

Some thoughts on agentivity¹

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The term 'agentive' is a familiar one in current discussions of the syntax of English (and other languages). Although most who use it seem, at first glance, to be referring to more or less the same semantic feature, the term is employed in a variety of ways. For instance, Fillmore (1968: 24) talks of an 'agentive case'; Gruber (1967: 943) has 'agentive verbs'; Lyons and others speak of 'agentive nouns'; while Halliday (1967: 196), although he does not use the term 'agentive', distinguishes a feature of clauses which is clearly related to the notion of agentivity. Apart from this disagreement as to what, precisely, the term 'agentive' is to be predicated of, there is a further divergence of opinion over which nouns (or verbs, etc.) are to be considered agentive. For instance, Lyons marks the surface subject of *see* as agentive (1968: 387). Fillmore, on the other hand, assigns this to the dative case, and Gruber classifies *see* as a non-agentive verb. Again, Lyons and Halliday take up what are in effect incompatible positions with regard to the status of *the prisoners* in *John marched the prisoners*. In view of this indeterminacy, it seems worthwhile to attempt a critical examination of the notion of agentivity, in the hope that a clearer characterization of it might emerge.

Despite the cheerful intuitivism frequently detectable in discussions involving agentivity, attempts to characterize the notion more precisely are by no means lacking. We can distinguish two main types of characterization: first, attempts to define agentivity in referential terms; and, secondly, purely linguistic definitions which relate the feature to the meaning of the surface lexical item *do*.

An example of the first type is Fillmore's statement that agentive is '... the case of the typically animate perceived instigator of the action identified by the verb' (1968: 24). Fillmore in effect apologizes for the phrase 'typically animate' in a footnote. We are left with no way of identifying inanimate agents (although the definition does seem to leave open the possibility that such exist). Comparing, for instance, *John overturned the dustbin* and *The wind overturned the dustbin*, it is difficult to see how *the wind* is any less of an agent than *John*: indeed, we commonly describe the sun, wind, frost, etc., as 'natural agents', with the, surely, attributing animateness to them. But other difficulties lie behind this definition. Why speak, for instance, of the PERCEIVED instigator? Perceived by whom?

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speaker, hearer, or speech community in general? How do we apply the definition to statements known by speaker or hearer to be false? In what sense do we 'perceive' fictional events? It is also possible to question the word 'instigator'. Who, for instance, is the instigator in (1)?

(1) Jim put Mary up to persuading Tom to make John strangle the cat.

It would seem that all qualify except John, if we accept the everyday meaning of the term. But presumably Fillmore did not mean this. We can try substituting 'performer' for 'instigator' in the definition. In (1) only *John* qualifies as the performer of the action. Consider now, however, sentence (2):

(2) John marched the prisoners across the yard.

What exactly is 'the action identified by the main verb'? If it is the act of marching, then this is performed by the prisoners; on the other hand, if it is the act of making people march, then clearly *John* is the performer. (In this case, 'instigator' gives an unequivocal answer.) We can, of course, like Lyons, recognize two agents in (2), but Fillmore's definition does not seem to allow for this, unless the sentence is recognized as syntactically complex.

Another attempt, along similar lines, to characterize agentivity is that of Gruber (1967: 943). According to Gruber, an agentive verb is one 'whose subject refers to an animate object which is thought of as the wilful source or agent of the activity described in the sentence'. We may note in passing, that although agentivity is assigned to the verb, agentive verbs are defined by the referential properties of their subject nouns. Even aside from this, however, the definition can scarcely be considered an improvement on Fillmore's. The insistence on 'wilful' means that *kicked* may be agentive in *John kicked the bucket over*, but not in *John accidentally kicked the bucket over*; and that verbs having as their subjects nouns denoting natural agents cannot be agentive. Furthermore, both 'source or agent' and 'the activity described in the sentence' are vaguer than their counterparts in Fillmore's definition. While maintaining that these definitions are inadequate, I do not wish to suggest that they are carelessly formulated. Indeed, only marginal improvement is possible, and that only at the cost of extreme cumbersome. The inadequacies stem rather from the attempt to deal with linguistic meaning in referential terms.

