

JAN FIRBAS

IT WAS YESTERDAY THAT...

During his short stay in Brno (13—14 May 1966) Professor Randolph Quirk suggested the question of the FSP¹ of the sentence type *It was yesterday that George flew to Prague*.² As there was little time for discussion, I propose to take the question up in the present note, trusting that it may be of interest to a wider linguistic public. To a certain extent, an answer to it is implied in my previous papers on FSP. I believe, however, that the problem is important enough to deserve explicit treatment,³ in fact even a more detailed one than the present brief note can offer, and that even tackling it may add a little to what is already known about FSP.

In my previous papers on FSP, an attempt has been made to examine how the semantic and grammatical structures of the sentence function in the act of communication, i.e. at the moment they are called upon to satisfy the communicative needs of the speaker. In performing this function, the sentence elements are not of the same communicative importance, differing in the extent to which they contribute towards the further development of communication: they do not carry the same degrees of CD.¹ The communicative purpose of the sentence is fully attained through the communicatively most important element, i.e. the one contributing most to the further development of communication, and in consequence carrying the highest degree of CD. It is in fact chiefly this element—the rheme of the sentence—on account of which the sentence is being uttered.⁴ As to the rheme of *It was yesterday that George flew to Prague*, the most natural interpretation will certainly place it on *yesterday*. An easy acceptance of this interpretation is due to the efficiency with which the *It-is—...—that*—construction singles out *yesterday* for particular attention, throwing it into relief.⁵ This construction is to be regarded as a means efficiently signalling a conspicuous deviation from the basic distribution of CD, which—as I have attempted to show in my previous papers—places the rheme proper in end-position. Whereas *yesterday* carries the highest degree of CD within the sentence, *it* undoubtedly occurs at the other end of the gamut, conveying the least degree of CD and functioning as theme proper. Between *it* and *yesterday* rank the items *is* and *that George flew to Prague*. It remains to decide exactly what places the latter two items occupy within the gamut of CD as displayed by the examined sentence.

If the conclusions arrived at in my paper “A Note on Transition Proper in Functional Sentence Analysis”⁶ are correct, the following can be stated about *is*. By expressing the temporal and modal indications, *is* starts building up the very information upon the foundation provided by the theme. In this way, *is* occurs on the very outskirts of the non-thematic section of the sentence, performing the function of transition proper. But how are we to interpret the two sections in regard

to which this function is performed? Does *is* mediate between *It* on the one hand and *yesterday* and *that George flew to Prague* on the other, or between *It* and *that George flew to Prague* on the one hand and *yesterday* on the other? I think that the latter interpretation is correct. The *It-is...that*-construction not only presents *yesterday* as the most important item of information, but also induces the reader/listener to regard the *that*-clause as a foundation, upon which this information is built. (Some day George flew to Prague; that day was—yesterday). It follows that *It* and *that George flew to Prague* constitute the theme, *is* the transition, and *yesterday* the rheme.

But stating that *it* functions as theme proper is not enough to give a full interpretation of the degrees of CD as they are distributed within the entire theme. On closer examination we find that the agent (*George*) is communicatively less important than his action (*flew*), communicatively most important being the goal of the action, i.e. the direction, or place of destination, of his flight. It follows that the *that*-clause serves a communicative purpose of its own, which is fully attained through the element *to Prague*.⁷ In this way the clause provides a field of distribution of CD, which in regard to the field provided by the entire complex sentence is to be looked upon as a distributional sub-field. Under the circumstances, the sub-field occurs within the theme of the sentence.

This is in accordance with a view put forth in one of my previous papers, where I pointed out that distributional fields are also constituted by other structures than mere clauses, principle or subordinate.⁸ On the one hand, there are distributional fields of still higher orders, such as those of a paragraph, chapter, or of an entire article or book. Even such fields are in the end set off by grammatical structure. On the other hand, there are fields of lower order, e.g. such as are provided by attributive words and phrases and their headwords.⁹ Remaining within the sphere of complex sentences and structures ranking below them, I subscribe to A. Svoboda's view that distributional fields are provided by grammatical structures that convey either explicit (open) or implicit (hidden) predication. (The structures formed by headwords and the accompanying attributive words or phrases naturally come under the latter heading.) In providing distributional fields, grammatical structure, as it were, cuts longer or shorter sections out from the linear flow of the discourse. Within these sections, the context and the semantic structure operate either in the same direction as, or counter to, the basic distribution of CD, this interplay of forces producing a distribution of CD that makes the field in question function in a definite kind of perspective.

