Transitivity and Intransitivity

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Abstract

There are a fair number of proposals to define the transitive prototype and they essentially agree that in the transitive prototype the agent’s action impinges on the patient and causes a change of state in it. In contrast, there are just a couple of attempts to characterize the intransitive prototype. One of them is my view, in which the intransitive prototype is not defined positively and various kinds of intransitive clauses, e.g. of an action, of a change, of a state, surround the transitive prototype, rather like satellites.

1. Introduction
2. Transitivity
   2.1 Traditional View
   2.2. Recent Approaches
   2.3. My View and Comments on Recent Proposals
3. Intransitivity
   3.1. Traditional Characterization
   3.2. Jacobsen’s Spontaneous Prototype
   3.3. My View on Intransitivity

1. Introduction

Transitivity has always been a central issue in grammatical studies, and there are many proposals to characterize the transitive prototype. However, there appear to be very few works that consider the issue of intransitivity. To my knowledge, there are only two attempts to define the intransitive prototype: one by W.M. Jacobsen (1991) and the other by myself (Tsunoda 1991, 1994).

This paper first reviews approaches to transitivity: the traditional view in 2.1, recent approaches in 2.2, and my view and comments on recent proposals in 2.3. It then turns to the issue of intransitivity: the traditional characterization in 3.1, Jacobsen’s spontaneous prototype in 3.2, and my view on intransitivity in 3.3.

Keywords: transitivity, intransitivity, action, change, state

1) I am grateful to Barry J. Blake, Wesley M. Jacobsen, Kevin Tuite and William McGregor for commenting on an earlier version of this paper.
2. Transitivity

2.1 Traditional View


(1) Traditional definition of transitivity:

(a) Transitive clauses contain an object. An activity/action goes across from the subject to the object. It is sometimes stated additionally that the object is affected by the activity, and/or that transitive clauses can be turned into passive clauses.

(b) Intransitive clauses lack an object. No activity is transferred.

(This definition refers to intransitive clauses as well. We shall return to this in Section 2.) This definition of transitivity is rather loose, and it is not free from problems. (See, for instance, Robins 1964: 265–66; Tsunoda 1991: 64–66, 1994: 4671.)

2.2. Recent Approaches

From about the late 1970s, partly due to the increasing interest in ergativity (cf. Dixon 1979), the issue of transitivity began to attract intensive attention from typologists as well as scholars working on individual languages. This in turn yielded a number of more rigorous characterizations of transitivity—more rigorous than the traditional characterization given in (1) above.

There are two points to note regarding these proposals.

First, these proposals employ the prototype approach. That is, they treat transitivity as a matter of degree, in contrast with the traditional characterization, which attempts (unsuccessfully) to make a clear-cut dichotomy of transitive and intransitive clauses. (This is one of the problems with the traditional characterization of transitivity.)

Second, these proposals characterize transitivity largely or entirely in semantic terms, which are intended to be applicable universally. Morphosyntactic properties of the transitive prototype—i.e. those morphosyntactic properties which are exhibited by those clauses which have such semantic properties—vary across languages.

Examples of these proposals follow. Lakoff (1977: 244) states that "prototypical agent-patient sentences" have the following properties.

(2) Lakoff’s “prototypical agent-patient sentences”:

1. there is a [sic] agent, who does something
2. there is a patient, who undergoes a change to a new state (the new state is typically nonnormal or unexpected)
3. the change in the patient results from the action by the agent
4. the agent’s action is volitional
5. the agent is in control of what he does
6. the agent is primarily responsible for what happens (his action and the resulting change)
7. the agent is the energy source in the action; the patient is the energy goal (that is, the agent is directing his energies toward the patient)
8. there is a single event (there is spatio-temporal overlap between the agent’s action and the patient’s change)
9. there is a single, definite agent
10. there is a single, definite patient
11. the agent uses his hands, body, or some instrument
12. the change in the patient is perceptible
13. the agent perceives the change
14. the agent is looking at the patient

Hopper and Thompson (1980: 252) propose ten “Transitivity” parameters, each of which constitutes a scale, ranging from “high” to “low”. See Table 1.

Givón (1985: 90) and Jacobsen (1991: 8) propose similar characterizations of the transitive prototype, although they employ a much smaller number of parameters than Lakoff and Hopper & Thompson do.

