Information Structure Glossary

Aboutness topic, A-topic: The topic that the comment is about. For some, this is the general definition of the topic function, whereas for others aboutness topics are a subtype of topic, involving a less accessible referent.

Accessibility, activation: How accessible or active the mental representation of a referent is. Each referent in our mind is somewhere on a scale between inactive and highly active. Referents can become active or accessible by being present in the context or by being mentioned in the discourse, for example.

Accommodation: Accepting the existence of a referent or the truth of a situation when this has not been mentioned in the conversation. That is, presuppositions can be added to the common ground without discussion. For example, if a writer starts a story by 'The lion was sleepy', the reader accommodates that there is a lion, even if the lion has not been introduced earlier.

Afterthought: A piece of information that comes after the clause is finished. Typically, the speaker thinks that the addressee can identify the referent and does not mention it fully in the clause, but then adds the explicit information afterwards. For example, 'I put them on the balcony… the flowers, that is'.

All-focus sentence: Sentence in which everything is in focus; often used to refer to thetic sentences where all information is presented as one piece.

Alternative question: An interrogative with a disjunction of subclausal constituents, which asks for a choice between these, for example 'Do you want rice or potatoes?'

Alternative set: The set of alternatives that is triggered for the focused constituent. The set consists of contextually relevant alternatives: for the sentence 'I saw a MOUSE in the forest', the alternatives for 'mouse' will naturally be other things I could see in the forest.

Argument focus: Focus narrowly on an argument in the clause. Sometimes conflated with term focus.

Assertive focus: The focus that fills a gap in the addressees knowledge by asserting a certain proposition, for example in an answer to a question: ADD EXAMPLE. See also completive focus and new information focus.

Background: 1. That part of the sentence that has neither the topic nor the focus function, or 2. The complement to focus in a 2-way split of the sentence (where the background contains a topic).

Brand-new: Inactive in the mind of the speaker, mentioned for the first time. This is the lowest point of the activation/accessibility scale.

Broad focus: Focus on a larger constituent than just a noun phrase, or multiple constituents, typically the verb phrase. It can sometimes include the whole sentence, that is, be a thetic sentence. Compare to narrow focus.

Categorical sentence: Sentence that is split in a topic and comment, in which the topic is expressed. Compare to thetic sentence.

Cleft: A construction consisting of a predicative constituent (typically a noun phrase) and a relative clause, possibly including an expletive element. For example '[It is a canoe] [that he owns]'. The noun phrase is typically in focus.

Closed focus: Focus selecting from a restricted set of alternatives, for example in an alternative question. Compare to open focus.

Co-text and context: The co-text is the linguistic environment of a sentence, for example the previous and following sentence or paragraph. The context can refer to the discourse in which a sentence takes place, but also the wider situation, for example the space in which the discourse or narrative occurs.

Comment: The complement of topic. Provides the information that the speaker wants to add to the addressee's knowledge (and thus to the common ground).

Common ground: The set of propositions and referents that are shared between speaker and addressee. The common ground contains at least the presuppositions in the conversation.

Completive focus: The focus that fills a gap in the addressees knowledge by completing a certain proposition, for example in an answer to a question. See also assertive focus and new information focus.

Contrast/kontrast: A comparison between two referents or states of affairs, most clearly when both are mentioned explicitly.

Contrastive focus: 1. Focus that occurs in a context where alternatives are explicitly mentioned, or 2. Focus that contrasts the focused referent with alternatives for which the proposition is not true. The latter is often mentioned as a pair with new information focus, and is in this book captured under exclusive focus.

Contrastive topic: Topic that is contrasted with another topic in the direct context, for example, '*The books* he read, but *the magazines* he threw away'.

Corrective focus: When the focused referent replaces a referent in a previous sentence for which the proposition is not true. The interpretational aspect of replacing is typically pragmatic; the semantics are captured as exclusive focus. Also called replacive focus.

Counter-assertive focus: See corrective focus.

Deaccenting: Applying a flat intonation to that part of the sentence that is backgrounded.

Discourse configurationality: The idea that the word order and morphology in a language are determined primarily by information-structural functions, rather than by grammatical functions.

Discourse topic: What the larger conversation is about.

Emphasis: Special importance or prominence given to a particular aspect of meaning. Tends to remain a vague and inoperable notion in linguistics.

Exclusive focus, exclusivity: Indicates that for some of the alternatives triggered by focus, the proposition is not true.

