Grammar, discourse, and effective communication

1. Grammatical choice

Consider this intriguing fragment from the Booker Prize winning novel *Amsterdam*, by the renowned British author Ian McEwan, who incidentally in 1974 applied for a job in the English department here at the VU but for some reason was not offered the position.

(1) Outside the hotel, set against a rough stone wall, was a long wooden bench. In the morning, after breakfast, Clive sat here to lace his boots. Although he was missing the key element of his finale, he had two important advantages in his search. The first was general: he felt optimistic. He had done the background work in his studio, and though he hadn’t slept well, he was cheerful about being back in his favourite landscape. The second was specific: he knew exactly what he wanted. He was working backwards really, sensing that the theme lay in fragments and hints in what he had already written. He would recognise the right thing as soon as it occurred to him. In the finished piece the melody would sound to the innocent ear as though it had been anticipated or developed elsewhere in the score. Finding the notes would be an act of inspired synthesis. It was as if he knew them, but could not yet hear them. He knew their enticing sweetness and melancholy. He knew their simplicity, and the model, surely, was Beethoven’s Ode to Joy. Consider the first line – a few steps up, a few steps down. It could be a nursery tune. It was completely without pretension, and yet carried such spiritual weight. Clive stood to receive his packed lunch from the waitress who had brought it out to him. Such was the exalted nature of his mission, and of his ambition. Beethoven. He knelt on the car park gravel to stow the grated cheese sandwiches in his daypack.

He slung the pack across his shoulder and set off along the track into the valley. During the night a warm front had moved across the Lakes and already the frost had gone from the trees and from the meadow by the beck. The cloud cover was high and uniformly grey, the light was clear … [after Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam*, p.76]
The narrator is Britain’s leading modern composer, and he is about to set off on a walk up a hill in the Lake District, in search for the final notes for a new commissioned piece, the Millenial Symphony. He contemplates his task, the waitress gives him a packed lunch, he puts it in his backpack, and off he goes. This is a perfectly coherent little text. Closer inspection shows that it also offers up a number of contrasts. The composer operates in cultured southern circles, but goes to the bare northern hills to find inspiration. He has a tune in his head that is without pretension, based on an ode that goes up and goes down. It is simple, but has spiritual weight. He has an exalted mission, but feeds it with grated cheese sandwiches, which in Britain, I can assure you, have the most non-exalted of nutritional connotations.

Now consider more closely the sentence in bold in (1). I have cheated. This is not the original text. Here is the original text.

(2) He knelt on the car park gravel to stow in his daypack the grated cheese sandwiches.

[LETT 134: Ian McEwan, Amsterdam, p.76, undoctored]

The author has employed a particular grammatical device here, not expressing the direct object in its standard position immediately after the transitive verb stow but postponing it to the final position of the sentence and indeed the paragraph. By so doing, McEwan chooses to miss out on perhaps the most natural paragraph link, which would have the paragraph ending with the daypack and not the sandwiches, given that he proceeds to sling the daypack over his shoulder. Instead he allows the grated cheese to form the climax of the paragraph, perhaps suggesting some extra emphasis on the contrast between the simple and the spiritual, the exalted and the mundane. But in fact there is much more to it than that.

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1 The coding used for the vast majority of examples adduced in this text relates to a database of 518 text segments which contain cases of postponed objects. My thanks go to Eric Akkerman for constructing the database and Julia Chavdar for researching and entering the data. [ACAD] stands for academic texts, [LETT] for literary texts. The bibliographical details for the data sources are provided at the end of the text.
This paragraph concentrates on the theme of artistic inspiration, which since classical antiquity has been associated with the divine. Homer, for instance, invoked the Muse to assist him in writing his epics The Neo-Platonic view placed the relation between art and divine perfection in a Christian context. Inspiration, the creative driving force for art, can only come from heaven, that perfect and innocent place which the soul remembers, but has lost in its fallen state on earth. Only artists can re-create this perfection through communication with the divine. In the sacrament of the holy communion, when the bread is turned into the body of Christ, that communication takes place. So what actually happens in this paragraph?

Clive goes through the ritual of receiving his bread, first sitting on a long wooden bench, which in retrospect reminds the reader of a church pew. He sits here to lace his boots, preparing himself for a search. This is a search for inspiration: it will be completed by an ‘act of inspired synthesis’, producing a melody which sounds to ‘the innocent ear as if it had been anticipated’ elsewhere. What he looks for are the ‘schöne Götterfunken’ from Beethoven’s Ode to Joy. He then ‘stood to receive’ his packed lunch from the waitress, who gains a priestlike quality. Having received his bread, Clive kneels, as one would do in church after receiving the host. Between the reception and the kneeling there are two sentences which place this simple event in the context of divine artistic inspiration: ‘such was the exalted nature of his mission, and of his ambition. Beethoven.’ The cheese sandwiches, a simple bread product, suggest the host, the means to receive divine inspiration. No wonder, then, that the author presents the sandwiches to us as the climax of the paragraph, instead of just telling us that Clive packs his lunch in his daypack, slings it over his shoulder, and walks off into the valley. The paragraph is about artistic inspiration, but the communication would have been less than effective without the grammatical strategy that Ian McEwan so wonderfully employs at the end.

