

Preposing in English and Its Trigger*

Taeho Kim

(Pusan National University)

Kim, Taeho. 2012. Preposing in English and Its Trigger. *Linguistic Research* 29(2), 315-327. This study explores the preposing phenomenon in English from a discourse-functional perspective, and discusses what seems to cause a given sentential element to be placed in a position ahead of its original position. Unlike many previous studies on this well-known phenomenon, this study seeks to explain the phenomenon introducing the notions of ‘cognitive accessibility’ and ‘discourse relevance’, and suggests that a given entity is preposed due to its high cognitive accessibility and discourse relevance. More specifically, it argues that the syntactic structure of a given utterance would be determined by the information structure that a speaker chooses for the message to deliver. The information structure would be constructed based on the cognitive accessibility and discourse relevance of a given entity to the speaker’s consciousness at the time of utterance. In this study, the author takes postposing phenomenon in Korean as supporting evidence to account for the preposing phenomenon in English. (Pusan National University)

Keywords cognitive accessibility, consciousness, discourse relevance, focus, topic, preposing, postposing, information structure

1. Introduction

It is widely known that the unmarked word order of English is SVO (Subject + Verb + Object), as is shown in the examples below.¹

(1) My son (S) enjoyed (V) watching Toy Story 3 (O).

(2) I like apples, but I dislike pineapples.

In (1), the subject *My son* comes in a position preceding the verb *enjoy*, and the

* This study was supported by a 2-year Research Grant of Pusan National University. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments. All remaining errors are of course mine.

¹ In this study, the discussion on the word order is limited only to that of declarative types of sentences for its purpose, excluding those of other types of sentences.

object *watching ToyStory 3* appears in a position following the verb. Therefore, the word order is SVO. Likewise, the word order of the example (2) is SVO, which means that the subject comes before the verb, which comes before the object. Just like sentences in above examples, most sentences (or clauses) in English conform to the SVO word order, but not all English sentences comply with this unmarked or default word order. The following are examples where this default word order is not maintained.

- (3) Apples I like, but pineapples I dislike.
 (4) A: What sort of thing did your son enjoy?
 B: Watching Toy Story 3 my son enjoyed.
 (5) A: What is that for?
 B: Poor children.
 A: Pardon me?
 B: Poor children it is.

In (3), both of the objects *apples* and *pineapples* come before the subject *I*, but not after the verbs *like* and *dislike*, and thus the word order of both sentences does not comply with the canonical word order of English sentences. Similarly, the object *Watching Toy Story 3* is not placed in a position following the verb *enjoyed* but in a position preceding the subject *my son*, so it does not conform to the unmarked order in English. Likewise, the word order in (5) does not comply with the basic word order of English since the subject complement *Poor children* comes not after the verb *is* but before the subject *it*, resulting in the marked word order of SC+S+V. As is shown in these examples, when a certain sentential element is not placed in its usual position and is relocated to a position ahead of its usual position, it is said that the given element is preposed, leaving the remaining portion of the sentence intact. This well-known phenomenon in English is referred to as ‘preposing’, or ‘preposing construction’.² In fact, the possibility of optional divergence from the basic word order is a universal property of natural languages (Erteschik-Shir 2007:1).

The natural question to be raised from the above examples should be: When and why is a given sentential element moved from its canonical position? Thus far, many

² This phenomenon is sometimes called ‘postposing’ or ‘postposing constructions’, in that other elements are postposed into a later position.

studies have been done to account for this phenomenon (e.g., Birner and Ward 1998, Culicover 1999, Dryer 2011, Erteschik-Shir 2007, Prince 1981, among others); Some researches have tried to explain this phenomenon in purely syntactic perspective, employing the syntactic term ‘movement’ for their discussion. Others have accounted for the phenomenon from a pragmatic perspective alone, introducing two pragmatic notions ‘focus’ and ‘topic’ (e.g., Gundel 1999, Prince 1981, Ward and Prince 1991, among others). Still, others have attempted to explain the phenomenon from mixed views, incorporating the notions of ‘topic/focus phrases’ or ‘topic/focus features’ into their discussion of the syntactic structure of a sentence with a preposed element (e.g., Dryer 2011, Erteschik-Shir 2007, among others). Simply put, their analyses allow for a pragmatic trigger for a syntactic operation.

