



Relevance Topics^{*}

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Abstract. I present a speech act approach to relevance topics (RTs) that builds on Krifka's (2001) analysis of speech acts as operations on commitment states. RTs can be marked with separating phrases (*as for*) or as antecedents of relevance conditionals. They are speech acts of their own and are used in contexts in which the speaker wishes to address something that was not addressed immediately before. A RT must be followed by a speech act that is relevant in relation to the topical element (which subsumes relations of predication and frame setting). Without the RT the discourse would be incoherent because the prerequisites of the subsequent speech act (e.g. Gricean maxims of relevance) would be violated. RTs cannot introduce completely new discourse referents. They must be referential, which in the case of properties as RTs can be achieved by a type shifting operation, but they can also pick up portions of earlier discourse by quoting. I compare RTs to hanging topics, which are a different type of speech act, as well as to frame setters, which can be expressed by very similar formal means to RTs.

1 Introduction

The notion of (sentence) *topic* has proven difficult to define, the reason being that there are different semantic-pragmatic types of topics, e.g. aboutness topics, frame-setting topics or contrastive topics, that seem to share a kind of family resemblance but cannot be reduced to one unifying characteristic (e.g. Jacobs 2001). In this paper I am concerned with what often is called a *free topic* or *freies Thema* in German, and which, for reasons that will become clear instantly, I refer to as *relevance topics* (RTs). RTs are typically realized by 'separating constructions' like *was x betrifft* ('as regards x') in (1). The hanging topic construction illustrated in (2), which has a DP at the left periphery and whose referent is picked up by a pronoun in the main clause, is

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often thought to be another instantiation of a free topic (e.g. Altmann 1981). In this paper I will show that the hanging topic construction has different semantic-pragmatic characteristics from RTs and is subject to different restrictions.

- (1) Was[Peters Geburtstag_{TOPIC}] betrifft, er will einen Traktor.
what Peter's birthday regards he wants a tractor
 'As regards Peter's birthday, he wants a tractor.'
- (2) [Peters Geburtstag_{TOPIC}], wir wollen ihn nächste Woche feiern.
Peter's birthday we want it next week celebrate
 'Peter's birthday, we want to celebrate it next week.'

For RTs like the one in (1) I will argue that they are clause-external and constitute a speech act of their own that must be followed by another speech act, in (1) this is the assertion that the referent of *er* wants a tractor. Between the RT and the subsequent speech act there needs to be a relation of relevance. Unlike aboutness topics RTs do not require a predication relation between the topic phrase and the main clause (comment), and unlike frame setters they do not need to restrict the domain of reality with regard to which the truth of the main clause is evaluated. But they *can* do both (cf. Jacobs 2001). The purpose of a RT is to create a coherent discourse if coherence cannot be established without the RT speech act. For instance, in (3) the phrase *with regard to* marks an RT. Truth-conditionally this RT can be left out without a meaning change. Discourse-wise, it is crucial: the discourse is incoherent without it.

- (3) ...The relative amounts of ammonia, nitrite and nitrate depend on a number of factors of which the most important are pH and temperature. Below a pH of 8 the majority of ammonia is present in the non-toxic ammonium form. Above 8 the toxic form becomes increasingly more prevalent. *With regard to [temperature_{TOPIC}]*, there is approximately five times as much toxic ammonia at a temperature of 20° than at 5°C. [From BNC-FBN *Practical Fishkeeping*. Peterborough, Cambs: EMAP Pursuit Publishing Ltd, 1992]

Thus, a RT has a discourse-managing function. It introduces a new discourse segment by taking up information that is in the common ground but which is not *addressed* in the immediately preceding context.

2 Relevance Topics as Speech Acts

The speech act view of topics is not new. Searle (1969) identifies a specific act of referring (\approx topic act) and an act of predication. Jacobs (1984) suggests

that 'free topics' (see above) constitute speech acts of their own. Endriss (2009) spells this out for aboutness topics. Ebert, Endriss & Hinterwimmer (2008) transfer these ideas to conditionals, where the antecedent serves as the topic act and the consequent as the second speech act.

