

## TOPIC AS A STRUCTURE, CHARACTER ENTITY, MESSAGE, AND TRANSACTION

Asst. Prof. MENAHIL AHMAD ALNAWAS\*

Date of Acceptance 21/5/2008

### ABSTRACT

The term topic has been defined by so many linguists and scholars corresponding to their interests and purposes, yet no comprehensive and accurate definition has been stimulated to convey all the essential features of this term.

The research is an endeavor to shed some light on four main trends that define the term topic. The first one looks at the topic as a structure which could be grammatical and informational. The second sees Topic as an entity that is to say a discursal rather than a sentential process. The third one considers Topic as a message of two types : Local topic which is identified in terms of the semantic relationships set up between the successive sequences of sentences of a discourse, or rather the propositions (idea units) they express.(b) Global topic is concerned with the meaning of large discourse chunks. Finally the fourth one which focuses on topic as a level that spells out the subject-matter a certain chunk of discourse.

### 1.1 Preface

The research sheds some light on the different perspectives of the term topic and how it has been dealt with and applied by different linguists. Four approaches are chosen for this purpose: the topic as a structure, topic as a transaction, topic as character entity, topic as a message. Notions such as information-bearing structure, communicative dynamism, Thematization will also be dealt with.

(FSP). According to Mathesius, every utterance has *two different* structures: one is grammatical, *and* the other is informational termed: “the information-bearing structure of the utterance” as shown in the following quotation:

### 1.2 Topic as a Structure

The term “topical structure” refers to the way speakers identify the relative importance of the subject matter in an utterance (Crystal, 1997: 387). This concept goes back to the founder of the Linguistic Circle of Prague<sup>1</sup>, Vilém Mathesius who, developed and applied the concept of “Functional Sentence Perspective”

---

\* University of Baghdad–College of Education for Women-Assistant Dean for Registration and Students Affairs.

The basic elements of the formal structure of the sentence are the grammatical subject and the grammatical predicate, the basic elements of the information-bearing structure are the *foundation* of the utterance- whatever in a given situation is *known* or at least *obvious* and thus forms a *point of departure* for the speaker- and the *core* of the utterance, that is, whatever the speaker *affirms* about the foundation of the utterance or in terms of it.

(Mathesius,1939:171)

The terms “foundation” and “core” are usually replaced, respectively, by “theme” and “rheme” after classical terminology (Garvin, 1969: 264, Vachek, 1974: 106). Unless special effects are aimed at, *theme* usually precedes *rheme* (i.e. theme is

unmarked). In marked utterances, rheme is promoted to the first *position* followed by the theme. Thus theme in (1a) is unmarked, but is marked in (1b, c) owing to the *thematization*<sup>2</sup> of the new information:

**Example (1):**

**a. The man is coming.**

**b. His hair I can't stand.**

**c. Smith her name was.**

(Crystal,1997: 351)

Drawing on the Prague School, Halliday (1967:212) defines theme as “the point of departure for the clause as a message” or as “the peg on which the message is hung”. The thematic role may be confluent with its reference to “given information”, “topic”, or “conversational topic”, but need not be always so.

Related to the notion of FSP is that of “Communicative Dynamism” (CD) introduced by Firbas in reference to the extent to which the sentence element contributes to the development of communication. According to Firbas (1974: 270), an utterance is a process of gradually unfolding meaning wherein each part dynamically contributes to the total communicative effect. Some utterance elements can have high degrees of contributions, others have low ones. The basic distribution of CD in an utterance is that the opening element carries the lowest degree of CD, then gradually passes on to the elements carrying the

highest degree of CD. Firbas (ibid.: 24) maintains that *theme* is the element or elements carrying *the lowest degree(s)* of CD within a sentence, and that *rheme* consists in element(s) carrying *the highest degree* of CD within the utterance. He also recognizes various transitional *utterance* elements that are neither “thematic” nor “rhematic”.

Daneš (1974: 106) affirms that the relevance of FSP for the organization of discourse is beyond doubt since the choice and the distribution of themes reveal a particular patterning. He coins the term “Thematic Progression” (TP) to refer to *the choice* and *ordering* of utterance themes, *their mutual relationship* and *hierarchy*, as well as *their links to the main theme* of the macrostructural units (such as the paragraph, scene, chapter.. etc) and *the theme of the whole text*.

