

Degrees of discourse configurationality and beyond

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This research was supported by the German Research Foundation [DFG] through SFB/
CRC 991.

The Notion of ‘Configurationality’

—The issue of configurationality originally concerned how grammatical relations are defined.

—Chomsky has maintained that they are configurationally defined, i.e. defined in terms of phrase-structure configurations: subject = [NP, S], object = [NP, VP].

—In his important 1979 paper ‘On the position of Walbiri in a typology of the base’, Ken Hale argued that there were two types of languages, ‘configurational languages’ like English, which define grammatical relations as Chomsky claimed, and ‘non-configurational languages’ like Warlpiri which do not.

—The configurationality debate expanded into one about what are the principles around which languages organize their clause structure.

—Vilkuna (1989) and É. Kiss (1995) proposed that Finnish and Hungarian clause structure is organized around the discourse functions of topic and focus.

Discourse Configurationality

Hungarian non-configurational clause structure:

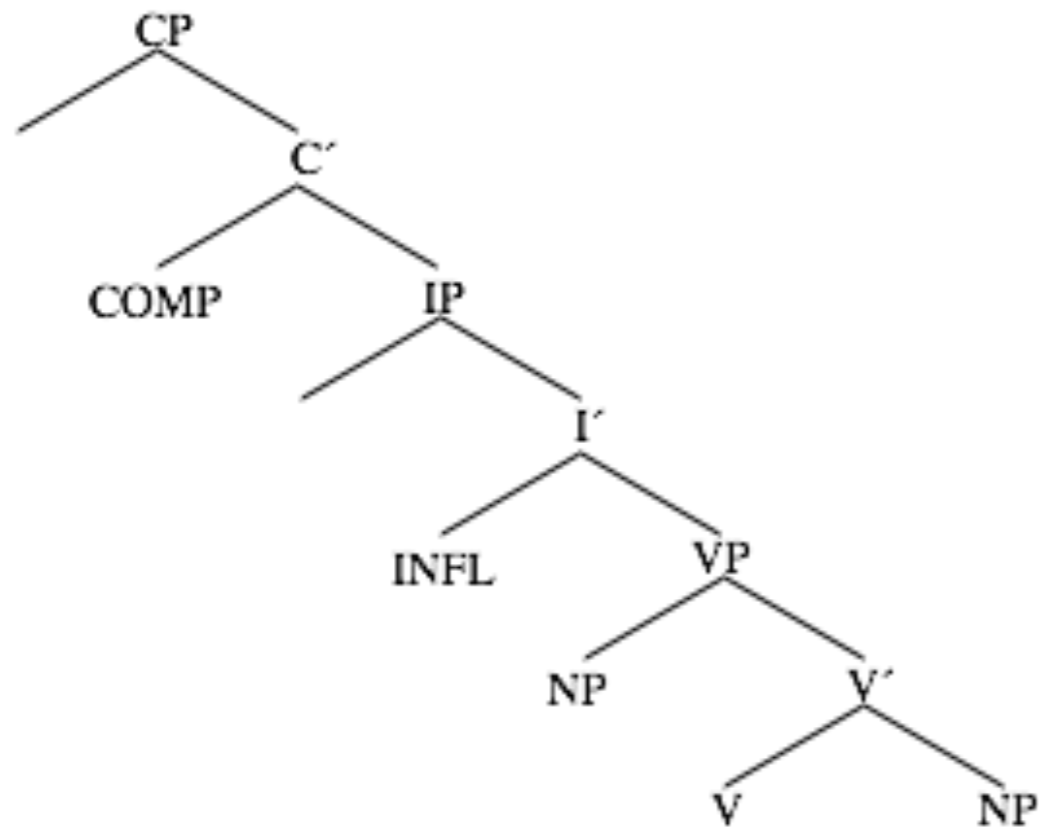
- (1) a. Be-mutatta Anná-t Mari-nak Péter-Ø.
VM-introduce Anna-ACC Mary-DAT Peter-NOM
‘Peter introduced Anna to Mary.’

Hungarian discourse-configurational clause structure:

