

**Discourse pragmatics and foreign language teaching:  
the expression of information structure in English**

**1 Descriptive linguistics and foreign language teaching**

- *Why do we need linguistics?*
- Descriptive linguistics is (still/again?) an important resource for EFL/ELLT:  
“The development of the learner’s *linguistic competences* is a central, indispensable aspect of language learning.” (CEF 149, emphasis original)  
“In general, focused L2 instruction results in large gains over the course of an intervention. Specifically, L2 instruction of particular language forms induces substantial target-oriented change...” (Norris and Ortega 2000: 500)
- **foreign language teaching needs to be linguistically informed**
- What contribution(s) can linguists make to render foreign language teaching more efficient?
- From linguistic description to L2 instruction:  
(i) ‘(linguistic) description’, (ii) ‘simplification’, (iii) ‘information (of learners)’
- **process of ‘simplification’ as an interface of descriptive linguistics and EFL**
- two types of simplification:  
a) ‘generalization’: treating exceptions and idiosyncrasies separately  
(‘linguistic simplification’)  
b) ‘reduction’: concentration on those phenomena that are particularly relevant in a given context (‘didactic simplification’)
- Each level is associated with specific ‘text genres’:

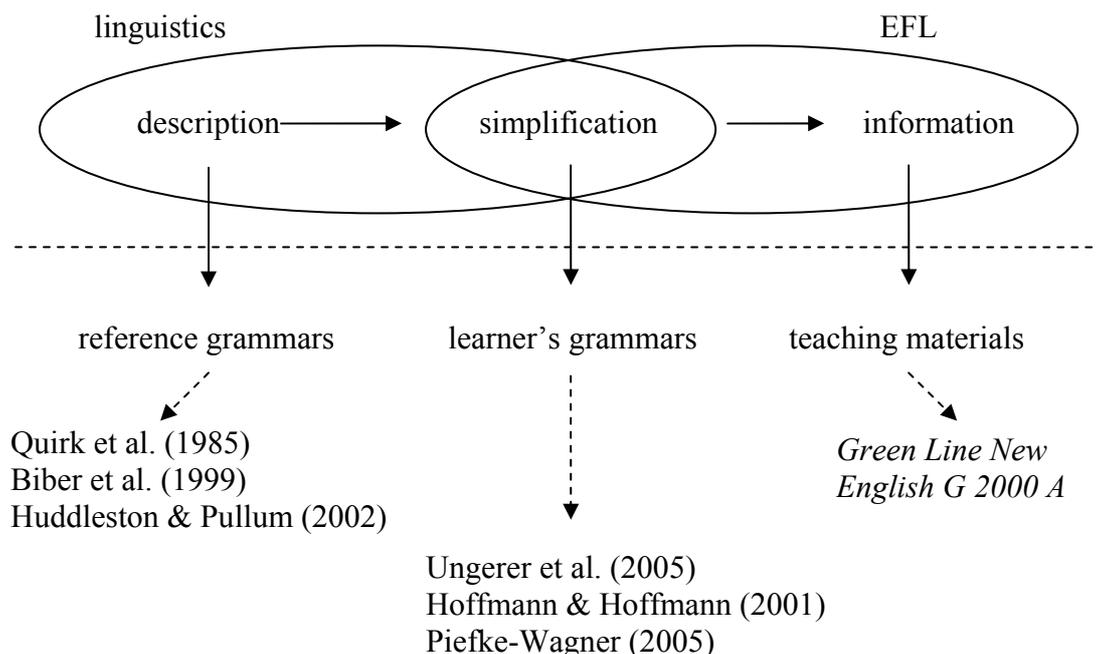


Diagram 1: The ‘information chain’ from linguistic description to L2 instruction

## 2 EFL and information structure

- Why information structure? → There seem to be gaps in the curriculum.
- (1)
- a. John lost the keys. ('canonical ordering')
  - b. It was the keys that he lost. ('object cleft-sentence')
  - c. It was John who lost the keys. ('subject cleft-sentence')
  - d. The keys, he lost. ('object fronting')
  - e. (...but) lose the keys, he did. ('VP fronting')
- (2)
- a. Two nurses were on board. ('canonical ordering')
  - b. On board were two nurses. ('inversion')
  - c. There were two nurses on board. ('existential')
- Chafe (1976: 27): “information packaging”  
“The statuses [of nouns, VG] to be discussed here have more to do with how the content is transmitted than with the content itself. Specifically, they all have to do with the speaker’s assessment of how the addressee is able to process what he is saying against the background of a particular context.”
  - Lambrecht (1994: 5): “information structure”  
“That component of sentence grammar in which propositions as conceptual representations of states of affairs are paired with lexicogrammatical structures in accordance with the mental states of interlocutors who use and interpret these structures as units of information in given discourse contexts.”
  - CEF 123:  
“**Discourse competence** is the ability of a user/learner to arrange sentences in sequence so as to produce coherent stretches of language. it includes knowledge of and ability to control the ordering of sentences in terms of :
    - topic/focus;
    - given/new;
    - ...”
  - Mastery of information structuring devices somewhere between C1 and C2.
  - Categories of information structure:
    - definiteness, presuppositions
    - information structural partitionings on the level of the proposition:

<i>psychologisches Subjekt</i>	<i>psychologisches Prädikat</i>	v.d. Gabelentz (1869), Paul (1880)
topic	comment	Hockett (1958)
theme	rheme	Firbas (1964), Bolinger (1965)
