Chapter Ten

TOPIC

The literature on schizophrenic speech teems with reference to the lack of discernible topic. This chapter demonstrates what a topic is and how it is signalled by the syntax of the language. There are two kinds of topic: that of the sentence and that of the discourse as a whole. These are determined in different ways as each is expressed in somewhat different ways. Fortunately, there are tests which can be applied to determine what the topic is. The difference between normal changes of topic and schizophrenic ones is elaborated. The ways that topic is used to express the speaker’s empathy towards the topic being expressed are also explored here.


The word topic refers to two distinctly different entities: the topic of the discourse, and the topic of the sentence. The discourse topic is at the heart of relevance because all entries in a discourse are relevant by reference to their topics. The discourse topic need not be overtly expressed. It derives from the text as a whole, “... what the upshot is ...” (VanDijk 1980) of the information provided by the discourse as a whole. It provides the linguistic context. The topic of the discourse works to constrain meaning by making individual sentences relevant to it. Thus, the topic is the prime disambiguating force in language. In other words, each sentence is interpreted as if it is relevant to the topic, which is why topic is so strong a determiner of meaning. If a global topic cannot be ascertained for any group of sentences, then the language used is perceived as obscure, strange, vague, or incoherent, and we are baffled.

The topic of the sentence, also known as the subject of the sentence, differs from the discourse topic by adding information to it. VanDijk explains that the subject of a sentence is

... the semantic-pragmatic function that selects which concept of the contextual information will be extended with new information. (1980. P. 97)
In the previous chapter we considered such selection in terms of relevance. In this chapter first we examine the factors leading to the choice of the subject itself, and how it pertains to the speaker's point of view. Then the topic of the discourse and its relation to our understanding of psychotic speech will be analyzed.


Traditionally, it has been assumed that the basic structure in language is the sentence, and that the sentence is composed of the subject and predicate. We intuitively recognize that the subject-predicate relationship gives a complete structure; hence the common misconception that sentences are complete thoughts. Case grammars (Chapter 4) have shown us the many kinds of relations subsumed under the rubric of "subject of the sentence." As we have already seen, these deeper relations explain aspects of meaning, implication, and even permissible paraphrases of a given proposition. More recently, relationships have been found between the noun chosen for the subject and the empathy and general perspective of the speaker.


Kuno (1987, pp. 203–267) develops the interesting proposition that the syntax chosen for a given sentence corresponds to the perspective of the speaker. Kuno (p. 204) explains that

... speakers unconsciously make the same kind of decisions that film directors make about where to place themselves with respect to the events and states that their sentences are intended to describe...

Such decisions are describable in terms of empathy. Kuno shows, for instance, that 1A is an unmarked empathy condition. It projects an objective view. In this encoding, no particular empathy is being shown either to John or to Bill. It merely states that John initiated the blow and that Bill has received it:

1A. John hit Bill.

However, if the same speaker says

1B. John's brother hit him.

he or she has identified more with John than with his brother. Kuno
observes that it "seems commonsensical" that the possessive chosen, here John's brother, would be used to refer to Bill only "... when the speaker has placed himself closer to John than his brother." This is because the brother is seen in this construction only through his relationship with John, not as an independent person. In other words, John's relationship is more important than the independent characterization of calling him Bill.

Yet another empathy condition occurs in passives:

1C. Bill was hit by his brother.
1D. Bill was hit by John.

Kuno says that passives always indicate empathy, because they show that the speaker has identified with the subject of the passive verb, in this instance, Bill. Kuno observes (p. 205) that the subject of the passive is "new" because the passive is formed by placing the object in what is usually the subject position. Doing this is more unusual so that hearers perceive the extra effort, so to speak, as a signal of empathy. If a speaker creates a marked construction, hearers will suspect that some special message is being implied. Actually, each of these has done something unusual, thereby creating empathy for Bill.

In 1C, the very fact that the brother's name is not mentioned is an overriding empathy condition on two grounds. First, use of a possessive ordinarily indicates the point of view of the possessor. The second is that failure to directly name someone whose name you presumably know, shows empathy for the one whose name you did use. Using a person's name indicates familiarity. Identifying another person simply by an anaphoric possessive like his again shows that one is telling this from the point of view of the named person. We shall see clear instances of this in the Ice Cream story narratives discussed below.

In 1D, the message indicating empathy for Bill works because passives with one word agents like John are rarely made (Svartvik 1966). Even if the passive were selected, ordinarily the agent wouldn't be mentioned. If the agent must be named, then the sentence usually would be in the active voice as in 1A above. The passive is used most habitually to enable the speaker to omit the agent or cause. There are two reasons for keeping the agent in at the end of the sentence. The first holds if the agent is heavily modified as in 1E and F. 1F is awkward. One expects that the sentence stopped too short as one would expect the object to be at least as long as the subject.
IE. Bill was hit by the short, skinny guy with curly red hair.
IF. The short, skinny guy with the curly red hair hit Bill.

There is a strong tendency in English to throw heavy constituents to the end of the sentence. A heavy constituent is one with a great deal of modification: adjective, relative clauses, and the like. These are either newly introduced items, hence the modification, or they are being especially emphasized. In 1D, since there is no heavily modified agent, choosing the object, Bill, to be subject indicates that there is some out-of-the-way connotation. Hence, the reason for putting the agent at the end must be because the speaker wishes to emphasize who did it. A major reason for emphasizing the agent is that he or she is blameworthy.

Kuno uses *empathy* and *perspective* almost interchangeably as in his discussion of the choice between *comes/came up to* and *goes/went up to*. He says that this indicates the speaker's "camera angle" and empathy (p. 225)

2A. So Mary comes up to Max and says . . .
2B. So Mary goes up to Max and says . . .

In 2A, the action is being seen from Max's angle, whereas in 2B, it is seen from Mary's.

Kuno's approach to sentence analysis has a great deal to offer. He points out that certain verbs demand certain kinds of subjects. For instance, the agent of *assassinate* (example mine) has to be reprehensible and the object has to be a victim, which implies "not reprehensible." It is difficult to express empathy for an assassin. If we wish to we have to use other terminology, such as *freedom fighter*. Other verbs, like *hit* and *go* can be designed (Kuno's term) in terms of perspective; hence, they can be manipulated to imply empathy or its lack.

