ENGLISH SYNTAX: POSSIBLE FURTHER SUB-CLASSIFICATIONS OF A LARGE NUMBER OF VERBS WHICH HAVE BOTH "TRANSITIVE" AND "INTRANSITIVE" FORMS

*A practical lesson

ALICIA BEATRIZ GONZALEZ G.CANTON

SINOPSIS

Este trabajo, que se ocupa específicamente de la Sintaxis del Inglés comtemplada "a profundidad" por medio de la investigación documental, analiza algunas sub-clasificaciones del gran número de verbos de la lengua inglesa que poseen tanto la forma transitiva con intransitiva. Forma parte de un estudio encaminado a enfatizar que el conocimiento de ciertas sutilezas del idioma en cuestión es un elemento fundamental en la formación profesional de los docentes del mismo.

La "descripción del Inglés" en el nivel de estudios de posgrado en la enseñanza de esta lengua, está formada por elementos básicos de la misma como la fonética, fonología y sintaxis ; semántica, pragmática y retórica. La evolución de las diferentes teorías concernientes a la metodología de la enseñanza del inglés manifiesta una tendencia definitiva a la desaparición gradual de la gramática - al menos como tal - en los libros de texto utilizados en esta disciplina. Dicho factor agudiza la necesidad de que la capacidad de los instructores permita equilibrar esta situaciónen el salón de clase de manera positiva.

ABSTRACT

This pieceof work has focused specifically on English Syntax. Looking at at largely and "in depth" through doing intensive bibliographic research in order to analyse some of the subclassifications selected from the endless number of verbs in the English language that occur both in the transitive and the intransitive forms.

It is but of a wider study which pursues to emphasize that teachers of English have to be proficient in said language learning many of its subtle possibilities as part of their professional training.

The current "Description of English" programme at Diploma level in ELT (English Language Teaching) particularly consists of such basic elements as Phonology and Syntax - nicely blended with ELT metodology so that English grammar is take care of almost without noticing.

Traducción: Alicia González G.Cantón

This is a brief analysis of the work done by Kilby (specifically), Brown and Miller, Radford, Quirk et al., and some other experts who have carried out research on the area of Syntax where verb categorization is concerned. The existence of a large number of verbs which habe both "transitive", and "intransitive" forms provides the opportunity to look into possible further sub-classifications.

The categorization of verbs as transitive and intransitive frecuently accounts for a major part of the description of their syntactic behaviour.

For instance, dictionaries (most of them) will provide this information about a verb being transitive or intransitive, or both, but will not systematically offer any other-syntactic information. There are verbs which can be used to exemplify these categories, such as wield, contain, dislike, etc. (transitive) and emerge, vanish, elapse, etc. (intransitive) as they appear to be rather close to behaviour of the ideal type; i.e., wield is nearly totally restricted to ocurring with a following noun phase.

Nevertheless, these "prototypes" are not very typical in English where most verbs allow a rather greater range of contexts to ocurrence. It is here that the limitations of categorization into transitive and intransitive can be detected; there are many different ways in which the transitive and intransitive uses of a verb can correspond to each other. It is in this area that the "demarcation" between dictionaries and grammars become troublesome" (Kilby, 1984/5:37-54). It seems to be necessary to produce some more refined classifications of transitivity properties so that they can be used in dictionaries. The solution could perhaps be to attempt to provide each different type of transitive or intransitive use of verbs a sort of general characterization, pursuing that they grammatical behaviour follows that meaning.

In order to give some idea of the range of grammatical behavoiur in this area, Kilby distinguishes several classes of verbs:

(i) so-called "ergative" verbs (a term borrowed from a rather exotic grammatical construction which is observed in many languages of the world) which occur both transitively and intransitively, the subject of the intransitive being the same as the object of the transitive, e.g. verbs like: disperse, melt, roll, break, open, turn, etc., i.e.,
1a) John opened the door (t)
2b) The door opened (i)

There is yet anothe distinction some grammarians (according to Kilby) found within this class, a set of verbs such as: walk, gallop, run, etc., where the intransitive verb involves volitional activity; e.g.:
2a) The soldiers marched over the cliff
2b) The general marched his soldiers over the cliff

(ii) "pseudo-intransitive" (PI) or "derived intransitive" verbs which are rather like ergative verbs. Only their intransitive uses are more restricted by comparison- E.G. polish, wash, read, etc.:
3a) I read Cook's new book
3b) Cook's new book reads like thriller

Referring to the above, Kilby avers that the similarity between ergative and PI goes rather far, as it seems that for every intransitive use of an ergative verb, there is another use which appears to be indistinguishable from a PI sentence: e.g.
4a) Suddenly the window broke (ergative)
4b) Be careful, that that window breaks easily (PI?)

