On Primary Topicalization

Author(s): József Andor

Proceedings of the 4th Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society (1978), pp. 18-30

Please see “How to cite” in the online sidebar for full citation information.

Please contact BLS regarding any further use of this work. BLS retains copyright for both print and screen forms of the publication. BLS may be contacted via <http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/>.

The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society is published online via [eLanguage](#), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

ON PRIMARY TOPICALIZATION

József Andor

Medical University of Pécs, Hungary
Department of Languages

0. There is a generally accepted view among linguists that, in sentences, the position in front of the verb (subject position in a number of languages) and the position immediately behind the verb (direct object position) are engaged by nouns that are primarily or secondarily topicalized, respectively. It was pointed out by case grammarians along the lines of Fillmore (1968: 33-48) that the treatment of the category 'subject' at the level of deep structure results in an incorrect understanding of the basic relations of the grammar of natural languages, since subjects are manifested on the surface due to the process of subjectivalization. Along the lines of Fillmore, however, case grammarians have treated subject-raising as a kind of universal rule of grammar, and thus the derivational process of primary topicalization has gained a crucial status in the analysis of surface strings, and the appearance of subjects was considered to be a universal property of surface forms. It was proposed by Fillmore (1968: 33), Lambert (1969: 36, 38, 148), Anderson (1971: 160-165), Stockwell et al. (1973: 59-63), and a number of other case grammarians, that the eligibility of the various deep cases to function as surface subjects is hierarchically ordered in such a way that whenever there is an Agent in a sentence, that Agent must appear in subject position in active sentences. The respective order of the rest of the case categories for subject choice is the following: Experiencer, Instrumental, Objective, and finally Locative, Temporal, etc. Although most of these grammarians used this respective hierarchy in determining the constraints on their rule of subjectivalization, it was Nilsen who attempted to give arguments for such an ordering of case notions for the first time. He suggested (Nilsen, 1973: 140) that the activity quotient of a particular case, as determined by its semantic features, had a decisive role in providing a definite position of the case in question in the subject-choice hierarchy. Cases with a high activity quotient were most likely to be chosen as subjects

in the surface structure of sentences

The purpose of the present paper is to point out that the status of the subject as a basic category of surface structure is significantly weakened based on an analysis of the manifestation of subjecthood in languages having a relatively free word order, such as Hungarian. It will be pointed out that Hungarian provides convincing arguments against the universal nature of the subject-choice hierarchy, and it will also be shown that primary topicalization loses its position to be considered as a primary rule of the transformational component of the grammar of this language, since the subject position is often left empty as a result of the operation of deletion rules.

1. Let us first have a look at some examples which would seem to support the view that constraints on subject selection are valid for Hungarian surface structures, as well.

- (1) (i) Péter eltörte a tányért a konyhában.
('Peter broke the plate in the kitchen. ')
- (ii) A tányér eltört a konyhában.
('The plate broke in the kitchen. ')
- (iii) A tányért törte el Péter a konyhában.
('It was the plate that John broke in the kitchen. ')
- (iv) A konyhában törte el Péter a tányért.
('It was the kitchen where Peter broke the plate ')
- (v) A konyhában tört a tányér.
('It was the kitchen where the plate broke. ')

Since Hungarian has a rich system of surface case morphemes, it is unnecessary in this language for categories of surface syntax to be positionally bound. Morphological markedness of surface case relations results in a relatively free word order, giving place to a relatively free topic selection. Thus it can be seen that whereas a coincidence of subject and topic is manifested in (li) and (lii), this is not the case in (liii), (liv) and (lv). In (liii) it is the deep Objective that is chosen as topic, whereas in both (liv) and (lv) it is the Locative. Since subjects are marked with a $\emptyset$ morpheme in Hungarian surface structure while

a typical ending for objects is -t and a typical ending of the locative relation is -ban/-ben, it can be seen that these notions are easy to recognize in sentences due to their morphological markedness. It is the Agent which is the subject in (li), (liii), and (liv), whereas in (lii) and (lv) the Objective is chosen for this function.

