

Thoughts on Transitivity

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The nature of the grammatical relationships of incorporation, subordination, predication, and commentary is outlined. Examples are given of languages which use incorporation and subordination as the basic tools in forming sentences, usually together with existential particles. Other languages prefer nominal predication or commentary as the basic sentence type. Such languages as those mentioned above do not possess the category of transitivity. Examples follow of languages which have developed transitivity (and active and passive verbal genera). A signal that a language is becoming transitive is the separation of actants from possessives and incorporations. Chinese is cited as a language which in its earliest known form was on the way from an ergative type (without transitivity) to an agentive type (with emerging transitivity). The full transitive construction (agent, verb, patient) is of a totally different nature from subordination and predication, whose job it is to furnish the statements of the types denoting "which is" and "is". Transitivity has to do with "does" and "done" together with "who, whom, what, by whom, by what" without anything in the basic structure owning anything or being equated to anything.

When people speak a language the words or concepts of coherent speech are not delivered in a haphazard way, but according to specific rules of specific languages. The most basic way of relating words to each other is through incorporation in the sense that the concept expressed by one word is joined to that of another word in an intimate semantic and often also phonological way which entails the information that concept one is to be understood as part of or relevant to concept two. Concept one is equipped with no extra circumscriptions supplying such information as definiteness, animateness, or number, but open for any natural interpretation. Purely lexical incorporation includes for instance compounds like typewriter, typewrite, typewritten, typesetter, typefoundry, where the exact relationship

of 'type' to the second element is left undefined. Incorporation thus includes the whole range of Sanskrit-Indo-European tatpuruṣa and bahuvrīhi compounds.

A similar, but not identical, device is subordination (or modification), which to a certain language-specific degree remains free to receive its own specifying marks such as definiteness etc or its own modifiers. Subordination characteristically involves possession or attribution. 'The king's palace' and 'the royal palace' would be examples of possession and attribution respectively, whereas 'Königreich' would be an incorporation. 'Königsschloss' is a possessive reinterpreted (frozen) as an incorporation (with a changed stress pattern). A similar phenomenon is known in English, e. g. 'cockscorn', different from 'the cock's comb'.

Another basic tool for ordering the elements of speech is predication. Predication carries with it the linguistic (not strictly logical) concept of 'A is B'. In English 'The king is the head of state', 'Who was the last of the Moheicans?', 'Mohecan is an Indian word', 'A Mohecan does not go back on his word', 'Peter is a fool', and 'Peter is stupid' are examples of predication. The two members of a predication are known as subject and predicate. In this paper we shall not use these two terms in any other sense.

Just as subordination is a looser relationship of the same kind as incorporation, there is a construction which, though somewhat similar to predication, is looser and less committing, viz. a commentary, also involving two terms, a topic and a comment, or in the prevailing terminology a theme and a rheme. A predication tells what the subject "is" or is subsumed under; a commentary tells what the theme is about or associated with as a valid comment. Just as predicates are meaningless without a subject, rhemes are meaningless without a theme. In some languages the relationship of the theme to the rheme can be (or must be) indicated in the rheme, for instance by means of a pronoun. Such a theme is also known as an exposure as in French 'ton père est-il très malade?'.

Given such tools as incorporation, subordination, predication, and commentary, languages can begin to function by forming utterances. Some languages need fewer categories, some need more.

