Managing information structure in spoken and sign languages: 
Formal properties and natural discourse organization

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Modern linguistics deals with information structure (IS) at least since Mathesius (1929). The existence of such phenomena as theme (topic), rheme (comment, focus), categorical vs. non-categorical (thetic) utterances, seem to be generally accepted and addressed in studies on both spoken and sign modalities (Féry & Ishihara 2016; Kimmelman & Pfau 2016), although even the most fundamental notions have been recently criticized (Matić & Wedgwood 2013; Ozerov 2018, see also the workshop “Beyond Information Structure” at the 50th SLE meeting in Zürich, http://sle2017.eu/downloads/workshops/Beyond%20information%20structure.pdf).

IS-related phenomena have been approached from different angles. They have been thoroughly analyzed in logic and semantics (Jacobs 2001; Maskova & Bernini 2006; Krifka & Musan 2012), as well as from pragmatic (Moneglia & Raso 2014), cognitive (Chafe 1976; Gundel 1988; Tomlin 1995) and grammatical (Lambrecht 1994, Kuroda 2006, Zimmermann & Féry 2010, Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2011, Van Gijn et al 2014) perspectives. A great deal of attention has been drawn to formal properties of IS that help distinguish one category from another, both universally (Lambrecht 1994; Féry 2016) and cross-linguistically. To give but one example, in Russian, syntactic (esp. word order) and intonational properties of utterances are strongly influenced by IS factors (Kovtunova 1976; Yanko 2008; Slioussar 2007; Paducheva 2015), and this is also the case in Russian Sign Language where sign order, non-manual markers and manual prosody all interact with IS (Kimmelman 2019). When it comes to oral and sign production, prosody seems to play an extremely important role (Kodzasov 2009; Calhoun 2012; Féry 2013, Crasborn & van der Kooij 2013, Herrmann 2015).

Although the theme – rheme distinction has a great impact on the overall structure of a coherent text (see, for instance, the notion of theme dynamics in Daneš 1964, Enkvist 1976), the formal properties of these and other IS-related categories have been primarily studied on the basis of isolated sentences. However, recently the focus of attention has been shifted to the interplay between IS and the organization of natural spoken discourse (Raso & Melo 2014; Moneglia & Cresti 2015; Fernandez-Vest & Van Valin 2016; Kibrik et al. to appear). The goal of our workshop is to follow this new line of research integrating the data of sign languages into a broader context of IS in natural discourse production. The suggested overall approach and the pool of research questions set below are in the spirit of the ongoing project “Managing information structure in spoken and sign natural discourse” (supported by RSF grant 17-18-01184)

The scope of the workshop will include, but not be limited to, the following key questions:

- Does the fundamental distinction between thetic and categorical utterances on the one hand, and that between theme and rheme on the other hand, stand against data of natural discourse in spoken and sign languages? If yes, what are the main formal properties of these categories as they arise in corpora of natural discourse?
• What is the exact role of prosody in delimiting IS categories in natural speech? What approach(es) to describing intonational structure yields better results when analyzing the information structure of spoken discourse in spoken and sign languages?

• What are functional and structural parallels between prosodic means of information structure encoding in spoken languages (i.e., phrasal accents, their placement rules, tonal patterns which are associated with accents) and prosodic means of information structure encoding in sign languages (including non-manual prosody, i.e. face expressions, head and body movement as well as manual prosody – pauses, speed, size and other integral characteristics of movement in sign systems)?

• How does the grammatical structure and / or intonation inventory of a language affect the interplay between grammar and prosody as they contribute to encode the IS? Specifically, (a) what is the role of prosody in the languages which grammaticalize IS marking (e.g., have grammaticalized topic); (b) what is the role of the phrase-level intonation in tonal languages?

• What are the possible contexts for neutralization of the theme – rheme opposition in natural discourse? For instance, in Russian, clausal themes and rhemes share a great number of formal properties when combined with non-final transitional continuity (Du Bois et al. 1993; see Yanko 2008; Korotaev 2018), and in American Sign Language, topics and foci can be marked by the same non-manual markers (eyebrow raise) in some contexts (Wilbur 2012). Do such contexts differ across languages?

• How are sentences with different illocutionary force integrated into the complex hierarchical structure in spoken and sign languages? Specifically, how are they integrated in the contexts which are sensitive to neutralizing illocutionary force meanings, e.g. in reported speech? Which grammatical and prosodic patterns are at play? Are prosodic signals of integrating IS accompanied by such grammatical phenomena as indexical shift?

• How is the prosody-IS coherence maintained in natural discourse in the case of communicative breakdowns – caused by speech generation problems or by interactional problems? Are coherency restoration strategies different in spoken and sign languages?

• What are the best practices for tagging IS in prosodically annotated spoken and sign language corpora?

• How do gestures participate in packaging information in spoken and sign languages?

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