

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE INTUITIVE UNDERSTANDING
OF THE CONCEPT OF AGENCY

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logical description of propositions such a scheme can be envisaged as correct, as is done in logic, it cannot, however, appeal to the mind of a generativist who would see a sentence forming process as a process in which the verb appears only by virtue of the prior existence of a noun to which it could refer. The speaker does not choose a verb and then attaches nouns to it but rather he communicates a state or process in which a noun is shown to be with the help of a verb. The polysemy of verbs is more striking than the polysemy of nouns and it is often the case that the meaning of the verb depends on the noun it goes with. A telling example comes from Hockett (1958 : 246). The Chinese morpheme *kāi* is open to eight separate verbal meanings depending on the nominal context.

The idea of the centrality of the verb is not new in the literature. Some linguists like Kuryłowicz and especially Reszkiewicz (1963) emphasized this approach convincingly, however on different grounds. Reszkiewicz shows verbs as central on the basis of connotation and determination and following this line one could regard verbs as being syntactically central but this view does not commit one to maintain their semantic priority over nouns in the semantically based underlying structures¹. Furthermore, the connotation of dependency between nouns and verbs also indicates that verbs must connote nouns because the former are incapable of being semantically independent and connotating nouns they are thereby dependent on them. In other words, surface syntactic centrality of verbs has to be distinguished from deep semantic centrality of nouns². In the same way adjectives, which are shown as connotating nouns, show themselves as semantically dependent on the elements they connote. This observation, to which we claim no originality, could be taken as one more factor supporting the idea of verb-adjective semantic unity.

Another objection to Fillmore's proposal is the unclear status of subjectivization and objectivization as surface structure rules. If these rules are said to operate on a set of underlying cases in a deep structure representation of e.g.,

(1) shoot [+ 0, (A), (I)]

in the way that they subjectivize the Agent, the Objective, or the Instrument in the case when all of them are present, then how is it that, given lexical items, the rules select the Agent in preference to the others as the subject of the sentence? If agents are preferred as subjects, as they really are in English, it follows that there is a kind of hierarchy with respect to the operation of the rule of subjectivization and that this implicit hierarchy is not motivated in Fillmore's grammar. The point becomes more conspicuous if one considers a

¹ Fillmore's verb centered orientation was recently supported by Senren (1969).

² The idea of the priority of nominal concepts goes back to the philosophy of Aristotle and the Modistae.

verb with two animate arguments. In this case the decision as to which of them should become the Agent cannot be said to be dictated by a preference rule favoring animate nouns because the decision has to be taken in the speaker's mind.

Another question is connected with the treatment of verb frames. Instead of Chomsky's three separate specifications for the verb *break*, Fillmore has introduced one, seemingly covering the same amount of information. This gain in economy is unfortunately lost when one comes to consider the same verb with different nominals. For example,

- (2) break [+ 0, (A), (I)]
 a. window, John, hammer
 b. record, John

where John is obligatory in b,

- grow [+ 0, (A)]
 a. roses, gardener
 b. baby, aunt

where aunt is not optional but should be excluded. In both *b* cases the verb frames are inadequate as we would obtain **The record broke in the 100-yard dash* and **The aunt grew the baby* in respective instances (a brief note on it is also found in Chomsky 1965 : 214). The examples cited do not deprive the case specifications of verbs of their apparent attractiveness, they indicate however, that verbs cannot be contemplated without taking into consideration definite nominals and their semantics. This considered, there arises the same question of whether we should allow for one or more than one representation for *break*, *grow* and the like.

