

Structural topic marking: Evidence from the processing of grammatical and ungrammatical sentences with adverbs[☆]



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Received 6 May 2012; received in revised form 5 September 2016; accepted 6 September 2016

Available online 22 October 2016

Abstract

The results of two German speeded acceptability-judgement experiments suggest that placing a DP in the position before a sentence adverb in the German middle field, which has been argued to be a structural topic position (Frey, 2004), has an impact on sentence processing. In object-before-subject orders, placing an object DP, whose referent is not normally topical, in the topic position increases acceptability and reduces acceptance latencies compared to structures where the object DP does not appear in the topic position. For subject-before-object orders, placing the subject, which is a typical topic, in the topic position does not yield such processing advantages. Locative adverbials, which do not mark topic boundaries, do not affect the processing of subject-object asymmetries in the way that sentence adverbs do. I suggest that these effects can be explained if Frey's topic position is indeed a topic position, and if topics serve as addresses in a structured mental representation of the discourse (cf. Repp and Drenhaus, 2015). Furthermore, evidence is provided for an influence of topic marking on the detection of case errors in ungrammatical structures with two DPs that are marked with the same case. Error detection also was found to be influenced by linear closeness.

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Keywords: Topic; Scrambling; Subject-before-object preference; Double case violation; Adverb; Speeded-acceptability judgement

1. Introduction

Under the most prominent definition, a topic is the entity a sentence is about (Reinhart, 1981, and subsequent literature). For instance, when we want to report that a dwarf and a giant met we can do this by using the sentence in (1a), and also by using the sentence in (1b). Intuitively, (1a) is about the dwarf, and (1b) is about the giant. Truth-conditionally, there is no difference between (1a) and (1b): they are true in the same situations.

- (1) a. [The dwarf]_{TOPIC} [met the giant.]_{COMMENT}
b. [The giant]_{TOPIC} [met the dwarf.]_{COMMENT}

The topics in (1) correspond to the subjects of the two sentences, and the comment that is predicated of each topic corresponds to the predicate of the sentence. Subjects very often are topics (Givón, 1983; Reinhart, 1981) but referents

[☆] The handling Editors for this article were Johan Rooryck and Harry Whitaker.

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denoted by other constituents with other grammatical functions can be topics, too. This can be seen most clearly in languages like Japanese or Korean, which have morphological devices that can mark topicality (e.g. Kuroda, 1965; Kuno, 1972). The Japanese examples in (2) and (3) illustrate that in a context that specifies what the next sentence is to be about, the aboutness topic in that sentence is denoted by a *wa*-marked phrase. In (2), the topic of the second sentence is the subject, and in (3) it is the object.

- (2) Context: Tell me something about that dog. Japanese
 ano inu-wa kinoo kooen-de John-o kande-simatta.
that dog-TOP yesterday park-at John-ACC bite-ended.up
 'The dog bit John in the park yesterday.'
- (3) Context: Tell me something about that hat.
 ano boosi-wa John-ga kinoo kaimasita.
that hat-TOP John-NOM yesterday bought
 'John bought that hat yesterday.'

Vermeulen (2013:128)

Morphological marking is one of several ways of topic marking that languages employ. In English, specific phrases like *for x*, or *as far as x is concerned* are often thought to convey the meaning carried by the *wa*-marker in Japanese and therefore are regularly used in translations for sentences like (2) and (3) (e.g. Hoji, 1985; Kuno, 1973; Saito, 1985; Vermeulen, 2013). Other languages have syntactic means to mark topics. For instance, some languages have been suggested to have a left-peripheral topic position in the clause (e.g. Mandarin Chinese, cf. Chafe, 1976).¹ For German, it has been claimed that it has a non-peripheral structural topic position (Frey, 2004). That language also employs prosodic means for topic marking: Repp and Drenhaus (2015) argue that left-dislocated phrases can be marked as topics vs. foci by prosodic means.

What is the purpose of topic marking? In the theoretical linguistic literature, topicality has been proposed to influence the way that the common ground – or the discourse model – is structured: topical referents correspond to *file cards* or *addresses* in the common ground, under which the information about the referent is stored (e.g. Reinhart, 1981; Vallduví, 1992; Vallduví and Engdahl, 1996 and subsequent literature). The notions of *file card* and *address* have been viewed in different ways in these accounts. For instance, Vallduví (1992) assumes an extra representational layer of information structure with a file card system where the update of the common ground is realized, whereas Portner and Yabushita (1998) argue that the structuring of the common ground according to the topicality of the referents in a clause can and must be done in the semantics. In this paper I adopt the latter kind of proposal but for expository purposes work with a somewhat simplified model. Portner and Yabushita (1998) and Reinhart (1981) assume that the common ground is not just a set of propositions that the interlocutors mutually agree to be true (which is the original view of the common ground; Karttunen, 1974; Stalnaker, 1974) but that it is a sequence of pairs of entities and propositions. A proposition is associated with the entity that is denoted by the topic phrase of the sentence denoting the proposition. According to this view, the proposition denoted by the sentences in (1) would be associated with the referent denoted by *the dwarf*, if it is conveyed in the form of (1a), and it would be associated with the referent denoted by *the giant* if it is conveyed in the form of (1b). For sentences without a topic (see below for elaboration), Portner and Yabushita (1998) suggest that the entity they are associated with is the event referent that is introduced by the proposition. Non-topical referents are also paired with propositions but with propositions that are formed on the basis of the corresponding referential expression only, such as “referent is a giant” in (1a).

Following Repp and Drenhaus (2015), we might assume that organizing the common ground in this way makes discourse processing easier – after all, there must be a reason for languages to provide topic-marking devices. Staying with the address metaphor, it seems plausible to assume that associating incoming information directly with an existing address makes integration of the new information easier than if there were no such association. Furthermore, information stored under an address might be easier to access if that address gets mentioned later on (Repp and Drenhaus, 2015; cf. Portner and Yabushita, 1998).

In psycholinguistic research on topicality (see section 3 for details), topical referents have generally been found to be more salient than other referents. There also is some evidence that marking a previously non-topical referent as topic incurs some processing costs for discourse reorganization. Furthermore, topic marking has been argued to influence the recall of a sentence from memory. If we consider the theoretical model of the common ground sketched above as a

¹ Left-peripheral topics in Chinese are not necessarily aboutness topics as they do not always have a predication relation with their comment, cf. e.g. Chen (1996).

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