

Russian data call for relational Information Structure notions

We will argue that it is necessary and advantageous to introduce relational notions in the Information Structure (IS) field (such as *more / less accessible* instead of *given / new*). Corpus studies (e.g. Sirotnina 1965) show that the neutral word order is 'IO DO' in Russian. The inverse 'DO IO' order was traditionally associated with DO givenness and narrow focus. Among generative studies, this was extensively discussed in (Junghanns & Zybatow 1995).

However, in (1b) and (2b) both the IO and the DO are new and part of focus. In (1b), the DO is interpreted as less salient than the IO as a result of reordering. In (2b), the DO is perceived as more accessible (by virtue of being more predictable). In (3), the whole sentence is in focus, but the subject is interpreted as more salient.

- (1) a. *Mnogie mizantropy očen' ljubjat životnyx.*
'Many misanthropes really love animals.'
- b. *Segodnja moj načal'nik otdal svoj buterbrod golodnoj sobake!*
Today [my boss].NOM gave [his sandwich].ACC [hungry dog].DAT
- (2) a. A: *Čto ty delaješ'?*
'What are you doing?'
- b. B: *Pišu pis'mo mame.*
write.1PERS.SG letter.ACC mom.DAT
- (3) *Redkij slučaj v gubernii: človeka ukusila bešenaja lisa.*
(a rare case in the province) man.ACC bit [rabid fox].NOM

First, these examples show that not only categorical notions, such as *singular* or *interrogative*, but also relational notions, such as *less salient* or *more accessible*, can be encoded in syntax. Second, they present an important argument against feature-based IS theories (like Rizzi 1997) and for configurational approaches (like Reinhart 1995, 2006), thus bearing on the most important ongoing debate in the IS field (features like *more accessible than* are impossible).

Relying on these observations, we will propose an IS model based on relative accessibility and salience (subsuming contrast and emphasis). We will argue that the necessary syntactic configurations are best derived with edge features introduced in Chomsky (2008), which allow for 'free' movement without agreeing features. Chomsky illustrates how edge features can be used to explain topicalization. He argues that IS features are unnecessary and the raised constituent is identified as a topic by the final position it reaches.

For Chomsky, the 'right position' for topicalization is a specifier of some FP in the C domain. Since we deal with relative notions, we need to modify this assumption: for us, it is a relative position with respect to other elements. If the object is higher than the subject, as in (4a) below, it is interpreted as more accessible (more topical). If the subject is the most embedded element and bears the main stress, as in (3), it is interpreted as less accessible or/and more salient than other elements.

We will demonstrate how relational notions can solve some persistent IS-related problems in Russian and other languages. A major problem associated with topics is an extreme diversity of formal means used to encode them. Namely, there is a syntactic operation of topicalization, but subjects and pronouns are exempt from it, as Russian (4) and (5) show. Their translations illustrate that analogous examples exist in English.

- (4) a. *Knigu Ivan pročel.*
book.ACC Ivan.NOM read
'The book, Ivan read.'

b. *Ivan pročet knihu.*
 Ivan.NOM read book.ACC
 ‘Ivan read the book.’

(5) Q: *Čto slučilos’ s Petrom?*
 What happened to Petr?

A1: *Ivan ego UDARIL.* A2: *Ivan UDARIL ego.*
 Ivan.NOM he.ACC hit Ivan.NOM hit he.ACC
 ‘Ivan HIT him.’ ‘Ivan HIT him.’

After we introduced relative positions with respect to other elements, it is unproblematic that object topics need to move (over the subjects), while subject topics can remain in the [Spec; TP] (unless they also need to move over something., e.g. a high adverb). Pronouns do not need to topicalize because they get on top of the accessibility hierarchy by virtue of their meaning, as it is stated in the lexicon. However, since their place on the salience hierarchy is not fixed, pronouns move out of the most embedded position or lose the main stress as a result of stress shift, as in (5) — unless they are the most salient information in the sentence, as in (6).

(6) *Ivan always wondered why Maria chose HIM (rather than Petr or Pavel).*

If we take foci, a major problem is the impossibility to pinpoint a single constituent that is the focus of the sentence. Sentences with several ‘nested’ foci, as in (7)-(8), are discussed in the literature.

(7) Q: *What happened?*

A: *When I came home, rather than doing his homework, [Johnny was [reading [SUPERMAN] to some kid]]* (Neeleman and Szendrői 2004).

(8) *[An [AMERICAN] farmer was talking to a [CANADIAN] farmer]* (Rooth 1992).

Nested foci, which were problematic for most definitions (something can either be in focus or not), can receive a natural explanation because the necessity of a yes/no label is removed: we can talk about accessibility and salience scales.

References

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