A Study on Topicalization and Focalization in the Zanjani Dialect

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Abstract: Topicalization and focalization are syntactic issues studied in a variety of languages. Topicalization is defined as the proposing of a constituent to the beginning of the sentence. It has the old information and the rest of the sentence is about it. Focalization, on the other hand, is a process in which a constituent may stay put in its canonical position represented by a relativizer or may be preposed, but bearing the new information. To study these issues, we studied the Zanjani dialect, an offshoot of the Azeri language. We analyzed sentences in a number of film scripts and found that the minimal program may not be able to deal with these issues in this dialect, and that information structure theories may be used to consider topicalization and focalization in this dialect.

Keywords: Topicalization, Focalization, Azeri Language, The Zanjani Dialect, Minimal Program, Information Structure

About the Author

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Introduction

Relocation of sentence constituents in general, and topicalization in particular has been studied by a number of linguistics (Halliday, 1985; Rizzi, 1997; Lambrecht, 1994; Prince, 1992). Topicalization has been studied from different perspectives. Rizzi (1997) considered topicalization from formalistic perspective. Lambrecht (1994) discussed topicalization within information structure context; Halliday (1985), on the other hand, analyzed topicalization from functional linguistics viewpoint.

Topicalization and focalization in the Farsi language have also been studied (Dabir Moghadam, 2004; Rasekh, 2006). Dabir Moghadam (2004) and Rasekh (2006) have studied Farsi topicalization and focalization from formalistic and functional perspectives. However, topicalization and focalization have not been studied in Azeri or any of its related dialects. Azeri or Azerbaijani is a Turkic language from the Oghuz sub-branch spoken primarily by Azerbaijani people, who mainly live in the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iran. In spite of significant differences in phonology lexicon, morphology, and syntax, they are mutually intelligible (Brown, 2005). Iranian Azeri is spoken in different regions of Iran with different dialects. Zanjan, a city in northwest Iran, is one of those regions where Zanjani dialect of Azeri is spoken. Zanjani dialect is syntactically, phonologically and lexically different from Azeri proper, though they are mutually intelligible.

Since there is little or no study into the syntax of the Zanjani dialect, the researchers as the native speakers of this dialect have decided to consider two aspects of its syntax, i.e., topicalization and focalization. In order to conduct the research, we have tried to answer the following questions:

1. How are topicalization and focalization differentiated in Zanjani dialect?
2. Can topicalization in Zanjani dialect be described by the Minimal Program?
3. What are the pragmatic and discursive aspects of topicalization in Zanjani dialect?

Review of the Literature

Topicalization is proposing a constituent to the beginning of sentence to make it more prominent syntactically and semantically in relation to other constituents in the sentence (Lambrecht, 1994). According to Crushina (2021), topic and topicalization are two important notions to understand processes of syntactic and prosodic readjustments in a language. He continues to argue that topicalization refers to constructions available in a language to mark an expression as the topic of the sentence.

Crushina emphasizes that in Romance languages prosodically topics are generally described as contained in independent intonational phrases. The syntactic and pragmatic characteristics of a specific topicalization depend both on the form of resumption of the dislocated topic within the clause and on the types of topics (aboutness, givenness, and contrastive topics) (op.cit).

Topic and Focus construction are often referred to situations where an element of discourse is considered as old information or important information; hence, it is syntactically or prosodically marked (Aboh, 2004). Since topic and focus may target constituents such as arguments, adjuncts, adverbs, adjectives, verbs, or prepositions; topicalization and focalization are definitely clausal properties of which noun sequences could be a target (op.cit).

A few studies have been conducted about topicalization in Persian, the official language of Iran, where Zanjani dialect is a minority language (Karimi, 2005; Darzi, 2006). These studies are based on Haegeman and Gueron's split CP hypothesis (1999). Based on these analyses, in Persian, topicalization is ubiquitous, that is, it occurs in simple as well as in complex sentences.

Objectives

The study endeavors to differentiate between topicalization and focalization in the Zanjani dialect of Azeri language. It tries to find whether topicalization can be described by the Chomsky's Minimal Program. The study, also, attempts to trace the pragmatic and discursive aspects of the topicalization in the Zanjani dialect.

Methods and Materials

Materials used in this research included TV series, plays, and movies screened on the local television station. They were all in the Zanjani dialect. The shows were recorded on a weekly basis. This was done to obtain a sufficient number of dialogues for analysis. It took three months to collect enough data for the research purpose. Of the recorded shows, two series, two plays, and two movies were selected.

