

Information Structure in English Nominal Phrases

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to show that nominal phrases in English often have an information structure, in much the same way as clauses do. The paper deals only with premodifiers and headwords, putting aside the role of determiners and of postmodifying words and phrases.

It uses a distinction made by Halliday (2004), as follows. Information structure exists on two levels: the "system of information," made up of Topic and Comment (which are familiar concepts in the literature), and the "system of theme," made up of Theme and Rheme (which work on a higher level, are less well known, and rely on a potentially confusing use of terms).

Information structure is a structure of information; its units may coincide with syntactic units, but need not; and one syntactic structure (such as adjectival or adverbial phrase, subject or object) may represent different information elements on different occasions. For example:

- (1) "By and large, they [i.e., certain collectors arrested for gun offences] were a group of exemplary, reputable, safety-conscious people."

People and *they* are co-referential, and serve the same information function (expressing given information), although one is in the subject of the clause, and the other in the complement; the adjectives *exemplary*, *reputable*, and *safety-conscious* express new information, serving a different function from the noun they modify (*people*).

This paper examines phrases whose parts have different functions in the information structure, as in the example just given.

2. Structure from the system of information

2.1. Introduction: Topic and Comment

The "Topic" in a unit of information is the information that is "given"--treated as already known to the hearer--and that has other information building on it. The "Comment" is "new": it is the added information; "new" here includes what is important, as well as what is unfamiliar or not readily accessible to the hearer; it is often called "focus." "Information" includes qualities, as well as participant entities. Topic and Comment make up the "system of information" (Halliday 2004: 93), the first of the two levels of information structure to be discussed.

Lambrecht (1994) distinguishes three types of focus-structure in sentences:

- (a) whole-sentence focus, as in "**My car broke down**", answering the real or implicit question, "What happened?";
- (b) argument focus, as in "**My car** broke down," answering the question, "What broke down?";
- (c) predicate focus, as in "It **broke down**," answering the question, "What happened to your car?"

Applying that distinction to nominal phrases, such as "a small lizard," instead of whole sentences, we find the same three types, as follows.

(a) The focus may be on the whole phrase; as in "It's **a small lizard**," answering the question, "What's a gecko?"

(b) The focus may be on the headword, (the phrase-equivalent of an argument in a sentence); as in "No, it's a small **lizard**," answering the question "Is a gecko a small bird?" In this reply, *it* and *small* represent given information carried forward as topic, and *lizard* represents new information that is predicated of the topic - a comment. Conceptually, the structure is: 'That small thing, the gecko (= Topic) is a lizard (= Comment). So, in the nominal phrase "a small **lizard**" (as used in this instance), the modifier (*small*) represents Topical information, and the head (*lizard*) represents Comment. (In this section, I use single underlining to represent Topic, and double underlining for Comment, as just above.)

(c) The focus may be on the modification (the equivalent of a predicate); as in "It's a **small one**," answering the question "So if it's a lizard, what's it like?" In this reply, *it* and *one* represent given information--the Topic--and *small* represents new information--Comment. Conceptually, the structure is : 'It is small.' So in "It's a **small one**," the head (*one*) represents a Topic, and the modifier (*small*) represents a Comment.

In the instances just discussed, there is a single information structure in the whole clause (with the Topic often overlapping subject and predicate). The following sections will argue that sometimes the nominal phrase has its own Topic-Comment structure, as a substructure within the clause: the noun head of the phrase acts as a separate Topic, on which premodifiers make Comment, or vice versa.

2.2. Premodifier as Comment

2.2.1. The structure

I begin with phrases where the premodifiers represent Comment--type (c) above--since their information structure is clearer than that of other phrase types.

Modifiers are often used descriptively, adding information about the head entity, and not working restrictively to identify the referent. Sometimes the description is presented as making a separate statement, commenting on the head--which accordingly is in effect a Topic. Examples follow.

(2) "He supported Hillary Clinton's (still undeclared) bid for the presidency."

