



## **‘SO WHAT IS NEW?’ AN INITIAL STATEMENT ON SIGNALLING NEW INFORMATION IN NON-NATIVE SPOKEN ENGLISH**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The question in the title of this paper is deliberately meant to be ambiguous. In one sense, it refers to the problem of defining ‘new’ as a theoretical concept. Thus one reformulation of the question would be: What is new information? In another sense, it calls attention to the practical problem of identifying new information in naturally occurring language as against constructed examples. In this regard, the question can be reformulated again as: ‘What is new in what you’ve just said?’ In this paper our main aim is to look at the second problem in relation to non-native varieties of English, whose discourse patterns have been little studied to date.

Using evidence obtained from analysing Ghanaian English (GE), we argue that the realisation of new information in non-native varieties of English may differ significantly from what obtains in native varieties.

#### **1. TERMINOLOGY: Theme/rheme vs given/new information**

Before going on to discuss the results of the study, the distinction between theme/rheme on the one hand and given and new information on the other has to be drawn, since they tend to be conflated, and this can lead to a misunderstanding of the research presented in this paper.

The theme of a clause is the first grammatical unit in the clause and the rheme is the rest (Brown and Yule, 1983; Halliday, 1985; Sinclair, 1972). In declarative clauses the theme is usually the nominal group which is the grammatical subject, but it may be some other element such as the initial adjunct in:

1. *In the administrative field*, Peter [the Great] copied much from the west. (Owusu-Ansah, 1992).<sup>1</sup>

In interrogatives and imperatives the theme is usually an interrogative word and imperative form of the verb respectively (Brown and Yule, 1983).

What all these kinds of theme have in common is that they constitute the point of departure of the clause. They realise the 'given' information in the clause, which is that part of the message considered by the speaker to be recoverable in the immediate context of the discourse or the wider context of situation.<sup>2</sup> The rheme on the other hand is the part that carries the 'new information', or that part of the message considered to be newsworthy or worth paying attention to by the speaker (Halliday, 1985; Fries, 1990).

Thus, while 'theme' and 'rheme' are terms describing the linear arrangement of clauses (cf Brown and Yule, 1983) vis a vis their discourse functions (i.e the interface between syntax and discourse)<sup>3</sup>, 'given' and 'new' have to do with the information structure. The theme and rheme realise the given and new information respectively.

The distinction between rheme and new is a crucial one, because in practice the boundaries of the two do not always coincide. In particular, not everything in the rheme is picked upon as new information by the intonation and grammar of the language. This view clearly underlies Halliday's analysis of the intonation of English (Halliday, 1970) and it is one that will form the basis of the analysis of GE to be reported later.

## 2. LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

The ways in which new information is signalled in GE can be related to the linguistic characteristics of Ghanaian languages (GLs). The relevant points are that:

(a) In GLs vowel length is not phonemic as in English. Also, GLs are syllable-timed and tend to have a down-step intonational pattern. (Cf Kropp Dakubu, 1988). English, on the other hand, is a stress-timed language, with a tendency to fall off gradually towards the end of statements and non-polar questions.<sup>4</sup>

(b) Though the normal word order in GLs is similar to that of English (i.e. SVO), nearly every word belonging to a major word class can be moved to the initial position for the purpose of emphasising it in GLs. Although in English the norm is for the stress to fall on the last lexical item, there is the option of emphasising any other item in a clause through sentence stress (Halliday, 1970). This does not occur in GLs.

(c) GLs make extensive use of clefted clauses for the purpose of highlighting items that would not otherwise be highlighted in a normal SVO construction.

On the basis of the above-listed differences between English and GLs, we put forward the following hypotheses:

(a) GE will not highlight new information through varying the length of syllables. In native English varieties (NVEs) stressed syllables tend to have longer vowels than unstressed ones.

(b) Word order will play a crucial role in the signalling of new information. It can be expected that Ghanaian speakers of English will use grammatical construc-

tions that are non-existent, or less frequently used, in native English to signal new information.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 *Data collection*

To test these hypotheses attention was focused on the language used in the lecture situation, because it was felt that this situational variety is maximally oriented towards giving new information, and, therefore, would make prolific use of the features under investigation.

The GE data were originally recordings made by a blind student of University of Cape Coast, Ghana, as study material and subsequently obtained by the researcher as samples of language to which Ghanaian university students are exposed. They were, therefore, not intended for the current investigation. The advantage of this is that the language analysed can be regarded as typical of the lecture situation, since it was not solicited.