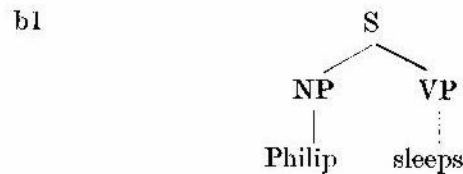
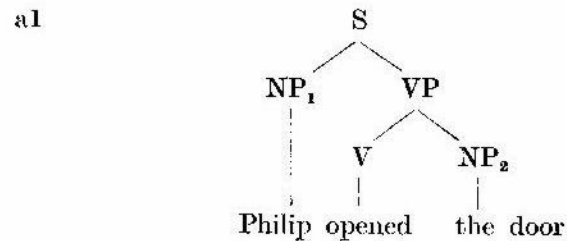
In what follows we assume that verbs and adjectives retain their classical "accidental" status with reference to nouns and we will try to show that it might be advisable to proceed along different lines towards constructing a semantically based grammar. In particular, we will try to suggest that the concept of agency should not be treated on a par with the concept of the Objective.

For the sake of argument the present paper will confine its hypothesis to simple intransitive and transitive sentences in the traditional understanding of the terms.

Linguistic tradition has it that a transitive sentence is one whose verb requires an object to follow it. Thus, *Philip opened the door* is transitive and *Philip sleeps* is intransitive, which are rendered as SVO and SV constructions respectively. Immediate constituents analysis and its formalized counterpart

Phrase Structure rules analyse them as follows:

- (3) a. Philip | opened | the door
 b. Philip | sleeps



where the first cut or the disjunctive rule separates subject NP from the remainder of the sentence, its predicate. Traditionally the predicate was said to predicate something about its subject. This view, once generally held, seems at present to be devoid of any justification. On the contrary, one might say that the semantic emphasis in a phonetically unmarked or neutral utterance rests upon the object. In this way, conforming to the procedure of IC analysis the separation of the subject from the predicate confirms, perhaps unintentionally, the intuitive comprehension of the predicate as one whole. It follows that the semantic relationship between the verb and its object is closer than that between the verb and its subject. If the noun *Philip* is equated with the Agent, or more precisely, if it takes this deep role and if the noun *door* plays the role of the Objective, as in *Case Grammar*, then, paraphrasing, one would say that the relationship between the verb and the two roles is by no means equal. In the intransitive sentence the only noun *Philip* is unambiguously in the deep objective case.

This less intimate relationship between the Agent and its verb is manifested in a number of agentless constructions which, on the other hand, invariably contain objectives. The constructions are either simple sentences like *Peter is sad*, *Peter sleeps*, *Peter dies*, *Peter is killed*, *Books sell well*, *The door opened*, *The book got wet*, *You run away*, or complex ones like *I want to have my hair cut*, *To write a book is not easy*, or transformed constructions like *The cleaning of the house was thorough*, in which agents are either not formed at all or deleted

and everywhere unspecified. Sentences like *I ran away* and *I rose*, which are sometimes said to contain the Agent and the Agent plus the Objective respectively, should be treated in one and the same fashion, that is, as containing one Objective as there is no conspicuous reason why they should be treated otherwise. The dispensibility of agents when compared to the indispensibility of the Objective, which can be viewed as a universal case, suggests that this fact should be reflected in the organization of a grammar. Anderson (1971 : 50) says: 'It is clear anyway that nom cf. Fillmore's objective is rather unlike the other cases... This uniqueness [of nom] is characterized... in terms of the unique status of nom as a case element that is universally present in the clause'.

On the syntactic plane the unity of the predicate is shown in the ability to construct conjoined sentences in which verbs and objectives behave as one constituent, as in Lees (1960 : XXXV):

- (4) a. The man hit the ball and saw the tree
 *b. The man hit and the boy saw the tree

The unity is also evident from:

- (5) I kicked the ball and {so did Mary }
 {Mary did too }

where *did* covers the whole of the predicate.

It is also interesting to observe that in the semantic study of Katz and Fodor (1963) the amalgamation rules assigning readings to a Phrase Marker work by proceeding from the bottom to the top of it and amalgamate first the semantic markers of verbs and objects and only then join the semantic predicate to the semantic marker of its subject³. A similar procedure, in this respect, is adopted by Weinreich (1966 : 460) in the process of joining the semantic features of verbs and objects prior to the conjunction of verb features to those of the subject. Weinreich convincingly argues that the relationship between the verb and its object, which he calls nesting, is qualitatively different in terms of the configuration of semantic features from that between the verb and its subject, which he calls linking and this distinction seems to be lost in Fillmore's framework.

