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On the Topicalizing Nature of Multiple Left-dislocations

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0.　Introduction

This paper considers one of the so-called Topicalizing constructions: Multiple Left-dislocation (MLD) in Spanish, and suggests that it does not involve multiple topics and should not be considered a Topicalizing device. It is proposed that MLDs have in fact a focalizing function, and that the notion "topic" should be re-examined.

Spanish is one of several Romance languages that allows for the construction in (1) referred to as Clitic left-dislocation (CLLD) by Cinque (1990):

(1)　El libro lo tengo yo
　　　the book cl have I

Prima facie, this structure seems to be a topicalizing construction. That is, as in other types of preposing mechanisms such as English Left-dislocation in (2), and English Topicalization in (3), the preposed element does not constitute the focus of the utterance:

(2)　John, I saw him yesterday
(3)　Julia I couldn't reach

Thus, the sentences in (1)-(3) contrast with cases of Focus Preposing such as the one in (4), where the preposed element *is* focal:

(4)　SIX DOLLARS it costs[1]
　　　(Ward 1988)

From this perspective, the preposed element in (1) has been assumed to be "topical". However, one interesting feature of Romance CLLDs, not shared by

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[1] For analyses of Focus Preposing see Casielles (1998), Prince (1981a), Vallduví (1990) and Ward (1988).

any of the mechanisms available in English, is that they allow for the simultaneous dislocation of a variety of phrases. As the examples in (5)–(7) show, we can dislocate several elements:

(5)   Marcos a los niños les compró un libro
        Mark prep the children cl bought a book
(6)   El cohete a los niños se lo compró Marcos
        the rocket prep the children cl cl bought Mark
(7)   A los niños Marcos una pistola no se la compraría nunca
        prep the children Mark a gun not cl cl would-buy never

Furthermore, these phrases can be dislocated in any order:

(8)   a. Mark a los niños una pistola...
        b. Una pistola Mark a los niños...
        c. Una pistola a los niños Mark...
        etc.

From a syntactic point of view, this feature has recently been accounted for by positing a series of topic phrases to host the preposed elements or by proposing multiple topic-features. Rizzi (1997), for instance, argues for several topic heads where the Topic Criterion (similar to his Wh-criterion) can be satisfied. Zubizarreta (1998), on the other hand, suggests that the Tense Phrase is a syncretic category where features such as topic, focus or emphasis can combine with the feature tense. To account for multiple topics, she suggests the following:

> To the extent that there may be more than one topic per sentence, it is reasonable to assume that there may be more than one "topic" feature that participates in the feature checking algorithm. Thus, besides the "topic" feature on T, there may be a "topic" feature on a functional category above TP. (Zubizarreta 1998:102)

However, from the point of view of information structure, two questions immediately arise: what does it mean for a sentence to have multiple topics, and why are multiple topics not possible in English?

This paper is organized as follows. In section 1, I examine what is meant by topic and by multiple topics. Section 2 suggests that MLDs do not involve multiple topics, and should not be considered a Topicalizing device. Finally, in section 3, I briefly consider the problems that single topics still pose, and suggest a re-examination of the notion "topic".

1.   Topics and Multiple Topics

There are very different proposals for the articulation of information structure, which I cannot consider here. Therefore, I will just concentrate on the notion Topic in dichotomies such as the Topic-Comment or Theme-Rheme Articulation.[2]

Topic or Theme as a discrete element in the Topic-Comment or Theme-Rheme articulation, tends to be described with a combination of discourse and/or syntactic features such as: a) what the sentence is about; b) what the speaker takes as the point of departure for the sentence, c) not part of the focus; d) active or salient in the discourse; e) placed towards the beginning of the sentence (due to the unmarked order topic-comment); f) a subject (particularly a preverbal subject); and g) expressed by pronominal or unaccented lexical phrases. In (9) we have some relevant definitions from the literature:

