

SYNTACTIC FORMS OF THE PRESENTATION SCALE AND THEIR DIFFERENTIATION

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0. The present paper is concerned with the different syntactic constructions in which the first participant in verbal action has the FSP function of rheme. In context-independent sentences this configuration is primarily found in sentences realizing the presentation scale (in Firbas's terminology, cf. 1992: 66–69, 109–110, 134–140), i.e. in sentences with verbs of existence or appearance which present a phenomenon on the scene. There being only one participant in verbal action, it is syntactically construed as the subject. However, expression of this semantic content is not confined to just one realization form in English, which raises the question to what extent the variant realization forms of the presentation scale are interchangeable or differentiated, and, in the latter case, in which respects.

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 obtain a textually homogeneous sample, attention was paid only to the authors' monologue, i.e. direct speech was excluded on account 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).

The frequency of occurrence of the presentation scale appears to be relatively low: 88 instances within the total of 1 500 clauses, i.e. 5.09%. In the following discussion the relative frequency of occurrence of the different realization forms of the presentation scale is considered within the subset of the 88 instances of the presentation scale.

1.1 The most frequent realization of the presentation scale is the existential construction (39 instances, 43.3%), followed by rhematic subject in preverbal position (28 instances, 31.7%), inversion with postverbal placement of the subject (12 instances, 13.6%), and the configuration of a semantically adverbial

element construed as the subject (the scene) with the phenomenon appearing on the scene construed as the object (9 instances, 10.2%).

The existential construction indicates the rheme by its postverbal placement after existential *be*, preceded by *there*.

(1) There were few alterations (OS 345)

Adverbials as a rule operate as a setting (i.e. an element with a low degree of communicative dynamism (CD)¹ within the thematic section, cf. Firbas 1992: 49–51), whether in initial or final position.

(2) there was nothing alarming there (Adams 15)

(3) here there was a delay (Adams 19)

The construction displays basic distribution¹ of CD if the scene-setting adverbial appears initially, as in (3). However, final placement is more frequent, and then the rheme is followed by the diatheme.² This is occasionally avoided by a deviation from grammatical word order, as in (4):

(4) There was about the place that dead silence indicative of an untenanted house.

In my corpus, scene-setting adverbials were mostly found in final position (16 final as against 9 initial adverbials; it is to be noted that while final adverbials were all locative, of the initial adverbials three were conjuncts, five were place adjuncts and one time adjunct). With one exception, where the final adverbial is given prominence by means of a focalizer,³ all final adverbials are thematic. Ex (5) shows that where the final adverbial belongs to the rheme, it has to be reinforced by a focalizer.

(5) At this height there was no risk of prying eyes even from the top desks of buses (OS 340)

With an initial adverbial *there* is optional, and if omitted, the resulting construction displays the pattern Adv – V – S, as in (6), (7) and (8) a.

(6) Behind the ornaments were two coloured photographs. (James 341)

(7) At the top of the bank ... was a little group of holes [almost hidden by brambles] (Adams 15–16)

(8) a. Across the street is a grocery. (Bolinger 93)

(8) b. Across the street there's a grocery. (Bolinger 93)

Although the two constructions may be used interchangeably as a stylistic device avoiding reiteration of the same structure, as in (9),

(9) In the top drawer of the desk there was a file labelled investments... In another file was a copy of her will. (OS 347)

according to Bolinger (1977: 93–94) "the first [(8) a.] presents something on the immediate stage (brings something literally or figuratively before our presence), whereas the second [(8) b.] presents something to our minds (brings a piece of knowledge into consciousness." According to Quirk et al. (1985: 18.50) "there is a tendency to omit *there* where the noun phrase is definite or relatively concrete and specific." This difference presumably applies where the existential construction or the construction with inversion is used in isolation, but in a longer description which consists of sentences presenting objects on the scene, different realizations of the presentation scale tend to occur side by side largely as a stylistic device. This is also evident with verbs of appearance or existence on the scene other than *be*.

1.2 In contrast to *there + be*, with verbs other than *be* the use of *there* is distinctly formal (literary) and rare (of the 39 instances altogether 4 occurrences (with *seem*, *come out*, *survive* and *exist*), i.e. 10%).

(10) indeed there still survives the unkind saying of one of them ['that little Richards have long ears'.] (Rav 120)

After integrated initial adverbials it is again optional.

(11) A hundred yards away, at the bottom of the slope, ran the brook, no more than three feet wide...(Adams 15)

1.3 Apart from sentences with inverted word order, appearance on the scene realized by verbs other than *be* is implemented by clauses with regular word order, i.e. with rhematic subject in initial position. This arrangement displays a major deviation from the basic distribution of CD, with rheme at the beginning and theme, if there is a scene-setting adverbial, at the end.