It seems there are three major criteria by which to distinguish ergative and PI sentences:

1) The semantic criterion that sentence such as the former (4a) refers to a specific event, where as the latter (4b) is generic in the sense that it refers to the propensity of the window to break, rather than to any event that has happened or which is projected.
2) Another semantic criterion is that PI sentences do not make sense unless the possible activity of an agent is envisaged, while the intransitive use of ergative verbs involves no suggestion of any agent being at a work. Example 4a, reports that the window broke, but it makes no reference to what may have caused the breakage.

By contrast, example 4b, is not compatible with an interpretation that the window is liable to break spontaneously.only that the external force required to break it is not substantial. The third difference between these uses is that the PI sentence typically involves some adverbial determination of the verb; Typical examples of this are: easily, well, negation and phrases that begin with LIKE:

> 5a) this material washes well
> 5b) the door won't shut
> 5c) Americans cars handle like oil tankers

Although kilby is aware that the boundaries between ergative and PI are not clear enough, he states that it is a rather commonplace observation that PI sentences can be formed by ACTION verbs only. So we cannot say:

* Mary dislikes all too easily. However, it would or appears to be too hard to interpret the said sentence, as indicating some general characteristic of the subject. Notwithstanding this, not all ACTION verbs allow the formation of PI sentences; e.g. * My savings won't withdraw (not possible).

Returning to Kilby's descrption of the different classes of verbs, we have:

(iii) "object-deleting" verbs, which occur both transively and intransitively while retaining the same subject. E.g. read, write, eat, walk, swallow, etc.,
> 6a) an old lady swallowed a fly
> 6b) The old lady swallowed hard

Object- deleting and ergative verbs share the general property that they both have transitive and intransitive uses, in addition to their use being heavily dependent on the lexical properties of the verbs themselves, more so than on contextual factors. Looking at Lilby's list of some of the verbs which are either ergatives, object deleting or neither of those (see Appendix 1) it is possible to observe the following:

a) the ergative verbs are without exception verbs of change of physical or mental state or location. Only a smallish proportion of the object-deleting verbs (cut, clean and build are all clear cases) are of this semantic class. If you cook something, for instance, it changes to a cooked state; whereas if you accept, answer or forget something, that thing is not automatically changed thereby.

b) In Table 2 (see Appendix 2), change, move, turn, walk are all in the 1000 most frequent words in English. None of the other list is in that class, and therefore we might suggest that ergative behaviour is contingent on "familiarity" as well as on semantic factors.

c) If we contrast a verb such as "cut" with one like "break", we can see that "cut" is associated both with a characteristic action and with a characteristic result, and not at all with action. For similar reasons, verbs like "cut" and "build" are not ergative: although they express a change of physical state, they also express a characteristic action performed by some agent, while ergative verbs do not presuppose any agent at all.

(iv) verbs – for which (according to Kilby) there is not accepted name where the transitive object is changed in some way (usually specified in a

prepositional phrase) by the (intransitive) action performed by the subject:
7a) his boss shouted (at Bill)
7b) his boss shouted Bill out of the door

(v) there is also substantial number of modifications which appear relatively idiosyncratic to individual verbs or constructions, but which affect the apparent transitivy of sentences. E.g.:
8a) the poor man squirmed
8b) the poor man squirmed his way out of the room

(vi) and (vii) finally there are verbs which may only be used intransitively respectively – the "pure" ones. There are comparatively few of these among the more frequent English verbs.

Kilby appears to consider that some of the mentiones categories are a matter of degree rather than simple yes/no features. He asserts that part of the difficulty with constructions of this type is that the notion of transivity is commonly defined in terms of the notion "direct object" (DO) which in turn is not at all transparent in its usage.