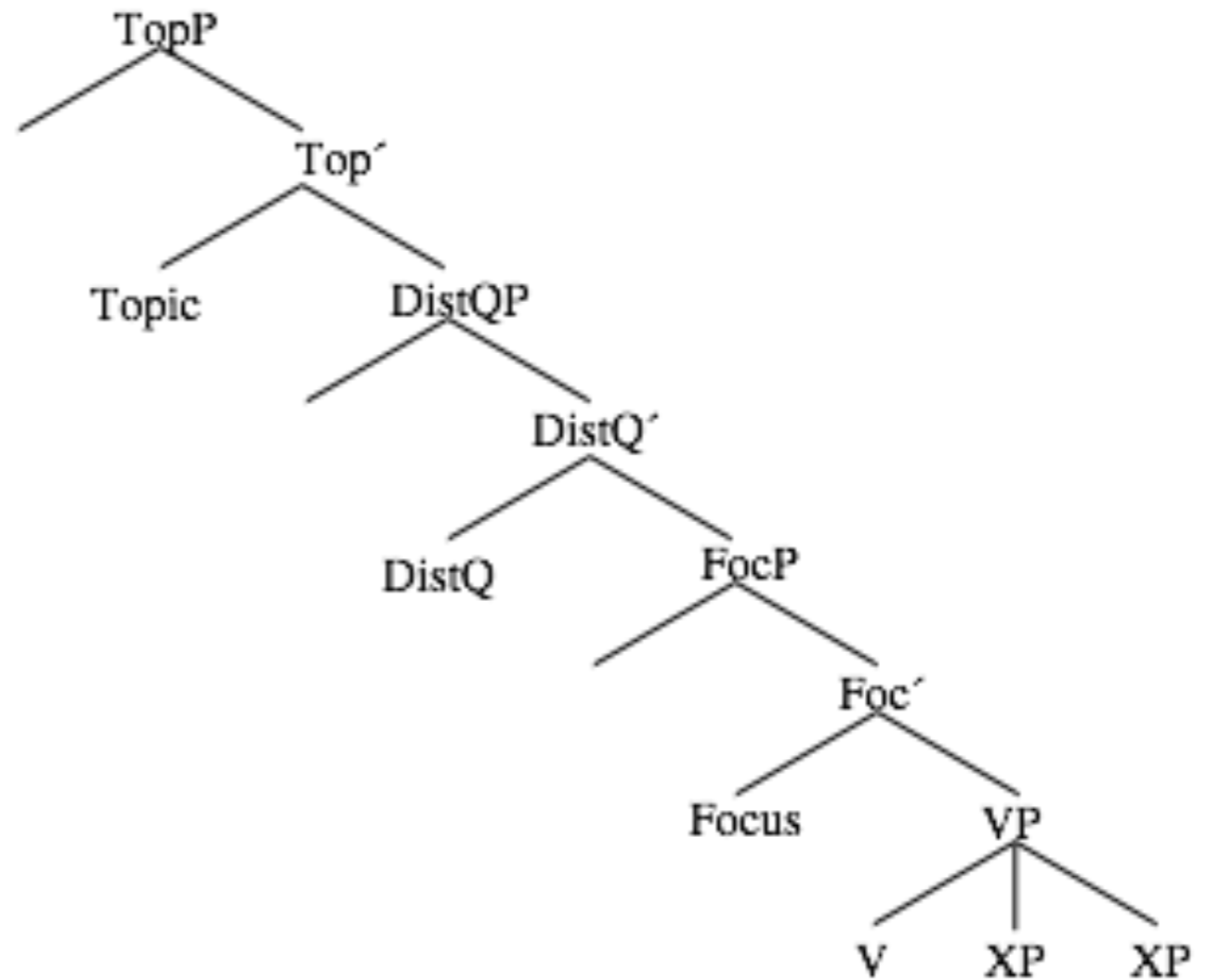
- b. [Péter-Ø]^{TOPIC} [mindenki-nek]^{DISTQ} [Anná-t]^{FOCUS} mutatta be.
‘It is Anna who Peter introduced to everyone.’
‘As for Peter, it is Anna who [he] introduced to everyone.’
- c. [Anná-t]^{TOPIC} [mindenki-nek]^{DISTQ} [Péter]^{FOCUS} mutatta be.
‘It is Peter who introduced Anna to everyone.’
‘As for Anna, it is Peter who introduced [her] to everyone.’
- d. [Mari-nak]^{TOPIC} [Péter]^{FOCUS} mutatta be Anná-t.
‘It is Peter who introduced Anna to Mary.’
‘As for Mary, it is Peter who introduced Anna to [her].’

Discourse Configurationality

English clause structure:



Hungarian clause structure:



Discourse Configurationality

—Rizzi (1997) proposed decomposing the C projection into the following functional categories:

[ForceP [TopicP* [FocusP [TopicP* [FiniteP [IP ...]]]]]]

—Because these projections are assumed to be found in the grammar of all languages, the contrast between discourse-configurational and non-discourse-configurational languages is less clear-cut than originally proposed.

—Discourse configurationality would depend on the role that these discourse notions, expressed in the generative accounts by these functional projections, played in the grammar of a language.

—In the remainder of the talk we will discuss how RRG has handled topic and focus, and how to represent their role in the syntax (without functional projections) and how variation in discourse configurationality can be captured.

Topic, Focus and Discourse Representation in RRG

- One of the founding ideas of RRG is that while in all languages syntax, semantics and pragmatics interact, the way they interact differs across languages and underlies important typological differences.
- In order to capture this variable interaction, RRG has adopted discourse representation structures [DRS] from Kamp & Reyle (1993), Heusinger (1999), which not only represent the immediate linguistic context but also can play a role in linking, as illustrated in Van Valin (2005) and Shimojo (2008).
- As part of its multiple projection representation of clause structure, RRG has a focus structure projection which specifies the potential focus domain in a sentence and the actual focus domain, which is related to the information status of the referents in the DRS.
- It does not, however, have any indication of which RP in a sentence is the topic expression.

Topic, Focus and Discourse Representation in RRG

—It is widely agreed that there are two fundamental oppositions underlying the contrast between topic and focus: focus vs. background, and topic vs. comment.

—The **focus** is the ‘new’ information or informational update, while the **background** encompasses that part of the sentence which is known to the interlocutors from previous discourse, or from shared knowledge, and is often referred to as ‘given’ information.

— The **topic** is the entity that the utterance is about; it is complemented by the **comment**, what is said about the topic referent. The referring expression that denotes the topic referent is termed the **topic expression**.

—Normally, the topic referent is part of the background, and the focus is part of the comment.

(2) Speaker 1: What did John buy?

