Subject-topic writing assignment
http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~gawron/fundamentals

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2012-01-25 Ling 525

Outline

1. Readings

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2. How to read

Outline

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1. Birner and Ward (1998)
2. Li and Thompson (1975)
3. Kuno (1975): The Kuno citation is here just for completeness. You can get a pretty good idea of Kuno's views from the Li/Thompson paper, and reading this is definitely not required for the assignment.

Outline

Reading goals

1. Read both readings:
2. In the Li & Thompson paper, focus on
   1. the concept of topic and of topic prominent languages.
3. In the Birner/Ward intro, focus on the following
   1. The information-packaging concepts that characterize felicitous preposed constituents, and whether they are topics

Outline

1. The paper should be a maximum of 5 pages long.

2. In the first section, introduce the concept of subject prominent and topic prominent languages, and discuss some high points. In the sense that L&T use the word topic, does every sentence have a topic? Explain the typology that L&T come up with and discuss triangle at the bottom of p. 483.

3. In the second section, discuss Birner&Ward. What is an open proposition? How is it different from a closed proposition? What is new versus old information? Give examples. Finally, discuss how Birner and Ward's theory of preposing accounts for the possibility of preposing indefinites, which previous accounts say is not possible.

4. In the third section address the question of whether Birner and Ward's theory of English topicalization has anything to do with topic in the sense discussed by L&T. L&T have a general notion of topic that extends beyond Topic-prominent languages (as they discuss in a footnote, it is quite close to what Kuno calls a **theme**), so that English sentences can have topics. Discuss whether the constituents Birner and Ward call preposed constituents are **topics** in L&T's sense; but beyond that discuss how **topical** they are; how anaphoric or generic are they (Kuno's characterization of themes)? To what extent does Birner and Ward's theory of preposed constituents challenge Kuno's claim that, since indefinites represent 'new unpredictable information', they cannot be themes (topics).

Birner, Betty J., and Gregory Ward. 1998.
   Information status and noncanonical word order in English.
   Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Kuno, Susumu. 1975.
   Subject, theme, and the speaker's empathy – a re-examination of
   relativization phenomena.
   In Li (Li 1975), 417–444.

Li, Charles, N. (Ed.). 1975.
   Subject and topic.
   New York: Academic Press.

Li, Charles, N., and A. Thompson, Sandra. 1975.
   Subject and topic: a new typology of language.
   In Li (Li 1975), 457–490.