Contrastive Topic and Focus, and Question/Answer Congruence In Nsyílxcən

Nsyílxcən (a.k.a. Okanagan) is a Southern Interior Salish language spoken by approximately 130 people fluently in southern British Columbia and northern Washington State. There are currently intensive efforts underway to revitalize the language at the Syilx Language House in Penticton BC, and the Salish School in Spokane WA and Inchelium WA.

Lyon (2013) discusses Nsyílxcən clefts, which involve the focus (Rooth, 1992) of an initial argument (1b) or adjunct (2b). There is an implicature of exhaustivity associated with the focus, which renders a fronted subject (1c) or in-situ focus structure (2c) infelicitous in contexts which require exhaustivity. Argument cleft residues are preceded by iʔ, and adjunct clefts by kiʔ.

(1)

a. Q: swit iʔ  ckicx? who DET came
   Who’s the one that came?

b. A: [John\textsubscript{focus}] iʔ  ckicx.
   John's the one that came.

c. A': #[John\textsubscript{focus}] ckicx.
   John came.

(2)

a. Q: tlaʔkín kiʔ  kw  ckicx? from.where CLF 2SG.ABS come
   Where did you come from?

b. A: [tl Vancouver\textsubscript{focus}] kiʔ  kn  ckicx.
   I come from Vancouver.

c. A: #kn ckicx [tl Vancouver\textsubscript{focus}].
   I come from Vancouver.

Interestingly, more than one constituent can occur to the left of the clefting particle. In (4), a subject ixíʔ iʔ sqəłtmíxʷ ‘that man’ may topicalize to a position preceding the focus. There are discourse constraints on sentences like (4), however, which is only felicitous in answer to (3b).

(3)

a. stiʔiʔ  sqəłtmíxʷ iʔ  wík-(nt)-s? what DET man DET see-DIR-3ERG
   What did the man see?

b. ha  wík-(nt)-s iʔ  sqəłtmíxʷ iʔ  swaʕʕ skipping.
   Did the man see a cougar?

(4)

[ixíʔ iʔ sqəłtmíxʷ\textsubscript{topic}] [iʔ skəmxíst\textsubscript{focus}] iʔ  wík-(nt)-s.

DEM DET man DET bear DET see-DIR-3ERG

That man saw a bear. (#3a,3b)

This pattern of felicity indicates that the second DP in (4) iʔ skəmxíst ‘a bear’ must be a contrastive focus (answer to 3b) and not simply a new information focus (answer to 3a).

(6) below shows however that contrastive topics, Jerry and Harvey, can each precede either a contrastive focus (in answer to 5a) or a new information focus (in answer to 5b).

(5)

a. ha Jerry naʔɬ Harvey xʷúy-ləx kł Merritt?
   YNQ Jerry and Harvey go-3PL to Merritt
   Did Jerry and Harvey go to Merritt?
b. kaʔkín kiʔ xʷúyɬ CLF go 3PL Jerry and Harvey
Where did Jerry and Harvey go to?

(6) [Jerry speakers-topic] [kl spáx̌mən speakers-focus] kiʔ xʷuy uɬ [Harvey speakers-topic] [kl tìkʷt speakers-focus] kiʔ xʷuy.
Jerry to Douglas lake CLF go and Harvey to lake CLF go
Jerry went to Douglas lake, and Harvey went to the lake.

Indeed, data suggest that the pattern [... topic] [... focus] CLF/DET shown in (4,6) is not felicitous if neither the topic nor the focus is contrastive (8a). (A topical subject may however follow the focus (8b), in which case neither expression need be contrastive.)

(7) Q: tlaʔkín ixíʔ kiʔ ckicx iʔ ylmíxʷəm?
from where DEM CLF come DET chief
Where did the chief come?

(8) a. A: ?/#[iʔ ylmíxʷəm speakers-topic] [tl nɬq̓iɬməlx speakers-focus] kiʔ scxʷuyx.
DET chief from Quilchena CLF come
The chief comes from Quilchena.

b. A’: [tl nɬq̓iɬməlx speakers-focus] [iʔ ylmíxʷəm speakers-topic] kiʔ ckicx.
The chief comes from Quilchena.

Towards an Analysis: In sum, a topicalized subject can precede a focus in an Nsyílxcan cleft structure only if (I) the focus is contrastive, and/or (II) the topicalized subject is contrastive. Question/answer congruence is thus sensitive to contrastivity in Nsyílxcan. Case (II) may be analyzed following Büring’s (2003, 2016) analysis of contrastive topics as involving alternative sets of questions. For Nsyílxcan (6) to be felicitous, there must be at least one alternative question of the form Did y go to Merritt? (or Where did y go? in answer to 5b) which is pertinent, identifiable, and logically independent of the semantic value of (6): Jerry went to Merritt. This is appropriately satisfied by the question Did Harvey go to Merritt?. For case (I) involving non-contrastive topics as in (4), the requirement that there be some question of the form Did the man see x? which is pertinent, identifiable, and logically independent of The man saw a bear still appears to hold in Nsyílxcan: This is satisfied by (3b) Did the man see a cougar? but not by (3a) What did the man see? (i.e. Did the man see x?) (see Ward 1985 for discussion of similarly shared contextual requirements on English topicalization and focus preposing). I suggest that left-most topicalization in Okanagan clefts is contextually licensed by an appropriately contrastive question alternative, but that it is unspecified whether that alternative contrasts with respect to the topic (case II) or the focus (case I), so long as there is some pertinent, identifiable and independent question alternative. I examine the distribution of topics and other information structural categories in Nsyílxcan, and compare theoretical approaches in weighing the tenability of this hypothesis.