(9)   Some definitions of Theme/Topic
- What is usually called the psychological subject; the basis of the utterance; the element about which something is stated; what is being commented upon. (theme, Mathesius 1928, 1975)
- What is being talked about; the point of departure for the clause as a message; what comes first in the clause. (theme, Halliday 1967)
- Those elements which are assumed by the speaker to be present in the addressee's consciousness. (theme, Contreras 1976)
- The thing which the proposition expressed by the sentence is about (topic, Lambrecht 1994)
- A referential entry under which propositions in the context set are classified (topic, Reinhart 1981)
- The address under which the hearer is instructed to enter the information (link, Vallduví 1990)
- Topics are old or presupposed; the subject is the unmarked topic; pronouns must be interpreted as topics (topic, Erteschik-Shir 1997)

I will come back later to the problem of finding an appropriate definition for single topics, but if we just look at these definitions now to see if they could apply to more than one element, probably with the exception of being a subject, in principle, there is no reason why a sentence could not be about several things, or why a speaker could not take several elements as the point of departure, and definitely we can have several elements which can be salient in the discourse, unaccented or in pronominal form. This might be the reason why often definitions contain expressions such as "the element or elements".

However, actual discussion of sentences with multiple topics is rare. Although multiple topics are sometimes mentioned, not much is offered in terms of their nature or interpretation. For instance, Halliday (1967:219) points out: "the

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[2] See Casielles (1997), (1999) and Vallduví (1990) for an examination of the different articulations and primitives.

function of theme, restricted elsewhere to single clause elements, can in the case of adjuncts extend over two or more." He gives the example in (10):

(10)   The other day in Sheffield I watched an interesting new process
       (Halliday 1967:219)

In Contreras' definition the plural *elements* is used and he does point out that the feature +topic may be assigned to one or more elements. However, the example he gives in (11) looks like a conjoined topic:

(11)   En cuanto al dictador y al pueblo, éste lo repudia a aquél
       "As for the dictator and the people, the latter repudiates the former"
       (Contreras 1976:82)

I did find the following example in Contreras (1976), which is similar to our MLDs (it has two left-dislocated elements), but he does not offer any comment about it.

(12)   Don Fermín sus espuelas las sacó de la SALA
       "Don Fermín took his spurs from the room"
       (Contreras 1976:98)

Erteschik-Shir (1997) mentions multiple topics, but only in the sense of potential choices for topic, meaning that a sentence may have two phrases as candidates for topic (for instance the subject and the object). Her system also includes main and subordinate topics, but most of her data comes from English, and there is no discussion of anything similar to our multiple dislocations.

Lambrecht (1994) argues that sentences can have more than one topic. This happens when both the subject and object are pronominals as in (13):

(13)   . What ever became of John?
       He married Rosa but <u>he</u> didn't really love <u>her</u>
       (Lambrecht 1994:148)

Multiple topics are also possible, he argues, when we have a nonsubject topicalized element, as in (14):

(14)   Why am I in an up mood? Mostly it's a sense of relief of having finished a
       first draft of my thesis and feeling OK at least about the time I spent
       writing this. <u>The product I</u> feel less good about.
       (Lambrecht 1994: 147)

According to him, in this case, both the topicalized element and the subject are topics. However, since we can have focal pronominals, it is not clear why being a pronominal immediately qualifies for being a topic. In addition, it seems to me that the appearance of the subject in (14) has more to do with syntactic requirements of English than with it being a topic.

Vallduví (1990) takes into account Romance MLDs and suggests that sentences can have more than one topic (link, in his terminology). He gives the following Catalan example, which shows multiple links:

(15)   El bròquil a l'amo l'hi van regalar   link-link-focus
        the broccoli to the boss obj iobj 3p-pst-give
        Approx.: "The broccoli the boss (they) gave it to him (for free)"
        (Vallduví 1990: 60)

Vallduví suggests that a link is interpreted as the address under which the hearer is instructed to enter the information, and in the case of multiple links "the speaker directs the hearer to go to two addresses and enter the information under both". So, the instruction for a sentence with multiple links such as that in (15) would be something like "I instruct you to go to the address *the boss* and the address *broccoli* and enter the information *hates* under both". I cannot consider here Vallduví's system in depth, which I think has many advantages over other theories. However, in regard to multiple topics, it is not clear to me what the difference in interpretation is between multiple links and a link-focus-tail structure or a focus-tail-tail structure.