presupposition	focus	Jackendoff (1972)
given information	new information	Halliday (1967), Kay (1975), Chafe (1976)
ground (link vs. tail)	focus	Vallduví (1990), Hendriks (1999)
background	focus	Jacobs (1983), Steedman (1991)

Table 1: Terms and concepts of information structure: Babylonian diversity

- Question:  
*To what extent is information structure represented in reference grammars and teaching materials, esp. in pedagogical grammars?*
- Focus on the expression of topic-comment structure.

### 3 The status of topic-comment structure in the lexicon and grammar of English

- *topic vs. comment*: cf. Hockett (1958: 201):  
“The most general characterization of predicative constructions is suggested by the terms “topic” and “comment” [...]: The speaker announces a topic and then says something about it.”
- (3) “President Uribe is a very strong leader; he’s committed to justice; he believes in fairness and he’s a man who has proven he can get things done.”  
(<http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=667&id=386972007>)
  - Topics are typically, but not necessarily, subjects.
- (4) A: Whatever happened to Radovan Karadzic?  
B: The EU force in Bosnia and Herzegovina is still trying to find him in the remote mountains of north-west Montenegro.
  - Are there any linguistic means specifically indicating topicality?
    - Not in the case of unmarked/‘canonical’ topics; but: special indicators of topicality are used when a topic is in some way ‘non-canonical’.
  - Canonical features of topics:
    - necessarily discourse given or accessible,
    - often pronominal,
    - typically non-contrastive and unstressed,
    - typically stable over a stretch of discourse (topic continuity).
  - Three types of expressive devices used in the case of ‘non-canonical’ topics:
    1. lexical means
    2. syntactic means
    3. prosodic means

#### 3.1 Lexical topic indicators

- Indicators of *topic change*: lexical markers *as for*, *regarding*, *speaking of*, etc.:
- (5) As for external funding, Smith has a grant application pending.  
Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 1371)
- (6) Any noise it made was lost in the wind. Speaking of the wind, it was getting stronger and I was getting colder. [BNC A6T]
- (7) Regarding training, the document said that food business operators must ensure that food handlers are fully trained or supervised... [BNC A0C]
  - Moreover: condition of ‘accessibility’ (weaker condition than ‘givenness’); referent in question must be a ‘potential topic’.
  - Lambrecht (1994: 152):  
“...the phrase *as for NP* (as well as similar phrases in other languages) can be appropriately used only if the NP referent is already a potential topic in the discourse at the time the phrase is used, i.e. the referent is contextually accessible.”

- Status in reference grammars: the complex preposition *as for*

reference grammars	Quirk et al. (1985)	'preposition of respect' (§ 9.57) "introduces topic transition", "has the meaning of 'returning to the question of'" (p. 706/7)
	Biber et al. (1999)	in section on 'prefaces' (p. 138) "prefaces serve to establish a topic" (p. 957)
	Huddleston & Pullum (2002)	in Section on information structure "indicates a change of topic, typically to something that has been mentioned earlier" (p. 1371)
learner's grammars	Ungerer et al. (2005)	
	Hoffmann & Hoffmann (2001)	
	Piefke-Wagner (2005)	

