The information status and discourse anchorage of non-nominal constituents: A case study on Spanish secondary predicates

Steffen Heidinger *

Institut für Romanistik, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz, Austria

Abstract

The information status of nominal constituents has been a recurring topic of research over recent decades. Little is known, however, about the information status of non-nominal constituents such as secondary predicates. In the present paper, we present a corpus based analysis of the information status (and also the discourse anchorage) of Spanish secondary predicates. We will show that secondary predicates are anchored both in the preceding and the following context, but to a much lesser extent than their subjects (i.e., the nominal basis of comparison in our study). The most frequent information status of secondary predicates is neither *given* nor *new*, but one where the state denoted by the secondary predicate is evoked by some element of the preceding context (e.g., *to cry* evokes the state *sad*). *Evoked* is an intermediate information status between *given* and *new*. While the lack of given secondary predicates is not surprising, the existing literature would suggest that secondary predicates express predominately new information. In this respect, our study shows not only that information status is a relevant category for non-nominal constituents, but also that its analysis requires a more elaborate inventory than a binary given-new distinction.
© 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Much linguistic data can be better understood once we take into account the information status of linguistic expressions, i.e., whether they express *given* or *new* information. It is therefore not surprising that information status has received considerable attention. One domain where information status has proven particularly useful is that concerning the formal types of nominal constituents, such as pronouns, definite NPs, indefinite NPs. It has been shown that information status is a good predictor for the occurrence of the various formal types (cf. Prince, 1981; Gundel et al., 1993; Ariel, 2001, 2014; Roberts, 2003).[1]

This close relation between form and information status in the nominal domain is, however, not the main reason why most research on information status is devoted to nominal constituents (while at the same time, the information status of

---

 * Corresponding author at: Institut für Romanistik, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz, Merangasse 70/III, A-8010 Graz, Austria.
Tel.: +43 316 380 8215; fax: +43 316 380 9770.
  E-mail address: steffen.heidinger@uni-graz.at.

 [1] Other domains where information status is relevant are the linear ordering (cf. Arnold et al., 2000) and the prosodic realization of constituents (cf. Baumann, 2006).

non-nominal constituents has received very little attention). The main reason seems to be that information status is often taken as a category which is relevant for nominal constituents only. In her seminal paper on information status, Prince (1981:235) explicitly states that only nominal constituents express discourse entities – which explains why she does not consider non-nominal constituents (cf. also Lambrecht, 1994:37, 75 for a similar view). In the same vein, Dipper et al. (2007:151) state in their annotation guidelines for information structure that information status is only relevant for "[a] constituent which refers to a discourse entity; mostly referential NPs or PPs, or their pronominal counterparts, unless part of an idiom [. . .].". Yet another annotation scheme where only NPs are considered is Nissim et al. (2004).

In other studies, however, non-nominal constituents have been included in the study of information status. Chafe (1976:28) and Riester (2008:85), for example, explicitly state that non-nominal constituents such as verbs have information status as well. Further, Ariel (1985) analyzes the discourse functions of given information and considers not only nominal, but also non-nominal constituents such as VPs or clauses. Horn (1991) analyzes informationally redundant (i.e., *given*) VPs. In the present paper, we will investigate the information status (and also the discourse anchorage) of another non-nominal constituent, namely secondary predicates (SP).

Secondary predicates are constituents such as *drunk* in (1), which describe the state of a participant during the event denoted by the verb.[2]

(1)   John$_i$ bought his new car drunk$_i$.

As concerns the information structural properties of secondary predicates, it has been repeatedly argued in the literature on Spanish that secondary predicates have a strong affinity to focus. Guemann (1990:200) states that in sentences with secondary predicates, the secondary predicate is the obvious rhematic element, and therefore it typically occurs in sentence final position and bears the main stress. Similarly, Rodríguez Espiñeira (1992:53) states that the secondary predicate expresses the most important information of the sentence. For Porroche Ballesteros (1990:157) the secondary predicate is the constituent of the sentence with the highest rhematic value; reflexes of this rhematic value are (i) the frequent occurrence in sentence final position and (ii) the fact that if the sentence has a negative particle, it has scope over the secondary predicate (cf. also Hummel, 2000:147 for this latter aspect).[3]

Although the above statements from the literature are about focus, they may also be instructive with respect to information status. Given that information status and focus typically align (cf. also section 2.1), we may assume that constituents with affinity to focus also show an affinity to expressing new information. But neither the affinity of SPs to focus nor their affinity to expressing new information has been systematically investigated. In order to investigate the information status of secondary predicates, we will analyze corpus examples of sentences with secondary predicates and determine to what extent the secondary predicate is already anchored in the preceding context (cf. (2a.)); simplifying somewhat, secondary predicates which are already anchored in the preceding context have the information status *given*, while those that are not are *new*.

In addition to the preceding context, we will also look at the context following the secondary predicate. The following context is relevant because it allows us to track the fate of the information expressed by the secondary predicate: Is it picked up in the following context or not? The event boundedness of secondary predicates might suggest that the information will not have a long lifespan after its mention as a secondary predicate. Preceding and following context taken together show us the discourse anchorage of the secondary predicate (cf. (2b.)).

(2)

a.   information status

preceding context   secondary predicate   following context

b.   discourse anchorage

---
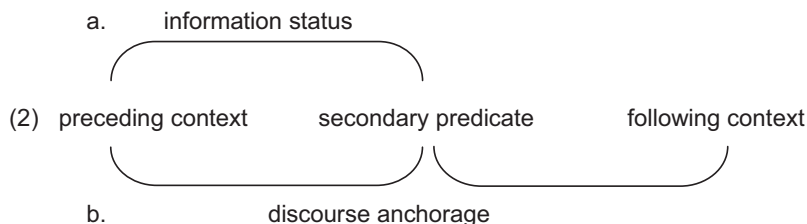
[2] There exist different types of secondary predicates. Distinctions have been made with respect to the participant of the event that the secondary predicate predicates over (subject- vs. object-oriented secondary predicates) and the syntactic status of the secondary predicate (argument vs. adjunct) (cf. Schultze-Berndt and Himmelmann, 2004; Himmelmann and Schultze-Berndt, 2005; Irimia, 2005; Rothstein, 2006, 2011; Winkler, 1997). In the present study, only the type of secondary predicate illustrated in (1) will be considered: a depictive subject-oriented secondary predicate which is an adjunct. General descriptions of Spanish secondary predicates can be found in Hernanz Carbó (1988), Guemann (1990), Suñer Gratacòs (1990), Demonte (1991), Demonte and Masullo (1999), Hummel (2000), Gumiel Molina (2005, 2008) and the references cited there.

[3] In this paper we focus on what might be called intrinsic information structural properties, such as the affinity to new (vs. given) information. The extrinsic information structural properties, i.e., the syntactic, prosodic and morphological behavior of secondary predicates under various information structural conditions, are not a topic of this paper.