The parentheses separate "still undeclared" from the rest of the phrase, making it a distinct Comment on the Topic represented by "bid for the presidency," So a Topic-Comment structure ('Hillary Clinton's bid for the presidency is still undeclared') is embedded inside the main Topic-Comment structure of the clause ('He [Topic] supported Hillary Clinton's bid for the presidency [Comment]'). Just as part of the Comment in one sentence commonly becomes the Topic for the next, so in this sentence part of the Comment becomes the Topic for the embedded structure.

- (3) "He felt he had made a mistake by hiring the flashy, controversial Carly Fiorina as his successor at Hewlett Packard."¹

Here, the modifiers (*flashy, controversial*) add extra information which is asserted of the head (*Carly Fiorina*), as if they were in a nonrestrictive adjectival clause (as in “. . . hiring Carly Fiorina, who is flashy and controversial”). The extra words are not simply description, because they implicitly give the reason for the hiring being a mistake. Again, there is an embedded Topic-Comment structure: ‘Carly Fiorina is flashy and controversial’.

- (4) "Liberal Britain and 19 other members of the European Union have . . .".²

Liberal does not aid the phrase's function of identifying the country (since is fully identified by the name); it makes an independent, informative comment on the Topic (“Britain”), without the need for a separate clause.

In the examples so far, all the premodifiers represent the Comment, and only the head represents the Topic; but that varies greatly, as illustrated below.

- (5) “She [Hanna Reitsch] was the golden girl of the great prewar German soaring scene.”³
(Three restrictive premodifiers and the head form the Topic.)

- (6) “I spent a therapeutic few hours . . .”⁴ (A quantifying determiner, *few*, is part of the Topic.)

- (7) “[There will be mosaics at the street corner in Ellerslie on public display, The artwork is being produced, A trust will seek sponsorship for . . .] what will be a stunning, and Ellerslie's first, public artwork.”⁵ (There are two Comments on one Topic.)

2.2.2. How the structure is marked

Often, hearers must construe the discourse structure pragmatically--by inference from the context. But it is sometimes signalled syntactically. In “the flashy, controversial Carly Fiorina,” the definite article (non-standard with a proper noun) marks “flashy, controversial” as Comment, and as definite (that is, as already known to the reader). Similarly, when a cricketer was caught behind the wickets by “a diving Geraint Jones,” the indefinite article, *a*, marks *diving* as Comment, and as indefinite (unknown to the reader). In “I spent a therapeutic few hours,” the abnormal position of the quantifier *few* (following a modifier) marks *few hours* as Topic, and *therapeutic* as Comment. Non-standard use of brackets or commas can also mark the structure, as in “Hillary Clinton’s (still undeclared) bid for the presidency”.

2.3. Head as Comment

¹ *Economist*, July 29 2006. Page 66.

² *Economist*, December 8 2007. Page 60.

³ *Gliding Kiwi* 29, (5). (June-July 2006). Page 6.

⁴ *New Zealand Herald*, travel article.

⁵ *Ellerslie Magazine*, Winter 2006. Page 2.

Very occasionally, the head functions as Comment, not Topic:

(8) “the second, whiter skin of a gymnast’s leotard”.⁶

The information structure is, ‘A gymnast’s leotard is a second skin, whiter than real skin’. The head, *skin*, is a Comment. (The Topic is in the syntactically dependent prepositional phrase.)

A climber describes the scene at dawn:⁷

(9) “. . . red snow, red rock, red sky”.

Red is stated in the first phrase, so in the second and third phrases it represents given information, and is Topic; Comment is made on it: ‘Red spread over the rock, and over the sky,’ in effect. The modifier (*red*) acts as Topic, and the heads (*rock*, and *sky*) act as Comments.

2.4. Discussion of structure from the system of information

This structure from the system of information is related to the syntactic and semantic structure of nominal phrases.