The reader must beware, however. Although Kuno formalizes his rules (p. 206), thus lending them a scientific air, he relies largely on his own intuitions. As with the judgments of other linguists who have done the same, the reader too often finds that his or her intuitions don't match those of the author's. He does mention that "many speakers" find a sentence acceptable or not (p. 209), but does not show how he verified this. Consequently, we run into the same problem with him as we do with other intuitive linguists. Using myself as a point of reference, I find that some of the sentences he uses as proof for his interpretations don't mean to me what they do to him. Some of those he stars (*) are fine with me,
and some which he doesn't star I would. These data cry out for verifica­
tion by careful investigation like that pioneered by Quirk and Svartvik.

Still, Kuno's work has a great deal of appeal. He is right often enough
to be exciting. It certainly makes sense that empathy is a condition on
syntax. After all, language did evolve so that we may inform others of
our feelings and to express the world from our perspective. Just as
concepts like agency and negativity occur in all languages because of the
need for all humans to express them, so is empathy a linguistic universal.
Recognizing this possibility when interpreting another's speech can enrich
understanding. Kuno gives us another place to look, so to speak, in the
analysis of discourse making us more sensitive to the possibilities for
empathy and perspective. These can be used along with an understand­
ing of semantic feature analysis to enrich our insights.


Nomi Erteschik-Schir (1981) establishes the pragmatic basis of syntac­
tic transformations. She suggests that a constituent in a sentence is
dominant if the speaker intends to direct the hearers' attention to its
intension, i.e., its full potential meaning. Dominance of a constituent,
then, is what the sentence is about, and has ramifications for what kinds
of transformations can apply. For instance, she shows that the kinds of
questions that can be formed from a statement depends upon whether or
not the NP is the dominant one. Consider the simple statement

3A. Jack eats candy.

One can form a question by using the wh-word that stands for Jack,
which is who or the wh-word that stands for candy, which is what. Two
questions, therefore, are possible,

3B. Who eats candy?
3C. What does Jack eat?

In essence, a wh-question is a kind of "fill-in-the-blanks" device. The
who says fill in the blank in "X eats candy." The what says fill in the blank
in "Jack eats X." In each instance, the X is the constituent the question is
about. Therefore, in 3B, the question is about Jack, and in 3C it is about
candy (or foodstuffs). One can ask 3B if one assumes that the corresponding
declarative sentence would be about Jack. In contrast, one can ask 3C if it
can be assumed that the declarative counterpart would be about candy.
Another pair even more graphically illustrates,

4A. I like the gears in that car.
4B. Which car do you like the gears in?
4C. I like the girl in that car.
4D. Which car do you like the girl in?

Erteschek-Schir contends that the unacceptability of 4D arises from the fact that the phrase “in the car” in 4C cannot be dominant in that sentence, therefore it cannot be the topic, but “in that car” in 4A can be dominant, hence 4B can be asked. She demonstrates that the reason that in the car in 4A can not be dominant, hence cannot be extracted to ask a question about, is that girls are not equipment on cars. She speculates that 4D would be fine in a society in which every car came with a girl so that choice of car also involved choice of girl.

The selection of the subject depends on such things as cultural facts and other pragmatic concerns. This is well illustrated by another fact. For instance, I can think of a setting in which 4D might very well be asked and would not be starred. Many young American males think that they will have an easier time getting a girlfriend if they have the right kind of car (with right kind referring to a much admired sports or luxury car). They also assume that different girls will be attracted by different cars. Imagine, then, a typical American high school parking lot with girls sitting in several cars waiting to be driven home by their boyfriends. In that cultural climate, a boy about to buy a new car could properly ask another, “Which car do you like the girl in?”, the object being to match a car to the particular girl.

Erteschik-Schir gives another test for determining potential topics of sentences, the which is a lie test. In this, the topic of a sentence can be referred to by which is a lie. This phrase cannot be applied to an NP which is not dominant. For instance,

5A. Sam said John wrote a book about Nixon.
5B. Which is a lie—it was about a rhinoceros.

Here we know that people write about presidents so that focussing on the prepositional phrase “about Nixon” is fine. She opposes 5A and B to

6A. Sam said John destroyed a book about Nixon.
6B. Which is a lie—it was about a rhinoceros.

Here Erteschik-Schir posits that 6B would be possible if we know that John habitually destroyed books. Otherwise one would assume that the
focus of 6A is on the act of destruction. If the topic of the discourse had been about Nixon or the Republican party, then John’s choice of book to destroy becomes relevant. For instance, as my proof that John is not a loyal Republican, it would be natural for me to produce 6A, and for another person defending John to produce

6C. Which is a lie, it was about Johnson.

6B is odd because we expect the name of another president or of a well-known politician or statesman as a response to 6A. We do not expect another mammal, especially one so far removed from American presidencies. Note the acceptability of 6C as a response to 6A

6C. Which is a lie. It was about his dog.

Here the relevance is twofold. It is primarily signaled by the possessive. Americans do have dogs and they are important to them. The “which is a lie” test is useful for picking out topics, but, still, pragmatic conditions prevail. We can negate a statement but only if our negation is related in some obvious way to the prior statement, the one we are negating. My judgments about negation rest upon the very criteria Erteschek-Schir offers: a given paraphrase of a sentence may be determined as grammatical or not on the basis of pragmatic and discourse possibilities.

Kuno (1987, p. 16) explains that the concept of topichood has ramifications in the syntax, or perhaps more accurately that hearers assume topichood in the presence of certain constructions. For instance, a subject is typically taken to be the topic. If it is not the topic but there is a possessive, the latter is taken to be the topic.

7A. The man bought the woman’s portrait of the clowns.

In an “out-of-the-blue” situation, the hearer will assume that this is about the man. Kuno says that this is the “easiest” interpretation. If subsequent conversation shows that the man is not the topic, then it is next taken to be about the woman. It is most difficult, although possible, to take it as being about the clowns.

There are ways to check whether or not a constituent is or can be the topic. Besides the kind of questioning Erteschek-Schir offers, there are regular rules of grammar which can be called upon as well as lexical items which exist specifically to announce a topic, that is to TOPICALIZE constituents, usually nouns. These are called upon when the speaker wishes to ensure that hearers assign topichood to the intended constituent. One syntactic mode of topicalizing is a process called CLEFTING. This
puts a dummy subject like it or this before the noun which is the topic and its puts its verb into a relative clause, as in 7B and C (clefting elements boldfaced):

7B. This is the man who bought the woman’s portrait of the clown.
7C. This is the woman whose portrait of the clowns was bought by the man.

