According to de Beaugrande, 'this node-sharing is a graphic correlate of Topic' (1980: 94). Clearly, what de Beaugrande understands as 'topic' is what may be described as a 'topic entity' (see section 4.3). We have already argued that a 'discourse topic' is a much more complex concept. However, de Beaugrande's claim, based on his analysis of simple text, is indicative of how far it is possible to take an extremely limited view of 'topic' when the data studied is so limited.

In fact, we might go further and state that much of the research reported in the literature on issues like 'topic', 'text-structure' and 'text-content' has been restricted to such unrepresentative discourse data that the findings are unlikely to have much wider application in the analysis of discourse. The discourse analyst may glean useful insights into some aspects of simple text from this research, but he cannot forever restrict himself to investigating versions of material like 'The farmer and the donkey' or 'The rocket in the desert'.

One of the issues de Beaugrande (1980: 92) shows an awareness of, but does not investigate, is the fact that 'the heavy use of sentences in comprehension models keeps us from addressing the question of how long a stretch of text people actually process at one time'. It seems unreasonable to suggest that whole narrative texts, for example, are processed in one single sweep. If there are smaller units of discourse, what are their boundaries like, what components do they contain, and how are they internally organised? These are questions we shall attempt to answer in the course of Chapter 5.

4

'Staging' and the representation of discourse structure

4.1 The linearisation problem

One of the constraints on the speaker / writer is that he can produce only one word at a time. When he orders these single words into sentences, and those sentences into texts, he confronts what has come to be called the 'linearisation problem'. He has to choose a beginning point. This point will influence the hearer / reader's interpretation of everything that follows in the discourse since it will constitute the initial textual context for everything that follows. Consider just two types of invented examples. First of all, consider the effect of an identical attributive description being preceded by different evaluative comments:

(1) a. I can't stand Sally Binns.
She's tall and thin and walks like a crane.

b. I do admire Sally Binns.
She's tall and thin and walks like a crane.

In *a* the attributes *tall and thin and walks like a crane* must be assumed to be unattractive, awkward, ungainly. In *b* those same properties are now endowed with elegance and grace.

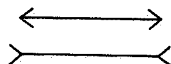
Consider next the effect of linear sequencing on the interpretation of events in time where 'the listener can be expected to derive different implicatures from different orderings' (Levelt, 1981: 91):

(2) a. She married and became pregnant.
b. She became pregnant and married.

There is, as Levelt reminds us, an *ordo naturalis*, whereby it is assumed that, if there is no cue to the contrary, the first-mentioned event happened first and the second-mentioned event followed it. It is, then, open to the hearer / reader to draw implicatures from that

ordering, implicatures which will be constrained by both the content of what is said and stereotypical expectations based on previous experience (cf. discussion in 2.4).

We are familiar, in the field of visual perception, with effects produced by presenting the same stimulus in a different context. A block of colour produced in the centre of a light surround may be perceived as being much darker than that same block of colour presented in the centre of a dark surround. Similarly a line presented in a given context is perceived as being longer than a



line of the same length which is presented in a different context. In a similar way, understanding of verbal input is processed against the relevant background of the immediately preceding co-text (within, of course, a specified context). The same sequence of words may take on a different 'value' (Widdowson, 1978) when it is uttered in a different co-text. We shall consider this effect, first with respect to the internal structure of messages at the sentence level, and then with respect to the organisation of larger stretches of discourse.

4.2 Theme

We shall discuss the linearisation process at this level only very briefly. This means we are obliged to cut several corners in our discussion. In particular we shall speak of the thematic organisation of the *sentence*. It is important to appreciate, however, that in complex and compound sentences a separate thematic organisation will be assigned to each *clause* (for an extended discussion of processes of thematisation in English, see Halliday, 1967). It is, further, going to be necessary in this section to cite as examples several sets of constructed sentences in order to demonstrate the potentially contrastive effects of different structures.

We shall use the term *theme* to refer to a formal category, the left-most constituent of the sentence. Each simple sentence has a **theme** 'the starting point of the utterance' and a **rheme**, everything else that follows in the sentence which consists of 'what the speaker

states about, or in regard to, the starting point of the utterance' (Mathesius, 1942). The theme, then, is what speakers / writers use as what Halliday calls a 'point of departure' (1967: 212). In many cases (often considered to be the unmarked or neutral cases) the theme of declarative sentences will be a noun phrase (the grammatical subject), that of interrogatives the interrogative word, and that of imperatives the imperative form of the verb. In our discussion we shall focus on simple declarative sentences and consider their thematic, rather than their syntactic, structure.

It is a striking feature of English, as of many other languages, that there exists a very wide range of syntactic forms which can be used by the speaker to convey the same propositional or cognitive content. Consider a few of the syntactic forms available in English:

(3)
a. John kissed Mary.
b. Mary was kissed by John.
c. It was John who kissed Mary.
d. It was Mary who was kissed by John.
e. What John did was kiss Mary.
f. Who John kissed was Mary.
g. Mary, John kissed her.

The same propositional content is expressed each time. In each case it is asserted that kissing went on and that John did the kissing and that Mary was the one who was kissed. If the only reason for having syntactic structure were to permit us to express propositional content, it is hard to see why there should be such an immense variety of forms (only a few of which are listed above) to permit the expression of that propositional content. Why do we find this wide variety of structures?

A number of different answers to this question have been proposed. Alice Davidson (1980) suggests 'The more marked the construction, the more likely that an implicated meaning will be that which the utterance is intended to convey', where her own sentence nicely, iconically, demonstrates the deliberate way in which she is manipulating the syntax to make her point. She suggests taking the active form as the normal, unmarked, form for the declarative sentence and claims that the passive may for example be used to convey a humorous or derogatory effect. So to the question '*Did John kiss Mary?*' a cautious friend might reply

'*Well, Mary was kissed by John*.' It is clearly not the case, however, that using the passive necessarily has a marked effect.

