

Disentangling Topicality Effects

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The concept of the proposition-level TOPIC is central to multiple areas of linguistic theory and analysis, but remains largely controversial regarding its definition and the range of the phenomena to which it applies. In the common pre-theoretical view, topicality is a property of information that specifies the settings and the referents required for the interpretation of the primary message conveyed by a sentence. Among the most generally accepted theoretical definition is the aboutness understanding, which describes TOPIC as the referent the proposition is about (following Strawson 1964; Reinhart 1981; Gundel 1988; Lambrecht 1994). Other definitions opt for different analytical levels and core properties - TOPIC being defined, for example, among many others, as a context displacer for the illocutionary force (following Hockett 1958), as an interpretative framework for the proposition (following Haiman 1978), as a carrier of discourse salience (following Givón 1983). These definitions are commonly channelled further into a cognitive model of information processing, where topic is regarded as a cognitive index where new information is to be stored (Reinhart 1981; Portner and Yabushita 1998; Endriss 2009).

Language-specific studies conducted within these theoretical frameworks explore how topics are *expressed* by various grammatical markers, structures and strategies. Topicality is commonly associated with a large set of prototypical cross-linguistically recurrent constructions: constituent order with a clause-initial position, Left Dislocation and Hanging Topic structures, *as for*-type markers, *wh*-clefts and topical particles.

Thus, the concept of TOPIC is applied to pragmatic phenomena which share a *high-level* interpretive effect, and is used for the analysis of a large set of distinct marking strategies. As a result, in the description of real data, the theoretical and empirical boundaries of the category become blurred, or too broad for the study of linguistic phenomena. The usage of the concept does not provide sufficient resolution for language-specific research and for comparative analysis of the numerous phenomena associated with it. Moreover, a definition based on a high-level interpretive effect potentially overgeneralizes a broad array of low-level factors, which should be identified and addressed separately. In fact, it is commonly acknowledged that topicality encompasses a cluster of factors (Jacobs 2001), and thus, the application of a unified concept to a large set of heterogeneous morphosyntactic constructions must be questioned (Gómez-González 1997). These concerns can recall the recent discussions on the conceptual and operational drawbacks of universally defined linguistic categories (Haspelmath 2010; Bickel 2015). However, since TOPIC is assumed to be a category of communication and cognitive processing (and not a grammatical category), disentangling this concept can potentially suggest the need for a different, multifactorial model of communication as outlined below.

This workshop aims at disentangling topicality effects, focusing on the description of phenomena of natural discourse and spontaneous interaction. Our purpose is to create a fruitful dialogue between

scholars from different theoretical and methodological backgrounds, in order to examine the range of phenomena commonly dubbed “topical”, as well as discuss whether and to what extent the traditional concept of TOPIC is theoretically and empirically relevant for the study of spoken and written discourse.

In this respect, a promising path of research has been traced from interactional, corpus-based approaches, aiming at providing fine-grained – and often cross-linguistic – descriptions of phenomena which have been described under the too broad concept(s) of TOPIC. Examination of specific constructions traditionally associated with topicality reveals indeed a panoply of factors that contribute directly to the process of dynamic information structuring, producing aboutness and framing effects only epiphenomenally. For instance, experimental studies by Tomlin (1997; cf. also Myachykov et al. 2018) suggest that attention plays a direct role in the choice of syntactic structure in English, with no need for a postulation of an intervening pragmatic layer of topicality. Numerous studies of natural interaction question topicality-oriented analyses of common “topical” structures. For example, Left Dislocation (LD) constructions have been found to be triggered by a variety of specific interaction-managing and production related factors, such as incremental utterance production, turn-taking, local attention alignment, resonance of available material, and textual prominence. (Pekarek-Doehler et al. 2015; Ozerov forthcoming; Cimmino forthcoming). Wh-clefts are cross-linguistically found to constitute discourse-regulating devices (e.g. Maschler and Fishman 2020 for Hebrew, Mori 2014 for Japanese), and classical cases of “contrastive topic”-markers are re-analysed in terms of interaction and attention management (Tanaka 2015 for Japanese, Kim 2015 for Korean). These studies may suggest that apparent aboutness- and frame-setting effects are not a primitive factor, but a retrospective, potentially epiphenomenal overgeneralization of the specific and diverse local discourse moves performed by the speakers. In this case, the identified specific factors can be modelled as guiding the interlocutors directly in the dynamic process of utterance production and interpretation (Ozerov 2021).

We invite submissions for papers aiming at describing effects associated with topicality, teasing them apart from syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic components in the description of discourse level phenomena. Every discourse phenomenon related to the concept of TOPIC can be the object of study and it can be approached from every theoretical and methodological angle. Submissions to the workshop may include, but need not be limited to the following theoretical and empirical issues:

- Theoretical discussion of discourse phenomena associated with topicality and possible alternative conceptual categories for their description;
- Theoretical discussion on the place/benefit/evidence for a unified view of the diverse topicality-like phenomena;
- Possible fruitful operationalization of the concept of TOPIC for language-specific or comparative studies;
- Language-specific and comparative studies of linguistic phenomena associated with topicality-like effects, combined with the examination of the factors triggering these effects;
- Crosslinguistic variation in the identification/description of topicality-like effects;
- Cross-linguistic variation in the assignment of topical-like effects in parallel contexts.

As we wish this workshop to be a free and fruitful forum of discussion, each paper needs to describe the definitions of the discussed categories in terms understandable also to other theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, methods adopted in the operational application of the concept of topic in corpora or experiment must be clearly described. Papers taking a theoretical approach must also

hint to empirical case-studies, and, in turn, empirical case-studies must also clearly state their theoretical contribution. Both intra-linguistic and cross-linguistic studies are welcome.

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