TOWARDS A COMMUNICATIVE ENGLISH GRAMMAR (2)

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1. Introduction

In this short article, I am going to overview the "Theme-Rheme" perspective[1] in English structures and demonstrate how this notion should be incorporated in a communicative English grammar. First, let us consider the sentences in (1) below :[2]

  (1) a. A halfpenny is the smallest English coin.

    b. The smallest English coin is a halfpenny.

There is a slight, but important difference in meaning between (1a) and (1b). In (1a), 'a halfpenny' can be considered to be 'theme.' (1a) can roughly mean "I'll tell you about a halfpenny. It is the smallest English coin." In contrast, 'the smallest English coins' in (1b) can be considered to be 'theme' and it roughly means "I'll tell you about the smallest English coin. It is a halfpenny." It should be recognized here that these two sentences are different in the choice of 'theme.' This difference can generally be characterized as 'thematic' and it should be identified that (1a) and (1b) are two different messages, although they are almost identical in terms of their cognitive meanings.

Before the end of the article I also suggest that the 'theme-rheme' structures should be closely related to the authenticity in English, or an English-likeness.

2. Theme-Rheme Structure

M. A. K. Halliday (1985) identifies thematic structures as one of the important factors which make up the textual component in English grammar. As we have already seen in the examples in (1), the initial element of a clause or a sentence is called its THEME. The theme is the most important part of a clause in terms of its presentation of a message. The remaining part of a clause is called its RHEME. In (2a), for instance, the noun phrase 'the duke' is

considered to be 'theme' of the sentence and 'gave my aunt that teapot' is considered to be 'rheme':[3]

>   (2) a. The duke/gave my aunt that teapot.
>
>   (Theme)/(Rheme)
>
>   b. I am going to tell you something about the duke ; he gave my aunt
>   that teapot.

The 'theme' is somehow an element semantically crucial to a clause or a sentence. It may, indeed, be characterized as a communicative point of departure for the rest of the clause or the sentence. Furthermore, the 'theme' of a sentence is more likely to represent 'given' or 'old' information than any other part of the sentence. Therefore, the combination between 'theme' and 'old information' is the most unmarked and usual pattern in perspective of communicative dynamism in the English language.

Before we go further into the characterization of the 'theme-rheme' structure, we need to reconsider the notion of the 'subject' in English. How do we identify the subject of a sentence? What is the function of the subject in a sentence? Ultimately we find it quite difficult to try to answer these seemingly simple questions.

Halliday (1985 : 31) roughly postulates the basic notion of the subject as one which consists of a several different features, as shown in (3) :

>   (3) a. Psychological Subject: that which is the concern of the message
>
>   b. Grammatical Subject: that of which something being predicated
>
>   c. Logical Subject: the doer of the action

Particularly, in the traditional framework of English grammar, we tend to use the term 'subject' as indicating the 'grammatical subject' of a sentence. The construction of 'subject' + 'predicate' has been long thought of as a purely formal and grammatical relationship. Moreover, 'logical subject' has been considered to have something to do with the semantic relations between lexical items in a clause or a sentence. However, we tend to fail in noticing that the 'psychological' subject also plays a significant role in the interpretation of a message.

To illustrate these notions, let us consider the examples below :

>   (4) The duke gave my aunt that teapot.
>
>   (5) This teapot my aunt was given by the duke.

In (4), the noun phrase *'the duke'* is realized as the subjects of three different levels, that is, as psychological, grammatical and logical subjects. To put it differently, the three different levels are realized in the same expression, *'the duke'*. In (5), on the other hand, the noun phrase 'this teapot' serves as a psychological subject (that is, theme), the noun phrase *'my aunt'* serves as a grammatical subject and the noun phrase *'the duke'* serves as a logical subject. That is to say, in this case, three different levels of subjects are realized in the three different noun phrases.

However, this kind of labeling seems to be deeply related to the fundamental linguistic notion, and therefore we will not go further into this issue. In this short article, we are going to shed light upon the function as a psychological subject, that is, the function as theme. The basic definition of psychological subject is what the speaker has in mind to start with when embarking on the production of a clause or a sentence. To put it more simple, 'theme' functions as the point of departure of a message or initiation of a message.

In all languages, the clause or sentence has the character of a message. In some languages, in Japanese for instance, 'theme' is announced by means of a kind of particle. In Japanese, there is a special postposition particle ~*wa*, which signifies that whatever immediately precedes it has a thematic interpretation.

In English, the theme is indicated by its position in the clause. In speaking or writing, native speakers of English signal that an item has thematic status by putting it first. Therefore, as a general guide, 'theme' can be identified as that element which come in the first (initial) position in the clause or sentence.

To summarize, 'theme' is the element which serves as the starting point of a message ; it is the element with which the clause is concerned. It is the starting point for the whole message ; figuratively speaking, it is the ground from which the clause or sentence is taking off. Furthermore the remainder of that message, the part in which the theme is developed, is called its 'rheme.' Therefore, a message can be considered to consist of 'theme' combined with 'rheme.'

