

A NOTE ON RHEMATIC SUBJECTS IN ENGLISH

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It has become a commonplace to say that English exhibits the tendency to express the theme of the sentence by means of grammatical subject. This is willingly ascribed to its largely grammaticalized word order, which would otherwise make it impossible for the sentence to comply with the basic requirements of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP). In this way English is said to resort frequently to the use of a number of "thematizing" devices which permit the placement of the rhematic material towards the end of the sentence. The thematizing effect of the passive is about the most often quoted: Mathesius, e.g., pointed out to the existence of the so called possessive passive (1) and perceptive passive (2)

1. *Everywhere he had crowds hanging on his lips*
2. *Upon examination of these, I found a certain boldness of temper growing in me.* (Mathesius 1975)

Notwithstanding similar observations there also exist sentences like (3) — with the rhematic part at the beginning — which are an example of an apparent insusceptibility to FSP on the part of the English language:

3. *A girl came into the room.*

The point is that such sentences may not be considered "subjective" (acc. to Mathesius' distinction between "subjective" and "objective" word order) as they definitely exhibit a regular, non-marked arrangement of sentence elements. Firbas (1966) admits the existence of nonthematic subjects in English, and voices the belief that the passive in English *may* have a thematizing effect, provided the cooperation of means in FSP permit it.

The present paper will have a look at some rhematic subjects in English, as well as discuss in some detail the often conflicting views on the pragmatic

status of such subjects; the semantics of the verb in respective structures and the use of the article will receive particular attention. The identification of the pragmatic functions of theme and rheme will remain in line with Firbas' concept of Communicative Dynamism (CD), yet alternative interpretations will also be mentioned.

1. According to Firbas the thematic-rhematic structure of the sentence depends on the amount of CD carried by individual sentence elements, i.e., the degree to which a given sentence element pushes communication forward. Accordingly, the rheme is believed to comprise that section of the sentence which exhibits the highest degree of CD, whereas the theme is signalled by a relative decrease in CD.

The assignment of the thema/rheme functions to respective sentence elements is simultaneously a resultant of a number of cooperating, or else conflicting, factors: these include primarily the semantic character of the verb, and the context, i.e., contextual dependence or independence on the part of a sentence element. As for the context, its operation is often relativized to narrow sentence — the ultimate purpose of communication. In this way a contextually dependent element may become unbound (independent), be it the ultimate communicative intent of the speaker. Obviously, articles cooperate in signalling degrees of DC: *a, ø* — mark contextual independence as well as a rise in CD, whereas the definite article never communicates an increase of CD though, at the same time, it does not have to prevent the following NP from taking on a rhematic function. It is also believed that the semantic content itself participates actively in the development of the discourse, i.e., it also constitutes its dynamics. This happens so, first of all, in the case of the verb, whose semantics is believed to have an important bearing on the assignment of pragmatic functions within the sentence.

It was not accidental then that the problem of thematic subjects was originally related to studies in the semantics of the verb and its communicative implications. Interest in verbs such as *come* led to an identification of a whole category of "verbs of appearance or existence on the scene" (cf. verbs of action), e.g., *come up, come in, emerge, arise, take place*, etc., which — to borrow Firbas' formulation — introduce the referent of the NP into discourse, or present it in the way in which it comes into the speaker's field of perception¹. On the strength of its semantic character the verb is said to render the subject high on the scale of CD, and thus promote it to the status of the rheme:

4. *An elderly lady entered the room*
5. *A young girl appeared in the window*
6. *A monster surfaced in the distance*
7. *Some difficulties arose at the end of the discussion.*

¹ These verbs underlie the concept of Presentational Sentence.

The correlation postulated here between subject rhematicity and the semantic profile of the verb invites a closer look at the verb.

