

Article published in:

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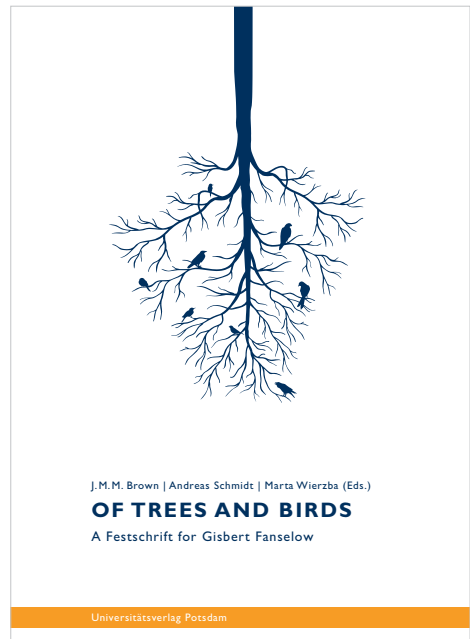
Of trees and birds

A Festschrift for Gisbert Fanselow

2019 – 435 p.

ISBN 978-3-86956-457-9

DOI <https://doi.org/10.25932/publishup-42654>



Suggested citation:

Fominyam, Henry / Tran, Thuan: Beware of ‘discourse markers’, In: Brown, J.M.M. / Schmidt, Andreas / Wierzba, Marta (Eds.): *Of trees and birds. A Festschrift for Gisbert Fanselow*, Potsdam,

University Press Potsdam, 2019, pp. 257–272.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.25932/publishup-43252>

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Beware of ‘discourse markers’

Henry Fominyam, Thuan Tran

Universität Potsdam

1 Introduction

The architecture of the human language, in its generative conception (Chomsky 1957), is an exciting, but also a controversial research program. One of the controversies concerns the manner in which information structure (IS) concepts interact with syntax. There are two main opposing views: on the one side, there is the view that “syntax interacts with phonology (and semantics), but not with information structure” (Fanselow 2006: 2). On the other end of the spectrum, the attempt to disassociate IS notions from syntax is seen as tantamount to “radically impoverishing” the latter, see in particular Rizzi (2013).

It is said that someone from the Awing community would be scared to death if she or he ever happened to see an owl; on the other hand, we are told that some citizens of Italy nest rescued owls. If the generative program was just (literary) fiction, one could live a happy life with these opposing ideas with the consolation that one man’s meat is another man’s poison. Unfortunately, this is not the case: we are compelled to be objective and dig deep; and not to rely, say, on the myths that have made the Awing person to believe that owls are omens of death, while the Italians enjoy petting them. The aim of these short notes is therefore to try to encourage linguists, especially those working on languages that have so-called topic and focus markers, to always look deeper and not rely on such IS labels prematurely.

Pollock’s (1989) split IP was an influential proposal concerning functional heads within the IP domain of the clause. In the same vein, Rizzi

(1997) argued that the CP domain does not only indicate the illocutionary force of the clause but involves scope-discourse categories like focus and topic projections. Nonetheless, (many) European languages seem to lack overt scope-discourse morphological elements and when in particular African languages (e.g., Gungbe: Aboh 2004) were described as having overt IS morphological markers, it was like the songbird foreseeing a nest in Africa, and before winter was around, it was already on its way to Africa. According to Rizzi (2013: 201), the “structural view of the expression of scope-discourse semantics is immediately supported by the existence of languages in which the criterial heads are overtly expressed, with overt Q, Top, Foc markers”. But does it actually suffice to see a word which occurs with an IS notion to conclude that they are, say, topic or focus markers? Consider the following examples in Awing:

- (1) a. Alombah *lá*, Aghetse a pe' η-kə m-fε ηgəsánə mbo
 Alombah PRT Aghetse SM P1 N-also N-give maize to
 yə.
 him
 Lit.: ‘How about Alombah, did Aghetse also give him maize?’
- b. *Lá* mbo Alombah pa'a Aghetse a pe' m-fε ηgəsánə.
 PRT to Alombah REL Aghetse SM P1 N-give maize
 ‘It is to Alombah that Aghetse gave maize.’

