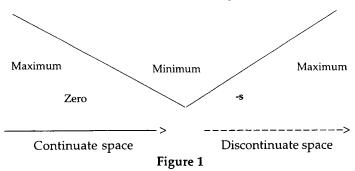# PERSON IN THE ENGLISH VERB:
THE PROBLEM OF -s

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When one thinks of the -s ending in English, the first use that comes to mind is probably that in which it expresses the notion of plurality. However the -s morph is also pressed into service for other very different purposes: as a sign of the possessive with the noun, and as a third person singular marker with the verb. It is this latter use which will occupy us more specifically here.

The -s ending of the verb is a curiosity from two points of view. First of all, it is an exception to the general dropping of verbal semiology indicating person in English: the English verb once had distinct signs for first, second, and third person singular, as well as for the plural. Secondly, the -s is not the etymological inflection, which was -(e)þ (spelled (e)th in Middle English). The same -s inflection which had become generalized as a marker of the plural in the noun also takes over as the only sign indicating person in the verb in an evolution consummated in the Elizabethan period.

This strange evolution is described by Hewson (1975: 86) as a case of what Gustave Guillaume calls synapsis: whenever two signs that signify different grammatical entities fall together, one can conclude that in the meaning of these two separates entities there is something in common that makes a common morphology appropriate. What the plural, the possessive, and the third person singular have in common can be defined as the general notion of transcendence (Hewson 1987: 87).

As Hirtle (1982: 124-125) has shown, the plural -s ending on the noun marks the transcendence of the continuate singular:

Figure 1

The -s is a sign of that which is beyond the limits of a continuate view of space, i.e., a discontinuate. This can be illustrated by comparing the form without the -s ending *a crossroad* (which evokes an unbroken image of space) and the form with -s ending *a crossroads* (which evokes a unit made up of two or more parts), or the singular *one lake* ('lake' represented as a single undivided entity) and the plural *two lakes* (where 'lake' is conceived as two separate entities, i.e., as discontinuate). As Hirtle's diagram indicates, in order to get a discontinuate representation of space one must necessarily start by a continuate one: a discontinuum is made up of a series of continuate stretches. The notion of the discontinuate (of which the plural is the most frequent case) thus involves a transcendence of the singular or continuate.

The notion of transcendence also underlies the use of the -s ending to mark the possessive. In a sentence such as:

(1)   They stayed at Mary's,

the -s is the sign that one has to mentally go beyond the person of Mary to some other entity which is in a relation of possession with her, in this case a house or an apartment (cf. Hewson 1975: 91).

As for the third person singular of the verb, Hewson has argued that it also involves transcendence—the transcendence of the conversational relationship of first and second persons: 'Third person is the one who is not present: neither speaker nor listener but the one *outside* or *beyond* the speaker-listener relationship' (Hewson 1975: 87). An event predicated of a third person is an event removed from the conversational locus, and is accordingly marked with the sign of transcendence.

This analysis allows one to account for a curious use of the -s which is to be found in the colloquial register of all dialects of English—its occurrence with the first person singular in the narration of past events:

(2)   I was just walking out of a dance hall, when this geezer nabs
              me. 'What do you want?' I says. 'Information,' he says.[1]

The event in this case is in the past, and, in spite of the fact that it is predicated of the first person, can therefore be represented as outside the conversational locus (Hewson 1975: 88). In fact, as Joly (1973: 16) comments, the speaker, who is recounting past events in the present tense to create a more vivid impression, draws a distinction between the person whom he is speaking about (represented as acting in the past) and the per-

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[1]   (Joly 1973: 15)

son who is speaking (who can only be represented as carrying out his act of speech in the present). The -*s* ending is used to signify that the event is not predicated of the speaker as first person (i.e., in his capacity of person speaking in the present instance of discourse), but as third person (i.e., in his capacity of person spoken about as the protagonist of certain events in the past). Once again therefore the transcendence of the conversational locus is implied in this use of -*s*.

As Hewson and Joly have argued, the cases where the -*s* ending occurs in the English verb can all be shown to involve the common notion of transcendence. What remains to be demonstrated for the proof to be complete however is to examine all the cases where it is not employed, in an attempt to determine whether any motivation can be found for the overall distribution of semiology. This will be the goal which we will pursue in this paper.

