

## CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR AND FOCUS STRUCTURE: THE TEMPORAL ADJUNCT CONSTRUCTION

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper addresses the issue of the relation between Construction Grammar and focus structure. Drawing evidence from other authors such as Lambrecht (1994), Van Valin and LaPolla (1997) or Dik (1989), I stress the significant role of pragmatics in the understanding of grammatical constructions. For this purpose, I revise several constructional templates whose main function is to promote or introduce topic and focus constituents into the discourse. Likewise, I attempt to provide a more exhaustive and complete account, in pragmatic terms, of the temporal adjunct construction for the adverbs yesterday, today and tomorrow than the one proposed by Fillmore (2001).*

**KEYWORDS.** *Construction Grammar, focus structure, temporal adjunct construction, pragmatics.*

**RESUMEN:** *En este artículo se trata la cuestión de la relación entre la Gramática de Construcciones y la estructura focal. Siguiendo a otros autores como Lambrecht (1994), Van Valin y LaPolla (1997) o Dik (1989), enfatizo el papel significativo de la pragmática a la hora de comprender construcciones gramaticales. Con este fin, reviso algunas plantillas 'construccionales' cuya función principal consiste en promocionar o introducir elementos tópicos y focales en el discurso. Asimismo, y en términos pragmáticos, intento elaborar un análisis más exhaustivo y completo sobre la construcción adverbial temporal de los adverbios yesterday, today y tomorrow que el propuesto por Fillmore (2001).*

**PALABRAS CLAVE.** *Gramática de Construcciones, estructura focal, construcción adverbial temporal, pragmática.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Construction Grammar as developed by authors such as Lakoff (1987), Goldberg (1995) and Fillmore and Kay (1999ab) constitutes a cognitive and functional model of language which describes grammar as a collection of constructions, each comprising

syntactic, semantic and pragmatic information. Although the grammatical model is quite recent in time, the idea of organizing grammar as constructional templates has been a recurrent issue in traditional grammarians like Bloomfield (1933).

In this ‘constructionist’ approach, language is considered as a social means of communication and as such pragmatics, along with syntax and semantics, play a crucial role in the description and explanation of language.

Construction Grammar is, nowadays, one of the most flourishing trends in linguistics, gaining many advocates, and with a remarkable amount of empirical and theoretical research on numerous grammatical phenomena<sup>1</sup>. However, as far as time adjuncts are concerned, very little or no attention has been devoted to them as evoking constructional templates. On this issue, nevertheless, we can consider Fillmore’s (2001) work on time adjuncts such as *before*, *still*, *three weeks ago*, *tomorrow*...etc. as a very remarkable one. Yet, Fillmore’s analysis is just concerned with the main semantic and some of the syntactic features of the grammatical constructions for those time adjuncts; as a result, his approach turns out quite incomplete as regards the pragmatics of the constructions, providing therefore, incomplete grammatical constructions. In the remainder of this paper, and following largely Lambrecht’s (1994) terminology, I shall try to develop more accurate descriptions for the temporal adjunct constructions of *yesterday*, *today* and *tomorrow* by dealing with some of their most relevant pragmatic features. The discussion will proceed as follows: first I shall emphasize the significance of the relation between focus structure and Construction Grammar by drawing evidence from other grammatical theories such as Role and Reference Grammar (1997) – hereafter RRG, and then I shall comment on the results of a 500-example corpus research as regards focus structure and the time adverbs *yesterday*, *today* and *tomorrow*.

## 2. CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR AND FOCUS STRUCTURE

As I remarked above, one of the main postulates of Construction Grammar is that grammatical structures are stored as constructional templates, each with a specific set of morphosyntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties.

In the RRG approach to constructional templates, it is assumed that there is a set of syntactic templates representing the possible syntactic structures in the language, which are stored in the syntactic inventory, and that there is a separate lexicon containing lexical items, morphemes and other types of lexical entities. According to Van Valin and LaPolla (1997: 234), some of those syntactic patterns can cooccur with specific focus structure patterns, as is the case with WH-words in the precore slot<sup>2</sup> or clefting constructions; this can be illustrated by the following examples, where the constituents in focus appear in capital letters:

- a. WHO is your best friend?
- b. It is PETER who went to France.

