

# IS HONG KONG SIGN LANGUAGE A DISCOURSE-CONFIGURATIONAL LANGUAGE?

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## **0. INTRODUCTION:**

Findings from previous studies show that constituent order in sign languages is to a large extent determined by discourse factors such as topic and focus. ASL, BSL and ISL are claimed to be topic-prominent languages (Janzen 1995, 1999, Deuchar 1984, Rosenstein 2001). Wilbur (1997), on the other hand, proposes that the surface word order of ASL is determined by what information is in focus. This paper presents the preliminary findings of an attempt to investigate the extent to which Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL hereafter) can be considered topic-prominent and focus-prominent according to the notion of discourse configurationality defined by Kiss (1995, 1997, 2001). Within the framework of generative grammar, Kiss proposes that a language is discourse-configurational if it links either or both of the discourse-semantic functions topic and focus to particular structural positions: topic-prominent languages encode the topic function structurally whereas the focus-prominent languages encode the focus function structurally. With elicited data from and intuition of four HKSL native deaf signers, I would like to argue that HKSL *is probably not a topic-prominent language* owing to the fact that the difference between thetic and categorial judgment is not clearly reflected syntactically as in other topic-prominent languages. My data, however, provides preliminary evidence that HKSL *is focus-prominent* because assigning the focused constituent to a post-verbal position is one of the ways identification focus can be manifested in the grammar.

## **1. Topic PROMINENCE**

### *1. 1. Topic, CATEGORICAL vs THETIC JUDGMENT AND TOPIC PROMINENCE*

According to Kiss, ‘topic’ is the function of the constituent which is predicated about in the sentence. Observations within and across languages show that the topic function is most frequently carried out by the grammatical subject, the constituent bearing the most prominent theta role in a sentence. The reason behind this correlation is that a human topic is preferred to a non-human one, and a subject more often has the feature [human] than a non-subject. The most common instantiations of topic constituents include proper names, definite NPs, specific indefinite NPs, and generic NPs.

Nonetheless, not all sentences contain a topic. A sentence contains a topic only if it expresses predication about an individual. Whether a sentence expresses a predication about an individual is captured in the logical theory by Marty (1918, 1965), which was later adopted by linguists such as Kuroda (1972-3) and Sasse (1987). According to Marty, judgments can be classified into two major types: categorical and thetic. Categorical judgment consists of two acts: the act of recognition of that which is to be made the subject of predication, and the act of affirming or denying what is expressed by the predicate about the subject. Categorical judgment has a notional subject – notional predicate structure: a constituent denoting an entity is being foregrounded and is then commented by a predicate. Two examples of categorical judgment provided by Kiss are shown below (1995:7):

(1) Fido is chewing a bone.

(2) The dog is a domestic animal.

Thetic judgment consists of a single act: the act of the recognition of the material of a judgment. A thetic judgment does not contain a notional subject/topic. Examples of thetic sentences include impersonal sentences, existential sentences, and sentences with non-specific indefinite

subjects (Kiss 1995:7):

- (3) It is raining. (impersonal sentence)
- (4) There is a dog in the room. (existential sentence)
- (5) A dog came into the room. (a sentence with a non-specific indefinite subject)

Sasse (1987) argues that the concepts ofthetic and categorical judgment can be adopted to interpret the typological difference between topic and subject prominent languages proposed by Li and Thompson (1976). According to Sasse, this typological distinction can be seen as a reflection of the differences in the syntactic realization of categorical andthetic judgment in a language. Sasse claims that subject prominent languages, as in English, realize both categorical andthetic statement through grammatical subject-predicate constructions, and ‘dethematize’ the grammatical subject inthetic sentences only by phonological means. In contrast, in topic prominent languages such as Hungarian or Chinese, categorical andthetic statements are realized through different syntactic structures, which directly reflect the notional predication structures of the given sentences.

