

NEEDS AND WANTS: THE SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC INTERPRETATION OF ENGLISH PRIVATIVE VERBS

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(Recibido Mayo 1996; aceptado Julio 1996)

BIBLID [1133-682X (1995-1996) 3-4, 173-185.]

Resumen

Este artículo examina el problema de traducción de los verbos privativos ingleses (es decir, *want, need, desire, miss, lack*, etc.) a otras lenguas. Para ilustrar la naturaleza de esta dificultad, se examina en detalle un poema de Philip Larkin. Se argumenta que, en el uso de estos verbos, no sólo deben considerarse las condiciones pragmáticas sino también su evolución histórica. Se proporcionan análisis diacrónicos y sincrónicos de estos verbos usando descubrimientos recientes de la teoría de la recepción y ligamento, la lingüística cognitiva y la teoría de la pertinencia. En la sección final se discute el significado prototípico de *want* y sus implicaciones para la traductores.

Abstract

This article examines the problem of translating English privative verbs (i.e. *want, need, desire, miss, lack*, etc.) into other languages. A poem by Philip Larkin is examined in detail to illustrate the nature of this difficulty. It is argued that one has to consider not only the pragmatic conditions of the use of these verbs but also their historical development. Diachronic and synchronic analyses of these verbs using recent findings from government-binding theory, cognitive linguistics, and relevance theory are provided. In a final section, a discussion of the prototypical meaning of *want* and its implications for translators is given.

Résumé

Cet article examine le problème d'une traduction des verbes privatifs anglais, comme *want, need, desire, miss, lack*, etc., dans d'autres langues. Pour illustrer la nature de cette difficulté, un poème de Philip Larkin est examiné en détail. Des arguments sont présentés appuyant la thèse qu'il faut considérer non seulement les conditions pragmatiques de l'usage de ces verbes, mais aussi leur développement historique. Dans l'article sont aussi procurées des analyses diachroniques et synchroniques de ces verbes se basant sur les découvertes récentes de la théorie du *government-binding*, la linguistique cognitive et la théorie de la pertinence. Finalement une discussion est soulevée portant sur la signification prototypique de *want* et ses implications pour les traducteurs.

Sumario

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1. Introduction

This article will not be about translation problems in general, but I will use the sort of difficulty a translator might have with poetic texts as an entry into a set of intriguing problems in modern English, ranging from underlying syntactic structure to pragmatic interpretation. I intend to touch upon a problem of translation from English into other languages which is also a problem for language teachers, viz. English privative verbs such as *want, need, desire, miss, lack*, etc.

It is not my purpose to deal explicitly with alternative or adequate translations of these verbs, but rather to show how a closer look at their syntactic and semantic properties forces the linguist to consider not only the pragmatic conditions of their use but also their diachronic development. Much of the syntactic part of my argument will be based on a revised version of what has come to be known as the 'government-binding' model of syntax or the 'principles and parameters' model. I should stress at the outset, however, that nothing of great theoretical import hinges on my decision to couch the argument in these terms and that the syntactic description given is relatively easily translatable into other generative models of syntactic description. The semantic part of the argument is inspired by developments in cognitive linguistics, and the pragmatic basis of my argument will rest on Grice's cooperative principle and its further development into relevance theory by Sperber and Wilson (1986).

In the second section I shall outline the nature of the problem in translating English privative verbs by looking at a poem by Philip Larkin and showing that the title contains a virtually insoluble ambiguity. In section 3 I shall discuss the historical development of privative verbs in English, introducing the notions of *topic prominence* and *subject prominence* in order to make a distinction between languages like German in which privative verbs still occur in impersonal structures and those like English which have developed away from impersonal structures. I shall link these notions up with the lexical structure of verbs involving the assignment of thematic roles to noun phrase arguments and show that languages like English have developed underlying syntactic structures with an empty subject slot which constrains the noun phrase that would have originally appeared in the Dative or Oblique case in the impersonal structure to be marked for Nominative case.

