

The Role of Communicative Dynamism in Directing the Flow of  
Information in Arabic with Reference to English

RAWI T. HABEEB

---

**The Role of Communicative Dynamism in  
Directing the Flow of Information in Arabic  
with Reference to English**

**RAWI T. HABEEB**

**Dept. of English**

**Kerkuk University**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper tries to investigate how the different degrees of Communicative Dynamism (CD) contribute in the distribution of Given and New information in English and Arabic on the sentence level. Many linguists argue that in the unmarked pattern, the theme always carries the Given information because it conveys the lowest degree of CD, while the rheme carries the New information because it conveys the highest degree of CD. Yet, that may only be in English and other Indo-European languages which tend to place the most important information towards the end of sentences. We shall try to investigate whether Arabic resembles English in this respect or not. We will adopt Firbas's model in which he argues that the distribution of the various degrees of CD over the elements of the sentence is governed by some factors such as the context of situation, the semantic structure and/or the linear arrangement of the elements.

**1. Introduction:**

In their theory of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP), the Praguean linguists (e.g.: Firbas, Mathesius, Daneš, Sgall) noticed

that linguistic communication is a dynamic phenomenon; therefore they called the property of communication the communicative dynamism. CD can be shown in the development of information to be conveyed. They argued that any element in a sentence bears a certain amount of CD. Furthermore, the extent to which an element pushes the communication forward is understood by the degree of CD carried by that element, thus contributing to the further development of a particular communicative act.

Firbas (1986: 42) points out that CD is one of the basic concepts of the FSP theory. It refers to the quality shown by the development of information towards a particular communicative goal. The degree of CD carried by a particular linguistic element is the relative extent to which the sentence contributes to the further development of communication.

According to the Praguean notions, the sentence is viewed as a unit which carries a message. The structure of the sentence is divided into two basic elements: Theme and Rheme. The Theme of a sentence is the starting point of the message and the Rheme is how the message develops and is brought to completion. The Praguean linguists combine between the thematic structure (theme-rheme) and the information structure (given-new) in relation to the amount of CD borne by the sentence elements. For them, the theme always represents given information because it carries the lowest degree of CD, while the rheme always represents new information because it carries the highest degree of CD.

The Praguean notions were later developed by Halliday who isolates thematic system from information system. For him, theme and rheme are not defined by means of information or CD they

## The Role of Communicative Dynamism in Directing the Flow of Information in Arabic with Reference to English

RAWI T. HABEEB

---

carry but rather by their position in sentences. The information carried by a message forms another system: the information system. In the unmarked pattern, given information is carried by the theme, while new information is carried by the rheme, in the marked patterns, the theme may represent the new information, while the rheme represents the given information (Aziz, 1998: 118).

The FSP theory examines how the semantic and syntactic structures of the sentence function in accomplishing the communicative purpose intended for the sentence. The basic idea of the FSP theory is that the separate elements of the sentence contribute differently to the development of discourse (Farhan, 1999: 1). Svoboda (1981: 1) points out that some elements of the sentence are communicatively more important than others: they push the communication forward with greater force and may be regarded as communicatively more dynamic. This means that CD is the relative extent to which the sentence elements contribute to the further development of the communication (Firbas, 1971, cited in Svoboda, 1981: 2). Furthermore, Firbas (1986: 40) states that different communicative purposes cause the sentence structure to function in different kinds of perspectives. A change in communicative purpose may affect the extent to which a linguistic element contributes towards the fulfilment of a given purpose.

### **2. Firbas's Model:**

Firbas (1971: 79) points out that the distribution of the various degrees of CD over the elements of the sentence is determined by certain factors. These factors are: the context, the semantic structure and the linear arrangement of elements.

**2.1. The Context:**

This factor states that a contextually-dependent element usually provides given information because it is known to both the addressor and the addressee. For that reason, a contextually-dependent element carries a low degree of CD. Contextually-independent elements, on the other hand, carry high degrees of CD because they provide new information to the addressee. Thus, according to Firbas, one of the concerns of the FSP theory is to identify the role played by a particular linguistic element in the dynamics of communication. As a result, the FSP linguists believe that the structure of sentences is determined by the use to which they are put and the communicative context in which they occur (Lyons, 1981: 227). For that reason, the FSP linguists' work is marked by analysing the sentence into parts having functions in the communicative process (Halliday, 1974, cited in Kapple, 1986: 73).

Let us consider the following example:

**1. a.** What did Mary buy?

**b.** She bought a new dress.

In this example, the theme (she) in 1.b is known to both the addressor and the addressee. It is a context-dependent element; therefore, it is regarded as given information: information that can be recovered from the context. It has the lowest degree of CD. The object (a new dress), on the other hand, is context-independent because the addressee knows Mary, but he/she does not what she bought. For that reason, it is considered new information that is irrecoverable from the context. It carries the highest degree of CD.

