

A Foot-Driven Analysis of the Typology and Distribution of Topics

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Synopsis: According to Cartography, a topic becomes specified as being Shifting, Contrastive or Familiar as a result of being moved to corresponding dedicated functional projections hosting these features. Drawing on data from a variety of Romance languages, I argue that this type of analysis is unwarranted: if we assume that a topic moves to escape a domain marked as focus, not only can we account for why different topic placements seem to be associated with different overall sentence meanings, but we also see that the type of a topic automatically follows from the size and composition of the material in its scope. This new analysis does not just dispense with dedicated functional projections, it also captures the extreme flexibility in the distribution of the different types of topics.

Types of Topics: Traditionally, (at least) three different types of topics have been assumed: *Shifting* (or *Aboutness*) topics, *Contrastive* topics and *Familiar* (or *Continuity*) topics. Shifting topics (*STs*) mark a shift in the conversation, whereas Contrastive topics (*CTs*) create oppositional pairs with respect to other topics. Finally, Familiar topics (*FTs*) are given, d-linked constituents which are used to simply reiterate an existing sentence topic. According to Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl (2007), the three types of topics are rigidly ordered, both with respect to each other and to other elements in the clause. In particular, the authors claim (1) to hold for topics moved to the Left Periphery:

(1) [ShiftingP [ContrastiveP [FocusP [FamiliarP [IP

Applied to Rizzi's (2004) Left-Peripheral template, (1) would then yield the sequence in (2):

(2) ForceP **ShiftingP** IntP **ContrastiveP** FocusP ModP **FamiliarP** Fin IP

An inherent problem with (2) is that the distribution of the different types of topics is significantly more flexible than what (2) would suggest. A case in point is represented by *CTs*: according to (2), these should follow elements merged in IntP, and yet we see that a *CT* (underlined) can surface both before and after the *wh*-word "why" (in bold), which is base-generated in IntP (Rizzi 2001):

(3) ¿**Por qué** el pan lo vendiste, y el pescado lo regalaste? (Spanish)

Why the bread it(cl) you-have sold, and the fish it(cl) you-have given for free?

(4) Entiendo por qué quieres estudiar Francés, pero Inglés, ¿**por qué** lo quieres estudiar? (Spanish)

I understand why you want to study French, but English, **why** it(cl) you-want to-study?

Topic Movement Marks the Material in Focus: The flexibility in the distribution of *CTs* is accounted for if we adopt a *foot-driven* analysis of topic movement. Following an idea originally presented in van Craenenbroeck (2006), I argue in particular that topics move because they must escape domains marked as [+focus]. This predicts that the material to the right of the landing site of a left-dislocated topic (for topics which appear to the left, but are actually right-dislocated, see Samek-Lodovici (2015)) should always be interpreted as being in focus. Indeed, we see that different topic placements correlate with different focal meanings:

(5) Cambiando discorso...

Changing topic...

a) Il canestro, **perchè** non lo regali al vicino? (Italian)

The hoop, **why** not it(cl) you-give to-the neighbor?

b) **Perchè** il canestro non lo regali al vicino?

Why the hoop not it(cl) you-give to-the neighbor?

What differentiates (5a) from (5b) is not so much the *type* of topic: both alternatives can be grammatically preceded by the expression *changing topic*, hence *the hoop* qualifies as a *ST* in both. Rather, the difference lies in the presuppositions associated with the event described by the sentence. Whereas (5b) presupposes that the idea of doing *something* with the hoop was already in the air, and it reads as a specific suggestion to *give* the hoop *to the neighbor*, no such presupposition is necessarily present in (5a). The difference between (5a) and (5b), which is unexplained under Cartography, naturally follows under the analysis developed here. In (5b), only the IP is to right of the left-dislocated topic, and hence is marked as being in focus. In (5a), on the other hand, the entirety of the rest of the sentence, *wh*-word included, follows the fronted topic: the entire sentence -minus the topic- is thus here marked as [+focus]. As such, no interpretative effect associated with having only the IP in focus arises in (5b).