An alternative to appealing to extralinguistic facts is to adopt some sort of contextual approach to meaning. Such an approach is implicit in attempts to relate agentivity to the lexical item *do*. We must now consider some of these in detail. Lyons mentions the relationship between agentivity and 'doing' (1968: 356), but he does not formulate a specific diagnostic test. Gruber, in addition to the referentially-based definition mentioned above, gives a number of purely linguistic definitions of agentivity. One of them is that an agentive verb is 'substitutable in all circumstances by the phrase *do something . . .*'. (Gruber gives two further contextual criteria: (a) modifiability by manner adverbials, such as

carefully, and (b) modifiability by a purpose phrase beginning with *in order to*. It is not entirely clear whether each of these is intended to be indicative of agentivity separately, or whether the conjunction of all three is necessary. It is easy to demonstrate that they do not define identical sets of verbs. We shall return briefly to these two criteria below.) We can see, perhaps, what Gruber is getting at here, but the test can hardly be accepted as it stands. If we take it that the verb only must be substitutable, then *walk* is agentive in *John walks fast* but not in *John walked home*. This is clearly absurd. If, on the other hand, the whole verb phrase must be substitutable, then for sentences in isolation, any verb whatsoever may be shown to be agentive. In connected discourse, however, many verb phrases containing (presumably) agentive verbs are not substitutable by *do something*, at least if some sort of semantic plausibility is to be preserved. Consider the following:

(3) John killed his father. That's why he was hanged.

(4) John did something. That's why he was hanged.

Sequence (4) does not make very much sense. A more satisfactory way of testing for relationship with *do* is that suggested by Halliday (1968: 196). Clauses are classified according to the 'preferred' form of the corresponding 'identifying clause'. Thus *John punched Bill* is a 'do-clause', because *What John did was punch Bill* is preferred to *What happened to John was that he punched Bill*. On the other hand, *The vase broke* is a 'happen-clause', since *What happened to the vase was that it broke* is preferred to *What the vase did was break*. Halliday's test depends on the selection of a 'preferred' form. This immediately raises certain questions. Who prefers one form to another? In what circumstances, and for what purpose? (Weinreich's remarks on 'intentional deviance as a communicative device' (1966: 116) come to mind here.) Instead of trying to answer these questions, which are relevant to the test as formulated by Halliday, but essentially irrelevant to the point under discussion, I shall propose a different criterion of choice. I shall simply say that *The vase broke* is a happen-clause because *What happened to the vase was that it broke* is normal, whereas *What the vase did was break* is somewhat odd, deviant, or abnormal. I shall henceforward use a question mark to indicate a form which is clearly and obviously abnormal. A queried sentence is therefore somewhat analogous to an asterisked one, except that I do not wish to indicate that it is necessarily ungrammatical, nor that it would never occur. Another possible form of the test uses the relative normality of question-and-answer sequences (see, for instance, Anderson, 1971: 42):

(5) A: What did John do? B: He moved the table.

(6) ?A: What happened to John? B: He moved the table.

We are to conclude from the relative normality of (5) and (6) that *John* in *John moved the table* is agentive.

A word would perhaps be apposite here about the correct location of the feature 'agentive'. We have seen the term variously applied to nouns, verbs and clauses. None of these, in my view, is strictly correct, although neither is any of them seriously wrong. I believe the most satisfactory answer is given by Halliday, when he says (1968: 198) that *marched* and *prisoners* in *John marched the prisoners* 'are in a happen-relationship'. I do not agree with this particular judgment, but I accept the implication that the feature we are studying is a relational one, which holds between a verb and a noun. (Fillmore's conception of 'case' seems to be essentially similar.) In the discussion which follows, I shall speak, for convenience sake, of 'agentive nouns'.

