Abstract J. Guéron U. Paris 3 “On predication and tense interpretation”

Carlson (1977) distinguished Individual Level Predicates (ILP) (1) from Stage Level Predicates (SLP) (2). Heim (1982) discussed the ambiguous Generic vs Episodic construal of (3).

(1) a. John is intelligent/ a doctor/handy around the house.
   b. John is hungry/crying (now).

(2) a. Firemen are available.
   b. Firemen are available (now).

I propose that only ILPs such as (1a) and (2a) are truly predications. An ILP predicates a property of its subject and constitutes a categorial sentences in the sense of Kuroda (1972). SLPs like (1b) and (2b) do not predicate a property of the subject, however. Rather, they are thetic sentences, in the sense of Kuroda, which affirm nothing more than that something pertains at a point in space and time.

The appropriate interpretive generalisation would be something like (3).

(3) The denotation of \(v/VP\) has a reference only when it is situated in (predicated of) a well-defined discourse space and time.

I propose that given its locality wrt the predicate, the syntactic subject can and must be construed as constituting the discourse space and time relevant for (3) whenever the predicate either denotes one of its inalienable properties, like having blue eyes, or else implies that the subject has a temporal history in the discourse, as with “be a doctor” or “be handy around the house”.

As the predicates “hungry” or “crying” do not not imply that the subject has a discourse history (a baby is usually hungry and/or crying at birth), a sentence like (1b) is not a predication, but denotes, rather, a situation, which must be positioned in the discourse time and place coordinates.

Arguments in favor of this hypothesis are provided by types of sentences which are marginal or unsuccessful in the syntactic form of a predication, subject + VP, but become better or fully acceptable when construed as existential sentences or have an unaccusative syntactic deep-structure.

The ILP examples in (4a) are successful predications, either because the VP denotes an inalienable property of the subject (body part, kin) or because, as with “money”, it implies that the property was acquired previous to the reference time. (4b) is unsuccessful because it does not imply that the subject has a temporal history.

Adding a locative PP to (4b) makes it acceptable, however. This abrupt change in grammatical status is even clearer with the [-animate] subject in (5).

(4) a. John has blue eyes/ a sister/money.  (ILP)
   b. John has ? a book/*a mosquito (SLP)
c. John has a book/ a mosquito/money on him.

(5)a. The table has thee legs. (ILP)
    b. * The table has a book. (SLP)
    c. The table has a book on it.

The acceptable (4c) and (5c) are not construed as predications, however, but, rather, as existential sentences. (A proposal will be made as to how the relevant construal is derived in syntax). The existential sentence is the prime example of a thetic sentence which says no more than that something pertains at the discourse time and place.

A variant of the grammatical strategy which makes (4c) and (5c) acceptable is illustrated in (6).

(6) a. ? J'ai eu une idée.
    b. Une idée m'est venue à l'esprit/m'est passée par la tête.

(6a) is unacceptable unless it is tightly linked to the discourse situation, in which case it does not really denote a property of “je”. (6b), which cannot be construed as a predication since its subject is not referential and its base structure is unaccusative (as shown by auxiliary BE) is totally acceptable, however. An unaccusative sentence is necessarily construed as a thetic sentence which says no more than that something happened at some point of time and in a place.

A more subtle type of case involves the acceptability of sentences with indefinite plural subjects. A predication cannot have an indefinite subject, while a thetic sentence placed in time and space can.

(7) a. John is tall
    b. * A man is tall.
(8) a. ? A man is crying.
    b. In that room a man is crying.

We will discuss the contrast between generic ILP sentences with inalienable predicate such as (9) below, which can have either an plural or singular indefinite subject, and generic SLP sentences like (10) in which a spatial setting is necessary and the indefinite plural cannot be replaced by a singular.

(9) a. Dogs have four legs.
    b. A dog has four legs.
(10) a. * Storms arise.
    b. Storms arise in this part of the Pacific.
    c.* A storm arises in this part of the Pacific.