From the discourse analyst's point of view, the most wide-ranging and interesting approach must be that which considers the effect of using one sentential form rather than another in the context of discourse. It is clearly the case that (3a–g) could not all function satisfactorily as answers to the same question. A speaker producing these utterances would have different assumptions about the state of knowledge of his hearer, that is about his hearer's presuppositions. Thus, in answer to the question '*What did John do?*', (3a) seems possible and so does (3e), but the rest seem less appropriate; (3b) seems to be about *Mary* rather than John; (3c) seems to imply that the hearer already knows that someone kissed Mary and identifies *John* as the individual who did it; (3d) seems to imply that the hearer knows that John kissed somebody and identifies the recipient as Mary (and may indeed, with contrastive intonation on *Mary*, indicate that it was Mary rather than somebody else who was the recipient); (3f) similarly assumes the hearer knows that John kissed somebody; (3g) seems more appropriate as an answer to the question *what happened to Mary*?

With simple examples like these, it seems reasonable to suggest that what is primarily at issue is the judgement that the speaker makes about what the hearer believes to be the case with respect to what he wants to talk about. Halliday demonstrates, with an effective example, the dislocating effect on a text of changing the thematic structure. The occasion in each case must be taken as one in which a reporter is announcing on a radio programme what is happening at a reception for three astronauts who have recently completed a successful mission:

(4) a. The sun's shining, it's a perfect day. Here come the astronauts. They're just passing the Great Hall; perhaps the President will come out to greet them. No, it's the admiral who's taking the ceremony . . .

b. It's the sun that's shining, the day that's perfect. The astronauts come here. The Great Hall they're just passing; he'll perhaps come out to greet them, the President. No, it's the ceremony that the admiral's taking . . .

This passage was presented by Halliday at a Systemic Workshop in the early seventies. For a similar example see Halliday, 1978.

Here the speaker in *a* simply asserts a sequence of facts and opinions which he thinks will interest his listeners. (We shall not discuss the internal structure of this sequence of assertions, merely note that, having set the scene, he clearly expects to report events as they occur in time, floating opinions when nothing of interest is happening.) This speaker's utterances could be seen as replies to a series of very general questions like *what's going on?*, *what's happening now?* The 'speaker' in *b* on the other hand would have to be imputing a great deal of knowledge to his hearer. The first two clauses appear to answer questions like *what's shining?*, *what's perfect?* The last sentence appears to contradict a belief which the speaker imputes to his listeners, namely that they suppose the admiral will be 'taking' something other than the ceremony. It is hard for the processor to construct a coherent model of what is going on from the text in (b), even though the propositional content is the same as that in text (a) and the cohesive links (see 6.1) are maintained.

The problem Halliday illustrates here is one which is familiar to many writers who pause in the middle of a paragraph, uncertain how to connect the next thing they want to say with the last sentence. It is sometimes possible to force a link with a connector like *however* or *therefore*, but sometimes it is necessary for the writer to recast his proposed sentence, to reorganise the syntactic expression. Whereas in written language we generally only see the finished product, so that we have no indication of where the writer may have made such a correction, in spoken language we can sometimes observe a speaker reorganising what he wants to say and thereby producing a different thematic structure:

(5) a. (a departmental discussion about spending money)
X: there was a gift of about £38
Y: well that isn't a gift + it is earmarked because + well + *the money is* + *in about 1975* some money was . . .

b. (a former Minister of Transport interviewed after a motorway accident in fog)
I'm going to introduce + mm + as a + certainly as a trial a + a measure of segregation ++ *this will – one cannot* make it compulsory + because of the difficulties of enforcement . . .

c. (conversation between young woman and her aunt)
'cause there was *a man in – my father*'s in the Scouts . . .

he's a county commissioner now . . . and eh one of his oldest scoutmasters . . .

In *a* and *b* the speakers appear to have embarked on one structure, which they decide is unsatisfactory, and modify it in midstream to produce a different thematic organisation. In *c* a more extensive reorganisation takes place as the speaker evidently realises that her aunt may not have access to the relevant information that her father is in the Scouts so she stops talking about this 'man', announces that her father is in the Scouts, and then after some local interaction with her aunt, reverts to talking about the man in his role as 'a scoutmaster of her father's'.

Whereas we may not be able to perceive this self-monitoring process at work in written language, it may be demonstrated, by requiring subjects to choose one of a set of possible continuation sentences, that there are preferred thematic sequences, in some genres of discourse at least, which will lead subjects to prefer 'marked' syntactic forms. Thus, given a constructed text like this:

(6) a. The Prime Minister stepped off the plane.
b. Journalists immediately surrounded her.
or
c. She was immediately surrounded by journalists.

There is a preference for *c* as the continuation sentence, rather than *b*. We suppose that this is because readers prefer to maintain the same subject (or *discourse topic entity* – a notion to be developed in the next section). The effect becomes even more striking if there are no competing animates, as in:

d. She was immediately buffeted by the wind.
or
e. The wind immediately buffeted her.

The passive (d) seems to be the natural choice here. Given the choice of an active sentence which continues the subject and marks the theme as agent, there is virtual unanimity of preferences for the active form:

f. All the journalists were immediately smiled at by her.
or
g. She immediately smiled at all the journalists.

Some recent studies have examined the distribution of some

sentential types in discourse genres of different kinds (see Jones, 1977 and Prince, 1978). It seems clear that some sentential types have a particularly narrow range of distribution. Thus, in expository prose, wh-clefts, in which, as Prince points out, the content of the introductory wh-clause is presupposed information, have a privilege of distribution limited almost exclusively to three functions:

(7) a. introducing the discussion as in:
What is most striking in the behaviour of newts is . . .
What is particularly worrying about the Cabinet's view of collective responsibility is . . .
What I'm going to talk to you about today is . . .
b. summarising the discussion as in:
What I have tried to argue then is . . .
What we have been considering is . . .
c. more rarely, to indicate explicit contrast as in:
You may find peace in the bosom of many religions. What is unique about what Christianity has to offer is . . .

We are grateful to Mahmoud Ayad from whose analysis we draw and from whose extensive corpus of wh-clefts we have borrowed these examples.

