

SENTENCE TOPIC AND DISCOURSE TOPIC

Teun A. van Dijk

1. THE PROBLEM

1.1 One of the problems Czech structural and generative linguists have paid repeated attention to is that of the functional structure of the sentence. At the same time they have been interested in the structure of discourse. In this paper I would briefly like to combine two issues from these domains, viz. by investigating some relations between the notions of 'sentence topic' and 'discourse topic', respectively. I will not try to review the whole actual literature on the topic-comment distinction, nor its treatment in the tradition of research carried out, mainly in Czechoslovakia, under the label of Functional Sentence Perspective. The same holds for the various issues in the grammar and more in general the theory of discourse. For the background and further references for this discussion the reader is requested to consult my recent book *Text and Context. Explorations in the Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse* (London: Longmans, 1977).

One of the issues which have been attacked in this book is an explication—in terms of formal semantics and pragmatics—of the notion 'topic of discourse'. At the same time I have been trying to investigate which systematic relationship should be construed between such a (provisionally intuitive) notion and that, much better studied, of sentence topic. I am afraid that I should admit that I was unable to cope with the full complexity of this problem, in which syntactic, semantic (referential) and pragmatic properties of language and language use are intertwined.

1.2 Let me try to specify the problem which I want to reformulate in this paper. Consider the following discourses, the first consisting of one sentence, the second of a sequence of sentences:

- (1) Eva went to Prague.
- (2) Eva awoke at five o'clock that morning. Today she had to start with her new job in Prague. She hurriedly took a shower and had some breakfast. The train would leave at 6:15 and she did not want to come late the first day. She was too nervous to read the newspaper in the train. Just before eight the train finally arrived in Prague. The office where she had found the job was only a five minutes walk from the station (...)

Under a normal intonation sentence (1) can intuitively be said to *be about Eva*, and more particularly we say that ‘Eva’ is topic (or that the phrase *Eva* expresses the topic) and that ‘went to Prague’ is comment, functioning as that part of the sentence which expresses *what* is said about the topic the sentence is about. Disregarding for a minute the many implications and problems of this rather awkward way of phrasing the issue, let us first have a look at the second example. There can be little doubt that, in the same intuitive way, language users are able to determine for a narrative fragment like (2) that it is *about Eva*. The question is: could we also say that *Eva* is the *topic* of this discourse fragment? And if so, what does this mean exactly, and how do we make this notion explicit? [In order to further link the two notions of topic, we could further say that ‘Eva’ is not only the topic of (1) taken as a sentence, but also of (1) taken as a one-sentence discourse. Similarly, whereas we wonder whether ‘Eva’ could be topic of a discourse like (2), it certainly is true that ‘Eva’ is topic in the majority of the sentences of (2). So, indeed, the question arises whether there is only one notion of topic involved—holding both for sentences and for discourses—or two different notions, which however seem obviously related. Finally to complicate the matter still further, it should be investigated in which respect the topic of a sentence is determined by the structure of the discourse, e.g. the semantic interpretations of the linear sequence of previous sentences.

2. SENTENCE TOPIC

2.1. In order to be able to unravel our questions, first some remarks about sentence topics. First of all, I here only consider the notion of (sentence) topic—henceforth S-topic (as distinguished from discourse or text topic: T-topic)—as a *semantico-pragmatic* notion. This does not mean that the abstract structures involved do not show in ‘surface’ structure. On the contrary, precisely the syntactical and phonological manifestations of the binary topic-comment distinction has given the main impulse to work on this problem: word order, specific morphemes or phrases, stress and intonation are the familiar means to express the underlying semantic and pragmatic differences involved. Thus, if we say that some phrase *~p* ‘is’ the topic of a sentence, this is an abbreviation for: (*p* ‘is the expression of, or the surface manifestation of, the topic of the underlying semantic structure of the sentence, c.q. the pragmatic structure of the (utterance of the) sentence’.

