

NADĚŽDA KUDRNÁČOVÁ

THE VERBS *FALL*, *SINK*, *SAG* AND *DROOP* IN BODY PART MOVEMENTS

The present paper is a contribution to a semantico-syntactic analysis of English constructions expressing body part movements. I shall consider only the verb plus body part lexeme constructions employing the verbs *fall*, *sink*, *sag* and *droop* (*His jaw sagged*, *He drooped his eyelids*). These verbs form, from the point of view of their lexico-semantic content and their syntactic behaviour, a distinct group. They all express movement downwards but, as opposed to verbs like *lower*, *bend*, *hang*, *duck*, *incline* etc., movement that is not accompanied by dynamic (kinetic) energy released by the person (“permissive” movement).

I shall pay attention to those semantic features of the discussed set of verbs that manifest themselves on the syntactic level.

One of the attributes of body part movements is what I shall call ‘predetermination of the final position of the body part’. By this working concept I do not mean orientation towards a certain position that is to be resumed, but predetermination given conceptually, i.e. such as follows from the logico-semantic analysis of the situation. The starting point of the body part movement is the body, or rather one of its parts which is relatively immobile and thus forms the base. The maximum position of the body part is then predetermined by the operational range of the body part (by its radius). In other words, the route along which the body part moves is, in strictly physical terms, limited on both sides.

In “permissive” movement downwards, the predetermination of the final position of the body part asserts itself distinctly since the incitement and course of the movement are not controlled in terms of the release of a certain amount of dynamic energy (that is why the verbs cannot combine with the adverb *energetically*). Thus the final position the body part resumes is, due to the predominance of gravitational energy, predetermined by the potential of the body part.

This characteristic of “permissive” movement as expressed by the discussed group of verbs (*fall*, *sink*, *sag* and *droop*) manifests itself in their syntactic be-

haviour: they are incompatible with the progressive (**His head was falling/sinking/sagging/drooping*). (As will have been noticed, there is no specific linguistic means whose function would be to signal the predetermination of the final position of the body part overtly. In Whorf's terminology (1958.88-9), this feature might be labelled "covert" since it shows itself only indirectly. From the point of view of the system of language, however, this characteristic syntactic behaviour of the verbs can be viewed as an overt signal *sui generis*.¹)

In certain cases the discussed verbs do occur with the progressive but this fact does not run counter to our observation. (a) The progressive aspect in *His feet were sinking into the mud* is not surprising - the person loses his footing. (Since the movement of the feet can be accompanied by the movement of the whole body, we cannot certainly say that the operational range of the feet is extended.) (b) The verbs *sag* and *droop* can also combine with the progressive, but the construction does not have a dynamic meaning. In contrast, it has a stative (resultative) meaning: *His eyebrows were drooping, His jaw was sagging*. This shift in meaning manifests itself in the fact that *drooping* can be replaced by the adjective *droopy* and can also be used as a premodifier (*a drooping head*).

At this point of our discussion one important remark should be made. The internal semantic structure of the discussed set of verbs can be decomposed into two distinct components: into what we may tentatively label 'the process-denoting component' and 'the goal-denoting component'. The former refers to the course of the movement, the latter to the final position the body part resumes.

Now let us consider this example:

[...] and she sank into it, slowly, leaning her head against the back, her arms falling along the sides. (KM 140.11²)

Here the verb form *falling* appears in an *ing*-participle clause. In this syntactic construction the movement is rendered as an ongoing process taking place against the background of other actions. The internal semantic structure of the verb is restructured: the process-denoting component of the verb is fore-

1 In Cruse's view, "[...] a semantic feature should be regarded as firmly established only if (a) it is intuitively convincing, (b) it is detectable contextually (including syntactically), and (c) it can be shown to have some explanatory value" (Cruse 1973.15-6).

2 The following list of abbreviations refers to the publications drawn on for the examples in the present paper:

DL-Ch = David Lodge, *Changing Places* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1983)

DL-S = David Lodge, *Small World* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1985)

EH = Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (Triad/Grafton Books, London 1987)

GO = George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1975)

JJ = James Joyce, *Dubliners* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1974)

KA = Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1975)

KK = Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Picador, London 1978)

KM = Katherine Mansfield, *Bliss and Other Stories* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1977)

OW = Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (Oxford University Press, London 1974)

grounded, while the goal-denoting component is pushed into the background. This enables these verbs to enter easily into participial constructions.

