

# FOCUS AND PERSPECTIVE IN THE SELECTION OF LEXICAL CONVERSES

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## 1. Introductory remarks

Lexical converseness is usually discussed in the context of sense relations of oppositeness together with such categories as complementarity and antonymy (cf. Lipka 2002, 164-165). The term was first introduced by Lyons (1968, 467) and later adopted by Apresjan (1974), Kastovsky (1981), Cruse (1986), and many other linguists. In logic, *converse relation* is a mirror-image relation, or function, in which the order of arguments is reversed. In language, this type of relation can be expressed either by grammatical means, namely, the passive voice, or lexical means, i.e. lexical converses. Lexical converses can be defined as pairs of words – typically verbs – describing one and the same situation but from the perspective of its different participants, e.g. *John precedes Bill – Bill follows John; He gave me an apple – I took an apple from him; I admire Irish literature – Irish literature appeals to me, etc.* This definition allows to treat them as denotative synonyms, or, in other words, as a means of synonymy in language (cf. Apresjan 1974). Semantically they stand in relational opposition (Palmer 1982; Cruse 1986); on the syntactic level a pair of sentences with lexical converses differ in the syntactic functions of the constituents denoting the same participants. Besides verbs, lexical converses can be nouns (*husband – wife, brother – sister, teacher – pupil*, which name the participants of a converse opposition and adverbs (*below – above*) or adjectives (*antecedent – consequent, elder – younger*); yet, verbal converses such as *buy – sell, lease – rent, send – receive, bequeath – inherit*, etc. are the most numerous and important ones. For this reason the study concerns exclusively verbal converses; it is based on a corpus of about seven hundred sentences selected from different texts in the English and Lithuanian languages.

Looking through contexts with lexical converses, it is easy to notice that in each particular case one member of a pair is selected and substitution is hardly possible. The purpose of this study is to reveal the factors, which determine the selection of one or the other member of the pair on the communicative level or, in other words, the pragmatic role of lexical converses.

## 2. The focus, or prominence, as a category of the communicative level

In order to determine the pragmatic role of lexical converses, I will use the notion focus and take into account the division of a sentence into “theme” and “rheme” (the functional sentence perspective). It should be pointed out that focus is one of the most abused terms in linguistic literature and a source

of constant confusion when the term is not properly explained. The confusion occurs, first of all, because the notion has obtained an interdisciplinary character by being used not only in pragmatics, but also in prosody, where it is extremely often the center of attention of the investigators (Vallduvi 1992; Holloway 1995; Zubizarreta 1998; Büring & Gutiérrez-Bravo 2001; Pereltsvaig 2002, to cite just a few).

The extent of the problem can be illustrated by the fact that Jeanette K. Gundel devoted a study to the question of how many independent, and linguistically relevant, notions of focus there are, what specific linguistic phenomena they are correlated with and in what way the different senses of the term are related. In her study she distinguishes three kinds of foci – psychological focus (current centre of attention), semantic focus (new information predicated about the topic), and contrastive focus (linguistic prominence for the purpose of contrast or emphasis) (Gundel 1999, 293). Yet, even these three distinct types do not exhaust the range of notions covered by the term as each time *focus* is used, a number of syntactic, semantic, intonational or pragmatic aspects have to be considered. The issue becomes even more complicated when a reader tries to see how the prosodic focus correlates with the pragmatic notions, especially those of topic and comment, or the theme and the rheme. Therefore, distinction of the different levels of analysis is essential.

For the purposes of this article, *focus* is understood as communicative prominence realized by marking one or another element of the sentence as the central or starting point, i.e. as the focus from the perspective of which the situation described by a particular verb is presented. In this sense the term *prominence* is closely related with *empathy*, which is understood as identification of one's self with the situation being described (cf. Kuno & Kaburaki 1977).

This narrow understanding of the focus, in the first place, contains the idea developed in the works of Fillmore (1968, 48), Aid (1973, 58-59), Nilsen & Nilsen (1975, 98), Leikina (1978, 134) and others that the main *formal means* for prominence, or focusing, in the communicative structure of the sentence is the 'weight' of syntactic functions. The function of the subject in a sentence and, accordingly, the nominative case is the most 'weighty' on the communicative level. The function of the direct object, which is usually expressed by the accusative, is the second to it, while the remaining syntactic functions are less 'weighty'. Compare:

(1a) *John has loaded the cart with apples.*<sup>2</sup>

(1b) *John has loaded apples on the cart.*

The denotative situation described is the same in both instances – John does something with apples and a cart. In both instances the situation is described from the perspective of the same participant, *John*, who remains the focus in both sentences. The sentence constituents *apples* and *cart*, however, have different weight because of the different syntactic functions they perform. In (1a), *cart* performs the function of direct object and thus is given more prominence and in (1b) a more significant communicative function is ascribed to *apples* (see also the discussion concerning interpretation of similar examples in Fillmore 1977, 79).

