

Givenness, contrastiveness, definiteness, subjects, topics, and point of view

Looking primarily at points made by Chafe (1976), with a few bits of commentary drawn in part from Krifka (2007).

1 Many roles for nouns

Chafe's article tries to untangle some of the many roles that noun phrases can play in a sentence. Here are the ones that he lists:

- the noun may be either given or new
- it may be a focus of contrast
- it may be definite or indefinite
- it may be the subject of its sentence
- it may be the topic of its sentence
- it may represent the individual whose point of view the speaker is taking, or with whom the speaker empathizes

Chafe splits these into two broad categories:

- Syntactic considerations (e.g., as a grammatical subject based on case or agreement)
- Cognitive considerations (e.g., prominent, focus of attention, etc.)

What this paper is primarily about is the second category, the “cognitive” role a noun phrase has in a particular utterance, and the implications this has on the form/realization of the utterance.

2 Terminology alert: “case” and “subject”

There are a few pieces of terminology that Chafe uses in a way that is not now standard, and I want to comment on those a bit. (This is kind of a general problem that we always seem to run into, though it seems to have hit discussions of “information structure” particularly hard. It stems partly from terminological choices people had made in the past that were tied to their understanding of the phenomena at the time, and which become

entrenched, so that even when the analysis changes, the common terminology doesn't. It also stems partly from an almost opposite angle, an attempt to be kind of "theory neutral" by using common and comprehensible labels for things that ultimately turn out not to be precise enough. You can see in Chafe's own article that he grappled with this: "Terms like 'already activated' and 'newly activated' would convey the distinction [in givenness] more accurately, but are awkward; we will probably have to live with the terms 'given' (or 'old') and 'new.'")

What we usually mean by *case* is the morphological marking that informs us about where in the syntactic structure a noun phrase is. In English, personal pronouns have different forms depending on whether the pronoun is the subject of the sentence or not. *I* is a subject, *me* is not a subject; *she* is a subject, *her* is not a subject. The subject is what controls agreement on the verb as well.

- (1) a. The article is incomprehensible.
b. The articles are incomprehensible.
- (2) a. They are incomprehensible.
b. The article is incomprehensible to them.

Chafe, on the other hand, generally seems to be using the term "case" to refer to something like the "semantic role" that a noun phrase plays in a sentence. A noun phrase can refer to an **agent** (3) or to a **theme** (4), (5).

- (3) John shouted.
- (4) John tripped.
- (5) I punched John.

Chafe also has an unusual definition of "subject," which we will generally not want to adopt. The definition of "subject" that we want to adopt is the one above, it controls case marking and agreement, and has to do with where in the structure the noun phrase finds itself.

Chafe's definition of "subject" is really, confusingly, rather more like what most everybody in recent times has called "topic." I guess what he had in mind was probably like "subject" in "subject of inquiry." We'll return to this as we proceed, but be alert.

3 Information packaging

What Chafe has in mind in his notion of "packaging" is essentially about the presentation of the message, independent of the content of the message.

Krifka (2007) observes (as many have previously) that this might not be quite good enough, because there are cases where the placement of accent actually affects the content of the message. That is to say, the choice of where the accent goes is not solely about packaging, it is about the message itself.

- (6) a. John only showed Mary [the PICTures].
- b. John only showed [MAry] the pictures.

The sentence in (6a) is false in a situation where John showed Mary something else, but the sentence in (6b) could still be true in that situation (so long as John didn't show the pictures to anyone else). And vice-versa, (6b) is false if John showed the pictures to someone else, but (6a) could be true in that situation (so long as John didn't show anything else to Mary).

These could be independent, two different things that both happen to be realized as accent placement, but we need to explore the possibility that they reflect the same underlying phenomenon (focus placement) that could have effects both on the packaging and on the message construction.

4 Givenness

Important point: All of this discussion here about “givenness” is really about the speaker's assessment of the hearer's state of mind. The speaker's considerations of givenness don't have to do with what the speaker has in mind, but what the speaker thinks the hearer has in mind, based on the context, shared assumptions, prior discourse.

