

A UNIFIED VIEW OF TOPIC*
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1. Introduction

When a child is just learning to speak, no matter what the language, a natural clustering of concepts would seem to be that, in the presence of a hearer,

- the child would wish to speak about something
- what the child wishes to speak about is something the child is attending to; it is the focus of the child's attention
- it is present in his or her immediate environment at that moment
- it is concrete and visible
- it is something the child is interested in
- it has also been made to be the focus of the hearer's attention
- it ipso facto has already been introduced into the hearer's consciousness
- this focus of the child's attention is the entity which is the important element in the child's view of the event -- it is the entity from the point of view of which the child views the event.

For example, if a child says (from Ochs Keenan and Schieffelin 1976:340f.),

1. Allison IV, 22 months
 - a. Allison: (looks in box, finding calf) cow/
 - b. Mother: A cow!
 - c. Allison: (holding calf) moo/↑
 - d. Mother: Moo, cow says moo.

the child usually either is confident that the hearer is attending to the box and to what is in it or has first secured the attention of the hearer on the box (ibid.:355), either verbally or with gestures. The calf is present, concrete and visible, and is the element from whose point of view the child is viewing the event.

In this paper I will argue that this clustering of concepts is universally the prototype for what we mean by the topic of a discourse or utterance for adults as well as for children. For adults as well as for children, the clustering of most if not all of the above characteristics is more natural than a lack of such a clustering. Many acute observers have discussed one or more of these concepts as attributes of topics, and have made real and accurate observations about the relation between topichood and one or more of these attributes. But the work was only partial: like the blind men with the elephant, they did not capture the whole truth about the nature of topics. With a prototypical view of topic, all these attributes can be combined into one definition of topic, and the relations between them can be studied. When all these attributes do not cluster in a certain entity, languages have recourse to less usual, more marked syntactic constructions, and there are constructions whose job it is to separate out

elements from this clustering of attributes when not all of them hold (see Van Oosten 1984).

Many observers have also noted certain correlations between topics and formal aspects of languages, specifically with subjecthood and with initial position in the sentence. It is harder to argue that having these attributes is a universal property of prototypical topics, because of difficulty with the notion that there may be universal prototypes for syntactic constructions, as I will discuss in Section 4. I tentatively claim, nevertheless, that the prototypical topic bears a close relation to subject and claims initial position in the sentence.

In this paper I will also argue that there are different types of topics analogous to the different levels of natural categories (Rosch 1978), namely that there are superordinate, basic-level and subordinate topics. The distinction I propose here is different from that between sentence topics and discourse topics (Ochs Keenan and Schieffelin 1976, van Dijk 1977). By recognizing discourse topics one is able to understand how there can be a succession of different sentence topics in a discourse which remains "on topic." The discourse topic is, as it were, the umbrella which unifies the different sentence topics. Similarly, there can be layers of discourse topics. Each higher discourse topic regulates the succession of the discourse topics in the next lower level in a discourse which remains on topic.

Whereas discourse and sentence topics are topics (of different levels) actually occurring in a discourse, superordinate, basic-level and subordinate topics are a categorization of topics. Distinguishing between superordinate, basic-level and subordinate topics makes it possible to describe one more way in which sentence topics can change while the discourse remains coherent. Not only can one change basic-level topics within one superordinate topic, but one can also switch from the basic level to the subordinate level (as well as to the superordinate level) and back again.

In the next section I will discuss the layering of topics and the relation between on the one hand superordinate, basic-level and subordinate topics, and on the other hand discourse and sentence topics. In Section 3 I will discuss the structure of prototypical topics and the semantic correlates of the pragmatic attributes of topics. In Section 4 I will discuss the possibility of there being syntactic characteristics like initial position and subjecthood in the universal prototype for topic.

2. The Layering of Topics

Consider the following sentence[1]:

2. Your cup is on the table.

Imagine that the hearer is having tea at the speaker's home. The cup in question is then probably the teacup that the speaker has designated for the hearer's use for the duration of the visit. Speakers of English and members of the English/North American culture (at least) have a cognitive schema for this kind of

situation, which we shall call the tea-party schema. Topics for a discourse where 2 might be used are concerns like the location of the hearer's cup, getting tea, enjoying oneself, being sociable and polite, etc. The sentence topic of 2 picks a salient entity -- in fact, two -- from the given actualized schema, or scene, in "your cup."

