

- (11) The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange things into different groups depending on their makeup. Of course, one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to lack of facilities that is the next step, otherwise you are pretty well set. It is important not to overdo any particular endeavor. That is, it is better to do few things at once than too many. In the short run this may not seem important, but complication from doing too many can easily arise. A mistake can be expensive as well. The manipulation of the appropriate mechanisms should be self-explanatory, and we need not dwell on it here. At first, the whole procedure will seem complicated. Soon, however, it will become just another facet of life. It is difficult to foresee any end to the necessity for this task in the immediate future, but then one never can tell. }

Their results indicated that the subjects who were provided with the title 'washing clothes' before reading the passage recalled it significantly better than those who were provided with no title, or those who were provided with a title after reading it.

Lastly, how do sentence level theme and discourse level theme interact with each other? There has been widespread speculation that the assignment of lower level themes is a function of the higher level themes. Although this may be true, Kim's (1994) experimental study which separated global theme from local theme showed that their influences on subject assignment in English are both significant and suggested that they, in fact, have separate functions in discourse production.

#### *Foreground and Background: Propositional Centrality*

Like other central discourse notions, the idea of *foreground* versus *background* information in discourse arises from attempts to explain structural alternations in language for which no obvious semantic explanations are apparent. Consider, for example, the paragraph in (12):

- (12) Sample paragraph

It was a calm, peaceful day as the little fish took its daily swim throughout its home territory. Gracefully sliding up to the surface of the water, the little fish is startled by one of its feared enemies – the crab. They stare at each other surprisedly, though the little fish soon realized its danger. Before the little fish could escape unharmed, the crab began to attack frantically, its long claws snapping at any part of the fish. Without thinking twice about it, the fish dashed away from the crab.<sup>6</sup>

The italicized clauses are all dependent adverbial clauses; the bold-faced clauses are all straightforward independent clauses. The critical question is this: what determines whether a given proposition in this fragment shows up as a dependent clause or as an independent clause? The classical

answer, reflected in any of dozens of composition texts, appears simple enough: the more important ideas are found in the independent clauses, the less important and supporting ideas are found in the dependent clauses. And it is this classical idea that is captured and developed in the various treatments of the discourse notion of *foreground* versus *background information*.

The earliest work on foregrounding (Longacre, 1968; 1976a; Grimes, 1975; cf. also Labov and Waletzky, 1967) distinguished *backbone* information from *background* information and employed this distinction to account for syntactic alternations in a number of languages. Longacre (1976a), for example, examined the use of the *waw*-predicate construction in biblical Hebrew. On the surface, there seems to be no semantic difference between clauses with the *waw*-predicate and those without. However, in looking at their distribution in text data, in particular the Flood narrative in the Old Testament, Longacre observed that the subset of clauses with the *waw*-predicate construction formed a coherent abstract of the overall narrative while the remaining clauses did not. Thus, it appeared that the *waw*-predicate construction was used to signal the importance of the clauses forming the backbone of the narrative.

Later work by Hopper (1979) developed the original ideas of Longacre and Grimes. For Hopper, information could be characterized as either foreground or background. Foreground information in narrative discourse includes 'the parts of the narrative belonging to the skeletal structure of the discourse' (1979: 213). Background information is 'the language of supportive material which does not itself relate the main events' (1979: 213). Hopper examined the distribution of foreground and background information in a number of languages, claiming that foreground clauses correlate with both independent clauses and perfective aspect (Hopper, 1979; Hopper and Thompson, 1980). Further, Hopper linked foreground information with the event line of narrative discourse (Hopper, 1979; Labov and Waletzky, 1967). The clauses which relate events falling on the main event line are foreground clauses, while those which do not fall on the main event line are the background ones.

Most work on the foreground-background distinction has been directed at narrative discourse. However, narrative is not the only kind of discourse one's treatment of foregrounding ultimately must deal with. Expository discourse in particular requires a treatment of foregrounding which is not dependent on the notion of event line for its theoretical definition (Jones and Jones, 1979). Tomlin (1984; 1985; 1986) offers a treatment of foregrounding which alleviates the dependence on event line for both theoretical and empirical purposes. In this treatment, foregrounding is viewed as a thematic matter. The centrality of any given proposition in discourse arises from the intersection of the theme of the discourse at that point – the subject matter being developed – and the rhetorical goal of the discourse, whether that goal is to narrate, or describe, or evaluate, and so on.

