

Sentence topic, discourse topic, or cognitive topic? Topic revisited from cross-linguistic perspective

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1. Rationale

This paper presents further examination as a response to studies by Chu (2000, 1999, 1993) regarding prototype / prototypicality of topic in Mandarin Chinese; also provides Bahasa Indonesia and English data to serve cross-linguistic comparison and contrast. Chu proposed five criteria/attributes to evaluate a potential and qualified prototype of being a topic in Mandarin Chinese, viz. being nominal, serving as an interclausal link, being specific/referential, occupying the sentence-initial/preverbal position, bearing no selectional relations to the predicative verb. Also he tried to place emphasis on discourse topic, as compared to van Oosten's previous study (1986) on prototypical-cognitive approach to language universals. Somehow the examples he cited or given in those studies (2000, 1999, 1993) are almost solely from sentence level, and the instances discussed are not so common in daily speech. As notified and informed quite frequently by linguists, we should not miss out any linguistic facts nor ignore actual language use (and intuition), and what matters lying in convincing examples instead of lots of data but lacks explanatory power.

2. Motivation

What attracts and challenges us most lies in the attributes of prototypicality of topic in Mandarin Chinese advocated by Chu (ibid.), and hence if it is workable cross-linguistically. We would like to reexamine the data provided by Chu and related studies (Li 1991; Tsao 1990; Li & Thompson 1981) from syntactic point of view, to evaluate the adequacy of the criteria, and even to propose modifications to their frameworks, and then based upon cognitive perspective to render plausible explanation and interpretations to what we concerned most mentioned above and the research questions outlined below.

3. Research questions

1. Questioning one of the characteristics of prototypical topic — aboutness (van Oosten 1986), Chu argued that which maybe the most frequently mentioned quality of topic (but is also most frequently criticised as being vague). It is thus Chu analysed from a structural viewpoint and claimed everything must be encodable before it can be recognised (Chu 1993: 38). But how could we analyse and regard the data chosen in this article in terms of (discourse) topic with sole syntactic focus whilst without resort to pragmatic-discursive-cognitive considerations? Especially as Chu also emphasised the significance of discourse, discourse grammar, and cognitive-functional grammar? Moreover, structurally vague might not necessarily mean conceptually/cognitively vague, and vice versa.
2. Considering how important the language facts will be and how the linguistic data given and discussed in Chu's and related studies fail to encompass the very nature of linguistic facts, we present data across different genres and discourse types, including: daily/colloquial speech, advertising, news report, political addresses and the like, only to wide-faceted observations.
3. If Chu's criteria are inappropriate for embracing language facts or just momentarily fail to catch the panorama of language use, it'll be worthwhile to revise them in order for the readers/audience not to always led by the author to specify/decide whether this or that would well-qualified for being a (prototype of) topic. This seems to be falling into inadequate reasoning and sort of circularity: we accept the criteria first, and we decide/assign the topic then.
4. If the prototype approach is not so wide-angled and far-reaching to cover many utterances in daily encounters, as we've observed and always try to improve the theoretical framework, we collect and investigate the data from actual daily speech across diverse genres to strengthen the explanatory power of Chinese/English topic as prototype. Or, perhaps we could even abandon the prototype approach just in case it is not convincing and persuasive enough.
5. In many instances/utterances, we are facing difficulties in assigning topic(s), and would rather think they (utterances) are hearer-based and carry context-sensitivity. This is endorsed by one of the prominent Neo-Gricean pragmatics — Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995). Take some examples for illustration:

(1) Di dalam dunia yang kurang peduli, kita harus menjadi orang-orang yang sangat peduli. (Bahasa Indonesia) (*In a world that couldn't care less, we are to be people who couldn't care more.*)

(2) Anda hanya membuat masalah jika mengkhawatirkan hari esok. (Bahasa Indonesia) (*You're only cooking up trouble when you stew about tomorrow.*)

How will different information receptors interpret and process the texts or talks and then assign a topic in terms of syntactic construction and/or based upon the attributes of prototypicality of topic? (In the current study, we very briefly

define *discourse* as 'texts and talks in contexts.'). Thus:

(3) Miranda: He was funny. And cute.

