

Variable agentivity: Polysemy or underspecification?

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Appendix 1: Simple transitive instances of *basic-sweep* are not covert unaccusatives

The analysis of sentences as in (1) as true transitives with an external argument bears examination.

- (1) a. The north wind swept the open tundra ...^C
b. A hurricane of projectiles swept Chih-Yuen [=a ship] ...^C

The reason is that simple contact verbs such as *cover* in (2) are also found in what appears to be a simple transitive frame when they are used to describe simple contact and receive a stative interpretation.

García-Pardo (2020), Rappaport Hovav (in press), and Wilson (2020) argue that this frame is an unaccusative structure: both arguments are internal.

- (2) The cloth covered the table.

The unaccusative analysis appears to be correct for *cover*, but not for *basic-sweep* in the simple transitive frame. First, transitive stative *cover* has a causative counterpart; simple transitive *basic-sweep* does not. (3b) can be considered the causative of (3a): it means more or less what is expressed in (3c). Further, if (3b) is the causative of (3a), the *with* phrase is not semantically an instrument, and indeed there is evidence that this is so (Rappaport Hovav in press; Wilson 2020). In contrast, the causative paraphrase of (4a) in (4c) cannot be expressed as in (4b), where a cause argument is introduced; in fact, (4b) is not at all felicitous. It seems then that (4a), in contrast to (3a), does not have a causative counterpart. Its unavailability follows on the assumption that the position that would be occupied by a cause argument is already filled in (4a) by the verb's external argument.

- (3) a. Snow covered the valley.
b. The storm covered the valley with snow.
c. The storm caused the snow to cover the valley.
(4) a. ... when the branch of the tree swept the window ...¹
b. *The wind swept the window with the branch of the tree.
c. The wind caused the branch of the tree to sweep the window.

Further evidence for the unaccusative analysis of stative *cover* comes from the verbal passive. On its stative interpretation, *cover* lacks a related verbal passive, consistent with its unaccusative analysis. (5), presented in the progressive to exclude an adjectival passive interpretation, illustrates this point.

- (5) *The table is being covered by the cloth.

¹ Hall, Lindsey. 2020. Spiders. Lindsey Hall writes. <https://lindseyhallwrites.com/2020/10/23/spiders/>; accessed 7/25/2023.

The unacceptability of (5) cannot be attributed to an incompatibility between the progressive and a stative predicate since (6), the active counterpart of (5), although stative, is acceptable in the progressive.

(6) The cloth is covering the table.

Stative *cover* does appear to occur in adjectival passives. The best evidence for this analysis is that the erstwhile subject argument is expressed not in a *by* phrase but in a *with* phrase.

- (7) a. ?The table is covered by a cloth.
b. The table is covered with a cloth.

In contrast, if instances of the basic-*sweep* sense with a non-agentive subject are true transitives, they should have a related verbal passive. The passive counterparts of many examples cited in Section 2.2.1 are somewhat odd, as in (8), but there are corpus examples of non-agentive transitive *sweep* in the passive, as in (9).²

- (8) a. ???The window was (being) swept by the branches.
b. ??The tundra was being swept by the north wind.
(9) a. I look at the distant fields swept by the autumn wind.^C
b. ... the Everglades will become a kind of ecological desert, a desiccated meadow swept by huge fires each dry season.^C
c. The Japanese stood at their guns throughout but their decks were not being continually swept by a barrage of projectiles ...^C

The examples in (9) include a *by* phrase, and in fact, Marín Arrese (2009) notes that under certain circumstances *by* phrases are almost obligatory in the passive. We propose that in these examples such phrases are necessary because they express the force bearer, that is, the moving entity, which is a critical component of an imparting force by contact event. In these sample sentences the force bearer does not seem to be recoverable from context.

Although transitive instances of the basic-*sweep* sense with a non-agentive subject may have passive counterparts, as noted in Section 2.2.3 they lack anticausative counterparts, as shown in (10).

- (10) a. The branches swept the window./*The window swept.
b. The north wind swept the open tundra ...^C/*The open tundra swept.

We attribute the unacceptability of the anticausative sentences in (10) to the absence of an explicit expression of the force bearer.

References

² The judgments in (8) are unsurprising. Other surface contact verbs do not passivize well, even with agentive subjects. Consider the awkwardness of ??*The horseshoe was pounded by the blacksmith*. The felicity of the passive is known to be affected by various factors, including the relative discourse topicality and animacy of a verb's arguments (Bresnan et al. 2001; Ransom 1979; Thompson 1987).

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