

Some contextual effects of aboutness topics in German

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Abstract

Exploiting the fact that aboutness topics in German can be unambiguously marked in syntax, the paper aims to show that aboutness topics have demonstrable effects on the surrounding text. Two claims about the textual relevance of topics which can be found in the literature are, however, shown to be untenable.

1. Introduction

Does a sentence topic have effects on the discourse surrounding the sentence in which it appears? If one adopts the notion of an ‘aboutness topic’, the answer is not necessarily ‘yes’. The speaker designates a topic to indicate that the sentence it appears in is related in a special way to the topic, be it that the topic gives the address under which the proposition denoted by the sentence is to be stored (cf. Reinhart 1981 and others) or that the mental representation of the topic’s referent is to be activated for the processing of the sentence (cf. Portner 2005). Thus, it might be the case that sentence topics play no role in linking the sentence to its context.

Nevertheless, it is not implausible to assume that the special function of a sentence topic within its sentence, even if it is conceived as a pure aboutness topic, should extend beyond that sentence. Different authors, although building on slightly different notions of topichood, have argued in this vein. Steube & Späth (2002) write: “Nach heutigem Kenntnisstand sind Topiks ein wesentliches Bindeglied zwischen der satzbezogenen Leistung der Informationsstrukturierung einerseits und ihrer textbezogenen (textteilkonstituierenden) Leistung andererseits.” (‘According to current wisdom, topics are a fundamental tie between the sentence related benefit of information structuring on the one hand and its text related (text component constituting) benefit on the other.’) In a similar vein, Kehler (2004, 238) claims with regard to sentence topics that ‘we find an important link between topics and coherence ...’, Asher (2004, 191) reasons ‘... that sentence topics must contribute to discourse topics’, and Oberlander (2004) argues for an entity-based view of text coherence for which he suspects that sentence topics should play a significant role.

This squib has a rather modest goal. I want to give some German examples which support these claims to the extent that they show that the designation of an aboutness topic may in fact have easily detectable effects on preceding or following sentences. Crucial for my endeavour is the thesis in Frey (2004) that there is a designated position for topics in the German clause. Obviously this unambiguous marking of topics makes it much easier to study contextual effects of topics.

However, the paper will also argue that certain claims in the literature about the contextual relevance of topics cannot be sustained by data in German. These data mainly concern the alleged relevance of topics for resolution of anaphoric elements.

2. Sentence topics

Many linguists subscribe to the so-called ‘aboutness concept’ of topics. A well-known advo-

cate of this concept is Reinhart (1981):

- (1) A topic is an expression whose referent the sentence is about. The concept ‘topic’ is a category of pragmatic aboutness.

Reinhart proposes an analogy to illustrate this concept. During the discourse, a context set is constructed which contains the set of propositions accepted to be true at this point. According to Reinhart (1981), the propositions in the context set are not stored there in an unordered way, but according to ordering principles. One of these principles relates the propositions to the discourse referents which are designated by their sentence topics. This ordering principle is similar to the ordering principle of a subject catalogue of a library. A topic functions like an entry of a subject catalogue under which information is stored. In the same vein, Jacobs (2001) states that an aboutness topic is an address which marks the point in the speaker-hearer knowledge where the information carried by the comment has to be stored.

A different perspective is taken by Portner (2005). According to Portner, aboutness topics can be thought of as introducing expressive meaning (Potts 2005). Portner argues for the following analysis of an aboutness topic occurring in an independent clause: By the marking of a topic, the speaker performs a separate speech act in which he reports that his mental representation of the topic in question is active.

In this paper, the aboutness concept will be assumed. However, whether its pragmatics or semantics is conceived in Reinhart’s (1981) or Portner’s (2005) sense, respectively, is not crucial for our purposes.

A controversial issue in the literature is whether an aboutness topic has to be already given in the preceding context (as e.g. assumed by Gundel 1988, Lambrecht 1994, Vallduví & Engdahl 1996, Erteschik-Shir 1997, Rizzi 1997) or whether it can denote a new referent (as e.g. argued for by Reinhart 1981, 1995, Molnár 1991, Frey 2004). This controversy will be briefly touched on below.

Let us next look at the position of a topic in a regular clause in German. Many syntacticians working on topics in German assume that a sentence internal topic has to be moved to the prefield, which is the position in front of the finite verb in a verb-second clause (e.g. Molnár 1991, Müller & Sternefeld 1993, Vallduví & Engdahl 1996):

- (2) Peter mag Italien
Peter likes Italy

It is very natural to construe *Peter* as the aboutness topic of the clause.

