

## Towards an alternative account of FG Topic

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### ABSTRACT

This paper revises the notion of *Topic* as rendered within the framework of *Functional Grammar* (FG). It is argued that, although in principle this category is described from a *semantic* perspective, that is, as entailing a relationship of 'aboutness', it turns out to be assigned both *syntactic* and *informational* readings. In other words, Topic (and its subtypes) is simultaneously identified with: (1) clause initial position and (2) salient/given information in the discourse co(n)text and/or the interactants' minds, which gives rise to a number of debatable issues.

In section 1 a cursory description is given of what is here understood by syntactic, informational and semantic interpretations of Topic. Section 2 concentrates on FG Topic, paying special attention to the weaknesses inherent in this model. And finally, section 3 summarises the main conclusions drawn in this paper, making suggestions for further research on this field.

**Key words:** topic; semantic interpretation; separating interpretation; combining interpretation aboutness.

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- 1 Part of this research was given at the VIIth *International Conference on Functional Grammar*, The University of Córdoba, Córdoba, Spain, 23th-27th September, 1996. I am grateful to the participants, especially, for their comments on that occasion. I would also like to express my thanks to Professors C. S. Butler, L. Mackenzie and M. Hannay for their constructive reactions to an earlier version. None of the foregoing is to be held responsible for what follows. The research reported here was supported by the Xunta de Galicia and by grant numbers PB90-0370 and PB94-0619 from the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science (DGICYT).
- 2 Described as it is, Dik's concept of Tail coincides exactly with what Chafe (1976: 53) calls *antitopic*, or with Halliday's (1967, 1994 [1985a]) substitute Theme.

## 1. THREE INTERPRETATIONS OF TOPIC

The term Topic has been used as a cover term for a wide range of functional concepts in a variety of approaches, which here have been narrowed down to three: syntactic, informational and semantic (cf. e.g. Güblig/Raible 1977; Allerton 1978; Brömser 1982; Fries 1984; Schlobinski and Schütze-Coburn 1992; Fries 1983, 1995a, b). Syntactic analyses identify Topic with the *leftmost*, or initial, constituent of the clause as a message (or the so-called *prefield* (*Vorfeld*) position), while informational approaches equate this label with different types of *given information*. The two positions depart from different interpretations of Mathesius's (1939: 234) notion of *základ* as 'that which is known or at least obvious in the given situation' and 'that (...) from which the speaker proceeds'. Thus, whereas the supporters of the syntactic approach separate out the two aspects of Mathesius' definition, i.e. (1) 'point of departure' and (2) given information, into two different axes, concentrating on the former; informational approaches collapse these two axes into a single one, assuming that both are different aspects of the same phenomenon, that is to say, the Given-New distinction. In their turn, according to semantic interpretations, Topic entails a relationship of 'aboutness'. This third reading echoes Grice's (1975) *maxim of relevance*, or 'Make your contribution relevant in terms of the existing topic framework', that is, make your contribution fit closely to the most recent elements incorporated in discourse.

Drawing on Gundel (1988: 211-2), I would distinguish at least three different trends in both informational and semantic interpretations. For, as illustrated in Table 1 below, it seems that the Given-New distinction, the identificational criterion endorsed by informational approaches, resorts to three distinct versions of givenness (and therefore of newness), namely:

- (1) *relational givenness*, or given information in relation to what is presented as new information in clauses/messages in isolation;
- (2) *contextual givenness*, standing for given information as rendered by the co(n)text, in terms of four non-coterminous notions:
  - (a) *recoverability* ( $Giv_R$ ), or information which is recoverable from the co(n)text (Halliday 1967, 1974, 1977, 1981, 1994);
  - (b) *predictability* ( $Giv_P$ ), or information that is predictable from the co(n)text (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981; Kuno 1972);
  - (c) *shared knowledge* ( $Giv_K$ ), i.e. the knowledge shared by the interactants at the moment of the exchange (Haviland and Clark 1974; Clark and Haviland 1977; Clark and Marshall 1981);
  - (d) *assumed familiarity* ( $Giv_F$ ), or a scalar notion of information which the speaker assumes her/his addressee can retrieve or infer from the co(n)text (Allerton 1978: 147; Prince 1981: 233-37); and *activated givenness* ( $Giv_S$ ), referring to what interactants have in mind at the moment of speaking (cf.

