ON THE INFORMATION STRUCTURE
OF THE HUNGARIAN SENTENCE

FERENC KIEFER

Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest[1]
Hungary

Traditionally, information structure in Hungarian has always been considered to be identical to topic-comment structure, which has been defined partly in syntactico-semantic and partly in pragmatic terms. The present paper argues in favor of the postulation of two independent levels, one defined in terms of logical subject and logical predicate, the other in terms of topic and comment. The paper is going to show that a number of phenomena which pose problems for the traditional account can easily be explained on the two-level approach.

Keywords: information structure, topic-comment, logical subject-logical predicate, word order

1. The Notion of Information Structure

The information structure of the sentence is normally defined as the way in which the information contained in the sentence is presented. "The information structure of a sentence is the formal expression of the pragmatic structuring of a proposition in a discourse" (Lambrecht 1994: 6). Topic and focus are listed among the most important categories of information structure, "which have to do with a speaker's assessment of the relative predictability vs. unpredictability of the relations between propositions and their elements in given discourse situations" (ibid.). More precisely, "a referent is interpreted as the topic of a proposition if in a given situation the proposition is construed as being about this referent, i.e. as expressing information which is relevant to and which increases the addressee's knowledge of this referent" (Lambrecht 1994: 131). Correspondingly, the comment is what is said about this referent and expresses new information. Cf. (1)(a)–(b).

(1) (a) What did the children do next? The children went to SCHOOL.
  (b) Who went to school? The CHILDREN went to school.

The sentence (1)(a) is about the children, i.e., the noun phrase *the children* is the topic of the sentence and the comment is that *they went to school.* At the same time, the topic is contextually bound by the preceding sentence. The sentence (1)(b), on the other hand, is about *going to school,* which is the topic, and it is asserted that this concerns *the children,* which constitutes the comment. For simplicity's sake let us dub this way of looking at information structure, which has been advocated by many scholars since the early 70s approach A.[2] It should also be noted that Lambrecht did not have anything to say about the role of grammatical subject and grammatical predicate. So far so good.

However, the notions of topic and comment have been known in the literature since they were introduced by Prague School scholars who have also been using the notion of "aboutness" for the definition of topic but in contradistinction to Lambrecht they have also pointed out that "topic-comment-articulation" is autonomous in the sense that it cannot be derived from the distinction between 'given' (i.e., known from the preceding context or situation) and 'new'.[3] Notice that the preceding context does not always determine uniquely the choice of topic and comment, as shown by the examples (2)(a)–(c) (Sgall et al. 1973).

(2) (a) On Christmas Eve we expected our RELATIVES.
    (b) Uncle Fred came FIRST.
    (c) First came Uncle FRED.

Here one either speaks about Uncle Fred and states when he came, or one speaks about the one who came first, and states who he was.

Moreover, in some cases the whole sentence may represent new information yet the sentence does assert something about the referent of the subject noun phrase.

(3) (a) What happened?
    (b) Mary broke her leg.

No doubt, in a certain sense of "aboutness" the sentence (3)(b) is about Mary. That is, though the noun phrase *Mary* is not contextually bound, sentence (3)(b) asserts something about Mary, hence it must be the topic of the sentence. The two layers of information structure, i.e., topic-comment and given-news, however, have never been distinguished systematically. Let us dub the Praguian approach, approach B.

We thus seem to have two different approaches, A and B, to topic-comment-articulation. On the approach A,[4] the topic represents at the same time given information (it is contextually bound) and the referent about which something is asserted. On the approach B, advocated by Prague school scholars,[5] the two layers, given information and aboutness are kept apart, which may but need not coincide.

In the present paper we are going to argue that approach B, to be elaborated in more detail in Section 3 below, is more adequate for the description of Hungarian sentence structure than approach A.

