Information Structure: An Introduction

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Abstract

By means of information structure, speakers adapt sentences to the cognitive context of the discourse, to the presumed mental states of their hearers, and to their own communicative intentions – all of which are cognitive dimensions of language. This paper is an introduction to the subject, an attempt to set forth some of the basic facts of information structure. Although it defines the major categories in cognitive terms, as a syntactic framework it uses simple notions from descriptive grammar such as construction, constituent, core, nucleus, and dependent elements. The three basic core constructions – topic-comment, focus-presupposition, and sentence focus – all have the focus as their nucleus, and can be formally distinguished according to the types of dependent elements they require or, alternatively, according to what their focus includes. In the view presented here, a sentence’s information structure is generally simpler and more universal than its basic grammar, and can be largely considered independently of the particular model of basic grammar that is being used.
### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>first person</td>
<td>INTS</td>
<td>intensifier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>third person</td>
<td>LOC</td>
<td>locative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDY</td>
<td>boundary</td>
<td>NEG</td>
<td>negation, negative</td>
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<tr>
<td>CLF</td>
<td>classifier</td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>noun phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONN</td>
<td>connective</td>
<td>POD</td>
<td>point of departure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DS</td>
<td>different subject</td>
<td>PRS</td>
<td>present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOC</td>
<td>focus marker</td>
<td>SBJ</td>
<td>subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FUT</td>
<td>future</td>
<td>SG</td>
<td>singular</td>
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<tr>
<td>HON</td>
<td>honorific</td>
<td>SPC</td>
<td>spacer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IND</td>
<td>indicative</td>
<td>TOP</td>
<td>topic marker</td>
</tr>
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</table>
1 Introduction

The information in a sentence can be presented in different ways, as can be seen in the examples below (small caps indicate that the word has the prosodic nucleus of the sentence): 1

(1) a. John drove the car to CHICAGO.
b. John drove the CAR to Chicago.
c. It was JOHN who drove the car to Chicago.
d. It was to CHICAGO that John drove the car.
e. Where John drove the car to was CHICAGO.
f. What John did was to drive the car to CHICAGO.
g. What John drove to Chicago was the CAR, and so forth.

These examples represent different ways to “articulate” the sentence (the term is from Andrews 2007b). All of the above articulations make the same assertion, hence have the same truth conditions – they are all true or all false in the same circumstances – but they use different presuppositions, hence are not equally appropriate in the same discourse contexts. 2 Thus, (1b) would be appropriate to correct someone who thought that John drove a truck, but (1c) would not be appropriate in that context. Articulations of the sentence are thus sensitive to the context, as well as to what the speaker intends to assert and what he thinks that the hearer believes or is conscious of at the time of the utterance.

These different ways of articulating the sentence are dealt with, in large part, in its information structure. In discussing a sentence’s information structure I will make reference to its basic grammar, but its information structure will be treated as a separate dimension of organization. Where possible, I will describe information structure using simple notions from descriptive grammar, beginning with construction, constituent, nucleus and dependent elements. A construction’s required constituents comprise its core, while its non-required constituents comprise its periphery. Required constituents are not necessarily obligatory in prosodically independent form; some can be elided as long as the hearer is able to recover them (Zwicky 1993:297). 3

Information structure is text organization on a micro-level, primarily reflecting conditions in the local context, within the preceding clause or so. Only occasionally is broader conditioning needed. In the other direction, however, it is common for information structure to have consequences for how following sections of the text are organized. In this paper, large-scale discourse organization is not dealt with as such.

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1 This material grew out of lectures I gave at a field workshop sponsored by the Mexico Branch of SIL International in the fall of 2016. At that workshop I took initial steps, aided by Steve Marlett, in learning to use the program XLingPaper by means of writing this paper. I thank Steve for his kind assistance and patience, as well as later assistance by Andy Black. I am also indebted to Paul Kroeger and Stephen Levinsohn for valuable comments. Any remaining problems with the paper are my own.

2 See section 2.1 for a discussion of examples in which information structure does alter the assertion.

3 That is, the notions of “core” and “periphery” are used here for information structure in the same sense as they are used in grammatical description and Role and Reference Grammar (Van Valin 2005:4). I will make no use of special syntactic positions which are sometimes associated with information structure: the “precore slot” in Role and Reference Grammar (Van Valin 2005:5), slots P1 and P2 in Functional Grammar (Dik 1989:363), etc.
2 Focus

The information structure of an utterance, then, can be viewed as a construction. The nucleus of the construction is its “Focus.” (In this paper, categories of constituents in information structure are capitalized.) In order to define Focus, I make use of the fact that the hearer (or reader) of a text is continually constructing and revising a mental representation of its content. The Focus of an utterance can be briefly defined as the part of the utterance which is intended, in its context, to make a change, or the greatest change, in the hearer’s mental representation.4

2.1 Signalling Focus

Because of its importance to the speech event, Focus is in almost all cases indicated by linguistic means, rather than purely by the context.5 In particular, Focus quite commonly carries the prosodic nucleus of the utterance. In English, for example, “focus is typically marked by a nuclear pitch accent; i.e. the last pitch accent in a phonological phrase” (Beaver and Clark 2008:8). The prosodic nucleus can be realized in other ways as well (Lee et al. 2008), nor is prosody the only signal of Focus.

4 Lambrecht (1994:207) defines Focus as “the element of information whereby the presupposition and the assertion DIFFER from each other” – that is, assertion minus presupposition. But this characterization has problems. When it is applied to Topic-Comment articulation, Topic must be treated as a presupposition for the Comment to come out as Focus. Lambrecht (p. 151) explains: “What is presupposed in a topic-comment relation is not the topic itself, nor its referent, but the fact that the topic referent can be expected to play a role in a given proposition, due to its status as a center of interest or matter of concern in the conversation.” However, that would not make Topic itself a presupposition, nor do all Topic-Comment utterances come with this kind of presupposition. I could begin a conversation to a person at a bus stop, for instance, by saying “The sun is really bright today,” “Today has a really bright sun,” “Yesterday’s clouds would be welcome today,” or some such thing. The sun, the current day, or the clouds of the previous day would be the Topic of my utterance, but I cannot expect the hearer – even if he perceives that I am about to say something – to anticipate that any one of these entities would actually be my Topic. That might be more viable within a discourse, but still it would only be a probability, an artifact of certain discourse contexts, not part of the definition of Focus, nor of Topic (see section 3.1). My definition of Focus is closer to traditional functional treatments, such as that of Foley (2007:363): the Focus “express[es] the new information the clause is expected to provide. The whole point of uttering it in the first place is to register this new information in the addressee’s store of knowledge.” Lambrecht himself (1994:254) describes Focus as “the most important semantic element in the sentence.” (In the present paper, a slight adjustment to the definition of Focus is made in section 6.)

5 Focus indicators can be anomalous in second occurrence or second instance utterances, sometimes called echoic utterances, which “contain major sections which are imitative of a ‘real or supposed sentence’” in the context (Bolinger 1950:1123; see also Beaver and Clark 2008:119–121). The second occurrence utterance may repeat focus indicators from the first utterance or add other indicators of its own.
In many languages, special word orders play the same functional role as focus [prosody] in English. In French, a range of clefting constructions are [sic] used much more commonly than English clefts (Lambrecht 1994), and these constructions have the effect of forcing the focus to be in a highly prominent post-verbal position. There are many other languages in which information structure is considered a primary determinant of word order, e.g. Hungarian, Czech, Mayan, and Catalan....In some languages, morphology serves a similar function to prosodic prominence in English. For example, Cuzco Quechua, like other varieties of Quechua, has several evidential focus enclitics (Faller 2002). 6...Some languages, e.g. Japanese and Hindi, use word order, morphology, and prosody. (Beaver and Clark 2008:9f)

What Beaver and Clark call “focus morphemes” are, presumably, elements that signal a certain expression as Focus. Such elements have been known as Focus markers, Focus particles, or Focalizers. They are commonly of a certain small list of semantic types: extreme quantifiers (all, none), additives (even, also), intensifiers (quite, indeed), excluders (alone, only), 7 and similar items (König 1991). Certain Focus markers only function as such when they occur in specific syntactic positions. In Portuguese, the quantifier todo(s) ‘all, every’ is a Focus marker only when it follows the phrasal head:

(2) a. Todo s os homens foram EMBORA.
   all the men went away
   ‘All of the men went AWAY.’

b. Os homens TODOS foram embora.
   the men all went away
   ‘ALL of the men went away.’

