Chapter 7
Rhetorical Functions

The following sentences describe essentially the same situation:

(7.1.) (a) The maid:AGT broke the vase:PAT

  (b) The vase:PAT was broken by the maid:AGT

This is accounted for by the assignment of semantic roles, which is the same in both the (a) and (b) sentences. The sentences differ in their (grammatical) subjects *(the maid vs. the vase);* they also differ in the linear order of the major constituents. The question now arises as to whether the different linear arrangement correlates systematically with differences in meaning.

It can be argued that in (7.1.)(a) *the maid* is the TOPIC about which a statement is made (cf. the German term "Satzgegenstand"). Whereas in (7.1.)(b) the TOPIC (what is being talked about) is *the vase.*

Consider also the following sentences

(7.2.) (a) The teacher:AGNT gave the student:RCPT a book:PTNT
  (b) The teacher:AGNT gave ??a student:RCPT the book:PTNT
  (c) The teacher:AGNT gave the book:PTNT to a student:RCPT
  (d) The teacher:AGNT gave him:RCPT the book:PTNT
  (e) The teacher:AGNT gave *him:RCPT it:PTNT
  (f) The teacher:AGNT gave it:PTNT to him:RCPT

The examples (7.2.)(a) and (7.2.)(b) differ only slightly. In (7.2.)(a) the first object *(the student)* has the definite article whereas the second object *(a book)* has the indefinite article. In (7.2.)(b) it is the other way round, and the result sounds rather odd. Why is this so? The indefinite article is used with referents that are newly introduced into discourse (i.e. to mark new information), the definite article is used for "given" information. There are obviously "preferred" arrangements for constituents that correlate with "given" or "new" information.

In the following sections an attempt will be made to make concepts like TOPIC, GIVEN, and NEW more precise.

7.1. Thematic structure

In a sentence like (7.3.) an additional level of structure can be identified. English sentences are organized into a THEME-RHEME structure.[1] The THEME is what comes first in a sentence, followed by the RHEME:

(7.3.)   <u>The senator</u>   <u>postponed the examination</u>
              Theme   Rheme

In a sentence such as (7.3.) the functions SUBJECT - THEME and PREDICATE — RHEME are coextensive. This, however, is not always the case.

Definition 7.1. *theme*

> The THEME is what is being talked about, the point of departure for the clause[2] as a message; and the speaker has within certain limits the option of selecting any element of the clause as thematic. (HALLIDAY 1967,212).

Consider the following pair of sentences:

(7.4.) a. *John* saw the play yesterday.
  b. *Yesterday* John saw the play.

In (7.4.)(a) the theme is the subject (John), in (7.4.)(b) it is an ADJUNCT.[3] Both sentences have the same semantic structure in terms of semantic relations. In both instances *John* had an experience *(saw the play),* and this happened *yesterday.* Considered as MESSAGES, however, these sentences have different meanings. (7.4.)(a) may be an answer to an implied question like

(7.5.) Talking about John, when did he see the play?

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[1] The ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle and Plato recognized two major components of the sentence: ὄνομα 'name' and ῥῆμα, which correspond roughly to the concepts TOPIC (THEME) and COMMENT, respectively.

[2] CLAUSE is a term that is used in some models of grammar for a unit that is smaller than a sentence but larger than a PHRASE and expresses a "predication". A simple sentence consists of a single clause. Complex sentences are made up of two or more clauses, one of which is the MAIN CLAUSE, the others being SUBORDINATE CLAUSES.

[3] ADJUNCTS are optional or secondary elements of a constructions which can be omitted without destroying the "structural" identity of the construction.

In (7.4.)(b) what is being talked about is *yesterday*. It may be an answer to an implied question like

(7.6.) What happened to John yesterday?

or simply

(7.7.) What happened yesterday?

Apart from adjuncts, which thematize quite freely, there is a general tendency in English for the subject to be coextensive with the theme. This may be the reason why there is a wider range of possibilities in subjectivalization, i.e. in the selection of sentence elements with a particular semantic function as the subject of the sentence:

(7.8.)   a. *This key*:INST opens the door.
           b. *Mary:*RCPT was given a book.
           c. *The garden:*LOC swarmed with bees.