Excluding a small group of "real" verbs of appearance, e.g., *appear, arise, emerge*, the category is largely intuitive and imprecise. Firbas himself seems rather apprehensive about the term and its explanatory power, yet he uses it regularly and extensively. He even goes so far as to postulate its extension to account for "indirect" verbs of appearance, i.e., "verbs showing latent kinship" with the former, as in the case of (8–11):

8. *A goldfinch flew over the shepherd's head*
9. *A wave of azalea scent drifted into June's face*
10. *(Swithin stared at her); a dusky orange dyed his cheeks*
11. *A fly settled on his hair.* (Firbas 1966:244)

In his opinion the verb here serves as the agent's extension (cf., *goldfinch-fly, wave-drift*) so, again, it adds only little information to that supplied by the subject. This explanation, however, does not seem all that convincing in (11). Moreover, it is not quite clear whether Firbas' formulation could accommodate equally well cases in which the semantic kinship between the subject and the verb is less obvious and only reluctantly accepts the subject-verb-extension interpretation:

12. *A log drifted southwards*
13. *Talks drifted from one subject to another.*

What seems to be at stake here is, first of all, the problem of selectional restrictions: the extent to which the subject and the verb "go" together, or tolerate their co-occurrence.

An additional difficulty arises in effect of a frequent multifunctionality of English verbs. Firbas admits that the same verb may determine differently the assignment of pragmatic functions within the sentence:

14. *At this time they had a notorious prisoner called Jesus Bar-Abbas, so) when they had gathered, (Pilate said to them' ...) — Matt. 27.17*
15. *..., but, as great crowds gathered to him (he entered a boat and sat down, while all the crowd stood on the beach) — Matt. 13.2 (Firbas 1966: 251)*

It is only in (15) that the verb can obtain a non-rhematic interpretation, thus coming close to that of "appearance", and promoting the contextually independent subject to a high — rhematic — position on the scale of CD. On the other hand, the same verb in (14) receives a high communicative prominence itself because it occurs after an anaphoric pronoun.

It seems that a related contrast can also be found in (16) and (17):

16. *Anger showed in his face*
17. *The sun showed among the trees.*

where *show* in (16) introduces a rhematic subject, whereas in (17) it may itself be included in the rhematic part of the sentence; the sentence is indeterminate in its pragmatic reading, without recourse to context and/or intonation:

- 17a. (*Soaked with rain we shivered in the tent. Then the sun showed among the trees (so, relieved, we went out to warm up)*)
 17b. (*We circled in the forest trying to find our way back home. Finally the sun showed among the trees (so, relieved, we headed southwards towards it)*)

In (17a) *the sun* is rhematic, yet in (17b) it yields its communicative rank to the remaining parts of the sentence.

It has also been pointed out that the "presentational" label might as well be attached to verbs with no semantic affinity to those of "appearance" which, however, may sometimes have a rhematizing effect on the subject they introduce:

18. *Several visitors from foreign countries died in the terrible accident. A woman died from Peru, a man died from India.*²

Firbas noticed a similar situation in the case of some passive sentences with contextually independent subjects and non-expressed agents:

19. *A cry could be heard*
 20. *A blind man was brought to him* (Firbas 1966)

Similarly Duškova (1971) accepts as counterexamples to her "thematizing passives" sentences such as (21):

21. *In the six years 1956–61, a total of 81,079 applications for disablement benefits were made by coalminers,*

where the subject places highest on the scale of CD.

Thus in terms of FSP a presentational reading of a sentence is less dependent on the category to which a particular verb can be assigned, and much more on its usage, i.e., the speaker's immediate communicative concern. Subject rhematicity in such sentences is frequently enhanced by absence of other sentence constituents, e.g., (19), or some communicative deficiency of elements that might compete for the status of rheme, e.g., a contextually dependent scene of appearance (4–7). Hence it is in a way natural that the subject dominates in the sentence and becomes its communicative peak. What adds up to subject prominence in such sentences is its typically non-bound character as frequently signalled by the use of the indefinite article.

