

An Analysis of English Inversion: A Discourse Perspective*

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Kim, Jae-Min. 2000. An Analysis of English Inversion: A Discourse Perspective. *Linguistics* 8-2, 43-58. This paper presents a discourse-functional account of English inversion. To remedy the short-comings of Old/New information-packaging explanation for inversion, Birner (1994) suggests the notion of *familiarity*. I, however, have argued that though Birner's familiarity model explains inversion well, some more functional principles are needed to explain it appropriately. Here, I have suggested three additional principles that trigger inversion: (i) Topic continuity principle, (ii) Focus/Topicality principle, and (iii) Subjectivity principle. I think they co-work to make inversion occur in discourse context. (Chonbuk National University)

1. Introduction.

In recent studies of syntactic phenomena, syntax has been less investigated in terms of meaning or contexts of use. Nonetheless, it has not really been claimed that the principles underlying the appropriate use of syntactic patterns are less decisive or important.

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This paper discusses the usage of inversion from a discourse perspective. It is well recognized that inversion represents a deviation from the norm and lends itself to a functional account. In other words, syntactic form in this case does not express the propositional content exclusively, and the norm-breaking in the inversion can be accounted for by the conditions of use. I will analyze some data collected by myself, Prince(1992), Birner(1994), and others. Furthermore, I will indicate their shortcomings and suggest a solution.

In most cases, inversion has grammatical counterpart with canonical order whose truth conditions are identical, as follows:

- (1) Round the bend came the bus.
- (2) The bus came round the bend.

The construction has been studied for many purposes, but I will be concerned with trying to answer the question: for what purpose is the inversion used?

Section 2 clarifies what clauses can be regarded as inversion in English. I will argue that some phenomena of simple preposing of a constituent are not inversion, but some that show specific syntactic characteristics are inversion. In section 3, I will review previous works concerning inversion and indicate their shortcomings. In section 4, I will suggest some additional pragmatic principles triggering inversion in English.

2. Basic Word-order and Inversion

2.1. Word Order as a Discourse Marker

There is abundant literature on the topic of word order, including typological studies of language (Greenberg 1966, Siewierska 1988, etc.). Though the typological studies of language might be useful to understand English word order and/or inversion in English, it will not be the main point or will not be reviewed here.

Word order, especially in formal grammar, can be understood as representing the relationship of sentence constituents. Also, it has been recognized generally that there are correlations between the order of syntactic constituents in a sentence and the discourse role of the information which a particular constituent represents.

It is well known that the basic and natural word order of English is SVO, and English is a subject-prominent language, which exploits highly predictable topics as separate constituents (cf. Li and Thompson 1976). Thus, in general, the first phrase in a sentence tends to be intended to denote familiar (or Given, or Topical, or Old, or Predictable, or Thematic) thing, while phrase at the end of the sentence tends to denote New (or Rhematic, or asserted) thing, if other things are equal.

Thus, from a functional perspective, it can be said that generally word order change happens to achieve the intended and/or differentiated discourse purposes. In other words, word order change can be understood as a marker indicating some changes in functional domain.

Dorgeloh(1997; 18) argues that '... natural or cognitive principles of word order and the structural prerequisites of English must be assumed to interact as follows:'

- (a) Since the sentence-initial position is cognitively salient, it is in principle available for urgent or important tasks.
- (b) From a discourse perspective, shifting a constituent other than the subject to the sentence-initial position signals wider discourse relevance.
- (c) Combining (a) and (b) suggests that inversion in English is

probably not just a result of pragmatic (theme-rheme) reordering, but that it attributes a particular discourse function.

2.2. Inversion and Preposing

As mentioned above, we may assume that canonical subjects are default topics and 'old' information, as follows;

- (3) a. *John* bought a book.
 b. *He* will buy another book tomorrow.
 c. *The house* was built by John.

The subjects in the above sentences faithfully represent their basic functional roles as default topic and old information in the discourse.

On the other hand, English has many kinds of word order change phenomena, some of which are as follows;

- (4) a. On the table was lying *a book*.
 b. There was *a book* on the table.
 c. John, I hate him.
 d. A couple of pounds *I* made for her.

