

CURRENT VIEWS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COGNITIVE INFORMATION STATUS AND SENTENCE STRUCTURE

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Over the past several decades a vast body of literature has emerged investigating the native speaker's implicit ability to assess the appropriateness of a grammatical sentence in a particular context. The present paper attempts to examine some of the most influential approaches that address the question of how cognitive and pragmatic factors correlate with constituent order. In a field where so much literature has been written there is an urgent need to be very selective; the paper therefore focuses on very general tendencies, facts and assumptions that relate to the vast area of the present discussion.

1. Defining syntactic, pragmatic and cognitive aspects of the issue

A useful summary of the issues related to the topic of the present article is found in Payne's (1992) book entitled *Pragmatics of Word Order Flexibility*. She claims that word order variations can be explained by considering such questions as how the mind grammaticizes forms and processes information, and how speakers get their hearers 'to build one, rather than another, mental representation of incoming information' (Payne 1992a, 2). Thus, three domains of order variation must be distinguished: syntactic, cognitive, and pragmatic.

An appropriate question at this point is: what do these three domains – syntactic, cognitive, and pragmatic – entail? A description of word order phenomena in terms of syntactic categories, particular morphosyntactic constructions, and grammatical relations is traditionally called syntactic. A cognitive approach deems as focal the relationship between constituent order and mental processes or constraints. Specifically, this perspective assumes as basic the relevance of the current status of certain information in the mind of the speaker – for example, whether it is in the active focus of attention, or not; it is also concerned with mental operations related to comprehension and integration of information into the already-existing knowledge network.

Pragmatics is a term which is not easy to define. In the *Concise Encyclopedia of Pragmatics*, published in 1998, there is this strikingly provocative statement by Jakob Mey (1998, 716): 'Among pragmaticians, there seems to be no agreement as to how to do pragmatics, nor as to what pragmatics

is, nor how to define it, nor even as to what pragmatics is not...’ My own position in this controversial matter is that no motivated sharp distinction can be made between semantics and pragmatics or, in other words, between linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge. Such a stand is in line with Langacker’s (1988, 14) claim that ‘the language user brings many kinds of knowledge and abilities to bear on the task of constructing and understanding a linguistic expression; these include the conventional symbolic units provided by the grammar, general knowledge, knowledge of the immediate context, communicative objectives, esthetic judgments, and so on’.

Thus a pragmatic perspective encompasses the relationship between constituent order and speaker-hearer interaction. This link includes several types of choices in terms of preferences which are available for language users both with respect to one constituent order over another, as well as the choice of one construction rather than another. In the speaker-hearer contexts ‘interaction’ means ‘to act on or in close relation with each other’. Viewed in this light, the imposed choices constitute a speech act of ‘instruction’ on the part of the speaker. In cognitive terms, the instruction may constitute the laying down of a new foundation. In speech act terms, such an ‘instruction’ informs the hearer to begin development of a new mental representation; in addition, it guides the hearer as to how information should be integrated into a mental, cognitive representation (cf. Lambrecht 1998; Vallduví & Engdahl 1996). This brief exposition of the issues involved clearly suggests that a pragmatic account cannot be separated from a cognitive one; this is due to the fact that ‘...the pragmatic acts are centrally concerned with what the speaker assumes is the current cognitive status of information in the mind of the hearer, and with how the speaker wants the hearer to mentally comprehend and integrate the information’ (Payne 1992a, 3).

Having briefly introduced the three dimensions – syntactic, cognitive and pragmatic – in their own right, let us turn to the area of linguistic inquiry where all these dimensions intersect, and this is the domain of discourse, which can be usefully viewed as consisting of two parts:

- (a) the text-external world, which comprises (i) speech participants, i.e. a speaker and one or several addressees, and (ii) a speech setting, i.e. the place, time and circumstances in which a speech event takes place;
- (b) the text-internal world, which comprises linguistic expressions (words, phrases, sentences) and their meanings. (Lambrecht 1998, 36)

2. Information structure and the information-packaging primitives

I will look now at what is meant in linguistic research by the term ‘information structure’. In modern linguistic science, information structure is defined as ‘the encoding of the relative salience of the constituents of a clause, especially nominals, and is realized as choices among alternative syntactic arrangements’ (Foley 1996, 200). Moreover, the information structure of a particular clause is determined by the larger sentence or discourse of which it is a part, that is, its context. The communicative effect of the information structure is to foreground certain aspects of the message, but to background others. It is also important to note that the need to encode information structure is a language universal; however, the formal means available vary widely across the languages of the world.

