

A Comparative Study of Topic and Focus Constructions with Special Reference to Tzotzil

Author(s): John Myhill

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 John Myhill  
 University of Pennsylvania

## 0.0 Introduction

In this paper, I will discuss the manifestations of the pragmatic categories "topic" and "focus" in a number of languages. A functional rather than structural definition of these categories makes it possible to recognize as topic and focus marking syntactic phenomena not traditionally associated with these categories; for instance, it will be shown that the ergative case marks topics and the zero article marks focuses. This conclusion cannot be reached deductively using a purely structural analysis but is unavoidable given the functional parallels between constructions with these markings and constructions with markings traditionally associated with topics and focuses (Kuno 1973, Givón 1979).

## 1.0 Argument and sentence types

Studies of pragmatic concepts such as "givenness" and "definiteness" (cf. Chafe 1976, Givón 1978) have dealt primarily with the marking accorded individual arguments such as pronouns and articles. On the other hand, work such as Prince (1980, 1982) gives a detailed account of various functionally distinct types of non-canonical word order in English; such constructions are marked, so that the functional concepts discussed are only designed to be applicable to a small subset of the sentences of English. The approach taken here is somewhat different; it is designed to explain the marking accorded sentences rather than individual arguments and to accommodate all sentence types rather than only marked constructions. This is a formidable task and the present work is only a first attempt; the ultimate goal is a model of sentence-level grammar making reference only to pragmatic categories. This is of course an idealization, similar to the idealization of an autonomous syntactic component made by exponents of generative-transformational grammar (cf. Chomsky 1975) which has led to a greatly increased understanding of this component; a model of language integrating the syntactic and pragmatic components will not be possible until the properties of each in isolation are understood. There is no universally accepted functional metalanguage and the authors of the grammars I have consulted in preparing this study (with the exception of Kuno (1973) and Kiss (1981)) are unwilling or unable to indicate the marking associated with this or that pragmatic category in the languages they describe, so that it will often be necessary here to communicate marking of pragmatic categories through reference to syntactic categories.

Argument/constituent types may be divided into three categories according to their pragmatic status. The argument types described here may be nominal, verbal, adjectival, or adverbial, while the constituent types are verb+argument:

1) Arguments or constituents which are entirely presuppositional or given, that is, carried over from the immediately preceding discourse; pronouns most commonly fill this role, which will be referred to as "unmarked topic".

2) Arguments or constituents which interact with and effect some change in the presuppositions involved in the discourse beyond the immediate clause. Typically, these change the temporal or spatial context, add a character to the discourse register, change the state of some character, or single out an element of a presupposed set to the exclusion of the other members of this set.

3) "Accessory" arguments, which have no effect upon the discourse beyond the immediate clause.

The above definitions must be understood to represent ideal types, as the distinction between these categories is not always clear in a given language.

Sentences may be divided into four basic types:

A) Those containing two type 2 arguments or constituents; one of these is a "marked topic" ("marked" as opposed to "unmarked", not as opposed to "not having marking"), which sets a temporal, spatial, or personal context for the remainder of the sentence (Chafe 1976); the other brings about some change in the information status of the characters, context, or presuppositions involved in the surrounding discourse and leaves the information status of the marked topic relatively unaffected. If the marked topic has a syntactic role, it will usually be a subject. In a given language, the marked topic may not necessarily receive marking associated specifically with topics; a type A sentence may for example have two type 2 arguments in the predicate, neither of which are marked as topic. However, a type 2 argument may not be marked as a marked topic unless there is another type 2 argument in the clause.

B) The subject and the predicate form a single type 2 constituent; the predicate indicates a change in the information status of the subject rather than any other character, context, or set in the discourse register.

C) The subject is type 1 and the predicate is type 2 or 3.

D) The subject is type 2 and the predicate is type 1 or 3.

Section 2 below discusses sentence types A, B, and C; focus constructions such as sentence type D will be discussed in section 3.

## 2.0 Different types of subject-topic marking

### 2.1 Type A vs. types B and C.

Languages may mark the distinction between sentence types A, B, and C through word order or case-marking. Many languages distinguish A from B and C by means of word order by putting

marked but not unmarked topics in initial position; these topics will not necessarily be subjects although they will tend to be, since subjects are generally the most topical nominal arguments (Givón 1979). Languages at the VS end of the "VS to SV continuum" (Givón 1977) are of this type.