The Role of Communicative Dynamism in Directing the Flow of  
Information in Arabic with Reference to English

RAWI T. HABEEB

---

Arabic declarative sentences are either nominal or verbal. A verbal sentence may have the verb as its theme, while the subject is a rhematic element. Consider the following examples:

- |                           |                      |
|---------------------------|----------------------|
| <b>2.a.</b> ماذا كتب زيد؟ | What did Zeid write? |
| <b>b.</b> كتب زيد رسالة   | Zeid wrote a letter? |
| <b>3.a.</b> من كتب رسالة؟ | Who wrote a letter?  |
| <b>b.</b> زيد كتب رسالة   | Zeid wrote a letter? |

The distribution of information in 2.b differs from that in 3.b. In 2.b, the subject (زيد) is context-dependent; therefore, it is given information, while the object (رسالة) is context-independent; therefore, it is new information. It carries the highest degree of CD.

In 3.b., the object (الرسالة) is context-dependent. It is recoverable from the context; therefore, it is given information. The subject (زيد), on the other hand, is context-independent. It is irretrievable from the context; therefore, it is new information. Furthermore, in 2.b., the verbal element (كتب) functions as theme, while the subject and the object function as rheme. In 3.b., however, the subject (زيد) functions as theme, while the verb and the object function as rheme. In 2.b., the object carries the new information, while in 3.b. the subject carries the new information. This means that in Arabic unmarked patterns of declarative sentences, the new information is not restricted to a particular sentence element or to rhematic elements. But, if we look at the English equivalents of 2.b. and 3.b., we find the same English sentence: “Zeid wrote a letter”. We see that English maintains the same arrangement of elements. In both cases the subject “Zeid” is the theme although in 2.b. it represents the given information, while in 3.b. it represents the new



The Role of Communicative Dynamism in Directing the Flow of  
Information in Arabic with Reference to English

RAWI T. HABEEB

---

**6.a.** What happened?

**b.** A man was hit by a car.

6.b. is completely new to the addressee who does not know what had happened.. he does not know that a car accident had taken place and that a man was hit by a car.

**2.2 Semantic Structure:**

The degree of CD a sentence element conveys may draw on its semantic content taken alone or taken in relation to the semantic content of other sentence elements (Svoboda, 1981: 2). At a high level of abstraction, the semantic contents of the separate sentence elements can be arranged according to the relative degree of CD they convey if the context does not act against this. Furthermore, Firbas (1986: 45) states that some types of semantic contents and some types of semantic relations are capable of working counter to linear modification provided that they are context-independent. Consider the following example:

7. اشترى رجل كبير السيارة.

An old man bought the car.

The verb (اشترى) in Arabic and its English counterpart (bought) denote getting something. The subjects in both sentences denote a person who got something which is the object in both sentences. If the subject is context-independent, it bears the most important piece of information. The object is context-dependent because it is known to the addressor and the addressee. Both the addressor and the addressee know that the car was bought, but the addressee does not know who bought it. Thus, the subject (رجل كبير) is the new information. It carries the highest degree of CD. The

object (السيارة), on the other hand, is the given information since it is modified by the definite article (الـ). It carries the lowest degree of CD. Let us see another example:

**8. خرج ثور كبير إلى الحقل**

A huge bull came out to the field.

In this example, we have an unknown entity (expressed by the subject) is communicatively more important than the process of appearing or coming out to the field. So, the subject (ثور كبير) bears the new information especially that it is an indefinite noun phrase. It has the highest degree of CD. The adverb of place (إلى الحقل) is the given information especially that the noun is modified by the definite article (الـ). It carries the lowest degree of CD.

**2.3 The Linear Arrangement:**

The linear arrangement of the sentence elements also plays a role in directing the flow of information. This factor shows that elements which bear lower degrees of CD occur earlier in the sentence, while those that bear higher degrees of CD occupy the end position in the unmarked flow of information. "The gradation of position creates gradation in meaning when there are no interfering factors." (Bolinger, 1952, cited in Firbas, 1986: 43). This implies that the communicative importance of the sentence elements gradually increases with movement towards the end of the sentence. The final element becomes the most important since it completes the communicative purpose of the sentence (Farhan, 1999: 17). Furthermore, Svoboda (1981: 2) believes that the study of linearity of the sentential level can be practically identified with the study of word order. She proceeds to say that in Indo-European languages,

## The Role of Communicative Dynamism in Directing the Flow of Information in Arabic with Reference to English

RAWI T. HABEEB

---

there is a tendency to put the most dynamic sentence element (the element conveying the highest degree of CD) at or towards the end of the sentence. More importantly, the degree of CD is determined by the communicative importance in that an element with a high degree of CD contributes more to the further development of the communication than an element with a lower degree of communicative importance. Consider the following example:

9. اشترى صديقي احمد سيارة جديدة.

My friend Ahmed bought a new car.

The pattern of information flow in both sentences is unmarked since the given information precedes the new information. In both languages, the new information is at the end of the sentence. Firbas (1971: 82) states that the factor of linear modification represents the basic distribution of CD. However, the distribution of CD is determined by other factors and not linear arrangement only. Therefore, it is not always possible to link up the degree of CD carried by an element with its position in the linear arrangement.

