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On teaching communicative effectiveness in English

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of intonation and the information structure /Halliday, 1970/ in language communication, but it is very easy to underestimate it in foreign language teaching. Intonation and the information structure of an information unit, two very closely related aspects of the functioning of language as a medium for communication, have not received enough attention from teachers of English as a second language. This has its consequences for the effectiveness of teaching, measured by the ability of the students to effectively communicate, by their ability to make full and correct use of all the language means available for the purpose of communication.

Lately there has been much interest shown and a considerable amount of research work done in the field of the functional analysis of sentence. The main problem for the linguists working in this area is how language fulfills its different functions. "The most outstanding and most obvious among these tasks is undoubtedly the communicative function, serving the needs and wants of the mutual understanding of individual members of the given language community," /Vachek, 1972, p. 14/. The functional approach to language seems to have much to offer in certain areas of foreign language teaching since the very aim of teaching a foreign language is to make the student able to communicate in this language.

The present paper is an attempt to show how the analyses of the

functional approach can be helpful in the teaching of communicative effectiveness of various constructions in English. First, a brief presentation of some concepts pertaining to the internal organization of a message, as developed within the functional theory by Halliday, will be provided. Then, on the example of specific English constructions, i.e. the double object construction and the corresponding construction with the prepositional object, it will be shown how inadequate the available textbooks of English are as regards the presentation of the communicative values of these constructions, how little the students learn from their books as to when and why to use one or the other of these constructions correctly. Finally, some suggestions will be offered concerning possible ways of remedying the existing situation.

In his analysis of the semantic system of language /Halliday, 1977/ Halliday distinguishes four components: experiential, logical, interpersonal, and textual. Within the textual component there are two types of systems: a/ the structure-generating systems /thematic systems, information systems/, and b/ the cohesive relations. We shall summarize here the main facts concerning the information systems since in the later part of the paper we shall be making references to them.

The discourse is organized by information systems into information units - pieces of information with a separate unit of intonation each. Within the information unit there are two elements: NEW and GIVEN, which are realized by the phonological systems of intonation. The element GIVEN is what the speaker treats as recoverable to the hearer from the environment, both verbal and non-verbal; and the NEW is what the speaker considers non-recoverable. With the element NEW it is important to realize that it is the meaning associated with that element and not the mere fact of its first occurrence in the text that determines its status as NEW /Halliday, 1977, p.184/.

Halliday distinguishes two types of distribution of NEW and GIVEN: the unmarked distribution, when the NEW element is at the end of the information unit, and the marked distribution with the NEW element being one of the non-final elements of the information unit. The last accented syllable of NEW /NEW may consist of more than one accented syllables/bears the tonic prominence, i.e. it bears the infor-

mation focus. Two distributions of the information focus can be distinguished, too. The unmarked focus falls on the last accented element in the information unit - in that case its information structure is not environmentally specific, i.e. it is not restricted to only one environment, because the elements preceding the information focus may be either NEW or GIVEN. In the case of the marked focus, which falls on an element that is not the last accented element in the information unit, its information structure is environmentally specific; the sentence can only be used correctly in a specific environment. All the other information has to be derived from that environment since all the remaining elements of the information unit are signalled GIVEN in the case of the marked focus.

Halliday goes on to say that the information system is hearer-oriented; the speaker encodes as GIVEN or NEW what is recoverable or non-recoverable to the hearer.

This in turn depends on the environment, both verbal and non-verbal; if a meaning is recoverable, it is in some way or other /but there are many possible ways/ present in the environment. Since the environment includes the preceding text, the information structure often serves to relate a piece to what has gone before it. But recoverability is not a simple matter of previous mention; and in any case it is the speaker's decision what he is going to treat as recoverable. /Halliday, 1977, p.185/

This above comment is very important for the present paper. This is exactly what the paper is going to show, namely, that the teachers should make their students aware of how much and in what way the organization of the information unit depends on the context, or environment.

Let us illustrate these remarks with a few examples:

(1) A: What time does your mother come home from work?

B: She's back home at five.

In the second sentence we should certainly treat "she" and "is back home" as GIVEN elements and "five" as NEW. "Five" cannot be recovered from the context while everything else can be. With the NEW element on the last accented syllable we have the unmarked distribution of NEW, and consequently, of focus. "Five" receives the tonic prominence.

