

NADĚŽDA KUDRNÁČOVÁ

## AGENT-ORIENTED DYNAMICITY IN BODY PART MOTION VERBS *PUT*, *BRING* AND *HOLD*

The present paper offers a semantico-syntactic analysis of the verbs *put* (*put up/down/out/forward/on one side*), *bring* (*bring up/down*) and *hold* (*hold up/out*) employed in constructions denoting body part movements. Its aim is to show that the syntactic behaviour of these verbs is conditioned by the semantic structures that constitute their meaning.

\*\*\*

These verbs can only enter into constructions with the subject position occupied by the person.

Examples with the verb *put*:<sup>1</sup>

Suddenly he put up his head and gave a loud wail. (KM 171.34)

“That’s right,” Dixon said, put his head down, and ran up the passage. (KA 74.11)

They led her up to the table amid laughing and joking, and she put her hand out in the air as she was told to. (JJ 102.35)

She put her feet forward for him to soap. (SB 181.9)

Examples with the verb *bring*:

He longed to execrate aloud, to bring his fist down on something violently. (JJ 88.15)

He allowed a terrible grimace to dawn on his features, forcing his chin

---

<sup>1</sup> The following list of abbreviations refers to the publications drawn on for the examples:  
DL = David Lodge, *Small World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985)  
JJ = James Joyce, *Dubliners* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974)  
KA = Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975)  
KM = Katherine Mansfield, *Bliss and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977)  
SB = Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971)

down as far as possible and trying to bring his nose up between his eyes.  
(KA 179.11)

Examples with the verb *hold*:

Miss Maiden holds up a hand to command their attention, and begins to recite in a high, vatic chant [...] (DL 245.19)

We were introduced. She held out her hand in that strange boyish way English women do, and standing very straight in front of me with her chin raised [...] (KM 81.32)

The verbs are not allowed into constructions with the subject position occupied by the body part, not even in their descriptive sense:

\*His head put down. / \*Her feet put forward. / \*Her head put on one side.  
/ \*His head put up. / \*Her hand put out in the air.

\*His fist brought down on the table. / \*His nose brought up between his eyes.

\*Her hand held up to command their attention. / \*Her hand held out.

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

\* His head was put down. / \*His fist was brought down (on the table). /  
\*Her hand was held up.

The impossibility of these verbs occurring in the above constructions becomes evident when one realizes that verbs like *lift* and *lower* can enter into them (Dixon 1991.98 takes *bring* and *lift* as semantically related verbs that refer to causing something to be in motion with respect to a Locus):

His brow lifted. / His chin lowered.

His chin was lifted. / His head was lowered.

A closer look at the character of the relation ‘agent-entity’ in the constructions that do not denote body part movements will help clarify the situation.

#### ***Put, bring and hold* in constructions other than denoting body part movements**

(a) The verb *put* “refers to putting an entity at some location” (Levin 1993.112). We have to add that *put* is devoid of any other meaning components that might imply the manner of the action, including the particular final positioning of the entity (as is the case in *sling* or *place*).

(b) The verb *bring* belongs to verbs of “continuous causation of accompanied motion” (such as *carry*), but (together with *take*) differs from them by “the

presence of the deictic component of meaning and the lack of a meaning component that specifies the manner in which the motion is brought about" (Levin 1993.135).

Although *bring* and *put* belong to different classes of verbs, they share certain features. In *put*, "putting an entity at some location" naturally presupposes "contact with the entity" and "causation of accompanied motion". (Needless to say, these presupposed semantic components are features of a real world event rendered by this verb.<sup>2</sup>

All these semantic features are rendered as features *per se*, without the respective manner specifications.

(c) The verb *hold*, in spite of not describing "a change of possession or a change of location", describes "prolonged contact with an entity" (Levin 1993.145), and it is this semantic feature that enables us to classify the verb as belonging to the *put/bring* group.

We have to realize, however, that the meaning component "prolonged contact without a change of possession or a change of location" is present in many verbs other than in *hold* (in *press* or *clasp*, for example). The type of contact in *hold* is simply "bare holding in one's hands": the pre-modifier "bare" is to indicate that the manner of the grasp is not specified (this will exclude the contact as expressed in verbs of the *clasp* type), and the specification "holding in one's hands" excludes verbs of the *press* type.

We may thus conclude that the verbs *put*, *bring* and *hold* are cognitively related in that they all share a semantic component "bare contact with an entity" (with respect to, prototypically, a person's hand). It is the type of contact (in other words, the type of relation between the agent and the object) that plays a crucial role in affecting the syntactic behaviour of verbs in constructions denoting body part movements.

### Relation 'agent-object'

In the constructions *he held something in his hand(s)*, *he put something somewhere*, *he brought something somewhere*, the relation between the agent and the object carried implies not the transmission of dynamic energy, but the transmission of statary energy. (The term "statary" seems to be more appropriate than its possible variant "static", since "static" excludes its opposite, i.e. "dynamic", and the relation between the agent and the object does imply a release of energy—"stationary" energy in this case.)

In verbs of the *lift*, *lower* and *turn* type, the relation 'agent-object' also implies a release of energy with the resultant change of the location of the entity. Here, however, the release of the energy is primarily oriented towards the object so the verbs carry in them information not only about the change of

<sup>2</sup> As Běličová (1982.27) put it, the classification of verbs is, first and foremost, the result of the logico-semantic of the situations as expressed by them.

the location of the object, but also about the direction of the motion (up, down or sideways). That is, due to the **object-oriented dynamicity of the action**, the change of the location of the object is reevaluated as a **qualitative change** (as opposed to the verbs of the *bend* and *straighten* type, inner qualities of the object remain the same). This also seems to be the reason why the slot for a Locus in the syntactic configuration remains empty.

