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SENTENCE PERSPECTIVE. ACTUAL DIVISION OF SENTENCE IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE. NOTIONS OF THEME AND RHEME

**Khomyk A.Yu., Assistant at the Department
of Foreign Languages for Natural Sciences Faculties
Ivan Franko National University of Lviv**

У статті досліджено поняття «теми» та «реми» в контексті побудови речення в англійській мові та впливу на його змістове наповнення.

Ключові слова: проблематика правильного розуміння та трактування тексту, речення, порядок слів у реченні, поняття теми та реми, членування речення.

Актуальное членение предложения предполагает разделение синтаксической структуры на логические составляющие. Они могут представлять собой либо члены предложения, либо блоки тесно объединенных по смыслу слов. Обычно используют такие термины, как тема, рема и единица членения, чтобы описать средства актуального членения предложения. Тема – это уже известная информация либо фоновая часть сообщения. Рема – это часть, на которую делается акцент. Она содержит в себе принципиально важную информацию, без которой предложение потеряло бы цель.

Ключевые слова: актуальное членение предложения, структура предложения, тема, рема.

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It is obvious, that the words in the English sentence are arranged in a certain order, which is fixed for every type of a sentence, and is therefore meaningful. Word order fulfills several important functions: grammatical, communicative and linking. These functions are manifested in different arrangements of the parts of the sentence. The main and the first function of word order is to express grammatical relations and determine the grammatical status of a word by fixing its position in the sentence. The second function is to make prominent or emphatic that part of a sentence which is more important or informative in the speaker's opinion. The third function of word order is to express continuity of thought in sentences following one another. This continuity is often supported by demonstrative pronouns and adverbs. There are two ways of arranging words in an English sentence – direct word order and inverted word order. For the sake of terminological consistency, the division of the sentence into notional parts can be just so called – the “nominative division”. Its existing names are the “grammatical division” and the “syntactic division”. The discrimination of the nominative division of the sentence is traditional. It is this type of division that can conveniently be shown by a syntagmatic model, in particular, by a model of immediate constituents based on the traditional syntactic analysis. Alongside of the nominative division of the sentence the idea of the so-called “actual division” of the sentence has been put forward in theoretical linguistics.

Key words: sentence, actual division of sentence, notion of theme, notion of rHEME.

The purpose of the actual division of the sentence called also the ‘functional sentence perspective’, is to reveal the correlative significance of the sentence parts from the point of view of their actual informative role in an utterance, from the point of view of the immediate semantic contribution they make to the total information conveyed by the sentence in the context of connected speech.

In other words, the actual division of a sentence exposes its informative perspective.

The main components of the actual division of a sentence are *the theme and the rHEME*.

The *theme* expresses the starting point of the communication, it denotes an object or a phenomenon about which something is reported.

The *rHEME* expresses the basic informative part of the communication, its contextually relevant centre.

Between the theme and the rHEME are positioned intermediary, transitional parts of the actual division of various degrees of informative value. These parts are sometimes called “transition”.

The theme of the actual division of the sentence may or may not coincide with the subject of the sentence.

The rHEME of the actual division, in its turn, may or may not coincide with the predicate of the sentence – either with the whole predicate group or its part, such as the predicative, the object, the adverbial.

Thus, in the following sentences of various emotional character the theme is expressed by the subject, while the rHEME is expressed by the predicate:

– “Max bounded forward.”

– “Again charlie is being too clever!”



– “Her advice can’t be of any help to us”.

In the first of the above sentences the rheme coincides with the whole predicate group. In the second sentence the adverbial introducer again can be characterized as a transitional element, an element informationally intermediary between the theme and the rheme.

The main part of the rheme – the “peak” of informative perspective is rendered in this sentence by the intensified predicative *too clever*. In the second sentence the addressee object to us is more or less transitional, while their informative peak, as in the previous example, is expressed by the predicative of any help.

In the following sentences the correlation between the nominative and actual divisions is represented in reverse: the theme is expressed by the predicate or its part, while the rheme is rendered by the subject:

– “Through the open window came purr of an approaching motor car.”

– “Who is coming late but John!”

– “There is a difference of opinion between two parties.”

If logic analyses its categories of subject and predicate as the meaningful components of certain forms of thinking, linguistics analyses the categories of theme and rheme as the corresponding means of expression used by the speaker for the sake of rendering the informative content of its communications.

The actual division of the sentence finds its full expression only in a concrete context of speech, therefore it is sometimes referred to as the “contextual” division of the sentence. This can be illustrated by the following example:

“Mary is fond of poetry”.