The tonic prominence is what other linguists call the nucleus, must be realized as the element of a sentence which is specified as focus, or, more precisely, of the corresponding Tone Group. /Marek, 1975, p.130/.

hence. This is the way speaker B organizes his/her message in the context of the question asked by A.

The marked focus can be illustrated by the following example:

(2) A: My wife leaves work at five and then she does shopping on the way home.

B: My wife is at HOME at five.

Here the new information, something that the hearer would not be able to recover from the context, is "home". In this context it is the focus of information, and the nucleus is assigned to this element.

Lack of knowledge of the facts described above on the part of both teachers and students of English produces confusion as to the usage and communicative effectiveness of at least some English constructions. "Some", because in many cases the distribution of NEW and GIVEN information, which in turn determines the place of the information focus and the nucleus, in English and Polish sentences in corresponding contexts is the same. For example, it is obvious for a Polish student of English that the sentence:

(3) Betty LIKES children.

is appropriate in the following context:

(4) A: Look at Betty. She knows how to get along with children. She's been playing with them for over an hour.

B: Betty LIKES children.

while

(5) Betty likes children.

is inappropriate there. Similarly, sentence (5) is correct in:

(6) A: We need someone who likes children and would like to look after them a couple of hours a week.

B: Betty likes children.

whereas (7) would be completely out of place:

(7) Betty likes CHILDREN.

Such texts are easy for a Polish learner to produce because the assignment of the information focus would be exactly the same in the corresponding Polish texts:

(8) A: Popatrz na Basię. Ona wie, jak sobie radzi z dziećmi.

Bawi się już z nimi ponad godzinę.

B: Basia lubi dzieci.

(9) A: Potrzebujemy kogoś, kto lubi dzieci i dokładnie się nimi zajmować kilka godzin w tygodniu.

B: Basia lubi dzieci.

There are, however, certain constructions in English /eg. the double object construction and the corresponding prepositional object construction, or the passive and the corresponding active sentences/, the mastering of which involves knowing the principles governing the organization of information in an information unit and the ways in which that organization is reflected by linguistic means.

We shall now describe the treatment the two object constructions receive in four textbooks of English currently used by Polish teachers: Candlin's Present Day English for Foreign Students, Alexander's Practice and Progress, Broughton's Success with English, and Zawadzka's We Learn English.

Of the three English textbooks, Candlin's Present Day English, v.3 gives the longest exposition of the principles governing the selection of one construction or the other. He says: "In sentences where the indirect object is short or unstressed, it is placed immediately after the verb and without a preposition." /p.16/. Some of his examples are:

He taught them English.

The judge gave him the first prize.

The teacher asked John a question.

Then Candlin goes on to say: "But when the indirect object is long, or is stressed because of its importance, it is placed after the direct object with to or for before it." /p.16/. And some of his examples to illustrate this point are:

The judge gave the prize to the best gardener at the show.

The dog brought the ball to his master.

She wrote a letter to her friend in Switzerland.

Tom is choosing a present for the firm he is going to marry.

Mrs Brown is making a dress for her niece.

Although the explanation seems satisfactory at first, it is very easy to give counterexamples to these rules. So, the indirect object does not have to be short in order to be placed immediately after the verb, cf.:

(10) She gave her dear mother-in-law a big HUG. /HUG - the infor-

mation focus/

Candlin also fails to say clearly what he means by "importance" - is it the importance of the person or thing denoted by the indirect object? And if not, then what is it? Actually what Candlin has in mind is the focus of information, and the stress, which he is talking about as one of the decisive factors in selecting one construction or the other, is but the realization of the speaker's previous choices concerning the distribution of NEW and GIVEN. Besides, the relative position of the "object" elements does not depend exclusively on the length of these elements. It is a means employed by English to reflect the way in which the speaker has organized information units in his message.

It is impossible to clarify these questions without providing contexts for the sentences quoted after Candlin, by discussing the NEW-GIVEN relations in these sentences in the contexts provided, showing both the marked and the unmarked focus for each of the two types of sentences.