Example (2a) is a typical Topic-Comment utterance (to be discussed in section 3.1): the elements of the subject NP todos os homens ‘all the men’ are in their default order, and the prosodic nucleus is on the final accentable word of the predicate: embora ‘away’. In (2b), however, the quantifier todos ‘all’ is postposed in the subject NP, where it obligatorily carries the prosodic nucleus, signalling that the subject has Narrow Focus (see section 3.3). Example (2b) would be given this reading even without other signals of Focus, such as in printed material where prosody is not represented. Thus, in Brazilian Portuguese, the nominal quantifier todos ‘all’ is a Focus marker when it occurs after the phrasal head.

2.2 Focus sensitivity

Whereas Focus markers signal the Focus expression, there is another way in which elements can be associated with Focus. Focus sensitive elements are operators, commonly modifiers, which “crucially refer in their interpretation to the placement of focus in the sentence” (Döring 2012:201). Consider the following two examples (ibid., p. 202):

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6 Stephen Levinsohn (pers. comm.) states that in Quechua, constituent order is a more important indicator of focus, and in some varieties the evidential enclitics do not occur with the focus expression.

7 The term “excluder”, signifying a modifier that rules out possible alternatives, is from Hall (1963:66); Beaver and Clark (2008:68–70) use the term “exclusive”.

(3) a. Paul only gave a **rose** to Charlotte.
   b. Paul only gave a **rose** to **CHARLOTTE**.

Here, Focus is signalled by the placement of the prosodic nucleus: *a rose* in (3a), *to Charlotte* in (3b). Since the modifier *only* is associated with each Focus expression, these examples have different truth conditions: (3a) claims that Paul gave nothing to Charlotte but a rose, whereas (3b) claims that he gave a rose to her but to nobody else.

In English, *only* is a Focus sensitive element which is not a Focus marker; Focus is identified by other means, such as by prosody in (3a) and (3b). However, there do exist Focus sensitive elements that are also Focus markers, such as the modifier *anho* ‘only’ (sometimes followed by an intensifier) in Mbyá Guarani:

(4) *ita ra'y ANHO oĩ*
   stone son only 3.be.located
   ‘There was only a small stone.’

In (4), the Focus expression, *ita ra'y ANHO* ‘only a small stone’ is the grammatical subject occurring in default preverbal position. The morpheme *anho* – or an intensifier or negative that immediately follows it – occurs at the end of the Focus expression and nowhere else, always bearing the prosodic nucleus of the utterance. For this reason it is a Focus marker, and since it always modifies the Focus expression, it is Focus sensitive as well.

The study of elements associated with Focus is a complex area of ongoing discussion among linguists (ibid., 201). Here I have provided only the barest introduction to this subject.

2.3 The scope of Focus

One way to think about the Focus expression in a given utterance is to ask, “What *wh*-question is this utterance intended to answer?”; the answer to such a question is the Focus (Beaver and Clark 2008:25). The question is generally implied in the context or in terms of “mutual knowledge” that the speaker and hearer are assumed to share. In example (2b) of section 2.1, one such question might be “How many of the men went away?” The answer “ALL the men”, or simply “ALL” (of them), is the Focus.

If we examine examples out of context, there are often various possibilities for the underlying question and accompanying scope of Focus, as indicated by square brackets in the following example from Beaver and Clark (2008:15):

   b. What did Mary buy a book about? *Mary bought a book* [about BATS].
   c. What did Mary buy? *Mary bought* [a book *about BATS*].
   d. What did Mary do? *Mary* [bought a book *about BATS*].
   e. What’s been happening? *[Mary bought a book about BATS]*.

That is, for a single English sentence, *Mary bought a book about BATS*, the **potential focus domain** can be the entire sentence, as in (5e), whereas the **actual focus domain** – in a specific context or with a specific reading – is contained within the potential focus domain (the terminology is from Van Valin 2005:77; cf. Chomsky 1971:201f).
The actual focus domain is often not indicated with precision. In languages like English, this happens because, as mentioned in section 2.1, “focus is typically marked by...the last pitch accent in a phonological phrase” (Beaver and Clark 2008:12), that is, on the right-hand boundary of the utterance’s actual focus domain, but the left-hand boundary is not specified. Because of this, a single sentence can represent multiple contextual possibilities or utterances, where the term “utterance” means an interpretation of a sentence in relation to a given context.

3 Basic core constructions (Focus types)

The core of an utterance in information structure generally has one of three construction types, or “articulations”: (i) Topic-Comment, (ii) Focus-Presupposition or Narrow Focus, or (iii) Sentence Focus or Focus-only (Andrews 2007b:148–151). The nucleus of the construction is always the Focus, and the three types of constructions are formally distinguished by the kinds of dependents that they require: the Topic-Comment construction requires a Topic constituent, the Focus-Presupposition or Narrow Focus construction requires a Presupposition constituent, and the Sentence Focus or Focus-only construction has no required dependents. Each of these basic core constructions can have subtypes, and each of the required dependents can, under appropriate circumstances, be elided. We will now consider these three core constructions (sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3).

3.1 Topic-Comment

The Topic-Comment construction was first described in those terms by Hockett: “The most general characterization of predicative constructions is suggested by the terms ‘topic’ and ‘comment’: the speaker announces a topic and then says something about it” (Hockett 1958:201). A sentence Topic is a referent that the utterance as a whole is about, or at least what the Comment is about. The notion of “aboutness” seems best conceived in cognitive terms – for example, as a referential node in the hearer’s mental representation which the speaker instructs the hearer to locate and use as the point at which the current assertion is primarily attached (Linde 1979:234). (Commonly, the term “Topic” also designates an expression that designates a Topic referent.) Since the time of Hockett, the term Comment has been used to designate the Focus when a Topic is also present. With this definition of Topic-Comment, a Topic cannot be included in the Focus, although it is possible for the Focus to include a non-Topic referent, as in example (19) of section 3.2.

Hockett gives two examples of Topic-Comment (the small caps in the data are added by myself, RAD):

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8 According to Lambrecht (1994:236), these “three major focus structure types...do not exhaust all possibilities.” However, he does not expand his typology to include others. The three basic core types considered here are taken to be the primary ones.

9 Despite Hockett’s “then”, the Topic-Comment construction does not always occur in that order, especially in languages whose basic order has the verb before the subject. In Koine Greek with its VSO basic order, it is common for the Topic to be medial and the Comment to be discontinuous, as in Luke 15:25: in literal translation, Was the older brother in the field (Levinsohn 2000:7).

10 Cf. Lambrecht (1994:131): “A referent is interpreted as the topic of a proposition if in a given situation, the proposition is construed as being about this referent....” Discourse Topics, which are mentioned only rarely within this paper, are normally what an entire text unit is about. See Dooley 2007 for references.
(6)  a. *Thus John ran away.*  
    **TOPIC**  **COMMENT**

   **TOPIC**  **COMMENT**

In example (6a), the Topic is the grammatical subject, while in example (6b), it is the fronted direct object *that new book by Thomas Guernsey.* Example (6a) has the Connective *thus* in its precore periphery. Other peripheral categories are presented in section 4.

If we think of a sentence Topic as a referential node in the hearer’s mental representation which he must locate for attaching the assertion there, then we can understand why “it is necessary for a referent to have a degree of accessibility in order to be interpretable as a topic” (Lambrecht 1994:164): hearers need to be able to locate it.

