The Hypothesis of Topic-relativization

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Introduction: Relativization transforms a sentential element into a nominal modifier, rendering the sentence into a predicate to the noun phrase it modifies. But the "predicate" here is obviously not the notion in the subject-predicate pair, as the head noun in the relative clause (RC) is not necessarily the grammatical subject. An **RC** and its **head noun** are connected in a way more like the typical "**aboutness topic**" (Reinhart 1981) and its **comment**: the RC is a statement *about* its head noun (Kuno 1976). This study shows the close relation between topicalization and relativization, and discusses the syntactic possibility of realizing Topic-relativization to explain instances of non-standard resumptive RCs in many languages. The main mechanism of Topic-relativization consists of the creation of a syncretic Rel-TopP, which syntactically connects the predicational function of Rel(ative)P and (aboutness-)TopP, but at the same time it also weakens their different divisions of labor and produces redundant resumptives. Therefore, we holds the idea that Topic-relativization may be used as a "shortcut" by children acquiring their L1 and by adults speaking in a colloquial style even in languages where RCs feature the presence of a gap, or as a "last resort", or in complex RCs as a remedy for some otherwise illicit movements (cf. Shlonsky 1992).

Theoretical Ground: Topicalization and relativization are both ways of predication in a broad sense. What is different is that the main syntactic aim of relativization is to turn a "predicate clause" into a nominal modifier which restricts the set of individuals denoted by the head noun. The two notions hold a tight relation from many perspectives. In the literature, Bianchi (1999) suggests that a syncretic Topic/Finiteness head may be the projection responsible for relativization in English. Radford (2009) points out some potential parallels between resumptive RCs and dislocated Topic structures. The semantic and syntactic similarity between the two is also mentioned earlier in Kuno (1976) and Chomsky (1977). Moreover, both notions bear a particular relation to the subject, which also involves "aboutness" (Rizzi 2006) and pairs with the predicate. On one side, it has already been argued that Topic is closely related to subject as early as in Li and Thompson (1976), and a grammatical subject is more likely to also be the primary Topic of the sentence (Givón 1983). On the other side, S-RCs seem to be easier for children to comprehend and produce cross-linguistically (Hawkins 2007, Guasti 2017).

Empirical Ground: The connection between RC and Topics becomes more transparent when resumptive elements (including pronouns, nouns, etc.) are involved. It is well known that topicalization to the left periphery (Rizzi 1997) often features a resumptive element co-referring to the topicalized constituent. Resumption is also a common topic discussed in studies of RCs. Some natural languages allow the use of explicit resumptive pronouns in simple RCs (e.g., Hebrew, Shlonsky 1992, Sharvit 1999; Brazilian Portuguese, Grolla 2005; Welsh, Rouveret 2011), while others only accept them in occational non-standard use (e.g., English, Standard Italian), by adults speaking in a colloquial style and by children acquiring their L1:

(1)   That implies **a cost**$_i$ [**which**, if you had a healthier lifestyle, we could reduce **that cost**$_i$] (Adult spoken English, Radford 2019:115)

(2)   *Tocca **la panca**$_i$ che **ci**$_i$ sono seduti i   due bambini.*
       touch the bench that there are   sitting the two children
       'Touch the bench on which the two children are sitting.'
       (Child spoken Italian, Guasti and Cardinaletti 2003)

The co-existence of an external head and an internal head in RC formation has been widely

accepted (Aoun and Li 2003, Sauerland 2003, Cinque 2020 a.o.), and a resumptive may be simply interpreted as the spell-out of the internal head. However, this interpretation can hardly explain: i). why there are restrictions in using resumptive RCs (e.g., unavailable with some strong quantifiers or in some embedded complex NPs), ii). if a *wh*-pronoun relativizer can be analyzed as the pronominalized internal head (as in *wh*-questions), why the internal head in (1) can still be spelled-out, and iii). why some kinds of mismatch in case, definiteness or specificity between the internal and the external head are allowed as in (2).

Analysis: We hypothesize that when the relativized element is exactly what the RC is about, speakers in an informal context or in their early grammar may choose not to distinguish the individual functions between RelP and (aboutness-)TopP (unique in the CP, Bianchi and Frascarelli 2010), and realize them all at once to facilitate the production. This process could be syntactically described as a syncretism of the functional projections in the left periphery of the RC, similar to the idea of *feature scattering* proposed by Giorgi and Pianesi (1997) (scattered in (3), non-scattered in (4)).

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(3)   Non-resumptive RCs:

RelP
   TopicP
      TP
        ...

(4)   Syncretized RCs:

Rel-TopP
   TP
      ...

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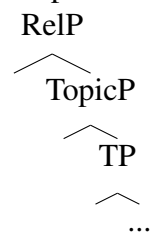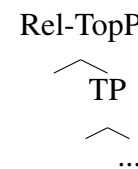
This proposal essentially states that at the edge of the CP_{RC}, an extra head noun (the Topic) is added as a "proxy" to reduce the difficulties related to locality and illicit movements (e.g., extraction from an island). This analysis can explain the questions mentioned above: i). the restrictions in using resumptive RCs should follow the restrictions of topicalization; ii). the co-existence of the 2 heads and the *wh*-pronoun are possible like in (1), because a non-recursive aboutness-Topic can be merged directly in TopP, and in such a structure there could be maximally 3 copies of the head noun (the internal one, the external one and the Rel-Top) instead of only 2 or 1 in traditional ways of relativization; iii). the mismatches between the internal and the external heads are tolerated because they are mediated by the Rel-TopP, which can be formally different from its co-referring internal head. It also explains the prevalent subject advantage observed in the studies of acquisition: since subject is conceptually more accessible to Topic and syntactically more local to it, the production and comprehension of S-RCs are facilitated by Topic-relativization without necessarily leaving any resumptive element in pro-drop languages. This Topic-relativization through syntactic syncretism avoids any illicit local movement (in line with Erlewine 2020) or the violation of criterial freezing effect in the left periphery. Further evidence of the parallelism between topicalization and relativization from complex RC cases will also be provided.

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