

Ding, Picus S.

1. Introduction

In their typological study of subject and topic, Li and Thompson (1976) note that languages such as Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, and Lisu are topic-prominent. As a linguistic feature, topic-prominence is indeed an important commonality between the majority of Sino-Tibetan languages. This paper will describe a variety of topic-comment constructions in Prinmi, a Qiangic language exclusively spoken in southwestern China, based on the study in Ding (1998). These include: basic topic-comment construction, double topic construction, chained comment construction, and embedded topic-comment construction. Before we proceed, a working definition for the topic-comment construction is proposed.

2. Defining the topic-comment construction

Topic-comment constructions occur pervasively in Prinmi, being a basic device for structuring information. The language is equipped with two clitics, *ggee* and *bbo*, for marking the internal topic and the external topic, respectively. While these markers are often instrumental in identifying a topic, they are not effective indicators of topic-comment constructions. First of all, the external topic clitic *bbo* may function much like a discourse particle, mainly for introducing a brief pause in utterance. Such use of *bbo* is subject to individual preference and the clitic can be freely omitted.¹ Secondly, some topics such as scene-setting topics may function without the company of a comment. Furthermore, there are occasions on which a topic, even in the presence of a comment, cannot possibly form a topic-comment relation with a following constituent. This is found when the internal topic appears as an 'anti-topic' after the comment, e.g.

- (1) Debbô dêa-giêa'non son_baigüân ggee.
 then up-fear+Dur three_brothers InT
 Then (they) get frightened, the three brothers.

¹ This is somewhat similar to the use of *ne* in Mandarin, which often appears at the end of an utterance. Nonetheless, it can also occur in the middle of a sentence when it follows a topic.

The internal topic in (1) is clearly a pragmatic topic which the sentence is about. However, occurring after the comment, the topic cannot be analyzed in terms of the topic-comment construction. The sentence represents a minor type of structure, an anti-topic construction.

As morphosyntactic marking does not provide a reliable means for recognizing a pragmatic topic in Prinmi, it is beneficial to advance an explicit definition for the topic-comment construction. A working definition for the construction is proposed as follows:²

Under a specific discourse context, a topic-comment construction is identified if a sentence can be divided into two parts such that the focus domain is realized on/within the second part only. Further, the semantic content of the two parts should allow establishing an aboutness relation between them. The first part, outside the focus-domain, represents or contains the topic of the sentence, and the second part serves as a comment about this topic.

Note that scene-setting topics may, or may not, occur in a topic-comment relation, depending on the construal of an aboutness relation.³ The two central criteria for the topic-comment construction are the identifiability of a narrow focus domain on the comment and the feasible construal of the comment being about the topic.

3. The basic structure of topic-comment construction

As shown below, the basic structure of the topic-comment construction is quite simple:

