

# Exposing Neo-Functionalist Fallacies

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## Abstract

Gisbert Fanselow's work furnishes strong arguments against the "syntacticization" of information structure. I summarize his key arguments for modularity and show that his conclusions extend beyond the cases he considered, undermining the neo-functionalist approach to syntax quite generally.

## 1. Introduction

One of Gisbert Fanselow's many valuable contributions to the study of language is his staunch defense of modularity with regard to the relationship between syntax and information structure (IS): These two dimensions of linguistic knowledge interact in important ways, but indirectly; syntax is blind to categories of IS, such as topic and focus.

Many contemporary syntactic analyses subscribe to a "syntacticisation of scope-discourse semantics" (Rizzi 2014): IS categories are recast in syntactic terms as heads or features and assumed to 'trigger' syntactic operations. In what Fanselow (2008) refers to as a 'direct model' of syntax-IS interaction, "information structure corresponds to syntactic features [...] or heads such as Topic or Focus (as in the cartographic approach of Rizzi 1997), and these figure in the syntactic computation." Fanselow (2006) points out that "Such approaches in which IS is directly coded in the syntax constitute one of two extreme ends of a continuum of models of the syntax-IS interaction"; I will refer to this class of proposals as "neo-functionalist."

The opposite end of the continuum is represented by approaches that assume no direct role for IS in syntax. On such a view, IS *exploits* the options afforded to it by the syntax but does not directly meddle with its operations: "Results of syntactic processes can be exploited by distinctions of information structure, but this does not show that these processes are triggered by them" (Fanselow 2007). Fanselow's principal concern was explanatory progress: While we may very well use IS notions in informal description, from a theoretical point of

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\*This paper is dedicated to the memory of Gisbert Fanselow.

view “nothing is gained if we make functional aspects part of the computation,” since “the formation of a construction is not driven by its functions, [which] arise as a consequence of properties of the product, for which it does not matter how the structure was generated” (ibid).

Fanselow’s arguments are well worth pondering, especially in view of the fact that large parts of the field of syntax espouse, explicitly or implicitly, the neo-functionalism premiss of syntacticized IS. I will rehash some of his trenchant conceptual and empirical objections to this reigning view in section 2. In section 3, I argue that the modular view he championed can be extended to ‘topic’ constructions commonly perceived as lending direct support to the neo-functionalism/cartographic view.

## 2. Against Syntacticization of IS

Fanselow’s (2007) observation that “Forces driving syntactic computations must be distinguished from the consequences of structural properties of the resulting constructions” echoes a cogent note of caution against teleological explanations in syntax of Chomsky’s (2001), issued in the context of his discussion of Scandinavian object shift:

“Sometimes [movement of XP] is described as being driven by [semantic] properties of [XP] [. . .]. That is a questionable formulation, however. A ‘dumb’ computational system shouldn’t have access to considerations of that kind, typically involving discourse situations and the like. These are best understood as properties of the resulting configuration [. . .]. One might also say that in [*the men seem to each other to be intelligent*], the phrase *the men* is raised in order to bind the anaphor.

But the mechanisms are blind to those consequences, and it would make no sense to assign the feature ‘binder’ to *the men* with principles requiring that it raise to be able to accommodate this feature. We may also say informally that someone is running to the left to catch a ball, but such functional/teleological accounts, while perhaps useful for motivation and formulation of problems, are not to be confused with accounts of the mechanisms of guiding and organizing motion.”

All of this ought to be a truism, yet analogous ‘explanations’ are routinely accepted as legitimate explanations in current syntactic theory.

Let us first consider the notion of ‘triggers’. It is dubious on general grounds: Structure-building that is licensed by features of the items it collocates requires significant complications of the combinatory mechanism; see Collins and Stabler’s (2016) ‘triggered Merge’ vs. Chomsky et al.’s (2019) freely-applying MERGE. This doesn’t mean that models assuming ‘triggered Merge’ are a priori invalid; but they bear the burden of proof of explanatory superiority.

As has sometimes been observed (e.g. Richards 2016), reliance on features to drive syntactic computation amounts in many cases to nothing more than a restatement of the fact that movement occurs. Some topical/focal XP is said to raise to SPEC of TopP/FocP because it bears a [Top/Foc] feature; the evidence for this feature is the very fact that XP appears in the putative ‘Topic/Focus position.’ The circularity of reasoning could hardly be more blatant.