Type A sentences require two type 2 arguments; such sentences are more likely in some situations than in others. A sentence beginning a subsection of the discourse is likely to change the set of characters or the temporal or spatial context presupposed in the discourse; data taken from a text is divided by the author or editor into subsections (impartially if not entirely objectively) by means of paragraphing. In the Mayan language Tzotzil, which is solidly VOS, subjects and objects may be topicalized by being put in initial position and being marked with the enclitic -e; topicalization of subject and object is considerably more common in the first sentence of a paragraph than in other sentences, as is shown in Table 1 (1):

Table 1	Topics	Not topics	Topic %
Paragraph-initial	70	305	18.7
Other	160	2320	6.4

chi-square=65.62, p .01

Prince (1980) shows that left-dislocation in English (which is a marked topicalization in the terminology used here) is similarly especially likely in paragraph-initial sentences.

Givón (1977) has pointed out a parallel situation in Early Biblical Hebrew. The narrative tense and VS order were used for the "continuity" function when the same subject was maintained and the events were in narrative sequence; SV order and the perfect tense were used when there was a personal or temporal reorientation; the new subject would be a preverbal marked topic and the time reference would move backwards.

Givón (1979) has also shown that in a number of languages the syntactic role of direct object and its unmarked position are associated with introducing and reintroducing characters; thus direct objects are likely to be type 2 arguments, so that transitive sentences are likely to be type A while intransitive sentences are likely to be type B. In Tzotzil, the presence of an overt direct object makes subject topicalization much more common, as can be seen in Table 2:

Table 2	Topics	Not topics	Topic %
Overt object	59	201	22.7
No overt object	148	1240	10.7

chi-square=28.85, p .01

Prince (1982) reports a similar situation in English; here characters are normally introduced or reintroduced in sentence-final position so that this position tends to be occupied by type 2 arguments. Type 2 arguments with OTHER positions in canonical

word order may then be left-dislocated; however, there is no purpose in left-dislocating a type 2 argument from final position and in fact no left-dislocations occur from this position.

Prince (1982:8) also finds that topicalization in English has the function of marking "an open proposition as Chafe-given in the discourse" (Chafe 1976); for example, see 1 (Terkel 1974:191):

1) Q: Do all the long-haired guys bug you?

A: I don't want my son to have it. Now, the sideburns I wear because I do TV commercials and stuff. I'm in the modeling field.

Filling the open sentence "I wear the sideburns for X/some reason" interacts with the presuppositions involved in the surroundings discourse so that "the sideburns" becomes a marked topic.

Ergative case-marking also distinguishes type A sentences from types B and C; in an ergative case-marking system, transitive objects and intransitive subjects receive the same marking (the absolutive case) while transitive subjects receive different marking (the ergative case) (Dixon 1979); it was argued above that transitive subjects in general serve as marked topics, so that the ergative case marks marked topics. Hopper and Thompson (1980) give numerous examples of languages where ergative case-marking is restricted to certain types of transitive clauses, most commonly those with perfective verbs, those in which the object is affected, and those in which the object is referential. All of these are likely to be type A, i.e., have a marked topic as subject, because the predicate has some effect upon elements of the discourse other than the subject; perfective verbs change the temporal context, verbs affecting their objects change the information status of the object, and referential objects add a new character to the discourse register. On the other hand, imperfective verbs, verbs not affecting their objects, and predicates with non-referential objects primarily affect the information status of the subject so that clauses with these features are likely to be type B and their subjects marked with the absolutive.

In many ergative languages, the alternation between ergative and nominative transitive subjects is governed by a universal implicational pattern known as the "animacy hierarchy" (Silverstein 1976). 1st and 2nd person pronouns are highest on this hierarchy, followed by 3rd person pronouns, animate noun phrases, and finally inanimate noun phrases. The higher positions of the hierarchy are associated with nominative marking of the transitive subject while the lower positions are associated with ergative marking of the transitive subject; the most common "split ergative" patterns restrict ergative marking to nominal transitive subjects or nominal and 3rd person pronominal transitive subjects. A typical example of this is found in the Australian language Ngawun (Breen 1976):

- 2) panya-gka nantu-lpuḡu tyalaḡu  
 woman-ERG hold -pres baby ="The woman is holding the  
 baby."
- 3) ḡayu ṡiṡi ṡaya-lpuḡu  
 I(NOM)tree cut -pres="I'm cutting firewood."