In his book *Information Structure and Sentence Form* (1998), Lambrecht suggests that the difficulties encountered in the study of information structure are due to several reasons. First, grammatical analysis at this level is concerned with the relationship between linguistic form and the mental states of speakers and hearers; next, what makes it difficult is the fact that the linguist dealing

with information structure must deal simultaneously with formal and communicative aspects of language. However, the study of information structure has a long-standing history, and it has played an important role both in the description of individual languages and in linguistic theory in general.

Much has been written on linguistic investigations of the scholars Henri Weil (1844) or von der Gabelentz (1868), and this topic will not concern us here. It has to be stressed, however, that a hundred and fifty years later Chafe writes pretty much the same. With respect to English, Chafe (1994:83) states: 'Clauses do not express a random collection of independent events or states, floating in the air like so many disconnected bubbles. Rather, each has a point of departure, a referent from which it moves on to provide its own new contribution. It is this starting point referent that appears grammatically as the clause's subject'.

The difficulties encountered in modern theoretical research on the information-component of grammar are reflected in certain problems of terminology. Thus, in Prague School research the organisation of utterances is viewed in terms of *Functional Sentence Perspective* (cf. Mathesius 1929; Firbas 1964). Halliday (1967) employs the term *thematic structure* to the same end, while Chafe (1976) and Vallduví (1992) talk about *information packaging*.

Dichotomies such as *theme vs. rheme* (cf. Firbas 1964; Halliday 1994), *topic vs. comment* (Gundel 1988), *topic vs. focus* (Sgall & Hajičová 1977), *presupposition vs. focus* (Chomsky 1975; Prince 1981), *given vs. new* (Clark & Haviland 1977) have all been proposed to account for the 'topic-first principle', or, in other words, to give substance to the intuition that given information tends to precede new information. On the other hand, it has been pointed out in a number of sources that there is less uniformity of opinion regarding what this vast terminological apparatus actually stands for. As the notions referred to above have been extensively treated in linguistic literature, for a convenient condensation of the problems and complexities involved see, in addition, Allerton (1978) and Birner & Ward (1998).

3. The given/new distinction, definiteness, topic/comment and word order

It should be noted that the polarisations 'definite/ indefinite', 'given/new' information, and 'topic/comment' are not equivalent (cf. Chafe 1976, Thompson 1978; C. Lyons 1999). Definiteness is generally associated with given information which comes from different sources, such as shared information between the interlocutors, or information which, although not mentioned previously, is inferable from the context. Despite the fact that definiteness and givenness often go together, and topics generally represent given, or old, information, given material is not always topical, as in (1), and the topic need not be given – new information can be treated as topical as well, as (2) explicitly shows:

- (1) *The burglar climbed in through the window Jean had forgotten to close.*
- (2) *A man I work with has won the pools.* (From C. Lyons 1999)

A definite NP, on the other hand, does not always count as old information, as is brought out in (3):

- (3) *I saw your father yesterday.* (From Chafe 1976)

Despite conceptual differences referred to above, the information-packaging primitives seem to be universally associated with the partition of the sentence into two distinct parts, and this is driven by the need to meet certain communicative demands. Consequently, the 'topic' part anchors the sentence to the previous discourse; it foregrounds something already present in the consciousness of the interlocutors, while an informative part makes some contribution to the discourse or to the hearer's

'mental' world. Therefore, it is not uncommon in the literature to posit a correlation between the notions of topic and comment, on the one hand, and given and new information, on the other. Van Valin & Lapolla (1997, 201) define this correlation in the following way: 'In most communicative situations, when a speaker makes a statement, she makes what we call a "pragmatic assertion" because it is a pragmatically structured utterance, generally involving both "old" information, such as the topic and the presuppositions associated with the topic, and "new" information, such as the comment about the topic. All languages have some grammatical system for marking which type of information is which within the utterance; it may involve intonation, morphological marking, word order or some combination thereof.'

