

THE SEMANTIC AND SYNTACTIC FRAME STRUCTURE OF THE  
TRANSITIVE/INTRANSITIVE VERB CATEGORY IN  
ARABIC AND ENGLISH  
GENERATIVE SEMANTIC APPROACH

A Paper Presented at  
THE FIFTH INTERNATIONAL LINGUISTIC INSTITUTE  
Damascus University  
30 June - 26 July, 1980  
Damascus, Syria

by  
Mazen Al-Waer  
Georgetown University  
Washington, D. C.

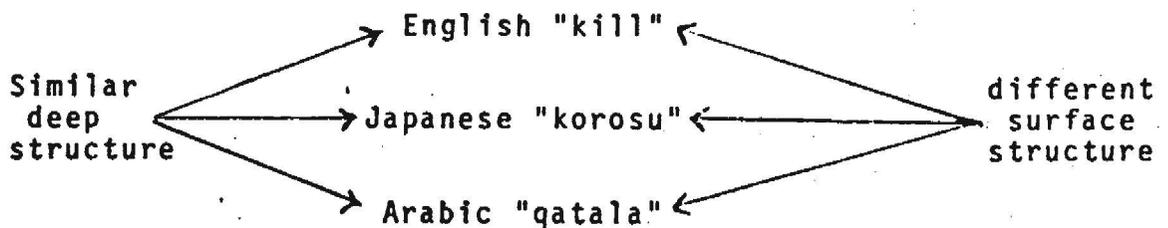
## ABSTRACT

### 1. Introduction

Transitivity represents an area of semantic and syntactic dimension that benefits greatly from Generative Semantics. Because Arabic and English treat these two types of actions differently, students learning either language are faced with the task of dealing with new and different categories which represent similar semantic structure.

The purpose of this paper is to examine and compare these categories concentrating on transitive/intransitive verb category and its surface and underlying deep representations.

### 2. Procedures of the Analysis

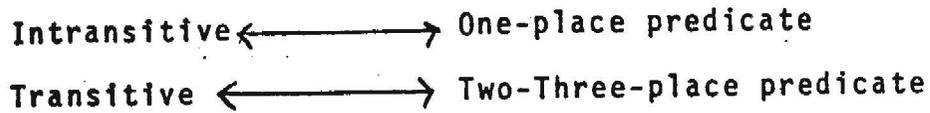


(1) Traditional definition ←————→ Syntactic

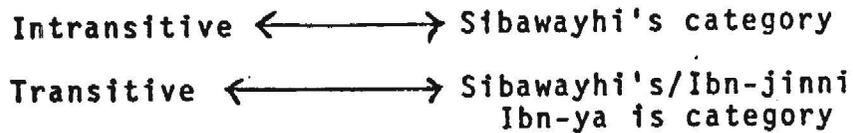
(2) New definition ←————→ Semantic

3. Transitive and Intransitive Verb Category

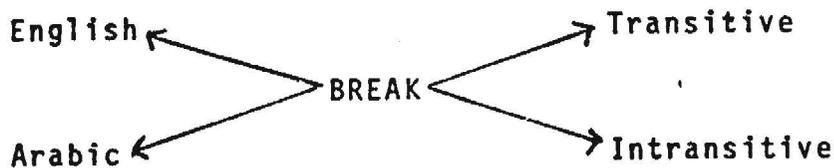
(1) American perspective



(2) Arabic perspective



4. Transitive/Intransitive Verb Category



(1) Not (BREAK (John, windows MANY (windows) )) (tv.)

LAM (YAKSIR (Zayd, nawāfiḫ IDData (nawāfiḫ) )) (tv.)

(2) Not (BREAK (window)) (iv)

LAM (TANKASIR (nāfiḫa)) (iv)