What the above examples have in common is that they are of the same sentence type in that they are all declarative sentences. Consider now the following sentences:

(7.9.)   *Did* John see the play?

(7.10.)   *What* did John see?

They are both interrogative. In one interpretation the meaning of (7.9.) is "Either John saw the play or he didn't see the play and I want to know which alternative is true". The expected answer is YES or NO. (7.9.) means "John saw something and I want to know what that something is". In both types of interrogatives the theme of the message is that there is something the speaker does not know and that he wants to know. This is signalled by the finite verb (in yes/no-interrogatives) or by a question word (in WH-interrogatives).

7.2. Information structure

Spoken English is organized into *information units*, 'quanta of information' or 'message blocks':

(7.11.) a. // John painted the shed yesterday //
        b. // John // painted the shed yesterday //
        c. // John // painted the shed // yesterday //

Each information unit is realized as an intonation unit (TONE GROUP in Halliday's terminology), with a separate intonation contour. Each information unit has an INFORMATION FOCUS, signalled by the location of the intonation nucleus.

> Information focus reflects the speaker's decision as to where the main burden of the message lies … Information focus is one kind of emphasis, that whereby the speaker marks out a part

(which may be the whole) of a message block as that which he wishes to be interpreted as informative. What is focal is 'new' information; not in the sense that it cannot have been previously mentioned, although it is often the case that it has not been, but in the sense that the speaker presents it as not being recoverable from the preceding discourse.... If we use the ... term 'given' to label what is not 'new', we can say that the system of information focus assigns to the information unit a structure in terms of the two functions 'given' and 'new'. (HALLIDAY 1967,204).

Consider the following examples, where the information focus is in upper case:

(7.12.) a. //JOHN painted the shed yesterday //
        b. //John PAINTED the shed yesterday //
        c. //John painted the SHED yesterday //
        d. //John painted the shed YESTERDAY //

Specific questions are derivable from the information units (7.12.) (a), (b), and (d)

(7.13.) a'.   Who painted the shed yesterday ? or
        a".   Did Mary paint the shed yesterday?
        b'.   What did John do to the shed yesterday? or
        b".   Did John mend the shed yesterday?
        d'.   When did John paint the shed? or
        d".   Did John paint the shed this morning?

Example (7.12.)(c) may imply the specific questions

        c'. What did John paint yesterday? or
        c". Did John paint the wall yesterday?

It may, however, simply imply 'what happened?'. Under the first interpretation the focal constituent is assigned the function NEW, whereas the remainder is GIVEN:

c'''	John painted	the shed	yesterday
	given	new	given

If the question implied is 'what happened?' the entire information unit may be regarded as new.

> A distinction may therefore be made between unmarked focus, realized as the location of the tonic [=itonation nucleus] on the final accented lexical item, which assigns the function 'new' to the consituent in question but does not specify the status of the remainder, and marked focus, realized as any other location of the tonic, which assigns the function 'new' to the focal constituent and that of 'given' to the rest of the information unit. (HALLIDAY 1967: 208).

Thematic structure - with the functions THEME and RHEME -and INFORMATION STRUCTURE - with the functions GIVEN and NEW are separate levels of structure. There is, however, a relationship between them in that in the unmarked case the focus of

information will fall within the rheme (though not necessarily extending over the whole of it).

(7.14.)

Theme	Rheme	
//The kids	were playing	football//
given		new

Theme (psychological subject), logical subject and grammatical subject are identical unless there is good reason for them not to be. Where they are not, the tendency in Modern English is to associate theme and grammatical subject; and this is the main reason for using the passive. The passive has precisely the function of dissociating the logical subject from this complex, so that it can either be put in focal position at the end, or, more frequently, omitted:

(7.15.)

Theme		Rheme	
The road	will be repaired	by the Borough Council	
Subject		logical Subject	
		new	

Theme	Rheme
The road	is being repaired
Subject	new

All three functions may be dissociated:

(7.16.)

These beads	I	was given	by my mother
Theme	Subject		Logical Subject
			new

7.3. Thematization and Focusing

There are a number of grammatical processes whose function it is to give prominence to a particular element of the sentence.

