

## Notes on Topicalization and Left Dislocation in English\*

Naohiro Takizawa

### 0. Introduction

This paper is an attempt to analyse discourse-related constructions in English, specifically, Topicalization and Left Dislocation, from a functional standpoint, and to make clear some characteristics peculiar to each construction.

Topicalized sentences (henceforth, T sentences) and left dislocated sentences (henceforth, LD sentences) are exemplified in (1) and (2), respectively:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) a. John, Mary kissed.  
b. The cabbage, she didn't eat.  
c. This we do in section 4.
- (2) a. John, Mary kissed him.  
b. Mary, many boys would like to marry her.  
c. As for Bill, John hit him.

It should be noted here that LD sentences may be accompanied by a wide range of what may be termed "LD markers", such as as for, as to, speaking of, concerning, which, under Rodman's (1974) framework, are claimed to be capable of appearing in the X position of his phrase structure rule:  $S' \rightarrow (X) NP S$ . These optional expressions will be represented as (AS FOR), where necessary, ignoring semantic or pragmatic differences (if any) among them.

Section 1 deals with functional differences between T and LD. Section 2 is concerned with the problem of whether there are some interactions between the topicalized element (henceforth, the T element) or the left dislocated element (henceforth, the LD element), on the one hand, and the subject of the sentence, on the other, in the hope of finding what it is that makes T or LD sentences as they are. Lastly, section 3 is devoted to concluding remarks.

# 1. Functional differences between T and LD

## 1.1. Topicalization

Let us first consider the following dialogue where a T sentence is appropriately used.

(3) a. What about Mary?

b. — Mary he called. — Gundel (1974)

In the interrogative sentence (3a), Mary is introduced into the discourse and established as the topic. Then the sentence (3b), which is a T sentence, answers the question (3a), "cooperatively" in Grice's (1975) terms.<sup>2</sup> Mary in (3b) is thus said to be an NP evoked in the preceding discourse, which Prince (1981) refers to as Textually Evoked. In fact, the T sentence is appropriate only if the preposed NP (i.e., the T element) is the current topic.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we find a contrast in acceptability between (4a) and (4b); the former sentence is acceptable, because John is already established as the topic in the previous interrogative sentence, while the latter is odd, because Bill is a newly established topic:

(4) What can you tell me about John?

a. — John, Mary kissed.

b. — Nothing. #But Bill, Mary kissed.<sup>4</sup>

— Rodman (1974)

This contrast leads us to claim that T serves as an operation to clarify explicitly what the topic of the sentence is. This function we will refer to as a topic-clarifying function, as distinguished from the function of LD, which is to be discussed in the next section.

## 1.2. Left Dislocation

As to the function of LD, Rodman (1974) first described it as "topic-establishing". Let us review his claim, considering the following dialogue:

(5) What can you tell me about John?

a. — #John, Mary kissed him.

b. — Nothing. But Bill, Mary kissed him.

(5a), where the NP established as the topic, i.e., John, is left dislocated, is acceptable, because, under Rodman's framework, the LD sentence is assumed to be used to introduce a new topic into the discourse. Bill of (5b), on the other hand, is not the topic in the current discourse, and this leads to the appropriate use of LD. We can safely conclude from this that LD is a topic-establishing operation, a conclusion which I believe is essentially correct.

Gundel (1975), on the other hand, claims that an LD sentence which is not itself a question always answers some implicit or explicit question: what about x?, a claim which does not go along well with Rodman's. For example,

- (6) a. What about this room?
- b. — This room, it really depresses me.

According to Gundel, this room of (6b) is appropriately used as the LD element, despite its fixed status as the topic in the preceding interrogative sentence. Rodman and Gundel thus differ in their claims concerning the function of LD, but it should be remembered that the data on which they base their judgments are not the same.

With respect to the "topic-establishing" function of LD, let us consider also the observation made by Keenan and Schieffelin (1976). The following will illustrate their point:<sup>5</sup>

- (7) What happened to Tom?
- a. — ?Tom, he left.
- b. — His car, it broke down and he's depressed.

