

## ON THE INTERNAL SEMANTIC STRUCTURE OF VERBS OF CORPOREAL MOTION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THEIR KINETIC STRUCTURATION<sup>[\*]</sup>

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*Abstract.* This paper deals with the principled connections between the kinetic patterns lexicalized in one distinct group of verbs of corporeal motion and the verbs' internal semantic structures as they manifest themselves at a syntactic level. In the verbal internal structures two distinct components can be distinguished, namely, the process-denoting component and the goal-denoting component. The verbs fall into three sub-groups, each displaying a specific configuration of the two components in terms of their different functional positions and of the possibilities of their profiling. These verbal internal structures represent dynamic potentials that interact with the meanings borne by the syntactic constructions into which the verbs enter.

It is generally acknowledged that the semantic content of the verb has a direct bearing upon its syntactic behaviour. The present paper is a contribution to the analysis of the internal semantic structuration of a selected group of English verbs and its manifestation in syntax. More specifically, it demonstrates the presence of two distinct semantic components in the verb's internal template and their operation at a syntactic level.

The verbs under investigation form a semantically coherent class. They denote the bringing together of those body parts which conceptually belong together (i.e. those which form a pair) or whose physical boundaries can be brought together: *fold, cross, clench, close, shut, clasp, press (together)* and *compress*.

Some of these verbs are adduced in Levin (1993: 34-35, 220-222) among verbs which take body parts as their direct objects and which describe conventionalized gestures and signs. In other comprehensive surveys of English verbs, the verbs under investigation are not mentioned as (part of) a distinct group. Dixon adduces some of them in their non-corporeal sense (1991: 98-102), but does not include any of these in his subsets denoting corporeal verbs (Dixon 1991: 118-119). Neither Faber and Mairal-Usón (1999) nor Snell-Hornby (1983) mention either of the verbs in their verbal classes (Snell-Hornby 1983: 132 adduces *clasp*, but only in its non-corporeal sense, i.e. "the prolonged action of holding firmly").

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In the internal semantic structure of these body part motion verbs, two distinct components can be distinguished, namely the process-denoting component and the goal-denoting component. The former refers to the course of the movement, the latter to the final position the body part resumes. For example, in *close* (*He closed his eyes*) the presence of the process-denoting component manifests itself in the possibility of profiling this component in the progressive with a non-iterative meaning (*He was closing his eyes*), and the presence of the goal-denoting component manifests itself in the possibility of its being profiled in the stative passive with a resultative meaning (*His eyes were closed*).

The verbs under investigation fall into three sub-groups, each displaying a specific internal semantic structuration. (Examples are taken from the *British National Corpus*, on which the analysis has been based. The bracketed symbol after each example indicates the respective text sample from which the example is taken.)

### 1) The *fold* subtype

This group comprises the verbs *fold*, *cross* and *clasp*. They denote multi-phase movements (by a kinetic phase I understand a sequence of kinetic quanta that follow a more or less linear progression, i.e. such a sequence does not imply a sharp reversal of direction) marked by a heterogeneous kinetic progression and by a relatively complicated resulting contact of the participating body parts. This fairly complex kinetic template has a bearing on the internal semantic structuration of these verbs.

The process-denoting component is to a large extent overshadowed in favour of its goal-denoting counterpart, with one important ramification: the movement cannot be presented as being in progress because the process-denoting component cannot be given a relatively autonomous status (i.e. it cannot be extracted, so to say, from the verb's internal structure and presented as a functionally independent unit). This fact shows itself in the interpretation of the progressive: when used with these verbs, it cannot denote a movement in its progress but only its repetition. Needless to say, constructions of the type *He was folding his arms*, *He was closing his eyes*, *He was crossing his legs* have, due to the inherent non-cyclic character of the movements, a theoretical status only. (In spite of their hypothetical status they certainly have a considerable explanatory value and serve as one of the tools in singling out individual verbal groups.) A more natural way of expressing a repeated movement of this type would certainly be to use the verb together with its semantic opposite, e.g.:

- (1) His hands were clenching and unclenching. (GV2)
- (2) He was clasping and unclasping his hands in his lap. (Native speakers regard this sentence as unusual, but still imaginable.)

