

ON TOPIC IN FINNISH SIGN LANGUAGE

Tommi Jantunen

Abstract

This article investigates, on the basis of previously collected material, topic in simple and declarative (intransitive, transitive and equative) sentences in Finnish Sign Language (FinSL). First, it is argued – on the grounds of the functional and structural similarity between Mandarin Chinese and FinSL sentences and their parts – that topic in FinSL resembles the Chinese-style topic characterized by Chafe, i.e. it is a unit which sets a spatial, temporal, or individual framework for the main predication, and which is partly integrated in the sentence structure. After this, it is suggested that FinSL has at least three types of topics: (i) possessor topics, (ii) adjunct-like topics, and (iii) complement-like topics. Finally, it is shown that topics in FinSL are marked both syntactic-prosodically (i.e. by their sentence initial position, pause, and a non-manual feature "eyes widened and eyebrows raised") and morphologically (i.e. indexically).

Key words: topic, comment, Chinese-style topic, Finnish Sign Language

1 INTRODUCTION

In this article I analyse the topic in simple declarative sentences of Finnish Sign Language (FinSL). The role of "topicality" has been traditionally emphasized in the linearization of the signs in FinSL (e.g. Rissanen 1985: 127), yet the phenomenon has not been investigated in more detail in FinSL as such (however, for a few scattered remarks, see e.g. Rissanen 1985, 1998, Rainò 2004: 128–131, Jantunen 2006). Research into topicality has also been limited internationally: except for a couple of special instances (e.g. Friedman 1976, Aarons 1996,

Rosenstein 2004), the concept of topic has only occurred marginally in sign language research, and even in those cases, the concept has been understood mostly in the sense of "topicalization" as defined in generativistically flavoured syntax (e.g. Fischer 1975, Liddell 1980, Neidle & al. 2000).

This article has three interrelated objectives. First, it aims at paving the way for topic studies in FinSL by, e.g., defining the concept of topic in FinSL;¹ an argument is made (see section 2) that topic in FinSL sentences is a unit similar to the Chinese-style topic characterised by Chafe (1976), that is, a unit which limits the interpretation of the main predication (i.e. comment) to a certain restricted domain, and which is, at least partly, integrated in the sentence structure (id. 50; see also Li & Thompson 1976: 463–464, 485). The second objective (see section 3) is to describe preliminarily what types of topics FinSL has. The third objective (see section 4) is to analyse the formal marking of topic in FinSL in more detail.

I will base the arguments and remarks concerning topic in FinSL on previously collected material consisting of simple and declarative verb(al) and nominal sentences (for the verbal and nominal signs in FinSL, see Rissanen 1998). The verbal sentences in the material are intransitive and transitive sentences collected by both elicitation (for more detail, see Jantunen & al. 2006) and semi-structured selection from the mini texts in *Suvi* (The Online Dictionary of Finnish Sign Language). The nominal sentences are equative sentences collected from *Suvi* (for further detail, see Jantunen 2006).

2 THE NATURE OF TOPIC IN FINSL

This section deals with the nature of topic in FinSL. I will first investigate the topic-comment structures and topics in Mandarin Chinese (Chinese in short), the language which is generally accepted to be a representative example of topic-prominent languages (see e.g. Li & Thompson 1976, Xu & Langendoen 1985). After this, I will argue (in section 2.2) – referring to the similarity of the formal-functional (etc.) structure of the sentences and their parts in Chinese and FinSL – that topic in FinSL is a Chinese-style unit which sets the "interpretative framework" for the main predication and which is (at least) partly integrated in the sentence structure.

