

Disentangling topicality effects

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Abstract

This paper introduces the special issue Disentangling Topicality Effects. The contributions are the result of a selection from the homonymous workshop organized at the 55th meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea, held in Bucharest on 25–26 August 2022. They offer empirical analyses of topic markers or topic-related constructions with the aim of critically exploring their functions and the relation of the latter to the concept of topic. Before analytically presenting the specific goals and results of each paper, we provide an overview of the category of topic. Without purporting to be exhaustive, we highlight the theoretical evolution of the concept, as well as some of the gaps that remain in its description, with the hope that this will contribute to a broader scholarly debate on the subject.

Keywords: topic; topic related constructions; corpus-based; cross-linguistic; information structure.

1. Origin and Aims

This volume represents our engagement with what we hope will become a sustained and evolving dialogue on the concept of topic. At the workshop Disentangling Topicality Effects held in Bucharest on 25–26 August 2022, in the frame of the 55th meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea, we invited scholars from different theoretical and methodological backgrounds to examine phenomena commonly dubbed “topical”. Our declared theoretical aim was to discuss whether and to what extent the traditional concept of topic is theoretically and empirically relevant for the study of spoken and written discourse. The empirical path suggested was the

description of functions of constructions traditionally related to the concept of topic from a corpus-based, and/or interactional, cross-linguistic or typological view, and the interrelation between these functions and the notion of topicality. The special issue is the result of a selection of the workshop contributions.

This introduction sets the ground for the special issue, discussing the different views and definitions of topicality. Without claiming to be exhaustive, we address the role of the concept of topic in linguistic analysis and theory (section 2) and its recent discussions (section 3), situating topicality in the light of the current advances in the study of relevant phenomena across typologically and genealogically diverse languages (section 4). We then detail (section 5) the aims and scope of the studies offered in this volume, which critically discuss the concept from different theoretical perspectives (from textual to interactional and prosodic based, but grounded in actual data), considering different topic-related structures (such as Left Dislocations, Inversions and Allocutives) and languages of use (namely, English, Spanish and Italian, Mandarin Chinese, Anal Naga and American Sign Language).¹ We conclude by highlighting perspectives that may contribute to an ongoing dialogue on the concept of topic (section 6).

2. Classic definitions and core traits

The notion of topic is used broadly in linguistic description, analysis, and theory. It is intuitively appealing and provides a convenient label for a large array of language-specific markers and structures. Debates on how to approach topicality and to define topics were particularly salient from the late 1960s to the late 1990s (Firbas 1964; Gundel 1974; Li 1976; Haiman 1978; Reinhart 1981; Lambrecht 1981; 1994; Vallduví & Engdahl 1996, to name a few). Rather than providing an overview of this debate, we critically examine the approaches taken thus far to the relationship between the classic notion of topic and some of its core properties.

In the most intuitive view, speakers select a referent from the relevant entities and organize their message from the perspective of this referent. This rationale underlies the most widespread view of topicality as an *aboutness* relationship between a referent and the proposition, and an according interpretation of a sentence constituent

¹ English: eng, Indo-European, Germanic; Spanish, spa, Indo-European, Italic; Italian: ita, Indo-European, Italic; Mandarin Chinese: cnm; Sino-Tibetan/Trans-Himalayan, Sinitic; Anal Naga: anm; Sino-Tibetan/Trans-Himalayan, South-Central, India; American Sign Language: ase, Sign Language.

(typically an NP). This aboutness-definition persists in literature for decades (Hornby 1971; Kuno 1972; Reinhart 1981; Gundel 1988; Lambrecht 2000; Endriss 2009; Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2011). The origins of the idea can be traced to Plato and Aristotle's *onoma* and *rhema* splitting of the logos (Matić 2022), and its evolution into a "psychological subject" in the 19th century thinking (von Heusinger 2002). Gundel's definition (1988) was particularly influential in the aboutness-definition trend: "An entity, E, is the topic of a sentence, S, iff in using S the speaker intends to increase the addressee's knowledge about, request information about, or otherwise get the addressee to act with respect to E." (Gundel 1988: 210).

Hence, (1) singles out Jane and describes how a state of affairs refers to her, (2) selects the addressee as such an entity, and (3) selects Jane's English [skills] instead.

- (1) Jane speaks English better than you.
- (2) You don't speak English as good as Jane.
- (3) Jane's English is better than yours.

In the aboutness approach to the definition of topic, what is being said about Jane, the addressee, or Jane's English skills is described as the Comment of the proposition. Propositions are indeed typically (but not inherently) arranged into a topic-comment structure.