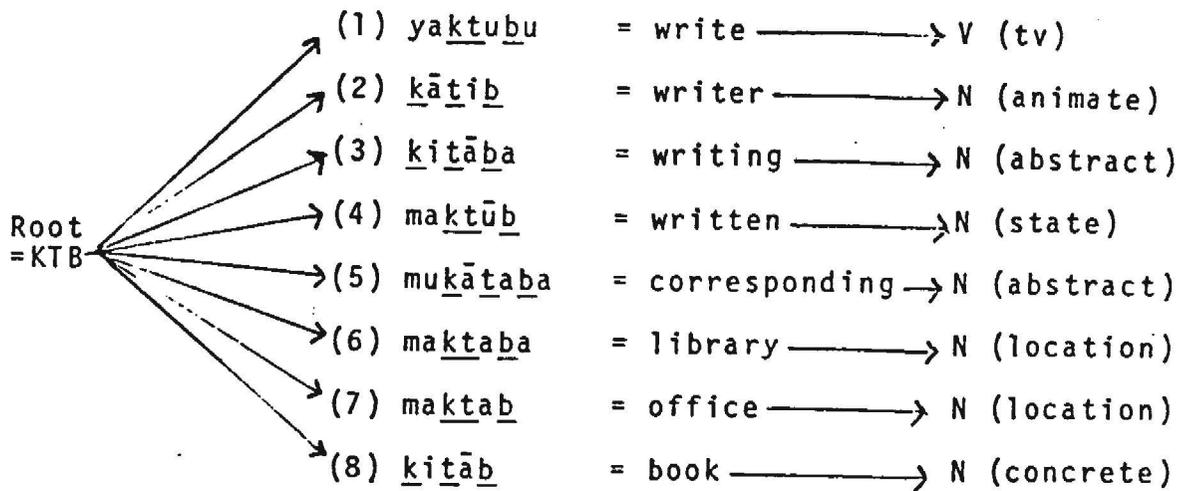
Lexical decomposition

BE-state	BECOME-process	CAUSE-action
$E \longleftrightarrow A$	$E \longleftrightarrow A$	$E \longleftrightarrow A$
∅ munsafiq	slam ʔinsafaqa	slam safaqa
black ʔaswad	blacken ʔiswadda	blacken ∅
thick θaxīna	thicken θaxunat	thicken ʔaθxana

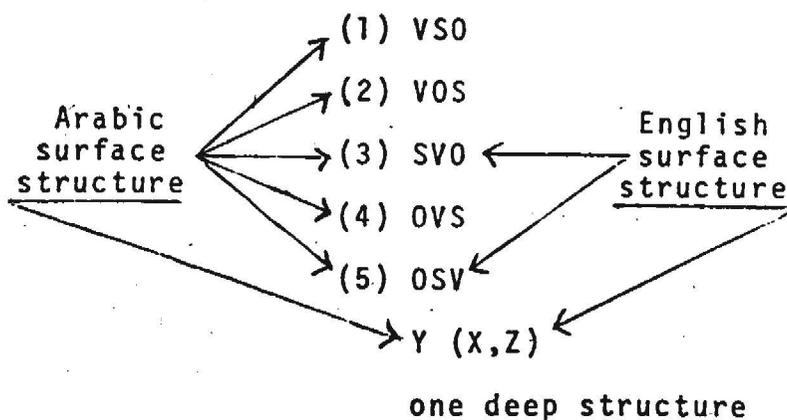
(1) Cook's semantic categorization



(2) Arabic semantic categorization



5. Comparative Point of View



6. Conclusion

(1) Generative semantics is a useful and adequate analysis in handling the universal semantic domain in languages.

(2) Recent statement was made by Chomsky concerning Generative Semantics.

## Introduction

Generative Semantics is a new approach in linguistic analysis. In this area, the linguist relates the surface structures of sentences to their underlying semantic representations. More important for our purpose, however, Generative Semantics can help foreign language teachers and textbook writers to be familiar with the similar semantic and deep structures of two languages, even though their syntactic and surface structures vary.

Fries (1945:9) wrote: "The most effective materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully, compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner."<sup>1</sup> By examining two languages, in terms of their semantic and deep structures in one hand, and in terms of their syntactic and surface structures in the other hand, teachers can minimize, for example, the interference between the two languages that often accompanies second language learning. Furthermore, they can help the students to avoid some of the pitfalls and errors that accompany surface to surface and deep to deep translation.

---

<sup>1</sup>Charles Fries, Teaching and Learning as a Foreign Language (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1945), p. 9.

Transitivity represents an area of semantic and syntactic dimension that benefits greatly from Generative Semantic approach. While the concept that transitive actions are somehow distinct from intransitive actions is a common phenomenon in languages, their treatment in the language structure varies. Because Arabic and English treat these two types of actions differently, students learning either language are faced with the task of dealing with new concepts and categories as well as with new forms and structures.

The purpose of this paper is to examine and compare these categories of Arabic and English transitivity concentrating on transitive/intransitive verb and its surface and underlying deep representation.

## 2. Procedures of the Analysis

Transitivity is as complex a subject as language itself. This kind of linguistic construction differs from language to language in its syntactic structures, but it is, somehow, similar in its logical representations in all languages. The semanticist Fillmore (1968:1-88) discussed how the English verb "kill" and the Japanese verb "korosu = kill" have different surface structures because of their different transitive functions.<sup>1</sup> The Japanese verb requires an animate subject, while the English verb allows sentences such as:

(1) The fire killed the boy.

(2) A falling stone killed the boy.

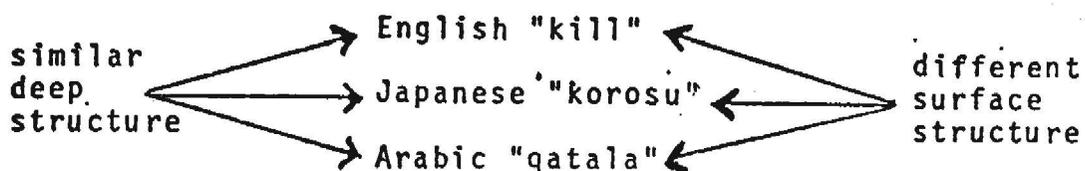
In turn, the Arabic verb "qatata = kill" is syntactically different from both, the Japanese and English verbs. Ibn Yaṣīṣ, the medieval Arab grammarian, classified the verb "qatala = kill" under the "al-ṣilāḥ verb category" which involves the use of body limbs. This category is different from the "non-al-ṣilāḥ verb category" which does not involve the use of body limbs.<sup>2</sup> However, while each of

---

<sup>1</sup> Fillmore, "The Case for Case," in Bach and Harms (New York, 1968), pp. 1-88.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn yaṣīṣ, Ṣarḥ al-mufaṣṣal (maṭbaʿat dar ṣihyā? al-kutub al-ṣarabiyya), p. 14.

these verbs has its own syntactic and categorized peculiarities, they are all very similar in their underlying representations as indicated below.