By a "discourse topic" I mean a schema, scene or other semantic network previously evoked in the discourse and which is still "relevant." Discourse topics are of the following types:

- cognitive schemata (standard, hypothetical knowledge structures that human beings use to interpret their environment) and parts of cognitive schemata;
- actualized scenes (actualized schemata) or parts of actualized scenes;
- evaluations or opinions about schemata or scenes that are operative at the point in discourse under consideration (see Schank 1977:426);
- generalizations on a set of schemata or scenes which includes one or more of the schemata or scenes which are discourse topic(s) at the point in discourse under consideration (*ibid.*);
- examples of relevant schemata, scenes, evaluations or generalizations.

Discourse topics are layered: each higher discourse topic has the next lower discourse topic as a part or as an example, or is an evaluation or generalization of the next lower discourse topic. In the above example, the cognitive schema is the tea-party schema, by which a certain set of expectations and judgments is aroused in the participants in the actualized tea-party scene. Any element of this discourse topic can be focused on and become the sentence topic, although because of human beings' "egocentric bias" (Zubin 1979) the human participants in the scene (actualized schema) are the most likely to become sentence topic. Nevertheless, other important or less important elements in the scene, such as the teacup in 2 above (with its relation to the person designated to use the teacup), can also become sentence topic. By "sentence topic" I mean a constituent inside a sentence which constitutes the locus, or "active zone"[2], of the discourse topic evoked in the current sentence.

The division of topics into superordinate, basic-level and subordinate topics is a categorization of topics. Cognitive schemata, actualized scenes, generalizations and evaluations are types of superordinate topics. Individual participants or elements inside the schema or scene are basic-level topics. Major participants inside the schema or scene are more prototypical basic-level topics than minor participants. Subordinate topics are the aspect or aspects of the basic-level topic that are relevant at the given point in the discourse. In the example above, the discourse topics are superordinate topics. The guest and the teacup are basic-level topics. Other possible basic-level topics are the host, other guests, and other accoutrements of the

tea-party schema or scene. Subordinate topics in the example above are the guests' appearance and clothing, the handle of the teacup, etc.[3]. For example, the sentence topic of 3b is a subordinate topic:

- 3a. I can't use that cup.
- b. The handle's broken.

Further examples of subordinate topics are found in 4b,c,d:

- 4a. When John came to the tea-party, he was a mess.
- b. His shirt-tails were hanging out,
- c. his hair had engine-oil in it,
- d. and his pants were ripped.

When the sentence topic moves from John to his shirt-tails, the move is from a basic-level to a subordinate topic. It is possible, under certain conditions which space considerations preclude me from going into here, to move from a basic-level topic to a subordinate topic which is an aspect of the basic-level topic without loss of coherence. When the sentence topic is a subordinate topic as in 4b,c,d, then the lowest discourse topic -- here, John -- is a basic-level topic.

An example of superordinate topics at the sentence level is found in the following passage from the Judiciary-Committee version of the Watergate Tapes (Rodino 1974:4):

- 5. President: (a) Goldwater put it in context, he said
"Well, for Christ's sake, everybody
bugs everybody else. We know that."
- Dean: (b) That was, that was priceless.
- Haldeman: (c) Yeah.
- (d) I bugged--
- President: (e) Well, it's true.
- (f) It happens to be totally true.

One of the discourse topics of the section that this fragment is in is the Watergate-bugging scene, including the Watergate hearings, and an evaluation about this scene, something like "All the ruckus about these buggings is ridiculous." Relevant schemata, and thus further discourse topics at this point, are the American government and the presidency. The Watergate-bugging scene matches part of a schema of government officials' illegal activities, and perhaps part of a schema of the American government, if our schema of the American government includes the evaluation that it is corrupt.

