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LIGN 225: Topics in Syntax
Handout 4/26/11

Erteschik-Shir's 2007 Information Structure Constraints

1.0 Main point(s)

- "The processing of information structure plays an important role with respect to constraints which have traditionally been viewed as syntactic constraints." (154)

  o For our purposes: Erteschik-Shir argues that islands emerge due to constraints on information structure rather than constraints on syntax. "…only focus domains are transparent for purposes of extraction." (159)

2.0 Word order, topicalization and avoiding ambiguous parses

- (5) ID: In a string, X V Y, identify X as subject and Y as object if neither is marked otherwise

- Danish

  o Topicalized sentences: DP V DP

  o Non-topicalized sentences: DP V DP

    ▪ word order is insufficient for argument identification → can only topicalize when arguments are identifiable by some other means (eg. case marking, animacy)

- Hebrew

  o V-2 topicalization renders potentially ambiguous string (preverbal subject = topics, postverbal subjects = foci), sentence judgements degraded when arguments are not distinguished by some other means (eg. "et", gender agreement)

3.0 F-structures, dependencies and extraction

- Gaps only 'visible' in focus domains

  o word choice and frequency, focus

- sentential subject constraint (CNPC)
    - (14) "A subordinate clause may be within the potential focus domain if it is a direct daughter of (a direct daughter of…) the clause node which is modified by the illocutionary force operator"

        Van Valin and LaPolla 1997, Van Valin 1993
    - "Note that it is the interpretation of the question rather than wh-extraction which is blocked. It follows that wh-interpretation in general, and not only wh-extraction, is restricted to potential focus domains." (162)
    - extraction from relative clauses in Danish (162) and English (163) when relative clause is the focus seems ok (thoughts on 16?)
- Canonical f-structures (English, 166) and constraint on I-dependencies (167)
    - unmarked f-structure → syntactic structure matches f-structure, subject as topic, stage topic
    - marked f-structure → object as topic
    - I-dependencies restricted to canonical f-structures (25, p.167)
- *that*-trace effect
    - I-dependency constraint encompasses past accounts by Bayer (2005), Van Valin (2005)

4.0 Cross-linguistic f-structure and superiority effects

- cross-linguistic differences in canonical f-structure lead to cross-linguistic differences in superiority effects
- English, Hebrew, German, Danish

5.0 Extraposition from NP

- Extraposition from NP predicted by constraint on extraction from 4.2 (p.167, (25)), which accounted for CNPC and *that*-trace effect

6.0 Processing as an explanation for constraints on extraction