A Functional Perspective in English Grammar

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0.   Introduction

The purpose of this article is to study discourse structure of English from the viewpoint of functional sentence perspective, which has been advocated by linguists such as Kuno (1978, 87), Dik (1978), Halliday (1985), and so on.

In this paper I shall discuss discourse structure, introducing two systems, that is, the information system and the thematic system. The information structure consists of given and new information. The thematic structure is made up of a theme and a rheme. These terms are difined later. I shall conclude that the typical type of a clause structure in the discourse is as follows:

(1)

Theme	Rheme
Given	New

Language is used mainly to convey information. When people use language, they are usually attempting to convey information. In the actual discourse there exist two people: a speaker and a hearer. The speaker attempts to convey information to the hearer. Sometimes the only information conveyed is of a purely social or ritual nature; such is the case in (2), where the utterances convey only ritual information.

(2)   a.   For good weather

   “Lovely day, isn't it ?”

   “Isn't it beautiful ?”

   “It's so nice and warm.”

  b.   For bad weather

   “Nasty day, isn't it ?”

   “Isn't it dreadful ?”

In conveying only ritual information on the weather, the hearer usually never contradicts the speaker. Should it hail or snow, should tornados uproot the trees from the ground, and should the speaker remark to the hearer: “Nice day, isn't it ?” — the hearer is supposed to answer without hesitation: “Isn't it lovely.” This is an extreme example, though.

However, in most cases the speaker makes remarks to convey significant information,

which is new and informative to the hearer. The speaker makes utterances, assuming that at least some of those are informative to the hearer. That is, some information may be already known to the hearer (i. e., given information) and other information may not (i. e., new information). According to the definitions by Halliday and Hasan(1978: 326), in speaker-hearer terms, given and new information is described in the following way:

(3)　a.　Given information

Given information expresses what the speaker is presenting as information that is recoverable to the hearer from some source or other in the environment — the situation, or the preceding text.

　　b.　New information

New information expresses what the speaker is presenting as information that is not recoverale to the hearer from other sources.

Discourse consists of given and new information. It should be noted here that the given-new information structure depends on the context of the discourse. It is the information structure. On the clause level, usually every clause contains new information, although given information is optional, since without new information there would be no reason to utter a clause.

Within a clause, there is structure, called "thematic structure", structure consisting of a theme and a rheme. Halliday(1967: 212) claims that, while 'given' means 'what you were talking about' (or'what I was talking about before'), 'theme' means 'what I am talking about'(or 'what I am talking about now'). In this sense the theme is regarded to be semantically equal to what I will call "thematized elements." The thematic structure may be described as follows:

(4)　a.　Theme (=thematized element)

The theme means the perspective from which a sentence is viewed, what the sentence is about.

　　b.　Rheme

The rheme is something said about the theme.

In unmarked cases, the theme appears in the grammatical subject of the sentence.

Finally, it is very important and crucial to state that the information structure (given and new) are at least partly independent of each other. Halliday (1979: 68) states the following:

(5)　The Theme is speaker-oriented; it is the speaker's signal of concern, what it is that he is on about — he may even make this explicit, by starting 'as far as... is concerned'. The New is hearer-oriented (though still, of couse, selected by the speaker); it is the speaker's presentation of information as in part already recoverable to the hearer (the Given) and in part not recoverable (the New).

Though the rheme and new information quite often, and naturally so, coincide, this is by no means necessary. Moreover, we can find some sentences including no thematized element, as in

(6)　A girl came to see me yesterday.

Given the following different contexts, example (6) may have the different information structure shown in (6a) and (6b).

(6a)　A:　what happened ?

　　　B:　A girl came to see me yesterday.

Non-thematized element
New

(6b)　A:　Who came to see you yesterday ?

　　　B:　A girl came to see you yesterday.

Non-thematized element	
New	Given

According to the different contexts, the identical sentence in (6) may have different information structures. Specifically, utterance (6) in both (6a) and (6b) contains no thematized element. In (6a), the whole utterance of (6) is assumed to be new information, while in (6b) utterance (6) might contain given information without a thematized element. In fact, although there is a strong tendency in English to express the theme of the sentence by means of the grammatical subject, non-thematic elements also often appear in the subject position. That is, the subject may express the rheme if it is new information, accompanied with an indefinite article, as in (6). In (6), the noun phrase *a girl* is part of the rheme and has a primary stress. Examples like (6) do not include any thematized elements.

