Topics and Conditionals in Sign Languages
Roland Pfau (University of Amsterdam)
r.pfau@uva.nl

1 Introduction

In the past, various studies on spoken and signed languages have emphasized similarities between topics and conditionals (e.g. Haiman 1978; Coulter 1979; Janzen 1999).

Superficially, in sign languages (SLs), the two types of constructions are similar in that both topics and conditionals appear sentence-initially, are marked by similar non-manual markers (NMMs), and constitute independent prosodic units (Sandler 1999).

In this paper, I will reconsider similarities and differences between topics and conditionals in SLs. I will also investigate their interaction with each other and speculate about their position vis-à-vis each other in the left periphery of the sentence.

While the focus of this paper is on SL of the Netherlands (NGT) and American SL (ASL), similar patterns are attested in German SL (DGS) and probably other SLs.

2 Types of topics

Generally, SL topics appear sentence-initially and are accompanied by a non-manual marker (NMM). The basic NMM is eyebrow raise; this may combine with other NMMs depending on the information structure status of the topic (see Figure 1a).

![Figure 1: Non-manual markers](attachment:image)

2.1 Moved versus base-generated topics

In her study on ASL topics, Aarons (1994, 1996) distinguishes base-generated and moved topics. She assumes that the topics in (1ab) are base-generated, since they are not arguments of the main verb. In (1a), the topic bears a semantic relation to an argument of the main clause, in (1b) the topic is co-referential with an argument (Aarons 1996: 78).2

\[ (1) \]
\[ a. \text{VEGETABLE, JOHN LIKE CORN} \]
\[ 'As for vegetables, John likes corn.' \]
\[ b. \text{JOHN, INDEX3 LOVE MARY} \]
\[ 'You know John, he loves Mary.' \]

Aarons (1994, 1996) describes three types of topics with different discourse properties which are accompanied by slightly different NMMs (top1, top2, and top3 in (1)).

NGT examples are given in (2): a base-generated (co-referential) topic in (2a) (NGC 2002), a moved topic in (2b) (Coerts 1992: 223; see Jantunen (2007) for Finnish SL).

\[ (2) \]
\[ a. \text{POSS1 BROTHER INDEX3, EVENING INDEX3 VISIT1} \]
\[ 'As for my brother, he will visit me tonight.' \]
\[ b. \text{AIRPLANE, COME NOT} \]
\[ 'The airplane, (it) did not arrive.' \]

Compare the Korean examples in (3). Note that in Korean, topics are morphologically marked by the suffix -un (Park 1997: 34).

\[ (3) \]
\[ a. \text{Ssaengsseon-un yeone-ga madissa} \]
\[ 'As for fish, salmon is delicious.' \]
\[ b. \text{[Guchaek-un] i John-i Mary-egetisuessda} \]
\[ 'The book, John gave to Mary.' \]

2.2 Argument versus adjunct topics

In all of the above examples, the topic either is related to an argument of the main clause or it is an argument of the main clause. However, it is also possible for a temporal or locative adjunct to occupy the topic position. See (4) for ASL examples (Aarons 1996: 72) and (5) for NGT examples (Coerts 1992: 228; NGC 2002).

\[ (4) \]
\[ a. \text{TOMORROW, JOHN PLANE ARRIVE TIME SIX} \]
\[ 'Tomorrow, John’s plane arrives at six.' \]
\[ b. \text{BOSTON, MARY GO-TO SCHOOL} \]
\[ 'In Boston, Mary goes to school.' \]

\[ (5) \]
\[ a. \text{SUNDAY, INDEX1 CAR MAKE} \]
\[ 'On Sunday, I (plan to) repair my car.' \]
b. YESTERDAY EVENING, PARTY INDEX3, MANY PEOPLE BE-PRESENT3 [NGT]
   ‘Yesterday evening, at the party, there were lots of people.’