In 5, these are the discourse topics. It in 5a refers to the Watergate buggings and the attendant upset; this is the sentence topic. Goldwater, the subject, is not the sentence topic but the locus or active zone of an example of an evaluation on the schema of government officials' illegal activities, specifically their bugging operations, which has not been mentioned before. That Goldwater becomes the active zone of this example has to do with the fact that a human being or an agent is, for humans with their egocentric bias, the most salient part of a scene and so becomes the entity that is mentioned in order to bring the whole scene into consciousness (cf. Zubin 1979). The discourse topic, a

superordinate topic, is brought down to sentence-topic level in the form of the pronoun it. Later it will become a discourse topic again.

In 5b exactly the same thing happens. The scene of Goldwater offering an opinion on bugging has been mentioned and can become a topic and a sentence topic, which it does, referred to by the demonstrative that. In 5c and 5d Haldeman begins to offer an example of Goldwater's evaluation, with himself as the salient entity, the active zone. (Because of the egocentric bias, speaker -- and hearer -- can always become sentence topic.) In 5e and 5f, the president is still on the superordinate level, with it referring to the superordinate-level notion "Everybody bugs everybody else," an evaluation on the schema of government officials' illegal activities[4].

In example 5, then, a superordinate topic becomes the sentence topic three times, whereas the sentence topic is a basic-level topic only once. It is in narratives, in the sections of the narrative that are concerned with the actual recounting of events, that sentence topics most frequently are basic-level topics. In evaluatory or philosophical settings in everyday speech, you find more superordinate topics, encapsulated into pronouns without precise antecedents, or into nominalizations or other abstract nouns, or into complex noun phrases. Labov (1972) has analyzed the structure of oral narrative to potentially include, in addition to the actual recounting of the events, an abstract -- a summary of the whole story -- and an orientation, an evaluation, and a coda. Most superordinate sentence topics occur in narratives at the points of evaluation and orientation and at the coda.

The following (from a personal tape recording) is an example of a narrative in which all sentence topics are basic-level topics, except at points of orientation and evaluation (including coda). The story concerns a periodontist, his dental assistant, named Joan, and a patient. Example 6 gives the beginning of the narrative: the orientation. The underlined sentence is the orientation; its sentence topic is the last thing that happened. Right after that the speaker launches into her story and the sentence topics become basic-level topics: the periodontist.

6. J. [...] he was- ... quite attractive but-
 from what Joan tells me...
 You know from the stories she tells me about how
 he is as a boss
 he's- he's got his real creepy side too.
 G. What's "creepy" mean.
 J. Well I mean the way he treats he::r
I mean I- you know I could-
the last thing that happened for example
 he went out for lunch...
 and he was supposed to be back at one,
 and he had two patients [...]

In the rest of the narrative, it is only at points of evaluation and at the coda that we have sentence topics which are other than the human protagonists in the story. Example 7 contains a point of evaluation:

7. J. And..she was sure that he [the patient] would be less nervous in the waiting room...you know reading a magazine
 than- sitting in a chair with- you know all this -unfamiliar stuff
 and [listening to her sharpening instruments.
 G. [mhm
 J. So, .. that made a lot of sense.
 =So,...twenty::...well after two-thirty.
 Her boss came back.

The underlined section is a point of evaluation in the narrative. At two other points of evaluation, and again at the coda, superordinate topics show up. The other sentences all have basic-level sentence topics.

It is remarkable in this narrative how consistently non-basic-level sentence topics come up only at points of evaluation. But judging from other narratives presented in the literature, it is not at all unique in this way. Up until now, theories about topichood have been tested almost exclusively using narratives, and then mostly with the part of the narrative dealing with the actual events. This has made it seem as if most sentence topics are basic-level topics and has made it impossible to consider the interplay between basic-level and superordinate topics at the sentence level, as well as the interplay between sentence and discourse topics.

But even though a superordinate sentence topic comes up frequently in certain positions in a discourse, some of which are quite well-defined, this type of topic is not prototypical. For example, it seems to be something which is learned later. Labov (1972) argues that the ability to use increasingly complex evaluatory comments improves with age and varies with the cultural environment, and facility in the use of superordinate topics as sentence topics is no doubt correlated with facility in the use of evaluatory comments, since the former are greatly used in the expression of the latter.

