

THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE AND THE FUNCTIONAL TRANSITION IN ENGLISH VERBS

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1. Introduction

In modern English numerous verbs are straddling between the categories of transitive verbs and intransitive ones. In dealing with this peculiar phenomenon, there have been two major theoretic treatments available: one is what the traditional grammar has claimed, namely, there is a clear-cut division between English transitive verbs and their intransitive counterparts, the other is a formal approach which has developed from the generative grammar since the late 50s. The former has, however, received much criticism and many scholars claim that the difference concerning this issue is a matter of usage, rather than a matter of kind (Jespersen 1949: 319; Erades 1975; Quirk et al. 1985: 1168; cf. Halliday 1985: 145).

On the other hand, the formal grammar takes a more flexible but quite different position in handling the issue. In the generative model, transitive and intransitive verbs are not treated as two incompatible species (Chomsky 1957). Rather, it recommends that there be one category of verbs, and that transitive verbs and intransitive verbs be simply results of subcategorization which is context-dependent. The good thing about the formal treatment of the phenomenon is that, as Phrase Structure Rule (1) below indicates, it provides a more powerful explanation to the matter.

(1) Phrase Structure Rule for Verbs in English:

VP ---> V(NP)

According to the recent development in TG grammar (e.g., by using the X bar theory), Rule (1) can be further rewritten as Modified Verbal Rule (2) below.

(2) Modified Verbal Rule:

VP ---> V Comp

From these two rules, it can be seen explicitly that either the bracketed NP in Rule (1) or the Comp part in Rule (2) is optional element. When there is a syntactical need for their occurrence, they appear; otherwise, they are dropped out at deep structure (cf. Chomsky 1965, 1981; Culicover 1982).

A third possibility for describing the phenomenon may be a pragmatic one and the illustration of this new approach will form the focus of the present study. The potential motivations for studying the issue from a pragmatic perspective are two-fold. First, as indicated above, the difference between a transitive verb and an intransitive verb is in fact a matter of usage, instead of a matter of kind. Moreover, it is also noticed, as in the case of the theoretic grammar, that this usage is contextually constrained. And contextual constraints for the transition of this kind very often move beyond the sentential level and tend to be governed by some pragmatic or functional principles. This fact makes the formal grammar less helpful in manipulating the English verb transition because the question here falls out of the domain of a pure syntactic model. If these claims hold, then it is believed that a pragmatic analysis might well be one of eligible candidates for providing some innovative explanations for the focus of this paper. The fundamental reason for this statement is that it is generally assumed that pragmatics is more interested in things such as context and usage than in pure structural analyses (Levinson 1983: 101; cf. also Grice 1975, 1978). Meanwhile, it is noted that the rapid development of pragmatics itself and the rich documents obtained in the field have been proved to be something that cannot afford to be ignored even in dealing with issues such as anaphora, which currently forms one of the foci in TG grammar (Ward et al. 1991: 439-474).

What follows will be a tentatively pragmatic description of the transition in English. Though the discussion is completely concerned with English examples, this, however, does not mean that the framework suggested is no good for other languages. The choice of English as the data source is purely a personal preference. In the next part, we are going to deal with the issue in a pragmatic model. A conclusion part is additionally supplemented at the end of paper for more relevant discussion.

2. Discussion

In order to hit the point directly, let us begin our discussion by asking a question like this: How does the transition happen? Or, rephrasingly, what is the motivation behind the phenomenon? Briefly stating, the possibility for structural omissions in English is the direct motivation for the type of "vt --> vi" transition to take place. If we compare the following pairs of sentences, this fact will loom up more explicitly (Jespersen 1949: 332).

- (3) a. He *smoked a pipe*.
b. He *smoked*.
- (4) a. John *dressed himself, washed himself, and shaved himself*.
b. John *dressed, washed, and shaved*.

- (5) a. They *kissed each other* and departed.
b. They *kissed* and departed.