Another intuitively appealing and classical approach to topic is its definition as the *departure point of the proposition*. Starting with the Prague school tradition (Firbas 1992) in which the concept of theme was understood functionally, it is Halliday (1985) to redefine the theme as the starting point, which is the element that "the speaker selects for 'grounding'" their message (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 58). In this framework, theme replaces the notion of a "psychological subject" (p. 56), and as such appears to be the counterpart of topic. However, it is a broader notion that encompasses diverse starting points, in addition to "topical themes" (p. 79). It includes a variety of structures that frame the interpretation of the message, such as modal adjuncts ('frankly', 'I presume' etc.), conjunctive items ('actually', 'and then'), vocatives (see also Lambrecht 1996 on vocatives as topics; cf. also Portner 2007), imperative verbs, and more.

Departure points also include frame-setters, such as locative, temporal, conditional and other expressions illustrated in (4). These are closely associated with the topical role, and some of them were explicitly argued to be a type of topics, as is famously

the case with conditionals (Haiman 1978). Similarly to “aboutness”-topics, they reflect different aspects of the foundation laying role of theme in the Prague school approach.

(4)

- a. **On Wednesday afternoon**, that hope was dashed.
- b. **B. and O. J., in the neighbouring village of Kippel**, were getting their chimney fixed.²

A range of initial, pre-clausal, and syntactically detached structures (such as *as for*, *concerning X*, left-detachment) is used for additional closely related but often highly specific functions, related to aboutness, frame-setting, or discourse structuring (‘Chinese-style’ or dangling topics in Chafe 1976; Repp 2011). The fact that this kind of structure is prominent in e.g. Mandarin, as illustrated in (5), resulted in the conceptualization of topic as a syntactic category in such languages (LaPolla 2009).

(5) Mandarin Chinese (Chen 1996)

Wù-jǐǎ Niǔyue zuì guì.

thing-price New.York most expensive

‘As for the price of things, New York is the most expensive.’

In addition to aboutness, communicative dynamism, position and syntactic iconicity, classical definitions of topic typically identify other *core traits*, such as the presupposition of the semantic content, its relevance within the overall utterance, all linked to the referentiality, definiteness, identifiability, and givenness of the topic constituent. The risk of aligning these categories too closely with the concept of topic is that the properties associated with topicality become conflated with the concept itself. Consider, for instance, the case of *givenness*.

The topic–comment partition of utterances has been traditionally linked to the idea that sentences are divided into old-new information parts (Givón 1983); some views even regarded the two as identical (Gundel 1974). However, it is crucial to identify at least two orthogonal dimensions within the notion of givenness (such as the Prague School and Halliday’s Functional Grammar, see LaPolla 2019 for a concise historical

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/resources/idd-c7f929de-96a9-45e5-b1bb-31de82fce72d>, accessed June 2, 2025

overview and discussion). The particularly relevant distinction is between the contextual givenness of a referent or information accessibility in Ariel's (1990) framework) on the one hand, and on the other hand, the role of the referent/information in the proposition, such as its back- vs. foregrounding. The two do not necessarily overlap, as Reinhart's (1981: 72) famous (6) illustrates.

- (6) A: Who did Felix praise?
B: **Felix** praised HIMSELF.

Both 'Felix' and 'himself' in B's response refer to the same person, and this referent is equally given for both. However, while the referent's role as the praising person is expected, predictable, and backgrounded, his identity as the person being praised is novel and foregrounded. Consequently, we must distinguish between the givenness of information and its role in the proposition. This distinction is conceptualized by Lambrecht as the difference between the pragmatic status (whether the referent is mentioned in the previous text) and its pragmatic role in the proposition (whether it is used as the referent the proposition is about (the topic), or an update about such a referent (the comment)). Given referents can constitute part of the updating information if their relationship to the proposition is not previously known, as in (6). And topics can be contextually new, as for example commonly happens in newspaper reports such as the opening of an article in (7).

- (7) **The village of Blatten** has stood for centuries, then in seconds it was gone.
Scientists monitoring the Nesthorn mountain above the village in recent weeks saw that parts of it had begun to crumble, and fall on to the Birch glacier, putting enormous pressure on the ice.³

To address this phenomenon, Lambrecht (1994) distinguishes between established topics (or *ratified* in later literature, e.g. Lambrecht & Michaelis 1998) and non-established ones. The former are referents expected to function as topics in the current discourse stage, as is the case with Felix in B's answer in (6). The latter are new referents, whose topical function is unexpected, as are the topics in (7). Similarly, in spoken language, although topics are commonly regarded as given (Chafe 1994), this

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/resources/idt-c7f929de-96a9-45e5-b1bb-31de82fce72d>, accessed June 2, 2025

is not necessarily the case. Gundel (1988) proposes familiarity, in the sense of an existing memory representation, as a felicity condition on topics. However, Endriss (2009) provides an extensive discussion of indefinite topics for German. In conclusion, givenness, along with the other traits discussed above, does not by itself suffice to define the concept of topic, even though each tends to characterise topical information.