Keenan and Schieffelin's judgments are not completely consistent with either Rodman's claim or Gundel's. If Rodman's claim were perfectly correct, (7a) should be judged to be completely unacceptable rather than of dubious status. If, on the other hand, Gundel were perfectly right, (7a) should be acceptable, since Tom is fixed as the topic in the preceding question.

I would like to point out here that the varied acceptability judgments observed above depend on what type of discourse is

taken into consideration. In other words, one of the factors which differentiate the judgments is the degree of willingness to participate in the discourse. This degree might be referred to as degree of attentiveness; the more attentively one wants to be engaged in the discourse, the higher degree of attentiveness will be required, and vice versa.<sup>6</sup> Discourse-related constructions of the kind which we are considering here are naturally considered to be subject to this factor which is purely pragmatic in nature.

From this point of view, it can be conjectured that Rodman is taking into consideration a type of discourse in which the participants are most attentively engaged in the conversation, and that Gundel's object of consideration is one where the interlocutors are least attentively engaged in the talk exchange. The discourse analysed by Keenan and Schieffelin will be located between the two. I believe that Rodman's "ideal-state" analysis is basically correct; LD has a topic-establishing function, which is, needless to say, stronger than that of T, whose function is topic-clarifying.

## 2. Interactions between the T/LD element and the subject

### 2.1. Peterson's (1977) Definiteness Scale

Before discussing the point I would like to make, it would be appropriate to sort out and reproduce here what Peterson (1977) claims concerning what effect the definiteness of NP has on word order. In order to explain the choice of which element is in subject position and which element is in predicate position, Peterson refers to a scale of definiteness, in addition to referring to context, claiming that the more definite NP is somehow preferred as the subject, unless there is some strong contextual justification preferring otherwise. The scale says that a deictic NP is taken as subject over a definite, that a definite is taken as subject over a specific indefinite, and that a non-specific indefinite is simply excluded from subject position entirely (generics excepted).

To see how this scale works, consider the following pairs:

- (8) a. Joe is the bellboy.  
b. The bellboy is Joe.  
(a is better than b.)
- (9) a. That man is the dean.  
b. The dean is that man.  
(a is better than b.)
- (10) a. The bellboy is an epileptic.  
b. An epileptic is the bellboy.<sup>7</sup>  
(a is better than b.)
- (11) a. Her dancing master was an Italian.  
b. An Italian was her dancing master.<sup>7</sup>  
(a is better than b.)
- (12) a. Joe is a cop.  
b. \*A cop is Joe.<sup>8</sup>
- (13) a. That man is a linguist.  
b. \*A linguist is that man.<sup>8</sup>

These examples show that the more definite element is preferred as the subject. The (a) sentences in (8)-(11), where the more definite NP serves as subject, are thus felt to be less marked than the corresponding (b) sentences. In (12) and (13), the (b) sentences are, indeed, ungrammatical, since the least definite NPs are put in the subject position.

According to Peterson, this generalization would entail as a corollary that if two NPs are identical with respect to definiteness, neither will have priority over the other in the choice of subject (abstracting away the contextual factors), as witnessed by the following examples.<sup>9</sup>

- (14) a. That guy over by the keg is Bill.  
b. Bill is that guy over by the keg.
- (15) a. The elevator boy is my brother.  
b. My brother is the elevator boy.

- (16) a. A recent monograph by Phutatorious entitled De Concubinis Retinendis is a particularly valuable investigation of its subject.
- b. A particularly valuable investigation of its subject is a recent monograph by Phutatorious entitled De Concubinis Retinendis.

In each of these pairs, where the two NPs have identical definiteness, one word order is not felt to be preferred over the other and the choice of subject depends on context.

Let us assume here that Fillmore's (1968) suggestion that subject formation is a sort of topicalization process has some validity; the subject of the sentence is thus considered to be the unmarked topic. Keeping this suggestion and Peterson's arguments in mind, we are now in a position to tackle the problem of whether there are some interactions between the T/LD element and the subject, i.e., the unmarked topic of the sentence.

