THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THEMATIC AND INFORMATION STRUCTURES IN ENGLISH LITERARY TEXTS

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The article addresses the topic of thematic and information structures of the message in the English literary texts and the effect these arrangements have upon the reader in the cognitive and aesthetic processes of text reception. The study draws on the mechanisms that explain how the sequencing of elements in the clause contribute to the flow of information and topic development in a paragraph as a unit of text analysis. It also analyzes various patterns of thematic and information structures and seeks to evaluate the function of marked and unmarked structures of the author's thematic choice in a number of literary excerpts with a view to identifying the pragmatic effect of these arrangement patterns in English literary fiction.

Keywords**:** *thematic structure, information structure, marked/ unmarked structures, effectiveness.*

In text linguistics, the principle of effectiveness presumes leaving a strong impression and the creation of favourable conditions for attaining a communicative goal. Reading is an aesthetic experience, as literary texts are an artistic ordering of words, ideas, and emotions into a unified representation that interprets reality. Readers derive pleasure from figurative language, plot turns, symbols, character development, irony, etc. [2, p. 9]. Other aesthetic strategies employed in narratives are the type of narrator, point of view shifts, incongruities between content order and form order meant to create enigmas, suspense, the presentation at length of minor events and the brief presentation of major events. The constraints of appropriateness of the literary texts require that the style should fit the message, the dialogues fit the characters, and the language be comprehensible [Ibidem, p. 83].

An important component of the literary text which contributes to its effectiveness is the language. Literary texts are characterized by peculiar and sometimes unconventional uses of language which make an appeal to the imagination or to the affective side of the readers, i.e. figurative language, idioms, modality, deviant linguistic occurrences, such as breaches of usual

rules of syntax, collocation, and even cohesion. Readers identify a stretch of language as a text partly because it is presented to them as a text – and hence they do their utmost to make sense of it as a unit – and partly because of the obvious connections within and among its sentences achieved through the arrangement of information within each clause and the way this relates to the arrangement of information in preceding and following clauses and sentences. These connections contribute mainly to topic development and maintenance through *thematic* and *information structures***,** notions developed for the English language by the British linguist Michael A.K. Halliday [7].

According to the thematic structure approach, a clause consists of two segments. The first segment is called the *theme*, the part which renders what the clause is about and has the functions 1) to connect back to previous stretches of discourse and thereby insuring a linear flow of information and (2) to connect forward, contributing to the development of later stretches. In *The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white* [8, p. 15], the theme is *The hills across the valley of the Ebro,* this is what the clause is about. At clause level, the writer states the topic of his utterance by *thematizing* it, i.e. by putting it in initial position. The second segment of a clause is called the *rheme*. The rheme is what the speaker says about the theme. It is the goal of discourse. Consequently, it is the most important element in the structure of the clause as a message because it represents the very information that the speaker wants to convey to the hearer [1, p. 133]. In the above example, the rheme is *were long and white.*

In the Hallidayan model, the distinction between theme and rheme is more or less identical to the traditional grammatical distinction between subject and predicate and is realized by the sequential ordering of clause elements. Theme is the element placed by the speaker in the first position in the clause; rheme is whatever comes after the theme. The placement of constituents in the theme and the rheme is specifically influenced by what is *given* (or old) information in the clause and what is *new information***,** although not always, see cleft clauses.

By definition, theme represents the speaker's or writer's point of departure in each clause, which suggests that its organizational role is more important than that of rheme. The overall choice and ordering of themes plays an important part in organizing and providing a point of orientation for a given text.

(1) Whatever hour you woke there was a door shutting. From room to room they went, hand in hand, lifting here, opening there, making sure – a ghostly couple [16].

The quoted excerpt, extracted from V. Woolf's short story "A Haunted House", is an example of thematic ill-formedness. To begin with,

the very first sentence of the exposition throws the reader into the middle of the action without providing any background information. The second-person pronoun *you* creates confusion since it can be ambivalently interpreted as referring to the narratee/reader or to the second-person protagonist. Furthermore, the use of cataphoric reference, i.e. the pronoun *they* occur before the noun it relates to, and the positioning of the theme *a ghostly couple* at the end of the sentence cause the text to feel disjointed and lacking orientation.

A particular aspect of thematic organization relates to the *marked* and *unmarked structures* of thematic choice – the selection of a clause element (subject, predicate, object, complement (predicative) and adjunct (adverbial modifier)) as theme, i.e. placing it in initial position. The degree of markedness of a certain element depends on the importance or meaning ascribed to it by the speaker or writer. The more obligatory and expected an element is, the less marked and the weaker its meaning is; the less expected a choice is, the more marked it is and the more significance it carries [1, p. 141-142]. For instance, the object may occur in initial position in English, although very rarely, as in *Of him they took but little notice* [17]. The theme expressed by the object is highly marked in this position and reveals a conscious effort on the part of the writer to emphasize this particular word as her point of departure. Apparently, this explanation does not reconcile with that of rheme, which comes in final position in the clause, and, consequently, is more important than theme. In fact, in marked thematic structures, the highlighted element acquires a local, temporary prominence within the clause, while the element in rheme position caries the communicative purpose of the utterance and represents the very core of any message [1, p. 143].

