

Elaboration: A Function and a Form

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# ELABORATION: A FUNCTION AND A FORM

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## I. Introduction

The term 'elaboration' has been used in work on Rhetorical Structure Theory (cf. Mann and Thompson (1987, 1988) and Thompson and Mann 1989), as well as in related work by Hobbs (1983, 1990) and Polanyi (1988), to refer to a particular type of relation that may hold between two or more utterances. In this paper, I discuss a *construction* in English which is distinguishable from sentences with null subjects primarily by a pragmatic constraint limiting its use to situations in which the phrase will bear an elaborative relation to the previous phrase (cf. Cote 1996).<sup>1</sup>

## II. The Relation

An elaboration is one of many types of rhetorical relationships that have been argued to affect discourse structure. Though there is a clear area of overlap in the formal definitions of elaboration, there are also significant differences.

Mann and Thompson, in their work on Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST), define the effect of elaboration as follows: 'R [a reader] recognizes the situation presented in S [a 'satellite' utterance] as providing additional detail for N [a 'nucleus']. R identifies the element of the subject matter for which detail is provided.' (Mann and Thompson 1987:273).

Under their definition, elaboration is a fairly broad relation, subsuming more specific relations such as set-member, whole-part, process-step, and object-attribute, which all provide additional detail about a nucleus situation. Mann and Thompson also propose that both clause combining and general text combining may use the same relations. Example 1 is one instance of a text which they characterize in this way.

1. [name], Sweden, will be the site of the 1969 International Conference on Computational Linguistics, September 1-4. It is expected that some 250 linguists will attend from Asia, West Europe, East Europe including Russia, and the United States. The conference will be concerned with the application of mathematical and computer techniques to the study of natural languages, the development of computer programs as tools for linguistic research, and the application of linguistics to the development of man-machine communication systems. (Mann & Thompson 1987:273)

Hobbs, in his work on coherence and text-building, offers another definition of elaboration: 'A segment of discourse S1 is an elaboration of segment S0 if the same proposition is inferred from both S0 and S1, and one

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<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank members of the audience at the Berkeley Linguistics Society's annual meeting, as well as Ellen Prince and the participants in the discourse seminar at the University of Pennsylvania, for helpful comments on this research. I'd also like to express appreciation to the Institute for Research in Cognitive Science for providing access to the switchboard database.

of the arguments in P is more fully specified in S1 than in S0.' (Hobbs 1983:31)

Polanyi (1988) adopts the same definition for a type of discourse embedding, and an example from her work is given in 2 below.<sup>2</sup>

2. John is a great cook.  
 He took all the home economics courses in High School.  
 He was a cook in the army.  
 He took the Cordon Bleu course in France last year.  
 (Polanyi 1988:609)

Despite differences, each of these theories of elaboration is concerned with a particular relation and with how it and other relations build discourse or text structure. They are not concerned with the characteristics of a particular syntactic form. Mann and Thompson state this explicitly: 'The schemas which compose the structural hierarchy of a text describe the functions of the parts rather than their form characteristics.' (Mann and Thompson 1987:85) Nevertheless, given that sentence structure is one of the tools used to structure discourse, it should not be surprising to find a construction in English which indicates this relation.

In particular, two phrases bound together intersententially may bear a different or more explicit relation than those that are independent but immediately adjacent to each other. Chafe argues that even after a period intonation a speaker may 'tack on' another intonational unit which 'conveys a piece of supplementary information relevant to that same sentence.' (1988:6) He suggests that this structure may be used to note afterthoughts and wheel-spinning. Examples of each of these are given in 3 and 4 respectively.

3. a. ... it was quite .. striking when we were .. the year we were in  
 Japan.  
 b. ... three years ago. (Chafe 1988:6)
4. a. ... yeah.  
 b. ... that's right.  
 c. ... yeah ... that's the idea. (Chafe 1988:7)

Though Chafe is concerned in this work with just spoken language and how intonational units convey the flow of ideas, it should be noted that there are similarities between his examples and the construction I describe below.

### III. The Construction

In appropriate contexts, conversational English permits utterances with phonologically-null subjects. Naturally-occurring examples of this construction are given in 5-7 below.