In other words, up until now, people have concentrated mostly on the most prototypical type of topics -- basic-level topics. This is a bit of weak evidence that basic-level topics are indeed the most prototypical.

Discourse and sentence topics are then a different kind of notion than what I mean by superordinate, basic-level and subordinate topics. The former are a designation of topics with regard to their role in a discourse, whereas the latter are a categorization into types of topics regardless of how they are used. The advantage of categorizing topics into superordinate, basic-level and subordinate ones is that it gives us a better understanding of the structure of discourse on the one hand, with

its recounting and its evaluatory sections, and the progression of topics in a discourse on the other hand, by enabling us to talk about the interplay between these three. It also enables one to see the interplay between discourse and sentence topics: how a discourse topic can become a sentence topic and then move back up to resume its status as a discourse topic.

3. Prototypical Topics

In the Introduction I suggested that the characteristics of prototypical topics clustered naturally: what a person speaks about is the focus of the speaker's attention and of the hearer's attention and thus in their consciousness; it is something that the speaker is interested in and that is the point of view from which the speaker is viewing the event; and it is present in the immediate environment, concrete and visible.

Prototypes tend to have a small set of attributes which are necessary conditions for membership in the category, along with a number of other characteristics which are neither necessary nor sufficient but which in the simplest case cluster with the necessary conditions. Prototypical topics are no exception. With prototypical topics, the necessary attribute is aboutness; and being in the speaker's consciousness and the focus of the speaker's attention is a natural consequence of what it means for someone to say something about something else. The other attributes are not necessary conditions for topichood. Thus the entity referred to by the topic does not have to be the hearer's focus of attention or even in the hearer's consciousness. Nor does the entity have to be in speaker's and hearer's immediate presence; nor does it have to be concrete: as we saw in Section 2, discourse topics tend not to be concrete but tend to be superordinate topics, that is, semantic networks like schemata or scenes, or evaluations or generalizations on schemata or scenes. And a topic does not have to be the entity from whose perspective the speaker views the event or state, though this attribute clusters with the necessary conditions for topichood more consistently than the others do (cf. Kuno 1976).

These pragmatic notions involved in the characterization of prototypical topics have semantic reflexes. Semantic notions often associated with topichood are in the first place, referentiality and definiteness (Li and Thompson 1976; Schachter 1977), and in the second place, agency (Hawkinson and Hyman 1974; MacWhinney 1977; Bates and MacWhinney 1982). In the third place, the above description of a prototypical topic implies that the prototypical topic is a basic-level topic.

Let us first look at agency as a reflex of the discourse characteristics of prototypical topics. The correlation of agency with topichood is related to what Zubin (1979:476) calls speakers' normal "focus of interest," which is as much like themselves as possible (their egocentric bias). This makes human beings the most likely thing human beings would want to talk about. We saw in the narrative presented in 6-7 that indeed, most of the

sentence topics are human beings. Further, among human beings agents are "cognitively salient" to humans, and as such more likely to be things that the speaker will want to speak about. So the relation of agency to topichood is based on humans' predilection for concerning themselves with, and thus for speaking about, entities as much like themselves as possible.

Referentiality is a reflex of the fact that the prototypical topic is concrete and visible, and definiteness is a reflex of the fact that the prototypical topic is the focus of both the speaker's and the hearer's attention. It is clear, of course, that much adult discourse is about entities that are not in the immediate presence of the speakers. However, the more referential a topic is the more it resembles the prototype -- so prototypical topics are referential and definite.

The prototypical topic is a basic-level topic. Human beings tend to focus on entities at the basic level, whether the actual entity that is being referred to by it is larger or smaller than the basic level. We saw in example 5 that Nixon refers to Goldwater in order to evoke the scene of Goldwater offering an opinion on bugging. When Haldeman, in 5c-d, wants to offer an example of the truth of Goldwater's statement, he moves right down to the active zone of the example: I in 5d. And we saw that in the narrative presented in 6-7 most of the sentence topics were basic-level topics, except in the evaluatory and orientation parts of the narrative.

