

## Relative Importance in English and Persian: Thematization or Tonic Prominence?

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### Abstract

There are two common ways to assign relative importance in spoken language: tonic prominence and thematization. The former is expressing the main points of information units in speech (Halliday, 1994), and the latter is putting an element at the beginning of a clause. This study explores how relative importance is realized in English and Persian. It also investigates how advanced Persian learners of English assign it in English. 20 Persian declaratives were given to 30 Persian Native Speakers (PNSs) to assign relative importance in whatever way. Results revealed that PNSs more thematize rather than use tonic prominence. Then, the English equivalents of the 20 Persian declaratives were given to 10 English Native Speakers (ENSs). Results demonstrated that ENSs thematize more too. Finally, the same English clauses were given to 20 learners of English. Contrary to expectations, results showed their greater use of tonic prominence.

**Keywords:** *thematization, tonic prominence, relative importance, speech, clause declaratives*

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### 1. Introduction

Halliday (1967b) expounded on the notion of Information Structure (IS) that was first put forth by the Prague School. Since then a number of different terms such as topic and comment, focus and background, theme and rheme, new and given have been attributed to IS as an attempt to divide different categories of clauses. Additionally, IS has been referred to as information packaging by Chafe (1974), and in a related manner, some Prague School linguists have referred to it as Functional Sentence Perspective (Sgall, Hajicova, and Panenova, 1986). According to Lambrecht (1994), there are difficulties in scrutinizing information structure in part due to the fact that IS

endeavors to cast light on the relationship between linguistic forms and the mental states of speakers and hearers, and as a result, IS deals simultaneously with formal and communicative aspects of language (p. 1).

According to Prince (1981), IS or packaging has to do with "the tailoring of an utterance by a sender to meet the particular assumed needs of the intended receiver. It reflects the sender's hypotheses about the receiver's assumptions" (Prince, 1981, p. 224). It is of great import to note that the study of information structure in Prince's sense is abstracted from lexical and propositional content in itself but concerns the way such content is transmitted. In other words, in line with Lambrecht (1994), information structure does not put the interpretation of words and sentences in given conversational contexts before other things; rather, it assigns priority to the discourse circumstances which express pieces of propositional information by means of different possible morphosyntactic or prosodic forms (p. 5). Accordingly, Lambrecht defines information structure as:

That component of sentence grammar in which propositions as conceptual representations of states of affairs are paired with lexicogrammatical structures in accordance with the mental states of interlocutors who use and interpret these structures as units of information in given discourse contexts. (Lambrecht, 1994, p. 5)

Pursuing the Prague School, functionalists claim that all languages identify clauses as messages through thematic structures. In other words, a clause is implemented as a message via achieving a communicative event albeit this communicative event may be realized differently in different languages. In accordance with Halliday (1994), the thematic structure of a clause encompasses theme and rheme or topic and comment in lieu. Halliday defines theme as the most salient element in a clause from which the message commences; it is the element on which the whole clause hinges. In the same way, what is left in a clause or whatever follows the theme is called rheme which develops the theme. In English, as many other languages, the theme can be distinguished from the remainder of the clause by its position so that in unmarked situations, more often than not, the theme occupies the first position of the clause and happens to coincide with the subject although it can be moved to other clausal positions. These non-canonical word orders render the clause marked. Therefore, what is chosen as the theme tends to be positioned first. This signal per se suffices to illuminate the theme; however, there is a tendency in spoken language for the theme to be marked off by the intonation pattern as well (Halliday, 1994, p. 37).

Halliday (1994) emphasizes that it is the functions rather than the syntactic positions that determine which element in a clause stands as the theme. He contends that:

Within Theme + Rheme configuration, the Theme is the starting-point for the message; it is the ground from which the clause is taking off. So part of the meaning of any clause lies in which element is chosen as its Theme. There is a difference in meaning between *a halfpenny is the smallest English coin*, where *a halfpenny* is Theme, and *the smallest English coin is a halfpenny*, where *the smallest English coin* is Theme. The difference may be characterized as "thematic"; the two clauses differ in their choice of theme. (Halliday, 1994, p. 38)

He keeps on stating that:

There is no automatic reason why the Theme function should be realized in this way; there are languages which have a category of theme functionally similar to that of English but which nevertheless express it in a quite different way. But if in any given language the message is organized as a Theme-Rheme structure . . . , then it seems natural that the position for the Theme should be at the beginning, rather than at the end or at some other specific point (ibid).

