

Topic metaphors in European languages

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Abstract

This paper deals with the semantic notion “topic”, understood broadly as the notion of ‘aboutness’ as in “to talk *about* stars,” and describes its various forms of expression across ten European languages. The aim is to explore and characterise how topic is construed, that is, which underlying conceptualisations are involved in the metaphorical expressions used to refer to this notion. The description is based on ten parallel versions of A. St. Exupéry’s famous novel *Le Petit Prince*. The analysis highlights the most salient metaphors that are found in European languages and points at some differences in the topic markers used across languages. The most revealing conceptualisation of topic involves what I have called the revolving metaphor, in which the topic is seen as the centre around which our discussion or thoughts revolve, as in *my thoughts revolved around her*. The paper ends with a tentative discussion of to what degree the different topic metaphors can be considered dead or alive.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, topic-marking expressions, prepositional semantics, cross-linguistic analysis, *Le Petit Prince*

1. Introduction

Consider the title of Locke’s famous treatise *An essay concerning human understanding*, where *concerning* is used to establish a relation between the noun *essay* and the topic, or subject, of the essay, *human understanding*. In this paper, I will refer to this notion of aboutness as *topic* (see Dirven et al. 1982), and consider the linguistic forms used to mark it as topic-marking expressions.¹ A closer look at the translations of Locke’s work into several European languages, as shown in examples (1) to (11), reveals that different languages employ different forms of expression, mainly prepositions and case endings, to invoke the same conceptual content, i.e. topic understood as the semantic relation of *aboutness*.

- (1) Eng. An essay *concerning* human understanding²
- (2) Po. Rozważania *dotyczące* rozumu ludzkiego
- (3) Nor. *Om* menneskets erkjennelse
- (4) Ice. Ritgerð *um* mannlegan skilning

¹ Dirven (1982:57) calls the prepositions *about, of, on* “topic denoting devices” in relation to the verb *to talk*. In the terminology used in Granvik and Taimitarha (2014) and Granvik (2015, 2017), they are called topic-marking prepositions.

² I use the following abbreviations for the different languages throughout the paper: Cat. = Catalan, Da. = Danish, Eng. = English, Est. = Estonian, Fi. = Finnish, Fr. = French, Ger. = German, Ice. = Icelandic, It. = Italian, Nor. = Norwegian, Ru. = Russian, Pt. = Portuguese, Sp. = Spanish, Swe. = Swedish.

- (5) Ru. Опыт *о* человеческом разумении
[Opyt o čelovečeskom razumenij]³
- (6) Pt. Ensaio *acerca do* Entendimento Humano
- (7) Fi. Tutkielma *inhimillisestä ymmärryksestä*
- (8) Sp. Ensayo *sobre* el entendimiento humano
- (9) Fr. Essai *sur* l'entendement humain
- (10) It. Saggio *sull'*intelletto umano
- (11) Ger. Ein Versuch *über* den menschlichen Verstand

Although we are talking about the same notion in the eleven languages, the expressions in (1) to (11) reveal different conceptualizations of the topic relation. First, in English and Polish, we find the participial expressions *concerning* and *dotyczące*, which derive from verbs indicating precisely 'to concern'. They are thus not particularly metaphoric in nature, but rather quite literal topic expressions. In the Scandinavian languages, Norwegian and Icelandic, as well as in Russian, two semantically general and abstract prepositions are used, namely *om/um* and *o(b)*. Scandinavian *om/um* are originally locative prepositions with the meaning 'around', whereas Russian *o(b)* has the meaning 'toward, against, about'. In present-day language both *om/um* and *o(b)* can be seen as the unmarked, default topic-marking prepositions in these languages. Although they were originally metaphorical expressions, most probably they do not evoke live metaphors in present-day speakers' minds.

In Portuguese, the compound preposition *acerca de* derives from Latin CIRCA 'around', but in present-day Portuguese it is only used as a topic-marking expression. Due to its relationship with the concrete verb *cercar* 'to surround; build a fence (around)', it is possible that the expression activates a conceptual image of 'around'. *Acerca de*, however, is not the default topic-marking preposition in Portuguese, but competes with the simple prepositions *de* 'of, from', *em* 'in, on' and *sobre* 'on (top of), over', which are more frequent and highly polysemous in comparison with *acerca de*.⁴

The Finnish elative case, the basic meaning of which is 'from', is the default way of establishing a topic-relation in this language, so the original source meaning associated with the *-sta* ending is most probably a dead metaphor.

Finally, the Romance languages French, Italian and Spanish as well as German employ prepositions which express the originally concrete idea of 'over', i.e. *sur*, *su*, *sobre* and *über*. These prepositions are very frequent and polysemous in the four languages, and the topic sense is one of their abstract meanings alongside several concrete, spatial senses. It is thus possible that the conceptual image of 'over, above' is associated to a certain degree with the topic relation in these languages.

³ The Russian examples have been transliterated into Latin script using the so called International scholarly system following the Online resource found here: https://www.cesty.in/azb-en#azbuka_anglicka_latinka_cyrillic_latin_transliteration_lc.

⁴ The situation in Portuguese is quite similar to that in Spanish, where *acerca de* —a monosemous topic-marking preposition— is found alongside polysemous *de* and *sobre* (see Granvik 2015, 2017).

The aim of the paper is twofold. The first objective is to identify and characterise the most salient topic metaphors and, based on this description, to discuss the differences in the use of topic markers across a group of European languages. The second objective is more speculative and consists of discussing the degree of productivity or liveliness of the main topic metaphors.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 lays out the theoretical background on which the study rests. I start by defining the semantic category "topic", in order to investigate its various forms of expression across languages (§ 2.1). In Section 2.2 I look into prepositional semantics from the point-of-view of cognitive linguistics and conceptual metaphor theory. I also briefly exemplify how topic is construed, that is, which underlying conceptualizations are involved in the expressions used. Section 3 introduces the data and the method(s) used, whereas Section 4 is dedicated to the analysis of the data retrieved from the different versions of *Le Petit Prince*. In Section 5, I discuss whether the identified topic metaphors are alive or dead based on additional linguistic evidence from different contemporary European languages. Section 6 concludes.

2. Theoretical background

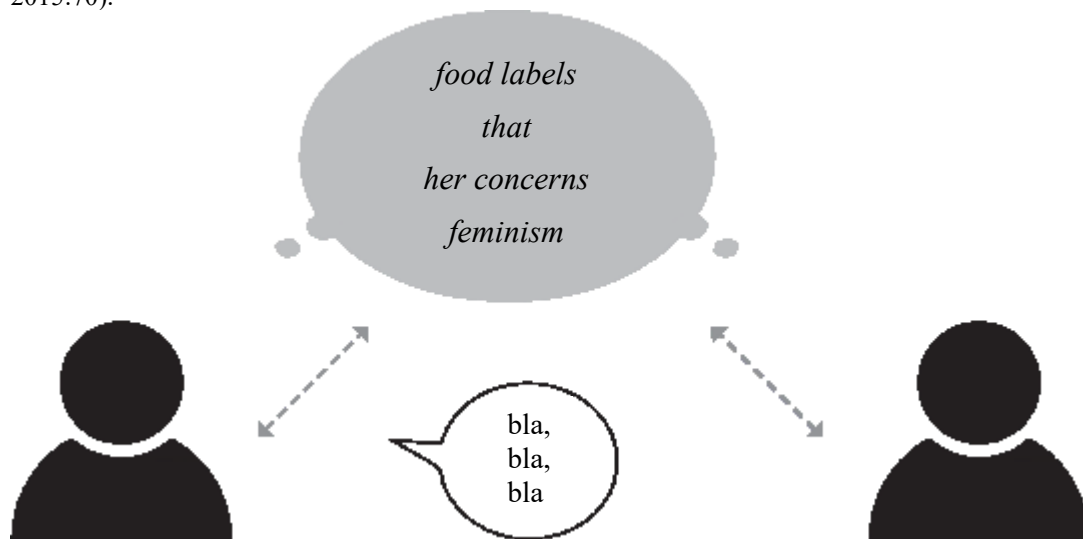
2.1. The topic-relation

The present paper rests on the hypothesis that there exists a semantic notion that can be called *topic* (see Radden 1978, Dirven et al. 1982:3, Granvik & Taimitarha 2014, Granvik 2015, 2017). As shown in examples (1) to (11) presented in Section 1, above, the notion of topic as understood in this paper can be expressed in various ways. The common denominator is that we have to do with a certain, abstract subject field or topic which is the centre of attention of a discussion among people, a mental product such as an essay or a book, or of a person's thoughts. In terms of Dirven et al. (1982:3), who study the domain of speaking and communicating, "topic is then the theme or the subject of a certain unit of linguistic action." Figure 1 presents a schematic illustration of *topic*.

The topic-relation I am concerned with in this paper is typically expressed by means of a preposition-like element that connects two discursively prominent constituents, as in (12) and (13), but topic can also be found in other syntactic constructions, as shown in (14) and (15):

- (12) There has been a lot of **talk about** food labels in the media lately
(COCA, 2012, blog)
- (13) Take a look at that, there's the -- what do you **think about** that?
(COCA, 2015, spoken)
- (14) a persistent Visiting Nurse kept **discussing** her concerns with him.
(COCA, 1990, magazine)
- (15) **With regards to** feminism, veganism is the highest form of it, in my view. (COCA, 2012, blog)

Figure 1. Schematic representation of the notion of prepositional topic (adapted from Granvik 2015:70).



