

Accentuation of Verbs: A Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

The tradition of the theory of information structure has focused upon one of the phrasal constituents, namely noun phrases. Prince (1981b: 235), for instance, argues in favor of dividing any text into three main components, namely: “DISCOURSE ENTITIES, ATTRIBUTES, and LINKS” (capitals in original), in which “all discourse entities,” which are mainly the potential carriers of information, “are represented by NPs”¹. The other parts of speech have almost been totally excluded from the investigation for no reasons other than unclarity and fuzziness of the subject matter (Finegan 1994: 206). This paper tries to investigate why the verb, in particular, fails to be the most prominent constituent in the discourse. Within the framework of this paper, it is argued that unlike verbal constituents, nominal constituents exhibit ‘inherent properties’, such as its definiteness and referentiality, which mark their information structure apart from the context (Finegan 1994: 206). At the discourse level, reference and word order contribute as well to this state of affairs. However, the information structure of the verb is, due to uncertainty of its definiteness status (Masica: 1986: 130), only determined by the context in which it occurs, and so it is stressed most of the time contrastively. Even when dividing the sentence, for example, into a ‘theme’ and a ‘rheme’ (Mathesius 1975), the verb is usually regarded as part of the rheme in which the noun phrase following it plays the highest degree of ‘communicative dynamism’ (Firbas 1966: 270), and thus, gets more prominence². Our argument will make clear that it is never unusual for the verb to communicate the highest degree of communicative dynamism, and thus occupies the focal position in the discourse. If this is true, we then provide a uniform analysis where the same argument is applicable to both nominal and verbal constituents.

Introduction

In a sentence like (1) below, the lexical constituent *car* is most prominent due to the fact that it receives primary stress, whereas *man* and *bought* receive secondary and tertiary stress, respectively.

(1) the man bought a **car**

One straightforward explanation for the subject matter comes from the thematic theory (Mathesius 1975) in which each discourse unit is divided into a

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‘theme’ (i.e., topic) and a ‘rheme’ (i.e., comment). The word *car*, therefore, by virtue of the fact that it is indefinite, conveys new information to the discourse³, and thus, occupies the nucleus of the rheme, but ‘*the man*’ does not add new information because the use of the definite article *the* implies that this lexical item is either ‘situationally’ or ‘contextually evoked’ (Prince 1981: 236). A natural deduction of this line of thought is the requirement that the whole proposition be divided into two portions only. If no movement rules are applied, the theme, then, comprises all the lexical items up to the verb, and all the other lexical items, including the verb, of course, make up the rheme. In (1) above, the NP *the man* is the theme, and the VP *bought a car* is the rheme. However, it is not crystal clear why the verb *bought*, though neither situationally nor contextually evoked, and despite being part of the rheme, is less prominent than the subject *the man* (i.e., the theme). If we assume that *a car* is the least familiar lexical item in this sentence because it adds new information into the discourse, and that *the man* is the most familiar because it does not, then we come up with a hierarchy of importance (based upon newness vs. givenness)⁴ as in (2) below which does not match up with the hierarchy of prominence (based upon relative pitch height) as in (3):

(2) HIERARCHY OF IMPORTANCE

a car > bought > the man

(3) HIERARCHY OF PROMINENCE

a car > the man > bought

Our task is to account for this discrepancy. In particular, why "bought", despite being as new as "a car", is less prominent; and even despite not being as old as "the man", is still less prominent. The relative "newness" of the verb does not match its relative prominence in the discourse⁵.

Chafe (1970: 212) proposes that “new is a specification which may be added, not to a whole verb or noun, but to a particular semantic unit within a verb or noun.” Therefore, it may be helpful to assume, following Jones and Jones (1979: 6) that the text consists of “degrees of significant discourse information”.

I here argue that the significance of each information unit is dependent upon its contribution to discourse development. As a general tendency, I argue that participants (N's) tend to contribute more to the discourse than actions (V's). For, participants, being more concrete, tend to stand out more in the "landscape". And in these cases (i.e. where the nominal constituent contributes more to discourse development), the verbal constituent functions no more than a link, to

use Prince's terminology. However, in cases where the verbal constituent contributes more to the development of the discourse, i.e. stands out more in the landscape, it receives more prominence.

