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Proceedings of the 2nd Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society (1976), pp. 280-285

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The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society is published online via [eLanguage](#), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

CONSTRAINTS ON THE ORDERING OF IF-CLAUSES

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This paper discusses the problem of the ordering of if-clauses. For sentences containing an if-clause and a main clause, both orderings of the clauses are grammatical. The question is how the speaker chooses one order, that is, what constraints operate on the construction of such sentences in real time.

To study this question, we must examine the sentences within a discourse context, so as to be able to do more than speculate about what factors operate as constraints. The discourses of this study are taken from a series of interviews with middle class New York City housewives. They include narratives of personal experience, pseudo-narrative accounts of daily routines --cooking dinner, getting the family off to work in the morning, describing the layout of an apartment, and explanations, including a series of explanations of the rules of a baby-sitting co-op. Questions eliciting these discourse units were included in the interview because each of these units requires the speaker to produce a fairly complex organization of spatial, temporal, or propositional items. In this data, the sentences containing if-clauses are almost entirely non-past sentences, expressing actual alternatives as background conditions or necessary conditions for the propositions expressed in the main clauses of the sentences. As we would expect from the nature of the discourse units, counterfactuals are extremely rare. They occasionally occur in past-tense narratives. They do not occur in pseudo-narrative accounts of daily routines, which present a conventionalized or idealized account of sequences of events. In order to elicit counterfactuals, a request for some reinterpretation of past events would probably be best, some form of "If you had it to do all over...."

In this body of data, there are 34 sentences containing if-clauses. 27 of these are preposed to the main clause and 7 are postposed. That is, 80% of these sentences have the if-clause preposed. A figure like this strongly suggests that the speakers' choice of position for the if-clause cannot be unmotivated. (The hypothesis of unmotivated choice, that is, syntactic free variation, is always suspicious. It is most unlikely that speakers will maintain two patterns as pure synonyms without any functional differentiation.) The most general statement of the constraint on ordering is that the order of clauses will not reverse the order of events in real time. Of the sentences with preposed if-clauses, we find two relations between the times of the events reported in the two clauses. One is that the event reported in the if-clause precedes that of the main clause--9 cases; the other is that the event of the if-clause includes or is simultaneous with the time of the event reported in the main clause,--13 cases. (1) and (2) are examples of the first; (3) (4) and (5) are examples of the second.

- (1) If you baby-sit for somebody, they pay you in timecards.
- (2) So if I ever get pinched, which has happened, I just take the baby over there and leave her until I get things cooked and go back and get her.
- (3) If I'm doing pickled beets or something like that, the day before I'll mix up onion and vinegar and whatever and put stuff in a jar to cool in the refrigerator.
- (4) And if it's a Saturday it's easy, cause my husband takes the kids and I just spend the whole day arranging things.
- (5) I mean, if you're going to be sitting in a playground with somebody, you may as well be sitting in a playground with somebody who you feel you have something in common with, somebody who's interesting.

There are two possible relations of two events in time--linear order and inclusion. The constraint on if-clauses predicts that only one ordering of each of these will occur: the preceding event or the including event will be mentioned before the following event or the included event. Thus, although sentences like (6) and (7) are clearly grammatical, they are not produced.

- (6) They pay you in timecards if you baby-sit for them.
- (7) You take it off the stove if it starts to boil.

At first glance, it is quite startling that unimpeachably grammatical sentences like these are not produced. However, previous studies of discourse have shown that real-world configurations can have an almost categorical effect on the production of sentences, so that apparently grammatical sentences do not occur. (Linde 1974a, Linde and Labov, 1975) Also, the constraint on if-clauses is, in effect, a local instance of an extremely general principle of the organization of discourse: the reported order of events will mirror the actual order. On a discourse level, this is the defining property of narratives, and by extension, of pseudo-narratives. (Labov 1972, Wald, 1976) The analysis of narratives requires a division of clauses into two types, distinguished not exclusively by syntactic form but by the type of proposition expressed, as well. Narrative clauses express events, and are in general constrained by the putative real-world order of these events. Free clauses express either background information for orientation or evaluative material, and are not as strongly constrained in their ordering. Similarly, the analysis of apartment layout descriptions, a form of pseudo-narrative, requires a selection of the information to be conveyed, from all the information the speaker has about his apartment. This information is

then ordered. The description is in the form of an imaginary tour, and the ordering of the mention of rooms is constrained by the order in which they would be encountered during the imaginary tour. Although additional constraints operate to impose order in cases where the tour would allow a choice, the fundamental principle is that if possible, the ordering of information follows the temporal order established by the choice of a tour strategy. Indeed, it appears to be the case that in the description of any discourse unit, the ordering problem is one of the two major operations necessary before the actual choice of syntactic pattern and lexicon can be described. The first operation is the choice of information, which may be arrayed as an unordered network. The second stage orders the information, using the temporal ordering principle if possible, if not, then the most accessible ordering principle. (Linde, to appear)

We can see, then a relation between a very general principle of discourse ordering and a particular, sentence level ordering problem. A similar relation appears to hold between the principle of temporal ordering and the interpretation of conjoined sentences--the problem of asymmetric conjunction. The problem is too complex to be reviewed here, but the strategy of interpretation seems to be that if two clauses can be interpreted as being temporally ordered, they will be. (Schmerling, 1975)¹

We see then that there are extremely general principles influencing the preposing of if-clauses. And yet the preposed order is not categorical; there are seven cases in which the if-clause is postposed. The question is, under what circumstances do speakers produce sentences like following.