Finally, it must be added that the information structural notion of topicality discussed here is distinct from and must not be confounded with discourse-level topicality. Following Givón (1983), discourse topics are defined as a relative salience of a referent in multi-sentential sequences, as judged by its recurrent mention. This characteristic does not have direct relationship to information structuring, and new discourse topics (referents that end up being salient in subsequent text) are often introduced in the comment part of the sentence.

3. Refining the definition of topic and its core traits – is this sufficient?

Various recent approaches, although not all, agree on the aboutness effects produced by sentence topics, but the actual definitions and the proposed sources of this interpretation differ. Many frameworks take the cognitive approach to topicality, regarding topic as a “cognitive category” (e.g. Krifka & Musan 2012: 5) or as a direct reflection of a dedicated cognitive process. Lambrecht (1994) posits the aboutness relation as a primitive notion through which topicality is defined, rooting it in admittedly vague Strawson’s (1964) usage of “about” and “topic” in his “Principle of Relevance”, for Lambrecht (1994), it is a universal pragmatic category that corresponds to the “mental representation” of a referent as having an aboutness relationship to the proposition. Unsatisfied with treating “aboutness” as a basic analytic notion, other approaches postulate a cognitive machinery from which this interpretation is derived. The common solution is describing human information processing and memories consisting of cognitive “indexes”, “addresses” or “folders” where new information is stored and through which information is assessed. In this interpretation, the aboutness relationship is a byproduct of the indexation procedure. These frameworks originate in the analyses of Reinhart (1981) and Heim (1983), and are developed in an explicitly cognitive perspective in follow up research (Vallduví 1994; Portner & Yabushita 1998; Erteschik-Shir 1997). Searle’s (1969: ch. 4) idea to regard referring as a special type of speech act paved the way for the according view of topicality. In these approaches, topics represent a separate communicative action

of selecting a referent, announcing its status as a relevant discourse file, and committing to address it in the subsequent discourse. This is suggested by Repp (2011) for left-detached structures, and developed by Endriss (2009) more generally with the formalism of cognitive addresses. For Portner (2007), topical function is a performative instruction “my cognitive representation of X is active”, with the aboutness effect being an outcome of that. However, the indexation, folder, or address-based model of cognition is rooted in the linguistic topic-comment model, postulating cognitive models in a way that would match this partition. As a result, it is no surprise that it accounts for linguistic phenomena from which it is directly derived. With no independent cognitive evidence for such mechanisms, it provides no parsimonious explanation for the aboutness interpretation, but rather transfers the burden of explanation to a more sophisticated, idiosyncratic, and otherwise unattested cognitive apparatus.

Non-cognitive definitions approach topics through a combination of structural and functional characteristics. Firbas partitions the theme, defined through its position, into a scale of functions “arranged in accordance with a gradual rise in CD [Communicative Dynamism]” (1992: 66). The semantic-pragmatic mapping of functions like “aboutness” or “frame-setting” is fitted within this accurately grained domain (e.g. Settings; Bearer of Quality etc.). The L-AcT methodology (Cresti & Moneglia 2018) is based on the combination of structural, prosodic, and semantic-pragmatic properties of the utterance in spoken language. Reference units are identified in the flow of speech and segmented through prosodic breaks relevant to perception (Swerts 1997). Once the reference unit is identified, it can be segmented further into information units, with a one-to-one correlation between information units and prosodic units. The unit of Topic is characterized by its initial position and non-terminating intonation contour, and has the function of selecting a domain of pragmatic relevance for the illocution. It supplies the semantic and cognitive representations to which the Comment is referred; Without the Topic unit, the utterance necessarily refers to the contextual domain.

Additional differences are found in the assumption regarding the number of topics necessary or possible for a proposition. One view assumes that each proposition has a single topic, the address through which the proposition is assessed (Reinhart 1981). A different, and probably a more widespread view, suggests that a proposition can provide information with respect to a relationship between two topics, as is the case in the second clause in the response in (8) (Lambrecht 1994: 150).

(8) Q: What ever became of John?

A: **He** married ROSA, but **he** didn't really LOVE **her**.

A similar position is argued for example by Erteschik-Shir (1997). The notions of tail (Vallduví 1994) and secondary topic (Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2011) were developed specifically for the analysis of information that has topical properties but is additional to the primary (typically clause-initial) topic. In addition, some frameworks accept propositions that have no topic, as is the case withthetic constructions dubbed by Lambrecht (1994) accordingly “all-focus” sentences. However, following Strawson (1964), Erteschik-Shir (1997: 44) defines topics as referents through which the proposition is assigned truth conditions. As a result, in this framework, topic-less propositions would lack truth-conditions. To solve this issue, Erteschik-Shir attributes them a “stage topic” (a discourse specified “here-and-now”). However, this kind of topic would be available for each proposition in the discourse, and resorting to it only in cases where theoretical assumptions require that to salvage the theory is problematic.

