

Objectless Transitives in English

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0. INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the transitivity variability of English verbs and its functional implication. Existence of an abundance of sentences like those in (1) illustrates the fact that a majority of English verbs that can take an object can also occur without.¹

- (1) a. Please let me explain.
- b. You still don't understand.
- c. He is studying.
- d. Jack drinks heavily.

Some linguists have discussed verbs like those occurring in (1) from the viewpoint of "deletability of objects" and have treated them as transitive verbs that allow their objects to be deleted. All the sentences in (1) are, in their view, products of the "omission of an obvious object" (Jespersen 1927.vol.III.320-4, Lehrer 1974, Allerton 1975). Others have argued for a distinction based on the "notion of completeness" of a sentence between the elliptical type (e.g. (1a), (1b)) and the non-elliptical type (e.g. (1c), (1d)) (Thomas 1979, Matthews 1981).

It is my purpose here to demonstrate that a proper treatment of objectless transitives in English must include lexical-semantic as well as discourse-functional perspectives. There are five questions that I am concerned with in this paper: (i) why do certain transitive verbs always require an object noun phrase, while many others easily appear without any? (ii) when an object is missing from the surface form of a sentence, is it present in its underlying structure or not? (iii) when the missing object is not syntactically accounted for, is it of a lexical-semantic or a pragmatic nature? (iv) What is the communicative intent of the speaker/writer when he/she chooses to employ the objectless form? (v) Are there any special semantic characteristics or discourse-functions generally associated with objectless transitives?

Many of the examples given in this paper are my own, but many are also modifications of sentences that occur at various places in the existing literature on objectless transitives. Reference to the source of the examples will be made only in cases of direct quotation.

1. VERBS WITH VARIABLE TRANSITIVITY

Dictionary definitions of action verbs in English usually differentiate between transitive and intransitive usages. A great many verbs, however, can be used either way. Those like *move*, *open*, *break*, for example, form a well recognized class of “ergative verbs”;

- (2) i. She moved her fingers rapidly.
- ii. Her fingers moved rapidly.
- (3) i. Jane opened the door.
- ii. The door opened.

The subject of the intransitive corresponds semantically to the object of the transitive. Verbs of this class which are conventionally called ergative verbs are to be differentiated from all the other cases, where the semantic role associated with the subject remains constant.

It is indeed hard to find ‘intransitive use only verbs’, for even seemingly pure intransitive action verbs like *walk* and *die* have transitive uses.

- (4) John walked the dog.
- (5) He died a glorious death.

(4) is an instance of so-called causative use of intransitives, and (5) is a typical example of cognate object construction.

Somewhat similar to (5) are the following type of sentences.

- (6) Jack waved his hand at us.
- (7) Jack shrugged his shoulders.

The object noun phrases in the above two sentences do not provide any communicatively significant information. This is because they contain information already contained in the verbs. Compare the following three sentences with *wave*.

- (8) a. She waved.
- b. She waved her handkerchief.
- c. She waved her pretty little hand.

(8a) implies that the subject-referent waved “her hand.” *She waved her hand* sounds tautological. (8b) is a case with an informative object different from the one implied by the verb. (8c) is also perfectly natural because the object noun phrase contains some new pieces of information other than those provided by lexical properties of the verb.

Wave and *shrug*, both express body part movement and information about the specific part is inherent in the verbal meaning. Though they are often treated as transitive verbs with deletable objects², these verbs are primarily intransitive and their transitive uses are in fact derivative. The meaning of the intransitive and transitive patterns seem to differ in a regular way, as pointed out by Allerton (1982.70), the former referring to the bodily movement in a general way as a signal, and the latter concentrating our attention on the particular body part (which would of course naturally take the intonation nucleus).

Addition of an object other than the lexically specified one, however, deprives the verb a part of its inherent meaning, as in (8b) above.

Likewise, many verbs with whom the transitive use is clearly primary can also occur without an object. This latter class, exemplified by (1) above and (6Bii) and (7Bii) below, will be the principal subject of the discussions in the subsequent sections.

