

PRAGMATIC INFORMATION IN SENTENCE STRUCTURE

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to underline the need for a functional approach to the study of grammar. I will try to prove that in certain constructions pragmatic rules play a more important role than grammatical rules. To prove this hypothesis I will go through some productive patterns which though they seem to be very well regularised by the grammar are highly based on extralinguistic information.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Consider the examples under (1). There are no syntactic or semantic clues that would lead us to interpret alive as resultative in (1a) and depictive in (1b). This inference comes from our cultural background. Thus (1a) would not necessarily be interpreted as a resultative unless we have *The Sleeping Beauty* or a similar fairy tale in mind, and a depictive construction like (1b) makes perfect sense if we are talking about the Inquisition or similar criminal activities.

- (1) a. He kissed her alive.
- b. He burnt her alive.

In the sentences under (2) we find the phenomenon usually discussed under the rubric "fake reflexives" or "fake objects" (this term was introduced by Simpson (1983)). These objects bear no semantic relation to their verbs.

- (2) a. He slept himself sober.
 b. She talked herself hoarse.
 c. I laughed myself sick.

A variety of syntactic and semantic arguments has led researchers to conclude that fake objects are not arguments of their verbs, but that they rather have an adjunct status. Goldberg (1995) in her construction grammar approach argues against this view by proposing that this resultative pattern is associated with a particular argument structure configuration and is, thus, independent of the verbs which instantiate it. The different idiosyncratic properties of this construction have also been analysed (Green, 1972). Yet I think that an important factor of these structures has been overlooked: the fact that they are, to a certain extent, governed by pragmatic rules.

I will try to prove that the decodification of these patterns relies mainly on the extralinguistic context. If the process they name is neither prototypical nor well defined, the use of this condensed construction will not work since the cost of decodification would be too high for the listener and would thus break the relevant rule stated by Sperber and Wilson (1986) in their theory of communication.

2. RESULTING CONSTRUCTIONS

Consider another fake object like the one in (3). A resultative like (3) would have no sense to people who are not familiar with the process of childbirth.

- (3) They breathed their labor pains away.

We find a very limited use of grammar in these structures, so to get the message we have to rely on extralinguistic data. Otherwise the sentence makes no sense. We fuse different non necessarily related notions in one structure, (*breathe* + *pain*); the object has nothing to do with its verb. We only get the message clearly if we are familiar with childbirth and we know that deep breaths between contractions help relax the muscles to diminish thus the pain. This construction clearly relies on pragmatic information. If we are not familiar with the situation we will not get the message. Thus a very familiar situation like the one that involves a baby crying till falling asleep crystallises into the resultative pattern (4). However, sentence (5) which describes a non prototypical situation is potentially possible only if the extralinguistic context is very clear.

- (4) She cried herself asleep/to sleep.
 (5) She cried herself sober.

Therefore, we cannot claim that we are facing lexicalised patterns or that the collocation restrictions of this construction are arbitrary; they are clearly motivated by the extralinguistic situation.

We may explain the interpretation of these structures by applying Sperber and Wilson's theory of communication, known as *Relevance Theory*:

« The Principle of Relevance: Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own relevance » (Sperber and Wilson, 1986).

« a. Other things being equal, the greater the cognitive effect achieved by the processing of a given piece of information, the greater its relevance for the individual who processes it.

b. Other things being equal, the greater the effort involved in the processing of a given piece of information, the smaller its relevance for the individual who processes it ».
(Wilson and Sperber 1988)

With the resultative pattern we find a great cognitive effect in a quite short string. The effort employed in processing it is small when the sentence is uttered in a well defined context, if this is not so, then the effort in processing it would be too high to make it relevant, and the speaker would have to make use of a longer string, subordination, or other grammatical devices.

Other transitive verbs which appear with a noun phrase not subcategorised by the verb involve what Quirk, et al. (1985: 852) call "formulae used for stereotyped communication situations": typically greetings (good morning, hello..) farewells (good bye, good night...) reaction signals (yes, no..) thanks, etc. In examples like He kissed his girlfriend goodnight; He shook his head no, She smiled her thanks, etc.