2. Word Order in Hungarian

The relatively free word order in Hungarian has always been a great challenge to grammarians. Traditionally, following the teachings of classical grammars, Hungarian sentences have been analyzed in terms of grammatical subject and grammatical predicate, the notion of grammatical subject being defined in terms of aboutness. The typical questions asked in school grammars have been 'About what do we assert something?' and 'What do we assert?', the first question being used to identify the grammatical subject and the second the grammatical predicate (in declarative sentences). Furthermore, it is taken for granted that the subject noun phrase is always in the nominative. It is easy to see, however, that the two aspects of subjecthood are incompatible. Consider[6]

(4) (a) Jánost   elütötte   a vonat.
         John-acc   over-ran   the train
         'John was run over by the train'
    (b) Jánosnak   tetszik   Éva.
         John-dat   likes   Eve
         'John likes Eve'

It is quite evident that sentence (4)(a) is about *Jánost* 'John-acc' in spite of the fact that it is in the accusative case, and it is asserted about John that he was run over by the train; the subject noun phrase of the sentence is *a vonat* 'the train'. Similarly, the sentence (4)(b) is about *Jánosnak* 'John-dat' in spite of the fact that it is in the dative case, and it is asserted about John that he likes Eve; the subject noun phrase is *Éva* 'Eve'.

From the above observations we may conclude that (i) aboutness cannot be a defining property of subjecthood; more importantly, (ii) word order is not defined by the grammatical subject – grammatical predicate articulation, since the grammatical subject has no fixed position (unlike in English or French), it may occupy various positions in the sentence and it may also occur in postverbal position.

The 19th century Hungarian linguist Sámuel Brassai (1789–1889) was the first to recognize the difference between word order rules in Hungarian and Indoeuropean languages.[7] At the same time, he found that both the fixed and the free word order languages display a sentence structure which begins with one or more complements carrying information already known. These complements "practically lay a basis for the meaning of the sentence in the listener's mind, i.e.,

they are calling attention, and pointing forward, connecting the mental activity of the listener with that of the speaker" (Brassai 1860: 341).[8] He refers to this initial part of the sentence as 'subject in a different sense' (1852), 'inchoativum' (1860, 1863–1865), or 'introduction' (1874), or 'preparatory part' (1885). The second part of the sentence, including the verb, is the 'predicate' (1852), or 'bulk' ('mondatzöm', 1860, 1863–1865), or 'message' (1874), or 'principal part' (1885). The function of this second part is "the communication of an action, or a circumstance of an action that the speaker supposes to be unknown to the listener" (Brassai 1874: 72). To return to our examples in (4)(a)-(b), the preparatory part of the sentence (4)(a) is *Jánost* 'John-acc'and the principal part *elütötte a vonat* 'was run over by the train', the preparatory part of the sentence (4)(b) is *Jánosnak* 'John-dat' and the principal part *tetszik Éva* 'likes Eve'. It can easily be seen that the preparatory part of the sentence is identical to what we called topic and the principal part of the sentence to what was termed comment in the previous section. In what follows we will therefore use the well-known terms topic and comment instead of Brassai's slightly idiosynchratic terms.[9]

Brassai was thus first in recognizing that Hungarian word order is determined by topic-comment rather than by grammatical subject-grammatical predicate articulation.[10] Brassai also emphasized that in Hungarian any kind of complement can serve as topic (in contrast to English or French)[11] and that the topic may contain more than one complement (in contrast to German). Furthermore, not all sentences have a topic-comment articulation, the topic may remain implicit. Consider

(5) (a) Marit   Péter   tegnap   moziba   vitte.
          Mary-acc Peter   yesterday   cinema-to   took
          'Yesterday Peter took Mary to the cinema'
     (b) Megjöttek.
          arrived-they
          'They arrived'

In (5)(a) the topic contains both *Marit* and *Péter,* and in (5)(b) the topic is left implicit, which is only possible if both the speaker and the addressee know about whom or about what the predicate 'arrived' is asserted.

