

Towards a Linguistic Theory of Specification Based on a Verb Grammar

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Abstract: The theoretical linguistic proposal that I call “a theory of specification based on a verb grammar” relies on the thesis that human language logically, cognitively, semantically and above all syntactically is built around a do-verb, constituting what I call “action trinity”: source of the action – ACTION – recipient of the action (which in terms of syntax corresponds to: SUBJECT – do-VERB – OBJECT [for transitive verbs]). The same structure applies to the predicative (be-verbs) syntax, which denotes “identification” (SUBJECT + be-VERB + PREDICATE). Reconsidering the view that the sentence (S) consists essentially of a noun phrase (NP) and a verb phrase (VP), we argue that what more efficiently describes its nature is to consider it as a verb phrase (VP) specified by the other components of an action trinity: (obligatorily) the noun phrase (NP) “subject”, functioning normally as the “actuator” of the verb, and (optionally) the complements of the verb, functioning either as objects (NP1 and/ or NP2) or as predicates. All the other linguistic components (adjective, adverb, article, pronoun, preposition, conjunction, etc.) are actually specific components that surround and refine semantically and syntactically this “action trinity”. Such a verb-based view of the sentence is consistent with a theory that the process of constructing meaning is a constant course from coral elements to more specific ones, leading thus to the creation of larger grammatical, syntactic and lexical structures. This article is the result of long personal research, which began with a joint publication on the subject together with my colleague Christos Clairis back in 2002 and has since continued with a view to publishing a book I have been working on. My contribution could be considered a “challenge” to think over the role of the verbs in sentences in a way I have found very promising in mother tongue teaching strategies.

Keywords: Specification, Action Trinity, Subject, Predicate, Sentence, Complement, Verb Grammar

1. Introduction

Specification in language is a constant course towards the creation of larger grammatical, syntactic and lexical structures, all of which are ultimately (directly or indirectly) components of specification of the verb, which remains the central basic semantic and syntactic component at the level of the sentence.

The theoretical proposal that I call “a linguistic theory of specification” [1], pp. 83-86; [2], pp. 83-86; relies on a thesis that human language logically, cognitively and semantically (whatever they are typologically the components of a language traditionally called “parts of speech”):

- a) focuses on the level of the sentence, i.e. of what is often termed as “a complete autonomous meaning”, and
- b) is built around a full verb, founded on the “action

trinity”:

action – source of the action– recipient of the action ¹,
i.e. do-VERB ² + SUBJECT (+ OBJECT).

A sentence is used to answer a number of basic questions of the type e.g.:

- 1) what is the core of given information? *wrote* ³
- 2) who wrote? *the author*
- 3) what did he write? *the text*

→ the author – wrote – the text

Both the source of the action (subject) and the recipient of

1 It is often defined as a relationship between: ACTOR – ACTION – GOAL [5], p 348.

2 “Full” or “complete” or “do-verbs” verbs (e.g. *write, take, work, give* etc.) is the class of verbs opposite to “be-verbs” (e.g. *is, are, constitute* etc.)

3 Specification theory starts from the core component “verb”, not from the subject of the verb which as such by definition follows the verb.

the action (object) define (as arguments) the informative environment of the central core of the sentence, the verb; they specify the verb. So do the other linguistic components (adjective, adverb, article, pronoun, preposition, conjunction etc.) that surround and refine semantically the “action trinity”:

“the well-known author boldly wrote the brave illuminating text when the problem arose”

Secondarily, the same applies to the predicative (*be* verbs) syntax:

“The boy is tall”

In this type of syntax, the meaning is built around a connecting verb, founded on the “identification⁴ trinity”:

connection – source of connection – target of connection
i.e. *be-VERB + SUBJECT + PREDICATE*

In predicative *be*-sentences such as “*Man is mortal*” or “*The tree is green*”, a relationship of the type $X = Y$ applies broadly. This is an “identification relationship”, so to say, of the two main terms of the sentence, the subject and the predicate. Both the source of the connection (subject) and the target of the connection (predicate) compose as arguments the identifying function of the central core of the sentence, i.e. of the connecting verb, which they specify:

