

Valency: different perspectives

Tesnière: "Le verbe signifie tout un drame." In analogy to chemical elements, the verb requires that positions are filled by actants, quantitatively and qualitatively

1. Gilbert Lazard and the RIVALC

Some of the most important of Lazard's statements:

- Linguists use different conceptual tools and terminologies, and when using identical terms, they often don't give them the same meanings.

- How can we carry out cross-linguistic comparison? If languages differ, if they are formerly different, if the linguistic categories used to analyze them are different, how can we find reliable criteria which will allow comparison? The only solution is to keep in mind that the only thing languages have in common is the capacity to express the same or at least similar meaning contents. Comparison has then to rely on the meaning.' (Lazard 1998a:11).

⇒ **A cross-linguistic approach to valency can only be based on semantic considerations.**

'Actancy', in Lazard's terminology, covers the facts relating to the grammatical relations established between the verb predicate and the noun phrases dependent on it.

His first Actancy schemata (1998a: 23), "highly abstract and independent of both semantic relations and the grammatical notions of subject and object" tentatively summarizes the possible combinations found in constructions, irrespective of word order.

N_i argument marked by a relator N_o no marker

V_n with index co-referent of N V_o no index

One argument

N_o V_o N_o V_n

N_i V_o N_i V_n

Two arguments, N and P:

N_o P_o V_o N_o P_o V_n N_o P_o V_{np}

N_i P_o V_o N_i P_o V_n N_i P_o V_{np}

N_o P_j V_n

N_i P_j V_o N_i P_j V_n N_i P_j V_{np}

N_o V_n: *The dog is running* vs. *The dogs are running*.

Latin

1a. *Marcu-s decessi-t* [N_o V_n]

Marcus- NOM perish. PST-3SG

"Marcus died."

1b. *Quintu-s Marcu-m occidi-t.* [N_o P_j V_n] or [N_i P_j V_n] ?

Quintus-NOM Marcus-ACC slay.PST-3SG

"Quintus slew Marcus."

Avar

2a. *Ima -∅ ∅-xwana* [N_o V_n]

Imach-ABS CL-die.AOR

"Imach died."

2b. *Ima -∅ ∅-`xwana Xur-icca* [N_o P_j V_n]

Imach-ABS CL-slay.AOR Khursh.INSTR

"Khursh slew Imach."

Less abstract system of representation, using X, Y and Z symbols:

- X is the actant representing the agent in action sentences and any actant treated in the same way in other sentences patterned according to the major construction;
- Y is the actant representing the patient in action sentences and any actant treated in the same way in other sentences patterned according to the major construction;
- Z is the actant of one-actant sentences

Latin: Zo Vz and Xo Ya Vx (where a = accusative case)

Avar: Zo Vz and Yo Vy Xb (where b = instrumental case)

⇒ In Latin, X = Z, while in Avar, Y = Z

By definition, if X is treated like a single actant [X=Z], the structure is accusative; if Y is treated like Z ([Y =Z]), the structure is ergative.

- nominative/accusative, such as Latin or Slavic languages: X = Z (and Y ≠ Z)
- absolutive/ergative, such as Avar or Pashto: Y = Z (and X ≠ Z)
- neutral: X = Z and Y = Z (or X=Y=Z)
- mixed: X ≈ Z and Y ≈ Z
- disjunct/disjoint: X ≠ Z and Y ≠ Z

(+ dual structure, in which the single actant is not treated unitarily: p.43-44)

"It is often held that an accusative language is a language which gives the same treatment to the subject of the transitive sentence and the subject of the intransitive sentence or, in short, the transitive subject and the intransitive subject, while an ergative language gives the same treatment to the object and the intransitive subject. But what is a subject? If the notion is definable in the context of a given language, it is less than clear in general linguistics. It cannot, therefore, provide the basis for a definition of the structures of actancy. The notion of agent, which is more overtly semantic, provides a firmer basis.

There are, however, in all languages, sentences showing the same construction as in (1b.) and (2b.) but in which there are no agent: *I am enjoying your show.*

"Attempts, therefore, have been made to find a notion which has a wider application than that of agent" (Lazard p.37):

"It is legitimate simply to take *action sentences* as the semantic basis for definitions of the *dominant structure of actancy*." (p.40). Thus we take the comparison of two-actant action sentences with one-actant sentences as the basis for the definition of the dominant actancy structure in any language. More precisely, we posit the action sentence as the *major two-actant construction* and we compare it with the (major) one-actant construction, and we say that the actancy structure that emerges from this comparison is the dominant actancy structure of the language.

