

Nonaffected Incremental Themes: the Case of Verbs of Creation

Affectedness is widely believed to be relevant to many phenomena concerning argument realization, including passive, unaccusativity, linking to objecthood, dative alternation (Beavers 2006, 2010, 2011a,b). A test that is commonly used to diagnose affectedness of an argument is the structure *What happened to x is...* (Cruse 1973: 13). In this paper, we will investigate some properties of this test, checking whether it actually diagnoses affectedness.

Beavers (2010, 2011b) offers a very good description of what is involved in this test. According to him, affected arguments that can be inserted in this structure are *potential* affected arguments, that is, those that are subject to possible change; in his words, "the verb lexically specifies that there are specific possible outcomes" (Beavers 2010: 16). Beavers formulates this idea as follows:

- (1) x has **potential** for change iff $\phi \rightarrow \diamond \exists g[\text{result}'(x, g, s, e)]$,
where x = a theme, s = a scale, g = a non-quantitized change, e = an event
- (2) *What happened to x is ϕ* is felicitous iff ϕ is felicitous
and entails x has potential for change.

We discuss what Beavers thinks is a counter-argument to the validity of the test: the fact that verbs of creation, as in (3), despite satisfying (1), do not entail that their (incremental) themes exist. This causes the relevant sentences to fail, as shown in (4).

- (3) Rebecca built/made a Victorian style house. (Piñon, to appear)
- (4) #What happened to a Victorian style house is Rebecca build/make it.

Given examples like (4), Beavers (2008, 2011b) concludes that the test is not wholly reliable. "Affected (created) objects" such as those in (3) produce odd results under the test because the construction *What happened to x is...* seems to presuppose the prior existence of the theme. Indeed, as Beavers shows, if there is a context in which such a previous existence requirement is satisfied, the resulting sentences do become acceptable; as illustrated in (5):

- (5) a. What happened to the model airplane is John built it.
b. What happened to the shed is John rebuilt/refashioned/reconstructed it.
(Beavers 2011b: 6)

Nevertheless, Beavers' (2008, 2011b) solution for the problem is not a real solution; rather, it displaces the discussion to the issue of whether the existence of the (incremental) theme is presupposed or not. We propose a different solution: affectedness with verbs of creation is not a lexical entailment on their incremental themes. If this is true, the case of verbs of creation does not represent a failure of the test; rather, the test shows that *these verbs, despite having an incremental theme as an argument, do not entail affectedness for this argument.*

Beavers' observation about the presupposition of existence in Cruse's test is correct; but his conclusion that the test is not wholly reliable is not, since these verbs do not have an affected argument, according to the characterization we propose here: if a thing does not exist, it cannot be affected. Consider, for example, the sentences in (5b): the prefix *re-* actually changes the meaning of verbs like *build*, *fashion* and *construct*, in such a way as to make the existence of the *shed* presupposed. That is, when one *rebuilt*, *reconstructs*, etc. something, this thing must exist previously.

Theoretically, our aim in this paper is propose a characterization for “affectedness” that is able to capture this idea. In our terms, Cruse's test shows that, for a thing to be perceived as affected in an event e , this thing must exist in a time t previous to the occurrence of e . More formally, we propose the following definition of affectedness (which is based on Parsons 1990, von Fintel & Gillies 2005, von Fintel 2006, and Beavers 2010, 2011b).

- (6) $[[\text{affect } y]]^{c,i} = I$ iff $\exists y \ \& \ \exists w' \in f$: $[[\exists y]]^{c, \langle w', ti \rangle} = I \ \& \ \exists e$ event (e) $\& \ \exists w' \in f$: $[[\text{AFFECTED}(e, y)]]^{c, \langle w', ti' \rangle} = I \ \& \ \diamond \exists g[\text{result}'(y, g, s, e)]$
 where:
 f = the set of worlds compatible with what the speaker believes that,
 at the time ti , y exists and, at the time ti' an event occurs with y , affecting it.
 c = the context of utterance, i = the index of evaluation (a world-time pair),
 w' = world of evaluation, ti = prior time, ti' = later time

Note that verbs of creation do *not* fall under this definition. We will attempt to clarify a distinction among “incremental themes” which is not commonly made (e.g., it is not made by Beavers 2010, 2011b): “incremental themes” of verbs of consumption, such as *eat* and *destroy*, exhibit a behavior that differs from “incremental themes” of verbs of creation, such as those in (3). Although both types of arguments measure out the event, “consumed” incremental themes – which we call “decremental themes” – *are affected* because the pre-exist the change they undergo; but “effected (created) objects” – “*true incremental themes*” – *are not affected because there is nothing to be affected previous to the occurrence of the event*.

We will show that this conclusion is supported by syntactic behavior. For example, verbs of consumption do not admit another affected argument as their first direct argument, cf. (7), while verbs of creation do allow such an argument to be realized, as in (8).

- (7) John ate (*me) the apple (on me).
 (8) Rebecca built/made (me) a Victorian style house (for me).

This distinction will allow us to explain why the direct object in (5a) is an “affected argument”, although the verb seems to be of the “creation” type. What happens is that the model airplane is interpreted as a set of pieces that will be converted into a toy airplane. On our analysis, inferentially the direct object is, actually, a decremental theme, since, as they are converted into the toy, the pieces as such disappear. Thus, the affectedness in this example is explained by a pragmatic relation, rather than a semantic description. Therefore, our conclusion is that Cruse's test is reliable to diagnose affectedness and that direct objects of verbs of creation are not affected arguments.

References:

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