For the BE data, two Open University lectures on television in the Social Science Foundation Course were specifically recorded for this study. The objective of including these in the analysis was to highlight the differences between the two varieties of English with respect to how new information was signalled. However, the television recording turned out to be so poor that only limited use could be made of it.

#### 3.2 *Procedure*

The analysis was carried out at two levels: the phonetic and the lexico-grammatical. The phonetic analysis concentrated on loudness as a factor in the signalling of new information in GE. The lexico-grammatical analysis focused on

(a) the use of lexical items which overtly call attention to the new information, and

(b) syntactic devices for signalling new information in GE.

For the analysis of loudness, the recordings were played back and the segments that were given emphasis were noted. These were then digitised onto a computer disk using the Interactive Laboratory System. By so doing it was possible to obtain information relating to the amplitude, fundamental frequency and duration of the highlighted segments. They were then compared with segments of speech that did not receive any prominence.

Only four seconds of speech could be most conveniently analysed at a time, because it was found that off-prints of longer segments of speech were difficult to interpret because of over-compression of information. As much as possible the stretch of speech analysed was made to coincide with a clause, but where this was

not possible, the clause was divided into two parts, analysed separately, and the two parts later brought together to form a whole.

The lexico-grammatical analysis involved transcribing the speech, and identifying the most frequent syntactic and lexical cues which point to the fact that the speakers intended certain sections of utterances to be taken as new information.

The results of the analysis are discussed below.

#### 4. RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

The analysis showed that:

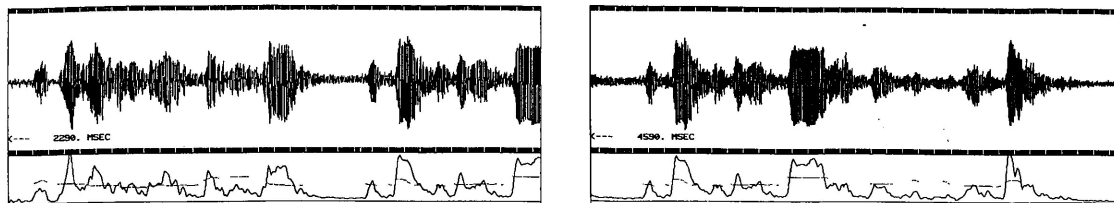
(a) the GE speakers used variation in 'loudness' to a greater extent than the native speakers in highlighting new information,

(b) clefted and semi-rhetorical constructions were used more frequently by the GE speakers than the native speakers for signalling new information.

##### 4.1 *Loudness as a marker of new information in GE*

When the GE recordings were played back it was found that initial elements of clauses and words belonging to the major word classes were considerably louder than other words. Furthermore, in most cases the loudest element occurred within the rheme section of the clause. This does not mean that the entire rheme was loud, rather the new information embedded in the rheme was emphasised, leaving the surrounding speech soft, though not falling below the volume of the softest parts of the pre-rheme segment.

This finding was subjected to instrumental verification with startling results. Though the loud sections often had high amplitude, it was found that pitch or fundamental frequency, and duration of the segment had a lot to do with the sense of loudness. In fact, amplitude, often equated with loudness, per se was not necessarily the most crucial factor in highlighting the loud parts. Raising any one of these elements gave prominence to the stretch over which the raising occurred. The loudest parts, however, were those in which high amplitude, high pitch and long duration coincided, as shown in Fig 1. It is, therefore, more accurate to state that what was thought initially to be loudness was in fact perceived loudness (PL).

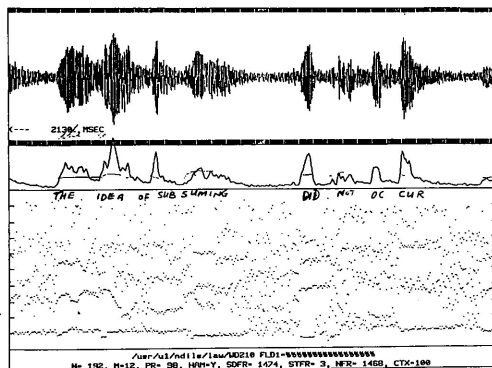


Education of the child is the entire responsibility of the parents

Fig 1 a,b: Measurements of amplitude, fundamental frequency and duration of samples of GE speech.

The usual pattern, as can be observed above, is that the highest peak falls within the rheme, though not always on the last lexical item in the clause. In figure 1-a, for example, the most prominent item is *entire* but *education* and *child* are also loud. Indeed, in terms of amplitude alone the last two are actually higher than the first. What makes *entire* more prominent in terms of its PL is the fact that the second syllable is stretched over 0.24 of a second compared with the vowel in *child* and the third syllable in *education*, both of which are less than 0.2 of a second. Therefore, in this particular instance the greatest emphasis is associated with sustained loudness.

