

Metonymy as a Syntactic Strategy in Assigning Informational Prominence within the Noun Phrase*

ESTHER ROMERO AND BELÉN SORIA
University of Granada

This paper shows how the syntactic strategies in assigning informational prominence in clause structures can be exploited in phrases. The thematic approach to phrases will shed clear light on the marked word order of elements in noun phrase (NP) and on how this allows increasing the degree of prominence of a component in NP. This is a general claim about different thematic strategies in NP which, we will argue, appear in examples of NPs marked by exchange of modifier-head syntactic functions, or by omission and supplantation of the head. We will concentrate on the latter, a case called “referential metonymy”. On the one hand, referential metonymy is better explained if considered as a syntactic strategy in assigning informational prominence and, on the other, it is a good example to illustrate the more general claim of thematization in the NP. These phrasal syntactic strategies are identified as such in context.

Key words: Referential metonymy, informational prominence, noun phrase

Esta comunicación muestra cómo las estrategias sintácticas para asignar prominencia informativa en las estructuras oracionales pueden explotarse en los sintagmas. El estudio del sintagma, desde el punto de vista temático, mostrará un orden marcado de los elementos en algunos sintagmas nominales (SN) y cómo así se aumenta el grado de prominencia de un componente sintagmático. Ésta es una propuesta general acerca de las distintas estrategias de tematización en el SN que, como defenderemos, aparecen en ejemplos de SNs marcados por el intercambio de las funciones sintácticas núcleo-modificador o por omisión y suplantación del núcleo. Nos centraremos en el último tipo de ejemplos, denominados “metonimias referenciales”. Por un lado, la metonimia referencial se explica mejor si se considera como una estrategia sintáctica de asignación de prominencia informativa y, por otro, es un buen ejemplo para ilustrar la propuesta más general de la tematización en el SN. Estas estrategias sintácticas se identifican contextualmente.

Palabras clave: Metonimia referencial, prominencia informativa, sintagma nominal

1. THEMATIZED STRUCTURES

1.1. Assigning informational prominence by means of syntax in clause structure

Most elements of clause structure, certainly the more nuclear elements, have an unmarked position, the position they occupy in basic or kernel clauses. Departures from this unmarked word order can be motivated by illocutionary or thematic factors. In the former case, interrogative or imperative structures which are typically used to convey the illocutionary forces of question and directive respectively both involve a readjustment in the number and position of elements in the clause structure. The examples in (1)

- | | | |
|-----|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| (1) | (a) John has read the book | <i>unmarked</i> |
| | (b) Has John read the book? | <i>marked by interrogative mood</i> |
| | (c) Read the book | <i>marked by imperative mood</i> |

show that there is a rearrangement of elements in the interrogative structure (1b) and an omission of the subject and verb modification in the imperative structure (1c) if compared with the unmarked clause structure above, (1a).

In the case of marked structures motivated by thematic factors, there is not normally any variation if the propositional content of unmarked structures and the propositional content of their thematic variants are compared¹. In addition, their illocutionary potential is also the same. A typical example of this is the active-passive pair as in (2).

- (2) (a) John has read the book *unmarked*
 (b) The book has been read by John *marked by voice*

(2b) would not involve any change in the truth conditions of a potential utterance containing this variant instead of the other. This means that no matter what the context is, if an utterance containing (2a) is true, another utterance whose only difference is that it contains (2b) instead is also true. Nevertheless, the information centre in the two utterances would not be the same, different parts of the message are emphasised in each of the variants. From the point of view of communicative dynamism (Firbas 1957), in (2a) the book is focused and in (2b) it is John. Two thematic variants have the same explicit propositional content but different thematic meanings.

Other examples of thematic systems are found in (3)-(5).

- (3) (a) To teach John is easy
 (b) It is easy to teach John *marked by extraposition*
 (c) John is easy to teach *marked by tough movement*
- (4) (a) John read the book
 (b) It was the book that John read *marked by clefting*
- (5) (a) Ten students are in the library
 (b) There are ten students in the library *marked there construction*

Saying that these systems may have in their appropriate context the same explicit propositional content is not to say that the choice of one or the other is of no communicative significance. The speaker can draw attention to one rather than another aspect of the context as the relevant stimulus for the interpretation of an utterance by means of syntax². We can assign informational prominence on a particular constituent in the clause by a marked syntactic structure.

In the difference between the basic clause and its non-basic thematic variant, one or more of the following grammatical changes are involved: addition, omission and rearrangement. These changes are perceived if the structure of an unmarked form is compared to the structure of a marked form³. For example, in the active-passive pair exemplified in (2) there is a rearrangement of elements which yields a reassignment of grammatical functions since, in the active clause, John is the subject and the book is the object whereas, in the passive, the book is the subject and John is the complement of the preposition which is included by another of the changes, to wit, addition of the preposition “by”. Besides, the verb phrase suffers a modification by means of the auxiliary “be” plus the inflectional morpheme “-en”. In (3), the thematic system provides two possible thematic variants. In (3b), the subject “To teach John” is placed at the end of the clause and its position is syntactically filled by a dummy “it”. In (3c), the object of the subordinate non-finite clause is moved to take on the syntactic function of subject of the matrix clause. In (4b), there is addition (“it”, “be” and “that”) and reordering, that is, the object, which is the highlighted element, has been moved to

an earlier position in the clause which is introduced by a dummy subject and a linking verb. In (5), the subject is postponed to form a part of a noun phrase and its position is taken by an existential “there”, which is a dummy subject as well.

