SOME REMARKS ON CONTEXTUAL BOUNDEDNESS
AND SEMANTIC RELATIONS
IN THE THEMATIC-RHEMATIC STRUCTURE OF SENTENCES

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0. Studies in the thematic-rhematic structure of sentences have led to a number of open issues and controversial statements; blurred by terminological plurality and liberal interpretations, they stem from an apparently simple truth that a regular message consists of “what is spoken about” and “what is said about it”. The source of this dichotomy goes back to the Aristotelian distinction between “hypokimenon” and “kategorounenon”, and since then it has evolved in linguistic and philosophical writings under a number of different labels. With the lapse of time, however, it has considerably lost its psychological undertones. Analyzed in terms of a formal notation, as has recently been attempted within the framework of functional generative linguistics, the topic-comment articulation (TCA) has departed even more from its original simple foundation. The question arises if the primary objective of the sentence, and namely its share in a communicative act, has not been reduced to the advantage of theoretical speculations.

It remains a matter of course that, as Vachek put it, “the sentence is an elementary verbal act of taking a standpoint towards some reality” and thus any attempts at divorcing speech from its context seem groundless. Such practices, however, are not at all infrequent; sentences under investigation are intentionally detached from any situational reality and thus they do not illustrate much in terms of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP), but merely stand out as grammatically acceptable strings of words. In this way they become certainly inadequate for any conclusive statements to be made about their communicative weight.

What is claimed here first of all is the belief that FSP should not admit sentences pronounced as having no communicative warrant. As Dahl says,
after Kortunova "outside speech bipartition does not exist. (...) The actual bipartition of one or another specific sentence is primarily given by the specific constellation and the purpose of the communication, in other words, by the actual information that the speaker wants to deliver, i.e., by factors outside the sentence proper" (Dahl, 1969:10). If FSP, to quote Daneš, is "concerned with the organization of the sentence as a message, with how the grammatical and semantic structures function in the very act of communication" (Halliday, 1974: 49), it is only sound to eradicate from the scope of its analysis sentences deprived of any context of use, and, consequently, to seek for them an analysis that would show the sentence in a communicatively relevant frame. This seems basic if the "functional" in FSP is to be defended.

The purpose of the following contribution is to discuss certain operations and concepts adopted within the framework of TCA and namely those related to contextual boundness, the concept of givensness and the role of semantics in the thematic-rhematic structure of sentences which, it seems, need reconsideration.

1. The TCA has traditionally been viewed as an interplay of linearization, semantic structure and contextual boundness. The point here is to see, primarily, how the two — context and semantic structure — have been said to relate to each other, and how their roles in ascribing a given TCA to a sentence have been evaluated; in that field the Prague linguists have done impressive work and their findings will be referred to extensively.

According to Firbas (Firbas, 1974) context is superior to the operation of semantic structure: semantic structure operates within that section of the sentence which remains unaffected by, and independent of, the preceding context. Thus in a context-independent sentence of the agent-action-goal type, expressed by S, V, O, e.g.:

1. A girl broke a vase,

the object carries a higher degree of communicative dynamism (CD) than the verb, and the verb carries a higher degree of CD than the subject, which leaves the object highest on the communicative scale.

Sgall's discussion of this point (Sgall 1973) remains in keeping with Firbas' formulation. Sgall distinguishes namely three layers of TCA and among them the first layer, referred to as the basic distribution of CD; this level of TCA is claimed by him to be determined entirely by the semantic structure of the sentence, and so, to come up in sentences not presupposing any preceding context:

2. Tom bought a blue shirt
3. Mouton published Chomsky's Syntactic Structures
4. A boy met a girl
5. A stranger came.

In this way Sgall, like Firbas, assumes that contextual non-boundness automatically sets in motion the operation of semantic structure which then freely determines the distribution of CD over the sentence.

2. Reference to such examples as above invites a closer look at the concept of contextual detachment and its implications for any measurement of CD distribution. Questionable here is, first of all, the notion of a sentence not presupposing any context, be it verbal or non-verbal. This seems so, primarily for two reasons: first, from a communicative point of view the performance of a sentence is always dictated by a definite communicative situation, and, second, a total estrangement of a sentence from any communicative background undermines its susceptibility to any evaluation in terms of how it might promote communication. Consequently an analysis of a sentence within FSP can disregard neither a broader perspective in which that sentence could occur nor its status within such a setting.

As for (1) it could be accepted against such linguistic and contextual set-ups as in (6) or (7):

6. There were a group of youngsters brawling in the hotel foyer. Some one tripped over an ash-tray. A girl broke a vase,

meaning: one of the girls in the group in the hotel foyer.

