

A Consideration of English Special Constructions

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1. INTRODUCTION

—Psychological Subject and Special Construction

In some grammar books, especially in the framework of Transformational Grammar, the category of subject is supposed to be purely syntactically defined and independent of semantic and pragmatic considerations which are concerned with new/old information, focus and so on. However I would like here to assume grammatical relations such as subject should be considered along with semantic and pragmatic factors.

Let me further suggest that subjects be preferably characterized as having the three occurrences: a grammatical/syntactic subject, a semantic subject and a psychological subject. Thus, in the sentence *John broke the window this morning*, *John* is clearly a syntactic subject, and also in this case a semantic subject since it serves as an agent. Then what is a psychological subject? It is determined by the context or the judgment of the speaker at the time of the utterance. Most typically, it is recognized by the stress on it. In the above sentence, for instance, when *the window* is put on a stress (as in case the sentence is the reply for *what did John break this morning?*), the speaker asserts *John* broke the window and not the vase or some other things. In this case, *the window* serves as a psychological subject. In short, a psychological subject is what the speaker psychologically put an importance on at the time of speaking, and therefore it is the focus of his/her attention. According to van Oosten (1986, p. 29), the psychological subject might be characterized as follows: "what a person speaks about is the focus of the speaker's attention and of the hearer's attention thus in their consciousness; it is

something that the speaker is interested in and that is the perspective from the speaker is viewing the event.”

Since I assume syntactic observations should not be separated from semantic and pragmatic ones, the psychological subject pragmatically defined above could also be represented structurally. As I wrote in my previous paper (Suzuki: 1988), English does have some special constructions which can distinguish a psychological subject (in other words, a focused element) from the rest of the sentence. The term *special constructions* I am using here is contrasted with the term *basic constructions*. In the latter constructions, syntactic subjects are at the same time semantic and psychological ones, while in the former (special) constructions are produced for some purposes, in particular, for certain pragmatic purposes. They are “marked” in that they are much more rarely used and their appropriate uses are highly context-dependent.

Among those special constructions, I will pick up *it*-cleft and existential *there* constructions for the study of a focused element in an English sentence. The typical examples are shown below: sentences (a) and (b) represent an *It*-cleft (hereafter I will refer to as cleft) construction and an existential *there* (hereafter I will refer to as *there*) construction respectively:

- (a) It is his idea that I am very interested in.
- (b) There are some misspellings in this essay.

As to the latter construction, I will restrict my study here to sentences with *be* as a main verb, and not deal with sentences with certain main verbs other than *be* such as *there appeared an old man with a strange hat* since the latter sentences are seen as falling outside the scope of the article proper. From now on, through the analysis of cleft element (a psychological subject) in an English sentence. The similarities found in the properties and functions of the two kinds of the constructions will, I hope, give us some interesting and significant suggestions.

2. Syntactic Analysis and Properties

2.1. Cleft Construction

Let us begin with considering how a cleft sentence is generated. In

previous studies of cleft sentences, we find the two main views. The one is that a cleft sentence is derived from its non-clefted counterpart by way of a movement rule. For instance, in Pinkham and Hankamer (1975), this movement rule is called *it*-clefting which “extracts the focus element, creates the upper S structure with the copular *be*, places the extracted constituent in predicate position. The original S is extraposed to post-focus position” (p. 429). On the other hand, Delahunty (1986: p. 8) gives the other view that a cleft sentence is to be base generated, stating that “the base phrase structure rules generate the phrases of the construction in their surface position.” In this view, the focus (which comes just after *be*) as well as the clause (which follows the focus) are supposed to be generated in their surface positions and the syntactic subject *it* is placed in its position by one of the regular lexical insertion rules. One of the merits of this view (which seems to me most powerful) is that it requires no additional complexities in the grammar, since the analysis based on this view does not need any transformational rules specific to cleft sentences. I would rather be favor of this view and, here in this paper, pay attention to the surface configurations of cleft sentences and their pragmatic functions.

As to the surface configuration of a cleft construction we would like to follow the formulation given in (1)

- (1) *It* (M) (have) *be* (ADV) X^n (S^1) (Delahunty: 1986, p. 2)

where *It* is the characteristic non-referential, non-anaphoric semantically neutral subject, and X^n represents the focused phrase of the sentence, and S^1 will be referred to as “the clause”. The focused phrase is further defined in Delahunty (*ibid*) as follows:

The variable X^n is limited to the categories that can be generated in the VP complement position by the phrase structure rules. These include NP, PP, ADV, QP, PRT and AP.

