

## English *remember* and Role and Reference Grammar: On Van Valin and Wilkins (1993)☆

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### Abstract

This paper examines Van Valin and Wilkins' recent account (1993) of the syntax and semantics of English *remember*. This is intended by the authors as a pilot study whose ultimate goal is to show that the types and form of the complements that a predicate takes can be deduced directly from the semantic representation in its lexical entry. Yet it is shown here, first, that Van Valin and Wilkins' analysis of *remember* is inaccurate, since it overlooks important facts about the grammar of this verb and of other related predicates. Second, and more importantly, it is also argued that there is a mismatch between the assumptions of Van Valin and Wilkins concerning *remember* and theory-internal requirements as contained in the Interclausal Relations Hierarchy.

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### 1. Introduction

Predicting syntactic facts from the semantics of predicates has been one of the goals of Role and Reference Grammar (RRG) since the early days of the theory. In their 1984 book (henceforth FVV), Foley and Van Valin examined preposition assignment with a number of English verbs (e.g. 'load the truck *with* cartons', 'drain water *from* the pool', 'show the book *to* Alice', etc.), and concluded that it could be largely predicted by general principles related to the semantics of the verbs themselves and that, as a consequence, the prepositions in question did not have to be idiosyncratically specified with each verbal lexical entry (FVV, 1984: 81-95; see also Jolly, 1993). Foley and Van Valin also suggested (1984: 315) in passing that the juncture-nexus combinations (i.e. the types of complements) available with a given verb might also be a function of its semantics, a possibility that has now been explored in Van Valin and Wilkins (1993). In the opening sections of this important

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paper the authors duly acknowledge the existence of a number of previous semantically-oriented approaches to complement selection (Grimshaw, 1979; Givón, 1980; Dixon, 1984; Ransom, 1986; Wierzbicka, 1988; Rudanko, 1989),<sup>1</sup> yet they feel (1993: 58–59) that, in general,

“there have been virtually no serious attempts to develop a fully explicit, rigorous theory which predicts syntactic structure from semantic representations. This paper is the beginning of just such an attempt, and therein lies its primary theoretical significance. It provides a concrete example of how syntax and semantics can be related in a principled and general way, and it shows how many of the phenomena which are today considered to be ad hoc and arbitrary by many syntactic theories (and therefore simply listed (stipulated) in lexical entries) can be derived from general, independently motivated semantic, lexical, and morphosyntactic principles.”

To this end, Van Valin and Wilkins have chosen to concentrate on one specific complement-taking predicate, namely English *remember*, and its equivalents in Mparntwe Arrernte, the aboriginal language spoken in Alice Springs, Central Australia. The selection of *remember* is justified (1993: 499) by

“the rich set of complement forms and associated meanings that it takes in English (*John remembered to close the door, John remembered that he had closed the door, John remembered closing the door.*)”

Though the authors think of their paper as only a promisory note for future developments in the field, it is doubtlessly of the greatest interest to anyone concerned with the semantic basis of complementation. Hence it is somewhat disappointing that their research should exhibit a number of inaccuracies and omissions which detract from its overall merits and even call into question basic tenets of the theory as a whole. Specifically, it will be argued here, first, that Van Valin and Wilkins' analysis leaves too many facts unexplained about the syntax and semantics of both *remember* and other complement-taking predicates; second, and more importantly, that the semantic and syntactic decomposition they propose for *remember* fails to meet the requirements of RRG itself, in that it contravenes the principles governing the so-called Interclausal Relations Hierarchy (FVV, 1984: 264ff.; Van Valin, 1993b: 109–112; Van Valin and Wilkins, 1993: 515). These two aspects are examined, respectively, in sections 3 and 4 of this paper; previous to these, a brief summary of Van Valin and Wilkins (1993) is provided in section 2. Throughout the discussion, some measure of familiarity with the fundamentals of Role and Reference Grammar has been assumed.

