

Reading aloud and the structure of information

JESÚS ROMERO TRILLO
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

ABSTRACT

The present article explores the role of English intonation in the organization of the information structure in read aloud poetry; and the extent to which the reader reflects his or her interpretation of the text in the act of reading. In order to account for this fact, two readings of the same poem are compared, the second of these after a discussion about the meaning of the poem. The analyses show how intonation patterns differ in both readings.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading aloud is a somewhat unusual activity which is mainly restricted to religious, artistic, scholarly and political domains. The act of reading in itself implies having to provide an interpretation of the written text; and reading aloud mirrors the reader's understanding of the text and, therefore, of the world that it depicts. The present article explores the degree of change in the information structure of a poem which is read aloud twice. The main purpose is to discover the relationship between reading and the conceptual framework that the reader has in mind when transferring the written text into the spoken mode.

2. THE STRUCTURE OF INFORMATION

It seems to be a fact that all human beings possess their own ideas about the world which enable them to socialize with the rest of mankind. The preconceptions

that humans fabricate about the world tend to define the characteristics of the surrounding situation, so that social interaction may suffer the least possible difficulties in daily communication. These intuitions are based on information items that, when put together, make up the individual's social image.

The dynamics of information stands within two clearly defined axes: what is known and predictable, and what is unknown or unpredictable. According to Halliday (1985), the interplay between both sides of the scale is what generates information from the linguistic and conceptual point of view.

In the spoken language, the structure of information is realised by means of intonation, especially by the placement of the Tonic; this mechanism forms the system of Tonicity. The Tonic marks the point of major interest in a given stretch of language, which is called the Tone Group. The Tone Group defines the boundaries of each information unit.

According to Halliday (1970) the Tonic element can be distinguished because it is the predominant part of the Tone Group, and is always a salient syllable: longer, louder and with the widest pitch range of the whole Tone Group. Its function is that of signalling the point of major interest in the Tone Group. Making a word prominent, whether it is a closed-class or an open-class item, always constitutes a meaningful choice and implies a choice in the final semantic load of the message.

The Tone Group may consist of either one or two information foci, the latter forming Compound Tone Groups. The Focus of a Tone Group signals the new information to which the listener should pay attention to (Fries, 1990).

Information in language can be distributed in different units. The information unit, which in English coincides with the Tone Group, reveals the points of information that the speaker has chosen to highlight. The written language orients the reader towards these peaks of information by means of other devices, such as punctuation, spacing formats, and capitalisation. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that grammar also contributes to the coherent transmission of information by means of such devices as the passive, cleft and pseudo-cleft sentences, branching and other such syntactic strategies.

The kind of new information that the speaker wants to give may be cognitive, achieved by adding new elements of knowledge, or grammatical, achieved by adding mood or polarity features. In this process there is always an overlap between the speaker's and the recipient's worlds; however, it is always the speaker who is the source of the information structure, and the one who chooses to present the New starting from his/her appreciations of the exophoric and endophoric elements of the situation.

The Tonic element tends to be placed at the end of the Tone Group (unmarked

position), since the information structure unfolds from the known part (the Given) towards the New. The reason for this organization is to guide the recipient with the minimum loss of information in what is called «the principle of communicative dynamism» developed by Firbas (1970). Sometimes the unmarked organization of information is changed for reasons of contrast or emphasis and the Tonic element appears in a different (marked) position.

On the whole, most linguists accept that the structure of information develops from Given towards New information. Nevertheless, there are many approaches as to the deep meaning of these two concepts, and of the linguistic and extra-linguistic ways to achieve recoverability of information (see Brown et al., 1980; Brown and Yule, 1983; Danes, 1974; Halliday, 1968b; Halliday and Hasan, 1976; and Prince, 1981). The theoretical discussion on these issues, although interesting, is not within the scope of this article which will use the basic concept of Given and New as accepted by most scholars.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE EXPERIMENT

The aim of the experiment, which forms part of a larger study (Romero Trillo, 1990), was to investigate the way in which intonation, in this case Tonicity, reflected the interpretation that the reader assigned to a poem.

With regard to the choice of participants, it was decided to choose two persons who felt attracted to reading poetry. Eventually two girls of the same age, twenty-one were chosen, with the same educational background and from approximately the same socio-economic environment.

In the original study each girl selected two poems, one to read herself, and one to be read by the other girl. It is important to point out that the poem to be exchanged was not shown to the other subject until the very moment of reading it, in order to check if there might be a difference of whether the poem was known or not beforehand. In fact, this variable was not significant in my data, since both sets of poems held the same kind of variation in the choice of the information structure.

The recording procedure was the following, one girl would read a poem, after which, we would engage in a discussion in order to see what the poems meant for each of them. After the discussion, the same girl would read the poem again. Both readings, complemented with the discussion, formed the basis of my analysis. In the present article I will analyse the first poem of the study, which had been chosen by one of the readers herself.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE POEM «AFTER WE'VE GONE»

In the present analysis the Tonic element will be signalled with capital letters, and the Tone Group boundaries with two strokes (//). A single stroke (/) will signal the foot boundary, and the numbers attached to the beginning of the Tone Group will represent the Tone used in the reading as described in Halliday (1967 and 1970).

