

Discourse Analysis and Grammar

Theme and rheme

English learners acquire quite consciously the structure of the English sentence either by repetition or *drills* or by mere grammatical analysis. It seems well known that English has a quite fixed word order, normally summarised as “SVOA”, that is, *Subject + Verb + Object + Adverbial*. “SVOA” means that a declarative statement must carry a subject at the front of the sentence, a verb after it and an object and/or an adverbial at the end of the sentence.

This kernel sentence structure may be altered to bring elements to the front of the sentence. This movement is called *fronting*. So, apart from *Daniel wrote a very good book last year*, we can create *A very good book, Daniel wrote last year* or *Last year Daniel wrote a very good book* or *What Daniel wrote was a very good book* or *Daniel, he wrote a very good book last year*. But why would we like to change the basic structure of the sentence?

The speaker/writer decides where to start the sentence and the beginning of each sentence is its *theme*. The rest of the sentence tells the hearer/reader something about the *theme*. That “rest of the sentence” is called *rheme*. The *theme* is the framework or the point of departure of the message. The *rheme* is what the addresser wants to convey about the *theme*.

M.A.K. Halliday (1994) describes the *theme-rheme* dichotomy. First, the *theme* is marked in intonation as a separate tone unit, frequently followed by a brief pause. Second, only the basic elements of the kernel structure can become *topic themes*: the process (main verb), the participants (subject and object) and the circumstantial factors (adverbials). However, sometimes the sentence has more than one *theme* (as this one). In English three possible *themes* are found: Textual theme (discourse markers and conjunctions) + Interpersonal theme (vocatives) + Topic theme (SVOA elements).

The addresser uses *theme* and *rheme* to highlight a piece of information in the sentence. For example, it is quite common that “in spoken narrative and anecdotes, speakers will often front-place key orientational features for their listeners. These are most obviously time and place markers (“once upon a time”, “one day”, “then, suddenly”, “at the corner”, etc.), but may also be foregrounding of key participants and information about them felt to be important for the listener.” (McCarthy 1991:54) *Theme* and *rheme* are also used to organise the information in the text. Frequently, the *rheme* in one sentence becomes the *theme* in a following sentence. This phenomenon is called *communicative dynamism*.

Furthermore, there is also a thematic organization of the paragraph. In English the first sentence of a paragraph is also the theme of that paragraph (*topic sentence*), whereas the following sentences have a rhematic value (*supporting sentences*), which develop the idea proposed by the theme by means of examples, counterarguments, etc..

Conclusion

It is quite frequent to hear that the English language has a fixed word order. However, we have just found out that this is untrue, because English word order allows the speaker/writer to alter the structure of the sentence in order to focus on elements different from the Subject.

It is important to provide learners with sufficient input of sentences with different “word orders”. The learner must be familiar with fronting as a powerful resource to highlight adverbials or objects. The learner must also be able to choose the themes of their sentences, as the organisation of information in the sentence depends on that.

The recognition of theme and rheme is also important for the learner as an addresser and as an addressee. For language production it is important to be aware of the concept of communicative dynamism as a way of organising the text. For language reception and interpretation the acknowledgment of the theme-rheme distinction may help in skimming, not only at the sentence level but also at text level.

Research proposal

Prepare an experiment with two different texts: one in which the theme-rheme is clearly used and another in which theme and rheme are confusing. Then, check whether comprehension is related to theme and rheme. Ask a group of readers to read both texts and then answer some comprehension questions.

Bibliography

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