- (6) A: Is that your new violin?
B: i. Yes, but I cannot play it well yet.
ii. Yes, but I cannot play well yet.
- (7) A: What have you been doing?
B: i. I've been painting a picture.
ii. I've been painting.

2. INTRINSICALLY TRANSITIVE VERBS IN ENGLISH

Though many transitive verbs in English may occur with or without an object, there are certainly some verbs where the object cannot be left unexpressed, no matter what the circumstances are. Compare (8) below with (9):

- (8) A: Who took the picture?
B: i. Jack took the picture.
ii. Jack took it.
iii. *Jack took.
- (9) A: Who passed the exam?
B: i. Jack passed the exam.
ii. Jack passed it.
iii. Jack passed.

(8Bi) and (9Bi) are both grammatical but sound somewhat unnatural, mainly because they violate the general principle of linguistic economy, i.e. remove or reduce the size of communicatively redundant items. (8Bii) and (9Bii) are versions with pronominalized objects, a typical case of “reduction” of repeated items. Sentence (9Biii) is an extreme case of linguistic economy; the redundant object is simply “removed.” While there is no difference in meaning whether a pronoun occurs or not in (9), the same does not obtain in (8) – (8Biii) is irredeemably ungrammatical.

Why does not this particular operation work with cases like (8)? It is clearly not a matter of configurational difference; the two constructions are syntactically identical. We may suspect then that what is responsible must be some what kind of lexical-semantic difference between the lexical properties of *pass* type verbs and *take* type verbs? Let us consider further examples. Compare (10) and (11) below with (12) and (13).

- (10) A: Did you hear the news?
B: *Yes, I heard.

- (11) A: Who damaged the key?
 B: *I damaged.
- (12) A: Did you watch the play?
 B: Yes, I watched.
- (13) A: Who washed the car?
 B: I washed.

We can see that the verbs *hear* and *damage* behave like *take*, and *watch* and *wash* like *pass*-type. It appears that the decisive factor in expressing or suppressing the contextually understood object is the lexical limitation imposed by the verbs on their possible objects; i.e. verbs like *take*, *hear* and *damage* can take unlimited range of objects, whereas those like *pass*, *watch* and *wash* intrinsically impose some limitation. There is practically no limit on the kind of things that one can *take*—concrete things like “medicine,” “umbrella” as well as abstract ones like “opportunity” or “idea.” *Pass*, on the other hand, imposes some specific understanding on its object: the object must be something that the subject-referent moves toward and beyond. A large number of *take* type verbs (e.g. *avoid*, *carry*, *catch*, *get*, *make*, *damage*) share a peculiar lexical property; viz. what they basically denote are general physical action/movements. A verb of this type falls short of specifying the type of action by itself without an expressed object. The semantic tie between a verb of this kind and its object seems to be inseparably strong.

Omission of an object of a semantically underspecified verb is prohibited on discourse-functional grounds as well. In a context like (8), (10) and (11), for instance, there is no point in repeating the verb, which is unqualified to provide any discourse-functionally significant piece of information, at the expense of linguistic economy. We might as well employ more truncated forms like *Yes*, *I did*, *I did* or simply *Yes*. The resulting ungrammaticality thus can be the joint effects of a number of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors.

In the case of question-answer context, there arises one more puzzle of somewhat different nature. What is the point of repeating the verb, as in (12B) and (13B), when it is perfectly natural to answer employing Pro-verb *do* or simply by *yes* or *no*. Here comes in the communicative intent of the speaker. To repeat the verb, violating the “law of least effort,” has an effect of emphasizing the action type—the speaker is saying more than the information requested by his interlocutor.

3. DETRANSITIVE VERBS

There is yet one other broad type of transitive verbs beside the ones discussed above, which frequently appear without any object. The nature or identity of the unexpressed something is recovered not from the context in which the sentence is used but from the lexical-semantic properties of the verb. (The following examples are cited from Lehrer (1970).)

- (16) A: Would you like to eat some cake?
 B: No, thanks. I don't care to eat just now.
 (17) Mary dances the tango badly. Can you dance?
 (18) John drinks only gin, but I wouldn't drink.

