Documenting topic and focus

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Note: This handout supplements a slide presentation. The handout contains references and some examples not on the slides; the slides contain material related to specific strategies for documenting topic and focus which are referenced here, but not presented.

1 The notion of 'focus'

Jackendoff (1972); Rooth (1992); Vallduví and Vilkuna (1998); Kiss (1998); Drubig and Schaffer (2001); Gundel and Fretheim (2004) among many others.

(1) a. Where will Mary drive tomorrow?
   b. Mary will drive [to Prágue] tomorrow. argument focus

(2) a. Who will drive to Prague tomorrow?
   b. [Mary] will drive to Prague tomorrow. argument focus

The bracketed, bold-faced constituent corresponds to the wh constituent in the preceding question. The bracketed constituent provides the new information. It is the focus of the answer, the rest is the background. In English, pitch accent marks the focus

(3) a. What will Mary do tomorrow?
   b. Mary will [drive to Prágue] tomorrow. VP focus

(4) a. What’s happening?
   b. [Mary will drive to Prágue tomorrow]. all-sentence focus

The bracketed, bold-faced constituent corresponds to the wh constituent in the preceding question. The bracketed constituent provides the new information. It is the focus of the answer, the rest is the background. In English, pitch accent marks the focus

(5) Correction
   a. Mary will drive to Paris tomorrow.
   b. No, Mary will drive to [Prágue] tomorrow.

(6) Contrast
   Bill is driving to Paris, but [Máry] is driving to [Prágue].

and others . . .

Focus provides new information in these contexts too. It also involves an explicit contrast among alternatives. More on this below.

1.1 Marking Focus

• in many languages by prosodic prominence (pitch, stress, duration, phrasing)
• where prosodic prominence is relatively fixed, this may involve reordering the focus

Castilian Spanish (Face and D’Imperio, 2005)

(7) Who will he give the book?
   a. English: He will give [Mary] the book.
   b. Spanish: Le dará el libro a [María]. recipient focus

(8) What will he give Mary?
   a. English: He will give Mary [the bóok].
   b. Spanish: Le dará a María [el libro]. theme focus

• by focus morphology or focus particles

Gürintüüm (West Chadic) (Hartmann and Zimmermann, 2009)

(9) Tỳ bá wùm kwálíngálá.
   3SG PROG chew colanut
   ‘He is chewing colanut.’ (p. 1341)

(10) a. Ā kwá bá wùm kwálíngálá-i?
    FOC who PROG chew colanut-DEF
    ‘Who is chewing the colanut?’ (p. 1342)
    b. Ā fúrnáyó bá wùm kwálíngálá.
    FOC fulani PROG chew colanut
    ‘THE FULANI is chewing colanut.’ (p. 1342) subject focus

(11) a. Tỳ yáb-à káá ng“áí?
    3SG sell-FOC what out
    ‘What did he sell?’ (p. 1344)
    b. Tỳ yáb-à gùurrí ng“áí.
    3SG sell-FOC millet out
    ‘He sold (THE) MILLET.’ (p. 1344) object focus
In the examples above, focus remains in situ and is marked by intonation or morphology. Some languages have a dedicated position for focus which requires movement.

- by movement to a dedicated focus position (ex situ focus)

Gürünüm (West Chadic) (Hartmann and Zimmermann, 2009)

(12) a. Á kää mà ti nàa wâlî?
   FOC what REL 3SG catch farm
   ‘What did he catch on the farm?’ (p. 1344)

b. Á fûl mà ti nàa wâlî.
   FOC cow REL 3SG catch farm
   ‘It’s a cow that he caught on the farm.’ (p. 1344) object focus

- Cleft constructions

(13) I heard your motorcycle broke down.
   a. French: C’est ma voiture qui est en panne. (Lambrecht, 1994)
   b. English: It’s my car that broke down.
   c. What broke down was my car.

