

Prototypical transitivity revisited¹

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Abstract

In this article, a point of view based on the linguistic usage has been adopted in order to achieve a review of the concept of prototypical transitivity. After analyzing the traditionally accepted ideas on the notion, we set up arguments based on the acquisition and the frequency of use of the transitive construction that lead to a new interpretation of the prototype. This prototype, that responds to the characteristics of the clauses relatively low in transitivity, is supported by the most recent studies on the perception of the causality, that put aside the classical idea of exclusively physical causation and incorporate the psychological or intentional causality to the human cognitive model. The communicative perspective reinforces, also, the discursive prevalence of the new usage-based prototype.

Keywords: transitivity, prototype, usage-based, causation.

When comparing the different characterizations of the transitive prototype that are found in the bibliography, what comes to our attention is a wide accord about the properties of the prototypical transitivity (cf. Lakoff 1977: 244; Delancey 1987; Langacker 1991: 301-302; Kemmer 2003: 96, etc.).

A list with the semantic traits of the canonical transitive construction was offered by Taylor (1995: 206-207):

- a) Events with two participants –subject and direct object– are described.
- b) The two participants are clearly individuated.
- c) The agent (subject) initiates the event.
- d) The agent acts with conscience and volition, and controls the event. The agent is human.

1. A larger version of this paper will be published in Nicole Delbecque (ed.): *Data-based approaches to transitivity, motion and causation*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

- e) The patient receives the effects of the action made by the agent.
- f) The patient suffers a perceptible change of state as a consequence of the event.
- g) The event is punctual.
- h) There is direct physical contact between the agent and the patient.
- i) The event is causative.
- j) The agent and the patient are contrasting entities.
- k) The event is real.

The characterization of the canonical transitivity seems to be based on the traditional definition of the transitive clauses as those in which “the action passes from an agent onto a patient”. The examples usually provided in the description of the transitive prototype obey to this traditional definition.

The traditional definition as well as the most usual examples in the bibliography let us identify a group of verbs as typical transitive predicates. Lakoff (1977: 244) offers examples with *kill*, *hit* and *break*. Tsunoda (1985: 387) includes *kill*, *destroy*, *break* and *bend* among the prototypical transitive verbs. Andrews (1985: 68), who defines the “primary transitive verbs” as “the class of two-argument verbs taking an Agent and a Patient”, gives as examples *kill*, *eat*, *smash*. Croft (1990: 60-61) considers as prototypical the verbs of “ingestion, manipulation, creation of objects, and force-motion, location” and the verbs of destruction. Levin (1999) distinguishes the “core transitive verbs” opposite to the “noncore transitive verbs”, and among the first ones she includes *kill*, *cut*, *destroy*, *break*, *open*. And García-Miguel (forthcoming) cites the verbs *kill*, *break*, *move* and *kick*.

In addition, the homogeneity in the coding, both interlinguistically and intralinguistically, seems to be the syntactic criterion to identify the prototypically transitive predicates. The idea is summarized in the following words by Croft (1990: 53): “ideal events are expressed in basically the same way across languages, while the non-ideal events are expressed in different ways across languages and even within languages”

But it occurs that languages show contradicting results. That is to say, the results of the comparison notably vary depending on which languages are taken into account. According as the number of languages compared grows, the group of verbs considered prototypically transitive reduce, and so the examples brought forward by the researchers are few and always the same.

According to the cognitive grammar, the concept of the human experience that underlies the transitive coding is causation. That is to say, the

transitive construction would be used for the symbolic expression of the notion of causation. In order to represent the causal event coded through the transitive construction, different models which are compatible with each other have been constructed within the cognitive grammar. For example, Langacker's "billiard-ball model", Talmy's "force dynamics" and Croft's "causal chains". Although these models are shaped from the purely physic causation, their authors observe that not all the transitive constructions profile an event that is characterized by a transfer of physical energy between an agent and a patient. The solution is to admit different degrees of 'metaphorical extension' of the transitive construction to non-archetypical situations, that is, from physical interactions to interactions of psychological and social type.

After reviewing the most widely accepted ideas about the transitive prototype, now we are going to look towards certain aspects of the configuration of transitive clauses which have not been taken into account in the papers cited in the last paragraphs. We will adopt a perspective that fits in an 'usage-based model' of the language. According to this model, the linguistic system known by the users is the result of sequential processes of abstraction from the concrete uses (cf. Barlow & Kemmer 2000).

On the one hand, the usage-based models give a great significance to the role of the learning from the use in the acquisition of the language by the child. On the other hand, these models attribute an essential prominence to the frequency parameter, due that the frequency determines the level of 'entrenchment' –the term is from Langacker– of a unit or a linguistic construction.