The reason for the absence of -*s* with the first and second persons has already been discussed by Hewson. The -*s* is not used with the pronoun *we* either, but a moment's reflection is sufficient to see the reason why: *we* must be analyzed as a complex person involving the notions of 'me' + 'you' + 'he, she, it' (where 'you' and 'he, she, it' are optional). This pronoun consequently evokes persons which do not transcend the conversational locus. In the case of *they*, the reasons for the non-use of -*s* are less obvious. However, it must be pointed out that *they* does not have the morphology of a simple plural of *he, she* or *it* (unlike Spanish *ellos/ellas* and French *ils/elles*). Moreover it does not make the distinction between the three genders—masculine, feminine and neuter—which one finds in the third person singular. These facts suggest that in the English pronoun system, the notion 'they' is not conceived simply as a discontinuate representation which multiplies the third person singular. While the latter is conceived by transcending the space defined by the speech act, whose limits are given by the first and second persons, so that the third person singular involves a discontinuity brought about by going beyond the first and second persons, this is not the case for the pronouns which denote complex persons: whereas the third person singular is obtained by transcendence, i.e., by negating or leaving behind the position in the system of the first and second persons, the complex persons are obtained by association, by grouping together persons which have already been defined in the system. The pronoun *we* quite clearly associates the persons 'me' + 'you' + 'he, she, it'. As for *they*, we feel it to be best analyzed as an associative person bringing together 'he' + 'she' + 'it': this explains why it lacks the semiology both of number and of gender. It would also explain why in spoken English

they/their functions as a pronoun which can have gender-indifferent third-person-singular reference, as in:

(3) a. Someone left their sweater on the chair.
     b. If anyone contradicts Bob, they had better
         be ready for an argument.

Since the representation of person involved in *they* is not obtained by transcending the space contained in the conversational locus but by associating persons of different genders, the transcendence marker *-s* is not used to signify it.

Another case where the transcendence marker is not used is in the past tense of the indicative. While the reasons for the absence of *-s* are not hard to see here, this use provides an interesting insight into the kind of transcendence signified by this morpheme. When the verb is conjugated in the past tense, the event it denotes is clearly conceived as being outside the conversational locus already. This implies that the person of which the event is predicated must also be represented as being already outside the conversational locus. This shows that *-s* is used whenever the speaker has conceived a transcendence of the conversational locus which is *purely spatial in nature*. With the past, the transcendence is not purely spatial, since a person involved in a past event is already represented as cut off from the speech situation because of the time-sphere denoted by the verb. With the present tense, however, the person involved in the event occupies the same time-sphere as the speaker, so that *-s* is the sign of a person which has been conceived as outside the conversational locus from the point of view of space alone. This observation is quite satisfying since it constitutes another element which the verbal *-s* shares with the plural and the possessive, the latter also being signs of transcendent representations of space.

The preceding remarks will have prepared the way for a discussion of the absence of *-s* in a very special type of context—that with the peculiar class of English verbs known as the modal auxiliaries. What is curious with these verbs is that *-s* is not used even when they occur in the non-past indicative:

(4)   He can swim.
(5)   He may be having lunch right now.
(6)   Water will boil at 100° C.

One might invoke historical reasons for the absence of *-s* here (the forms *can, may, will*, etc., being originally preterite indicatives or optatives), but it is clear that these forms are no longer felt as preterites, since they have developed new past forms (*could, might, would*, etc.). There

must therefore be some other reason for the stubborn refusal of these verbs to take the -s ending.

A good starting-point for explaining the modals' behaviour is the fact that they are incapable of evoking real-world happenings all by themselves. *He can* or *He will* are not complete statements, and, without a preceding context which identifies the event lexically, would provoke the questions *He can what?* or *He will what?* The modals are verbs which are incomplete as regards the capacity of their lexical content to refer to an experience to be expressed, and therefore require the use of an infinitive to express a real-world experience (cf. Guillaume 1964: 78).

What these auxiliaries do express are not states of reality *in se* but rather states construed as potentialities for other events. The nature of their meaning could be compared to that of viewing an acorn not as a being in its own right, but uniquely and exclusively as the potency for another being, i.e., an oak tree. Even though what leads a speaker to use a modal auxiliary such as *will* in *They'll be having supper right now* is the awareness of a set of real circumstances, the latter are mentally construed by the speaker as a state of potentiality for the real existence of the event expressed by the infinitive. This makes the modal auxiliaries exponents of various types of potentialities for reality rather than of reality itself.

That the English modals are exponents of potentiality for reality rather than of reality itself is the key to understanding a number of their peculiar morphosyntactic characteristics, among which their refusal to take -s. One such characteristic is the ability of the past tense forms of English modals to be used to evoke irrealis in non-conditional clauses, as shown in:

(7)   I could be on the beach right now.

With all the other verbs of the language, the past tense can be exploited in this way only after a conditional conjunction such as *if* or a verb implying the non-reality of its complement like *wish*:

(8)   If I was on the beach right now, I would be happy.
(9)   I wish I was on the beach right now.

This shows that the lexical meaning of the modals is equivalent to the meaning of *if* insofar as placing one outside of the sphere of reality is concerned.

