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Functional Sentence Perspective, Intonation, and the Speaker

The following article,[1] argues for the distinction between »thematic structure« and »information structure« as set up by Halliday. Information structure is believed to be expressed by intonation, and the »nucleus« marks the »focus of information«. It is claimed that the concept of »normal intonation« has to be restricted if not abandoned since it is the speaker who decides where the nucleus falls, on the basis of what he wants to communicate. The communicative function of sentences is expressed by word order in conjunction with intonation.

1 Functional Sentence Perspective

Word order, and its communicative function, has been investigated in great detail by the Prague school of linguistics, both before and after the Second World War. This has been done mainly within the framework of the theory of Functional Sentence Perspective (= FSP).[2]

1.1   Beginning with the founder of the Prague school, V. Mathesius, most researchers in FSP believe that sentences can be analyzed in a binary way into two elements, the *theme* (or topic) and the *rheme* (or comment). The theme is usually equated with known or given information, while the rheme is identified with new information.[3] The theme is also defined in the Prague school as »something that one is talking about, that from which the speaker proceeds«, while the rheme is »what one says about it«.

Since it is often difficult to draw a neat line between theme and rheme, *transition* is sometimes added, and three elements are distinguished, as in the following example:

⟨1⟩   Mr. Brown /   has turned out /   an excellent teacher.
        theme   transition   rheme

Another solution to the problem is given by Firbas, who replaces the dichotomy of theme/rheme by a scale of »degrees of communicative dynamism« (= CD), which he defines as: »the extent to which the sentence element contributes to the development of the communication« (Firbas 1964, 270; 1966, 240). This leads Firbas to the definition of FSP as: »the distribution of (various degrees of) CD over the elements of the sentence« (Firbas 1964, 272). According to Firbas, there is a »basic distribution of CD« which consists of a theme-(transition)-rheme sequence. Functional Sentence Perspective for Firbas is the outcome of an

interplay between: (1) the basic distribution of CD, and (2) the context and the semantic structure of a sentence.

1.2   The dichotomy of theme/rheme also plays an important role in Halliday's work.[4] However, his definition of theme is different from that within the Prague school. He rejects the terms topic and comment and their equation with theme and rheme. He argues that theme/rheme must not be identified with given/new, although they may fall together. The former dichotomy concerns an aspect of what he calls »thematic structure« while the latter concerns »information structure«.
Although there is some overlap with the Prague definition of theme, since Halliday also calls it »the point of departure for the message« (Halliday 1970a, 162), he defines it differently as: »the body of the message . . . the element which, in English, is put in first position« (Halliday 1970a, 161). This is illustrated with the following examples, where the items outside the brackets represent the theme.

⟨2⟩ I (don't know).
⟨3⟩ Yesterday (we discussed the financial arrangements).
⟨4⟩ The one who built this gazebo (was Sir Christopher Wren).
⟨5⟩ Didn't (Sir Christopher Wren build this gazebo)?

Thus, according to Halliday, the theme in English is exclusively defined by word order, since it is always the first element in the clause or sentence. In spite of this positional definition, Halliday also refers to the theme as »the peg on which the message is hung« (Halliday 1970a, 161), but distinguishes it strictly from considerations of either given or new information.

1.3   The relative freedom of word order is obviously a highly language-specific matter. The theory of FSP, on the other hand, was developed and used especially for the comparison of different languages. It is thus basically a universal phenomenon, although Prague linguists have been very careful in postulating universals. Daneš (1972, 225 f.), who uses topic and comment instead of theme and rheme, states:

»It appears that in many languages . . . the comment of the utterance would be associated with the center (nucleus) of the (terminal) intonation contour.«

He therefore concludes that in languages where the comment (or rheme) is normally at the end of a sentence, the nucleus should be »on the last stress-unit of the utterance« (Daneš 1972, 226). Daneš distinguishes two possible orders of sentence elements: topic-comment and comment-topic. He claims that the latter order characterizes emphatic utterances.
For Halliday, this question could not arise, since theme is identified with the first element in the English clause. In the following, I shall restrict myself to English, as Halliday does. Any claim made is not to be regarded as a universal statement, but relevant to English, although it may also hold for other languages, e.g. German.

