

## Topic: Theme, focus, and information processing

In the processing and receiving of information (I), whether written or spoken, lexical choice and grammatical organization have an important role.

Consider the following examples:

1. *I don't think I can do more than pay them an occasional visit.*
2. *I'll visit them occasionally.*

**Communicative dynamism (CD)** refers to the **variation in communicative value** as between different parts of an utterance.

Example: A: *When shall we know what Mary is going to do?*

B: *She will de /cide 'next WEEK.*

A **tone unit** (2.15) is a stretch of speech containing one **intonation nucleus**, and since each nucleus serves to highlight a piece of information, it follows that a tone unit is coextensive with **information unit (IU)**. But although an IU highlights one item, this does not mean that the rest of the unit is devoid of I. As in the example above, the CD can range from very low (corresponding to weak stress, as with the subject *she*), through medium (corresponding to nonnuclear stress, as with the VP *will decide*), to very strong stress (corresponding to intonation nucleus, as with the adverbial *next week*). It is common to process I in a message so as to achieve a **linear presentation** from low to high I value: the **principle of end-focus**.

### Given and new information

When we construct a message, it is a courtesy to the receiver, as well as a convenience for ourselves, to provide the point of the message with enough context for this point to be both clearly identified and unambiguously understood, as well as being placed in a formal linguistic framework.

Example: A: *When shall we know what Mary is going to do?*

B: *She will de /cide (given information) 'next WEEK (new information).*

There is commonly a one-to-one relation between 'given' in contrast to 'new' I on the one hand, and '**theme**' in contrast to '**focus**' on the other. **Theme** is the name we give to the **initial part of any structure** when we consider it from an informational point of view. When it occurs in its expected or '**unmarked**' form, its direct relation to given I can be seen informally as announcing that the starting point of the message is established and agreed. In the following examples thematic elements are not italicized:

The *lecturer*

The lecturer's *name*

The lecturer's name *wasn't announced.*

Unlike thematic elements, the italicized elements are given greater prosodic prominence and if uttered as messages the intonation nucleus would be placed on them. In other words, the new I in each case is the '**focus**' of the message. It seems natural to place new I after providing a context of given information, so we can regard focus as most naturally and normally occurring at the end of the IU.

Since the new information often needs to be stated more fully than the given information, it is not unexpected that an organizational principle which may be called end-weight comes into operation along with the **principle of end-focus**.

Examples: *She visited him that very day.*

*She visited her best friend that very day.*

*She visited that very day an elderly and much beloved friend.*

*That very day, she visited an elderly and much beloved friend.*

Apart from 'theme'/'focus', there are some other terms used when discussing information processing (functional sentence perspective): 'theme'/'rheme', 'topic'/'comment', etc.

### Marked focus

According to the **principle of end-weight** we expect to have new information (I) at the end of structures: *I am /painting my 'living room BL\UE*. The **sentence has an increasing degree of CD** from *painting* to *blue*. But when we reflect upon the sentence, we must realize that in fact no part is necessarily more obvious or predictable than another. This means that it is perfectly possible to make the sentence informationally appropriate with the intonation nucleus (and hence the information focus) elsewhere. **When we move the focus from its predictable position** to another position we speak of **marked focus**: *I am /painting my L\IVing room 'blue*.

*I am /painting M\Y 'living room 'blue.*

*I am /P\AINting my 'living room 'blue.*

*I / \AM 'painting my 'living room 'blue.*

*/|I am 'painting my 'living room 'blue.*

The condition for marked focus arises **when special emphasis is required**.

Frequently such emphasis is needed for the purposes of contrast or correction. (for details, see SGEL).

### Divided focus

It sometimes happens that **we want to put nuclear focus upon two items in an information unit**. An intonation pattern particularly associated with this in BrE is the fall-plus-rise contour. Where such **divided focus** is realized by fall-plus-rise, therefore the item carrying the rise is made subsidiary to the other focused item, accepts that it represents I that is to some extent 'given', but (compatible with the rise) calls its status in question: *William W\ORDSWORTH is my 'favourite P/OET*. can be reply to the question 'Who is your favourite poet?' or to a contrary statement 'I understand that John Keats is your favourite poet.'