Incorporation and subordination have in common that they do not normally in themselves form utterances (cf. endocentric in Bloomfield's terminology, junction in Jespersen's). To form a complete sentence they need minimally an existential particle or copula in an exocentric construction, a nexus, 'Manslayer' and 'manslaughter' are incorporations for which the minimal expansions would be 'he is...' and 'there was...' respectively, forming a predication and an existential sentence, which latter in English is a pseudo-predication with 'there' functioning as a pseudo-subject. In English such constructions are not the only or the prevailing sentence types, but in many languages they are. In Tongan 'naʔe kai ika ʔa Mele' 'there was Mary's fish-eating' <naʔa 'there was', kai 'eating', ika 'fish', ʔa 'subordinator of noun to action noun (verb)', Mele 'Mary'> where 'Mary' is subordinated and 'fish' is incorporated, is the normal way of saying 'Mary ate fish'. If we subordinate 'fish' instead of incorporating it, we may say 'ʔoku kai ʔae iká' 'there is eating of the fish' <ʔoku 'there is', ʔae 'subordinator of definite noun'> which may mean both 'the fish is eating' and 'the fish is being eaten' (the exact meaning depending on context or sentence amplification). Matters are further complicated in Tongan by the fact that there is another subordinating particle ʔe, which introduces the agent (the more active participant) in contradistinction to the patient (the less active participant). So we have 'ʔoku tamate ʔe he fefine ʔa ʔe tangata' 'there is the woman's killing of the man' (or perhaps 'there is the killing of the man by the woman') <tamate 'killing', first ʔe 'active subordinator', he and second ʔe 'marker of definiteness', fefine 'woman'>, that is 'the woman kills the man'.

All the Tongan examples above begin with either ʔoku 'there is' or naʔe 'there was'. Without these existential particles the phrases would not have

constituted a sentence or an utterance. So sentences which in our translation contain transitive verbs in either active or passive voice, in Tongan are rendered by means of verbal action nouns whose subordinations tell us, or hint at, the role played by participating nouns.

Tongan is a Polynesian language belonging to the Eastern division of the Malayo-Polynesian language family. In the Western division, the Malay languages, we do not find the Polynesian existential sentence construction. In most languages of the Philippines and Taiwan, and in some languages further west, all sentences constitute a predication, A is B, where A typically contains a verb-like concept, B a noun-like. The A term is marked by means of affixes which indicate the relationship with B, which on the other hand like other post-A noun-like parts of the sentence is preceded by a specific function particle. The nexus is established through the presence of one relationship marker (on A) and/or one function marker (on B). There is no overt copula. The construction is therefore something on the order of 'qui regit regnum rex, quæ regit regem regina'.

Tagalog is such an 'A is B language'. A can be marked for four kinds of relationship with the B-phrase: Agent, Goal, Locus, or Implication (Reference, Instrument, Cause), 'Nagbukas si Juan nang pinto' 'Juan was the opener of the door' <nag 'to be a past agent', bukas 'open', si 'non-possessive marker before PN', nang 'possessive marker', pinto 'door'> expresses 'John opened the door'. 'Binuksan ni Juan ang pinto nang susi' 'John's place of the key's opening was the door' <-in-... -an 'to be a place for past action', ni 'possessive marker before PN'> means 'the door was opened by Juan with a key'. 'Ipinangbukas ni Juan nang pinto ang susi' 'John's instrument of the door's opening was the key' <ipinang 'to be a past instrument'> means 'John opened the door with the key'. 'Kumain nang isda ang bata' 'the eater of the fish was the child' <kain 'eat', -um- 'to be an agent', isda 'fish'> means 'the child ate the fish', and 'kinain nang isda ang bata' 'the child was the goal of the fish's eating' <-in- 'to be the goal'>, that is 'the fish ate the child'.

The commentary construction exhibits the form of 'as for A, (there is) B', where A is the theme, B the rheme. It is often used in Atayal, a Malayo-Polynesian language from Taiwan, where we find 'sqgmi? ual su? baqun' 'as for healing magic, (it) has gotten to be known by you', 'it has been the goal of your getting to know' <sqgmi? 'the art of healing internal bleeding', ual 'past action', baq 'to know', -un 'for there to be a goal for the verbal concept'>. One can also overtly mark the theme by means of the particle 'ga?' as in 'ziau na? mlikui ki? kneril ga? ini? nha? balai hnci' 'as for the matter of men and women, there is certainly their not treating (it) lightly' <ziau 'matter', na? 'of', mlikui 'man', ki? 'and', kneril 'woman', ini? 'not', nha? 'their', balai 'certainly', hamut 'treat lightly', -i (together with negative) 'for there not to be a goal for the verbal concept'>. Another example is 'osa? siluŋ qasa ga? ciux ki?an na? hoŋ' 'as for going over that ocean, there is the existence of a bridge' <osa? 'future of usa?, to go', siluŋ 'ocean', qasa? 'that', ga? 'postposed marker of theme', ciux 'progressive preverb', -an 'for there to be a location for the verbal concept', aki? 'to be there, *dasein*' (aki? plus -an becomes ki?an 'for there to be a location for existing'), hoŋ 'bridge'>.