In 7B the subject is the man. This corresponds to the reading of 7A in which one assumed that the sentence is about the man. The second reading of 7A, that the woman in the possessive is the subject, is paraphrasable by 7C.3


We have already seen that both the syntax and meaning of a sentence are dependent upon the discourse or text in which it appears, what VanDijk (1977, 1980, pp. 94–106) calls MACROSTRUCTURES. He claims (1980 131, 229–242) that these differ from phenomena variously known as FRAMES, SCHEMATA, SCRIPTS and STRUCTURES OF EXPECTATION (Chaika 1989, pp. 11–114). Since they have been variously defined and studied, calling upon those terms can constitute serious ambiguities. For these reasons VanDijk’s term is preferable when discussing such matters as relevance and topic. However, it must be borne in mind throughout that we are discussing speech produced in interactions with schizophrenics. We are not discussing problems arising from schizophrenic failure to behave as expected in certain social frames. We are discussing why their discourse fails as discourse linguistically. This may entail the giving of socially inappropriate responses, but it also entails linguistic aberrations definable by linguistic analysis apart from failures in interaction.

Macrostructures are GLOBAL structures to which individual sentences are subordinated. They determine what kinds of sentences are to be produced, what sequencing is allowable, even what kinds of vocabulary may be used. Macrostructures are as various as poems, novels, sermons, classroom lectures, conversations, and dissertations, and even this listing is far from exhaustive. Moreover, all of these can be further subdivided. Conversations, for instance, may range from arguing to kidding to informing, and each of these range from serious to nastiness to frivolity. Although we think of both written and oral communication as ways of
communicating ideas, some macrostructures have no such purpose. For instance in conversation of the "shmoozing" or "shooting the breeze" type, the content of what is said is of little or no importance at all. What is important is its having been said. This is phatic communication, which is also seen in such matters as greetings, congratulating, complimenting, and even ritual insulting.4

Each kind of macrostructure demands its own forms. The kinds of words and grammatical forms demanded of casual phatic conversation are quite different from those demanded in a sermon. "Hi guys, whatcha doin’" is appropriate for quite different social situations than "Sirs, mesdames, may we proceed to the lecture hall." Similarly, both the syntax and vocabulary of formal written language are different from spoken in many respects. These comments may seem to be so self-evident that they hardly bear mentioning, but they must be kept in mind because breaches in the selection of vocabulary and sentence types are deviations as much as inappropriate neologisms are.

Although each evokes different kinds of speech activities, each with its own particular form, all macrostructures are similar in that they proceed from old to new information. That way the hearer/reader is oriented. The explicitness of the orienting segments ranges from the obligatory review of the literature or a summary of experiments in a scholarly publication to a brief phrase or sentence which plugs a cospeaker into the implicit assumptions of personal mutual knowledge in ordinary conversation. The purpose of the speech act and its locus of delivery also influence its form. A sermon in a cathedral is obligatorily more structured and limited in subject matter and form than is an informal chat in the party room of the same edifice.

The macrostructure itself entails or presupposes certain meanings as well as certain forms, and, by so doing, creates coherence. VanDijk (1980) explicitly argues that coherence is effected simply by producing what belongs in the given macrostructure. It seems to me that this position is an entirely expected result of the fact that all utterances bear meaning in reference to their context. A macrostructure forms a context, just as it itself is formed by the locale and purpose of a speaking activity (Chaika 1989, pp. 182–184).

Brown and Yule (1983, p. 83) advance the interesting concept that the communication source activates a pool of presupposition in the receiver, a pool including both personal and cultural knowledge. As we shall see,
there are ways of introducing information which can not be presupposed to be shared.

Constructs like "topic of conversation" or "topic of discourse" refer to semantic properties beyond those of individual sentences within the discourse. Implicata, for instance, are influenced by what we perceive to be the topic of the macrostructure (Chapter 7) strongly influencing our interpretation of what we hear. For instance, consider

8A. Ms. Jones cheats all the time.
8B. She loses all the time anyway.

On the one hand, if we think we are overhearing a conversation about dieting, then 8A gives us no reason to make a negative moral judgment about Ms. Jones. Moreover, in such a context 8B may be an admiring or jealous comment or both. On the other hand, if we think the speaker is talking about an exam, then we do have reason to make such a negative judgment, and 8B becomes a triumphant or vindictive comment. In a sermon, the same sequence would not only be interpreted as a moral discussion, but an example of a greater theological belief, namely that sinners get punished not rewarded for their sins.

Our dependence on perceived topic explains some jokes, like

9A. Z: (coming out of movie): There's nothing better than a good love story.
9B. Too bad this wasn't one of them.

Here, the humor lies in Z's apparently setting up the topic of how good the movie is, so that the negative evaluation contradicts the topic.


Topics, especially in open-ended oral communications, unfold, with exchanges potentially opening up new topics. Even in volatile conversations with a great many topic switches, comments referring to previous contributions can be charted, just as the topic-producing ones can be. If no such linkages can be ascertained, then we judge the speaker as rambling, drunk, or crazy.

VanDijk (1980, p. 43) contends that we infer a MACROPROPOSITION from the sequence of propositions in discourse. He was actually talking of texts here, but the principle is the same in speech. He offers as a test for macropropositions the fact that they can be summarized. However, in
spoken interactions, it is frequently not so easy to find a single global proposition. Typically, there are many topics in a conversation. This is true of extended pieces of writing as in books or even lengthy articles. Therefore, it is usually more accurate to say that one requires a series of summaries which account for changing of topics (Brown and Yule 1983). It must be stressed that these changes are not chaotic. They are introduced in orderly ways.

No one constituent of the discourse or even of a sentence within it need overtly encode what the topic is. A statement of topic should be able to complete the phrase “This is about....” Outside of grammar handbooks, topic sentences are not always overtly encoded in speech or in writing. However, coherent discourse can somehow be summarized as having what Carlson (1983) calls “aboutness.”

This does not mean that all parties to an interaction or all readers of a book agree on what the topic is, or, for that matter, what is being said about it. The speaker may think he or she is speaking on one topic, whereas the hearer may perceive it to be on another. This is usually not fatal to the communication process, however, because participants, when made aware of misunderstandings, can say or write, “You misunderstand. By X, I did not mean Y. I meant Z.”