- 1) what is the core of given information? connection
- 2) what substantiates the connection? *is* (connecting verb)
- 3) who is it? *the student*
- 4) what is it? *the best*

→ the student – is – the best

The other language components (parts of speech) further refine the connection:

“the student with the short hair is comparatively the best in the school in which he studies”

I argue that specification as a mental semantic necessity of communication is present in all languages; it is a universal issue, regardless of whether typologically the verb may as a *form*, i.e. formally, coincide with the noun or adjective, and regardless of whether –again as a *form*– other specifications are performed with markers or other linguistic components. The specification of what I call “action trinity” for full verbs, and of the “identification trinity” for connecting *be*-verbs is a universal feature, typologically only differentiated.

2. Verb-centred View: Pāṇini – Case Grammar – Dependency Grammar

It is remarkable that focus on the verb as the core of speech has been pointed out both by ancient grammarians –for instance by Pāṇini (ca. 350-250 BC), the founder of grammatical analysis of Sanscrit– and by newer theorists, as by Charles Fillmore, the founder of Case Grammar. We clarify, however, that the perspective from which we see here the verb as the epicentre of speech based on a “theory of specification” is quite different.

Pāṇini, considering the verb as the nucleus of the sentence, focused on the nouns that directly surround the verb with certain relationships (subject, direct object, indirect object, and other verb completion relationships), which are grammatically denoted by the cases (nominative, accusative, dative, genitive, ablative, instrumental). So, what in modern grammatical theory are called “arguments” or “participants”, Pāṇini collectively called them *kāraka* (“actor” / “agens”) after the basic syntactic function of the subject [11], p. 278; [9], p. 145.

In the same direction but from a completely different perspective, the perspective of generative-transformational grammar, Ch. Fillmore in the 60s published his study “The Case for Case” [3], pp. 1-88. In his theory of “Grammar of the Cases”, the verb also becomes the epicentre of the sentence with the “valence” of the verb (number and type of the verb’s noun arguments) to regulate through the cases the form in which the nouns appear in the surface structure as subjects (nominal case), objects (accusative case) etc. All are put around the verb in close relationship of syntactic and semantic function.

A remarkably very long time ago Indian grammarians had pointed out the decisive role of the verb and –in their own thinking and their own way– had shown that everything in the sentence depends on it. Vrashabh P. Jain [12] refers to the position of ancient Indian grammarians by accepting their own view:

“So all the case relations depend upon verb, the main theme is that neglecting verb case-relations cannot exist. In fact cases are relations centring to verb, that is why they accomplish the verb. BHOJA has explained case as an instrument of verb [...]. Adjectives also qualify pronouns and nouns which always remain linked with verb. Prepositions, adverbs qualify the activity of verb, that is why they also depend upon verb” (Suryanarayana Sinha, 1973, p. 110-112).

Based on the tradition of ancient Indian grammars, Vrashabh P. Jain [12], p. 129, displays the verb relationship with the sentence and the meaning of the sentence:

“Every sentence has a final verb. Final verb mainly represents final finite action. [...] If there is no verb, there is no sentence. MALAYAGIRI also holds the similar view by stating that in performance of sentence verb is main, other constituents are for the verb [...]. The concept of simple, complex and compound sentence also depends upon verb. Meaning is a very important constituent of language. Although every word gives its own general meaning, yet its specific role and meaning is actualized while the verb is accomplished. Thus, the meaning of words of sentence and also of sentence itself rests on the actualization of verb”.

Parallel view –albeit from a different point of interest– focusing on the verb governs the “Dependency grammar” that began in Europe with the French linguist Lucien Tesnière, whose theory appears in his posthumous work *Éléments de syntaxe structurale* (1959). Tesnière dared! He opposed to the dipole subject-predicate, which he considered a distinction of logic that does not apply in language, rendering the verb the

⁴ The term “identification” is used here to denote the relationship $X = Z$ but in a very broad meaning, which refers to a rather general connective relationship between X and Z .

centre of the sentence or, as he called it, the “root” of the sentence. The words that make up a sentence are connected to each other by what he called the “dependence” of one from the other, with one being the *governor* and the other the *subordinate*. In the sentence.

