

A New Approach to Contrastive Topic: Partition Semantics and Pragmatics

The purpose of the current work is to propose a more comprehensive approach to Contrastive Topic (henceforth, CT) than the existing ones. In the literature, there have been two approaches to CT proposed: one is to take CT as an information-structural discourse-regulating notion on a par with focus and the other is to analyze CT as an focus-sensitive operator with its inherent semantic and pragmatic content. Although both of the approaches have their own merits capturing some facets of CT, neither of them is adequate, for one cannot capture the facets the other can and furthermore, as we will see, there are examples of CT neither of the approaches can be extended to deal with. Alternatively, we will propose an alternative approach couched in the so-called partition semantics of questions proposed by (Groenendijk & Stokhof 1984, Groenendijk 1999).

1 CT as an information-structural discourse-regulating notion on a par with focus

Consider the question-answer discourse in (1). It is intuitively clear that CT as well as focus has something to do with the congruence of the discourse.

- (1) a. Who kissed whom?
 b. Well, who did Larry kiss?
 c. [Larry]_{CT} kissed [Nina]_F

Kadmon (2001) argued the focus semantic value (Rooth 1985, 1991) and the *topic semantic value*, a set of focus semantic values (Büring, 1999) for (1c) can account for the congruence in question; (1c) is a direct answer to (1b), and (1c) answers (1b) as part of “strategy of inquiry” (Roberts, 1996) aimed at answering (1a), with (1b) being a “sub-question” of (1a).

The problem with the analysis is that it is applicable only to examples with one instance of CT and one instance of focus like (1c); there are garden-variety examples with more than one instance of CT and/or with no explicit instance of focus like (2) in Japanese.

- (2) John wa Mary wa Bill ni wa shookai-shi-ta.
 CT CT to CT introduction-do-Past
 ‘John_{CT} introduced Mary_{CT} to Bill_{CT}.’

2 CT as a focus-sensitive operator (Hara 2006, Lee 1999, 2006, Oshima 2002)

The analyses on this approach all share the following schema:

- (3) Semantics and Pragmatics of CT as a Focus-Sensitive Operator
 a. $CT(\langle \lambda x. \beta, \alpha \rangle)$ (semantic representation) (in terms of the structured-meaning approach to focus), where α and $\lambda x. \beta$ are the focus and the background parts, respectively.
 b. $\lambda x. \beta(\alpha)$ (assertion)
 c. $\exists x[x \neq \alpha \wedge \neg[\lambda x. \beta(x)]]$. (conventional implicature)

The part of (3c) is supposed to capture the so-called “Reversed Polarity Implicature” (henceforth RPI) of CT; a sentence with a CT-marked constituent tends to imply a “contrasting” sentence with the constituent replaced with an alternative and of the opposite polarity. However, the matter of fact is that the alleged implicature can be absent as in (4), which should not be the case if it were really a conventional implicature.

- (4) John wa kita ga sonohokano hito ni-kanshite wa shira-nai.
 CT came but the other people about CT (I) don’t know
 ‘[John]_{CT} came, but as for the other people, I don’t know whether they came.’

Another problem with the current approach is that it is not clear how to analyze examples

with more than one instance of CT like (2), as in the case of the previous approach.

3 Alternative Approach to CT: Based on Partition Semantics of Questions by Groenendijk and Stokhof

In the following presentation of the alternative approach, the familiarity with partition (dynamic) semantics of questions and answers by Groenendijk & Stokhof (1984) and Groenendijk (1999) will be assumed.

Partition Semantics and Pragmatics of CT

Here are the bare bones of the alternative analysis of CT.

(5) Semantics of CT

Suppose that

- (i) γ is a sentence with CT marked phrases,
- (ii) the “usual” semantic representation (in a predicate logic) of γ is ϕ ,
- (iii) $wh\text{-}\gamma$ is the interrogative sentence resulting from γ by replacing the CT marked phrases as well as the focused phrases if any with the corresponding wh -phrases,
- (iv) the semantic representations for the CT-marked phrases and the corresponding wh -phrases are $t_1, \dots, t_n (\bar{t})$, and $x_1, \dots, x_n (\bar{x})$, respectively,
- (v) $?\text{-}\gamma$ is the interrogative sentence directly corresponding to γ in that only the focused phrases are replaced by the corresponding wh -phrases and if there are no focused phrase $?\text{-}\gamma$ is the polar interrogative sentence, and
- (vi) the abstract meaning of $wh\text{-}\gamma$ and $?\text{-}\gamma$ is $\lambda x_1, \dots, x_n. \phi[t_1, \dots, t_n/x_1, \dots, x_n]$, or $\lambda \bar{x}. \phi[\bar{t} / \bar{x}]$, where $\phi[t_1, \dots, t_n/x_1, \dots, x_n]$ ($\phi[\bar{t} / \bar{x}]$) is the result of replacing $t_1, \dots, t_n (\bar{t})$ in ϕ with $x_1, \dots, x_n (\bar{x})$, respectively.

(6) Pragmatics of CT

Sentence γ explicitly or implicitly assumes interrogative sentence $wh\text{-}\gamma$ as QUD; however, the answerer, or the utterer of γ opts to answer $?\text{-}\gamma$ instead of $wh\text{-}\gamma$ for some reason.

The proposed alternative approach can account for the insights of both of the existing approaches in the following sense. It substantiates the intuition that a sentence with a CT is an answer to a “sub-question” for another question in that in (5), γ , an answer to $?\text{-}\gamma$ is always a PARTIAL ANSWER to $wh\text{-}\gamma$ in terms of Groenendijk and Stokhof (1984) and Groenendijk (1999). For example, (1c), (1b), and (1a) correspond to γ , $?\text{-}\gamma$, and $wh\text{-}\gamma$ in (5), respectively. The implicational properties of CT can be seen as the results of particular instantiations of ‘for some reason’ in (6). For example, when ‘Who came to the party?’ ($wh\text{-}\gamma$) is QUD, if you are only sure of John that he came to the party, it would be safe for you to answer ‘Did John come to the party?’ ($?\text{-}\gamma$) with ‘[John]_{CT} did’ (γ), restricting your commitment to the issue of John’s coming to the party or not. Otherwise, i.e., if you answered ‘Who came to the party?’ (directly) with a non-CTed answer, ‘[John]_F did’, you would misleadingly imply that only John came to the party by means of exhaustification (van Rooij & Schulz, 2006). This case of ‘ignorance’ as “for some reason” is exemplified by (4). Next, suppose you don’t have total information about the predicate again, but this time you know some negative instances as well as some positive ones. In this situation, an answer with γ , a sentence of the positive instances being CT-marked is expected to be followed by the sentence of the negative instances being CT-marked, or vice versa. This is a characteristic of CT that has traditionally been referred to as RPI. Last, but not least, the current analysis is equally applicable to examples with more than one instance of CT, as is evident in (5), unlike the other approaches.