Given and New: The interaction of Prosody word order and semantics

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- Disclaimer – Influences Halliday's (Systemic Functional Linguistics), Corpus Linguistics (e.g.) Sinclair/Brazil and Firbas (Communicative Dynamism)
- Text/Discourse Linguistics
- Terminology

Syntax

- Sentences contain a point of departure equally present to speaker and hearer and culminate with a goal (Weil 1887: 29)
- Mathesius (1975: 81ff) argued that sentences contained thematic elements which he defined as both the point of departure and the basis or foundation
- Halliday & Matthiessen (2014: 107) defines **Theme** as the elements that serve as the point of departure of the message and it serves to orient the clause within its context and is identified as culminating in the first experiential element
- Firbas (1992) theme = elements with lowest communicative dynamism (those that contribute least to the moving forward of the message).

Information can be recoverable because:

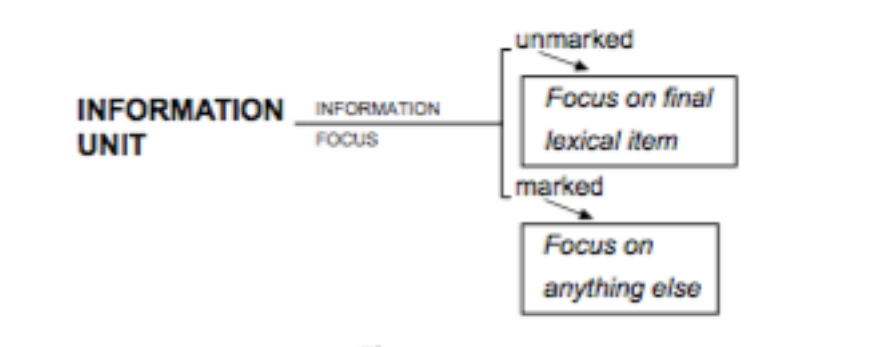
- it is recoverable/predictable from the context
- salient because it is potentially accessible
- presupposed as common knowledge (Prince 1981)

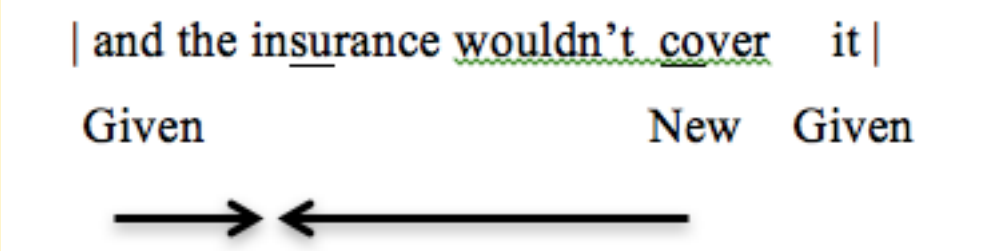
But in SFL: Given/New is projected by a combination of tonic (nuclear) placement and context.

Given/New

For Halliday:

- Speech is chunked into tone groups, each of which represents an information unit (a piece of information) and each tone group consists of a single New element realised by the nuclear syllable and optional Given/New elements
- Given information is that which is **presented** by the speaker as recoverable from the context or co-text (mentioned before) while New information is **presented** as being non-recoverable.





Data methodology and Collection

- Aim to generate spontaneous speech both in monologue and conversation.
- 8 participants broken into 3 groups.
- Each individual was given a silent You Tube clip on the 2013 UK floods to watch. Then they watched again in their group. They were asked to talk for two minutes on what they had seen. Finally they were asked to engage in a reflective discussion of what they had seen.

Data #Tone Units by speaker

	Monologue					
	\	/\	/	\/	–	Total
Ann	37	1	14	11	8	71
Jim	49	1	13	11	3	77
Mary	23	2	32	12	5	74
Kate	62	5	45	17	15	144
Jane	50	3	26	14	8	101
Rosa	57	0	19	18	18	112
Phoebe	50	1	21	24	7	103
Minnie	80	5	17	22	10	134
Overall	408	18	187	129	74	816

	Conversation					
	\	/\	/	\/	–	Total
Ann	19	0	15	10	8	52
Jim	13	1	2	3	0	19
Mary	27	0	10	4	4	45
Kate	47	3	19	14	5	88
Jane	41	2	6	9	4	62
Rosa	3	0	1	1	0	5
Phoebe	13	0	11	9	4	37
Minnie	38	0	7	5	3	53
Overall	201	6	71	55	28	361