7.3.1. CLEFT SENTENCE

This construction gives both thematic and focal prominence to a sentence element. It divides a single sentence into two separate parts, each with its own verb; hence the name. Cleft sentences begin with the pronoun IT followed by the verb BE which in turn is followed by the element on which the focus falls. The thematic and focal part is linked with the rest of the sentence by a relative pronoun or the particle THAT (which in certain cases may be omitted).

(7.17.) It was   JOHN   (that) he gave the book to
                    Theme

      new

From a single sentence a number of cleft sentences can be derived, each highlighting a particular element of the sentence:

(7.18.) John wore his best suit to the dance last night.

(7.19.) a. It was *John* who/that wore his best suit ...
         b. It was *his best suit* (that) John wore ...
         c. It was *to the dance* that John wore his best s...
         d. It was *last night* that John wore his best suit ..

7.3.2. PSEUDO-CLEFT SENTENCE

In pseudo-cleft sentences two noun phrases are linked by the copula BE, where one noun phrase is a clause introduced with the question word *what:*

(7.20.)

What you need most	is	a good rest
Theme		new

(7.21.)   What the pseudo-cleft sentence makes explicit is the division between given and new.

Through the use of *do* as a pro-form the pseudo-cleft sentence permits focus to fall on the predicate:

(7.22.)   a. What he's done is (to) spoil the whole thing.
          b. What John did to his suit was (to) ruin it.

(7.23.)   What the pseudo-cleft sentence does is (to) make explicit the division between given and new.

Further possibilities arise through the interplay of clefting and passivization:

(7.24)   a.   The division between given and new is made explicit by the pseudo-cleft sentence.
          b.   It is the division between given and new that is made explicit by the pseudo-cleft sentence.
          c.   What is made explicit by the pseudo-cleft sentence is the division between given and new.
          d.   What the division between given and new is made explicit by is the pseudo-cleft sentence.
          e.   It is the pseudo-cleft sentence that the division between given and new is made explicit by**.**

Given the following sentence. Derive new sentences using both types of clefting and passivization.

(7.25.)   Information focus reflects the speaker's decision as to where the main burden of the message lies.

EXTRAPOSITION

Extraposition is a device that places a sentential subject or object nounphrase at the end of the sentence, the original position being filled by the anticipatory pronoun it.

(7.26.)   a.   That John passed his exam is surprising.
          b.   It is surprising that John passed his exam.
               subject + predicate $\Rightarrow$ *it* + predicate + subject

The following sentences - all of the same basic semantic structure - show how sentence elements can be distributed in various ways to achieve different communicative effects:

(7.27.)

a.   They expect that the enemy will destroy the bridge.

b.   They expect that the bridge will be destroyed by the enemy.

c.   That the enemy will destroy the bridge is expected.

d.   That the bridge will be destroyed by the enemy is expected.

e.   It is expected that the enemy will destroy the bridge.

f.   It is expected that the bridge will be destroyed by the enemy.

g.   What they expect is that the enemy will destroy the bridge.

h.   What they expect is that the bridge will be destroyed by the enemy

i.   What is expected is that the enemy will destroy the bridge.

j.   What is expected is that the bridge will be destroyed by the enemy.

k.   They expect the enemy to destroy the bridge.

l.   They expect the bridge to be destroyed by the enemy.

m. The enemy is expected to destroy the bridge.

n.   The bridge is expected to be destroyed by the enemy.

o.   It is the enemy they expect to destroy the bridge.

p.   It is the bridge they expect to be destroyed by the enemy.

q.   It is the enemy that is expected to destroy the bridge.

r.   It is the bridge that is expected to be destroyed by the enemy.

s.   It is the bridge they expect the enemy to destroy.

t.   I is the enemy they expect to destroy the bridge.

u.   It is the enemy they expect the bridge to be destroyed by.

v.   It is the enemy the bridge is expected to be destroyed by.

w.   It is by the enemy that the bridge is expected to be destroyed.

LITERATUR:

HALLIDAY, M.A.K.

1967   Notes on transitivity and theme in English, Part 2, *Journal of Linguistics* **2**: 177–274.