Against this landscape of frameworks that define topics as a core part of proposition structure and argue for its cognitive nature, some approaches in the 1990s questioned the validity of the notion and its necessity (Tomlin 1995; Roberts 1996; Gómez-González 1997). The arguments for the latter views are presented in Section 4. However, it seems that the debate has largely settled down since – without answering the concerns raised by these views. Instead, there has been a sustained interest in language-specific analyses of topicality, topic-markers, refined examination of topic properties, and the typology of topic expression up to these days (e.g. Maslova & Bernini 2006; Vydrina 2020; Wälchli 2022 among many others), with occasional book-sized discussions on the definition, types, and analysis of the notion (Endriss 2009). As we shall see in the following, corpus-based investigations of topic-like markers and structures suggest that using a unifying definition of topic risks to over-interpret or under-interpret the data.

4. Linguistic expression of topic core traits – or, what is marked?

On par with other pragmatic categories, such as accessibility or focus, topicality is regarded across the abovementioned approaches as a universal property of cognition or discourse. It is not a linguistic category or a grammatical notion, but its prominent and universal role in human communication suggests that languages are likely to

evolve means for its expression (e.g. Krifka & Musan 2012: 5). The literature on the *linguistic expression of topical information* (often not distinguished properly from the information itself, and similarly called topic) in specific languages is abundant, and a broad range of diverse language-specific markers and constructions have been analyzed as topic-marking (e.g. van der Wal 2015). However, in none of the known cases does the marking map on topicality directly, so that all and only the topical constituents are flagged accordingly. Indeed, some argue that the relationship between information structure and grammar is indirect, with grammatical markers merely cuing the pragmatic categories (Féry 2007).

Early efficiency-based considerations assumed that since the primary goal of an utterance is to communicate new information, it is the constituents that violate this expectation and provide no update that should be flagged (McNally 1998). Indeed, this assumption fits languages where given information tends to remain unexpressed (“radical pro-drop” in some frameworks), as is the case in the East-Asian Sprachbund (Tao 1996; Matsumoto 2003). At first sight, this view appears to violate the situation in well-studied Western languages, such as English or German (deu, Indo-European, Germanic), where established topics (i.e. given referents, whose topical status is predictable) are expressed by reduced, poorly articulated constituents (e.g. de-accented pronouns), while new information is marked by an accent (Baumann & Schumacher 2011). However, in line with this view, the de-accenting can be analyzed as the dedicated marking of established topicality, with the accent being the default marking when this is not the case (Lambrecht 1994: 99; Schwarzschild 1999). We are not aware of proposals for a consistent marking of established topics otherwise.

Explicit marking typically applies to specific kinds of topics within designated discourse conditions. The conditions and the functions in the discourse associated with the marking are often so specific, that some approaches revise the goals of their study to an exploration of the discourse functions of the specific constructions, such as left detachment, assuming that those are “not necessarily related to the theme–rheme dichotomy” (Netz & Kuzar 2007: 307). The strategies ascribed the topic-marking role are commonly morphological, syntactic, and in some languages prosodic. Commonly, a few options are combined: for example, a relevant morphologically or prosodically marked constituent is additionally expected to occur in the clause-initial position, already associated with topics.

Syntactic position is a cross-linguistically salient characteristic associated with topicality or attributed the topic-marking role. An initial, pre-comment field – if filled

– was linked directly to the topic-expressing function in Mandarin, and to the clause-final position in Tagalog (tgl, Austronesian, Malayo-Polynesian) (LaPolla 2019). While the former option represents a typologically nearly omnipresent tendency, the latter is rather exceptional (cf. also Mithun 1984). In languages with a flexible constituent order, such as Slavonic or German (Firbas 1992), the initial field is also associated with the backgrounding, frame-setting, and topical function. Similar characteristics are also applicable to languages with an otherwise strict constituent order, as is well studied for English (Birner & Ward 1998). Moreover, a topicality-based analysis is also implemented for constituent order more generally, for example accounting for the OV-order in Russian (rus, Indo-European, Slavic) instead of the more frequent VO, including cases where the initial slot is already filled by a topical subject (Dyakonova 2009: 99).

However, closer inspection reveals that topicality is insufficient to describe the observed distributions of the constituent order. For example, the combination of givenness, definiteness, and pronominality – analyzed jointly as evidence for topicality – accounts for around 60% of fronted objects in written Swedish (swe, Indo-European, Germanic) (Hörberg 2018). In the rest of the cases, the structure can have other and diverse discourse effects. The final interpretation can be driven directly by the assessment of referents' pragmatic status, combined with language-specific discourse structuring options. Consequently, the aboutness interpretation can actually be a byproduct of the initial position, rather than the factor underlying this choice. Similarly, the OV order in Russian is better accounted for by accessibility, with topical-like interpretations being merely a potential byproduct thereof (Seržant et al. *forth.*). Furthermore, the initial subject position in English, closely associated with topicality, was proposed to reflect directly the basic cognitive factor of attention (Tomlin 1995), with topicality being an epiphenomenal interpretive product unneeded for the analysis.

