

The form and function of extra-sentential elements*

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Extra-sentential elements have been described as being both syntactically and prosodically independent from the phrase to which they are appended. It is commonly assumed that their prosodic independence follows from their syntactic independence. This paper argues that since extra-sentential elements do not form a single syntactic class, their common properties are better explained in terms of their role in the information structure of the discourse. All members of the class of extra-sentential elements accomplish a similar functional role and all of them share a specific prosodic form that helps to optimise the communicative relevance of the utterance by minimizing the effort required to process it.

1 INTRODUCTION

Altering the normal order of words and clauses is a basic strategy in the organisation of discourse, which in classical rhetoric is exemplified by a number of related figures of speech grouped under the collective term ‘transposition’. For instance, *anastrophe*, as in ‘Glistens the dew upon the morning grass’, or ‘She looked at the sky dark and menacing’, or ‘Troubles everybody’s got’ implies an alteration of the normal syntactic order (Matthews 1997, *Silva Rhetoricae* on-line). Another figure of speech which was commonly used in classical literature is that of *hysteron proteron* (‘valet atque vivit’, ‘he is well and lives’, or, in conversational English, ‘put your shoes and socks on – not in that order, of course!’) which involves the transposition of the temporal order of related events (*Silva Rhetoricae* on-line).

Such figures of speech rely for their effect on expectations about a normal order in the succession of communicative events, the alteration of which brings about the desired stylistic effects. More than being mere changes in word order, they imply a shift in the expected order of the building blocks of information structure.

In this paper I argue that constructions such as dislocated phrases, as in ‘It’s ready, *your meal*’, appositions, as in ‘Anna, *the cook*, baked the cake’, parentheses, as in ‘Your dinner, *as we agreed*, is ready’ constitute alterations of an expected or unmarked order of the elements in the sentence. Such examples of ‘fancy syntax’, to use the label given by Prince (1998), perform a communicative purpose and this purpose is generally accompanied by a specific prosodic form.

1.1 The organisation of information

‘Information packaging’ (Halliday 1967), ‘information structure’ (Chafe 1974), and ‘functional sentence perspective’ (Firbas 1964) are related terms that refer to the organisation of the constituents of the sentence according to the demands of the communicative situation. In every language sentences are composed of two parts, whereby something is said (the ‘comment’ or ‘rheme’) about something else (the ‘topic’, or ‘theme’). The following example is from Hockett (1961).

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