Some grammarians claim that these structures are stereotyped. The grammar of these constructions is not stereotyped what is stereotyped is the situation they name (the habit of kissing someone to say good-bye, etc.), which favours the use of a grammatically unmarked construction. Hence, speaker and listener being both very familiar with the situation may rely on a very brief construction. Thus, other less prototypical situations are allowed in a specific context:

- (6) The doctor gravely nodded approval. (Brown: G51 7)
- (7) Uncle Donald Murkland found himself nodding agreement too. (Brown: P17 106)
- (8) [...] the stranger stood up and nodded farewell. (Brown: L23 65)
- (9) In or out, should I kiss her goodnight? (Brown: K29 42)
- (10) They were kissing their hellos. (song by Susan Vega)
- (11) She touches him good-bye. (song by Susan Vega)

3. MIDDLE CONSTRUCTIONS

The middle construction is another syntactic phenomenon which has been focused on by researchers in different languages and in different theoretical frames. One of the general assumptions about it is that the unexpressed agent of this pattern receives a generic interpretation. Thus Fellbaum (1985: 21), Goldberg (1995: 183), Levin (1982) and Fagan (1988), among others, claim that it is not a specific or definite one, and they interpret this agent as "people, in general" or "one". Thus, a sentence like (12) would have the interpretation under (13).

- (12) This book reads easily (Fagan, 1988: 196 (61a))
- (13) People, in general, can read this book easily (Fagan, 1988: 196 (62))

It seems to me that the agent banned from this structure is not always interpreted as an arbitrary agent as it has been stated. On the contrary, in many cases it is a very specific one and perhaps even definite, though its definiteness derives from the extralinguistic context. This is very much so in ads where these structures are specially productive and where it would be absurd to claim that there is no specific addressee. The potential consumer of a specific product is always limited and even specific.

So if we are trying to sell prams, we will make an ad clearly directed to a collective group of parents with babies no to "people" in general. Therefore a sentence like (14a) placed in a commercial context would not have the reading under (14b). Likewise, if we are trying to sell a Mercedes (15) it is also evident that the intended driver will not be a homeless, a student or a cashier, but rather a wealthy person. So again we find a restriction to that genericness given to the agent. It is also evident that the agent of sentence (16) is no "people in general" or "one",

(14a) That pram pushes easily. (Dixon 1991: 329)

(14b) !People, in general, push that pram easily.

(15a) This new Mercedes handles beyond your expectations.

(15b) !People, in general, handle this new Mercedes beyond their expectations.

(16a) This dog food cuts and chews like meat. (Fellbaum, 1986: 10 (60))

(16b) !Dogs, in general, cut and chew this food like meat.

Outside the commercial context, we also find specific situations where the agent is also restricted to a specific class of humans. At least I cannot imagine myself as being the potential agent of any of the processes under (17)

(17a) That sermon, from the old book I found, preaches well. (Dixon 1991: 330)

(18b) Shakespeare translates well into Greek. (Dixon 1991: 334)

Notice how odd would they sound with a subject like "people, in general":

(17b) !People, in general, preach that sermon well.

(18b) !People, in general, translate Shakespeare well into Greek.

Hendrikse (1989) comes to the conclusion that middles, even though they appear to contain ordinary verbs, work semantically as complements of a predicative construction like predicative adjectives and nominals, so they are not related to other syntactic structures by formal devices, they are rather options in cognitive and pragmatic schemas. This leads the researcher to the claim that syntactic structures should be construed as pragmatic options.

By claiming that middles work semantically like copular constructions Hendrikse emphasises one of the main properties of middles: that they focus on an inherent property of the grammatical subject resembling thus generic statements like the following:

(18) China breaks easily.

(19) Oil floats on water.

If we relate (18) to (20), apart from changing the orientation of the adverb, we change the time properties of the sentence from a timeless situation to an habitual event.

(20) People, in general, break china easily.

So (18) should be better interpreted, as Hendrikse assumes, as a copular pattern, therefore no agent is implied. But not all middles express a stative situation and cannot, therefore, receive a copular interpretation.

(21a) Do you think that this material will make up into a nice-looking dress? (Dixon 1991: 326)

(21b) !Do you think that people, in general, will make this material up into a nice-looking dress?

In this sentence we get the idea of a specific material which will be made up into a specific type of dress in a future time. So instead of a copular interpretation we interpret it as a specific event, the only variable being the person who will perform it, which is unknown but not "people in general". Since we are talking about one specific piece of material it will be logical to assume also one unknown but specific agent, who will probably be clear for both speaker and listener in a real communicative situation.

