

SOME REMARKS ON CONTEXTUAL BOUNDNESS
AND SEMANTIC RELATIONS
IN THE THEMATIC-RHEMATIC STRUCTURE OF SENTENCES

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0. Studies in the thematic-rhematic structure of sentences have led to a number of open issues and controversial statements; blurred by terminological plurality and liberal interpretations, they stem from an apparently simple truth that a regular message consists of "what is spoken about" and "what is said about it". The source of this dichotomy goes back to the Aristotelian distinction between "hypokoimenon" and "kategoroumenon", and since then it has evolved in linguistic and philosophical writings under a number of different labels. With the lapse of time, however, it has considerably lost its psychological undertones. Analysed in terms of a formal notation, as has recently been attempted within the framework of functional generative linguistics, the topic-comment articulation (TCA) has departed even more from its original simple foundation. The question arises if the primary objective of the sentence, and namely its share in a communicative act, has not been reduced to the advantage of theoretical speculations.

It remains a matter of course that, as Vachek put it, "the sentence is an elementary verbal act of taking a standpoint towards some reality" and thus any attempts at divorcing speech from its context seem groundless. Such practices, however, are not at all infrequent; sentences under investigation are intentionally detached from any situational reality and as such they do not illustrate much in terms of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP), but merely stand out as grammatically acceptable strings of words. In this way they become certainly inadequate for any conclusive statements to be made about their communicative weight.

What is claimed here first of all is the belief that FSP should not admit sentences pronounced as having no communicative warrant. As Dahl says

after Kortunova "outside speech bipartition does not exist. (...) The actual bipartition of one or another specific sentence is primarily given by the specific consituation and the purpose of the communication, in other words, by the actual information that the speaker wants to deliver, i.e., by factors outside the sentence proper" (Dahl, 1969:10). If FSP, to quote Daneš, is "concerned with the organization of the sentence as a message, with how the grammatical and semantic structures function in the very act of communication" (Halliday, 1974: 43), it is only sound to eradicate from the scope of its analysis sentences deprived of any context of use, and, consequently, to seek for them an analysis that would show the sentence in a communicatively relevant frame. This seems basic if the "functional" in FSP is to be defended.

The purpose of the following contribution is to discuss certain operations and concepts adopted within the framework of TCA and namely those related to contextual boundness,¹ the concept of givenness and the role of semantics in the thematic-rhematic structure of sentences which, it seems, need reconsideration.

1. The TCA has traditionally been viewed as an interplay of linearization, semantic structure and contextual boundness. The point here is to see, primarily, how the two — context and semantic structure — have been said to relate to each other, and how their roles in ascribing a given TCA to a sentence have been evaluated; in that field the Prague linguists have done impressive work and their findings will be referred to extensively.

According to Firbas (Firbas, 1974) context is superior to the operation of semantic structure: semantic structure operates within that section of the sentence which remains unaffected by, and independent of, the preceding context. Thus in a context-independent sentence of the agent-action-goal type, expressed by S, V, O, e.g.:

1. A girl broke a vase,

the object carries a higher degree of communicative dynamism (CD) than the verb, and the verb carries a higher degree of CD than the subject, which leaves the object highest on the communicative scale.

Sgall's discussion of this point (Sgall 1973) remains in keeping with Firbas' formulation. Sgall distinguishes namely three layers of TCA and among them the first layer, referred to as the basic distribution of CD; this level of TCA

¹ The concept of contextual boundness is originally taken from Sgall. According to his definition elements contextually bound are "established, ... i.e., such elements that the speaker only reminds of, as elements known to the hearer, either known from the context, from the situation or from general conditions of the given utterance" (Sgall, 1973: 47).

is claimed by him to be determined entirely by the semantic structure of the sentence, and so, to come up in sentences not presupposing any preceding context:

2. Tom bought a blue shirt
3. Mouton published Chomsky's Syntactic Structures
4. A boy met a girl
5. A stranger came.

In this way Sgall, like Firbas, assumes that contextual non-boundness automatically sets in motion the operation of semantic structure which then freely determines the distribution of CD over the sentence.

