Information packaging, discourse structure and rhetorical relations

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There are only few languages that have been claimed to have a fully grammaticalised information structure and to be truly discourse-configurational like Hungarian (Kiss 1995). Even for those languages, it can be shown that it is only a certain subtype of focus (exhaustive focus) or subtype of topic (given aboutness topic) that is coded syntactically (cf. Balogh (to appear)), For other kinds of topic and focus (additive focus, pure information focus), the hearer still needs to rely on a rather complex reasoning strategy to determine what the speaker intended to be the information structure of a given utterance.

In a small experimental study with native speakers of Tagalog, a non-configurational language with rather free word order, several inversion constructions and a complex voice system, Latrouite & Riester (to appear) show that a top-down and a bottom-up strategy need to be combined in order to construe implicit questions under discussion which are assumed to be tools for determining the information structure of an utterance (as e.g. suggested by Craige 2012). Given that grammatical clues (constructions and morphemes) often may serve more than one function, their intended function in a given utterance can only be construed based on information provided in the immediate common ground and assumptions regarding the developing discourse structure. The idea is that grammar-wise we start out with constructions that may have a couple of different readings with respect to information packaging (m1, m2, m3…) and text-wise, we start out with a couple of plausible questions under discussion (QUD) that would yield a certain information structure (m1, m2, m4…). By comparing the set of possible information structures compatible with the construction and those provided by the plausible QUDs, we can eliminate implausible information structure types and rank the remaining candidates according to plausibility. The study by Latrouite & Riester shows furthermore that certain text types, e.g. ones with sentences exhibiting explicit parallelisms, lead to the use of a certain type of inversion construction (*ay-* inversion). While parallelisms yield a contrastive reading of elements, and the narrow contrast of the aboutness topic is explicitly coded by the *ay*-inversion, it can be shown that the *ay*-inversion is not a means to code simple contrast that is not based on the rhetorical relation 'parallelism'. This proves that the information-structural category 'contrast' in itself is not coded by one device and that rhetorical relations need to be considered when describing construction types and their interpretation. Overall, the study shows that it is not first and foremost the information status of the arguments in terms of given and new that is relevant for voice and word order choice, but the at-issueness of phrases with respect to a given question under discussion, the complexity of the discourse strategy and the rhetorical relations.

References:
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