However, in the next example *yesterday* could be regareded as the theme of the sentence.

(7)　Yesterday a girl came to see me.

As pointed out by Hornby (1975: 169), the adverbials of time normally have end position. If the unmarked position for *yesterday* is end position, in (7) the speaker intentionally moves *yesterday* up to front position (=marked position). By this speaker's intention, putting the time adverbial *yesterday* in initial position, it may be considered that *yesterday* is thematized in a theme-rheme perspective.

Consequently the information system is partly independent of the thematic system. Therefore, when considering the discourse in terms of both of the structures, we can have various patterns of sentences in the discourse. Some patterns follow:

(8) a.

Theme	Rheme
Given	New

b.

Rheme	Theme
New	Given

c.

Theme		Rheme
Given	New	Given

d.

Rheme	Theme	Rheme
New	Given	New

In the next section, I shall argue some characteristics of the information system (given and new).

1. Given and new information

In the preceding section, I introduced two basic and important systems in the structure of the English caluses. One is the thematic system and the other is the information systems. In terms of these two systems, one clause in English like (9) can have various patterns as follows:

(9) This gazebo can't have been built by Wren.

a

Theme	Rheme
Given	New

b.

Theme	Rheme

Given	New

c.

Theme	Rheme

| Given	New

Because of the interaction between the two systems, there are various possible patterns as indicated in the above. Thus, although most linguists have studied the phrase structure of language, Halliday and other linguists have emphasized its linearity. Their approach has tended to emphasized the multifunctionality of language and the importance of its expressive and social functions, in contrast with or in addition to its descriptive function. One of the functionalists' interests has been functional sentence perspective, a term coined by Prague School linguists and other functionalists. Their approach has contributed much to the development of discourse/text grammar. In the information system, new information has several characteristics.

(10) a. Information focus, which is signaled by the nucleus, is put on new information, i. e., information which has not been prepared for.

b. The unit carrying new information has the nucleus and falling tone in final position within the unit.

c. In the most typical case, new information, accompanied with the nucleus, is put in sentence-final position.

That is, given information usually comes earlier, in sentence-initial position. And at least it can be assumed that the clause which contains new information with focus, signalled by the nucleus in final position within the unit, is the coherent and unmarked one, as shown in (11).

(11)

Given	New Foucus
Sentence	
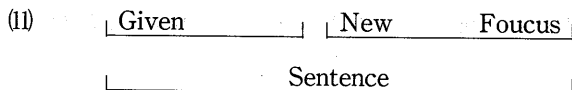
The following examples are offered to support the assumption above.

(12) There was a great log burning on the hearth.

(13) I opened the box. Inside was a ring.

(14) The girl has a hat. It's funny.

(15) There was a notice-board. On it we read the following words.

(16) An intelligent person will find plenty of thrills in a search of this nature,...

In (16), *thrills* gets the nuclear stress, since it is considered to be the final open-class element in the new information unit, and *in a search of this nature* is regarded as forming given information.

(17)　　|Given　　　　| |New　　　　| |Given　　　　|

　　　　　　　　　　　　　thrills

　　　|_____|
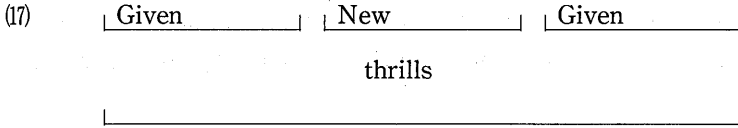
Example (16)

The information structure is decided by the speaker's intention; it depends on what he would like convey to the hearer. It is also decided by the speaker's assessment of what information the hearer already has.