In (12) the preposition *about* is used to establish a topic relation in the communication domain between the noun *talk* and its complement *food labels*. In (13) a similar relationship in the mental domain is established between the verb *to think* and the topic *that*. While *talk* is a communication noun and *think* is a mental verb, in (14) we find a communication verb, *to discuss*, the topic of which, *her concerns*, is construed as a direct object, i.e. without an explicit topic marker (see Radden 1978, Dirven 1982:62-64). Finally, in (15) *with regards to* is a topic-marking expression introducing *feminism* as the topic, but there is no main verb or noun on which the topic-marker is syntactically dependent. Examples (12) to (15) illustrate how the syntactically restricted prepositional topic-marking relationship is semantically connected to the discourse-level notions of topic (Givón 2001, Quirk et al 1985:§18.9n) and theme (Halliday 1967:212, Zubizarreta 1999:4218).

The starting point for this paper is thus the general conceptual meaning of *aboutness* (see Langacker 2008:513) which I call a topic relation (see Dirven 1982), or, more specifically, a prepositional topic-marking relation when it is expressed by preposition-like elements (see Dirven (1982:62) who uses the term *topic prepositions* for *about*, *of* and *on* in combination with the verb *talk*).

2.2. Prepositional semantics from the point-of-view of cognitive linguistics and Conceptual metaphor theory

Theoretically, the study rests on Conceptual metaphor theory as initiated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and well-known examples of metaphors, such as LOVE IS A JOURNEY, THEORIES (and ARGUMENTS) ARE BUILDINGS, THOUGHTS/IDEAS ARE OBJECTS, and so on. However, since I am dealing mainly with prepositional topic-markers, the scope of this study lies not on the conceptualisation of ideas as objects or places/locations but on the level of

prepositional semantics, where an important body of work has been carried out within the cognitive linguistics framework.

A common denominator of much of this previous work, which has focused especially on prepositional polysemy, semantic networks and prototypes (see Lakoff 1987, Zelinsky-Wibbelt 1993, Dirven 1993, 1995, Sandra & Rice 1995, Taylor 2003, Tyler & Evans 2003), is the view that the originally spatial meanings of prepositions give rise to abstract meanings through the workings of conceptual metaphor. In his study of the expression of cause by means of English prepositional expressions, Dirven (1995:116-117) states that

The prepositions, in other words, encode at least seven different concepts of cause. [...] These have their origins in the spatial configurations denoted by these prepositions. Ultimately, then, it is the linguistic construal of space in a given language which has also structured the construal of the abstract conceptual domain of cause.

The metaphorical move from the spatial to the abstract domain can be exemplified in many ways, since it is frequent that prepositions have spatial, temporal and abstract uses alongside one another, as examples (16) and (17) show:

- (16) in the city ≠ in the morning ≠ in debt
(17) from Helsinki to Berlin ≠ from dusk till dawn ≠ from love comes
sorrow

The use of Swedish *om* to express the topic relation provides a similar example of a metaphorical extension of the spatial meaning 'around' to the abstract meaning 'about', as examples (18) and (19) reveal:

- (18) Swe. lägga en halsduk **om** sin hals
'put a scarf around one's neck'
(19) Swe. De satt där och pratade **om** alldagliga ting.
'They sat there talking about ordinary things.'

Following Langacker's (1993) notion of construal, the cognitive grammar approach to linguistic structure defends that different topic markers reveal alternative ways of construing the topic relation, as seen in the various topic-marking expressions involved in the titles to Locke's famous *Essay*. Among the alternate construals of the topic-relation one finds expressions indicating a source in the Finnish elative case ('from'), a perspective from above (Fr. *sur*, Ger. *über*, Sp. *sobre* 'over'), a revolving movement (Swe. *om* 'around') or a general location or area (Ru. *ob* (*oō*) 'in, at, on', just to name the ones involved in Locke's *Essay*.

On this basis, the research questions I will attempt to answer in this paper are:

- Which metaphors are invoked in order to express topic?
- How do languages vary in this respect and what similarities are there?

- To what degree can the spatial metaphors underlying the abstract prepositional uses be considered dead or alive/productive?
- What evidence can be found in support of the metaphors being dead or alive?

Within a single language, the choice of lexical form to express the topic relation will, of course, depend on several factors, such as the immediate syntactic environment (nouns, verbs, adjectives, fixed expressions...) but also on extralinguistic factors such as genre, style, register etc. In this cross-linguistic study I will not go into such detail concerning individual languages but focus on describing and analysing the metaphors present in different topic-markers used in a selection of ten European languages.

3. Data and methods

In order to address and answer the above research questions, I have collected cross-linguistic data using the translations of A. Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* into the following ten languages: Catalan, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish and Swedish. I carefully read the first ten chapters of the book and extracted all topic markers from the different versions, using French, Spanish, English and Swedish as my main points of reference. Due to structural differences the exact number of occurrences varies from one language to another, but the corpus consists of roughly 40 examples of the topic relation in the ten languages.

Ten chapters of *Le Petit Prince* is, of course, not a representative sample in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the expression of topic in all the languages included in the study. For that, in-depth studies on the individual languages would be necessary.⁵ However, as a starting point using a fixed narrative such as *Le Petit Prince* as point of comparison seems warranted. Especially for an onomasiological study like the present one, relying on a comparable and clearly limited data set is necessary, given that one needs to read through and interpret all the sentences included in order to identify relevant instances where a topic relation

⁵ Radden (1978) and Stroh-Wallin (2019) are the only papers I know of which focus explicitly on the semantic notion of topic as understood in this paper. Radden (1978) calls this notion Area, and studies its various expression in English from a Case grammar perspective. Stroh-Wallin (2019) examines a series of prepositional and adverbial expressions used as 'in-what-respect-markers' in Swedish. Semasiologically oriented studies that deal with the topic relation are, e.g. Dirven et al. (1982), who focus on the linguistic and communicative verbs *speak*, *talk*, *tell* and *say*, and discuss the topic relations from the perspective of these four verbs; Tyler and Evans (2003), who discuss the metaphorical relationship between spatial *over* and *over* as a topic marker, and Krawczak and Glynn (2019), whose study tries to explain the contrast between *of* and *about* in combination with four verbs, mental predicates *think* and *know* and communication predicates *speak* and *talk* as a difference in construal of the topic relation. Granvik and Taimitarha (2014) look into the relationship between four topic-marking prepositions in Swedish, and Granvik (2015, 2017) investigates a similar contrast among four Spanish topic-marking prepositions. None of these studies has a cross-linguistic scope nor a specific interest in the metaphors involved in the conceptualisation of the topic relation, which are the main foci of this paper.

is involved. It is well-known that large, computerized corpora are rather useless for search queries targeting meanings. That is, a corpus generally gives relevant results when searching for an individual word such as *topic*, presenting hundreds or thousands of concordance lines with the word in its usage context, but the same corpus will not yield concordance lines of the topic-marking prepositions *about*, *of*, *on*, *regarding*, etc. when using *topic* as a search string.

Of course, using a set of parallel translations as corpus means that there is a risk of interference from the original to the translated texts (calques, direct loans, etc.). However, considering that the focus of this paper are topic-marking expressions which are typically prepositions or other fixed expressions with specific more grammatical than lexical functions, the possibility of direct influence from one language on the other does not seem too high.

In order to illustrate the situation, consider the first five examples of the topic relation in *Le Petit Prince*, which include the following expressions: *book about*, *ponder over*, *to be interested in*, *talk about*, *satisfied (to)*. In the four Romance languages, Catalan, French, Italian and Spanish, the same structure is used with both *book* and *talk about*, that is Cat. *llibre sobre*, Fr. *livre sur*, It. *libro su*, Sp. *libro sobre* and *parlar de*, *parler de*, *parlare di* and *hablar de* respectively. This is by no means surprising, since these are standard ways of expressing these concepts in these languages.

With *ponder*, *to be interested* and *satisfied* the solutions in the four languages are more varied. First, with *satisfied (to + infinitive)* all four languages use the same preposition *de/di* but different adjectives. French *content de* is mirrored by Catalan *content de*, but Italian uses *felice de* and Spanish *satisfecha de*. Second, with *ponder over*, French, Italian and Spanish use *sur*, *su* and *sobre* with the verbs *réfléchir*, *meditare* and *reflexionar*, whereas Catalan has *rumiar en*. With *to be interested in*, finally, the solutions diverge even more, with Catalan and Spanish opting for the verb *interessar/interesar* which is combined with *en* in Spanish and *per* in Catalan. The French original also has *s'interessar*, but it is combined with *à*, whereas Italian combines the verb *applicarsi* with *a*. In contrast with these, the English version uses the neutral topic preposition *about* with *book* and *talk*, but the expression *s'interessar à* is translated as *to devote oneself to* and *content de* as *pleased to have met...*; this last example would not qualify as topic-expression in this analysis.

What these observations show, then, is that the different versions of *Le Petit Prince*, despite sharing the same source text, show their own specifics as a consequence of the choice of lexeme governing, or not, the topic expression. Although there are, of course, close equivalents, such as *parlar/hablar de* and *libro sobre/sur/su* (cf. Eng. *talk/book about*), on other occasions the solutions differ in accordance with the preferences of the language in question. Also, expressions such as *talk/book about* constitute typical cases of the topic relation (see below) and also typical topic-markers in the different languages; as such, in Swedish we find *tala/bok om*, in German *Buch* and *sprechen über*.

As this discussion hopefully shows, a parallel corpus such as the translations of *Le Petit Prince* can be considered a good starting point for a comparative analysis

of the topic relation and the different construals or conceptualisations involved in the topic-marking expressions (see Stolz 2007).⁶

I will start the analysis by characterising the topic expressions used in the ten language versions of *Le Petit Prince*. The topic expressions are classified according to two parameters, and the comparison is based on the ensuing two-dimensional matrix: i) the kind or type of topic relation; ii) the different topic metaphors. The topic relation is divided into four different types, according to the context in which the expressions are used: communication topic, mental topic, general topic and marginal topic, as shown in (20) to (23):

Topic of communication

(20) talk, tell, ask, book *about*

Topic of thinking and knowing (mental predicates)

(21) think, know, realize, ponder *about*

General topic

(22) to be *about*, to *concern*, when it comes to...