2. Reference to such examples as above invites a closer look at the concept of contextual detachment and its implications for any measurement of CD distribution. Questionable here is, first of all, the notion of a sentence not presupposing any context, be it verbal or non-verbal. This seems so, primarily for two reasons: first, from a communicative point of view the performance of a sentence is always dictated by a definite communicative situation, and, second, a total estrangement of a sentence from any communicative background undermines its susceptibility to any evaluation in terms of how it might promote communication. Consequently an analysis of a sentence within FSP can disregard neither a broader perspective in which that sentence could occur nor its status within such a setting.

As for (1) it could be accepted against such linguistic and contextual set-ups as in (6) or (7):

6. There were a group of youngsters brawling in the hotel foyer. Some one tripped over an ash-tray. A girl broke a vase,

meaning: one of the girls in the group in the hotel foyer.

7. What's happened? What's that glass doing on the floor?

A girl broke a vase,

meaning: one of the girls who happened to be there, whom I know, etc.

Obviously these are only two out of a number of possible communicative slots in which (1) could possibly fit: it strikes as pulled out of a bigger communicative whole and allows no conclusions about what was said before or what may be said next. On the contrary, it exhibits a strong contextual dependence. It also seems only appropriate as an answer to such questions as:

- What happened?
 What happened over there?
 What was that noise?, etc.

Similarly (5) is first of all a new action-event announcement. It positively assumes a scene of appearance, be it a place where somebody or something can appear, or somebody's presence to notice this appearance:

8. We waited in the hall. Then the door opened. A stranger came. We looked at him in surprise.
9. "A stranger came. He wants to talk to you. He is waiting at the door". Paul got up slowly from his chair and made his way to the door.

Still more inconclusive as to its communicative perspective is (4), striking at the same time as very low on the scale of frequency of usage; the only natural situation in which it could possibly occur — that comes to my mind at present — is as a start for a story:

10. A boy met a girl. Then they fell in love, got married and lived happily ever after.

It should be noticed, however, that the use of such sentences resembles a literary convention according to which the reader agrees to take for granted a number of presuppositions or the existence of certain facts. What the author does is respond as if to a certain call: "You want to know how it happened, so I will tell you", or "You want to hear a story, so imagine a certain boy and I will tell you about him". On similar grounds sentences like (11) are not at all infrequent as starting points for a chapter or a book:

11. The doctor arrived late.

What the author says is: "This is the doctor I know well and you will learn about him soon. So let us take it for granted that you know whom I mean".

As for the communicative import sentences (1–5) outweigh considerably those that could precede as well as those that could follow; their heavy communicative load overrides the principle of gradual communication progression. As an integral, separate communicative unit they admit a whole variety of verbal settings, yet at the same time restrict their type: in this way "breaking a vase" may be juxtaposed with happenings in a house, in a restaurant, in an office, in a shop, etc., still it always introduces an announcement of an *event* which involves some not quite specified participants. However, the pronouncement of such sentences in a natural act of communication must be in accordance with the presupposition, shared by the participants of the discourse, of the possibility for such an event to have taken place; thus (1) would be communicatively devoid if uttered in a setting excluding the existence of *girls, or vases*.

The doubtful validity of such examples for the purpose of FSP has already been pointed out by Sgall (Sgall, 1973). In discussing the example given by Firbas (1) Sgall administers the negation test to show that

12. A girl did not break a vase

does not exclude the assumption that there may be girls "in the respective world or universe of the given discourse" (*ibidem*: 97), which runs counter to Firbas' contention that there is no bound segment in the sentence in question.²

It is believed then that (1–5) are only apparently non-bound. Their pronouncement is context-sensitive to a similar extent as that of the other sentences; if it is perceived otherwise this is so only because the consituation is not explicitly verbalized and hence less rigid in adopting, or else rejecting, a particular instance of verbal reaction. Therefore such sentences carry heavy communicative loads and should be conceived of as single communicative units, integral chunks of new information. By and large such examples are only of little interest to TCA studies.