“the boy left”

there are not only three words, but three words plus two “dependencies”:

boy + left, the + boy

All of the above components directly (the component *boy*) or indirectly (the component *the*) go back to the “root”, i.e. to the verb *left*. This analysis also serves the parsing of the language, especially for languages with free word order. It goes beyond the analysis based on the phrase structure that causes certain commitments.

An example of the difference is shown below:

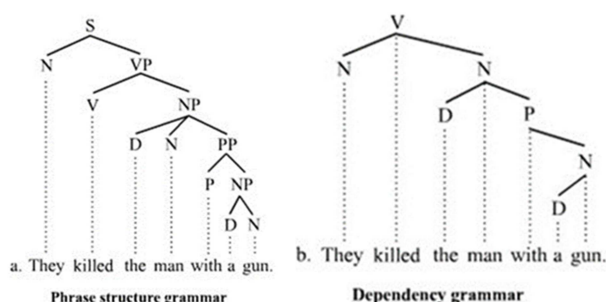


Figure 1. Phrase structure grammar vs Dependency grammar.

The components of the sentence on the “tree” do not depend on the knot Sentence (S) but on the knot Verb (V).

The concept of structure-dependency is also central to generative transformational grammar being considered as a “universal characteristic”. V. J. Cook [4], pp. 11-12, writes:

“An important insight into the nature of human language will be missed if structure-dependency is treated as a feature of a particular language. Instead it seems that the principle of structure-dependency is used in all languages. Any human being who knows any language therefore includes the principle of structure-dependency within their knowledge of language”.

3. Verb: The Basis of the Sentence

Based on the verb, “logos” (λόγος), as the ancient Greeks named what later was called “sentence”, goes beyond the simple “naming” (ὀνομάζειν) of the entities of the world, ensuring completeness in what we say. This is what we call “complete meaning”, which is the essence of the sentence.

Of particular importance is Plato's observation that sentence “completes something”; it has a beginning and an end, it has a “self-contained meaning” as the definition of the sentence in “traditional grammar” (and not only) aptly noted. The concept of “bringing to an end, to completeness” (περαίνει τι) is emphasized for the role of the verb in the sentence by Otto Jespersen [7], p. 86:

“We discover that the verb imparts to the combination a special character of finish and makes it a (more or less) complete piece of communication—a character which is wanting if we combine a noun or pronoun with an adjective or adverb”.

Therefore, the verb constitutes the “structural focus” of the sentence at the syntactic level, combined with an obligatory subject and an optional object (or objects). The established schematic representation, in which NP is directly dependent on S, allows the interpretation that NP is “the subject of the sentence” and not “the subject of the verb”, which is not the case.

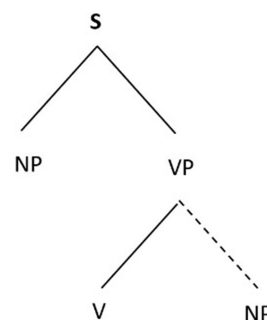


Figure 2. Sentence representation with NP directly dependent on S.

What is correctly perceived and actually understood is that the S[entence] (each Sentence) necessarily consists of a Verb Phrase (VP) which includes a V with (obligatorily) a NP (as the subject of the verb) and (optionally) one or two nouns (as the object/objects for transitive verbs). But then, I argue, it is better to show this relationship clearly by projecting the verb and the VP in general as the structural basis of the sentence. Schematically:

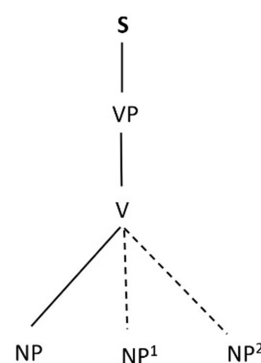


Figure 3. Verb phrase based sentence representation.