(12) [any small concavity in the grass] where moisture may collect (Adams 29)

Since the representation of the structures discussed in this section is not sufficiently illustrative in my corpus, I include examples collected variously from other fiction.

(13) At the bottom of the blackness in front of them a line of light appeared.

(14) A noise, a sort of low growl, came from the waterfall.

As shown by (13) and (14), the position of the scene-setting adverbial is again mobile. Where it stands at the beginning, as in (13), at least this element occupies a position consistent with its degree of CD. On the other hand in final position, as in (14), it contributes to a complete reversal of the basic distribution, the linear arrangement being rheme – transition – theme. Here the FSP is primarily indicated by semantic structure; contextual boundness or nonboundness of a scene-setting adverbial, where present, does not play a role. All instances contain a context-

-independent subject, and a verb of appearance or existence on the scene (or a verb implying this meaning), which is less dynamic than the context-independent subject. On the whole, final placement of a scene-setting adverbial appears to be the more common (10 as against 3 instances, disregarding 3 adverbials in initial position due to relativization). It is to be noted that the realization of the presentation scale by means of a rhematic subject in initial position + verb of appearance or existence on the scene borders on clauses with rhematic subject and thematic object where the borderline between object and adverbial is not clear-cut. Thus the examples in (15) will largely be regarded as the realization of the presentation scale.

- (15) a. A small sigh escaped Fanny here.
b. A kind of stillness seemed to have fallen on the house.
c. A chill of horror swept over her.

On the other hand the examples in (16), though very similar, should duly be treated under thematic objects.

- (16) a. A faint cold hand touched her heart.
b. An intolerable weight burdened his spirit.
c. A sensation of vast loneliness possessed him [and this was replaced by a twinge of fear].

1.4 To complete the picture, mention should be made of the presentation scale realized by the passive, both with a rhematic subject alone and with *there* preceding it. Although in this case the subject is not the first, but the second participant in verbal action, the structure as a whole clearly implements the presentation scale in that it introduces a phenomenon on the scene, the nature of the presentation scale being compatible with introducing into discourse phenomena of any semantic role. Cf. exx (17) – (19).

- (17) Near one of the posts, a hammer and a few nails had been left behind.
(Adams 18)

(18) There, a curiosity had been aroused in his mind.

(19) At the moment of his departure a telegram was handed to him.

The rhematic function of the subject is due not only to its context-independence, but also to the semantics of the verb, which implies appearance on the scene, and to contextual boundness of the adverbial element(s).

The passive presentation scale is also found with existential *there*, as in (20), or with subject – verb inversion, as in (21) and (22). Ex (21) moreover contains a fronted participle, which is the only possible arrangement in the absence of existential *there* or an initial adverbial.

- (20) There were exhumed at least a dozen corpses. (Bolinger 97)
 (21) Exhumed were at least a dozen corpses. (Bolinger 96)
 (22) To uneasiness was added a strong sense of guilt.
 (23) [What a desk it was ... Its top was a single sheet of heavy glass...] Under it could be seen posters of films that must have achieved some special honour.

The passive with existential *there* is of special interest in that the two constructions normally indicate different FSP functions: insofar as the passive serves to achieve basic distribution of CD, the subject is thematic (cf. Dušková 1971). Existential *there*, on the other hand, indicates a rhematic subject, which is moved to postverbal position (cf. Dušková 1977). Hence the appearance of both the passive and *there* side by side in one clause, as in (20), may at first sight seem contradictory until it is realized that the syntactic form is a mere surface structure implementing a deeper semantic structure – in this case the presentation scale: optional scene – verb of appearance – phenomenon appearing on the scene.

The four variants of the passive presentation scale presumably differ in their degree of markedness. Even though they are all formal and literary, the least marked form appears to be that with the rhematic subject in preverbal position, as in (17) – (19), insofar as it conforms to the rules of English word order. Next comes the variant with *there* (20), the forms with inversion being greatly confined both stylistically (with respect to register) and contextually. These assumptions should be verified by further studies.

1.5 The last construction to be mentioned is the structure illustrated by (24).

- (24) a. This road carries a lot of traffic.
 b. There is a lot of traffic on this road.
 c. On this road there is a lot of traffic.

Although the presentation scale is here obscured by a transitive construction with thematic subject and rhematic object, it is revealed by both the semantic role and the FSP function of the subject, as well as by the b. and c. versions, which present the content by means of the existential construction. Here the scene-setting nature of the subject (the theme) finds expression in adverbial construction, while the phenomenon appearing on the scene (the rheme) assumes the syntactic function of subject.