In this article I will argue that lexical converses, just like the passive, are a means of focusing a participant of the situation by turning a noun which names it into the subject of the sentence. Both

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<sup>1</sup> According to Gundel, semantic focus is the linguistic correlate of the pragmatic notion *comment*, i.e. the complement of the *topic* of the sentence (1999, 299). Cf. also a similar understanding of the focus by Pereltsvaig (2002): Focus is the new (non-presupposed, informative) part of the clause.

<sup>2</sup> I am particularly grateful to Mr. Craig Locatis and Mr. Tom Rindfleisch (USA) for their interpretations of the English examples. The Lithuanian sentences provided in this article are mainly from the book V. Sirijos Gira. Nakties muzika. 1-2, 1986. Vilnius.

types of sentences imply each other mutually, e.g. (2a) *He gave me a book* implies (2b) *I took a book from him*, and vice versa, the same as (3a) *He gave me a book* implies (3b) *A book was given to me*. Furthermore, in both types of opposition, the change of the subject signals a change in the perspective from which the situation is described and, thus, determines the choice of one or the other of the lexical converses. At the same time this type of permutation makes it possible for the speaker to assign a different theme/rheme structure to the noun in order to express a certain communicative intention (cf. Kastovsky 1981).

### 3. The functional sentence perspective and lexical converses

The division of a sentence into theme and rheme is closely related to and dependent on the regularities of a cohesive text. The sequence of words in a sentence depends on the preceding context and is determined by it. It is customary to say that the theme carries the given information already supplied by the context and the rheme carries the new information, which is the most important part from the viewpoint of the purpose of communication (Lithuanian Grammar 1997, 691).

The most important means of signifying the functional (theme – rheme) sentence perspective (FSP) in the written variety of language is word order, which can be neutral or inverted, i.e. unmarked or marked. In languages like English, German, or Swedish, where the word order is rather rigid, it serves to signal the syntactic function of the sentence constituents. The syntactic structure and the theme – rheme structure usually coincide: the subject (or subject group) corresponds to the theme and the predicate (or predicate group) corresponds to the rheme. In Lithuanian the theme – rheme structure coincides with the syntactic structure only in case of the neutral unmarked word order “subject – predicate – object”. The changes in the word order indicate the changes in the correspondence between the two types of structures.

In my corpus of sentences with lexical converses the majority of instances (about 80%) display neutral, unmarked word order; the most unusual order being “predicate – subject – object”:

- (4) ...*išsinuomojo jis kambarį prabangiame viešbutyje, įsitaisė katiliuką ir ėmė dairytis tinkamos partijos...*  
 ‘...rented he a room in a luxurious hotel, acquired a bowler hat and started looking around for a suitable candidate [for marriage]’

Thus, lexical converses are more often used to change the focus and not the theme – rheme structure, but the change of the focus always implies a change of the thematic content.

### 4. Correlation between the focus and the FSP in sentences with lexical converses

In the case of neutral unmarked word order, sentences with lexical converses differ with regard to the content of the theme and the rheme. Compare:

- | Theme = Subject           | Rheme = Vpredicative  |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| (5a) <i>John</i> (=focus) | <i>precedes Bill.</i> |
| (5b) <i>Bill</i> (=focus) | <i>follows John.</i>  |

These two converse sentences differ also in the choice of the focus, or the main participant of the situation on the communicative level: in (5a) the situation is described from the perspective of *John*; in (5b) it is described from the perspective of *Bill*. It is evident that in the case of neutral unmarked word order (SVO) the focus coincides with the theme in both sentences, but their content is different.

The change of the word order in converse sentences has no effect on prominence as the focus is always the subject, even in cases of inverted, marked word order as in the examples (6a) and (6b) below). However, in such instances the focus and the theme do not coincide.