I will now give a brief presentation of how, in actual practice, different ways of information structuring are interpreted as different instructions for information update. A good example of the strategies involved is the instruction-based approach to information packaging described in Vallduví & Engdahl (1996). I will not go into technicalities of the approach here except for mentioning that each instruction type (and there are four of them) corresponds to a different focus-ground partition. The focus in this approach is defined as the part of the sentence that encodes information, the actual update potential. Sidner (1981), for example, views all discourse entities as ranked according to salience in a 'focus stack'. Thus, the 'focus' is the most salient discourse entity at a given time point, so to say, placed on the top of the focus stack. The ground is what is already established in the hearer's mental state at the time of the utterance; it therefore acts as an usher for the focus indicating how the information update is to be carried out. The structure of information states in the hearer's mind, on the other hand, is viewed as an arrangement of data files, an idea borrowed from Heim (1982). Files are collections of file cards, and the content of file cards is updated during communication.

Information packaging reflects the way the speakers take into account their assumptions about the structure of the hearer's information state in order to optimize information update. Simultaneously, yet independently, the marking of the cognitive status of the discourse referents (that is, familiarity or novelty) is responsible for providing the hearer with instructions for file-card management.

Discourse referents, as has been discussed above, are either familiar ('given' or 'known') or novel ('new' or 'unknown') to the hearer. Speaker assumptions about whether their interlocutors are familiar with a particular discourse referent determine the realization of this referent in a given sentence. The process is described by Vallduví & Engdahl (1996, 498) as follows: 'It is generally agreed that determiners, in languages that possess them, play an important role in the realization of cognitive status. Roughly, [indefinite] noun phrases express novel discourse referents and indicate that a new file card has to be created, whereas familiar referents are realized through definite noun phrases. Familiar referents can be more or less 'accessible' (Ariel 1988): there are 'dormant' file cards and 'activated' file cards. The former are realized as full noun phrases to indicate that the dormant file card must become activated. The latter, which are also said to be 'salient' or 'in focus', may be realized as pronouns'.

This approach sets apart the two dimensions, those of cognitive status and information packaging. Even though they are seen as operating simultaneously, they are doing it independently: cognitive status markers provide hearers with instructions for file-card management and information packaging provides them with instructions to update the file cards. The independence of the two dimensions is exemplified in (4 a and b), taken from Vallduví & Engdahl (1996, 498). The examples demonstrate that phrases denoting salient, familiar, on-stage referents, that is, pronouns, can be either focal (in 4a), or ground, as in (4b):

- (4) a. *I like [F HIM].*
b. *Him [F I LIKE].*

The division of labour between cognitive status and information packaging can be summed up thus: as noted in the previous quote, cognitive status is signalled through the choice of lexical realization of the noun phrase; in contrast, information packaging is structurally realized through syntactic operations, intonational phrasing or morphological marking.

As studies of information structure in different languages have demonstrated (e.g. Kuno 1972; Li & Thompson 1976; Schachter 1976; Prince 1981; Chafe 1987), sentence subjects are most likely candidates for the topic position. Givón (1979, 28) claims that the subject position in the sentence is usually reserved '...for the topic, the old information argument, the "continuity marker."' Strong empirical evidence in favour of this assumption can be found in the fact that in coherent discourse the overwhelming majority of subjects are unaccented pronouns, and this is one of the strategies to indicate topic continuity across sentences. However, despite a strong correlation, it is not possible to equate a pragmatic category 'topic' with a grammatical category 'subject'. As is rightly observed by Lambrecht (1998, 131), 'If this were possible, no separate category "topic" would be needed'. This assumption is in line with Li & Thompson's (1976) claim for a new language typology based on the notions of topic-prominence and subject-prominence. According to Li & Thompson (1976, 459), 'In subject-prominent languages the structure of sentences favors a description in which the grammatical relation *subject-predicate* plays a major role; in topic-prominent ... languages, the basic structure of sentences favors a description in which the grammatical relation *topic-comment* plays a major role.' It can be asserted with respect to English that it is a prototypical example of a subject-prominent language. In the unmarked word order pattern sentence subjects are generally interpreted as unmarked topics due to the fact that the topic-comment articulation is the unmarked pragmatic sentence articulation and represents, from a communicative point of view, the most useful, and, therefore, common sentence type.

