

Næss, Åshild. 2007. *Prototypical Transitivity*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins [Typological Studies in Language (TSL) 72]. ix + 240pp. (ISBN 978 90 272 2984 7)

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This book is a considerably revised version of the author's 2004 doctoral dissertation from the University of Nijmegen, entitled *Transitivity: from semantics to structure*. The book discusses what prototypical transitivity is, how it should be defined, and how a prototype analysis relates to other approaches to transitivity, such as that based on markedness. It also discusses how the definition of prototypical transitivity can be employed in the analysis of a number of phenomena, such as case-marking, experiencer constructions, and so-called ambitransitives. The basic claim is that transitivity is iconic: a construction with two distinct, independent arguments is prototypically used to refer to an event with two distinct, independent participants.

The book consists of an introduction, eight chapters and an appendix. The references are followed by author, language, and subject indices.

Chapter One is an introductory chapter, in which the author explains theoretical preliminaries such as functional typology and prototype theory. She also provides a definition of a transitive clause and introduces some terminologies used in the book. In this book, a transitive clause means a construction with two syntactically privileged arguments although exactly what characterizes a transitive clause varies from language to language. To refer to the participants encoded in one- and two-participant clauses, the author uses the well-established terms S, A, and O: S referring to the single participant of an intransitive clause, A referring to the most "agent-like" participant of a two-participant clause, and O referring to the second, non-agentive participant of a two-participant clause. This use of the terms differs slightly from that of Dixon (1979, 1994), where A and O are specifically defined as the roles found in formally transitive constructions. It is more similar to that of Hopper and Thompson (1980), where A and O are used to refer to the participants in a two-participant clause. This book makes no claims about the grammatical relations or roles that the NP arguments referring to these participants might bear to the verb. Thus S, A and O refer to participants of one- and two-participant events, regardless of their structural encoding; the second participant of a two-participant clause is referred to as an O whether it is encoded as a syntactic direct object or as an oblique argument of an extended intransitive construction.

Chapter Two asks the question of why a prototype definition is a good way of approaching the phenomenon of transitivity. Another influential approach, based on the notion of naturalness or markedness, is contrasted with the prototype analysis of transitivity. A wide range of data suggests that transitivity may be a matter of degree. In other words, the membership of the category 'transitive verb' or 'transitive clause' is gradable, depending on an item's degree of similarity to a central exemplar — a prototype structure. Jacobsen (1992), among others, has taken a similar view on transitivity as far as I know. Næss states that a prototypical transitive clause is taken to describe an event involving a volitionally acting 'agent' participant, performing a concrete, dynamic action, which has a perceptible and lasting effect on a specific 'patient'. In addition, the event should be presented as real and concluded; that is, the clause should show perfective rather than imperfective aspect, realis rather than irrealis mood, be positive rather than negated, etc.

Chapter Three proposes that the notion of distinctness of participants is the most important factor in the transitive-intransitive continuum, and that the transitive prototype must be defined in terms of the presence of two participants which are clearly distinct not just physically, but in the sense that they play maximally distinct roles in the event in question. The following hypothesis is formulated as a basic criterion of transitivity (p30).

The Maximally Distinct Arguments Hypothesis: A prototypical transitive clause is one where the two participants are maximally semantically distinct in terms of their roles in the event described by the clause.

The author argues that a prototypical transitive event involves a prototypical agent and a prototypical patient, neither of which shares any of the defining properties of the other. However, it remains to be defined what the relevant defining properties of agents and patients are. This is a controversial question, and the remainder of this chapter discusses the difficulty of defining the agent and the patient. Nevertheless it turns out that there is no "correct" definition of the category "agent". Næss neither claims her definition to be the only correct definition of the term "agent", nor chooses another label although perhaps it would have been sensible to do so given the amount of debate over the term. What the author has proposed, quite independently from the debate over the precise properties of the "agent" category, are participant roles, or roles that participants play in states of affairs, that is, they are extralinguistic entities. In this book, therefore, no assumption has been made that verbs subcategorize for specific "thematic roles". The terms 'Agent' and 'Patient' in this book have been employed strictly as labels for clusters of properties exhibited by noun phrases when these function as core arguments of specific clauses. In other words, these terms should be taken to refer to participant roles rather than to thematic roles. Thus, the author defines "agents" as volitional instigators and

“patient” as affected participants. This definition is far from new, but according to the Maximally Distinguished Arguments Hypothesis, these categories are defined by the properties/features — volitionality, instigation, and affectedness — assigned the values ‘+’ or ‘-’. An Agent participant is thus defined as being + Volitional or [+VOL], and +Instigating or [+INST], while a Patient is defined as +Affected or [+AFF]. In addition, by the Maximally Distinguished Arguments Hypothesis, each of the categories receives the value ‘-’ for the defining property/properties of the opposing category, so that a complete definition of the category Agent is [+VOL, +INST, -AFF], and of Patient [-VOL, -INST, +AFF]. This definition is a feature-based definition of the Agent and Patient categories. Semantic specifications of other participant types are also discussed in Chapter Five.