HIERARCHY OF PROMINENCE

To account for the position of the nucleus, i.e., the hierarchy of prominence as in (3) above, scholars have approached the subject matter from different angles. Chomsky and Halle (1968), for instance, propose two rules: Compound Stress Rule (CSR) which applies to lexical categories, and Nuclear Stress Rule (NSR) which applies to phrasal categories. The example in (1) above can have a syntactic structure as in (4) below:

(4) [S[NP the man [VP[V bought [NP a car] VP]S]

Since the two rules apply cyclically—that is, the most deeply embedded constituent and so on, then the NSR assigns primary stress to the NP *a car* first, and erases inner-most brackets. The resulting syntactic structure is like (5) below:

(5) [S[NP the man [VP *bought a car*] S]

Now the most deeply embedded constituent is the VP, and so the NSR applies once more and assigns primary stress to the rightmost stressed constituent (i.e., *car*) while, at the same time, demoting all other constituents in the same domain of application (i.e., *bought a car*) by one level and erasing inner-most brackets as in (6) below, where the word *car* continues to be primarily stressed, but the word *bought* receives secondary stress. In the third cycle, the domain of application is the whole sentence:

(6) [S the *man* bought a **car**]

The stress on **car** continues to be primary because of the application of the NSR for the third time, but the stresses on *bought* and *man* are reduced by one level, resulting in tertiary stress for *bought* and secondary stress for *man*.

It is quite clear, therefore, that the adoption of the syntactic approach does not tell us why a certain constituent is made more prominent than all the other constituents in the same domain of application (i.e., hierarchy of importance). Rather, it just accounts for how that constituent gets more prominence in its context (i.e., hierarchy of prominence).

The argument that takes the grammatical function of the lexical item into account yields almost identical results. They just tell us what constituent is more prominent, but they do not tell us why that constituent is made more prominent. Consider, for example, the hierarchy of grammatical functions proposed by Horne (1985: 57) where the predicate complement is always given priority:

(7) Predicate Complement > Subject > Verb

a car > the man > bought

HIERARCHY OF IMPORTANCE

Bardovi-Harlig (1983) argues that pronouns, which are contextually evoked- to use Prince's (1981b) terminology- can be stressed for their "semantic roles."⁶ In a sentence like (8) below, the accentuation of the pronoun *he* is accounted for on semantic grounds, namely, the change of semantic relations:

(8) John hit Sam and then *he* was hit by Ira,

where *he* (i.e., the topic of the second clause) is not interpreted as referring to *John* (i.e., the topic of the first clause), but to *Sam* (i.e., the comment of the first clause). This semantic role shift makes it clear that the accentuation of pronouns is not solely, though it does imply, for emphasis or for contrast. Such being the case, Bardovi-Harlig (1983: 21-2) rightly concludes that "[p]ronouns are also potential carriers of new information," and "[n]ewness...is definable not only by strict appearance in a text or discourse."

The same rationale applies to verbs. Verbs cannot be excluded from the investigation on the basis of the meaning they contribute to the text, for their semantic content is undeniable. For example, a verb is often accentuated when repeated. Consider the following examples taken from Bardovi-Harlig (1983: 17), where in (9) the verb *broke* is in focus, but in (10) the pronoun gets that privilege:

(9) She saw the window break, but she didn't know what broke it.

(10) I saw the glass that Floyd broke, but I couldn't tell what it broke.

Whereas Bardovi-Harlig argues for the accentuation of sentences like (10), I would like to extend the same argument to include sentences like (9). Here, the accentuation of the verb can also be accounted for in terms of the change in the semantic content: *broke* in the second clause does not communicate exactly the meaning of *break* in the first clause: Whereas the verb *break* in the first clause communicates the idea that the experiencer saw the whole action, it is not used in that sense in the second clause. Notice here that the verb *break* on its second occurrence in (9) has changed its grammatical function: whereas it is transitive on its second occurrence, it is not on its first occurrence. Therefore, in both cases (i.e., the accentuation of verbs and pronouns), the two lexical items are accentuated not only because of their semantic content, but also their discourse function. This, at least, gives us an insight how accentuation works at the discourse level: *for the meaning they contribute to the text in which they occur*. This may fit well with the suggestion that Bardovi-Harlig (1983: 23) puts

forward to account for the accentuation of pronouns apart from that of emphasis or contrast: “a scale on which all information bearing sentence elements are entered.” However, in the case of verbs, it is not an unusual thing that a verb reaches the top of the scale, hence it is not, nor it can be, a totally ‘evoked entity’ as is the case with pronouns.⁷

At the other end of the scale, according to Prince (1981b: 235), the text is usually divided into “DISCOURSE ENTITIES, ATTRIBUTES and LINKS”⁸ in which the first two categories correspond, roughly speaking, to noun phrases (including pronouns), and adjectives, respectively (capital in original). Within this framework, pronouns are always regarded as ‘contextually evoked’ entities that cannot be stressed for their informativeness. Verbs, on the other hand, are neither discourse entities (which are represented by noun phrases) nor attributes. Although Prince’s discussion says nothing about verbs, one can infer that they can be treated as links—the third category in this taxonomy. I should mention, however, that the information structuring of verbal constituents merits further investigation.

