Abstract

This study attempts to make a clear distinction between subject and topic, sentence topic and discourse topic, and to investigate the various functions topic can serve in a discourse. Analysis is based on Modern Chinese.

Comparing the attributes of subject and sentence topic, it is found that subject is a syntactic notion while topic, with its discourse characteristics, is more significantly a discourse notion. Since interclausal linkage must be regarded as one of the essential attributes, it is inconsequential to look for topic in an isolated clause.

Because of the discourse characteristic, many linguists misunderstood sentence topic as discourse topic. Arguing in terms of aboutness, the study, following Van Dijk, Yule and Brown and Giora, suggests that sentence topic be formulated in terms of noun phrase(s) and discourse topic in terms of propositions.

Some important functions of both sentence topic and discourse topic are examined. The former helps to obtain cohesion and in some cases helps to construct discourse topic, while the latter helps to establish text coherence.