

# English Discontinuous Structures

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the possibility of inserting linguistic elements in unusual positions. The outcome of such insertion has come to be known as a discontinuous structure. Learners of English as a foreign language are warned against the use of such structures in their speech or writing. However, in several cases the insertion of a word or a clause within a constituent or between constituents becomes obligatory or stylistically preferable. One striking example is the use of adverbials between the main verb of a sentence and its direct object when the object of the sentence is long or heavy.

## INTRODUCTION

A discontinuous structure refers to “a constituent which appears on the surface in two or more parts separated by material which is not part of the constituent, posing severe problems in drawing a tree structure (Trask, 1993: 83). In morphology, discontinuity occurs when a morpheme consists of two parts with another morpheme in between. An interesting instance is the negative morpheme in spoken Egyptian Arabic {ma---} as in /matifham/ (you don't understand), the negative of /tifham/ (you understand).

In syntactic analysis, discontinuity refers to the splitting of a construction by the insertion of an element, a word, a phrase or a clause, within the construction producing a stylistically unusual structure.

In the present study, the researcher will identify and analyse the major English discontinuous syntactic structures and will attempt to specify the purpose underlying their use and the controversy over their acceptability.

### **I. The Insertion of Elements between the Main Verb and the Direct Object:**

The normal unmarked order of elements in an English sentence containing an object is that of subject-verb-object (SVO). Adverbials,

prepositional phrases and clauses can be added before and after the sentence as well as between the subject and the verb as in the following examples:

1. The doctor examined the patient.
- 1a. Soon the doctor examined the patient.
- 1b. The doctor soon examined the patient.
- 1c. The doctor examined the patient soon.

However, the position between the main verb and the object rarely admits such elements. The following example, is, therefore, unacceptable:

- 1d. \* The doctor examined soon the patient.

This is why foreign learners of English are always advised to avoid using adverbials or prepositional phrases between the main verb and the object of the sentence.

Nevertheless, grammarians of English concede that in certain cases the placement of an adverbial between the main verb and the object is optional or even obligatory. They refer to this phenomenon as “the rightward movement of the direct object” (Haegemen and Gue’ron, 1999:53) or as “heavy NP shift” (Chomsky, 1995).

Consider the following sentence:

2. You should read with the greatest attention all the instructions which you receive in the course of the day. in which the direct object, the NP all the instructions which you receive in the course of the day is not adjacent to the verb read; the PP with the greatest attention intervenes. This movement of the object to a position after the PP is optional because it is also grammatical to say:

2a. You should read all the instructions which you receive in the course of the day.

placing the PP after the object NP.

The movement of the object to a position after the PP is possible when the object NP is “long” or “heavy”. In the above example, had the object been a pronoun or a noun, *i.e.* a “light” NP, the movement would have been unacceptable, *e.g.*

2b.\* You should read with the greatest attention the book.

In the opinion of Haegeman and Gue'ron (*ibid*:223) the object NP may move rightward (be placed after the adjunct when it is informationally "heavy", and hence must be focalized, that is, to be put in a prominent position in the sentence where it carries end-weight.

In some cases the movement of the object is obligatory because without this movement ambiguity or awkward structures may result. Consider the following sentence in which the PP after a long debate has been inserted before the object NP

a law that bans smoking in railway stations and airports.

3. The parliament has passed after a long debate a law that bans smoking in railway stations and airports.

Placing the PP after the object NP will obviously render the sentence ungrammatical and will distort the meaning.

3a. \* The parliament has passed a law that bans smoking in railway stations and airports after a long debate.

Similarly, in the following sentence the placement of the adverb beautifully after the object will result in a syntactically and semantically awkward sentence.

4. She sang beautifully a school song the teachers had taught her when she was a child.

The foregoing examples indicate that when the object is followed by a postnominal clause modifying the NP the insertion of the adverbial before the object (especially when the adverbial is short) is either obligatory or at least preferable.

Quirk *et al.* (1985:1395) point out that the movement forward of the adjunct is usually accompanied by the assignment to it of a marked (subsidiary) focus as in:

5. She pulled to one SIDE the heavy CURtain.

5a. She pulled the heavy curtain to one SIDE.

Haegeman and Gue'ron (1999:124) cite an example in which two adjuncts are placed successively before the direct object NP.

6. You should read before filing with the utmost care all the instructions concerning the system.

## II. Discontinuous Noun Phrases:

A phrase or a clause acting as a complement or a modifier of a noun usually follows that noun immediately as in the following examples:

7. The industrialization of agriculture in Iraq has increased productivity.

8. The book you are reading must be very interesting.

The PP of agriculture in 7 acts as a complement of the noun head NH industrialization and, therefore, occurs adjacent to it. Similarly, the clause you are reading modifies the NH book and occurs immediately after it. The movement of the PP in Iraq to a position before the complement in sentence 7 will render the sentence unacceptable or at least awkward.

7a. \*The industrialization in Iraq of agriculture has increased productivity.

The same thing can be said of sentence 8 where the movement of the verb phrase VP to a position prior to the clause modifying the NH book will render the sentence completely ungrammatical.

8a. \* The book must be very interesting you are reading.

However, there are cases in English where the insertion of elements between the NH and a following complement or a postnominal modifier is possible. Following are some of these cases:

A. The Insertion of Elements between a Derived Noun and its Complement:

When a clause is nominalized, as in the examples that follow, the same rules of object postponement discussed above apply. The only difference is that in these examples the object of the underlying sentence appears on the surface structure as a prepositional phrase following the nominalized NH and acting as its complement.