- unmarked focus

Hartmann and Zimmermann (2007) show that in Hausa, focus can occur in situ and is associated with no prosodic marking. They suggest the same is true in some other Chadic, Bantu, and Kwa languages

1.2 Documenting focus

1.2.1 In naturally occurring speech

(14) a. Bu l-a-’ay?
   where CP-ABS2-go
   ‘Where did you go?’

b. L-i-’ay ta Muk’ta Jok.
   CP-ABS1-go P Muk’ta Jok
   ‘I went to Muk’ta Jok.’ (Laughlin, 1977, Tale 154) Tsotsil Mayan

(15) a. K’u ora ch-a-bat-ik un?
   what time ICP-ABS2-go-PL ENC
   When are you all going?

b. Ch-i-bat-otikotik lavie.
   ICP-ABS1-go-1PL,EXC today
   We’re going today. (Laughlin, 1980, roman.3) Tsotsil Mayan

1.2.2 Literacy-based elicitation

See elicitation reported in Gabriel (2010)

1.2.3 Non-literacy-based elicitation

See Skopeteas et al. (2006, 126-137)

1.2.4 Reading task

See Downing and Pompino-Marschall (2013)

1.3 Types of focus

Dik et al. (1981); Rooth (1992); Vallduví and Vilkuna (1998); Kiss (1998) and many others

A focus α is associated with a set A of contextually appropriate alternative values that might have been selected, including α itself. Alternative Items ‘normally’ eaten for breakfast = {eggs, pancakes, waffles, bacon . . . }

(16) (New) information focus
   a. What did you eat for breakfast?
   b. I ate [eggs].

(17) Selective focus: selects from alternatives explicitly introduced in previous discourse
   a. Did you have pancakes or eggs for breakfast?
   b. I had [eggs].

(18) Corrective (or replacive) focus: replaces alternative(s) introduced in previous discourse.
   a. Did you have pancakes for breakfast.
   b. No, I had [eggs].

(19) Expanding (or additive) focus: adds to alternatives already introduced in previous discourse.
   a. Did you have pancakes for breakfast?
   b. Yes, and I had [eggs] too.

(20) Exhaustive focus: excludes all alternatives other than α
   a. What did you have for breakfast?
   b. I only had [eggs].

(21) Unexpected focus: unexpected alternative (not member of set of culturally appropriate alternatives) (see also Hartmann and Zimmermann 2009).
1.3.1 Are different types of focus marked differently

- Kiss (1998) argues for Hungarian that new information focus remains in situ while exhaustive focus moves to a dedicated focus position
- Hartmann and Zimmermann (2007) make a convincing case for Hausa that all types of focus can be expressed either in situ or ex situ. But statistically there is a strong association between in situ focus and new information focus on the one hand, and ex situ focus and ‘kontrastive’ focus on the other.

1.4 Documenting types of focus

1.4.1 In naturally occurring discourse

Corrective (replacive) focus

(22) A- What are you doing?
B- Ta j-tz’un, ta j-tz’un ton, ta j-tz’un te’.
   ICP ERG1-PLANT ICP ERG1-plant rock ICP ERG1-plant tree
   ‘I’m planting, I’m planting rocks, I’m planting trees.’
C- Pero chobtik tz-tz’un un.
   pero corn ICP.ERG3-plant ENC
   ‘But it was corn that he was planting.’ (Laughlin, 1977, 334)

Selective focus

(23) Q: “what do you all want to eat, eggs or meat or chicken?” you (sg) asked us.
A: A li vo’ozuk xchi’uk j-kumpa-tik-e, ton=kaazlan
   TOP DET 2PL with ERG1-compadre-1PLINC-ENC egg
   a-k’an-ik,
   ERG2-ask-PL
   ‘As for you and our compadre, you asked for [eggs].’
A: li vo’one, bek’et i-j-k’an, yu’n . . .
   DET 1SG meat ERG1-want because . . .
   ‘Mé, I asked for beef because . . .’ (Laughlin, 1980, 93)

Unexpected focus

(24) a. Something had landed at the foot of the tree. They went to look. There was a straw mat. Something was rolled up inside the straw mat. “Hell, what could it be? Let’s go, let’s untie the straw mat,” the two men said to each other. They untied it. You know what –

b. Tzeb san-andrex la te s-ta-ik un.
   girl san-andres cl there ERG3-find-PL ENC
   ‘It was a San Andrés girl that they found there.’ (Laughlin, 1977, 69)

1.4.2 Through literacy-based elicitation tasks

See Gabriel (2010)

1.4.3 Through non-literacy-based elicitation

See Skopeteas et al. (2006, 139-141)

2 The notion of ‘topic’

Reinhart (1982); Givón (1983); Lambrecht (1994); Gundel and Fretheim (2004); Skopeteas et al. (2006), among many others

[1] The notion ‘topic’ is highly contested, with disagreement on basic issues, e.g. whether ‘topic refers to a linguistic expression or a discourse entity, whether ‘topic is a categorical notion or a scalar one, and (a related question), how many ‘topics’ a clause can have (one? more than one?).
- I will assume that the ‘topic’ is a discourse referent and, for the sake of simplicity, that it is a categorical notion, and that a clause has no more than one topic.

