

**DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v8i2.2150**

**Citation:** Blokh, M. Y., Asratyan, Z. D. & Asratyan, N. M. (2019). Topic of the Imaginative Text and Its Philosophical and Linguistic Presentation. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 8(2), 128-135. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v8i2.2150>

### **Topic of the Imaginative Text and its Philosophical and Linguistic Presentation**

**Mark Yakovlevich Blokh<sup>1</sup>, Zoya Dmitrievna Asratyan<sup>2</sup>**

**Norair Martinovich Asratyan<sup>3</sup>**

#### **Abstract**

This paper discusses various approaches to the nature of the imaginative literary text, especially in the 20th century. Considering the topic as a semantic focus, as an integrating phenomenon compositionally uniting all the elements of a text, the authors proceed from the idea that the methodological basis of this principle of research is represented by the theory of dicteme which is understood as a minimal unit of thematization (topicalization), styling and conceptualizing the text. The real or unreal world reflected in imaginative literature is given to the reader through the individual author's perception which is conceptualized. This conceptualization is observed at the level of dicteme, manifested, on the one hand, in the ideological validity of the topic, and on the other hand, in the thematic (topical) role of the concept. The topic of a work of art is the semantic core itself that concentrates the main idea, the key problem essential for the author, his/her intention and purpose, and, together with this, the topic as such organizes the relevant text structure that connects the parts around that core. This topical construct is built by dictemes that form the composition of a text. At the same time, the authors caution against one-sided approaches, both elementary and holistic, in identifying the topic. To identify the topic, both by formal definition and adequate description it is proposed to use a judgment with its categorial-propositional structure, including subject/s, objects, predicates, attributes, certain adverbial characteristics, etc.

**Keywords:** Topic, Meaning, Dicteme, Composition, Nomination, Predication, Thematization, Styling, Conceptualization, Elementarism, Holism, Judgment, Categorial-propositional structure, Structural and semantic approaches.

---

<sup>1</sup> Doctor of philological sciences, Professor, The head of the English Grammar Department, Moscow State Pedagogical University. E-mail: [blmy2@mail.ru](mailto:blmy2@mail.ru)

<sup>2</sup> Candidate of philological sciences, Associate Professor, the Continuing Education Institute, Naberezhnye Chelny State Pedagogical University. E-mail: [asratyan@mail.ru](mailto:asratyan@mail.ru)

<sup>3</sup> Candidate of philosophical sciences, Associate Professor, Teaching Department, Naberezhnye Chelny State Pedagogical University. E-mail: [norair.asratyan@gmail.com](mailto:norair.asratyan@gmail.com)

## Introduction

The translation of the word 'topic' (*θέμα*) from the ancient Greek language has a fairly wide range of meanings: 'something that is used as a basis', 'something that is formed', a 'problem for discussion', a 'provision'. In antiquity the topic was understood as a structural element of rhetoric, as the main content of speech and works of art (Aristotle, 2018; Cicero, 1972; Quintilian, 1834).

In the Renaissance, the concept of topic suggested by P. Bualo (1937) coincided with the presentation of the events under discussion and their sequence, as well as with the subject, motive and plot of a literary work.

Philosophers of the New Time transfer their research emphasis to the field of the theory of knowledge. In particular, I. Kant (1994) trying to find a connection between the categorial structure of mind and the subject of cognition in his agnostic constructions identified the topic of judgment with the content of judgment treating the latter as an act of belief.

## Materials and Methods

We proceed from the fact that the methodological basis for the study of the problem of topic is represented by the theory of dicteme, developed by one of the authors of this article (Blokh, 2000). To understand it, it is necessary to take into account that in the segment-level structure of the language there acts a reversible pattern: units of the overlying level can be decomposed into the units of the underlying level; or vice versa: units of the underlying level, when combined, build up the units of the directly overlying level. At the same time, one or several units of the underlying level build up only one unit of the directly overlying level (Blokh, 2000, p. 58).

In this process the dicteme through the *sentences* it comprises represents four major functional aspects of speech: nomination, predication, thematization and styling (Ibid., p. 63). Thematization includes the information transmitted by a dicteme into the unfolding content of the whole text (Ibid., p. 63).

## Results and Discussions

In the twentieth century, the research concerning the concept of topic was significantly intensified, and investigations were carried out simultaneously in philosophy and philology. Our main task is to conduct an analysis of the linguistic meaning of the notion of topic, while it is important to take into consideration the general outlines of a philosophical approach to the subject as well. Philosophers interpreting the concept of topic within the framework of their ontological and epistemological attitudes view it as an essential phenomenon in the analysis of social being and consciousness.

