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Topic Constructions in Spoken French: Some Comparisons with Chichewa

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1. Introduction¹

In this paper I will examine some topic constructions in spoken French which have been described by Lambrecht (1981), and consider them in light of some proposals for the formal analysis of topic constructions which have been made by Bresnan and Mchombo (1985) in the context of a study of Chichewa, a Bantu language spoken in Malawi.

In any topic construction, such as (1), the essential problem for formal grammar is that of how the topic constituent is integrated into the syntactic structure of its sentence.

(1) Snakes, I can't stand them.

What Bresnan and Mchombo suggest is that there is an anaphoric relation within the clause between the topic constituent 'snakes' and the pronominal object 'them', just like the anaphoric relation between those words across sentences in discourse, as in (2):

(2) My brother eats snakes for breakfast, but not me. I can't stand them.

What is special about the topic construction in (1) is that the anaphoric relation is necessary not just to the coherence of the discourse but to the grammaticality of the sentence. Within the lexical functional theory of grammar, this is expressed by distinguishing between argument functions such as subjects, objects and obliques, which are integrated directly into the syntactic argument structure by being governed by a predicator; and discourse functions, which include grammaticized topics. Discourse functions are claimed to be integrated into the syntactic argument structure in certain other specified ways, one of which -- the one which will be relevant here -- is by anaphorically binding an argument.

In English, the fronted position of the topic and the independence of the pronoun to which it is related make the resemblance of this kind of clause-internal anaphora to anaphora across clauses fairly clear. But it can be less clear in languages which differ structurally from English in these respects. For example, in a language where a topic can occur in the same linear position as an argument would, and where the pronoun to which it is bound is one which is incorporated into the predicator, sentence-internal anaphora to a topic can bear a strong resemblance to grammatical agreement, which is here taken to be a relation between an argument of a predicator and some features of it encoded on the predicator. Such a structural similarity obtains in Chichewa:

- (3) a. Njuchi zinaluma alenje.
 bees SM-past-bite-indic hunters
 'The bees bit the hunters.'
- b. Njuchi zinawaluma alenje.
 bees SM-past-OM-bite-indic hunters
 'The bees bit them, the hunters.'

The verb in Chichewa shows obligatory subject marking and optional object marking. On Bresnan and Mchombo's analysis, the object marker is an incorporated pronoun. A noun phrase which occurs in a sentence without an object marker as in (3a) can be an object, but one which occurs with an object marker is taken to be a topic, as in (3b). Yet superficially the two constructions look quite similar. Historically, agreement marking often derives from incorporated pronouns; and it has sometimes been suggested that it is in principle impossible to distinguish between sentence-internal anaphora and grammatical agreement (Givon 1976).

Within the framework outlined above, however, there is a major difference: a noun phrase in a grammatical agreement relation is an argument, but one in this kind of anaphoric relation is not. If the difference between argument functions and discourse functions has any validity, then, there should be syntactic grounds by which the two may be distinguished; and Bresnan and Mchombo make further explicit proposals along these lines. One such suggestion is that a noun involved in a grammatical agreement relation, since it would be participating directly in the argument structure of its sentence by being governed, might be expected to be marked for case, or to have to occur within the local domain of the predicator, while one involved in an anaphoric relation would not.

I would like to turn now to spoken French, and to some topic constructions which appear not to conform to these proposals. Certain preverbal topics need not be bound to any argument at all; and postverbal topics seem to exhibit certain properties which are claimed to be characteristic of grammatical agreement. I would like to suggest that these apparent difficulties do not undermine the anaphoric analysis, but do suggest a need to couple it with a more refined notion of the properties of different topic constructions.

2. Antitopics

French has a series of clitic pronouns which form a phonological unit with the verb.² While standard French is traditionally assumed to have a structure in which the distribution of noun phrases is determined primarily by their syntactic roles, as in (4),

- (4) Ces Romains sont fous.
 'These Romans are crazy.'

in spoken French an equally basic sentence structure consists of a verb to which clitics are attached, together with optional noun phrases which are coreferential with the clitics and whose distribution is determined primarily by discourse factors (Lambrecht 1981):

- (5) a. Ces Romains, ils sont fous.
 'These Romans, they are crazy.'
 b. Ils sont fous, ces Romains.
 'They are crazy, these Romans.'

The noun phrases which cooccur with clitics in this way can always be omitted without causing ungrammaticality, the clitics themselves being sufficient to make a clause well-formed in terms of its argument structure:

- (6) a. Pierre il la voit Marie.
 'Pierre, he sees her, Marie.'
 b. Il la voit.
 'He sees her.'
- (7) a. Pierre voit Marie.
 'Pierre sees Marie.'
 b. *Voit.