Finally, the interpretation of the distribution of CD over a sentence such as (1) in terms of an inherent communicative quality to be ascribed to individual sentence constituents, loses from sight the overall communicative perspective against which a given sentence is produced. It is hard to say, for instance, why "vase" should be higher on the communicative scale than "break" if the linguistic intuition says something opposite: it seems that the two are inseparably connected as one communicative unit. In the light of what has been said another possibility cannot be ignored, and namely the fact that such a sentence could be viewed as one integral communicative entity, so any breaking of its CD into graded bits may be of doubtful linguistic consequence. Last but not least: since the notion of CD remains rather unspecified and speculative, its validity for a TCA of a sentence needs reconsideration — preferably to the advantage of a dichotomic theme-rheme division.

3. Separate problems among sentences traditionally labelled as non-bound are raised by examples such as:

13. It is raining.
Polish: Pada ((it is) raining)

They have also been viewed as themeless and subjectless though contrary

² For further evidence he also discusses another example: Blond Albanians study linguistics at Harvard, and its negative transforms. He hopes to illustrate his point better and "more convincingly (since a world with no blond Albanians is more likely than a world with no girls)" (Sgall, 1973: 98).

interpretations are noted.³ It is toward the latter that the author feels inclined; the meaning of (13) can be paraphrased as: "what I am telling you about the space surrounding me is that it is wet", where "the space surrounding me" is said to act as a covert theme. The pronouncement of (13) is inseparably connected with the place and moment of speaking, and any other interpretation of the local setting must be clearly specified in the sentence:

14. It is raining in Warsaw.

Similarly in:

15. It is cold

Polish: (Jest) zimno ((it is) cold)

the meaning is: "it is cold in the area surrounding me/us". There seems to be no reason to treat such sentences differently from sentences with explicit themes:

16. I am cold

Polish: Zimno mi. (cold — me)

Jest mi zimno ((it is) cold — me)

It is assumed that the theme does not have to be shown explicitly: themes can also be signalled non-verbally with an overt marker in the semantic structure of the sentence left out. Somewhat parallel facts are recorded in the case of the deletion of semantic roles, e.g.:

17. All gone?

Yes, the bottle was smashed into pieces.

Incidentally, languages differ also in the way in which they mark themes of their sentences: in Lihu there exists a separate topic-word in the sentence structure which is distinct from subject (Li, ed., 1976), Japanese has a special topic-marker, the particle *wa*, and English usually merges the notion of topic with that of subject, thus showing explicitly no difference between the two concepts.

There is no reason why the notion of theme, basically psychological in its character, should not be deverbilized in some cases and relegated to the extralinguistic domain. It appears that such a transfer of "what is spoken about" on to an extralinguistic situation finds its illustration in (13): with such sentences the theme is situated beyond the sentence proper, however, it still serves as an implicit point of departure for the sentence.

4. As for the difference between the first and the second layers of TCA, Sgall's explication at this point does not seem very convincing (Sgall, 1973);

³ According to Wierzbicka "the subject of such sentences is a part of space surrounding the speaker although there is no separate part of the phonic sequence corresponding to that part of space" (Bogusławski 1977: 16).

what deserves special reconsideration is the ensuing problem of givenness, or generally speaking, that of knowledge.

When talking about the second layer, Sgall says: "in marked cases (as opposed to first layer sentences with an action verb — A. D.) the degree of CD can be lower than if it were determined only by its syntactic role in the semantic representation of the sentence. These cases constitute the second layer of TCA. They are connected with the (necessary, not sufficient) condition that the constituent in question is "known" in a certain sense (more precisely, the object it refers to has been either mentioned in the preceding context, or perceived in the given situation), or that it is accompanied by a general quantifier (or used in a generic sense). One can speak here about topicalization, bearing in mind that the topicalization is not an operation belonging to the transductive (transformational) component of the system, but a relation inside the semantic level (or DS). In this way, for instance, the goal is topicalized in (1—9): (...)