All these examples are typical cases of thematic structures in which the elements have been distributed in a marked way to alter the relative degree of informational prominence in the structures of the clause.

1.2. Assigning informational prominence by means of syntax in noun phrase structure

In the previous examples of thematic structures, we have encountered addition, omission and reordering of elements in clause structure. These changes are also likely to be found in phrases in order to assign informational prominence on a sub-phrasal constituent: phrases can also be marked. We have found two different types of phenomena in which there has been thematization in the noun phrase. Let us take (6) and (7) as representative of the two types:

- (6) (a) That silly lecturer does not say anything interesting
(b) That silly of a lecturer does not say anything interesting
marked by exchange of modifier-head functions

- (7) (a) The customer of the ham sandwich is waiting for his check
(b) The ham sandwich is waiting for his check
marked by omission and supplantation of the head

In (6b), there is a reassignment of grammatical functions of the elements in the phrase structure by which the adjective takes the position of head in the noun phrase and the head of the unmarked noun phrase takes the position of head of the dependent one functioning as modifier. In order for this to become possible, given the rules of syntax, we have to introduce the preposition “of” and the determiner of the dependent noun phrase “a”. The motivation of this thematic structure is typically the reinforcement of an insult.

In (7b), whose normal utterances would be typical examples of referential metonymy, there is also omission and reordering. The notional head of the main noun phrase is omitted and a nominal element included in the restrictive modifier takes its empty position to fill the slot that cannot be left empty from a syntactic point of view. The head is supplanted by this nominal element. As we have seen in other cases such as (3b), (4b) and (5b), even if the subject is postponed, the syntactic slot of subject cannot be left empty and we get an expletive subject. Furthermore, if we compare (3c) and (3a), we see that the subject of the unmarked structure, “to teach John”, is split and part of it, the NP “John”, takes on the position of subject and the rest, “to teach”, is postponed. In both (7b) and (3c) a NP included in a larger subject takes on the position of subject. One of the differences between them concerns the rest of the subject; in (7b) “the customer” is omitted, and in (3c) the infinitive “to teach” is postponed.

In (7b), the omission of part of the unmarked noun phrase is possible because it is well known information for the interlocutors. The fact that the restrictive modifier includes a noun phrase is very convenient because, on the one hand, the syntactic slot is filled and, on the other, it gets prominence. The motivation for this type of marked structures is the assignment of prominence to the new information in the NP. “The ham sandwich” is but a thematized

part of the restrictive modifier that serves to identify the referent of the notional subject of “is waiting for his check”, to wit, the customer of the ham sandwich.

Of course, all these thematic structures are identified as such when they are in context. Their motivation is communicative and pragmatically dependent. For example, we cannot say whether (4) is a case of clefting or not unless we are interpreting one of the utterances including it. If (4) is uttered in the context in which we are pointing to a specific book, “it” would not be an empty subject but a pronoun with exophoric reference to the book and the clause introduced by “that” a relative clause, thus, it is not a cleft sentence. If, on the contrary, it is uttered to indicate who read the book in an emphatic way, it is a case of clefting and has a thematic meaning. Similar examples can be found in cases of metonymy where context is needed for their identification and a pragmatic process for their interpretation, as it is explained in what follows.

2. REFERENTIAL METONYMY AS A SYNTACTIC STRATEGY IN ASSIGNING THEMATIC PROMINENCE IN THE NOUN PHRASE

Examples such as (8), a normal utterance of (7b), and (9)

- (8) [Looking at the ham sandwich customer, a waitress says to another:] The ham sandwich is waiting for his check
- (9) [In a restaurant, a waitress asks another to give the check to several customers that have finished eating and handing her the check of a customer, she utters:] The ham sandwich is at table four

are identified as novel referential metonymies⁴. These identifications are achieved, among other things, by realizing that in both cases there is a marked or abnormal presentation of the information. In (8), the abnormal presentation of the information is noted because the normal interpretation of the predicate, “is waiting for his check”, is incompatible with the normal interpretation of the noun phrase “the ham sandwich” functioning as its subject. There is a failure of function-argument application (Borschev and Partee 2001). In (9), the abnormality is presented by the confrontation between the semantic value of “the ham sandwich” in a possible usual context, and the actual and unusual use of the expression in this specific situation in which interlocutors know that we do not give the bill to a ham sandwich and it is clear that when the waitress uses the expression “the ham sandwich”, she cannot be speaking merely about the ham sandwich in this context. In addition, the identification of metonymies is reached if there is a veiled restricted nominal element functioning as the head of a marked noun phrase. In (8) and (9), “the ham sandwich” is part of the restrictive modifier “of the ham sandwich” that modifies “the customer”, that is, the marked noun phrase is part of the restrictive modifier of a non-textual nominal element. In both cases, the omission of “the customer” makes “the ham sandwich” supplant the function of the unmarked noun phrase, “the customer of the ham sandwich”.

