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Focal Prominence Through Preposing: A Syntactic-discourse Analysis of Telecinematic Discourse

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Abstract

The current study investigates the phenomenon of preposing (i.e. fronting) in the British series “Downton Abbey”. The first two seasons of the series are the data of the study. The analysis focuses on how characters that belong to different social classes use this syntactic structure to perform different discourse functions. The study adopts Carter and McCarthy’s (2006) classification of marked structures for analysing the unusual word order in English. As matter of fact, preposing was extensively studied. However, this study attempts to highlight how this construction may interact with social variables such as class and status, especially within telecinematic. The main objective here is to examine whether preposing patterns differ according to the social class of the characters. Instances from season one and two are analysed both quantitatively by calculating frequencies to examine if there is a statistically significant relationship between preposing and social class using Chi-square test and qualitatively by demonstrating the pragmatic function of specific instances. The study reveals that the upper-class characters favor complex syntactic structure. However, both social classes (the upper and lower classes) used preposing with comparable frequencies. The analysis confirms that preposing functions as a shared discourse-functional recourse for all speakers, while social stratification appears more clearly via other linguistic features such as lexical formality and clause complexity.

Keywords: preposing, fronting, marked structure, social class, telecinematic discourse, Downton Abbey

1. Introduction

Language is an integral part of human beings so the way one uses language has many things to tell about them. According to Richardson (2010) telecinematic discourse (the language of films and TV) provide a valuable resource to investigate the connection between language and social hierarchy. Bednarek (2010) further argues that TV dialogue offers “a rich recourse for the study of language in use” (p. 1) that reveals how language reflects social meanings and power relations. Despite its naturalistic nature, TV drama provides carefully crafted dialogue that highlight the relationship between grammatical structures and social positioning (Mandala, 2007). "Downton Abbey," with their carefully developed characters and clearly defined social classes, offer a rich opportunity to explore how language choices both reflect and strengthen social hierarchies. This study focuses on a particular grammatical occurrence called preposing, which is often referred to as fronting. Preposing involves relocating a phrasal component (such as a noun phrase, verb phrase, or adverbial phrase) to the start of a sentence (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). This study adopts a more detailed perspective by examining the precise usage of preposing by characters from different social classes in "Downton Abbey."

Preposing is a discourse-functional phenomenon in which speakers use to organize information and signal pragmatic relationships. Additionally, Preposing represents an optional syntactic choice that speakers make for specific communicative purposes. These purposes often include marking information status, creating emphasis, establishing coherence, and signaling social relationships and identity (Ward et al., 2002).

Preposing has been studied extensively in terms of information structure and discourse coherence yet its relationship to social variables such as class, status, and power remains worth exploring thoroughly particularly in dramatic dialogue where such variables are foregrounded thematically (Culpeper, 2001). This study adopts a mixed approach to examine the precise usage of preposing by characters from different social classes in “Downton Abbey”, investigating whether and how this syntactic phenomenon patterns employed differently across the characters. In other

words, to shed light on how linguistic choices, specifically instances of preposing, in the first two seasons of “Downton Abbey” relate to the portrayal of social dynamics. The first two seasons provide a coherent narrative arc covering the years 1912–1920, a period of significant social upheaval that the series explicitly thematizes through its upstairs-downstairs structure.

2. Theoretical Framework

Preposing

In 2004, Halliday provided a clear explanation of the terms “theme” and “rheme”, which are also referred to as “subject” and “predicate”. He states that in all languages, the topic of a clause is identified either by a particle or by its position within the clause. In the field of linguistics, the Prague school of linguists employs the term “theme” to denote the initial element of a clause, which indicates the subject or object that the clause is about (Carter and McCarthy, 2006). Additionally, it aids in the identification and placement of the clause within its surrounding context. The Rheme is the remaining part of the sentence where the fundamental idea is further explained.

Furthermore, in the syntax of English, the theme is typically located at the beginning of the clause, often as the subject, whereas the rheme is positioned after the subject, closer to the end of the clause. Nevertheless, certain structures deviate from this order. Some constructions are influenced by multiple factors such as familiarity or the presence of given or old and new information in the clause. According to Meyer (2009), these constructions are called (marked) because the primary factor that determines word order in a language is the concept of markedness. Unmarked constructions in a language are typically seen to be standard and conventional, whereas marked constructions are uncommon, unusual and generally occur within a specific context. Therefore, preposing is a construction that involves moving an element to the front when its original position is later in the sentence (Huddleston, et al. 2022). Preposing, also known as fronting, is the act of relocating a sentence element from the middle or end of a sentence to the initial position (Crystal, 1992).

