

Discourse contribution of naming a referent: a projection-based account of lone NPs in two typologically different languages

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Stating a referent and then saying something about it is considered in the field of Information Structure (IS) to represent a classic case of topic-expression. Cross-linguistically, structures of this type include Left Detached (LD) constructions, dedicated particles and/or prosodic marking. This study aims at the re-analysis of some “topical” phenomena from the online-syntax perspective, aiming at the identification of the direct functions of the markers in question. It examines “lone NPs” – namely, NPs (potentially accompanied by pragmatic markers), which occupy their own Intonation Unit and are not projected (in the sense of Auer 2005) by the preceding material. The analysis compares the findings from a previous study on Israeli Hebrew with the preliminary results for Anal Naga (Manipur (India), Tibeto-Burman).

Israeli Hebrew is a verb-medial language with nominative-accusative alignment; post-verbal NPs typically convey the primary information. The study of lone NPs in 2.5 hours of spontaneous everyday conversation in Hebrew reveals two primary phenomena misconceived as “topicalising” in the static, IS-oriented analysis: (i) turn-initiating attempts departing with a lone, often recycled NP. These account for 2/3 of the apparent LD in the data. (ii) The second primary part of examples, which account for 1/5 of the data, consists of referent introductions, aimed at local attention-alignment of the interlocutors as well as the negotiated identification of the referent. Only a handful of examples are accompanied by explicit markers that indicate the local discourse-structuring role of the referent.

Anal Naga is a verb-final language with pragmatically driven differential ergative-absolutive alignment. Moreover, co-subordination allows to resolve the marked argument role in a distant clause. There is also a large set of pragmatic markers, such as =te indicating a discourse shift, =tū indicating turn-keeping non-finality and others. This system allows for the incremental construal of an utterance, where NPs are introduced with the indication of their local discourse contribution, before the overall syntactic structure is resolved by the final verb. This results in common introduction of a new referent combined with an identification request and an immediate construal of the utterance as “about it”, at times occurring where English requires athetic statement.

In sum, a comparative analysis of lone NPs reveals different structurally and culturally motivated strategies of information management, which have been misleadingly conflated under the label of “topical markers” in a universalistic, static IS-driven analysis.

References: Auer, Peter (2005). Projection in Interaction and Projection in Grammar. Text 25(1), 7–36.