(1—9) *Chomsky's Syntactic Structures* were published by Mouton". (Sgall, 1973: 20)

Further on Sgall states that (1—9) is acceptable only in a context where *Chomsky's Syntactic Structures* "has already been mentioned or belongs to the foreground of the situation of the discourse". (Sgall 1973:20).

The two sentences, (3) and (1—9) — Sgall's first and second layer, respectively — obviously differ in their thematic-rhematic structure as they respond to different communicative needs and satisfy different points of communicative interest: in the former the speaker announces the goal, while in the latter he reveals the actor. What is not clear, however, is the switch of layers as postulated by Sgall. It raises no doubt that *Chomsky's Syntactic Structures* has a lower degree of CD in (1—9) than in (3) — repeated here for convenience —

3. Mouton published *Chomsky's Syntactic Structures*, yet it might equally well be treated as "known in a certain sense" in either of its uses. There is no reason to assume that the nontopicalized constituent in (3) may not "belong to the foreground of the situation of the discourse".

The weakness of Sgall's definition of the second layer is largely the result of his imprecise statements; to my mind, Sgall does not in fact formulate the "sufficient condition" for a sentence to qualify as an instance of the second layer of TCA. His explications in terms of a lower degree of CD and, first of all, in terms of a dimly specified concept of knowledge are of weak explanatory power. First and foremost, however, the difficulty with Sgall's organization of TCA dwells on the inconsistent way in which he relates topic and comment to contextual dependence. On the one hand he propounds a full autonomy of TCA from the Datum/Novum distinction: "The distinction between topic and comment is autonomous, in the sense that it cannot be derived from the distinction between "given" (i.e. known from the preceding context or situation, contained

among the presuppositions) and “new” (not given)” (Sgall, 1973: 17). On the other hand, this distinction is abandoned in subsequent formulations: in practice, Sgall conflates the idea of topic with that of known information. Hence topic in his terminology stands for contextually bound segments (known from the consituation of the discourse) whereas comment covers unknown (non-derivable) segments of the sentence: “The sentence nucleus (the verb and the elements depending on it — participants, i.e. intentional participants or ‘cases’ as well as free adverbials) can be thus, in the general case, divided into a bound segment or topic, comprising the topic proper or theme (and, as the case may be, a temporal, local, or other setting) and into a non-bound segment, or focus” (Sgall, 1973: 48). At some other point (*ibidem*: 56) he states clearly that “the boundary between the topic and the comment (...) depends not only on the distribution of CD but also on the contextual boundness”. Finally his perception of the position and function of “boundness juncture” (BJ, i.e. the boundary between the contextually bound segment, or topic, and the focus of the sentence) (Sgall 1973: 191) leaves no doubt as to his association of topic with contextual boundness.

In his discussion of the first and second layers of TCA Sgall resorts again to a similar concoction of CD and contextual conditioning: his topicalization entails knowledge. Incidentally, however, he admits at some other point (Sgall, 1973: 17) that “the preceding context does not always determine uniquely the choice of topic and comment of a sentence; for instance the statement (1—1) can be followed in a quite natural way either by (1—2) or by (1—3) — not to speak of other possibilities:

(1—1) Yesterday was the last day of the Davis cup match between Australia and ROUMANIA.

(1—2) Australia WON the match.

(1—3) The match was won by AUSTRALIA.

In such cases the speaker is free to choose any of the previously mentioned names of countries or a word referring to the match itself as the topic of the next sentence”.³

By and large, however, Sgall’s explication of the second layer of TCA is not very clear. His autonomy of levels is hard to reconcile with the heavy reliance on contextual dependence and presupposed knowledge. The present author admits that she has found his reasoning at this point controversial

³ Similarly it is a mistake to call sayings or proverbs contextually non-bound even if, as it is claimed sometimes, their TCA does not respond to FSP considerations. On the contrary, such sentences are first of all under contextual determination as it is hard to imagine some one say out of a sudden something like: “When a fox cannot reach the grapes he says that they are not ripe”.

and unconvincing, hence it may not be excluded that some of his ideas have remained unnoticed or misinterpreted.

