

A Felicity Condition for Locative Inversion Constructions

Taichi Hirota, Hiromitsu Akashi, and Yukiko Arita

This joint research focuses on the semantics and pragmatics of so-called locative inversion (henceforth LI) constructions. In this construction, the PP is placed sentence-initially, and the NP sentence-finally, as illustrated in (1a):

- (1) a. On top of the fridge stood tonight's pudding
 b. Tonight's pudding stood on top of the fridge

At first glance, (1a) seems to be derived optionally via the PP substitution from the canonical sentence in (1b). What is problematic, however, is that not all verbs can freely participate in this construction as in the following examples:

- (2) a. On the other side is a blond girl in her twenties
 b. From the kitchen appeared a fat woman
 c. On top of a cupboard in the corner crouched Dobby
 d. Onto the table jumped a cat
- (3) a. *On the table has placed a tarte Tatin Susan (Bresnan (1993))
 b. *On the streets of Chicago melted a lot of snow (Levin and Rappaport (1995))

We have no doubt in saying, with Bolinger (1977:93f.), that the LI construction “presents something on the immediate stage (brings something literally or figuratively BEFORE OUR PRESENCE)”. Because this construction expresses the existence of some entity, it might be possible to posit the felicity condition as follows:

- (4) For LI constructions to be felicitous, it must be guaranteed that the referent of the postverbal NP exists at the place expressed by the PP.

The prevailing view in the literature is the following: while verbs that imply existential meaning occur in this construction, the ones that seem to lack this sense don't (cf. L & R (1995), Nakajima (2001), among others). If we tentatively adopt this felicity condition, it seems that the paradigm above can be explained in a natural way. The verbs in (2a-c), verbs of existence, appearance and spatial configuration, can be considered straightforwardly to be compatible with this condition, since they express that the referents of postverbal NPs *exist* at the place referred to by PPs. As for (2d), where the verb itself does not describe existence of an entity, but motion, existence of the cat on the table is ensured by virtue of the goal phrase. Hence it is compatible with the condition in (4). Note that the verbs in the ungrammatical sentences in (3) do not allow the existential interpretation: transitive verbs express the relation between the two arguments; and verbs of change of state focus that the state of an entity has changed. Considering the lexical meanings of these verbs, we can conclude that the sentences in (3a-b) are filtered out by the felicity condition.

However, further considerations suggest that we need to make the generalization more

precise. Consider the following ((5a) is cited from Birner (1996), (5b) is from L & R (1995)).

- (5) a. From the kitchen wafted aromatic smells of fresh-cooked eat, spices, garlic, and onion
 b. From the dining-room now could be heard the sounds of Hovering

(5a-b) involve emission verbs (and hence they do not describe the existential sense lexically), and the *from* phrases denote sources of what is emitted. Thus neither of them satisfies (4): however, the fact that both of them are well-formed should not be surprising. The point to observe is that we can easily identify the places where smell or sound exists, even though they are not explicitly expressed. For successful perception, it must be in our perceptible domain. The same is true of the case in (2) above: the referents of the subject NPs exist in the perceptible domain (i.e., the visual domain) of the discourse participants. Thus it would be accurate to modify the condition in (4) as follows:

- (6) For LI constructions to be felicitous, it must be obvious from the information of the whole sentence that the referent of the post-verbal NP exists in the perceptible domain of the participants.

The revised condition in (6) is further supported by the fact that inversion is disallowed with the case where the sentence is interpreted metaphorically (e.g., *Into the yard was thrown a ball*/?*Into panic were thrown passengers*).

Finally, let us briefly comment on the unergative sentences. It has been pointed out in the literature that some LI constructions with unergative verbs are appropriate:

- (7) Inside swam fish from an iridescent spectrum of colors (L & R (1995))

This fact is of particular interest because unergatives are generally considered not to have the existential sense. What has to be noticed is that in the case of (7) the intended meaning is not eventive, but predicational, i.e., the fish *is* inside (in the tank). Taking this into consideration, we may say that the verb *swim* denotes a prototypical way of how fish exists in water. Broadly speaking, the action is considered to be backgrounded in unergative cases. In addition, compare the following examples:

- (8) a. *In the café of Paris talk many artists (L & R (1995))
 b. In cafés of Paris talk many artists

What differentiates between the two is whether the existential interpretation is possible or not. The PP in (8a) refers to a specific location (as indicated by the definite article), and thus the preferred reading is the eventive one. In (8b), on the other hand, the bare plural NP represents generic locatives, which makes the conventional reading possible. As seen in the previous example, the focus of the sentence is not the action of talking; rather, this sentence expresses the general state of affairs. We are now in a position to explain why some LI constructions involving unergatives are acceptable in terms of condition (6). In such cases, the action is backgrounded, and thus the sentence could be construed as expressing existence of an entity.