2.1 Topic in Mandarin Chinese

Topic has been generally accepted as a core concept in the analysis of Chinese sentences (e.g. Li & Thompson 1976, Xu & Langendoen 1985). Example (1) dis-

¹ The term topic has been used in varied ways in linguistic literature (for one overview, and an additional view, see Lambrecht 1994: 117–127). My conception of topic in this article is based on Chafe's (1976) view according to which topic is not a universal concept, but a concept that must be defined specifically for each language.

plays a few sentences acknowledged as topic-comment structures in Chinese; the sentences are from Kroeger (2004: 142–147) who, in turn, bases his research on, e.g., Li and Thompson's (1976) classic research into the subject and topic prominence in languages (the underlined element is topic; the underlining follows the original):

- (1) a. nèi kuài tián, dàozi zhǎngde hěn dà.
that piece land rice grow very big
'(On) that piece of land, the rice grows very big.'
- b. zuótiān tā 12 diǎnzhōng shuìjiào.
yesterday he 12 o'clock sleep
'Last night, he went to bed at 12 o'clock.'
- c. zhèi-ge nǚ'hái ne, yǎnjing hěn dà.
this-CLASS girl TOP eye very big
'This girl, her eyes are very big.'

A few significant observations can be made on the sentences in (1), concerning both their overall structure and the sentence-initial topic element. As regards the overall sentence structure, it can first be concluded that the syntactic form of the sentences in each of the cases in (1) follows the pattern [[XP] [clause]]. In this pattern, XP represents a nominal or adverbial phrase before the clause, whereas clause refers to a larger unit containing the nucleus and the core arguments (see Van Valin 2005: 3–8).² Prosodically, XP is often separated from the clause in the sentences in (1) (cf. Van Valin 2005: 6), although it need not be (Kroeger 2004: 142).

Secondly, as regards the function of a sentence-initial topic phrase, it can be stated that in each of the sentences in (1), the topic limits the main predication expressed by the clause (i.e. comment) to a certain specific interpretational framework. In sentence (1a), the framework created by the topic is primarily spatial-locative ('that piece of land'); in sentence (1b) it is temporal ('yesterday') and in sentence (1c) perhaps mainly individualistic, i.e. pointing at a person ('this girl'). Creating a spatial-temporal-individualistic framework for the main predication is one of the primary functions of the Chinese-style topic (Chafe 1976: 50, Li & Thompson 1976: 463–464).

Finally, it can be concluded, regarding the topics in (1), that they are all definite and that none of them has a syntactic relation with the predicate in the main clause. Both the definiteness and the syntactic independence of the predicate belong to the core features of the Chinese-style "pragmatic" topics (Kroeger 2004: 142, Chafe 1976, Li & Thompson 1976: 463).

2.2 Topic in FinSL

It is remarkably easy to find sentences in FinSL that resemble the above (in section 2.1) described Chinese topic-comment structures both for their basic orga-

² It should be noted that the clause in (1c) is built around a characterising nominal predicate and therefore does not contain core arguments.

nization and for the functional and other features of their initial constituents.³ Three examples of such FinSL sentences are given in (2):⁴

- (2) a. e[yes]w[idened]&b[rows]r[aised]
 NIGHT CLUB INDEX_a / [=pause&blink] INDEX₁ WORK DOORMAN⁵
 i. 'That night club, I work (there) as a doorman.'
 ii. 'I am a doorman at that night club.' (*Suvi* 165/4)
- b. ew&br
 NOW EVENING / INDEX₁ GO PUB
 i. 'This evening, I (will) go to the pub.'
 ii. 'I will go to the pub this evening.' (*Suvi* 42/1)
- c. ew&br n[od]&n
 JESUS PERSON_a / OWN_a FATHER "PT":modal GOD
 i. 'As for Jesus, his father is God.'
 ii. 'The father of Jesus is God.'
 iii. 'Jesus is the son of God.' (*Suvi* 1138/1)

As regards their structure, all the sentences in (2) are organized like the topic-comment sentences of Chinese (see example 1), following the pattern [[XP] [clause]]. Just as in typical Chinese, XP and clause are also prosodically separated in FinSL. In the sentences in (2), the prosodic separation of XP is manifested, e.g., as a brief pause between XP and the clause, as well as in the fact that the position of the eyes and eyebrows, which occurs layered with XP, does not continue in the clause part of the sentence (cf. Wilbur 2000).