So, the interpretation of the agent in middle constructions is not determined by the grammar but rather by the pragmatic principles of utterance interpretation as Haegeman (1987: 247) proposes for the interpretation of objects.

Other syntactic and semantic features generally attributed to the middle construction which may be absent in specific contexts are the stative interpretation and the presence of what has been called a "facility adverb". For example, Fagan (1988) cites two English examples which violate those two properties of middles: stative interpretation (22) and the presence of a modifier (23). Both examples show utterances restricted to very specific contexts.

(22) Bureaucrats are bribing more than ever in Reagan's second term.

(23) This dress buttons. (when describing how a particular dress is fastened, for example with buttons not with a zip)

So there are different varieties of middles which may be uttered in different specific contexts. The construction is highly restricted by Pragmatics. The interpretation of the construction as a generic kind of copular construction or as an event with an agent implied, either generic, limited generic or even specific depends highly on the context. So many of the syntactic properties of the construction may be left apart if the context makes the utterance clear enough. Goldberg actually states that "it is possible to concoct a context in which the semantics of a particular expression in fact is compatible with middle formation" (1995: 185). Ackema and Schoorlemmer (1994: 71-72) state that "in principle, all that is required for a middle to be acceptable is an appropriate context. They thus claim that a sentence like (24) is fine if it is uttered in a context where properties of bureaucrats are being discussed.

(24) This bureaucrat bribes. (Ackema and Schoorlemmer, 1994: 72)

They conclude that out of context, the individual level interpretation is much easier to get with the right kind of modification." Now my question is do communicative acts take place out of context?

Brakel (1976: 18) finds a context where (25), which sounds odd, would be acceptable:

- (25) Caviar eats noiselessly.
- (26) I can't stand potato chips, they crunch so much, but caviar eats noiselessly. (Brakel, 1976: 18)

In Spanish we find an even larger variety of constructions discussed under the rubric of "middles" which show a very similar formal structure, their differences deriving from the context in which they are uttered. So we move from examples of middles which imply no agents (27a), when they are used to emphasise an inherent attribute of the subject, (27b), to examples in which an agent is implied but its reference is not tied up to the construction itself, but is rather a variable which gets its content from the communicative context. Thus, if we imply an agent in (28) it is definitely not a generic "la gente, en general", but rather a specific restricted group like "los franceses/los extremeños...". Actually a group which does not include the listener, otherwise there would not be New information. Similarly a sentence like (29), restricts the agent to a particular place, "la gente de aquí".

- (27a) La gripe se cura.
- (27b) La gripe es curable.
- (28) Las ranas se comen.
- (29) Aquí se habla español.

García Negroni (1996) in her search for a single rule that would interpret a [+human, +indefinite] agent for all middle se constructions comes to paraphrases like (30b, 31b), which clearly deviate from the intended message of the original middles, (30).

- (30a) El caviar se come acompañado de vodka.
- (31a) Esta silla se guarda detrás del ropero.
- (30b) Todo el mundo debe comer el caviar acompañado de vodka.
- (31b) Todo el mundo debe guardar esta silla detrás del ropero.

It does not make sense to postulate a generic "todo el mundo" as potential eaters of caviar with vodka or users of one single specific chair. This misconception of middles comes from giving an excessive power to grammatical rules over pragmatic rules.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have tried to prove that the interpretation of some constructions is not always determined by grammar rules but rather by the pragmatic principles of utterance interpretation.

Grammar and Pragmatics stand on opposite ends of a scale. Since the boundaries in Grammar are not clear, the ends of the scale should not be overlooked. The more the context contributes to the communicative force of an utterance, the less need there is for explicit grammatical markers. Hence, the lack of grammatical markedness in certain constructions implies a well

defined context, therefore a predominance of situation over linguistic form in the communicative process. In this case, the grammarian should cease their search for a constant formal feature that would define all cases and admit the presence of some variables filled by extralinguistic information.

There are many structures labelled "irregular", "formulae" or "lexicalised" which may actually be quite productive. One reason for this is that the language analysed is usually created ad hoc by the linguist. If we do not get actual occurrences, we cannot claim that we are defining a language, but merely the idea we have of that language. The grammarian should try as much as possible to contextualise the examples they will use, and this will inevitably make them pay more attention to the interaction between grammar and other factors in the communicative process.

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