This pattern is completely predictable if, as suggested here, the ergative case marks marked topics; since pronouns (especially the more "topical" 1st and 2nd person pronouns, cf. DeLancey (1981), Kuno and Kaburaki (1977)) are likely to be type 1 rather than type 2 arguments, they will normally be unmarked rather than marked topics, and so do not receive ergative marking; thus "split ergative" marking is a grammaticalized topicalization of the type described by Givón (1976, 1979).

## 2.2 Types A and C vs. B

Many languages mark the subject-topic of types A and C the same, while the subject of type B is marked differently; those distinguishing these types via word order are midway on the VS to SV continuum. Typical examples are 17th century Spanish (cf. Myhill 1982) and the Mayan language Chorti; in these languages, as in more strictly VS languages such as Tzotzil, marked topics are preverbal while subjects of type B sentences are not; thus transitive subjects still have a higher likelihood of being preverbal than intransitive subjects, as can be seen in Table 3 (2):

Table 3

Spanish	SV	VS	SV%
Transitive subjects	648	352	65%
Intransitive subjects	142	180	46%
		chi-square=43.40, p .01	
Chorti			
Transitive subjects	14	1	93%
Intransitive subjects	55	90	38%
		chi-square=17.01, p .01	

In these languages, in contrast to strictly verb-initial languages, unmarked topic-subjects such as non-contrastive pronouns and noun phrases with determiners are normally preverbal (Myhill 1982); as a result, text counts show about an even split between SV and VS order in these languages.

The same distinction between type A and C sentences on the one hand and type B sentences on the other is marked in Japanese by the alternation between the "topic" marker *-wa* and the "subject" marker *-ga* (Kuno 1973); unmarked topic *-wa* has been referred to as "anaphoric" while marked topic *-ga* has been referred to as "contrastive". Sentence 4 is an example of the use of anaphoric *-wa*:

- 4) John- wa hon- o yonda  
 John-TOPIC book-ACC read="Speaking of John, he read the  
 book."

In a sentence with a contrastive -wa, both the topic and the remainder of the sentence (the "comment") contrast with some other (mentioned or unmentioned) topic and comment. Thus the comment affects the presuppositions involved in the surrounding discourse and so the sentence is type A; this is illustrated in sentence 5, where the subject "many people" is not anaphoric:

- 5) Oozei-no hito - wa party-ni kimasita ga omosiroi  
 many people-TOPIC party-to came but interesting  
 hito - wa hitori mo imasen deshita  
 people-TOPIC one person even was not  
 "Many people came to the party, but there were none who  
 were interesting."

When the subject is not anaphoric and there is no contrast (type B), the subject is marked by -ga, as in sentence 6:

- 6) Sora-ga akai  
 sky red="Look! The sky is red!"

### 2.3. Types A, B, and C vs. D

The final stage in the VS to SV continuum may be exemplified by modern English and French; here, subjects of sentence types A, B, and C are all preverbal and the only remaining VS patterns are some type D sentences such as existentials and presentatives (Givón 1977). A parallel situation involving case-marking may be found in Filipino languages where every sentence has some argument with a "subject-topic" case-marker except existentials (Schachter 1976) or in Finnish where subjects are in the partitive in certain existential constructions and in the nominative otherwise (Itkonen 1979).

### 3.0 Focus marking

In this section, I will discuss some general characteristics of focus marking. Focus marking may be at the level of the sentence or the verb phrase and chooses a single argument which represents one or another of a set of values; this set is pragmatically or semantically implied in the discourse but need not be explicitly stated (Prince 1981). The remainder of the sentence or verb phrase is held constant or presupposed. The position associated with sentential focusing may be anywhere in the sentence; for instance, French focuses are clefted and referential focuses in Persian may be in sentence-initial position, separated from the verb (Haeri pc). On the other hand, verb phrase focus marking is limited to reordering and marking

within the verb phrase. Nevertheless, it is possible that sentential focus and verb phrase focus will be associated with the same position in a given language; this is the case for instance in Tzotzil, Hungarian (Kiss 1981) and Basque (Lafitte 1944).

