

CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

**The Pragmatic Functions of Non-Canonical Word Orders**  
**- A Survey on Topicalization, Left Dislocation and Right Dislocation**

LIN4011 Approaches to Discourse

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## **ABSTRACT**

The present study studies the interaction between syntactic structures and pragmatic functions by focusing on three word order movements, namely topicalization, left dislocation and right dislocation. We have identified various pragmatic functions of these constructions, and also pointed out that these constructions can behave and function pragmatically differently in different languages.

## **Section 1. Introduction**

In a conversation, speakers employ different conversational strategies to achieve different purposes. For instance, often times a purposefully made change in the syntactic structure can give certain explicit or sometimes subtle messages to the hearers. For instance, instead of saying directly “Please pass me the salt,” we might say “Could you pass me the salt?<sup>1</sup>” In changing the sentence from an imperative mood to an interrogative mood, the speaker employs a negative politeness strategy and indicates his respect of the hearer’s willingness to pass the salt.

The interaction between syntactic structures and pragmatic functions has been an interesting and inspiring topic for many past scholars, who have already done a number of researches on it. They have studied, for instance, the functions of different moods, different interrogative forms (wh-questions, yes-no questions, tag questions, etc.) and so on and so forth. However, studies on dislocated structures, which we refer to as non-canonical constructions here, are relatively few. These non-canonical constructions are, however, quite commonly found in colloquial usages as they seem to serve a wide range of pragmatic purposes even at first glimpses. The present study is thus interested in systematically studying the pragmatic functions of three specific non-canonical constructions, namely topicalization (TOP), left dislocation (LD) and right dislocation (RD).

## Section 2. Non-Canonical Constructions

When we speak of “non-canonical constructions”, we are actually contrasting these constructions with a so-called “canonical construction.” The canonical construction which we refer to here is loosely defined as the default word order, whereas non-canonical constructions are structures in which one or more elements are syntactically dislocated. For example, to express the proposition “I DO NOT LIKE MOST RAP,” one might use the default word order, or the canonical construction:

I don't like most rap. (1)

or alternatively use one of the non-canonical versions, such as:

Most rap, I don't like. (2)

Syntactically, [<sub>DP</sub> most rap] does not originate from the surface position, but from the internal argument position of the verb *like*, and is then moved, or dislocated to the surface topic position.

There are three kinds of such non-canonical: topicalization (TOP), left dislocation (LD) and right dislocation (RD).

### 2.1 Topicalization

Gregory et al. (2001) defines topicalization as follows:

*“Topicalization contains a gap in the clause which corresponds to an argument position that the preclausal NP can be construed as filling.”*

Let's take a look at the two examples here:

*Most rap* <sub>i</sub>, I don't like  $\phi_i$ . (3)

*That kind* <sub>i</sub>, I kind of enjoy  $\phi_i$ . (4)

Syntactically, we can illustrate them with a tree diagram, as shown in Fig.1. The topicalized elements originate from the internal argument position of the respective

verbs, and are fronted to the CP,Spec position, leaving a gap in their original position. In actual speech, there is often a pause between the topicalized element and the following main clause. There is also a rising intonation in the topicalized head noun (Douglas, 2004), as indicated by the arrows above the sentences in Fig.1.