Marginal cases (topic ~ cause, topic ~ area/region)

(23) *proud of something, angry at something, interested in something...*

The topic metaphors are divided into five types: i) topic as source (Fi. elative case, Eng. *of*), ii) topic as contact (Eng. *on*, Swe. *rörande* 'touching'), iii) topic as revolving movement (Swe. *om*, Eng. *around*), iv) topic as perspective from above (Eng. *over*, Fr. *sur*), v) topic as area or general location (Eng. *at, in*). Since the main focus of the paper are the different metaphors involved in the linguistic expression of topic, this parameter will receive the most attention and the analysis in Sections 4 and 5 will be structured according to the types of metaphor.

In Section 5 I evaluate to what degree the different metaphors are alive, i.e. productive, or dead, i.e. fossilized. Using data from different sources, such as reference corpora, books and the internet, I will attempt to show how some of the metaphors seem to correspond to quite vivid conceptual images, which are frequently recurred to and elaborated upon when expressing different nuances of the topic relation. In this sense, what I have called the revolving metaphor stands out as highly relevant in the European languages. On the other hand, among the default topic-markers there are several expressions that do not appear to activate conceptual imagery, such as Eng. *of* and Sp./Fr. *de* or the elative case in Finnish indicating a source reading of the topic relation.

It is important to bear in mind at this point that the study is circumscribed to a descriptive analysis of linguistic material, i.e. what is often referred to as metaphorical expressions. The evaluation of whether a given metaphor is alive and productive or not will not be based on e.g. psycholinguistic experiments into the minds of speakers or detailed analysis of corpus-data, but simply on the existence

⁶ Stolz' (2007) paper provides an enlightening discussion of the pros and cons of using translations of *Le Petit Prince* as well as the *Harry Potter* series as parallel corpora for typological analysis.

of other, related expressions which illustrate the metaphor in question more literally when compared to prepositional semantics. Consider example (24), where the concrete verb *revolve* is combined with the preposition *around* to establish a topic relation, which is clearly depicted in terms of a circling movement, thus exemplifying the revolving/surrounding metaphor:

- (24) At the moment, my primary research **interests revolve around my doctoral dissertation**
 (http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/people/varieng_tyrkko.html)
 14/03/2011 15:02)

4. Analysis

4.1. Topic constructions and topic markers in *Le Petit Prince*

As a first step in the analysis, Table 1 lists the topic-marking expressions used in the different versions of *Le Petit Prince*. Due to syntactic and constructional differences, the languages exhibit different numbers of topic-marking expressions. It nevertheless becomes quite clear from looking at Table 1 that all languages have one or two forms that can be considered their default topic-marker. In Catalan, French, Italian and Spanish, it is *de/di* ‘of’, a highly abstract preposition with the original meaning ‘from’. In Estonian and Finnish, the semantically equivalent elative case (with the spatial meaning ‘from’) predominates. In Russian, *o/ob* (*o/oḃ*) ‘in, at, on; to, towards, into; about’ plus locative case is the most frequently attested form; in German *über* ‘over’ predominates and in Swedish *om* ‘around; about’ undisputedly has the status of default topic-marker. Only in English are there two expressions, *of* and *about*, with roughly the same frequency in *Le Petit Prince*.

Table 1. Top topic markers in different language editions of *Le Petit Prince*. The numbers within parenthesis refer to the number of cases identified in the language

Language	Topic marker
Catalan	<i>de</i> (18), <i>sobre</i> (3), <i>en</i> (3), <i>amb</i> (3)
French	<i>de</i> (18), <i>sur</i> (8), <i>à</i> (2), <i>envers</i> (1)
Italian	<i>di</i> (19), <i>su</i> (7), <i>a</i> (3)
Spanish	<i>de</i> (16), <i>sobre</i> (4), <i>acerca de</i> (2), <i>en</i> (1)
English	<i>of</i> (9), <i>about</i> (7), <i>over</i> (1), <i>in</i> (1), <i>at</i> (1)
German	<i>über</i> (13), <i>um</i> (2), <i>von</i> (3), <i>auf</i> (2), <i>an</i> (2), <i>in</i> (1), <i>mit</i> (1)
Swedish	<i>om</i> (12), <i>över</i> (1), <i>på</i> (1), <i>för</i> (2)
Russian	<i>o/ob</i> (9), <i>pro</i> (3), <i>obo</i> (1), <i>nad</i> (1), <i>ot</i> (1), <i>s</i> (1)
Estonian	elative (‘from’) (7), <i>peale</i> (3), <i>üle</i> (1), <i>nende suhte</i> (1), <i>kallal</i> (1)
Finnish	elative (‘from’) (15), illative (‘to’) (2), <i>kimpussa</i> (1)

In Table 2, the different types of topic are introduced, allowing us to fine-tune the overall analysis. Thus, we find that in the Romance languages *de/di* and *sobre/sur/su* are used in all four contexts; in the communication topic category they are the only options. The less frequent topic expressions are found across the different kinds of topic relation, particularly with thinking, general and marginal

topics. The Germanic languages seem to have two things in common. First, mental topic relations show most formal variation, being expressed by four, five and six different prepositions in Swedish, English and German, respectively. Second, the communication and general topic relations are distinct from the other two types. In English, communication topics show a clear preference for *about* while the general topic relation prefers *of*. In Swedish, only *om* is found in both these types of topic relation, whereas in German there is quite a lot of variation from one kind of topic relation to another, the only constant form being the preposition *über* 'over'.

In Russian, *o/ob* (*o/oḃ*) seems to be the first alternative in all types of topic relations, with the other forms becoming more important in thinking, general and marginal topic relations as compared to communication topic. Finally, in the case marking languages, Estonian and Finnish, the relative case predominates. Estonian separates itself from Finnish in showcasing several alternative forms, such as postpositions *peale* 'on top of', *suhte* 'in relation to' and *üle* 'above', while Finnish shows little variation. In Finnish there are two examples of illative case ('into') with communication topics.

Table 2. Distribution of typical topic markers across semantic classes⁷

Language	Types of topic relation			
	Communication	Thinking	General	Marginal cases
Catalan	<i>de</i> 4, <i>sobre</i> 2	<i>de</i> 5, <i>en</i> 2, <i>per</i> 1	<i>de</i> 9, <i>sobre</i> 1, <i>amb</i> 1, <i>en</i> 1	5 <i>de</i> , <i>sobre</i> 1, <i>amb</i> 2
French	<i>de</i> 4, <i>sur</i> 3	<i>de</i> 4, <i>à</i> 2, <i>sur</i> 2, <i>envers</i> 1	<i>de</i> 10, <i>sur</i> 3	<i>de</i> 5, <i>sur</i> 2
Italian	<i>di</i> 3, <i>su</i> 2	<i>di</i> 7, <i>su</i> 2, <i>a</i> 3	<i>di</i> 9, <i>su</i> 3	<i>di</i> 5, <i>su</i> 1, <i>a</i> 1, <i>per</i> 1
Spanish	<i>de</i> 4, <i>sobre</i> 1	<i>de</i> 6, <i>sobre</i> 1, <i>en</i> 1	<i>de</i> 7, <i>sobre</i> 2, <i>acerca de</i> 1	<i>de</i> 5, <i>sobre</i> 1, <i>por</i> 2
English	<i>about</i> 5, <i>of</i> 1	<i>about</i> 1, <i>over</i> 1, <i>of</i> 3, <i>in</i> 1, <i>at</i> 1	<i>about</i> 1, <i>of</i> 5	<i>of</i> 2, <i>over</i> 2, <i>to</i> 2
German	<i>von</i> 2, <i>über</i> 7, <i>an</i> 1	<i>um</i> 1, <i>von</i> 1, <i>über</i> 3, <i>auf</i> 1, <i>für</i> 1, <i>an</i> 1	<i>um</i> 1, <i>über</i> 3, <i>auf</i> 1, <i>mit</i> 1, <i>in</i> 1	<i>über</i> 1, <i>für</i> 1
Swedish	<i>om</i> 6	<i>om</i> 3, <i>över</i> 1, <i>på</i> 1, <i>för</i> 1	<i>om</i> 3	<i>om</i> 2, <i>över</i> 6, <i>på</i> 1
Russian	<i>ob</i> (об) 6, <i>pro</i> (про) 1	<i>ob</i> (об) 5, <i>obo</i> (обо) 1, <i>s</i> (с) 2, <i>Instr.</i> 1	<i>ob</i> (об) 2, <i>pro</i> (про) 2, <i>v</i> (в) 1, <i>nad</i> (над) 1, <i>Instr.</i> 1	<i>ot</i> (от) 1, <i>s</i> (с) 1
Estonian	Elicative 3	Elicative 2, <i>peale</i> 2, <i>suhte</i> 1	Elicative 2, <i>peale</i> 1, <i>üle</i> 1, <i>kallal</i> 1, <i>Kom.</i> 1	–
Finnish	Elicative 6, <i>Illative</i> 2	Elicative 6	Elicative 3	Elicative 1

To summarise, the context of communication seems to be the most stable of the four kinds of topic relation, in the sense that there are seldom more than two different forms. There is also a limited number of different expressions in the marginal topic cases, but the topic-markers used are more heterogeneous than in the communication domain. On the other hand, there is most variation in the forms used in the thinking and general topic relations. In a sense, if communication is seen as the typical context for the topic relation, it is natural that the standard, default topic markers are enough to mark the relation between the discussion and the topic it is concerned with. From this perspective, then, less typical topical relations need to involve more and more explicit variants, a situation which is especially salient in the context of general topic. If the expressions involved do not automatically involve a topic, it may be important to recur to explicit topic-markers in order to highlight this relation.

