Configurational Information Structure: Evidence from Brazilian Portuguese

Renato Lacerda, University of Connecticut

A controversial ongoing debate in linguistics is how particular syntactic structures are converted into Information Structure (IS) configurations, such as topic-comment and focus-presupposition. Recent analyses can be categorized in two main opposing views: Cartographic and Configurational. Cartographic approaches postulate a fixed hierarchy of functional heads in the clausal spine (TopicP/FocusP), whose role is to license (via Spec-Head agreement) the interpretation of topics and foci; in this approach, topic and focus interpretation is read off fixed positions in the clausal spine. In Configurational approaches, operations that are independently available in the syntax may create structures that can be “mapped” onto specific IS configurations at the interfaces; topic and focus interpretation is not associated with fixed positions. In part due to the syntactic properties of the languages observed and in part due to the birthplaces of such opposing approaches, Cartographic analyses are common in the literature on “scrambling languages” such as Germanic and Slavic (Neeleman & van de Koot 2008, 2010, Horvath 2010, Konietzko & Winkler 2010, Fanselow & Lenertová, 2011, a.o.).

In this paper, I argue for a Configurational approach in a Romance language, namely Brazilian Portuguese (BP). In particular, I present here the evidence coming from the behavior of aboutness topics. As (1B1–B2) show, aboutness topics can only be licensed in a left-peripheral position. The discourse particle já unambiguously indicates an aboutness-shifting move (in the sense of Bianchi & Frascarelli 2010) and cannot be licensed if the element it marks is sentence-internal. The contrast between (1B1–B2) illustrates the requirement that aboutness topics conform to the traditional topic-comment articulation, whereby a topic is associated with a comment (usually assumed to be a semantic object no smaller than a full proposition). While in a Cartographic approach já o Barriers must be in Spec,TopicP in the CP domain, in a Configurational approach it suffices for the interpretive interface that it is higher than ele não leu (cf. (2)).

(1) A: O Pedro leu O Programa Minimalista pra escrever o trabalho final.
   ‘Peter read The Minimalist Program to write the term paper.’

B1: Já o BarriersAT, ele não leu.
   Já the Barriers he not read

B2: *Ele não leu já o BarriersAT.
   he not read Já the Barriers
   ‘Now BarriersAT, he didn’t read it.’

(2) a. [CP [TopicP [Já o Barriers] [TopP Top0 [TP ele não leu _ ] ]]] Cartographic
    b. [CP [XP [Já o Barriers] [XP ele não leu _ ]]] Configurational

Let us now look at subject topics. As (3B1–B2) show, the subject topic may or may not be associated with a resumptive pronoun. The relevant question here is whether the topic já o João is in the same syntactic position in (3B1) and (3B2) (and whether that position is the same position occupied by já o Barriers in (1B1)). Under Cartographic assumptions, all these topics must be in the same position, Spec,TopicP, the sole position that can license their topicality. Under Configurational assumptions, these topics can be in different positions, as long as they precede a well-formed comment to form a valid topic-comment structure.

(3) A: O Pedro leu dez livros do Chomsky pra escrever o trabalho final.
   ‘Peter read ten books by Chomsky to write the term paper.’

B1: Já o JoãoAT não leu nenhum.
   Já the John not read none
   ‘Now JohnAT didn’t read any.’

B2: Já o JoãoAT, ele não leu nenhum.
   Já the John he not read none
   ‘Now JohnAT, he didn’t read any.’

I will now argue that já o João occupies two distinct syntactic positions in (3B1) and (3B2), which will be taken as evidence for the Configurational approach. It is assumed in the literature on BP that pre-verbal subjects occupy Spec,TP, this being a non-pro-drop language. Under Configurational assumptions, a subject in Spec,TP is already higher than a potential comment and should therefore be able to be interpreted.
as an aboutness topic — given the widely assumed predicate-internal subject hypothesis, the comment in (3B1) includes a trace/copy of the subject itself, thus being a fully-saturated proposition. Therefore, no “subject-to-topic” movement in (3B1) is enforced for interpretive reasons — left dislocation, being available in the syntax, also complies with the topic-comment articulation and is therefore also an option. Note that já o João forms a single intonational unit with the TP in (3B1), whereas it forms a separate intonational unit in (3B2) (i.e., there must be an intonational break between the topic and the comment in (3B2) but not in (3B1)), suggesting that the subject topic occupies different syntactic positions in the two structures. Another contrast between non-resumed and resumed versions of subject topics is seen in (4B1–B2). While the non-resumed (4B1) is a transparent domain for extraction, the resumed (4B2) creates an island (although já cannot appear in embedded clauses, prosody and interpretation of aboutness topic is granted for o João in (4B1)). It cannot be the case then that o João in (4B1) sits in a dislocated topic-specific position in the CP domain, for no topic island is created here.

(4) A: A Maria disse que o Pedro paga as contas dele com cartão de crédito.
   ‘Mary said that Peter pays his bills with a credit card.’
   B1: E como ela disse [que o João paga as contas dele?]
      and how she said that the John pays the bills of-his
   B2: *E como ela disse [que o João, ele paga as contas dele?]
      and how she said that the John he pays the bills of-his
      ‘And how did she say that John pays his bills?’

Additional evidence for the Configurational approach is given in (5). BP is a language where wh-elements may appear either in the left periphery or in situ. If the wh-object is left-dislocated, as in (5B1), the já-marked subject cannot stay in Spec,TP; the wh-object is part of the comment and must be under the topic (i.e., the material following the topic is not a full proposition and does not qualify as a comment). Then, the subject too must be dislocated (to a position higher than the wh-object) and be resumed by a pronoun, as in (5B2). If there is no resumption, as in (5B3), the sentence is ruled out. The fact that a dislocated subject topic must be associated with an overt resumptive is evidence that there is no subject-to-topic movement in (3B1) (for there is no overt resumption), which is at odds with Cartographic assumptions. If the wh-object is realized in situ, as in (5B4), no issue arises and the aboutness subject may remain in its canonical position — with dislocation again also being an option, as in (5B5), since it is independently available in the syntax and the result complies with the interpretive requirements of the topic. (The paradigm in (5) additionally sheds light on the nature of wh- in situ in the language: There is no covert movement. If the wh- moved covertly in (5B4), (5B4) should have the same bad status as (5B1) and (5B3), wh-movement of the object being impossible in the absence of an overt subject resumptive pronoun in this paradigm.)

   ‘Peter read ten books by Chomsky to write the term paper.’
   B1: *O que já o João leu?
      what já the John read
   B2: Já o João, o que ele leu?
      já the John what he read
   B3: ?*Já o João, o que leu?
      já the John what read
   B4: Já o João leu o quê?
      já the John read what
   B5: Já o João, ele leu o quê?
      já the John he read what
      ‘What about João, what did he read?’

The patterns above therefore show that the interpretation of subjects as aboutness topics in BP is not contingent on their being on the specifier of a topic-dedicated position in the CP; rather, what we see in this language is that the same element can have the same informational role in distinct syntactic positions, which is only expected under Configurational assumptions. Given the privileged canonical position of subjects in BP, the interfaces can interpret them as aboutness topics without any additional operations in the syntax.