Speaker 2: He bought a new car.

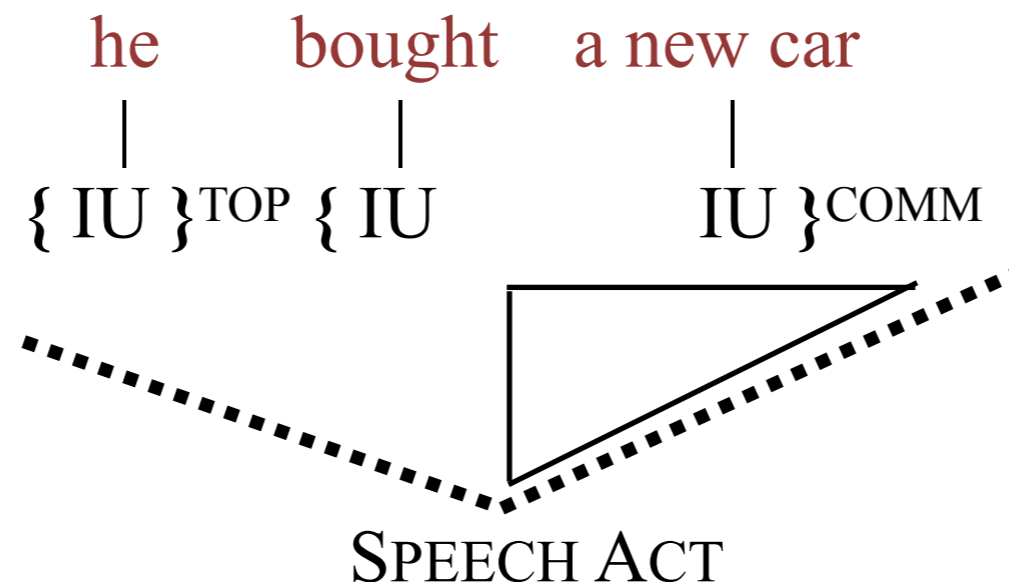
(3) $\langle \{ \mathbf{He} \} \quad \{ \mathbf{bought} \} \quad \langle a \text{ new car.} \rangle \rangle$
 $\{ \text{Topic} \} \quad \{ \text{Comment} \}$
 $\langle \mathbf{Background} \rangle \langle \text{Focus} \rangle$

Topic, Focus and Discourse Representation in RRG

—Only the focus-background opposition is represented in the focus structure projection currently.

—How can the topic-comment opposition be represented? Balogh (2019) proposes to annotate the information units [IU] in the focus structure projection to signal it. The topic expression's IU would be annotated to indicate that it refers to the topic referent, and the remaining IUs would be bracketed together to signal the comment. She further suggests that the projection be renamed the *information structure* projection, since it now carried more than just information about the focus.

—The information structure projection for *He bought a new car* in (2) would be:



Topic, Focus and Discourse Representation in RRG

—An important difference between the RRG approach and those of É. Kiss and Rizzi is that there are no syntactic structures that are necessarily associated with a particular pragmatic function; in other words, there is nothing in RRG analogous to TopicP or FocusP in the generative models.

—One might expect that the Pre-Core Slot and the Post-Core Slot would be inherently associated with focus, but this is not the case. In German, both focal and topical material can readily occur in the Pre-Core Slot, and even in English it is possible to have topical elements in it, as in Ellen Prince's famous example *Běans I LIKE* (Prince 1981). The Post-Core Slot also shows variation: in Dhivehi (Cain & Gair 2000) both plain focus and contrastive focus can appear there, but in Japanese (Shimojo 1995) neither can.

—The Pre-Detached Position (formerly the Left-Detached Position) also shows variation, from contrastive topics to setting topics and reintroduced topics; since it is outside of the clause and hence of the potential focus domain, it cannot normally host focal material, unless it counts as a separate assertion.

Topic, Focus and Discourse Representation in RRG

—Rizzi’s factoring of the C projection might appear to make more distinctions than RRG makes in terms of PrDP, PrCS and Core, but Bentley (2008) shows that the Italian data which motivated Rizzi’s analysis can be readily handled in RRG.

(4) *IL LIBRO*, per sbaglio, Luca ha strappato, non il quaderno.
the book by mistake Luca have.3sg tear.PP NEG the workbook
‘It is the book that Luca tore by mistake, not the workbook.’

—She assigns it the following structure: (‘PoDP’ = Post-Detached Position)

(5) [[[PRE-CORE SLOT *IL LIBRO*], [PERIPH per sbaglio], [CORE Luca ha...]], [PoDP non...]]

—The curious second TopicP below FocusP in Rizzi’s scheme turns out to be the location of peripheral adjuncts assigned to a periphery which occurs before the nucleus; this is outside of the potential focus domain due to independently motivated constraints on Italian clause structure, hence must be part of the background.

Topic, Focus and Structure Building

—Discourse configurationality is not an all or nothing phenomenon, and languages vary as to their degree of discourse configurationality. In particular, they vary in terms of what grammatical phenomena are sensitive to discourse functions like topic and focus, and to what extent these notions are ‘structure building’.