We have proceeded so far on the simplifying assumption that the left-most constituent in the sentence is the grammatical subject of the declarative sentence. This permits a simple conflation, made by many scholars, of the categories *theme* and *grammatical subject*. Thus, in discussion of discourse one may find the term *theme* rather than grammatical subject used (e.g. in Clark & Clark, 1977). It is important to note that the left-most constituent (as in (3g)) is not always the grammatical subject. It is frequently the case, for instance, in declarative sentences, that adverbs or adverbial phrases may precede the grammatical subject as in:

(8) a. *Late that afternoon* she received a reply paid telegram . . . (64)
b. *In one place* Betty saw the remains of the study safe . . . (64)
c. *Without hesitating* Betty replied . . . (64)
d. *Then* he went on . . . (65)
e. *In the meantime* she would be the better of professional aid . . . *An hour later* a pleasant-looking middle-aged woman arrived and took charge. (65)
(all from Freeman Wills Crofts, *Golden Ashes*, Penguin Books, 1959)

These extracts are from a detective novel which constantly thematises time adverbials (as well as others). The direct link between what has gone before and what is asserted in the main clause of the sentence is then the adverbially expressed relationship. In extracts from a travel brochure we find, predictably, more locational adverbials thematised:

(9) a. *On some islands* it is best if you . . .
b. *In Greece and Turkey*, you are met at the airport . . .
c. *In all other places* we make bookings . . .
d. *At the centres* where we have our own representatives you . . .
e. *In some centres* we have local agents . . .
f. *On a few islands* you have to collect them yourselves . . .
(*Aegina Club* brochure 1981, p. 3)

In general it seems reasonable to suggest that the constituent which is thematised in a sentence is, in some sense, 'what the sentence is about', regardless of whether or not the constituent is the grammatical subject. When the grammatical subject is thematised, this seems self-evident. Thus in

(a) Fred borrowed a hammer from John
(b) John lent a hammer to Fred

sentence (a) seems to be 'about' *Fred* and (b) seems to be 'about' *John*. Where adverbials of time were thematised, as in the examples (8) above, the sentence seems to be 'about' (or, put differently, to be answering the question) 'what happened next?' We shall discuss the implications of this textual structuring in the next section.

Meanwhile, we should note that there is another set of adverbials which are frequently thematised but which do not contribute to the structure of the discourse in the same way. This set includes what we shall call *metalingual comments* in which the speaker / writer specifically comments on how what he is saying is to be taken. He may comment on the structure of what he is saying: *let me begin by, first of all I shall, I shall now turn to, in conclusion, finally*, etc. He may comment on his commitment to belief in what he is saying: *obviously, of course, clearly* as against *perhaps, possibly, supposedly*, etc. He may produce one from a large number of expressions which indicate how the recipient is to 'tag' the content in his memory: *in confidence, between you and me, frankly, briefly*, etc. (For an extended discussion of adverbials of this kind, see Brown & Levinson, 1978.) It is clear that this thematised 'metalingual' comment is not to be integrated with the representation of content which the recipient is constructing. It merely gives him directions, in some cases about the type and structure of mental representation he should be constructing (*Once upon a time* presumably instructs the recipient to construct a fairy-tale model), in some cases about the internal structure of the model (*more importantly*), and sometimes comments on the reliability of what is asserted (*perhaps*).

Sometimes, of course, 'hedges' of this sort are not thematised but inserted within the sentence, or they follow it, as in:

(10) a. Frankly I don't think he will.
b. I frankly don't think he will.
c. I don't think he will, frankly.

It is hard to make judgements on the effect of different placings of adverbials in sentences in isolation. Some hearers feel these variations produce no difference in meaning, others perceive subtle nuances of difference. Like many issues concerning thematisation / linearisation / selection of syntactic structure, this issue is little understood. We shall assume in the rest of our discussion that *theme* is a formal category in the analysis of sentences (or clauses in a complex or compound sentence) and, following Daneš (1974), we shall assume that it has two main functions:

(i) connecting back and linking in to the previous discourse, maintaining a coherent point of view

(ii) serving as a point of departure for the further development of the discourse.

4.3 Thematisation and 'staging'

The process of linear organisation which we have been examining, largely at a sentential level in 4.2, produces the same sort of problem for the speaker / writer in organising units larger than the sentence. We may talk in general of **thematisation** as a discoursal rather than simply a sentential process. What the speaker or writer puts first will influence the interpretation of everything that follows. Thus a title will influence the interpretation of the text which follows it. The first sentence of the first paragraph will

constrain the interpretation not only of the paragraph, but also of the rest of the text. That is, we assume that every sentence forms part of a developing, cumulative instruction which tells us how to construct a coherent representation.

4.3.1 *'Staging'*

A more general, more inclusive, term than *thematisation* (which refers only to the linear organisation of texts) is 'staging'. This metaphor is introduced by Grimes in a way which seems consonant with our use of *thematisation*: 'Every clause, sentence, paragraph, episode, and discourse is organised around a particular element that is taken as its point of departure. It is as though the speaker presents what he wants to say from a particular perspective' (1975: 323). Grimes is here particularly concerned with how the linear organisation can be manipulated to bring some items and events into greater prominence than others. Thus an initial main clause will, iconically, refer to an important event, while following subsidiary clauses will supply subsidiary information. Other scholars have widened the application of Grimes' staging metaphor. Thus Clements (1979: 287) suggests: 'Staging is a dimension of prose structure which identifies the relative prominence given to various segments of prose discourse.' This definition opens the door to far more than processes of linearisation, and permits the inclusion within 'staging' of rhetorical devices like lexical selection, rhyme, alliteration, repetition, use of metaphor, markers of emphasis, etc. We shall use 'staging' not as a technical term, but as a general metaphor to cover the exploitation of such varied phenomena in discourse.

The notion of 'relative prominence' arising from processes of thematisation and 'staging' devices has led many researchers, particularly in psycholinguistics, to consider staging as a crucial factor in discourse structure because, they believe, the way a piece of discourse is staged, must have a significant effect both on the process of interpretation and on the process of subsequent recall. In 4.3.2 we shall examine some work which relates to discourse 'staging'.