⁷ The abbreviations *Instr.* and *Kom.* refer to the instrumental (Ru.) and comitative (Est.) cases, both roughly equivalent to 'with, together with'.

4.2 Overview of the metaphors involved in the expression of the topic relation across languages

As stated above, the topic-marking expressions instantiate different conceptualisations of the topic relation, i.e. conceptual metaphors. In the previous section (§ 3) I identified five different metaphors, which are briefly characterised in Table 3, involving representative examples from the different languages. It should be evident from the descriptive labels that the proposed metaphors are based on the literal, spatial meanings of the expressions involved. For example, the source metaphor derives from the fact that expressions such as the preposition *de* and the elative case forms express point of departure, origin, source in their spatial uses (see Dirven 1982, 1995). In the following I will briefly present the five metaphors with the aid of examples included in the different versions of *Le Petit Prince*. In Section 5 I will then attempt to motivate these metaphors and discuss to what degree they constitute live conceptualisations, building on additional data.

Table 3. Different kinds of topic metaphors.

Kind of metaphor	Literal meaning	Topic expression
Source metaphor	'from'	Est./Fi. elative, Fr./ Sp. <i>de</i> , It. <i>di</i> , Eng. <i>of</i>
Perspective from above metaphor	'over'	Eng. <i>over</i> , Cat./Sp. <i>sobre</i> , Fr. <i>sur</i> , It. <i>su</i> , Swe. <i>över</i> , Ger. <i>über</i> , Est. <i>peale</i> , <i>üle</i>
Revolving metaphor	'around'	Swe. <i>om</i> , <i>kring</i> , Ger. <i>um</i>
Contact metaphor	'on, against, toward'	Ru. <i>nad</i> , <i>pro</i> , Sp. <i>acerca de</i> , Swe. <i>på</i> , Ger. <i>auf</i> , Est. <i>kallal</i>
Area, location metaphor	'in, at'	Eng. <i>about</i> , <i>at</i> , <i>in</i> , Sp. <i>por</i> , Fr. <i>à</i> , Cat./Fr./Spa. <i>en</i> , Swe. <i>i</i> , Ru. <i>o(b)</i> , Fra. <i>envers</i> ...

4.2.1. Topics are Sources (or points of origin of communication)

The source metaphor is the most frequent type of topic-expression in the different versions of *Le Petit Prince*. The default topic-marking expressions in Romance, *de/di* and the elative case in Estonian and Finnish all exemplify this metaphor, as illustrated in (25) to (27)⁸ in the context of communication:

- (25) Sp. Un día, por ejemplo, hablando **de** las cuatro espinas, dijo al principito: ¡Ya pueden venir los tigres con sus garras! (VIII)⁹
- (26) Fi. Eräänä päivänä se esimerkiksi neljästä piikistään puhuessaan oli sanonut hänelle: Tiikerit saavat tulla kynsineen, minä en pelkää! (VIII)

⁸ The English version of the Spanish and Finnish examples in (25) and (26) follows example (26); it is repeated in (28) when discussing the English solution. In general, when the same passage is used as an example in several languages, the English translation is not repeated after every language, but presented once within simple quotes after the final example; see examples (30) to (33) and (38) to (39), below.

⁹ Reference to examples in the parallel *Le Petit Prince* editions include only a mention, with Latin numbers within parenthesis, of the chapter from which the expression was taken. The source of examples taken from other sources are explicitly marked.

‘One day, for instance, when she was speaking **of** her four thorns, she said to the little prince: —“Let the tigers come with their claws!”’
(VIII)

- (27) Est. Siis ei rääkinud ma temaga ei boamaaduse**st**, ei ürgmetsadest ega taevatähtedest. (I)
‘Then I would never talk to that person about boa constrictors, or primeval forests, or stars.’

The source metaphor is also present in English *of* (28) and German *von* (29), albeit *von* is not the default topic marker in German.

- (28) One day, for instance, when she was speaking **of** her four thorns, she said to the little prince: —“Let the tigers come with their claws!”
(VIII)
- (29) Ger. Eines Tages, zum Beispiel, als sie **von** ihren vier Dornen sprach, hatte sie zum kleinen Prinz gesagt: “Die Tiger sollen nur kommen mit ihren Krallen!” (VIII)

The motivation behind the use of expressions indicating the source or origin seems cognitively retrievable, in the sense that it is easy to envision how the topic functions as a point of origin from where the communication starts out. According to Dirven (1982:60) “*of* denotes the direction from where one comes; [...] it is linked up with a more specific meaning in the sense that one does not view the whole of an entity but only elements or parts, or in the case of *talk*, aspects of it.” As the quote from Dirven shows, the source metaphor can also be associated with a distinct nuance of the topic relations, highlighting the idea of “parts... or aspects of it [= the topic]”. This “more specific meaning” can be connected to the well-known fact that case forms such as the Finnish elative (cf. Radden 1978:333) and prepositions such as *de*, *of* and *von* are often involved in partitive expressions.

4.2.2. Topics Are Seen from Above

The expressions forming the basis of the perspective-from-above metaphor are frequent in both Germanic and Romance languages. *Über* seems to be the default topic-marking preposition in the German version of *Le Petit Prince*,¹⁰ and in the Romance languages *sobre*, *su*, *sur* are also frequently used in all contexts. Examples (30) to (36) illustrate typical instances of the perspective from above metaphor, in the context of mental topic:

- (30) Ger. Ich habe damals viel **über** die Abenteuer des Dschungels **nachgedacht** (I)
- (31) Fr. j’ai alors beaucoup **réfléchi sur** les aventures de la jungle (I)

¹⁰ The same applies to Dutch, where *over* predominates (albeit *Durch* is not part of the inventory of languages).

- (32) Sp. **Reflexioné** mucho entonces **sobre** las aventuras de la selva (I)
(33) It. **Meditai** lunge **sulle** **avventure** della jungla. (I)
'I **pondered** deeply, then, **over** the adventures of the jungle.' (I)

Although they are far from being default topic markers, the equivalent prepositions in English and Swedish, *over* and *över*, appear in the same context, as shown in (35) and (36). Also Estonian locative particle *üle* 'over, above, across' can be used, as in (36):¹¹

- (34) I **pondered** deeply, then, **over** the adventures of the jungle. (I)
(35) Swe. jag **funderade** **mycket** **över** allt spännande som hände i djungeln (I)
(36) Est. Siis **mõtlesin** ma palju dzungliseikluste **üle** järele. (I)

In Estonian, there is furthermore the case of *peale* 'onto, upon', derived from the noun *pea* 'head', which is found in the context of mental topic, as shown in (37):¹²

- (37) Est. Vahest oleksite nii hea ja **mõtleksite** ka minu **peale**... (VIII)
'If you would have the kindness to think of my needs' (VIII)

As the above examples indicate, in this metaphor the conceptual image involved is one in which the mental activity (or the discussion in the case of the communication topic) is seen to be concentrated above the topic. In their analysis of English *over*, Tyler and Evans (2003:93-96) distinguish two senses derived from locative *over*, which they call the Examining Sense and the Focus-of-Attention Sense. The second of these senses is illustrated in Figure 2 and corresponds closely to the topic relation.

Figure 2. Schematic illustration of the Focus-of-attention Sense of *over* according to Tyler and Evans (2003:96).

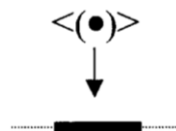


Figure 4.11 Focus-of-attention Sense

In addition to examples (30) to (37), above, which illustrate the Focus-of-attention sense of Tyler and Evans (2003), Swedish *över* typically appears in expressions with causal nuances, such as *förargad*, *stolt*, *generad över* 'lit. irritated, proud and embarrassed over', as in (38). In the Romance languages, on the other hand, adjectives such as *proud* and *annoyed*, as in Fra. *fier* 'proud' in (39), are typically

¹¹ Examples (35) and (36) are the Swedish and Estonian equivalents to the English sentence presented in (34).

¹² See Veismann (2009) for a detailed analysis of the semantics of Estonian adpositions *üle* and *peale*.

combined with *de*, based on the source metaphor, which can also indicate a causal reading. Finally, in a similar fashion, Russian *nad* (*над*) 'over, above' in (40) can be thought of as a borderline case between a topic and a cause sense, considering that the numbers and figures in this example can be considered both the reason for laughing and its topic.

- (38) Swe. Nej, res inte!, svarade kungen, som var **stolt över att** ha en undersåte. (X)
- (39) Fra. Ne pars pas, répondit le roi qui était si **fier d'**avoir un sujet.
'Do not go, said the king, who was very proud of having a subject.'
- (40) Ru. Но мы, те, кто понимает, что такое жизнь, - **мы**, конечно, **смеемся над номерами и цифрами!** (IV)
[No my, te, kto ponimaet, čto takoe žizn, -my, konečno, smeemsja nad nomerami i ciframi]¹³
lit. 'We, of course, laugh over numbers and figures'
'But certainly, for us who understand life, figures are a matter of indifference.' (IV)

4.2.3. Topics are the centre of a revolving movement

The third metaphor involves prepositions that originally indicate a revolving or circling movement, so that the topic is construed as an object around which the discussion or the mental processes revolve. Alternatively, there is also the possibility of more static imagery, in which case one might rather talk of the topic as being surrounded.¹⁴ The revolving or surrounding metaphor is found as the default option in the Scandinavian languages, where the preposition *om* is found in all four topic relations, as indicated in the Swedish examples in (41) to (43). Scandinavian *om* is paralleled by German *um*, as in (44), but its use is fairly limited in comparison.