## 2. Van Valin and Wilkins' account of English *remember*

Stripped of its technicalities, the approach of Van Valin and Wilkins (1993) proceeds in four different stages, the first of which involves assigning to the lexical

<sup>1</sup> Two studies on the same topic not mentioned by Van Valin and Wilkins are Verspoor (1990) and Beukema and Verspoor (1991).

entry of every verb a decomposed semantic representation and a set of so-called semantic redundancy rules. In the case of English *remember*, this predicts, inter alia, that this verb can take two arguments, the second of which (= the *y* variable in the notation of Van Valin and Wilkins) can be an intention, a perception, or some piece of knowledge or a belief. Thus, examples (1) and (2) below are described by the authors as denoting an intention, (3)–(5) a perception, and (6)–(7) as having a cognition reading:

- (1) John remembered his checkbook.<sup>2</sup>
- (2) John remembered to bring his checkbook.
- (3) John vividly remembers the signing of the contract.
- (4) John vividly remembers signing the contract.
- (5) John vividly remembers Fred signing the contract.
- (6) John remembers the solution.
- (7) John remembers that two plus two equal four.

Van Valin and Wilkins note (1993: 516), too, that the same interpretations are found whether the object of *remember* is an NP or a clause, and “this shows that the complement forms are not the source of the various interpretations; rather, they are a function of them”. In other words, the fact that the three interpretations in question are available also with object NPs is crucial for the assumption that the clausal complements are selected semantically by *remember*, and not added in a compositional procedure.

Each of the possible readings of *remember* is then linked to one of the semantic relations that compose, within the Role and Reference Grammar framework, the so-called Interclausal Relations Hierarchy. See Fig. 1.

For the various interpretations of *remember*, the relevant interclausal semantic relations are respectively psych-action (“some kind of mental disposition to act”; cf. Van Valin and Wilkins, 1993: 514), direct perception (“unmediated apprehension of some act, event, or situation through the senses”; *ibid.*: 515), and cognition/propositional attitude.

The third stage in the process of relating the semantic representation of *remember* to syntactic form is mapping the three semantic relations mentioned above into the relevant syntactic clause linkage categories, as specified in the Interclausal Relations Hierarchy. In connection with this, Van Valin and Wilkins point out (1993: 516) that the mapping between the semantic and syntactic clause linkage relations “is not random, and there are strong universal constraints on it”. Basically, the outcome of this is that the juncture-nexus types (i.e. the specific syntactic relations) corresponding to the three interclausal semantic relations associated with *remember* are as follows:

<sup>2</sup> Van Valin and Wilkins (1993: 510) acknowledge that though this too could have a cognition interpretation, “it is more likely to have a psych-action reading, e.g. he remembered to do something with his checkbook”.

<i>Syntactic relations</i>	<i>Semantic relations</i>
Strongest	Closest
Nuclear cosubordination	Causative
Nuclear subordination	Aspectual
Nuclear coordination	Psych-action
Core cosubordination	Purposive
Core subordination	Jussive
Core coordination	Direct perception
Clausal cosubordination	Propositional attitude
Clausal subordination	Cognition
Clausal coordination	Indirect discourse
	Temporal adverbial
	Conditionals
	Simultaneous actions
	Sequential actions: Overlapping
	Sequential actions: Non-overlapping
	Action-action: Unspecified
Weakest	Loosest

Fig. 1: The Interclausal Relations Hierarchy (from Van Valin, 1993b: 112).

Psych-action	→	Core cosubordination
Perception	→	Core coordination
Cognition/Propositional attitude	→	Core/Clausal subordination <sup>3</sup>

Within the RRG framework the first of these relations, core cosubordination, is characterised by these defining properties:

- (a) the complement is [-embedded];
- (b) the two predicates share a core argument;
- (c) the linked units are dependent upon the matrix predicate for the expression of the relevant operator (deontic modals) at the core level of juncture.

Conditions (a) and (b) apply also to core coordination, but not (c), for this particular relation, in addition to [-embedded], is also [-dependent] at the core level of juncture; in other words, the two junctives must not share the relevant operator, namely deontic modality.

Finally, core/clausal subordination involves the embedding of an entire clause as a core argument, hence this juncture-nexus type is both [+embedded] and [+dependent].

The fourth and last stage in Van Valin and Wilkins' analysis of *remember* is language-specific, and consists in determining the normal morphosyntactic realization

<sup>3</sup> This type of relation differs from ordinary core subordination in that, though the level of juncture is the core, the linked units are not of the same type (i.e. core with core); instead, an entire clause is embedded as a core argument, hence the label 'core/clausal subordination'. See FVV (1984: 251–255) and Van Valin (1993: 109–110), for detailed discussion, and also footnote 5 below.

in English of the three juncture-nexus types just mentioned. In the case of core cosubordination, this is instantiated by the subjectless *to*-infinitive construction, as in *he wanted to live in London* or in

(8) Helen should have remembered to lock the gate.