2 Intonation as the Expression of Information Structure

Halliday claims that information structure, in English, is expressed by intonation. We will discuss this proposal in detail in the following.

2.1 First it has to be stated that in many communicative studies and research on FSP intonation has been either totally neglected, or often been treated as an optional addition of emotional elements.
A notable exception to this statement is Daneš (1972, 227), who writes:

»... in English it is rather the suprasegmental phonological structure that signals ›the functional perspective of utterance‹, i.e. the points of the highest communicative dynamism.«

Comparing English and Slavonic languages he concludes that the freedom of word order in the latter is compensated for by a uniform location of the nucleus of intonation, while in English, the fixed word order is compensated for by a highly variable intonation centre.
In the following, I shall consider intonation as a complex of prosodic features, not restricted to pitch contrast alone.

2.2 Let us consider the treatment of intonation as the expression of information structure in the ›University Grammar of English‹, which in many respects is based on Hallidayan theory.
According to this grammar (= Quirk/Greenbaum 1973), intonation is organized in »tone units«. The centre of the tone unit is called the *nucleus*, a widely used term as we have seen before, which is defined as »the peak of greatest prominence« (454). It is stated that pitch prominence is normally associated with pitch change, and that the commonest change is a fall. According to the grammar, the *nucleus* signals the *focus of information*, which »indicates where new information lies« (408). The grammar argues for a neutral position of focus, which is called *end-focus* and is said to consist of »chief prominence on the last open-class item or proper noun in the clause« (406).
The tone unit represents a unit of information. The signalling of new information, by means of the focus is, however, not unambiguous in the case of neutral position of focus. This is demonstrated (Quirk/Greenbaum 1973, 408) with the help of example ⟨6⟩, where the nucleus is symbolized by capitals and the extent of the new information by italics. Depending on context, the signal of focus is ambiguous: in ⟨6a⟩ the extent or scope of the new information concerns the entire clause, in ⟨6b⟩ only the predication, and in ⟨6c⟩ only the last element.

⟨6a⟩ (What's on today?) *We're going to the RACes*
⟨6b⟩ (What are we doing today?) We're *going to the RACes*
⟨6c⟩ (Where are we going today?) We're going *to the RACes*.

The same point is made by Halliday (1970b, 41) and illustrated with example ⟨7⟩.

⟨7a⟩ *I've just come back from GERmany.*
⟨7c⟩ (Where have you just come back from?)
       I've just come back from *GERmany.*

If there is no context, the whole sentence can be new, as in ⟨7a⟩. In ⟨7c⟩, with identical intonation, i. e. nucleus on the last open-class item, only *Germany* is new. Halliday adds, however, that if the »tonic«, or nucleus, is not »in its neutral place«, then only the item carrying the nucleus is new.

2.3   In the preceding examples, the nucleus, signalling information focus, was on the last open-class item of the sentence. However, the nucleus can also be placed on other items in the sentence. In his article on transitivity and theme in English, Halliday (1968, 204) distinguishes marked and unmarked »information focus«. In ⟨8⟩ focus is unmarked, while in both ⟨9a⟩ and ⟨9b⟩ focus is said to be marked.

    ⟨8⟩   John saw the PLAY.
    ⟨9a⟩ JOHN saw the play.
    ⟨9b⟩ It was JOHN who saw the play.

The choice between marked or unmarked is clearly up to the speaker. The importance of the speaker's choice is unmistakeably expressed in Halliday's later publications:

»... each tone group represents what the speaker decides to make into one unit of information ... The information unit consists of an obligatory ›new‹ element ... and an optional ›given‹ element; the main stress (›tonic nucleus‹) marks the end of the ›new‹ element.« (Halliday 1970a, 162 f.)

and also in the following quotation:

»Within each information unit, one part is selected as prominent; this is the tonic ... The function of the tonic is to form the focus of information ... The information which the speaker decides is to form the focus of the message we may call *new*.« (Halliday 1970b, 40)

Thus, for example ⟨9b⟩ could also have been expressed as two information units, i. e. two tone groups, with a possible choice of either *saw* or *play* as the nucleus in the second tone group.

