language.

Another reason for studying the topic/focus articulation is that earlier works on clause structure regarded focalization and topicalization as a single process that is often characterized by fronting rules or primary stress assignment rules that may affect the neutral word order or the intonation pattern. Accordingly, focus and topic constructions were described as a bipartite structure that contains a focus/topic and a complement to this focus/topic that is referred to as presupposition/background or comment (Jakendoff 1972; Chomsky 1972; Gundel 1974). In recent years, however, there has been a growing consensus that focus and topic are two different phenomena. But because these two constructions exhibit certain interdependencies, not much is known about what discourse properties trigger the focus-topic articulation cross-linguistically. Similarly, it is not clear how discourse properties interact with purely syntactic rules governing the distribution of focus and topic. While most current syntactic analyses argue for distinct focus and topic positions within the clause (Rizzi 1997, Belletti 2002, Brunetti 2003, Aboh 2004), a number of questions still arise. For example, what are the syntactic properties and discourse-functions of focus and topic constructions across languages? How precisely does focus differ from topic? Do focus and topic form a unitary phenomenon or do they belong individually to a family of such discourse phenomena? How much cross-linguistic variation do focus and topic display and how can that variation be accounted for in a principled way?

One way to answer these questions is to provide (i) a macro-typological study that allows a finer characterisation of focus and topic by looking systematically at both their morphosyntax and their discourse functions; and (ii) a micro-typological study that consists of an in-depth investigation of the morphosyntax of focus and topic in relation to other discourse-linked constructions (e.g. question, scrambling) in a smaller number of typologically different languages. In the first part of this talk, I discuss the typology of focus and topic in general and show how the proposed research is relevant for linguistic studies. In the second part I provide details about the project and raise more specifically the questions that we plan to address.