

## Discourse Topic and Left Dislocation

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### Abstract

Little attention has been paid to the relation between 'topic' and 'left dislocation' in spite of various arguments raised concerning each of them. This is perhaps because the former is regarded as a functional concept but the latter a structural one. The exception is Keenan and Schieffelin's study, in which they discuss the discourse-functional properties of the construction. Through a deliberate examination of their claim I argue that REF of left dislocation plays a double role in regard to discourse, and explain a topical hierarchy suggested by this role, namely, 'subordinate topic' and 'superordinate topic/hypertopic'. Furthermore, I clarify the behavior of left dislocation in connection with given/new information.

### 0 Introduction

In this paper I discuss the relation of left dislocation to discourse topic. In order to do this, I first outline various arguments over 'topic' and the 'topic-comment' pattern in 1. 1, and introduce Keenan and Schieffelin's notion as an illustration in 1. 2. After the formal arrangement of left dislocation in 2. 1, in 2. 2 I develop another conception of Keenan and Schieffelin's in regard to the construction. I finally consider left dislocation from the viewpoint of given/new information in 2. 3.

#### 1.1 General Notions of Topic

At first, I will briefly look at previous arguments over what I call here 'topic' and the 'topic-comment' pattern. Since Mathesius (1975)<sup>1)</sup> proposed the basic notion of topic-comment pattern in his original framework of functional grammar, it has been widely taken up, generally in the same vein of functionalism, but in different names: "topic-comment" (Hockett, 1958), "Theme-Rheme" (Halliday, 1967; 1985), "theme-focus" (Quirk *et al.*, 1985), "Referent+Proposition" (Keenan and Schieffelin, 1976a; 1976b), "background+assertion" (Givon, 1979), etc. Behind these confusing terms I suppose there to be the following two contrastive ideas about discourse and function: 1) the idea that since the basic functional-grammatical unit is a sentence (or a clause) and discourse is the coherence of these units, the function of discourse is reduced to that of the subordinate units it is composed of; and 2) that discourse is in itself a functional unit, i.e. an utterance (or a series of utterances) that comprises a message (or a series of messages), and its internal structure is analyzed with regard to development of messages, not of clauses or sentences. The first conception is Halliday's and Quirk *et al.*'s, the second Keenan and Schieffelin's and Givon's.

In Halliday's theory, a clause is the fundamental unit which is always divided into Theme and Rheme, thus every clause, dependent or independent, has its thematic component (the character Theme takes varying

with the category it belongs to). Conversely, when discourse is primarily regarded as a message which includes its own topical element, a clause or a sentence composing the message does not necessarily have such a constituent in itself. Givón (1979) claims:

. . . in human language live discourse tends to be *multipositional*, with the subject-topic argument serving as the *continuity point*, the *leitmotif*, the common thread about which humans make assertions in multipositional chains (p.66).

Li and Thompson (1976), clearly distinguishing functional properties from formal properties, claim that one of the characteristics of 'topic' (as opposed to 'subject') is that "it need not be an argument of a predicative constituent" (p.461).

These differences can be ascribed to the differences in methodology; that is, whether function is always analyzed in correlation with form or it is examined independently of form. Although the former makes it much easier to formulate the structure analyzed, the analysis itself is very difficult in the case of 'unplanned discourse' (Ochs, 1979), because clauses and sentences in it are often opaque and incomplete. On the other hand, the latter has the possibility of arbitrary decomposition in spite of being a better procedure for unplanned discourse. I have no intention to insist on either view; rather I wish to make the most of the merits of both sides in the discussion that follows.

## 1.2 Keenan and Schieffelin's Conception of Topic

In order to see how unplanned discourse has been dealt with in regard to 'topic' I will summarize Keenan and Schieffelin's claim by way of illustration. As mentioned earlier, for Keenan and Schieffelin (1976b) topic is, without presupposing a clause or a sentence, defined in the course of speech—how it is *initiated*, *sustained*, and *dropped* in discourse. From this viewpoint they classify "Discourse Topic" (in their terminology<sup>2)</sup>) into the following four sets: 1) *Collaborating Discourse Topic*, which is maintained through plural utterances, appears in such types of discourse as *question-answer pair* and *repetition*:

- (1) a. Mother: (trying to put too large diaper on doll, holding diaper on) Well we can't hold it on like that. what do we need? Hmm? What do we need for the diaper?  
 b. Allison: pin/  
 c. Mother: pin. Where are the pins?  
 d. Allison: home/

The first speaker sets up the discourse topic ('we need something for the diaper') in (1a) by describing the problem she faces and asks the interlocutor questions relevant to it. In (1b) the second speaker replies to the questions, which sustains the topic. In this way they 'collaborate' on the discourse.