The point advocated here is that the distinction between Sgall’s first and second layers is a matter of a different thematic-rhematic organization of the sentence and should be analyzed independently of the datum/novum criteria: the non-topicalized elements may equally well belong to the foreground of the discourse. If by knowledge we mean identification of a particular constituent in the course of activating relevant presuppositions, then *Chomsky’s Syntactic Structures* — regardless of different ordering in (3) and (1—9), and its communicative implications — does not have to be pronounced different in either of its uses.

Knowing stands for one’s being able to identify an item either through its appearance in the immediate context, whether verbal or extralinguistic, or through activation of one’s general knowledge, so that, to quote Chafe, “given or old information is that knowledge which the speaker assumes to be in the consciousness of the addressee at the time of the utterance”⁴ (Chafe, 1976: 30). Thus a communicative lay-out of a sentence and the stock of knowledge about individual sentence participants, as stored in the speaker’s consciousness are two separate issues. The former is governed by communicative priorities, the latter is determined by a certain number of presuppositions.

5. The dominance of context over semantic structure in the distribution of CD over the sentence, as postulated by Prague linguists, seems undermined by the introduction of the concept of “narrow scene” — the ultimate objective of what is being said. Firbas says namely (Firbas 1974) that in

20. John went to the window

the window may be known or unknown yet it is communicatively most loaded as the main purpose of the message is the expression of direction. Therefore *the window* becomes non-derivable. Similarly *London* in

21. I flew to London

becomes non-derivable as an expression of direction of movement. The above interpretation seems to advocate the idea that semantic structure can get an upper hand over context operation, which would then run counter to the previous statement.

⁴ It does not seem very clear why an item, if considered given, may not be recoverable at the same time as claimed by Chafe: “... it is important to remember that givenness is a status decided by the speaker and that it is fundamentally a matter of the speaker’s belief that the item is in the addressee’s consciousness not that it is recoverable”. (Chafe 1976: 32).

The question arises why *the window* or *London* should be declared non-derivable in order to legitimately bear the highest communicative weight. It is clear that in a majority of uses these elements are fully or partially contextually bound (by "partially" is meant the fact that (20) would not be pronounced in a situation in which the only possible response would be: "How do you mean? What window? We're in the forest.") The extent to which the direction of movement can be predicted by the addressee is one thing, and the distribution of communicative accents in the sentence is another.

Also relevant at this point is the notion of Communicative Importance (CI), understood as an integral communicative quality to be possibly ascribed to an individual sentence participant. The first steps have already been made here to recall a tentative classification of verbs into semantic classes according to their communicative import.⁵ Sgall's perception of CI may not be dissociated from his concept of the deep structure (DS) of the sentence. He claims namely that DS should not be formalized in terms of grammatical structure rules, but according to the principle of CD. In consequence two sentences differing only in TCA would receive separate semantic interpretations. Apparently disregarding the merely intuitive and imprecise nature of the concepts of CD and CI, Sgall makes them the basic ordering principle in DS. At the same time, however, he does not say much about how to determine the ordering of the elements within the contextually bound segment, and, only a little about the ordering of elements in the contextually non-bound segment: he postulates namely a "systematic ordering of the basic participants of verb" (Sgall, 1973:67) with a simultaneous reservation that his list "is to be taken as a tentative formulation which should be further supplemented and verified, perhaps also differentiated according to the individual groups of verbs" (Sgall 1973:67). Incidentally, at some other point he admits that "as for the hierarchy of communicative importance, it is not

