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Knud Lambrecht

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Why do speakers of all languages use different grammatical structures under different communicative circumstances to express the same idea? In this comprehensive study, Professor Lambrecht explores the relationship between the structure of sentences and the linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts in which they are used. His analysis is based on the observation that the structure of a sentence reflects a speaker's assumptions about the hearer's state of knowledge and consciousness at the time of the utterance. This relationship between speaker assumptions and formal sentence structure is governed by rules and conventions of grammar, in a component called "information structure." Four independent but interrelated categories are analyzed: presupposition and assertion, identifiability and activation, topic, and focus. Lambrecht reveals that each category correlates directly with structural properties of the sentence.

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INFORMATION STRUCTURE AND SENTENCE FORM

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discourse referents*

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**This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents:
Anni and Hans Lambrecht**

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Preface

This book proposes a theory of the relationship between the structure of sentences and the linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts in which sentences are used as units of propositional information. It is concerned with the system of options which grammars offer speakers for expressing given propositional contents in different grammatical forms under varying discourse circumstances. The research presented here is based on the observation that the structure of a sentence reflects in systematic and theoretically interesting ways a speaker's assumptions about the hearer's state of knowledge and consciousness at the time of an utterance. This relationship between speaker assumptions and the formal structure of the sentence is taken to be governed by rules and conventions of sentence grammar, in a grammatical component which I call **INFORMATION STRUCTURE**, using a term introduced by Halliday (1967). In the information-structure component of language, propositions as conceptual representations of states of affairs undergo pragmatic structuring according to the utterance contexts in which these states of affairs are to be communicated. Such **PRAGMATICALLY STRUCTURED PROPOSITIONS** are then expressed as formal objects with morphosyntactic and prosodic structure.

My account of the information-structure component involves an analysis of four independent but interrelated sets of categories. The first is that of **PROPOSITIONAL INFORMATION** with its two components **PRAGMATIC PRESUPPOSITION** and **PRAGMATIC ASSERTION**. These have to do with the speaker's assumptions about the hearer's state of knowledge and awareness at the time of an utterance (Chapter 2). The second set of categories is that of **IDENTIFIABILITY** and **ACTIVATION**, which have to do with the speaker's assumptions about the nature of the representations of the referents of linguistic expressions in the hearer's mind at the time of an utterance and with the constant changes which these representations undergo in the course of a conversation (Chapter 3). The third category is

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that of **TOPIC**, which has to do with the pragmatic relation of aboutness between discourse referents and propositions in given discourse contexts (Chapter 4). The fourth category is that of **FOCUS**, which is that element in a pragmatically structured proposition whereby the assertion differs from the presupposition and which makes the utterance of a sentence informative (Chapter 5). Each of these categories or sets of categories is shown to correlate directly with structural properties of the sentence.

The theoretical orientation of this study is generative, if “generative” is understood as referring to linguistic analyses which do not merely describe observed structures but which also attempt to explain why certain structures do not occur in a grammar. However, in analyzing the facts of information structure I was often led to an alternative, non-generative, approach to grammatical analysis, in which the function of a given lexicogrammatical structure is not interpreted compositionally, in terms of the meanings of its parts, but globally, in terms of the formal contrast between the entire structure and semantically equivalent alternative structures provided by the grammar. In terms of Saussure’s fundamental dichotomy, the study of information structure requires an analysis not only of the **SYNTAGMATIC** relations between the elements of a sentence but also, and importantly, of the **ASSOCIATIVE** relations between different sentence structures as they are stored in the memory of speakers and hearers. Methodologically, this study is an attempt to combine insights from formal and from functional approaches to grammatical analysis.

My ambition in the present work was not to define the information-structure component in such a way that it would fit one or another of the established generative or functionalist frameworks but rather to lay the theoretical groundwork which will make such integration possible and meaningful. (Such integration will no doubt be easier with frameworks which do not postulate a hierarchical ordering and strict separation of the different components of grammar.) Throughout the book, the emphasis is on the notional foundations of the theory of information structure in natural language. Special importance has therefore been attributed to elaborating the basic concepts and terms needed to describe and define this underexplored part of grammar. In particular, I have tried to provide definitions of, and alternative labels for, the concepts of “new information” and “old information” which will help prevent some of the confusion that tends to creep into analyses which make use of these

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concepts. My definitions of the notions of “topic” and “focus” serve a similar goal.

The book contains relatively few analyses of linguistic data, and most of these data are from English. However, the principles discussed have wide crosslinguistic applicability. The volume also contains little by way of formalism. I believe, however, that the presented theory is explicit enough to be amenable to formalization. I hope my attempt will encourage other researchers to pursue the task and to correct whatever is wrong or misguided in my approach.

The present volume was originally planned as an introduction to a book dealing with the relationship between syntax and discourse in spoken French. It was to provide the theoretical foundation for the analysis of a number of pragmatically motivated French construction types. As my work on that introduction progressed it became clear that the theory was too complex to be dealt with in the same volume as its application to a particular language. At the same time, in working on the analysis of spoken French data, I realized that more space was needed to present a coherent picture of the manifestation of information structure in that language. The analysis of spoken French will therefore appear as a separate volume (Lambrecht, in preparation).

The present book is a continuation of research presented in my Ph.D. dissertation, which was completed in 1986 in the Department of Linguistics of the University of California at Berkeley, under the title “Topic, focus, and the grammar of spoken French.” I would like to thank again the members of my Ph.D. committee, Charles Fillmore, Suzanne Fleischman, Paul Kay, Johanna Nichols, and Karl Zimmer for their help and encouragement. Among them, I would like to single out my thesis director Charles Fillmore, who more than anyone has shaped my ideas about language and linguistics. His influence is manifested in many aspects of the present book. I am also grateful to Wallace Chafe, who allowed me to pursue my research while I was his research assistant at the Institute of Cognitive Studies at Berkeley. Much of the material in Chapter 3 of the present volume was conceived in relation and reaction to his ideas. And I would like to thank my former fellow graduate students Farrell Ackerman, Claudia Brugmann, Giulia Centineo, Amy Dahlstrom, Pamela Downing, Mark Gawron, Tom Larsen, Yoshiko Matsumoto, Shigeo Okamoto, David Solnit, and especially Cathy O’Connor for many stimulating discussions concerning my work and theirs. Thanks are due also to Ruth Berman, Martin Harris, Peter Pause,

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