5. Okay, well, **0** enjoyed it. (**0** = I)  
 6. **0** Have to make sure they don't get out of hand. (**0** = you)  
 7. **0** Beats me. (**0** = it)

Discussions of the nature and function of utterances of this type can

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted however, that Polanyi re-labels what Hobbs calls an elaboration as an 'ISA' relation.

be found in Cote (1996), Thrasher (1974), Napoli (1982), Zwicky and Pullum (1983), and Zwicky (1987). The exact analysis given for these utterances varies, but they are consistently described as either being or being derived from syntactically complete and independent sentences.

There is, however, a superficially similar construction which has some unique properties. Utterances of this type are given, with some context, in examples 8-11.

8. A: And then they changed the game.  
B: and they changed it and gave us another game in the middle of another, you know, one that was going on.  
A: Right.  
B: *0?* *Cut us off right there in the last few seconds.*
9. A: But they had [laughter] the time of their lives, you know.  
B: Oh, yeah [laughter].  
A: *0?* *Had the boat just pulled up right by the tents.*  
B: Uh-huh.  
A: It wasn't bad.
10. A: Well, we're, we're moving to a new house, and so, we'll have to get started over there --  
B: Oh.  
A: -- *0?* *decide what we're going to plant and everything.* At the old house we had a lot of roses.
11. A: Well, you've really got a handle on this stuff I've noticed.  
B: Not, not,  
A: *0?* *Got the vocabulary down and everything.*

Like examples 5-7 above (henceforth referred to as null subject utterances), these tokens are lacking overt subjects (or subj-aux), but they differ in substantive ways from the earlier examples and also form a clear functional class. A priori, it is neither certain that these utterances are full sentences nor even clear that they are structurally distinct from the speaker's previous utterance. In fact, I argue they represent instances of a different type of construction and suggest that this construction has a specific elaborative function associated with it. I will therefore refer to them from this point on as elaborations.

The data on null subjects used here was taken from the switchboard corpus, a text and audio database of 5-10 minute telephone conversations on a variety of everyday topics. The construction examined in this paper was first noticed in this database and additional examples were then overheard or found in other sources.<sup>3</sup>

The first immediately noticeable difference between null subject utterances and utterances like those in 8-11 is that the null subject in null subject utterances need not refer to the the same entity as the subject of the previous phrase. The highlighted phrase in examples 8-11 is, in contrast, necessarily the same as the subject of the previous utterance spoken by the same speaker. In addition, it turns out that there are feature differences in the referent of the subject of the two types, as shown in figure 1 below.

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<sup>3</sup>All tokens taken from sources other than the switchboard corpus have the source cited.

% 3rd Person Referential Subjects

NULL SUBJECTS = < 20%  
ELABORATIONS = 60%<sup>4</sup>

% 3rd Person Animate Subjects

NULL SUBJECTS = near 0%  
ELABORATIONS = > 75%

[Figure 1]

Elaboration constructions also differ from null subject utterances in that they readily occur in written and even very formal registers. Example 12 is one token which demonstrates how acceptable and felicitous an elaboration may sound even in a clearly literary construction, and example 13 is also a written token, taken from a newspaper article.

12. 'Because then your hands are clean, so you can wash your face with them.' This was pure mentation, since Claude seldom washed at all, *was, in fact, slovenly and far beyond such niceties of personal hygiene.* (Conroy 1993:10)
13. [Name] gave his 1951 Heisman Trophy to the Princeton football program, gave it to his alma mater rather than have it on display at his home or place of work.

The frequency of the elaboration construction and its use in written contexts make it unlikely that they should be treated as instances of performance error. The fact that the subjectless phrase in each case consistently occurs bound in a specific, elaborative relation to the previous phrase is further evidence that these phrases are part of a well-defined construction.

Coordination constructions (or parataxis) may also appear without an explicit conjunct joining the two phrases, as shown in 14 below.

