

SEMANTICS OF CHARACTERIZATION: THEME AND RHEME REVISITED

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1. *Introduction*

It appears that two basic tendencies can be distinguished in the treatment of topic-comment (or, in other terminology, theme-rheme¹) relations. The first tendency is a movement towards more precision in the definition of the metalanguage and development of new instruments for a more scrupulous analysis (cf. e.g. Sgall et al. 1986; Firbas 1987; Francis 1989). The second tendency is a search for substitute theories which could better explain semantic mechanisms underpinning the syntactic sentence structure (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1986; Yokoyama 1986; Givón 1990).

However much has been done in the past decades, neither of these tendencies has led the linguists to a theory that would enable them to explain and predict the choice between syntactic synonyms (with different topic-comment structure) under the influence of various (con)textual parameters. Nor is there a theory that would account systematically on the semantic level for numerous restrictions on the intrasentential combinability.

Within the first tendency, the notion of characterization as the basic relation binding communicative elements (roughly – multiple topics and comments which can coincide with sentence elements, or, on higher levels of hierarchy, with more complex syntactic units) on the intrasentential and extrasentential level turns out to be very helpful in achieving the aforementioned purposes.

2. *Characterization*

It is rather odd that there is no obvious continuity as far as the notion of characterization is concerned, i.e. no linguist operating with this concept refers to

¹ The terms 'topic' and 'comment', 'theme' and 'rheme' will be used hereinafter indiscriminately, as synonyms, regardless of the differences between scientific paradigms within which they are used.

his predecessors. Historically, however, a gradual movement of the concept towards more complexity and precision can be observed.

The Russian linguist Potebnya (1899) seems to be the first to indirectly mention characterization. He saw the development of human thought as a series of "jolts of pairs: the explained and the explaining, the subject and the predicate" (Potebnya 1899:642). One can easily see that Potebnya, alongside with seeing semantic relations as those of "explanation" (cf. characterization), accepted their multiplicity in the sentence – an idea that was further developed by Firbas within his theory of communicative dynamism (CD). At the same time, Potebnya does not appear to distinguish between the element explained and the subject of the sentence, which was done by the psychological school, the Prague school and Smirnitsky (1957). Also, the multiplicity of "jolts" in the sentence does not necessarily point to their hierarchic structure – an idea that was barely mentioned by Smirnitsky (1957:69) and was developed later by Firbas (see e.g. Firbas 1975).

Smirnitsky (1957:67-70) was perhaps the first linguist to speak of characterization as the basic semantic relation underlying syntactical sentence structure. He compared this relation to mathematical formulae showing the non-equality between the values A and B, where B is less than A. The relation between A and B can be shown in two ways: (1) $A > B$ and (2) $B < A$. In both cases we show the same fact of objective reality, but still there are two ways of presenting this fact both in mathematics and in the language². If we say $A > B$, according to Smirnitsky it means that we are interested in A and not in B, the latter being used only as a characteristic of the former.

This view of characterization shows that there can be a kind of "importance" different from the importance of the new vs given (cf. CD theory). This former importance is the importance of the thing (person, place, etc.) which is chosen as the main target of characterization. The analysis of a large corpus of texts, both

² This later proved to be a slightly simplistic approach (cf. Prozorova and Seliverstova 1990:25-6). Cases exist when the choice of topic-comment structure imposes restrictions on the "objective" reality, i.e. $A > B$ is unequal to $B > A$. Cf. the following examples:

(a) *A girl was watering flowers in the room.*

The door was locked, so she stood on a bench in the garden, reaching the watering can through the window.

(b) *In the room a girl was watering flowers.*

*The door was locked, so she stood on a bench in the garden...

It is obvious that (a) does not restrict the girl's location to the room, whereas (b) does so. Thus FSP is not something superimposed on the logical (deep) structure; topic-comment relations belong to the level on which the "real situation" itself is structured, i.e. FSP is part of semantics.