² Rochenont, M. S. 1978. The example as well as his perception of the presentational/predicational difference after: Grzegorek M. 1984, *Thematization in English* 1984

2. The article and the extent to which it may promote, or lower, subject rhematicity in such sentences constitutes another disputable issue. Needless to say, the problem stays mainly with the definite article since the indefinite non-anaphoric *a* naturally strengthens the rhematizing effect of the entire communicative situation. Although the definite article may not by itself cause an increase in CD in the NP which it accompanies, nonetheless it does not have to prevent it from occupying the rhematic position in the sentence. Firbas (1966) maintains that subjects in (22–24) are still rhematic though introduced by the definite article:

22. *The word fisherman came to his head*
 23. *The brooding look darkened on her face*
 24. *In the passage was standing the girl with the veil (pressing the parcel to her breast and panting for breath...).*

At the same time Firbas does not claim that the distribution of pragmatic functions in such sentences is independent of the use of the article; he admits that the definite article may downgrade the subject on the scale of CD and thus deprive it of its rhematic function, provided the referent of the NP conveys known information, i.e., derivable from the preceding context. In consequence the utmost communicative weight is taken over by the verb and/or the scene.

On the other hand, the presentational label may be linked invariably with the indefinite article (see note 2); the article is believed to predetermine the perception of the sentence. In this way (25) and (26) differ substantially in that (25) introduces the subject into the world of discourse, i.e. it is presentational, while (26) makes a comment about the subject which was introduced previously, i.e., it is predicational.

25. *An old man entered the room*
 26. *The old man entered the room*

The stand defended here opposes an arbitrary delimitation of such sentences on the basis of the use of the article. Firbas seems right in saying that the definite article does not have to discredit the subject as the carrier of the highest degree of CD in the sentence. Working within a different theoretical framework Chafe propounds a similar contention; he claims namely that there is no reason why definite items could not be either given or new (1976:42–3). Though definiteness and givenness often go together, yet there are also sentences such as (27), in which an item can be both definite and new:

27. *I talked with the carpenter yesterday* (op. cit)

In conclusion Chafe identifies four possible combinations: indefinite and new,

definite and new, definite and given and indefinite and given³. Hence the overt marker of definiteness may be said to signal that a given referent is known and identifiable, yet not necessarily non-rhematic. Cf., e.g., (17a) and (28) below

- (28. (*They seemed to agree on most of the issues*). *The difficulties arose at the end of the debate.*)

In some cases the use of the article is of less tangible pragmatic consequence; in (29), for instance, the definite article may not override the thematic rank of *me*.

29. *A [the feeling of panic and shame came over me.*

Primarily, however, any estimation of the role of the definite article in isolated sentences is largely unwarranted as it disregards the preceding communicative set-up, and thus often makes the speaker's communicative intent inexplicable or at least indeterminate. Cf., (30), where the meaning of the subject becomes relativized to the requirements of *narrow scene*, so it gains on communicative prominence:

30. (*A sound of smashed glass and squeaking brakes broke the silence in the street. After a while*) *the people from the near-by bus stop headed towards the battered car.*

At the same time the indefinite *a* or its plural zero counterpart are not necessarily signals of indefiniteness, as in (31–32) below:

31. *Temperatures can rise up to +50°C*
32. *Wheat is grown in the valleys.*

The definite interpretation consists in narrowing the meaning of the NP in each case to a given communicative situation, e.g., *temperatures* in (31) refers to temperatures in this region, area, country, etc., rather than to temperatures in general. Similarly *wheat* in (32) means *the wheat* rather than *some wheat*. (See, also, Sgall 1973:127f). They resemble generic expressions which are known to exhibit strong kinship with definites; cf., e.g., Kuno's concept of generic theme (1972). To my knowledge Firbas does not discuss similar sentences, yet in his model of CD distribution the subjects here should obtain a rhematic interpretation.

