

MID-POSITION OF TIME-ADVERBIALS IN JOURNALISTIC PROSE:
AN ATTEMPT AT AN EXPLANATION

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In his discussion of stylistic variation within adverbial positions Jacobson (1964:148) draws attention to the fact that

“a particularly striking difference between the news-columns of daily newspapers and other kinds of prose is the replacement of such adverbs as *today* and *yesterday*”,

His survey of British journalistic publications and of other prose work reveals that Mid-position of *to-day*, *yesterday*, etc. is far more common in the newspapers (19%) than in other prose (3%): e.g.

- (1) Mr. Hussein Ala, Persian Prime Minister, *to-day* described the relations between Persia and Britain as having reached a happy stage. (*Daily Telegraph*, August 3, 1955, Jacobson: 1964:149)

Jacobson offers the following explanation:

The reason for the higher percentage of M in news-columns must be that these nearly always report what has happened during the day or the day before and that therefore the adverbs *to-day* and *yesterday* are rather unimportant in the context. The type of verb also plays some part, M being more much common with verbs like *declared*, *announced*, *described*, which have some weight, than with the light verb *said*.

Though the relative unimportance of the time-specification may play a part in determining the position of the adverbial it seems that it cannot be the only reason, and that there are other, more important, considerations involved.

A pilot study of present-day usage in the British press reveals that:

- (i) the unimportance of the adverbials need not be the essential reason for M-position of *to-day*, etc. If the adverbial is indeed unimportant, it can easily be deleted. This is often the case if it is obvious to both reader

and writer that the event described took place the day before the paper's edition. Adverbials of time such as *yesterday* or *last night* tend to be omitted for instance in theatre and music reviews:

- (2) A DISCUSSION about music and commitment preceded the opening recital in the Arts Council's Contemporary Music Network series, which began at the Roundhouse and tours the country. No one was quite certain whether the two events here were connected. (*Guardian*, 14 October 1980, p. 9 (3)).

And similarly in other sections:

- (3) The first strike by Federal Government clerks ended, after two weeks, when they ratified a settlement that gives a 24 percent wage increase over two years. (*Guardian*, 14 October 1980, p. 7 (2)).

Alternatively the unspecified present perfect is used:

- (4) Rail traffic on the line linking Zimbabwe with the Mozambic port of Beira has resumed, following an attack on a train by guerillas in Mozambique which severed the link between the two countries for a fortnight. (*Guardian*, 16 October 1980, p. 6 (4)).

In the majority of instances the adverbial appears at its more usual position at the end of the clause, even if the adverbial is 'relatively unimportant':

- (5) A charge of murdering a detective against a former internee from Northern Ireland was withdrawn by police in the Irish Republic *yesterday*. (*Guardian*, 16 October, 1980, p. 4 (4)).

(ii) For an adequate analysis other factors must be taken into account. Consider the following example:

- (6) The Government will *this week* announce a pay rise of more than 20 per cent to Britain's 80,000 Health Service doctors and dentists. (*Observer*, 3 May 1979, p. 3 (8)).

Mid-position as such is not exceptional: certain types of time-adverbials regularly occur in Mid-position:

He's already seen the play.
He's often mentioned it to me.
He will then announce another decision.
He's now living in a Bayswater flat.

We may assume that the Mid-position of *yesterday*, *to-day*, *this week*, etc. is modelled on this example. The adverbials eligible for Mid-position are relatively short: either adverbs or short phrases: *already*, *often*, *then*, *now*, *yesterday*, *this week*, *tomorrow*, etc.

It is revealing to consider the alternative positions available to the writer of (6):

- (a) Front-position puts undue prominence on the time-adverbial, suggesting a contrast with the preceding or following sentence:

This week the Government will announce a pay rise of ...

- (b) End-position, which would be the 'normal' position is impossible:

The Government will announce a pay-rise of more than 20 per cent to Britain's 80,000 Health Service doctors and dentists *this week*.

This variant may easily give rise to misunderstanding: the sentence may suggest that the pay-rise is due *this week*, while the example-sentence (6) only suggests that the announcement is due *this week*; the pay-rise may come into effect only later, or may be spread over various gradual increases.

- (c) A similar type of misunderstanding may arise with fronted End-positions breaking up the object NP:

The Government announce a pay-rise (i) (this week) of 20 per cent (ii) (this week) to Britain's 80,000....

this week (i) will be related to *pay-rise*; *this week* (ii) to (*a pay-rise of*) 20 per cent.

Conclusion

The mid-position of adverbials such as *yesterday*, *today*, etc. is not merely guided by considerations of 'focus' and 'comment' i.e. of relative importance. The relative unimportance of the adverbial does block Front-position, but this becomes only relevant because the normal End-position of the adverbials gives rise to structural ambiguity and misunderstanding. That such a conclusion is not desirable can be derived from the following attested example:

- (7) Electro-convulsive therapy, putting a high voltage current through the brain, commonly used in psychiatry to relieve depression, has been given without anaesthetic of muscle-relaxant at Broadmoor Hospital four times in contravention of Royal College of Psychiatrists guidelines. Dr Patrick Mc Grath, medical superintendent of Broadmoor, admitted that therapy was used without anaesthetic to an All Party Parliamentary Mental Health Group last week. (*Observer*, 17 February 1980, p. 5 (5)).

By assigning the usual End-position to the adverbial of time as well as to the *to*-phrase the reader is left with the impression that both have the same function of modifying the head verb of the subordinate clause (*use*). *Last week*, and the *to*-phrase, modify the main verb *admitted*; the structural ambiguity which arises might have been avoided if they had been assigned different positions: with *last week* in M-position and the *to*-phrase at fronted-end position:

Dr Patrick Mc Grath, medical ..., *last week* admitted to an All ... Group that therapy was used without anaesthetic.

It would appear that avoiding ambiguity ranks higher among the aims of the writer than considerations of relative importance of adverbials, and that

avoiding ambiguity may be at the basis of some stylistic characteristics of some registers.

REFERENCES

Jacobson, S. 1964. *Adverbial Positions in English*. Stockholm: AB Student Book.