

Fundamental Sentential Level Issues of English Information Structure

Huỳnh Anh Tuấn*

*Science and Technology Office, VNU University of Languages and International Studies,
Phạm Văn Đồng street, Cầu Giấy, Hanoi, Vietnam*

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Abstract: This paper is an exploration into the fundamental sentential level issues of English information structure: the order in which information is distributed within the sentence, the given/new status of the information exchanged, the contextual constraints on the given/new status, and the syntactical devices used to indicate this given/new status. The conclusion that these issues are fundamental to sentential level English information structure is based on the studies of Birner and Ward (1998), Ward and Birner (2001), Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), Erteschik-Shir (2007), and others. The perspective from which these issues are viewed in the paper adopts Quirk et al. (1985)'s comprehensive approach in which a linguistic construction is discussed with regard to its syntactic features in relation to its pragmatic function under contextual constraints. At the discourse level, these issues can be discussed within Winter (1994)'s clause-relational approach to text analysis in which the clause is viewed as a device of co-relevance constructing and distributing information. Given and new information status, information distribution, information distribution signals and contextual constraints are embedded in the relations held among the clauses which can be interlocked to create the logical structure of the whole text. However, discourse level information structure does not fall within the scope of this paper.

Keywords: Information structure, information distribution, given/new status, contextual constraints, syntactical devices, non-canonical constructions.

1. Introduction

Language users engaged in an act of communication in particular or in the whole process of discourse in general in order to express or negotiate their ideas and beliefs have to make myriads of decisions in terms of both intra-linguistic and extra-linguistic constraints

if they wish to assure the success of the communication. Among the many decisions that language users have to make and which may determine their effectiveness as discourse participants is how they distribute information in a message. Information distribution, together with information exchange and processing, is part of a larger aspect of language use theory, which is often known as information structure. English information structure is generally

* Tel.: 84-902229101

Email: huynhanhtuan@vnu.edu.vn

discussed in literature at sentential and discourse level. However, discourse level information structure does not fall within the scope of this paper.

It is almost impossible to reach a comprehensive definition which encompasses every feature of information structure. The definition hereby offered shows what are considered as important components of the term. The perspective from which the term is defined is not only syntactic but also functional and pragmatic so that learners of English could have a panoramic view of its concept and use it for further understanding and acquisition.

The term can be briefly described as follows:

Information structure is the ordering and articulating of communicatively exchanged information bearing given and/or new status constrained by context, signaled by particular devices and brought forwards by the speaker/writer in order for the listener/reader to achieve optimal comprehension, the whole process depending on the shared knowledge between the interlocutors in discourse. (Adapted from Johnson & Johnson, 1998 [1]; Richards et al, 1992 [2]; and Quirk et al., 1985 [3])

Following from the definition above, there are at least four issues related to English information structure which need to be taken into account at the sentential level: the ordering of the information distributed in the sentence, the given-new status of the information exchanged, the contextual constraints by which the given-new status is defined, and the devices used to signal this status. The central issue of this definition is the given/new status of information. The other issues are considered to

be peripheral, either as constraints on given/new status, or given/new status signals.

2. Fundamental Sentential Level Issues of English Information Structure

2.1. *The order in which information is distributed in the sentence*

Erteschik-Shir (2007:1) [4], while discussing the order in which information is distributed in the sentence in particular and word order in general, pointed out, 'optional divergence' from the norm is inherent in every 'natural language.' This feature of word order information distribution has pushed language users into a vexed situation in which a fully justifiable explanation for one possibility of divergence in a specific context is never completely clear-cut. Pragmatically, how information is distributed is important in that it may affect the newsworthiness status of the information, directing the hearer/reader to the highpoint of the message. By saying so, it is implied that there always exist two kinds of information, the given and the new in a sentence. However, according to Bloor and Bloor (1995) [5] or Prince (1981) [6], there are certain exceptions to this rule in different text types or genres in which information units consist of only the new. One is often found at the beginning of a text (or a certain section of a text) or the opening of a topic of conversation. The second is the outcome of ellipsis, when the given (e.g. the pronominal subject) is omitted. Even so, as Bloor and Bloor (1995) [5] pointed out, there must be some assumed shared given prerequisite knowledge among interlocutors. So, whenever information distribution is mentioned in this paper, the assumption is that

any utterance consists of both the given and the new.

On the whole, information distribution in English is constrained by three principles and tendencies: the principle of end-weight and end-focus, communicative dynamism and non-canonical constructions.

2.1.1. Principle of end-weight and end-focus

The principle of end-weight and end-focus generally stipulates that clausal or sentential units bearing the most important information should be postponed towards the end of the clause or sentence for communication to be achieved effectively (Quirk et al, 1985 [3]; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004) [7]. In other words, more important information-bearing syntactic phrases are disfavored in subject position in canonical constructions (Ward and Birner, 2001 [8]; Erteschik-Shir, 2007 [4]; Bloor and Bloor, 1995 [5]; van Valin and Lapolla, 1997 [9]). From the given/new distribution perspective, this is the tendency in which the given is placed before the new. For example, in the sentence, ‘Sometimes, Joyce reads the Guardian’ (McCarthy, 1991: 51 [10]), ‘the Guardian’ is believed by the speaker to be the new information in the sentence to the listener and is intended by the speaker to be the most important information for the listener. The tendency is considered to be unmarked as opposed to the marked or non-canonical constructions (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004 [7]; Quirk et al, 1985 [3]; Bloor and Bloor, 1995 [5]).

