Referentiality in German Left Dislocation

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1 German left dislocation and topicality

For many languages it has been claimed that they have structural positions that are reserved for (aboutness) topics, e.g. Hungarian (Szabolsci 1997, Kiss 1994, 2002), Chinese (Chafe 1976), German (Altmann 1981, Frey 2004a, 2004b, 2005), Italian (Rizzi 1997). Whether the respective positions can indeed be occupied only by topics and whether topics need to occur in that position in some cases is a matter of dispute. For German, Fanselow (2006) argued against the existence of the dedicated topic position in the middle field suggested by Frey (2004a, cf. Repp 2017). In this paper, we are taking a closer look at another German construction which has been classified as topic-marking: German left dislocation, GLD (Frey 2004b, 2005, Endriss & Hinterwimmer 2009). We will show that GLD does not mark topics but separates referential or quasi-referential expressions from the remainder of the clause independently of information structure, and serves a non-specified highlighting function.

In GLD, a DP (PP/CP/AdjP) occurs at the left periphery of the clause which is taken up by a resumptive d-pronoun[1] (d-RP) with the same case, number and person features. The d-RP typically is adjacent to the dislocated phrase, as in (1), but can also occur lower in the clause (2). GLD further shows connectivity effects in its binding behaviour, as shown in (3) (Frey 2004b).

(1) Den   Fritz, den   sieht   man   oft   auf   Parties.
     the.ACC Fritz   d-RP.ACC   sees   one   often on   parties
     'Fritz, you often see him at parties.'

(2) Den   Fritz, wo   sieht   man   den   oft?
     the.ACC Fritz   where   sees   one   d-RP.ACC   often
     'Fritz, where do you see him often?'

(3) Sein$_i$ neues iPhone,   das   vergisst   keiner$_i$ im   Biergarten.
     his   new   iPhone   d-RP forgets   no-one in.the beer garden
     'No one forgets his new iPhone in the beer garden.'

The proposal that GLD encodes topicality is based inter alia on the observation that only a limited class of DPs is acceptable in left-dislocated position (Frey 2004b, 2005, Endriss & Hinterwimmer 2009): DPs that either are referential (1)–(3), or quasi-referential (indefinites with unmodified determiners; see Endriss 2009), as in (4). Clearly quantificational expressions like indefinites with modified determiners are unacceptable (5).

(4) Zwei   Themen, die   haben die Deutschen   diesen Sommer beschäftigt.
     two   topics   d-RP have   the Germans   this   summer moved
     'Two topics have moved the Germans this summer.'

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[1] Personal pronoun for first and second person pronouns.

(5) *{Weniger   als   drei / mindestens   zwei} Themen,   die   haben ...
      less   than   three / at.least   two   topics   d-RP   have
     'Less than three topics/at least two topics have moved the Germans this summer.'

Frey (2004b, 2005) and Endriss & Hinterwimmer (2009) derive the referentiality constraint as a direct consequence of Reinhart's (1981) assumption that topics serve as addresses for information storage in the common ground.

2 Referentiality without topicality

In the following, we show that the referentiality constraint on GLD is independent of topicality: it also holds in cases where the left-dislocated constituent is clearly not a topic. First, the left-dislocated phrase can be a narrow focus in an answer to a question, as shown in (6), where '\' indicates a falling accent. Frey (2004b) suggests that examples like (6) have a 'contrastive flavour' and analyzes them as involving a contrastive topic. However, it is unclear what the function of topicality should be. Contrastive topics are usually thought to indicate that there is a larger discourse involving at least two contrastive topics (Büring 2016 for an overview). Examples like (6) need not occur in such discourses. We propose that they simply involve focus – possibly contrastive focus where the notion of contrast is linked to notions like mirativity or noteworthiness (see Cruschina 2021 for types of contrastive focus).

(6) Q: Whom did Paula introduce to the president?   (Frey 2004b: ex. 24)
     Den   \KARL,   \DEN hat   Paula dem   Präsidenten   vorgestellt.
     the.ACC K.   d-RP has   Paula the.DAT president.DAT   introduced
     'Karl, Paula introduced him to the president.'

