

## ON THE NATURE OF THE CONCEPTS "GIVEN" AND "NEW" IN LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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While investigating the phenomena grouped under the term "Functional Sentence Perspective" of the Prague School, otherwise called "Thematic Organization of Text", the concepts of given information and new information have been of crucial importance, being either differentiated from another plane of the sentence division into topic and comment (Halliday 1967a<sup>1</sup>) or being regarded as the only exponents of FSP (Firbas 1964; 1965).

Nevertheless, both concepts have remained as mysterious and vague as, for instance, the concept of "complete thought" of the traditional grammar used to define sentence. In order to measure them another concept, that of Communicative Dynamism (CD) has been introduced (Firbas 1964; 1965). The appearance of CD points to an important aspects of the problem; viz. to the difficulties in deciding which elements belong to the given and which to the new in a given sentence.

It seems that CD concept hardly solves the above difficulties. Two main problems appear in relation to CD. First, what should be the criteria to measure the amount of information which a given item contributes to the sentence in its unique context? Apart from the intuition of an investigator no formal criteria have so far been proposed. The problem is not trivial as this intuition may often mislead the investigator where old languages or a language not native to him is concerned.

Second, and no less important, which units within the sentence (clause) should be distinguished and measured; groups,<sup>2</sup> words, morphemes? For the

<sup>1</sup> He calls them "thema" and "rhema" and differentiates them from "given" and "new" as belonging to the different constituent structures; the former to the thematic structure and the latter to the information focus structure.

<sup>2</sup> On the linguistic unit "group" cf. Kuryłowicz (1948).

purposes of practical communication both (1) and (2) may have the same meaning, given the same contexts and similar suprasegmental phonological features:

(1) We have 'come

(2) Przy'szliśmy

And yet in English, (1), there are three words; in Polish, (2), only one.

It is not only word semantics but mainly sentence semantics<sup>3</sup> that is most important in the development of communication. In this respect all units are important and the meaning emerges from their particular syntactic combination, numerous possibilities of interpretation being thus rejected in favour of one. For instance in (3);

(3) He went there last night

although both the person and the place must be known from the previous discourse the pronouns are still necessary to show unambiguously that it was "he and not someone else" and it was "there and not some other place". The Polish equivalent:

(4) Poszedł tam wczoraj wieczorem

has "he" included in the verb (the ending). Generally, it seems that languages will rather tolerate redundancies in this respect than any unwarranted communicatively elisions.<sup>4</sup>

It is not always sufficient to consider the pronominal status of an item in order to label it as given. The context and the situation must be considered. To give an example, in the case of (3) one preceding context will render the items "he" and "there" quite superficial and they could really be deleted if the English grammar allowed for that; while some other context will leave a large margin of doubt whether it was he or she, John or Jack, etc. who went there; and this must be unambiguously specified, which (3) does. In this latter case "he" is going to display a considerable degree of communicative importance; in some contexts possibly even higher than "went". At the same time it need not be highly contrastive and imply that it was "he and not the other person" with everything in the sentence except for that "he" being given (thematic) and without, in this case, the strong contrastive stressing of "he".

(3) surely is not highly contrastive when it follows (5):

(5) Some people went to the museum to see the exhibition.

Nevertheless, the mild contrast which is thus implied will prevent (4) from being a sequel to (6);

(6) Niektórzy ludzie odwiedzali muzeum, aby obejrzeć wystawę.

It is rather (4b) that will appear after (6) in Polish;

(4b) 'On poszedł tam wczoraj wie'czorem.

<sup>3</sup> For this distinction cf. e. g. Bartsch and Vennemann (1972).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the Russian equivalent of (3) and (4); "Он пошел туда..." (on poszeł tuda)

In English, (3) is realised as two, and not one, information units consisting of two tone groups;

(3b) 'He//went there last 'night.

The status of "he" changes in this way. It is an independent stressed unit with its own nuclear tone. In this sense it is new despite the fact that its referent is known from the previous discourse.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, (3b) is one single sentence and "he" functions as given in relation to the second information unit in which the new information is "last night". And yet, "he" does not appear for the second time because its meaning and its connection with the elements in the second information unit are extended from the first information unit. "He" is also the theme (topic) of the whole sentence; it is the person referred to as "he" about whom the assertion is made about going to the museum at the time specified. The same is also relevant to the Polish equivalents.