There is a close association between Topics and grammatical subjects. It is true that not every grammatical subject is a Topic: in example (6b) above, the subject *I* is not the Topic of the utterance because it is part of the Comment (Focus). And if the subject carries the prosodic nucleus, as in the following example, that also means that it cannot be Topic:

(7) *Here comes the cat.* (Lambrecht 1994:39)

In example (7), the prosodic nucleus on the subject (*the cat*) indicates that it is focal rather than topical. I return to this kind of construction in section 3.3.2.

Nevertheless, in all languages “the subject...tends to be interpreted as a Topic” (Lambrecht 1994:132). Specifically, if the subject satisfies the pragmatic conditions for a Topic – if it is identifiable by the hearer and non-focal – and if no other expression in the sentence is signalled as Topic, then the subject will probably be interpreted as Topic.

Lambrecht (1994:132, 222) hypothesizes that in each language, Topic-Comment is the default construction type in information structure. This implies, first of all, that Topic-Comment is very common, as can be verified by examining almost any extensive text. It also implies that while other constructions only occur in specific situations, Topic-Comment is more neutral, capable of multiple uses. In “common language” translations of the Bible, Topic-Comment is frequently used in place of special-purpose constructions, such as the Focus-Presupposition construction to be described in section 3.2. The Topic-Comment construction can do this because, as the default construction, it lends itself to a great variety of contexts and interpretations.

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11 Lambrecht’s term for Comment is “Predicate focus”, although, as can be seen in example (6b), it does not always correspond to an actual grammatical predicate.

12 Exceptionally, in certain languages, including Koine Greek and English, Topics can at times be indefinite: *A certain man had two sons* (Luke 15:11). This stretching of the category of Topic is a kind of “pragmatic accommodation”, stretching a certain pragmatic category in practice, within modest limits (Lambrecht 1994:65–67). In the example from Luke, this happens at the beginning of the story.

13 In ergative constructions, “subject” in this paragraph may need to be understood as the absolutive argument.
3.1.1 Marked and unmarked Topics

An important distinction is drawn between marked and unmarked Topics. Marked Topics are those whose Topic function is highlighted for some reason, whereas unmarked Topics are not highlighted. Given the close association of subject and Topic, every non-subject Topic can be taken as a marked Topic. Subjects can also be highlighted as marked Topics. A marked Topic always has a specific functional motivation in the context.

A marked Topic is required to be physically separate and distinct from the Comment, and typically must occur before the Comment as well (Lambrecht 1994:202). Since that is so, marked Topics are not found embedded within the Comment. Hence, in Hockett’s example (6b), the direct object that new book by Thomas Guernsey could not be a marked Topic in the default English SVOX order: I haven’t read that new book by Thomas GUERNSEY yet, even if it didn’t have focal prosody. For the same reason, even though an unmarked Topic can sometimes be elided, a marked Topic cannot, for then it could not be physically separated from the Comment. Similarly, it would be difficult or impossible for a verbal clitic to occur as marked Topic.

Prosodically, marked Topics often have a secondary accent and are commonly separated from the Comment by a brief pause. In at least one Mixtecan language, marked Topics are reported to be lengthened (Inga McKendry, pers. comm.). Whereas marked Topics often (always?) have some kind of prosodic highlighting, an active discourse Topic which the speaker is confident that the hearer is accepting as such (a so-called “ratified Topic”) is never a marked Topic, nor is it prosodically highlighted (Lambrecht and Michaelis 1998:389f), unless it is contrastive.

It is often possible to recognize marked Topics because of overcoding, when the referring expression has more linguistic material than is necessary semantically – for example, to identify the referent. In so-called “pro-drop” languages, there are contexts where any prosodically independent expression would be overcoded. In Mbyá Guarani (Tupi-Guarani) of Brazil, for example, an English sentence such as Now I will eat can be translated grammatically without the pronoun, since the verbal inflexion is unambiguous. Given that fact, the following example represents overcoding:

(8) Aỹ, xee AKARU ta.
    now 1SG 1SG.eat intent
    ‘Now, I will eat.’

In (8), the overt pronoun xee ‘I’ is, ipso facto, sufficiently overcoded to suggest a marked Topic, which could indicate a contrast between the referent of ‘I’ and other persons in the speech context. Depending on its prosodic prominence, however, the degree of markedness may only be slight (markedness is often a scalar category).

Another example of overcoding is taken from a text in Brazilian Portuguese about two men, Compadre Tonho and Compadre Chico, who are woodsmen and makers of charcoal (Junqueira 1985). The first major section of the text describes these two participants together in the woods, the second section relates how Compadre Tonho found very valuable wood for charcoal, and the final section tells what happened when Compadre Chico attempted to do the same. This final section begins with the following sentence:
In this example, Compadre Chico is indicated as a marked Topic by the overcoded designation *seu companheiro* ‘his companion’, a fact of which the reader has long been aware. Topic overcoding commonly occurs at the beginning of a new text unit, thus helping to signal the unit’s onset. For the section (episode) which example (9) initiates, Compadre Chico is the discourse topic as well.

There can be another kind of signal for marked Topics, a so-called “Topic marker”, which commonly is a clitic which occurs with marked Topics. Among these is the well-known Topic marker *wa* in Japanese, glossed TOP in the following example:

(10)  
\[Yamada \text{ san } \text{ wa } \text{ tabi } \text{ ni } \text{ ikimashita.}\]  
name HON TOP eat to went  
TOPIC COMMENT  
‘Hon. Yamada went to eat.’ (Hinds 1984:465)

Here, the subject *Yamada san* *wa* ‘Hon. Yamada’ is indicated as a marked Topic, possibly to establish the discourse Topic for a new paragraph. But the “Topic marker” *wa* can also occur with situational Points of Departure (time, place, etc., to be discussed in section 4.2), as in the following example:

(11)  
\[\text{di } \text{nuka } \text{ ni } \text{ wa } \text{ ...}\]  
and floor LOC TOP ...  
CONN POD  
‘And on the floor, (there was a mat).’ (Iwasaki 1987:121)

In (11), the adverbial Point of Departure ‘on the floor’ has the same “Topic marker” *wa* as the nominal Topic in (10). Thus, ‘topic marking’...is just one of the derivative functions which are made possible by the main function of ‘scope setting’ that is signalled by *wa* (Iwasaki 1987:131). This distribution of *wa* points to the fact that Topics and situational Points of Departure share the same “scope-setting” (orientational) function, indicating a referent or a larger area of situational scope.

I have mentioned two reasons why a Topic might be marked: to signal contrast (example 8) or the beginning of a new text unit (example 9). A marked Topic can also be used to signal a logical subdivision of a discourse topic or theme. This can be seen in the original Greek of 1 Timothy 3:1–13, as represented below in translation:

(12)  
\[\text{vv 1–7} \quad \text{(Instructions about “bishops”)}\]  
\[\text{vv 8–10} \quad \text{Deacons likewise (should be) dignified...}\]  
\[\text{v 11} \quad \text{The women likewise (should be) dignified...}\]  
\[\text{vv 12–13} \quad \text{Deacons should be husbands of one wife...}\]

14 According to Iwasaki (1987:135f), “it is *wa*’s distinct function to organize a bigger chunk of discourse while other particles only organize a single clause unit...Once a scope is set for predication by *wa*, it can be followed by multiple clauses.”
In (12), the underlined expressions are discourse subTopics, that is, subdivisions of the
general discourse Topic of church leaders. In the original Greek (with basic order VSO),
the marked Topic status of these nominal expressions is suggested by their preverbal po-

tion. Each language can be expected to have its own set of conditions for the use of
marked Topics, but the three mentioned above – contrast, new text unit, logical subdivi-
sions – are common.

