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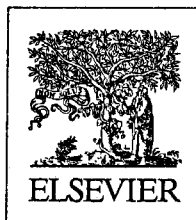
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## Topic and Comment

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### Definitional Problems and History of the Terms

There are few terms and concepts in linguistics as problematic as Topic and Comment; few have had such a wide range of different applications that affect such fields as grammar, typology, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics. Moreover, few terms and concepts are relevant in so many different areas of application, from language instruction to professional writing (journalistic, official, legal, and political language) and from automatic text analysis to artificial intelligence. In fact, this pair of terms covers a wide range of far-reaching phenomena and properties that are found at the very center of the functioning of the linguistic system, such as referentiality, predication, the utterance-act, and information structure. The fact that definitions (and applications) were developed in different scientific spheres means that they have focused to a varying degree on these different aspects, which has at times prevented a clear view of all the problems and all the results. In addition, the general phenomena referred to above belong not only to a primarily philosophical but also to an empirical dimension, and we are still uncertain how we can reconcile these different dimensions; it is difficult to give definitive answers using individual models.

Although there are points of convergence and a level of continuity among the definitions, differences remain because their origins lie in different traditions, and the concepts have been adapted by changing scientific and cultural contexts. Attempting to superimpose terms belonging to different fields and periods is therefore problematic. The definition of Topic as 'what is being talked about' and Comment as 'what is being said about what is being talked about,' which is

characteristic of American Structuralism (see Sapir, 1921; Hockett, 1958), is based on the axiom that these two parts are present in every declarative utterance. This is expressed in regulative terms by Lambrecht (1987: 254): "Do not introduce a referent and talk about it at the same time." He affirmed that the relation Topic-of "expresses the pragmatic relation of aboutness that holds between a referent and a proposition with respect to a particular discourse" (Lambrecht, 1994: 127). For an element to be able to assume the Topic function, it has to be referential. Moreover, the relation 'Topic of' is defined in entirely semantic terms: "A referent is interpreted as a topic of a proposition if in a given discourse the proposition is construed as being about this referent, i.e. as expressing information which is relevant to and which increases the addressee's knowledge of the referent" (Lambrecht, 1994: 127 and 131).

This type of definition and the axiom referred to above have their origins in a philosophical tradition that includes the whole history of Western thought. Although terms found in classical thought require accurate philological investigation and are not easily paired up with modern terms, one can argue that the splitting of an expression (*logos*) into "two inseparable semantic and referential functions" – *onoma* and *rhema* – was established by Plato and then taken up again by Aristotle (see Lyons, 1968; Lallot, 1988; Spina, 2002). Furthermore, linking referentiality to the utterance-act has an ancient provenance. The *onoma* signals actors and experiencers, whereas the *rheme* signals actions and events. Sometimes, the *onoma* is represented as content, and the *rheme* is represented as typically having an enunciative function (Spina, 2002; for an overview of the whole tradition, see Sandmann, 1979).

An underlying opposition has also been suggested for the notions of Theme and Rheme, as is found in European functional linguistics and text linguistics (see Halliday, Michael A. K. (b. 1925); Prague School). In these fields, the pair is defined according

to functional principles that are based on the speaker's needs and communicative aims. Mathesius (1983: 102) maintained, "Every bipartite utterance is composed of two components, the first of which expresses something relatively new and contains what is asserted by the sentence... The second part of the sentence contains the basis of the utterance or theme, the psychological subject according to earlier terminology, i.e. things relatively familiar or most readily available to the speaker as the starting point." The order assigned here to the first and second parts invokes a hierarchy of importance, not some linear property of the syntagmatic structure. However, the linearization of Theme and Rheme is an area that has been investigated widely by Mathesius and other Prague School theorists (see Mathesius, 1924, 1939, 1941-1942; Daneš, 1985; Sgall *et al.*, 1986; Firbas, 1992).

The categories described by the Prague School are classical tools in discourse analysis that have precedents in philosophical thought concerning textual hermeneutics (see Schleiermacher, 1988). In actual fact, no textual analysis is possible without assuming a hierarchy of informative importance for parts of the texts with respect to the speaker or to the interlocutor. However, the Prague School and North American definitions are not as rigidly separated as one might think. Mathesius (1939: 174), for example, assimilated "that which is known in a given situation" to the "utterance's starting point... from where the speaker begins," defining the utterance's nucleus as "that which the speaker asserts with respect to the starting point... or taking it into consideration."