However, it is clear that phrases of other informational status can also be moved to the prefield:

- (3) a. Keiner mag diesen Film
no one likes this movie
b. Leider hat Paul verschlafen
unfortunately has Paul overslept
c. Wer hat Maria heute gesehen?
who has Maria today seen

The elements in the prefields of (3) are elements which, by their nature, cannot be topics: a quantified DP in (3a), a sentential adverbial in (3b), and a question word in (3c). These phrases, being non-referential, do not yield good addresses for the storage of information, and neither do they denote referents whose mental representation could be activated.

Under the assumption that topics have to be moved to the prefield and given the fact that non-topics may also be moved to the prefield, the standard view is that there is no position which is exclusively reserved for topics in a regular German clause (cf. Lambrecht 1994, Vallduví & Engdahl 1996, Molnár 1991). However, although using slightly different notions of topichood, Steube (2000) and Frey (2004), for instance, argue that one comes to a different conclusion if one considers the middle field. In Frey (2004) for example, the following thesis is argued for:

- (4) In the middle field of the German clause, directly above the base position of sentential adverbials (SADVs), there is a designated position for topics (in the aboutness-sense): all topical phrases occurring in the middle field, and only these, occur in this position.

The term ‘SADV’ refers to adverbials which express the speaker’s estimation of the eventuality, e.g. *zum Glück* (‘luckily’), *anscheinend* (‘apparently’), *wahrscheinlich* (‘probably’). (4) refers to SADVs in their neutral use, in which they modify the whole proposition. In this use, the base position of SADVs is higher than the base position of any other element in the German clause (cf. e.g. Frey 2003). SADVs may also have a focus inducing use, in which the SADV relates to one narrowly focussed constituent of the clause, the rest of the clause being presupposed. In the following, the focus inducing use of SADVs is not relevant and should be disregarded.

Three kinds of evidence for (4) are given below (for further evidence, see Frey 2004):

the context forces aboutness

- (5) Ich erzähle dir etwas über Hans
I tell you something about Hans
a. Nächstes Jahr wird den Hans zum Glück eine vornehme Dame heiraten
next year will the^{ACC} Hans luckily a fine lady marry
b. # Nächstes Jahr wird zum Glück den Hans eine vornehme Dame heiraten

non-referential expressions

- (6) a. * Während des Vortrags haben mindestens zwei leidereinen Apfel gegessen
during the lecture have at least two unfortunately an apple eaten
b. Während des Vortrags haben leider mindestens zwei einen Apfel gegessen
c. * Heute hat fast jeder erfreulicherweise gearbeitet
today has almost everyone fortunately worked
d. Heute hat erfreulicherweise fast jeder gearbeitet

cataphoric pronouns

- (7) a. Sein₁ Vater wird dem Otto₁ wahrscheinlich das Auto leihen
his father will the^{DAT} Otto probably the car lend
‘Probably, Otto’s father will lend him the car’
b. * Sein₁ Vater wird wahrscheinlich dem Otto₁ das Auto leihen

The context in (5) states that the next sentence will be about Hans. Thus, it requires that if *Hans* occurs in the following sentence, it has to be an aboutness topic. *Hans* may occur in the prefield or in the middle field. The sentences (5a,b) demonstrate that if *Hans* occurs in the middle field, it has to precede a SADV. Thus, the sentences (5) confirm one part of (4): There is a position above the position of SADVs which an aboutness topic has to occupy if it occurs in the middle field. The examples (6a,c) confirm the other part of (4). Quantificational phrases cannot be aboutness topics. The sentences (6a,c) show that inside the middle field, quantificational phrases, i.e., non-topics, cannot appear in front of a SADV. Finally, the sentences in (7)

confirm both parts of (4). They contain cataphoric pronouns. According to Reinhart (1981), based on Kuno (1972), a phrase can license a cataphoric pronoun if and only if the phrase is an aboutness topic. So, (7a) shows that a non-topical phrase in the middle field has to occur below a SADV, and (7b) shows that a topic in the middle field has to occur in a position above the SADV.

As mentioned above, the prefield of a German clause is a good position for topics but it is not reserved for topics. The fact that in the middle field, German has a designated topic position, and that a topic can therefore be objectively identified as such, will be of importance for the investigations of contextual effects of sentence topics in the following.