2) *Incorporating Discourse Topic* is drawn out of the preceding utterance. Again in example (1), based on the first topic set up in (1a) and (1b) the second topic is established ('The pins are somewhere.'). which can be seen from the first speaker's restatement and relevant question in (1c). This second topic is *Incorporating Discourse Topic*, which 'incorporates' the previous utterance. Thus, *Collaborating Discourse Topic* and *Incorporating Discourse Topic* lead to continuous discourse.

By 3) *Re-introducing Discourse Topic* Keenan and Schieffelin mean the topic that existed before the preceding utterance and is presented again into the current context. Adult speakers often add to it such idiomatic phrases as "concerning", "as for", "as far as . . . is concerned/goes", or metalinguistic expressions such as "getting back to", "like you said before".

In contrast to this, 4) *Introducing Discourse Topic* is a topic that is brought into the discourse for the first time and is not inferable from the previous context. When this kind of topic is introduced, there occurs a break that suggests to the listener that the hitherto sustained topic may be changed, or such explicit metalinguistic expressions appear as "I am sorry to change the subject but . . .", "Not to change the subject

but . . .". Both *Re-introducing Discourse Topic* and *Introducing Discourse Topic* lead to discontinuous discourse.

The appropriateness of this arrangement itself and its use in the analysis of left dislocation will be examined in section 2. 2.

## 2.1 General Notions of Left Dislocation

In this section I will discuss the functional properties of left dislocation<sup>3)</sup> in detail through analyzing examples found in spoken and written texts. Prior to the analysis it is necessary to delimit the variation of this construction. Left dislocation and its variants generally present the format of Referent+Proposition (REF+PROP hereafter; Keenan and Schieffelin's terminology), which will be sorted into the following four groups:

- (2) a. REF(bare form) + PROP(coreferential pronoun included)
- b. REF(bare form) + PROP(no coreferential pronoun incl.)
- c. REF(with additional element) + PROP(coreferential pronoun incl.)
- d. REF(with additional element) + PROP(no coreferential pronoun incl.)

These will be exemplified by the following sentences respectively:

- (3) a. John/Children, I must bring him/them up.
- b. John/Children, I must prepare meals.<sup>4)</sup>
- c. As for John/children, I must bring him/them up.
- d. As for John/children, I must prepare meals.<sup>5)</sup>

The left dislocation rule formulated by Ross (1967) is shown in (2a); type (2c) is also a typical left dislocation in that PROP includes a coreferential pronoun with REF, as is dealt with in Gundel (1977). Rodman (1974) and Keenan and Schieffelin (1976a) count as variants of left dislocation (2b) and (2d) which exclude coreferential pronouns from PROPs (but relate PROPs to REFs semantically and/or pragmatically).

Concerning the function of this construction Keenan and Schieffelin (1976a) claim that in general "the speaker brings a referent into the foreground of the listener's consciousness" (p.242), and that because the addresser directs the addressee's attention to REF and makes predication of it in the following PROP, it is appropriate to say that left dislocation is in itself a discourse rather than a syntactic unit.

Keenan and Schieffelin (1976b) also assert that REFs with subsidiary elements (2c) and (2d), and without these (2a) and (2b) differ in distribution. That is to say, an NP preceded by "as for" or "concerning" plays the part of a reintroducing topic, whereas a bare NP is less restricted in performance so that it may behave both as a reintroducing topic and as an introducing topic. I must point out, however, that such phrases as "you know", "remember", "look at" only play a role of presenting novel topics.

More important is the problem of register. Ochs (1979) claims that left dislocation often appears in everyday conversation held among intimates but seldom occurs in well planned texts such as monographs or articles in newspapers and magazines. Therefore I assume that prescriptive grammar prohibits use of this construction (e.g. Swan, 1980). Note, however, that its acceptability greatly depends on whether REF accompanies any additional constituent or not, and if it does, what kind of expression it is.

## 2.2 Left Dislocation in Relation to Topic and Discourse Continuity

Now I will discuss left dislocation in connection with topic and discourse continuity/discontinuity, as mentioned in section 1. 2. Keenan and Schieffelin (1976a) argue that this construction is generally used to introduce a new referent or to reintroduce a referent that appeared in the preceding discourse:

- (4) (Adolescents discussing people who do not like one another)

K: Uh *Pat McGee*(REF). I don't know if you know *him*, he-he lives in//Palisades(PROP).

J: I know him real well as a matter of fa(hh) (he's) one of my best friends

- (5) K: An' I got *a red sweater*, an' a white one, an' a blue one, an' a yellow one, an' a couple other sweaters, you know, And uh my sister LOVES borrowing my sweaters because they're pullovers, you know, an' she c'n wear a blouse under'em an' she thinks "Well this is great" (pause)

K: An' so *my RED sweater*(REF), I haven't seen *it* since I got it(PROP).