Although my main concern is the study of Tonicity, I will use the contrasts and choices expressed by the systems of Tonality, i.e. the division of the Tone Group into a succession of feet; and Tone, i.e. the variation in pitch of the Tonic segment in the Tone Group. These other systems will help to round off the analysis, as in each utterance the speaker has to make a selection from each of them at the same time.

4.1. First reading

²//WHO will/live in¹//OUR/house//
¹//After/we've/GONE//
²//^Will they have/green/PLAStic
 Ins¹//tead of a/LAWN?//

²//WHO will/live in ¹//OUR/house//
⁴//After the/WARS?//
²//^Will there be mu/TATIONS
 That¹³//CRAWL on all /FOURS//

¹//^Will the/shiny robot/WORKers
 Be³//dreaming/STRANGE,¹//new/DREAMS?//
²//^Will the/Pigeons,³//big as/TURkeys//
¹³//ROOST on our/ancient/BEAMS?//

¹//Who will/use our/KITchen?//
¹//What will they/COOK?//
¹//Who will/sleep in/OUR room
 And¹//how will they/LOOK?//

¹³//^Will they/feel our/ghosts dis/TURbing
 Their/CYbernetic/years//.
¹³//^With the/Echoes of our/LAUGHter
 And the¹³//SHAdows of our/TEARS?//

²//^Will there/still be/LOvers?//
²//Who will/sing our/SONGS?//
¹//Who will/live in/OUR house//
¹//After/we've/GONE?//

In the first stanza we find five different Tone Groups which denote five units of information in the four lines of the stanza. The subject of the first clause, «who», carries the Tonic, which in WH-questions is typical of echo questions. This markedness is reinforced by the fact that the Tone Group bears Tone 2, which is also a feature of echo-questions. The reader commented that the topic dealt with by the poem had often puzzled her, and that is why the stressed «who» may refer to some entity thought about in advance.

The second Tone Group in the stanza also contains marked focus, since the Tonic does not fall on the final lexical item. The Tonic lies on «our», stressing the possession towards the house. In this way, the focus of information, the New, lies on the actors of a hypothetical activity or state, «who» and «our».

The rest of the stanza has unmarked Tonicity. In the discussion, however, the reader emphasized the words «plastic» and «lawn», while criticizing the use of artificial plants. It is very likely that, had these words not appeared in final position, they would have had marked Tonicity.

The second stanza bears a parallel structure in Tonality, The Tonics of the first line also lie on «who» and «ours», emphasizing again the newness of these elements for the reader. The last line of the stanza has a compound Tone Group with the Tonics on «crawl» and «fours», stressing the strange nature of the inhabitants. In the discussion the reader commented that she had often thought about the advent of a war, and of its dreadful consequences.

In the third stanza the reader makes seven different Tone Groups. The first line has unmarked Tonicity, the Tonic being on «workers». This means that the whole syntactic unit to which this word belongs should be regarded as New, that is, «the shiny robot workers». The fact that this Tone Group is read with Tone 1, rather than with Tone 2, indicates that the speaker wants to emphasize the importance of the message.

The second line is composed of two Tone Groups, both of them unmarked. The first one has Tone 3 and follows a pause that the speaker makes at the end of the first line. This first Tone Group seems to be dependent on the information that follows which has the Tonic on «dreams». The fact that the adjective «strange» is a modifier of the noun «dreams» may be the reason why it is read with Tone 3, and not with Tone 1.

In the third line we find again two Tone Groups with unmarked Tonicity, which means that we may consider the whole line as new information. The new in this case is represented by the words «pigeons» and «turkeys». The second Tone Group is also uttered with Tone 3, as if it contained subsidiary information to the previous elements. We could consider this Tone Group as a qualifier in syntactic terms, because it is a non-defining relative clause with an elliptical relative pronoun.

The last line of the third stanza has a compound Tone Group, with the Tonics on «roost» and «beams». The Tone used is 13, and it is noticeable that the word «roost» appears in the first position, therefore it is heavily marked. We should regard this element as new information, although it may seem a bit strange, since pigeons and turkeys have roosting as one of their habits. In my opinion this enhancement of the word «roost» may just be a parallelism with the structure of the previous stanza.

In the discussion, the reader commented that the idea of «shiny robot workers» was quite naive. She emphasized that humans may have machines to help them in their daily tasks, but that these machines would never be human-like robots. She also emphasized the contraposition of the new dreams that would take place in the ancient beams. In her opinion, the whole poem seems to be a criticism of the future and expresses a worry of what is to come after our generation.

The fourth stanza is the most unmarked in Tonality, Tonicity, Tone and syntax. Each line corresponds to a different clause, the last two being coordinated ones. Each clause carries the Tonic in the last element, except for the third one, which has the Tonic on the pronoun «our», following the examples discussed above. All the clauses are WH-questions with Tone 1, which is the neutral Tone for this kind of question.

