

## TOWARDS A COMMUNICATIVE ENGLISH GRAMMAR (1)

Itsuro INAGE

### **O. Introduction**

For a long period of time it has been suggested that the conventional or traditional method of presenting English grammar in terms of structure has a certain drawback. In teaching and learning the English language in Japan, studying grammar makes most sense if we start with the question, 'How can we use grammar to communicate in English?' We are more interested in the uses of grammar, rather than in the description of English grammatical structures. We need to establish a new perspective of English grammar, which relates grammatical structures systematically to meanings, uses and situations. In other words, we have to emphasize the communicative aspects of English grammar. In this way, we will be able to improve and extend the range of our communicative skills in the English language.

In this article, the two basic discourse principles will be reviewed; the Principle of End-Focus and the Principle of End-Weight. I believe these two discourse principles are really helpful for learners to comprehend and produce basic English sentences. First, we are going to review what the information structure means. Second, I would like to demonstrate how we can analyze English sentences in terms of information structure. Third, we are going to consider how we can apply these basic notions to analyzing teaching materials for Japanese EFL students.

### **1. Information Structure**

#### **1.1. Old Information and New Information**

First of all, it seems very significant to try to answer the simple questions "How do you read aloud the sentence below?" or "How do you interpret the meaning of sentence (1)?"

(1) The boy painted the fence yesterday.

In terms of the traditional perspective, the grammatical explanation would be that 'the boy' is the grammatical subject, 'painted' the predicate verb, 'the fence' the grammatical object of the verb 'painted' and 'yesterday' the adjunct (adverbial modifier). This answer might be correct only if we consider the logical meaning, or to be more precise, the cognitive meaning of sentence (1). However, if we consider the context of situation in which this sentence (1) is uttered, we would have much more difficulty in answering the simple questions above.

In terms of contextual meaning, sentence (1) can have at least five different meanings, that is, the sentence can be the answer to five different questions as shown below :

- (2) a. When did the boy paint the fence ?
- b. Did the boy paint the fence this morning ?
- (3) a. What did the boy paint yesterday ?
- b. Did the boy paint the gate yesterday ?
- (4) a. What did the boy do to the fence yesterday ?
- b. Did the boy repair the fence yesterday ?
- (5) a. Who painted the fence yesterday ?
- b. Did the girl paint the fence yesterday ?
- (6) What happened ?

If sentence (1) is the answer to the questions under (2), the word 'yesterday,' which is in the sentence-final position, should be stressed the most. This pattern is the most unmarked or usual case. If sentence (1) is used as the answer to the questions under (3), the word 'fence' should be stressed the most. If sentence (1) is used as the answer to the questions under (4), we should give the strongest stress to the word 'painted.' If sentence (1) is used as the answer to the questions under (5), the word 'boy,' which is in the sentence-initial position, should be stressed the most. Furthermore, in a rare case, sentence (1) can be used as the answer to (6). In this case, every content word (*boy, painted, fence, yesterday*) should be stressed.

In general, the elements of a sentence can be divided into two groups ; old information and new information.<sup>1</sup> In examples (7a) to (7e)

the words in capital *Italics* represent new information and the other parts represent old information :

- (7) a. The boy painted the fence *YESTERDAY*.  
 b. The boy painted *THE FENCE* yesterday.  
 c. The boy *PAINTED* the fence yesterday.  
 d. *THE BOY* painted the fence yesterday.  
 e. *THE BOY PAINTED THE FENCE YRETERDAY*.

The basic definition of 'old information' and 'new information' is stated below :<sup>2</sup>

- (8) Old Information : the information already supplied by context  
 (perhaps by a preceding part of the discourse)

New Information : the information which has not been prepared for  
 by a preceding part of the discourse<sup>3</sup>

What is important is that this communicative aspect of the English language actually contributes to the presentation of the content of a clause in one particular order rather than another.