A counter-example to this general pattern is illustrated by Figure 1-c:



The idea of subsuming did not occur.

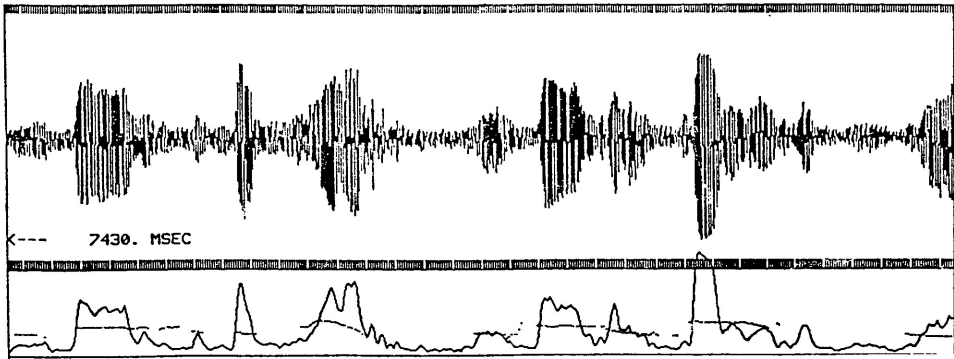
Here *subsuming* appears to be the most prominent item. The reason is that in the lecture *subsumence* had just been introduced as a new concept, an observation underscored by the fact that the word *subsumence* and derivations from it like *subsume* and *subsuming* were repeated over and over again during the lecture, and in addition written on the blackboard.

Furthermore, in all the examples analysed the utterance can be divided into two parts. The first part is nearly always lower in terms of PL than the second part, which carries the burden of the new information, e.g.

2. We fail to subsume, we fail to incorporate.

Fig. 2: Showing the sudden jump in the fundamental frequency over the emphasised vowels in *subsume* and *incorporate*.

item sub/'sume i ii	f. freq. (in hertz)		dif.	
	i	ii	—	—
in / 'cor / porate i ii	132	207	77	
	f. freq. (in hertz)		dif.	
	i	ii	—	—
	122	199	77	



We fail to subsume We fail to incorporate

Both occurrences of *we* were very low with respect to their fundamental frequency. The two occurrences of *fail*, as expected, received some emphasis. However, the evidence from measuring the fundamental frequency, amplitude, and duration shows that more energy was expended on uttering the two words *subsume* and *incorporate*. In each case, there was a sudden jump in the fundamental frequency by over 70 hertz. In addition, the vowel in the emphasised syllable of *sub'sume* was about a quarter of a second long (0.24 sec.), which is considered exceptional for normal syllable length. In comparison, the second vowel in *incorporate* was 0.11 of a second, which is normal. <sup>5</sup>

These initial findings established a prima facie case for investigating this phenomenon even further. So the distribution patterns of the fundamental frequency for two of the GE speakers were computed. The results are presented below in the form of histograms.

Frequency

Statistics of	all data	130.0	to	270.0	
Minimum	139.0	139.0			
Maximum	263.0	263.0			
Average	194.8	194.8			
Standard Dev	31.22	31.22	Median =	189.0	
Number of points	2270	2270	Mode =	167.7	

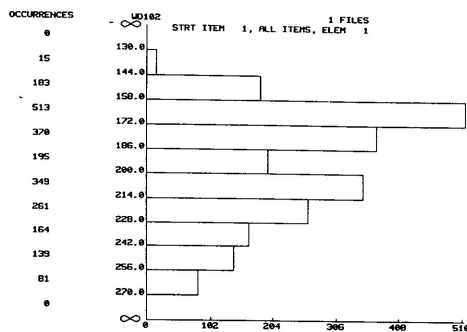


Fig 3a: Distribution of Fundamental Frequencies in a GE Speech

Frequency

Statistics of	all data	500.0	to	1.35E+04	
Minimum	500.0	500.0			
Maximum	1.33E+04	1.33E+04			
Average	2788.	2788.			
Standard Dev	2267.	2267.	Median =	1801.	
Number of points	4728	4728	Mode =	1376.	

