English Word Order and the Principle of FSP

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Abstract. In the article, the syntactic potential of English is explored by carrying out a functional syntactic analysis of Carson McCullers’ short stories. The analysis shows that the main causes of noncanonical ordering of sentence elements in English are thematization by means of preposing and rhematization by postposing sentence elements. The preposed elements were semantically diverse, though the frequency of occurrence of different process type sentences varied. The postposed elements were process-specific. The ‘syntactic configurations’ of the canonical word order were determined by particular semantic, structural and contextual restrictions.

Keywords: (non)canonical word order pattern, thematization, preposing, postposing, immediately relevant context, retrievability span.

Introductory Remarks

In communication, a language user is naturally disposed to proceed from what is known to, or shared by, both the speaker/writer and hearer/reader and end with the information that is the most important. Such a disposition makes a language user transform the grammatical word order pattern SVO(A), i.e. comply with the requirements of the word order principle of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP).
Synthetic languages display a greater susceptibility to the said requirements than analytic languages; however, this difference seems to be unduly misinterpreted when it comes to translation from a synthetic to analytic language disregarding the principle of FSP (Cambell, 1998; Hatim, 2001; Newmark, 2003; Petronienė, 2007). That is why noncanonical word order patterns of analytic languages, like English, seem to need more extensive investigation to reveal the syntactic potential of the language to produce sentence patterns other than basic. One such attempt to explore the syntactic potential of English is taken here by carrying out a functional syntactic analysis of Carson McCullers’ short stories (Šimkienė, 2014).

A functional analysis of text sentences deals with a complex interaction of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The production of a sentence is seen as a multifaceted process taking place at the semantic, syntactic, and communicative level (Sgall, 1994; Halliday, 1990, 2002; Valeika, 2000; Van Valin, 2005). The semantic level is accountable for the semantic structure of the sentence which is a combination of semantic functions. The syntactic level structures the semantic components into a sentence pattern, or a clause. The communicative level turns a clause into a text sentence, or a contextualized clause. At the communicative level, a language can reveal its syntactic behavior, as the functional basis of any syntactic pattern is formed by the perspective in which some extra-linguistic reality is to be conveyed.

Accordingly, the present study addresses the following questions: what are the contextual restrictions (familiar, unfamiliar, or homogeneous information) on the use of noncanonical word order patterns in English? What are linguistic (structural peculiarities of the language) constraints? Are the identified noncanonical word order patterns process-specific?

**The Goal and the Method**

To answer the research questions, declarative sentences with the first element performing a syntactic function other than Subject (non-SVO(A)) were selected from the short stories ‘The Ballad of the Sad Café’ by Carson McCullers (2001). So, the English sentences based on the sentence patterns OSV, ASV, AVS and there\text{VAS} were submitted for the analysis.

Although the sentences were selected according to their syntactic constructions, the analysis is meaning-based and focuses on the communicative level of the sentence. To start with, the semantic structure of the selected sentences was analyzed by identifying the Process and its Participants and Circumstances. Then, the semantic elements were evaluated from the point of view of FSP. The syntactic level was also involved in identifying the communicative structure of the sentence. Afterwards, the contextual
peculiarities which conditioned the noncanonical word order patterns were described and the discourse functions were established. Finally, the data was assessed quantitatively.

The object of the study is a text sentence based on a finite clause. Non-finite clauses are treated as units within finite clauses. Subordinate finite clauses are also viewed as part of main finite clauses. The main clause serves as a linguistic resource for expressing a communicative situation, or in other words, for describing a Process, the Participant(s) the situation involves, and the attendant Circumstances. A typical realization of the Process in focus is the main verb of the finite clause. Participants can be realized by noun phrases or non-finite clauses or subordinate finite clauses. Circumstances are typically expressed by noun, adverb or prepositional phrases, non-finite clauses or subordinate finite clauses. The current study focused on noun phrases and prepositional phrases. Such syntactic units are generally less flexible than subordinate clauses from the syntactic point of view and can exert higher degrees of non-canonicity.

As mentioned earlier, the semantic structure of the sentence is composed of the Participants, the Process, (the Attributes) and the Circumstances. Participants are entities such as persons, objects or abstractions which employ the roles of Agents, Affected Participants, Recipients, Beneficiaries, Experiencers, Phenomena, Carriers, Attributes, Existents at the semantic sentence level (Valeika, Buitkienė, 2003). The semantic roles taken by Participants depend on the type of Process they take part in, or rather on the verb denoting the Process and its valency. The verb plays a crucial role in the sentence as it is the semantic, communicative and syntactic core of the sentence. The semantic properties of the verb are related to its combinability with other elements. All the elements in the sentence are structured due to the peculiarities of the verb, though the verb can be of obligatory and optional valency. Obligatory semantic components are Participants inherent to the Process, while optional semantic components are, as a rule, Circumstances non-inherent to the Process (ibid.).

