Topic constructions in Hong Kong Sign Language

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This dissertation investigates the linguistic properties of topic constructions in Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL), the visual-gestural language used by the Deaf community in Hong Kong. It aims at addressing the following issues:

i. How is the notion of topic manifested in the grammar of HKSL? In particular, what are the syntactic, morphological, non-manual and prosodic characteristics associated with topic constructions in HKSL?

ii. Is HKSL a topic-prominent language?

Chapters 2 to 5 investigate how ‘topic’ is manifested in the grammar of HKSL. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature. Although the notion of ‘topic’ has been a focus of linguistic research for many years, there remain abundant terminological confusions and controversies concerning its definition and associated characteristics. This chapter begins with an overview of the major approaches of analyzing topics and some of the controversial issues in the spoken language literature. Among these approaches, ‘aboutness’ topics (Reinhart 1981; Gundel 1985) and ‘scene-setting’ topics (Chafe 1976) are chosen as the areas of investigation in this dissertation. An ‘aboutness’ topic is defined pragmatically: it represents what the sentence is about, and the information it encodes is familiar and identifiable to both the speaker and the addressee. A ‘scene-setting’ topic, on the other hand, provides a spatial, temporal, or individual framework within which the main predication holds. ‘Scene-setting’ topics are mostly sentence-initial and can be further classified into several sub-types, namely, Chinese-styled topics, locative/temporal adverbial phrases and locative/temporal subordinate clauses.

Apart from the definitions of topics, a few unresolved controversies about the characteristics of ‘topic’ in spoken languages are also discussed in Chapter 2, e.g. whether the topic always precedes the comment in a sentence in all languages,
whether certain syntactic structures, for instance, left dislocation, have marked topic positions, etc. All of these unresolved issues are taken into consideration in the working assumptions underlying the current analysis. The last part of Chapter 2 is a review of topic constructions in the sign language literature. Specific attention is drawn to the terminological inconsistencies and some methodological issues that might hamper cross-linguistic and cross-modal comparisons.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology of the current study. Three types of spontaneous discourse data from four young native signers of HKSL were collected and transcribed: (i) paired unstructured conversations; (ii) spontaneous narratives elicited by picture stimuli; and (iii) spontaneous, monologue answers to open-ended questions. A small part of the discussion focuses on how sentence boundaries were identified in the data, and the difficulties involved in this process. A set of practical procedures for identifying topic constructions in the HKSL data basing on Reinhart’s original suggestion (1981) is also described.

Chapter 4 investigates the basic word order in HKSL. Since one of the aims of this dissertation is to find out the syntactic position of topics in HKSL, it is necessary to know what constitutes the basic word order first. Statistical evidence shows that the most frequently seen word order in spontaneous HKSL discourse data across different verb types is SVO (i.e. subject — verb — object), with certain verb types having a slight adherence towards verb-final structures. Sequences of Object-Subject-Verb are found but are relatively rare in the data, providing preliminary evidence that fronting of grammatical objects in HKSL may not be as productive as in other sign languages. Overall speaking, the surface word order of HKSL is governed by a strong preference for SVO, with variations to a large extent explicable by the semantics, morphological properties, and syntactic subcategorizations of the verbs involved.