We know that syntactic elements have inherent features that determine their lexical specifications. Morphological (strong) features (e.g. a *wh*-feature in languages like English) can determine/enforce the movement of elements within a lower (IP/vP) domain. Proponents of the Cartographic view maintain that topicalized and focalized elements in the C-domain operate within this realm. Taking this view into consideration, we may say that there is a specific feature in (1a) and (1b) that triggers movement of *Alombah* to sentence-initial position, and this can only be the *lá* morpheme. Hence, should we assume that the *lá* morpheme contains both a focus and a topic feature? Descriptively, it is not an issue labeling the *lá* morpheme as topic and/or focus marker—that is, with the sentence-initial topic and focalized element in (1a) and (1b), respec-

tively. However, such tags often obscure core syntactic notions as they presuppose that the focused or topicalized elements are attracted to such positions by the so-called topic or focus markers. If we were to keep aside the (crucial) question as to whether topic and focus markers only show up in the CP domain (to trigger movement of the focused and topicalized phrases)¹, one still wonders how the same morpheme in a given language can perform both roles, as the Awing data seem to suggest. In our opinion, such labels can make researchers ignore another important question, namely whether a morpheme labeled as focus or topic marker in a given language occurs *only* with such scope-discourse categories. The data in (1) already warns us to beware of such words. In the following pages, basing on data like (1) above in Awing and Vietnamese, we will show that so-called ‘discourse markers’—elements that co-occur with IS notions like focus and topic—may not always be directly linked to them.

2 The Vietnamese case

It is well established in the literature on Vietnamese linguistics that the particle *thì* is a topic particle that marks the constituent following it as a topic (Cao 1998; Duffield 2007; Tran 2009; Michaud & Brunelle 2016). Formal analyses couched in the Cartographic view (Rizzi 1997, and consequent work) by Duffield (2007) and Tran (2009) take the particle as the overt head of the Topic Phrase that triggers the movement of the topic constituent from its TP-internal position to the Specifier of the Topic Phrase. An illustrative example is given in (2).

- (2) [TopP Nam_i thì [TP t_i thích bóng đá nhất]].
 Nam TOP like football best
 ‘Nam likes football best.’

1. A lot of languages, including Awing, structurally have such morphemes in the lower domain of the clause (IP/vP). A good example is Aghem, where Aboh (2007) assumes that the lower ‘focus marker’ spells out a lower focus phrase in the spirit of Belletti (2004).

One problem with this analysis is the fact that the topic can stay in situ, as shown in (3). The object NP ‘this fruit’ is construed as topic since, according to Cao, (3) is uttered when the interlocutors are talking about ‘this fruit’ or are looking at it. It is not clear why the topic does not move to the Spec,TopP if Vietnamese projects a Topic Phrase.

- (3) Sóc bay rất thích ăn quả này.
 squirrel fly very like eat fruit this
 ‘Flying squirrels like eating this fruit.’
 (Cao 1991: 95) [gloss and translation mine]

Another problem is that *thì* is not always associated with topic, as demonstrated by the exchange in (4), where the particle follows the *wh*-phrase *ai* ‘who’, and the focus constituent *Nam*, elements known to be highly inadequate for topichood. The question in (4a) is non-canonical in that the object *wh*-phrase *ai* ‘who’ is dislocated from the base position (the post-verbal position). Vietnamese is a *wh*-in-situ language, but licenses *wh*-ex-situ under certain semantic-pragmatic conditions. Essentially, while it is normal to start an exchange with a canonical *wh*-in-situ question, a *wh*-ex-situ question like (4a) cannot be used at the beginning of a conversation, and is felicitous only when it is preceded by a denial or a series of denials of a propositional content of the form ‘you help X’.

- (4) a. Ai_i thì anh giúp t_i ?
 who PRT you help
 ‘Who will you help?’
- (5) a. Nam_i thì tôi giúp t_i .
 Nam PRT I help
 ‘I will help Nam.’

It is equally infelicitous to answer a non-canonical *wh*-question with a canonical word order sentence. As a reply to the question in (5a), it is preferable to use a non-canonical sentence in (5b), where the fronted object NP *Nam*, followed by the particle, is a focus. Interestingly, (5b) can also serve as a natural continuation of a mini-discourse such as ‘As

for generosity, it is not my nature to help anyone, yet...’ A topic-marking particle would not be expected to be felicitous in these contexts.