In some cases, 'theme' is announced explicitly, by means of some expressions, such as *'as for* ~,' *'with regard to* ~,' or *'speaking of* ~':

    (6) a. As for the burglar, he escaped through the attic window.

　　　b. Speaking of my aunt, the duke has given her that teapot.

These expressions are special devices for introducing 'theme.' Usually these devices introduce only nominal 'themes.' And these nominal 'themes' are often picked up later in the clause by an appropriate pronoun, as shown in (6).

Although the noun phrase *the duke* in (4) shows only a normal or unmarked realization of 'theme,' there are many other patterns in terms of theme realization. Now, let us consider the following examples :

　　(7) a. *On the ground* or *in the air* small creatures live and breathe.

　　　　b. *To this list* may be added ten further items of importance.

　　(8) a. *Most of these problems* a computer could take in its stride.

　　　　b. *Really good cocktails* they made at that hotel.

　　(9) a. *Joe* his name is.

　　　　b. *Relaxation* you call it!

　(10) a. *Did* he buy a new house?

　　　　b. *Is* anybody at home?

　(11) a. *Who* killed Cock Robin?

　　　　b. *Which* house did he buy?

　(12) a. *Answer* all five questions!

　　　　b. *Don't leave* any belongings on board the aircraft!

　(13) a. *How cheerfully* he seems to grin!

　　　　b. *What tremendously easy questions* you ask!

The adverbial modifiers (adjuncts) in (7a), '*on the ground*' or '*in the air*' and '*to this list*' in (7b) can be considered to funcion as 'theme.' In (8), the object noun phrases, '*most of these problems*' and '*really good cocktails*' function as theme. In (9), the complement noun phrases, '*Joe*' (the subjective complement) and '*Relaxation*' (objective complement) serve as 'theme.' In (10), the operators in yes-no questions, '*Did*' and '*Is*' serve as 'theme.' In (11), *wh*-elements in *wh*-questions, '*Who*' and '*Which house*,' function as 'theme.' In (12), the main verbs in these imperative sentences, '*Answer*' and '*Don't leave*' can be considered to function as 'theme.' Finally, in (13), *wh*-elements in the exclamatory sentences, '*How cheerfully*' and '*What tremendously easy questions*' function as 'theme.' These are the examples in which 'marked' themes are realized.

In addition, there are some more cases which show 'marked' theme. The examples (14a) and (15a) below are generally called 'pseudo-cleft' sentences. In

these examples, 'theme' is realized by a relative clause beginning with the relative pronoun '*what.*' This type of sentence has a special connotation of 'exclusiveness,' as shown in (14b) and (15b):

(14) a What the duke gave to my aunt was that teapot.

b. I am going to tell you about the duke's gift to my aunt : it was that teapot—nothing else.

(15) a. What we want is plenty of rain.

b. I am going to tell you what we want : it is plenty of rain—nothing else.

Lastly, there is another special or marked case of theme realization called 'left-dislocation.' Let us consider the dialogue in (16):[4]

(16) A : What can you tell me about John?

B : Nothing. But *Bill*, Mary kissed him.

'Left-dislocation' is considered to be the operation which intoduces a new topic into a discourse. In (16), Speaker A has established '*John*' as a topic, while Speaker B is establishing '*Bill*' as a topic, using the 'left-dislocation' structure. In this sense, '*Bill*' in the utterance B is considered as a 'marked' theme.

3. Theme Consistency

In this section, we are going to consider the progression of sentences (discourse structure) which seems to be one of the important factors to determine the selction of 'theme.' The basic question here is ; what aspect of discourse (or passage) is closely related to the choice of theme? In general, a mere sequence of grammatically correct sentences cannot make a natural discourse, as shown in (17) below :[5]

(17) ??John can swim. The president of Russia conversed with our prime minister on the matter of northern territories. See Naples and then die.

The passage (17) is quite meanigless or nonsense. In order to constitue a natural discourse, all the grammatical sentences have to be related to each other in terms of a discourse topic. In other words, it is required that the subject in each sentence should be coherent or consistent with the discourse topic in one sense or another. Otherwise, the progression or the flow of discourse would

somewhat be damaged.

Now, let us compare the examples (18a) and (18b):[6]

(18) a. No one else had known where the entrance to the cave was situated. *The one who discovered the cave* was John.

b. No one else had known where the entrance to the cave was situated. ?*What John discovered* was the cave.

These two passages are different in the choice of the subject noun phrases in the second sentences ; '*The one who discovered the cave*' in (18a) and '*What John discovered*' in (18b). Of course, (18a) is more natural because in the first sentence the 'theme' is '*no one,*' a human being, and not 'where the cave was situated.' Therefore the choice of a human being (*The one...*) as a subject is coherent with the discourse topic. In (18b), this coherence is damaged and results in unnaturalness.