2.3 Topic stacking

A sentence can contain more than one topic. In ASL, there is a maximum of two topics (6); see Aarons (1996: 93f) and (9) for combinatorial constraints.

(6) a. JOHNi, MARYj, ti LOVE INDEX3i [ASL]
   ‘As for John, Mary loves him.’

b. JOHNi, MARYj, ti LOVE INDEX3i
   ‘You know John, Mary loves him.’

c. JOHNi, MARYj, INDEX3i LOVE INDEX3j
   ‘You know John, as for Mary, he loves her.’

Topic stacking is also allowed in NGT (7). The maximum of topics per sentence also appears to be two but it is not yet clear in how far the order of topics is constrained; examples from Coerts (1992: 227f) (note that ‘mm’ in (7b) is an adverbial NMM).

(7) a. POSS1 HUSBAND, MORNING, POSS1 DAUGHTER ONE TIME ACCOMPANY [NGT]
   ‘As for my husband, one morning, (he) accompanied my daughter once …’

b. INSIDE HOUSE INDEX3, MOTHER, COOK, FATHER NEWSPAPER
   ‘Inside the house, the mother, (she) is cooking while the father is reading the newspaper.’

The above data are in line with Rizzi’s (1997) claim that there are (at least) two topic positions within the left periphery.

Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl (2007) claim that three different types of topics have to be distinguished; these are briefly characterized in (8).

(8) a. Aboutness-shift topic: represents “what the sentence is about” with particular reference to the element that qualifies as a shift in the conversation and is made prominent with respect to other (possible) topics in the previous discourse.

b. Familiar topic: is part of the background information (i.e. D-linked elements) and are generally produced to obtain topic continuity.

c. Contrastive topic: creates an oppositional pair with respect to other topics as far as some (new) information is concerned.

The different topics are claimed to occupy dedicated topic positions within the left periphery in the following hierarchical order: ShiftP > ContrP > FocP > FamP* > IP.

Puglielli & Frascarelli (2007) suggest that the topic types distinguished by Aarons relate to the three types distinguished in (8): aboutness topics are Aarons’s “top2” (1a), familiar topics are “top3” (1b), contrastive topics are “top1” (1c).

However, while an aboutness topic precedes a contrastive element (6a), familiarity precedes contrast (6b) and aboutness (6c) in ASL, reverse orders are ungrammatical (9).

Although studies on ASL conditionals (e.g. Baker & Padden 1978; Liddell 1980, 1986) give slightly different descriptions of the NMM, they all agree that the conditional clause is accompanied by raised eyebrows; see figure 1b above (for NGT see Coerts (1992)).

Just like topics, conditionals precede yes/no-questions (12a), wh-questions (12b) (Smith 2004), and imperatives (12c). Again, in all cases, the reverse order is ungrammatical.
Conditional protases are clausal constituents. Note, however, that not only DPs and adverbials can be topicalized but also sentential arguments (CPs or IPs), as shown for ASL in (13a) (Aarons 1996: 87) and NGT in (13b).

(13) a. [JOHN MUST LIPREAD MOTHER] top, TEACHER REQUIRE ti [ASL]
   ‘About John having to lipread mother, the teacher requires (it).’

b. [POSS2 BROTHER HAPPY] top, INDEX1 KNOW ti [NGT]
   ‘As for your brother being happy, I know (about it).’

With respect to topics and conditionals (and some other constructions), Coulter (1979) suggests that phrases accompanied by raised eyebrows describe background information and that all such phrases function as topics (see Dachkovsky (in press) for Israeli SL).

Similarly, Haiman (1978: 564) notes that “conditionals, like topics, are given facts which constitute the frame of reference with respect to which the main clause is either true (if a proposition), or felicitous (if not)”.

