

Alternative Approach to Locative Inversion Constructions in English Grammar

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1. Introduction

This paper examines how so-called locative inversion constructions in English (henceforth referred to as LICs) should be presented when teaching English grammar in Japan. LICs are attributed to the inversion of the locative phrase and the subject in canonical sentences. For instance, (1a) is a canonical sentence seen as unmarked, whereas (1b) is a typical LIC, and thus is often considered as a marked sentence:

(1) a. [A vase of glass with roses] is [on the dining table].

subject

locative

b. [On the dining table] is [a vase of glass with roses].

locative

subject

(Kuno and Takami 2007: 272)

According to Kuno and Takami (2007), (1b) relates to the inversion of the two elements: subject and locative. On the other hand, Quirk et al. (1985) shows that LICs arise from subject-verb inversions with the third element in “SVC” and “SVA” fronted to establish a desirable information process.

(2) a. In a distant grave lies his beloved body.

b. Slowly out of its hangar rolled the gigantic aircraft. (Quirk 1985: 1380)

As shown clearly, the basic form of the sentences in (1b) and (2) are identical, that is the “locative + V + S,” which is irrespective of Kuno and Takami or Quirk.

This paper sheds light on the following issue: although the forms of canonical sentences and LICs are apparently different, minimal effort has been put into the teaching of traditional English grammar. This is especially true in terms of illustrating their semantic and functional discrepancies as well as examining the motivation to use marked constructions despite the ease with which they can deliver the same message with simpler constructions, as seen in (1a). We naturally assume that LICs should take on the particular connotations that their unmarked counterparts do not. Therefore, this paper examines whether LICs are a result of the avoidance of top-heavy subjects, and insists that LICs should be taught in a manner that highlights the context in which they are acceptable.

2. How are LICs taught in English grammar?

We now examine how LICs are presented in English grammar textbooks in Japan, intended for Japanese junior high or high school students studying English. Most of the textbooks, ranging from primers to more specialized ones, generally regard LICs as “special constructions” in which the subject of a sentence is not left in situ. Japanese students, at least those who were taught English based on methods that specifically adhere to grammar and translation, all too often have learned that top-heavy subjects are less common in English. In addition, such subjects should be extraposed with the anticipatory pronoun *it* placed at the original subject position.¹ Consider the following example:

¹ The following sentences involve extraposition and inversion, as exemplified by Huddleston and Pullum (2002). Their basic counterparts are listed in the right-hand column.

(i) a. INVERSION In the bag were two knives Two knives were in the bag.

 b. EXTRAPOSITION It's clear that it's a forgery. That it's a forgery is clear.

(Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 67)

- (2) a. To become an expert at anything takes time.
b. It takes time to become an expert at anything. (Egawa 1991: 315)

Traditional English grammar articulates that (2a) comprises three components: subject, verb, and object. According to Egawa (1991), the sentence with the extraposed subject in (2b) is often preferable to (2a) because the subject *to become an expert at anything* is perceived as top-heavy.² When searching for a good supply of “It V ... to do ...” constructions in the process of learning English grammar, learners may assume that in English, top-heavy subjects should always be extraposed.

While drafting this paper, the author noticed that the computer-based software underlined (2a), indicating that it had to be revised. Of course, this green line does not suggest the specific factor that makes this sentence grammatically incorrect or unnatural, but it most likely implies that the infinitive phrase as the subject does not agree with the verb *takes*. In any case, most grammar textbooks emphasize the avoidance of top-heavy subjects, making learners hesitant to use sentences such as (2a), which begin with the *to*-infinitive as the subject.

Notably, the above “overgeneralization” may oblige most Japanese learners to assume that LICs result from the evasion of top-heavy subjects, as shown in (3):

- (3) Not far from the lake is a long avenue, straight and wide, with trees along both sides of it. (Egawa 1991: 485)

Most learners will almost undoubtedly conclude that the subject in (3), modified by the adjectives and prepositional phrases, is top-heavy, thus leading to the inversion of the entire subject.

² Watanuki et al. (2000) also provides a similar illustration of extraposition with the following sentence:

(ii) It is impossible to control market tendencies. (Watanuki 2000: 473)

Although there are many other special constructions that learners are inclined to identify as what is derived from the avoidance of top-heavy subjects, it results in nothing more than one of the substantial properties in English that learners must acquire. Significant work remains to be done in terms of teaching sentences with a top-heavy subject. In fact, there is evidence that some sentences with a top-heavy subject sound more natural compared to those with an inverted subject, which we shall examine in a later chapter.

3. Subjects and verbs that appear in LICs

It is noteworthy that LICs do not necessarily stem from the avoidance of top-heavy subjects. Consider the following example:

- (4) Just inland from this, against its background of sheltering trees, stood **the house**. (BNC: CKF, emphasis added)

The house in (4) is, self-evidently, not a top-heavy subject and it is not accompanied by modifiers such as adjectives and prepositional phrases. It is entirely fair to assume that LICs allow a wide range of noun phrases to occur as a subject.