In one way or another, many who would explain schizophrenic speech comment on its lack of topic. Such vague—and traditional—terms as loose associations or flight of ideas were clearly an attempt to describe such a situation. In order to remedy this imprecision, Andreasen (1979a,b) devised an apparently more precise set of criteria for schizophrenic speech, carefully defining them. Among them, she presents the following as separate diagnostic criteria defining them as follows:

- **DISTRACTIBILITY**, when a patient breaks off repeatedly “in the middle of a sentence or idea and changes the subject in response to a nearby stimulus.”
- **TANGENTIALITY**, irrelevantly answering a question.
- **DERAILMENT**, when “ideas slip off the track onto another one” which may be obliquely or completely unrelated.
- **INCOHERENCE**, incomprehensible speech in which a “series of words or phrases seem to be joined together arbitrarily and at
random,\textsuperscript{6} speech lacking "cementing words" such as subordinating and specifically coordinating conjunctions, and "adjectival pronouns" [terminology hers]\textsuperscript{7} such as the and a(n).

Andreasen's careful definitions were an important step towards much needed precision in the psychiatric discussion of language data. However, as she defines them, the above four terms are all actually instances of straying off a topic, whether that topic is introduced by a co-conversationalist who asks a question, or is one brought up by speakers themselves.

Andreasen's definition of incoherence above specifically mentions some of the syntactic categories which are designed to indicate the relationship between phrases and sentences to an overriding topic: the conjunctions and the noun \textsc{determiners} (articles) the and a(n). Determiners have the function of announcing whether or not nouns are encoding \textsc{new information} or \textsc{old information}. The latter is called \textsc{given information} by some. By indicating whether or not a noun is one that has been mentioned before, noun determiners tell us whether topic is the same or whether a new one is being introduced. That is how these work as "cementing words."

The indefinite article signals new information, that not previously mentioned, and the definite one signals old information as in the interplay between a and the below:

\begin{itemize}
  \item 10A. A dog walked in the room.
  \item 10B. The dog was carrying a bone.
  \item 10C. The bone was messy.
\end{itemize}

Names\textsuperscript{8} typically do not appear with articles because they are specified by the use of the proper noun itself. Often the name introduces a specific individual or location. Thereafter, pronouns or omissions indicate that the same person is being talked about.

Topicalizers, \textsc{topic markers}, also serve to mark out new information. Typically, they set up the hearer's expectations that a stretch of discourse will be following. Unlike the clefting and passive transformations they usually operate on more than a subject of a sentence. The nominal which comes after expressions like the following are taken as the topic:

\begin{itemize}
  \item About last night . . .
  \item As I was saying
  \item Speaking of [name] . . .
  \item Do you remember [name] . . .
\end{itemize}
• You’d never believe it, but . . .
• The subsequent sections deal with . . .
• Today we take as our verse . . .

Some of the most basic rules of grammar have as their raison d’etre the signalling of new and old information. The deployment of such simple devices as the and an in English has such a function. So do such mundane matters as the dummy it and there, which allow the topic to be thrown to the end of the sentence. This is the part of the sentence which typically takes the strongest stress in English.

11A. It is nice that Bob asked you to the prom.
11B. There’s milk in the fridge.


Brown and Yule (1983, p. 71–73) discuss the function of a title as a way of announcing topic. In writing and in certain kinds of formal speech these function as topicalizers. People typically assign meaning according to an announced title. Hearers may even complain if they feel that the title did not fairly represent what was actually said. The title functions as a guide to understanding. One of the schizophrenic participants in my study of narration complained that she could not complete the task because she didn’t know what the title of the videostory was. This conversation ensued:

12A. I don’t know what the title was. [pause] How can I tell you?
(Me: What do you think a good title for it is?)
A pleasant day at the ice cream store. uh [pause] 'n fek [pause]. That's all like I have to say. [long pause]. A pleasant walk to and from [pause] home to the ice cream store. That still isn't right. I should be . . . It should say that it should say that they went in and bought the ice cream and they came out and that's it.
[to me, clearly ex cathedra] You wait a minute. I ha e to get my lighter . . .]
What? Did they sell everything? I didn't observe because I kept fiddling around.

Actually, the patient did summarize the story correctly if you allow for her use of they rather than she. The girl did go in and buy ice cream and did come out, and that is the end of the story. The patient became
derailed over the question of the title, apparently feeling that a video presentation should have one.

Another patient ascribed a title to the video with quite different results

12B. [enunciates clearly with equal stress on each word indicating this is a title] Everyday Life in America.
Little girl in candy store. Runnin' free.
Her parents don't really care. So she gets up and takes to the air...

This was said as if it was intended to be a poem with regular recurring strong beats and pauses at the end of each rhyming word. Before announcing the title, he had created another rhyme

12C. Little girl in candy store. Mommy and Daddy away.
[pause] That day.


Across speakers, perhaps the most extreme instance in which topic constrains what may be said is seen in UTTERANCE PAIRS, variably known as ADJACENCY PAIRS (Sacks 1964–1972; Chaika 1989 pp. 119–131). The former term is preferable because such pairs may not always be adjacent in the conversation. Specifically, utterance pairs occur when one utterance elicits another of a specific form and content. These include phenomena like

- greetings → greeting
- questions → answers
- compliments → acknowledgements
- complaints → excuse, apology, or denial
- request/command-acceptance or rejection.

Whoever receives the first part of the utterance pair has to somehow respond with the other. The first part of the utterance pair constrains both the form of the response and the possible subject matter, that is, the topic. If someone says "hello," the other has to give a greeting. The only way to get out of it is to pretend not to see the greeter, or to be drunk, stoned, or otherwise mentally incapacitated.

It is no accident that so many greetings take the form of questions since in mainstream society, at least, the norm is that questions must be
answered. Moreover, the question must be answered according to the form used by the questioner. A question preceded by what demands a noun, one preceded by a why demands a reason, and a who demands that a person be designated. A yes-no question of the “Are you going?” type must be answered by a yes, no or I don’t know. The squiggles described in Chapter 11 are utterance pairs. Hallowell and Smith (1983), as part of therapy for a schizophrenic patient, offered the patient a line, typically only part of a sentence and the patient completed the sentence. This worked like questions and answers because responses were directly governed by the immediately preceding phrase and left little room for wandering on to other matters.

