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A Unified Account of English Fronting Constructions

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1 Introduction

Recent work in discourse has uncovered a variety of discourse functions served by a speaker's use of some marked or non-canonical syntactic construction in a particular context. However, much less attention has been devoted to the question of generalizations that may apply across constructions – in particular, how a given functional principle may be variously realized in similar but distinct constructions (cf. Prince 1986). That is, current theory has not yet adequately addressed the question of how or whether a syntactic commonality between distinct constructions may correspond to discourse-functional commonalities in the uses of these constructions.

Two such well-investigated marked syntactic constructions in English are inversion and topicalization, exemplified in (1) and (2), respectively:

(1)   We pulled off, and RIGHT AT THE END OF THE EXIT WAS AN AMOCO. [E. Birner, in conversation]

(2)   Colonel Bykov had delivered to Chambers in Washington six Bokhara rugs... ONE OF THESE RUGS CHAMBERS DELIVERED TO HARRY DEXTER WHITE. Another he gave to Hiss – but not as a routine "payment on rent." [Nixon 1962:58]

vvIn both the inversion in (1) and the topicalization in (2), a canonically post-verbal, lexically-governed constituent appears clause-initially; however, in the inversion, the logical subject appears in post-verbal position, while in the topicalization, the subject and verb remain in their canonical positions. Thus, inversion and topicalization share the fronting of some canonically post-verbal material, while differing in the relative placement of the subject and the verb.

In fact, many researchers (e.g., Aissen and Hankamer 1972, Emonds 1976, Green 1980, Coopmans 1989, and Rochemont and Culicover 1990) have assumed that at least certain types of inversions are triggered by, or otherwise preceded by and dependent on, topicalization (or preposing in general). Some (e.g., Hartvigson and Jakobsen 1974, Huffman 1993) go so far as to claim that the shared fronting correlates with a shared function – that is, that fronting serves exactly the same function in both topicalization and inversion, while inversion serves an additional function related to the non-canonical ordering of the subject and verb. In this paper we will show that the function of topicalization does not apply consistently to inversion, and that inversion cannot, therefore, be considered to be simply the sum of topicalization and subject-verb inversion.

It is not the case, however, that the functions of topicalization and inversion are unrelated. We will show that, while the two constructions differ in terms of their presuppositional

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structure as well as the way in which they relate to the preceding discourse, they nonetheless share the general property of fronting information that is (either relatively or absolutely) discourse-old, in the sense of Prince 1992. Thus, we hypothesize that fronting in English consistently serves to move discourse-old information to clause-initial position. This is of course consistent with the general Prague School notion that given information precedes new, although as we shall see this tendency is manifested differently in different fronting constructions.

2   The Function of Inversion

In Birner 1994, it is shown that 'discourse-familiarity' is a crucial factor in the felicitous use of inversion. The notion of discourse-familiarity is due to Prince (1992), who classifies the information represented by an utterance in terms of two distinct divisions: DISCOURSE-OLD/DISCOURSE-NEW and HEARER-OLD/HEARER-NEW. This pair of distinctions reflects the fact that what is new to the discourse may not be new to the hearer (cf. Firbas 1966, Chafe 1976).

In an empirical study reported in Birner 1994, it was found that inversion is subject to a constraint that the preposed element must not be less familiar in the discourse than the postposed element. In that study, a corpus of more than 1700 naturally-occurring inversions was found to contain no tokens in which the preposed element represented discourse-new information while the postposed element represented discourse-old information, although all other possible combinations were represented. In fact, in 78% of the tokens, the preposed constituent represented discourse-old information while the postposed constituent represented discourse-new information, as in (3):

(3)   We have complimentary soft drinks, coffee, Sanka, tea, and milk. ALSO COMPLI-
        MENTARY IS RED AND WHITE WINE. [Flight attendant on Midway Airlines]

Notice that the opposite ordering – a preposed discourse-new element combined with a postposed discourse-old element – renders the inversion infelicitous:

(4)   A: Mom, have you seen my gym shirt? I'm late.
        B: #In the hall closet is your gym shirt. (cf. Your gym shirt is in the hall closet.)
        [=Birner 1993, ex. 4]

Moreover, it is shown in Birner 1993 that when the preposed and postposed constituents both represent information that has been explicitly evoked in the prior discourse, it is consistently the more recently evoked (and thus arguably more familiar) information that appears in preposed position in the inversion.

Interestingly, Birner 1994 also found that 'inferrable' information (in the sense of Prince 1981a) is treated as discourse-old with respect to inversion; that is, inferrable information may either precede or follow other discourse-old information, but may never follow discourse-new information. Hence, for the purposes of inversion, inferrable information behaves exactly like information that has been explicitly evoked in the discourse. Thus, inversion appears to serve an information-packaging function: to present information which is relatively familiar in the discourse before information which is relatively unfamiliar in the discourse.