The traditional definition of transitivity is based entirely on syntax with little regard for semantic and logical structure explanation. Syntactically speaking, a transitive verb is one that takes an object, and an intransitive verb is a verb that does not take an object. According to traditional Arab grammarians, a transitive verb, or rather a transitive action is an action that is transmitted from an actor to something acted upon. Although Arab and American grammarians classify the transitivity into two categories namely, transitive verb category and intransitive verb category, some verbs can exist either with or without an object and can thus be classified in the transitive/intransitive category.

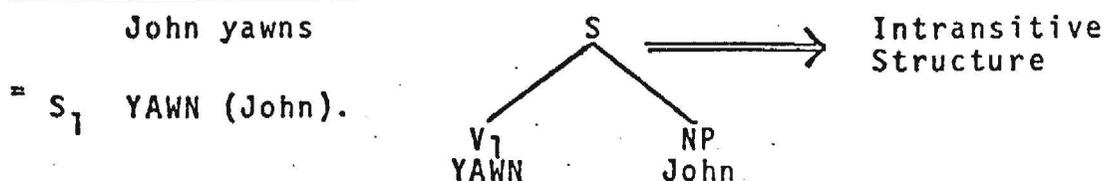
### 3. Transitive and Intransitive Verb Categories in English and Arabic

#### A. American Perspective

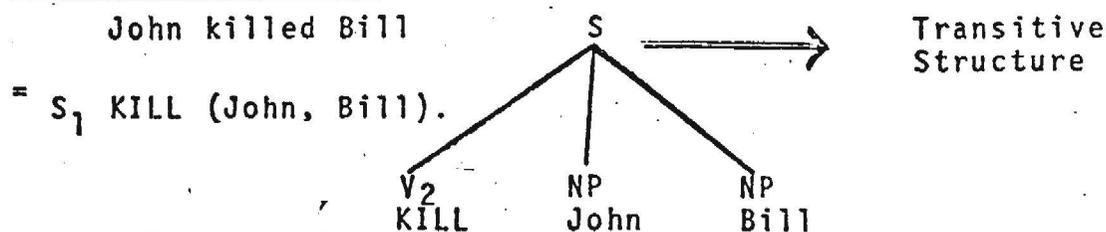
In English, verbs are recognized and classified not only according to their forms or inflections, but also according to their sequence requirements. Built into the

English verb is a set of expectations about what must accompany it. For example, when a listener hears the utterance "He opened . . . .," he expects more semantic arguments to follow the predicate "OPEN." The predicate alone is not a logical structure validity in this linguistic level. According to Professor Walter A. Cook (1980:6), English verb sequences can be classified according to one-place predicate, two-place predicate, and three-place predicate as in the following examples.<sup>1</sup>

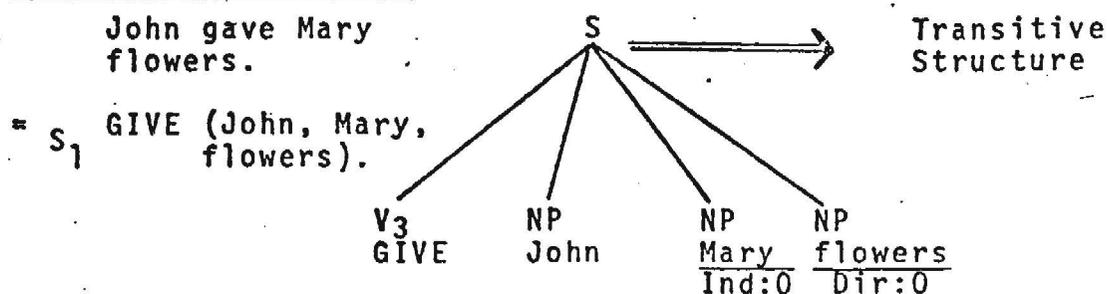
(1) One-place predicate



(2) Two-place predicate



(3) Three-place predicate



Transitive verbs are those verbs which can fall in two or three-place predicate classification. One object

<sup>1</sup>Walter A. Cook, "Introduction to Generative Semantics," 1980, Georgetown University, p. 6.

often co-occurs with an indirect object or an object complement. The direct object of the predicate consists of a noun phrase, nominal structure or pronoun that indicates who or what receives the action expressed by the predicate. Though the direct object usually comes after the predicate on occasion it will precede the predicate for special emphasis or stylistic effect especially in the surface structure, for example:

(1) The heavy jobs Jack always leaves for me.