Furthermore, such noun phrases have the essential pragmatic properties of topics: their referents are treated as being in some way recoverable from the context of the discourse and can be considered to be that about which the information in the sentence is being communicated (Reinhart 1982); they also show certain concomitant formal properties, such as having to be definite. These constructions thus lend themselves naturally to being analyzed as involving anaphoric relations between topic constituents and the clitic pronouns.

However, while topic constituents which precede the verb show the properties which would be expected on this analysis, topic constituents which follow the verb do not. Lambrecht distinguishes these postverbal topic constituents by the name 'antitopics',³ and notes that, among other differences, antitopics appear to be marked for case and to be subject to certain locality constraints. Strikingly, similar exceptional properties appear to characterize antitopics in Chichewa.

Case. In French, grammatical functions other than subjects and objects are usually expressed by prepositional phrases. In topic constructions, when the argument to which a topic is bound is one which could be expressed as a prepositional phrase, a preverbal topic constituent will not include the preposition, but an antitopic must:

- (8) a. La plage il faut y aller quand il fait chaud.
 'The beach, you have to go there when its hot.'
- b. Il faut y aller quand il fait chaud, à la plage.
 'You have to go there when it's hot, to the beach.'
- c. *Il-faut y-aller quand il-fait chaud, la plage.

The same asymmetry may be found in Chichewa. The verb in Chichewa may incorporate a locative enclitic which may either replace or cooccur with an argument expressed as a prepositional phrase. When the enclitic and the prepositional phrase cooccur, the discourse effect is that of a topic construction. In such constructions, the preposition may be eliminated from the phrase when the phrase precedes the verb, but not when it follows it:

- (9) a. Nyumba iyi mwana wanu waikamo njoka.
 house this child your SM-perf-put-encl snake
 'Your house, this child has put a snake in it.'
- b. Mwana wanu waikamo njoka mnyumba iyi.
 child your SM-perf-put-encl snake in-house this
 'Your child has put a snake in it, this house.'
- c. *Mwana wanu waikamo njoka nyumba iyi.

This inclusion of the preposition in these antitopic constructions would of course be expected if the antitopics were not in fact related to the syntactic argument structure by anaphora, but were themselves arguments governed by the verb. However, it does not seem to pattern quite as that analysis would predict, either. For it seems that what is at stake is the representation not so much of the syntactic role of the argument as of certain semantic information. This can be seen most clearly in the behavior of antitopics related to the French oblique clitics, 'y' and 'en'. 'Y' is a pronominal equivalent to a prepositional phrase with 'à', and 'en' to one with 'de'. Now among verbs which take arguments expressed as prepositional phrases, some seem to require the preposition as a kind of syntactic case marking while others seem to require it by virtue of some semantic information it contributes to the predication (Bresnan 1980). Certain properties have been suggested to distinguish the two cases; for example, the choice of preposition tends to be invariant when the marking is principally syntactic, but not when it is semantic. Thus there is a difference between a verb like 's'interesser à', which occurs in (10), in which the marking of the oblique argument with 'à' is invariant and therefore may be said to be of the syntactic type, and one like 'aller', which occurs in (11), in which 'à' seems to contribute semantic information, as suggested by the fact that it may be replaced by other locative prepositions, depending upon the meaning: It is possible to say not only 'aller à la plage' but also 'aller chez les Dupont', 'aller vers l'eau', etc.

Now in antitopic constructions, including the preposition is preferable in both cases. But it is possible to leave it out where it functions like syntactic case marking, while it is absolutely impossible to do so where it plays a semantic role:

(10) a. Je m'y intéresse plus, moi, à cette femme.
'I'm not interested in her any more, that woman.'

b. ?Je m'y intéresse plus, moi, cette femme.

(11) a. J'y vais plus, moi, à cette plage.
'I don't go there any more, to that beach.'

b. *J'y vais plus, moi, cette plage.

Exactly the same difference arises with arguments represented by 'en'. In the verb 'se souvenir de', in (12), the marking of the oblique argument with 'de' has the properties of syntactic case marking, while with the verb 'venir', in (13), 'de' clearly contributes semantic information. Again, in antitopic constructions it is possible to omit the 'de' in the former case but never the latter:

(12) a. Je m'en souviens bien, moi, de cette nuit à Paris.
'I remember it well, that night in Paris.'

b. ?Je m'en souviens bien, moi, cette nuit à Paris.