Furthermore, if this particle were to mark topic, it would be difficult to explain why the particle chooses to accompany a *wh*-phrase, not a topic, in cases where both are left-dislocated, as shown in the following example. Consider a bargaining context in which the seller asks the buyer how much he/she is happy to pay for the merchandise after the customer’s rejections of the price offers given by the seller. This context ascertains that the shirt is the topic. It would be more natural if the topic is dropped in (6b).

- (6) a. Cái áo này_i bao nhiêu_j thì anh mua t_i t_j?
 CL shirt this how much PRT you buy
 ‘How much will you buy/pay for this shirt?’
- b. Bao nhiêu_j thì anh mua cái áo này t_j?
 how much PRT you buy CL shirt this
 ‘How much will you buy/pay for this shirt?’
- c. *Cái áo này_i thì bao nhiêu_j anh mua t_i t_j?
 CL shirt this PRT how much you buy
 ‘How much will you buy/pay for this shirt?’

If *thì* were a topic marker, we would expect (6a, b) to be ungrammatical, and (6c) to be grammatical, contrary to fact. It is therefore plausible to reject the assumption that the particle in question is a topic marker, and propose, following Neeleman & van de Koot (2008), as a first approximation, that it is a discourse template marker. Its function is not to mark topic or focus, but to license their dislocation. This analysis is indirectly supported by the fact that *thì* is not allowed contexts in which the whole sentence is in focus; hence, no dislocation. Cao (1991: 135) observes that *thì* cannot be used with sentences used to respond to questions that trigger all-new focus such as ‘What happened?’ and ‘What’s wrong?’ It turns out, as demonstrated in what follows, that the left dislocation of the information structural categories topic and focus associated with the particle *thì* is licensed by contrast, with contrast being quantificational in the sense of Neeleman & Vermeulen (2012). Consider the case of con-

trastive focus first. Suppose that Nam is required to read five books, and that the conversation is built around the question of which book Nam read. In (7), A informs B of the book that Nam has read. B confirms the information provided by A by uttering either (8a) or (8b), and then adds more information about Nam's reading by using one of the continuations. Adhering to the notational format in Neeleman & Vermeulen (2012), in the examples below, focus elements are in small capitals.

(7) Question (by speaker A):

Nam đã đọc QUÊ NGƯỜI.
 Nam ASP read Que nguoi
 'Nam has read Que nguoi.'

(8) a. First response variant (by speaker B):

Anh biết. QUÊ NGƯỜI_i thì Nam đã đọc t_i.
 I know Que nguoi PRT Nam ASP read
 'I know. Nam has read Que nguoi.'

b. Second response variant (by speaker B):

Anh biết. Nam đã đọc QUÊ NGƯỜI.
 I know Nam ASP read Que nguoi
 'I know. Nam has read Que nguoi.'

(9) a. First continuation variant (by speaker B):

nhưng O CHUỘT_i thì Nam chưa đọc t_i.
 but O chuoat PRT Nam not-yet read
 '...but Nam has not read O chuoat yet.'

b. Second continuation variant (by speaker B):

và thật ra, Nam đã đọc hết năm quyển sách theo
 and in fact Nam ASP read finish five CL book follow
 yêu cầu.
 requirement
 '...and in fact, Nam has read all the five books as required.'

In this context, (9b) is odd as a continuation of (8a), where the focus is left-dislocated, but is felicitous as a continuation of (8b), where the focus is in situ. This is because the contrast component, licensed by left dislocation, in (8a) provides a negative statement that there is at least one alternative to *Quê Người* that does not belong to the set of things that Nam has read. This statement is in conflict with (9b), where the assertion is made that Nam has read all the books required. With the focus in situ, (8b) does not convey any negative statement regarding Nam’s reading, hence the felicity of (9b) as a continuation of (8b). Along the same lines, the felicity of sentence (9a) as a continuation of (8a, b) is obvious. The negative component of (9a) states that there is at least one alternative to *O Chuột* such that this alternative is not contained in the set of things that Nam has not read. This statement is in agreement with both (8a) and (8b).

