

**THE RECURRENT USE OF THREE POSTPOSITION
PHENOMENA IN MARTIN LUTHER KING'S SPEECHES.
A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE EXISTENTIAL
SENTENCE, EXTRAPOSITION, AND THE PASSIVE**

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1. Introduction

The theoretical framework of this paper is Systemic Functional Linguistics because of the importance this linguistic school gives to the relationship between language and society: language is always understood inside the situation in which it is framed. Michael Halliday highlights the main reasons why speakers choose certain linguistic forms instead of others, these choices being always determined by the function that those linguistic forms have in context.

Systemic Functional Linguistics pays attention to the analysis of authentic products of social interaction (texts). Texts take place in a social context, and they are the result of different choices inside the language systems. These choices are not arbitrary since they are adapted to the context and to the function the text has, i.e., the text shows historical, political, social nuances, etc.

We are going to base our analysis on the theoretical principles of this linguistic school, to study three postposition phenomena of English in Martin Luther King's speeches, i.e., existential sentences, extrapositions and passive. We have analysed all the instances we have found in the speeches, and we will use different examples to illustrate the main formal and functional characteristics of these three postposition phenomena. The recurrent use of these structures allows the author to create a social reality through language.

Martin Luther King writes in a historical moment in which twenty two millions of black people were fighting against racial injustice in the United States. He fought in favour of the black population's rights, and in favour of freedom and justice.

King was born in Atlanta January 15, 1929. He was distinguished for his intelligence at an early age, entering university when he was just 15 years old. After receiving his PhD in Theology in 1955, he accepted an offer to be Minister of the Baptist Church in Alabama, Montgomery. Some time after that the great non-violent movement to protest against Civil Rights took place: "The Montgomery Bus Boycott". With this boycott, the "Montgomery Improvement Association", of which King was president, tried to end with the segregation on public buses. The boycott was a success, since it got that black population did not use the bus for more than a year.

King became more and more important in public events, and his talents as leader and as orator started to be well known, determining that he became the leader for the movement of Civil Rights. In 1960, King started as co-pastor of the Baptist Church in Atlanta.

When the centre of the fight for Civil Rights was moved to Birmingham, Alabama, King was there taking part, resulting in his imprisonment. Although violence was quite common in the streets, he maintained that the fight for Civil Rights should continue with a non-violent attitude.

One of the most significant moments in the movement for Civil Rights was the *March to Washington* in 1963, where King pronoun-

ced his famous discourse "I Have a Dream". One year later he became the youngest person ever to receive the Peace Nobel Prize.

As we will see with the analysis of his speeches, the three areas in which King was distinguished were in the defence of Civil Rights, the defence of peace, and the improvement of work conditions. He was murdered April 4, 1968. In his speeches, in his writings, and in his life, he always tried to give a message of hope, and highlighted dignity to black population and to poor people.

The marked structures under analysis —existential sentences, ex-trapositions and passive— contribute to the vividness of the speeches, and allow the author to build the reality of the historical moment in which the speeches were pronounced: the period of exploitation of the black population in the United States. The fact that the author describes and centres his work in North America in this historical moment creates a great interest for us as functional linguists, since we find a historical, political and social reality with very specific characteristics, that the author tries to highlight and denounce through his speeches.

There are several reasons to analyse a text: ethnographic, literary, pedagogical, etc. The main reasons for us to study King's speeches are to understand the relationships between language and culture and language and situation.

2. Existential sentences

2.1. Formal aspects

From a semantic point of view, existential sentences are those that describe the existence of something, or let us know that something took place. In Kimball's words (1973: 265):

"The proper characterization seems to be that the existential 'there' can appear with a sentence if it expresses coming into being of some

object, where this coming into being can include coming into the perceptual field of the speaker, i.e., coming into being for the speaker.”

Breivik (1983: 5-6) reserves the term existential sentence to refer to “all and only clauses containing existential/locative be or an intransitive verb which has included in it the meaning ‘be in existence’ or ‘come into existence’.”

Grzegorek (1984: 76) declares that all existential sentences have three characteristics: “(1) their subject NPs are focus elements, (2) their verbs have a lower degree of C.D. than the subject NPs, (3) the verb and the notional subject are arranged according to the increasing degree of C.D., i.e. the order is: verb-subject.”

The structure of existential sentences is the following: There+verb +nominal group.

We find the verb be in all the examples we have analysed except in the following one, in which we find the verb come:

There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the blackness of corroding despair. (1997: 62)

In existential sentences we can find a relative clause introduced by *that, who* or *which*:

But there is something that I must say to my people, [...] (1997: 44).