One may argue that in (b) the best explanation is that sentence initial locatives always have the whole predication within their scope and thus presuppose that if there is an agent it should also be within the place. This is, however, not true. Cf. (c) where one of the agents is outside the place denoted by the sentence initial locative.

(c) *I was cooking dinner in the kitchen. Suddenly a strange noise attracted my attention. I looked out of the window. In the garden I saw my sister playing an unknown musical instrument.*

English and Russian, has shown that this "importance" is very often the priority consideration behind the choice of sentence structure (cf. Prozorova and Seliverstova 1990).

A similar idea was further no less explicitly expressed by Benes (1968), who noted that when we say *Prague is the capital of Czechoslovakia* we attribute a quality to a bearer, whereas when we say *The capital of Czechoslovakia is Prague*, we attribute a bearer to a quality,

The first linguist to use the appropriateness of a characteristic as a basis for testing procedures was obviously Bolinger (1977). Comparing the sentences *In this building there exploded one of the most powerful bombs* and **In this sink there broke one of my best plates*, Bolinger says that it may seem strange to consider a locative as a topic of the sentence, yet this may be what accounts for the acceptability of the former sentence and the unacceptability of the latter. "A building can be remembered as the site of an explosion; a sink is hardly memorable as the site of breaking a plate. The plate is too trivial to be worth characterizing (compare the effect of transforming *There's a bug on your collar* to **On your collar there's a bug*), and the action is not one that has any locative repercussions" (Bolinger 1977:100). This, however, seems to be the only occasion when Bolinger uses characterization as an instrument for linguistic analysis. It can be treated as an insight of a talented man, rather than a systematic approach.

It was only as late as 1984 that a comprehensive approach to functional sentence perspective (FSP) was suggested, whose basic concept was characterization (see Seliverstova 1984). In accordance with this approach a sentence is seen as a hierarchy of multiple vector (oriented) relations of characterization, binding all communicative elements within a sentence. Outward orientation (external characterization) does not exclude internal division of the sentence into a hierarchy of topics and comments.

Also shown by Seliverstova were some aspects of the interaction between characterization and other phenomena, such as stress placement, relative communicative divisibility/indivisibility (i.e. ability/inability of a sentence to be in the focus of paradigmatic contrast as a whole and characterize an element in the preceding context), givenness/newness³, etc.

3. Objectives

The author's interests heretofore lay primarily in the field of textual parameters, influencing the choice of syntactic synonyms with a certain FSP. In this area the notion of characterization proved to be very helpful (cf. Prozorova and Seliverstova 1990; Prozorova 1992).

³ Although the restrictions of the traditional definition of "given" and "new" information are pretty obvious, "given" is treated by Seliverstova (as well as by the author of the present paper) in accordance with tradition, i.e. as (a) given in the preceding context or (b) retrievable from the preceding context/situation. Also about the interaction of givenness/newness and stress placement see Szwedek (1976, 1986).

The purpose of the present paper is to show how combinability of elements within a sentence may be accounted for by the combinability of various characteristics, which depends on the type of characteristics as well as on the order in which they are attributed and on their scope (i.e. whether they refer to a certain individual element or to a combination of elements).

In view of the complexity of the issue, only three aspects of the interaction between locatives and propositions in English and in Russian will be discussed here: characterization and truth conditions, localization of propositions and some requirements to the appropriateness of characteristics attributed by propositions to locatives⁴.

4. Characterization and truth conditions

Looking at locatives functioning as topic, Chafe (1976) came to the conclusion that they set spatial boundaries within which "the main predication" is true. However, spatial boundaries of the same kind can be set by locatives which are non-topics.

- (1) В этой гостинице я познакомилась с \Джоном.
In this hotel (topic) I got acquainted with \John.
- (2) Я познакомилась с Джоном в этой \гостинице.
I got acquainted with John in this \hotel (comment).

