

Syntax and intonation of contrastive topics in Estonian

Heete Sahkai, Institute of the Estonian Language

Anne Tamm, Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences

The aim of the paper is to propose a first description of the syntactic and prosodic properties of Estonian contrastive topic as a discourse-configurational category (cf. É. Kiss 1995, Gyuris 2009).

Estonian is generally considered to be a V2 language, allowing a single constituent before the second-position verb (e.g. Tael 1990). The V2 order occurs both in main and (most) embedded clauses, including ones containing a complementiser (which does not count as the first constituent), but not in *wh*-questions.

The preverbal position is not a topic position: a non-subject aboutness topic cannot precede the verb, if the sentence contains a non-focussed subject (1a). A contrastive topic however can occur before the verb independently of its syntactic function and the presence of a subject; furthermore, it is compatible with an optionally pre-verbal subject (1b).

(1) Aboutness topic (a) vs. contrastive topic (b)

a. (Kuidas vanaemal läheb? “How is grandma doing?”)

#Talle (Mart) kinkis (Mart) tahvelarvuti.

3sg:ade M[nom] give:3sg.pst M[nom] tablet.acc

‘Mart gave her a tablet’ (intended reading)

b. (Kuidas vanaemal ja vanaisal läheb? “How are grandma and grandpa doing?”)

Vanaemale (Mart) kinkis (Mart) tahvelarvuti.

grandma:ade M[nom] give:3sg.pst M[nom] tablet.acc

‘To grandma Mart gave a tablet’

Nevertheless, the sentence with a contrastive topic is still V2, as suggested by a comparison with non-V2 contexts like *wh*-questions and certain subordinate clauses, which are verb-final (2). At the same time, contrastive topics do not seem to be left dislocated, as they are marked for syntactic function and the sentence contains no resumptive elements.

(2) Contrastive topic (a) vs. *wh*-question (b)

a. (Kuidas vanaemal ja vanaisal läheb? “How are grandma and grandpa doing?”)

*Vanaemale Mart tahvelarvuti kinkis.

grandma:all M[nom] tablet.acc give:3sg.pst ‘To grandma Mart gave a tablet.’

b. Kellele Mart tahvelarvuti kinkis?

Who:all M[nom] tablet.acc give:3sg.pst ‘Whom did Mart give a/the tablet?’

The topicalised element can be a phrase (1b), a head (3a-c), a non-finite VP or clause (3b), or just the non-verbal element of an idiomatic or particle verb (“representing” the topicalisation of the corresponding verb or non-finite phrase/clause, 3d); additionally, if the contrastive topic is a non-finite VP/clause, it is possible to topicalise only an argument (3d).

(3)

a. (Mis kleidist ja pükstest saab? “What about the dress and the trousers?”)

Kleidi ma ostan uue.

dress.acc 1sg[nom] buy:1sg new.acc

‘As for the dress, I’ll buy a new one.’

- b. (Kas ta ujuda ja sukelduda oskab? “Can he swim and dive?”)

Ujub ta hästi/küll, aga sukelduda ta ei armasta.

swim:3sg 3sg[nom] well/ptcl but dive:inf 3sg[nom] neg love.conneg

‘Swim/As for swimming, he swims well/all right, but diving he doesn’t like.’

- c. (Kellele ta otsustas helistada ja kellele kirjutada? “Whom did he decide to call and whom did he decide to write?”)

Helistada ta otsustas Martile.

call:inf 3sg[nom] decide:3sg.pst M:all

‘He decided to call to Mart.’

- d. (Kas ta kolis välja ja tagastas võtmed? “Did he move out and return the keys?”)

Välja ta kolis küll, aga võtmeid ta ei taha tagastada.

out 3sg[nom] move:3sg.pst ptcl but key.par.pl 3sg[nom]neg want.conneg return:inf

‘He moved out all right, but he doesn’t want to return the keys.’

In certain cases (similar to the Finnish FOCTOP sentences described by Vilkuna 1989:102-107), the topicalised element can be interpreted as focal. However, contrastive topics differ syntactically from fronted foci. Unlike contrastive topics, a non-subject initial focus is not compatible with an overt subject, neither pre- nor post-verbal (although it is compatible with a pro subject) (4).

- (4) Contrastive topic (a) vs. initial focus (b)

- a. (Kellele sa tahvelarvuti ja telefoni kingid? “Whom will give the tablet and the phone?”)

Tahvelarvuti ma kingin vanaemale.

tablet.acc 1sg[nom] give:1sg grandma:all ‘The tablet I will give to grandma.’

- b. (Mille sa vanaemale kingid? “What will you give to grandma?”)

(*Ma) Tahvelarvuti (*ma) kingin (*ma).

1sg[nom] tablet.acc 1sg[nom] give:1sg 1sg[nom] ‘I will give her a tablet.’

With respect to intonation, the paper will report the results of a study aiming to test the following possible ways of the prosodic marking of contrastive topics: (i) a dedicated pitch accent type, (ii) an emphatic realisation of the pitch accent, (iii) separate phrasing.

References

- É. Kiss, Katalin (ed.). 1995. *Discourse configurational languages*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gyuris, Beáta. 2009. *The Semantics and Pragmatics of the Contrastive Topic in Hungarian*. Budapest: The Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Lexica Ltd.
- Tael, Kaja. 1990. *An approach to word order problems in Estonian*. Tallinn: Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia.
- Vilkuna, Maria. 1989. *Free word order in Finnish: its syntax and discourse functions*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden seura.