= S<sub>1</sub> LEAVE (Jack, me, jobs).

In addition, the direct object might occur in an initial position when a transformation-question rule is applied:

(1) She dropped the book.

= S<sub>1</sub> DROP (she, book).

By T-Question Rule (2) What did she drop?

However, when a sentence also contains an indirect object, it is possible that the direct object will be separated from the predicate, for example:

(1) Jack wrote Susan a letter.

= S<sub>1</sub> WRITE (Jack, Susan, letter).

(2) John gave Mary flowers.

= S<sub>1</sub> GIVE (John, Mary, flowers).

A noun or pronoun is considered an indirect object only

if it is used without a preposition. If the noun follows a preposition, it is no longer an indirect object but the object of a preposition. For example:

(1) Jack built his son a house.

= Jack built a house for his son.

Action verbs such as "give, buy, send, bring, lend, write" often take an indirect object as well as a direct object. Similarly, verbs such as "elect, appoint, name, make, choose, consider" are also followed by more than just a direct object. Instead of an indirect object, the direct object is followed by an object complement, for example:

(1) The U.S.A. elected Mr. Carter president.

Transitive verbs, however, have a variety of forms; they can consist of a single noun, or they can also be open compounds. Direct objects also appear in a variety of forms, consisting of a noun, noun phrase, infinitive, gerund or clause. The transitive verb complementation involves both direct and indirect objects, as we have seen before. The indirect object frequently precedes the direct object and stands as recipient or beneficiary. In the sentence,

(1) John bought Mary a gift.

= S<sub>1</sub> BUY (John, Mary, gift)

the indirect object (Mary) acts as the patient. Sometimes, the indirect object can be non-participating in a given sentence. Therefore, we can omit it and still have a syntactic and semantic validity like this sentence:

(1) Mary bought a gift.

=  $S_1$  BUY (Mary, gift).

And as mentioned earlier, the indirect object can be replaced by a prepositional phrase like this example:

(1) He bought his friend a gift.

= He bought a gift for his friend.

As shown in this example, if the indirect object is part of a prepositional phrase, it follows the direct object. Some transitive verbs that have both a direct and indirect object allow only transformation-passive rule. For example:

(1) They accused him of murder.

ACCUSE (They, him, murder).

By T-Passive Rule (2) He was accused of murder.

Some transitive verbs allow two transformation-passive rules. In one, the indirect object becomes the syntactic subject, and in the other, the direct object takes the role of syntactic subject, for example:

(1) They gave John the money.

(2) They gave money to John.

(3) John was given the money.

(4) Money was given to John.

Finally, some transitive verbs do not yield to the transformation-passive rule. For example:

- (1) John met Mary (to go acquainted).
- (2) \* \* Mary was met by John.
- (3) The teacher married Mary.
- (4) \* \* Mary was married by the teacher.

Just as an indirect object can co-occur with the direct object in the same transitive sentence, so can the object complement. The object complement is realized by either a noun phrase, an adjective phrase, or an infinitive. As the following examples illustrate, the object complement follows the direct object:

- (1) They made the little girl upset.
- (2) They elected him president.
- (3) She wanted him to buy it.

In such sentences, there is only one possible transformation passive rule. The direct object can become the syntactic subject, but the object complement cannot:

- (1) He was elected president.
- (2) \* \* President was he elected.

The Intransitive verbs in English fall into the category of those verbs which do not require any object. They do not take any of the sequences involving a direct

object, indirect object or object complement. The intransitive verb alone is sufficient. Like transitive verbs, intransitive verbs can occur as a single verb, or as a compound verb: i.e., they can consist of a verb plus an adjunct.

#### B. Arabic Perspective

The well-known medieval Arab grammarian, Sibawayhi discussed the categories of the Arabic "word." According to him, an Arabic word falls into one of three classifications: (1) nouns, (2) verbs, (3) particles.<sup>1</sup> The discussion of transitivity, however, will focus on Sibawayhi's second word category: verbs.

Transitive verbs in Arabic are those verbs which take one direct object or two objects or sometimes three objects without the need of any special particle or preposition as we have seen in English. Sibawayhi mentioned the type of transitive verb which takes an object and he gave this example:

(1)  $\overset{V}{\text{daraba}} \quad \overset{S}{\text{ʃabdullāhi}} \quad \overset{O}{\text{Zaydan}}$   
 abduallahit Zayd.  
 =  $S_1$  DARABA (ʃabdulla, Zayd).

He explained that "ʃabdullāhi" is nominative subject and "Zaydan" is accusative object. It is possible, however,

---

<sup>1</sup>Sibawayhi, al-Kitāb "maṭbaʿt būlāq, p. 2 (n.d.).

for the object in this sentence to precede the subject:

(2)  $\overset{V}{\text{ḍaraba}}$   $\overset{O}{\text{Zaydan}}$   $\overset{S}{\text{ḥabdullāhi}}$

ḥabdulla hit Zayd.

