Functional sentence perspective and relatives

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Abstract

Contrary to the assumption often made in the literature as to relatives being informationally flat structures, this paper argues for the susceptibility of the restrictive relative clause paradigm to Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) considerations of the type advanced especially in Firbas (1959, 1964, 1974, 1979, 1992) and Svoboda (1981). The distribution of thematic and rhematic properties in the relative clause H-noun - predicate complex for subject and object relatives on the basis of this susceptibility is demonstrated and its correlation with relative clause order facts, in both English and Greek, is discussed. It is, further, suggested that the specific correlation might be partly responsible for the complexity hierarchy obtained in data concerning the acquisition of the L2 English relative construction by Greek learners (Calfoglou 1998).

Key words: restrictive relatives, Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP), theme, rheme, thematisation, word order

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to argue for the informationally non-flat nature of the restrictive relative construction and to demonstrate how this non-flatness operates in information distribution terms, namely in terms of the linear arrangement of thematic and rhematic material, in subject- and object-focus (S- and O-focus), centre-embedded (CE) and right-branching (RB) relatives, both in English and in Greek.¹

¹Focus relates to the function of the relativised constituent in the embedded clause, as in The man who came (S-focus) and The man who I met (O-focus). Embeddedness position can vary as in The man who came yesterday/who I met yesterday was an old friend (CE) and Did you see the man who came yesterday/who I met yesterday? (RB).
The present discussion will exclusively deal with the linear arrangement of the major — subject, verb, object — constituents as information carriers. I will attempt to show how this arrangement correlates with relative clause constituent order facts in the two languages, ordering possibilities in Greek interacting with Functional Sentence Perspective — henceforth FSP — to produce a thematic configuration in the O-focus paradigm which differs from its English counterpart. Finally, I will suggest that clause-internal information distribution could, at least partially, account for the increased acquisitional complexity observed for object as against subject relatives in data obtained from Greek learners of English, as well as for the specific deviant order pattern emerging from this data.

2. Are restrictive relatives informationally flat?

It has generally been assumed (Comrie 1981, Givón 1985, Philippaki-Warburton 1985, among others) that restrictive relative clauses involve exclusively presupposed or, in FSP terms, purely thematic information. Thus, Comrie makes use of such terminology to distinguish between restrictive relatives and their non-presuppositional, non-restrictive counterparts pragmatically (1981: 132), Givón speaks of the “non-negotiable” (1985: 1024), non-assertion property of the construction, while Philippaki-Warburton refers to relatives as presenting “presupposed background information” (1985: 132). Philippaki-Warburton actually employs this pragmatic neutrality point as an argument for the basicness of the VSO order pattern obtained in Greek relatives — as well as in other embedded clause types —, a pattern considered from a rather different angle in this paper, as we will see later on. This pragmatic neutrality, she argues, is testified to by the fact that all types of thematisation processes are blocked in a relative clause.

If, indeed, this is so and relative clauses convey old, that is thematic, information exclusively, it would appear that the distribution of information clause-internally is of practically no interest. In other words, what this line of arguments would amount to is suggesting that restrictive relatives are informationally flat. I would be inclined to argue, however, that despite the information backing often performed by relatives, they still constitute what Firbas calls a “distributional subfield of C(ommunicative) D(ynamism)” (1992: 84, and elsewhere), in the sense that they exhibit internal fluctuation in terms of their constituents’ relative contribution to communication.

For one thing, the anaphoricity of the restrictive relative construction should by no means be taken for granted. Indeed, as has been convincingly argued in Werth (1976), in a study of the semantics of relative clauses, restrictive relatives may be cataphoric in the sense, for instance, of initiating discourse and thus be-

That theme-related issues are, at least partially, relevant to dependent clauses, including relatives, is clearly suggested in Halliday (1967: 221). Thus, while conceding that “probably only independent clauses, that is those which select for mood, exhibit the option of theme in its full interpretation”, Halliday goes on to contend that the theme system does operate in dependent clauses, except that “the interpretation of theme in this environment requires the recognition of it as secondary to the underlying theme of such a clause, its relation of dependence to another clause”. It therefore seems that, even if anaphoric relatives exhibit a certain amount of susceptibility to thematic considerations.

Partial support for the interplay of such forces in the relative clause paradigm can also be gained from Asselman (1992), who argues for the possibility of presenting the H-noun, namely the noun phrase modified, and the relative clause with a DO dependency — in Greek — either as a single or as a complex information unit involving a H-noun topic and a focus element within the relative, depending on the “speaker’s intention”. This, in turn, ties in with the reference to varying focalisation and thematisation in the H-noun — relative clause complex made in Στασόπουλο (1985), a point I return to in 4.3.