An answer to a genuine question can often be deferred, as in, “I’m not sure. Let me get back to you later.” The degree to which we are constrained by the topic of a question is beautifully illustrated by insertion sequences (Schegloff 1971). In these, a question is asked as a response to another question, as in

12A. Wanna come to a party?  
   B. Can I bring a friend?  
      A. Male or female?  
      B. Female.  
      A. Sure.  
      B. Yeah, I’d like to come.

The responses are severely constrained here both as to order and to kind of response. B starts the insertion sequence by asking if he can bring a friend. Then A asks about the gender. Then, in the reverse of the order in which they were asked, all three questions get answered. Sometimes when such sequences become derailed, later on in the conversation or even in a subsequent one, one person will answer it, prefacing his or her remarks so that the original question will be recalled or the asker will remind the other to answer:

13A. Oh, gee, I never got around to answering your question . . .  
13B. You asked about the party and I meant to tell you . . .  
13C. We got so sidetracked that you never told me if you . . .

Such verbal placemarkers seem rarely to be used when psychotics become derailed. Whereas normal conversation loops back to an earlier exchange and then builds on it, schizophrenic ones sometimes just keep going linearly, so to speak (Chapter 8). Normal looping adds new mate-
rial to the topic. In contrast, schizophrenic perseveration is characterized by not adding new information. Schizophrenics have two difficulties with topic: progression away from it or repetition of phrases without advancing it at all.


Because of the strong constraints on responses, we would not expect such exchanges to be deviant, but in patients who evince a great deal of disintegration this does occur. Even so, Laffal (1965) reports that his patient, Dean, whose speech was so disrupted that he uttered both gibberish and opposite speech, still attempted to answer questions, as did Robertson and Shamsie's (1958) patient who apparently produced copious amounts of gibberish. The following exchange transpired between X, reported on in Chaika (1974), and an unidentified woman poking her head into the room and asking

14. W: Hello. Anybody here want some coffee?
   [pause]
   X: Head, heart, hands, health.

The [h]'s in W's pronunciation of “Hello” and “here” were aspirated with unusual strength and held longer than usually, sounding on the tape almost like slight short-term hissing. What is noteworthy about X's response is that it was clearly motivated by the sound [h], not by the form or content of the question. This, of course, is never normal. One has to respond to both the syntactic form and semantic content of a question.

Sometimes schizophrenics do respond correctly to questions and other utterance pairs. X herself did “answer” the question, bizarrely to be sure, but still recognizably an answer. She just responded to the wrong part of the message. Laffal (1965) reports that his patient, Dean, whose speech was highly disrupted, also attempted to answer questions, as did Robertson and Shamsie's (1958) patient who produced gibberish. They interpreted his gibberish as real language, volitionally produced, explaining that his gibberish responses arose from his not being “prepared” to answer any inquiries about what it meant. The validity of such an assertion aside, even so severely disordered a patient as they describe still attempted to answer questions, that is, to obey this essentially social requirement. It was his linguistic ability which was not up to the task. If people are being
uncooperative, they do not answer at all or evade the issue by trying to initiate a new topic.


An added complication to the notion of subject of a sentence is the relationship between the subject and the theme of the sentence as opposed to what is being said about it, the rHEME. These are often referred to as the TOPIC versus the COMMENT and coincide with what traditional grammars call the subject and the predicate.

Halliday (1965, p. 37) explains that the first constituent of the sentence is the theme, "...[the] speaker's point of departure for the clause. He believes that the theme and the subject are not necessarily the same constituent of the sentence, a position independently arrived at by Jeng (1982) from his studies of Mandarin Chinese. According to Halliday, in 15A, the theme and the subject do coincide, but in 15B they do not since the theme is yesterday but the subject is they:

15A. They freed the whales yesterday.
15B. Yesterday, they freed the whales.

There are difficulties with the absoluteness of Halliday’s analysis (Lyons 1977, p. 508), not the least of which is that considering the first element as the theme no matter what that element is, is circular. The theme is the first element and the first element is the theme. In addition, the first element in the sentence may be a topicalizer. What follows that is the theme, but the first element is not itself the theme.

The theme in the sense of aboutness can be expressed also by such devices as anaphora and deixis. Undoubtedly the reason that it is so common for sentences to start with pronouns is that they signal that the speaker is still talking about the same person or thing. In such a case, the first element is the theme. Another objection to the equation of theme with sentence position is that often, introductory adverbs and adverbial clauses like yesterday or because of you serve the purpose of orienting one to the discourse following. That is, these provide a context, but the actual theme of the discourse is about someone or something else. Where there is a choice of subject, as in a trivalent verb that allows a subject, object or dative, the particular noun chosen is often the theme, although, as we have seen at other times the choice of subject is dictated by a desire to waffle or to avoid repetition.
Carlson (1983, pp. 242–246) demonstrates that one can make a case for all or at least more than one of the constituents in a sentence being what the sentence is about, showing that

16A. Mr. Morgan is a careful researcher and a knowledgeable semiticist, but his originality leaves something to be desired. (Carlson, p. 243)

can be construed as being about Mr. Morgan or about his scholarly abilities. Similarly, in an ordinary spoken sentence like

16B. Max gave Griselda a diamond ring.

we can say that the sentence is about Max, Griselda, the diamond ring, or the act of giving which, in itself, implies that Max intended to become engaged to Griselda by his offering.

So long as we are hung up on the notion of the sentence as the bearer of topic and theme, we will continue to face such uncertainty. The problem disappears when we consider that the sentence is part of a larger construct: the discourse and its context of utterance or text. Considered this way, theme is what the entire discourse is about, which each constituent in the sentence “may pick out, refer to, or stand for” (Carlson, p. 244). This requires one modification: the theme is what a stretch of discourse is about, for topics do change in discourses.

Lyons neatly explains how the theme may influence at least some passives. He (1977, pp. 510–511) asserts that humans naturally are more interested in humans than in other entities, and that this interest explains which constituent was chosen as the subject. In turn, this can lead to the passive if the object was made subject. For instance, he gives as examples:

17A. A man was stung by a bee in the High Street today.
17B. A bee stung a man in the High Street today.