Preposing can be categorized into various types based on Carter and McCarthy's classification (2006). The frequency of occurrence of these types may vary, possibly influenced by the social class of the characters involved. The kinds include object preposing, complement preposing, adjuncts preposing, and verbs preposing.

Object Preposing

Carter and McCarthy (2006) state that in a declarative clause, a direct object can be placed at the front of the sentence, which is known as fronting or thematizing. This is commonly done when the speaker wants to highlight a contrast between items which can sometimes be implied as in the below example there is an implied comparison to other novels that the speaker would not repeatedly read:

*I must admit, **my favorite books** I do read over and over.*

Prepositional verbs and phrasal verbs can also have their objects placed at the beginning of the sentence:

*I do the flowers; **the vegetables** he looks after.*

Object fronting can also occur in interrogatives in casual speech:

***Soup** are you making? Wow, lovely!*

Predicative complements

Subject predicative complements are frequently moved to the beginning of a sentence in order to emphasize them or to create a contrast. This can happen in statements and in questions. Fronted noun subject complements are more prevalent in informal spoken language compared to fronted adjective subject complements.

- ***Jack**, could it have been?*

(fronted noun complement)

- ***Ambitious** it may be, but when a club sells 20,000 season tickets and makes£3.3 million during the summer, it knows it is back in the big league.*

(fronted adjective complement)

Adjuncts

Adjuncts can be moved to the beginning of a sentence to highlight or emphasize them, or to create a contrast with other elements.

- *Ten years we've lived here.*
- *Without my glasses I can't see a thing.*

When negative adjuncts (such as never, not once, rarely, seldom) are placed at the beginning of a sentence to emphasize them, subject-verb inversion occurs:

Seldom had we witnessed such bad behavior.

Verbs

Occasionally, a lexical verb that has a complement or adjunct can be moved to the beginning of the sentence in order to emphasize another aspect of the verb phrase.

Sitting in the garden I've been, all morning.

Sometimes, it is possible for both an auxiliary/modal verb and a lexical verb to be placed at the beginning of a sentence. This phenomenon commonly arises in spoken communication:

Why didn't you phone your mother? Been really panicking she has.

Telecinematic Discourse

Telecinematic discourse refers to the scripted yet naturalistic language of television and film, characterized by dialogue that simulates authentic interaction while serving narrative and characterization functions (Piazza et al., 2011; Richardson, 2010). The narratives in film and television are constructed using both visually captivating imagery and the expressive power of language. The complex interplay of auditory and visual elements in this context is commonly known as telecinematic discourse among scholars. Telecinematic discourse fundamentally acknowledges film and television as narratives that utilize several modes of communication.

Piazza et al. (2011) identify several distinctive features of telecinematic discourse. First, they emphasize the unique relationship between characters and audiences in television series. Unlike film, which typically offers a contained narrative experience, television series develop characters over multiple episodes and seasons, creating familiarity and fostering sustained viewer investment. This extended character development allows for more complex linguistic patterns that evolve as characters grow and change across narrative arcs.

Second, telecinematic discourse maintains a significant relationship with real-world language use. Films and television programs function as cultural representations that reflect specific temporal, spatial, and social contexts (Bubel, 2008). The language employed in these texts mirrors the linguistic and communicative practices of particular eras and locations, connecting fictional discourse to the socio-cultural environments in which productions are created. Period dramas like “Downton Abbey”, for instance, attempt to recreate the linguistic registers and social conventions of early twentieth-century Britain, though filtered through contemporary screenwriting practices.

Hoffmann (2020) offers a comprehensive framework for understanding telecinematic discourse that accounts for recent developments in film and television production. His definition encompasses both verbal and visual semiotic elements, recognizing their integrated contribution to meaning-making. Importantly, Hoffmann's framework applies to both fictional narratives (dramas, comedies) and non-fictional genres (documentaries, reality television), acknowledging the diverse range of contemporary screen content. He emphasizes the dynamic interplay between spoken dialogue and visual composition, arguing that these elements work synergistically to create immersive viewing experiences.