Similar rules, and also insufficient, are given in the Polish textbook We Learn English, Part II, by Anna Zawadzka. On pages 85-86 the author says:

Zdania z dopełnieniem dalszym i z dopełnieniem bliższym można przekształcić na zdania z dopełnieniem bliższym i dopełnieniem przyimkowym /Prepositional Indirect Object/.
Wzór I stosujemy najczęściej, gdy dopełnienie bliższe jest bardzo rozbudowaną grupą wyrazów:
Mr Jones can lend Robert an interesting book on the Welsh language.
a także, kiedy dopełnienie dalsze jest zaimkiem osobowym, natomiast dopełnienie bliższe nie jest zaimkiem:
Lend me your ball.
Wzór II stosujemy najczęściej, kiedy dopełnienie dalsze jest bardzo rozbudowaną grupą wyrazów:
Susan lent her ball-pen to a girl from Miss Gibson's form.
a także, kiedy dopełnienie bliższe jest zaimkiem osobowym:
Show it to my mother.

The author is talking here about transforming the double object construction into the one with the prepositional object. Such a statement may cause misunderstanding because it implies that the former construction is more basic and serves as the source for the latter; that the latter is derivative and in some way dependent on the former, which is not the case. Besides, the formulation of the rules of

usage is made without reference to the information structure of the messages, as was the case in Candlin.

In Alexander's Practice and Progress, on page 18 we read:

"Instead of saying:
He lent me a book.
He sent me a card.
He passed me the salt.
She bought me a tie.
She made me a cake.
We can say:
He lent a book to me.
He sent a card to me.
He passed the salt to me.
She bought a tie for me.
She made a cake for me."

An exercise follows in which the students have to automatically change the sentence with the prepositional object into one with the indirect object or the other way round. In the majority of cases the indirect object or the prepositional object are expressed by pronouns. Often the two corresponding sentences may have the same information structure if the pronoun is "inherently GIVEN" /Halliday, 1977, p.184/, but since there are no contexts provided for these sentences, the students are not able to see the identity of the information structures. There are also a few cases when the prepositional object is not a pronoun but a noun with a modifier, as in:

Pass the mustard to your father.
Then the student changes this sentence into:

Pass your father the mustard.
he most probably changes the information structure of the message /depending on the context, of course/ but the student may not be aware of it at all, and as a result he will not see how the two sentences function in actual communication. Besides if there are no contexts provided for these sentences, there is no way of assigning the nucleus and the correct intonation pattern to them. In such a situation the student is not likely to learn the correct intonation patterns.

The situation is equally bad in Doughton's Success with English. In Coursebook One /pp. 99-100/ the construction "Give it to him" is introduced in the following way: on a picture there are two girls the student is familiar with, Jillian and Alison. Alison is giving the other girl a needle. The text under the picture says:

"Alison is giving the needle to Jillian.
Alison is giving it to Jillian.
Alison is giving it to her."

Another picture follows with the same kind of text and then five other pictures without descriptions, for students to practice on. In the section aiming at the automatization of the structures, the student is asked to look at the seven pictures and "say seven pairs of sentences like this: Alison is giving the needle to Jillian.

She is giving Jillian the needle.

Now say seven pairs of sentences like this:

She is giving the needle to Jillian.

She is giving it to her. /Broughton, p.100/

The textbook does not provide the slightest clue as to the differences between the two types of sentences; on the contrary, it makes the understanding of the functional differences very difficult indeed. As a matter of fact, the sentences under the pictures described above are inappropriate for the situational context in which they occur. In the first of the three sentences under the picture of Jillian and Alison, the definite article used with "needle" forces one to treat it as a GIVEN element in the information unit which this sentence constitutes. Similarly, the action of "giving" is "recoverable" from the situational context - from the picture. The only element which is left to be considered NEW is "Jillian". Besides, the end-position of it in the sentences makes the assignment of the information focus unmarked. But such an interpretation of this message is inappropriate in the context of the picture. We can see that the person to whom the needle is being given is Jillian. The meaning of this element in the sentence is fully "recoverable" from the non-verbal environment. Thus there is a contradiction between the environment and the organization of NEW and GIVEN in the sentence occurring in this environment. The sentence that one would expect to accompany the picture in question is:

(11) Alison is giving Jillian a needle.

The NEW information is being carried by the element "needle". In order to introduce the sentence with the prepositional object the picture could show Alison giving the same needle /if this could be shown/ to a man. The corresponding sentence would be:

(12) Alison is giving the needle to Martin.

