

Synonymy vs. differentiation of variant syntactic realizations of FSP functions

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0. Introduction

The present article deals with the second participant in verbal action as it appears on the syntactic level and the level of functional sentence perspective (FSP).¹ The interaction between the two levels will be considered where the second participant in verbal action has the FSP function of theme.² This involves contextual boundness³ of the second participant insofar as context-independent second participants are as a rule rhematic.⁴ The constructions under consideration include the passive, in which a thematic second participant appears as the subject, active clauses with the second participant as thematic object occupying the regular postverbal position, and active clauses with the second participant constructed as fronted object. Fronted objects moreover raise the question of their relation to the passive, and the cleft sentence in which the second participant appearing as thematic object in the underlying noncleft form is focused.

The aim of the present paper is to find out to what extent these structures are interchangeable, and if differentiated, to ascertain the features to which the differentiation is due.

1. Analysis

The following discussion is based on an analysis of three samples of contemporary fiction (see *Sources*), each providing 500 clauses taken from continuous text, i.e. a total of 1,500 clauses. To eliminate textual diversity, attention was paid only to the authors' monologue, i.e. direct speech was excluded on the ground of the differences between monologue and dialogue on the one hand, and the different role of intonation in speech and writing on the other. In written language the role of intonation as an indicator of FSP is of minor importance insofar as in this

medium intonation largely constitutes a concomitant feature of an FSP structure primarily indicated by other means, viz contextual boundness, syntactico-semantic structure and linear arrangement (Firbas 1992:10–11, 115, Sgall *et al.* 1986:3.10–3.13). In addition, since the representation of some of the structures under discussion is not sufficiently illustrative in my corpus, I also include examples collected variously from other fiction.

1.1 The passive

A major syntactic realization of the second participant with the FSP function of theme is found in the passive.

1.1.1 *Second participant with the function of theme*

The passive is usually described as a device serving to achieve basic distribution of communicative dynamism (CD).⁵ This capacity of the passive partly results from the fact that the subject, the second participant, has the FSP function of theme. Equally important is the postverbal section of a passive clause, which usually contains the rheme. In studies of the FSP role of the passive the function of the rheme is mostly described in connection with the *by*-agent (cf. Dušková 1971), the first participant in verbal action, as in ex (1).

- (1) British art has constantly been changed and enriched by contact with European art.

However, the function of the rheme in a passive clause is not confined to the *by*-agent. The rheme can be realized by any context-independent postverbal element, except scene-setting adverbials. In (2) the postverbal adverbial is an adjunct of purpose, in (3) an adjunct of manner, and in (4) the object of a ditransitive passive verb.

- (2) The sacrifice has been made for nothing.
- (3) The family were now seen to advantage.
- (4) We may yet be spared undue publicity.

Scene-setting adverbials,⁶ whether contextually bound or not, are thematic, as in active clauses, cf. the temporal setting in (5) and the contextually bound prepositional phrase in (6).

- (5) He got stuck in the underground last Monday.
- (6) This was accepted between them. (Adams 18)

In the absence of postverbal elements, the rheme is usually the verb, as in (7).

- (7) All our good intentions were forgotten.

Statistical counts (Dušková 1971; Hedviková 1996) show that passives with *by*-agents or quasi-agents⁷ almost invariably display the basic distribution of CD, and this is precisely why the passive is described as a special device of FSP (cf. Mathesius 1975:101): it serves to rearrange the information structure of the corresponding active clause containing a context-independent subject and a contextually bound object so as to achieve basic distribution of CD.

1.1.2 *Passives with thematic by-agents*

However, as shown by ex (8), passives with a thematic *by*-agent are not entirely ruled out.

- (8) I am so terribly upset by all this.

Here the *by*-agent is contextually bound and the rheme is constituted by the verb with its intensification. Two points should be noted in this case: first, it is an example taken from speech, which ensures recourse to intonation. And secondly, *upset* is one of the attitudinal verbs which are found more frequently in the passive than in the active, the passive being moreover stative, which endows it with adjectival features.

