Arguments for Seeing Theme-Rheme and Topic-Comment as Separate Functional Structures

This paper presents the concepts of theme-rheme as discussed by the early Prague School and by Michael Halliday, and then, using the facts of Tagalog, argues that, unlike these two approaches, which conflate topic-comment and theme-rheme because all of the languages they looked at happened to have this configuration, we should expand the typology to allow for languages where topic (what the clause is about) and theme (defined as the speaker’s starting point) are not conflated. The latter is important because of the phenomenon known as “projection”, and it is also argued that typologists should consider the different mechanisms that speakers of different languages have conventionalized in order to help the addressee project the speaker’s intention. The typological variability of access to unmarked topic will also be discussed, using English, Tagalog, and Chinese as examples.

Speakers

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