4.3.2 *'Theme' as main character / topic entity*

In this section, we encounter uses of the term *theme* quite different from the formally constrained category which we

(following Halliday, 1967) use to refer to the left-most constituent in the sentence or clause. We find *theme* used sometimes to refer to the grammatical subjects of a series of sentences as in this remark by Katz (1980: 26): 'The notion of a discourse topic is that of *the common theme* of the previous sentences in the discourse, the topic carried from sentence to sentence as *the subject of their predication*' (our emphasis). The same term is also used, particularly in the psycholinguistics literature, to refer not to a constituent, but directly to the referent of the constituent. Thus Perfetti & Goldman (1974: 71) write: 'By thematisation we mean the discourse process by which *a referent* comes to be developed as the central subject of the discourse' (our emphasis).

This latter usage leads naturally to an interpretation of *theme* as meaning 'main character'. The discourse process of thematisation referred to by Perfetti & Goldman then leads to the *foregrounding* of a referent, as described in Chafe (1972), whereby a particular referent is established in the foreground of consciousness while other discourse referents remain in the background. The foreground or 'thematised' individual, as Perfetti & Goldman emphasise, may be referred to by a variety of different formal expressions. Thus an individual called *Dr Jones* can be 'thematised' when identified in the discourse by the expressions as *the doctor* or *the surgeon* or *he*, just as well as by the repetition of the expression *Dr Jones*.

Perfetti & Goldman performed a series of experiments (1974) in which they sought to demonstrate the effect on the recall of sentences occurring in a text of using a prompt word referring to a thematised referent, as opposed to using a prompt word referring to a non-thematised referent. They were able to show that a thematised referent occurring as syntactic subject was the better prompt for sentence recall. Such a finding is consonant with the observation that pieces of discourse about a 'main character' are frequently organised into sets of sentences in which the character is referred to by the noun phrase acting as syntactic subject. A good example of this is the thematisation of 'Birdie' in extract (14) in Chapter 3.

Perfetti & Goldman's results may help to explain why one basic organisational method for discourse production involves placing the main referent in subject position. Sets of sentences structured in

this way may be easier to remember. This method is favoured by those who prepare encyclopaedic entries, such as (11), in which 'the Nez Perces' are thematised, by obituary writers, as in (12) and by the writers of children's reading books, as illustrated by extract (13). (Expressions used for the thematised referent in each extract are italicised.)

(11) NEZ PERCES
The Nez Perces continue to bear the name given them by French fur traders, referring to the custom of piercing their noses for the insertion of ornaments. *They* belong to the Sahaptin language family, in contrast to the other peoples of the region, who speak languages of the Shoshonean branch of the Uto-Aztecan stock. *The Nez Perces* number more than 1,500, a reduction of about 2,500 since their first contact with whites. *The great majority* live on a reservation in Northern Idaho: *less than a hundred* live on the Colville Reservation in Washington.
(*Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, Harvard University Press, 1980)

(12) *Mr Mitsujiro Ishii*
Mr Mitsujiro Ishii, who as a former Speaker of the Japanese House of Representatives was instrumental in staging the 1964 Tokyo Summer Olympics and the 1972 Sapporo Winter Olympics, died on September 20. *He* was 92. *Ishii* had served as Industry and Commerce Minister and in other cabinet posts under the late Prime Ministers, Shigeru Yoshida, Nobusuke Kishi and Eisaku Sata, before retiring in 1972.
He was speaker of the House of Representatives from February 1967 to July 1969.
(from *The Times*, 25 September 1981)

(13) *Jack* goes up the beanstalk again.
He comes to the giant's house and *he* sees the giant's wife.
(from *Jack and the Beanstalk*, Ladybird Books, Series 777)

The organisation of stretches of spoken discourse can follow a similar pattern, as shown in extract (14).

(14) P: did you have any snow + during the holidays
R: there was some actually on + at Hogmanay because we had some friends + *a Greek friend of ours* was visiting us and when *he* left the house + just after Hogmanay + you know *he* had been away about fifteen minutes then *he* rang the doorbell again + *he* said – it's snowing it's snowing + *he* was really excited you know +

If we look at extract (13) as a set of clauses, we can follow a method suggested by Daneš (1974) and represent its structure in the following way:

(15) Theme$_1$ (*Jack*) – Rheme$_1$ (*goes up the beanstalk again*)
Theme$_1$ (*he*) – Rheme$_2$ (*comes to the giant's house*)
Theme$_1$ (*he*) – Rheme$_3$ (*sees the giant's wife*)

In each of the clauses of this piece of discourse the theme, or 'the starting point', is the same. If we wish to claim that the referent 'Jack' is the theme of the discourse, we must be aware that we are basing this claim on the fact that 'Jack' is 'thematised' in each of the clauses in the discourse. It is on the basis of discourses with this type of fixed structure that the term 'theme' seems to have come to be used as a general term in discourse analysis for 'main character' and sentential subject (as well as the left-most constituent).

The possibilities for confusion with this varied use of the same terminology are obvious. We have already said that we shall reserve *theme* for the formally left-most sentential constituent. For the 'main character / object / idea' notion – exemplified by the referents 'Mr Mitsujiro Ishii' in (12) and 'Jack' in (13) we shall use the term writer's / speaker's **topic entity.** In those examples the text was very simply constructed so that the topic entity was formally thematised in each sentence. In the next extract we shall observe that an expression referring to the writer's topic entity is formally the *theme* of some sentences, but not of all sentences. (We shall not examine clauses in non-sentence-initial position, since that would involve a wide-ranging technical discussion of thematisation which we have no space for here, but see Halliday, 1967.)

(16) *Mr William Serby*
Mr William Serby who died aged 85 on September 20 was County Treasurer to Buckinghamshire County Council from 1929 to 1961.
He was commissioned in the Queen's (R. W. Surrey Regiment) in 1915 and served in France until he was wounded in 1916. From 1917 to 1919 *he* served as liaison officer with the French and Russian forces in the North Russian Expeditionary Force.
In 1926 *he* was appointed County Accountant to the Cornwall C.C.

