

NADĚŽDA KUDRNÁČOVÁ

ON RUBBING AND WRINGING ONE'S HANDS

The present paper offers an analysis of certain semantic aspects of the verbs *wring* (*one's hands*) and *rub* (*one's hands*). Attention will also be paid to the way in which the semantic status of the movements denoted by the verbs manifests itself in their behaviour.

The analysis is based on the British National Corpus. Each example is tagged with a symbol identifying the respective text sample (e.g., 'bncdoc.id=CH7') from which the example is taken. For the sake of simplicity, however, the first, invariant, part of the identification is omitted and only the second part ('CH7') is adduced.

The verbs under investigation form a distinct class. They denote, together with *nod one's head* and *shrug one's shoulders*, movements that function as signals of the person's inner state and that, at the same time, display a complex kinetic pattern (all four verbs denote movements consisting of more than one kinetic phase).¹ Rubbing and wringing one's hands differ from nodding (one's head) and shrugging (one's shoulders) in displaying a relatively complicated physical structuration. *Nod* and *shrug* denote movements consisting of two phases (at the end of the second phase the body parts resume their initial positions.) The kinetic structuration of the phases is fairly simple – the body parts follow a more or less linear course. The verbs *wring* (*one's hands*) and *rub* (*one's hands*) denote multi-phase movements (the number of phases is, needless to say, not specified) which are marked by a heterogeneous kinetic progression (this is especially prominent in rubbing one's hands) and, in comparison with the moments as expressed in, e.g., closing one's hands, also by a relatively complicated physical contact of the participating body parts.

In Levin (1993) the two verbs under investigation are adduced among the 'verbs of gestures/signs involving body parts'. Levin (1993: 221–222) states, too, that the direct object of these verbs 'is a body part possessed by the subject of the verb' and that the object must be, as opposed to the verbs *nod* or *shrug*, obligatorily expressed and, furthermore, it cannot function as the subject in the passive (**His hands were wrung/rubbed*). Neither Faber and Mairal-Usón (1999) nor Dixon (1991), focusing their attention on main types of verbs, includes the verbs in their analysis.

Schlesinger (1995: 72) adduces the direct object *one's head* (from *nod one's head*) as an example of what he calls a defining participant. This term covers such a participant as is 'inherently implicated in the verb and is not expressed as the underlying subject' (Schlesinger 1995: 58). So, by definition, direct objects are all defining participants (e.g., *the water* in *He boiled the water*). It is obvious that the noun phrase in *nod one's head* is already built into the semantics of the verbs. What it has in common with *wring one's hands* and *rub one's hands* is the fact that in both nodding one's head and rubbing/wringing one's hands the action (the movement) is not directed towards the respective body part. In other words, the goal of the movement is not to change the position of the body part. Therefore, the body parts (hands) do not act as affected objects (i.e. as patients) but acquire the role of instruments (i.e. as those participants with whose help the action is carried out). This fact has linguistic consequences. The body parts (hands) cannot, as has already been mentioned, occupy the position of the subject in passive constructions (or, rather, in pseudo-passive constructions with a stative, resultative meaning): **His hands were wrung/rubbed*. And, also, they cannot occupy the subject position in the active syntactic constructions: **His hands wrung/rubbed*. This is, in essence, what Wierzbicka (1980: 23–24) observes: certain verbs denoting body part movements cannot be employed in the last mentioned type of syntactic construction because they do not imply a final change in the position of the body part(s). As I have shown (Kudrnáčová 2002), this is not the sole explanation because, e.g., the verbs *sway* or *wag* do not imply a change in the resultant position of the body part(s) either, and they may still enter into the active construction with the body part(s) in the subject: *Her head wagged*, *His head swayed*. I have indicated that the reason for the said impossibility must also be sought for in the function of the movements. Functioning as signals, the movements are 'clearly intentional', i.e. they are accompanied by a relatively high degree of mental processing on the part of the person as the manipulator and are carried out with a certain objective. The ties between the person as the controller of the movement and the movement itself are thus very tight.

This is not to say, however, that volitional movements cannot be rendered in the *His head bent* or *His head went up* type of construction. In such instances the situation is presented in atomized form: the attention is centred on the body part and on its motion, and the connections between the movement and the person (as bearer of the will or control over the movement) are severed (the person is present only indirectly, through the possessive *his*). The motion is thus presented as freed from its ties both to its possible causes and to its possible aims. The result is, naturally, a stylistic markedness.