Carrie: Yeah, and in town for a week! What's the point?

Samantha: That IS the point! It's the best possible scenario, because you know he's leaving.

Carrie: But it's like whatever happens, there's an expiration date. It's expiration dating.

(Sex and the City)

The topics here may comprise from *Carrie's unwillingness of he's leaving (Mr. Big)*, cause *this relationship couldn't be everlasting*, to *Miranda's value judgments towards Big* and *Samantha's life philosophy*.

(4) Miranda: Steve is completely predictable but that's one of the things I love about him. He's just so comfortable and safe.

Carrie: Are you dating a man or a minivan?

The contradictory interpretations between Miranda and Carrie via Carrie's 'irony' led to quite different conclusions and topics: *Miranda truly appreciated Steve's simplicity* (comfortable and safe), whereas *Carrie expected a lover be supposed to go beyond comforts and safety*.

(5) Carrie: There is no way that the love that I had with Big is the same thing that he has with Natasha.

Miranda: "Natasha?" When did you stop calling her "the idiot stick figure with no soul?"

Big's new girlfriend *Natasha was negatively evaluated* amongst Carrie and Miranda (and Samantha and Charlotte) out of *their proud, self-confidence, and jealousy*.

(6) Carrie: He's a bisexual.

Samantha: I could've told you that, sweetie. He took you ice skating for god's sake!

The shared background knowledge of Carrie and Samantha, and perhaps knowledge of the world, informed the audience of *gay/bisexual traits and lifestyle*.

4. Methodology

We propose a qualitative and synchronic approach in light of the weakness noticed concerning the inadequacy and indeterminacy in assigning a (prototype of) topic. Data for analysis came from daily speech across genres for elaboration to improve and strengthen the explanatory power of Chinese/Bahasa Indonesia/English topic as prototype, or simply define and assign a topic. Those discourse types include colloquial speech, advertising, popular literature, news coverage, political addresses and so forth.

5. Expected results

People often mean more than they say. Grammar on its own is typically insufficient for determining the full meaning of an utterance, as suggested by Hedberg (1990) "...It is possible, then, for a discourse as a whole to end up structured into multiple levels of hierarchically organised topics and subtopics. It seems useful to identify the notion of 'discourse topic' with the superordinate questions, or, in other words, to simply view the 'sentence topic' as the lowest level of 'discourse topic'" and claimed by past studies (Chen 1996; Chu 1999). The assumption that the discourse is coherent or 'makes sense' has an important role to play in determining meaning as well (cf. Asher & Lascarides 2005). Just as syntactic surface structures display ramifications of underlying structures, we can well notice the rich implicit meaning (vs. explicit meaning) conveyed by the interplay of syntax-semantics-pragmatics and discourse. *Conceptual topic* (or termed *cognitive topic* in this paper) from a cognitive perspective will not merely avail the readers with more accessible contextual effects (implicatures), but the sub-topics along with grounding (Chui 2001) and 'composite topics' (Bilhaut 2005) can also be approached layer by layer with regard to cognition and language, which, again, play a vital role in perception, comprehension, and interpretation of utterances and non-verbal communication, and hence the mental processes of assigning/deciding a topic. The topic may vary from a word, to short phrases, a sentence, and/or to the gist (after reader's digestion and reorganisation) of the text/discourse.

As demonstrated in this paper, those weak implicatures for being potential cognitive-discourse topic(s) are resulted from the author's higher involvement and active processing. They are indeterminate and unlimited for inferencing, and might be processed continuously, as long as one is willing to, and thinks it is worthwhile, i.e. she will be rewarded with additional contextual effects, which would outweigh her processing efforts. Different readers will receive different readings and interpretations, the 'absolute levels' are diverse; also, even the same reader will receive different readings and interpretations under different degrees of involvement and circumstances. However, they (/she) would reach at any rate the 'optimal relevance' for themselves (/herself).

Keywords: cognition, discourse topic, implicature, pragmatic inference, relevance

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