

The Syntax of Discourse Functions in Fox

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## The syntax of discourse functions in Fox<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction

In this paper I argue for the existence of topic and focus positions in the constituent structure of Fox, and describe some of the syntactic properties of topic and focus. The structure of the paper is as follows: the first section briefly surveys some recent work on word order in Native American languages, beginning with three functionalist studies. The second section illustrates the distinct discourse functions of topic and focus, and the third section discusses the syntax of topic and focus.

1.1. Recent work on word order. Tomlin and Rhodes 1979 claim that in the Algonquian language Ojibwa rheme precedes theme (the opposite of the ordering found in European languages). In general, indefinite NPs precede the verb and definite NPs follow the verb; however, subjects of existential verbs and 'thematically irrelevant NPs' follow the verb, even if they are indefinite, and contrastive NPs and topicalized NPs precede the verb, even if they are definite (p. 316-7).<sup>2</sup>

Payne 1987, on the Uto-Aztec language Papago, finds a strong association between indefiniteness and preverbal position, and between definiteness and postverbal position, as Tomlin and Rhodes 1979 report. But she concludes that a better predictor of Papago word order is that preverbal elements are either 'pragmatically marked' (contrastive focus, question words and answers, change in major topic (p. 787)) or an indefinite NP for which 'the hearer is instructed to open a new active discourse file' (p. 794).

Mithun 1987 claims that 'pragmatic ordering' is a separate word order type, apart from the word order typology established by Greenberg 1966. She illustrates the type with data from Cayuga, Coos, and the Australian language Ngandi. According to Mithun, constituents in pragmatically ordered languages are arranged in descending order of 'newsworthiness'. The property of 'newsworthiness' is characterized as follows: 'Constituents may be newsworthy because they introduce pertinent, new information, present new topics, or indicate a contrast' (p. 325).

These three papers, and others working in a functionalist tradition on Native American word order, have been able to describe a number of the discourse factors conditioning word order in the so-called 'free' word order languages. Indeed, it is remarkable that the same pragmatic factors turn up in Algonquian, Iroquoian, Uto-Aztec, and other language families: overt topics tend to occur before the verb, as do contrastively focused NPs and question words. However, some criticisms can be made of the functionalist approach to word order. First, there is an unfortunate tendency to look for

a single property, such as ‘newsworthiness’, that controls word order. As a consequence, elements with radically different discourse functions, such as topic and focus, get lumped together as being the same thing. (This is less true of Payne’s paper than the others.) Second, the discussion in the papers cited above concerns linear order only, with no investigation of hierarchical structure. Third, there is little discussion of the relationship between topic or focus NPs and the rest of the syntax of the language. Indeed, Mithun 1987 seems to be claiming that there *is* no other syntax in these languages aside from the pragmatic conditions on linear order.

A recent exception to the above criticisms is Aissen 1992, which discusses Jakaltek, Tzotzil, and Tz’utujil Mayan word order patterns, assuming a GB syntactic framework. Aissen begins by providing clear definitions of topic and focus, and goes on to demonstrate that they appear in separate syntactic positions in a hierarchically structured clause, and that topic and focus control distinct sets of syntactic properties. Figure 1, adapted from Aissen 1992, illustrates the structure of a Mayan clause.<sup>3</sup> I have obviously omitted here a great deal of the information that Aissen presents for Mayan; the important thing for my present purpose is that figure 1 specifies not only the relative linear order of Topic, Neg, Focus, etc., but also the hierarchical structure.

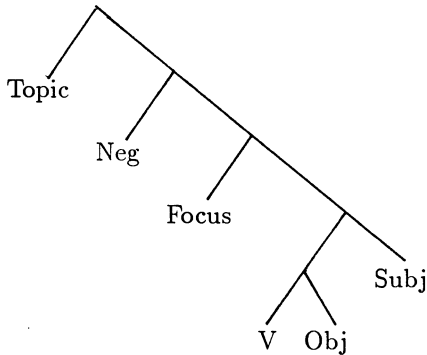


Figure 1. Mayan clause structure (adapted from Aissen 1992).