Another counterexample to the FSP function of the passive is provided by passives with rhematic subjects. Admittedly, they are rare (3 examples out of 127, i.e. 2.4% in my material). A characteristic type of a passive clause with a rhematic subject is illustrated by (9).

- (9) Near one of the posts, a hammer and a few nails had been left behind.
(Adams 19)

The rhematic function of the subject is due not only to its context-independence, but also to the semantics of the verb, which implies existence/appearance on the scene, and to contextual boundness of the adverbial element. That is, the passive in this case implements the presentation scale.⁸

1.1.3 *The passive of ditransitive verbs*

The FSP function of the passive is also demonstrated by the passive of ditransitive verbs, which normally serves to achieve basic distribution of CD: whichever object in the active is less dynamic becomes the subject of the passive, the more dynamic object preserving its object function, as in (4) and (10).

- (10) The ring was left to the eldest daughter.

In (4) the theme is the indirect object of the active, whereas in (10) the theme is constituted by the direct object of the active. However, as shown by ex (11), this is not always the case.

- (11) Strength was given this opposing theory by the meteorological report stating the velocity of the wind.

Here the only contextually bound element is the indirect object, which could be constructed as the subject. The context independent subject (direct object of the active) would then stand in postverbal position before the rheme proper,⁹ implemented by the *by*-agent. Cf. (11').

- (11') This opposing theory was given strength by the meteorological report stating the velocity of the wind.

In (11) the initial position of a context-independent element gives this element more prominence than the position consistent with the basic distribution of CD, in a similar way as in the case of fronted object (see 1.3).

1.2 Active clauses with thematic objects

Since one of the FSP functions of the passive is to achieve initial placement of a thematic element, the object of the corresponding active, it is legitimate to inquire into active clauses with thematic objects, and consider them with respect to passivization. Statistical data show these two realization structures to be about equally frequent: in my corpus of 1,500 clauses the passive was represented by 127 and the active with thematic objects by 136 instances, i.e. 8.5% and 9%, respectively. Expectedly, not all active clauses containing a transitive verb and an object lend themselves to passivization. Apart from structural and semantic restrictions, a constraint arises from the FSP structure itself. Significantly, an active clause with a thematic object passivizes primarily where the subject is the rheme. In most active clauses with a thematic object, however, the subject is also contextually bound, often operating as the theme proper.¹⁰ This is reflected in its form of realization. In my corpus half of the subjects of finite clauses with thematic objects are personal pronouns (45 out of 89). Passivization of such clauses would result in sentences with a thematic *by*-agent, which, as we have seen, are very rare, precisely because what the passive primarily serves to achieve is final or postverbal placement of the rheme, the agent in the syntactic function of adjunct. Where the subject is thematic, the motivation for constructing the first participant as a postverbal clause element is thus lacking. Accordingly, passivization of clauses containing both thematic subject and thematic object is as a rule applicable only if the agent can be suppressed, which is usually ruled out by the semantic relevance of the agent. Hence passivization of sentences like (12) and (13), which require expression of the agent, is conceivable only under special contextual conditions.

- (12) he greeted them politely¹¹ (Adams 23)

- (12') they were greeted politely by him
 (13) they followed us all the same (Raverat 129)
 (13') we were followed by them all the same

Passivization is even less likely where the subject is pronominal and the object, though contextually bound, is a noun phrase, the rheme being constituted by a final adverbial, as in (14).

- (14) She was evaluating the interview in the light of subsequent events.
 (James 352)
 (14') The interview was being evaluated by her in the light of subsequent events.

On the other hand, passivization is more feasible where the subject, though contextually bound, is a noun phrase and the object a personal pronoun. It is again the verb that constitutes the rheme, but the subject is diathematic,¹² i.e. it is more dynamic than the object, as in (15).

- (15) Her initial testiness had surprised him (James 350)
 (15') He was surprised by her initial testiness.

While (15') is presumably more acceptable than either (13') or (14'), owing to the respective forms of realization of the first and the second participant, ex (16) demonstrates an even more important aspect, which presumably also asserts itself in the preceding examples of this group (12)–(15).

