Motivation for GAGL 24 and 25, jointly edited by Werner Abraham and Sjaak de Mey

The following collection of papers constitutes a clear digression from the previous topics that were published in GAGL. Hungarian definitely does not belong to the Germanic languages and consequently has little to do with German. Yet, the Department of German, the Department of General Linguistics and the Department of Finnugrian languages have jointly organized the 6th Groningen Grammar Talks, April 6-8, 1984, dedicated to the subject "Topic, focus and configurationality". In line with the general policy followed in the previous Groningen Grammar Talks we invited contributions on the linguistics of German and Dutch. But in addition to this, we thought it fruitful and helpful to ask a selected group of Hungarian linguists working in the field to report on their recent findings under the topic mentioned above. The reason for choosing this topic specifically and for confronting work on German on the one hand and the completely unrelated Hungarian on the other hand will be given in what follows.

One of the most striking developments in the theory of generative grammar is its growing interest in the comparison of languages and, most prominently, in those languages which deviate considerabely in structure from English. It is by means of this that not only is there a beginning made to a truly empirical approach to a generative typology of languages, but also the concept of modularity can be brought to full application and fruitfullness. Languages radically different from English will now have to be viewed as ones whose grammars receive a different structuring by way of different contributions of the different modules as characterised in Universal Grammar (Chomsky 1981). Irrespective of the fact whether topic and subject are basic categories in a theory of grammar, such categories, next to focus and object, do play a prominent role in many grammars. "Subject" for example, will have to be analysed in a variety of more primitive properties, and languages will differ with

respect to this universal list of properties that their subjects
are assigned. There is indication that there is a connection
between the richness in characteristics of the subject concept
and the role that the subject plays in the syntactic structure
of a language. We have come to call a language whose sentential
structure is dominated by properties of the subject, a subject-
prominent language. In those languages where the subject has little
dominance, i.e. where the syntax gives prominence to other
categories such as topic, are called topic prominent languages.
According to Li and Thompson (1976), one can distinguish
between topic prominent languages, subject prominent languages,
languages in which both subject and topic are prominent, and
finally languages where neither topic nor subject receive any
structural prominence.

While such a classification seems to take us astray from
the elementary and language-specific syntactic studies as opposed
to the typological study in the sense of discourse grammar
(see Givón 1981, 1984), it will nevertheless remain a particular
task of the true syntactician to make out exactly what the
truly structural correlates are of topic and focus or subject
and object, and which modules contribute to the constitution
of these phenomena in a grammar.

Different degrees of restriction on word order seem to be
another prominent class of properties of languages. Exactly what
the connection is between subject or topic prominence of a
language and the relative freedom of word order is still unclear.
On the other hand, "freedom of word order" seems to be a very
intuitive, and by no means clearly defined, term. However,
there is reason to believe that the dimension within which
languages differ with respect to relative word order, correlates
with the degree of configurationality, that is of hierarchical
structure of the sentence. It is assumed that only in the case
that there is no hierarchical sentential structuring there are
no specific positions to be distinguished categorially within
a sentence. From this follows that it is by no means a matter
of the surface phenomena alone to determine the degree of
non-configurationality of a language; rather, it is by means

of a number of movement properties and their restrictions
that we can determine the degree of the categorial assignment
of positions and, in consequence, the hierarchical structuring
of the sentence. One of the prominent examples illustrating
such a case is Georgian, which betrays free word order, but
requires nonetheless that the w-element be placed in the
position immediately prior to the finite verb of a sentence.

Grammatical and, specifically, syntactic theory have been
developed so far almost exclusively by trying to account for
the properties of the English language. It was not until the
first publications by Richard Kayne (1983, 1984) that languages
other than English attracted the interest and the ambition
of modern syntacticians. While, in this way, it was mainly
Romance languages that English was confronted with and on
account of which the theory of grammar was further developed,
it now seems to be of importance also to inspect scrutinously
Germanic languages, which, though related to English, deviate
in one radical aspect from the subject-prominent language
such as English, French, and Italian: both German and Dutch are,
much as Hungarian, a lot less subject-prominent than English,
and they further betray a relatively strong freedom of word
order. On the other hand, while the categories of topic and
focus have been proved to play a crucial role in the grammar
of Hungarian, it is still to be shown that these categories
play a simular role in German.