(3) Givón’s “transitivity”:

a. Agent-related: The prototypical transitive clause has a visible, salient, volitional, controlling agent-cause which initiates the event.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Hopper and Thompson's “Transitivity”</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Participants</td>
<td>2 or more participants, A and O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Kinesis</td>
<td>action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Aspect</td>
<td>telic</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. Punctuality</td>
<td>punctual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Volitionality</td>
<td>volitional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Affirmation</td>
<td>affirmative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Mode</td>
<td>realis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Agency</td>
<td>A high in potency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Affectedness of O</td>
<td>O totally affected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Individuation of O</td>
<td>O highly individuated</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
b. *Patient-related*: The prototypical transitive clause has a visible, salient, non-volitional, non-controlling *patient-effect* which registers the bulk of the change associated with the event.

c. *Verb-related*: The prototypical transitive clause has a *compact, perfective, realis* verb or verbal tense-aspect-modality.

(Italics in the original.)

(4) Jacobsen’s “transitivity”:
   i. There are two entities involved in the event.
   ii. One of the entities (called the “agent”) acts intentionally.
   iii. The other entity (called the “object”) undergoes a change.
   iv. The change occurs in real time.

These proposals are summarized in Tsunoda (1994: 4671).

### 2.3. My View and Comments on Recent Proposals

We have seen that various parameters have been proposed to characterize the transitive prototype. I shall briefly comment on these parameters and provide my own view.

First, some, if not all, of Hopper and Thompson’s parameters can be subsumed under the rubric of Affectedness. Thus, consider Kinesis. If there is an action, the patient may be affected by it, but this is not the case if there is no action. Regarding Affirmation, the patient may be affected in an affirmative sentence, e.g. *John hit the ball*, but not in a negative sentence, e.g. *John did not hit the ball*. Similarly, with respect to Mode, the patient may be affected in a realis sentence, e.g. *John hit the ball*, but not in an irrealis sentence, e.g. *John wanted to hit the ball*.

Second, crosslinguistically, the semantic parameters are not equally relevant to morphosyntactic manifestations of transitivity. Affectedness is the most important and it is always or almost always relevant. However, Volitionality and Agency, for instance, are much less pertinent. Volitionality of the agent and Affectedness of the patient are often lumped together in discussions of transitivity, e.g. Hopper and Thompson (1980: 252). Note, however, that in the extra-linguistic world they have no link whatsoever with each other. Thus, compare an unsuccessful murder (“volitional” and “non-affected”) and accidental homicide (“non-volitional” and “affected”).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>volitionality</th>
<th>affectedness</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>unsuccessful murder</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accidental homicide</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
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</table>
Linguistically as well, Volitionality and Affectedness do not necessarily correlate with each other, contrary to Hopper and Thompson's (1980: 255) claim. Affectedness is the most relevant to morphosyntactic manifestations of transitivity. Thus, in my crosslinguistic study of the case-marking of two-place predicates regarding verb-types and tense/aspect/mood (cf. Tsunoda 1981), there is no example in which Volitionality of the agent plays a positive role in manifesting a transitive case frame. It is always Affectedness of the patient, rather than Volitionality of the agent, that is crucial. Thus, consider the following examples from English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>case-frame</th>
<th>volitionality</th>
<th>affectedness</th>
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<tr>
<td>(5) I hit him.</td>
<td>NOM-ACC</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) I hit at him.</td>
<td>NOM-at</td>
<td>+</td>
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In English, (when most pronouns are involved) the NOM-ACC case frame is a manifestation of prototypical transitivity as defined in the proposals cited above, whereas the NOM-at case frame is not. Examples (5) and (6) show that it is Affectedness, and not Volitionality, that is manifested in the transitive case frame. For further discussion and examples, see Tsunoda (1985: 386, 393–94, 1991: 81–84, 1994: 4671, 4676).

The preceding discussions indicate that, for practical purposes, generally the parameter “Affectedness” is sufficient (Tsunoda 1994: 4672).

All the proposals cited above include “affectedness” among the transitivity parameters. In my view, however, Affectedness needs to be further refined. Specifically, the component “change of state in the patient” needs to be included. Indeed, with the exception of Hopper and Thompson (1980), these proposals all refer to this component.