The function of the initial constituents (i.e. XPs) in the sentences in (2) is also identical with the function of the sentence-initial topic elements in Chinese (see example 1). Just as the sentence-initial topic in Chinese, the initial constituents in FinSL sentences limit the main predication of the clause to a certain specific interpretational framework: in sentence (2a) this framework is spatial-locative ('that nightclub'; cf. 1a), in sentence (2b) it is temporal ('this evening'; cf. 1b), and in sentence (2c) it is mainly individual, i.e. pointing at a person (literally: 'Jesus person'; cf. 1c).

³ In this article, I will only focus on illustrating the similarity between Chinese and FinSL as regards the sentence structure and function of the sentence-initial (topic) phrase. In practice, however, the similarities between Chinese and FinSL seem to be far more numerous than these. For example, phonologically, the movement in FinSL – and in sign languages in general – seems to behave much like the contrastive tone that can be found (even) in Chinese (Brentari 1998: 24); morphologically, both Chinese and FinSL can be characterised as languages where there are no clear grounds for the postulation of the class of adjectives (cf. McCawley 1992, Rissanen 1998).

⁴ Some of the translations of the sentences in (2), as well as the subsequent examples (see sections 3 and 4) are contrastive. In the standard case, the original sentences in FinSL are not contrastive.

⁵ Signs are represented in the text as glosses, written according to the current practice with small capital letters. Some information about the form of a sign may be included in the gloss. For example, the gloss INDEX refers by definition to the pointing index finger. Letter subscript, on the other hand, indicates that the sign is located in space; a letter subscript right before and after a gloss indicates that the sign moves from one spatial loci to another. The number subscript 1 indicates first person referent. Information about prosody (i.e. about non-manual features) has been added above and in-between the glosses; underlining is used to indicate the scope of a given nonmanual feature.

Finally, just as the sentence-initial topics in Chinese (see example 1), the initial constituents in (2) are (e.g. because of the deictic elements they include) definite. Moreover, they do not have a syntactic relation with the predicate of the clause; for example, the XPs can be left out of the sentences without turning the remaining clause ungrammatical.⁶

On the grounds of the formal-functional similarity between the topic-comment structures in Chinese and FinSL sentences, I will now make the move to call the sentence-initial XPs in (2), and other comparable constituents in FinSL, topics. In practice, I argue that topic in FinSL is a Chinese-style unit which limits the interpretational possibilities of the main predication and which is integrated in the sentence structure. I am basing this argument on the following grounds: (i) there are sentences in FinSL whose syntactic-prosodic features correspond to sentences acknowledged as topic-comment structures in Chinese; (ii) the sentence-initial constituents in these FinSL sentences are similar to the topic units in the initial constituents of Chinese topic-comment sentences as regards both their functional and other (pragmatic) features.

The view of the topic in FinSL as a Chinese-style topic provides the basis for the discussion of topic in the remainder of this article.

3 TOPIC TYPES IN FINSL

This section gives a brief overview of the types of topics in FinSL. On the basis of the present material (see section 1) and the definition of the Chinese-style topic by Chafe (for grounds for using the definition, see section 2), the topics in FinSL are divided into three preliminary categories: possessor topics (3.1), adjunct-like topics (3.2) and complement-like topics (3.3).⁷

3.1 Possessor topics

In structures including a possessor topic, the topic and the subsequent nominal phrase are in a possessive relation (cf. Kroeger 2004: 144). An example of an (equative) sentence including a possessor topic in FinSL is given in (3) (see Jan-

⁶ An exception to this is sentence (2c), where the clause-initial NP [OWN_a FATHER] begins with a deictic pronominal (possessive) sign OWN. Directing the sign OWN requires, in principle, that we know who the sign is directed at or rather, who the person is in the place where the pronominal sign points at. In practice, however, we can omit to specify the person lexically and make an interpretation on the basis of the context.