Vallduví's articulation involves the hierarchical trichotomy in (16), where the non-focal material, the Ground, is subdivided into the link, a sentence-initial topic, and the tail, any other non-sentence-initial topical element.

(16)   Vallduví's Articulation
        S = {Focus, Ground}
        Ground ={Link, Tail}

A right-dislocated element, for instance, since it is not sentence-initial, would not be considered a link, but a tail. A tail specifies the way in which information is entered under a given address. So, the instruction for an example such as (17) below would be as follows: "I instruct you to go to the address *the boss* and then retrieve the information of the sentence by substituting *hates* for the blank in *he ____ broccoli*, which is already under *the boss*."

(17)   L'amo l'ODIA, el bròquil   link-focus-tail
        the boss cl hates the broccoli

From this perspective, then an MLD involves two addresses while a sentence which has a topic-tail structure, such as (17) involves only one address. It is not clear what the instruction would be for a multiple right-dislocation such as (18), where there is no link, and presumably no address.

(18)   l'ODIA, l'amo el bròquil   .   focus-tail-tail

I think that considering left-dislocated phrases topics and right-dislocated phrases tails fails to capture the similar nature of these structures. That is, the different structure proposed for these sentences in (19)–(21) does not reflect the fact that they all involve narrow focus on the verb:

(19)   L'amo l'ODIA el bròquil   link-focus-tail
(20)   El bròquil l'amo l' ODIA   link-link-focus
(21)   l'ODIA, l'amo el bròquil   focus-tail-tail

Vallduví's proposal has a key feature that should be kept: the distinction between a sentence-initial topic element and other non-focal elements. However, I think that instead of the multiple structures proposed for examples (19)–(21) we could offer a unified analysis for left- and right-dislocations, and suggest that the non-focal elements in all three cases above are instances of one non-focal element, different from a sentence topic and known in the literature as Background or Open Proposition (see below). From this perspective, although a sentence can have several non-focal elements, it cannot have multiple topics. This is also the view expressed by Reinhart (1981), who explicitly rejects the claim that a sentence can have two topics. She says that although conjoined topics are possible, a sentence uttered in a given context has in this context only one sentence topic (1981:56).[3]

In the next section I suggest that Romance multiple dislocations (left or right) do not involve multiple topics, but a unique non-focal element, and I extend Vallduví's analysis of right-dislocations to left-dislocated structures.

2.   MLDs: a Focalizing Device

One key feature of Vallduví's analysis of right-detachments in Catalan is the proposal that these elements are dislocated so that a different element gets sentence-final focus. From this perspective, a right-dislocation marks the detached element as non-focal.

Let's look again at our Multiple Left-dislocations. I have repeated the examples in (22)–(24).

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[3] Although I cannot go into details here, I believe that in Spanish and other Romance languages sentence topics are restricted to a non-dislocated sentence-initial position: the preverbal subject position.

(22)   Marcos a los niños les compró un LIBRO
        Mark prep the children cl bought a book
(23)   El cohete a los niños se lo compró MARCOS
        the rocket prep the children cl cl bought Mark
(24)   A los niños Marcos una pistola no se la compraría NUNCA
        prep the children Mark a gun not cl cl would-buy never

If instead of paying attention to the position where these elements have been placed, we pay attention to the position they would have occupied had they not been dislocated, we will see that these elements have not been dislocated because they are multiple topics (whatever that might mean) but so that a different element occupies the focal sentence-final position. That is, the non-dislocated unmarked structure for (22) would be (25):

(25)   Marcos les compró un libro a los niños
        Mark cl bought a book prep the children
        "Mark bought a book for the children"

By removing *a los niños* from its unmarked sentence-final position, as we did in (22), the direct object *un libro*, 'a book' gets the sentence-final position and focal interpretation. So, this would be appropriate in a situation where it is under discussion that Mark bought something for the children and the speaker informs that what he bought for them is a book. The same applies to the other examples where removing certain elements from the VP results in marking the subject as focal, as in (23) or the negative quantifier never as in (24).