In contrast to the binary branching structure of Mayan, the constituent structure of Fox is mostly flat (figure 2). Only the topic is outside the S: all other constituents are daughters of S. Topic, Neg, and Focus appear in the same linear order in Fox and Mayan, but the hierarchical structure of the two languages is different. In the present paper, there is not enough space to justify all aspects of the template in figure 2, such as the appearance of syntactically oblique arguments immediately before the verb, and the appearance of all nontopic, nonfocus, nonoblique arguments after the verb,

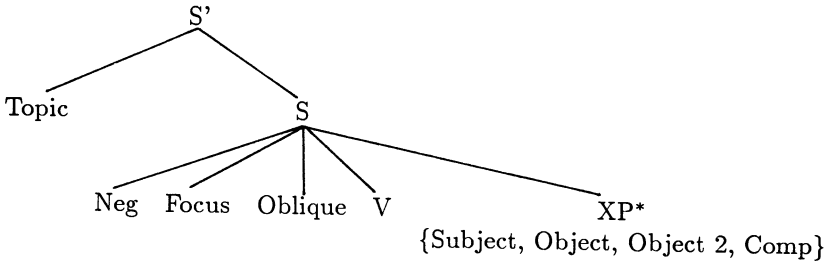


Figure 2. Fox clause structure.

in any order.<sup>4</sup> Instead, the discussion here will be limited to the topic and focus positions.

1.2. Background about Fox and theoretical assumptions. In this paper I am assuming LFG as the syntactic framework. Fox syntax is organized in terms of grammatical functions (e.g., subject, object, second object, oblique, complement clause (COMP); also the discourse functions topic and focus). These functions are represented at a level of functional structure, distinct from constituent structure. Consequently, there is no need to posit empty NPs if a grammatical function such as subject is expressed only morphologically.

Fox verbs are inflected for subject and object; verbs in relative clauses are additionally inflected for the head of the relative clause. Possessed nouns are inflected for possessor. Syntactically, the inflection for subject, object, etc., may function pronominally.<sup>5</sup> The emphatic series of independent personal pronouns is used almost exclusively to express topic or focus (Dahlstrom 1988).

Fox verbs may be inflected in one of eighteen inflectional paradigms, depending on syntactic factors (e.g., main vs. subordinate clause) and semantic/pragmatic factors (e.g., aspect, mood, evidentiality). Inflectional information is represented in glosses like this: *1-3/ind.ind.*, read 'first person singular subject acting on third person singular object, in the independent indicative paradigm'. The examples cited in this paper are a combination of elicited sentences and sentences drawn from narrative texts.

## 2. Discourse functions of topic and focus

2.1. Topic. For topic, I follow Reinhart 1982 in characterizing topic as standing in an 'aboutness' relation to the remainder of the sentence. In Fox, an overt NP will appear in topic position to indicate a new topic, or a shift back to a previously introduced topic.

- (1) [TOP *wi-sahke-ha*]=*ke·hi* *wa-natohka*=*meko* *e·h*=*kehči-nepa·či*.  
*Wi-sahke-ha*=and peacefully=emph greatly-sleep 3/aor  
 ‘As for *Wi-sahke-ha*, he was peacefully sound asleep’ W163P<sup>6</sup>

A somewhat surprising property of overt topics in Fox is that they may be either proximate or obviative. Proximate vs. obviative is an obligatory, discourse-based distinction within third person in Algonquian languages. Roughly speaking, proximate corresponds to the ‘main character’ of the discourse, and is expressed by unmarked third person forms; more peripheral characters are expressed using obviative forms. The topic of (1) above is proximate; the example below shows that a topic may also be obviative.

- (2) [TOP *i·nini*]=*ke·hi* *o·šisemani*]  
 that.obv=and her.g-child.obv  
*wa-natohka*=*meko* *e·h*=*kehči-nepa-niči*.  
 peacefully=emph greatly-sleep obv/aorist  
 ‘As for her grandson [obv], he was peacefully sound asleep’ W10H

(1) and (2) are taken from the same text and form a minimal pair. In (1), the overt topic is *wi-sahke-ha* (the name of the culture hero); the remainder of the sentence functions as a comment about this topic, stating that he was sleeping peacefully. At this point in the story, *Wi-sahke-ha* is the main character, and is therefore referred to by proximate forms. (2), on the other hand, is taken from a later section of the same text, in which *Wi-sahke-ha*’s grandmother is the proximate character, and events are expressed from her point of view. Again, the character *Wi-sahke-ha* is sleeping peacefully, but in (2), he is referred to by an obviative NP, *i·nini o·šisemani* ‘that grandson of hers’, appearing in the topic position.<sup>7</sup>

