The Encoding of Predication in Topic-Prominent Languages

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Purpose of the Experiment The structure of most western languages is based on the syntactic notions of ‘subject’ and ‘predicate’. However, in other languages, the syntactic characteristics and clausal word order is determined by the information structure of the sentence. In such languages, the sentence begins with the topic, which presents the anchoring for the event, and continues with the comment. Such languages are called ‘Topic-Prominent Languages’ (TP). These languages, in addition to their Topic-Comment sentence structure, are characterized by other properties, many of which have been noted in the literature. Among TP languages are several sign languages, natural languages that arose in deaf communities. The goal of this work was to find new properties that characterize TP languages, both signed and spoken, in order to better understand their nature. Procedures Used In order to examine the properties of TP languages, a sample of 5 languages, including signed and spoken, was chosen. The languages were defined as TP according to known criteria that were used in earlier studies. Observation/Data/Results Using data about these languages, 3 new properties of TP languages were found in the language sample: a) Tense marking is absent. b) Core-argument flagging is absent. c) Aspect marking is present. Conclusions/Applications The absence of tense marking and core-argument flagging leads to another property of TP languages: they are predicted to have at best a weakly grammaticalized notion of predication – the relation between subject and predicate. The understanding of TP languages is important for studies of natural language processing and Artificial Intelligence, analyzing language acquisition in children and adults, deaf studies and Neuroscience.

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