Tibetan uses a combination of commentary and incorporation in its basic sentence structure. 'kho ?gummo' 'there is him-dying' <kho 'he', ?gum 'die', mo from ?o 'there is'> is how to say 'he dies'. 'ngas kho bkummo' 'by me there was him-killing' <nga 'I', -s 'instrument, agent', bkum 'past killing', that is 'I killed him'. And 'tib-ril chus ?gengsso' 'as for the teapot, there is a getting filled with water' <tib-ril 'teapot', chu 'water', ?gengs 'fill', so from ?o 'there is'> meaning 'the teapot is filling with water'.

What is characteristic for all of these languages is the absence of transitive verbs in the sense of verbs which can be (or must be) equipped with an agent and a patient, where the action transits from the agent to the patient as in 'Charley beat Lucy', 'Christian IV built the town of Christiania'. Characteristically such transitive constructions can be passivized with or

without stating the agent: 'Lucy was beaten <by Charley>', 'Christiania was built by Christian IV'. Neither incorporation nor subordination enters into these constructions, and neither are they predications nor are they commentaries. Historically, however, transitivity can be the result of a reinterpretation of such categories, so that for instance agentive and patientive possessives or incorporated nouns are reinterpreted as agent and patient in the transitive flow. Verbs which do not require a patient, intransitive verbs, still are equipped with an agent, indistinguishable from the agent of transitive verbs. Somewhere between Proto-Indo-European and the earliest known Indo-European languages, the animate possessive case split into a genitive and a nominative, and medial verbal forms acquired the possibility of expressing the passive. The result was the creation of the transitive active and passive sentence constructions.

Languages which form nexus through transitive flow may use incorporation and subordination in compounds and junctions. English 'he went to France' may be subordinated as 'his going to France', 'he killed the lion' as 'his killing of the lion' which contain agentive and patientive possessives. Late Archaic Chinese has 'wáng zhī hào yuè' <wáng 'king', zhī 'possessive particle', hào 'to love', yuè 'music'> 'the king's loving music' as a subordinate form of 'wáng hào yuè' 'the king loves music'. We have already mentioned English use of incorporation in such compounds as 'typewriter'. One can also point to such pairs as 'a long hand' (attributive subordination) and 'longhand' (incorporation).

Danish has an interesting mechanism for creating incorporation even on the nexus level, viz. through "unit accentuation" (no more than one primary stress in the phrase involved) which in some cases suspends the agent-patient dichotomy. 'Der kommer gæster' <der 'existential particle establishing nexus', kommer 'come, arrive, present tense', gæster 'guests'> '(some) guests are arriving' requires such a stress pattern. 'Han sælger biler' <han 'he', sælger 'sells', biler 'cars'> 'he sells cars' with primary stress only on the final noun,

but 'han solgte bilerne' <solgte 'sold', bilerne 'the cars'> 'he sold the cars' with primary stress also on the verb, cf. 'automobilforhandler' 'car dealer' with incorporation and primary stress only on the syllable -bil- in the incorporated member. Danish incorporation through unit accentuation on the nexus level carries with it the connotation that the activity apart from the agent contains only new information and does not refer to concepts which would require a definite or indefinite article.