### 1.2. Information Focus

In the English language, there is a tendency to place new information towards the end of a clause or a sentence. This tendency is widely called the "Principle of End-Focus." Usually the lexical item which carries the new information is normally signalled by an intonational nucleus, an item that is stressed most in a clause or a sentence.

- (9) Principle of End-Focus (PEF) : Place new information towards the end of the clause<sup>4</sup>

To be more general, English intonation is normally realized in tone units consisting of a sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables. The peak of the greatest prominence is called the "nucleus" of the tone unit. This nucleus is the 'information focus' of the clause or the sentence, as examples (10) to (12) show (indicated in boldface capital letters) :

- (10) We're going to the **RACES**.  
 (11) It's the address he sent the **LETTER** to.  
 (12) She was looking **HAPPY** tonight.

In view of this principle, let us consider the following examples :

- (13) a. John gave her the book.  
       b. \*John gave a girl the book.
- (14) a. John sent her a book.  
       b. \*John sent Mary it.
- (15) a. Cathy gave it to the dog.  
       b. \*Cathy gave the dog it.

The examples (13b), (14b), and (15b) are unacceptable because they violate the Principle of End-Focus. In (13b), for instance, the indefinite noun phrase (NP), 'a girl', represents new information and the definite NP, 'the book', represents old information. Therefore, the indefinite NP, 'a girl', has to be put towards the end of the sentence. But actually the order is reversed and this word order violates the Principle of End-Focus.

The English language organizes spoken messages into units of information, signalled by intonation. Each intonation unit represents a unit of information, and the place where the nucleus falls is the focus of information. Moreover, information units vary according to various factors, such as required degree of emphasis, complexity of grammatical units, speed of utterance, and so on. Roughly speaking, if the length of the sentence goes beyond a certain point, say around 10 words or so, it would be difficult to avoid breaking the clause into two, or even more, information units. The examples (16) to (21) show a variety of information units:

- (16) We spent our holiday in **WALES**.
- (17) The year before **LAST**,/we spent our holiday in **WALES**.
- (18) The **JAPANESE**,/whose industry is well **KNOWN**,/have recently broken all **EXPORT** records.
- (19) **MARY**,/are you **LEAVENG**?
- (20) What we **WANT**/is plenty of **RAIN**.
- (21) He opened the **DOOR**/and walked straight **IN**.

### 1.3. Contrastive Stress

First, let us consider the dialogue between A and B in (22):

- (22) A: Why haven't you had a bath?  
       B: I **HAVE** had a bath.

B's utterance shows the focus can be placed on the operator, that is, the

auxiliary verb 'have' here. This pattern often has the function of signalling contrast between a positive or negative meaning. In (22), Speaker A thinks or presupposes that Speaker B hasn't had a bath yet and asks, 'Why haven't you had a bath?' But actually Speaker B has already had a bath, contrary to Speaker A's presupposition. Therefore, the most prominent stress is put on the auxiliary verb 'have.' Examples (23) to (28) below show the similar patterns of 'contrastive stress':

(23) A : Look for your shoes.

B : I **AM** looking for them.

(24) So you **DID** go to the concert this evening? (I thought you might, but...)

(25) But I **DO** think you're a good cook. (...even if you imagine I don't)

(26) The opinion polls **MAY** be right. (but I suspect they're not)

(27) My purse **OUGHT** to be here. (but it probably isn't)

(28) **DYLAN** Thomas was born in 1914. (not **EDWARD** Thomas)

Furthermore, examples (29) to (32) show that function words, which would normally have no stress, can have 'contrastive' stress, representing contrastive meaning :

(29) We live in **THIS** house. (not **THAT** one)

(30) I put them **ON** the bed. (not **UNDER** it)

(31) Who are you working **FOR**? (not **WITH**)

(32) He was speaking to **ME**. (not to **YOU**)

#### 1.4. End-Weight

Thirdly, there is another tendency in English to reserve the sentence final position for the more complex parts of a clause or sentence. This tendency or rule is generally called the "Principle of End-Weight" :

(33) Principle of End-Weight (PEW) : Reserve the sentence final position for more complex parts of the clause or sentence<sup>5</sup>

In view of this principle, let us consider the examples (34) to (36) :

(34) a. I called up *the man who left*.

b. \*I called *the man who left up*.