The noun itself has no autonomy, it is “subject” to the verb and denotes relationship. It denotes the relationship “subject of the verb” and functions normally as the “actuator” of the verb. The same is true of the noun as an object; it is not self-contained; it denotes “the object of the verb” and, therefore, it is a complement to the verb. Whereas it is inconceivable to talk either about a relationship “verb of the subject” or about a relationship “verb of the object”!

Therefore, the point of reference in the sentence is the verb. This is under the spotlight and everything else is situated

around it. The non-verb elements surround the verb, specifying the information it gives. The constantly “specified” element in every form of communication is the verb, while everything else around it, directly or indirectly, are –in relation to the verb– “specifying” elements. This is the perspective which justifies speaking also of a “verb grammar”.

In fact, the question that arises in such a syntactic-hierarchy debate is which component is prioritised hierarchically in communication: the active person (actor/agent) or the action? If action (the verb) precedes, then the active factor (the noun) is functionally the predicative component in the sentence; the noun predicates, i.e. specifies the verb. If the active person (actor) precedes, then the verb (as it is usually argued) predicates, specifies the noun; in such a case the verb specifies the subject, as if it functioned as “the verb of the subject”! The matter becomes even more difficult if we take into account the object. Because then the predication should be extended to the noun that functions as the object of the verb. In this case, not only the verb but also its object will be subordinated to the subject, both as its predicates.

It is therefore more natural and functional to consider the verb as the focus of the sentence. All the other elements –with a different role and weight– surround and refine it, functioning as “predicative elements”.

4. What Is “Predicative” Is the Function of the Arguments

If we characterise the function of the verb as predicative (as they do: Aristotle, *On interpretation*⁵, traditional grammar and others), we assign to the verb a secondary functional role, “complementing” the subject, so to speak, as if they were merely “follow-up” arguments: first comes the actor and the action follows. This view “degrades”, so to say, the role of the verb in the sentence, since the verb is what is considered as predicative. This view, to its extreme application, led to considerations such as the case of the English philosopher of the 18th century James Harris [6], pp. 409–411, who distinguishes the parts of speech into two main categories, substantives and attributes, describing the verb as “attribute”, and the adverb as a second-degree attribute! [10], p. 168.

Based on what we said, with a sentence of the type.

“John drinks beer”

the consideration of the verb as predicative presupposes a starting point such as *“What does John do?”*, whereas the verb-centred position, which is argued here, presupposes that the starting point is made from the verb (*he drinks*) and the “original” presupposed question is *“Who drinks?”*, in order to have the answer:

“John drinks”

Indeed, the tacit identification of the predicative function

with the verb (which starts from the assumption that the subject precedes it and that the verb follows and “predicates” it, i.e. speaks of it) made that in the initial determination of the parts of speech the adjective was included in the category of the verb (Plato and Aristotle) [10], p. 31. If the subject is the one which is “predicated” (identified or specified) in sentences such as:

1. *The doctor healed the child*

2. *The doctor is good*

then the nominal (with a be-verb) sentence (2) that acts as a predicate –including the verbal sentence (1) (with a do-verb)– lead to the inclusion of the adjective within the verb class as it happened in fact (Plato – Aristotle). However, if things are so, analytical consistency in predicative be-sentences of the type:

“Our son is a doctor”

where the predicate is a noun (*a doctor*), would require including also nouns in the category of the verb! Which leads to *absurdum*.

What we argue here is that in such sentences it is the constituent subject which is subjected to the verb, and not vice-versa. This is why we always talk about “the subject of the verb” and not about “the verb of the subject”! In fact, instead of the “predicativity” of the verb in regard to the subject, we should be talking about the “predicativity” of the subject, the specifying character and the specifying function of the subject in its relation to the verb.

The same applies, logically, to the object of the verb. The correct question here too is *“What does he drink?”*, in order to have the answer.

“He drinks beer”

That is why we are talking about “the object of the verb”, and not about “the verb of the object”! Again, speaking about the object, we must talk about the “predicative character”, the predicative function of the object in its relation to the verb.

In what has been said, one needs to clarify that the “functional perspective of the sentence”, which –based on the respective intentions of the speaker– determines in the actual communication whether the emphasis is placed on the subject or on the object of the verb or on the verb itself, does not remove the prototypical function of the verb that focuses “predicativity”, i.e. specifying information, on everything that surrounds the verb and not on the verb itself.