Both examples in (1) make use of a marked word order in order to introduce focus elements into the discourse. Van Valin and LaPolla represent the constructional template for WH-words in the precore slot as follows:

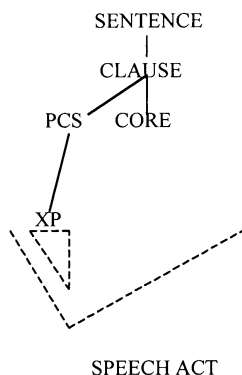


Figure 1. *Syntactic template for English WH-question*

On the other hand, there are other grammatical constructions whose main function is to introduce or promote a new topic into the discourse. A topic-promoting construction, following Lambrecht (1994: 117), is the presentational construction. This is illustrated by (2):

(2)

Once there was a **princess** called Ellen. **She** was very pretty, nice and kind.

Sentence (2) is an example of the presentational construction. This construction introduces a new referent into the discourse, *the princess*, which will become the topic of the following sentences and will usually be referred to by anaphorical pronouns (*she*).

Givón (1993: 206) also proposes several other constructions with a marked word-order which serve the function of promoting focus or topic elements; including topicalizing constructions such as raising, dative shift, etc. and focalizing constructions like *Y-movement* and clefting.

Nevertheless, it should be remarked that many templates are not associated with a specific focus structure construction, and their entry in the syntactic inventory is underspecified as to focus structure. That is, the main device in English for focus-marking is prosodic prominence. Indeed, it is the only device which can occur by itself, without being complemented by another coding system.

On these grounds, Lambrecht (1994: 226) defines some grammatical constructions at the level of prosody by distinguishing three main types of focus structures: *predicate-focus structure*, *argument-focus structure* and *sentence-focus structure*. Examples are given in (3):

- (3)
- a. (What happened to Tom?) Tom had an ACCIDENT.
  - b. (Who had an accident?) TOM had an accident.
  - c. (What happened?) TOM had an ACCIDENT.

Sentence (3a) is an example of predicate-focus structure. This is the unmarked subject-predicate (topic-comment) sentence type, in which the predicate bears the pragmatic function of focus and in which the subject (*Tom*) is part of the presupposition.

An example of argument-focus construction is given in (3b). This kind of structure is also called identificational, since the focus identifies the missing argument in a presupposed open proposition (in this case *Tom*). It should be noted that the term “argument” in “argument focus” is used here as a cover term for any non-predicating expression in a proposition, i.e. it includes terms expressing place, time, and manner.

Finally, (3c) shows a sentence-focus structure. These are sentences of the presentational or event-reporting type, in which the focus extends over both the subject and the predicate. Since the entire clause is within the focus domain there is no topic.

In all these cases, focus structure is not determined by a marked word order as we observed in (1) or (2), but by the speaker’s intonation. This corroborates one of the main tenets of Construction Grammar, that is, that syntax is not the central aspect of language, but it is the interaction between syntax, semantics and pragmatics that allows us to explain and describe a wide range of linguistic phenomena.

After having highlighted the significant role of focus structure in Construction Grammar, the following section will be devoted to the specific pragmatic features of the time adjuncts *yesterday*, *today* and *tomorrow*.

### 3. YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

My research on the pragmatic features of the time adjuncts *yesterday*, *today* and *tomorrow* has been centered on a 500-example corpus drawn from the Corpus of Spoken Professional American English (CSPAЕ)<sup>3</sup>. The CSPAЕ is a corpus of over 2 million words which includes transcripts of conversations of various types occurring between 1994 and 1998. The corpus consists of short interchanges by approximately 400 speakers that carry out professional activities, namely academics and politics, including academic politics. The fact that the genre is professional discourse means that the form of the interactions is more similar to written discourse than more casual conversations would be.

This corpus has been selected in terms of the significance of the communicative context. That is, pragmatic functions can be identified just in relation with their context or communicative setting; the CSPAЕ displays the whole text and in this way, the three temporal adverbs can be located and related to a communicative setting.

Before analyzing several examples from the corpus, it should be remarked that adverbs such as *yesterday*, *today* and *tomorrow* are linguistic expressions designating text-external elements, and as such they are referred to as deictic expressions.

Deictic expressions allow the speaker to directly designate elements of the text-external world by “pointing” to them. Among the deictic expressions of a language are those which denote (i) the speaker and the addressee (*I, you*, etc.), (ii) the place of the speech event and places situated in relation to it (*here, there*, etc.), (iii) the time of the speech event and points in time measured with reference to it (e.g. *now, yesterday, tomorrow*, etc.), and in general all expressions whose meaning can only be understood with reference to some aspect of the text external world.