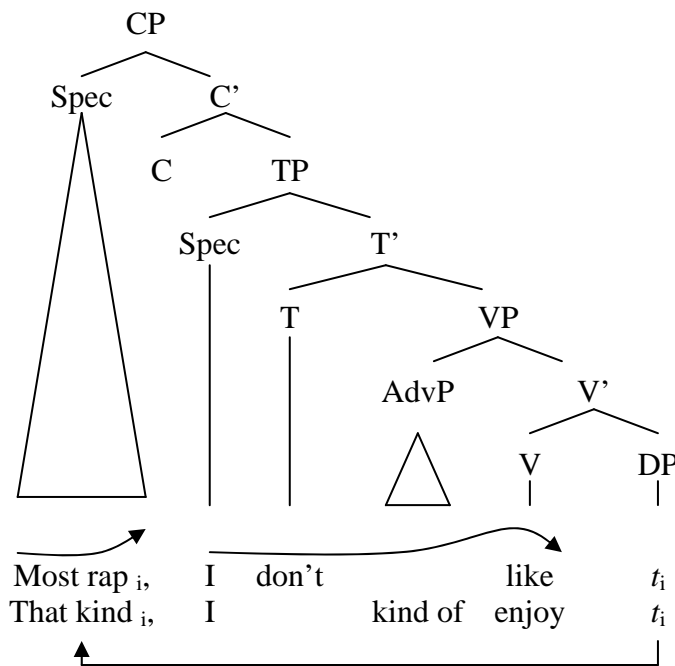


Fig.1 Topicalization

## 2.2 Left Dislocation

Left dislocation is similar to topicalization in the sense that they both contain a preclausal DP and a clause following. However, left dislocation contains an argument-position pronoun which topicalization does not. Gregory et al. (2001) characterizes left dislocation as follows:

*“Left dislocation contains an argument-position pronoun which is co-referential with the preclausal NP.”*

Here are some examples of LD, and their structure is illustrated in Fig.2. In contrast to topicalization prosodically, LD has a falling intonation in the main clause, whereas topicalization has a slight rise at the end of it (Douglas, 2004).

*The Saturns*<sub>i</sub>, you can get air bags in *them*<sub>i</sub>. (5)

And *heavy metal*<sub>i</sub>, *it*<sub>i</sub>'s noisy. (6)

Well, *my car*<sub>i</sub>, *it*<sub>i</sub>'s an eighty six. (7)

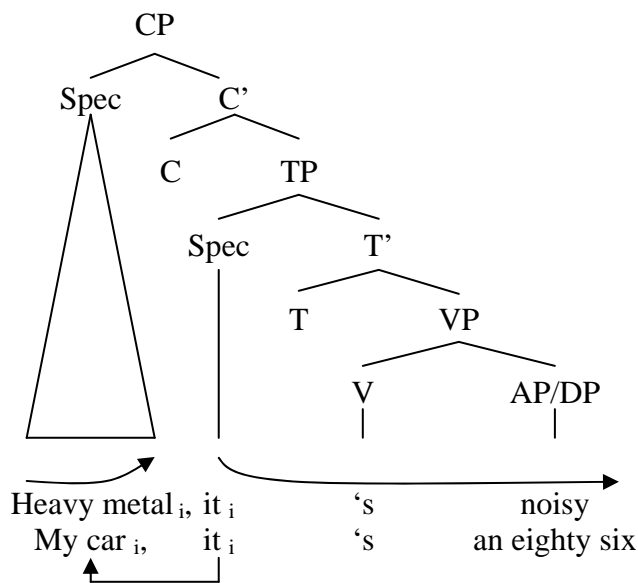


Fig.2 Left Dislocation<sup>2</sup>

### 2.3 Right Dislocation

Right dislocation at first sight seems to be a counterpart of left dislocation, in that a certain DP is seemingly dislocated to the end and outside of the main clause, leaving a resumptive pronoun co-referential to the DP in the main clause. The definition of RD, however, varies quite widely among different linguists. Some linguists such as Cheung (1997) extends the definition to include dislocated elements other than DP, as quoted below:

“Right dislocation refers to the phenomenon in which a sentence possesses a component standing to the right of what we normally take to be sentence final boundary.”

Two simple examples are given below and their corresponding structure and typical intonation shown in Fig.3. Law (2003) notes that “[a]n intonational break is obligatorily required before the Right-dislocated phrase which often has a low and level pitch intonation.”