Turning more specifically to the notion that IS-based features drive derivations, Fanselow (2006) points out that it is at variance with the Inclusiveness Condition of Chomsky 1995, which mandates that only features inherent to lexical and functional items can figure in the computation. Any rejection of this fundamental condition is tantamount to the postulation of a more complex derivational mechanism, hence again bears the burden of proof. As Fanselow (2006) points out, unlike features such as [wh] or phi-features, IS features are incompatible with Inclusiveness as a matter of principle.

This is most clearly shown by the fact that focus/topic “is not a correct attribute of any of the parts of the [focused/topical XP].” For instance, no term of the NP *a small yellow book* in (1) can be said to be equipped with an optional ‘focus feature’ which then percolates up to the NP level, since the property of being focus applies only to the NP as a whole.

- (1) Q: What did you see?  
 A: I saw [<sub>NP</sub> a small yellow book ]

It will not do to disguise IS features as functional items that merge with XPs, yielding the structure [ *Foc* [<sub>NP</sub> a small yellow book ] ] for the above case. Given that the hypothetical term *Foc* would need to attach at the top of NP and heads do not adjoin to XPs, [ *Foc* NP ] could only be a head–complement structure; but this would falsely entail that the focused NP is of a different syntactic category than a non-focal counterpart.

A related problem pointed out by Fanselow (2006) is that of optionality: “In German, syntactic responses to information structure are always optional [...]. E.g., focus and topic phrases can be placed into sentence-initial position (Spec,CP), but they do not have to be.” For instance, both ‘new’ and ‘given’ NPs can but need not be fronted to the prefield; assigning ‘trigger features’ to NPs just in case their movement is observed is a coding trick in the service of a poorly motivated general view of syntax and movement in particular.

‘Focus movement’ has been argued to play a crucial role in the derivation of fragments in clausal ellipsis, as the driving force behind evacuation movements from IP/TP (e.g. Merchant 2004). But Ott and Struckmeier (2018) demonstrate that this claim is untenable. Using immobile middle-field-internal particles, they show that remnants of clausal ellipsis may but need not move to the prefield. The conclusion that clausal ellipsis is not fed by obligatory fronting of focal remnants casts further doubt on the very idea that such movement exists in anything other than an informal-descriptive sense.

Much like ‘focus features’, hypothetical features triggering ellipsis (Merchant 2004) or driving scrambling (Grewendorf and Sabel 1999) are brute-force coding tools that do little more than conceal our ignorance of the actual mechanisms involved. With regard to the latter case, Fanselow (2008) observes that “Scrambling features are [...] nothing but a technical device for not admitting that scrambling is syntactically untriggered and optional.”

Exactly nothing is gained by positing optional scrambling features (and/or attracting heads and corresponding positions). In fact, such a move is a net loss for the theory given that, as pointed out above, ‘triggered’ structure-building requires a more complex operation than MERGE.<sup>1</sup>

Just as important as these conceptual objections to IS features, and focus features in particular, is Fanselow’s empirical observation that what moves can be both smaller and larger than the focus. The first case is illustrated by the following, where the focus is VP but only the object is fronted:

- (2) Q: *What did you do?*  
 A: ein BUCH hab’ ich [ *t* gelesen ]  
     a book have I read  
     ‘I read a book.’

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<sup>1</sup>Free application of operations is often taken to entail ‘overgeneration,’ but the term has no clear meaning; see Berwick et al. 2011, Ott 2017a, Chomsky et al. 2019.

Not only can the observed movement not be driven by a syntactic focus feature (which would need to be wrongly assigned to the fronted NP), the landing site of the movement cannot in any meaningful way be identified as a ‘focus position’ either, for the same reason.

The flipside of this phenomenon is felicitous fronting of constituents larger than the focus, such as VPs containing narrowly focused NPs:

- (3) Q: *What did he buy?*  
 A: [ ein BUCH gekauft ] hat er *t*  
     a book bought has he  
     ‘He bought a book.’

While smaller-than-focus fronting could be argued to involve discontinuous PF-realization, no such account is available for this case.

Analogous facts hold for “topicalization,” regardless of whether the label is taken to denote fronting of given topics (4) or ‘contrastive topics,’ (5).

