

Abstract

**Synchronic Move and diachronic reordering driven by switch-topic in Australian indigenous languages: interface illegibility as a motor of change**

Some syntacticians are proposing that the ‘Split-CP’ cartography (Rizzi 2004:7) should include Topic Phrase and Focus Phrase; Beninca and Poletto (2004) argue for a structure of phrases in that order but with Focus Phrase divided into contrastive and information focus phrases. Many languages, including Australian languages, have dedicated positions for this kind of function in the left periphery. However, in some cases the indicators of discourse functions for the interpretive component are not very transparent, and may indeed be variable and unclear. This ‘semi-legibility’ at the interface is the source of diachronic change, and may be to some extent inherent in the nature of such discourse functions in languages in general.

One source of the illegibility is the complexity of the discourse-pragmatic functions which are not neatly divisible into Topic and Focus or even a subdivided Focus. Constructions from the Ngumpin-Yapa languages show that Contrast has syntactic effects distinct from Topic and Focus and ‘switch-topic’ is another function marked in the syntax, which is distinct, and moreover quite variable in its semantics. Another source is the situation that a number of distinct discourse functions may be competing for a limited number of positions, so that the position-function match is not highly legible. The number of positions is an empirical question of syntax distinct from that of the number of discourse functions. It may be that ‘opaque’ heads like C and landing-sites like Spec-CP do still have a role in that kind of situation, and proposals for maximising configurational representation to match discourse semantics (eg Speas and Tenny 2003) may have disadvantages in not capturing the areas of illegibility and disequilibrium on the syntax-discourse interface.

The Ngumpin-Yapa languages (a Pama-Nyungan subgroup, McConvell & Laughren 2004) all have pronominal special enclitics doubling subjects and objects but their placement varies within and between languages, often second (Wackernagel) position, which has been argued to be adjoined to C, which is linked to Focus (McConvell 1996). In those languages where enclitics are adjoined to a modal ‘catalyst’ (I), second position has other discourse functions, notably Contrast (distinct from Topic and Focus).

This paper looks mainly at more marked cases in the languages with unmarked second-position enclisis, where the enclitics are found enclitic on the verb instead. Setting aside the question of V= enclisis in the imperative (McConvell to appear) in many of the languages, the concentration is on constructions where the initial element is a phrase representing a change of topic, in some Northern languages. This case has parallels in verb-second phenomena in Europe. While switch-topic is the prototypical function of this construction, it has a ‘halo’ of usage around that which is less transparent, and may be subject to individual and social variation.

In related languages to the west of Ngumpin-Yapa, verb-enclisis has become categorical. It is proposed here that similar processes of ‘topic-switch’ broadening to include a much wider set of clauses may have resulted in this change. There is evidence for increasingly wide application of these erstwhile marked placements in western dialects of northern Ngumpin-Yapa languages. I propose that this trend is due to it being based on discourse notions which are inherently hard to interpret, and this can lead to ever increasing usage of V=enclisis by speakers, so that it becomes more like an optional variable, which (in concert with increasing incidence in non-realis moods, perhaps) can lead to categoricity of V=enclisis.

These hypotheses are examined in the light of the notion that syntactic change often consists of a replacement of Move by Merge (Roberts and Roussou 2003, discussed in McConvell 2006). Verb-enclisis due to preceding switch-topic is analysed as raising of V to C triggered by raising of an XP where there is a switch-topic feature. It seems that this kind of discourse motivation for Move is very open to reinterpretation, and child learners also would, like linguists, have a hard time figuring out what it is and may either reanalyse it or generalize it. This then provides a motor for the change Move to Merge.

Thus certainly for the case of switch-topic, and probably for other discourse functions such as left topics, we have a degree of ‘illegibility’ of discourse functions from the syntax. As philologists are aware, illegibility will increase the number of errors and changes in a copied text, and the same is true of syntax-discourse interface illegibility – it will produce variation and change.

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