Similar questions apply for left detached structures, such as left dislocation and hanging topics, commonly regarded as topicalizing constructions (Maslova & Bernini 2006). In left dislocation, a clause-external constituent is followed by a clause that cross-refers to the same entity, for example by a resumptive pronouns, as in (9). Hanging topics have no syntactic cross-reference, and the initial constituent provides an interpretation frame for the clause, as in (10).

(9) (Haselow 2017: 108)

Your friend_i here, does she_i doodle a lot?

(10) (Lambrecht 1994: 193)

Other languages, you don't just have straight tones like that.

Various proposals see such structures as announcing the topic for the subsequent proposition, and as revealing fine aspects of cognitive information processing. In particular, they are analyzed as evidence for the limitations of the cognitive abilities to activate a new referent and use it as the topic simultaneously (Lambrecht 1994: 185; Gregory & Michaelis 2001; Kerr 2014). However, since Prince (1998) the research explores the idea that the structures have in fact designated discourse-structuring functions. The latter view was more recently developed in textual and interactional approaches, as studies identify a range of functions belonging to the domains of relevance, content-management (contrast, listing), interaction (turn-taking, sequence organization), and specific actions (assessment, disagreement) (Pekarek-Doehler & De Stefani & Horlacher 2015 for French, Cimmino 2023 for Italian and English).

Furthermore, Ozerov (2024) proposes for spontaneous Hebrew (heb, Afro-Asiatic, Semitic) that it is the detached NP alone that performs the relevant functions: it is the locus of turn-taking where cut offs typically occur, it can be used separately for attention alignment before the rest of the discourse is planned, or it can recycle previous discourse for creating discourse cohesion. Only a third of such detached NPs are continued with a clause, suggesting that it is erroneous to select these as a conventionalized construction, while in fact they are compositional constructs of an NP and the clause, each performing a separate function. Consequently, although the initial NPs typically have a vague aboutness interpretation with respect to the optional subsequent clause, this is again a byproduct of the relevance principle, rather than an underlying motivation for the construction.

Another marking strategy associated with topical constituents is so called “topical” particles. Particularly abundant research on this phenomenon is available for Korean (kor, Koreanic) and Japanese (jpn, Japonic) (Lee 2007; Vermeulen 2009; Shimojo 2016; Nakagawa 2020), but they are widespread in many other Asian languages (Boro 2021) and cross-linguistically (Wälchli 2022). The marked constituents are not just topics, but a special kind thereof, and a precise analysis of the marking remains

elusive even for well-studied languages. For example, Japanese *wa* marks frame-setters of various kinds, semi-active, inferable (as in 11) or contrastive topics (Nakagawa 2020: 124), as well as established topics in discourse shifts (Shimojo 2016).

(11) Japanese (Nakagawa 2020: 108)

‘I guess this is the same for all kinds of jobs, people might call it “dream and reality”,’

gyappu-wa kanari ari-masi-te

gap-wa very exist-PLT-and

‘There is a gap (between what I expected and reality).’

Moreover, although ‘gap’ in (11) obtains a topical reading thanks to its initial position and the marking, the English translation is remarkably a thetic, all-focus statement, with the same information consequently being a part of focus (cf. also Tomioka 2010). This cross-linguistic discrepancy goes against the typical assumption that information structure is a universal property of discourse merely expressed by language-specific means. Addressing the actual distribution of the markers in natural language use prompted some approaches to shift away from their uniform categorization as ‘topical’ that “fall[s] ... short of representing the dynamic and methodic ways in which they are actually used by the participants for a real-time management of ... social interaction” (Morita & K. Kim 2022). Japanese and Korean “topic”-markers are reanalyzed in such studies as linked directly to attention (I. Kim 2015), as categorization means signalling expectation shifts (Tanaka 2015; K. Kim 2021), and as performing specific discourse tasks in defined contexts (Jin & Takagi 2021; Kwon & Rim & K. Kim 2021).

Morphosyntactic marking of topical constituents by dedicated constructions bears some resemblance to the particle marking strategy. This is a strategy known from well-studied languages, including English, and from typologically diverse languages (Abubakari 2021). In English, for example, constructions such as *As for...* and *Concerning ...* are used to introduce new topics (cf. also Repp 2011 for German). The former structure is commonly used as a topicality test, although its function is more specific than topic-marking (Reinhart 1981) and appears to be a specific kind of a discourse structuring device, namely a discourse-shift to address an issue that forms a set with previously addressed issues (Jaeger & Oshima 2002).