Leaving aside other semantic differences between (1) and (2), we can say that in both cases the proposition is true for the given place (in the hotel), untrue for any other place and true upon the extraction of the locative, i.e. "in the world in general" it is true that I got acquainted with John at a certain moment t.

Also, whether the proposition (P) is true or not after the locative (Loc) has been extracted does not depend on the original function of Loc in the sentence. Cf. (1) and (2) on the one hand with (3) and (4) on the other:

- (3) В этой семье никто никогда не \лжет.
In this family (topic) no one ever tells \lies.
- (4) *Никто никогда не лжет в этой \семье.
No one ever tells lies in this \family.

In the sentence (3) and (4) P is true for the given Locs the truth of P is not clear for other Locs, and P is untrue upon the extraction of Loc: it is not true that "in the world in general" no one ever tells lies.

It appears that in English the place of the locative in the communicative sen-

⁴ It should be noted that sentence initial placement of a locative does not mean that it always functions as topic (cf. Seliverstova 1984:445), neither does the sentence final position always mean that an element is in the focus of paradigmatic contrast by itself. Also, the boundaries between topic and comment on the highest level of hierarchy may be situated in various places. Chosen for analysis are only types of organization, which are necessary for illustration; the latter does not exclude the possibility that the same sentence may have a different FSP, depending on stress placement and other parameters.

tence structure (FSP seems to be a less appropriate term within the approach accepted here) is not a relevant truth condition for propositions. The function of Loc may be important, in a limited number of cases, for determining the localization of the agent of the action, which has no bearing on truth conditions.

Russian, however, shows a certain correlation between non-topicality of locatives and truth restrictions on propositions, which can be accounted for by characterization. Locative in the role of topic allows P to be true for other Locs if the character of P itself does not rule out this possibility (cf. sentence (1)). P characterizing a locative-topic should be true AT LEAST for the given Loc. On the other hand, a single locative-comment, being in the focus of contrast by itself (enumerative intonation is excluded in this case) FORBIDS P to be true for other Locs. This, in particular, accounts for the unacceptability of the Russian sentence (4). In Russian logical stress on family may render to it an ability to attribute to P a characteristic "in this Loc and no other". Unlike Russian, English sentence final Locs in the focus of contrast obviously attribute to P other characteristics, such as e.g. "in this Loc as different from SOME others" or "in this Loc as well as in some others" (enumerative intonation).

Thus, it can be concluded that the types of characteristics attributed to propositions by locatives may tell on the truth conditions for these propositions. On the other hand, locatives as topics do not put any restrictions of the truth conditions for propositions different from the restrictions imposed by locatives functioning as comments.

5. Localization of propositions⁵

Characterization provides for a new understanding of the restrictions, which locatives impose on the localization of actions, processes and states. These restrictions were analyzed by Boguslawski (1991:69-78) who tentatively referred to them as "world-building" locatives. These are in fact locatives which signify various kinds of non-physical spaces: the space of situation (*Here the sun never sets – we are beyond the polar circle – Boguslawski's example*), the space of a functional or other set (*In our school every student knows French*⁶). Boguslawski supposes that the component "physical space" is always present in these locatives. This, however, appears to be an optional condition. Cf. the following example (5) where the members of a set, forming a functional space, may not be localized in the same physical space:

- (5) В нашем редакционном совете каждый рецензирует около десяти работ в месяц.
On our editorial board everyone reviews about ten papers a month.

In this situation the editors on the board may be working in different countries.

⁵ I am grateful to Prof. Dr. Christian Mair for valuable comments on an earlier version of this section.

⁶ Cf. the broad understanding of space suggested by Olga Seliverstova (1975:35-6).

The idea that the "physical space" component is obligatory in locatives leads Boguslawski to the assertion that a world-building Loc cannot be combined with the proposition localized elsewhere (1991:73). Cf. the following example:

- (6) *В нашем городе школьники провели лето в Крыму.
*In our town schoolchildren spent summer in the Crimea.

