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THE INTERNAL SEMANTIC STRUCTURE OF *NOD* AND *SHRUG*

The present paper offers a semantico-syntactic analysis of the verbs *nod* and *shrug* as employed in constructions expressing body part movements (*He nodded his head, She shrugged her shoulders*). Attention will be paid to those semantic features that manifest themselves at the syntactic level.

First, a few terminological remarks must be made.

(a) I take movement as a sequence of kinetic quanta. I define 'kinetic 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.

(b) By 'kinetic phase' I understand a sequence of kinetic quanta without an implied reversal of direction in the course of the movement (for example, *raise* is a single-phase verb, *wave* is a multi-phase verb).

(c) In the internal semantic structure of body part motion verbs I distinguish two components: '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. For example, the process-denoting component as present in the verb *raise* (*one's hand*) enables the verb to enter into the *ing*-participle clause (*he was raising his hand*). The goal-denoting component enables the verb to be employed in the pseudo-passive construction, which has a resultative meaning (*his hand was raised*).

Within the field of verbs denoting body part movements, *nod* and *shrug* form a distinct group. As far as their lexico-semantic content is concerned, they denote movements consisting of two kinetic phases. At the end of the second phase the body parts resume their initial positions.

Internal semantic structure

The verbs do not denote movements, whose outcome is the change of the final localization of the body parts (they share this feature with the multi-phase

verbs of the *wave* type, which also do not imply a final change of the position of the body part). This fact manifests itself at the level of their **internal semantic structure**. In spite of the fact that the verbs denote movements with a definite, pre-programmed number of kinetic phases, their internal semantic structure cannot be decomposed into a process-denoting and a goal-denoting components. We see, then, that the internal semantic structure of the discussed verbs is of a homogeneous, compact character. In other words, the movement is linguistically structured as **an unanalyzable motion continuum**.

Syntactic behaviour

The overt syntactic signals of the compact character of the internal semantic structure of the verbs under discussion are the following:

(A) The incompatibility of *nod* and *shrug* with the non-iterative *begin*

The sentences *He began to nod his head*, *She began to shrug her shoulders* express a sequence of accomplished motion units. That is, the verbs are compatible with *begin* only in the iterative meaning. The incompatibility of the non-iterative *nod* and *shrug* with *begin* is, naturally, an outcome of the inchoative meaning of this verb. *Begin* typically expresses the onset of the movement, whereas with *nod* and *shrug* it covers, due to their compact, unanalyzable character, the whole motion continuum. Consider:

- (1) As he stared, she slowly began to nod her head up and down as if to say, 'That's right, Moses, I am dying now.' (SB-H 241.35)¹

(B) The incompatibility of *nod* and *shrug* with the non-iterative progressive

The verbs can combine with the progressive only in their iterative meaning. The sentences *He was nodding his head*, *She was shrugging her shoulders* again express a sequence of accomplished motion units. The incompatibility of the non-iterative *nod* and *shrug* with the progressive can of course be accounted for by the primary function of this construction, namely to profile the progression of

¹ The following list of abbreviations refers to the publications drawn on for the examples:
 DL = David Lodge, *Small World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985)
 EW = Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980)
 JDS = J. D. Salinger, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters. Seymour: An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982)
 JJ = James Joyce, *Dubliners* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974)
 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)
 SB = Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971)

the movement, i.e. to foreground the process-denoting component of the internal semantic structure of the verb.

The iterative progressive with these verbs is, however, rare. The function to imply a sequence of accomplished motion units is, in certain contexts, taken over by the simple form. Consider example 2, in which the iterative interpretation is not ruled out:

(2) Freddy Malins, who had listened with his head perched sideways to hear her better, was still applauding when everyone else had ceased and talking animatedly to his mother, who nodded her head gravely and slowly in acquiescence. (JJ 190.33)

The reason for the scarceness of the iterative progressive may be sought for in the function that the movements as denoted by *nod one's head* and *shrug one's shoulders* fulfil in the process of communication. They serve as conventionalized signals and as such imply a limited, though not precisely specified, number of kinetic phases that make up a sequence of accomplished motion units.

The possibility of *nod* and *shrug* to combine with *slowly* (cf. the above example) does not run counter to our observation concerning the unanalyzable, compact character of the internal structure of these verbs. The reason lies in the fact that this adverb does not operate within the sphere of the internal semantic structure. Because of its function to mark a slow progression from one kinetic quantum to another, *slowly* modifies the kinetic attributes of the movement. Its sphere of operation is thus in the kinetic structuration (i.e. kinetic quantization) of the movement.