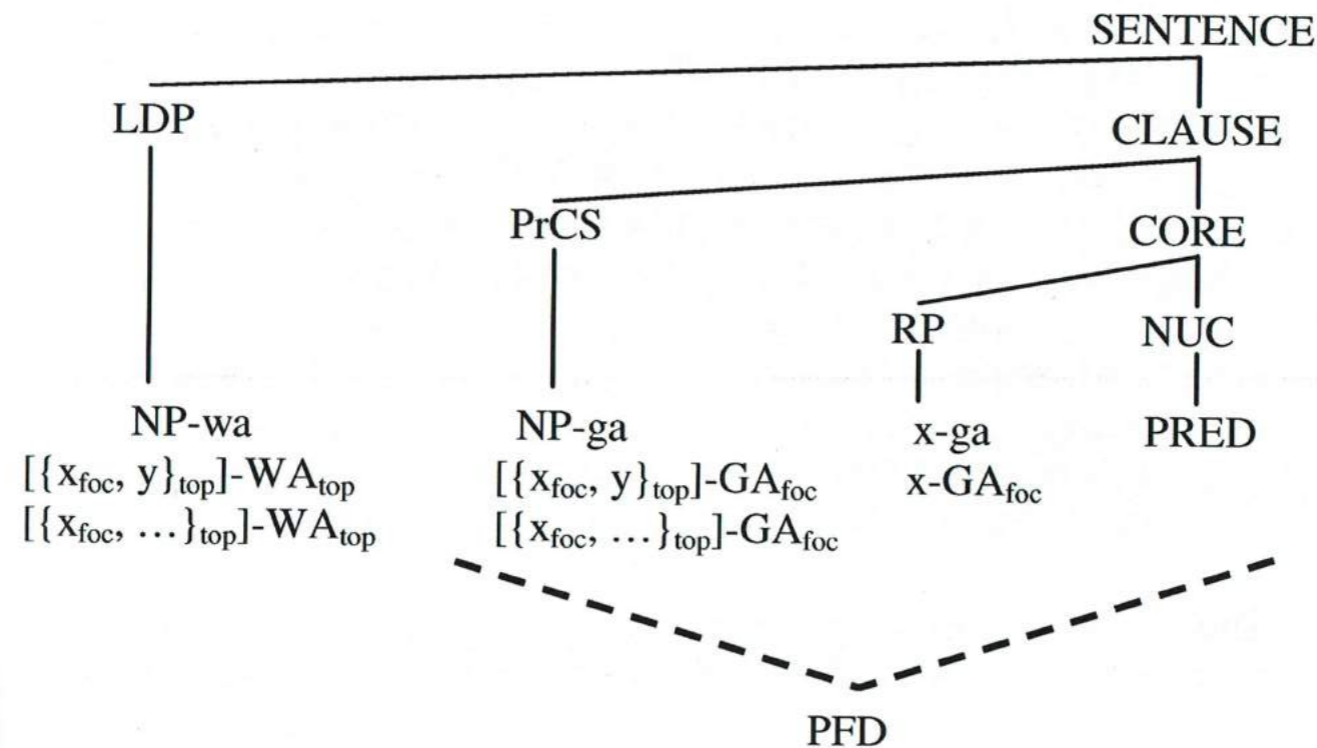
—Hungarian presents a good example of structure building, as the earlier examples in (1) showed, and Kata Balogh’s paper showed how this could be represented in a frame-based version of RRG.

—Another example of structure building can be found in the left periphery in Japanese, based on the discourse functions of the particles *wa* and *ga* (Shimojo 2011).

Topic, Focus and Structure Building

—“By default, NP-*wa* is outside of the potential focus domain [PFD] and NP-*ga* is (part of) the actual focus of the sentence (NP-*ga* in PrCS is always the narrow focus of the sentence).”(Shimojo 2011:278)

—Shimojo (2011:279) proposes this as the structure of the left periphery in Japanese, and it reflects the structure building based on the default uses of topic-marking *wa* and focus-marking *ga*.



Topic, Focus and Structure Building

—There is an interesting asymmetry between *wa* and *ga*: While *ga* must occur within the PFD, *wa* can also occur within the PFD, and when it does, it is interpreted as focal and, in some contexts, according to Kuroda (2005) cited by Shimojo, as having AN ANTI-EXHAUSTIVE LISTING reading. Both of the B examples in (6) are narrow focus, and in both cases the particle is stressed.

(6) (at a party)

A: Dare-**ga** baakuree-no gakusee?
who-NOM Berkeley-LK student
'Who are Berkeley students?'

B: Karera-**ga** baakuree-no gakusee desu.
they-NOM Berkeley-LK student COP
'They are Berkeley students.'

