

Where does John is being polite come from?

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Nobuhiro Kaga

0. Introduction

This article will be concerned with the pairs of sentences like (1a) and (1b):

- (1) a. John is polite.
- b. John is being polite.

This type of simple-progressive alternations have always been a serious obstacle to general accounts of the progressive construction owing to their own peculiar features. First, such pairs as (1) apparently deviate from the well-known generalization about the progressive that stative predicates cannot occur with this aspect; for instance, (2b) is impossible, where the stative know has assumed progressive aspect:

- (2) a. John knows the answer.
- b. \*John is knowing the answer.

As opposed to this, the progressive (1b) is perfectly grammatical in spite of the obvious fact that its corresponding simple sentence (1a) is a static expression as (2a) is.

A second peculiarity of the pair (1) is a large discrepancy in meaning between (1a) and (1b). (1a) may be interpreted as a comment on John's permanent characteristic while (1b) cannot. As we know, (1b) is taken to refer to John's temporary behavior and (1b), unlike (1a), is always given an agentive meaning; i.e., what is claimed in (1b) is that John is showing or displaying politeness by acting or behaving in

a certain manner. To account for these meanings of (1b), some grammarians proposed that the meaning inherent in the progressive construction is agentiveness and temporariness such as (1b) typically has. As is already pointed out, however, this proposal is untenable, because we can find immediately those grammatical sentences which contain progressive aspect but have nothing to do with such notions. For example, sentence (3) can be said quite naturally without implying that things will change in the near future or without granting the earth's volition.

- (3) The earth is revolving around the sun at a rate of  $365 \frac{1}{4}$  days per revolution. (Dowty, 1975)

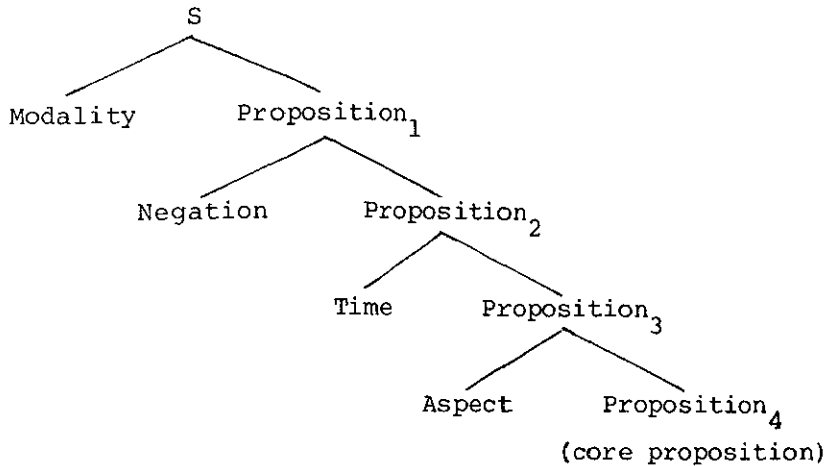
As long as examples like (3) exist, we cannot attribute the meanings of agentiveness and temporariness such as observed in (1b) to progressive aspect itself. Then where do such special meanings come from?

The aim of this paper is to give a principled account of these peculiarities of example (1). Our discussion below will be based mainly on Nakau (1982)'s hypothesis about semantic sentence composition, which we will argue about in section 1, and on Kaga (1982)'s proposal about English auxiliary system, which will be recapitulated in section 2. We will see that interaction of these two independent proposals produces some interesting consequences for our purposes.

## 1. Semantic Structure and the Progressive

Nakau (1982) has proposed the following hierarchical semantic structure:

(4)



The structure (4) embodies his underlying assumption that from a semantic point of view, S(entence) can be regarded as a layered system which consists of several independently characterizable propositions. The most deeply embedded proposition is a level where case relations are determined and is called 'core' proposition. Other semantic elements (Aspect, Time, Negation, and Modality) are characterized in their respective propositions and superimposed on the core proposition in that order.<sup>1</sup>

The postulation of the semantic structure like (4), as one of its natural consequences, leads us to make the following statement about Aspect, which is our main concern here.

- (5) Aspectual elements do not enter into the determination of semantic relations in Proposition<sub>4</sub>.

Or, if we take into account the fact that Proposition<sub>4</sub> is the level where case relations are specified, we can say plainly:

(6) Aspectual elements cannot change the case relations determined in Proposition<sub>4</sub>.

To clarify (6), let us examine the sentences in (7).

- (7) a. John painted the house.  
 b. John was painting the house.  
 c. John had painted the house.

