On Bohumil Trnka's Concept of Neutralization and its Nature on the Higher Language Levels

Bohumil Trnka's concept of neutralization is a recurrent point in his work,[1] closely related to his concept of oppositions. He regards it as a feature of all structural language levels: »The subject of the present paper [Trnka 1982c] is to draw the attention of linguists to two linguistic phenomena called homonymy and neutralization. Both of them operate on all structural levels of language, i. e. on the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and suprasyntactic levels …« (1982c, 356). Trnka himself was mostly concerned with neutralization in phonology and morphology, with a few digressions into syntax, but none – to my knowledge – into the suprasyntactic level.

The present chapter is concerned with neutralization on the levels that involve meaning. As a relevant starting point, the first part outlines Trnka's conception of neutralization in morphology and syntax. In the second part, neutralization is reconsidered on the level of morphology and elaborated on the syntactic level, with a tentative excursion into the level of utterance.

1.   Bohumil Trnka's Conception of Neutralization

Neutralization is treated as the primary or a major point in two of Trnka's papers: the article from which the above quotation is drawn (Trnka 1982c) and a longer treatise concerned with morphological oppositions (Trnka 1982d). In the former, neutralization is contrasted with homonymy. The relation between the two concepts is explicated in terms of the phonological identity of the members of a morphological opposition in the case of homonymy, and suppression of the morphological opposition itself in the case of neutralization. Homonymy of

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1 According to the years of the first appearance of his articles included in *Selected Papers in Structural Linguistics* (1982) Trnka's concern with neutralization appears to extend over more than three decades (from 1938 [1982a, 1982i] to 1974 [1982c]; as shown by the years of the first publication of the other papers referred to in the present chapter – 1961 [1982h], 1963 [1982f], 1966 [1982g], 1969 [1982e] – his interest in this point was continuous.

lexical and morphemic oppositions is defined here as the identity of their phonological realizations. Pairs of words like *light* (›not heavy‹) and *light* (›pale‹), *to lie* (›be at rest‹) and *to lie* (›to tell a lie‹) are homonymous because they are realized by identical phonological formations which do not contrast with each other in spoken English, while their lexical contrast and consequently their contextual distribution show them to be different words (lexical units). As examples of homonymy in the phonological realization of grammatical oppositions Trnka adduces, e.g., Latin inflexional suffixes *–ae*: identical form of the genitive and dative singular of the first declension (e.g. *familiae, agricolae*) in contrast to other declensions in which the two cases are differentiated (e.g. *mulieris : mulieri, dies : diei*; *–a* (nominative singular feminine – nominative, accusative plural neuter); *–um* (nominative, accusative singular neuter – accusative singular masculine), etc.; the English preterite and past participle suffix *-ed*. On the other hand, the verbal suffix *-ing* is not regarded as a homonymous morpheme, since its participial use differs from the gerundial only on the syntactic level. Similarly the prefix *un-* represents a single non-homonymous morpheme, because its two different senses (*unwise* ›not wise‹ x *to uncover* opposite of *to cover*) are distributed mechanically according to whether the base morpheme is an adjective or a verb.

Whereas homonymy involves the identity of phonological exponents of a morphological opposition, neutralization is suppression, under specified non-phonological conditions, of the morphological opposition itself. As one of the best known examples, Trnka adduces the suppression of the nominative versus accusative opposition which took place in Indo-European languages in the case of neuter nouns. For example in Latin, nouns like *vinum bonum, vina bona* appear in all syntactic positions in which all masculines or feminines must be put either in the nominative or in the accusative. A case of syntagmatic neutralization of the morphological opposition singular vs. plural is illustrated by the predicative noun, e.g. in *My brothers are merchants.* Here the opposition singular vs. plural in the predicative noun *merchants* is suppressed because it depends on the non-neutralized plural of the subject *my brothers* and does not express the plurality of *merchants*. The example is commented upon as follows:

the grammatical concord in English and most IE languages is a case of the syntagmatic neutralization of their morphological singular v. plural (or dual) opposition, which is realized by singular or plural in accordance with the number of the governing noun. There is no specific form of a noun available which would be neither singular nor plural and which could be used in this syntagmatic position which requires a noun devoid of numerical qualification.