=  $S_1$  ḌARABA (ḥabdulla, Zayd).

The sentence will be understood because of the case ending or what is called "al-ʔiḥrāb = declension." According to Sibawayhi, although it is possible for the object to precede the subject of a transitive verb, Arab grammarians prefer the subject to precede the object.

One grammarian, Ibn yaḥīṣ, classified transitive verbs into two types:

(1) al-ḥilāj verb category, which involves the use of body limbs: "ḍarab = hit, qatala = kill."

(2) non-al-ḥilāj verb category, which does not involve the use of body limbs: "ʔākara = mention, faḥima = understood."<sup>1</sup>

Sibawayhi wrote that when a verb takes two objects, neither object may be omitted; the two objects must go together because of the semantic relationship between them. The objects of these types of transitive verbs can be divided into groups according to their syntactic relationship to each other:

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibn-yaḥīṣ, Ṣarḥ al-mufaṣṣal (maṭbaʔat dār ʔiḥyāʔ al-kutub al-ḥarabiyya), p. 14 (n.d.).

- (1) Objects which can form nominal sentences by themselves, for example:

(1)  $\overset{xV}{\text{Qanantu}}$   $\overset{O_1}{\text{ssaḥāba}}$   $\overset{O_2}{\text{mumṭiran}}$

"I thought that the cloud was raining."

=  $S_1$   $\overset{x}{\text{QANAN}}$  (tu, saḥābah, mumṭiran).

Object<sub>1</sub> and object<sub>2</sub> alone can form a valid Arabic sentence, for example:

$S$   $PA$   
(2) al-saḥābu mumṭirun

"The cloud is raining."

=  $S_1$  BE MUMTIR (saḥāb).

- (2) Objects which cannot form nominal sentences by themselves, for example:

$V$   $S$   $O_1$   $O_2$   
(1)  $\text{ʔaṣṭaytu}$   $\text{ssāʔila}$   $\text{mālan}$

"I gave the beggar money."

= ʔAṢTAY (tu, ssāʔil, māl)

In the case of the second group, the objects cannot form correct nominal sentences. We cannot make for example, a sentence from number (1), because it will be an invalid Arabic sentence:

(2) \* \* ʔassāʔilu mālan.

"beggar . . . money"

There is another type of transitive verb in Arabic which takes three objects. As Sibawayhi mentioned, none of the three objects may be omitted, because of the semantic

relationships among them; for example:

(1) V S O<sub>1</sub> O<sub>2</sub> O<sub>3</sub>  
 ?a?lāma llāhu Zaydan ?amran xayran minka

"May God give Zayd and ?amr an awareness that is better than yours."

= S<sub>1</sub> ?A?LAMA (llāhu, Zaydan, amran, xayran)  
 AND

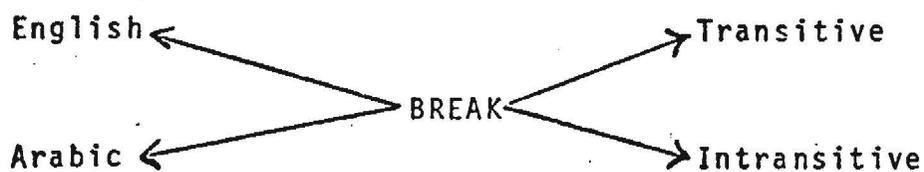
Intransitive verbs in Arabic are those verbs which cannot take an object directly. However, in spite of this syntactic definition, some intransitive verbs have essentially transitive meanings. In order for these intransitive verbs to be transitive in deep structure, they need a helping particle "preposition" in their surface structure, for example:

(1) "ʔiḏā ʔasrafa lʔahmaqu fii mālihi  
 ʔintahā ʔamruhu ʔilal faqrī waqaʔada fii baytihi."  
 "If a fool squanders his money, he will end up penniless, and will stay at home."

Each of these words "māl = money" "faqr = poverty" and "bayt = house" is the semantic object of the verb which precedes it. As far as surface structure is concerned, these verbs are considered intransitive verbs, because their objects are considered objects of preposition.

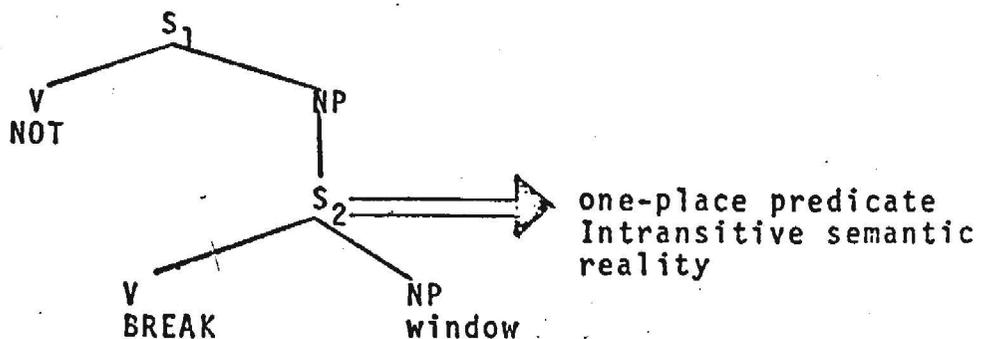
4. The Transitive/Intransitive Verb Category in Arabic and English

Although we categorize transitive and intransitive verbs according to their sequence requirements, the distinctions between these two types of verbs are not always clear cut in both English and Arabic. Some verbs can exist either with or without an object, and thus can be classified as intransitive and transitive. For example, the English verb "BREAK" can have two semantic realities in its structure.



