SUMMARY. T. Reinhart (80) has claimed that the naive identification of topic information with old information and of focus information with new information is inconsistent. I shall try to reconstruct the old versus new information approach in such a way that no inconsistency can arise.

My topic information will be what Chomsky (71) calls presupposition. The focus information of a sentence will be the material implication between its topic information and its content (its truth-conditions). The focus-information is 'the meaning' of the sentence qua focus-structure.

The usefulness of these concepts is illustrated because they are needed to show claims like the following.

1. Different focus assignment does not affect the truth conditions of a sentence, but it is responsible for the fact that the same sentence expresses different assertions, if it has different foci.
2. Topichood is one essential notion for the definition of the concept of the 'local relevance' of one utterance for another.
3. The relation between answers and questions should be described in terms of local relevance. Such an approach will provide a much more general account of the relation of being an answer to a question than commonly found in the literature.
4. Negative sentences with different foci express different assertions although they have the same truth-conditions. It makes a difference whether the negation belongs to the focus or not. The phenomena to be discussed can't be explained by differences in the scope of the negation.
5. We are able to explain the difference between questions like 'Who called, JOHN or MARY?' or 'Did JOHN call or did MARY call?' on the one hand and the corresponding alternative question without focus, 'Did John or Mary call?' on the other hand.

The approach developed in this paper belongs to truth-conditional semantics. It is assumed that propositions determine truth-conditions. But we argue for something more: Propositions should be regarded as structured entities. They should at least have a topic-focus structure.

I. WHAT IS NEW INFORMATION?

Mostly the topic of an utterance is defined as the old information of the utterance. And the focus is the new information of the utterance.¹

The concept of 'new information' is omnipresent in the 'functionalistic' literature. When I tried to find out how this notion is semantically defined I was very surprised to discover that there doesn't seem to exist a commonly
accepted definition. One could think that this is so for trivial reasons: We have a clear intuitive understanding of old and of new information. Therefore there is no need to define these notions.

Tanya Reinhart’s paper ‘Pragmatics and linguistics: An analysis of sentence topics’ shows however that the notions of old and new information are far from being unproblematic. A problem arises as soon as we admit that being old or new information is a property of referents.

Imagine that we are talking about Hans-Robert and you want to know whether anyone likes him. I say then:

(1) Hans-Robert likes himself.

Now, Hans-Robert and himself obviously are coreferential, by the rules of English grammar. So both words denote Hans-Robert. Next, let us assume that Hans-Robert is the topic of (1). Therefore Hans-Robert is old information. Let us further assume that he himself is the focus expression of (1). Therefore, the denotation of himself, i.e., Hans-Robert, is new information. Thus, Hans-Robert is both old and new information.

T. Reinhart concludes from an argument of this kind that topichood (and, presumably, focushood, too) can’t be defined in terms of referents. I think this observation is correct, but I believe that it would be premature to draw the same conclusion from it as T. Reinhart does. She gives up the identification of topichood with old information in favour of the notion of ‘aboutness’. It may be a matter of personal taste whether one finds this latter notion very illuminating. As for myself, I find it rather obscure.

I prefer the old information approach, despite the inconsistency discovered above. The inconsistency can easily be eliminated. Let us see how. Consider the following small text.

(2) a. Hans-Robert has admirers.
   b. He admires himself.

Let us ask ourselves what the new information of (b) with respect to (a) is. In other words, what does (b) tell us in addition to (a)?

I think the answer is this. In the configuration (2), (b) excludes the possibility that (a) holds but (b) does not hold.

To put it using different words: The new information of sentence (b) with respect to sentence (a) is the information that given (a) is true, (b) is true. So the new information of (b) with respect to (a) is the material implication between (a) and (b).