2.　Theme and rheme

　This section will discuss some problems in the notion of theme and rheme proposed by Halliday (1970). He defined the thematic structure as follows:

　(18)　Theme is the initial component of a sentence, the rheme being the remainder.

　　　|_____| |_____|

　　　　Theme(=thematic position)　　　Rheme

　　　|_____|
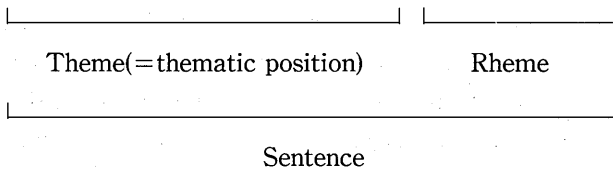
Sentence

This definition of theme is totally different from that propesed in (4). Halliday's theme is the initial component of a sentence, while in (4) the theme is semantically defined. It seems to me that Halliday confuses thematic position with a semantically thematized element. This confusion causes some problems in describing thematic structure in English. These problems will be discussed later in this section.

　Besides information focus, which has the nuclear stress, there is another point of prominence, which may have a secondary stress in a clause. This Halliday calls 'thematic prominence'. And he assumes the following:

　(19)　In English thematic prominence is associated with first position in the clause; in fact it is realized by first position, since putting something there is what gives it the status of theme. (Halliday, (1979: 67—68)

This statement by Halliday is unclear and inconsistent. In what follows, I will argue against it. The main point I would like to demonstrate here is that we cannot say that what comes in initial-sentence position is always given the status of a theme. On his assumption, it could be said that clause like (20) is structured in terms of theme and a remainder (known as the rheme).

　(20)　Daphne　went shopping in London.

Theme	Rheme
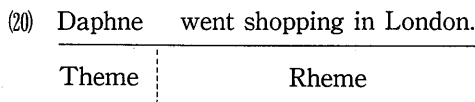
In a similar spirit, Quirk *et al*. (1972: 945) characterize the theme as the communicative point of departure for the rest of the clause. They imply that it may be natural that the speaker should begin with what he wants to talk about in thematic position, just as writers begin with a topic sentence including a main idea in paragrph-initial position. Thus, according to them (*ibid*.: 945), the expected or 'unmarked' themes of main clauses are as follows:

(21) a. Subject in a statement:
          He bought a new house.
      b. Operator in a *yes-no* question:
          Did he buy a new house ?
      c. *Wh*-element in a *wh*-question:
          Which house did you buy ?
      d. Main verb in a command:
          Buy a new house.

It must be noted here that there is quite a difference between the theme (in the sense of Halliday and Quirk *et al*.) and thematic elements in the sense of definition (4). The theme, that is, the thematic position is the initial component of a clause, as indicated in (18). On the other hand, the term *thematic elment* means the element that indicates what the sentence is about. That is, this term, as defined in (4), does not refer to a position of the clause, but instead to the phrase which says what the sentence is about. This phrase will characteristically have thematic prominence, a secondary stress.

The problem to be considered here is that in most cases thematic elements appear in sentence-initial position, but in some cases they also appear in other positions than the sentence-initial one. That is, frequently, the thematic element does occur in "thematic position", as they do in (22) and (23).

(22) John hit the dog on the head.

(23) The dog was hit on the head by John.

Example (22) takes *John* in the thematic position as its thematic element and tells us something about what 'John' did. Likewise, in (23) *the dog* is a thematic element, appearing in the thematic position, and the whole sentence tells us something that happened to 'the dog'.

However, in some examples like (24), the unmarked thematic position and the thematized element do not coincide.

(24) (Q: What about the Eiffel Tower ?)
      a. I rather like the Eiffel Tower.
      b. We were going to make a trip to the Eiffel Tower, but we lost our way and never
          arrived there.   (Dik, 1987: 143)

Here *the Eiffel Tower* is the thematized element, even though it does not occur in initial position.

Another interesting example is given in (25):

(25) *Why* did *you* let the big one get away ?
    Theme   Thematic element

Halldiay (1979: 67) claims that the word *why* in (25) proclaims the theme of the discourse. This statement is problematic. It seems to me that Halliday confuses a theme (=thematic position) with a thematized element. He believes that the theme is a sentence-initial position and the thematized element means 'What I am talking about'. Thus *why* in (25) would have to be called a theme because it occurs in intial position. However, it is not thematized element, but *you* is a thematized one.