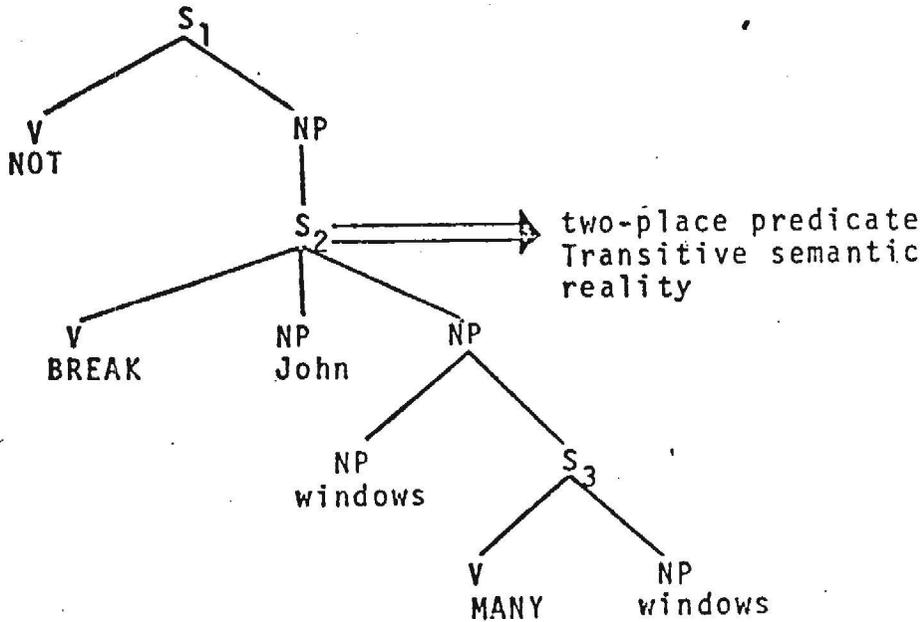
(1) The window did not break. (iv)

= S<sub>1</sub> Not(S<sub>2</sub> BREAK (window) S<sub>2</sub>) S<sub>1</sub>



(2) John did not break many windows. (tv)

=  $S_1$  NOT ( $S_2$  BREAK (John, windows,  $\langle$  MANY (windows)  $\rangle$ ) )  $S_3$   $S_2$   $S_1$



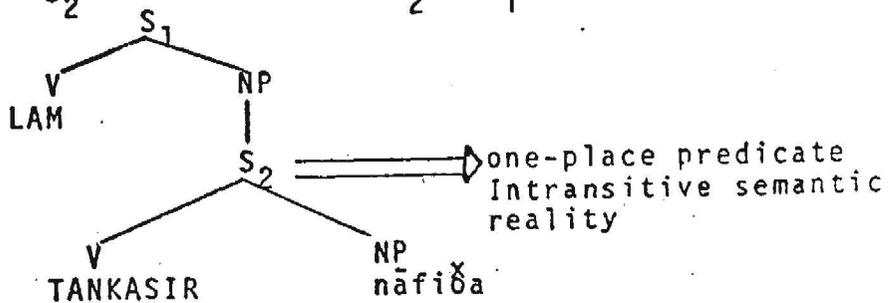
The Arabic verb "YANKASIR = Break" can have two semantic realities like its counterpart in English.



(1) Lam tankasir al-nāfiḫa. (iv)

"The window did not break."

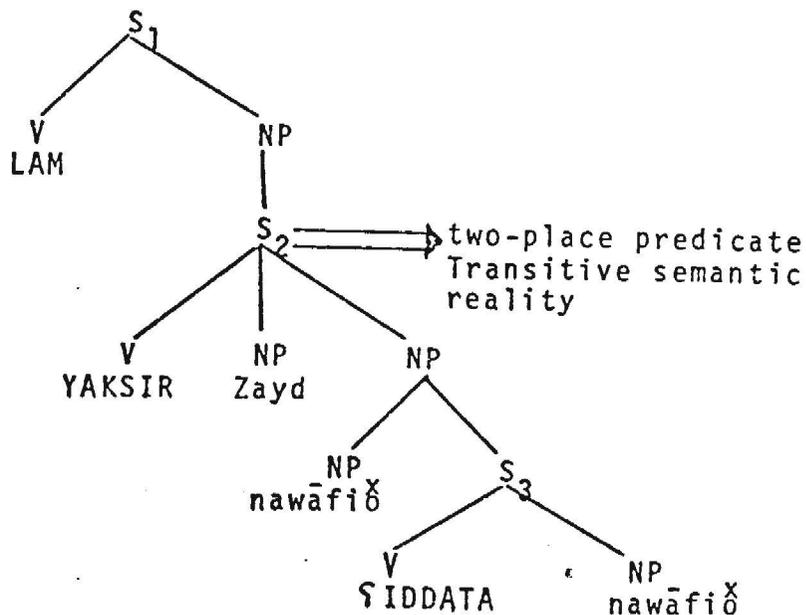
=  $S_1$  LAM ( $S_2$  TANKASIR (nāfiḫa  $S_2$ ) )  $S_1$ .