Being the skeleton of the plot, TP has three types: i) *simple linear TP*; ii) *TP with a constant theme*; and iii) *TP with derived themes* (ibid.: 109). In

simple linear TP, the rheme (R2) of the first utterance (U1) appears in the next (U2) as its theme (T2). In other words,

T1----- R1

T2 (=R1) ----- R2

T3 (=R2) -----R3

**Figure (1) TP with Linear Thematic Progression of Rhemes (Daneš, 1974: 118)**

each R becomes the T of the succeeding one as shown in the following figure:

In TP with a constant theme, the same theme appears in a series of utterances as diagramed hereunder:

T1 —————> R1

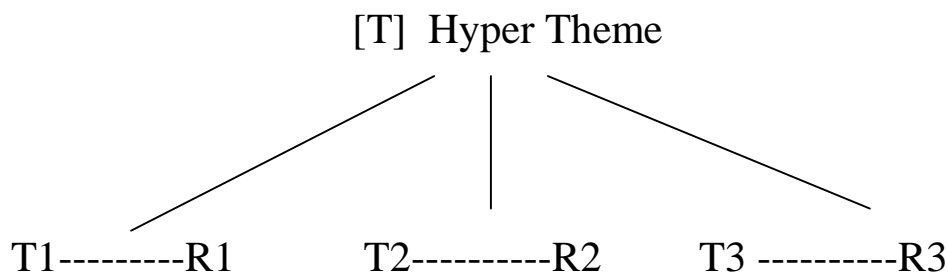
T1 —————> R2

T1 —————> R3

**Figure (2) TP with Constant Theme (Daneš, 1974: 118)**

Finally, in TP with derived themes, the latter are derived from the main theme

or “the hyper theme” as shown in the diagram below



**Figure (3) TP with Derived Theme (ibid. :119)**

Daneš concludes that the generalized structure of the text could be described in terms of the underlying thematic progression, as well as in terms of the rhematic sequences of the semantic relations obtaining between particular rhemes (ibid.: 127).

Following the Prague School terminology, Halliday (1994) defines thematic structure as the organization of the message into “*theme*” and “*rheme*”. Within the Theme + Rheme configuration, the theme is the starting-

point for the message; therefore, part of the meaning of any clause lies in that element which is chosen as its theme (ibid.: 39). The theme, then, is what speakers / writers use as their point of departure. Formally, it is the left-most constituent of the sentence as realized in the grammar of English. The theme is not necessarily a nominal group, it may also be an adverbial group or a prepositional phrase (ibid.). In many unmarked cases, the theme of the declarative sentences will be a

noun phrase; that of interrogatives: the interrogative word; and that of the imperatives: the imperative form of the verb.

In his analysis of a biographical text, Halliday (1994: 40) shows how theme could be traced clause by clause throughout each orthographic paragraph in the text. The scheme of the thematic structure reveals "paragraph themes", all contributing to the characterization of thoughts and actions. The theme that occupies more paragraphs is distinguished as "the dominant theme" [cf. the notion of "hyper theme" in Daneš (1974), Figure (3)].

### 1.3 Topic as Character Entity

Some discourse analysts take the view that the term "*theme*" refers to *the grammatical subjects* of a series of sentences. Among these analysts are

Perfetti and Goldman (cited by Brown & Yule, 1983: 135), who view *thematization* as "the discourse process by which a *referent* comes to be developed as the *central subject* of the discourse". Accordingly, the term *theme* does not refer to the constituent itself, but to the referent of the constituent, i.e. an individual's name could be thematized when identified in the discourse by the repetition of the same name, using pronouns or equivalent words. For example, Dr. *Jones* could be thematized by using the expression "Dr. Jones" or "he" or "the surgeon" or "the doctor" (ibid.). In short, *theme* refers to the constituent that occupies the subject slot in a series of sentences and consequently becomes the *main character* or *the topic entity* of the discourse. A topic in this sense is

**A coherent aggregate of thoughts introduced by some participant in a conversation, developed either by that participant or another or by several participants jointly, and then either explicitly closed or allowed to peter out. Topics typically have clear beginnings, although that is not always the case, and their endings are sometimes well defined, sometimes not.**

(Chafe; 2003 :674)

