

The semantic inertness of objects

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In both typological and theoretical work, the characterisation of the core relation OBJECT has taken second place to that of SUBJECT (though Plank (1984) forms a notable exception). In this paper, we shall present evidence from a range of construction types in a variety of languages and argue on the basis of this evidence that OBJECT is the only truly semantically inert grammatical relation. The SUBJECT relation shows considerable semantic freedom, though it is restricted to different degrees in different languages (Hawkins 1986:Ch4). At the same time, there is a strong cross-linguistic preference for subjects to be Agents or to a lesser extent Experiencers. In marked circumstances, such as passives, the SUBJECT may be associated with other types of argument or with expletives. The unmarked OBJECT, on the other hand is, we argue, inherently unrestricted and thus capable of assuming a wide range of functions, but at the same time dependent on its predicate for interpretation. This idea goes back at least to Fillmore (1968:25), where the case Objective is defined as 'the semantically most neutral case, the case of anything representable by a noun whose role in the action or state identified by the verb is identifiable by the semantic interpretation of the verb itself'. In this paper, we review the evidence in support of this semantic non-restrictiveness of objects, something which to our knowledge has not been done before. The evidence comes from the following:

1. *Cognate objects*: the extreme case of semantic neutrality of the OBJECT function occurs with so-called 'cognate objects' *He laughed a hearty laugh*. In such a construction, at the semantic level, there should be no representation of OBJECT and the interpretation essentially be the same as for *He laughed heartily*.
2. *Non-canonical objects and case marking*: the converse circumstances occur when an object has additional specific semantic properties not normally associated with objects, such as for instance agentivity or experiencerhood. In these circumstances, there is a cross-linguistic tendency to mark the object with non canonical case, as in German *Er diente dem König* (cf Aikhenvald, Dixon and Onishi 2001). Objects in German then become non-canonical when there are additions to the inherent lack of content.
3. *Double objects*: if the OBJECT is defined via the semantics of the predicate, then — *pace* a considerable literature — it will not change in a double object construction, so that the OBJECT in *Oscar gave the dog a bone* is *the bone*. Hudson (1992) shows that this is independently the right conclusion.
4. *Absence of object expletives*: while subjects expletives are well-attested, object expletives are unusual. They seem to be linked in the main to sentential arguments (*I hate it when you do that* (Postal & Pullum 1988) or idiomatic expressions (It *me la vedo brutta* 'Things look bad to me'). On our account this follows from the intrinsically empty nature of the object relation; in a sense the object is already its own expletive.
5. *Pseudo objects*: we argue that pseudo objects in resultative constructions such as *she worked her fingers to the bone* also trade on the semantic openness of the object relation. In these constructions, which resemble the ones with cognate objects, the object makes no semantic addition to the main predicate but is required as a syntactic pivot for the secondary predicate.
6. *Subject-to-object raising*: SOR constructions such as *The police believe him to be a pathological liar* can exist precisely because the OBJECT is semantically inert and therefore there is no incompatibility between an argument drawn from the lower predicate and the higher OBJECT slot.
7. *The relation between OBJECT and accusative*: the view that the OBJECT is the semantically empty grammatical relation par excellence opens up an interesting account of the role of accusative case. We follow Smith (1994:40ff) in arguing that accusative is the default case. Taking this to mean that accusative has the fewest, perhaps even no, intrinsic case specifications, we can establish an iconic link between the "empty" grammatical relation and the "empty" case.
8. *OBJECT and position*: just like indirect objects in a immediately postverbal position do not become OBJECTS, so postverbal noun phrases in so-called presentational constructions, e.g. Sw *Det arbetar en man i skogen* 'there works a man in the forest', do not become OBJECTS, but remain SUBJECTS.

We consider the consequences of this characterisation of the OBJECT function for syntactic theory, in particular the relation between grammatical relations and semantic roles, and the arguments for two kinds of objects, primary and secondary (Dryer 1986, Margetts & Austin 2007).