Exhaustive focus, exhaustivity: Indicates that for all of the alternatives triggered by focus, the proposition is not true.

Expanding focus: When the focused referent extends the set of referents mentioned in a previous (incomplete) statement for which the proposition is true. If the previous statement had an exhaustive aspect of meaning, the extension corrects this exhaustivity (see exclusive and corrective focus).

External/internal topics: 1. External topics are in a position in the left periphery of the clause (CP/TopP), whereas internal topics are inside the clause (specTP), or 2. External topics are outside of the clause, base-generated as a hanging topic, whereas internal topics are in a (dislocated or in situ) position within the clause.

Familiar(ity) topic, F-topic: A topic that is highly active and has already been the topic in a previous sentence. Sometimes distinguished from contrastive topics and aboutness topics.

Focus: A function that triggers a set of (contextually relevant) alternatives.

Focus-sensitive particles: Particles like 'only', 'also', and 'even', which associate with the focus of the sentence. The focus triggers a set of alternatives, and these particles operate on that set (for example by excluding or ordering the alternatives).

Fragment answer: One-phrase answer to a question, not repeating a whole sentence. For example, answering 'What did you have for breakfast today?' by the simple 'Fruit' rather than 'Today I had fruit for breakfast'. This is often the most natural answer, but not always the most useful answer to discover linguistic strategies at sentence level.

Generics: Reference to classes or types of entities (people, animals, objects) in a general way. For example, '*Elephants* eat grass' or '*The moon* is round'. These can generally function as topics.

Hanging topic, dangling topic: A topic that does not fulfill an argument role in the clause, expressed sentence-initially, often originating in that external position. For example, 'Amsterdam, you have to visit the Rijksmuseum' or 'This professor, I've never seen (her)'.

Identificational focus: Focus that identifies a referent in an existential presupposition. For example in 'What I like is sunshine', where the presupposition is that there is something that I like and this something is identified as sunshine.

Implicature: Something that the speaker suggests without mentioning it explicitly. An aspect of information structure that may be implied is exhaustivity: in asserting that the proposition is true for one referent, it can often be implied that it is not true for other referents (even if this is not said, or if it is indeed not the case).

In situ/ex situ: In situ means 'in place' and refers to constituents that occupy their original position. Ex situ means 'out of place' and refers to constituents that occur in a position different from their original position, typically in the left periphery. Some authors take the canonical linear position as the original position (e.g. the preverbal position for a subject in an SVO language), whereas other authors take the underlying structural position as the original position (e.g. the VP-internal position for the subject).

Information structure, information packaging: The way in which speakers shape their sentences in order to make it easier for the addressee to parse the message, and to highlight important information.

Logical subject: The argument combining last with the predicate to form a proposition.

Mirativity: The grammatical marking of unexpected information.

Narrow focus: Focus on a smaller constituent, and only a single constituent, often equal to term focus, but also used for focus narrowly on the verb or an operator. Compare to broad focus.

New information focus: A focus constituent presenting new information without further aspects of meaning (such as contrast); typically the answer to a wh question. See also assertive focus and completive focus.

New vs. old/given: The state of a proposition or referent as presented or perceived relative to the current discourse. A split into two states (new/old) may be too coarse; see the accessbility scale.

Non-specific indefinite: Noun or pronoun referring to an unknown entity. For example, '*Someone* smashed the window' or 'They heard *a man*, but didn't know who it was'. Compare to specific indefinite.

Open focus: Focus selecting from an unrestricted set of alternatives, for example in an answer to a wh question. Compare to closed focus.

Operator focus: Focus on sentence operators such as tense, aspect, mood, and polarity. Subpart of predicate-centred focus.

Parallel focus: Focus in two juxtaposed clauses, featuring contrastive topics as well. For example 'The troll *passed the giant quietly*, but the fairy *woke him up*', where the troll and the fairy are contrastive topics, and the predicates are in parallel focus. The interpretational aspect of a parallel or contrast is typically pragmatic.

Predicate-centred focus (PCF): Focus that is not on a term (argument or adjunct), but on part of the predicate. Subdivided into state-of-affairs focus, tense/aspect/mood focus, and truth/polarity focus.

Permanently available referent: Referent that is generally known and to some extent accessible, such as 'the queen' and 'the sun'. These can easily become a topic without having been explicitly introduced into the discourse.

Polarity focus: Focus on the affirmation or negation in the clause. See truth focus.