> During the Second World War *he* commanded the Home Guard in Wendover and in later years was actively concerned with the work of the R.N.I.B., the Oxford Diocesan Board of Finance, the Bucks Historic Churches Trust and in many local organisations in Wendover.
> In 1926 *he* married Jean Durns and they had one son and two daughters.
>
> (from *The Times*, 25 September 1981)

Obituaries such as extract (16) provide particularly clear examples of discourses which have only one writer's topic entity throughout. In this case, it is 'Mr William Serby'. An expression referring to this individual is thematised for the whole discourse in the title, and for each of the first and second paragraphs where expressions referring to him are made the 'starting point' for what follows. The writer might have continued, as in extract (13) with expressions referring to the same individual thematised in each sentence and paragraph. In each of the subsequent sentences and paragraphs, however, the writer thematises a time-adverbial phrase. We could say that, although the writer continues with the same 'topic entity', he organises what he wants to say about this topic entity according to different (temporally determined) perspectives on the individual concerned. The thematised elements do not simply produce a chronological list, but provide different 'points of departure' for considering the individual in different roles.

It might be objected that the term 'topic entity' is unnecessary and that what we are talking about here is simply our old friend 'topic'. We insist that it is useful to distinguish between the topic entity / main character notion and the general pretheoretical notion of 'topic' as 'what is being talked about'. One would hardly want to say that 'the topic' of an obituary was 'the man' referred to by the name at the top of the entry, except in speaking in some kind of shorthand. There are many aspects of 'the man', physical characteristics for instance, which would hardly be considered to be appropriate aspects for inclusion in an obituary. The 'topic' of an obituary might be more adequately characterised in some such terms as 'an appreciation of the noteworthy events and deeds in the life of X'.

4.3.3 *Titles and thematisation*

We argued in Chapter 3 that the 'title' of a stretch of discourse should not be equated with 'the topic' but should be regarded as one possible expression of the topic. We now wish to propose that the best way of describing the function of the title of a discourse is as a particularly powerful thematisation device. In the title of extract (16), the topic entity was thematised, or, to express the relationship more accurately, when we found the name of an individual thematised in the title of the text, we expected that individual to be the topic entity. This expectation-creating aspect of thematisation, especially in the form of a title, means that thematised elements provide not only a starting point around which what follows in the discourse is structured, but also a starting point which constrains our interpretation of what follows. This point may be illustrated by using part of a text constructed by Anderson et al. (1977: 372), and reproduced here as (17a and b). (We have provided the title in each case.)

(17a) *A Prisoner Plans His Escape*

> Rocky slowly got up from the mat, planning his escape. He hesitated a moment and thought. Things were not going well. What bothered him most was being held, especially since the charge against him had been weak. He considered his present situation. The lock that held him was strong, but he thought he could break it.

The topic-entity of this fragment is the individual named 'Rocky' and, because of the thematised expression in the title, we can read this text with the interpretation that Rocky is a prisoner, in a cell, planning to break the lock on the door and escape. In an exercise which we conducted using this text after which subjects were asked to answer several questions, we found that there was a general interpretation that Rocky was alone, that he had been arrested by the police, and that he disliked being in prison.

When we presented exactly the same questions to another group who read the following text, (17b), we received quite different answers.

(17b) *A Wrestler in a Tight Corner*

> Rocky slowly got up from the mat, planning his escape. He hesitated a moment and thought. Things were not going well.

> What bothered him most was being held, especially since the charge against him had been weak. He considered his present situation. The lock that held him was strong, but he thought he could break it.

In answering questions on this fragment, subjects indicated that they thought Rocky was a wrestler who was being held in some kind of wrestling 'hold' and was planning to get out of this hold. Rocky was not alone in a prison cell and had had nothing to do with the police. By providing different 'starting points' in the thematised elements of the different titles, we effectively constrained the way in which the piece of text was interpreted. (Anderson et al. (1977) discuss the different possible interpretations of the one piece of text (without titles) presented in (17a) and (17b) in terms of knowledge structures or 'schemata' which are activated for the interpretation of texts. We shall discuss schemata and related concepts in more detail in Chapter 7.)

Extracts (17a) and (17b) provide a particularly dramatic illustration of the effect of thematisation. There are, of course, many other easily recognisable thematisation devices used in the organisation of discourse structure. Placing headings and sub-headings within a text is a common thematisation device in technical or public-information documents. It also occurs, you will have noted, in linguistics textbooks. What these thematisation devices have in common is not only the way they provide 'starting points' for paragraphs in a text, but also their contribution to dividing up a whole text into smaller chunks. This 'chunking' effect is one of the most basic of those achieved by thematisation in discourse.

4.3.4 *Thematic structure*

In (8) and (9) we demonstrated the possibility of elements other than the grammatical subject occurring as the formal theme of the sentence or clause, by considering a set of thematised adverbial phrases of time which occur in a detective story, and adverbial phrases of place which occur in a travel brochure. In (11) we exemplified the structure of an encyclopaedic entry where the grammatical subject, referring to the writer's topic entity, was consistently made the theme of succeeding sentences. Then in (16) we discussed an obituary in which there was an interweaving of

themes which related to the individual, the topic entity, and themes which related to different temporal frames, an interweaving which permitted the writer to represent his topic entity from different temporal perspectives. Here we consider the thematic structure of three further passages:

(18) *This rug* comes from the village of Shalamazar in the southern Chahar Mahal, but *the design* is woven in many of the villages. *The design* is one of those that fit into several possible categories, involving as it does elements of bird, tree, vase and prayer types. *The prayer mihrab* may be omitted in some cases, but *the vase* is always present, as are the strikingly drawn birds . . . *In rugs of this type* excellent natural dyestuffs are very often found, and *the quality* varies from medium to quite fine. *Outstanding examples* . . .
(P. R. J. Ford, *Oriental Carpet Design*, Thames and Hudson 1981, p. 113)

Observe the sequence:

This rug (illustrated)
the design
The design
The prayer mihrab } (details of design)
the vase }
In rugs of this type
the quality
Outstanding examples

The thematic organisation here gives a clear identification of

(i) the writer's topic area
(ii) the organisation of the paragraph, moving from a particular example of a rug type, through characteristic design, to generalisations about rugs of this type.

