

The emphatic interpretation of English verb-phrase preposing

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1. Introduction. This paper addresses the questions we ought to ask when we see a syntactic displacement that is linked with a complex array of pragmatic effects: How are the syntactic mechanisms linked with those pragmatic effects? Do we simply list the array of pragmatic effects alongside the syntactic pattern? Doing so would amount to listing use conditions; if we wish to maintain a clean theory of movement, we hope to explain, rather than list, these effects. Can we alternatively factor out the contributions of distinct components? Doing so would allow us to arrive at a more reasonable understanding of the syntactic mechanisms.

Verb-phrase preposing (VPP) is a particularly intricate and challenging instance of the puzzle. In VPP, a verb and its arguments appear to the left of the subject (1). Thanks to Ward (1990) and others, we have understanding the linked pragmatic effects that is better than for many such constructions.

- (1) LeBlanc, who acted in spots for products like Heinz Ketchup years before “Friends,” agreed. “We’re definitely concerned about overexposure and say no to a lot of things,” he said of the cast members. To limit problems with the Diet Coke campaign, he added, the cast and Warner Brothers had Coca-Cola agree “**to run it only one month only on NBC.**

“And run it they did,” he said.

According to Bifulco, Nielsen data for supermarket sales of Diet Coke in the first three weeks of January “are up in double digits.” So don’t be surprised if there are even more “Friends” tie-ins.¹

VPP is often associated with an emphatic interpretation: The most natural interpretation of (1) is that the commercial ran extraordinarily many times.

The goals of this paper are to further clarify what the pragmatic effects of VPP are and to argue that the clustering of pragmatic factors can be factored out. This reveals that different elements have different (and independent) sources. It allows a simpler and cleaner analysis of what the actual syntactic mechanisms are. A secondary goal is to serve as a model for similar investigations of complex syntactic-pragmatic interactions, to serve as a model for similar investigations of complex syntactic-pragmatic interactions.

2. Background. VPP is a type of verb-phrase fronting. The subject appears in its canonical position in SpecTP, and a functional element is stranded sentence-finally: an auxiliary, a modal, or emphatic *do* (1). The fronted verb always appears in its base form.

3. Antecedence requirement. In general, an overt linguistic antecedent for the preposed verb phrase is required. Verb-phrase preposing is infelicitous out of the blue or in the absence of a suitable antecedent:

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¹Unless otherwise noted, all examples are adapted from the *New York Times* portion of the English Gigaword corpus (Graff and Cieri, 2003).

- (2) Guess what?

#Keep it together they did (the Reds, like the Tigers, won the World Series).

I build on the work of Ward (1990), who characterizes the condition as “affirmation of an explicitly evoked proposition”. The antecedence condition must actually be looser than this in several ways. First, the sentence with preposing may negate an evoked proposition. Second, the explicitly evoked material need not be a proposition: A morphologically related noun is sufficient to serve as an antecedent:

- (3) Though the image of older people has improved somewhat in recent years, being old still carries heavy social and economic freight. Small wonder that we avoid the label as long as possible. “Coming to grips with age and death is tough,” said Harry Moody, the acting director of the Brookdale Center on Aging in New York. “**Sometimes denial is a good thing**”.

And deny we do.

Consider David Garth, the 65-year-old New York political consultant, in front of his bathroom mirror. “I have a special angle where I can see myself the way I used to be,” he said. “Then you see yourself on television, and you say ‘Who is that old guy?’” The first time Mr. Garth was offered a discount at the movies, he said, “I was outraged.”

Something more-or-less corresponding to the preposed verb (phrase) must appear in the discourse. VPP, then, is an instance of verb repetition.

4. The emphatic interpretation. The VPP-sentences discussed above have an emphatic interpretation. Ward (1990) refers to this interpretation as “scalar affirmation”, in which the predicate is construed as a scale upon which the subject is assigned a high value.

- (4) Led by police cars with flashing lights and trailed by other vehicles and more police, the seven cyclists were carefully watched for about the first three weeks of their journey [across the Soviet Union]. Neither the Soviets nor the Americans knew how to get rid of the police “shadows.” “**They stopped when we hit the mud**,” Jenkins said.

And hit mud they did. And swamps. And paths so small they could barely be followed.

(Ward 1990, (15))

The idea is that the riders rank highly on a contextually-determined scale of mud-hitting. Both the contextual standards and the scales themselves are also contextually determined.

(5–6) go beyond what is allowed by Ward’s (1990) formulation in interesting ways. The predicate does not form a scale on which the subject ranks highly, because it is not always clear what the scale is (see especially (6), I will refer to this property as “emphasis” rather than “scalarity”).

- (5) Companies raced to sell shares and take advantage of a stock market that surged this year, sending the benchmark Standard & Poor’s 500 index up 34 percent. Demand for new shares was also fueled by a shrinkage in the numbers of shares available to the public caused by a record number of companies buying back stocks and a record year for mergers and acquisitions. Meanwhile, billions of dollars poured into the market from baby boomers starting to sock away cash for retirement. “**That’s a pretty good stage on which to tap dance no matter what you are selling**,” said Dick Smith, managing director and new issues specialist at Montgomery Securities, in San Francisco.