According to Boguslawski, (6) is unacceptable "because the situation of 'spending summer' is localized in the Crimea, which is incompatible with the world of 'our town'" (1991:73). However, leaving the localization parameter unchanged, and changing some other parameters, we can easily make this sentence sound natural if restricted to a specific style:

- (7) В нашем городе все школьники ежегодно отдыхают в Крыму.
In our town every child goes to the Crimea in summer.

Thus, the restriction does not confine the localization of P to the boundaries set by Loc. For locative initial sentences, in which Loc signifies a functional or other set, it is essential that P (which may be localized elsewhere) should characterize this set as a whole. Boguslawski's example (6) is unacceptable because the characteristic attributed is not constant, universal or significant for the image of "our town". Indeed, it would sound odd if we say: *?Our town's important characteristic is that children spent summer in the Crimea*. On the other hand the following will sound more natural: *In our town the local administration works so well that all children can go to the Crimea in summer*. Cf. also the following:

- (8) В нашем классе многие ученики побывали за границей.
?In our class many pupils have been abroad.
(9) В нашей деревне почти все старики ездят рыбачить на озера за десять километров.
In our village almost all the old men go fishing in the lakes which are ten kilometers away.

In Russian (8) and (9) are both acceptable. In sentence (8) the set "our class" is characterized as having a considerable number of people who have been abroad. In sentence (9) the life style of the set "our village" is characterized by imparting information about the favorite occupation of its important subset.

In English, however, tighter restrictions are in evidence. In particular, it is obviously preferable that the verb be in the present tense, unless there is a strong syntagmatic contrast and some indicators of relevance for the present, like in sentence (12). Cf.:

- (10) In our town every child goes to New York at least twice a month.
(11) ?In our town every child has been to New York.
(12) In //our town every child has been to New York \ \already.

All the three sentences would be acceptable in Russian. Another consideration

in relation to the "world-building" locatives is that since they may lack the component 'physical space', there is no sense in treating them as locatives. Still, if we look at locatives proper, denoting physical space, the aforementioned considerations appear to hold true. Cf.:

- (13) In our museum all the exhibits were found in various parts of the world.
(14) In this room all the carpets were made in Egypt. In the other room you'll find carpets from all over the world.
(15) In our theater all the sceneries were made in Paris.

All these sentences were considered acceptable by our informants (twelve native speakers of English). It is obvious that P is localized outside the physical space denoted by Loc, yet it is equally obvious that the characteristics attributed are important components of the overall information about the place.

Thus, localization restrictions are in fact restrictions on the appropriateness of characteristics attributed by propositions to locatives.

6. Appropriateness of characteristics

For decades linguists have been wondering about what types of predicates can bring a material or imaginary object into the sphere of a locative, i.e. in the terminology accepted here, what types of propositions can characterize a locative. Initially it was considered that these should be propositions containing verbs of existence/appearance on the scene (cf. e.g. Firbas 1975). Further the list of these verbs was made gradually broader (a most detailed list is given by Breivik 1983). It transpired, however, that the same function can be performed by predicates of "disappearance" (vanish, sink, etc.) and predicates of action, if only in a limited number of situations. Bolinger (1977:101-102) appears to have come closer than anyone to the explanation of the workings of predicates, whose meaning does not seem to fit into the existence/appearance group, in sentences of the type Loc PS (locative + predicate + subject). Bolinger sees the appropriateness of characteristics as the main requirement to these predicates in locative initial sentences. Cf. his explanation for the examples (16) and (17) quoted in section 2:

- (16) In this building there exploded one of the most powerful bombs.
(17) *In this sink there broke one of my best plates.

The notion of appropriateness, however, needs further specification. Criteria of appropriateness may be different depending on FSP as well as on the semantics of elements, comprising a sentence.

