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NADĚŽDA KUDRNÁČOVÁ

ON IMPULSIVE VERBS IN BODY PART MOVEMENTS

The present paper is a contribution to a semantic analysis of English verbs *fling, throw, shoot, jerk, toss* and *dart* employed in constructions denoting body part movements.[1] These verbs form a distinct group: in dictionaries they are generally defined as denoting sudden, quick movements. Since "suddenness" and "speed" are the two constituent features of impulsivity, we will term these verbs "impulsive".

Body part movements are the very basic movements we perform. Their analysis must therefore take into consideration the contexts in which they occur:[2]

1. *"Then what in God's name is the point of it all?" cried Philip Swallow, throwing his hands into the air.* (DL-S 28)
2. *(...) oh, the strangest, most tremendous excitement filling her slowly, slowly, until she wanted to fling out her arms, to laugh (...)* (KM 208)
3. *Without thinking he threw back his head, filled his lungs, and let loose a loud and prolonged bray of rage which recalled, in volume and timbre, Goldsmith's performance in the madrigals.* (KA 59)
4. *(...) until he felt his breast would break.*

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1 Eye movements are left aside here.

2 The following list of abbreviations refers to the publications drawn on for the examples in the present paper:
DL = David Lodge, *Changing Places* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983)
DL-S = David Lodge, *Small World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985)
EB = Elizabeth Bowen, *A Day in the Dark* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965)
GO = George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985)
HJ = Henry James, *Washington Square* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978)
JDS = J. D. Salinger, *Franny and Zooey* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964)
JJ-D = James Joyce, *Dubliners* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974)
JJ-P = James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1995)
KA = Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975)
KK = Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (London: Picador, 1978)
KM = Katherine Mansfield, *Bliss and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977)

"Oh well, don't let us quarrel," said he, and actually flung out a hand to his wife.
But she was not great enough to respond. (KM 159)

5. *He could have flung his arms about her hips and held her still, for his arms were trembling with desire to seize her and only the stress of his nails against the palms of his hands held the wild impulse of his body in check.* (JJ 212)
6. *She cried and threw her hands round his neck, saying: "O Bob! Bob! What am I to do? (...)"* (JJ-D 64)

We see that movements as expressed in impulsive verbs are an outward, directly observable expression of the person's state of mind. Impulsive verbs denote movements carried out in situations implying certain mental states that function as causes of the movements. Their impact is very strong—the person acts, as it were, under the pressure of them. However, the causes are not of such a nature as not to allow room for a certain, however low, degree of mental processing of the impulse (MPI) instigating the movement (note, in examples 2 and 5, the presence of a controlling mechanism which might prevent the movement from occurring).[3]

In examples 1-3, a definite final position of the body part is not built into the motoric plan of the motion since the aim of the movement is not to bring the body part to a certain position (the movement thus represents the aim in itself).[4] In examples 4-6, the localizations (*to his wife, about her hips, round his neck*) indicate that the final position of the body part is pre-programmed in the motoric plan of the movement. This testifies to a relatively higher degree of the mental processing of the movement. Still, due to the forcible operation of the cause (the person's state of mind), the movement cannot be labelled as goal-oriented, but rather as occupying an intermediary position within the causative chain. For example, the movement as expressed in flinging out a hand to one's wife in example 4 is conditioned by the person's inner state and, at the same time, is carried out with the desire to elicit a response from the person's wife.

We have observed so far that a low degree of MPI in impulsive movements (the degree is higher in movements with preprogrammed localizations of the body part) is an outcome of the forcible causative operation of certain types of mental states.[5]

It should be noted that the type of cause is not irrelevant. In *He closed his eyes in fatigue* the degree of MPI is also low, yet no one would say *He flung out*

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3 On the positions of body part movements within the causative chain and on the concept of MPI see Kudrnáčová 1998.

4 Cf. Běličová 1982.

5 On account of their lexico-semantic content, impulsive verbs may also be used to denote reflex movements:
(...) he ran his hands through the glass. The glass came apart like water splashing, and the nurse threw her hands to her ears. (KK 155)
Here the cause is of such nature as it conditions the movement to even a greater degree than in impulsive movements.

his hands in fatigue (or *He threw back his head in shame*). It shows, then, that a certain type of mental cause elicits a specific type of physical reaction.

Impulsive verbs may also be resorted to in contexts implicative of a relatively high degree of MPI:

7. *"What have I done?" he demanded rhetorically, throwing his arms about.* (DL-Ch 40)
8. *"It is the Englishman," said the driver, turning round and smiling. And the Countess threw up her hands and nodded so amiably that he spat with satisfaction (...)* (KM 147)

In these examples, the movement (as expressed in the verbs *throw about, throw up*) may be interpreted as functioning as a signal: the aim of the movement is to deliberately let the others know one's mental state by imitating the very kind of movement as is carried out in such situations (note the use of the adverb *rhetorically* in example 7 and of the verb *nod* in example 8).