The Objective of a so-called "transitive" verb and the Objective of an "intransitive" verb are both distinct from the Agent, which is, in ergative languages, marked inflectionally with a special ending. English, although it is not overtly an ergative language, may be considered as a reduced or modified type of the ergative system in the semantic sense as was demonstrated by Lyons (1968) in his *Introduction to theoretical linguistics*. Thus, the sentences in the pairs:

³ The terms *object* and *Objective* are used in the syntactic and semantic sense respectively.

- (6) a. Philip moved the stone a. Philip killed Peter
 b. The stone moved b. Peter died

can be said to contain ergative agents which are typically animate as in the vast majority of subjects in transitive sentences. In this way intransitive sentences may be viewed as basic and a transitive sentence may be derived syntactically from an intransitive sentence by means of an ergative or causative transformation (Lyons 1968 : 359). Moreover, the semantic parallel existing between intransitives and passives is clear enough to allow for certain generalizations. Reformulating the traditional way of looking upon transitive constructions one can say that a transitive construction is not one that has an object but one that has an agent.

The recognized unity of the predicate allows for the modification of views concerning the basic types of predication. With nouns in the objective case we can have the following types⁴:

- (7) a. The boy (is) sleep(ing)
 b. The boy (is) kill(ed)
 c. The boy (is) dead

These types may be considered as minimal syntactic combinations. Of these only *b* does admit of the agentive or causative interpretation and its basic form is passive in character⁵.

The relationship between passive and active sentences has almost always been dealt with in terms of the priority of active constructions. It was probably because of the greater formal complexity of the passive sentence and because the passive in English is felt as more marked than the active in all respects. The cognitive meaning of *Philip opened the door* and *The door was opened by Philip* is synonymous and the sentences may be regarded as mirror images of each other, being formally notational variants of the same proposition (cf. Leech 1969 : 252, 257). Nevertheless, the passive has been considered a derived form and all but one treatment of it in transformational terms derive it from its active counterpart, either mechanically as is done in *Syntactic Structures* or indirectly from an active-like underlying sentence containing the *by* NP dominated by the *Manner* node, as is done in *Aspects*.

It is worth noting that IC analysis must have infrequently been applied to passives as it is very difficult to spot such a case in the literature. The only one I have found is in Hockett (1958 : 151). If one conforms to the IC procedure of cutting then the result obtained in the analysis of a passive sen-

⁴ *The boy is in Warsaw* and *The boy is a student* are excluded here as not directly relevant.

⁵ This approach evidently bears a strong resemblance to that of categorial grammars.

tence is intuitively unsatisfactory and conflicts with the analysis of its active counterpart by not revealing any difference between the two⁶:

- (8) a. The door | was opened by Philip
 b. Philip | opened | the door

If, however, the analysis runs against the procedure but along with our intuition, it will look like:

- (9) The door | was opened | by Philip

In this way the two constructions can be said to exhibit mirror image properties and show consistently the agent noun as remaining outside the basic proposition of the sentences. The frequent omission of agents in passive constructions has been given various interpretations (Bolinger 1968, Svartvik 1966). One thing, however, seems clear; the Agent is frequently left unspecified because it does not constitute an argument of the basic predication in language. This fact seems to be implicitly recognized by Hasegawa (1968), whose underlying structure for both passive and active sentences is roughly of the form:

- (10) The door (be) [Philip open the door]

Moreover, the semantic and syntactic "behaviour" of the Instrumental shows it as much related to the Agent except for the usual lack of the feature animate, which is present in the latter⁷.