This raises one question, if the goal is to leave the book in sentence-final position, we do not need to place a los niños in the dislocated leftmost position, we could just place this phrase right before a book, as in (26).

(26)   Marcos les compró a los niños un libro
        Mark cl bought prep the children a book

One difference between (22) and (26), however, is that only (22) marks narrow focus on the direct object. As noted by Chomsky (1971), Contreras (1976), Selkirk (1984) and others, one feature of sentence-final focus is that it can project up to the whole verbal phrase.[4] This means that if we leave *a los niños* inside the VP as in (26), it could be interpreted as focal. The left-dislocation in (22), on the other hand, marks this phrases as non-focal.

From this point of view, rather than a topicalizing device, this construction should be considered a focalizing device: by removing all these non-focal elements

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[4] For instance, Chomsky (1971) observes that in (i) any of the constituents in brackets can be part of the focus:
(i)   He was (warned (to look out for (an ex-convict (with (a red shirt)))))

from the domain of focus projection, the intended element gets sentence-final focus-related accent. If this is right, rather than being similar to any of the Topicalizing mechanisms available in English, Romance Multiple left-dislocations are similar to structures such as (27)–(29), where narrow focus is marked intonationally, rather than syntactically.

(27)   Mark bought a BOOK for the children
(28)   MARK bought a rocket for the children
(29)   Mark would NEVER buy a gun for the children

These sentences do not involve multiple topics, but a Focus-Background structure or Focus-Open proposition structure.

A Focus-Background structure is a structure involving a unique focal element. It is pragmatically marked in that it cannot start a discourse, it cannot be uttered out of the blue and requires a very specific context. The Background elements are pragmatically presupposed (either discourse-old or accommodated as such). In (30) we have some definitions:

(30)   Some definitions of Background/Open Proposition
- The information in the sentence that is assumed by the speaker to be shared by him and the hearer (presupposition, Chomsky 1971, Jackendoff 1972)
- Salient shared knowledge;information which the speaker believes his/her hearer is attending to at the time of the utterance (open proposition, Prince 1981b, 1985, 1986, Ward 1988)
- That which is c-construable (which has a semantic antecedent in the previous discourse) (old information, Rochemont 1986)

While in English this structure tends to be expressed intonationally, that is, by intonationally focussing the unique focal element, as in (27)-(29), in Romance languages like Spanish, which prefer sentence-final focus-related accent, Background elements are taken out from the domain of focus projection, they are syntactically dislocated. From this perspective, the information structure of Multiple Left-Dislocations is not a Topic-Topic-Topic-Comment structure but a Background-Focus structure, as expressed in (31):

(31)   Information Structure of MLDs:
        Background-Focus (*Topic-Topic-Topic-Comment)

I believe this focalizing function is also true of single left-dislocations. Typical instances of non-multiple left-dislocations involve narrow focus. We have some examples in (32)–(34):

(32) El libro lo compró MARCOS
      the book cl bought Mark
      "MARK bought the book"
(33) El libro lo QUEMÓ
      the book cl burnt
      S/he BURNT the book
(34) El libro lo compró en ESPAÑA
      the book cl bought in Spain
      "S/he bought the book in SPAIN

Also, this explains why a sentence such as (35) sounds almost ungrammatical in isolation:

(35) #El libro lo compró

Since it is quite uninformative to say about a book that s/he bought it, as opposed to burned it, as in (33), it is hard to find the point of the utterance, the narrow focus. It could be rescued, for instance, in a very specific context where the speaker is emphasizing that this person BOUGHT the book as opposed to say borrowed it from the library. Sometimes the focus in these structures is the polarity of the sentence and in this case we find the affirmative or negative particle following the dislocated element, as in (36)–(37).