Chafe 1974, 1976, 1987: 30 ff.; Givón 1988, 1992; Copeland and Davis 1983; Lambrecht 1988, 1994):

Table 1: Trends in informational interpretations of Topic

clause level of analysis	discourse level of analysis	
relational interpretation	referential interpretations	
	contextual interpretation	activated interpretation
Given information in relation to New information	Recoverability (Giv <sub>R</sub> ) Predictability (Giv <sub>P</sub> ) Shared Knowledge (Giv <sub>K</sub> ) Assumed Familiarity (Giv <sub>F</sub> )	entities participants are attending to at the time of the utterance

Further, semantic analyses of Topic entail, in my view, a relationship of ‘aboutness’ again in three different senses, as expounded in Table 2 below:

- (1) *relational ‘aboutness’*, established by an entity or proposition with respect to a clausal predication (cf. Li and Thompson 1976: 463; Kieras 1981: 2; Reinhart 1982: 48; Schiffrin 1992: 172; Pufahl 1992: 218; Lambrecht 1994: 127);
- (2) *referential ‘aboutness’*, entailed by a referent with respect to the overall discourse (cf. Givón 1983b, 1984b, 1988, 1992; van Dijk 1973, 1977, 1984, 1988; van Dijk *et al.* 1972; Beaugrande 1980):
  - (a) either as determined by the co(n)text, i.e. the *contextual referential semantic interpretation*;
  - (b) and/or as processed by the (decoder/receiver’s) mind, i.e. the *activated referential semantic interpretation*.
- (3) *interactive ‘aboutness’*, evoking salient/relevant information in discourse that is negotiated as a problem frame in the process of conversing/interacting (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1986; Beaugrande & Dressler 1981; de Beaugrande 1992; Yule and Mathis 1992):

Table 2: Trends in semantic interpretations of Topic

clause level of analysis	discourse level of analysis		
relational interpretation	message centred interpretations		context-centred interpretation
	referential interpretation		interactive interpretation
	contextual	activated	
clause/utterance entity proposition in a complex clause	discourse entity or proposition ‘in the co(n)text’	discourse entity or proposition ‘in the speaker’s minds’	propositional/problem framework saliency/relevance

## 2. TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION OF FG TOPIC

FG appears to assign Topic a(n) (*activated*) *referential semantic interpretation*, but explains this category in both *syntactic* and *informational* terms, which leads to a number of inconsistencies and theoretical lacunae that impede a ‘functionally adequate’ account of this category. In principle, Topic is said to represent the predication-internal entity about which the predication predicates something, in relation to the overall discourse and as processed by the speaker/decoder’s mind. Within this all-encompassing definition FG recognises four subtypes of topical elements:

- (i) New Topics (NewTops), assigned to either Unused or to Brand New referents, as in Siewierska’s (1991: 161 (19)):

(1) There’s a man at the door

- (ii) Given Topic (GivTop), associated with Active discourse referents, as in Dik’s (1989: 271 (19) [my emphasis]):

(2) Yesterday I got a phone call from *the tax inspector* (NewTop): *He/The man/The joker* (GivTop) wanted me to come to his office, and *he/* (GivTop) gave me the impression that I was in for some trouble;

- (iii) SubTopic (SubTop), assigned only to Semi-Active referents, as in Haviland and Clark’s (1974, 1977):

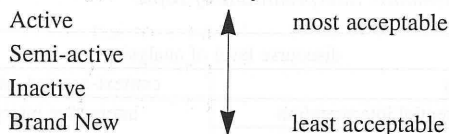
(3) *Mary got some picnic supplies out of the car.* The beer was warm;

