

Review of the habilitation theses

Radek Šimík: Studies in information structure and reference

The theses submitted by Radek Šimík PhD for habilitation (for the title of "docent" in the Czech hierarchy of academic titles) is a collection of 9 research papers (out of which 7 papers are co-authored, see below for my remark) accompanied by a very substantial Introduction part (50 pages incl. 8 pages of the chapter by chapter overview).

The Introduction part is a kind of state-of-the-art description, documenting a remarkable width of the author's awareness of variety of contributions to the topic of information structure. In this context it might be appropriate to recall Levinson's (1983) pessimistic observation that "Terminological profusion and confusion, and underlying conceptual vagueness, plague the relevant literature to a point where little may be salvageable." It is one of the merits of Šimík's habilitation that he actually demonstrates that Levinson's harsh pronouncement on the writings on theme-rheme or whatever terms are used is unjust. It should be appreciated that Radek Šimík had the courage to immerse into such a vast field. And he did that with a remarkable understanding and good skills to present the most different views in a highly systematic and clear way. In this respect I have only one observation that might need an explanation. The introductory "state-of-the-art" section almost completely ignores treatments based on other than what may be rather traditionally called "phrase-structure" based formal frameworks. As a linguist trained in (and working with) a formal framework based on a dependency approach I am curious to know whether this focus on constituency is given by the author's own linguistic orientation or whether he considers the dependency treatments of information structure not worth of serious analysis. In this connection, I would like to mention e.g. Igor Mel'chuk's Meaning-Text Model (see his monograph devoted specifically to the treatment of IS in his model, *Communicative Organization in Natural Language. The Semantic-Communicative Structure of Sentences*, John Benjamins 2001) and the arguments for the semantic relevance of IS in the so-called Praguian theory of TFA, also based on dependency relations.

The core of the submitted habilitation theses is constituted by 9 more or less monothematic papers, mostly bringing linguistic evidence for the author's theoretical position, namely that there is no (direct) relation between semantics (or syntax/semantics) and information structure, but rather that information structure is a part of discourse pragmatics (cf. e.g. p. 40). The language data come mostly from Czech (or, in one paper, from Czech, Polish and Slovak, and in another from German and Russian), and in two cases from Bantu languages.

The authors use the cleft-like constructions in one of the Bantu languages as a support for the index based theory of focus as proposed by A. Kratzer; the authors assume that the Basaá left-peripheral pronoun has a special focus semantic value. The morphosyntax of exhaustive focus is analyzed based on another Bantu language Awing; the authors claim that the particle *lə* does not just encode focus, but, as they say, "makes a semantically stronger claim about it", namely gives a presupposition of exhaustiveness.

Czech data relate mostly to the specific properties of Czech word order and the absence of articles. In Ch. 4, the relation between givenness on the one side and word order and prosody on the other is examined. The outcome just confirms one of the assumptions present in studies of information structure in Czech linguistics (be it in terms of functional sentence perspective

– the four “factors” - or of topic-focus articulation - based on the function-form relation) that word order and prosody interacts in that e.g. if word order seemingly contradicts to the intended interpretation, the prosody fulfils the task. Šimík and Wierzba go even beyond that, claiming (in Ch. 5) that it is prosody that is used as a primary marker of information structure in Czech, Polish and Slovak. Their experiment resembles the optimality-theory approach using a scale of violable constraints (the authors mention the inspiration by Keller’s 2000 linear optimality theory). In another collective paper devoted to the study of the relation between prosody and information structure the authors examine the motivation of stress shift in relation to focus and givenness. The authors claim that focus and givenness are independent and they present an interesting experiment to test this claim based on the use of a certain kind of questions test. The interaction of definiteness and word order is studied in a joined paper using a corpus study. Again, as the authors admit, the claim that the definiteness of a nondetermined noun phrase depends on the position of that phrase is based on the intuition among Slavic linguists since the 70’s. Their corpus study confirms that the position is more important than the syntactic function (object, subject; actually this observation goes back to the traditional Czech comparative studies on English and Czech). Nondetermined (bare) noun phrases are also in the center of attention in the paper co-authored by Burianová, the core issue of which is the relation between the clausal position of such phrases and referentiality. They test different approaches and predictions concerning this issue and conclude that there is a strong correlation between definiteness and the clause-initial position. In the overview section of Chapter 1 R. Šimík acknowledges that this conclusion might seem to be in contradiction of the position proposed in the habilitation, namely that the relation between information structure and interpretation is very loose, but he sees the problem in the fact that referentiality has both semantic and pragmatic aspects. This issue is brought into foreground in the paper by Šimík and Demian, included in the habilitation theses, where the relation between information structure and semantics is studied on the basis of data from German (a language with articles) and Russian (a language without articles). The authors claim that they have found no evidence for a semantic effect of the fact that a referential nominal phrase is in the topic position.

The two last papers in the collection have R. Šimík as the single author, one published in 2016 and one in press. Both are based on Czech data and actually do not address directly the issue of information structure but rather some phenomena that are loosely connected with it. In the first paper, the author examines a specific group of demonstratives and proposes to treat them as pragmatic discourse anaphoric demonstratives. In the second paper, the author returns to languages without articles and compares two possible situations, one in which a demonstrative is preferred to refer to a certain object and one when a bare NP is preferable, while both objects are referentially unique. He claims that the distinction of the two cases lies in the distinction between inherent vs. accidental uniqueness.

From the formal point of view, it might be considered a little bit unusual that the habilitation theses is a collection of papers rather than a coherent piece of work, and more than that, that it contains papers mostly co-authored. However, the candidate attaches a brief overview of what is the contribution of the co-authors and, first of all, in which activity the co-authors participated. It is clear from that survey that the candidate’s role was substantial, both in the formulation of the research questions, in proposing the theoretical background and methodology so that I do not find any obstacles to view upon the submitted collection as an appropriate basis for the judgements on the quality of the candidate’s work.

Both the Introduction and the nine articles included in the habilitation make it clear that the candidate's main hypothesis concerns the position of information structure in the language system (or its description?). He strongly believes that information structure is neither a matter of syntax, nor a matter of semantics but that it belongs to the domain of (discourse) pragmatics. As for the syntax, it has been convincingly shown in several studies coming from most different syntactic orientations that it would be hard to defend purely syntactic arguments for the description of information structure. However, in the introductory part of the submitted thesis, the author quotes several examples the interpretation of which clearly indicates the semantic validity of the difference (examples with "only" and other focussing particles and the famous Haliday's example from London underground station) and one can easily find other convincing examples in literature. The difference in the meanings of these (pairs of) sentences is often claimed to be a matter of different truth conditions, in other words, a matter of semantics. This observation may lead to a more general question: when speaking about „semantics“ (this term often appears in a „slashed“ expression *syntax/semantics* and it is not always clear whether it should be read as „syntax AND semantics“ or some combination of both), what is the candidate's understanding of this domain?

To sum up, the submitted habilitation theses make it evident that the candidate is an independent researcher deeply involved in the subject of his interest and aware of the intricacies involved in the data he uses for his investigation and capable of a clear formulation of the research questions and proposals for their solution.

I wholeheartedly recommend to accept the habilitation theses submitted by Radek Šimík as an appropriate basis for the process of habilitation for the title of docent.

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