

THE FUNCTION OF 'SUBJECT' IN LOCATIVE  
INVERSION CONSTRUCTIONS IN ENGLISH

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IT HAS RECENTLY BEEN PROPOSED that the preposed constituent in so-called 'locative inversion' structures such as (1) below is in fact the syntactic subject of the clause (cf. Bresnan & Kanerva 1992:119-21; Bresnan 1994:115):

(1) Here comes trouble.

Various kinds of syntactic evidence are used to support this claim, such as Heavy-NP-Shift, subject raising, tag formation and constraints on subject extraction (cf. Bresnan & Kanerva 1992:120-21), as well as the putatively topicalized status of the preposed NP (Bresnan 1994:92). To be fair to Bresnan, it should be pointed out that in fact she makes a distinction between three different kinds of subjects in her tri-level model of grammar. On the level of argument structure, she distinguishes a logical subject, which in locative inversion constructions corresponds to the role *THEME* (i.e., that of which location or change of location is predicated). The *THEME* role is expressed by the postposed element *trouble* in (1) above. On the level of grammatical structure, where functional syntactic relations and attributes are established, she distinguishes a grammatical subject, which is associated with the discourse role of topic as well as with certain syntactic properties such as raising and extraction. The grammatical or syntactic subject in (1) corresponds to the preposed locative adverbial *here*. Thirdly, on the level of categorial structure, which has to do with the surface positions and forms of constituents, Bresnan speaks of a 'structural subject'. Sentence (1) above has no structural subject, as there is no element with the requisite NP category in the subject position to the left of the VP, this position being occupied by the locative prepositional phrase.

I wish to argue in this paper that the analysis described above is based on an inadequate definition of the function of subject on all three levels. The latter cannot be defined as a universal category as Bresnan defines it, since linguistic categories involve a stable correspondence between a meaning and a linguistic sign. This immediately excludes both Bresnan's argument structure and her categorial structure as levels on which linguistic categories can be defined. The former is concerned exclusively with referential roles in complete disregard for how they are expressed by linguistic signs; the latter is concerned merely with the form and

position of the sign in complete disregard of the meaning. This leaves the functional or grammatical structure, which is defined as corresponding to 'functional syntactic relations and attributes' such as person, number, gender, case, subject raising and subject extraction (Bresnan 1994:105). This level is however also defined exclusively in terms of concepts and relations which are 'inner' or 'covert' (Bresnan 1994:74), which means that they have no correlation with the way they are expressed by linguistic signs in a given language. On the contrary, if there is such a thing as a linguistic category of subject, it must first of all exist in a particular language and secondly it must involve a stable correspondence between sign and meaning in that language. I will now attempt to show that this is the case for English.

The term 'subject' will be used here to refer a word which stands in a relation to a finite verb such that:

- (a) the word in question denotes the 'VERBING ENTITY' in the event expressed by the verb (thus *John* denotes the 'eating entity' in the sentence *John ate the custard*)
- (b) the word in question has, or is replaceable by, one of the following forms: *I, you, he, she, it, we, they*
- (c) if the verb is in the indicative mood, it shows third-person vs. non-third-person agreement (-s vs.  $\emptyset$ ); if the verb is *be*, it shows first (*am*), third (*is*) or plural (*are*) agreement.

What justifies taking these as defining a linguistic category in English is that they involve a stable correlation between meaning and linguistic sign: if one has (b) and (c) on the level of the sign, one always observes (a) on the level of the meaning. It should be noted that (a) is defined in a more general way than the thematic role of AGENT, which does not correspond to the semantic status of the subject *John* in a sentence such as *John is tall* (cf. Keenan 1987:106). It is nonetheless obvious that *John* is represented as being tall by such an utterance, and so it meets the more general semantic criterion proposed here as having a correspondence to the linguistic sign in English.