7. What's happened? What's that glass doing on the floor?

A girl broke a vase,

meaning: one of the girls who happened to be there, whom I know, etc.

Obviously these are only two out of a number of possible communicative slots in which (1) could possibly fit: it strikes as pulled out of a bigger communicative whole and allows no conclusions about what was said before or what may be said next. On the contrary, it exhibits a strong contextual dependence. It also seems only appropriate as an answer to such questions as:

What happened?
What happened over there?
What was that noise?, etc.
The doubtful validity of such examples for the purpose of FSP has already been pointed out by Szgal (Szgal, 1973). In discussing the example given by Firbas (1) Szgal administers the negation test to show that

12. A girl did not break a vase

does not exclude the assumption that there may be girls “in the respective world or universe of the given discourse” (ibidem: 97), which runs counter to Firbas’ contention that there is no bound segment in the sentence in question.²

It is believed then that (1–5) are only apparently non-bound. Their pronouncement is context-sensitive to a similar extent as that of the other sentences; if it is perceived otherwise this is so only because the constipation is not explicitly verbalized and hence less rigid in adopting, or else rejecting, a particular instance of verbal reaction. Therefore such examples carry heavy communicative load and should be conceived of as single communicative units, integral chunks of new information. By and large such examples are only of little interest to TCA studies.

Finally, the interpretation of the distribution of CD over a sentence such as (1) in terms of an inherent communicative quality to be ascribed to individual sentence constituents, loses sight the overall communicative perspective against which a given sentence is produced. It is hard to say, for instance, why “vase” should be higher on the communicative scale than “break” if the linguistic intuition says something opposite: it seems that the two are inextricably connected as one communicative unit. In the light of what has been said another possibility cannot be ignored, and namely the fact that such a sentence could be viewed as one integral communicative entity, so any breaking of its CD into graded bits may be of doubtful linguistic consequence. Last but not least: since the notion of CD remains rather unspecified and speculative, its validity for a TCA of sentence needs reconsideration — preferably to the advantage of a dichotomic theme-rheme division.

3. Separate problems among sentences traditionally labelled as non-bound are raised by examples such as:

13. It is raining.

Polish: Tea (it is) raining

They have also been viewed as themeless and subjectless though contrary

² For further evidence he also discusses another example: Blond Albanians study linguistics at Harvard, and its negative transforms. He hopes to illustrate his point better and “more convincingly (since a world with no blond Albanians is more likely than a world with no girls)” (Szgal, 1973: 98).
what deserves special reconsideration is the ensuing problem of givenness, or
generally speaking, that of knowledge.

When talking about the second layer, Sgall says: “in marked cases (as
opposed to first layer sentences with an action verb — A. D.) the degree of
CD can be lower than if it were determined only by its syntactic role in the
semantic representation of the sentence. These cases constitute the second
layer of TCA. They are connected with the (necessary, not sufficient) condi-
tion that the constituent in question is “known” in a certain sense (more
precisely, the object it refers to has been either mentioned in the preceding context, or
perceived in the given situation), or that it is accompanied by a general quanti-
ifier (or used in a generic sense). One can speak here about topicalization, bear-
in mind that the topicalization is not an operation belonging to the trans-
ductive (transformational) component of the system, but a relation inside the
semantic level (or DS). In this way, for instance, the goal is topicalized in
(1—9): (...)
(1—9) Chomsky’s Syntactic Structures were published by Mouton”. (Sgall,
1973: 29)

Further on Sgall states that (1—9) is acceptable only in a context where
Chomsky’s Syntactic Structures “has already been mentioned or belongs to
the foreground of the situation of the discourse”. (Sgall 1973:20).

The two sentences, (3) and (1—9) — Sgall’s first and second layer, respec-
tively — obviously differ in their thematic-thematic structure as they respond
to different communicative needs and satisfy different points of communicative
interest: in the former the speaker announces the goal, while in the latter he
reveals the actor. What is not clear, however, is the switch of layers as postu-
lated by Sgall. It raises no doubt that Chomsky’s Syntactic Structures has a lower
degree of CD in (1—9) than in (3) — repeated here for convenience —
3. Mouton published Chomsky’s Syntactic Structures,
yet it might equally well be treated as “known in a certain sense” in either of
its uses. There is no reason to assume that the nontopicalized constituent in
(3) may not “belong to the foreground of the situation of the discourse”.