Similar marking of conditionals and topics is also observed in some spoken languages. In Hua (Papua New Guinea), for instance, the same marker (-ve) is used in conditionals (14a) and topic constructions (14b) (Haiman 1978: 570f). In (14c), the topic marker accompanies a sentential constituent (Haiman 1978: 575)

(14) a. E-si-ve baigu-e [Hua]
   come-3.SG.FUT-INT will.stay-1.SG
   ‘If he will come, I will stay.’ ‘Will he come? I will stay.’

b. Dgai-mo-ve baigu-e I(emph.)-C.P.-TOP will.stay-1.SG
   ‘As for me, I will stay.’

c. Krivua hangirehamana namo-ve, nabo? aʔ-koe
   trap how.to.set thing-TOP that NEG-I.know
   ‘As for setting a trap, that I don’t know how to do.’

In Turkish (15), a conditional suffix or particle can be used in a special type of topic construction (Moser-Weithmann 2001: 148; Haiman 1978: 577).

(15) a. Türkiye-yo gide-r-se-m Bursa-ya da ugra-r-um [Turkish]
   Turkey-DAT go-AOR-COND-1.SG, Bursa-DAT also stop.at-AOR-1.SG
   ‘If I go to Turkey, I will also visit Bursa.’

b. Ahmed i-se, çok meglul
   Ahmed be-COND very busy
   ‘As for Ahmed, he’s very busy.’
   (lit. ‘If it’s Ahmed you’re interested in, he’s very busy.’)

In Turkish (16), a conditional suffix or particle can be used in a special type of topic construction (Moser-Weithmann 2001: 148; Haiman 1978: 577).

(16) a. *RED CAR, INDEX1 SELL [ASL]
   ‘The not red car, I sold it.’

b. JOHN, SHOW-UP THINK SELF
   ‘As for John, if he doesn’t show up, use your own judgment.’

Again, this difference is not surprising, if we assume that the headshake must accompany at least a negative sign or a predicate (Pfau & Quer 2002).
In other words, (18a) would also be ungrammatical if the topicalized argument was in its base position (Neidle et al. 2000). In contrast, negated sentential constituents can very well be topicalized; the topics in (13) e.g. could also be negated.

Consequently, Liddell’s examples do not necessarily constitute strong evidence against the assumption that SL conditionals are topical.

4 Interaction of topics and conditionals

The above discussion raises the question of what position the conditional clause occupies in the phrase structure. In the following, I will speculate on different possibilities based on the interaction of topics and conditionals.

4.1 Stacking

Adopting Rizzi’s (1997, 2001) proposal for the left periphery (19) and taking into account that conditionals precede interrogatives, it is clear that the conditional clause must occupy a position above InterP.

(19) Force > Top,* > Inter > Foc > Top,* > Fin > Mood > IP ...

The next thing to note is that a conditional clause can precede a topic, as shown for NGT in (20ab) and for ASL in (20c) (Liddell 1986: 259).

(20) a. SUNDAY INDEX2 VISIT1, BOOKINDEX1, INDEX2 GIVE2 [NGT]
   ‘If you visit me on Sunday, as for the book, I will give it to you.’

b. EVENING RAIN, PARTY INDEX3, INDEX2 WEAR WHAT
   ‘If it rains in the evening, as for the party, what will you wear?’

c. TEST INDEX3, GET-A, PART B, NOT-HAVE-TO STUDY INDEX3 NOT-HAVE-TO [ASL]
   ‘The test, if you get an A on it, then as for part B, you won’t have to study for it.’

Assuming that the conditional does indeed target SpecTopP, this would have to be SpecTop in (19). Note, however, that at present, it is unclear whether there are constraints on what type of topics can follow the conditional (see 2.3). Actually, it is not even clear what type of topic the conditional should be (see (8)).

What makes things more complicated is the fact that the reverse order – a topic preceding a conditional – is also grammatical in NGT (21ab) and ASL (21c) (Neidle 2002: 81).