⁷ Interestingly, similar types of topics can also be identified in Mandarin Chinese (e.g. Kroeger 2004: 142–150). In addition to these, a central topic type in Chinese is the dangling topic (Kroeger 2004: 147–150, Pan 2007). The FinSL material I am using does not include (probably because of methods of material collection, see Jantunen & al. 2006, Jantunen 2006) clear instances of the dangling topic, but an overall observation would seem to indicate that such topics exist in FinSL. Further investigation on this issue is required.

tunen 2006): the topic phrase in the sentence [ICELAND INDEX_a] is a possessor to the subsequent nominal constituent [HEAD CITY] (see also sentence 2c).

- (3) $\frac{\text{es}[\text{quinted}] \& \text{br}}{\text{ICELAND INDEX}_a} / \frac{\text{ew} \& \text{br}}{\text{HEAD CITY}} / \frac{\text{n}}{\text{"PI":modal r-e-y-k-j-a-v-i-k}}$
 i. 'As for Iceland, its capital is Reykjavik.'
 ii. 'The capital of Iceland is Reykjavik.' (*Suvi* 466/3)

Sentence (3) is especially interesting in the sense that even the sequence [HEAD CITY] can be given the status of a topic. According to this interpretation, the sentence would include two topics, of which the first one sets a wider spatial-locative framework, which the subsequent topic further limits (cf. McIntire 1982: 620). The actual main predication '(is) Reykjavik' is expressed by the third nominal constituent.

Among the spoken languages, chains of two topics occur in, e.g., Mandarin Chinese (Xu & Langendoen 1985: 16–18, Kroeger 2004: 143). In signed language, two-topic chains have been observed in at least the sentences of American Sign Language (e.g. Aarons 1996) and Israeli Sign Language (Rosenstein 2004).

3.2 Adjunct-like topics

Adjunct-like topics (cf. Aarons 1996: 72, Kroeger 2004: 147) in simple declarative FinSL sentences are – as their name indicates – adjunct-like signs or phrases resembling adverbials of space and time. The FinSL sentence in (4) includes an adjunct-like topic limiting the situation in terms of its location (see also sentence 2a):

- (4) $\frac{\text{ew} \& \text{br}}{\text{HOUSE}} \text{ [=blink]} \text{ CAR}_a \frac{\text{I}[\text{ean}] \text{f}[\text{orward}]}{\text{VEHICLE-ARRIVES-AND-STOPS}_b}$
 i. 'The house, car stops (at it).'
 ii. 'Car drives and stops near the house.' (elicitation test, sentence 1)

In the sentence in (5), the adjunct-like topic limits the situation temporally (see also sentence 2b):

- (5) $\frac{\text{es}}{\text{SIX-YEARS BEFORE}} \frac{\text{ew}}{\text{OWN}_1 \text{ AUNT DEAD+ALREADY:perfective}}$
 i. 'Six years ago, my aunt died (then).'
 ii. 'My aunt died six years ago.' (*Suvi* 24/3)

Adjuncts are basically core-external peripheral units in the clause (Van Valin 2005: 4). The syntactic and a certain semantic independence of the core, typical of adjuncts, is also characteristic of adjunct-like topics and, in this respect, among the topics in FinSL, they do resemble most the Chinese "dangling topics", whose connection to the comment entails chiefly a conceptual whole-part relation (Kroeger 2004: 147, Pan 2007).

3.3 Complement-like topics

Some of the topics in FinSL would seem to be obligatory complement-like supplements to the verbal (i.e. core arguments, e.g. Van Valin 2005: 4–5). Two FinSL sentences including such a complement-like topic are shown in (6) and (7); in sentence (6), the topic is a subject-like unit (A-argument, see Engberg-Pedersen 2002: 5) whereas in sentence (7) it is an object-like unit (P-argument, *ibid.*).⁸

- (6) $\frac{\text{br}}{\text{OWN}_1 \text{ BAPTISE AUNT}} \text{ / } \frac{\text{(br)} \text{ n}}{\text{LIVE SWEDEN INDEX}_a:\text{locative}}$
 i. 'My godmother, (she) lives in Sweden.'
 ii. 'My godmother lives in Sweden.' (*Suvi* 114/4)