This initial example illustrates rather poignantly the relationship between grammatical choice and communicative effect. I would like to talk some more now about this grammar of choice. The main point I want to make today is that a comprehensive grammatical description simply needs, in addition to a grammar

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2 I would like to thank Theo Bögels for pointing this out to me. I am also grateful for his valuable contribution to the close reading of the relevant section of Amsterdam. For a brief description of the Neo-Platonic view, see Rivers (1979: 35-39).
of structure, a grammar of choice. I will then, to round off, consider the value of
grammar in the context of developments in university language teaching. We
need the grammar of choice in particular because it can breathe life into what is
quickly becoming an endangered grammar curriculum in English language
studies. ³

2.  Postponed objects

The construction for which Ian McEwan seems to have something of a
predilection is currently known as object postponement or object postposing,
and its treatment in linguistics over the last 40 years can serve as an illustration
of the tussle between structural and informational accounts of variation in
grammatical form.

In basic grammars of English, the comment is usually made that adjuncts
prefer a position towards the end of the clause and following the object or
complement if there is one, but can also appear at the front of the clause. ⁴ The
position between verb and object is strongly dispreferred, and is not possible at
all if the object is an unaccented pronominal expression. Examples are given in
(3–4):

(3) a. I watched the news last night.
    b. Last night I watched the news.
    c. ??I watched last night the news.
    d. *I watched last night it.

(4) a. I found my books in the cupboard.
    b. In the cupboard I found my books.
    c. ??I found in the cupboard my books.
    d. *I found in the cupboard them.

³ The poignant formulation of the distinction involved here is due to Carter & McCarthy
(2006: 6), where the grammar of choice is described as relating to differences in grammatical
form which reflect the relationship between the speaker/writer and the listener/reader. I extend
the notion to capture choices of form and contextual factors, thus relating grammar and
⁴ See for example Sinclair (1990: 282).
You may all feel the awkwardness of (3c) and (4c), and indeed the rule may be presented rather strongly in a Dutch learning context, since the position following the finite verb in Dutch is a standard position for unstressed adjuncts:

(5) Ik heb gisteravond naar het journal gekeken.

(6) Ik heb in de kast wat boeken gevonden.

What is fine for Dutch is thus out for English. However, there is a well known set of exceptions to this rule. If the object is heavy, it tends to occur after adjuncts and certain complements rather than before them. This follows the principle of end weight, according to which constituents of increasing complexity occur further and further to the right.\(^5\) Thus (7a) and (8a) are preferred to (7b) and (8b):

(7) a. I found in the cupboard a set of boxes containing books which I had totally forgotten I had.
   b. ?? I found a set of boxes containing books which I had totally forgotten I had in the cupboard.

(8) a. It is important to keep constant all the other factors which you think might be involved in determining the outcome.
   b. ?? It is important to keep all other factors which you think might be involved in determining the outcome of the election constant.

An important feature of this construction is its intonation pattern: the unexpected position of the adjunct or complement is signalled by a secondary focus assignment; there is also the sense of a pause before the object, which gives it a

\(^5\) See Quirk et al. (1985: 1361) for a general description; see Ernst (2002: 227) for a formal definition within weight theory, and see Wasow (1997) for a discussion on different ways of measuring heaviness or weight. In a functional framework, Dik (1978: 212) formulated LIPOC, the language-independent preferred order of constituents, which states that it is easier to perceive, process, and store complex information when this information is presented in chunks of increasing internal complexity.
certain detached prominence. In the generative framework it was long assumed that the postponed versions in (7a) and (8a) were derived from the normal order in (7b) and (8b) by a transformation known as Heavy NP Shift. However, a clear problem is that heaviness or weight is not always involved. For instance, the sentences in (9-10) are fine:

(9) In response, the Prime Minister is expected to emphasize in a speech in Glasgow today the humanitarian reasons for war.
    (LETT 54: Ian McEwan, Saturday, p. 69)

(10) The police came bringing with them two tracker dogs.
    [LETT 297: Ian McEwan, Enduring love, p. 34]

Neither of the postponed objects in these sentences is overly weighty. Rather, what seems to be the central feature of the constraint is focality, or new information status, which immediately explains the ungrammaticality of sentences like (3d):

(3) d. *I watched last night it.