## 2.2. The T element and the subject

To see the interactions between the T element and the subject of the sentence, we will examine the following pairs of sentences where various combinations of elements are involved. (The case of non-specific indefinites as subject, which is impossible per se according to Peterson, is excluded from consideration.)

- I. A deictic NP / a definite NP
  - a. \*The girl, that man wants to hit.
  - b. That man, the girl wants to hit.
- II. A deictic NP / a specific indefinite NP
  - a. ??A certain girl, that man wants to hit.
  - b. That man, a certain girl wants to hit.
- III. A deictic NP / a non-specific indefinite NP
  - ??A girl, that man wants to hit. He doesn't care who it is.<sup>10</sup>

- IV. A definite NP / a specific indefinite NP  
 a. ??A certain girl, the man wants to hit.  
 b. ??The man, a certain girl wants to hit.<sup>11</sup>
- V. A definite NP / a non-specific indefinite NP  
 ??A girl, the man wants to hit. He doesn't care who it is.
- VI. A specific indefinite NP / a non-specific indefinite NP  
 ?\*A man, a certain girl wants to hit. She doesn't care who it is.
- VII. Deictic NPs  
 a. That man, Mary wants to hit.  
 b. Mary, that man wants to hit.
- VIII. Definite NPs  
 a. The girl, the man wants to hit.  
 b. The man, the girl wants to hit.
- IX. Specific indefinite NPs  
 a. A certain girl, a certain boy wants to hit.  
 b. A certain boy, a certain girl wants to hit.

From the judgments above, we will have the following table.

Subj. \ T.	Deictic	Def.	Spec.	Non-spec.
Deictic	ok	*	??	??
Definite	ok	ok	??	??
Specific	ok	??	ok	?*
Non-spec.				

In order to account for the data, I will propose a condition like the following:

(17) The Topicalization Condition<sup>12</sup>

In a T sentence, the subject of the whole sentence must not be more definite than the T element.

This condition is consistent with the topic-clarifying function of T in that the less definite element cannot be taken as the topic over the more definite one.<sup>13</sup>

### 2.3. The LD element and the subject

The question which is appropriately asked here is whether or not (17) applies to the LD sentences, whose function is, as noted in section 1.3., topic-establishing. The function of topic-establishing of LD would allow the less definite element to be taken as the LD element over the more definite one, a prediction which is, in fact, correct. Consider the following sentences corresponding to the T sentences considered in the previous section.

- I. A deictic NP / a definite NP
  - a. (AS FOR) that man, he wants to hit the girl.
  - b. (AS FOR) the girl, she wants to hit that man.
  - c. (AS FOR) the girl, that man wants to hit her.
  - d. (AS FOR) that man, the girl wants to hit him.
- II. A deictic NP / a specific indefinite NP
  - a. (AS FOR) that man, he wants to hit a certain girl.
  - b. (AS FOR) a certain girl, she wants to hit that man.
  - c. (AS FOR) a certain girl, that man wants to hit her.
  - d. (AS FOR) that man, a certain girl wants to hit him.
- III. A deictic NP / a non-specific indefinite NP
  - a. (AS FOR) that man, he wants to hit a girl.  
He doesn't care who it is.
  - b. (AS FOR) a girl, that man wants to hit \*her/  
?one. He doesn't care who it is.
- IV. A definite NP / a specific indefinite NP
  - a. (AS FOR) the man, he wants to hit a certain girl.
  - b. (AS FOR) a certain girl, she wants to hit the man.