4. Topic/focus, cognitive states and sentence form

I will now show how the pragmatic topic/focus categories and the cognitive status of discourse referents are expressed on the sentence level presenting a three-way relationship between cognitive, pragmatic, and syntactic factors.

An important theoretical distinction, drawn by most researchers of the field (cf. Chafe 1987; Vallduvi 1992; Vallduvi & Engdahl 1996) and referred to above, recognizes two kinds of information-structure categories; they are inter-related but, nevertheless, distinct phenomena. Lambrecht (1998, 112) argues that the first category indicates the (temporary) cognitive states of the mental representation of discourse referents, labelled as activation and identifiability, whereas the second one has to do with pragmatically construed relations between referents and propositions, and these are referred to as topic and focus. The two categories correlate with each other, but they cannot be equated despite the fact that the subtle differences in the activation status, i.e. a cognitive category, are reflected by the syntactic organization of utterances.

Lambrecht (1998, 113) discusses the following examples:

- (5) *I heard something terrible last night. Remember Mark, the guy we went hiking with, who's gay? His lover just died of AIDS.*
- (6) *I just heard something terrible. Remember Mark, the guy we went hiking with, who's gay? I ran into his lover yesterday, and he told me he had AIDS.*

The activation status of the referent his lover is the same in (5) and (6): in both examples the referent was not previously mentioned but it is 'inferentially accessible', that is, it is to be inferred

from another referent in the context. But there is a subtle difference in the construal of his lover in the two versions. It seems as if in (6) his lover is given greater pragmatic salience than in (5). And this greater salience correlates with the fact that in (6) the NP is likely to be perceived as being prosodically more prominent. The inferentially accessible status of the referent is grammatically exploited in (5), where the NP is a subject, but not in (6), where it occurs in a postverbal prepositional phrase. Through its syntactic organization, example (5) suggests that the referent is already accessible in the discourse. But the syntactic organization of (6) suggests that the referent is being evoked in the hearer's consciousness as a previously inactive, unused, discourse referent. In fact the sentence 'I ran into his lover yesterday', just like the preceding sentence 'Remember Mark?' may be seen as a type of 'presentational' construction, whose purpose is to introduce the referent of the NP into the discourse rather than predicating something about the subject 'I'. Thus, the difference between (5) and (6) is that (5), by its structure, conveys a request to the hearer to act as if the referent of the NP 'his lover' were already pragmatically available, whereas (6) does not convey such a request.

Of special importance to the topic under discussion is the claim made by Lambrecht (1998, 114) to the effect that 'Facts such as these show clearly that the parameters of identifiability and activation do not exhaustively determine the information structure of sentences. Indeed if activation has to do with the states of the mental representations of discourse referents, how can the position of a noun phrase in a sentence have an influence on our perception of the activation state of its referent?' In view of this, Lambrecht concludes that the syntactic structure of sentences and the assumed discourse representations of referents correlate with each other; moreover, this correlation is determined by an independent factor, i.e. the topic and focus structure of the proposition in which the referent is an argument.

Further, Lambrecht (*loc.cit.*) argues convincingly that the reason why his lover in (5) should be interpreted as an accessible item and why the same NP, his lover, in (6) is not so perceived has to do with the fact that in the first case the referent plays the pragmatic role of topic, while in the second case it is part of the focus of the utterance. It allows Lambrecht to make the following claim: there is a three-termed relation between accessibility, subject, and topic on the one hand, and inactiveness, object, and focus on the other.

