

This paper argues that certain sets of noncanonical constructions represent contextually conditioned variants of a single abstract construction, in the same way that we speak of allophones representing contextually conditioned variants of a phoneme. Such **alloforms** of an abstract syntactic construction share a discourse function but appear in distinct syntactic contexts. One such pair of alloforms are inversion (1) and *by*-phrase passives (2) in English:

- (1) “We do get those from time to time, but they’re rare,” the taxidermist said. *Above his head hung a massive seagull with its beak open, and next to him, on a tabletop, lounged a pair of hedgehogs.*  
[David Sedaris, *The New Yorker*, 10/22/12]
- (2) The Low Speed Chase was of Australian design, “a high-end racing boat, fast, a good boat,” said Andy Turpin, editor of Latitude 38, the sailing magazine in Sausalito. Boats like this would cost about \$200,000, he said. *The boat was owned by James Bradford, a 41-year-old San Francisco investor.*  
[Carl Nolte, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 04/22/12, from the Corpus of Contemporary American English]

Inversion requires its preposed constituent to represent information that is at least as familiar within the discourse (in the sense of Prince 1992) as that represented by the postposed constituent (Birner 1994, 1996a). Thus, we find naturally-occurring inversions with a preposed discourse-old constituent and a postposed discourse-new constituent, as in (1), as well as cases in which both constituents are discourse-old, or in which both are discourse-new. What does not occur are instances with a preposed discourse-new constituent followed by a postposed discourse-old constituent. The same constraint holds for passivization (Birner 1996b); that is, we find passives in which both the subject NP and the NP in the *by*-phrase are discourse-old, others in which both are discourse-new, and others in which the initial NP is discourse-old while the *by*-phrase NP is discourse-new, as in (2) above. However, we do not find cases in which the initial NP is discourse-new while the *by*-phrase NP is discourse-old. This similarity between inversion and passivization is brought out in the constructed examples in (3)-(4):

- (3) a. Jane owns a mahogany table. On the table is a beautiful vase.  
b. Jane owns a beautiful vase. #On a mahogany table is the vase.
- (4) a. Jane owns a beautiful vase. The vase was painted by her son.  
b. Jane has a talented son. #A beautiful vase was painted by him.

Thus, inversion and passivization obey the same discourse constraint. They are also in complementary distribution syntactically: There is no syntactic context in which inversion and the corresponding passivization are equally permissible. Passivization applies to transitives (5), while inversion applies to intransitives (6) and copular clauses (7):

- (5) a. *A new element, the 117<sup>th</sup>, was discovered by a U.S.-Russian team of scientists* after they smashed calcium and berkelium atoms in a particle accelerator.  
[Corpus of Contemporary American English]  
b. \**A new element, the 117<sup>th</sup>, discovered a U.S.-Russian team of scientists....* [as inversion]

- (6) a. The door shut with a faint whoosh. *Beyond a small vestibule with a place for coats and umbrellas lay a larger reception area paved in thick lilac pile.*  
[S. Paretsky, *Burn Marks*, Delacorte Press, 1990, p. 247]
- b. \*Beyond a small vestibule with a place for coats and umbrellas was lain by a larger reception area.
- (7) a. [...] *Beyond a small vestibule with a place for coats and umbrellas was a larger reception area paved in thick lilac pile.*
- b. \*Beyond a small vestibule with a place for coats and umbrellas was been by a larger reception area paved in thick lilac pile.

Quotative verbs provide an interesting case; here we typically find inversion, while passivization is infelicitous:

- (8) a. ‘Yes, we went to school in the sea, though you mayn’t believe it—’  
*‘I never said I didn’t!’ interrupted Alice.*  
*‘You did,’ said the Mock Turtle.*  
*‘Hold your tongue!’ added the Gryphon, before Alice could speak again.*  
[Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, Cricket House Books, p. 42, accessed via Google Books]
- b. ‘Yes, we went to school in the sea, though you mayn’t believe it—’  
#*‘I never said I didn’t!’ was interrupted by Alice.*  
#*‘You did,’ was said by the Mock Turtle.*  
#*‘Hold your tongue!’ was added by the Gryphon, before Alice could speak again.*

There is a reading in which, e.g., *‘Hold your tongue!’ was added by the Gryphon* (as in (8b)) is acceptable – in a context, say, in which we have a list of sentences and we’re discussing which character uttered which sentence, as in (9a). But this would be a mention, rather than a use, of the sentence *Hold your tongue* – and, as complementary distribution would predict, on this reading inversion is disallowed, as seen in (9b):