Within a formal syntax approach, this realization led to a revised version of the constraint on heavy NPs in terms of focality, and Heavy NP Shift, without losing its name, came to be classified as a focus construction.

More recent accounts take a discourse-oriented view of object postponement, and have refined this focality constraint by appealing to the distinction between different kinds of new information. Thus postponed objects must be discourse-new to be acceptable. That is to say, they may contain information which in itself is old, but this is still the informational point of the message. Seen in terms of the informational dichotomy of topic and focus, this is

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8 See the treatment in Rochemont (1986) and Rochemont & Culicover (1990).
9 The distinction is between what is hearer-old and hearer-new on the one hand and discourse-old and discourse-new on the other. The distinction is due to Prince (1992). See Ward et al. (2002: 1368) for a discussion of the constraint and Birner & Ward (1998) for a detailed treatment of postponement and other similar non-canonical constituent orders in English.
in fact nothing more than a statement to the effect there is an assertive focus requirement on postponed objects.

But the weight argument has not gone away. On the contrary, the notion of relative weight in particular has played a central role in more formal accounts of object postponement. In other words, it is not so much the weight of the postponed object itself, but its weight relative to the intervening adjunct or complement that arguably determines its final position. A noteworthy example of a weight approach is the performance theory of Hawkins (1994), who in his data sees such a strong correlation between the position of the object and its weight relative to other postverbal constituents that he casts doubt on any account that gives priority to content over form (1994: 184). Of the 22 cases of postponed object NPs in his 200-page sample, only three occur with a preceding PP that contains more words (Hawkins’ measure of weight), and two of these are only one or two words longer. Accordingly, Hawkins claims that any account based on informational status must at least be able to explain the correlation with syntactic weight.\(^\text{10}\)

Now, let us pause and reflect for a moment. Both weight and focality have been adduced to explain the constraint on object postponement. Weight is primarily a syntactic concept, with a place in the grammar of structure, while focality is an informational or pragmatic concept, and belongs more in the grammar of choice.\(^\text{11}\) They are, however, very much related concepts. The dual principles of end focus and end weight in English both apply in cases like (11-12):

(11) A Why did you react so furiously?
   B Well, it shocked me that so many politicians refused to back the doctors.
(12) Yesterday a man came into the shop who I swear I have seen on television recently.

Information which is syntactically heavy also tends to be new. This is true of the extraposed subject clause in (11B), and the same goes for the discontinuous

\(^{10}\)Another major examples of a weight-based account is Ernst (2002). Ward et al. (2002) also mention the value of relative weight.

\(^{11}\)For an alternative formal analysis which argues for weight against focality see Shiobara (2002). The key to Shiobara’s analysis is that cases of light NP shift are re-analysed as heavy because of their contrastive value. This leads to a different view of what constitutes weight.
structure in (12); here, the man coming into the shop also represents discourse-
new information, but the informational highpoint of the sentence is the content of
the postponed relative clause.

So how can we disentangle the two concepts in an attempt to understand
what is really going on with object postponement? One thing I have already
noted, and that we really need to keep in mind, is that postponed objects are not
necessarily weighty, not even relatively weighty. Here are two more examples:

(13) Contrastively stressed statements, on the other hand, serve to contradict a
preceding statement which the speaker believes to be false; the speaker
substitutes for the phrase in the false statement which he believes serves to
make it false a phrase which he believes will make the statement true.
[ACAD 88: Rochemont 1978: 49]

(14) The machine would not necessarily have revealed to Clifton, married only
eighteen months, his wife’s infidelity, but it began to encircle the fault, the
disease in the system.

In (13) the adjunct has thirteen words but the object only fourteen, and in (14) the
adjunct plus its modification together contain six words while the object is only
three words long. Another point to keep in mind is course that objects that are in
focus, expressing discourse-new information, are not always postponed. Indeed,
they tend to occur in their unmarked position immediately following the object, as
in (15-16):

(15) I had opened a few box-files of cuttings at random, but with no clear
heading to guide me, I gave up after half an hour.
[Ian McEwan, Enduring Love, p.100]

(16) She was creating a little fuss around her.
[Ian McEwan, Enduring Love, p.162]

A rather simple question arises: why should objects be postponed in the first
place? They do not have to be, and the ones that are are not always heavy.
Early accounts within a formal syntax framework sought to formalize the constraint on postponement, in other words they were concerned with establishing what had to be the case in order for the form to be acceptable. But later accounts sought to motivate the postponed form. Those who appeal to weight note that sentences can be difficult to process if the weighty element is not placed last. Look again at (7b) and also at (17b) in this regard:

(7) a. I found in the cupboard a set of boxes containing books which I had totally forgotten I had.

b. ?? I found a set of boxes containing books which I had totally forgotten I had in the cupboard.