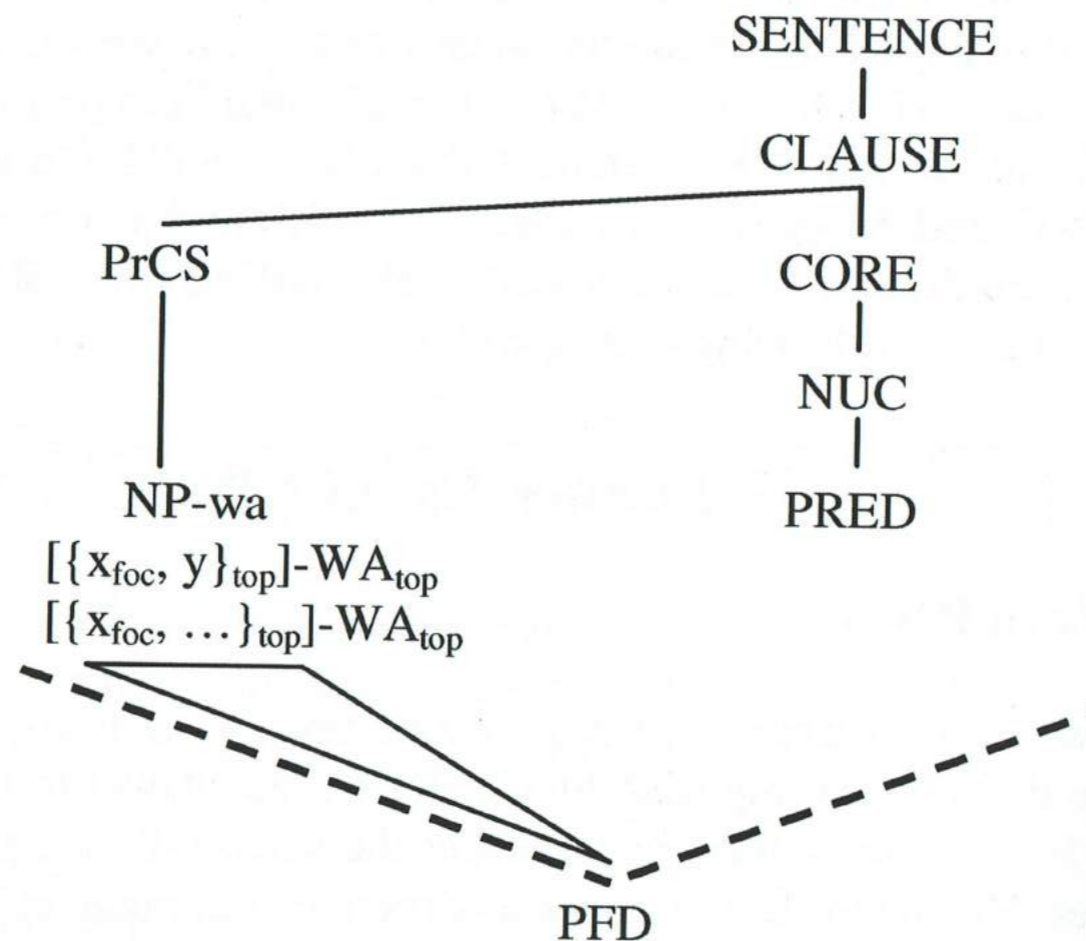
Exhaustive listing

B': Karera-**wa** baakuree-no gakusee desu.
they-TOP Berkeley-LK student COP
'They are Berkeley students (I don't know about others).'

Anti-exhaustive listing

Topic, Focus and Structure Building

—Since NP-*ga* occurs in the PrCS when it is narrow focus and exhaustive listing, it would seem to follow that NP-*wa* when it is narrow focus and anti-exhaustive listing would also be in the PrCS, and in fact this is where Shimojo locates it, as shown below (Shimojo 2011:282).



Topic, Focus and Structure Building

—Japanese, it may be concluded, belongs in the category of discourse configurational languages, due to the existence of discourse-motivated syntactic structures, namely the PrDP [LDP] and the PrCS. Information structure results in structure building in Japanese, or , in other words, it motivates aspects of the syntactic structure of the language.

—One of the significant claims made by RRG is that the more semantically motivated a construct or notion is, the less cross-linguistic variation it will exhibit. A prime example of this is the LSC: the universal parts of it (NUCLEUS, CORE, CLAUSE, PERIPHERIES) are strongly semantically motivated, and the non-universal parts, i.e. PrDP [LDP], PrCS, PoCS, PoDP [RDP], are not semantically motivated but rather are pragmatically motivated, as exemplified by the discussion of Japanese.

—Hence every language with PrDP/PoDP and or PrCS/PoCS positions in their syntax exhibits a degree of discourse configurationality.

Topic, Focus and Structure Building

—English is usually presented as the prototype of a configurational language in contrast to discourse-configurational languages like Hungarian. But English definitely exhibits some discourse-configurational features.

—RRG does not have VP as a part of the LSC, and denies that VPs are universal; nevertheless, some languages, e.g. English, clearly have them. Van Valin (2005) argues that one of the sources of VP-like groupings is information structure, where it imposes bracketings on the constituent projection, yielding units that are involved in topical VP-fronting and VP-ellipsis constructions, a clear case of structure building.

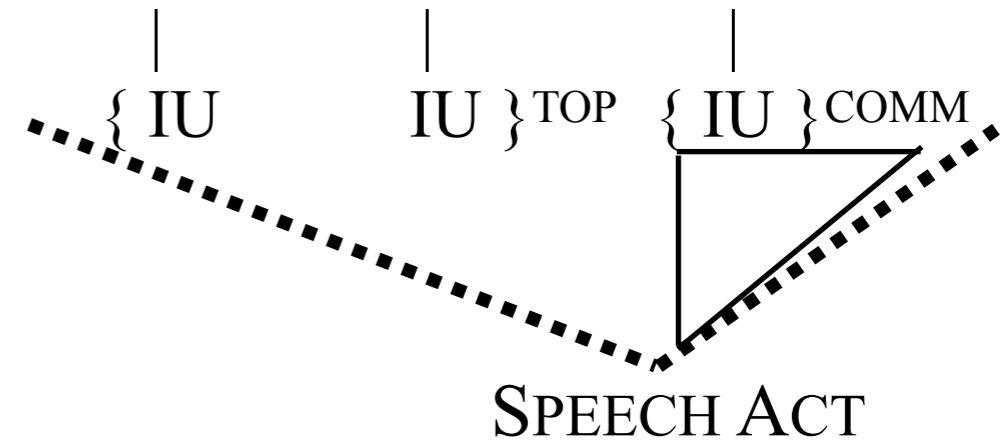
(7) I expected to find someone mowing the lawn, and mowing the lawn was Bill.
...??Bill was.