- (16) ["Are you all right, Blackie? I mean, do you want someone to go home with you?"]¹³ The thought appalled Blackie. (James 195)

The subject resumes the most activated semantic content, expressed in the immediately preceding clause, whereas the object refers to an element further to the left in the text. Both noun phrases are again contextually bound, and their form of realization is equally weighty. Their respective positions in the sentence appear to be due to the position of the sentence in the text, specifically to the linear arrangement of the referents of the two noun phrases in the preceding stretch of text.

It may be concluded that active clauses with thematic objects do not in fact constitute an alternative realization of passive clauses with expressed *by*-agent insofar as they lack the second relevant feature of transitive active clauses liable to passivize, viz a rhematic subject. Even in the case of the most likely candidates for interchangeability illustrated by exx (15) and (16), the choice between the two structures is subject to textual factors.

1.3 Fronted objects

Although the regular position of thematic objects appears to be the postverbal, there are also thematic objects in initial position, as a result of fronting. These should again be considered with respect to passivization, and obviously also with respect to postverbal thematic objects.

Fronted objects are not only thematic, but also rhematic. These two structures should be distinguished because they are motivated by different factors. Consider exx (17) and (18).

- (17) a. [Pen would have liked to have been present at the rendezvous,] but this offer Piers declined.
 b. [A.: "I am the most selfish creature alive. I never do anything to please anyone but myself."
 B.: "That I know to be untrue."
 c. [A.: "There are things in my life you don't know anything about."
 B.: "Good God, I should hope there were! I've only known you for a month."
 A.: "And some of them you wouldn't like."
- (18) a. Wonderful memory your grandmother has, Miss Smith.
 b. Damn silly names these horses have!
 c. A lot of trust I get around this house, don't I?

Whereas the examples under (17) illustrate fronted objects that are thematic, the preceding context showing them to be contextually bound, the examples in (18) contain context-independent objects constituting the rheme. Both structures are variants of postverbal objects, as illustrated by (17') and (18').

- (17') a. . . . but Piers declined this offer.
 b. . . . I know that to be untrue.
 c. . . . And you wouldn't like some of them.
- (18') a. Your grandmother has a wonderful memory, Miss Smith.
 b. These horses have damn silly names!
 c. I get a lot of trust around this house, don't I?

Neither in (17') nor in (18') does the change in the position of the object affect the FSP function of the object. The factor determining the FSP function of the object regardless of its position is its contextual boundness in (17): accordingly, it is thematic; and the context-independence in (18): it is hence the rheme. Fronted objects obviously represent a marked variant which shares one feature in both instances, viz initial placement makes both thematic and rhematic objects more prominent. Otherwise, the markedness of the two types is of a different kind.

Fronting of a thematic object not only makes the object more prominent, but also allows the rheme to occupy the final position. It thus contributes to basic distribution of CD. At the same time it also serves as a connective link with what precedes — this is amply demonstrated in all three examples under (17). Fronted thematic objects thus have not only intrasentential, but also suprasentential function, as a means of cohesion.

A fronted rhematic object, on the other hand, has only intrasentential function. Initial placement makes it not only more emphatic than it would be in its regular postverbal position, but also indicates emotive colouring, expression of an attitude. The emotive aspect of a fronted rhematic object manifests itself in concomitant features such as intensifying imprecations (*damn*), and irony (in (18c) *a lot* is used in the opposite sense). Unlike fronting of a thematic object, fronting of a rhematic object results in a deviation from the basic distribution of CD, viz the rheme precedes the theme. This again testifies to the emotive nature of fronted rhematic objects.

Evidently, it is only the fronted thematic object that can be considered as a variant of the structures discussed so far, i.e. the passive, and thematic object in postverbal position.