Following Sasse’s line of thought, Kiss (1995, 1997, 2001) defines topic-prominent languages as those in which the syntactic structure of sentences is the direct equivalent of their logical-semantic structure, that is, their categorical orthetic character. Subject-prominent languages, on the other hand, are those in which sentences invariably display a syntactic predication structure, whether or not they express predication on the logical-semantic level. Kiss (1997) makes use of two contexts to elucidate how categorical andthetic judgment are realized in different syntactical structures in topic-prominent languages:

- Context (a): Several girl-friends of yours were waiting for the bus. The bus arrived. *A girl got on the bus.* (categorical judgment)
- Context (b): You were sitting in a bus alone at night, frightened. Luckily, *a girl got on the bus.* (thetic judgment)

Swedish (topic-prominent language)

6a. En flicka steg på bussen. (categorical)

a girl got on the-bus

6b. Det steg en flicka på bussen (thetic)

there got a girl on the-bus

Turkish (topic prominent language)

7a. Bir kız otobüs-e bin-di. (categorical)

a girl bus-DAT board-PST

7b. Otobüs-e bir kız bin-di (thetic)

bus-DAT a girl board-PST

In the above examples from Swedish and Turkish provide by Kiss, the syntactic structures directly reflect the predication on the logical-semantic level. In both languages, the grammatical subjects of categorical sentences sentence-initially, whereas the subjects of thetic judgment remain inside the predication. Similar syntactic alternations can also be found in Cantonese, a Chinese dialect spoken by the majority of the hearing population in Hong Kong:

(8a) zau2-zo2 go3-hok6sang1 jap6lai4

come-ASP CL-student inside

‘A student has come in.’ (thetic judgment)

(8b) go3-hok6sang1 zau2-zo2 jap6lai4

CL-student come-ASP inside

‘The student has come in.’ (categorical judgment)

Example (8a) shows athetic judgment in Cantonese, with the postverbal NP *go3-hok6sang1* (a student) necessarily interpreted as indefinite. In contrast, the preverbal NP in the categorical sentence (8b) must refer to a specific and definite NP.

Given the crosslinguistic observations on the linkage between topic prominence and thetic/categorical judgment, the first research question in this paper is: does HKSL also exhibit syntactic alternations to differentiate the logical-semantic distinctions of thetic and categorical judgment as in other topic-prominent languages?

## *1.2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY ON TOPIC PROMINENCE*

Four native deaf signers of HKSL, two females and two males, participated in this study. They are all in their twenties and graduated from the same deaf day-school. All of them have deaf signing parents and sign language was their first language. Four contexts were designed to elicit thetic sentences from the signers.<sup>1</sup> To ensure that the signing was natural, the informants worked in pairs, and they signed the sentences out as if they were having a conversation. The contexts were explained to them in signs by the author of this study. They were allowed to discuss the signing among themselves if they felt necessary before the recording took place.

The four contexts for thethetic judgments are listed as follows:

### Context 1:

(A is working in the office. Looking out of the window, A sees a big crowd of people on the road and wonders what has happened. B then comes back from the outside.)

A: Why are there so many people looking at something on the road? What has happened?

B: A girl has just been knocked down by a car. (thetic judgment)

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<sup>1</sup> Originally, I intended to use similar contexts to elicit the corresponding categorical sentences. As I expected, however, the subject of a categorical judgment is either expressed as a pronominal or null argument due to its topical status in the preceding discourse. This makes direct comparisons with the full NP subjects of thethetic sentences difficult. In other spontaneous conversation data of my own research, activated subjects may appear in the form of a full NP in categorical sentences when there is a topic shift. Except for some sentences that involve right-dislocated subjects, the majority of these categorical sentences assume the canonical order of subject-predicate (SVO or SOV depending on verb types). Basing on this observation, I assume that the subjects of categorical sentences appear pre-verbally.

Context 2:

(A, B, and Jafi are discussing their research project in the office. A and B are both deaf but B can hear some sounds with the help of hearing aids. In the middle of the discussion, Jafi suddenly stands up and walks towards the door hurriedly. A wonders what has happened.)

A: Why did Jafi stand up and walk towards the door all of a sudden?

B: Someone has come and is knocking on the door. (thetic judgment)

Context 3:

A group of colleagues are having a retreat in a rented flat in the countryside. Having the hearing aid on, A hears some continuous noises and asks another colleague, B, who has relatively better hearing.

A: Can you hear some strange noises?

B: Don't worry. Some dogs are barking. (thetic judgment)

Context 4:

You were sitting in a bus alone at night, frightened. Luckily, *a girl got on the bus*. (The thetic context designed by Kiss for her cross-linguistic study of topic-prominence, Kiss 1997)

*1.3. SYNTACTIC REALIZATION OF THETIC JUDGMENTS IN HONG KONG SIGN LANGUAGE*

Elicited data from the four native signers in the current study show that thetic sentences are realized as primary predication structures, at least as the surface word order reflects<sup>2</sup>:

Example (9) (context 1):

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<sup>2</sup> The sign SOME involves a 1-handshape with an outward palm orientation. It makes use of a tremor pivoting movement at the wrist roughly across a horizontal path at the signer's eye level in the neutral space.