But frequently the second focus conveys little more than courtesy; thus it is used with final vocatives and formulaic subjuncts:

*What's the T\IME, J/OHN*

*At /T\ENTion, PL/EASE*

### Marked theme

The two communicatively significant parts of an IU, the **theme and focus**, are typically distinct as they can be: one is the point of initiation, and the other the point of completion. The theme of an IU, coming first, is more often 'given' information than any other part of it. Yet the two **can coincide**; for instance, **when, as marked focus, the nucleus falls on the subject of a statement**:

*(Who gave you that magazine?) B\ILL gave it to me (=extreme form of marked theme)*

Compare with an unmarked theme (*he*) with minimum prosodic prominence:

*He gave me a magaZ\INE.*

It is clear that theme and focus must coincide in one-word utterances, whether these are questions, responses, or military commands, e.g. */C/OFFEE, /TH\ANKS*.

The theme carries considerable prosodic weight when it is an item that is not (like subject or conjunction, for example) normally at initial position in a clause.

Example: A: *Are you /going to in'vite J/OHN*

B: *Oh /John I've al'ready in\ITed*

In B's response, John is a marked theme, and the term is used for any such fronted item, whether or not it carries (as such items commonly do) a marked focus.

**Fronting** - the moving into initial position of an item which is otherwise unusual there (compare with marked theme)

Examples: An */utter F\OOL she 'made me 'feel*

*/W\ILSON his N\AME is*

### Subject-verb inversion

Fronting naturally carries with it the inversion that puts subject in final position, and it is to achieve end-focus on the S that the fronting is generally undertaken:

SVA: *His beloved body lies in a distant grave.*

AVS: *In a distant grave lies his beloved body.* (fronted adverbial)

### Subject-operator inversion

There are four common circumstances in which the operator precedes the subject:

1. elliptical clauses with initial *so* or the corresponding negatives *neither* or *nor*:

*She was angry and so was I.*

2. where a phrase of negative form or meaning is fronted:

*Hardly ever can you see him at home.*

3. in comparative clauses when the S is not a personal pronoun:

*Oil costs less than would atomic energy.*

4. in subordinate clauses of condition or concession, esp. in rather formal usage:

*Should you change your plans, please let me know.*

*Even had she left a will, it is unlikely that the college would have benefited.*

### Cleft sentences

represent a device for giving prominence by more elaborate means (than fronting or intonation), involving the division of the sentence into two clauses, each with its own verb. **Examples:**

*John wore a white suit at the dance last night.*

*It was /J\OHN who/that wore a 'white 'suit at the D\ANCE 'last 'night*

*It was a /white S\UIT (that) 'John 'wore at the D\ANCE 'last 'night*

*It was /last N\IGHT (that) 'John 'wore a 'white 'suit at the D\ANCE*

*It was at the /D\ANCE (that) 'John 'wore a 'white S\UIT 'last 'night*

*It was the /D\ANCE (that) 'John 'wore a 'white S\UIT at 'last 'night*

The above constructions have been called 'cleft sentences', though we distinguish the **cleft sentence proper**, as above, from the pseudo-cleft sentence (see below). With the subject pronoun *it* as an empty theme, followed by the verb *be*, the cleft sentence readily achieves focus on the final item.

### Pseudo-cleft sentences

another device whereby, like the cleft sentence proper, the construction can make explicit the division between given and new parts of the communication:

The following sentences are synonymous, the last one representing the pseudo-cleft sentence:

*It's a good rest that you need most.*

*A good rest is what you need most.*

*What you need most is a good rest.*

**Postponement** which involves the replacement of the postponed element by a substitute form is termed **extraposition**. The most important type of extraposition is that of a S realized by a finite or nonfinite clause. The S is moved to the end of the sentence, and the normal subject position is filled by the **anticipatory** *it*. The resulting sentence thus contains two subjects, which we may identify as the postponed subject (the one which is notionally the S of the sentence) and the anticipatory subject (*it*).

Thus in place of Example 1 we have Example 2:

Example 1: *To hear him say that surprised me.*

Example 2: *It surprised me to hear him say that.*