The language reduction that takes place in metonymy is possible because a restrictive modifier forms a part of the description that serves to pick out the referent (Huddleston 1984: 265) and the head of the complete NP is given information. In (8) and (9), the context, waiters speaking about their customers in a restaurant, is essential to reveal that there is a type of entity which constitutes a piece of given information (Halliday 1985: 275) and forms a part of

the non-textual semantic value of the head of a noun phrase. In a restaurant, it is well known that waiters' work consists in serving customers thus, "customer" will be *given information* for the waiters when talking about the goods and services that they have to offer them. When waiters are communicating at work, it is essential for them to pick out the specific customer in order to get him attended. We detect that, in spite of being the notional head of the noun phrase that functions as subject of the sentence, the topic talked about, a customer, does not realize the syntactic function of head of the marked noun phrase. This syntactic function is supplanted by the NP "the ham sandwich", which is new information. However, this expression does not bring about the description of the customer but its identification. "The ham sandwich" is recognized as part of the modifier restricting "customer".

The use of a restrictive modifier is appropriate in a context of discourse when there is more than one entity which can be included in the semantic value of the head of the noun phrase and a modifier is required to distinguish the entity being referred to from other entities of this type. The task of the modifier "of the ham sandwich" is to identify one entity of this set. The key to restrictive modification is that the significant part of what the speaker has to say with a noun phrase that forms part of an utterance is the piece of *relevant* or *new information* included in the semantic value of the restrictive modification. The central element that serves to pick out the referent of the expression "the customer of the ham sandwich" is, in this context, "the ham sandwich" as "the customer of" is given information and, therefore, can be omitted without any problem of recovery.

Once the metonymy is identified, it is interpreted and this requires the pragmatic process of recovery of the content of empty elements in order to complete the description which allows reference assignment; the pragmatic process of the automatic recovery of the non-textual nominal element it is restricting and with which it has an obvious connection. There is a reconstruction so that the content of the empty syntactic element becomes "visible" in the interpretation of the metonymic utterance. In this sense, the result of applying the pragmatic process involved in metonymy has a direct effect in the grammatical structure of this type of utterance, and this serves to show that there is a compelling interaction between grammar and discourse.

If metonymies are interpreted in this way, we can see that the reason why the marked noun phrase refers to an object different from the one it has in a textual use is not, as it is argued in the most extended theories of metonymy (Romero and Soria 2002), that in the metonymic use of designators, they change their meanings but that the designator used metonymically is just part of the modifier of a more complex designator that really refers or denotes. Metonymy does not exploit a transferred meaning. Metonymy is a marked use of language in which there is at least one empty sub-phrasal constituent, a veiled restricted nominal element. The expression "the ham sandwich" keeps its ordinary meaning and denotes or refers to a sandwich but gets thematic prominence by means of the metonymic utterance. Metonymy is but a marked noun phrase in which a part of a restrictive modifier has been thematized.

NOTES

* Research for this work has been supported by the project BFF2003-07141 funded by DGICYT, Spanish Government.

¹ In order to consider cases in which the marked structures motivated by thematic factors show some variation with respect to the propositional content of the unmarked structures, see Huddleston (1984: 437).

² We are aware of the fact that more often than not the element carrying the informational prominence normally carries the intonation nucleus as well. However, in this paper we will be concerned only with the syntactic strategies used in assigning informational prominence without studying the relation between syntax and intonation (Halliday 1985).

³ We are concerned here only with the description of the form of clauses or phrases, not in the mental process of speaking or writing. We are not suggesting that when speakers include one of these thematic expressions, they first formulate in their minds the unmarked variant and then go through some mental operation of reformulating it. We are saying, following Huddleston (1984: 14), that the form of the marked constructions can be conveniently accounted for in terms of their systematic difference from the unmarked constructions.

⁴ Referential metonymies are a type of cases in which the referent of the textual noun phrase does not coincide with the intentional referent of the speaker (Romero and Soria 2002). Utterances such as “it won’t happen while I still breathe”, “she turned pale”, etc. are sometimes considered cases of metonymy. We won’t take into account this type of examples because, as Warren (1999: 121-122) reveals, not all of them are equivalent from a conceptual nor a linguistic point of view. Even if we admitted that both the examples excluded and those considered “referential metonymies” had a common cognitive basis, it can be still defended that within this group there are different types of metonymy that respond to different restrictions and that, linguistically speaking, they behave differently.

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