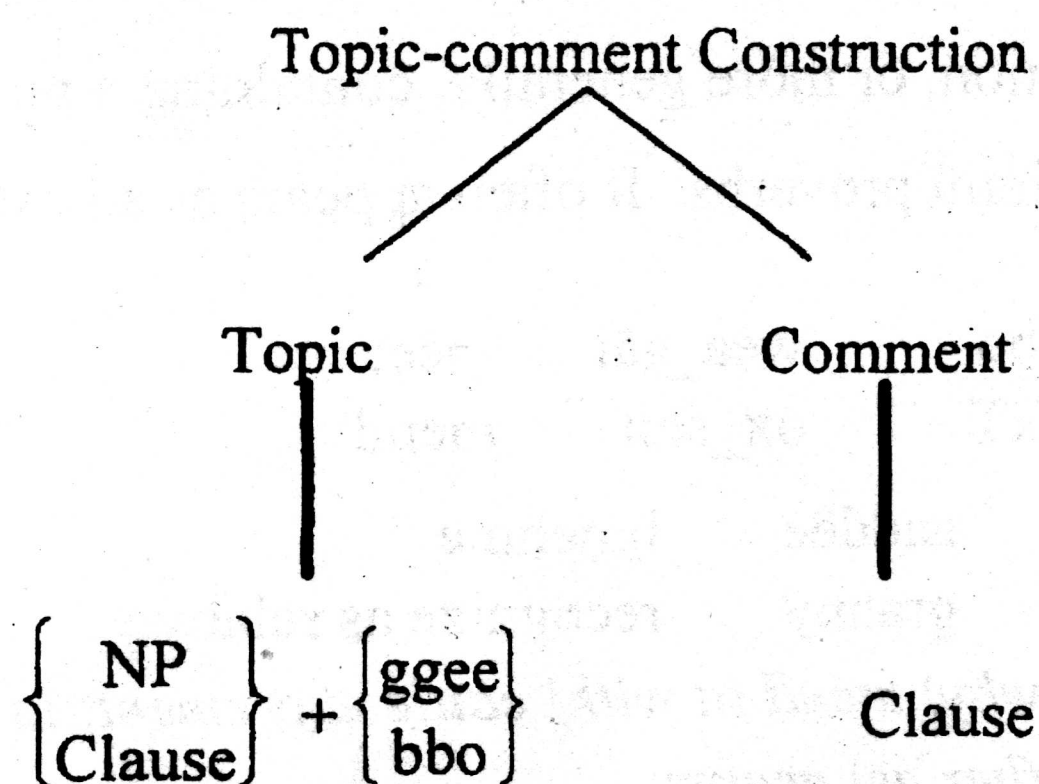


Figure 1: The basic structure of the topic-comment Construction

² The proposal makes reference to *focus*, as discussed by Lambrecht (1994).

³ Kirkpatrick (1996) has rightly pointed out that a scene-setting topic without a comment should not be considered as a topic-comment construction. However, sometimes it is possible to have a scene topic in the topic-comment construction, as will be shown later.

The construction comprises two essential parts: a topic and a comment. The former is not necessarily expressed explicitly, however. The topic, if overt, always precedes the comment, and it usually occurs at the very beginning of a simplex sentence. The topic can be marked by *ggee* or *bbo*. A topic without morphosyntactic marking must be an inferable one whose topical status is already established in the discourse situation. Furthermore, the complex clitic *ggon*, combined from *ggee* and the instrumental *on*, may also be considered as a kind of topic, 'agentive topic'. Examples for the variety of topics are presented in the following, with the topic constituent underscored:

- (2)a Bêaddî êa zzhu zzî. (inferable topic)
 frog 1s friend Cpl
Frog, (he) is my friend.
- b Beazii ggêe prîn. (internal topic)
 flower InT white
(Its) flowers are white.
- c Qüi bbo zzhêazzhea yon. (external topic)
 badger ExT bad Assr
Badgers are certainly harmful animals.
- d xiôn ggon biánwu da dea-pan. (agentive topic)
 g. pheasant Inst grove in only up-hide
The Golden Pheasant, (he) just hides (himself) in the wood.

Topics are often encoded on noun phrases. Sometimes the topic can also be realized on a noun phrase conveying a location, or more generally, containing a postposition. This kind of topic is found in several Prinmi proverbs. It often appears as an external topic, e.g.

- (3) Xxian bbûu bbêe bbo wea_gâi pêe;
 manure_pile at ExT ox_shit mend
Jiibamâ bbee bbo aaddêe hmehme.
 witch at ExT granny recognize as relative
Onto the manure pile, (why) mend (it with) cattle excrement; to the monstrous witch, (why) recognize (her as) granny.

Less frequently, a topic can also be a clause. A clausal topic often receives a clitic marking. In the simplest case, it may consist of no more than a verb, as in (4)a and (5)a-b.

- (4) Clauses serving as a topic
- a Ggüân bbô ggüân yôn.
 tall ExT tall Assr
As for being tall, (the tree) is certainly tall.

- b Hon_qüêe xi bbo diá ko_qüêe xi yon.
 inner_side exist ExT now outer_side exist Assr
(Since) there exists an 'innerland', certainly there exists an 'outerland'.

(5) Conditional clauses serving as a topic

- a Bbó pián bbo hêaggî tea-xii?
 Dc flee ExT where fr.sp-go
Well, (if we) run away, where (should we) go?
- b Ma'pian bbô nee tea-lhîgi ma'gaî.
 N+flee ExT Dc fr.sp-release N+Vlt
(If you) don't flee, (you) won't extricate (from the flood).
- c Lô tea-biâ lâ née dde-préa ma'gaî.
 work fr.sp-work also 2s to.sp-meet N+Vlt
Even (if you) work, you won't be rewarded.