Let me in this connection adduce one example with the verb *wave* (which has certain lexico-semantic features in common with the verbs under investigation) occurring in the subject position in the active sentence. Although the motion does not have a signalling function, it is clearly volitional. The facts of reality are thus presented in an anatomized, stylistically marked way:

1. 'It's crazy here at this time of the year', the hairdresser ex-

plained. Beringed hands waved in a frenzy around Miranda's own boldly streaked, mane-like hair, and Belinda quickly paid and left, realising she had been very lucky to get squeezed in at the salon when so many women wanted to look special for Christmas. (H9H)

To return to the movements which have the status of signals, a closer analysis of the examples in the British National Corpus has shown, however, that the verb *wave*, e.g., can be (very rarely, though) used in active constructions with the body part in the subject position even when the verb denotes a movement functioning as a signal. Consider:

2. Most were writing up reports between assignments, or busy making arrangements by telephone. A number of hands waved in his direction. On Forbes's 'throne' by the VDUs sat the queen bee of admin, weaving order out of the potential chaos of paperwork. (CEC)

Here the status of the movement as a signal remains unchanged in spite of the fact that the movement (the hands waving in somebody's direction) is presented not as a real fact, but as a metaphorical expression.

It shows, then, that apart from the above two factors (the verbs *wring/rub one's hands* denote movements during which the body parts do not change their final localization and the movements have a signalling status), there must be a third factor that co-determines the impossibility of the verbs occurring in the *His hands wrung/rubbed* type of construction. (It must be noted that although rubbing one's hands does not necessarily have a signalling function since it can be performed with the aim of making the hands warm, it still cannot be rendered in active constructions with body parts in the subject position). It seems that this third factor must be sought for in the lexico-semantic content of the verbs. Let me explain. As mentioned above, wringing and rubbing one's hands represent fairly complicated movements. Being thus structured, they presuppose the presence of a high degree of mental processing. However, even this does not seem to be a crucial point because waving also displays a rather complicated kinetic pattern, and, above all, the participating body parts are long, i.e. their manipulation requires the release of a relatively high amount of energy. What seems to be the decisive factor is the fact that in wringing and rubbing one's hands the participating body parts are in (fairly complicated) physical contact. This is, however, not the whole truth because we do have cases like the following ones:

3. Theda's hands rubbed furiously at one of the posts of the bed in the second of the chambers she had tackled in the last unnumbered days. (HGV)

4. 'Now I believe what the countrywomen say about peacocks – they won't have a feather in the house – the Evil Eye they say it brings.' Her hands wrung at his wrist. 'For me, Gabriel.' (HTN)

Here the verbs *rub* and *wring* are employed in the construction with the body parts in the subject position, in spite of the fact that the movements do imply physical contact of the body parts with some entity. A closer inspection shows that in the movement expressed as ‘hands rubbing at something’ (or ‘hands wringing at something’) the physical contact is of a different order than in ‘rubbing one’s hands’ (or ‘wringing one’s hands’). As opposed to ‘the hands rubbing at something’ (or ‘the hands wringing at something’), in ‘rubbing one’s hands’ (or ‘wringing one’s hands’) the participating body parts do not come into contact with any other entity. The body parts are in contact ‘with themselves’ because they conceptually belong together (they form a pair – just like legs or lips) . We may say that they refer to one kind of body part, such as is ‘split’, as it were, into two parts (two hands). It is now obvious that just as the hand cannot rub or wring (or cross) itself, the hands cannot rub or wring themselves – in the same way as they cannot close or cross themselves.

Needless to say, the said change in the syntactic behaviour of the discussed set of verbs (cf. examples 3 and 4) is inevitably accompanied by a categorial change in their semantic content. In connection with this let me adduce an example with the verb *close* and with the participating body parts in the subject position:

5. Suddenly his hands closed over her arms. (JXW)

It is, obviously, the same type of movement as in examples 3 and 4. The hands do not close ‘themselves’ or ‘over themselves’. They close over something else, i.e. they come into physical contact with some other entity.

