

Information structure in some East Asian languages or Is there a thing called subject?

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1 Introduction

It is generally presumed that information flow is structured and that all languages make a systematic partition between familiarity and 'newness', topic and focus, etc. Other well-established partitions are that of the grammatical notions subject and predicate, which interacts with the above-mentioned in a complex way, as well as that of semantic roles such as agent and patient.

Information structure is one of the most complex fields within linguistics, as it may be expressed by a combination of linguistic means: by phonology (prosody, mainly stress and tone), morphology (affixes, independent particles) and syntax (mainly word order). Furthermore, information structure is discourse dependent, i.e. directly dependent of the language in its direct use and of the interplay between the interlocutors. Information structure can affect both nouns (definiteness, pronominalisation) and verbs (voice, aspect), not to mention word order.

Information structure is a fairly uncovered field, although these phenomena are generally more explicitly described in East Asian languages than in European ones. A classical work is Kuno 1972. The standard view by Li & Thompson 1976a suggests that East Asian languages are more topic-prominent and European ones more subject-prominent, but they stress that this distinction is not a dichotomy but a continuum.

Although a number of language-specific studies have been done, only a few treat information structure from a more general approach, suggesting universal principles. In this paper it is my purpose to point at the close connections between topic, subject and agent and to relate them to other features, especially definiteness and basic word order. This leads to a questioning of the notion 'subject'. I will give examples from Japanese,

4 A typological overview

Languages differ in their topic marking. Some rely on word order only (Mandarin Chinese); others add a topic particle (Japanese, Korean, Lahu, Vietnamese), yet others combine a topic particle with verb morphology (Tagalog, Seediq). In some languages the partition topic – comment seems to coincide fully with the partition subject – predicate (Kammu, Khmer). The following overview (Table 2) is taken from Li & Thompson 1976b, Vamling & Svantesson 1994b, Rosén 1998 and others. It shows that several East Asian languages, which are known for their topic-prominence, have different genetic and geographic background, and that they differ both in language type and basic word order. A question mark indicates that the classification is under debate.

According to Li & Thompson, Japanese is both subject- and topic prominent, while Tagalog is neither-nor. I will however discuss the topic constructions also in these languages.

5 Relations to syntactic structure

Li & Thompson 1976a:461 ff. present three factors in differentiating between topics and subjects – discourse strategy, noun-verb relations and grammatical processes – and they conclude that topic is discourse-dependent while subject

Table 2. A typological overview

	Language group	Language family	Language type	Word order	Topic marking
Japanese	isolated? Altaic?		agglutinating	SOV	particle
Korean	isolated? Altaic?		agglutinating	SOV	particle
Mandarin Chinese	Sinitic	Sino-Tibetan	isolating	SVO	word order
Lahu	Tibeto-Burman		isolating	SOV?	particle
Vietnamese	Mon-Khmer	Austro-asiatic	isolating	SVO	particle
Kammu	Mon-Khmer		isolating	SVO	word order
Tagalog	Malayo-Polynesian	Austro-nesian	flect./agglut.	VSO?	particle + verb morph.
Seediq	Atayalic		flect./agglut.	VOS	particle + verb morph.

is a sentence-internal notion. As for *discourse strategy*, the topic's functional role is to specify the domain and announce the theme or, according to Chafe 1976:50 "limit the applicability of the main predication to a certain restricted domain". The topic should therefore be clause-initial and identifiable, while subjects need not.

Turning to the *noun-verb relations*, subjects (and objects) are selectionally related to the verb, but topics are not. The subject can be predicted by the verb, and in languages with verb agreement the verb agrees with the subject, not with the topic. Further Li & Thompson list several *grammatical processes* – reflexivisation, passivisation, etc. – where the subject plays a role, not the topic. This concerns also phenomena such as 'dummy' subjects, which is characteristic when the subject is not a topic or definite.

The most striking examples of the difference between topic and subject are given below. They are totally different concepts, and in the classical examples below, taken from Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Lahu and Vietnamese, one observes how the subject together with the predicate is part of the comment. These constructions are sometimes misleadingly called 'double subjects'.

Mandarin Chinese (Svantesson 1994:194)

1	Dàxiàng bízǐ cháng elephant nose long	Paraphrase: 'About elephant, nose is long'
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Japanese (Svantesson 1994:194)

2	Zoo wa hana ga nagai elephant TOP nose SUBJ long	— " —
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Lahu (Matisoff 1973:190)

3	Hò ǒ nā-qhō yì ve yò elephant TOP nose long AFFIRM	— " —
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Vietnamese (Rosén 1998:87)

4	Voi, thì vòi dài elephant TOP trunk long	— " —
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In Japanese the theme and the subject have separate particles, *wa* and *ga* respectively, see also (2).