- (7) $\frac{\text{body lean + face}}{\text{KEY INDEX}_a(\text{down})} \text{ / } \frac{\text{body lean + face}}{\text{WOMAN } a(\text{down})\text{TAKE}_b(\text{up})}$
 i. 'The key, woman picks (it) up.'
 ii. 'Woman picks up the key.' (elicitation test, sentence 32)⁹

Traditionally, the topics in sentences (6) and (7) have been analyzed as complements moved, in one way or another, from their "normal position" to the sentence initial topic position: for example, Liddell (1980: 84–87) speaks of the topicalization of the subject and the object, Johnston & Schembri (2006) about the topicalization of the core argument, and Aarons (1996: 71–72) directly about moved topics, which she contrasts mainly with base-generated topics (cf. 2c and 3).¹⁰ In practice, the traditional view has involved the presumption that such topics are still in a semantic and syntactic relation to the verbal predicate. However, Lambrecht (1994) – in whose own framework the topics in sentences (6) and (7) are perhaps mostly treated as examples of topic promotion realized by left-dislocation (Lambrecht 1994: 176–184) – criticizes this view. According to his own view, there is no ultimate reason why units like the topics in (6) and (7) should be presumed to possess a relation to the predicate (Lambrecht 1994: 192–195). Instead, he suggests that the use of the topic structure in question seems to be more likely related to an attempt to preserve the initial constituent (semantically and syntactically) as a unit separated from the argument structure (Lambrecht 1994: 192).

The scope of this article does not allow for a more detailed consideration of whether the topics and verbal predicates in sentences (6) and (7) are in semantic-syntactic relation with each other. Nevertheless, the question is of ut-

⁸ The terms subject and object have not been defined in FinSL so far, and the terms "subject-like" and "object-like" are only used here to illustrate the difference between the topic units in sentences (6) and (7).

⁹ Sentence (7) is no longer necessarily a structurally minimal simple declarative sentence, since it can be analyzed to include elements that are categorized as extra linguistic in terms of traditional terminology. This method of analysis is used by, e.g., Liddell (2003), who characterizes – within the frameworks of Cognitive Grammar (e.g. Langacker 1986) and the Mental Space Theory (e.g. Fauconnier 1994) – expressions like sentence (7) as surrogate blends integrating mimicry in an conceptual-interpretative manner.

¹⁰ Aarons (1996: 72) also refers to adjunct topics, but she does not make it clear whether they belong to the moved topics or to base-generated topics, which she cites as the main division of topics in American Sign Language.

most importance for a later syntactic analysis of FinSL, and the issue should be urgently investigated.

4 ON THE MARKING OF TOPIC IN FINSL

This section explores the formal characteristics and marking of topic in FinSL. In practice I will make a summary of the syntactic-prosodic-morphological features that were associated more or less systematically with the topics of the sentences in my material (see section 1).

Syntactically, the topics in my material were all sentence-initial phrases that were prosodically separate from the clause.¹¹ The main prosodic boundary markers were a pause and blink (cf. Wilbur 2000: 228); even the changes in the position of the eyes and eyebrows took place at the boundary of the topic phrase and the clause (cf. Wilbur 2000: 233; see also Rainò 2004: 128–131). In light of syntactic-prosodic evidence, topic in FinSL can be considered a unit integrated in the sentence structure (cf. topic-comment structure); for example, within the framework of Van Valin's (2005) *Role and Reference Grammar*, the FinSL topic can be analysed as an element in an extra-clausal (yet sentence-internal) left-dislocated position (see Van Valin 2005: 6).