The fact that the markedly heterogeneous kinetic pattern underlies the verb's incompatibility with the progressive (in a non-iterative sense) is by no means surprising. It is well known that the progressive presents the action in progress, i.e. as a sequence of phases. It follows that a verb may enter into this syntactic construction if the movement it designates allows segmentation into discrete quanta (or discrete phases). It may be argued that folding

one's arms consists of a sequence of kinetic phases (and therefore one can say *He folded his arms slowly*). However, it must be borne in mind that, as pointed out above, the kinetic phases constituting this type of movement are of a markedly varied character, especially in the final phases. From this it follows that each individual quantum (and each individual phase) is not capable of representing the movement as a whole. That is, the movement must be carried out in its entirety and only then can it be labelled as "folding one's arms".

It is now clear that the impossibility of using these verbs in the progressive form cannot be taken as evidence that they belong to the class of Vendler's achievements (cf. Vendler 1967). Achievements denote actions that "occur at a single moment of time" (cf. Vendler 1967: 103) or "have little or no duration" (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 208). The above discussion shows that the incompatibility of the discussed set of verbs in the progressive form is underlain not by the limited duration of the movements they denote (note in this connection the possibility of combining these verbs with the adverb *slowly*: *He slowly folded his arms*), but by the dependent status of the process-denoting component as present in their internal semantic structure.

It must be stressed that the impossibility of extracting the process-denoting component from the internal template and making it an autonomous, functionally independent unit does not invalidate its postulation as a distinct constituent. Let me, in further support of my claim, point out that although the verbs cannot occur with the progressive, they still cannot be used in the diagnostic questions of the form "At what time did you fold your arms (cross your legs, clasp your hands)", which would indicate their true achievement status.

The subordinated status of the process-denoting component is, needless to say, also the reason why the verbs from this group cannot be used with the non-iterative *begin* (*?He began to fold his arms, ?He began to cross his legs, ?He began to clasp his hands*).<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, these verbs are, due to the dependent status of the process-denoting component, compatible with *begin* in an iterative sense only (the movement is thus rendered as a sequence of completed units). This construction is, again, only hypothetical: certainly it is difficult to see the reason why this kind of movement should be carried out repeatedly (*He began to fold and unfold his arms in his lap, He began to cross and uncross his legs, He began to clasp and unclasp his hands*). This means that the reason for the theoretical status of this construction must be sought first and foremost in the pragmatic functional load with which the movements can be endowed, and not in the semantic structure of the respective verbs.

## 2) The *close* subtype

This group comprises the verbs *close* and *shut*. *Close* may be used with the progressive and with the inchoative *begin* in a non-iterative sense because its internal structure is marked

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<sup>1</sup> The sentence *He began to fold his arms* may, theoretically, be used in a non-iterative sense, but in this case the sentence does not present a detached, purely objective depiction of physical reality. It may serve as a (possibly emotively coloured) depiction of the inner state of the performer of the movement (as is well known, folding one's arms belongs to movements which may serve as a signal of one's inner state). But even here the onlooker must know (or, at least, safely predict) the entire kinetic pattern of the movement although it has not been completed yet.

by a more or less balanced status of both the process-denoting and the goal-denoting components. That is, not only the goal-denoting but also the process-denoting component can operate as functionally independent constituents. The reason for this situation lies in the homogeneous kinetic structuration of the movement denoted by this verb. Let me offer an explanation. Each kinetic quantum, whose sequence constitutes the movement as a whole (I take quantum in its most minimum sense, namely as the distance between discrete contiguous points on the path), encompasses in itself the nature of the whole movement and thus represents a (more or less) functionally independent unit within the whole pattern. The movement has, therefore, a cumulative character, with each quantum representing a further stage in the attainment of the goal (the resultant position of the body parts). The cumulativity of the kinetic structuration does not run counter to its homogeneousness because cumulativity is a quantitative phenomenon, whereas homogeneousness is a qualitative one. Consider:

- (3) [...] but tonight she was tired, her eyes were closing, she had had four hours of party already [...] (FBO)
- (4) Her father held her tightly until her eyes began to close and from far away she heard [...] (CEH)

The corporeal *shut* with the non-iterative progressive represents a merely hypothetical construction. I have found only two examples in the BNC, but even in them the progressive has an iterative meaning. Cf.:

- (5) He was opening and shutting his mouth and licking his lips, much as a cat does when something disgusts it. (EWC)
- (6) [...] I tried to get him down to sleep again, and he was shutting his eyes and sucking on his dummy, but he was [...] (KCG)

The explanation must probably be sought in the semantics of *shut*. In contrast to *close*, it suggests “the interposition of a barrier or obstacle” (*Webster’s New Dictionary of Synonyms* 1978: 153), which emphasizes the reaching of the final position. This implication is, naturally, quite plausible for shutting entities other than body parts, cf.:

- (7) I was shutting the front door when I heard the phone ring. (HTR)

### 3) The *press* subtype

This group comprises the verbs *press*, *compress* and *clench*. Their internal structure is, due to a very specific physical structuration of the movement, characterized by a dominant position of the goal-denoting component. The last phase does not involve a merely static contact between the participating body parts (as is the case in the two groups of verbs discussed above). Owing to the pressure that is exerted, the body parts, although being in con-

tact already, continue to engage more closely – note the use of the expressions of the *hard* type in the following two examples:<sup>2</sup>

- (8) Harry clenched his teeth so hard that the stem of his clay pipe broke [...] (EWH)
- (9) [...] but she had to press her lips tightly together to stop them quivering. (H7W)

The restructuring within the physical composition of the body parts in question is linguistically reevaluated as a movement *sui generis*. The dynamicity as present in the last phase (which involves the resuming of the final position of the body parts) underlies the merging of the goal-denoting component with its process-denoting counterpart in constructions with the progressive and with the inchoative *begin*. This is the reason why the use of the progressive with these verbs reevaluates the course of the movement as covering the prolonged physical contact of the participating body parts. Consider:

- (10) The old man seems to be clenching his teeth. (HGU)
- (11) He was pressing his fingertips together.

The same interpretation is valid for the combination of these verbs with the inchoative *begin* (needless to say, such a construction is very unusual but imaginable). *Begin*, then, marks the onset of the process shaped as the prolonged dynamic contact between the participating body parts.

- (12) [...] he just continued to hold on to her, and after a time even began to press his tongue against hers. (K8T)

It must be pointed out that when *clench* combines with *one's fist(s)*, the construction yields a different interpretation: it marks the onset of the first kinetic quanta, cf.:

- (13) [...] then breathe in through your nose and at the same time, start to clench your fists and bend your elbows so that they are near your shoulders, elbows down. Repeat this exercise three times. (B21)

This interpretation is underlain by the fact that the internal semantic template of this predicate is characterized by a more or less balanced weight between the two internal components. This is only natural since the kinetic pattern in clenching one's fist(s) is, in comparison with a kinetically homogeneous pattern as present in clenching one's teeth, relatively heterogeneous. Put another way, the lexical content of *clench one's fist(s)* provides information not only about the presence of the final quanta during which the body parts are in contact, but also about those that precede them.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The increasing pressure is also implied in this example: She clenched her jaws until they ached. (*New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 1993: 416).