As regards the relation between the passive and an active clause with a fronted thematic object, part of what has been said about thematic objects in postverbal position applies even here. The subject is again thematic, but in contrast to clauses with postverbal thematic objects in which it can constitute either the theme proper or the diatheme, with a fronted thematic object it can only serve as the theme proper since the diatheme is implemented by the fronted object. Apart from the constraints imposed on passivization by the necessity to express the agent, whose FSP function is different in active clauses with thematic objects and in clauses underlying the passives with a *by*-agent, there is also a difference in the FSP function of the fronted thematic object and that of the subject of the passive. As has been explained, fronted objects are diathematic, whereas the subject in the passive largely constitutes the theme proper. Accordingly, active clauses with fronted thematic object do not provide a variant of the FSP structure of the passive.

Nor do sentences with fronted thematic objects provide a variant of active clauses with postverbal thematic objects. As has been pointed out, fronted thematic objects have a distinctly cohesive function. In contrast to other contextually bound elements, which are also inherently cohesive, the cohesive function of fronted thematic objects consists in “providing direct linkage with what has preceded” (Quirk *et al.*: 18.20).

1.4 The cleft sentence

Fronted object should also be considered in respect of its relation to the cleft

sentence since both fronting and the cleft sentence serve to give prominence to a clause element. As appears from previous studies of the cleft constructions (Dušková 1993; Dvořáková 1988), *it*-clefts focus both thematic and rhematic elements of the underlying noncleft clause. In view of the point under discussion, only *it*-clefts focusing thematic elements will be taken into account.

Focusing an element that is thematic in the underlying non-cleft sentence appears to be the primary function of *it*-clefts. Specifically, *it*-clefts most frequently highlight the subject (almost 50%, see Dvořáková 1988:35–46) and scene-setting adverbials (30%), i.e. elements which appear initially and are mostly context-dependent. Focused objects are the least frequent of the three syntactic functions: they account for 21%. Though thematic in the underlying noncleft sentence, in the *it*-cleft all these elements operate as the rheme, since the subordinate clause of the *it*-cleft typically presents its content as known, and hence presupposed. Considering these facts, as well as the fact that fronted objects constitute the FSP function of diatheme, not that of the rheme, commutability between a fronted thematic object and an object focused by means of an *it*-cleft appears to be unlikely. This is confirmed by the cleft forms of example (17): (17'a–c).

- (17') a. Pen would have liked to be present at the rendezvous, * but it was this offer that Piers declined.
- b. A: I am the most selfish creature alive. I never do anything to please anyone but myself.
B: *It is that which I know to be untrue.
- c. A: There are things in my life you don't know anything about.
B: Good God, I should hope there were! I've only known you for a month!
A: *And it is some of them that you wouldn't like.

As indicated by the asterisks, the cleft forms are textual misfits. The reasons for the misfit are to be sought in the differences in the FSP structure between the forms with fronted object and the *it*-clefts. In (17) the fronted object constitutes the diatheme, whereas the rheme is implemented by the verb in a. and c., and the object complement in b. On the other hand, in the cleft forms (17'a–c) he diathematic element of the underlying structure becomes the rheme, and the rheme of the underlying structure is backgrounded in the subordinate clause, which presents it as known. Moreover, the cleft constructions involve certain presuppositions which are absent in the particular contexts, and the absence of the presuppositions is reflected in the forms with fronted objects. Thus the cleft form (17'a) presupposes that Piers declined some offer, and the only point in question is which offer. On the other hand the only presupposition of (17a) is that an offer had been made. Similarly in (17'b–c).

Nevertheless, as shown by example (19), the function to give prominence to an element, which fronting and clefting have in common, may occasionally manifest itself in an appropriate context. It is to be noted, however, that the cleft construction in the last clause of (19) does not represent the more common type with given information in the subordinate clause, reflected in its weak stress, but the informative-presupposition cleft with a normally stressed subordinate clause (Prince 1978).

- (19) when I sent that letter, all I was interested in was a leave of absence.
 That's still all I'm interested in. I haven't given any thought to the matter of a contract, and I don't think I'm prepared to think about it right now.
 A leave of absence I asked for, and it's a leave of absence that I want.