Examples of active zones being used to evoke entire schemata, scenes or examples are all over. The passage below offers a very obvious example, from the Judiciary-Committee transcript shortly after the passage quoted in 5:

9. P: (a) What is the situation on your, uh, on the, on the little red box?
 (b) Did they find what the hell that, that is?
 (c) Have they found the box yet?
 D: (d) Gray has never had access to the box.
 (e) He is just now going to pursue the box.
 ...
 P: (f) They -- The Bureau better get over pretty quick and get that red box.
 (g) We want it cleared up. [Unintelligible]
 D: (h) That's exactly the way I, I gave it to Gray.
 (i) I, uh, uh --
 P: (j) We want it cleared up.
 (k) We want to get to the bottom of it.
 (l) If anybody is guilty over here we want to know.

At the beginning of this passage the president brings up another embarrassing situation for the White House on which he wants action. He refers to this situation throughout by its active zone, the little red box. (Between 9e and 9f are twelve clauses in which the scene is only referred to via the little red box.) That this basic-level object has evoked an entire scene is shown by the fact that Nixon can bring the scene, a discourse topic,

down to the sentence-topic level with the pronoun *it* in 9g,j,k without previously referring to the scene in any other way than via the little red box. It is only because the little red box evokes a whole scene that hearers have no problem fixing on a referent for they in 9b,c, as shown by Dean's response in 9d.

Similarly, the topics in topic-prominent languages like Chinese, Japanese or Korean are frequently the active zones of the discourse topics to which they allude. The following examples are taken from Li and Thompson 1976:462, 468 (see, however, note 1):

- 9a. Nèi - chang huǒ xìngkuì xiǎofang-duì láide
that-classifier fire fortunately fire-brigade come
kuài (Chinese)
quick
"That fire (topic), fortunately the fire-brigade came quickly."
- b. Sakana wa tai ga oisii. (Japanese)
fish top. red snapper subj. delicious
"Fish (topic), red snapper is delicious."
- c. Pihengki - nǎn 747 - ka khī - ta (Korean)
airplane - top. - subj. big - stative
"Airplanes (topic), the 747 is big."

In 9a the topic nèichang huǒ evokes the entire scene of the fire; the subject xiǎofang-duì picks out the part of the scene that is going to be talked about in the sentence. In 9b, the topic sakana evokes the fish-eating schema, and the subject tai picks out the particular fish that is going to be talked about in this sentence. Similarly for 9c: the topic pihengki evokes the discourse topic of airplanes and flying; the subject 747 picks out the particular (type of) airplane.

I suggest that in the topic-prominent languages of the type exemplified in 9 it is also the case that in spite of the presence of a syntactic topic in the sentence another element in the sentence can also have topical properties. In the three examples looked at here, it is the subject which has topical properties, but I do not wish to suggest that this always has to be the case; nor do I wish to suggest that there must always be another topical element in the sentence. In the Chinese examples in 10 (from Li and Thompson 1976:479), for example, the rest of the sentence is (most likely) all comment:

- 10a. Huáng - sè de tǔ-dì dàfen zuì héshi
yellow - color rel. soil manure most suitable
"The yellow soil (topic), manure is most suitable."
- b. Nèi - zuo fángzi xìngkuì qù - nián
that - classifier house fortunate last - year
méi xià xuě
not down snow
"That house (topic), fortunately it didn't snow last year."
- c. Dòngwu wǒ zǔzhang bǎo - shǒu zhèngcè
animal I advocate conservation policy
"Animals (topic), I advocate a conservation policy."

In all three sentences of 10, it is very possible that the whole rest of the sentence is brand-new and no element is the particular focus of the speaker's attention (it is impossible to know for sure, of course, without context). Each of these examples is striking, however, by the way the syntactic topic is the active zone of the relevant schema or scene and is used to evoke the entire schema or scene. In spite of the existence of sentences like those in 10, nevertheless sentences like those in 9 show that in topic-prominent languages the syntactic topic is not the only element in the sentence which can have topic properties.