9. The implementation by the British government of a new law that bans smoking in public halls was welcomed by the World Health Organization.

In example 9 the PP by the British government intercedes between the NH the implementation and its complement of a new law that bans smoking in public halls, producing a discontinuous structure. The reason for this movement is due to the fact that the complement is “long” or

“heavy”, and thus placing it in a position immediately following the NH will result in an ambiguous and rather awkward sentence.

9a.? The implementation of a new law that bans smoking in public halls by the British government was welcomed by the World Health Organization.

When the complement of the NH is not so long, the movement of the elements is optional as the following example illustrates:

10. The discovery of new building materials in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has revolutionized architecture.

10a. The discovery in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century of new materials has revolutionized architecture.

(Quirk *et al.*, 1985:1397)

B. The Insertion of Elements between the NH and its Postmodifier:

Sometimes discontinuity occurs by the insertion of elements between a NH and its postmodifier, which normally follows it immediately. Thus instead of saying

11. The loaf you sold me was stale.

one can say equally correctly:

11a. That loaf was stale that you sold me.

Similarly, 12 and 12a are both possible.

12. A steering committee consisting of Messrs Smith, Robinson and Schults has been formed.

12a. A steering committee has been formed consisting of Messrs Smith, Robinson and Schults.

In sentences 11 and 11a the postnominal modifier is a finite clause that you sold me, whereas in sentences 12 and 12a the modifier is a non-finite participial clause.

The modifier can also be a word, phrase, or a clause in apposition to the NH it modifies as in the following example:

13. The rumour, that he was secretly engaged to Jane, circulated widely.

Discontinuity may arise in the above example when the appositive clause and the NH are separated by the insertion of elements between them as follows:

13a. The rumour circulated widely that he was secretly engaged to Jane.

In cases where a prepositional phrase modifies the NH, discontinuity is also possible as the following example demonstrates:

14. The story is told *of her phenomenal success in Australia*.

14a. The story is told in Australia of her phenomenal success.

The choice between the ordinary structure and the discontinuous one in examples 11-12 lies in the writer's (or speaker's) attempt to produce stylistically well-balanced sentences in accordance with the norms of English structure in particular to achieve end-weight (or end-focus), which is a very common phenomenon in English syntax (Quirk *et al.*, 1985:1398)

Sometimes, certain instances of multiple post-modification raise serious problems of meaning and style. Therefore, careful ordering of constituents is essential to communicate the writer's or speaker's exact meaning and/or intention. To cite an example, the following pair of noun phrases differ in meaning and are not mere stylistic variants:

15. The man in black talking to the girl . . .

15a. The man talking to the girl in black . . .

Moreover, the head of a modifying phrase may itself be modified by another phrase as in the following example:

16. The man and the woman in the corner nearest the door talking to Jane...

Although the last modifier in 16 is rather far removed from the NH, ambiguity is impossible: the door could not be talking to Jane! Nevertheless, many users of English would prefer to use a finite relative clause here (... who are talking to Jane) (Quirk *et al.*, 1985:1299).

In some ordering of post-modifiers, ambiguity and sometimes unacceptability may arise as in the following example:

17. She recalled the smiles of delight *on all the faces*.

The phrase *on all the faces* can be said to modify either *the smiles* or *delight*. Another ordering, which attempts to avoid ambiguity will result in a grammatically awkward sentence:

17a.? all the faces that she recalled the smiles of delight on ...

One solution of this problem is to replace the relative clause by a construction with a preposition plus -ing participle clause as follows:

17b. On recalling the smiles of delight on all the faces...

### III. Fronting the Object Complement:

In a sentence of the structure Subject-Verb-Object-Complement (SVOC) the complement normally occurs after the direct object as in the following examples:

18. The judge pronounced the man guilty.

19. She called the boss an idiot.

Yet, when the object is long and complex, final placement is possible and in some cases obligatory to avoid ambiguity or awkward structures. In the following examples, the object complement precedes the object and, therefore; a discontinuous structure results:

18a. They pronounced *guilty everyone of the accused*.

19a. He had called *an idiot* the man on whose judgement he had to rely.

(Quirk *et al.*, 1985:1395)

### IV. The Split Infinitive:

When an adverbial modifies a to-infinitive verb, the usual position of that adverbial is after the infinitive or after the object or complement of that infinitive as in the following examples:

20. He tried to leave *quietly*.

21. Thomas made an appointment to see the manager *immediately*.

Some grammarians, however, allow the use of a limited type of adverbials between *to* and the infinitive on the ground that some native speakers do insert such adverbs in this position in their unconscious speech or in their writing.

22. My wife told me to *probably* expect you.

23. Vauxhall are attempting to *really* break into the market.

(Collins Cobuild, 2000:284)

This, naturally, results in a clearly discontinuous structure.

### CONCLUSION

There are certain constituents in English that rarely allow the insertion of elements within them. Yet, under certain conditions, it is sometimes possible to violate the rules and place certain elements in unusual positions for stylistic purposes or to avoid the ambiguity that would result from putting these elements in their normal positions.

It has been shown in this paper that placing elements between the main verb and the object of a sentence or between a noun phrase and its complement is optional or even obligatory when the object or complement is “heavy” or “complex”.

Several other similar cases have been found where the speaker or writer is allowed to place elements within constituents without producing ungrammatical sentences.

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