Consider next another contrastive focus context.

- (10) A tells B about Nam’s shopping habit: what he buys and does not buy.
- a. Nam does not buy pens, Nam does not buy notebooks, but...
 - b. Nam buys cookies, Nam buys chocolate, and...
- (11) a. SÁCH_i thì Nam mua t_i.
book PRT Nam buy
‘Nam buys books.’
- b. Nam mua SÁCH.
Nam buy book
‘Nam buys books.’

The non-canonical word order sentence in (11a), with the focus being left dislocated, is felicitous as a continuation of (10a), where negative statements about the alternative (pens, notebooks...) are provided. Negative statements like this are not present in (10b); hence, the infelicity of (11a) as its continuation. By contrast, the canonical word order sentence in (11b), where the focused object ‘books’ stays in situ, is felicitous as a continuation of (10b), not of (10a).

Now let us look at the case of contrastive topic (CT). Consider the exchanges in (12) a context that triggers CT. For ease of exposition, the focus is written in small capitals, and the CT is underlined>.

- (12) A: Tell me who will help whom. For instance, who will help Mai?
 B: I don't know who will help Mai, but...
- a. BA sẽ giúp Nam.
 Ba FUT help Nam
 'Ba will help Nam.'
- b. Nam_i thì BA sẽ giúp t_i.
 Nam PRT Ba FUT help
 'Ba will help Nam.'

The two sentences in (12a,b) convey the same propositional content, namely that a help-relation holds between the two arguments, represented by two proper names, Nam and Ba, where Ba is the helper and Nam is the helpee. It is obvious from the context in (12) that B is not able to make an assertion about Mai, an alternative to Nam. In this context, (12a), where the CT object stays in the base position, is not felicitous, while (12b), where the CT object undergoes left dislocation, is. It is plausible to assume that similar to the case of contrastive focus, it is the contrast component in CTs that licenses left dislocation. However, unlike contrastive focus, the contrast component in a CT indicates that the speaker for some reason cannot make a claim about alternative topics.

In conclusion, the particle *thì*, characterized in the literature on Vietnamese linguistics as a topic marker, is in fact a contrast marker that triggers the dislocation of the element it associates with, be it topic or focus. Vietnamese as such endorses the Pure Syntax hypothesis, advanced by Fanselow (2006, and consequent work), in that it disproves a direct link between focus/topic and syntax.

3 Back to Awing

In the previous section, it was concluded that the *thì* morpheme in Vietnamese is neither a topic nor a focus marker. In Fominyam (2012), the

lǎ morpheme is considered a focus marker in Awing. Due to its position, that is preceding the focalized element, it was argued then that the focus phrase in Awing is a two-layered projection (in the sense of Koopman 1997). However, there was no hint about the type of focus: plain, exclusive/contrastive or exhaustive. Now consider example (13). First, note that while it is fine to focalize both the subject and post-verbal elements in their canonical positions in Awing, the usage of the *lǎ* morpheme in an answer like (13b) is considered inappropriate, that is, when the *lǎ* morpheme is omitted in the question, as it is the case in (13a). Fominyam (in preparation) argues that *lǎ* is used with focus only when the focus alternatives are explicit in the context. Hence, if the *lǎ* morpheme was used with the *wh*-object in (13a), its presence in (13b) will be optional; using *lǎ* as in (13b) implies that the substitution of the focused element with another alternative will result in a false proposition (Neeleman & Vermeulen 2012). As shown in Fominyam & Šimík (2017), the *lǎ* morpheme does not mark focus in Awing but rather functions as an exhaustive focus operator in contexts like (13b).

- (13) a. Alombah a ɲaɲnə kǎ?
 Alombah SM cook what
 ‘What has Alombah cooked?’
- b. A ɲaɲnə (#lǎ) məkwúnə.
 SM cook PRT rice
 ‘He has cooked rice.’

Taking into consideration the data in (1) and (13) and the conclusion reached in the previous section, there seems to be common features that characterize the use of the Vietnamese *thì* and the Awing *lǎ* morpheme, namely that they both function, as already mentioned for the Vietnamese case, as a ‘discourse template marker’ and a contrastive operator.