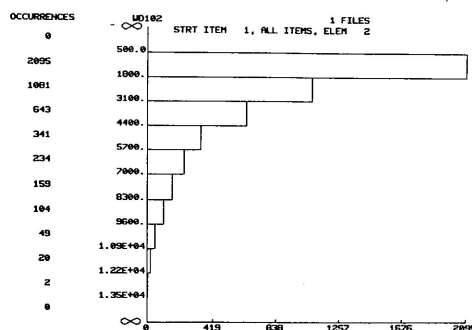


Figure 3b: Distribution of Fundamental Frequencies in the Speech of a Native Speaker of English

According to the first histogram, the distribution for the GE speaker is bimodal with a tendency to skew positively. The positive skew is to be expected, since there will normally be more occurrences of the low frequencies within a speaker's range. But the double peak cannot be easily explained away. A tentative explanation for this is that the GE speakers make more use of the higher frequencies within their respective range than can be predicted on the basis of the shape of the normal distribution curve; and this is done to help place emphasis on the items carrying new information.

Owing to the poor quality of the recordings of native speech, comparisons between this and GE have to be stated with a great deal of caution. However, it is clear from the second histogram that the shape of the distribution of the fundamental frequency in native speech is different from that of GE speech. In the latter, the positive skew is more pronounced, showing a tendency for low frequencies to occur. The high frequencies are so few as to be insignificant compared with what happens in the GE speech. Although, in the literature on native speech pitch movement or variation in fundamental frequency is held to be the most important phonetic signal of new information (cf Halliday, 1970 and Brown et al., 1980), apparently GE speech is different in making use of more sudden jumps in pitch than is normal in NVE.

Furthermore, duration and volume do not appear to play a central role in giving prominence to new information in NVE as is the case in GE. This is surprising since it is in English rather than GLs that vowel length is phonemic. Thus, it would be expected that GE would make less use of duration to signal new information. But it appears from the data that the use of duration in GE is mainly for the expression of meaning at the macro level of discourse, i.e. for highlighting new information. In native English speech on the other hand there appears to be a tendency for the meaningful use of duration to operate at the micro levels of lexis and sentence.

To conclude the discussion of the phonetic analysis, the results of the analysis does not support the first hypothesis: that GE will not make significant use of syllable duration in highlighting new information. In reality duration emerges as the most important phonetic feature especially when it is varied in conjunction with fundamental frequency and volume. This result should be stated with a great deal of caution, because the data upon which the analysis was based is too small. Hence this research must be regarded as a preliminary study which must be validated by studies based on a larger corpus.

#### 4.2 *Lexical markers of new information*

In the GE data, new information was often preceded by words like *say, talk about, tell, suggested, know, propose, proposition, call, and term*. In this context they primarily serve the discourse function of highlighting the entire section following it or part of it, e.g.

3. We were *saying* that Ausubel actually was describing things that happen within the cognitive structure.
4. He was *saying* that when you are asking about the content of something there are two things that happen.
5. By way of review, their *proposition* is that the system of charging everybody the same amount of fees in the State of Wisconsin [...] is less satisfactory.
6. They are *proposing* what they call **the Higher Education Opportunity Programme** [written on the blackboard].
7. But they are *saying* that out of your savings you must be able to pay 350 <sup>6</sup> towards your maintenance.
8. They are determining what they *call* **Student Standard Budget** [written on the blackboard].

These explicit markers were often used together with other signals such as



phonetic prominence, writing the new information on the blackboard (e.g. 6-8), and the syntactic devices of clefting, and semi-rhetorical constructions, as will become clear presently.

The importance of these discourse markers in GE can be seen in comparing the frequency of occurrence in British English, where they appear to be used sparingly. In the televised lectures the only genuine example was:

9. This is what we *call* empirical knowledge.

The following utterance also occurred in the BE data:

10. This is what we mean when we *say* that facts underdetermine theories.

But the use of *say* in this context is quite different from what has been noted for GE above, in the sense it does not have the same highlighting function, although the word order suggests that the following verbal group, i.e. *underdetermine theories*, contains the new information.

#### 4.3 Grammatical signals of new information in GE

Normal word order in GLs, as in English, is SVO (Kropp Dakubu, 1988). In such constructions the new information is automatically located towards the end of the clause. From personal experience, marking some other item as new in such constructions is virtually unknown in GLs. Thus GLs differ from English in not making use of sentence stress to locate the new information in, say, the initial element of SVO clauses. For example, in such constructions as

11. Kofi dzii paano no (Kofi ate the bread)

there is no way of presenting the initial element Kofi as the new information using stress. (See also Trudgill and Hannah, 1985 on emphasis in West African English).