The thematic structure of the extracts we have examined so far is relatively helpful to the identification of topic area and the organisation of structure. Other cases are far less clear. Journalistic prose is often far more loosely structured:

(19) *Due in the bookshops* soon from Faber and Faber is a small paperback which reveals more about the way British television drama is really produced than all the weekend symposiums and university gabfests I've attended in the last ten years. *It* consists of seven chunks, one each from . . . *The title*, *Ah*

Mischief, comes from Hare's contribution. *He* tells of going nervously to visit . . .

(*The Listener*, 29 April 1982, p. 12)

This set:

Due in the book shops	The title
It	He

makes it clear that the writer's topic area is concern with a book, though the structure of the contribution is much less clearly marked. It is possible, though it would need to be demonstrated, that less clearly marked structure is more difficult for a recipient to process.

The analysis of thematic structure in spontaneous speech provides considerable problems. We have glossed over some of the problems of attribution of thematic structure in written language, and we shall do so again as we encounter spontaneous, conversational speech. Much of what is said is not readily related to the syntactic categories 'sentence' or 'clause' (*contra* Labov (1966) who reported that 'about 75% of utterances in most conversations are well-formed by any criterion (when rules of ellipsis and general editing rules are applied, almost 98% would fall in this category)' cited in Linde & Labov, 1975). In the following extract, an attempt has been made to assign thematic structure:

(20) *the environment I was living in* was Berkeley + *which* is purely academic + *no it* wasn't purely academic it was em + *it* was basically academic *I* mean *most of Berkeley* is the university + *it*'s like a town + *in which* the university dominates the city + like Cambridge + or Oxford + *the university* is the hub of the city + and *most of the people you* found there kind of ancillary to the university + + em and *you* also got a lot of wasters there *I* mean *people* who dropped out of university and can't bear leaving the place +

The thematic framework here is generally less specific:

the environment I was living in	it
which	in which
no	the university
it	most of the people you
it	you
it	I
I	people
most of Berkeley	

Again it is possible to discern the speaker's topic area but it is not possible to discern the developing organisation of the text by looking at the thematic structure. It is a characteristic of primarily interactional conversational speech in our data that the interactional aspect, marked by *I* and *you*, is frequently thematised (cf. also (2) in Chapter 1, description of a rainbow). This marking gives a clear indication of the speaker's view of what he is using language to do.

Thematic organisation appears to be exploited by speakers / writers to provide a structural framework for their discourse, which relates back to their main intention and provides a perspective on what follows. In the detective story cited in (8), the writer shuttles about, commenting on the activities of a number of different individuals, located in different parts of England and Europe within the space of two pages. The coherence of structure is imposed, partly at least, because locally within the text the author is meticulous in relating events to each other in time. Each new adverbial phrase marks the fact that the scenario has shifted. The relevance of the various activities to each other, or to the plot, is not plain to the reader at this point. He has to trust the writer to restrict himself to the account of relevant activities and his warrant for this sustained trust is that the author goes to such trouble to specify the complex temporal relationships of the activities he describes.

In the travel brochure (9), what is essentially an unstructured list of facts is given structure and arranged into paragraphs on the basis of different geographical locations. It is the different geographical locations, realised in thematic position, which form the framework of the discourse.

Anyone who has ever written an essay is familiar with the problem of where to start the essay, how to relate paragraphs to what has gone before, and how to relate sentences to what has gone before. We all frequently encounter prose where the writer has not paid sufficient attention to thematic organisation. Consider this citation on the wrapping of a Swiss Lemon Oil soap tablet:

(21) Li-mang is what the Chinese called the citrus lemon tree in 1175 AD and some believe the Mongolians invented lemonade in 1099. Lemons, like other species of citrus fruits, have been cultivated for thousands of years and are native to Southeastern Asia.

There is more than one problem here, but one reason why this text reads rather oddly is because of the thematised *some* in the co-ordinated second clause of the first sentence, following the marked structure in the first clause.

4.3.5 *Natural order and point of view*

We have already mentioned the notion of a 'natural order' for the presentation of a narrative sequence of events. As Levelt (1981) remarks, it is natural to put the event that happened first before the event which followed it. A sequence of events in time, told as a narrative in English, will often be presented in the order in which they happened and, often, with an unstated implication of a relationship in which the second event in some sense follows from the first (e.g. *was caused by*). This type of non-logical inference has been characterised by Horn (1973) as *post hoc ergo propter hoc.* Consider the following passage. Just before it begins, a violent storm has broken, with torrents of rain:

(22) Between where I stood by the rail and the lobby was but a few yards, yet I was drenched before I got under cover. I disrobed as far as decency permits, then sat at this letter but not a little shaken.
(W. Golding, *Rites of Passage*, Faber & Faber, 1980, p. 191)

It is not stated that the narrator is 'drenched' by the rain (rather than by, say, perspiration) or why he wishes to get under cover. It is not made clear why he disrobes or why he finds himself 'not a little shaken'. The normal assumption of an English-speaking reader will be, however, that the series of events are meaningfully related to each other, and he will draw the appropriate inferences that the narrator is drenched by the rain, wishes to take cover from the rain, disrobes because his clothing has been drenched by the rain, and is 'not a little shaken' because of his immediately preceding experience in the violent storm. (For a discussion of inferencing see Chapter 7.) We stress that these inferences will be drawn by an English-speaking reader because it appears that in other cultures there are rather different bases for narrative structures (cf. Grimes, 1975; Grimes (ed.), 1978; Becker, 1980).

It is clearly the case that there are stereotypical orderings in genres other than those which obviously consist of a series of events

in time. Thus Linde & Labov report that 97% of the subjects, in a survey in which subjects were asked to describe the lay-out of their apartments, described them in terms of 'imaginary tours which transform spatial lay-outs into temporally organised narratives' (1975: 924). The narrative tour in each case begins at the front door, just as it would if the interviewer were to arrive for the first time at the apartment. A similar alignment with the point of view of the hearer is taken by speakers who are asked to give directions in a strange town. They always begin, co-operatively, from the point where the enquiry is made and then attempt to describe the route as a succession of acts in time. In each of these cases then, there is a 'natural' starting point and the description is an attempt to follow a 'natural' progression. Levelt suggests that by adopting the stereotypical pattern of the culture 'the speaker facilitates the listener's comprehension' (1981: 94) since both speaker and hearer share the same stereotype.