The reason why *wh*-phrases, appearing in initial position, precede thematized elements might be attributed to the "information seeking" nature of questions. Dik (1981: 24) points out that many languages strongly prefer or even require questioned costituents to take clause-initial position. I consider that this preference is linked to the fact that questioned terms inherently have the pragmatic function of seeking information.

It follows from the assertions above that Halliday's thematic structure (thematic position + rheme) loses its validity when dealing with interrogative sentences. Stronger reasons for considering *wh*-phrases to be non-themes will arise in the discussion of Japanese thematization. However, delimiting our interest to declarative sentences, at least, it can be said that in general one of the peculiarities of the first position in English and Japanese is that in initial position the speaker gives the hearer a cue about the orientation of the remainder of the clause, that is, about the rheme.

3.   Thematic elements and a thematic position

If we regard thematic elements as what the speaker is talking about, as indicated in (4), it is natural that thematic element of sentences should be objects and concepts that have been mentioned and recorded in the registry of the present discourse. Of course, any element in a clause can be thematized, that is, can become a theme of the clause semantically, as shown in (26c). However, usually in English a superficial or derived subject in the sentence is thematized, as in (26b).

(26) a. John went to the party.
    b. Speaking of John, he went to the party.
    c. As for the party, John went to it.

As indicated above, in English, thematized elements can move up to sentential-initial position with expressions like *as regards...*, *as for...*, *as far as...is concerned*, *speaking of...*, etc. However, with normal intonation, the hearer considers example (26a) semantically equal to (26b) rather than (26c). In fact, as stated by Yasui (1978: 41), in general, surface subjects in English mean 'speaking of...' unless they are affected by thematic preposing

rules like topicalization, left dislocation, etc. or by other rhetorical word order changes. That is, if they keep the basic word orders of English, then grammatical (or surface, derived) subjects are thematized by nature. This analysis also seems to apply to Japanese.

(27)　a. John ga Mary ni　hon　o　yatta.

　　　　　　　　　　　　to　book　　gave

　　　'John gave Mary a book.'

　　b.　John toieba, Mary ni hon o yatta.

　　　　'Speaking of John, he gave Mary a book.'

　　c.　Mary toieba, John ga hon o yatta.

　　　　'As for Mary, John gave her a book,'

With normal intonation, the hearer considers (27a) semantically equal to (27b) rather than (27c). If the speaker wants to show a thematic element clearly, the thematic particle *wa* is used.

(28)　a.　John ga Mary ni hon o yatta.

　　b.　John *wa* Mary ni hon o yatta.

　　c.　John ga Mary ni *wa* hon o yatta.

Example (28b) is equal to (27b), and (28c) to (27c).

　It is true that any element in the clause can be a theme, that is, can be thematized and appear in sentence-initial position. However, it seems to me that an element must satisfy one of two conditions in order to be a thematic element semantically, as listed below.

(29)　a.　Elements which are specific to the hearer as well as to the speaker, can be thematized.

　　b.　Usually, elements which are generic can be thematized.

Condition (29), which is a tentative one on thematized elements, explains the following examples.

(30)　a.　Speaking of the girl I met yesterday, she was a hardworking accountant.

　　b.　* Speaking of a certain girl that I met yesterday, she was a hardworking accountant.

(31)　a.　Speaking of horses, they are useful animals.

　　b.　Speaking of the Japanese, they are diligent people.

In (30a) the speaker assumes that *the girl* is already specific to the hearer from the current discourse. The speaker assumes that the hearer can uniquely identify the specific reference of *the girl*. Specific elements such as *the sun, the moon, my wife* always have a referent. In (30b) a certain girl is of course specific to the speaker, but the speaker is placed in the situation where he cannot but assume that the hearer has not been informed of the reference of the thematized element *a certain girl*; *a certain girl* is not yet specific to the hearer. This is particulary true with indefinite expressions like *somebody, anybody*, etc. These expressions are clearly non-specific to the hearer as well as to the speaker.

(32)　a.　Somebody has stolen my car.

    b. * Speaking of somebody, he has stolen my car.

    c. * Somebody, he has stolen my car.

Thus, thematized elements must have at least uniquely identifiable reference to the hearer in this universe of descourse.

