

A Lexicalist Approach To Absolute Reflexives

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Lees and Klima (1963; henceforth L&K) note that English has absolute reflexive verbs, which constitute a separate category of verbs whose objects can only be reflexive pronouns, e.g. *absent oneself*, *perjure oneself*, *bestir oneself*. L&K call the base verbs reflexive intransitives, and claim that through transformation, these verbs get an object that is identical with the subject, and in a subsequent step this object is pronominalized.

This series of rules clearly contradicts the Principle of Economy that claims that language always uses the minimum number of steps to form a structure. L&K's analysis presupposes that the base word that is contained in the lexicon is an item that never gets realized without the two additional obligatory rules that determine its actual form. The following example illustrates their analysis:

- (1) a. Lexical entry: *perjure* (v) Example: O.J. *perjures*.
- b. Obligatory transformation: O.J. *perjures* O.J.
- c. Obligatory pronominalization: O.J. *perjures himself*.

I propose that instead of deriving the underlined item by an operation on a simple -- and non-existing -- verb's argument structure, we consider it as a complex item that constitutes a separate entry in the lexicon. It just happens to be two words, but we see many similarly complex units in the lexicon, e.g. verb+particle constructions like *put off*, or compound words like *pot luck*. This approach is more economical, since it allows these complex verbs to occupy one slot in the lexicon and does not require additional rules -- as opposed to L&K's approach which provides the bare verbs one slot in the lexicon, plus requires two rules to get the reflexive form. Basically, what L&K consider a phenomenon that needs to be dealt with and constrained in syntax, becomes a simple lexical axiom in this framework.

The following two arguments support the alternative analysis outlined here:

(i) L&K observe that reflexive verbs cannot be separated from the reflexive pronouns under conjunction, whereas non-reflexive verbs followed by reflexive pronouns can:

- (2) * John excused and behaved himself. (=L&K (103))
- (3) John cut and scratched himself. (=L&K (104))

Their theory could not explain why the following sentence is bad:

- (4) * O.J. cut and perjured himself.

The approach advocated here states that unlike *scratched himself*, the item *perjured himself* is one lexical unit, therefore it cannot lend its second half (*himself*) to

another verb, because it is not an argument that can be shared. The same explanation is held for *behaved himself* in (2). Hence, we can consider (3) an elliptical sentence, whereas in (2) and (4) we have verbs whose second halves are missing.

(ii) Language after language we see that the same class of verbs can be followed by a reflexive pronoun, e.g. *to cut oneself*. The occurrence of absolute reflexives, however, seems rather idiosyncratic, it cannot be attributed to meaning; therefore it is more of a random phenomenon which meaning is expressed in an absolute reflexive verb in a certain language. This characteristic of the absolute reflexives makes it necessary to list them as inseparable objects in the lexicon.

References

Lees, R.B. and Edward S. Klima. (1963) Rules for English pronominalization. *Language* 39, 17-28.