2.2. Focus. Turning now to the discourse function of focus, Lambrecht’s definition of focus as “the new element added by an utterance to an established pragmatic presupposition” (Lambrecht 1986:177) fits the range of uses associated with focus position in Fox. Examples of items bearing a focus function include question words or phrases, and the answers to such questions; and elements standing in contrastive focus: ‘not x, but y’. To this may be added other varieties of focus identified by Dik et al. 1981: expanding information (not only x, but also y) and restricting information (only y). Also, indefinite pronouns and quantifiers display a strong tendency to appear in focus position, as does ‘surprising’ information.

The following examples provide illustrations of some of the types of focus in Fox — question words, answers to questions, and contrastive focus.

- (3) [FOC we·ne·h]=čā·h ne·sa·ta neto·kima·mena·nan?  
 who one.who.killed.him[obv] our.chief.obv

'Who killed our chief?' J26.13

- (4) [FOC mana=čā·h ni·hka·na] ne·sa·ta  
 this=so my.friend one.who.killed.him[obv]

'My friend is the one who killed him' J26.17

- (5) šewe·na [FOC ni·na] nemehči—meko -wi·tama·kwa,  
 but I plainly—=emph -tell 3-1/ind.ind.

a·kwi [FOC ki·nwa·wa]  
 not you.pl

'but he has instructed me plainly, not you' AR40:136.6

The indefinite pronouns of Fox (e.g., *owiye·ha* 'some/anyone', *ke·ko·hi* 'some/anything') usually appear in focus position. In this respect, Fox behaves like Papago (Payne 1987:798; see also Lambrecht 1986:170).

- (6) a·kwi='yo=ke·h=meko='pi [FOC ke·ko·hi] mi·čiwa·čini  
 not=of.course=and=emph=quot anything eat 3p-inan/neg

'And, of course, they didn't eat anything at all, it's said' W252K

In (6), the quantifier *ke·ko·hi* 'anything' is found in focus position, between the negative *a·kwi* and the verb.

Another use of focus NPs is to express 'surprising' information, as in the following example:

- (7) ke·htena=meko [FOC aše·wa·pikone·hi] e·h=no·ša·taki  
 surely=emph little.squash give.birth.to 3-inan/aor

'Surely she gave birth to a little squash' W923

The contrast here which motivates placing the NP *aše·wa·pikone·hi* 'little squash' in focus position is that between the conventional presupposition that a pregnant woman will give birth to a human baby, and the information that it was in fact a little squash that she gave birth to.

It was observed above that overt topic NPs could be either proximate or obviative. Focus NPs likewise may be either proximate or obviative. Compare (3) above, which contains a proximate question word, with the following example:

- (8) [FOC we·ne·hani]=yo we·wi·hka·ničini no·sa?  
 who.obv one[obv].who.he.had.as.friend my.father

'Who [obv] did my father have as a friend?' W914

In (8), the question word *we·ne·hani* 'who' bears the obviative suffix *-ani*.

### 3. Syntax

**3.1. Topic.** The topic element need not correspond to a gap or coreferential pronoun in the remainder of the sentence:

- (9) [TOP ni·na]=ke·hi [s a·kwi ke·ko·hi ašenokini]  
 I=and not anything disappear inan/negative  
 ‘As for me, nothing is missing’ AR40:146.10

(9) is taken from a passage of a text in which there has been a terrible flood. After the flood waters recede, the people return and check on their houses; one person utters the sentence in (9). Here the topic is *ni·na* ‘I’, and the comment about that topic is that nothing is missing. The relation between the topic and comment is the pragmatic relation of aboutness, rather than a syntactic relation of coreference.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of constituent structure, too, there is a looser connection between an overt topic and the following comment; the comment forms an S constituent which is a sister to the topic. Evidence for this claim comes from co-ordination, clitic placement, and the position of adverbial clauses.

**3.1.1. Co-ordination.** If topic is sister to an S constituent, then topic should also be able to appear as sister to two conjoined Ss:

- (10) [TOP i·na=ke·hi neniwa]  
 that=and man  
 [[s a·kwi ni·mičini] na·hkači [s a·kwi nakamočini]]  
 not dance 3/neg also not sing 3/neg  
 ‘As for that man, he didn’t dance, and he also didn’t sing’

In (10), *i·na neniwa* ‘that man’ is the topic for both of the following clauses.