(33) Three boys came to the party. Speaking of the three boys, they did not behave themselves.

In (33), the thematized element *the three boys* does have a reference in the preceding sentence, although this earlier reference itself does not offer a specific referent to the hearer. By contrast, example (30b) is ungrammatical since *a certin girl I met yesterday* is not yet added to the registry of the current discourse at the point at which the phrase is used in the thematic position. Only after this entry in the registry is accomplished, that is, after the first time it is mentioned, can the phrase of some specific reference as shown in (30a) become a theme of a sentence.

The conditions on thematized elements in (29) can be simplified in terms of the information structure:

(34) Thematized elements must be given information.

Thus, if the whole sentence consists of new information only, there can be no thematized elements in that clause.

Next I will show that condition (34) is more valid than (29). Thus even if the NP's concerned here have unique reference and are specific like proper nouns, they cannot become thematic elements of sentences unless they are given information to the hearer. This point can be seen by considering (35):

(35) As for John Smith, he is brilliant.

Example (35) will be unacceptable where the name *John Smith* is not given information to the hearer, that is, the referent of this name is not recoverable to the hearer from some source or other in the environment. In this case the speaker of (35) cannot make *John Smith* a thematized element. Furthermore, listening to (35), the hearer would respond as in (36):

(36) Who's John Smith ?

In this case, *John Smith* is non-specific for the hearer, even though it is definite. It does not refer to certain individuals who exist in the mind of the hearer. For a more coherent conversation, the speaker of (35) would be obliged to provide the hearer with introductory remarks about *John Smith*.

On the other hand, (35) is perfectly acceptable when it is preceded by the introductory remarks like (37), making it possible for *John Smith* to become the topic of the conversation.

(37) I know of only three students who have solved this problem: they are Mary Harris, John Smith,and Jane Henderson.   (Murata, 1982: 70)

Likewise, (35) is acceptable when it has the following situation:

(38) (Looking at a picture of John Smith.)

As for John Smith, he is brilliant.

John Smith is used here exophorically[1], where the situation makes it clear what referent is intended by the speaker. The referent is fully specified by the context and no further specification is needed. Hence *John Smith* is regarded as given information. And it can be thematized.

The second argument for Condition (34) rather than (29b) is concerned with genericity and given information. They are different from each other, it is certain. As stated in (29b), usually elements which mean 'generic' can be thematized as follows:

(39) a. Speaking of man, he is mortal.

      b. Speaking of cats, they are sneaky, malicious animals.

However this condition is not a sufficient condition. If a thematized element is not given information, the whole sentence is unacceptable, even though the thematized element is generic. Observe the following.

(40) Speaking of etas in Japan, they are still socially discriminated against in the countryside.   (Kuno, 1973: 41)

If the speaker assumes that the hearer does not know what *eta* ('social outcast') means, that is, if the definition of *eta* is not known to the hearer, then *eta* is not given information to the hearer. Hence the speaker cannot start a discourse with *etas* as a thematic element. According to Kuno (1973: 42), the speaker will have to establish an entry for *etas* in the hearer's registry of discourse by introductory statements such as :

(41) In Japan, there is a class, called *eta*, of social outcasts.   (Kuno, *ibid*.: 42)

Kuno also states that only after statement (41) has been made can the speaker use *etas* as the topic of a sentence as in (40). This makes it clear that even generic NP's have to be given information in order to be thematized elements.

In this section, I have shown that the necessary and sufficient condition of thematic element is that they must be given information to the hearer.

4.   Theme and given-new information

More or less word order plays a role in functional sentence perspective. In this section I shall claim that if the basic word order of a sentence is changed by one of the thematizing rules, the sentence transformed should keep a theme-rheme organization.

As I have shown in Section 2, the initial positions in sentences can give the hearer a cue about the orientation of the remainder, i. e., the rheme. The importance of this function of the initial position is clearly indicated in examples like:

(42) No-one else had known where the entrance to the cave was situated. The one who discovered cave was John.

