

THE PRAGMATICS, WORD ORDER AND PROSODY OF PREPOSING CONSTRUCTIONS: EVIDENCE FROM SPOKEN BRITISH ENGLISH

MATTHIAS MITTENDORFER

ROUNDTABLE ON THE INFORMATION STRUCTURE OF SPEECH

NOVEMBER 12 2024



universität
wien

- 1 Preposing constructions
- 2 Methodology
- 3 Data & results
- 4 Analysis
 - Topicalisation
 - Focus Fronting
- 5 Task urgency
- 6 Concluding Remarks

Preposing:

- fronting of lexically-governed constituent
- distinction between
 - Topicalization: marking/introducing (new) Topic (e.g. Halliday, 1967; Reinhart, 1981)
 - Focus Fronting: marking Contrast/mirativity (e.g. Cruschina & Remberger, 2017; Givón, 1993)

Examples:

- (1) a. G: Do you watch football?
E: Yeah, *Baseball I like a lot better.*
- b. A: Where can I get the reading packet?
B: In Steinberg. [Gives directions] *Six dollars it costs.*

(Birner & Ward, 1998, pp. 36–37)

Constraints:

- partially-ordered sets
- salient (i.e. presupposed) open proposition (OP)

- (2) a. G: Do you watch football?
E: Yeah, *Baseball I like a lot better*
- b. OP = I like to-X-degree {sports}, where X is a member of the poset {amounts}.
- (3) a. A: Where can I get the reading packet?
B: In Steinberg. [Gives directions] *Six dollars it costs.*
- b. OP = It costs X, where X is a member of the poset {prices}.

(cf. Birner & Ward, 1998; Prince, 1998; Ward, 1988)

Problems with earlier accounts:

- Information packaging
 - no grammatical reflex of Topic in English (cf. Mackenzie & Keizer, 1991; Prince, 1998)
 - Focus not necessarily realised in clause-initial position
- posets & OPs (cf. Clark, 1977; Prince, 1986)
 - necessary, but not sufficient conditions
 - e.g. sets also relevant in bridging contexts

Neither of these approaches can explain the placement of a constituent in clause-initial position

Problems with earlier accounts:

- Information packaging
 - no grammatical reflex of Topic in English (cf. Mackenzie & Keizer, 1991; Prince, 1998)
 - Focus not necessarily realised in clause-initial position
- posets & OPs (cf. Clark, 1977; Prince, 1986)
 - necessary, but not sufficient conditions
 - e.g. sets also relevant in bridging contexts

Neither of these approaches can explain the placement of a constituent in clause-initial position

- RQ₁: Which pragmatic features trigger the fronting of a lexically-governed argument of the verb phrase?
- RQ₂: In what way do these features affect the prosodic realisation of preposing?
- RQ₃: What is the interaction between the pragmatics, placement, and prosody of preposing?

ICE-GB: (Nelson et al., 2002)

- covers a wide variety of genres (private conversations, interviews, etc.)
- includes audio files

Data collection:

- data collected using Fuzzy Tree Fragments (FTF)
- searched for fronted NPs, PPs, ADJPs
- 43 items found; analysed following
 - the QUD approach (Riester et al., 2018)
 - 22 instances of Topicalization
 - 21 instances of Focus Fronting
 - ToBI (Beckman et al., 2006)

	NP	PP	ADJP	Total
TOP	20	2	0	22
FF	17	2	2	21
Total	37	4	2	43

Table 1: Distribution of syntactic classes across types of preposing

NB:

- NP preposing less constrained (cf. Birner & Ward, 1998)
- more specific contexts needed for other syntactic classes

Topicalisation:

- (4) a. A: Ferndale Business Services got in touch with you having seen an advertisement in one of the papers.
B: Well, *Ferndale I wrote to*.

(S1B-064 #098)

- b. Q₁: {Did Ferndale get in touch with you?}
> A₁: [Ferndale I [wrote to]_{Foc}]~.

- discourse- and hearer-old entity fronted
- *Ferndale* member of (discourse-old) poset {businesses}
→ other businesses mentioned in larger discourse context
- weakly contrastive

Focus Fronting:

- (5) a. A: Right. And your age is?
B: Twenty-five.
A: Twenty-five? Twenty-six, isn't it?
B: No. Twenty-five. *Sixty-seven I was born.*

(S1B-080 #113)

- b. Q₁: {When were you born?}
> A₁: [[Sixty-seven]_{Foc} I was born]~.