*It<sub>i</sub>'s an impossible topic, right dislocation<sub>i</sub>.* (8)

*He<sub>i</sub>'s not an easy man, Marg's husband<sub>i</sub>.* (9)

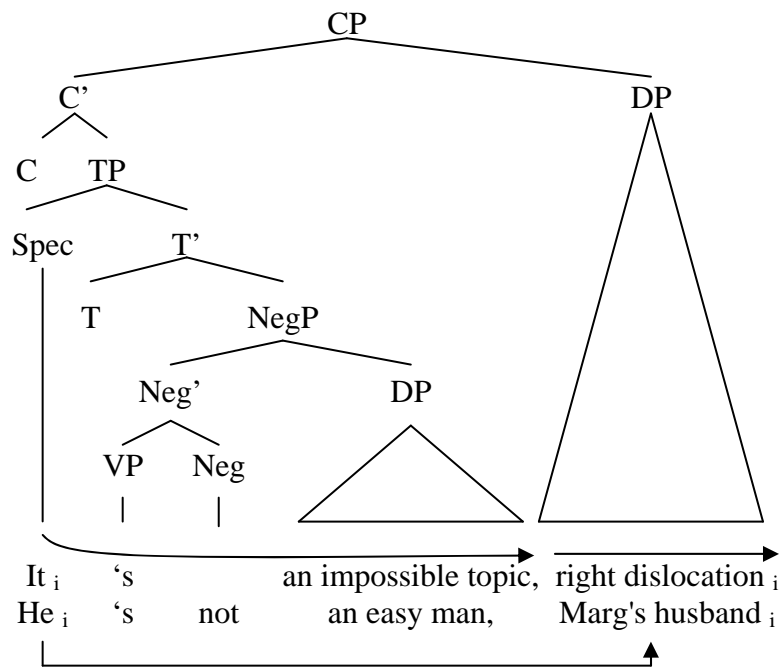


Fig.3 Right Dislocation<sup>3</sup>

#### 2.4 Comparison between TOP, LD and RD

To further illustrate the differences between TOP, LD and RD, we will look at some more examples in English and Cantonese.

### 2.4.1 English

Given a canonical sentence:

I kind of enjoy this course on discourse. (10)

It is quite straight forward to form the corresponding sentences in TOP, LD and RD constructions if *this course on discourse* is to be dislocated:

TOP: *This course on discourse* <sub>i</sub>, I kind of enjoy  $\phi$ <sub>i</sub>. (10a)

LD: *This course on discourse* <sub>i</sub>, I kind of enjoy *it* <sub>i</sub>. (10b)

RD: I kind of enjoy *it* <sub>i</sub>, *this course on discourse* <sub>i</sub>. (10c)

### 2.4.2 Cantonese

The picture in Cantonese is however more complicated. Give the canonical sentence:

我 都幾 鐘意 呢個 話語分析 嘅 科 。 (11)

ngo dougei zungji neigo waajyufansik ge fo

I quite like this discourse GEN course

“I kind of enjoy this course on discourse.”

To form the corresponding non-canonical sentences by dislocating *neigo waajyufansik ge fo*, we encounter several difficulties:

TOP: *Neigo waajyufansik ge fo* <sub>I</sub> le1<sub>PART</sub>, ngo dougei zungji  $\phi$ <sub>i</sub>. (11a)

LD: \* *Neigo waajyufansik ge fo* <sub>i</sub>, ngo dougei zungji *keoi* <sub>i</sub>. (11b)

RD: Ngo dougei zungji (\* *keoi* <sub>i</sub>) aa1<sub>PART</sub>, *neigo waajyufansik ge fo* <sub>i</sub>. (11c)

In Cantonese, the LD and RD sentences sounds a bit weird if the pronoun *keoi* is present. In addition, particles like *le1* and *aa1* are obligatory in forming these dislocated sentences. Without them, the sentences would sound quite strange to native speakers.

From the examples, it can be seen that there are some problems in the classification (or definitions) of TOP, LD and RD in Cantonese. As Cantonese is a pro-drop language, pronouns for subjects and objects can optionally be dropped. When it is dropped, it is hard to distinguish between TOP and LD as they both appear the same on the surface. Cheung (1997) identifies further criteria for distinguishing TOP from LD in Cantonese. For example, in TOP, one of the following particles has to follow the head noun: *le1/ne1*, *aa3* and *aa6*; but in LD, any other particle can follow the head noun, as long as their semantic properties are compatible. We will, however, not drill into too much detail here.

