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Author(s): Larry Gorbet

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On Discourse Syntactic Consequences of Certain Short Topic Sentences¹

Larry Gorbet
University of New Mexico

A pervasive property of human language is that structures and processes with clear functional motivation at one level of grammar become "institutionalized" -- grammaticized -- and seep into other levels where they lack the motivation that created them. Phonologization of articulatorily and acoustically motivated phenomena and morphologization of phonological phenomena are two such processes. This paper presents a fragment of the investigation of one limit of grammaticization.² Although within its narrow scope serious questions remain unanswered and others unasked, the facts presented suggest that grammaticization proceeds at least far enough that grammar and speech event ritual begin to grade into one another.

The specific focus of this paper is a very small class of discourses, those containing the "introducer" Tell me. I will describe these in terms of surface syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic properties and then will argue that these properties require that the ways discourses are segmented into component sentences may have a syntactic (as well as a pragmatic) basis.

Even modest attempts to describe languages at the sentence level assume that one can in principle determine what a possible sentence is and that the appropriateness of a possible sentence is limited only by pragmatic factors. The discourses described here bring these assumptions into question. Discourses beginning with Tell me, it will be seen, require that a later sentence of the discourse, possibly rather distant from Tell me, have a particular pragmatic force and surface syntactic categorization. The constraints alluded to are not, it is crucial to note, between parts of the sentences, as in the case of inter-sentential pronominalization, but between whole surface sentences.

1. Tell me discourses.

To get some idea of the kind of discourses we will be looking at, consider the rather simple example

(1) Tell me. How do I get out of here?

The point of the discourse is clearly to request the information "how I might get out of here". This request resides intact within the second sentence of (1), and the first sentence Tell me somewhat redundantly points out what the discourse will be about -- it is a sort of topic sentence. It is also a rather peculiar sentence. It is very short, for one thing. So short that its sentencehood might be questioned, a point to which I will return very shortly. It is also unusual in form, being essentially an elliptical lexicalization of the performative

stratum of the second sentence. It is the appearance of this introducer or short topic sentence which I will argue governs a later sentence of the discourse. For the particular introducer Tell me, what is required is that there follow a sentence in question form that is a request for information.

I have claimed that Tell me is a sentence. This claim is actually stronger than needed for my main argument. All that is essential is that Tell me be a constituent of a different sentence than the actual request for information; a weaker form that satisfies this condition is suggested by the punctuation of (4) and (5) below. Nevertheless, my argument is easier to follow if Tell me is regarded as a sentence, and so I will present a few reasons why this characterization is at least plausible.

As implied above, discourses with Tell me may involve an indefinite number of sentences intervening between Tell me and the request for information:

- (2) Tell me. I've seen you around a lot lately. What's your name?
- (3) Tell me. You seem to know your way around here -- and don't say you don't -- I've seen you with your Disneyland guide uniform on. I'm with the National Review. Name's Al Bedoya. How can I get an interview with Snow White?

If Tell me is not a sentence in such discourses (cf. (4) and (5)), then it has a rather incongruous semantic relation to the sentence of which it is part.

- (4) Tell me, I've seen you around a lot lately. What's your name?
- (5) Tell me, you seem to know your way around here -- and don't say you don't -- I've seen you with your Disneyland guide uniform on. I'm with the National Review. Name's Al Bedoya. How can I get an interview with Snow White?

The intonation of Tell me is the same as lexically similar sentences like the imperative (6) and so is at least compatible with sentential status.

- (6) Hit me.

Finally, discourses with Tell me such as (1) - (3) are similar formally and semantically to discourses beginning with what are clearly sentences, such as

- (7) Tell me this.
- (8) Tell me one thing.

If discourses with the latter are not a special problem to

generate, then they provide a parallel to a plausible source for Tell me.

2. Components of Tell me discourses.

Assuming the sentential status of Tell me, it is convenient to treat these discourses as consisting of three parts: the INTRODUCER (Tell me), (optional) INTERVENING SENTENCES, and the FOCAL SENTENCE (the request for information).

2.1 The introducer.

I have intentionally limited this paper to discourses with the exact introducer Tell me. Besides the quite different introducers listed in Appendix A, there are introducers similar to Tell me semantically (cf. (9) below) and even lexically (cf. (10) and (11)) which have quite different discourse properties. I will not discuss these here -- there isn't space to sketch even a few of them -- but some idea of the importance of keeping them distinct comes readily from substituting them for Tell me in the example discourses of this paper, an exercise I leave for the reader.

- (9) Let me know.
- (10) Tell me now.
- (11) Just tell me.

As the term introducer implies, Tell me typically occurs discourse-initially. In appropriate contexts and with suitable intonation, it may appear in other discourse positions. In most acceptable such discourses, deviousness plays a part:

- (12) You seem to know your way around here. I'm with the National Review. Name's Al Bedoya. Tell me. How can I get an interview with Snow White?
- (13) I've seen you around a lot lately. Tell me. What's your name?
- (14) I'm looking for a good used car. Tell me. Are there any reputable dealers in Del Mar?