The goal of this study is to explore the preposing phenomenon in English from an empirical perspective, and its discussion about the phenomenon will be done focusing primarily on the pragmatic analysis of the phenomenon. Other approaches to the phenomenon, particularly a syntactic account for the phenomenon, will be ignored for the purpose of this study.

2. Information Structure

For a better understanding of the preposing phenomenon in English, it is necessary to discuss information structure in general as well as how information is normally structured within an utterance. It is generally accepted that there are two strong tendencies in the arrangement of information within an utterance when a speaker constructs a syntactic structure for a given utterance (Erteschik-Shir 2007, Maynard 1989, Gundel 1988, Shimojo 2005, among others). One tendency is often referred to as ‘given-before-new’ principle, in that old and predictable, information is placed before new, thus unpredictable, information when building information structure for a given utterance (Gundel 1988). The other tendency can be labeled as ‘important information first’ principle because important information is likely uttered before less important or unimportant information (Shimojo 2005, Simon 1989). The former way of arranging information in a sentence is viewed as ‘topicalization’, and the latter way of forming an information structure is called as ‘focus preposing’ (Ward 1988).

The notion of ‘topic’ is usually defined as a part of a clause or sentence that denotes what the sentence is about and it generally denotes given or presupposed information in terms of its information content. On the other hand, the term ‘focus’ is viewed as a way of singling out some particular elements of a sentence or an utterance as representing the most important new information (Reinhart 1981, Trask 1999:95-6). Given information is the information that is assumed or supplied by the speaker, while new information is that which is presented for the first time. Despite these definitions, it is sometimes pointed out that the definitions of ‘topic’ and ‘focus’ have never been clear enough, thus creating confusion, even among linguists who are leaders in the field (Trask 1999:96).

In terms of information status, old or given information is considered of little importance whereas new information is viewed as important. Therefore, it can be said that the ‘important information first’ principle is consistent with the arrangement of new information before old or given information. This way of arranging information conflicts with the ‘given-before-new’ principle, according to which given, and therefore unimportant, information comes before new, thus important, information. This suggests that the two pragmatic notions, ‘topic’ and ‘focus’, may not be as useful for the explanation of why a certain element in a sentence is likely preposed as many previous studies have pointed out.³

The two pragmatic notions of ‘topic’ and ‘focus’ seem to be related to the information structure of a given sentence, so it is not surprising that many studies have sought to account for the preposing phenomenon in English using these two pragmatic terms. However, as Kim (2011) suggested in his study of postposing constructions in Korean, they may not be as effective as originally thought for explaining when a given element is preposed and when it is not. That is to say, the pragmatic notions of ‘topic’ and ‘focus’ may not necessarily be triggers for the preposing of a certain sentential element in English. In the following section, why this is the case will be discussed in more detail.

³ Some state that the two principles are not in conflict because they are based on the different senses of importance (Kim 2011).

3. Pragmatic Factors as the Trigger for the Syntactic Operation?

As was discussed above, many studies have been done in the investigation of this well-known phenomenon, but these discussions have mostly focused on the structural properties of preposed entities themselves (e.g., Culicover 1999). This has left uncertainty as to when and why a certain sentential element would be preposed from its canonical position. On top of that, previous analyses of the phenomenon are somewhat imperfect in several ways. For instance, a purely syntactic analysis of the phenomenon accounts for the process of syntactic operation, as well as the structure after the syntactic operation, but it does not give us sufficient justification as to why a given entity has been proposed. This indicates that syntax alone cannot fully account for the preposing phenomenon in English, even though it may be useful to explain the structure after the syntactic operation.