Second, the left-dislocated phrase can be a narrow focus associated with a focus-sensitive operator (7):

(7) Hardly anybody understands Inquisitive Semantics straightaway.
     Nur   der   Andreas,   der   hat's   natürlich   sofort   gecheckt.
     only   the.NOM Andreas   d-RP   has-it   of.course   straightaway got
     'Only Andreas, he got it straightaway, of course.'

Finally, the left-dislocated phrase can be used as a 'groundholding' device, or serve as a bridge to link the subsequent discourse segment: (8) shows that nothing has to be said in the subsequent discourse about the referent denoted by the GLD-ed phrase. In other words, there clearly is no topicality involved.

(8) An ongoing conversation about snakes
     'N   Freund   von   mir,   der   hat   'ne   Freundin,
     a   friend   of   me   d-RP   has   a   friend.FEM
     die   hat   'ne   Boa   als   Haustier.
     RELP   has   a   boa   as   pet
     Boas sind keine Giftschlangen, können einen aber erwürgen.
     'A friend of mine, he has a friend that has a boa as a pet. Boas are not poisonous but they can strangle you.'

Now, as (9a) vs. (9b) show, the referentiality constraint holds in non-topical uses of GLD, too. Hence, it cannot be derived from the topic status of the left-dislocated phrase.

(9)   Welche Pferde haben Peter gestern gut gefallen?
        'Which horses did Peter like yesterday?'

        a.   Drei   Berberstuten,   die   haben   ihm   gut   gefallen.
                three   Berber.mares   d-RP   have   him   good   like
                'Three Berber mares, he liked them.'

        b.   *Weniger/mehr   als   drei   Berberstuten,
                Less/more   than   three   Berber.mares
                die   haben   ihm   gut   gefallen.
                d-RP   have   him   good   like
                'Less than three Berber mares, he liked them.'

3 Analysis

Our analysis of the referentiality constraint builds on two observations: (i) GLD is compatible with generic and adverbial quantification (10) (Endriss & Hinterwimmer 2009); (ii) Modified indefinites, i.e. clearly non-referential expressions, cannot be interpreted in the restrictor of adverbial quantifiers, (11a) vs. (11b). The reason is that adverbial quantifiers quantify over minimal situations satisfying the restrictor (von Fintel 1994): a minimal situation containing less than three kids (11a) is a situation with no kids at all, which is nonsensical. Hence the infelicity of (11a).

(10)   Ein   Torwart,   der   hat   meistens   gute   Nerven.
        a   goalie   d-RP   has   mostly   good   nerves
        'Usually, a goalie has strong nerves.'

(11)   A survey of vaccination records in schools last year revealed:
        a.   (??)Weniger   als   drei   Kinder sind meistens   geimpft.
                    less   than   three   kids   are mostly   vaccinated
                'Less than three kids are usually vaccinated.'
        b.   Meistens sind   weniger   als   drei   Kinder   geimpft.
                mostly   are   less   than   three   kids   vaccinated
                'Usually, less than three kids are vaccinated.'

For GLD we propose that these structures contain a covert (existential/generic) or an overt adverbial quantifier over situations, which takes the left-dislocated phrase as its first argument (= restrictor) and the remainder of the sentence as its second argument. Due to minimality, the left-dislocated phrase needs to be quasi-referential. The interpretation proceeds in 'two steps'. First, a (class of) situation(s) is introduced that contains the referent denoted by the left-dislocated phase. Attention is drawn to that referent: it is made prominent. Then something is said about the referent.

The presence of the adverbial quantifier in GLD is a result of the syntactic structure of GLD sentences. We assume that there is an operator in the C position licensing the occurrence of the d-pronoun, the dislocation and the occurrence of the quantifier (details omitted for space reasons). The restriction to the particular structure is important because sentences without GLD

or other dislocation structures are not subject to the referentiality constraint (e.g., hanging topics, Frey 2004b, 2005, Repp 2011).

To conclude, we have argued that GLD is not a topic-marking construction. Rather, it separates referential or quasi-referential expressions from the remainder of the clause independently of information structure, and serves a non-specified highlighting function.

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