

Critique of Tenny's View on the Correlation
between Delimitedness and Noun Phrase Passives/ Middles'

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1. Introduction

Indeed I agree with Tenny (1987, 1992, 1994) that the semantic aspectual notion of delimitedness in her sense plays a crucial role in the linking of lexical semantics and syntax, but I will show in this paper that delimitedness alone is insufficient for providing a thorough explanation of the behaviors of English transitivized unergative verbs with respect to noun phrase passives and middles.

2. Delimitedness and its 'Correlation' with Noun Phrase Passives and Middles

Tenny (1987), in her stimulating and influential dissertation, recognizes the semantic aspectual contrast observed in such a pair of verb phrases as in (1).¹

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| (1) a. eat an apple | (Tenny (1987: 77)) |
| b. push a cart | (Tenny (1987: 79)) |

According to Tenny (1987: 77-79), 'eat an apple' is a delimited accomplishment while 'push a cart' is a nondelimited activity. If a person eats an apple, he eats one bite of it at time t_1 , another bite at t_2 , continues to eat, and finally reaches at some time n where no part of the apple remains for him to eat since the quantity of the apple is spatially finite. In other words, in the action of eating an apple there will be a certain time point at which the apple is gone and at which there is no remaining apple at all subsequent time points. The existence of this distinctive

point of time, Tenny claims, makes 'eat an apple' a delimited accomplishment.² The internal direct argument an apple in (1a) imposes a finite and definite duration on a person's eating of an apple and it is defined by Tenny as an aspectually affected argument. 'Push a cart', by contrast, is a nondelimited activity. If a person pushes a cart, it is true that the cart's location changes over time but there will be no distinctive time point to mark the end of 'push a cart'. The internal direct argument a cart in (1b) imposes no finite or definite duration on a person's pushing of a cart and it is an aspectually unaffected argument.³

The property of aspectual affectedness, Tenny (1987: section 2.5) argues, correlates with English noun phrase passives and middles; verbs with aspectually affected arguments may form noun phrase passives and middles, while those with aspectually unaffected arguments cannot.

- (2) a. The Mongols' destruction of the city
 b. The city's destruction by the Mongols (Tenny (1987: 60))
 c. John's avoidance of Bill
 d. *Bill's avoidance by John (Tenny (1987: 60))

The deverbal noun destruction in (2a) with an aspectually affected argument the city forms the corresponding noun phrase passive, (2b) while the deverbal noun avoidance in (2c), which takes an aspectually unaffected argument Bill, cannot form the corresponding noun phrase passive, (2d). Consider (3):

- (3) a. This door opens easily. (Tenny (1987: 61))
 b. *The mountains see beautifully after rain. (Tenny (1987: 62))

The argument this door in (3a) is aspectually affected so that (3a) is grammatical while the argument the mountains in (3b) is not, which makes (3b) unacceptable. So far so good.

3. Problems

Tenny (1987: 82-84) further discusses the verbs of motion whose internal direct arguments are delimiting paths.⁴

- (4) a. cross the desert
 b. traverse the continent
 c. climb the mountain
 d. swim the Channel
 e. run a lap
 f. walk ten miles
 g. circumnavigate the globe
 h. infiltrate the enemy battalion (Tenny (1987: 82))

The internal direct arguments of the motion verbs above represent an area, object or distance which is traveled through in the course of the event described by the verbs. So they are aspectually affected arguments in the sense defined by Tenny above. Tenny's theory, therefore, predicts that all the verb phrases in (4) may uniformly be turned into fairly acceptable middles and noun phrase passives. Tenny herself says that "these may form middles in the author's judgement (Tenny (1987: 82), the emphasis is mine)."