2. In continuous texts the different realization forms of the presentation scale may be found as stylistic variants serving to avoid repetition of the same structure, cf. (25) and (26):

(25) We found ourselves in what had once been a saloon bar. The bar itself was of solid mahogany but sadly stained by bleached rings where glasses had stood. Round it ran a footrest apparently made of green verdigris. There were one or two stools with legs of uneven length and seats polished by generations of rustic posteriors. Behind the bar a few shelves held dusty bottles half full of unlikely liqueurs.

(26) In front of the house there was a circular drive. ...In the centre of this stood a rickety post from which an inn sign still swung.

However, seen from the language system point of view, the different realization forms of the presentation scale appear to be distinguished by their degree of markedness, defined on the one hand by deviation from the word order rules, and on the other by deviation from the basic distribution of CD (or the principle of end focus), which seems to be a general principle of the linear arrangement of the information structure. The unmarked or marked character of a particular structure may be reflected in its stylistic characteristics (stylistically neutral as against carrying stylistic connotations), which evidently also derive from the distribution of the particular structure in different texts.

Two of the active realization forms conform to both the word order rules and the basic distribution of CD: the existential construction (cf. 1.1) and the structure illustrated by (24) a. The former partly deviates from the basic distribution of CD in having the scene-setting adverbial mostly at the end, but then a thematic element in the post-intonation-centre shade (cf. Firbas 1980) is a fairly common feature of Modern English prosody. It is found in other structures apart from the presentation scale. The actual distribution of these two structures in texts, however, confirms the neutral character of the existential construction alone. The existential construction is found in all kinds of texts, and as shown by the data obtained from the three samples under study, ranks highest among the different realizations of the presentation scale (43.3%). The structure illustrated by (24) a. (10.2%) appears to be more characteristic of written texts, the realization form used in informal speech being largely again the existential construction.

The remaining forms are all more or less marked. The realization form with the rhematic subject in initial position conforms to the word order rules, but the information structure is presented in reversed order: rheme – transition – theme. Nevertheless, according to statistical data (the second most frequent structure, accounting for 31.7% of the realization forms of the presentation scale), English appears to tolerate deviations from the basic distribution of CD more readily than

those from the word order rules. Hence with respect to its degree of markedness, this realization form probably ranks next to the existential construction and the structure (24) a.

The realization form with the subject in final position and inverted word order is marked with respect to the word order rules, even though it conforms to the basic distribution of CD. It carries the stylistic connotation of a descriptive passage included in a longer text. Considering that English appears to tolerate deviations from the basic distribution of CD more readily than those from the word order rules, this realization form (Adv – V – S_{rheme}) probably ranks higher on the scale of markedness than the form with initial rhematic subject (this is supported by statistical data, 13.6 % and 31.7% of the different realization forms, respectively).

The remaining realization forms, the passive presentation scale and *there* with verbs other than *be*, presumably rank at the top of the markedness scale, even though not so much on account of their degree of deviance as owing to their rare occurrence, which assigns them to the periphery of the forms realizing the presentation scale. Stylistically, they connote formal writing, presumably fiction rather than informative prose. However, these conjectures, as well as the conclusions drawn above, call for further research.

Notes

¹ 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, theme and rheme being defined as elements carrying, respectively, a low and a high degree of CD (Firbas 1992: 72–73). 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).

² The most dynamic element within the thematic section, see Firbas (1992:79–81) and Svoboda (1981).

³ Focusing subjunct in Quirk et al. (1985: 8.116).

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Libuše Dušková: SYNTAKTICKÉ FORMY PREZENTAČNÍ ŠKÁLY A JEJICH DIFERENCIACE

Článek se zabývá syntaktickými konstrukcemi, v nichž má první účastník slovesného děje aktuálněčlenskou funkci rématu. V kontextově nezávislých větách se tato konfigurace vyskytuje především v konstrukcích realizujících prezentační škálu, které obsahují jediného účastníka slovesného děje syntakticky ztvárněného jako podmět. Empirický výzkum ukazuje, že nejčastější formou prezentační škály je existenciální konstrukce. Forma s inverzí a postverbálním postavením podmětu je méně častá, stejně tak existenciální *there* s jinými slovesy než *be*. Vedle těchto forem se vyskytuje rématický podmět v preverbální pozici a konstrukce uvádějící jev na scénu v syntaktické funkci předmětu v konfiguraci s podmětem, který sémanticky realizuje scénu. Diferenciace těchto konstrukcí je posuzována na základě jejich stupně příznakovosti, definované mírou odchylky jak od gramatických pravidel anglického slovosledu, tak od základního rozložení výpovědní dynamičnosti.