Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung

Verb-Subject Order and Theticity in European Languages

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Theticity, V.S order and the interplay of syntax, semantics and pragmatics

1. A glance back to theticity

Theticity is a topic that has received growing attention in recent years, especially in German linguistics. The contemporary cultural setting of the area of theotica is interesting in itself and does not appear accidental. It was through a debate involving philosophers and linguists from Mid-Europe that the thetisch/kategorisch dichotomy became evident from linguistic point of view in the second half of the 20th century. One of the main points under discussion was how to answer the relationship between logical judgment and linguistic expressions. At a time when the boundaries between philosophy and linguistics were being redrawn, this was an especially difficult problem, for through the debate, a specifically linguistic stance bringing into focus, among other things, the question of whether ideal or existential construction were to be analyzed according to the Subject/predicate partition. Its importance can also be recognized by the number of specialists participating in this debate, such as Barthes, Montague, Husemann, and others. Nevertheless, it is of mention that when, in the 19th century, the thetisch/kategorisch dichotomy was first developed in a philosophical context and received a strong impulse in Prague and then in Graz from Wittgenstein's philosophical theory of logical judgment, it was then receiving a broader significance between philosophy and linguistics by Austin, Mattox, and others. Wittgenstein's, in his work an interesting attempt was developed of finding a link between the theories of logical judgment and the logical analysis of linguistic expressions. This was a major shift in perspective. Not less important was Mattox's awareness of the fundamental asymmetry between the logical and the linguistic levels, as well as his assumption that the former is to be considered a narrower of the latter. This point seems of crucial importance to the understanding of more recent developments in the reflection on thetic structures and the problems that the notion of "theticity" poses to contemporary linguistics.

We shall now approach the question more closely in order to be able to consider these problems on the evidence of real linguistic data.

2. Assumptions and problems in the theory of theticity

MARTY singled out two main kinds of judgment, the two-membered or synthetic judgment and the one-membered or indivisible judgment. The first is set up through the combination of two constitutive units, i.e. a logical subject and a logical predicate, while the latter judges "being and being in An'menigen" (i.e. "Verbreiter") and an "ogestellten Indikations" so that it contains neither a logical subject nor a logical predicate. It is the one-membered judgement that is called "thetic". As has been underlined by ULRICH, MARTY himself saw a number of difficulties in comparing the logical and the linguistic level. One such difficulty which concerns us here is that, although a thetic, one-membered judgment is indivisible, the corresponding thetic expression at the linguistic level gives rise to "den Scherzen der Zwischenfigur". This effect is due to the fact that the linguistic expression shows a grammatical subject and a grammatical predicate. The solution offered by MARTY concerns attention, and it is full of implications for contemporary research. ULRICH sums it up under three main points: 1) That the etymology between the forms and the logical system involves two, 2) By the meaning of the term "Sprachlichen Gesand (Fassungen)" and 3) As far as the linguistic form is concerned, the meaning of the form(s) in the terms which are mentioned, and the difference of the Zwischenfigur candidates.

MARTY maintained that it is not inappropriate in this case to speak in terms of "Subject" and "Predicate", and that the terms which he assigns a different meaning from and only "similar" to the one he has in the two-membered judgement. As MARTY observed, in fact, the subject of a judgement of the form is something other than the subject of the sentence, and the form is something other than the sentence which underlies it. The linguistic and philosophical sphere of the "theletic/kategorisch" dichotomy has exercised a subtle and powerful influence even on contemporary research on the problem. In particular, recent approaches seem to share the implicit assumption that the existence of a "thetic" function need not be demonstrated on empirical grounds, being rather the result of a theoretical speculation. This is reflected in the methodological procedures in works on theticity, which start from the definition of thetic function and then try to analyze a set of means (i.e.

