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Topic Marking in Haida

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0. Introduction

On-going analysis of the role of some post-positional particles in Haida indicates that topic marking and topic-prominence are important in the organization of this language. Topicalization refers to a process whereby sentence elements are placed at the front of the sentence for the purpose of focus or contrast. Some languages employ topicalization more than others and are said to be topic-prominent languages (Li & Thompson 1976). Chinese is the time-honored example of a topic-prominent language.

The topic in Haida will be assumed to be any sentence-initial element (a word or phrase) marked with a topic marking particle.

Initial elements without such particles will be said to be

foregrounded. Sentence elements in Haida are foregrounded (i.e., placed in a more prominent position) to indicate communicative importance. These elements may be topicalized for contrast or emphasis.

The topic-comment dichotomy of the Prague school¹ will be examined in the analysis of topicalization of Haida. It will be seen that defining the topic as the contextually bound element (as in Sgall 1973) hampers the description of the function of the two-part sentence in Haida. Topicalization in this language is motivated by the need to emphasize certain information. It is the purpose of this paper to examine topicalization in Haida, to indicate its basicness in the language and to describe the particles that are used to mark it.²

1. Theoretical Perspective and Prior Studies

The concern of the Prague school linguists is that the logical structure of the sentence says nothing about the way the sentence functions in the process of communication. Topic-comment analysis is considered to be the way to show the relationship between the systematic nature of the language and its communicative function. For the Prague school, a sentence consists of something the speaker wants to modify for the hearer (the topic), and how he wants to modify it (the comment). The initial element of the

sentence signals a starting point. Thus, topicalization is more than a superficial process, it is basic to the act of communication.

Prague school linguists define the topic as a contextually bound element having to do with information known "from the context, from the situation or from general conditions of the given utterance" (Sgall et al., 1973:48). This sentence-initial element is a reference by the speaker to some points of information in the hearer's memory. The definition of topic as used in this paper has been broadened to include any sentence-initial element marked with a topic marking particle. This element may be contextually bound information as defined above or it may be some point of new information the speaker wishes to bring to the hearer's attention or fix in the hearer's memory. It is not clear whether the topic is preposed from a more basic structure or whether it is generated in sentence-initial position. The latter is believed to be the case for topic-prominent languages.

Li & Thompson suggest the following characteristics for the topic of topic-prominent languages:

1. The topic must be definite in Chafe's (1976) sense of "I think you already know and can identify the particular referent I have in mind" (Li & Thompson 1976:461). This does not seem to be a primary criterion for Haida topics, which depend more

on the speaker's intent to foreground certain information.

It is a concomitant, however, of the referential nature of topic marking particles (see Edwards 1977) that the topic will probably be something the hearer can identify.

2. The functional role of the topic is constant across sentences (Li & Thompson 1976:463). It will be shown that the functional role of the topic in Haida is to foreground and differentiate the information which is of greatest communicative importance.
3. The topic will occur in sentence-initial position (p.465). In Haida, the foregrounded element will occur in sentence-initial position whether topicalized or not because of the speaker's intention to place before the audience that information which has the most communicative importance. Specifying an element as contrastive, locative or relative also tends to enhance communicative importance. Thus, topicalization and foregrounding together determine the sentence-initial element.
4. In topic-prominent languages there will be surface coding for the topic but not necessarily for the subject (p 466). In Haida the topic is marked by morphological markers as well as occurring in sentence-initial position. The morphological markers also indicate the relationship of the topic to the comment, for example, in the relative or locative sense.

Subjects, on the other hand, are determined by selectional restrictions or the hearer's assumptions based on previous knowledge.

Li & Thompson present other suggestions about topics and topic-prominent languages which are beyond the scope of this paper. They include the absence of selectional restrictions and verb agreement for topics and grammatical processes that depend on the topic; the lack of a passive construction or dummy subjects; the double subject; co-reference; constraints on the topic constituent (in Haida there may be none); and the basicness of topic-comment sentences in the language (L976:461-485).