Japanese (Li & Thompson 1976a:462)

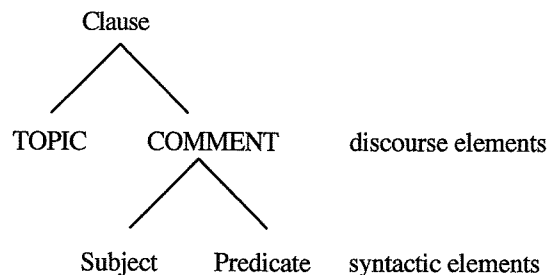
- 5 Gakkoo wa boku ga isogasi-kat-ta
 school TOP I SUBJ busy-PAST
 'School (topic), I was busy'

This is not restricted only to East Asian languages. Many languages express this idea with adverbials, here Swedish:

Swedish

- 6 I skolan var hon duktig.
 in school was she bright
 'At school, she was bright'

The construction can be modelled as following:



However, despite the previous description, there are other examples in the classical topic prominent languages where subject – predicate coincides with topic – comment. Subjects tend to be topics by default.

Mandarin Chinese (Svantesson 1994:203)

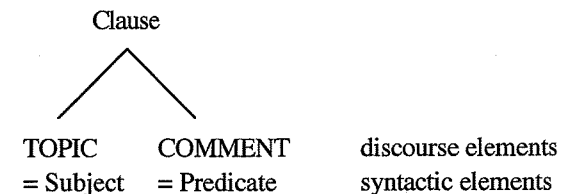
- 7 Wōmen xuéxí zhōngwén
 we study Chinese
 'We study Chinese'

In Japanese, a subject in a topic position does not have a TOPIC-particle. The choice between *wa* and *ga* has been thoroughly discussed by japanologists, and it is still an open question. It can be asserted that the issue is highly related to prior discourse, thus to information structure, see also Kuno 1972.

Japanese (Vamling & Svantesson 1994a:23)

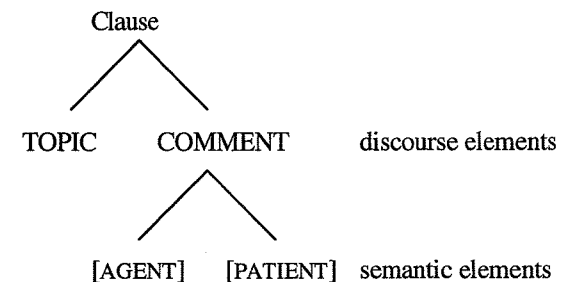
- 8a What has Taro done?
 Taro-wa e-o kakimashita
 Taro-TOP drawing-OBJ drew
 'Taro made a drawing'
- 8b What has happened?
 Taro-ga e-o kakimashita
 Taro-SUBJ drawing-OBJ drew
 'Taro made a drawing'

The cooccurrence of topics and subjects can be pictured as follows:



6 Relations to semantic roles

The subject and the object can be seen as manifestations of semantic roles. There is a tendency in most languages to let the AGENT be expressed as the subject and the PATIENT as the object. As was shown above in (1–6), the comment may contain both the subject and the predicate, and the object is a part of the predicate. In accordance with the tree model above, this can be expressed as follows:



However, as was shown in (7–8), subject – predicate may coincide with topic – comment. This is also the case for AGENT – PATIENT: the agent of an event tends to appear as topic. If the opposite occurs – a patient appears as a topic – this may have effects on the structure. A noun, which is not the agent,

cannot precede the other arguments unless it has a topic function. In topic constructions the subjecthood of the non-agent will cause verb-changes. In Kammu such constructions are avoided, see (9b).

