

UNIT 8

THEMATIC AND INFORMATION STRUCTURES OF THE CLAUSE

In the processing and receiving of information, whether written or spoken, lexical choice and grammatical organisation have an important role.

In the following examples, all sentences express the same message, but do so in a variety of ways, using a variety of grammatical devices:

George gave Jill a diamond ring.

It was a diamond ring that George gave Jill.

It was George who gave Jill a diamond ring.

Jill received a diamond ring from George.

Jill was given a diamond ring by George.

What Jill received was a diamond ring from George.

What happened to Jill was that she got a diamond ring from George.

etc.

The truth value of the examples above is fundamentally unchanged, but the presentation is very different. The utterances have been put to a communicative context highlighting the aspect that is communicatively effective. In other words, the messages were reorganised to achieve a particular communicative purpose. In order to achieve it, the grammar of English allows us to express the same message in a variety of ways according to:

- * what is suitable in the context
- * what we believe our addressee already knows
- * what parts of our message we want to draw attention to

8.1 THEME AND EMPHASIS

In English, there is a tendency for the constituent (the phrase) which identifies the main topic to come at the beginning of the clause or sentence. The initial constituent, technically called the **theme**, serves, as Halliday puts it, as “. . . **the point of departure for the rest of the message.**” It announces what the sentence is about. It is realized in English by the first or initial clause constituent, and the rest of the message constitutes the **rheme**. Together, **theme** and **rheme** are the elements which make up the functional configuration of the clause message.

Theme	Rheme
<i>I</i>	<i>can't stand the noise.</i>
<i>His car</i>	<i>was stolen last night.</i>
<i>Who is missing</i>	<i>is John.</i>

The choice of theme is important because it represents the angle from which the speaker projects his/her message, and partially conditions how the message develops. The initial element

acts as a signal to the hearer, directing expectations regarding the structure that is likely to follow, or about the mental representation of what the message is likely to be. Choice of the theme may be influenced by the speaker/writer's assumptions about what is known by the hearer, or by what presuppositions are current in the discourse. For example, the sentence *It is John who is missing*. seems to presuppose a shared belief that someone is missing and goes on to *identify that person*. The theme may also establish a link with what has gone before in the discourse and it helps push the message forward, thus contributing to the cohesiveness of the text.

Theme is to be distinguished from **subject** and **topic**.

- **Theme**, as mentioned before, is an element of the **thematic structure**, of which the other element is rheme.
- **Subject** is a **syntactic element** of clause structure, of which the other elements are predicate, objects, complements, etc. Quite often theme coincides with subject but by no means always. The two are distinct concepts.
- **Topic**, as we see it, is a **discourse category** representing the notion 'what the text, or part of the text, is about'. Topics are often maintained in the discourse through anaphoric reference. They can be reactivated into the discourse through such expressions as: *as regards, as for, what about, now*. Topics may coincide with theme but again not always. Often topics are pushed to end position in the clause.

The grammar of English, then, is generous in allowing us a set of options for packaging the information in a message in a way best suited to the needs of the hearer/listener in a particular context.

Listed below are a number of **grammatical devices** available in English for reordering the information in a message. These are called **Thematic Systems of the Clause** or, more informally, as **special purpose clauses**.

1/ **Thematic Re-ordering**

Fronting: *Her friend I didn't like.*

Postponement: *Under the table lay a dirty old sock.*

2/ **Subject-Complement Switching**

Here comes the bus.

3/ **Passives (passivization)**

He was questioned by the police.

4/ **Extraposition**

It was obvious that we had been misled.

5/ **Existential 'There'**

There were some children playing in the street.

6/ **Clefting**

Cleft Sentences:

It was Wimbledon that beat Liverpool in the 1988 Cup Final.

It was in the 1988 Cup Final that Wimbledon beat Liverpool.

Pseudo-cleft Sentences:

What he needs is a cholera vaccination.

Normally we would prefer b/ because *'Ikea'* is the new information and *'They'* (=the chairs) is given, having already been mentioned. The use of the passive construction allows us to organise information to conform with the Given-New Principle.

8.2.2 THE PRINCIPLE OF CLAUSE-INITIAL TOPIC (TOPIC PRESERVATION)

As it was mentioned above in 7.1.1, what comes first in a clause is thus of considerable importance since it indicates what the sentence is about.

'Michael married Liz' is mainly about Michael, whereas

'Liz married Michael' is mainly about Liz.

In written language, we often like sentences in the same paragraph to have a similar **theme** to signal that they are about the same topic, and to bind the paragraph together. The initial item in a sentence, then, often has a **topic preserving function**. For example, in a narrative we have the initial sentence:

'The Prime Minister stepped off the plane.'

