The Highlighting Devices in English Grammar
"Postponement Use and Meaning"
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Abstract

Postponement which involves the replacement of the postponed element by a substitute form is termed EXTRAPOSITION. It operates almost exclusively on subordinate nominal clauses. The most important type of extraposition is that of clausal subject – ie a subject realized by a finite or nonfinite clause. The subject is moved to the end of the sentence, and the normal subject position is filled by the anticipatory pronoun it. The resulting sentence thus contains two subjects, which we may identify as the POSTPONED SUBJECT (the one which is notionally the subject of the sentence) and the ANTICIPATORY SUBJECT (it). A simple rule for deriving a sentence with subject extraposition from one of more orthodox ordering is:

Subject + predicate ~ it + predicate + subject

Thus:

To hear him say that + surprised me ~ it +surprised me + to hear him say that

But it is worth emphasizing that for clausal subjects. The postponed position is more usual than the canonical position before the verb, examples are:

Type SVC: It is a pleasure to teach her.

Type SVA: It was on the news that income tax is to be lowered.

1. Postponement

It is to place later (as in a sentence) than the normal position in English or to place later in order of precedence, preference, or importance. It will be clear from the examples below is that one important communicative difference between the two types of cleft construction is that while the cleft sentence with it is often used to put the main focus near the front of the sentence, the pseudo – cleft is chiefly used to postpone the focus to end position. In the respect it is often in competition with the passive.

Quirk et al (1985:1389)

1. The manufacturers tested the device.

Focus is placed on the noun phrase the manufacturers by means of the passive in (2) and by the means of the pseudo-cleft in (3)

2. The device was tested by the manufacturers.

3. The people who tested the device were the manufacturers.

It should be noted that (3) presupposes that the hearer knows that testing has taken place; with (2) is not so.

Given the importance of end focus , it is not surprising that English has numerous resources to enable us to phrase a sentence in such a way to ensure the distribution of information according to our wishes.

There are four example lexical and grammatical devices which reverse the order of roles:

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

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

6. An *unidentified* blue liquid *was in* the bottle.

7. The bottle *contained* an unidentified blue liquid.

8. A red sports car was *behind* the bus.

9. The bus was *in front of* a red sports car.

Quirk et al (1985:1390-1)

The items or sequences in italics are converses; *ie* they express the same meaning but with a reversal of the order of participants. The second sentence in each pair will be generally preferable, since the element with the definite meaning , containing given information, would normally not take end-focus.

Note:

A special case of converseness is the relation of reciprocity expressed by certain terms such as *similar to, different from, near (to) , far from, opposite, married to,* where reversing the order of the participants preserves the essential meaning without any other change in the construction:

10. My house is opposite the hotel.= The hotel is opposite my house.

A more complex relation of converses is illustrated by:

11. The dealer *sold* the car to my friend.

12. my friend *bought* the car from the dealer.

Compare also *rent to/rent from, lend to/borrow from, give to/receive from.*

2. Voice and postponement

With transitive clauses, the passive voice provides a convenient postponing the agentive subject by turning it into the agent in a passive construction. We thus reverse the active order of the agentive and affected elements where the agentive requires end focus:

13. who makes these tablemats?

14. they are made by my sister-in-law.

A preference for end-focus (in this instance, coinciding with end-weight) can even override an aversion to passive constructions that are in themselves rather awkward:

The regulations were taken *advantage of* by all the tramps and down-and-outs in the country.

A finite clause as subject is also readily avoided by switching from the active to the passive voice:

15. That he was prepared to go to such lengths astounded me.

16. I was astounded That he was prepared to go to such lengths.

It was pointed out that the V element cannot be focused in the cleft-sentence construction. Where such focus is desirable with an intransitive verb, end-focus is easily achieved; with a transitive verb, it can be achieved by the use of passive, provided that the agent can be ignored as either given or otherwise is dispensable. Thus in place of:

17. But our scientists finally solved all these problems.

18. We can have, ignoring the noun phrase our scientists

19. But all these problems were finally solved.

The passive can also ensure a smooth crescendo of communicative dynamism with ditransitive verbs by making the indirect object thematic. Thus, after 'Marion performed well for the judges', we might hear:

20. They awarded her the prize.

But both *they* and *her* are obviously 'given' and there is thus a break in the crescendo of new information between the subsidiary awarded and the focal prize. Such a break is avoided in the alternative passive, now ignoring the active subject they:

21. She was awarded tithing a sentence as to the ordering he prize.

It should be noted that the principle of end-focus applies just as much to the ordering of clauses within a sentence as to the ordering of elements within a clause. The principle of end-focus also has its analogue at sentence level in the principle of RESOLUTION.