The classification of marked theme, according to Halliday, includes three main types: fronted theme, predicated theme, and identifying theme. Fronting, or *topicalization*, involves "the achievement of marked theme by moving into initial position an item which is otherwise unusual there" [5, p. 407]. Adjuncts of place and time are commonly thematized in English texts, where locative and temporal themes offer a natural method of text development. The fronting of objects and complements is much more marked than the fronting of adjuncts in English because objects and complements have a strict position. The effect of such placement is to provide contrast and to emphasize the speaker's or writer's attitude to the message. It foregrounds the expressive meaning of the utterance. The phenomenon of marked theme achieved through fronting is illustrated in the following examples:

(2) To him the change was of the most galling nature [17]. – *Fronted object.*

(3) Behind Miss Barrett's bedroom, for instance, was one of the worst slums in London. Mixed up with that respectability was this filth [Ibidem]. – *Fronted adjunct of place; fronted complement.*

Such variations in word order are also related to narrative representation strategies. For instance, the initial positioning of prepositional phrases of place or direction, as in *Into the room it came* or *In flew a large bird* is frequently related in narratives with the description of surprising developments presented from the point of view of an observer, the protagonist, who implicitly functions as a focalizer [4, p. 72].

Fronting the predicate is the most marked of all thematic choices in English, but rather uncommon. It also involves re-arranging other clause elements and adjusting the form of the verbal group:

(4) Slammed the door in his face, you did, Mr Cranmer, sir, and me and Oliver here were wondering why you did that to him... [10].

Predicating a theme involves using an *it-structure (cleft structure)* to place an element near the beginning of the clause [1, p. 146], as in *It was upon her evidence that Flush was convicted* [17]. The theme of an *it-structure* is not *it* but rather the element which occurs after the verb *to be*. *It* acts as an empty subject which allows a certain element to be placed near the beginning of the clause and to be interpreted as its theme. This structure allows the speaker or writer to select the subject as a marked thematic choice, an option not generally available since the subject is the unmarked theme of a declarative sentence in English. The main function of the predicated themes is to render contrast:

(5) Mrs Albert Forrester lived in a flat not far from the Marble Arch ... It had a handsome drawing–room on the street and a large bedroom for Mrs Albert Forrester, a darkish dining–room at the back, and a small poky bedroom, next door to the kitchen, for Mr Albert Forrester, who paid the rent. It was in the handsome drawing–room that Mrs Albert Forrester every Tuesday afternoon received her friends [11, p. 344].

In example (5), *in the handsome drawing–room* contrasts with other rooms of Mrs Albert Forrester's flat presented in the story*: a large bedroom for Mrs Albert Forrester, a darkish dining–room at the back, and a small poky bedroom, next door to the kitchen*. Another important function of predicated theme is to signal *information structure* by presenting the element following the cleft structure in the main clause as the new or important item to which the reader's attention is drawn.

The identifying theme places an element in theme position using a wh-structure (pseudo-cleft structure) [1, p. 148]. The following example comes from the novel *Sons and Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence and represents the description of the main character Gertrude Morel:

(6) She loved ideas, and was considered very intellectual. What she liked most of all was an argument on religion or philosophy or politics with some educated man. This she did not often enjoy. So she always had people tell her about themselves, finding her pleasure so [9, p. 19].

Like predicated themes, identifying themes are often associated with implicit contrast. They tend to imply that the item in theme position (in the case of predicated themes) or the item in rheme position (in the case of identifying themes) is chosen from a set of possible items as the one worthy of the reader's attention. In the last quoted example the implication is that Gertrude preferred particularly this elevated type of conversation *an argument on religion or philosophy or politics with some educated man*, which she could very rarely indulge in, and not the trivial talk of her interlocutors she was compelled to listen to.

The organization of the text into units of given and new information is defined as *information structure*. In Hallidayan tradition, information structure is viewed as a feature of spoken, rather than written English and is expressed by the intonation patterns [6, p. 325]. According to Halliday and Hasan, each information unit consists of either a combination of given-plus-new elements or of just a new element, realized phonologically as a tone group, with the emphasis or tonic accent on the new element – *information focus*. The information focus of an unmarked information structure falls on the whole rheme or part of it; for example, in *John was appointed Chairman*, the tonic accent will normally fall on *Chairman,* giving the message the meaning of a statement of what happened or what John was appointed as. However, any element of the statement can be stressed, depending on the element the enunciator wants to emphasize as the core of the message:

The information structure reflects the issuer's sensitivity to the receiver's state of knowledge in the process of communication. The old information represents the segment of the message which the speaker/writer regards as already known to the hearer/reader, while the new information is the one that the speaker/writer intends to communicate to the hearer/reader. Given information represents the common ground between issuer and receiver and gives the latter a reference point to which the new information can be related. The linguistic or situational context determines what part of a message is new and what part is given.