A quick structural perusal of these paired sentences will lead to a general statement for all the b-type sentences, namely, all b-type sentences are actually structural derivations of the original a-type counterparts, but with the understood objects being intentionally deleted. Reaching this statement brings about a new question: For what purpose should the understood objects be omitted? Structurally and stylistically speaking, it may be explained as the result of brevity. Then, another relevant question will come up: If so, why is there a communication failure in the following dialogue.

- (6) A: "He kicks well."
B: "Kicks *what* well?"

In this situation, a pure structural explanation may not succeed in telling the whole story. On the other hand, pragmatics will probably provide some help in this case, that is to say, what is wrong with the dialogue is that speaker A violates the cooperative principle in pragmatics and does not provide as much information as s/he should do. Consequently, a failure in communication occurs.

According to Grice (1975, 1978), when we talk, we are following four basic maxims of conversation which keep our interaction running smoothly. These maxims that guarantee our speech acts are 1) Maxim of Quality, 2) Maxim of Quantity, 3) Maxim of Relevance, and 4) Maxim of Manner. Now let us return to the problematic dialogue given in (6) above and see what is actually wrong with it in the light of these conversational maxims.

Argument One: According to the Maxim of Quality, A should only provide true information in his/her speech for B to understand him/her. And it turns out that A suffices this requirement;

Argument Two: Following the Maxim of Quantity, A should also provide enough information in his/her speech for B to understand him/her correctly. Unfortunately, A looks like failing to do so, by deliberately or carelessly dropping the object needed for the verb "kick" in this situation;

Argument Three: The Maxim of Relevance requires A's speech behavior to be relevant to the on-going conversational task. What is wrong with the dialogue is, however, either A has not given B enough clues for kicking activities, or B has not been psychologically or cognitively ready enough for A's remark;

Argument Four: As far as the Maxim of Manner is concerned, A does pretty well with the submaxim of being brief in his/her information despatch. However, A probably strives too hard in this respect that this submaxim is achieved at the price of flouting the other two submaxims (e.g., avoiding obscurity and ambiguity). Consequently, miscommunication takes place that forces B to ask A for more relevant information by raising a question like "Kicks *what* well?"

A structural analysis, which has been observed in example sentences (3), (4), and (5) above, tells us that if we have a noun (e.g., "a pipe"), a reflexive pronoun (e.g., "himself"), or a reciprocal noun (e.g., "each other") as the object of a verb in a given structure, these elements allow to be omitted as understood objects in English. Clearly enough, a deletion rule for the "vt --> vi" transition in English could be formed from the result of this analysis as (7) below.

(7) Deletion Rule for Understood Object

[_____ NP] ---> [_____ #]

noun

< reflexive pron.

reciprocal pron.

And the good thing about this deletion rule is that, as those example sentences (3)-(5) indicated, it captures a generalization of the language and works well in most cases. On the other hand, it is also noted that if the rule is striven for too hard, or used inappropriately, miscommunication, as the short dialogue (6) above indicated, may take place. Facing this dilemma, it must be pointed out that a structural analysis could hardly provide a satisfactory explanation for the constraints that govern the appropriateness of language usage. The reason for this is that a formal analysis is exclusively concerned with a description of structural elements at the sentential level and it can hardly provide enough feasible explanations as far as context is concerned. This is because a study of miscommunication in question is in fact more closely related to a functional or pragmatic analysis and than to a formal discussion. More objectively, a study of communication failure caused by inappropriate use of Deletion Rule (7) above is heavily context-dependent and goes well beyond the structural dimension. Unfortunately, any analysis above the sentential level falls completely out of the scope of a formal description.

Hopefully, as our above arguments indicated, a pragmatic principle, if correlated with the structural rule of deletion, is highly likely to tell us more about the whole story of English transitions discussed here. Here are more examples.

(8) Don't you think she *plays (the piano)* well?