The languages of South East Asia generally possess transitive flow of a simple SOV type with no marking of the actants or the verb: . Thai 'sŷa kin wua léɛw' <sŷa 'tiger', kin 'eat', wua 'cow', léɛw 'particle for completed action'> 'the tiger has eaten the cow'; Cambodian 'ʔoopùk khŋom nŋu phtèəh' <ʔoopùk 'father', khŋom 'my', nŋu 'remain, dwell, be in', phtèəh 'house'> 'my father is in the house'; Radé 'mnie mduon anən ŋaʔ kpie' <mnie 'woman', mduon 'old', anən 'that', ŋaʔ 'make', kpie 'wine'> 'that old woman made wine', and Radé 'si klɛi araŋ pia jiiŋ dɔʔ anɛi' <si klɛi 'what', araŋ 'non-referential pronoun', pia 'call', jiiŋ 'be, constitute', dɔʔ 'thing', anɛi 'this'> 'what do they call this?' 'what is this called?'; Vietnamese 'hai ngưòì đò mua sách' <hai 'two', ngưòì 'person', đò 'that, those', mua 'buy', sách 'book'> 'those two people buy books'; Cantonese 'tsòkmään ɲŋ tsòujŋntsŋ játkin si' <tsòk 'yester', mään 'evening', ɲŋ 'I', tsòu 'make, do', yŋn 'finish', tsŋ 'marker of completed action', ját 'one', kin 'classifier', si 'business, affair'> 'last night I finished up a matter of business'.

Corresponding passive constructions are not well developed in South East Asian languages. Some languages have a special third person pronoun without specific reference (reminiscent of French 'on', German 'man', which both historically go back to the word for 'man, person') which can be employed in contexts where English and many other languages would use a passive: Cambodian 'kèe lùək ʔŋkɔɔ knoŋ kɔnlaeŋ nìh' <kèe "they", lùək 'sell', ʔŋkɔɔ 'husked rice', knoŋ 'in', kɔnlaeŋ 'place', nìh 'this'> 'they sell rice here' 'rice is sold here'; Radé 'dlie anɛi araŋ sraŋ ŋaʔ hma' <dlie 'grassland', anɛi

'this', arɑŋ "they", sraŋ 'will', ɲaʔ 'make', hma 'field') 'this grassland they will make into a field' 'this grassland will be made into a field'; Vietnamese 'họ bán sách đó ở Sài Gòn' <họ "they", bán 'sell', sách 'book', đó 'that', ở 'in') 'they sell that book in Saigon' 'that book is sold in Saigon'.

Some languages possess a class of transitive verbs which with a potential object placed as an agent before the verb (rather than after the verb as a patient) express the idea of passive. Such verbs are named ergative by Cikoski 1978, bigeneric by Egerod 1985. We shall look at some examples: Thai 'khǎw pìd pratuu' <khǎw 'he', pìd 'close, shut', pratuu 'door') 'he shut the door'; 'pratuu pìd' 'the door has been shut, the door is shut'; Cambodian 'sɑŋ phtɛəh' 'build a house', 'phtɛəh nìh sɑŋ ʔɑmpii chǔǔ' <sɑŋ 'build', ʔɑmpii 'from, of', chǔǔ 'wood') 'this house is built of wood'; Vietnamese 'sách đó bán ở Sài Gòn' 'that book is sold in Saigon', 'nhà này mua năm ngoái' <nhà 'house', này 'this', mua 'buy', năm 'year', ngoái 'last') 'this house was bought last year', and 'nhà này tôi mua năm ngoái' <tôi 'I') 'this house I bought last year'.

For the last Vietnamese example compare Malay 'rumah ini kubeli tahun lalu' <rumah 'house', ini 'this', ku 'my, by me', beli 'buy', tahun 'year', lalu 'last') 'this house was bought by me last year', which is a passive corresponding to the active 'aku membeli rumah ini tahun lalu' <aku 'I', mem- 'active prefix') 'I bought this house last year'. But in Malay there is an overt shifting of voice marked both in the pronominal agent (aku versus ku) and the verb (mem- versus zero). In the second person there is a parallel shift from engkau 'you' to kau 'your, by you', whereas in the third person we find dibelinya 'bought by him' consisting of di 'marker of third person passive', beli 'buy', and nya 'his, by him'. The Malay passive is an intermediate type between the Philippine-Taiwanese type with three pseudo-passives and one pseudo-active but no genuine transitivity, and the South East Asian type with uninflected pronouns and verbs, using word order to create a pseudo-passive from a genuine active construction. The question whether the Viet-

name construction is a remnant of a former inflected type or the result of Chinese influence we shall not go into here.