Brassai made some further important observations concerning Hungarian sentence structure, which should not be left unmentioned. First, he emphasized the important role of stress in identifying the comment: the first element of the comment carries the strongest stress in the sentence. In contemporary research, too, it is generally assumed that one way to determine the boundary between topic and comment is stress: the first obligatory full stress marks the first element of the comment. Consider

(6) (a) Péter sokszor   járt   Párizsban.
     Peter often   was   Paris-in
     'Peter has often been in Paris'
  (b) Péter "Annával   találkozott Párizsban.
     Peter Ann-with   met   Paris-in
     'Peter met ANN in Paris', 'It was Ann that Peter met in Paris'

This observation is still used as one of the major tests to distinguish the two parts of the sentence.

Another important observation made by Brassai concerned the so-called question test, which we have already made use of in the examples (1)(a)-(b). According to Brassai in order to distinguish between 'given' and 'new' information, one has to find out to what kind of question the sentence can be considered to be an adequate answer to. The noun phrase which is the common part of the question and the corresponding answer is the topic of the sentence.[12] Here are some more examples:

(7) (a) A könyvet   kinek   adtad oda? – A könyvet   PÉTERNEK adtam oda.
     the book-acc whom-to gave   – I the book-acc Peter-dat   gave-I
     'Whom did you give the book?' I gave Peter the book.
  (b) Hol   találkoztál Annával? – Annával   a PARKBAN találkoztam.
     where met-you   Ann-with – Ann-with   the park-in met-I
     'Where did you meet Ann?' 'I met Ann in the park'

According to the question test in (7)(a) the topic is *a könyvet* 'the book-acc' and in (7)(b) *Annával* 'Ann-with', according to the test based on stress, the first element of the comment is *Péternek* 'Peter-dat' in (7)(a) and *a parkban* 'the park-in' in (7)(b). This conclusion would also be in full accordance with most present-day work on Hungarian syntax.

Let us summarize Brassai's main merits: (i) Brassai argued convincingly that the word order rules in Hungarian cannot be formulated in terms of grammatical subject – grammatical predicate, word order is determined by topic-comment articulation; (ii) the topic can be identified by means of the question test (the common element of the question and the corresponding answer belong to the topic); (iii) the boundary between topic and comment is determined by stress: the first stressed element in the sentence is the first element of the comment;[13] (iv) typically, the topic occupies the sentence-initial position and it is followed by the comment. However, Brassai does not make any distinction between topic, i.e., 'the subject in a different sense' and the thing which is known. In fact, he did not realize that (ii) and (iii) define two different things: the question test identifies whatever is contextually bound and the first obligatory full stress defines the boundary between the 'preparatory part' and the 'principal part' of the sentence. Consequently, Brassai is an early representative of approach A.

In what follows I am going to show that approach A fails to account for a number of phenomena and that approach B, which makes a distinction between given-new, on the one hand, and logical subject-logical predicate, on the other, must be favored over approach A.

3. Some Problems with Approach A

3.1. Non-specific Referring Expressions?

The indefinite pronouns *valaki* 'somebody' and *valami* 'something' cannot be contextually bound in the sentences (8)(a)-(b).

(8) (a) Valaki   kopogott az ajtón.
          somebody knocked   the door-at
          'Somebody was knocking at the door'
    (b) Valami   leesett a tetőről.
          something fell   the roof-from
          'Something fell from the roof'

These sentences do not induce any existential presupposition either, they rather assert the existence of somebody or something.[14] There is thus no way to interpret *valaki* 'somebody' in (8)(a) and *valami* 'something' in (8)(b) as topic: neither one is a referring expression (a specific noun phrase) and neither one is contextually bound. But both sentences (8)(a) and (b) can be answers to the question 'What happened?'. That is, in both cases the whole sentence represents new information.[15] At the same time, in (8)(a) it is asserted that there was somebody who was knocking at the door, and similarly in (8)(b) it is is asserted that there was something that fell down from the roof.[16]

