

Prepositions as event licensors and the semantics of copular clauses

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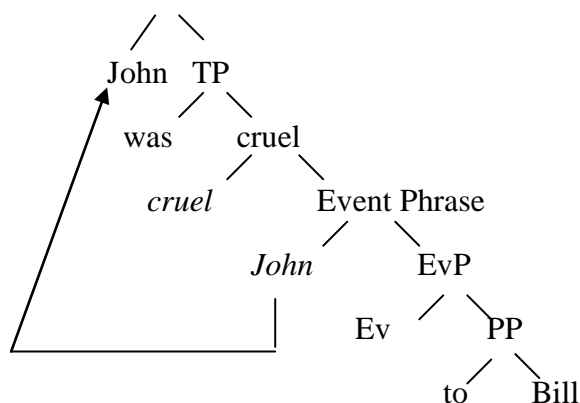
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The contribution of particles and prepositions to event structure occupies the centre of attention within current syntax-semantics interface literature (e.g. Higginbotham 1995, 2000; Folli & Ramchand 2002; Svenonius 2004; Borer 2005; Ramchand 2008). These works propose a fine-grained decomposition of the events and demonstrate the role of prepositions in the subevent structure as well as their impact on the inner-aspect properties of the event. Within this context, in this paper I study the properties of copular clauses exhibiting agentive properties. Although copular clauses are generally assumed to behave like un-agentive states from the aspectual point of view, as their incompatibility with the progressive and intentional adverbials show (1) & (2), this is not always the case (3)-(5), as several authors have pointed out throughout the years (Lakoff 1966, Dowty 1977, Stowell 1991, Arche 2006).

- (1) John is/*is being blond
- (2) * John is blond on purpose
- (3) John is very cruel to Bill
- (4) John is being very cruel to Bill
- (5) John is cruel to Bill on purpose

In sentences like (3) we understand that John did something to Bill and that “whatever he did” is cruel. In this paper, I argue that the active and agentive-like properties exhibited by sentences like (3) can be derived from the preposition introducing the goal argument (*to Bill*). I argue that the preposition licences the event structure responsible for the peculiar thematic properties aforementioned. More specifically, the PP is conceived as the predicate of an event that is unspecified, as the precise action undertaken by John towards Bill remains vague.

- (6) *John was cruel to Bill*



From a structure like (6) we expect that when the PP is not present the copular clause loses its active properties. This prediction is borne out. As the sentences below show, adjuncts emphasizing the predication of the adjective of the individual (e.g. *by nature*) are all right in the absence of the PP but odd in its presence.

- (7) John was cruel by nature
- (8) *John was cruel to Bill by nature

The configuration of (6) enables us to explain further contrasts such as that shown in (9)-(10)

- (9) ??/*John is annoying (in order) to make his brother laugh
(10) John is annoying to his brother (in order) to make him laugh.

As Truswell (2007) points out, goals introduced by *in order*-clauses are possible only when agency is at stake. While (9) is ill-formed, it becomes possible with the presence of a PP (10), which suggests that agency is effectively brought up to the construction via this PP. Within these lines, consider also (11). When the DP subject is inanimate, the contribution of a PP makes the sentence odd and the dynamic and agentive properties are unavailable.

- (11) These images are cruel (*to Bill) (*on purpose)

The structure of (6) containing an Event projection accounts for two more related facts. First, it accounts for the impossibility of having an event overtly expressed when the PP denoting goal is present, as noticed by Stowell (1991). The paradigm in (12) illustrates the incompatibility of the action denoting clause and the PP goal. I argue here that this is because both convey an event and occupy the same position.

- (12) a. John was cruel to Bill
b. John was cruel to insult Bill in public
c. *John was cruel to Bill to insult him in public

Second, having an event in the structure enables us to account for event re-descriptions of the sort we see in (13), where adjunct clauses modify, providing explicit content, an implicit event. If there were no event in the structure to start with, it would be difficult to explain what event the adjunct clause may be referring to.

- (13) John was cruel to Bill by/in insulting him in public

I argue that this approach proves superior to previous ones where the agentive properties found in copular clauses are either explained by the existence of two different copular *bes* (Partee 1977; Dowty 1979), which multiplies lexical entries and leaves the correlations between the syntax and the semantics unaccounted for, or are associated with causative scenarios (14). Rothstein (1999, 2004) and Becker (2004) explain the agentive properties by the presence of the infinitival form *be*, which they assume not to be semantically null, unlike inflected copula. Under this account the active properties found in inflected cases like (3) remain unaccounted for.

- (14) John made Paul be cruel to Bill

The account proposed here, however, derives the observed semantic properties directly from the syntactic configuration built up by the preposition introducing the goal complement *to*.