Now let us see the examples classified by the kinds of X^n :

- (2) $X^n = \text{NP}$: It is the scent that attracts bees.

- (3) $X^n = PP$: It was to Mary that he owed his success.
 (4) $X^n = ADV$: It was only lately that I heard the sad news.

ADV may be sentential:

It's only because you were her oldest friend that I'd offer them to you.

- (5) $X^n = QP$: How far is it that we have to go?
 (6) $X^n = PRT$ (particles that are semantically separable from the verb and focused):

It wasn't on that he pulled boots, it was off.

- (7) $X^n = AP$: It was happy that he looked when I saw him last.
 (Examples (4)–(7) are from Delahunty (1986).)

Besides these kinds of examples, there are also ones which have sentential subjects and infinitives as their focused elements though I cannot deal with them in this small paper.

In a cleft construction, as exemplified above, the psychological subject is in predicate position after *be* and it is the focus of attention. From the pragmatic viewpoint, therefore, a cleft construction can be regarded as one of the focus constructions, where its psychological subject is the focus. It might be appropriate to notice here this remark:

“Fundamental to the focus-presupposition distinction is the division of the propositional meaning of a sentence into two parts, which are assigned different degrees of communicative importance. We may speak of this kind of division, in general terms, as the FOREGROUNDING of one part of the sentence at the expense of the other....in focus constructions the new information is FOREGROUNDED, or IN THE FOREGROUND, while the presupposed information is BACKGROUNDED or IN THE BACKGROUND”
 (Schachter: 1973, p. 41)

Accordingly, in the case of a cleft construction, the focus is in the foreground and the clause is in the background: in other words, the clause

is understood as presenting background information for clarifying the referent of *it* (i.e. the focus) and the content conveyed by this clause may be regarded as presupposed in the sense that the information is shared by both the speaker/writer and the hearer/reader.

Before studying pragmatic functions of cleft constructions, we shall take a survey of generation and properties of *there* constructions.

2.2. *There* Construction

Concerning the generation of *there* constructions, there are largely two kinds of viewpoints. The one is the transformational viewpoint (shown, for instance in Chomsky (1977)) which assumes *there* construction is derived by way of certain transformational rules including a movement rule. On the basis of this viewpoint, most typical analysis proposes a movement rule called Subject-postposing besides *There*-insertion rule. Thus, sentence (8) is supposed to be derived from sentence (9) by the successive application of these two rules:

(8) There is a snake in that yard.

(9) A snake is in that yard.

The other viewpoint is based on the assumption that there is no transformational rule involved in the generation of a cleft construction but this construction is generated directly in the base by the phrase structure rules. The analysis under this assumption is shown in, for instance, Jenkins (1975) and Hannay (1985), and quite similar to the base generated analysis of cleft constructions which we observed in the last section. Here, in this paper, we shall follow this line and for the moment will be mostly concerned with the features seen from the surface configuration of a *there* construction, shown in (10);

(10) there (M) (have) be (ADV) NP X

where NP+X, according to Hannay (1985, p. 21), denotes either an entity as in example (11) or a state of affairs as in (12).

(11) There must be a lot of fun to it.

- (12) While I wasn't looking, there was a hood brought down over my head.

As for *there*, it is "held to have the positional properties associated with the Subject but does not constitute the Subject term itself," (Hannay: 1985, p. 193) Namely, *there* is only a syntactic subject without any referent, and NP following *be* in (10) can be regarded as the psychological subject and at the same time the focus element.

2.3. Comparison

From the above observations, we have now noticed some similarities and differences between cleft constructions and *there* constructions. In the both constructions, the psychological subjects are syntactically marked and phonetically emphasized as the focused elements. As for *it* (in a cleft construction) and *there* (in a *there* construction), they serve as the syntactic subjects. The parallelism is seen in the following examples:

- (13) a) There is a snake in that yard. (=8)
 b) It is the snake that I caught in the yard.

Incidentally, Jenkins (1975, p. 26) proposes "that the *there* construction will be analyzed as a reduced cleft": i.e. the constituents immediately following *be* in a *there* sentence are considered to be the remnant of a cleft sentence. Under this analysis, both cleft and *there* constructions have the same process from the deep structures to the surface structures. Semantically the focused elements of the cleft and *there* constructions (represented as X^n in (1) and NP in (10) respectively) are closely related to their respective following constituents S^1 in (1) and X in (10): (1) and (10) are repeated here as (14) and (15) for the convenience' sake.