This deviousness is hardly surprising given that we begin the discourse with information relevant to the request for information but whose relevance is not apparent while the information is being conveyed.³ The appearance later of Tell me accentuates this, since it suggests that the information-gathering nature of the discourse has not yet been established -- compare (12)-(14) with Tell me removed:

- (12') You seem to know your way around here. I'm with the National Review. Name's Al Bedoya. How can I get an interview with Snow White?
- (13') I've seen you around a lot lately. What's your name?

- (14') I'm looking for a good used car. Are there any reputable dealers in Del Mar?

2.2 The intervening sentences.

The intervening sentences contribute in various ways to the eventual success of the discourse. In Tell me discourses, they explain why the information is requested, explain why the hearer is being asked for it, clarify what kind of information is requested, etc. The latter function is exemplified by

- (15) Tell me. I'm totally ignorant of algebraic hoop theory, but I need to understand the Biothanian Theorem by Friday. Do you think I could figure it out from Milo's notes?
- (16) Tell me. I'm looking for a good used car. Are there any reputable dealers in Del Mar?

As with the introducer, it is possible to deviate from the usual sentence order, although the more peripheral nature of intervening sentences makes the effects less severe.

- (17) Tell me. Who do you think will win the game? I want to know so I can be ready in their dressing room after it's over.
- (18) Tell me. What do you think of the new provost? I mean with respect to his public image?⁴

2.3 The focal sentence.

The focal sentence is constrained both pragmatically and syntactically, as noted previously. The pragmatic requirement is that it must be a request for information. Preceding examples have been at least consistent with this requirement. Discourses where the focal sentence is not a request for information are deviant, whether they are grossly different in force (as is (19)) or are question forms used to communicate other speech act types.

- (19) *Tell me. Today is the fifth of July.
- (20) ?*Tell me. This is exam week. Why the hell don't you leave me alone!
- (21) ?*Tell me. Who do you think you are!
- (22) ?Tell me. What do you think you're doing?!

The relative acceptability of (22) seems problematic, but unlike (20) and (21), it is not just an exclamation -- it is also a question. The hearer is invited to supply an explanation if one is available. Of course the plausibility of a true question reading is not sharply defined in many cases. Varying the degree of "questionhood", however, confirms the dependence of focal

sentence acceptability on this property:

- (23) ?Tell me. This is exam week. Why are you bothering me?
 (24) Tell me. Do you really think Seattle is going to win again?

Substitution of the hedged introducer Just tell me for Tell me in (20)-(22) improves dramatically the acceptability of the discourses, but it is a quite different item from Tell me, with different commitments as to the focal sentence; most of the acceptable Tell me discourses become unacceptable with Just tell me.⁵

The syntactic requirement for focal sentences is that they must be explicit questions. In other words, they may not merely derive the force of a request for information via indirect speech rules.⁶ Note the following:

- (25) ?*Tell me. This seems to be Walnut. I sure wish I knew which one was Elm.
 (26) ?*Tell me. This seems to be Walnut. I'll be in real trouble if I don't find Elm Street.
 (27) ?*Tell me. I know this must be Walnut, but it sure would be nice of you to point out Elm Street for me.

Now consider

- (28) Tell me. You seem like a nice fellow. Could you direct me to the bank?
 (29) Tell me. Would you show me the way to the meeting?

Here the focal sentence is pragmatically a request for information but unlike earlier examples, it derives that force indirectly. Thus they might seem counterexamples to the claimed formal restriction. But (28) and (29), unlike (25)-(27), derive that force from a surface sentence which is already formally a question.

The relevance of the category surface question is further supported by the fact that focal sentences with tags are also acceptable:

- (30) Tell me. This is the Maxwell Museum, isn't it?
 (31) Tell me. You're the editor of the Metaphor Conference Proceedings, aren't you? [acceptable, of course, only if the speaker really isn't sure]

3. "Tell me" discourses are "grammatical".

I claimed earlier that the relation between the introducer Tell me and the focal sentence of the same discourse was a

"syntactic" as well as a pragmatic one. Consideration of the preceding data supports this characterization. Whether or not Tell me is a surface sentence, it is clearly a member of a formally (if not lexically) limited set of constructions. The focal sentence, even though it may be distant from Tell me and does not generally form a surface constituent with it, is constrained in its surface form by the earlier appearance of Tell me. It must have the form of a question. While discourse level functional considerations like overall schematization and functional sentence perspective contribute to the linear ordering of sentences within the discourse and to their various illocutionary forces, they are inappropriate to explain in themselves this constraint on the form of the focal sentence. The set of surface questions is not a natural class at the discourse level (i.e. pragmatically). Not only may the force of the question form itself vary, but, where a "real" question is intended, a variety of types of responses on the part of the hearer may be appropriate, including the full range of uses of declaratives.⁷ Note, for example, that Tell me discourses may request displays as well as truly informative responses:

- (32) Tell me. What's the capital of Washington?
- (33) Tell me. How much is $12 + 5$?
- (34) Tell me. How would you derive John is eager to please?