Although all these proposals take a speech act view on topics they are underdefined as regards the actual illocutionary aspects of the speech act. According to Endriss (2009), for instance, the speech act character of topics manifests itself as follows. If a topic-comment structure is embedded under an illocutionary operator such as ASSERT and if the topical referent is not familiar the update of the common ground proceeds in two steps. In a topic act, a discourse referent/ storage address is created. Then, the comment is applied to it. If the topical referent is familiar it is identified with an existing address and then the comment is applied to it. If the operator is non-illocutionary (e.g. a verb like *announce*) the establishment of a discourse referent is part of the ordinary semantic content. In this account, the illocutionary aspects of the topic act are characterized in terms of its semantic update effects but not in terms of the social commitments of the discourse participants that arise from performing it. In this sense the account is only 'near-speech act' take on topics.

According to Krifka (2001) speech acts are operations that apply to a commitment state s , i.e. a set of social commitments between discourse participants, and deliver the commitments that characterize the resulting commitment state s' . A speech act is an *appropriate* act A for a state s if s fulfils the 'presuppositions' for the performance of A . I assume that such 'presuppositions' include felicity conditions, sincerity conditions and Gricean maxims (e.g. relevance). Some acts create the commitment to react with a corresponding act, e.g. questions commit the hearer to answer (cf. Krifka 2001: 13):

- (4) If s is a neutral state and Q is a question act, then $Q(s) = s'$ is a state in which an answer A is expected that will lead back to a neutral state:
 $A(Q(s)) = A(s') = s''$,
 where Q is appropriate for s , and A is appropriate for s' ,
 and where s and s'' are neutral states and s' is a non-neutral state

On the basis of this I suggest that the speech act character of RTs should be captured in the following way:

- (5) **Relevance topics as speech acts**
 $ACT^{sp}(RTOP_x^{sp}(s)) = ACT^{sp}(s') = s''$,
 where $RTOP_x^{sp}$ is appropriate for s , and
 ACT^{sp} is appropriate for s' and relevant in relation to x .

Let s be a neutral conversational state and RTOP_x a relevance topic performative act. The speaker commitment delivered by RTOP_x is: *I will address x* , where x is the topical element. $\text{RTOP}_x(s) = s'$ is the resulting non-neutral state. s' requires another speech act ACT that leads back to a neutral state s'' . The superscript *sp* both on RTOP_x^{sp} and ACT^{sp} in (5) indicates that the speaker of the RT act and the speaker of the subsequent speech act are the same. This is different for questions, which place a commitment on the hearer to answer (unless they are used as rhetoric devices in monologic discourse). The neutral state s'' is only achieved if ACT asserts something relevant in relation to x . For non-assertive acts, ACT also needs to be relevant in relation to x . However, it will not lead back to a neutral state but to a state that might require yet another speech act, e.g. in the case of questions. Furthermore, before the performance of RTOP_x the speaker did not address x (n.b. this does not mean that x was not mentioned in the previous utterance): ACT, if performed without the preceding RTOP_x , would have been inappropriate for s .

Applied to example (3) from above we can discern the following sequence of conversational states and speech acts:

- (6) $\langle s \rangle$ [RTOP With regard to temperature] $\langle s' \rangle$ [ACT there is approximately 5 times as much toxic ammonia at a temperature of 20° than at 5°C] $\langle s'' \rangle$

In the conversational state s , which is a neutral state, the performance of ACT (= Assert [...]) would not be appropriate due to a lack of relevance at this stage. $\text{RTOP}_{\text{temperature}}(s)$ is appropriate because *temperature* was not addressed immediately beforehand. The resulting state s' is a non-neutral state: It contains the commitment of the speaker to address *temperature*. ACT(s') now is appropriate because ACT addresses *temperature*. The resulting state s'' is a neutral state because the commitment has been fulfilled by ACT.

