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Tracing the sources of Information Structure: Towards the study of interactional management of information

Pavel Ozerov

Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Martin Buber Society of Fellows, Mandel Building, Room 353, Mt. Scopus, Jerusalem, 9190501, Israel



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ABSTRACT

Building upon previous literature and insights from natural corpus data, this paper questions the theoretical bases and applicability of Information-Structural categories, such as topic and focus, and proposes an alternative approach to this field. In the proposed framework, so-called “information-structural” phenomena are epiphenomenal effects of diverse linguistic devices, related directly to a broad array of primarily intersubjective, interactional and discourse-structuring aspects of communication and language. The paper presents cross-linguistic data that support this view and proposes the ensuing directions for the systematic study of these phenomena.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, cross-linguistic data and the typological theory have converged to produce a paradigm shift in different domains of linguistic inquiry. Theoretical approaches to different phenomena have been shifting away from the procedure of: (a) formulating theoretical proposals of universal categories and (b) exploring their cross-linguistic expression, which in turn (c) feeds back into the definition of the proposed categories. As demonstrated by cross-linguistic studies of topics such as “word-classes” (Haspelmath, 2012) or “grammatical relations” (Witzlack-Makarevich, 2010), an attempt to define absolute categories such as “noun” or “subject” involves dubious lumping methodologies. As a result of these, language-specific phenomena are analysed as instances of a presumed universal category because some of its features share similarities with the features ascribed to the universal category. In this process, major differences between language-specific devices may be disregarded as irrelevant if they are not part of the identification criteria of the assumed category. At the same time,

E-mail address: pavel.ozarov@mail.huji.ac.il.

superficial similarities and secondary features receive a disproportionately large weight due to their apparent correspondence to some criteria that fit the definition of the assumed category (Haspelmath, 2012).

The alternative, bottom-up approach applies a different methodology in the inquiry procedure. Fine-grained descriptive analysis of language-specific phenomena is followed by a subsequent theoretical-typological analysis. The latter classifies these features, and finds sets of basic, cross-linguistically applicable variables that allow qualitative and quantitative comparison of the phenomena examined (Bickel, 2015). As a side effect, it also produces a re-analysis of the presumed universal categories proposed by the former method, such as “subject” or “noun”. These phenomena turn out to represent not a basic or universal category, but clusters of features, which have been perceived as “prototypical” due to certain theoretical or typological biases.

In the last four decades, the field of Information Structure has followed the former universals-driven approach. Specifically, the strategy of inquiry involved the three stages outlined above: (a) theoretical work postulates universal Information-Structural categories based on assumed features of communication (e.g. Lambrecht, 1994; Zimmermann and Onea, 2011; Roberts, 2012; Krifka and Musan, 2012); and (b) subsequent research discovers how these are **expressed** in different languages. Yet, since the language-specific categories discovered in this way often do not neatly fit into the theoretical Information Structural mould, this research typically results in (c) repeated modification of proposed universal categories according to the findings of language specific facts (e.g. É. Kiss, 1998).

Following the views expressed by Matic and Wedgwood (2013) (cf. also Gómez-González, 1997), the present paper argues that the field of Information Structure should – and in fact already does – shift away from the pre-empirical postulation of categories and their subsequent verification and exploration. Theoretical considerations, and in particular the constantly growing cross-linguistic evidence and natural data, suggest the necessity of a shift in the vein of the bottom-up approach, calling for analysing and typologising heterogeneous devices that create dynamic interactional structuring of information in natural discourse. Their encompassing research paves the way for the discovery of the categories involved in this process, and for better generalisations that would advance our understanding of language structure, discourse and communication beyond the alleged categories of Information Structure.

This paper sets out to propose a research programme along these lines. The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 outlines the basic assumptions of the study of Information Structure. Section 3 is a theoretical discussion regarding these assumptions and research practices that questions the possibility of a universal definition and identification of universal Information-Structural categories. Readers who have little interest in the theory of Information Structure and are primarily concerned with the implications of methodology for linguistic analysis can skip it entirely. Section 4 presents the emerging alternative for the study of Information Structure. It demonstrates how diverse linguistic categories, which have no direct relation to Information Structure, create effects that merely echo particular features of Information Structure. The theoretical discussion in Section 5 summarises the paper.

2. Information-Structural categories: a very brief overview

Information Structure¹ is the field of linguistic inquiry concerned with the question of how the communicative goals of the speaker and the context shape the lexicogrammatical configuration of the utterance, and, more generally, with the way information is presented in a given context. It is often regarded as the expression of those aspects of natural language that reflect the managing and updating process of the *Common Ground* (e.g. Stalnaker, 2002) – information that the speaker considers to be shared in the course of communication (e.g. Krifka and Musan, 2012:1). Many current theories conceive of Information Structure as having (at least) two dimensions, namely contextual properties of information with the corresponding cognitive status of discourse referents (givenness-newness or activation state), and the role of information in the modification and management of the Common Ground (e.g. Lambrecht's 1994 pragmatic relations of topic and focus). This paper deals with the latter dimension of Information Structure, namely Information-Structural categories whose prominent representatives are concepts such as topic, comment or focus.

Information-Structural categories are defined as UNIVERSAL categories of Information Structure (Lambrecht, 1994:5; Vallduví, 1994; Roberts, 2012:2; Zimmermann and Onea, 2011:1652). These universal concepts – and above all TOPIC and FOCUS – are widely known and employed throughout linguistic studies. Although the definitions, as well as the set of basic concepts, differ between approaches, there is wide agreement that these categories are definable on the basis of the role and context-dependent features of information in a proposition. From the point of view of most current theories these are properties of information, or of the speaker's cognitive perspective on information. Definitions of topic and focus (and other Information-Structural categories) identify absolute features of information universally applicable to any given proposition, and unrelated to any linguistic category or property of any language. In a similar way, concepts of past or future time of an event are language-external universals. Their identification would be universally dependent on the properties of an event, and independent of the question of whether a language has a dedicated category for their expression or not.

Topic and focus are probably the most widely known and used categories of Information Structure. Topic is typically defined in terms of ABOUTNESS: it is assumed that, irrespective of linguistic marking and availability of a corresponding category

¹ Throughout the paper, I will use *Information Structure* for the field of study and its universal concepts, and *information structure* for a configuration of a particular proposition.

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