## Focus Management

The central observation within focus management is that certain concepts and propositions seem to be more novel or unexpected from the listener's viewpoint. In fact, the novel concepts and propositions appear to be the target of the speaker's utterance, that is, what the speaker wishes the listener to specifically add to her mental representation. The key questions are: (1) What makes a concept or proposition more novel? (2) How is the novel concept tied to the developing discourse? (3) What does the speaker do to convey the novelty to the listener? and (4) How does the listener know when to construe a concept or proposition as novel?

One problem is that of the newness of particular pieces of information in the utterance. Generally, each clause contains one element which contains new information. This central new idea is the *focus*. Traditionally, it has been linked with the Prague School notion of *rheme* (as opposed to *theme*) and *newsworthiness* (Mithun, 1987). A second aspect of focus is that the information may not be expected by the listener because it clashes with information that she already has. So, the focus may be the speaker's attempt to get the listener to replace some incorrect information with the correct information. Finally, focus is related to the cognitive notion of prominence or salience. Focus is the information that 'stands out' from other information. If discourse were not like this, in Longacre's words, 'the result [would be] like being presented with a piece of black paper and being told, "This is a picture of black camels crossing black sands at midnight"' (1976b: 10). This unequal prominence of some elements over others is necessary for human cognition. We perceive something when it 'leaps out' from the surrounding area.

### *Focus as Prominence*

The term 'focus' is used by linguists to refer to the resources available to speakers for packaging information in order to make some information stand out for the listener. While thematic management is concerned with how the speaker lets the listener know what information is more central to the discourse, focus management is concerned with how the speaker lets the listener know what in particular she should notice about that central element.

All languages provide speakers with a variety of devices for making some information seem more prominent or significant than other information. In English (as in many other languages), some words can be said with extra stress. For example, consider these sentences:

- (13) I'M not mad at you.  
 (14) I'm not mad at YOU.

In each case, the actual words are the same, but by putting extra stress on different words, slightly different meanings can be conveyed. Sentence (13)

implies that while I'm not mad at anyone, someone else is, in fact, mad at you. On the other hand, (14) implies that I *am* mad at someone, but my anger is not directed towards you. By making one word stand out more than the others, the listener is invited to infer why that particular piece of information is important and contrast it with other possible situations. In these situations, the focused information is said to have a contrastive function.

Intonation is not the only device speakers can use to make certain information stand out to listeners. Languages may also use special constituent orders, morphological markers, or grammatical constructions to make some information more prominent. For example, English has a special structure called a cleft-sentence, which fulfills this function. Cleft-sentences have the form 'It was *X* that *Y*', where *X* is an NP and *Y* is a statement about the referent of the NP. This structure focuses whatever element is in the *X* slot. Whatever is in the *Y* slot is assumed to be true, that is, it is presupposed. Consider the following sentences:

(15) It was Mary that went to the party.

(16) It was the party that Mary went to.

In (15), 'Mary' is the focused information. The speaker presupposes that there was a party and that someone went to it. He or she uses the cleft-sentence to tell the listener to associate the notion 'someone' with the person 'Mary'. This is very different from the structuring of information (16). Here the speaker presupposes that Mary went somewhere. He or she uses this cleft-sentence to tell the listener that the notion of 'somewhere' should be associated with 'the party'.

Another common device for focusing information is to put it in a special position by altering the usual word order of the sentence. Usually, focused elements appear first or last in a sentence where they are more likely to be noticed, rather than being put in the middle. In English, the speaker can move constituents that normally occur at the end of the clause to the beginning in order to make them more prominent. For example, in the sentence

(17) Coffee I like, but tea I don't.

'coffee' and 'tea' have been moved to the beginning of their respective clauses. In that position, they are more salient to the listener and the contrast between them is heightened. This strategy of moving NPs to the first or last position in order to focus them is found over and over again in the world's languages. It probably reflects speakers' intuitive capitalization on universal properties of human cognitive processing in order to meet their discourse goals.