- (14) It (M) (have) be (ADV) X^n (S^1)
 (15) There (M) (have) be (ADV) NP X

Now having a just look at (14) and (15), I would like to point out a main difference here. In the case of a cleft construction, the focal element represented as X^n is not limited to only NP but can be some

other categories as we have observed in 2.1. In the case of a *there* construction, on the other hand, the focal element is shown as only NP, and X modifying this NP appears as not only the clause but various forms: as is often the case, the focal NP combines X to constitute “a state of affairs.”

Now, in the next section, we shall observe pragmatic functions of these two constructions, putting an emphasis on the pragmatic effects of the focal elements.

3. Pragmatic Considerations

3.1. Pragmatic considerations of cleft constructions

As I studied the pragmatic functions of a cleft construction in Suzuki (1989), I would like here to sum up the main points with my remarks. The most typical function of this construction is to pick out or to identify a unique referent which may be regarded as a known referent already in the consciousness of the speaker and hearer. In this case, Xⁿ shown in (14) is clearly the focus of attention and emphasized with a contrastive stress on it, and therefore considered to be the stressed focus. In other words, the cleft sentence serves to pick up the element in the proposition which the speaker/writer thinks is important, put it in the predicate position and conveyed its importance to the hearer/reader. Accordingly, the cleft sentence suggest subjective views of the speaker/writer. Let us see some of the examples:

- (16) ...So I learned to sew books. They are really good books. It's just the covers that are rotten.

(van Oosten: 1986, p. 44)

- (17) The idea is to fix the traffic jams that have made the main road from here to there in Lancaster County a daily exercise in frustration. The proposal is for a new highway to relieve the congestion by cutting across some of the most fertile farms anywhere in the nations. But it's more than just property that's at stake, some people say, more than farmland. It's part of a culture that's at risk, a way of life.

(CBS News: Dec. 11, 1987)

- (18) It was just about 50 years ago that Henry Ford gave us the weekend. On September 25, 1926, in a somewhat shocking move for that time, he decided to establish a 40-hour work week, giving his employees two days off instead of one.

(van Oosten: 1986, p. 67)

- (19) *[Introduction]* During the first weeks of life, educational development consists primarily of a stabilization of the unsteady, somewhat fragile pieces of behavior present at birth..

[Three paragraphs later] The initial collection of reflexlike behavior that newborns show is not, however, irrelevant to intelligence. According to Piaget, it is from these simple isolated acts like grasping and glancing that mature intelligence develops.

(White: 1975, pp. 21-22)

- (20) It's not just the sensibilities of the Amish community that road planners have to worry about. The Amish are also good for business; their unique way of life is an attraction that has made tourism here a booming industry.

(CBS News, Dec. 11, 1987)

- (21) An infant trying to get an object that is hard to reach will actually attempt various procedures to reach the object, whereas the child over two years of age choose the one most likely to succeed, and then act. It is this shift from working problems out with actions to thinking them through that takes place in late infancy. Your child is now much more able to reflect upon events and situations than he was at age one, for example. He is a thinker...

(White; 1975, p. 199)

- (22) As previously mentioned, the notion of fostering a competitive spirit in their children is distressing to some people... Competition is occasionally, in my opinion, misinterpreted when it comes to child-rearing practices. In the best sense of the term, a competitive person is very much interested in achieving, in doing things well, and in having his output compare favorably with others. It is in that healthy sense that the children we have

studied have been competitive, and it is in that healthy spirit that I urge you to encourage your child in that regard. This encouragement is easily provided through attention to the child's achievement, and appropriate expressions of pride.

(*Ibid.*, p. 203)

In the above examples, focus-governing morphemes¹ such as *only* and *just* add further uniqueness and exhaustiveness to the psychological subjects which are at the same time the focal elements. For instance, in (17), it is emphatically asserted by the two cleft sentences that people's way of life is being more at risk than anything else.

Besides the function presented above, the following pragmatic functions are pointed out:

- They are
- i) to introduce a passage, and
 - ii) to reintroduce/recall the major topic of the article, a) by returning from a tangent, or b) for giving the next step for further discussion.

There are also minor functions, though the examples having those functions are rarely found, such as those of summing the main topic up² and of avoiding a direct assertion, which I will not take up here in this paper. Before continuing our observations, let us keep in our minds that those functions stated above are closely correlated.