Premodifiers further from the head are more general, more complex, and more expressive than those closer to the head; so they are semantically suitable for comment. In the following (a previous example repeated), *great* is a general and emotive word, which makes its use for Comment natural.

(10) “She [Hanna Reitsch] was the golden girl of the great prewar German soaring scene.”

Premodifiers, as modifiers, necessarily make a “comment”, in a loose sense--very clearly so in the descriptive use of premodifiers. Moreover, the structure is that each premodifier modifies the following part of the phrase, not simply the head--modifier₁ [modifier₂ [modifier₃ head]], or in simplified form, modifier₁ [modifier₂ modifier₃ head]; so the syntax provides the underlying structure for a premodifier to make comment on a Topic consisting of later modifiers + head:

(11) . . . the [great [prewar German soaring scene]].”

My assertion that nominal phrases sometimes constitute a Topic-Comment structure has some limited support in other works. Svoboda (1968: 66) notes that heads of noun phrases can be a Topic (“theme” in his terms). Warren (1978: 40) sees the same structure in “compounds” such as “pocket knife.” Mel’cuk (1988: 58) notes the embedded Topic-Comment structure in noun clauses which are part of the Comment (“rheme”) of a main clause.

3. Structure from the system of theme

3.1 Introduction: Theme and Rheme

⁶ British National Corpus.

⁷ *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, 2006: 15.

Again following Halliday (2004: 93), I use “system of theme” to mean the structure of Theme and Rheme. The Theme is the speaker’s point of departure, which locates and orients the information, for the hearer; it is necessarily at the beginning of the information unit, but may be expressed by one word or many. The Rheme traces the speaker’s route through the information from the point of departure. Mel’cuk (1988: 58) has a similar definition of “rheme.”

This structure works on the higher of two levels of information structure, being embodied at the lower level in any or all of three forms, as follows. The Theme may set the Topic (in the sense discussed in the last section) as the point of departure, serving to structure the message (e.g., “The best idea . . .”); and it may be interpersonal, setting the speaker’s relations with the hearer as the point of departure (e.g., “Surely . . .”, “Jean . . .”); and it may relate the content to previous or following material, setting textual relations as the point of departure (e.g. “But . . .”, “Then . . .”).⁸

Halliday presents Theme and Rheme as operating clearly only in clauses; but this section argues that, like Topic and Comment, they sometimes operate clearly in nominal phrases.

3.2 Instances of Thematic structure

I have illustrated Themes of the Topical type in the previous section; here I instance interpersonal and textual Themes.

If we hear a sentence begin, “He’s a mere . . .”, we know that the following information will be derogatory--as in “a mere useless gibbering stop-the-war-at-any-price pacifist”;⁹ without *mere*, we need not interpret *stop-the-war-at-any-price* and *pacifist* derogatorily. Emotive words and reinforcers such as *mere* express the speaker's attitude, and orient the hearer to responding attitudinally, guiding interpretation of the following words; they form interpersonal Themes.

A humorous anecdote from a hunting story begins as follows¹⁰.

(12) "Rain fell all night... The water began flowing through the bush. My super-duper new pup tent that was guaranteed 'totally weather-proof' began to leak so badly that my sleeping bag became a soggy sponge."

Super-duper, as a hyperbolic colloquialism, orients us to sharing the writer's self-mocking humour, and makes us interpret the other modifier, *new*, as a continuation of the humorous tone. The first premodifier is again interpersonally Thematic.

⁸ The examples are all from Halliday (2004: §3.4).

⁹ Cited in Fries (2000: 312).

¹⁰ Harker, Peter. *Random shots*. Auckland: Halcyon press. Page 26.