3   The Function of Topicalization

Topicalization, on the other hand, appears to observe a rather different set of constraints. On the basis of a large corpus of naturally-occurring tokens and their discourse contexts, it

is argued in Ward 1988 that topicalization performs two simultaneous discourse functions. First, topicalization marks the referent of the preposed constituent as standing in a salient PARTIALLY-ORDERED SET relationship (Hirschberg 1991) with other previously evoked entities. Two elements A and B which cooccur in a partially-ordered set (or 'poset') can be related to each other in one of three possible ways: A can represent a lower value in the set than B, A can represent a higher value than B, or the two can be of equal rank, or 'alternates'. An element in a poset may be associated with an entity, attribute, event, activity, time, or place, or with a set of such items (see Hirschberg 1991, Ward and Hirschberg 1985, Ward 1988, and Ward and Prince 1991).

An examination of 430 tokens of naturally-occurring topicalizations reveals that in every case, the preposed constituent stood in an evoked or inferrable poset relation to other salient discourse entities. Notice that this characteristic of topicalization bears an interesting similarity to the pattern found above for inversion. That is, if we take non-evoked information that stands in a salient poset relationship to evoked information to be inferrable, then topicalization, too, is characterized by the preposing of discourse-old information.

The second discourse function of topicalization is to mark an OPEN PROPOSITION (Prince 1981b, 1986) as salient in the discourse. An open proposition is a proposition which contains one or more variables; the variable is instantiated with the focus of the utterance (cf. Jackendoff 1972, Rochemont 1978, Vallduví 1992, inter alia). To illustrate, consider (5):

(5)   a.   I made two minor mistakes. ONE APPARENTLY EVERYONE IN THE CLASS MADE. [K. Gottschlich, in conversation]

       b.   X made {mistakes}.

Here, the preposed constituent *one* is not the focus – *everyone in the class* is. However, the referent of the preposed constituent does stand in a poset relation to the two minor mistakes evoked in the preceding sentence. It is the open proposition in (5b) that must be salient to assure the felicity of the topicalization in (5a). That is, the open proposition which is salient in (5) is not that everyone in the class made ONE mistake, but that someone made SOME NUMBER of mistakes. While other elements of the open proposition, such as the focussed element, may also be construed to be members of a poset, they need not; only the preposed constituent MUST be so construed.

4   Differences and Commonalities

Although inversion and topicalization have much in common, they differ in the status of the discourse elements represented by the constituents of the sentence. First, unlike topicalization, inversion requires no salient open proposition for felicity. Consider (6):

(6)   The giant leader roared and shouted and cheered on the guests. BENEATH THE CHIN LAP OF THE HELMET SPROUTED BLACK WHISKERS. [Upfield 1988:178; noted by B. Levin]

Here, it does not seem that the relevant open proposition, roughly 'something sprouted somewhere', can be assumed to be salient based on the prior context.

As noted above, in a felicitous topicalization the fronted constituent represents discourse-old information; similarly, the fronted constituent in a felicitous inversion tends to represent discourse-old information. Importantly, however, in inversion this requirement is not absolute; discourse-new information may in fact appear in this position, but only if the information represented by the postposed constituent is also discourse-new. That is, in inversion what is important is not the *absolute* but rather the *relative* discourse-familiarity of the preposed element. Thus, consider (7):

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(7)   a.   In a little white house lived two rabbits. [=Green 1980, ex. 15a]

       b.   #In a little white house two rabbits lived. [discourse-initially]

The inversion in (7a) is the first sentence of a children's story; hence, the preposed and postposed elements are both discourse-new, and the inversion is felicitous (see Birner 1993, 1994). The PP topicalization in (7b), however, is not felicitous discourse-initially, since the fronted constituent does not represent discourse-old information. If the house represents previously evoked information, however, both variants are felicitous, as illustrated in (8a) and (8b).

(8)   a.   Once upon a time there was a little white house. In the house lived two rabbits.

       b.   Once upon a time there was a little white house. In the house two rabbits lived.

Thus, inversion and topicalization differ in that topicalization requires the presence of a salient open proposition and that in topicalization the requirement that the fronted constituent represent discourse-old information is absolute, while in inversion it is relative. Nonetheless, it is in both cases the discourse-familiarity of the fronted information that is relevant for the felicity of the marked expression. Thus, we hypothesize that fronting in general serves to place discourse-old information in clause-initial position (cf. Horn 1986).

Interestingly, however, often the information itself is not explicitly evoked in the prior discourse; indeed, in our corpora, almost half (971/2153, or 45%) of the fronted constituents contained non-evoked elements that were nonetheless inferrable from information that *was* evoked in the prior context. Thus, inferrable information is here being treated as if it had been actually evoked. Moreover, even when the fronted constituent contains evoked information, it is rarely the case that this information is presented verbatim as in its prior evocation. It is far more common for the two evocations to differ in some way, with the preposed constituent presenting additional information while still representing a link between the current utterance and the prior discourse (Vallduví 1992; cf. Green 1980). Given that the preposed constituent in both constructions serves such a linking function, we will henceforth refer to it as the link, and to the relation between the preposed constituent and the prior context as the linking relation. Inferrability, then, is simply one such linking relation.