The unexpressed object in (16B) is not necessarily *cake* but any *food*, in (17) it is any *dance*, not just *tango*, and in (18) it is *alcoholic beverage* in general, not necessarily *gin*.

Several linguists have treated this type largely from two differing points of view. Lehrer (1970) recognizes three subtypes³; (i) the type which allows certain specific objects to be deleted, (ii) the type which allows deletion of two or more objects, and (iii) the type which allows deletion of non-specific objects. Allerton (1975), in discussing deletion and proform reduction in general, treats this type as a kind of indefinite deletion. Thomas (1979) argues that the missing object of this type is a case of non-realization and that there is no loss of information caused by the absence of the object; the object does not appear because there is no need for one. I shall subscribe to this last view, since the objectless expressions in (16)–(18) above are all self-sufficient as they are. (The following examples are provided by Thomas (1979:43).)

- (19) A: Have you been reading 'Alice in wonderland'?
 B: I've been reading but not 'Alice in wonderland'.
 (20) A: What have you been doing there?
 B: *I've been watching.
 (21) A: Have you been watching television?
 B: *I've been watching, but not television.

Watch, as we have seen above will not appear objectless unless there is a contextually provided object in the preceding discourse. Hence the ungrammaticality of (20B). Likewise, (21B) ends up having a contradictory meaning. *Read*, on the other hand, has a sufficient meaning in itself. Though the "act of reading" necessarily implies the presence of some object, the speaker can choose not to specify it depending on his/her communicative intent. A striking contrast obtains with the verbs *telephone* and *ring up* as illustrated in the following (Allerton, 1975).

- (22) A: What's the secretary doing?
 B: i. She's telephoning.
 ii. She's ringing up.

(22Bi) is an example of "detransitivization" (*read* type) and (22Bii) is a result of contextual deletion (*watch* type). Although both verbs refer to the same kind of action and the syntactic structures in which they occur appear to be identical, (22Bii) is incomplete without a contextually understood, recoverable object, whereas (22Bi) portrays the action as a complete and self-sufficient piece of information and no reference is made to the person being rung up.

The removal of a communicatively unnecessary object of a *read/telephone* type of

verb is not dictated by the syntax but derives from the lexical-semantic properties of the verb and the pragmatic intent of the speaker/writer. They are different from pure intransitives in that the action will not be complete without some lexically implied (but unspecified) object.

Examination of lexical-semantic properties of the verbs reveals differing degrees of object specification. Three types of verbs may be mentioned in this category. One type is those like *read* and *telephone* with which the nature of possible object is necessarily determined by the meaning of the verb, i.e. in other words, verbs of this subtype denote activities where there is some standard or typical kind of object; with *read* it is a book or some such written material; with *telephone* the object is most certainly a person/persons. In the following, the (a) sentences are all examples with some unspecified object of the characteristic kind understood. The (b) sentences, on the other hand, are each accompanied by an object with additional information.

- (23) a. Jane is cooking. (foods/meal)
 b. Jane is cooking Irish stew.
- (24) a. Do you smoke? (tobacco)
 b. Do you smoke cigars?
- (25) a. Mary's been sewing. (cloth/article of clothing)
 b. Mary's been sewing her wedding dress.
- (26) a. I'll write soon. (letter)
 b. I'll write a letter of recommendation soon.

The second subtype is represented by *drink* and *shave*. A verb of this subtype also has a narrowly restricted semantic specification for its possible object, which originates in the type of action expressed by the verb; in the case of *drink* the object is necessarily "liquid," and in the case of *shave*, the object must be something with hair on its surface. However, the objectless use of this subtype has, conventionally or socially, acquired a slightly different sense from the habitual one, as is observed in the following examples.

- (27) Dick drinks heavily. Do you drink?
 (28) He shaves every morning with an electric razor.