Chafe notes right at the outset that this is not really about *knowledge* that the hearer has, but rather what is floating about it the hearer's consciousness. “New” here is taken to mean “not currently in consciousness.”

Given information is conveyed in a weaker and more attenuated manner than new information: pronounced with a lower pitch, weaker stress, subject to pronominalization (that is, using a pronoun instead of a full noun phrase). The referents of a pronoun are always given, although whether a speaker uses a pronoun for something given also depends on whether the speaker judges that ambiguity would result (e.g., *John and Bill met. He knocked him unconscious.*).

Chafe gives an example of morphological marking from Japanese, where *wa* is taken as marking something given, and *ga* is taken as marking something new. However, this specific case is definitely tricky, because both have other functions as well—I'm not convinced that we can take the function of these particles to be really about marking givenness. The situation, it seems to me, is more likely the reverse—something more like with the use of pronouns. In order to use *wa*, the referent of the *wa*-marked noun

phrase must be given. With *ga* things are even fuzzier, because *ga* is also the subject case marker in Japanese. My guess is that the reason *ga* has the sense of conveying new information is that if *ga* is used, it is used *instead of wa*, suggesting that *wa* was not appropriate.

How a referent comes to be given is a very “cognitive” thing, perhaps entirely situation in the extralinguistic context. Joint attention can lead to givenness, or references to the speaker or hearer. And although prior mention in the linguistic context can change something from new to given, this still seems as if it can be interpreted as essentially extralinguistic—mentioning something will bring it into the hearer’s consciousness, and from then on can be assumed to be old.

Old information does not stay old, though—here again is where “activated” might be a better way to think about this than “old” is—because we are limited in the amount of stuff we can retain in our active consciousness. Newly activated things will push out things that were previously activated.

Cf. also Gundel et al. (1993), the reading for next time, which explores the different levels of “activation” that referents can have, and the effects this has on the linguistic choices made in the presentation of an underlying message.

Because a lot of this revolves around what the speaker thinks about the hearer’s state of mind, there is always the possibility that the speaker gets it wrong, which can impede communication. (There is also the possibility that the speaker is somewhat intentionally being uncooperative, too—it’s two separate things, what the speaker actually believes about the hearer’s state of mind, and what the speaker *acts* as if s/he believes about the hearer’s state of mind.) Sometimes, even if something isn’t actually activated in the hearer’s consciousness, it is possible to continue with the discourse if the hearer can re-activate it (that is, if it is “recoverable”). Hearers are a bit flexible on this, and speakers could conceivably do this for effect.

5 Contrastiveness

- (7) a. Rónald made the hamburgers.
- b. Ronald, as opposed to other possible candidates the addressee might have had in mind, is the right selection for this role (of hamburger-maker)
- c. I believe that you believe that someone made the hamburgers, that you have a limited set of candidates (perhaps one) in mind as that someone, and I am telling you that the someone is Ronald, rather than one of those others.

Contrast, according to Chafe, has three factors.

- Background knowledge (the predicate holds of something)
- A set of possible candidates (there is a—limited—set of possible referents that the predicate could hold of)
- An assertion of which candidate the predicate holds of

Background knowledge: awareness that someone made the hamburgers. Chafe goes on a bit about what he means by “awareness,” and winds up deciding he means “at least quasi-given” which is something like “recoverable.”

It might be worth pointing out here that this is related to the concept of “presupposition” and “accommodation.” Without getting into a deep discussion of this, the idea of a presupposition can be illustrated with the verb form *stop Xing*, which when used presupposes that *Xing* was happening before. This holds whether the sentence itself is positive or negative: *I have stopped eating meat* or *I haven’t stopped eating meat*. If either one of these is taken as true (or false), it is automatically also taken as true that *I ate meat in the past*. When you use a sentence with a presupposition in a situation where the presupposition is already part of the shared knowledge, it goes by relatively unnoticed. If the presupposition is not part of the shared knowledge, it can often be *accommodated*, which means essentially adding the presupposition to the shared knowledge as well. This is rather like what Chafe is talking about with “recoverability,” although Chafe is specifically concerned with not just beliefs about the world in general, but things that are currently active in consciousness.