The pragmatic function of clausal topic is to introduce a discourse setting for the comment in the following clause. As such, it is typically expressed as an external topic. An important function of clausal topics is to encode the topic as a conditional clause, illustrated in (5). Unless followed by other words with a rich pragmatic content, as with the contrastive adverb *la* "also" in (5)c, the conditional clause must be encoded as an external topic.

4. Chained Comment Construction

When a sentence contains a topic shared by several comments, the information structure of the sentence is identified as a Chained Comment Construction. The topic constituent in the Chained Comment Construction is explicitly expressed once and often receives some morphosyntactic marking, e.g.

- (6)a Lhasiân ggee bbo [rônnddiân bbo la ddiôn yon],
 Lhasian InT Dc lowland Dc also exist_{inan} Assr
 [gônnddiân bbo la ddiôn yon].
 highland Dc also exist_{inan} Assr
The 'Lhasian' tree, (it) is found in the low land, (as well as) in the high land.
- b Lûubbon ggee [sianbbôn dêa_con], [bbîn], [lealiân ggüân].
 China fir InT tree one_kind radially thick very tall
The China fir is a kind of tree, radially thick, and very tall.

As shown in (6)b, the chained comments need not have parallel structures. What is required for the comments in the construction is that there are at least two comments which provide additional information about the initial constituent, the topic. Such

pragmatic relation even allows the actual topic referents of the chained comments to be different, as long as they are part of the topic constituent of the construction. With a clausal topic as in (7), the chained comments can relate to different referents situated in the clausal topic:

- (7) Buunîsân mî^m ggia kelhâzii xxialhâziiⁿ dea_zii mâ'hran ggee bbo
 nowadays person M toe finger one_Ctr N+long InT Dc
- topic^m* [xxiahnián jiiddîn_ddî-mi ggon gge-zzîi],
 ancient flood_cast-er Inst out-eat
- topicⁿ* [pea-con pëa_hrân tea-zzhon güe'si zzii], jii.
 half_short half_long to.sp-become let+Pf Cpl say

As for (the reason why) nowadays man's fingers and toes are not equally long, it's said that in the ancient time (man) was swallowed by the flood-starter, and (the fingers and toes) became of different lengths.

The first comment in the Chained Comment Construction is about *mî* “man” and the second one about *kelhâzii xxialhâzii* “toe and finger”. Both of the topic referents are part of the clausal topic of the sentence. Recall that the topic-comment construction, as defined in §1, permits a flexible identification of topic — either coinciding with the entire constituent outside the focus domain or confining to a smaller constituent within it. Thus the kind of topic-comment relation found in (7) is unusual, but not deviant.

5. Double Topic Construction

The Double Topic Construction consists of pragmatic topics of different kinds. The first one, ‘scene topic’, is typically a scene setting topic outside a topic-comment relation, and the second one appears in an aboutness relation with its comment. The structure of the construction can be depicted as follows:

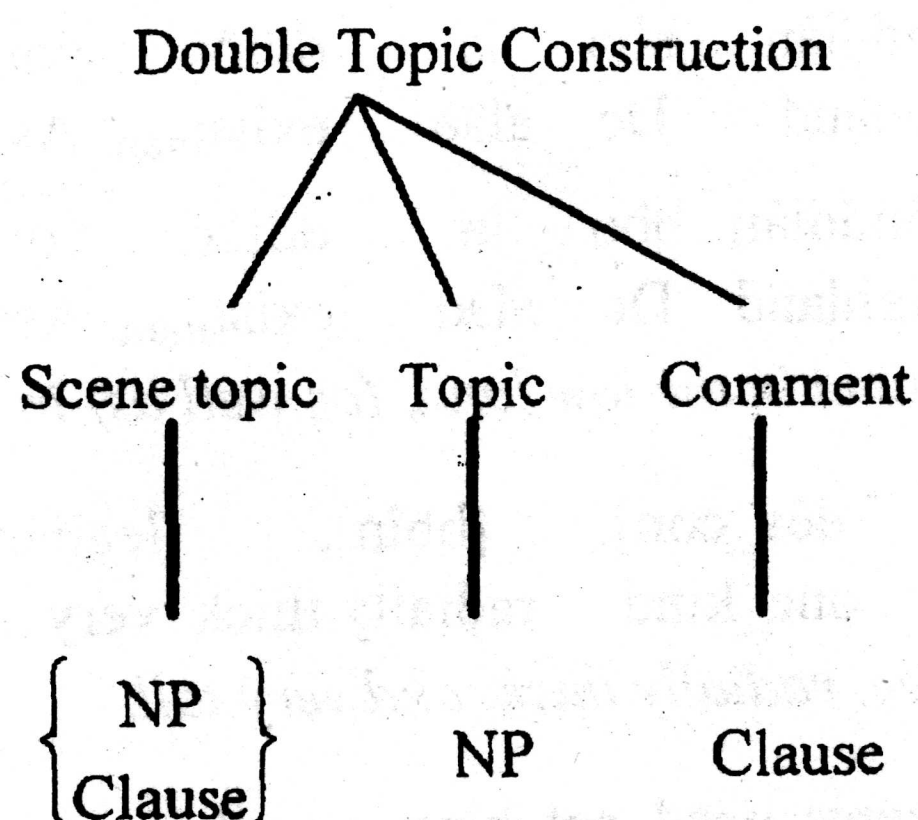


Figure 2: The structure of the Double Topic Construction

The diagram in Figure 2 has also indicated the kinds of syntactic constituents permitted for the topics in the construction. The scene topic is often followed by the external topic clitic *bbo*, as in (8)a. It may also occur as an inferable topic without any discourse clitics, as shown in (8)b. The second topic tends to be marked as an internal topic or is left unmarked. It can also be rendered as a zero anaphor (not exemplified here), but has not been found to encode as an external topic. In the following examples, the scene topic is double underlined, while the second topic is indicated by a single line underneath, and the comment is placed within a pair of brackets.

- (8)a Jii ggêe niâ krê bo dêa-dâ ra kee bbo,
 water InT 2s:M foot below up-reach nInv:M time ExT
nee [re bbêe zhinzhu ggêe nea-ddi nea-xii gêe].
 2s first at pestle InT down-cast down-go let:subj
When the water reaches your feet, you throw the pestle down first.

- b Nón má'zzii hhodüi gge-hîn nee mî ggee
 Dc N+Cpl wart out-grow Dc person InT
 [nêa-rin gge-qion].
 down-suffer out-appear
(If) not, bad things are going to happen to the person with warts.

As the scene topic is often used for setting a temporal frame, the use of scene topic, as in (8)a, is very common. Like the conditional clause in (8)b, a temporal scene topic may also appear without any discourse clitics.

It must be emphasized that the notions of 'external topic' and 'scene topic' are independent of each other. The former refers to a morphosyntactic marking while the latter typically occurs in the Double Topic Construction.

The analysis of the Double Topic Construction in terms of apposition of the scene topic before the commented topic is much influenced by the definition of topic-comment construction proposed above. Should the aboutness relation be downplayed, the distinction between the two kinds of pragmatic topics would smear, leaving the Double Topic Construction difficult to distinguish from the Embedded Topic-Comment Construction to be discussed below. It should also be pointed out that the use of 'double topic' in the labeling does not imply a restriction on the possible pragmatic topics for this kind of complex construction. For instance, a total of four pragmatic topics occur in the following Double Topic Construction:

- (9) Přinmĩ're Wuxi qũa chii kee bbo, dẽa giu dẽa gea
 Pumi+p New Year_pig slaughter time ExT one_year one_family
niãn're [ni chĩi], xxĩi'rẽ [wẽa chii].
 few+p two slaughter many+p five slaughter

When the Pumi slaughter New Year pigs, every year every household, for the few, two are slaughtered; for the many, five are slaughtered.

