

## TOPIC IN ORAL AND WRITTEN ARGUMENTATIVE DISCOURSE

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**Abstract:** This study is about topic in oral and written argumentative discourses. Topic is the thematic important element in multipropositional discourse. The analyzed data are oral interviews from radio and TV and written editorials from newspapers and magazines. The analyses showed us that oral argumentative discourses have more continuous topics than written ones. These topics are more connected than written ones and the topic chains are bigger and less interrupted. Otherwise, in the written argumentative discourses, the topic chains emerge more disrupted and the rate of extensive topics is rather elevated.

**Keywords:** Topic, cognition, functionalism, argumentative discourse, oral and written text.

This work has the objective of showing the results of an investigation on topic in oral and written argumentative discourse.

The research reported here had the purpose of inquiring how the distribution of information in oral and written argumentative texts is accomplished and which communicative strategies are utilized. To do so, we relied on the assumption that there are differences in the realization and organization of topic in this textual typology in relation to the modalities of language in which it happens, oral or written, and in relation to the other textual typology.

The text has been considered from a pragmatic basis, that is, with the objective of studying language from the point of view of its use and from that of its users. It has been conceived as a functional unit - a unit of communication - which implies the importance of the speaker and the hearer to the construction of meaning.

Thus, for interaction to happen, it is necessary that certain conditions related to the context in which the utterances are pronounced be supplied. Following Halliday (1989), we assume that the close relation between text and context allows the reader / hearer to make predictions that guarantee the success of the communicative interaction.

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Among the existing contexts in a communicative interaction, we allude to the cognitive context that specifies the conditions in which the texts can be perceived, organized and stored.

We have conceived of the existence of two closely related levels of organization. One of them concerns the existing relations among the elements that form the superficial structure of the text and that are responsible for the relations of connexity among utterances. The other one refers to the global content that exists in a deep structure that underlies the structure of the text.

Processing the relations of connexity among utterances is essential for the text receptor to get the global plan and, therefore, to grasp the meaning. There are cohesive relations that underline the introduction and maintenance of participants in the discourse, maintaining the same referent over several utterances which permits the continuous thematic development of the text. These cohesive relations are based upon some elements of strict recurrence that are present on the linear development of the text and that form the referential chain. Such repetition mechanisms constitute the main object of our study. We have assumed that the use of some entities in discourse is closely related to extra-linguistic phenomena, especially to the reader / hearer's mind.

The interpretation of cognitive factor is, to our understanding, a priority if we want to have a more precise knowledge of how the apprehension and comprehension of language is processed in what concerns referential elements (topics). Particularly, we adopt Givón's functionalist proposal as a theoretical support to the analyses that were made.

According to Givón, language is closely controlled and, at the same time, motivated by the cognitive system. The speaker / hearer uses topicality grammar resources to construct communication. The grammatical signals that encode topicality in discourse provoke the activation of attention in the receptor's memory and activate episodic memory where the text has been stored. In this way, the text verbally encoded is stored in memory and the topics function as an indicator of how and where the information can be registered.

Givón in on analogy with artificial intelligence terminology, calls the topics under this perspective file labels. They function as an address or a file for storing in the episodic memory.

These nominal entities put in perspective are determined by the hierarchy of deep cases and they tend to surface verbally as the grammatical subjects and objects of the clauses.

Although Givón's work is a deep study, positive to our investigation, it is on narratives and conversational discourses. There is little appreciation of other text typologies.

We, contrariwise, abide by argumentative texts. The analyzed data are oral interviews from radio and TV and written editorials from newspapers and magazines.

In narrative texts the topic tends to be, as is referred in the above-mentioned works, overwhelmingly human oriented in relation to the thematic issue and centered on events, mainly those related to actions. Events defined in real time, important at the moment they occur and obeying the natural sequence of occurrence.

However, in our research into argumentative discourse - chiefly written argumentative discourses - we found topics centered on abstract themes and much more diffuse. The oral argumentative discourse lies in an intersection area between both textual typologies: narrative and argumentative.

