Chapter 12: Word order choices

The basic word order of English is subject-verb-object (SVO), as you can see in a sentence such as:

\[ \text{Myrna} (s) \text{ makes} (v) \text{ the best cucumber salad} (o). \text{ (CONV)} \]

\( \text{Myrna, the subject, precedes the verb makes, which precedes the object the best cucumber salad. However, different contexts may make it preferable to put elements of the clause in different places. For example, a speaker who wants to emphasize that Myrna, not someone else, makes the best cucumber salad might say:} \]

\[ \text{It's Myrna who makes the best cucumber salad.} \]

This type of construction is called \textit{clefting} (12.12). Or a speaker who is discussing a variety of cucumber salads might start with \textit{the cucumber salad} and say:

\[ \text{The best cucumber salad is made by Myrna.} \]

This type of construction is the \textit{passive} (discussed fully in 6.6-8). These are just two examples of ways to reorder clause elements.

In the present chapter, we discuss six grammatical devices to manipulate word order in clauses: fronting, inversion of subjects and verbs, existential \textit{there} clauses, dislocation, clefting and variations in the ordering of objects. Some of these devices involve simply moving elements to different positions. Others require changing the clause in more complicated ways, such as changing the verb to passive voice.

The techniques that we discuss here are used in a variety of ways to make a clause better fit its context. Four major discourse factors are important in understanding the grammatical choices that influence word order:

- information flow: given v. new information
- focus and emphasis, including end-focus and double focus
- contrast
- weight, including end-weight and balance of weight.
Because these factors are so important, we introduce them first in this chapter. However, these concepts do not explain all the reasons for word order changes. For example, irony and surprise may also be important. Also, in some registers, such as fiction, writers may simply want to make varied use of language.

12.1.1 Information flow
If we look at a clause in its discourse content, some elements refer back to information that is familiar due to the preceding discourse – i.e. given information – and other elements present new information. The typical word order in English is to start with given information and move to new. Thus, in the following example clause, the person Mr Summers and the house have already been introduced.

1 Inside the house, Mr Summers found a family of cats shut in the bathroom.
(NEWS)

The clause is first grounded in the situation that has already been mentioned – the house and Mr Summers. Then the communication advances with the information about what Mr Summers found. This typical ordering of information – from given to new – is the information-flow principle.

Given – new order of information contributes to the cohesion of a text. The given information is usually related to its previous mention, and the new information is often taken up in the following discourse. This order of information makes it easier for receivers to understand, because the clause starts with something that is familiar.

However, there are exceptions to the information-flow principle. For example, the needs of focus and emphasis, discussed in the next section, may be stronger than the need to follow the information-flow principle.

12.1.2 Focus and emphasis
In any clause, there is usually at least one point of focus. This point receives some prominence in the clause. It is apparent in speech because the strongest stress or intonation peak will occur at this point. Typically, the focus occurs naturally on the last lexical item in the clause (e.g. the bathroom in 1 above). The general principle governing
focus is therefore known as the principle of **end-focus**. When the information-flow principle is being followed, new information, which occurs at the end of the clause, will be the focus.

However, there is another potential point of focus in a clause: the beginning. Many of the devices covered in this chapter increase the focus given to the beginning of the clause by starting with an element other than the subject. The result is a clause with a double focus (or even more than two points of focus). For example, in 1 an adverbial occurs first. That adverbial – *Inside the house*, and more specifically the lexical item *house* – receives its own focus, in addition to the focus on *in the bathroom*.

When an initial element is the point of focus, it gains prominence. A complement of the verb in initial position is intensified, much as it is intensified by an adverb like *very*:

\[
\textit{Brilliant that was! (CONV)}
\]

Here *brilliant* is intensified by being in initial focused position, before the subject. The meaning is similar to the speaker saying *That was absolutely brilliant!* The marked word order – with the complement first – gives intensification to the complement (*brilliant*).