

What makes a discourse topic: a comparative study of Northern Khanty and Nganasan

Ob-Ugric and Samoyedic languages of Northern Siberia exhibit a special kind of passive used as a topic-maintaining device in discourse (Nikolaeva 2001, Filchenko 2012). Normally the A argument of a transitive clause appears in the subject position, like Masha in example (1). However, this slot can be taken over by the non-A argument, like Vasya in (2), if it matches the current discourse topic, in terms of (Givón 1983). This is done by means of passivization.

KAZYM KHANTY

- (1) *maša-jen waša-jen λapt-əs*
Masha-PROP Vasya-PROP feed-PST[3SG]
'Masha fed Vasya.'
- (2) *waša-jen maša-jen-ən λapət-s-a*
Vasya-PROP Masha-PROP-LOC feed-PST-PASS[3SG]
'Vasya was fed by Masha.'

As straightforward as it may seem, there appear to be subtle differences in what participants are chosen to be discourse topics in each language and what types of contexts allow a topic shift. This study, based on the data from three dialects of Northern Khanty (Kazym, Shuryshkary and Priuralsk) and Nganasan, attempts to capture the cross-linguistic and dialectal variation in the use of active and passive verb forms with respect to topic assignment, maintenance, and shift. All examples of transitive active and passive clauses were obtained from the available corpora¹ and manually annotated for several morphosyntactic and discourse parameters, including person, animacy, volitionality, affectedness, definiteness, protagonism, mainline/background. Consider, for example, passive in Shuryshkary Khanty (3) which allows a temporary topic shift from the protagonists to other participants affected by an event, cf. a similar context from Kazym Khanty (4) where the current topic is maintained.

SHURYSHKARY KHANTY

- (3) *xota λoη-λ-ət, xojat-ət isa pǎrat-λ-aj-ət, wel-λ-aj-ət*
where enter-NPST-3PL person-PL all destroy-NPST-PASS-3PL kill-NPST-PASS-3PL
'Wherever they enter, they destroy, kill all the people (lit.: all the people are destroyed, killed).'

KAZYM KHANTY

- (4) *wən pox-əl il mǎn-əs, λow-əl šəyxsə-s-λe, xəλε-η aηkəl*
big son-POSS.3SG down go-PST[3SG] horse-POSS.3SG kick-PST-3SG>SG dirt-ATTR stump
šəp-a ji-s
piece-DAT become-PST[3SG]
'The elder son sank to the ground, kicked the horse, which turned into a dirty stump.'

Based on this and several other observations, I argue that, although the mechanisms of discourse topic assignment, maintenance, and shift in all varieties in question broadly work in a similar fashion, as outlined in (Givón 1983) and subsequent works, they are also influenced by discourse parameters and strategies which vary across languages and dialects. Hence the notion of discourse topic should incorporate a set of additional criteria to account for the observed variation.

¹ Nganasan Spoken Language Corpus (NSLC), URL:

<https://corpora.uni-hamburg.de/hzsk/de/islandora/object/spoken-corpus:nslc-0.2>

Northern Khanty corpus at Endangered Languages and Cultures of Siberia, URL:

<https://siberianlanguages.surrey.ac.uk/summary/northern-khanty>

Unpublished Northern Khanty corpus collected by Egor Kashkin (2012–2014).

References

- Filchenko, A. 2012.* Continuity of information structuring strategies in Eastern Khanty: Definiteness/topicality. In Pirkko Suihkonen, Bernard Comrie & Valery Solovyev (eds.), *Argument Structure and Grammatical Relations: A crosslinguistic typology* (Studies in Language Companion Series 126). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 115–132.
- Givón, T. 1983.* *Topic continuity in discourse: A quantitative cross-language study.* Amsterdam–Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Nikolaeva, I. 2001.* Secondary topic as a relation in information structure. *Linguistics* 39(1), 1–49.

Abbreviations

ATTR — attributivizer, DAT — dative, LOC — locative, NPST — non-past, PASS — passive, PL — plural, POSS — possessive, PROP — proprial article, PST — past, SG — singular.