X-squared = 11.2804, df = 4, p-value = 0.02359

Data

Table 1. Description of the corpus

	Number of Tone Units	Number of seconds
Group 1		
Ann	77	149.9
Jim	78	137.9
Ann/Jim	74	135.2
Group 2		
Mary	76	142.5
Kate	132	201.8
Jane	101	158.8
Mary/Kate/Jane	206	317.9
Group 3		
Rosa	109	181
Phoebe	108	168.5
Minnie	134	207.4
Rosa/Phoebe/Minnie	97	152.9
Total	1192	1953.8

Data

Referents were classed as new = indefinite NP, potentially recoverable = definite NP and given = Pronoun

Table 2. The number of New, potentially recoverable (Pr) and Given referents made tonic

	New	Pr	Given
Ann	12 (21)	7 (7)	0 (1)
Jim	13 (14)	7 (11)	0
Ann/Jim	10	4	1
Mary	6 (12)	3 (4)	0
Kate	20 (35)	9 (11)	3
Jane	19 (33)	13 (16)	0
Mary/Kate/Jane	35	6	0
Rosa	12 (12)	10 (10) 1	
Phoebe	13 (20)	5 (6)	0 (2)
Minnie	25 (29)	15 (22)	1 (3)
Rosa/Phoebe/Minnie	11	8	4
Total	176	87	10

Table 3. Tonic lexically given items listed by speaker and position

Speaker	Example	Theme/Rheme	Tone
Ann	| even if it's ...yu ... in this \case it was you know |	Theme	Fall
Kate	| where \I was from |	Theme	Fall
Kate	| where \/we were |	Rheme	Fall-Rise
Kate	| like ten minutes from /me |	Rheme	Rise
Rosa	| um I think \we had |	Theme	Fall
Minnie	|and having my sister come pick \me up |	Theme	Fall
Phoebe	| while /we're |	Theme	Rise
Phoebe	| while we're going through \this |	Rheme	Fall
Phoebe	|on at L /you |	Rheme	Rise
Phoebe	| and uh \we |	Theme	Fall

| where H\I was from | it was affected by a lot of the /flooding |

|but for H\longer |because of the \time |it takes for that \car | and all the water is /spraying |on at /you