2.1.2. Communicative dynamism (CD)

Information status tends not to be static but dynamic. Different parts of an utterance or different elements in a sentence might vary in their communicative value and the variation is

really dynamic in real-time communication. This dynamism is called Communicative Dynamism (CD), a term originally created by the Prague School Linguists. In Firbas (1974) [11], Werth (1984) [12], Quirk et al, 1985 [3], Bloor and Bloor (1995) [5], Crystal (1997) [13], CD is defined as the actual and contextual semantic contribution of each major element in a sentence and rated with respect to the dynamic role it plays in communication. The contribution of the elements to the CD is ranked in a scale which can range from very low, through medium, to very high. Normally, information exchangers process the information in a message so as to achieve a linear presentation from low to high information value, which is somehow related to the principle of end-focus (Quirk et al, 1985) [3]. This value is contextually dependent and highlighted by some phonological devices such as stress and intonation in spoken discourse and by word order in written discourse. Bloor and Bloor (1995) [5] pointed out that in an unmarked declarative clause, a syntactic unit bearing new information (normally final-positioned in the clause) has the most communicative dynamism. In the example ‘Sometimes, Joyce reads the Guardian’ above, ‘sometimes’ is lowest, and ‘the Guardian’ is highest in information value as intended by the speaker’s linear presentation.

2.1.3. Non-canonical constructions

Parallel to these two principles and tendencies are some constructions such as fronting or right-dislocation in which some items of information are dislocated from their normal position towards either the initial or final position of the sentence to perform a certain pragmatic function like linking with previous discourse or compensating for unclear

information, as illustrated in the following two examples:

The cheese they sold mainly to the miners (Brown, 1983:322) [14].

In the above example, ‘the cheese’, which normally occupies post-verbal position, is pushed to the sentential initial position to provide a link with previous discourse, the construction thus being termed ‘fronting’.

She reads the Guardian, *Joyce* (McCarthy, 1991: 52) [10].

In this sentence, *Joyce* is pushed towards the end of the sentence after being substituted by the pronominal subject ‘she’. *Joyce* is said to be right dislocated, and the construction is termed ‘right-dislocation’. The function of ‘Joyce’ in this position is to compensate for the pronominal subject which the speaker, in his or her afterthought, believes to be unclear to the listener.

Non-canonical constructions are marked and highly contextually dependent. Detailed discussions about non-canonical constructions are presented in section 2.4.3, which deals with devices used to signal information status.

2.1.4. *The tension of order distribution tendencies and principles*

There exists some tension among these tendencies and principles. While the principle of end-weight stipulates that the more important information should be postponed towards the end of the sentence, non-canonical constructions like inversion or fronting have it the other way round. This means that information can get prominence by occupying either the ‘head’ (left) or the ‘tail’ (right) position (Renkema, 1993:142) [15] in the sentence. It is language users who have to decide which principle and tendency to apply in each specific communicative situation. Much of

this decision depends on their communicative language ability.

2.2. *Given-new status of the information exchanged*

2.2.1. *Givenness-newness distinction*

In the studies of such authors as Kuno (1978)[16] and Prince (1981) [6], the distinction between givenness and newness with regard to the status of information depends on either its recoverability or predictability or both. According to Kuno (1978: 282-283) [16], ‘an element in a sentence represents old, predictable information if it is recoverable from the preceding context; if it is not recoverable, it represents new, unpredictable information.’ Prince (1981: 226) [6] claimed if ‘the speaker assumes that the hearer can predict or could have predicted that a particular linguistic item will or would occur in a particular position within a sentence’, the item might have givenness status. Prince (1981) [6] also argued that recoverability and deletability are in a correlative relationship, i.e. if an item is recoverable, it can be deletable. In the pragmatic and syntactic interface, the given/new status is seen as simultaneously affected by two parameters: the order of distribution, as earlier discussed and the knowledge shared between discourse participants, which Paprotté & Sinha (1987) [17] calls discourse knowledge. Information, which may be new to a particular hearer, can be quite old to others. This status is therefore highly contextualized, dynamic, and flexible. In the example ‘Sometimes, Joyce reads the Guardian’, generally, ‘Joyce’ is given information, whereas ‘the Guardian’ is new as assumed by the speaker, i.e., the speaker believes that ‘Joyce’ has been mentioned in

previous discourse, while ‘the Guardian’ is mentioned for the first time in the same discourse. However, different listeners in the discourse would treat ‘Joyce’ and ‘the Guardian’ with different statuses, i.e., some would see ‘Joyce’ as new information; some would see ‘the Guardian’ as old information.

2.2.2. *Given-new and theme-rheme*

Most authors discussing information structure, for example Dressler (1978) [18], Werth (1984) [12], Quirk et al (1985) [3], Paprotté and Sinha (1987) [17], Richards et al (1992) [2], and Crystal (1997) [13] mention the Praguean Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) which takes as its central concepts the sequencing and organization of information-conveying sentential units in terms of their *Topic-Comment Articulation (TCA)*. TCA is a functional approach which views the sentence as being divided into two parts, Topic and Comment, often referred to in several notational variants (though this conflation is not always universally approved of): theme (topic, known/given information, presupposition, basis); rheme (focus, comment, unknown/new information). The theme exists to create topic continuity by providing a linkage with prior discourse, while the rheme is the real reason for communication. Halliday (1970) [19] metaphorically compared theme to a “peg” on which the message (i.e. the rheme) is hung. Speakers tend to start the conversation with something new in their mind (potentially becoming the rheme) which they wish to communicate and they use the theme as the ‘point of departure’ (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004:64) [7].