A similar case of neutralization is found in negative sentences, since in his view negation is incompatible with a meaningful distinction between singular and plural in a sentence like *he has no child = he has no children* (Trnka 1982g, 343).[2]

The most clear-cut formulation of the distinction is found in the treatise on morphological oppositions:

The neutralization of morphological oppositions is fundamentally different from homonymy. In neutralization the opposition meaning of the members of the morphological pair disappears under certain non-phonological conditions and the whole opposition is represented by either one or the other member. Homonymy, on the other hand, does not have the function of the semantic suppression of the opposition, but only represents the identity of its phonological realization under certain phonological conditions. For example, the opposition of genitive singular vs. dative singular in the Czech feminine paradigm *kost* (bone) is realized by the same exponent (*i,* with occasional alternation of the final dental plosive), whereas in other Czech feminine paradigms the distinction of the two cases is upheld; the identity of genitive and dative singular *kosti* cannot be explained by stating semantic reasons, we must interpret this identity as a case of homonymy. (Trnka 1982d, 313)

Among other examples of homonymy of morphological exponents in Czech Trnka adduces nominative singular and nominative plural in neuter nouns *znamení* ›signal, sign‹, *moře* ›sea, ocean‹ – *znamení* ›signals, signs‹ – *moře* ›seas, oceans‹. These instances are regarded as homonymous on the basis of the existence of other neuter paradigms, viz. *slovo* ›word‹, pl. *slova* ›words‹, *ptáče* ›young bird‹, pl. *ptáčata* ›young birds‹, *séme* ›seed‹, pl. *semena* ›seeds‹. If the Czech system of neuter nouns did not include these paradigms, the opposition of singular/plural in the nominative of all neuter nouns would be neutralized in Czech.

Neutralization plays an important role in the classification of morphological oppositions, which can be grouped according to whether they are relevant in the

2 The distinction between neutralization and homonymy is also expounded elsewhere, cf. »On morphemic homonymy« (Trnka 1982f) and »On some problems of neutralization« (Trnka 1982b).
»… morphemic homonymy must be strictly distinguished from neutralization of morphological oppositions. Whereas the former consists in the identity of the phonemic implementation of a morphological opposition, the latter is the suppression, under specific non-phonemic conditions, of the morphological opposition itself. Thus in Latin the identical form of the genitive singular and the dative singular of the first declension (e. g. *familiae, agricolae*) is an example of homonymy of both cases that are differentiated in other declensions (e. g. *mulieris : mulieri, dies : diei* …), the endings *–um* in *vinum* and *–a* in *verba* is a phonemic implementation of the neutralized opposition nominative/accusative. The neutralization of this opposition consists in the structural incompatibility of all neuters to take part in it.« (Trnka 1982f, 336; similarly in Trnka 1982b, 153–54)

whole language system or whether they are suppressed (neutralized) under certain conditions. Neutralization of morphological oppositions is illustrated by gender in German, where gender distinctions are found in the singular but not in the plural. Similarly the morphological opposition nominative/accusative in the plural of animate masculines is neutralized in Slovak and Russian. According to whether neutralization depends on the base of the word, on the interplay with other morphological oppositions or on the syntactic context, Trnka distinguishes three types of neutralization:

(1) The neutralization of a morphological opposition is caused by the meaning of the base. For example the opposition of degrees of comparison, which characterizes adjectives, is neutralized in all adjectives that do not participate in the opposition of antonymy: *heavy, heavier, heaviest* against *metallic, Praguean*, etc. Only adjectives like *heavy* (x *light*), *poor* (x *rich*), *quick* (x *slow*), *healthy* (x *ill*) take the degrees of comparison.

(2) Neutralization is due to the participation of members of an opposition in another morphological opposition. Here Trnka adduces many examples, some of which have been mentioned above: the opposition of gender in nouns in the plural in German, Dutch and Scandinavian languages; the opposition nominative vs. accusative in the plural of animate masculine nouns in Slovak and Russian; the opposition nominative vs. accusative in the singular of neuter and inanimate masculine nouns in Slavonic languages; in Latin the opposition dative/ablative in all nouns in the plural; in Czech, Slovak and Russian the opposition nominative vs. accusative in inanimate masculine, all feminine and neuter nouns is neutralized in the plural.