14. She leaned forward, kissed him full on the mouth to the cheers of the crowd, and broke away. (Conroy 1993)

In addition, elaborations seem like implicit coordination in that there are examples that occur with other types of phrases besides tensed verb phrases. For instance, examples 15-18 contain tokens with untensed verb phrases, noun phrases, and prepositional phrases. Example 19 is arguably even an elaborative construction formed of two full sentences.

15. The sound itself seemed to wrap him in a kind of protective cloak, *to encase him in a bubble of invisible energy.* (Conroy 1993)
16. B: You know, I can remember as a child,  
A: [Throat\_clearing].  
B: uh, spending summers at my grandfather's place, and I'd be running around with nothing but a bathing suit, *no shoes, socks, shirts, or anything.*

<sup>4</sup>The control data (all overt pronominal subjects had 33% 3rd person referential subjects).

A: Uh-huh.

B: Uh, I mean, from dawn till dusk.

17. If anyone paused he could see detail -- *straps, eyelets, a worn heel, or cracked leather with the sock showing through* -- but it was the movement that he liked, *the passing parade of color and motion.* (Conroy 1993)

18. B: Uh, yeah, well I've got, uh, oh, several shrubs outside,

A: Uh-huh.

B: uh, *out there*, uh, #depending on,#

A: #Have you# ever tried any vegetables?

B: No, I never have, uh,

19. A: It gets a little dusty there -- *Lubbock blows by there about once a month*, if I remember [laughter].

Finally, like coordinations, one elaboration may be embedded inside of another, as in example 20.

20. B: Right, so and we, uh, we try to teach our kids as much as we can at home, *you know, we have, we try to spend like Monday nights, we call it family home evening*,

A: *Uh-huh.*

B: *and, have our kids, uh, you know, have little lessons with them, and, you know, just see, count, see how things are going in our family and, you know, teach them about their grandparents or something like that. Bring out pictures of them so they get to know them and, we just do all kinds of fun things like that an.*

Of course, an elaboration differs from a coordination in that the overt conjuncts that may occur with a coordination are infelicitous with an elaboration. In other words, elaborations either do not sound right or do not retain the same meaning when, for instance, and, or, or but is placed in between the two parts or too is inserted at the end. Note how odd 8 (repeated here as 21) sounds with and placed before the second component of the elaboration, and how the meaning of 11 (repeated here as 22) is changed.

21. A: And then they changed the game.

B: and they changed it and gave us another game in the middle of another, you know, one that was going on.

A: Right.

B: ??and *Cut us off right there in the last few seconds.*

22. A: Well, you've really got a handle on this stuff I've noticed.

B: Not, not,

A: ??and *Got the vocabulary down and everything.*

Example 21 is odd because the insertion of and makes it seem as if B doesn't know that he has already told us that the television station stopped showing the game he wanted to watch right at the end of it. In example 22, A seems to be making a second observation about B now, rather than clarifying what she meant before. The effect of the and in these cases is explained by the fact that, unlike coordination, the two parts of an elaboration overlap in content.

Grimes (1975) describes a number of examples similar to elaborations as instances of hypotaxis of various types. In particular, he gives examples of attributive, equivalent and 'specifically' hypotaxis, shown here as examples

23, 24, and 25 respectively.

23. Oh! but he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! - a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.
24. We planned to leave on May 1, the day of the spring celebrations.
25. He was not a very ceremonious beau; he never sent her flowers or whispered silly things in her ear...

Elaborations also bear some similarity to syntactic amalgams as described in Lakoff (1974) and Lambrecht (1988). One reason not to treat elaborations as the same phenomenon is that, unlike amalgams and like coordination and subordination, elaborations may be marked by specific lexical discourse cues. Some examples include you know, like, just, and in fact. Further study of elaborations may reveal others.<sup>5</sup>

Whether elaborations should be thought of as instances of subordination/hypotaxis or coordination/parataxis is an open issue and crucially dependent on a very clear treatment of the difference between the these two types of conjoined phrases.<sup>6</sup> For my purposes here, I will simply say that elaborations consist of conjoined phrases, and propose the following definition:

**Elaborations** are conjoined phrases lacking an overt conjunction but having a covert connective (ELAB) that is constrained (roughly) as follows:

ELAB conjoins two phrases F0 and F1 if the same proposition P is stated by, entailed by or strongly inferable from both F0 and F1, and some aspect of P is more detailed, clearer or made more relevant in F1.

