What ABOUT Lisu?

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1. Introduction

It is presumably uncontroversial that linguistic theory should enable us to analyze individual languages, and to state how they differ from—or resemble—each other. These questions are interrelated, of course, and. in particular, they both require a typology powerful enough to allow accurate description of disparate languages and subtle enough to do so without forcing them into Procrustean categories. In this paper I am concerned with the taxonomy proposed by Li and Thompson (1976), which defines four linguistic types: topic-prominent, subject-prominent, topic- and subject-prominent, and neither subject- nor topic-prominent. This work, I will argue, fails in a particularly illuminating way to achieve the goals I have outlined.

I will be concentrating on the topic-prominent category, which is instantiated in Li and Thompson's sample by Chinese, Lahu, and Lisu. These are supposed to be languages whose syntax makes little or, in the case of Lisu, no reference to the category of subject, and revolves around the category of topic instead. In fact. Li and Thompson devote a lot of effort to showing that Lisu is a language in which topic-comment sentences are the basic sentence type, "grammatical relations such as Agent and Patient cannot be identified [and t]hus, there is no way to identify the notion of subject". This analysis of Lisu syntax is based on Hope (1974) and additional data supplied by him to Li and Thompson. However, my reading of Hope does not confirm the claims made by Li and Thompson, and suggests instead that this analysis rests on their misinterpretation of what was already an incomplete and unreliable description of the language. This undermines their case about Lisu, which I will argue is a rather ordinary-looking language, with respect to the phenomena at issue. Given the importance that Li and Thompson attach to Lisu and also simply because their whole theory seems to ride on the claim that some languages (notably Lisu) give the same kind of prominence to topics that the Western Indo-European languages do to subjects, this conclusion poses a direct challenge to the entire typology.

For one thing, Hope's work—unlike Li and Thompson's—was written in the case grammar framework, and they fail to take the resulting terminological and conceptual discrepancies into account. Thus, Li and Thompson equate Hope's topic with their own, and identify his agentive and objective cases with their agent and patient. Yet, in his system, the term topic covers both their topic and subject, although two different processes of topicalization are countenanced, one of which in effect defines subjects and the other true topics. However, Li and Thompson, while accepting the letter of Hope's rules, employ *a priori* assumptions about expected frequencies of sentences generated by one or the other rule, to trivialize the subject rule, and build their whole case on virtually ignoring it. Likewise, the case distinctions are quite different in the two systems, and in the resulting confusion Li and Thompson make crucial claims about Lisu case marking which are simply false.

Second, Hope's whole analysis comes straight out of Fillmore's (1968) description of English case grammar, without any attempt being made to show that this is valid for Lisu. As a result, many of Hope's statements are totally unsupported by evidence internal to the language, and in some cases the data he cites in fact do not fit in this framework. It may be that Lisu is quite different from English in various ways, but the fact remains that Li and Thompson derive all their claims from a description copied from one that was tailored to English.

Third, Li and Thompson base much of their case on the apparent scarcity of explicit references to certain grammatical categories (especially, subject) in Hope's rules. Yet Hope's analysis is a rather brief and very incomplete syntax of the language. Many issues are simply not mentioned or get only cursory treatment, and most rules are stated without the precision that would be required to answer crucial questions about reference to categories like topic, subject, agent, or patient. Indeed, it is not usual to find such information in case grammar works, even when they are detailed and in-depth, which is not the case here.

Finally, it is easy to find numerous contradictions between Hope's description and the data he cites. Thus, no special knowledge of Lisu is required to see that his analysis is questionable on a number of points. Yet Li and Thompson accept Hope's claims of fact without any reservations. We will see that this is not a good idea.

2. Subjects and Topics

According to Hope, topics in Lisu are derived by two distinct processes which have the same structural effect of creating a binary topic-predicate structure out of one where all the arguments are co-equal sisters of the verb, and marking the topic with the postposition *nya* (and in certain cases *xə*). The two processes are referred to as primary and secondary topicalization. Secondary topicalization applies in sentences with presupposed arguments, and makes all of the latter into topics with no reference to their case roles. Primary topicalization, which takes place when no argument is presupposed, does refer to the system of cases. The choice of which argument to make into a topic is determined in this situation by the following hierarchy: time/place < agentive < dative < objective < instrumental. Thus, for Hope, the central rule of Lisu syntax distinguishes cases like agentive, dative, and objective.

Li and Thompson were aware of the primary topicalization rule and admit that in this case "we might say that this function of *nya* is a subject-marking function since some noun phrase is being singled out not according to its case role, but according to a hierarchy that is typically invoked for subject-prominent languages". However, they only mention this fact at the tail end of their presentation, which is organized around Hope's secondary topicalization instead. Furthermore, they do not make it clear that these are supposed to be two distinct grammatical processes, in effect treating primary topicalization as a special case of secondary topicalization.

Even then they try to finesse the issue by claiming that sentences with no presupposed arguments are uncommon, and argue that "[s]ince this subject-marking function of *nya* occurs only in this relatively rare sentence type, and since the notion of subject seems to play no other role in the grammar of Lisu, then we claim that the basic sentence structure is topic-comment . . .". However, Hope's description, both because of its limited scope and depth and because of its theoretical orientation cannot be expected to provide many examples of explicit reference to categories like subject, no matter what the facts of the language might be. An argument *e silentio* is not appropriate under the circumstances.