By showing how the new syntactic structure does not really alter the lexical semantic relationship between privative verbs and their argument noun phrases in section 5, I am able to account for an apparently disparate range of complement structures occurring after privative verbs. Section 6 deals with a development that has also taken place in the prototypical meaning of the verb *want* which leads to the need for a context of communication in order for the correct inferences to be derived. I argue that the prototypical meaning remains LACK, and that the new meaning of active willpower is an extension from the prototype which is derivable by a process of inference from the context. The consequences for translators of literary genres such as poetry, which contain a high degree of ambiguity, is then touched on briefly in the final section.

2. The nature of the problem

One of the hallmarks of a good translator is his/her ability to interpret the source text within the socio-cultural and socio-pragmatic context in which it was first produced with a view to making decisions on how that text might best be represented linguistically within the framework of a very different socio-cultural context. In literary translation this ability can make all the difference between the production of a literary text of equal or approximate value in the target language and the production of a trivial, culturally meaningless text.

Consider the following poem by Philip Larkin:

Wants

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:
However the sky grows dark with invitation card
However we follow the printed directions of sex
However the family is photographed under the flagstaff -
Beyond all this, the wish to be alone.

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs:
Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,
The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,
The costly aversion of the eyes from death -
Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs.

On the assumption (cf. Watts 1981, 1985, 1995) that the title of a written text is equivalent to what Labov and Waletzky (1967) call the 'abstract', or the summary of what is to follow in the text, the title *Wants* indicates what the topic of the poem is to be. The translator/interpreter, however, is confronted with a semantico-syntactic ambiguity which is virtually impossible to retain in the target language. If the ambiguity cannot be retained, one or the other interpretation will have to be chosen and the poem in the target language will be read and critically interpreted somewhat differently from the poem in the source language, English.

The lexeme 'wants' has been stripped of any linguistic context that might help to resolve the ambiguity, the latter residing in the fact that we read either the verb *want* in the third person singular present tense form or the abstract, countable nominal *want* in the plural form. Most native speakers resolve the ambiguity by choosing the nominal interpretation, the reason being quite straightforward. A noun phrase consisting only of a noun and a plural morpheme lends itself to a generic interpretation for which no determiner is needed. The reader is able to derive part of a fuller propositional structure

which might be inferred from the rest of the poem. In order to derive a full propositional structure for the verbal form 'wants', on the other hand, the reader would have to project an appropriate singular noun phrase subject and any of a wide range of possible complement structures following the verb. In terms of Sperber and Wilson's (1986) relevance theory, therefore, the nominal interpretation is higher on a scale of relevance than the verbal interpretation since the reader has to go through far less mental processing to reach a fully interpretable propositional structure.

In this article, however, I shall argue that it is the verbal interpretation which is more adequate for a critical interpretation of the whole poem, and this will lead me into a discussion of a range of interesting characteristics of the privative verbs *want* and *need* in English, which a good translator should bear in mind. My argument will provide evidence for the following three assumptions:

1. The adequate syntactic description of any language rests not only on synchronic facts but also on an appropriate consideration of the historical facts of its development.
2. By paying close attention to basic semantic concepts, underlying structures for the sentences of language L are not only very close to, if not identical to, their surface structures but also reflect earlier stages of L.
3. Much of what is generally considered to be the semantic structure of a lexeme is in fact an interpretation derived from pragmatic context, as is the case in the initially preferred reading of 'wants'.

Before I continue with the argument, however, let me provide some evidence for my contention that the verbal interpretation of the title is at least as adequate if not more so for a critical appraisal of Larkin's poem. There are two noun phrases in the poem with which the noun phrase *wants* can be pragmatically equated, *the wish to be alone* and *desire of oblivion*. Throughout the whole poem there is only one oblique reference to the person who has this wish and desire, viz. the first person plural pronoun *we* in the third line of stanza one.

However, the most satisfactory interpretation of *we* is that it is the inclusive pronoun, from which it is relatively easy to infer the coreferent as being anyone or everyone, including the implied poet, the implied reader, or, if the poem is performed orally, the oral performer and her/his audience. The all inclusive unidentified third person pronoun is then interpretable as the subject of the verb *wants* and the reader can infer its complements as being *to be alone*, *oblivion* and, in the final instance, *death*. Hence, putting ourselves obliquely into the position of the missing subject of the verb in the title allows us to consider death as a wished for state, or at least a state which we lack and which will inevitably be resolved. In interpretative terms, therefore, I conclude that the verbal resolution of the ambiguity is more satisfactory than the nominal resolution.