### *Formulations of Focus*

These differences of importance between the elements of a sentence were first characterized by Weil (1887 (1844)). He proposed that the 'focus' of

one sentence is related to the topic (or theme) of the next. His work was followed by the Prague School scholars who were interested in the communicative dynamism of the elements of sentences (Firbas, 1974; Vachek, 1966). Recall that the communicative dynamism of an element is the degree to which it moves the sentence forward. The focus or 'rheme' is the part of the sentence with the highest degree of communicative dynamism, that is the predicate or the comment portion of the sentence or 'what is being said about' the theme. In the Prague School framework, sentences might not have a topic, but every sentence had a focus. If there were no focus, there would not be any information relevant for communication. Thus,

(18) A girl broke a VASE.

has a focus but not a topic/theme, since none of the information has been previously talked about.

Halliday (1967a) elaborated the Prague School work, investigating what he called *information structure*. Like the Prague School scholars, he used ideas of the newness or givenness of information. For Halliday, focus was the new information marked by pitch prominence, while theme was the element expressed in the first position of a sentence. From Halliday's point of view, WH-words ('what', etc.) were themes; this was contrary to the Prague School, which argued that they were focus, but never theme. Also, notice that Halliday's approach does not work for cleft-sentences. In these constructions, the first element is not 'what's being talked about'. Another problem with this approach is that the surface structure of natural languages has both ambiguity and synonymy. That is, a single structure can have more than one meaning (ambiguity), and several structures can have the same meaning (synonymy). Consequently, an element of structure, such as first position, cannot be used directly to define notions of meaning.

Following Halliday's work and later work by Chomsky (1970), the importance of topic and focus in determining the meaning of sentences (that is, their semantic representation) was recognized and accepted by most linguists. It is often assumed that, in many European languages, focus is primarily in the last position. In this position, it need not be marked with stress. When a focused element occurs earlier in the sentence, it receives intonational stress and the NPs which follow it are theme. Other languages use variations of these strategies. For example, in Yagua (Payne, 1992), focused information occurs in the first position in the sentence and is also sometimes repeated in the last position, just in case the listener missed it.

An important contribution to the study of focus was Chafe's (1976) work on the statuses of referents, that is the ideas that nouns within a sentence represent. One status is the 'speaker's assessment of how the addressee is able to process what he is saying against the background of a particular context' (1976: 27). Here, focus has to do with how the message is packaged, that is, how the speaker presents the message to the listener, rather than the content of the message *per se*. The speaker packages messages in different ways, depending on his assessment of the listener's mental state,

that is what she is presently thinking about. Also, the speaker makes judgments about what is important and needs to be emphasized, what has been said in previous discourse, and what the listener already knows.

Chafe investigates focus of contrast (or contrastiveness) as one packaging phenomenon. In English, this is conveyed by high pitch and stress on one element of the sentence. For example, consider the sentence:

(19) RONALD made the hamburgers.

This conveys information that: the speaker knows that, out of a group of possible candidates the listener might be thinking of, Ronald rather than one of the others did it. According to Chafe, in using this construction, (1) the speaker assumes that both the speaker and the listener know that someone made hamburgers (Chafe calls this background knowledge); (2) the speaker assumes that the listener entertains or perhaps actually believes that someone other than Ronald did it; and (3) the speaker asserts that Ronald is the correct someone. Thus, by focusing one element of the sentence, the speaker may directly contradict a previous assertion of the listener. Chafe calls the asserted alternative the 'focus of contrast'. He suggests, as a rule of thumb, that a phrase beginning with the words 'rather than . . .' can felicitously follow the assertion. Chafe argues that focuses of contrast assert the correctness of a particular referent, but the referent itself is *not* new information; the speaker assumes it is already in the mind of the listener. Chafe also permits a single sentence to have more than one focus of contrast. For example, in

(20) RONALD made the HAMBURGERS.

the assertion is that the particular referents have a particular pairing or relationship or role in the event under discussion.

