

Infinitive phrase with behavior evaluation adjectives: confronting French and English data

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The main particularity of a sub-class of adjectives that we call Behavior Evaluation ones (BEA), like *wise* or *rash*, is that they can take a human subject (e.g. *Peter is rash to drive so fast*) as well as a clause subject in the infinitive form (e.g. *To drive so fast is rash of Peter*). Unlike previous analyses of these adjectives (cf. among others, Bolinger 1977, Stowell 1991, Bennis 2000, Landau 2009), our presentation proposes an overall treatment of BEAs in English and in French, emphasising in particular the exact semantico-syntactic status of the infinitive phrase.

We argue that the two above-mentioned structures should be viewed in both languages as diathetic variants of one another, the structure with the clausal subject being the passive equivalent of the active construction with a human subject. In the active construction, BEAs function as modifiers of an agentive predicate *be* in English or *être* in French, which takes an external argument expressed by an NP +human, to which it attributes the semantic role of an agent, and a direct internal argument (infinitive clause).

This direct internal argument expressed by the infinitive phrase can be assimilated to the “cognate” object type, as it establishes with the active verbal predicate a relation of semantic specification. In other words, the infinitive clause specifies the type of act that the agent accomplishes and that justifies the attribution of the property in question to the agent through his or her action. Therefore, in the English construction *X is BEA to V-INF* and its French equivalent *X est BEA de V-INF*, the act explicitly specified by an infinitive clause is in a superordinate relation with acts characterized by their BEA property. Moreover, the spelling out of the argumental cognate object (cf. Pereltsvaig 1998) results in an aspect shift. In French, the presence of the infinitive phrase limits the attribution of the BEA property to a particular occurrence of a specific event (*Pierre est gentil* ‘Peter is nice’ vs. *Pierre est gentil de nous avoir aidés* ‘Peter is nice to have helped us’), while in English, the use of the progressive form on the verb *be* with BEAs is incompatible with the explicit presence of the infinitive phrase (*You are being rash* vs. **You are being rash to drive so fast*).

References

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