(35) a. I consider him *a fool*.

b. \*I consider *a fool* him.

- (36) a. He claims he can make her *very happy*.  
 b. \*He claims he can make *very happy* her.

All the (b) sentences in the examples above are unacceptable because these examples violate the Principle of End-Weight. In (34 b), for instance, a more complex NP, *the man who left*, occurs before the particle *up*, hence the sentence becomes unacceptable. These examples show that the Principle of End-Weight, together with the Principle of End-Focus, actually plays a significant role in the communicative aspects of English grammar.

Lastly, let us consider some more marginal examples. In the English language, there is a group of predicates called 'factive' predicates.<sup>6</sup> The factive verbs have a special semantic feature. The verb 'regret' in (37) below, for instance, presupposes that the semantic content of its complement is true. To be more concrete, in (37) the subject *John* believes the content of object *that*-clause (*that his mother mailed the letter*) is true. Therefore, the content of *that*-clause usually represents old information, rather than new information:

- (37) John regretted that his mother mailed the letter.  
 (38) It is strange that John mailed the letter.

Furthermore, let us consider the following examples:

- (39) a. A girl came into the room.  
 b. A haze hovered over the prospect.  
 c. A fly settled on his hair.

In normal cases, an indefinite noun phrase, that is, a phrase in the form of the indefinite article (a/an) + a noun phrase, indicates new information. This noun phrase would normally be placed near the final position of a sentence. But when the indefinite noun phrase is used with 'verbs of appearance,' as in (39), the indefinite noun phrase is usually placed in the sentence-initial position. Here, the NP represents new information.

## 2. Information Structure and Teaching Materials

In this section, let us take a brief look at how we should apply this communicative aspect of grammar to English language teaching, especially in the analysis of teaching materials. First, let us compare the two passages (40 a), (40 b) below:<sup>7</sup>

- (40) a. The four black horses pulled a golden chariot, and in the golden chariot stood *a great – bearded king*. In his right hand he carried a key, and in his left hand he shook the reins furiously. This was Pluto, King of the Caves and Caverns, King of the world Underground, god of the Underworld.
- b. The horses pulled a golden chariot, and in the chariot stood a great king *with a black beard*. This was Pluto, King of the Underworld.

The passage (40 b) is from a certain senior–high textbook, with passage (40 a) being its original version. In (40 a), the prepositional phrase, *in the golden chariot*, is moved leftward (preposed) from its original clause final position. This process can be seen as a stylistic effort to put ‘information focus’ on the indefinite NP, *a king*. In (40 b), however, the NP is rewritten as *a great king with a black beard*. In this form of expression, the information focus would naturally fall on the part *a black beard*, not on the indefinite NP, *a king*. This rewriting results in an inappropriate flow of information, because the NP *a king* is introduced into this passage for the first time. Therefore, the NP *a king* should have much more focus to be put on. When we analyze a passage in terms of information structure, we recognize that this type of rewriting has no validity at all.

Similarly, we can also identify the difference in information focus between (41 a) and (41 b) below : <sup>8</sup>

- (41) a. Whatever Freud learned, he reported *to other doctors*. Many of them were greatly upset by his discoveries.
- b. Freud reported to other doctors *everything that he learned from his treatments*. Many of them were shocked by his discoveries.

In (41 a), the information focus is placed on the prepositional phrase, *to other doctors*. On the contrary in (41 b), the focus is placed on the clause *everything that he learned from his treatments*. Since what Freud learned is mentioned in the preceding context, there would be little reason to put information focus on *that*-clause. Therefore, our analysis is that the original version (41 a) has a more natural word order than (41 b).