Table 2: *As for* in reference grammars and learner's grammars of English

- Teaching practice: lexical indicators of topicality are regarded as belonging to the lexicon and are simply translated (*Was...(an)betrifft/ angeht, ...*).
- Also in monolingual dictionaries, e.g. Longman DCE:  
7 **as for sb/sth** used when you are starting to talk about someone or something new that is connected with what you were talking about before: *Kitty's got so thin. And as for Carl, he always seems to be ill. | You can ask the others, but as for myself, I'll be busy in the office.* [LDCE, s.v. *as*]
- ***As for* (as a marker of 'topic resumption') can probably be learnt without any focused instruction, e.g. by imitation or transfer from L1.**

### 3.2 Syntactic indicators of topicality: fronting

- 'Preposing', 'fronting': constituent is positioned before the subject.
- Gundel (1974): 'topicalization'; Givón (2001): 'contrastive topicalization'.

(8) I saw John there. Mary I never saw.

(9) I gave it all to Mary. To Joan I gave nothing. (Givón 2001: 263)

(10) Customer: Can I get a bagel?

Waitress: No, sorry. We're out of bagels. A bran muffin I can give you.  
(Birner & Ward 1998: 33)

(11) Humble they may be. But daft they ain't. (Birner & Ward 1998: 46)

(12) I'll have to introduce two principles. One I'm going to introduce now and one I'm going to introduce later. (Birner & Ward 1998: 78)

(13) Anything you don't eat put back in the fridge.  
Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 1372)

- Note: non-topical constituents may also be fronted:

(14) I had two really good friends. Damon and Jimmy their names were. (part of comment)  
Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 1381)

(15) Did you want tea? Coffee I ordered. (part of comment)  
(Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1381)

- Fronting is not restricted to topics; however, it lends itself to functioning as a topic marker because of its discourse pragmatic properties.
- Condition on the use of fronting: the fronted element has to be a ‘link’ between the relevant sentence and the preceding discourse (it must be *given* or *accessible*).

(16) He suggested I phone Emma, so phone her I did.

(17) I’ve put Jones in the Green Room [and in the Green Room he stays].

Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 1381)

- Fronting in reference grammars and pedagogical grammars:

reference grammars	Quirk et al. (1985)	under ‘grammatical aspects’ (of information structure) “used to echo thematically what has been contextually given”; “It is as if the thematic element is the first that strikes the speaker, and the rest is added as an afterthought.” (p. 1377)
	Biber et al. (1999)	under ‘Word order and related choices’ “subject is generally a personal pronoun” (p. 900)
	Huddleston & Pullum (2002)	cf. Birner & Ward (1998) (co-authors)
learner’s grammars	Ungerer et al. (2005)	
	Hoffmann & Hoffmann (2001)	optional rule “Anfangsstellung des Subjekts” (p. 401)
	Piefke-Wagner (2005)	

Table 3: Fronting in reference grammars and learner’s grammars of English

Anfangsstellung des Objekts	
Auch ein <u>Objekt</u> kann – in Abweichung von der normalen Wortstellung – betont an den Satzanfang gestellt werden. Die Wortstellung <u>im übrigen Satz</u> verändert sich dabei nur, wenn das an den Anfang gestellte Objekt einen verneinenden oder einschränkenden Charakter hat (s. o.). Vergleichen Sie:	
They discussed <u>most of these problems</u> .	Sie diskutierten die meisten dieser Probleme.
<u>Most of these problems they discussed</u> .	Die meisten dieser Probleme diskutierten sie.
They discussed <u>none of these problems</u> .	Sie diskutierten keines dieser Probleme.
<u>None of these problems did they discuss</u> .	Keines dieser Probleme diskutierten sie.

Diagram 2: Fronting in Hoffmann & Hoffmann (2001: 401)

- Fronting only before pronominal subjects (Biber et al. 1999)? Cf. (14), (18):

(18) The first ten dollar bill I got as a tip, a Viking guy gave to me.

(Birner & Ward 1998: 79)

- Needs to be relativized; relative weight of fronted constituent and subject?
- To what extent are the conditions on fronting mentioned in the grammars?
- Conditions on fronting:
  - (i) accessibility,
  - (ii) prosodic prominence,
  - (iii) relative weight of fronted constituent and subject

	Quirk et al. (1985)	Biber et al. (1999)	Huddleston & Pullum (2002)	Hoffmann & Hoffmann (2001)
accessibility	+	+	+	-
prosodic prominence	+	+	+	-
relative weight	-	(+)	-	+

Table 4: Conditioning factors for fronting in grammars

- **Some relevant generalizations could easily be included in a pedagogical grammar of English.**

### 3.3 Prosodic means

- Jackendoff (1972): special accent to mark (contrastive) topics

- (19) A: Who came with whom?  
 B: √Anna came with √Manny.