Repeated Referent

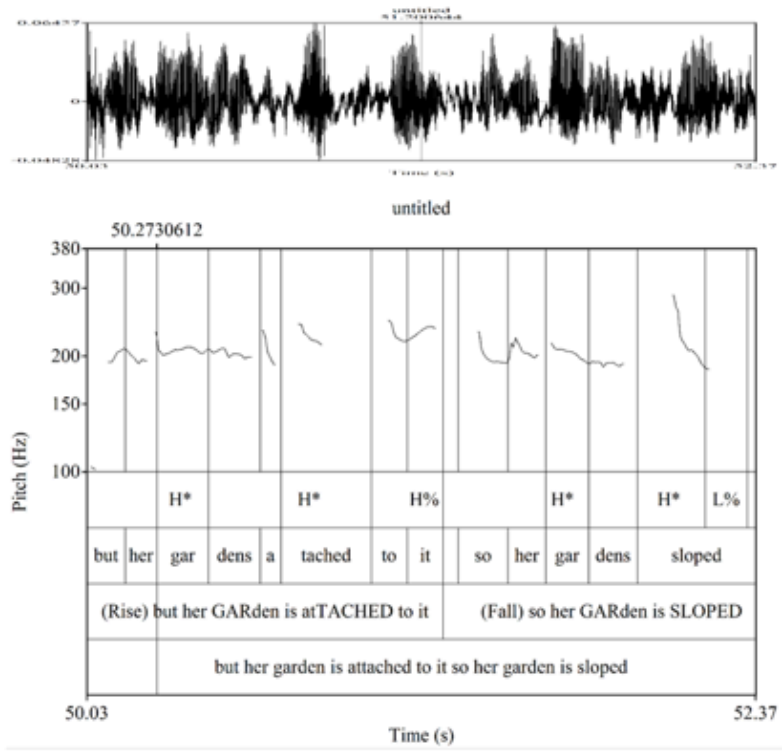


Figure 3. A spectrograph of a repeated referent

Repeat Mentions

Table 4. Repeated mention of lexically signalled items and prosodic prominence

NAME	REFERENT	# MENTIONS	# TONICS	# ACCENT	1ST MENTION
Jim	disaster	3	1	1	Accented
Ann /Jim	climate change	2	1	1	Accented
Ann/Jim	flooding	5	3	0	Tonic
Kate	friend	3	2	0	Tonic
Kate	power (cut)	5	4	1	Accented
Kate	christmas	5	3	1	Tonic
Jane	town	3	1	1	Accented
Mary/Kate/Jane	people	15	5	4	Tonic
Mary/Kate/Jane	river	10	4	2	Tonic
Mary/Kate/Jane	flood defence	2	2	0	Tonic
Mary/Kate/Jane	Debenhams	2	1	0	Tonic
Mary/Kate/Jane	London	2	0	0	Tonic
Mary/Kate/Jane	friend	2	1	1	Tonic
Mary/Kate/Jane	house	3	2	0	Tonic
Rosa	weather	2	2	0	Tonic
Phoebe	Wiltshire	2	2	0	Tonic
Phoebe	flooding	2	2	0	Tonic
Minnie	Portland	3	1	0	Tonic
Minnie	road	7	4	1	Tonic
Minnie	village	2	1	1	Tonic
Minnie	car	3	3	0	Tonic
Minnie	mum	2	1	1	Tonic

| they were talking about climate change and \flooding ‖

Referential Distance

Table 5. Referential distance and accenting of subsequent mention

	Number	Longest	Shortest	Average
Tonic ... Tonic	16	70	1	12.3
Tonic ... Accent	8	30	1	11
Tonic ... Deaccent	13	53	1	17.2
Accent ... Tonic	6	44	7	21.7
Accent ... Accent	0	N/A	N/A	N/A
Accent ... Deaccent	5	44	1	13.2
Deaccent ... Tonic	6	42	3	15.2
Deaccent ... Accent	5	23	2	8.4
Deaccent ... Deaccent	4	20	5	13.5

An example of extended speech

1 |a few flooded \/roads and things | **Newsworthy** … ⟨13 Tone units⟩
2 | we had to then drive through \country roads | **Focus on type of road and not the generic category** … ⟨26 tone units⟩ 3 |blockade of \/water on the road | **Deaccented, focus on *water*, lexically signalled as recoverable** … ⟨10 tone units⟩. 4 | and all of the roads around the \town | **Accented, focus on *the town*, lexically signalled as recoverable** … ⟨19 tone units⟩
5 | one of the \roads | **Tonic, focus on *the roads*, lexically signalled as recoverable** … ⟨4 tone units⟩ 6 | They opened up the – roads | **Tonic, focus on *the roads*, lexically signalled as recoverable** … ⟨1 tone unit⟩ 7 | H\
one of the roads | **Deaccented, focus on quantity, lexically signalled as recoverable.**

Table 6. Referential distance and lexicogrammatical form

Referent	Earlier mention	Later mention	Referential distance
Weather	New	New	70
Village	New	PR	30
Flooding	New	PR	30
Friend	New	PR	39
House	PR	New	53
Power cut	PR	New	44
People	New	New	44
Disaster	PR	New	42
Video	New	New	135
Water	PR	New	31
River	New	New	91

Conclusion and further work

1. Some support for previous information hierarchies e.g Gundel et al (1993) and Lambrecht (1994);
2. It is broadly supportive of Givón's (1983) claim that a referential distance of 20 clauses or more entails that the second mention of a referent cannot be anything other than new;
3. Nuclear accents did not correspond with referential distance = some support for Halliday's (1967) view that speakers make tonic the items they signal as the most newsworthy regardless of whether the item is recoverable or non-recoverable;
4. The lack of a positive relationship between larger referential distance and the presence of tonic accents offers some support for Firbas' (1992) claim that in spoken language tonic accenting re-evaluates rather than reflects information structure;
5. Nuclear accents represent the speaker's projected assessment of whether or not the focal items are newsworthy in the context in which they were expressed. The recoverability of a referent is instead determined by its lexical realisation and falls broadly into three categories: (1) discourse new and hearer new, (2) discourse new but hearer given/inferable, discourse distant and hearer given/inferable (3) discourse and hearer given.
6. More work is needed to (1) disambiguate the status of the two subcategories of potentially recoverable items, (2) examine the possible informational structuring effect of prenuclear accents and (3) the role of linear modification in signalling the most newsworthy (high CD) item in clauses and clause complexes.

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