However, no matter how many early versions of these concepts and terms can be found, in modern linguistics, the Topic-Comment and Theme-Rheme pairs must be understood within the scientific traditions in which they were developed and in which they continue to be used (with some subsequent modifications). Even allowing for the differences between the North American and European scientific environment, both use linguistic concepts that have been influenced by schools of pragmatism. These trends have left their mark in various ways on functional approaches of the 20th century and, in certain respects, also on some fields of North American structuralism. In fact, the definition of both of these pairs assumes that the functioning of the utterance-act or of the discourse/text is a key criterion. All 20th-century models are based on the notion of functioning (the First and Second Prague Schools, Halliday, and Chafe), but the biases of each favor either the pragmatic or the semantic dimension. In the Prague tradition, the Theme and the Rheme are considered to be the units of the actual articulation of the sentence

(Functional Sentence Perspective). This concerns "the way in which the sentence is inserted into the real context from which it comes" (Mathesius, 1939: 174). Indeed, "it is only the moment of actuality that creates a sentence from the words" (Mathesius, 1924: 171).

## Topic and Comment, Subject and Predicate

### Lack of Alignment between Pragmatic Functions and Semantic and Grammatical Functions

In many approaches, a correspondence (if not an exact correlation) is assumed between Topic-Comment and Subject-Predicate (see Sapir, 1921; Strawson, 1974; Lambrecht, 1994). In developing a "Relevance Principle," Strawson (1974: 97) observed, "Statements or the pieces of discourse to which they belong have subjects, not only in the relatively precise sense of logic and grammar, but in a vaguer sense with which [one] shall associate the words 'topic' and 'about.'" Moreover, he noted that "stating is not a gratuitous and random human activity. We do not, except in social desperation, direct isolated and unconnected pieces of information at each other, but on the contrary intend in general to give or add information about what is a matter of standing current interest or concern" (Strawson, 1974: 97; cf. also Lambrecht, 1994).

Yet, the association of Topic-Comment and Subject-Predicate is problematic, because alongside the obvious similarities, there are also considerable differences. The first similarity lies in the actual nature of the relationship between the two parts. The question of whether the Subject is dependent on the Verb (Predicate) or whether the Predicate is dependent on the Subject has been discussed at length, and valid reasons have been proposed to support both theories (see Matthews, 1981; Graffi, 2001). However, it seems plausible to think that in each case both of the parts are necessary for the larger construction that they form (enunciation for T-C and phrase for S-P) and that they correspond and are mutually dependent (for more information on this model of interdependence or 'solidarity,' see Martinet, 1965 and 1985). There can be no Predicate without a Subject, and there can be no Subject without a Predicate; Predicate and Object, in contrast, are not linked by this kind of reciprocal relation. A second aspect that the two pairs of functions have in common concerns the canonical (or prototypical) semantico-pragmatic properties of each of the two parts: one carries reference, and the other carries the utterance-act/predication (for a philosophical account, cf. Strawson, 1974).

The differences are no less significant. Topic-Comment (T-C) or Theme-Rheme (T-R) is a representation that is anchored not at the syntactic level, but rather at a more general dimension defined as rhetorical-pragmatic (see below). In fact, it seems necessary to bring back into focus the traditional distinction among 'utterance,' 'proposition,' and 'sentence' as constructions that belong to three different dimensions; namely, the pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic. The T-C (or T-R) pair is concerned with the level of the utterance-act, and it constitutes its basic articulation. Its terms therefore need to be kept distinct from both Predicate-Arguments and Subject-Predicate, whatever similarities might exist between them. The utterance-act is defined by the speaker's communicative intention or, in other terms, by his or her desire to mean something. This type of component is not included in either the syntactic configuration or in the propositional scheme. A simple utterance such as:

- (1) John loves the sea

is not represented fully by either the phrase structure of traditional constituent analysis (or any more recent version of generative grammar):

- (2) [S[NP *John*] [VP[V *loves*] [NP[Det *the*] [NP *sea*]]]]

nor by the propositional scheme:

- (3)  $p(a, b)$ , where  $p =$  'to love',  $a =$  'John',  $b =$  'sea'

but by a more complex structure that can be informally expressed as follows:

- (4) as for John, I am telling you that John loves the sea

The representation in (4) demonstrates that the syntactic configuration and the propositional scheme can only be considered subparts of the whole utterance. In particular, the  $p$  component of (3) forms a lower-level predicate, the semantic representation of which is defined by three properties: bivalency, the inherent lexico-semantic features of 'to love', and the capacity to combine with arguments that have specific semantic features. In contrast, the fact that an utterance like (1) has a pragmatic representation in which a declarative statement appears does not concern the propositional predicate: It is not something that is included in the properties of the predicate 'to love,' and neither is it part of its relations with the arguments 'John' and 'sea.' The declarative statement 'I am telling' must be represented as a predicate of a higher level. The differences between the representations of the syntactic structure (2), the proposition (3), and the utterance-act (4) can be expressed in

relation to the well-known distinction between 'mood' (*modus*) and the statement's content structure (*dictum*; see Bally, 1944; Graffi, 2001). The constituent that has predicative function in a sentence configuration and the predicate of the logical-semantic scheme are part of the statement's content structure. The higher predicate 'I am telling' is the mood of the utterance-act. It is not necessarily realized by phrase structure or by any other kind of segmental shape; in many languages in fact, it is normally realized by intonation. Yet, in order for an utterance-act to be formed, it must be present in any case.

Based on this schema, one can say that the division of Topic and Comment constitutes the basic structure of representations like (4). The relationship between T and C is defined by a predication at a higher level than that belonging to the predicate 'to love.' This kind of predication can be represented by the illocutionary force of statement. The Topic function does not coincide with the Subject any more than the Comment does with the Predicate. Topic and Comment belong to an organizational level that is logically higher, and their relation is determined by the declarative mood.

Significant proof of this theory is found in a well-known empirical feature that distinguishes subordinate clauses from main clauses. Only the latter can have a Topic-Comment articulation, whereas the former do not. In fact, the illocutionary force of statement is a fundamental part of the representation of main declarative clauses, whereas subordinate clauses have only the statement's content structure in their representations. The fact that, in some approaches, like the Second Prague School (see Svoboda, 1968; Firbas, 1992), subordinate clauses have been divided into Theme and Rheme illustrates a further aspect of the conceptual difference between the two pairs of terms.

Representations like (4) can account not only for utterances like (1), where the statement's content structure is made up of a Subject – (transitive) Predicate structure but also utterances where the statement's content structure has Subject – (intransitive) Predicate structure, as in (5) with the corresponding representation of the utterance-act (6):

- (5) John is coming

- (6) as for John, I am telling you that John is coming

Yet, not all utterances with single-arguments in the statement's content structure have a representation like (6). So-called presentative orthetic utterances like (7):

- (7) JOHN is coming

that are marked in English by a focal accent on *John* and in other languages by the order VS do not easily conform to the Topic-Comment split. According to a line of thought that has gained wide consensus, utterances like (7) lack the Topic-Comment articulation and the Theme-Rheme split. They can be analyzed according to two different interpretations, depending on the context. In one, *John* is in Focus (in this case, the utterance has the pragmatic presupposition that someone will come), and in the other, the whole statement's content structure is in Focus (in this case, the pragmatic presupposition can be expressed by the question "what's happening?"). In the latter interpretation, single-component structures like (7) are opposed to bipartite T-C or T-R structures. This tradition of linguistic thought was influenced by the distinction made by Kant between *a priori* 'analytic' judgments and *a posteriori* 'synthetic' judgments, which are typically bipartite, and existential judgments that have no predicate. Marty reinterpreted the Kantian distinction by opposing "categorical" judgments that are bipartite and "thetic" judgements that are simple, having only one member (see Ulrich, 1985).

In this respect, there is an interesting difference between some Topic-Comment models that are in wide use today and the Theme-Rheme models from the Prague School. According to the first type, Topic is absent because this type of function needs to be realized by a constituent that has a high position in the referentiality hierarchy; canonically, this would be a NP. According to the second type, in contrast, the bipartite articulation is legitimate if (7) is interpreted as having only *John* in Focus: The verb 'to come' would be the Theme, and *John* would be the Rheme.