Various theories have been developed for case relations (or thematic relations), but any of them will do for our purposes. We tentatively assume the theory in which the subject John in (7a) is assigned the Case of Agent and the object the house in (7a) the Case of Patient. Of interest here is the fact that under such a theory, the subjects in (7b) and (7c) are also specified as Agent and the objects in (7b) and (7c) as Patient; i.e., all the sentences in (7) involves the same case relations in spite of the difference in aspect. This fact is compatible with our assumption (6), and further can also be thought of as strong evidence for it, because if we accept such an assumption, we can account simply for the case relations of the three sentences in (7) with a single representation like (8) at the level of Proposition<sub>4</sub>.

(8)     John - paint - the house  
           (Agent)   V       (Patient)

From the viewpoint of explanatory economy, the simplicity of this kind seems to be highly advantageous.

The assumption that Aspect does not change case relations can be evidenced by many other simple-progressive alternations:

- (9) a. John watched TV last night.  
       b. John was watching TV last night.
- (10) a. Mary wrote a letter.  
        b. Mary was writing a letter.
- (11) a. The earth rotates around the sun.  
        b. The earth is rotating around the sun.

What about the sentences in (1)? It is not clear to me what case relations to be assigned to them. But, as we mentioned above, we have at least the intuition that the subject in (1b) is Agent but the subject in (1a) is obviously not. Let us assume for the sake of argument that John in (1a) is assigned the Case of Object.<sup>2</sup> Then, in example (1), the case relations in the simple sentence are distinct from those in its corresponding progressive sentence. This situation is apparently contradictory to our assumption (6).

Here two alternative ways are open to us. One is to conclude that the assumption (6) is untenable so long as we have counterexamples like (1). This conclusion naturally leads to dismissal of the hierarchical semantic structure (4) Proposed in Nakau (1982). The other is to keep the assumption (6) as it is and attempt to develop a different kind of analysis of examples like (1); one possibility along this line is to throw doubt on the traditional view, which has been long accepted but without any serious consideration, that (1b) is the progressive sentence of (1a). The choice between the two alternatives ought to be determined on empirical grounds, of course. Theoretically, however, the latter approach is more appealing to us, because, if it is possible, we can maintain our assumption (6) and hence the semantic structure

(4), which has a lot of interesting consequences in some other domains as well, need not be dismissed. In the next section, we will explore the possibility of the latter approach.

## 2. Stative be and Dynamic be

Let us investigate more closely example (1), which is repeated here for convenience:

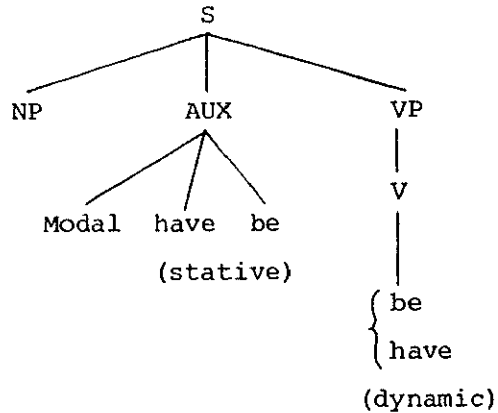
- (1) a. John is polite.  
 b. John is being polite.

(1b) has two instances of be: the first one is the auxiliary be which functions as a marker of progressive aspect along with the inflectional affix ing, and the second is the so-called main verb be, inflected as being in this case. On the other hand, (1a) contains only one instance of be. This be has traditionally been considered the main verb be, i.e., a counterpart of the second be in (1b). Under such an analysis, (1a) and (1b) should be regarded as a minimal pair with respect to progressive aspect, just like the sentences in (9)-(11), for instance. In traditional theories, thus, pairs like (1) are serious counterexamples to our assumption (6).

Kaga (1982) has proposed a different analysis of the English auxiliary system, in which the fundamental distinction is made between the stative be and the dynamic be rather than between the auxiliary be and the main verb be in traditional terms; under this new analysis, be in (1a) and the first be in (1b) are classified as the stative be and the second be in (1b) as the dynamic be; Kaga (1982) has furthermore shown that the stative be should be generated under the node of AUX

while the dynamic be should be included in the node of VP. This analysis is shown in (12):

(12)



Main arguments for this analysis are the following:

1) In the application of the VP Deletion rule, the dynamic be is obligatorily deleted while the stative be can not; (13) and (15) are cases of the stative be and (14) and (16) cases of the dynamic be.

(13) John can't be a genius and Mary { a. \*can't \_\_\_\_\_,  
  either.  
  b. can't be \_\_\_\_\_,  
  either.

(14) Can I be frank with you? - Yes, { a. you must \_\_\_\_\_.  
  b. \*you must be \_\_\_\_.

(15) They say John isn't honest, but I believe him  
    { a. to be \_\_\_\_\_.  
      b. \*to \_\_\_\_.

