Non-canonical Word Order and Its Discourse Functions in English Fairy Tales

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Abstract: What is noticeable is that in English, there exist a variety of expressions to convey a given proposition. Why would the English language provide the speaker with so many syntactic options for saying what amounts to the same thing? Drawing lessons from previous studies, this research found that the main reason of the phenomenon is that multiple choices allow the speaker to mark the information status of different constituents that make up the sentence. By altering the world order of the proposition, the speaker could provide the hearer with an inference of which part of the information is given and which part is new, so that the hearer could understand and follow the speaker more easily. Among so many different syntactic ways of expressing a given proposition, non-canonical constructions have caught researchers' eyes for years due to its function of increasing discourse coherence while communicating and its significance in meeting the immediate communication needs. Therefore, this paper specializes in three typical non-canonical utterances, locative inversion, there insertion and left dislocation, with instances selected from a series of fairy tales to further explore how they achieve coherent function and help the hearer or the reader follow the story easily.

1. Introduction

It has been long known that there are a number of ways available for English speakers to express a given proposition, which assume the same meaning but completely different information structure (IS). As many previous relevant researches show, the main method that speakers use to build distinct IS is to alter the ordering of words so as to structure the information they are trying to express. Therefore, it is said that these various specific forms speakers employ to establish their utterance "arise from the need to meet the communicative demands of a particular context or discourse" [4], with the purpose of fitting information into the hearer's way of thinking.

Non-canonical syntactic structures is one of the essential ways of marking inter sentential and intrasentential information relationships. Despite non-canonical-word-order constructions amount to the corresponding canonical utterances in terms of expressing truth values, they differ greatly in discourse context. That is, different from canonical structures, non-canonical expressions "frequently serve aninformation-structuring purpose" [1]. And it is the existence of informational

relationships among sentences that contributes to the coherence of a discourse. What is notable is that utterances formed in a coherent way are much easier for the hearer to follow than incoherent ones, for it allows the hearer to track the given information and infer the informational status of each constituent that makes up a proposition when communicating by being clearly aware of what is new and what is linked to the prior discourse. Therefore, there are strong reasons to believe that non-canonical constructions preserve discourse coherence, which, in turn, facilitate the hearer's processing of information.

And the convenience provided by non-canonical structures in terms of discourse coherence is primarily based on a "given/new" principle. Firstly, how to define the notions of given and new information. Today, in this respect, scholars mainly adopt the theory proposed by Ellen in 1992. Ellen (1992) put forward the concepts of, at one level, discourse-old and discourse-new information, at another level, hearer-old and hearer-new information. Discourse-old information refers to context that has been mentioned or evoked in prior discourse, while discourse-new information is which has not been called forth previously. Hearer-old information is what the hearer has known, regardless of whether it has been mentioned in previous utterances or not, whereas hearer-new information is that which is assumed to be unknown for the hearer. And many languages, such as English, tend to place what is assumed to be old before what is assumed to be new in a sentence. In this way, the speaker could consolidate the informational link among utterances, in an effort to simplify information processing of the hearer.

What this paper focuses on is how speakers use non-canonical sentence positions to serve coherence and facilitate the processing of the hearer on the basis of "given/new" principle, by recruiting vivid examples from fairy tales, for fairy tales are much richer in stylistic inversion. And the non-canonical-word-order structures this paper is about to concentrate on here are "Locative Inversion", "*There* insertion" and "Left Dislocation", which will be further explained in analysis part.

2. Analysis

2.1 Locative Inversion

As one of the most typical non-canonical sentence constructions, locative inversion is used in fairy tales pervasively. And in this kind of structure, "the predicative PP (in front of the house in example (1a)) occupies the same position as the subject" [6], as shown in the example (1a).

(1) a. *In front of the house was a great stone trough*, so she said to the child, "Take the pail, Red-Cap"; (Little Red- Cap, 1812)

b. *A great stone trough was in front of the house*, so she said to the child, "Takethe pail, Red-Cap";

How does the occurrence of locative inversion in fairy tales improve the coherence of the text so that the hearer or the reader could follow the story easily? The coherent function of locative inversion is achieved on the basis of 'given/new' principle. With the help of the forward movement of the predicative PP, the sentence is linked strongly with the prior discourse, which, in turn, facilitates the inference process of the hearer or the reader to the informational statue of each element that creates the sentence. For instance.

(2) In a large town, full of houses and people, there is not room for everybody to have even a little garden, therefore they are obliged to be satisfied with a few flowers in flower-pots. *In one of these large towns lived two poor children who had a garden something larger and better than a few flower-pots.* (A Little Boy and a Little Girl 1845)

In the example (2), at the very beginning of the paragraph, "large town" is mentioned for the first time, as new information for the reader. However, when it is mentioned again in the second

sentence of this paragraph, which is locative inversion, "large town" has become discourse-old information for the reader so that the reader has no effort to understand it the second time and could pay the full attention to the new information in this sentence, which is "two poor boys". Therefore, in line with 'given/new' principle, the use of locative inversion makes the given information "large towns" placed before the new information "two poor children", resulting in the improvement of the discourse coherence and facilitation of the reader's processing.