According to Lambrecht (1994: 303), elements of the text-external world do not have to be established by speakers via discourse representations but they may be taken for granted by virtue of their being present in, or recoverable from the speech setting. Then, the referents of time expressions like *yesterday, today* and *tomorrow* are usually situationally accessible, since they are deictically anchored with reference to the time of utterance. This, in turn, implies that these kinds of adverbs are most often unaccented and tend to have a topic relation to the proposition. Sentences in which they are accented and focal are therefore perceived as special. However, I do not entirely agree with Lambrecht’s (1994) view on the topicality of these adverbs. Let us consider the following examples from the corpus:

(4)

- a. The president then spoke to Governor Wilson, and the Governor informed him that a disaster declaration would be coming today.
- b. Secretary Pena is also on his way out there. He was in Birmingham today.
- c. That’s the only open event, he’ll have other private meetings tomorrow.

All of these examples represent the typical structure topic-comment (predicate-focus construction). In (4a), a new referent is introduced into the discourse (*Governor Wilson*) becoming therefore an established topic. The focus information of the sentence is *the information that a disaster declaration would be coming today*.

In the same way in (4b) *He* is the topic of the clause since its referent has already been introduced in the previous clause (*Secretary Pena*). In this case it is expressed as the unmarked topic, pronominally coded and unaccented. The information in focus would be *was in Birmingham today*.

Finally, in (4c) again, *he* being co-referential with a previous referent introduced in the discourse, is the topic of the sentence, while *will have other private meetings tomorrow* is the focus.

These three examples are not special constructions where the temporal adverbs are accented and therefore in focus. They are situationally accessible since they are anchored in reference to the speech time. Then, according to Lambrecht (1994) they have a topic relation to the proposition. However, although the focus accent does not fall directly on these adverbs, I would consider them as part of the focus structure rather than the topic.

In order that sentence (4b) be informative, for instance, the speaker provides the hearer with the information that not only *Secretary Pena* was in *Birmingham*, but also that *he* was there *today*. Moreover, even if they are deictic expressions, which make them situationally accessible, some differences with other deictic elements, like personal pronouns, can be noticed:

- (5)
- a. When did Peter go to your house? He came YESTERDAY.
  - b. Who went to your house? ?HE came to my house.
  - c. Where did you put the book? ?I put it HERE.

While example (5a) – with *yesterday* as the element in focus of the sentence – sounds perfectly natural, (5b) does not seem to be appropriate. That is, unless there is a previous context like *I saw Peter and Mary yesterday*, the speaker in (5b) cannot know by the answer of his interlocutor, the identity of *he*. In the same way, if the addressee in (5c) does not point to a specific place (e.g. *on the table*), the speaker will not be able to infer the referent of *here*. Therefore, it seems that not all deictic expressions behave in the same way, and, while *yesterday* may be in focus without a previous mention to it, other deictic elements like *he, she, here, there...etc.*, are usually in a topic relation with the utterance.

Consequently, even though these deictic adverbs can be accessible or semi-active for the addressee, they also represent “new” information together with the main focus of a sentence.

Before analyzing structures where *yesterday, today* and *tomorrow* are the main focus of an utterance, Dik’s concept of focus (1989) should be considered. That is, as we shall see in several examples from the corpus, when *yesterday, today* and *tomorrow* are the main focus of a sentence, they will usually appear in cases of contrastive information; these cases in turn, may be further specified following Dik’s typology of focus according to the communicative point expressed. In this way, Dik (1989) distinguishes the following types of focus as illustrated in Figure 2:

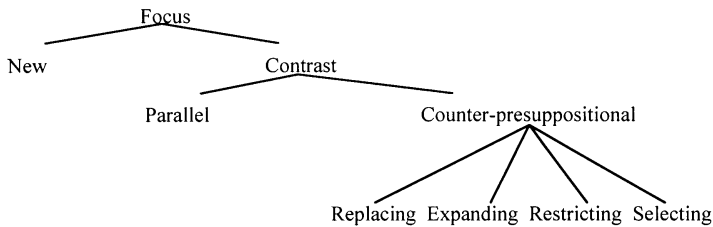


Figure 2. *Types of focus according to communicative point*

A completive (new) focus presents information pertaining to an information gap on the part of the speaker. That is, there is no contrast involved with any other kind of similar information.

