

Topic and Comment

Daniel Büring (UCLA)

buring@humnet.ucla.edu

March 2007

to appear in Patrick Hogan (ed) *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Language Sciences*

Many languages mark constituents as denoting, roughly, “what the sentence is about” — its topic. The rest of the sentence is called the comment: what is said about the topic. Examples include suffixing *wa* in Japanese, and clitic left dislocation in Greek:

- (1) a. John-wa gakusei desu.
John-TOP student is
“Speaking of John, he is a student.”
b. Ti Maria, tin ide o Petros.
the Maria-ACC her saw the Peter-NOM
“As for Maria, Peter saw her.”

English as well can mark topics by way of special phrases (cf. the paraphrases in (1)) or constructions such as cleft-sentences or left/right dislocation. Some researchers also postulate *unmarked* topics, i.e. phrases that meet some pragmatic topic criterion, for example “aboutness”, but are not grammatically marked; English subjects for example would often fall in that category. Crosslinguistically, topics — marked or unmarked — strongly tend to occur towards the left edge of the sentence.

The term “topic” (but not “comment”) is also found meaning *discourse topic*, i.e. what an entire text or paragraph is about; though related, these concepts should be distinguished.

The notions *theme–rheme*, *link–tail*, and *psychological subject–psychological predicate* are often used synonymously with topic–comment. *Background–Focus* is sometimes identified with topic–comment as well, but more often

is seen as either independent from, or cross-classifying with, topic–comment (i.e. both topic and comment can contain focussed and unfocussed elements). Tripartite models, structuring sentences into topic, focus, and background, are also common (see *FOCUS*).

Sentences that contain a topic are sometimes called *categorical*, as opposed to *thetic*, topic-less sentences (e.g. *It's raining*, or *Trains arrived*).

Contrastive topics are elements that, intuitively, the sentence is about, but which are themselves new (related to given material by e.g. contrast, or the part-whole relation):

- (2) a. *Ame-wa futte imasu ga, yuki-wa futte imas-en.*
rain-TOP falling is but snow-TOP falling is-NEG
“It is raining, but it is not snowing.”
b. (This university has 20,000 students.) *The freshmen* live in dorms.

Contrastive topics can be marked by regular topic markers, as in (2a), and/or by use of a special topic intonation (e.g. the English fall-rise contour in (2b)).

There is little formal research, or descriptive consensus, regarding the pragmatic function of (contrastive) topics; consequently, the identification of topics varies widely from language to language and researcher to researcher. Controversies include the question of whether topics need to be referential noun phrases, or can be for example adjectives, nouns or verbs; whether sentences are partitioned into one topic and one comment, or whether a sentence can have multiple topics; whether topicality is a discrete or gradual property.

— Daniel Büring

Selected Further Readings

- Büring, Daniel. 2003. On D-Trees, Beans, and B-Accents. *Linguistics & Philosophy* 26:511–545.
Kuno, Susumo. 1973. *The Structure of the Japanese Language*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
Lambrecht, Knud. 1994. *Information Structure and Sentence Form*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reinhart, Tanya. 1982. Pragmatics and Linguistics: An Analysis of Sentence Topic. *Philosophica* 27:53–94.

Vallduví, Enric. 1992. *The Informational Component*. New York: Garland.