We have analyzed the grammatical devices used to express the topic, taking the question of predictability of the topic as a parameter. This is the pragmatic and discursive parameter of topicality proposed by Givón, which is, at the same time, both relevant and measurable. The referential predictability is related to the previous discursive context (anaphoric). This relation can be expressed in the following way: the less predictable/accessible a referent is the more encoding material will be used to encode it.

We have observed in our investigation that in the oral argumentative discourses the most frequent resources are zero anaphora and pronouns. These encoding devices retake referents in similar proportions. As topic, noun phrases appear in small number. Other ways of codification are not quantitatively expressive.

Nevertheless, in the analyzed written texts, the number of zero anaphora and pronouns used to express the topic element is irrelevant. The existence of noun phrases, followed or not by clauses, and even the clause itself that functions as topic, is much more evident. The use of larger quantities of coded material works to retake even topics from a minimal distance. Either the repetition of nominal elements occurs many times, or there is its substitution for other nominal elements, instead of encoding the topic as zero anaphora or pronoun, as indicated by the predictability scale.

As regards the topic and its referent, we have observed that often in written work it is either only partially retaken or it is expanded. These evidences show an increase of referential complexity in written argumentative texts, and that the topic is more continuous in oral argumentative discourses than in written ones. The issue of the semantic feature of the discourse participants, as already mentioned, causes differences in the form of topic realization.

As for the continuity of the topic, the argumentative discourse, both oral and written, presents more anchored topics than new ones, which is an indication of textual coherence. Nonetheless, when we compared one modality of language with the other, oral with written, we found out that the oral texts present, in proportion, more anchored topics and less new ones than written texts.

Analyzing the topic sequences, we have observed that oral discourse presents more topics in chains than written discourse. Further more, the chain topics are bigger and less interrupted.

The presence of discontinuity in written argumentative texts, evidenced by frequent interruptions and introduction of new topics or new topic sequences, interrupting the continuity of these elements is reason to less mental accessibility of the referent.

Two analyzed factors partially render the mental accessibility of the referent difficult. One of them is conceptual anaphora, that is, the resource used to give thematic continuity. It does not retake a quoted element, but an idea that generally includes several clauses, and which needs more attention from the reader / hearer and a more complex mental processing. The conceptual anaphora occurs in both oral and written discourses, but it is more complex in the last modality of discourse.

The second fact that causes difficulty to access the referent mentally stored is the extension of the topic. Large topics appear in a significant rate in written argumentative discourses, while in oral argumentative discourses they are predominantly short.

As for the position occupied by the topic, in oral discourse, when it appears as the subject of the clause, it is more frequent before the verb, in a preposition, and less frequent after the verb. In the written discourse we still found more topics in preposition, but we found an expressive number of them after the verb. That means the inversion of this element is more current in the written discourse.

The topic posposition in relation to the verb in this kind of discourse frequently appears in association with extensive topics and presentative constructions. We concluded that this is a way to facilitate the mental storage of these type of topic.

Going back to the assumption that underlies our study, which says that topic realizes itself differently in oral and written modalities of argumentative texts, we can conclude that indeed there are differences.

In oral discourse, the human oriented topics and the abstract ones occurred in similar proportion. The topic organization presents itself more continuously, more centered on a theme, and the topic is less extensive.

In written discourse, on the other hand, there is predominance of abstract topics, the chains appear more interrupted and the rate of extensive topics is higher.

Now looking at the question of mental accessibility to the referent and according to what was exposed, in written argumentative texts we see several elements that increase the complexity of topic organization, which, we assume makes the comprehension of the written text more difficult to the reader.

The assumption of greater difficulty in the apprehension and storage of written argumentative topics is the reason that made us realize the present study. The correlation between a possible non-identifying of the topic of texts and the difficulty in their comprehension will be our basic assumption to guide the continuity of this work.



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