It seems very likely that there are other constraints on ordering in types of discourse which are not simply arranged as a sequence of events in time. Van Dijk (1977) suggests that descriptions of states of affairs will be determined by perceptual salience so that the more salient entity will be mentioned first. He suggests that 'normal ordering' will conform to the following pattern:

(23) general – particular
whole – part / component
set – subject – element
including – included
large – small
outside – inside
possessor – possessed
(van Dijk, 1977: 106)

Consider the following extract in terms of van Dijk's proposed constraints:

(24) [1]It was indeed a horrifying sight. [2]The walls alone stood, bare and gaunt and blackened, with cracked and split stone dressings and gaps where the cornice had been dragged away when the roof collapsed. [3]Within were heaps of wreckage, mostly brick and stone from internal walls which had fallen, but with occasional objects of twisted metal and quantities of broken glass. [4]In one place Betty saw the remains of the study safe and

in another three stick-like objects which she eventually classified as the barrels of shot guns.
(Freeman Wills Crofts, *Golden Ashes*, Penguin Books, 1959, p. 64)

The first sentences describe the *general, whole, large, outside*. The second sentence moves to the walls, *part, including, large, outside*. The third sentence moves *inside* and begins to observe *small included* objects. The last sentence introduces *small included particulars*, initially unidentified and then particularised. It seems reasonable to suggest that, in general, in this descriptive passage the constraints which van Dijk proposes are adhered to. Suppose the constraints were not adhered to? It would follow then, that when the 'normal' ordering is reversed, some 'special effect' (staging device, implicature) would be being created by the speaker / writer. Van Dijk suggests that if the normal ordering (general–particular) is reversed as between (25a and b) the second sentence in (b) will be taken as giving an explanation for the state of affairs described in the first sentence:

(25) a. Peter always comes late. He won't be in time tonight either.
b. Peter was late again. He never comes on time.

Van Dijk's suggestion is certainly of interest to the discourse analyst. We should, however, take note of Levelt's warning: 'the . . . question of how natural order relates to different domains of discourse, will never be answered exhaustively: there are as many natural orders as there are things to talk about' (1981: 94).

One obvious constraint on ordering which may override the 'perceptual salience' principle outlined by van Dijk, is the maintenance of a consistent point of view. Fillmore (1981) has noted that a feature of literary discourse is the effect of a particular orientation or 'angle of vision' on the way events are presented. Thus, at the beginning of Hemingway's *The Killers*, the way the reader has to view the events is determined by the organisation of the first sentence:

(26) The door of Henry's lunchroom opened and two men came in.

The 'opening of the door' takes place before the appearance of the two men. This ordering of events is compatible with the fact that the men 'came in'. The structure of this fragment reflects the view

of events which a narrator inside the lunchroom must have had. In another of Fillmore's examples, (27) below, the sequential structure of reported events is determined by the order in which they were observed, rather than by their most natural physical sequence:

(27) The light went on. She was standing by the door.

In literature, the author frequently assigns the role of narrator to one of his characters. The author then has to manipulate the knowledge which the reader needs so that it can be plausibly known to and recountable by the narrator. Several authors have explored the literary possibilities of recounting the same events seen through the eyes of different characters and interpreted differently by them (cf. for two very different literary types, *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins and *The Alexandrian Quartet* by Lawrence Durrell). The problem for the author is to create a coherent view of a particular world.

The problem is, of course, one which affects all our production of language. Kuno (1976) and Kuno & Kaburaki (1977: 627) have pointed out that the variation in what they call 'camera angles' has an effect on the syntax of sentences. If the speaker is empathising with one participant in a domestic drama rather than another, the same event may be described for example by sentence *a* or by sentence *b*:

(28) a. John hit his wife.
b. Mary's husband hit her.

The speaker's empathy, his sympathy with one point of view rather than another, may also lead to a particular choice of lexis. Consider the following paradigm:

(29) a. Mary, Queen of Scots, was executed by the English Queen.
b. Mary, Queen of Scots, was assassinated by the English Queen.
c. Mary, Queen of Scots, was murdered by her cousin, Elizabeth.

In each case the agent referred to is the same individual, the patient referred to is the same individual, and the agent causes the patient to die. (The cognitive content might be held to be the same.)

However, in *a* the action is reported as a legal process (*executed*) sanctioned by the constitutional monarch (*the English Queen*). In *b* the action is reported as an illegal, politically motivated act (*assassinated*) sanctioned by the constitutional monarch (*the English Queen*). In *c* the action is reported as an illegal, criminal act (*murdered*) performed by a close relation (*her cousin Elizabeth*). In each case the writer reveals a different assessment of the character and motivation of the act. (For a discussion of the wide range of factors influencing lexical choice in discourse, see Downing, 1980.) The question of 'empathy', described by Chafe as arising because 'people are able to imagine themselves seeing the world through the eyes of others as well as from their own point of view' (Chafe, 1976: 54), takes us far beyond the relatively formal investigation of the effects of thematisation into the general area of 'staging' which we return to in the next section.

4.3.6 *Theme, thematisation and 'staging'*

Throughout this chapter we have attempted to draw a distinction between the linearisation problem in terms of the cognitive ordering of events, description, etc. and the linearisation problem in terms of the linguistic means available to the speaker / writer for expressing that cognitive structuring, particularly the thematic organisation of the sentence or clause. The distinction is, however, difficult to maintain for the obvious reason that our only access to the speaker's / writer's cognitive structuring is via the language which he uses to express that structuring.

