Construction telling: Modes of subject-predicate bonding and directions of travel in the English clause

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This paper is based on a proposed approach[1] to a fragment of English grammar (sentence types and non-deontic modal verbs) seen as 'built up' in layers from a basic nexus of a subject-predicate pair. In this approach,"telling" is treated as the central language-forming operation involved[2]: it is what is done with reality (events and states of affairs, knowledge of them and decisions and wishes about them) to construct and present language between people in interaction. Telling is said to be of two kinds, both of which involve bonding. "Construction telling" applies to the bonding of subject and predicate to form a propositional base. "Presentation telling" applies to bonding between a participant and what is said: participants (speaker and/or addressee) may be shown to be associated more or less closely with a propositional attitude as conveyed in grammatical form. Informally, construction telling produces what is said; and presentation telling produces an association between what is said and those involved in saying it. Telling is seen as the central element in the semantics.

The semantics of construction telling has its roots in linguistic philosophy. It is based on a paper by J.L. Austin[3], and relates to his concept of the "locutionary act". In it, far from adopting a Chomskyan approach to sentence structure, in which the **division** between subject and predicate is the fundamental basis of grammatical analysis, Austin presents the **bond** between these two parts of the sentence as the foundation for understanding its structure, and in terms that modify its use. He establishes four different modes of such bonding, and goes on to associate these with different kinds of assertion: *describing*, *calling*, *classing* and *exemplifying*. These distinctions run closely parallel with Halliday's subsequent (1968, 1985:112-128, 2014: 276-289) studies of different kinds of identifying clauses; and in this way they have links with Davidse's work in the area of intensive transitivity[4].

Austin divides up his manners of subject-predicate bonding according to two dimensions of contrast: "direction of fit" and "onus of match"[5]. Both of these have a dynamic characterization. "Direction of fit" concerns what might be called a "centre of attraction" and "movement" towards it. Using Austin's metaphor of a bolt and a nut which is screwed onto it, the "bolt" is the "centre", a fixed element to which a (moveable) "nut" is added (and to which the nut must conform in order for its thread to match that of the bolt and so fit). Austin associates the bolt with the "given" element. The "given" is the item(s) in the subject in what he calls "name-giving" (*describing* and *calling*); and the name in the predicate in what he calls "sense-giving" (*classing* and *exemplifying*). This distinction has

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[1] Davies, forthcoming. See also, Davies, 2015: chapter 3, 78-79.
[2] *Cf*. Davies, 2015: chapter 5.
[3] Austin (1970)
[4] For example, Davidse (1992, 1996, 1999).
[5] He presents these as independent variables; but I argue elsewhere that this is not strictly speaking the case (Davies, forthcoming: Chapter 4).

the effect that the direction of the "adding movement" (from given to new) is "forwards" (from subject to predicate) in name-giving; and "backwards" (from predicate to subject) in sense-giving.

The second dimension, that of "onus of match", concerns the question of which element (subject or predicate) is assessed for assimilation to the other. Here, the distinction is between one element (subject or predicate) being presented as a standard of comparison and the other being assessed in terms of the extent to which it matches up to the first. The "onus of match" is said to "lie" on the assessed element. Where this assessed element is the subject, we have *describing* and *classing*; where the assessed element is the predicate, we have *calling* and *exemplifying*. This distinction has the effect that the direction of assimilation (from the assessed element to the standard in terms of which the assessment is taking place) is "forwards", from subject to predicate, in *describing* and *classing*; and "backwards", from predicate to subject, in *calling* and *exemplifying*.

If we combine the two dimensions, there is a tension between conflicting "directions of travel" in *calling* and *classing*; but "harmony" between theses directions in *describing* and *exemplifying*. However, this "harmony" is of a very different kind in the two cases: *describing* has "forward movement" on both dimensions; but *exemplifying* has "backwards" direction on both. I associate forward movement of this kind with communicative dynamism.

The paper is in two parts: semantics and pragmatics. With respect to pragmatics, I will attempt to account for input from context, which Prague School linguists make integral to their approach, by using the "Significance Generating Device" suggested in Davies (2015: chapter 2, 37-38 [1979]) and later developed and applied (Davies, 1985, 1988).

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