The weakness of Sgall’s definition of the second layer is largely the result
of his imprecise statements; to my mind, Sgall does not in fact formulate the
“sufficient condition” for a sentence to qualify as an instance of the second
layer of TCA. His explications in terms of a lower degree of CD and, first of
all, in terms of a dimly specified concept of knowledge are of weak explana-
tory power. First and foremost, however, the difficulty with Sgall’s organization
of TCA dwells on the inconsistent way in which he relates topic and comment
to contextual dependence. On the one hand he propounds a full autonomy of TCA
from the Datum/Novum distinction: “The distinction between topic and com-
ment is autonomous, in the sense that it cannot be derived from the distinction
between “given” (i.e. known from the preceding context or situation, contained
among the presuppositions) and “new” (not given)” (Sgall, 1973: 17). On the other hand, this distinction is abandoned in subsequent formulations: in practice, Sgall conflates the idea of topic with that of known information. Hence topic in his terminology stands for contextually bound segments (known from the constitution of the discourse) whereas comment covers unknown (non-derivable) segments of the sentence: “The sentence nucleus (the verb and the elements depending on it — participants, i.e. intentional participants or ‘cases’ as well as free adverbials) can be thus, in the general case, divided into a bound segment or topic, comprising the topic proper or theme [and, as the case may be, a temporal, local, or other setting] and into a non-bound segment, or focus” (Sgall, 1973: 48). At some other point (ibidem: 56) he states clearly that “the boundary between the topic and the comment (...) depends not only on the distribution of CD but also on the contextual boundedness”. Finally his perception of the position and function of “boundedness juncture” (Bj, i.e. the boundary between the contextually bound segment, or topic, and the focus of the sentence) (Sgall 1973: 101) leaves no doubt as to his association of topic with contextual boundedness.

In his discussion of the first and second layers of TCA Sgall resorts again to a similar conception of CD and contextual conditioning: his topicalization entails knowledge. Incidentally, however, he admits at some other point (Sgall, 1973: 17) that “the preceding context does not always determine uniquely the choice of topic and comment of a sentence; for instance the statement (1—1) can be followed in a quite natural way either by (1—2) or by (1—3) — not to speak of other possibilities:

(1—1) Yesterday was the last day of the Davis cup match between Australia and ROUMANIA.
(1—2) Australia WON the match.
(1—3) The match was won by AUSTRALIA.

In such cases the speaker is free to choose any of the previously mentioned names of countries or a word referring to the match itself as the topic of the next sentence”.¹

By and large, however, Sgall’s explication of the second layer of TCA is not very clear. His autonomy of levels is hard to reconcile with the heavy reliance on contextual dependence and presupposed knowledge. The present author admits that she has found his reasoning at this point controversial and unconvincing, hence it may not be excluded that some of his ideas have remained unnoticed or misinterpreted.

The point advocated here is that the distinction between Sgall’s first and second layers is a matter of a different thematic-thematic organization of the sentence and should be analyzed independently of the datum/novum criteria: the non-topicalized elements may equally well belong to the foreground of the discourse. If by knowledge we mean identification of a particular constituent in the course of activating relevant presuppositions, then Chomsky’s Syntactic Structures — regardless of different ordering in (3) and (1—9), and its communicative implications — does not have to be pronounced different in either of its uses.

Knowing stands for one’s being able to identify an item either through its appearance in the immediate context, whether verbal or extralinguistic, or through activation of one’s general knowledge, so that, to quote Chafe, “given or old information is that knowledge which the speaker assumes to be in the consciousness of the addressee at the time of the utterance”¹⁴ (Chafe, 1978: 30). Thus a communicative lay-out of a sentence and the stock of knowledge about individual sentence participants, as stored in the speaker’s consciousness are two separate issues. The former is governed by communicative priorities, the latter is determined by a certain number of presuppositions.

5. The dominance of context over semantic structure in the distribution of CD over the sentence, as postulated by Prague linguists, seems undermined by the introduction of the concept of “narrow scene” — the ultimate objective of what is being said. Firbas says namely (Firbas 1974) that in

20. John went to the window

the window may be known or unknown yet it is communicatively most loaded as the main purpose of the message is the expression of direction. Therefore the window becomes non-derivable. Similarly London in

21. I flew to London

becomes non-derivable as an expression of direction of movement. The above interpretation seems to advocate the idea that semantic structure can get an upper hand over context operation, which would then run counter to the previous statement.

¹ Similarly it is a mistake to call sayings or proverbs contextually non-bound even if, as it is claimed sometimes, their TCA does not respond to FSP considerations. On the contrary, such sentences are first of all under contextual determination as it is hard to imagine some one say out of a sudden something like: “When a fox cannot reach the grapes he says that they are not ripe”.