Chomsky (1973) refers to the contextually bound part of the sentence as the "presupposition". New information about the presupposition (the comment) he calls "focus". He refers to the two parts as topic and focus and suggests that topic-focus is a grammatical relation of surface structure corresponding to the subject-predicate relation of the logical (deep) structure (1965:163). In many cases the topic would coincide with the logical and/or grammatical subject.³ Such an analysis assumes the basicness of the subject and predicate in the derivation of the sentence, and the assignment of topic at the surface level. However, in a topic-prominent language the logical subject and object are determined

by selectional restrictions on the verb and are not crucial to the order of elements in the sentence. The sentence is generated as topic + comment. Since the presence of a sentence-initial topic is a matter of communicative importance, not every sentence will have one.

Swanton (1911) discusses the linear order of subjects and objects in the Haida sentence with respect to whether they are nouns or pronouns. Leer (1977) differentiates between dependent and independent pronouns in the matter of ordering. Eastman (1978, this conference) discusses the work of these and other authors and concludes:

(W)hen the subject and object of the verb are nouns, objects may precede subjects and subjects may precede objects; when they are pronouns, objects precede subjects....When nouns and pronouns are both used as subjects or objects, the pronouns usually stand nearest to the verb.

Exceptions to this 'rule' are usually occasioned by the process of topicalization or, as Swanton states it, 'exceptions to this are usually for emphasis'.

(1978:16)

2.0 Data and Analysis

The following sentences illustrate various Haida sentence types. T refers to the topic marking particle. The orthography is that used in Edwards (1977) and is a modified form of the Practical Orthography used in the Haida Language Workshop, Ketchikan, Alaska.

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Comment</u>	
(1) <u>chiin</u> uu fish T	hl taagang I eat	I eat <u>fish</u> .
(2) hlaa o I T	chiin taagang fish eat	<u>I</u> eat fish.
(3)	chiin hl taagang fish I eat	I eat fish.
(4) <u>chiin</u> taagaay gu fish to eat T	dii guudanggang I want	I want <u>fish to eat</u> .
(5) gwaahl uu sack T	iijang is	It's a <u>sack</u> .
(6)	gwaalaay iijang sack is	It's a sack.
(7)	gwaalaay diingaa sack my	sgiidang red is My sack is red.

In (1) and (2), respectively, "fish" or "I" are designated as topic by the position of the word in the sentence and the use of a topic marking particle. In (1) the grammatical subject is hl "I", the verb is taagang "eat", and the object chiin "fish" has been topicalized. In (2) the grammatical subject is the marked topic hlaa "I", the verb and object are taagang and chiin, respectively. Sentence (3) does not have a marked topic. In (4) the topic coincides with the object of the predication. This focal point, "to eat fish", is marked by its initial position and the use of the topic marking particle guu. The grammatical subject of

the sentence is *dii* "I" and the verb is *guudanggang* "want".

Sentence (5) has a topic (sack), but sentences (6) and (7) do not. A native speaker of Haida was asked about the acceptability of using a topic marking particle in (6) or leaving it out of (5). The response was that there is a contrastive sense to (5) that is not present in (3), (6) or (7). Sentence (6) simply declares the existence of a sack, while (5) is used to focus old information or imply contrast: it's a sack, not a doormat.

In the semantic framework of the Prague school, the topicalized elements of these sentences would have to be contextually bound old information, that is, be based on hearer presupposition. Such elements would have to be known "from the context, from the situation, or from general conditions of the given utterance" (cf. above). But this rules out the contrastive sense of (1), (2) and (5) and does not address the focal preposing of new information as in (4). It appears that the topic in Haida is not contextually bound.

In a transformational framework, the topicalized sentences (1), (2), (4) and (5) would be derived from a basic linear order. Near the end of the derivation, a topicalizing transformation would prepose an element from each sentence to appear in sentence-initial position in the surface structure.

Li & Thompson claim that the topic-comment construction is basic or is among the basic types of sentence constructions in topic-prominent languages (471ff.). The initial element of the sentence (the topic) in a topic-prominent language can be new or old information; it is the intent of the speaker to give it communicative importance by placing it first in the sentence. If this is so, the speaker can choose to say "fish is what I eat" as in (1) where "fish" occurs in sentence initial position. If the pronoun is more important to the communication as in (2), the speaker can say "I (am the one who) eat(s) fish". Similarly, communicative importance is the reason for the initial position of "fish to eat" in (4), possibly in answer to the question "what do you want?".