(7') I expected to find Bill mowing the lawn, and mowing the lawn he was.
... ??was he.

(8) Sam is eating ice cream, and Mary is, too. / and so is Mary.

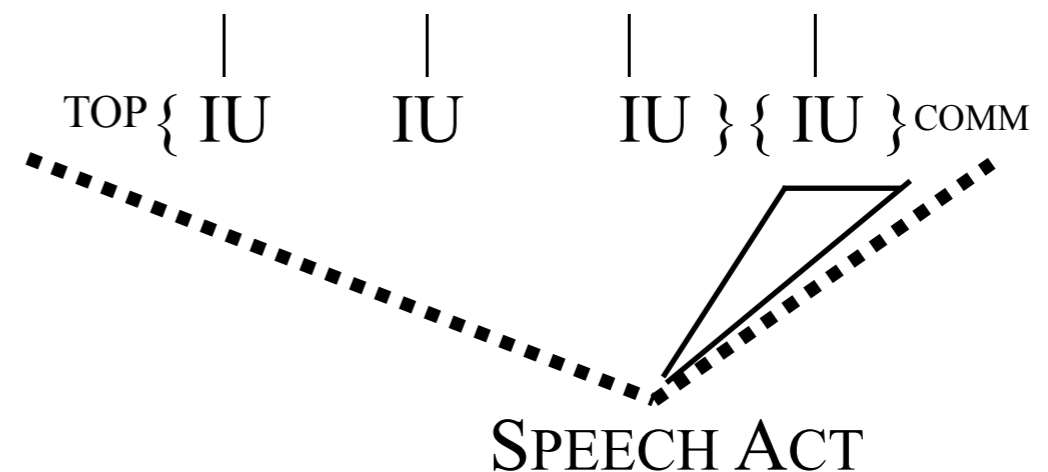
Topic, Focus and Structure Building

(7) I expected to find someone mowing the lawn, and mowing the lawn was Bill.



—In (7) the first clause establishes ‘mowing the lawn’ as a topical unit, and the focus in the second clause is ‘Bill’.

(7') I expected to find Bill mowing the lawn, and mowing the lawn he was.

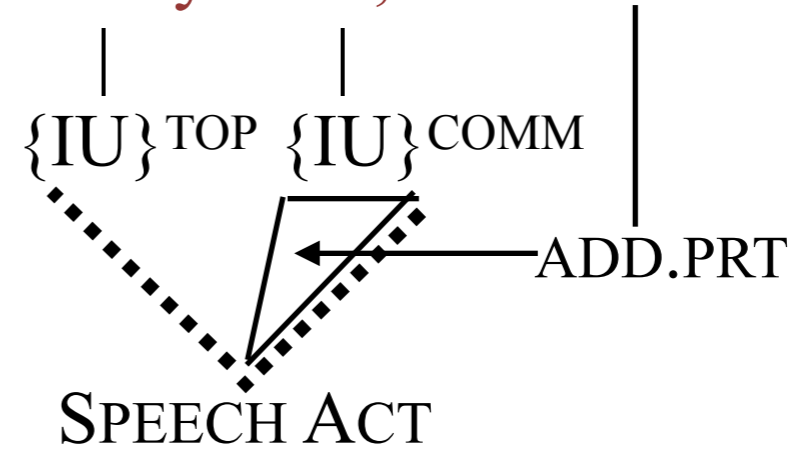
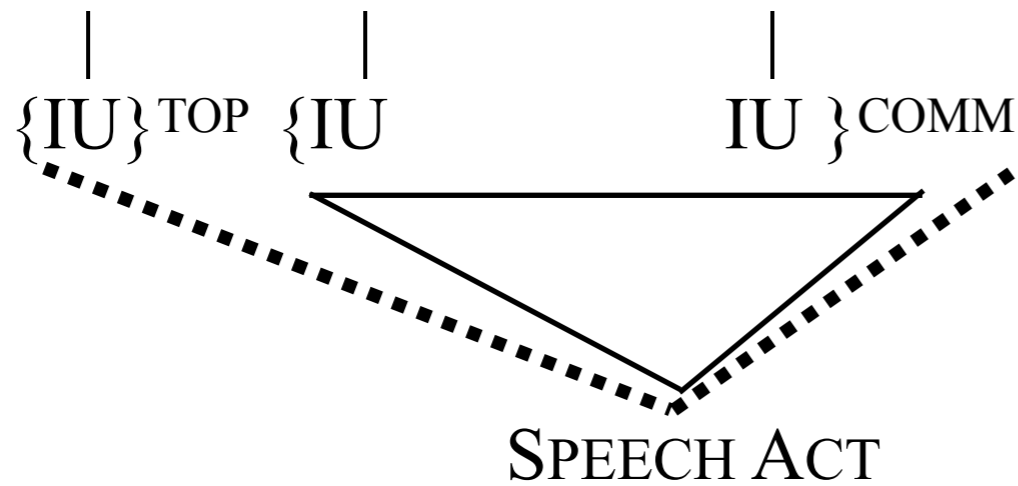


—In (7'), on the other hand, ‘Bill mowing the lawn’ is established as topical, and the focus is the assertion of the truth of this topical proposition. This is often called *verum* focus.