Considering the above it seems that what is given may at the same time function as new in some other relation and the so-called marked themes (topics) are by no means rare in actual speech.<sup>6</sup> In actual discourse situation there appear sentences and clauses whose elements cannot be described in terms of *only one*, single, value of CD in relation to *all the other* elements in the sentence (clause). The terms given and new information must therefore be treated as relative.

In (3) or (3b) the unit of meaning realized as "last night" is new *only* in relation to the named person's doing (going) something (somewhere). The night in question may have been mentioned previously in relation to some other event, which does not mean that it becomes once and for all given.<sup>7</sup>

In view of the above the question arises as to what are the necessary criteria for an information to be given or new in a given context. It has been observed by many linguists<sup>8</sup> that with the development of a discourse the storage of assertions representing the common knowledge of speaker and hearer is constantly increased with every new utterance whose validity is not challenged. It has been proposed to call this common storage "presupposition pool" (PP) (Vennemann 1973). PP must comprise every item of knowledge

<sup>5</sup> Pronominalization of such an element depends on the possibility of an unambiguous reference rather than on the "givenness" of the element. If some other person could possibly be referred to as "he" or the given referent is mentioned in much earlier parts of the discourse the pronoun will no longer appear but instead a proper name or a noun will have to be placed there; John; Charles; Mr. Brown; the professor, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the utterances analysed in Halliday (1976b:33-47).

<sup>7</sup> A similar situation obtains, in fact, for the above analysed "he" which also refers to something (here somebody) mentioned before *but not in the same context of meaning*; "he" is new in relation to the whole event of his going at the time specified being "new".

<sup>8</sup> Cf., for instance, Daneš (1972).

both overtly expressed and that implied or hinted.<sup>9</sup> It is also probable that PP must also store the participants' knowledge about the real world and the relations possible in this world. This goes outside linguistics proper but may prove indispensable for determining what is the given information in some analysed discourse.<sup>10</sup>

The given may thus be understood as that information about whose constituents an assertion has already been made and can be found in PP, the minimal requirement being the existential one;

$$(7) \langle \exists x/F/x \rangle^{11}$$

but which at the same time *is not* focused by the speaker; i.e., does not carry sentence stress and nuclear tone in its surface representation.

The latter restriction does not hold for topics (themes). It is sufficient that (7) should occur in PP and the item can become the theme. This explains why "he" in (3b) functions as the theme at the same time appearing in another information unit and carrying its own stress and intonation. In general, it explains why there are the so-called marked themes.<sup>12</sup> The theme of the sentence (clause) is chosen from a variety of assertions in PP. To some extent it is chosen freely. Though a certain coherence in the sequence of topics is always expected for a well-formed discourse, it is the speaker who chooses what he is going to talk about.<sup>13</sup> Thus theme is best characterized as the "point of departure; the opening element of the sentence that links up the utterance with the context and the situation, selecting from several possible connections one that

<sup>9</sup> Almost every statement carries with itself some implied knowledge distinct from that for which it is uttered (cf. e. g. Dahl 1970). That it goes to PP might be testified by the following discourse;

A: My neighbour, hurt herself.

B: That's a pity.

A: They say he<sub>1</sub> is rather bad.

B: Why, didn't you say it was she?

The problem is how *this* sort of information should be measured in terms of CD.

<sup>10</sup> After all, no real-life conversation starts with a completely empty PP. Some common knowledge is already there.

<sup>11</sup> To be read: there exists n-number of objects such that they are ... and about which there is already an assertion in PP.

<sup>12</sup> As, for instance, in:

"the 'play// John saw 'yesterday"

— implying: "but I don't think he's seen the film" (Halliday 1967a); where new information from both units creates the pair: "the play — yesterday". In (3b) the pair is "he — last night".

<sup>13</sup> Unless, of course, another participant asks him a question and thus largely delimits the possibilities of choosing a topic, the particular topic being given in that question.

becomes the starting point, from which the entire further utterance unfolds and in regard to which it is oriented" (Beneš 1959:210).

