

English VP fronting and the syntax of Yoda

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Introduction: Yoda



- Yoda is a fictional character from the Star Wars series of films.
- First seen in *Empire Strikes Back* (episode V).
- Appears in 5 of the 6 films so far made.
- Well known for his idiosyncratic use of English.

Some Yoda utterances (from ESB)

“Stopped
they must
be.”

“Help you I
can.”

“If you leave
now, help
them you
could.”

“Mmm. Take
you to him, I
will.”

“Consume you it
will, as it did Obi-
Wan's apprentice.”

“Found someone,
you have, I would
say, hmmm?”

“Stay and
help you, I
will.”



People have intuitions

- How do you turn the following sentence into Yoda-speak?
 - Palpatine was attacked by Ewoks.
 - *Attacked by Ewoks Palpatine was.*
 - Palpatine will have been attacked by Ewoks.
 - *Attacked by Ewoks Palpatine will have been. (?)*

Analysing Yoda

- Some general archaisms:
 - Inversion with lexical verbs:
 - Ready, are you? What **know** you of ready?
 - Inversion of auxiliaries with some topics:
 - For eight hundred years **have** I trained Jedi. My own counsel **will** I keep on who is to be trained!
 - Present tense form for progressive:
 - Rootleaf, I **cook**.
 - Some general weirdness:
 - **Away** put your weapon!
 - Wars **not make** one great.

Yoda's most typical feature

- The most typical Yoda feature is **VP fronting**.
 - [_{VP} Help you] I can.
 - [_{VP} Stopped] they must be.
 - [_{VP} Found someone] you have.
 - [_{VP} Take you to him] I will.
- **V(erb)P(hrase) fronting** (also known as VP preposing and VP topicalization) is a productive process in standard English.

Use of VP fronting in English

- VP fronting in standard English is restricted to salient propositions explicitly evoked in the preceding discourse (Ward 1990).
 - John didn't mean to insult his aunt.
#But [_{VP} upset her] he did.
- Yoda does not seem to have this requirement.

Analyses of VP fronting

- Traditional analyses (Reinhart 1978; Zagana 1988a, b; Baltin 2007) have analysed VP fronting as **movement** of the VP to the front of the clause.

he will [_{VP} eat the pies]

A problem from Yoda

– [_{VP} Told you] I did. (*Empire Strikes Back*)

- This VP can't be analysed as having moved from the end of the clause.

[_{VP} told you]*I did

not a grammatical sentence!

- Is it only Yoda who accepts 'morphological mismatch' sentences like these? Do humans accept them too?

Small survey

- I requested acceptability judgements from 12 native speakers of English.
- The speakers were not told what the objective of the survey was. The survey included a number of 'filler' sentences to distract them.

Results

- ‘Normal’ instances of VP fronting were judged fully acceptable by all 12 speakers.
 - (We wanted John to eat the pies, and) **eat the pies** he did.
 - (Good: 12, Intermediate: 0, Bad: 0)
 - (We hoped that Wiggins had won a gold medal, and) **won a gold medal** he had.
 - (Good: 12, Intermediate: 0, Bad: 0)

Results

- Yoda-style ‘morphological mismatches’ were generally accepted.
 - (She said that she would meet me, and) **meet me** she has.
 - (Good: 8, Intermediate: 3, Bad: 1)
 - *she has meet me
 - (The boy promised to do his homework, and) **do his homework** he has.
 - (Good: 8, Intermediate: 4, Bad: 0)
 - *he has do his homework

Results

- Yoda-style ‘morphological mismatches’ were generally accepted.
 - (Everyone said that Susan called her mother twice, and) ?called her mother twice Susan did.
 - (Good: 4, Intermediate: 5, Bad: 3)
 - *Susan did called her mother twice
 - (We’d heard that the shipwrecked man swam to shore, and) swam to shore he had.
 - (Good: 8, Intermediate: 2, Bad: 2)
 - *he had swam to shore
- (* at least in SSBE!)

Naturally occurring examples

- (I bought the ring from the store in St. Cloud and Tony Brown was the manager that helped, and) **helped** he did.
 - <http://riddles-jewelry.blogspot.co.uk/2011/08/customer-review-of-riddles-jewelry-from.html> (accessed 08/11/2012)
- (He was asked to go to the affiliated program in Fresno to “help out for 1 to 2 years” in 1976.) And **helped**, he did.
 - <http://www.communitymedical.org/news/ucsf-trauma-educator-and-surgeon-remembered> (accessed 08/11/2012)

Results

- Not all combinations are acceptable:
 - (I expected Billy to have gone to the shops, and)
*gone to the shops he will.
 - (Good: 0, Intermediate: 1, Bad: 11)
 - (Last time it was Amy who drove the getaway car, and)
*drove the getaway car she should.
 - (Good: 1, Intermediate: 2, Bad: 9)

Discussion

- This small survey indicates that some speakers, at least, have ‘Yoda grammars’.
- If there’s a morphological mismatch, the movement analysis becomes untenable.
- Alternative analysis: the VP isn’t moved to sentence-initial position, but is there all along.
 - The lower VP is then deleted by a process of VP **ellipsis**.

Discussion

- The non-movement analysis finds support from other languages in which both the initial VP and the lower VP may be pronounced, e.g. Spanish (Vicente 2007):
 - ?? [_{VP} Leer un libro], Juan ha leído un libro
read.INF a book J has read a book
“As for reading a book, Juan has read a book”
- Some complications (for both theories!):
island constraints; binding; adverbs.

Conclusion

- A few odd examples from a small green alien a long time ago in a galaxy far far away can be surprisingly important when investigating the structure of the modern English language!



Thank you!

References

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