Stanzas one and four are very related in their meaning, and this is the reason why the reader uses unmarked intonation as she considers that many of the elements are already Given. For example, the interrogative pronouns do not carry the Tonic, because it has been made explicit before that the identity of the new people and their habits was the main concern of the reader.

The fifth stanza shows a very interesting intonation pattern, because we only find three Compound Tone Groups, all of them with Tone 13. The Tonics fall on «disturbing», «cybernetic», «echoes», «laughter», «shadows» and «tears».

The Nominal Group «their cybernetic years» is read with Tone 3, which is unusual, because this tone signals secondary information and this Nominal Group functions as a Direct Object with a primary function in the clause. The Tonic in this group falls markedly on «cybernetic». The unmarked distribution would have been with the Tonic on «years», and «cybernetic» therefore modifying the head of the Nominal Group. However, the reader admits during the discussion she does not know the meaning of the word «cybernetic», and that she did not have time to look it up in the dictionary. This is the reason why this word is marked as New.

The last stanza of the poem is characterised by having unmarked Tonality and Tonicity.

Second Reading

²//WHO will/live in¹//OUR/house//
¹//After/we've/GONE//
²//^Will they have/green/PLAStic
 Ins¹//tead of a/LAWN?//

²//WHO will/live in¹//OUR/house//
⁴//After the/WARS?//
¹//^Will there be mu/TATions
 That²//CRAWL on all³//FOURS//

¹//^Will the/shiny robot/WORKers//
¹//Be/DREAming/strange,¹//new/DREAMS?//
¹//^Will the/PIgeons,³//big as/TURkeys//
¹³//ROOST on our/ancient/BEAMS?//

²//WHO will/use our/kitchen?//
¹³//WHAT will they/COOK?//
¹³//Who will/sleep in/OUR room
 And¹³//HOW will they/LOOK?//

²//^Will they/feel our/ghosts dis/TURbing
 Their¹//CYbernetic/year.
 With the¹³//Echoes of our/LAUGHter
 And the¹³//SHAdows of our/TEARS?//

²//^Will there/still be/LOvers?//
²//WHO will/sing our/songs?//
²//WHO will/live in/our house//
¹//After/we've/GONE?//

In this part of the discussion I will only stress the main points that show differences with the first reading.

The first difference we may notice with regard to the intonation pattern is in the fourth line of the second stanza, in which the reader makes two Tone Groups instead of a compound one. She uses Tone 3 for both Tone Groups, and makes «fours» be an independent piece of information, a New on its own. The fact that both Tone Groups have Tone 3 is because they belong to a defining relative clause and are, therefore, subsidiary information.

The third stanza contains more modification than the previous ones. In the second line the reader uses Tone 1, instead of Tone 3. This situation enhances the markedness of the question, since Tone 2 is unmarked for polar questions. The use of Tone 3 makes the structure marginally marked. However, the use of Tone 1 in this Tone Group correlates with the other two parts of the clause which, being independent Tone Groups, both use Tone 1 likewise.

Another change in this second line is that the Tonic of the first Tone Group

has changed from «strange» to «dreaming», which leaves the adjective «strange» as given information. This may be due to the fact that it was pointed out in the discussion and in the first reading that the new inhabitants would be «strange» in many ways, and therefore the important thing to say is that the robots will also have the capacity to dream.

The third line also undergoes a change of Tone, from 2 to 1. Since it is a polar question, this means that the reader marks the question in a evident way.

The fourth stanza sees several changes. The most important difference in comparison with the first reading is that the interrogative pronouns receive the Tonics throughout the four lines. These peaks of New Information share the protagonism in the last three lines with the words «cook», «our», and «look», forming Compound tone Groups with Tone 13.

The first line of this fourth stanza also changes its previous Tone and becomes marked with Tone 2. This change in Tonality, Tonicity and Tone relates to the importance that the reader has ascribed to her house during the discussion. It is not only that the reader has shifted the points of major information focus, but also that she has created more points of prominence by the use of double Tonicity in the same Tone Group.

In the fifth stanza the reader has produced four Tone Groups, with identical allocation of Tonics. The only difference is that the first Tone Group, which was compound in the first reading, is now single and uses Tone 2 for a Polar Question. The second Tone Group still marks «cybernetic» as New, subsuming the whole impression of a new world.

Finally, in the last stanza the interrogative pronouns also receive the Tonics, and become the «News» in their Tone Groups. In fact, the entities «songs» and «house» are already quite known for the listener, therefore the reader makes a parallel Tonicity structure to that of the previous stanza. Both Tone Groups get Tone 2, which indicates the importance that the reader allocates to the meaning of these pronouns.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The outcome of the present analysis suggests that the intonative features of the readings do in fact have a close relationship with the reader's understanding of the poem.

In the experiment we have appreciated a reduction of Tone Groups in the second reading of the poem. This fact confirms the hypothesis that the reader treats more information as Given after the discussion, since there is no need to mark so many intems with Tonics as in the first reading of the poem.

On the whole, we may deduce that reading aloud is a useful tool to ascertain what a person thinks and expects from a written text by means of the intonation markers used.

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