The Material in the Scope of the Topic Determines Its Type: No dedicated projections are needed to capture the existence of different types of topics: the different flavors associated with different types of topics are a function of the composition of the material in their scope. I argue in particular that the type of a topic is chiefly dependent on the presence vs. absence of material in focus to its right: if we take the directionality of topic movement to be

determined by the necessity of overtly marking the material relevant for its interpretation, we expect that topics which are contrastive will always be followed by material in focus. This follows from the standard assumption that the meaning of a CT is dependent on the presence of a set of alternative propositions (Büring 2003). This gives rise to an initial split: on the one hand we have familiar topics, which are generally right-dislocated and must always follow elements in focus (Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl 2007), and which indeed can never be interpreted as being contrastive (Samek-Lodovici 2015). On the other hand, we have Shifting and Contrastive Topics, which must both precede constituents in focus (Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl 2007). This type of analysis generates a number of predictions; the first is that, since STs and CTs are now grouped together, one should find cross-cutting generalizations that apply to both. Indeed, we see that a ST can always be interpreted as also being contrastive; importantly, the switch to a contrastive reading does not correlate with any additional movement of the topic to a different syntactic position. Consider for instance the example in (6):

(6) Context: “Your basketball set is in the attic. That room is so full of stuff you can barely walk in, so we need to get rid of it. *The basketball*, you can throw it away. It’s old...”

(a) *Il canestro, perché* non lo regali al vicino? (Italian)

The hoop, why not it(ct) you-give to-the neighbor?

(6a) is identical to (5a), where *the hoop* was merely a shifting topic (i.e., no underlying contrast was implied). Provided the appropriate context, however, we see that such a constituent can easily be contrasted with a second topic (in (6), *the basketball*). Note that the grammaticality of (6a) is unexpected under Cartography: if CTs were associated with a dedicated functional projection, either (5a) or (6a) should be ungrammatical. A second prediction is that the relative height of a focus is inconsequential, as long as it is in the scope of the associated CT. Indeed, we see that if the focus does not front to the Left Periphery, a CT can surface very low in the structure: consider in particular (7), where the CT follows both a fronted modifier -which is merged very low in the Left Periphery, see again (2)- and the fronted subject:

(7) Ho detto che **rapidamente** Ugo *il pane* l’ha venDUTO, e che *il pesce* l’ha regaLATO. (Italian)

I said that rapidly Ugo the bread it(ct)-he-has SOLD, and that the fish it(ct)-he-has GIVEN.

The Size of the Focus Value Primes for (the Lack of) Contrastiveness: In a similar vein, I argue that the size of the focus value determines how likely it is for the corresponding topic to be interpreted as Contrastive, as opposed to Shifting. If presented in isolation, the tendency is to interpret the fronted topic in (8) as being contrastive:

(8) *Le briquet*, je l’ai (French)

The lighter, I have it (→ Focus value: {[I have x], [I do not have x]})

I contend that this is because the focus value of (8), a verum focus, is a closed set whose members are both limited in number and predictable: by general Gricean reasoning, the hearer will infer that there must be another entity *y* to which the second proposition in the focus value *does* apply. This implicature is however cancellable, and indeed, provided an appropriate context, even a topic associated with a restricted focus value can be interpreted as Shifting:

(9) J’ai parlé avec Jean. *La voiture*, il l’a. (French)

I spoke with Jean. The car, he has it (intended meaning: he does have a car)

I also argue that the shifting flavor associated with structurally high topics is an artifact of the size of the material in focus. Specifically, if a topic surfaces as the leftmost element in a sentence, the entirety of the rest of the sentence is marked as being in focus. Such a configuration bears strong similarities with sentences where a non-topicalized subject introduces a new referent in the discourse: in these sentences, the whole proposition generally represents new information, resulting in the whole sentence being in focus. I argue that this is at the basis of the interpretative effect associated with what Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl describe as STs. Indeed, if these factors are controlled for, I show that it is in fact easy to find examples where structurally high topics refer to previously introduced entities.

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