Werth (1984:219) [12] considered it important to give a reason for TCA and offered a two-sided explanation for the process. The

first reason is psychological and expresses speakers’ wish to construct a message in a ‘maximally effective’ way when conveying its meaning. The second reason is a pragmatic one with in which speakers should try to avoid ambiguity by speaking in an orderly and unambiguous way.

Some researchers e.g. Clark and Clark (1977) [20] and Paprotté and Sinha (1987) [17] have either implicitly or explicitly conflated the notion of given and new in the notion of theme-rheme and topic-comment; however, this is not universally advocated. Halliday (1967) [21], Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) [7], Fries (1994) [22] and Lyons (1970) [23] point out that though related and both being textual functions, given-new and theme-rheme are not homogeneous. Theme and rheme are speaker-oriented whereas given and new are listener-oriented. ‘The Theme is what I, the speaker, choose to take as my point of departure. The Given is what you, the listener, already know about or have accessible to you’ (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004:93) [7]. Fries (1994) [22] claimed that it would be a fallacy to assume some absoluteness in the correlation between new and rheme and given and theme despite the fact that in general, rheme tends to be new information and theme given information. Many themes, especially marked themes are intended as new information. Similarly, not all rhemes are presented as bearing new information. Moreover, some new information may encompass the theme and some given information the rheme. These distinctions can be explained in the following examples taken from Halliday (1967: 200) [21] and Halliday and Matthiessen (2004:94) [7] respectively:

John [saw the play yesterday].

Supposing the above utterance is a direct response to a previous question in the discourse, say ‘Who saw the play yesterday?’ in that case, ‘John’ bears the new information though being the theme.

I haven't seen you for ages.

If used as a counter-attack against some prior complaint made by another interlocutor of one's absence, ‘I haven't seen’ may be treated as new which includes the thematic grammatical subject ‘I’.

2.2.3. *The changeability of discourse participants' knowledge*

Given or new information does not preserve its status permanently, i.e. it can be changed by time and by the participants. Chafe (1976) [24], therefore, emphasized the real time an utterance is introduced into discourse and the status quo consciousness of the addressee when distinguishing given and new information. In his view, given information is ‘that knowledge which the speaker assumes to be in the consciousness of the addressee’ when the utterance is being made and new information is ‘what the speaker assumes he is introducing into the addressee's consciousness by what he says’ (Chafe, 1976:30) [24]. That is to say, the same utterance addressed to the same interlocutor in the same place but at different times can have different given-new distribution.

2.2.3. *The relativity of the given-new status*

It is almost axiomatic that a new item is only relatively new (or unpredictable). Lambrecht (1994) [25] identified as one of the categories of information structure the ‘relative predictability of relations among propositions’ (cited in Ward and Birner, 2001: 120 [8]). This is why many researchers use other terms rather than ‘given’ and ‘new’ while discussing information status.

Gee (1999) [26], for example, used the term ‘informationally salient’ to refer to new information and ‘informationally less salient’ to refer to already known or predictable information. Meanwhile, some other researchers claim that a simple binary distinction between given and new will not suffice, suggesting more refined taxonomies. Chafe (1976 [24]; 1987 [27]) and Prince (1981) [6] suggested a three-part division, each using their own terms for the distinctions, and there is some overlapping in the referential meaning of the terms. In Chafe (1987:22) [27]'s taxonomy, information can be ‘active, semi-active (or accessible/inferable) and inactive’ on the given and new scale. Inactive information, which can be brand new or unused, is ‘neither focally nor peripherally active’. Active information, which can be given or evoked in the listener's consciousness, is the information ‘that is currently lit up...in a person's focus of consciousness at a particular moment’. Semi-active (or inferable/accessible) information is already stored in the listener's knowledge and can be ‘quickly activated’. This process can proceed in two ways, either ‘through deactivation from an earlier state, typically by having been active at an early point in the discourse,’ or by linking to ‘the set of expectations associated with a schema’ which is ‘a cluster of interrelated expectations’ (Chafe, 1987:29 [27]).

Prince (1981) [6]'s division somewhat overlaps with Chafe's in the following finer distinctions with more gradations within the scale of given-new. Brand new items are those unknown in the listener's consciousness. Unused items are those whose concept is known but not yet activated. Inferable status is somewhere between new and given, having not been mentioned before, but inferable from

participants' prior knowledge concerning its concept. Given elements can be either situationally or textually evoked. Situationally evoked are elements already present in the situation, e.g., the first person narrator. Textually evoked refers to those elements that have already been mentioned in the discourse.