In languages with the rigid word order it would be difficult to change it in such a way as to have the focus in the predicative position, but in Lithuanian, Russian, Italian or any other language with relative freedom of word order, “pragmatically driven” word order, it is quite possible. Compare:

	Theme = Subject	Rheme = Vpredicative
(6a)	<i>Ežeras</i> (=focus) 'The lake	<i>atspindi dangų</i> reflects the sky'
(6b)	<i>Dangus</i> (=focus) 'The sky	<i>atsispindi ežere</i> reflects itself in the lake'

But

(6c)	<i>Dangų</i> 'The sky	<i>atspindi ežeras.</i> (=focus) is reflected by the lake
(6d)	<i>Ežere</i> * 'In the lake	<i>atsispindi dangus</i> (=focus) reflects itself the sky'

The sentences under comparison, i.e. (6a) and (6b), are of the same type as (5a) and (5b), i.e. the theme coincides with the focus in both sentences, although the focus is expressed by a different noun in subject position. In examples (6c) and (6d) the word order is not neutral but marked. Here the theme and the focus do not coincide. It is notable that in the English sentences, where the inverted word order is restricted lexically, the same information structure can be expressed with the help of a grammatical means, the passive, which is another proof that both lexical and grammatical converseness serve the same communicative goal.

Our analysis has revealed that, no matter what word order is used, the selection of the member of the converse opposition always depends on which participant of the denotative situation is more important to the speaker who is building his sentence on that basis. Compare:

- (7a) *Jis nusipirkdavo naują knygą kiekvieną savaitę*  
'He used to buy a new book every week'
- (7b) *Naują knygą jis nusipirkdavo kiekvieną savaitę*  
'\*A new book he used to buy every week'

If the speaker prefers to describe the situation from the point of view of another participant of the situation, the other member of the converse pair (*sell*) will be selected. Accordingly, a noun naming that participant of the situation will serve as the subject of the sentence. Compare: (8) *With a smile, a young shop-assistant would sell a book to him every week...*

In written texts the author's point of view finds its expression in the sequence of foci in the related sentences and in the correlation between the theme and rheme in a coherent text.

## 5. Interchangeability of lexical converses

Logically there are four possible schemas reflecting the simplest contextual relations in two adjacent sentences. They are as follows:

- (1) schema T1 – T2, when the prominent noun (focus) is the theme both in the first and in the following sentence;
- (2) schema T1 – R2, when the prominent noun (focus) is the theme of the first sentence and the rheme of the following sentence;

- (3) schema R1 – T2, when the prominent noun (focus) is the rheme of the first sentence and the theme of the following one; and
- (4) schema R1 – R2 is realized when the prominent noun (focus) is the rheme of the first and of the following sentence (cf. Sevbo 1969, 29).

I must admit that in the corpus I have no instances of the last schema, while the other three are amply represented.

In order to demonstrate how the preceding context affects the selection of lexical converses, a few examples can be analysed. Schema T1 – T2 is realized in the following sentences:

- (9a) (1) *Barbara* was very enthusiastic. (2) *She* bought every little piece he showed her.

The theme of the first and of the following sentence is the same: Barbara/she. It also is the focus of each sentence, which correlates with the fact that the whole situation is described from the perspective of 'Barbara'. The choice of Barbara as the focus determines the use of the verb *buy* as it is the actions of Barbara that interest the author while *selling* of the goods is of no importance there. Replacement of the verb *buy* by its converse *sell* is impossible for two reasons of a different nature: (a) the second active participant of the *buy-sell* situation is not stated, (b) the rule of text cohesion would be broken. Compare:

- (9b) *Barbara* was very enthusiastic. [*The shop-assistant*] sold her every little piece he showed her.

Compare also:

- (10a) (1) *John* addressed the people and they testified (2) that *he* had lent the money to my parents.

- (10b) (1) *John* addressed the people and they testified (2) that *my parents* had borrowed the money from him.

Replacement is possible because the main relationship between the lender and the borrower is retained, and the change of the focus does not have a sense-destroying effect.

Schema T1 – R2:

- (11a) (1) *The school team* became champion of the game; (2) the finals were won by *William Johnson and Brian Young* [the team] scoring twice.

In this example the focus of the first sentence (the school team) is narrowed to two members of the team in the second. In English we can find the focus in the rheme only because the verb is used in the passive voice, yet replacement of the verb *win* by its converse counterpart *lose* is impossible as it would completely change the meaning of the text. Compare:

- (11b) (1) *The school team* became champion of the game; (2) the finals were lost by *William Johnson and Brian Young* scoring twice.

In the following example schema R1 – T2 is represented:

- (12a) (1) *Apie išnuomojamą kambarį Joanai pasakė draugė*: (2) *Marija* nuomojosi kambarį tame name jau daug metų.

'About the room for rent she has learnt from her friend: *Mary* has rented a room in that house for years.'