The founder of phenomenology E. Husserl (2001) distinguished between 'unthematic' and 'thematic' layers of the consciousness. To the first ones he referred the hidden aspects of consciousness and experiences that were not subjected to reflection, and to the second – those that became a subject of reflection. Topics, therefore, were understood by him as sections, layers of consciousness, which were singled out in the process of applying the procedure of reflexive analysis.

M. Heidegger (1997) also used the notion of thematization. He included it in the context of his philosophy which combined phenomenological and existentialist elements. He connected this notion with the key concept of his teaching – being as presence (*Dasein*), being-in-the-world. Unlike E. Husserl who understood the topic and thematization only within the framework of consciousness as its phenomena and processes M. Heidegger sought to understand and study those problems in the context of processes of objectification and inter-subjectivity. Thematization by his definition is "articulation of existential clarity, the delineation of the subject area with the help of this clarity and a markup of conceptuality which is commensurate with the things and phenomena in existence" (Heidegger, 1997). At the same time he underlines a dual nature of thematization. On the one hand, it objectifies, 'builds up', highlights the existing, subjects it to 'objective'

interrogation and determination (Ibid., p. 363). On the other hand, according to M. Heidegger (1993) the language is a way of intersubjective thematization.

But if in philosophy the problem of topic and thematization was still peripheral, then for the philological research of the twentieth century it was one of the most important. Therefore there appeared a significant number of approaches and points of view that will be considered below. But there is another important difference: thematization in philosophical theories is presented as an aspect of intentionality, as an orientation towards the subject of study, articulation, selection, isolation of a certain circle of phenomena for the purpose of cognition. While in linguistics and literary studies, this problem is treated as a more complicated one. Here the topic can also be understood as semantic focusing, highlighting: "The text is speech, both written and oral, which is thematically (topically) distinguished" (Blokh & Velikaya, 2012). At the same time, thematization (topicalization) is a creation, formation of a topic as an integrating, unifying principle of the text, which gives its all elements a compositional integrity.

Due to semantic interaction dictemes are united into dictemic groups ('hyperdictemes' or 'dictememes'). Thus thematization of a text takes place. Inside a dicteme a detailed elaboration of certain aspects of the general topic of a work (the topic of hyper-identity) is brought about.

Consequently the role of the dicteme in the course of text thematization is a crucial one and it has two aspects. Integrating the units of the underlying level, which themselves are not characterized by the function of thematization, the dicteme incorporates them into the general thematic fabric of the text, giving them a meaningful wholeness. At the same time, the integrity of the text of a work of art or a scientific work is determined by its common topic, which integrates multiplicity of dictemes into a single text; and the topic itself is a logical semantic chain uniting even meaningfully separate dictemes into a conceptually uniform structure that gives a text a compositional harmony.

The topic of a text is its main unifying and organizing factor. It is revealed through micro-topics reflected in the utterances-dictemes making it up (Blokh, 1999). The topic of the whole text ('pleno-textus') is represented through a hierarchy of particularistic topics, highlighting increasingly fractional communication-text segments ('partialis textus') (Blokh, 2005). Dicteme is at the very bottom of this hierarchy and is a minimal thematization unit.

The concept of topic is widely used in literary studies, where it is defined as "a range of events that form the basis of epic and dramatic works and at the same time it serves to raise philosophical, social, ethical and other ideological problems" (Maslovskiy, 1987). Then the topic is considered in two ways – from the point of view of reality and from the point of view of its aesthetic value. In the first case it is "subject, 'picture' content of a work, something that is depicted in it"; in the second, – "what is expressed," i. e. it is identified with the concept of a problem (Ibid., p. 437).

In linguistics the notion of topic was associated with a description of the structure of sentence, where a topic was opposed to a comment. The topic, as a rule, was considered as a subject, and the comment to it as a predicate: "In the English and other similar European languages, topics are usually subjects, and comments - predicates" (Hockett, 1958). Such an approach can be observed in a number of works of that time (Dahl, 1972; Sgall, 1975; Grimes, 1975; Givon, 1979, and others).

Later a lot of researchers began to study semantic aspects of the topic (E.O. Keenan, B. Scheffelin, T.A. van Dijk, G. Brown, G. Yule, A.K. Zholkovskiy, Yu.K. Shcheglov, O.I. Moskalskaya, E.I. Shendels, A.I. Novikov and many others). However, with the emergence of the dicteme doctrine the notion of topic began to be directly associated with the notion of meaning.