Brown and Miller (1980/1985: 50-59) distinguish the following "classes" of verbs which can be considered as further sub-classifications of the transitive and intransitive forms:

1) "Di-transitive verbs", e.g. John gaves Mary the book. They are called di-transitive since they are typically followed by two NPs, and most verbs in this class have to be followed by two NPs; sentences of the form "John gaves Mary book" have corresponding sentences where the two NPs are reversed in order and a prepositio (typically "to") is introduced: John gave the book to Mary (they usually have two objects indirect and direct object). They also have their corresponding sentences like those containing transitive verbs:
9a) Mary was given the book by John
9b) The book was given to Mary by John

2) "Intransitive locative" verbs: most verbs of this class require to be followed by a PP:
10a) The lamp stood on the table * The lamp stood (not possible).
10b) The gun leant against the wall * The gun leant (not possible)
The PP indicates a location. Other intransitive locative verbs are: hang, sit, slump.

3) These are the "transitive locative" verbs: e.g. John stood the lamp on the table. Frequently, as it appears in the example given these verbs correspond to the verb found as "intransitive locative" verbs, except for the object NP inmediately following the verb. These verbs resemble transitive verbs in that there are corresponding sentences like: The gun was leant against the wall by Mary. They differ from simple transitive verbs in that, typically, they require to be followed by a PP as well as an NP, i.e. *John stood the lamp (not possible).

These verbs differ from "di-tansitive" verbs in that they cannot be followed by two NPs: e.g. John stood the lamp on the table but * John stood the table the lamp (not possible). Other transitive locative verbs are: put, lay, hang.

Each of the three different verb classes we have looked at (as described by Brown and Miller), can be distinguished in terms of the enviorments in which the members of the class can occur, and in terms of he sentences that can be related to a sentence containing a verb from a particular class. Only some of them have been illustrated here. Brown and Miller account for those different verb classes as: 1) "inherent subcategorizations", i.e., STAND v; -(NP) PP since they describe the form class to which a particular item belongs which seems to be an inherent property of the item itself. 2) The representation – (NP) PP, indicates that STAND most occur with a following PP, and may, optionally, occur with an immediately following NP. This is equivalent to say that STAND is either an intransitive locative, or a transitive locative verb, since

these two environments define these verb classes. The authors call these characterizations "Strict subcategorization". This always refers only to the syntactic environment relevant to the subcategorization of the item in question which means other constituents of the VP.

According to Radford (1981/1986:119-142) those verbs in English (traditionally called transitive verbs) can be inserted into a VP which coantains an NP following the verb concerned whereas others (traditionally referred to as intransitive verbs) cannot.

Verbs are subcategorized with respect to Verb Phrases they occur in; Grammar comprises a set of Categorial Sentence – Formation Rules, a Lexicon Insertion Rule and Lexicon. Among the syntactic information which a lexical entry provides for a given item is its subcategorization frame, specifying the range of sister constituents which the item takes. The Lexicon also comprises "redundancy rules" of various types 8including Subcategorization and Word-Formation Rules) and Restructuring Rules. The essential principle of subcategorization is that items are subcategorized with respect to any idiosincraty (i.e. not predictable from some general rule or principle) complements which they do or do not permit. We are referring (in this case) to the problem of subcategorizing Verbs with respect to the types of Verb Phrases they occur in e.g. both "eat" and "devour" seem to have roughly the same meaning but the former can be inserted in a VP which lacks any NP whereas the latter cannot: John ate/devoured the steak greedily.

I haven't eaten/ * devoured yet (not possible).

This kind of idiosincratyc information which will have to be included in the "Lexical Entry" (=dictionary specification) for each individual verb. ("eat" can be used either transitivaly or intransitivaely). Matthews (1981/2) analyses the different classes of verbs and their further sub-classifications considering that there are general and universal categories according to how

grammarians refer to classes or constructions peculiar to a particular language or to a particular range of languages. He posits that some of the categories are such that every language can be expected to display them, and these categories form a system of "linguistic universals".

Since Verb is an essential element of the Predicate, we will mention Mattews' assertions on Predicates; he describes three types of predicates: in the first the verb has an object S --- NP + Predicate phrase (this construction is then described as transitive); in the second type, the verb is a copula accompanied by a noun or adjective; the third type of predicate may again refer to an action; but there is no goal to which it is directed. In this case the construction is described as intransitive. Matthews concludes that there cannot be an object without a verb, thus an objects are treated as depending on the verb; therefore, in a dependency analysis, transitive and intrasitive are special cases of a general schema.