If the above definition of subject as a linguistic category is applied to the proposed PP in locative inversion constructions which Bresnan claims to be the grammatical subject, it can be seen that this constituent fails to meet the definitory criteria for being an English subject on any count. Firstly, on the level of its meaning relation to the verb, it does not correspond to the VERBING ENTITY at all: in (1) above *here* is not understood to denote that which is coming, the latter being designated rather by the postposed noun. Second, the preposed prepositional phrase or adverbial is not replaceable by a subject pronoun (*\*It comes trouble*). Nor is the third criterion applicable either—subject-verb agreement; as pointed out by Schachter (1992:107) the verb in a locative inversion construction agrees with the postposed NP and not with the locative expression:

- (2) a In the swamp was / \*were found a child.
- b In the swamp were / \*was found two children.

The conclusion is clear: the locative expression is in no way a subject. The latter corresponds rather to the postposed NP.

The main reason why Bresnan proposes that the postposed NP is not the subject in locative constructions is because it is associated with the discourse function of focus. These constructions are seen as having 'a special discourse function of presentational focus... in which the referent of the inverted subject [sic] is introduced on the scene' (1990:13). Within this discourse structure, the preposed locative has the role of topic—it sets the scene and therefore constitutes presupposed information—while the postposed NP introduces an entity onto this scene, and so represents the new information or focus. Although I can agree with the essence of this view as to the information structure of locative inversions, the assumption that a subject cannot function as a focus seems entirely unwarranted. As Birner's work on inversion suggests, discourse-familiarity correlates not with subjecthood but rather with relative sentence position, at least in canonical word order and inverted constructions, with discourse-old information tending to precede discourse-new information (1996:6, 141). Even here, however, caution must be exercised, as it has been recognized since Jespersen's times (1924:145) that in English, even in sentences with so-called canonical word order, first position does not always correspond to the topic, as shown by (3):

- (3) – *Who* said it?
- *Peter* said it.

Here the subject *Peter* occupies first position and nevertheless in this context provides new information. This shows that the packaging of information in a text is to a certain extent independent of the grammatical relations holding between the constituents making up the text. If the non-isomorphic nature of information structure and grammatical structure is recognized, the fact that the subject of a locative inversion construction has the information function of focus rather than topic is no impediment to its being a grammatical subject at all.

The two levels are not completely autonomous of one another however and there are certain cases where the presence of a grammatical subject in a locative inversion construction does appear problematic, with the possibility of a change in the grammatical relations between the constituents of the sentence being due to the peculiar discourse function of this construction. Birner (1996:150) observed that in 1% of the utterances in her corpus of inversions (21 occurrences out of 1778) the verb does not agree with the postposed NP but rather occurs in the third person singular form even when the postposed phrase is plural. This is illustrated in (4) and (5):

- (4) The office isn't so big but pretty crowded. Usual things, ledgers, files and docket books. On the wall is two Winchester rifles, a Savage high-powered weapon and a shotgun.

(Birner 1996:14)

- (5) On the title page of this report of this 'Grossaktion', as the Germans called it, *was inscribed* in decorative Gothic lettering the words 'there are no more Jewish dwellings in Warsaw'.

(Hartvigson & Jakobsen 1974:60)

Also associated with these uses involving lack of verbal agreement is the occurrence of the common case form of the pronoun, as noted by Lambrecht (1994:42) regarding (6) and by Bresnan (1994:86) regarding (7):

- (6) Look, here's me!

- (7) Among the guests of honor was sitting her. [pointing]

The criteria proposed here for determining English subjecthood lead to the conclusion that the postposed nominal is not the subject in these cases: although the semantic criterion is met, neither of the criteria on the level of the sign are satisfied.

This indeed is the analysis which I wish to defend. I will submit that in sentences (4)–(7) what we have in fact is a subjectless presentational construction. This construction is composed of three parts:

- (a) a locative expression which sets a scene or defines a situation
- (b) a verb whose primary function is to denote the existence or appearance of some entity on this scene or in this situation
- (c) a nominal which provides the identification of the entity situated on the scene.