INFORMATION STRUCTURING AND SENTENCE FOCUSING

The encoding of the information structure, i.e., “highlighting certain elements and backgrounding other elements” (Finegan 1994: 197), of nominal constituents has been extensively studied in the literature (Prince 1981b, 1990; Gundel et al 1992; Birner 1994; Ward et al. 1996; inter alia). It turned out that at the surface structure, intonation and word order are the most important features (Chafe 1970: 233; Creider 1979: 16)⁹. However, in order to understand the real impact of these factors at the discourse level, we need to consider other parts of speech whose information statuses seem to be less crystal clear.

At the discourse level, the prominence of a certain constituent is to a large extent determined by the context (verbal or nonverbal) in which it occurs. Several studies have shown that once a certain constituent enters into the discourse for the first time, it is more likely to receive prominence as it adds a new piece of information to the message communicated by the speaker/writer to the audience (see Bardovi-Harlig 1983: 23-4); meanwhile, that same constituent is often thrown towards a focus position (Mathesius 1975; Firbas 1966; Prince 1981; 1992; Birner 1994; Ward et al. 1996; inter alia). This may contribute to considering the text as consisting of “degrees of significant discourse information” (Jones and Jones 1979: 6).

Firbas (1966a;1966b), argues that each constituent in the discourse communicates a certain degree of ‘communicative dynamism’¹⁰, i.e., securing the heterogeneity of the discourse. In Ping’s words, “Backward inferences relate

rheme to theme, establishing a degree of appropriateness between them" (Ping 2000: 21).

I would argue that it is not an inherent property of noun phrases, as has sometimes been implied, that they are given priority in the discourse. Although participants, as stated earlier, tend to stand out more than actions in the "landscape", the present uniform analysis proposes that the information status of constituents (theme-rheme distinction) occurring in the same discourse is determined by their relevance to the subsequent discourse. The constituent, be it verbal or nominal, that contributes more to the overall meaning of the text and pushes it forward most is the likely constituent to receive prominence (foregrounding) on its first occurrence, and backgrounding on its subsequent occurrences. THIS HAPPENS BECAUSE THE SAME CONSTITUENT KEEPS CHANGING ITS INFORMATION STATUS AS THE DISCOURSE DEVELOPS. The greater the 'saliency' of that constituent as the discourse develops (i.e., in terms of frequency), the less likely it is to be prominent (in terms of stress). That same constituent—be it nominal or verbal—which was part of the rheme (i.e., comment) on its first occurrence changes now to become part of the theme (i.e., topic) on subsequent occurrence(s). This can be clarified by the well-known example of the opening of the narrative:

(11) A- once, there was **a king**

B- *the king* had **three daughters**

C- *the three daughters*.....

In each case (A, B, or C), the nominal constituents acquire an information status on their second occurrences (in italics) different from that they have acquired upon entrance into the discourse for the first time (in bold). This shift in position, we argue, is the most important factor in determining the information status of a certain constituent—be it a noun, a verb, etc. It is not because *a king* is an indefinite noun that makes it more prominent than the verb *was* in this sentence in particular, but rather, because it occupies a position that makes it the most legitimate candidate to become the topic (i.e., the salient feature) of the following discourse, and thus, contributing in one way or another to the development of the discourse. This happens when a new element (thrown toward a rhematic position) takes turn to be part of the subsequent discourse. *A king* in A is the rheme because the narrator wants to prepare it to become the theme of the next sentence.