3.1.2 External Topics

A construction that can be found in many languages, containing an external Topic, is
illustrated by the following example from the same Portuguese text as example (9) above:

(13) A alma, essa estava LEVE.

the soul that was light

TOPIC COMMENT

‘His heart, that was light.’ (Junqueira 1985:20)

In context, Compadre Tonho was returning home with a load of good quality wood for
making charcoal. The load was heavy, but his heart (lit. ‘soul’) was light. The clause
in example (13), essa estava leve ‘that was light’, contains a subject pronoun, essa ‘that’,
which is coreferential with the left-detached (or “left-dislocated”) NP a alma ‘the soul’.15
This left-detached NP is a Topic that is external to the clause ‘that was light’, and this
clause in its entirety can be considered its Comment. The coreferential pronoun inside
the clause, essa ‘that’, is sometimes called a resumptive pronoun or a copy pronoun. But
the occurrence of a resumptive pronoun is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition
for external Topics.16

External Topics are external both to the core in information structure and to the clause
in basic grammar. In information structure, they are generally in the left periphery, but
sometimes occur in the right periphery, as right-detached (section 4). The latter is found
in the following example:

(14) He is a nice GUY, your brother.(Lambrecht 1994:203)

[TOPIC COMMENT] ANTITOPIC

Such right-detached referential expressions are often called Antitopics (loc. cit.).

The communicative function of a right-detached Topic is quite different from that of a
left-detached one. Left-detached Topics are clearly marked Topics, occurring in contexts
that call for salience (such as would be required by a referent that is not active in the
context), and are typically pronounced with a secondary prosodic nucleus. Antitopics, on
the other hand, are regularly active in the context and pronounced with weak prosody

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15 In general, detached expressions are expressions within an utterance that are not part of its internal,
main-clause syntax. They can be left-detached (before the main clause), right-detached (after the clause),
and center-detached (medial within the clause). Lambrecht (1994:181–195) and Van Valin (2005:6) only
mention left- and right-detachment, and deal almost exclusively with detached NPs.

16 Bickford (1998:339) gives the following example of a resumptive pronoun (it) in a relative clause con-
struction in which an external Topic does not occur: A tradition [that nobody knows what it’s based on] will,
sooner or later, fall apart. An external Topic with no resumptive pronoun will be seen in section 6, example
(44).
Information structure: An introduction (Lambrecht 1994:203f); their function may not go beyond reinforcing or correcting a reference in that sentence. (For more on Antitopics, see section 4.3.)

In some languages, left-detached Topics have distinctive markers: in example (13), the free translation could have been rendered ‘As for his heart, that was light’, in which as for serves to indicate the external Topic.

3.1.3 Prosody in the Comment

The following principle is presented by Lambrecht (1994:247) for information structure constituents, such as marked Topic or Comment, that have prosodic accents.

(15) In a constituent of information structure that has a prosodic (“sentence”) accent, the default position for the primary accent occurs on the last word that can accept it (the last “accentable” word).

Principle (15), claimed to hold “at least in languages like English and French,” is illustrated in the following example from Lambrecht (1994:243), where the constituent in question is the Comment:

(16) She doesn’t have a particularly interesting JOB.
    TOPIC COMMENT

In the context of (16) that Lambrecht has in mind, job is a new concept. Being final in the Comment as well as being accentable, it receives the primary prosodic accent of the Comment.

Non-accentable words include nouns or pronouns with discourse-active referents (Lambrecht and Michaelis 1998:389). If sentence (16) were spoken in a context in which the job is currently active in the discourse, then job would not be accentable and the prosodic nucleus would occur earlier in the Comment, as in the following example:

(17) She doesn’t have a particularly interesting job, but at least it keeps her in an apartment.
    TOPIC COMMENT

In the first clause of (17), interesting has the prosodic accent because job is contextually active.

In some languages, principle (15) gives rise to a strategy by which the most focal expression is “maneuvered” (the term is from Bolinger 1957) to the default position of the prosodic nucleus. This is seen in the following two examples from Levinsohn (2015:55):

(18) a. John gave the knife to a BOY.
    Active argument    Inactive argument
    Active argument    Inactive argument
    b. John gave the boy a KNIFE.

In each of the examples in (18), the postverbal terms include one which, judging from the definite and indefinite articles, is active in the context and one which is not. The inactive
term – *to a boy* in a) and *a knife* in b) – is maneuvered to final position where it receives the prosodic nucleus.\(^\text{17}\)

### 3.2 Focus-Presupposition (Narrow Focus)

In information structure, as has been mentioned, the nucleus is always some variety of Focus, and there may be a required dependent as well, in the form of a Topic or a Presupposition. If the required dependent is a Topic, the core is of the Topic-Comment type; if it is a Presupposition, the core is a *Focus-Presupposition* or *Narrow Focus construction*.\(^\text{18}\)

A third possibility, a core with only the Focus, is described in section 3.3.

A Focus-Presupposition (Narrow Focus) construction occurs in the following example (with a preceding context such as “John bought rice, right?”):

(19) No, it *was* **COFFEE** that John bought.

Example (19) has a *cleft construction* – specifically, an *it*-cleft. The Presupposition expression *that John bought* does indeed invoke a proposition that, in the context, is presupposed: JOHN BOUGHT X.\(^\text{19}\) The Focus in (19) is “narrow” in the sense that it accounts for only one term of the presupposition (Van Valin 2005:71f): here, it is the direct object.

Narrow Focus can comprise even less than that:

(20) *I said* *Affirmation*, not **CONfirmation**.

Example (20) is separated by a comma into two assertional cores, each one in the form of Focus-Presupposition. In the first core, the Focus comprises only a single syllable *AF*-, and the Presupposition – the proposition I SAID X-FIRMATION – is discontinuous. The second core invokes the same contextual Presupposition (although there *I said* is elided), and the Focus is not **CON**-.\(^\text{20}\)

The contextual Presupposition in a Focus-Presupposition construction is incomplete in some way. This is because a crucial bit of information within that proposition is not presupposed at all, but is asserted as a narrow Focus. This element is a missing syllable in (20) and the debated direct object in (19).

Signals of Focus-Presupposition seem always to include prosodic prominence on the Focus element, which is not surprising given the especially informative nature of narrow Focus. The Presupposition constituent, however – if overtly present at all – usually has only weak prosody. Syntax commonly also plays a part in signalling the Focus-Presupposition construction: in many languages, narrow Focus is commonly fronted. This is shown in the following example from Mbyá Guarani in the same context as example (19) above:

\(^{17}\) Focal elements in that position, called “dominant focal elements” by Heimerdinger (1999:167), are discussed by Levinsohn (2015:58).

\(^{18}\) The term “focus-presupposition” is from Lambrecht (1994:207f, 350). He also uses “argument focus” (p. 228). Andrews (2007b:150) also uses “focus-presupposition,” and Van Valin (2005:71f) uses “narrow focus.”

\(^{19}\) This way of identifying contextual presuppositions is related to the technique, mentioned in section 2.3, that uses wh- questions.

\(^{20}\) According to Lambrecht (1994:240f), the prosodic or sentence accent can override the lexical accent in “free accent position” languages such as English, but not in German.
In the Mbyá Guarani of example (21), the direct object ‘coffee’ is fronted from its default postverbal position (the basic word order is SVO in main clauses) and receives the prosodic accent as well. In this context and that of example (19), in English, where narrow Focus is not commonly fronted, it would be common for the speaker to say, *(No,) he bought COFFEE*, instead of either of the free translations in (21). The sentence *he bought COFFEE* is formally ambiguous in regard to the scope of Focus (see section 2.3). In some languages, the Focus-Presupposition construction regularly occurs in the order Presupposition-Focus. It is also possible for the Presupposition to be discontinuous, as in the first clause of (20).

In all of the Focus-Presupposition constructions shown above, the Presupposition is not only contextually presupposed, it is required to be contextually active: at the utterance’s onset, the hearer can be expected to have the presupposed proposition in active consciousness, that is, thinking about it. The condition of being treated as active characterizes a “strong” type of the Focus-Presupposition construction. Certain other types of the construction are “weak” (the Presupposition need not be active), with consequences for both the occurrence and the form of the construction. In the “strong” type of the construction, for example, the Presupposition expression can be elided, as is partially done in the second (negative) part of (20). In Mbyá Guarani, certain “weaker” semantic subtypes of Focus-Presupposition do not accept Focus markers (examples are given in the following section).