In German the opposition of gender in nouns is neutralized in the plural: *der Knabe / er, die Frau / sie, das Kind / es – die Knaben / sie, die Frauen / sie, die Kinder / sie.*

(3) Neutralization is due to participation of the opposition members in syntactic oppositions. This type of neutralization is illustrated by concord in number between the subject and the predicative noun in a classifying predication, already adduced above, viz. *Moji bratři jsou rolníci* [my brothers are peasants]. The noun *peasants* does not express the opposition of plurality, because the plural form is only used to express concord in number with the subject, the actual number of peasants not being our concern. In other words, the neutralization of the opposition singular/plural is realized by the singular or by the plural form according to the grammatical number of the subject. Agreement with the number of the subject is further illustrated by instances like *The men had high hats on their heads*, where the forms *heads* and *hats* are used as a realization of the suppressed opposition of plurality. A fairly general case of neutralization of the singular/plural distinction is found in generic sentences. The realization form of this opposition is, according to Trnka, usually the sin-

gular *The swallow is a bird*, *An island is a piece of land surrounded by water,* or sometimes the plural *Dogs are useful animals.* Generic nouns displaying neutralization of the number opposition occur especially in negative and interrogative sentences.

Trnka also asks the question what is the cause of morphological neutralization. The answer seems easier for type one and three than for type two. Neutralization of the first type manifests itself as incompatibility of the particular opposition with the meaning of the word base. There is no point in comparing an adjective like *ferrous* if we refer to the substance. As for the third type of neutralization, it results from the fact that every word participating in a morphological opposition must also participate in its phonological realization either as the marked or the unmarked member of the opposition, even if this opposition is not desirable or even pointless in signalling the meaning of the particular syntactic context. Thus in the sentence *The dog is a domestic animal* the singular does not signal the opposition singular/plural, but refers to dogs in general. Since a language usually does not have nominal forms which are neither singular nor plural, it must use one of the two forms. Trnka points out that such a structure of morphological oppositions has certain disadvantages, of which a language like Chinese is free.

The causes of the second type of neutralization, the participation of an opposition in another morphological opposition, are less evident. According to Trnka they are to be sought neither in the phonological realization of the morphemes, nor in the operation of morpho(no)logical analogy, but in the needs of the sentence structure, and in the sphere of structural morphology in which the members of morphological oppositions are grouped along the syntagmatic axis.

The last point of importance with respect to neutralization in morphology concerns the number of features by which the members of an opposition pair are distinguished. The examples discussed so far all differ only in one feature. However, there are far more morphological oppositions whose members differ by several features and still correlate, e. g. the instrumental singular *otcem* in Czech: dative plural *otcům.* Can these oppositions be neutralized? According to Trnka, evidence for the existence of this type is provided, e. g., by Czech feminine nouns, all of which have identical form in the genitive singular and the nominative and accusative of the plural: *ženy* ›of a woman‹,›women‹ (nominative and accusative plural); similarly in all the other feminine paradigms. This would appear to be a specific feature of morphology (or possibly of all higher levels), distinctly contrasting with the situation in phonology, where neutralization is found only between members of oppositions differing in one distinctive feature.

2.   Neutralization Reconsidered

The extension of the phonological notion of neutralization to the higher language levels introduces a dual aspect into it: the loss of a distinction applies at the same time to form and meaning. As noted above, of the higher levels Trnka's treatment of neutralization mostly concerns morphology. Neutralization of morphological oppositions is explicitly defined in Trnka (1982d, 306):

As any other morphological element, all these oppositions [=morphological oppositions] must consist of meaning and the phonological implementation of this meaning. The determination of the morphemic meaning is often very difficult – recall the problem of Russian case inflection which was examined by R. Jakobson (1936, 240–248). Let us therefore choose a less complex opposition: the opposition singular/plural in Present-day English. Its morphological (or general, classifying) meaning is ›plurality‹ vs. ›non-plurality‹ [...]. The marker of plurality is manifested with countable nouns as a number larger than one. [...] In the morphological analysis we are only interested in the basic semantic opposition of both members [...].