2.4   This brings us to the question of whether there is such a thing as unmarked information focus, or normal intonation. The ›University Grammar of English‹ speaks of a »neutral position of focus«. This corresponds to Halliday's unmarked »information focus« or »neutral place for the tonic« which he defines in the following way:

»... it is located so that it begins on the (accented syllable of the) last content word in the tone group. This is what is called *neutral tonicity*.« (Halliday 1970b, 41)

This is illustrated with example ⟨10⟩.

    ⟨10⟩ Jane goes shopping in town every FRIday.

As already mentioned, Halliday (1970b, 41) also states explicitly that if the tonic, or nucleus, is elsewhere, then only the item which carries the nucleus is new. He further points out that questions concerning items other than the last content item shift the tonic, as in ⟨11a⟩ und ⟨11b⟩

    ⟨11a⟩ (Which Fridays ...) ... EVery Friday.
    ⟨11b⟩ (Where does Jane go shopping every Friday?)
          Jane goes shopping in TOWN every Friday.

2.5 Halliday's examples demonstrate the importance of the influence of context on intonation. It follows therefore that there cannot be a context-free, normal intonation. The doubtful status of the notion of normal intonation or neutral tonicity is further supported by Bolinger and Schmerling who, in various articles,[5] argue against the notion of normal stress or predictable accent. Schmerling (1974, 70) points out that normal stress is nothing but »stress used in citations«.

Bolinger draws attention to the fact that the nucleus does not necessarily fall on the last open-class item in a sentence, but that semantic considerations and speaker's intentions play an important role. This can be demonstrated with the following examples:

⟨12a⟩ There are too many topics to eLUcidate.
⟨12b⟩ There are too many TOpics to cover.

According to Bolinger, the information focus in ⟨12a⟩ is on the operation rather than on the thing, as in ⟨12b⟩. In the latter, a semantically poorer word is chosen as the verb. Bolinger (1972b, 634) stresses the important fact that choice of intonation is tied up with the choice of lexical item and »... the choice of the semantically richer verb is part of the decision«.

3 The Speaker and his Communicative Means

Before we have a closer look at Bolinger's and Schmerling's arguments, let us consider again the question of normal intonation and also some specific features of intonation.

3.1 The examples of neutral position of focus, or neutral tonicity, which we have seen so far, all consisted of a complete sentence. Bolinger's example shows that the nucleus is not necessarily on the last open-class item. If we want to clarify the question of what is normal in intonation, we must also draw on other types of utterances, besides full sentences. Halliday (1970b, 29) gives a very interesting example of a single word utterance which can be pronounced with a considerable number of quite different intonation patterns. The example, in simplified form, is the following, where the numbers preceding the utterance refer to Halliday's distinctions of different tones, or pitch contours, and a paraphrase of the meaning of the utterance is given in brackets.

⟨13⟩   1 EIleen (come here!, stop that!) – falling
⟨13b⟩ 2 EIleen (is that you?, where are you?) – high rising
⟨13c⟩ 3 Ei/LEEN (listen!, I've got something to say to you) – low rising, pretonic
⟨13d⟩ 3 EIleen (I'm warning you!)   – low rising

I believe it is impossible to state which of the different intonation patterns in the four examples is the normal one. Intonation here clearly depends on the intention of the speaker, and it is impossible to predict which pattern will be chosen unless you are a mind-reader.

3.2   I mentioned before that I regard intonation as a complex of prosodic features. Let us now consider some of the features which make up intonation in greater detail, and see how the speaker may use them for the expression of his communicative intentions. We shall single out some features of intonation only.

Pause can be used to express different meanings as in the following two pairs of sentences.