Such presentations as the one described are responsible for the fact that very many people learning English /at least at the early

stage/ are not able to assign the information focus and the nucleus properly. But can they be blamed for it? If they hear the first sentence read by the teacher with the nucleus on "Jillian", they are ready to use the same intonation pattern for the reading of the third sentence: Alison is giving it to her. Such an intonation pattern can be correct in the proper context, but not here. Then the students extend the pattern to cases like the last sentence in this imaginary text:

(13) John knocked at the door and waited for a while. Then the door opened and he saw Mary. He looked at HER.

where "HER" is incorrectly read with the tonic prominence as the nucleus. Such a position of the nucleus is inappropriate in the verbal context in which this sentence occurs since "her" can only be assigned the status of GIVEN.

Since teachers of English are confronted with the situation described in the paper, when textbooks do not provide adequate information concerning the communicative possibilities existing in English, it is their responsibility to "do something about it". And the first thing they can do is recognize the importance of the adequate presentation of the concept of the information structure to the students. The students should be told certain theoretical facts about the functioning of the information structure and about how different internal organizations of an information unit can be reflected by different syntactic arrangements. It has to be followed by practical material: different structures, especially those which cause most problems to the students, should be practised in different contexts. Contextualization is of utmost importance in teaching various language skills but probably the most important from the point of view of the organization of information. The teacher should amend the textbook he is using with additional practice material. He should provide different contexts to explore all the possible arrangements of NEW and GIVEN and to make his students react properly to those various contexts and situations.

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- Streszczenie**
- Uczenie języka obcego ma na celu doprowadzenie uczącego się do posiadania takiej wiedzy językowej, która mu umożliwi skuteczne porozumiewanie się w tym języku. Aby to osiągnąć nie wystarczy opisać w różnych konstrukcjach składniowych danego języka. Trzeba też umieć użyć właściwej konstrukcji we właściwym kontekście werbalnym lub syntaktycznym. Problemy związane z tą umiejętnością zostały pokazane w artykule w oparciu o dwie angielskie konstrukcje zdaniowe: 1/ z dwoma dopełnieniami i 2/ z dopełnieniem przyimkowym, np:

Alison is giving Jillian a needle.

Alison is giving the needle to Jillian.

Konstrukcje te są w większości podręczników do nauki języka angielskiego przedstawiane jako równoważne lub jako wypracowane jedna z drugiej. Aby wykazać niewłaściwość takiej interpretacji, która to interpretacja w konsekwencji powoduje niewłaściwe użycie tych konstrukcji przez uczących się angielskiego, posłużono się metodą analizy zdania wypracowaną w ramach funkcjonalnego podejścia do języka przez Hallidaya. Halliday bada wewnętrzną strukturę jednostki informacji /information unit/, czyli części informacji wydzieleną z przekazu /message/ przez odrębny przebieg intonacyjny /intonation pattern/. W ramach jednostki informacji Halliday wyróżnia dwa elementy: NOWY i DANY, czyli znaczenie, które odbiorca jest w stanie "uzyskać" z kontekstu, i znaczenie, którego nie jest w stanie "uzyskać" /recover/. Centrum informacji /information focus/ w jednostce informacji jest zawsze na elemencie NOWY, co jest realizowane jako jedno przebiegu intonacyjnego /nucleus/.

Różnice funkcjonalne między dwoma typami omawianych konstrukcji angielskich wynikają właśnie z różnej organizacji informacji wewnątrzjednostki informacji odpowiadającej jednemu lub drugiemu typowi. Ale żeby uczący się mógł jasno zdać sobie sprawę z tych różnic, musi najpierw zobaczyć, jak każda z tych konstrukcji funkcjonuje w sobie właściwym kontekście. Po omówieniu niewłaściwości występujących w różnych podręcznikach, a wynikających z rozważania tych dwóch typów konstrukcji 1/ bez uwzględnienia kontekstu, 2/ bez odniesienia do wewnętrznej organizacji informacji przekazywanej przez poszczególne zdania /tj. organizacja elementów NOWY i DANY/, zasugerowano nauczycielom zwrócenie baczniejszej uwagi na zagadnienie skuteczności porozumiewania się /communicative effectiveness/ i wypracowanie własnych sposobów zwiększania tej skuteczności u swoich uczniów, przede wszystkim przez ćwiczenie użycia tych samych wzorów zdaniowych w różnych kontekstach werbalnych i syntaktycznych.