According to the aforementioned quotations, as a functionalist, Halliday (1994) believes in an iconic relation between different elements in a clause in that he holds that it seems that the theme-rheme configuration is natural, hence themes precede rhemes. By the virtue of this iconicity or non-arbitrariness, the packaging of information is universal, not language-specific, although there are exceptions to this fact.

Amazingly, within the formalist camp, there have been some calls for softening attitudes so that syntacticians may incorporate into their work functionalist standpoints in general and information structure views in particular. In this vein, Rizzi (1997) has introduced split complementizer phrase (CP) hypothesis, claiming that the CP layer of clause structure should be split into four projections, viz. force phrase, topic phrase, focus phrase, and finiteness phrase. With regard to how information is packaged, Rizzi holds that focus position in a clause is a ground on which emphasized elements land; that is, this position which occupies the specifier position within a focus phrase projection signifies new or unfamiliar position. For example, in cleft sentences such as "It is *Shiraz* that tourists like to visit", the word *Shiraz* is said to occupy focus position. On the other hand, Rizzi (1997) defines topic phrase projection as a constituent that contains the topic of the clause. Topic is an expression which represents old or familiar information

moved to the beginning of the clause through the process of topicalization. For instance, in the sentence "*Shiraz*, most tourists like to visit", the expression *Shiraz* is said to occupy topic position.

Given the above proposition, languages are equipped with a number of tools to highlight information within a given clause. In other words, addressers (speakers/writers) resort to these tools to make their addressees (listeners/readers) construe some specific element in a clause as relatively important from their viewpoints. The most frequently used ways whereby addressers assign relative importance to an element in a clause entail:

1. Thematization (also Fronting or Topicalization): *An Omelet*, Mary cooked.
2. Tonic prominence (also Tonic accent): Mary cooked *an OMELET*.
3. Cleft sentence: It was *an omelet* that Mary cooked.
4. Pseudo-cleft sentence: *An Omelet* was what Mary cooked or What Mary cooked was an *omelet*.
5. Passivization: *An Omelet* was cooked by Mary.

This study aims at revealing how English and Persian native speakers assign relative importance to a given element in a spoken clause. To this end, this contrastive investigation brings under scrutiny only thematization and tonic prominence as two common ways through which interlocutors highlight relative importance.

Concerning thematic structures, quite a number of research studies have been conducted. Researchers took into consideration the tonic elements in the tone groups through contrastive meaning of a focused element in a message (Bolinger, 1972; Cooper, Eady and Mueller, 1985; Cruttenden, 1997; Halliday, 1970, 1994). Another approach to the study of thematic structures is equating tonicity to the status of information within which the tonic element spotlights the new information and what remains is given information which receives no emphasis (Bolinger, 1972; Chafe, 1974; Gussenhoven, 1984; Halliday, 1967a, 1970, 1994; Heldner and Strangert, 2001; Ladd, 1980, 1996; Nooteboom and Krut, 1987). Lieberman (1963) has stated that the status of information relates to the emphasis which some specific elements of a message receive. He revealed that those words which can be predicted in reading, viz. the given information, are read more rapidly than those words which are uttered for the first time, viz. the new information. Moreover, Riesco-Bernier and Romero-Trillo (2008) carried out a study regarding the acoustics of newness and its pragmatic implications in classroom discourse.

A number of other researchers have also embarked on thematization from different perspectives. Collins (2006) and Weinert and Miller (1996), for instance, studied cleft structures. Taylor (1983) has held that thematic

patterning which is affiliated with certain genre and generic structure may be typical of that genre. In her study to analyze student essays, North (2005) took the approach suggesting that subjects are to be deemed necessarily thematic (Martin and Rose, 2003; Rose, 2001). The justification for such an approach is that there is often a distinction between unmarked (subject) themes which are associated with topic continuity and marked or circumstantial themes which are affiliated with discontinuity (Gosden, 1992, 1993; Lowe, 1987). Wennerstrom (1994), too, carried out a study on the intonation of Spanish, Japanese, and Thai speakers of English.

Pursuing the studies so far conducted on thematic structures and intonation, it goes without saying that contrastive studies of thematization and tonic prominence respecting relative importance in language in general and contrastive studies on English and Persian in particular have been consigned to oblivion. Granted that there exists a dearth of research concerning how English and Persian assign relative importance in speech, there is an opaque picture of the way the two languages differ in this regard. In the bargain, material designers are believed to have failed to maneuver appropriately on the ways through which relative importance is assigned in textbooks and oral materials. Accordingly, Persian learners of English, although bombarded with a host of explanations about language usage, face difficulties acquiring native-like oral proficiency as far as showing relative importance in English speech is concerned.