In a discourse-pragmatic approach to the phenomenon, the two notions of ‘topic’ and ‘focus’ were introduced for the explanation of the phenomenon, vastly focusing on the functional aspects of preposed entities of a given sentence (e.g., Kim 2008, Lambrecht 1999, etc.). In this approach, they argue that a given entity in a sentence can be fronted to mark ‘topic’ or ‘focus’ which seems to be encoded in the entity. In other words, the preposed element, e.g., noun phrase, functions either as a ‘topic’ of the clause or as a ‘focus’ of the clause. Then, what is really the preposed noun phrase? Is it the ‘topic’ or the ‘focus’ of the clause? As was previously pointed out, the pragmatic term ‘topic’ is usually defined as a part of a clause that denotes a given or presupposed information, while the term ‘focus’ is defined as a way of singling out a particular element of a clause as representing the most important new information (Reinhart 1981, Trask 1999). Following are examples that illustrate the notions of ‘focus’ and ‘topic’ respectively.

- (6) a. Have you been to New York City?
 b. New York City I have been to. (Topic)
- (7) a. What did John do?
 b. The dishes he washed. (Focus)

In (6b), the noun phrase, ‘New York City’, was already mentioned in (6a), and

is thus old information, so it would be analyzed as a ‘topic’. The noun phrase, ‘the dishes’, in (7b) is however counted as a ‘focus’ because it has been newly introduced into the conversation by the speaker. At first glance, this analysis may appear plausible, but in fact it does not hold up well under further scrutiny since the two noun phrases in (6b) and (7b) are analyzed as ‘topic’ and ‘focus’ respectively, even though they appear in the same syntactic slot. In other words, the two pragmatic notions are in fact opposite to each other in terms of informational status of their referents, but they often hold the same syntactic position, although both do not occur in one slot at the same time. Since this is the case, it is difficult to see what differences really exist between them. Therefore, with these two notions, it would be difficult to provide a clear and reliable account for what actually triggers the preposing of a given NP in English. Furthermore, as Trask (1996:96) pointed out, the definitions of ‘topic’ and ‘focus’ themselves are not always clear, thus creating further confusion. Therefore, it is necessary for us to look for another way to pinpoint the true motivation for the preposing of an NP in English.

Preposing of a Noun Phrase in English is also referred to as either ‘topic topicalization’ or ‘focus topicalization’, depending on its informational status (Gundel 1988), or as ‘topicalization’ and ‘focus preposing’ (Ward 1988). Examples follow below.

- (8) a. Cashew nuts, I can’t afford. (Topicalization)
 b. Cashew nuts I think they’re called. (Focus Preposing)

From the syntactic point of view, ignoring the fact that the verb used in each example is different, the only difference between (8a) and (8b) seems to be the use and non-use of a punctuation mark, specifically a comma, after the preposed NP ‘cashew nuts’. The preposed NP ‘cashew nuts’ in (8a) is counted as ‘topicalization’ or ‘topic topicalization’ because of the comma used after the NP. However, the one in (8b) is analyzed as ‘focus preposing’ or ‘focus topicalization’, because no comma is used after the NP in the clause. Yet, is it plausible to define them as two different things, merely based on the presence or absence of the punctuation mark? It is in fact not sensible to take this as a basis for distinguishing one discourse-pragmatic function (i.e., ‘topicalization’) from another (i.e., ‘focus preposing’).

In addition, neither of the two sentences suggest why the preposed NP *cashew*

nuts has been shifted. For this reason, this study attempts to account for this phenomenon from a different perspective, using Kim's (2011) analysis of the postposing constructions in Korean. More specifically, this study claims that the information structure a speaker chooses determines the syntactic structure of a given utterance, and therefore a discourse-based approach should be taken for the better analysis of the preposing phenomenon of NPs. More importantly, it claims that the preposing phenomenon in English can be better explained with the notions of 'cognitive accessibility' and 'discourse relevance' than with those of 'topic' and 'focus', despite the fact that many previous studies have accounted for the phenomenon using the latter.