The significance of the relationship between the active and passive may also be considered in terms of the distribution of old and new information in the entire sentence. If we adopt the theme-rheme sentence perspective as semantically functional, then a normal, unmarked situation is when we produce an active sentence, for it is this type in which the semantic stress of novelty rests upon the predicate and especially upon the objective noun. According to Firbas "among the parts conveying new information, this hierarchy of communicative dynamism is determined by the semantic structure of the sentence; e.g., an object, expressing the goal of action, carries a higher amount of communicative dynamism than its verb" (Sgall 1967 : 223). This type of arguing can be taken as relevant in the explication of the fact why

⁶ The inadequacy of representing a derived passive structure in transformational terms is discussed in Seuren (1969: 49-50).

⁷ The examples from Russian are here significant: *Dom stroitsya rabochimi* and *Rabochie stroyat dom*. I thank Mr. S. Konderski for calling them to my attention.

active sentences are more frequent in speech. When the speaker, producing a sentence, chooses to communicate the Agent he can do this in one of the two ways:

- a) if he considers the Agent to be less important for his message than the Objective, he would place it automatically at the beginning of the sentence, thus producing an active sentence with a novelty emphasis laid on the Objective,
- b) if he considers the Agent to be more important than the Objective, he would place it in the rhematic position at the end of the sentence, thus producing a passive construction.

In this way the passive with a specified agent may be viewed as a marked sequence bringing out the normally considered less important information to the focus of attention. It is probably for this reason that the sentence *This play was written by Sheridan* is thought of as more natural and preferred to *Sheridan wrote this play*.

The above statement is contrary to the traditional viewpoint which expounded that the function of the passive was to expose the object. Why English makes extensive use of the passive is probably due to the fact that its restricted inflectional system does not allow for other word order shifts to effect the desired exposure of the Agent. The construction *It was N that...* is capable of exposing both the Agent and the Objective but this exposure involves more than a mere change in word order. The rare occurrence of agentive pronouns in the rhematic position as in e.g., *The book was written by him*, is usually explained as a semantic clash between what is normally old information and the marked rheme position in which it sometimes happens to be put.

There is one more interesting fact about passivization. Unspecified agents, when chosen, seem to favor different positions from those favored by unspecified objectives, which can be seen by comparing the following pairs:

- (11) a. Philip cooked something
b. Something was cooked by Philip

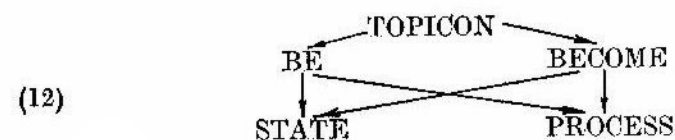
- a. Somebody cooked this fish
b. This fish was cooked by somebody

where the *b* sentences are rare, if not impossible in normal speech. We could infer that unspecified agents favor the thematic position whereas unspecified objectives favor the rhematic position. This is perhaps one more indirect indication that agents are accepted in the rheme position almost only when they are specified.

If we think of a grammar as a device which is to be a reflection of our internal grammar of the mind, thus, not only generating but also forming sen-

tences in a fashion more or less as our mind does, then the only way to show this intricate device formally, given the present state of our knowledge, would be by means of a system of semantic and (syntactic) rules for the association of ideas observed as present in the human mind, such as actions, objects, properties, relations, and the like. This set of rules has to be capable of creating realization processes of a generative character for reasons discussed elsewhere. If this approximation is correct, then the semantic sentence forming process should start both ontologically and logically with some idea, which we assume, is different from Chomsky's enigmatic symbol *S*. Without going into the problem of psychological motivation for creating a sentence, it is assumed that this idea is not a verb in its earliest form but a noun. The nouns that appear as first entities in the sentence making process will henceforth be called topic nouns (TNS), because we see them as selected by the speaker from a topicon⁸, which is a "store-house" for all nouns in a language⁹. The nouns are divided into two sections, those which are animate and those which are inanimate and this is dictated by the conviction that this distinction is universally observed in language. TNS are unmarked for roles, since they are all in the neutral objective case but they have to be specified in terms of semantic features similar to those which Fillmore (1970) considered in his *Grammar of hitting and breaking* as features of verbs (cf. also Langendoen's approach 1969: 40 - 42).