Based on the proposed definition of the transitive prototype, the author begins to examine particular non-canonical transitive construction types from Chapter Four. First of all, she discusses in some detail constructions where the agentive participant is itself affected by the event. The affected agentive participant is called an Affected Agent. Affected Agent can be characterized as [+VOL, +INST, +AFF]. According to the definition of prototypical Agent and Patient in Chapter Three, clauses with Affected Agents deviate from the semantic transitive prototype. Næss argues that verbs with an affected agent argument should tend to occur in constructions other than a canonical transitive clause. It is quite convincingly illustrated that this is the case in a wide range of languages. There is in fact a class of verbs crosslinguistically characterized by having an Affected Agent argument, namely so-called ingestive verbs, the most prototypical of which are ‘eat’ and ‘drink’. Such verbs show a strong crosslinguistic tendency towards being expressed in formally intransitive clauses. The best-known and most frequently-discussed case of the “intransitive behavior” of ‘eat’ verbs is so-called indefinite object deletion (IOD), found in English and other languages: *He is eating the apple/an apple/apples* vs. *He is eating*. The “missing object” here is necessarily interpreted as indefinite. The phenomenon of IOD is examined in more detail in Chapter Six. The ways in which clauses with verbs meaning ‘eat’ deviate from the prototypical transitive construction were examined across languages in this chapter. In a number of languages, there is a formal link between the verb ‘eat’ and various markers of agent affectedness. The link may be of two types: either the verb ‘eat’ appears with a marker of agent affectedness, such as a reflexive. Alternatively, the verb ‘eat’ may itself be grammaticalised into a marker of agent affectedness. In most cases, such uses of ‘eat’ express a sense of undergoing, affectedness or adversativity. Although the author’s examples are mostly illuminating, her claim with regard to one Korean example is not necessarily true. Næss claims that ‘eat’ is used in cases where the subject is seen as agentive and affected. It also occurs in a number of cases where no control is implied, and that in Korean, lack of control is specifically implied by the ‘eat’ construction (p75–6).

- (1) ku-ka sonkkarak-ul callu-a mok-ot-ta
 he-NOM finger-ACC cut-CONN eat-PAST-DEC
 'He accidentally cut (one of) his fingers.'

It seems to me, however, that the lack of control is not implied by the 'eat' auxiliary verb, but by the main verb itself or the event itself, i.e. 'cutting one's own fingers'. If we replace the main verb with other transitive verbs, the lack of control is not implied, as in example 2.

- (2) ku-ka chinku-lul nolly-e mok-ot-ta.
 he-NOM friend-ACC tease-CONN eat-PAST-DEC
 'He made fun of his friend.'

Therefore we cannot generalize that lack of control is implied by the 'eat' construction in Korean. Given the wide range of crosslinguistic data the author has incorporated in the book, however, this sort of minor misinterpretation may perhaps be inevitable.

There are other constructions in which the affectedness of the agent may be reflected in language structure. Among others, the difference between the two causatives in Hindi in terms of the notion of affected agent on the one hand and the affectedness of the causee agent on the other, is also discussed in this chapter (p63f). The semantic difference between different causatives in terms of the affectedness of the causee argument has been discussed in many languages including Korean (see Yeon 2003). Another obvious example is middle constructions, the main function of which is to indicate the affectedness of an initiating entity. The author concludes this chapter with remarks that she hopes to have shown that 'eat' is not an example of a prototypical transitive verb although in some literature it is cited as such.

Chapter Five discusses all other deviant constructions than the canonical transitive construction. Having defined the Agent ([+VOL, +INST, -AFF]), Patient ([-VOL, -INST, +AFF]) and Affected Agent [+VOL, +INST, +AFF], based on features in Chapters Three and Four, the author illustrates that all other distributions of the semantic features [+/- VOL], [+/- INST], [+/- AFF] across the participants of a two participant clause should lead to the use of a construction other than a fully transitive clause in at least some languages. The deviant participant types discussed in Chapter Five, which should also be understood in terms of participant roles rather than thematic roles, are as follows:

- [+VOL, -INST, +AFF]: Volitional Undergoer
- [-VOL, +INST, -AFF]: Force
- [-VOL, +INST, +AFF]: Instrument
- [+VOL, -INST, -AFF]: Frustrative
- [-VOL, -INST, -AFF]: Neutral

