Continuing and expanding topics

Filippa Lindahl & Elisabet Engdahl
University of Gothenburg
{filippa.lindahl/elisabet.engdahl}@svenska.gu.se

Preposing of pronouns is common in the mainland Scandinavian languages. An example in Swedish from the Nordic Dialect Corpus is given in (1) (NDC, Johannesen et al. 2009).

(1) de ville ha reda på [när] man hade gjort sin första bilaffär
och den gjorde jag 1950 strax före julen
and it made I 1950 soon before Christmas
‘They wanted to know when you made your first car deal, and I made mine in 1950 just before Christmas’

We investigated a sample of 150 utterances with preposed pronouns in NDC, annotating the pronouns and their antecedents for information structural function (cf. Erteschik-Shir 2007). We found that 92 of the utterances involve rheme-topic chaining, where the antecedent of the pronoun is introduced as (part of) a rheme (focus) in the preceding utterance. In 24 of the utterances, the initial pronoun is part of a topic chain and in 20, the pronoun refers to a immediately preceding left dislocated phrase which acts as an attention shift topic (Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl 2007, Eide 2011). In all these cases, the preposed pronoun contributes to the coherence of the dialogue and acts as a continuing topic.

It is also possible to prepose entire subordinate clauses as shown in (2) with an embedded question, and in (3) with a that-clause.

(2) [Men varifrån dessa strålar kommer], är det ingen som vet e,
but from where these rays come is there no one who knows
‘But no one knows where this radiation comes from.’

(3) [Att den stämmer med verkligheten], är det väl heller ingen som på allvar tror e,
that it corresponds with reality is there PRT neither no one who in earnest believes
‘There is probably no one who really believes that it corresponds to reality.’

Preposed clauses have received less attention than preposed noun phrases, and it might be considered surprising to find such informationally heavy constituents in this position. As can be seen in the examples in (2) and (3), subordinate clauses can even be fronted out of relative clauses, resulting in a syntactically rather complex structure (Lindahl 2011). Preposed clauses often contain a pronoun, a demonstrative or a definite description which refers back to an antecedent in the preceding utterance. This way they maintain cohesion in the discourse at the same time as they introduce new aspects of the question under discussion.

We analyze the data using Ginzburg’s (2012) Dialogue Gameboard. The DGB models the discourse participants’ views of the common ground and provides a way to account for the gradual changes in information states during a conversation. We propose that the pronouns are preposed in order to provide cohesion and smooth transitions in the dialogue by referring back to a referent that was recently introduced in the discourse. The fronted pronouns are rarely contrastively accented, which makes the mainland Scandinavian languages’ use of preposing different from the way it is used in languages like English and Catalan, where topicalized phrases are almost exclusively interpreted as contrastive. The preposed clauses typically both contain a backward looking anaphor and raise new issues related to the main
topic of discussion which may lead to further contrastive comments. In this way, they behave as expanding topics. The possibility to front constituents out of a relative clause suggests that the tendency to front for discourse coherence is so strong that it can override the potential processing disadvantage.

References