The verbs *put* and *bring* present a different linguistic structuration of the situation. The release of dynamic energy is not primarily oriented towards the object; in other words, its range of action is limited to the agent. **The dynamicity of the action is presented as agent-oriented**. It is perhaps not without interest to mention in this connection the wording used by Faber and Usón in their specification of the semantics of *bring*: “to cause somebody/something to go with you” (Faber and Usón 1999.281).

In the relation ‘agent-object’, it is stative energy that comes to the fore. In *he put something somewhere, he brought something somewhere* the change of the location of the object is thus presented as a result of the change of the location of the agent or of his/her body part(s).

Consequently, these verbs do not carry as their meaning components the specific direction of the motion or the final localization of the entity. The syntactic slot for a Locus must thus be filled (naturally, if *bring* implies “to here”, *here* can be omitted):

I put the books on the table. / I brought the books to the meeting.

The static character of the relation between the agent and the object is supported by another observation. Let us consider the semantic operation of the adverb *accidentally* in the following sentences:

(a) *Accidentally*, he put the books on the table.

*Accidentally*, he brought the books here.

(b) *Accidentally*, he turned the stone.

*Accidentally*, he bent the rod.

*Accidentally*, he raised the chair.

In (a), *accidentally* can relate to the Locus (*on the table, here*) or to the object (“instead of putting the books on the table, he put something else there”). It cannot relate to the verb (“instead of putting it on the table, he smashed it there”). Interpretation of the kind “instead of putting it on the table, he smashed it there” is possible, but not as a semantic reading of *he accidentally put it on the table*.

In (b), *accidentally* can relate to the object (“instead of raising the chair, he raised the box”) or to the verb (“instead of straightening the rod, he bent it”).

We have seen that the adverb *accidentally* implies choice out of dynamic possibilities, whereas in *put* and *bring*, the relation between the agent and the object is characterized by the lack of the release of dynamic energy.

### **Syntactic behaviour of *put*, *bring* and *hold* in constructions denoting body part movements**

(a) The impossibility of the discussed set of verbs occurring in constructions with the subject position occupied by a body part and in the pseudo-passive can be accounted for by the primarily static character of the relation between the agent and the object moved. The change of the object's location is not presented as a qualitative change, but as a result of the change of location of the agent or his/her body part(s). Since the dynamicity of the action is presented as agent-oriented and not as object-oriented, the object cannot be presented as acting "on its own"—hence the impossibility of the verbs being employed in constructions with the subject position occupied by a body part and in the pseudo-passive.

As far as the pseudo-passive is concerned, one might, due to its resultative meaning, suppose that the verbs will freely enter into this syntactic construction. It is certainly true that the above mentioned absence of the directional/locative meaning components does not contradict the fact that the discussed verbs are goal-oriented. This feature is, however, overruled by the meaning component that plays a dominant role—by the primarily agent-oriented dynamicity of the action.

(b) Let us now consider the compatibility of the verbs with the progressive and with the inchoative *begin*:

He was putting up his head. / He began to put up his head.

He was holding up a hand to command their attention. / He began to hold up a hand to command their attention.

He was bringing his fist down on the table. / He began to bring his fist down on the table.

Here the situation is not as straightforward as in the above syntactic constructions. Some native speakers regard the progressive and the verb *begin* with these verbs as "very odd" and add that the above sentences need a specific context (for example, the onlooker watches the motion on a video, the video is interrupted and the onlooker comments on what he sees).

The reasons for the questionability of the use of the discussed verbs in sentences with the progressive and with the verb *begin* is brought about not by the relative shortness of the route implied (although this may play a corroborative role), but, first of all, by the relative poorness of the semantic content of the verbs. They denote the mere change of the spatial positioning of the body part (expressed by an additional locative expression), and this change is presented as the outcome of an agent-oriented action. The verbs are devoid of any manner specification, both with respect to the manner of the action itself and with respect to the final spatial configuration of the object. Consequently, the goal-oriented character of the movement is of a specific, achievement-like

kind (achievements can, strictly speaking, be predicated only for single moments of time, cf. Vendler 1967).

(c) The discussed verbs can, however, occur in *ing*-participle clauses:

“Ssh”! hissed Ronald Frobisher, holding up a finger. (DL 178.16)

Bringing his fist down on the table, he exclaimed...

Putting her feet forward for him to soap, she went on to say...

The easiness with which these verbs enter into this construction is enabled by the achievement-like character of the verbs: the *ing*-participle clauses with these verbs do not denote the progression from one kinetic quantum to another. That is, they do not present the movement as an ongoing process taking place against the background of other actions, but render the movement as an accomplished motion unit.

\*\*\*

In my analysis I have endeavoured to demonstrate that within body part motion verbs, the verbs *put*, *bring* and *hold* 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.

## WORKS CITED

- Běličová, H. (1982). *Sémantická struktura věty a kategorie pádu* [The semantic structure of the sentence and the category of case] (Prague).
- Dixon, R. M. W. (1991). *A new approach to English grammar, on semantic principles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Faber, P. B. and Usón, R. M. (1999). *Constructing a lexicon of English verbs* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter).
- Levin, B. (1993). *English verb classes and alternations: a preliminary investigation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press).
- Vendler, Z. (1967). *Linguistics in philosophy* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press).