Furthermore, let us consider the following examples :

- (42) a. John gave the girl a book.





companies and shipping offices. And banks, of course.

- (2) You work here in England. There's the BBC. It wants people to broadcast in foreign languages and also to listen to what other countries are saying. Translators are needed by many kinds of companies. And banks, of course.

In the passage (1), the fourth (and last) sentence is in a passive form and therefore the principles of End-Focus and End-Weight seem to function efficiently; the weightiness of the *by*-phrase in the passage enables a deleted form of the phrase *banks, of course to* be interpreted as *translators are needed by (banks, of course)*. Compared with the weightiness of this *by*-phrase in the original passage, the *by*-phrase in passage (2) is not long enough, or weighty enough. In passage (2), it would be quite doubtful whether the element, *banks, of course*, can be understood as a passive sentence by the readers with such easiness as a passive interpretation can be done in passage (1). Therefore, this type of rewriting seems to be quite unnatural in terms of the information structure of the passage.

#### 4. Summary

In this short article, we have seen that there are two significant communicative principles in the English language; the Principle of End-Focus and the Principle of End-Weight. The principle of End-Focus requires that the new or the most important idea in a piece of information should be placed towards the end of a clause or a sentence, where in speech the nucleus of tone unit normally falls. The Principle of End-Weight requires that the more weighty part or parts of a sentence should be placed towards the end of a sentence, otherwise the sentence sounds awkward and unbalanced. The weight of an element can be defined in terms of the length of the expression (the number of lexical items) or in terms of grammatical complexity.

In the English language, these two principles are considered to be applied not just to a single piece of information, but to a whole sentence containing many pieces of information. This is why a sentence generally become more effective when the main point is saved up towards the end of a sentence. These principles certainly play important roles in discourse

grammar and therefore constitute a major part of the communicative ability in the English language.

### Notes

\*I wish to express my gratitude to Michael—Christopher Koji Fox, who kindly acted as an informant and corrected stylistic errors. Needless to say, responsibility for remaining inadequacies is my own.

<sup>1</sup>Note that we have to be very careful about “old/new” information dichotomy. First, the “old/new” distinction does not signify an ‘absolute’ value, but rather than ‘relative’ value. Second, the distinction is the one assumed by a speaker/writer or by a preceding discourse.

<sup>2</sup>Lambrecht (1994 : 45) describes as follows :

“Old information is the sum of ‘knowledge’ evoked in a sentence which a speaker assumes to be already available in the hearer’s mind at the time of utterance. New information is the one which a speaker assumes is added to an already existing stock of knowledge in hearer’s mind.”

<sup>3</sup>Rochmont (1986 : 47) makes an attempt to explain the information structure of a sentence by using the notion ‘c-construable.’ He stipulates that an expression E is ‘c-construable’ in a discourse if E has a semantic antecedent in the discourse. This implies that a given phrase is ‘new information’ if, and only if, it is not c-construable. For further discussion, see Rochemont (1986).

<sup>4</sup>See Quirk et al. (1985 : 1357).

<sup>5</sup>See Quirk et al. (1985 : 1362).

<sup>6</sup>For further information, see Kiparsky and Kiparsky (1970).

<sup>7</sup>This passage is from *Unicorn English Reading Course IIB*, Tokyo : Bun—Eido, 1982.

<sup>8</sup>This passage is from “Sigmund Freud” in *Highroad to English IIB*, Tokyo : Sanseido, 1983.

<sup>9</sup>This type of re-ordering is called “Heavy NP Shift.” This operation, however, does not apply to all kinds of clause types. SVOO patterns, for instance, always block the re-ordering as in the followings :

- (i) a. I gave her the chocolate.  
 b. \*I gave the chocolate the girl who I saw for the first time.
- (ii) a. I promised him the reward.  
 b. \*I promised the reward the man who I saw for the first time.

<sup>10</sup>This passage is from *Highroad to English I*, Tokyo : Sanseido, 1986.

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