1. MARTY (1958) explicitly says that the logical judgement is "unabhängig von jeder Art Sprachliche". 
2. ULRICH (1985). 
3. Cf. MARTY (1958), FJ. 
5. ULRICH (1985).
6. MARTY (1958), this point is mentioned by ULRICH (1985), p. 44.
3. VS order in Italian and Spanish

3.1. Mono-argumentality

A close inspection of various texts shows that VS configuration in Romance languages can be determined by a wide range of factors. The first and most influential factor seems to be that I will call “mono-argumentality” (cf. also Cassano, this vol.). This is a property concerning the nature of the verb, i.e. its predicate frame; it has turned out that in the great majority of VS structures in our corpora of Italian, the main verb is either an intensive or an infinitive reflexive (even more generally a si-construction) or an oblique intransitive passive. As apparent, these are all verbs that, at the level of tense representation or any other derived level, have a one argument predicate frame. The same result was obtained from the scrutiny of our corpora of Spanish.

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Here I will quote a few examples from the corpora of written Italian and written Spanish:

(1) Ma, grazie ad un miracolo, i raccoglitori riuscirono a finire la tua figura
but thanks to a number is arrived the connection Ligurian
(But thanks to a little phone number, the Ligurian connection arrived)

(2) Dopo aver visto mio vecchio amico, è andata in una taverna
since 3rd person a month not remains vacant not even a single room of hotel
SG, of the
verb ‘drink’

‘For the past month, not a single hotel room has remained vacant’

(3) Si sono arrivate nuove comunicazioni per lo studio di Lecco
3rd person opens a new section; that of the hospital of Lecco
SG, REFLEX

a new section is opening; that in Lecco’s hospital

(4) e nel frattempo non si conosceva ancora nulla

and at this time, forecasts are no longer made

and at this time, now not 3rd person makes forecasts

(5) In figura 1 sono riportati i valori formanti relativi ai dati vocali

In figure 1 are represented the values of formants related to such vowels

‘In fig. 1, formant values of such vowels are represented’

(6) Suolo lodebbi solo recuperare 20 edizioni

only had been recovered twenty editions

‘only twenty editions had been recovered’

Mono-argumentality can be considered as a powerful, though not necessary, condition. Other factors, however, play a role in the determination of VS structures. They are of various nature: rhythmic, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic, such factors seem to enhance the effect of mono-argumentality rather than work independently of it; in other words, they succeed if the mono-argumentality condition is met. What seems especially worth noting is the fact that none of them (strictly speaking, not even mono-argumentality) conforms to the cause and effect model. Rather, they all seem to be consistent with a multiple conditioning model, where each factor exerts a partial and variable influence on the phenomenon.

I will first try to illustrate briefly the factors mentioned so far and then point out the “weight”, i.e. the frequency of each in the corpora.

3.2. Rhythmic factors

At the moment, the exact role of rhythmic factors is not at all clear. They require a broader and deeper discussion than can be presented here. In the corpora, they appear to operate especially in VS structures with “verba dicendi”:...
(7) "Ocasionally I meet in the landing hall, " adds Mrs. Delbrin.

(10) los accidentes se producen porque hay conducciones mal repartidas proponen

(19) mi amiga tiene una amiga de las vecinas, in which live some friends of the girls.

(20) en la que visiblemente la expedicion de africanos in which the expedition of North Africans travelled.

(11) que varia como variara la altura de la tormenta, to see how vary the pitches of the tormenta.

(9) en la que visiblemente la expedicion de africanos, in which the expedition of North Africans travelled.

(12) y ver a que clase pertenece uno, to see to what class one belongs.

Another relevant factor concerns the part of structure preceding the verb when it is occupied by a constituent which is not the subject. The subject tends to occur in post-verbal position.

(13) ad ogni posizione della scena passa una particolare del segnale, for each position of the signal, passes a part different of the signal.

(14) La Bijnemerken eran sobre todos los inmigrantes del Surinam in Bijnemerken live above all inmigrants from Surinam.

(17) Alle 18 e mezzo un altro incendio at 6 p.m. is brokenout another fire.