Given (4), it can be shown that an indefinite DP may be a topic:

- (8) Heute hat ein Student leider während der Vorlesung geschlafen
today has a student unfortunately during the lecture slept

In (8), the indefinite is located in the topic position characterized in (4). We expect that a topical indefinite may license a cataphoric pronoun. This is confirmed:

- (9) Weil er₁ müde war, hat ein Student₁ leider geschlafen
since he tired was has a student unfortunately slept

Note that the indefinites in (8) and (9) have a specific interpretation, i.e. in order to use these sentences properly, the speaker has to have a certain referent in mind. But this referent does not have to be related to any set which is already established in the discourse. Thus, the referent does not have to be familiar to the hearer. Therefore, given (4), the examples in (8) and (9) show that familiarity is not a necessary condition for topichood.

Note also that anaphoric phrases do not have to appear in the topic position:

- (10) Gestern hat Paul [eine nette Frau]₁ kennengelernt. Er wird hoffentlich
yesterday has P. a nice woman met He will hopefully
[die Dame]₁ wiedersehen
the lady see again

According to (4), the anaphorically interpreted definite description in the second sentence of (10) is not a topic. Thus, (8)-(10) show that familiarity is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for being a topic in German.

3. A note on McNally (1998)

I would like to briefly consider an argument against the relevance of the concept 'sentence topic'. McNally (1998) writes: "there is ... little evidence that we must say anything special about sentence topic at all. Rather, what seems necessary is a good formal characterization of *discourse* topic."

McNally (1998) considers sentences with the fall-rise intonation (B-Accent or (L+)H*L-H% pattern) on one item and a focus accent on another as illustrated in the following English example:

- (11) Who wants what for dinner?
[Laura]_B wants [macaroni]_A, [Kent]_B wants [pizza]_A, and [Johnny]_B wants [nothing]_A

In German, there exists a very similar contour with very similar semantic/pragmatic effects (cf. e.g. Büring 1997, Jacobs 1997). In Jacobs (1997), the fall-rise intonation in German is indicated by ‘√’:

- (12) √PAUL will in die O\per gehen und Ma√RIA ins KI\no
Paul wants to the opera (to) go and Maria to (the) movies

McNally (1998) arrives at the cited claim by the following reasoning. The fall-rise intonation has been associated with sentence topichood (e.g. Vallduví & Zacharski 1994, Büring 1997). Often, it is assumed that topics have to be entity denoting (e.g. Reinhart 1981, Portner & Yabushita 1998). However, phrases with the fall-rise intonation do not have to be entity denoting:

- (13) How many people expressed interest in your house?
 Well, [lots]_B of people [called]_A, and [three]_B [looked at it]_A, but [nobody]_B [made an offer]_A

Therefore, McNally (1998) concludes, the analysis of sentences with fall-rise intonation does not need to refer to the notion ‘aboutness-topic.’ Rather, the analyses of such sentences should follow the lines of Roberts (1996). According to Roberts (1996), the fall-rise intonation signals that the speaker is pursuing a certain strategy for answering a (perhaps implicit) complex question. This approach does not refer to sentence topics but to discourse topics conceived as questions. After this first step, McNally goes one step further. She insinuates that if other phenomena usually linked to sentence topics were studied carefully enough, analyses for them without reference to sentence topics could be given.

I think McNally (1998) draws her conclusions too quickly. It is without any question that Roberts (1996) (and, similarly, Büring 1997) offers crucial insights about the pragmatics of the fall-rise intonation. However, this does not make the notion of an aboutness-topic dispensable for the analysis of sentences containing a phrase accentuated this way. Consider the following sentences:

- (14) Was ist mit den Freunden von Emil? Was machen sie in diesem Sommer?
 ‘What about the friends of Emil.’ ‘What are they going to do this summer?’
 a. Ich denke, dass [√KARL]^{Topic} wahrscheinlich nach PO\len reist und
I think that Karl probably to Poland goes and
 dass [√OTto]^{Topic} sicherlich einige Wochen in ITA\lien verbringen wird
that Otto certainly some weeks in Italy spend will
 b. # Ich denke, dass wahrscheinlich [√KARL]^{Non-Topic} nach PO\len reist und
 dass sicherlich [√OTto]^{Non-Topic} einige Wochen in ITA\lien verbringen wird

- (15) Wer macht denn die Reise mit?
 ‘Who is coming on the trip’
 Gestern hat anscheinend √KARL InterESSE\ bekundet und
Yesterday has apparently Karl interest expressed and
 heute hat erfreulicherweise √OTto fest ZU\gesagt
today has luckily Otto firmly promised

In both (14) and (15), the answering sentences contain phrases with the fall-rise intonation. The questions in (14) trigger the effect that these phrases figure as aboutness topics of the answering sentences. According to (4), topics occurring in the middle field have to be positioned in front of a sentence adverbial. This explains the difference in acceptability between (14a)

and (14b). In contrast, the question in (15) does not induce topical status for the phrase with the fall-rise intonation. Therefore, in the answer in (15), this phrase does not have to be positioned in front of the sentence adverbial.