- discourse- and hearer-new entity fronted
- discourse-old poset {years}

Prosody of preposing: (cf. Birner & Ward, 1998)

- TOP → T* on preposed element; nuclear T* on non-preposed Focus
- FF → nuclear T* on preposed focal constituent

	o	H*	!H*	H+!H*	L+H*
TOP	1	15	3	0	3
FF	0	16	2	2	1

Table 2: Distribution of accents across types of preposing

	o	L-L%	L-	!H-
TOP	17	1	2	2
FF	16	4	1	0

Table 3: Boundary strength

PROSODIC FEATURES: TOPICALISATION

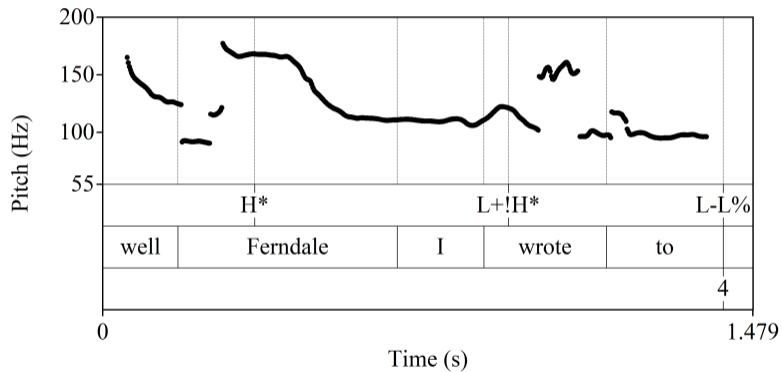


Figure 1: Pitch track of *Ferndale I wrote to* (TOP)

PROSODIC FEATURES: FOCUS FRONTING

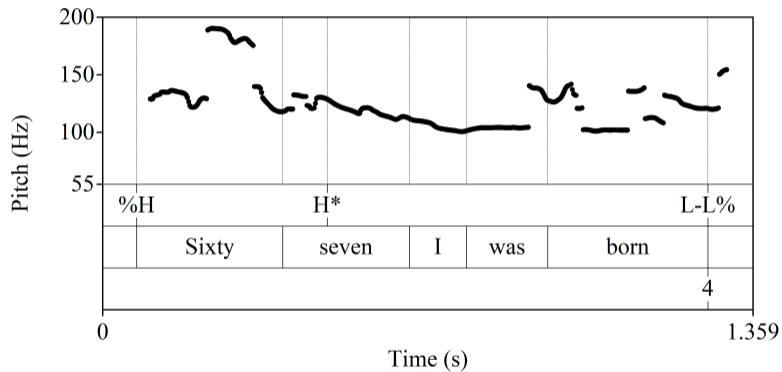


Figure 2: Pitch track of *Sixty-seven I was born* (FF)

- information packaging cannot explain
 - why an element gets fronted, i.e. w.r.t. Focus structure, TOP and FF do not have anything in common
 - the prosodically prominent (but integrated) realisation
- posets and OPs
 - capture what both TOP and FF have in common
 - but are only necessary conditions, i.e. do not trigger preposing

- (7) a. A: Ferndale Business Services got in touch with you having seen an advertisement in one of the papers.
B: Well, *I wrote to Ferndale.*
- b. A: Twenty-five? Twenty-six isn't it?
B: No Twenty-five. *I was born sixty-seven.*

- information packaging cannot explain
 - why an element gets fronted, i.e. w.r.t. Focus structure, TOP and FF do not have anything in common
 - the prosodically prominent (but integrated) realisation
 - posets and OPs
 - capture what both TOP and FF have in common
 - but are only necessary conditions, i.e. do not trigger preposing
- (7) a. A: Ferndale Business Services got in touch with you having seen an advertisement in one of the papers.
B: Well, *I wrote to Ferndale.*
- b. A: Twenty-five? Twenty-six isn't it?
B: No Twenty-five. *I was born sixty-seven.*

Principle of Task Urgency: (Givón, 1988, p. 252)

(8) Attend first to the more urgent task.

- if information is least predictable, it is most urgent to express
- has repercussions for word order in languages
 - less predictable information is ordered before predictable information

Focus Fronting:

(9) A: Right. And your age is?

B: Twenty-five.

A: Twenty-five? Twenty-six, isn't it?

B: No. Twenty-five. *SIXTY-SEVEN I was born.*

- *Sixty-seven* least predictable ('new' information) → age at issue, i.e. urgent
- presupposed information moved to a position directly following the Focus expression
 - pragmatically backgrounded
 - prosodic deaccentuation (cf. Ladd, 2008)
 - increases perceived prominence on clause-initial constituent

What about Topicalisation?

Focus Fronting:

(9) A: Right. And your age is?

B: Twenty-five.

A: Twenty-five? Twenty-six, isn't it?