4. Semantics as the Trigger?

In the previous section we learned that although many previous studies accounted for the phenomenon using the two pragmatic terms, i.e., 'topic' and 'focus', these two terms do not really tell us why a certain NP is preposed. Therefore, in this section, we will look at the preposing phenomenon in English from a semantic perspective in order to see if a semantic factor plays a role in determining if a given NP is preposed. For this purpose, we performed a conversion test by turning a construction with a preposed NP into a construction without a preposed NP, as shown in (9) and (10) below.

- (9) I graduated from high school as an average student. My initiative didn't carry me any further than average. History_i I found ______i to be dry. Math courses_j I was never good at ______j. I enjoyed sciences. Football was my bag.⁴
- (10) I graduated from high school as an average student. My initiative didn't carry me any further than average. I found history to be dry. I was never good at math courses. I enjoyed sciences. Football was my bag.

In (9) above, the two NPs, 'history' and 'math courses' do not appear in their

⁴ This example is from Prince (1981:253).

canonical position, which shows that they have been relocated to the front for some reason. In order to test whether a semantic factor was involved in the relocation of the two NPs, the two sentences with a preposed NP, were transformed into the sentences without a preposed NP as in (10). Put more simply, unlike those in (9), the two NPs in (10) are placed in their canonical positions. With the sentences in (9) being compared with those in (10), it is clear that no semantic difference exists between sentences with a preposed NP and those without. Since there is no significant difference in the propositions of each example, it would be acceptable to say that the transformation test rules out semantic factors as a trigger for the preposing of NPs in English.

(11) Q: Have you been to New York city?

A: New York City I have been to.

B: I have been to New York City.

Similarly, in (11), no semantic or propositional difference is observed between responses A and B. Therefore, it is quite certain that semantics does not play its role in shifting an NP to the front. Then, what is it that really triggers the preposing of a given NP in English? In the following section, we will address this issue by introducing the notions of ‘cognitive accessibility’ and ‘discourse relevance’.

5. Cognitive Accessibility, Discourse Relevance and Preposing of NPs

Up until the last section, we have discussed the preposing phenomenon in English using the two pragmatic terms, ‘topic’ and ‘focus’, and we have learned that these two notions do not do much to explain why certain NPs were preposed in a sentence. We also learned from the transformation test that semantic factors had to be ruled out as the trigger for preposing NPs in English.

On the other hand, according to what was noted in previous sections, it is certain that a preposed NP can be a topic as well as a focus of a given sentence though, not functioning as both at the same time. This suggests that the two terms share some features, namely that they both refer to something that is directly relevant to

preceding utterances, and is thus cognitively accessible to the speaker at the time of utterance.⁵ Based on this notion, this study suggests that the reason a speaker selects a sentence construction involving a preposed entity over the one without a preposed element is that the referent of a preposed element is more cognitively accessible to the speaker than that of a non-preposed entity at the time of utterance.⁶ This way of thinking may seem to be consistent with the ‘important information first principle’, in that the more important information is generally placed earlier in an utterance, followed by the less accessible information; however, it is not. This is because the important information first principle does not give us an account as to why given information frequently appears before new information. We believe, however, that the two terms, ‘cognitive accessibility’ and ‘discourse relevance’, can more fully explain the preposing phenomenon because cognitively accessible information can be given information as well as new information. The following example shows speakers’ tendency of putting cognitively more accessible information ahead of cognitively less accessible information.

- (12) A₁: I graduated from high school as an average student. My initiative didn’t carry me any further than average.
 A₂: History_i I found ______i to be dry. Math courses_j; I was never good at ______j.
 A₃: I enjoyed sciences. Football was my bag.