The second sentence is a kind of explanation of what is said in the previous discourse. In this case interchangeability of converses seems impossible for two reasons already mentioned with regard to the previous example, namely that the other participant of the situation (the landlord renting the room) is irrelevant. This explains that the rules of text cohesion and even the rhythmical pattern would be violated too:

(12b) (1) *Apie išnuomojamą kambarį Joanai pasakė draugė:* (2) *šeimininkas nuomojo jai kambarį tame name jau daug metų.*

'About the room for rent she has learnt from her friend: [The landlord] has let a room to her (=friend) in that house for years.'

One more example of the type:

(13a) (1) *Apie studentus ir Reiną jai buvo pasakojęs tėvas;* (2) *Daktaras Dubinskas (= tėvas) žavėjosi vokiečių kultūra ir Vokietijos miestais.*

'About the students and the Rhine she was told by her father; Doctor Dubinskas (= father) admired German culture and German towns.'

This example is similar to (12a) as the second sentence again is an explanation of the preceding one. This pattern seems to be quite typical: the goal of the author is to stress the attitude of the father (Doctor Dubinskas) to German culture and German towns (being aware of the fact that he is a Jew), rather than the effect of the German culture on him. Therefore the noun phrase *Doctor Dubinskas* is selected as the focus and, accordingly, the verb *žavėtis* 'admire' is preferred to its converse *žavėti* 'appeal', although logically the sentence would be equally correct:

(13b) (1) *Apie studentus ir Reiną jai buvo pasakojęs tėvas;* (2) *Daktara Dubinska žavėjo vokiečių kultūra ir Vokietijos miestais.*

'About the students and the Rhine she was told by her father; German culture and German towns appealed to Doctor Dubinskas.'

As I have mentioned, no instances of the fourth possible schema, R1 – R2, of focus distribution have been found among the sentences I have collected for the analysis. Maybe, it is impossible to realize this schema in contexts with lexical converses because the noun, which is chosen as the focus, can hardly be placed in sentence-final position, especially in English or other languages with rigid word order. It is even harder to think of an instance with the same noun in the final position in two adjacent sentences. Of course, my study is not conclusive and more research needs to be done in this area.

## 6. Conclusion

In this article an attempt has been made to show that sentences containing lexical converses differ in the communicative prominence, or focus, which is understood as a category of the communicative level closely related to empathy. Furthermore, lexical converses are a means of focusing a participant of the situation by turning a noun which names it into the subject of the sentence. This change in the prominence or focus (emphasis) determines the role of lexical converses on the communicative level.

The choice between lexical converses is determined by the communicative goal of the speaker, which also determines the preceding context and the direction of its development. In certain instances the context restricts interchangeability of converses very rigidly either because it would mean an interruption of cohesion or an abrupt change in the focus. In other instances the information structure is retained, and replacement of one converse by its counterpart seems possible if the main meaning of the sentence is not affected. There are other factors that influence selection and interchangeability of lexical converses, including syntactic, semantic and stylistic restrictions. They deserve further analysis.

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## FOKUSAS IR PERSPEKTYVA, PASIRENKANT LEKŠINĮ KONVERSYVĄ

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas veiksmažodinių leksinių konversyvų, tokių kaip *pirkti – parduoti, duoti – imti, atspindėti – atsispindėti, angl. lease – rent, bequeath – inherit* ir t.t., funkcionavimas rišiamame tekste. Abu konversinės poros nariai retai vartojami viename ir tame pačiame kontekste – paprastai pasirenkamas vienas arba kitas konversyvas. Darbe siekiama nustatyti, kas nulemia vieno ar kito konversyvo pasirinkimą, remiantis fokuso išskyrimo ir aktualiosios sakinio skaidos principais. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad leksiniai konversyvai, kaip ir neveikiamoji rūšis (gramatinė konversijos priemonė), atlieka tą patį vaidmenį komunikaciniame lygmenyje, o būtent, yra priemonė pabrėžti svarbiausią situacijos dalyvį, apiforminant jį pavadinantį daiktavardį sakinio veiksniu. Daroma išvada, kad vieno ar kito konversinės poros nario pasirinkimas priklauso nuo komunikacinio kalbėtojo tikslo, kurį, savo ruožtu, įtakoja ankstesnis kontekstas ir tolesnė minties slinktis. Kai kuriais atvejais kontekstas labai griežtai apriboja konversyvo pasirinkimą; kitais atvejais informacinė struktūra išlaikoma, todėl vieno konversyvo pakeitimas kitu yra galimas, jei nepakeičiama pagrindinė sakinio reikšmė.

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