

With You the Force May Be: Explorations into the Syntax of a Jedi Master

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1. Introduction

(1) “The rarity of OSV constructions and languages perhaps explains the impact of this strange speech style used by the Jedi Master, Yoda, in the film *Return of the Jedi* (1983).” (Crystal 1987:98)

(2a) Strong with the force you are.

(2b) Your father he is.

(2c) When 900 years you reach, look as good you will not.

Claims:

(i) Although Yoda is an alien, his speech style is not as strange as suggested by Crystal. → Yoda’s language does not violate UG-constraints.

(ii) Yoda’s language resembles English at an earlier stage (OE): no do-support in questions, and V2-phenomena.

(iii) Regarding VP-fronting phenomena, Yoda remains within the confines of the grammar of Modern English (reveiling unconscious knowledge of English on the part of the scriptwriters).

Methodological Problem:

Yoda’s language features a large degree of variability and inconsistency. Given that the overall number of utterances is relatively small, it is difficult to come up with firmly based conclusions → we will merely show trends and tendencies.

2. Characteristics of Old English in Yoda’s language

There are two (partly related) classes of ungrammatical structures in Yoda’s speech: (i) lack of do-support in negated declaratives, imperatives, and in questions, and (ii) V2-phenomena. Both are characteristics of Old English (OE) (cf. Lightfoot 1979).

2.1 Lack of do-support

2.1.1 No do-support with negation

Yoda does not have do-support in negated declarative sentences. The negation particle follows the first verb (modal or full verb). No categorial distinction between auxiliaries and full verbs (cf.3-4). → OE. In addition, Yoda does not use NPIs (cf.5).

(3a) I cannot teach him (5)

(3b) Your weapons...you will not need them. (5)

(3c) You must not go. (5)

(3d) Nothing more **will** I teach you today. (5)

(4a) A Jedi **craves not** these things. (5) (V2)

(4b) Size matters not. (5) (V2)

(5) Hear you nothing that I say? (5) (V1)

BUT:

(6) Wars **not make** one great. (5) (no V2)

2.1.2 No do support in negative imperatives

No do-support in negative imperatives. → OE.

(7a) Train him not. (1)

(7b) Try not. (5)

BUT:

(8) Do not underestimate the powers of the Emperor. (6)

(suspicion: here Yoda speaks grammatically because the statement is important (see §4.)

2.1.3 No do-support in questions

Yoda does not have do-support in questions either. Again, this is similar to the situation in OE.

wh-questions:

(9a) How feel you? (1) V2

(9b) Why wish you become Yedi? (5) V2

(9c) What know you of ready? (5) V2

yes-no-questions:

(10a) Hear you nothing that I say? (5) V1

(10b) Master Qui-Gon, more to say have you? (1) V2

2.1.4 An exception:

Yoda uses do-support with VP-deletion once → inconsistent

(11) Consume you it will, as it **did** Obi Wan's apprentice.

2.2 V2 in declaratives

Yoda's language also features V1/V2-phenomena resembling Old English: V1 in yes/no-questions, V2 in wh-questions, with negation, with optionally preposed elements.

- V1 in **yes/no-questions** (due to lack of do-support):

(12a) **Hear** you nothing that I say? (5)

(12b) **Look** I so old to young eyes? (6)

- V2 in **wh-questions**:

(13a) How **feel** you? (1)

(13b) Why **wish** you become Yedi? (5)

BUT:

(14) How you get so big, eating food of this kind? (5)

(attested with children (Thrift, p.c.))

- V2 with **negation**

(15a) A Jedi **craves** not these things. (5)

(15b) Size **matters** not. (5)

BUT:

(16) Wars not **make** one great. (5)

- V2 with **optionally preposed elements**.

(17a) For 800 years **have** I trained Jedi.

(17b) Forever **will** it dominate your destiny.

Note:

(18) This one a long time **have** I trained.

- Optional V2 in declaratives:

(19a) Soon **will** I rest.

(19b) Already **know** you that which you need.

Conclusion so far:

→ Yoda does not speak contemporary English, but a language strongly resembling OE. Yoda's language features (i) no do-support, (ii) negation after the first verb, (iii) subject verb inversion in questions and with optionally preposed elements (cf. Lightfoot 1979).

→ The OE-style employed by Yoda might serve to stress his old age and/or importance (at least to the ears of English speakers).

→ Yoda's language is within the confines of UG.

3. Fronting phenomena

Optional fronting of predicates (and marginally of objects) is the main characteristic of Yoda's language. We find fronting in (i) matrix declarative clauses, (ii) in matrix questions, (iii) in embedded sentences.

3.1 Bad fronting:

Fronting patterns that do not occur in English (neither OE nor ME):

- in questions:

(20a) Ready so early are you? (1)

(20b) Judge me by my size, do you? (5) (do-support!)

- in embedded sentences:

(21) ..., if involved the Sith are. (1)

Note that (21) is unlike stylistic fronting in Icelandic embedded sentences, which is only licensed with absent subjects (= subject not in base position, but e.g. relativized, cf. Maling (1990),

→ Yoda's fronting in matrix questions and in embedded sentences is not attested in English, nor in other Germanic languages (to the best of our knowledge).

3.2 Good fronting: OSV, Predicate Inversion, and VP-fronting

All other instances of fronting found in Yoda's speech are possible grammatical structures of Modern English (though some are marginal and heavily context

dependent). In Yoda's speech, this special context is often absent. This means that a lot of his sentences are structurally correct, but pragmatically odd.