2.2. Secondly, we should realize that the semantic notion of S-topic derives from certain intuitions we have about language and the use of language: we call ‘Eva’ the topic of (1) on account of our intuitive judgment that (1) is *about Eva*. Such intuitions, however, may be vague and misguided, and we should be careful with them. The vagueness of the

phrase ‘to be about’ would also allow us to say that (1) is about Prague or about Eva’s going to Prague. It follows that ‘to be about’, in this sense, is not different from the more technical notion of *reference*, and we no longer have a means to make a binary distinction between ‘the’ topic and ‘the’ comment of a sentence. Hence, we need an operation assigning different *functions* to parts of the semantic structure of a sentence. As such, the semantic structure does not allow such a distinction: even if we would use the classical subject (arguments)–predicate distinction, the more general notion of reference, denotation or interpretation would allow us to say that the sentence, as a whole, is both ‘about’ some (n-tuple of) individual(s) and ‘about’ some property or relation. So, if for some syntactic reason, e.g. word order, we want to single out the argument ‘Eva’ as having the topic function of the sentence, we need information from other levels of theoretical description.

2.3. It has been assumed that these other levels co-determining the topicality of some semantic component of a sentence are those of *context*, broadly speaking, viz. the previous part of the discourse and/or the pragmatic—or even cognitive—context. This makes the notion of S-topic, as a theoretical reconstruction of the intuitions mentioned above, an essentially *relative* concept: it is determined relative to the semantic structure of the discourse or the pragmatic structure of the context. Thus, intuitively, ‘Eva’ is topic of (1) just because we were already speaking of her, or we were thinking of her, and by uttering (1) want to predicate some property of her which is unknown to the hearer. Which brings us to the semantico-pragmatic domain of *information distribution in discourse* and information processing in communication.

At the level of formal, model-theoretic semantics part of this approach of the problem of S-topicality can be handled in a simple and straightforward way. The general rule would then be that each expression is assigned Topic-value if its semantic value (referent) is identical with that of an expression in one of the previous sentences of the discourse (or of one of the sentences of a previous discourse in a conversation). Thus ‘Eva’ would be assigned topic function if (1) would be the answer to a question like “*Where is Eva?*”, whereas ‘someone went to Prague’ would be assigned Topic-value in (1) after a question like “*Who went to Prague?*”, and ‘ x =Eva’ would be assigned Comment-value, which appears clearly in the paraphrase of the latter functional reading of (1):

(3) The one who went to Prague is Eva.

In this case, the bound expression does not denote an individual or a property or relation but a fact (see Text and Context for a discussion of the notion of ‘fact’ in formal semantics). The precise model-theoretic

format will not bother us here; it is sufficient to know that the ‘previous mention’ (or rather the ‘previous reference’ rule) can be made explicit in terms of a formal semantics of discourse.

The rule is very general and we should specify it for particular complicating cases. Thus, stressing *Eva*, as in the mentioned second functional reading, where ‘Eva’ is assigned the Comment-value, we may have it that both *Eva* and ‘that somebody went to Prague’ were already introduced as referents of the discourse model, e.g. by questions like

(4) Did *Eva* or *Maria* go to Prague?

According to the rule, both ‘*Eva*’ and ‘*x* went to Prague’ are assigned Topic-value, and the Comment-value would be assigned to the identity ‘ $x=Eva$ ’, asserted by the *Eva*-stressed version of (I) or by (3). As such, this topic does not show in surface structure, unless we say that the phrase *Eva*, with specific stress, expresses the specific identity. We here have the peculiar situation whereby ‘*Eva*’ is having topic function (indeed, we are talking about *Eva*) but *Eva* is assigned comment function, because it is the only phrase expressing part of the comment ‘ $x=Eva$ ’. This is one of the reasons which make it necessary to distinguish between the abstract, theoretical, semantic and/or pragmatic, notions of topic and comment, on the one hand, and their, possibly varying, manifestations in surface structure.