We have so far referred almost exclusively to the agentivity of nouns in the subject position. Unfortunately, the do-test does not, in either of the above formulations, enable us to distinguish agentive from non-agentive objects (or to put it another way, to detect the agentive relationship between a verb and its object). Indeed, it has already been mentioned that Halliday regards *marched* and *prisoners* in *John marched the prisoners* as manifesting a happen-relationship. This is a decision based on the results of the do-test, since *What happened to the prisoners was that John marched them* is more normal than *?What the prisoners did was that John marched them*. The test does not reveal, therefore, the (intuitively) clear difference in the relation between *the prisoners* and the verb in *John marched the prisoners* and *John shot the prisoners*. Lyons recognizes both agentive and non-agentive objects: he marks the object of, for instance, *John walked the horse* as agentive. Our problem is to devise a form of the test which will reveal this. Let us first examine more carefully what it is that the do-test does. It seems fairly clear that it selects verbs which are hyponymous to *do* - or, more exactly (since in some cases the nature of the subject determines whether or not the verb is hyponymous to *do*), it selects sentences *NP VP* such that *NP (do) something* manifests the feature of agentivity in a more or less pure form. This being so, we should be able to obtain the same results by using the more general implication test for hyponymy (see Lyons, 1963: 69). And, in fact, this is the case. We can use as our criterion either the logical concept of necessary implication (entailment):

(7) *John broke the vase* entails *John did something*.

(8) *The vase broke* does not entail *The vase did something*,
or simply the normality of a sentence embodying the implication:

(9) *John broke the vase*: it therefore follows that he did something.

(10) *?The vase broke*: therefore it did something.

The new form of the test is superior to the old in that it readily distinguishes

agentive from non-agentive objects:

(11) *John marched the prisoners* entails *The prisoners did something*

(12) *John shot the prisoners* does not entail *The prisoners did something*.

It must be emphasized that all that has been achieved so far is a more precise statement of the assumed relationship between agentivity and 'doing'. The test can be said to be reliable in the sense that the area in which intuitive judgment is required to operate is reduced to a minimum (it is not, of course, eliminated entirely). Whether or not the test is valid is quite a different question. A valid test is one which detects what it purports to detect. We do not have, unfortunately, an independent characterization of agentivity, of comparable precision, with which to verify the do-test. But we do have an intuitive notion, and a number of intuitive characterizations. The most we can say about the do-test at this stage is that it gives the correct answer in the most obvious cases. I shall try to demonstrate below, however, that a notion of agentivity based on the do-test is semantically heterogeneous, and therefore perhaps not as useful as it at first appears.

In the present climate of linguistic opinion I feel obliged to say something in defence of my use (indeed, insistence on) analytic techniques such as the do-test. (Hafe (1970) is his chapter entitled 'States, processes and actions' gives a number of contextual methods, similar to those we are seeking here, for the recognition of certain basic semantic features. But he hastens to point out that these are simply 'rules of thumb', not discovery procedures, since 'there is no reason to think that a particular semantic fact will be mirrored with 100 per cent consistency by some other fact' (*ibid.*: 99). There seems to be considerable confusion over the meaning of the term 'discovery procedure'. Let us take an analogy from chemistry. No chemist, I imagine, would claim that a technique was even conceivable that would allow the automatic discovery of the structure of a completely new chemical compound. Conversely, no chemist would deny that automatic techniques were possible for the detection of, say, the element zinc in a chemical compound. There are linguistic analogues of both these types of 'discovery'. I do not believe that a fully automated discovery procedure for grammars is possible, but what we are dealing with in this paper is much more comparable to the detection of zinc. We wish to detect the presence of a bit of meaning. If the presence or absence of a semantic feature has no constant contextual correlates, then I do not know what is meant by saying that it is present or absent (although '100 per cent consistency' is perhaps aiming a little high in linguistic matters). It is not sufficient to say that semantic components are abstract, like deep phonological elements, and cannot be directly related to surface meaning. All the 'deep' semantic elements I have so far seen proposed (including those proposed by (Hafe) are bits of meaning. They are abstract only in the sense that they may not be synonymous with any surface lexical items. I submit, therefore, that a semantic feature should be regarded as firmly established only if (a) it is intuitively

convincing, (b) it is detectable contextually (including syntactically), and (c) it can be shown to have some explanatory value.

Let us now return to a consideration of the validity of the do-test. The following statements represent generally accepted opinions with regard to agentivity. They can all be extracted (or at least inferred) from the discussion of the subject in Lyons (1968: ch.8):

- (i) the agentive/non-agentive distinction is relevant only for animate nouns;
- (ii) obligatorily process verbs, such as *die*, do not admit of an agentive interpretation;
- (iii) stative verbs cannot have agentive subjects.