- (41) Swe. Och då **talade** jag inte med honom vare sig **om** boaormar, urskogar eller stjärnor. Jag rättade mig efter hans fattningsförmåga. Jag **talade** med honom **om** bridge, golf, politik och halsdukar. (I)
'Then I would never talk to that person about boa constrictors, or primeval forests, or stars. I would bring myself down to his level. I would talk to him about bridge, and golf, and politics, and neckties.'
- (42) Swe. Han höll ett långt **föredrag om** sin upptäckt vid en internationell astronomkongress. (IV)
'He gave a long talk about his discovery at an international astronomy

¹³ The transliterations of the Russian Cyrillic script are presented within square brackets immediately after the examples and before the English translation.

¹⁴ I would like to thank one of the reviewers of the first draft of this paper for this pertinent observation.

- congress.’ [Eng. version: “the astronomer had presented it to the International Astronomical Congress, in a great demonstration.”]
- (43) Swe. Jag fick snart **veta** mer **om** den där blomman. (VIII)
‘I soon found out more about that flower.’
- (44) Ger. Da wiederholte er ganz sacht, als **handele es sich um** eine sehr ernstzunehmende Angelegenheit: (II)
‘And in answer he repeated, very slowly, as if he were speaking of a matter of great consequence’

Although not attested in *Le Petit Prince*, prepositions indicating a circling movement or a static situation of surrounding are found in several other languages apart from Swedish and German. These expressions can be seen as more colourful alternatives to the default expressions, providing us with an indication that this might be a productive metaphor. For example, in Swedish, a more concrete alternative to *om* is *kring*; in Spanish the compound preposition *en torno a* is quite frequent (cf. Granvik 2015, 2017); in French there is *autour de* and in Russian *vokrug* (вокруг), which all parallel English *around*. There is also evidence of Finnish *ympäriällä*, a locative adverb related to the noun *ympyrä* ‘circle’. The following examples, which all stem from sources beyond *Le Petit Prince*, illustrate these more vivid expressions which highlight how the topic is seen as the centre around which the discussion takes place:

- (45) Swe. Läs gärna också Brit Stakstons **kommentar kring** ämnet.
(Korp-swe, bloggmix)
‘Please also read Brit Stakston's commentary on the subject.’
- (46) Fi. Mistähän johtuu yhtäkkiä **vaikeneminen** tämän aiheen **ympäriällä**? (Korp-fi, Suomi24, 2003)
‘Why the sudden silence around this topic?’
- (47) Esp. Comienza entonces una **polémica en torno al** perdón de los sublevados (CORPES XXI, 2001)
‘This was the start of a controversy over the pardon of the rebels’
- (48) The authors of this article would like to rekindle the **debate around** that topic. (COCA, 2019)
- (49) Fr. D'où désormais le silence et le manque de **communication autour de** l'affaire.
(<https://www.koffi.net/koffi/recherche/annee/2013/a/14/recherche/affaire>, 2021-05-07)
‘Hence the silence and lack of communication around the case.’
- (50) Ru. Валентина Кечман, председатель Совета по международным отношениям партии «Единая Сербия» прокомментировала последние **события вокруг** Алексея Навального.
(https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2020/09/02/n_14882558.shtml, 02-09-2020)

[Valentina Kečman, predsedatel' sojeta po meždunarodnym otnošenijam patrii "Edinaja Cerbija" prokomentirovala poslednie cobytija vokrug Alekseja Naval'nogo]
'Valentina Kecman, chairperson of the International Relations Council of the United Serbia Party, commented on the recent developments around Alexei Navalny.'

In Section 5, below, I will present more data in order to illustrate how the revolving/surrounding metaphor seems to be very much alive in several European languages.

4.2.4. Topics are touched (Contact metaphor)

Topic can be conceptualised as something that is approached or touched in almost all the languages involved in this study, but these cases are relatively few and rarely occur in typical topic contexts (communication and mental topic). The main exception is Russian *pro (npo)* 'through, against', which is relatively frequent and alongside *o(b)* (*o(б)*) appears to be a default expression with communication predicates, as in (51) (cf. Tolskaya 2007). The other topic markers in (52) and (53) refer to notions such as Sp. *acerca de* 'close to, nearby' and Fi. illative case 'into'.

- (51) Ru. Когда мне было шесть лет, в книге под названием "Правдивые истории", где **рассказывалось про** девственные леса. (I)
[Kogda mne bylo šest' let, v knige pod nazvaniem "Pravdivye istorii", gde rasskazyvalos' pro devstvennye lesa]
'Once when I was six years old [I saw a magnificent picture] in a book, called True Stories [from Nature], about the primeval forest.'
- (52) Esp. Si os he referido estos **detalles acerca del** asteroide B612 y si os he confiado su número es por las personas grandes. (IV)
'If I have told you these details about the asteroid, and made a note of its number for you, it is on account of the grown-ups and their ways.'
- (53) Fi. Voitte kuvitella, miten tämä **vihjaus** "toisiin tähtiin" oli kiihottanut uteliaisuuttani. (III)
'You can imagine how my curiosity was aroused by this half-confidence about the "other planets."'

Although the examples above seem quite unremarkable, the Estonian and Finnish versions of *Le Petit Prince* include two highly salient topic expressions, casting additional light on the contact metaphor. Although marginal in terms of frequency, the Estonian and Finnish noun-based postpositions *kallal* (54) and *kimpussa* (55) refer to a physical involvement with the topic in question. Both *kallal* and *kimpussa* are adverbial expressions with the concrete meanings 'to attack or be engaged with physically', respectively, a sense that is clearly understated in the English equivalent 'work hard over'.

- (54) Est. **töötasingi** nõnda suure hoolega selle joonistuse **kallal**. (V)
(55) Fi. Olen **ahkeroinut** tuon piirustuksen **kimpussa** (V)
'I have **worked so hard over** this drawing. (V)'

The expressions involving physical interaction and contact with the topic suppose a natural conceptualization, which can be related to the well-known mental metaphor of IDEAS ARE OBJECTS and THINKING IS GRASPING (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; DeVito 2010). Thus it is hardly surprising that *Le Petit Prince* includes expressions in many of the languages that point in the same direction. In Swedish and German, for example, the verbs *handla* and *sich handeln*, derived from the noun *hand* 'hand' as in *to handle*, are combined with *om/um* 'around, about' (the default topic-marking preposition in Swedish) to create the general topic expression *det handlar om* and *es handelt sich um* 'it is a question about', as shown in (56) and (57).

- (56) Ger. Aber wenn es sich **um** Affenbrotbäume **handelt**, führt das stets zur Katastrophe. (V)
'But when it is a matter of baobabs, that always means a catastrophe.'
(57) Swe. en bok som **handlade om** urskogen (I)
'a book ... about the primeval forest.'

Furthermore, in Finnish the verb *käsitellä* 'to handle; to be about' based on *käsi* 'hand' is also used; and the same body part is also involved in the Finnish words for 'concept' *käsitys* and 'conception, idea' *käsitys*. In the Scandinavian languages there are two more participle-based prepositions involving touch verbs, Swedish *rörande* and Danish *vedrørende* 'touching' (see Granvik & Taimitarha 2014; Strohwollin 2019). The same lexical base is found in Finnish *koskien* 'with regard to; lit. touching', based on the verb *koskea* 'to touch'.

4.2.5. Topics are locations

The final metaphor is also the least specific of the ones identified in the *Le Petit Prince* corpus. Within this category I have included almost all other prepositions that carry a locative meaning, thus picturing topic as a location.¹⁵ These expressions are seldom found in the prototypical topic contexts, but rather appear in the marginal contexts. Examples (58) to (63) illustrate some expressions of the location metaphor.

¹⁵ In fact, an alternative solution would have been to use TOPICS ARE LOCATIONS as a schematic, general metaphor with several subtypes, such as the perspective from above metaphor, the revolving/surrounding metaphor, the contact metaphor, and the general location metaphor. However, in this way all the categories would fall under the locative metaphor, and its descriptive value would be very low and instead include an extra level of hierarchy; a simpler, more economical solution is the one adopted here, with the locative metaphor as a category of its own. This decision is also motivated by the fact that the prepositions and expressions giving rise to this conceptualization are seldom found among the typical topic relations.

- (58) Such power was a thing for the little prince to **marvel at**. If he had been master of such complete authority, he would have been able to watch the sunset, not forty-four times in one day (X)
- (59) And if I forget him, I may become like the grown-ups who are no longer **interested in** anything but figures... (IV)
- (60) Cat. I també **m'equivocaré en** alguns detalls més importants. (IV)
'In certain more important details I shall make mistakes, also.'
- (61) Fr. Les enfants doivent être très **indulgents envers** les grandes personnes (IV) [English version in (62)]
'Children need to be very forgiving of grown-ups'
- (62) Children should always **show great forbearance toward** grown-up people. (IV)
- (63) Ger. Um meine Freunde **auf** eine Gefahr **aufmerksam** zu machen, die –unerkannt – ihnen wie mir seit langem droht, habe ich so viel an dieser Zeichnung gearbeitet. (V)
'In order to make my friends **aware of** a danger that - unrecognised - has been threatening them as well as me for a long time, I have worked so much on this drawing.'