Brown and Yule (1983: 33) share this view with Chafe and assert that thematization is a *discoursal* rather than a *sentential* process, and that by collecting the recurrent grammatical

subjects in sequence, one would establish the thematic structure of the whole text (ibid.: 141). They support their argument by offering the following example:

***This rug comes from the village of Shalamazar in 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...***

The sequence of the grammatical form:  
subjects would have the following

*This rug (illustrated)*

*the design*

*The design*

*The prayer mihrab*

*the vase*

*In rugs of this type*

*the quality*

*Outstanding examples*

and the writer's *topic area* would be a *specific type of rug*. The organization of the discourse moves from a *particular* example of a rug type, through characteristic design, to generalizations about rugs of this type. The co-authors (ibid.: 132) state that the presence of theme in certain thematic devices, such as the title, will influence the interpretation of the text that follows it. They assume two main functions for the theme:

- connecting back and linking into the previous discourse in order to maintain a coherent point of view;
- serving as a point of departure for the further development of the discourse.

They (ibid.: 140) add that the analyst may find other text-specific thematic devices, such as headings and sub-headings, in the text. What these thematic devices have in common is that they do not only provide *starting points* for paragraphs in a text, but also divide up the whole text into smaller chunks. This *chunking* effect is one of the most basic of those achieved by thematization in discourse (ibid.).

#### 1.4 Topic as a Message

Among the comprehensive approaches to the study of theme as a message are the works of van Dijk (1972, 1977, 1980, 1981, 1984, 1985, and 1990), van Dijk and Kintsch (1983), and Kintsch and van Dijk (1978).

Van Dijk (1981: 3) presents a number of arguments about the properties of sentential sequences. First, an adequate description of the properties of sentences should take into account the structures of other sentences in the discourse. Second, sentence sequences have important linguistic features such as connection, coherence, topics and changes of topics, turn-taking systems in conversation, and so on. Third, language use should not only be accounted for in terms of sentences or sequences of sentences, but also in terms of more comprehensive units such as texts or discourses as wholes. Finally, the levels and dimensions of discourse analysis should be approached in terms of theories of narrative, style, conversation, rhetoric...etc, or as van Dijk (ibid.) puts it:

**A more adequate linguistic theory should pertain to sequential and textual structures of utterances and should be connected with other theories, which account for certain properties of discourse and language use.**

Van Dijk (1977: 132; 1981:4) considers the terms “topic of discourse”, “theme”, “being about” and “aboutness” to be synonymous in that they are used alternatively to denote one and the same phenomenon in discourse, namely: “what the message is about”. Theme could be derived from the passage itself in a form of a quasi-paraphrase of the same underlying semantic representation or the abstract relations holding between the propositions that are expressed by the sentences of the discourse in relation to some possible world(s), and relative to some set of knowledge or other cognitive information (van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983: 150).

The process of general theme derivation can be done at two levels: i) the microstructural level which is presented by the local semantic

coherence, ii) macrostructural level that is denoted by the global semantic coherence.

*Local* semantic coherence is identified in terms of the semantic relationships set up between the successive sequences of sentences of a discourse, or rather the propositions (idea units) they express. It refers to the meaningful intersentential connections that are signalled by a number of correlates such as word order, the use of connectives, sentential adverbs, verb tenses and pronouns (van Dijk, 1985: 108).

*Global* coherence is concerned with the meaning of large discourse chunks, or whole discourses that are indicated by a smaller set of higher level propositions (or macro-propositions). Van Dijk (1981:4) defines global coherence as:

**... higher level semantic structures which are derived from the propositional sequences of the text by a number of macro-rules. Macrostructures define the intuitive notion of the “global meaning”, (theme) or “topic” of a text or of a fragment of the text.**

More specifically, theme is derived by decomposing the text constituent clauses into micro-propositions (local themes). These are then condensed into a higher level macro-proposition through the application of *semantic information reduction* rules which include the recursive operations of *deletion*, *generalization*, and *integration*. The resultant highest level

**Example (2):**

- **Peter went to the station.**
- **Peter bought a ticket.**
- **Peter went to the platform...etc.**

By applying the macroreduction rules, the single macrostructure “Peter took the train” can be derived from the above text.

macrostructure denotes the global coherence which gives the discourse its overall unity, and signals its main general theme. The following example offered by van Dijk (1981: 4) shows how the semantic reduction rules function in deriving the global semantic macrostructure of a text:

Van Dijk (1979: 161) admits that his definition of topic is imperfect in that it does not make explicit all the intuitive notions, which the analyst tries to capture. Furthermore, *different*

global meanings could be assigned to the same discourse owing to the differences in the reader's background knowledge, attitudes, sets of beliefs and preferences which all may lead to different evaluation about what is relevant or important information in the discourse (van Dijk, 1985: 117).

