FOCUS IN ENGLISH CLAUSE STRUCTURE SEEN VIA SYSTEMATIC EXPERIMENTAL SYNTAX[1]

Kenneth L. Pike

Summer Institute of Linguistics

Why, we ask insistently, should there be a variety of structural possibilities for change of the center of attention - for focus - in a language? Our reply: That the necessity for the ability to select and group into attention various contrastive features of a situation is so crucial to human nature, universally, that the epistemologist, Angus Sinclair, treats it as the basic condition for "knowing" anything at all (Sinclair 1951). Focus capacity is a characteristic of the universal human computer.

Attention-focussing devices can be widely scattered throughout the structural mechanism of a language. They are all-pervasive, being found in conversation-sequence controls, monologue plan, paragraph thematization, clause ordering in sentences, or word ordering in clauses and phrases. The mechanisms occur in all hierarchies - semantic, grammatical, and phonological. Focus from two or more hierarchies may occur in the same clause, reinforcing one another, or giving focus an n-dimensional space by forcing attention simultaneously in more than one mode of perception.

Focus devices differ in detail from language to language, even while their presence is universal. Focus in Philippine languages, on the clause level, is much more symmetrical in its patterning, for example, than it is in English. In the

Philippine languages, a focus-predicting device occurs in the verb to tell us that one of three or four elements, occurring after it in the clause, will be under attention. But it is to a set of English phenomena that we now turn (and note that by this very phrase we have used a lexical device, the word 'turn', as a metaphor derived from a physical movement involved in physical focus; and that 'now' uses a time word to bring change from the continuance of attention on past focus to a new one.).

In English, selecting and grouping in attention can be accomplished by the contrastive use of clause types, as, for example, transitive versus equative:

(1) John saw the dog yesterday.

(2) John is the one who saw the dog yesterday.

Within the clause, subject position may be used to focus material, as in the following equative set:

(3) The one who saw the dog yesterday is John.

(4) The dog is what John saw yesterday.

(5) Yesterday is when John saw the dog.

(6) The time when John saw the dog was yesterday.

(7) What John saw yesterday was the dog.

(8) Seeing the dog yesterday was what John did.

Various changes of detail are involved in this general placement in subject position. In (4), 'the dog' can be placed there without change of that noun phrase, but the substitute 'what' replaces it, in the complement, before 'John saw'. 'Yesterday' as subject is replaced by 'when' in the complement of (5). But when 'yesterday' becomes the total complement in (6), the subject noun phrase must be given a generic head, 'the time' modified by the relativized original clause with the time replaced by 'when'. Other changes can also be seen within the equative.

If, however, the focussed element is moved outside the clause, to a preclause position in the sentence, a different construction results.

(9)   As for John, he saw the dog yesterday.

(10) As for the dog, John saw it yesterday.

(11) As for yesterday, that is when John saw the dog.

On the other hand, a multi-level relation can be seen, when a constituent is moved out from the clause into the sentence margin, but with no replacement of pronoun into the emptied slot. This results, according to the present analysis, in a simultaneous function of the focussed constituent in the new sentence function and in the old clause function, as in (12) and (13).

(12) The dog, John saw yesterday.

(13) Yesterday, John saw the dog.

Phonological components, including stress grouping and placement, are also critically involved in attention, emphasis, and sequence coherence. We have not only the subtle

(14) John ís the one who came.

(15) John is thé one who came.

but the discourse acceptable

(16) Who came? Jóhn came.

(17) Who came? John cáme.

In the grammatical area, however, there is a further subtlety: a constituent can be moved from a marginal (time, degree, location, purpose, result) part of the clause or the sentence directly into the nucleus (subject, predicate, object, indirect object of person or location) of the clause. Compare illustration (18), where the clause nucleus is in parentheses, and 'water' in the sentence margin, with (19) where 'water' is now the object in the clause nucleus.

(18) (She wrung the clothes) yesterday so that water came out.

(19) (She wrung water out of the clothes) yesterday.

In (20) 'John' is object in the clause nucleus, and 'the difficulty' part of a prepositional phrase in the sentence margin. In (21), 'the difficulty' becomes clause object and 'on John' becomes a special variety of indirect object (by criteria not discussed here, but implied in our tree diagram presently).

(20) (Others blamed John) because of the difficulty.

(21) (Others blamed the difficulty on John).