If these discourses lack discourse functional explanations of the usual sort, how and why do they exist? At this point, more than a weak speculation is inappropriate, but what seems to be involved is this. The prototypic request for information takes question form. Tell me discourses of this sort seem to have become syntacticized -- ritualized -- so that the form of the prototype focal sentence has become a formal requirement, much as similarly "dysfunctional" constraints on syntactic category etc. have arisen in sentential syntax.

4. Relation to the performative stratum.

I suggested earlier that Tell me, like some other introducers, had its source in the performative stratum of the focal sentence. In this regard it parallels a large class of sentence adverbs, adverbial phrases, and adverbial clauses. I do not favor any purely syntactic or semantic treatment of performative phenomena, but I do claim that Tell me has a similar relation to the performative stratum to that held by other lexical realizations of the stratum.

Though formalization of the derivational, productive, or recognitional nature of these discourses would be premature, I do see two possible directions such an analysis might take. The first is similar to the general type proposed by early transformationalists like Katz and Fodor (1963) and Bever and Rosenbaum (1964), in which discourses are generated as wholes by phrase structure rules. The analogous treatment in later, more abstract

frameworks would be distinguished by having logical structural antecedents of the introducer present from the beginning in initial position; the relation to the focal sentence would be essentially anaphoric. An alternative is for Tell me to actually originate in the performative stratum of the focal sentence and be promoted ("raised") to surface sentence status and fronted to discourse-initial position. Its origin would be analogous to that of sentence topics in sentence-level grammar.⁸

The successful development of such speculation depends on the prior task of understanding what's going on semantically and pragmatically with topicalization generally and the topicalization which produces (some) introducers in particular. While in one sense we say we know what topicalization "means" -- it means that the sentence, discourse, etc. is "about" the topic -- on the other hand we are rather ignorant of a deeper meaning. We say we know what "topic" means, but how does a sentence with a topic overtly marked differ from the same sentence without such a topic? How do discourses with Tell me differ from the same discourses without it? The answer must raise the question of why topicalization of (part of) the performative accomplishes the "meaning" that it does.⁹

NOTES

1. I would like to thank for their valuable comments and suggestions on various versions of this paper Don Forman, Jim Hamilton, Ellen Kaisse, S.-Y. Kuroda, and Carol Woodall.
2. The phenomena discussed here might profitably be thought of in terms of linguistic metrology -- the investigation of the effects of scale on linguistic structures and processes. Many differences between linguistic levels are less qualitative differences in content than differences in the temporal (and cognitive?) "size" of the units comprising the levels.
3. The lesser sneakiness of (14) probably reflects the pragmatically-based informativeness of its opening sentence about the nature of the discourse.
4. The order of the sentences in (17) and (18) cannot result from mere rearrangement of surface sentences generated as part of a conventionally ordered Tell me discourse, since each of the last sentences contains an anaphor of material in the request for information. Even a quite abstract remote structure for these sentences would be bizarre if it gave rise to a surface structure preceding the request for information.
5. For example, Just tell me in (2) gives

(i) ?Just tell me. I've seen you around a lot lately.
What's your name?

Just tell me foregrounds the impatient or sarcastic element that is peripheral at best with Tell me, so that its focal sentence is shifted toward a less straightforward reading, or, if an impatient

or sarcastic reading is incompatible, becomes infelicitous.

The relation between Just tell me and Tell me raises the complicated issue of the internal structure of introducers. While the degree of productiveness of the introducer construction is unclear, there are a number of items which seem to function as hedges on introducers -- items like just, now, and please plus vocatives of various forms. The productivity of these hedges and the question of what they contribute and why are inviting grounds for further inquiry.

6. A major exclusion from this claim is the situation of a discourse (as a whole) being interpreted indirectly. If I walked up to someone I knew fairly well at this Meeting and uttered the following, they would probably take the entire discourse as a more or less unitary input to some principle of indirectness:

- (ii) Tell me. I'm with "60 Minutes". Do you think linguistics meetings should have top priority in our national energy policy?

Such examples point out the general difficulty of drawing the line between general cultural and cognitive phenomena and linguistic phenomena. One response would be to extend pseudo-syntactic indirect speech rules to include larger units like discourses, but I suspect it is better to recognize the inappropriateness of that approach not only for discourses but also for the treatment of single-sentence speech acts.

7. For a discussion of such uses, see Forman (1974).

8. If I understand it correctly, Lakoff (1974) in its later sections regards syntactic amalgamation as a very general process of framing (in the sense of Chafe (1977)) which would be applicable not only to sentence-level outputs but also to the kind of discourse structures discussed here.

9. My treatment here of Tell me has been focussed on its role in discourse, but it also faces outwards, toward the conversation of which it is always part. Carol Woodall has pointed out (personal communication) that it is typically a conversation opener. In particular, it may also function as one of those "empty" openers used to "get a foot into" the conversation by slightly overlapping the previous speaker. I have not yet investigated the significance of these functions for the discourse-internal role of Tell me or other introducers.

APPENDIX A: SOME INTRODUCERS

Anyway	I wonder	Okay	Well
After all	Let's see	Please	Oh
Gee	Now	Really	[any vocative]
I tell you	Of course	Tell her (etc.)	

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