[2] Some sentences can be partitioned into two parts, one corresponding to TOPIC and the other to COMMENT.
- The topic points to a discourse referent which is usually already an element of the discourse context (the common ground); the comment says something about it, adding further information to what we already know about it.
- Identification of the topic requires access to discourse context (Lambrecht, 1994)

(25) The children went to school.

(26) a. What did the children do next? [The children] TOPIC [went to school] COMMENT
   b. Who went to school? [The children] F [went to school] BACKGROUND
   c. What happened? [The children went to school] F. (all-sentence focus)

[3] The topic is often associated with the grammatical subject role, but this is not necessary (though some languages may restrict the grammatical role of the topic)


2.1 Familiar vs. shifted topic

See Skopeteas et al. (2006) for a more detailed classification of topic types.

- Familiar (or continuing) topic: topic of current sentence is the topic of immediately preceding discourse. Familiar topic is deaccented and often marked by a minimal referring expression (e.g. unstressed pronoun or ∅) (Givón, 1983; Ariel, 1990).

(28) Mary is driving to Prague tomorrow. She’s bringing her sister with her.
• Shifted (or new) topic: topic of current sentence is not the topic of immediately preceding discourse. Shifted topic needs to be brought into the ‘focus of attention’ of the hearer. Depending on various factors, this may require a more elaborate referring expression (e.g. a full NP, a demonstrative pronoun).

(29) Mary is driving to Prague tomorrow. She’s bringing her sister with her. Her sister/*she plans to fly from there to Berlin.

• Relevant factors include how far back previous mention was, how many intervening ‘competing’ discourse referents there are, its inherent semantic properties, and the potential for ambiguity (Givón, 1983; Ariel, 1990).

An example from Tsotsil

(30) ‘The jaguar y the jaguarundi” (a fragment) (Laughlin, 1977, 54)
   a. i-vay la ta be jun vinik ta yak’ol Bik’it Nich.
      CP-sleep CL P road a man P above Bik’it Nich
      ‘a man slept by the trail above Bik’it Nich’
   b. i-‘och la ak’abal,
      CP-enter CL night
      ‘night fell’
   c. i-tal la tzajal bolom,
      CP-come CL red tiger
      ‘a jaguarundi came’
   d. te la x-joyet,
      there CL NT-prowl
      ‘[it]FT was prowling around’
   e. te la x-‘avet
      there CL NT-scream
      ‘[it]FT was howling’
   f. ta la s-k’an ch-ti’-van
      ICP CL ERG3-want ICP-eat-ANTIPS
      ‘[it]FT wanted to bite [the man]’
   g. O la s-man-oj s-bek’et ti vinik-e.
      EXIS CL ERG3-buy-PF ERG3-meat DET man-ENC
      ‘[the man]ST had bought some meat’
   h. i-s-ten-be la jay-tuch’
      CP-A3-throw-APL CL QUAN-NCLS
      ‘[he]FT threw it several pieces’

Some correlates of topic illustrated by this fragment:

(31) a. Speakers tend to continue to talk about the same entity (topic persistence, topic chains)
   b. A familiar topic is highly accessible and may be referenced by a minimal referring expression, e.g. personal pronoun, which may be Ø
   c. A shifted (new) topic requires a fuller description
   d. Topics (both familiar and shifting) have identifiable referents
   e. Speakers tend to talk about living things (humans, animals: topic expressions are more likely to have animate referents than inanimate ones

2.2 Marking topic

2.2.1 By particle: Japanese

wa as topic marker (Kuno (1973); Portner and Yabushita (1998); pace Kuroda (1992))

(32) a. Inu ga neko o oikakete iru.
   dog NOM cat ACC chasing is
   ‘A/the dog is chasing a cat.’
   b. Inu wa neko o oikakete iru.
   dog TOP cat ACC chasing is
   only ‘The dog is chasing a cat.’ (Kuroda, 1972, 165)

Topic wa phrase occurs on left edge of sentence (topic-comment partition visible in constituent structure)

Topic wa only possible with an expression that has an identifiable referent

(33) a. Dare ga/*wa kimasita ka?
   who NOM/TOP came Q
   ‘Who came?’
   b. Dareka ga/*wa kimasita.
   who NOM/TOP came
   ‘Someone has come.’ (Kuno, 1973, 37)