⇒ *Actances* 12 volumes which can be freely downloaded on the Lacito website.

http://lacito.vjf.cnrs.fr/actances/actances_numeros.htm

An actancy variation comprises every change, minimal or considerable, in the actancy structure, i.e. in the formal relations between X, Y and V or between Z et V ö (*Actances* 1:10).

- free variations: French *J'habite à Paris* or *J'habite Paris*.
- constructional variations: *Je mange du pain* "I eat bread", *Je ne mange pas de pain* "I do not eat (any) bread."

These variations are most often correlated with the following points (1994:172):

- (a) type of the event and participant roles,
- (b) categorization of the actants
- (c) verb classes
- (d) pragmatic aims
- (e) morphosyntactic devices.

"Lazard's (2005, 2006) approach is even closer to mine in that he not only focuses on the differences between similar descriptive categories across languages, but also regards comparative concepts as a different sort of thing. He proposes that as a point of departure for their research, typologists should use 'arbitrary conceptual frameworks', clearly and explicitly defined concepts that are ultimately based on linguists' intuitions (e.g. 'major biactant construction' in the definition of transitivity, Lazard 2002). These are more or less what I have called comparative concepts, the important point being that the comparative concepts are different from language-specific categories, and that they are 'tools for research, not hypotheses susceptible of being verified or falsified [í] We have "to create comparative concepts that allow us to identify comparable phenomena across languages and to formulate crosslinguistic generalizations. Comparative concepts have to be universally applicable, so they can only be based on other universally applicable concepts: conceptual-semantic concepts, general formal concepts, and other comparative concepts. [í] they usually contain a semantic component." (Haspelmath 2010:663).

2. The notion of transitivity

2.1. Lazard and the RIVALC: Four different points on the transitivity axis:

- A) Quality, state, change of state, etc.: uniactanciel/monovalent verbs.
- B) Body or mental activities directed or not towards an object
- C) Spontaneous or provoked processes
- D) Action: bi-actanciel/bivalent verbs

Lazard (2003:152):

(1) A **prototypical action** is an effective volitional discrete action performed by a controlling agent affecting a well individuated patient:

- action voluntarily performed by a human being, who controls it, not a natural process or a non-intentional or uncontrolled action.
- it is real, not prospective or imagined.
- it is discrete, i.e. perfective or completive, not progressive, conative, habitual, etc. or somehow incomplete.
- the patient is a well individuated, animate entity.
- the patient is actually affected, i.e. (s)he/it undergoes a change as a consequence of the action.

(2) The **major bi-actant construction**, in any language, is the construction used to express a prototypical action. [í]

Hypothesis: The **transitive construction** in any language is the major bi-actant construction.

Constructional variations

- **differential object-agreement** (linked to the degree of definiteness):

Tswana (Bantu)

1a. *Thabo ó-e-bidítse ntsá*
Thabo 3SG1-3SG2-call dog
"Thabo called the dog."

1b. *Thabo ó-bidítse ntsá*
Thabo 3SG1-call dog
"Thabo called a dog."

- **differential object-marking**

Persian

2a. *ketâb-râ xând-am*
book-POSTP read:PST-1SG
"I read the book."

- 2b. *ketâb xând-am*
 book read:PST-1SG
 "I read a book / books."

- **oblique constructions**

English *to shoot at a rabbit* vs *to shoot a rabbit*.

German *im Buch lesen* "to read in the book" vs *das Buch lesen* "to read the book"

- **incorporation**

Incorporation of the object implies non-referentiality of the object.

- **antipassive and passive** (derived diatheses)

Signifié (<i>Sé</i>)	process	participants	
Signifiant (<i>Sa</i>)	verb	actants	
<i>Sé</i>	prototypical action	other two-participant processes	one-participant processes
+			-
<i>Sa</i>	major two-actant constr.	in-between construction	one-actant construction

2.2. Valency (Ulrike Mosel 1991:240).

"Valency is the property of the verb which determines the obligatory and optional number of its participants, their morpho-syntactic form, their semantic class membership (e.g. ± animate, ± human), and their semantic role (e.g. agent, patient, recipient). The valency inherently gives information on the nature of the semantic and syntactic relations that hold between the verb and its participants [í] Valency as a property of the lexeme includes the valencies of all its verb forms. [í] Therefore, in describing valency one has to start with the valencies of its verb forms and then investigate the paradigmatic relations between the particular verb forms and their valencies. [í] it is reasonable to consider the valency of the unmarked form as basic (or intrinsic. [í] The paradigmatic relations between basic and secondary valencies can be described in terms of valency changing devices as, for instance, intransitivization, transitivity, passivization, antipassivization, etc. which result in various kinds of changes; these changes may be roughly classified as follows:

Type I: Valency (increasing or reducing) derivations which change the number of obligatory participants, but do not affect the syntactic and semantic status of those participants that are common to both the basic and the derived forms.