Procedure

First of all, each taped show was transcribed, then, reading through the texts, the researchers searched as many as preposed topicalized and focalized sentences as possible. 50 sentences were selected in total. Next, the sentences were analyzed to see whether the preposed constituents were topicalizations or focalizations. To do this, we listened to the conversations out of which the selected sentences were extracted once more.

Traditionally a preposed constituent with heavy stress and old information is called a topicalization; whereas, a preposed constituent with heavy stress but new information is described as a focalization. Once the type of constituents is determined, they are described on the basis of both formal and functional traditions. Since the focus

of the research is on the topicalization problem in Zanjani dialect, it is further discussed within the framework of Minimal Program. The discussion goes on to distinguish between topicalization and focalization in this dialect.

Topicalization is naturally functional; hence, it cannot be described solely on the basis of a formal approach such as Minimalism. Therefore, views of Lambrecht (1994) and Prince (1994) together with the Minimal Program theory are used to answer the question regarding topicalization problem in Zanjani dialect.

Data Analysis

A selected number of sentences with proposed constituents are analyzed based on Formal and Functional traditions as well as Minimal Program. The purpose is to differentiate between topicalization and focalization in Zajani dialect and their importance in communicating old or new information in the sentence.

According to Halliday (1985), topic is the first constituent in the sentence, therefore, the topic of the sentence closely matches the subject of the sentence accordingly. In formal analysis, however, the topic is considered as the constituent which is relocated to the beginning of the sentence (Haegeman and Gueron, 1999). Here, the proposed constituent bears the old information and the rest of the sentence is about it. The latter is termed as "aboutness" on which many scholars agree, including Halliday (op.cit). Halliday also believes that the proposed constituent is separated from the rest of the sentence with a pause (op. cit).

In the current research, it is presumed that the topic is the constituent which lacks the heavy stress, and is separated from the rest of the sentence with a pause, and the rest of the sentence is about it (aboutness). The following examples illustrate this presumption.

Example (1):

A: Kim   qab. lari.   i   ju:do?

who dish   .es the washed

(Wsho washed the dishes?)

B: qab. lari.i Sara ju:do.

dish.es   the Sara washed

(the dishes Sara washed.)

In the conversation above, /qab.lar.i/ is the constituent which lacks the heavy stress and bears the old information and is separated from the rest of the sentence with a pause, and the rest of the sentence is about it. This is verified by repeatedly listening to the dialogue within the context in which it occurred. Therefore, it is considered as the topic of the sentence according to the definition of topic by Lambrecht (1994) and Karimi (2005).

Example (2):

A: kitab   har.da?

the book   where is

(Where is the book?)

B: kitab   Sara.nin   janin.da

the book   Sara. Poss marker   has

(Sara has the book.)

A: Fikr.elir.an   kitab.i   Sara oxoju:p?

think.you   book.the   Sara read.past

(You think the book, Sara read?)

B: kitab.i   fikr.elir.am   Sara oxoju:p.
book.the   think.I   Sara read. past

(The book I think Sara read.)

Based on the context of the dialogue, the constituents /kitab.i/ bears the old information and is topicalized. It does not carry the heavy stress and is separated from the rest of the sentence with a pause. Therefore, it meets the requirements of being a topic.

Example (3):

A: Sara   dir   aval.seri   Maryam.i   xiaban.da   gördu

         Sara   say.pres   first time   Maryam.obj   the street.in   see.past

         hava.da   barunimiʃ.

         weather.and   rainy.past

         (Sara says she saw Maryam for the first time in the street and the weather was rainy.)

B: xiaban.da   baran.i.altinda   Sara   Maryam.i   gördu?

         the street.in   rain.the.in   Sara   Maryam.obj   see.past?

         (In the street, in the rain, Sara saw Maryam?)

In this dialogue, B asks A a confirmatory question using the rising intonation. At the same time, B topicalizes two constituents bearing old information; namely, /xiaban.da/ and /baran.i.altinda/. Listening to the dialogue, we found that none of the topics carried the heavy stress, and both of them were separated from the rest of the sentence with a pause. This supports the claim of Haegeman and Guiron (1999) who believe that more than one topic is possible on the left periphery.

