

PROBLEMS IN DEFINING A PROTOTYPICAL TRANSITIVE SENTENCE TYPOLOGICALLY

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ABSTRACT

This paper is trying to show that the concept of the prototypical transitive sentence is very useful in the study of transitivity, but is as such not so unproblematic as has often been assumed. This is achieved by presenting examples from different languages that show the weaknesses of the “traditional” prototype. The prototype proposed here remains, however, a tentative one, because there are so many properties that cannot be described typologically because of their language-specific nature.

1. INTRODUCTION

Transitivity has been defined in many different ways during the history of linguistics. Traditionally transitivity was understood to be a semantic phenomenon: Transitive sentences were sentences which describe events that involve a transfer of energy from subject to object (e.g. ‘he killed the man’). Structurally these are mostly sentences with a grammatical subject and a direct (accusative) object (at least in the languages that were the targets of description). In the golden era of formal grammars transitivity became a purely formal concept: Verbs (or more rarely sentences) with a direct object were classified as transitive and those without one as intransitive without taking their semantics into account (see e.g. Jacobsen 1985:89 [4]). Formal definitions very rarely allow any intermediate forms, i.e. every transitive sentence is equally prototypical (because there are no adequate criteria by means of which the prototypicality could be measured). Therefore, the concept of a *prototypical* transitive sentence is irrelevant in the formal descriptions. Lately, because of the growing interest in “exotic” languages this purely structural definition (that was mainly based on English or other Indo-European languages) has become insufficient. It is, for example, not capable of describing transitivity in languages in which subject and object cannot be defined so easily as in the Indo-European languages. As a result of this, a new kind of “typological” definition (which is more or less directly based on the traditional semantic definitions) has been developed. This definition is a kind of combination of the two previously presented ones: It defines the prototypical transitive sentence as one which describes a semantically highly transitive event. This definition has the advantage that it does not restrict the structure of the prototypical transitive sentence to some specific structure, which is the case in the formal definitions. It is, as such, however, not so suitable for describing transitivity as one might assume, but it has to be made more accurate. In this paper I present some issues (some of which are very basic in nature (and may even seem naive), but should in any case be explicitly mentioned in a valid definition) that one has to take into account when defining a prototypical transitive sentence. The goal of this paper is to propose a new (specified) prototype that could possibly be more suitable for typological studies. I hope to be able to show that the presented prototype is not so unproblematic as has often been assumed.

2. DEFINING AND SOLVING THE PROBLEMS

Before attempting a typological description we must first answer the question what we mean by defining something typologically. This is crucial because of the numerous different ways in which this question has been

answered. In this paper a typological definition is simply the most structure-neutral and simultaneously broadest definition possible. One might further ask why we need one single prototype for a specific construction type. This is best answered by referring to the continuum-like nature of transitivity: The description of different alternations is a vital part of transitivity. Therefore any typologically valid definition of a prototypical transitive sentence should enable us to describe not only the structure of this basic sentence itself but also as many deviations from it as possible which can most easily be achieved by comparing different sentences to the prototype (cf. Shibatani 1985:837 [10]). Without this prototype the comparison between sentences would be much more difficult. The prototype must not, however, be too loosely defined if it is to achieve this goal: If the proposed prototype in itself includes all the possible deviations, they can no longer be described as such. Because of this, certain deviations should be excluded from the prototype by explicitly mentioning them in its description.

A prototypical transitive event has traditionally been defined as a dynamic, concrete event where a volitionally acting agent acts on a patient that is directly and in a perceptually salient way affected as a result of this event (see e.g. Hopper & Thompson 1980:251 [3], Lazard 1998:236 [7]). As already mentioned, some authors base their definitions of a prototypical transitive sentence on this semantic description (see for example Lakoff 1977:244 [5], Lazard 1989:319 [6]): A prototypical transitive (two-actant) *sentence* (or structure) describes a prototypical transitive *event* (with two participants). This kind of definition treats the semantic transitivity of sentences independently of their morpho-syntactic structure. Accordingly, any structure that describes a prototypical (transitive) event should be classified as equally transitive. (Some authors (see e.g. Testelec 1998:29 [11]) regard even nominalisations of transitive sentences as transitive, but they are excluded here because of their static nature.) This is simultaneously both the strength and the weakness of this description. Firstly, because of its non-restrictive nature, this semantic-based definition makes it possible to describe transitivity in all the languages (despite their structural differences). Secondly, however, this can lead to serious problems: If we define every linguistic structure that describes a prototypical transitive event as prototypically transitive, we cannot, for example, make the necessary difference between active and (anti)passive clauses (which also describe *semantically* transitive events).