Taking this into account, one may propose that verbs are less likely to change their positions; they are less likely to occupy a rhematic position on their first occurrence, and a thematic one on their second occurrence. Nouns, on the

contrary, are less subject to the restriction; they have a relatively higher degree of maneuverability. Consider the following examples which involve It-Clefting:

(12) it was John that bought a car

(13) it was a car that John bought

(14) *it was bought that John a car

The grammar of the language prevents such movement for the finite verb as in (14) above, thereby making its position with respect to the other constituents in the sentence highly predictable. A well-known example of movement rules that influence the information status of the lexical items undergoing the movement is the passive. Whereas the grammatical subject and object interchange positions resulting in highlighting one and backgrounding the other, the information status of the verb remains unchanged in both constructions. Besides, almost all movement rules that influence the information status of the lexical item undergoing the rule are done relative to the verb (cf. preposing and postposing). This gives us the indication that movement rules which “serve an information packaging function” (Birner 1994: 233) are not as influential in the case of verbs as they are for nouns. This would inevitably decrease the likelihood that verbs occupy a thematic or a rhematic position. Besides, in SVO languages, verbs do not occupy initial position (talking about typical declarative sentence) as that position is reserved for nominal constituents which, in order to avoid mere repetition, can be pronominalized on subsequent occurrences. Factors such as these may explain why nominal constituents are, relatively speaking, more likely to be the main DISCOURSE ENTITIES, the potential carriers of information.

However, verbal constituents, when occupying a rhematic position, become most prominent. As sentence final position is one of focus, it is necessary that a constituent occupying that position acquire an information status, relative to the other constituents in the same discourse, up to that capacity. Consider the following examples:

(15) the bank was robbed

(16) John slept

(17) John wanted to leave

In these three sentences, the verbal part is more prominent (i.e., uttered with high pitch) than the nominal part. In connected speech- all other things being equal- it is not unusual that this part of the sentence be developed as the topic of subsequent discourse units. In other words, the information structure of the discourse in which (15) occurs will not suffer from lack of coherence if the next

discourse unit talks about ‘the act of robbery’ rather than ‘the bank’ that is by then, in Wallace’s (1982: 208) words, backgrounded; and the discourse following (16) about the act of sleeping; and the discourse following (17) about the act of leaving. This is so because the constituent that occupies the rhematic position is the most legitimate constituent to occupy the thematic position in the subsequent discourse. Consider the following example taken from Birner (1994: 238), where she argues for the accentuation of the postposed constituent (i.e., Nusseibeh) in terms of “the familiarity of the subject and the preposed element” (i.e., most immediately affected):

- (18) Nusseibeh’s unusual predicament causes concern all around. His friends fear that Arab hard-liners will turn on Nusseibeh, thinking he is an Israeli ally. The Israelis, who certainly want to squelch the 17-month-old uprising in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, are under intense pressure from the United States not to jail moderates who may figure in their election proposal for the territories occupied since the 1967 war. <most immediately affected> is <Nusseibeh himself>

Despite the fact that *Nusseibeh* has been introduced into the discourse earlier, and despite the fact that it is a proper name, it occupies a focus position in the sentence on its second occurrence. Earlier approaches would predict that *Nusseibeh* is the least likely constituent to occupy this position by virtue of the fact that it has already been introduced into the consciousness of the hearer/reader. Otherwise, an attempt to throw it towards a position of focus, and thus, producing it with high pitch, may convey a contrastive function, i.e., as an answer to a question like: who is most likely affected? In my view, moving Nusseibeh to a rhematic position is a preparatory step to making it the theme of the subsequent discourse: for Nusseibeh to become the topic of discussion (i.e., part of the background) as the text moves forward, it is better introduced into the discourse not as part of background information, but rather as the nucleus of the discourse. Implicit in this assumption is the fact that strict appearance in the text is not the decisive factor; a lexical item may appear in the text for the first time without having it in rhematic position (cf.: Nusseibeh in initial position in 32 above). As long as it does not occupy the rhematic position of the discourse at a certain point, it may not be developed to become the topic of the subsequent discourse. Notice here that Nusseibeh on its second occurrence in the first part of the discourse is thrown towards a focus position, and is not pronominalized until it becomes the theme of a sub-part of the discourse (i.e., he is an Israeli ally). To make use of the notion of ‘communicative dynamism’ (Firbas 1966: 270), Nusseibeh on its final occurrence, being introduced on the scene as part of ‘foreground’ information, does have the highest degree of ‘communicative dynamism’ as it occupies a focus position—being the rheme of the second

discourse unit, and uttered with a high pitch. *On its next hypothetical occurrence it will have the least degree of ‘communicative dynamism’* as it moves into a thematic position. Hence, movement into a thematic position adds no further information in this case as it becomes part of the background, and contributes no more to the development of the text. The speaker presupposes the existence of this piece of information in the consciousness of the hearer (i.e., theme), and begins thinking of adding new information (i.e., rheme) to what has already been presupposed.