The verb *fall* can combine both with the adverb *quickly* and with the adverb *slowly*. Native speakers regard the combination *fall* + *quickly* as redundant, though acceptable. Thus it seems that *fall* is associated with a relatively high speed.³ A closer look at the semantic content of the verb shows that the redundancy of the adverb *quickly* has as its underlying cause also the homogeneity of the movement as expressed by the verb: the movement is rendered as smooth, i.e. the transition from one quantum to another is backgrounded (I define the term "quantum" in its most minimum sense, namely as the distance between the points A, B, C ... X on the route along which the body part moves). In other words, the movement is presented as a homogeneous sequence of kinetic quanta. For this reason *fall* cannot combine with the adverb *gradually* (*gradually* means "by degrees"; these degrees are distinct boundaries between quanta).

The adverb *gradually* can, however, combine with the verbs *sink*, *sag* and *droop* (*His head gradually sank*). This is due to the fact that the homogeneous character of the movement is backgrounded, i.e. the transition from one quantum to another is foregrounded.

Like the verb *fall*, the verbs *sink*, *sag* and *droop* can combine with the adverbs *quickly* and *slowly*. In dictionary definitions of the verb *sink* a low speed of the movement is mentioned: "to fall slowly".⁴ It seems that the perception of the movement as being relatively slow is facilitated by the fact that the movement is rendered as less homogeneous, and also by the fact that the verb *sink* is compared with *fall*, i.e. a verb from the same semantic class whose homogeneity is suggestive of a (relatively) high speed.

The homogeneous character of the movement as expressed in *fall* and its less pronounced variant in *sink*, *sag* and *droop*⁵ manifests itself also in the (in)compatibility of the verbs with the inchoative verb *begin*.

The verb *fall* cannot combine with *begin*: **His arms began to fall*.⁶ The incompatibility of *fall* with *begin* is not surprising - the inchoative *begin* denotes the onset of the first kinetic quantum. In *fall*, however, the quantization of the movement is backgrounded, the movement is rendered as one homogeneous continuum.

3 Vernon (1977:137) remarks: "An apparent movement vertically downwards tends to appear more rapid than a corresponding movement vertically upwards."

4 The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1982:987).

5 I am not inclined to label the movement (expressed by the verbs *sink*, *sag* and *droop*) 'heterogeneous' since its constituent kinetic quanta are of the same kind - only the transition from one quantum to another, being implicative of certain duration, is rendered as more distinct.

6 This sentence is possible only when functioning as a metaphorical expression of one's inner state. The present paper concentrates, however, on the movement in a strictly physical sense.

The verbs *sink*, *sag* and *droop* can combine with *begin*: *His head began to sink/sag/droop*. The compatibility with *begin* is enabled by a more pronounced quantization of the movement as expressed in these verbs:⁷

After about three minutes [...] they begin to sag in their chairs. (DL-Ch 125.18)

As we have seen, the compatibility with *begin* combines with the compatibility with *gradually*, and vice versa. Such combinatory tests are of a considerable explanatory value and help to determine the semantic structure of the verbs as it manifests itself on the contextual level: the quantization of the movement appears to be a constitutive lexico-semantic element of the verb.

In *fall*, the homogeneous character of the movement, i.e. its less marked quantization, goes hand in hand with the orientation of the movement towards its goal (the final position of the body part). The goal-oriented character of the semantic content of the verb enables the verb to occur in the pseudo-passive (or, rather, in the passive form having a stative, resultative meaning):

[...] and the neck was still strong too and the creases did not show so much when the old man was asleep and his head fallen forward. (EH 13.11)

In contrast, the verbs *sink*, *sag* and *droop* are not admitted into this syntactic construction (**his jaw was sagged*) since a more marked quantization of the movement overshadows the orientation of the movement towards its goal.

To sum up:

stative passive *begin, gradually*

<i>fall</i>	+	-
<i>sink</i>	-	+
<i>sag</i>	-	+
<i>droop</i>	-	+

The sentence *He was sitting there, his jaw sagged* is, however, quite normal and thus might contradict our observation. Nevertheless, a closer analysis reveals that the construction *his jaw sagged* does not, from a functional point of view, represent a counterpart to *his jaw was sagged*. The participial construction with an *ing*-participle (*she sank into it, her arms falling along the sides*) and the participial construction with an *ed*-participle (*he sat there, his jaw sagged*) are parallel in their capacity to foreground the process-denoting component of the internal semantic structure of the verb and the goal-denoting component, re-

⁷ The compatibility of the verbs *sink*, *sag* and *droop* with *begin* does not contradict the fact that the verbs cannot combine with the progressive. It is necessary to realize that *begin* with these verbs denotes the onset of the first quantum only, hence it does not cover the movement as one compact continuum.

spectively. In other words, in the former construction the goal-denoting component of the internal semantic structure of the verb is overshadowed in favour of its process-denoting counterpart, and in the latter construction the process-denoting component is overshadowed in favour of its goal-denoting counterpart. This enables the verbs *fall*, *sink*, *sag* and *droop* to enter into participial constructions:

The man was led out, walking unsteadily, with head sunken, [...] (GO 191.5)

Now let us turn our attention to the constructions that contain body part lexemes in their subject position (Sbp constructions - *His eyelids drooped*) and to the constructions that contain body part lexemes in their object position (Obp constructions - *He drooped his eyelids*).