(14) disconfirms McNally's conclusion that the notion of 'aboutness topic' is irrelevant for the analysis of sentences containing phrases with the fall-rise intonation. Rather, (14) and (15) together show that the topical status of a phrase is independent of the fall-rise intonation.

Given the independence of the two markings and given (4), we expect that a phrase which, by its very nature, cannot be a sentence topic but which is assigned the fall-rise intonation cannot appear in the topic position. This expectation is confirmed:

- (16) a. *Heute hat mindestens $\sqrt{\text{EINE}}$ Antwort erfreulicherweise fast JE\der
today has at least one answer luckily nearly everyone
gewußt
known
b. Heute hat erfreulicherweise mindestens $\sqrt{\text{EINE}}$ Antwort fast JE\der gewußt

4. Some further contextual effects of sentence topics

We have seen an example in which the context of a sentence forces a certain element to be designated as a topic of that sentence: In (14), a question which contains a topical plural expression denoting a set demands that phrases denoting members of this set be treated as topics. In this section, it will be investigated whether there are further examples showing the interaction of sentence topics with the context.

We may start by considering cataphoric pronouns again. In (7a) above, the cataphoric pronoun and the co-referential phrase appeared in the same sentence but a cataphoric pronoun and the co-referential phrase may also appear in separate sentences. Here too, we find that a cataphoric pronoun has to relate to a sentence topic:

- (17) a. Er₁ war zufrieden. Heute wurde Koch₁ erwartungsgemäß nominiert
he was satisfied today was Koch as expected nominated
b. *Er₁ war zufrieden. Heute wurde erwartungsgemäß Koch₁ nominiert

Thus, (17a) constitutes further evidence that a sentence topic may have effects outside of its sentence.

Let us now consider some examples exhibiting different discourse relations to see whether they are sensitive to the designation of sentence topics. The following discussion will not be systematic. Rather, the discourse relations are more or less randomly chosen.

(18) is an instance of the discourse relation *Elaboration*¹. The first sentence is elaborated by the sequence of the following sentences:

- (18) Den ganzen gestrigen Tag hat Emil₁ überraschenderweise zu Hause verbracht.
All yesterday long has Emil fortunately at home spent
Zuerst hat er₁ die Küche gereinigt. Dann hat er₁ das Kinderzimmer geordnet.
First has he the kitchen cleaned Then has he the children's room tidied

¹ For our purposes the following rough characterization of *Elaboration* is sufficient: *Elaboration* is a subordinating discourse relation whose *Nucleus*, the elaborated statement, describes something about which its *Satellites*, the subsequent elaborating statements, give more specific information (cf. e.g. Mann & Thompson 1988).

I conjecture that in a broader sense question-answer pairs can also be seen as instances of *Elaboration*.

- a. # Dann war Mittagessenszeit und da hat [Maria]^{Topic} glücklicherweise
Then was lunch time and then has Maria fortunately
[dem tapferen Mann]₁^{Non-Topic} eine Linsensuppe gegeben
the brave man a lentil soup given
- b. Dann war es Mittagessenszeit und da hat [Maria]^{Topic} [dem tapferen Mann]₁^{Topic}
glücklicherweise eine Linsensuppe gegeben

In the sentence to be elaborated, the phrase *Emil* figures as a topic. The elaborating sentences contain phrases which are co-referential with *Emil*. (18a, b) show that it is preferred to keep the topical status of *Emil* constant. The following constraint seems to hold:

- (19) If a sentence E to be elaborated contains a topical phrase α and an elaborating sentence E_i contains a phrase β which is co-referential with α or denotes a member or a subset of the denotation of α , then β is a topic in E_i .