In terms of FSP, any Participant, apart from the Existent, can express the role of the Theme and function on its own or form a part of the thematic structure, i.e. perform the function of Theme Proper or serve to extend the Theme of the sentence (Petronienė, 2007). Thematic sentence elements differ in the degree of Communicative Dynamism (CD) (Firbas, 1995). Theme is usually Given, i.e. thematic information is recoverable from the context of shared environment or from the immediately preceding text which is also called the immediately relevant context (ibid.). From the functional viewpoint, a semantic and grammatical sentence structure can function only when contextualized. Without context, the sentence cannot perform any communicative function. According to the requirements of FSP or the communicative principle, the thematic sentence elements precede the rhematic ones in a sentence. The present analysis attempts to reveal the syntactic potential of English by estimating its susceptibility to the communicative principle via preposing or postposing as alternative to the more common subjectivization.
A Short Description of the Analysis

In the course of the data collection, it was discovered that out of 3626 clauses 649 were based on noncanonical sentence pattern (non-SVO(A)). Such being the case, 649 English sentences were submitted for the analysis.

The analysis of the selected sentences revealed that the noncanonical word order patterns occurred in sentences of various Process types: Material, Happening, Mental, Relational, Verbal and Existential; however, the Material and Existential Processes were evidently predominant. By comparison, Material and Existential Process type noncanonical sentences made 76% of the sentences under investigation, and only 24% was shared by other Process type noncanonical sentences. The identified noncanonical word order patterns are described in more detail further below.

PREPOSING THEMATIC PARTICIPANTS

The OSV(A) pattern was used from 3% to 14% in various Process types. The Objects varied semantically. The said pattern was employed to thematize the Affected Participant, the Recipient, the Source, the Range, the Phenomenon and the Experiencer.

Consider the examples below:

(1) [Cousin Lymon had a very peculiar accomplishment, which he used whenever he wished to ingratiate himself with someone. He would stand very still, and with just a little concentration, he could wiggle his large pale ears with marvelous quickness and ease.] This trick he always used when he wanted to get something special out of Miss Amelia, (2) and to her it was irresistible. (McCullers, 2001, 59)

In sentence (1), the Affected Participant this trick is Given and easily recoverable from the immediately relevant context. It carries the lowest degree of CD and functions as the Theme of the sentence. The element this trick is co-referential with a detailed description of the character’s behavior in the preceding sentence. It represents discourse-old information and serves as a link to the prior discourse. Besides creating coherence, the resulting noncanonical word order brings about an emotional effect and helps the story teller to enhance the importance of one character’s role in the life of the other.

In sentence (2), the preposed Experiencer to her serves to express a logical relationship to the prior proposition and to emphasize the prominence of the Participant. The Participant can take the sentence-initial position to function as the Theme thanks to its familiarity from the point of view of the information it expresses – the Experiencer has a co-referent in the immediately preceding sentence. As mentioned above, such noncanonical ordering not only establishes a close link of ideas, but also adds some emotional charge to the description of the characters.

Consider two more examples below:

(3) [On autumn afternoons they sat on the back steps chopping sugar cane.] The glaring summer days they spent back in the swamp where the water cypress is a deep
black green, where beneath the tangled swamp trees there is a drowsy gloom.
(McCullers, 2001, 31)

In example (3), the Range the glaring summer days is given the function of Object and is placed early in the sentence, even though it is lexically governed (to spend time/a day). The Range is Given as it expresses information which is readily retrievable from the preceding sentence. As for the communicative intentions of the writer, the thematized Range expresses ‘contrastive newness’ (cf. on autumn afternoons) and effects a dynamic information flow.

(4) [To begin with she had no patience with any traveling:] those who had made the trip to Atlanta or traveled fifty miles from home to see the ocean – those restless people she despised. (McCullers, 2001, 63)

Being lexically governed (despise sb/sth) and structurally complex the Phenomenon seems to be determined to take a postverbal position in the sentence. Its preposing exerts high non-canonicity and thus helps to express a distinct feeling which the character has about the given Participants people. Such ordering of sentence elements also serves to relate two Processes performed by one Participant and in this way it effects direct linking. The preposed Participant is Given as it is recoverable form the immediately relevant context. Its thematization by means of preposing here brings about a noticeable strong effect on the mood of the story.

To sum up, the communicative analysis of the noncanonical sentences shows that non-canonicity is effected by the thematization of Participants by means of preposing. Although being lexically and syntactically governed, the elements at Object can appear in sentence-initial position, when they are context-dependent and the feature of Givenness develops from a retrievability span of one clause. From the communicative point of view, such patterns are used to maintain a close thematic link of the sentence to the neighboring sentences in the text, to build up strength of emotion, or to contrast important entities/ideas.