(7) and (8) illustrate how a RT can precede a question and a directive, respectively (also cf. Altmann 1981 for such data), which are relevant with respect to the topic act: a plausible reading of (7) is that the meeting was a meeting with the boss, and a plausible reading of (8) would be that the addressee has a problem with the boss and that the speaker recommends calling a friend for advice.

- (7) Wegen deinem Chef, war Max eigentlich pünktlich beim Termin?
because.of your boss was Max actually on.time at.the meeting
 'About your boss, was Peter actually on time at the meeting?'
- (8) Wegen deinem Chef, ruf doch mal bei Sarah an!
because.of your boss call PART PART with Sarah on
 'About your boss, go ahead and call Sarah!'

3 Different Shapes of Relevance Topics

The data in (9a-c)(i) suggest that, apart from being introduced with a separating phrase, a RT can be a hanging topic, see (9b)(i), and a relevance conditional (Ebert et al. 2008), see (9c)(i). (9a-c)(ii) reveal, however, that in contrast to the construction with a separating phrase and in contrast to the conditional the hanging topic construction is restricted to cases where the topical referent is taken up in the comment, as in (9b)(i), i.e. there must be a predication relation between topic and comment. (9b)(ii), where such a relation is missing, is unacceptable.

- (9) a. Was Peters Gesundheit betrifft,--
what Peter's health concerns
 ‘As regards Peter's health,--’
- b. Peters Gesundheit,--
Peter's health
 ‘Peter's health,--’
- c. Wenn du etwas über Peters Gesundheit wissen willst,--
if you something about Peter's health know want
 ‘If you want to know something about Peter's health,--’
- a / b / c -- (i) sie hat in den letzten Jahren sehr gelitten.
she has in the last years very suffered
 -- ‘it suffered a lot in the last few years.’
- a /#b / c -- (ii) es gibt jetzt eine Spenderniere.
it gives now a donor.kidney
 -- ‘the hospital has a donor kidney now.’

The example in (10) from Altmann (1981:49) might be taken to be a counterexample to this generalization about hanging topics but there might be independent reasons for its acceptability. The first is that (10) involves an epithet as the anaphoric device (*this face* by many speaker is viewed as an epithet of *slim blonde*) so that there actually is a predication relation between topic and comment here. Alternatively, we might assume that the face being a part of the topical referent is sufficient to establish a predication relation in this pointing scenario. These issues need closer scrutiny.

- (10) Die schlanke Blondine da drüben, ich glaube, ich habe
the slim blonde there over.there I believe I have
 dieses Gesicht schon einmal gesehen.
this face already once seen
 ‘The slim blonde over there: I think I've seen that face before.’

Hanging topics differ from RTs with separating phrases also in their discourse characteristics: they can occur at the end of a discourse:

- (11) Context: Peter ist in einem Modelleisenbahnverein. Er hat eine CB-Funkanlage, sammelt alte Faxgeräte und liest jeden Elektronikblog, den er finden kann. 'Peter is in a model train club. He has CB radio, collects old fax machines and reads every electronics blog he can get hold of.'

[_{HANGING TOPIC} Peter], er ist ein ganz schöner Geek.
Peter he is a whole nice geek
 'Peter, he is quite a geek.'

These data suggest that hanging topics are a different speech act from $RTOP_x$, let us call it $H-RTOP_x$. $H-RTOP_x$ does not come with the 'presupposition' of $RTOP_x$ that the speaker did not address x before the performance of $RTOP_x$. Furthermore, $H-RTOP_x$ requires the subsequent speech act to be about x in the predication sense and not just relevant in relation to x . I have not the space to elaborate on hanging topics here (see Frey 2004 for further observations).