In the cited sentence, if we approach it as a stylistically neutral construction devoid of any specific connotations, the theme is expressed by the subject, and the rheme, by the predicate.

This kind of actual division is “direct”.

On the other hand, a certain context may be built around the given sentence in the conditions of which the order of actual division will be changed into the reverse: the subject will turn into the exposé of the rheme, while the predicate, accordingly, into the exposé of the theme.

Here is an example in which this very situation is described in the best way: ‘But you are wrong.

“Mary is fond of poetry, not Tim.” – the actual division in which the rheme is expressed by the subject is to be referred to as ‘inverted’. The close connection between the actual division of the sentence with the context in the conditions of which

it is possible to divide the informative parts of the communication into those “already known” by the listener, and those “not yet known” by him, gave cause to the **recognized founder of the linguistic theory of actual division J. Mathesius** to consider this kind of sentence division as purely semantic factor sharply opposed to the ‘formally grammatical’ or ‘purely syntactic’ division of the sentence, – in our terminology called its ‘nominative division’.

One will agree that the actual division of the sentence will really lose all connection with syntax if its components are to be identified solemnly on the principle of their being “known” or “unknown” to the listener. However, we must bear in mind, – informative value of developing speech consists not only of introducing new words that denote things and phenomena not mentioned before.

The informative value of communications lies also in their disclosing various new relations, between the elements of reflected events, though the elements themselves may be quite familiar to the listener.

The expression of a certain aspect of these relations namely, the correlation of the said elements from the point of view of their immediate significance in a given utterance produced as a predicative item of a continual speech, does enter the structural plane of language.

This expression becomes part and parcel of the structural system of language by the mere fact that the correlative informative significance of utterance components are rendered by quite definite, generalized and standardized lingual constructions. The functional purpose of such constructions is to reveal the meaningful centre of the utterance (its rheme) in distinction to the starting point of its content (its theme).

These constructions do not present any ‘absolutely formal’, ‘purely differential’ objects of language which are filled with semantic content only in the act of speech communication.

On the contrary, they are bilateral signemic units in exactly the same sense as other meaningful constructions of language, they are distinguished both by their material form and their semantics. It follows from this that the constructional, or immediately systemic side of the phenomenon which is called the ‘actual division of the sentence’ belongs to no other sphere of language than syntax.

The crucial syntactic destination of the whole aspect of the actual division is its rheme- identifying function, since an utterance is produced just for the sake of conveying the meaningful

content expressed by its central informative part by the rheme.

Among the formal means of expressing the distinction between the theme and the rheme investigators name such structural elements of language as word-order patterns, intonation contours, constructions with introducers, syntactic patterns of contrastive complexes, constructions with articles and other determiners, constructions with intensifying particles. The difference between the actual division of sentences signaled by the difference in their word-order patterns can be most graphically illustrated by the simplest type of transformations.

– “The winner of the competition stood on the platform in the middle of the hall.”

– “On the platform in the middle of the hall stood the winner of the competition.”

– “Fred did not notice the flying balloon.”

– “The one who did not notice the flying balloon was Fred.”

– “Helen should be the first to receive her diploma.”

– “The first to receive her diploma should be Helen.”

In all the cited examples, both base sentences and their transforms, the rheme (expressed either by the subject or by an element of the predicate group) is placed towards the end of the sentence, while the theme is positioned at the beginning of it. This kind of positioning the components of the actual division corresponds to the natural development of thought from the starting point of communication to its semantic center, or, in common parlance, from the ‘known data’ to the ‘unknown (new) data’.

Still, in other contextual conditions, the reversed order of positioning the actual division components is used, which can be shown by the following illustrative transformations:

– “It was unbelievable to all of them.” – “Utterly unbelievable it was to all of them.”

– “Now you are speaking magic words, Nancy. – Magic words you are speaking now, Nancy.”

– “You look so well! – So well you look!”

It is easily seen from the given examples that the reversed order of the actual division, positioning of the rheme at the beginning of the sentence, is connected with emphatic speech.

Among constructions with introducers, the three-pattern provides for the rhematic identification of the subject without emotive connotations:

– “Tall birches surrounded the lake.” – “There were tall birches surrounding the lake.”

– “A loud hoot came from the railroad.” – “There came a loud hoot from the railroad.”

Emphatic discrimination of the rheme expressed by various parts of the sentence is achieved by constructions with the anticipatory:

– “Grandma gave them a moment’s deep consideration.” – “It was a moment’s deep consideration that grandma gave them.”