The Malay pronoun *nya* 'his, hers, its, by him, etc' occurs as modifier of nouns as in *rumahnya* 'his house', and is an agentive possessive in *dibelinnya* 'was bought by him', just as *ku* and *kau* in *kubeli* and *kaubeli* are agentive possessives to be compared with *rumahku* 'my house' and *rumahkau* 'your house'. *Nya*, but not *ku* or *kau*, can also be used as a patientive possessive, as in *dia membelinya* 'he bought it'. It must be concluded that Malay has to a large extent acquired transitivity, but that the use of pronouns in active-passive contrasts shows remnants of a system which was more like the Philippine-Taiwanese one.

Classical Malay makes extensive use of a doubly marked theme-rheme construction as in '*baginda pun berangkatlah*' (<*baginda* 'majesty, king', *pun* 'marker of theme', *berangkat* 'depart', *lah* 'marker of rheme') 'the king departed'. *Lah* can also mark the exposure of a rheme: '*digitnya lah si Ali oleh anjing*' (<*gigit* 'bite', *anjing* 'dog') 'Ali by the dog, it was a case of being bitten by it', 'Ali was bitten by the dog'.

The South East Asian languages have a third way of approaching the question of active-passive, which involves a special coverb or marker which reverses the transition: Thai '*wua thùug sǎa kin sia léew*' (<*wua* 'cow', *thùug* 'coverb or marker of reversed transitive flow', *kin* 'eat', *sia* 'marker of total completion', *léew* 'marker of completed action and resulting situation') 'the cow has been eaten up by the tiger', cf. '*sǎa kin wua léew*' above. By removing the indication of the prime mover from '*wua thùug sǎa kin sia léew*' we obtain a construction which suggests the passive even more: '*wua thùug kin léew*' 'the cow was eaten'. The same thing happens in Vietnamese: '*ông đó bị họ giết ở Sài Gòn*' 'that man was killed by "them" in Saigon', reducible to '*ông đó bị giết ở Sài Gòn*' 'he was killed in Saigon.' Similarly Cantonese: '*pěi kǎu nǎau*' 'was bitten by the dog', '*pěi nǎau*' 'was bitten'.

The above examples of flow reversal have all had to do with unpleasant

events, which is the typical domain of South East Asian and East Asian passives. There are however faint traces of passivizing of pleasant events, made for instance with *dâjrâb* in Thai (<'dâjrâb chæ̀n' 'was invited') and *được* in Vietnamese (<'ông đó được họ chọn làm đại-diện' 'he was chosen to be the representative'). In modern Standard Chinese the passive or passive-like constructions are in the process of losing the connotation "unhappy event".

We have seen that possessives can enter into the sentence construction both as agents and as patients in languages which lack transitivity, such as Tagalog or Atayal, and also in Malay as a remnant of a pretransitive stage. In such languages the same possessive forms occur indicating relations involving genuine nouns and nominal verbs. In Maranao the preposed particle *sa* indicates the patientive possession (inalienable and objective genitives) as in 'somombali? sa karabao' 'he is the slaughterer of the buffalo, he slaughters the buffalo' and 'solotan sa Mandeia' 'the Sultan of Mandeia', whereas *o* indicates agentive possession: 'sombali?an o mama?' 'it is the man's goal of slaughtering—he slaughters it' and 'so karabao o solotan' 'the Sultan's buffalo'. In Malay *nya* 'his' can be both agentive and patientive possessive as shown above.

With transitivity the possessive tie between actions and actants disappears in order to make room for free flow (free transit) and separate means may develop for expressing nominal possession and actancy. In passive sentences Malay is always free to indicate the agent by means of *oleh* (a former noun meaning "possessor, owner", but now completely grammaticalized) as in 'Ahmad dipukul dengan kayu oleh Ali (pukul 'beat', dengan 'with', kayu 'wood') 'Ahmad was beaten by Ali with a stick'. The same meaning can also be expressed as 'Ahmad dipukul Ali dengan kayu', where Ali as agent cannot formally be distinguished from Ali as possessor, since the latter is also unmarked as in 'kayu si Ali' 'Ali's tree' (where *si* just introduces a PN). In the active both agent and patient are unmarked: 'Ali memukul Ahmad' 'Ali beats Ahmad'. In Thai the patient is always unmarked in the active

construction and can therefore formally coincide with the head noun—possessor noun construction, but this latter construction can be made explicit by means of the marker khǒṅ as in 'nǎṅsǎy khǒṅ phǒm' (nǎṅsǎy 'book', khǒṅ 'of, belonging to', phǒm 'I, male speaker') 'my book'. We have already mentioned the agent marker thùg used in certain passive constructions.