Predicate focus: Focus on the verb itself, or the verb phrase. Not to be confused with predicate-centred focus.

Presentational focus: 1. Explicitly introducing a new participant into the discourse, as a thetic sentence; 2. Presenting a referent as new information, see new information focus and assertive focus.

Presupposition: Tacit assumptions taken for granted by the speaker. For example, 'Do you want to go to the cinema again?' presupposes that the addressee has gone to the cinema previously. See also identificational focus.

Prominence: See salience.

Pseudocleft: A construction that equates (the referent of) a headless relative clause with (the referent of) a noun phrase, as in 'What he wants is pizza'. Also known as wh-cleft. Typically expresses identificational focus.

Question under discussion (QUD): The (often implicit) question that participants in the discourse are trying to answer. For example, the QUD can be what you did over the weekend, answering by 'We went for a walk', which can be followed by 'and then had a nice cup of tea', which can be seen as answering an implicit QUD 'and what happened then?'. "QUD" can be seen as a framework to understand how sentences in a discourse relate to each other.

Referent tracking: Seeing for each referent in a discourse or narrative when and how it is referred to.

Referent: An entity (person, animal, thing) in the world that is being referred to in a sentence.

Replacive focus: See corrective focus.

Restrictive focus: When the focused referent is a subpart of an earlier mentioned (overcomplete) referent, thus being corrected by restricting the truth to just one part. For example, 'No, it's not bananas and mangos that she brought – she just brought mangos'. The interpretational aspect of restriction is typically pragmatic; the exclusion of the other referent is captured in the semantics as exclusive focus.

Rheme: The information added to the theme; comparable to the comment.

Salience: Special importance given to or inherent to referents or states of affairs, for example due to high animacy, perceptual prominence, or mental activation.

Scalar focus: Focus on a referent at the far end of a scale. For example when alternatives are ordered to likelihood, the least likely can be referred to with the focus-sensitive particle 'even'.

Scope of focus: The part of the sentence that is in focus, which can be smaller (e.g., an adjective within a NP) or larger (e.g. a whole VP).

Second occurrence focus: The semantic focus of a focus-sensitive operator (e.g. only), but repeated from an earlier focused occurrence. For example, 'Everyone in this group only wears [green shirts]. Even [the chief] only wears [green shirts]!', where in the second sentence 'only' still associates with (second occurrence focus) 'green shirts', while 'even' associates with the focus 'the chief'.

Selective focus: When the focused referent is selected from a given set of alternatives. The interpretational aspect of selection is typically pragmatic.

Sentence focus: Lambrecht's (1994) term for thetic sentences. See also 'all focus'.

Shift topic: A topic whose referent is different from the topic referent of the previous sentence (and therefore less active/accessible).

Specific indefinite: A form referring to a referent that is known to the speaker, but not the addressee. For example '*A man* came at the door. He was called Hans.' The fact that we can refer to him in a second sentence, makes the referent of the NP 'a man' specific, even if it is indefinite. Compare with non-specific indefinite.

Stage topic: The 'here and now' that the comment is about in a thetic sentence, for example in 'It's raining' or 'The QUEEN had an accident!'.

State-of-affairs focus: Focus on the lexical value of the verb, for example 'She BAKED the cake, she didn't buy it'. Part of PCF.

TAM focus: Focus on the tense, aspect, or mood of the clause, for example 'The prime minister MAY resign, but she doesn't have to.'

Term focus: Focus on an argument or adjunct, or a subpart of these. Complementary to PCF.

Theme: What the rheme is about, comparable to topic, typically an active referent.

Theticity, thetic sentence: Presenting all the information as one piece, in a sentence that does not have a topic expression. The topic referent can be the 'here and now' (stage topic); the sentence can be seen as 'all comment' or 'all focus'.

Topic: What the sentence is about; what the information in the comment is anchored to.

Truth focus: Focus on the truth of an utterance, contrasting with its negation/denial. For example, 'So you DID eat the cheese!' (as opposed to not eating it). See also polarity focus. Also called verum focus.

Unmarked word order: The word order in a pragmatically neutral sentence. This is often taken to be a topic-comment construction, with the subject being the topic, and the VP forming the new (but not contrastive) information. Some also take an out-of-the blue context to be indicative of pragmatic neutrality.

Unused: Indication of activation status fairly low on the activation/accessibility scale.

Verum focus: See truth focus.

Wh question: A question using an interrogative word (who, what, when, etc.) to ask for specific content.

Wide focus: See broad focus.