- (iv) Resumed Topic (ResTop), identified with Semi-Active referents assumed to be still in peripheral consciousness, as in Dik’s (1989: 277):

(4) John had a brother Peter and a sister Mary. Peter ... [considerable episode about Peter]. Now, John’s sister Mary, who I mentioned before

The above four subtypes of Topic are placed along Lambrecht’s (1988: 147; 1994) scale of Topic acceptability as follows:

- (5) The Topic Accessibility Scale



where it is implied that utterances are more likely to be about Active referents than about Brand New referents, because the former are presumed to be already in the forefront of the addressee’s consciousness and therefore more easily retrievable.

Below I shall explain that the outlined FG approach to Topic may be questioned for two main reasons:

- (1) the inconsistencies emerging from using in an equivocal manner the three interpretations of Topic, i.e. the syntactic, informational and semantic (cf. Jiménez Juliá 1981: 340, 342; De Vries 1989: 66-71; Butler 1991: 508; Mackenzie and Keizer 1991 [1990]: 174, 183, 187 ff.; Hannay 1991 [1990]: 133, 138, 140); and
- (2) as a corollary, the lack of self-consistency and therefore the debatable functional adequacy of some aspects of the analysis (cf. Nuyts 1983: 383; 1985: 101-2; Keijsper 1985: 45; Butler 1990: 13; 1991: 507, 511-12; Mackenzie and Keizer *ibid.*: 169, 191 ff.; Hannay *ibid.*: 131, 146):

With regard to (1), I would argue that that the first inconsistency emerges because in FG referential semantic descriptions of Topic are equated with both syntactic and (activated) informational explanations. Though treated as three different pragmatic functions, Topic, Theme and Tail are in fact rendered as three different realisations of the same pragmatic function. The three are described as establishing a relationship of relevance ('aboutness'), but of two different kinds. Whereas, as noted above, topical aboutness is of a referential nature, Theme and Tail evoke relational 'aboutness'. Theme is thus described as presenting to the left and external to the predication an entity or sets of entities that the subsequent predication is going to bear upon (e.g. *That guy*, is he a friend of yours?, *That trunk*, put it in the car, *As for the students*, they won't be invited, Dik 1978: 132 [my emphasis]):

By contrast, Tail constituents are characterised as set off from the main predication, typically to its right, as 'afterthoughts', or further specifications, modifications or corrections of (parts of) the previous predication (e.g. He's a nice chap, *your brother*; I like John very much, *your brother I mean*; John gave that book to a girl, *in the library*; Dik 1978: 153 [my emphasis]).

However, this semantic interpretation of Topic (Theme and Tail) programmatically endorsed by FG is pervaded by both syntactic and informational overtones, which makes its operationalisation not always insightful and sometimes inconsistent. Thus, although Topics seem to be in principle presented along (activated) referential semantic lines, that is to say, as referents establishing a relationship of 'aboutness' between individual clauses/utterances and the overall discourse as processed by the interactants' minds, ultimately topical referents are elicited by expression rules invoking the criterion of linear ordering (i.e. pragmatic positions), which is posited by syntactic interpretations. Importantly enough, this practice violates the FG tenet that an interpretation rule cannot be based on an expression rule as formulated for the quasi-productive mode.

Besides, FG adheres to a further syntactic tenet: the aforementioned claim that the dependencies between extraclassical constituents, Theme and Tail, and the Predication, run from left to right. As a result, applying the criterion of the linear processing of information, also adopted by syntactic accounts, Themes are identified with initial predication-external position, and Tails with the final predication-external one. In addition, FG equally resorts to