Signer A: Gesture-attention IX-loc ROAD PEOPLE MANY CL-a-crowd-of-people  
LOOK WHAT

Signer B: **SOME FEMALE CAR CL-car-knock-down-human,** PEOPLE  
CL-a-crowd-of-people LOOK

Example (10) for context 2:

Signer A: gesture-attention JAFI CL-walk-away WHY

Signer B: **SOME COME KNOCK,** IX-jafi JAFI CL-walk-away OPEN-DOOR  
IX-matter “jafi-opens-door”

Example (11) for context 3:

Signer A: gesture-attention IX-1p HEAR IX-loc OUTSIDE NOISE WHAT

Signer B: **SOME DOG BARK** NOISY

Example (12) for context 4:

YESTERDAY BUS SOME CL-bus-arrive CL-person-get-on-bus SIT LOOK-AROUND  
EMPTY FEAR SWEAT FEAR CL-bus-stop LUCKY **SOME FEMALE**  
**CL-person-get-on-bus** CL-two-persons-sit CL-bus-move-forward

Examples of signed thetic sentences by HKSL signers show that the surface word order of thetic judgments does not differ from that of categorical judgments.

*1.4. ALTERNATIVE SYNTACTIC TESTS FOR THETIC/CATEGORICAL DISTINCTION?*

Kiss (1997) argues that although in English both thetic and categorical sentences manifest the same SV order, the subjects of these two types of sentences actually occupy different structural positions. This subtle distinction is evident in the possible placements for sentence adverbials and negative

particles in thetic and categorical sentences (examples 33 and 34 in Kiss 1997):

(13a) John fortunately has been born on time. (categorical judgment)

(13b) \*A baby fortunately has been born. (thetic judgment)

(14a) Not a baby was born.

(14b) \*Not John was born on time.

As Kiss (1997) explains, as the usual position of sentence adverbials and the negative particles across languages is between the subject of predication and the Predicate Phrase, the above asymmetry in thetic and categorical sentences can provide evidence that non-specific subjects are internal to the Predicate Phrase (IP), whereas the specific subjects are external to it.

Since the subjects of both thetic and categorical sentences in HKSL appear preverbally, an attempt was made to look for possible syntactic tests in HKSL similar to the sentence adverbials and negative particles in English. From my observation, however, there seems to be a lack of sentence adverbs in HKSL corresponding to those in English. Most sentence adverbs in English are speaker-oriented, expressing the speaker's comment on or evaluation of the propositional content of the sentence. In HKSL, however, these functions are usually realized as non-manual features (e.g. facial expression accompanying a sentence), a *wh*-cleft structure (e.g. LUCKY WHAT? IX-1p FATHER DIE NOT-HAVE 'Luckily, my father survived'), or an independent adjective following the sentence to be commented on (e.g. IX-3p GREEDY, OBVIOUS 'He is greedy. That's obvious'). Therefore, there seems to be no suitable sentence adverbials that can help determine whether non-specific subjects in thetic sentences are internal or external to the Predicate Phrase. Negative particles in HKSL provide no reliable clue, either, as they are restricted to the sentence-final position in the majority of cases.

To the best of my knowledge, the only syntactic unit whose placement may be sensitive to

thetic/categorical distinction is temporal adverbials such as PAST and RECENTLY. According to the intuition of native signers, PAST or RECENTLY can appear after a definite subject if the sentence is categorical, but can be sentence-initial if the context requires a thetic reading:

Example 15:

Signer A: SIGN-LANGUAGE BOOK WHERE? CANNOT-BE-FOUND “Where is the sign language book? I can’t find it”

Signer B: **RECENTLY** JENNY TAKE-AWAY. “Jenny took it away recently” (thetic sentence)

Example 16:

Sign A: **JENNY** **RECENTLY** BORROW SIGN-LANGUAGE BOOKS MANY, WHY? “Jenny recently borrowed a lot of sign language books. Do you know why?” (categorical sentence)

However, this still cannot serve as a conclusive test for thetic/categorical distinction because a non-specific subject may sometimes appear before a temporal adverbial, as in the following sentence:

(17) SOME STUDENT RECENTLY PUNCH SCHOOL-PRINCIPAL. KNOW YOU

“A student punched the school principal recently. Do you know it?”