The choice of a given item to be focused may be placed on a continuum according to the extent to which it violates presuppositions about which item would be chosen. At one end of the continuum are choices where no presuppositions are violated; the choice is "neutral". On the other end of the continuum are choices which are "contrastive", that is, where the choice of item contradicts presuppositions about which item would be chosen. For the sake of exposition, the following discussion will be limited to a characterization of the endpoints of this continuum, that is, "neutral" and "contrastive" choices; this of course is an oversimplification of the situation.

Focus marking may be either marked or unmarked, depending on the construction type and the language. For an argument to receive unmarked focus marking, it may be a marked or an unmarked choice; for an argument to receive marked focus marking, it must be contrastive.

Certain argument types are inherently more likely than others to be focused. The answer to a question is focused; this choice is usually neutral and hence receives unmarked focus marking but not marked focus marking. In English, focus intonation is unmarked but focus movement and clefting are marked (Harries-Delisle 1978): thus answers to questions receive sentential stress but are not focused unless contrast is implied (Givón 1979). In Tzotzil, focusing places arguments in preverbal position and is a marked construction (only 160 out of 3,323 (4.8%) subjects and objects in the data base were focused); answers to questions are not normally focused, as can be seen in 7 (Laughlin 1980:5):

- 7) Q: Bu ch - a -bat Lol?  
 where inc-2abs-go Larry="Where are you going, Larry?"  
 A: Ch - i -bat ta Jobel  
 inc-labs-go to San Cristóbal="I'm going to San  
 Cristóbal."

Focused arguments are typically contrastive, as for example in sentence 8 (Laughlin 1980:84):

- 8) L - i - y -ak' - b -otikótik j -ve7el-tikótik  
 cmp-labs-3erg-give-dat- excl. lerg-meal - excl.  
 7un, pero muk' x - i -ve7-otikótik  
 phrase-final but not sta-labs-eat- excl.  
 7un, y - u7n naka chij t - z -ti7-ik  
 phrase-final 3erg-because just mutton inc-3erg-eat-pl.  
 te yo7e  
 there  
 "He gave us a meal, but we didn't eat, because just mutton  
 they eat there."

On the other hand, in Hungarian (Kiefer 1966) and Basque (Lafitte 1944), marking of focus by word order is completely unmarked and so answers to questions must be focused by being put directly before the verb. So, in Basque, to answer the question "Who threw the vase?", it is necessary to say (Lafitte 1944:47):

- 9) Untzi- a - 0 aita - k aurdiki du  
 vase-the-ABS father-ERG throw aux="Father threw the vase."

Sentence 9 may also be translated as a marked focus construction: "It was father who threw the vase."

### 3.1 Focusing and the zero article

In many languages, the zero article on a direct object marks unmarked focus in that an object with the zero article is a member of a set; the set consists of those objects which are to some extent predictable from the semantic nature of the verb in that they are characteristically associated with the verb; the verb and object are semantically cognate. Each verb has a set of characteristic objects associated with it; when a non-specific object is selected from this set, it is given the zero article; when an object is taken from outside this set, it receives an article whether it is specific or not. See for example sentences 10-12 from Hungarian (Károly 1972:97):

- 10)\*Ceruzá- t néz  
 pencil-ACC see(3s)="He sees pencil."  
 11) Egy ceruzá- t néz  
 a pencil-ACC see(3s)="He sees a pencil."  
 12) Néz egy ceruzá- t  
 see(3s) a pencil-ACC="He sees a pencil."

Note that the direct object with an article may be focused or not. On the other hand, semantically predictable non-specific objects take the zero article; such objects are focused by a grammatical rule whether they are contrastive or not (Kiss 1981) (3), since they form part of a set and focusing is unmarked (A. Pap pc):

- 13) Inge -t próbál  
 shirt-ACC try on(3s)="He's trying on a (non-specific) shirt."  
 14)\*Próbál inge - t  
 try on(3s) shirt-ACC="He's trying on a (non-specific) shirt."