PREPOSING THEMATIC CIRCUMSTANCES

Being optional in the realization of Processes, less governed lexically and more flexible syntactically, the Circumstances at Adjunct appeared in different positions of the sentence: sentence –initial, –middle and –end positions. That was determined by the degree of CD which the circumstantial element carried within a sentence. When they expressed known information, i.e. they were Given and context-dependent, the Circumstances were placed in sentence-initial position and served as the departing point of the message. It was also evident that not all Circumstances have complete freedom to take any position in the sentence. As a result, the preposing of the Circumstances expressed by prepositional phrases exhibited a relative variation in the degree of non-canonicity in ordering sentence elements.

Consider the three examples below:
(5) [He did not wear trousers such as ordinary men are meant to wear, but a pair of tight-fitting little knee-length breeches.] **On his skinny legs he wore the stockings and his shoes were of a special kind, being queerly shaped, laced up over the ankles.** (McCullers, 2001, 24)

In sentence (5), the **Location on his skinny legs** does not have an explicit referent in the preceding text but the information is recoverable from the preceding context through the part-whole semantic relationship. **His skinny legs** represents familiar information as it refers to the part of the character’s body, thus it is **Given**. To perform the function of the **Theme**, it is placed in sentence-initial position. As the thematized Circumstance of **Location**, however, it not only sets the scene but also receives some prominence. The canonical pattern would require a postverbal use of the Circumstance: *to wear sth on one’s legs.*

(6) [When the last note had stopped vibrating, he closed the book and deliberately got up from the chair. He was moving his lower jaw from side to side] – **and between his open lips she could glimpse the pink healthy lane to his throat and his strong, smoke-yellowed teeth.** (McCullers, 2001, p. 100)

The Circumstance which is shifted towards the beginning of the sentence functions as **Theme**. It serves to locate the entity in place. Besides its main discourse function of linking, the Circumstance receives emphasis and gives a pause before the meaning of the sentence is completed. Such an effect is produced due to the change in the canonical word order of the given pattern *to glimpse/see sth between sb’s lips*, which is more directly governed from the semantic and syntactic point of view in comparison to the pattern used in example 5 above.

(7) [He regarded each person steadily at his own eye-level, which was about belt line for an ordinary man.] **Then with shrewd deliberation he examined each man’s lower regions – from the waist to the sole of the shoe.** (McCullers, 2001, 24)

Example (7) illustrates an even higher degree of non-canonicity. Unlike Circumstances of **Location**, Circumstances of **Manner** are more often context-independent than the opposite (Petronienė, 2007). They serve to restrict the Process which, as a rule, initiates the **Rheme**. Shifted to the beginning of the sentence, the Circumstance of **Manner** at **Adjunct** in sentence (7) receives emphasis but does not completely attract the focus. The sentence remains perspectived towards the entity expressed by the final element in the sentence. The preposed Circumstance of **Manner** does not reverse the perspective of the sentence. On the contrary, this gives a pause to form the emotional background and then guides the reader to the focus. Such a discourse function makes it possible to modify the pattern *SVO(A)*, although the function of **Adjunct** is conflated with the context-independent information and lexically governed language units. Separated from the Process by the agentive **Participant** constituent in the sentence, the **Circumstance of Manner** loosens its relationship to the Process and establishes a closer semantic relationship with the thematic **Agent**.
Summing up, Circumstances are peripheral, optional elements which make them syntactically more movable and flexible than the main elements of the clause. The present analysis showed that in a number of cases their position in the sentence was determined by the degree of familiarity of the information they expressed and by a particular discourse function they were assigned to perform. In sentence-initial position, the Circumstances-Adjuncts evoked various degrees of non-canonicity of the pattern. A further research is needed to establish correlations between preposing of Circumstances and noncanonical effects it exerts. The results of this analysis suggest that the main reasons for Adjuncts to be preposed are to build scene-setting, to establish a logical relationship and/or produce a dramatic effect.

POSTPOSING RHEMATIC PARTICIPANTS

Existential Processes are the processes of being or existing. The function of Existential Processes is to state the existence, or coming into existence, of an entity called the Existent in a given location, i.e. it serves a presentative function of introducing an entity into the discourse. As a result, the Existent, although at Subject, is postposed to the end of the sentence. The research shows that such sentences reflected the following word order patterns: (1) A + ‘dummy’ there + V + S, (2) ‘dummy’ there + V + A + S, and (3) A + V + S.