Kammu (Damrong Tayanin, personal communication)

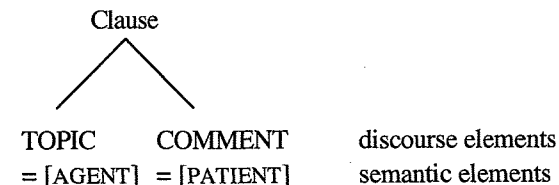
- 9a What is Sáo doing?
 Tá Sáo tí Tá Càng
 Mr. Sáo beat Mr. Càng
 'Sáo beats Càng'
- 9b What has happened to Càng?
 Tá Càng dóon Tá Sáo tí tè.
 Mr. Càng undergo Mr. Sáo beat AFF
 'Càng was beaten by Sáo'

This is a common phenomenon among the world's languages, not only in East Asian languages, here Swedish:

Swedish:

- 10a What did the man do?
 Mannen öppnade dörren.
 the-man [AG] opened the-door [PAT]
 'The man opened the door.'
- 10b What happened to the door?
 ?Dörren öppnade mannen.
 the-door [PAT] opened the-man. [AG]
 'The door the man opened (but not the window).'
- 10c What happened to the door?
 Dörren öppnades av mannen.
 the-door [PAT] was-opened by the-man [AG]
 'The door was opened by the man.'

Both (10a) and (10c) are judged as both grammatical and fully acceptable. Example (10b) is not ungrammatical but acceptable only in a contrastive context. 'The-door' serves here both as topic and a subject, but it is not an agent, and the preferred construction is therefore (10c), which is a passivisation. The passivisation is thus triggered by the non-agency of the subject. Thus, while agents tend to be topics/subjects, then patients tend to be comments/objects. This construction can be modelled as below:



7 Definiteness

Definiteness is primarily a discourse property. According to Li & Thompson 1976a, topics are by definition always definite, while a subject can be either definite or indefinite. However, the choice of definiteness is primarily determined by discourse, i.e. the question whether the referent is identifiable or not. This depends on the speaker's expectations of the listener's world-knowledge, the 'Given-New Contract' (Clark & Haviland 1977) or the 'Universe of Discourse' (Givón 1984:388) between the two interlocutors. Nouns as topics tend to be definite, clause initial and thus preverbal, while nouns in a non-topic position tend more often to be indefinite and have a postverbal or at least a post-subject position. Thus, subjects may be indefinite, but indefinite subjects seldom appear as topics. What, then, are 'subjects', and what determines their subjecthood? Are they 'agents in a topic position'?

Objects may be definite or indefinite. They are more often in a non-topic position than subjects, but this does not mean that they are indefinite. Several studies (Givón 1979, 1995, Hopper & Thompson 1980, Lindvall 1998) have shown that objects are more often definite than indefinite, but more often indefinite than subjects are. Again, definiteness is determined by the discourse and by the nature of the verbs. Verbs denoting inchoative events tend to have indefinite objects, while most other verbs trigger definite objects (Lindvall 1998). Instead of 'objects', it would possibly be more fruitful to describe them as 'non-topic patients'?

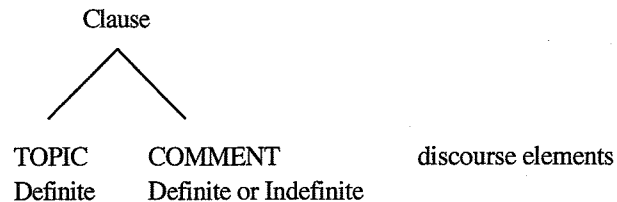
Thus, topics are definite. In Seediq, if a referent is definite it becomes automatically the topic. Therefore the topic particle *ka* also serves as a definite article. Holmer uses the standard term 'focus' for Austronesian languages.

Seediq (Holmer 1996:82)

- 11a What will the rat do?
 Meyah mekan bunga ka qolic
 AF-come AF-eat sweet potato FOC/DEF rat
 'The rat will come and eat sweet potatoes.'

- 11b What will happen to the sweet potatoes?
 Yahun mekan qolic ka bunga
 come-PF AF-eat rat FOC/DEF sweet potato
 'A rat will come and eat the sweet potatoes.'

The summary of definiteness can be pictured as follows:



8 Word order

The discussion has laid more and more doubt over the notions Subject and Object. About basic word order, it is generally considered that the two major types are SOV and SVO, *provided* that subjects and objects can be defined. In these two types the subject is clause-initial. In SVO, the object is clause-final, in SOV the verb. Further, the third major word order type is VSO, where the subject is not clause-initial but still preceding the object. If the verb is put aside the prevalent order is SO in all three types, i.e. the subject precedes the object. The three remaining word order types, VOS, OVS and OSV where the prevalent order is OS, are much less frequent. This supports the tendency that subjects precede objects.