Although this semantic analysis of topic function is a crucial component of the issue, it is not yet satisfactory. It might be maintained for instance that although both *Eva* and the fact that someone went to Prague were previously established discourse referents, the stressed version of (1), and (3) are essentially about the fact that somebody went to Prague (and not about *Eva*), and hence that there is a divergence between the formal predictions and our intuitions. Now, in order to solve this predicament, we should further analyze our intuitions, i.e. the facts on which they are based. If only the fact that somebody went to Prague seems to be the topic, this seems to be caused by the functional structure of the preceding sentence, i.e. (4). Here again, by our general rule, the fact that somebody went to Prague is topic, and the (question-) comment is whether *x* is identical with *Eva* or whether *x* is identical with *Maria*. Since of a disjunction it holds that the speaker does not know which of the two disjoined propositions is (will be) true, the information needed in the answer must be an assertion of one of the disjoined propositions, which were comment in the previous question. More specifically, the speaker of the question assumes that it is either *Eva* or *Maria* who went to Prague, and he merely wants to know the (unique) value of *x*, which is supplied by the comment of the answer.

Disregarding for a moment some further intricacies, the point

which is interesting for our discussion is that the topic functions in the stressed version of (1) and in (3) are determined by what is topic in the previous sentence, for those cases where there may be several candidates for the topic function. In other words, in last analysis the topic function of a sentence seems to depend from what we may call the *topic of a sequence*. Such a sequence topic would be a topic remaining identical in a sequence of sentences. Typical is the sequence topic ‘Eva’ in (2), realized by *she* and *her* in the following sentences. Note that the topic need not simply be identical with any established discourse referent. Thus, although the referring expression *the train* occurs twice we would hardly say that the passage ‘is about’ the train in the intuitive sense of topicality discussed above. Yet, there are two sentences in which ‘the train’ is S-topic, i.e. which say something about the train, where the first occurrence of the definite noun phrase *the train* is interesting because no train has been introduced explicitly into the ‘universe’ of this discourse. We still may have this kind of definitivization, due to a rule operating on our world knowledge, viz. that it is probable (possible) that somebody travelling to sonic town takes the train, such that this knowledge is, if necessary, integrated into the text base in order to guarantee coherence (see *Text and Context*, for details).

From this brief discussion we may tentatively conclude that the topical structure of a sentence not only depends on referential identity (or boundness) of expressions, or even of a sequence of sentences. Even if, momentarily, other discourse referents are introduced in the sequence – thus possibly being an S-topic—one expects that a previous topic will be related with this ‘momentaneous’ topic, as e.g. in the following sentence which might have occurred in (2)

(5) She did not want to miss it.

This is another example where *two* expressions in a sentence, viz. *she* and *it*, are co-referentially identical with previous expressions. Nevertheless, we again intuitively would say that the sentence is about Eva, although formally speaking either both Eva and the train are topical, or else the ordered pair <Eva, train>, where the comment would be ‘the property of x such that x does not want to miss y ’—for which we would have a convenient notation with the help of a lambda operator. If we still would prefer to follow our (vague) intuitions, maintaining that ‘Eva’ is topic in this sentence, this can only be accounted for through the role of ‘Eva’, as a sequential topic, in this *discourse*. We see that a consequent analysis of our intuitive judgements about topicality cannot but require insight into the ‘role’ of topical elements in sequence and discourse, a role further to be explored in the second part of this paper.

2.4. Before we try to analyse the notion of ‘discourse topic’, however, there is another point where S-topics seem to be ‘contextually’ determined, this time not by preceding discourse—which could still be a matter of (text-)grammatical semantics—but by properties of the communicative situation: the *pragmatic context*.