They further categorize the function of left dislocation into three types, which are 1)*alternatives*, 2)*particular cases*, and 3)*special emphasis*. The first type, *alternatives*, appears when the speaker introduces a referent that is formally different from, although semantically related to, the referent mentioned earlier in the discourse. For instance:

- (6) (Adolescents discussing how parents treat them)

K: Yeah// yeah! No matter how old// you are

L: Yeah. Mh hm

L: *Parents* don't understand. But all *grownups*(REF), w-*they* do it to kids(PROP). Whether they're your own or not.

The function of the second type, *particular cases*, is to bring in a referent that specifies the current topic. That is, it works 1)not merely to refer to a specific case of some general topic, 2)but to reconfirm the subject under discussion. The first of these functions is exemplified by (4) and the second one by (5).

The third and last type, *special emphasis*, is employed when the speaker reinforces the present topic of the discourse. For example:

- (7) (Discussing younger siblings)

L: Y'know *some of 'em* are darmn tall and goodlooking *they* could pass for (t)-nineteen.//A twelve year old guy comes over I say who's y-older brother is he? He's in the A7.

R: But *they* don't-

R: But *they* don't have a brain to go with it hehhh

L: *These kids*(REF) I don't believe *it they're* six foot(PROP).

They say that this type occurs infrequently.

Although Keenan and Schieffelin do not mention it, it is quite relevant to point out that all the REFs in these left-dislocated examples have synecdochical or part-whole relations to the preceding referents. In example (6) the REF *grownups* is a superordinate word to its relevant antecedent *parents*. In (7), since *some of 'em* and *they* indicate the younger brothers of the participants in the conversation, *kids* in the REF is superordinate to these items. Inversely, in (4), because *Pat McGee* is cited as one of the "people who do not like one another" it is a hyponym of the set concept. The same explanation can be offered for the following instance:

- (8) I played with Mickey Mantle and now I'm playing with Willie Mays. People always recognize them. *Yogi Berra*(REF), people always recognize *him*(PROP).

(S. Terkel, *Working*; italics and parentheses mine)

The reason for this is that *Yogi Berra* is presented as a member of the set of "the players the speaker has played with". As for (5), though the REF *my RED sweater* is apparently identical with *a red sweater* mentioned previously, it cannot be replaced by a pronoun. This is because it is merely one of the sweaters the speaker refers to so that it cannot be specified by itself. In this sense (5) is the same case as (4).

What I wish to claim is that the REF of left dislocation, whether it operates as an introducing topic or as a reintroducing topic, is motivated by the preceding discourse; or rather, that all utterances are essentially motivated in some way or other by their previous context (cf. Quirk *et al.*, 1985: 1421ff.). If this is so,

discontinuity in discourse must be considered in a restricted sense. Thus, whereas a referent newly introduced into discourse is discontinuous in the sense that it triggers a different utterance from those which precede, it still is continuous in that it bears some relation to the previous context. Part-whole relationship is especially common.

Compare another instance:

- (9) Jim: No, ma'am. All these fuses look okay to me.  
 Amanda: Tom!  
 Tom: Yes, Mother?  
 Amanda: *That light bill I gave you several days ago.*(REF<sub>1</sub>) *The one I told you we got the*  
*notices about?*(REF<sub>2</sub>)  
 Tom: Oh. —Yeah.  
 Amanda: You didn't neglect to pay *it* by any chance?(PROP)  
 Tom: Why, I—  
 (T. Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*; italics and parentheses mine)

This fragment shows that while *Amanda* is wondering why the light was suddenly put out the reason for it flashes into her mind. Thus, although the story about the 'light bill' is not told previously, its background has already been provided. In this sense, the REFs do not introduce an entirely new discourse. The significant thing is that discourse continuity should be considered not at only one level, as is dealt with in Keenan and Schieffelin (1976b), but at plural levels. It is, therefore, very probable that the same discourse could be discontinuous from the viewpoint of 'subordinate topic' and continuous from the standpoint of 'superordinate topic' or 'hypertopic'.

Let us take (4) again. If we look at the discourse that follows *Pat McGee* from that topic then it is discontinuous, whereas the same discourse is continuous if we view it from the standpoint of the hitherto maintained hypertopic, that is, "people who do not like one another". The same applies to (5) and (8), the superordinate topic being "the sweaters I have got" and "the players I have played with", respectively.

It should be noticed that hypertopics are not necessarily superordinate words. In examples (6) and (7), the part-whole relation of the REFs to their preceding items is opposite to the cases above, as mentioned earlier. This is true in the lexical sense. But in the discourse context the REFs work so as to reinforce the hypertopics, not to provide their superordinates. In (6) the REF *grownups* means the ones who behave like parents; in (7) the REF, modified by the determiner *these*, becomes coreferential with *some of 'em /they*.