Returning now to our main topic, the dependence of the subject choice hierarchy of deep cases on their activity quotient, it can be seen that all the examples in (1) supported this idea, since in sentences (li), (liii) and (liv), where an Agent appeared on the surface, this was chosen as subject of the sentence, whereas in (lii) and (lv), in which only an Objective and Locative occurred, the Objective functioned as subject. Curiously, however, it was not the higher activity quotient of the Objective case that was decisive in the choice of this category for position of subject in (lii) and (lv), but the compulsory nature of this case in the frame of the verb "eltör -- eltörök", whereas the Locative was optional in (li-iii), and it was only due to the choice of this category for the function of the topic that its surface occurrence was compulsory in (liv-v).

Let us now have a look at the following example.

(2) Az a cikk Jánosé.

The above sentence has two interpretations in Hungarian. It either translates as "That paper belongs to John," or, and this is more important for our purposes, as "That paper was written by John." If the first interpretation is taken, there is no problem with the subject-choice hierarchy, since it is the lack of an Agent that makes it possible for the Objective NP "az a cikk" ('that paper') to appear as the surface subject of the sentence. The second interpretation, however, contradicts the subject-choice hierarchy, since the NP "Jánosé" translates as "by John", that is, it functions as an Agent and not as a Goal in the sentence. It should be mentioned, however, that there are no passives in present-day Hungarian, and thus (2), being an active sentence, ought to be ruled out by the subject-choice hierarchy, since it is the NP that represents the Objective deep category that functions as a subject here, in

an active construction in which the Objective functions as subject.

It seems reasonable, then, on the basis of examples (2) - (6), that in Hungarian, and most probably in a great number of other free word order languages as well, the idea of considering the condition of the activity quotient of cases to be of decisive power in the determination of subject choice hierarchy should be rejected, and together with this, as evidenced by the above sentences, the hypothesis of the subject choice hierarchy, which has gained wide acceptance by case grammarians, has to be dispensed with in a universal grammar. Before an attempt is made toward an explanation of the above phenomena, it has to be remarked that the role and effect of topic selection and of the process of thematization on the subject selection of sentences has not yet been examined by case grammarians in detail. Strangely enough, they have neglected to investigate the relation of the pairs: topic vs. comment and theme vs. rheme, and have only used the notion of topic in the analysis of the processes of topicalization. It was Ferenc Kiefer who pointed out the relevance of differentiating between the role of these pairs in grammatical analysis (Kiefer, 1976: 157-161). On the basis of this difference, the following hypothesis for subject selection in sentences can be put forward.

Whenever a particular deep case undergoes topic selection and also functions as the theme of the utterance at the same time, that deep case compulsorily fills the position of subject in the sentence.

It follows from the above hypothesis that there exist cases where the positions of theme and topic of the sentence are filled by two different NPs, and this can be seen in examples (liii-v) above. The hypothesis, however, works as an explanation of why the particular cases in sentences (2) - (6) were chosen as subjects in spite of the fact that potentially more active cases also occurred in these examples. For the sake of gaining further support, let us take sentence (4) and see what happens when the item "katonákkal" ('with soldiers') is chosen as topic and becomes the theme of the sentence.

(4') Katonák töltötték meg a lőteret.

Obj.
:
:
topic
theme
:
subject

It can be seen that simultaneous topicalization and thematization of the Objective case resulted in the selection of this case as subject, followed by a change in word order and the morphological marking of the items (surface subject marked $\emptyset$, and object typically marked -t). (4') is a grammatical sentence in Hungarian that translates into English as "Soldiers filled the rifle-range."

In fact, as was pointed out by Nilsen (1973: 130-2), there are no semantic constraints as to the subject-fronting of deep cases in sentences, since virtually any deep case can appear in this position. Nilsen, however, used sentences with the surface appearance of only one compulsory case throughout his analysis and at that point did not investigate the validity of the hierarchy of cases eligible for subjects. As it was pointed out above, two processes that have an important role in subject selection are topic selection and thematization. It remains for us to determine the relative rank of these processes as regards their effect on subjectivization. Since Hungarian is a language in which virtually any of the NPs in the sentence can be topicalized, and raising into topic position does not necessarily bring along subject-fronting of the particular case, and since, as it will be pointed out below, theme selection goes well beyond the boundaries of the sentence, and the coincidence of themes and subjects is typical in this language, the following hierarchy is reasonable:

- I. theme-selection
:
:
- II. topic-selection
:
:
- III. subject-selection

2. Having pointed out the erroneous nature of the determination of subject choice hierarchy of cases, it

is the purpose of the following section to point out that the relevance of subjecthood itself loses its primary importance in the categorial breakdown of surface sentences, if languages with a relatively or completely free word order are examined, since it is a very common phenomenon of surface strings in such languages that the subject position is left empty in the sentence. Examples from Hungarian are the following:

- (7) (i) Hova ment?
('Where did he go? ')
- (ii) Elment a barátjához.
('He went to see his friend. ')
- (iii) Akarok venni egy ernyőt.
('I want to buy an umbrella. ')
- (iv) Mire célzol?
('What are you hinting at? ')

It can be seen that while the subject NPs were deleted from the surface in the above Hungarian sentences, their English counterparts are grammatically correct only in the case when these NPs appear in their surface forms. It is not the case, however, that deep cases eligible for subject selection do not appear in deeper layers of the derivational history of the above Hungarian sentences. The argument for the presence of such cases in deeper layers is strengthened by the fact that native speakers are fully aware on intuitive grounds which category is understood to be capable of filling the function if it were the case that their surface appearance were required by the well-formedness conditions of sentences. Although subject NPs do not appear in any of the examples in (7) above, the intuitive recognition of their deep status is supported by the morphological process of verbal suffixation. Viewed diachronically, the rich suffixation of verb conjugation in Hungarian developed as a result of reduction in deeper layer pronominalization sets; thus it can be assumed that the surface deletion of subjects is affected by previous pronoun deletion based on coreference phenomena. This is the reason why it is easy for native speakers to identify the deep case eligible but left unexpressed as a subject, on intuitive grounds.

If we try to give an explanation of the process of subject deletion in Hungarian surface structure, the

following three categories should be examined in relation to one another. What is the role, if any, of theme selection and topic raising in subject selection and subsequent subject deletion? The role of topics and themes in subject selection was pointed out in the previous section. If Hungarian surface strings are examined from the point of view of topic and subject selection, it can be observed that it is the topic that dominates within the limits of the sentence. If the two functions are filled by one item, that item is moved to the front of the sentence, but whenever these functions are filled by two different items (as in (liii-v)), it is the topic that keeps its front position. It can thus be observed that Hungarian is a topic-prominent language, where it is the surface appearance of the topic that is of primary importance. Going back to our examples in (7), it can be observed that in (7i) and (7iv) the topic is expressed and the subject remains unexpressed. In (7ii) and (7iii), however, even the topic has undergone deletion on the surface. There are parallel strings, however, where the topic keeps its front position.

- (7) (ii') A barátjához ment el.
 (iii') Egy ernyőt akarok venni.

One thing that remains to be taken into consideration here is the role of theme-selection in the above phenomena. As it was pointed out in the previous section, the process of thematization is of primary importance in the formation of sentence structures in Hungarian, and this process goes well beyond the boundaries of the sentence, once a set of sentences is related to form part of a higher unit, that of discourse. If the sentences in (7) are examined from the point of view of theme-selection, it is striking that the theme is not represented by an NP on the surface in Hungarian, whereas its appearance is compulsory in the corresponding English sentences. The Hungarian examples of (7), however, are accepted as well formed only if they are inserted into the flow of conversation, whereas the corresponding English sentences seem to be fully understood by themselves, as well. Thus it becomes clear that in Hungarian, at least, and most certainly in the majority of languages having a free word order, as well,

it is the theme of the unit of discourse that is responsible for topic- and subject-deletion in particular sentences. Themes are basic elements of discourse units, and if they are once expressed in Hungarian, they dominate the structural relations of the corresponding sentences forming part of that given discourse unit. The theme of the discourse unit has to be expressed only once within the boundaries of that particular discourse unit. Whenever there is a new theme-selection, however, the newly chosen theme must appear in the discourse compulsorily, and that theme governs the surface relations and morphological processes in the sentences of that unit of discourse. Thus themes have an absolute control over subject-choice in the particular sentences. This is not the case as regards their role in topic selection, however. As it has been pointed out above, topic selection is an important feature of Hungarian sentence structure, and virtually any NP filling the function of a deep case notion can be topic-fronted on the surface in this language. When there is a coincidence of the theme and the topic, however, and the topic has already been expressed in the discourse unit, as it is not required that it be expressed again and again in the sentences of that discourse unit, this condition results in topic deletion. When the topic and the theme are expressed by two different NPs, the topic cannot be deleted on the surface, since Hungarian is a topic-prominent language. As Hungarian is not a subject-prominent language, it follows that since it is the theme that has primary control in the subject-choice of sentences, subject NPs can be deleted from the surface within the boundaries of the particular discourse unit once the theme (and together with this the subject) was expressed in that discourse. If the theme in the discourse unit is the speaker or the hearer, the subject is not expressed by a surface NP. Its presence is understood intuitively, however, and the recognition of this is further supported by the morphological marking of the verb that functions as a predicate in sentences belonging to the given discourse. This is evidenced by examples (7iii) and (7iv) above.