There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, “When will you be satisfied?” (1997: 46).

Now there is nothing wrong with an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade, [...] (1997: 66).

In this structure we can also find adverbials following the nominal group: *We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. (1997: 44).*

2.2 Functional aspects

Existential sentences have a clear textual function. As Downing and Locke (2002: 257) declare, in the existential sentence the nominal group (notional subject) represents new information, and this is the reason why it is normally indefinite. If we present an indefinite subject in initial position, the expectations of the listener are changed, since the beginning of the message is started by information unknown by the listener. In this way, the theme is new, and is disconnected from what has been previously said. When this happens, if we place a *there* without any meaning at the beginning of the sentence, we are giving certain newness to the whole structure, in such a way that it attracts the listener's attention.

After what we have just said, it can be stated that existential sentences are a syntactic resource to introduce new topics in a conversation. These topics may include people, objects, events, etc., on which the listener receives information. There is a very clear functionality, when we find existential sentences at the beginning of comments, verses, stories, etc., as in the generically familiar 'there was once...?'

Regarding the analysis of the sentence in terms of theme and rheme, following the analysis proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004: 257), the Theme, being typically also Given information, is the lexically empty *there*, the rheme being the part of the sentence with new information, as we can see in the following example:

There are some instances when a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. (1997: 66).

Theme Rheme

This structure thus tends to shift the focus of meaning towards the Rheme/New (the Theme/Given offering no meaning beyond that it is an existential sentence).

The main uses of existential sentences we find in King's speeches are the following:

As is pointed out by the name of this structure, with this sentence we are informed about something that is taking place, something that exists. We agree with Grzegorek (1984) that this is the most common use of this structure.

In the first example we get to know the different steps that are necessary in a non-violent campaign: the thematization of the adverbial phase at the beginning of the example introduces this local framework.

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: (1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive, (2) negotiation, (3) self-purification, and (4) direct action. We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham. There can be no gainsaying of the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community. (1997: 54).

In the following example the author informs us about events that took place in that historical moment, which are clearly characteristic of racial segregation: it refers to the conflicts that took place in Birmingham, Alabama, which made of the city a place of violence and racial segregation:

There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than any city in the nation. (1997: 56)

In these two examples we can see the function of the existential sentence in 'setting the scene' as it is, in the next we can see it used to picture a deeper picture, of a moral reality, or perhaps to envisage 'how it should be'.

In the example of page 58, King represents the existence of non-violence as something necessary. In this way it is made clear what is one of the main ideas of his philosophy, which is clearly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi:

[...] but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth. (1997: 58)

In some examples, it is pointed out that there are two types of laws, fair and unfair, which determine the way in which black population is treated in America:

One may well ask, "How can you advocate breaking some of the laws and obeying others" The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are just and there are unjust laws. (1997: 64)

There are some instances when a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. (1997: 66)

Again, this presents a vision of reality as it is, a moral reality; in the following example, he again uses the structure to present reality as it might or should be. King states that hope should not be lost: in this case, as in many others, we can see that the author is optimistic and believes that a better future is possible:

I believe that even amid today's mortar bursts and whining bullets, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow. (1997: 94)

In other instances what is highlighted are unfair situations clearly characteristic of racism, segregation, and suffering:

[...] and there are some counties without a single Negro registered to vote despite the fact that the Negro constitutes a majority of the population. (1997: 66)

And force everybody to see that there are thirteen hundred of God's children here suffering, sometimes going hungry, going through dark and dreary nights wondering how this thing is going to come out. (1997: 104)

[...] there was a religious law that "One who was engaged in religious ceremonies was not to touch a human body twenty-four hours before the ceremony" (1997: 112)

It is evident that the last examples have religious connotations, which reveals that Martin Luther King is a believer, as he makes reference to religion many times to offer examples and to maintain hope; he receives the word of God as a blessing.

We have observed that by using this structure, King makes statements in a categorical way, giving solemnity to the speeches, as we can see in the following examples:

There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. (1997: 44)

In the next example, King declares that he believes in love, and in moral actions as fundamental characteristics of social transformation:

There can be no deep disappointment where there is no deep love. (1997: 80)

3. Extraposition

3.1. Formal aspects

Extraposition is found when we place an empty *it* without any meaning at the beginning of the sentence, and we postpone the real subject of the sentence until the end of the structure. Huddleston (1984: 451) offers a very clear definition: "Extraposition shifts a unit to the end of the clause (except that certain peripheral adjuncts may still follow it) and inserts *it* into the vacated position."

