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

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In the context of communication, language can be understood as a trinity of form, meaning, and function. The use of formal elements such as words, constructions, and intonation patterns is dictated by the meaning that a language user wishes to convey. The function of the utterance in the communicative exchange between interlocutors is an important codeterminant of its eventual form.

This dissertation aims to shed light on how functions belonging to the domain of information packaging exert their influence on the form of the utterance. Specifically, the question is addressed how these functions cluster with regard to their neutralization in surface structure, and whether such ‘alignment patterns’ provide a useful means of typological classification.

Information packaging (Chafe 1976) is concerned with instructions imparted by the Speaker to the Addressee to process and store the information conveyed to him in a specific manner. In chapter 2, I argue that information packaging is one aspect of the wider domain of information structure, which is concerned with “the relation of what is being said to what has gone on before in the discourse, and its internal organization into an act of communication” (Halliday 1967: 199). Information structuring is a deeply interpersonal aspect of the linguistic system in that the assignment of information structure to the utterance is Speaker-driven as much as it is Addressee-oriented. That is, the Speaker has an interest in getting across his communicative intention, but can only succeed in doing so if he takes into account his interlocutor’s state of knowledge. Since this is not directly accessible to him, the Speaker plans his communication on the basis of a nested set of representations of interlocutors’ presuppositional states: he makes assumptions about the knowledge of his Addressee, assumptions about the Addressee’s assumptions about his own knowledge and that of others, et cetera. Information structuring in this light is understood as the body of categories that facilitate the transmission of units of knowledge from one such subset to another.

Besides information packaging, information structure is concerned with referent management and the maintenance of discourse coherence. Referent management keeps track of the activation status of referents evoked in the discourse: the estimated amount of effort it takes for an interlocutor to construe or retrieve the mental image belonging to a referent. Referent management deals with categories like Given and New, which have a long history of being conflated with concepts.
related to information packaging. The same is true for coherence management, which keeps track of the sequential relations between propositional contents. While it is fairly easy to keep apart information packaging, referent management and coherence management notionally, categories belonging to these classes have a strong tendency to make use of the same expressive devices, making it rather difficult to identify their individual contribution to surface structure.

Information packaging in this study is viewed as a mechanistic aspect of language rather than something interpretive: it tells the Addressee ‘what to do’ with an incoming assertion in relation to his current state of knowledge, rather than ‘what to understand’. The mechanistic approach presupposes some model of the way in which discourse knowledge is structured, stored and accessed. In chapter 3 I propose such a model of discourse knowledge management, which has two independent dimensions. Adressation (Jacobs 2001) ensures a thematic ordering of the knowledge that is exchanged in the discourse, such that information relevant to a referent that is worth talking about is stored together at a single address. The contents of the address constitute a context set (Reinhart 1981) which is used to evaluate the acceptability of new assertions directed to the address. As such, addressation can break up the assertion in two parts: a Topic that specifies the address where the contents of the assertion are to be evaluated, and a Comment that contains the contents proper. It should be noted that the inference of aboutness that is often associated with this kind of organization has little role to play: it is the position of this study that aboutness and addressation are undoubtedly related, but that it is impossible to tell apart cause from consequence. Complementing addressation, actualization applies a distinction between the part of the message that is capable of bringing about a change in the Addressee’s presuppositional state, and the part that serves as an anchor due to the presence of which the information can be optimally processed.

Following Vallduví (1992), it is assumed that categories from either packaging dimension combine to form what is known as an informational articulation: a syntagmatic pair of instructions imposed on the contents of the message, that tell the Addressee where to evaluate the information asserted to him and how it is meant to update his current state of knowledge. The adoption of Vallduví’s notion that information packaging deals with syntagms rather than individual categories offers a new outlook on typological classification in information packaging: instead of investigating how different languages subdivide the individual categories of Topic, Focus and the like, joining these categories in a principled way makes it possible to classify languages in terms of the behaviour of an entire functional dimension. Furthermore, the concept of articulation as coined by Vallduví is highly similar to that of a frame in Functional Discourse Grammar (Hengeveld and Mackenzie 2008). This offers a viable alternative to the way in which information packaging is currently implemented in Functional Discourse Grammar (FDG).

