FYI : theory and typology of information packaging
Smit, N.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Download date: 28 Dec 2018
1

Draping the dress of thought

Language is the dress of thought. We speak to express our feelings and opinions and share knowledge with our audience. Through language we attempt to manipulate the way our interlocutors perceive the world or the way they act. As we tend to judge people by their clothes, we tend to judge their intentions by the way in which they are communicated.

There is a subtle difference between wearing the right clothes and dressing right for the occasion. The same is true for language: depending on the situation, the same thought will need to be clad in different expressions. In order to make our communication have the intended result we need to ‘drape its dress’ the right way for the conversation that we are engaged in. This study investigates one aspect of the tailoring of language to the occasion in which it is used, and explores some of the differences between the ‘sense of fashion’ of the world’s languages.

The research for this dissertation was carried out as part of the project *typology of focus and topic: a new approach to the discourse-syntax interface*,¹ whose aim is to investigate the interaction between discourse pragmatics and syntax from a combined generative and functionalist perspective. The project seeks to bring together macrotypological findings with results obtained from the in-depth study of individual languages. This dissertation seeks to cover the macrotypological part.

**Background** While the relative importance attached to either explanation varies considerably from one theoretical framework to the next, the view has long been predominant that the surface structure of linguistic expressions can be accounted

for by looking at two things: a set of rules that governs combinatorial behaviour, and the structure of the semantic meaning that is conveyed. The systematic study of the impact of the context of use on the shape of linguistic expressions long used to be shunned, often with a rightful appeal to Occam’s razor: why invoke a whole new explanatory dimension if the existing ones can do the trick? However, the past decades have yielded overwhelming evidence to suggest that the interaction of form and meaning does not suffice to do the trick. Both corpus research and data from previously undocumented languages point in the same direction: many surface structure phenomena in the languages of the world (especially those that transcend the boundaries of the sentence) require explanations that go beyond ideational meaning and syntax-internal rules, and take into account the communicative situation in which the utterance is used. Likewise, the question why languages have multiple options available to express the same ideational meaning can only be given a satisfactory answer if contextual factors are dragged into the picture. In short, substantial descriptive adequacy is to be gained for a model of language that allows syntax to be informed by the communicative situation.

This is hardly a world-shattering insight. Indeed, theories of the formalist as well as the functionalist persuasion in recent years have given due prominence to a variety of ‘contextual’ factors, in particular those relating to information structure: the estimations as to the interlocutor’s state of knowledge that language users take into account when putting ideational meaning into words. At the same time, an increasing number of studies have appeared that explore the language-specific encoding of information structural (henceforth: informational) categories. The majority of such studies can be characterized as ‘bottom-up’. They invoke informational categories, but only to the extent that these can help to explain phenomena in surface structure that cannot be accounted for otherwise.

The predictable result of this approach is a somewhat defective treatment of information structure dictated by the question whether informational categories are directly reflected (‘overtly marked’) in surface structure. If one’s research objective is to give an account of the way in which syntax works, the bottom-up approach is quite satisfactory. One need not bother about the question why certain functional categories are expressed and certain others are not; in fact, one need not even treat information structure as a coherent explanatory dimension. Likewise, although a set of cross-linguistically identifiable informational categories is preferable to language-specific ones, questions as to whether and how such functional notions are (paradigmatically) related within and across languages need not be asked.

If one’s research objective is to give an account of the workings of the linguistic apparatus as a whole in the wider context of human communicative competence, the bottom-up approach to information structure is more problematic. Functionalist theories of language are interested in the question how the Speaker’s communicative intention affects the structure of the linguistic expression: this presupposes a comprehensive picture of the systems that generate the intention. Not just the categories that manifest themselves through dedicated expressive means are of interest, but also the ones whose presence cannot be tied to a specific segment or constellation of segments, but can only be revealed through distributive analysis.
Also, questions regarding the cross-linguistic distribution of informational categories become crucially important, as they give information about the band width within which their influence on morphosyntactic structure can vary from one language to the next. In sum, the bottom-up investigation of information structure needs to be supplemented by (if not substituted by) a top-down approach if we want to arrive at a better understanding of the interaction between ideational meaning, morphosyntactic structure and communicative context.

When a top-down approach is chosen, a number of additional questions present themselves. One concerns the interaction between informational and ideational structure: little systematic research has been conducted so far with regard to the issue how the reflection of information structure in surface structure is mediated by the meaning that is conveyed. Another question concerns the interdependencies between informational categories. Due to their preoccupation with the explanation of individual morphosyntactic phenomena, such as the occurrence of segmental marking or the use of specific linear positions, most bottom-up studies only consider the influence of individual informational categories on surface structure. The possibility that surface structure is affected by a syntagmatic combination (a configuration) of such categories is disregarded.

**Information structure** Information structure can be characterized as the body of functional considerations that concern the interlocutors’ respective state and organization of knowledge and the way in which their mutual assumptions about these impact on the surface structure of the utterance.