However, these analyses are problematic. The two interpretations of (7) could correspond to the representations of the utterance-act (8) and (9):

- (8) I'm saying that the person who is coming is John
- (9) I'm saying that what is happening is that John is coming

Yet, such representations can be considered, respectively, equivalent to the following:

- (10) As for who is coming, I'm saying that the person who is coming is John
- (11) As for what is happening, I'm saying that what is happening is that John is coming

The fact that the Topics of utterances like (7) are not realized in the linguistic structure does not prevent the analysis of the utterance-act from containing representations that make them explicit; the utterance-act also includes elements that are not verbally

expressed but present in the context. This has at least two implications: (1) the distinction between elements that carry reference and elements that carry the predication, at the pragmatic level, might be more complicated than is often thought, and (2) the T-C and T-R models can be transcoded.

It becomes particularly obvious that we need representations of the utterance that are not limited to the canonical forms of configurational and propositional representation when we look at utterances whose syntactic structure contains constituents that do not have traditional Grammatical Functions. Utterances with various types of left dislocation and hanging topics, like (12), (13), and (14)

- (12) John, I saw him yesterday
- (13) John, I lent him the book
- (14) John, his house is a complete mess

do not have identical functions: The Subject and Object (either direct or indirect) functions evidently belong to a level of representation different from that at which the Topic function is found. This question has recently been tackled in the so-called discourse configurational models of generative grammar (cf. Kiss, 1995). These models define two discourse semantic functions, Topic and Focus, the first "serving to foreground a specific individual that something will be predicated about" and the second "expressing identification" (Kiss, 1995: 6). Although this may seem a major departure from traditional generative models, which define the Topic function in purely configurational terms, the main orientation still remains on the study of how the two discourse functions are expressed through a structural (i.e., configurational) relation. In other terms, the discourse configurational models only account for the structural projections of a Function that itself belongs to another level of representation.

What has been said so far allows further consideration of the parallels between the Subject-Predicate and the Topic-Comment functions. The former defines the sentence and the latter the utterance. Both relations are crucial for functioning, at different levels. Through them, what were simple groups of elements become meaningful units at the sentence-level and carry indexical values at the utterance-level. It is at the latter level that they properly become communicative units.

#### Structural Implications of the Differences among Pragmatic, Semantic, and Grammatical Functions

The pragmatic and semantic differences discussed here have significant consequences for the structural level. They also involve different formal properties. In

languages in which the Subject function is morphologically encoded (this is realized by the relevant Noun Phrases and/or by the heads of Verb phrases of which they are made), such encoding does not necessarily match the structural projection of the Topic function. For example, if the linguistic system has Case marking on the Subject, this might not be required for the Topic, or it could be realized by Case marking that is not the same as the Subject's marking. Similarly, if a language has agreement between Subject and Verb, the same might not apply to the constituents that realize the Topic and Comment functions. In general, the range of types of constituents that can have the Topic function (or the Comment function) is larger than the range of types of constituents that can have the Subject or Predicate functions.

Another group of structural properties that distinguish Subjects from Topics concerns the movement properties of the relative constituents within the sentence. In certain models, the Topic function is determined by linearity. It is associated with the first or one of the first positions of the proper domain of the sentence or with an extra-sentential position to the left of the proper domain (see Graffi, 1994; Dik, 1997). The movement of the Topic constituent to another position in the sentence, in particular toward final or extra-sentential positions to the right of the proper domain (the Tail), generally leads to the constituent losing the Topic (or Theme) function. Nevertheless, the fact that there is a significant statistical correspondence across the world's languages between the basic Subject position and the Topic function appearing in the initial position (see Comrie, 1981; Tomlin, 1986) cannot be taken as conclusive proof that Subjects and Topics should be considered to be structurally equivalent. In fact, in many languages the range of grammatical functions whose constituents can occupy the initial positions of the proper domain of the sentence is not limited to the Subject function alone. One need only think of relatively common processes, such as left dislocation of direct or indirect Objects.