Exploring the linguistic essence of the notion of topic, we cannot fail to notice that this problem, as well as many others, is rooted in the depths of philosophical thinking.

The philosophical aspect of the problem is associated with a discussion regarding the categories of the part and the whole. Prolonged argument has spawned opposing theories, each of which is based on one-sided priorities.

One of the theories ('merism', from the Greek *μέρος* 'meros' – a part) reduces the whole to its parts, insisting that the whole is only the sum of the properties of its parts. Various modifications of merism are called elementarism, atomism, mechanism, additivity, reductionism. But with all the differences and shades of meaning the general methodological foundations inherent in these theories boil down to three statements: the whole is nothing more than the sum of its parts; the whole is learned through the knowledge of its parts; the parts precede the whole.

The alternative theory is called holism (from the Greek *ὅλος*, 'holos' - the whole). Its methodology is based on three principles directly opposite to merism: the whole is more than the sum of its parts; the knowledge of the whole precedes the knowledge of its parts; the whole precedes its parts.

The term 'holism' itself belongs to the South African philosopher and politician J. Smuts (1927). He created the 'philosophy of integrity' in the 20s of the twentieth century, allegedly relying on the words from the *Metaphysics* by Aristotle "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (Aristotle, 1976).

This principle, unjustifiably attributed to Aristotle, cannot by itself rouse objections. Holistic objects really have an additional systemic effect, which cannot be reduced to any of their parts, or to their entirety.

However, if we turn to the text of *Metaphysics*, then we may find that the Stagirite argued in a balanced way and avoided one-sided estimates and simplified approaches. He wrote: "The whole is called [1] that, which does not lack any of its parts, consisting of which it is called a whole by nature, and also [2] that, which so embraces things that it contains, that the latter form something one..." (Aristotle, 1976).

Aristotle clearly sees two sides or varieties of the whole and gives no preference to either. The first is a "whole by nature" in which no part is missing. Indeed, natural phenomena, especially living organisms, are born as a whole with their integral parts. The second type of the whole, as follows from the above passage, is formed from parts ('things'). These are, in particular, products of human activity.

It is possible to add to what Aristotle said the following. Natural objects by their genetic nature can belong to two different types of integrity. Living organisms represent an indissoluble unity of parts which cannot exist by themselves as separate objects. And inanimate systems consist of parts that can also exist separately from each other, e.g. the elements of water – hydrogen and oxygen.

Objects created by human activity appear because he/she at first divides the whole into parts; and then these elements, derived from the previous integrity, are synthesized into a new integrity. In turn, these new items in some cases (mechanical systems) can be disassembled into parts, and the latter can be replaced. And in other cases they represent mixtures, the ingredients of which can no longer be restored.

The objectives of our investigation do not presuppose a more detailed study of philosophical categories. Moreover, it should be noted that modern studies in this area (general theory of systems, synergetic, etc.) avoiding extremes, tend to explore opposites in a dialectical manner.

In this context, it is important for us to point out, as it has already been noted, that all products of human experience, including texts, are constructions formed from parts (which corresponds to the assertions of elementarists). At the same time, meaningful activity implies that goal-setting actions should be and are primary in genuine creativity, while a holistic mental picture of the future result (what holists insist on) precedes the actual creation of the parts of anything that is created and their unification. Generally speaking any meaningful text is an author's construction, parts of which (words) are extracted from other texts (written or oral) and assembled anew.

It is necessary to proceed from the fact that a text is a sign-thematic formation, disclosing a specific topic, which unites all its parts into an informational unity (Blokh, 2005). And this factor determines the dual role of the topic:

- a) it is somehow hidden in the text and requires its disclosure;
- b) it integrates all parts of the text into information unity.

Indeed, a literary text should contain a semantic center, a conceptual core, combining ideological informational and moral ethical aspects. The content of the work and all its parts are built around this core and in connection with it.

The events and phenomena of the real or unreal world pictured in imaginative literature are reflected through the author's individual perception, and thus are conceptualized. And this conceptualization is already observed at the level of dicteme. It is manifested, on the one hand, in the ideological validity of the topic, and on the other hand, in the thematic role of the concept.

The topic of a work of art is both the semantic core itself, which concentrates the main idea, the key problem that is interesting for the author, his/her intention and aim, and the text structure that connects the parts around that core, i.e. common fundamentals forming its composition.

The topic 'leads' the text from the conceptual-semantic core to the end of the work. At the same time, connecting parts of the text into a whole, it reveals itself as the conceptual core of the text.