It is now unimportant to note at this point of the discussion
that topic and focus as used so far in the scarce literature
of generative syntax are conceptually different from those
used primarily in the school of Prague and in Halliday's
Systemic Grammar, just as well as in other work of a more
typological nature. The reader is reminded of the pertinent
articles by Kiss (1981) and by Scherpenisse (in GAGL 25, 1984).
But this is not to say that the different concepts cannot
be reconciliated and conceptually sharpened in one or the
other way and as seen from different components of grammar and
its sub-theories (modules). The time seems mature that

languages other than English will have to be focussed with
respect to their possible potential for a more fruitful
theory of grammar. For example, if we should find that topic
and focus, of one definition or the other, play a crucial
role in the grammars of the specific languages, we may then ask
whether these categories do not play a similar role for the
grammar of English to the extent that phenomena unexplained so far,
or perhaps even unnoticed, will receive a natural explanation.
And, crucially also, we think that the time has come that a
clear picture is developed of those languages which have an
evident, but still somewhat undefined position between the
two polar languages of English and Walbiry, i.e. a clearly
configurational and a clearly non-configurational language.
Definitely, one of these languages seems to be German.

It has been a fruitful strategy of linguistic investigation
in the past twenty years to concentrate the attention on a
small number of languages and subject them to a minute
investigation with the instrumentarium of modern syntax. This
is exactly what the organizers of the 6th Groningen Grammar
Talks on "Topic, Focus and Configurationality" (April 6-8,
1984) had in mind to stimulate. That Hungarian was chosen to
be one of those languages has a practical ratio: namely the
fact that Hungarian linguists have succeeded in analysing
Hungarian in a way which has raised a series of very fundamental
questions within the theory of generative grammar. See above
all Kiss (1981), which paved a promising way for the discussion
of less subject and more topic and focus prominent languages.
However, the group of Hungarian syntacticians is far from
unanimous in very crucial questions. See, among others, Hunyadi,
Kenesei and Szabolocsi for perspectives which are radical in
temper and in newness of outlook.

Let us formulate a few points that the organizers hoped
the discussion would shed further light on: in Li and Thompson
(1975), topic was taken as a non-analyzable category, and
Hungarian was characterized as a subject-prominent language.

This characterization was not only to be confronted with
that by Kiss (1981) with its detailed topic-focus analysis
but, more far-reaching, it is to be asked what the consequences
of such characterization are for the general theory of grammar
and the specific grammar of Hungarian and other languages of
similar properties. More specifically, one can ask the question
whether or not it is reasonable to assign focus such a prominent
role in the analysis of Hungarian, and try to determine its
relative degree of prominence in German and Dutch. Or, to put
the question differently: Is the subject in Dutch and German
of sufficient structural prominence such that not only does
it keep topic from exercising more influence on the sentential
structure, but also that it sets the object at a distance
thereby restricting the influence of focus on the sentence
structure in crucial ways? It seems that a lot more questions
are still open to empirical investigation than had been
assumed to be the case hitherto. Are there, on the one hand,
no asymmetries of subject and object in Hungarian? Is there
a far-reaching symmetry between subject and object in German
as has been claimed by Haider (1981; 1983), or can we believe
other evidence to the contrary effect presented, however,
in "deeper", more indirect terms (see Fanselow). Does topic
indeed play the crucial role in Hungarian as has been claimed
by Kiss? Are topic and focus functions in the grammar of
Hungarian which in German and Dutch are taken over by COMP? Is
there no COMP-position in Hungarian? Is the position of focus
indeed to be defined structurally (Kiss 1981), or do we have
to look our for other sorts of elements which can occur in the
position of focus as has been defended by Hunyadi? Is focus,
much like subject, a conglomerate of more fundamental properties.
Such a view would warrant the assumption that languages could
be regarded to differ in accordance with the number and the
selection of such properties with which they load the concept
of focus. Such considerations will involve also the concept
of definiteness, since it is a well-known fact that languages
very often associate positions with definiteness requirements:
topic is definite by its very definition. Which of the topic

characteristics will carry over to the subject?