2.1 Ordering

The linear order of the nouns or noun phrases which have the relation of subject and object to the verb is determined by the intent of the speaker to foreground certain information. In the untopicalized sentence the hearer is assumed to have enough information from the context to prevent ambiguity. In the topicalized sentence it is the object which occurs in the sentence-initial slot. When either the subject or object is a pronoun, it will occur next to the verb. When both subject and object are

sentences, (16) and (18) are "expressions which contain the information which the speaker wishes to communicate" (cf. Sgall, above). In other words, they correspond to "rheme" in the Prague school sense, "comment" of the topic-comment dichotomy or "focus of utterance" with normal intonation (cf Chomsky 1973:205).

Since the linear order of the noun phrases depends on communicative importance (i.e., which NP is foregrounded), a given English sentence will assume various interpretations in Haida. When the target sentence is Joe brought Lil a fish, the responses range from (19) to (22):

- (19) Lil k chiin Joe dlis dlaayaan
Lil to fish Joe whole brought Joe brought whole a fish to Lil.
- (20) chiin Lil k Joe dlis dlaayaan
fish Lil to Joe whole brought Joe brought whole a fish to Lil.
- (21) Joe Lil k chiin dlis dlaayaan
Joe Lil to fish whole brought Joe brought whole a fish to Lil.
- (22) chiin uu Lil k Joe dlis dlaayaan
fish T Lil to Joe whole brought It was a fish Joe brought whole to Lil.

If one asks a native speaker what these sentences mean, the answer is the same for (19) - (21): "Joe brought a fish to Lil--the whole thing". For (22) the response is, "It was a fish Joe brought whole to Lil". The order of the noun phrases in the untopicalized

sentences depends on their importance from the speaker's point of view. When one of the noun phrases is contrastive or emphasized, it will be topicalized and marked with a topic marking particle as in (22) and the following:

- (23) chiin uu tablegaay aang iijang
fish T table+DEF on is A fish is on the table.
It is a fish on the table.
- (24) tablegaay aangk uu chiin iijang
table+DEF on T fish is A fish is on the table.
On the table (is where) the fish is.

2.2 The Topic as Theme

Prague school linguists discuss the two part sentence from a functional perspective. They see topic and comment as "theme" and "rheme". According to Lyons (1977:507), "'rheme' is employed by Prague school linguists to refer to the expression which contains the information which the speaker wishes to communicate". If the rheme corresponds to the comment of Haida sentences it is easy to see why every sentence needs a comment, but not every sentence has a topic. In those sentences where there is nothing contrastive or of striking communicative importance, no element will be topicalized. Whatever information is being communicated will appear in the format of a comment, including non-remarkable contextually bound elements. Lyons continues, "The theme...is the expression used by the speaker

for what he announces as the topic of his utterance....Not surprisingly, there is a very high correlation, not only in English, but in all languages, between occupying initial position in the utterance and being thematic".

Though the Haida topic is the center of attention and occupies the initial position in the sentence, it is not thematic in the Prague school sense of being contextually bound. Nor does it have the "old information" function of the theme, i.e., to "distinguish the relevant points of previous knowledge" (Sgall 1973:11). In Haida, this function of the theme may be indicated by the topic, but is primarily accomplished by an aspect marker in the verb phrase which clarifies the speaker's assumptions about the hearer's previous knowledge in this regard. In the following sentences, this aspect marker is the final syllable of the verb:

(25) Lilgyaa xyaay gwaa gwaanggaagan
Lil+POSS arm break + PAST (old info)
Lil's arm had been broken.

(26) Lilgyaa xyaay gwaanggaagan
Lil+POSS arm break + Past (old info)
Lil's arm had been broken.

(27) Lilgyaa xyaay gwaanggaagan
Lil+POSS arm break + PAST (new info)
Lil's arm had been broken.