(21) a. BOOKINDEX1, SUNDAY INDEX2 VISIT1, INDEX1, INDEX2 GIVE2 [NGT]
   ‘As for the book, if you visit me on Sunday, I will give it to you.’

b. PARTY INDEX3, EVENING RAIN, INDEX2 WEAR WHAT
   ‘As for the party, if it rains in the evening, what will you wear?’

c. JOHN INDEX5, RAIN INDEX5 LEAVE
   ‘As for John, if it rains, he’s leaving.’

To accommodate multiple topics, Rizzi (1997) assumes that TopP is recursive (marked by * in (19)). Sticking to the assumption that SL conditionals are topical, this could account for the sequence Top > Cond > Top.

Enter focus: actually, brow raise does not only mark given, presupposed information; it also marks new information. Contrastive topicalization e.g. always targets new information that replaces/corrects what has previously been asserted or implied (1c).

Brow raise (br) is also found to accompany other structures with new information: e.g. the ASL that-cleft (22a) and sentence-initial constituents with focus particles (22b) (Wilbur & Patschke 1999: 15).

(22) a. Context: And what about Fred? What did he eat?
   BEANS THAT, FRED EAT
   ‘It’s beans that Fred ate.’

b. KIM ONLY-ONE GET-A
   ‘Only Kim got an A / The only one who got an A is Kim.’

This observation opens up another avenue for analysis. Analyzing the topic-conditional relationship in depth, Jacobsen (1992: 154) concludes that “the apparent affinity between the two is illusory” (contra Haiman (1978) and Coulter (1979)).

First, only topics require a presupposition of truth. In contrast, (hypothetical) conditionals are statements of conditions that are not (yet) true.

In addition, Iatriou (1991: 53) shows that in a typical conditional “both the if-clause and the consequent are part of the assertion”. That is, the if-clause, in contrast to a topic, is not pragmatically presupposed.

Actually, Neidle (2002) suggests that conditionals occupy the specifier of some functional projection FP above FinP but below TopP. In a footnote, she points out that this projection might be FocP.

Her suggestion is based on the observation that conditional clauses, (head-internal) relative clauses, and focused DPs are in complementary distribution. However, all these types of phrases can follow a topic.

While this may account for the co-occurrence of topics and conditionals in (20) and (21), it cannot, without further stipulation, account for the fact that conditionals precede questions in NGT (23a) and ASL (23b) (Wilcox & Wilcox 1995: 143).

(23) a. EVENING RAIN, PARTY CANCEL
   ‘If it rains in the evening, will the party be cancelled?’

b. INDEX3 STUDY++, PASS TEST WILL INDEX3
   ‘If he studies really hard, will he pass the test?’

Following suggestions made in Aboh (2004ab), one could assume that first, the conditional clause moves to SpecFocP followed by movement of FocP to SpecInterP.

4.2 Embedded topics

The last question I want to address is whether topics can appear within conditional clauses. The identification of such structures, if they exist, is not straightforward, since – as mentioned before – the relevant NMMs are very similar.
Note first that in many languages, topicalization is allowed in complement clauses. For spoken languages, this is demonstrated in (24) by an English (Maki et al. 1999: 3) and a Gungbe (Aboh 2004a: 168) example; for sign languages, it is shown by the ASL (Aarons 1996: 83) and NGT examples in (25).

(24) a. John believes that this book, Mary read. [English]
    b. Ùnsè dâ [dàn lâ yâ tô, Kôfi huî ñ] TopKôfïkîl 3.SG
    ‘I heard that, as for the snake, Kofi killed it.’

(25) a. TEACHER REQUIRE MOTHER, JOHN MUST LIPREAD ti [ASL]
    ‘The teacher requires that mother, John must lipread.’
    b. INDEX1 HOPE, PHONOLOGY EXAM INDEX1 PASS [NGT]
    ‘I hope that, as for the phonology exam, I will pass it.’

