Theme and Context Dependency: Thematic Progression
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Central to the understanding of the text is the manner in which its minimal constituent utterances--sentences-- are linked to one another. Our very perception of a text as a text depends upon our recognition of it as a coherent unit. Clearly, textual unity derives from the interplay of a complex of textual and sentence-level functions. It is the linguist's task to expose the threads that, woven together, produce the textual cloth.

One such means of textual cohesion is semantic component structure, which marks lexical items of different sentences of a text as related based on their content similarity--as when they belong to the same word-field or equivalence-class. Bierwisch (1965) points out, however, that equivalence-class membership is not a sufficient means of marking textual coherence, and he gives as an example the following pseudo-text:

1) There's nobody who isn't enchanted by her singing. Our singer is called Josephine. Singing is a word with 7 letters. Singers are wordy. (p. 72, transl. by N.K.)

As the example shows, component structure does not itself unequivocally mark sentences in a series as textually coherent. Another, more promising textual organizational principle is thematization, the structuring of information in terms of "theme" and "rheme" (also called topic/comment).[1] The minimal unit of thematic linkage is the theme, which expresses that about which something is said or that which is commented upon in the sentence. Paired with its rheme, which comments upon the theme and contains the core of the clausal message, the theme, as we shall see, contributes significantly both to the information of the clause it appears in and to the overall textual organization and cohesion. It is the relation between these overlapping functions that interests us here.

In answer to the question of how the theme structures the text, F. Daneš (1970) proposes five common types of what he calls "thematic progression":

linear progression--the rheme of one sentence becomes the theme of the next:

2) Yesterday I saw Mary. She looked terrible.

continuous theme--one theme serves as theme of a series of sentences:

   3)   Henry hates pizza; he can't stand the smell; he can't stand the taste; he can't stand the texture.

derived theme--one central hyper-theme yields subordinate, derived themes:

   4)   Pizza is delicious. The sauce is spicy, the cheese is chewy and the crust is crispy.

split rheme--the rheme presents a class whose members become thematic:

   5)   There are many types of pizza. A mushroom pizza has mushrooms on it. A vegetarian pizza has no meat. etc.

thematic jump--one member of a thematic chain of the linear progression type is omitted but supplied by the context:

   6)   I just saw Mary. Her dress looks awful, doesn't it?

Underlying each of Daneš' five types of thematic progression is the assumption that information recoverable from the pre-text (i.e., "given" information) finds its way into a subsequent sentence as the theme. A survey of almost any text, however, will disclose that it need not be the case that the theme present given information; "new" information can also appear in thematic function, though, to be sure, the "given" theme is considerably more common than the "new" one.

Yet even among those themes that express a contextual link as in examples 2-6 above, the relation between theme and antecedent information especially in terms of thematic progression is quite diverse and not just a relation based upon the transmission of recoverable information across sentence boundaries, even when this is consistent with one of the above-mentioned progression-types. (Bierwisch's pseudo-text above satisfies this criterion.) One must bear in mind that the given/new distinction is not a binary taxonomy, but a polar one admitting of a whole spectrum of possibilities between the extremes of complete "givenness" and complete "newness". Accordingly, "given" thematic material may, and frequently does convey new information as well. Consider examples 7-9:

   7)   Paul tried to understand the thesis, but the thesis (or it) was too abstract for him.

8) Paul tried to understand the <u>thesis</u>, but the <u>point</u> was too abstract for him.

9) Paul tried to understand the <u>thesis</u>, but the <u>formulation</u> was too abstract for him.

Clearly, the semantic relationship between $rheme_1$ and $theme_2$ differs in each example based upon the degree to which, or manner in which, given/new information is transmitted. Although all three versions fall into one or the other of Daneš' progression types, only in example 7) does the theme express purely given information. In 8) the synonym, <u>point</u>, while conveying largely given information, does also contribute something new to the antecedent, <u>thesis</u>, which it replaces. The theme of example 9), while still context dependent and hence "given", adds considerable new information--in the form of a shift of emphasis from <u>thesis</u> to its <u>formulation</u>.