Ward and Birner (2001) [8] plotted a three-dimensional interacting pragmatic interface along which information structure can vary: old vs. new information, discourse-familiarity vs. hearer-familiarity, and relative familiarity vs. absolute familiarity. The authors then used a pair of inter-crossing dichotomies for the first two interfaces in which information is divided into either discourse-old or discourse-new and either hearer-old or hearer-new. Discourse-old information is what has been introduced, evoked or is inferable based on prior discourse, while, by contrast, discourse-new information is what has not been evoked in previous discourse or not inferable based on prior discourse. 'Discourse-familiarity' is determined by prior evocation in the discourse. The familiarity of discourse-old information might vary according to the degree of recency of being mentioned of the information. Treated as more familiar and thus being more salient is information mentioned more recently. Hearer-old information is what the speaker believes to be already available in the hearer's knowledge. The point here is that what is new to the discourse need not be new to the hearer. In general, therefore, in their scale, there can be four specific cases of old-new division: discourse-new/hearer-old, discourse-new/hearer-new, discourse-old/hearer-old, and discourse-old/hearer-new.

The relativity of the given/new status suggests that in communication, for better mutual understanding, the speaker should make

sure that an item of information he assumes to be given is really given to the listener. Otherwise, the process of exchanging information may break down when the listener does not really have the background knowledge the speaker assumes that he should have.

2.3. Contextual constraints on given-new status

It is almost impossible to define the given-new status of an information item when it is isolated from its context. Whether an item should be treated as given or new is constrained by the context in which it occurs. This context encompasses either prior discourse, the shared knowledge between interlocutors, or the assumed relationship among interlocutors. Prior discourse and cataphoric links are strong clues for status and they are especially important when the borderline of the given-new status is blurred. Furthermore much of this distinction depends on the shared knowledge between the speaker and the listener. Haviland and Clark (1974) [28], while investigating syntactic devices used in English for explicitly marking information types, propose that when speaker and listener expectations match with respect to the identification of given and new information, communication occurs most expeditiously. In order for this to occur, interlocutors are supposed to make an implicit agreement in which the speakers are committed to refer to information they believe the listeners can uniquely identify from their background knowledge as given information and to refer to information they believe to be true but new to the listeners as new information. Clark & Clark (1977) [20] called this the given-new contract. Renkema (1993) [15] emphasizes the crucial importance of accuracy of assumptions and judgments made by the speaker/writer about the

extent of the listener/reader's previous knowledge of the subject matter on maintaining the given-new contract. In particular, she warns that inaccurate judgments may result in a violation of the contract and subsequently, a breakdown in communication between speaker/writer and listener/reader.

2.4. Syntactical devices as information status indicators

In English, devices utilized to encode information and indicate its saliency status can be phonological or syntactical or a mixture of both. Relevant phonological units are stress placement and intonation, which are used to imply that information is new or given by giving some contrast with one word being stressed and not the other (in spoken language, givenness tends to be expressed by deaccenting) (Richards et al, 1992 [2]). Syntactical devices include canonical and non-canonical constructions (Quirk et al, 1985 [3]; and Ward and Birner, 2001 [8]). Phonological devices do not fall within the scope of this paper, though they maybe at times resorted to for the sake of illustrating the operation of syntactical devices in context.

2.4.1. Linking relations, canonical and non-canonical constructions

The status of being given or new information is, as earlier discussed, encoded by word order, which can be either canonical or non-canonical. There are in English 7 canonical sentential clause patterns (Quirk et al, 1985 [3]) and 7 non-canonical constructions (Ward and Birner, 2001 [8]). For different pragmatic purposes, the selection of a canonical or non-canonical construction affects the word order and thus the given-new status. This status reveals the intended discourse function of the

construction. Ward and Birner (2001) [8] argue that non-canonical constructions of English are resorted to by speakers for the sake of felicity in terms of relating information in a current context with previously evoked information in prior context. In such constructions, an item is inverted or pre-posed thus being itself a link connecting the current utterance with previous ones semantically. In other words, when an item of information is included in an utterance, it automatically falls within a linking relation, a term used to describe the relationship between elements of the current sentence and the prior context by such authors as Reinhart (1981) [29], Fraurud (1990) [30], Garrod and Sanford (1994) [31], Strand (1996) [32], and Hawkins (1978) [33].

2.4.2. Canonical constructions

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) [7], functionally, there are three different kinds of subject in a sentence: grammatical, psychological, and logical. When a sentence is viewed as consisting of a subject and a predicate, grammatical subject is part of the sentence followed by the predicate. The relationship between the subject and the predicate is purely grammatical. Psychological subject is what the speaker has in his mind to start with when producing a sentence. Logical subject means the doer of the action. The three kinds of subjects are exemplified as in the following sentence:

<i>this teapot</i>	<i>my aunt</i>	<i>was given by</i>	<i>the Duke</i>
psychological subject	grammatical subject		logical subject

Halliday and Matthiessen (2004:56) [7]

Canonical constructions in English are those beginning with a grammatical subject. Otherwise, they are non-canonical.

The 7 canonical clause patterns are introduced in Quirk et al (1985: 721) [3].

2.4.3. *Non-canonical constructions of English*

Non-canonical constructions in English are those which do not begin with a grammatical subject except for conversing. Conversing is a process by which nominal clause elements can equally take either initial or final position in the sentence. This is the reason why a convertible sentence is considered as non-canonical although it begins with a grammatical subject. Following are examples of a convertible sentence with both acceptable orders:

An uncle, three cousins, and two brothers benefited from the will.

The will benefited an uncle, three cousins, and two brothers.

(Quirk et al, 1985: 1390) [3]

Other non-canonical constructions undergo either leftward movement (fronting, left-dislocation, argument reversal, it-cleft sentences), or rightward movement (postposing, right-dislocation) or both (conversing). For example, in fronting, an item which normally occupies another position in the sentence is pushed toward initial position, as in the following sentence:

This latter topic we have examined in Chapter 3 and need not reconsider. (Quirk et al, 1985:1377) [3]

In the above example, '*this latter topic*', which is normally positioned after 'examined', is pushed toward the beginning of the sentence.