The research carried out on the acquisition of the grammar by authors like Tomasello (1992), Lieven, Pine & Baldwin (1997) and Pine, Lieven & Rowland (1998) let us consider that the beginning of the multiword language in the child is founded in specific constructions of the particular lexical items:

In other words, children do not utilize schematic categories such as [VERB] or schematic constructions such as the transitive construction [SBJ VERB OBJ] in their early acquisition, whether these schematic structures are innate or not. Instead, children begin with very low level generalizations based around a single predicate and a single construction in which that predicate occurs, and only later in acquisition learn more schematic categories and constructions. (Croft & Cruse forthcoming: chapter 11, page 24).

The study of Ninio (1999) on Hebrew and English is a valuable contribution to our knowledge on the acquisition of the transitive construction. The author shows that the first verbs used by the children in the V-O pattern are not prototypically transitive verbs, but they are stative verbs like *want* and *see*.

There are also some grammaticalization processes that involve these ‘generic’ or light transitive verbs. Verbs like *take*, *carry*, *put*, *get*, *have*, *give*, *want*, etc. give rise to transitivizer morphemes in different languages. In addition to this, the verbs which usually take part in complex predicates VERB-OBJECT, as illustrated in (1)-(5) in the handout, are low transitive verbs with a generic meaning²:

- (1) *Siempre hay que **tener cuidado** con ellos* (Sonrisa: 278, 35).
‘You always have to be careful with them’
- (2) *Para ser boticario no **hace falta** saber leer* (Coartada: 11, 11).
‘to be an apothecary there is no need to know how to read.’
- (3) *Con estas memeces yo no **me he dado cuenta*** (Hotel: 31, 6).
‘With these absurdities, I haven’t noticed.’
- (4) ***Pasé revista** acelerada a sus respectivos historiales* (Laberinto: 59, 9).
‘I hastily reviewed their respective records.’
- (5) *En este tipo de relaciones no hay que **tomar partido*** (Hotel: 76, 14)
‘We don’t have to opt for a side in this type of relationship.’

So then, both the processes of acquisition and grammaticalization aim for the same group of verbs as the representative of the core concept of transitivity.

Ninio observes, nevertheless, that this group of verbs don’t fit into the Hopper & Thompson’s (1980) high transitivity notion, in which the identification generally assumed between high transitivity and prototypical transitivity is questioned.

2. The textual examples are from the corpus called ARTHUS (Archivo de Textos Hispánicos de la Universidad de Santiago ‘Archive of Hispanic Texts of the University of Santiago). The information on the most frequent verbs in fixed constructions VERB-OBJECT come from the Syntactic DataBase (BDS, “Base de Datos Sintácticos) made from the analysis of the cited corpus under the direction of Prof. Guillermo Rojo. For more information vid. <http://www.bds.usc.es>

Besides the acquisition data, the frequency of use is also a very relevant factor in an usage-based approach to the transitivity notion.

In table 1 below, we can see the 20 most frequent verbs in the SUBJECT-PREDICATE-DIRECT OBJECT construction, according with the data from a large syntactic DataBase of contemporary Spanish (see footnote 2):

Table 1. Most frequent verbs in the transitive pattern with percentages of the pattern over the total of the verb.

<i>Verb</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>% of the pattern over the total of cases of verb</i>
Tener 'have'	4810	83.52%
Hacer 'do/make'	2806	51.34%
Saber 'know'	2404	78.41%
Ver 'see'	2285	62.93%
Creer 'believe'	1551	81.03%
Querer 'want'	1165	90.38%
Mirar 'look'	871	67.89%
Decir 'say'	883	31.01%
Pensar 'think'	792	54.10%
Conocer 'know'	782	92.98%
Dar 'give'	745	23.51%
Recordar 'remember'	644	77.78%
Oír 'hear'	565	60.95%
Buscar 'look for'	549	88.69%
Esperar 'wait'	523	70.11%
Encontrar 'find'	469	42.52%
Llevar 'take'	463	32.74%
Tomar 'take'	453	59.68%
Sentir 'feel'	445	39.45%
Leer 'read'	404	75.51%

As we can see, they are verbs that shape clauses that are away from the transitive prototype. It is important to point out that among these twenty most frequent verbs none of the usually cited in the descriptions of the archetypical transitivity appear, and that the first verb considered prototypically transitive – the verb *matar* 'kill' – is not found until the 39th position.

We have to admit that, with regard to Spanish, the data from our corpus challenge the pervasiveness of the high transitive clauses in the discourse.