- (5) a. The desert crosses more easily than the prairie for settlers with large wagons.
 b. Today the continent traverses in only four hours compared with the weeks or months it took a hundred years ago.
 c. That mountain climbs easily from the west side but it has never been attempted from the east.
 d. ?The Channel swims in fifteen hours for a swimmer in top condition.
 e. ?The last lap runs the hardest.
 f. ??Ten miles walks easily in good shoes.
 g. The globe circumnavigates in a day with Pan Am.
 h. The enemy battalion infiltrated surprisingly easily

for the guerrilla soldiers. (Tenny (1987: 83-84))

What should be noticed here is that Tenny herself judges (5d, e, f) as less acceptable than (5a, b, c, g, h). However, if all the internal direct arguments in (4) are aspectually affected arguments as Tenny says (and I also think they are under the delimited reading),⁵ then there is no way for her theory to account for the marginal status of (5d, e, f). In fact, she gives no comment on why the sentences in (5d, e, f) are not fully acceptable. Then, something must be added to her theory. It seems to me that the difference in the acceptability of (5) correlates with the fact that the verbs in (5d, e, f) are quasi-transitive verbs and they have corresponding prototypical intransitive usage while those in (5a, b, c, g, h) are basically transitive verbs and they have no prototypical intransitive usage, a crucial fact which Tenny overlooks.⁶

Now let us consider noun phrase passives.

- (6) a. The desert's crossing was inevitable, once gold was discovered on the other side.
 b. The continent's traversal takes five days.
 c. ?That mountain's climb will be attempted before its mapping has been completed.
 d. ??The Channel's swim is less of a problem than its traversal by sailboat.
 e. ?One more lap's run is impossible.
 f. Ten miles' walk was enough.⁷
 g. The globe's circumnavigation was impossible until sextants were developed.
 h. The enemy battalion's infiltration was carried out at night without mishap. (Tenny (1987: 83-84))

My remarks concerning (5) also apply to (6). Tenny's theory has no account for the marginal status of (6c, d, e). I have no explanation of why (6c) is less acceptable, either. It should be noticed that, compared with the low acceptability of (5f), the acceptability of

(6f) is pretty high. It seems to me, however, that the noun phrase ten miles' walk in (6f) does not involve noun phrase passivization, since we have independently a lot of examples in which measure phrases and the like appear in the determiner position of noun phrases, such as ten minutes' talk, three miles' run and today's paper. Putting aside the low acceptability of (6c) and the high acceptability of (6f) for the moment, we notice that the middles in (5d, e, f) and the noun phrase passives in (6d, e, (f)) show a strong correspondence in marginal acceptability. This correspondence, I believe, is significant and due to the crucial fact mentioned above that the verbs in (5d, e, f) and (6d, e, f) are transitivized unergative verbs, although Tenny's theory says nothing but that it is a mere coincidence.

Tenny (1987: section 4.2.2) makes very interesting observations on the ambiguous reading of intransitive unergative verbs and the unambiguous reading of the cognate object constructions in which unergative verbs are used as their main verbs. Tenny states that "intransitive unergative verbs, which have no internal arguments at all, describe non-delimited events (Tenny 1987: 153)" and that "where they may be understood to describe delimited events, they are understood as if they had a reflexive object, or a cognate object (Tenny 1987: 153-4, the emphases are mine)." Judging from this statement, we understand that Tenny holds that intransitive unergative verbs, without a reflexive or a cognate object, are potentially ambiguous in at least two ways between delimited reading and nondelimited reading although their salient readings are nondelimited interpretations. She observes further that a cognate object delimits the event described by an unergative verb since it makes reference to one event of the type described by the verb and that the presence of a cognate object disambiguates the verb phrase readings and forces a delimited reading only.* She cites the following examples with notes on readings.

- (7) a. sneeze (non-delimited, delimited)
 b. sneeze a horrific sneeze (delimited)

- c. laugh (non-delimited, delimited)
 d. laugh a mirthless laugh (delimited)
 (Tenny (1987: 154))

Notice that according to Tenny's theory, the cognate objects in (7b, d) are aspectually affected arguments (and I also think they are under the delimited reading).⁹ So here again, her theory predicts that (7b) and (7d) may form fairly good middles and noun phrase passives, which is contrary to the facts as shown in (8).