Let us first address the notion of ‘template discourse marker’ with the Awing data. Fominyam (in preparation) argues that although the *lǎ* morpheme shows up in copular clauses with no overt tense marker as

the copula, the *lɔ́* morpheme is not the copula in Awing.²

In this regard, Fominyam (in preparation) shows that unlike verbs and inflectional categories like tense and aspects, the *lɔ́* morpheme cannot be inflected; for instance, it cannot be prefixed with the homorganic nasal prefix which attaches to inflectional categories and verbs. Moreover, while the *lɔ́* morpheme is relatively mobile in copular clauses, the verb and other inflectional categories have a fixed order.³

It is further shown that the *lɔ́* morpheme in copular clauses associates with both the pre-copula and the post-copula nouns. For example, morpho-syntactically, the *lɔ́* morpheme restricts the kind of elements that can occur to it left. (14b) below shows that when *lɔ́* structurally precedes the tense marker, no personal pronouns (i.e., I, we, they etc.) can immediately precede it.

2. At face value, the *lɔ́* morpheme appears to be the actual copula in example (ia). However, when tense markers are used, the actual copula *pə* 'be' shows up. Notice that a homorganic nasal is prefixed to the copula when it is preceded by the past tense marker, resulting in *mbə*.

- (i) a. Alombah *lɔ́* zé'kə-ŋwa'ró.
Alombah PRT teach-book
'Alombah is a teacher.'
- b. Alombah *yó* *pə* *lɔ́* zé'kə-ŋwa'ró.
Alombah F2 be PRT teach-book
'Alombah will be a teacher.'
- c. Alombah *nə* *m-bə* *lɔ́* zé'kə-ŋwa'ró.
Alombah P2 N-be PRT teacher
'Alombah was a teacher.'

3. The following examples illustrate this:

- (i) a. Alombah *nə* *m-bə* *lɔ́* zé'kə-ŋwa'ró
Alombah P2 N-be PRT teach-book
'Alombah was a teacher.'
- b. Alombah *lɔ́* *nə* *m-bə* zé'kə-ŋwa'ró
Alombah PRT P2 N-be teach-book
'Alombah was a teacher.'

- (14) a. Maŋ nə m-bə ló ndzərə.
 I P2 N-be PRT thief
 ‘I was a thief.’
- b. *Maŋ ló nə m-bə ndzərə.
 I PRT P2 N-be thief
 Intended: ‘I was a thief.’

Another interesting issue with copular clauses in most Bantu languages is the fact that either the pre-copula or the post-copular noun is read as focus (see Zerbian 2006). Awing is no exception to this, as the post-copula noun is always construed as focus in Awing. However, crucially, the position of the *ló* morpheme in (15a) below changes the status of the pre-copula element from a ‘mare subject’, as in (15b), to ‘topic-hood’ status, as in (15a); this mimics the function of a contrastive topic exemplified in (1a).

- (15) a. Ndzə ló nə m-bə maŋ.
 thief PRT P2 N-be me
 ‘The thief was me.’
- b. Ndzə nə m-bə ló maŋ.
 thief P2 N-be PRT me
 ‘The thief was me.’

The discussion on copular clauses in Awing here can be summed up by indicating that not only does the *ló* morpheme associate with the post-copula elements, its presence in copular clauses also conditions, morpho-syntactically and semantically, the pre-copula noun. Other than this function in copular clauses, the *ló* morpheme is also used to form what Fominyam (in preparation) terms ‘information passive’. In such constructions, as shown in (16), the object occurs in a position preceding *ló*, and the subject occurs immediately after the verb (OVS). The object ‘beans’ is construed as topic and the subject ‘Alombah’ as (exhaustive) focus. Fominyam (in preparation) therefore concludes that the *ló* morpheme in constructions like (16) and in copular clauses functions as an ‘information copula’ in the sense that it partitions such clauses into a topic-comment structure.

- (16) Ndzô ló pe' η-kɔ' Alombah.
 beans PRT P1 N-eat Alombah

'The beans were eaten by Alombah (...not Hans).'

