

Kibbitzer 11

Pre- and post-dislocations in MICASE Rebecca Maybaum and John Swales (July 2006)

I. Illustrations and a definition

The phenomenon of *pre-* and *post-dislocation* is illustrated below:

<u>Her little brother</u> is really obnoxious.	[standard SVO construction]
<u>Her little brother</u> , <u>he</u> 's really obnoxious.	[pre-dislocation]
<u>He</u> 's really obnoxious, <u>her little brother</u> .	[post-dislocation]

In a pre-dislocation, the noun phrase occurs first and is then picked up by an appropriate pronoun. In a post dislocation, the opposite occurs.

II. Frequency and Distribution

The first method we tried for finding dislocations in MICASE was to search in WordSmith Tools, a concordance software program. Using search terms such as “those *” with the pronoun (they, he, she, etc.) occurring within five words to the right, we were able to sift through the examples and find a preliminary list of dislocations. This method was useful because it helped us to identify several good examples, but it gave us very little indication of frequency. Additionally, in the above search we found only five *dislocations* in the 89 total examples that came up—a lot of effort for very few results.

So, using the results from the search as a guideline, we chose six transcripts in a variety of disciplines to analyze by hand: Public Math Colloquium, Academic Advising, Medical Anthropology Lecture, Intro Astronomy Discussion Section, Cognitive Psychology Research Lab, and Biology of Fishes. Of the 72,223 words total, we found 52 dislocations, which averages to about 700 dislocations per million words.

In our data, pre-dislocations were much more common than post-dislocations. Of the 52 total instances, there were only seven (13%) post-dislocations compared with 44 (85%) pre-dislocations. Here are some examples of the post-dislocations in our six transcripts:

- 1) yeah that's what i was gonna say, dropout
- 2) you will have had more time to learn your minnows those of you who were um a little shaky last time
- 3) it should be, fairly simple, the lab exam
- 4) it was not a very easy thing to do getting those women out of there

Curiously, dislocations are not evenly distributed throughout the transcripts; rather, they occur in clusters. For example, in the 10-page Intro Astronomy Discussion Section transcript, eight of the nine dislocations occur in the first two pages:

- 1) this point, directly above my head, what do i call that if i'm an astronomer? (p. 1)
- 2) and we've got a line that runs, from north to south, passing through the zenith what do we call that? (p. 1)
- 3) horizon okay um so horizon what's the definition of that...? (p. 1)

- 4) okay so the Big Dipper in winter it's standing on its tail (p. 2)
- 5) all the stars that are within a certain number of degrees from Polaris never rise or set what do we call those? (p. 2)
- 6) so these lines that run, north south what do we call those? (p. 2)
- 7) it's actually flipped when we talk about it these lines the lines of right ascension, because they measure how far, east or west we are (p. 2)
- 8) uh, when we look up here, this part we've got numbers that have degrees (p. 2)
- 9) i had somebody, this is my fourth semester teaching and my first semester, like the third week of lab, a person in the back was like uh, we didn't go over this in lecture (p. 7)

These examples are full of deictics (“up here”) and demonstratives (“what do we call those?”), and are spoken by the instructor in order to elicit a response from the students. They are part of a series of questions checking the students’ understanding of vocabulary items, much as one might find in a language classroom. Example [9], which occurs outside of the cluster, follows neither the structural nor functional pattern of [1-8].

Now take a look at the 27-page Biology of Fishes transcript. The session took place on boats as students caught fish and recorded their measurements. Most of the conversation previous to the following excerpt took place within small groups and was very informal.

All four dislocations occurred in the last six pages, and in fact three of the four dislocations occurred in the span of six turns. The following extract appears near the end of the session, when the instructor gathers the class together to discuss their final examination.

S1: you will have okay, the exam will be in the same kind of format as uh, as as it was before, same number of pages the same kinds of material, um you will have had more time to learn your minnows those of you who were um a little shaky last time, um you will uh will be going back into to um, t-fine tune refine your keying and those kinds of things, the skills that you've acquired it should be, fairly simple the lab exam, we may have more questions on process such as what (gear) would you choose and why and those kinds of things. but it will be very similar to the one before.

SU-F: so we're (keying out) two species we've never seen before right?

S1: yes

SU-F: wait two species we've never seen before?

S1: yes

SU-F: and how many that we have seen before do we have to key any of those out?

III. Discourse Functions

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We can classify the dislocations into three broad (in fact sometimes overlapping) functional categories. In the first category, the speaker states the topic, or theme, of the utterance before offering a commentary.

- 1) um starting starting with epidemiologists they construct risk in a way that seems very solid
- 2) chemistry does that count as natural science?
- 3) so i'm just wondering like, Orgo, should i, take it this semester and then skip like you know

4) so these lines that run, north south what do we call those?

In the second category, the speaker breaks down a long or complex structure into pieces that are easier to keep track of (and for the listener as well).

- 5) that, those that linear stuff down here, you know this, regular growth rate here, um it's not reaching an asymptote is it?
- 6) so you have the square packing, and the triangular packing, they both give about seventy-four percent of space filled
- 7) that's how long it takes an anthropologist to analyze aggregate data with an N of forty it takes her a week
- 8) and the average of, four hundred, six-fifty and six-fifty, it would be like, five-something also

In the third category, the speaker begins to talk about something (the NP), and then adds information to further clarify the topic or set the background.

- 9) uh here's Kepler's book, he wrote a book after corresponding with Harriot for a while
- 10) a student of mine Sean McLaughlin, he's an undergraduate here, he proved that his is the smallest possible box that you can build
- 11) you will have had more time to learn your minnows those of you who were um a little shaky last time
- 12) like they got into a fight and this friend, it was his friend's like lover's brother or something and so, he beat up his lover and the brother

VI. Conclusion

The characteristics of *pre-* and *post-dislocations* outlined here serve as a strong starting point for future studies, but the results must be confirmed using a larger data set, with a wider variety of contexts. The description and analysis of *dislocations* and other less-commonly studied features of English can provide useful information to researchers and educators alike. If you have any comments or suggestions, please send an email to micase@umich.edu.

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