contextual factors, addressed by (activated) informational interpretations, without solving the main deficiencies intrinsic to such accounts. Hence, with the exception of inactivated/unidentifiable NewTops (identified as a subtype of Focus), Top status is assigned to given information (usually the entity which the interactants are thinking of at the time of utterance). Yet, in my opinion, such an assignment does not admit of an easy empirical verification for it appears to invoke six non-coterminous versions of Givenness, namely: (i) Recoverability (Giv<sub>R</sub>), (ii) Shared Knowledge (Giv<sub>K</sub>), (iii) Assumed Familiarity (Giv<sub>F</sub>), (iv) Activation (Giv<sub>S</sub>), (v) Givón's (1988) cognitive domains, and (vi) Lambrecht's (1988) scale of Topic acceptability. Moreover, these interpretations of givenness seem to be inherently unverifiable because they rely on the speaker/writer's and/or addressee's assumptions and, presumably, there is no way one can have access to them, a problem exacerbated by the fact that what the speaker presents as Given or New might not actually be rendered so by the co(n)text.

By the same token, it remains a moot point as to how the most topical element can be isolated from the other contextually bound elements, if neither the 'one term only' restriction, nor anaphoric reference, prosodic prominence, the Q-test (or similar), nor placement in initial, or P1, position via R2 appear to provide consistent answers to this question. There seem to exist exceptions to the "one term only" restriction (cf. De Groot 1981; Siewierska 1988: 73 ff.). Furthermore, in contexts where there is more than one candidate for Topic assignment, the term restriction does not state clearly which one is Topic and which one is not.

Secondly, anaphoric reference, the grammatical means used for maintaining Topic continuity cross-linguistically, need not as such indicate Topichood either: anaphors can be used to refer to contextually given or inferable entities which need not be Topics, as in (6) below (from Brown and Yule 1983: 183, [emphasis in original]):

- (6) There was a car approaching the junction, but the driver didn't stop at *the give way sign*

Thirdly, prosodic prominence in its turn seems to be equally vague a notion, despite Keijsper's (1990: 45) or Dik's (1989) observations that Topic may be marked by prosodic contour. GivTops do not have prosodic prominence (unless contrasted with some other Topic, in which case such prominence does not distinguish them from Focus elements). Conversely, SubTops and ResTops may have some degree of accentual prominence, but this prominence is only 'typical', and applies only to spoken language.

Fourthly, Dik seems to suggest that a systemic elaboration of (Sgall's 1975) Q-test would bring us nearer to the solution of this problem. However, in my view the Q-test is invalid as criterial to the identification of topical status for it merely elicits bound information, even if this procedure is not devoid of problems either. This method does not yet determine the degree of activation or presupposition of the constituents of a message (cf.

Daneš 1989: 29; Weiss 1975: 271 ff.). Besides, as observed by Beaugrande (1980: 120), it proves to be an artificial and an uneconomical technique, since (i) in natural discourse answers do not normally repeat information which is directly derivable from questions and (ii) to apply single questions to individual utterances does not seem to be the easiest and most economical way to determine the Topic of message stretches (cf. Dressler 1972).

We are forced then to turn to the fifth and last 'special treatment' device to mark the function of Topic, namely: placement in P1 via the rule R<sub>2</sub> given below (which for convenience's sake has been renumbered (7)):

- (7) (R1) P1 -constituent → P1  
 (R2) GivTopic, SubTop, Focus → P1  
 (R3) X → P1

In connection with this device Mackenzie and Keizer (1991 [1990]: 193) comment:

One may, of course, object that it is nowhere explicitly stated that Topic elements must go into P1; this is, however, something that must be deduced from what is stated in Dik (1989) about P1 position and from the fact that Topic assignment necessarily involves singling out elements for special treatment [there is only one exception on p. 217 (ex. 18b) *Well, the police (Subj.) removed them (Obj-GivTop) from the platform [my emphasis]*]. Note, however, that dropping the requirement that Topics must be placed in P1 would mean losing the last possibility of giving special treatment to Topic elements in English.

Mackenzie and Keizer's fears for the applicability of R2 in English are clearly not unmotivated. On the one hand, this rule turns out to be only relatively operational given that:

- (1) some languages may lack a clearly demarcated P<sub>1</sub> position<sup>3</sup>;
- (2) an element with no pragmatic function may be placed in P<sub>1</sub>;
- (3) the position may be left unfilled.