Let us look at some appropriateness requirements for the sentences with the syntactic structure Loc PS, where the locative is topic and the predicate signifies an action which is no longer taking place at the moment of speech. Such sentences without 'there' were obviously considered unacceptable by Bolinger (1977:93-96), who thought that it was necessary to add 'there' when something is not on the immediate stage, in particular, out of sight, no longer happening or doubtful. Cf. a number of examples which Bolinger quotes to prove this point:

- (18) ?About a mile from here is a police station.
 (19) ?Nearby had been a fight in full progress.
 (20) *On the table is probably a book. (Breivik's 1983 example)

It is however possible to distinguish a number of conditions, the presence of one of which is sufficient to make such sentences natural. On the other hand, even in the English sentences of this type with 'there' there are a number of restrictions on predicates and propositions which have to be specified. For Russian sentences built according to the pattern Loc PS there are at least five such parameters of P which are necessary requirements for acceptability.

1. As a result of the action the properties of the place have changed.

Cf.:

- (21) В этом лесу охотился браконьер. Смотри, на земле видны следы крови и перья убитой птицы.

Lit.: In this forest hunted a poacher. Look, on the ground can be seen traces of blood and the feathers of a killed bird⁷.

The choice of the perfective/imperfective (Pfv/Ipfv) aspect of the Russian predicates in such cases depends on whether the change of the properties was caused (a) by the resultant state, reached upon the completion of the action or (b) by the process itself. Cf.:

- (22) В этой комнате взорвали (Pfv) бомбу.
 ? взрывали (Ipfv)

Lit.: In this room was exploded a bomb.
 ? was being exploded a bomb

- (23) В этой комнате курили (Ipfv) сигару.
 ? выкурили (Pfv)

Obviously, English sentences without 'there' would not be acceptable even if they met this requirement. With 'there' the semantics of English predicates in such cases would have to be much more restricted than in Russian.

In particular, the passive voice in English would not be likely in such cases. Cf.:

- (24) *In this room there was smoked a cigar.
 (25) In this room there used to be a fireplace. I can see the marks on the floor where the coals must have fallen.

2. (a) The kind of action or type of the subject has made the place a place of interest, or in other ways remarkable;

⁷ The marker 'Lit.' is used for English translations if they do not present sentences acceptable in English. Other markers in these translations (queries, asterisks) are copied from the Russian sentences and are irrelevant in English.

(b) The combination of place and action is remarkable.

- (26) В этом ресторане кушал блины сам Иван Андреевич Крылов.
 Lit.: In this restaurant often ate pancakes Ivan Andreevich Krylov himself.

In this case the acceptability of the predicate as a characteristic of Loc in Russian is often determined by its ability to fit into the set of actions, usually associated with this place⁸. Thus the place 'house' can be characterized through such predicates as was born, died, often liked to stay, stopped, made a speech and does not allow for such characteristics as slept, was ill.

The significant difference between English and Russian is that in Russian the predicate in sentences of the type Loc PS can have a direct object (cf. sentence (26)) or can denote an action in progress which would, as is generally known, be impossible in English.

There are, however, a number of restrictions for Russian as well. Cf. e.g. (27) and (28), whose objects we shall assume to be new:

- (27) *В этом лесу встречал с /Машей Николай /Второй.
 Lit.: In this forest met Masha Nickolas the Second.

- (28) В этом лесу стрелял /зайцев Николай Второй.
 Lit.: In this forest shot rabbits Nickolas the Second.

'Shooting rabbits' in (28) can be seen as roughly synonymous to 'hunting', Thus the object is not much news in itself; the predicate-object (PO) combination serves mainly as a means of linking the subject to the place. The place is characterized as remarkable not because the person (S) did something exceptional there, but because the person WAS there. The PO group imparts certain information about the character of the action, but it is not in the focus of attention, unlike (27), where there is a double focus (one on the object and the other on the subject), which renders the sentence unacceptable. Cf. also:

- (29) ?В этом ресторане пил джин Сергей Есенин.
 Lit.: In this restaurant drank gin Sergei Esenin.
 (30) В этом ресторане пил водку Сергей Есенин.