- (8) a. *A horrific sneeze sneezes easily.
 b. *A mirthless laugh laughs easily.
 c. *A horrific sneeze's sneeze by John
 d. *A mirthless laugh's laugh by John

What should be noticed here is that the verbs which cause the ungrammaticality in middles and noun phrase passives in (8) are the same kind of transitivized unergative verbs which have caused the marginal acceptability in (5) and (6). There is no way for Tenny's theory to account for this fact nor for the unacceptability of (8).¹⁰ Again, something must be added to her theory.¹¹

4. Conclusion

My conclusion is that Tenny's distinction between the aspectually affected argument and the aspectually nonaffected one is needed to account for various syntactic and semantic facts, as she convincingly argues in her three studies, Tenny (1987, 1992, 1994), but that her theory based solely on the semantic aspectual notion, delimitedness, is not sufficient, as it now stands, for providing a full explanation of the behaviors of English transitivized unergative verbs with respect to noun phrase passives and middles, since it gives no way to account for the marginality of (5d, e, f) and (6 d, e, (f)) and the ungrammaticality of (8) and (ii) in fn. 10 and since it cannot capture the significant fact that all these cases involve the same sort of

transitivized unergative verbs which have corresponding prototypical intransitive uses like (7a), (7c), (ia) in fn. 10 and (ic) in fn. 10. What is worse, the problems pointed out in this paper will become more serious when we consider those constructions in which transitivized unergative verbs take aspectually affected arguments, discussed by Tenny (1994: sections 1.5.3 and 3.3.3). (See fn. 10.) The key to the solution of these problems, I believe, is to pay more serious attention to the prototypicality of transitivity.^{1 2}

NOTES

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² Throughout this paper, I will refer mainly to Tenny (1987), since it involves the most detailed discussion on the issue here among her three studies, Tenny (1987, 1992, 1994), and Tenny (1994: 157) states that "for more discussion of the affectedness constraint on middle formation see Tenny (1987, 1989)." Notice here in passing that Tenny (1992) is wrongly referred to as Tenny (1989) by Tenny (1994) and that Tenny (1992) is the compact version of Tenny (1987). Tenny's (1992, 1994) crucial notions such as delimitedness and measuring-out relevant to our discussion here are the same as those in Tenny (1987) so that our argument against Tenny (1987) also applies to Tenny (1992, 1994).

² Delimitedness is defined informally by Tenny (1987) as follows:

Delimitedness refers to the boundedness over time of an event as described by a linguistic expression. A linguistically described event is delimited if the sentence describes an event as something that must transpire over a

fixed length of time. It does not matter whether that length of time is indicated in the sentence. The sentence or event is delimited if it is understood to mean that there is some point in time after which the event is no longer continuing. (Tenny (1987: 17))

Tenny (1994) defines it simply as follows:

Delimitedness refers to the property of an event's having a distinct, definite and inherent endpoint in time.

(Tenny (1994: 4))

³ In this paper, I will limit myself mainly to discussing such expressions as that in (1a) where the direct object nominal is crucially involved in making the whole verb phrase delimited. I will not discuss such nondelimited expressions as that in (1b). Notice incidentally that the expression push a cart itself is a nondelimited activity, as is shown in the text but that when the goal phrase, say, to the station is added to it, the whole verb phrase will become a delimited expression, as is argued by Tenny (1987: section 3.1.1). I will not discuss such an expression in this paper, either.

⁴ Tenny (1994: 32, 72-73) observes that walk the trail and climb the bridge/the ladder are actually ambiguous with respect to delimitedness; they may be used in non-delimited expressions as well. This observation, however, does not affect the nature of our argument below. What is crucial to our discussion is that the delimited reading of these expressions and those in (4) is available and the internal direct arguments in these expressions and (4) are aspectually affected arguments under the delimited reading. Tenny (1994) and Tenny (1987) take the same position in this regard so that our argument holds of Tenny (1994) as well.

⁵ See fn. 4.