Nod and *shrug* can, however, freely enter into *ing*-participle clauses. Cf. example 3:

(3) Shrugging and smiling, he took it all as analytic material and seemed very pleased. (SB-H 60.37)

The possibility of the verbs in question to enter into this type of construction does not run counter to our observation concerning the unanalyzable character of their internal semantic structures. It is certainly true that the above participial construction has the capacity to foreground the process-denoting component of the verbal internal structure. But here, due to the absence of this component, the *ing*-participle clause does not render the movement as an ongoing process taking place against the background of other actions. It presents the movement as an accomplished motion unit, that is, it covers the movement as one motion continuum.

Quirk et al. (1985.200-9) include the verb *nod* among 'momentary acts', i.e. among verbs that are dynamic, agentive (they need a 'doer' of the action), non-conclusive (they do not result in a change of state) and punctual (they are not capable of having duration). In the light of our discussion about the absence of both the process-denoting and the goal-denoting components in the internal semantic structures of the verbs in question, I argue that punctuality of action does

not, at least with *nod* (and, certainly, with *shrug*), lie in the absence of duration of the respective acts. As will have been seen, *nod* and *shrug* do have duration, which asserts itself in their capacity to combine with *slowly*. The movements must be accomplished to such a degree—i.e. the head must first go downwards and then upwards, and the shoulders must first go upwards and then downwards—as enables the onlooker to linguistically encode them as ‘nodding one’s head’ and ‘shrugging one’s shoulders’. Put in another way, the movements must go through all their kinetic phases if they are to be what they are claimed to be. (This feature forms a constitutive part of Vendler’s accomplishments. However, *nod* and *shrug*, in contrast to accomplishments, can be predicted only for single moments of time, which is a constitutive feature of achievements, cf. Vendler 1967.) ‘Duration’ is a feature whose sphere of operation is in the kinetic structuration of the action, and as such must be kept apart from what I have termed the ‘internal semantic structure’ of the verb. The verbs *nod* and *shrug* are linguistically shaped as internally compact, unanalyzable motion units. We might say, then, that ‘punctuality’ of the verb consists in the absence of its internal semantic structuration.

(C) The impossibility of *nod* and *shrug* occupying the subject position

These verbs are not allowed into constructions with the subject position occupied by the respective body part(s), not even in their descriptive sense (on the constructions with the body part in the subject position see Kudrnáčová 1997):

- *His head nodded.
- *Her shoulders shrugged.

The verbs can only enter into the constructions with the subject position occupied by the person as the manipulator of the body part(s). Consider:

- (4) Mr. Browne nodded in answer and, when she had gone, said to Freddy Malins /.../ (JJ 183.7)
- (5) The man from Interpol sits up sharply, puts on his headphones, switches on his recording apparatus, and nods to Désirée. (DL-S 281.11)

In Wierzbicka’s view (1980.23–4), the impossibility of employing *nod* and *shrug* in these constructions can be accounted for by the fact that the verbs do not imply a final change in the position of the respective body part(s). This explanation seems plausible and in compliance with our observation, namely that these verbs, apart from lacking a process-denoting component, are also devoid of its goal-denoting counterpart.

And another reflection corroborates Wierzbicka’s view. In movements in which the end position of the body part is changed (e.g., *turn one’s head*, *bend one’s head*, *open one’s eyes*), the respective body part has the status of a manipulated object and as such can occur in the subject position (*his head turned*, *his head bent*, *his eyes opened*). In the movements denoted by *nod* and *shrug*,

however, the aim of the movement is not to change the final position of the respective body part(s). The aim of the movement is the occurrence itself—the motion itself represents the aim *per se*. From this follows that the body parts in *nod* and *shrug* do not have the status of objects of the movement but acquire the status of instruments, owing to which the movements are implemented. And therefore they cannot occur in the subject position.

However, there exist verbs denoting movements that do not imply a final change of the position of the respective body parts and still may, under certain conditions, be employed in constructions with the body parts in the subject position (on the status of these constructions see Kudrnáčová 1997). Consider:

(6) Lottie's head wagged; she drooped, she slipped half into Kezia's lap and lay there. (KM 17.18)

(7) His head was very long, and swayed lightly as he spoke /.../ (EW 18.4)

(8) Her breasts poured out like honey. They swung and trembled as she stooped to strip off tights and briefs. (DL-S 324.35)