On the assumption that relative clauses are not pragmatically neutral, then, it seems quite natural to argue for the presence of both thematic and rhematic material in them. That this is so has been more or less directly supported in the Prague School literature; but the informational content of relatives has been more explicitly considered in Firbas (1959, 1964, 1974, 1979, 1992), as well as in Svoboda (1981). The discussion that follows will involve a synthesis of the suggestions made, especially by these two researchers, concerning the FSP representation of relative clauses.

3. The theme and rheme division: Some background information

Before the minutiae of FSP operation in restrictive relatives are presented, clarification of certain terminological points, along with a brief exposition of the basics of the theory presupposed in the discussion that follows, appear to be in order.

Following Firbas (1964: 272), I take theme to be “the sentence element (or elements) carrying the lowest degree(s) of CD within the sentence”, that is contributing least to “the development of the communication...” (1964: 270), and

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2 Note that even though Asselman’s main concern is with non-restrictive relatives, this point is relevant to a discussion of restrictive relatives since it is seen as sometimes cutting across the restrictive - non-restrictive distinction.
rHEME the "communicative nucleus" (1959: 39), namely the sentence element(s) carrying the highest degree of CD. Moreover, I take theme as such to be "the point of departure for the clause as a message", "what is being talked about", in Halliday's (1967: 212) terms, though not necessarily sentence- or clause-initial, and rHEME as what is said about it.

In distributional terms, theme will generally coincide with the subject, in "objective" (Mathesius 1928/1964: 66), "non-emotive" (Firbas 1964: 271) order, and rHEME with the object, in accord with Firbas's "FSP linearity principle" (1992: 118), the unmarked progression thus being S-V-O: THEME = RHEME (see also Tomlin 1986). At the same time, however, positional criteria will often have to be tipped against aboutness criteria (see esp. Firbas 1959, 1964, 1974, 1979, 1992: passim), also determining the thematic or rhematic properties of a clause constituent.

Beside subject-themes and object-rhemes, the verb, generally treated as transitional, (see, e.g., Firbas 1959, 1979; see also discussion in Firbas 1992), is described as often carrying rhematic properties outweighing its thematic ones (see, e.g., Firbas 1992: 70). I will therefore treat it as part of the rhematic component of the clause.

Crucial to the present discussion of FSP in relatives is the idea that—as proposed especially in Firbas (1959, 1964, 1979) and further supported in Sgall (1974), Svoboda (1981)—the theme-rHEME division is not a watertight one and that sentence constituents might therefore vary in terms of degree of thematicity or rhematicity, which is largely the outcome of conflicting factors. Thus, in the remainder of the discussion, more strongly thematic/rhematic constituents appear as +TH/+RH and their weaker counterparts as -TH/-RH.

4. The FSP description of relatives

4.1 The informational content of relative clause constituents

Let us now come to relatives. Consider first of all the fact that they are themselves, in a sense, a product of thematisation. In formal terms, their derivation involves fronting a wh-operator or an empty category (ec), as shown in (1a) and (1b):

(1a) \[ \text{NPI} \left[ \text{CP} \, \text{wh}_i \, \text{\_} \, / \, \text{ec}_i \, \text{that} \, [ \text{IP} \, t_i ] ] \] (Subject relatives)

(1b) \[ \text{NPI} \left[ \text{CP} \, \text{wh}_i \, \text{\_} \, / \, \text{ec}_i \, \text{that} \, [ \text{IP} \, [ \text{VP} \, t_i ] ] ] \] (Object relatives)

(Based on Haegeman and Guérin 1999)

Moreover, the relativised constituent has repeatedly been assigned the role of theme (see Werth 1976, Givón 1977, Downing 1978, Dik 1978, among others). In Grzegorek's (1984: 8) words, "thematisations are surface reflections of
the speaker’s choice of perspective”, which, transferred to relatives, determines which element in the clause is to be thematised, that is, whether the clause will be an S- or an O-focus one.

And then, the very function of relatives is one of predication. In the context of formal grammar, for instance, it is this predication function that underlies Rizzi’s (1990) discussion of the complementiser that in ec relatives, the H-noun being the “subject of the predication” (1990: 70) and the relative clause what is predicated of it, and a predication rule that allows co-indexation of the H-noun and the ‘wh/ec...t’ chain, thus securing proper construal.