The findings of Thompson & Hopper (2001) confirm the marginal role of the high transitive clauses in the discourse and let us conclude that “the most frequent kind of clause used by speakers in everyday conversational interactions is one that is low in Transitivity” (p. 39).

From what has been claimed in the previous paragraphs, it seems that prototypical transitivity is no longer a synonym of ‘high transitivity’ but of ‘low transitivity’, at least in what is referred to some of the components of the notion, as Ninio (1999) established. Now, the acquisition and usage data brought forward are only signs of which clauses are prototypical and which ones are not, but do not constitute by themselves the foundation of this prototypicality. Next we will propose a cognitive and communicative basis for the alternative transitive prototype that is defended here.

As it has been seen above, the notion that underlies the classical interpretation of the transitive prototype is the notion of physical causation. This mechanical view of causality doesn’t establish distinctions in the way of acting of the animate entities and the inanimate ones. In fact, Langacker’s ‘billiard-ball model’ and Croft’s ‘causal chains’ make the physical causality prevail above the psychosocial interactions, and justify this last ones as ‘metaphorical extensions’ of the physical transitive prototype. The psychological base of this conception of transitivity rests on the traditional trends of developmental psychology, represented by authors like Piaget (1927) and Michotte (1946), who defended a purely physical perception of the causal relation by the child.

As opposed to this point of view, in the last few years different authors have upheld a different vision of the children’s conceptualization of the causality. The conclusion of these studies is that babies process differently the human and physical information and are sensitive to the differences between the way people and inanimate objects act.

Spelke et al. (1995) observe that one of the first notions of baby’s knowledge about the physics of movement of inanimate objects is the ‘contact principle’: “objects act upon each other if and only if they touch” (p. 49). But the contact principle is not applied equally to all the perceptible entities, due that the animate entities withdraw from it. Humans and also animals own perception mechanisms that permit them to detect and respond to other entities at distance. People manifest intentions, they make plans and they follow goals, and can influence in actions and cognitive states of other people simply through verbal and non verbal communication without having to fall back on immediate physical contact.

In the same vein, Premack & Premack (1995) defend two conceptions of causality, one *physical*, that occurs “when an object launches another

by contacting it" (p. 191), and another one *intentional* or psychological, that is produced "when one object either moves by itself or affects the movement of another without contacting it" (p. 191). These authors are clearly against the piagetian theory of causality when they state that "the infants earliest encounter with cause is in the psychological domain and occurs the moment that an infant attributes intention to a goal-directed object" (p. 191).

The conclusion that comes out from the aforementioned studies is that the causality principle can receive a psychological interpretation of intentional character different from the physical facet in which most of the approaches to the prototypical transitivity are based on. Particularly, the idea claimed by Premack & Premack (1995) that the psychological causality is prior to the physical causality in the child's development gives a cognitive basis to the data of linguistic production reported before, and it seems to be congruent with the information on transitive verbs most frequently used in textual corpora.

From the functional perspective in which this research is carried out, it is necessary to make reference also to the communicative basis of the notion of transitivity.

In Hopper & Thompson (1980) this basis rested on the textual distinction between the background and the foreground, a distinction recognizable mainly in the narrative discourse. The background is incidental or marginal with respect to the foreground, which includes the core aspects of the discourse and provides the text with structural coherence. A highly transitive expression corresponds to the foreground, in such a way that high transitivity would be the grammatical sign of a higher discursive prominence, that at the same time would reflect the cognitive salience of the codified event (cf. Delancey 1987: 56).

Nevertheless, there are no sound arguments that support the attribution of a greater cognitive importance to the events expressed through the highly transitive clauses opposite to the low transitive ones. On the contrary, both the acquisition data and the data of textual frequency lead us to think that the relatively low transitive clauses are the ones that configure the more relevant cognitive model.

At this point, we should turn our attention towards the type of discourse that constitutes the primordial manifestation of the linguistic activity: the spontaneous conversation. Like it has been seen before, Thompson & Hopper (2001) observe that the English conversational discourse shows very low indexes of transitivity. The reason of this bias towards low transitivity is the communicative function of clauses. Thompson & Hopper

confirm that the “Clauses of low Transitivity are far more useful in the intersubjective interpersonal contexts that make up most of our talking lives” (2001: 52).

Certainly, the colloquial conversation has as its main aim the expression of the subjectivity of the speakers and not the impartial report of the physical interaction between the world entities. Conversation is a mechanism for the self-expression more than for the objective description of the physical reality that surrounds us. Evidently, human beings are interested in the actions and the processes that are developed in the world, but above all what is interesting for us is the way that actions and processes affect us, and that affection is more frequent in the psychosocial realm than in the material one.

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