Finally, there are also substantial differences in the referential endophoric properties. In many languages, the grammatical Subject constituents have control properties over anaphors that the Topic constituents do not have. All the structural differences mentioned so far have implications for both typology (cf. the Topic-prominent vs. Subject-prominent language dichotomy presented by Li and Thompson, 1976 and widely used in typology) and Universal Grammar (see the important study of Keenan, 1976).

To sum up, the set of the structural properties defined by T-C, T-R and the set of structural

properties defined by Subject-Predicate intersect, but do not wholly overlap. In particular, the set of constructions that realize T-C functions is larger than the set of constructions that realize the syntactic functions Subject-Predicate.

### Similarities and Differences among Various Models

The concept of Topic as an element that limits or restricts the field of the predication (Chafe, 1987) is based on structural properties (for example, the fact that the Topic needs to precede the predicate) and lexico-semantic properties (specifically, contiguity and isotopy). The definition of Theme as the 'Base' or starting point of the utterance (Mathesius), or the part that conveys the lowest level of Communicative Dynamism (Firbas, Svoboda), depends on linear principles of functioning that are to some extent independent from the grammatical organization. To a certain extent, one can say the same for the GIVEN-NEW and for the KNOWN-UNKNOWN parameters, all of which are used widely in text linguistics. These parameters are based on the lexico-semantic and compositional properties of units in relation to larger sections of text; however, they also constitute pragmatic categories related to the functioning of the utterance-act. Similar observations can be applied to the notion of 'Focus' in Tagmemics (see Pike, 1982) and the recent versions of the Focus function (see Rebuschi and Tuller, 1999 and (see Focus), which show similarities to the notions of Comment and Rheme. This is also the case for the definitions of Topic either as the center of attention (see Chafe, 1976) or as a most accessible element (see Givón, 1985; Chafe, 1994) that are based on cognitive properties.

In many models, two different pragmatic and semantic approaches are merged: one according to which the meaning and information of units depend on their referential indexes, determined by the context, and the other according to which the meaning and information of an utterance depend on the 'functioning,' or to be more precise, on the actual dynamics with which the speakers plan and perform the discourse in relation to the listeners. It is generally the case that in all the models the relationship between meaning and information remains an open question (but see the interesting proposals presented by Bar-Hillel and Carnap, 1964; Harris, 1991). However, the centrality assigned to indexical coordinates to a greater or lesser extent (see Bar-Hillel, 1954, 1970) is a criterion that appears to have been employed in a more general way than the concept of 'functioning,' albeit at different levels of theoretical development. This kind of characteristic in fact can be

used as a distinctive criterion to determine the degree of pragmatic orientation of a model. Another criterion for pragmatic orientation concerns the speaker-listener dimension: Base, GIVEN, NEW, Focus, accessible element, and center of attention are all categories related to the speaker and the listener.

However, a question emerges that has so far remained unanswered: whether the categories defined according to the speaker are the same as those defined according to the listener. The fact is that the two types of categories do not necessarily coincide: what is Topic for the speaker might not be for the listener and vice versa. In fact, an important difference among the functional models concerns the bias toward production or comprehension of the utterance/text. If concepts like GIVEN and NEW or the hierarchy of communicative dynamism seem to be ambivalent, 'Base' perhaps displays a bias toward production and 'the most accessible element' is biased toward comprehension. The bias often remains implicit, but has important consequences for the modeling itself.

### Topic-Comment Articulation and Spoken Discourse

Two questions often discussed concern the hypotheses that the Topic-Comment articulation is characteristic of spoken discourse and that it has a more basic character than the Subject-Predicate articulation. Indeed, several psycholinguistic studies seem to show that in the process of language acquisition the structures that have the grammatical properties of Subject-Predicate appear after the structures that are grammatically heterogeneous and that are reducible to the general Topic-Comment articulation (cf. MacWhinney and Bates, 1978 and, for second language acquisition, Klein and Perdue, 1992). There is no question that analyses of oral corpora of languages that have grammatically articulated Subject and Predicate show numerous structures that do not conform to patterns in which the Topic is a Subject NP and the Comment is a canonical VP. Yet, the two hypotheses proposed are difficult to test empirically. One reason is that phenomena with very diverse structural characteristics are often grouped together under the label of T-C, which means that results obtained across a variety of research areas are incompatible.

