

Vojtěch Veselý: Verbs of Reaction as Presupposition Triggers

The verbs of reaction constitute a large group of semantically heterogeneous units. With respect to the ontological type of a reaction, several semantic groups can be distinguished, especially: verbs of verbal reaction (*odpovědět* ‘answer’, *odmítnout* ‘reject’), verbs of emotional reaction (*litovat* ‘pity’, *závidět* ‘envy’), verbs of perception (*vidět* ‘see’, *cítit* ‘feel’). I will argue that while a reaction is represented as asserted content, a stimulus of the reaction is often encoded as a presupposition. Although my research has been confined to Czech language material, cross-linguistic scope of my findings may be expected.

How do we find out whether the stimulus argument is encoded as a presupposition? First, the negation test can be applied.¹ E.g. from both *odpověděl mu* ‘he answered him’ and *neodpověděl mu* ‘he didn’t answer him’ follows ‘someone communicated something to the subject, prototypically a question’. In dynamic accounts of presupposition (both semantic and pragmatic ones) it is assumed that a presupposition has to be entailed in the context upon which the sentence is interpreted otherwise the sentence would not be felicitous.² Therefore, another method could be to inspect the text preceding the sentence and determine whether the stimulus is directly expressed therein. If this was often the case it would strongly suggest that the stimulus argument is encoded as a presupposition.

I decided to check the status of the stimulus argument with respect to the second criterion, i.e. entailment in context. However, the stimulus may be expressed quite deep in the pretext or it may only follow from the situation. Thus, I have tried to examine how often is the stimulus directly expressed in the sentence as a piece of new information, i.e. as the focus. Focusing the stimulus argument implies that it is either not presupposed or the process of accommodation³ had to be engaged. On the contrary, expressing the stimulus in the topic or omitting it would suggest that it has already been part of the established context. Before carrying out the research, I hypothesized that the second case, i.e. not focusing the stimulus argument, would prevail as a result of the stimulus being part of the presupposed content.

I have conducted a corpus-based analysis of 24 Czech verbs of reaction. For each of them, a random sample of 200 occurrences was extracted from the Czech corpus SYNv6. Consequently, each occurrence was marked as an instance of either focusing, or not focusing the stimulus argument⁴ and the ratio of both instances was determined. The results principally confirmed the preliminary hypothesis, as shown in the table below. Furthermore, the data suggest that if the stimulus argument is presupposed (which is common) it is usually syntactically facultative. The predominance of occurrences where the stimulus argument is not focused and the feature of syntactic facultativity seem to be intertwined. In the table, notice the relatively high rate of occurrences including focused stimulus in the group of verbs with obligatory stimulus. As regards the verbs of perception which also belong to this group, it seems that both characteristics are related to the fact that the stimulus argument is presupposed only in some cases, cf. *neviděl jsem tam žádného policistu* ‘I didn’t see a policeman there’ (the presence of a policeman is not presupposed) × *neviděl jsem, jak ke mně*

¹ See especially Frege (1892), Strawson (1950), van Fraassen (1968).

² Karttunen (1974), Heim (1983).

³ Lewis (1979).

⁴ I have employed classical tests for determining topic-focus articulation, defined e.g. by Sgall et al. (1980).

přichází policista ‚I didn’t see a policeman coming to me’ (the presupposition ‘a policeman was coming to me’ is triggered).

Due to lack of space, here I will only present results for 12 of these verbs.

| | ontological type of the reaction | ontological type of the stimulus | focusing the stimulus argument | syntactic status of the stimulus argument |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <i>kritizovat</i> ‘criticize’ | verbal | unspecified | 39 % | facultative |
| <i>odpovědět</i> ‘reply’ | verbal | verbal | 20 % | facultative |
| <i>odvděčit se</i> ‘pay back’ | unspecified | unspecified | 9 % | facultative |
| <i>pochválit</i> ‘praise’ | verbal | unspecified | 47 % | facultative |
| <i>pomstít se</i> ‘retaliate’ | unspecified | unspecified | 24 % | facultative |
| <i>popřít</i> ‘deny’ | verbal | verbal | 51 % | obligatory |
| <i>potrestat</i> ‘punish’ | unspecified | unspecified | 24 % | facultative |
| <i>slyšet</i> ‘hear’ | perception | audible | 61 % | obligatory |
| <i>souhlasit</i> ‘agree’ | verbal | verbal | 42 % | facultative |
| <i>vidět</i> ‘see’ | perception | visible | 63 % | obligatory |
| <i>vyvrátit</i> ‘refute’ | verbal | verbal | 43 % | obligatory |
| <i>závidět</i> ‘envy’ | emotional | unspecified | 23 % | facultative |

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Data source:

Czech National Corpus – SYNv6. Institute of the Czech National Corpus, Prague. 10. 09. 2018. Accessible at WWW: <<http://www.korpus.cz>>.