Functionally, non-canonical constructions are used to perform such functions as focusing, contrasting, thematizing, topicalizing, or discourse linking. Focusing is the most typical function of non-canonical constructions except

for fronting and left-dislocation. The function is performed by putting an element in a striking position in the sentence, e.g., after the 'it + to be' structure in the 'it-cleft'. For example:

I've always had morning stiffness, I accept that's part of my life. By the time I've had my pills for two hours in the morning, the stiffness eases and I'd sooner have a bit of stiffness than I'd have the pain. *It's the pain I can't cope with* (Carter and McCarthy, 2006:785) [34].

In the example, 'the pain' is the focus.

Contrasting is performed using 'it-cleft' and 'wh-cleft' structures to rectify interlocutors' wrong assumptions or propositions about an item previously brought into the discourse. For example:

And, say the authors, it was Mary Magdalen, not Mary the Mother of Jesus, who has been the real, if secret, object of Mariolatry cults down the ages (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004:96 [7]).

In the example, 'Mary Magdalen' is contrasted with 'Mary the Mother of Jesus' to rectify a wrong assumption about 'Mary the Mother of Jesus'.

Topicalizing and thematizing are performed through fronting and left-dislocation to make an item the topic or marked theme of the sentence by pushing it to the sentential initial position. This is to orientate the listener towards the main topic of the sentence. For example:

That new motorway they were building, is it open yet? (Carter and McCarthy, 2006:194 [34])

In the example, 'that new motorway' was left-dislocated to signal its topical status.

Thematizing is also used in passivization to make the sentential initial phrase the theme of the sentence. For example,

Peterson would have been approved of by Tatum. (Werth, 1984: 12 [12])

'Peterson' in the example is put in initial position to mark its status as the theme of the sentence and also to link it with previous discourse as mentioned below.

Discourse linking is performed through inversion and passivization to create a link between the passivized or inverted item with previous discourse. For example,

We have complimentary soft drinks, coffee, Sanka, tea, and milk. *Also complimentary is red and white wine.* We have cocktails available for \$2.00. (Ward and Birner, 2001:129 [8])

In the example, 'also complimentary' is inverted to provide a link between it and what has been mentioned in previous discourse.

Fronting

Fronting (Quirk et al, 1985 [3]), which is also referred to as pre-posing (Ward and Birner, 2001 [8]) or topicalization (Erteschik-Shir, 2007 [4]; Brown, 1983 [14]), is typically the pushing into initial position of an item which normally occupies another position in the sentence/clause to make it a marked theme. The item is in most cases an entire sentence/clause element. Often it is the context that urges the speaker to resort to fronting, either to thematize an item previously brought into the discourse providing direct linkage with what has gone before, or to initially introduce what the context most requires. Although English is a subject-prominent language (Li and Thompson, 1976 [35]), sentences with fronted elements are very common both in colloquial speech and in formal written style, particularly in journalism (Quirk et al, 1985 [3]). The fronted parts may be prosodically marked as marked themes and may be any of a wide range of grammatical units such as direct object, prepositional

complement, subject complement, object complement, predication adjunct and predication, e.g.: (the italicized are fronted elements)

Od: *The cheese* they sold mainly to the miners. (Brown, 1983:322 [14])

Cprep: *Others* I have only that nodding acquaintance with and some are total strangers. (Birner and Ward, 1998: 4 [36])

Cs: *Rare* indeed is the individual who does not belong to one of these groups. (Sinclair, 1990: 429 [37])

Co: ... and *traitor* we shall call him. (Quirk et al, 1985: 1378 [3])

Left-dislocation (LD)

Superficially, left-dislocation is rather similar to pre-posing in that an item is pre-posed, i.e. moved leftwards in the construction, e.g.:

The cheese they made there, they sold most of it to the miners (Brown, 1983:321 [14]).

The canonically constructed sentence would have been:

They sold most of the cheese they made there to the miners.

Ward and Birner (2001) [8], Erteschik-Shir (2007) [4], and Prince (1997) [38] pointed out the following structural and functional differences between the two constructions:

Structurally, while in pre-posing the canonical position of the item is left unoccupied, in left-dislocation a resumptive co-referential pronominal element appears in the marked constituent's canonical position. In the above example, co-referential with the sentence-initial item *the cheese they made there* is the direct object pronoun *it*.

In terms of function, left-dislocation is also distinct from pre-posing. In pre-posing, the pre-

posed constituent consistently represents information standing in a contextual relationship with information either discourse-old or evoked or inferable based on prior discourse. However, left-dislocated item introduces discourse-new (or maybe hearer-new) information. In the above example, 'the cheese they made there' has never before appeared in the discourse.

Argument reversal

Argument is a structural-functional term used to indicate a phrase (mainly but not exclusively nominal) required by a verb as its complementation (Ward and Birner, 2001 [8]). In the reversing process, one clause element is pushed to the sentential initial position resulting in another element normally occupying that position being pushed towards the sentential final position. Argument reversal exists in two constructions: inversion and by-phrase passives, both subject to the same discourse constraint in that they both place relatively familiar information before unfamiliar information while performing a linking function. That is, the pre-verbal constituent conveys information interlocked in a linking relationship with a previously evoked or inferable item in the discourse. While comparing the two constructions, Ward and Birner (2001:130 [8]) claim that 'passivization and inversion represent distinct syntactic means for performing the same discourse function in different syntactic environments'. The two constructions with examples are presented below.

