OBJECT Topicalization in Cantonese

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TOPIC and FOCUS topicalization constructions are commonly found in Cantonese, a Chinese language spoken by 71 million people. This paper aims at giving an optimality-theoretic (OT) account of the topicalization phenomenon in Cantonese, focusing on constructions where the TOPIC or FOCUS is identified with the OBJ function.

The [+New] feature (Choi 2001) is employed to explain the motivation of FOCUS topicalization in Cantonese. The NEW-L constraint, however, cannot be directly applied to the language since it exhibits a peculiar phenomenon that, though the [+New] feature motivates FOCUS topicalization, a FOCUS does not necessarily contain purely [+New] information and the [+New] information is not obliged to occur in the leftmost position of the FOCUS as in (1b) below, where saam1 bun2 zi6din2 is the FOCUS and only the non-leftmost zi6din2 is established as the [+New] information with question (1a).

(1) a. nei5 maai5zo2 saam1 bun2 me1 aa3?
   2.SG buy.PERF three CL what PART
   ‘What are the three books which you have bought?’

   b. [saam1 bun2 zi6din2] aa3 ngo5 maai5zo2
   three CL dictionary PART 1.SG buy.PERF
   ‘It is three dictionaries which I have bought.’

[+New]-FOCUS AFOCUS-L is introduced in this study to account for the phenomenon.

References