(16) He didn't want to be frank, but I finally succeeded  
    in persuading him { a. \*to be \_\_\_\_\_.  
                                b. to \_\_\_\_.



2) In the application of the VP Fronting rule, the dynamic be must be fronted while the stative be may not.

(17) They all said that John was being obnoxious before I arrived, and { a. being obnoxious he was!  
b. \*obnoxious he was being!

(18) They all said that John was a good doctor, and { a. a good doctor he was!  
b. \*be a good doctor he did!

3) The dynamic be can appear in the complements of the perception verbs (having the structure ... V [NP VP] ...), while the stative be cannot.

(19) a. I saw him be rude.  
b. I saw him be obnoxious.  
c. \*I saw him be tall.

4) The imperative construction (the syntactic structure is (NP) VP) admits only the dynamic be.

(20) a. Be careful.  
b. \*Be tall.

5) The stative be and the dynamic be behave differently with respect to "Do-Support"; the former acts in the same way as the auxiliary elements (Modal, etc.) and the latter as the main verbs.

(21) a. He { isn't                    } sad.  
          { \*doesn't be            }

b. { Is he                    } sad?  
    { \*Does he be           }

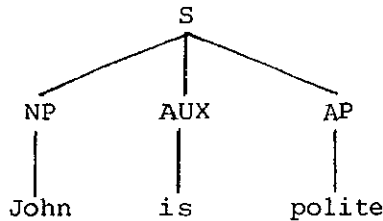
c. He { is                    } sad.  
      { \*does be            }

- (22) a. If he doesn't be a good boy, I shan't give him anything.  
 b. Why don't you be careful?  
 c. But we <sup>1</sup>did be careful.

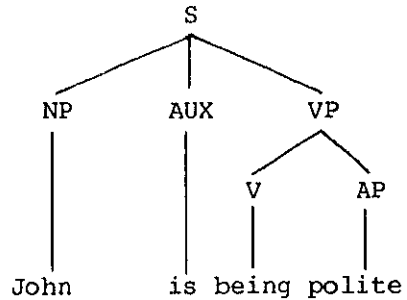
These facts can be straightforwardly accounted for in terms of the auxiliary system (12) (see Kaga (1982) for detailed discussion).

Assuming that (12) is a correct analysis of the English auxiliary system, (1a) and (1b) have the structures in (23a) and (23b), respectively:

(23) a.

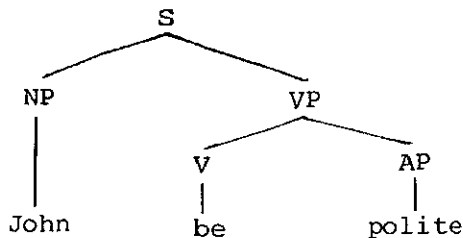


b.



(23a) and (23b), hence (1a) and (1b), differ in one crucial respect: the former includes no verb (therefore no VP node), in contrast to the latter. Given such an essential difference between (23a) and (23b), it seems inadequate to treat them as a minimal pair of the simple-progressive sentences. Rather, it is plausible to consider that the simple form corresponding to (23b) is (24)<sup>3</sup>:

(24)



(24) contains the dynamic verb be. If this analysis is correct, (1b) is no longer the progressive sentence of (1a), and then it is possible that the pair (1) is not a counter-example to our assumption (6).

Under this new analysis, the peculiarities of example (1) can be accounted for as follows: the fundamental distinction between (1a) and (1b) lies in the types of predicates, that is, the difference between the stative adjective (phrase) polite and the dynamic verb phrase be polite; thus, the progressive of the latter is perfectly permissible, as is predictable from the well-known generalization mentioned in the introduction; further, considering the dynamic nature of the verbal be, such meanings as 'agent' and 'temporary' observed in (1b) are appropriately attributed to this verbal be.

As was noted in the introduction, it is not correct to say that the 'actional' reading of (1b) stems from its progressive aspect. Another piece of evidence against this view is that the dynamic be with this action meaning may occur in some constructions other than the progressive. Consider the modal and the imperative constructions like the following:

- (25) a. John must be polite. (cognitive reading)  
 b. Be polite.

It is clear that these sentences bear no relation to the progressive at all. Nevertheless, we have the action meaning here, too. What is common among (1b), (25a) and (25b) is the presence of "the dynamic be", and it is this dynamic be that is responsible for the actional reading in these sentences.

On the other hand, the progressive as an aspect can be regarded as an environment in which the dynamic be, but not the stative be, may appear; the progressive construction, just like the cognitive modal construction and the imperative construction, requires non-stative predicates.