⟨14a⟩ I'll move / on Saturday.
⟨14b⟩ I'll move on / Saturday.
⟨15a⟩ I fed her / dog biscuits.
⟨15b⟩ I fed her dog / biscuits.

The function of the pause here is to split up the sentences into different tone groups, i. e. information units. The presence or absence of pauses in a sentence also depends on speech tempo. If the sentence is spoken quickly, there may be no pauses and only a single nucleus. If the tempo is slowed down, optional pauses may be inserted, and the intonation contour is changed. Tempo is clearly a factor determined by the speaker.

Another variable in intonation is tone, also called pitch change, or pitch contour. A stock example for the influence of intonation on the meaning of a sentence is the distinction between statements and questions as in the following sentences.

⟨16a⟩ HE went HOME. (statement) – falling
⟨16b⟩ He went HOME? (question) – rising

A combination of different tone and different placement of nucleus can be seen in the following example.

⟨17a⟩ What's that lying on the STREET ahead? – falling
⟨17b⟩ What's that lying on the street aHEAD? – rising

As this example shows, the position of the nucleus, or tonic prominence, also often called stress, directly influences the meaning of the utterance. Two further examples, with identical tone, i. e. pitch change, further illustrate this point.[6]

⟨18a⟩ I THOUGHT it was raining (it is!) – falling
⟨18b⟩ I thought it was RAIning (it isn't) – falling
⟨19a⟩ The paper MUST be finished (by now) – falling
⟨19b⟩ The paper must be FINished (by midnight) – falling

Finally a German pun can serve to show that this function of intonation is by no means restricted to English.

⟨20a⟩ Man muß mit der ZEIT gehen, sonst
⟨20b⟩ muß man mit der Zeit GEHen!

3.3   We shall now briefly consider intonation and context and its influence on the speaker's choice. As mentioned before, Schmerling (1971) argues against the notion of normal stress, claiming that the following sentence ⟨21⟩ does not have a single normal stress pattern as would be predicted by Chomsky and Halle's ›Nuclear Stress Rule‹.

⟨21⟩ The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog.

Schmerling points out that the stressing depends on possible preceding questions, an observation which was also made by Halliday, as we have seen in 2.4 Schmerling argues that in ⟨22a⟩ and ⟨22b⟩, for example, the italicized portion of the sentences is asserted and therefore receives heavy stress. The rest of the sentences bears reduced stress.

⟨22a⟩ (Who jumped over the lazy dog?)
     The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog.
⟨22b⟩ (What did the quick brown fox jump over?)
     The quick brown fox jumped over *the lazy dog*.

She arrives at the following general conclusion:

»Those portions of sentences receive reduced stress which contain material presupposed by the speaker to be true and to be known to the addressee(s).« (Schmerling 1971, 249)

3.4   Bolinger's (1972b) position is the opposite and at the same time the complementary one. As mentioned before, he claims that accented words are points of information focus, therefore arguing against syntactically and morphologically determined »sentence accents«. He makes a clear terminological distinction between *stress* – which for him belongs to the lexicon – and *accent* – which belongs to the utterance. He arrives at the following conclusion:

»The distribution of sentence accents is not determined by syntactic structure, but by semantic and emotional highlighting.« (Bolinger 1972b, 644)

Accent is thus clearly determined by the speaker's intentions and not by any general morphological, syntactic, or intonational rule.

3.5   If we now compare Bolinger's and Schmerling's positions on the question of normal stress or accent, it is evident that they each have a different perspective, but that both authors argue for the ultimate relevance of the speaker's intention and decision. Schmerling concentrates on the destressing of presupposed, i. e. given, information while Bolinger argues for the accenting of information focus, i. e. semantically or emotionally more important information. The two stand-points are compatible and complementary.

4 The Spoken and the Written Language

We have so far not said anything about the relationship between the spoken and the written language. Of course it is not surprising that in dealing with intonation, we are mainly concerned with the speaker.