More than any other area of linguistics, information structure is plagued by widespread dissent about virtually everything besides its importance to our understanding of what language is all about. There is disagreement about its scope, about its position inside or outside Grammar, about its relation to morphosyntax and semantics, about the number of independent subdomains and dimensions that need to be distinguished, and most of all there is a deeply rooted terminological confusion. Part of this dissent can be explained by historical developments: the study of information structure passed through the hands of philosophers, semanti-cists, ‘discoursists’, informaticians, syntacticians and phonologists, each of which groups imposed their own worthwhile but painfully incompatible views onto the domain. This study does not give a comprehensive historiography of information structure. To the extent that such a thing is at all possible, several of the works cited here give a good impression of the richness of the field. In particular, the reader is referred to Von Heusinger (1999) for a thorough historical introduction, and to Vallduví (1992) for a concise ‘typological’ classification of theories. Finally, Kruijff-Korbayova and Steedman (2003) give a detailed graphical overview of the origins of and interaction between the various terminologies that are used in the literature.

The framework for information structure – or rather one of its components, **information packaging** – that is laid down in chapters 3 and 5 of this study belongs to what could be termed the ‘mechanistic tradition’. It conceives of information structure as a set of instructions by the Speaker to the Addressee that specify how
the (semantic) contents of his message are to be treated. This mechanistic view
dates back to Chafe (1976) and Reinhart (1981), although Heim (1983) was the
first to operationalize it in her theory of File Change Semantics. The framework is
employed in a way that is strictly functionalist: informational choices are taken
to ‘drive’ the construal of morphosyntactic structure. A third characteristic of
the framework is its adherence to what Vallduví (1992) calls trinomial articula-
tions. That is, the relevant informational categories are understood to belong to
independent dimensions, the categories from which form syntagmatic constructs.
These articulations are thought to constitute a paradigm, following Lambrecht and
Polinsky (1997).

The idea

This study is propelled by the assumption that linguistic expressions
result from the interaction between a number of levels of linguistic meaning, entirely
in the spirit of Functional Discourse Grammar (Hengeveld and Mackenzie
2008). The structure internal to those levels consists of a recursively layered
collection of predefined syntagmatic configurations of slots (frames) and filler items
(lexemes).

Theoretically, it should be possible to isolate the exact impact on surface
structure of a specific change in one of the underlying levels of analysis. Suppose that
we had a way to identify the informational characteristics of the Speaker’s message
in another way than by looking at the morphosyntactic and prosodic properties of
the expression; that is, suppose that we had external evidence, comparable to the
kind that is easily gathered for many semantic distinctions. Suppose also that we
could control all other factors that impact on surface structure, such as changes
in the semantic meaning of the message. If we then manipulated the information
structure (for instance, by changing the communicative context), we would see the
exact impact of our manipulation reflected by the morphosyntax and prosody of
the expression. If we had defined a neatly structured paradigm of informational
choices that we expect the language user to be capable of making, we could chart
the surface structure reflection of the entire paradigm.

Such information would be extremely useful not just to gain insight into the
functional conditions under which specific morphosyntactic and prosodic coding
strategies are used. By looking at the way in which informational distinctions
pattern in surface structure, we would also gain insight into the manner in which
these categories are organized in the language user’s conceptual space. Following
the principle of iconicity (Haiman 1985), we would expect that recurrent similarity
in form is indicative of proximity in meaning. Hence, if two or more information-
structural distinctions in a language were consistently expressed by means of the
same surface structure strategy, we would have a solid case for claiming that they are
‘conceptually close’ in that language. Moreover, such findings about form–function
interaction could be compared across languages to reveal patterns of typological
variation.
Structure of this dissertation While the above vision may seem somewhat utopian, it comes fairly close to what this study intends to achieve: for five paradigmatically related informational articulations that are provided by the theory proposed in the first part of this study, the encoding in surface structure is examined in a sample of fifteen languages. The point of departure is not the specific morphosyntactic means that are used, but rather the function potential of the various constructions. The correspondence of coding strategies and informational articulations is analysed cross-lingustically to draw conclusions regarding the relative importance of a number of informational parameters to the interaction with syntax. To this end, the dissertation is divided in two parts. Part one deals with theoretical issues, while the empirical study and related methodological issues are discussed in part two.

Chapter 2 discusses a number of basic notions upon which the theoretical framework is founded. It presents the ‘Stalnakerian’ triplet proposition – presupposition – assertion (Stalnaker 1978, 1998), that is fundamental to many theories of information structure (for instance Lambrecht 1994). It argues that these notions should be exploited in the context of a deeply interpersonal model of discourse knowledge management, because of the mutual inaccessibility of discourse knowledge between interlocutors (Dik 1997a). In this interpersonal process, the interlocutors’ assumptions as to the other’s cooperativeness, covered by the framework of Gricean pragmatics (Grice 1975), are argued to play a crucial role. Finally, the chapter proposes that information structure be broken down in three separate but interrelated subdomains, dealing with referent management, cohesion management and information packaging, respectively.