Although all of the topics in my material were sentence-initial constituents, all of the sentence-initial constituents in my material cannot be considered topics. For example, the sentence in (8) I interpret as topicless: the uniform prosody, which even bears a resemblance to Finnish church language, together with the general structure that can be detected through it (cf. the evidence and suggested analysis put forward above), as well as the function of the initial constituent, do not support the interpretation that the sentence-initial GOD sign would be a topic.¹²

- (8) GOD LOVE WORLD
'God loves the world.' (*Suvi* 169/1)

In terms of prosody, the topics in my material were always¹³ layered with some sort of a position of the eyes and eyebrows (cf. Liddell 1980: 22–23, Aarons 1996: 68–70, Wilbur 2000: 233, Engberg-Pedersen 2002: 11). It was typical that the eyes were more open than normally and the eyebrows were slightly raised as compared with their basic position, although the quality of the marking showed variation. In the expression in (3) with the double topic – but not clearly in the

¹¹ The fact that the sentences in my material did not include, e.g., "antitopic structures" (Chafe 1976: 53–54) does not exclude the possible occurrence of such structures in FinSL

¹² Here I wish to underline the fact that, for example, an analysis where sentence (8) is interpreted as topicless depends, in the end, on how topic is defined. For example, within Lambrecht's (1994) framework, the initial sign GOD in sentence (8) could be analysed as an unmarked topic. In this article I have understood topic as the Chinese-style topic characterized by Chafe (1976) (see section 2).

¹³ In sentence (7), the position of the eyes and eyebrows cannot be identified because of the camera angle.

expression in (2c) – the other topic could also be interpreted as being marked by a distinctive position of the eyebrows and eyes; the positions of the eyes in these successive topics were different.

Based on the material, it would seem that the topics in FinSL occur with a prominent position of the eyes and the eyebrows (see above), yet we cannot jump into the (reverse) conclusion (even) on these grounds that all of the units marked by a corresponding position of the eyes and eyebrows would be topics. For example, I would interpret the extremely quickly signed and thus pauseless sentence in (9) as a topicless expression, even though its initial constituent is marked by the eyes and eyebrows. In my view, it is possible that in (9) the position of the eyes and eyebrows functions as a grammatical marker of the subject (cf. Chafe 1976: 46), or that it is simply an articulatory "intensity pulse" marking the beginning of the sentence.

- (9) $\frac{(ew\&)br}{BOY \quad APPLE \quad BUY}$
 'Boy buys an apple.' (elicitation test, sentence 5)

The morphological marking of topics was most sporadic in my material. However, on the basis of the material, it can be suggested that the deictic elements (e.g. pointing sign and other directional nominal indexes, such as the sign PERSON) function – possibly through their definiteness (cf. Kroeger 2004: 142) – as topic markers in FinSL (Rissanen 1985, 1998), although they also have clearly other functions, as well (e.g. pronominalising function, see Rainò 2004: 129); these deictic elements can be found at the end of topic phrases before the prosodic break between the topic constituent and the subsequent constituent. Interestingly, temporal (adjunct-like) topics would not seem to allow morphological marking by deictic elements (perhaps because adverbials are deictic elements as such). Further research into the deictic elements and their functions in FinSL will be necessary.

5 CONCLUSION

In this article I have investigated topic in the simple declarative sentences of FinSL on the basis of previously collected material. In accordance with my first objective (see section 2), I have argued – referring to the structural-functional similarity of Mandarin Chinese and FinSL sentences – that topic in FinSL should be understood as resembling the Chinese-style topic characterized by Chafe (1976), and that it is partly (even) a structural unit (cf. topic-comment structure). Following my second objective, I have presented a preliminary categorization of the topic types in FinSL; I have divided the topics in my material (see section 3) into the three categories of (i) possessor topics, (ii) adjunct-like topics, and (iii) complement-like topics. To attain my third objective, I have shown (see section 4) that FinSL topics are marked syntactically (by being sentence-initial), prosodically (e.g. through a prominent position of the eyes and

eyebrows, together with a pause), and partly even morphologically (by deictic elements).

I have taken up two issues that should be foregrounded in future research: (i) the semantic-syntactic relation of the predicate verbal and the complement-like topic (cf. Lambrecht 1994: 192–193), and (ii) the functions of deictic elements. Besides these, it is evident that (the other) topic types and the prosodic marking of topic should also be investigated further. Moreover, as our basic understanding of FinSL sentences increases, we should broaden the scope of research into topic in FinSL to also cover texts (cf. Givón 2001: 16, 105), the organization of which is presumably also highly affected by topicality.

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