The function of TOP in Cantonese is similar to that in English. It translates roughly to the English phrase ‘as for...’ or ‘as far as...is concerned’. (Matthews & Yip, 1996) For example, a Cantonese TOP sentence like “cin ngo bong nei m dou laa3” (錢我幫你唔到啦) can be translated as “As far as money is concerned, I can’t help you.”

Topicalization of an object is also widely used without a subject, when the implicit subject is unknown or generic (Matthews & Yip, 1996). As in the example “gamjoeng gei je m jinggoi gong ge2” (咁樣既野唔應該講嘅), there is no explicit subject in the sentence. When translated into English, a subject is inserted, giving “One shouldn’t say such things”.

## Section 3. Pragmatic Functions

### 3.1 Topicalization

Four main functions of topicalization can be identified, namely topic introduction, set-inference triggering, contrasting and attention drawer / focusing.

#### 3.1.1 Topic Introduction

Topicalization can serve to limit the topic of the discourse. In other words, the head noun informs the hearer in advance what the following clause is going to be about, as illustrated in (12).

行 嘅 過程 呢，你 係 點樣 去 經歷 嘅呢？(12)

hang ge gwocing lei nei hai dimjeong hui ginglik ge3le1

walk GEN process PART you are how go experience PART

“The course of the walking, how did you experience (it)?”

As explained in §2.1, the head noun is normally a constituent dislocated from the main clause. In Chinese, there is however a special kind of topicalization whose head noun is not dislocated from anywhere. This is illustrated in the Mandarin example (13). In this kind of topicalization, the head noun obviously provides a topic for the discourse.

那 場 火，幸虧 消防員 來 得 早。 (13)

nei chang huo xingkuai xiaofangyuan lai de zao

that CL fire lucky fireman come ASP early

“As far as that fire is concerned, it was lucky that the firemen came early.”

#### 3.1.2 Set-inference Triggering

A second function of TOP is, according to Prince (1993),

“to trigger an inference on the part of the hearer that the entity represented by the initial NP stands in a salient partially-ordered set relation to some entity or entities already evoked in the discourse-model.”

In short, this is a “listing” function, which informs the hearer that the initial DP is one of the similar items in a group. Prince (1993) illustrates this with the example (14), in which the head noun *the third* is obviously in a list of items, namely the three groups of mice.

She had an idea for a project. She’s going to use three groups of mice. One, she’ll feed them mouse chow. Another, she’ll feed them veggies. *And the third she’ll feed junk food.* (14)

### 3.1.3 *Contrasting*

A related but different function from set-inference triggering is contrasting. When used in a TOP, the head noun is contrasted from other items in the group, which are mentioned or implied in the context (Matthews & Yip, 1996). For example, in (15), *Schubert* is contrasted against *Schumann*.

舒百特 我 成日 聽 嘅， 舒曼 就 少啲 啦 (15)

Syubaakdak ngo sengjat teng ge2, syumaan zau siudi laa1

Schubert I always listen PART Schumann then less PART

“I listen to Schubert a lot, Schumann rather less”

### 3.1.4 *Attention Drawer / Focusing*

Besides the above mentioned functions, we have also observed that TOP can often be used by the speaker to draw the hearer’s attention by uttering “something,” before he further gives further information on the topic introduced by the head noun,

which is perceived by the speaker to be more important and requires the hearer's attention. This can be seen by the very common (or even obligatory) pause between the head noun and the main clause. As the function of the head noun is to draw attention, therefore the speaker typically waits for a while before the hearer is ready to receive and parse the upcoming information. Also, the head noun is typically rather short. This can be explained if the head noun functions as an attention drawer, since it is supposed to be easily parsable by the hearer.

### ***3.2 Left Dislocation***

Left Dislocation serves a number of pragmatic functions, including simplifying discourse processing, set-inference triggering, re-initiation of story, affect display, attention drawer / focusing and hesitation.