Set of possible candidates: The speaker evidently assumes that the addressee was at least entertaining, and possibly believed in one or more other candidates for this role. It is not essential that the addressee (is believed to) actually believe that another candidate is the hamburger-maker. It does seem essential that there be a limited candidate set (whether or not the addressee could actually list them), otherwise it doesn’t feel like a contrast.

The third factor is the **assertion of which candidate is the correct one**. (Note: in stating it this way, Chafe also has a kind of implicit “exhaustivity”—one candidate is correct and no other candidates are correct. This may not be a necessary feature of contrast, but it does seem to hold at least most of the time.)

The asserted alternative is the **focus of contrast**. And it is independent of givenness; the speaker may or may not be thinking of the referent: *I did it*.

It is possible to have more than one focus of contrast: *Rónald made the hámburgers, but Sálly made the sálad*. Or even *Rónald pícked the léttuce, but Sálly bóught the méat*.

Chafe then tries to differentiate the prosodic effects of being new vs. being a focus of contrast—they both involve “higher pitch and stronger stress.” In places where one

contrastive focus is directly followed by another, Chafe thinks there's a difference—compare the high pitch on *Alice* in (8b) (new, where the pitch falls only slightly) vs. (8c) (focus, where the pitch must fall steeply). Chafe diagnoses this as something that happens only when one contrastive focus is directly followed by another.

- (8) a. What happened at the meeting?
- b. They elected *Álice* président.
- c. They elected *Hénry* trésurer, and they elected *Álice* président.

Chafe also mentions here that answers to *wh*-questions sound kind of like contrastive sentences. But the “context and intent” is different, so they can't be the same. (But—really? What are we in danger of if we suppose they *are*?)

The question Chafe suggests is *Who did they elect what?*, which sounds like a pretty goofy question to me, even with his “(assuming that only one office was at issue)” which does not seem to help. The answer (words being as in (8b)) need not have the same falling intonation on both items that is obligatory in the double contrast sentence.

Cleft sentences can also be used to express contrastiveness: *It was Rónald who made the hamburgers*. Pseudo-clefts evidently serve the same function: *The one who made the hamburgers was Rónald*.

How to choose between these methods of expressing contrastiveness? Well, perhaps you'll prefer to echo the syntax of a preceding utterance. Clefts allow the focus to appear at the end, which maybe language likes to do with not only new information but also foci of contrast.

Seneca uses a pronoun only with contrast, according to Chafe (usually it is just a verbal prefix). (Editorial note: but cf. Spanish or Italian, that's generally the same.)

Concerning Japanese, *wa* also appears with a focus of contrast meaning (not just givenness). *Ame wa hutte imasu ga, yuki wa hutte imasen* ‘Rain is falling, but snów is nót falling.’ And *ga* may express contrastiveness where the focus of contrast is an “exhaustive listing” (*John ga baka desu*. ‘(Among the people under discussion) John and only John is stupid. It is Jóhn who is stupid.’)

There is an unfortunate tendency of both linguists and psychologists to pick foci of contrast as paradigm examples of new information. Still true, I think.

6 Definiteness

A **definite** noun often appears with a marker (like *the* in English), and is restricted to nouns that refer to something that can be uniquely identified. An **indefinite** noun (often marked with *a* in English) is used when the referent is new to the discourse. *A man walked in. The man sat down.*

Both definite and indefinite noun phrases categorize, where definites are used for the case where you can pick out the one I have in mind. Close enough anyway. There's quite a bit of discussion here that isn't really pertinent to the points at hand.

Though he does talk about the interaction between givenness and definiteness. There is a strong tendency for definiteness and givenness to go together, as for indefiniteness and newness. Chafe tried to tease them apart with this:

- (9) a. I saw an eagle this morning.
- b. Sally saw one too.