(21) Por contra, respecto de la politica economica de la CE, predominan in the contrary aspect, of the policy economic of the CE prevails

The Spanish word literal means "yesterday".
In the literature on VS order in Romance languages a distinction is often made between structures in which only the subject noun has the feature [+ New] and structures in which this feature is distributed over the entire sentence (i.e., the so-called all new sentences). VS order, in fact, can appear with either the first or the second property. In the following examples, only the subject noun has the feature [+ New].

(14) mense n m di fronte e le ambulanze
arrive the men and the ambulances

(15) Tambien estabano prime doravanti et i Noli
also the Noli River was about to overflow

In each of the following examples the sentence is all new:

(16) E' arrivato un piacevole pensiero
a pleasant thought arrived

(17) e ora erano aumentate solamente da gente che era in esclusivo
and at that time, in any case only legal people of this origin social

Structures like (15) (16) seem to occur especially when the subject noun has the feature [+ Animate] and/or [+ Definite]. Furthermore, it is perhaps not surprising that they are frequently found in narrative contexts. The phenomenon, however, deserves to be studied in depth, as a clear distinction between sentences with a [+ New] subject and all new sentences is not always possible when real texts are analyzed. In particular, the impact on the VS order of the animacy feature on the one hand, and of the narrative context on the other, should be tested on a larger and more differentiated corpus.

It seems even more problematic to ascertain the role played by locality, a property which has often been considered either as coinciding with nearness or partially overlapping with it. In particular, regarding terminological problems, some scholars prefer to term the phrase

R. Saporiti, in V. Badino et al., Problems and perspectives in the study of Italian VS order and the interpretation of sentence and phoneme under discussion sentences "with subject in focus" and "all focus" sentences, respectively.

A first and general difficulty concerns the definition of focus itself; if it is considered as the function of "highlighting", one has to take into account the possible discrepancy between what is highlighted for the speaker and what is highlighted for the listener. If the latter has to be defined in terms of focus properties, it risks falling apart.

A second problem concerns the common association between the focus and all focus sentences. This association is based on the assumption that pragmatic structure is isomorphic to the semantic one. In the same way, as eventivity orientation on the process makes the structure indivisible from a semantic point of view, locality should be distributed over the whole sentence, making this interpretable at the pragmatic level. This isomorphism, however, is highly disputable. To put it back to our examples, one should conclude that (21) and (22) are not non-thermic structures, while (23) and (24) are. This is a highly undesirable claim since, from the semantic point of view, (22) and (23) sharing the property of [Animate] subject can be grouped together, while (21) and (24) - whose subject nouns have the features [Animate] + Human] - are in a way more similar.

On the other hand, if the focus is defined in terms of orientation on the process/eventivity/producitivity, (21) (23) (24) may well conform to it, or, at least, better than (21). The latter sentence offers some problems as to whether it may be considered "thermic" due to the conjunctive of facts [Animate] + [Human] + Definite].

So far, we have discussed two pragmatic factors influencing VS order. There is a third one remaining to be mentioned, i.e., the type of textual progression. In Italian newspaper reports, for example, VS often characterizes descriptive progressions or, more generally, background information, while VS often occurs in narrative progressions or in foreground parts of the text:

(18) R. Saporiti, in V. Badino et al., Problems and perspectives in the study of Italian VS order and the interpretation of sentence and phoneme under discussion sentences "with subject in focus" and "all focus" sentences, respectively.

... a few days before, five patients of the Institute for the Elderly...
8. What is ticletivity?

To summarize what we have said up to this point, mono-argumentality seems to be the most powerful factor in determining VS order in both Italian and Spanish.² It seems to behave like a trigger of the six main factors investigated; in turn, can interact with each other. We can thus obtain the following diagram:

Rhythmic factors

Mono-argumenality

Syntactic factors

Semantic factors

Pragmatic factors

Before drawing some conclusions of a more general nature, it would be useful to consider the quantitative data on VS order in Italian and Spanish and the influence of various factors.

I: Text Type can influence, to a certain extent, the frequency of the order with present subject, as well as with past verbal subject. A surprising result is that both the Italian and Spanish corpora show very similar values for the text types which were analyzed.