Furthermore, let us consider the following passage from *Time* magazine :[7]

(19) In the long run, **the U. S. Big Three** may be the most dangerous competitors. **American auto makers** were once dismissed by Europeans as the creators of Detroit monster ; **they** were thought to be incapable of selling small cars in the U. S., let alone overseas. But now **they** have been forced by energy-conservation laws to become small-car specialist ... and this time **they** are doing well.

Let us assume that the topic sentence of this paragraph is the first sentence. The subject noun phrase in it is '*the U. S. Big Three.*' That of the second sentence is '*American automakers*'. It would be reasonable to say that the selection of the subject in the second sentence is based on the subject in the first sentence. This subject also functions as the topic of the whole passage. Furthermore, the selection of the subjects in the third, forth, and fifth sentences is made along this line. In other words, we can claim that the choice of subjects in this paragraph is made in order to maintain 'theme' consistency. This leads to the elegant and natural progression of the discourse. Especially in the third sentence, this order gives it a strong motivation to become a passive sentence, not an active sentence.

4. Thematic Structure and Teaching Materials

In this section, I am going to demonstrate how these communicative aspects concerning 'theme' should be applied in the analysis of teaching materials. First, let us compare the passages (20) and (21):[8]

> (20) The stage manager came on with a handkerchief and helped me gather it up. I thought he was going to keep it. *This thought* was conveyed to the audience and increased their laughter, especially when he walked off with it with me anxiously following him.

> (21) The stage manager came on and helped me to gather it up. I thought he was going to keep it. And I made *this thought* known to the audience. So they laughed harder, especially when he walked off with it and I followed him anxiously.

(20) is adopted from the original version and (21) is a rewritten passage from a senior-high textbook. In (20), the subject noun phrase *'this thought'* can be interpreted as 'theme' and it also refers to the content of the preceding sentence. This choice of 'theme' also gives a passive motivation to the following clause elements. In contrast, in (21), *'I'* is selected as 'theme' and the noun phrase *'this thought'* is shifted to an object position. The difference in the choice of 'theme' seems to make the message quite different.

And lastly, let us compare the passages (22) and (23) below :[9]

> (22) Martin wanted to live to see the day when men would put aside their hatred and distrust of each other. He wanted to see his dream of brotherhood come true. He never did. *He was murdered* in Tennessee on April 4th, 1968.

> (23) Martin wanted real human equality. He wanted to see his dream of brotherhood come true. He never did. On April 4th, about dinner time, he was talking with one of his friends on the balcony of his hotel. Suddenly *there was a rifle shot.*

Here again, (22) is from the original version and (23) is a retold version from a senior-high textbook. In (23), the last sentence is rewritten as *there was a rifle shot.* Of course, we can easily understand that this rewriting rhetorically means Martin was murderd. By rewriting this way, however, the passage has lost the consistency in subject selection or, to be more exact, 'thematic

consistency.' In (22), the subjects in the four sentences, which function as 'theme,' are consistent, as in 'Martin=He=He=He.' In fact, such a consistency in 'theme' is often seen in authentic passages. However, if we do not pay much attention to this delicate communicative principle, we tend to make arbitrary rewritings as in (23), and this leads to the damaging of the naturalness which the original passage contains.

5. Summary

In this article, we argued that the 'theme-rheme' structure really plays a significant role in realizing a natural flow of a discourse. In Section 1 and 2, we introduced Halliday's (1985) notion of 'theme-rheme' structure in English and also illustrated its relation to the traditional notion of 'subject' of a sentence. In Section 3, we demonstrated how the 'theme-rheme' perspective in English structures could be applied in the analysis of English discourse or passages. And we also suggested that the 'theme-rheme' structures should be closely related to the authenticity in English, or an English-likeness. In Section 4, we analyzed some of the teaching materials at a senior high level in English textbooks published in Japan and demonstrated that they have certain drawbacks and 'unnaturalness' in terms of 'theme-rheme' structure.

Notes

   [1] The discussion developed in this article is mainly based on the framework suggested in Halliday (1985).
   [2] For further details, see Halliday (1985 : 39).
   [3] Some linguists use the terms Topic-Comment instead of Theme-Rheme. But the Topic-Comment terminology carries rather different connotations. The term 'Topic' usually refers to only one particular kind of Theme ; and it tends to be used as a cover term for two aspects that are functionally distinct, one being that of Theme and the other being that of Given. For further discussion, see Chafe (1970).
   [4] See Rodman (1974 : 440) for further discussion.
   [5] See Yasui (1985 : 49).
   [6] For further information, see Yasui (1985 : 48).
   [7] This passage is from *Unicorn English Reading Course IIB*, Tokyo : Bun-Eido, 1982.
   [8] This passage is from *Unicorn English Reading Course IIB*, Tokyo : Bun-Eido, 1982.

⁹ This passage is from *Mainstream I, The New Comprehensive English Course*, Osaka : Zoshindo, 1988.

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