Daneš' formulation of progression takes into account the fact that in our examples $theme_2$ and $rheme_1$ are linked by virtue of their shared information. This is both valid and important. As a complement to this backward-oriented information structuring, however, belongs the important aspect of development within the text--clearly, a product of the introduction of new information. Any definition of "thematic progression" must, I believe, fully account for this "pro-gressive", forward-oriented aspect of thematic information.

Textual linguistics has been quick to note the importance of the rheme in this regard, for the rheme characteristically conveys the core of the new information in a sentence. In fact, in the case of Daneš' continuous theme type, where the same theme is commented upon in a series of sentences, the rheme alone conveys new information. In example 3) above the development is from <u>smell</u> to <u>taste</u> to <u>texture</u>. In 7) too the rheme unilaterally indicates the informational development. In a word, the rheme provides the entire informational development whenever the theme contributes nothing but the link to the pretext, <u>i.e.</u>, whenever the theme is purely "given" information.[2]

In many connected sentences, however, the theme not only establishes contextual dependence but conveys new information as well. Examples 8-9 above feature themes, <u>point</u> and <u>formulation</u>, which to lesser or greater degrees contribute to the message at hand. In sentences of these common types, the theme itself adds to or modifies the content of the information item in the pre-text that it replaces. The rheme in such sentences presents a statement on this modified thematic content.

These sentences and sentences like them demonstrate that at least as important to the question of thematic progression as Daneš' types is the manner in which, or the degree to which, new information is conveyed by recoverable material; for

as much as the theme provides a means by which successive
sentences in a text may be informationally linked, its con-
tribution to thematic progression throughout the text depends
upon the newness it conveys. Hence, the "given" effects the
cohesion while the "new" marks the semantic or informational
development.

If it is so that thematic progression bears such a
direct relation to the new information added by the theme, it
behooves us to examine more closely some of the points along the
spectral line between the extremes of given and new.[3]

repetition

Repetition represents the only case of the thematiza-
tion of completely given information through morphological,
lexical, and referential identity (cf. example 7). The sub-
stitution of a pro-word alters neither the coreferentiality nor
the informational identity between the theme and its contextual
referent:

10) John <u>is ill</u>. <u>That</u>'s his reason for not coming.

Since the theme primarily serves as a means of linkage in such
sentences, we must seriously question whether "thematic progres-
sion" is indeed involved in cases of repetition.

synonymic substitution

Synonyms convey essentially given information, but
permit greater or lesser degrees of meaning divergence. In other
words, while the synonym and its antecedent are coreferent, the
synonym admits some degree of newness:

11) Peter went to see <u>Othello</u>. The <u>drama</u> really impressed him.
The <u>tragedy</u> really impressed
him.

paraphrastic substitution

Like synonymy, paraphrase involves coreference, and
effects the restatement of something in new terms, often in an
expanded form. Paraphrase therefore conveys new information
(and potentially to a greater extent than synonymy which is
limited to lexical substitution):

12) . . . Queen Elizabeth. The monarch of Britain . . .
The mother of Prince Charles. . .

The selection of one or the other of an often vast array of possible paraphrastic substitutions represents of course an aspect of a speaker's thematic choice and is subject to what may be called his communicative strategy. Given his general communicative intent the speaker may select his sentence themes as signposts directing the hearer along the path of understanding his message.

derivation[4]

Derivation involves the selection by the speaker of a single component feature or aspect of a previously mentioned item for thematization. Consequently, the derived theme and its antecedent source are not coreferential. Clearly a vast array of thematic derivations is possible, from very close ones, in which the contextual referent may be said naturally to contain or possess the feature, to very loose derivations, whose connection is far less direct. An example of close derivation might be:

13) I just ran into <u>John</u>. <u>His</u> <u>arm</u> is still in a cast.

Compare with this the following lose derivations:

14) Yesterday there was a three-car collision on Highway 80.
   <u>Several</u> <u>people</u> were seriously injured.
15) Yesterday there was a three-car collision on Highway 80.
   A <u>police</u> <u>spokesman</u> reported that several people were
   seriously injured.

