

Topics and topic prominence in two sign languages

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Abstract

In this paper we describe topic marking in Russian Sign Language (RSL) and Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT) and discuss whether these languages should be considered topic prominent. The formal markers of topics in RSL are sentence-initial position, a prosodic break following the topic, and non-manual markers, including eyebrow raise and backward head tilt. In NGT all these markers are used, too, but sometimes topics are also marked by clause-final pointing signs referring back to the topic of the sentence (sentence-final topic copying); this was not found in RSL. Topics in RSL and NGT are not marked obligatorily. Eyebrow raise and head tilt only mark shifted aboutness topics. In both RSL and NGT the VS order is used inthetic sentences. However, this strategy is optional, so the SV order is also accepted inthetic sentences. According to the criteria of topic prominence summarized by [Sze \(2008\)](#), RSL and NGT cannot be considered topic prominent. We argue that the notion of topic prominence should be considered gradual.
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1. Introduction

1.1. Topic prominence

In this paper we try to answer the question whether two European sign languages – Russian Sign Language (RSL) and Sign Language of the Netherlands (*Nederlandse Gebarentaal*, NGT) – are topic prominent. The notion of topic prominence goes back to [Li and Thompson \(1976\)](#) who argued for a four-way typology: all languages can be classified into \pm topic prominent and \pm subject prominent. In subject prominent languages (such as English or German), grammatical rules refer to the notion of subject, while in topic prominent languages (such as Chinese, Lisu and Lahu), the notion of topic is referred to by many grammatical rules. According to Li and Thompson, topic prominent languages have a number of characteristics that distinguish them from subject-prominent languages. In particular, topic prominent languages lack passives and dummy-subjects; also, they are predominantly SOV. The most important criterion is that in these languages topics have to be overtly marked. Within the generative grammar framework, [Kiss \(1995\)](#) refined the definition of topic prominence by focusing on this last property of obligatory topic marking. She claimed that topic prominent languages consistently differentiatethetic sentences from sentences with topics (categorical sentences).

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In the quest for understanding the notion of topic prominence, it is important to analyze data from various spoken and signed languages of the world. Research has shown that sign languages can make an important contribution to typology, as they represent a different modality but nevertheless share fundamental properties with spoken languages (Zeshan, 2008). Very little is known about cross-linguistic variation in the domain of topic prominence for signed languages. In fact, a direct comparison of topic marking and topic prominence in two or more sign languages has not been conducted before. In this paper, we aim to fill in this gap by discussing the results of our research on RSL and NGT. Before introducing the languages, we briefly summarize the results of previous research on topic marking and topic prominence in sign languages relevant to this study.

1.2. Topics and topic prominence in sign languages

From the early days of sign linguistic research, the notion of topic has been applied to sign languages (Friedman, 1976). In recent years research on various sign languages has demonstrated that they show some similarities with respect to topic marking. In particular, topics are marked by sentence-initial position and a certain set of non-manual markers in many unrelated sign languages.

Fronting, also known as topicalization, and in general sentence-initial position for topics can be found in various sign languages, including American Sign Language (ASL, Friedman, 1976), Israeli Sign Language (ISL, Rosenstein, 2001), Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL, Sze, 2008), and Finnish Sign Language (FinSL, Jantunen, 2007). Note that sign languages share this tendency with spoken languages, as typological research showed (Gundel, 1988).

Another very common way of marking topics in sign languages is non-manual markers, such as eyebrow raise and backward head tilt. Sze (2011) found out that these markers are used to mark topics in ASL, NGT, Australian SL, and HKSL. Jantunen (2007) also described eyebrow raise as topic marker for FinSL. Although there are some differences in the choice of particular non-manuals in particular contexts (for instance, in ISL, according to Dachkovsky et al. (2013) most topics are marked with eye squints, and only half of the topics with raised eyebrows, while in ASL the opposite distribution of markers applies), the cross-linguistic similarities are still striking. Researchers also noticed that even if a topic is not marked by a distinct non-manual, it is usually separated from the rest of the sentence by a prosodic boundary, such as a pause, a head nod, or a blink (Sze, 2008, 2011).

There is some research on topic marking in NGT (Coerts, 1992; Crasborn et al., 2009), and the results suggest that topics in NGT can also be marked with sentence-initial position and the same types of non-manuals (in particular, eyebrow raise and backward head tilt) as in other sign languages. For RSL no research on topics specifically has been done before, but some researchers mentioned that topics can be marked by the initial position and eyebrow raise in this language as well (Prozorova, 2009).

The notion of topic prominence has also been applied in the analysis of sign languages (but not to RSL or NGT). Several researchers have explicitly claimed for specific sign languages, ASL (McIntire, 1982) and ISL (Rosenstein, 2001), that they are topic prominent. However, Sze (2008), in her discussion of topic prominence of HKSL, argued for a need to reconsider the criteria of topic prominence. Despite the fact that HKSL shares many features with ASL and ISL, she argued that it is not topic prominent.

Given the results of previous research on other sign languages, and some research on RSL and NGT, it was expected that topics in these two languages would be marked by sentence-initial position and by eyebrow raise and backward head tilt; however, a small-scale corpus-based investigation of topics also allows us to analyze frequency and distribution of topic markers. In addition, based on this research, we address the question of topic prominence that has not been addressed for RSL and NGT before.

1.3. RSL and NGT

RSL and NGT are most probably not related to each other.¹ RSL is a language used by deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Russia. According to the latest census organized in 2010, it is used by 120 000 people.² To date, there is very little linguistic research on RSL, and the notions of topic and topic prominence have not been examined before. NGT is a language used by deaf and hard-of-hearing people in the Netherlands. According to Crasborn's (2001) estimation, it is used by 16 000 people. The two languages display many grammatical similarities (see Kimmelman, 2014 for details). In

¹ Bickford (2005) argues that both languages are related to Old French Sign Language; however, no reliable evidence of such influence can be found for RSL.

² For preliminary results of the census (in Russian), see: <http://www.rg.ru/2011/12/16/stat.html>.

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