Intuitively, (19) makes sense: If the sentence which will be elaborated is especially concerned with a certain referent, then the elaborating sentences will be too. Thus, if the referent in question is explicitly referred to in an elaborating sentence, the referring phrase has to be a sentence topic. The next example also illustrates (19):

- (20) Auf der Sitzung werden sich die führenden CDU-Politiker
on the meeting will REFL the leading CDU politicians
höchstwahrscheinlich auf einen Kandidaten einigen.
most likely on a candidate agree
- a. Laut FAZ wird Schäuble mit Sicherheit für Merkel plädieren
according to FAZ will Schäuble definitely for Merkel argue
- b. # Laut FAZ wird mit Sicherheit Schäuble für Merkel plädieren

The term *führende CDU-Politiker* is a topic and so is the instantiating term *Schäuble* in the elaborating sentence.

In a *Narration*, a sequence of events is reported.² The discourse participants thereby implicitly characterize an event of a more general type which comprises the singular events reported in the *Narration* (cf. e.g. Asher 2004). The question we may ask is whether the designation of sentence topics has any effects on this undertaking. Let us look at the following examples:

- (21) a. Erst hat den Paul überraschenderweise Maria beleidigt. Dann hat
First has the^{ACC} Paul surprisingly Maria insulted. Then has
den Fritz leider die Frau Professor gekränkt
the^{ACC} Fritz unfortunately the professor hurt
- b. Erst hat Maria überraschenderweise den Paul beleidigt. Dann hat die Frau Professor leider den Fritz gekränkt
- c. Erst hat Maria den Paul überraschenderweise beleidigt. Dann hat die Frau Professor den Fritz leider gekränkt

It seems that sentence topics do have effects on the content of the ‘superevent’. According to the intuition of my informants as well as my own intuition, (21a) is interpreted as reporting the terrible things that happened to Paul and Fritz. In contrast, (21b) is more likely to be inter-

² *Narration* is a coordinating discourse relation, whose *Nuclei*, the statements which constitute the *Narration*, present a succession relationship between events (cf. e.g. Mann & Thompson 1988).

preted as reporting the terrible things that Maria and the professor did. Finally, (21c) is concerned with the terrible things that Maria and the professor did to Paul and Fritz, respectively.

These intuitions support the following constraint on *Narration*:

- (22) The sentence topics of the different sentences of a *Narration* figure in the event which is implicitly reported by means of the *Narration*.

Let us now consider an instance of the relation *Contrast*³ between referents:

- (23) Wie haben Otto und Maria den Antrag aufgenommen?
how have Otto and Maria the proposal taken up
Zunächst hat Otto zum Glück dafür argumentiert.
at first has Otto fortunately for it argued
a. Danach hat Maria leider Zweifel ausgedrückt
after this has Maria unfortunately doubts expressed
b. #Danach hat leider Maria Zweifel ausgedrückt

The text is intended to express a contrast between *Otto* and *Maria*. In (23), the term *Otto* is established as a sentence topic. (23a,b) demonstrate that the contrasting element *Maria* has to be topical too.

Note that the relation *Contrast* does not demand the designation of topical phrases:

- (24) Der Antrag wurde von unseren Vorsitzenden leidenschaftlich diskutiert.
the proposal was by our chairpersons vehemently discussed
Zunächst hat zu meiner Überraschung Otto dafür argumentiert.
at first has to my surprise Otto for it argued
Danach hat erwartungsgemäß Maria Zweifel ausgedrückt
after this has as expected Maria doubts expressed

According to my intuition, the contrast relation expressed in (24) is not the one between *Otto* and *Maria* but the one between the events expressed by the second and the third clause, respectively⁴.

Let us now look at the discourse relation *Result*⁵. Kehler (2002, 20) gives an example like the following:

- (25) Koch₁ ist ein Politiker; man muss diesem Mann₁ misstrauen

The rule that must be presupposed in order to establish the coherence of (25) is something like (26) (cf. Kehler 2002, 21):

³ *Contrast* is a coordinating discourse relation, which has not more than two *Nuclei*, namely, the statements which constitute the *Contrast* relation. The *Nuclei* present eventualities as being similar in many ways but contrasting in ways the speaker wants to point out.

⁴ See e.g. Kehler (2002, 16) for the differentiation between contrast between referents and contrast between eventualities.

⁵ *Result* is a subordinating discourse relation whose *Nucleus* presents an eventuality that could cause the eventuality described in the *Satellite*. The presentation of the *Nucleus* is more central to the speaker's purposes than the presentation of the *Satellite* (cf. Mann & Thompson 1988).