This way of argumentation supports Bardovi-Harlig’s conclusion that making a certain constituent occupy a focus position on a ‘dynamic scale,’ where “an item may move up the scale from a lower position,” is not a matter of “strict appearance in the text” (1983: 22). Any constituent—be it nominal or verbal—may not occupy the rhematic position of the text unless it has the highest degree of ‘communicative dynamism’ - the contribution it makes to move the discourse, at least, one step forward. And this may not happen unless that constituent becomes the most significant piece of information by being the likely constituent to become (part of) the theme of the subsequent discourse unit.

Such being the case, the choice between (19) and (20) below in connected speech is not a matter of stylistic variation as one would assume at first sight. Rather, it is a function of their ‘communicative dynamism’ not only within the boundaries of the sentence as an independent, bounded unit, but, more importantly, in the discourse as a whole—what they contribute to the text as a whole:

(19) I gave John a book

(20) I gave a book to John

Extending Creider’s (1979) analysis, I should need to mention first of all that (19) is an answer to a question like *what did you give John?* and (20) *to whom did you give the book?* The information status of examples like these, I believe, can be approached from a different angle, that is, taking the following discourse into account. In my view, their uses in the appropriate context can be revealing. Examining these two sentences in their unmarked occurrences would reveal that they are not the same as far as the following discourse unit is concerned: (19) is most appropriate if the topic (the theme) of the following discourse is *a book*, which has already occupied the rhematic position in the previous discourse, and thus, contributing more to the coherence and cohesion of the text. Similarly, the subsequent discourse unit of (20) will make *John*, not *book*, its topic (the theme) by virtue of the fact that it has already functioned as the rheme in the discourse. This fact is manifest if we try to extend the discourse of (19) and (20) as in (19a) and (20a) below:

(19a) I gave John a book which I borrowed from the library

(20a) I gave a book to John, who attended the meeting yesterday

Notice that as *book* is the focus of the matrix clause in (19a); it violates neither the grammar nor the semantics of the discourse unit to be developed as the theme of the embedded clause; similarly, *John* is the rheme of the matrix clause in (20a), and so changing its information status to become the theme of the embedded clause will not result in a weird construction. This can be clarified if we make the following paraphrase:

(19b) I gave John a book[that book I borrowed from the library

(20b) I gave a book to John[John attended the meeting yesterday

Once a constituent -irrespective of its type- is thrown towards a focus position, its likelihood to be developed in the discourse increases. As for the verbal-nominal dichotomy relative to their information statuses, nominal constituents are more likely to occupy rhematic-thematic positions; and thus they acquire higher degrees of 'communicative dynamism'. Pronominalization is just one piece of evidence. To illustrate, in addition to their semantic content, which surely contributes to their saliency in the discourse, nominal constituents are usually pronominalized on subsequent occurrences. When repeated in their reduced forms, their likelihood of continuing to occupy a focus position decreases, as they move more to the left on Prince's (1981b) hierarchy of Assumed Familiarity, or Gundel et al.'s Hierarchy (1992). This is corroborated by the findings of Prince (1981b: 250) where she shows that evoked entities in subject position make up 50% of the total tokens she investigated, whereas in nonsubject position they make up 12.55% only, implying that those entities in thematic position are more likely to have been introduced into the discourse earlier.

In the same vein, verbs occupy the rhematic position once they have the highest degree of communicative dynamism which will enable them to become the theme of the subsequent discourse (i.e., topic under current discussion) with the grammatical subject of each sub-part being copied into the next. Consider the following example taken from Finegan (1994: 209)

(21) I've kept in touch with many people from my school days. I still see Harold, who was my best friend in high school. And there's Jim, who was my college roommate, and Stan and Hilda, who I met in my sophomore year at State. I really like Jim and Stan and Hilda. But Harold, I can't stand him now.