As for intonational marking of topics, in addition to the deaccenting discussed above, there was a substantial discussion of a special type of final rises (“B-accents”; L* + H L-H%) as markers of contrastive topics in English (Büring 1997, 1999; Constant 2014). The claims were partly corroborated for spoken German, although the distinction between a new topic accent and the contrastive topic accent was not always straightforward (Riester & Schröder & Baumann 2020). In addition, this intonational pattern and topical structures classically devised as contrastive topic devices is found not only with contrastive topics, but more broadly with contrast foreshadowing, including pairs of contrasted propositions and discourse structuring markers of the kind *on the one hand... on the other hand* (Barth-Weingarten 2009), and contrast on the focal part of the utterance (Cimmino 2024).

In summary, there is a vast array of devices associated with topic marking cross-linguistically. Nonetheless, no known marker maps directly on the topical function or a type thereof. Instead, upon closer examination, the factors driving the distribution of the marking are linked to specific pragmatic factors and discourse structuring functions. Although all the marked constituents exhibit the “aboutness” interpretation, this falls short of characterizing the actual function and usage. The “aboutness” may instead be a byproduct of the identified function, rather than the underlying reason for the marking. In fact, it has been acknowledged but largely overlooked that topicality encompasses a cluster of factors (Jacobs 2001), and thus, the application of a unified concept to a large set of heterogeneous morphosyntactic constructions must be questioned (Gómez-González 1997). These concerns can recall the recent discussions on the conceptual and operational drawbacks of universally defined linguistic categories (Haspelmath 2010; Bickel 2015), resulting in recent renewed debate on the validity of information structural concepts, including topicality (Ozerov 2021).

5. The contributions in this article collection

The six papers collected in this special issue offer empirical analysis of topic markers or topic related constructions, from which a theoretical reflection on the very concept of topic can spring. In line with the main aim of the special issue, the overall goal of each chapter is to disentangle the actual functions of topic-related markers and the discourse nature of topic related phenomena, which have been conflated under the notion of topic in the literature so far. The phenomena taken into account, the

language of study, and the analytical approach adopted in each chapter vary, differently contributing to such goal. Topic markers in American Sign Language, classically described as a topic-prominent language, are analyzed in a corpus-based and discourse perspective allowing for an in-depth reflection on the concept of topic (Janzen). A prosodic-functional approach is adopted in the distinction of allocutives and topics in spontaneous Italian speech, also providing an opportunity to critically examine the category of topic and how it is defined (Cresti). The same prosodic-functional approach is exploited to investigate quantitative and qualitative aspects of topics in a new spontaneous corpus of Mandarin Chinese (Luo). Left dislocation, a classically topic-related construction, is investigated contrastively in spoken Italian, English and Spanish (Cimmino-Saccone) and in an underexplored Trans-Himalayan (Tibeto-Burman) language, Anal Naga (Ozerov), adopting a textual and interactional approach, respectively. Finally, inversion, another structure generally associated with topic-marking, is explored in written English (Dorgeloh), gaining a discourse understating of the phenomenon with implications for the analysis of the information structure of the construction. Irrespective of the language, phenomenon or methodology selected, the analyses provide several starting points for reflection, which, however, can by no means exhaust the subject of disentangling topicality effects. In what follows, details on each paper's main objective and results are provided.

Janzen's contribution focuses on the concept of topic in American Sign Language (ASL). Drawing on examples from a corpus of nine hours of video-recorded dialogic ASL conversations, he argues that a categorical definition of topic in ASL is either not tenable or at least requires significant re-evaluation. The data shows that, while raised eyebrows and backward head tilt are prototypical signals associated with topicality, the dialogic corpus reveals a high degree of variation. Moreover, Janzen suggests that topic marking in ASL may function more as a mechanism for topic shifting, rather than the classical topic-maintaining function. This claim is supported by the observation that topic-marked elements in ASL are those less likely to introduce recoverable or already topical information for the addressee. Importantly, the corpus data further indicate that topic-marked elements are not always characterized by classical topical traits such as givenness, aboutness, emphasis, or even subjecthood. This raises important questions about what parameters are truly core to defining topic as a linguistic category. In conclusion, Janzen hypothesizes that the category of topic may be a "theoretical holdover", and proposes that in ASL, topic-marked elements

may be better analyzed as reference points from which the comment or predication is interpreted (in line with Langacker 2013). In line with the aims of this volume, he advocates for a bottom-up, discourse-centered approach to language description—one that avoids broad generalizations in favor of close, language-specific analysis.