As a general tendency, S is the topic and V+O or O+V is the comment. If we consider that a subject is clause initial because it is a topic and that an object is in a post-verbal or post-subject position because it is a comment, then the word order is not SVO or SOV but topic+comment. This brings us back to the beginning of the discussion. For more discussion on word order, see Verb-initial languages below.

The question of word order is also connected with semantic roles. Example (9b) from Kammu, repeated here, showed that a patient, chosen as a topic, acquires a clause initial position.

- 9b What has happened to Càng?
 Tá Càng dóon Tá Sáo tíi tèo.
 Mr. Càng undergo Mr. Sáo beat AFF
 'Càng was beaten by Sáo'

Another phenomenon connected with word order is the systematic differentiation between given and new, see Mandarin Chinese.

Mandarin Chinese (Svantesson 1994:203)

- 12a What about the guest/guests?
 Kè lái le.
 guest come PF
 'The guest/guests have come.'
- 12b What has happened?
 Lái kè le.
 come guest PF
 'There has/have come a guest/guests.'

In (12a), the guests are well known, given, identifiable as the topic but their arrival a comment. In (12b), the whole clause denotes an unexpected event, the guests are not given and the whole clause serves as an introduction of a new topic. Translation to languages with definiteness marking will give a definite marker to the first example and an indefinite marker to the second example. This construction is also often used in Slavic languages.

Czech

- 13a What happened in the street?
 Na ulicy vybuchla bomba.
 in street exploded bomb
 'In the street there exploded a bomb.'
- 13b What happened to the bomb?
 Bomba vybuchla na ulicy.
 bomb exploded in street
 'The bomb exploded in the street.'

9 Verb-initial languages

It is said that topic-prominent languages are not verb initial. The Austronesian language Tagalog has as its basic word order VSO (depending on the definition of subject and object), and Li & Thompson 1976a claim that Tagalog is neither subject- nor topic-prominent. Still, the fact that Tagalog does operate with topic markers makes it necessary to discuss this language. Its clause structure represents 'the Philippine type'.

Tagalog (Schachter 1976:494)

- 14a What will the woman do?
 Magsalis *ang babae* ng bigas sa sako para sa bata
 AT-FUT-take out TOP woman OBJ rice DIR sack BEN child
 'The woman will take some rice out of a/the sack for a/the child.'
- 14b What will happen to the rice?
 Salisin ng babae *ang bigas* sa sako para sa bata
 FUT-take out-OT ACT woman TOP rice DIR sack BEN child
 'A/The woman will take the rice out of a/the sack for a/the child.'
- 14c What will happen to the sack?
 Aalisan ng babae ng bigas *ang sako* para sa bata
 FUT-take out-DT ACT woman OBJ rice TOP sack BEN child
 'A/The woman will take some rice out of the sack for a/the child.'
- 14d What will happen to the child?
 Ipagsalis ng babae ng bigas sa sako *ang bata*
 BT-FUT-take out ACT woman OBJ rice DIR sack TOP child
 'A/The woman will take some rice out of a/the sack for the child.'

In these examples the topic, determined by the appropriate question, has a particle *ang*, preceding the topic head. Also the clause-initial verb is marked by this topic (AT=Actor topic, OT=Object topic, GT=Goal topic, DT= Direction topic, BT=Beneficiary topic). Thus, even though the basic word order is not affected by the change of topic, and even though the topic may be clause final (as in (14d)), the topic particle appears already early in the clause, as a prefix of the verb. There have been discussions (Schachter 1976, Shibatani 1988) if the noun with *ang* should be seen as a topic or a subject (or neither).

The same phenomenon appears in Seediq, a language distantly related to Tagalog, with VOS as basic word order. The particle *ka* serves to differentiate active and passive, cf. voice in Germanic languages.

Seediq (Arthur Holmer, personal communication)

- 15a What did the woman do?
 Mnege ido laqi ka mqedin.
 AF-PRET-give rice child NOM(DEF) woman
 'The woman gave rice to a child.'
- 15b What happened to the child?
 Bniqan ido na medin ka laqi.
 PRET-give-LF rice ERG.DEF woman NOM(DEF) person
 'A woman gave rice to the child.'
 'The child was given rice by a woman.'

The change of focus, (see above on the standard term 'focus' for Austronesian languages) may be compared with verb aspect in Slavic languages, here the distinction between telicity and atelicity.

Seediq (Arthur Holmer, personal communication)

- 16a Is there some beer left?
 Wada mu mahun biru nii
 WAD I drink-PF beer this
 'I drank this beer.' (= I have finished this beer.)
- 16b Did you touch the beer?
 Wada mu mahan biru nii
 WAD I drink-LF beer this
 'I drank from this beer.'
 (= The beer has been the place for my drinking.)