What follows from these formulations is that neutralization in morphology concerns the loss of distinction between the members of an opposition both in form and basic meaning (morphological, general, classifying), as demonstrated by plurality vs. non-plurality in the case of nouns.

2.1.   Neutralization in Morphology

Reconsidering the three types of neutralization of morphological oppositions specified above, we find that the aspect of meaning (Trnka's concept of the basic or morphological/ general/ classifying meaning) is fully operative in Types 1 and 3. In Type 1 the basic meaning involves the distinction between degrees of comparison: positive vs. comparative: vs. superlative. In the case of non-gradable adjectives, this distinction is blocked by the lexical meaning of the base morpheme. Accordingly, both prerequisites of morphological neutralization, neutralization of form (the opposition is expressed by one form, the positive) and meaning (loss of the capacity to distinguish degrees) are satisfied.

   This type of morphological neutralization appears to be fairly common not only in the case of adjectives (and adverbs, for that matter, cf. *soon, sooner, soonest* x *now, then*, etc.), but also with nouns and verbs. For example, the opposition between generic and non-generic reference is incompatible with nouns that have unique reference (proper names), and the opposition singular vs. plural is blocked by the uncountable nature of uncountable nouns. As regards

the verb, in Slavonic languages the opposition perfectivity vs. imperfectivity is incompatible with atelic verbs;[3] in English the opposition simple vs. progressive conjugation is annulled in the case of non-dynamic, stative verbs. A general constraint on verbal categories is due to the basic meaning of the categories themselves: thus the basic meaning of the imperative mood excludes reference to the past, and the basic meaning of the present conditional blocks the distinction between reference to the future and reference to the present.

Type 3 involves interaction between morphology and syntax. Significantly, all examples illustrating this type display neutralization of the singular/plural distinction. This is presumably not incidental, but rather reflects the fact that the meaning distinction between the singular and the plural is relatively easy to determine. In the case of concord between subject and subject complement in copular sentences

(1) My brothers are merchants.

the suppression of the singular/plural distinction in the subject complement primarily results from the semantics of the respective sentence type: the subject and the predicative noun are co-referential, the subject complement merely assigning the subject to a class. As shown by instances of discord, co-referentiality of the subject and the subject complement is a relevant feature of the sentence semantics. Compare examples adduced by Leech and Lu Li (1995):

(2) a. The successes of the Labour Party are good evidence of this.
     b. Mushrooms are a very risky crop.
     c. His achievements were just a part of a magnificent year.
     d. They are now a threat.

Here the subject complements lack the feature of co-referentiality. Although they also assign the subject to a class, they are closer to qualification than classification. Leech and Lu explain the discord by the adjective-like character of the predicative nouns,[4] basing their arguments on the prototype theory. The definitional core of the category of NPs consists in (a) being referring expressions, (b) beginning with a determiner, and (c) containing a head noun of variable number. Noun phrases in the discussed sentence type resemble the prototypical

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3 Panevová (1981, 88) regards this type of neutralization as semantic defectiveness.

4 Among other adjectival features of noun phrases in the function of subject complement they noted their restricted occurrence with copulas other than *be*, the tendency of singular count nouns to omit the article, facile coordination of nouns and adjectives in this function, occurrence of nouns with the semantic feature of gradability, the dummy noun phenomenon, e. g. *our departure was a hurried one.* (Leech, Lu Li 1995)

adjective phrase in being (a) property ascribing, (b) abstract, (c) gradable and (d) invariable.

The other instance of neutralization of the singular/plural distinction due to the interaction of syntax is even more illustrative:

(3) The men had high hats on their heads.

In this type the loss of the semantic distinction sometimes overrides the concord principle: the member representing the neutralized opposition may take either form, i. e. also the discordant one. Quirk et al. (1985, 768) treat this type of concord as distributive number, with the following comment and examples after the prototypical example (4) a.: »While the distributive plural is the norm, the distributive singular may also be used to focus on individual instances.«

(4) a. Have you all brought your cameras? [›Each has a camera‹]
     b. The students raised their hand(s).
     c. Some children have understanding fathers / an understanding father.
     d. We all have good appetites / a good appetite.
     e. Pronouns agree with their antecedent(s).