The article by Cresti provides a rich discussion on the category of topic and its definition(s), starting from its comparison to the information unit of Allocutive in Italian spontaneous speech, within the prosodic-functional framework of Language into Act Theory (L-Act). As a peculiar type of vocative, the distribution and lexical filling of Allocutives partially overlaps with the Topic Information Unit, since both can occur before the main illocutionary unit of Comment and can be syntactically realized by bare and proper nouns. Therefore, the two units can be found in the same lexical sequences and word order, which can result in interpretive ambiguity, if prosody and function are not taken into consideration. Based on evidence from a pragmatically annotated corpus, the study contends that the distinction between allocutives and topics is precisely prosodic and functional. From a prosodic point of view, allocutives are poorly perceptually prominent with respect to topics, since they are defocused, while the latter constitute a prefix to a focused unit. From a functional point of view, allocutives are defined as devices of social/empathic cohesion and attention reactivation, while the topic information unit is produced by the speaker as a reference to the addressee for their illocutionary action(s). Moreover, while topics provide an identifiable reference for the addressees, allocutives have a designatory reading. In conclusion, the comparison between the two information units allows the topic definitory traits to be reduced to prosodic and functional aspects. Cresti clarifies that in the model she developed (Language into Act Theory) the topic is disentangled by epiphenomenal characteristics such as givenness, animacy, definiteness, presupposition, relevance, aboutness, and communicative dynamism.

In her contribution, dedicated to inversion in American written English, Dorgeloh reflects on the very concept of topicality in relationship with discourse and genre. Since inversions are generally described as left marked structures highlighting an aboutness topic, the author chooses an unbiased empirical approach to put this assumption to test. Starting with a generally accepted syntactic definition of inversion, the analysis of more than 500 occurrences found in the COCA corpus is conducted with two main points of interest. First, the role of inversion in discourse is accounted for looking at the topic persistence of the NP constituents in the structures rather than at its information packaging. Second, the possible (con)textual variation

in the use is considered, looking at the actual behaviour of the structures in academic vs. fiction genres. The results show that the sentence-final postposed subject rather than the one of the fronted verbal complements is more likely to become discourse topic in all types of inversions, hinting at an understanding of the structure's discourse role as a right rather than a left marked structure. Moreover, differences in the syntactic realization as well as in the nature of the semantic relation between persisting referents can be observed in the two contrasted discourse genres, confirming that narrative texts possess a substantial referential continuity, while academic texts typically build on more implicit semantic relations. All in all, the chapter provides a fine-grained look at topicality effects, arguing for a more complex view in which topic persistence is understood in terms of discourse topicality, the nature of which varies at least across genres.

Ozerov's study is devoted to Left Dislocations (LD), which are investigated in a spontaneous speech multimedia corpus of Anal Naga, an underexplored Trans-Himalayan language spoken in India-Myanmar border. Discarding the pre-empirical assumption that LD-structures form a syntactic construction, the chapter separately focuses on instantiation of Detached NPs, that is, NPs that initiate a syntactic structure and terminate the Intonation Unit. Anal Naga is verb-final language, and NPs rarely occur post-verbally; moreover, the expression of contextually recoverable referents is optional, and updating NPs tend to appear with a copula. Based not only on syntactic, prosodic and pragmatic traits, but also on interactional and multimodal aspects of referent introduction, the study provides evidence that detached NPs firstly and foremost perform a local interactional task, while the continuation has not been planned yet. The detachment does not arise in attention-aligning cases as a means for expressing topicality; it is better analyzed through the notion of attention combined with relevance and interactional principles. Detached NPs alone are exploited for turn-taking or alignment of joint attention on a referent, completing the interactional move, irrespective of the continuation. The topicality effects of aboutness or frame-setting are thus argued to be epiphenomenal and observed only in static retrospective examination of the data. In fact, they are radically deemed unneeded for the analysis and irrelevant for the dynamic planning and processing of interactional discourse.

Cimmino & Saccone account for LD's discourse functions in spoken Italian, English and Spanish. Relying on a corpus-based and textual approach, they set out to describe LD's functions looking at the interplay between prosody, syntax, information structure, and discourse. The starting point for this analysis is a syntactic definition

of LD, which allows collecting real occurrences in spoken Italian, English and Spanish devoid of functional biases. The information structural analysis is based on a pragmatic definition of topic, as the field of application of the utterance illocutionary force (in line with Cresti & Moneglia 2018). The corpora used for each language are pragmatically annotated for their prosodic-information traits, allowing to observe the presence/absence of Topic Units. This datum is also observed in interaction with the architecture of the text, that is, precisely on its topic progression and logical organization. The results show that there is no systematic correspondence between the prosodic and syntactic form of the constructions and their information traits or text organization. Therefore, the discourse functions of LD cannot be altogether reconducted to an overarching topic-marking one. In fact, the functions vary cross-linguistically and, especially in semi-free word order languages such as Italian and Spanish, they can be devoid of a topic-comment information partition or be used to perform functions unrelated to topic progression. Based on these findings, the chapter disentangles the discourse functions of LDs from the concept of topic, arguing that LDs are better understood as prominence cues used by speakers to signal a disruption in the ongoing discourse, the nature of this discourse prominence being dynamic and evolving as the text unfolds.