Sometimes we find a finite verb form, which normally happens when the sentence is introduced by *that*:

All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great of a religious hurry. (1997: 70)

The previous example makes reference to the "March of Washington", which took place in 1963; it is the first great march of protest against the racial segregation.

In other examples, we find a non-finite form of the verb, i.e., we find infinitives or *-ing* forms (we do not find examples of this second case in our corpus):

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment.

(1997: 44)

Extrapolation is obligatory with verbs such as *appear, seem, chance, happen, remain* and the passive of *hope, intend*, etc. (Huddleston, 1984: 452).

Quirk et al. (1985: 1392) and Downing and Locke (2002: 262) point out that extrapolation is also obligatory in certain constructions: with the expressions *it is high time, it's a pity, it's no use*, with the passive of *say, hope and intend* and after the verbs *seem, appear, happen, chance* and *look as if*.

3.2. Functional aspects

According to Erdmann (1990: 138-139), the main difference between extrapolation and its corresponding sentence without extrapolation is that the latter places the speaker in the discourse, in the situation or in his/her knowledge about a certain fact. By contrast, extrapolation does not make reference to the text, to the context or to the knowledge about facts or people. Extrapolation is therefore a much more contextually neutral structure than its correspondent.

As regards the analysis of the structure in terms of theme and rheme, following Halliday (1994: 61) we consider the theme to be *it*, and the rheme to be the rest of the structure:

It is possible that these men were afraid.
(1997: 112)

Theme Rheme

This syntactic device places long units and new information at the end of the structure in such a way that the author can highlight an important part of the information

Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, [...] (1997: 58)

And you know, it is possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. (1997: 114)

Martin Luther King wants to point out certain things when he places new information at the end of the structure: in the first of these two consecutive examples of extrapositions King highlights that the only thing the black population could do to improve the terrible conditions they have to put up with in Birmingham (Alabama) is the organization of demonstrations:

I would not hesitate to say that it is unfortunate that so-called demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham at this time, but I would say in more emphatic terms that it is even more unfortunate that the white power structure of this city left the Negro community with no other alternative. (1997: 54)

In this, and the previous examples, we can see that King is highlighting the concepts of 'necessity', 'possibility' and 'misfortune': the central issues for the audience.

After the previous instance in the same speech King highlights the fact that the black population have no other possibility than sleeping in their cars, since they are not allowed to sleep in hotels:

When you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep

night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; [...] (1997: 62)

As with the use of the existential structure, these examples show how King draws the attention of his audience, his people, to the prevailing state of affairs, the context ('context' being that which is situationally relevant to a text).

In the following example, it is implied that black population do not normally break the laws, laws that the white population have designed in a very unfair way:

[...] it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. (1997: 64)

With extraposition, the author highlights in a categorical way by placing the long unit at the end of the structure, as in the next example.

It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. (1997: 68)

In this example is also emphasized the unfair way in which some human beings are denied their basic rights. King promoted non-violent action because in his opinion violence is immoral and should not be practiced:

We must come to see, as federal courts have consistently affirmed, that it is immoral to urge an individual to withdraw his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest precipitates violence. (1997: 70)

On the same page, we find two consecutive extrapositions pointing out the importance of Christianity in defending the equality of all human beings:

All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great of a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. (1997: 70)

In the same way, in the following two consecutive extrapositions, the author distinguishes in an emphatic way what is right from what is wrong. We can thus see how the extrapositions are an important

part of his rhetorical strategy, for creating textual cohesion, and informational prominence. Again, we can see that King highlights the idea that the black population has to be against oppression through non-violent means, which can be considered similar to passive acceptance in its non-violence, but similar to (and a replacement for) violence in its resistance:

So I have tried to make it clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends. (1997: 86)

The following example brings out how important friendship is for Martin Luther King. Behind this idea we can see that King's proposal is the creation of a community and the end of the division of people: his purpose is reconciliation. We can also see how a personal comment becomes part of his textual strategy, bearing the mark of the characteristic extraposition:

It is always good to have your closest friend and associate to say something good about you. And Ralph is the best friend that I have in the world. (1997: 98)

In the next example, we can see how extraposition places the most important part of the message at the end of the structure: fear is highlighted as a general characteristic of people at that time:

It is possible that these men were afraid. (1997: 112)

4. Passive

4.1 Formal aspects

When we find a transitive verb in a sentence, the passive voice allows the postponement of the agent subject and changes it into the agent complement of the passive construction. At the same time, the passive construction has the quality of moving another nominal group, the di-

rect object of the active sentence, to the beginning of the construction.