− Conditional clauses, however, are adjunct clauses. Note that in (21), with topics preceding conditionals, the topic cannot be part of the conditional clause. However, in the NGT example in (26a) and the ASL example (26b) (Liddell 1986: 258), the sentence-initial topic might as well occupy a position within the conditional clause (also see (20c)).

(26) a. CAR1, FATHER ti, LEND AUX1, VISIT2 [NGT]
    ‘As for the car, if my father lends it to me, I will visit you.’
    ‘As for JFK, if he were still alive, what would America be like?’

− The NGT examples in (27) provide clearer evidence for embedded topicalization since in these examples, the (optional) conditional marker SUPPOSE indicates that CAR/BOOK are indeed part of the conditional clause and do not precede it.

(27) a. SUPPOSE CAR1, INDEX1 FATHER ti, LEND AUX1, VISIT2 [NGT]
    ‘If the car my father lends to me, I will visit you.’
    b. SUPPOSE BOOK INDEX3, INDEX2 I, READ, SLEEP CAN NOT NOT [NGT]
    ‘If this book you read, you will not be able to sleep.’

− While the eyebrows remain raised throughout the conditional clause, the topic within the conditional clause may additionally be marked by head forward and/or a sharp head nod.
− This observation, as preliminary as it is, is interesting in the light of a study by Maki, Kaiser & Ochi (1999) who show that embedded argument topicalization is impossible in (English and Japanese) adjunct clauses, as shown in (28) (Maki et al. 1999: 3, 10).

(28) a. * Before this book, Mary read, John had already read it. [English]
    b. * [Kono hon-wa Mary-ga yomu maeni, John-wa sudeni yondeita] [Japanese]
    this book-TOP M.-NOM read before J.-TOP already had.read
    ‘Before this book, Mary read, John had already read it.’

− Haegeman (2003) distinguishes between event-conditionals (which contribute to the event structure by modifying the main clause event) and premise-conditionals (which relate to discourse structure).
− She shows that Maki et al.’s generalization is too strong. In particular, argument fronting is impossible in event-conditionals (29a) but possible in premise-conditionals (29b) (Haegeman 2003: 332).

(29) a. * If these final exams you don’t pass, you won’t get the degree.
    b. If his SYNTACTIC analysis we can’t criticise, there is a lot to be said
      against the semantics of the paper.

− Therefore, assuming that the NGT conditionals with fronted arguments in (27) are event-conditionals (presupposed conditionals), they are a challenge to Haegeman’s conclusion. I leave this issue for further research.
− Note finally that adjunct fronting is possible in both types of conditionals, as shown for-event-conditionals in the English (Haegeman 2003: 333) and Gungbe (Aboh 2004a: 168) examples in (30).

(30) a. If [with all these precautions] you don’t succeed, you will have [English]
    to try again next week
    b. Ní [hwénnénu yâ], Kôfi wë yê yr5, bë Æsibá má ná wâ [Gungbe]
    COND at.that.time TOP Kôfi FOc 3.PL call then Asiba NEG FUT come
    ‘If at that time, they invited Kofi, then Asiba would not have come.’

5 Conclusion
− In ASL and NGT (and DGS), topics and conditionals share prosodic (non-manual) and syntactic characteristics. Moreover, some of the alleged differences (head thrust, negation) between the two have been shown to be due to their internal syntax.
− Based on these structural similarities as well as the suggested overlap in information structure status (given information), it might be tempting to assume movement of the conditional clause to one of the topic positions in the left periphery.
− However, once we take into account the interaction of topics and conditionals with each other as well as with other non-manually marked constituents, their integration into the left periphery suggested by Rizzi (1997) proves problematic.
− I offered some speculations for how to account for the patterns: (i) recursive TopP, as suggested by Rizzi (1997); (ii) movement of conditional to FocP, motivated by difference in information structure status (new information) – both options deserve further research.
− Finally, I investigated the possibility of topicalization within the conditional clause. The data indicate that argument fronting within the conditional is possible, at least in NGT.
References