2.2 There Insertion

The second type of non-canonical-word-order construction this studyis going to talk about is *There* insertion. There has been plenty of prior researches related to *There* insertion, showing that its felicitous use in utterances is a good way of marking informational status of sentence elements as well. In addition, these studies not only focus on the 'existential' *there,* in which the main verb is *be*, but also pay enough attention to 'presentational' *there,* "restricted to verbs of 'appearance' or 'emergence' " [7]. Among them, Gregory&Bettymade a great attempt with regard to the differences between these two kinds of *there* by saying that they differ pragmatically in "the information status of the NP in postverbal position"[5]. Roughly speaking, the postponed information in postponing constructions must be new. In the case of existential *there*, it is hearer-new; on the contrary, it is new to the discourse in the case of presentational *there*. More instances from fairy tales are presented:

(3) a. *There was something mysterious in the air that morning.* Nothing was done in its regular order and several of the native servants seemed missing, while those whom Mary saw slunk or hurried about with ashy and scared faces. (The Secret Garden, 1911)

b. She felt something mysterious. #*There was something mysterious in the air that morning.* Nothing was done in its regular order and several of the native servants seemed missing, while those whom Mary saw slunk or hurried about with ashy and scared faces.

In example (3a) which represents existential *there*, the postponed NP (something mysterious in the air) is hearer-new and the sentence is appropriate. While in example (3b), since "something mysterious" has been mentioned at the beginning of the paragraph, the postponed NP (something mysterious in the air) becomes hearer-old when it is mentioned again in the postposing structure, which renders infelicity. The case for presentational *there* is different, in which as long as the NP is discourse-new, regardless of whether it is hearer-new or not, the sentence is felicitous. For instance,

(4). Now this Little Old Woman had not always lived in a Shoe. She and her family had once dwelt in a nice house covered with ivy, and her husband was a wood-cutter, like Strong-arm. *There lived in a huge castle beyond the forest, a fierce giant*, who one day came and laid their house in ruins with his club. (The Little Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe, 1875)

In example (4), representing presentational *there* "with a non-*be* verb (lived)" [1], the postponed NP (a fierce giant) is discourse-new, for it has never been evoked in prior context and this discourse-new information results in the appropriateness of the postposing-information utterance.

The main function of *there* insertion, no matter existential *there* or presentational *there*, in fairy tales, is to increase the coherence of the whole story by placing new information at the end of the sentence, which, in turn, makes it more convenient for the next context to follow 'given/new' rule. Take (3a) as an example:with the help of *there* insertion, the author of the fairy tale, The Secret Garden, puts forward the new information "something mysterious in the air" easily at the beginning of the paragraph, making the appearance of the equivalent expression in terms of meaning " nothing was done in its regular order" in the following discourse easier to be inferred and accepted by the reader. In addition, with enough given information paving the way, there appears the next new information naturally, explaining what is mysterious and irregular in detail in the last half of the

second sentence in example (3a). Therefore, in accordance with 'given/new' principle, the whole paragraph is constructed smoothly and there is no doubt that this flowing structure reduces readers' time of processing information.

2.3 Left Dislocation

The last situation relating to non-canonical word order this paper is going to explore in this paper is left discourse. Just like locative inversion and *there* insertion, many academics have made great contribution to the exploration of left discourse as well. First, what is left dislocation? According to Ellen, there is usually an element in left dislocation, which is placed in the initial position of the sentence, being coreferential with a personal pronoun that occurs later in the sentence and identifying the topic of the sentence [2], such as the following example:

(5) *The three little pigs they* were very frightened, *they* knew the wolf wanted to eat them. (The Three Little Pigs, 1922)

In this instance, the NP (the three little pigs) actually bears the same meaning with the personal pronoun (they) appears in later discourse. The author of the fairy tale, The Three Little Pigs, places the NP in the initial position of the sentence to "trigger an inference on the part of the hearer thatthe left dislocated NP represents an entity standing in a salient partially-ordered setrelation to entities already evoked in discourse," [3]which is also one of its main function. From the name of the story, it is shown that these three little pigs are the main characters of it, which have been mentioned a lot in previous text as given information. Therefore, the use of left dislocation here could easily lead to an inference on the part of the hearer or the reader that the preponed NP (the three little pigs) has a close relationship with prior discourse and the topic of the story. In other words, the recurrence of the main characters (the three little pigs) reduces the possibility of the reader losing the topic, making readers follow the story easily.

3. Conclusions

Given the increasing importance of non-canonical-world-order constructions in real communication, more and more relevant studies have been carried out to analyze how non-canonical structures meet immediate communication needs in our daily life. On the basis of a lot of previous researches, this paper focuses on some vivid examples from a variety of fairy tales due to its richness in stylistic inversion and concentrates on three typical non-canonical world orders, which are locative inversion, *there* insertion and left dislocation respectively. And the main finding of the study is that by following 'given/new' principle in texts, the employment of a series of non-canonical utterances in fairy tales could promote the coherence of the whole story tremendously, with the result of facilitating discourse processing.

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