The normal, unmarked order is for the issuer to enunciate first the given element, then, the new one. The given-before-new principle, termed by Greenbaum and Quirk as *end-focus*, is found to contribute to the ease of comprehension and recall, as it helps "to achieve a linear presentation from low to high information value". A similar principle of information structure is that of *end-weight* which refers to the practice of placing longer and heavier

structures, used to convey the new information more fully than the given, towards the end of the clause [5, p. 395-398].

Except intonation, there are certain devices able to signal information status in both written and spoken language. For instance, definiteness is generally associated with given information and indefiniteness with new information. Pronouns denote inherently known information. Other means of signalling information status in English are cleft and pseudo-cleft structures. In cleft structures, the item in theme position is presented as new and the item in rheme position - as given, while in pseudo-cleft structures, the information status is marked vice versa.

Apart from syntactic structures, punctuation can also be used as a device for signalling information status in written language. Comma is used, for example, in non-defining relative clauses to indicate that their content represents new information as in example (7) selected from W.S. Maugham's short story "The Pool":

(7) I met Ethel at the house of a man called Caster, who lived two or three miles from Apia with a native wife [12, p. 100].

In literary texts, marked information structure is often presented by means of typography or punctuation devices. In the following example, taken from E. Waugh's short story "Mr Loveday's Little Outing", italics highlight the elements which carry the information focus:(8) 'Oh yes, sir, thank you, sir, I've enjoyed myself *very much*. I'd been promising myself one little treat, all these years. It was short, sir, but *most* enjoyable. Now I shall be able to settle down again to my work here without any regrets.' [15, p. 28]

Rheme can be marked in written texts by stripping the message of its initial element – the theme. The following example, from Saki's short story "Tea", illustrates the point:

(9) His Mediterranean musings were interrupted by the sound of a clock striking the half-hour. Half-past four. A frown of dissatisfaction settled on his face. He would arrive at the Sebastable mansion just at the hour of afternoon tea [13, p. 12].

The rheme of the first sentence is reiterated in the second *Half-past four,* while the theme is omitted. This procedure foregrounds the rheme. It is the only element that the clause consists of, thus capturing the reader's entire attention as the core of the message. Moreover, the verbatim repetition of information that has already been established in the preceding sentence breaks the reader's expectation of discourse continuity, achieving thus prominence.

Paragraphs are generally regarded as structural units, composed of one or several sentences, having thematic unity, i.e. developing one main topic,

and characterized by a set of grammatical cohesive features such as conjunctions, anaphora, tense and aspect markers. The content of the first sentence often helps readers formulate the paragraph theme, though it is not possible to immediately determine what the text is saying about its theme (the paragraph rheme). In narratives, the linguistic boundaries of paragraphs are frequently marked by temporal and spatial adverbials which signal respectively temporal and spatial changes.

Text linguistics studies operate with another notion to denote a processing and structural unit in narrative texts – *the episode***,** borrowed from everyday discourse, e.g. "an episodes of our life", "episodes in the history of a country". The episode is claimed by many linguists to be a primary unit of analysis in narratives. Teun A. van Dijk's distinction between *paragraph* and *episode* is based on the following assumption: "An episode is properly a semantic unit, whereas a paragraph is the surface manifestation or the expression of such an episode." [16, p. 177] An episode is, first of all, conceived of as a unified part of a whole defined in temporal terms, as it involves a sequence of events or actions having a beginning and an end. Hence, readers can identify it and distinguish it from other episodes [Ibidem, p. 179].

As a semantic unit in discourse organization, an episode consists of a coherent sequence of related propositions governed by a macro-proposition or a paragraph level theme, for instance, identical participants, time, location or global event or action [14, p. 460]. Besides having local coherence, the sequence should be globally coherent*,* i.e. be subsumed under some more global macro-proposition or topic, thus ensuring the overall unity of a discourse sequence known under such notions as *theme*, *topic*, or *gist*. Teun A. van Dijk suggests that the following devices usually signal the beginning of episodes in narrative texts: paragraph indentations, time change markers and tense changes, place change markers, introduction of new individuals (often with indefinite articles) or reintroduction of 'old' ones (with full noun phrases instead of pronouns), change of perspective markers, by different 'observing' participants or differences in time/aspect morphology of the verb, (free) indirect and direct style [3*,* p. 181].

From the cognitive standpoint, the episode solicits on the part of the reader sustained attentional effort until attention is diverted by an episode boundary. Episode boundaries causing attention shifts represent major breaks in the flow of information in discourse which correspond to changes in place, time or characters [14, p. 460]. Therefore, the episode-like units have processing significance in reading, representation, and memorization of discourse.

Having analyzed various patterns of thematic and information structure in English literary texts, the following conclusions can be formulated:

1. The conventional sequencing of thematic and information structures embedded in semantic units of narrative discourse organization functions as a point of orientation in the literary text and hence in the text world helping the reader to piece together the information about characters, actions, and places.

2. Deviant arrangement patterns, such as marked structures of thematic choice and thematic ill-formedness, alert the reader's attention to different elements of information structure and solicit a higher degree of readers' cooperation in processing the textual information.

3. Variations in thematic and information structure can be used to achieve different narrative representation strategies, for instance to mark descriptions or story developments from the point of view of a certain agency, i.e. character or narrator, or to render contrast.

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