(26) Being a politician implies being not trustable

In (27), a sentential adverbial is added in order to make clear what is topical in the second clause:

- (27) a. Koch₁ ist ein Politiker; man muss diesem Mann₁ leider misstrauen
Koch is a politician you must this man unfortunately distrust
b. *Koch₁ ist ein Politiker; man muss leider diesem Mann₁ misstrauen

In (25), the term *Koch* is very likely to be a topic in the first sentence⁶. In order to interpret the two sentences in (25) as standing in the *Result* relation, one has to rely on the general rule given in (26). It seems that we want to treat all the coreferring phrases which instantiate such a general rule as sentence topics. This has been done in (27a) but not in (27b). Thus, if we want to interpret the two sentences as being related by *Result*, only (27a) sounds perfect. (27b) is not understood as exhibiting *Result*, rather this text appears to be incomplete, requiring enrichment by additional material in order to become part of a coherent text.

Let me stress once more that it is not the anaphoric status of *diesem Mann* which triggers the preposing. An anaphoric expression per se does not have to be preposed in front of a sentence adverbial, cf.:

- (28) Maria konnte heute endlich mit Guido₁ sprechen. Bisläng war sie
Maria could today finally with Guido talk so far has she
leider diesem Mann₁ nie begegnet
unfortunately this man never met
b. Dort drüben läuft Emil₁. Maria hat erstaunlicherweise diesen Angeber₁
over there walks Emil Maria has amazingly this show-off
vor kurzem geheiratet
recently married

Let us now consider an example of *Violated Expectation*⁷:

- (29) Koch₁ ist ein Politiker, aber man kann diesem Mann₁ vertrauen
Koch is a politician but you can that man trust

The rule which licences the interpretation of (29) as a instance of *Violated Expectation* is the same as the rule which is presupposed to make the example (25) coherent. If we now add a sentence adverbial we get the following judgements:

- (30) a. Koch₁ ist ein Politiker, aber man kann diesem Mann₁ zum Glück vertrauen
Koch is a politician but you can that man fortunately trust
b. *Koch₁ ist ein Politiker, aber man kann zum Glück diesem Mann₁ vertrauen

⁶ The subject of a predicative clause is a topic, cf.:

- (i) a. Laut Maria ist Hans wahrscheinlich eine Genie
according to Maria is Hans probably a genius
b. ??Laut Maria ist wahrscheinlich Hans eine Genie

⁷ This is the term Kehler (2002, 21) uses. *Violated Expectation* can be characterized as a subordinating discourse relation whose *Nucleus* presents an eventuality that could cause the eventuality described by the negation of the proposition presented in the *Satellite*.

Again, we find that the co-referential phrases which instantiate the two parts of the presupposed general rule should be sentence topics.

If we make the discourse relations connecting the sentences in (27) and (30) explicit by conjoining them with the relevant conjunctions, we find:

- (31) a. Koch₁ ist ein Politiker, deshalb muss man leider diesem Mann₁
Koch is a politician therefore must you unfortunately this man
misstrauen
distrust
- b. Koch₁ ist ein Politiker, trotzdem kann man zum Glück diesem Mann₁
Koch is a politician even so can you fortunately this man
vertrauen
trust

To perceive the texts in (31) as coherent, it is no longer necessary to rely on (26). Rather, the conjunctions reveal in which discourse relation the sentences in (31a) and (31b), respectively, stand. Thus, for the question whether the texts in (31) are judged as true, (26) might be relevant, but not for the establishment of text coherence. The examples in (31) show that, under such circumstances, it is not necessary to designate the co-referential terms as topics in the two sentences standing in the ‘cause-effect’ relation⁸.

To sum up this section, different data were presented which show that sentence topics do have contextual effects. For example, the referent of a topic in a sentence to be elaborated cannot be picked up by a non-topic in an elaborating sentence. A contrasting topical phrase wants to be contrasted with a phrase which is also a topic; and a topic occurring in a *Narration* becomes part of the description of the event which subsumes the different events reported in the *Narration*. Furthermore, instantiations of the ‘cause-effect’ discourse relations which rely on a general rule demand that the phrases which instantiate this general rule have to be sentence topics.

5. Two putative effects of sentence topics

I would like to make a comment on a very concrete proposal about the role sentence topics play for the coherence of texts. Although this is an old proposal I think it still makes sense to consider it. This proposal overestimates the role of sentence topics. The reason is, I believe, that the different functions of preposing constructions were less clear at the time this proposal was made than nowadays.