(17) a. The problem for the linguist, as well as for the child learning the language, is to determine from the data of performance the underlying system of rules that has been mastered by the speaker-hearer and that he puts to use in actual performance. [Chomsky 1965: 4; example used in Wasow 1997: 94]

b. The problem for the linguist, as well as for the child learning the language, is to determine the underlying system of rules that has been mastered by the speaker-hearer and that he puts to use in actual performance from the data of performance.

In (17b) the sentence is almost unprocessable as it stands, and the order in (15a) is the only possible order for the postverbal elements following determine. By apparent contrast, (7b) seems fine as it stands, but the adjunct in the cupboard will most readily be interpreted as modifying the verb had and not the verb found. As a variant of (7a), (7b) can thus also be seen as problematic in terms of processing. Hawkins’ performance theory presents a more refined version of this processing argument by claiming that heavy NP shift involves a rearrangement of constituents to ‘facilitate the on-line recognition of constituent structure’ (1994: 184). In other words, speakers choose a form which allows the addressee to parse the sentence as quickly as possible.

This is not enough for Wasow (1997). He sees the motivation not so much in processing but in terms of utterance planning. Processing cannot, he argues, be involved in a case like this:
(18) I share with that part of the population of which I am a member, and those others who are identifiable by colour, sex or disability, the feeling that we are experiencing today a day of tragedy which I would attribute, as my colleague did previously, to the inability of the Hon. Members opposite to put themselves in the shoes of those who have suffered from discrimination in the past and who will suffer from the Government’s failure to attack systemic discrimination today. [Wasow: 1997: 95]

At the point at which the speaker utters the postverbal adjunct, it is highly unlikely that he can know how long the object or indeed the adjunct element is going to be.

Wasow is also interested in seeking an explanation for non-weighty postponement, and works with considerably more cases of non-weighty postponement that Hawkins. One thing Wasow notes is that in many cases the adjunct following the verb forms a kind of collocation with that verb, and placing it immediately after the verb may give the speaker more time to decide on what the object is going to be. From this he develops the claim that in the first instance postponement offers a planning advantage for the speaker rather than a processing advantage for the addressee. The claim is further substantiated by the analysis of a body of data.

Now, this argument clearly relates to online spoken language production. But interestingly, Wasow argues that it is not unlikely that speakers will transfer strategies used in speaking to writing. In other words, he claims, utterance planning might be a relevant consideration for object postponement in planned written discourse in the same way that it is relevant for unplanned discourse.

But surely this is highly dubious. Although the device itself may be readily available in a highly controlled writing environment, the possible motivations for using it must at least in part be related to the nature of the writer’s communicative goals. In other words, we need to look elsewhere to identify motivations.
3. Object postponement and communicative effect

So, why indeed should objects be postponed in the first place? The defining case, it seems, is where processability and weight are not an issue, and where there is also no doubt as to what actually constitutes the focal information, whatever the order of constituents. This is arguably the case in the following example, where the object and the adjunct appear totally switchable:

(19) a. Had I known what this glance meant to him at the time, and how he was to construe it later and build around it a mental life, I would not have been so warm. In his pained interrogative look was that first bloom of which I was entirely ignorant.


b. Had I known what this glance meant to him at the time, and how he was to construe it later and build a mental life around it, I would not have been so warm. In his pained interrogative look was that first bloom of which I was entirely ignorant.

Two things stick out here. First of all, the narrator is recounting a scene in which the ‘he’ starts building up a picture of the first person narrator which forms the subject matter of the whole book, stalking. Second, ‘the bloom of which I was entirely ignorant’, which is introduced via a presentative construction in the following sentence, is the first characterization of ‘a mental life’ At this early point in the novel the main theme of the whole text is thus put on centre stage for us. Let’s call the special communicative effect created by this device presentational relief.

My analysis of the grated cheese sandwiches suggests that the technique of postponement can serve to give informational prominence to a piece of information which has a particular status in the broader communicative context. I have started to look at the communicative effect of postponed objects more closely, by considering aspects of textual coherence in texts from two different genres, literary texts and academic articles.

When we look at literary text we see a number of examples of postponement used for dramatic effect, similar to the example from Amsterdam.
Here is a case in point, this time from another leading contemporary British novelist, William Boyd:

(20) As I took the jacket from him I looked out of the window and saw, down below on the gravelled forecourt, standing beside Mr Scott’s Dolomite, a man. A slim young man in jeans and a denim jacket with dark brown hair long enough to rest on his shoulders. He saw me staring down at him and raised his two thumbs – thumbs up – a big smile on his face.