The do-test gives results which conflict with each of these. We shall consider them in turn.

(i) *Agentivity and animateness*: the most obvious discrepancies under this heading are nouns denoting natural agents:

- (13) What the wind did was blow the tree down.
- (14) ?What happened to the wind was that it blew the tree down.

This is probably not serious: it is perhaps arguable that these nouns should be classified grammatically as animate. The same is true of nouns denoting certain types of machine:

- (15) What the computer is doing is calculating the correlation coefficient.
- (16) ?What is happening to the computer is that it is calculating the correlation coefficient.

But indisputably inanimate nouns can be the subjects of do-sentences:

- (17) The bullet smashed John's collar-bone.
- (18) What the bullet did was smash John's collar-bone.*
- (19) ?What happened to the bullet was that it smashed John's collar-bone.

It seems, therefore, that inanimate objects can, as it were, acquire a temporary 'agentivity' by virtue of their kinetic (or other) energy. In general, the causation of some external effect seems to be necessary for this type of 'agentivity' to be detectable. It is possible, however, to construct natural-sounding sequences which appear to throw doubt on even this restriction:

- (20) A: Why does the door do that? B: What? A: Fly open every time the wind blows.
- (21) A: Why does the vase do that? B: What? A: Keep falling off the shelf.

Apparently in certain circumstances the difference between *do* and *happen* is neutralized, *do* being the normal form. I am not at all sure what these circumstances are. *Happen* can, of course, be used in (20) and (21) in place of *do*, but the result, although not deviant in any radical way, sounds artificial:

- (22) A: Why does that happen to the door? B: What? A: Why does it fly open every time the wind blows?

(ii) *Process verbs*: only one example will be given under this heading. The implications will be more fully discussed below. That (23) has a do-interpretation is shown by the normality of (24) compared with (25):

- (23) Christ died in order to save us from our sins.
- (24) What Christ did was die in order to save us from our sins.
- (25) ?What happened to Christ was that he died in order to save us from our sins.

(iii) *Stative verbs*: Lyons characterizes stative verbs notionally as those referring to states rather than processes or actions, and linguistically by their inability to occur in the progressive form. These criteria do not correlate perfectly. Verbs like *stand*, *sit*, *lie*, etc., may refer to states (they also have an action interpretation), yet they occur freely in the progressive form. Whether they refer to states or actions, however, they are do-verbs:

- (26) What John is doing is standing/sitting/lying in the middle of the room.

It is not necessary to interpret this as meaning 'standing up'/'sitting down', etc. But even in cases where the progressive is not possible, a do-interpretation occasionally is:

- (27) What I did was have my passport ready.
- (28) ?I am having my passport ready.
- (29) What you must do is be absent that day.
- (30) ?You are being absent.

The foregoing examples show that what is revealed by the do-test is not necessarily what is usually referred to by the term 'agentive'. However, those NP VP combinations which would normally be said to manifest agentivity, almost without exception give a positive result with the do-test. (The only exception that comes to mind is Lyons's marking of the subject of *see* as agentive (1968: 387). Lyons seems to contradict himself on this point, at least by implication. Having affirmed the relationship between agentivity and 'doing', he states (*ibid.*: 351) that *see* is a stative verb, and 'does not typically occur in sentences

answering questions of the form "What is X doing?") The converse, however, is not true. There is thus a distinct possibility that agents may be a definable sub-set of 'doers'. Plausibility is lent to this suggestion by the following evidence of the existence of a number of distinct semantic features, the presence of any of which will lead to a positive result with the do-test. The evidence is, alas, vulnerable to my own criticisms: some appeal is made to referential aspects of meaning, and the features are only partly substantiated in contextual terms. At this stage I can claim only that the evidence is highly suggestive. Four features (at least) seem to be operating: I shall refer to these as volitive, effective, initiative and agentive, respectively.