It is evident that the analysis of body part movements must take into consideration the conditions under which the movements are performed. In other words, body part movements must be set in a causative chain, i.e. in a broad frame of possible causes and possible goals (objectives). Wringing and rubbing one’s hands is clearly volitional, its objective being to deliberately let the others know one’s mental state or one’s attitude (wringing is – but not always – as can be seen in example 7 – performed to signal negative states like grief or disappointment, and rubbing is used to signal positive states like contentment or joyful expectation, but also negatively taken states like greed or malice). Consider:

6. The other headmen indicated their agreement by attending a feast given by the chief, though the women of the village cried, wrung their hands, tore their hair, and appeared to be in the utmost distress. (ALX)

7. He wrung his hands in pleasure at her pleasure. (HTU)

From this it follows that on the causative chain such movements are oriented towards their objective, namely to signal something.

Rubbing one's hands can also be performed not with the aim of signalling something, but with the aim making the hands warm. In any case, the position of the movement on the causative chain is marked by its unequivocal orientation towards its goal, as can be seen in example 8:

8. He fancied too that he felt the cold less than they did. They had stamped their feet and rubbed their hands while they were waiting about. (FU2)

However, movements functioning as signals are not so straightforward as it may seem at first sight. One important fact must be borne in mind, namely that the person is not only the agent (volitionally manipulating his/her body parts with the aim to signal other people his/her inner state) but also the experiencer of precisely that mental state or attitude he/she wishes to signal. Seen from this perspective, mental states underlying the movements function as their causes. Therefore, in spite of their clear orientation towards the intended aim, the movements are also linked to their causes. Consider:

9. 'The tests won't be severe,' he said, rubbing his hands together gleefully. (AMB)

10. Joanna wrung her hands in despair, beginning to weep. (HH1)

11. [...] Barak instinctively stuffed them back into his pocket then rubbed his hands together nervously. (ECK)

12. And ace marksman Aldo is rubbing his hands in glee at the prospect. (CH7)

There are contexts which clearly show that the connections between the inner states and the movements themselves are fostered owing to a more forcible operation of the causes – the mental states may be so intense or so compelling that they actually trigger the movement. Consider:

13. On occasions Mr Parry was seen to wring his hands as he struggled with his emotions when he spoke of the impact of recent events, since the double IRA bomb blast cut down Tim and [...] (E9P)

14. Her disappointment was so acute that she was wringing her hands. (BPI)

This is not to say, however, that in these cases the movements are predominantly cause-oriented. They are goal-oriented, too, because they retain their signalling function (goal-oriented expressions of one's inner state presuppose the presence

of the decoder(s) of the message, and these movements are – as is the case with the clearly goal-oriented movements discussed above – invariably carried out in the presence of other people). In other words, there is forethought operating in the genetic tier of the movement, and this considerably weakens the force of the cause (to put it differently, the relation between the movement and its cause is not so tight as to prevent forethought from its operation). We may thus say that such a movement functions not only as a signal of the person's inner state but also as its symptom. The movement, being Janus-headed (i.e. oriented both to its cause and to its objective), thus occupies an intermediate position on the causative chain. (One more remark is worth mentioning here: the reinforced position of the cause considerably adds to the emotiveness of the factual content.)

To sum up. The verbs under investigation may denote two types of movements. The first, goal-oriented, type is characterized by considerably weakened ties to a certain state functioning as the cause of the movement: the movement functions as a clear signal of the person's inner state. The second type of movement, characterized by a more compelling operation of the inner state, is oriented both to its aim and to its goal: it occupies an intermediary position on the causative chain in that it functions both as a signal and as a symptom of the person's inner state.

Sometimes the exact status of the movement is not clear – it is debatable whether it is oriented more towards its objective (to signal something) or whether it is oriented more towards its cause (i.e. whether it functions more as a symptom). Consider:

15. I was nervous but she put me at ease immediately. 'Well dear, and what do you want so early in the morning?' she asked, rubbing her hands together. My voice trembled as I answered. (CDM)

16. 'I was sorry to hear about Mrs Redburn.' He rubbed his hands together and looked at Peter. 'Are you familiar with the contents of the will?' (CKB)

The above typological differentiation manifests itself in language.