As regards condition (a) above, the sequence *to lock the gate* is shown not to be subordinated by its failure to pass such syntactic tests for embedding as passivization and clefting (cf. Van Valin, 1993b: 108):

(8a) \*To lock the gate should have been remembered by Helen.

(8b) \*It was to lock the gate that Helen should have remembered.

(8c) \*What Helen should have remembered was to lock the gate.

Condition (b) is also clearly met, *Helen* being the core argument shared by the two predicates in the linkage. Lastly, the deontic modal *should* has scope over both units, for, as Foley and Van Valin (1984: 312) put it: “what is it that Helen ought to have done: ‘remember’ or ‘remember to lock the gate’? [...] the answer seems to be the second one, the one which includes both cores”.

Summarizing so far, given the existence of an intention component in the semantic decomposition of a predicate, for instance English *remember*, it can be predicted that that component will correspond to a psych-action interclausal relation; this, in accordance with the universal constraints on the mapping between semantic and syntactic relations, will be instantiated by a syntactic relation of core cosubordination and from this we ultimately arrive at the appropriate language-specific complement type, which is, in the case of English, the subjectless *to*-infinitive construction. This is a general morphosyntactic principle of English grammar and “need not be stated specifically for *remember* or any other psych-action verb” (Van Valin and Wilkins, 1993: 516).

Similar considerations lead to the assignment of *that*-clauses to the knowledge and belief components of *remember*. Once again, *that*-clauses constitute the specific instantiation of core/clausal subordination in English, as shown by the fact that, like other core arguments, they can passivize and can occur in the slot of the pragmatic pivot (i.e. in canonical subject position; cf. Foley and Van Valin, 1984: 252), as in

(9) That he had closed the door was remembered by John.

Finally, for the perception interpretation of *remember* the approach of Van Valin and Wilkins also seems to make the correct predictions, for, as it happens, the specific complement realising core coordination in English is precisely the ACC-*ing* construction, as in *John should remember Fred signing the contract*, a sequence that the authors take to be ‘analogous’ to those occurring “with direct perception verbs, e.g. *John saw Fred/him leaving the party early*” (Van Valin and Wilkins, 1993: 517). Within the RRG framework, this type of structure satisfies all the requirements that are characteristic of core coordination (cf. Foley and Van Valin, 1984:

247–248), namely: (a) it is shown to be [–embedded] by its failure to pass passivization and clefting (cf. \**Fred signing the contract should be remembered by John*); (b) the two junctives share a core argument (i.e. *Fred*); and (c) it is also [–dependent], since the deontic modal does not have scope over the whole construction, that is, in the *remember* example above the obligation holds only between *John* and *remember*, and not between *Fred* and *signing*.

Having thus accounted for the syntactic behaviour of *remember*, Van Valin and Wilkins (1993: 518) conclude their analysis on an optimistic note:

“given the theories of lexical decomposition and clause linkage discussed here, the only information that needs to be listed in the lexical entry for *remember* is the decomposed semantic representation presented above; all the facts about complement types follow from that.”

### 3. The data on *remember* and related predicates in English

As is well known, a common construction with *remember* is that illustrated below:

(10) John can remember signing the contract.

This pattern is duly mentioned by Van Valin and Wilkins in the opening lines of their study and again briefly on p. 510, where it is said to exemplify direct perception. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, no further references are made to it, neither in later sections nor in Fig. 3 of Van Valin and Wilkins (1993: 517), where the actual analysis of *remember* is summarised. The reader can thus only guess at the particular syntactic interpretation they would propose for it. If the semantic relation involved is perception, as the authors contend (1993: 510), yet the juncture-nexus type cannot be typified as core coordination, as was the case with *John remembers Fred signing the contract*, for in (10) *can* does not express John’s ability to remember, but rather his ability to remember signing the contract; in other words, the deontic modal has scope over the whole construction, which excludes core coordination (cf. condition (c) on p. 4 above).

In fact, within the RRG framework, (10) can only be a case of core subordination, since it exhibits the features that are characteristic of embedding in RRG (cf. FVV, 1984: 247–248; Van Valin, 1993b: 108), namely, the ability to passivize and to become the focus of a cleft sentence:

- (10a) Signing the contract was remembered by John.
- (10b) What John remembered was signing the contract.
- (10c) It was signing the contract that John remembered.