It is interesting to note that the rheme of each sub-part is the theme of the next, but the topic of discussion for the discourse as a whole is that of *keeping in touch with*:

(21a) A-I still see Harold, who was my best friend in high school

B- And then there's Jim, who was my college roommate

C- and Stan and Hilda, who I met in my sophomore year at state

Notice here that in those cases where the same grammatical subject of the first clause is copied into the next, the verb is the part that plays the highest degree of communicative dynamism (or the most important element in the discourse—so to speak) since the verb itself is what pushes the discourse forward, and at the same time inviting a new constituent to occupy the rhematic position:

(21b)D- I've kept in touch with many people from school days. I still see Harold

E- I really like Jim and Stann. But Harold, I can't stand him now

In D above, as the most important thing is the idea of *keeping in touch with, many people* is not the theme of the next discourse unit: the grammatical subject *I* is copied and a new constituent (i.e., Harold) is introduced as the rheme of the new discourse unit. Interestingly, left-dislocation in E has no effect except moving the constituent which occupies the nucleus of the rheme (i.e., Harold) from sentence final position to sentence initial position. In other words, whether *Harold* is sentence initial or sentence final, the next sentence will no doubt make him its topic:

(22) But Harold, I can't stand him now, because he

Another example where the verbal part, not the nominal part, has the highest degree of communicative dynamism is taken from Birner et al (1998):

(23) My sister got stabbed. Two of my sisters were living together on 18th Street. They had gone to bed, and this man, their girlfriend's husband, came in. He started fussing with my sister and she started to scream. The landlady, she went up and he laid her out. So sister went to get a washcloth to put on her, he stabbed her in the back.

It is interesting to note that the part in focus in the first sentence (got stabbed) is the one that pushes the text forward by being developed throughout. Within the larger context, there are, of course, sub-parts that all contribute to the development of the whole discourse topic. Looking at the discourse as a whole unit of heterogeneous nature in which each item contributes, relatively speaking, something to the development of the topic under discussion, it is easy to detect

the part which communicates the highest degree of communicative dynamism—by being thrown to a focus position, and uttered with highest pitch. That part is really of most concern to both the encoder and the decoder.

Having established this close theme-rheme interface, it is easy to see why certain texts are more coherent than others. The more the text follows this pattern, the more it is continuous, and the more it gives the reader/hearer the opportunity to anticipate. Even without needing to consider them in larger contexts, though essential, one may comment why in a written text (24) below is far more coherent than (25):

(24) A- have you seen John?

B- I've seen his sister.

(25) A- have you seen John?

B- I've seen the manager.

To reiterate, because *the idea of seeing John* is the rheme of the question, there is no need to continue acquiring that same information status as the discourse develops; it would better be (part of) the theme in the answer, i.e., be part of the presupposed knowledge of the interlocutors; This will guarantee the heterogeneity of the text, and the continuity of the discourse; otherwise, intelligibility on the part of the reader will be greatly affected. But the important point is that this may have nothing to do with the grammatical category of the constituent(s) undergoing the change. Verbs, like nouns, can be accentuated for reasons other than emphasis or contrast, simply because they are potential carriers of meaning, and so they can push the text forward. We need not, then, provoke terms like emphasis or contrast to account for one category where, meanwhile, we can handle the subject matter in more unifying terms.

Given this uniform analysis, we then need not assume that some verbs convey a higher degree of communicative dynamism than others as Firbas (1966) does. Consider the following example:

(26) A- he is a good teacher.

B- yes, he *is*.

In A *teacher* is the rheme of the discourse unit, and so it becomes the theme (i.e., he) of B; as a corollary of the belief that each discourse unit comprises a theme and a rheme, *is* on its second occurrence does not communicate the meaning of contrast whatsoever; rather, it displays the highest degree of 'communicative dynamism'—by being thrown to a focus position and uttered with, relatively higher pitch than the pronoun *he* (that is, the accentuation of the

copula here is due to its semantic content at the discourse level). This surely does not contradict Chafe's observation that "the fact that high pitch regularly reflects new information except that a verb root specified as new is not represented in the surface structure with high pitch unless it is final" (Chafe 1970: 217). Examples like these emphasize three facts: first, the rules that account for the accentuation of nouns are the same rules that account for verbs; second, there is no motivation to assume that some verbs are less likely than others to undergo the same rules; and third, the position of the constituent which communicates the higher degree of communicative dynamism in the sentence becomes less decisive. Each lexical item fits in its context if the choice is successful. The final point merits further clarification.

In Horne's (1985: 57) terms, the predicate compliment is given precedence over the grammatical subject. In light of the present discussion, this may not be true all the time. Consider:

(27) A man called while you were on your break. He said he'd call back later.

