PRINCIPLED SENTENCE ARRANGEMENT

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1.   A student from Iran studying intermediate English at the University of Southern California recently submitted an assigned composition in which she had written the following passage:

> (1) .... *Our house had four bedrooms and two sitting rooms. A large garden was in front of the house. My father had planted a lot of flowers in the garden. These flowers were roses and tulips, etc.....*

In a first-stage improvement of the paper it was indicated that the passage would be better as something like this:

> (2) .... *Our house had four bedrooms and two sitting rooms. In front of the house was a large garden. In the garden my father had planted a lot of flowers. These flowers were roses and tulips, etc.....*

A second stage of improvement was then suggested along the following lines:

> (3) .... *Our house had four bedrooms and two sitting rooms. In front of the house was a large garden, where my father had planted a lot of flowers, including roses and tulips.....*

It is evident that the second stage involved some natural conversions of short sentences into relative clauses, a standard technique used in many ESL/ EFL classes. It was the first stage of improvement, however, that rearranged the constituents of the sentences in such a way that collapsing some of them into subordinate clauses was the obvious final step. Rearrangement, then, was the key to improvement of this paragraph.

Notice that what we have been looking at involves no "errors" as such, no violations of the formal rules of English syntax. Indeed, the word "correction" would not even be appropriate for describing what was suggested in the two rewrite stages. In "operating" on the sentence, so to speak -- that is, shifting certain constituents around -- the student started with a grammatical sentence and finished with a grammatical sentence (where "grammatical" refers simply to the well formedness of the sentence in isolation). What the student was being led to do, however, was choose among different possible ways of expressing a single meaning.

1.1.   Now the focus of classroom attention upon alternate ways of saying or writing things is nothing new. In textbooks, new and old, exercises abound in which the student is required to say or write a sentence in some semantically "equivalent" but syntactically different version. The term often used in the instructions for such exercises

is "transform". Courses are frequently laid out in such a way that the student is "exposed" first to the so-called "basic" forms, then to the various ways in which such forms can be, as it were, "transformed" or combined. After an ample amount of sentence-level work of this kind, the activity that usually follows is one in which the student freely expresses himself, whether in speech or in writing. But this free expression, even if grammatical violation is kept to a minimum, invariably produces the kind of jarring effect noted in (1), where individual sentences appear awkward only in the context within which they've been placed. It is not that the student did not know that it was possible for an English sentence to assume the shape preferred in that particular context; it was that she did not know that there are *reasons* for preferring one shape over another, in that context or any other.

In the remainder of this paper I will attempt (a) to restate some of the principles by which we select particular sentence arrangements in context, and (b) to suggest a number of written-exercise techniques that are designed to sharpen awareness of those principles.

2. One of the best informal statements of the criteria by which grammatical constructions are deemed appropriate or not is to be found in the last chapter of A *Grammar of Contemporary English*, by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1972). Very briefly, those grammarians remind us that there is a general tendency in English to let "old" or "given" information come early in a sentence and "new" or salient information come late, the so-called principle of "end focus." Parallel to this is another tendency to put "complex" constructions last in a sentence, the so-called principle of "end weight." Furthermore, since what is complex --- especially, for example, surface vestiges of underlying sentences --- is extremely likely also to be new information, the two principles work *with* rather than against each other. Applying the principle of end focus to example (1), we can easily see that in the second sentence of that example mention of the house, the old information, should come first, and the large garden, the new information, last. What gets the words into their proper positions is a grammar rule that allows us to reverse the two halves of a sentence containing a predicate consisting of a verb of place or direction plus a locative [*In the corner stood a clothes tree, Through the streets surged the mob, There lurked the assassin*].

2.1 What are some of the possible ways in which the student can practice giving proper shapes to sentences, as determined by their positions in discourse? One very obvious technique is simply to let the student choose between alternate sentence arrangements within a supplied context (Rutherford, 1975, 1977). We might then have exercises like the following:

(4) Kinesiology has a useful purpose.

a. *In order to learn how to analyse the movements of the human body we study it.*

b. *We study it in order to learn how to analyse the movements of the human body.*

2.2 Limitations placed by context upon the choices of sentence arrangement can facilitate the study of grammatical constructions per se. For exam-

ple, the options provided by the rule of "tough movement" [*English is tough to learn* / *It's tough to learn English*] become clearer when put into certain contexts:

> (5) What's an easy experiment to perform?
>   *It's easy to [demonstrate that the earth has gravity].*
>
>   Is it hard to demonstrate that the moon has gravity?
>   *No. That's easy to demonstrate [too].*

2.3 A sentence like *They believe that he has a police record* has two alternates in the passive: *It is believed that he has a police record* and *He is believed to have a police record*, this last representing what linguistics has sometimes termed the "second passive" (Stockwell, Schachter, and Partee, 1973). It is possible to "set up" the second passive through a series of sentences describing, say, someone who was seen breaking into the chemistry laboratory, where such description would consistently favor the culprit as "topic," or old information:

> (6) Think - they - (He has a police record)
>   *He is thought to have a police record.*
>
>   believe - they - (He was working alone)
>   *He is believed to have been working alone.*
>
>   expect - they - (He will try to break in again)
>   *He is expected to try to break in again.*

2.4 In the syntax of sentence negation, fronting of the negative element triggers subject-Aux inversion, a somewhat complicated operation [*She was not only.../ Not only was she...*]. Fronting is not natural, however, unless the negative attaches to a constituent that can be considered old information, as in the following rewrite:

> (7) When hydrogen and chlorine are mixed there is a combustion
>   reaction. You cannot actually see the reaction between the
>   two *at any time during the combustion process*, however.
>
>   At no time during the combustion process can you actually
>   see the reaction between the two, however.

2.5 In English, extraposition of sentential subjects where no context is specified is almost an obligatory rule (*To speak two languages is nice* / *It's nice to speak two languages*). The high probability that a sentential subject will be extraposed is explained by the principle of end weight. Although, as mentioned earlier, the principles of end focus and end weight tend to work together, complex structures usually carrying new information as well, this is not necessarily always the case. Complex structures are sometimes old information, and when this happens the two principles pull against each other. In formal written English the principle of end focus wins out. In these situations, in other words, sentential subjects do not extrapose. The choice for the student could be laid out in the following way:

(8) Dr. Weiss is carefully considering tomorrow's experiment.

It *That It might not work* is his opinion at the moment

Several scientists are of the opinion that tomorrow's

experiment may not be successful. *That it might not work* is also Dr. Weiss's opinion.

2.6 The possibilities for sentence arrangement, of course, are endless. The demands of discourse and context can affect, literally, any constituent of the grammar, and in the course of a paragraph adherence to rhetorical principles will require a sequence of sentences whose permutations, inversions, and preposings range over all of syntax. The student can be taught to recognize the choices within this diversity in paragraph layouts like the following, where single sentence alternatives occur horizontally, but sentence sequence vertically, from top to bottom, a drawn-in line connecting the end of one sentence to the beginning of its proper successor:

(9) *Weathering and erosion of rock exposed to the atmosphere constantly remove particles from the rock.*

	a	b	c
1.	*These rock particles are called sediment.*	*Sediment is what these rock particles are called.*	*What these rock particles are called is sediment.*

	a	b
2.	*The upper layers press down on the lower ones as sediments accumulate.*	*As sediments accumulate, the upper layers press down on the lower ones.*

	a	b
3.	*etc.*	*etc.*

2.7 For the practice of diverse kinds of rearrangement within a tight framework, the sentence "sandwich" is useful, where the ill-fitting middle sentence is re-ordered to properly connect the flanking sentences. The student decides what the re-ordering should be, writes it in, and crosses out the original:

(10) Air coming up from the lungs causes the vocal chords to vibrate.

The vocal chords stretch across the larynx. The larynx is the upper part of the respiratory tract.

or: The upper part of the respiratory tract is called the larynx.

Stretching across the larynx are the vocal chords. The vocal chords are caused to vibrate by air coming up from the lungs.

2.8 The middle sentence, however, need not even be supplied in full. It can be sketched out in case frame fashion, the verb always the leftmost element, where the student, again according to the principles of weight and focus, selects one of the given noun phrases for movement into subject position and writes out the resulting full sentence:

(11) *Scientists are engaged in many different kinds of activity.*

find necessary - some scientists - (Some scientists use very large number).

Some scientists find it necessary to use very large number.

Such as the distances to stars and galaxies. On the other hand,

often encounter - very small numbers

very small numbers are often encountered,

such as the dimensions of atoms and molecules.

be - one way to handle such numbers - (One expresses them as powers of 10).

One way to handle such numbers is to express them as powers of 10.

3. The ultimate opportunities — short of free expression itself — for exercising choice of sentence rearrangement would be something like a series of paragraphs in which *every* sentence is laid out in case frame fashion. Strictly speaking, however, the only part of a paragraph in which there is an actual "choice" of arrangement would be the opening sentence, the internal arrangement of every succeeding sentence being largely determined by what has immediately preceeded. But this is precisely one of the selection processes that operate in free speech and writing.

The preceding characterizations of the weight and focus principles are of course an oversimplification, and application of the principles, at least in speech, need not be confined to the order of sentence constituents. Similar ends can often be accomplished by means of special stress and intonation. What is important, however, is that for TESL/TEFL methodologies which feature the bringing of matters of language structure to the consciousness of the learner, it is not enough simply to teach the student the various syntactic forms in which any particular meaning can be realized; it is necessary also for the student to know that in practically any linguistic environment the choice among related grammatical forms is not arbitrary, and he should know enough of the principles of sentence arrangement to be able to make his choices appropriate.

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