Seediq has four semantic roles compared with the five in Tagalog: AF = Agent focus, LF = Locative focus, PF = Patient focus, IF = Instrumental focus. Here again, the topic is both marked by the particle *ka* and an affix on the clause-initial verb. The constructions can be compared both with the voice in e.g. Germanic languages (15) and with aspect in Slavic languages (16).

As for the question of basic word order, Greenberg 1966a has pointed out that the order Subject+Verb+Object correlates with other 'orders' like Adjectiv+Noun, Genitive+Noun, etc. Vennemann 1972 and Lehmann 1973 have brought this to a further generalisation. Vennemann makes a difference between operand (the dominant constituent, traditionally termed head) and operator (the subordinate constituent, traditionally named modifier). In the three major word order types SOV, SVO and VSO, the position of the verb is either initial, medial or final. If the subject is put aside, the word order of the verb phrase is either OV or VO. Vennemann presents a table:

OPERATOR	OPERAND
Object	Verb
Adjective	Noun
Genitive	Noun
Noun phrase etc.	Adposition etc.

This partition divides languages into operator-operand languages (where the modifier precedes the head) and operand-operator languages (where the modifier follows the head). Vennemann has not discussed information structure, but his model can be applied to the order between topic and comment. But also the place of the subject is important. Both subject and

object should be seen as arguments of the verb. If a language has the SVO order, the S position seems to rule out the O position and make SVO languages act like SOV languages.

It is therefore to be expected that languages characterized by SV, AN, postpositions, etc. also have the order topic-comment. This is illustrated by Japanese and other East Asian SOV-languages, which are regarded as fully or partly topic-prominent.

OPERATOR+OPERAND

e.g. Japanese
SOV, SVO, OSV
Adjective+Noun
Genitive+Noun
Noun phrase+Postposition
Topic+Comment
Topic+Topic particle

OPERAND + OPERATOR

e.g. Tagalog
VSO, VOS, OVS
Noun+Adjective
Noun+Genitive
Preposition+Noun
Comment+Topic
Topic particle+Topic

This is also characteristic for Mandarin Chinese, with SVO word order according to some researchers (SOV according to others). Similarly, languages characterized by VSO/VOS, NA, prepositions, etc. seem also to have the order comment-topic. This can be applied to Tagalog and other Austronesian V-initial languages. These languages obviously possess topic markers but these are not placed clause-initially and the languages are not considered as topic-dominant.

The following example from Tagalog shows that the predication precedes the topic, and also that the topic particle precedes the topic head.

Tagalog (Schachter 1985:12)

- 17a Nagtatrabaho ang lalaki
is working TOP man
'The man is working.'
- 17b Lalaki ang nagtatrabaho
man TOP is working
'The one who is working is a man.'

It can be assumed that verb-initial languages are just as topic prominent as verb-medial and verb-final languages, and that the order of the constituents is in concordance with their word order in general or order of their operand/operator dominance.

10 Other languages

The topic prominence in some South East Asian languages can be compared with other languages. Not all languages have clearly defined subjects, but all languages definitely have information structure. The question of topic-comment structure should be compared with the so-called topicalization in some languages. The term suggests a process from a 'normal' word order to a word order with a non-subject in the preverbal position. In my opinion there is no such process but any constituent can take the clause-initial topic position. Swedish is a V2-language, with *one* pre-verbal position to be occupied, either by the subject or by any other constituent, which is chosen as the topic from the context. This position is preferably occupied by the subject, and there is also a tendency in general for the topic to consist of a subject.

Swedish

- 18a Han kom igår.
he came yesterday
'He came yesterday.'
- 18b Igår kom han.
yesterday came he
'Yesterday he came.'

As was observed in (14-18) there is a tendency to place given information clause-initially or as early as possible, and new information clause-finally or as late as possible, in operator-operand languages. In some languages, e.g. Swedish, the information structure expressed by word order is additionally expressed with definite articles, dummy subjects and other means.

Swedish

- 19a Det har kommit gäster.
It has come guests.
'There have come guests.'
- 19b Gästerna har kommit.
The-guests have come.
'The guests have come.'

Finnish

- 20a Talossa on mies.
House-in is man
'In the house there is a man.'

- 20b Mies on talossa.
man is house-in
'The man is in the house.'