In these examples and others like them we see the introduction of essentially new information. At the same time, contextual dependence is achieved on the situational or pragmatic level. Indeed the more tenuous the derivation the more important the pragmatic aspect becomes. In example 14) the involvement of cars in a collision presupposes that people (drivers and possibly passengers) are also involved. In 15) such a collision entails that police attention will be drawn to the incident. Both examples display in a most transparent way the informational connection the speaker makes between the coupled clauses. The hearer, for his part, recreates for himself the relation between successive items of information as intended by the speaker.

new theme

Finally it is possible for a theme to introduce completely new information without any direct or indirect contextual link. In the case of the contextually independent theme we must again question whether the term "thematic progression" applies, since no connection exists between the theme and previous material. Rather, other structures or sentence elements function to link the sentences to one another. One of the most common alternative means of linkage is, not surprisingly, the conjunction. Consider the following example:

16) I'll travel to Denver, if the weather holds.

Here the conjunction if ties the clauses and indicates their relation to one another while no thematic connection exists and no thematic progression is involved. The same is true for the following example containing conjunctional linkage:

17) We enjoyed our picnic, until the sun went down.

The new theme also occurs with some frequency in the first sentence of a text (or text segment). Clearly, no thematic progression pertains in such a case. Rather, the theme introduces a statement that forms the subject of the text or text portion, as in the following examples:[5]

18) A convict has escaped from the state prison at San Quentin.
19) Many people believe that it's okay to steal from corporations.

Conclusion:

The notion of thematic progression proposed by Daneš is a most significant concept and one whose importance and relevance to our understanding of textual dependence may be fully appreciated. At the same time, it should be kept in mind that the theme not only marks contextual dependency by conveying recoverable material; it frequently introduces unknown information as well and hence exhibits a greater or lesser degree of contextual independence. Consequently, there is a need to extend Daneš' concept of thematic progression to account for the bidirectional orientation of the theme by encompassing the relation--essentially a semantic one--between the theme and its context in terms of the manner in which, or degree to which, new information is conveyed by recoverable material. Only then can a clear understanding of the dynamics of this form of textual

development emerge, especially as it relates to the larger question of a speaker's communicative intent.

Thus, the notion of thematic progression presented here pivots on the interaction of the thematic and the given/new functions. At the extremes, when either completely given information (repetition) or an entirely new theme is presented, the entire question of progression becomes a moot point. Instead, other syntactic and informational structures indicate the informational development from sentence to sentence.

The relevance of thematic progression to our understanding of how information is transmitted across sentence boundaries within a text is clear. Beyond this, the application of thematic progression in the analysis of specific performances, especially literary and poetic texts, should prove a most fruitful avenue of investigation.

NOTES

[1] The literature on theme/rheme articulation is considerable. Pioneered by V. Mathesius (1929) research in this area continues to the present especially by other members of the Prague School of Linguistics. Space will not permit a detailed survey of the scholarship, but for an overview cf. Daneš (1970), Firbas (1964), Dressler (1973), Halliday (1967-68), and Sgall et al (1973).

[2] The rheme may also disambiguate the ambiguous and expose the pseudo-text. In our example 1) the progression from sentence 1 to sentence 2, while it strikes us as awkward, is probably acceptable, perhaps interpreted as a parenthetical adjunct. The utter breakdown in acceptability occurs in sentence 3. Although the theme, _singing_, appears to repeat the _singing_ of the first sentence the two are not in fact coreferent. It is the rheme, _a word with 7 letters_, that unequivocally indicates this.

[3] No claim to completeness is made regarding the categories included herein.

[4] This category overlaps in part Daneš' "derived theme" type but accounts for derivation from any thematic or rhematic source. Derivation concerns less the source of the theme and more the semantic relation the theme bears to its antecedent source in terms of given/new. Daneš' last three types do go beyond the distributional definition of thematic progression inherent in his first two types and form the beginning of a more semantically oriented approach to the subject.

[5]Although such introductory themes as these are common enough, especially in newspapers, magazines and other media news reportage, there is in fact considerable resistance to the "new" theme in the first sentence of a text, especially in spoken discourse. To avoid the new theme a speaker will begin his text with some situationally recoverable or informationally lean filler theme (often coupled with a verb of knowing or thinking) in order to present as its rheme what would otherwise be thematic if it stood alone. Cf. "I think . . .", "you know . . .", "guess what? . . ." "did you know . . .", "they say . . .", etc.

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