Theme comes from PP and is isolated by the speaker's decision that it should fulfil an added condition C/x/ meaning that the attention of the interlocutors is focused on the item x. In the logical notation used by Bartsch and Vennemann (1972) the theme of a sentence can be fully characterized as;

$$(8) \langle \exists x/F/x \& C/x \rangle$$

Nevertheless, it is not held here as it is in Vennemann (1973) that the item x is prevented from receiving sentence stress (and nuclear tone) by its existence in PP in the form like (7) or (8). The above sequence (5) — (3b) contradicts those assumptions rendering one item ("he") mildly contrastive with a stress and nucleus of its own, though the item already has a representation like (8) in PP.

In the corresponding Polish sequence (6) — (4b) a stressed pronoun appears in the surface representation, whereas in other contexts it is usually completely absent from the surface representation: (4). It follows that some other way of accounting for sentence stress will have to be devised in the model of Bartsch and Vennemann.<sup>14</sup>

A similar situation obtains relative to the new information. It is up to the speaker to choose among several new items present in his utterance (especially in a longer one) which item is going to be focal, most important, and to single it out for attention by placing the sentence stress and the nuclear tone on one of its syllables in the surface representation.<sup>15</sup> The communicative value of the focus in relation to the other new items is relative. No doubt the focus is regarded as the most important by the speaker who tries to attract the hearer's attention to it.<sup>16</sup>

Taking objective criteria it is possible in any given sentence (clause) to single out the thematic and the focal elements; and in a given tone group — focus and sometimes, if not marked as in (3b), also the thematic item. The rest of the elements might be subdivided into those which already have representation, minimally like (7), in PP; and those without such representation — corresponding respectively to given and new. The focus is also new but not every new item is focal. This would give four categories: *theme*; *given*; *new*; *focus* — not necessarily appearing in that order in the surface representation;

<sup>14</sup> Currently the items which are not topicalised, i.e., not represented in PP can only receive sentence stress, i.e., only new items (Vennemann 1973).

<sup>15</sup> Once again, if the utterance answers a question, this question usually delimits the possibilities of choosing the focus; cf. also note 13 in this paper.

<sup>16</sup> But cf. the following discourse:

A: John went there last 'night.

B: So he 'went there after all.

Underlying this there must be some difference in PP between A and B.

even when the clause is unemotive and non-contrastive. Theme can in some cases be focal for itself constituting a separate tone group and a separate information unit; remaining, nonetheless, the topic for the whole sentence (clause).

Any further grading within the domain of given or of new is very difficult if at all possible with any objective criteria. This observation is borne out by the character of word order in Polish. It has been pointed out in Doroszewski (1961), vol. II chapt. 9) and also in Szwedek (1973) that Polish unemotive word order requires that the new information should be put after the known one.<sup>17</sup> Let us have the following context (9):

- (9) Zastanawiam się, gdzie oni się podzie'wają.  
(I'm wondering what has be'come of them)

and the possible answers:<sup>18</sup>

- (10) 'Jana z narzeczoną widziałem wczoraj w te'atrze.  
(11) 'Jana z narzeczoną wczoraj widziałem w te'atrze.  
(12) 'Jana wczoraj z narzeczoną widziałem w te'atrze.  
(13) 'Jana widziałem wczoraj z narzeczoną w te'atrze.  
(14) 'Jana widziałem z narzeczoną wczoraj w te'atrze.  
(15) 'Jana wczoraj widziałem z narzeczoną w te'atrze.  
(16) Wczoraj widziałem 'Jana z narzeczoną w te'atrze.  
(17) Wczoraj 'Jana z narzeczoną widziałem w te'atrze.

(As for 'John / I saw him and his fiancée in the 'theatre yesterday).

All the elements in (10)–(17) convey new information to the hearer; also the theme ("John") is new because it is contrastive, the implication being: "As for John, I can say this but about the others — I don't know". It might be argued that (16) and (17) are not as well formed in relation to (9) as are the other six because the contrastive function of the marked theme ("John") as well as its thematic function are best carried out by placing it in the initial position.<sup>19</sup> Because of the principle of coherence of elements<sup>20</sup> the answers (12)–(15) are

<sup>17</sup> As it is the case in:

- (a) Po chwili *kobieta* weszła do sklepu.  
(After some time *the woman* went into the shop)  
(b) Po chwili do sklepu weszła *kobieta*.  
(After some time *a woman* went into the shop)

— both (a) and (b) from Szwedek (1973).

<sup>18</sup> It is assumed that *John* is one of the members of the group denoted by "oni" ("they") and also that all the answers have an unemotive character and in this way the same suprasegmental parameters (stress, intonation).

