

## **Stage topics and locative inversion: The cases of English, French and European Portuguese**

Locative inversion (LI) is the only type of subject-verb inversion (SVI) shared by languages with distinct degrees of word order flexibility, like European Portuguese (EP), English and French.

- (1) a. Na floresta vive uma família de ursos. (EP)
- b. In the forest lives a family of bears. (ENG)
- c. Dans la forêt habite une famille d'ours. (FR)

In these languages, LI is subject to discourse conditions. While there is a general consensus that the postverbal subject must be (part of) the focus of the sentence (e.g. Bresnan, 1994; Cornish, 2005; Sheehan, 2007), the discourse status of preverbal XPs is still open to debate. Some authors (e.g. Birner, 1996) have advocated that, at least in English, preverbal XPs correspond to information that is comparatively more familiar than that conveyed by the subject. Other authors, in contrast, have defended that the preverbal XPs are topics (e.g. Rizzi & Shlonsky, 2006). Recently, an alternative proposal has been put forward by Lahousse (2003, 2011) to account for the properties of preverbal XPs in French LI. According to her, these XPs are stage topics.

With a view to contributing to this ongoing debate, the present paper seeks to (i) describe the types of preverbal XPs allowed in LI in English, French and EP, and (ii) analyse their discourse status. Building on Lahousse's (2003, 2011) work, we will argue that the preverbal XPs of LI constructions are stage topics not only in French, but also in EP, a language where SVI is freer than in French, and English, a language which allows SVI in more restricted contexts than French. We will show that, in addition to the structures typically classified as LI, SVI structures with non-spatio-temporal XPs, like participial and adjectival phrases (e.g. *Senators expressed outrage when the budget was proposed. Angriest of all was Judd Gregg.*), are also licensed by a preverbal stage topic, which, despite not being spatio-temporal in the strict sense, provides an abstract, notional location in context. We will further show that most cases of SVI traditionally labelled "absolute inversion" in French (e.g. *Arrive la lettre d'un ami* 'Arrive-3SG the letter of-a friend'), as well as "free" inversion structures occurring in wide-focus contexts in EP (e.g. *O que aconteceu? Chegou o João* 'What happened? Arrived-3SG the John') are licensed by a preverbal covert stage topic, which has, however, different properties in the two structures. These three types of SVI will be proposed to be instances of (covert) LI. Differences across English, French and EP regarding covert and overt stage topics will be explained on the basis of syntactic factors.

As the notion of stage topic is central to this paper, we will start by presenting this notion, which was first proposed by Erteschik-Shir (1997). According to her, stage topics specify the loco-temporal frame of the event or state expressed by the sentence and may be either overt or covert. Erteschik-Shir postulates that sentences that do not have an overt topic necessarily have a covert stage topic, which is interpreted as referring to the here-and-now of discourse. This claim will be argued to be empirically unsupported. It will be further argued that Erteschik-Shir's (1997) definition of stage topics is too broad and has to be reformulated to include two additional constraints: (i) stage topics must be lexically and/or grammatically represented in the sentence, and (ii) they must be part of the presupposition associated with the sentence.

Following a detailed description of the types of preverbal XPs allowed in LI in English, French and EP, two pieces of evidence will be provided to support the claim that those XPs are stage topics. First, it will be shown that empirical data indicate that preverbal XPs need to be presupposed, but not necessarily discourse-old, for LI to be felicitous. Second, it will be demonstrated that it is not the case that all presupposed, topic XPs can license LI. As it will be made clear, in English and French, (i) the XPs admitted in the preverbal position of LI typically specify a spatio-temporal location, just like stage topics do; (ii) time and space XPs which do not specify a spatio-temporal location are not allowed in LI (e.g. *often*, *fréquemment*); and (iii) XPs which do not denote a spatio-temporal location (e.g. PPs expressing manner, instrument, cause...) are generally incompatible with SVI, even when their content is presupposed. In EP, LI also tends to occur with XPs specifying a spatio-temporal location. However, this language is more flexible than English and French, allowing SVI in wide-focus contexts, the discourse context where LI typically occurs, without any overt locative. Crucially, in such contexts, SVI is licensed by a covert fronted loco-temporal argument (Sheehan, 2007), which, in our terms, acts as a covert deictic stage topic.

It will, thus, be concluded that stage topics strongly correlate with SVI crosslinguistically and that the generalization according to which only preverbal stage topics can license LI accounts for the patterns found with respect to preverbal XPs both language-internally and crosslinguistically.

**Selected references:** Birner, B. (1996). *The discourse function of inversion in English*. New York / London: Routledge. // Erteschik-Shir, N. (1997). *The dynamics of focus structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. // Lahousse, K. (2011). *Quand passent les cigognes. Le sujet nominal postverbal en français contemporain*. Paris: Presses Universitaires Vincennes. // Rizzi, L., & Shlonsky, U. (2006). Satisfying the subject criterion by a non subject: English locative inversion and heavy NP shift. In M. Frascarelli (ed.), *Phases of interpretation* (pp. 341-362). Berlin / New York: Mouton de Gruyter. // Sheehan, M. (2007). *The EPP and null subjects in Romance*. (Unpublished PhD thesis). Newcastle University, UK.