Newspaper Reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Italian</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VS 31%</td>
<td>VS 38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Spoken Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Italian</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VS 34%</td>
<td>VS 43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both Italian and Spanish spoken texts exhibit frequency values of VS order significantly higher than those obtained for newspaper reports. Even more interesting is the "weight" of the different factors examined regarding VS order.

Here I will confine myself to the presentation of some results on the corpus of newspaper reports from the two languages investigated. In the Italian corpus, 98% of VS structures (51 cases out of 52) have a one argument verb. The influence of syntactic factors is weak (12% of mono-argumental VS structures).

Semiotic features show the following percentages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>37% (19 instances)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>63% (32 instances)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The given/new features show the following percentages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>47% (24 instances)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>22% (11 instances)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sentence is all new (all in focus) 31% (16 instances)

An interesting correlation is that, in all the cases of all-new sentences, S (Subject) is Animate.

In the Spanish corpus, 100% of the VS structures (52 cases out of 52) have a one argument verb. Syntactic factors show a stronger influence here than in the Italian corpus, as they appear in 37% of all instances (11 cases out of 52). These differences, of course, cannot be evaluated in the size of the samples is too small.

Semiotic features have the following percentages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>27% (14 instances)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>73% (38 instances)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The features [Given] [New] have the following percentages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>23% (12 instances)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>4% (2 instances)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The whole sentence contains material which is [Given] or partially [Given] 15% (8 instances)

The sentence is all new (all in focus) 58% (30 instances).

In the Spanish corpus the great majority of all-new structures (87%) - if not all of them, as in the Italian corpus - have the features [Animate] [Abstract]. However, structures with the conjunction of features:

\[
\begin{align*}
\{ \text{Subject} \} & \quad \{ \text{Sentence} \} \\
& \quad \{ \text{All-new} \}
\end{align*}
\]

comprise 50% of all VS structures.

The various factors discussed so far regarding newspaper reports seem to conform to a hierarchy of influence on VS order. This hierarchy is partly different in the two corpora investigated. In both corpora, the factor occupying the highest position in the hierarchy is mono-argumentality. The feature [Animate] follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Italian</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mono-Argumentality</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Animateness</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Italian and Spanish corpora differ as to the factor occupying the third and fourth position in the hierarchy; they show a reverse order of the features. In both corpora, however, syntactic factors occupy a lower position.

In both corpora, however, the syntactic factors occupy a lower position.

It is considered by itself, none of the factors discussed so far can be related to the notion of "facticity." This is obvious for both syntactic and rhythmic factors, as well as for structurally where the subject only exhibits the feature [New]. It seems important on the other hand to justify the previous assumption for factors, such as animacy and non-animacy, as well as the notion of "all-neutrality." As a means of argumentation, one could argue that if one or more argument verbs have no factitive [or process-oriented] interpretation, this could be related to the notion of "facticity." This conclusion seems wrong for at least two reasons. First, animacy is a fact; as such, it is a semantic property. Therefore, the fact that the factive value of some one argument verb is not carried by the verb itself, it is the whole VS structure that determines the value. As a matter of fact, the factitive interpretation can be ascertained more clearly when the subject has one or more of the features: [Animate], [Abstract], [Definite]. On the contrary, it is prevented when the subject has one or more of the following features: [Animate], [Human], [Definite]. In other words, the hierarchies of animacy and definiteness are crucial for factitive interpretation. (Note, however, that non-animacy to it is not related that can be related to the notion of "facticity." )

A further confirmation of the view that the composition of the semantic features of both verb and subject is responsible for the factitive interpretation is displayed by the fact that such interpretation can be assigned to structures with one or more argument verbs and VS order, provided that the subject satisfies the semantic conditions described before.

(27) Sì la purificazione è necessaria nei miti dello spettro. (Corpora are listed in alphabetical order in the Appendix.)

(28) La verità comunque emergerebbe (the truth is anyway emerging)

(29) Almeno tre edifici vengono attualmente

(30) Hacia los días de la tarde la circulación comenzó a normalizarse.

References