The topic-comment pattern does not necessarily present itself in the form of left dislocation but this is a typical example of the pattern. Conversely, left dislocation (REF+PROP), at least from the discourse-functional point of view, always shows the topic-comment pattern, which explains Keenan and Schieffelin's claim that the construction itself is a discourse.

### 2.3 Left Dislocation in Relation to Given/New Information

In the rest of the paper I wish to reconsider the problem from the viewpoint of 'given/new information'. As I have discussed this concept elsewhere (Sato, 1988), here I confine my remarks to the matter in connection with the specific construction.

When REF is 'new' information in the sense that it has not appeared in the preceding context, it indicates that it is set up as a novel topic (which will be superordinate or subordinate). But if the referent is not something the listener can identify, in other words, it is not 'shared knowledge' (Prince, 1981), then it does not qualify as REF. This is shown by the inacceptability of specific indefinite NPs:

- (10) a. The man, I saw him yesterday.  
b. \*A man, I saw him yesterday. (Givon, 1979)

The pragmatic reason for this is that the utterance-initial position appropriate for 'known' information hinders the unidentified referent from being introduced smoothly. However, in the case of generic indefinite NPs, which essentially need not identify their referents, they can be left-dislocated if they are not shared knowledge, as long as the Cooperative Principle concerning Relation (Grice, 1975) is observed:

- (11) a. Speaking of horses, have you seen Dick's big roan?  
b. Oh students, I've got to read papers, evaluate exams, assign final grades, and flunk out the non-streakers. (Rodman, 1974)

It must be noted that in (11a) REF accompanies an additional constituent which suggests that REF has already been mentioned in discourse. This does not mean, however, that REF is shared knowledge, because it says nothing about any specific horse(s); it still remains as general knowledge. In short, whether REF is 'cohesive' (Halliday, 1976; Quirk *et al.*, 1985) with discourse is one thing; whether REF is shared by communicators is another.

When REF is 'given' information in the sense that it has already appeared in discourse, it means that it is a reestablished topic. If REF is both coreferential and formally identical with the preceding topic, it can hardly be acceptable:

- (12) a. What can you tell me about John?  
\*John, Mary kissed him. (Rodman, 1974)  
b. What happened to Tom?  
?Tom, he left.<sup>6)</sup> (Keenan and Schieffelin, 1976a)

This can be attributed to the violation of one of the maxims of Quantity, namely, "Do not make your contribution more informative than is required" (Grice, 1975: 45). However, if the speaker intends to emphasize the referent with surplus information, he or she may use left dislocation (with REF emphatic in form). This is instanced by example (8).

And, therefore, when REF appears in the form of anaphoric pronoun then stress is always placed on it:

- (13) A: I heard you read Japanese literature. Do you like *Soseki*?  
B: Well, generally I like modern Japanese literature, but HIM/as for HIM, I don't really like him.

### 3 Conclusion

Functional concepts are often said to be vague and ambiguous. The terms 'topic' and 'given/new information' are not at all exceptions. I wonder, however, if human language, the object of the examination, is so strict with itself. If it is, in the final analysis, nothing but an accumulation of speech, made of various errors and hesitations which Chomsky thought it possible to exclude, then a rigid method might conversely render the object opaque. Functionalism is, in that sense, a superior methodology.

I have considered aspects of a specific left dislocation construction from this point of view. The important result is that REF which operates as a topic plays a double role with regard to discourse, hence the hierarchy of topic. Further research is to be conducted along this line.

### Notes

- 1) Throughout this paper references follow the style suggested by the editors of the Bulletin of Mukogawa Women's University.
- 2) They define Discourse Topic in the form of a proposition. I doubt its necessity, not only because it is rare to find it in its form in actual discourse, but because it is too artificial when it appears just as an NP.

- 3) Left dislocation was first presented by Ross (1967) in the form of a transformational rule. However, since my concern here is not the generative procedure for the construction but the function in discourse of the generated structure (if it be generated), I will use the term as a resultant construction.
- 4) It must be noticed that REF is not vocative; thus (3a) and (3b) are not addressed to *John* or *children*. Nor is it a confirmatory phrase, so that it is not pronounced with a rising intonation.
- 5) In actual utterances, such combinations of REF with PROP is possible when, as can happen, there is a "Background PROP" (Keenan and Schieffelin, 1976a) expressed by e.g. *if*-clauses, or addressee's 'phatic' signals that show his/her identification of the referent (e.g. "oh", "yeah") between REF and PROP.
- 6) If *John* or *Tom* were used in order to confirm the topic with a rising contour, it would be fully acceptable. However we usually don't count that case as a left dislocation. See note 4.

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