#### ***3.2.1 Simplifying Discourse Processing***

In normal circumstances, new information is usually placed at the end of a sentence. When someone asks you, for example, "What is your name?" Your answer would typically be like "My name is *Arnold Schwarzwälderskirschtorte*," in which the italicized element is the new information in the sentence. It is grammatically perfectly possible to answer "*Arnold Schwarzwälderskirschtorte* is my name," but it is pragmatically more awkward because the new information comes too early and unexpectedly in the sentence.

In other words, new information is usually presented in the object position of the sentence. But when it is necessary to present the new information in the subject position or other unfavorable positions for new information, such as possessive nouns, LD serves to make the utterance more easily parsable to the hearer, and facilitate the

hearer's understanding of it, by first presenting the new information as a head noun, and then present it as a piece of old information in the form of a pronoun in the main clause (Prince, 1993).

### 3.2.2 *Set-inference Triggering*

This is the same function mentioned in §3.1.2 and is also illustrated in (14), which is restated in (16) for convenience. Both *one* and *another* serve to identify items in a group.

She had an idea for a project. She's going to use three groups of mice. *One, she'll feed them mouse chow. Another, she'll feed them veggies. And the third she'll feed junk food.* (16)

Taken from the radio, we have a similar example (17) in Cantonese. In the discourse, *meigwok* is one of the countries which have a base in Antarctica.

美國 啦，本身 佢哋 都有 自己 嘅 基地 啦。 (17)

meigwok laa1 bunsan keoidei dou jau zigei ge geidei laaa1

The US PART self they all have self GEN base PART

“The US, they also have their own base.”

Compared with TOP, however, LD lacks a contrasting function, or at least, the contrastive sense of the head noun against other items in the group is less obvious.

### 3.2.3 *Re-initiation of Story*

According to Kim (1995), LD also serves to re-initiate a story when it is interrupted by someone during the conversation, as illustrated in the following example.

B: Well I, when I was at the Laundromat last Sunday, the most attractive looking girl, in fact she works for doctor uhm-

A: No, this one doesn't work, and oon't be working.

B: Uh huh,

B: *Well this gal, she's red headed'n, and freckled, and brown eyes,* and uh she had the cutest little boy, and she was telling me he'd be three, in November. (18)

### **3.2.4 Affect display**

Another function Kim (1995) has mentioned is affect display, which he illustrates with example (19), in which the speaker expresses certain attitudes, here a despising one, towards *my father*.

-an' I've just- I was sitting over here, an' I got up an' just walked out an' *my father, he w' "Huh? Huh? Huh?"* He was (//) He turned green an' I think my father said something before he left, because they were here for another twenny minutes. (19)

### **3.2.5 Attention Drawer / Focusing**

This is the same function mentioned in 3.1.4. We suggest that LD serves the function of getting the hearer's attention.

### **3.2.6 Hesitation**

Compared with TOP, in which a syntactic movement is more obviously present, and is thus more probably planned, LD might be an instance of unplanned speech, because the main clause can exist without the head noun. Therefore, for some instances of LD at least, it is also possible that LD is a result of hesitation.

### 3.3 Right Dislocation

There are three main pragmatic functions of using RD. These functions include conversational repair / afterthought, information restructuring and meta-linguistic information. They are to be discussed one by one with examples of Cantonese.

#### 3.3.1 Conversational repair / Afterthought

The idea that RD being a speech repair or afterthought was discussed by Chao (1968), Givón (1976), and Geluykens (1994). The basic concept of conversational repair / afterthought is that the speaker first produced an utterance which he realizes afterward that the content is not providing enough information for the audience to understand thoroughly. The speaker then supplements additional information at the end to enrich the content.

The most popular way in using RD in English is the production of general term at the initial part of the speech, pronoun as usual, followed by a string of NP or DP to reveal what the general term represents. Cases in Cantonese, however, can be quite different. According to Chao (1968), afterthought is “*an unplanned part added to a sentence which has already been completed.*” This means that the additional part simply is added at the end, after the main clause is completed. This piece of information does not refer to any part of the sentence, i.e. no general term is to be referred to. Therefore, the attached part is not necessarily a string of NP or DP.