3.2.1 OSV (cf. Crystal's claim)

- (22a) ?Rootleaf, I cook (5)
- (22b) Through the force, **things**₁ you will see t₁. (5)
- (22c) **Rest**₁ I need t₁, yes, rest. (6)
- (22d) **Our own council**₁ we will keep t₁, on who is ready. (5)
- (22e) **Quagon's defiance**₁ I sense in you t₁. (1)

- (23a) Friends, you have there. (5)
- (23b) An apprentice you have. (1)

Instances of OSV with 'have' (cf. 23a,b) may be reanalyzed as instances of predicate raising assuming that the 'have'-construction is a copular construction (cf. Kayne 1994:102)

Conclusion:

→ OSV is not attested very often in Yoda's speech. In some Cases it can be reanalyzed as predicate-fronting → 5 'real' OSV-sentences are juxtaposed to 10 SVO sentences.

→ Yoda does not speak an OSV language.

3.2.2 Predicate Fronting with Copula

- with copular in intermediate position:

- (24a) Strong am I with the force (6)
- (24b) Luminous beings are we (5)¹ (attested with Dutch children)
- (24c) Powerful Jedi was he (5) (attested with Dutch children)
- (24d) The dark side of the force are they (5)

- with copula last:

- (25a) Correct you were (1)
- (25b) My home this is (5)
- (25c) Clouded this boys future is (1)

¹ The structures in (24b) and (24c) are also attested in Dutch child language (Thrift, p.c.)

(25a-c) are similar to the sentence in (26), from Quirk, Greenbaum & Leech (1972:945)

(26) JOE his NAME is.

→ context does not always license fronting. (sentences are often pragmatically odd).

3.3 VP-Fronting with AUX:

Yoda often fronts entire VPs in the context of one or more auxiliaries.

- (27a) [Discover who this assassin is]₁ we must t₁. (1)
- (27b) [Tested]₁ he will be t₁. (1)
- (27c) Then [continue]₁ we will t₁. (1)
- (27d) [Take you to him]₁ I will t₁. (5)
- (27e) [Consume you]₁ it will t₁. (5)
- (27f) And [confront him]₁ you will t₁. (6)
- (27g) ..., or [suffer your father's fate]₁ you will t₁. (6)

However, fronting with auxiliaries is not obligatory:

- (28a) Soon you will be with him. (5)
- (28b) A Jedi must have the deepest commitment,... (5)
- (28c) You will know. (5)

→ the structures in (27) are possible (if marginal) English structures: cf. Quirk, Greenbaum & Leech's examples of 'predication as a theme' (1972:946):

- (29a) léave him I còuldn't (but at least I could make his life a misery).
- (29b) (I've promised to do it) , so dó it I shall.

→ Yoda's VP-fronting it is subject to the structural constraints on VP-fronting in Modern English:

- (30) "It is wellknown that VP-fronting can only front the lowest of a series of stacked VPs (assuming that this is in fact the structure of complex auxiliary sentences in English)." Roberts (1998:117) → **VP-front+AUXlast**

Roberts' examples (11a, b):

- (31a) I told the children to be very good, **and [very good] they have been.**
Vs. * and [been very good] they have.
- (31b) John said he was going to be obnoxious **and obnoxious he will be.**
Vs. *[be obnoxious] he will.

Note that the presence of do is enforced by the structural requirement on VP-fronting (**only with auxiliaries**) (cf. 32a,b), or by fronting of a negative phrase (32c).

- (32a) But agree on you taking this boy as your Padawan learner I **do** not. (1)
*But agree on you taking this boy as your Padawan learner I not.
*But agree not on you taking this boy as your Padawan learner I.
*But agree not on you taking this boy as your Padawan learner I do.
- (32b) [Need that]₁ you **do** not t₁. (1)
- (32c) [No more training]₁ **do** you require t₁. (6)

That the presence of do in (32) is triggered by fronting, rather than by negation, is seen from the fact that VP-fronting in non-negative declarative sentences also triggers the presence of do.

- (33) [Confer on you the level of Jedi-knight]₁ the council does t₁. (1)

Note also:

- (34) Told you, I did.

3.4 Intonation:

In the predicate fronting cases, Yoda uses the intonation pattern that is expected in the ‘Predication as theme’ (Quirk *et al.* 1972) (i.e. stress on the predicate and on the ‘stranded’ auxiliary). Apparently Yoda is unable to use a more ‘neutral’ intonation with this highly marked word-order.

Facit:

- Yoda uses fronting a lot
- Most of his fronting structures are possible in English, but rarely used because of their special contextual requirements → syntactically, they are OK
- The special contextual environment is often lacking with Yoda’s utterances. In this respect, the word order is pragmatically not adequate. In any case, it is only licensed by the peculiar rise-fall intonation pattern expected with ‘predicate-as-theme’-structures.

- regarding VP-fronting with AUX, Yoda stays in the confines of English grammar. **He never fronts more than the lowest VP!**
- The structural requirement VPfront+AUXlast overrules the scriptwriters’ preference for lack of do-support, presumably for reasons of interpretability: VPfront+AUXlast >> no do support.

→ **Contrary to first appearances it does not seem to have been the scriptwriters’ objective to construct an impossible human language (i.e. a non-UG compatible language) for Yoda** (unlike e.g. Klingon).

4. Context & Grammaticality

There is a tendency that important statements are usually expressed with the neutral word order, in particular in utterances relating to the Empire or the Force.

- (35) Fear is the path to the dark side...fear leads to anger...anger leads to hate...hate leads to suffering. A Jedi must have the deepest commitment, the most serious mind. I sense much fear in you.

5. Conclusion

- Yoda does not speak an impossible human language, but by and large remains within the limits of the grammars of Old and Modern English.
- The peculiar effects of his language are achieved by means of certain OE constructions and by an excessive use of predicate fronting.
- The overall large number of exceptions and inconsistencies point to the fact that the scriptwriters have not put too much effort into designing a coherent and internally consistent language system for Yoda. For the next episode they might want to consider consulting a linguist....

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