Just a few notes are needed here to clarify what these participant types are. Volitional undergoers have the same semantic feature specification as experiencers and beneficiaries, and would be expected to receive similar formal encoding. Volitional Undergoer is used as a cover term for all participant types characterizable as above. In this book, the term Force is used to refer to any participant characterizable as above, regardless of whether the participant is an inanimate “force” or an animate “involuntary agent”. Many languages distinguish formally between Forces and Instruments — that is between entities which bring about events by virtue of their own inherent power and entities which do so only through being manipulated by an agent participant. By assuming instruments to be [+Affected], this feature specification can not only define instruments as opposed to Agents and Forces, but also capture the similarity between Instruments and Patients which is reflected formally in certain languages: these two argument types are both manipulated by another entity, and so they are both affected. Frustrative does not appear to correspond to any of the traditionally recognized “thematic roles”, and may seem like an unlikely candidate for a linguistically relevant category — a specifically “non-doing” participant. However, there are some languages which recognize a category of participants which are volitionally involved in that they want or attempt to instigate an act, but are unable to or prevented from carrying out the act, so that no actual instigation takes place. Some interesting examples are cited in the book (p100ff). Neutral, the category defined by the value ‘-’ for all the three features, represents a participant which is not directly involved with the event either in terms of participating in its instigation or in registering its effect. The stimulus argument of experience clauses is one type of argument which is not normally conceived of as affected by the event in question. Many languages mark at least some stimulus arguments differently from Patients. For example, in Japanese and Korean, the object of ‘like’ takes the nominative case, rather than the accusative case used for affected objects. Having discussed how various types of core arguments are to be described in terms of feature combinations, the author assumes that verbs do not subcategorize for roles or argument types, but rather for feature values. A verb such as English *break*, for example, may take a volitionally instigating subject argument, an agent (*John broke the window (on purpose)*), or a nonvolitional subject argument (*John accidentally broke the window*), or an inanimate force (*The bolt of lightning broke the window*) or even an instrument (*The hammer broke the window*). The best way to solve the problem of verbs being compatible with several different types of participants (in the case of *break*, Agents, Forces, or Instruments), is to assume the verb *break* in English only requires of its subject being [+INST]; it is compatible with any values for the remaining features. The remainder of the chapter discusses properties of argument NPs that are relevant for transitivity such as animacy and definiteness/specificity/referentiality. Also

discussed here are clause-level properties relevant to transitivity such as negation, mood, and aspect.

Chapter Six deals with so-called ambitransitives, arguing that the phenomenon known as indefinite object deletion (IOD) is most felicitously analyzed not as a lexical property of certain specific verbs, but as a syntactic detransitivisation mechanism, typically employed when an object has a low degree of distinctness. The author has shown that the semantic classes of verbs which typically undergo IOD share the property of reduced transitivity vis-à-vis the prototype, by virtue of a low degree of distinctness. Iterative and generic contexts, for instance, can be analyzed as instances of low transitivity. Iterative or generic statements do not describe a single instance of an action affecting a single patient, but rather a set of similar actions affecting different patients. The object of such clauses is less individuated, clearly representing reduced semantic transitivity. The author argues that they would be, therefore, eligible for being encoded in formally intransitive clauses, i.e. without an overt object. To support this, she provides evidence from many languages that suggests a link between IOD and a certain degree of reduced semantic transitivity (p136f).

Chapter Seven argues that certain case-marking data can be better explained with reference to transitivity as defined through the maximal semantic distinction of arguments. First the author outlines both the discriminatory analysis and the indexing analysis to show that some languages have case-markers which cannot easily be explained under either of the two analyses. Rather, they appear to relate to semantic properties of the clause as a whole: whether the event is construed as involving both a controlling Agent and an affected Patient. In other words, in a number of languages object marking may depend on certain properties of the subject/agent; specifically, whether or not the agent is acting intentionally. The opposite phenomenon also occurs, i.e. subject case-marking depending on properties of the object. To put it differently, case-marking does not apply when the participants are not in maximal semantic distinction. The analyses of case-marking behavior and data from many languages in this chapter were presently nicely and it shows the author's original interpretation. The author's claim is that the canonical function of core case-marking is to discriminate between the participants in a fully transitive clause, that is, between Agents and Patients in maximal semantic distinction.

Chapter Eight examines clauses of experience and shows a wide range of variation in the encoding of such clauses. Clauses of experience obviously do not exhibit a maximal semantic distinction and the traditional label "experiencer" is a fairly heterogeneous category. It corresponds to at least two distinct participant types — Volitional Undergoer and Affected Agents. As a consequence, we would expect the encoding of experiencer participants to be variable. Therefore the author admits

that experience events are difficult to classify in terms of the properties which define the transitive prototype. On the other hand, a common strategy for the encoding of experiencer arguments is the use of a case-marker commonly labeled the dative. The dative case shows a diverse range of functions across languages, and therefore providing a crosslinguistically adequate definition of the category 'dative' is far from straightforward. The problematic nature notwithstanding, Næss argues that the dative, whose most typical use is to mark recipients, benefactives, and experiencers, can be explained by the fact that these participants all share the same feature specifications: [+VOL, -INST, +AFF]. Lastly, in Chapter Nine, the author touches upon some issues that go beyond prototypical transitivity such as the traditional grammatical relations 'subject' and 'object', and the question of structural vs. semantic case in a brief manner.

The book contains a large amount of illuminating data with arguments convincing enough to persuade its readers to take an interest in the question as the author originally hoped. It also successfully demonstrates that how linguistic structure is motivated by aspects of human cognition. It is a welcome and worthy addition to the literature on transitivity, one of the most fundamental aspects of linguistic structure.

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