### 3.2.1 Semantic subtypes of Narrow Focus

Focus-Presupposition or Narrow Focus constructions have several subtypes that are distinguished along semantic lines, and commonly differ in formal ways as well. The following list, including terminology, is from Dik et al. 1981.

**Complettive Focus** completes a presupposed proposition with information that was lacking:

\[(22)\] Speaker 1: *(What did John buy?)*

Speaker 2: *He bought COFFEE.*

In English, the response of Speaker 2 above – and, in fact, in most of the semantic types below – is formally ambiguous with Topic-Comment in the sense of Focus scope (section

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21 As is common with it-cleft sentences, the first part is Focus, the second part is Presupposition.

22 Chafe (1976:34) points out that the hearer may not always be actually thinking about the presupposition at the time. “Sherlock Holmes, for example, might have spent the whole evening in cogitation before exclaiming, ‘The BUTLER did it!’ to a surprised Watson whose mind was completely on the book he was reading. The two shared the knowledge that someone did it (whatever it was), but Holmes could not objectively assume that Watson had that knowledge in his consciousness at that moment. Nevertheless, Holmes was evidently treating this knowledge as if it were given....” This “as if” corresponds to “treated as” in the sentence to which this note is attached and involves “pragmatic accommodation” (section 4.2).
2.3). In Mbyá Guarani, with SVO basic order in main clauses, a completive Focus response uses a fronted narrow Focus: ‘COFFEE he bought.’

**Selective Focus** chooses the correct piece of information from among possibly several that are active in the context:

(23) Speaker 1: *(Did John buy coffee or rice?)*  
Speaker 2: *He bought COFFEE.*

The Mbyá Guarani response would be the same as for Completive Focus in example (22) above, but certain African languages would use a distinctive form (Dik et al. 1981).

**Replacing Focus** corrects erroneous information:

(24) Speaker 1: *(John bought rice.)*  
Speaker 2: *(No,) he bought COFFEE.*

The Mbyá Guarani response would be ‘COFFEE he bought’ as for Completive Focus in example (22) above. In this case, English can use a cleft construction: *(No,) it was COFFEE he bought.*

**Expanding Focus** adds a piece of information to an incomplete listing:

(25) Speaker 1: *(John bought rice.)*  
Speaker 2: *He bought coffee ALSO / He also bought COFFEE.*

Mbyá Guarani would use a fronted narrow Focus with an additive Focus marker: ‘Coffee ALSO he bought.’

**Restricting Focus** removes a piece of information from a list:

(26) Speaker 1: *(John bought coffee and rice.)*  
Speaker 2: *(No,) he only bought COFFEE.*

Mbyá Guarani would use a fronted narrow Focus with the Focus sensitive Focus marker anho ‘only’: ‘Coffee ONLY he bought’ (section 2.2).

**Parallel Focus** has double contrast (section 7):

(27) *(Peter bought rice, but) John bought COFFEE.*

The Mbyá Guarani response would use a “nested construction”, ‘John, COFFEE he bought’, in which a Comment constituent is internally restructured as Focus-Presupposition. (Nested constructions are discussed in section 6.)

This section has shown, among other things, that for many or all subtypes of narrow Focus, English commonly uses a construction that is not formally distinct from Topic-Comment, although in certain cases, such as for replacing Focus, it can use a cleft con-
struction instead. Mbyá Guarani, on the other hand, tends to use some variety of Focus-Presupposition for each of the above subtypes, sometimes with a Focus marker as well. A third possibility, represented by the Grassfields Bantu language Aghem, is to use prosodic and morphosyntactic signals which distinguish all of these subtypes (Dik et al. 1981). Thus, the realization of Focus-Presupposition construction varies widely among languages, and could serve as a measure of word-order flexibility among languages.

### 3.3 Sentence Focus (Focus-Only)

The **Sentence Focus** or **Focus-only** construction contains only the Focus as its nucleus, with no required dependents. This construction has two major subtypes, which Lambrecht (1994:143f) calls “event-reporting” and “presentational.”

#### 3.3.1 Event-reporting sentences

The term “event-reporting sentence” does not signify sentences that are normally used to relate events in narrative (that sentence type is commonly Topic-Comment), but rather a special sentence type that is illustrated in the following examples, presented here with contextually implied *wh*-questions:

(28) a. **Speaker 1:** (What’s the matter?) **Speaker 2:** Something’s **BURNING**!
   b. **Speaker 1:** (What’s the matter?) **Speaker 2:** The **TOAST** is burning!
   c. **Speaker 1:** (What happened?) **Speaker 2:** My **CAR** broke down!
   d. **Speaker 1:** (What happened?) **Speaker 2:** A **boy** was run over by a **CAR**!

Lambrecht (1994:142–169, 233) argues that these examples are not Topic-Comment sentences. In (28d), for example, “the subject *np* is not construed as a Topic but as a participant in an event .... No aboutness relation is intended in this sentence.” The contextual questions for these examples are of the type “What’s the matter?” or “What happened?” instead of “What’s the matter with *X*,” “What happened to *X*,” or “What did *X* do?,” which would reflect an established Topic. Just as there is no Topic constituent, there is also no Presupposition constituent. The entire utterance (core) is new, with no required dependents, and the event being reported is usually striking as well as unexpected.

#### 3.3.2 Presentational sentences

Whereas in event-reporting sentences what is being presented is an event, in presentational sentences it is a referent (Lambrecht 1994:144). Presentational sentences can be illustrated as follows:

(29) a. **And then a boy came in.**
   b. **Here comes the cat.**
   c. **Across the sky floated a silver blimp.**

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23 Lambrecht (1994:137–146) calls this type of core “thetitic” and characterizes its type of Focus as “Sentence Focus”. Andrews (2007a:151) uses the term “thetitic articulation”. According to Lambrecht (loc. cit.), “the thetic sentence has an ‘all-new’ character.”
In presentational sentences, the referent being introduced is commonly the subject in postverbal position, as in examples (29b) and (29c) (“subject inversion”). It is also common for the referent to have the prosodic accent, as in all of the examples in (29) above.

Each of the examples in (29) has a prenuclear (precore) expression of orientation (a “Point of Departure,” section 4.2) – then in (29a), here in (29b), and across the sky in (29c) – which anchor time or location in given information. The frequent inclusion of this kind of element seems to indicate that presentational sentences tend to be better planned, less abrupt, than event-reporting sentences.

This section concludes with two examples from Mandarin Chinese (LaPolla 1995:311):

(30) a. you yi zhi gou zai yuanzi-li
    be one CLF dog LOC yard-in
    ‘(There) is a dog in the yard.’

    b. (zai) yuanzi-li you yi zhi gou
    LOC yard-in be one CLF dog
    ‘In the yard, (there) is a dog.’

LaPolla describes ‘in the yard’ in (30b) in terms which the present treatment uses for Points of Departure; in (30a) the same expression is included in the core of the utterance – that is, in the Focus – as a grammatical adjunct within the clause.

This concludes the survey of the three basic core constructions. Section 6 deals with a further possibility for constructing the core, by nesting basic core constructions one within the other.

4 The periphery

Certain examples presented in earlier sections have contained peripheral elements, which are adjuncts in information structure. These elements assume a variety of forms. The present section briefly presents four types: Connectives, Points of Departure, Antitopics, and assertional detached elements.

4.1 Connectives

Sentential connectives are peripheral both in information structure and in basic grammar. The earlier example (6a) is from Hockett (1958:201): Thus John ran away.