As the examples show, it is often a question of fixed or semi-fixed predicate-preposition combinations, as in English *marvel at*, *(to be) interested in* and *(show) forbearance toward* in (58), (59) and (62), Catalan *equivocar-se en* 'to make a mistake in' in (60) and Fr. *indulgent envers* in (61). Finally, there is the German *aufmerksam auf* 'conscious on' in (63), also a fixed combination, where the following preposition doubles the prefix *auf-*. In all these examples, the locative prepositions *at*, *in*, *toward* as well as Catalan *en* 'on' and French *envers* 'toward' show that the topic is understood as a location *where* the mental processes take place or towards which it is directed. This situation is captured in alternative terms by Radden's (1978) notion of *Area* to refer to the topic relation.

Apart from the rather marginal topic relations presented above, involving locative prepositions of different kinds, there are a number of fixed verb-preposition combinations, which constitute the core of the communication and mental domains, i.e. the basic verbs of speaking and thinking. Examples include Spanish *pensar en* 'think on' and French and Italian, *penser à/pensare a* 'in, on, at' (examples (64) through (66)), with their Germanic equivalents in German *denken an* 'on' and Swedish *tanke på* 'on' in (67) and (68). Also the English default topic preposition *about*, which is frequently combined with both mental verbs such as *think* and communication predicates such as *to talk*, as in (70), is classified by Dirven (1982:60) as a locative preposition. The same goes for the Russian triplet *o/ob/obo* (*o/ob/oĭo*)¹⁶ 'about', which is the default topic-marking preposition in this language and used with almost any predicate, e.g. *znat'* (*знать*) 'to know', in (70).

¹⁶ The form chosen depends on the onset of the following word: if it begins with a consonant, *o* is used; *ob* is used before a vowel and *obo* in front of certain specific consonant clusters.

- (64) —Me parece que ya es hora de desayunar — añadió la flor —; si tuvieras la bondad de **pensar** un poco **en** mí... (VIII)
- (65) C’est l’heure, je crois, du petit déjeuner, avait-elle bientôt ajouté, auriez-vous la bonté de **penser à** moi... (VIII)
- (66) Pensò che sia giunta l’ora della colazione – e aveva subito aggiunto – vorresti **pensare a** me... (VIII)
- (67) ”Es is bald Zeit zum Frühstück”, fügte sie kurz darauf hinzu. “Hätten Sie die Güte, **an** mich **zu denken**?” (VIII)
‘If you would have the kindness to think of my needs (VIII)’
- (68) Eftersom han kände sig litet ledsen vid **tanken på** sin lilla övergivna planet, vågade han utbe sig en ynnest av kungen: (X)
‘And because he felt a bit sad as he remembered his little planet which he had forsaken’
- (69) I would **talk** to him **about** bridge, and golf, and politics, and neckties. (I)
- (70) Она ничего не могла **знать о** других мирах. (VIII)
[Ona ničego ne mogla znat’ o drugix mirax]
‘She could not have known anything of any other worlds.’

To sum up, the examples involving locative prepositions presented in this section—including both general and borderline topic expressions, such as *marvel at*, on the one hand, and certain fixed particle verb-like combinations, such as *think about*, *penser à*, on the other—constitute well-established ways of speaking, a fact that correlates with a low degree of transparency in terms of the metaphors involved.¹⁷

In the next section, I will pick up on this question by looking into the “liveliness” of the conceptual images by assessing the productivity of the five topic metaphors in linguistic expressions as manifested in language use outside *Le Petit Prince*.

5. Dead or live metaphors? Discussion and complementary findings

As the above analysis has shown, the topic markers found in the different language versions of *Le Petit Prince* indicate that the topic of a conversation or a mental process is often conceptualized as a concrete object that functions as a kind of locative reference point for the predicate. The topic as object and/or location, however, is accessed from different perspectives, depending on the semantics of the topic marker, construing the topic relation in different ways. In the source metaphor, the location is seen as the point of origin of the predicate; in the perspective from above metaphor the topic is accessed from *above*; in the revolving metaphor the discussion or thought process revolve around or surround

¹⁷ This, of course, does not prevent linguists from finding an association between the original locative meanings of a preposition and its reflection in abstract uses, as the following reasoning of Dirven (1982:58) shows: “the locative meaning of *about*, which denotes movement along a path in any possible direction ... [allows us to] think of the metaphorical use of *about* in *talk about* either as a longer discussion of the same topic or as a discussion of various successive topics.”

the topic and in the contact metaphor the location is physically touched. Finally, in the most general kind, the topic is simply conceptualized as a location, without additional, salient nuances.

Given the above classification of the different topic marking expressions into five separate metaphors, or conceptualisations, a question that needs to be addressed has to do with the degree to which the conceptual images involved can be considered alive and productive or dead. That is, do the expressions exemplify live conceptualisations that are (subconsciously) activated in the minds of speakers when they talk about the notion of topic? Or are they rather fixed, fossilized ways of speaking that can merely be thought to hint at underlying, past ways of understanding an abstract notion?

In the following I will try to provide a preliminary text-based answer to the above questions. A full answer would require non-linguistic evidence for the cognitive nature of these metaphors, but I believe that the linguistic elaborations that can be found in (written) texts can help to elucidate this matter at least to a certain degree. Linguistic data can also serve as an important starting point for further studies if they allow one to postulate hypotheses about which of the proposed metaphors are most likely to be actively involved when talking about topic. These hypotheses can then be tested by means of more sophisticated analysis, such as psycholinguistic experiments or detailed quantitative analysis of corpus data.

The ensuing discussion is necessarily exploratory and somewhat speculative in nature, especially since the material on which the discussion relies does not stem from systematic searches in representative and comparable sources but rather consists of a collection of examples which I have encountered in different texts and languages over the past ten years or so. Most of the examples come from English, Spanish and Swedish, but supporting examples from other European languages are included as well.

5.1. The source and location (area) metaphors

Although the source metaphor is conceptually natural and the image of source or origin is easy to comprehend, I have found no expressions truly supporting it. This means that, apart from the prepositions and case endings making reference to the notion of origin or point of departure, there do not appear to be other linguistic elements, e.g. motion verbs such as *come*, *originate*, *stem from*, which further evoke the idea of the topic being a source. In addition, since the source metaphor is instantiated throughout by highly grammaticalised prepositions (*de*, *of*, *von*) (see Lehmann 2002)—all of which are present-day substitutes of earlier genitives—and case endings (elative, ablative), this metaphor does not stand out as a live and productive conceptual image but rather as a fossilized and syntactically governed way of introducing the topic relation.¹⁸

¹⁸ In present-day English, the original source meaning of *of* is hardly present, as its treatment in different Cognitive Linguistics analyses show. For example, for Langacker (1991, 1999) *of* denotes an “intrinsic relationship between its trajector and landmark”, where the trajector is “an inherent subpart” of the landmark. Similarly, according to Lindstromberg (2010:206-207) *of* has an

Similarly, it is also difficult to find support for the general location metaphor—as illustrated by prepositions such as *in*, *at*, *about*, etc.—in additional lexical predicates building on or reinforcing such an unspecific conceptual image as 'location'. For example, a maximally general verb such as *is* does not reinforce the idea of a topic being a place in an expression such as *This is about me, not you*.

This, of course, does not mean that such supporting expressions do not exist or could not be identified for linguistic description. Rather, it means that I will not discuss these two metaphors further. Instead, I will comment on the remaining three, of which there are, as we will see, more readily available elaborations.

5.2. Elaborations of the contact metaphor

Additional support for the contact metaphor can be found in two kinds of expressions. First, there are expressions which belong to the expanded group of topic-marking prepositions, such as Finnish *koskien*, Swe. *rörande* and Sp. *en lo que toca a* 'in relation to, concerning, regarding'. These expressions are derived from verbs meaning 'to touch', as in Finnish *koskea*, Swedish *röra* and Spanish *tocar*. Finnish *liittyen* 'in relation to', based on the verb *liittyä* 'to join', can also be considered part of the family of topic expressions involving the contact metaphor. Examples (71) to (74) illustrate the use of these expressions.

- (71) Swe. Största delen av **kommunikationen rörande** kundens elavtal görs också på svenska (Korp-swe, 2012)
'Most of the communication regarding the customer's electricity contract is also done in Swedish'
- (72) Fi. Arvoisa puhemies, haluaisin esittää **tiedonannon koskien** kollegaamme...(Korp-fi)
'Mr President, I would like to make a statement regarding our colleague...'
- (73) Fi. Niin tietäisikö joku joitakin netti **osotteita HOROSKOOPPEIHIN LIITTYEN?** (Korp-fi, 2002)
'So would anyone know of some online addresses for horoscopes?'
- (74) Sp. Estoy segura que muchos te ven como **una dama inaccesible en lo que toca a** relaciones amorosas. (CORPES XXI, 2001 Cuba)
'I'm sure many see you as an unapproachable lady when it comes to love relationships.'

Second, apart from these expressions, which extend and enrich the category of topic-marking prepositions, there are further elaborations of the touching or contact metaphor in the topic domain. In languages such as Spanish and Swedish, the verbs of touching, *tocar* and *röra*, can be used with a topic sense in the context of

"integrative meaning" and Taylor (2002:325) states that *of* cannot be perceived as genuinely polysemous but merely has a "schematic value. See also Krawczak and Glynn (2019:5-6) for a discussion.

communication, as in examples (75) and (76). As the translations show, in combination with (*up*)on the English verb *touch* can also be used in a topic sense.