Reinhart (1980) states the following condition:

- (32) Two sentences are connected only if they are referentially linked or linked by a semantic connector.
Two sentences are referentially linked only if there is an aboutness topic or a scene-setting expression⁹ in the second sentence which is referentially controlled by an element of the first sentence.

⁸ Kehler (2002) subsumes *Result* and *Violated Expectation* and other discourse relations under the label ‘cause-effect’ relations.

⁹ Reinhart (1980, 173) defines a scene-setting expression as “that part of the sentence that specifies the spatial and temporal framework for the event reported in the sentence, or the particular world about the state of affairs in which the sentence asserts something.”

At least for German, this condition is too strong. The following two sentences constitute a coherent sequence:

- (33) Peter₁ ist ein netter Kerl. Laut Maria mag wahrscheinlich
Peter is a nice guy. According to Maria like probably
fast jeder [diesen wackeren Schwaben]₁^{Non-Topic}
almost everyone this good Swabian

There is no semantic connector between the two sentences and there is no scene-setting expression in the second sentence which would be semantically controlled by an element of the first sentence. There is an anaphoric element in the second sentence but given (4), it is not a topic. Thus, according to (32) the discourse should be incoherent, contrary to fact.

Which reasoning lead Reinhart (1980) to propose (32)? The following data are important:

- (34) a. ??Dan is a nice fellow. To her parties Rosa always invites him
b. ??This book is very boring. As for Rosa, she couldn't finish it

In addition, the following assumptions are crucial for Reinhart's claim in (32): (i) Every clause contains at most one sentence topic; (ii) Topicalization, Left Dislocation and the 'as-for'-construction mark a sentence topic. Now, Reinhart (1980) reasons as follows: Given (ii), the topics of the second sentences of (34a,b) are *to her parties* and *Rosa* respectively. Given (i), there can be no other topics in these sentences. Furthermore, these sentences do not contain any scene-setting expressions. Thus, the examples in (34) are bad because the topics of the second sentences are not referentially controlled by elements of the first sentences.

Both cited assumptions of Reinhart (1980) are problematic. First, Rizzi (1997) and many others (including Frey 2004) assume that a clause may contain more than one topic. Second, Prince (1998) and others (including Frey 2005) do not assume that Topicalization and Left Dislocation necessarily mark a sentence topic. However, even if we accept both assumptions, there are reasons other than those given by Reinhart why the texts in (34) are bad.

In Prince (1998), it is shown that the preposed phrase in Topicalization is anaphoric, i.e., it has to be linked to a phrase in the preceding context. This requirement is not fulfilled in (34a), and this fact already explains why (34a) is bad. In Frey (2005), it is argued that Left Dislocation in English and 'Freies Thema' in German induce a point of discontinuity in the discourse structure, i.e., they have the effect that the current discourse unit is closed and that a new one is started. In all likelihood, the same holds for the English 'as for'-construction. In addition, the DP inside the preceding 'as-for'-phrase has to pick up a referent which was already introduced into the discourse. Neither requirement is fulfilled in (34b), therefore (34b) is bad. Thus, to account for examples like (34), the problematic condition (32) is not necessary. Rather, the deviance of (34) is due to the violation of certain properties of Topicalization and the 'as for' construction.

Let us now come to another instance of a presumed extrasentential effect of topics, which turns out to be not real. In theories of anaphoric relationships, it is a standard assumption that the more reduced an anaphoric expression is, the more salient its antecedent has to be (e.g. Ariel 1990, Gundel et al. 1993). It follows, for example, that a pronoun relates to a phrase with highest salience, i.e., to a phrase which denotes the most salient referent. The semantically most reduced referring expression refers to the most prominent referent at that point of the discourse.

The question, then, is what makes a referent salient. Many authors assume that topics refer to salient referents (e.g. Gundel et al 1993, Lambrecht 1994, Erteschik-Shir 1997, Strube

& Hahn 1999).¹⁰ Given that, according to (4), topics in German are unambiguously designated, it is easy to check whether in fact pronouns prefer topics as antecedents. The answer is negative (cf. Hoffman 1998 for a similar conclusion with respect to Turkish):

- (35) a. Gestern hat überraschenderweise [den Paul]₁^{Non-Topic} der Direktor₂
Yesterday has unexpectedly the^{ACC} Paul the director
 getroffen. Er_{*1/2} hat sich sehr darüber gefreut
met he was REFL very about it pleased
 b. Gestern hat [den Paul]₁^{Topic} überraschenderweise der Direktor₂ getroffen. Er_{*1/2} hat sich sehr darüber gefreut

