

On the Rearrangement of Syntactic Constitutes for Information Structure

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Abstract

Generally speaking, information structure deals with the sequencing of given and new information in information transmission and it is usually characterized as the interface of syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Most researchers adopt a dichotomy of information structure-given and new information, assigning different labels to syntactic constituents based on their own background theory. But these labels only indicate the functions of different syntactic constituents, without involving their effect on syntactic construction. That is, the researchers mainly adopt a direction-inverted approach to the research: from syntactic construction to information structure.

Based on the above issues, this paper, attempts to make an analysis of how information structure is syntactically realized, i.e., the motivations for the syntactic realization of information examines pragmatic motivations for the syntactic realization of information structure. In this part, we still adopt the traditional terms for the division of information structure, such as “topic-focus”, etc. And we suggest that it is different conversational situations that first constrain the potential sequencing of information units, and it is this sequencing of information units that further affects our choice of syntactic constructions.

Key words: Information structure; Information focus; Syntactic construction

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INTRODUCTION

Advances in studying syntactic construction have the relation with information structure have been noticed by many researchers, and a great progress has been made by them. But most of the researchers put much emphasis on the effect of syntactic construction on information structure, i.e., they present the terms such as theme-rheme, topic-focus, given-new and the like based on the ready-made constructions, only dealing with how and where to assign different syntactic constituents the different information labels. The traditional dichotomy of information structure in ready-made constructions cannot contribute much to the effect of information structure on the formation of syntactic constructions, for most researchers adopt a direction-inverted approach: from syntactic construction to information structure.

Since we assume that syntactic construction is goal-oriented, we hold the view that either the syntactic constructions containing the same constituents but in distinct word orders or those containing different constituents but with same or similar meaning are motivated by information structure. So we suggest that information structure comes before syntactic construction.

In this essay, we will discuss the syntactic realization of information structure under the influence of different situations. Without involving context, to realize an information structure into a clause, we usually deal with the information focus in such ways: post-posing the constituents carrying the focus (right-shifting), or pre-posing those carrying the focus (left-shifting). And because of different positions of focus information, we will arrange the sequence of syntactic constituents in different ways, and in the following chapters we will illustrate them one by one.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since, this essay is going to study the relationship between syntactic constitutes and information structure, it should

be known that the dichotomy of information structure has received many terms that are used by different theories in different are based an independent level approaches. The terms of each dichotomy of description with some belonging to pragmatics text linguistics, some psychological states of referents and others grammar proper. The researchers do not reach an agreement about which level is based on appropriately to locate all the dichotomies. But all the approaches have in common that the information structure is defined with in terms of a subject-predicate structure of a syntactic construction: the two information units can be integrated into a complete construction in an extra-grammatical manner. The terms of the dichotomy of information structure are shown in Table 1 (Heusinger, 2001).

Table 1
Terminology for the Dichotomy of Information Structure

Terms	Proposers
Psychological subject – Psychological predicate	Von der Gabelentz (1869), Paul (1880)
Theme – rheme	Ammann (1928), Mathesius (1929), Firbas (1964), Danes (1970), Halliday (1967)
Topic – comment	Von der Gabelentz (1869), Reinhart (1982)
Topic – focus	Sgalla, Hajicova and Benesov (1973)
Presupposition – focus	Chomsky (1971), Jackendoff (1972)
Background – focus	Chafe (1976), Jacobs (1982)
Old/given – new	Halliday (1967), Chafe (1976)
Already activated – newly activated	Chafe (1976)
Open proposition – focus	Prince (1981)
Discourse old – discourse new Hearer old – hearer new	Prince (1981)
Notional subject – notional predicate	Kiss (1995)

On the previous studies, the theoretical basis for all the approaches varies according to the background theories of the researchers, and however, most of the approaches depend more or less on the two basic notions: the subject-predicate structure and the simplistic dichotomy of figure-ground from the psychological gestalt theory. They only deal with how to provide the dichotomy of information structure in terms of syntactic constructions on the level of either sentence or discourse, seldom involving how information structure is syntactically realized, or where information structure is from and further affects syntactic construction. Finally we present our view on the status of information structure, and propose a tentative outline of the paper to do the research from both synchronic perspective and diachronic one. In the following parts, we will discuss explicitly the motivations for the syntactic

realization of information structure, attempting to establish functional commonalities of motivations corresponding to syntactic commonalities.

2. REARRANGE THE SEQUENCE OF SYNTACTIC CONSTITUENTS

Syntactic constituents usually have their own sequence, but it is not fixed, we can change or rearrange the sequence under certain circumstances for sake of information structure.

2.1 Left-shifting Syntactic Constituents

In daily life when we rearrange the sequence of syntactic constituents, we usually want to change the information focus in our discourse, so this essay will first discuss how we left-shift the syntactic constituents in the sentence for different information focus.