Within the discourse, every field contributes more or less towards the further development of the communication. In developing it, the speaker/writer will most naturally 'begin at the beginning' and gradually proceed towards the fulfilment of the communicative purpose of the discourse. Special effects can occasionally be achieved by anticipating and expressing a piece of information that would normally come later in the discourse. I believe to be right in assuming that all this is a natural consequence of the linearity of the discourse and of the character of human apprehension. It follows that even within fields of higher order (paragraph, chapter, book), linearity—on a higher level—aims at a basic distribution of CD. On the other hand, it seems to be equally in accordance with the character of human apprehension that in a discourse (field) made up of a longer string of verbal sentences, a basic distribution of CD in the fullest sense of the word (i.e. one throughout which, gradually, every element becomes a carrier of a higher degree of CD than its precedes-

sor) can practically never be accomplished. Within such a distribution every element would convey new information. But this is not the way the discourse is structured. In order not to jeopardize comprehension the discourse is continually interspersed with elements conveying information known from the previous context. Such information is conveyed by the thematic elements within the fields of complex-sentence and lower orders. It is through these elements—duly signalled by the interplay of means referred to above—that relief is constantly provided from the flow of new information.

The preceding comments on the relation between the distributional fields and the linear character of the discourse may be briefly summed up as follows. Bound by the linear character of the discourse, the speaker has to place one distributional field (possibly containing one or more possible sub-fields) after another. It is within these fields, chiefly those of the complex-sentence and lower orders, that the linearity, manifesting itself in the tendency towards the basic distribution of CD, is being worked counter to.

The interpretation of the FSP of the sentence type under discussion has been qualified as the most natural one. This implies that at least one other interpretation may be thought of. Before discussing this possibility, it should be pointed out that the present note deals with *It-is-...-that*-structures only in so far as they throw into relief the word(s) occurring between *It is* and *that* (or another relative element). As is well known, these structures may sometimes be employed in another function. M. Schubiger has drawn attention to the double meaning of *It is the country that suits my wife best.*¹⁰ Adopting O. Jespersen's explanation, we may say that according to one interpretation the country is being specified in that it is distinguished from some other country (or countries) that does (do) not suit the speaker's wife so well; according to another interpretation 'country' is put in contrast with town life. It could be added that in the first case we may have to do with a reply to 'What kind of country is it?', in the second, with a reply to 'What is it that suits her best?' Whereas in the first case, the *that*-clause conveys rhematic information, in the second it is thematic. This possible double use of an *It-is-...-that*-structure, however, does not seem to be very frequent. But it raises an interesting problem of syntactic homonymy, which cannot be discussed in the present note. Needless to say, under certain conditions homonymy is ruled out. This applies to the sentence type *It is yesterday that George flew to Prague*, in which the co-occurrence of *yesterday* and *that* excludes the first type of contrast, the one which renders the *that*-clause rhematic.

It is now time to examine another possible interpretation of the FSP of the sentence type *It was yesterday that George flew to Prague*. I believe it possible to conceive of special contexts in which almost any element of the discussed sentence could be singled out for particular attention, and in consequence become rhematic: *IT WAS yesterday that George flew to Prague*, *It was yesterday that GEORGE flew to Prague*, etc. In such cases the sentence would already have been uttered and would be repeated in order to focus attention on one element that may have been misunderstood or the like. (Such repetition may naturally take place even because of *yesterday*, although it would rarely occur because of *that* and perhaps never because of *it*, the latter two occurrences being confined to metalanguage, i.e. language about language, employed, for instance, in the classroom.) A repetition of the entire sentence on account of one of its elements creates a special kind of contextual dependence. For in such cases the element on account of which the sentence is being repeated is the only contributor towards the further development of the communication.

It functions as rheme (proper), all the other elements constituting an extensive theme (proper). The presence of the two extreme degrees of CD (theme proper and rheme proper), to the exclusion of all the other degrees of the CD gamut, is characteristic of what we have elsewhere termed second instance.¹² The uses of *It was yesterday that George flew to Prague* discussed in this paragraph should be referred to second instance.

It is of course true that even in its most natural application, the examined structure is used to single out one of its elements for special attention. Under such circumstances, however, its contextual dependence is quite different. In their entirety, the elements that have not been singled out cannot then be regarded as merely repeating some information and therefore not developing the communication any further. That shows that if used in its most natural application, the examined structure cannot be interpreted as functioning within second instance.

By way of conclusion it may be stated that no matter whether they are simple or complex, second instance sentences always provide only one distributional field, possible distributional sub-fields having been eliminated within them. On the other hand, second instance elimination of fields never seems to outstep the boundaries of one sentence, simple or complex. In other words, second instance elimination of fields seems to operate only within the boundaries set up by one sentence, not merging two sentences into one field. (It is difficult to imagine one element singled out for special attention from two independent sentences which together provide one distributional field with eliminated sub-fields.) If these observations are correct, they show what an important role sentence structure plays in all possible contextual situations, i.e. throughout the entire sphere of the contextual applicability of a sentence structure.