(13) a. J'en suis venu il y a quelque jours, de Paris.
'I came from there a few days ago, Paris.'

b. *J'en suis venu il y a quelque jours, Paris.

Finally, indirect objects, which in French are marked with 'à', pattern with the syntactic cases in that it is not impossible to omit the 'à' from antitopic constructions:

(14) a. Mes parents ont donné une voiture à mon frère pour son anniversaire.

'My parents gave my brother a car for his birthday.'

b. Mes parents lui ont donné une voiture pour son anniversaire, à mon frère.

'My parents gave him a car for his birthday, my brother.'

c. ?Mes parents lui ont donné une voiture pour son anniversaire, mon frère.

Thus there is clearly an asymmetry between topics and antitopics with respect to the case-marking predictions of the anaphoric analysis, but it does not seem to derive from the antitopics' actually being arguments governed by the verb.

Locality. A similar asymmetry arises with respect to the issue of locality. In French, while a topic can be separated by one or more clauses from the argument to which it is bound, an antitopic cannot be:

- (15) a. Pierre, les censeurs ont interdit tous les films qui le passionnent.
 'Pierre, the censors have forbidden all the films which excite him.'
- b. Les films qui le passionnent, Pierre, ils ont tous été interdits.
 'The films which excite him, Pierre, have all been forbidden.'
- c. *Les films qui le passionnent, ils ont tous été interdits, Pierre.

The same difference appears to obtain in Chichewa:

- (16) a. Alenje asilikali a ganyu anapha njuchi zimene zinawaluma.
 hunters soldiers of temporary work bees rel SM-past-OM-bite-indic
 'The hunters, the mercenaries killed the bees that bit them.'
- b. Njuchi zimene zinawaluma alenje zinali zaululu.
 bees rel SM-past-OM-bite-indic hunters SM-past-be poisonous
 'The bees that bit them, the hunters, were poisonous.'
- c. *Njuchi zimene zinawaluma zinali zaululu alenje.
 bees rel SM-past-OM-bite-indic SM-past-be poisonous hunters
 'The bees that bit them were poisonous, the hunters.'

Again, while this constraint is not what would be expected of an anaphoric relation, it does not have quite the characteristics which would be expected of a grammatical agreement relation, either. Within the lexical functional theory of grammar, in order for a syntactic structure to be well-formed, the arguments governed by a predicator are required, except where certain conditions for control are met, to either be expressed syntactically within the phrasal structure headed by the predicator or expressed morphologically on the head itself. Under this definition, if the antitopics were actually arguments, the sentences in (17) and (18) would be expected to be bad, yet they are fine in both French and Chichewa:

- (17) Les discipliner est complètement impossible, ces enfants.
 'To discipline them is completely impossible, those children.'
- (18) Kuwachatamitsa ndi kovuta, ana awa.
 inf-OM-discipline is difficult, children those
 'To discipline them is difficult, those children.'

Instead what seems to be required is that the antitopic be in the same clause as the pronoun to which it is related, as suggested by the fact that (19a) is ungrammatical for speakers who would otherwise accept (19b):

- (19) a. *Pour Marie de les discipliner est complètement impossible,
 ces enfants.
 'For Mary to discipline them is completely impossible, those children.'
- b. Pour Marie de les discipliner est complètement impossible.
 'For Mary to discipline them is completely impossible.'

Similar evidence comes from possessive constructions. For at least some

speakers in French, and in Chichewa, it is possible for an antitopic to be related to a possessive adjective:

(20) Leur voiture est complètement cassée, mes parents.
 'Their car is completely wrecked, my parents.'

(21) Bwato wao waswekeratu wonse makolo anga.
 canoe their it-perf-smash all parents my
 'Their canoe is completely smashed, my parents.'

Here again, if the antitopics were actually arguments, the constraint on the locality of arguments defined above would erroneously require them to appear within the subject noun phrase, whereas all that in fact seems required is that they remain within their clause.

I do not have an explanation for these facts -- possibly they derive from more general restrictions on cataphora. The point is simply that, as with the case-marking properties of antitopics, the locality constraint to which they appear to be subject does not seem to derive from their being arguments with which the clitics might be showing grammatical agreement. In fact Lambrecht offers some suggestions for these properties of antitopics based on their pragmatic functions; and the apparent semantic character of these patterns, together with their occurrence in Chichewa, lends plausibility to this approach.