Chapter 5 concerns how topics are realized in the grammar of HKSL. As in spoken languages, 'aboutness' topics in spontaneous HKSL data can surface as different syntactic categories, namely, hanging topics, left dislocated topics, subjects, objects, or right dislocated pronominals. 'Aboutness' topics in HKSL are not necessarily null when continued, and not necessarily overt when shifted. This runs counter to the general assumption in the literature that in a pro-drop language an overt topic expression only appears when there is a shift of topic (e.g. Vallduvi’s Link-Tail-Focus Theory (1992); Li & Thompson’s analysis of topic chain in Chinese (1981)). 'Aboutness' topics in HKSL are usually spatially anchored, in that the majority of the topic expressions involve either a pointing pronominal or a determiner which indicate the loci of the topic referents in the signing space. Furthermore, to uphold their prominence in discourse, particularly in conversations, signers have a strong tendency to refer to the ‘aboutness’ topic repeatedly with pronominal signs even within a single sentence. ‘Aboutness’ topics, when
clause-external, are not marked consistently by any non-manual features and are not required to form their own prosodic units. Scene-setting topics, which can be realized as subordinate adverbial clauses, temporal or locative adverbials, usually occur sentence-initially in HKSL. Unlike ‘aboutness’ topic, scene-setting topics in HKSL are frequently accompanied by brow raise, are seldom referred to repeatedly in discourse, and cannot be right-dislocated. The fact that ‘aboutness’ topics, if taking a pronominal form, can be right-dislocated to the end of the sentence, indicates that apart from TOPIC-COMMENT sequences, HKSL also exhibits COMMENT-TOPIC structures. These right-dislocated pronominals, at first glance, resemble the subject pronoun copies discussed in previous studies on other sign languages. Basing on their distributions and prosodic characteristics, however, it is argued that these sentence-final pronominals in HKSL are in fact right dislocations rather than instantiations of subject agreement or emphasis/focus as proposed for other sign languages. With respect to the grammatical process of fronting, objects in HKSL that bear the function of ‘aboutness’ topics are not necessarily fronted to the sentence-initial position. On the other hand, any definite object which enjoys a high degree of saliency in discourse can be fronted, though this kind of fronting is not frequently seen in the data. Objects can also be fronted under several other conditions unrelated to the notion of ‘topic’.

Chapters 6 and 7 investigate whether HKSL is a topic-prominent language. Chapter 6 is a review on the notion of topic-prominence in the spoken language literature. The list of the characteristics of topic-prominent languages proposed by Li & Thompson (1979) is reviewed critically. Cross-linguistic evidence from spoken languages is presented to show that some of these alleged characteristics of topic-prominence in fact do not necessarily define topic-prominence. They include: (i) the marginal status of passive constructions, (ii) a lack of dummy subjects, (iii) verb finality, (iv) existence of double subject constructions, and (v) topics controlling co-referential NP deletion. The three remaining characteristics which are more relevant to topic-prominence theoretically are (i) existence of a surface coding of topics, (ii) basicness of topic-comment structures, and (iii) lack of constraints on what may become a topic. In order to obtain a solid baseline for measuring the degree of topic-prominence in HKSL, these three characteristics are further substantiated with data from Mandarin, Lahu, and Lisu, the three topic-prominent languages cited by Li and Thompson in their original proposal. Building on these linguistic facts, a revised list of topic-prominence characteristics is proposed. This is followed by an evaluation of three other proposals on topic-prominence put forward by subsequent researchers. Justifications are given to explain why only Kiss’s theory of discourse configurationality (Kiss 1995, 1997) is selected among the three, together with the original typological proposal by Li & Thompson (1976), to evaluate the degree of topic-prominence in HKSL.
Chapter 7 investigates whether HKSL can be considered topic-prominent, on the basis of the revised list of topic-prominence characteristics, as well as Kiss's structural tests for discourse configurationality. It will be argued that HKSL is not topic-prominent for the following reasons: (i) there is no systematic surface coding for topics; (ii) topics do not occupy a fixed syntactic position; (iii) word order is not determined primarily by the notion of ‘topic’; (iv) double-subject constructions are restrictive in their distribution; (v) topicalizations and left dislocations exist but are infrequent; and (vi) propositions involving categorical and thetic judgments do not differ in their surface syntactic realizations in HKSL.

Chapter 8 presents the conclusions of the current study and its implications for other sign languages.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction

Chapter Two: Review of topic constructions in spoken and sign languages
2.0 Introduction
2.1 Review of topic constructions in spoken language literature
2.1.1 Topicality/topic continuity by Givón
2.1.2 Theme-rheme dichotomy by Hallidays and others
2.1.3 Topic-focus articulation by Prague School linguists
2.1.4 Topic-comment approach by Reinhart and Gundel
2.1.5 Link-tail-focus theory by Vallduví
2.1.6 Focus structure theory by Erteschik-Shir
2.1.7 Scene-setting topics by Chafe and others
2.1.8 Various approaches towards the definition of topic: a brief summary
2.1.9 Validity of the topic-first principle
2.1.10 Types of topic constructions and their controversial status
2.1.11 Marking of topics
2.1.12 Availability of topics in certain syntactic structures
2.2 Review of topic constructions in sign language literature
2.2.1 Topic constructions in American Sign Language
2.2.2 Topic constructions in other sign languages
2.2.3 A general discussion
2.3 Chapter summary