Moreover, as Hannay (1991 [1990]: 135) points out, even if it has been decided that P1 will be filled, R2 does not stipulate the conditions under which:

- (1) P<sub>1</sub> is indeed filled by a pragmatic element;
- (2) a Topic as opposed to a Focus constituent is placed there (e.g. *John and Bill came to see me. JOHN was NICE, but BILL was rather BORING*, where 'the constituents *John* and *Bill* [the second instance] are emphasised [and so qualify for Focus status], although they have already been introduced and may thus be assumed to be Given Topics to A'; Dik (1989: 278 (34)) [emphasis in original];
- (3) whether constituents are or are not in P<sub>1</sub>.

3 De Groot (1981) suggests that P1 (the topical position) in Hungarian can be filled by two constituents (allegedly with a different topical status), whereas Siewierska (1988: 73 ff.) argues that Polish, Czech and Russian have *composite Topics*, the order of their constituents determined by their relative degree of predictability.

In sum, the FG approach to Topic, Theme and Tail apparently cannot satisfy the three criteria of functional adequacy it sets for itself, (pragmatic, psychological and typological adequacy) as a result of the theoretical gap existing between the speaker's dynamic forward-looking view of verbal interaction and the static backward-looking perspective mostly adopted by FG analyses, preoccupied with instances of Theme, Tail and Topic (and Focus) assignment in the underlying structure of the clause. It seems that FG is unable to bridge this gap because it rests on the same paradox that pervades other models (e.g. the Prague generative-functional model), that is to say: to represent Theme, Tail and Topic (and pragmatic functions in general) as systemic variables, that is, as 'autonomous' (i.e. that cannot be derived from co(n)textual variables) logico-semantic rules and, at the same time, to claim that their assignment is to be negotiated by discourse participants. I would suggest that, were we to admit that the assignment of Theme, Topic, and Tail occurs in the underlying structure of sentences in isolation, these should be addressed as formal rules (i.e. logico-semantic), rather than as pragmatic functional rules, which by definition deal with both the syntagmatic oppositions established by the contextualisation of messages and the associative and paradigmatic relations between different structures as they are stored in the memory of speakers and hearers.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper it has been suggested that Topic has been approached from three different perspectives: syntactic (Topic = initial position of the clause), informational (Topic = three kinds of Givenness, viz. relational, contextual and activated), and semantic (Topic = three readings of aboutness, viz. relational, referential and interactive).

In addition, it has been argued that, in order to be functionally adequate, FG descriptions of Topic should attempt to overcome the drawbacks inherent in the referential informational interpretations they subscribe to, namely:

- (1) that Topic is not defined directly, but rather is described:
  - (a) in relation to such elusive concepts as 'recoverability', 'shared knowledge' and 'saliency' at a discourse level;
  - (b) as a discrete value along a scale of topicality;
  - (c) as a process of attention activation;
- (2) that syntactic givenness/newness and phonological givenness/newness may not coincide and not enough quantitative and qualitative evidence has yet been provided to analyse systematically the interaction of both realisational tendencies cross-linguistically or in specific languages;
- (3) that the explanatory power of the approach is restricted mainly to NPs, which poses two further issues:

- (a) how to identify the Topic of messages containing more than one Given NP;
- (b) whether it is true that only Given NPs qualify for Topical status.

Last, but not least, there exists a further problem that FG has to face for 'what is being talked about', a gloss often assigned to Topic within this framework, may be judged differently at different points in discourse and participants themselves may not have identical views of 'what is being talked about' (cf. Kintsch 1974: 124; Chafe 1976; Brown and Yule 1983: 73; Levinson 1983: x): It seems to me that in order to counteract the apparently inherent subjectivity of the semantic overtones of FG Topic, firstly it should be stated which of the three readings of 'aboutness' (relational, contextual and interactive) this category refers to, and secondly, that reading should be rendered as an empirically verifiable and operational criterion.

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