If the H-noun is the subject of the predication, it would appear most natural to suggest that it must be strongly thematic. Yet discussion of the specifics of relatives in the light of FSP theory somehow moderates this point. Thus, according to Firbas (1959: 58, example 30), the relative clause might be said to strengthen its antecedent, namely the H-noun. In Svoboda’s (1981: 50) terms, the fact that the relative clause that follows makes the H-noun the “centre of the scene” can be said to detract from its thematicity. A further boost to this is apparently given by Halliday’s (1985: 52) treatment of relatives, among other structures, as fulfilling “a DEICTIC or pointing out function”.

Taking account of all this, as well as of the position of the H-noun in CE and RB relatives, I consider the outcome of the trade-off between its partially conflicting properties to be -TH and -RH respectively. More specifically, in the case of CE relatives we have a sentence-initial subject H-noun, which is therefore strongly thematic, but its thematicity is somewhat mitigated by the foregrounding the H-noun undergoes in relativisation; this results in the H-noun being designated as -TH, or a reduced theme. In the case of RB constructions, by contrast, the thematic properties of the H-noun compete with both foregrounding, as in relativisation in general, and its normally rhematic–object–position in the sentence, which, I would argue, results in its FSP description being that of -RH, namely that of a reduced *rhem*e. Now, if TH and RH are seen as a continuum, see (2), -TH is contiguous to -RH, which suggests that, in actual fact, the FSP differentiation resulting from embeddedness position may not be significant:

\[
\text{(2)} \quad +\text{TH} \quad -\text{TH} \quad -\text{RH} \quad +\text{RH}
\]

Indeed, as I will attempt to show next, it is the focus variable which, systematically correlating with clause-internal order — in the English paradigm —, unlike embeddedness, produces sharper contrasts in FSP configuration terms. This could, in fact, be said to be corroborated by evidence obtained against the significance of embeddedness position in relative clause acquisition (see also section 5).
So far, I have considered the description of the relative clause H-noun. Let me now turn to the FSP characterisation of the relative clause constituents as such. Consider first the relative marker. In defending the thematisation character of relatives, I have already somehow appealed to its thematicity. Firbas actually designates it as carrying a very low degree of CD, in view of its dependence on the immediately preceding context, namely its antecedent (1992: 75), and its resultant retrievability (1992: 31; see also 1959: 49). This can be seen in the relative marker description in (3), (1992: 75), where it is presented as both heavily context-dependent and thematic — while also the bearer of the quality expressed by the verb, usually a subject-theme property:

(3) [a manuka tree] that (d, B, Th) grew in the middle of the front grass patch
(d:context-dependent, B: bearer of the quality expressed by the verb, Th: thematic)

Similarly, Halliday (1985: 52) notes that “A relative group or phrase of this kind (whose house, in which ...) functions, as a whole, as a Theme of the clause in which it occurs”. In the discussion that follows I will treat it as strongly thematic, bearing the +TH marker, together with the subject constituent in O-focus relatives, following the association between subject and theme pointed to in the previous section, while the verb will be referred to as a rheme, as explained above, together with its object in S-focus relatives, normally the strongest rhematic element in the clause, or rheme proper.

4.2 The English case

On the basis of what has been said so far, the distribution of information in S-focus relatives would read as in (4a) and (4b):

-TH +TH +RH
(4a) The woman who made that painting is world-famous. (S-focus, CE)

-RH +TH +RH
(4b) I met the woman who made that painting. (S-focus, RB)

Similarly, the linear succession of constituents in O-focus clauses in information terms would be as in (5a) and (5b):

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3 A more refined description is obtained in Svoboda (1981: 5), where the relative pronoun is presented as diathematic, that is as the “most dynamic element in the thematic sphere”, a view to which Firbas (1992) also apparently subscribes, but no further segmentation is deemed necessary for the purposes of the present discussion.
(5a) The monument which the tourists visited is a real gem. (O-focus, CE)

(5b) You should go and see the monument which the tourists visited. (O-focus, RB)

The systematic correlation between word order, as determined by focus, and information distribution order can thus be clearly observed. Clause-internally, we have +TH+RH in the NrelIVN/SrelVO S-focus instances (4a) and (4b), and +TH+TH+RH in the NrelNV/OrelSV O-focus ones (5a) and (5b). I would suggest that the information distribution pattern emerging in S-focus constructions is more balanced or relaxed than its O-focus counterpart, while also being closer to the smooth theme-rheme progression referred to above.

