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.”

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

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

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

“Help you I can.”

“Mmm. Take you to him, I will.”

“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**.
  – \([_{\text{VP}} \text{ Help you]} \text{ I can.}\]
  – \([_{\text{VP}} \text{ Stopped}] \text{ they must be.}\]
  – \([_{\text{VP}} \text{ Found someone}] \text{ you have.}\]
  – \([_{\text{VP}} \text{ Take you to him}] \text{ 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 \[ VP \text{ upset her} \] he did.

• Yoda does not seem to have this requirement.
Analyses of VP fronting

• Traditional analyses (Reinhart 1978; Zagona 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

• 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.

– (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.
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):
  – ?? \([_{\text{VP}} \text{Leer un libro]}\), Juan ha leído un libro
    read.\text{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 far away can be surprisingly important when investigating the structure of the modern English language!
Thank you!
References

• Vicente, Luis. 2007. The syntax of heads and phrases: a study of verb (phrase) fronting. Utrecht: LOT.