It appears, then, that the perception interpretation of *remember* can be mapped, at the syntactic level, onto both core subordination, as illustrated in (10), and core coordination, as in the V NP *-ing* pattern. Since Van Valin and Wilkins are silent in this respect, we are bound to assume that such double mapping would be solved by

adding to the lexical entry of *remember* an ad hoc explanation alluding to facts of control; in other words, the juncture-nexus type for the perception interpretation of *remember* would ultimately be determined by the nature of the controller: if this is the higher subject, then core subordination and a *V-ing* construction will follow; otherwise, perception will be instantiated by core coordination, as in *John remembers Fred signing the contract*, where the object itself, *Fred*, is the controller.

Yet this stipulation still leaves certain facts unexplained. Consider in this respect the following data:

(11) \*John saw signing the contract.

(12) \*John heard singing a song.

The point is that the *V-ing* construction is available with *remember*, but it is not possible with immediate perception verbs like *see*, *hear*, and so on. One wonders, then, whether *remember (NP) V-ing* can be appropriately classed together with them, as is suggested by Van Valin and Wilkins (cf. p. 5 above), and, further, whether anything is gained by doing so. Its behaviour is more like that of *imagine* and related verbs, which are capable of taking the type of clausal complements seen in both (5) and (10) above (i.e. *V NP -ing* and *V -ing*):<sup>4</sup>

(13) Would you ever have imagined him becoming a politician?

(14) She imagined walking into the office and telling everyone what she thought of them.

In other words, as regards the hierarchy of semantic relations recognised by RRG (cf. Fig. 1 above), it seems to me that neither the label 'direct perception' nor its definition ("unmediated apprehension of some act, event, or situation through the senses"; cf. Van Valin and Wilkins, 1993: 515) are delicate enough to accommodate the perception interpretations of predicates so diverse as *see*, *hear*, *imagine*, *contemplate* or *remember*. It would be better, I think, to speak simply of 'perception', and then go on to distinguish two subtypes within the class (as is done, for instance, by Noonan, 1985: 129–130), one encoding sensory perception (*see*, *hear*, *feel*, etc.), and the other including verbs of mental perception like *imagine* or *remember* itself.

<sup>4</sup> Van Valin and Wilkins do not seem to be aware that, historically, the *-ing* forms in sequences like

(a) I saw him signing the contract

(b) I remember (him) signing the contract

go back to two different sources, respectively a present participle and a 'gerund' or abstract verbal noun of action (cf. for detailed discussion Fanego, 1996a,b). Even if one is only making a synchronic claim about *remember* (as is indeed the case with Van Valin and Wilkins), there can be little doubt that the different origins of such clauses account for some of the contrasts mentioned in the body of this paper, as also for the possibility of replacing *him* by the possessive *his* in (b) above (cf. *I remember his signing the contract*), but not in (a) (cf. \**I saw his signing the contract*), a possibility which, oddly enough, is not discussed by Van Valin and Wilkins.

#### 4. Van Valin and Wilkins' analysis of *remember* in the light of the Interclausal Relations Hierarchy

Having once pointed out in the previous section a number of inaccuracies in the decomposition and analysis of *remember*, I would now like to turn to a far more serious flaw in Van Valin and Wilkins' proposal, namely, the apparent mismatch between their predictions for *remember* and the requirements of the Interclausal Relations Hierarchy.

As is well known, and as already discussed in section 2 of this paper, it is a basic tenet of RRG that, cross-linguistically, there exist nine possible juncture-nexus types, that is, nine possible types of syntactic relations holding between clauses. Through the application of various syntactic tests (cf. FVV, 1984: 244ff.; also pp. 4–5, this paper), these nine relations are shown to be ranked from strongest to weakest when seen in terms of the tightness of the syntactic bond involved in the linkage, as shown in Fig. 1 above.

Alongside these nine juncture-nexus types, RRG recognizes a cline of semantic relations between the units in the juncture; and, as in the former case, these semantic relations are ranked hierarchically in terms of "the degree of semantic cohesion" (Van Valin, 1993b: 111) existing between the propositions linked in the complex structure. We can thus speak of 'closer' as opposed to 'looser' semantic relations (cf. Fig. 1). It must be noted, however, that, unlike the syntactic criteria adduced to justify the ranking of the syntactic relations, neither Foley and Van Valin (1984: 268–272) nor later statements of the theory make it clear how exactly one is to measure something so elusive as 'degree of semantic cohesion'.