We might continue in one of two (or more) ways as follows:

a/ *'She was immediately surrounded by journalists.'*

b/ *'Journalists immediately surrounded her.'*

Both are grammatically possible, but the passive sentence a/ would normally be preferred because: - it allows us to maintain the Prime Minister as the topic (*'she'* is the 'theme') and
- it also conforms to the Given-New Principle.

So, in this case the grammatical device of passivisation is employed for discourse reasons.

8.2.3 THE PRINCIPLE OF END-WEIGHT

In English, there is a preference for placing long, complex, 'heavy' constituents towards the end of the clause because in this position they seem easier to understand or process. Very complex or long noun phrases in subject position are disliked, as are very short light phrases in post-verbal position.

a/ *It is annoying that he changed the time of the meeting without telling us.*

b/ *That he changed the time of the meeting without telling us is annoying.*

In most instances sentence a/ would be preferred to sentence b/. The reason for this is that sentence b/ has a very long, complex noun clause in subject position and a very short predicate after the verb. The extraposition construction in a/, however, allows us to move the long, complex noun clause to the end of the sentence and thus makes the whole sentence easier to process.

The mentioned three general discourse 'principles' dictate a preferred sequence of information, and hence the selection of a grammatical structure permitting that sequence.

8.3 MOTIVATION FOR THE SELECTION OF PARTICULAR THEMATIC CONSTRUCTIONS

Messages are organised units of information. When a speaker structures a message, the information is processed into units and ordered in such a way as to produce the kind of message that is desired. As well as variations produced by phonological means, several syntactic alternatives exist for arranging information into a series of alternative messages. The following variations on clause patterns depend upon a range of structural, semantic, pragmatic, and textual factors.

8.3.1 THEMATIC RE-ORDERING AND SUBJECT-COMPLEMENT SWITCHING

Theme is a meaningful choice and, as in other parts of the grammar, speakers can choose between a **marked** and **unmarked** option. **Unmarked theme** coincides with the first constituent of each mood structure (subject in declarative, operator + subject or wh-element in interrogative, finite verb or let in imperative). The starting point of the clause is the expected one, the one that announces the mood type of the clause. Theme is **marked** when any other element of structure but the expected one is brought to initial position. **THEMATIC RE-ORDERING** takes two forms. When a clause constituent is moved to the front of the clause, this is called:

• **Thematic Fronting**

It made him very angry. → *Very angry it made him.*

He is not hardworking. → *Hardworking he is not.*

The main discourse functions of fronting are:

- organising information flow to achieve cohesion (link with the preceding discourse)
- expressing contrast
- enabling particular elements to gain emphasis

Fronting is often accompanied by *inversion* (see 7.3.1.1 below)

Another form of re-ordering is:

• **Postponement**

The disappearance of the TV is even more worrying.

→ *Even more worrying is the disappearance of TV.*

SUBJECT-COMPLEMENT SWITCHING also takes two forms which are illustrated in the following examples:

• **Subject-verb inversion**, where the subject is preceded by the entire verb phrase.

The runners went off like the wind. → *Off like the wind went the runners.*

The rain came down. → *Down came the rain.*

Subject-verb inversion may occur if the verb phrase is a single intransitive verb of position (*be, stand, lie*) or a verb of motion (*come, go fall*).

Subject-verb inversion does not take place with fronted topic when the subject is a personal pronoun: *Here it is.* ~~*Here is it.*~~

Away they go. ~~*Away go they.*~~

▪ **Subject-operator inversion**, where the subject is preceded by the operator rather than by the main verb or a full verb phrase. As in independent interrogative clauses, the auxiliary *do* is inserted if there is no other verb that can serve as operator.

They are even less understood, and their effect recognized by the designer.

→ *Even less are they understood, and their effect recognized by the designer*

Subject operator inversion is found after opening **negative or restrictive coordinators** or **adverbials**, such as: *neither, nor, never, nowhere, on no condition, not only, hardly, no sooner, rarely, scarcely, seldom, little, less, only.*

I have never seen this picture. → *Never have I seen this picture.*

Rarely does he stay at home after dinner.

Only later did they realise how difficult it was.

Subject-complement switching and thematic re-ordering typically have the effect of **moving an element of the clause to the front**, thereby giving it **topic status**, a special prominence. The fronted element may then become:

- an **emphatic topic**

In informal conversation it is quite common for a speaker to front an element (particularly complement) and to give it nuclear stress, thus giving it double emphasis:

Her friend I didn't like.

Joe his name is.