Furthermore, Li and Thompson do not show that sentences without secondary topicalization are actually rare in Lisu. Rather, they seem to be taking Hope's analysis of secondary topicalization as applying to any and all presupposed arguments quite literally, and then reasoning *a priori* that in a text most sentences will contain reference to something already mentioned and hence presupposed. However, none of this needs to be the case, and indeed even a cursory look at the brief Lisu text appended to Hope's work shows that it is not true that every argument that has been mentioned earlier gets topic marking. The story begins as follows:

(1) nɔ́ anyí thì ma dyu-a̱.
    there last-year one one have-DEC
    'There is a story of long ago.'

nyí syí.
two siblings
'The two brothers.'

yíwà nyì syí áṉa̱ amyâ ma dyu-a̱.
they two siblings buffalo many ones have-DEC
'The two of them had many buffalo.'

These examples further show that Lisu sentences need not contain any NP with topic marking at all. Moreover, this does not necessarily mean that there is an implicit topic, since there does not appear be anything omitted in these sentences. In fact, in this story, the marker *nya* is used only sporadically on NPs. In certain cases, the marker *xə* is used (a possibility noted by Hope), primarily or exclusively to mark topic shift. However, most sentences have no NP marked with either postposition. On the other hand, most sentences begin with a *nya*-marked subordinate clause, which recapitulates what was said immediately before. This either takes the apparently fixed form *áthe ŋu ba̱-a̱ nya* 'this being the case' or else repeats the whole or part of the previous sentence. Such an introductory clause may be analyzed as a topic, though presumably in a special sense (since normally one is concerned with a topic within a single clause). It is clear that Hope's rules do not account for these facts. However, precisely because there are few examples of NP topics, it is difficult to come up with a precise alternative.

But a couple of generalizations suggest themselves. First, the clausal topics are presumably always secondary topics. Second, they seem to always take the *nya*, which suggests that for secondary topics such marking is obligatory. Third, this would mean that secondary topicalization is not triggered by mere presupposition, for in that case we would find many more NPs marked with *nya* than we do. Rather, this process must express some much more specific set of meanings (such as contrast, emphasis, etc.). Fourth, in most sentences there is no NP explicitly marked as topic, which means either that a primary topic is also relatively rare or else that it need not take any postposition. The second alternative seems more plausible to me. This would imply that primary topics could be assumed for all clauses (provided we also allow ellipsis or zero anaphora). All this adds up to a tentative, but plausible, case that primary topics really are primary, and secondary ones, secondary. It may be that this proposal will not stand up to additional data, of course, but for the moment it accounts for much more of the scant corpus available than Li and Thompson's redoing of Hope or even than Hope's original proposal.

Moreover, even if Li and Thompson's assumptions about frequencies were valid, that would not prevent us from taking sentences without secondary topicalization as the syntactically basic pattern. Analogously, in many languages, including Lisu, it is normal for presupposed arguments to be missing altogether, yet we usually take sentences with expressed arguments as basic. Even more important, anyone who has read Fillmore (1968) will have realized that primary topicalization is the term he introduces about halfway through his article for subjectivalization, whereas secondary topicalization is his term for "stylistic changes involving stress assignment, late word-order changes, and possibly the 'cleft-sentence construction'". In other words, Hope's primary topicalization is intended to refer to subjects, and secondary topicalization to topics. Nor was this fact missed by Hope: "The base rules posited above are supplemented by a set of rules which achieve such things as 'primary topicalization' (which is subjectivalization in English)". It may be that Fillmore's analysis of English does not extend to "topic-prominent" Lisu. However, the simple fact is that Li and Thompson are basing their claims about Lisu on an analysis of that language which explicitly refers to subjects (even if it does so by talking about "primary topicalization").

Thus, the primary topic seems by its very existence—no matter how precarious—to contradict Li and Thompson's central claim that "there is no way identify the notion of subject in Lisu". As a matter of fact, additional instances of probable reference to subject are implied by Hope's description and/or his data. One of these is obscured by the fact that Hope often fails to indicate which of the two kinds of topics is involved in a particular example. Since the outputs of both of his proposed topicalization processes often look the same, it is usually impossible to tell which is involved in a given sentence (especially out of context). Li and Thompson, too, state most of their argument in terms of claims about topics *tout court*. These claims would seem to be intended to cover both primary and secondary topics, since they never acknowledge the existence of the former as a separate grammatical category. However, Li and Thompson require topics to be definite in all cases, but in Lisu the existential verb *dyu* normally takes an indefinite topic, e.g.:

(2) áɲà nya dyu-a
    Buffalo TOP be-DEC
    'There was a buffalo/There are (such things as) buffaloes.'

Other examples of indefinite topics are not also not hard to find, e.g.

(3) yítywé nya ɣə-a
    crack TOP form-DEC
    'A crack is forming.'

(4) swu nya áthà də-a
    people TOP knife forge-DEC
    'Someone is forging a knife.'

This would not be surprising if were dealing with subjects, of course, and indeed these are presumably instances of primary topicalization. But this means, again, that Lisu does distinguish primary and secondary topics (or, in other words, subjects and topics) in a second way: the former may be indefinite, and the latter presumably cannot.[1] One more case of apparent reference to subject in Lisu syntax will be discussed in section 5, since it presupposes some results about agents which have yet to be established.

3. Patients

When we turn to the case distinctions, we see that Hope's system is again based on Fillmore's analysis of English and is quite different from Li and Thompson's. Hope operates, inter alia, with the following case notions:

Dative (D) The case of the animate being affected by the state or action identified by the verb.

Objective (O) . . . the case of anything representable by a noun whose role in the action or state identified by the verb is identified by the semantic interpretation of the verb itself.

It might seem that O can be anything, including D, but in fact Hope uses it essentially as an inanimate analogue of D. The connection is in fact apparently palpable to Hope himself since he

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[1] Of course, it is conjectural that secondary topics cannot be indefinite, but, of course, if they can, then so much the worse for Li and Thompson's whole system, since for them the obligatory definiteness of topics is one of the main ways these differ from subjects.