Above it was already hinted at that the topic-comment distinction in sentences is related with the problem of *information distribution* in discourse and conversation. Taking a theory of cognitive information processing as one of the supporting theories for a theory of pragmatics, a cognitive account of the topic-comment distinction would be given in terms of (mutual) knowledge of speakers and hearers, intentions of speakers, and notions such as attention, manifested e.g. as ‘conversational focus’. The precise cognitive theory cannot be gone into here. Important, however, is that *new* information in principle can be processed (understood, stored, etc.) only in relation to *old* information. Thus, the information that Eva went to Prague is intended by the speaker to be added to the information the hearer already has about Eva, both in general and in particular, holding for the particular situation. Hence, this new information is tied to a concept, which in the present conversation should be ‘foregrounded’ by the hearer, i.e. drawn from memory, and serve as a peg to hang on the new information. It is this cognitive permanence of the EVA-concept in (?) for instance which determines our intuitions that the sequence and most of its sentences are ‘about’ Eva, and that ‘Eva’ thus is S-topic in individual sentences, and *assumed* to be topic in isolated (‘laboratory’) sentences like (1). It even seems to account for the difficult problem, ignored above, of possible topic-less sentences, e.g. at the beginning of a discourse or new paragraph, characteristically in (indefinite) existential sentences:

(5) A girl was sitting in the train to Prague.

Although the phrase *a girl* has no referential identity with preceding phrases in text or context (hence the indefinite article), and thus is not ‘bound’, our notorious intuition again seems to suggest that the sentence is ‘about’ a girl, and that thus ‘a girl’ is topic, where formally the whole sentence would be comment (with a zero topic or some undefined situation as topic). However, since we *expect* ‘the girl’ to be topic in following sentences, we take it already to be topical in the first sentence. Our observations about sequential topicality made above operate both backwards and forwards apparently. Indeed, we would be most surprised if after (5) no further mention of the girl would be made and only a description of Prague would be given; which would be a violation of rules of discourse coherence and narrative. Again, the cognitive account also leads to (conventional knowledge about) textual and narrative constraints

on the functional interpretation of sentences.

The same cognitive account also allows however for the possibility to have several topics or compound topics in a sequence or in a sentence. In (4), for instance, we could interpret the sentence as being about both Eva and Maria, whereby two concepts would be foregrounded. For such cases it would not always be easy to determine whether of two possible sequence topics, only one is the “main topic” of a sentence, as e.g. in

(6) Maria had written her a letter,

where the pronoun suggests ‘she’ to be topical, and the syntactic structure (first position, subject) suggests that the sentence is about Maria. Again, the decision would be based on contextual information: if the story is about Maria and Eva, they could in principle both be topic or form a compound topic—unless we let the ‘last topic-rule’ decide: if ‘Eva’ would be topic in the preceding sentence, then also in (6), even if both ‘Eva’ and ‘Maria’ would be topical for the sequence as a whole. This informal cognitive account is crucial for the pragmatics of the given examples, taken as utterances whereby *speech acts* are accomplished, e.g. assertions. Conditions on the appropriateness of (speech) acts, as for acts in general, are given in terms of the knowledge-belief, wishes and intentions of speaker/hearers. Thus, in an assertion the speaker wants that the hearer knows that *p* (assuming that H does not know *p*, might be interested in knowing *p*, etc.). In a situation where it is obvious that the hearer does not know where Eva is, for instance, and that—e.g. by saying so—he is interested to know where she is, sentence (1) may be appropriately uttered as an assertion. Since Eva, then, has the particular pragmatic focus, i.e. being the object speaker and hearer have foregrounded cognitively in this situation, ‘Eva’ would be topical in (1). If this condition is not fulfilled, c b. when the hearer had merely asked “*What happened?*”—seeing the speaker’s sadness, say—, the whole sentence would strictly speaking be comment (viz. upon the situation, denoting a reason). As was argued above, ‘Eva’ would in that interpretation only acquire topical function under the assumption of the sequential topic rule

The pragmatic constraints on language use, thus, tell us that in principle the hearer is only interested in information he not yet has and that the information given must be *relevant* to the actual context, e.g. the hearer’s acts and/or his wish to have some particular piece of information. So, if the hearer is interested in some actual property of Eva, ‘Eva’ will in principle be the topic of an adequate answer. The same holds for the pragmatics of (monologue) discourse: given the fact that the speaker has been talking (mainly) about Eva, as in (2), the knowledge

thus induced in the hearer through the interpretation of the previous sentences will determine the interpretation that ‘Eva’ is also topic in some given sentence.