4 Two Speech Acts – two Clauses: Relevance Topics in Comparison to Frames

The view that RTs constitute a separate speech act is corroborated by evidence for their extra-clausal position. It is instructive in this respect to compare RTs to frames. So far I have mainly looked at RTs that 'only' have a relevance relation with their subsequent speech act but RTs can also have a frame-setting relation with the subsequent speech act: if they restrict the domain of reality with regard to which the truth of the proposition expressed by that speech act is evaluated, as in the English (12). In such cases the content of the second speech act is trivially relevant for the domain of the frame.

- (12) Changes in primary care: The imposition of the new GP contract. [...]

*With regard to [the health care of older people_{RT}] the most salient feature of the new contract is that they will be required to annually invite each patient on their list aged 75 and over to participate in a consultation which should assess the health of the patient. [From BNC-ECE 1849 Victor, C. (1991) *Health and health care in later life*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 14-156.]*

A corpus analysis investigating the most frequent separating phrases in English (*as for x*, *as far as x is concerned*, *as to*, *with regard to x*) revealed

that 42% of the investigated expressions had a frame-setting relation with the main clause.¹

I suggest that frame setting is not automatically an instance of relevance topicality. In German, RTs can be clearly set apart from frames. To begin, consider that like in English, in German separating expressions can be used to mark a frame, see (13), which hosts the frame in Spec,C. (14) is the corresponding example with a frame adverb. (15) and (16) show that frames are not restricted to a syntactic position that would be characteristic of topics: they are not restricted to a left-peripheral position, or to one before the comment. Note that there does not need to be an intonational break between the frame-setting clause and the remainder of the sentence. The commas in (15) are an orthographical convention.

(13) [_{CP} Was seine Gesundheit betrifft [_C geht [_{IP} es Peter gut]]]
what his health concerns goes it Peter good
 ‘As far as his health is concerned, Peter is fine.’

(14) [_{CP} Gesundheitlich [_C geht [_{IP} es Peter gut]]]
healthwise goes it Petergood
 ‘Health-wise Peter is fine.’

(15) a. Peter geht es, was seine Gesundheit betrifft, gut.
 b. Peter geht es gut, was seine Gesundheit betrifft.

(16) a. Peter geht es gesundheitlich gut.
 b. Peter geht es gut gesundheitlich.

Next consider (17), where the separated phrase is not a frame – it does not restrict the domain with regard to which the truth of the proposition *that Peter has diabetes* is evaluated. Variants (b) – (d) show that the separated phrase must occur *before* Spec,C, which need not be a clause-external position but can be (cf. Frey 2004). Note that the judgements for (b) vary but for most speakers the presence of *so* (‘so’) is strongly preferred. Also note that

¹ The corpus analyzed was the British National Corpus. The frequencies of the most frequent clause-initial separating phrases were: *as for* - 15.9 per million words, *as far as* - 12.3 pmw, *as to* - 5.9 pmw, *with regard to* - 3.3 pmw. 42 % of the separated RTs had a frame-setting function, as indicated above, 23 % had a predication relation with the comment, and 35% had neither a frame nor a predication relation. Amongst the separating phrases, *as far as* was used more often than the other phrases to mark frames – 76% vs. 20% vs. 46% vs. 26% in the above order ($\chi^2 = 39.24$, $p < 0.0001$). The reason for this is that in contrast to the other separating phrases *as far as* can be used to mark what can be called a *judge*, or an *epistemic source*: a person that restricts the validity of the statement, e.g. *as far as I am concerned...*, *as far as he knows...*, which accounts for the great majority (88%) of frames in this category.

(c) and (d) improve for some speakers if a strong intonational break plus gesture(s) indicate that the separated phrase is inserted parenthetically post-hoc as a correction for mismanaged discourse. Such cases are irrelevant because they are not instances of RTs but – as just specified – correction measures. (18) gives the same set of data with the frame as an adverb, where all variants are completely unacceptable.