All other focus types in Figure 2 involve some kind of contrast between the focus constituent and alternative pieces of information which may be explicitly presented or presupposed. *Parallel focus* is involved when focus is assigned to corresponding constituents in parallel constructions:

- (6)  
JOHN is nice but PETER is a fool.

In the counter-presuppositional focus types on the other hand, the information presented is opposed to other, similar information which the speaker presupposes to be entertained by the addressee. In this type of focus the following sub-types are found:

*Replacing focus.* The speaker presumes that the addressee has some incorrect piece of information X, which is to be replaced by some correct piece of information Y:

- (7)  
A: Peter studies law.  
B: No, he doesn't study LAW, he studies LINGUISTICS

*Expanding focus.* The speaker presumes that the addressee has a correct piece of information X, but that X is not complete. The speaker knows that there is at least one piece of information Y which it is also relevant for the addressee to know.

- (8)  
A: Anna bought milk.  
B: She not only bought MILK, she also bought COOKIES.

*Restricting focus.* The speaker presumes that the addressee has a correct piece of information X, but also (incorrectly) believes that Y is the case:

- (9)  
A: Tom likes Sarah and Patty.  
B: No, he doesn't like SARAH, he only likes PATTY.

*Selecting focus.* The speaker presumes that the addressee believes that X or Y is correct, but does not know which:

- (10)  
A: Would you like milk or tea?  
B: TEA, please.

These distinctions can be applied to some examples in the corpus:

(11)

- a. We will start briefings for you all perhaps as early as TOMORROW, but definitely by WEDNESDAY.
- b. He'll also meet with some outside people – has a dinner TONIGHT – I mean, TOMORROW night with outside experts to talk just generally about –
- c. Again he's meeting with the mayors TODAY about it and the governors TOMORROW about it.
- d. Oh, yeah, let's do Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. TOMORROW he's going to go to Kramer Junior High School.

All the sentences in (11) involve some kind of contrastive information. An example of expanding focus is given by (11a); in this case the speaker adds the information that if the briefings do not start by *tomorrow*, they will do it by *Wednesday*.

Clause (11b) is an instance of replacing focus, though in this case it is not an incorrect assumption on the part of the addressee, but a mistake on the part of the speaker. Anyway, the speaker thought or mistook some information, *tonight*, and he then replaced it for the correct information, *tomorrow night*.

Sentence (11c) is an example of a parallel focus structure. In this case, depending on the speaker's intonation, *today* and *tomorrow* may be the main focus of the sentence and they are contrasted in parallel structures.

Finally, (11d) also shows a case where *tomorrow* is contrasted with the other days of the week in a parallel way.

An example which does not involve contrastive information (completive focus) is given in (12):

(12)

VOICE: WHEN is the civil rights announcement?

MYERS: It will happen TODAY or over the WEEKEND.

In this example, the addressee is provided with the required information about the *civil rights announcement's date*. This constitutes a case of argument-focus structure where the focus identifies a missing argument (in this case an adjunct) in a presupposed open proposition.

Finally, another fact that should be taken into account is the order of these temporal adverbs. Usually, time adjuncts like *yesterday*, *today* and *tomorrow* take the final position in a sentence. However, they can also appear in other positions such as after the subject, after a main predicate, initial position, etc. According to Quirk *et al.* (1991), focus is normally placed at the end of the information unit (end-focus principle). Therefore, when these adverbs are in focus, they will usually appear at the end of the clause:

(13)

A. When did she arrive?

B. She arrived **YESTERDAY**.



However, position only cannot be a determining factor since, as stated above, these adverbs usually take the final position of the clause. Consider the following examples:

(14)

- a. MYERS: It will happen **TODAY** or over the **WEEKEND**.
- b. The President **MET** yesterday with Speaker Foley and Majority Leader Mitchel.

In (14) the temporal adverbs appear after the main predicate; however, whereas in (14a) *today* (and *weekend*) are the main focus of the sentence, i.e. they are fully accented, in (14b), the main accent does not fall on *yesterday* but on the predicate.