4. Syntactic Reflexes of Topics

In previous sections we have seen a little of the nature of topics in language. It now remains for us to see if topics have any regular connection with any syntactic structures or elements. This question can be asked on a language-specific level and on a universal level. In discussions of both questions, the syntactic characteristics which have come up most frequently in connection with topics have been subjecthood and initial position in the sentence.

As alluded to in the Introduction, because prototypes are claimed to have psychological reality, there is a problem with claiming that there may be universal syntactic prototypes for syntactic constructions, (cf. Dahlstrom 1984). It is not a problem language-internally to postulate psychological reality for a certain syntactic construction, since one can make the psychological reality contingent on knowledge of the language. And the requirement of psychological reality is no problem universally as far as discourse notions like "topic" are concerned, if one assumes that the human race is more or less homogeneous as regards its psychological make-up and needs. However, even a universal prototype for "topic" becomes problematical as soon as one adds to the prototype syntactic notions like sentence-initial position or subjecthood. When one adds syntactic facts to the prototype, then one must deal with the question "For whom is this a prototype?" because syntactic facts vary so drastically from language to language.

For example, it may be argued that topics are prototypically sentence-initial for Chinese speakers. Certainly syntactic topics are sentence-initial in Chinese and other topic-prominent languages (cf. 9 and 10 above; and Li and Thompson 1976:465). However, topics are treated syntactically quite differently in English. In spite of that fact, do Chinese speakers and English speakers have the same syntactic prototype for topics?

It is difficult to conceive of a universal syntactic prototype, then, because syntax is too language-specific. There are, as far as I know, no syntactic facts, such as "prototypical topics are sentence-initial," which are universal. All typological studies are concerned with trends and implicational universals rather than absolute universals. The need for a particular construction in a particular language is usually very

much dependent on what G. Lakoff has called (personal communication) the "ecology" of the language, that is, the structure of the language as a whole. And in any case the particular form and function of a construction in a particular language is constrained by the rest of the ecology of the language. It is well-known that for every language, many constructions do not have equivalents in every other language, and some constructions -- particularly minor ones -- do not have equivalents in any other language. And relations between syntactic and semantic categories are never exactly the same across languages.

Thus, for example, the relation between the syntactic category subject, the semantic category agent and the discourse category topic, depends on the "ecological niche" of the syntactic subject in the language, that is, the place that the syntactic subject takes up in the ecology, or structure of the language. An obvious factor in the place of the syntactic subject in the ecology of a particular language is the question whether there is a syntactic topic in the language. This syntactic topic might then take over at least some of the topic function that a syntactic subject might have in another language. Conversely, a language without a syntactic topic will obviously have to find some other means of coding a pragmatic topic than via the syntactic topic (Bates and MacWhinney 1982:204). It must be remembered here, though, that syntactic topics in e.g. Chinese code discourse topics whereas subjects in English code sentence topics (see on this Van Oosten 1984). Other factors also influence the ecological niche of the syntactic subject; for example word order.

Further, there are problems with the claim that the universal topic prototype clusters with the formal properties of initial position and subjecthood in the face of such languages as Malagasy, where the unmarked position for the subject is final position in the sentence, though even so the subject is claimed to have some topic properties (Keenan 1976a).

On the other side of the problem is the fact that the connection of subjects, initial position, agents and sentence topics is remarkably consistent across languages, even if not universal. As concerns the relation between topic and initial position, both topic-prominent languages like Chinese, Japanese and Korean, and subject-prominent languages like Dutch (Van Oosten 1984) and Czech (as discussed by Prague School linguists), exploit this possibility. As concerns the relation between (sentence) topic and subject, many people have noted the remarkably consistent relation between the two (cf. e.g. Keenan 1976b and all of Li 1976, and Bates and MacWhinney 1982). Similarly, people have noted a relation between subjects and agents, which cluster naturally with (basic-level) topics, while we have seen in Section 3 that there is a natural correlation between agents and topics. These correlations are too frequent to be coincidental. If the topic prototype does not contain mention of syntactic

characteristics like subjecthood or initial position, then these correlations are not accounted for.