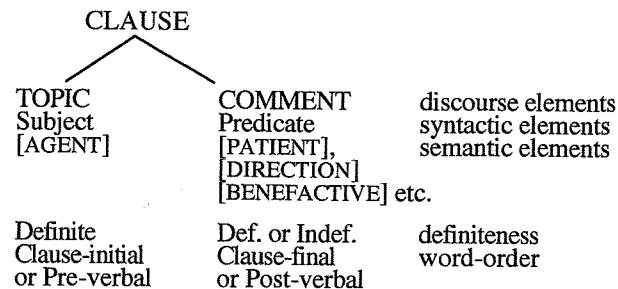
11 Is there a thing called subject?

First of all it should be stressed that the three partitions topic – comment, subject – predicate and agent – patient are three different kinds of notions, namely discourse-pragmatic, structural and semantic. It is just as awkward for a clause to have double subjects as to have double topics or double agents. The discourse-pragmatic partition seems to be primary. Human language exists because people use it for specific purposes. On the other hand there is doubtlessly a psychological concept called subject, a cluster with several properties. For a listing of properties defining a subject, see Keenan 1976. However, many of these properties may fit in with topics as well. The third partition is between semantic roles, which is, too, a psychological reality with effects on the surface structure in many languages.

Even though there are three separate partitions, they also seem to cooccur and be intermingled with each other in a most intricate way. The question is whether they are all needed. It could be worth studying different linguistic terms in this field, such as 'theme', 'rheme', 'verb', 'predicate' and others, in addition to those just mentioned.

'Subject', 'topic' and 'theme' are listed as synonyms in some English dictionaries, e.g. 'the subject/topic/theme of a discussion'. 'Rheme' comes from the Greek word *ríma* meaning both 'verb' and 'predicate'. Both 'verb' and 'predicate' come from Latin meaning 'speak' or 'say', i.e. 'comment'. With this comparison it is shown that originally it could have been only one partition, but they were separated for different purposes.

As a summary of the previous discussion, the prototypical case can be pictured as follows, see also Comrie 1981:107. It describes the canonical case of information structure for operator-operand languages.



For operand–operator languages, the order is reversed, with a possible exception of semantic roles. In (18–21), the agent precedes the patient, which precedes the direction and the benefactive, just as in the model above. Semantic roles are probably only indirectly connected with topic-comment.

The question is still if there is a thing called subject, and what is the use of this notion? In discussions about subjects it has been said that the verb agrees with the subject, not with the topic. But there are many languages with no verb agreement at all. It is to be noticed that verb agreement is especially common among Indo-European languages, i.e. those languages that are known for subject prominence. If verb agreement is one of the criteria for defining a subject, this may lead to circular evidence. A subject seems to be a combination of topic, definiteness, pre-verbal or pre-object position and agency. But is there a need for an extra term? In this schema, there seems to be no place for such things as subject. Although the point of departure was some South East Asian languages, the principles can be applied to any language.

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Hit and *dit* in translations between Swedish and English

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1 Introduction

1.1 Problem

Translating between two or more languages, the question of the translative validity of corresponding or equivalent words in different languages is eventually raised (Jakobson 1959), even between languages as similar in structure as Swedish and English. Swedish situative adverbs/particles, especially in their directive, or lative, function (*hit/dit*, etc.), pose such a problem – especially when translated to or from a language without overt manifestation of this functional contrast. In relation to the speaker (or the point of origin of the statement/story), Swedish can show location as well as direction; situatedness close to, as well as distant from, and motion towards as well as away from, the deictic center. English, on the other hand, mostly uses locational expressions (*here/there*), and also employs fewer such situative words than does Swedish (Jespersen 1964). (For an illustration of English verb complements, see Svartvik & Sager 1996.)

Furthermore, these Swedish adverbs/particles ('deictic situatives') may, or may not, be part of a verb phrase (*ta sig dit*), combined with a verb (*komma hit*), and/or with another adverb/particle included (*cykla upp hit*). Their grammatical functions can be those of being purely an adverb, or part of a phrasal verb, or being used with extra – added – adverbs with or without a phrasal verb, or as relative adverbs initiating a relative clause (Thorell 1973, Telemann 1974). Of these functions, some uses may overlap and some can fill more than one function.

2 Issues to be looked at in this study

2.1 Deictic situatives, and the ways they can be approached

Locative/directive adverbs or particles either indicate an 'essive' (stative) location of something in relation to the speaker/point of view (close/remote), or