The cleft sentence in (18) serves to introduce a passage, linking the reader with the material. The reader's attention may be directed to about 50 years ago. Sentence (19) effectively works on picking out the focus of attention at points where it might get lost, such as at the end of a tangent or at a turning in the article. In such cases, the psychological subject serves as a transition from the preceding context

¹ This term originally comes from Gussenhoven (1983, p. 381); besides *only* and *just*, it includes *also*, *even*, *purely* etc.

² I will give here just one example:

In regard to the topic of opening doors, you will find that babies are peculiarly handicapped with respect to rotational hand motions at this stage... It is manual skill that is beyond them. (White: 1975, p. 161)

to the following context: in the latter the clause after this focal element does play an important role in conveying to the reader the information used as a foundation of the next discussion. Those roles which the focus and the clause play are most clearly found in examples (20), (21) and (22), where the cleft sentences reintroduce the major topic of the article after fairly long background discussion, and give the next step for further development of the discussion. In (22), for instance, the first cleft sentence recalls the major topic in the reader's mind and emphasize it, and the second one serves as a key to the next discussion for which the clause is effectively used as a foundation. In fact, in the next paragraph, the author asserts that through this encouragement a child will try to achieve something, feel pride in his personal accomplishment, and finally the child will develop his social abilities.

From those observations above, we find that the focus (in other words, the psychological subject) in the cleft sentence serves as a link between the hearer/reader and the material, while the clause following it not only makes explicit the intended prominence of the focus but also serves as an informational foundation for further discussion or communication between the speaker/writer and the hearer/reader.

3.2. *There* Construction

Let us now turn to the pragmatic considerations of *there* constructions. In previous studies such as in Stockwell (1977), a *there* construction is pragmatically characterized as presentative. Along this line, I would like here to consider *there* as a "presentative signal", refer to NP after *be* as Subject NP and pick up the typical pragmatic functions of this construction as follows:

- i) Function of introducing new information (previously unshared expressions) into the discourse; to be more exact, into the addressee's consciousness.
- ii) Function of focusing (Subject NP is focused on).

These functions should not be considered independently, since they are closely correlated, just as the functions of a cleft construction are.

Now, we shall look into these functions through the following examples. Considering function i), we will find the most typical case of introducing new information when the speaker initiates the discourse, as shown in (23) and (24):

- (23) "You want to get to King's Cross Station, sir? It's very easy. There's bus every ten minutes from stop number four. The next bus is at five past nine, and...

(*Follow me*, p. 14)

- (24) There was the girl who threw herself out of the window, remember?
(Christie: *Orient Express*, p. 101)

When uttered, these sentences are actually performing the function of introducing Subject NP's as new information into addressee's consciousness. Furthermore, regardless of its syntactic form, Subject NP bears a kind of specificity which is compatible with the property of new information. As to Function ii), let us see the following pairs:

- (25) a) A dance party was held at the music school.
b) There's a dance party at the music school.
(26) a) Several students were absent in that class.
b) There were several students absent in that class.

In each pair, one might notice, the two sentences have the equivalent meaning, but the subject NP is more focused upon in sentence b). Since focusing rules are defined, for instance in Stockwell (1977, p. 157), as "introducing special marking into the surface structure to set off some element or elements as new or important," the above observation tells us that a *there* construction also plays the focusing role; that is, it functions to highlight its psychological subject NP as the focus.

4. Summary and Implication

The observations developed throughout this paper will be summarized briefly as follows:

- i) Syntactically, the surface configurations of a cleft and *there*

constructions are quite similar and both of them represent special constructions which can structurally mark their psychological subjects.

- ii) The properties and the functions of these constructions together with their psychological subjects are most appropriately observed from the pragmatic viewpoint. In the both constructions, the psychological subjects bear a new information (at least in the addressee's consciousness, it is new) and so they are characterized as the focus; in the pragmatic terms, they are supposed to be foregrounded, while the elements following the focus show informational background; they are backgrounded.

Although the detail properties and pragmatic functions of the two constructions are slightly different, I suppose their ultimate purpose may be the same: the both constructions aim at serving effectively for easing the communication process between the addresser and the addressee.

After all, in the study of languages, such pragmatic observations as above will lead us to the significant findings and therefore pragmatic considerations should not be separated from semantic and syntactic considerations. In future, on the basis of the study in this paper, I would like to make further investigation of English special constructions other than cleft and *there* constructions, always keeping in mind that the language is a means of communication.

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