Finally, it goes without saying that any conclusion to the effect that there is a fundamental symmetry between subject and object, as has been claimed by Haider, is of far-reaching consequences for the grammar of these languages and the theory of grammar in general if we stick to Chomsky's government and binding theory. One of these consequences for German would be that PRO would have the status of a governed category which is excluded by GB. In more general terms, it would then have to be asked whether this is one of the properties that characterises languages located somewhere inbetween the two polar ends on the configurationality scale. And, in turn, the question then would arise whether, in order to account for certain differences of the binding characteristics, we should let lexical properties carry over to the syntactic base rules in terms of the projection principle? What, for example, would the structure of the verbal complex be if no canonic VP can be assumed for German (and perhaps also for Dutch)? Is there really no asymmetry between accusative (direct) objects and oblique (indirect and others) objects in German? Clearly, since these objects are distinguished in terms of morphological case in German, the theory of case would have to give an answer to such a question and, consequently, would have to play a crucial role in the syntax. But does the case theory as developed by Den Besten (1982) really serve the purposes of German? Is Van Riemsdijks concept of CA (closest argument) a cover term for the direct object, and which of the collective properties of focus does German select to represent the direct object case (accusative) as one of the closest arguments of the verb in terms of its valency? It is to be noted that Haider (1983) has presented a theory on the basis of the evidence in German that can be defined strictly within the framework of fundamental assumptions of GB and which allows for the specific languages to fall out very naturally by parametric guidance from the general theory, and which seems to cover in more general terms the module-like setup of a theory of grammar which was developed mainly on the

basis of English.

The reader of GAGL 24 and 25 is invited to draw his con-
clusions with respect to these and similar questions. Un-
doubtedly, the results emerging from the contributions to
these two volumes warrant in perfunctory terms the following
conclusion: both German and Dutch have a richly developed
topic-focus structure. However, they are not to be compared
with Hungarian with respect to a solid position of the focus
category in the constituent structure of the sentence. Rather,
focus positions, in contrast to Hungarian, seem to be
representable in vast number of positions distributed all over
the sentence in Dutch and German. Its position in Hungarian,
however, is prominently verb-proximate. This is one of the most
crucial typological differences between the two languages.
Although there is a strong preference for focus to be located
close to the verb (in sentence-final position) in German (as
noted by Jacobs, von Stechow, and Uhmann, and Abraham in GAGL
25), focus otherwise is positionally dependent on discourse
requirements (unless determined by quantifier-like operators).

The second important question, namely whether Hungarian,
on the one hand, and German and Dutch, on the other, are
configurational remains an unsolved one. There is agreement
that both Hungarian and the two Germanic languages are partially
configurational: both languages are configurational within the
constituent structure of the nominal and of the prepositional
phrase, in the component of formal government and under scope-
conditions under the force of operator-like governors. What
remains open is, for example, whether German has a VP-structure
or whether the nominals bound by verbal valency have a flat,
unhierarchical organisation. Observations to the latter
assumption have been forwarded by Abraham, Haider, Jacobs and
Scherpenisse, in strongly implicative terms possibly also by
Von Gussenhoven for Dutch. Kenesei puts to doubt a number of
properties which by Kiss have been interpreted as strong
configurational indicatives for Hungarian (Kiss 1981 and ever

since).

A third topic in GAGL 24 and 25 comprises observations with respect to verbal classifications on the basis of semantic points of view in Hungarian. The contributions by Kiefer, Ackermann and Komlosy show, on the basis of different linguistic material and according to different lines of argumentation, that focus, syntactically transitive properties and aspectual properties such as terminativity, perfectivity and adjoining properties of Aktionsart are closely interrelated. As far as we can see, this is a totally new point of view for the linguistic investigation of both Dutch and German. A fourth group of contributions were devoted to the intonational structure of Dutch and Hungarian (Von Gussenhoven and Prószécky). The field of intonation is a widely unploughed one but, as far as work on sentential modal particles in German is concerned (Jacobs 1982), has crucial correlates to the other syntactic constituents and their structural positions. It is along this line of thinking that the observations as to the structural definition of focus by Jacobs and Von Stechow/Uhmann, and with respect to semantic and structural instantiation of the "closest argument" by Abraham seem to be connected with this question.

In general, one can say that the 6th Groningen Grammar Talks proved a panel in the course of which fundamental insights about the connection between focus and other grammatical entities were discussed on a formal basis and within the framework of grammatical and discourse-pragmatic parameters. We would like to think that this proves to be a good step beyond the functionally orientated work (as presented primarily by what has been regarded a classical reading on this topic by Charles Li (1976)). We would like to think that it deserves special mentioning that, much in contrast to previous work on topic and focus, the contributions at this conference betrayed a clear grammatical, formal orientation, which, for the first time, seems to permit a typological comparison in the sense of a formal and cognitively-based conception of universal grammar.

From among the papers read at the conference, those by Von Gussenhoven and Höhle are not included in this collection. For Von

Gussenhoven's contribution see Von Gussenhoven 1984.

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