(29) has a lesser degree of acceptability, because gin-drinking is not very common (although not impossible) for Esenin, which puts extra load on gin and breaks up the unity of the PO group. Vodka-drinking as is generally known, was Esenin's habit, so the main function of the PO group is to link Esenin to a place through an action (PO) generally associated with him in the minds of Russian speakers. The same happens in the case of works of classics in the object position. Cf.:

- (31) В этом доме написал "Лунную сонату" Бетховен.
 Lit.: In this house wrote "Moonlight Sonata" Beethoven.

⁸ This is so far a relatively ambiguous notion which requires further specification.

However, sometimes a PO combination, acceptable in the pattern Loc POS semantically, may not be acceptable for prosodic reasons. Cf. (31), (32) and (33):

(32) ?В этом доме написал "Евгения Онегина" Пушкин.

Lit.: In this house wrote "Eugene Onegin" Pushkin.

(33) В этом доме писал своего "Евгения Онегина" Пушкин.⁹

In English the choice of predicates, acceptable in the pattern Loc PS, is much more limited. They are mostly verbs of existence (be, live) and very few other verbs allowing for existential interpretation. Cf.:

(34) In this house lived William Shakespeare himself.
? worked

Even with 'there' the pattern Loc PS is acceptable with only a limited number of predicates. Cf.:

(35) ?In this house there worked William Shakespeare himself.

Cf. in Russian:

В этом доме работал Шекспир.

In cases when the combination of place and action is remarkable English allows a broader variety of predicates. Cf.:

(36) In this tiny room slept four children.¹⁰

3. The fact that the action took place is the result of certain properties of the place.

Cf.:

(37) Мы должны любить эту землю. На этой земле сажали пшеницу наши деды и прадеды.

Lit.: We must love this land. On this land planted wheat our grandfathers and greatgrandfathers.

It is obvious that the English sentences of this kind would not be acceptable. On the other hand, with the predicate 'live' they may be possible. Cf.:

(38) This land we have to love. On this land lived our fathers and grandfathers.

4. The fact that the action (event) took place suggests the presence of the agent of the action or those who usually accompany him in the place.

⁹ This example was suggested to me by Dr. Olga Seliverstova, who, however, supports a different explanation, whereby the addition of "his" shifts the focus from 'Pushkin' (who should not be in the focus because it is well known that "Eugene Onegin" was written by him) to a broader unit, thus making the sentence acceptable. One objection here may be that Pushkin is in the focus in relation to "this house" and not to "Eugene Onegin", and this is not the reason for the unacceptability of (32). Cf. (31) where everybody also knows that Beethoven wrote "Moonlight sonata".

¹⁰ This example was kindly given to me by Dr. Julie Van Dyke.

(39) В этой комнате скрипнула дверь. Посмотри, может быть там кто нибудь есть.

Lit.: In this room creaked a door. Look, maybe there is someone there.

In English the only predicate which may be acceptable in this case is probably the verb 'be' and only if 'there' is used.

(40) In this window there was a light. There must be someone home.

(41) *In this house (there) barked a dog. There must be someone there.

5. The action is still "newsworthy" i.e. the fact that the action took place characterizes the present situation in the place.

(42) В Лос-Анжелесе произошел крупный взрыв.
In Los Angeles there has been a huge explosion.

English sentences under the same conditions require 'there'.

Thus, out of the five requirements existing in Russian only two also hold good of 'thereless' sentences of the same type in English and all five hold good for English sentences with 'there'. At the same time it should be noted that the semantic restrictions on predicates within propositions, characterizing locatives, are much tighter in English than in Russian.

7. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the appropriateness of characteristics is a basic notion behind truth conditions, localization of propositions and some combinability restrictions. Appropriateness requirements appear to be language specific and thus require a contrastive approach.

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