Besides concord, this type of neutralization is illustrated by the loss of number distinction in generic sentences.

(5) a. The swallow is a bird.

The suppression of the singular/plural distinction between both form and meaning is easily demonstrated here by the potential alternation of singular and plural forms in many of these instances:

(5) b. Swallows are birds.

There is even orthographic evidence for the loss of both the formal and the meaning distinction between the singular and the plural of generic nouns, found in some instances of the possessive case. Instances listed under (6) (drawn from Quirk et al. 1985, 327 – 28) show vacillation between the singular and the plural even in writing.

(6) a. There were ten farmer's / farmers' wives at the meeting.
     b. a girl's school / a girls' school.[5]

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5 Quirk et al. (1985, 328, note [a]) point out the tendency of the genitive of generic nouns

Yet another example of neutralization of the singular/plural opposition is demonstrated by negative sentences of the type

(7) a. He has no brother / no brothers.

A set that is empty remains empty whatever number of potential members is denied. It is worth noting that this type represents the only instance referred to under neutralization in the index of *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Huddleston, Pullum 2002, 389). In the adduced example, here listed as (7) b., the two forms are described as semantically equivalent with little pragmatic difference.

(7) b. No juvenile was admitted. / No juveniles were admitted.

In other instances, the pragmatic difference may play a role: one of the forms may be preferred or required.

(7) c. He has no father. / *He has no fathers.
    d. He has no child. / He has no children.

In (7) c. the singular is required because one does not have more than one (biological) father. In (7) d., on the other hand, the plural may be preferred as reflecting the more usual case.[6]

The realization form of a neutralized morphological opposition appears to play a role only in the respective pragmatic implications. As is known from phonology, neutralization of an opposition is formally implemented by either member in dependence on the environments; e.g. in Czech the neutralization of voice in paired consonants is realized by the voiceless member at the end of words (cf. *led* [let] ›ice‹ and *let* [let] ›flight‹), but by the voiced member before a paired voiced consonant (cf. *prosba* [prozba] and *hrozba* [hrozba]). There are also instances where the neutralization form is identical with neither member, e.g. *comfort* [kaɱfət], containing a variant of the phoneme /m/, which represents all nasal phonemes in English before labials.

(descriptive genitive in their terminology) to have an idiomatic connection with the head noun, which may eventually result in the formation of a compound.

6 On the basis of these examples the authors argue for the plural as the default choice: in (7) c. the singular is required because one does not have more than one (biological) father; in (7) d. the plural would be normally used because it is more usual to have two or more children than just one. One may wonder whether the comment on (7) d. still applies, and what the pragmatic choice would be in (7) a. and in instances with a fixed number of the members of a set like *He has no grandmother / grandmothers.*

The second type of neutralization, neutralization due to the participation of members of an opposition in another morphological opposition, is illustrated by many examples, most of which are drawn from the declension of nouns. Specifically, neutralization is postulated for cases for which none of the respective paradigms displays distinctive forms: the opposition nominative vs. accusative in the plural of animate masculine nouns in Slovak and Russian; the opposition nominative vs. accusative in the singular of neuter and inanimate masculine nouns in Slavonic languages; in Latin the opposition dative/ablative in all nouns in the plural, the opposition of nominative/accusative in both the singular and plural of all neuter nouns, etc.

(8) *vinum bonum* nominative/accusative singular
     vina bona nominative/accusative plural
(9) *feminīs, servīs, puerīs, victōribus, rēbus …*
     dative/ablative plural

I regard this type as deficient in meeting the second criterion of neutralization, the suppression of meaning; cf. the formulation quoted above, »[=morphological oppositions] must consist of meaning and the phonological implementation of this meaning«. What is here identical is only the form. The basic meaning of the cases is different, however difficult it may be to determine, especially as regards the nominative and the accusative (cf. the definition of the ablative and dative in Pyles and Algeo (1993, 338 and 343): Ablative A case typically showing separation and source, but also instrument and cause; Dative A case typically marking the indirect object or recipient.) In the above quotation, Trnka himself refers to Jakobson's *Kasuslehre* (1936), where cases are treated as forms involving invariant meaning.