1. *Volitive*: this feature is present when an act of will is stated or implied. Willing is a kind of doing, whether what is willed is a state, process or action. Hence the normality of (24), (31), (32) and (33):

- (31) What John did was drift two miles further down the river, so as to avoid landing in enemy territory.
- (32) What John did was not eat anything for two days.
- (33) What John did was be ready.

There are features whose do-feature is due entirely to the presence of 'volitive'. These provide what is probably the most convincing evidence for the existence of the feature. When they are placed in contexts where volition is rendered unlikely, or is explicitly denied, they become happen-sentences. For instance, (34) is more normal than (35), but (36) is less normal than (37):

- (34) What John did was not sleep that night, so as to forestall any surprise attack.
- (35) ?What happened to John was that he did not sleep that night, so as to forestall any surprise attack.
- (36) ?What John did was not sleep that night, through no fault of his own.
- (37) What happened to John was that he did not sleep that night, through no fault of his own.

Similarly, in spite of the normality of (24), (38) is less normal than (39):

- (38) ?What John did was die in a car accident.
- (39) What happened to John was that he died in a car accident.

Gruber's criterion of modifiability by a purpose phrase beginning with *in order to* is in effect a test for volitivity. The normality of (31), and the abnormality of (40), show that the agentivity of the noun in question is irrelevant:

- (40) ?John accidentally trod on the toy, in order to punish the child.

The same is true of the possibility of an imperative, which Anderson uses frequently as a test for 'ergative', apparently believing it to be an equivalent to the do-test (see Anderson, 1971: 49). That this is not so is easily demonstrated:

- (41) What John did was kick the bucket over accidentally.
- (42) ?Kick the bucket over accidentally!

It appears from the examples Anderson gives that his 'ergative' is something like our 'volitive' plus 'agentive'. He considers *John sneezed* (*ibid.*: 45) and *John cried* (*ibid.*: 70) to be non-ergative, although both are do-sentences:

- (43) What John did was sneeze.
- (44) ?What happened to John was that he sneezed.
- (45) What John did was cry.
- (46) ?What happened to John was that he cried.

Gruber's other contextual criterion, modifiability by *carefully*, detects the combination of volitivity plus agentivity:

- (47) ?John carefully fell out of the window.
- (48) ?John carefully and accidentally pushed the door open.
- (49) John carefully pushed the door open.

The point I wish to make is that although agentivity and volitivity frequently co-occur, they are nevertheless independent features. *-> Elle se-bien o presen to include -* which exerts a force (literally or metaphorically), not by virtue of an internal energy source, but because of its position, motion, etc. For example:

- (50) These columns support the weight of the pediment.
- (51) What these columns do is support the weight of the pediment.
- (52) ?What happens to these columns is that they support the weight of the pediment.
- (53) The flying stone broke the window.
- (54) What the flying stone did was break the window.
- (55) ?What happened to the flying stone was that it broke the window.

Fillmore classifies all inanimate 'doers' as instrumentals, along with the more obvious examples. For him, the underlined noun-phrase in each of the following sentences is in the instrumental case:

(56) *The wind* opened the door.

(57) *The stone* broke the window.

(58) John broke the window with *a stone*.

I shall argue that each of these stands in a different relationship with its verb. *The wind* in (56) is in a do-relationship with *opened*, and is a true agentive (see below); *the stone* in (58) is an instrumental. Notice that the latter is not in a do-relationship with *broke*:

(59) ?John broke the window with the stone: it therefore follows that the stone did something.

(57), however, needs further discussion. It is my contention that it is, in fact, ambiguous, between an instrumental interpretation, as in (58), and an effective interpretation. The first meaning can be roughly paraphrased 'the stone was successfully used to break the window'; the second meaning appears in contexts like (60):

(60) As a result of the explosion, a stone flew across the road and broke the window.

Only under the second interpretation is (57) a do-sentence. We can contrast (57), for which, out of context, neither interpretation is dominant, with (61), in which the instrumental interpretation is dominant:

(61) This key will open the door.

3. *Initiative*: (The term is borrowed, with slight modification, from Halliday, who speaks of the 'initiator' of an action (1967: 42).) The following sentences illustrate this feature:

(62) The warder marched the prisoners across the yard.

(63) John galloped the horse around the field.