3.2. Two Different Topicless Sentences?

Notice that the question 'What happened?' can often be answered in two different ways, e.g.[17]

(9) (a) Bodri megharapta Marit.
          Bodri bit   Mary-acc
          'Bodri bit Mary'
    (b) Marit   megharapta Bodri.
          Mary-acc bit   Bodri
          'Mary was bitten by Bodri'

If the sentences (9)(a)-(b) are considered answers to the question 'What happened?', they are both topicless. Nevertheless the sentence (9)(a) is an assertion about *Bodri* and (9)(b) an assertion about *Marit*. Consequently, the structure of the assertion (what is asserted about what) is independent of topic-comment articulation.

3.3. 'Truncated' Topics?

Sometimes only a fraction of a noun phrase may belong to the topic. This has to do with the fact that only specific noun phrases may be fully contextually bound. In the sentence (10) the noun phrase *valamelyik gyerek* 'one of the children' is non-specific and can never be fully contextually bound hence it cannot function as a topic.[18]

(10) Valamelyik   gyerek minden feladatot   megoldott.
     one (of them) child all   problem-acc solved
     'One of the children solved all the problems'

Yet sentence (10) asserts about one of the children that it solved the problem. On the other hand, if a set of children is contextually given, then, *gyerek* 'child', which is the head noun of the subject noun phrase, is contextually bound, and the sentence can be paraphrased as 'From among the children one solved all the problems'. In other words, in that case the topic of (10) is *gyerek* 'child' but not *valamelyik gyerek* 'one of the children'. Once again, the two articulations are different.

3.4. The Problem of Quantified Noun Phrases[19]

Consider the following sentences:[20]

(11) (a) Sok kutya "három járókelőt   is megharapott.
         many dog   three passer-by-acc even bit
         'Many dogs bit even three passers-by'
     (b) "Sok kutya megharapta a három   járókelőt.
         many dog   bit   the three passer-by-acc.
         'Many dogs bit the three passers-by'

In (11)(a) the comment begins with *három* 'three' since it carries the first obligatory full stress. In (11)(b), on the other hand, it is the first element of the sentence that carries the heaviest stress, consequently the whole sentence must be consid-

ered comment. Notice, however, that both sentences assert something about *sok kutya* 'many dogs'.

The above examples may suffice to show that aboutness in the sense of being an assertion about a referent and aboutness in the sense of contextual boundedness are two different things. Let us introduce the term 'logical subject' for the NP about which something is asserted and the term 'logical predicate' for what is asserted about that NP. We will keep the traditional terms 'topic' and 'comment' to denote 'given' and 'new', i.e., the pragmatic articulation of the sentence. The logical subject need not be known from the discourse context but if a full NP is the topic, it is at the same time the logical subject. To return to our examples, it can easily be seen that in terms of the above distinction sentences (8)(a)-(b) are topicless but both have a logical subject. In the given context sentences (9)(a)-(b), which are semantically (truth-functionally) equivalent are topicless, too, but they have two different logical subject-logical predicate articulations. The sentence (10) is not topicless and though the full noun phrase *valamelyik gyerek* 'one of the children' is the logical subject, only *gyerek* 'child' may belong to the topic. In the sentence (11)(a) *sok kutya* 'many dogs' can be both logical subject and topic, whereas in (11)(b) it cannot be the topic though it is the logical subject. It can thus be claimed that syntactic structure in Hungarian (including word order) is based on logical subject-logical predicate and not on topic-comment articulation, the latter determines the information structure of the sentence in discourse. In sum, then, by postulating two different levels, a syntactico-semantic and a pragmatic one, we arrive at a more adequate analysis of Hungarian sentences, hence approach B is to be favored over approach A.