The sentence starts with two scene topics, one denoting the time frame for the activity and the other setting up a frequency-unit frame. The other two topics are associated with two comments respectively, forming a pair of chained clauses. The pair has the pragmatic function of conveying contrastive foci. Notice that the second scene topic does not hold a topic-comment relation with the following clauses. Otherwise, the sentence would involve a topic-comment embedding.

6. Embedded Topic-Comment Construction

Taking the topic-comment construction as an information structure, its ability to recur and embed the same construction within another one is parallel to that found in many syntactic structures. For a variety of reasons, the possibility of an embedded topic-comment construction has not been well explored.⁴ Applying the working definition of topic-comment construction proposed earlier, we can identify sentences embodying an embedded topic-comment under another topic-comment construction. For instance,

- (10)a Eqiãn dẽ mĩ ggee [piqĩ [ẽa kũe bõ ma'qion]].
 Eqian this person InT temper 1s heart under N+open
Eqian this guy, (his) temper I don't like.

- b Ggãn do'a zãggiõn son ggee
 bed on+M dried pig three InT
 [hrãnzã ggee [di mezza son_riũ gũee]].
 length InT one every three_elbowspan exist_{in}
The three dried pigs on the bed, (their) length each has three elbows long.

The construal of the initial part of the sentences in (10) as a topic is straightforward, as it can be easily interpreted as what the sentence is about. If we look inside the comment of the topic, we find that the comment itself can be partitioned into two parts with the first word (underscored within the brackets) serving as the topic and the remainder (placed

⁴ For a different motivation for such complex information structure, see the pragmatic analysis of the Mandarin resultative construction in terms of topic-comment embedding in Ding (1993).

within a second pair of brackets) providing information about this embedded topic. That is, there exist two instances of topic-comment relations, one within another. These pragmatic relations give rise to an Embedded Topic-Comment Construction which may be analyzed as follows for the sentences in (10):⁵

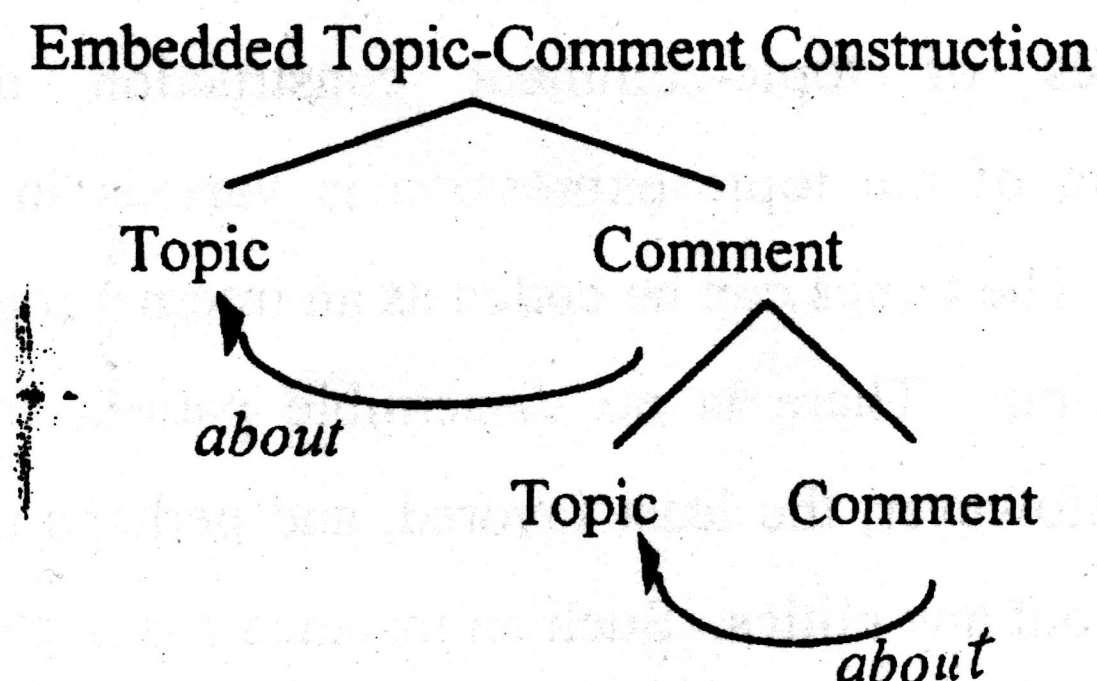


Figure 3: The structure of the Embedded Topic-Comment Construction

The fundamental distinction between the Embedded Topic-Comment Construction and the Double Topic Construction rests on whether the initial topic is construable as what the rest of the sentence is about. If and only if the aboutness relation holds, the sentence is analyzed as the Embedded Topic-Comment Construction. The following is a pragmatic test useful for diagnosing the Embedded Topic-Comment Construction:

(11) Provided that the sentence **X-Y-Z** is given as a reply to:

Q1 - **X qiini'riu?** (What about X?)

The sentence **X-Y-Z** is an Embedded Topic-Comment Construction if it can also answer the question:

Q2 - **X Y qiini'riu?** (What about Y in relation to X?)

If we apply the set of test to the sentence in (10)b, we get the following results:

Q1 - What about the three dried pigs on the bed?

Reply - The three dried pigs on the bed, their length each has three elbows long.

ACCEPTABLE

⁵ The Embedded Topic-Comment Construction proposed here has been labeled such as 'double nominative construction' (Teng 1974), 'double subject construction' (Li & Thompson 1976), 'pragmatic incorporation' (LaPolla 1995), and so forth in study of Mandarin Chinese.

Q2 - What about the length of the three dried pigs on the bed?

Reply - The three dried pigs on the bed, their length each has three elbows long.

ACCEPTABLE

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The test will fail, however, when applied to the Double Topic Construction, because the scene topic is too vague for establishing an appropriate topic-comment relation.

As in other types of topic-comment construction described earlier, the morphosyntactic marking of the topic expression is various in the Embedded Topic-Comment Construction. The topics can be coded as an internal topic, an external topic, or without any clitic marking. There is no discernible pattern for the morphosyntactic marking of the topics. However, the least favored, and perhaps unacceptable, one is for both topics to occur without any clitics. Such an instance has not been attested. In regard to syntactic constituent, clausal topic is not permitted in the Embedded Topic-Comment Construction. The construction requires that the outer topic hold a certain semantic relation with the inner topic. Thus the topic must be a noun phrase.

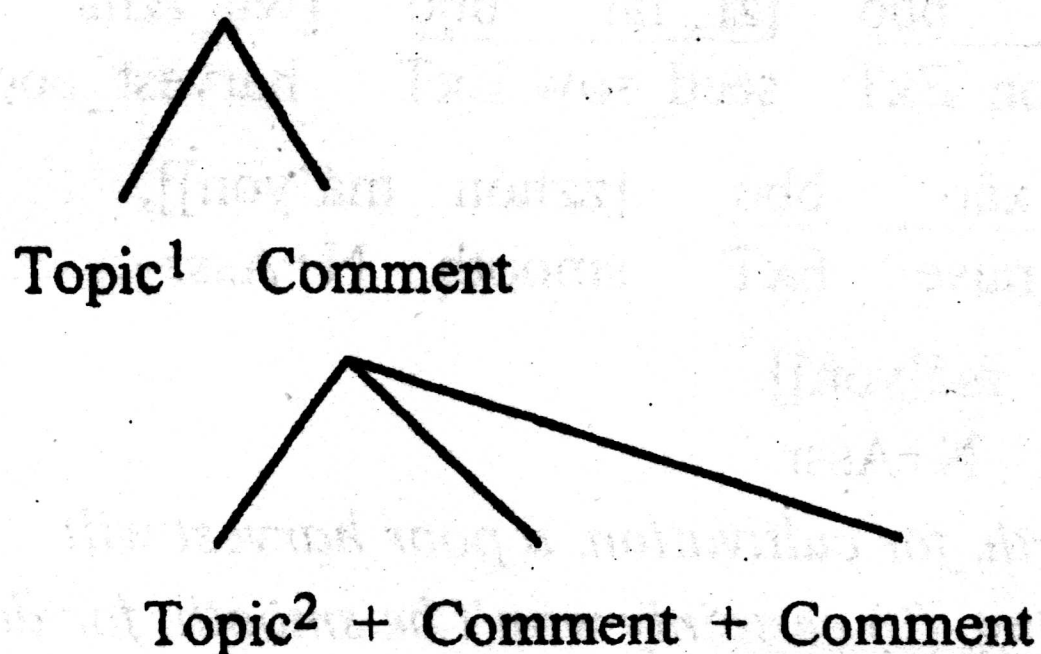
When a topic-comment relation is embedded within another comment, the two topics are typically in a kind of possessive relation, with the outer topic understood as the possessor and the embedded topic as possessee. More common than property terms, as found in (10), body part terms feature frequently as an inner topic in the Embedded Topic-Comment Construction. For example,