‘Who’s that?’ Hamid asked, glancing out and then glancing back at me, noting my expression of shock and astonishment.

‘He’s called Ludger Kleist.’

‘Why are you looking at him like that?

‘Because I thought he was dead.’

[END OF CHAPTER]


In this case, the first step in the build-up of tension comes from the fact that as soon as the reader is presented with ‘he saw’ he is expecting the object, but this is not immediately forthcoming. In this particular case, the tension actually builds up more because the reader has to turn the page half way through the inserted adjunct phrases, only then to experience perhaps anti-climax, perhaps mystery, because all the woman saw was ‘a man’, not a particularly heavy object. However, the suspense becomes real when a few lines later, in the last line of the chapter, we are told that the woman who saw the man thought that he was in fact dead. Because the next chapter jumps from England 1976 to Scotland 1939, the reader has to wait 18 pages before finding out who the man is, and why he is not dead. As with the grated cheese sandwiches, it is clear that the normal order of constituents would not allow presentational relief, and the whole text would suffer as a result.

One final example of how presentational relief contributes to the writer’s goal in a broader context is the following:

(21) Emily successfully resisted the pursuit of this line, and seemed to drift away then, not quite into sleep, but out of thought into invalid nullity, and many minutes passed until she heard in the hallway outside her bedroom footfalls
on the stairs, and by the muffled sound of them thought they must be barefoot and therefore Briony’s. The girl would not wear her shoes in the hot weather. Minutes later, from the nursery again, energetic scuffling and something hard rattling across the floorboards.

[LETT 96: Ian McEwan, Atonement, p. 66]

Here the author creates an image of the noises that Emily experiences as she lies half asleep. There are muffled barefoot footfalls, and there is scuffling and rattling across the floorboards. All these sounds are described at the end of discourse units.

Another set of motivations comes from consideration of the more local context. First consider this example from Ian McEwan’s novel Saturday:

(22) [NEW PARAGRAPH] Besides, Lily had another life that no one could have predicted, or could remotely guess at now. She was a swimmer. […] She came second, and her tiny silver medal, set on a wooden shield made of oak, always stood on the mantelpiece while Henry was growing up. It’s on a shelf in her room now. That silver was as far, or as high, as she got, but she always swam beautifully, fast enough to push out in front of her a deep and sinuous bow wave. [END OF PARAGRAPH]

[LETT 69: Ian McEwan, Saturday, p. 157]

Here, Henry is prizing the qualities of his mother as a swimmer, announced at the beginning of the paragraph. The focal information in the coordinated main clause in the last sentence is ‘beautifully’, and the appended structure seeks to provide an elaboration of this beauty: ‘a deep and sinuous bow wave’. This is highlighted by placing the two constituents which form a kind of focal tie in the same position in the clause and thus forming a kind of parallelism. The beauty of the swimming is expressed in the beauty of the shape of the water.

A similar point can be made about this example from an academic text:

\[ \text{12 This is suggestive of the notion of rhematic progression, in parallel with thematic progression. See Daneš (1974).} \]
(23) The availability of two different perspectives - stemming from two different ways of defining discourse - is partially responsible for the tremendous scope of discourse analysis. If we focus on structure, our task is to identify and analyze constituents, determine procedures for assigning to utterances a constituent status, discover regularities underlying combinations of constituents (perhaps even formulating rules for producing those regularities), and make principled decisions about whether or not particular arrangements are well formed. If we focus on function, on the other hand, our task is to identify and analyze actions performed by people for certain purposes, …

[ACAD 235: Schiffrin, 1994: 42]

In the second sentence of this segment the author presents a list of three tasks, and the object of the verb in each case involves something relating to constituents. If there had been no postponement in the second of the three parts of the list, there would not have been such a single emphasis on constituents throughout the list.

A number of other functions emerge from the data. First, contrast appears as a particular kind of focal tie. Consider the following example:

(24) On a rather less general, but still very general, level, we might identify in the domain of politics a discourse of liberalism, and within the economic domain a ‘Taylorist’ discourse of management. By contrast, in Fairclough (2000b) I discussed the political discourse of the ‘third way’, i.e. the discourse of ‘New Labour’, which is a discourse attached to a particular position within the political field at a particular point in time (the discourse is certainly less than a decade old).

[ACAD 3: Fairclough, 2003: 125]

Here the author is contrasting the political with the economic domain and a discourse of liberalism with a discourse of management. But the contrast that is

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13 For a brief discussion of some of these data, plus a proposal for a formal account of these discourse phenomena in the framework of Functional Discourse Grammar, see Hannay & Martinez Caro (forthc.). Functional Discourse Grammar seeks to account for the grammatical features of linguistic expressions which encode speaker intention in the ongoing discourse. For an overview of the model, see Hengeveld & Mackenzie (2006).
relevant for the argument is the latter, since the author continues by introducing
a third kind of discourse, the discourse of New Labour. The use of the
postponement strategy places the discourses on centre stage rather than the
domains, ready to be picked up in the following sentence.