5. Specification in Be-Verb Constructions

Given that specification takes place to great extent and is directly noticeable with do-verbs, a particular reference is required to the “connective constructions” (be-verbs constructions or constructions in which a be-verb connects a subject and an adjective / noun). Examples:

“John is a doctor”

“Elsa is very smart”

“Such actions are wrong”

“The tsunami after an earthquake is dangerous”

⁵ Aristotle, *Περὶ ἑρμηνείας* (On interpretation), 3: «(ῥῆμα) ... καὶ ἐστὶν ἀεὶ τῶν καθ' ἑτέρον λεγομένων σημείον» [(the verb) ... is always a sign that something is asserted of something else].

Also, in connective constructions (be-sentences) a specification of a different type takes place. It is certain that the (connective) be-verb *is/are* does not give information of the kind that the do-verbs (e.g. *sees, reads, gives, buys, goes, eats*, etc.) give. The be-verb has a strong syntactic meaning and different weight. It functions as a marker for a quality or characterisation to follow, which will specify in the form of a quasi-identity the relationship between the subject (e.g. *John, Elsa, actions, tsunami*) of the be-verb *is/are* and the predicative attribute of the subject (e.g. *doctor, smart, wrong, dangerous*)⁶; it will specifically identify the two components (*John – doctor, Elsa – smart, actions – wrong, tsunami – dangerous*) syntactically and communicatively—not necessarily logically. *Sensu lato*, it will even identify the type of a sentence.

Traditionally, this 'idiosyncratic' meaning of be-verbs in connective structures –idiosyncratic in the sense that it does not indicate an action, a situation, or a passion– is not seen as a “meaning” but as a mere connecting factor, which connects the subject to a predicative attribute. However, by actualising the connection, the speaker states at the same time that he refers –this is the “idiosyncratic” information– to the existence of a basic quality or a basic characterisation or an adverbial indication, which he connects to a person/thing/situation/act, etc., and is denoted by a noun or adjective or pronoun or even a whole sentence that functions as a predicative attribute.

Therefore, with connective (be-verbs) there is no lack of specification; specification has another form, another wording, another content; in connective structures the connecting verb (called also “connector”) functions as a specified core entity in regard to its subject and its predicate. Be-verb (*is/are*) can be considered as the core of the sentence, whose specifying arguments can be heuristically traced by asking “who is” (for specifying subject) and “what is” (for specifying predicate).

In general, it could be said that do-verbs are used as the basis of speech to denote the “becoming” (Greek “*gignesthai*”)⁷, the various forms of energy of man (action, movement, changes, everything the speaker does physically or spiritually), whereas be-verbs denote the “being” (Greek “*einai*”)⁸ of the subject, its property, its characteristics. Thus, do-verbs have a more dynamic character, while be-verbs are inherently static.

6. Conclusion

The basis of my thought is that our communication (mentally and syntactically) is a continuous specification of “becoming” (“*gignesthai*”) and “being” (“*einai*”), which constitute the two pillars on which all linguistic communication is based: 1) who/what does what → do-verbs

(“action verbs”); 2) who/what is what → be-verbs (“connection/identification verbs”). Therefore, human speech is prototypically built around the verb, which is the “specified” unit of the sentence, with all other components (adverbs, adjectives, etc.), directly or indirectly, being “specifying” constituents of the verb. Such a proposal for a “grammar of the verb” leads up to a multi-layered “theory of specification” (concerning, for example, grammatical specification, lexical specification, etc), which however needs a more detailed argumentation that the limited space of an article does not allow.

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6 Quirk Randolph, Greenbaum Sidney, Leech Geoffrey, Svartvik Jan [8]. p. 343, consider predicative attributes as “Complement of the Subject (Cs)”.

7 The term “becoming” is used to denote the greek philosophical term «γίγνεσθαι» of Heraclitus and Aristoteles in opposition to «εἶναι» (to be).

8 See Note 7