Consider the examples below:

(8) [Now, this was the beginning of the café. It was as simple as that. Recall that the night was gloomy as in wintertime, and to have sat around the property outside would have made a sorry celebration.] But inside there was company and a genial warmth. (McCullers, 2001, 28)

Sentence (8) is noncanonical, but the ordering is in compliance with the Theme-Rheme perspective. The preposed Locative Circumstance establishes a clear link to the preceding text and effect coherence as well as a smooth information flow. The structural Subject there enables the notional Existent Subject to take sentence-final position, the legitimate position of the Rheme.

A different degree of non-canonicity is reached when the Location is placed in the postverbal position in the sentence and precedes the notional Subject. Consider:

(9) [Where Miss Amelia stood, the light from the chinks of the stove cast a glow, so that her brown, long face was somewhat brightened. She seemed to be looking inward.] There was in her expression pain, perplexity, and uncertain joy. (McCullers, 2001, 30)

The given pattern performs the function of emotional coloring. Such ordering of sentence elements modifies there-construction and seems to give an intentional pause before presenting specific emotions. The Locative Circumstance is Given as the information is recoverable from the immediately relevant context, in other words, immediately preceding sentences. Taking into consideration the listing of emotions and their complexity of combination, it seems especially important for the writer to
highlight the emotions rather than their location, which is achieved by placing the Locative element in a noncanonical position.

In the analyzed texts, the Existential Processes were expressed by the verb be and verbs other than be. When used in Existential sentences, verbs of occurrence lose their dynamic quality and function as presentational. As the analysis shows, the presentational English verbs appeared in an inverted word order pattern without a ‘dummy’ there. Some linguists note the functional difference between the presence and the absence of there (Bolinger, 1977; Breivik, 1981; Birner, Ward, 1998; Fawcett, 2010). Sentences without there are said to convey a ‘visual impact’, as if the scene is before one’s eyes and no preparation is required to present an entity (Breivik, 1981, 12). It should be observed that in such situations the Circumstance presupposes the existence, or occurrence of an entity. Consider:

(7) [A spinner who has thought only of the loom, the dinner pail, the bed, and then the loom again – this spinner might drink some on a Sunday and come across a marsh lily. And in his palm he might hold this flower, examining the golden dainty cup,] and in him suddenly might come sweetness keen as pain. (McCullers, 2001, 15)

The verb come is instigated by the Circumstance which expresses the meaning of direction rather than a point in Location. In the given situation, the Circumstance presupposes the occurrence of an entity. The pattern A + V + S marks inclusion in a sequence and presents an entity onto the scene with some emotional charge. The Location is contextually bound and easily recoverable from the immediately relevant context. It functions as the Theme and through the presentational Process leads towards the rhematic Existent.

To summarize, existence was expressed by noncanonical word order patterns, which was caused by the rhematic character of the Existent and inherent Givenness of the Circumstance of Location. The latter formed the thematic background of the existential sentence. The preposed Circumstances of Location served to establish a close link of the sentences with the preceding text and to create a distinct mood by strengthening the emotional coloring of the story.

**Conclusions**

The results of the functional syntactic analysis of noncanonical declarative sentences lead to the following conclusions:

Noncanonical word order patterns are used in the realization of different Processes. However, the frequency of occurrence of such patterns with regard to Processes varies.

Existential Process type sentences having noncanonical word order can be explained with reference to the functional peculiarities of the components of the Process: the
**Existent Subject** tends to take sentence final position to function as *Rheme*, while inherently thematic *Location* at *Adjunct* appears at the beginning of the sentence.

Fewer instances of noncanonical word order in the realization of other Processes point to valency characteristics of the verbs used to express various Processes; however, noncanonical word order patterns can be determined by the context and discourse functions which affect the regular verb valency patterns.

*Postposing* appears to be Process-specific, while preposed elements are semantically diverse. However, different types of Circumstances outnumbered Participant types. This can be explained by the difference in their semantic and syntactic functions. The Participant *Objects* are semantically and syntactically more tightly bound to the main verb of Process than the Circumstantial *Adjuncts* are.

*Preposed* Circumstances varied in the degree of non-canonicity they evoked. Degrees cannot be estimated by artificially created measurement but can be recognized when comparing structural peculiarities of Circumstances, their semantic involvement in the Process and their contextual boundness. Patterns with preposed Circumstances are used to provide direct linking with the preceding text, to set a circumstantial framework or/and to produce emotional effects.

The syntactic unity of the main verb and its *Object* can be interfered when the *Object* expresses information of high familiarity, in other words, when Givenness is inferred from a very short retrievability span – one clause long. Patterns with preposed Participants at *Object* are used to mark the strength of emotion, contrast or a shift in the mood of the story.

The conclusions cannot be viewed as final. It would be fruitful to pursue further research including other English speaking authors.

**References**


The research data have been drawn from:

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**Santrauka**

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**Esminiai žodžiai:** (ne)tipiška žodžių tvarka, teminimas, prepozicija, postpozicija, aktualusis kontekstas.

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