The grammatical features found to signal new information in the corpus were:

- (a) clefted constructions
- (b) semi-rhetorical questions

These are discussed with examples below.

##### 4.3.1 Clefted types

These were mostly of the *wh*-type, e.g.

- 12. What we need to know is that on the international scene English and French are widely spoken in Anglophone and Francophone countries respectively.
- 13. And in this case what is being suggested is that both instructions and system of

exchange of students should be encouraged between Anglophone and Franco-phone countries in the region.

14. But what I normally do is that I call somebody to come here and read his or her paper.

15. It is this Cameroonian pidgin which is used as a tool of commerce.

It is being argued in this paper that GE speakers frequently use this type of construction as a way of achieving focus in the clause. Although this construction occurs in NVEs, the fact that a similar effect can be achieved through the use of stress means that cleft constructions are less pressed into service than in GE where sentence stress is virtually absent.

#### 4.3.2 *Semi-rhetorical questions*

In this type of construction, the speaker began with a structure that looks like a declarative sentence, turned it into a question using the word *what* (spoken with a falling tone), and then went on to provide a response. In a few cases both the students and the lecturer provided the response.<sup>7</sup> The responses served as the new information in the utterance. A few examples will make the point clear.

16. And he was saying that to subsume means *what?* **To learn.**

17. And the structures that contain these ideas or concepts are what he call *what?* **Subsumence.**

18. In other words subsumption involves both remembering and *what?* **Forgetting.**

19. The child is in a *what?* **Learning situation.**

20. We are saying that what he is advocating for is this idea of *what?* **Meaningful learning.**

21. There are others that have not been well incorporated into *what* — the cognitive *what?* **Structure.**

The 'reponses' serve as new information by virtue of their position and also because they were phonetically highlighted. In (21) the speaker abandons the original question, which would have elicited the response *cognitive structure*, for another one whose expected response is *structure*. It thus illustrates the flexibility of semi-rhetorical questions as a focusing device.

The types of lexico-grammatical devices discussed above are either unknown in

native English or are used sparingly. In the BE recording only one instance of cleft sentence was found:

22. But what we are interested in is how the designer goes about choosing materials and processes for specific components.

The closest thing to the semi-rhetorical questions that this writer has encountered in native English speech was spoken on the Oprah Winfrey Show by the host:

23. O.W.: Does that make you feel *what*?

The response was provided by the interlocutor. Although similar in structure, this is, in fact, different in function from the semi-rhetorical questions found in the GE data. The American English question appears to be a genuine request for information rather than a device for highlighting new information. However, the possibility that this feature of Black American speech can be traced to African speech style cannot be discounted.<sup>8</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to show that GE may be distinguished from BE on the basis of some of the phonetic and lexico-grammatical aspects of highlighting new information in the two varieties. Admittedly, the range of data analysed is too narrow for any conclusive statements to emerge from the analysis. However, the investigation does raise a number of issues that need to be addressed in further research; for example: what is the frequency of occurrence of the features in other situational varieties of GE? What type of GE speakers use these features in their speech? What is the effect of the use of these features on intelligibility of GE outside Ghana? All these issues and many more need to be investigated using a wider range of data, because they can contribute to the ongoing discussion of the existence and form of non-native varieties of English.

## Notes

1. According to Halliday (1985), the adjunct in this case is the textual theme, Peter the ideational theme and copied ... west the rheme.
2. It is important to stress that it is the speaker who determines what is new and what is given (cf Cook, 1989). Usually the new information is not recoverable from the immediate context. However, this consideration may be over-ridden by considerations of what the speaker believes to be the state of knowledge of the addressee. In that case, an item may be treated as new when in fact it is recoverable from either the immediate or general context of the discourse.
3. Fries (1990), for instance, describes the theme as the function of the clause as message.
4. This is true of educated speech of southern England, which is the model mostly used in second

language teaching, but in northern England a rising intonation may be heard in statements and polar questions.

5. The information on vowel length was provided by Norman Dryden, Linguistics Department, Edinburgh University. I wish to record my gratitude for the time he devoted to the instrumental work on the data, and the numerous discussions we had during which he explained to me the results of the various measures.
6. i.e. \$350.
7. Such cases illustrate the fact that the discourse represents a joint effort by all the participants in the situation, which is an aspect of the interpersonal dimension of the discourse. They also illustrate the fact that the new information is not always new in the sense of fresh, but in this case it refers to what is worth remembering.
8. Similar constructions occur in Akan and other Ghanaian languages. Its presence in some varieties of English, including white American speech, may be the result of spread from African American speech.

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