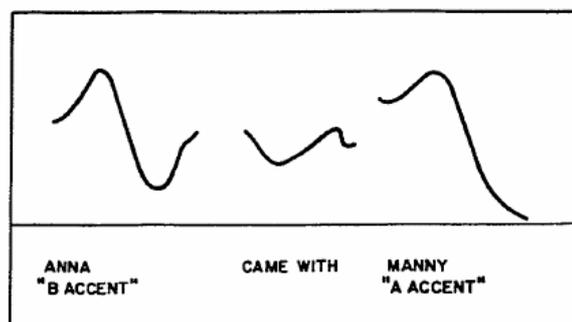
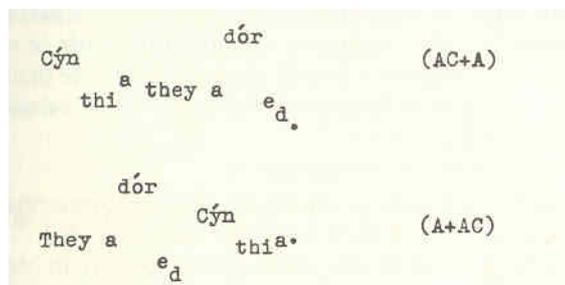


Diagram 3: Jackendoff's (1972) 'A-accent' and 'B-accent' (Féry 1993: 146)

- Bolinger (1986: 321): 'profile AC' as a 'theme' marker:

"... in fact, AC becomes a pretty good theme-marker regardless of position. Note the reversal of profiles in the following:



The likeliest interpretation either way is 'As for Cynthia (theme) they adored her (rheme)'."

- Steedman (1991: 275):  
 "It seems as if at least one function of the tune L+H\*LH% is to mark a constituent whose translation corresponds to the open proposition established by the question. It may thus be thought of as marking WHAT THE SENTENCE IS ABOUT... However, the tune does something more. The presence of a pitch accent also marks some or all of the open proposition as emphasized or contrasted with something mentioned or regarded by the speaker as implicated by the previous discourse and/or context." (emphasis original)
- The *fall-rise* accent is also used with other functions, e.g. sentence-initial adverbials:

- (20) Un∖fortunately, | he can't ∖come.  
 (21) Un/fortunately, | he can't come. (Tench 1996: 83)  
 (22) He ∖can't ∖come, | unfortunately.

- Tench (1996: 84):  
“It is generally agreed that such uses of the fall-rise indicate some kind of **implication**. Halliday once glossed the meaning as ‘there is a *but* about it’...” (emphasis original)

(23) It’s \cheap. (reservation: ‘but that’s not the only thing that’s true about it’)

(24) It \looks expensive. (contrast: ‘but is it really?’)

- Ward & Hirschberg (1985): uncertainty as to the relevance of a speaker’s contribution:  
“We claim that speaker’s use of FR [fall-rise, VG] conveys uncertainty about the appropriateness of some utterance in a given context ... While uncertainty per se is certainly not incompatible with Bolinger’s ‘up-in-airness’ or Halliday’s ‘reservation’, FR involves a particular type of uncertainty. Intuitively, it seems to indicate that a speaker is uncertain about whether his utterance is relevant to the discourse.”

(25) A: You have VW, don’t you?

B: I’ve got an \O/pel. (‘You asked about foreign cars – is this close enough?’)

- Simplifying somewhat, the *fall-rise* accent indicates ‘incompleteness’.
- The *fall-rise* accent in reference grammars (no mention in pedagogical grammars):

reference grammars	Quirk et al. (1985)	in Appendix II (Stress, rhythm, and intonation) “The FALL-RISE ( ˇ ) occurs in many ‘contingency’ environments, for example in doubtfully expressing a condition ...” (p. 1600)
	Biber et al. (1999)	
	Huddleston & Pullum (2002)	

Table 5: The *fall-rise* accent in English reference grammars

- Intonational devices for marking information structure are poorly represented even in major reference grammars of English, not to mention pedagogical grammars.
- CEF 117: Can-do statement for level C1/phonological control:  
“Can vary intonation and place sentence stress correctly in order to express finer shades of meaning.”
- **Intonation deserves a more central role in both grammaticography and advanced-level English instruction.**