It is symptomatic that the verbs *rub* (*one's hands*) and *wring* (*one's hands*) are not, as a rule, accompanied by modifying expressions specifying various aspects of the kinetic structuration of the movement. The reason must be sought for in the status of such movements. This requires some further explanation. The physical shape of the movements which function as a signal must be conventionalized in order to evolve a more or less unequivocal interpretation. The movements must, therefore, have a certain, relatively unchanging kinetic pattern. (Needless to say, people may carry out the same type of movement more or less differently, but this is not – at least from the point of the decoder – the most relevant thing.) To put it differently, the above-mentioned function of the movement goes hand in hand with the petrification of its kinetic pattern. The actual realization of the movement thus has no bearing upon its interpretation. Therefore, what is relevant is not the precise way the movement is carried out but the mere

fact that it is carried out. In other words, the occurrence of the movement *per se* is what matters most. This is the reason why the signalling movements as expressed in wringing/rubbing one's hands typically occur without the modifying expressions mentioned above:

17. Emilia's face was white almost as the snow, but she was conscious and moaning now. Mrs Tillotson stood wringing her hands. 'That happen all of a flesh,' she was saying. (H82)

18, [...] and he was clearly very pleased with himself this evening. He sat down in an armchair and rubbed his hands together and addressed his son in a loud voice. (CH4)

As the following examples show, the above absence of modifiers constitutes a mere tendency – there are, of course, cases in which such expressions do occur:

19. He tried to cover his embarrassment by starting to rub his hands together with more than the usual combustion force, and was secretly rather proud of how she had managed to [...] (G15)

Sometimes, and this is in line with the function they assume, the physical shape of the movements is vividly described as a depiction of the person's inner state:

20. Lucasta Redburn rubbed her hands together as though washing them in invisible soap and water, a sign of displeasure. (CKB)

The kinetic pattern of rubbing one's hands performed to keep the hands warm is certainly not petrified to such an extent, which manifests itself in the easiness with which this kind of movement combines with specifying expressions of the *vigorously* type:

21. He threw the flask away and began to rub his hands vigorously together until the circulation was restored. (B1X)

However, even this kind of movement has a kinetic structuration similar to that of the signalling type. In example 22 the onlooker is uncertain how to properly evaluate the kinetic situation:

22. The doctor was rubbing her hands, probably to warm them, but it looked like a gesture of glee and greed. (A6J)

Let us now turn our attention to the temporal aspects of the physical structuration of the movements under investigation.

First of all, it must be noted that the duration of the movements as expressed by the verbs under investigation (with the apparent exception of 'rubbing one's

hands' performed to keep the body parts warm) is certainly not relevant. It will be helpful here to recall the earlier observation that the exact physical shape of the movements is also irrelevant and that this fact is a logical consequence of its function. It is, indeed, fairly difficult to imagine under what circumstances the movements might be presented as covering a certain (more or less clearly specified) time span (an apparent exception to this would most probably be constituted by comic presentations of the situation).²

It might therefore come as a surprise to learn that the verbs under investigation can combine with the inchoative *begin*, which marks the onset of the movement and thus may be considered as implying its prolonged duration:

23. And Rose, who chose that inopportune moment to walk out of the lounge, began wringing her hands and saying wasn't it a judgement on them all? (HGY)

A closer inspection reveals that the verb *begin*, by marking the initial phases of the movement, foregrounds the very onset of the movement. This accentuation puts the movement into contrast with the contiguous events, which results in highlighting the movement. In other words, *begin* strengthens the tension between the movement and the events around it. Also, we should not overlook one fact, namely that in this particular example the movement is most probably used metaphorically.

At this point a remark must be made concerning the metaphorical status of the movements. As mentioned above, in certain types of movement the operation of the cause is reinforced to such a degree that it overshadows the orientation of the movement towards its goal. Not surprisingly, precisely this type of movement is, by its character, predisposed to be used as a metaphorical expression of one's inner state. It is interesting to note that this re-evaluated status of the movements manifests itself in language, namely in the characteristic behaviour of the respective verbs. More specifically, the movements may be rendered as lasting for a certain (sometimes very long) time:

24. Bazille was killed a few months before his twenty-ninth birthday in the Franco-Prussian war, and since then the scholars have been wringing their hands at the loss of a potential 'great Impressionist', discounting the possibility that he could equally have evolved into a third-rate artist [...] (EBX)