Inversion

The inversion process involves the logical subject appearing after the main verb, while other elements, canonically appearing after the main verb, occupy preverbal position. Birner

(1994) [39] while examining 1778 naturally occurring inversions found out that in 78% of the tokens, the pre-posed constituent represented discourse-old information while the post-posed constituent represented discourse-new information. He also argued that felicitous inversion in English depends on the 'discourse-familiar' status of the information represented by the pre-posed and post-posed constituents, e.g.:

We have complimentary soft drinks, coffee, Sanka, tea, and milk. *Also complimentary is red and white wine.* We have cocktails available for \$2.00. (Ward and Birner, 2001:129 [8])

In the italicized part of the example, the discourse-old item 'complimentary' is pre-posed to provide linkage with the previously mentioned 'complimentary'. However, there are cases in which both the pre-posed and post-posed constituents represent discourse-old information. In these cases it is the recency of being mentioned that appoints which element to be pre-posed, e.g.:

Each of the characters is the centerpiece of a book, doll and clothing collection. The story of each character is told in a series of six slim books, each \$12.95 hardcover and \$5.95 in paperback, and in bookstores and libraries across the country. More than 1 million copies have been sold; and in late 1989 a series of activity kits was introduced for retail sale. *Complementing the relatively affordable books are the dolls, one for each fictional heroine and each with a comparably pricey historically accurate wardrobe and accessories.* (Ward and Birner, 2001:129 [8])

Though 'the dolls' have been evoked in prior discourse, the reason for their being post-posed is that they are less recently evoked than 'the books'.

Passivization

English *by*-phrase passives are sub-categorized with inversion as argument reversal because both constructions involve the reversing of the canonical order of two arguments. In such sentences, the logical subject is mentioned in a *by*-phrase, e.g.:

The device was tested by the manufacturers (Quirk et al, 1985: 1389 [3]).

In this example, ‘the device’ is pre-posed for linking purpose, ‘the manufactures’, according to Quirk et al (1985) [3] is the focus.

The discourse constraint for *by*-phrase passives, according to Ward and Birner (2001) [8], is that for the sake of felicity, the syntactic subject must represent relatively familiar information leaving relatively unfamiliar information to be presented by the noun-phrase in the *by*-phrase, e.g.:

The Mayor’s present term of office expires Jan.1. *He will be succeeded by Ivan Allen Jr.*

In the italicized part of the example, ‘he’ (‘the Mayor’ in the previous sentence) is discourse-familiar and ‘Ivan Allen Jr.’ is discourse-new, and the sentence is felicitous.

If the information status of the relevant NPs is reversed, such *by*-phrases will be seen as infelicitous, e.g.:

Ivan Allen Jr. will take office Jan.1. # *The mayor will be succeeded by him.*

The italicized sentence is taken as infelicitous because ‘the mayor’ is discourse-new, whereas, ‘him’ is discourse-old. The given-new status of the sentence initial noun phrase and the *by*-phrase is not always clear because it is governed at the same time by both the syntactic determiner of the noun phrase (the articles) and the context. Consider the following

example as analyzed in Renkema (1993:149) [15]:

A passer-by was hit by the falling debris.

The articles suggest that ‘passer-by’ is new and ‘falling debris’ is given. If so, an active sentence would sound more felicitous by linking the given with prior discourse. However, the passive is absolutely acceptable if the speaker wishes to put an end-focus on ‘the debris’. In solving this contradiction, Renkema (1993) [15] suggests subdividing the given/new into ‘conceptually’ given or new and ‘relationally’ given. Conceptually given or new items are ruled by prior discourse, whereas relationally given items are governed by the relationship between the predicate (i.e. the verb) and the agent (the *by*- phrase) or the patient (the sentence initial noun phrase). In her analysis, ‘passer-by’ is ‘conceptually new’, but ‘relationally given’, which justifies the discourse acceptability of the passive sentence.

In the case of agents or patients realized by proper nouns, the given/new status goes through a different distinction. Consider the following example:

Peterson would have been approved of by Tatum (Werth, 1984: 12 [12]).

In this case, for felicity’s sake, ‘Peterson’ is pre-posed, however; both noun phrases must be discourse-old and hearer-old.

Graver (1971) [40] gave the following pragmatic reasons for using the passives:

- To avoid weak impersonal subjects
- To maintain the same subject in the discourse
- To disclaim responsibility or to evade personal involvement
- To promote the predicates
- To focus on objects of interest.

Cleft structure

The cleft structure (Quirk et al, 1985 [3]), or focus construction (Brown, 1983 [14]), is a construction aimed at giving an item more prominence by cleaving the sentence into two parts. The outcome of this process is a cleft sentence, which is the general term for both 'it-cleft' and 'wh-cleft' (or 'pseudo-cleft'). Cleft structure can be said to have two simultaneous functions: focusing and contrasting, the contrasting one often rectifying participants' wrong assumptions or propositions, e.g.:

It-cleft: It was *the rain* that destroyed the crops (Widdowson, 1978:35 [41]).

Wh-cleft: What I need is a good holiday (Richards and Schmidt, 2002:75 [42]).

