Why Topicalize VP?

Abstract

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In this paper we are concerned with explaining the function of VP topicalization in English and German. Our particular focus will be on what licenses VP topicalization. We continue a line of research that we began in Culicover and Winkler (2008). There we argued that the linear ordering of a particular English construction, focus inversion, is explained in part by the fact that it gets the subject onto the right branch of the verb phrase. This position is characterized by being the default locus of sentence accent, which is thereby interpreted as focus. So, while the syntax of this construction is non-canonical, it does not require a sentence-internal accent to convey focus.

The key aspect of this proposal is that the explanation for focus inversion does not have to do with what is in initial position. The constituent in initial position must be interpreted in such a way that the sentence is coherent with the preceding discourse, and this can happen in a number of ways. What is crucial is that what is left behind in final position is in focus.

Our proposal here is that VP topicalization in English and German is explained in the same way. Specifically, the topicalized constituent appears in a non-canonical position so that the focused element may fall under the default sentence accent.

We summarize our core hypothesis as follows:

Hypothesis
There are two motivations for VP-Top:

a. Movement of the VP to the left satisfies the need to isolate focus at the right edge of the sentence (as in Culicover and Winkler 2008).
b. The topicalized constituent connects to the previous discourse and therefore falls under general constraints of discourse coherence.
References