正常 去 南極 呢，好多 人 都 坐 船 去， (20)

zingsoeng heoi naamgik le1 houndo jan dou co syun heoi

Normally go Antarctica PART many people all sit ship go

係 新西蘭 坐 船 去 。

hai sansailaan co syun heoi

LOC New Zealand sit ship go

“Normally to go to the Antarctica, many people would go by sea, go by sea from New Zealand.”

The information supplemented at the end of the sentence can also be an adverb.

眼睛 嘅 視線 範圍 好 大 嘅 ， 其實 。

(21)

ngaanzing ge3 sisin faanwai hou daai ge2 keisat

eye GEN view field very large PART actually

“The field of view of the eyes is very wide, actually.”

### 3.3.2 Information Restructuring

Another function that RD serves is information restructuring. Since in discourse, when an utterance is too long, the prominence of the important information may more easily be suppressed. RD thus serves to displace the less important information outside the main clause, and thus allows the hearer to more easily identify the important information. This is illustrated in (22), in which *gei leng* is the information the speaker wishes to emphasize. Comparatively, *ceotlai go haaugwo* could possibly be identified from the discourse, and is thus less important; and *ngo gindou* is the least important because it adds no contents to the proposition.

其實 幾 靚 架 ， 出黎 個 效果 ， 我 見到 。

(22)

keisat gei leng ga3 ceotlai go haaugwo ngo gindou

actually quite good PART outcome CL effect I see

“Actually it looks quite good, the outcome, I can see.”

### 3.3.3 Providing meta-linguistic information

Furthermore, RD also serves to provide meta-linguistic information. Meta-linguistic information is the information above linguistic level. In other words, they do not serve to add “contents” to the proposition expressed, but to achieve various purposes in a speaker-hearer interaction. For example, it can be used as a “pointing device” to direct the hearer’s attention to a certain direction, as illustrated in the Mandarin example (23).

這 是 什 麼 吔 ， 你 看 ？ (23)  
 zhe shi shenme ya ni kan  
 this is what PART you look ?  
 “What’s this, look?”

### 3.4 Comparison between TOP, LD and RD

TOP, LD and RD function differently in term of pragmatics. The pragmatic functions of these structures are summarized and contrasted in the Fig.4

	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8	F9	F10	F11
TOP	✓	✓	✓	✓							
LD		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
RD									✓	✓	✓

Keys:

- F1: Topic Introduction
- F2: Set-inference Triggering
- F3: Contrasting
- F4: Attention Drawer / Focusing
- F5: Simplifying Discourse Processing
- F6: Re-initiation of story
- F7: Affect display
- F8: Hesitation
- F9: Conversational repair/afterthought
- F10: Information restructuring
- F11: Providing meta-linguistic information

Fig.4 Comparison of Pragmatic Functions of TOP, LD and RD

#### **Section 4. Conclusion**

Although syntactic constructions do not have a one-to-one correspondence to pragmatic functions, in our study, however, we have shown that certain syntactic functions can have certain specific pragmatic functions. Besides, it should be noted that these structures studied can behave and function differently in different languages, such as English and Cantonese. Future studies should be done in exploring these differences between different languages.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Since the auxiliary verb *could* is ambiguous and can have several interpretations, therefore, although quite some linguists might interpret this sentence as “whether you have the physical/mental abilities to pass me the salt” (physical/mental ability), it seems more relevant to argue that when one utters this sentence, he means “whether it is possible for you to pass me the salt” (general possibility). Nonetheless, no matter which interpretation we adopt, the pragmatic effects of this utterance is definitely more than its literal meaning, because when such a sentence is uttered, we do not expect an answer, which is normal if it is an ordinary interrogative sentence, but a corresponding action.

<sup>2</sup> There is dispute among scholars whether the head noun in left dislocation is moved from the argument position in the main clause, leaving a resumptive pronoun behind, or that the head noun is base-generated in the CP,Spec position. However, since the syntactic structure is not of our utmost concern here, we will regard the structure as a movement process in parallel to topicalization.

<sup>3</sup> Many linguists argue that the element outside the main clause is not dislocated, or at least, not through a rightward movement. However, again, for the simplicity of our analysis, we will treat it so here.

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