(36) El libro NO lo compró
(37) El libro SÍ lo compró

I believe the same applies to right-dislocations such as the one in (38):

(38) Lo compró MARCOS, el libro

In this sense, and although I do not want to imply that there are no differences between left- and right-dislocations, both can fulfil this focalizing function by removing certain elements from the domain of focus projection. We could still derive the interpretative differences between left- and right-dislocations from the different position of the Background.

Prince (1986) has pointed out that the Focus-Open Proposition structure can also be marked syntactically in English. As the examples in (39) show, clefts, pseudo-clefts and Focus Preposing structures mark this information structure.

(39) a. It was the SHIRT that she gave to Harry
      b. What she gave to Harry was a SHIRT
      c. A whole SET she gave to him
      (Prince, 1986:209)

In Romance languages, it is also possible to mark this articulation by dislocating all non-focal elements, so I would like to add Romance MLDs to the group of syntactic structures that can mark the Focus-Open proposition.

I will leave open here the syntactic structure of these MLDs, but if this is right, and they involve a Focus-Background structure, rather than having several topics move to different topic phrases, as Rizzi (1997) proposes, if we want to move these phrases and we want this movement to be triggered by a feature, I think it should be a [-focus] feature, that is, in these languages [-focus] elements need to escape the domain of focus projection. However, these phrases do not behave like moved elements, we can have as many as we want in any order over any barrier. In addition, we would need a separate analysis for right-dislocations. So, I would rather suggest that in Spanish and other Romance languages that maintain sentence-final focus, Focus-Background structures are syntactically expressed by freely base-generating all the non-focal or Background elements outside the domain of focus projection.

3.   Further Issues: the Notion Topic

I will conclude with some brief comments about the problems that single topics still pose. As Polinsky (1999) has recently pointed out, linguists appear to have given up on a definition of topic. I suggest that the main reason why no appropriate definition has been found is because this unitary entity we have been trying to define does not exist. That is, due to the variety of phonological, morphological, lexical and/or syntactic ways in which languages can mark, if at all, topical elements, any specific definition of topic based on a particular language will not be adequate to characterize topical elements in a different language.

Recently Prince (1998) has shown that what had been considered to be homogeneous topic-marking constructions seem to involve different discourse functions. Jacobs (1999) has also pointed out that there are different semantic relations involved.

Here I have suggested that what are considered to be multiple topics are in fact part of the Background, and that this non-focal element should be distinguished from sentence topics. If we look for example at the features that sentence topics tend to have as opposed to Background elements, we see that although both have been referred to as topical, they do not have much in common. That is, as has been pointed out in the literature, sentence topics tend to correlate with a unique element in sentence-initial position, which has a discourse referent, and it is not necessarily discourse-old or unaccented. Background elements, on the other hand, are necessarily unaccented and discourse-old, while they do not correlate with any position in the sentence. So, in fact they seem to have quite different, if not opposite, characteristics.

I suggest that instead of trying to come up with a definition of topic, what we need to do is establish a typology of topical elements. Thus, I would argue for a

non-unitary characterization of this notion based on a collection of phonological, syntactic, semantic and discourse features. For instance, the differences between sentence topics and Background elements could be tentatively expressed as follows:

(40)   SentenceTopic   Background
        +single   ±single
        + sentence-initial   ±sentence-initial
        + discourse referent   ±discourse-referent
        ±unaccented   -unaccented
        ±discouse-new   -discourse-new

From this point of view, some particular combinations of certain intonational, syntactic, and discourse features will give us different types of topical elements. What we need to do is examine how different languages mark non-focal elements and discover which are the relevant features, and how they combine to produce different types of topics

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