– “She had just escaped something simply awful.” – “It was something simply awful that she had just escaped.”

– “At that moment Laura joined them.” – “It was Laura who joined them at that moment.”

Syntactic patterns of contrastive complexes are used to expose the rheme of the utterance in cases when special accuracy of distinction is needed.

This is explained by the fact that the actual division as such is always based on some sort of antithesis or ‘contraposition’, which in an ordinary speech remains implicit.

Thus, a syntactic contrastive complex is employed to make explicative the inner contrast inherent in the actual division by virtue of its functional nature.

This can be shown on pairs of nominatively cognate examples of antithetic constructions where each member-construction will expose its own contrastively presented element:

– “The costume is meant not for your cousin, but for you.” – “The costume, not the frock, is meant for you, my dear.”

– “The strain told not so much on my visitor than on myself.” – “The strain of the situation, not the not the relaxation of it, was what surprised me.”

Determiners, among them the articles, used as means of forming certain patterns of actual division, divide their functions so that the definite determiners serve as identifiers of the theme while the indefinite determiners serve as identifiers of the rheme:

– “The man walked up and down the platform.” – “A man walked up and down the platform.”

– “The whole book was devoted to the description of a tiny island on the Pacific.” – “A whole book is needed to describe that tiny island on the Pacific.”

– “I am sure Nora’s knitting needles will suit you.” – “I am sure any knitting needles will suit you.”

Here in these examples we will see how intensifying particles identify the rheme, commonly imparting emotional coloring to the whole of the utterance:



– “Mr. Stores had a part in the general debate.” – “Even Mr. Stores had a part in the general debate.”

– “Then he sat down in one of the armchairs.” – “Only then did he sit down in one of the armchairs.”

– “We were Impressed by what we heard and saw.” – “We were so impressed by what we heard and saw.”

On closer consideration, however, this view of rheme-identifying role of intonation proves inadequate. To appreciate the true status of intonation in the actual division of the sentence, one should abstract oneself from ‘paper syntax’ (description of written texts) and remember that it is phonetical speech, articulately, pronounced utterances that form the basis of human language as a whole.

As soon as the phonetical nature of language is duly taken account of, intonation with its accent – patterns presents itself not as a limited, but as a universal and indisputable means of expressing the actual division in all types and varieties of lingual contexts.

This universal rheme – identifying function of intonation has been described treatises on logic, as well as traditional philological literature, in terms of ‘logical accent’.

The ‘logical accent’, which amounts linguistically to the “rhematic accen”, is inseparable from the other rheme-identifying means described above, especially from the word-order patterns.

What is more, all such means in written texts in fact represent the logical accent, they indicate its position either directly, or indirectly. This can be seen on all the examples hitherto cited in the present paper.

While recognizing the logical accent as a means of effecting the actual division, we must strictly distinguish between the elements immediately placed under the phonetical, ‘technical’ stress, and the sentence segments which are identified as the informative center of communication in the true sense of the term.

Technically, not only notional, but functional units as well can be stressed by phrase in an utterance, which in modern printed texts is shown by special graphical ways of identification, such as italics, bold type:

– “I can’t bring along someone who is not invited. But I am invited!” said Miss Casement (I. Murdoch).

– Moreover, being a highly intelligent young woman, she’d be careful not to be the only one affected” (A. Christie).

However, it would be utterly incorrect to think that in such instances only those word-units are logically, rhematically, marked out as are stressed phonetically.

As a matter of fact, functional elements cannot express any self-dependent nomination, they do not exist by themselves, but make up units of nomination together with the notional elements of utterances whose meanings they specify.

The actual division, since it is effected upon the already produced nominative sentence base providing for its relevant manifestation, enters the predicative aspect of the sentence.

It makes up part of syntactic predication, because it strictly meets the functional purpose of predication as such, which is to relate the nominative content of the sentence to reality.

This predicative role of the actual division shows that its contextual relevance is not reduced to that of a passive, concomitant factor of expression.

By this syntactic process, the rheme of the utterance or its most informative part (peak of informative perspective) is placed in isolation, thereby being very graphically presented to the listener:

“You’ve got the letters?” – “In my bag”

“How did you receive him?” – “Coldly”

In other words, the thematic reduction of sentences in the context, resulting in a constructional economy of speech, performs an informative function in parallel with the logical accent: it serves to accurately identify the rheme of the utterance.

In such a way of changing word order authors want to deliver some really important in their opinion information to reader.

To sum up all information, it is important to put an emphasis on the fact, that any changes in sentence lead to changes in its logical content, or give the sentence another emotional background.

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