On other occasions, the presentational relief offered by postponement is
simply used to introduce a new element into the discourse at the head of a topic
chain. Consider (25) in this regard:

(25) Rome did indeed support the rule of local aristocrats, noble landowners of
the same type as ruled at Rome itself, who might be closely linked to the
Roman nobility. Some peoples were actually given Roman citizenship, and
their chief men secured high office at Rome. The Romans themselves saw
in this practice a major factor in their rise to world power.
Archaeological and philological evidence in fact confirms that early Rome
was the product of a union of Latin and Sabine communes, and there can be
no doubt that Rome's readiness to admit new citizens gave her at each
successive stage of her history superiority in sheer manpower over her
enemies, which was usually decisive in ancient wars.
[ACAD 31: <ICE-GB:W2A-001 #9:1>]

Here the second half of the segment provides evidence for the claim centring
around Rome’s rise to world power. Another example is (26):

(26) [New paragraph] In court, such litigants strive to introduce into the trial the
details of their social lives. Their accounts of their troubles emphasize the
social networks in which they are situated, often to the exclusion of the
contractual, financial, and property issues that are typically of greater
interest to the court. Even an event such as an automobile accident
involving strangers may be described in terms of the social history of the
parties.
[ACAD 151: Conley & O’Barr, 1990: 58]

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14 This example comes from the ICE-GB corpus. W stands for written.
The use of postponement to create textual coherence in this way seems quite characteristic of the academic texts.

Finally, compare the use of postponement with a case like (15), now in its expanded context as (27):

(27) A trawl through the database for curtain / signal had brought nothing. I had opened a few box-files of cuttings at random, but with no clear heading to guide me, I gave up after half an hour. I had read somewhere about a curtain used as a signal and it had some relevance to Parry. I thought my best chance was to cease pursuing it actively, and hope that stronger associations would break through, perhaps in my sleep.

[Ian McEwan, *Enduring Love*, p.100]

Here is a case where the object is considerably longer than the adjunct but no postponement takes place. However, it is also noticeable that the box-files of cuttings do not play a prominent role in the segment: there is no specific contrast with other sources of information, there is no other relevant sentence-final information, and the cuttings do not stay in the discourse. Now, this is just a single example, but I suspect it is illustrative, and a more systematic investigation of the role in the discourse of postponed objects versus non-postponed objects may turn out to be revealing.

What can we conclude from this little look at discourse behaviour? At the level of the paragraph we see postponed objects contributing to a kind of paragraph focus and also serving to introduce a new discourse topic, while at the local level we see postponement serving the identification of focal ties and contrast. Object postponement, as what I would call a presentational focus construction, is a prime example of what Matthiessen calls a culmination device. Culmination systems constitute ‘the resource for assigning informational prominence in writing in terms of newsworthiness to constituents in the clause’ (Matthiessen 1995: 600). Culmination captures the notions of surprise and suspense that are created in literary text through the presentational relief of the postponed object, but it also captures the coherence-promoting functions of focal ties, contrast, and new topic introduction.

It will be clear where I stand on the structure vs choice issue. Even though weight seems to account for the vast majority of postponed objects, and is
clearly part of the story, there are many cases where weight is simply not relevant at all, and any satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon must take the motivation for non-weighty object postponement well and truly into account.

So what do we see from this overview of the history of the study of object postponement? We saw that basic grammars promote other positions for adjunct placement in English and in a learning context may even block the postponement construction. We saw that formal grammars tried to capture the exception to the rule, first by defining a heaviness constraint but then realizing that information structure rather than categorical weight might hold the key. Other accounts again insist on the value of syntactic weight, and propose an explanation based on processing ease. Yet others argue that it is planning ease rather than processing ease which motivates postponement. Finally, I have suggested today that a full understanding comes only from getting to grips with discourse motivation. It makes sense to pay attention to how grammatical structures are used in different types of discourse to promote effective communication.

4. Grammar in the language curriculum

But I am not finished. There is another context that is relevant here, so to round off, let me introduce into the discussion the university language curriculum. In the last few years we have seen how the rapid advance of our information society, together with a focus on learning to learn and on communication skills, has produced a generation of students coming out of secondary school who can amass information on a subject like never before, can express their opinions, and can give oral presentations brimming with confidence. But across the country, people are worrying about the level of practical Dutch language skills. Accuracy and correctness have become an issue, and attitudes to accuracy and correctness are a particular cause for concern.