A very useful and detailed discussion of the different types of focus phenomena found in language was presented by Dik (Dik et al., 1981; Dik, 1989). Dik regards focus as a pragmatic function and studies it within the framework of functional grammar. He tries to determine what different categories of focus there must be if we are to account for all the focus phenomena of different languages. Like others, Dik (1978; 1989) contrasts topic and focus:

- 1 *Topic*: the topic presents the entity 'about' which the predication predicates something in the given setting.
- 2 *Focus*: the focus represents what is relatively the most important or salient information in the given setting.

According to Dik, 'A constituent with Focus function presents information bearing upon the difference in pragmatic information between Speaker and Addressee, as estimated by the Speaker' (1978: 149). For example, consider these sentences:

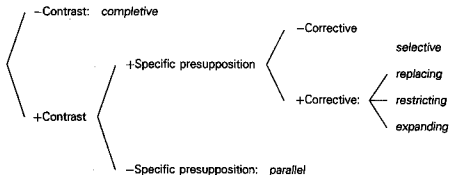


Figure 3.4 Dik's overall model of focus

- (21) A: What did John buy?  
B: John bought an umbrella.

Speaker A indicates a difference between himself and the listener about the identity of a particular item and B's answer eliminates the difference. The NP 'an umbrella' is the important or salient information which eliminates the difference and thus is the focus.

Examples using WH-questions, such as the one above, are critical to Dik's approach to focus. In fact, Dik takes WH-questions as diagnostic of what the focus of a sentence is. Thus, the answer to the question 'Who ate what in the restaurant?' must have two referents which are assigned focus. Consequently, focus is different from functions like agent and subject. A function such as subject cannot be assigned to more than one constituent per predication, while focus may be assigned to more than one constituent in a predication. Dik also makes clear that focused information is not necessarily new information, although it may well be. The focus function is defined as presenting information about the *difference* in pragmatic information between speaker and addressee, and this information need not be new. The speaker may focus information to stress its importance and to reactivate that information in the listener's memory.

Dik subcategorizes the focus function based on the uses to which it can be put. These subtypes of focus function are organized as in Figure 3.4. Each of the six subtypes of focus has a special function. Let's examine these different functions using examples drawn from Dik et al. (1981). Consider the following exchange:

- (22) A: What did John buy?  
B: John bought COFFEE.

In B's statement, the focused element, 'coffee', is a *non-contrastive completive focus* because it simply emphasizes information that is meant to fill some gap in the listener's information. Alternatively, all *contrastive focus* types put some piece of information in opposition to other information,

either implicitly or explicitly. One way to do this is with *selective focus*, which selects one item from among a set of several possible values. For example, in a slightly different exchange,

- (23) A: Did John buy coffee or rice?  
B: John bought COFFEE.

B's use of 'coffee' is a selective focus, because it selects one item from a group. This differs from *replacing focus*, which attempts to remove some incorrect information from the listener's mental representation and replace it with the correct information. So, in the exchange

- (24) A: John bought rice.  
B: No, John bought COFFEE.

B is attempting to remove the incorrect information, 'rice', and replace it with the correct information, namely 'coffee'. A speaker may also try to correct the listener's information by using *restricting focus* to narrow the value of the information even further than he or she believes the listener has. For example, consider the exchange:

- (25) A: John bought rice and coffee.  
B: No, John only bought COFFEE.

In this case speaker B notes that A's information includes correct and incorrect information. By focusing 'coffee', B attempts to restrict the information to the correct items. Speakers may also use *expanding focus* to add more information when the listener's information seems to be incomplete, although essentially correct. This can be seen in the following:

- (26) A: John bought rice.  
B: Yes, but he also bought COFFEE.

Here B's remark adds information to A's essentially correct statement. Finally, the speaker may use *parallel focus* to contrast two pieces of information within one linguistic expression. This case is illustrated by the sentence

- (27) JOHN bought COFFEE, but PETER bought RICE.

Here, all four NPs have the focus function, but what the speaker is specifically contrasting are the pairs of relationships.