In recent years, most discussions related to information packaging have been set against the background of information flow (see Chafe 1987; Du Bois 1987; Givón 1983; Prince 1981) or the 'flow of conscious experience' to use Chafe's (1994) term. According to Fox & Thompson (1990, 297), 'information flow refers to the interactionally determined choices that speakers make which determine intonational, grammatical, and lexical choices'. Viewed from this perspective, information flow is claimed to influence the process of grammaticization of the most common linguistic patterns used by speakers via the cognitive constraints imposed on the information flow in discourse. Mention should be made of 'the light subject constraint' proposed by Chafe (1987) where 'lightness' is understood in terms of either givenness or accessibility. This constraint accords well with the cognitive 'lay foundation first' principle referred to above and the view that subjects express starting points to which other information is added. As relevant studies show, in English, at least, perceptually salient, animate, definite, and presupposed concepts are likely to be mentioned first and appear to constitute particularly good foundations (*cf.* Gernsbacher & Hargreaves 1992).

Chafe's (1994, 109) hypothesis that an intonation unit can express no more than one new idea led to the formulation of 'the one new idea constraint' which posits that 'thought, or at least language, proceeds in terms of one such activation [of a new referent] at a time, and each activation applies to a single referent, event, or state, but not to more than one'. Similar hypotheses have been put forward at various times and by different scholars. For example, Givón (1984, 258) calls the same phenomenon

the 'one chunk [of new information] per clause principle', Du Bois (1987, 826) refers to it as the 'one new argument constraint', while Tomlin & Pu (1991) talk about 'a severely limited amount of focal attention'. Discussing constraints on information flow, Du Bois (1987, 846) notes that constraints on information flow typically single out new information; the amount of given information, on the other hand, has not been shown to be limited to the same degree. It follows that new, or previously inactive information appears to be more difficult to process; this is due to the fact that this type of information requires special cognitive effort to bring it into an activated state. Moreover, the fact that the constraints discussed above apply to a variety of languages which exhibit different basic word order patterns, not only SVO (Givón 1975; Du Bois 1987), points to the universal character of the 'flow of conscious experience', which has to do with the limited human processing capacities.

5. Some alternative approaches to information structuring

To do justice to the full scope of the field, it has to be pointed out that I have been dealing with what is considered to be the mainstream of approaches to information structuring. However, it deserves to be mentioned that in the literature information structuring is seen as a far more complex matter as has been argued here. Thus, instead of analysing it in terms of the given/new dichotomy, it should be approached in terms of multi-partitioning. This is exemplified by the degrees of 'communicative dynamism' and 'transition' as the part of information standing between theme and rheme, distinguished in the theory of Functional Sentence Perspective (cf. Firbas 1971); the degrees of 'newsworthiness' of the elements of the sentence posited by Mithun (1992); or the recognition of new/contrastive topic versus old/non-contrastive topic by Koktová (1997).

Another important point to make is that the pragmatic principle 'old information first' grammaticized as the 'topic-first' syntax is not universal. As studies by a number of researchers (cf. Keenan 1978; Payne 1987; Hale 1992; Mithun 1992) show, precisely the opposite ordering appears to be the rule for at least some languages; consequently, 'in no way is it a foregone conclusion that cross-linguistically, information lower in "communicative dynamism" generally comes before information higher in "communicative dynamism" ' (Payne 1992a, 6).

6. Concluding remarks

To conclude, this paper presents a very selective overview of a field in which a vast amount of work has been carried out. I have therefore merely touched upon the basic aspects of a very wide and complicated topic, and my main focus was on the mainstream approaches related to the analysis of problematic areas within the field. However, whatever the scope and depth of the analysis, I hope to have shown that cognitive-pragmatic factors play a very prominent role in predicting the order of sentence elements. Moreover, such factors can be grammaticized, the fact aptly captured by Du Bois (1985, 363), who claims that 'Grammars code best what speakers do most'.

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KOGNITYVINIS POŽIŪRIS Į INFORMACINĘ SAKINIO STRUKTŪRĄ

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje autorė pristato, nagrinėja ir lygina pastarojo laikotarpio kalbos moksle išryškėjusius požiūrius į informacinę sakinio struktūrą. Reiškinyks analizuojamas kognityviniu ir pragmatiniu aspektu, aptariant šių lygmenų įtaką sintaksinei sakinio struktūrai. Analizės pagrindą sudaro Wallace Chafe'o, Talmy Givón'o, Knudo Lambrechto, Ellen Prince ir kitų šiuolaikinių kalbos tyrinėtojų idėjos ir vėliausi darbai.

Įteikta

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