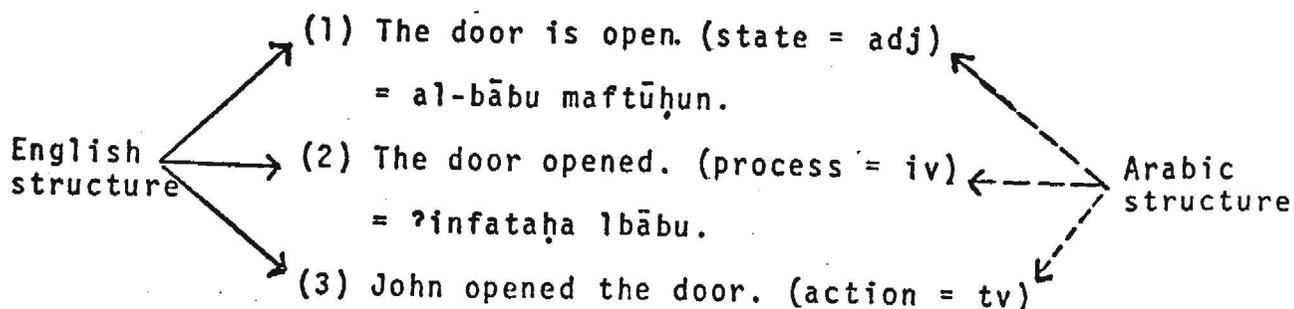
(2) Lam yaksir Zaydun ʕiddata nawāfiḫ. (tv)

"Zayd did not break many windows."

=  $S_1$  LAM ( $S_2$  YAKSIR (Zaydun, nawāfiḫ,  $S_3$  < IDDATA (nawāfiḫ) >))  
 $S_3$   $S_2$   $S_1$



Another aspect of transitive/intransitive classification arises in the structural framework of the English verb "OPEN" and its counterpart "YAFTAḤ = open" in Arabic. We can illustrate the identical semantic and syntactic structures of these two verbs in such sentences:



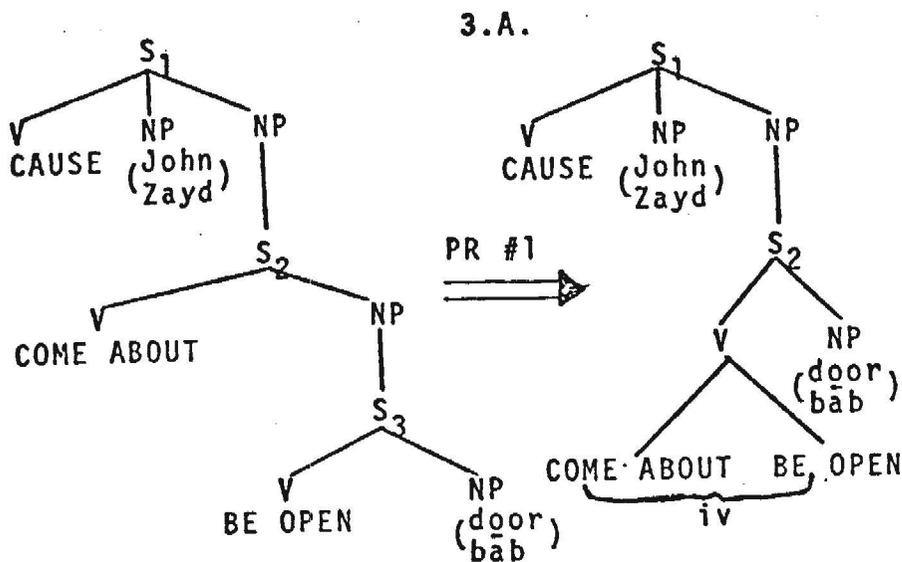
As a matter of fact, Arab linguists did not explain this kind of linguistic construction, except for their explanation of transitive and intransitive points of view, and their classification of nominal and verbal sentence perspectives.

American linguists, however, analyze this kind of verb explicitly in a number of ways. According to Fillmore (1968:1-88), verbs like "OPEN" are basically transitive. If the agent is not mentioned the patient becomes the syntactic subject. We assume that "someone or something opened the door" even though we do not choose to specify the agent, when we say "the door opened." According to MacDonald (1978), the verbs in these situations are basically intransitive. In the sentence "John opened the door," we really mean that "John caused the door to open." There is a causative relationship between the subject and the object. But given a set of related state, process, and action forms from the same morphological root--a set of relationships which are analyzed in an adequate and scientific way by Professor Walter A. Cook (1970-1978:50-82 and 1980:13-24), the lexical decomposition hypothesis suggests that the state verb is the basic form. The process form is composed of state + inchoative, represented by the atomic predicate, COME ABOUT, and the action verb is composed of the process verb + causative, represented by the atomic predicate CAUSE.

