Topics cross-linguistically

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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 topic-hood 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 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

interpreted as discourse topics, or, put differently, object foci can only occur preverbally when they are discourse topics.

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, distinguishing two pre-subject topic positions and a topic position between the subject and the verb. They furthermore underline the important role of prosodic phrasing 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, subjecthood and agentivity. They argue that in Yucatec Maya, constituents occur sentence-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 position otherwise. For transitive verbs, on the other hand, this almost always means left-dislocation of the subject when both arguments are lexically realized. 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 prototypicality 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 sentence 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 parenthetical construction which may operate at different levels, giv-

ing different results for the syntax, semantics and phonology of the construction.

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.

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