There is another position that should be regarded as a special case: the left-detached position (henceforth LDP)<sup>4</sup>. Just as the constituents located in the pre-core slot such as *why*, *who*, *when*, etc. always constitute the focus of a sentence, the same thing could be applied to *yesterday*, *today* and *tomorrow* when they are in LDP. However, according to Van Valin and LaPolla (1997: 228), while the interpretation of elements in the precore slot is focal, elements in the left-detached position are always topical: *they are outside of the actual focus domain by definition, since they are outside of the clause and therewith outside of the potential focus domain*.

This is illustrated by the following examples:

(15)

- a. Tomorrow, 10:15 a.m., he will BE at the CIA in the lobby of the headquarters where he will speak briefly to employees.
- b. Today, he's LOOKING at some overall – sort of overall trip.

Both clauses in (15) have a predicate-focus structure with the constituent *he* as the topic and the predicate as the comment about this topic. The temporal adverbs are in a topic relation with the sentences, since they constitute the ground, or “scene-setting” for what follows. Moreover, they are separated from the rest of the clause by an intonational break, which places them outside of the potential focus domain.

Nevertheless, there are some other cases where, the adverbs being in LDP, they can be said to be in focus. Following Quirk *et al.* (1991: 1362), the end-weight organization principle comes into operation with the principle of end-focus in the following way:

(16)

- a. She visited him **THAT VERY DAY**.
- b. She visited **THAT VERY DAY** an elderly and much beloved friend.

While in (16a) the time adjunct is located in its unmarked final position, in (16b), the “weight” of the object noun phrase makes it preferable to place the adjunct at what Quirk *et al.* (1991) call *iE* (initial end position). Quirk *et al.* (1991: 1362) state that even if the time adjunct is the constituent in focus, its position at *iE* is preferable than at the end of the clause; moreover, they remark that an even more preferred position might

have been *I* (initial position): *THAT VERY DAY, she visited...* Consequently, even if the time adjunct is in LDP, we find that it may be in focus. This can also be seen in the following example:

(17)

A. You are so lazy! You haven't done your homework, you haven't cleaned your room; yesterday you got up at 1.00p.m, today you've got up at 2.00p.m....

B. **YESTERDAY**, I got up **AT 9.00a.m.**

In (17B) both *yesterday* and *at 9.00 a.m.* are in focus. *At 9.00a.m* is emphasized in order to provide the hearer with the correct piece of information (replacing focus in Dik's terms), and *yesterday*, even if it is placed in LDP, is also stressed since it constitutes a selection of the previous constituents (Dik's selecting focus).

Therefore, though the adverb positions can influence their pragmatic function (as in specific constructions like *It's tomorrow when she is leaving*), stress is the main device for determining if they are in focus or not.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to give a more detailed account of the pragmatic characteristics for the time adjunct construction of *yesterday*, *today* and *tomorrow*. In this sense, Fillmore's (2001) approach does not follow the basic precepts of Construction Grammar since he just provides the main semantic and some of the syntactic features of those adjuncts. Consequently, I have deemed it necessary to emphasize the significant role of focus structure in Construction Grammar. For this, and drawing evidence from other grammatical theories, I have revised some grammatical constructions whose main function is to promote or introduce focus and topic elements into the discourse.

As regards the time adverbs *yesterday*, *today* and *tomorrow*, it may be concluded that these adjuncts are usually situationally accessible since they are linked to the utterance time, hence recoverable from the communicative context. However, as shown by examples like the ones in (5) they differ from other deictic elements in that, rather than being in a topic relation with the clause, they usually present 'new' information to the hearer, thus being in a focus relation with the sentence. In order that these temporal adverbs be the main focus of an utterance, they will usually appear in cases of contrastive information as those in (11) or in cases where they are considered the missing information of an structure like (13) above.

#### NOTES

1. Research on this field involves the study of many grammatical factors as constructions such as verbs, prepositional phrases, idioms, conjunctions, rhyme, relativization, etc. Moreover, the dynamic character of

the theory is corroborated by the *First International Conference on Construction Grammar* held in the University of California, at Berkeley, April 2001.

2. The precore slot is a special syntactic position for some arguments of the verb which are placed outside of the core of a sentence – this, in turn, encompasses the predicate plus its arguments. For more information see Van Valin and LaPolla (1997).
3. This sample and more information about the CSPAE corpus are available in the web page [www.athel.com/cspa.html](http://www.athel.com/cspa.html).
4. According to Van Valin and LaPolla (1997) the left-detached position is usually the position of pre-clausal elements in left-dislocation constructions

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