A loaf of bread is what we chiefly need (Halliday and Mathiessen, 2004:70 [7]).

What happened to the crops was that they were destroyed by the rain (Widdowson, 1978:38 [41]).

As shown in the examples above *it*-cleft involves the pushing of an item towards the front of the sentence after the structure "it + to be". A *wh*-cleft consists of a *wh*-nominal clause which can come first or second in the sentence. The other part of a *wh*-cleft can be a nominal phrase or clause (e.g. *that*-clause or *wh*-clause).

The difference between the two is in their structural features. While the focused item is always in the first part of the sentence after 'it + to be' in 'it-cleft', in the pseudo-cleft, it can be in either sentence initial or final position. For this reason, Halliday and Mathiessen (2004:70) [7] call the pseudo-cleft construction a 'thematic equative' because in this construction, there is the equated proportion of the two parts of information in the sentence: the Theme and the Rheme. (Other constructions, e.g. fronting

are non-equative, in which elements rather than the subject can be the theme).

Cleft structure (*it*-cleft and *wh*-cleft) differs from other non-canonical structures as follows:

Whereas the cleft structure functions as a means of focusing, the others (fronting, e.g. with the exception of existential there-sentences) functions as a means of topicalizing (Erteschik-Shir, 2007 [4]). In terms of the given/new distribution, while most of the other constructions (fronting, e.g.) set their items a very clear status, it is not so fixed with the cleft structure when viewed in the whole discourse, though it is always explicitly clear within the sentence.

Lock (1996) [43] claims that cleft sentences are particularly useful in written English, where there is not the freedom to put the focus on different parts of a message with the assistance of the nuclear stress as in spoken form. In discourse level, they can be used to highlight a piece of information central to a particular stage in the development of a text. Widdowson (1978) [41] calls this a way of achieving cohesion by developing propositions.

Post-posing

As opposed to pre-posing, post-posing is an information movement tendency in which an item is dislocated from its canonical position towards the typically (but not exclusively) final position in the sentence, either emptying its canonical position or allowing it to be occupied by 'there', termed 'expletive' in Birner and Ward (1996) [44]. In terms of the given-new contrast, post-posing distinguishes itself from pre-posing in that while pre-posing enables the marked constituent to represent discourse-old information; post-posing enables the marked element to represent new information. There are two frequent post-posing constructions with the

logical subject post-posed, leaving the expletive *there* in the canonical subject position, traditionally known as existential *there* and presentational-*there* sentences, e.g.:

Existential *there*-sentence:

“*There’s a warm relationship, a great respect and trust*” between [United Airline]’s chairman, Stephen M. Wolf, and Sir Colin Marshall, British Air’s chief executive officer, according to a person familiar with both sides (Ward and Birner, 2001:126 [8]).

Presentational-*there* sentences:

Not far from Avenue de Villiers there lived a foreign doctor, a specialist, I understood, in midwifery and gynecology. He was a coarse and cynical fellow who had called me in consultation a couple of times, not so much to be enlightened by my superior knowledge as to shift some of his responsibility on my shoulders (Ward and Birner, 2001:126 [8]).

While sharing the same feature of requiring the information represented by the post-verbal noun phrase (PVNP) to be discourse-new, there are two major differences between existential *there*-sentences and presentational *there*-sentences. The first involves the main verb used in each type of sentence. While in existential *there*-sentences, the main verb is *be*, verbs other than *be* function as the main verb in presentational *there*-sentences. The second difference lies in the nature of the unfamiliarity of the PVNP in each construction as to whether the information must be (or believed to be) new to the hearer or new to the discourse.

Existential *there*-sentences

As noted by Prince (1988 [45]; 1992 [46]) and Ward and Birner (1995) [47], the PVNP of existential *there*-sentences must represent information that the speaker believes to be unfamiliar to the hearer, otherwise, i.e. if the

PVNP represents information which is hearer-old or both hearer-old and discourse-old, the post-posing construction would be unacceptable or infelicitous, e.g.:

a. I have some news you’re going to find very interesting. # *There was on the panel your good friend Jim Alterman.* (Cited in Ward and Birner, 2001:127 [8])

b. President Clinton appeared at the podium accompanied by three senators and the vice president. # *There was behind him the vice president.* (Cited in Ward and Birner, 2001:127 [8])

The PVNP in (a) represents hearer-old information and that in (b) both hearer-old and discourse-old, thus disallowed because of their infelicity.

Presentational *there*-sentences

One feature that makes presentational *there*-sentences differentiated from existential *there*-sentences is that their PVNPs are discourse-sensitive, more specifically, the referent of the PVNPs can be both hearer-new and discourse-new or it can be hearer-old but discourse-new, e.g.:

a. And so as voters tomorrow begin the process of replacing Mr. Wright, forced from the speaker’s chair and the House by charges of ethical violations, *there remains a political vacuum in the stockyards, barrios, high-tech workshops and defense plants of Tarrant County.* (AP Newswire 1989), (cited in Ward and Birner, 2001:128 [8])

b. Suddenly there ran out of the woods the man we had seen at the picnic. (Ward and Birner, 2001:128 [8])

In (a) the referent is new to the readership and simultaneously to the discourse, while in (b) it is hearer-old, yet discourse-new.