Even though the examples in (4) show word order change, they are not the same syntactic phenomena. In other words, they show different syntactic and functional behaviors. The phenomenon of inversion is defined as those declarative constructions where '*the subject follows part or all of its verb phrase*'. (cf. Green 1982, and Birner 1994). Following the definition, I will regard the following cases as inversion in English:

(A) AdvP-inversion:

- a. Now and then could be seen southward through the scrub the vista of the great plain parallel to which the tracks were running on and on before Bony; ... (=Birner 1992: (45b))
- b. Now is the time for the first of these omissions to be rectified. (Dorgeloh 1997; (17))

(B) PP-inversion:

- a. Among the loudest advocates of regulation are members of the airline unions, who hope that this will preserve their high paid jobs. (=Dorgeloh 1997: (21))
- b. Of equal importance are the forces of erosion that have shaped it and continue to shape it today mainly running water from rain, ... (Geologic Story at Grand Canyon)
- c. Into the ball game is Dave Brenner. (=Green 1980: (5q))

(C) VP(Participial Phrase)-inversion:

- a. You won't believe what I saw yesterday when I was walking past the park. Sitting and talking with an elderly man was your little brother. I think they were feeding the squirrels. (=Birner 1994; (20))
- b. Gone are the days when Europe's monopoly carriers would fix prices and pool revenue on high traffic routes. (=Dorgeloh 1997; (24))

(D) AdjP- and NP-inversion:

- a. Some of them are very beautiful, but most important are their fascinating detail and accuracy. (=Green 1980; (32a))
- b. An exception to this rule are the wealthy merchants, Ministers, and senior Government officials who have interested in cattle. (=Dorgeloh 1997; (28))

(E) Subj-Aux-inversion:

- a. Under no circumstances may candidates leave the room. (=Kim 2000; (33a))
- b. Only in wartime does it add some value as a focus of national unity. (=Kim 2000; (37a))
- c. So grave would the consequences have been that he would have had to resign. (=Kim 2000; (38a))

Though the following cases show the word order change, generally they all are not regarded as inversion, because each of these sentence types is both structurally and functionally different from inversion. (cf. Hooper & Thompson 1973, Green 1985, and Levine 1989 for the pragmatic differences)

(5) existential *there*-construction

- a. There are statues behind the building.
- b. On the table there are some books.

(6) preposing of the adverbial, focus, topic, and left-dislocation

- a. Into the room John came.
- b. John I like.
- c. It was John that I spoke to.
- c. John, I like him.

Also, the following examples show that simple preposing is different from inversion syntactically:

- (7) a. Under no circumstances may candidates leave the room. (=Ea)
b. *Under no circumstances candidates may leave the room.

- (8) a. Only in wartime does it add some value as a focus of national unity. (=Eb)
b. *Only in wartime it adds some value as a focus of national unity.

- (9) a. So grave would the consequences have been that he would have had to resign.
b. *So grave the consequences would have been that he would have had to resign.

The inverted phrases in the above examples include negative marker *no* in (7), *only* in (8), and *resultative* in (9). In these cases, they do not have corresponding preposed clauses. In other words, the optional preposing and inversion are not always interchangeable, as the following examples:

- (10) a. Into the room came John.
b. Into the room John came.

(10a) is inversion, while (10b) is PP preposing. Thus, because of functional and syntactic reasons, I regard as inversion the structure where subject follows part or all of its VP.

3. Discourse Functions of Inversion

As Green (1980) argues, it is tempting to suppose that the inversions are all governed by some general pragmatic principles, such as the 'Old information first, new information last' dictum of some Prague School linguists. To support the assumption, Kuno(1972: 299) presents the following examples;

- (11) a. Round the bend came the train.
b. Up jumped the rabbit.
c. Standing there was my brother.

- (12) a. *Was there John still standing in front of the doctor?
b. *Did round the bend come the train?
c. *Was standing there your brother?

Following Bolinger's(1971) argument, Kuno argues that the examples in (11) are presentational, and the examples in (12) are ungrammatical because '... questions are usually questions about something, and that one does not usually form a question which does not contain any *old information*.'