Since the grammatical subject *he* is the theme of the second sentence, I find no reason not to consider its antecedent *A man* the rheme of the first sentence, though it is not part of the predicate. Besides, the fact that the grammatical subject is indefinite, it adds new information, necessary for pushing the discourse forward; and thus gets pronominalized in the subsequent discourse. The noun phrase *A man* is the rheme, not because it is part of the subject or part of a certain grammatical category, but, may, in part, be looked at from another angle: it is the theme (the part that is under current discussion) of the second clause. The speaker in the first sentence wants to communicate the idea that there was an act of calling by someone (whom he does not know); in the next sentence he wants to convey the message of that person (that is, he will call later). That same person on the second occurrence (i.e., he) is no longer occupying a focus position in the discourse, simply because any constituent cannot have the same 'degree of communicative' dynamism on two or more successive occurrences in the development of the discourse. Otherwise, the text will be totally homogeneous, i.e., as if nothing is added to what has already been presupposed. I would hesitantly use the term 'fossilization' of the text in such instances (or 'termination' of the discourse). Making use of analogy, one would say that a discourse is like a tree with a trunk (theme) and branches (rhemes). The time the tree stops producing these branches, it reaches a state of dormancy that, if continues for too long, causes the tree to die.

As a final example to illustrate how the subsequent discourse determines which constituent, irrespective of its grammatical structure or its position in the

sentence, plays the highest degree of ‘communicative dynamism’—that is, pushing the text forward. Contrast:

(28) A- My wife talked to me about what happened yesterday. She doesn’t know how to keep a secret.

B- My wife talked to me about what happened yesterday. Someone knocked at the door....

The ‘act of talking’ in A is far more important than the action that took place, simply because the second sentence emphasizes the idea by making that act its theme. On the other hand, B stresses the importance of the action that took place, not because it belongs to a certain category of lexical items, but, more importantly, because it displays the highest degree of ‘communicative dynamism’, resulting in making that action the topic of discussion in the next most adjacent discourse unit. In other words, (28a) is most appropriate when the speaker is telling a fact about his wife, but (28b) is most appropriate when reporting the incident that happened yesterday.

As far as primary stress is concerned, the speaker will stress the word *talked* in A in an attempt to draw the attention of the hearer(s) to it as he plans to make it his next topic. In B, on the other hand, *talked* goes unstressed as the speaker’s next topic has nothing to do with ‘the act of talking’. In both cases the accentuation does not convey any sort of contrast, it is just the context that determines which constituent plays the highest degree of communicative dynamism, irrespective of (a) the grammatical category of the word, and/or (b) its position in the sentence.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion brings us back to the definition of the theme and rheme first proposed by Mathesius (1975), where he defines the two terms functionally. The relationship between the theme and rheme as functional terms on the one hand, and the subject and the predicate as grammatical terms on the other is not one-to-one, for they do not always coincide. Otherwise, the grammar of the language will not be able to incorporate into its system cases like (27) above where the grammatical subject (i.e., a man) may be far more salient in the subsequent discourse than the predicate complement. As for language teaching/learning, the proposed analysis provides a uniform analysis that capitalizes on the following assumptions. First, the rules that account for the accentuation of nominal constituents are the same rules that account for the accentuation of verbal constituents. Second, there is no need to for parameterization (i.e. to assume that some verbs are more likely to attract stress than others. Third, the canonical word order of the constituent which

communicates the higher degree of communicative dynamism in the sentence becomes less decisive. Each lexical item fits in its context if the choice is successful. We conclude that primary stress placement at the discourse level is a matter of how much the stressed constituent contributes to the development of the text as a whole.