It is as if the speaker says the most important thing in his mind first. The ordering of the elements here is OSV, CSV instead of normal order SVO and SVC.

- a **contrastive topic**

Here fronting helps to point dramatically to a contrast between two things mentioned in neighbouring sentences or clauses:

Clever he is, hardworking he's not.

The fronting of the adjective emphasises the contrast between these two personal characteristics.

- a **given topic**

Is found in more formal, especially written English:

This subject I spoke about in an earlier lecture. (topic = object)

'This subject' is fronted because it is 'given' information. It also allows a more important idea to fall into final position and receive end-focus. The fronting here is more negative – the less important idea is shifted to the front so that end-focus can fall on another, more important idea. The word *this/these* is often present in the fronted topic, showing that it contains given information.

We shall not normally consider an initial adverbial to be 'fronted topic' because most adverbials can occur freely in front of the subject. *Yesterday John was late for school.* But some adverbials

which are closely connected with the verb, such as those of *manner and direction*, do not usually occur in front position. These may be said to be ‘fronted’ for special purpose in clauses like:

Willingly he will never do it.

Into the smoke we plunged.

8.3.2 PASSIVIZATION

Another example of a grammatical process which changes the position of elements in the sentence is the rule of forming passive sentences. The passive is often selected in preference to an active sentence for discourse or thematic reasons. It may allow us, for example, **to place given information before new** as in the following exchange:

A: ‘Who made this pullover?’

B: *(It was made by)* **my Granny.**’ not ‘My Granny made it.’

The passive gives the sentence end-focus, where the active would not. The passive may also permit the preservation of topic across sentences as the following example shows

The teacher entered the classroom. He was greeted by the pupils.

not *The pupils greeted him.*

A further important reason for selecting the passive construction is that it allows us to omit the agent because:

- **the agent is unknown**

Manuela was asked a difficult question.

- **the agent is irrelevant or unimportant**

Rice is grown mostly in Asia.

- we want to be impersonal or **avoid attributing responsibility**

The delay is regretted.

8.3.3 EXTRAPOSITION

Extraposition is a kind of postponement which involves the replacement of the postponed element by a substitute form. It operates almost exclusively on subordinate clauses.

The main reason for adopting extraposition is that it **allows us to move long, subordinate clauses (acting as subject) into final position** and thereby keep faithful to the principle of **end-weight**. The subject is moved to the end of the sentence, and the normal subject position is filled by the **anticipatory** pronoun *it*. The resulting sentence thus contains two subjects, which we may identify as the **extraposed subject** (the real subject) and the **anticipatory subject (it)**:

To hear him say that surprised me.

It surprised me to hear him say that.

That he had lost the way was obvious.

It was obvious that we had lost the way.

When the object is a long and complex phrase, final placement **for end-focus or end-weight** is possible in SVOC and SVOA clause types. This doesn’t involve an IT- substitution:

*They pronounced **every one of the accused** guilty.*

S V O C

*They pronounced guilty **every one of the accused**.*

S V C O

- A less important reason for adopting extraposition is that when it is combined with passivisation it allows us **to avoid mentioning the agent** of the source of our information.

*It is believed **that he is involved in the scandal**.*

- When the information in the subordinate clause is **given**, then an unmarked (normal) construction may be preferred over an extraposed one:

***That he has an alibi** is not surprising.*

In this case it may already be known that he has an alibi. So, given information is placed before new.

8.3.4 EXISTENTIAL “THERE”

The main use of existential ‘there’ construction is that it allows a noun phrase containing **new information to be moved out of subject position and placed nearer the end of the clause**.

***Some friends of ours** are waiting outside.*

*There are **some friends of ours** waiting outside.*

***A policeman** is regulating the traffic.*

*There is **a policeman** regulating the traffic.*

In existential constructions the noun phrase that follows the verb is usually indefinite and very rarely definite. This is because existential clauses normally announce the existence of something **previously unknown** to the hearer, and unknown entities are normally referred to by means of indefinite expressions.

8.3.4.1 EXISTENTIAL SENTENCES WITH RELATIVE CLAUSES

An additional type of existential sentence consists of **there + be + NP + relative clause**:

***Two students** would like to see you.*

*There are **two students** that/who would like to see you.*

We can have different tenses in the two parts of the sentence.

***Some planets** were discovered by the ancients.*

***There are some planets** that **were** discovered by the ancients.*

The existential there with a relative construction is particularly common as a means of **emphasising a negative**.

