ANCA-MARIANA PEGULESCU
Ministery of National Education

CAN SEMANTIC ROLES IMPACT ON SYNTACTIC RELATIONS?

Abstract: Linguists and grammarians do not consider languages neat and symmetrical. That is why the varying grammatical behaviours of words are seen as a consequence of words' meaning differences.
The approach I have undertaken is a 'meaning oriented' one and the article will be a constant interplay between theory and examples extracted from the two short stories I have selected due to possible similarities and obvious differences. The theoretical parameters extracted from the case grammar framework allowed me the examination of the syntactic structures displayed by the two Romanian short stories writers' prose - Peter Neagoe's The Village Saint and Ion Agârbiceanu's Bunica Safta.
The way in which words are combined is different in English as compared to Romanian. Both writers seem to have a common denominator: the Transylvanian village. Even if their vision of the world is different (Neagoe is writing in English and Agârbiceanu is writing in Romanian), their mentality is similar: the rural universe is defined by primitive 'rules', the characters act very often on instinct. The characters' messages are selected in specific syntactic arrangements that give a peculiar importance to the semantic roles.
The semantic and the syntactic constructions in both Romanian and English short stories are determined by principled interaction between the minor and the major word classes.

Keywords: activity, difference, implication, participant, verb.

1. The verb as the centre of the clause.

The verb is, no doubt, the engine of a clause because it refers to the activity(ies) in which some participants have roles:

(i)'Oamenii își <u>isprăviră</u> treburile de dimineață din gospodării.'
(I. Agârbiceanu – *Bunica Safta*)
(ii) 'You shall <u>count</u> the stars, <u>face up</u>, while I <u>drink</u> your breath'
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

The verb may also refer to a state and the participant(s) experience(s) that particular *state*:

(i)'Bunica Safta <u>era văduvă</u> de zece ani'
(I. Agârbiceanu – *Bunica Safta*)
(ii)' <u>Goats-herd-</u>like his patron saint – <u>as gaunt, as tall, as hairy'</u>
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

I have chosen the above two short stories writers due to the way they make the Romanian village work, live and breath. Both writers lived and died almost during the same period of time. The difference is the language: while Agârbiceanu wrote in Romanian, Neagoe wrote in English.

The Romanian village at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, is the main theme in both literary works. Peter Neagoe's approach when presenting the Romanian peasant was praised by the literary critics of his time and very much analyzed by today's

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critics or researchers. Agârbiceanu, in his turn, has been perused by prestigious names belonging to the Romanian literary criticism. They underlined the human presence, especially the feminine one, characterized by powerful psychological and ethical intuition.

Neagoe seems to write out of first hand experience. Still, to many literary critics, Neagoe might have allowed himself the role of the objective narrator, having detached himself from his topics. *The Village Saint* introduces the main character from the very first sentence:

(i)'His name is John.'

(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

Agârbiceanu prefers a smooth beginning: the description of the place and people's activities at sun rise reminds us Balzac's style in introducing his characters:

(ii) Se împrăştiase de mult, topindu-se în văzduhul limpede….fumul'.

(I.Agârbiceanu - *Bunica Safta*)

Both short stories writers seem to hide themselves behind very common human situations that have however a very deep significance, leaving these situations as unfold, unexpected moments, followed by surprising solutions.

At the phrase or sentence level, Agârbiceanu and Neagoe cannot be analyzed according to a common pattern. Agârbiceanu's phrase can bring the verb on the first place and the action in itself is emphasized:

(i)'…..își dădură în stavă caii, scoaseră sub biciul lung…..vitele, fugăriră porcii…..'

(I. Agârbiceanu – *Bunica Safta*)

Neagoe's phrase can lack the verb:

(ii)' His voice clear as mountain air, vibrant. His walk wide-stepped, spring.'

(P.Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

The village is a little universe, sometimes colourless, otherwise representing the root and the cradle of a population or even a nation. In *The Village Saint* the events linked to the main character happen outside the community. *Bunica Safta* is placing the main character and everything that is connected to her in the middle of the facts, descriptions and characters' interactions.