Aesthetic means give a special emotional intensity (tension) to the process of disclosing (unfolding) a topic as a semantic core of a text, and they provide a special artistic logic (style) to the process of combining parts of a text into a complete work.

The topic is the meaning and concept of a work of art and their representation by artistic means. The topic is a unity of concept and content. The dicteme is a thematic unit, and the topic is a semantic structure, the elements of which are dictemes.

A text should be a reflection of extra-textual reality. Therefore, thematization outside the text is the author's choice and shaping of the topic, his work on extraction, highlighting, 'articulating' of certain processes and events from the external reality, as well as understanding his/her own views and experiences that seem to them worthy of description and analysis. And thematization inside the text is a special kind of meaning formation, in which parts of the text are put together into a common semantic space. The meaning of a text is a unity of ideological-conceptual goals and artistic-emotional ways of expressing them.

The problem of a formal representation of a topic which arises in connection with these speculations becomes a subject of keen argument.

E.O. Keenan and B. Schieffelin defined the discourse topic "not as a simple nominative phrase but as a proposition (about which either something is stated, or from which this statement originates)" (1977).

T.A. van Dijk understood the topic of a discourse as its macro-proposition, which determines "the meaning of parts of a discourse and of the whole discourse on the basis of the meanings of individual sentences" (1977). It is clear that the position of this author is close to the methodology of elementarism. In his opinion, "the discourse topics seem to reduce, organize and categorize semantic information of sequences as wholes" (Ibid., p. 132) However the semantic representations proposed by him were, as G. Brown and G. Yule noted, a kind of "a translation (which is incidentally, also an interpretation) of the piece of text into an alternative format" and therefore, in their opinion, "the semantic representations cannot be the topic" (Brown & Yule, 1983). Thus, the authors conclude that "the formal means of identifying the topic for a piece of discourse claimed by van Dijk is, in fact, an illusion" (Ibid., p. 110). The same idea was also expressed by W. Kintsch, who noted that "no algorithmic procedure exists to analyze a given sentence (or paragraph) into its propositional base structures" (1974). However, G. Brown and G. Yule admit that "the proposition form is the representation in which all knowledge is used and stored" (1983, p. 110).

Despite all the differences between these researchers each of them tries to find a formal way of presenting the topic at the level of sentence, which we cannot agree with, since we believe that the sentence does not have a thematic function. This function appears only at the level of text and its minimum unit, a dicteme.

For the formal representation of a topic, in our opinion, it is possible to use as its basis a judgment with its categorial-propositional structure, which includes subject/s, objects, predicates, attributes, denotations of certain time-space relations, etc. However, the categorial-propositional structure is a deep dynamic structure which could be transformed by nominalization into a static event of a surface structure.

At the same time propositions presented in a text are not equal ranking. As it was admitted by N.D. Arutyunova in the linguistic dictionary: "Both in logic and linguistics, the term 'proposition' is used ambiguously depending on the following factors: the volume of the initial notion (a sentence, an utterance or a speech act) and the way it is partitioned " (1990). It is necessary to distinguish propositions at the sentence level and at the level of text. The hierarchical nature of the propositional structure of text was noted by many researchers. Thus, according to G. Brown and G. Yule, "some propositions are subordinate to others <...>. This suggests not only that mental representation of the text is in the form of proposition set, but that there is a hierarchical organization of the set" (1983, p. 112). From which it follows that "each proposition in the propositional set would be defined as hierarchically subordinate to the topic-proposition" (Ibid., p. 112). This view is shared by some other linguists (E.O. Keenan, B. Schieffelin, W. Kintsch).

However, the functions of the proposition at the sentence level and at the level of text are different. At the sentence level, it is a categorial-regulatory or a logical function, and at the text level it is a categorial-cognitive or a thematic one.

Considering the categorial-propositional structure as the basis of any judgment, we share the point of view of those researchers who emphasize the hierarchical organization of propositions in texts. However, the topic is not limited to the proposition, but is only based on it. The topic and the proposition, in our opinion, generally belong to different spheres: the proposition – to an ideal one, and the topic formed on propositional basis from the linguistic material of the text – to a material one.

L. Wittgenstein called "the sign through which we express the thought" a propositional sign and a judgement or a proposition – "the propositional sign in its projective relation to the world" (1922, 3.12). He wrote: "To the proposition belongs everything which belongs to the projection; but not what is projected. Therefore the possibility of what is projected but not this itself. In the proposition, therefore, its sense is not yet contained, but the possibility of expressing it" (Ibid., 3.13).

