On the cognitive nature of verb transitivity in English

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Abstract. The traditional view of the transitivity of a verb as its ability to have a direct complement in the accusative case does not reflect the core essence of this verb characteristic. Therefore, the existing dichotomy of verbs into transitive and non-transitive verbs should be revised with the introduction of additional types of transitivity. The traditional classification of complements into direct, indirect and prepositional also requires a critical reconsideration due to its inconsistency. The study of the properties of English verbs using the methods of cognitive linguistics and through the prism of event theory suggests that only monovalent predicates of action or process are truly non-transitive. All other verbs should be considered transitive. The transitivity of a verb is directly related to the notion of profiling. The profile boundaries of a transitive verb include all participants in the force-dynamic chain, from the agent to the object, which undergoes a complete change of state. A non-transitive verb profiles only the agent as the source of force. Both transitive and non-transitive verbs can display variation of their transitivity characteristics as a result of the meaning evolution, associated with shifting the boundaries of the verb’s profile to represent a new kind of event.

1 Introduction

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An indirect complement always comes “bundled” with a direct complement:

1) *I showed him* the contents of the Green Box (BNC, A08) →
   
   ![I showed him [...].]

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   It is evident that in the absence of the direct complement the sentence becomes grammatical and semantically incomplete without a wider context. The omission of the object in such constructions is only possible if the object expressed by the direct complement is understood by default and therefore remains in the implication:

2) *He proposed to me,* and I said yes. (BNC, AE0)

   ![He proposed to me, and I said yes. (BNC, AE0)]

   ![He proposed to me, and I said yes. (BNC, AE0)]

   In this example, the implied object is conventionally understood as “marriage” and does not need explication. In addition, this example demonstrates that the indirect complement in English (in the dative case, in the semantic role of the beneficiary in the situation) can also be prepositional in structure. Moreover, some English verbs allow for a change in the order of the direct and indirect complements in relation to the verb predicate in English (show, give, send).

3) *The headmaster gave him* the letter. (BNC, AMB) →
   
   *The headmaster gave* the letter *to him*

   ![The headmaster gave him the letter. (BNC, AMB) →
   The headmaster gave the letter to him]

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2 Materials and Methods

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The material for the work comprised a sample of sentences from the British National Corpus (BNC) [5]. The focus of the study was on English verbs demonstrating the ability to function in different distributions, i.e. to actualize events with a different set of participants. The analysis of semantic and structural features of these verbs in relation to the characteristics of the events they represent, using the methods of semantic decomposition, frame analysis and cognitive modeling allowed us to make a number of assumptions about the cognitive basis of transitivity and the mechanism of its transformation.
3 Results and discussion

From the viewpoint of cognitive science, transitivity is the linguistic encoding of basic events (in which the agent has an intentional impact on the object, as a result of which the state of the object changes to some extent), as well as formal and semantic characteristics associated with the encoding of such events [6, 7]. From this position, only a verb encoding an event in which the agent’s action is not directed at any object can be considered non-transitive. Such verbs usually include state or process predicates (4) and verbs denoting motion (5) according to C. Fillmore [4] and W. Chafe [3]:

4) The flowers bloomed happily in the soft sunshine… (BNC, H8F)
5) For relaxation he golfed, swam, and walked. (BNC, AJ6)

6) Francis had discovered a photographer who only did trees and did them brilliantly. (BNC, A0L)
7) Jay drank a smoky oak ruby wine. (BNC, A0L)

8) The prince chewed at a fingernail as he stared at the map. (BNC, CMP)

“…!” change in the meaning of the verb occurs through the verb’s “appropriation” of some “the agent’s influence”.