(42) No-one else had known where the entrance to the cave was situated. What John discovered was the cave.   (Halliday, 1986: 210)

Examples (42) and (43) may be regarded as different versions of the same sentence or, alternatively, equivalent and therefore,on a narrow interpretation of 'meaning', can be said to have the same meaning. (cf. Lyons, 1981: 226) In short, there is no difference in truth value between them. However, example (43) is awkward, while (44) seems natural. The reason for the awkwardness of (43) is that the speaker of (43) intentionally selected as the initial phrase *what John discovered* in the second clause, which forces it to be interpreted as a thematized element. But this is a bad choice of the thematic element. It seems that in English the following pattern of information structure is considered to be the most coherent to the hearer.

(44)

Theme	Rheme
Given	New

In particular, if the sentences are derivations from the basic word order, then they are supposed to have the information structure like (44).

Thus, the second sentence of (42) has a pattern like (45), but that of (43) has a completely opposite pattern, like (46).

(45)   The one who discovered the cave was   John.

Theme	Rheme
Given	New

(46)   What John discovered   was the cave.

Theme	Rheme
New	Given

In addition, assuming as a basic form of (45) and (46) the following sentence, we would get the discourse like (48).

(47)   John discovered the cave.

(48)   No-one else had known where the entrance to the cave was situated. John discovered the cave.

Discourse (48) is much better than (43). Sentences which preserve basic word order of English, like *John discovered the cave* in (48), do not necessarily have pattern (44). The following pattern is also quite acceptable:

— 19 —

(49)　John　discovered　the cave.

Rheme	Theme
New	Given

As I mentioned in the introduction, in English non-thematic elements often appear in the grammatical subject position. Especially, in sentences keeping basic, 'unmarked' word order of English, the grammatical subject can be ambiguous in thematicity: theme or non-theme. This is why discourse (48) is not bad, even though the initial element *John* in the second sentence is not a thematized element.

However, it is not natural to make one of the thematic preposing rules like pseudo-cleft sentence transformation operate on sentences keeping basic word order of English, like *John discovered the cave* in (48), where *John*, which is new information from the discourse, is already occurring in the thematic position. It is not proper to use thematic preposing rules to any element carrying new information in the underlying form.

Therefore, an information structure like (46) is not adequate for sentences which are derived from the basic word order. Specifically speaking, in (46) the new information to the hearer occurs in the initial position. It is too abrupt to say (46), following the first utterance "No-one else had known where the entrance to the cave was situated." In short, the awkwardness of utterance (43) is attributed to the information structure of the second sentence, as shown in (46).
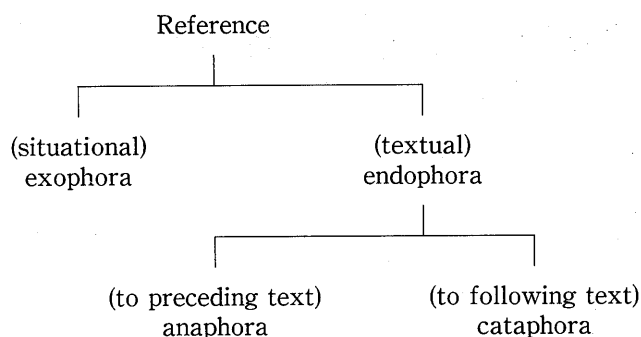
5.　Conclusion

The previous section has looked at some processes of word order change in a theme-rheme organization that secures initial sentence position for some particular constituent, assuming that the pattern of information structure as shown in (44) is the most cohrent to the hearer. It is not always easy in a well-formed context to the identify precisely what effect a word order change by thematic preposing rules has: it is, paradoxically, much easier to describe the effects of a thematic preposing rule when it applies to an inappropriate element, causing awkwardness and unnaturalness in discourse.

NOTE

1.　I owe this term to Halliday & Hasan (1976: 33). It is useful in the discussion to have a special term for situational reference. This we are referring to as EXOPHORA, or EXOPHORIC reference; and we could contrast it with ENDOPHORIC as a general name for reference within the text:

```
                        Reference
                            |
        ┌───────────────────────────────────┐
        |                                   |
   (situational)                        (textual)
   exophora                             endophora
                                           |
                        ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                        |                              |
                (to preceding text)           (to following text)
                    anaphora                        cataphora
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