Connectives do not always occur initially, but can occur medially (John, however, did not return) or even in sentence-final position (He did not return, however). Their function in information structure is to provide some indication of how the sentence is intended to relate to the preceding context or to the ongoing organization of the text.
A Point of Departure (PoD) is a (usually left-)detached expression, commonly anchored to something in the context, whose function is to contextualize the assertion within a domain of location, time, action, or reference (Chafe 1976:50). In later works Chafe refers to this function as orientation. He describes how a person, after losing consciousness and then regaining it, will commonly ask questions such as “Where am I?”, “What time/day is it?”, “Who are these people?”, and “What’s going on?” (Chafe 1994:128f). These questions make reference to the four basic narrative orientation dimensions – place, time, participants, and action – that are commonly (re)established at the beginning of new text units, especially when discontinuities have occurred (Dooley and Levinsohn 2001:35–42). In basic grammar, a Point of Departure may be a word, a phrase, or a clause which functions as an adsentential modifier – an adjunct of the entire main clause (Radford 1988:532f) – hence a detached expression. Examples (31) through (34) below have left-detached PoDs:

(31) **Locational Point of Departure (prepositional phrase):**
Outside the door, John could see a large ANIMAL.

(32) **Temporal Point of Departure (adverbial phrase):**
Just then, he heard a GROWL.

(33) **Action Point of Departure (adverbial clause):**
As he was trying to recover from that, the thing LUNGED at him.

(34) **Referential Point of Departure (noun phrase):**
The big brute, John had never seen anything LIKE it.

In all of these examples, the commas indicate that the PoDs have their own prosodic contour and are followed by a pause. Such prosodic effects are sometimes taken as part of the definition of left detachment (Van Valin 2005:6). When PoDs are single words, however, both the contour and the pause are commonly absent, so that instead of (32) it would be common to hear Then he heard a growl. In this form, the initial adverb then could be considered either as a fronted expression within the clause or as a left-detached PoD which, possibly because of its brevity, is not given its own contour.

The orientational, contextualizing function of PoDs makes use of situations that are readily accessible to the hearer: like Topics (section 3.1), they are locatable within the hearer’s mental representation, being anchored in a given state of affairs. Further, typical PoDs are non-assertional. This is clearly the case in the locational, temporal, and referential PoDs in examples (31), (32), and (34) above, since they are not propositional at all. But what about example (33), with the action PoD as he was trying to recover from that?

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24 The term “Point of Departure” is from Beneš (1962) of the Prague School, cited by Garvin (1963:508).
This is an adverbial clause with new information. However, if hearers recognize such a clause as having the contextualizing or orientational function of a PoD that is anchored on a given situation, then they will generally be willing to treat it as established information. This phenomenon, called **pragmatic accommodation**, is described in the following way: “a speaker can create a new presuppositional situation merely by using an expression which requires this situation” (Lambrecht 1994:66). In this sense, all PoDs can be taken as being hearer-accessible and based on established information, and clausal PoDs can all be taken as **"pragmatically presupposed"**: the speaker treats them as presupposed, assuming that, even if that is not actually so, “the hearer is likely to accept [them as such] without challenge” (Givón 1979:50). 25

In example (34), the NP *the big brute* is what section 3.1.2 calls a left-detached, external Topic. Here, it is seen from a complementary perspective, as a referential PoD. PoDs are usually left-detached, but sometimes there occur expressions in other positions that have the same orientational, contextualizing function, as can be seen in the following examples.

In a Mbyá Guarani folktale, the final sentence of a text unit (here presented in translation) ends with the expression ‘in that place’, which is not necessary for establishing the location:

(35) ‘So when he looked in that place, there was some kind of liquid, in that place.’

In fact, earlier in this sentence the same expression ‘in that place’ occurs. The sentence-final expression has little or no prosodic prominence and can be analyzed as right-detached as well as being non-assertional (the location is given). Its function may be to signal the end of the text unit.

The following example, also from Mbyá Guarani, is center-detached:

(36) *Xero, oky rā, OTYKYP*.
1SG.house rain DS 3.drip.completely

**TOPIC** **SPC** **COMMENT**

‘My house, when it rains, leaks COMPLETELY.’

A final example, also center-detached, is from Korean (Yang 1994):

(37) *Na-nun, he-ka tul-mvun, whabun-ul changka-e changka-e.*
1SG-TOP sun-SBJ come-if pot-do window-in put-PRS-IND

**TOPIC** **SPC** **COMMENT**

‘I, if the sun shines, put the (flower) pot in front of the window.’

In both (36) and (37), the orientational, PoD-like clause occurs between Topic and Comment – that is, in a position which is associated with “Spacers” (section 5.3).

The following points are also relevant:

25 For different ways that hearers can take certain kinds of new information as already established, see Prince 1981.
Sometimes a PoD in the form of an adverbial clause restates the main clause of the preceding sentence or narrates an expected consequence of it: \textit{he took the water to the house. When he got to the house, he saw a snake.} This so-called “\textit{tail-head linkage}” often has ramifications for the structural organization of the text (Dooley and Levinsohn 2001:16, Levinsohn 2015, section 3.2.3).

PoDs, like other adjuncts, can occur recursively or serially, with no fixed limit (Radford 1988:189): \textit{Just then, as he was trying to recover from that, the thinglunged at him.}

In a text, the presence of a PoD often helps to signal the onset of a new text unit – a narrative episode, say, or a new paragraph within an episode, and establishing or re-establishing an orientational dimension for the text unit as a whole (Dooley and Levinsohn 2001:68).

4.3 Antitopics

The following example is from Lambrecht (1994:203–205):

\begin{align*}
(38) & \text{He is a nice guy, your brother.} \\
& \text{[Core Topic Comment ] Antitopic}
\end{align*}

Lambrecht labels \textit{your brother} as an \textit{Antitopic}: a right-detached, unaccented lexical expression which is coreferential with something in the main clause. Although Lambrecht does not provide examples in a discourse context, he states that, as “a general condition for the appropriate use of the antitopic construction across languages,” the main clause referent is “quasi-active or at least highly identifiable.” He describes Antitopics as right-detached, but notes that they can have morphosyntactic properties which suggest a degree of syntactic integration with the clause: “in many languages, the antitopic constituent must immediately follow the clause,” and in both French and German, “the antitopic NP must agree in case with” its coreferential expression in the main clause, as if the Antitopic were a deferred appositional expression. In any case, Antitopics are not assertional but purely referential, reinforcing the earlier referent. In languages such as non-standard French, Antitopic is “a normal and frequent construction type that is well integrated into the syntax” (Lambrecht 1981:76).\textsuperscript{26}

4.4 Assertional detached elements

The following example is the beginning of a well-known book of stories:

\begin{align*}
\text{Antitopics can be considered a referential type of what Dik (1978:160) calls a Tail: “A constituent with Tail function presents as an ‘afterthought’ to the Predication, information meant to clarify or modify (some constituent contained in) the Predication.”}
\end{align*}
(39) (1) Here is Edward Bear,
   (a) coming downstairs now,
   (b) bump, bump, bump,
   (c) on the back of his head,
   (d) behind Christopher Robin.

(2-) It is,
(e) as far as he knows,
(-2) the only way of coming downstairs... (Milne 1994:1)

This excerpt has two independent clauses, (1) and (2). Clause (2) is discontinuous, being composed of the two parts (2-) and (-2). Each main clause makes an assertion that is semantically and syntactically complete, while the underlined expressions (a) through (e) all contribute further details about the state of affairs. Huddleston and Pullum (2002:1350f) call such expressions *supplements*: “elements which occupy a position in linear sequence without being integrated into the syntactic structure of the sentence....Although supplements are not syntactically dependent on a head, they are semantically related to what we will call their anchor.” This description implies that supplements are detached elements (section 4.2), although the requirement of an anchor may rule out certain kinds of detached parenthetical expressions. Supplements can occur after the main clause, as in example (39a); after another supplement, as in (39b), c), and d); interpolated within the main clause, as in (39e); or before the main clause, as in the following example:

(40) With a nod of thanks to his friends, he went on with his walk.

In (39a), the anchor is Edward Bear from line (1), and the anchor for (39b), c) and d) is coming downstairs in line (a). According to Huddleston and Pullum’s analysis of a similar example (2002:1351), the anchor for (39e) is the entire discontinuous clause (2) it is...the only way of coming downstairs. The clause-initial supplement in (40) is anchored on he went on with his walk...in the following main clause.