The passive of have is rarely used, but when it occurs, the verb has a transitive meaning usually absent from the active. Compare:

22. (people) have little satisfaction from pop music.

With the following examples which combine existential three with the passive:

23. There's little satisfaction to be had from pop music.

24. I wanted to buy sherry but there was none to be had.

Together with the phenomenon of discontinuous noun phrases, the following textual example uses the passive to enable *no mention* to be thematized and *the police* to be

focused (at some cost in the possible misunderstanding of the written form of the sentence):

25. *no mention* is made in the report of the police.

　　　[= They make no mention of the police in the report.]

3. **Extraposition**

Extraposition of a clausal subject

Postponement which involves the replacement of the postponed element by a substitute form is termed EXTRAPOSITION. It operates almost exclusively on subordinate nominal clauses. The most important type of extraposition is that of a clausal subject− ie a subject realized by a finite or nonfinite clause. the subject is moved to the end of the sentence, and the normal subject position is filled by the anticipatory pronoun it. The resulting sentence thus contains two subjects, which we may identify as POSTPONED SUBJECT (the one which is notionally the subject of the sentence) and the ANTICIPATORY SUBJECT (IT). A simple rule for deriving a sentence with subject extraposition from one of orthodox ordering is:

Subject + predicate ~   it + Subject + predicate

(Pove (2006:10)

Thus:

To hear him say that + surprised me ~ It + surprised me + to hear him say that

But it is worth emphasizing that for clausal subjects the postponed position is more usual than the canonical position before the verb.

Examples are:

26. Type SVC : It is a pleasure *to teach her .*

27. Type SVA : It was on the news that *income tax is to be lowered .*

28. Type SV : It doesn't matter *what you do .*

29. Type SVO : It surprised me *to hear him say that .*

30. Type SVOC : It makes her happy *to see others enjoying themselves .*

31. Type SV $_{pass}$: It is said *that she slipped arsenic into his tea .*

32. Type SV $_{pass}$ C : It was considered impossible *for anyone to escape .*

Some notes about extraposition :

For certain constructions which have all the appearance of clausal extrapositions (*It seems\ appears\ happened\ chanced * etc), the corresponding nonextraposed version does not occur . For example , there is no sentence * That everything is fine seems to correspond with It seems that everything is fine , nor do we find * That she slipped arsenic into his tea is said . In

such cases , we may say that the extraposition is obligatory . With *be* , this type of extraposition is used for expressions of possibility and (especially) for reflective questions .

33. It may be that she no longer trusts you.

34. Could it be that you left the keys in your office ?

Clauses with extraposed subject must be distinguished from superficially similar clauses in which it is a personal pronoun or empty 'prop' subject : *It's good to eat* (ie 'This (fish, etc) is good to eat') ; *It's lovely weather to go fishing* .

If– and when– clauses behave very much like extraposed subjects in sentences like:

35. It would be a pity if we missed the show.

   [*cf* It is a pity that we missed the show]

36. It'll be a great day when you win the sweepstake .

It is doubtful in each case , however , whether the clause could act as subject , although it could act as initial adverbial clause : *If we missed the show , it would be a pity* . On balance, therefore these appear to be adverbials rather than the extraposed subjects. Contrast : *for us to miss the show would be a pity ~ It would be a pity for us to to miss the show* .

Another marginal case is the 'phrasal extraposition' of *it's two hundred miles from Boston to New York*, Where the prepositional phrase sequence , if fronted , could act either as subject or as adverbial: *From Boston to New York (it) is two hundred miles*

Compare also : *It's Wednesday today ; Today (it) is Wednesday* .

While the extraposed clause can only rarely be a nominal relative in type SV , It is even rarer with SVC : *Whoever said that was wrong but * It was wrong whoever said that* . *In examples like It's a mystery why she did it* \ how he does it , the *wh*– clauses are best regarded as indirect interrogatives .   Quirk   et   al (1985:1392)

The *it* used in extraposition is called 'anticipatory *it*' because of its pronominal correspondence to a later item . But informationally , this *it* is similar in effect to prop *it* , as in '*It* started to rain' which likewise enables us to end the clause at a focal point . Contrast Rain was starting . Compare also *It was snowing beside snow was falling* .