- c. (AS FOR) a certain girl, the man wants to hit her.
- d. (AS FOR) the man, a certain girl wants to hit him.
- V. A definite NP / a non-specific indefinite NP
  - a. (AS FOR) the man, he wants to hit a girl. He doesn't care who it is.
  - b. (AS FOR) a girl, the man wants to hit \*her/?\*one. He doesn't care who it is.
- VI. A specific indefinite NP / a non-specific indefinite NP
  - a. (AS FOR) a certain girl, she wants to hit a man. She doesn't care who it is.
  - b. (AS FOR) a man, a certain girl wants to hit \*him/?\*one. She doesn't care who it is.
- VII. Deictic NPs
  - a. (AS FOR) that guy, he wants to hit Mary.
  - b. (AS FOR) Mary, that guy wants to hit her.
- VIII. Definite NPs
  - a. (AS FOR) the man, he wants to hit the girl.
  - b. (AS FOR) the girl, the man wants to hit her.
- IX. Specific indefinite NPs
  - a. (AS FOR) a certain boy, he wants to hit a certain girl.
  - b. (AS FOR) a certain girl, a certain boy wants to hit her.

All of these sentences are acceptable, aside from the sentences containing a non-specific NP as the LD element. It is rather natural that non-specific NPs cannot be left dislocated, for the reason that they do not have any particular referent and therefore cannot be assigned the role of topic. However, the sentence in which the non-specific LD element has a generic reading, i.e., refers to the definite class rather than to an individual, should be acceptable, which is confirmed by the following sentence:

- (18) (AS FOR) a beaver, it builds dams.

All these facts indicate that LD is not constrained by condition (17), a conclusion consistent with the claim that LD has a topic-establishing function.

### 3. Conclusion

In previous analyses, little attention has been paid to the interactions between the T/LD element and the subject.<sup>14</sup> I hope that this paper has shed light on this point, assuming that subject formation is a sort of topicalization process and that the subject is the unmarked topic of the sentence, and has made clear the following generalizations:

- (i) T has a topic-clarifying function. Therefore, T is constrained by condition (17) whose effect is that the subject must not be more definite than the T element.
- (ii) LD has a topic-establishing function. Therefore, LD serves to establish as the topic an element which is more/less definite than the subject or is identical to the subject in definiteness.
- (iii) The only exception to generalization (ii) is that a non-specific indefinite NP is excluded from the left dislocated position (generics excepted). This is because a non-specific indefinite NP does not have a referent to be topic-established.

### NOTES

\* I am grateful to Masaki Sano, Nobuhiro Kaga and Shōichi Tanaka for their invaluable comments and to Wayne Lawrence for acting as an informant and improving the English of an earlier version of this paper. Needless to say, all remaining errors are my own.

<sup>1</sup> Gundel (1974) argues that two types of topicalized sentences must be distinguished — those in which the topicalized NP has the primary stress of the sentence (i.e., Focus Topicalized sentences, abbreviated as FT sentences) and those in which it does not (i.e., Topic Topicalized sentences,

abbreviated as TT sentences). The prime concern of this paper, however, is with the latter type, i.e., TT sentences, which are simply referred to as T sentences, unless necessary.

<sup>2</sup> If, on the other hand, the interlocutor utters "out of the blue" words in answer to the question (3a), he is not engaged in the conversation "cooperatively".

<sup>3</sup> Here, "topic" simply means what the sentence is about.

<sup>4</sup> The mark # is used to indicate unacceptability in discourse, rather than ungrammaticality on the sentence level.

<sup>5</sup> Keenan and Schieffelin refer to our "LD sentence" as the "Referent + Proposition" construction, because they treat it as a discourse-level phenomenon, not as a sentence-level one.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Rodman also admits that attentiveness is one of the non-linguistic factors which play a role in determining what elements are taken to be established as topics and what elements are not, but he does not explain explicitly how this factor affects acceptability judgments.

<sup>7</sup> According to Peterson, this indefinite NP is clearly specific and the sentence asserts the identity of the two individuals, rather than stating a characteristic of one individual. I will follow his view without discussion.

<sup>8</sup> The indefinite here cannot be specific, as distinguished from the one in (10b) or (11b).

<sup>9</sup> This corollary is true, as far as definiteness is concerned. Indeed, the relative length of the NP will also affect the choice of subject; the shorter NP will be preferred as subject over the longer one. The examples given here, however, are exempt from this factor, since the two NPs have almost the same length.

