

Information structure and syntactic change in Early Bulgarian

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Early Bulgarian texts (i.e., 17th century damaskins) display two configurations for deriving the information structure: (i) one with the particle *ta*; and (ii) one without the particle *ta*. These two configurations contrast in significant ways w.r.t. the operations at the left periphery of clauses: in (i), *ta* allows only for *information focus* (versus *contrastive focus*) reading, and forces the dislocation of some constituent to Topic; in (ii), the derivation allows for a contrastive focus (information focus being read off the lower hierarchy) and the Topic may be absent. Only configuration (ii) survived to Modern Bulgarian, while *ta* has been re-analyzed as a discourse transitional particle of the type ‘ok’/‘so’. How could the particle *ta* determine a separate strategy for deriving the information structure, and what happened to that strategy?

This paper argues that, up to the Early Bulgarian time, *ta* functioned as a syncretic node carrying features for “old” and “new” information, as well as functional features for sentence typing and finiteness, and triggered the configuration (i). Derivational flexibility and economy favored the configuration (ii), in which speakers integrated the grammaticalized *ta*.

The morphology and the distribution of *ta* in the damaskins provide evidence for its status as a free morpheme that triggers obligatory lexical material on its left and on its right, as in (1). The interpretation indicates that the material on the right side (i.e., the c-selected constituent) stands for “new information”, whereas the material on the left side stands for “old” or “background” information in relation to the material on the right.

Ta displays the properties of a functional head that c-selects verbal predicates (e.g., clauses), as in (1), (2). These predicates receive an information focus reading (i.e., *predicate-focus* or *sentence-focus* in Lambrecht’s 1994 terms) only in relation to the constituent to the left of *ta*, which is systematically de-focused, and interpreted as background/old information in relation to the c-selected predicate.

The observations on the behavior of *ta* amount to a definition of this particle as a functional head that carries an underspecified [new information] feature, which triggers the lexical material on the left (for [– new information]) and on the right (for [+ new information]), in a phrasal configuration as in (3). This configuration is obligatorily relational and confirms the intuition that *focus* is, somehow, a “complement” of *topic*. The relational property of *ta* emerges from its features and the way they are checked in syntax: *ta* has a [V] feature, which forces it to select verbal predicates (e.g., versus nouns); an operator feature (it occurs in complementary distribution with *wh/qu* items); sentence and inflectional typing features (it restricts the type of clause it derives and the compatible tense/mood). Thus, *ta* subsumes the functions usually attributed in the literature to various functional heads (i.e., Topic, Focus, Force, Finiteness).

The same texts attest the parallel use of the non-relational strategy in (ii), where, in the absence of *ta*, the information structure displays the cartographic pattern in Rizzi (1997) and Belletti (2008), shown in (5). Co-occurrence of the two configurations in the same sentence, as in (4), is avoided; the loss of the pattern in (i) coincides with the simultaneous re-analysis of *ta* as a coordinating conjunction, a subordinator and a discourse connector. This multiple re-analysis indicates the break of the syncretic node and the free association of *ta* with one of the features formerly clustered on this node. We assume that the dissolution of the syncretic *ta* node happened when the left periphery of clauses became stable in Bulgarian (i.e., after the completion of the infinitive replacement by subjunctives), allowing the left field to derive the focus “analytically” as in (5).

References:

- Belletti, Adriana. 2008. *Structures and Strategies*. New York: Routledge.
Demina, Evgenija I. 1971 *Tixonravovskij damaskin. Bolgarskij pamjatnik XVII v. Issledovanie i tekst. Čast’ II. Paleografičeskoe opisanie i tekst*, Sofia: Izdatelstvo na BAN.

Lambrecht, Knud. 1994. *Information Structure and Sentence Form: Topic, Focus and the Mental Representations of Discourse Referents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

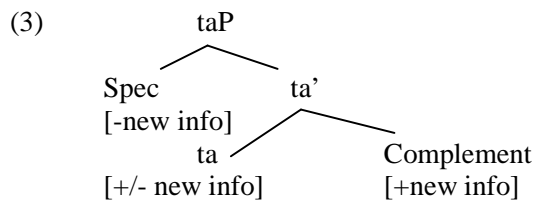
Rizzi, Luigi. 1997. The fine structure of the left periphery. In *Elements of Grammar*, ed. L. Haegeman. 281-339. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Examples:

(1) *i toizyi svěť ta [e do vrěme, i pogynuva]*
 and this.MASC world TA is until time and perishes
 ‘And this world lasts for a limited time, and perishes.’ (Demina 1971: 261, 1650s, Tixonravov damaskin, *togazi* section)

(2) *i poide onzi kaluger ta [go*
 and went.3SG that.MASC monk TA him.CL.ACC
navadi na igumena]
 denounced.3SG on abbot

‘And that monk went and denounced him to the abbot.’ (Demina 1971, 54 – 1650s, Tixonravov damaskin, *togazi* section)



(4) *koga šte da se svurši svetut ta [nikoj ne*
 when will to REFL ends world.THE TA nobody not
znae ot ljudiete tukmo edin bog deto
 knows from people.THE just one.MASC god that
stori nebo i zemlju i dni i godini i]
 made.3SG heaven and earth....
 “No human being knows when the world will end but God who created the heaven and the earth,...”
 (Demina 1971, 206 – 1650s, Tixonravov damaskin, *togiva* section)

