

Topic-prominence in spoken Norwegian

Ever since 1976 when Li and Thompson suggested a new typology of languages based on subject-prominence and topic-prominence, Indo-European languages have been classified as subject-prominent. In other words, the subject-predicate structure is considered the most important organizing principle of Norwegian sentence structure. This paper questions that view, suggesting instead that spoken Norwegian is topic-prominent.

The common view in contemporary approaches to the study of syntax, relies on the assumption that there is one “basic” or “neutral” sentence type – the *main, declarative, active* clause – in reference to which all other syntactic types may be described. This structure follows a SVO ordering. However, empirical data suggests that as many as 40% of Norwegian sentences do not begin with a subject, and this is corroborated by my preliminary study of spoken Norwegian based on the NoTa corpus. Current research on Norwegian syntax does not give an adequate explanation of this phenomenon because it mainly focuses on which constituents are possible to move, and their potential landing sites. By contrast in this paper I ask *why* up to 40% of Norwegian sentences begin with non-subject material. I suggest that Norwegian utterances are organized according to a topic-comment principle, in which the topic is not seen as derived from a canonical ordering, but represents a basic category (cf. Rosén 1998).

The NoTa corpus reveals numerous examples of left-dislocated constituents (LD) which do not have a selectional relationship with the verb of the predication, as illustrated in (1):

- 1) 001: [når man blir en sånn femten seksten sytten år] så blir kanskje stedet litt lite
when one becomes like fifteen sixteen seventeen years then becomes maybe place-def. a bit small
”When you’re getting like fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, the place perhaps gets a bit small”

There is an absence of grammatical link between *så* and the main verb, and the semantic roles and grammatical functions play no role in controlling the kind of constructions exemplified by (1). This indicates that the sentence structure is coded by pragmatic functions rather than syntax (cf. Givón 1979). Thus, utterances beginning with a non-subject do not deviate from the core sentence structure; instead they are governed by pragmatic principles relating to information structure.

In addition to present the results of my pilot study and discuss the information structural status of the data, I will try to implement, and analyze the sentences in the framework of Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG). The project thus adds to our understanding about first position in spoken Norwegian, as well as to contribute to the general development of LFG.

Givón, T. (1979). On understanding grammar. New York, Academic press.

Rosén, V. (1998). Topics and empty pronouns in Vietnamese. Bergen, Department of Linguistics and Comparative Literature, Section for Linguistic Studies, University of Bergen: XIV, 312 s.