A second point confirming the analysis of the modals proposed above is the behaviour of the verbs *need* and *dare* in English. These two verbs can be construed either as full verbs, taking the -s ending and the *to* plus infinitive construction, or as modal auxiliaries, with all the morphosyntactic

characteristics thereof (and even as a blend of both in the case of *dare*, as discussed in Duffley 1992). What is pertinent to the present discussion is that the modal or semi-modal behaviour of these verbs is practically restricted to contexts which are nonassertive in nature, the most common being negatives and interrogatives:

(10)   Need he be involved in the deal at all?
(11)   She daren't bother them right now.

The import of this restriction is that it is only when needing and daring are not asserted as realities but discussed as necessities or possibilities that they can become equivalent to modal auxiliaries.

The fact that the modals evoke potentiality for reality rather than reality itself has consequences for the subject of the modal, which must be conceived as the support of a potentiality and not of a reality. This places the subject in similar conditions to those existing in the past tense. There it was seen that the reason for the absence of -s in the third person singular is that the tense of the verb situates the subject of the verb outside the here-and-now of present existence associated with the conversational locus inasmuch as the subject is the support of an event which took place in the past. In the case of the modals, their subject is conceived as the support of a pure state of potentiality for reality. This has the effect of placing the subject outside of the present reality of the speaker and hearer's existence in time as a potential realizer of the infinitive's event rather than an actual one. Since the third person is already conceived as absent from the reality of the present of speech in its function as support of the modal, it is not thought of as being in a situation of mere spatial transcendence of the conversational locus, and so the notion signified by -s ending is not present here, which accounts for the absence of the corresponding sign.

It is instructive in this respect to compare the modal auxiliaries to the present subjunctive, which also refuses the -s morpheme in the third person singular:

(12)   The men had said that he must have been delayed,
            and had suggested that she *wait*.   (Zandvoort 1969: 111)

Neither the modals nor the present subjunctive represent their subject as being really involved in an event in the non-past time-sphere: the present subjunctive has two major senses—an 'optative' one, as in (12) above, and a 'potential' use, as in:

(13)   Though everyone *desert* you, I will not,

where it expresses something as possible but not real. The absence of -s
with the subjunctive would consequently seem to be for reasons which are
similar to those which motivate its absence with the modal auxiliaries.

There is one difference however: if Guillaume's theory of the system of
mood is correct, the subjunctive corresponds to a mental representation of
time which is less developed than the indicative, in that time is imagined in
the subjunctive without the insertion of the present and the consequent di-
vision of time into time-spheres (Guillaume 1964: 193). This means that it
is impossible to represent the relation between an event and its subject as
actual in the subjunctive, for the simple reason that the moment of actual-
ity (the present) is not represented. In the case of the modals, however,
there is a distinction between non-past and past (*He can/could swim*),
which implies that the present is included in the representation of time un-
derlying these verbs, i.e., in their grammatical meaning. It is their lexical
meaning therefore which cuts their subject off from present reality inas-
much as its function of being a support of a state of potentiality is con-
cerned, and consequently renders unnecessary a spatial cutting off from
the conversational locus. In other words, the modals negate actuality by
evoking a positive lexical content of potentiality in the present. The sub-
junctive, on the other hand, negates actuality by refusing to represent it.

This cursory observation of usage has shown, hopefully, that the occur-
rence of the verbal -s ending is governed by a hidden order. The notion of
transcendence in space which this morpheme signifies is felt to be neces-
sary whenever the third person is included temporally as support of an
event in the present of speech. The introduction of a spatial discontinuity
between the locus of speech and the locus of the third person is perfectly in
keeping with the nature of the latter: the third person corresponds to that
which is neither speaker nor listener but merely spoken about, and as such
must be conceived as outside the range of the speaker-listener relation-
ship. What is striking is that if the third person is already situated as some-
how outside the locus of speech in its role as support of the event denoted
by the verb because of the latter's tense or mood, or by means of the modal
auxiliaries, the need is not felt to evoke its spatial transcendence of this lo-
cus.

This tends to confirm Guillaume's view (1990: 109) that conceiving a
phenomenon from our experience as an event by means of the category of
the verb necessarily involves establishing a relation of external incidence
between the notion of the action or state being represented, on the one

hand, and the notion of person, on the other. The way person is conceived and expressed in the verb is thus conditioned by the way the action or state itself is conceived, so that, for instance, the effect of the past tense is not only to represent the event in the past but also the person involved in the event. Representing the event in the non-past indicative has the effect of situating the person involved in it in the same locus in time as the speaker and hearer. This situation calls for a further definition of the third person, which is conceived as outside the speaker-hearer relationship in space. The -s ending on the verb is the sign of this spatial transcendence, which constitutes the sole defining trait of the third person when the latter is conceived as occupying the same temporal and modal locus as the first and second persons.

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