We are now back to the point where we were before: it has been shown that the abstract functional interpretation of sentences, i.e. the assignment of topic and comment, is relative, viz. relative to the (functional) structure of the sequence at the level of semantic description, and relative to the cognitive properties (knowledge, assumptions, interest, focus, etc.) at the level of pragmatic description.

3. DISCOURSE TOPIC

3.1. Until now we have been dealing with topic-comment distinctions at the level of the sentence, and the way the assignment of such functions is determined by the semantic structure of sentence sequences. Our problem was whether a similar notion of topic may be used for a discourse or a discourse fragment, and if so, how such a notion is related to the notion of sentence or sequence topic as discussed above.

In our little story fragment of (2) we may, as intuitive language users, answer questions of the type “*What is the story about*”, or “*About whom is the story?*”. One of the possible answers in that case would be “*About a girl*”, or “*About Eva*”. If in that case the answer provides the ‘topic’ of the discourse, this topic would for (2) coincide with the topic in most sentences of (2). In this sense a discourse topic would be based on the notion of a sequential topic, defined in terms of repeated reference to a given discourse referent, of which the various comments specify properties and relations with other, variable, discourse referents. Note that in this case the sequence may still contain sentences with a different topic, e.g. some reference to previously introduced discourse referent, with which the ‘major discourse referent’ is related, e.g. ‘train’ in our example.

3.2. There is however another way to approach the notion of a discourse topic. In the same intuitive way as above, we would in general not merely answer that some story ‘is about’ a girl. Rather we briefly specify what the girl did, e.g. that she went to Prague. Thus, in (2) we may express the topic of the story as

(7) Eva took the train to Prague and started her new job.

Such a sentence would at the same time be an acceptable *summary* of the story fragment. Of course, other such summaries are possible, but in general they will be close variants, whereas some other ‘summaries’ are definitely not acceptable, e.g. as adequate answers to the question

what the story was about. Thus, the story is not about the fact that Eva took a shower, or about the position of the railway station with respect to Eva's office. (In other words, the topic is determined by what, from some perspective, seems the most important fact(s) of the story. Note, incidentally, that the summary of (2) expressed by sentence (7) does not occur in the story: a summary is based on a construct 'taking-to-gether' semantic information from the discourse as a whole.

In *Text and Context* and other previous work we have assumed that a summary of a discourse is based on the so-called *macro-structure* of the discourse. A macro-structure is defined at the level of semantic representation of a discourse: it makes explicit the 'global' meaning of a discourse. Thus (7) is a possible expression of the macro-structure for the given story fragment. Since (7) at the same time answers the question what the story 'is about', viz. as a brief summary, we may assume that the intuitive notion of a discourse topic may theoretically be made explicit in terms of semantic macro-structures. Such macro-structures are not only theoretical constructs, but are assumed also to have a psychological correlate, a cognitive schema, which determines the planning, execution, understanding, storage and reproduction of the discourse. Recent experiments and cognitive theories by psychologists and myself have suggested that this series of hypotheses are correct (see *Text and Context* for references to this work, which will not be discussed here).

At the theoretical level of semantic discourse description macro-structures are, as in each serious semantics, obtained from 'smaller' elements, viz. the interpretations of the respective sentences of the discourse. There are various kinds of *macro-rules*, which map sequences of propositions onto sequences of (macro-)propositions. Macro-rules have reductive and subsumptive functions: they operate on (2) such that (7) is the result—rather the macro-structure of which (7) is (one) possible verbal manifestation. In other words, the macro-rules make meaningful 'pictures' out of details. They abstract and generalize to more embracing concepts, select the most relevant facts i.e. facts which are conditions of facts later in the discourse, and in general account for the notion which information is most important of a discourse. In our example, taking a shower is dropped as being irrelevant for the rest of the story, or else it is integrated into the more global information of 'making morning preparations for the day', in which also having breakfast is inserted. Similarly, the few details about the train are integrated in the more general picture (proposition) 'Eva is taking a train', into which also the possible sentence 'She went to the station', 'She bought a ticket',...etc. could have been integrated.