4. Extraposition of –ing clauses

Although we mentioned that extraposition is usual for clausal subjects, there is an exception with –ing clauses which occur very naturally in ordinary subject position :

37. *Teaching her to drive* turned out to be quite enjoyable *.*

38. *Getting the equipment loaded* was easy *.*

Extraposition of   *–ing* clauses is in fact uncommon outside informal speech .Compare :

39. It was easy *getting the equipment loaded* .

Some common informal examples are :

40. It's no use *telling him that*

41. It wouldn't be any good *trying to catch the bus* .

The *–ing* clause often shows itself incompletely adapted to the extraposition construction , notably by being resistant to bearing the main information focus . Rather than:

42. (a) It's |fun being a HOSTESS|

We hear :

(b) It's |FUN being a HOSTESS|

With main focus on the first element of the predicate . In Writing , this example could well be punctuated as :

(c) It's fun , being a hostess .

We might conclude from this that the participial clauses has just as much affinity with a noun–phrase tag as with a genuine extraposed subject .

5. Extraposition of clausal object

When the object is an *–ing* clause in *SVOC* and *SVOA* clauses type , it can undergo extraposition ; when it is a *to–*infinitive clause or a *that–*clause , it must do so :

43. You must find *it* exciting *working her* .

Cf : You must find *working here* exciting .

Working here is exciting .

44. I made *it* my objective *to settle the matter* .

SVOC Cf : * I made *to settle the matter* my prime objective .

To settle the matter was my prime objective .

Contrast: I made *settling the matter* my prime objective .

*I made *it* my prime objective *settling the matter* .

Comack & Smith (2004 220)

45 . I woe *it* to you *that the jury acquitted me* .

Cf: * I woe *that the jury acquitted me* to you .

Contrast: I woe *my acquittal* to you .[with corresponding nominalization] SVOA

46. Something put *it* into his head *that she was a spy* .

Cf : * Something put *that she was a spy* into his head .

Something put *the idea of her being a spy* into his head .

6. The construction type *She's a pleasure to teach*

Where the extraposed clause is of type SVC and comprises an object of prepositional complement , the noun phrase concerned can sometimes be fronted to become the theme in place of it . for example:

47. To teach Elizabeth is a pleasure .

~ It is a pleasure to teach Elizabeth .

~ Elizabeth is a pleasure to teach .

Compare also:

48. It is impossible to deal with him . ~ He's impossible to deal with.

49. It's easy\difficult to beat them . ~ They're easy\difficult to beat.

50. It's fun (for us) to be with Margret. ~ Margret is fun (for us) to be with .

This thematic fronting does not apply to all constructions of the same kind .For instance , with

$$\text{It's} \begin{Bmatrix} \text{Rare} \\ \text{Odd} \end{Bmatrix} \text{to} \begin{Bmatrix} \text{find} \\ \text{lose} \end{Bmatrix} \text{them} .$$

There is no corresponding :

$$* \text{They are} \begin{Bmatrix} \text{Rare} \\ \text{Odd} \end{Bmatrix} \text{to} \begin{Bmatrix} \text{find} \\ \text{lose} \end{Bmatrix}$$

There is a similar construction for be sure, be certain, seem, appear, be said, be known, etc, except that in these cases the corresponding construction with anticipatory it requires a that−clause, not a to−infinitive clause, and except also that it is the subject of the extraposed clause that is fronted:

51. It's certain that we'll forget the address. ~ We're certain to forget the address .

52. It seems that you've made a mistake . ~ You seem to have made a mistake.

53. It is known that he's a crowd . ~ He's known to be a crowd.

(Corder 1967)

Notes about the construction type :

A combination of movement explained previously permits a valuable range of sentence forms adjusting the development of communicative dynamism and the assignment of end−focus as desired . Thus along with the canonical SVC Sentence :

54. To |play Mozart on this violin is deLIGHTful|

We have three further possibilities . First ,with ordinary it extraposition :

(a) It is de|lightful to play Mozart on this vioLIN|

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Secondly , with thematization of the object Mozart in the extraposed clause , we emphasize even more the properties of the violin :

(b) |Mozart is delightful to play on this vioLIN|

Thirdly , with thematization of the prepositional complement , we switch attention to the properties of Mozart;s music :

(c) |This violin is delightful to play MoZart on|

The shifting relations of the adjective can perhaps be seen more clearly in the following:

55. This| jug is DiFficult to pour CREAM out of|

|Cream is DiFficult to pour out of this jUG|

The former implies difficulties with the jug (perhaps its spout is too narrow) ; the latter implies difficulties with cream (perhaps it is too thick) .