Due to the paucity of comparative studies on English and Persian thematization and intonation, this study attempts to tease out the main ways by means of which English Native Speakers (ENSs) and Persian Native Speakers (PNSs) assign relative importance to a specific element in a clause while speaking. In other words, the study tries to find out how English and Persian differ or resemble each other with regard to utilizing the tools at hand to show the important elements in clauses as intended by speakers. Moreover, the present study makes endeavors to determine whether, in speech, advanced Persian learners of English are able to assign relative importance to given elements in clauses as ENSs do. That is to say, advanced Persian learners of English will encounter difficulty assigning relative importance to given elements in English speech unless English and Persian bear resemblance to each other in their use of thematization or tonic prominence. Accordingly, the study is tempted to respond to the following questions:

1. How do English and Persian differ in assigning relative importance in speech?
2. Can Persian advanced learners of English assign relative importance in English speech as English native speakers do? Why?

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1. Participants*

To conduct the study, initially we selected 30 Persian native speakers who were both males and females, all aged above 25 years. They were all educated individuals and asked to furnish some given elements in Persian speech with relative importance. They were required to indicate how they would assign relative importance for some specific elements underscored in the 20 Persian clauses administered to them in a questionnaire. We asked them to look at the questionnaire and read the statements to assign relative importance to the underscored parts in whatever way they thought would be appropriate. We tape-recorded their voice for later analysis. The recordings for each participant were carried out separately.

Besides, the study included 10 English native speakers, all educated as well. Six of them were Britons and four of them were Canadians working for the Oil Company in Iran. They aged between 32 to 46 years. We also administered them the English counterpart of the same questionnaire and asked them to determine in what ways, in spoken language, they would assign relative importance to some specific elements underscored in the 20 English clauses. The same recordings were carried out as well for each of them. On the other hand, 20 male and female English teachers from different universities who were considered as advanced Persian learners of English were selected. They all had more than five years of teaching experience. We also gave them the same questionnaire once administered to ENSs and recorded their voice. This step aimed to investigate how they could assign relative importance in English speech.

### *2.2. Instruments*

The materials utilized for this study embodied two separate questionnaires. The questionnaires were intended to unearth how Persian and English differ or resemble each other in providing relative importance to some given elements in speech. The first questionnaire included twenty Persian declarative clauses of which some elements in the clauses were underscored to be afforded relative importance in whatever way the participants would deem acceptable. This questionnaire was administered to 30 Persian native speakers. In addition, the second questionnaire, administered to 10 English native speakers, comprised the English equivalents of the clauses in the first questionnaire (see appendix). Likewise,

the same elements in the clauses were underscored to be assigned relative importance. The following declaratives exemplify the clauses included in the questionnaires:

1. We can see the ecological succession *all around us*.
2. He entered the conference hall *joyously*.
3. That laptop was *what my mother gave to me*.

The second questionnaire was also assigned to 20 advanced Persian learners of English to find out whether they could signal relative importance in English speech as ENSs do. Moreover, we recorded all the participants' voices by a voice recorder to make sure that their productions were as natural as the real contexts. We surveyed Interchange Series (Richards, 2005) to find out how and to what extent the textbooks include the relative importance.

### 2.3. Procedure

The present study is concerned with comparing English and Persian in terms of showing relative importance in speech. Following Halliday (1994), the study only takes into account two major ways of furnishing clauses with relative importance in speech, namely thematization and tonic prominence, from the categorization proposed above. Accordingly, "in a declarative clause, the typical pattern is one in which Theme is conflated with Subject; for example, *little Bo-peep has lost her sheep*, where *little Bo-peep* is both Subject and Theme" (Halliday, 1994, p. 43). This configuration of theme and subject is referred to as the unmarked theme of declarative clauses. To pursue Halliday, the subject is the element chosen as the theme unless there is satisfying reason for something else to be the theme. In declarative clauses, the theme that is something other than the subject is referred to as a marked theme. Halliday believes that adverbial groups and prepositional phrases functioning as adjuncts in clauses are the most usual forms of marked theme. For example:

4. *Merrily* we roll along (an adverbial group)
5. *On Saturday night* I lost my wife (a prepositional phrase) (p. 44)

He further adds that the elements which are thematized in clauses either express some kind of setting for the clause, or express a feature of contrast, or express the significance of what we are saying (relative importance). For example:

6. *Talent* Mr. Micawber has (expressing setting for the clause)
7. *Capital* Mr. Micawber has not (expressing contrast)

8. *Probably* they didn't understand, *therefore* the scheme was abandoned (expressing relative importance) (Halliday, 1994, pp. 48, 50).