On the basis of our topic criterion in (4), (35a,b) show that irrespective of whether or not the object is a topic, it is the subject to which the pronoun relates.¹¹

This observation can be controlled with the help of a German left peripheral construction which is standardly assumed to designate a topic (cf. e.g. Lambrecht 1994, Jacobs 2001, Frey 2005) – the so-called Linksversetzung illustrated in (36) (*den* is a resumptive pronoun which enters into a chain-relation with the proposed phrase):

- (36) Den Paul^{Topic}, den mag jeder
the^{ACC} Paul RP likes everyone

In (37) it is checked whether the dislocated phrase of a Linksversetzung is the preferred antecedent of a following pronoun:

- (37) Gestern war Institutsversammlung. [Den Paul]₁^{Topic}, den hat
yesterday was the departmental meeting the^{ACC} Paul RP has
 erfreulicherweise der Direktor₂ gelobt. Er_{*1/2} war sehr zufrieden
fortunately the director praised he was highly satisfied

The intuition is again pretty clear. In (37), it is not the topical object but the non-topical subject which figures as the antecedent of the pronoun.

The following examples also show that preceding subjects are more salient for anaphor resolution than are preceding topical objects, :

- (38) A: Wir planen eine Party für den 50. Geburtstag von Peter. Wen sollen wir einladen?
 ‘We are planing to have a party for Peter’s 50th birthday. Who should we invite?’
 B: Was ist mit Max?
 ‘What about Max?’
 A: Laut Maria mag den Max₁ leider der Peter₂ nicht. /
According to Maria likes the^{ACC} Max unfortunately the^{NOM} Peter not
 Den Max₁, den mag leider der Peter₂ nicht so sehr.
 a. Daher will er₂ den Max sicher nicht dabei haben
Therefore wants he the^{ACC} Max. certainly not to be there
 b. *Daher will Peter ihn₁ sicher nicht dabei haben

(38a,b) show that the pronoun refers to the subject of the preceding clause.

¹⁰ The different authors use different notions of ‘topic’, but usually the concept of ‘aboutness’ is part of these notions.

¹¹ Independently of the question of which role topics play for anaphor resolution, the data in (35) disprove Rambow’s (1993) claim that the surface order of the main constituents from left to right in the middle field corresponds to their descending salience for pronoun resolution.

In view of the data in (35), (37) and (38), it seems that pronouns do not want to relate to a topic of the preceding clause but, rather, to the subject, be it topical or not. Thus, the reason for the view that the most salient referent for anaphor resolution is the one denoted by a topic might be because, contrary to our assumptions, subjects are taken by many authors to be the canonical sentence topics.

Note, however, the following example pointed out by Manfred Krifka:

- (39) Peters großes Haus hat ein schönes Dach₁. Es₁ ist grün
Peter's big house has a pretty roof it is green

The pronoun *es* is interpreted as co-referring with the object of the preceding clause. This object is not topical¹². Rather, it denotes the referent which is introduced into the scene by this very construction. (39) shows that in this construction, it is the referent of the object that is more salient for pronoun resolution than that of the subject. However, again, it is not the case that the resolution of the pronominal reference is to an entity denoted by a topic. Thus, all the above examples demonstrate that it is not the phrase which tells us what the sentence is about which figures prominently in the linking of sentences by means of pronominal relationships.

6. Conclusion

In the literature claims can be found to the effect that sentence topics play a significant role for establishing the coherence of a text. In this squib, a small piece of evidence for this claim was contributed. It was argued that, given an unambiguous criterion for whether or not a phrase is an aboutness topic in German, it can be shown that there are textual configurations which are only coherent if certain phrases are designated as topics. Furthermore, it was argued that aboutness topics have an influence on the construction of the implicit theme which summarizes the content of a sequence of sentences. On the other hand, one field was addressed in which the contextual role of sentence topics seems to have been occasionally overrated in the literature. It was shown that, in German, a phrase's status as an aboutness topic does not increase its saliency for pronoun resolution.

Although at this point no theoretical systematisation of the data was given, I think that the observations presented in this squib demonstrate that if one considers textual phenomena, the notion of an aboutness topic cannot be dispensed with, and that it is worthwhile to study the role aboutness topics can play for the coherence of texts.

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¹² This is shown by the ungrammaticality of (i):

- (i) * weil Peters zukünftiges Haus ein schönes Dach selbstverständlich haben wird
since Peter's house-to-be a pretty roof as a matter of course have will

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