Then, for practical purposes, the transitive prototype may be simply defined as follows (Tsunoda 1991: 72, cf. also Tsunoda 1994: 4672):

(7) Transitive prototype (Tsunoda 1991: 72):
There are two (or more) participants: the agent and the patient. The agent’s action impinges on the patient and causes a change of state in it.

On this view, prototypical transitive verbs may be defined as follows (Tsunoda 1991: 72–73): those verbs which describe those actions which impinge on the patient and cause a change of state in it. Examples from English include kill, break (vt), and melt (vt).

The proposals cited above refer to the component “the change in the patient”, but they do not provide examples to show that this component is manifested in morphosyntax. My own research shows that this component is manifested in case-marking in a large number of languages. A couple of examples are given below.

Verbs such as hit, shoot, and kick are often used in examples of transitive claus-
es—of English, at least. (See, for instance, Robins 1964: 266, Lyons 1968: 350–51, Hartman & Stork 1972: 242, and Huddleston 1988: 53.) However, in my view, they are not prototypical transitive verbs. This is because, although the activities they describe impinge on the patient, they do not necessarily imply a change in it. In contrast, killing, for instance, necessarily implies such a change, i.e. the patient’s death. (See Tsunoda 1991: 73, 1994: 4671.2)

The difference between verbs like *kill* and those like *hit* is not obvious in languages such as English. But it is clearly manifested in case-marking in many languages, e.g. Newari (Nagano 1986) and Abkhaz (Hewitt 1979: 49). Thus, in Newari, verbs such as “kill” and “break” take the ERG-ABS case frame, cf. (8), while verbs such as “hit” and “kick” take the ERG-DAT case frame, cf. (9).

(8)  
1SG.ERG: shresthat-Ø  syā-nā.  
‘I killed Shresthat’.

(9)  
1SG.ERG: shresthat-yāta  dā-yā.  
‘I hit Shresthat’.

The difference between these two types of verbs is to be observed even in English, at a more subtle level. Thus, verbs such as *hit*, *shoot*, and *kick* can take the preposition *at* to indicate a failure or non-completion of the action, e.g. (6). But this is not possible with verbs such as *kill*. Consider:

(10) *I killed at him.

A similar difference in case-marking occurs in other languages such as Japanese and Tibetan.

(This and the preceding paragraphs are repeated from Tsunoda 1985: 390, 1991: 73, 100–01, 1994: 4671–72.)

3. Intransitivity

3.1. Traditional Characterization

In the traditional characterization, intransitive clauses are defined as those clauses which are not transitive clauses, cf. (1b) in Section 1. That is, they are defined negatively, and there is no prototype posited for them.

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2) Even Lakoff (1977: 244) uses *hit* in an example of “prototypical agent-patient sentences”, although he includes the component “change in the patient” in his characterization of these sentences.
3.2. Jacobsen’s Spontaneous Prototype

Jacobsen (1991: 109) discusses “the spontaneous prototype” and proposes that it consists of the three elements shown below.

(11) Jacobsen’s spontaneous prototype:
   i. There is one entity involved in the event—the semantic object.
   ii. The semantic object undergoes a change.
   iii. The change occurs in real time.

Jacobsen uses the term “the spontaneous prototype”. However, his remarks on pp.108–09, 157 clearly indicate that it is intended to be the intransitive prototype. Also, although Jacobsen’s monograph in the main deals with Japanese, the definition cited in (11) is no doubt intended to be universally applicable.

Now, the component ii in (11) refers to a change. Specifically, Jacobsen (1991: 111–15) lists three predicates as “paradigmatic instances” of the spontaneous prototype in Japanese: okoru ‘happen, occur’, deru ‘emerge, come out’, and naru ‘become’, and he emphasizes that they all have share the core meaning of “some entity coming into existence”. Jacobsen examines the morphosyntactic properties of the spontaneous prototype—as against other, intentional intransitive clauses—such as the possibility of passivization.

3.3. My View on Intransitivity

I shall now present my view on intransitivity, elaborating on the brief statement in Tsunoda (1991: 86–87, 1994: 4671). These two papers were written from the late 1980s to 1990, i.e. before I gained an access to Jacobsen (1991).

I do not claim that my view on intransitivity is superior to Jacobsen’s. I shall simply offer it as a possible alternative.