All of the above supplements are assertional: rather than following from established information, they assert some kind of further, nonrecoverable detail about their anchor. Bump, bump, bump in (39b) asserts the sound that is being made, and as far as he knows in (39b) asserts the epistemic basis for independent clause (2). In that sense, these supplements all make additional assertions about their anchors.²⁷

Whereas the dependent syntax of supplements suggests that they are peripheral elements in information structure, seeing them as additional assertions raises the possibility that they can be considered additional cores. As assertions outside the core of the utterance, their processing is paratactic with respect to it. Like other paratactic additions, post-core supplements can be appended without fixed limit, as in example (39), lines (1) through (d).²⁸

²⁷ This cannot be said of all supplements that satisfy Huddleston and Pullum’s definition – for instance, the Antitopics of section 4.3 are not assertional and are generally recoverable from their anchor in the main clause. PoDs are also non-assertional (section 4.2).
²⁸ When a supplement precedes the main clause, however, it appears that only one or two supplements can be inserted between it and the clause, possibly because they are center-embedded between the supplement and its anchor. Clause chaining constructions (which do not require anchors) are not being considered here (see Dooley 2010 and references there).
5 Markers

This section describes three types of markers, all of which are common in information structure: Topic markers, Focus markers, and Spacers. A Topic marker indicates that a certain expression is Topic, a Focus marker indicates that a certain expression is Focus, while a Spacer indicates some other aspect of the utterance’s information structure.

5.1 Topic markers

Example (10) in Japanese (section 3.1.1) contains the Topic marker *wa*, which occurs with a marked Topic. In example (11) in the same section, this so-called “Topic marker” is seen to have a broader function – not to signal a referential Topic, but a non-referential Point of Departure. Thus, its pattern of occurrence confirms the fact that Topics, especially marked Topics, often have much the same orientational function as PoDs (section 4.2). Both kinds of orientational expressions must be accessible to the hearer.

5.2 Focus markers

Focus expressions, especially in narrow Focus, sometimes come with Focus markers, as in the Portuguese example (2) of section 2.1. Other instances of Focus markers are mentioned in section 3.2.1, in regard to the Mbyá Guarani versions of Expanding Focus (example 25) and Restricting Focus (example 26). There it was observed that, depending on the language, Focus markers may be restricted to certain “strong” varieties of narrow Focus, that is, to those which involve contrast or in which the Presupposition is required to be active.

5.3 Spacers

A third type of marker in information structure, the Spacer (SPC), appears to be found in many languages, at least in certain language areas. The following three examples, with Spacers underlined, are from Mbyá Guarani (Dooley 2013):

(41) a. *Xee  ma NDAIKUAAL.*
   1SG  BDY  NEG.1SG.know.NEG
   TOPIC  SPC  COMMENT
   ‘I don’t KNOW.’ (p. 135)

   b. *Ko’ẽ  ramo  ma  aa  ’rã  TETÃ  re.*
   dawn  DS  BDY  1SG.go  FUT  city  at
   POD  SPC  TOPIC  COMMENT
   ‘In the morning I will go to the CITY.’ (p. 135)

   c. *Ko’ẽ  ramo  MAE  ma  ’rã  aguta.*
   dawn  DS  already.ENTS  BDY  FUT  1SG.travel
   FOCUS  FOC  SPC  SPC  PRESUPPOSITION
   ‘It will only be in the MORNING that I will travel.’ (p. 131)
All three of these examples make use of the Spacer ma ‘boundary marker’. In (41a), this Spacer occurs between a Topic and its associated Comment. In (41b), it occurs between a Point of Departure and a Topic-Comment core (with Topic elided). Example (41c) has a sequence of three markers between a Focus and its associated Presupposition: a Focus marker mae ‘only’, the Spacer ma, and the future marker ’rā in Spacer position.29

In certain languages of lowland South America, Spacers are often mobile particles or expressions in TAM categories (tense, aspect, mood/modality; Dooley 1990). They can be of other categories as well, including dependent clauses. The Guarani Spacer ma ‘boundary marker’ in the above examples is exceptional in that its only function is that of a Spacer: it apparently has no other meaning or function (Dooley 1977). What makes such elements Spacers is not their grammatical category, but their positioning. Spacers occur at major boundaries in information structure: before or after the Focus, as in examples (41a) and (41c), or before the core, as in (41b). Spacers seem to either clarify the information structure or highlight one of its constituents.30

The highlighting function of Spacers can be seen in marked constructions. In (41a), the subject ‘I’ is signalled as a marked Topic, not only by its overcoding as an overt pronoun, but also because the Spacer ma adds to the separation of Topic from Comment (see section 3.1.1). In (41b), the Point of Departure ‘in the morning’ is similarly highlighted by the Spacer.31 In (41c), the narrow Focus ‘in the morning’ is signalled and highlighted, not only by its prosodic accent and by the Focus marker mae ‘only’, but also by the two Spacers ma and ’rā ‘future’.

Another type of Spacer can be seen in the following example, which was given when the speaker was asked to tell about a fight he had been in (Labov and Waletzky 1967:17):

(42) Well, one, I think, was with a GIRL.

The modal clause, I think, is in the Spacer position between the Topic one and the Comment was with a GIRL.

Section 4.2 has two examples – (36) in Mbyá Guarani and (37) in Korean – in which a PoD adverbial clause occurs in the same Spacer position, between Topic and Comment, as in (42) above. Center-detached PoDs often appear to occur in a Spacer position.

29 The default position of the future marker is post-verbal, in the verbal expression, as in example (41b). However, like other TAM elements in Mbyá Guarani, it can be taken from its default position and put in a Spacer position, to take on a Spacer function as well (Dooley 2013:section 24.4.3.2).

30 The Spacer function can be grammaticalized, a process which involves the loss of at least some of its function in information structure. In Mbyá Guarani, Spacers are all but obligatory in equative clauses between the subject (Topic) and the predicate (Comment); in this position, no copula occurs (Dooley 2013:44f). Since in NPs adjectives follow the head noun, omitting the Spacer in an equative would introduce ambiguity: the adjective could be taken either as attributive (‘the good orange’) or predicative (‘the orange is good’).

31 Chu (1998:268) states that, in Mandarin Chinese, “any topic can be followed by a potential pause or pause particle...ya or ne...” Such “pause particles”, which appear to be Spacers, can also occur following sentence-initial PoD phrases (p. 252).
6 Nested constructions

The following example in Portuguese is from a conversation between two university faculty members (Pontes 1987:24).

(43) *Esse projeto da Medicina, é o Banco MUNDIAL que financia.*

This project of medicine 3SG.be the bank world that 3SG.fund

Topic Comment Focus Presupposition

‘This project in Medicine, it’s the World BANK that’s funding it.’

In this example there is a global Topic-Comment construction having an initial Topic ‘this project in Medicine’ whose Comment, the cleft construction ‘it’s the World BANK that’s funding (it)’, is itself structured as Focus-Presupposition: the Presupposition X IS FUNDING THE PROJECT is indeed presupposed and active (from the external Topic, since funding is part of a project schema), and X is identified, in the Focus, as ‘the World Bank’. The Focus-Presupposition construction is embedded, nested, within the Comment, effecting an internal restructuring of the Comment of the global Topic-Comment construction. Example (43) actually illustrates two possibilities for nesting: the initial marked Topic ‘this project in Medicine’ can either be the direct object of the verb *financia* ‘funds’ (in the Portuguese) or, as in the English free translation, a left-detached Topic that is external to the assertion.32

A second way to restructure a global Comment is seen in the following example from the same Portuguese database:

(44) Woman to maid upon leaving house: (‘Tina, you can put the dishes in the dishwasher.’)