And sell they did.

So far this year, 541 companies sold stock to the public for the first time, second only to 1993 when 666 companies sold stock for the first time to raise \$34 billion, according to Securities Data Corp. Among this year's most stunning IPOs was that of Netscape. Sold to investors in August for 28 a share, it first traded at 71. The shares later rose to 174, as frenzied investors placed huge wagers on a company they hoped would dominate the worldwide computer network, or Internet.

- (6) "The economy is going to pick up an interest rates are going to go higher. And the market can't handle that." Still, for the session, **the attitude was "Buy 'em,"** as Alfred Goldman, a market strategist at A.G. Edwards Inc. in St. Louis, headlined a fax sent out yesterday.

And buy they did.

Of the Dow's 30 component stocks, 29 gained Tuesday, led by Proctor & Gamble, up 4 a share, to 138; J.P. Morgan, up 4 5/16, to 111 13/16; Merck, up 3, to 95 11/16; and GE, up 3 to 66 3/16. U.S. stocks had their best day since the start of the Persian Gulf War in 1991, sending the Dow Jones Industrial Average to its biggest point gain ever. Proctor & Gamble Co., J.P. Morgan & Co. and Merck & Co., which have some of the largest market capitalizations in their industries, led the gains, sending the 30-stock average up 257.36, or 3.37 percent, to 7879.78.

Ward (1990) treats the emphatic interpretations as a distinct function of VPP. That is, the context determines whether a given sentence is emphatic or not:

- (7) a. "I don't want to get too foaming at the mouth over winning this game," [Jerry Jones, the Dallas Cowboys' owner] said. "We should beat the Giants here at home with as much at stake as we got with the players that we got. **We should beat them.**"
And beat them the Cowboys did.
But this was not a stunning loss by the Giants.
- b. "I don't want to get too foaming at the mouth over winning this game," [Jerry Jones, the Dallas Cowboys' owner] said. "We should beat the Giants here at home with as much at stake as we got with the players that we got. **We should beat them.**"
And beat them the Cowboys did.
This was a stunning loss by the Giants.

5. Removing emphasis. The context, however, is not the only determinant of emphasis. I argue that emphasis actually arises from the intonational contour on the preposed VP.

(8) shows that VPP-sentences are not necessarily emphatic. These VPP-sentences express verum focus (Höhle, 1992). Verum focus is in fact the core meaning of VPP. All VPP-sentences express verum focus; some also express emphasis.

- (8) "This was way more than I expected it to be. I wasn't expecting such a turnout and a warm response. **I didn't think people cared about us anymore.**"
But care we do.

The emphatic interpretation is not a property of verum focus in general because it is unavailable in sentences with auxiliary focus. Nor is it a property of preposing in general because it is absent from DP preposing.

6. Intonation. Emphasis is also available when a main verb is repeated:

- (9) When he works, he **WORKS**.

Similar to VPP, the emphatic interpretation is not obligatory in the canonical order.

The emphatic interpretation is contributed by a particular intonational contour. The (a) and (c) examples below have a LH*H% contour on *rise*. The (b) and (d) examples have at most a H* pitch accent on *rise*. Emphatic continuations are compatible only with the emphatic intonational contour; verum-focus continuations are incompatible with it.

- (10) “I am starting at the bottom again,” he said. Bottom was seven years ago, when Engskov and a friend drove from Arkansas to the nation’s capital without money or jobs, and on the hunt for both. Bottom was being holed up in a \$35-a-night-motel in a big, strange city and being “scared to death.” But without a bottom, there’s nowhere **to rise**.
- a. And RISE he did, from volunteer staff at the White House to trip coordinator in the travel office to the President’s aide and assistant press secretary.
 - b. And rise he did, from volunteer staff at the White House to a paid job doing the same thing.
 - c. # And RISE he did, from volunteer staff at the White House to a paid job doing the same thing.
 - d. # And rise he did, from volunteer staff at the White House to trip coordinator in the travel office to the President’s aide and assistant press secretary.

The intonational contour can also be what conveys emphasis in the canonical order, but here the intonation is optional in that the emphatic continuation is also compatible with default intonation:

- (11) a. And he **ROSE**—from volunteer staff at the White House to trip coordinator in the travel office to the President’s aide and assistant press secretary.
- b. And he rose from volunteer staff at the White House to a paid job doing the same thing.
- c. # And he **ROSE**—from volunteer staff at the White House to a paid job doing the same thing.
- d. And he rose from volunteer staff at the White House to trip coordinator in the travel office to the President’s aide and assistant press secretary.

I conclude, therefore, that the emphatic interpretation comes from the intonational contour. This intonational pattern is independently attested, and is not an idiosyncratic property of VPP.

7. Conclusion. “Scalar” emphasis is not a distinct function of VPP. Emphasis is independent of verum focus, and verum focus is independent of preposing. The three components come together in a compositional way, so that the complex constellation of pragmatic properties is derived from simple ones.

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