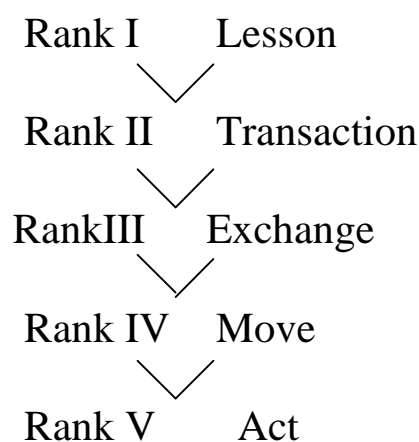
Still, he concludes that, generally speaking, global semantic structures or themes have a tendency to keep *uniform* in that the divergences in interpretation are kept at a minimum since certain interpretations of a discourse will always emerge as *more preferable* than others, regardless of all the subjective factors (ibid.).

### 1.5 Topic as a Transaction

Burton (1980) offers an insightful example of the linguistic approach<sup>3</sup> to discourse analysis wherein the

investigation of the structure of verbal interaction is anchored within the discipline of linguistics through the application of tried linguistic techniques to the description of new data (Coulthard, 1985: 120).

Burton's model makes use of the five-rank scale developed earlier by Sinclair et al at Birmingham University to handle the structure of classroom interaction. Drawing initially on Halliday (1961), the practical descriptive apparatus used by the Birmingham Group postulates a new linguistic level, termed *Discourse* with its own rank-scale whose units are realized by items at the level of *Grammar*. The basic structure of the discourse rank-scale is shown below:



**Figure (4) Discourse Rank-Scale  
(Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975: 21)**

The scale above shows that lessons are made up of Transactions, Transactions are made up of Exchanges, and so on down the hierarchy.

In order to render this model applicable to non-formal conversational data such as play interactions, Burton revised the list of

twenty-two acts used by the Birmingham Group by making certain alterations and additions while keeping the hierarchy itself intact except for the replacement of the topmost rank of *lesson* by *interaction* (Burton, 1980: 143).

Burton's list of Acts (at Rank V) consists of nineteen labels: *Marker*,

*Summons, Silent Stress, Starter, Metastatement, Conclusion, Informative, Elicitation, Directive, Accusation, Comment, Accept, Reply, React, Acknowledge, Excuse, Preface, Prompt, and Evaluate*<sup>4</sup>.

*Markers* (m) are realized by a closed class of items such as “Well”, “OK”, “Now”, “Good”, “Alright” and certain expressive particles (e.g. *Kaw, Blimey*) whose function is to mark boundaries in the discourse, and to indicate that the producer of the item has a *topic* to introduce. *Summons* (sum) have the same function as that of markers and are realized by a closed set of verbal and non-verbal items: the use of the name of another participant or mechanical devices like doorbells telephone-bells...etc. *Silent stress* (^) is realized by a pause to highlight a marker or summons as the head of a boundary exchange.

*Starters* (s) and *metastatements* (ms) are realized by statements, questions or commands. The former act provides information or directs attention towards an area, while the latter act clarifies the structure of the immediately following discourse. *Conclusions* (con) make clear the structure of the immediately preceding discourse and are realized by anaphoric statements. *Informatives* (i) are realized by statements that provide information, while *elicitations* (el) are realized by questions requesting certain linguistic responses. Contrariwise, *directives* (d) request non-linguistic response and are verbalized by commands.

*Accusations* (accu) and *comments* (com) are made up of statements, questions, commands, or moodless items requesting an apology or a surrogate excuse for the first type of act, and to expand, justify or provide additional information for the second type. *Accepts* (acct) and *acknowledge* (ack) can be realized by *yes, ok, or*

*uhah* to show that the speaker has heard and understood the previous utterance. The only difference is that *acknowledge* indicates an appreciation of the significance of an informative

While *reply* (rep) functions to provide a linguistic response appropriate to a preceding directive, *react* (rea) provides a non-linguistic response to a preceding directive. Thus the analytical apparatus is well equipped to account for both linguistic and paralinguistic responses. *Excuse* (ex) provides a formulaic apology or an excuse in response to a preceding accusation. *Prefaces* (pr) are realized by combinations of placement markers, self-referential meta-terms, or meta-references to preceding talk in order to *reinstate a diverted topic*.