But other factors, such as conventionalization of structures and conflicting and nonprototypical demands on a linguistic interchange (Bates and MacWhinney 1982:190ff.), make the correlation between subjects, topics and agents less direct, even in languages like English for which such a prototypical correlation can fairly easily be argued. Problematic languages for the claim that topics are prototypically in initial position are verb-first languages (assuming that active zones of topics are prototypically entities of the type referred to by nouns) and Malagasy, where subjects do have topic properties but typically occur sentence-finally (Keenan 1976a). Classes of problematic languages for the claim that topics are prototypically subjects are topic-prominent languages, and ergative languages (cf. Dixon 1979 and Keenan 1976b:321). But note that I have shown in Section 3 that even in Chinese, Japanese and Korean, languages with syntactic topic, subjects are more topical than other elements in the sentence besides the syntactic topic, and that the syntactic topic usually does something different than the syntactic subject or the sentence topic does, for example, in English.

It is logically possible but practically inconceivable that speakers of one language (a verb-initial one) would consistently have verbs as their sentence topics and speakers of another language would consistently have nouns; or that speakers of one language (an ergative one) would consistently choose patients as the active zone of their topics and speakers of another language would consistently choose agents. The problematic languages should be studied again, now that there is more clarity on the nature of topics. Sentences should be studied in context, taking account of the progress of both discourse and sentence topics. It may very well be that precisely these problematic languages will advance our understanding of the nature of topics and their progress in discourse the most.

For now, I propose that the question whether there are syntactic reflexes in the universal prototype for topics be answered with a cautious "yes." It seems, after all, to be the most natural case to first express (the active zone of) what one is talking about and then say something about it; and given the correlation between agents and subjects, and the natural correlation between agents and topics, it would seem also to be the most natural case for a sentence topic to be a subject.

NOTES

- * I wish to thank George Lakoff, Gary Holland, and Tom Whitmore for their contributions to the ideas in this paper. Any errors or infelicities are of course my own. This paper has been revised since it was presented at the conference, to improve presentation and to reflect reactions from the audience.
- 1 I consider it very bad form to talk of the topic of a single sentence. It seems to me impossible to determine the topic of any sentence without knowing its place in the accompanying discourse. However, for the sake of simplicity we will start with a single sentence, being careful to create a discourse around it, and remaining aware there is danger of misrepresenting the true state of affairs in this method.
- 2 I am using the notion "active zone" in a way somewhat different from the way Langacker (this volume) usually uses it, but still, I believe, in a way that is in the spirit of Langacker's notion. In Langacker's examples, what is mentioned is usually larger than an active zone and has an active zone as part of it, rather than that what is mentioned is the active zone of the entire network or scene that is called up by the mention of the active zone: the opposite, in other words. Langacker gives the example in (i):
- (i) Susan has a cigarette in her mouth.
- The active zone of Susan is her mouth, and the active zone of the cigarette is one end of it.
- In spite of the fact that our uses of the term "active zone" seem to be opposite to each other, nevertheless I believe that these are but two sides to the same coin. See also Section 3 below, where I discuss the fact that the prototypical topic is a basic-level topic because of the tendency of speakers to pick out active zones out of more complex topics. I would also point out that Langacker requires my notion of "active zones" in order for his to work. In his example (i) above, note that our understanding of what the active zones of the participants Susan and cigarette are, depends on our knowledge of the cigarette-smoking schema. But what brings this schema to mind is the mention of participants in (an instantiation of) this schema, namely the cigarette and Susan's mouth: these are the active zones of the schema. In order to know that the active zones of Susan and the cigarette are, respectively, her mouth and the cigarette's end, therefore, we have to know of what schema Susan and the cigarette are (instantiations of) the active zones.
- 3 I am grateful to George Lakoff for this interpretation of the notion "subordinate topic."
- 4 The situation is a little more complicated. The proposition "everybody bugs everybody else" is itself not an evaluation but it implies an evaluation. We will ignore this complication here, as tangential to the topic at hand.

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