

Chapter 10 Pragmatics and discourse analysis

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“Delving Deeper”

Old and new information

In this section, we will see that pragmatics often intersects with syntax and phonology. This is because sentences not only carry information, they also tell the hearer which parts of that information are new, which parts are most important, etc. The elements of a sentence which constitute new information are determined according to discourse content and how we structure the information, that is, we have to look beyond the sentence itself. In a question like ‘Who broke the vase?’ the only new information in the answer *Jerry did*, is *Jerry*. The rest of the sentence can be omitted precisely because it is presupposed. Read the question in (1) below. What do you think is a bit strange in the answer to the question? What would be a more natural answer?

- (1) When did you buy those blue pants for your daughter?

I bought those blue pants for my daughter yesterday.

The more natural way to answer the question in (1) is to simply say *yesterday*, or maybe *I bought them yesterday*. Normal discourse tends to avoid the repetition of unnecessary information. Now consider the question in (2). Would you still be able to answer simply *yesterday*?

- (2) What did you do with the money you had?

I bought those blue pants for my daughter yesterday.

In the answer in (2), it is necessary to say the whole sentence because all of it is actually relevant. Languages have different means at their disposal to avoid repeating new information. In English, subjects and objects that constitute old information can be reduced to pronouns, verb phrases can be omitted or replaced by *do so*, adjuncts can be omitted, etc. Examples are shown in (3) and (4).

- (3) When did the children’s mother drop off the casserole?
She dropped it off an hour ago.

As we saw in Chapter 5 Syntax, in some languages, you may leave the subject unpronounced (pro-drop or null subject languages). The existence of null subjects is part of the syntax of a language, but the use of null subjects is pragmatically constrained. In a null subject language, you can drop the subject if the information is old as in (4), but not when it is new as in (5). Recall that in these languages, the verb has inflection that allows you to identify who is doing the action. The symbol # here means the sentence is grammatical from a syntactic point of view, but pragmatics rules it out.

- (4) ¿Qué trajo Juan?
what brought Juan?
'What did John bring?

Trajo el vino.
brought the wine
'He brought the wine.'

- (5) ¿Quién trajo el vino?
who brought the wine?
'Who brought the wine?

El lo trajo
he it brought
'He brought it.'

#Lo trajo.
it brought
'He brought it.'

In example (4), the answer omits the pronoun because the subject, *Juan*, has already been mentioned and therefore constitutes old information. In (5) not pronouncing the pronoun is inappropriate because, in the context of the question, it is new information.

Another pragmatic condition in which you are not permitted to drop the pronoun is when you are comparing or contrasting subjects. Compare (6a) and (b).

- (6) a. Ella trajo el vino, no yo.
she brought the wine, not I.
'She brought the wine, not I.'
- b. #Trajo el vino, no yo.
brought the wine, not I.
'She brought the wine, not I.'

Other languages, such as Chinese and Nahuatl (a language spoken in Mexico) go even further than Spanish: you can omit both the subject and the object if both refer to known information. However, Chinese and Nahuatl differ in that the verb in Chinese does not have inflection to indicate agreement either with the object or the subject, you have to rely solely on the discourse to recover the meaning of the dropped elements. In contrast, the verb in Nahuatl agrees with both the subject and the object.

So far, we have talked about how you reduce old information, either by converting it to pronouns that are pronounced, as in English, or may be left unpronounced, as in Spanish, Chinese, and Nahuatl. But the opposite also happens, you may want to focus the hearer's attention on part of the sentence because it is more important or more relevant to the conversation. English has several

ways of doing this, including the use of phonetic resources, such as the placement of stress on a particular word (see Chapter 2 Phonetics). Consider the examples in (7) in which the words that are in capitals are more stressed. Can you think of a discourse context in which you may pronounce these sentences this way?

- (7) a. My sister bought the TABLE.
b. My SISTER bought the table.

You would probably use (7a) when you want to clarify that your sister bought the table as opposed to another piece of furniture; in contrast, you may use (7b) to clarify who bought the table.

Old and new information acquisition

The distinction between old and new information is relevant in every language, but the syntactic and phonological resources available from one language to another may differ. Intonation may be used in one language to indicate the importance of something, while in another language, moving elements to the beginning or end of the sentence may be the preferred way to draw attention to some element. In the same way, simply not pronouncing elements that refer to old information may be a way of avoiding unnecessary repetition in one language, while in another, converting the item to a pronoun may be the way to do it. Therefore, if you are learning a language, it is not the basic distinction itself that you have to acquire, but rather how your target language goes about enhancing relevant and important information and reducing old information.

The case that has most often been studied is that of pro drop. Very young children tend to omit subjects but children acquiring a null subject language do so between 70-100% of the time (see Chapter 12 First Language Acquisition). In languages such as English, in contrast, they omit only around 30%. However, children learning a null subject language hardly ever include unnecessary subjects or omit them in contexts where they are obligatory. This is not the case with second language learners, for whom learning the pragmatics of null subjects is quite a challenge.

Learning that a language permits null subjects is relatively easy. In other words, the syntax is not a problem. However, even advanced level learners of languages like Italian (a null subject language), may overuse subjects in contexts in which they should be left unpronounced, although they never omit subjects in contexts in which it is not permissible (Sorace, 2011). This often happens even in cases where the first language also has null subjects. It seems there is something inherently difficult in processing the pragmatics of null subjects when you are acquiring a second language.

To summarize, languages distinguish between new and old information, but how they do this varies from one language to the next. Acquiring these different approaches may be problematic under some learning conditions.

References

- Sorace, A. (2011). Pinning down the concept of "interface" in bilingualism. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 1(1), 1-33.