<sup>10</sup> This sentence is intended to confirm that the indefinite NP in question has a non-specific reading.

<sup>11</sup> The dubious status of this sentence is perhaps due to reasons irrelevant to the present discussion.

<sup>12</sup> Note that this condition does not apply to FT sentences, which is shown by the following perfectly acceptable sentences:

- (i) a. The girl, that man wants to hit.
- b. A certain girl, that man wants to hit.
- c. A girl, that man wants to hit. He doesn't care who it is.
- d. A certain girl, the man wants to hit.
- e. A girl, the man wants to hit. He doesn't care who it is.
- f. A man, a certain girl wants to hit. She doesn't care who it is.

<sup>13</sup> The remaining problem is why the sentences (IX) in which two specific indefinite NPs are used as the T element and the subject are judged to be completely acceptable. It is, in fact, difficult to conceive a situation in which the sentences (IX) are felicitously used. The reason these sentences are acceptable is indeed a mystery to me, because the T element is assigned the two antagonistic roles; a certain is considered to serve to assert the existence of the NP of which it is a part and the T element is the one already established as the topic in the preceding discourse. It is, however, sufficient here to realize that neither of the items identical in definiteness has priority over the other as far as the topicalization process is concerned.

<sup>14</sup> Kuno (1976) is an exception and notes an interesting pair like the following:

- (i) ?Speaking of this man, Mary has been wronged by him.
- (ii) Speaking of this man, many innocent people have been wronged by him.

The dubious status of (i) may be accounted for easily, in our terms, by assuming that LD, whose function is topic-establishing, and passivization, by which the by-passive agent is dethematized or focalized, have applied to one and the same element; the topic-establishing process and the dethematization process result in a conflict when applied to the same element. Assuming furthermore that the by-passive agent is most easily interpreted as the theme when the subject is indefinite, this

man or him of (ii) is more easily taken as the theme than the one of (i). This leads to the contrast in acceptability between (i) and (ii); in (ii), the indefinite subject is consistent with the interpretation that this man or its coreferential him is the topic, while, in (i), it is somehow more difficult to interpret the sentence as in (ii), because of the deictic nature of the subject. (Kuno uses the term "theme", which corresponds to our "topic".)

It should be noted here, however, that these phenomena relate directly to the conflict of the LD element and its coreferential by-passive agent, rather than to the interactions between the LD element and the surface subject which we are considering in this paper.

#### REFERENCES

- Fillmore, C. L. 1968. "The case for case," in E. Bach and R. T. Harms (eds.) Universals in linguistic theory. 1-88. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Grice, H. P. 1975. "Logic and conversation," in P. Cole and J. L. Morgan (eds.) Syntax and semantics 3. 41-58. New York: Academic Press.
- Gundel, J. K. 1974. The role of topic and comment structure in linguistic theory. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin.
- . 1975. "Left dislocation and the role of topic-comment structure in linguistic theory," Working Papers in Linguistics 18. 72-131. Ohio State University.
- Keenan, E. O. and B. Schieffelin. 1976. "Foregrounding referents: a reconsideration of left dislocation in discourse," in H. Thompson et al. (eds.) Proceedings of the Second Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistic Society. 240-257. Berkeley, California: Berkeley Linguistic Society.
- Kuno, S. 1976. "Subject, theme, and the speaker's empathy — a reexamination of relativization phenomena," in C. N. Li (ed.) Subject and topic. 417-444. New York: Academic Press.
- Peterson, D. J. 1977. Noun phrase specificity. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Xerox University Microfilms.

- Prince, E. F. 1981. "Toward a taxonomy of given-new information,"  
in P. Cole (ed.) Radical pragmatics. 223-255. New York:  
Academic Press.
- Rodman, R. 1974. "On left dislocation," Papers in Linguistics 7.  
437-466.

Institute of Literature and Linguistics  
University of Tsukuba