Further on, there seems to be no reason why — on analogy to Firbas' claim for (19) — sentences such as (33) and (34) below could not be ascribed a presentational reading:

33. (*What was that noise?*) *The flap came off.*
34. (*We can't pass here*) *The road has been flooded.*

The identifiability of the referent does not interfere with the speaker's communicative intent: the speaker may report on a certain fact and the way it enters his perceptual field, rather than predicate something about it.

In general, analyses of sentences with verbs of appearance, or with their distant counterparts, should perceive the verb as well as the article through the prism of the speaker's immediate communicative concern; the sentence becomes fully explicable only against the preceding constitution. Subject rhematicity in such sentences is quite often the result of a negative selection, cf. (19), where there are no interfering factors, i.e., the sentence is reduced to a subject-verb-scheme, which makes it more likely for the non-bound subject to overrule the verb in communicative prominence. Secondly, in the majority of sentences illustrating the use of such verbs the scene, if any, is contextually dependent and hence less eligible for a rhematic function.

On the whole, an excessive preoccupation with the verb and the article has led to some negligence of the role of the scene and its share in determining the rhematic or non-rhematic status of the subject; the distribution of CD over the sentence becomes still more troublesome in the case of a repeated use of one article:

- 35a. *A man turned up in a village*
b. *A man turned up in a small village northwest from X*
c. *A man with a scar on his face turned up in a small village northwest from X*
36. *The prophet appeared among the crowds.*

Basic instances sentences such as (35a) fall out from the scope of interest of the present paper as they are not a part of a communicative continuum and represent a marginal case in terms of contextual sentence organization. As for (35b-c), the sence, though preceded by an indefinite article, appears to admit a definite rather than an indefinite interpretation, which highlights the subject as bearer the of main communicative load. Alternatively, both (35b) and (35c) may be perceived as a single communicative unit. In either case, however, the sentences seem to pend in a communicative vacuum: the listener's communicative expectation has not been met, he awaits further information.

(36), on the other hand, associates the scene, rather than the subject, with the rhematic part of the sentence. Nonetheless, the reverse is equally possible:

- 36a. (*People were sitting in the windows, some climbed the trees and on to the roofs of the houses. Then*) *the prophet appeared among the crowds.*

3. The pragmatic status of the subject in such sentences as discussed here is certainly a cumulative effect of a number of factors, hence its proper asse-

³ The fourth combination, indefinite and given, may be found only when the referent in question is different from the referent which established the givenness, e. g.:

I saw an eagle this morning
Sally saw one too. (Chafe 1976:42).

sement in isolated sentences becomes hardly feasible. On closer scrutiny such sentences receive divergent interpretations: there is no agreement among linguists as to the role of the article, and that of the verb, neither are the pragmatic functions similarly distributed.

The correlation between subject rhematicity and the verb of appearance becomes less evident, given the possible extension of the category to cover also verbs of a distant semantic affinity, or merely their "presentational" rather than "predicational" uses. It seems that it is not that much the verb that matters but its actual usage, i.e., the projection of the speaker's immediate communicative interest. Further on, the "emergence" of the NP referent as allegedly signalled by the verb may not be utterly dissociated from a predicative statement; since the appearance is frequently linked with making a comment on a given referent, the verb can hardly be reduced to an introductory element subordinate to the quality denoted by the noun as its more "extension". By communicating that a certain element enters into his field of perception, the speaker also says something about what the element does or what is happening to it.

The thematic-rhematic structure of such sentences is also variously delimited. Proponents of the positional approach to FSP, e.g., Halliday (1967), link the first position invariably with the theme. This leads apparently to a neutralization of such distinctions as perceivable in the Polish versions of (37) and (38) respectively:

37. *An old man entered the room*
Do pokoju wszedł stary mężczyzna
 38. *The old man entered the room*
Stary mężczyzna wszedł do pokoju.

A similar conflation is rather unhappy in view of the basic tenet of FSP: contextual sentence organization.