3. From topic prominence to subject prominence

The verbs *want* and *need* in English belong to a restricted set of verbs which Leisi (1961) calls privatives. The appropriateness of the term is often in dispute, but I shall define it as delimiting semantically verbs whose prototypical semantic denotations are STATE and LACK. Leisi's set of privative verbs is considerably larger than the small set that I shall propose consisting of *want*, *need*, *wish*, *desire*, *lack* and *miss*, and possibly also a restricted set of prepositional verbs such as, for example, *yearn for*, but whether or not we extend the set, it still comprises a very small number of English verbs.

Until the late middle English/early modern English period privative verbs, in common with other verbs such as *like*, *think*, *seem*, etc.. were used in impersonal surface structures. Bertschinger (1941) gives the following examples from Middle English:

- (1) *On alre ȝerst, gif þu wilt beon edmod, þenc euer hwat þe wonteð of holinesse and of gostliche þeawes.* (from the *Ancrene Riwe/The Rules of the Anchorites*
'First and foremost, if you wish to be obedient, always think what you lack in sanctity and spiritual practices.'

- (2) *... for ther nys no creature so good that him ne wanteth somewhat of the perfeccioun of God, that is his maker.* (from Chaucer's *Tale of Melibeus*)
'... for there is no creature so good that he does not lack something of the perfection of God, that is his maker.'

The reader will note that the most suitable translation of the Middle English verb *wante* into modern English in these examples is with the verb *lack*. The morphological case marking of the head noun in a noun phrase is the primary indication of the noun phrase's grammatical function. Hence in (1) the noun phrase of *hwat . . . of holinesse and of gostliche þeawes* is the subject noun phrase of the verb *wonteð*, since it is understood to be marked for Nominal Case even in the absence of an overt case marker, whereas the noun phrase *þe* is the indirect object of *wonteð* since it is marked for the Dative Case¹. In (2) the noun phrase *somwhat of the perfeccioun of God* may be taken as the subject noun phrase in the sentence and the pronoun *him* as the indirect object.

The subsequent development in English away from the impersonal structure to a 'subject-verb-object' structure in which the subject noun phrase is marked for Nominative case and the object noun phrase for Oblique case (cf. Bertschinger 1941) presents a number of interesting problems. The development itself is certainly not restricted to English, being common to all the Germanic languages to a greater or lesser degree, but it is correlated in English with the loss of morphological surface case marking. Burridge (1993) argues that

¹ I shall take it as uncontroversial that we can still talk of a Dative Case in Middle English, although the Dative and Accusative Cases had fused into what we might call the Oblique Case by the time of Chaucer

Middle Dutch, like Middle English, was what she calls a topic prominent language and has developed, like English, into a subject prominent language, and I will explain these two concepts in what follows.

There is still a great deal of discussion on how the terms *topic* and *comment* should be understood and in what ways they differ from the grammatical terms *subject* and *predicate*. Hockett (1958) considers the person or thing about which something is asserted to be the *topic* and that which is asserted of the *topic* to be the *comment*. So in a sentence like (3):

- (3) That new James Bond film I haven't seen yet.

the noun phrase *that new James Bond film* would be the *topic* and the rest of the sentence the *comment*. On the other hand, in (4):

- (4) Mary came home late.

the noun phrase *Mary* is the *topic* and the rest of the sentence the *comment*. At the same time *Mary* is also the grammatical subject, whereas in (3) *that new James Bond film* is the grammatical object. Thus, *topic* and *comment* are functional rather than grammatical terms referring to one aspect of the organisation of discourse whereas *subject* and *predicate* are syntactic terms. In languages with a well developed inflectional system the *topic* of a sentence will always appear in the syntactic position occupied in subject prominent languages by the subject, i.e. immediately to the left of the verb phrase. Such languages can be called *topic prominent*. In languages that show a weak morphological marking of surface structure case distinctions the *subject* generally occupies the position immediately to the left of the verb phrase and a marked topicalised element must then appear to the left of the subject. Languages of this type can be called *subject prominent* languages.