Compare also (22) with (23), where marginal quality-in-time becomes characteristic-of-the-subject of an equative clause.

(22) (My sister married) when she was young.

(23) My sister married young.

But in my view a dissatisfaction remains with any treatment, including the one just given, which treats a list (or even a set of lists) of somewhat randomly selected illustrations. Thus I am still dissatisfied even when a large number of interesting structure observations are made or even tight rules proposed. I would like some more systematic method of search and description of the results. Even a large corpus, inductively studied, would not serve my purpose if it in turn led only to lists of rules or structural descriptions.

This problem gets vastly more acute as we move higher in the hierarchy to try to find rules concerning discourse invariants and variants, both grammatical and semantic – and phonological. The size of the requisite corpus needed for induction becomes unmanagable for certain of my purposes; and intuition of the native linguist, unguided by an adequate hypothesis, does not, in fact, turn out the systematically related illustrations needed.

In order to solve this problem, I have invented, in cooperation with Evelyn Pike,[2] and others, a heuristic approach which I shall call here SYSTEMATIC EXPERIMENTAL SYNTAX: experimental, since we are trying for forms to test various generalized hypotheses; systematic, since it searches through specific formal parameters as wholes, rather than seeking only for miscellaneous paired contrasts or ambiguities.

The experiment: (a) Take an analysis of English clause types. (b) Choose from the first clause type a typical example containing both nucleus and margin. (c) Paraphrase that same clause repeatedly, transforming it into the second clause type, then into the third, and then into each of the others (retain the basic semantic content, but allow changes of focus, and changes of meaning introduced by the new clause structure itself). (d) Describe the changes which were required in order to allow for the paraphrase. (e) Choose a new sample, from the second clause type, and repeat Steps (c) through (d). (f) Continue with further new samples until all types have been explored. (g) Classify the results.

In Figure 1, a tree diagram is given classifying clause roots (which fill the nucleus slot of a clause) by presence or absence of participants in an emic actor role (or 'quasi-actor' or 'agent'); as emic undergoer (or 'patient'); or as emic scope[3] (or 'site' or 'target'). When all three are present, the clause is bitransitive (BT); if only one, intransitive (I); if two, including actor and undergoer, transitive (T); if two, including actor and scope, semitransitive (ST). If role is emic item, rather than actor, one has equative (Eq) (without scope) or semi-equative (SEq) (with scope).
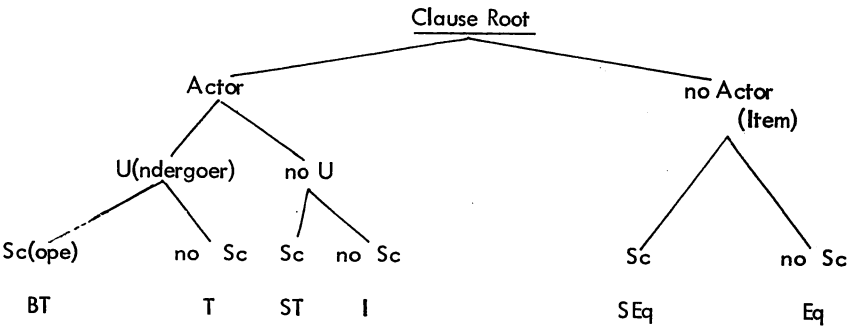

Fig. 1. English Clause Roots (according to participant emic roles)

For the clause types in Fig. 1 we give a few samples. Notice that in any one set there may be formal subsets (e.g. active versus passive) or semantic subsets (e.g. action versus state).

BT (Bitransitive)

    (24) He handed the tools to me.

    (25) The tools were handed to me ($\pm$) by him. (with subject as undergoer)

    (26) I emptied the water out of the tank.

    (27) John received the prize ($\pm$) from the committee.

    (28) The book cost me ten dollars. (with 'me' as scope)

T (Transitive)

    (29) He found the dolphin.

    (30) The dolphin was found ($\pm$) by him. (with adjunct as actor)

    (31) She owns the horses.

    (32) The issue transcends politics.

ST (Semitransitive)

    (33) His family settled in Corfu.

    (34) The play lasted three hours.

    (35) The toys are in the box.

I (Intransitive)

    (36) I chuckled.

    (37) The water swirled.

    (38) The path forked.

S Eq (Semi-equative)

    (39) The food tasted good ($\pm$) to me. (with subject as item, complement as characteristic of the subject, and indirect object as scope)

    (40) The body lay sprawled on the floor.