This may be made clearer by taking a look at the corresponding FSP configuration graphs (Figures 1 and 2), where the vertical arrangement of each component is a reflection of its higher or lower degree of CD and the horizontal arrangement corresponds to its position in the clause, reflecting the clausal syntagm. The grammatical description of each component appears at the top:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{H-noun} & \quad \text{Nrel/Srel} & \quad \text{V-N/V-O} + \text{Rheme} \\
-\text{RHEME} & \quad \text{Theme} \\
-\text{Theme} & \quad \text{Theme} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\textit{Figure 1. FSP configuration for S-focus relatives in English}

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\begin{align*}
\text{H-noun} & \quad \text{Nrel/Orel} & \quad \text{N/S} & \quad \text{V} + \text{RHEME} \\
-\text{RHEME} & \quad +\text{Theme} & \quad \text{Theme} \\
-\text{Theme} & \quad \text{Theme} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\textit{Figure 2. FSP configuration for O-focus relatives in English}

Such a-symmetrical stacking of thematic constituents is also obtained in the O-focus genitive case paradigm, where constituent ordering, as determined by focus, retains the disparity observed in the non-genitive paradigm, and the FSP configurational differences obtained for S-, as against O-focus, constructions persist.

\footnote{On acquisition evidence for focus cutting across case, and what this might entail for relativisation hierarchies, see Calfoglou (1998, 1999).}
4.3 The Greek case

Let us now come to the Greek paradigm. As can be seen from the Greek translation of sentences (4a) and (4b) — reproduced here as (6a) and (6b) respectively — there is no discrepancy to speak of between the two languages in the S-focus case. NrelVN/SrelVO is replicated and so is the theme-theme configuration:

-TH  +TH  +RH  
(6a) Η γυναίκα που ξυργάρισε εκείνο τον πίνακα είναι διεθνώς φήμης  
(S-focus, CE)  
-RH  +TH  +RH  

(6b) Γνώρισα τη γυναίκα που ξυργάρισε εκείνο τον πίνακα.  (S-focus, RB)

A different image, however, emerges in the case of the O-focus construction corresponding to (5a) and (5b) above. As we can see from the translated versions in (7a) and (7b), the most natural configurational arrangement in the Greek O-focus relative construction would be NrelVN/OrelVS, instead of the NrelNV/OrelSV replicating the English case. Naturally, the information distribution sequence is also different:

-TH  +TH  +RH  +TH  
(7a) Το μνημείο που επισκέφθηκαν οι τουρίστες είναι ένα πραγματικός  
στολίδι. (O-focus, CE)  
-RH  +TH  +RH  +TH  

(7b) Πρέπει να πας να δεις το μνημείο που επισκέφθηκαν οι τουρίστες.  
(O-focus, RB)

Indeed, the NrelNV configuration, as in (8a) and (8b) below, involving a theme-theme sequence practically identical with that of the corresponding English sentences, would be rather awkward:

(8a) ??? Το μνημείο που οι τουρίστες επισκέφθηκαν είναι ένα πραγματικός  
στολίδι.

(8b) ??? Πρέπει να πας να δεις το μνημείο που οι τουρίστες επισκέφθηκαν.

Which brings us to the point made about relatives blocking thematisation processes in Philippaki-Warburton (1985) and referred to in the opening of this paper. If, indeed, the preverbal position is a position for which subjects are eligible, as in Horrocks’s (1992) derivation for the Greek sentence, for instance, and as, further, testified in actual practice by the fact that the preverbal subject instances are not deemed ungrammatical and could, I believe, be made more palatable if the rhematic component were reinforced, as in (9) below, then it ap-
pears that we are dealing with an instance of FSP susceptibility, which favours the thematic distribution correlating with VSO → OVS order.

(9) ... το μνημείο που οι τουρίστες επισκέφθηκαν με τόσο ενθουσιασμό σήμερα το πέρα το αρραβονιζόμενο σπήλαιο...⁵

Such an explanation may also account for the fact that, as suggested in Philippaki-Warburton (1985: fn.10), acceptability of the pre-verbal subject relative increases in a presentational — that is, in FSP terms — a highly thematic context, as can be seen in (10):

(10) Αυτό είναι το μνημείο που οι τουρίστες επισκέφθηκαν.