The verb 'to be' is seen by certain linguists as the 'most irregular verb'[Dixon, R.M. W: 2005]. It is, probably, the unique verb which has this 'behaviour', both in Romanian and English:

(i)'His mother was Nutza, the terror of the shepherds'

(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

(ii) Era o clădire mare și grea din piatră și cărămidă….la spatele casei era grajdul și șura'

(I. Agârbiceanu – *Bunica Safta*)

Peasants' life is in Agârbiceanu's prose is linear: in summer they get up before the sun rises and work in the fields from dawn to dusk. It is the general image in *Bunica Safta*. Grand-ma Safta is very busy with supervising her grand-children. The writer begins with the physical portrait of the character who is no longer a young woman and who nevertheless is able to help her children when they are busy with the field works.

At the sentence level, Grand-ma' Safta is an indirect Object while her grand-children are at the same time the Subject and the Patients:

(i)*'Trei copii* - doi băieţi de şapte şi cinci ani şi o fetiţă de trei - rămăseseră încă dormind,

S/P V

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în grija **bunicii Safta**, mama bărbatului.'
I O
(I. Agârbiceanu – *Bunica Safta*)

The Romanian verb 'a rămâne', in the above example, is a secondary verb because it provides the semantic modification of the verb 'a dormi'.

Primary verbs, on the other hand, make up a sentence by themselves:

(ii)' *She* counted **stars** above, a male with her….'
S/A V O
\ (P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

The most obvious difference between Agârbiceanu's phrase and Neagoe's phrase is the word order and the length of the sentence or the phrase:

(i)'Apoi lega iar **trăistuţa**, **o** ducea **în casă**, **în camera largă**, care dădea **spre uliţă**
V O/R DO V Adv M Adv M V Adv M
şi **o** punea **pe masă**.
DO V Adv M
(I. Agârbiceanu – *Bunica Safta*)

(ii)'*Nutza* bathed **at the spring**, lay **in the cold grass**.'
S/P/B V Adv M V Adv M
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

If Neagoe's prose is much more marked by primary verbs (like in (ii), Agârbiceanu's phrase is indebted to secondary verbs (in (i)):

(i)'Începea **să fie mai uitucă,** greşea adeseori la numărat când trecea de zece.'
(I.Agârbiceanu – *Bunica Safta*)

2. Semantic roles.

Verbs belonging to a semantic type impose the same set of semantic roles. GIVING verbs, for example, require a DONOR, a GIFT or a RECIPIENT:

(i)'Să **le** fi pus **destul**, că pe **ăştia** cu greu **îi** saturi….'(the DONOR here is the 'addressee of the message)
IO DO/G DO/R DO/B V
(I.Agârbiceanu – *Bunica Safta*)

The 'giving' verb may be presumed in:

(i)'All in his hands **she** was.' (i.e 'she was giving herself to him', being at the same time
S/P V
a DONOR, a PATIENT and above all a Subject)
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

Attention verbs can be easily seen in:

(i)'Văd că **i**-ai adus!'
V DO/P
(I.Agârbiceanu – *Bunica Safta*)

Affect verbs can involve an AGENT or a TARGET:

(i)'His hands had found **her**…..everywhere.' (the AGENT is 'felt' through a part of his body
A V DO

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'his hands' while the PACIENT is a Direct Object)
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

Something can be manipulated by the AGENT when he/she comes into contact with the TARGET:

(i)The tall, agile **Nutza** [….] threw her hichory stick to strike end-on.'
S/A
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

At the semantic level a certain semantic type verb can promote a certain number of roles. As a general rule, GIVING and AFFECT type verbs have three semantic roles, while ATTENTION type verbs have only two. CORPORAL verbs and MOTION verbs can have only one:

(i)'**You** smell of **male-tallow'**, **Nutza** cried to **him**.'
S/P V Adv M S/A V IO/T
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

(ii)'…..**vorbele** zburau de la **om la om!**'
S/A V Adv M
(I.Agârbiceanu – *Bunica Safta*)

The AFFECT type verbs display the AGENT as the Subject and the TARGET as the Adv Modifer or the Direct Object:

(i)**'The moon** spilled **light** on **him.'**
S/A V O Adv M/T
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

(ii)'Striga la ei, **îi** certa, avea şi o nuieluşă în mână…. **îi** plesnea din când în când.'
V DO/T V DO/T V
(in the above example the AGENT is not expressed, it is included in the ending of the verb, which is very common in Romanian as compared to English)
(I.Agârbiceanu – *Bunica Safta*)

If there are two or more roles, the role which is most relevant for the success of the activity, will be put in a transitive subject/object relation:

(i)'**The night of nights** has made the girl's dream true'
S/A V
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

(ii)'Şi dacă **o** isprăvesc mai devreme, nu-i nici o supărare, le dă **alta**.'
DO/T V V DO/M
(I.Agârbiceanu – *Bunica Safta*)

There are roles that do not control the specific activity:

(i)'**He** smiled on **her**.'
S/A V AdvM/T
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

In most of the cases the role that is considered a relevant one. is mapped onto human:

(i)'**She** carried his **seed the numbered moons**.'