As shown by (10) a. and b., the semantic relations between the undifferentiated nominative and accusative forms of neuter nouns are identical to those between the differentiated nominative and accusative forms in other genders the nominative is here the agent and the accusative the patient.

(10) a. House kloflo kachně. The gosling (nom.) pecked the duckling (acc.)
         x Kachně kloflo house. The duckling (nom.) pecked the gosling (acc.)
      b. Husa klofla kachnu. The goose (nom.) pecked the duck (acc.).
         x Kachna klofla husu. The duck (nom.) pecked the goose (acc.).

All examples of neutralization discussed so far, including types 1 and 3, involve neutralization of morphological oppositions. Even in the two types that involve the syntactic aspect, neutralization again affects morphological oppositions, not syntactic ones.

2.2.   Neutralization in Syntax

Looking for potential candidates of neutralization in syntax, we need to specify the features on the basis of which they can be identified. On the analogy of morphological oppositions we seek related syntactic structures which differ in one syntactic feature and alternate with each other; in other words, syntactically related structures whose semantic distinction has been suppressed. As an instance of this kind we may consider the non-agentive passive which alternates with the active without appreciable difference in meaning. Compare the examples under (11).

(11)   a. Atoms are formed /form if the ions are diatomic
       b. In ion-ion recombination the electron transfers/is transferred from the negative ion to the positive ion.[7]
       c. The word derives/is derived from Latin.

Here we have two related syntactic structures differing in the feature active vs. passive, which normally contrast with each other semantically, but which appear to be more or less in free variation.

     Another instance of syntactic neutralization within the English verb system is found in the infinitive operating as a postmodifier of a noun. Compare (12) a. and b. While in (12) a. the active and the passive convey their respective meanings, in (12) b. the formal distinction becomes irrelevant since both forms express passive meaning.

(12)   a. his wish to teach $\neq$ his wish to be taught (is sincere)
       b. The only thing to do/to be done (is to deny everything).

In the sphere of sentences and clauses, potential neutralization can be exemplified by two contrasting structures: positive vs. negative polarity and locative vs. existential sentences.

     Theoretically, sentence polarity appears to be irrelevant in *yes-no* questions, whose primary function is to ascertain in which polarity the content being expressed is true; this function can be served by either polarity. The only systemic constraint is the marked nature of the negative form. In language use this constraint appears to be a powerful one, alternation of positive and negative polarity being found only in rare cases. One type is encountered in Czech: either a positive or negative question can be used in the same situation with hardly any

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7   Examples (11) a. and b. are shortened versions of examples adduced in Dušková (1999a, 120 – 22), where this point is treated at more length.

semantic distinction. What differences there are consist in the pragmatic aspects, the negative form being less direct, and hence more tentative. Compare examples (13) a. and b.:

(13) a. Máš/nemáš známku? (literally: Have you/not-have you stamp?)
      b. Znáš/neznáš jeho adresu? (literally: Know you / not-know you his address?)

In English this use of negative *yes-no* questions does not occur. Nevertheless, a marginal case of alternating polarity may be found in *yes-no* questions operating in the secondary function of expressing invitation, offer, suggestion, as in (14).

(14) Will / won't you join us?

As in (13), the difference between the two forms is here of a pragmatic nature: the negative form gives the addressee more freedom in responding according to his/her choice.

As regards locative and existential sentences, their structures and contrasting meaning are nearly always fully operative. Instances of blurred structure and meaning are even more marginal than in the preceding cases. It is to be noted that here neutralization requires very special contextual conditions. Compare (15) a. and b.

(15) a. There is cheese and ham in the fridge. / In the fridge there is cheese and ham.
      ≠ The ham and cheese are in the fridge.
      b. He seemed to see the appeal in her eyes, <u>as there surely was</u>, for she was thinking, If his mother comes …, … it will be someone else to talk to.