Halliday (1994) points out that each information unit is comprised of an obligatory new element plus an optional given element. This structure is essentially natural (non-arbitrary) in that the new element is marked by prominence and the given element precedes the new. According to this universal configuration, each information unit is realized as a pitch contour, or tone. Within the tone group, one foot which signifies the rhythm of language carries the pitch movement, or the change of direction. This feature is known as tonic prominence. In speech, the typical sequence of informational elements is given followed by new and the new element is marked by tonic prominence which in unmarked situations falls on the last functional element of clause structure in the information unit. However, it is also possible to have given material following the new and thereby the accented element which is new moves toward the beginning of the clause to capture a variety of rhetorical effects. In other words, in marked situations, the speakers can place tonic prominence in elements other than the last element in the clause in order to assign relative importance to the accented element. For example:

9. //^ it needs to have / **love** // (Unmarked information structure)

10. //^ if / you sug/**gest** it's / beautiful // they / **see** it as / beautiful // (Marked information structure) (Halliday, 1994, pp. 296-298).

For the first phase of the study, to analyze the participants' speech based on the categorization of assigning relative importance provided earlier, we recorded their voices. As for the second phase, we also conducted the same recordings of 10 English native speakers to reveal how English spotlights the relative importance in spoken declarative clauses. On the last phase, we gave the second questionnaire to 20 English teachers. We recorded their voices as well. Then, we analyzed the participants' responses to discover the answers to the questions raised in the study. It must be pointed out that we solely focused on and compared thematization and tonic prominence in this study. Finally, we conducted a case study on the ways through which relative importance is provided in English textbooks. To this end, we selected the Interchange Series (Richards, 2005) because they are the most commonly used textbooks in Iran's EFL context. In addition, three raters decided on the reliability of the categorization of the declaratives in the questionnaires.

### **3. Data Analysis**

#### *3.1. Results of Persian Native Speakers' Responses to the Questionnaire*



As illustrated in Table 1, the majority of participants used thematization rather than tonic prominence to assign relative importance while speaking. The Chi-square observed which is well high above the critical value also indicates this fact. Therefore, the results revealed that Persian native speakers tend to more or less thematize some elements in clauses to assign relative importance in speech.

**Table 1.** *Responses of Persian Native Speakers*

Percentage of thematizati	Percentage of tonic prominenc	Percentage of cleft sentences	Percentage of pseudo-cleft	Percentage of passivizati	Chi-square observed	Chi-square critical value
54.5%	36.33%	3.66%	2.33%	3.16%	2059.156	9.487

### 3.2. Results of English Native Speakers' Responses to the Questionnaire

Table 2 shows that, like Persian native speakers, English native speakers agreed on applying thematization more than tonic prominence in order to assign relative importance in speech. The high Chi-square, too, substantiates this fact. Needless to say, when speaking, native English speakers may tend to thematize some elements in clauses to assign relative importance.

**Table 2.** *Responses of English Native Speakers*

Percentage of thematizati	Percentage of tonic prominenc	Percentage of cleft sentences	Percentage of pseudo-cleft	Percentage of passivizati	Chi-square observed	Chi-square critical value
48%	38%	3%	2%	9%	676.84	9.487

### 3.3. Results of Responses of Persian Advanced Learners of English to the Questionnaire

As sketched in Table 3, in a sharp contrast to expectations, most advanced Persian learners of English made extensive use of tonic prominence in place of thematization to assign relative importance in speech. This controversial finding is approved by the Chi-square observed.

**Table 3.** *Responses of Persian Advanced Learners of English*

Percentage of thematizati on	Percentage of tonic prominenc	Percentage of cleft sentences	Percentage of pseudo-cleft	Percentage of passivizati	Chi-square observed	Chi-square critical value
31.25%	61.5%	1.75%	1.25%	4.25%	1391.26	9.487

#### 4. Discussion

According to the results, regarding the two questions raised earlier in the study, thematization, and not tonic prominence, is a more-employed tool in both English and Persian through which relative importance is assigned in speech. In other words, it is argued that English and Persian approximately bear resemblance in this respect. This similarity can be well explained by reference to Halliday's (1994) claim that thematic structures are iconic. That is, the same way that the naturalness of causes preceding effects which are embedded in language is universal, addressers' tendency to position elements at the beginning of clauses to prioritize them and signal their importance to the addressees is shared among most languages including English and Persian principally due to the fact that clause-initial positions are universally associated with substantiation of important elements by addressers.

In addition, Lambrecht (1994) contends that in specific discourse contexts, interlocutors tailor their mental states with specific lexicogrammatical structures to impose specific rhetorical effects on their listeners. In a similar vein, English and Persian speakers make a bolder use of thematization so that they would convey the intended important elements in a more efficacious way to the other side of the conversation.