The understood object of *drink* in (27) is not just any type of liquid but "alcoholic beverage" and that of *shave* in (28) is undoubtedly the subject-referent's "face." Whenever a verb of this subtype appears by itself, the type of action denoted by it gets specialized, i.e. get more narrowly restricted. What are referred to in (27) and (28) are specific activities of "alcoholic drinking" and "shaving one's face" respectively, and not general activities of 'drinking' or 'shaving,' in which case explicit objects are obligatory as in the following.

- (29) A: Where's my lemonade?
 B: *I drunk.
- (30) My legs are getting too ugly. *I must shave soon.

The verbs *expect*, *propose* and *drive* also fall into this category. *Expect* (probably only with progressive aspect, *be expecting*) is often used with the sense “expect a baby, i.e. be pregnant.” The other two are most commonly used to mean “propose marriage” and to “drive an automobile” respectively.⁴

- (31) Mary is expecting.
- (32) Bill proposed to Betty.
- (33) Do you drive?

When we compare the usages, with and without an expressed object, of the *read* subtype and the *drink* subtype, we note that the semantic specialization of the verbal meaning of one works in the opposite direction to the other. A *drink* subtype with an explicit object has a general meaning, while the same verb without an object denotes a more narrowly restricted activities. An expressed object of the *read* type, on the other hand, works in the direction of specifying the activity, while the objectless usage of this subtype serves to denote only a general activity type. Examples follow.

- (34) A: What have you been doing all this while?
- B: i. I've been reading.
- ii. I've been reading a fascinating article.
- iii. I've been drinking.
- iv. I've been drinking three cups of coffee.

(34Bi) simply conveys that the kind of activity the speaker has been doing is ‘reading,’ while (34Bii) is more specific about it. In the case of (34Biii) and (34Biv), the former denotes specifically that what the subject/referent has been doing is not the general act of drinking but “alcoholic drinking” activity, while the verb *drink* in the latter is used in its general sense. The following may appear to be a counterexample to this generalization.

- (35) Fred drank gin at the party.

At a glance, (35) looks like having a still more specialized meaning, viz. ‘drink gin,’ than a simple objectless form which means ‘drink alcoholic.’ This, however, is a straightforward case of a combination of *drink* in its general sense and an explicit object.

There is another noteworthy difference between the two subtypes. The interpretation associated with the objectless use of *read* type is of a lexical nature, i.e. inherent in the basic meaning of the verb. The particular interpretation associated with the objectless use of the *drink* type has now come to be lexicalized, but is thought to be of social origin, i.e. such specialization is conditioned by social-pragmatic factors. In a society where drinking alcoholic is prohibited for religious or other reasons, for instance, such conventionalized automatic association of the act of drinking with alcoholic beverage is unthinkable. Likewise, in a society where it is customary for a man to have beard, automatic association of the act of shaving with one's face will probably not take place.

The third subtype of detransitive verbs denotes a highly specialized kind of activity, and in many cases imposes practically no limitation on possible objects. This class is represented by *steal*, *see* and *annihilate*. ((36) and (37) are found in Huddleston (1984)

- (36) He steals (= is a thief).
- (37) Chickens can't see in the dark (= are night-blind).
- (38) This weapon doesn't merely kill, it annihilates.
- (39) Jane irons on Tuesdays.

The sentences (36)–(39) above each conveys a general tendency of the subject-referent with respect to the activity denoted by the verb, the object thereof is irrelevant—can be anything.

Quite a few verbs could be placed either with *pass* type, which allow deletion of an contextually redundant object, or *steal* type discussed above. For example, the following two sentences, which are from Lehrer (1974) and Huddleston (1984) respectively, are ambiguous.

- (40) John wants to sell cars, but I don't think he can sell.
- (41) I can't see.

By (40), the speaker may be expressing his/her negative opinion of John's aptitude for "selling cars" or his selling ability in general. If former, then it is a case of contextual deletion. If latter, then *sell* behaves as a *steal* type verb. Similarly, (41) can equally well be interpreted as "I can't see the particular thing that I am trying to see because something is in the way" (contextual deletion) or as "I am blind" (*see* is used as a *steal* type verb).