Thus, telecinematic discourse represents a complex phenomenon in which language plays a central role in narrative construction. Linguistic choices shape character development, establish genre boundaries, and facilitate audience engagement with fictional worlds (Bednarek, 2010; Richardson, 2010). Hoffmann's (2020) integrative framework provides a valuable foundation for how language operates within the multimodal environment of screen-based storytelling, particularly as film and television continue to evolve in response to changing technologies and viewing practices.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed approach to the analysis of preposing in the television series “Downton Abbey”. Carter and McCarthy's (2006) classification of preposing (fronting) was used to identify and categories instances of non-standard word order. The data of the analysis comprised of the first two seasons of the series. All the instances of preposing from character dialogues across characters were identified manually, all identified instances were coded according to social class of the speaker, syntactic type of the fronted element, and contextual factors, with frequencies calculated to determine distribution patterns. The representative samples were analysed to understand the pragmatic functions and intended meanings conveyed by proposing, taking into account the interactional circumstances surrounding each case, including emphasis, contrast, topic management, and coherence. Finally, a statistical analysis was done using Chi-square test to examine whether there is a significant association between social class and the use of preposing.

5. Findings and Discussion

Preposing in Downton Abbey

This section analyses some representative examples of preposing used by the upper-class characters and the lower-class ones in the first two season of the aforementioned series.

1- “*Bates: funny, our job, isn't it?*”

Mr. Bates, a member of the lower class, works as the valet to Robert and shares his military experience with him. This close connection helped develop his way of using language. In this instance, Bates utilizes preposing to accentuate a different side of their job. The adjective "funny" is placed at the beginning of the sentence as an attention-grabbing technique, instead of following the usual word order "our job is funny." Bates does this to capture the listener's attention by emphasizing what he wants to focus on at the start of the sentence, and then proceeds to complete his inquiry. This form of preposing is a preposing of an adjective subject complement, which is used in formal language.

2- *“Isobel: You would not, I imagine.”*

Isobel Crawley is discussing with Violet the possibility of making use of the Crawley house as a place for injured men to recover and regain their health. Isobel asserts that Violet is unlikely to agree to such a matter and then justifies her opinion with the phrase “I imagine”. The purpose of this proposed noun phrase is to highlight the significance of her judgment by placing it at the beginning of the clause. The canonical version of the clause is “I imagine you would not”. Nevertheless, this unconventional order of words adds sophistication to the sentence, captivates the audience's attention, and directs their focus towards the speaker's or writer's intended emphasis. Isobel is an intelligent character who strategically chooses her words, demonstrating her knowledge on the issue at hand. In this instance, she attempts to convince Violet to go along with the situation, despite the tension between them, in order to prove her wrong.

3- *“Sybil: Different ranks can relax together, it has been known.”*

Sybil employs preposing to emphasize her point that people of different social strata can coexist and socialize, contrary to Violet's perspective. This is an example of left dislocation, a syntactic structure in which the noun phrase is relocated to the beginning of the sentence and separated by a comma. Subsequently, the dislocated element is frequently followed by a pronoun (in this case, “it”) that refers back to the dislocated element. The phrase “Different ranks” functions as a dislocated/preposed element, highlighting the apparent uncommonness. Sybil then mitigates this unconventionality by stating “it has been known”.

4- *“Carson: Acting Sergeant, I believe.”*

Carson is a character of a lower social class, and this instance aims to demonstrate how characters from various social classes utilize different word orders. This is due to the longtime of Carson and other characters such as Anna and Mrs. Hughes had working with the Crawley family, which resulted in a significant change in their language. Carson is using the phrase “acting sergeant” to address Thomas, who has expressed a preference for

being called Sergeant Barrow. Thomas made this request to remind everybody that he served a prominent role in the war and not wanting to be referred to as a servant named Thomas. Carson clearly disapproves of Thomas due to the troubles he has caused in the past and doubts that he's capable to become a Sergeant. Therefore, he refers to him as a fake rather than an actual Sergeant. Preposing is employed to smoothly introduce Carson's viewpoint by initially emphasizing his belief that Thomas is an acting sergeant, followed by an explanation that this only his belief, as he acknowledged. This careful strategy of speech is attributed to him growing up as a butler in Downton Abbey.

5- “Dr. Clarkson: Not good news, I’m afraid.”

Dr. Clarkson takes part in a conversation with Mary and Robert over Matthew's condition after the explosion of a shell near him and William. The process of preposing the phrase “Not good news” is crucial in emphasizing the negative nature of the information being conveyed. Dr. Clarkson strategically emphasizes his despair by starting the statement with “Not good news”, thereby informing Mary and Robert to the forthcoming information. Subsequently, he uses the phrase “I'm afraid” which establishes a sense of sympathy.

6- “Daisy: The falseness of my heart, more like.”