E o almoço, eu volto mais CEDO.

and the lunch 1SG.return more early

Topic Comment Topic Comment

‘And as for lunch, I will return EARLIER.’ (Pontes 1987:98)

Example (44), like (43) above, begins with a global Topic-Comment construction – this time, the Topic ‘the lunch’ is left-detached. But instead of the global Comment ‘I will return earlier’ being internally restructured as Focus-Presupposition, in (44) it is restructured as Topic-Comment: the pronoun eu ‘I’ can be considered as a weakly marked Topic (see section 3.1.1) whose Comment is ‘will return earlier’. The result is two Topics, on two levels of Topic-Comment structuring. With this example we observe that a left-detached Topic does not require a resumptive (copy) pronoun (section 3.1.2) in the following.

32 Lambrecht (1994:237, 293) discusses various examples of nested constructions, but does not explicitly use the notion of nesting.
Nested constructions

clause. Lambrecht (1994:193) calls external Topics which lack resumptive pronouns “unlinked Topics”. As example (44) shows, some “unlinked Topics” have no reference at all within the clause.

A further example of restructuring a global Comment, attributed by Chafe (1976:50) to Li and Thompson, is from Mandarin Chinese, a language in which constructions with two topics are extremely common:

(45) Nei-xie shùmu, shù-shén dá.
    those trees trunks big
    TOPIC       COMMENT

    Topic: ‘Those trees, their trunks are big.’

In all three of the above examples, it is a global Comment which is restructured as a nested core construction: Focus-Presupposition in (43) and Topic-Comment in both (44) and (45). Thus, the Focus in the global construction contains a Focus of narrower scope in the nested construction. This raises questions about the definition of Focus given in section 2: the expression “the part of the utterance which is intended, in its context, to make a change...” can refer to two different things, one nested in the other. In (45), for example, the global Comment (Focus) shù-shén dá ‘their trunks are big’ contains a narrower Focus dá ‘are big’. Which expression “is intended, in its context, to make a change”? In considering this question, it helps to remember that the notion of Focus is relational – a pragmatic relation, as is each constituent of the core. That being so, a Focus expression has the Focus function only in relation to its own core construction. This suggests an adjustment to the definition of Focus along the following lines: “the Focus of an utterance (or of a more limited construction within an utterance) is the part of the utterance (or of the more limited construction) which is intended, in its context, to make a change (or the greatest change) in the hearer’s mental representation.”

Thus far, all of the examples of nested constructions have involved restructuring a global Comment. But at least one other kind of global constituent – a global Presupposition – can be restructured in this way. The following example is from a Mbyá Guarani story in which a rancher with several daughters had invited young men from the region so that his daughters could choose a husband by throwing a flower at the one that pleased them most. In that situation, one of the daughters said the following:

(46) Peva’e re RIVE ’rā ko xee yvoty amombo.
    that.one re FUT ‘fut personally 1SG flower 1SG.throw
    FOCUS    FOC SPC SPC PRESUPPOSITION
    TOPIC    COMMENT

    ‘It’s only at THAT one that I personally will throw my flower.’

In this example, we observe that the global construction has a Focus separated from the Presupposition by the Focus marker RIVE ‘only’ and two Spacers: ’rā ‘future’ and ko ‘personally’. The global Presupposition (I WILL THROW MY FLOWER AT X) is restructured as Topic-Comment, in which the Topic xee ‘I’ is marked by overcoding (section 3.1.1) – the verb amombo ‘1SG.throw’ is fully inflected – as well as by a secondary accent. In
the context, the markedness of this Topic is contrastive: the sisters of the speaker were openly disdainful of her choice.

In each example of nesting presented here, the information structure constituent that is restructured – Comment or Presupposition – is relatively extensive, having more than one clausal constituent. This raises the question of whether other constituents, such as Topic and narrow Focus, which typically have a single clausal term, can be internally restructured as well. Another question is whether an utterance can have more than one level of nesting. These are open questions.

7 Contrast

Among the changes to the hearer’s mental representation that a speaker makes, one radical type is that of contrast: the selection of one item – the “correct” one – from a set of accessible alternatives that would be relevant or plausible in the context. The correct item may be either new or given, but in the proposition in question its role is new. As one would expect from the definition of Focus, the correct item is predictably packaged as focal.

I mention contrast here for purely illustrative purposes, as an area where various categories of information structure are commonly applied. This treatment will follow Chafe (1976:33–38) in distinguishing single contrast, with one point of difference, from double contrast, with two.

7.1 Single contrast

Single contrast is illustrated by an earlier example of “replacing Focus” (section 3.2.1), repeated here:

(47) Speaker 1: (John bought rice.)
Speaker 2: (No,) he bought coffee.

In this example, coffee is contrasted with rice. (Only Speaker 2’s utterance is necessarily contrastive here; Speaker 1 may have had no contrast in mind.) The contrastive utterance is of the type Focus-Presupposition, the presupposition being JOHN BOUGHT X. As with other “strong” forms of Focus-Presupposition, the Presupposition JOHN BOUGHT X is in active consciousness at the onset of the utterance.

Speaker 2’s reply in English is formally indistinguishable from Topic-Comment, in the sense discussed in section 3.2. In Mbyá Guarani, however, as mentioned in the discussion of example (24) in section 3.2.1, Speaker 2’s reply would take the form (No,) COFFEE he bought, with fronted direct object and an unambiguous Focus-Presupposition construction.

7.2 Double contrast

In double contrast, there are two points of difference: some kind of orientation expression and the Focus or assertion. In the following example, the orientational difference is temporal:
In the second clause of (48), the orientational difference is represented by the temporal PoD *yesterday*, whereas the focal difference is realized by a Topic-Comment construction. The first clause is not necessarily contrastive, nor does it suggest that a contrast is to follow, although it does set up the contrast of the second clause.

In the following example, the orientational difference is referential, represented by two subjects/Topics:

(49)  
*Hé* was being *OBNOXIOUS,*  
[ Topic COMMENT ]

*but*  
*shé* kept her *COOL.*  
[ Topic COMMENT ]

In (49), the second difference is represented by two Comment expressions. The prosody of the first clause, especially the secondary accent on the subject *he*, may indicate that a contrast is being set up.

In both of the above examples, the orientational expression in the contrastive clause carries a secondary prosodic accent as a marked constituent in information structure.

8 Concluding remarks

According to Lambrecht (1994:xii), the term “information structure” was first used in the modern era by Halliday (1967). Various aspects of the subject had been dealt with since antiquity, and particularly in the last century by linguists of the Prague School (see Daneš 1964, 1974). Since the 1960s and 1970s there has been a growing literature on the subject, of which Lambrecht 1994 continues to be a highly cited general reference. Studies on particular aspects, such as “focus sensitivity,” are represented by Beaver and Clark 2008 and Döring 2012.

In this overview I have tried to set out some of the basic facts about information structure in a way that will be understandable to readers who are familiar with general descriptive terminology. I have treated information structure as a dimension of sentence organization that can be considered in a way that is largely independent of the particular model of sentence grammar being used.

In closing, I make the following general observations about information structure, especially in relation to basic grammar.

• An inappropriate construction in information structure is not necessarily ungrammatical or factually incorrect, but it does not fit well with the context and can make sentence processing difficult.
• The information structure of an utterance is generally simpler and more universal than its basic grammar.
• Information structure, like basic grammar, can be largely presented in terms of con-
structions with nucleus, dependents, core, and periphery.
• Information structure is the dimension of language, along with sentence processing
more generally, that makes the most systematic use of prosodic accents and prosodic
segmentation.
• It influences the syntax of languages with flexible word order more than that of lan-
guages with rigid word order.
• It influences the structure of sentences and clauses more than that of phrases.
• It tends to influence the structure of independent clauses more than that of dependent
clauses.
• Constructions and elements in information structure can become grammaticalized to
varying degrees, losing part of their functional role and coming under the control
of basic grammar. A Topic-Comment analysis, for example, may be non-viable in
examples such as *It started to rain*, since the dummy subject *it* does not satisfy cognitive
properties associated with Topic (Comrie 1988). Antitopics (section 4.3) can also
become reanalyzed as clause-final grammatical subjects (Derbyshire 1985:103f).
References


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