The verbs *fall*, *sink*, *sag* and *droop* can normally be employed in Sbp constructions only:

The shelf collapsed, and the VC's jaw sagged momentarily. (DL-Ch 221.10)

[...] Lord Henry's heavy eyelids drooped, and he began to think. (OW 82)

The verbs cannot enter into Obp constructions because they denote permissive movement (i.e. not controlled by dynamic energy released by the person).

Nevertheless, the verb *sink* can occur in the construction with the person in the subject position:

[...] [he - N. K.] sank his teeth luxuriously into the first respectable-looking steak he had seen [...]. (DL-Ch 110.14)

The lexico-semantic content of the verb *sink* is recategorized (the verb loses one of its categorial lexico-semantic features - its permissiveness), which enables the verb to be employed in the Obp construction. It will have been observed that the verb denotes the movement in which the body part comes into direct physical contact with some other entity (in this case with the *steak*⁸). (The choice of the Sbp construction as in *His teeth sank into the steak* brings about a specific stylistic effect.)

The verb *droop* can also occur in the Sbp construction (*He drooped his eyelids*): the presence of control over the incitement and course of the body part movement recategorizes the lexico-semantic content of the verb. The verb *droop* then comes close to the verb *close*. (It is worth noting that in this use *droop* combines with *eyelids* only - the amount of energy that has to be exerted in moving this body part is relatively very low, which is another factor deciding in favour of this type of construction.)

8 The present paper focuses on the verb plus body part lexeme constructions which do not imply any direct physical contact with any other entity in the outer world (from the person's point of view).

Let us now turn our attention to the (non)volitional character of the impulse instigating the movement expressed in this set of verbs. At this point a few terminological remarks must be made. By 'impulse' I understand initiation of an action by giving a nervous command. I do not work with the dichotomy 'voluntary movement' versus 'involuntary movement' since the attribute "voluntary", however treated, allows only of its opposite concept, i.e. "involuntary"; and the mere bipolarity does not cover body part movements adequately. Instead, I propose to work with the concept of a mentally processed impulse. The attribute 'mentally processed' is broad enough to cover all the subtler distinctions that "relate to what may in the aggregate be called the intentionality of action - the considerations having to do with generic features of the agent's state of mind and train of thought with respect to the action" (Rescher 1966.218).⁹ In the light of Rescher's distinctions, the impulse instigating body part movement can be specified as mentally processed to a varying degree; or it does not have to be processed mentally at all.

Since the verbs *fall*, *sink*, *sag* and *droop* denote permissive movement, the interpretation of the degree of the mental processing of the impulse instigating the action (the body part movement) might seem clear: the impulse is mentally processed to a relatively small degree, or is not mentally processed at all. This inference seems to be corroborated also by the fact that (a) the verbs are not normally admitted into Obp constructions, (b) the verbs occur frequently in the constructions employing the verbs *let* and *allow* (*He allowed his eyelids to droop*).

This seemingly obvious inference must be reconsidered in the light of the following example:

They followed him in silence, their feet falling in soft thuds on the thickly carpeted stairs. (JJ 212.25)

A closer look at the semantic content of the verbs *let* and *allow* will throw more light on the problem. Waterlow (1970.107) analyzes the verbs with the semantic feature ALLOW in this way: "Allowing something to happen or to be is not interfering with it", which means "simply being out of its way". This fact, however, does not prevent her from classifying the predicates of the type ALLOW as the predicates that "have an effect on the subject". In Waterlow's view, the difference between "affecting" and "allowing" lies in the fact that "affecting something makes a difference to it [=to the subject - N. K.], but actively as opposed to passively" (1970.108).

The idea of a passive influence is very stimulating. A closer look at the verb *let* reveals that there is a difference between what can be labelled ACTIVE LET/ALLOW and what can be labelled PASSIVE LET/ALLOW.

9 Rescher (1966.218) adduces the following group of contrasts: voluntarily - involuntarily, deliberately - inadvertently (or accidentally), intentionally - unintentionally (or by mistake), consciously - out of habit, knowingly - unwittingly, willingly - unwillingly.

At this point it is necessary to come back to the permissive movement as expressed by the verbs *fall*, *sink*, *sag* and *droop*. We must realize that gravitational energy alone is not responsible for the body part movement, for a certain amount of energy (exerted by the person) is needed to keep the body part in a certain position (prior to the forthcoming movement downwards). This energy can be called 'static', as opposed to dynamic (kinetic) energy.