B: No. Twenty-five. *SIXTY-SEVEN I was born.*

- *Sixty-seven* least predictable ('new' information) → age at issue, i.e. urgent
- presupposed information moved to a position directly following the Focus expression
 - pragmatically backgrounded
 - prosodic deaccentuation (cf. Ladd, 2008)
 - increases perceived prominence on clause-initial constituent

What about Topicalisation?

Topicalisation: not urgent in terms of predictability

(10) A: Ferndale Business Services got in touch with you having seen an advertisement in one of the papers.

B: Well, *FERNDALE* I wrote to.

- urgency grounded in what has been said before ('backward-looking')
 - clause-initial element functions as a referential link (cf. Reinhart, 1980)
 - urgency develops from the need to increase discourse coherence
- prosodic prominence result of urgency (cf. Mittendorfer, to appear)

- (11) a. A: Ferndale Business Services got in touch with you having seen an advertisement in one of the papers.
B: Well, *FERNDALE* I wrote to.
- b. I wrote to *Ferndale*.
- (12) a. During the Greco-Roman period Greek became the language of the administration [. . .]. *This STAGE we now call Coptic.*

(S2A-048 #014)

b. We now call *this stage* Coptic.

- moves Foc to position towards the end of the clause (End-Focus); thus
 - moving non-focal information to a position that is not inherently focal, e.g. (11a)
 - avoiding having to break up the Focus expression by non-focal information, e.g. (12a)

Preposing and task urgency:

- manifests itself differently for TOP/FF
 - TOP → discourse coherence
 - FF → unpredictability/importance
- interacts with Focus structure
 - TOP → moves Focus to position towards the end of the clause
 - FF → moves presupposed information to position *after* Focus (overrides End-Focus)

→ optimizes the information-structural organisation of the utterance
- left edge → position for communicatively important (i.e. urgent) information

REFERENCES I

- Beckman, M. E., Hirschberg, J., & Schattuck-Hufnagel, S. (2006). The Original ToBI System and the Evolution of the ToBI Framework. In S.-A. Jun (Ed.), *Prosodic typology: The phonology of intonation and phrasing* (pp. 9–54). Oxford University Press.
- Birner, B. J., & Ward, G. L. (1998). *Information status and noncanonical word order in English*. John Benjamins.
- Clark, H. H. (1977). Bridging. In P. N. Johnson-Laird & P. C. Wason (Eds.), *Thinking: Readings in Cognitive Science* (pp. 411–420). Cambridge University Press.
- Cruschina, S., & Remberger, E.-M. (2017). 14. Focus Fronting. In A. Dufter & E. Stark (Eds.), *Manual of Romance Morphosyntax and Syntax* (pp. 502–535). De Gruyter.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110377088-014>
- Givón, T. (1988). The pragmatics of word-order: Predictability, importance and attention. In M. Hammond, E. A. Moravcsik, & J. R. Wirth (Eds.), *Studies in Syntactic Typology* (pp. 243–284). John Benjamins.
- Givón, T. (1993). *English grammar: A function-based introduction* (Vol. 2). John Benjamins.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1967). Notes on transitivity and theme in English: Part 2. *Journal of Linguistics*, 3(2), 199–244.
- Ladd, R. D. (2008). *Intonational Phonology*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mackenzie, J. L., & Keizer, E. (1991). On assigning pragmatic functions in English. *Pragmatics. Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA)*, 169–215.
<https://doi.org/10.1075/prag.1.2.03mac>
- Mittendorfer, M. (to appear). Discourse functions, placement and prosody: An FDG analysis of left- and right-dislocation in British English.

- Nelson, G., Wallis, S., & Aarts, B. (2002). *Exploring natural language: Working with the British component of the International Corpus of English*. John Benjamins.
- Prince, E. F. (1986). On the syntactic marking of presupposed open propositions. In A. P. Farley & K.-E. McCullough (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 22nd annual meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society* (pp. 208–222). Chicago Linguistic Society.
- Prince, E. F. (1998). On the Limits of Syntax, with Reference to Left-Dislocation and Topicalization. In P. Culicover & L. McNally (Eds.), *The Limits of Syntax* (pp. 281–302). Academic Press.
https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004373167_011
- Reinhart, T. (1980). Conditions for Text Coherence. *Poetics Today*, 1(4), 161. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1771893>
- Reinhart, T. (1981). Pragmatics and linguistics: An analysis of sentence topics. *Philosophica*, 27(1), 53–94.
- Riester, A., Brunetti, L., & De Kuthy, K. (2018, August). Chapter 14: Annotation guidelines for Questions under Discussion and information structure. In E. Adamou, K. Haude, & M. Vanhove (Eds.), *Studies in Language Companion Series* (pp. 403–444, Vol. 199). John Benjamins.
- Ward, G. L. (1988). *The semantics and pragmatics of preposing*. Garland.