This idea of L. Wittgenstein is an additional confirmation of the fact that the proposition is only a scheme "in projective relation to the world", and the meaning (sense) appears in a dicteme, as a minimum text unit in which it is the topic that performs this sense-making function.

As we have already noted, micro-topics do not originate at the level of sentence, since it has no function of thematization, but only at the level of text and its minimum unit, a dicteme, which under certain conditions can be represented by one sentence.

Text mini-propositions are the basis for the formation of micro-topics. Micro-topics form macro-topics, which, in their turn, determine the basic topic of the entire work. A topic can systematize not only the denotative space of a work of art, but its emotive space as well.

## **Conclusion**

From what has been said, there is witnessed an obvious connection between the topic of a work and its factual space, i.e. 'what is depicted in it'. The topic can be defined as concentrated content of the text, its conceptual presentation. It is revealed by artistic means on the basis of the topical proposition of a work of art within the framework of both the denotative and the emotional space of the text. The topic of an

imaginative literature work is both the semantic core itself, which concentrates in itself the main idea, the key problem which worries the author, his/her intention and purpose, and the text structure that connects the parts around this core. And this unity is represented by a dicteme that forms the composition of a work of art.

Thus, the basis for the definition of the topic of a work of art is, in our opinion, not the opposition of a part and a whole, but the dialectical combination of these two approaches, which in interaction creates new meanings.

## References

- Aristotle (1976). *Metaphysics*. In: *Collected Works in 4 vol.* V. 1. M.: Mysl.
- Aristotle (2018). *Rhetoric. Poetics*. M.: ACT.
- Arutyunova, N. D. (1990). Proposition. In: *Linguistic Encyclopedic Dictionary* (ed. by V.I. Yartseva). M.: Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya.
- Blokh, M. Ya. (1999). Seven Lives of the Text. *Bridge*, 6.
- Blokh, M. Ya. (2000). Dikeme in the Level Structure of the Language. *Voprosy yazykoznaniya*, 4, 56-63.
- Blokh, M. Ya. (2005). *Theoretical Foundations of Grammar (4th ed.)*. M.: Vysshaya shkola.
- Blokh, M. Ya. & Velikaya, E. V. (2012). *Prosody in Text Styling: Monograph*. M: Prometey.
- Brown, G. & Yule, G. (1983) *Discourse Analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bualo, N. (1957). *Poetic Art*. M.: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo hudozhestvennoy literatury.
- Cicero, M. T. (1972). *Three Treatises on Oratory* (ed. by M.L. Gasparov). M.: Nauka.
- Dahl, O. (1969). *Topic and Comment: a study in Russian and general transformational grammar*. Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis (Slavica Gothoburgensia, 4). Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.
- Givon, T. (1979). From Discourse to Syntax: Grammar as a Processing Strategy. In: *Syntax and Semantics* (ed. by T. Givon) (pp.81-112). Volume 12. New York: Academic Press.
- Grimes, J. E. (1975). *The thread of discourse*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Heidegger, M. (1993). Path to Language. In: *Vremya i Bytie: Articles and Speeches* (pp. 259-273). M.: Respublika.
- Heidegger, M. (1997). *Being and Time*. M.: Ad Marginem.
- Hockett, C. F. A. (1958). *Course in Modern Linguistics*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Husserl, E. (2001). Logical research. In: *Collected Works. V.3.II*. M.: Gnozis, Dom intellektual'noy knigi.
- Kant, I. (1994). Critique of Pure Reason. In: *Collected Works. In 8 v.* V. 3. M.: Choro.

Keenan, E. O. & Schieffelin, B. (1977). Topic as a Discourse Notion. In: *Subject and Topic* (ed. by C.N. Li). N. Y.: Academic Press.

Kintsch, W. (1974). *The Representation of Meaning in Memory*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Maslovskiy, V. I. (1987). Topic. In: *Literary Encyclopedic Dictionary* (ed. by V.M. Kozhevnikova, P.A. Nikolaeva). M.: Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya.

Quintilian, M. F. (1834). *Twelve Books of Rhetorical Instruction*. Translated from Latin [incomplete] by A. Nikol'skiy. SPb.

Sgall, P. (1975). Conditions of the Use of Sentences and Semantic Representation of Topic and Focus. In: *Formal Semantics of Natural Language* (ed. by E. Keenan) (pp. 297-312). Cambridge.

Smuts, J. C. (1927). *Holism and Evolution*. London: MacMillan Press.

van Dijk, T. A. (1977). *Text and Context: Explorations in the Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse*. London: Longman.

Wittgenstein L. (1922). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Kegan Paul.