Functional Discourse Grammar, which is used as the theoretical framework for this study, is presented in chapter 4. In line with its structural-functional orientation, FDG enables the integrated analysis of formal, functional and denotational aspects of the utterance. In addition, Functional Discourse Grammar
provides a context in which Grammar (the module responsible for the generation of interpersonal, representational and morphosyntactic structure) interacts closely with other cognitive components involved in communicative competence. Both of these are vital prerequisites for the investigation at hand. They are discussed in considerable detail. In passing, some minor changes – unrelated to the matter of information packaging – to ‘canonical’ FDG (Hengeveld and Mackenzie 2008) are proposed. In particular, an argument is made to reinstore Dik’s original idea that every Restrictor that is used to instantiate the designation of a Layer takes the configurational shape of an endocentric predication, following Smit and van Staden (2007).

Some changes that are more pertinent to the matter at hand are proposed in chapter 5, where an argument is made for the abandonment of pragmatic function assignment as the way to deal with information packaging in FDG. There are two reasons for this: first of all, assigning informational categories as functions is believed to cause inconsistencies in the application of FDG’s formal apparatus. Secondly, pragmatic function assignment entails that information packaging is made dependent on the evocational structure of the Speaker’s message: in order to be able to assign pragmatic functions at the Interpersonal Level, Subacts of evocation have to be present to assign these functions to. However, this goes against the intuition that the Speaker’s strategic choices how to affect the Addressee’s current state of discourse knowledge should precede his choice as to the means with which to evoke the Communicated content with which to affect it, rather than follow it. To remedy both problems, a proposal is made to adopt the informational articulation as a complex unit at the Interpersonal Level in FDG. More specifically, informational articulations are represented as Frames, exactly like predication frames at the Representational Level. A Frame provides a given number of equipollent slots and the relationships between them: these Frames are not generated by Grammar upon formulation, but are available as ready-made configurational units from the Lexicon.

Two actional Layers are proposed that can instantiate the slots of the informational frame: Topic (Top) and Comment (Cm). The Head of the Topic layer specifies at what address in discourse knowledge the content of the assertion is to be evaluated, while the Comment contains the content to evaluate. To either Layer, a Focus Operator may be attached that reflects the capability of the Layer’s content to bring about a change of knowledge. In addition, a Focus operator may be attached to the units inside an informational Layer, as is the case in so-called identificational Focus constructions (Kiss 1998). Apart from the fact that the proposed modifications improve on FDG’s formal consistency and do justice to the priority of information packaging over evocation, the frame-based approach offers a better handle on typological variation in this domain. That is, limits to what are and what are not possible ways to package information during discourse can now be dealt with as a matter of frame availability, while leaving the combinatory machinery of Grammar out of the equation.

Following suggestions by Lambrecht and Polinsky (1997) and Lambrecht (2001b), it is assumed that the inventory of available informational articulations constitutes
a paradigm. Whereas their original proposal makes use of a single parameter (scope of Focus) to distinguish three categories, I argue that the paradigm is structured along two dimensions: the Layers that occur in the Frame, and the locus where the Focus operator attaches. This yields five basic articulations, which can be described as in Table 1:

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Table 1  Informational articulations

Most of these articulations correspond to information packaging scenarios that are well-documented in the pragmatic literature. What is innovative about the approach taken here, is the way in which they are integrated into a cohesive paradigm. Articulation A, consisting of a Topic Layer only, is tantamount to the entity-central thetic assertion (Sasse 1987). Articulation B is its counterpart, and consists of a Comment Layer only. It corresponds to Sasse’s event-central thetic assertion. Articulation C is best known as the Topic-Comment articulation, or categorical assertion. It is the ‘default’ way to present information in discourse, in which the information state at a given address (indicated by the Topic) is augmented with a new proposition (contained in the Comment). Articulation E corresponds to the identificational Focus construction (Kíss 1998). The odd one out is articulation D, a Topic-Comment articulation in which both the Topic and the Comment are meant to bring about a change in the Addressee’s discourse knowledge. This scenario is widely considered to be dysfunctional on account of the dual update instruction, a burden which languages often resolve by splitting the articulation in an expression that consists of two parts (Lambrecht 1994): one part which introduces the new Topic, and another that provides the information about that Topic. Nevertheless, such resolutions in surface structure do not warrant treatment of these cases as combinations of two simple articulations, if only because the two parts usually constitute a single Communicated content. Therefore, this type of information packaging should be treated as an articulation of its own, and the paradigm provides a logical basis for doing so.

