While the study of information structure or information packaging has sometimes been called a ‘terminological minefield’ (Vallduvi & Engdahl 1996), recent years have seen the development of broad agreement on terminology. The primary distinction between ‘relationally given’ vs. ‘relationally new’ information (Gundel 1985; Gundel & Fretheim (in press)) is typically termed ‘topic’ versus ‘focus’, ‘theme’ versus ‘rheme’, or ‘(back)ground’ vs. ‘focus’, depending on the researcher. What are more interesting than terminological distinctions, however, are cases where different researchers classify certain phenomena as falling into the ‘relationally given’ category whatever it might be called as opposed to the ‘relationally new’ category. Insofar as the different researchers have principled reasons for classifying such phenomena differently, there is reason to conclude that their information structure categories are empirically distinct.

This paper discusses five cases of such topic-focus controversies with a view to elucidating both the phenomena in question and the conflicting theories of information structure. Facts about intonation in English and topic-markers in languages like Japanese and Korean will be brought up when relevant. Most of the examples from English are taken from videotapes and transcripts of the PBS political discussion program ‘The McLaughlin Group’ (Hedberg & Sosa 2002, in press).

1. Questions

The first case is question words in constituent questions. Such words are widely considered to be the focus of the question. This conclusion is argued for recently in Lambrecht & Michaelis 1998. However, Steedman 2000 analyzes them as ‘themes’, since the question word evokes but does not restrict a presupposed alternative set. Steedman predicts that the pitch accent marking ‘themes’ in English is the L+H*, and it is interesting that Hedberg & Sosa 2002 found that out of the 35 wh-questions in their corpus of spontaneous speech, 21 or 60% had the wh-word marked with the L+H*.

(1) Mr. Duffy: Why is it going to take a year to put it into place?
L+H* !H* ¡H*LL% H*+L H*LL%
[Washington Week, 11/16/01]

L+H* is widely considered to be the ‘topic accent’ (Gundel & Fretheim (in press), Vallduvi & Engdahl 1996, Büring 2002, inter alia). Thus we have a topic-focus controversy here. In languages like Japanese, constituent question words typically do not take the topic marker (Kuno 1972).

2. Negative Statements

A second case is negative contradictions marked by L+H*LH%. For example, (2).

(2) Mr. McLaughlin: Well, he’s been a successful politician, and he’s been a successful statesman, has he not?
Mr. O’Donnell: He’s done – the only thing – he was in a box with China. He did the only thing you could do. He hasn’t done anything extraordinary
L+H* LH%
[McLaughlin Group, 4/27/01]

In Hedberg & Sosa (in press), this phrase is analyzed as a contrastive focus, but the question was raised at the conference where these results were first presented, as to whether these phrases should instead be analyzed as topics/themes. Again they are marked with the so-called ‘topic’ pitch accent L+H*, and even with the so called ‘topic tune’ L+H* LH%. The rationale for treating this phrase as a...
topic could be that we can paraphrase the sentence containing it as “As for whether he is unattractive, I don’t find him so.” In Korean, we interestingly find such a phrase marked with the topic marker.

3. **Fall-Rise Only Sentences**

A third case is affirmative sentences with a single nucleus which has a fall-rise shape, either L+H*LH% or L*+HLH%. Steedman 2000 analyzes such cases as themes, but Hetland (in press) argues that they are foci.

(3) Q: Does Marcel love opera?
A: Marcel likes **musicals**.
   L+H* LH%

Most analysts would analyze them as foci since they believe that every utterance has a focus, but Steedman argues against this view in favor of ‘theme-only’ sentences. Again his analysis fits his claim that L+H* or L+H*LH% marks themes.

4. **Cleft Sentences**

A fourth case is cleft sentences. Lambrecht 2001 analyzes the clefted constituent as always functioning as a focus, but Hedberg (1990, 2000) claims that they can also function as topics. Kiss 1998 (and Horn 1969 before her) states that clefted constituents can never be modified with ‘even’ or ‘also’ because these operators are incompatible with the exhaustiveness or uniqueness condition associated with clefted constituents. However, Hedberg (1990, 1999a) points out that such modifiers are possible in topic-comment clefts, for example (4):

(4) It was the President, in a rare departure from the diplomacy of caution, who initiated the successful Panama invasion. **It was also Bush who came up with the ideas of having an early, informal Malta summit with Gorbachev and a second round of troop cuts in Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall.** But it was Baker who subtly turned the Malta summit from the informal, ‘putting our feet up’ chat initially envisaged by the President into a platform for the United States to demonstrate through a 16-point initiative that it was prepared to help Gorbachev. [M. Dowd and T. L. Friedman, ‘The Fabulous Bush and Baker Boys,’ The New York Times Magazine, 5/6/90, p. 64]

5. **Inverted Pseudoclefts**

Finally, Lambrecht 2001 also claims that the clefted constituent in an inverted pseudocleft always marks a focus, and explicitly argues against Hedberg’s (1988, 1990, 1999b) claim that it is possible for such constituents to mark a topic, as in (5):

(5) Mr. McLaughlin: Number two, isn’t it true that Nancy Reagan is always right? … This is not a bash-Reagan session. I just want to know if her instincts are invariably correct. I ask you.

Mr. Kondracke: No, they’re not. I mean, **she was the one who wanted to keep Reagan from appearing in public.** That was –

Mr. McLaughlin: But she also has the concern about the man’s health. She—he lived through an assassination attempt. Remember that.

[McLaughlin Group, 3/6/87]

Evidence from Korean reported on in Jhang 1994 and Hedberg & Jhang 1994 will be invoked in favor of Hedberg’s position.