What's a topic in the Philippines?

Alexis Manaster-Ramer
Wayne State University

In this paper, I sketch the history of the use of the term topic in Philippine linguistics between 1957 and 1977 (for a very different presentation, see Thomas 1977). The reason for this choice of dates is simple. In his 1957 description of Maranao, McKaughan (published in 1958) first used the term topic for the grammatical constituent which had traditionally been called subject. By 1973, McKaughan recanted his original reasons for distinguishing the Maranao "topic" from the subject, arguing openly for the universality of the subject category. But in 1976 and 1977 Schachter promulgated a new theory of syntactic typology, in which Philippine topics are systematically distinguished from non-Philippine subjects, and he cited a large body of evidence in support of this distinction.

To be sure, there has been much work in this area since then, in a variety of frameworks (such as Payne 1982, Bell 1983, Foley and Van Valin 1984, Andrews 1985, Gerdts 1988, Shibatani 1988, Manaster Ramer to appear, and many others), all of it ultimately based on, even if usually more or less critical of, Schachter's publications. As a result, it becomes particularly interesting to find out how the topic theory originally arose, why it was given up by its creator, and what made it so successful in later years in spite of McKaughan's disavowal.

To put things in context, it will be well to recall that, from the seventeenth century through the 1950's, many grammars of Philippine languages were written, all of them wedded to the Western grammatical terminology and all of them recognizing a subject category as well as an active and a number of different passive voices. To be sure, this tradition had been challenged by Humboldt (1836-39), who analyzed the traditional three passive voices of the Tagalog verb as verbal nouns, primarily because of the apparent formal identity of the agent of the passive with the possessor of a noun.

271

Humboldt's analysis was followed, for various Philippine and other Austronesian languages, by some leading scholars, such as Seidenadel (1909) in his epic grammar of Bontoc Igorot, Vanoverbergh (1955), and, most recently, Capell (1964).

This analysis is obviously wrong (see Manaster Ramer, to appear), nor is it widely accepted anymore, but I suspect that for a time it served channeled the same discontent with traditional grammars which later helped contribute to the success of the topic theory. For, although it was Schachter (1976, 1977) who first gave a clear account of numerous syntactic properties which differentiate such languages as Tagalog both from English and from the expectations of universal grammarians, there had been a feeling for a long time that the Philippine languages were quite different syntactically from the European ones.

The 1950's were, of course, the heyday of the movement to describe every language in its own terms. The new breed of American linguist who arrived in the Philippines in those years naturally sought to develop a new style of description for the exotic languages he found there. While the term topic originated with McKaughan, it took several years before the whole framework of syntactic analysis we now associate with that term took shape. In this analysis, the place of subject is usually taken by topic and that of voice by focus, so that the active and the various voices are renamed actor focus, goal focus, instrument(al) focus, etc.

Interestingly, the terms topic and focus were introduced independently: topic by McKaughan (1958), focus by a group of SIL linguists, including Dean (1958), Healey (1958), and Thomas (1958). (In the same spirit, Newell (1958) used the term highlight, which did not survive.) Both the terms topic and focus appear together in P. M. Healey (1960), Reid (1969), Hidalgo (1970), and many works written since. This is now regarded by many as the standard mode of analysis of Philippine languages (Llamzón 1982), and with the work of Schachter (1976, 1977) it has attracted the attention of theoretical linguists at large.

In terms of motivation for the new terminology, the relevant literature, starting with McKaughan (1958), has claimed that this is precisely where Philippine languages differ

from other languages, ones which are supposed to lack the topic-focus system. Which other languages these are, is often left somewhat vague: McKaughan originally referred specifically to English, but there has been a tendency to loosely contrast all the Philippine languages with all the Indo-European ones (e.g., Hidalgo 1970) or even with all the languages of the world outside the Philippine archipelago (e.g. Schachter 1976, 1977).

So the question arises: what IS a topic? (Since the distinction between voice and focus is correlated with the distinction between subject and topic, the former does not need to be discussed separately.) For most linguists, the term subject has very different connotations from the term topic. The former is a clausal, the latter a sentential or discourse phenomenon. The subject is a formal category having to do with verb agreement, case marking, equi, etc. The topic is a pragmatic category having to do with emphasis, contrast, topic of discourse (i.e. what the discourse is about), etc. The two are quite independent roles of NP's, such that an NP may have both, one, or neither, as noted by Hockett (1958: 201-202), who seems in a large measure responsible for popularizing the term topic in general linguistics.

Yet, in the case of Philippine languages, we find that the new analyses usually do not provide for a subject category at all. They simply claim that the grammatical element which was traditionally treated as the subject is really the topic. (As we will see, the earliest of the topic analyses used the term subject for the actor, but this clearly does not alter the situation described here in any substantive way).

A possible explanation for this discrepancy between what is normally understood by the term topic and what is claimed by the descriptions of many Philippine languages is suggested by Schachter (1977). Schachter shows that the Philippine topic has nothing to do with the notion of topic just described, and claims that only linguists working on non-Philippine languages might confuse the two:

> In the usage of non-Philippinists, the term "topic" designates the constituent that represents the "center of attention" of the discourse (cf. Li and Thompson 1976). That

this usage is NOT relevant to the Philippine-language topic is clear from examples like the following, in which the discourse context overtly directs attention to a referent which is subsequently represented by a nontopic nominal:

Speaker A: Nasaan ang katulong?
                where TOP maid
                'Where's the maid?'

Speaker B: Inihahanda niya ang pagkain.
                GT-prepare A-she TOP food
                'She's preparing the food.'

In this example, the center of attention established by the discourse context is the maid, but the pronoun that refers to the maid is the nontopic actor pronoun niya, while the sentence topic is ang pagkain 'the food'.

Schachter's demonstration is clear and convincing as far as the facts of Tagalog are concerned. There can never again be any doubt that the grammatical constituent called topic in Tagalog and its ilk is not a topic in the usual sense of that term, i.e., the center of attention, that which a clause is about, or the like.

However, the implication that this is well understood by Philippine linguists is misleading. It is easy to show that, when topic gets defined at all in Philippine linguistics, it is usually precisely in the way which Schachter showed to be inappropriate. For example:

. . . in focus, that is, the topic of conversation or discourse, the center of attention [Healey 1960:22]

The topic of a Tagalog sentence usually represents some person, object, idea, or action that the listener is already aware of, either because it is visible to him or because it has been mentioned or implied in the immediately preceding context. The predicate of a Tagalog sentence usually offers new information to the listener, and represents some person, object, idea, or action that the speaker wants the