Chapter Three: Research methodology
3.0 Introduction
3.1 Data collection and transcription
3.2 The issue of sentence boundary and methods of segmentation
3.3 Identification of topics and their associated markings
Chapter Four: Word order of Hong Kong Sign Language

4.0 Introduction

4.1 Word order coding method

4.2 Verb classification, types and tokens in the word order count

4.3 Word order patterns in HKSL data
   4.3.1 Word order patterns in one-place predicates with locative adjuncts
   4.3.2 Word order patterns in two-place predicates
   4.3.3 Word order patterns in three-place predicates

4.4 Chapter summary

Chapter Five: Topic constructions in Hong Kong Sign Language

5.0 Introduction

5.1 Realization of ‘aboutness’ and ‘scene-setting’ topics in HKSL data
   5.1.1 Overall statistics of ‘aboutness’ topics in HKSL
   5.1.2 Representation of shifted and continued ‘aboutness’ topics in HKSL
   5.1.3 Syntactic realization of ‘aboutness’ topic in HKSL
   5.1.4 Non-manual and prosodic features of ‘aboutness’ topic expressions in HKSL
   5.1.5 Morphological components of ‘aboutness’ topic expressions in HKSL
   5.1.6 Realization of ‘scene-setting topics’ in HKSL

5.2 Controversy about TOPIC-COMMENT vs. COMMENT-TOPIC
   5.2.1 Sentence-final pronouns in HKSL and other sign languages: comparing syntactic and phonetic features
   5.2.2 Previous accounts for sentence-final pronouns in sign languages
   5.2.3 Sentence-final pronouns in HKSL as right dislocated topics

5.3 The grammatical process of fronting in HKSL spontaneous data

5.4 Chapter summary

Chapter Six: Review of topic-prominence in spoken languages

6.0 Introduction

6.1 Li and Thompson’s typological proposal

6.2 A review of some of the ‘defining characteristics’ of topic-prominence and a proposed revision
   6.2.1 Marginal use of passive as a defining feature of topic-prominence?
   6.2.2 Lack of dummy subjects as a defining feature of topic-prominence?
   6.2.3 Verb-finality as a defining feature of topic-prominence?
   6.2.4 Existence of double-subject constructions as a defining feature of topic-prominence?
   6.2.5 Topic but not subject controls coreferential deletion in TP languages?
   6.2.6 Section summary

6.3 Manifestation of the core TP characteristics in Lisu, Lahu, and Chinese
   6.3.1 Surface coding of topic in TP languages
   6.3.2 Topic-comment structures being basic in TP languages
   6.3.3 Lack of constraints on what can become topics in TP languages
   6.3.4 Section summary

6.4 Subsequent theoretical developments of the notion of topic prominence
   6.4.1 Gundel’s proposed relation between topic-prominence and zero anaphora (1980)
   6.4.2 Takahashi’s modified list of subject/topic-prominence (1990)
6.5 Chapter summary

Chapter Seven: Is Hong Kong Sign Language a topic-prominent language?

7.0 Introduction

7.1 Topic-prominence in sign languages

7.2 Evaluation of HKSL with respect to the TP characteristics

7.2.1 Passives in HKSL

7.2.1.1 Passives: an introduction
7.2.1.2 Passive constructions in American Sign Language
7.2.1.3 Passives in Hong Kong Sign Language

7.2.2 Dummy subject

7.2.3 Double subject construction

7.2.4 Coding for topics

7.2.5 Basicness of topic-comment structure

7.2.6 Restrictions on topic constructions

7.2.7 Section summary

7.3 Evaluation of HKSL with respect to Kiss’s discourse configurationality

7.3.1 Methodology: Elicitation task

7.3.2 Syntactic realization of thetic judgments in Hong Kong Sign Language

7.4 Chapter summary

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

Bibliography

Appendix I The five sets of pictures for eliciting narrative data
Appendix II List of verbs for the word order count in HKSL

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