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S/A[+human] V DO/R AdvM
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)
(ii)'Să nu **vă** butruşiţi, să nu **vă** văd că **vă** daţi **pumni,** că
DO/P DO/T V IO/T V DO/I
pun pe **voi** **cu nuiaua'**
V AdvM/T AdvM/I
(I.Agârbiceanu – *Bunica Safta*)

A role which is not identified as A(transitive subject) or O(transitive object), will be marked by an appropriate preposition:

(i)'**John** was born *of it'*(from 'the night of nights')
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)
(ii)*'De pe uliţa asta, din vecini*, mai erau trei-patru femei necăjite……'
(I.Agârbiceanu – *Bunica Safta*)

Verbs from the semantic types that have three roles may display two different constructions, having different semantic implications:

(i)'He is the saint of our village, God bless him and us' the old woman said'
(ii)'It is spring and eggs are the blessed food for man in this season.'
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)
(the same verb – *to bless*- can 'control' both an Agent – *he*(*He is the saint….)* and a Patient(*God bless him)* in (i) and a Gift(*the blessed food*) in (ii)).

In Romanian the dialogue is targeting the same idea of 'giving' even if the sentence adds another semantic nuance:

(i)'Văd că i-ai adus! Dar le-ai pus în traistă?' (*give them food*)
'Pus, cum să nu!'(*emphasizing the action*)
(ii)' Să le fi pus destul că pe ăştia cu greu îi saturi!' (*the quantity counts*)
(I.Agârbiceanu – *Bunica Safta*)

A very rich and challenging role display appears when analyzing secondary verbs-B, secondary verbs-C, secondary verbs-D. The roles can vary from a CAUSER, to a TIMER or HELPER:

(i)'Ha! Voi nu **vă** puteţi juca frumos şi în linişte!.....'
(ii)'Acum **bunica Safta** nu-**i** mai opreşte să iasă la portiţă……'
(I.Agârbiceanu – *Bunica Safta*)

3. Syntactic relations.

Both Romanian and English display Subject and Object as universal relations. Romanian favours the Subject in Nominative and the Object in Accusative. The word order SVO is not a rule like in English where nouns have no case inflection (as a general rule) and the grammatical relations are displayed especially by word order.

The differences between intransitive subject:

(i)'And now **we** come to John'

transitive subject:

(ii)'**He** sews his own shirts.'

and transitive object relations can be understood through the selection of the nouns that are combined with the classes of verbs already mentioned:

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(iii)'The goats watch **the rain** from shelter with stupid, staring eyes.'
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

Some transitive verbs may require a further argument(for extension to the core):
(i)'He turned from one to the other, kissing **here,** kissing **there**'
the one the other
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

There is also the phenomenon of dual transitivity which can be illustrated by the example:

(i)**'John** (A) leaned **them(**O) back, they leaned(S) on the floor.' (where A, O and S
refer to transitive subject, transitive object, intransitive subject)
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

The invisible transitivity can appear in a construction where the verb may enter into
a S construction or play the game of different prepositions:
(i)'They[young women] come singly or in pairs to benefit by **his virtues**'
(P. Neagoe – *The Village Saint*)

Conclusions

From the above analysis I can retain the following ideas:

- semantic incompleteness leads to the existence of different degrees of transitivity;
- a broader definition of the link between the verb and the subject is needed;
- a re-evaluation of the relationship type between the verb and the participants is also needed;

Even if the styles of the two short story tellers are different I can still admire some eternal human characteristics that seem to have crossed boundaries, values and attitudes: the humility of
accepting a destiny that is not what a character really deserves, the importance of the community for the individual existence, the freshness of the colours that are brought in writing as if the writing was a drawing.

Both Agârbiceanu and Neagoe seem to convey the same message: love of nature, tradition and spiritual life.

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Note: the following abbreviations are to taken into account:
A= Agent
P= Patient
S= Subject
V= Verb

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