Independent and clitic pronouns. There also seems to be some positive evidence in favor of the anaphoric analysis. In addition to its clitic pronouns, French has a series of independent pronouns. It has sometimes been suggested (Cowper 1979) that antitopic constructions are only possible when the pronoun to which the antitopic is related is a clitic pronoun. In fact, it has sometimes been suggested that preverbal topic constructions are also restricted in this way (Lambrecht 1981). If this were the case, the construction would certainly bear a strong resemblance to grammatical agreement. Basically my argument against this position is simply that the facts are otherwise, as shown by the grammaticality for at least some speakers of sentences like (22); and that it is implausible to suggest that such constructions involve anything other than an anaphoric relation.

(22) Pierre se bat avec elle sans cesse. Marie.
 'Pierre fights with her all the time, Marie.'

But I mention it here because I think the difficulty of getting clear judgments about the data in this area arises for an interesting reason. As in many languages with two series of pronouns, the independent pronouns in French normally have a contrastive function, while the clitics have an anaphoric one (Bresnan and Mchombo 1986). But because the usual anaphoric pronouns are verbal clitics, there are some constructions in which they cannot appear for purely structural reasons. For example, given a verb which takes as an argument a prepositional phrase other than one with 'à' or 'de', the only way to express that argument pronominally is with an independent pronoun in a prepositional phrase, as in (22). In

these cases, the independent pronouns can serve either discourse role, but the possibility of the contrastive reading means that much more care must be taken in establishing a context suitable for an anaphoric reading. In fact, the very example given by Lambrecht to show that topics may not be bound to independent pronouns, as in (23a), is given in the context of an argument that the clitic system has undergone certain changes such that it is now possible for the oblique clitic 'y' to be used for human referents and it is therefore possible to use it in topic constructions such as (23b). The availability of the clitic would in fact be expected to make the choice of the independent pronoun impossible because of its discourse properties.

(23) a. *Son frère, Pierre pense à lui.
'His brother, Pierre thinks about him.'

b. Son frère, Pierre y pense.
'His brother, Pierre thinks about him.'

Anaphoric agreement. I would like to conclude this section on some difficulties in distinguishing sentence-internal anaphora from grammatical agreement in the case of antitopics with some comments on the role of agreement features such as person, number and gender in anaphora in general, and some further evidence that one view of the matter provides for the anaphoric analysis. It has been suggested (Wiese 1983) that syntactic conditions of agreement should not be required of anaphoric relations at all, in light of the fact that disagreement is clearly acceptable where the semantic interpretation justifies it:

(24) Ich habe das Mädchen gesehen als sie das Haus verliess.
'I saw the girl(neut) when she(fem) left the house.'

Nonconformity by a pronoun with some noun phrase with respect to agreement features may prevent that noun phrase from being picked up as the referent of the pronoun, but under certain conditions it need not do so. In contrast, he suggests, agreement is a syntactic condition whose violation results in ungrammaticality.

Now in French, there are some nouns with respect to which there may arise conflicts between grammatical and natural gender, such as 'la sentinelle', which is grammatically feminine but, meaning 'the sentinel', often has a male referent. In such cases, within a clause grammatical gender must be respected, while in deictic contexts, natural gender will be:

(25) La sentinelle est grande/*grand.
'The sentinel(fem) is tall(fem/masc).'

(26) Il/*Elle [pointing to a male sentinel] m'a poussé.
'He/She pushed me.'

In topic and antitopic constructions, either choice is possible, but in antitopic constructions the choice of natural gender may actually be preferred on the grounds that conformity to grammatical gender would mislead one's interlocutor:

- (27) a. La sentinelle, il/elle m'a poussé.
'The sentinel, he/she pushed me.'
- b. ?Elle/Il m'a poussé, la sentinelle.
'She/he pushed me, the sentinel.'

On the view of the role of agreement features outlined above, the possibility of the discrepancy is compatible with the view that antitopics (and topics) are involved in an anaphoric relation with the clitics, but not with the view that they are involved in a relation of grammatical agreement.

3. Non-Anaphoric Topics

Finally I would like to turn to a topic construction in spoken French which poses a different kind of problem for the anaphoric analysis. Lambrecht describes topic constructions in which the topic is simply not related at all to the argument structure of the verb:

- (28) a. La prison, y a pas à se plaindre.
'Prison, there's nothing to complain about.'
- b. Leurs cousins, les Becker, c'est la même chose.
'Their cousins, the Beckers, it's the same thing.'

Such topics do not occur in Chichewa. This suggests that they may be a rather different kind of phenomenon; and in fact, in French they do seem to have properties which set them apart. First, they seem to have to be followed by a subjective evaluation rather than by an objective proposition.⁴ This is true of both the examples in (28), and is shown in the contrast in (29):

- (29) a. Cet incendie de forêt, les pompiers sont arrivés juste à l'heure.
'That forest fire, the firefighters arrived just in time.'
- b. *Cet incendie de forêt, les pompiers sont arrivés à onze heures.
'That forest fire, the firefighters arrived at eleven o'clock.'