In (12), the speaker begins an utterance by stating that his or her average academic performance in high school was not excellent, and continued to say that his performance at the beginning was just about the average. Then, the natural question to follow would be what made the speaker not go beyond an average student, and it should be an issue immediately relevant to the current statement as well as cognitively accessible to the speaker’s consciousness. This tendency motivates the speaker to place those NPs, i.e., *history* and *math courses*, before any

⁵ Similarly, it has been suggested that postposing phenomenon frequently observed in colloquial Korean could be better explained by discussing the shared feature between the two pragmatic notions, ‘topic’ and ‘focus’, than by discussing them in separate (Kim 2011).

⁶ In this study, the notion ‘accessible’ does not refer to relative accessibility of referents in discourse but conceptual or cognitive accessibility of a given part of an utterance in the speaker’s consciousness at the time of utterance.

other elements of the sentence, which has resulted in them being preposed. A similar tendency is also observed in Korean postposing, as is shown below.

- (13) A: *kyesokhayse kito-ø ha-ko iss-nun-de.*
 Continually prayer-ø do-conn be-prog-sem
 “(I) am praying continually.”
- B: *mace. ______i kito-lul nemwu an ha-ko iss-e, nay-ka_i.*
 Right. ______i prayer-acc too neg do-conn be-sem 1sg-nom
 “Right, I am not praying enough (these days).”⁷

In (13), the speaker A talks about his religious life saying that he keeps praying and the speaker B comments on his statement by comparing her religious life with his. The speaker B started her utterance with the contrastive part ‘not praying’ placed before the other parts of the sentence. In this conversation, the contrasting part, ‘not praying’, is considered as the information directly relevant to the whole proposition of the preceding utterance by the speaker A, and therefore, it would be cognitively very accessible information to the speaker B’s consciousness at the time of utterance.

- (14) A₁: I have a recurring dream in which,
 A₂: I can’t remember what I say.
 A₃: I usually wake up crying.
 A₄: This dream_i I’ve had ______i maybe three, four times.

Similarly, in (14), the speaker talks about the dream that has been recurring to him, and this recurring dream is thus be a discourse topic of the utterance that the speaker is currently engaged in.⁸ Therefore, it can be said that the object NP *this dream* in the utterance of A₄ is directly relevant to the current discourse topic, and in fact, would be cognitively most accessible information to the speaker’s consciousness when the speaker is about to make an utterance. According to the cognitively most accessible information first principle, when forming an

⁷ This example is excerpted from Kim (2011:235).

⁸ The notion ‘topic’ here does not refer to the pragmatic term that has been discussed in the previous sections, but it indicates the theme of the discourse that the speaker is engaged in.

informational structure for a given sentence, cognitively more accessible information is usually linearized first, followed by cognitively less accessible or inaccessible information. This tendency results in the sentence construction in which the object NP *this dream* is preposed, leaving the rest of the sentence left intact. The same principle can apply to the following question and answer pair below.

- (15) Q: Why is it so noisy on the second floor?
 A: They are listening to the television.
 B: #The television_i they're listening to ______i.

In (15) above, the question is about the noise upstairs, so the directly relevant topic would be the reason for the noise. In other words, *the television* itself should not be directly related to the question, but the reason for the noise on the second floor would be the information that is directly relevant and thus cognitively most accessible to the speaker's consciousness at the time of utterance. This explains why the object NP *the television* has not been preposed but appears in its usual position. As a matter of fact, the utterance would sound quite strange if the object NP were fronted as in answer B. The tendency for cognitively most accessible information to be linearized first in an utterance rules out the answer B as an acceptable response to the question. In contrast, the whole proposition in the second answer is directly related to the question, and it is cognitively most accessible to the speaker's consciousness at present. Therefore, it can be taken as an acceptable response to the question as in the answer A. The same reasoning can be applied to the following example.

- (16) Q: Do you want to see a movie?
 A: I have to walk the dog.
 B: #The dog_i I have to walk ______i.

Just like in example (15), the object NP *the dog* is not directly related to the question of addressee's wanting or not wanting to see a movie, but the whole proposition of the answer A. Meaning, the NP is directly related to the question and is thus the most cognitively accessible information. Not surprisingly, this leaves the second answer B as a very strange answer, as is marked in (16).