In fact, in Hungarian, ALL articleless verbal complements, which have the characteristic of being semantically cognate to the verb, are focused (Kiss 1981):

- 16) \*János ment mozi -ba (4)  
 John went(3s) movie-to="John went to the (non-specific)  
 movies."  
 17) János mozi -ba ment  
 John movie-to went(3s)="John went to the (non-specific)  
 movies."

Many languages allow direct objects to "incorporate" into the verbal complex, becoming essentially part of the verb and so being subject to word-internal phonological rules; the verb may be formally marked as intransitive. Typically, incorporated direct objects are non-referential, non-specific, and semantically cognate with the verb; the verb-object construction is essentially a single lexical item. This is the situation for example in the Oceanic languages Fijian (Arms 1974), Mokilese (Harrison 1976), and Woleian (Sohn 1975), the Austro-Asiatic language Temiar (Benjamin 1976) and the American Indian languages Paiute and Nahuatl (Sapir 1911). Thus "object incorporation" (Mardirussian 1976) is a type of verb phrase focusing.

Unlike other Mayan languages such as Yucatec (Bricker 1977), Tzotzil does not have object incorporation; however, the same principle applies since objects with no article are both semantically cognate to the verb and non-specific. These objects may be predictable or contrastive; if they are predictable, they occur in postverbal position while if they are contrastive, they are focused. Thus the percentage of focus movement in Tzotzil of articleless objects is fairly high. On the other hand, objects which have articles may have them either because they are specific or because they are non-specific but not semantically cognate to the verb; all the objects which are not semantically cognate to the verb will not be part of a set and thus not eligible to be focused (5), so that the percentage of focused objects with articles is considerably lower (see Table 4):

Table 4

Objects	Focused	Not focused	Focus %
With article	28	767	3.5
No article	38	387	8.9

chi-square=15.89

Just as the definite or indefinite article may mark verbal complements which are unpredictable in that they are not semantically cognate to the verb, they may also mark complements which are unpredictable in that they are contrastive. A typical example of this is shown in sentences 18-19 from Hungarian (A. Pap pc):

- 18) Egy borbély volt  
 a barber was(3s)="He was a barber." (as opposed to  
 anything else)

- 19) Borbély volt  
barber was(3s)="He was a barber." (neutral statement of fact)

Stockwell, Bowen, and Martin (1965) report a similar situation in Spanish.

In Persian, where -ra marks definite and specific (and normally non-cognate) direct objects, it may also distinguish contrastive objects from predictable objects (Haeri pc):

- 20) Man ingilisi-ra khoob yad gereftam  
I English well learned ="I learned English well." (as opposed to some other language)
- 21) Man ingilisi khoob yad gereftam  
I English well learned ="I learned English well." (neutral statement of fact)

### 3.2 Focus and aspect

There is a clear connection between focus and aspect; perfective verbs characteristically move the time reference forward (Hopper and Thompson 1980); on the other hand, in sentences with focused nominals, the verb must be presupposed information and hence the time reference CANNOT move forward; put another way, both focused nominals and perfective verbs normally represent the main assertion of the clause they occur in (Hopper 1979). Thus focused nominals and perfective aspect are incompatible. Focusing in Tzotzil is considerably more likely when the verb is imperfective than when it is perfective (see Table 5):

Table 5

Subjects and objects	Focused	Not focused	Focus %
Perfective	43	837	4.9
Imperfective	43	477	8.3

chi-square=6.49, p .01

In Hungarian, perfectivity is marked by verbal prefixes which are stressed and occupy focus position; the presence of a focused nominal forces the prefix out of this position; this means that the verb has been displaced as the main assertion of the clause (Kiss 1981):

- 22) A csapat el-vesztette a döntő- t  
the team away-lost(3s) the final-ACC="The team lost the final."
- 23) A csapat a döntő- t vesztette el  
the team the final-ACC lost(3s) away="It was the final that the team lost."