In (25) the speaker and hearer both know Lil had a broken limb, but only the speaker knows it was her arm. Thus, arm is marked with

a focusing particle gwaa, and the gan in the verb phrase indicates old information as far as a broken limb is concerned. In (26) both speaker and hearer had prior knowledge of the broken arm; therefore, the gwaa of focus is not required and the verb phrase still contains the old information marker gan. In (27) the speaker is giving new information to the hearer. This is indicated by the final syllable of the verb phrase, gaan. Leer calls this the inferential form of the verb. "The inferential form is also a past form, but refers to something which the speaker has not experienced for himself (sic) but has found out by inference or by being informed of it" (Leer 1977:79).

It appears that the topicalized elements in Haida sentences are either items known to the speaker and hearer from context or something the speaker wishes to fix in the hearer's mind. An example of this is (28):

(28) Ham Cove guu' l xaogaangaan
Ham Cove T he fish + PAST (new info)
Ham Cove is where he fished.

It is evident that this is new information because of the inferential ending on the verb. It is as if people had been wondering for years where he had been catching all of those fish, and finally they found out the answer: Ham Cove. In this sentence, the topic marker has a contrastive function, "Of all the places we thought he might have fished...".

Topic markers can also serve to recall to mind a piece of information:

- (29) Ham Cove guu l xaogaanggank
 Ham Cove T he fish + PAST (old info)
 Ham Cove is where he fished.

Though the gloss for this sentence is the same as for (28), it would be used in a different context, that is, for the recall of general knowledge. Whenever an item is emphasized for contrast or recall, it will be topicalized and marked with a topic marking particle. It is the piece of information the speaker will want the hearer to receive first.

3.0 Summary and Implications.

The communicative importance of particular sentence elements in Haida has been analyzed as determining their linear order. These elements are often the grammatical subject or object of the sentence, but can be any word, phrase or clause. The placement of one or more of these elements at the beginning of the sentence constitutes foregrounding. By foregrounding particular elements, the speaker conveys to the hearer what the speaker has uppermost in mind with regard to the rest of the sentence. This corresponds to the Prague school maxim which says that topic-comment analysis makes the distinction between what "is spoken about" and "what is said about it" (Sgall, et al., 1973:10).

When the foregrounded elements are not only uppermost in communicative importance but are also contrastive or of special emphasis, they will be marked with a topic marking particle. If the topic marked element is not the logical object of the verb, its relation to the sentence, if unclear, will be indicated by other particles or pronouns. Recall (15):

- (15) hlaa o John guu iijaan hl guudanggang
 I T John there was I think I think John was there.

In this sentence, the subject pronoun "I" appears in the comment even though it is also the topic. Though guu is glossed "there" in this sentence, it is quite possibly a topic marker. In that case an approximate interpretation of the sentence would be, "I (am who) think(s) John (is the one who) was (there)". Study now is in progress on the possibility of the occurrence of multiple topic markers in Haida sentences.

NOTES

1. The Prague school tradition referred to in this paper began in the 1920's with Mathesius' comparison of the distribution of old and new information in English and Czech. He called the old information "theme" and the new information "rheme". He found the theme to be optional, especially if it was discourse-initial. Firbas (1971, in Sgall) modified the theme/rheme concept from a dichotomy to a continuum. He said that every sentence has a theme to some degree. He introduced the idea of communicative dynamism in which some elements contribute more (rheme) and some less (theme) to the furtherance of the communication and there may be some intermediate elements (transition) in the sentence. Sgall, et al., (1973) combined generative semantics with communicative dynamism in a theory of contextual boundedness which produces a topic-comment dichotomy in sentences. (I wish to thank Professor Heles Contreras, Department of Linguistics, University of Washington for this historical information).
2. The research for this paper was partially funded by the Phillips Fund of the American Philosophical Society. I wish to express my thanks to my primary consultant, M. Lillian Pettviel of Seattle and Hydaburg. I am also grateful to Professor Carol M. Eastman and to Nancy Sharp whose discussions with me aided this analysis.
3. The logical (psychological) subject is a semantic relation of the deep structure (cf. Chomsky 1965:163) while the grammatical subject is a relation between items in the surface structure. The grammatical subject may be a convenience of the syntax of English and other "subject"-prominent languages which has little utility in languages which are organized according to different principles. In this paper the subject is an element which is in an agentive relation to the verb and corresponds to Chomsky's logical subject.

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