It is my humble conviction that nouns will have to be adequately described semantically in any generative grammar which claims to be an explanatory model of a language. To produce a minimal syntactic construction the grammar would require that the selected TN be matched with such a predicator, which at this stage is neither a verb nor an adjective, whose semantic features would not contradict those of the selected TN. The conceptualization of predication, instead of being given, should be considered as a "resultant" of a semantic situation in which the TN plays a decisive role. Agents are optionally selected from the 'animate' section of the topicon only in certain types of predication. Moreover, we assume the necessity of positing something like *universal* qualifiers of existence, BE and BECOME, which come into play with two operators such as STATE and PROCESS in the following way:



⁸ The idea of a topicon has been discussed in a number of works. For the most recent work see Krzozowski (1970).

⁹ It is likely that abstract nouns have to be treated somewhat differently, though no definite reasons can be adequately formulated at present.

The result is fourfold, where the plus sign means only "connected with":

- (13) a. BE + STATE
 b. BE + PROCESS
 c. BECOME + STATE
 d. BECOME + PROCESS

We can roughly describe it as a semantic pattern of prelexical predication which determines, we believe, whether a nominal is in a state or in a process, or "becomes to be" in a state or process. After the TN has been selected and a prelexical pattern has been chosen for it the semantic form of the basic predication is already decided on. Lexical insertion can be tentatively viewed as composed of two stages. In the first stage word stems functioning as predicators are added to the prelexical pattern. It is at this place where semantic collocational features can enter. Stage two would consist in lexical modifications of stems, e.g., by forming their adjectival and verbal shapes depending on the prelexical pattern as well as by later morphological adjusting of the predicators according to various rules of word formation. The derivations of semantically deviant sequences, in case the collocational restrictions are not observed, would be either blocked and excluded from further processing or let out to be marked with respect to the degree of their deviation at a subsequent stage of lexical comparability. The latter case was favored by Weinreich (1966). The case of ungrammatical but syntactically and semantically well formed sentences as e.g., **Everybody is agressed by John* can be treated in the way Krzeszowski suggested (1970 : 21), that is, by blocking their derivations at the stage of lexicalization, providing them 'however' with their semantic specifications.

The above proposition, which is less than sketchy, is meant to provide a background against which the problem of a semantic sentence forming process could be contemplated. As an illustration, let us take the commonplace example: the TN *door* and the predicator *open*. The possibilities are as follows:

- (14) a. door /BE + STATE/ open
 b. door /BE + PROCESS/ open (by, with N)
 c. door /BECOME + STATE/ open
 d. door /BECOME + PROCESS/ open (by, with N)

Of these only PROCESS marked *b* and *d* allow for verbalization, which with other stems might require adding various verbal derivational affixes like *-en*, *-ize*, etc., and it is only the PROCESS patterns which are subsequently marked with *-ed*, *-ing*, *-s*. BECOME changes into *get* optionally in *c* but obligatorily in *d*. This fact is especially interesting in view of Hasegawa's proposal concerning the treatment of passives. The *get* passive is not treated as a variant of the *be* passive since its meaning is obviously different (Hasegawa 1968 : 232),

being dynamic in character as opposed to the stative formative *be*. Again, of the strings *a-d* only *b* and *d* can take agents and/or instruments optionally, perhaps from the corresponding parts of the topicon. Thus, the above scheme develops into something like:

- (15) a. door was open
 b. door was opened (by Philip)
 c. door became/got open
 d. door got opened (by Philip)

In *a* and *c* we can also have classically intransitive verbs as in e.g., *He was dancing* and *He got dancing*. Case *c* is probably where *The door opened* would belong as it may be paraphrased into *The door became open*. Case *d*, which is perhaps more open to discussion, is found as absolutely possible even with the *by* Agent. Consider some of Hasegawa's examples (232):

