

Characterizing reflexivization: Semantic and syntactic perspectives

In addition to *argument reflexives* such as the reflexive anaphor of English, we encounter in many languages *verbal reflexives* (Faltz 1977), involving detransitivization of the verb, so that a single argument satisfies what would be two roles in the equivalent transitive predicate. We consider the proper characterization of the argument structure operation behind verbal reflexivization.

It has been recognized since Kayne (1975) that the reflexive clitic *se* in French is not an argument of the verb, but is instead a marker of verbal detransitivization. Syntactically, this can be described as suppression of one argument. Whether this involves suppression of the internal or the external argument is a question that has been addressed at some length. Much of the literature, including Marantz (1984), Pesetsky (1995) and Sportiche (1998), conclude that Romance reflexives are unaccusative, but Reinhart and Siloni (2004, 2005) argue that in fact they are unergative. In the Theta System framework of Reinhart (2000, 2002), reflexivization is reduction (complete elimination) of the internal argument.

From the semantic viewpoint, however, it is incontestable that the single argument of reflexives satisfies both thematic relationships of the underlying transitive predicate. For example, *John shaves* states that John is both the agent and patient of shaving. In other words, at a semantic level the second argument has not so much been removed as identified with the first, and their syntactic realization is the subject *John*.

For Reinhart, thematic roles have semantic content, and the specification of theta roles plays a role in the projection of arguments. So if the syntactic effect of reflexivization is reduction, it necessarily has to extend to the semantics. But we have just explained that semantically there is no reduction, leading to the conclusion that reduction cannot be the right account of reflexivization.¹ Accordingly, later versions of the Theta System (Reinhart and Siloni 2005) propose that reflexivization is not reduction but a new operation termed *bundling*, which combines two theta roles into a compound one that is projected as a single argument.

While this neatly captures the semantic side of reflexivization, the very concept of theta role is intermediate between syntax and semantics. The syntactic projection of arguments is partially determined by the semantic (thematic) relationship they bear to the predicate, but it is a given that the semantic categories relevant to syntactic projection are but a subset of each verb's argument semantics. Putting aside theory-internal considerations of Reinhart's system, is there evidence that the particular semantics of reflexives are relevant to their syntax? While Reinhart considers theta roles and arity operations to have semantic content, other approaches might allow for a looser coupling of syntax and semantics and might see no need for two arity operations that cannot be syntactically distinguished.

¹ Neither can *saturation*, responsible for passivization and expressed as existential closure, because it allows free reference for the suppressed argument, as with the suppressed subject of passives, and because of theory-internal generalizations about its distribution.

We can address this question by considering syntactic diagnostics for the kinds of arguments available with reflexives. The evidence for whether reflexives are akin to unergatives or unaccusatives - suggesting the presence of an agent or theme, respectively - is not entirely conclusive. Reinhart and Sioni (2004, 2005) present arguments for the suppression of the internal argument. E.g., en-cliticization, which is possible only out of the object position, is incompatible with reflexives:

- (1) *Il s'en est lavé beaucoup dans ces douches publiques, récemment.
there SE of+themcl is washed many in these public showers recently
'Many of them washed in these public showers recently'

This is a purely structural diagnostic, suggesting that reflexives are unergatives. But what do we know about the thematic properties of the subjects in the verbal reflexives under discussion. In terms of theta roles, the reflexivized verbs pass tests for the presence of an agent, such as allowing impersonal passives (if the language allows one) and allowing modification by adverbs like *intentionally* or *carefully*:

- (2) a. John threw the rock carefully.
b. ?? John fell down carefully. [Non-agentive]
c. Bill washed carefully.

There are fewer tests for the presence of a theme or patient, but reflexives appear to pass these as well (cf. Levin & Rappaport Hovav 2005). The modifier “completely” appears to require a syntactically accessible theme (of an appropriate sort) (cf. 3a-c). It is compatible with suitable reflexives (cf. 3d).

- (3) a. John sang the song completely [theme]
b. The fruit was peeled completely [passive theme]
c. *John sang/baked completely [unexpressed theme]
d. John shaved/disrobed completely [reflexive]

Similarly, in English the modifier “painfully” cannot modify the cause or agent (cf. 4a,b), but must refer to an explicit (sentient) patient (cf. 4c): (but, so it seems, not consistently; something that awaits further explanation). Subjects of reflexive verbs appear to patient-like (cf. 4d):

- (4) a. # Mary shouted painfully (cannot mean “with pain”)
b. Mary pushed me painfully.
c. Bill fell painfully [unaccusative]
d. Bill shaved, painfully, with a dull razor. [reflexive]

We conclude that reflexive verbs retain both theta roles of the underlying transitive predicate, in the syntactic as well as the semantic sense - to the extent that these might be distinguished – supporting the bundling analysis. This could be important in understanding the mixed results of the diagnostics for unaccusativity, since these too rely to some extent on the theta roles present.

References

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