

Mismatches in Information Structure

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Workshop topic and research questions:

Information structure concerns how linguistic expressions are organized in consideration of the interlocutors' mental representation of the discourse and their communicative intent (see, e.g., Halliday 1967, Chafe 1976, Prince 1981, Lambrecht 1994, Krifka 2008). Language users employ various morphosyntactic and prosodic/phonological strategies to convey information in an appropriate manner for the given conversational situation, reflecting a sensitivity to information-structural notions such as focus and topic, among others.

Consider the notion of focus. From a semantic viewpoint, “focus indicates the presence of alternatives that are relevant for the interpretation of linguistic expressions” (Krifka 2007: 18). Pragmatically, it corresponds to the constituent of the sentence to which the speaker intends to direct attention (Erteschik-Shir 1997), and may reflect the organization of questions in the discourse (Roberts 1996, Beaver & Clark 2008). Although focus is associated with prosodic prominence in many languages (Truckenbrodt 1995, 1999, Ladd 1996, Zubizarreta 1998), this is not always the case (see e.g. Büring 2010). Indeed, focus can also be marked through specialized morphology or syntax (see e.g. Rizzi 1997, É. Kiss 1998, Belletti 2004), exclusively in addition to or prosodic marking.

The linguistic marking of topic may also affect the grammatical properties of a sentence at different levels. Topic is generally defined in terms of ‘aboutness’ and/or ‘givenness’, expressing what the sentence is about (Reinhart 1982), and/or information that is typically ‘old’, that is, accessible to the interlocutors or at least inferable from the context (Gundel 1988, Lambrecht 1994). Topic may also be marked morphologically with special morphemes or grammatical particles, or it can be syntactically displaced in a dedicated position, typically at the beginning of the sentence. Several studies have moreover shown that the actual prosodic, syntactic or even morphological properties of topic and focus depend on the specific type of focus or topic (see, e.g., Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl 2007, Büring 2016, Bianchi, Bocci & Cruschina 2016, Cruschina 2021a,b, 2022).

Linguistic strategies for encoding particular information structural notions sometimes exhibit *mismatches*, especially at the interfaces between different modules of grammar. For instance, a particular constituent that serves semantically and pragmatically as the focus or topic may nonetheless not bear the expected prosodic, morphological, or syntactic reflex in a given language or in a specific environment. The possibility and shape of such mismatches may inform the linguistic architecture that allows for apparent grammatical reference to information-structural notions. Similar mismatches also occur in the opposite scenario, when a constituent that is marked as focus or topic is not associated with the corresponding meaning, or in the lack of a full isomorphism between the syntactic constituent that is marked as focus or topic and the portion of the sentence that is assigned a focus or topic interpretation.

The aim of the proposed workshop is to bring together linguists working on mismatches in information structure. The questions addressed in the workshop include, but are not limited to:

- What sorts of mismatches are attested between prosody, morphosyntax, semantics, and discourse, in individual languages or cross-linguistically?
- Are some apparent information-structural mismatches in fact best described as not involving a mismatch, through improved empirical description and/or revised theoretical notions? (See e.g. Krifka 1998.)
- What sorts of grammatical processes and pressures can impede an expected information-structural expression?
- When and how do utterances violate a language’s information-structural defaults (e.g. expected topic–comment structure, given–new partition, default prosody)?
- How cross-linguistically uniform are the semantics and pragmatics of particular information-structural devices?
- How do information-structural notions such as topic and focus line up with other, overlapping notions such as given, new, contrast, and surprise (mirativity)?
- What do information-structural devices and their mismatches teach us about the cognitive representation of discourse and mental states? (See e.g. Roberts 1992, Büring 2003, Beaver & Clark 2008.)
- How do language users resolve potential ambiguities and mismatches in information structure in interaction and/or in on-line processing?
- How do child and adult grammars differ in their use and interpretation of information-structural strategies? (See e.g. Crain et al 1992.) How are such strategies and their attested mismatches learned?
- Are there typological generalizations regarding the shapes and sorts of attested information-structural mismatches? What do such generalizations teach us about the architecture of grammar? (See e.g. Büring 2009, 2015, Branen & Erlewine 2023.)

A discussion of the unexpected mismatches in information structure will shed light not only on the specific contexts in which these mismatches are found, but also on the general status and role of information structure in the architecture of the grammar. Empirically, information structure has established itself as an autonomous field of study, but the theoretical question is still open of whether or not information structure counts as an independent domain of analysis

at the ‘interface’ between grammar and discourse. Mismatches and unexpected patterns can be viewed as ‘anomalies’ that are hard to explain, but at the same time they can also be key to the theoretical development and understanding of the notion of information structure itself.

In this workshop proposal, we are pleased to bring together 18 original papers, with abstracts below, which address diverse aspects of the study of information structure and advance our understanding of attested information-structural mismatches. The papers described below include those employing a variety of methods — including experimental and corpus methods as well as from original fieldwork and theoretical analysis — and include works situated against different theoretical backgrounds. The workshop will therefore be a unique venue that brings together scholars from different subfields and traditions, around a coherent broader theme, as is only possible through a conference such as SLE.

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