

Old and New Information

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An Example

(1) The dog bit a girl.

The Dog in Discourse

(2) The dog bit a girl.

- 1 The use of the definite article *the* marks *dog* as old information (that is, an entity or proposition that has been introduced earlier in discourse).
- 2 The appearance of *the dog* as the subject of a sentence, which is correlated—though imperfectly—with the notion of TOPIC

About A Girl

(3) The dog bit a girl.

- 1 The indefinite article *a/an* marks *girl* as new information.
- 2 The appearance of *girl* as an object means that it is less likely to be topical and more likely to be new information.

It would be very strange to say

(4) A girl walked down the street. The dog bit a girl.

if both instances of *a girl* refer to the same entity. However, both of the following two examples are fine:

- (5) A girl walked down the street. The dog bit the girl.
- (6) A girl walked down the street. The dog bit her.

Pronouns and Old Information

Pronouns are a way of expressing that an entity is old information:

- (7) a. A girl walked down the street. The dog bit the girl.
- b. A girl walked down the street. The dog bit her.
- c. # She walked down the street. The dog bit a girl.

The most extreme form of pronouns are those that are not pronounced at all.

- (8) a. 不 知道。
 bu zhidao
 NEG know
 ‘I don’t know.’
- b. 喜欢 吗?
 xihuan ma
 like Q
 ‘Do (you) like (it)?’

These only occur when the referents of the null pronouns are old information.

- (9) Prantl's, I find to be the best bakery
in Pittsburgh.

- (10) a. S1: Do you like Prantl's?
 b. S2: Prantl's, I find to be the best
 bakery in Pittsburgh.

The BA Construction

- (11) a. 我 吃 饭 了
wo chi fan le
1SG eat rice PERF
'I ate rice.'
- b. 我 把 饭 吃 了
wo ba fan chi le
1SG BA rice eat PERF
'I ate rice.'

The noun phrase marked with *ba* (rice) is old information in (11b). Rice is potentially new information in (11a).

Old and New Information in Hmong

- (12) *muaj ib tug yawm muaj peb tug tub*
exist one CLF man exist three CLF boy
'There was a man who had three sons.'

Two constructions for new information here:

- Presentational construction (*muaj* X, like 有 X in Chinese)
- Numeral + classifier construction

- (13) *Tug tub hlub hu ua Los Tuam*
CLF boy senior call do Lao Da
'The oldest son was called Lao Da.'

Two constructions for old information:

- Bare classifier construction
- Preverbal subject

Word Order and New Information

Compare the following two sentences:

- (14) a. *ob tug mivnyuas tuaj*
two CLF child come
'two children came'
- b. *tuaj ob tug mivnyuas*
come two CLF child
'two children came'

- In both of these sentences, the noun phrase has a numeral and a classifier
- This would suggest that they are both new information
- However, one of these marks new information twice. Which one?