- (17) a. Was seine Gesundheit betrifft, [_{CP}Peter [_C hat Diabetes]]
What his health concerns Peter has diabetes
 ‘As far as his health is concerned, Peter has diabetes.’
 b. Was seine Gesundheit betrifft, [_{CP}?(so) [_C hat Peter Diabetes]]
 c. * [_{CP} Peter hat, was seine Gesundheit betrifft, Diabetes]
 d. * [_{CP} Peter hat Diabetes, was seine Gesundheit betrifft]
- (18) a. *Gesundheitlich, [_{CP} Peter [_C hat Diabetes]]
health-wise Peter has diabetes
 b. *Gesundheitlich(so) hat Peter Diabetes
 c. * [_{CP} Peter hat gesundheitlich Diabetes]
 d. * [_{CP} Peter hat Diabetes gesundheitlich]

I suggest that (17c-d) and (18), which contain potential frames but no RT, are deviant because restricting an eventuality by a frame to a domain only is allowed if the eventuality principally could be in some other domain (cf. Ernst 2004). Having diabetes can only be defined in the domain of health (in the absence of an easy-to-accommodate metaphorical relation). Note that it is not the presence of the vague predicate (*good*), that makes the difference in the frame-setting examples. Such a predicate could be argued to provide some variable that must be constrained by the frame. However, frames can co-occur with non-vague predicates (*midget*), see (19a), and a vague predicate (*fat*) without an alternative domain as in (19b) is just as impossible as a non-vague predicate without an alternative domain.

- (19) a. He is a midget politically. (Ernst 2004: 106)
 b. *He is fat physically.

Turning to binding we find clear indications that RTs are clause-external whereas frames are not. In (20) the separating phrase is before the CP and the comment is a CP with a filled Spec,C. The pronoun in the comment can be co-referential with the referent, resulting in a predication relation – another trivial instantiation of relevance. In (21), where the separated expression is in Spec,C, the binding options change and the separated expression is inter-

preted as a frame. The RT in (20) is clause-external, the frame in (21) is clause-internal.

- (20) Was Max_i betrifft, [_{CP} $\text{er}_{i/k}$ [_C hat sich als sehr nützlich erwiesen]]
what Max concerns he has REFL as very useful turned.out
 ‘As regards $\text{Max}_{i/k}$, $\text{he}_{i/k}$ has turned out to be very useful.’
- (21) [_{CP} Was Max_i betrifft [_C hat $\text{er}_{*i/k}$ sich als sehr nützlich erwiesen]]
what Max concerns has he REFL as very useful turned.out
 ‘ $\text{He}_{*i/k}$ has turned out to be very useful as regards Max_i .’

5 Relevance Topics, Referentiality and Familiarity

The speech act view on RTs proposed above allows us to explain some characteristics of RTs that would come as a surprise otherwise. The type of expression that may occur as a RT is restricted in a different way than the type of expression that can occur as aboutness topics, which have been studied in some detail with respect to this issue and which have been assumed to be restricted to referential expressions (Reinhart 1981, Jacobs 2001) or quasi-referential expressions (e.g. Ebert & Endriss 2003; Endriss 2009). The latter essentially are indefinites with unmodified determiners. For these quantifiers a sensible representative can be formed from which a discourse referent can be created that can serve as an aboutness topic.

In this section I show that RTs must be individuals (type *e*) but can also be properties that are turned into individuals by type shifting. In addition, RTs can refer to previous portions of discourse (by quoting). These characteristics follow from the addressation function of RTs. Furthermore, the status of RTs as separate speech acts explains why RTs cannot be in the scope of propositional operators in the subsequent speech act (e.g. the generic operator). Finally, RTs must be familiar (in a way to be specified): they cannot introduce new discourse referents. This follows from their discourse management function. Let us start with the latter aspect.

(22) illustrates that specific indefinites are allowed as RTs if they come with the modifier *gewiss* ('certain') but not if they occur unmodified. Also note that if *gewiss* in (22) were replaced with its close relative *bestimmt* ('certain'), the result would be unacceptable.