Luo presents a quantitative and qualitative description of the Topic Information Unit in Mandarin Chinese, based on Cresti's model for spontaneous speech segmentation. The data analysed in the chapter are part of a new spontaneous corpus of spoken Mandarin Chinese (C-ORAL-ZHONG). As in Cresti's contribution, topic is defined as a prosodically realized field of application of the illocutionary force. The corpus-based inquiry highlights prosodic, morphosyntactic, semantic and functional patterns and trends of Mandarin Chinese topics in spontaneous speech, partially corroborating findings from previous literature. The functionally identified Topic Information Unit consistently appears to be realized through a prefix unit, in line with cross-linguistic investigations conducted on Italian, Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese, and American English. Pauses and resets also align with previous research, while the characterization of Sentence Final Particles, used to mark non-final prosodic breaks in Mandarin Chinese, such as *a* 啊, *ya* 呀, *ne* 呢, and *ba* 吧 are related by Luo to the intimacy of the speakers. In the examined corpus, the quantitative occurrence of topics is approximately 10% higher than in Italian, possibly supporting the topic-prominent nature of Chinese. The lexical fillings appear to be mostly referential, as expected from previous studies and classical theoretical approaches to topic

definition; however, modal topics also occur, corresponding to hypothetical and temporal/hypothetical clauses, modal adverbials, adjectival phrases used to express the speaker's attitude and points of view. Finally, the data allows to reject the systematic correspondence between givenness and topicality, contributing to the volume's aim of distinguishing the core from the epiphenomenal traits of topics.

6. Prospects for Future Research

The discussion on marking (§4) and on the direction of our collection contributions (§5) suggests a *discrepancy between linguistic marking and the pragmatic notion of topic*. This situation clearly does not disqualify the theoretical notion of topic or its validity. It is not unexpected that it is not expressed in the language by directly dedicated means but rather cued indirectly by other grammatical categories (Féry 2007). However, as the research commonly does use types of topicality as the endpoint of the analysis and explanation of the linguistic structure, the situation suggests a problem in the analytic procedure. "Topical" markers briefly surveyed above (§3) are directly related to various discourse-structuring, pragmatic, and utterance planning factors, whose aspects and linguistic expression are often poorly understood. Instead of exploring the dedicated factors that link to the examined marker directly, the research often opts for the indirectly related interpretation of topicality as the analytic endpoint. Despite being a handy label for some of the effects associated with the marker, this solution both leaves the actual factors understudied, and provides an analysis that falls short of addressing the examined phenomenon. Moreover, the effects can be entirely epiphenomenal of the actual marking, and stem for example from the clause-initial position of the studied forms (Gómez-González 1997: 137).

Indeed, the idea that topicality as a uniform and universal concept is ill-defined and unneeded for pragmatic or linguistic analysis is not new in research (Roberts 1996). Jacobs (2001) attempts to disentangle the notion into four separate, independently functional and marked dimensions: information separation, predication, addressation, and frame-setting. The array of domains and factors that motivate "topic"-markers cross-linguistically surveyed above suggests that this partition is too coarse and misses various domains related to discourse-structuring and planning. From the cognitive perspective, Tomlin's (1997) and follow up experiments (Myachykov et al. 2011) link linguistic marking associated with topicality (namely the subject role in English and the initial position in other

languages) directly to the notion of attention. Although attention was evoked in some definitions of topic (Erteschik-Shir & Lappin 1979; Engberg-Pedersen 2011), Tomlin's analysis links linguistic marking and attention directly, dispensing with the need for intermediate levels of cognitive representation. Instead of channelling the attention-directing instruction to the higher-level notion of topicality, interactants can orient at this communicative instruction directly, similarly to the range of other instructions epiphenomenally characterized by aboutness interpretations.

The remaining question is whether topicality is required as a typological notion (Däbritz 2023). Indeed, in the current research context, it appears to provide a useful label for phenomena that otherwise cannot be generalized. We do not yet have universally acknowledged or commonly shared tools to approach pragmatic or discourse typology, but to a large degree this is because we gloss over the relevant categories as 'topics' without producing their coherent analysis. With this volume, *we advocate the idea that once the analysis advances beyond this interpretive level, it will be possible to break this uniform label into diverse categories* of discourse-shifters, attention-centerers, givenness markers etc.; we will then be in a position to produce more accurate typological generalizations. It is not impossible that specific kinds of frame-setters or attention-centering at relevant referents will come up as cross-linguistically recurrent discourse phenomena with dedicated marking strategies, thus corroborating the current intuitions about their due status in linguistic theory and analysis. But this remains to be shown by future research.

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Abbreviations

ASL = American Sign Language

LD = left dislocation

NP = noun phrase

PLT = politeness marker

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