Summarising, in a *topic prominent* language the first noun phrase which immediately precedes the finite verb in a sentence structure need not be the grammatical subject. This is the case in modern German, which has not lost the distinction between Nominative, Accusative and Dative Cases in surface structure. In a *subject prominent* language such as modern English and Dutch, the noun phrase immediately preceding the finite verb is typically the grammatical subject. The privative verbs like *want* and *need* in Middle English tended to be used with a *topic prominent* word order (cf. examples [1] and [2] above). In other words the person or thing suffering the lack preceded the verb and the grammatical subject, and the grammatical subject itself, which expressed the theme of the lack, was part of the *comment* of the sentence.

The movement towards *subject prominence* caused grammatical subjects to appear increasingly in the prominent position to the left of the verb with the exception of the small set of impersonal verbs including the privatives, with which noun phrases marked for Oblique case continued to appear in the prominent position. A situation of syntactic and semantic opacity arose, in which one particular regularity in the language had become an

exceptional structure. We must assume that the reflex on the part of speakers of Middle English was to restore transparency and regularity by taking the topic prominent noun phrase marked for Oblique case to be the grammatical subject and adjusting the case marking accordingly. Evidence of this process can be seen in Chaucer, from whose work (5) is taken:

- (5) ... many a mayde of which the name I wante ...

4. Syntactic structure and lexical thematic roles

So far I have merely summarised the historical facts concerning the development of this small fragment of English syntax. The question that I now wish to consider is whether the syntactic facts can be linked logically to the semantics and pragmatics of privative verbs. If they can, this will provide evidence for assumption 1., viz. that an adequate synchronic description of a language cannot be divorced from historical considerations.

One interesting proposal in modern generative grammar is that every verb in a language is associated lexically with a set of noun phrases, some of which are obligatorily present in syntactic structure while others remain optional. The noun phrases may also be sentential, i.e. full finite sentential complements, infinitival and gerundive complements, and small clauses (cf. Williams 1975). Each noun phrase will be correlated with semantic information projected by the verb specifying the thematic role it fulfills with respect to the other noun phrases. Semanticists have argued about the number of thematic roles it is feasible to postulate for a natural language, but I shall subscribe to the belief that there are just five, Agent, Theme, Place, Source and Goal. The privative verbs do not assign the thematic role of Agent to any of the noun phrases they project, the central roles assigned being Place and Theme. In a language displaying surface structure case morphology, e.g. German and Russian, there is a higher correlation between the thematic roles assigned lexically and morphological case than in languages with reduced morphological case marking, e.g. English. Consider the following example from German:

- (6) *Ihm* *fehlt* *der* *Mut*
he-Dat lacks the-Nom-Masc courage-Nom-Masc
'He lacks courage.'

The Dative pronoun *ihm* reflects morphosyntactically the thematic role Place, whereas the noun phrase *der Mut* in the Nominative case must be assigned the thematic role Theme. There is absolutely no reason to suppose that in the English translation equivalent 'He lacks courage' other thematic roles are assigned, even though the pronoun *he* appears in the Nominative case. But this raises a tricky question. How do we explain the fact that

it is always the Place noun phrase which appears in the Nominative case in English whereas it is the Theme noun phrase which appears in the Nominative in German?

We can solve this conundrum by returning to Burridge's distinction between topic prominent and subject prominent languages. We can expect of a topic prominent language like German that the word order of the noun phrases in (6) can be inverted to yield (7):

(7) Der Mut fehlt ihm.

If we do the same to the English sentence we get the syntactically non-well-formed (although possibly interpretable) structure in (8):

(8) *Courage lacks he.

In both languages one noun phrase must be assigned the grammatical function of subject². In assertive sentences one member of a major syntactic category must appear in the topic prominent position preceding the verb, but in English the subject noun phrase, whether or not it is the topic, must immediately precede the verb. Hence, given a situation in which no other material apart from the verb is generated in the sentence than two (possibly three) noun phrases and in which only one noun phrase precedes the verb, that noun phrase, which is by definition in the topic position, must be the subject in English, but need not be in German. I shall now postulate that the underlying structures for English and German differ in the following way:

(9) English: $\Delta [[\Delta] V [NPP]_{\text{Place}}] [NP]_{\text{Theme}}]$

(10) German: $\Delta [V [NP]_{\text{Place}}] [NP]_{\text{Theme}}]$

The empty position immediately preceding the verb in English will always only receive the subject noun phrase, and surface case marking will take place only after one of the argument noun phrases has been moved. The thematic role Place is higher on a movement hierarchy than Theme, and since, by virtue of its move to the subject NP position, it takes on that grammatical function, it will receive the Nominative case marking. This means that the Theme argument is still free to move to the topic position at the left of the total structure, and we can in fact get sentences like (11), which are of course rather unusual due to the preferred tendency in English of using a cleft structure as in (12) to indicate topic prominence:

(11) Courage he lacks.