- (4) Q: *Who saw Peter?*  
 A: HANS hat den Peter gesehen  
     Hans has ACC Peter seen  
 A': [ den Peter ] hat HANS *t* gesehen  
 A'': [ den Peter gesehen ] hat HANS *t*  
     ‘Hans saw Peter.’

- (5) Q: *Who bought what?*  
 A: [ das AUTO ] hat MARIA *t* gekauft  
     the car has Maria bought  
 A': [ das AUTO gekauft ] hat MARIA *t*  
     ‘Maria bought the car.’

In view of these rampant syntax/IS mismatches, Fanselow (2007) concludes that “The presence of (massive) functional ambiguities makes it unlikely that these functions play a role in the generation of a construction.” Put differently, the identification of some XP as focus or topic tells us virtually nothing about where it will eventually appear, and conversely, the IS status of some XP makes little to no predictions about its syntactic distribution (with some principled exceptions, see below).<sup>2</sup> This very fact renders the postulation of

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<sup>2</sup>This is less obvious in languages such as Basque or Hungarian, where focal status correlates

corresponding features, heads, and positions as putative ingredients of the syntactic derivation highly dubious; the same is true for cartographic templates stipulating the hierarchical configuration of landing sites (Rizzi 1997).

As Fanselow (2007) concludes, “At least for the core of the syntax, we can exclude the ‘strong’ functionalist view according to which some syntactic operations are triggered by aspects of information structure such as a ‘focus’ feature.” And more generally: “Syntactic rules make no reference to information structure” (Fanselow 2006).

### 3. IS Features Beyond the Clause?

Fanselow (2006) did issue a qualification of the conclusion just cited, however: While core syntax appears to be ‘uncontaminated’ by IS features, “reference to topicality may be necessary in domains other than the middle field [and prefield],” referring specifically to left-dislocation as “a case in point.”

Let us consider fronted (‘topicalized’) XPs as in (6) and their dislocated counterparts (dXPs for short) as in (7)/(8):

- (6) [ ihren Bruder ] hat sie *t* gestern angerufen  
 her.ACC brother has she yesterday called  
 ‘She called her brother yesterday.’
- (7) [<sub>dXP</sub> ihren Bruder ]<sub>i</sub>, den<sub>i</sub> hat sie gestern *t<sub>i</sub>* angerufen  
 her.ACC brother him.ACC has she yesterday called  
 ‘Her brother, she called yesterday.’
- (8) [<sub>dXP</sub> ihren Bruder ]<sub>i</sub>, wann hat sie den<sub>i</sub> *t<sub>wh</sub>* angerufen?  
 her.ACC brother when has she him.ACC called  
 ‘When did she call her brother?’

dXPs have important properties in common with their fronted cousins: They display case/binding connectivity and (partial) island-sensitivity, among other commonalities (Fernández and Ott 2020). At the same time, they appear to be creatures of a rather different kind: Their prosodic realization and compositional redundancy betray paratactic qualities, as does the fact that a left-dislocated XP precedes an entire V2 configuration and any peripheral operators (8).

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rather strongly with peripheral positioning. But it is not clear that anything beyond fronting to the CP edge is involved, perhaps driven by prosodic requirements.

Like their fronted counterparts,<sup>3</sup> dXPs function as either corrective foci or delimiting expressions/contrastive topics; their function is thus not invariably topical. Both (6) and (7) are felicitous in either of the following contexts:

- (9) a. *Maria called her SISTER yesterday*  
 b. *When did Maria call who (which relative)?*<sup>4</sup>

The prosodic realization of the fronted/dislocated XP depends on the context: In response to (9-a) it is marked by a falling tone (focus accent), in response to (9-b) it is marked by a rising tone (cf. Krifka 2007). In the first case, the dXP is a corrective fragment followed by an optional continuation:

- (10) nein, ihren BRUDER (DEN hat sie gestern angerufen)  
 no her.ACC brother him has she yesterday called  
 ‘No, her BROTHER, it was HIM she called yesterday.’

By contrast, the rising contrastive topic (CT) intonation generates the expectation of a continuation, making the host sentence pragmatically obligatory:<sup>5</sup>

- (11) ihren /BRUDER #(den hat sie GESTERN angerufen)  
 her.ACC brother him has she yesterday called  
 ‘Her BROTHER, she called YESTERDAY.’