### 3. On assignment of Case Relations

In the preceding section, we have seen that, if Kaga (1982)'s analysis of English auxiliary system is adopted, the peculiarities of example (1) can be given an elegant explanation, or, to put it more exactly, there are no longer real peculiarities about (1). Before concluding the discussion, here it may be in order to consider briefly the way of assignment of case relations under that new analysis. We have assumed above that the subject in (1a) is Object and the subject in (1b) Agent. The case assignment in the latter seems to be rather straightforward; the case relations in (1b) are determined by the main verb be, which is supposedly a two-place argument verb with the following lexical entry:

(26)  $be_V \quad (NP \quad , \quad AP)$   
                   |                  |  
                   Agent     Location<sup>4</sup>

The (rough) representation of (1b) perhaps will be (27):

(27)  $[[John]_{NP} \quad [is]_{AUX} \quad [[being]_V \quad [polite]_A]_{VP}]_S$   
                   |  |  
                   Agent  (V)     Location

It should be noticed that in (27) the AUX is is an aspectual element which does not enter into the determination of the case relations.

In the case of (1a), on the other hand, it seems to me

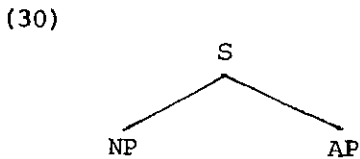
that at least three alternatives are available in principle for the assignment of case relations. The first alternative is to regard the AUX be as a case determiner and assume the following lexical entry for it:<sup>5</sup>

- (28) be<sub>AUX</sub> ( NP , AP )  
                   |            |  
                   Object Location

The second is to stipulate that the head of the predicate is responsible for the case assignment in the sentence; in normal cases, verbs are the heads, but in (verbless) adjectival constructions like (1a), the head is an adjective; hence the lexical entry relevant in this case might be (29):

- (29) polite<sub>A</sub> ( NP )  
                   |  
                   Object

Y. Endo (personal communication) suggested to me the third possibility. (1a) has the following skelton structure in Kaga (1982)'s analysis:



We could stipulate that in this structure the subject NP is always assigned the Case of Object and the predicate AP the Case of Location, irrespective of the presence of the AUX elements.<sup>6</sup>

The choice among these three alternatives has a number of theoretically significant implications, of course, but I will not go into the issue here, leaving it for future researches. An important point to us is that different case relations are assigned somehow to the subjects of (1a) and (1b).

## 4. Conclusion

Under the present analysis, (1a) and (1b) are given the following structures and case relations:

- (31) a.  $[[\text{John}]_{\text{NP}} \text{ [is]}_{\text{AUX}} \text{ [polite]}_{\text{AP}}]_{\text{S}}$   
           |  |  
           Object  (Location)
- b.  $[[\text{John}]_{\text{NP}} \text{ [is]}_{\text{AUX}} \text{ [[being]}_{\text{V}} \text{ [polite]}_{\text{AP}}]_{\text{VP}}]_{\text{S}}$   
           |  |  
           Agent  Location

As we have shown, given this analysis, (1a) and (1b) are no longer counterexamples to our assumption (6), in spite of the different case relations of their subjects. The difference between them can be accounted for in a principled way by the presence or absence of the dynamic verb be, which has an "action" meaning inherently. (1a), being a static adjectival construction, has no corresponding progressive sentence, while (1b), containing the dynamic verb be, is compatible with progressive aspect and further has such meanings as agentiveness and temporariness. This explanation is not only quite natural but also very significant, because it enables us to keep intact our assumption (6) and the hierarchical semantic structure (4).

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> We can find a number of investigations in (partial)

support of this assumption. Among them are Nakau (1979), in which it is shown that Modality in its most restrictive sense is independent of the so-called propositions, and Kajita (1967), in which it is argued that Tense and Aspect are located outside "the basic sentence" which is made up of the subject NP and the predicate VP.

<sup>2</sup> This term is borrowed from Nakau (1982). The readers need to discriminate carefully between the semantic case of Object and the grammatical case of Objective.

<sup>3</sup> For a certain reason that we need not be concerned with here, (24) cannot appear as an independent affirmative sentence. Notice, however, that it can occur as a bare infinitive question or the complement of perception verbs:

- i) John be polite?
- ii) I saw John be polite.

<sup>4</sup> It is unclear to me whether the Case of Location is appropriate here. I will leave this problem for a future research.

<sup>5</sup> If this alternative is correct, we are forced to divide the AUX be into the two kinds: the copula be which is relevant to the case determination of the sentence and the aspectual be which is not.

<sup>6</sup> Considering that the function of adjectives is in general to characterize the nature or state of a thing or things involved, this stipulation may seem to make sense.

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