

# The syntax of information structure: A relational approach

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## The proposal in a nutshell

This paper presents a syntax of information structure based on the idea that topichood, focushood and contrast are defined with reference to the nature and position of the clause-internal element linked to the fronted constituent, not with reference to (the position of) the element in the left periphery itself. Topic and focus functions are relational, and syntactically represented as such, with topic–comment and focus–presupposition relationships being mediated by a RELATOR: (1).

$$(1) \quad [_{RP} XP_i [_{R'} RELATOR [_{YP} \dots x_i \dots ]]]$$

Fronted topics and foci (occupying the specifier position of the RELATOR; ‘XP’ in (1)) are associated with different types of bound elements within the complement of the RELATOR (‘YP’): a bound variable in the case of focus fronting (2a), and a resumptive proform in the case of topic fronting (2b). In the latter case, the choice between (i) a clause-internal personal pronoun and (ii) a demonstrative in the left periphery makes the difference between plain and contrastive topics.

- (2) a. XP = FOCUS if  $x$  = bound variable  
b. XP = TOPIC if  $x$  = resumptive proform  
(i) XP = TOPIC<sub>[−CONTRAST]</sub> if  $x$  = clause-internal personal pronoun  
(ii) XP = TOPIC<sub>[+CONTRAST]</sub> only if  $x$  = clause-peripheral demonstrative

## High focus/topic fronting and the Verb Second differential

In focus–presupposition structures, YP is necessarily transparent for the  $\bar{A}$ -binding relationship that needs to be established between  $x$  (a bound variable here) and XP. This entails that in focus fronting constructions, YP cannot be a phase; hence, CP can only be merged outside RP. In (3), C and T cannot communicate for feature-sharing purposes unless T raises to the RELATOR of the focus–presupposition relation. It is the obligatoriness of the raising of T to the RELATOR of the focus–presupposition relationship that delivers the generalized Verb Second effect well known from Hungarian and English focus fronting, even in subordinate contexts, as illustrated in (4a,b).

$$(3) \quad [_{CP} C [_{RP} XP_i [_{R'} RELATOR+[T(+V)] [_{TP} \dots \bar{F} \dots x_i = \text{variable} \dots ]]]]$$

- (4) a. Úgy tűnik, hogy CSAK EGY SZÓT mondott János erről.  
so seems that only one word.ACC said János about.this  
Úgy tűnik, hogy EGY SZÓT SEM mondott János erről.  
so seems that one word.ACC neither said János about.this  
b. It appears that ONLY ONE WORD did John say about this.  
It appears that NOT A WORD did John say about this.

In topic–comment structures, YP cannot be as small as TP: the resumptive proform would be locally bound by  $XP_i$  in that case, causing a violation of the binding theory, with binding domains defined as phases and TP not qualifying as a phase. Topic-fronting constructions in which the topic is placed in the high left periphery thus require YP to be as large as CP, as shown in (5). With YP identified as CP, C and T can communicate directly: head movement up to the RELATOR is not triggered. This explains why Verb Second is not universally forced under high topic fronting.

$$(5) \quad [_{RP} XP_i [_{R'} RELATOR [_{CP} C [_{TP} \dots x_i = \text{resumptive} \dots ]]]]$$

### Focus and definiteness agreement

In Hungarian, a fronted accusative focus always has its definiteness specification reflected on the finite verb of its clause: (6a~b). This confirms that *x* in focus fronting constructions is a variable, not a resumptive pronoun (which, as Germanic left dislocation constructions with resumption show, is definite regardless of the definiteness of the left-dislocate: *(These) books, he really hates them*). The definiteness agreement pattern in (6) also shows that the dependency between the fronted focus and *x* is not mediated by a null operator (which is indefinite: see parasitic gaps in ‘definiteness effect’ contexts like *the solution which they found without at first believing/expecting there to be*). The unavailability of (7) for Hungarian focus fronting follows from the fact that raising of V to the RELATOR (forced for reasons discussed on the previous page) would cause the null operator (an instance of PRO) to end up governed by the RELATOR+V complex.

- (6) a. Csak egy könyvet olvasott/\*olvasta el.  
 only one book.ACC read.INDEF/\*DEF VM  
 b. Csak ezt a könyvet olvasta/\*olvastott el.  
 only this the book.ACC read.DEF/\*INDEF VM  
 ‘Only {one/this} book has (s)he read’
- (7)  $[_{RP} XP_i [_{R'} RELATOR [_{YP} Op_i \dots x_i \dots ]]]$

### Low focus/topic fronting

While (3) and (5) represent focus and topic fronting in the *high* left periphery, the structure in (9) exemplifies a combination of topic–comment and focus–presupposition dependencies in the *low* left periphery. (8) is a Kayne (1998)-style approach to sentences like *She talked only to me all day*, with  $XP = to\ me$  and  $RELATOR_1 = only$ . VP is located in a topic position between the focus–RP and T, introduced by a second RELATOR and binding a resumptive pro-predicate in the complement of  $RELATOR_1$ , whose movement to  $RELATOR_2$  linearizes the focus particle to the immediate left of XP. The variable<sub>i</sub> cannot be located inside VP (not c-commanded by  $XP_i$ ), which is why low foci can only be elements that can be shifted out of VP (*\*She*  $[_{VP} talked\ to\ x_i]$  *only me<sub>i</sub> all day*).

- (8)  $[_{TP} T [_{RP2} [_{VP} \dots V \dots]_j [_{R'} RELATOR_2 [_{RP2} XP_i [_{R'} RELATOR_1 [_{YP} \dots variable_i \dots res_j \dots ]]]]]]$   
 ↑  
 only

### Contrastiveness and the nature and position of the resumptive

The Dutch sentences in (9) show that while contrastive topicalization involves a demonstrative resumptive that must be clause-peripheral (thus, (9b’), while marginal, cannot be contrastive), plain topicalization links the topic to a resumptive pronoun surfacing in a clause-medial position. This raises the expectation that conditional *if*-clauses, which are known to be resistant to contrastive topicalization within their boundaries (Haegeman 2002, 2003, 2004), should be tolerant of non-contrastive topic fronting. The acceptability of examples of the type in (10) (where *these conditions/rules* inside the *if*-clause is an anaphoric, non-contrastive fronted topic) confirms this.

- (9) a. Jan, ik ken hem niet. (#Piet wél.) a’. ?\*Jan, hem ken ik niet. (#Piet wél.)  
 Jan I know him not Piet AFF Jan him know I not Piet AFF  
 b. Jan, die ken ik niet. (Piet wél.) b’. ?Jan, ik ken die niet. (#Piet wél.)  
 Jan DEM know I not Piet AFF Jan I know DEM not Piet AFF
- (10) a. Certain conditions apply; if these conditions you do not meet, the application is void.  
 b. So it’s a sonnet that you wish to write? [a set of rules follows] If these rules you follow to the end, you’ll have a sonnet. (<http://www.sonnets.org/yoursonnets/yoursonnets-v2.htm>)