We have argued thus far that unlike previous proposals, according to which *thi* was considered a topic marker in Vietnamese and *ló* the focus marker in Awing, none of these information structure notions can be linked directly to these elements. Section 2 concluded that *thi* is a contrastive marker. Contrast seems to be a feature that is also present in the contexts in which the *ló* morpheme is used. We already mentioned that *ló* functions as an exhaustive operator in non-copular clauses like (1b); it is no gospel that exhaustiveness is an extreme case of contrast. However, the *ló* morpheme is used in contexts other than the ones presented here, e.g., as an adversative conjunction. Discussing all of them is beyond the scope of this paper, and thus, the position that the *ló* morpheme can be subsumed under the umbrella of a contrastive marker cannot be fully developed here. Nonetheless, to give a taste of the argument, reconsider the example in (1a). (1a) cannot be a statement out of the blue: the topic 'Alombah' is pragmatically opposed or contrasted to an explicit set. To illustrate how this works, (1a) is repeated as (17) below with the appropriate context.

- (17) Context: Aghetse gave maize to her children.
 Alombah ló Aghetse a pe' η-kɔ m-fɛ ηgəsájó mbo
 Alombah PRT Aghetse SM P1 N-also N-give maize to
 yə.
 him

Lit: 'How about Alombah, did Aghetse also give him maize?'

The presupposition in (17) could be that Alombah (not being one of Aghetse's kids) was present when Aghetse was sharing maize with her kids and the questioner wants to know whether Aghetse also gave maize to Alombah. It could also be that Alombah is one of Aghetse's kids, but he (i.e., Alombah), say, did something wrong and was not expected to have the maize, too. In both scenarios, there is a set of individuals and Alombah is by default excluded from, not necessarily the set, but, a uni-

fying feature within the set. To broaden the picture, further consider example (18).

(18) Context: Aghetse has traveled to all nations on earth.

America *lá*, Aghetse a *ká* *ŋ-ghen* *ówó?*

America PRT Aghetse SM also N-go there

Lit: ‘How about America, has Aghetse also gone there?’

Given that (18b) is a logical follow-up to the provided context, and that ‘nation’ is quantified by ‘all’, America is naturally included within such a set. However, the topic in (18b), namely America, is considered, say, too ‘prestigious’ for Aghetse to have been there. In other words, contrast here is characterized by isolating an element which is believed to have a distinctive feature within a set. Note that as far as Awing is concerned, we are not claiming that it is the *lá* morpheme that licenses the dislocation of the topic to sentence-initial position. It suffices to note here that sentence-initial topic ‘associates’ with *lá* and is read as contrastive; just as focus ‘associates’ with *lá* and is read as exhaustive—an extreme case of contrast.

4 Conclusion

Our paper is an inconvenient warning regarding the cross-linguistic analysis of discourse markers such as *thì* in Vietnamese and *lá* in Awing as topic or focus markers, a descriptive and theoretical content so well established that researchers interested in the issue would find it difficult to view it differently. For instance, in the case of Vietnamese, the supposed topic marker *thì* fits the language typology proposed by Li & Thompson (1976): Vietnamese is a topic prominent language, with the sentence-initial element being marked as the topic. It is therefore natural to embrace the Cartographic view in the study of Vietnamese syntax. However, as evidenced in our paper, information structure is independent of syntax: the dislocation of topic and focus is not triggered by the discourse related feature [topic] or [focus], but by [contrast], a semantic feature with quantificational force. That said, we must note

that there are a few obvious questions that could not be fully addressed here. For example, in Awing, it has been claimed that copular clauses contain a focused element but it has not been shown if the focus in copular clauses is the same as that in non-copular constructions. Moreover, although we mentioned that *lá* in an example like (15a) can change the status of the pre-copula noun to topic-hood, we left out details regarding whether the contrastive feature with the *lá* morpheme associates with the pre-copula noun (the topic) or the post-copula noun (the focus), or both of them. Actually, the notion of ‘association’ has been used in a vague way here (see Fominyam & Šimík 2017 on how *lá* associates with focus in Awing). As mentioned from the onset, our purpose was to create the awareness not to rush into labeling elements that co-occur with information-structural categories as heads of such categories; and with respect to that aim, we believe, the Vietnamese and Awing examples have adequately proven us to beware of ‘discourse markers’.

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