² Leaving aside the problem of imperative structures for the moment.

(12) It's courage that he lacks.

In German, however, morphological case marking must take place before anything is moved to the topic prominent position and reflects the semantic relationship between the noun phrase and the verb. The noun phrase assigned the Place role will therefore receive Dative case and since one noun phrase must still be marked as Nominative, the noun phrase assigned the Theme role is the only candidate. In highly inflectional languages semantic dependencies between the verb and its associated noun phrases are likely to be carried more by morphological case marking than by syntactic configuration, whereas in a language like English in which syntactic configuration determines the grammatical function an extra empty category slot will be developed to take the subject noun phrase.

5. Complement structures following privative verbs

The relationship between underlying lexical structure and syntactic structure in English is thus expressed more by syntactic configuration than by the semantic relationship between a verb and its projected noun phrases. However, unless we see the underlying structure in (9) as having developed from the underlying structure in (10) and the significance of this development for the privative verbs in modern English, it will be impossible to explain either the grammaticality or the semantic and pragmatic interpretation of gerundive and infinitival complements and small clauses functioning as the complement of verbs like *want*, *need* and *miss*.

The following sentences will give an impression of this wide range of possible complement structures, which I have highlighted in italics:

- (13) You always want *your coffee white*.
- (14) The Prime Minister wanted *the point clarified*.
- (15) Your hair wants *cutting*.
- (16) I wanted *to see you yesterday*.
- (17) The judge wanted *the accused to repeat his statement*.
- (18) We don't want *any water getting into the shaft*.
- (19) Jill needs *her hair cut*
- (20) Jill's hair needs *cutting*.

(21) I don't need *him to tell me how to do it*.

(22) I don't need *you telling me the same old joke day after day*.

(23) We miss *Bob popping around for a game of bridge*.

The list could easily be extended, but any translator from English or any teacher of English will immediately recognise the kind of problems presented by sentences (15), (18), (20) and (22). The crucial sentence in the set, however, is (16). The subject noun phrase of the infinitival complement is not realised phonetically, i.e. it is an empty category which, I maintain, enters pragmatically rather than syntactically into a coreference relationship with the pronoun *I*.

There is a standard principle in the principles and parameters model of generative syntax which states that a phonetically non-realised category cannot be governed by the member of a governing category, and within the terms of that model the principle is well-motivated. However, if we adopt the non-configurational underlying structure for sentences containing privative verbs in English (cf. [9]) the principle need not even be invoked. Similarly, (9) provides a logically well-motivated explanation for the occurrence of the Oblique case in (21), since there is strong evidence from English that non-governed NPs will always appear in the Oblique case (cf. Watts 1986). The pronoun *him* is not the direct object of the verb *need*, but the subject of the infinitive *to tell*. Hence, not only is there strong evidence to support assumption 1., but the analysis also leads to acceptance of assumption 2

6. The semantics and pragmatics of privative verbs

The third assumption concerning the relationship between semantic content and pragmatic context now needs to be examined, and in doing so I will focus on the verb *want*. Bertschinger (1941) identifies six ways in which the verb *want* can be interpreted pragmatically in English. At the heart of all six interpretations lies the prototypical semantic notion of LACK. In one case, however – and it is probably the commonest interpretation in contemporary English – Bertschinger is led to consider the possibility that *want* expresses an active personal involvement on the part of the subject noun phrase which amounts almost to a decision to do or achieve something.

Consider the following sentence:

(24) I want a cup of tea.