The first and perhaps the biggest problem one faces when defining a prototypical transitive sentence in the way described above, is to decide which (kind of) activity or event should be considered as the most transitive one. All events in which there is no agent or affected patient are, of course, automatically excluded from this discussion. It is very difficult to describe the most transitive event exhaustively, because transitivity consists of so many different aspects. The selected prototype should, in any case, be one with as many highly transitive parameters (including at least the affectedness of the patient and some degree of agentivity) as possible (see for example Lakoff 1977:244 [5] and Hopper and Thompson 1980:252 [3]). Firstly, this kind of event is the most likely one to be encoded transitively in all the languages. And second, this kind of prototype makes the best comparison between prototypical and less prototypical cases possible, because it can describe the biggest possible number of different deviations from the prototype (if there is only one such parameter, only one deviation can be adequately described). The semantic definition proposed above does not, however, always enable us to separate prototypical cases from the less prototypical ones. This problem is especially acute in languages in which highly transitive events can be encoded in more than one way (at the level of basic sentences). This is the case for example in Finnish (see also Tsunoda 1985:387 [12]):

- | | | | |
|-----|-----------------------|-----------|----------|
| (1) | hän | tappo-i | miehe-n |
| | s/he.NOM | kill-PAST | man-ACC |
| | “S/he killed the man” | | |
| (2) | hän | lö-i | mies-tä |
| | s/he.NOM | hit-PAST | man-PART |
| | “S/he hit the man” | | |

In cases like this it can be very difficult to choose a single prototype. We can, however, in some cases justify our decision with evidence from other sentence types; for example, in Finnish the sentence pattern used in the example (1) is more likely to be a prototypical transitive one, because it is used when the patient is seen as totally affected (3), whereas the partitive case (4) correlates with partial affectedness, e.g.:

- (3) hän jo-i maido-n
s/he.NOM drink-PAST milk-ACC
“S/he drank (all) the milk”
- (4) hän jo-i maito-a
s/he.NOM drink-PAST milk-PART
“S/he drank (some) milk”

Even if we could define the most transitive event exhaustively, the definition as such is, however, not satisfactory. The first restriction one has to make is to explicitly restrain the concept of prototypical transitive sentences to cases where the agent and the patient clearly have distinct non-linguistic referents that bear a single semantic role. This criterion distinguishes reflexive and reciprocal sentences from the prototypical transitive ones. The *activity* described by these sentence types is identical to that described by prototypical transitive sentences (at least in prototypical cases such as ‘killing’ and ‘washing’). This is also partly reflected in the similar (but not identical) kind of marking of these event types in many languages, e.g. English, German and Finnish. As a result of this, a prototypical transitive sentence cannot be based on some particular activity type, but it must refer to a transitive *event* (with two distinct participants).

The definition of the prototypical transitive sentence must further consider the tense, aspect and mood of sentences. They (with the possible exception of aspect) do not change the *inherent* semantic transitivity of events either (this means, for example, that the the action of killing affects the patient in an identical manner when the action is actually carried out). They can, however, affect the overall transitivity of sentences and can change their transitive marking accordingly. The most transitive sentence in this respect is one in past tense, perfective aspect and indicative mood (for example ‘you have built the house’). Any deviation from this can lead to a reduced transitivity of the sentence. Aspect is of the utmost importance, because in a strict sense only events that are completed successfully, can adequately be classified as transitive, cf. Djaru (Lazard 1998:183 [7]):

- (5) ngatyu-ngku nga-nra-ø ngumpirr-ø pat-man-i
I-ERG AUX-1SG-3SGII woman-ABS touch-do-PAST
“I touched the woman” (action completed)
- (6) ngatyu-ngku nga-rna-la ngumpirr-la pat-man-i
I-ERG AUX-1SGI-3SGIII woman-DAT touch-do-PAST
“I tried to touch the woman” (action attempted)

In this case the relation between semantic and morpho-syntactic transitivity is very iconic in that an alternation in the semantic transitivity is directly reflected in the marking of the sentence. Hence, based on both semantics and structure, only the first of these sentences can be regarded as a prototypical transitive one.

In addition to semantic phases of transitivity, an adequate definition of a prototypical transitive sentence also has to take various pragmatic aspects into account. As for semantics, the alternations in semantic and morpho-syntactic transitivity are more or less iconic, as a result of which it is, in principle, fairly easy to decide which sentence we consider as the more transitive one when choosing between two. Pragmatically motivated alternations differ crucially from the semantic ones in this respect, because they only change the morpho-syntactic marking of sentences without affecting their semantic transitivity in any considerable way. This makes the relation between semantic and morphosyntactic transitivity much more indirect than it is in the prototypical case which leads to problems as for the prototype of a transitive sentence. For example, a very low topicality or definiteness of either core argument (agent or patient) can lead to the use of some pragmatically marked (often morphosyntactically less transitive) construction (for example passive or antipassive). These pragmatically altered sentences describe semantically highly transitive events, but they should not be (and never are) regarded as prototypical transitive sentences because of their “intransitive” morphosyntactic structure (or, if they are, active sentences should be classified as deviations). They cannot be excluded from the description of a prototypical transitive sentence if it is based solely on semantic criteria. Hence, the pragmatic status of the arguments must explicitly be taken into account in any serious description: Only events in which there clearly is a definite referential agent and a definite referential patient can serve as the basis for a prototypical transitive sentence. For example, in West Greenlandic (Manning 1996:82 [8]) only the sentence (7) can possibly be

classified as the prototypical transitive sentence of the language, even if both of the following examples describe a semantically highly transitive event:

- (7) hansi-p inuit tuqup-paa
 Hansi-ERG people.ABS kill-IND.3SG.3SG
 “Hansi killed the people”
- (8) hansi inun-nik tuqut-si-vuq
 Hansi.ABS people-MOD kill-ANTIP-IND.3SG
 “Hansi killed people”

The relevance of the pragmatic aspects of transitivity is also manifested in the existence of many pragmatically oriented transitivity definitions (see e.g. Hopper and Thompson 1980:294 [3]). These kinds of definition are based on the fact that the transitive marking of sentences often correlates with important and pragmatically relevant information.

In addition to the properties discussed so far, the sentence chosen as the prototypical transitive one must be a syntactically independent, single sentence that describes a single independent event. This follows from the fact that in some languages subordinate clauses or clauses that describe events that are somehow caused by other events are marked differently from prototypical transitive ones, cf. e.g., Turkish (Blake 1994:88 [1]):

- (9) müdür mektub-u imzala-di
 director.NOM letter-ACC sign-PAST
 “The director signed the letter”
- (10) Ali mektub-u müdür-e imzala-t-ti
 Ali.NOM letter-ACC director-DAT sign-CAUS-PAST
 “Ali got the director to sign the letter”

3. CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER PROBLEMS

Based on the reasons briefly presented above, the prototypical transitive sentence of any language is best described as an independent sentence that describes a single, concrete and dynamic event where a volitionally acting definite and referential agent acts on a definite and referential patient that is not co-referential with the agent and that is directly affected by the action. Furthermore, this event must have taken place or must take place in the very near future and has to be completed successfully. This kind of definition clearly has the advantage that it does not restrict transitivity to any specific sentence type: Any structure that describes an event that corresponds to the prototype described above, can adequately be classified as transitive despite its morpho-syntax. The restrictions presented in the previous chapter must, however, be taken into account.

The definition I have proposed in this paper does not cover all the possible phenomena and does not always enable us to choose only one sentence (type) to present the prototypical transitive sentence of the language in question. There are some properties that cannot be adequately described typologically because of their highly language-specific nature. Such are, for example, different kinds of split marking in some languages (for a more detailed presentation, see e.g. Dixon 1994:70ff [2]). These splits can be more or less motivated with respect to transitivity. Perhaps the most motivated (and therefore least problematic as for the description of the prototype) are the splits that result from the semantic nature of the verb, e.g., Georgian (Palmer 1994:79 [9]):

- (11) glex-ma datesa simind-i
 peasant-AGT sow-3SUBJ.3DO.AOR corn-PAT
 “The peasant sowed the corn”
- (12) čems megobar-s gasayeb-i dakraga
 my friend-DAT key-PAT lose.3SUBJ.3IO.AOR
 “My friend lost his key”

In this case it is fairly safe to state that the sentence (11) is a more prototypical transitive sentence than the sentence (12) because of the low semantic transitivity of the latter example.

Other (more problematic) kinds of split (or differential marking) include ones that are due to the person, individuation or animacy of the participants. For example, in some (ergative) languages only the third person pronouns are marked using the ergative-absolutive pattern, whereas first and second person pronouns follow the nominative-accusative pattern (this means that animate patients are marked accusatively and third person agents ergatively). In others, only animate or highly definite inanimate patients are marked (either in the verb (Suahili) or in the marking of the object (Persian)). A differential marking can also be due to common knowledge about the world; either participant has to be marked only if its role is not the one we expect, e.g. Fore (Blake 1994:123 [1]):

- (13) yagaa wá aegúye
 pig man.NOM 3SG.hit.3SG
 “The man kills the pig”
- (14) yagaa-wama wá aegúye
 pig-ERG man.NOM 3SG.hit.3SG
 “The pig kills the man”

In some languages different splits lead to a situation where the same event is realised differently at the level of morpho-syntax depending on the nature of the participants and/or their roles. In cases like this it is very difficult or even impossible to decide which sentence should be labeled as the prototypical transitive one. This is especially difficult in languages in which animate participants are encoded differently according to whether they represent speech act participants or not; for example, how can we meaningfully argue for the higher transitivity of the event 'I killed him' in comparison with the event 'the woman killed the man' or vice versa? In cases like these the decision on the prototypical transitive sentence always requires a thorough language-specific analysis, which is a matter of future research.

4. ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Absolutive case	IND	Indicative mood
ACC	Accusative case	IO	Indirect object
AGT	Agent(ive)	MOD	Modalis case
ANTIP	Antipassive	NOM	Nominative case
AOR	Aorist	PART	Partitive case
AUX	Auxiliary	PAST	Past tense
CAUS	Causative	PAT	Patient(ive)
DAT	Dative case	SG	Singular
DO	Direct object	SUBJ	Subject
ERG	Ergative case		

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