Statistical calculations have been done on a range of languages through corpora in an attempt to determine the occurrence rate of structures that are traditionally considered to be examples of the T-C split, such as hanging topics, left dislocations, etc. However, it is questionable whether the results obtained in this way can definitively prove the prevalence of such structures in spoken discourse because of the great

variety of linguistic and extra-linguistic conditions that can apply to both spoken texts and written texts. To sum up, without excluding the fact that certain structures like (13) and (14) are in reality characteristic of unplanned spoken discourse, in general the hypotheses discussed may have methodological rather than theoretical value. In the analysis of spoken discourse, categories, such as Topic-Comment or Theme-Rheme, may prove to be more useful than purely syntactic categories.

### Cognitive, Interactional, and Textual Dimensions

The representation of Topic and Comment in cognitive terms, common in some North American functional schools, has important precedents in the history of linguistic thought. During the second half of the 19th century, a lively debate emerged about the notion of Subject and Predicate, in which the grammatical categories were defined psychologically by some scholars (see Graffi, 2001). Paul (1920: 87) defined the Psychological Subject as "the first retrievable complex of psychological representations in the consciousness of the speaking and thinking being" and the Psychological Predicate as "the second [complex of psychological representations] that is connected to the first." Although he acknowledged that the grammatical Subject and Predicate do not always correspond to the psychological Subject and Predicate, Paul nevertheless believed that "the grammatical relations are based on the psychological relations" (1920: 111). Interest in the psychological dimension has always been present in linguistics, in particular in certain functional schools. However, in the Prague School, psychology was considered to be a discipline entirely auxiliary to linguistics (Mathesius, 1924).

In North American functional studies, topics have been defined at sentence-level (the micro-level) as constituents that have referential features or rather as 'participants' in the semantic scheme (see Foley and Van Valin, 1984; Givón, 1985; Chafe, 1994; Lambrecht, 1994). This definition has often been used in linguistic typology, particularly after Comrie (1981; see Prempert, 2001). Discourse topics have been defined as "aggregate[s] of coherently related events, states, and referents that are held together in some form in the speaker's semi-active consciousness" (Chafe, 1994: 121). Givón (1985) believed that the definition of Topic as an atomistic, singular, and discrete unit at the sentence-level (the so-called micro-topic) should be replaced by a model that represents a plurality of sentence topics and the permanence or continuity of these text participants. In each case, these studies were based on a semantic assumption about the

representation of ideas; namely, that events and states and the referents that participate in them make up the basic cognitive network of the speakers and the listeners (see Givón, 1985; Chafe, 1994). This model has an equivalent in the so-called ontologies in use today in artificial intelligence. The analyses of Topic continuity can in fact have numerous applications in this sector and also in computational linguistics.

### Topic and Comment: Between Reference and Relationship

The property traditionally ascribed to the Topic function – namely, its capacity to contain elements that carry reference – is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for topicality. The fact that Topic has recently been reinterpreted in relation to a referential hierarchy of access to the function (Topics tend to be elements high up on the hierarchy of referentiality) shows that it is not a necessary condition. For example, there are adjectives or verb forms with no finite marking that can perform the Topic function in many languages. Moreover, not all referential elements are Topics. Referentiality simply defines a relation between an element and an exophoric context (that is to say, extra-linguistic) or an endophoric context (that is to say, intratextual). In contrast, topicality is a purely textual function, linked to the flow of information in the text: For an element to be a Topic, it must be part of an informative progression where something is being said about it or, more precisely, more information is being added about it. In other words, for an element to be a Topic, it must be true that other information will be added about it. As has been said, the models of textual Topic-continuity rely on referential characteristics, whereas sentence-oriented models are based on the relational characteristics of Topic and Comment. In the latter, the similarity with the syntactic functions of Subject and Predicate – also inherently relational – is therefore emphasized.

See also: Clefting in Spoken Discourse; Detachment Constructions; Focus; Halliday, Michael A. K. (b. 1925); Information Structure in Spoken Discourse; Intonation and Syntax; Prague School; Referential Relations in Spoken Discourse; Spoken Discourse: Word Order; Understanding Spoken Discourse.

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