The speaker of (24) appears only secondarily to be saying that s/he lacks a cup of tea. Primarily, the speaker appears to be expressing an active mental movement directed towards the attainment of a goal. For this reason, the usual translation of *want* would

involve a verb of volition such as *vouloir* in French, *wollen* in German, *querer* in Spanish, etc. It may well be that the development of subject prominence in English has led to a significant shift in meaning away from the purely privative denotation of *want* towards a denotation involving active willpower.

This is corroborated by sentences (25) and (26) below:

(25) Your hair wants cutting

(26) Your hair needs cutting.

The addressee of (25) is more likely to infer an implicature that the speaker is issuing a mild threat than that s/he is merely asserting the truth of the proposition itself. It is obviously not possible to attribute active willpower to the subject noun phrase *your hair* in (25), but the extended, secondary meaning of *want*, which is certainly not expressed through the verb *need*, would clearly help to account for the differentiated pragmatic interpretation of (25) and (26).

On the other hand, the distinction between the two senses LACK and ACTIVE WILLPOWER is still largely dependent on context, a context which is significantly missing in the title of Larkin's poem. Imagine the following situation: a friend of yours is doing a particularly difficult jigsaw puzzle and is unable to continue. You might then say either (27) or (28):

(27) You want a blue piece in there.

(28) You need a blue piece in there.

In this case the two sentences are very close in meaning. There is no implicature in (27) that the speaker is expressing a mild threat. You are not insinuating that s/he is actively engaged in searching for a blue piece; you are merely making a helpful suggestion in case s/he has not yet noticed what type of piece is needed. You are making a statement about what s/he lacks in the struggle to complete the jigsaw puzzle, on the assumption that the most relevant inference will be that you are making a suggestion.

However, if your friend says:

(29) I want a blue piece in there

s/he may be interpreted pragmatically as asserting what s/he lacks or as expressing an active desire to find a blue piece. Without the situational context the sentence remains ambiguous, as is indeed also the case with (24) (*I want a cup of tea.*). In order to prove his point, Bertschinger is also constrained to quote much more of the texts from which he has drawn his examples than when he is illustrating the 'pure' denotation of LACK.

Assumption 3, in section 2 is thus supported by the previous argument. Much of

what we think is semantic content turns out to be conventionalised pragmatic interpretation given a situational context. In the case of privative verbs in English, above all with the verb *want*, this is particularly evident. Even if we were to admit the active willpower interpretation as a derived prototypical denotation of *want*, it would not greatly alter the semantico-syntactic argument for considering diachronic facts in the synchronic description of English. Instead of the thematic roles Place and Theme, those of Source and Goal would have to be posited. But since no Agent noun phrase is present, the underlying structure in (9) would still be valid, the only difference being the thematic roles assigned to each noun phrase, and my basic syntactic argument would still stand

7. Conclusion

In conclusion I shall argue that Larkin's poem is in fact doubly ambiguous. Not only do we have the choice between interpreting a nominal reference or a verbal reference for the title *Wants*, but, if the second interpretation is chosen – and I have provided evidence to indicate that it might indeed be the preferred interpretation – the reader/translator is still confronted with a choice between the prototypical meaning of LACK or the derived meaning of ACTIVE WILLPOWER. In effect both these interpretations are present in the poem. We actively will that which we lack, viz. death.

If the translator is aware of the ambiguity, it does not necessarily make her/his job easier, since the same double ambiguity can almost certainly not be introduced into the translated text. In Spanish, for example, the third person singular of the verb *faltar*, *faltá*, could be interpreted to mean that something is missing to someone or that someone dies. It would thus be ambiguous but would force the reader's attention to the motif of death. Any translation into German with the verb *wollen* or the nominal *Wille* would stress the active willpower meaning and exclude the interpretation of lack.

To become aware of the ambiguity, it is necessary for the translator to acquire a knowledge of linguistic theory which not only includes the historical bases of structures in the modern language, but also focuses on questions of prototypical meaning, relevance and pragmatic inferencing. Without this knowledge, it is hardly possible that the complex ambiguity residing in poetic forms of discourse will be fully recognised and the immense difficulties appreciated in creating a translated text that is worthy of the original. However, with this knowledge the job of translating literary texts becomes a formidable task, a daunting challenge which many translators would rather not take on, and I have no solution to this conundrum.

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