#### 4 Conclusions and outlook

- Information in reference grammars is partially incomplete.
- There are considerable gaps in pedagogical grammars.
- More general problem: systematic grammatical instruction stops after the lower secondary level (*Sekundarstufe I*); no appropriate teaching materials are available for more advanced aspects of grammar.
- **Desideratum: Inclusion of aspects of information structure in pedagogical grammars and other teaching materials.**

## 5 Appendix I: Information structure in reference works

reference grammars	lexical topic indicators	fronting	fall-rise accent
Quirk et al. (1985)	'preposition of respect' (§ 9.57) "introduces topic transition", "has the meaning of 'returning to the question of'" (p. 706/7)	under 'grammatical aspects' (of information structure) "used to echo thematically what has been contextually given"; "It is as if the thematic element is the first that strikes the speaker, and the rest is added as an afterthought." (p. 1377)	in Appendix II (Stress, rhythm, and intonation) "The FALL-RISE ( ) occurs in many 'contingency' environments, for example in doubtfully expressing a condition..." (p. 1600)
Biber et al. (1999)	in section on 'prefaces' (p. 138) "prefaces serve to establish a topic" (p. 957)	under 'Word order and related choices' "subject is generally a personal pronoun" (p. 900)	
Huddleston & Pullum (2002)	in Section on information structure "indicates a change of topic, typically to something that has been mentioned earlier" (p. 1371)	cf. Birner & Ward (1998) (co-authors)	
Ungerer et al. (2005)			
Hoffmann & Hoffmann (2001)		optional rule "Anfangsstellung des Subjekts" (p. 401)	
Piefke-Wagner (2005)			

## 6 Appendix II: Aspects of information structure in a learner's grammar

### § x Information packaging

#### § x.1 The status of 'protagonists': *new*, *accessible*, *given*

A text or discourse can be likened to a movie: characters appear on the scene, remain there for a while and then disappear. When a character is newly introduced in a sentence (enters the scene), it is *new*; if it has been introduced already, it is *given*. Some characters are not 'immediately present', but they are 'conjured up' by some other character. For instance, when a car enters the scene, a viewer (or listener) knows that there is a driver in the car. Such protagonists are called *accessible*. We thus distinguish three statuses of protagonists: *new* ones, *given* ones and *accessible* ones.

...

#### § x.y.1 Topic and comment

Most sentences are structured in such a way that they provide information about some person, thing, event, etc. This person, thing, event, etc. is called a 'topic', and the information provided about the topic is called 'comment'.

...

#### § x.y.4 *As for*

When a speaker wants to return to a topic that was discussed previously but abandoned in the meantime, s/he can re-introduce it using the complex preposition *as for*:

*As for the purchaser, tell him to come to my house and choose another picture.*

...

#### § x.y.7 Fronting

If you want to put special emphasis on some part of the sentence other than the subject, you can place that element before the subject. This operation is called 'fronting':

Customer: *Can I get a bagel?*

Waitress: *No, sorry. We're out of bagels. A muffin I can give you.*

Fronting is possible only under specific circumstances:

- the subject is a pronoun,
- the fronted protagonist must be accessible, and
- the fronted element must be stressed.

It is often used when two topics are compared to, or contrasted with, each other:

*I'll have to introduce two principles. One I'm going to introduce now and one I'm going to introduce later.*

*Some people, you like; others, you don't.*

#### § x.y.10 Intonation and accents

English sentence intonation is largely parallel to German intonation. There are some subtle contrasts, however.

...

#### § x.y.15 The *fall-rise* accent

If you want to indicate that your answer is incomplete or inconclusive, you can use a *fall-rise* accent instead of a simple rising or falling tone.

*It's cheap.*

In German, such meanings are often conveyed using other expressive devices, e.g. modal particles (*Abtönungspartikeln*) such as *schon*:

*Billig ist es schön.*

The *fall-rise* accent can also be used to compare two topics with one another:

Fred: *What is the difference between atheism and agnosticism?*

Carl: *\Athe/ism means you believe there is no God; ag\nosti/cism means you do not believe that there is a God.*

...

## Literature

- BNC: British National Corpus..
- CEF: *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Council of Europe, 2001.
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