We have assumed that the notion of 'staging' embraces a much wider field, facets of which we have only briefly discussed. It embraces on the one hand the speaker's / writer's overall rhetorical strategy of presentation which may be motivated by an intention to create suspense, to convince his listener of the truth of what he is saying by adding credible supporting details, to persuade his listener to a course of action, or to shock or surprise. Indeed a speaker / writer may simultaneously have all of these intentions. The 'staging' which the discourse analyst might be concerned with is that which is manifest in the language used. It must be obvious, however, that, whereas the discourse analyst can draw attention to the effect of particularly marked staging, his discussion of the

'effect' of staging, or indeed his abstraction of some particular linguistic forms rather than others, as contributing to that effect, will necessarily be fairly unconstrained, in many ways akin to traditional literary interpretation or rhetorical discussion. Most linguists will feel uneasy at this 'soft' extension in the discussion of discourse. Notwithstanding, it is clear that discourse analysts can contribute to a description of the staging of the following extract:

(30)

B: I think if your physical appearance is em sort of neat and + well-controlled and so on this gives at least a superficial + feeling that one's going to give a neat and well-controlled performance

L: that's right + do you know I remember something which er points this up very well something that Gill said + and it's now I suppose er + er eight years ago + when + em + what's that Russian chap's name who was here for a while

B: Shaumyan

L: Shaumyan yeah + when he was here + em I gave a seminar on phonetics and the brain + which I later wrote up in Work in Progress but never did anything + with em + to my slight regret + but I – that was the first time I'd ever ventured beyond as it were orthodox phonetics in – in public + em and it was in front of + our department after its first amalgamation I think + and er one or two people from outside were also present + so in very many ways I was before an unknown public + relatively speaking er talking about somewhat unfamiliar territory of a very speculative nature + but claiming expertise + and I remember that one of the things I did was buy a new pair of shoes

We could characterise this as a discussion of the beneficial effects of a good physical appearance on the confidence of someone addressing an audience. Whereas speaker L is certainly saying something about this, we can note that he is presenting a detailed, structured orientation from which his comment on the matter has to be appreciated. He first establishes a particular time co-ordinate relating to a place co-ordinate, selecting a means of fixing the time which involves an element familiar to his interlocutor ('when Shaumyan was here') which may have the effect of reminding his interlocutor of how much younger, less experienced or less confident they were at that past time. The impression is further elaborated by details of what the speaker talked about ('speculative,

never-published') and to whom ('not close colleagues but outsiders'). This structured accumulation of elements contributing to a lack of confidence is counterbalanced by a single act of confidence-boosting, presented as the final comment. We could point to the fairly complex syntactic structure of the earlier part of the fragment, with a number of subordinate clauses adding extra detail. We could point to the typically polysyllabic lexis of most of the fragment and the sudden transition to the simple, monosyllabic *one of the things I did was buy a new pair of shoes* with its parallel transition out of professional life into the everyday life of the High Street. We could describe the change of voice quality on that last quoted phrase, the overall raising in pitch, the breathy voice, the effect of smiling.

It is presumably the case that these details noted by the discourse analyst are relevant to his interpretation of the fragment. The problem with a complex fragment of this sort, which has no near-parallels in most of our data, is that we can only bring the most general notions of 'regularity' to bear on it, notions no more specific than those found in any general manual of rhetoric. In the present state of knowledge it seems to us wise to restrict the discussion of general staging processes, in the analysis of discourse, to data which consists of multiple realisations of strictly comparable data like descriptions of apartment lay-outs (Linde & Labov, 1975), re-tellings of narrative events (Grimes, 1975; Chafe, 1979; Chafe (ed.) 1980) or instructions to perform a task (Grosz, 1979; Yule, 1981).

One form of strictly comparable data which is readily available for analysis in everyday language can be found in letter-writing. The 'staging' of letters in terms of what information is represented and how it is thematised depends on the type of letter and the intentions of the writer in writing it. In most letters the basic elements which are thematised are those primary (contextual) features of time, location and addressee which we considered earlier as constituting part of the topic framework. The more formal the letter, the more explicit is the information contained in these thematised elements. If we compare the beginnings of two letters, extracts (31) and (32), we can see that the same type of information is thematised, but the amount of explicit information differs. The inclusion of the addressee's full address in (32) is not, obviously,

intended to 'inform' the addressee where he himself lives, but to mark the letter as one of a filed series in which this information is preserved, as a formal letter. The specificity of information in representing the writer's address is one conventional means of marking the 'starting point' for the discourse which follows.

(31)

Stirling, Sunday.

Dear George,

I hope you managed to get home safe and sound through that downpour yesterday. The roads must have been treacherous . . .

(32)

Davies's Educational Services Ltd.,
66 Southampton Row,
London W C 1B. 4BY

18th August, 1978.

George Yule, Esq.,
Department of Linguistics,
The University,
Edinburgh, 8.

Dear Mr. Yule,

In your letter of the 10th July, 1978, you told me that you were arranging for me to be sent the ELBA material in response to my letter of the 3rd March ...

As soon as one begins to investigate the different formats used in letter-writing, general similarities in the type of information thematised are discernible, but the variety of staging considerations to be recognised is extremely large. The envelope, plain brown official or light blue personal, airmail or 'official paid', is just one part of the complex staging which precedes the reading of the actual contents

of a letter. Clearly, much of this type of 'staging' is non-linguistic (part of the external context of discourse), but its effect on our interpretation of the text of letters and many other types of discourse should not be ignored.

5
Information structure

5.1 The structure of information

In the previous chapters we have been considering increasingly restricted views of the production and interpretation of discourse. In Chapter 2 we considered the effect of situational context on discourse and in Chapter 3 the effect of different perspectives of topic structure. We devoted Chapter 4 to discussing the effect of linearisation in discourse, how what is presented first limits the interpretation of what follows and how decisions on thematisation provide the overall structure within which the addressee interprets the discourse.

In this chapter we focus in even further, to the smallest units of discourse structure: small local units at the level of phrase or clause. We consider how information is packaged within such small structures and, particularly, what resources are available to speakers and writers for indicating to their addressees the status of information which is introduced into the discourse.

5.1.1 *Information structure and the notion 'given / new' in intonation*

The serious study of information structure within texts was instituted by scholars of the Prague School before the Second World War. They studied what they called 'the communicative dynamism' of the elements contributing to a sentence, within the framework of 'functional sentence perspective'. (For an overview of this work see Vachek, 1966; Firbas, 1974.)

Many of the insights developed by the Prague scholars were first brought to the attention of Western scholars by Halliday in an extremely influential article published in 1967. Halliday elaborated and developed those aspects of Prague work which related directly to his own interests in the structure of texts. In particular, he