Right-dislocation (RD)

As we have seen and as suggested by the terms used to indicate the constructions, left-dislocation (LD) stands in a close relationship with pre-posing, in terms of their structural and functional features, especially when it comes to the discourse constraints that regulate their communicative operations. The same scenarios of similarities and differences exist between right-dislocation and post-posing. Structurally, both constructions involve the non-canonical placement of a complement of the verb in post verbal position. The difference lies in the given-new status of the information expressed by those non-canonically positioned elements, specifically, in right-dislocation, the post-verbal noun phrase bears no requirement to represent new information. In other words, the right-dislocated constituent represents information that has been either explicitly or implicitly evoked in the prior discourse, e.g.:

It bothered her for weeks, John's smile.
(Brown, 1983:322 [14])

In this example, 'John's smile' has been previously mentioned in the discourse, and so can be right-dislocated in sentential final position. The example also suggests that LD and RD are syntactically and semantically identical except for their clausal initial or final position (Culicover and Jackendoff, 2005 [48]).

Some researchers other than Ward and Birner (2001) [8], though agreed on the given or inferable status of information in the dislocated noun phrase, associated it with some degree of newness, either as a topic (Davison, 1984 [49]), or as the most salient entity available for subsequent reference (Ziv and Grosz, 1994 [50]) or as a repair device for self-correcting potentially unclear references (Tomlin, 1986 [51]; Geluykens, 1987 [52]).

Ward and Birner (2001:133) [8], based on their corpus-based study however, argue strongly that 'right-dislocation cannot be viewed as marking information that is new in any sense'. In fact, also according to the authors, the dislocated noun phrase represents information that is both hearer-old and discourse-old, thus functionally differentiating RD from post-posing.

Conversing

Conversing is a process by which nominal clause elements can equally take either initial or final position in the sentence. The process is made possible due to the reciprocal meaning of some verbal, prepositional, or adjectival phrases. Often it is the context e.g., the given-new status of information that decides which position is optimal. In the following examples, the second order is generally preferred (Quirk et al, 1985) [3] because it conforms to the given-new distribution constraints:

An uncle, three cousins, and two brothers benefited from the will.

The will benefited an uncle, three cousins, and two brothers.

In the second sentence, the definite article suggests that 'the will' is either discourse-old, or hear-old, or both, and the initial position of 'the will' is assumed to provide a direct linkage with prior discourse, and is thus preferred.

Some of the verbs, prepositions and adjectives that support conversing can be found in (Quirk et al, 1985): benefit (from), rent (to/from), lend (to)/ borrow (from)/ give (to), receive (from), sell (to), buy (from), contain, behind/in front of, opposite, near (to), far (from), similar (to), different (from), married (to).

3. Summary

In this paper, four fundamental issues of English information structure at sentential level are discussed: the order in which information is distributed in the sentence, the given/new status of the information exchanged, the contextual constraints on the given/new status, and the syntactical devices used as information status indicators. The order in which information is distributed in an English sentence is constrained by three principles and tendencies: the principle of end-weight and end-focus, communicative dynamism and non-canonical constructions. An item of information in the sentence can be given or new depending on its recoverability or predictability. This status is relative depending on the shared knowledge between the speaker and the listener in a discourse and on the context in which it occurs. There are different canonical and non-canonical syntactical constructions to indicate the given/new status. Each construction performs a specific function by placing an item in a particular position in the sentence.

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Các vấn đề căn bản của cấu trúc thông tin tiếng Anh ở cấp độ câu

Huỳnh Anh Tuấn*

*Phòng Khoa học - Công nghệ, Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội,
Đường Phạm Văn Đồng, Cầu Giấy, Hà Nội, Việt Nam*

Tóm tắt: Bài báo trình bày các vấn đề căn bản của cấu trúc thông tin tiếng Anh ở cấp độ câu: trật tự phân bố thông tin trong câu, tính cũ/mới của thông tin, ngữ cảnh chi phối tính cũ/mới của thông tin, và các phương tiện cú pháp thể hiện tính cũ/mới của thông tin dựa trên các nghiên cứu của Birner và Ward (1998), Ward và Birner (2001), Halliday và Matthiessen (2004), Erteschik-Shir (2007) và một số tác giả khác. Các vấn đề này được xem xét từ góc độ cú pháp, chức năng và dụng học theo đường hướng tổng hợp của Quirk và đồng sự (1985) theo đó đặc điểm cú pháp của một cấu trúc ngôn ngữ được phân tích trong mối liên hệ của nó với chức năng dụng học dưới sự chi phối của ngữ cảnh giao tiếp. Ở cấp độ diễn ngôn, các vấn đề này được xem xét theo đường hướng quan hệ mệnh đề của Winter (1994) trong đó mệnh đề được xem là một phương tiện kết cấu và phân bố thông tin. Tính cũ/mới của thông tin, sự phân bố thông tin, các dấu hiệu thể hiện tính cũ/mới và sự chi phối của ngữ cảnh được lồng ghép trong mối quan hệ của các mệnh đề kết nối với nhau tạo nên cấu trúc lô gích tổng thể của diễn ngôn. Tuy nhiên, cấu trúc thông tin ở cấp độ ngôn bản không nằm trong phạm vi trình bày của bài báo này.

Từ khóa: Cấu trúc thông tin, phân bố thông tin, tính cũ/mới của thông tin, sự chi phối của ngữ cảnh, các phương tiện cú pháp, cấu trúc quy chuẩn và phi quy chuẩn.