Lyons contends that 17A is more usual than 17B because humans are more interested in men than in bees. Hence, in Hallidayan terms, it is more natural to select man as the theme as in 17A, than it is to use the active as in 17B. Kuno would say that the perspective is from the human's point of view. In other words, the selection of the object as subject here arises from a natural tendency to thematize human perspectives.

The role that theme, subject, and empathy play in actual narrative is illustrated in the following collected as part of the Ice Cream Stories. Both were produced by patients with the discharge diagnosis of schizo-
phrenia, but the first was not an SD schizophrenic and the second was. The boldface in each indicates each topic and theme encoded:

17C. A little girl was looking in a window of a Baskin-Robbins ice cream shop 'n she wanted some ice cream and uh she went home and asked her mother if she could have some ice cream and her mother said it's too close to supper an' she asked her father for some ice cream an' her father gave her some money an she went down to the ice cream parlor and bought a double scoop of ice cream.

17D. One was about I think a little girl or boy having a ball and having to be real careful about crossin' the street an' I might be mistaken. I was just thinking of movies I've watched . . . It seems like what children do in their actions just exemplify what grown-ups are like an' it just gives grown-ups a better idea to think that they are necessarily better than children y'know an' I think it's time to really talk now approaching 1980's,10 And peop'—kids goin' to college and things like that. I haven't even finished ya know it's ridiculous.

The first is well formed discourse as well as consisting of well formed sentences. The very first sentence thematizes girl by mentioning it first. The anaphoric reference she ties the next three predicates together to this first mention. Then the anaphoric reference her links the mention of her parents to the preceding. The parents are seen only in reference to the girl's wishes, which is as it should be. The anaphoric reference in the last sentence ties it all up. Moreover, it consistently encodes the action from the perspective of the little girl, showing empathy for her.

In contrast, although 17B like 17A shows no disruption in sentential syntax or word choice per se, it is deviant. It is only when one examines it from the point of view of the theme and subject of the sentences that we see what is wrong. The sequence opens with a recognized and correctly used topicalizer, “one was about . . .” which introduces the little girl or boy. First the speaker correctly topicalizes with [was about + mention of NP], here, the child. Both the facts that the child was “having a ball” and “crossing the street” are possible and logical, and ellipsis is used correctly in not repeating the subject before both verbs.11 Given the clearly marked topic the next sentence should deal with the child and crossing the street. Instead, a second topic is announced, the movies the narrator had seen. I think of is often used as a topicalizer, so is it seems, the opener of the very next sentence. The reference to kids' going to college is completely unprepared. Being careful about crossing the street and kids' emulation
of adults are tenuous threads to the remark about the 1980s and higher education. So far, we have seen three topicalizers and not one theme. None of the topicalizing sentences are followed by any expansion of the topic, although it is not hard to explain why the speaker introduced these three topics together:

- the video was of a child
- videos remind people of movies
- children do imitate adults

The semantic content of each sentence is fine, but our feeling that the speaker is flitting from topic to topic is explained by the successive topicalizing with no elaboration. The speaker is flitting from topic to topic. At the third, it seems as if the speaker has finally settled on children as his theme, but the conjoined mention of grown-ups' thinking that they are superior to children is a jolt because now the theme has become grown-ups just when we thought it was children. There is also no consistency of perspective. It, too, flits from the narrator to the child to the narrator.


After its introduction, the theme is given information, referring to something already present in the verbal and nonverbal context (Lyons 1977, p. 508; Halliday 1985, p. 275). The sentence is composed of a theme and a rheme or comment. Some scholars speak of the theme versus rheme of the sentence, and other refer to the topic versus comment of the sentence. For the most part, these are simply different terms for the same thing, although the pairs are not interchangeable. If one decides upon theme, then it must be opposed to rheme, and topic has to co-occur with comment. Often, in fact, usually, these coincide with the traditional complete subject and complete predicate. All of these actually refer to the flow from old to new information that sentences within a discourse ideally have. Such notational variants using different terms for the same entity and the same terms for different ones afflicts all scholarly fields.

No matter what they call them, discourse analysts agree that many naturally occurring sentences have a given and a new component (Lyons 1977, pp. 508–510; Brown and Yule, 1983 pp. 153–189). Van Dijk (1980, p. 94) elaborates, saying that the subject (a.k.a. topic, theme) the part of the sentence is "information that is already introduced (...) already supposed
... to be known ..., or otherwise given or started from” and the predicate (a.k.a. comment, rheme) expresses “new, unknown, unpredictable, ... information” about the topic (all italics his).12 For this reason, such markers of old information as pronouns or deictics usually occur in subject position. As already shown in discussing cohesion, given information can also refer to information known by previous interactions, the physical context or cultural knowledge. This leads to the optimal flow of old to new information with heavily modified constituents at the end of the sentence.

When new information can fill the subject position, there is a very strong tendency to throw it to the end of the sentence leaving a dummy *it* or *there* as the subject, as in

18A. Roses are on the table.
18B. There are roses on the table
18C. That you came was nice.
18D. It was nice that you came.

As valid as these examples are, and as accurate as the observation is that sentences tend to flow from old to new information, it is still a dubious claim to say that is how all sentences progress. Sentences in isolation do travel from old to new information, as do many sentences in a discourse but, again within the discourse, many sentences in their entirety simply repeat the information or messages given before although not necessarily in the same words and syntax. Culturally known items might be mentioned. This can be done very effectively—or annoyingly—to emphasize a point or to mark out for the hearer that something prior is being brought up again. The flow from old to new information is also a feature of skillful rhetoric, but not all rhetoric is skillful and that which is not is not necessarily psychotic or deranged. In a psychotic population we would expect that flow to be interrupted more than it is in normals since, as a byproduct of psychosis, a speaker may not be in control. The defining difference between normals and psychotics is the way that distinctly psychotic speech does not flow. It is blocked by perseverations of all sorts (Chapters 1 and 2). In contrast, normal speech which is faulty in presentation of new and old information is clumsy or boring (e.g., Williams 1981).

Looking again at the following response to the question about where the patient lived and what it was like living in that place, we see the extent of deviation possible in schizophrenic perseverations.