Expletive premodifiers are thematic in the same way, orienting the hearer to the speaker's intention: they occur first, as in "Bloody great stupid game"; (the initial *bloody* indicates that *great*, *stupid* and *game* are also intended angrily and derisively). They can colour the whole utterance, as in "Get those bloody doors open and get out of the bloody thing [a crashed plane]"¹¹: *bloody* expresses anxiety to open the doors and get out of the plane, not any feeling about the doors in particular. Consequently, they can slip outside the nominal phrase, as in "Remember the *News Chronicle*? On sale one day. Amalga-bloody-mated the next"¹²; since *bloody* applies to the whole situation, it can be placed in the middle of a predicative adjective (*amalgamated*), not as premodifier in a noun phrase.

(13) "The weather was beautiful--the beautiful sunny winter weather that has more charm than the summertime."¹³

Beautiful orients us to what the rest of the sentence will develop, guiding us towards interpreting sunniness as beauty, and preventing us from taking winter as unpleasant. In making the text cohesive, it provides a textual Theme.

(14) "There was a queer white misty patch in the sky like a halo of the sun."¹⁴

Queer orients us to oddities, encouraging us to take *white* and *misty* as odd, which "like a halo of the sun", and following events, confirm: the misty patch is the first sign of the coming typhoon. That is another textual Theme.

Textual Themes can structure a whole passage. With a theme of prettiness (and headed "Pretty pastels"), an advertisement read:¹⁵

(15) "Try these cute, festive fairy room decorations as part of a pretty pastel decorative theme in soft pastel pinks and purples."

3.3. Discussion: structure from the system of theme

Words other than premodifiers at the beginning of the phrase can function as Theme. In the colloquial expression, "I met this man . . .", the determiner *this*, which does not refer to a specific man, orients the hearer to the introduction of a new character in the conversation, and commonly to a new narrative episode. Similarly, in "They face a hard future . . .", the article is inappropriate to *future*, strictly (since there is only one future); so it is interpreted thematically, as warning hearers of new information, in the word *hard*. (That use of articles was noted previously, at the end of section §2.2.)

3.4. Conclusion: structure from the system of theme

¹¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 19 June 2007. Page A5.

¹² SOED citation. Semantically, *bloody* belongs most closely with "News Chronicle".

¹³ Josef Conrad, *Youth*.

¹⁴ Joseph Conrad. *Typhoon*. Pickering edition of the complete short fiction, volume 3. Page 89.

¹⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 11 November, 2005.

Nominal phrases, then, occasionally have a Theme-Rheme structure: the first modifier orients the reader to the information in the rest of the phrase; it sets a point of departure, which may be the Topic, or the speaker's relation to the hearer, or the phrase's relation to the rest of the text.

4. Discussion: discourse structure is a matter of degree

In many of the examples cited, the discourse value of the premodifiers has been a matter of degree, with the most important first: "My super-duper(1st) new(2nd) pup(3rd) tent"; "these cute (1st equal), festive (1st equal) fairy (2nd) room (3rd) decorations". That gradation fits closely with degrees of accessibility (Chafe, 1994), of newness (Prince, 1981), of referential importance (Chafe 1994), and of "communicative dynamism" (Firbas, 1992; Vachek, 1966; Svoboda, 1968).

The importance of the first premodifier explains the way we interpret question and negation of descriptive premodification. If a speaker refers to his "super-duper new pup tent", and a hearer says "That's not a super-duper new pup tent", the first speaker will interpret the comment (I believe) as 'It's not super-duper' (not as a denial of its being new or being a pup tent): the first premodifier is most salient.

Similarly, moving a word from premodifier position to determiner position raises the referent's salience (or "distinguishability"); for example, in "the student centre" (with a premodifier), the students are out of our focus of attention; but in "the students' centre" (with a determiner); they are more in focus. They are fully in focus, and fully salient, when referred to by the subject of the clause: "The students have a centre". For a second example, compare "the Iraqi war on Iran"; "Iraq's war on Iran"; and "Iraq warred with Iran".

5. Conclusion

In English, nominal phrases - as well as clauses - can have information structure. Premodifiers can express a Comment, with the headword expressing the Topic, or vice versa; premodifiers can express a Theme.

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