Topic wa is not restricted to subjects, i.e. it is not a subject case marker

(34) a. Neko wa inu ga niwa de oikakete iru.
   cat TOP dog NOM garden in chasing is
   ‘The cat is being chased by a dog in the garden.’
   b. Niwa de wa inu ga neko o oikakete iru.
   garden in TOP dog NOM cat ACC chasing is
   ‘In the garden, the dog is chasing the cat.’ (or: ‘The garden has a dog chasing a cat in it.’ [ja]) (Kuroda, 1972, 168)

Topic wa-marked expression need not be an argument of the following comment. It can serve as a frame in terms of which the following comment is verified.
(35) Nihon wa dansei ga tanmei desu.
Japan TOP male NOM short-life-span are
‘As for Japan, men have a short life-span.’ (Kuno, 1973, 65)

2.2.2 By structural position: Tz’utujil (Mayan)

(36) X-kee-tij tzyaq ch’ooyaa’.
cp-erg3pl-eat rats
‘Rats ate (the) clothes.’ (Dayley, 1985, 305) VOS

(37) Ja ch’ooyaa’ x-kee-tij ja tzyaq.
det rats cp-erg3pl-eat det clothes
‘The rats ate the clothes.’ (Dayley, 1985, 306) SVO

Preverbal position is a dedicated ‘topic’ position (Dayley, 1985; Aissen, 1999).

2.3 Documenting topic

2.3.1 Naturally produced discourse

See (30).

2.3.2 Short answers with topic expressions

See Skopeteas et al. (2006, 139-141) (these questions elicit focus, but they also elicit
topic expressions)

2.3.3 Elicitation of story

Example from Skopeteas et al. (2006, 151-152)
Materials: Picture story
Participants: Linguist and Speaker
Step 1: Speaker looks at picture story
Step 2: Linguist narrates story in metalanguage
Step 3: Speaker asked to re-tell story

(38) [1] Once upon a time, a mother had three children. [2] One market day,
she sent her eldest child to the market to buy tomatoes, because she
wanted to cook tomato soup. [3] The child took a basket and set off to the market. [4] But it couldn’t find the right road and came back without the tomatoes. [5] Then the mother sent the second child. [6] This child, too, set off, lost its way and came back without tomatoes. [7] So the mother sent her youngest child to the market. [8] This child found the right way. [9] It arrived at a market stall, bought tomatoes and came back to its mother. [10] They were very happy and the mother cooked the tomato soup.

3 The notion of ’contrastive topic’

Büring (2003); Gundel and Fretheim (2004)

(39) a. I have two siblings.
   b. My brother is a musician.
   c. My sister is a nurse.

• The sentences in (39b) and (39c) are answers to an implicit question – what
about each of them, what do they do?.

• This question implies subquestions – what does your brother do? what does
your sister do?.

• The answer proceeds subquestion-by-subquestion, first considering the brother
and then the sister. Each response consists of a pair, associating with each
person their profession.

• The members of the set that organize the reply (THE MAN, THE WOMAN) is
called the ‘contrastive topic’; the other value is the focus.

• In English, the contrastive topic is marked by a characteristic HL contour , the
‘B’ accent of Jackendoff (1972) (indicated here by capital letter).

3.1 Marking contrastive topic

• prosody
• dedicated construction

(40) “She had an idea for a project. She’s going to use three groups of mice.
ONE, she’ll feed them mouse chow, just the regular stuff they make for
mice. ANOTHER, she’ll feed them veggies. And the THIRD, she’ll feed t junk food.” (Prince, 1998)

(41) Tzotzil

a. ‘There was a couple, recently married.’

b. A top ti vinik-e tax-lok ech’el, tax-bat, tax-xanav.
top det man-enc icp-leave going icp-go icp-travel
‘As for the man, he left, he went, he travelled.’

c. A top antz-e jun yo’on ta=x-kom.
top det woman-enc one heart icp-stay
‘As for the woman, she stayed home happy.’ (Laughlin, 1977, 67)

3.2 Documenting contrastive topic

• In naturally produced discourse. See (41)
• Short answers to questions. See Skopeteas et al. (2006, 139-141) (under ‘contrast’)
- Eliciting story. See (38), which involves all three types of topics: familiar, shifted, and contrastive.

References