The CD approach, on the other hand, makes it possible in practice to account for similar contrasts, yet it also nurses its own problems. Primarily, it undermines the binary division into theme and rheme admitting discontinuous rhemes and gradation among the rhematic material in the sentence. Secondly, the assignment of the theme/rheme functions in terms of CD distribution does not have to coincide with the identification of these distinctions in terms of "what is spoken about" and "what is said about it". Thus in (37a) the subject receives the highest amount of CD and becomes rhematic though it appears largely counterintuitive to claim that it is *the room* rather than *an old man* that we are taking about.

Moreover, the CD-based approach leaves unresolved the following effect:

- 39a. *Fresh tuna fish is being sold in these shops*
 b. *These shops are selling fresh tuna fish*

- 40a. *A strange-looking object was illuminated by his headlights*
 b. *His headlights illuminated a strange-looking object*
 41a. *A/the dreadful feeling of panic and shame came over me*
 b. *I was seized by a/the dreadful feeling of panic and shame.*

On the basis of their CD weight the subjects in (a) sentences above should retain their rhematic function in respective (b) sentences, e.g., *fresh tuna fish* should place higher on the scale of CD in comparison to *these shops* in both sentences. This would entail the levelling of the difference in the theme/rheme bipartition — except for its sequencing — between (39a) and (39b); these, however, are not pragmatically equivalent.

Neither are (16) — repeated here for convenience — and (42) though *anger* sustains its rhematic character in both.

16. *Anger showed in his face*
 42. *His face showed anger*

In this case, however, the difference is also largely an effect of the changing verb. Cf.:

43. *(On hearing his name called out, he turned round. He noticed Mary and) anger showed in his face. (=he became angry)*
 44. *(I met him on the stairs. He must have been dissatisfied with the talks because) his face showed anger. (=he was angry)*

As for (40a), some linguists regard as less acceptable sentences which advance an indefinite, and demote a definite element. Ransom (1977), e.g., considers (45) awkward on the grounds that the definiteness-specificity constraint has been violated:

45. *A cat was chased by the dog.*

Similarly Hinds (1974) finds (46) unnatural, and expounds the belief that the passive in English functions first of all as a thematizing device, which shifts the new material to the end of the sentence:

46. *A house was struck by the train.*

Such reservations are well-founded and basically accurate, yet not quite unexceptionable. It seems, again, that an ad hoc communicative choice may justify a similar sentence arrangement as opposed above. Cf. (47—49) below:

47. *(Can you smell it?) Yes, a skunk was run over by the car in front of us*
 48. *A house must have been struck by the lightning (I can tell by the noise)*
 49. *(What's going on there?) A child has been bitten by Mary's dog and the parents have come to complain.*

In conclusion, the non-bound subject in English — as well as a number of overtly definite subjects — seems to act as rheme in sentences under discussion. This complies, first of all, with the speaker's communicative intent: the subject obtains utmost communicative prominence. Secondly, many of such sentences show a close affinity with presentational *there*-sentences, in which case the communicative advancement of the subject is less debatable:

50. *There came a man into the room.*

Further corroborative evidence comes from equivalent structures in such languages as, e.g., Polish, where the subject tends to occupy the rhematic — sentence-final — position:

51. *Do pokoju wszedł brodaty mężczyzna*
A bearded man entered the room

52. *Na scenie pojawiła się dziewcznie wyglądająca dziewczyna*
A strange-looking girl appeared on the stage

53. *Rozległ się krzyk*
A cry could be heard

54. *Przyprowadzono mu jakiegoś człowieka*
A man was brought to him.

It may also be emphasized that such sentences display a high level of pragmatic compression in the sense that they often behave as an integral communicative entity, i.e., as if answer the question "what happened?". At the same time the exemplifications of such sentences most frequently quote human rather than non-human — cf., Kuno's concept of empathy (1976) — and general rather than specific subjects.

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