Quirk et al., (1972/1980:30-39) refer to the subclassification of verb through the analysis of the different types of complementation. They describe the categories of verb considering their closeness to the various types of object and complement. E.g.
The girl is now a student (Cs) –subject Complement- at a large university.
His brother grew happier (Cs) –subject Complement- gradually.

These two sentences which have subject complements have intensive verb.

The following sentences have intensive verbs.

John carefully checked the room (Od) Direct Object-
He had given the girl an apple (Oi) Indirect Object-
They made him happier (Cs) – Subject Complement-

The latter two are intransitive if as in It rained steadily all day; and they do not permit any of the four object

and complement types so far distinguishes (Od, Oi, Co, Cs).

Extensive verbs are otherwise transitive, when these (in addition to their direct object) permit an indirect object, they are called (as stated by Brown and Miller –page 4 of this paper) "di-transitive". The few verbs that take an object complement, i.e. "They make him the chairman (Co) every year", are referres to as complex-transitive. Curiously enough, the verb "make" allows three possibilities:

She made a cake (transitive)
She made him a cake (di-transitive)
She made him a hero (complex-transitive)

The authors also exemplify the four main types of complementation, i.e.,

a) Intensive: John is only a boy
b) Monotransitive: He gave a big fish yesterday
c) Di-transitive: She called him a hero (op. Cit.: 820)

Quirk et al., ellaborate a bit more on the subject, this time at the light of "conversion". They mention some cases when a direct object or object complement in one of the "clause patterns" (op. Cit.: 334) may be considered optional. E.g.

He's eating –cf. He´s eating an apple (type SVO)
He made her career – cf. He made her career a success (Type SVOC)

Though many grammarians (according to Quick et al. treat such cases as the first above in terms of the "omission or deletion of the object" with a transitive verb. However, Quick et al., regard this as a case of "conversion"* whereby a word such as "eat" is transferred from the transitive to the intransitive category. Thus "he's eating" is an instance of clause type SV rather than a SVO (with optional deletion of the object). These writers justify treating object-omission as a matter of conversion, positing that it is

idiosincratyc, in the sense that applies to some transitive verbs but not to others. E.g.

They are hunting her –they are hunting but ther are chasing cats- * they are chasing (not possible).

*Conversion in the English language is usually prominent as a word – formation process, through both the variety of conversion rules and their procutiveness. Conversion is a term used to refer to the DERIVATIONAL process whereby an item comes to belog to a new class without the addition of an affix.

Conversions from one category to another are mentioned 8op.ct.: 105-17) by these autors (verb to noun, noun to verb, adjetive to verb, etc.) while stating that the notion of conversion may be extended to changes of secondary word – class: verbs, within the same major word category, i.e., exemplifying similar categories that exist for verbs:

a) Intransitive to Transitive
   "cause to V" RUN THE WATER ("cause the water to run")

b) Transitive to Intransitive
   i) "can be V-ed2" THE CLOCK WINDS UP AT THE BACK ("can be wound uo")
   ii) "to V oneself" HAVE WASHED YET? ("washed yourself")
   iii) "to V someone/something/etc. WE HAVE

c) Intransitive to Intensive
   i) CURRENT MEANING (Existing attribute of the subject) –Stative verbs – He lay flat
   ii) RESULTING MEANING (Resulting attribute for event described by the verb) – with dynamic verbs – He fell flat

d) Intensive to Intransitive

WHAT MUST BE, MUST ("exist")

e) Monotransitive to Complex-Transitive
   i) CURRENT MEANING
      We catch them young ("...when they are young")
   ii) RESULTIN MEANING
      I wiped it clean ("made it clean by wiping it")
      Note reflexive objects: I laughed myself silly, etc.

The one thing which appears to be consistent throughout the analyses of all of the mentiones writers, is that there is no precise demarcation between the transitive and intransitive forms of verb, existing various exceptions to most of the rules that in turn attempt to establish the differences between the sub-clasifications. Thus, I may as well adopt Huddleston's view (1984/86:19-2= on the subject. He tends to regard it as peculiarity of English that a great many verbs occur in both transitive make a sharper division within the lexicon between these verb forms. Therefore, he chooses to refer to them as "transitive and intransitive uses of verbs".

* [Most of the above examples together with explanations are suggested to be included as part of either programmes for advanced students or teacher trainess].

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