- (75) Swe. Men han **berörde** ämnet även i Före stormen och i nästa film vill ha göra något helt annat. (Korp-Swe, GP 2002)
'But he also touched (upon) the subject in Before the Storm, and in the next film he wants to do something completely different.'
- (76) Sp. En el almuerzo se habló de todo y finalmente, el padre Estanislao **tocó** el tema de Primitivo. (CORPES XXI, Bolivia 2002)
'During the lunch, everything was discussed and finally, Father Stanislaus touched on the subject of Primitivo'

Such topic uses of touch-verbs, however, are not very frequent. In fact, touch verbs are also used metaphorically in the domain of emotional experience, where a certain stimulus can be pictured as touching our perceptive or emotive apparatus (see Ibarretxe-Antuñano 1999, 2006, Trojszczak 2019). Thus, apart from cases such as *He touched upon this topic in his speech*, we also find examples such as *His speech touched the audience*, or *He wrote a touching message*.

Finally, recall the Estonian and Finnish adverbial expressions *kallal* and *kimpussa*, presented in (54) and (55) above, which make reference to physical meanings such as attack and get physically involved with.

As the examples presented above show, then, the contact metaphor does seem to extend beyond the domain of topic-marking prepositions and involves figurative uses of touch verbs, so this metaphor seems to be alive and productive to a certain degree.

5.3. Elaborations of the perspective from above metaphor

The perspective from above metaphor is a natural way of conceptualising topic, since the general conception of control is easily related to vertical superiority, which, in turn, can be reinterpreted as control over a topic (see Tyler & Evans 2003). Although the prepositions *sobre*, *su*, *sur* (in Spanish, Italian and French) and *over*, *över* and *über* (in English, Swedish and German) that give rise to the perspective-from-above metaphor are semantically transparent and also maintain their spatial meaning in many uses, they are also highly frequent and grammaticalised to a certain degree. In addition, the 'from above' conceptualisation is not supported by a large number of elaborations. It is thus uncertain to what degree the above metaphor can be considered a live and productive conceptualisation of topic.

There are, however, a limited number of expressions that seem to elaborate this conceptualisation. In the Swedish example presented in (77), the verb *glida* 'to glide, slide' is combined with *över* 'over' describing a scene where the subject's thoughts slide or drift over and across an abstract object, i.e. the topic. In English, the expression *hover over* is occasionally found in combination with thoughts, but as example (78) shows, the topic relation is less clear than in the Swedish example.

Example (79) includes another example of *hover over*, but it is also only marginally topical.

- (77) Swe. Sakta som solstrimman **gled hans tankar över** allt som hade hänt. (<https://litteraturbanken.se/f%C3%B6rfattare/Lo-JohanssonI/titlar/GodnattJord/sida/286/etext>, 2021-04-23)
'Slowly, like a beam of sunlight his thoughts drifted over everything that had happened.'
- (78) Divinest calm, disturbed only by the flutterings of winged **thoughts hovering over** the cloudless heaven of fancy! (M. Corelli, *Ardath: The story of a dead self*, 2019)
- (79) Senate is **hovering over** Twitter & Facebook: Dorsey, Zuckerberg to both testify before & after election (*The sociable*, Oct 26, 2020, <https://sociable.co/big-tech/senate-is-hovering-over-twitter-facebook-dorsey-zuckerberg-to-both-testify-before-after-election/>)

As the discussion regarding examples (77) to (79) shows, a person's thoughts can be conceptualised as hovering above something, be it the topic they are concerned with or something else. In this sense, the conceptual image of a perspective-from-above is clear and identifiable and also elaborated to a certain degree. At the same time, however, the low number of elaborations and the marginal status of the topic relation involved in them suggest that the perspective from above metaphor is not a productive conceptualisation that is often recurred to in order to lexicalise the topic relation.

5.4. Elaborations of the revolving metaphor

The most interesting of the five topic-metaphors is the revolving movement or surrounding metaphor, for which it is quite easy to find illustrative, figurative examples across European languages. Although the topic-marking prepositions expressing a circling movement only appear frequently in Scandinavian languages (Swedish, Danish, Norwegian. *om*) and to a lesser degree in English (*around*), French (*autour de*), German (*um*), Russian *vokrug* (вокруг) and Spanish (*en torno a*), there are several expressions from outside the restricted domain of prepositions that exemplify the productivity of the revolving/surrounding metaphor. Consider examples (80) through (83), which include verbs indicating how our thoughts sometimes move around inside our minds in a spinning motion, revealing a very dynamic construal of topic.

- (80) Swe. Kul, men omöjlig idé, ansåg han, medan **tankarna virvlade runt** som uppskrämda höns i huvudet på honom. (J. Guillou, *Slutet på historien*, 2020)
'Funny, but an impossible idea, he thought, as his thoughts swirled around in his head like scared hens.'

- (81) Oh, and twisted **thoughts that spin round** my head
I'm spinning (Pearl Jam, *Black*, 1992)
- (82) Sp. Tuve muchos **pensamientos revoloteando** por mi cabeza,
incluyendo cosas como, 'si escribo así no va a ser tan bueno como
Gangnam Style' (CE, 2015)
'I had a lot of thoughts flying around in my head, including things like
'if I write like this it's not going to be as good as Gangnam Style''
- (83) Fi. Ukko nojasi päätänsä kiveen ja koetti rauhoittua, mutta
ajatukset pyörivät hänen väsyneissä aivoissaan (Korp-fi, 1942)
'The old man rested his head against the rock and tried to calm down,
but the thoughts were swirling in his tired mind'

An interesting detail about these spinning or swirling thoughts is that, when they behave like this, our minds do not seem to be at their most efficient, but rather lack the power to control the thoughts. Hence the sense of confusion and the negative connotations involved in examples (80) to (83). It is not difficult to imagine a concrete, physical motivation for the association between a state of confusion and spinning thoughts — a few pirouettes should be enough to make anyone who is not an active dancer, figure skater or acrobat out of sync and dizzy.

In the domain of prepositional topic, there are examples of prepositions expressing a circling movement in several languages which, in combination with verbs expressing a similar, accompanying movement, make up highly explicit linguistic expressions illustrating this metaphor, as shown in (84) to (88). In English we find the verb *revolve* in combination with *around*; in Swedish the verb *mala* 'to grind', which refers to a markedly circular motion, is combined with *kring*, a spatial preposition meaning 'around'. In German *drehen* means 'to turn' as does Spanish *girar* and Russian *vraščatsja* (вращаться), and they are all combined with locative prepositions *um*, *en torno a* and *vokrug* (вокруг), which share the meaning 'around'. These explicit combinations clearly make reference to a particular, dynamic construal of the topic relation, which, however, can be of different kinds. In English and Swedish the topics seem to be mainly mental ones; in English related to somebody's research interests (84); and in Swedish the thoughts are grinding around something (85). In German (86) the expression *sich um etwas drehen* 'to be [=turn] about something' is a fixed expression with a general topic meaning, whereas in Spanish and Russian the topic relation has to do with communication: a discussion *around* a certain topic (examples (87) and (88)).

- (84) At the moment, my primary research interests **revolve around** my
doctoral dissertation
(http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/people/varieng_tyrkko.html)
14/03/2011 15:02
- (85) Swe. Samtidigt som tankarna **mal kring** frihetens tema (Korp-se,
Parole)
'As the thoughts grind around the topic of freedom'

- (86) Ger. Es dreht sich um die Zukunft der Menschheit und um den Klimawandel (Mannheimer Morgen, https://www.mannheimer-morgen.de/orte/mannheim_artikel,-stadtteile-einhart-klucke-im-kulturtreff-_arid,525971.html, 2022-06-24)
'It is about [turns around] the future of humanity and climate change'
- (87) Sp. Nuestras discusiones **giraban** sobre todo **en torno a** nuestras lecturas, a la forma de concebir una obra de arte. (CE, 19-OR)
'Our conversations circled mainly around our readings', around our way of conceiving a work of art.'
- (88) Ru. В этом уроке для начинающих разговор **вращается вокруг** покупок в универмаге. (<https://ru.kyaaml.org/im-kaufhaus-department-store-4070869-3340>, 2021-03-03)
[V ètom uroke dlja načinajuščix razgovor vraščaetsja vokrug pokupok v univermage]
'In this beginners' lesson, the conversation revolves around shopping in a department store'

The same prepositions as illustrated in (84) to (88), above, can also be used as topic-marking prepositions without the company of verbs of circular motion. This can be seen as an indication that the topic sense is firmly established in the semantic network of these prepositions. Examples (89) through (95) show how *around* prepositions are used in seven different European languages to express topic in combination with communication nouns meaning *discussion*, or *debate* in German (95):¹⁹

- (89) Swe. Vi kom så småningom in på en **diskussion kring** mat och dryck (Korp-swe, 2013)
'We eventually got into a discussion about food and drink'
- (90) Fi. Ja onhan se ymmärrettävää että nyt kun on uusi rokote, ja **keskustelu tämän ympärillä** on vilkas niin ei haluta yhtään negatiivistä julkisuutta.
(<https://keskustelu.jatkoaika.com/threads/koronavirus-%E2%80%93-keskustelua-rokottamisesta.71566/page-54>, 2021-03-02)
'And it's understandable that now that there's a new vaccine and there is a vivid discussion around it, you don't want any negative publicity.'
- (91) Sp. La del lunes fue una larga jornada de **discusión en torno al** caso de Paul Rueda. (CE, 2019)
'Monday was a long day of discussion about the Paul Rueda case.'
- (92) But the biggest thing that has changed about public **discussion around** Clinton and Lewinsky in the last 20 years is the question of consent (COCA, 2018)

¹⁹ Recall examples (45) to (50), presented in § 4.2.3, above, which provide further examples.