<sup>3</sup> Note the use of *loosely* implying the absence of marked pressure: [...] forming a shell like a loosely clenched fist. (EFR)

It thus does not come as a surprise to learn that the progressive with, e.g., *clench one's hands* may, under certain circumstances (when *clench* is accompanied by its semantic opposite) denote a repeated movement:

- (14) His hands were clenching and unclenching. (GV2)

### ***Ing*-participle clauses**

The verbs from all the three groups may be employed in an *ing*-participle clause, which presents the movement as taking place against the background of other actions. Owing to the operation of this construction, the verbal internal semantic template is restructured: the process-denoting component is foregrounded, while the goal-denoting component recedes into the background. It must be stressed, however, that the restructuring involves a mere shift in the relative weight of the two components. The process-denoting component, albeit foregrounded, is not given a functionally independent, autonomous status (as in the progressive with a non-iterative meaning), which means that the goal-denoting component is still in operation. This enables the verbs with a firmly built-in process-denoting component (*fold*, *cross*, *clasp*) to freely enter into this type of construction, and this also explains why this construction denotes the movement as occurring in its entirety even when denoted by verbs with a potentially extractable process-denoting component (as in, for example, *He was closing his eyes* in a non-iterative sense). Consider:

- (15) Jess resisted, primly folding her hands, looking down and waiting [...] (C85)  
(16) He seemed to find the spirit relaxing, and sat down himself, crossing his legs almost casually. (CE5)  
(17) He sat forward on his chair, clasping his hands. (G1W)  
(18) He kissed her, closing his eyes so that she could not see herself any more. (FRC)  
(19) She turned away, shutting her eyes to adjust them to the darkness, and then [...] (BMX)  
(20) He bit his lip, clenching his fists. (A73)  
(21) Belinda stood back, smiling and pressing her hands together with pleasure. (H9H)  
(22) Compressing her lips, she fleetingly observed their full curve with a stab of dissatisfaction. (GUE)

### **Resultative constructions**

All the verbs under investigation may occur in the pseudo-passive construction, which has a stative, resultative meaning. Needless to say, in this type of construction the goal-denoting component, acquiring a functionally independent status, becomes foregrounded.

The ease with which the verbs enter into the resultative construction lies in the kinetic pattern of the movements denoted by the verbs: the body parts resume, irrespective of the

character of the course they traverse, a definite position, which represents the goal of the movement. That is, the body parts involved in movements under investigation belong to the class of “accusative body-part objects” (the term used by Wierzbicka 1980: 24 for the body parts which occupy the object position and occur with verbs which imply a final change in the position of the body parts). Consider:

- (23) [...] the gloves and hat were placed side by side on the gleaming wood of the table before her and her hands were folded in an attitude of prayer [...] (EVG)
- (24) Her legs were crossed at the knee, and she was wearing her new wedge-heeled shoes. (ACW)
- (25) His hands were clasped together as if to comfort one another. (H7A)
- (26) She blinked twice, taking the risk of missing the right few seconds while her eyes were shut. (H0R)
- (27) My eyes are closed, my throat is clogged growing over. (FU5)
- (28) Lachlan’s jaw was clenched tight as his hand. (APW)
- (29) Her shoulders were hunched up high and her lips were pressed together tight and she sat there [...] (CH4)
- (30) His lips were compressed into a thin line as he awaited some explanation. (CEC)

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The analysis has endeavoured to show certain aspects of the interaction between the kinetic pattern as lexicalized in the verbs under investigation and their internal semantic structure as it is manifested at a syntactic level. It can be seen, too, that internal semantic templates of verbs are not a static phenomenon. On the contrary, they represent a dynamic potential whose components become activated in a specific type of syntactic construction. This fact provides further evidence that syntactic constructions are endowed with characteristic functional potentials, capable of activating certain components of the verb’s internal semantic template. (Let me in this connection recall Daneš’s “back effect” of form upon meaning (cf. Daneš 1968) and Goldberg’s (1995) construction grammar.)

By way of concluding my paper let me tentatively observe that my analysis of the connections between the verb’s internal semantic template and the kinetic structuration as implied in its lexico-semantic content offers an alternative (quite compatible, though) view of the verbal internal temporal structuration as first proposed by Vendler (1967).

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