⁵ Traditionally such attempts have not gone beyond fragmentary or only tentative classifications (Firbas 1959, Pala 1974, Chernyakovskaya 1976): these concerned mainly different classes of verbs, to mention here the distinction between the verbs like *be*, *cost*, *appear*, etc., and such as *read*, *wash*, *buy*, etc., based on different degrees of "semantic completeness". However, even if justifiable on general grounds, such an analysis comes across substantial difficulties if transferred to detailed studies of actual applications of individual verbs: what comes here, for instance, is the multiplicity of meanings shared by single words whose semantics can be specified only in concrete realizations. Certain shortcomings of similar analyses were mentioned by Sgall (Sgall, 1973: 29ff). The comparison of such two Czech sentences as: *V Praze jezdi TRAMVAJE* (In Prague there are TRAMS) *Trojka jezdi na Václavské NÁMĚSTI* (Number three goes to Wenceslas SQUARE), shows that the verb *jezdi* has a different function in each case so that it may be treated as two different words. Regardless of similar objections, the question remains how implications of such semantic studies can be fed into analyses of communicative strategies within FSP.

yet clear whether it has the form of a linear ordering (i.e. whether the ordering of the types of participants is complete") (Sgall, 1973:47). It seems that in practice his ranking of participants will have to be determined separately for each language, though, he claims that there should be no significant differences among languages. By and large, however, the semantic relevance of CD and CI for the organization of DS appears largely speculative and hypothetical in its present version.

It is also argued here that in the face of the criticism of the first layer of TCA as postulated in the present paper, the concept of CI proves dispensable. Its association with the notion of CD seems at odds with the primary quality of the latter as a factor "pushing communication forward". In discussing this issue Sgall says that "we shall use the term CI when referring to the hierarchy determined by the roles of the participants, and the term CD will be reserved for the actual hierarchy of elements of a sentence, be it in accordance with the scale of CI (as in the first or basic layer) or affected by deviating influence of context of situation, as in the second layer" (Sgall, 1973:45). Needless to say it is only "the actual hierarchy" which is of interest to FSP as it is only in use that a language unit obtains its real communicative value, so any measurement of communicative weight in a communicative vacuum seems out of place. Consequently CI comes close to a cover-up for some semantic facts in need of further explication. Finally, the introduction of CI adds up to an unnecessary terminological ballast and proves of doubtful utility within the framework of FSP.

Conclusion. In the light of what has been said the concept of an isolated sentence — if legitimate for syntactic or semantic investigations — proves of doubtful validity for any evaluations in terms of FSP; the basic layer of TCA runs counter to the fundamental principle of FSP, namely its communicative orientation. Since the utterance of a sentence clearly presupposes a certain context of use as well as activation of some knowledge on the part of the participants of the discourse, it is claimed here that sentences dissociated from any context, both actual and potential, cannot be evaluated in terms of CD distribution. FSP should not disregard the communicative foundation of any topic-comment bipartition, which means that it should always consider how a given sentence can be located in a broader communicative perspective.

In her criticism of the first layer of TCA the present author points also to a strong contextual dependence of such sentences as (13) or (15) — typically viewed as non-bound and themeless. A tentative assumption has been made that such sentences could be treated as cases in which the theme is not overtly marked, yet implied indirectly through reference to the extralinguistic sphere. Admittedly, however, this concept needs further explication.

As for the relation between semantic structure and context in the distri-

bution of CD over the sentence, it is believed that they should not be discussed in terms of dominance or subordination, but as two independent factors determining the communicative pattern of a sentence. Regardless of any regularities to be observed in their operation in that respect, communicative needs are governed by their own rules, and the element of knowledge as well as that of contextual dependence constitute a separate issue in the process of communication. Any language message assumes, to a greater or lesser extent, activation of some knowledge or its deduction from a contextual condition of the sentence. Nonetheless what is "known" or "contextually bound" should be kept distinct from what is communicatively emphasized. In this way the controversy over what is superior in assigning the topic-comment articulation to a given sentence is an attempt at putting two different things together: knowledge and communicative focus, identification of a unit and its communicative function at a given moment.

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