The fact that owing to the operation of the context practically any element can become theme proper or rheme proper within second instance proves that in producing FSP, context is in the end superior to semantic structure. It is through context that the semantic and the grammatical structures of the sentence are introduced into the act of communication, i.e. into speech (parole). As I have attempted to show in my previous papers, the way these structures depend on the context determines the co-operation of means (context itself being one of them) that produce the FSP of a sentence. This co-operation of means, however, is not haphazard; the laws governing it constitute an important sub-system within the system of language (langue). In other words, systemic means are provided by language to cope with various contextual situations.

Closing the note on the interpretation of the FSP of the structure *It was yesterday that George flew to Prague*, I am well aware that the problem has not been fully exhausted. The present note, however, has fulfilled its purpose if it has thrown some further light on how a sentence structure functions in the act of communication.

NOTES

¹ 'FSP' and 'CD' respectively stand for 'functional sentence perspective' and 'communicative dynamism.' For a brief outline of my conception of the theory of FSP, may I refer the reader to my paper on *Non-Thematic Subjects in Contemporary English*, *Travaux Linguistiques de Prague* 2, Prague 1966, pp. 239—56. The paper contains further references to my previous articles on FSP.

² I do not remember the example Prof. Q. actually used. The one given here has been chosen by myself.

³ The corresponding Czech type has received such treatment from J. Filipec in his paper *Byl to můj přítel, který...* [It was my friend who], *Naše řeč* 38/1955, pp. 193—198, and from F. Daneš in his book *Intonace a věta ve spisovné češtině* [Sentence Intonation in Present-Day Standard Czech], Prague 1957, pp. 77—78.

⁴ H. Weil refers to the rheme as 'le but du discourse/the goal of the discourse' (*De l'ordre des mots dans les langues anciennes comparées aux langues modernes*, 3rd ed., Paris 1879, p. 21; *The Order of Words in the Ancient Languages Compared with that of the Modern Languages*, Boston 1887, p. 30).

⁵ The use of this structure (the 'splitting sentence') as a means of emphasis is well known. (Other relatives than *that* may of course be used.) Cf., e. g., K. Schibsbye, *A Modern English Grammar*, London 1965, par. 6.3.6.

⁶ *Philologica Pragensia* VIII (1965), pp. 170—176.

⁷ Reasons for such an interpretation are discussed in detail in my *Thoughts on the Communicative Function of the Verb in English, German and Czech*, Brno Studies in English 1, Prague 1959.

^{7a} Cf. J. Mistrík, *Slovosled a vetosled v slovenčine* [Word Order and Clause Order in Slovak], Bratislava 1966, p. 102.

⁸ *Some Thoughts on the Function of Word Order in Old English and Modern English*, Sborník prací filosofické fakulty brněnské university 6/1957, A 5, p. 96, note³⁰.

⁹ The question of distributional fields has recently been aptly taken up by A. Svoboda in *The Hierarchy of Communicative Units and Fields as Illustrated by English Attributive Constructions*, to be published in Brno Studies in English 7, Brno 1967. He concentrates on various types of distributional fields provided by attributive elements and their headwords, and examines the relations of such fields to fields of higher order. (In the passage referred to in note⁸ I use the term 'sphere,' but 'field' fits in better with my conception of the sentence as a field of relations. Cf. my *A Note on Transition...*, quoted above, p. 171.)

¹⁰ *The Role of Intonation in Spoken English*, Cambridge 1935, p. 17.

¹¹ *Analytic Syntax*, London 1937, p. 87.

¹² After D. L. Bolinger. Cf. my *Non-Thematic Subjects...* (quoted here in note¹), p. 241.

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Z podnětu prof. R. Quirka zkoumá autor funkční perspektivu souvštného typu *It was yesterday that George flew to Prague* [Bylo to včera, co Jiří letěl do Prahy]. Obdobným českým typem se zabývali F. Daneš a J. Filipец. Autor podrobně zkoumá rozložení výpovědní dynamičnosti uvnitř tohoto typu a ukazuje, jak jeho sémantická gramatická struktura účinně působí proti tendenci k základnímu rozložení výpovědní dynamičnosti. Současně řeší i kontextovou zapojenost a zapojitelnost zkoumaného typu. Na konec uvažuje o různých typech distribučních polí, tj. úseků (vytvářených vposledu gramatickou strukturou), v nichž se realizuje rozložení výpovědní dynamičnosti.