1 Introduction

In this paper, I discuss the two most prominent examples of the interaction between definiteness and Information Structure (IS): Topicalization has been associated with definiteness (specificity) and existentials with indefiniteness (the “definiteness effect”). Both these phenomena exhibit seemingly idiosyncratic exceptions to this association. This paper demonstrates that these exceptions are resolved by a careful analysis in terms of IS. Section 2 defines the primitives of IS, topic and focus, in terms of their effect on a file system representing the discourse manipulation of referents in the common ground. It is shown how subordinate ISs afford an explanation of the fact that specific indefinites can provide topics.

It is well known that IS has an impact on word order. I have argued elsewhere (e.g. Erteschik-Shir 2007, 2005b) for an account of this interaction in terms of PF linearization constrained by the canonical IS of a language.¹ This is the topic of section 3 where I demonstrate how topicalization is constrained differently in Danish, Norwegian, Hebrew, Catalan and Russian in view of their different canonical ISs as well as other language particular properties. I also show that although the first position in Germanic languages is generally dedicated to topics, non-topics in this position also impact IS by forming thetic sentences. Section 4 offers an analysis of the definiteness effect in existentials. It also gives some evidence (citing Romance data from Leonetti 2008) that here again there are differences in canonical IS as well as morphological differences between the languages.

2 What Is a Topic?

Topics are what the sentence is ‘about’ and the truth value of a sentence is determined with respect to them (Reinhart 1981, Strawson 1964). Since sentences

¹ For arguments against the idea that IS functional features trigger movement (e.g. Rizzi 1997) see Erteschik-Shir 2007, 86–101.
may have more than one topic, the “main” topic (often the syntactically highest one, i.e., a subject or one that is topicalized) is the pivot for truth value assessment. Depending on context, however, any one of the topics in a sentence can play this role. Only referential expressions serve as topics. Topics are prototypically referential DPs with a discoursal antecedent. Weak (unstressed) pronouns are therefore by definition topics and can be used to tell which constituent types may function as such. Personal pronouns, temporal and locative pronouns (then, there) show that DPs and spatio-temporal expressions may function as topics. Although topics are necessarily given or presupposed, not all presupposed elements are topics.

Languages mark topics in a variety of different ways. Topics can be marked by topicalization, by a (clitic) pronoun, morphologically, by topic drop or by intonation (including destressing). Most languages use several of these options. In Danish, for example, topicalization is prevalent, but topics can optionally remain in situ (Erteschik-Shir 2007). Different types of topics may therefore have different properties cross-linguistically. The following two kinds of topics are commonly distinguished: continued topics, which refer back to an already mentioned referent, and shifted topics, which are derived from a restrictive (d-linked) or contrastive set. In Catalan, this distinction applies as follows: topicalization is reserved for shifted topics but continued topics are postposed rather than dropped (Barker 2007). It has been claimed that dropped topics are continued topics (Schulz 2003). In the case of languages that employ several ways of marking topics, for example both topicalization and topic drop, there may be a division of labour such that the former applies to shifted topics, whereas the latter applies to continued topics. In some languages, however, topics selected from restrictive or contrastive sets are distinguished from continued topics. (Erteschik-Shir, Ibnbari, and Taube 2013) argue that Topicalization applies to the former and Topic drop to the latter in both Russian and Hebrew. (1)–(3) ((60)–(63) in Erteschik-Shir et al. op. cit.) illustrate this for Hebrew.

(1) **Dani hevi xalav me-ha-super ve-sam ∅ ba-mekarer**
Dani brought milk from-the-supermarket and-put in-the-fridge
‘Dani brought milk from the supermarket and put it in the fridge.’

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2 Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl 2007 distinguish Familiar Topics, Aboutness-shift Topics and Contrastive Topics. These are parallel to continued, shifted and contrastive topics respectively.

3 Catalan is discussed in section 3.3 below.