The precise formulation of such macro-rules is not at issue here. Apparently, they operate on the lexical structure of the meanings of the concepts of the respective sentences. This is however not sufficient:

in order to be able to construct a macro-proposition, we must call on our knowledge of the world, as it is cognitively organized in *frames*. The details in the Train-frame allow us to construct, conversely, the notion of a train-journey on the basis of similar details in the discourse. Hence, the macro-rules not only reduce and abstract a story, but at the same time organize its information in terms of super-ordinate macro-propositions. Cognitively, this means that when reading (2) we make assumptions, on the basis of our frame-knowledge and the macro-rules, on what the story is about, i.e. what the corresponding macro-structure is. This macro-structure is again the basis for the coherent interpretation of the rest of the story. Thus, macro-propositions of subsequent passages may again be subsumed by a macro-proposition at a higher level of semantic representation. Experiments have shown that the top-levels of this macro-structural hierarchy of the discourse are recalled best and most permanently. Indeed after having read (2)—and the rest of the story—will most certainly recall that it was about a girl going to Prague to start a new job, and not (after several weeks) that it was about a girl who hurriedly took a shower. This kind of empirical and intuitive evidence is accounted for at the theoretical level by postulating macro-structures and macro-rules.

Mapped on these semantic macro-structures are also specific *super-structures* defining the kind of discourse, e.g. narrative structures in our recent example. They assign specific functions to the macro-propositions or, in other words, they place the ‘content’ of the discourse within a narrative schema (e.g. a hierarchical structure with categories like Introduction or Setting. Complication, Resolution, etc.). They also provide for a global organization of the discourse, and explain how we are able to summarize a story as a story, and recall a story as a story. The precise rules involved, their cognitive basis and their relation with semantic macro-structures will not be dealt with here. Important is only that they also define the global organization of discourse and explain why we are able not only to answer what the discourse ‘is about’, but also that the discourse in question was a story.

3.3. Discourse topics as they are made explicit in terms of semantic macro-structures have another important function which brings us back to the level of sentences. It is well-known that a sequence of sentences, in order to be acceptable, must follow certain rules and constraints of *semantic coherence*. The most conspicuous manifestations of one of these rules are for instance the co-referential expressions, denoting a permanent discourse referent, e.g. *Eva* and *she* in (2). More in particular, clauses and sentences are to be pairwise *connected*, and the connection conditions involved are based on relations between facts e.g. cause and consequence, part and whole, etc. Thus, we see that a sentence like

(8) The train would leave at 6:15

can only be *relevant* in the story if taking a train is a normal component (means) to travel to some town—which is a piece of information already (liven (Eva would go to Prague)). It follows that sentences are not only directly, linearly, coherent, but also *relative* to the topic of discourse, which indicate *in which respect* two sentences are connected. In fact, the topic of discourse, i.e. the macro-structure formed on the basis of conventional world knowledge (frames), allows that much information is not explicitly expressed in the discourse, e.g. the fact that Eva went to the station in her home town or got into the train. In spite of these ‘gaps’, the discourse is coherent, due to the over-all topic ‘taking the train’ or ‘travelling (by train) to Prague’.

3.4. The question which now arises is whether sentential or sequential topics are related with the textual topic of some (fragment of) discourse. In order to be able to answer this question, we should recall that a textual topic is defined in propositional terms. Thus a topic of this story may be ‘Eva went to Prague’, but not ‘Eva’ or ‘Prague’. Apparently, we do not seem to have this requirement for sentence topics, where ‘Eva’ could well be assigned topic function. *Hence the two notions are theoretically different.* At the level of the sentence, a topic is a specific function assigned to some part of a (possibly compound) proposition and indicates the way information is *linearly distributed*, whereas a textual topic indicates how information is *globally organized*. In the first case, the topic is the link, between given information and new information, for each sentence in the discourse, whereas the textual topic is the hierarchical organization of the whole of information of all sentences, taken ‘at the same time’.

