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The present special issue is all about the **topic**, which very generally means ‘what is being talked about’. This meaning, although intuitively sound, is rather vague, but there is very little consensus among linguists on any more specific definition. Multiple properties contributing to topichood have been described, but none of these properties seems either necessary or sufficient to classify something as a topic: topics are often subjects, but they need not be; topics mostly occur sentence-initially, but they do not have to; topics are generally definite, but they can be indefinite too. The ‘flexible’ applicability of all these properties makes it hard to come up with a uniform definition of topics.

The contributions to this special issue shed light on topics from various perspectives. The authors were not by any matter or means restricted in their definition of topics, but in every article a different language was taken as the point of departure. This resulted in a colourful collection of syntactic, semantic, phonological, phonetic and discourse-functional approaches to topics.

One recurring topic in this issue is the link between topicality and the preverbal position (see also van Bergen 2006, and Yang and van Bergen 2007 on the interaction between semantic properties such as animacy and definiteness and preverbal position, partly independent of grammatical function). Although the preference to place topics preverbally seems to be universal, there is language-specific variation in the exact position before the verb that the topic takes. Stella Gryllia (this issue) investigates the interaction of topicality and word order in Greek. She argues that discourse topicality can explain the difference between preverbal and postverbal object foci. She shows that focused objects behave similarly in pre- and postverbal position with respect to exhaustivity and contrast: in both positions, object foci can receive a non-exhaustive interpretation, and they can be interpreted contrastively both pre- and postverbally. Gryllia claims that the difference between pre- and postverbal object foci can be explained in terms of discourse topicality: preverbal object foci must be
A similar connection between the preverbal position and topicality is found
in Durban Zulu by Lisa Lai-Shen Cheng and Laura Downing (this issue). They
show that focused constituents in Zulu must immediately follow the verb, while
non-focused constituents are obligatorily dislocated from that position. They
claim that non-focused constituents can be either left- or right-dislocated, but
that they can only be left-dislocated when they are discourse topics. The
authors argue that Zulu has three different preverbal topic positions, distinguish-
ing two pre-subject topic positions and a topic position between the subject
and the verb. They furthermore underline the important role of prosodic phras-
ing in Zulu as opposed to accenting, which is generally considered the most
important way of topic marking in Germanic languages.

Stavros Skopeteas and Elisabeth Verhoeven (this issue) give an analysis of
the sentence-initial position in Yucatec Maya in terms of topichood, subject-
hood and agentivity. They argue that in Yucatec Maya, constituents occur sen-
tence-initially for two reasons: elements are left-dislocated either to fulfill the
general topic-first preference, or to avoid ambiguity in the interpretation of two
adjacent postverbal arguments. For intransitive verbs, this means that subjects
will occur sentence-initially when they are topics, but stay in postverbal po-
sition otherwise. For transitive verbs, on the other hand, this almost always
means left-dislocation of the subject when both arguments are lexically re-
alized. These findings lead the authors to the conclusion that the connection
between left-dislocation and discourse-related features like topichood is not
one-to-one.

The link between agentivity and topichood is explored by Lisa Brunetti (this
issue) who takes a semantic approach to topics, discussing topic prototypical-
ity and topic selection in Spanish and Italian. She claims that Dowty’s (1991)
proto-properties, which are generally linked to the selection of subjects and
objects, can also be used to account for topic selection. Brunetti argues that the
argument with the most proto-agent properties will be selected as the sentence
topic, which, in her definition, means that it occurs sentence-initially (in a sen-
tence with neutral stress intonation). She shows how her approach can explain
why subjecthood and topichood often, but not always go hand in hand. At the
same time, she shows how this semantic selection of topics can be overruled
by discourse factors like focus and contrast.

Mark de Vries (this issue) investigates different types of left- and right-
dislocation in Dutch. He proposes four information-structural features, [about],
[new], [add] and [contrast], and illustrates how these features can be combined
in all logically possible ways to characterize the types of left-dislocation and
right-dislocation constructions that exist in Dutch. He claims that dislocation
is a kind of parenthetic construction which may operate at different levels, giv-
Topics cross-linguistically

Laura de Ruiter (this issue) focuses on the acquisition of prosodic topic marking in German. She presents the results of a phonological and phonetic study of preverbal topic marking by 5- and 7-year old children in comparison with adults. She found that the intonational patterns of children are similar, but not identical to those of adults: children of both age groups as well as adults use the same accent types, but with a different distribution. De Ruiter did not find any contrastivity effect on topic marking for either group, and argues that accentuation differences are probably the result of individual variation.

Onno Crasborn, Els van der Kooij, Johan Ros and Helen de Hoop (this issue) analyse topic constructions in NGT (Sign Language of the Netherlands) in which topics occur in sentence-initial position, and the remainder of the sentence is interpreted as a comment about that topic. They claim that topics in NGT may be (co-referential with) arguments of the verb, but also spatio-temporal expressions. When both occur, argument topics precede spatio-temporal topics; typically, they each form a separate prosodic domain. The authors furthermore argue that sentence-final indexical signs, which are analyzed as anaphoric pronouns, may refer back not only to the subject of the sentence, but also to the object or a spatial or temporal expression. For that reason, they claim that NGT exhibits topic-agreement rather than subject-agreement.

In their article on topic constructions in Chinese, Jianhua Hu and Haihua Pan (this issue) propose a redefinition of the aboutness condition on topic constructions, which very generally states that the comment must be about the topic. The authors propose to split up this aboutness condition into a licensing condition and an interpretation condition. The licensing condition is formulated in terms of set intersection: a topic is licensed if there is a variable in the comment, and the set generated by this variable produces a non-empty set when intersecting with the set denoted by the topic. The interpretation condition states that the topic must form a subject-predicate relation with an element inside the comment, with the topic being the predicate and the element in the comment the subject. Chinese topic constructions are acceptable only if they meet both these conditions. Hu and Pan show how this decomposition of the aboutness condition makes it possible to account for all types of Chinese topic constructions.

To conclude, we would like to thank our co-organizers of the workshop “What’s the topic?” that was held at the Radboud University Nijmegen in January 2007, Yiya Chen, Onno Crasborn, and Els van der Kooij, as well as the participants of the workshop for many helpful discussions. Also, we thank the external reviewers of the individual contributions for their great work, and Harry van der Hulst (editor-in-chief) and Nancy Ritter (managing editor) for their full assistance and enthusiasm. Special thanks go to Jorrig Vogels for...
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