- (22) *Context: My neighbour has a secret affair with your friend Peter.*
 Was einen*(gewissen) Freund von dir betrifft, meine Nachbarin
what a certain friend of you concerns my neighbour
 war in letzter Zeit verdächtig häufig erst morgens daheim.
was in last time suspiciously often only in.the.morning at.home
 ‘As far as a (certain) friend of yours is concerned, recently my
 neighbour’s been getting home only in the wee hours of the morning.’

If we assume that RTs pick up familiar information (but not information that was immediately addressed before the utterance of the RT) the contrast in (22) follows: Let us take *familiarity* to mean *identifiability* as in Ebert, Ebert & Hinterwimmer (to appear), so that a referent is familiar to a speech act participant if s/he can distinguish it from other referents on the basis of a particular property it has. Ebert et al. argue that *gewiss* signals that the referent of the indefinite can be identified by the speaker, i.e. is familiar to the speaker. They also discuss cases, however, where it is required that both speaker and addressee can identify the referent. These cases are questions. An example is given in (23b), with a minimal variant that uses *bestimmt* instead of *gewiss* in (23a) (see Ebert et al. example (70) ff.):

- (23) a. Geht Paul immer in eine bestimmte Kneipe?
goes Paul always in a certain pub
 ‘Does Paul always go to a particular pub?’
 b. Geht Paul immer in eine gewisse Kneipe?
 ‘Does Paul always go to a certain pub?’

By asking (23a) the speaker enquires whether Paul goes to a specific pub on a regular basis, without being interested in the actual pub itself (it could be any pub, as long as Paul is a regular there). A felicitous answer could be *Yes, but I forget which one it is*. By asking (23b) the speaker indicates that it is a particular pub s/he has in mind and that the addressee knows which one that would be, with the pub at issue being noteworthy one way or another – it could be the pub where Paul’s prospective girl-friend works. Answering (23b) with *yes, but I forget which one it is* is inappropriate. So by using *gewiss* the speaker indicates both speaker and hearer familiarity.

(22) suggests that this is exactly what licenses the *gewiss*-indefinite as a RT. The referent of the indefinite is picked up as familiar information from the common ground. If the hearer is not able to identify the referent, which s/he could signal by asking *Who are you talking about?* the purpose of the RT failed: the discourse was incoherent for the hearer. *Gewiss* cannot be replaced by *bestimmt* because *bestimmt* signals that the respective referent can be

identified by some salient agent, which means that it is not necessarily familiar to speaker and hearer (cf. Ebert et al. to appear). The discourse managing function of the RT would fail. If there is no modifier the specific indefinite introduces a brand-new referent. Again, this is not possible for a RT.

Let us turn to the felicitous use of specific indefinites in partitive constructions as in (24). In partitives, the indefinite is used to introduce an individual from a set that is already familiar, so in (24) the set of animals from which one animal is singled out must be part of the common ground. Note that the accent on *eins* ('one') is only one prosodic option, it is also possible to place the main accent in the RT on *Tiere* ('animals'), indicating the presence of (focus) alternatives for *animals*.

- (24) Was EINS der Tiere betrifft, so mache ich mir Sorgen.
what one the.GEN animals concerns so make I REFL sorrows
 'As far as one of the animals is concerned, I am quite worried.'

I suggest that familiarity with the set licenses the introduction of the discourse referent the indefinite refers to in cases like (24). Both speaker and hearer must be able to identify the set. Note, however, that the hearer can adequately react to (24) with *Oh yes, which one is it?*, which suggests that it is not necessary that the hearer can identify the individual introduced by the indefinite. Importantly, though, this *which*-question is only adequate if the hearer is at least somewhat familiar with the make-up of the set, i.e. knows which (or what) individuals are members of the set. I leave the particulars of this issue to future research.

Let us next turn to generic interpretations of indefinites, which like specific indefinites have been argued to be acceptable in aboutness topic positions like the left-dislocated position in German, illustrated below (Ebert & Hinterwimmer 2010):

- (25) a. Ein Hund, der ist anhänglich.
 b. Hunde, die sind anhänglich.
 {*a dog / dogs*} PRON {SING/PL} *be* {SING/PL} *devoted*
 'A dog is devoted. / Dogs are devoted.'