Tok Pisin

- | | | |
|----|----------------|-----------------------|
| 5. | <i>mi rait</i> | <i>mi rait=im pas</i> |
| | 1SG write | 1SG write=TR letter |
| | "I write" | "I write a letter." |

Type II: Derivations correlated with a change of the syntactic status of the participants shared by the basic and the derived form (e.g. passivization in English and causativization in Austronesian languages)

English

The pig destroyed the fence vs. *The fence was destroyed by the pig.*

Type III: Derivations which do not reduce or increase the number of obligatory participants, but serve as a means of promoting a peripheral, optional participant to a nuclear obligatory one, while demoting a nuclear obligatory participant to a peripheral optional one, e.g. antipassivization in Dyirbal.

Components or aspects of valency are:

1. The quantitative component which determines the number of participants.
2. The semantic component which determines the semantic roles and the semantic class membership of participants

3. The morphosyntactic component which determines the morphosyntactic form of participants.

4. The pragmatic component which indicates which participant is selected for a particular pragmatic role." (p.243)

"It is problematic to determine the valency of a verb on the basis of its meaning. Rather, the syntax should be the point of departure in analyzing valency" (p.245)

German

- | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 6. <i>Eva speiste.</i> | (only one participant involved) |
| <i>Eva schmauste.</i> | (only one participant involved) |
| <i>Eva aß (den Apfel).</i> | (optional patient) |
| <i>Eva verspeiste den Apfel.</i> | (patient obligatorily expressed) |

2.3. Martin Haspelmath (2010)

Comparative concepts (mostly from Lazard 2002):

prototypical action: "an effective volitional discrete action performed by a controlling agent and actually affecting a well individuated patient";

major bi-actant construction (MBC): "the construction used to express a prototypical action (possibly among other event types)";

A: "the argument of the MBC that expresses the agent when the MBC expresses a prototypical action";

P: "the argument of the MBC that expresses the patient when the MBC expresses a prototypical action";

basic construction: a construction that does not involve special voice marking on the verb (i.e. overt marking that is restricted to occurring with a particular kind of argument coding);

accusative pattern: a pattern according to which A is treated like the S (single argument of an intransitive construction), and unlike the P, in the basic construction;

ergative pattern: a pattern according to which P is treated like the S (single argument of an intransitive construction), and unlike the A, in the basic construction.

2.4. Denis Creissels (2016): Defining Transitivity

"Verbs encoding events involving one, two, or three essential participants are designated as *monovalent*, *bivalent*, and *trivalent*. *Transitive* and *intransitive* do not refer to the number of essential participants in the events denoted by verbs, but to the fact that they select a coding frame identical to that of verbs encoding a particular type of event. The delimitation of the set of transitive verbs is language-specific and relies on formal criteria, but the sets of transitive verbs of the individual languages are universally defined as including a particular semantic class of verbs, the *core transitive verbs*, defined as bivalent verbs that can head clauses encoding events characterized by a maximum degree of semantic transitivity."

In other words, a core transitive verb is a bivalent verb that has the ability to refer to two-participant events involving two well-individuated participants, a typical agent (i.e. a human participant consciously and willingly controlling an activity oriented towards the other participant), and a typical patient (i.e. a participant undergoing a change of state or position triggered by the activity of an agent). **Break** is a good example of a core transitive verb. By contrast, **hit** is not a core transitive verb (and in many languages, hittees are coded differently from typical patients), and **eat** is not a core transitive verb either (which explains why many languages have two totally different translational equivalents of English **eat**, one of them transitive and the other intransitive, a situation that seems to never occur with core transitive verbs)." (p. 19).

"EAT is used to mean something like 'eat a meal' - not merely 'eat something', and DRINK is used to mean 'drink alcoholic beverages' (Fillmore 1986:96).

Creissels: The term *transitive verb* without further specification refers to verbs whose construction includes two terms coded like the two arguments of core transitive verbs, whatever their semantic roles (p.20).

Basque (Creissels pers.doc.)