The difference between active ALLOW/LET and its passive counterpart lies in the circumstances under which the elimination of static energy is triggered. Namely, the impulse instigating this elimination can be mentally processed (active ALLOW/LET), or it does not have to be mentally processed at all (passive ALLOW/LET). Needless to say, the interpretation of the degree of the mental processing of the impulse depends on the character of the causative chain (cf. Kudrnáčová 1989.78).¹⁰ For example, the person is sleepy - the impulse may be processed to a relatively small degree or does not have to be processed at all.

To illustrate:

In the Lotus, she let her head fall back against the head-restraint and closed her eyes. (DL-Ch 204.14)

Eventually, he allowed his chin to sink on to his breast, and fell into a deep sleep. (DL-S 197.15)

He sank onto a seat, allowed his eyelids to droop and projected upon their inner surface [...] (DL-S 225.24)

It must be noted, however, that active ALLOW/LET cannot be equated with the incitement of the action in terms of the release of dynamic energy. If we did so, one of the features of permissive movement, namely the predominance of gravitational energy, would be lost. Nevertheless, even the verbs that denote body part movements directed by the release of dynamic (kinetic) energy can combine with *allow* or *let*:

McMurphy let his lips spread in a slow grin, but he didn't look away [...] (KK 167.41)

Dixon willed his hand to stay at his side until his three seniors had helped themselves, then let it bear the fullest remaining glass to his lips. (KA 213.1)

The combination of *allow/let* with the verbs like *bear* or *spread* brings about a functional tension between the primarily permissive character of *let/allow* and the non-permissive character of the verbs *bear* and *spread*. This tension is part of specific stylistic strategy.

By way of concluding our discussion about the semantico-syntactic properties of the permissive verbs *fall*, *sink*, *sag* and *droop*, let me add some remarks con-

10 The causative chain can be seen as an axis with its starting point taken up by a cause of the body part movement (the cause being conceived in a very broad sense), its intermediary position by the body part movement, and its final position by the effect (aim) intended to be produced.

cerning one very specific meaning in which the verbs *sink* and *fall* can combine with the progressive:

[...] *she was out of breath - indeed her bosom was swelling and sinking in the most amazing fashion [...]* (DL-S 37.34)

This movement is, within the framework of bodily movements, quite unique: it is (a) cyclic, i.e. it consists of an indefinite number of kinetic phases (by "kinetic phase" I understand a sequence of kinetic quanta without an implied reversal of direction in the course of the movement), and it is (b) physiological. The physiological character of this indefinite, cyclic movement of the chest downwards and upwards (i.e. breathing) makes the verbs *fall* and *sink* fall outside the dichotomy 'the impulse that is mentally processed (to a varying degree) - the impulse that is not mentally processed'.

According to Wierzbicka, however, "to breathe is to do something" because "one can hold one's breath" (Wierzbicka 1975.522). True enough, volitional actions "can be commanded" (Kenny 1963.183) - the sentences *Breathe! Can you breathe?* and *Stop breathing!* are quite normal. But the impossibility of **He persuaded her to breathe* and **She gave up breathing* indicate that this body part movement indeed represents a movement *sui generis*.

Owing to the cyclicity of this movement the verbs *sink* and *fall* can combine with the progressive. The non-progressive use of *sink* and *fall* is, naturally, possible too:

I can see her shoulders rise and fall as she breathes. (KK 113.14)

By way of concluding our discussion let me state only the following: we have arrived at certain semantic features that reveal themselves on the level of the "internal sentence structure"¹¹. The analysis of the syntactic behaviour of the discussed set of verbs has also shown that their internal semantic structure can be decomposed into two more or less distinct components.

REFERENCES

- Běličová, H. (1982). *Semantická struktura věty a kategorie pádu* [The semantic structure of the sentence and the category of case] (Prague).
The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1982). (Oxford).
 Cruse, D. A. (1973). Some thoughts on agentivity, *Journal of linguistics* 9.11-23 (Cambridge).
 Kenny, A. (1963). *Action, emotion and will* (London).
 Kudrnáčová, N. (1990). On the semantics of constructions expressing body part movements, *Brno studies in English* 18.75-91 (Brno).
 Rescher, N. (1966). Aspects of action. In: *The logic of decision and action* 215-9, ed. by N. Rescher (Pittsburgh).
 Vernon, M. D. (1977). *The psychology of perception* (Harmondsworth).
 Waterlow, S. (1970). Affecting and being affected, *Mind* 79.92-108 (Oxford).
 Whorf, B. L. (1958). *Language, thought and reality* (Cambridge, Mass.).
 Wierzbicka, A. (1975). Why "kill" does not mean "cause to die": the semantics of action sentences, *Foundations of language* 13.491-528 (Dordrecht, Boston).

11 The term used by Běličová (1982.32).