- (9) a. A: I remember that in *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice and the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon were talking, and one of them said ‘You did,’ and one of them said ‘Hold your tongue,’ but I can’t remember which one said which.  
B: It was the Mock Turtle that said ‘You did’; *‘Hold your tongue’ was added by the Gryphon.*
- b. [...] It was the Mock Turtle that said ‘You did’; #*‘Hold your tongue’ added the Gryphon.*

Finally, we do find sentences that incorporate both inversion and passivization:

- (10) For his camp Venters chose a shady, grassy plot between the silver spruces and the cliff. *Here, in the stone wall, had been wonderfully carved by wind or washed by water several deep caves above the level of the terrace.* They were clean, dry, roomy.  
[Z. Grey, *Riders of the Purple Sage*, in Z. Grey: Five Complete Novels, Avenel Books, NY, 1980, p. 58]

But here, the passivization creates the syntactic context that allows the inversion. The simplified canonical-word-order variant in (11a) does not permit inversion, as seen in (11b). However, it does permit passivization, as in (11c). This structure, in turn, permits inversion, as in (11d).

- (11) a. Wind had carved several deep caves in the stone wall.  
 b. \*In the stone wall had carved wind several deep caves.  
 c. Several deep caves had been carved in the stone wall by wind.  
 d. In the stone wall had been carved by wind several deep caves.

In sum, although a single sentence may incorporate both passivization and inversion, no one syntactic structure is equally subject to either passivization or the corresponding inversion. Thus, the two forms serve the same discourse function while being in complementary distribution, and constitute contextually conditioned alloforms of a single abstract construction.

Another such pair of alloforms are Italian presentational *ci*-sentences and subject postposing. Presentational *ci* occurs with a copula and requires its postverbal NP to be discourse-new; when it is discourse-old, infelicity results (Berruto 1986, Birner and Ward 1996, Ward 1999):

- (12) *C'è un ponticello* dove ogni anno, la notte del 2 aprile appare un fantasma.  
 there's a bridge where each year, the night of the 2 april appears a ghost

'There's a bridge where, each year on the night of April 2<sup>nd</sup>, a ghost appears.'  
 [=Birner and Ward 1996, ex. (23)]

- (13) A: Ho parlato con la Giulia oggi. Sta molto bene.  
 (I) have spoken with the Julia today. Is very well

'I talked to Julia today. She's doing very well.'

- B: Mi fa piacere. #A proposito, sai che c'era la Giulia alla festa  
 to-me makes happy. By the way, you know that there was the Julia at the party

di Paolo ieri sera?  
 of Paul yesterday evening

'That's good. By the way, did you know that Julia was at Paul's party last night?'  
 [=Birner and Ward 1996, ex. (27)]

Subject postposing in Italian differs from presentational *ci*-sentences not only in lacking *ci*, but also in that it is restricted to verbs other than *be*:

- (14) È arrivato stamattina una lettera dall' America.  
 arrived this morning a letter from the America

'A letter from America arrived this morning.'  
 [=Birner and Ward 1996, ex. (28)]

As shown in Birner and Ward 1996, subject postposing also requires that the postposed subject represent discourse-new information. Therefore, the two Italian postposing constructions share a single discourse constraint. Moreover, as noted in Ward 1999, they are in complementary distribution, with presentational *ci* applying to copular sentences and subject postposing applying to non-copular sentences. Thus, here again we have a case of a single abstract construction manifesting itself as distinct contextually conditioned alloforms.

We also find minimal pairs – that is, pairs of constructions that differ only in a single minimal feature of their form, yet differ in their functional effect:

- (15) a. Famous men came – engineers, scientists, industrialists; and eventually, in their turn,  
*there came Jimmy the Screwsman and Napoleon Bonaparte....*  
 [=Birner and Ward 1998, ex. (124b)]  
 b. Famous men came – engineers, scientists, industrialists; and, eventually, in their turn,  
*#there were Jimmy the Screwsman and Napoleon Bonaparte...*

In a context in which the postverbal NP is discourse-new but hearer-old, the presentational in (15a) is felicitous, whereas the existential in (15b) is not. This is because presentationals, which contain an intransitive verb, require their postverbal NP to be only discourse-new, while existentials, which contain a copula, require this NP to be hearer-new (Birner and Ward 1996). These groupings of forms into abstract constructions are also language-specific. For example, although the Italian *ci*-sentence is formally analogous to an English existential *there*-sentence, in that both postpone the subject and contain the verb *be*, it behaves functionally like the English presentational, in that both require their postposed constituent to be discourse-new. Thus, the Italian *ci*-sentence is the formal analog of the English existential, but the functional analog of the English presentational.

We can conclude that noncanonical syntactic constructions have contextually conditioned alloforms, and that the distinction between abstract types and their variants holds not only for phonology and morphology, but for noncanonical syntactic constructions as well.

## References

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