The sum of both ranks of relations (syntactic and semantic) constitutes the so-called Interclausal Relations Hierarchy, the primary principle governing which is apparently very simple, namely "the closer the semantic relation between two propositions is, the stronger the syntactic link joining them" (Van Valin, 1993b: 111). Basically, what this predicts is that, in any given language, a semantic relation of, for instance, causality, will be instantiated by a syntactic linkage that is tighter than the syntactic linkage corresponding to any other semantic relation which is lower on the hierarchy (jussive, cognition, etc.).

With this in mind, let us now consider again the semantic and syntactic relations that were found to obtain for the various interpretations of *remember*. From what was said in both sections 2 and 3 above, it appears that the actual analysis of this verb can be summarised as follows:

- (15) John remembered to bring his checkbook.  
[psych-action; core cosubordination]
- (16) John remembers signing the contract.  
[mental perception; core subordination]
- (17) John remembers him signing the contract.  
[mental perception; core coordination]
- (18) John remembers that two plus two equal four.  
[cognition; core/clausal subordination]



Psych-action, as illustrated in (15), is the closest of the semantic relations expressed by *remember*; in this case, the theory makes the correct predictions, since this particular relation is mapped onto a type of syntactic linkage (core cosubordination) that is tighter, i.e. closer to the top of the hierarchy, than any of the syntactic relations seen in (16)–(18).

The problem, however, lies in the mapping of the perception readings; despite the fact that the Interclausal Relations Hierarchy postulates perception to be a closer semantic relation than cognition, this latter is coded by a type of linkage (core/clausal subordination) which is:

- (a) higher on the hierarchy than the linkage illustrated in (17);
- (b) of the same level as that illustrated in (16).

This second aspect, that is, the fact that both cognition and perception are expressed by core subordination, can be explained away. As is clear from Foley and Van Valin (1984: 271–272), when a semantic relation has more than one syntactic manifestation, as is the case with mental perception in English, the requirement is, simply, that one of those syntactic realizations be higher on the hierarchy than the syntactic realizations of looser semantic relations; but the remaining syntactic realizations may well be of an equal level. The chief weakness of Van Valin and Wilkins' analysis is, therefore, that mentioned under (a) above, namely, the mapping of perception onto core coordination (cf. example (17)), this being, as already noted, a weaker syntactic relation than the one identified for the cognition reading of *remember*.<sup>5</sup> This is, in my view, a serious anomaly, and one for which, moreover, Van Valin and Wilkins provide no explanation. We are thus bound to conclude that either their analysis of *remember* is wrong, or, more plausibly, that the interaction between the semantic and syntactic relations operates in a way other than that envisaged by the (supposedly) cross-linguistic principle referred to above of 'the closer the semantic relation, the tighter the juncture'.

Earlier in this paper I mentioned one comparatively minor improvement which pertained to the conception of 'Direct Perception' within the Semantic Relations Hierarchy. The anomaly pointed out in this section is, however, of a more fundamental nature and seems to indicate that the Interclausal Relations Hierarchy as a whole is in need of revision. More specifically, I would suggest that the problem may lie, primarily, with the ranking of the semantic relations; for, as already noted

<sup>5</sup> In connection with core/clausal subordination, as illustrated in (18), it must be acknowledged that in Foley and Van Valin (1984: 251–256) it is argued, though not very clearly, that we have a core subordinate juncture only in (a) below (that is, when the clause is a subject), but not in (b), where the clause is an object:

- (a) That she had promised to come is remembered by John.
- (b) John remembers that she had promised to come.

In the second sentence, the assumption of Foley and Van Valin seems to be that the juncture is, instead, clausal subordination, which is, indeed, a weaker syntactic relation than core coordination, the manifestation of perception, as in (17) above. But even with this qualification, the core subordinate juncture in example (a) remains problematic in terms of the predictions of the Interclausal Relations Hierarchy.

(cf. p. 8), the arrangement of these from closer to looser does not seem to be clearly justified by RRG on independent grounds, unlike the cline of syntactic relations, which goes from stronger to weaker on the basis of verifiable syntactic criteria.

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