*I can do **nothing** about it. → **There’s nothing** (that) I can do about it.*

8.3.5 CLEFT SENTENCES

The cleft construction is used **to emphasise a particular part of the sentence**. It has an effect of drawing special attention to or highlighting the complement of the verb 'be'. This involves the division of the sentence into two clauses, each with its own verb. There are two major types of cleft-constructions: **it- clefts** and **wh- clefts**. The extra focused element normally appears early in *it-* clefts and late in *wh-* clefts.

8.3.5.1 IT- CLEFTS

The first sentence begins with **It + be** (optionally followed by *not* or *only*) and the second is like a relative clause beginning with **that**. The specially focused element may be a noun phrase, a prepositional phrase, an adverb phrase, or an adverbial clause. The content of the second clause is de-emphasised because it is assumed to be known to the hearer.

It was his voice that held me.

It was only for her excellent performance that they enjoyed the concert.

It is here that the finite element analysis comes into its own.

It was because they were frightened, he thought, that they had grown so small.

In speech the highlighted element carries the main stress and the content of the relative clause is only lightly stressed. The second clause is difficult to classify, using 'that' it resembles relative or nominal clauses but in fact they are not.

8.3.5.2 WH- CLEFTS

The *wh*-type cleft sentence is called **pseudo-cleft**. The pseudo-cleft sentence has an effect of **drawing special attention to the complement of the verb 'be'**. This element is highlighted because it is the new information or the most interesting one. The pseudo-cleft sentence occurs more typically with the **wh-clause** as subject.

Wh- clefts are less flexible than *it*-clefts in that they cannot be used to focus on a prepositional phrase, an adverb phrase, or an adverbial clause. A *wh*-cleft sentence is introduced by a **wh**-word, usually **what** (which its own point of focus, typically at its end) + **be + the focused element** (a noun phrase, an infinitive clause, or a finite nominal clause).

What I really need is another credit card.

What he did was to go to Holy Trinity Church.

What they will be hoping for is that they can get a few weeks of holiday.

Often the highlighted element in a cleft or pseudo-cleft sentence is said to be in **contrastive focus** with something that has been said previously.

*'Oh, I think the cat needs **a rest**.'*

*'No, **what** the cat needs is **a little milk**.'*

The words 'a little milk' contrast with what has been previously said or assumed. The cleft construction achieves in writing what stress achieves in speech.

Pseudo-cleft sentences permit marked focus to fall on the predication. The information in the subordinate clause (introduced by 'what') loses its emphasis either because it is already known or because it is relatively uninteresting.

Clauses introduced by **where** and **when** are sometimes acceptable, but mainly when the *wh*-clause is subject complement.

*Here is **where the accident took place.***

*In autumn is **when the countryside is most beautiful.***

- The *wh*-cleft may be followed by 'be'

What he wanted was exercise.

- The *wh*-cleft may follow 'be'

Exercise is what he wanted.

- If 'do' is used in the *wh* -clause, then the focus can be on the verb or predicate. The verb is usually an *infinitive*, though the *ing*- form is possible to balance 'doing':

What he did was to drive a racing car.

What he was doing was driving a racing car.

Wh-clefts are straightforward *nominal clauses* functioning as subject or complement. **It-cleft sentences** are to be contrasted with sentences with anticipatory 'it'. In anticipatory (introductory) *it*- sentences, 'it' introduces a clause and there is no emphasised clause element to act as focus.

Compare: *It disappointed us that they hadn't invited David to their wedding.* **Extraposed Subj.**
(*That they hadn't invited David to their wedding disappointed us.*)
It was David that/who hadn't been invited to their wedding. **Cleft-sentence**
(~~*That/who hadn't been invited David to their wedding was David.*~~)

EXERCISES 120-126

120. Look at the following sentences and suggest reasons why the speaker/writer has chosen an agentless passive.

1. Two soldiers were wounded last night on patrol in Belfast. _____
2. The concerto was first performed in 1824. _____
3. The President is said to want greater privatisation in the country. _____
4. The specimen was dissected and examined spectoscopically. _____
5. Late entries to the competition cannot be accepted. _____
6. The inconvenience caused to passengers is regretted. _____

121. Match the sentences in column A with those in column B so that they fall into the most suitable pairs.

A

B

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Somebody twisted his ankle on the doorstep. | a/ It was on the doorstep that Ken twisted his ankle. |
| 2. Ken twisted something on the doorstep. | b/ What Ken did was twist his ankle on the doorstep. |
| 3. Something happened to Ken. | c/ It was Ken who twisted his ankle on the doorstep. |
| 4. Ken twisted his ankle on something. | d/ What happened to Ken was his ankle was twisted on the doorstep. |
| 5. Ken did something on the doorstep. | e/ It was his ankle that Ken twisted on the doorstep. |

122. Rewrite the sentences so as to emphasize the words in italics using "It" or "Wh" cleft constructions.

1. An inquest revealed that *poisonous mushrooms* caused his death.
An inquest revealed that _____
2. We need *more time*, not money.
_____, not money.
3. I didn't realize the value of education *until after I left school*.
It wasn't _____ I realized the value of education.
4. The trouble started *when the police arrived*.
_____ the trouble started.
5. John *left* the front door unlocked.
_____ the front door unlocked.
6. Sue borrowed my bike *last night*.
_____ Sue borrowed my bike.