This relation is realized somewhat differently by the two constructions due in part to the syntactic differences between them. Topicalization typically fronts NPs, which in turn typically denote entities. As discussed above, such entities are the basis for the poset relations that must hold between the referent of the preposed constituent and other salient discourse entities. Thus, in the case of topicalization, the linking relation is the poset relation between the link and some salient discourse entity, as illustrated in (9a) through (9c):

(9)   a.   Set/Subset Relation:
             So, in this course, we have a two-part goal. ONE I'M GOING TO TALK ABOUT AND YOU'LL BE TESTED ON. This is... [E. Prince, in lecture]

       b.   Part/Whole Relation:
             E: How do you like [your new job]?
             A: I like a lot of it. PARTS OF IT I DON'T LIKE AT ALL. [A. Bower, in conversation]

       c.   Type/Subtype Relation:
             G: Which staples should I use?
             C: Use the half-inch ones. THE SMALLER ONES WE NEVER USE. [C. Connelly, in conversation]

In addition, the preposed constituent in a topicalization may represent an evoked entity in new terms, as in (10):

(10)   The only time the guy isn't considered a failure is when he resigns and announces his new job. That's the tipoff, "John Smith resigned, future plans unknown" means he was fired. "John Smith resigned to accept the position of president of X company" – then you know he resigned. THIS LITTLE NUANCE YOU RECOGNIZE IMMEDIATELY WHEN YOU'RE IN CORPORATE LIFE. [Terkel 1974:537]

In this case the poset relation is one of identity, in that *this little nuance* represents an entity (the tipoff) that has already been evoked in the discourse; however, by describing it in new terms (as a "little nuance"), the preposed constituent adds information to the discourse. We consider such preposed constituents to be in a 'characterizational' linking relation to the prior discourse, in that they convey information further characterizing an already salient entity (Takami 1992, Ward 1988).

In the case of inversion, it is typically a PP, VP, or AdjP that is preposed, and whose relationship to the preceding discourse must be determined. Given the wider variety of constituent types that are preposed in inversion, it is not surprising to find that the range of linking relations found for inversion is likewise broader than that found for topicalization, as illustrated in (11a) through (11d) (see Birner 1992, Birner and Ward (in prep.); cf. Halliday and Hasan 1976):

(11)   a.   Locative:
              On a recent sun-splashed Saturday afternoon, a Coors beer truck lumbered up to the campus amphitheater... INSIDE THE COORS TRUCK WAS BEER FOR THE STUDENTS' CONSUMPTION. [*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 10/7/83]

        b.   Scalar:
              Though certainly relevant, the criterion based on the principle of relevance, like any criterion based on the intent or purpose of an utterance, is somewhat vague. MORE ILLUMINATING IS STRAWSON'S SECOND CRITERION OF TRUTH-ASSESSMENT. [Reinhart 1982:6]

        c.   Additive:
              Inmates say they run out of toilet paper and soap occasionally. ALSO SCARCE ARE THE TOOLS TO APPEAL THEIR RECENT COURT CONVICTIONS – LEGAL FORMS, BOOKS AND EVEN PAPER – AND TELEPHONES TO CALL THEIR ATTOR-NEYS OR FAMILIES. [*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 5/6/84]

        d.   Inferrable:
              According to a Champaign police report, [an] apartment in the 500 block of South Fourth Street was broken into between 1 and 1:40 a.m. STOLEN WAS A STEREO SYSTEM VALUED AT $ 1,100, THE POLICE REPORT SAID. [newspaper article, 9/8/89; noted by Georgia Green]

Note that since inversion is less likely than topicalization to front bare NPs, it is correspondingly less likely that the preposed constituent will bear only a characterizational linking relation to some previously evoked entity. However, there are many cases of inversion in which more than one linking relation is operative, and in these cases one of the linking relations evident may be characterizational, as in (12):

(12)   The BMOC is Garson McKellar (Tim Quill), the handsome scion of a Kennedy-esque political family who is the star of the varsity debate team. No quarterback ever had half of Garson's problems, fighting as he must each day to clear a path through the hordes of beautiful co-eds begging for his favors. INTO THIS HEADY ATMOSPHERE STRIDES TUCKER MULDOWNEY (KIRK CAMERON)... [*Chicago Tribune*, 5/8/89]

Here we find a characterizational relation between *this heady atmosphere* and the previously described context, and a locative/directional relation between *this heady atmosphere* and *into this heady atmosphere*.

Thus, in all cases there must be a linking relation between the fronted constituent and the preceding discourse.

5   Conclusion

Given the data presented above for inversion and topicalization, we have argued that leftward movement in English serves to front entities representing information that is either relatively or absolutely discourse-old. Such a conclusion is consistent with the notion that discourse-familiarity correlates not with subjecthood, but rather with relative sentence position (Horn 1986). Thus, a comparison of these two sentence types offers compelling evidence that discourse-familiarity is a primary factor in determining whether or not fronting may occur in an English utterance.

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