(12)a Dê qüi ggêe [ggiônhmiân bbo
this badger InT body ExT
[zhêa má'yon], [ejjiâ bbezii pâ la ede dai]].
big N+Assr there piglet half also that big
The badger, (its) body is not big, about as big as half a piglet there.

b Yonzzîi baba [ssuu ggêe [zzhea'non]] [zho ggêe [zzi]].
bat face InT bad+Dur organ InT wonderful
The bat, (its) face is ugly; (yet its) organs are perfect.

The examples in (12) are structurally more complex than those in (10). As the number of clauses in a sentence increases, more topic-comment relations may be embodied. The information structures of these sentences can be illustrated as follows:

for (12)a:



for (12)b:

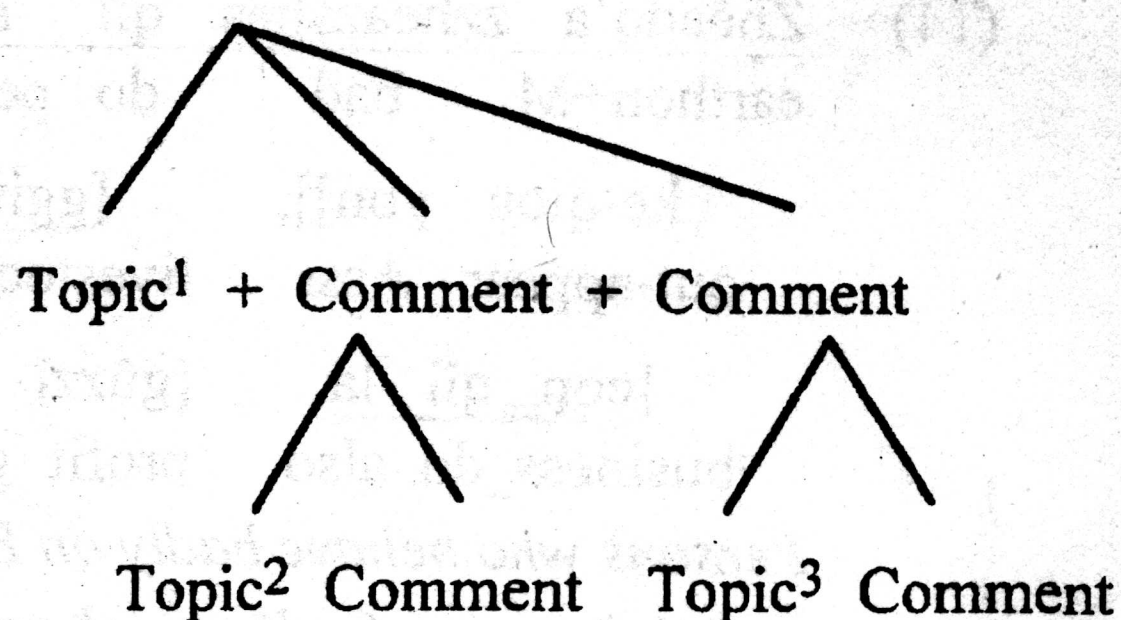


Figure 4: Combinations of chained-comment and topic-comment embedding

As can be seen from the illustration, each sentence in (12) involves a combination of the Embedded Topic-Comment Construction and Chained Comment Construction.