**3.1.2. Clitic placement.** Fox has a large number of second position enclitics. If an overt topic NP appears in a sentence, second position enclitics may be attached in two places: following the first word of the topic NP, and following the first word of the S constituent.

- (11) [TOP i·niye·ka=ke·hi ki·h-kočawičiki  
 those.absent=and ones.who.had.tried  
 wi·h=ča·kiha·wa·či apeno·hahi],  
 fut=kill.all 3p-obv/aorist child.obv.pl  
 [s waninawe=meko=’pi·=’ni e·h=inohinote·wa·či].  
 all.directions=emph=quot=then move [thither] 3p/aorist  
 ‘As for those aforementioned<sup>9</sup> ones; who had tried to kill the children;  
 they; then moved away in all directions, it’s said.’ W250DE

In (11) the topic is a complex NP containing a relative clause; the enclitic =*ke·hi* 'and' is attached to the first word of the topic. (= *ke·hi* is often found with shifted topics.) Other enclitics appear in second position within the S: =*meko* emphatic, =*ipi* quotative, and =*i·ni* 'then'.<sup>10</sup>

Positing an S constituent which is sister to the topic provides a simple account of enclitic placement in Fox. The second position enclitics attach to the first phonological word of an S' or S. An analysis of Fox clause structure which did not recognize the existence of the S constituent, on the other hand, could provide no principled explanation for the placement of enclitics in (11).

**3.1.3. Adverbial clauses.** A third piece of evidence supporting the structural analysis of topic given here is the position of adverbial clauses. Clauses containing a verb inflected in the changed conjunct paradigm (or in the iterative paradigm) function as temporal adjuncts, locating the action of the main clause in time. Such clauses are adjoined to the main S, and may either precede or follow an overt topic. The appearance of adjunct clauses following the topic supports an analysis in which a major constituent break occurs between the topic and the remainder of the sentence.

- (12) o·ni            [TOP we·tapeno·hemičiki],  
and then            those.who.have.children
- [ADV ke·tawi-wa·paniki,]  
          almost-be dawn inan.obv/changed conj.
- e·h=pya·niči            otapeno·hemwa·wahi  
          come obv/aorist    their.children.obv.pl

'And then as for the ones who had children,  
when it was almost dawn, their children arrived.' W167

The topic of (12) is *we·tapeno·hemičiki* 'the ones who have children', which is followed by the adverbial clause *ke·tawi-wa·paniki* 'when it was almost dawn'.

**3.2. Negative.** The previous section demonstrated that the topic position is a sister of S. The negative position, however, is a daughter of S, and the remainder of the clause does not form a constituent. This can be demonstrated by co-ordination:

- (13) \* a·kwi    [[ni·mičini]    na·hkači    [nakamočini]]  
          not    dance 3/neg    also    sing 3/neg
- (‘He didn’t dance and sing’)

In the ungrammatical sentence (13) a single token of *a·kwi* 'not' is applied to two conjoined clauses. The verbs of both clauses are inflected in the negative

paradigm. If the negative position were a sister of S, as the topic position is (and as Aissen claims for negation in Mayan), then it should be possible to have a single negative element negate two Ss. However, such sentences are ungrammatical in Fox; instead the negative *a·kwi* must appear in both clauses:

- (14) [[a·kwi ni·mičini] na·hkači [a·kwi nakamočini]]  
 not dance 3/neg also not sing 3/neg  
 'He didn't dance and he also didn't sing'

As a consequence, the negative position must be analyzed as a daughter of S in a flat structure.

As the first word in S, Neg may be the host for enclitics (cf. (6)), but — as predicted by figure 2 — second position enclitics do not attach to the word following Neg. Likewise, adverbial clauses do not intervene between Neg and the remainder of S.

**3.3. Focus.** After the negative position, the next position in the syntactic template for Fox is reserved for focused elements. There are two separate syntactic constructions in Fox in which focused elements may appear: a clefted structure, with the focus element equated to a headless relative clause (Fox has a zero copula in equational sentences), or a nonclefted clause, with the focused element to the left of the verb. (For examples of clefts, see (3), (4), and (8); for focus in nonclefts, see (5), (6), and (7).) Either way, the pragmatically focused element occupies the syntactic focus position.