It is possible that some modifiers follow the noun phrase as a subject in LICs, implying that modifiers can be added effortlessly after the noun phrase if it is inverted and not left in its original position. As illustrated in (5), the subject *the house* is accompanied by the modifier *called Tullivers*:

- (5) Within fifty yards of the Youngs' home, across the road which led northward to the Midlands, stood **the house called Tullivers** at one on our imaginary clock. (BNC: ASE, emphasis added)

In addition, it has been conventionally argued in some literatures that informationally light verbs appear in LICs. According to Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995), when these verbs are found in LICs, a relationship of mutual predictability exists between the verb and the subject. For example, the verb *tick* is seen as informationally light since we can easily deduce that the most typical object that ticks is “a clock” and the most typical action of a clock is “to tick.” Therefore, the following sentence is acceptable:

- (6) In the hall ticked the long-case clock that had been a wedding present from her parents. (Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995: 255)

This argument, however, requires further consideration. How is “mutual predictability” predicted? (7) is unacceptable despite the strong connection between heavy smokers and their habitual action of smoking:

- (7) *On the corner smoked a heavy smoker. (Kuno and Takami 2007: 288)

To the best of the author’s knowledge, there is no argument against the relationship between the two aspects. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that mutual predictability mentioned above relies heavily on each speaker’s knowledge and it is not lexically defined.

4. Focus on information structure

We insist with fair certainty that English grammar in Japan should adopt context-oriented grammar that focuses on information structure, especially when teaching the usage of LICs. In this regard, information structure involves a natural flow of information in which given information often precedes new information.

This point becomes valid by reconsidering (4), a single sentence, with another sentence attached to it to clarify the context.

- (8) I followed the cliff path which led steeply up out of Otters' Bay and then westward over the headland for something less than half a mile, to bring me in sight of the bay I had seen yesterday. Just inland from **this**, against **its** background of sheltering trees, stood the house.

(BNC: CKF, emphasis added)

In (8), *this* and *its* both refer to *the bay* in the previous sentence. It is possible to estimate that this LIC fulfills the function of the effective reminiscence of the subject, *the house*, with given information such as *this* and *its* put forward. In other words, *this* and *its* serve as “reference points” to the subject *the house*. Therefore, it is plausible to suggest that the grammatical feature of LICs is based on information structure, regardless of whether subjects are top-heavy.

Furthermore, one can state that LICs depict the interior of a certain physical object. Consider the following example:

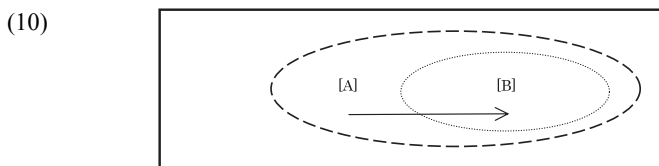
- (9) a. ... we went into a spacious classroom in the traditional Japanese style ...
Among one wall hung a large board with pegs holding many tiny wooden plaques; on each plaques was written a name in gat, black stroke.

(*Memoirs of a Geisha*)

- b. Greenway unfolded the newspaper on Rickey's bed in front of them ... At the bottom of the front page was a headline about Romey. NEW ORLEANS LAWYER COMMITS SUICIDE IN NORTH MEMPHIS. Under the headline to the right was a big photo of W. Jerome Clifford.

(*The Client*)

Here (9a) delineates the interior of a spacious classroom. The writer of (9a) first provides a description of the classroom wall and then writes about the plaques that rest on it. Furthermore, (9b) explains in detail the content of a newspaper by referring to the headline on the bottom of the front page. This peculiarity in LICs is illustrated in the figure below:



In the above figure, we should not overlook the positional relationship between [A] and [B]. [A] is located in a certain physical object, and [B] is located within [A], which denotes that [B] is a subset of [A]. Although it is apparent that the information in [A] and [B] qualifies to be conveyed in LICs, their appropriateness is built largely on which precedes the other, [A] or [B]. As the arrow in (10) points toward [B], LICs are easily found to be appropriate when the information in [A] precedes that in [B]. If one delivers the information vice versa with LICs, then LICs could be judged as less acceptable.

5. It is the context that matters

Minimal attention in English grammar has hitherto been given to the relationship between grammar and context. Simply put, the context in which a certain sentence successfully conveys its message has not been taken into account. This outlook focuses on the question of whether a sentence is “syntactically appropriate” without considering its context. However, this should be revised to properly describe and teach the features of LICs and other related constructions. We

must posit the argument that English grammar should turn more toward whether a sentence is “contextually appropriate” with reference to situations in which it is accepted. Consider the following example. In (11a), the *that*-clause, which serves as the subject of the entire sentence, is placed at the beginning, whereas it is extraposed in (11b):

- (11) a. That it might not work is also Dr. Weiss’s opinion.
b. It is his opinion at the moment that it might not work.

If a typical Japanese learner of English is made to believe that top-heavy subjects are unnatural in English, then how can one describe the contrast above? It is noteworthy here that it provides clear evidence against the basic assumption that top-heavy subjects should always be avoided. In fact, the addition of another sentence to each will suffice to concisely illustrate the difference, and the identical *that*-clause plays its own functional role in each context.