Topic, Focus and Structure Building

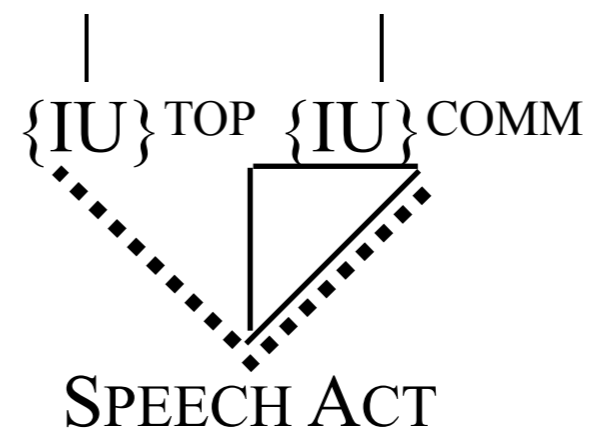
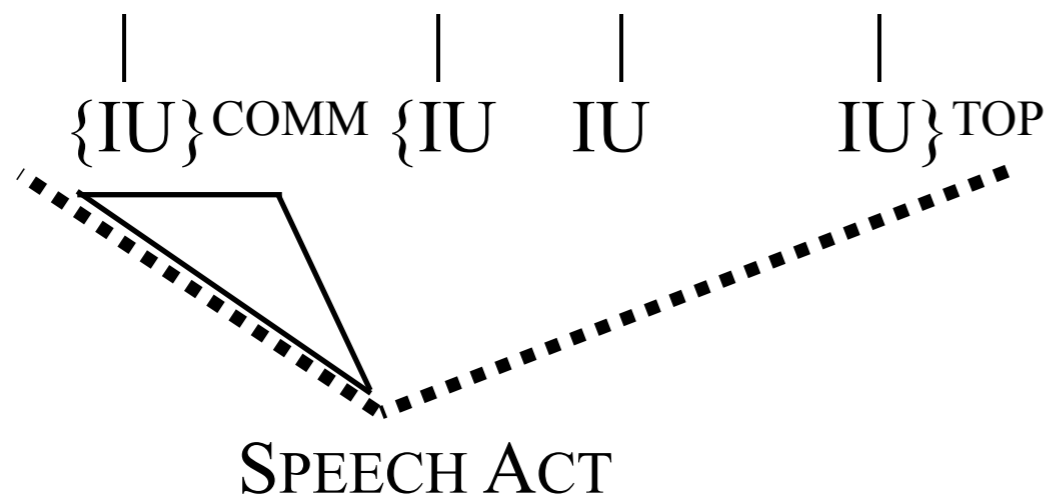
(8) Q: What are Sam and Mary doing?

A: Sam is eating an ice cream cone, and Mary is, too.



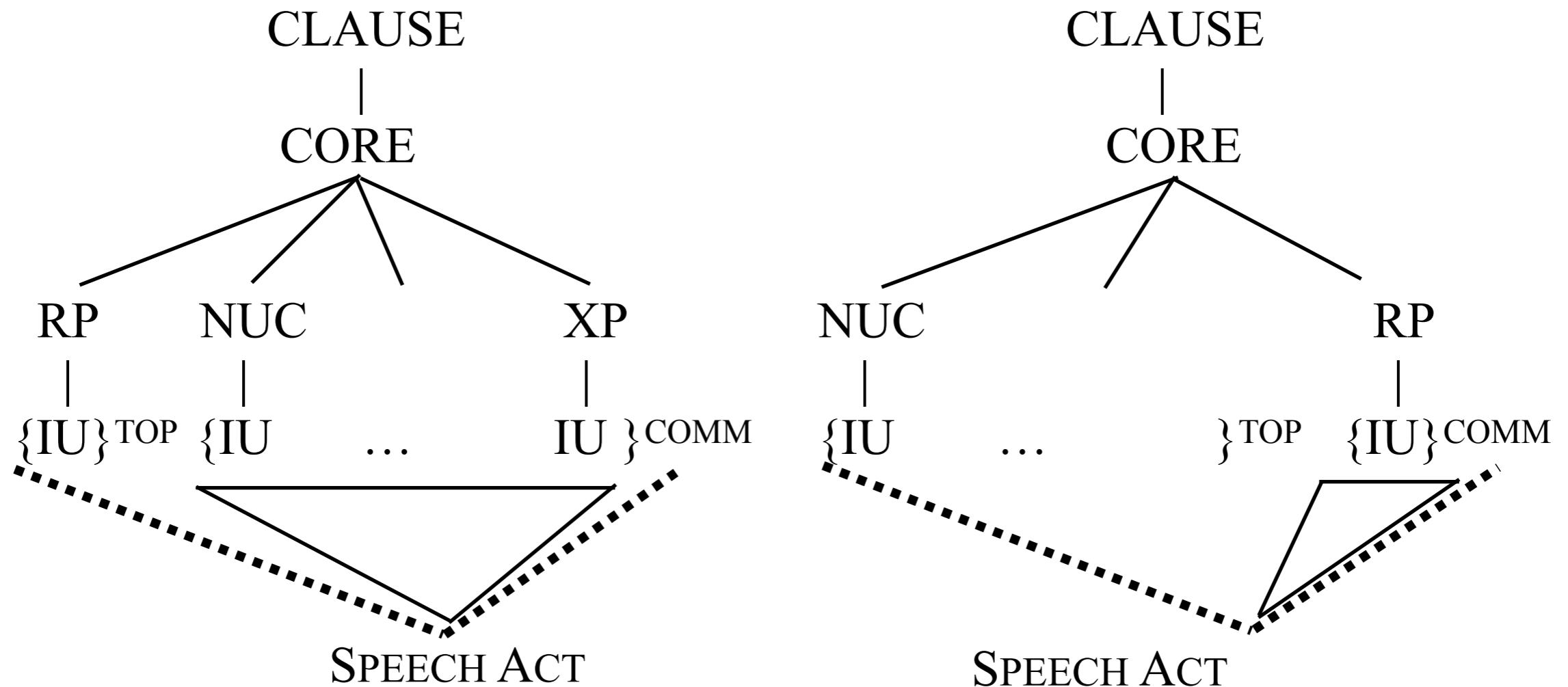
(8') Q: Who's eating ice cream?