Given the way the speaker puts together the notions making up this construction, the verb can be conceived as merely evoking the existence/appearance of some yet to be identified entity on the scene set by the preposed locative. This would explain why in some cases it is conjugated in the third person singular regardless of the person and number of the postposed NP. Just as the verb is conceived independently of what could have been its subject, so also the nominal is conceived independently of what could have been its verbal predicate. As a consequence, one finds the same pronominal forms here as in uses where the pronoun is completely independent of any relation to a verb such as (8):

- (8) – Who ate all the cookies?  
– Me.

This brings out the tight symbiotic relationship which exists between a verb and its subject in English, whereby the form of the verb shows that its mental genesis is based on the person/number of the subject, and the form of the subject shows that its mental genesis takes into account its role with respect to the verb. The nature of the locative inversion construction causes this symbiosis to be broken in a certain number of cases, with the verb being thought independently of the postposed NP and the latter being thought independently of the verb. Since the breaking of this relationship is signified by the linguistic sign in English, we are justified in sustaining that the postposed NP in these cases no longer corresponds to the linguistic category of English subject.

To show that these considerations can be extended to other constructions, I would like to end this paper by taking a cursory look at so-called existential-*there* sentences. What is noteworthy here is the fact that, particularly in colloquial English, we find the same tendency to have no verbal agreement in *there*-sentences as was observed with locative inversion, as pointed out by Quirk et al. (1985:1405):

- (9) There's some people in the waiting room.

Moreover, when pronominal forms are used, they occur in the independent form, as in the 'list use' of *there*-sentences, which allow definite NPs, as illustrated by Rando and Napoli's (1978:308) examples:

- (10) A. My God! How many people know about this?  
B. There's me and there's you. That's all.

- (11) A. I don't have any friends.  
B. Oh, don't be silly! There's John and me and Susan and Peggy...

These facts suggest that the existential-*there* construction is also often conceived as a subjectless presentational structure. This would provide a further piece of evidence against analyzing *there* in its existential use as the subject of the sentence even in cases where it appears to command verbal agreement, being used in the third person singular form as in (9)–(11). In actual fact, as we have seen occurs in certain locative inversion constructions, the verb here is conceived independently of the postposed NP as merely evoking the existence of some yet to be identified entity in the locus evoked by *there*, which explains its occurrence in the third person singular.

Of course, there still remain problems to be addressed with respect to this analysis of existential *there*, such as its inverting with the verb in interrogative utterances.

Nevertheless, the views presented here seem capable of both explaining the curious parallels between locative inversion and existential-*there* constructions and accounting for the confusion surrounding the identification of the subject with both constructions as well.

The approach taken here has been based on a definition of 'subject' as a category involving a correlation between meaning and linguistic sign. That is why I have not used the term 'subject' in the cases where this correlation is not observed, such as (4)–(7) and (9)–(11) above. I am aware that some analysts would propose to treat the postposed NPs in these cases as subjects which do not exhibit all the features typical of this function. However, this amounts to adopting a purely notional definition of this category which abstracts away from the bond between meaning and sign. The term 'subject' itself makes it easy to be led into this temptation: it is applied to a wide variety of things in various languages, as shown by Keenan (1987). If this term is to be used as a linguistic rather than a logical category however, it must be defined within the framework of each natural language as a stable correlation between meaning and linguistic sign. This allows one to see what a given language treats as different and what it treats as the same. The observations made in this paper show that, outside of the information-packaging function of topicality, English treats the preposed element *here* in (1) above completely differently from that in *Here is fine, if you want a place to sit*. In the latter case the preposed element shows a correlation between the semantic criterion of being represented as 'being fine' and the semiological criteria of corresponding to a subject pronoun and commanding verbal agreement, and consequently satisfies the definition for being a subject in English. Abstracting away from the semiological criteria for subjecthood on the other hand would even license calling the possessive *his* in *his arrival* a subject. While the problem which this type of definition of subjecthood poses is perhaps less obvious with locative inversions, I hope to have shown that the semiology is essential for determining how the grammatical relations are established in this construction as well.

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