6. Conclusion

This study explores the preposing phenomenon in English from several different perspectives in order to pinpoint the trigger for the preposing of a given NP, focusing particularly on the notions of ‘cognitive accessibility’ and ‘discourse relevance’. In this study, we find that the information structure a speaker chooses will determine the syntactic structure that is used. This suggests that the preposing phenomenon in English can be explained from a syntax-discourse interfaced perspective. While the preposed NPs may be a ‘topic’ or a ‘focus’ of a given utterance, these two pragmatic terms are not useful as some studies claim in justifying why a given sentential element has been preposed. Therefore, this study suggests that the notions of ‘cognitive accessibility’ and ‘discourse relevance’ can better account for the preposing phenomenon in English in that they hint at a reason why a given sentential element is preposed. However, this study has some shortcomings because it lacks a detailed discussion of how the two terms ‘cognitive accessibility’ and ‘discourse relevance’ can be measured and represented quantifiably. Therefore, future research on this phenomenon may be focused on defining the notions of ‘cognitive accessibility’ and ‘discourse relevance’ and furthering the research with more quantifiable empirical data and statistical analysis of the phenomenon.

References

- Birner, Betty J., and Gregory Ward. 1998. *Information Status and Noncanonical Word Order in English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Dryer, Matthew. 2011. *Three types of noun phrases preposing in English*. Ms., State University of New York at Buffalo.
- Erteschik-Shir, Nomi. 2007. *Information Structure: The Syntax-Discourse Interface*. Oxford University Press.
- Gundel, Jeanette K. 1988. *The Role of Topic and Comment in Linguistic Theory*. New York: Garland.
- Gundel, Jeanette K. 1999. On different kinds of focus. In P. Bosch and R. van der Sandt, eds., *Focus: Linguistic, Cognitive, and Computational Perspectives*, 293-305. Cambridge University Press.

- Jackendoff, Ray S. 1972. *Semantic Interpretation in Generative Grammar*. Cambridge, MA: MIT press.
- Kim, Taeho. 2008. *Subject and object markings in conversational Korean*. Ph.D. thesis. State University of New York at Buffalo.
- Kim, Taeho. 2011. An empirical study of postposing constructions in Korean. *Eneyenkwa 'Linguistic Research'* 28(1), 223-238.
- Maynard, Senko K. 1989. *Japanese Conversation: Self-contextualization through Structure and Interactional Management*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Polinsky, Maria. 1999. Review of Information Structure and Sentence Form, by Knud Lambrecht. *Language* 75: 567-582.
- Prince, Ellen F. 1981. Topicalization, Focus-Movement, and Yiddish-Movement. In Dan Alford et al, eds., *Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, 249-264.
- Prince, Ellen F. 1984. Topicalization and left-dislocation: a functional analysis. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 433: 213-225.
- Prince, Ellen F. 1997. On the functions of left-dislocation in English discourse. In Akio Kamio, ed., *Directions in Functional Linguistics*, pp. 117-143. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Shimojo, Mitsuaki. 2005. *Argument encoding in Japanese conversation*. Palgrave: New York.
- Simon, Mutsuko. 1989. *An analysis of the postposing construction in Japanese*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan.
- Trask, Robert L. 1999. *Key Concepts in Language and Linguistics*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ward, Gregory L. 1988. *The Semantics and Pragmatics of Preposing*. New York: Garland.
- Ward, Gregory L. and Ellen F. Prince. 1991. On the topicalization of indefinite NPs. *Journal of Pragmatics* 16: 167-177.

Taeho Kim

Dept. of Language and Information, College of Humanities
 Pusan National University
 63 Busandaehak-ro, Geumjeong-gu
 Busan 609-735, Korea
 Tel: +82-51-510-2037 Fax: +82-51-582-0572
 E-mail: taehokim@pusan.ac.kr

Received: 2012. 07. 13

Revised: 2012. 08. 19

Accepted: 2012. 08. 20