- (8) She gets upset if she doesn't see me in the morning.
- (9) I stick to pretty traditional meals, like, you know, you have to have fish or meat if I can afford it.²
- (10) There are benches that are obstructing you if you have to run.
- (11) And so it turned out it was one of those very involved New York situations where they, the people who had the apartment, wanted to get another apartment and they could only do it if they rented theirs.

With one exception, these examples all involve either negatives or modals, both of which can be analyzed as irrealis elements.³ Negatives are used to deny an expectable or plausible possibility. Modals are used to postulate the possibility but not the actual occurrence of some possibility. It is clear then that clauses containing either a negative or a modal are exempt from the general constraint on temporal ordering, since such clauses do not refer to events which are to be taken as being in the time stream.

It is important to note that an irrealis clause is not always postposed; there are preposed ones also, for example, (12) and (13).

- (12) If he can't, if he's away or something, I take her.
- (13) If Eric's home in the morning, which has been happening the last couple of months, which has been very nice, I don't have to bother getting Jonathan dressed.

It is not yet apparent what factors influence the ordering of irrealis clauses, if the temporal ordering principle does not apply.

The structure of the conditioning of the two choices is the same as the organization of discourse constraints which we have come to expect. The recurring structure is that there is one or more marked syntactic patterns, which are constrained in their use, and an unmarked pattern, which may occur everywhere, including the conditioning environment of the marked patterns. Often, as in the case of preposition of if-clauses, the unmarked pattern is the most frequent. But if there are enough different marked patterns, this may not be the case. An example of this is the use, in apartment layout descriptions, of sentences containing a locative, a copula, and a designation of a room with or without the dummy *there*, locative existential sentences. Examples are (14), (15), (16) and (17).

- (14) To the right is my bedroom.
- (15) My bedroom is to the right.
- (16) There's my bedroom to the right.
- (17) To the right there's my bedroom.

(14) is the unmarked pattern; it may be used under all conditions, while (15), (16) and (17) have constraints on their use. While sentences like (14) are the single most frequent type, they are less frequent than the sum of the marked patterns. Here, clearly, markedness must refer to complexity of conditioning, rather than to simple statistical frequency. (Linde 1974)

Syntactic patterns are marked only within a specific discourse type. The status of the locative existential sentences discussed above is their markedness within apartment layout descriptions; this is the result of the organization of information peculiar to this discourse type. Similarly, the conditioning on if-clauses holds in discourses whose organizing principle is temporal ordering. It is not apparent *a priori* exactly what the constraints would be in discourses which must be organized by some other principle.

Even within the discourse types we have been examining, the informational status of a pattern is not static; it can easily be

changed. For example, as we have seen, single irrealis clauses are exempt from the temporal ordering principle. But it is quite possible to get a sequence of irrealis clauses, which may then form an embedded narrative, itself subject to the temporal ordering principle. The underlined portion of (18) is an example.

- (18) And he was like home about forty-five minutes after he had left. Then we got worried because we thought Jan couldn't find him and she'd be worried that he couldn't find his way home and she was supposed to baby-sit at four o'clock and it was like three o'clock then. So Bob went down and looked for her.

Jan's being unable to find him, at a pre-arranged meeting point, occurs before her being worried. (It is interesting to note that the report of her worry itself contains a further irrealis embedding.)

This case of an embedded irrealis sequence raises extremely complex problems. It must be distinguished from flashbacks, meanwhile-back-at-the-ranch cases, in which a sequence of narrative clauses referring to the same stream of events as the rest of the narrative has been displaced out of actual temporal order.⁴ The important point is that in analyzing constraints on the use of a pattern, it is necessary to consider not only the form and meaning of the conditioning factor itself, but also its functioning within a discourse type.

FOOTNOTES

0. I am extremely grateful to Michael Cole, Joseph Goguen, Ray McDermott, Geoffrey Nunberg, Chiahua Pan, and Benji Wald for pointing out to me, in the various states of the writing of this paper, what I was talking about. Remaining unclarity and errors are my own.

1. The discussion of this problem has been complicated by a failure to differentiate between conjoined sentences with coreferential surface subjects and those with conjoined VPs. Conjoined VPs are much more likely to be interpreted as simultaneous, while conjoined sentences are more likely to be interpreted as temporally ordered. This is particularly the case when the sentences are conjoined with and then, a form of conjunction which does not occur with conjoined VPs, although it is perfectly grammatical. (Linde 1975)

2. The variation in pronoun choice in this sentence may be confusing. It appears to be the result of emotional stress: the speaker is afraid that because of financial difficulties, she is not feeding her son adequately. In general in these discourses, it seems to be the case that emotional disturbance produces syntactic disruption of a kind not otherwise found.

3. The exception seems to involve an afterthought, signalled by the use of Oh.

- a. Oh in the meantime you put in the rice and make the salad, if you're having a salad.

4. On-going research on flashbacks indicates that they are most commonly used for events unknown to the narrator at the time of their occurrence. These events are inserted in the sequence at the point of their becoming known to the narrator. However, crucial problems remain with the analysis of multiple-protagonist narratives, which necessarily involve continuous parallel streams of events.

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