I regard the *there*-clause in (15) b. as a case of suppression of the locative vs. existential distinction in that *there* in this clause merges both the locative (*there= in her eyes*) and the existential function (*as there surely was there=in her eyes*).

The last two points to be discussed are two types of subordinate clauses which do not lend themselves to facile classification.

The first is the subordinate clause in the cleft sentence. Although resembling the relative clause, it also differs from it in several relevant points.[8] In the case of some antecedents the deviation from the relative clause is so essential that the

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8 For a more detailed discussion of this point and references to the literature, see Dušková (1999b, 320–22).

subordinator *that,* which is the only choice here, is to be regarded as the conjunction and not a relative pronoun. Compare the first two examples in (16) with those given under c. a d.: while in (16) a. and b. the subordinate clause bears all features of a relative clause, in c. and d. relative interpretation fails to apply.

(16) a. Those who are faithful know only the trivial side of love. It's the faithless who know love's tragedies.
b. It was the girl whom/that/zero they blamed (not the boy).
c. It was with great misgivings that he looked at the strange food on his plate.
d. Why is it that you dislike her so much?

As shown by these instances, the contrast between the relative clause vs. content clause is here suppressed, the neutralized form being identifiable with neither; the subordinate clause of the cleft sentence represents a structure sui generis, which is doubtless a consequence of the relationship between the cleft and the underlying non-cleft form: a sentence expressing one propositional content is syntactically dissociated into two clauses.

The other type of clause that can be regarded as a neutralized form of two distinct types of subordinate clauses is found in the case of an *if*-clause in the position of an extraposed subject content clause, as in (17). Compare a. and b.

(17) a. It is understandable that they feel threatened.
b. It is understandable if they feel threatened.
c. If they feel threatened, it is understandable. X That they feel threatened is understandable.

Leaving aside the interpretation of the *if*-clause in (17) b. as a straightforward adverbial clause of condition, which presupposes anaphoric function of the initial *it*, we get an entirely analogous structure as in (17) a.: initial *it* has an anticipatory function and the *if*-clause occurs in the position of extraposed subject. The only difference here consists in the presentation of the content of the subordinate clause: whereas in (17) a. it is presented as a fact, in (17) b. its truth value is conditional.[9] As shown by (17) c., the subject interpretation of (17) b. applies only to the linear arrangement with the *if*-clause in final position. When

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9 This point is treated at more length in the doctoral dissertation of V. Smolka (Smolka 2007, 19). Clauses like (17) b. are regarded as »a combination of a subject clause and a conditional clause which have merged and where the subject clause is meaningful only if the condition expressed in the *if*-clause is true.«

placed initially, the *if*-clause is again clearly adverbial, its only special feature being the co-referentiality of *it* and the content of the entire *if*-clause.

Considering the examples under discussion with respect to their character, they appear to differ from instances of morphological neutralization in two respects: the first is inherent in the syntactic level as such, and the second is connected with it. While in morphology, neutralization involves form and meaning, in syntax it involves another additional aspect: apart from form (structure) and semantic roles and/or sentence semantics, it also comprises syntactic function. Consequently, the conditions giving rise to neutralization are more complex. Even though more examples of syntactic neutralization can doubtless be found, they will hardly substantially differ from those that have been presented. The complexity of the neutralizing conditions rules out the central functions and uses of most structures, so that potential instances have to be looked for on the periphery of syntactic categories. This circumstance determines the characteristics of the adduced examples of neutralization: all types are (1) rare, (2) marginal (within the range from very marginal to more or less marginal), and (3) involve special, in some cases strongly marked, uses. These characteristics will presumably remain true even for a larger collection.

2.3.   Neutralization at Suprasentential Level

The last point to be considered is neutralization on the suprasentential level. As stated in the introductory quotation, Trnka postulated neutralization for all levels, including the highest. His conception of this level was very broad insofar as it covered not only functional sentence perspective, but also stylistics and some pragmatic aspects such as illocutionary force and conversational implicatures (cf. Trnka 1990, 23). However, the highest level is not elaborated in his work. According to the brief outline, functional sentence perspective appears to play a major role insofar as the basic units of the suprasentential level Trnka identified with the theme and the rheme. Hence instances of neutralization are to be sought in the suppression of the distinction between the FSP functions.