*Prompts* (p) reinforce a preceding directive or elicitation through a closed class of items *Go on, What are you waiting for, and Hurry up*.

Finally, *evaluates* (ev) comment on the appropriateness of a preceding utterance in statements, questions, commands, or moodless items (Burton, 1980: 156-9).

At the next level (Rank IV), seven types of *Move* are recognized: *Framing, Focusing, Opening, Supporting, Challenging, Bound-Opening, and Re-opening*. *Frames* and *Focuses*, as explicit markers of transaction boundaries, involve acts that are essentially pre-topic<sup>5</sup> items serving the purpose of attention-getting. A

*Frame* comprises a head which is either a marker or a summons with a silent stress as qualifier, while *focuses* are made up of an optional signal (marker or summons), followed by a pre-head (starter), a compulsory head (metastatement or conclusion), and an optional post-head (comment) (ibid.: 148).

*Opening Moves* are either topic-carrying<sup>6</sup> or transaction-initial items. In



the cases where they are not Transaction-initial, they follow Frame and/or Focus. *Supporting* moves can occur after all other types of move. The recognition of such moves depends on the concept of discourse framework which concerns the presuppositions set up in the initiating move of an exchange as well as the interactional expectations dependent on that move. Here Burton argues that for casual conversation, exchange can be seen to last long as the framework holds (ibid.: 142).

*Challenging* moves hold up the progress of topic maintenance or topic-introduction in one way or another. They can occur after any other move with the exception, in two-party talk, of following a supporting move. *bound-opening* moves enlarge the discourse framework by extending the ideational-textual aspect of the original opening move, employing various types of informative and comment acts. They occur after a preceding opening, bound opening, or re-opening move has been supported (ibid.: 152).

Finally, *re-opening* moves take place after a preceding opening, *bound-opening*, or *re-opening* has been challenged. They are made up of compulsory informs / comments as heads, with optional Prefaces as preheads (ibid.: 153).

At the next higher level (Rank III), Burton recognizes two types of Exchanges: *Explicit Boundary Exchanges* and *Conversational Exchanges*. Explicit boundary exchanges are optional at the opening of transactions, realized either by a framing move, a focusing move, or both. Conversational exchanges are compulsory, realized by an opening move, challenging move, or a re-opening move as initiators. Optional constituents of conversational exchanges are supporting moves (as a response) or a bound opening move as

a reinitiator. The specifications above show how this descriptive system is finite, clear, replicable, and accounts for both optional and compulsory structures alike. At the higher level of Rank II, there is the category of *Transaction* that spells out the subject-matter or topic of a certain chunk of discourse. This *transaction* has the compulsory-opening move that is a topic-carrying item.

Finally, the topmost level of Interaction (Rank I), enveloping the whole discourse, can only have the structure of an unordered string of category since each and every discourse is a unique piece of interaction in terms of its component structures (ibid.: 154).

## 1.6 Conclusions

The definition of the term topic has been enacted four trends: The first one looks at the topic as a structure that can be classified into two types: one is grammatical which constitutes the subject and the predicate ; and the other is informational. The latter form is considered a point of departure for the speaker and the core of the utterance, that is, whatever the speaker affirms about the foundation of the utterance or in terms of it.

The second trend looks at the topic as an entity that is to say a discorsal rather than a sentential process. This process can be done by collecting the recurrent grammatical subjects in sequence one to establish the topical structure of the whole text.

Topic as a message takes two forms : (1) Local topic which is identified in terms of the semantic relationships set up between the successive sequences of sentences of a discourse, or rather the propositions (idea units) they express. In other words, it refers to the meaningful inter-sentential connections that are signaled by a number of correlates such as word

order, the use of connectives, sentential adverbs, verb tenses and pronouns.

(2) Global topic is concerned with the meaning of large discourse chunks, or whole discourses that are indicated by a smaller set of higher level propositions (or macro-propositions).