Example (4):

A: eʃit. miʃan   Sara   bimarestanda   de?

         hear.past   Sara   hospital   is

         (Did you hear Sara is in hospital?)

B: Sara.i   ke   man   dunan   xiaban.da   gördum.

         Sara.obj   foc.maker   I   yesterday   in the street   see.past

         (Sara, I saw her in the street yesterday.)

In example (4), Sara, the proposed constituent, carries the old information. However, it is focalized in its original place using the relative pronoun /ke/ (who). This focalized constituent is then topicalized as a secondary process to put more emphasis on it at the beginning of the sentence (Oroji, 2013). Based on the conversation in which the dialogue took place, the topicalized focus constituent unlike topics in other examples carries the heavy stress to compensate for the deleted focus marker /ke/. This topical prominence justifies the concept of aboutness discussed by Lambrecht (1994). Therefore, aboutness and prominence are not always in opposition, rather they can be complementary in certain languages.

Regarding the analysis of Zanjani dialect within the framework of Minimal Program, it seems that formal theories might not be able to explain the functional nodes of topic and focus. In the Minimal Program, two Functional nodes of the topic and focus phrases on the left periphery without a fixed order are present. In Zanjani dialect, however, there is only one functional node on the left periphery, i.e., the topic phrase. In the examples presented, the proposed elements are typically inserted in the Spec of the topic phrase node. Thus, formal theories might not be able to provide a complete analysis of the nature of topicalization in languages in general and in Zanjani dialect in particular.

In Zanjani dialect, information structure determines the word order of the sentence. Examples showed that elements containing old information are considered as topic. This is in line with the suggestion of Birner and Ward (1998) and Birner and Mahootian (1996). They argue that topicalized constituents bear old information as opposed to Lambrecht (1994), who proposed that focalized elements could bear old information.

Results and Discussion

This research aimed to examine topicalization in Zanjani dialect. Several sentences out of 50 sentences extracted from TV series, plays, and movies screened on the local television station were selected to study topicalization and focalization in this dialect. The criteria for the study were the pause, the information structure, and the heavy stress. It was hypothesized that if a preposed constituent contained old information with a pause and lacked the heavy stress, it would be a topic, otherwise, it might be considered as a focus. Throughout the current research, no trace of a preposed focalized constituent was found. It seemed that the whole idea of preposing was about "aboutness". Based on this finding, it appears that in Zanjani dialect, relocating a constituent to the beginning of the sentence is merely the topicalization process and has nothing to do with the focalization. It was also found that in Zanjani dialect, more than one constituent could be topicalized, which is unique to this dialect.

Regarding the first question of the research, it should be said that in Zanjani dialect, topicalization is about "aboutness", but focalization is about speech projection using syntactic and phonological tools. The results of the current research, however, showed no sign of relocation to the beginning of the sentence for the focalized constituents. To summarize, topicalization is differentiated from focalization in three ways: (1) information structure which contains the old information and is relocated to the beginning of the sentence, (2) pause which separates the preposed element from the rest of the sentence, and (3) lack of heavy stress. None of these applies to focalized constituents.

With regard to the second question whether topicalization in Zanjani dialect can be described by the Minimal Program, it should be said that formal theories do not deal with functional nodes such as topic and focus and are not set to explore their nature. Thus, to study the functional nature of the topic and focus and with regard to the above-mentioned criteria, functional and information structure theories such as that of Lambrecht (1994) should be used.

Concerning the third question, the pragmatic and discursive aspects of topicalization in the Zanjani dialect was explored. It should be argued that in this dialect of the Azeri language the arrangement and setup of the constituents are determined by the information structure of the sentence. We found that constituents containing the old information can be topicalized. According to Birner and Mahootian (1996), topicalization occurs if a given constituent bears the old information. Most of the topicalized constituents extracted from the dialogues contained the old information from both speaker's and hearer's point of view.

Conclusion

To conclude, in the Zanjani dialect the most important constituents which bears the old information is the topicalized constituent. All the examples cited witness this fact. In Zanjani dialect, focalized constituents hold new information and stay put and normally it can be distinguished by some grammatical elements within the sentence. This phenomenon could be compared with the Persian grammar in which the focalized constituents are represented by the relativizer 'ke' which means who, which, that, whose, and whom in English. It is a broad term and is widely used both in Persian and in the Zanjani dialect.

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Conflict of interest
The Authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.