Here the first problem that arises is the system of the FSP functions themselves. Although most theories of information structure recognize only two, the theme and the rheme (whatever terms may be used), the theoretical framework elaborated by Jan Firbas (1992), the most widely used theory among Czech anglicists, works with a third function, transition, implemented by the verb. In general, the FSP structure is regarded as a gradient which in the interpretative arrangement displays a gradual rise in communicative dynamism. Nevertheless, since the only poles in this arrangement are the theme and the rheme, even this

framework offers only these two functions as potential candidates for neutralization.

Another problem arises in connection with the realization form of these units. In contrast to the units of the lower levels, the realization forms of the theme and the rheme fail to provide a distinctive formal criterion. The theme and the rheme are largely realized in the same way, by noun phrases and adverbial phrases. A different realization form is found only in the case of the verb where one constituent of the verb phrase, usually the lexical element, operates as the rheme. This also applies to the verbo-nominal predication when the subject complement, which as rule constitutes the rheme, is implemented by an adjective phrase.

Altogether, the problem appears to be approachable only on the basis of the distinctive features of the FSP functions. These are to be sought in the FSP factors: linearity, context, semantics, and intonation in speech.

Starting with linearity, the theme is by definition the least dynamic and the rheme the most dynamic element, irrespective of position. Still, though not invariably, position as the indicator of an FSP function applies in a majority of instances: the theme is mostly found at the beginning of the sentence or in preverbal position and the rheme at the end or in postverbal position. To this extent it might be argued that where the rheme occurs at the beginning and the theme at the end, the (limited) distinctiveness of linearity is neutralized. This might be illustrated by rhematic subjects in initial position, as in (18):

(18) A car pulled up at the curb.

Compare the Czech equivalent *U chodníku zastavilo auto* [At the curb pulled up a car] in which the rheme occurs at the end.

Context dependence/independence is of a similar nature. Although given (context-dependent) elements mostly constitute the theme and new (context-independent) elements the rheme, both these functions often display a composite structure containing both given and new elements. Moreover, even given elements function as rhemes and new elements as themes, the FSP structure being ultimately determined by the interplay of all factors. Only an FSP configuration displaying an entirely new theme and an entirely given rheme might be regarded as neutralization of the contextual factor, but such a configuration is hard to conceive.

Within the FSP theory the semantic factor is treated in terms of dual semantics, static and dynamic, the latter being represented by the dynamic semantic functions constituting the presentation scale and the quality scale. Since the distinction between the two basically depends on the dynamic semantics of the verb in conjunction with the context independence of the subject, instances

of the neutralization of this factor might be sought where the verb fails to indicate presentation or quality, which is regarded as an instance of potentiality by Firbas (1992: 108–110), »which occurs when the interplay of FSP factors permit of more than one interpretation.« Compare his example:

(19) as great crowds gathered to him, [he entered a boat and sat down]

While the potential interpretation of the FSP structure in (19) either as the presentation of a phenomenon (*great crowds*) on the scene, or as ascribing a quality (*gathered*) to a quality bearer (*great crowds*) is an instance of homonymy, it might be argued that the distinctive function of the semantic factor is neutralized insofar as it fails to operate.

The last factor, intonation, primarily operates in speech, while in writing the FSP structure as a rule results from the interplay of the other three factors. Even so it appears to qualify as a neutralizable feature best in that the rheme generally bears the intonation centre (the nucleus). Hence it may be said that where the intonation centre falls on an element other than the rheme, the distinctive potential of this feature is neutralized. Such instances are rarely found where the automated pattern of falling intonation with the intonation centre at the end overrides the rhematic function of the initial subject, illustrated in (18).

To conclude, this tentative discussion of neutralization on the level of FSP has confirmed what was found about neutralization in syntax: the more variables are involved, the less favourable the conditions for neutralization become. Even more than in syntax, the instances of neutralization found on the level of FSP, if accepted as such, are peripheral or even non-existent.

Acknowledgements

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