25. The Government have consistently wrung their hands and said that in the past the services were awful. (HHX)

By way of digression, let me mention very briefly that the figurative status of the motion also makes it possible to stress the operation of forethought in the instigation phase – note the use of the verb *want* in the following example:

26. That reminds me of the ghosts who really want to know what's

going on. They don't haunt because they want to wring their hands and wail about something that happened hundreds of years before. (G3P)

Let us come back to the temporal progression of the movements as denoted by the verbs *wring/rub one's hands*. It is fairly obvious that, due to the unspecified number of kinetic phases, the verbs may be combined with the progressive:

27. Her disappointment was so acute that she was wringing her hands. (BPI)

28. Her face was pale and she was wringing her hands in agitation. (CAB)

29. Razia, the loudest and the most ebullient of Chaman's chelas would be wringing her hands and weeping because her new boyfriend had gone off to Ajmer or [...] (H89)

30. He stayed, however, and as he looked around at the faces of Frankie and Chopper he worried. Frankie was rubbing his hands together and Chopper merely nodded now and then with a silly expression on his face. (EA5)

A closer analysis reveals that the progressive form presents the movement as more vivid – the movement is, as it were, presented from inside. Seen from this perspective, we may say that the progressive fulfils an evaluative function: by profiling the temporal progression it emphasises the movement and by doing so it enforces the forcible operation of the cause underlying the movement. (In the light of this observation, the implied prolonged duration of the movement in example 27 foregrounds the operation of the cause, too.)

In contrast, the simple form grasps the movement from outside (consider examples 6, 7, 10, 11, 18 and 20). This means that the movement is presented as a simple fact, without an added evaluative force.

The verbs *wring/rub one's hands* can, of course, occur in *ing*-participle clauses, which profile the movement as occurring against the background of other actions (states). This type of syntactic construction is mute with regard to the temporal extension of the motion. The evaluation of the (approximate) duration of the movement must therefore be made on the basis of the evaluation of the whole situation in which the movement occurs. For example, in 31 the movement, being accompanied by a temporarily extended state (the person is standing), also lends itself to a temporarily extended interpretation:

31. For her efforts, Riddler wins an exemption from military service for her son, Attila, a delicate type who slopes about in a dressing-gown, wringing his hands. (BNT)

The opposite interpretation is implied in the following example:

32. 'You play with my life!' cried Katarina dramatically, wringing her hands. 'And you all play with mine,' answered Lucenzo quietly. (H94)

* * *

By way of concluding the paper let me state only the following: The verbs *wring/rub one's hands* represent a distinct group. Their behaviour is conditioned by the semantic information as carried by them. Apart from the lexico-semantic content of the verbs and the semantic status of the participating body parts it is necessary to take into consideration also the signalling status of the movements.

Notes

- ¹ By the term 'kinetic phase' I understand a sequence of kinetic quanta that follow a linear progression, i.e. such a sequence as does not imply a sharp reversal of direction.
- ² Let me adduce an example with *wring one's hand* (i.e. 'clasp one's hand') accompanied by a precise temporal specification. The result is a decidedly comical effect:

The only thing that surprised me after our painful, taciturn lunch was the astonishing enthusiasm and goodwill he displayed on my departure. He wrung my hand for about five minutes and told me how much pleasure the meeting had given him, though God knows where he had extracted the pleasure from, and expressed the most fervent hope that we would become the firmest friends in the nearest possible future. (FPN)

Works Cited

- British National Corpus*. 2004 <<http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>>.
- Dixon, R. M. W. (1991). *A New Approach to English Grammar, on Semantic Principles*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.
- Faber, P. B., and Mairal-Usón, R. (1999). *Constructing a Lexicon of English Verbs*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1999.
- Kudrnáčová, N. (2002). "The Internal Semantic Structure of *Nod* and *Shrug*". *Brno Studies in English* 28 (2002). 57–63.
- Levin, B. (1993). *English Verb Classes and Alternations: A Preliminary Investigation*, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993.
- Schlesinger, M. (1995). "On the Semantics of the Object". *The Verb in Contemporary English*. Eds. Aarts, B. and Ch. M. Meyer. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.
- Wierzbicka, A. (1980). *The Case for Surface Case*. Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers, 1980.