- 7a. *Haurr-ek ispilu-a puskatu dute.* coding frame <ERG, Ø>
 child-PL.ERG mirror-SG break.CPL PRS.A.3PL.P.3SG
 -The children have broken the mirror.Ø
- 7b. *Haurr-ek ispilu-a ikusi dute.* coding frame <ERG, Ø>
 child-PL.ERG mirror-SG see.CPL PRS.A.3PL.P.3SG
 -The children have seen the mirror.Ø

Akhvakh (Creissels pers.doc.)

- 8a. *Mikø-de istaka biqø^v ri.* coding frame <ERG, Ø>
 child-ERG glass break.CPL
 -The child broke the glass.Ø
- 8b. *Mikø-la istaka harig^wari.* coding frame <DAT, Ø>
 child-DAT glass see.CPL
 -The child saw the glass.Ø

2.5. Ashild Naess (2003:123-124)

The transitive prototype: Agent defined as a [+ Volitional, + Investigating, - Affected], while a Patient is defined as [-Volitional, -Instigating, + Affected]

Three semantic roles associated with the subject of 'break':

Agent [+ volitional, + instigation, - affected]: *John broke the window (on purpose).*

Force [- volitional, + instigation, - affected]: *John broke the window accidentally.*

Instrument [- volitional, + instigation, + affected]: *The hammer broke the window.*

2.6. Other approaches/definitions

- **Dixon** (1979:103; 1994:6 ff) follows inductive procedure. He notes that all, or nearly all, languages, with verbs signifying 'cut' and 'give', 'rub' and 'carry', 'take' and 'cook', and even 'see' and 'hear', treat their participants identically: "By this I mean that the participant who makes the incision (for 'cut') is equated with the person who transfers possession of something he had (for 'give'), with the participant who receives the sense impression (for 'see'), and so on. I denote this participant by the functional label "A": the A NP's for 'cut', 'give', 'see', etc., are consistently treated in exactly the same way, in all aspects of morphology and syntax, across every type of human language. The other participant in these transitive activities - that which is incised (for 'cut'), whose sense impression is noticed (for "see'), etc. is treated in the same way; here I use the functional label "O". It is these facts which lead me to suggest that the syntactic-semantic functions A and O are universal linguistic primitives."

- **Van Valin & Foley** (1980:335) regard as fundamental "an opposition between participants that perform, effect, instigate or control the situation denoted by the predicate, and participants that do not perform, initiate or control any situation but rather are affected in some way. The former type of participant we refer to as an *Actor* (A) and the latter as an *Undergoer* (U)". The notion of Actor is broader than that of agent: it is a "macrorole" (Foley & Van Valin 1984:30); also by an "instrument": *the rock in the rock shattered the mirror*; a "receiver": *the lawyer in the lawyer received a telegram*; an "experiencer": *the dog in the dog sensed the earthquake*.

⇒ These two notions bear a great resemblance to Dixon's A and O.

- **Hopper and Thompson** (1980): the transitive prototype is defined in terms of ten semantic parameters, considered to be "the component parts of the Transitivity notion"

Transitivity parameters (Hopper and Thompson 1980:252)

	High	Low
A. Participants	2 or + participants, A and O	1 participant
B. Kinesis	action	non-action
C. Aspect	telic	atelic
D. Punctuality	punctual	non-punctual
E. Volitionality	volitional	non-volitional
F. Affirmation	affirmative	negative
G. Mode	realis	irrealis
H. Agency	A high in potency	A low in potency
I. Affectedness of O	O totally affected	O non-affected
J. Individuation of O	O highly individuated	O non-individuated

- **Tsunoda** (1985:388): Verb-type hierarchy with correlated meanings and English examples

Type 1 : Direct effect on patient, with two subtypes:

- resultative: *kill, break, bend*
- non-resultative: *hit, shoot, kick, eat*

Type 2 Perception, with 2 subtypes:

- patient more attained: *see, hear, find*
- patient less attained: *listen, look*

Type 3 Pursuit

search, wait, await

Type 4 Knowledge

know, understand, remember, forget

Type 5 Feeling

love, like, want, need, fond, fear, afraid, angry, proud, boast

Type 6 Relationship

possess, have, lack, lacking, resemble, similar, correspond, consist

Type 7 Ability

capable, proficient, good

Tsunoda presents data from several languages which shows that verbs of Type 1 are more likely to take canonical transitive case-marking than verbs farther down.

Main parameter encoded in this hierarchy is affectedness: Type 1 + affected, type 7 - affected.