"That's what it's all about": Abstract Topics in Thucydides

Recent work on Greek syntax has established that the word order of a clause is largely determined by the pragmatic status of the various constituents (Dik 1995, 2007, Matić 2003, Allan 2014, Goldstein 2016). In one common pattern, the Topic of the sentence, what the sentence is about, precedes the Focus, the new information that is the main point of the sentence, which in turn precedes the verb. (This particular pattern only holds true (i) for certain types of Topics—broadly, those that are involved in some sort of contrast, as opposed to those that merely confirm an existing Topic—and (ii) when the verb does not contribute significantly to whatever is salient in the clause, so Focus rests more narrowly on one of the nouns of the clause.) Accordingly, one finds Greek sentences such as στρουθὸν δὲ οὐδεὶς ἔλαβεν "But no one caught an ostrich" (X. *An*. 1.5.3, discussed by Matić 2003: 574) with στρουθόν in the Topic slot (this is a sentence about ostriches, as opposed to other wild animals Xenophon has just mentioned), and οὐδείς in the Focus slot before the verb (because the idea of catching animals is already in play, what's especially salient is the fact that *no one* caught an ostrich).

Now most of the research that has elucidated this (Contrastive) Topic – (Narrow) Focus – Verb pattern has been carried out on prose texts exhibiting a comparatively simple style, especially Herodotus and Xenophon. But does it hold true even for authors with a reputation for writing thornier Greek? By considering in detail several representative passages from Thucydides, this paper argues, first, that the general rules do in fact still apply, but, second, that Thucydides sometimes has rather generous ideas about what sort of nouns can go into the Topic slot—a slot which should orient readers by giving them a starting point from which to understand the rest of the sentence. In situations where Herodotus or Xenophon might use a

specific character from the narrative as the Topic of the clause, Thucydides is quicker to deploy abstract nouns in this position, thereby helping to establish his characteristically rarefied style.

In looking for examples of this structure, one might think that the famously difficult speeches, with their frequent recourse to abstract expression, would be the best place to start. But it is in fact in relatively ordinary narrative that Thucydides' fondness for abstract Topics is clearest. After all, in a sentence where everything is abstract, one has no choice but to treat an abstraction as the starting point for the clause. But when Thucydides is composing a clause in which both an abstraction and an actual participant in an event will be named, and he still puts the abstract constituent into the Topic slot, it is especially clear evidence of how he organizes his thoughts. Take, for instance, this sentence from the chapter in which he recounts Archidamus' invasion of Attica: τάς τε οὖν προσβολὰς ηὐτρεπίζοντο καὶ ἄλλως ἐνδιέτριψαν χρόνον περὶ αὐτήν. [αἰτίαν τε οὐκ ἐλαχίστην]Topic [Ἀρχίδαμος]Focus ἔλαβεν ἀπ᾽ αὐτοῦ "So they prepared their attack and whiled away their time aimlessly around [Oenoe]. And Archidamus got no small amount of blame because of it" (2.18.2–3). Whereas another author might have oriented the reader by placing the Spartan king in the Topic slot, Thucydides structures the clause around the idea of blame by putting αἰτίαν first. That is, what connects this sentence to what precedes isn't Archidamus as a personal actor, but the more generalized idea that the wasting of time is sure to be followed by some sort of consequent reproach, and that, in this case, the blame fell upon Archidamus in particular. Furthermore, that many such abstract expressions occur with δέ—e.g. 2.8.4 (ἡ δὲ εὔνοια), 2.53.4 (θεῶν δὲ φόβος ἢ ἀνθρώπων νόμος, with the negative modifier οὐδείς left in the Focus slot; cf. X. *An*. 1.5.3 above), and 2.68.2 (ἔχθρα δέ)—confirms the identification of such constituents as Topics, given Goldstein's observation that δέ frequently serves as a topic marker (2017: 121–2). Thus, at the end of 1.23, when Thucydides transitions from his

historiographical comments to the war narrative proper, the accusative τὴν μὲν γὰρ ἀληθεστάτην πρόφασιν, ἀφανεστάτην δὲ λόγῳ is not just sentence-initial because it is important, but because it is, quite literally, the Topic.

Bibliography

Allan, R. J. (2014) "Changing the topic: topic position in Ancient Greek word order," *Mnemosyne* 67: 181–213.

Dik, H. (1995) *Word Order in Ancient Greek: A Pragmatic Account of Word Order Variation in Herodotus*. Amsterdam.

Dik, H. (2007) *Word Order in Greek Tragic Dialogue*. Oxford.

Goldstein, D. (2016) *Classical Greek Syntax: Wackernagel's Law in Herodotus*. Leiden.

Matić, D. (2003) "Topic, focus, and discourse structure: Ancient Greek word order," *Studies in Language* 27: 573–633.