It is well-known that non-specific indefinite NP cannot serve as a notional subject. Hence, temporal adverbials such as RECENTLY may not serve as a reliable clue for thetic/categorical distinction. Further research is warranted in order to find out whether subjects of thetic and categorical sentences occupy different syntactic positions in Hong Kong Sign Language.

## 1.5. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS ON TOPIC PROMINENCE IN HKSL

In brief, the surface syntactic word of HKSL is not reflective of their logical-semantic predication as in other topic-prominent languages. The evidence presented here so far indicates that HKSL is probably not topic-prominent in accordance with the discourse-configurational theory proposed by Kiss.

## 2. FOCUS PROMINENCE

### 2.1. INFORMATION FOCUS VS IDENTIFICATIONAL FOCUS

According to Kiss, focus is used in at least two different senses in the literature: information focus and identificational focus. Information focus refers to the part of the sentence that carries new information. It is used in contrast to the presupposed part of the sentence (i.e. background). There is no restriction on the constituent size of the information focus. It can be an N, NP, ADJ, VP, or even an entire sentence in the case of ‘wide focus’. Identificational focus is sometimes called focus operator in the literature. It introduces a set and identifies a subset of it as such of which the predicate exclusively holds. It is a major constituent of the sentence, which undergoes operator movement either in syntax or in LF to a position from which it c-commands its scope (Focus Movement). In the following Hungarian example of identificational focus provided by Kiss (1995:15), the context invokes a set of members, for instance, students of a class, and the focusing of *János* means that among this set of members only John got A+.

(18) JÁNOS kapott jelest

John got A+

“It was John who got A+”

Presumably, every language is capable of expressing the discourse-semantic notion of identificational focus, but the means by which it is expressed may differ across languages. The two most commonly seen methods are phonological and structural. Some languages express identificational focus by stress and

intonation. Other languages express identificational focus through an invariable structural position, with or without a morphological focus marker. Kiss argues that languages which express identificational focus in an invariant structural position are focus-prominent. In her observation, focus-prominent languages are often also topic prominent, but not necessarily so. There are topic-prominent languages with no structural focus, such as Japanese, and there are also non-topic-prominent languages with structural focus. The second research question of this paper concerns the extent to which HKSL can be considered focus prominent according to Kiss's definition.

## *2.2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY ON FOCUS PROMINENCE*

To find out how identificational focus is expressed in Hong Kong Sign Language, seven contexts were designed to elicit identificational focus on different types of syntactic constituents, including subject NP, object NP and the verb:

- i. Jafi said it was *Ng* that gave the book to Jenny. (subject of the subordinate clause)
- ii. It was *Brenda and Kenny* who went to Brazil. (subject)
- iii. It was *books* that father bought. (object)
- iv. It was *Jenny* whom Jafi saw in the office. (object)
- v. Lisa and Fok only *observed* the teaching in the classroom; they did not teach or play or participate in any caring work. (verb)
- vi. Mother only *scolded* Chun Chun. She did not beat him up. (verb)

The contexts were explained to the four native signers in signs by the author of this study. The signers worked in pairs, and they were given time to discuss how these sentences could be expressed naturally before the recording started.

## *2.3. EXPRESSION OF IDENTIFICATION FOCUS IN HONG KONG SIGN LANGUAGE*

Interestingly, identificational focus in HKSL can be expressed in a variety of ways, including a fixed structural position and focus-in-situ. In what follows, I will basically use identificational focus

involving subjects as examples, due to the fact that subjects, which are canonically preverbal in HKSL, can best illustrate Focus Movement which results in the structural encoding of identificational focus in a postverbal position.<sup>3</sup>

First of all, the meaning of exclusivity can be expressed by context without invoking any morphological, phonological or syntactic markings.<sup>4</sup>

(19) JAFI SAY NG BOOK GIVE JENNY ONE, ANYONE GIVE  
NOT-HAVE

Focus-in-situ is allowable in the presence of ONLY-ONE:<sup>5</sup>

(20) JAFI SAY NG ONLY-ONE BOOK GIVE JENNY

It is possible to mark the constituent bearing the identificational focus with brow raise and pressed protruded lips without any change in word order.

brow raise & pressed protruded lips

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(21) KENNY BRENDA TWO-BOTH CL-two-go-to BRAZIL

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<sup>3</sup> As I observe, identificational focus can be expressed by similar strategies regardless of whether the subject is embedded or not.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, this method is considered by all four signers to be the clearest way to express exclusivity. They only came up with other strategies when I urged them to try to use one sentence to express identificational focus.