Chapters 2 – 5 line up all the ingredients necessary for the empirical study which takes up part two of this book, chapters 6 – 8. The question is straightforward: how are the informational articulations distributed across the available morphosyntactic coding strategies of a language? More in particular, do the neutralisation patterns found in the languages of the world provide support for the paradigm of informa-
tional articulations proposed above, and can languages be classified in terms of the individual parameter that exerts most influence on their surface structure?

Chapter 6 addresses a number of preliminary methodological issues. Besides a brief discussion of relevant past studies, the language sample \((N = 15)\) and some general considerations regarding data quality, the chapter proposes a ‘mapping design’ for the research: the study is set up in such a way that correspondences can be investigated systematically between a set number of categories at the interpersonal level (the five informational articulations described earlier, identifiable from the discourse context) and an indeterminate number of categories in surface structure (collectively referred to as coding strategies). Each coding strategy is not defined in terms of its morphosyntactic behaviour, but rather in terms of its coding potential, i.e. the type and number of articulations it is capable of expressing. In this way, the cross-linguistic incommensurability of surface structure categories (Haspelmath 2007) is overcome, and the correspondence patterns for individual languages can be meaningfully compared.

Chapter 7 investigates the global correspondences between informational articulations and individual coding strategies, without paying attention to the distribution of strategies within or across languages. The assumption is that the parameterized structure of the paradigm of informational articulations (see Table 1) is reflected in the way the articulations cluster with regard to the available coding strategies. In other words: articulations that have parameter settings in common are expected to be able to share a coding strategy, while those that show little or no communality will not be expressed by the same strategy. In particular, it is expected that the articulations A and C will not be expressed by the same strategy, as well as B and D, on account of having too few characteristics in common. On the whole, the findings presented in this chapter support the prediction: across the fifteen languages of the sample, strategies whose coding potential includes either of the two pairs mentioned above are extremely uncommon indeed.

Whereas it was the objective of chapter 7 to investigate the distribution of individual coding strategies, chapter 8 considers the way in which a single language ‘cuts up the cake’, and distributes the informational articulations across its available coding strategies. In particular, the question is at issue what a particular distribution reveals about the relative importance of the parameters that govern the paradigm introduced in Table 1. In order to approach this question, a method is proposed that converts the complex whole of correspondences between articulations and coding strategies in a particular language to a set of quantified statements about the similarity of the articulations in that language. The method by which these similarity scores are calculated is based on the iconicity principle (Haiman 1985), which dictates that there is an interdependence between neutralization in surface structure and conceptual proximity of categories in underlying structure. Simply put, when two articulations belong to the coding potential of a single coding strategy, this is a good indication that they are similar; when they are consistently kept apart in surface structure, this is a good indication that they are dissimilar underlyingly as well. The proposed method implements this line of reasoning, while also providing a way to take into account conflicts caused by strategies
with partially overlapping coding potentials. The comparison of similarity scores provides further support for the findings already presented in chapter 7 on the basis of a qualitative comparison of the various possible kinds of coding strategies: the pairs and triplets of articulations that have parameter settings in common score much higher on similarity than the ones that do not. As a next step, pairwise similarity scores are exploited to classify languages in terms of what I have called informational alignment: the extent to which (relative) surface structure neutralization of informational articulations is asymmetrical, and what type of split languages apply. The way alignment is implemented allows for a scalar classification; a language can be more or less representative of a particular alignment pattern. The prediction is that the alignment patterns which split the informational domain along one of the parameters suggested above are attested more frequently, and that languages score higher on these. The alignment of the languages of the sample supports this prediction as well. Taken together, the results from chapters 7 and 8 provide ample support for the assumption that the paradigm of informational articulations that was proposed on the basis of theory, is indeed a useful one, and is worthy of further exploration.