4. DISCOURSE FUNCTIONS OF OBJECTLESS CLAUSES

We have made a brief reference to the communicative intent of the speaker/writer in the second section. Munro (1982) points out that our normal interpretation of an English transitive verb used without an object (in examples like *She's cooking*) is that the general action is of more interest than the specific unspecified object. Her observation seems to apply to all the cases of objectless expressions we have discussed (including cases of contextual deletion and detransitivization). When we combine this fact with Allerton's observation, cited in Section 1, of the transitive use of body part movement verbs, we may make the following generalization.

- (42) The common discourse function of all types of objectless expression is to emphasize the action type.⁵

However, there seems to be more to it. There is a difference in sentence type between objectless sentences of non-contextual variety and those of contextual variety.

- (43) An objectless sentence of non-contextual (= lexical or social) variety is used in an expository description while that of contextual variety is used as a particular fact/event description.

What is noteworthy in this connection is that in many cases like (17), (18), (24a), (27), (28), (33) and (36)–(39), an objectless sentence of noncontextual variety is uttered in reference to characteristic action of the subject-referent, and is often used to provide information about the personality or ability/capability of the subject—just what type of person he/she is if it is a human, or the nature of the thing if otherwise. For example, the verb *annihilate* might be used intransitively in clauses expressing a general property of the subject-referent as in (38), but hardly in the narration of a particular event, as ?*Yesterday he went out and annihilated* is quite odd (Huddleston 1984:193). Similarly, in (44), the second conjunct is a negative characterization of the personality of *John*. (The object of *steal* in the second conjunct is not just *cars* but anything.)

- (44) Jack is a bad boy and steals cars, but John is good and wouldn't steal.

5. NON-INDIVIDUALITY AND DE-CATEGORIZATION OF OBJECT

There are cross-linguistic phenomena of de-categorized objects which have a direct bearing on the objectless transitive phenomena. One of the commonest mechanism, via which the construction is rendered intransitive may be 'object incorporation' process, as found in the (b) sentence below (Givón 1984).

- (45) a. John hunted *the deer/a deer*.
 b. John did some *deer-hunting*.

While in (45a) a specific, referentially unique deer must be involved, in (45b) *deer* is non-individuated and thus decategorized.

Japanese is full of nominalized verb phrase compounds, some like those in (46) are "Sino-Japanese compounds," and others are of Japanese origin like (47).

- | | | | |
|---------|-------------------|----|---------------------|
| (46) a. | doku-sho suru | b. | ten-kyo suru |
| | read book do | | change address do |
| | "do book-reading" | | "move" |
| (47) a. | hon-yomi o suru | b. | ha-migaki o suru |
| | book read ACC do | | teeth brush ACC do |
| | "do book-reading" | | "brush one's teeth" |

Another mechanism frequently observed in many of the world languages is the use of an explicit but non-individuated object. An object of this kind exhibits a certain characteristic process of decategorization, like in the following. ((48b) is from Allan (1980:565).)

- (48) a. John hunted deer.
 b. Nick Frenzy plays guitar with noise.

The object of these sentences are distinguished both syntactically and semantically from prototypical ones, as in the following.

- (49) a. John hunted the deer/a deer. (= (45a))
 b. Nick Frenzy played the piano for two hours.

The object nouns *deer* and *guitar* in (48) do not have independent reference as *the deer/a deer* and *the piano* in (49) do, as is reflected in their decategorized surface forms, viz. absence of article and number marking. In fact (48a) is much closer in its sense to (45a).

The similar contrast between a fully categorial object and decategorized one obtains in the use of Turkish accusative marking. In the pair of sentences below, accusative-marked *balığı* in (50a) is interpreted as referring to an individualized entity whereas the non-marked *balık* in (50b) does not (Nilsson 1984.24).

- (50) a. Ayşe balığı tutuyor.
 fish-ACC she catches/holds
 “Ayşe is catching/holding the fish.”
 b. Ayşe balık tutuyor.
 “Ayşe is fishing.”

The following examples from Fijian show another decategorization process of non-referential object, viz. the lack of verbal conjugation (Lazard 1984.279).