⁶ Tenny (1987, 1992, 1994), of course, notices that swim, run, and walk are basically intransitive unergative verbs and they normally do not take direct internal arguments. The other verbs in (4) are basically transitive verbs and they normally take direct internal

arguments. What Tenny (1987, 1992, 1994) overlooks is that only the unergative verbs which normally would not take direct internal arguments cause the low acceptability when they are turned into middle constructions while such basic transitive verbs as those in (4a, b, c, g, h) do not.

⁷ My correction for Tenny's (1987: 84) ten mile's walk. Cf. The Chicago Manual of Style, Thirteenth Edition, Revised and Expanded (section 6.14).

⁸ This observation is quite different from that of Tenny (1994); Tenny (1994: 38-40) observes that cognate object constructions are ambiguous with respect to delimitedness. This change, however, does not affect the nature of our argument here. What is crucial to our discussion is that a delimited reading becomes available when intransitive unergative verbs take cognate objects as their direct internal arguments and that those cognate objects under the delimited reading are aspectually affected arguments. Tenny (1994) and Tenny (1987) take the same position in this regard so that our argument holds of Tenny (1994) as well. See also fn. 4. Tenny (1994) captures cognate object formation as an operation on aspectual structure. This view, I believe, goes one step forward. For more discussion see Tenny (1994: sections 1.5.3 and 3.3.1).

⁹ See fn. 8.

¹⁰ The same argument applies to a set of unergative nonverbal communication verbs which are touched on by Ross (1970: 239, fn. 34, 266-268), Jackendoff (1990: 242) and Tenny (1994: 199-201), and discussed by Levin and Rapoport (1988). (For that matter, the same argument also applies to all those constructions in which transitivized unergative verbs take aspectually affected arguments, discussed by Tenny (1994: sections 1.5.3 and 3.3.3); the his/her way construction, the reflexive object construction, the fake reflexive resultative construction (see also Hoekstra (1992) for discussion on the relation between aspect and resultative constructions), the expletive body part construction. Then, the problems pointed out by this paper will become more serious for Tenny (1987, 1992, 1994).)

- (i) a. Miss Marple nodded. (non-delimited, delimited)
 b. Miss Marple nodded agreement. (delimited)
 (Agatha Christie, A Murder is Announced. Fontana, Glasgow. 1953. p.75)
 c. Miss Marple smiled. (non-delimited, delimited)
 d. Miss Marple smiled forgiveness. (delimited)
 (Agatha Christie, At Bertram's Hotel. Fontana, Glasgow. 1965. p.197)
- (ii) a. *Agreement nods easily.
 b. *Agreement's nod(ding) by Miss Marple
 c. *Forgiveness smiles easily.
 d. *Forgiveness' smile/smiling by Miss Marple

See fn. 8.

¹¹ Even if something is added to Tenny's theory, the following examples, which are cited from Fagan (1992: 68), will not be explained.

- (i) a. The car drives easily.
 b. This pipe smokes nicely. (Fiengo 1980: 50)
 c. This piano plays easily. (Fellbaum 1986: 13)
 (Fagan (1992: 68))

The arguments in (i) are not aspectually affected ones. But the middles in (i) are perfectly grammatical. Notice incidentally that at first glance the examples in (ii) below appear to be counterexamples to Tenny's theory. But they are not, as Tenny herself states.

- (ii) a. This cart pushes easily.
 b. This horse gallops easily. (Tenny (1987: 102))

According to Tenny (1987: 102-103), the middles in (ii) above have an inceptive reading. Thus, (iia) actually means 'this cart starts to push easily'. Verbs of motion used in middles are used as change of state verbs. The moved object undergoes a change of state from being an unmoving object to being a moving object and it delimits the

situation. I am indebted to anonymous TES 14 reviewers for these arguments.

¹² For the discussion of prototypicality, see Rosch (1978) among others. Jackendoff (1983, 1985, 1990) tries to capture prototypicality in terms of a preference rule system within his conceptual semantics. The prototypicality of transitivity is discussed by Hopper and Thompson (1980). I would like to make an attempt to recapture the prototypicality of transitivity in terms of the dynamic theory of grammar, which has been developed by Kajita (1977, 1986) and his associates but that will go beyond the scope of this paper.

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