19. Mill Avenue is a house in between avenues U and avenue T I live on Mill Avenue for a period of for now a period of maybe
fifteen year for around approximate fifteen years I like it the fam—I like every family on Mill Avenue I like every family in the world I like every family in The United State of America I like every family on on Mill Avenue I like Mill Avenue is a is a block with that is busy cars always pass by all the time I always look out the window of my front porch front porch at time when I s- when I’m not sure if it’s possible about the way I think I could read people mind about people’s society attitude plot and spirit so I think I could read their mind as they drive by in the car sh- will I see Paradise will I not see Paradise should I answer should I not answer I not answer w- their thought of how I read think I could read their mind about when they pass by in the car in the house pass by in the car from my house I just correct for them for having me feel better about myself not answer will I should I answer should I not answer will I see Paradise will I not see Paradise I just correct them to have me feel better about myself about the way I think I can hear their mind r- about the way I think I could read their mind as they pass by the house Mill Avenue is also Mill Avenue is also a place of great event for all the families that live on Mill Avenue always eht- receive world wide attention and I am o- I am just one of the families live on Mill Avenue that always receive world wide attention so therefore [unintelligible] to receive world wide attention is receive world wide attention is some some you should be proud of you should be proud of world wide attention [unintelligible] there’s the family are just too out in the open not to have world wide attention so they all have world wide attention by the cars pa— that pass in the front cars that pass by all the time so therefore Mill Avenue is also a a I like a quiet residential n- block like a quiet residential block with a Italian people talk outside by the fence discuss their feelings their attitudes their opinions opinion about any story feeling concept idea or sentence that they may have and once again when I look outside the window because I think I could read people’s minds about people’s society attitude plot and spirit w-should I answer should I not answer will I see Paradise will I not see Paradise I not answer correct them have me feel about better about myself like I said before I’m not sure if it’s possible about the way I think I could read people mind about people’s society attitude plot and spirit so I not answer them I just correct them have me feel better about myself Mill Avenue is also a place where people gather in back yards to have people gather in back yards to have a barbecue
in the back yard to have relative over to have friend over to talk in the back yard to be merry with each other. (data courtesy of Dr. Bonnie Spring)

There is neither a flow from given to new information, nor is there any relevance achieved. Rather the same phrases are repeated cyclically and no connections are made between the problem of seeing Paradise and the street where he lives. Perhaps he is reminded of death, hence Paradise because of the connection between people's plotting and death. It is possible to make some sense of this, at least from the written transcript which gives us the luxury of slowly analyzing what was said. Spoken, as in the original tape recording, one makes no sense out of it at all. The lack of pronouns seriously impedes our understanding. Even in writing, our usual means of comprehending do not work. As with glossomania, we can only seek an explanation of why these phrases are juxtaposed.


Prince (1981), with much justice, complains that different scholars have used the concept of given versus new information in three somewhat different ways, thus rendering the concept imprecise. Given information has been considered to be information which is predictable, shared, or salient. If the information is predictable, then it is recoverable from the context if it is not fully expressed. We have already seen the importance of anaphora in showing whether or not a constituent has been already introduced.

Prince (1981), discriminates between two kinds of new information: salient and brand new information. Givenness in the sense of being salient refers to information that the speaker assumes to be in the consciousness of the hearer (Chafe quoted by Prince, p. 228). In this sense, for an NP to be properly signalled as a given entity, it must have been mentioned in the discourse, or be in the same category of something which has been mentioned. A third possibility is that the NP can refer to something in the physical context of the interaction. For instance, in the Ice Cream Stories (Chaika and Alexander 1986; Chapter 8), many people spoke of a little girl asking her mother for ice cream, without introducing the mother as new information. The fact of having mentioned the child was sufficient for the existence of the mother, as in:
20A. A little girl was looking in a window of a Baskin Robins ice cream shop 'n she wanted some ice cream and uh she went home and asked her mother if she could have some ice cream....

20B. Um—in an ice cream store she was lookin' in to see if she could get any she went home her mother said....

In both of these the mention of the mother is the first mention in the discourse. Mothers are salient because children are presumed to have them and it is also presumed that they are the ones to give permission to eat ice cream.

Prince suggests that the term *shared knowledge* be replaced by *assumed familiarity*, since all anyone can do is assume what another knows. She suggests that there are two different kinds of new information. If the hearer already knows about the entity being introduced, it is simply new. In contrast, if the speaker introduces something the hearer doesn't know about, then that entity is brand new. Brand new information has to be created in the hearer's mind. This, of course, puts a greater burden on the speaker in presenting enough information so that the hearer can create what was intended.

To see the difference between these two types of new information, consider the following (examples and analysis mine):

21A. Freud certainly shook up the world of medicine.

21B. Jerry Jones certainly shook up the world of medicine.

21A is fine. I have invoked mention of someone my readers have knowledge of. They know he lived. They know he was a physician, and that he had radical ideas about the human mind. They also know that he has had a great influence on 20th century thought. I am introducing him as new to this discussion, but I don't have to create him in the reader's mind. In fact, I can say many things about him without very much preparation because I assume familiarity. 21A works very well as an utterance bringing up new information.

In contrast, 21B doesn't work well at all for introducing new information, unless fortuitously some reader knows a Jerry Jones who had a strong effect on the world of medicine. Here, Jerry Jones has to be created (in Prince's sense) in the reader's mind by syntactic and lexical choices, as in

21C. I used to know this guy who was named Jerry Jones and he sure shook up the world of medicine when he...
21D. A man named Jerry Jones had a profound effect on the medical community because he....

Mechanisms for introducing brand new information abound in both speech and writing. In 21C, the expression *this guy* is a colloquialism indicating “I'm going to tell you about someone you don't know of.” The indefinite *a* in 21D can be used for salient and brand new information, but the clincher for brand new information in this sentence is the phrase *named Jerry Jones*. This always indicates that nonsalient new information is being introduced. Relative clauses and participles both are frequent markers of brand new information, as in 21C and D respectively. For instance, note the disparity in

21E. *Our mother named Tessie Dorgan gave you this note, dear.*

The distinction between the two kinds of new information appears to be useful in analyzing schizophrenic discourse. When discussing exophora, I noted that using a *she* for first mention of a girl shown in a video was not deviant if the patient had viewed the video with the experimenter. The child in the video was in the patient's consciousness and, presumably, mine since we had both watched the video together. Hence the patient could assume that the reference was salient.