Notice that the third topic in (12)b holds with the initial topic a part-and-whole relation parallel to that between the second and the initial topics. The whole-and-part relation, or more generally the set-and-member relation, does not necessarily involve the initial topic as the base in connection with an embedded topic-comment. In a delicate information structure, it is possible for a third topic to hold a member-set relation to the second topic which, in turn, has a member-set relation to the initial topic. Such a case is found in (13):

- (13) Dê sian dêa_con [seabâ ggêe bbo nee [ruearuéa]],
 this wood one_kind leaf InT Dc Dc round
 [ku ggêe [lialiâ di qiâ]], êni zzii.
 top InT a bit sharp like that Cpl

This kind of tree, (its) leaf is of round shape, a bit sharp at the top (of the leaf), like that.

While a set-member relation exists between *tree* (the initial topic) and *leaf* (the second topic), the third topic *top* holds a direct semantic relation to the second topic instead of the first topic. Otherwise, what is sharp would be the top part of the tree, not the leaf.

Agent-and-activity is another feasible realization of the set-member relation for the Embedded Topic-Comment Construction. Coding an animate noun as the initial topic and theme-verb compounds denoting general activities as the inner topics, a clause-chaining sentence can accommodate topic-comment embedding within the comments. For example, each of the three chained comments in (14) consists of an embedded topic-comment

relation. All the inner topics are directly related to the outer topic at the outset of the sentence in terms of activity-and-Agent.

- (14) Zhêado'a zzheazzhêa qîi mi bbo [zî_lâi bbo [wu_zzhâ
 earthon+M bad do person ExT seed_sow ExT harvest_poor
 ke-qion yon]], [ggin_xâo bbo [zzhón má'yón]],
 out-appear Assr livestock_raise ExT smooth N+Assr
 [con_qîi lâ [gûzzî rí má'yón]].
 business_do also profit get N+Assr

Persons who behave badly on Earth, for cultivation, a poor harvest will certainly come; for livestock-raising, (it) certainly won't be smooth; for doing business, profit certainly won't be made.

The set-member relation between topics is essential for topic-comment embedding. The semantic relation is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition. It is possible for sentences with expressions in such semantic relation to occur without topic-comment embedding. Consider the following:

- (15) Zâggiôn jjî râ lhuâicôn ggee bbo
 dried pig saturate M spice InT Dc
 [cí, sée, gîi, rezhîi, sshê_con zzii].
 salt pepper garlic wine four_kind Cpl

The spices for seasoning the dried pig, (they) are salt, pepper, garlic, (and) wine — four kinds.

While a topic-comment relation exists in (15) and the underscored topic holds a semantic relation of set-member with the successive noun phrase, the sentence cannot be analyzed as an Embedded Topic-Comment Construction. Despite the obvious set-member relation between *lhuâicôn* "spice" and the individual spice terms, the syntactic structure of the equational sentence precludes any interpretation of the spice terms as a topic. This prohibition can be verified by the pragmatic test introduced in (11).

7. Summary

This paper has described a variety of topic-comment constructions commonly found in Prinmi. Besides the basic topic-comment construction, which pragmatically relates a topic to its comment in a sentence, there are a few complex topic-comment constructions. These include the Chained Comment Construction, the Double Topic Construction, and the Embedded Topic-comment Construction. These complex constructions are built upon the basic topic-comment construction, but they can also combine with each other, giving rise to a more complex structure.

The Chained Comment Construction contains more than a comment related to a common topic. The Double Topic Construction consists of a scene-setting topic and a topic-comment component; the scene topic serves to set out discourse background such as time, place, and condition for the sentence. The Embedded Topic-comment Construction represents a kind of subordination in information structure where topic-comment relationship is instantiated at two levels. When the set-member relation exists between the topic and the adjacent noun phrase in the comment, the comment may further be divided into a topic and comment, generating an embedded topic-comment construction.

Abbreviations

1/2-s/p	first/second person-singular/plural		
Assr	Assertive	Inst	Instrumental
Cpl	Copula	InT	Internal Topic marker
Ctr	Counter	M	Modificatory marker
Dc	Discourse clitic	N	Negator
Dur	Durative	nInv	non-Involvemental
exist _{in}	Existential for inside something	Pf	Perfective
exist _{inan}	Existential for inanimate	sbj	subjective
ExT	External Topic marker	to.sp	towards the speaker
fr.sp	away from the speaker	Vlt	Volitive

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