However, the analyses which apply some type of given or old/new information principle to inversion fail to account for the full range of them in natural discourse. Kim (1992) and Green (1980) correctly indicate that they fail to account for the pragmatic principles of inversions because the 'givenness' has been treated inaccurately as an all-or-nothing phenomenon.

- (13) Down with the rebound comes Roan. (=Green 1980; (50))

- (14) Enclosed Are the GEICO Home Insurance Rates You Requested. [on front of envelop] (=Birner 1994: (28))
- (15) Of equal importance are the forces of erosion that have shaped it and continue to shape it today mainly running water from rain, ... (=Bb)

The inverted phrases in the above examples are never mentioned in the discourse context. Thus, they are new information, but inverted.

To avoid the 'all-or-nothing' dictum, Birner(1994: 242) suggests four theoretically possible information statuses, of which only the first three are useful for the analyses of inversion:

- (i) Hearer-old, Discourse-old; information which has already been evoked in the current discourse.
- (ii) Hearer-old, Discourse-new; information which has not been evoked in the current discourse, but of which the speaker believes the hearer is aware.
- (iii) Hearer-new, Discourse-new; information which has not been evoked in the current discourse, and of which the speaker believes the hearer is unaware.
- (iv) Hearer-new, Discourse-old; theoretically, information which has been evoked in the current discourse, but of which the speaker nonetheless believes the hearer is unaware. For obvious reasons, this type presumably does not occur in natural discourse.

Birner argues that her distinction of information statuses is the taxonomy of *familiarity types* and they provide a more concrete way of getting at many of the same intuitions that motivate the theme/rheme distinction.

I think Birner's familiarity-status combinations well explain many

cases of inversion from information-packaging perspective. Through the following analysis of her data, we can see the distribution of the information and how well the concept of Discourse-familiarity can explain the inverted element;

Final Element	Initial Element			Total
	H-old/D-old,	H-old/D-new,	H-new/D-new	
H-old/D-old	29	0	0	29
H-old/D-new	100	4	6	110
H-new/D-new	433	28	103	564
Total	562	32	109	703

Table 1. Discourse- and hearer-familiarity distribution
(=Birmer1994; Table 1)

Here we can see that inverted constituents representing discourse-old element outnumbered those representing discourse-new by 4 to 1 (562 tokens or 80% vs. 141 or 20%). Thus, the results of the analysis looks well support the idea that inversion serves the information-packaging function with the preposed constituent representing discourse-old information.

However, we should pay attention to the fact that Hearer-new /Discourse-new 103 tokens are also used as the preposed constituent. To explain the fact, Birmer takes the term *inferrables* from Prince(1992). Prince notes that inferrables, although they are technically both hearer-new and discourse-new, depend on a discourse-old 'trigger' element. Furthermore, Birmer argues that inferrables pattern with evoked

information with respect to inversion, and that evoked and inferrable elements are treated as equally discourse-old for this purpose. Thus, she offers the following scale ranking entities from most to least familiar:

- (16) Evoked > Inferrable > Unused > Brand-New Anchored
> Brand-New

4. Discussion and Conclusion

As mentioned in Section 3, Birner's(1994) familiarity model explains well many cases of information packaging function of inversion, compared to the bisection of information. There, however, are some cases that cannot be explained by the familiarity model or by the model of New and Old bisection; first of all, when Discourse-old information (evoked or inferrable) occurs at both the preposed position and the postposed position (29 tokens in Table 1), it is very hard to explain why inversion occurs. Also, New information can occur at the preposed position, as follows:

- (17) Into the ball game is Dave Brenner. (=Green 1980: (5q))
(18) Into the consulting room of a fairly mad physician, whose name I somehow remember as Lucas Membrane, hurtled a haggard middle-aged woman, towing her husband, a psychotic larrikin about seven feet tall. (=Birner 1994; (13b))

As they mentioned, since each of these sentences begins a narrative, the preposed constituents are new information. We may argue that the preposed elements are inferrables, as Birner does. However, because

the postposed element may be inferrables too, the argument cannot explain why inversion occurs in these cases, either.

To solve the problems, Kim(1995) suggests that non-locative *be*-inversions are not the cases of inversion but those of so-called *headless reduced constructions*.