A. Sam is eating ice cream, and so is Mary.



Topic, Focus and Structure Building

—We may abstract out the following templates for VP-like groupings in English:



—The lefthand template is predicate focus, as in (8), and the righthand one is narrow focus on the (inverted) ‘subject’ in (7) and (8’). In both cases the ‘subject’ RP is set off from the remaining core arguments via the information structure projection’s representation of the topic-comment and focus-background distinctions.

Topic, Focus and Structure Building

—Not all interactions of topic and/or focus with syntax are structure building. A good example of this can be found in the role of information structure in the constitution of the canonical English PSA, which is defined structurally as the first RP in the core. This correctly characterizes the agreement controller for finite auxiliary/verb agreement, but not the controller in conjunction reduction constructions, as the following examples from Lambrecht (2000) show.

(10) Q: Did John marry Rosa?

A: He did, but he/___ didn't really love her.

(11) Q: Who married Rosa?

A: JOHN did, but he didn't really love her.

?? JOHN did, but ___ didn't really love her.

—In (10) the referent of the RP *John* is established as topical by the question, and is referred to with a pronoun in the reply, in which conjunction reduction is an option. In (11) *John* is focal, and despite being in the same structural position as in (10), controlling zero anaphora in the second clause is highly questionable; a pronoun is strongly preferred.

Topic, Focus and Structure Building

—Hence occurring in the core-initial position is not sufficient for an RP to function as a canonical English PSA; rather it must be in that position and be topical.

—Here we have a clear interaction of discourse functions and syntax, but it is not structure building: the structure of the core in English is not dependent on topic or focus, but rather is independent of, and compatible with, both. This is different from the Hungarian preverbal field with its rigid ordering of topic and (exhaustive) focus. The structure of the preverbal field requires reference to discourse functions, hence this is a clear case of structure building. The same goes for the LDP (PrDP) and PrCS in Japanese.

—Thus, in order for a language to be considered discourse configurational, it must exhibit structure building involving the discourse functions of topic and/or focus. By this criterion, Hungarian, Japanese and English can be analyzed as discourse configurational.

—But are they discourse configurational to the same degree?

Structure Building and Discourse Configurationality

- Hungarian can be considered to be substantially discourse configurational because the structure that results from structure building is involved in the expression of any Hungarian sentence which involves a pre-verbal RP, but not in those, like (1a), in which all RPs are post-verbal.
- The importance of topic-marking *wa* and focus-marking *ga* in the grammar of Japanese is well-known, and they motivate the structure of the left periphery. Hence Japanese can be considered substantially discourse configurational as well.
- The English constructions which derive from structure building, VP-fronting and VP-ellipsis, do not play a central role in the language analogous to the Hungarian pre-verbal field or Japanese *wa* and *ga*. VP-fronting, in particular, is a relatively rare construction (unless you're Yoda). But English, like Japanese, has a PrDP [LDP] and a PrCS, which do play important roles in discourse-motivated constructions, especially the PrCS. So English, somewhat surprisingly, shows a non-trivial degree of discourse configurationality.

Do we need the notion of Discourse Configurationality?

- In early discussions of Finnish and Hungarian the contrast between these languages and languages like English seemed stark and clear-cut.
- Rizzi’s proposal to decompose CP into ForceP, TopicP, FocusP, etc., and to attribute these functional projections to all languages blurred the picture a bit, since now both Hungarian and English have these discourse-related projections.
- We have proposed, as did Kata Balogh in her paper, that the property of being ‘discourse configurational’ is associated with STRUCTURE BUILDING motivated by the discourse notions of topic and focus. We have seen examples of this from Hungarian, Japanese and English, and there are different structures in each of the languages: the pre-verbal field in Hungarian, detached positions and extra-core slots and aspects of their interaction with topic and focus marking particles in Japanese, and the ‘VPs’ in ‘VP-ellipsis’ and ‘VP-fronting’ in English.
- Thus, many languages are discourse-configurational to some degree, and this is a function of the extent of the discourse-motivated structure building and the centrality of these structures in the grammar.

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