The last trend considers topic as a unit along a rank – scale of five units : Lesson, Transaction(s), Exchange(s), Move(s) and act(s). Units, except the smallest at each level exhibit structures, that is to say is an ordered internal composition of units next below on the rank scale within the level. So a Topic or a Transaction is part of a Lesson, and at the same time constitute different types of Moves. Transaction spells out the subject-matter or topic of a certain chunk of discourse and it has the compulsory-opening move that is a topic-carrying item.

## References

- Brown, G. and Yule, G. (1983) *Discourse Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burton, D. (1980) *Dialogue and Discourse: A Sociolinguistic Approach to Modern Drama Dialogue and Naturally Occurring Conversation*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Chafe, W.(2003) "The Analysis of Discourse Flow " in Schiffrin, D etal. **The Handbook of Discourse Analysis**. Blackwell publishing.pp 673-687
- Crystal, D.(1997). *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. London: Blackwell
- Daneš, F. (ed.) (1974) “Functional sentence perspective and the organization of the text”, in *Papers on Functional Sentence Perspective*. Mouton: The Hague.
- Firbas, J. (1962) “No-thematic subjects in contemporary English”, *Traling* 1, 239-256.
- (1969) “The Prague school of linguistics”, in Hill, A. *Linguistics*, in *Forum Series*.
- Garvin, P. (ed.) (1964) *A Prague School Reader on Esthetic, Literary Structure and Style*.

- Washington: Georgetown University Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K (1961) "Categories of the theory of grammar". *Word* 17, 3, 241-292.
- Halliday, M. A. K (1994) An Introduction to *Functional Grammar* (2nd ed).. London:Arnold London:Arnold
- Mathesius, V. (1939) "On the so-called information-bearing structure of the sentence". *Slovo a Slovesnasty* 171-174.
- Perfetti, C. and Goldman, S. (1974) "Thematization and sentence retrieval". *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 3, 70-79.
- Sinclair, J. and Coulthard, R. (1975) *Toward an Analysis of Discourse: The English Used by Teachers and Pupils*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vachek, J. (1974) (ed.) *Praguiana: Some Basic and Less Known Aspect of the Prague Linguistic School. Vol. (12)*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (1972) *Some Aspects of Text Grammar*. The Hague: Mouton.
- (1976) *Pragmatics of Language and Literature*. Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company.
- (1977) *Text and Context*. London: Longman.
- (1979) "Relevance assignment in discourse comprehension". *Discourse Processes* 2, 113-126.
- (1980) *Macrostructures*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum.
- (1981) "Discourse studies and education". *Applied Linguistics*. 11,1, 1-26.
- (1984) *Prejudice in Discourse*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- (1985) (ed.) *Handbook of Discourse Analysis. Vol.(4)* London: Academic Press.
- (1990) "The future of the field: discourse analysis in the 1990's". *Text* 10, 133-156.
- Van Dijk, T.A. and Kintsch, W. (1983) *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension*. New York: Academic Press.

## استخدام المصطلح في البناء والوجود الخطابي والرسالة ومعنى النص الخطابي

الأستاذ المساعد مناهل احمد علي النواس

كلية التربية للبنات-جامعة بغداد-معاون عميد شؤون الطالبات والتسجيل

### المستخلص

ان المصطلح فكرة قد تم تعريفه من قبل العديد من اللغويين والمثقفين وفقاً لـ رغباتهم واهدافهم، وبالرغم من ذلك لا يوجد تعريف شامل وصحيح يحوي على جميع الخصائص المهمة لهذا المصطلح. ان هذا البحث هو محاولة لالقاء الضوء على اربعة من الاتجاهات التي تعاملت مع هذا المصطلح: أولاً الاتجاه الذي يعتبر الفكره ترتيباً بنويماً و يكون اما قواعدي او معلوماتي. الثاني يعتبر الفكره وجود خطابي بدلاً من عمليه تكوينيه للجمل. الاتجاه الثالث ينخذ من الفكره كرساله ذو حدين الأول محلي ويمكن تميزه عن طريق العلاقات المنطقيه التي تربط الجمل المتعاقبه مع بعضها والثاني شامل يتعلّق بمعنى النص الخطابي كلاً. اما الاتجاه الأخير فيركز على الفكره بوصفها كمرتبّه تغطي تفاصيل الموضوع في نص محدد.

□