Eq   (Equative)

(41)   John became a man.

(42)   He became ill.

(43)   He is in a hurry.

(44)   John is tall.

Given such an analysis (not discussed as such here), as fulfilling Step (a) of the experiment as indicated above, we perform the first part of Step (b) by taking the bitransitive clause (24), calling it the basic form, arbitrarily (basic in reference to experimental departures from it). For the moment, we omit the second part of Step (b) - that is, we do not add margins to the basic sentence or to its internal components.

Step (c) is fulfilled by the paraphrases of this basic sentence into each of the other clause types of the list given. We repeat (24) as here (45). By paraphrase we mean, in this usage, that we wish to retain the cognitive content; but we explicitly cause that kind of change of focus which the change of clause type introduces; and we explicitly add that kind of meaning which is inherent in the new clause type itself. The loss of original focus, and the loss of original construction meaning, leaves the paraphrase valid, within our usage of that term here. After each of the paraphrases, a comment will be given for Step (d).

(45 Basic BT)   John handed the tools to me.

(46 T)   John performed the act of handing me the tools.

Note the dummy verb 'performed', as a generic abstraction of the meaning of an action transitive verb (with the generic term 'the act', which fills the object slot, as that which was performed). Thus, the meaning of the transitive construction as a whole may be 'X performed Y' (or 'X "verbed" Y'). The original cognitive content (the specific act of giving by hand, the tools as that given, and the indication of actor and recipient) is retained, but it is treated within a prepositional phrase as a modifier of the dummy head 'the act'.

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(47 ST) John reached his goal of handing me the tools.

Here, again, note in this semitransitive clause the use of a dummy verb 'reached', which carries the semitransitive meaning of movement toward a target, plus an implication of the necessity for their being such a target – an obligatory indirect object of scope. Similarly, the indirect object requirement is met by the generic term 'goal' which carries the rest of the cognitive paraphrased meaning realized as the prepositional modifier 'of handing me the tools'. In general, then, our aim is reached: nothing is changed but those semantic features inherent in the construction meanings of transitive and semitransitive themselves; and these meanings are added by as small an increment of lexico-constructional apparatus as possible, i.e. by the lexical items 'reached' and 'goal' which come close to labelling the semi-transitive constructional meanings themselves.

(48 I) John's action of handing me the tools occurred.

Here the problem was to find an intransitive verb which would serve to carry the requisite constructional meaning and the requisite lask of requirement for object. We chose 'occurred', which serves the purpose when combined with the noun 'action' as a dummy head subject noun. If we had chosen 'ended' and 'task', the paraphrase would have accomplished the constructional aims, but would have gone beyond our desired criteria for paraphrase, by highlighting (more than necessary) both the time element and the energy involvement.

(49 SEq) The action of John's handing me the tools seemed complete
       (to this observer).

For the semi-equative, an observer must be implicit or explicit. The implication of implicitness is here accomplished by the use of the lexical item 'seemed'; the parentheses show the optional use of explicit observer, in a generic form as a dummy (instead of such a phrase as the cognitively more expanded 'to the boss').

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(50 Eq). The action of John's handing me the tools was a completed fact.

For this equative clause we needed some characteristic-of-the-subject as a role of complement, but did not want to invent characteristics outside of those already present in the given basic form. This was a bit awkward, since the basic form is not qualified. So we settled for the dummy word 'fact', reflecting the initial action, and a modifier 'completed' reflecting the initial tense. The action itself was moved to the subject slot of the equative clause. If, however, we had been willing to add cognitive characteristics, we might have said that 'The action of John's handing me the tools was good' – but this is unwarranted: he may have been annoyed. Or we could have said that 'The action of handing me the tools was complete'. We wanted to avoid, however, 'John's action of handing me the tools was completed', since that would have forced it into the passive subset of a transitive clause. On the other hand, 'John's action of handing me the tools was complete' meets the requirement of being an equative clause type, but does not have quite the same emphasis; it puts more attention on the aspect of completion, and less on the original total assertion.

For Step (e) we should now choose the next clause in our list – the transitive – and repeat Steps (c-d). Then for Step (f), we should choose the further clause types successively. In order to save space, however, we move directly to the semi-equative clause type, with its basic form (and, again, without marginal elements).