7. He doesn't pass his exams *because he doesn't work hard enough*.

_____ he doesn't pass his exams.

8. *People who push into the queue* really get on my nerves.

_____ is people who push into the queue.

123.

1. Which of the two replies to the question below is preferable?

Who produces these chairs? a/ IKEA produces them.

b/ They are produced by IKEA.

2. Express the same idea in a more appropriate and elegant way.

a/ That the driver succeeded in avoiding the collision with another car was due to luck rather than judgement.

b/ Where the pilot finally managed to land isn't yet known.

c/ To follow what the speaker was saying wasn't at all easy for the audience.

d/ How the company should promote the new product is a matter of disagreement.

3. What is the difference between the following sentences?

a/ What he is doing is reading a book.

b/ What he is reading is a book.

4. Rewrite to emphasize the time.

Steven came home from the party after midnight.

5. You want to convince someone of the truth of your statement. Which of the following sentences is more likely to have a greater effect?

a/ It's true that they got engaged secretly.

b/ That they got engaged secretly is true.

6. Write down the questions to which the following are answers:

a/ Q: _____

A: Fiona wrote her boyfriend a message.

b/ Q: _____

A: Fiona wrote a message to her boyfriend.

7. Rewrite the sentence to emphasize the direction.

The balloon went up into the air.

124. Rewrite each sentence so as to emphasize the underlined words. Each time use the grammatical device indicated in brackets.

1. I've never had such a nice holiday. (S-C switching)

2. The heavy rain on M25 has already caused two accidents. (passive)

3. To talk to one's parents in such a rude way is not acceptable. (extraposition)

4. She doesn't need money. She needs love. (pseudo-cleft)

5. Mr. Jones told us about his experiences in Africa. (cleft)

6. She is pretty, but she is not clever. (fronting)

7. He did not say a word. (S-C switching)

8. They left for holidays on Thursday. (cleft)

9. My friend Kevin has organized the outing. (passive)

10. He drove a car, not a motorbike. (pseudo-cleft)

11. To watch him playing tennis was amazing. (extraposition)

12. Snow has blocked all roads to the north. (passive)

13. I really can't stand lukewarm food. (pseudo-cleft)

14. The runner was so exhausted that he didn't finish the race. (S-C switching)

15. We spent our weekend in the mountains. (cleft)

125. Rewrite the sentences so that they have the same meaning, starting with the words given.

1. The window was broken by a cricket ball.
It _____
2. Einstein proved that energy and mass are basically the same thing.
What _____

3. Getting through the summer without getting injured was the only thing the athlete wanted.
All _____
4. I had to clear the spare room before I could start decorating.
Only when _____
5. Buying a plane ticket at the last minute isn't often possible.
Rarely _____
6. I have never travelled by airbus.
Never _____
7. Tim lost his wallet, and forgot where he had put his car key.
Not only _____
8. The pedestrian cannot be blamed for the accident in any way.
In _____
9. She doesn't know at all what has been going on in her absence.
Little _____
10. The snowfall was so heavy that all the trains had to be cancelled.
So _____
11. If I had known what they were planning, I would have protested.
Had _____
12. It seems strange, but the bus is actually faster than the train.
Strange _____

126. Rewrite each sentence so that it contains the word/s in capitals, and so that the meaning stays the same.

1. I seem to want to do nothing but sleep. ALL

2. It was only when I stopped that I realized something was wrong. DID I

3. It's not common for this region to be so warm in May. SELDOM

4. You are not to leave the lecture under any circumstances. NO

5. Sandra didn't realize how serious problems her husband had. LITTLE

6. I'm sure you enjoyed yourselves at her wedding. MUST

7. It may seem strange, but I don't like ice-cream. AS

8. After posting the letter, I remembered that I had forgotten to put on a stamp. ONLY

9. They are expected to have arrived by now. SHOULD

10. I didn't know where I was before I asked a passer-by. NOT UNTIL

11. I was told about the website by Alex. WHO

12. Listening to such loud music makes me nervous. WHAT