9) The door knob rattled, and Mrs. Livesey came in. (BNC, ANL)
10) He walked over and rattled at the locked door. (BNC, BPD)
11) Keith chewed his lip, trying to remember. (BNC, AC4)
12) Maggie chewed at her lip, wondering how to put it to him… (BNC, HGK)

The similarity of the semantic characteristics of the objects attached by non-prepositional means (6, 7) and with a preposition (8) indicates that in both cases we are dealing with transitive verbs. Yet for verbs with complementary prepositional phrases, this transitivity is "acquired" due to the extension of their semantics to actualize a new type of event. The change in the meaning of the verb occurs through the verb’s “appropriation” of some necessary characteristics of “manner” associated with them. In other words, it makes sense that every verb “aspires” to become transitive. It is much easier for the cognitive apparatus
When an initially transitive verb becomes alternatively transitive, it gains the ability to objectify another kind of event, just like originally non-transitive verbs. Alternatively transitive verbs profile only the initial stage of the event, in which the agent performs an action, the purpose of which is to change the state of the object, but rather to keep one of the object’s properties unchanged through such an action. The changes in the valency characteristics of the verb and the shift in transitivity are connected to the changes in the way humans perceive the state of the object in an event. The cognitive approach also accounts for the “transformation” of the non-transitive verb stab into the alternatively transitive verb stab, cut, and grab?

13) I cut the cheese with the Lappish knife…. (BNC, A6T)
14) The Keeper of Secrets cut at him with his great claw. (BNC, AT7)
15) Lee had grabbed the bag and was pulling things out of it. (BNC, ABX)
16) She grabbed at his shoulders for support as her head swam. (BNC, HA5)
Generously, Ryan sent him £100. (DNC, AJ8)

Then I sent the money to Giulia. (BNC, HGF)

Such verbs can profile a situation with one set of actors in two different ways. The situation involves an agent acting on an object in such a way that the object changes its location and/or state, coming into the possession of the beneficiary. The impulse of force from the agent in any case initially goes to the object, with which the agent needs to cease contact before the object comes into contact with the new owner—the beneficiary (the final point of force application). Therefore, the object, being maximally involved in the situation, is thematic and therefore closest to the center of the verb profile, which explains its tendency to occupy the position adjacent to the verb (18) [4, 15]. In such a case, the beneficiary acquires the features of a locative argument, towards which the object’s location changes, and, consequently, it is forced out of the verb profile, which explains the necessity to include it with the help of a preposition as the center of additional predication. In the case where the beneficiary is so thematic that it is even encoded by the pronoun (17), on the other hand, it is drawn into the boundaries of the verb profile, occupying a position immediately adjacent to the verb predicate. This proximity to the center of the verb profile allows the beneficiary to be attached without preposition, as well as the object.

It is worth noting, though, that in the situation when both right-hand arguments are maximally thematic, which is expressed in their parallel pronominalization, it is the object, but not the beneficiary, that will occupy the immediate post-verb position:

19) I hold out my hand for the hat and he gives it to me. (BNC, A74 1534) → *I hold out my hand for the hat and he gives me it.

20) I picked up The Times and showed it to her. (BNC, CKF 101) → *I picked up The Times and showed her it.

This feature can also be explained in terms of verb profiling. Other things being equal, the object is always closer to the agent, and hence to the center of the verb profile, than is the beneficiary, because before it literally or metaphorically comes into the possession of the beneficiary as a result of the agent’s causative action, the object must initially be under the agent’s control.

4 Conclusion

To summarize, we conclude that the nature of verb transitivity is far more complex and much deeper than its representation in traditional grammar. Transitivity is not just a syntactic-functional characteristic of a verb, which is associated with its ability to take a complement in the accusative case. Transitivity is a manifestation of the basic relationship between the participants in the event denoted by the verb. This allows us to reconsider the conventional syntax classification of verbs into transitive and non-transitive and to propose a more detailed classification. From the perspective of the cognitive approach, English verbs can be non-transitive (monovalent), conventionally transitive (with a direct complement in the accusative case), ditransitive (with a direct and indirect complement) and alternatively transitive (with a prepositional group as a complement). This understanding of transitivity makes it possible to correlate semantic and syntactic aspects of linguistic units more correctly. The change in the valence of a verb, and consequently in the characteristics of its transitivity, is nothing but...
References


5. The British National Corpus, Retrieved from: http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/