<sup>19</sup> This would also be relevant in respect to all other possible variants with "Jan" non-initial — not listed above.

<sup>20</sup> Requiring that modifier and modified should be placed together and not separately (cf. Kuryłowicz 1948; also Bartsch and Vennemann 1972:118–139 about operator and operand placement).

possibly also less well formed than (10 or (11); still, they do appear in Polish and also cannot be classed as grammatically unacceptable.

Considering the sentences (10)–(15) it is impossible and also not necessary to insist on the differentiation of the degrees of CD of the respective elements; "z narzeczoną" ("together with (his) fiancée"); "wczoraj" ("yesterday"); "widziałem" ("I saw"); although each element carries a separate piece of new information related to the topic "John". Most indispensable but rather for structural reasons is "widziałem".<sup>21</sup>

This tolerance for changes in the sequence of elements in the language in which FSP is active in the domain of word order (cf. note 17 here) indicates that the elements in question should be regarded as being of equal status in respect to their communicative importance. It is the item at the end which, bearing the intonation centre and the sentence stress, is singled out as most important in the communication. Each of the three items: "wczoraj", "w teatrze", "z narzeczoną", could appear at the end as the focus, with the others arbitrarily sequenced before it, given the proper context.<sup>22</sup>

In the discussion so far the words "element" and "item" have been used without any characteristics of what should constitute the smallest communicative unit. The problem has been illustrated in (1) and (2) at the beginning of the discussion. This unit is never one syllable, unless contrastive, despite the fact of the realization of nuclear tone on one syllable. It is not coextensive with any one of the prosodic units of speech, either; although a tone group is always one information unit with one nuclear syllable.

The evidence from the domain of word order would indicate that the unit in question might be coextensive with what Kuryłowicz calls syntactic group (Kuryłowicz 1948) and what is also called endocentric (exocentric) phrase.<sup>23</sup> Word order within a syntactic group is fixed and not susceptible to FSP:

- |                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| (18) (a) zielona trawa | *trawa zielona <sup>24</sup> (green grass) |
| (b) podczas spotkania  | *spotkania podczas (during the meeting)    |
| (c) w ogrodzie         | *ogrodzie w (in the garden)                |
| (d) dochód narodowy    | *narodowy dochód (national income)         |

<sup>21</sup> To a similar effect for communicative purposes, i.e., considering the context of (9), would be: "Jan był wczoraj z narzeczoną w te'atrze" (as for 'John, he was together with his fiancée in the theatre yesterday").

<sup>22</sup> Only "widziałem" seems not possible in the final position if more than three elements constitute a sentence. In a longer sentence (clause) even the focal "wi'działem" will be placed near the beginning.

<sup>23</sup> From the point of view of communication, prepositions (unless contrastive) have no separate value; i.e., "w miesiącu marcu" ("in the month of March") will have one CD value just as "miesiąc marzec" ("the month of March") has one.

<sup>24</sup> Unless in poetry; not in common usage.

- (e) miasto Warszawa \*Warszawa miasto (the city of Warsaw)  
 (f) w ubiegłym tygodniu \*tygodniu w ubiegłym  
 \*ubiegłym w tygodniu (last week)

It is evident that the whole entities (groups) change place as required by FSP but never their constituents alone. In contrastive usage stress and intonation operate so that instead of the usual stressing:

- (19) (a) niebieska su'kienka (the blue 'dress) there will be:  
 (b) nie'bieska sukienka (a nie żółta) (the 'blue dress (and not yellow))

but not

- (c): (c) \*sukienka niebieska

Word order within the syntactic group in Polish depends on other than FSP factors; in the first place on modifier—modified (operator—operand) relation; and this is connected with the historical change of the ordering relations in syntax (cf. Bartsch and Vennemann 1972).

### Summary

It is possible to distinguish non-arbitrarily only three degrees of CD: given, new, and focal information. A thematic element can possess a degree of CD either equal to given or, if it is a marked element of the thematic nature forming a separate information unit, to focal.

The standard unit of CD in analysing non-contrastive sequences is the so-called syntactic group or any smaller unit functioning as a syntactic group.<sup>25</sup>

Both conclusions are tentative and require further investigation.

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<sup>25</sup> For instance a pronoun or a noun functioning as the subject or the object; also a single verb instead of a verb phrase.