(51 Basic SEq cf. 39). The food tasted good to John.

(52 BT) Someone gave good-tasting food to John.

Here the typical word 'give' is used to establish the bitransitive framework. This would be acceptable if it did not at the same time add a cognitive element beyond that of the purely abstract bitransitive relation. Specifically, it would be in error if the context showed that John had gathered and prepared the food for himself directly. Either, then, one must find a dummy verb which is bitransitive but which lacks the added cognitive content, or one seems to be in trouble here. We will solve

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the problem, for this experiment, by returning to the second part of Step (b) and adding a marginal element (as provided for there) to the basic form.

(53 as amplified Basic 51 SEq, i.e. with margin)

The food tasted good to John in the restaurant yesterday.

(54 BT) The restaurant gave good-tasting food to John yesterday.

Here we now have an actor, deduced from the margin, by the argument that, if he ate in the restaurant, the restaurant must have given it to him. That is to say context may provide the source for choice of words appropriate to the desired clause type and required by that type. This context may be present at any layer of structure, whether earlier in the discourse, or embedded as a modifier of some noun phrase, or implied but not stated. If, further, the sentence is stated to a long-term friend, the usable context may include events or circumstances or conversations which have existed for a long time and are not available to strangers. For strangers, therefore, the paraphrase sources are much more restricted than they are for friends; and the expansion of paraphrase through needed explicitness may need to be much greater and the risk of ambiguities much larger. In this present instance, for example, if John were known to be a perpetual thief, and one who fraudulently obtained what he wanted, then the choice of the term 'gave' might have been unfortunate.

(55 T) John ate the food, which tasted very good, in the restaurant yesterday.

Here the eating process is exploited as source of a transitive verb; John couldn't have tasted it, in the sense implied, without eating it – unless the larger context made him a non-eating taster, for some reason not to be expected by the presumed audience. Here, again, PRESUMED AUDIENCE AND KNOWN OR PRESUMED CONTEXT PLACE SOME LIMITS ON PARAPHRASE CHOICES SINCE SOURCES OF IMPLICIT OR EXPLICIT INFORMATION DIFFER. A more subtle addition in this paraphrase is the word 'very'; the statement seems more normal with it than without it, even though it did not seem needed in the basic expanded form. Perhaps the reason is that in (55) the tasting is embedded in a relative clause, which is almost unnecessary unless the

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tasting had some special quality which made it worth mentioning. (George Huttar suggests: 'The food pleased John', which would not need to use the marginal material, since the evaluation is included directly in the meaning of the transitive verb.)

(56 ST   in relation to Basic SEq with margin)   John went to the restaurant yesterday to eat the good-tasting food.

Here, again, the marginal additions are helpful. Otherwise, one might have (57), which is more abstract, but still meets the requirements of the paraphrase. Note that, in general, fewer dummy or 'generic' words are needed when the margin is present, since elements from the margin allow the use of verbs or nouns which have more semantic content, without departing from the explicit materials in the source sentence.

(57 ST without marginal source)   John went somewhere where the food tasted good.

(58 I)   John relaxed with the good-tasting food.

Here the intransitive verb is not quite as abstract as we would desire, but is perhaps justifiable for normal contexts. It would be false, however, in a context such as 'The food tasted good to John but he was too nervous to be able to relax and enjoy it'. For such a context, the paraphrase would need to be changed.

(59 SEq)   (This is the basic form, already given in (51), and (53 amplified).

(60 Eq)   The food was good-tasting, that John ate.

(61 Eq)   The food was tasty that John ate.

Perhaps (61) is a bit more idiomatic than (60), leaving the adjective 'good' as fused semantically into the word 'tasty' as meaning both 'was tasted' and 'tasted good'.

(62 Eq)   The food that John ate was very tasty.

Here the movement of the clause modifier to the front, plus the addition of the term 'very' from (55), seems to give a more acceptable result.

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We may call such experimental syntax, systematically changing certain kinds of elements, the PLANNED DISTORTION of a basic form.

NOTES

1. This paper was presented at the Eighth Annual Congress of the Linguistic Society of Papua New Guinea, September 28, 1974.
2. See Pike and Pike (1972, 1974), and also articles by K. Pike and Schottelndreyer in Hale (1973 Part I), and by Pike and Gordon in Trail (1973).
3. From Pike and Pike (1974: sec. 4.20), building on earlier work by Austin Hale.

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