- (12) a. 1. Several scientists are of the opinion that tomorrow’s experiment might not be successful.
2. ***That it might not work*** is also Dr. Weiss’s opinion.
b. 1. Dr. Weiss is carefully considering tomorrow’s experiment.
2. *It is his opinion at the moment **that it might not work.***

(Schachter and Rutherford 1983: 306, emphasis added)

What is intended in the *that*-clause in (12a) is obviously mentioned: “tomorrow’s experiment might not be successful.” In other words, the *that*-clause in (12a) carries given information, which is placed at the beginning of the second sentence. In (12b), by contrast, the content indicated in the *that*-clause has never been brought up in the relevant context or in this case, the new information. Thus, the *that*-clause is

extraposed for the prominence of the new information.

In addition, (13) is an excerpt from a vignette in which “bullying” is being discussed by four office colleagues: Nissen, Breakstone, Garcia, and Umemura. We must draw attention to Umemura’s line in which the non-finite *to*-infinitive is left in situ:

(13) Nissen: Another thing this discussion brings to mind is bullying. It’s something we all encounter in childhood and adult life.

Breakstone: In the office and in the schoolyard, nobody likes or truly respects a bully. You should never abuse your position of power to bully members of your team at work. That’s a good way of losing the loyalty of your staff. And it may just happen that one of your employees becomes your boss someday.

Garcia: What goes around comes around, as they say.

Umemura: I can’t stand bullies. They’re such cowards. And **to use bullying tactics in the workplace** is so unprofessional.

Nissen: Something else I found unprofessional is ...

(Sugita 2012: 22, 26, emphasis added)

In (13), Nissen first mentions the subject of bullying encountered in childhood and adulthood, followed by Breakstone and Garcia. Following these three coworkers, Umemura comments on bullying in the workplace, which he says is “so unprofessional.” The *to*-infinitive left in situ in his utterance reflects that Umemura perceives the topic of bullying as old information and offers new information about bullying, which is realized with the phrase *so unprofessional* at the end of the sentence. In turn, Nissen tactfully receives Umemura’s new comment as old information and then follows with the topic of something else he “found unprofessional.” It may be a matter of little to no consequence to mention here, but

Umemura, a 32-year-old Japanese man, must have had a good command of English to place the *to*-infinitive at the original position instead of applying the extraposition, as seen in most Japanese learners.

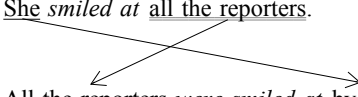
To sum up, it is debatable to teach learners to consistently extrapose or invert top-heavy subjects with little or no attention to the context or situation in which the sentence is acceptable. We are in a better position to state that it is necessary to introduce context-oriented grammar to English grammar in Japan to enlighten learners with the peculiarities of special constructions and LICs in English.

6. Conclusion

The present study has examined the advantage of describing grammar based on context compared to not resorting to context. Provided that one supports the latter viewpoint, LICs, among others, are simply a result of the evasion of top-heavy subjects. In this case, learners are often driven to analogically infer the evasion of top-heavy subjects from the constructions that involve the extraposition of subjects such as “It V ... to do ...” or “It V ... that S V ...” Conversely, accepting the former position allows us to view LICs as necessary for hearers/readers to capture information with minimal effort. Thus, learners should always bear in mind the context in which the sentence is suitable. This is presumably of significant help when one asks for the extension of learners’ competence from writing single sentences to paragraphs or passages.

There is no denying that English grammar in Japan has little concern for context and it focuses too much on the grammatical appropriateness of single sentences. This author maintains that a learner’s persistence to grammatically correct single sentences can hinder them from coping with top-heavy subjects, regardless of whether they are finite or non-finite. Hopefully, the notion proposed in this paper will help learners to better utilize these special constructions.

In addition, it is possible that the above argument calls for the alternation between the active and passive voice. English grammar has often dealt with passive sentences in comparison to their active counterparts. Most learners in Japan must acquire the passive voice with the aid of a typical pair of sentences with two lines or arrows crossed between the two sentences, as seen in (14). This indicates that the object element in the active voice moves to the subject position in the passive voice and that the subject in the active voice moves after the preposition *by* in the passive voice:

- (14) Active: She *smiled at* all the reporters.
- Passive: All the reporters *were smiled at by* her.
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It is true that both are acceptable at the level of single sentences, and that this alternation may be the substantial reflection of an operation advocated in early generative grammar. This often misleads learners into the incorrect postulation that the two sentences simply have the same semantic value. However, this generalization does not make sense in the following example. In this instance, the identical sentence is followed by the active and passive sentence, which clarifies that each second sentence includes a distinct semantic value:

- (15) a. Lady Gaga stepped off the plane. She smiled at all the reporters.
b. Lady Gaga stepped off the plane. The reporters were smiled at by her.

In most cases, (15b) sounds less common or natural compared to (15a), which displays a more natural flow of information. This disparity implies that each of the sentences includes a different semantic value. Furthermore, the alternation of voices, as seen in (14), should probably be equivalent to the problem with extraposition of

to-infinitives or *that*-clauses, as mentioned earlier.

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(Research Subject: Functional Constraints on Existential Sentences in English)

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