#### IV. The Connection

How does this elaboration construction relate to the elaboration *relations* discussed before? Clearly, not all units of text or discourse that may be said to be related to each other in exactly the way described in the definition of ELAB above are represented (grammatically) as a single complex construction. Equally clearly, less than the full range of relations defined as elaborations even appear to be acceptable environments for elaboration constructions.

There are at least three factors which, together, may effect the limited use of elaboration constructions. First, the 'same subject' requirement prevents sentences that may otherwise meet the constraints for an elaboration construction from combining in this way. This rules out a number of cases immediately. Second, the existence of a marked form highly associated with a particular function does not mean that a speaker/writer is required to use this form in all environments where its use

<sup>5</sup>I'm calling these discourse cues rather than conjuncts because at least some of these same cues may occur along with an overt conjunct in a coordination.

<sup>6</sup>See Matthiessen and Thompson (1988) for one discussion of the distinction as applied to full clauses.

is felicitous. As with other marked constructions, such as topicalization, it-cleft, etc..., elaboration is rarely the only appropriate form available. Finally, it is possible for the constraints on the use of a particular form to be at least partially distinct from its function. In other words, the elaboration construction may do more than indicate that the two phrases are bound in a particular type of elaboration relation; it may have attentional, attitudinal or other effects on the discourse as well.

The observation that the elaboration construction is only available as an option under a subset of the elaboration relations discussed in the literature also raises some interesting points. It turns out that the elaboration construction discussed here is, in fact, very closely related to the elaboration relation defined by Hobbs and adopted by Polanyi. Indeed, in Hobbs (1990) there is even an example of an elaboration construction used to illustrate the elaboration relation. This token, taken from Chomsky's 'Reflections on Language', is provided in example 26 below.

26. I would like now to consider the so-called 'innateness hypothesis,' to identify some elements in it that are or should be controversial, and to sketch some of the problems that arise as we try to resolve the controversy. (Hobbs 1990:83)

Though Hobbs does not address the use of the marked construction as an indicator of the elaboration relation, it is clear that the relation he has in mind is somewhat more specific than the one discussed by Mann and Thompson and is closely associated with the elaboration construction. The apparent parallel between my definition of ELAB and his definition of the elaboration relation is therefore not unintentional.

The one noticeable difference between Hobbs' discussion of the elaboration relation and my own discussion of the constraints on the elaboration construction is that he includes repetitions as well. Though it is possible that there is a functional overlap between the two, I am not yet ready to collapse them. I did find some repetitions in the switchboard corpus which involved an apparently subjectless sentence identical in other ways to the previous utterance, but it is not clear that they occurred in the same contexts.<sup>7</sup> In addition, there are production issues that can be involved in the use of repetition in speech. Nonetheless, it may be that at least some instances of phrase repetitions should be treated as elaboration constructions and, it is quite likely that the two relations may be collapsed for Hobbs' purposes.

Finally, though Mann and Thompson's definition of elaboration clearly allows for a broader range of contexts than those which allow the elaboration construction, the definition is not necessarily too broad in an absolute sense. The level of detail specified by the elaboration construction is not necessarily the minimally sufficient one for structuring text at any level. On the hand, the fact that the elaboration construction is constrained to a particular subset is strong evidence that this subset is the relevant one, at least at some level of discourse/text representation.

More generally, the existence of the elaboration construction may be

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<sup>7</sup>For instance, the original utterance and the repeated phrase were not always uttered by the same speaker. (See Walker (1993) for one good discussion of the functions of repetition.)

taken as new evidence that rhetorical notions such as elaboration, like information status and other pragmatic data, can be relevant to the structuring of sentences and discourse in the English language. A worthwhile subject for future study would be to see to what extent constructions of this type are found in other languages.

## V. Summary

I have argued that elaborations involving subjectless clauses are a distinct phenomenon from null subjects utterances in conversational English. This is an analysis of a syntactic form but it is also crucially related to the notion of elaboration as a relation.

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