Let us now concentrate on the semantic features (a) "speed" and (b) "suddenness", commonly adduced as constituting the semantic content of the discussed verbs.

(a) Impulsive verbs denote kinetic reactions that are immediate, energetic and mentally processed to a low degree. Hence they imply not only high speed (native speakers regard the combination "*quickly* + impulsive verb" as redundant, and the combination "*slowly* + impulsive verb" as hardly conceivable), but also a considerable amount of force (especially—due to the impulsive genesis of the movement—in the first kinetic quanta).[6] This is only natural since high speed is conceptually related to a release of a relatively great amount of energy.

High speed and accentuation of the first kinetic quanta are accompanied by the backgrounding of the final localization of the body part (this may also be the case in movements that are carried out in a certain direction). Consider the following example, in which the specification of the final position of the body part is missing although it can be deduced from the context:

9. *His eyes settled on the smashed face of the chinless man. He flung out a lean arm. "That's the one you ought to be taking, not me!" he shouted.* (GO 190)

(b) In body part movements, the attribute "sudden" may mean "acting on impulse", "shortly following its cause" or "unexpected". The first two meanings

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6 For the purpose of our discussion I will take movement as a sequence of kinetic quanta. 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. (Cf. also Russell's wording (1957.80) implicitly suggesting the idea of the quantization of movement: "People used to think that when a thing changes, it must be in a state of change, and that when a thing moves, it is in a state of motion. This is known to be a mistake. When a body moves, all that can be said is that it is in one place at one time and in another at another.")

are conceptually related to the genesis of impulsive movements. That is, due to the forcible operation of a specific type of cause (certain mental states), movements as expressed in impulsive verbs are "sudden" in both displaying a relatively low degree of MPI and indicating an immediate onset of the movement.

As far as "suddenness" in the sense of "unexpectedness" is concerned, the answer is not so straightforward. At this point let me recall a previous observation, namely that impulsive movements are an outward, directly observable manifestation of the person's state of mind. The reader will have observed that all the above examples are instances of more or less explicit contexts: the character of the cause (and of the possible aim) of the movement is evident or can be readily inferred. Since a certain set of causes elicits a certain set of impulsive reactions, it is not surprising that impulsive movements in the above types of context are not "unexpected": they may be seen as a natural manifestation of the person's state of mind. In other words, the movements are evaluated as fitting into the respective frame of explicitly presented causes and possible aims. (Let us, for example, consider example 1 with *suddenly* added to it: *"Then what in God's name is the point of it all?" cried Philip Swallow, suddenly throwing his hands into the air.* If we were to accept the plausibility of *suddenly* in this context, we would have to interpret the act of throwing one's hands into the air as an outcome of some unspecified cause.)

We have observed that in all the above examples the body part movements represent an outward expression of the person's state of mind. This point deserves our attention. As is well known, people do not have a direct access to other people's minds. The access is, among others, mediated via interpreting other people's behaviour, including the movements of the person's body parts. We might even say that body (part) movements have an indexal status in that they point at the person's inner state. The observer (speaker/writer) decodes (= evaluates) the status of the movement as impulsive on the basis of his interpretation of the context in which the movement occurs (in other words, on the basis of his interpretation of the character of the causative chain). From this point of view the semantic concept "impulsivity" has an evaluative status.

As opposed to more or less explicit contexts in the above examples, impulsive verbs also occur in contexts in which a specific type of mental state as the cause of the movement cannot be unequivocally inferred. Consider:

10. *Gore-Urquhart, who didn't seem to have noticed Margaret's smiles, jerked a short, nicotined thumb towards the departing Maconochie. "A fellow Scottish Nationalist," he said.* (KA 110)
11. *Still more softly she* [= Beryl — N. K.] *played the accompaniment—not singing now but listening (...) Beryl flung up her head and began to sing again (...)* (KM 40)
12. *Stanley himself, big and solid, in his dark suit, took his ease, and Beryl tossed her bright head and pouted. Round her throat she wore an unfamil-*

iar velvet ribbon. It changed her, somehow (...) (KM 52)

13. *Mrs Penniman threw back her head, with a certain expansion of the eye which she occasionally practised. "It seems to me that you talk like a great autocrat."* (HJ 93)
14. *Lane spotted her immediately, and despite whatever it was he was trying to do with his face, his arm that shot up into the air was the whole truth.* (JDS 12)

Here, due to the implicit causative connection of impulsive movements with certain types of mental states, impulsive movements function as a characterization of the mental state of the "manipulator" of the respective body part(s). The possibility of employing the adverb *suddenly* in combination with impulsive verbs in such types of context does not contradict our above assumption concerning the plausibility of *suddenly* with impulsive verbs. In vague contexts, the unexpected status of the movement may be an outcome of the unexpected character of the mental state as the supposed cause of the movement:

15. *And all of a sudden his hand shot out and with a swing of his arm untied my sheet, cleared my bed covers (...)* (KK 174)