The situation in the example starts with a dialogue between Mrs. Patmore and Daisy. Mrs. Patmore compliments and appreciates Daisy's actions. However, Daisy refuses the compliment and implies that the intentions behind it are not genuine. By placing "The falseness of my heart" at the beginning of the sentence, it gains prominence. The initial focus is placed on Daisy's opposing opinion of her own motives. The fundamental characteristic that identifies Daisy's heart is highlighted as “falseness”, which contrasts with the initial feeling of "goodness" presented in the first phrase. This form of preposing is known as AdjP preposing. The contrast between the adjectives is not expressed in the same sentence, but rather one adjective frame the other through the discourse. This is achieved by considering the preceding discourse. Mrs. Patmore tells Daisy, “You’re doing it out of the goodness of your heart”, and Daisy responds with an

opposing adjective, denying the "goodness" and instead emphasizing the "falseness" of her heart.

7- ***"Sir Richard Carlisle: what does anyone do? Buy it, I presume."***

By positioning "Buy" at the beginning of the sentence, Sir Richard stresses the act of buying as the most probable and appropriate option. It emphasizes the practicality of the situation. The preposition of the verb is conjoined with the phrase "I presume", which, on one hand, establishes a tone of acceptance. He believes that buying is unavoidable, despite it not being ideal. On the other hand, the phrase "I presume" softens the idea, making it less direct and closer to an opinion. It avoids a direct remark such as "You should buy it". This use of preposing is in direct opposition to Lady Mary's comment. She replied, "Your lot buys it. My lot inherits it". The phrase "My lot inherits it" emphasizes the differences in social status and the differing responsibilities that individuals from different classes play in such circumstances. She highlights the concept of inheritance as a special advantage enjoyed by her family, whereas purchasing furniture suggests a less fortunate position in society.

8- ***"Carson: Please. I have asked for silence and silence I will have."***

The original word order for the clause "silence I will have" is "I will have silence", in which "silence" is a direct object that has been placed at the beginning in a non-canonical order. This phenomenon commonly occurs when the speaker desires to highlight a contrast between different things. In this case, there is an implied contrast with the atmosphere of the situation Mr. Carson was in. By placing the word "silence" at the beginning, it highlights and emphasizes the importance of that concept.

9- ***"Edith: Nothing too drastic, I hope."***

Edith's decision to prioritize "Nothing too drastic" shows her apprehension about any possible harm. She wants to guarantee that the issue will not be addressed too harshly as she's talking with Sybil about their post-war life, Sybil expresses her inability to return to her previous life. However, she mentions finding a way to evade this life. By fronting "Nothing", Edith also is able to show her concern in an indirect way. It is a more thoughtful

way of seeking information about the strategy, as opposed to expressing concern by saying "I hope it's not too drastic".

10- *"Lavinia: Nice things, I hope."*

11- *"Drake: Very well, I think."*

12- *"Lavinia: Happy old times, I hope."*

The above instances exhibit the same form of preposing, namely the preposing of an adjective subject complement. In this construction, an adjective is placed before a verb in order to highlight or emphasize a particular characteristic.

13- *"Thomas: Snuff boxes, he collects them."*

14- *"O' Brien: Neither of them were picked up, that's what he said."*

15- *"Mr. Molesley: Nice girl, that Anna."*

A number of characters from the lower class use this kind of construction usually in their speech, as seen in the examples above and the previous ones. In (14) the direct object "snuff boxes" is placed before the subject. Thomas may employ preposing for purposes that do not necessarily prioritize "snuff boxes". Given Bates' newness, Thomas provides clarification on the specific duties and responsibilities that Mr. Bates should be aware of in his role as a valet. In (15) the placement of "neither of them was picked up" at the beginning highlights that information and in (16) by preposing "nice girl", Molesey emphasizes his favorable perspective on Anna.

16- *"Robert: Nothing too terrible, I hope."*

17- *"Robert: Even to me, it seems absurd."*

18- *"Robert: For the time being, yes."*

Robert used preposing in these cases for additional emphasis, either by inverting the order of the subject and verb, as seen in example (16), or by placing a prepositional phrase at the beginning, as demonstrated in examples (17) and (18).

Table 1
Observed Frequencies of Preposing by Social Class and Season

Social Class	Season 1	Season 2	Total
Upper Class	36	17	53 (67.9%)
Lower Class	17	8	25 (32.1%)
Total	53	25	78 (100%)

The table above presents the distribution of preposing across the two seasons according to the social class of the characters. The results show that upper-class characters produced a higher number of preposed constructions overall (53 instances) compared with lower-class characters (25 instances). However, the distribution across the two seasons remains proportionally similar for both groups.