¹⁴ It does not seem very clear why an item, if considered given, may not be recoverable at the same time as claimed by Chafe: “(...) it is important to remember that givenness is a status decided by the speaker and that it is fundamentally a matter of the speaker’s belief that the item is in the addressee’s consciousness not that it is recoverable” (Chafe 1976: 22).
yet clear whether it has the form of a linear ordering (i.e., whether the ordering of the types of participants is complete)" (Sgall, 1973:47). It seems that in practice his ranking of participants will have to be determined separately for each language, though, he claims that there should be no significant differences among languages. By and large, however, the semantic relevance of CD and CI for the organization of DS appears largely speculative and hypothetical in its present version.

It is also argued here that in the face of the criticism of the first layer of TCA as postulated in the present paper, the concept of CI proves dispensable. Its association with the notion of CD seems at odds with the primary quality of the latter as a factor "pushing communication forward". In discussing this issue Sgall says that "we shall use the term CI when referring to the hierarchy determined by the roles of the participants, and the term CD will be reserved for the actual hierarchy of elements of a sentence, be it in accordance with the scale of CI (as in the first or basic layer) or affected by deviating influence of context of situation, as in the second layer" (Sgall, 1973:45). Needless to say it is only "the actual hierarchy" which is of interest to FSP as it is only in use that a language unit obtains its real communicative value, so any measurement of communicative weight in a communicative vacuum seems out of place. Consequently CI comes close to a cover-up for some semantic facts in need of further explication. Finally, the introduction of CI adds up to an unnecessary terminological ballast and proves of doubtful utility within the framework of FSP.

Conclusion. In the light of what has been said the concept of an isolated sentence — if legitimate for syntactic or semantic investigations — proves of doubtful validity for any evaluations in terms of FSP; the basic layer of TCA runs counter to the fundamental principle of FSP, namely its communicative orientation. Since the utterance of a sentence clearly presupposes a certain context of use as well as activation of some knowledge on the part of the participants of the discourse, it is claimed here that sentences dissociated from any context, both actual and potential, cannot be evaluated in terms of CD distribution. FSP should not disregard the communicative foundation of any topic-comment bipartition, which means that is should always consider how a given sentence can be located in a broader communicative perspective.

In her criticism of the first layer of TCA the present author points also to a strong contextual dependence of such sentences as (13) or (15) — typically viewed as non-bound and themeless. A tentative assumption has been made that such sentences could be treated as cases in which the theme is not overtly marked, yet implied indirectly through reference to the extra-linguistic sphere. Admittedly, however, this concept needs further explication.

As for the relation between semantic structure and context in the distri-

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1 Traditionally such attempts have not gone beyond fragmentary or only tentative classifications (Firbas 1959, Pula 1974, Cheryakovsky 1976) these concerned mainly different classes of verbs, to mention here the distinction between the verbs like be, cost, appear, etc., and such as read, wash, buy, etc., based on different degrees of "semantic completeness". However, even if justifiable on general grounds, such an analysis comes across substantial difficulty if transferred to detailed studies of actual applications of individual verbs: what comes here, for instance, is the multiplicity of meanings shared by single words whose semantics can be specified only in concrete realizations. Certain shortcomings of similar analyses were mentioned by Sgall (Sgall, 1973: 297). The comparison of such two Czech sentences as: V Praze jezdí TRAMVAYE (In Prague there are TRAMS), Trojka jezdí na Vlašské NÁMĚSTÍ (Number three goes to Venceslas SQUARE), shows that the verb jezdí has a different function in each case so that it may be treated as two different words. Regardless of similar objections, the question remains how implications of such semantic studies can be fed into analyses of communicative strategies within FSP.
bution of CD over the sentence, it is believed that they should not be discussed in terms of dominance or subordination, but as two independent factors determining the communicative pattern of a sentence. Regardless of any regularities to be observed in their operation in that respect, communicative needs are governed by their own rules, and the element of knowledge as well as that of contextual dependence constitute a separate issue in the process of communication. Any language message assumes, to a greater or lesser extent, activation of some knowledge or its deduction from a contextual condition of the sentence. Nonetheless what is “known” or “contextually bound” should be kept distinct from what is communicatively emphasized. In this way the controversy over what is superior in assigning the topic-comment articulation to a given sentence is an attempt at putting two different things together: knowledge and communicative focus, identification of a unit and its communicative function at a given moment.

REFERENCES