Significantly, all elements in the last sentence are contextually bound: the passage is about a leave of absence, and the context preceding the last sentence implies that the speaker has asked for it and wants it. The highlighted elements in both clauses are the verbs. The clause with the fronted object performs its usual function: it serves to give prominence to a contextually bound element, and at the same time leaves the final position to the rheme. The *it*-cleft achieves information focus by the intonation centre on the last word of the subordinate clause. We may even consider the possibility of interchanging the two constructions.

- (19') a. A leave of absence I asked for, and a leave of absence I want.
 b. ?It's a leave of absence that I asked for, and it's a leave of absence that I want.
 c. ?It's a leave of absence that I asked for, and a leave of absence I want.

Even though (19) is presumably preferable to (19'a), the latter impairs neither the FSP structure nor the textual fit. Objections are conceivable on stylistic grounds: repetition of the same structure tends to create a monotonous effect. (19'b, c), as the question marks indicate, appear to be less acceptable. (19'b) tends to be interpreted as an *it*-cleft with a presupposed subordinate clause; hence the only element presented as newsworthy is the focused *leave of absence*, the other relevant component of both the semantic and the information structure being lost. In (19'c) the more emphatic form precedes the less emphatic one. As explained above, whereas the fronted object constitutes the diatheme, the focused element, even in the type with new information in the subordinate clause, implements the rheme, at least within its communicative subfield. Hence a focused element is given more prominence than a fronted one. On the other hand the arrangement in (19), displaying the fronted object in the first clause and the *cleft* in the second, achieves an information climax, which is absent in (19a) and (19b), while (19c) in fact results in an anticlimax.

2. Conclusions

To conclude, the foregoing discussion appears to have shown that the FSP structure of the different syntactic realizations of the second participant in verbal action with the FSP function of theme is more or less differentiated. Consequently, interchangeability is largely ruled out. Clarification of instances in which it is conceivable calls for further study.

Notes

1. Functional sentence perspective is defined as the distribution of degrees of communicative dynamism (CD) over the elements of a sentence. In written language it is determined by the interplay of three factors, linear modification, semantic structure, and contextual boundness (Firbas 1992:10–11).
2. In the Prague school treatment of FSP, the theme and the rheme are defined as elements carrying, respectively, a low and a high degree of CD (Firbas 1992:72–3).
3. Contextual boundness means retrievability of information from the (immediately relevant) preceding context (Firbas 1992:11).
4. Cf. Firbas's discussion of context-independent objects (1992:42 ff.).
5. Communicative dynamism (CD) is defined as "the relative extent to which a linguistic element contributes towards the further development of the communication" (Firbas 1992:8); the degree of CD corresponds to "the variation in communicative value" in Quirk *et al.* (1985:18.3); the degree of CD is also referred to as the information load, or newsworthiness, of a linguistic element in a sentence. By basic distribution of CD is meant a linear arrangement which displays a gradual rise in CD (Firbas 1992:10), i.e. the order Theme–Transition–Rheme. Basic distribution of CD is comparable to the principle of end focus as presented in Quirk *et al.* (1985:18.3), and with the concept of systemic ordering in Sgall *et al.* (1986:3.13).
6. Cf. Firbas's setting (1992:49 ff.).
7. Agents taking lexically determined prepositions other than *by* (*be worried about, interested in, etc.*), cf. (Svartvik 1966:102–4).
8. For the concept of the presentation scale, see Firbas (1992:66 ff.). This scale typically contains an active intransitive verb of appearance or existence on the scene with the first participant constituting the rheme. The different syntactic forms of the presentation scale and their differentiation are treated in Dušková (1998).
9. The most dynamic element in the rhematic section (cf. Firbas 1991:71–2).
10. The least dynamic element in the thematic section (cf. Firbas 1992:80–1, and Svoboda 1983).
11. The examples preserve the punctuation as found in the source, i. e. where the excerpt is a medial clause of a sentence it has no final punctuation mark and the first word is not capitalized.

12. The most dynamic element in the thematic section (cf. Svoboda 1981 and 1983).
13. Where the context is needed, it is added in square brackets.

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