- (16) 1. The mail gets delivered everyday
 2. The treasure got found by the skin divers
 3. He got seen by the police
 4. He will get killed by the snake
 5. I got forced to marry the girl by her father

and also

6. The homework won't get written by itself.

The seemingly bizarre idea of having an active transformation may be viewed as acceptable when we come to consider a semantic sentence forming process in non-linear terms. Propositions to the effect that linguistic structures can be envisaged as sets can be found in Anderson (1971 : 153), who also mentions other scholars in this respect, and Krzeszowski (1970). Although such propositions are not yet conclusive, the idea of postulating non-linear semantic structures is desirable to show "that it is after all not possible to motivate the selection of one particular underlying order" (Anderson 1971 : 154), and this is what plays a special role in the linguistic analyses of active and passive sentences. If sentence *b* from (15) were represented otherwise, that is, not as a derived or transformed structure then the need for having something like an active T rule would have to be accepted in terms of the optional selection of the Agent. That the basic predications are passive in their semantic character leads us into thinking that Fillmore's critique of Kuryłowicz and the others was perhaps a little hasty. He writes (1968 : 60): "The frequent claim that the ergative languages are more primitive than the accusative languages are..., together with the assumption that the ergative construction is really a passive construction, has led such scholars as Kuryłowicz, Schuchardt, and Uhlenbeck to assume that the passive construction represents a more primitive concept in the evolution of language than that of the active transitive construction.

Evidence mustered for this position includes the signs that pre-Indo-European was of the ergative type, and the fact that some languages have 'invented' have-like verbs in relatively recent times". He goes on to say: "It seems very unlikely to me that syntactic changes of the type known from the present state of our knowledge are really capable of showing an intellectual evolution of a type as potentially significant as whatever might be understood as the transition from an essentially passive to an essentially active point of view". We, on the other hand, would tend to support the position of the afore-mentioned scholars, which is evident from our proposition.

There is one more thing worth mentioning at this place and there are several others which have to await serious consideration as e.g., the problem of mental process verbs, the relationship between topicalization and passivization, etc. What we want to touch upon here is the fact that we can have the following sentences in Polish:

- (17) a. Polska granica na Odrze i Nysie jest uznana za ostateczną.
 b. Polska granica zachodnia na Odrze i Nysie jest uznawana przez coraz więcej państw świata.
 c. Polska granica na Odrze i Nysie zostaje uznana za jedyną możliwą granicę na Zachodzie.
 d. Polska granica na Odrze i Nysie zostaje uznawana przez coraz więcej państw świata.

The above sentences seem to exhibit the same prelexical patterns that were discussed on page 120. Because it is believed that aspect plays quite a role in the formation of the predicate, the question arises whether there is any aspectual affinity of a semantic and/or syntactic kind in the case of the English predicate types.

In summary, the following points can be brought out:

1. Fillmore's verb-center orientation is of little use for semantically based grammars.
2. The only noun which is ever present and semantically central is one in the objective case.
3. The basic types of predication are passive in character.
4. The passive should no longer be analysed as a derived structure.
5. The Agent is semantically and syntactically secondary to the Objective.

In conclusion the following can be said in favor of this orientation: However tentatively,

1. it provides some assumptions for constructing a grammar on a semantic basis along the lines proposed.

2. it hopes to allow for greater generality and uniformity of approach to sentences such as transitive, intransitive, passive, be-Adjective, and other types.

3. it provides a perspective of an automatic procedure for forming basic predications in a language.

4. it incorporates common sense logic in that predication is defined in reference to one semantically unique category, i.e., the Objective.

These sketchy observations encompass a wide range of issues which will have to be investigated in greater detail to yield a more satisfactory picture of such and similar semantic relations involved in the process of forming a semantic sentence. It is believed that further research in the field will proceed, at least in some respects, along the lines presented above¹⁰.

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¹⁰ At the time of writing (Dec. 1971) I was not aware of the publication by D. Ingram (1971), which contains similar ideas developed in terms of language acquisition.

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