Nevertheless, the two different concepts may also be related. Whereas a sentential topic has the function to relate the (new) information this link need not be based on explicitly given information. We saw, first of all, that in the sentence of (2) repeated in (8), that apparently ‘the train’ may be topic, without having been mentioned before. Hence we must assume that a train is implicitly introduced by the frame-information induced by the notion of travel, itself inferred from the information that somebody has to go somewhere else (to another town). Still, that in fact this possible option (going by train) is relevant, is only known after sentence (8) in (2). We here have an example where the topic not simply entailed by previous discourse still conveys new information. In such a case we may speak of *semi-topics*. Conversely, we may have *semi-comments* if the comment of a sentence in fact would be derivable from the previous discourse.

Similarly, a topic does not only link a sentence with an implicit or explicit expression from the previous discourse, but also with a pre-

vious discourse topic. In that case we may have a definite noun phrase, referring to an object or event which is the referent of a macro-structural expression. In our example, we could for example have had:

(9) At 8 o'clock the journey was finally over,

where 'the journey' would be topic linking the sentence with previous information 'as a whole', i.e. with a macro-structure or discourse topic ('Eva travelled to Prague'). In fact, this is one of the intuitive ways in which we decide what some sentence is 'about'. If we repeatedly take 'Eva' as the topic of the respective sentences, this does not mean that she merely was mentioned in several previous sentences, but is part of the macro-structure of the passage. There are even cognitive reasons for this: the precise list of mentioned referents cannot possibly be memorized in a longer story, but only a set of macro-propositions. Besides the already treated 'previous-topic' rule, we now have a further means to determine the topic in a sentence with more than one co-referential expression: in this sense 'Eva' would rather be topic than 'the train' in the same sentence.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1. Of the rather complicated set of problems related with the functional analysis of sentences, e.g. in terms of the topic-comment distinction, we have discussed only a few, ignoring others. We have been concentrating on the explication of questions like 'What is this sentence about' and how can such questions be linked with 'What is this discourse about'.

4.2. It has been argued that in *general* it cannot be determined what the topic-comment structure of a sentence is, without an analysis of contextual information, both in the previous discourse and/or in the pragmatic context and the cognitive context (knowledge of speaker and hearer). Thus, semantically, topics are assigned to parts of the semantic representation of sentences relative to the interpretation of previous sentences, as a general rule to co-referential expressions (or n-tuples of these), where however 'previous mention' may be implicit, in the sense of entailed or frame-induced information inferrable from given information. If, according to some intuition, we only want one topic in sentences with several co-referentials, the topical structure of the previous sentence or the sequence may decide.

4.3. Discourse topics are made explicit in terms of macro-structures. They globally organize the information of a passage, whereas sentence topics linearly link pieces of information. They respectively answer the

questions ‘about what/whom’ at the macro- and the micro-level of discourse semantics. (It has finally been shown that a discourse topic may influence the choice or the expression of sentence topics, such that a sentence may have a topical phrase (e.g. a definite noun phrase) which however is not co-referential with an explicit or implicit previous phrase of the preceding sentences, but co-referential with a phrase of a macro-proposition, defining the discourse topic of the previous passage, or the passage as a whole.

4.4. From these observations it follows that both a semantic and a pragmatic functional analysis of language should operate at several levels: within the sentence, within the sequence and within the discourse or conversation as a whole. Only by linking these various levels by explicit rules, are we able to fully explain phenomena and intuitions such as those related with notions of linguistic information processing, e.:. ‘topic’, ‘comment’, ‘focus’, ‘theme’, ‘subject’ and others.

University of Amsterdam
October, 1976

NOTE

I'm Unable to specify what in this paper and in my other work I have learned from Czech literary theorists and linguists such as Mukarovský, Havránek, Wellek, Dolezel, Benes, Danes, Firbas, Sgall and others. Without their contributions, European poetics and linguistics would not be what they have become due to the structuralist and functionalist insights provided.

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.daneprairie.com>
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only