We see, then, that the lexico-semantic content of the verbs *nod* and *shrug* cannot serve as a sole explanation of the nonacceptability of *his head nodded* / *her shoulders shrugged*. The reason must be sought for also in the function of the movements. As mentioned earlier, they serve as conventionalized signals whose aim is to deliberately let the others know one's mental state, and as such they are clearly volitional. (I have to add, however, that the action-specifying attribute 'clearly volitional' is not felicitous since 'volition' is a binary concept allowing only of its extreme positions. In Kudrnáčová 1998 I have attempted to show that this bipolarity does not cover body part movements adequately, and I have introduced the concept of an impulse mentally processed to varying degrees.) The construction with the person (as the bearer of the impulse instigating the action) in the subject position (*He bent his head*) is by its character predisposed to render movements instigated by impulses that are mentally processed to a relatively high degree. This is not to say, however, that the construction with the body parts in the subject position is reserved for 'non-volitional' movements only—for example, the sentence *His head bent* may also imply a wilful actor. (This construction is often resorted to for stylistic reasons: it offers a bare description of the movement of the body part due to the fact that the movement is explicitly freed from its ties with the impulse underlying the action.) In spite of this the verbs *nod* and *shrug* are not admitted into this construction and the reason seems to lie in the fact that they express movements functioning as conventionalized signals, that is movements that need a high degree of the mental processing of the impulse. By way of digression let me point out that the verbs *wring* (*one's hands*) and *rub* (*one's hands*), which also denote conventionalized movements functioning as signals, are not admitted into constructions with the body parts in the subject position either.

At this point, mention must be made of one interesting fact, namely that the movements as denoted by the discussed verbs may occasionally occur in contexts in which the possible decoder of the signal is absent. Consider:

(9) The letter from Joe Higgins? A transparent piece of horseplay. Dixon nodded to himself and, clutching up a handful of the insurance policies, stuffed them into his pocket and left. (KA 230.7)

The movement here evidently functions not as a signal of the person's mental state, but as its symptom. The goal-oriented character of the movement (to signal somebody something represents the goal of the motion) is thus considerably weakened in favour of its orientation towards its cause (one's mental state). (On the relations 'movement - its cause' and 'movement - its goal' see Kudrnáčová 1998). The re-evaluated status of the movement goes hand in hand with a decrease in the degree of the mental processing of the impulse instigating the motion. A closer analysis of the status of the movement reveals that the discussed lower degree of the mental processing of the impulse is an outcome, seemingly paradoxically, of the typically conventionalized status of the movements as denoted by the verbs *nod* and *shrug*. The reason lies in the fact that conventionality implies repetition (habituation) and as such may form grounds for the automatization of the movement—this observation is in line with Gordon's view (1969:37) that expressing emotion in a conventional manner does not necessarily mean that the person is aware of the conventional character of the movement. In the light of this, consider also the wording *I found myself nodding* in example 10:

(10) /.../ he pantomimed to us both the very highest salutations and greetings, and I found myself grinning and nodding immoderately in return. (JDS 50.15)

(D) The impossibility of *nod* and *shrug* to enter into the pseudo-passive

The verbs cannot occur in the pseudo-passive (or, rather, in the passive form having a stative, resultative meaning):

*His head was nodded.

*Her shoulders were shrugged.

The impossibility of these verbs occurring in the above constructions can again be explained by the character of their internal semantic structure: *nod* and *shrug*, apart from lacking a process-denoting component, are also devoid of its goal-denoting counterpart. This internal semantic segment, referring to the final position of the body part(s), is a necessary prerequisite for the formation of the pseudo-passive construction.

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By way of concluding this discussion, let me add a few remarks about the possible use of *nod* with body parts other than *head*. Consider:

(11) The amateur violinist nodded the top half of his body and, supported by the local composer, burst into some scurrying tunelessness or other. (KA 53.4)

(12) His big chin, already scrubbed so much this morning he'd worn the hide off it, nodded up and down at McMurphy once or twice, then turned him around to lead him down the hall towards the end of the line. (KK 177.11)

These sentences are, naturally, stylistically marked. The use of *nod* serves a specific purpose, namely to throw considerable light upon the movement itself. In example 11, the use of the possible *bend* would shift the weight of the message towards the respective body part (*the top half of his body*), whereas *nod* here directs the attention upon the movement as well. In example 12, *nod* does not denote conventionalized movement functioning as a signal. This fact enables the verb to be employed in the syntactic construction with the body part in the subject position. Being thus explicitly freed from its links with the impulse instigating the movement, the body part is presented as an object capable of movement of its own accord. The situation is rendered as an atomized set of elements. This apparent tension between the facts of reality and their linguistic presentation brings about a specific stylistic effect.

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In my analysis I have endeavoured to show that the verbs *nod* and *shrug* form a semantically cohesive group with a distinctive syntactic behaviour and that their syntactic properties are conditioned by the semantic information as carried by them.

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