The passive has two aspects: it emphasizes the verb as a thematization phenomena; and it emphasizes the agent as a postposition phenomena. We are going to concentrate our analysis on this second aspect.

4.2. Functional aspects

As we will see in the analysis of the examples, the passive is a characteristic of formal discourse, as Nash (1980: 140) declares: "A further stylistic property of the passive is that it noticeably cools the manner of address – i.e. it is an index of the formal tone".

In this kind of construction, the theme is the subject, and the rheme is the passive verb and the rest of the structure, whether it has an agent complement or not, as we can see in this example:

[...] *they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*
(1997: 48)

Theme Rheme

Passives emphasize certain facts in a very formal way, giving solemnity to King's speeches. The author presents two consecutive passive sentences to highlight that freedom is something very difficult to have in his society, allowing him to make explicit the idea of agency in the giving/acquiring of freedom:

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntary given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.
(1997: 60)

These following two examples of passive voice point out what the

role of the church was at that time, or refer to a religious fact with a serious and formal tone, while in this case effacing the idea of agency, a characteristic function of this structure:

In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill, three men were crucified. We must not forget that all three men were crucified for the same crime-the crime of extremism. (1997: 76)

I say it as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen. (1997: 78)

Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are. (1997: 82)

The main use of this syntactic structure in King's speeches consists in emphasizing something that is important, related to racial segregation, frustration and the adverse situation of the population, as we can see in the following examples. In the first one, King makes reference to the period of boycott of buses (1955-1956), in which Afro-Americans and whites used different public places such as parks or schools:

[...] when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; [...] (1997: 62)

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free; one hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination; [...]

[...] we can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating "For White Only"; [...] (1997: 46)

In the same page, the persecutions and the brutality suffered by black population are emphasized through the passive voice:

Some of you have come fresh from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. (1997: 46)

These examples illustrate the way in which the concept of agency,

which is so crucial a part of the use of this structure, can be used to great effect: by making the idea of agency explicit through the grammatical choice of the passive, King invites the black population, so long the passive recipients of the agency of others, to become themselves agents in their own destiny.

Although the social situation surrounding black population was very bad, King did not lose hope, believing that one day the colour of the skin will not be a reason to be judged by society:

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. (1997: 48)

[...] *the largest and best known being Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement. This movement is nourished by the contemporary frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination.* (1997: 72)

The following example highlights the importance of Christian prayers in prison, and is significant in being an example of the black people themselves being agents, acting on passive others- or rather, their prayers:

And every now and then we'd get in the jail, and we'd see the jailers looking through the windows being moved by our prayers, and being moved by our words and our songs. (1997: 106)

5. Conclusions

The use of certain syntactic structures that break the normal SVO (subject, verb, object) order of English, such as existential sentences, extraposition and passives, is very significant from the functional point of view, because of the contrast these structures make with this basic word order.

King intended to create a new social consciousness, to oppose the dominant ideology in the United States, in this historical moment, and to reinforce identity. These syntactic structures form an important part of his rhetorical strategy, being appropriate to highlight a

particular part of the information presented, to emphasize feelings, to create an expressive discourse, etc. In this sense, it can be stated that marked syntax appears connected with a marked social reality. King's ideas are made even more effective through the use of these three structures of marked syntax to present certain aspects characteristic of racial segregation.

Existential sentences, extrapositions and passive structures accomplish the principles of end —focus and end— weight. These structures help King to emphasize his key points, particularly the importance of non —violent resistance— a difficult task in the context. Needless to say this idea is basic in his ideology, philosophy and, thus of course, in his speeches. King achieved his purpose, as we know: the strategy of non-violence was successful for the Civil Rights movement in the United States, due to the courage of those who practiced it. No doubt this courage was substantially helped, or even created, through the rhetorical brilliance of one of the movement's most influential leaders, as this article has tried to show.

We have chosen Systemic Functional Linguistics as a theoretical framework for this paper because it is really useful for one of our main purposes: to study the use of language in its context. The analysis of the examples we have presented from a systemic functional perspective helps us to understand the relationship between language and the situation in which it is used: between the speeches of King, and his context of situation.

In our view, the three marked postposition structures we have analyzed reflect the experience of the author and the situation which surrounded him, and are reflective of the type of text he chose as appropriate to his contextual purpose; that is the reason why we agree with Bhatia's statement (1993: 16): "Since each genre, in certain important respects, structures the narrow world of experience or reality in a particular way, the implication is that the same experience or reality will require a different way of structuring, if one were to operate in a different genre."

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