We must make a clear distinction between the type of thematic fronting discussed here (where the item assumes maximally 'given' status) and the fronting discussed previously , where the item retains its nonsubject status grammatically and is given greater rhetorical emphasis . contrast the following:

56. |Mozart is delightful to play on this vioLIN|

|Mozart| it is delightful to play on this vioLIN|

57. E|lizabeth| is a pleasure to TEACH|

E|LIZabeth| it is a pleasure to TEACH|

A slighter but somewhat corresponding difference occurs between :

58. In the garden there is a sundial .   In the garden is a sundial .

With be certain , be sure , a personal subject can be followed by either a to–infinitive clause or an –ing clause , but there is a crucial difference in meaning:

59. Janet is certain to be put on the committee .   [The speaker is confident]

60. Janet is sure of being put on the committee . [Janet is confident]

The construction type 'She is pleasure to teach' has been called 'Tough Movement' by reason of canonical (if rather informal) examples involving the adjective tough , as in He's a tough man to argue with .

(Brown 1994: p.203–204)

7. Postponement of object in *SVOC* and *SVOA* clauses

When the object is a long and complex phrase , final placement for end-focus or end-weight is possible in SVOC and SVOA clause types . This does not involve an it–substitution .

(a) Shift from SVO_dC_o order to SVC_oO_d order :

61. They pronounced guilty every one of the accused .

62. He had called an idiot the man on whose judgment he now had to rely.

(b) Shift from SVO_dA to $SVAO_d$:

63. I confessed to him all my worst defects .

We heard from his own lips the story of how he had been stranded for days without food.

64. She dragged (right) in (side) the two heavy boxes of chemicals .

65. We cannot set (totally) aside a whole system of rules devised by Congress itself .

The fact that we are disturbing the normal order in such clauses is indicated by a tendency to adopt a different intonation pattern . Thus the movement forward of the C or A is usually accompanied by the assignment to it of a marked (subsidiary) focus .

66. He had |called an IDiot his best FRIEND|

67. She |pulled to one SIDE the heavy CURtain|

Compare:

68. He had |called his best friend an IDiot|

69. She |pulled the heavy curtain to one SIDE|

The sentence He had called an idiot his best friend need not of course involve movement ; with unaltered *SVOC* we would understand that an idiot was his best friend .

8. Objects and paraphrases

In ditransitive complementation , the indirect object precedes the direct object:

[70] She gave her brother \ him a signet ring .

Thus whether or not the O_i is pronominalized , the implication is that it carries less communicative dynamism (is relatively ،given ') as compared with the O_d . Where the converse is true , the O_i is replaced by a prepositional phrase and placed after O_d :

[71] She gave a signet ring to her brother .

(Heaton, 1988:180)

But there is a third possibility ; the prepositional paraphrase of the O_i can itself precede the O_d:

[72] She gave to her brother a signet ring .

Note that we cannot have : * She gave (to) her brother it . The O_d in [72] has the same rhematic force as in [70] but the O_i has been replaced by a form that raises its communicative dynamism above that of the O_i in [70] though still below that of the paraphrase in [71]

Consider now the special type of ditransitive construction we find with eventive objects :

[73] We paid them a visit .

[74] He gave Helene a nudge .

Here we have a device which is convenient when our communicative requirement is to put focal emphasis on the activity rather than on a human participant . Contrast .

[73a] We paid a visit to some old friends .

[74a] he gave a nudge to Helen .

But as we can see from the doubtful acceptability of [74a] , it may be preferable not to use the eventive object construction at all when it is a human participant that is needed in end-focus :

[73b] We visited some old friends .

[74b] He nudged Helen .

Where both O_d and O_i are pronouns , it would be usual to replace the latter by a to-phrase :

75. She GAVE it to him .

She gave it to HIM .

Alternatively , we could have :

She GAVE him it .

She GAVE it him   < only BrE >

She gave it HIM

But not :

*She gave HIM it .

*She gave IT him .

On the divided focus in example [72] , compare the similar phenomenon accompanied by unusual positioning .

Quirk et al (1985:1393)

Conclusion:

This paper has explored the distribution of English grammatical devices for highlighting particular constituents restrictively, and factors controlling the choice of one grammatical device over others, as exemplified in two extremes of "spokenness" and "writtenness".

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