Similarly, in Russian, the imperfective form of the verb is used if some other arguments represents the main assertion of the

sentence even if the action described is perfective in meaning (Forsyth 1970):

- 24) Kto pisal                    Vaynu i Mir?  
 who wrote(imp.) war and peace="Who wrote War and Peace?"
- 25) Tolstoy pisal                Vaynu i Mir  
 Tolstoy wrote(imp.) war and peace="Tolstoy wrote War and Peace."

#### 4.0 Conclusion

The pragmatic categories "topic" and "focus" are still poorly understood and their manifestation in individual languages is obscured by interaction with marking of syntactic categories; comparative study shows, however, that in a given language this interaction consistently produces one of a number of patterns of word order or case-marking; for example, in every language with variable order of subject and verb which I have investigated, type A subjects are most likely to be preverbal, followed by type C subjects, and finally type B subjects. This word order typology was devised through study of languages in which the verb almost invariably precedes the object; the situation in OV languages is obviously quite different and remains to be investigated. Similarly, the "active" case-marking system of languages such as Guaraní (Gregores and Suárez 1967), where (in the traditional view, cf. DeLancey 1981) intransitive subjects are marked as transitive subjects if they are agentive and objects if they are not, may be entirely semantic in nature; if this is the case, the typology suggested here is not applicable to such systems (but see Munro and Gordon 1982, where it is argued that semantic and pragmatic factors in such systems are not necessarily independent); this question obviously must be left open here pending further research.

The connection between marked and unmarked topicalization has been common knowledge for some time (cf. Givón 1977); however, while marked focusing has received some attention (Harries-Delisle 1978, Prince 1978), unmarked focusing such as exists in Basque and Hungarian has been described as an idiosyncratic property of certain languages and to my knowledge no attempt has been made to relate the facts regarding unmarked focusing in various languages to each other or to what is known about marked focusing. It appears that a number of interesting generalizations may be made about the characteristics of marked and unmarked focus constructions so that a focus system such as that of Hungarian might be a grammaticalized version of a focus system such as that of Tzotzil. It would then be necessary to investigate the details of and motivation for this grammaticalization.

The typology of sentence types outlined in section 1 accounts for the data considered here. It must of course be recognized as preliminary in nature, since each sentence type has subtypes and

may be represented in a number of different ways; hopefully, further research will reveal correlations between various subtypes and representations. This work is also preliminary in that it cannot yet have any pretensions of explanatory adequacy. To say that the ergative case marks marked topics simply unifies two descriptive categories; this is a step in the right direction but does not in itself tell us exactly what these descriptive categories represent. It seems likely that they are manifestations of a category which is universal to human language, and which is described (doubtless imprecisely and inaccurately) in section 1 above; although work such as Li and Thompson (1976) and Van Valin and Foley (1980) has made it clear that there are no universal syntactic categories, there is no evidence to suggest that there are no universal pragmatic and semantic categories and in fact such categories are assumed to exist in various theoretical frameworks such as Van Valin and Foley's "Role and Reference Grammar" and Dik's (1981) "Functional Grammar" (6). The ultimate object of research here must be these categories rather than the details of their manifestation in one language or another (although the nature of the former may only be deduced through observation of the latter); thus it is the typology itself which is of primary theoretical interest, as it reveals the nature of the categories basic to the organization of language.

#### Footnotes

1. This and all data from Tzotzil is taken from Laughlin (1977, 1980).
2. This data is taken from, respectively, Cervantes (1605) and Fought (1972).
3. It is possible for an articleless verbal complement to occur outside of focus position, as this position may only be occupied by one argument or constituent; cf. fn. 4 and Kiss (1981) for details.
4. This sentence is only grammatical if "János" is given focus intonation, so that it means "It is John who went to the movies."; "moziba" is then displaced from focus position (cf. sentences 22-23).
5. That is, they will not be eligible to receive verb phrase focus; they may of course still receive sentence focus. Articleless objects, on the other hand, will always be eligible for both kinds of focus.
6. Linguists working within the framework of generative-transformational grammar (cf. Chomsky 1981) have incorporated thematic (semantic) roles into their model of language and it is probably only a matter of time until they do the same with pragmatic roles; cf. Kiss 1981 for such a discussion of Hungarian.

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