Or, it may be an outcome of the observer's evaluation of the movement as unexpected in the sense "deviating from the standard pattern of kinetic behaviour that might be expected to occur in the given situation":

16. *Here he halted, (...) and knocked. The shrill voice cried:*
    "Come in!"
    The man entered Mr Alleyne's room. Simultaneously Mr Alleyne, a little man wearing gold-rimmed glasses on a clean-shaven face, shot his head up over a pile of documents. The head itself was so pink and hairless it seemed like a large egg reposing on the papers. (JJ 84)

In example 16, the cause of the movement expressed in *shoot up* is not, at least under standard circumstances, of such a character which would elicit an impulsive reaction on the part of the person carrying out the movement. Still, the use of *shoot up* has an evaluative status: due to the apparent discrepancy between the type of movement (quick, sudden) and the non-compelling character of the cause—the person enters after knocking and after being given the permission to enter, the narrator presents the movement as unexpected (and thus possibly implicative of undesirable effects for the man entering the room). (The said discrepancy brings about a specific stylistic effect: Mr Alleyne's head appears to stand out in a more marked, prominent way than when used with, for example, the non-evaluative, descriptive verb *raise*—note also the use of the definite article with the body part in the sentence *The head itself was so pink ....*)

In connection with the "unexpectedness" of movements expressed in impulsive verbs, consider a stylistically marked use of primarily impulsive verbs in the following examples:

17. *I watch her hand reach for another empty needle, watch it dart out, hinge over it, drop.* (KK 26)
18. *There is a black boy leaning against the wall near the door, arms crossed, pink tongue tip darting back and forth over his lips, watching us sitting in front of the TV set.* (KK 117)
19. *The fat man is swinging back and forth, looking off down the ridge of lava to where the men are standing their places on the scaffolding in the falls (...) Every so often you can see somebody shoot out an arm and take a step forward like a swordfighter (...)* (KK 165)

It is symptomatic that all the above examples are taken from Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The "inappropriate" use of impulsive verbs reflects the narrator's distorted ability to evaluate other people's movements, i.e. to interpret their position within the respective causative chains.

We have seen so far that impulsive verbs display an evaluative status in that their use reflects the observer's interpretation of the position of the movement within the causative chain. Therefore it is not coincident that, for example, the non-evaluative verbs *tilt* and *tip* occur in non-emotive contexts:

20. *Mrs Glass tilted her head to one side, the better to read the title (...)* (JDS 67)
21. *He tipped his head back to look things over (...)* (DL-Ch 67)

On the other hand, the impulsive *throw back one's head, toss one's head* are resorted to in contexts implicative of a mental cause of the movement—for example, the Chambers Dictionary (p. 1830) gives the following definition of the verb *toss*: "to fling, jerk (e.g. the head), e.g. as a sign of impatience":

22. *Davin tossed his head and laughed (...)* (JJ-P 156)

At this point it is worth mentioning that, theoretically, the movements as expressed in *She held out her arms, She tilted her head back* may have the same physical characteristics as the movements expressed in *She flung out her arms, She threw back her head.* It is the observer's (= the evaluator's) point of view that is responsible for assigning the features "sudden" and "quick" (with an added implication of force) to the respective movement. For example, in example 11, the primarily impulsive, i.e. evaluative, *fling up* might be replaced by the non-impulsive, i.e. merely descriptive, *put up* (*Beryl put up her head and began to sing again*). However, such a linguistic presentation would be lacking in evaluative character (i.e. would be lacking in reference to the impulsive status of the movement within the causative chain).[7]

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[7] Cf. also a merely descriptive, non-interpretative status of *put out* in *I put out my hand—"Ah, my poor little friend."* (KM 92)

By way of concluding our discussion, an important remark must be made. Some impulsive verbs may also be found in non-evaluative use too:

23. *(...) he began to do exercises—deep breathing, bending forward and backward (...) and shooting out his legs (...)* (KM 157)
24. *Corley had already thrown one leg over the chains when...* (JJ-D 52)

The movements display the same kinetic attributes as movements used in impulsive contexts (rapid movements with an added implication of force). However, they do not carry explicit (or implicit) reference to the person's mental state as the cause of the movement nor do they evaluate the movement as deviating from the standard pattern of kinetic behaviour in a given situation.

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In my analysis I have endeavoured to demonstrate the primarily evaluative status of the discussed set of impulsive verbs as being an outcome of the observer's interpretation of the position of the movement within the given causative chain. The physical attributes of the movement (rapid course, with an added implication of force, and, sometimes, with a backgrounded final localization of the body part) are then presented as superimposed upon the basic physical attribute of the motion (= transition from A to X).[8]

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8 Temporal as well as other specifications of movement (e.g. specifications of the manner in which the movement is carried out) may be conceived of as secondary phenomena, conceptually following from movement as spatial transition. Cf., e.g., Daneš and Hlavsa (1981.88) and Talmy (1975.181), who gives the following definition of motion situation: "One object moving or located with respect to another object will be termed a motion situation."