Loci of topic marking: a typological study

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Topic is defined in various ways in the literature, which often results in the term being described as confusing (see, e.g., Smith 2009: 196 for a brief overview of different definitions of topic). The most well-known of these definitions are, perhaps, the "given information" definition (preferred, for instance, by Haiman (1978)) on the one hand and the "aboutness" definition (that is, the topic of a sentence is that which the sentence is about) on the other. In this study, I use the aboutness definition following Lambrecht (1994). In this study, I suggest an approach to topic marking based on the locus of marking (i.e., on the position of the topic marker) and consider topic marking strategies from this perspective.

For the purposes of this study, a topic marking construction (or strategy) is a construction that marks a participant as the topic by segmental means and is not a matter of topicality hierarchies. This study is limited to NP topics, and voice systems are excluded from consideration. However, some non-dedicated topic markers are included, and, as topics may be integrated into the clause to various degrees (see Lander 2021 for a discussion), some less grammaticalized constructions are included as well.

Data. This study uses a convenience sample of 33 languages. The point of departure for the sample was the Descriptive Grammars Series. Since all of these grammars are based on the Lingua Descriptive Studies Questionnaire (Comrie & Smith 1977), they follow the same structure and each include a relatively detailed section dedicated to the notion of topic (namely, section 1.12). However, only the languages including segmental topic marking strategies were included into the sample.

Locus of marking. The approach used in this study is similar to the approaches suggested in (Aannestad 2021; Aissen 2023; Lander 2022) for focus marking and is based on a modification of head/dependent marking typology suggested by Lander & Nichols (2020). This modification allows for a more uniform analysis of what is termed C marking, which would, under the original head/dependent marking approach, be separated into head-marking (positioned in relation to the head) and detached marking (always taking a specific position, for instance, the second position).

The two main topic marking strategies described are D topic marking, the position of which is defined with respect to the topic constituent, and C topic marking, the position of which is defined with respect to the whole construction. D topic marking is illustrated by (1), where the marker is attached to the topic constituent, and C topic marking is illustrated by (2), where the tense-modal marker and the mood marker show agreement with the topic in gender. I will describe the possible positions of the marker for both these strategies (for instance, in D topic marking strategies, the marker may be positioned before the topic constituent, after it, or both before and after it), as well as discuss some less grammaticalized topic marking patterns bearing some similarities to them (namely, "concerning X" and pronominal doubling constructions).

(1) Imbabura Quechua (Quechuan)
fluka   tayta-**ka**   alpa-ta-mi   yapu-n
1SG   father-**TOP**   land-ACC-VALIDATOR   plow-3
'My father$_{Topic}$ plows the land'. (Cole 1985: 95)

(2)Jarawara (Arawan)

oko	siraba	Okomobi	jo-kaba-ni-ke
1SG.POSS	cangati(**F**)	PN(M)	OT-eat-PST.**F**-DECL.**F**

'Okomobi ate my cangati$_{Topic}$'. (Dixon 2004, as cited in Marquardt, 2020: 14)

Kinds of topics. This approach allows for comparison between D and C topic marking strategies along various lines. I will describe various distinctions topic marking strategies may show in relation to topics of various syntactic or semantic roles, phrasal types (e.g., pronominal and non-pronominal topics), as well as topic types (e.g., maintained or shifted topics). For instance, both D and C marking strategies may be restricted to a particular syntactic role (e.g., subject or direct object).

Although D marking strategies seem to show a tendency to mark shifted and contrastive topics (which aligns with previous observations made by Wälchli's (2019)), whereas C marking strategies seem to show a tendency to mark maintained topics, both D and C marking strategies were found to be used for maintained topics, as well as shifted and contrastive topics.

Besides that, some D marking strategies are restricted to topics of a particular semantic role or to pronominal topics. No such restrictions were found for C marking strategies (though this may simply be caused by the relatively small amount of data on C marking strategies in my sample).

Abbreviations: 1: first person, 3: third person, ACC: accusative, DECL: declarative, F: feminine, M: masculine, OT: object topic, PN: proper name, POSS: possessive, PST: past, SG: singular.

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