Now, a characterization of the transitive prototype was reasonably straightforward. As seen in 2.2, there are a fair number of proposals to characterize it, including mine. They are all similar to one another, and there is no significant disagreement among linguists on this matter. No linguist is likely to object to any of the proposals.

In contrast, the situation is very different with intransitivity and the intransitive prototype.

[1] First, the issue of intransitivity has attracted much less attention than that of transitivity.

(i) As seen in 3.1, in the traditional approach, intransitive clauses are defined negatively, i.e. they are defined as those clauses which are not transitive clauses. In recent studies as well, intransitivity is not a central issue. It is almost always discussed only in conjunction with transitivity.

(ii) The term “transitivity” is often used, while on the other hand the term “intransitivity” is hardly ever used, in grammars, dictionaries of linguistics, technical articles,
and so on. Apart from my own work (Tsunoda 1991: 86–87, 1994: 4671), I have seen this term only in Tcheikhoff (1985: 385). (But she does not define it.) (The term “intransitive clauses” is often encountered, though.)

(iii) There are very few attempts to characterize the intransitive prototype. To my knowledge, there are only two, namely Jacobsen’s and mine.

[2] Second, while a characterization of the transitive prototype was reasonably straightforward, the matter is really problematic when we attempt to characterize intransitivity. We shall look at the situation that surrounds this problem.

(i) The traditional approach avoided a positive definition of intransitivity.

(ii) Is it really worthwhile to define intransitivity? A characterization of the transitive prototype has proved to be useful, e.g. in descriptions of individual languages, cross-linguistic generalizations of morphosyntax, and so on. But will a characterization of the intransitive prototype prove useful? If not, then such a characterization will not be worth the effort.

(iii) There is consensus among linguist as to what the transitive prototype is. However, it is not really clear what type of intransitive clauses are best considered as instances of the intransitive prototype.

Now, if we decide to set up the intransitive prototype at all, one of the issues to consider is the relationship between transitivity and intransitivity. It is generally assumed that they share one single axis, with the respective prototypes occupying its opposite ends. See, for instance, Hopper and Thompson (1980: 254), Tcheikhoff (1985: 385) and Jacobsen (1991: 108). But is this view adequate? Isn’t there any alternative view? There are indeed alternative views, such as the following.

It is possible to conceive of transitivity and intransitivity constituting two separate axes. Then, they may be parallel to each other. Or they may intersect each other. Thus far, we have assumed that transitivity and intransitivity are placed on a two-dimensional plane. But it is also possible to place them in a three-dimensional space, in which case they may not be parallel, running in different directions, without intersecting each other. And so on.

Regarding the semantic aspect, intransitive clauses express varied meanings, such as an action, e.g. (12), a change, e.g. (13), and a state, e.g. (14). (This classification essentially follows that by Chafe 1970: 95, i.e. “action”, “process”, and “state”. The following three examples are from Chafe 1970:98.)

(12) Michael ran.
(13) The elephant died.
(14) The wood is dry.

Do these three meanings present different degrees of intransitivity? Can any of them be singled out as manifesting the intransitive prototype?

If we decide that transitivity and intransitivity constitute one single axis, then can
these three meanings be allocated relative to one another on that axis? And in what order?

Similarly, if we decide to set up a separate axis for intransitivity, can these three meanings be allocated relative to one another on that axis? In what order? And so on.

These issues are extremely controversial—pace Jacobsen—and it may eventually turn out to be necessary to abandon the assumption that transitivity and intransitivity constitute one single axis.

An alternative view is possible. On this view, unlike the transitive prototype, the intransitive prototype is not defined positively. (This is possibly what is intended by the term "intransitive", i.e. "not transitive"). Various kinds of intransitive clauses surround the transitive prototype, rather like satellites.

Yutaka Eguchi (pers. com.) suggested a slightly different model, in which the transitive prototype is located at the top of, say, Mt. Fuji and various types of intransitive clauses are situated at its foot, surrounding it. ③)

References

(THE reference is to its 1966 impression.)

③) William McGregor (pers. com.) argues that a classification of clauses in terms of transitive and intransitive clauses is inadequate and does not exhaustively divide the clauses of a given language. This is an important observation. However, to further explore this issue will be beyond the scope of this paper.