As a conclusion to the above, then, the rule of subject- and theme-deletion in Hungarian can be the following:

Within the boundaries of a discourse unit the theme has to be determined compulsorily, but it is required to appear only once in that discourse. Whenever the theme and the topic of the discourse unit are expressed by the same NP, that item can be deleted from following sentences forming part of that unit of discourse. If there is a coincidence of theme, topic, and subject of the sentence, the surface appearance of the item that represents these is required only once in the given discourse unit; in subsequent strings the subject is deletable. If the theme and the topic are expressed by two separate items, subject selection is controlled by the theme only, and once the theme is expressed in the discourse unit and the subject is dominated by that item, the subjects are deletable from the subsequent sentences in that particular discourse.

Let us now take some examples and see how the operation of the rule is realized in speech. Let us assume that two girls, Helen (H) and Anne (A) are talking.

- (8) (i) A: Elementél Péterhez?
('Did you go to see Peter?')
- (ii) H: Elementem, igen. Péter azonban nem volt otthon.
('Yes, I did. Peter, however, was not at home.')
- (iii) A: Mit gondolsz, miért nem volt otthon?
('Why do you think he was not at home?')
- (iv) H: Biztosan meglátogatta a nagymamáját.
('He must have visited his granny.')
- (v) A: A nagymamája is ebben a városban lakik?
('Does she live in this city, too?')
- (vi) H: Fogalmam sincs. Péter még sohasem említette, hogy hol lakik.
('I have no idea. Peter has never mentioned where she lives.')
- ...

As it is Anne who addresses Helen by putting her questions throughout the conversation, Anne becomes the primary theme of the conversation. As it was mentioned earlier, the surface appearance of this NP is unnecessary

in such cases; its deletion is optional, however, as shown by (8i').

(8) (i') Elmentél Péterhez, Anna?

In all the sentences following (i) in (8), "Anna" does not gain surface expression, as she functions as the primary theme of the conversation. In (8ii), however, a new, secondary theme is chosen, the person "Peter", whose surface appearance is compulsory in (8ii). From that on, however, until the theme changes again in (8v), the NP "Peter" remains unexpressed on the surface except for the morphological marking via the verbal suffixes in the sentences. The same rule operates for the new theme, Peter's granny, introduced in (8v).

3. It can be concluded, then, that the status of the rule of subject raising as considered to be a kind of universal transformational process in a semantically based grammar is significantly weakened if data based on an analysis of Hungarian sentence structure, and probably of other free word order languages too, are taken into account. Subject-fronting is a language-specific rule of grammar, and its constraints are determined by parallel powerful rules of the grammar. Thus the generally accepted idea that subject-fronting is in close relation with case ranks on semantic grounds is to be rejected altogether. Subject-fronting is preceded by the more powerful process of theme selection, and is also controlled to some extent by topic selection, and the conditions on the latter rule are also to be considered language-specific in a number of natural languages.

References

- Anderson, J. (1971) The Grammar of Case, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Fillmore, C.J. (1968) "The Case for Case", in E. Bach and R.T. Harms, eds., Universals in Linguistic Theory, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1-88.
- Kiefer, F. (1976) "Some remarks on topic-comment and presuppositions", in N.E. Enkvist and V. Kohonen, eds., Approaches to Word Order, University of Åbo, Åbo, 157-173.
- Lambert, D.M. (1969) "The Semantic Syntax of Metaphor: A Case Grammar Analysis", Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan.
- Nilsen, D.L.F. (1973) The Instrumental Case in English, Mouton, The Hague.
- Stockwell, R.P., Schachter, P. and Partee, B.H., eds., (1973) The Major Syntactic Structures of English, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York.