The second question of the study pertains to whether Persian advanced learners of English can assign relative importance in English speech as English native speakers do. The present study revealed the fact that Persian advanced learners of English did not employ thematization properly to assign relative importance in their English speech which is contrary to the findings of the first two phases of the study and to the expectations that they might utilize more thematization instead of tonic prominence due to positive transfer from Persian into English. In the same line with the study we carried out on the use of different ways to assign relative importance in English textbooks, one reason explaining the above finding may be that material designers have not taken heed of thematization in textbooks sufficiently; rather, the majority of textbooks have tackled relative importance chiefly

through tonic prominence. Consequently, Persian learners of English were not acquainted with thematization to illuminate relative importance. By virtue of the fact that these language learners are not made aware of thematization in English speech, they would rather make use of tonic prominence to spotlight relative importance in clauses.

The above claim can be explained by resort to Hoey's (2005) *lexical priming theory*, a new theory of the lexicon contrary to Chomskyan approach, in which the roles of grammar and lexis are reversed so that lexis is complexly and systematically structured and that grammar is an outcome of this lexical structure. Based on this theory, lexical items are acquired or lexically primed, in Hoey's terms, through an individual's encounters with the words in the appropriate contexts. Hoey asserts that "as a word is acquired through encounters with it in speech and writing, it becomes cumulatively loaded with the contexts and co-texts in which it is encountered, and our knowledge of it includes the fact that it co-occurs with certain other words in certain kinds of context. The same applies to word sequences built out of these words" (p. 8). Another characteristic of words, following Hoey's lexical priming theory, is that "every word is primed to occur in or avoid certain grammatical positions and functions; these are its colligations" (p. 13). This way, one can extend Hoey's theory to lexicogrammatical structures of language and claim that native speakers of both English and Persian, through picking up their languages as children growing up, have primarily primed the thematization of specific elements in clauses with assigning relative importance instead of applying tonic prominence to those elements. In other words, language speakers acquire that clause-initial positions in declaratives are suited for signaling the importance of some lexical elements and the addressers mental states to the addressees. Clause-initial positions are, therefore, primed as the colligations for assigning relative importance. However, the question is "how did Persian advanced learners of English fail to apply thematization in English speech?" Hoey's (2005) response is that primings may drift or crack. This means that primings are never a permanent feature of word sequences. He believes that our new experiences with words can weaken the primings "if the encounter introduces the word in an unfamiliar context or co-text if we have chosen in our own use of it to override its current priming" (Hoey, 2005, p. 9). Hoey maintains that "primings may crack, and one of the causes of cracking is education" (p. 11).

Following Hoey, it can be said that Persian advanced learners of English applied tonic prominence instead of thematization mainly due to the fact that their native Persian primings of clause-initial colligations to assign relative importance in speech had cracked and drifted into the application of tonic prominence. The logical reason explaining this drift of primings, as earlier mentioned, seems to be the fact that advanced learners had intensively

studied and deeply delved into the use of tonic prominence in their English textbooks.

### 5. Implications

This contrastive study suggests that EFL textbooks in general and oral materials in particular incorporate explicit instruction of the tools English employs to assign relative importance to some given elements in clauses. Material designers are especially recommended to utilize thematic structures which were shown to be the major way of showing relative importance in speech either explicitly or implicitly. We recommend teachers to use some consciousness raising techniques in their classrooms to acquaint their students with different ways of assigning relative importance in English especially thematization. For instance, teachers can ask students to compare different ways through which native speakers assign relative importance in English.

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### Appendix

#### *The English Version of the Questionnaire*

1. Habitat is *where an organism lives*.
2. Natasha hates *apples*.
3. Ashley is *the only clerk who can handle the situation*.
5. Wildlife ecology is *what we hear these days on radio or TV*.
6. The trees in the forest are *tremendously tall*.
7. John dropped out *through the lack of interest*.
8. A sparrow hawk hovers *over the hay field*.
9. There is a fabulous soccer mach *on TV* on Wednesday.
10. Nicole replied to *the questions which were difficult for the students*.
11. The college students like *this course* very much.
12. We can see the ecological succession *all around us*.
13. Retailers are *the ones that sell goods to the public*.
14. That laptop was *what my mother gave to me*.
15. The skunk seeks refuge *in a groundhog burrow*.
16. He entered the conference hall *joyously*.
17. The restaurant serves *hot and cold foods*.
18. A mature forest is *one example of a climax plant community*.
19. The students were given *difficult tests* this semester.
20. My friend John gave me *this nice pen* for my birthday.

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