التحليل السياقي لنبر الافعال

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ملخص

التقليد في نظرية التكديس المعلوماتي (information structuring) ركز على واحدة من مكونات الجملة الأساسية وهي التراكيب الاسمية NPs وغالباً ما غفل عن التراكيب الفعلية VPs. فقد دلت دراسة Prince (1981b: 235) على تقسيم النص إلى ثلاثة مكونات رئيسية وهي: وحدات السياق Discourse entities والخصائص attributes، والروابط links، حيث تكون وحدات السياق الممثلة بالتراكيب الاسمية من الجملة هي التي تحتوي على المعلومات الخبرية. أما الأجزاء الأخرى كالخصائص والروابط التي تقع ضمن السياق نفسه فقد استثنيت من البحث لأسباب لا تعدى ضبابية الاستخدام وعدم وضوح الرؤيا. فتحاول الدراسة الحالية تقصي لماذا يفشل التركيب الفعلي، على وجه التحديد، في أن يقع في بؤرة التركيز لينتج نبر السياق، وقد تم التأطير في هذه الدراسة للافتراض التالي: تتميز الأسماء، على غير عادة الأفعال، بسمات دفيئة كقدرتها على تحمل التعريف (definiteness) والتضمير (referentiality) والترتيب (word order) التي تحدد تكديسها المعلوماتي حتى وإن كانت منعزلة عن السياق (انظر: Finegan 1994: 206). ويساهم كل ذلك بشكل كبير في تعزيز مكانة التراكيب الاسمية على مستوى السياق. وبالمقابل يصعب تجلية التكديس المعلوماتي للتراكيب الفعلية إلا ضمن إطار السياق الذي تقع فيه (انظر Masica 1986: 130)، ولذا يتم تحديد درجة نبر التركيب الفعلي في أغلب الأحيان على أساس تقابلي (contrastively). وحتى عند تقسيم الجملة إلى جزئين ابتدائي وخبري (انظر Mathesius 1975)، فإن الفعل يعتبر جزءاً من القسم الخبري الذي يحتل فيه الاسم المتمم للجزء الفعلي الدرجة الأعلى من الدفع الاتصالي communicative dynamism (انظر Firbas 1966: 270)، وهو بالتالي من يقع عليه نبر السياق. وفي دراستنا هذه فإننا نبين أن ليس من الاستحالة أن يتحمل الفعل نفسه أعلى درجة من الدفع الاتصالي وبالتالي احتلال بؤرة التركيز في السياق. وإن صح هذا الافتراض فالدراسة الحالية تقدم تحليلاً موحداً للتراكيب الفعلية والاسمية من خلال وظائفها في السياق.

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Notes

- 1- Following Chafe (1970: 213), we would like to assume that, as a general tendency, “those surface structures items which reflect new information are (with some exceptions) spoken with a higher pitch (and greater amplitude) than those which reflect old information”. Bolinger (1972: 633) restates the same idea by saying that tonic stress “is a matter of information, not structure”. Allerton and Cruttenden (1979: 49) paraphrase this idea as “ words with low informational content ... are unlikely to receive a nuclear stress, whereas words with high information content ... are likely to receive a nuclear stress.”
- 2- Allerton & Cruttenden (1979) show how an intransitive verb may fail to receive tonic stress, which gets shifted on to the definite subject. In the same vein, Faber (1987) subcategorizes intransitive sentence with regard to tonic stress placement. The present study deals with the same issue in more unifying terms.
- 3- The discussion here is inspired by Chafe’s (1970: 214) question: “why does a noun which conveys old information have to be either definite or generic?” According to Chafe, “the trouble with sentences like (*a box is empty* or *sm boxes are empty* [p:213]) is that they treat something which has to be new information as if it were old information by placing it first in the surface structure and giving it low pitch.”
- 4- The discussion here is restricted to English sentences where the typical word order is SVO. An excellent overview of the theme-rheme distinction is provided in Halliday (1994) and Szwedek (1977).
- 5- See Allerton and Cruttenden (1979) for examples where even a definite subject takes precedence over an intransitive verb to attract tonic stress.
- 6- It should be pointed out that the discussion here excludes altogether the assignment of stress for emphasis or contrast⁶, simply because every lexical item in a certain context, including prepositions and form words which are marked for “their high word frequency and their low sentence stress” (Philips 1983: 487), can be stressed contrastively. Bolinger (1985: 85) argues that “the focusing of a preposition is like the focusing of any other word,” but I think we need to draw a distinguishing line between those stressed contrastively, and those stressed noncontrastively. Otherwise, the speaker may choose to make a “declared contribution” (Gussenhoven 1983: 383) to the context, and thus, highlight the meaning of any lexical item, for “whenever emphatic stress occurs in a sentence, it overrules normal stress” (Hogg and McCully 1987: 4).
- 7- Bardovi-Harlig (1983: 23) proposes a scale on which all lexical items are listed according to their semantic content: “An item is entered on the top of the scale on its first occurrence.” However, she assumes that pronouns, due to the fact that they can never be totally new, they cannot, compared to the other lexical items, reach the top of that scale.

- 8- Prince (1981b) does not define the term link and does not even consider those constituents that can be listed under this category. My assumption regarding verbs here is no more than a filling-in-the-gap exercise.
- 9- Besides, in some languages such as Japanese and Quechua some particles are used.
- 10- The term communicative dynamism is used in the sense of Firbas (1966: 270): a criterion according to which the information status of the constituents are viewed, so as to guarantee the heterogeneity of the text, i.e., not all items in the discourse are new (because the message cannot be totally understood), and not all of them are old (because that won't help the discourse to move forward).

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