The meaning of the feature can be roughly glossed 'initiation of an action by giving a command'. No single lexical item corresponds to it, but its presence can be detected contextually by the abnormality which results when the suspected sentence is placed in a context which (a) denies the agentivity of the object of the verb:

(64) ?John galloped the horse, which had died the previous day, round the field.

(b) denies the existence of a channel of communication between the subject and the object:

(65) ?John galloped the horse, with which he had no means of communicating, around the field.

and (c) denies the responsiveness of the object to command:

(66) ?The warder marched the prisoners, who were successfully resisting any form of persuasion or command, across the yard.

4. *Agentive*: This feature is present in any sentence referring to an action performed by an object which is regarded as using its own energy in carrying out the action. Included amongst these objects are living things, certain types of machine, and natural agents. The presence of the feature in a sentence containing an ergative verb used intransitively can be detected by noting the effects of reflexivization: if the feature is present, the semantic effects are minor:

(67) John moved (himself) to avoid the falling stones.

(68) The machine automatically switches (itself) off at 6 p.m.

Natural agents do not commonly occur as the subjects of intransitive verbs since interest usually centres on the effects they have on other things, but the following are possible examples:

(69) The fire rapidly spread (itself) through the building.

(70) Every year, the sea, by constantly eating away at the shore, inched (itself) closer to the village.

If, on the other hand, the feature is absent, the semantic effects of reflexivization are considerable:

(71) The stone flew through the air.

(72) ?The stone flew itself through the air.

(73) The ball rolled across the floor.

(74) The ball rolled itself across the floor.

(74) is by no means impossible, but suggests that the ball contained some sort of mechanism. A kind of reflexivization may also distinguish non-ergative verbs which carry the feature from those which do not:

(75) John laughed himself sore.

(76) John shouted himself hoarse.

(77) ?John fainted himself cold.

(78) ?John fell himself flat.

Certain verbs, including *jump* and *fly*, can only occur transitively if their objects are capable of carrying the feature:

- (79) The stone flew.
- (80) The hawk flew.
- (81) The model aeroplane flew.
- (82) ?John flew the stone.
- (83) John flew the hawk.
- (84) John flew the model aeroplane.

(except, of course, where the object has a clear locative meaning, as in *John flew the Atlantic*). In transitive constructions the problem is to distinguish between 'effective' and 'agentive'. With verbs referring to gross physical actions, this is not too difficult. (85) and (86) can be readily perceived as ambiguous (in each case the (a) modification selects 'effective' and the (b) modification 'agentive'):

- (85) The machine crushed the bottle (a) when it fell on it.
(b) when we switched it on.
- (86) John smashed the window (a) when he fell against it.
(b) with a stone.

Manner adverbs which refer specifically to the energy output of an action, such as *powerfully*, *vigorously* and *energetically*, discriminate quite well between 'effective' and 'agentive' in this sort of example:

- (87) The machine powerfully crushed the bottle when we switched it on.
 - (88) ?The machine powerfully crushed the bottle when it fell on it.
 - (89) John vigorously smashed the window with a stone.
 - (90) ?John vigorously smashed the window when he fell against it.
- but they are less satisfactory for sentences where the semantic element of physical action is less prominent:

- (91) ?John vigorously looked at Mary.

It may be, of course, that there is no rigorously characterizable feature of agentivity which is shared by *John looked at Mary* and *John smashed the window*. It is not impossible, for instance, that *look* is the volitive counterpart of *see*, and not the agentive counterpart, as Gruber believes, as Gruber believes. A more confident proposal must await further work.

I have tried to show that the notion of agentivity has received insufficient

attention from those who use it, and have attempted to give at least the outlines of a more accurate and soundly-based characterization. A great deal of effort is currently being directed towards the elucidation of the semantic sub-structure of language. This is all to the good: semantics should be at the centre of linguistic studies. But it seems to me that the enterprise is hampered by a lack of adequate ground-work. Chomsky notwithstanding, we do not have enough data, and this is at least partly due to an irrational aversion to elementary empirical 'procedures'. Although I have concentrated here on agentivity, it is my firm belief that a significant number of the semantic features which figure in current discussions would turn out, on closer examination, to be in need of similar revision.

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