(10) I talked with the carpenter yesterday.

... where *one* is given (it is a pronoun after all), but it is indefinite because the specific eagle can't be identified. Independent.

7 Subjects

This section gets all muddled up by Chafe's rather confusing use of the word "subject." He starts out trying to say something like 'the reference to "subject" across languages is so pervasive that it has to be some doing work—and where doing syntax is not counted as doing work, only work in the cognitive domain is doing work.' Not really convincing, particularly if what he calls a subject is not called a subject in other literature.

Where he's going with this is to a place that many call "topic." Specifically, he suggests something that might be a bit clearer using the metaphor of a card file (Reinhart/Heim)—each card in the file represents an individual entity of some kind in the world, and as the conversation progresses, what is happening is that you take out an index card and write new stuff on it. The topic tells you which card to take out—that is, what the sentence is about, what it's commenting on.

For an experiment kind of similar to one he describes (Perfetti and Goldman 1974), see also Portner & Yabushita (1998).

8 Topics, English style

Here, we're talking about cases where a non-subject has wound up at the front.

- (11) The pláy, John saw yésterday.
- (12) As for the pláy, John saw it yésterday.

There's a bit of confusing talk here about topic-prominent languages, but the bottom line here is that Chafe thinks this construction is one of contrast in English. There is a

construction that puts a non-subject in front in Chinese, but on the basis of the Chinese sentences not needing to be contrastive, Chafe wants to say that the English-style and Chinese-style topics are different.

9 Topics, Chinese style

On the Chinese cases, it is probably misleading to translate his (15) as “As for those trees, the trunks are big”—if there is no necessary contrastiveness. These seem to kind of restrict the domain of applicability for the predicate, kind of like *Tuesday*, or *on Commonwealth Avenue*.

10 Topics as Premature Subjects

When presenting the content of a sentence, a speaker must choose a “case frame” and a noun to be the subject. The case frame limits the options for what can be the subject. (I think by “case frame” Chafe has in mind something like the choice between active and passive.) But there’s also something that speakers do, Chafe says, where the subject is chosen and uttered first “before the case frame is chosen.” He gives an example from Caddo, which seems to have a noun spoken first, and with “the intonation of a complete sentence” and then one where the topic was uttered, followed by something like “um,” and then the sentence. Chafe suggests that this is pervasive enough to be considered a real phenomenon of the language, making it a “topic-prominent” language of a sort, though different from Chinese.

11 Antitopics

What Chafe has in mind here is the reverse of the previous case, where the “case frame” has been uttered first, but where nothing has identified the subject, and the subject can be added later.

To me, this sounds a bit like English “He’s a good guy, John.” Why this is called an “anti-topic” is not really clear.

12 Point of View or Empathy

Here, a very vague commentary on the fact that a sentence might be presented as from one perspective or another (where the perspective taken seems to correspond to the subject). This is illustrated with the pleasant examples “John hit his wife” (John’s perspec-

tive) vs. “Mary’s husband hit her” (Mary’s perspective), and a perspective conflict is supposed to be what makes “Mary’s husband hit his wife” sound odd. Though I’m not really convinced that this is what makes that last sentence sound odd.

The idea seems to be (and this is all following Kuno as far as I can see) that there are various factors that play into the choice of where empathy lies. If the speaker is in the sentence, the speaker is likely to pick him/her-self as the focus of empathy (which I suppose means that the noun referring to the speaker is likely to take on the subject role), otherwise a human is more likely to be empathized with, and the addressee takes priority over a third party.

Notes on the reading for next time: Gundel et al. (1993). This paper is an exploration of what it means to be “activated.” They propose that there are six different levels of activation, each of which has an appropriate linguistic form. I haven’t really had a chance to go through it closely enough to really warn you about potential trouble spots. “Matrix sentence” means ‘main sentence.’ Make notes on terminology you aren’t sure about.

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