1 Two types of topic

(1) Mr. Morgan is a careful researcher and a knowledgeable Semiticist, but his originality leaves something to be desired.

(2) Sentence topic: (1) is about Mr. Morgan

(3) Discourse topic: (1) is about Mr. Morgan’s scholarly ability

• Sentence topics must correspond to an expression in the sentence, whereas discourse topics are topics of larger units and can be more abstract

2 Defining sentence topics

• Sentence topic cannot be defined based solely on syntactic structures, as different uses of the same sentence can have different sentence topics.

(4) a. Bill saw Lee yesterday → Bill is topic
(5) a. Did anybody see Lee yesterday?
    b. Bill saw Lee yesterday → Lee is topic

• Previous approaches to defining the relation TOPIC OF
  
  – Directly on linguistic structures - linear order: the first expressions of a sentence, grammatical structures: the subject of the sentence, intonation: the non-stressed expression
  – Psychological terms - the speaker’s intentions and interests

• Reinhart adopts the approach that topic defines the expression whose referent the sentence is about.
2.1 What does it mean to be pragmatically about?

- Two types of criteria: background purpose of the utterance, and verification

- Background purpose of the utterance can be divided into two principles
  - The Principle of the Presumption of Knowledge: assertions “commonly depend for their effect upon knowledge assumed to be already in the audience’s possession”
  - The Principle of Relevance: discourse does not proceed arbitrarily, but rather relates itself to and makes use of what is presumed to be known, and “intends... to give or add information about what is a matter of... current interest”

- Verification: for All crows are black, do we check the set of all crows to see if any are not black, or the set of all non-black things to see if any crows are there?

2.2 Old information

- Some have said that the only criterion upon which to base topichood is whether the information is new or old (where topic = old information)

- The aboutness approach views topichood as a relation between an argument and a proposition relative to a context, whereas the old information view sees it as a property of the referents denoted by the expression in the context

- Old information view has three major criteria for “oldness”
  - Predictability - information is old if its present mention could be predicted from previous discourse
  - Saliency/immediate awareness - information is old if it can be assumed to be directly in the immediate consciousness of the participants
  - Shared knowledge - information is old if it is generally known to the participants, and they can infer it from the given discourse even though they needn’t be immediately aware of it

3 Syntactic restrictions on possible topics

- There is a strong preference to interpret the grammatical subject as topic, or to place the topic in subject position. This is not always the case, though:

  (6) Kracauer’s book is probably the most famous ever written on the subject of the cinema. Of course, many more people are familiar with the book’s catchy title than are acquainted with its turgid text.

- Some syntactic structures have fixed topic positions, especially fronted NP’s/Left Dislocation:
Since syntactic structures specify what the topic of a sentence must be, we can use them as a test of topichood - but we need to be careful, as topicalization and left dislocation are restricted anyway.

(8) He said about the book that many more people are familiar with its catchy title...

4 Semantic restrictions on possible topics

• Topichood is sensitive to both the semantics of the NP itself and to its semantic relations with the sentence. Quantified NPs/those that cannot cannot be interpreted as referential are rarely topics:

(9) a. There is a fly in my tea
    b. ?? As for a fly, it’s in my tea

• NPs are more likely to be topics if the reported state of affairs AFFECTS that NP:

(10) a. Laura is standing near Felix → Laura is topic
    b. As for Felix, Laura is standing near him → Felix is topic

(11) a. ? Speaking of Athena, I lost a book about her
    b. Speaking of Athena, I read a book about her

5 Effect of topic on sentence interpretation

• Presupposition: Strawson thinks that examples like the one below do not lack a truth value, even though the second argument fails to refer. He argues that absorption of a referential expression in the predicate is only possible when that expression is not the topic

(12) The exhibition was visited yesterday by the King of France

• Anaphora: What the topic of a sentence is may change the interpretation of a pronoun

(13) a. Felix_i hit Max and then he_j hit Bill
    b. Felix hit Max_j and then he_j hit Bill

(14) a. Can you give me an exact description of Max’s role in the fight?
    b. Felix hit Max_j and then he_j hit Bill
6 Problems with the *Old Information* account

- You can’t define topichood based solely on properties of the referent

(15)  
  a. Who did Kara praise?
  
  b. Kara praised *Karl* → Kara is old information and topic

(16)  
  a. Who did Kara praise?
  
  b. Kara praised *herself* → Referent is same

- In (16), the referents are the same, meaning that with the definitions of ‘old’ and ‘new’ information, Kara is simultaneously in and not in the participants’ immediate awareness or general consciousness

- Topics can’t be defined as ‘old information’ as this is not a sufficient condition - we can mention individuals which were already mentioned in the previous discourse although they are not the topic of the present discourse

- Topics are not always ‘old information’, as this may be caused by other requirements of discourse cohesion

7 The Context Set

- Since we cannot define topics in terms of the effect of previous discourse (old vs. new), we should try to define them in terms of their effect on ongoing discourse

- The Context Set of a given discourse at a given time is the set of the propositions which we accept to be true at that point. In felicitous discourse, speakers are assumed to share the same context set

- During the construction of the context set, the speakers attempt some organization and classification of information → sentence topics are one way to organize or classify information that is being exchanged

8 Possible Pragmatic Assertions (PPAs)

- Each declarative sentence is associated with a set of PPAs, which means that the sentence can be used to introduce the content of any of those assertions in the context set.

(17)  
  Let φ denote the proposition expressed by sentence S
  
  Let PPAS denote the set of PPAs of S
  
  Let α represent the interpretation of an NP expression in S PPAS = φ
together with <α,φ>
• In other words, the members of $PPA_S$ are the proposition expressed by $S$ and each possible pair one of whose members is this proposition and the other is an interpretation of an NP in $S$. $\alpha$ corresponds to sentence topic, or $S$ is pragmatically about $\alpha$.

• In *All crows are black*, with topic *all crows*, the proposition expressed will be assessed by checking what we know about crows, rather than about all non-black entities.

• The syntactic form and semantic interpretation of a sentence may restrict the possible set of PPAs.

• The *selection function* maps each pair of $<C,S>$ ($C = \text{context}$) onto a member of the set $PPA_S$.

• Select $<\alpha_1, \phi>$ if $\alpha_1$ is already in your context set, unless $\phi$ is linked by a semantic connector to the previous proposition in $C$, or the utterance of $S$ starts a new segment in $C$ in which cases, select any member of $PPA_S$ → this captures the fact that there is a preference to identify topic with ‘old information’, but need not be.

• When permitted by the previous rule, select $<\alpha_1, \phi>$ if $\alpha_1$ is the interpretation of the subject of $S$ → this captures properties of the syntactic and semantic processing of sentences.