More recently, Lambrecht (1994) has investigated the issue of focus. Like Chafe and Halliday, Lambrecht has been concerned with how information is structured. He seeks to understand how speakers manipulate the focus of an utterance to meet what they assume are the needs of the listener. For Lambrecht, the focus is that portion of the proposition which is asserted, that is what the listener is expected to know or take for granted as a result of hearing the sentence uttered. Asserted information is contrasted with presupposed information, that is what the speaker assumes the listener *already* knows or is ready to take for granted. Lambrecht has identified



three distinct types of focus: predicate focus, argument focus, and sentence focus. Each type occurs in distinctly different types of communicative situations. Consider the exchange

- (28) Q: What happened to your car?  
A: My car broke down.

According to Lambrecht, the answer in this exchange is an example of a *predicate focus*. Here, the speaker's car is presupposed since it is already known to the listener; the focus, or information not known to the listener (who asked the question in the first place), is the predicate 'broke down'. Consider this same answer in reply to a different question:

- (29) Q: I heard your motorcycle broke down?  
A: My car broke down.

In this case, the speaker uttering the answer presupposes that the listener knows that something belonging to the speaker broke down; the speaker asserts that that thing is the speaker's car, and thus the argument 'car' is the focus of the proposition. Thus, Lambrecht terms this an example of *argument focus*. Finally, consider this same answer in response to another question:

- (30) Q: What happened?  
A: My car broke down.

Lambrecht calls this an example of *sentence focus*. In this case, there is no presupposed information at all; the entire sentence is the focus.

Prince (1978) has tried to understand the functions of two different English focus constructions by studying their use in natural discourse. These constructions, known as clefts (or it-clefts) and pseudo-clefts (or WH-clefts), are shown in the following examples:

- |                                     |                      |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|
| (31) (a) John lost his keys.        | neutral construction |
| (b) What John lost was his keys.    | pseudo-cleft         |
| (c) It was his keys that John lost. | cleft                |

Although all three sentences convey the same basic information, they differ in the way they package the pieces of information. Specifically, they differ in terms of what information is *focus* and what is presupposition. Logically, both (b) and (c) presuppose that 'John lost something' while (a) does not (see Prince, 1978: 884 for a more thorough discussion). The information that is not presupposed in (b) and (c) is the identity of the 'something', namely, 'the keys', which is the focus. Since both (b) and (c) have the same presuppositions and the same focus, many linguists have considered them essentially synonymous (Bolinger, 1972; Chafe, 1976). Prince's investigation of the phenomena as they occur in natural discourse showed that this is not the case.

In order to explain the difference between clefts and pseudo-clefts, Prince drew a distinction between 'given' information and 'known' information.

- 1 *Given information*: information which the cooperative speaker may assume is appropriately in the hearer's consciousness.
- 2 *Known information*: information which the speaker represents as being factual and as already known to certain persons (often not including the hearer) (1978: 903).

Thus, Prince adds the idea that the speaker is acting cooperatively to Chafe's definition of 'given' as 'material which the speaker assumes is already in the addressee's consciousness' (1974: 112). It is important from Prince's viewpoint that the speaker does not necessarily believe that the information is, in fact, activated in the listener's mental representation, only that it would be appropriate if it were. Thus, a professor may felicitously begin a lecture or course with the sentence (## = discourse initial utterance)

(32) (a) ##What we're going to look at today (this term) is . . .

but not with the sentence

(33) (b) \*##What one of my colleagues said this morning was . . . (1978: 889).

The professor may assume that, at the beginning of a course, students appropriately have activated the information that some content will be taught, but the information that the professor had a recent conversation with a colleague is not appropriately activated in that situation. Thus, the information in the WH-clause of a pseudo-cleft is information the speaker may cooperatively assume is in the listener's consciousness. In contrast, the information in the that-clause of cleft sentences is *not* assumed to be in the listener's mind, though, of course, it may be. In discourse, clefts seem to have a number of functions, such as focusing new or contrastive information or presenting the information as known without making any claim that the listener is thinking about it.

As we have seen, speakers try to make some information more prominent or salient to their listeners. Depending on which language they are using, they have a number of devices at their disposal in order to achieve this goal of focusing information.

### Methodological Issues and Dilemmas

No discussion of information management and knowledge integration in discourse can be considered complete without an examination of methodological issues in text and discourse analysis. There are three principal methodological strategies employed in the analysis of text and discourse: (1) introspection-based analysis, (2) text counting methods, and (3) experimental and quasi-experimental methods.