The differentiation of actants from possessives can be taken as an overt manifestation of the tendency towards transitivity. Conversely we have an interesting case in Radé, where it is not possible formally to tell the differences among incorporation, possession, and transitivity. 'Bòh phaaṅ phuṅ rǒh' <bòh 'ball', phaaṅ 'gun', phuṅ 'group', rǒh 'enemy'> 'the enemy's bullets' can be analyzed as consisting of bòh with phaaṅ incorporated, phuṅ with rǒh subordinated, and finally bòh phaaṅ with phuṅ rǒh as subordinated possessive, but there are no overt signs to prove such an analysis. And 'ṅa' hma' could be 'making (working) a field' or 'the making (working) of a field'. The language will have to choose sides, to develop overt signs, before we can be quite sure how to interpret this syncretism. The situation in Cambodian is similar to that of Radé. It is reasonable to assume that Radé is a Malay language which has been caught up in the typological ambiguities of Cambodian.

Early Archaic Chinese was a language in transition from an ergative sentence type (without transitivity) to an agentive sentence type (with emerging transitivity). In the Shi Jing we find sentences like 我其不怨 'I shall not resent it' with 我 as ergative, 其 as patientive possessive, and 予其殺 'I shall kill him' with 予 as agentive, 其 still as patientive possessive, and finally 王左杖黃鉞 'the king in his left hand wielded the yellow battle-axe' with 王 as agentive and 鉞 as patientive. In Early Archaic Chinese the indicator of alienable possession 其 functions as agentive and patientive with main (nominal) verbs, whereas the indicator of inalienable possession and ergative actancy 厥 only enters into subordinate phrases. Between Early and Late Archaic Chinese the process towards transitivity was completed and Chinese

falls into a typological structure similar to that of present-day South East Asian languages (but with modifier preceding head). The traces of ergative sentence structure in modern Northern Chinese rather than being a late survivor of the earliest type is perhaps due to influence from a substratum with such a typology.

It is important to stress the difference between ergativity and passivization. The “verb” in an ergative construction possesses no power of transition, it simply conveys a nominal concept for what happens to the inert noun: ‘as to the house there is burning’ or ‘there is house-burning’, whereas the genuine passive construction is related to an active transitive construction: ‘the pig was eaten’ relates to ‘...ate the pig’ with transitive flow.

In languages which operate with case markings the patient is often closely connected with a “goal” in a very concrete sense. Latin *Romam ire* ‘to go to Rome’ is constructed like *Romam condere* ‘to found Rome’, but the “passive” works differently (*Romam itur* vs. *Roma conditur*). Other cases than the goal may struggle to become truly transitive and passivizable. The English “beneficiary” is fully transformable: ‘They gave him a scholarship’-‘he was given a scholarship’, whereas German ‘*Man gab ihm Geld*’ can only become ‘*Ihm wurde Geld gegeben*’, as also with verbs whose first complement is in the dative case: ‘*Man hilft ihm*’-‘*ihm wird geholfen*’. The road to transitivity can be long and arduous, but apparently desirable and worth the effort to many a language.

The full transitive construction (agent, verb, patient—in whichever order preferred by the language in question) is by nature totally different from modification and predication, whose job it is to furnish the sentence with phrases and statements of the type “which is” and “is”—in some languages more or less sufficient for all construction of sentences. Transitivity has to do with “does” and “done” together with “who, whom, what, by whom, by what” without anything in the basic structure owning anything or being

equated to anything. In languages without transitivity what triggers the metamorphosis of phrases into utterances (junctions into nexus) is the presence of an existential element "there is (the...of...)" or the correct marking of elements as equatable or relatable to each other. With transitivity the right number and marking of actants in the correct concatenation with a verb tells the story—which is why it is also known as a narrative construction.

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