2.1.1 Left-Shifting of Non-focus

In both English and Chinese, human usually has a memory capacity in the left-to-right order of information units, requiring old information to precede new information, and “light” constituents to precede “heavy” ones in Leech’s (1983) words. This is called unmarked information structure: given information to new information. For example:

(1) Whom do you want to talk with?

I want to talk with (given information) Jack (new information/information focus).

The end-focus actually belongs to a kind of normal focus, so we intend to put the new information at the end of a construction. In order to make the new information occupying the end position in a construction be the end-focus, we need to rearrange the sequence of syntactic constituents carrying different information to observe unmarked information structure.

The sifting of constitutes can influence the focus of information, and change the structure of new information and given information. So if we want to change the focus of a sentence, we can left-shifting the non-focus constitute.

(2) a. You give Charlie **that book**.

b. You give that book **to Charlie**.

In (2a) “that book” carries the focus, it is the new information, and “Charlie” is given information. But if “to Charlie” is the focus, we need to left-shift the non-focus of “that book” to spare the focus the end position, which is showed in (2b).

Discontinuous syntactic constructions appear to be uneasy for people to process in their mind, so for clarity’s sake, we tend to make the conceptually adjacent information units syntactically adjacent which also need left-shifting. For instance:

(3) a. I have borrowed from the University Library a book expounding the evolution process of human beings.

b. **From** the University Library. I have borrowed a book expounding the evolution process of human beings.

In (3b), we left shift the adverbials (from the national library) to draw a clear distinction between the presupposition and the information focus. So we can see that the presupposition part is given information (From the University Library), and (I have borrowed a book expounding the evolution process of human beings) is the new information, the information focus.

2.1.2 Left-Shifting of Contrastive Focus

In order to highlight the contrastive part, the syntactic realization of information structure also leads to the left-shifting of the new information or the information focus. The left-shifted important information in this case usually belongs to the contrastive focus, for example:

- (4) a. 这事情查理有办法。
b. 查理这事情有办法。

Above, although Charlie is the focus information, in order to contrast Charlie with other people, we left-shift Charlie to highlight that it is Charlie, not others can deal with this thing.

2.2 Right-shifting Syntactic Constituents

Besides left-shifting, we also need right shift some constituents in order to fulfill different purposes. And after right-shifting, the given information, new information and focus information are all changed.

2.2.1 Right-Shifting of Focus

We will first talk about right-shifting of focus in a sentence, and its influence for the information structure.

- (6) a. Don't leave out Peter.
b. Don't leave Peter out.

In (6a), "Peter" carries the focus, while in (6b) "peter" is been right-shifted, so "out" occupying the end position carries the focus.

2.2.2 Right-shifting of Theme

In most cases, theme-rheme division of information structure in Chinese is different from that in English, for the theme usually carrying the less important information in Chinese may carry the more important information or the information focus in English. But if we want to make the hearer get the focus as soon as possible, we should right-shift the theme. Consider the following examples:

- (7) a. 那只小狗多么聪明啊!
b. 多么聪明啊, 那只小狗!
c. How smart the dog (is)!
- (8) a. 那个女孩是谁呀?
b. 是谁呀, 那个女孩?
c. Who is that girl?

In (7a) "那只小狗" is the theme, carrying the less important information, and it is right shifted in (7b) to observe the focus. But in the English construction of (7c), though the theme is 'how smart', it still carries the information focus, as the Chinese version "多么聪明" does in (7a) and (7b). The case in (8) is similar. "那个女孩" in the Chinese constructions is the theme, carrying the given information, and "是谁呀" carries the information focus

or the question focus. In (8c), it is also 'who' that carries the information focus or the question focus, but it usually functions as the theme.

2.2.3 Right-shifting of Adverbial Modifiers

The effect of the on the syntactic realization of information structure is not restricted to the right-shifting of the theme, but can also applied to adverbial modifiers, as the following:

- (10) a. Everyday he goes to bed early.
b. He goes to bed early everyday.
(11) a. Actually he is quite terrible.
b. He is quite terrible actually.

After right-shifting of adverbial modifiers, we can see that the focus of sentences above has changed. The focus "he goes to bed early" in (10b) and "He is quite terrible" (11b) is more easily to avoid confusion and make the hearer get the focus as soon as possible.

3. OTHER WAYS TO REARRANGE SYNTACTIC CONSTITUENTS

In addition to left-shift and right-shift of syntactic constituents, this essay will also try to do some researches about other ways to rearrange syntactic constituents, including topicalization, reduction, addition, and dislocation.