In previous work, I argued for an analysis of left-peripheral dXPs as separately generated focal sentence fragments (Ott 2014, 2015); each dXP and host are independently generated objects (henceforth delimited by angled brackets) that are juxtaposed in discourse. The analysis captures the aforementioned parenthetical qualities of dXP while also accounting for apparent connectivity effects, such as the matching case assigned to the dXP; see the references provided above. For the corrective-focus use of dXPs as exemplified in (10), this analysis is rather self-evident:

<sup>3</sup>Fronted XPs can also be given/discourse-old, which is not a natural option for left-dislocated XPs. I take this to be a corollary of the analysis of dXPs as sentence fragments, although topical dXPs do exist in right-dislocation (Ott and de Vries 2016, Ott 2017b).

<sup>4</sup>The fact that the rendition of the question in English incurs a mild superiority violation is evidently immaterial here.

<sup>5</sup>Rising tones are marked by ‘/’; simple caps indicate a focus accent (part of an overall rising interrogative contour in cases such as (8)). The correlative d-pronoun can itself be marked by a rise; this redundant replication of the contrastive topic appears to be optional. I set this case aside here. Note that ‘hanging topics’ are excluded from the discussion.

(12) <ihren BRUDER ~~hat sie gestern angerufen~~>

‘(She called) her BROTHER (yesterday).’

<DEN hat sie gestern angerufen>

‘It was HIM she called yesterday.’

The CT use of the dXP employs the same parenthetical discursive sequence, but in this case the fragment is equivalent to a question-internal focus; informally:

(13) <~~wann hat Maria~~ ihren BRUDER angerufen?>

‘(When did Maria call) her BROTHER?’

<den hat sie GESTERN angerufen>

‘She called him YESTERDAY.’

The focus-containing question underlying the surface fragment is equivalent to a CT on Büring’s (2003) terms: Foci, like questions, evoke sets of propositional alternatives, and CTs denote sets of these alternative sets. Note that the elliptical question is resolved against the context of (9-b).

Following Büring, the pragmatic function of the CT is to indicate that the speaker is pursuing a complex discursive strategy, namely the shift from a Question Under Discussion (9-b) to a subquestion thereof (where a subquestion of a question *Q* is one whose complete answer entails a partial answer to *Q*). The indexation of this subquestion is precisely the role of the fragment (Q2 below); the following host sentence then either resolves the subquestion or spells it out:

(14) Q1: *When did Maria call who (which relative)?*

Q2: <~~wann hat sie~~ ihren /BRUDER angerufen?>

= *When did she call her BROTHER?*

A2: <den hat sie GESTERN angerufen>

‘She called him YESTERDAY.’

[= (7)]

A2’: <wann hat sie DEN angerufen?>

‘When did she call HIM?’

[= (8)]

Note that the Q2 fragment is marked with rising intonation; assuming cooperativeness, the hearer will thus be guided to accommodate the implicit Q2 (or Q1 if Q2 is the explicit context<sup>6</sup>) and expect a continuation. Whether the

<sup>6</sup>When the context is an explicit non-elliptical question equivalent to Q2, Q1 is inferred via the implicated alternative questions. See Büring 2003 for details.



continuation resolves Q2 or spells it out, the CT is the question-internal focus setting the stage for the host-internal information focus (cf. Wagner 2012).<sup>7</sup>

While not all CTs are dislocated, it is indeed the case that dislocated CTs universally surface to the left of their host sentence and cannot follow it. It is now easy to see why this is: The relevant subquestion must be accommodated before it is addressed (Ott 2017*b*, in press). Right-dislocated XPs are invariably specificational but not contrastive (Ott and de Vries 2016); they respond to implicit questions raised by the host (Onea and Ott 2022).

No ‘topic position’ or similar device is required to derive the properties of left-dislocated XPs; adding such a position and/or a corresponding feature would add exactly nothing of explanatory value, and would furthermore contradict the parenthetical (extra-sentential) properties of dXPs. The grammar, blind to any notion of ‘topicality,’ simply yields structural descriptions of (potentially elliptical) expressions. The speaker uses these units as moves in sequential arrangements in accordance with laws of discourse coherence.