(19) The University of Minnesota offers hundreds of academic programs.

a. <Unique among them> is <that provided by the Department of Independent Study>.

b. ??? <that provided by the Department of Independent Study> is <Unique among them>. (=Kim 1995; (38))

(20) Free election were held yesterday in Czechoslovakia for the first time since the war.

a. Losing the election was the main opposition party. (=Birner & Ward 1992)

b. The main opposition party was losing/lost the election.

c. *Lost the election was/did the main opposition party.

Kim argues that (19a) does not have counterpart with normal word order, as the example in (19b) shows. Thus, he regards (20a) as a headless reduced construction, as follows:

(21) <((The party)(that was losing /that lost) *the election*> was the main opposition party.

For the example (20), he argues that because it is impossible to transform from (20b) to (20c), we should regard (20a) as a headless reduced construction, not as inversion from (20b). Moreover, he argues that (19a) and (20a), instead of (19b) and (20b), are used to preserve

topic continuity and thereby to contribute to coherence in discourse.

Kim's arguments have some problems: first of all, he selected very limited cases: he used only non-locative *be*-inversion. The cases may be explained as reduced construction, but the other forms of inversion cannot be explained as reduced construction. Second, if the remaining *losing* in (19) is the subject of the sentence, it should behave as subject syntactically. However, as Kuno(1972) shows, it does not behave as subject for the cases of Question formation. (cf. (11) and (12)) Also, he rejects the syntactic explanation for the impossibility of (19b) and (20c) cases. I think the attitude that rejects formal explanation without any specific reason is not desirable.

Here I suggest a solution to remedy Birner's familiarity model. I think we should accept multi-dimensional explanation for the various cases of inversion. Thus, in addition to the information-packaging principle, I suggest the following three principles that trigger inversion to occur:

(i) Topic continuity principle: As Chafe(1987) argues that the subject in English can be regarded as a grammaticalized starting position to evolve a new topic, a speaker/writer chooses a specific constituent for the subject position of a sentence based on the strategy of backgrounding and foregrounding. Thus, when a sentence has two constituents of Old or New information, a speaker may choose one that he/she wants to make as a topic in the discourse ahead.

(22) Attached to it, as always, is an application blank for next year's license. (=Green 1980: (13e))

In the example, the preposed constituent (*Attached to it*) is inferrables and the postposed constituent (*an application ... license*) is old. Thus,

the speaker may choose either one for the subject position. As Green (1980: 588) expounds, (22) serves to introduce new topic---license applications---gently, by relating it to the current topic---a new driver's license. In this way it avoids a discontinuity that might have been distracting if the subject of the sentence had been at the beginning.

(ii) **Focus/Topicality principle:** As I mentioned before, the following examples do not have counterparts with preposing. Kiss(1998) argues that *only*-phrase has [+contrastive] and/or [+exhaustive] features. I think the examples that have *only*-phrase and negative element (*no* in (24)) inherently have contrastive or exhaustive focus features, and they trigger inversion.

- (23) Only in wartime does it add some value as a focus of national unity. (=4a)
 (24) Under no circumstances may candidates leave the room. (=7a)

Thus, when inversion occurs in a sentence that has the inherent focus feature, it always requires Aux-Subj-inversion.

(iii) **Subjectivity principle:** A speaker/writer may choose inversion subjectively, when he/she wants to describe specific events effectively, or just because of a stylistic reason.

- (25) The newspaper complained that Roger Altman, the deputy treasury secretary, [...].

Behind these complaints lies the tacit suggestion that some Clinton officials are intent on side-tracking or emasculating Mr. Fiske's Whitewater investigation while the democrats in

Congress look the other way. (=Dorgeloh 1997; (37))

(26) Into the game for New Trier West is Brenner. (=Gren 1980;(5p))

Dorgeloh(1997; 171) argues that in (25), significantly inversion occurs in the final paragraph of the report, and thus it is justifiably considered a means of concluding analysis and evaluation. In other words, the inversion is used stylistically because the speaker/writer is an architect of discourse organization. Also, in (26), the inversion allows the speaker to identify a player in terms of a location or an act just performed. Thus, the speaker can describe the sport event more effectively.

Even though I suggested three additional principles, I am not sure I have identified all the principles triggering inversion. Also, we should try to test those principles for inversion in other languages.

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