### **2.3.1 Arabic Word Order:**

The linear word order of the Arabic sentence differs from that of its English equivalent. Al-Jurjani (1969: 43) claims that the organization of meanings in the mind precedes the organization of elements. He connects the process of organization with syntax, stressing that the former is not arbitrary: that is, the organization of elements must be strictly subjected to the rules of syntax.

Besides the flexibility of word order, Arabic has a unique characteristic in determining the flow of information in sentences;

that is the use of vocalizations (dhamma ( ُ ), fatha ( َ ), kasra ( ِ ), sukun ( ْ ), etc.). These vocalizations are used to assign functions to different sentence elements. Thus, the subject is characterized by using ‘dhamma’ over the last letter of the word, while the object is identified by using ‘fatha’ over the last letter of the word. Consider the following example:

10. رأى الغلام أسداً

The boy saw a lion.

Notice that the subject (الغلام) is marked by a ‘dhamma’, while the object (أسداً) is marked by a ‘fatha’ at the end of the word. Suppose that the above sentence is written without the use of such vocalizations: رأى الغلام أسد. In this case the sentence may have two interpretations. Either “The boy saw a lion” or “A lion saw the boy”. The vocalizations called ‘tanween’ ( ً , ٍ , ِ ) are often used to mark the new information because they characterize sentence elements as indefinite, while ( ُ , َ , ِ ) are often used with definite noun phrase which bear the lowest degree of CD (given information). Because the word order in Arabic is flexible, writers have to use such vocalizations in their sentences and texts in order to identify the different functions of the sentence elements. The above example can be reordered as follows:

رأى الغلام أسداً

أسداً رأى الغلام

الغلام رأى أسداً

Despite the different order of elements in the Arabic sentence, the subjective case is marked by the ‘dhamma’, while the objective case is marked by the ‘fatha’ (Aziz, 1989: 129).

The Role of Communicative Dynamism in Directing the Flow of  
Information in Arabic with Reference to English  
RAWI T. HABEEB

---

As far as, Arabic nominal declarative sentences are concerned, Sibawayhi (1889: 132) defines the initial element “Mubtada” as any nominal starting a sentence, while the “Khabar” as what is about the “Mubtada”. In the normal flow of information, the “mubtada” is the given information while the “khabar” is the new information told about it. In other words, the “mubtada” is the sentence element which bears the lowest degree of CD, while the “khabar” carries the highest degree of CD. Consider the following example:

11. زيدٌ تلميذٌ ذكي

Zeid is a clever pupil.

In this sentence (زيدٌ) is the “mubtada”. It is the given information known to the addressor and the addressee, while (تلميذٌ ذكي) is the “khabar”. It is the new information told about the “mubtada”.

**Conclusions:**

1. The distribution of information (given-new) in the Arabic declarative sentence is affected by two important interrelated factors: the flexible word order on the one hand, and the vocalizations on the other hand.
2. Arabic, like English and other Indo-European languages, tends to prepose the given information and postpose the new information. Yet, English depends highly on the context of situation in determining the given and new information, while Arabic makes use of other factors in this respect.
3. The Arabic notions ‘mubtada’ and ‘khabar’ resemble to a great extent the Praguean notions ‘theme’ and ‘rheme’ respectively.

The ‘mubtada’ and the ‘theme’ are associated with the given information and low degrees of CD, while the ‘khabar’ and ‘rheme’ are associated with new information and high degrees of CD.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aziz, Y. Y. (1989). **A Contrastive Grammar of English and Arabic**. Baghdad: Higher Education Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1998). **Topics in Translation with Special Reference to English and Arabic**. Bengazi: Gar Younis University Press.
- Farhan, Z. G. (1999). **Syntactic Structures in Relation to Thematic Progression in Arabic with Special Reference to English**. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis. University of Mosul.
- Firbas, J. (1971). “On the concept of communicative Dynamism in the Theory of FSP” in **SPFFBU**, 19, pp.135-144.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1986). “On the Dynamics of Written Communication in the Light of the Theory of Functional Sentence Perspective” in C. R. Cooper and S. Greenbaum (eds.): **Studying Writing: Linguistic approaches**, 40-71.
- al-Jurjani, A. (1969). **Dala’il al-I’jaz**. Cairo: Cairo Library.
- Kopple, W. J. (1986). “Given and New Information and Some Aspects of the Structures, Semantics and Pragmatics of Written Texts” in C. R. Cooper and S. Greenbaum (eds.): **Studying Writing:**

The Role of Communicative Dynamism in Directing the Flow of  
Information in Arabic with Reference to English

RAWI T. HABEEB

---

Linguistic Approaches: 72-111. London:  
SAGE Publications.

Lyons, J. (1981). **Language and Linguistics**. London:  
Cambridge University Press.

Sibawayhi (1989). **al-Kitab**. Paris: Hartwig Derenbourg.

Svoboda, A. (1981). **Diatheme**. Univerzita J. E. Purkyn.