4.1   We shall now return to our starting-point, the communicative function of sentences, and FSP as the distribution of various degrees of communicative dynamism over the elements of the sentence. Summing up, we can say now that the communicative function of sentences in spoken language is expressed by both word order and intonation. Word order is responsible for what Firbas calls the basic distribution of CD, Halliday ›thematic structure‹, and Daneš »the usual order of topic-comment«, or »inverse order«. Daneš (1972, 225) points out that

one of the functions of intonation is »simply to signal the T-C structure of utterance« and that the written language, as opposed to the spoken language, has no such device. We will see below that this statement may have to be modified.

4.2   In English, there are certain specific constructions which provide a means of bringing certain elements into focus, signalled by the nucleus, thereby giving them prominence. Such elements would then contain an extremely high degree of communicative dynamism. The constructions, of course, exist both in the spoken and the written language. They do not assign focus but afford a specific possibility for signalling it in the spoken medium.
Let us look briefly at two such constructions, the passive and the pseudo-cleft sentence.

⟨23⟩ She was pleased by the GIFT.
⟨24⟩ These chairs are made by ERcol.

In ⟨23⟩ and ⟨24⟩ we have neutral tonicity or unmarked focus. Passive in English is »a means of bringing the element governed by *by* into prominence as the focus of information« (Halliday 1970a, 153). However, the speaker is basically free in his choice of the placement of the nucleus. In many cases, he could also decide on leaving the element governed by *by* out altogether. This is also one of the functions of the passive in English. Let us now look at a pseudo-cleft sentence, such as ⟨25⟩.

⟨25⟩ What John did was KILL Harry.

It should be obvious that the nucleus is not necessarily assigned to the element which is accented in the example. *Harry* could also have been made the focus.
It follows that the nucleus in both passive and pseudo-cleft sentences is basically variable.

4.3   I believe, however, that there is one construction in English which can be regarded as a substitute for intonation in written language. This is the cleft sentence.[7] We shall use an example from the ›University Grammar of English‹ to illustrate this point.

⟨26⟩ John wore his best suit to the dance last night.

⟨26⟩ can be converted into a number of cleft sentences. Various elements can be made the theme, as is illustrated in the following examples, where the theme is italicized.

⟨27a⟩	It was *JOHN*	/that wore his best suit to the dance last night.
⟨27b⟩	It was *last NIGHT*	/that John wore his best suit to the dance.
⟨27c⟩	It was *to the DANCE*	/that John wore his best suit last night.
	fixed focus (= theme)	/nucleus variable

As is indicated by the capitals, the theme, in the first part of the cleft sentence, always receives the nucleus in the spoken language. The construction provides

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a fixed focus, which in the spoken medium invariably becomes a fixed nucleus. The two parts of the cleft sentence construction represent two information units, which are realized in the spoken language as two distinct tone groups at least. The nucleus in the second part of the cleft sentence is basically variable. There is more than one nucleus if this part of the cleft sentence is split up into more than one tone group.

According to the ›University Grammar of English‹ the cleft sentence construction »gives both thematic and focal prominence to a particular element of the clause« (Quirk/Greenbaum 1973, 414).

This is true only for the spoken language. The information focus is regarded as being signalled by the nucleus of intonation. However, since the sentence is always broken up into two units, the theme becomes prominent also in the written language, and the construction can therefore be regarded as a substitute for intonation in the written language.

Notes

1 An earlier version of this article was read at the Spring Meeting of the Linguistics Association of Great Britain in Edinburgh on 4th April 1976. I would like to thank James Monaghan for very helpful comments.

2 Cf. Daneš (1972), Firbas (1964), Firbas (1966).

3 But cf. Firbas (1964), Firbas (1966, 255); Daneš (1972, 222).

4 Cf. Halliday (1967/68, 1970a).

5 Schmerling (1971, 1974); Bolinger (1972b).

6 Cf. Crystal (1969, 264 f.) with his remarks on the »grammatical functions of tonicity« and the example *I thought it would rain.*

7 For a discussion of other aspects of the cleft sentence and pseudo-cleft sentence constructions cf. Lipka (1976).

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