- (93) Fr. Guillén Calvo a animé une **discussion autour** des réussites, enseignements et défis de différentes expériences de réconciliation en Colombie (<https://www.insuco.com/guillen-calvo-a-anime-une-discussion-autour-des-reussites-enseignements-et-defis-de-differentes-experiences-de-reconciliation-en-colombie/>, 2021-03-02)
'Guillén Calvo led a discussion on the successes, lessons and challenges of different reconciliation experiences in Colombia'
- (94) Ru. Все о книге "**Разговор вокруг еды**" (<https://www.yakaboo.ua/razgovor-vokrug-edy.html>, 2021-03-03)
[vse o knige "Rozgovor vokrug edy"]
'All about the book "Conversation around food"
- (95) Ger. Eine davon ist **die Debatte um** die umstrittene Ausstellung Vernichtungskrieg. (<https://www.adlibris.com/fi/kirja/die-wehrmachtsdebatte---erkenntnisse-aus-schwachen-als-wege-zum-erfolg-9783640802982>, 2021-03-02)
'One of these is the debate about the controversial exhibition Vernichtungskrieg.'

In comparison with the first, and most metaphorical, examples of the circling movement metaphor (exemplified in (81) to (84), above), the examples in (90) to (96) illustrate a less dynamic construal, where the revolving movement gives way to a static scene of surrounding. They also have rather neutral connotations in comparison with the more dynamic expressions presented above (in (80) to (88)). In the discussion of food and drink, Clinton and Lewinsky's affair and the debate about a controversial exhibition there is little left of the confusion involved in having thoughts spinning around one's head. Instead, it seems to be the case that the discussion of the different topics is not necessarily very precise and detailed. On this basis, I would suggest that the prepositions which refer to communication surrounding a topic imply a rather superficial involvement with it. The discussion can be intense and long, as is hinted at in the Spanish, English and German examples (from (91) to (93)), but it seems less likely that it is deep and inquiring.

In English, *around* as a topic-marking preposition can be compared to *about*, *of* and *on*, which in Dirven's (1982) analysis respectively cover i) all aspects of the topic (from many points of view and during an extended time), ii) only parts of it, or iii) really zoom in on it.

the locative meaning of *about* [...] denotes movement along a path in any possible direction [...] we can think of the metaphorical use of *about* in *talk about* either as a longer discussion of the same topic or as a discussion of various successive topics. (Dirven 1982:58)

The difference between *talk about* and *talk of* may be traced back to the premetaphorical, locative meanings of *about* and *of*: *about* denotes any possible direction; *of* denotes the direction from where one comes; consequently it is linked up with a more specific meaning in the sense that one does not view the whole of an entity but only elements or parts, or in the case of *talk*, aspects of it. Thus *talk about* denotes all possible aspects of the topic, *talk of* rather denotes that one picks out some elements of a topic and implies that one could always take more and more elements from it. (Dirven 1982:60)

Given the meaning of close contact with a surface, which *on* in its locative use has, it is only natural that in its metaphorical sense in *talk on* this preposition has kept the idea of dwelling on a given subject with a certain intensity. Thus of the three prepositions denoting a discourse topic, *on* certainly has the most marked meaning (Dirven 1982:61)

Seven cases representing seven different languages is, of course, not sufficient evidence to draw solid conclusions, so further investigation is needed in order to verify if the suggestions I have made above are valid. However, if there is indeed a semantic contrast between revolving/surrounding prepositions and other topic-marking prepositions in terms of involvement with the topic, then one could consider that the confusing connotations involved in the live expressions of the circling movement metaphor become attenuated when stored as part of the meaning of the topic-marking prepositions (and postposition in the case of Finnish *ympärillä* 'around'). The conceptual image could be seen as involving a slow, sweeping movement circling around the topic without touching or getting closely involved with it, or, without dynamicity, as simply surrounding or involving it. A further step of semantic attenuation is then found in e.g. Swedish *om*, which, as a grammaticalised preposition, is the default topic-marking preposition in this language and has lost most locative nuances apart from the general topic meaning.

6. Concluding remarks

In the preceding paragraphs I have presented and discussed different ways of expressing and conceptualising the abstract notion of topic, especially by means of prepositions or preposition-like expressions combined with verbs and nouns of speaking and thinking and their topic or subject matter. The analysis of the different topic-marking expressions in ten language versions of *Le Petit Prince* allowed me to identify five different conceptualisations underlying the metaphorical expressions. According to these five metaphors topic can be construed as a concrete object, or location, which i) functions as points of departure or source; ii) is accessed or viewed from above; iii) is touched; iv) is circled around or surrounded; and v) is simply seen as an area or location.

The comparative analysis shows that the expressions used in the different languages vary across two dimensions. On the one hand, the default topic markers instantiate different metaphors; on the other hand, different metaphors are employed differently across the several kinds of topic relations (communication, mental, general and marginal). For example, in Romance languages the default topic prepositions *sobre*, *su*, *sur* and German *über* instantiate the Perspective from above metaphor, whereas the case languages Estonian and Finnish have default topic markers instantiating the Source metaphor. In the Scandinavian languages, default *om* is based on the revolving metaphor, whereas Russian *o* and English *about* are considered general locations. Apart from the default topic-markers, most languages show a considerable variety of expressions highlighting that different conceptualizations are possible.

In a second phase of analysis, I used additional textual evidence in an attempt to evaluate to what degree the different metaphors can be considered live

conceptualisations or rather fossilised remnants of earlier conceptual images. This tentative analysis reveals clear differences between the status of the five metaphors.

In the first place, the source metaphor appears to constitute a clear case of a dead metaphor. It finds no support in other linguistic expressions, and the prepositions, or case endings, instantiating the source metaphor are all grammaticalised forms with highly schematic and/or vague meaning. The instances classified as area or locative metaphor also find little additional support. In fact, this category is so general and unspecific, that it is hard to envision it as a specific metaphor. Alternatively, one could see it as a general image schema (Lakoff 1987) that underlies all the other metaphors (which are, after all, locative in their origin). From this perspective, it is not surprising that the elaborations that are found are not directly based on the abstract locative schema but rather on more specific instances of it.

Second, both the Contact and the Perspective from above metaphor seem to instantiate partially productive conceptualisations. Both find support in additional expressions which are found across several languages. For instance, the contact metaphor is supported by alternative topic-markers such as Swedish *rörande*, Danish *vedrörande* 'touching', Finnish *koskien* 'touching' and *kimpussa* 'be physically involved with', Estonian *kallal* 'physical(ly) attack' as well as by verbal predicates based on the concrete noun *hand*, e.g. Swedish *handla om* and German *sich handeln um* 'to be about [lit. to handle].' English *touch (up)on* can also be included among supporting expressions.

Similarly, the perspective from above metaphor is supported by several topic-marking prepositions (English *over*, Swedish *över*, German *über*, Estonian *peale*, *üle*) and, although to a limited extent, some figurative predicates, such as English *to hover over* or the Swedish expression in which the thoughts are pictured as gliding over a topic (see example (77), above).

Finally, the revolving metaphor stands out by showcasing several explicit elaborations of the circling movement in many languages. These elaborations are found both among the topic markers and in more elaborate expressions such as verbs or whole phrases. Illustrative examples include the use of concrete, locative and less grammaticalised prepositions such as Eng. *around*, Swe. *kring*, Sp. *en torno a*, Fr. *au tour de* and Ru. *vokrug* (вокруг). Furthermore, expressions such as *spinning thoughts*, *a discussion revolving around a topic*, Ge. *es dreht sich um* 'it is about [lit. it turns around],' and Swe. *tänkarna mal kring* 'the thoughts grind around,' and so on, are illustrative of this construal constituting a live metaphor in the European languages included in this study.²⁰

One must bear in mind, however, that the revolving/surrounding metaphor is, of course, not fully productive in the sense of allowing, e.g. a preposition such as *around* to be combined with any communication or mental verb. *To talk around politics*, for example, does not seem to be a standard way of putting things in

²⁰ Given the high salience of the revolving metaphor, it is interesting to note that the thorough descriptive presentation of a great variety of mental metaphors in DeVito (2010) does not involve the revolving construal of topic.

English; however, it is not completely infelicitous either but quite understandable. In any case, among the five metaphors identified in the different versions of *Le Petit Prince*, the revolving/surrounding metaphor is clearly the one which finds most support and which is most widely attested in figurative expressions outside the strict domain of prepositional semantics.

Although I have been able to identify a number of different topic metaphors, some of which appear to constitute live conceptualisations, or at least productive ways of speaking, there remain several questions to be answered. For example, how general is the revolving/surrounding metaphor? Is it specific to Indo-European languages or can it be found in other languages and language families as well?²¹ Is it truly a live conceptualisation?

Second, despite quite explicit linguistic evidence of the existence of topic metaphors, the degree to which these actually form a part of speakers' active conceptualisation of abstract notions needs to be put to test through more strict, empirical studies that move beyond eclectic observations of language use. Out of the five topic metaphors identified in this paper, the Contact and Perspective from above metaphors seem to possess a certain productivity and it would be interesting to see if psycholinguistic experiments or sophisticated analysis of corpus data could verify their cognitive reality.

Finally, the main candidate that stands out in this study is the circling/surrounding metaphor, for which there seem to be both a plausible motivation—the embodied experience of spinning and the effects that this has on our mental alertness—and relatively widespread linguistic elaborations across several languages. A natural following step would thus be to try to verify the importance of the revolving metaphor for the conceptualisation of the topic relation by experimental means. One could also use quantitative analysis of corpus data to contrast the different topic-construals expressed by e.g. *around* and *about* in English or *om* and *kring* in Swedish.

Although this exploratory text-based study can hardly be deemed conclusive with regards to its topic, I hope that the results at least show the way for future work on the intricate relationship between the conceptualisation of the abstract topic relation and its linguistic expression.

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