In chapter 3, the subdomain of information packaging is considered in greater detail. An extralinguistic model for information packaging during discourse, termed the Discourse Bulletin Board, is proposed that organises the knowledge invoked during the communicative exchange in subsets called addresses. The address serves as the domain of evaluation for propositions that are asserted by the other party, and as the locus in discourse knowledge where it is stored upon acceptance. The manipulation of the structure of knowledge on the Discourse Bulletin Board requires instructions of two kinds, which are part of the Speaker’s message: instructions that specify where the Speaker’s assertion is to be directed in order to be evaluated (addressation), and instructions as to how the Speaker’s assertion is to be used to change the current state of the address it is directed to (actualization).

Chapter 4 introduces Functional Discourse Grammar (FDG), the theory of language that is used as the overarching framework for this study. FDG is discussed in considerable detail, in particular because a number of fundamental changes to the canonical version of the theory are envisaged, following recent ideas in Smit and van Staden (2007) and Hengeveld and Smit (2009). A proposal is made for the generation of layered structure by means of two precisely defined formal operations, restriction and predication, which act on configurational frames taken from the lexicon. This proposal has repercussions for the way in which information packaging on the DBB interacts with Grammar.

This topic is taken up in chapter 5. There, it is argued that the canonical way in which information packaging is represented in Functional Discourse Grammar –
namely, by means of pragmatic function assignment to Subacts of evocation at the Interpersonal Level – is problematic in a number of respects. Because of this an alternative representation is proposed that capitalises on Vallduvi’s informational articulations, which in FDG can be formalized as information packaging frames. These frames are allocated to the first restrictor slot of the Communicated Content layer. They may contain Topic and Comment units, which regulate the addressation of knowledge to a location in the Discourse Bulletin Board, and evaluation of a proposition at that place. These units, as well as the Subacts of evocation that are thought to be contained in them, may be assigned a Focus operator that ensures the actualization of discourse knowledge in the proper way. Based on these two dimensions, five informational articulations are proposed that vary in terms of their predicationality, the layers that they consist of, and the locus of the Focus operator.

With all the theoretical ingredients lined up, a small-scale empirical-typological investigation takes up part two of this study. In chapter 6, a number of theoretical preliminaries are discussed. After a brief survey of a number of relevant previous studies and the identification of a number of challenges that present themselves when doing typological research that touches on pragmatics, the research design and questions are introduced. The design has been discussed above; this study takes no interest in the particular morphosyntactic encoding that is used to convey informational articulations but is merely interested in the form-function correspondences of the entire paradigm. In particular, it is hypothesized that the parameters which govern the paradigm of informational articulations exert an influence on the extent to which separate articulations can and cannot be conveyed by means of a single coding strategy. Also, the sample of languages used in this study is discussed, as well as some general concerns regarding data quality and reliability.

A qualitative analysis of the data is presented in chapter 7. The results show that the clustering of informational articulations under a single coding strategy appears to conform to the expectations that were formulated in the previous chapter. That is, only coding strategies are attested that have a function potential that is congruent with a parameter of the paradigmatic structure of informational articulations prescribed by the theory. Moreover, the few exceptions to this tendency can be given an alternative explanation that does not weaken the original hypothesis.

Having thus established that the parametric structure of the domain of informational articulations is reflected by the way in which they pattern in surface structure, chapter 8 aims to quantify the ‘conceptual proximity’ between the articulations. This cannot be done straightforwardly: as the design specifically allows for many-to-many correspondences between articulations and coding strategies, this multidimensionality has to be reduced in a transparent manner before it can be interpreted. To that end, an affinity metric is developed that takes into account the entire constellation of surface structures and articulations and expresses the mutual similarity of each n-tuple of articulations as a value ranging from .000 (full dissimilarity) to 1.000 (full similarity). This metric makes it possible to perform cross-linguistic comparisons of various kinds. The results support a secondary hypothesis, regarding the expected affinity of parametrized vs. non-parametrized clusters of articulations.
As a final step, an attempt is then made to classify languages in terms of the alignment that they exhibit in the expression of the various articulations in the paradigm: the question which informational articulations are most similar in quantitative terms, and which ones are most dissimilar. On the basis of fifteen logically possible alignment patterns (i.e., every possible grouping of the five articulations, ranging from a scenario with five singleton groups to a scenario with a single group of five formally indistinguishable categories), another metric is proposed that quantifies the extent to which an alignment pattern is representative of the form-function constellation found in a particular language. These alignment patterns give some insight into the relative importance that each language attaches to the three parameters that govern the domain of information structuring.

Due to a number of methodological complications that are extensively discussed at various places in this work, only tentative conclusions are warranted. Therefore, chapter 9 is shaped as an epilogue that seeks to wrap up some of the more interesting elements of the investigation, and identifies a number of subjects that require further research.