- (51) a. E-raica a koro.
 ASP-look ART village
 “He looks at the village”
 b. E-rai-koro.
 ASP-look-village
 “He is a village-inspector (lit. looks-village)”

When we examine all cases of object decategorization noted above from a discourse functional point of view, we find a certain characteristic that is not shared by sentences with prototypical objects. That is, they serve to depict the subject-referent by way of action/activity type. In many case, as in (48), (51b), they describe the general property or personality (or sometimes profession) of the subject-referent, as a part of personal description. A sentence with a prototypical noun phrase, on the other hand, is usually employed in the narration of a particular event involving the subject referent.

Verbs with decategorized objects thus share a common property with objectless transitive, viz. the communicative intent of the speaker in both is to provide information concerning the subject by way of emphasizing the action-type. Removal of an object noun phrase is hence regarded as an extreme form of de-categorization.

6. DISCOURSE FUNCTIONS OF DETRANSITIVE SENTENCES

We have noted, in various parts of the discussion, discourse functions of objectless transitives and communicative intents of the speaker in using them, which is summarized in (42) and (43). When we examine them further, we recognize the following two different functions.

- (52) i. Explication of the subject-referent's action type at a time (eg. *I was reading, John's been painting, Mary just studied*)
- ii. Explication of general property, characteristic activities or disposition of the subject-referent (e.g. *John drives, Fred drinks heavily, Chickens can't see in the dark*)⁶

The second function, (52ii), has a striking similarity to the function of so-called activo-passive sentences which may be regarded as another process of detransitivation.

- (53) a. His books sell well.
- b. This material feels soft.
- c. The meat cut tender.

The sentences in (53) are all employed to characterize the subject-referent with respect to its readiness or suitability to undergo the process denoted by the verb.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have discussed general phenomena of verb detransitivization in English chiefly from a discourse pragmatic point of view. We also looked at some comparable facts in other languages. As noted by Lyons (1977:487), there are in most languages, and probably in all, grammatically productive mechanisms for decreasing or augmenting the intrinsic valency of a verb. The detransitivizing process is one such mechanism for decreasing the valency.⁷ A sentence with tautologous accusative or cognate object construction, as we have pointed out, works in the opposite direction, i.e. to augment the valency of a verb.

We have also pointed out that the motivation for these mechanisms is ultimately found in the overall discourse context, but above all in the speaker/writer's communicative intent.

NOTES

- 1) Huddleston (1984:191-2) points out that the optionality of lexical objects is a property that may be regarded as something of a peculiarity of English, for languages generally make a sharper division within the lexicon between transitive and intransitive verbs.
- 2) Jespersen (1927), Lehrer (1974) and Allerton (1975) share this view.
- 3) Actually her classification is four-fold, the fourth subtype being those with contextual deletion,

which we have treated separately in Section 2.

- 4) There are verbs whose meanings get specialized in more than one way. For example, *I changed here* can mean either “I changed train here,” or “I changed my clothes here.” In most cases, however, the contexts in which they are used play the principal role in their disambiguation. Lehrer (1970) was first to discuss the existence of a considerable number of verbs of this type. Her overall grouping, however, does not necessarily coincide with ours.
- 5) This has a corollary; viz. the common discourse function of cognate object constructions is to present the object as a communicatively relevant piece of information. cf. Section 2 above.
- 6) There is one notable feature of detransitive sentences of the subject-referent characterizing type, i.e. they are quite often used in the negative (e.g. *John doesn't smoke, I don't drink, Mary doesn't cook*).
- 7) Passive construction is another possibly universal mechanism for decreasing the valency of a verb, via which the patient and the process it undergoes get all the attention.

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正誤表

Yasutake Tomoko "Objective Transitives in English" 愛知教育大学研究報告
人文科学 Vol.36 p.43-55 (1987)

	誤	→	正
p. 45 l. 3	whom		which
p. 52 l. 30	case		cases
p. 55 l. 10	(挿入)	Huddleston, R.D. 1984. <i>Introduction to the grammar of English</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.	