

Question under Discussion, Information Structure, and Textual Evidence

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Recent research in information structure (IS) has cast doubt on the universality of information structure categories (Matic & Wedgwood 2013). In this paper, I am going to develop this idea further by analysing possible partitions of the IS space and exemplify this with a corpus-based analysis of the highly idiosyncratic IS system in Tundra Yukaghir, a north-eastern Siberian isolate.

The set of standard assumptions in the IS research can be subsumed as follows: (a) Common Ground delivers partially defined propositions that constitute the background; (b) the job of grammars is to signal the locus of saturation of these partially defined propositions, i.e. the ‘focus’; (c) grammars differentiate between the following types of saturation – narrow, broad and sentence focus (Lambrecht 1994 and many others). There is no doubt that this kind of system works well in the description of some European languages. However, many languages seem not to be sensitive to focus size and the degree of givenness of the background. In order to try and accommodate at least some (though certainly not all) variation in the domain of IS categories across languages, I will propose an additional dimension of IS, based on possible expectations generated in discourse. If the development of discourse is conceived as a sequence of questions under discussion (QUD, Roberts 2012), then at least the following types of expectations related to QUDs can be defined: (a) eventualities entailed by QUD and therefore expected (EE); (b) eventualities that are plausible given the current QUD and therefore possible (PP), and (c) eventualities underspecified as to the current QUD (U). These three categories form a Horn scale <EE, PP, U>, such that the use of the type on the right implicates that the meaning of the type(s) on the left does not apply.

I shall argue that the so-called Tundra Yukaghir focus system encodes the difference between EE, PP and U rather than focus size and background specification. In particular, the S- and O-focus sentences denote EE eventualities, neutral sentences with the particle *mə(r)* = PP eventualities, while those sentences that contain neither ‘focus’ marking nor particles convey U-type events. These sentence types directly encode EE, PP and U as *procedural meanings* in the sense of Relevance Theory: they provide the hearer with instructions not about the content of the partition of the context set that is to be updated, but rather about the way inferences are to be drawn given the current QUD. Using the EE form amounts to the instruction ‘interpret as an answer to the preceding QUD’, whereas U form implicates dissociation from the QUD. PP confirms expectations or presents an eventuality as corresponding to expectations given the current QUD. I will show that these general types of instructions can have multifarious interpretive effects.

Tundra Yukaghir thus instantiates an IS system which has little in common with the standard European type, despite appearances. It is conceivable that other languages are sensitive to yet other restrictions and divisions. I conclude with the suggestion that a realistic typology of IS should devote its energy to identifying differences of this kind rather than looking for structural identity where there is none. Importantly, this kind of cross-linguistic variation cannot be detected by simply applying the standard test battery for information structure, but solely by thorough investigation of natural discourse.

References

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