Although a topic in Fox need not correspond to any argument in the remainder of the sentence, a focused element must be followed by either a gap or a coreferential pronoun as a consequence of its pragmatic function. It is possible to have long distance dependencies between focus and the coreferential element, as in the following examples:

- (15) a·kwi [FOC i·tepi] wi·to·hkawa·čini [∅ wi·h=a·niči]  
 not there allow 3-obv/neg fut=go obv/aor

owi·wani i·na neniwa  
 his.wife.obv that man

'it's not there; that that man allows his wife to go ∅<sub>i</sub>'

- (16) [FOC we·ne·ha]=ča·hi ne·na·toše·yana  
 who=so one.who.you.ask

[owiye·hani e·ši-ne·wokokwe-ni]?  
 anyone.obv whether-see obv-3/interrogative

'Who<sub>i</sub> did you ask whether anyone saw ∅<sub>i</sub>?'

In (15) *i-tepi* 'there' is in focus position, corresponding to the gapped oblique argument of the embedded clause. In (16) the question word *we-ne-ha* 'who' is coreferential to the object of the embedded clause, expressed by pronominal inflection on the lower verb.

There is a syntactic constraint on focus: a complement clause cannot be put into the focus position.

(17) \* a·kwi [FOC i-tepi wi·h=a-niči] wi-to·hkawa·čini  
 not there fut=go obv/aor allow 3-obv/neg

owi·wani i-na neniwa  
 his.wife.obv that man

(‘It’s not [for her to go there] that that man allows his wife’)

COMP is the only grammatical function that cannot be placed in focus: subject, object, second object, and oblique may all be focused.

In conclusion, this paper has used the tests of co-ordination, clitic placement, and adverbial clause placement to motivate the constituent structure of figure 2. Topic and focus have been shown to occupy distinct syntactic positions in Fox, and to differ syntactically in that focus requires a gap or coreferential pronoun in the remainder of the sentence, while topic need not correspond to any argument of the sentence.

#### Notes

1. Fox, or Mesquakie, is an Algonquian language spoken in Iowa. Thanks to Adeline Wanatee for her insights into the Mesquakie language, and to the members of the U. of Chicago seminar on syntax/discourse interactions (Tista Bagchi, Karen Deaton, Bob Knippen, Rosa Rodríguez, and Etsuyo Yuasa) for comments on an earlier version of this paper.
2. Tomlin and Rhodes 1979, Payne 1987, and Mithun 1987, have been reprinted in Payne 1992.
3. For Tz’utuujil, the top node is CP; for Tzotzil and Jakalteq, the top node is E. Consequently, Tz’utuujil allows topics in embedded clauses, while Tzotzil and Jakalteq topics appear only in root clauses. Fox is like Tz’utuujil in allowing topics in embedded clauses; unfortunately, space does not permit a discussion of the properties of Fox subordinate clauses here.
4. The absence of a VP node in figure 2 is motivated by the grammaticality of weak crossover constructions (e.g., *a·kwi owiye·ha kaka·čimekočini o·hkomani* ‘his<sub>i</sub> mother-in-law doesn’t tease anyone<sub>j</sub>’). See Dahlstrom 1986 for discussion.
5. In LFG terms, third person inflection is associated with an optional equation ( $\uparrow$ PRED) = ‘pro’. Nonthird person inflection obligatorily contributes the information that ( $\uparrow$ PRED) = ‘pro’.

6. In the citations of textual examples W = Kiyana 1913, AR40 = Michelson 1925, and J = Jones 1907. In narrative, verbs of main clauses are inflected in the aorist conjunct paradigm, which requires a proclitic *e·h=* (nonfuture), or *wi·h=* (future).
7. I am ignoring second position enclitics, such as *=ke·hi* 'and', for the time being. Enclitics are discussed below in section 3.1.2.
8. This property of Fox topics (also found in topic prominent languages such as Chinese and Japanese (Li and Thompson 1976) and in Tzotzil and Jakaltek Mayan (Aissen 1992)) runs counter to the Extended Coherence Condition of Bresnan and Mchombo 1987, which requires the discourse functions of topic and focus to be bound by an argument.
9. The absentative series of demonstrative pronouns (e.g., *i·niye·ka* in (11)) is often used in narrative to mark the reappearance of a previously mentioned character.
10. For the rules of clitic sandhi, see Goddard 1991.

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