The RT counterpart of (25) is only possible with the bare plural:

- (26) a. *Was einen Hund betrifft, er ist anhänglich.
What a dog concerns he is devoted.
 ‘As for a dog, it is devoted.’
- b. Was Hunde betrifft, sie sind anhänglich.
what dogs concerns they are devoted.
 ‘As for dogs, they are devoted.’

Bare plurals like in (26b) have been argued to refer to kinds (Carlson 1977 and many others) and therefore have a referential reading. Singular indefinites cannot refer to kinds.² They are interpreted as one of the arguments of a generic operator whose other argument is delivered by the predicate of the sentence. If, as I argue, the RT is extra-clausal and constitutes a separate speech act the indefinite in (26a) cannot provide the (restrictor) argument required for the generic operator. Note that for the generic operator it is unreasonable to assume that the argument can be provided by the context as in the case of some other quantifiers. Further note that even though the pronoun *er* in the second speech act is problematic in (26a) – a speaker can only refer anaphorically with a singular pronoun to a referent denoted by an indefinite if s/he made an epistemically specific use of the indefinite (Kamp & Bende-Farkas 2006) – replacing this offending pronoun by a *d*-pronoun, analogously to the felicitous (25a), does not improve (26a).³ Since Frey (2004) has shown convincingly that left dislocation in German is a monoclausal structure and since I assume that RTs are extra-clausal we can assume that it is indeed the missing restrictor that is the problem in (26a).⁴

Let us next look at the unspecific reading of indefinites. (27) can be used in a situation where the speaker wants to make clear that s/he will not buy a dog, and that for a good reason. From the use of the indefinite in (27)

² *Pace* sub-kind readings, which would be indicated by an accent on the determiner and under which (27)(a) improves, just as expected.

³ Krifka et al. (1995:88) show that *d*-pronouns can be used to refer to kinds, which is not given here:

- (i) Hans fuhr Mercedes_i. *Er_i war grau. / Das_i ist ein zuverlässiger Wagen.
 'Hans drove (a) Mercedes_i. It_i was grey. / That_i is a reliable car.'

⁴ Construing sentences like (26a) without a pronoun invariably results in a reading of the indefinite as an unspecific indefinite, see (i), cf. (27) in the main text for a plausible context:

- (i) As for a poodle, {a poodle / a dog} is demanding.

This is predicted by the above analysis. The generic operator takes as its arguments subject and predicate of the second speech act. The RT is still outside its scope. The unspecific reading is available for reasons given in the next paragraphs.

the existence of the individual does not follow: there is no particular dog under discussion here.

- (27) Was einen Hund betrifft, meine Wohnung ist zu klein.
what a dog concerns my apartment is too small
 'As far as a dog is concerned, my apartment is too small.'

If the unspecific indefinite does not introduce a referent we expect that we cannot refer anaphorically to it by means of a singular pronoun. This is confirmed by data like the following:⁵

- (28) Wegen [einem Geschenk für Max]_i, ich war gestern einkaufen. #Es_i hat 5 Euro gekostet.
 'About a present_i for Max, I went shopping yesterday. It_i cost 5 euros.'

The behaviour of unspecific indefinites – to have no existential import – is of course familiar from intensional contexts, where indefinites are interpreted as properties without existential quantification (and where intensional verbs can be assumed to take properties of arguments, cf. Zimmermann 1993). Let us assume that unspecific indefinites as RTs are also interpreted as such properties, and let us see if other expressions denoting properties can occur as RTs as well. This is indeed the case, cf. (29). For reasons of space I illustrate with an English example with a verb in the gerund form, the observations carry over to German non-finite verbs.

- (29) [From BNC-FR4 *The impact of social policy*. Wilding, P & George, V. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul plc, 1984.]