Second, they must be sentence initial. They cannot occur as antitopics:

- (30) a. *Y a pas à se plaindre, (à) la prison.
- b. *C'est la même chose, leurs cousins, les Becker.

More telling, usually when there is more than one topic their relative order is free:

- (31) a. Cet incendie de forêt, les pompiers, ils l'ont éteint sans problème.
'That forest fire, the firefighters, they put it out without trouble.'
- b. Les pompiers, cet incendie de forêt, ils l'ont éteint sans problème.
'The firefighters, that forest fire, they put it out without trouble.'

But where one topic is of the kind that is not related to an argument, that topic generally must be first:

- (32) a. Cet incendie de forêt, les pompiers, ils étaient formidables.
 'That forest fire, the firefighters, they were terrific.'
- b. *Les pompiers, cet incendie de forêt, ils étaient formidables.
 'The firefighters, that forest fire, they were terrific.'

Finally, there can be only one topic of this kind in a sentence.

The fact that these topics thus form an identifiable class seems to make it more appropriate than problematic that they should be analyzed in a somewhat different way from the anaphoric analysis given for most topics. And in fact they may have a rather different pragmatic function: They have sometimes been described as 'setting the scene', as 'themes', etc. (Chafe 1976).

It is interesting to note that only these non-anaphoric topics really share most of the characteristics attributed to topics in descriptions of 'topic-comment' languages, such as not being required to bear any relation to the argument structure of the verb, never numbering more than one in a sentence, and always occurring in sentence initial position (Li and Thompson 1976). However, spoken French does not in general seem to share the typological characteristics of topic-comment languages. For example, in prototypical topic-comment languages, constructions in which the topic names some category and the comment predicates some property of a member of that category, as in the following example from Japanese, are claimed to be pervasive:

- (33) Sakana wa tai ga oisii.
 fish top red snapper subj delicious
 'Fish, red snapper is delicious.'

But though such sentences are possible in French in certain contexts, they are not really typical. Similarly, in topic-comment languages non-anaphoric topics are not confined to subjective contexts as in French; they are perfectly natural in objective contexts in Mandarin, for example:

- (34) Nei-chang huo xiaofang-dui shiyi dian dao de.
 that-classifier fire fire-brigade 11 o'clock arrive particle
 'That fire, the firefighters arrived at 11 o'clock.'

4. Conclusion

A variety of constructions have been characterized as topics in descriptions of various languages. Although there are clearly certain pragmatic and formal properties which such constructions share, in other respects they seem to form a rather heterogeneous group. Within French alone it is possible to distinguish topics, antitopics and these non-anaphoric topics. But it also seems that if the differences among these different kinds of topics are recognized, a certain order emerges amidst the heterogeneity, and a formal analysis based on a distinction between discourse functions and argument functions can be maintained.

Notes

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²The relation of these elements to the verb may be more accurately described by the term 'incorporated pronoun' than by the term 'clitic'; but in the absence of an analysis to decide the question I will simply follow traditional usage in calling them clitics. For the sake of convenience I will also represent them with the orthography of written French, which does not reflect the phonetic erosion they typically undergo. For a thorough description of the clitic system of spoken French see Lambrecht (1981).

³Such constructions are frequently referred to as 'afterthoughts' and are sometimes claimed to result from a planning error whereby the speaker erroneously assumes that a referent is sufficiently recoverable for a pronoun to be used but, realizing too late that it is not, adds a full noun phrase at the end of the clause (Givon 1976). Lambrecht convincingly argues that antitopics should be distinguished from such constructions because of their frequency, the identifiability of their pragmatic function in discourse, and the fact that while afterthoughts are typically stressed and preceded by a pause, antitopics are unstressed and not preceded by a pause. To these arguments I would add the frequency with which first and second-person independent pronouns serve as antitopics: It would make no sense to claim that a speaker might suddenly realize that the referent of a first or second person pronoun -- namely, the speaker or his addressee -- was not readily recoverable from the discourse.

⁴It is not surprising that subjectivity should be an important concept in topic constructions. The very notion of a topic implies a kind of invitation on the part of the speaker for a particular point of view to be shared with respect to the discourse. This is at least partly why definiteness is so important with respect to topics: The use of a definite article likewise typically creates a shared world between the speaker and his addressee.

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