Fortunately, something is being done about it. A discussion has started to develop in schools to re-vamp grammar-oriented teaching. Across the universities as well, faculties and language centres are developing tests and teaching materials for their own student population. But what is frightening is that the same problem that we have identified at school level may well be with
us in our own language departments in the universities, and we need to tackle it now, at the level of the curriculum.

With the introduction of the Bachelor-Master system, and the subsequent move, now picking up pace, to develop the Bachelor degree as a broad academic programme of education, we have redesigned our curricula and in some areas started to squeeze on more traditional content. In English degrees we have seen the rise of ‘World English’ courses and communication-oriented courses, in addition to academic skills and research method courses. What we have lost is Middle and Old English, reduced to an introductory course on the history of the language and perhaps here and there a specialist option. The same may be beginning to happen with grammar, with the only core courses being practical pedagogical grammar and usage courses and more theoretical approaches becoming specialist options too. If this development really were to set in, the consequences would be disastrous.

Admittedly, it is a major move forward that we are now developing language curricula where students can become involved in setting up their own research projects, collecting data, analysing real language, and interpreting the outcome. Likewise, it is a major move forward that we are thinking about how to implement the CEFR, the Common European Framework of Reference, and how we can provide validation for the levels we claim our students obtain. But if these are our aims, then we cannot run the risk of scrapping from our curricula the very content that is required to equip students with the ability to conduct independent linguistic analysis, and that in skills terms is required to develop a discourse competence at the higher levels of the CEFR.

This means an important role for grammar, and that includes not only the grammar of structure but also, significantly, the grammar of choice. Students must be able to describe the structures and the rule system of a language, just as medical students need to know the names of all the bones of the body and be able to identify them. They must also have an understanding of the constraints on use of grammatical structures. But on top of that they must be concerned, given a variety and communication-oriented curriculum, with understanding motivations of speakers and writers from an utterance planning and ultimately from a discourse planning point of view, and develop a productive repertoire of

their own that makes them into proficient communicators. The question, quite simply, is why do utterances have the form and the shape that they do, in the context in which they are used? To answer these questions, students need a thorough grounding in both structure and choice.

Just think about what one could do with grated cheese sandwiches in a first year class of English students who are hungry to learn. To start with, one might confront them: is (2) a grammatical English sentence or not?

(2) He knelt on the car park gravel to stow in his daypack the grated cheese sandwiches.

This allows a discussion of what they have internalized as rules, of how these rules might in fact have had a didactic rather than an absolute value, and of how grammaticality is anyway not necessarily an absolute concept. A following step might involve providing examples of object postponement and an invitation to consider the conditions under which a sentence might feel more or less acceptable, both in terms of formal characteristics and the context of use. There is a link here to writing instruction. Yet another angle is the contrastive grammatical view, which allows simple sentences like those in (28) to be set against each other: if both these sentences are acceptable, then it might appear that Dutch and English are in fact closer together than what one may have supposed in an earlier stage of learning, but this would of course be misguided, since the status of the construction is totally different in Dutch than in English.

(28) a. I brought with me this afternoon my cheese sandwich.

b. Ik heb vanmiddag mijn broodje kaas meegenomen.

Finally, there is what I began with: the value of considering grammatical choice in the context of the close reading of literary text. Valuable for literature students, but in a language study environment it is also inviting to consider with students the insight that grammatical structures such as object postponement

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16 A consequence is that grammar has to be presented in a way which will allow students to profit from it in a skills-oriented environment, a notion which underlies the ‘syntax for writing’ courses in American universities. Cf. Hinkel (2002, 2004), as well as Hannay (2007).
serve different coherence-promoting purposes in different communicative situations.

My point is I hope quite simple and clear. The development of a broad, Englishes-based, varieties-based and communication-based curriculum requires a strong grammar component, and one in which the grammar of choice has pride of place. We need the grammar of choice for a full, rounded account of grammatical phenomena anyway, and we need it all the more in an educational setting where students not only investigate, but also seek to produce, in a challenging environment, effective communication.
5. DANKWOORD

Geachte Dames en Heren,
Het betoog dat ik vandaag heb gepresenteerd is het product van een lange gedachtenwisseling met collega’s en vrienden gedurende 30 jaar aan de VU. Tegenwoordig bedrijft men zijn vak in internationale kringen, maar Amsterdam blijft een fantastische thuisbasis, waar de taalkunde nog steeds volop bloeit.

Allereerst wil ik het College van Bestuur van de Vrije Universiteit bedanken voor het in mij gestelde vertrouwen. Ik doe de komende jaren mijn uiterste best om een zinvolle bijdrage te leveren op afdelings-, facultair en universitair niveau aan de kwaliteitsverhoging van onderwijs en onderzoek.