3.1 Topicalization of Syntactic Constituents

The examples of topicalization are illustrated as follows:

- (12) (a) I didn't take your hat.
(b) Your hat, I didn't take.
(c) The hat, I didn't take yours.

Generally speaking, in (12a) "your hat" carries the focus. In (12b), with the topicalization of the non-focus "your hat", we make "I didn't take" carry the focus, and similarly in (12c), with the topicalization of the non-focus "the hat", we make "I didn't take yours" carry the focus.

In our daily conversation, it often requires that the expression to avoid obscurity and ambiguity, and to be brief and orderly. Actually, it means say as much as you can, See the following examples:

- (13) a. I found that he was an experienced doctor.
b. For him, I found an experienced doctor.
*c. I found him an experienced doctor.

Both (13a) and (13b) are clearly expressed. In (13a), the new information is "he was an experienced doctor". And in (13b), the new information is "I found an experienced doctor". But (13c) is ambiguous, containing the meanings in both (13a) and (13b). See Chinese examples

- (14) a. 孩子, 娜娜是前年生的。
b. 孩子娜娜, 是前年生的。
*c. 娜娜是前年生的孩子。

(14c) is ambiguous, containing two meanings conveyed by (14a) and (14b) But if we left-shift "孩子" to make it function as either topic or appositive of "娜娜" showed respectively in (14a) and (14b), the original

information focus “前年生的” occupies the end position and the ambiguity can also be settled.

3.2 Reduction and Addition of Syntactic Constitutes

Besides left shifting, right shifting and topicalization of syntactic constitute in a sentence, there is also another way: reduction of constitutes syntactically. Here, the focus will not change but keep intact.

In order to be more clear, one may reduce where possible, so for the syntactic realization of information structure, it recommends that the given information or even the less important information can be omitted, while the information focus is kept unimpaired, as in the following examples:

- (15) a. 你想干什么?
 b. 干什么?
 (16) a. 谁在那儿?
 b. 谁?

Focus markers and focus sensitive particles in the constructions are always used to distinguish the information focus easily and clearly from the other information units. For the addition of the focus markers in syntactic constructions, In English, it often uses “(to) be”. But note that, the use of the focus marker “(to) be” in English usually causes the left-shifting of the focus and the addition of a “dummy subject” (Xu Jie, 2001). See the following examples:

- (17) a. Yesterday Charlie bought a hat to her father.
 b. It was Charlie who bought a hat for her father yesterday.
 c. It was yesterday that Charlie bought a hat for her father.
 d. It was for her father that Charlie bought a hat yesterday.
 e. It was a hat that Charlie bought for her father yesterday.

In (17), (b)(c)(d)(e) are it-cleft sentences, marking the contrastive focus, which means each sentence carry different focus after dummy subject “it”.

In addition to the focus markers, the focus sensitive particles can also be used to mark clearly the syntactic constituents carrying the contrastive focus, for example:

- (18) a. Charlie only drinks beer at the dinner.
 b. Even Alex can do that.

3.3 Left-dislocation and Right-Dislocation of Syntactic Constituents

We also explain the constructions of left-dislocation and right-dislocation. Being different from the general shifting, both the left-dislocation and the right-dislocation require that after the shifting of a certain information unit, there is a referential one (usually carried by a pronoun) in its canonical position. Through the left or right dislocation of a certain information unit, we can get a clear distinction between the information focus and the other less important information units. Generally speaking, the left-dislocated information unit is the information focus, while

the right-dislocated one is the less important information unit. Compare the following examples:

- (19) Gallstones (focus), you have them out and they are out (left-dislocation)
 (20) He really is old (focus) that man. (right-dislocation)

in (19), gallstones is obviously the focus of the sentence, so it is put in the left, while the rest is less important, so we use pronoun “them” to occupy the position, this is how left dislocation works. So does right dislocation, in (20) “old” is the new information in the sentence, and that man is less important. So, we put is on the right, and use pronoun old to occupy its original position.

CONCLUSION

In this essay we have taken a look at the pragmatic motivations for the syntactic realization of information structure within construction out of context. However, the pragmatic principles we have mentioned can only be regarded to some degree as the pragmatic factors contributed to the syntactic realization of information structure. Though usually we incline to form a construction to transmit information efficiently, because the syntactic. Realization of information structure is interpreted as goal-oriented. We may employ different constructions for different purposes, for example, in our daily conversation we should be concerned with the expressive and aesthetic aspects of communication, we should be clarity, get the key information as soon as possible. In order to achieve these different purposes, the information structure must be changed, and finally we should rearrange the sequence of syntactic constitutes to adjust the information structure.

All in all, this essay holds that it is the different conversational situations that first constrain the potential sequencing of information units, and it is this sequencing of information units that further affects our choice of syntactic constructions.

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