The chances of an unskilled manual worker's child being a poor reader are six times greater than those of a professional worker 's child." There is no evidence

⁵ The data are not totally clear here. If the second speech act is in subjunctive mood, anaphoric reference with a *d*-pronoun improves with unspecific indefinites, see (i)-(ii). One way to deal with this would be to say that we do not have unspecific indefinites here (or above) but 'formal' kinds, rather than 'conventional kinds' (Schubert & Pelletier 1989), since kinds can be picked up by *d*-pronouns (see footnote 3). Also see Krifka's (1995) notion of 'concept', which can also be applied to properties in general. Also cf. Müller-Reichau (2006). All this deserves thorough discussion for which there is no space here.

- (i) Was eine neue U-Bahnlinie betrifft, die müssten wir dann nächstes Jahr in Planung nehmen (wenn wir sie realisieren wollen).
 'As far as a new metro line_i is concerned, we would have to start planning that_i next year (if we want to build it).
- (ii) Was ein Geschenk_i für Peter betrifft, das_i könnte ich bei Dussmann besorgen.
 'As far as a present for Peter is concerned, I could buy that at Dussmann's'

to show whether such differences have changed over the years. There is evidence, however, to show that these differences in school attainment at age 7 do not decrease, but rather increase as children get older. [new paragraph] [*As far as passing examinations is concerned* _{RT}], the obvious applies. The proportion of children passing Ordinary and Advanced level examinations is positively correlated with social class.

I assume with Chierchia (1984) that non-finite verbs like in (29) denote individuals that are derived from the respective property by a nominalization function. Since this nominalization function applies to properties it also applies to unspecific indefinites like in (27) and (28) – but not to semantic objects denoted by adverbs, prepositions etc.⁶ This accounts for the fact that adverbs or prepositions cannot occur as RTs (see section 4 for adverb data). Further note that Chierchia (1998) also accounts for the behaviour of kind-denoting expressions with the nominalization function (and the corresponding predicate function), a parallel which resounds in the behaviour of these different expressions as RTs.

The last type of expression I would like to look at are modified quantifiers which like unspecific indefinites are excluded as aboutness topics. As RTs they are acceptable:

- (30) Was höchstens zwei Fehlschüsse betrifft,
what at.most two failures concerns
 das Prüfungsamt ist gar nicht so streng.
the exam.office is at.all not so strict
 ‘As for at most two failures the exam office is not quite so strict.’

- (31) Was Peters mindestens 15 Freundinnen betrifft,
what Peters at.least 15 girl.friends concerns
 das Großmaul lebt noch bei seiner Mutter.
the big.mouth lives still with his mother
 ‘As for Peter's at least 15 girl friends, that bigmouth still lives with is mother.’

I suggest that the quantificational phrase in these examples is used as a quote. The quote is used as a name by which the speaker refers to the contents of a previous utterance (also cf. Searle 1969). For instance, in (31) that previous utterance could have been an assertion that Peter has had at least 15 girl

⁶ We also find non-finite constructions with subjects, cf. (i). These can be analysed as zero-place propositional functions (Chierchia 1984).

(i) [*As for him having a permanent dwelling* _{RT}], where is he supposed to live? [From BNC-K52 *Northern Echo*. Leisure material].

friends, or a question whether Peter indeed has had at least 15 girl friends. The RT picks up these utterances. For aboutness topics this is not possible because they must refer to semantic objects. RTs can designate a previous utterance as relevant.

6 Summary

I have characterized RTs in terms of their formal and their speech act properties. RTs constitute separate speech acts that function as discourse-structuring devices by committing the speaker to a subsequent speech act which is relevant with respect to the RT by adding information, asking a question etc. RTs are different from aboutness topics in that they are clause-external, and in that they have different restrictions with respect to the types of expressions that are licit RTs. I have put this down to the illocutionary characteristics of RTs. Frames need not occupy a structural position that would classify as a typical topic position: left peripheral, or before the topic. I have suggested that they are not topics unless they are also RTs.

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