There are also sentences in Hungarian which evidently are topicless and at the same time may be analyzed as lacking a logical subject. Sentences with the order verb-subject (VS) all belong here. Such sentences are used to report events and are often referred to as 'event reporting sentences'.[21] Consider

(12) (a) Megérkezett   a postás.
           arrived   the postman
           'The postman arrived'
      (b) Kitört   a háború.
           broke out   the war
           'The war broke out'

The sentence (12)(a) is not an assertion about the postman, nor is (12)(b) an assertion about the war. Moreover, everything contained in (12)(a)-(b) is new information. Consequently, these sentences have neither a logical subject nor a topic. They are asserted about a situation, which – in a somewhat metaphorical sense – can also be considered the logical subject of the assertion.[22]

To summarize, then, out of the four logical possibilities: (a) an NP is logical subject but not topic, (b) an NP is both logical subject and topic, (c) an NP is neither logical subject nor topic, (d) an NP is topic but not logical subject; for obvious reasons only the last one is excluded.

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Notes

[1]   Benczúr utca 33, H-1068 Budapest, Hungary. E-mail: kiefer@nytud.hu, fax: (36-1)-322 9297.

[2]   The notion of topic-comment articulation (and also that of functional sentence perspective) was introduced into Anglo-American linguistics by Susumo Kuno in Kuno 1972.

[3]   Lambrecht does, of course, refer to the work of Prague School linguists, however, without pay-ing attention to the twofold distinction topic-comment and given-new.

[4]   Represented also by Katalin É. Kiss (1987, 1999, 2002) and in a considerable number of arti-cles.

[5]   Cf. Sgall – Hajičová – Benešová 1973 and the references cited therein.

[6]   Examples from É. Kiss 1987: 24–25.

[7]   Cf. Brassai 1852, 1860, 1863–1865, 1874, 1885.

[8]   Cited by É. Kiss (1982: 336). It is worth quoting in this connection Lambrecht (1994: 6) who mentions identifiability and activation as the second type of categories of information struc-ture: these categories "have to do with a speaker's assumptions about the statuses of the mental representations of discourse referents in the addressee's mind at the time of the utterance". The difference between Lambrecht and Brassai is a matter of wording.

[9]   Brassai was never happy with the terms he proposed that is why he came up with a new term in each of his major works.

[10] Apparently, the first linguist who was aware of the problem of word order was Henri Weil (1844) rediscovered in the 30s by Prague School scholars. Word order was discussed more thoroughly by Georg von der Gabelentz in two papers published in 1869 and 1875, respec-tively. Brassai 1885 contains a critical examination of the latter. For a brief comparison of Weil and von der Gabelentz see Kiefer 1998.

[11] This latter statement needs some refinment: only specific noun phrases can function as topics, in other words, the topic must be a referring expression. Cf. the contrast between *Egy könyvet nem találok a lakásban* 'There is a (specific) book that I don't find in the apartment' – *Nem találok egy könyvet a lakásban* 'I don't find a (any) book in the apartment' or 'I don't find a (certain) book in the apartment' (É. Kiss 1987: 76–77).

[12] The first use of the question test is attributed to Hatcher 1956 but, as we saw, it had already been proposed by Brassai in 1863–1865.

[13] Since optionally the topic, too, can carry stress and in addition to full stress the sentence nor-mally also contains elements, which carry secondary stress, Brassai's formulation is not quite adequate: 'the first stressed element' must be replaced by 'the element which carries the first obligatory stress'.

[14] Contrary to É. Kiss 2002: 11.

[15] Such sentences are usually referred to as sentences expressing a thetic judgment or simply thetic sentences. Cf. Kuroda 1972 for the term 'thetic judgment'.

[16] Such sentences are called categorical since they express a categorical judgment. Cf. Kuroda 1972 for the term 'categorical judgment'.

[17] The examples are taken from Gécseg – Kiefer (forthcoming).

[18] Zsuzsanna Gécseg's example (p.c.).

[19] For details cf. Gécseg – Kiefer 2005.

[20] Cf. Gécseg 2004.

[21] Cf. the discussion of 'event reporting sentences' in Lambrecht 1994: 137–146.

[22] Cf. Maleczki 1998.