Mijn bijzondere dank gaat uit naar de Faculteit der Letteren. Beste vrienden en collega docenten van de Afdeling Taal en Communicatie, en van de hele faculteit, na een moeilijke periode zijn we er weer bovenop en vol hoop. Ondersteund door het enthousiasme en de doelgerichtheid van het faculteitsbestuur en het hele personeel op de 10e verdieping zijn we met elkaar al bezig initiatieven te nemen op het gebied van onderzoek en onderwijs om van onze faculteit een zeer sterke en zelfs prominente eenheid te maken. Ik vind het fijn om lid te zijn van een facultair team waar steeds meer en steeds beter samengewerkt wordt.

Beste leden van het Taalcentrum VU en collega's in het Raad van Bestuur, ik ben onder de indruk van jullie steeds grotere professionalisme op het gebied van taaldiensten in Nederland. Het Taalcentrum-VU is sterk en is goed voor de Vrije Universiteit. Ik hoop dat er steeds meer samenwerking kan komen tussen jullie en onze afdeling Taal en Communicatie, omdat ik overtuigd ben dat we allebei daardoor nog sterker worden.

Beste collega’s Taal en Communicatie en in het bijzonder Engels, de kern van het dagelijks leven aan de VU wordt door de eigen werkeenheid gevormd. Ik ben vereerd dat ik jullie als collega's, vrienden en vangnet mag hebben. Het geeft een heerlijk gevoel om te weten dat er zoveel mensen als jullie zijn op wie men altijd vertrouwen kan. Jullie zijn heel bijzonder. Ik hoop dat het me lukt om wat terug te geven.

Beste Lachlan, ik vind het een hele eer om je te mogen opvolgen. Ik weet dat je weg bent, maar op een rare manier ben je niet weg, en ik kijk met vreugde uit naar onze volgende gezamenlijke publicatie.
**Beste Elseline,** jij bent niet weg, en bent niet weg te denken. Jouw betrokkenheid, overzicht, en enthousiasme is en blijft een grote inspiratiebron voor mij, maar wanneer ga je een beetje rustiger aan doen? Want dat zou ik dan soms ook wel eens willen.

**Beste Henk,** ik ben samen met vele anderen heel blij dat je besloten hebt toch twee jaar aan te blijven en nog niet weg te gaan, want zonder jouw advies en jouw zachte maar controlerende stem zou ik veel meer fouten maken. Daarnaast ben ik ook blij dat je er nog bent omdat ik zo nog een tijd lang niet de oudste ben bij Engelse taalkunde.

**Beste Gerard,** jij ging weg maar bent teruggekomen. Ik denk vaak terug aan 1977, PH31, dé kroeg van de VU in Amsterdam Zuid, waar ik van jou in mijn eerste jaar in Amsterdam Nederlands heb geleerd. We zouden vaker de kroeg in moeten, want dat levert gelach op, hoe melig dan ook, en dat levert ideeën op, en prachtige interactie.

**Beste studenten,** we zijn er toch bijna uitsluitend voor jullie, en jullie zullen het altijd waard zijn. We willen jullie zien, we willen er samen met jullie wat van maken. Moge jullie blijven werken maar ook blijven lachen.

**Ten slotte, Lieve Mieneke, Mark en Sarah,** jullie blijven alle drie groeien, alle drie, en ik blijf dankbaar voor de liefde, voor de zorg, voor het begrip, en voor jullie humor.

Hartelijk dank.
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**Data sources**

*Academic texts*


*Literary texts*

CURRICULUM VITAE

Michael Hannay was born in Hexham, England, in 1951. He studied Linguistic and Regional Studies at the University of Surrey in Guildford, and from 1974 to 1977 he lectured in German language at the University of Kent at Canterbury. In 1977 he joined the English department in the Arts faculty at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. In 1985 he received his doctorate cum laude at the University of Amsterdam entitled English Existentials in Functional Grammar. He became a senior lecturer at the VU in 1989 and from 2002 to 2007 held an endowed chair in Language and ICT. On 1 January 2007 he was appointed professor of English language at the VU.

His research is concerned with the information structure of the English sentence and the relation between grammar and discourse, the work being conducted within the theory of Functional Grammar. He is the author of various books and articles which seek to incorporate principles from functional linguistics into advanced language skills materials. He was editor-in-chief of Van Dale’s Dutch-English and English-Dutch concise dictionaries, and is chairman of the English section of the CEVO, which oversees the national school Examinations in the Netherlands. Since 1994 he has supervised a range of projects which seek to improve the quality of university language teaching with the help of ICT.