

(Non-)agentivity and Subjecthood

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Studies of the semantic underpinnings of transitivity associate subjecthood with agentivity, and indeed the first examples of transitive verbs that come to mind have agentive subjects (e.g., *The toddler broke the toy*; *The gardener swept the path*; *The cook pounded the meat*). However, transitive verbs do not always have agentive subjects, and the question that arises is whether there are any restrictions on their distribution. There seems to be a consensus that causative transitive verbs, such as those denoting a change of state, allow various ontological types of subjects, but there is controversy about whether transitive manner verbs allow such subjects. There are claims that such verbs are found with non-agentive subjects, including natural forces and other inanimate causes, only in the context of an overtly expressed result, i.e. in an explicit bi-eventive (or causative) structure, and not when they describe simple events (Folli & Harley 2005, 2008, Martin & Schäfer 2014:233, Schäfer 2012). Folli & Harley (2005:96) exemplify this claim with the pair **?The wind carved the beach* vs. *The wind carved away the beach*.

This so-called “result restriction” is motivated by a small number examples, and its empirical basis has been questioned (Bruening 2010; Mateu & Rigau 2010:264–265; Rappaport Hovav 2016:472). This talk presents English corpus data from verbs of contact that show that the empirical picture is more complex: transitive manner verbs with non-agentive subjects need not co-occur with result phrases (e.g., *Dust particles battered the spacecraft*; *He felt the sand scrape his skin*). These data show that the restriction is at best a tendency, and in the talk I propose an alternate approach to the range of observed non-agentive subjects. Drawing on Rappaport Hovav & Levin (2024), I introduce conceptual representations of the core meanings of the relevant verbs together with principles of argument realization to account for their argument realization options, including the (non-)agentivity of their subjects.

References

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