It might be suggested that the view from German is misleading. As Fanselow (2006) observes, “In certain languages, movement to focus or topic position seems indeed obligatory: [...] ‘Discourse-configurational’ languages [...] such as Catalan and Italian may be cases in point.” This is indeed the case, as prominently discussed in Vallduví 1992 and much work since:

- (15) [dXP el GOS ]<sub>i</sub>, el<sub>i</sub> prendrem a EIVISSA, però el GAT, ...  
           the dog     him we.will.take to Ibiza     but the cat  
           ‘The dog we’ll take to Ibiza, but the cat...’ (Catalan)
- (16) \*[ el GOS ] prendrem *t* a EIVISSA, però el GAT...

Fanselow adds that “the obligatoriness [of dislocation] may be due to the fact that prosodic properties can only be realized in certain syntactic configurations in such languages [...]”, echoing a claim of Vallduví’s. Vallduví argued that Catalan and relevantly similar languages are intonationally too ‘inflexible’ to accommodate fronted CTs and the resulting double-peak/hat contour; focus

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<sup>7</sup>This must be distinguished from echoic-interrogative retort fragments (*Her BROTHER (you mean)?*). In this case, which requires the explicit context to be the question *When did she call her brother?*, the fragment differs intonationally and pragmatically from CT, not evoking alternatives against which the subsequent focus is evaluated (enabling continuations equivalent to *That I don’t know*, infelicitous with CT intonation on the initial fragment).

and its corresponding pitch accent are unique and rigidly positioned. Therefore, CTs must be ‘left-detached’, in his terminology; cf. Wagner 2012.

It is easy to see how the parenthetical analysis of LD can accommodate the requirement of a unique sentence focus, breaking up the CT–Focus configuration into a fragment–host sequence; schematically:

- (17) Q1: *Which pet are you taking where?*  
 Q2: <~~where are we taking~~ the DOG?>  
 A2: <we’re taking it to IBIZA>  
 Q3: <~~but where are we taking~~ the CAT?>  
 A3: ...

In intonationally more flexible languages such as German, CTs can be positioned clause-internally; left-dislocation is an option, but never obligatory. But even for Catalan-type languages where CTs have a definite syntactic distribution, it would be a mistake to conclude that dislocation of CTs is a syntactic response to some ‘topic feature’. Rather, given the rigidity of sentence prosody and accent placement, languages of this type must resort to a parenthetical sequence of expressions to create the kind of configuration conducive to performing the discourse function of a CT.

In sum, no qualification of Fanselow’s claim that “syntactic rules make no reference to information structure” is necessary or desirable; the mechanisms of generation are blind to notions such as focus and topicality.

#### **4. Conclusion: Exorcising Neo-Functionalism**

Gisbert Fanselow’s astute observations concerning syntax–IS interactions lend strong support to a modular view of sentence grammar and discourse grammar. The former yields complex objects comprising syntactic and phonological information; the latter exploit the range of objects presented by the grammar to form complex discourse structures based on questions and answers (and perhaps other rhetorical relations).

On this view, syntax is indeed ‘dumb’, i.e. blind to discourse-functional notions such as focus and topic. If correct, syntactic explanations couched in terms of IS are technical descriptions of certain surface regularities, but not accounts of underlying mechanisms. But it is, of course, just those mechanisms that generative grammar seeks to elucidate.

Chomsky (2013) recalls how the refinement of taxonomic techniques in

post-WW2 structuralism eventually raised an ominous question: “What will happen after we have provided a structural analysis for every language by applying the procedural methods of analysis of texts that had been developed, which may creak here and there but need nothing more than technical repair?” The neo-functionalist fallacy, uncritically adopted by many researchers in the field embracing ‘cartographic’ tenets but cogently opposed in Gisbert Fanselow’s work, has led to a similar situation in present-day syntactic theory. Given the general acceptance of a largely unconstrained syntacticization of IS and corresponding presumptions about its role in driving derivations, we are once again at a point where a complete syntactic theory appears to be a mere matter of time and resources. One can only hope that grammatical theory will manage once more to emancipate itself from the prevailing philological–taxonomic mindset that mistakes functional/teleological accounts for explanations. Gisbert Fanselow’s remarkable body of work leads the way.

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