However, in the following, failing to introduce something as brand new information contributes to the deviation of the passages. In 22A, brand new information is presented as if it were simply new salient information. This narrative also contains gibberish, so that the failures in presenting information as brand new or not is matched by a general disruption in linguistic ability.

22A. Okay. I was watching a *film of a girl* and um s bring back memories of things that happened to people around me that affected me during the time when I was living in that area and she just went to the store for a candy bar and by the time oooh of course her brother who was supposed to be watching wasn't paying much attention he was blamed for and I didn't think that was fair the way the way they did that either so that's why I'm just asking yah could we just get together and try to work it out all together for one big party or something ezz it hey if it we'd all in which is in not they've been here....

In 22B, we see typical schizophrenic repetition about his sleeping for 11 weeks. Then the the patient erroneously signals *the man* as if it were
given information, but this is the first mention of the man and he is nowhere introduced. Then the narrator fails to tell us why his father told him to call the police. Here, the why is the essential brand new information to ground the events of the narrative. Since she was not dealing with the kinds of data presented here, Ellen Prince (1981) claimed that her formulation of new and brand new information always falls on nouns, but examples like this show that adverbials also may be involved. In the following, an adverbial clause is required in order to explain the reason.

22B. I was sleeping in bed on top of my bed from the last time I got out of the hospital which was about 11 weeks that I was released I was lying top of bed for the 11 weeks that I was released and and my father told to call the police car and the police car enter over my house the man stepped out of the police car and he w—entered my house with two patrolmen and they patrolman cherry and patrolman alcolino . . .

One problem in trying to use distinctions such as Prince's in the disordered speech of schizophrenics is that some might say that neologisms and even outright gibberish are brand new information that hasn't been introduced correctly. I would put limits on any analysis of new and old information, such that we presume an error only if we can recognize the words and the markers themselves such as articles, pronouns, adjectives, relative clauses, or any other recognizable construction that is used to identify new information or refer to old.


Kuno (1987, p. 17) coins the term HYPER-TOPIC to indicate "a paragraph topic or a conversation topic" as distinct from the subject of a sentence. He offers an important insight, that there is a LATENT TOPIC as well, and this usually is the speaker, the first person, the ego, the I. That is, it is assumed that whatever we say we are talking about our own perspective and experiences. He shows how the hyper-topic interacts with the latent first person topic, as in the following example, which for brevity's sake I have here paraphrased.

23A. I have been collecting pictures of movie stars, and I can show them to you, but I cannot show you my picture of Marilyn Monroe.
Kuno points out that such a discourse is, indeed, on one level about the first person. This constitutes the latent or hyper-topic, but the picture of Marilyn Monroe is what Kuno terms the prominent topic. Notice here that the actress mentioned can be isolated with clefting.\(^{14}\)

23B. It is Marilyn Monroe's picture which I cannot show you.

But it is odd to topicalize *I* or even *my*.

23C. *It is I who cannot show you my picture of Marilyn Monroe.*

23D. *Regarding me, I cannot show you my picture of Marilyn Monroe.*

23E. S: I took aerobic dancing until I broke a toe.
    H: Oh, how is it?
    S: I don't know. It wasn't my toe.

I suggest that 23C and D are strange because it is rarely the case that speakers have to emphasize that the discourse is about themselves. That is presumed, hence latent. If it is already presumed to be a topic, then there is no reason for topicalizing it. We topicalize only new or brand-new information. Similarly, the humor of 23E resides in the expectation that S is talking about herself, the latent topic being *I*. Notice that none of these violate syntactic rules. There is no grammar rule which would exclude them. By themselves, they are perfectly good English, questionable only in terms of requirements of discourse.

Notes

1Here and elsewhere in actual quotes, this sexist choice of pronoun is Kuno's.

2Although they might prefer to have their tongues cut out with burning pincers rather than admit it, the transformationalists did the same thing that traditional grammarians had always done: they invented sentences and rules based upon their own notion of their own speech.

3Kuno says that all NP's in a sentence cannot be topicalized. He finds it impossible to topicalize *clowns* as in *These are the clowns who the man bought the woman's portrait of.* Kuno claims that the strangeness of this is caused by the possessive. I suspect that another reason this paraphrase seems queer is the very complexity of the sentence which entails one's keeping track both of the noun that goes with the preposition and even the distance of *the clowns* from its preposition.

4Typically, these are insults clearly given in jest. Socially, they relieve hostilities safely in tense situations. In some cultures they are readily used to test verbal prowess, as in adolescent male "your mother" jibes. These originated in black male verbal contests called variously *sounding, chopping, cutting, ranking,* and *ragging.*

5These are only some of the criteria on which she diagnoses schizophrenia.
Andreasen also includes under this term such phenomena as word salads and schizophasia.

The determiners the, and an are not pronouns. They do not replace nouns or any constituent of a sentence. Nor do they function as adjectives. Adjectives come between the determiner and the noun; moreover, they can take a word indicating degree as in “very happy” or “most generous.” There is no category of “adjective pronouns” in syntax.

Actually, in English, names for animate creatures, most countries, states, cities, and towns do not have articles before them, but rivers, oceans, and mountain ranges do, as in The Mississippi, The Atlantic, or The Rockies. Lakes and individual mountains do not take the article, but they are typically preceded or followed by the words Lake and Mountain, respectively. Such variation clearly serves the function of building up redundancy in the message, while still specifying exactly.

When speaking about duration and strength of an individual sound, it should be realized that we are talking about milliseconds. The human ear is able to recognize as distinct differences between sounds that are almost imperceptible on a spectrograph, and sounds that differ in length so slightly that special equipment is needed to record them.

These data were collected from 1978–1980.

However, it is inaccurate. The video did not show a child having a ball in any sense of those words, nor was there anything about crossing the street. These inaccuracies aren’t linguistic ones, just perceptual ones. Additionally, this was elicited one week after viewing the video. He wasn’t sure how many videos he had seen; hence, the use of one rather than it.

Notice that these findings, that the flow of information in the sentence should go from old to new information, therefore the unstressed to the stressed, from short structures to long is diametrically opposed to what students learn in school. They are told to put the important information first. This is always the new information. One of the reasons for the denseness of scholarly and bureaucratic writing is that it violates the flow from old to new information.

Dr. Spring does not necessarily endorse my interpretations of these data, however.

All of these examples and topic tests are mine, not Kuno’s.