Statistical Analysis

To examine whether the use of preposing differs according to social class across the two seasons, a Chi-square test was conducted. The test compared the frequencies of preposing produced by upper-class and lower-class characters in Season One and Season Two.

Table 2
Chi-Square Test Results

Statistic	Value
Chi-square (χ^2)	≈ 0.00
Degrees of Freedom	1
p-value	≈ 0.99

From the results above, it can be said that there is no statistical significance that links between social class and the use of preposing ($\chi^2(1) \approx 0.00$, $p > 0.05$). This suggests that although upper-class characters utilized preposed structures in a slightly higher number about (67.9%), the relative distribution across seasons remains largely similar between the two groups.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the phenomenon of preposing (fronting) in the British series Downton Abbey. Two seasons (season one and two) were analysed using Carter and McCarty's (2006) classification of marked structured, particularly preposing, to investigate the relationship between preposing and social class. The study came up with the following conclusions:

Firstly, preposing is proven as a syntactic phenomenon that serves pragmatic functions that do more than simple information arrangement. It allowed characters to foreground particular information, create rhetorical emphasis, signal topic shifts, and manage the flow of discourse in ways that contributed to characterization and the construction of social identity.

Secondly, upper-class characters used preposing more frequently than lower-class characters. They also tend to use more complicated syntactic structure and more formal lexical choices which marks their access to more resources and their relationships with upper-class society. Regarding preposing, it is proven that it functions with other linguistic features collectively rather than being a direct indication of social class.

Thirdly, although, the quantitative results showed that the upper-class characters use preposing more frequently than lower-class characters. The statistical analysis using the Chi-square test proved that this difference has no statistical significance. This suggests that the use of preposing is not strongly determined by social class in the dialogue of the series. The qualitative analysis revealed that both upper-class and lower-class characters use preposing for similar discourse purposes including creating emphasis, expressing contrast, organizing topics, and maintaining coherence in conversation. These functions appear consistently in the speech of both groups, which suggests that preposing operates as a shared communicative resource rather than a socially restricted linguistic form.

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البروز البؤري عبر التقديم: تحليل تركيبي-خطابي للخطاب التلفزيوني السينمائي

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مستخلص البحث:

تتقصى الدراسة الحالية ظاهرة "التقديم" في المسلسل البريطاني "داونتون آبي"، حيث اتخذت من الموسمين الأول والثاني مادةً للبحث. يركز التحليل على كيفية استخدام الشخصيات التي تنتمي إلى طبقات اجتماعية مختلفة لهذه البنية التركيبية لأداء وظائف خطابية متنوعة. وتعتمد الدراسة تصنيف كارتر و مكارثي 2006 للمباني النحوية الموسومة "لتحليل رتبة الكلمات غير المعتادة في اللغة الإنجليزية". على الرغم من أن ظاهرة التقديم قد خضعت لدراسات مستفيضة، إلا أن هذه الدراسة تحاول تسليط الضوء على كيفية تفاعل هذا البناء النحوي مع المتغيرات الاجتماعية مثل الطبقة والمكانة، لا سيما ضمن سياق الخطاب التلفزيوني السينمائي. الهدف الرئيس هنا هو فحص ما إذا كانت أنماط التقديم تختلف باختلاف الطبقة الاجتماعية للشخصيات. تم تحليل النماذج المستخرجة من الموسمين الأول والثاني كمياً من خلال حساب التكرارات لفحص ما إذا كانت هناك علاقة ذات دلالة إحصائية بين التقديم والطبقة الاجتماعية باستخدام اختبار "كا تربيع" ونوعياً عبر تبين الوظيفة التداولية لنماذج محددة. كشفت الدراسة أن شخصيات الطبقة العليا تفضل البنى النحوية المعقدة، ومع ذلك، استخدمت كلتا الطبقتين (العليا والدنيا) أسلوب التقديم بترددات متقاربة. ويؤكد التحليل أن التقديم يعمل كمورد خطابي وظيفي مشترك لجميع المتحدثين، في حين يظهر التمايز الطبقي بشكل أوضح من خلال ميزات لغوية أخرى مثل الرسمية المعجمية وتعقيد الجمل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التقديم، الواجهة (Fronting)، البنية الموسومة، الطبقة الاجتماعية، الخطاب التلفزيوني السينمائي، داونتون آبي.