(9) In my eyes the question is not what to teach, but how to *educate (our students)* (Charles Kingsley [Barnhart and Barnhart 1981: 670]).

(10) She's *following (us)* (Dixon 1991: 267).

(11) I *won (the game)* (Dixon 1991: 267)

Clearly enough, as far as the "vt --> vi" type of transition is concerned, a structural explanation of deletion is far from enough. This is especially the case when we want to know: 1) why such a failure in communication as in the dialogue (6) would take place, and 2) how this communication failure can be feasibly explained. In order to deal with these questions in a better way, we must notice that there are two interwoven factors hidden behind this phenomenon: one is structural (which works at the sentential level), the other pragmatic (which functions at the contextual level, or rather, at the functional level of information dispatch and interaction).

Neither of these explanations can be dispensed with if a deeper understanding of the transition in English verbs is required. From the above discussion, it has been observed that what lies behind the structural explanation is the deletion of an understood object indicated by Deletion Rule (7) above, whereas what supports the pragmatic analysis is the cooperative principle put forward by Grice (1975, 1978). More specifically, we may claim that the pragmatic principle "watches" that there should be a felicity condition to be met if we want to communicate with each other in a smooth and ordinary way. Any blind application of the structural deletion can be regarded either as a deliberate or as a careless ignorance of this pragmatic principle. And an ignorance like this is highly likely to result in miscommunication or a break of communication of different types. Fortunately, as we have illustrated so far, a combination of a structural analysis and a pragmatic analysis may open a new avenue to the issue in question. For this we have more to say below.

The necessity for a correlation of the structural rule and the pragmatic principle can be further testified if we purposefully insert an understood object which is contextually, hence, pragmatically required to be deleted. The direct result of such an attempt will be that if we do so, our utterance may sound quite unnatural. For instance, if two speakers, A and B, both know that it is time for lunch, and if it is also true that A knows B has not had his/her lunch, then it will be tautological and awkward for A to ask a question like (12) below.

(12) Have you eaten your lunch?
(cf. a more natural one should be "Have you eaten?"
instead (Dixon 1991: 267))

Similarly, sentence (13 b) below will sound rather heavy and unnatural. Because we only know it too well that if there is not enough food, life cannot continue and for this reason in a normal situation sentence (13 a) is preferred:

(13) a. We should *eat* to live, not live *to eat* (Liang 1977: 645).
b. We should *eat food* to live, not live *to eat food*.

Therefore, it is clearly enough that, if B in dialogue (6) above knows that the person mentioned by A is a football player, amateur or professional, B will immediately realize what A means by saying "kicks well."

From these discussions, we can see that English transition of "vt --> vi" type is both structurally and pragmatically constrained. More specifically, the application of the cooperative principle guarantees the appropriateness of the structural deletion. If this statement holds, it could be further argued that the transition we discuss here is not a static phenomenon as the traditional grammar has claimed, but a dynamic process of shifting all the time. In other words, the dynamic feature of the English transition can be better specified by turning to an alternative pragmatic approach--information theory (Levinson 1983). That is, as interactions continue, the speaker and the hearer will have more mutual knowledge of different types, ranging from having a better understanding with each other to knowing the

subject discussed more deeply and completely. In this situation, the probability of employing the deletion rule will greatly increase. Put it in another way, a successful and appropriate application of Deletion Rule (7) is based on the amount of mutual knowledge gathered and shared by interactants toward a certain speech event or a subject matter. The more accumulation of this mutual awareness is gained, the more possibility there is for a successful adoption of this functional transition.

3. Conclusion

At the beginning of the present paper, three descriptions of the English transition of verbs were briefly introduced. These approaches, however, can not be regarded as a diamond-cut-diamond type of selection. Rather, to some extent, they are alternative choices – each, based on its own theoretical base, has something to offer. Of the three, the traditional description, however, has received much criticism (Jespersen 1949: 319; Erades 1975; Quirk et al. 1985: 1186); the formal analysis has attracted a lot of attention (Chomsky 1957, 1965, 1981; Culicover 1982); and the pragmatic approach, however, is still something brand new, though it looks like a more promising model (cf. Ward et al. 1991). And what the present study has done is only a tentatively initial attempt of this kind.