As with the non-genitive/genitive paradigm analogies observed in English, such FSP susceptibility is, further, demonstrated in the genitive O-focus case in Greek, as can be seen in the relative advantage of (11a) or (11b) over (11c) below:

(11a) Η γυναίκα που την τούφτα της (την) έφαγε τα παιδιά
(11b) Η γυναίκα που τα παιδιά έφαγε την τούφτα της
(11c) ??? Η γυναίκα που την τούφτα της τα παιδιά έφαγε

I would argue that (11c) involves heavy stacking of thematic constituents, while (11b) relaxes the thematic weight by placing part of the relativised constituent post-verbally and (11a) does so by leaving the thematic subject in post-verbal, clause-final position.⁶

We can, therefore, see that the FSP configuration of Greek O-focus relatives resembles that of their S-focus counterparts as well as that of the English S-focus paradigm, in being more balanced and more evenly spread out. This is illustrated in Figure 3:

![Figure 3. FSP configuration for O-focus relatives in Greek](image)

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⁵ Note that, alternatively, the sentence could improve by rhematising the preverbal subject-theme by means of contrastive stress, which would, again, modify clause-internal FSP configurational arrangement.

⁶ Interestingly, (11c) becomes fully acceptable if we both add a clitic and strengthen the thematic component —the verb— by means of contrastive stress, as in η γυναίκα που την τούφτα της τα παιδιά την έφαγε.
The resistance to preverbal subjects evinced in the Greek O-focus relative construction could, perhaps, be said to be further enhanced by the thematisation property of relatives. If, indeed, relatives involve thematisation, they must be unlikely to admit the fronting of yet another constituent (cf. Philippaki-Warburton 1985), if this is not structurally determined. Yet, as indicated in (9), for instance, the subject-theme in the Greek O-focus construction can occupy preverbal position provided the rhematic complex becomes competitive.

Seen in this light, then, and in view of the discussion concerning the thematic-rhematic properties of the H-noun in 4.1 above, the examples of an object relative being made to license the pleonastic DO clitic in Σταύρου (1985) — which appear as (12a) and (12b) below — could also be interpreted as an instance of reinforcing the rhematic component in the clause, thus interfering with FSP configuration, rather than of thematising the H-noun by moving focus elsewhere, since thematisation has occurred anyway. This could, I believe, gain further support through (12c):

(12a) Ἐμείνε ἐκπλήκτη με τις φανταστικές ιστορίες που (*τις) ἀκούσε (Σταύρου 1985: 122)

(12b) Ἐμείνε ἐκπλήκτη με τις φανταστικές ιστορίες που τις ἀκούσε (δεν τις φαντάστηκε) (: 130)

(12c) Ἐμείνε ἐκπλήκτη με τις φανταστικές ιστορίες που (τις) ἀκούσε καθισμένη σε μια πολυθρόνα (Calfoglou 1998: 258)

But, of course, going into the potential correlation of thematic balance and the pleonastic clitic in O-focus relatives in Greek is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, for the purposes of the present discussion, that, like constituent order, DO clitics seem to lend support to the non-flatness of relatives.

5. An acquisitional dimension

It is interesting to note that there may well be an acquisitional extension to this discrepancy observed in relative clause constituent order and, consequently, in FSP configuration, between the two languages. Interlanguage data obtained for Greek L2 learners of English (Calfoglou 1998), for instance, indicates that the informationally problematic O-focus case in L2 is the problem in the acquisition process as well. Thus S-focus relatives fare much better than their O-focus counterparts, and this subsumes the genitive paradigm. Embeddedness position, which does not interact with word order systematically, thus having practically no impact on theme-rheme distribution — as explained earlier — does not seem to correlate with the deviance pattern observed.
Though one cannot, of course, account for the totality of this data at this point, I believe it is worth noting that the non-target pattern of deviance emerging in intermediate grammar in O-focus instances involves relaxing or spreading out the target +TH+TH+RH sequence more evenly, thus aligning it, in a sense, with the S-focus sequence or its L1 O-focus counterpart. This is done primarily in the form of pronominal resumption, where the clause-initial thematic load is somehow counterbalanced by the clause-final resumptive theme, and, less frequently, via inversion or passivisation.

In other words, there appears to be some evidence that, at least in the area of relativisation, learners demonstrate susceptibility to the susceptibility of their L1 to FSP, until they fully acquire an L2 grammar in which structure is the major driving force behind configurational arrangement. Needless to say, firmer conclusions await systematic investigation of the acquisition of areas where FSP effects in learners’ L1 are obtained.

6. Conclusions

I have tried to show that restrictive relatives constitute a field—or rather a “subfield”—in which FSP forces are at work. The presentation of their thematic and rhematic configurational specifics revealed what I believe is an advantage, in FSP distribution terms, of the S-focus construction in English and Greek as well as of the O-focus construction in Greek over the corresponding O-focus paradigm in English. It was suggested that this advantage may well underlie acquisition trends among Greek learners of English.

References


7 On the sense in which resumption seems to interact with L1 cliticisation habits in DO relatives, see Calfoglou (1998: 257-263).


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