<sup>5</sup> Note that the lexical item ONLY-ONE takes a variety of form: (a) an index finger releasing from a fist with a leftward path movement (for right-handers) in front of the signer's forehead (or with initial contact with the forehead); (b) an upward 1-handshape with an inward palm orientation plus a bending movement of the wrist towards the signer in the neutral space; (c) a 1-handshape with a downward facing palm plus a pronating movement of the wrist. The preliminary observation shows that form (a) and (b) can be used when NP is being focused. Form (c) is used exclusively for focused verbs in this study's data set. Signers can also use numerals such as ONE, followed by FINISH-exclusive. It seems that the lexical item ONE is in the process of being grammaticalized into some kind of morphological marker for exclusiveness. Due to time constraint I cannot go any further into this intriguing phenomenon and would like to leave it for future research.

Signers may also assign a locus for the focused NP referent and use the lexical item ONLY-ONE which agrees with it at the end of the sentence:

(22) JAFI TELL-ME IX-ng<sub>i</sub> NG BOOK GIVE JENNY ONLY-ONE<sub>i</sub>

The above methods to express identificational focus do not involve a change in word order. Yet signers can employ structural means to represent exclusivity. One way of doing this is to use a wh-cleft construction with the focused constituent followed by the lexical item ONLY-ONE.

(22) JAFI SAY BOOK GIVE JENNY WHO? NG ONLY-ONE

The second syntactic means is to associate the focused constituents structurally to a postverbal position<sup>6</sup> plus the sign FINISH-exclusive<sup>7</sup>:

Pressed protruded lips

(23) FLY-TO BRAZIL, IX-1P BRENDA WE-BOTH FINISH-exclusive

#### 2.4. SUMMARY of Findings

In brief, signers may adopt a variety of ways to mark identificational focus in HKSL, and associating focus with a structural position is just one of them. HKSL is therefore focus-prominent according to the definition provided by Kiss. However, HKSL may be considered less focus-prominent when compared with other languages in which structural position is the only means to encode identificational focus.

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<sup>6</sup> I would like to leave the direction of movement (whether the focused elements move rightward or the non-focused elements move leftward) open here for future research. Although the focused constituent in the example appears sentence-finally, other constituents such as negator and modal may appear after it. Hence the focused position is probably post-verbal rather than sentence-final in HKSL.

<sup>7</sup> This FINISH-exclusive is accompanied with pressed, protruded lips. It involves a spread 5-handshape, an inward palm orientation and a (or repeated) pronating movement at the wrist in the neutral space. It is therefore non-manually different from the aspectual marker FINISH, which is not accompanied with a specific set of non-manual features.

### **3. Conclusion**

This paper has made an attempt to test whether Hong Kong Sign Language can be considered discourse-configurational on the basis of Kiss's notions of topic and focus prominence. Preliminary observations suggest that HKSL is probably not topic prominent because the thetic/categorical distinction is not reflected directly in the syntactic predication structures as in other topic-prominent languages. Identificational focus can be encoded structurally in HKSL, as the focused constituent can be postposed to a postverbal position with or without the lexical item ONLY-ONE. HKSL can therefore be considered focus-prominent.

It should be noted, however, that this paper actually raises more questions than it can answer, as a number of important issues are left unaddressed. Although both thetic and categorical subjects show up in the preverbal position in HKSL, it is still possible for these two types of subjects to occupy different syntactic positions as in English. Further syntactic tests are needed to see whether HKSL is similar to English in this regard. If HKSL is indeed not topic-prominent, as the preliminary evidence suggests, then how are thetic and categorical judgment distinguished in the grammar? Does HKSL employ phonological means, such as a specific set non-manual features or a particular kind of rhythm? When the native signers were given the contexts inducing identificational focus, they came up with a variety of methods: change in word order, use of non-manual features, and use of lexical item ONLY-ONE. Do these constructions differ from each other in any subtle ways? Under what circumstances would a signer opt for a structural means to code identification focus? What syntactic position does structural focus occupy in relation to other sentence-final focused elements such as wh-word in HKSL? All these questions are worth-investigating and can be possible directions for future research.

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