With the rapid development of pragmatics, it is believed that this theory will have more “say” in linguistic study. For instance, Levinson (1983: 100) names five reasons for taking up pragmatics, one of which states: “certain syntactic rules seem to be sensitive to conversational implicature.” In fact, as shown in this paper, this potentially structural sensibility could be expanded so that it will interact with other pragmatic rules such as the cooperative principle and so on. On the other hand, possible expansion also exists for pragmatics itself. For example, the English verb “to air” has been exclusively used as a transitive one. But recently, it develops a new usage as a intransitive verb:

- (14) The new program will *air* Tuesday at 8 p.m.
(Morris – Morris 1975: 23)

A rich document like this, if they can all be pragmatically explained, will definitely enrich our knowledge of how language changes (cf. Levinson 1983: 165).

Another relevant possibility may go to a pragmatic investigation of issues such as conversion or functional shift in English. The underlying factor behind the linguistic phenomenon is that, theoretically, conversion is possible for any proper noun to be used as a common noun. And it is also highly likely for its derivation to undergo a secondary shift and to be used as a verb. Sentences (15)-(17) below will illustrate these processes neatly:

- (15) ...the disclosures of misconduct in high places loosely defined as “*Watergate*” (James A. Wechsler [Barnhart – Barnhart 1981: 2364]).
(16) ...some accusing President Mitterand directly of lying and demanding his immediate resignation in what they described as *a French Watergate* (Geddes 1985: 9).

- (17) Who *watergated* my cigarette lighter? (Feng 1982: 594)

Clearly, there is a pre-condition for such functional shifts and this pre-condition appears to be related to Grice’s theory of meaning-nn. The discussion of acceptability of usage like sentences (15)-(17) definitely goes beyond their pure lexical and sentential levels and moves into the field of pragmatics and information theory. It is assumed that these example sentences would be totally unintelligible, if there were not a pragmatically governed pre-condition which can be specified as there is an intentionally conveyed meaning that the addressee knows what the addressor implies here by

- i) first using “Watergate” as a proper name, and then,
- ii) using it as a common noun on the assumption that the event is such a notorious political scandal that every one should know, and finally,
- iii) employing it as a verb derived from its nominal source, on the assumption that any of its derivational forms, whether in its nominal form as “A French Watergate” or being a verbal derivation as “to watergate,” is deeply embedded with a denotation that something illegal has been conducted.

Clearly, the addressee is expected to use these clues to interpret what the addressor is striving at by turning to functional shifts in a successive way. Unfortunately, a satisfactory description of this dynamic process of re-interpretation is completely absent in a pure lexical or syntactic discussion of conversion (cf. Clark – Clark 1979; Yang 1986a, 1986b, 1988).

Another relevant point to make here is that, as far as the transitions in question are concerned, in addition to pragmatic factors, the gender of the speaker may also have something to do with the phenomenon. For instance, a general assumption is that women tend to make their speech less explicit but more implicit than their male peers (Yang 1990: 165-168). Considering this tendency, cases of miscommunication like the one in our short dialogue (e.g., (6)) at the beginning of the paper may well be ascribed to the result of some special communication strategies adopted by female speakers (cf. Masur – Gleason 1980; Gleason 1987; Wetzel 1988).

As mentioned initially, the present study is a tentative and initial attempt to correlate a structural study with a pragmatic perspective for a better understanding of the “vt --> vi” transition in English. As has been shown above, pragmatics, new as it is, does play a role in linguistic analysis and sheds additional light on our re-conceptualization of some linguistic issues (cf. Ward et al. 1991). And this general conclusion partially answers the question why we need pragmatics, and probably sociolinguistics as well, in our linguistic study.

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