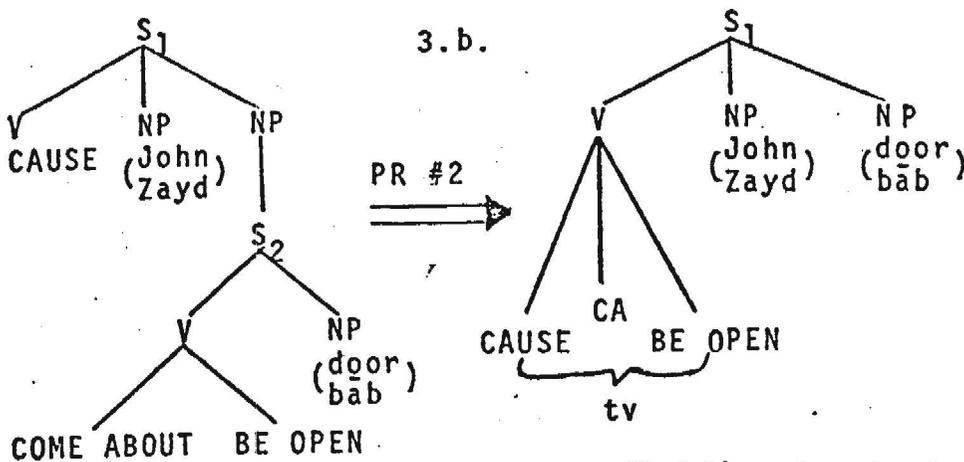


(3) John opened the door. = fataḥa Zaydun al-bāba.

= S<sub>1</sub> CAUSE (John Zayd S<sub>2</sub> COME ABOUT (BE OPEN (door) bāb S<sub>3</sub> S<sub>2</sub> S<sub>1</sub>)) → action verb



ONS<sub>3</sub>: \_\_\_\_\_  
 ONS<sub>2</sub>: PR #1  
 ONS<sub>1</sub>: 1) PR #2  
 2) lexical insertio  
 V - NP inversion



According to MacCawley (1976), the atomic predicate "CAUSE" is a two-place transitive predicate that relates an event to an event, or an agent to an event. "CAUSE" never directly dominates a state, but has within its scope a process or an event. An agent does not cause a state, he

\*V-NP inversion cannot be applied to the verbal construction in Arabic, i.e., VSO.

causes a state to come into being. The atomic predicate, COME ABOUT is defined as -PTP, where P = a proposition, -P = the negative of that proposition, and T is a two-place operator meaning "and next" (Cook, 1980). For example, "The door opened = ?infataḥa lbābu" is translated as "The door was not open = kāna lbābu gayra maftūḥin" "AND NEXT" "The door was open = kāna lbābu maftūḥan." "COME ABOUT" is a one-place intransitive predicate which always has a state within its scope. In the factoring of inchoative and causative from lexical predicates, the first step is to determine the existence of related state, process, and action forms (Cook, 1980:13-23).

Actually, the state form is the BE form, the process form is the BECOME form, and the action form is the MAKE BECOME form. Lexical and semantic gaps will be found in English as well as in Arabic. The English predicate "BLUE" have neither inchoative nor causative forms. The Arabic predicate ?AZRAQ = "BLUE" in turn, lacks the Causative form, but it has the inchoative one. The lexicon of Arabic and English, however, provides sets of lexically related verb forms derived from a single root. These forms are semantically related by the semantic derivation; inchoative, resultative, causative, decausative. Lexical gaps of some adjectives, and transitive/intransitive forms in the paradigm are filled by paraphrases or by new roots. Semantic gaps cannot be filled by paraphrases.

The chart below is a list of related verbs in English and Arabic, which can show some of these lexical and semantic gaps in transitive/intransitive function.

BE-State (adjective)		BECOME-Process (intransitive)		CAUSE-Action (transitive)	
English	Arabic	English	Arabic	English	Arabic
1) OPEN	←→ maftūh	OPEN	←→ ?infataha	OPEN	←→ fataha
2) BROKEN	←→ maksūr	BREAK	←→ ?inkasara	Break	←→ kasara
3) move	←→ mutaharrik	move	←→ tataharrak	move	←→ harraka
4) thick	←→ θaxīna	thicken	←→ θaxuna	thicken	←→ ?aəxana
5) deaf	←→ ?aşamm	∅	←→ ∅	deafened	←→ ?asamma
6) dead	←→ mayyit	die	←→ māta	kill	←→ amāta
7) healthy	←→ muşāfā	∅	←→ tafāfa	∅	←→ şāfā
8) washed	←→ ∅	wash	←→ ?inşasala	wash	←→ şasala
9) rolled	←→ mutadahrij	roll	←→ tadahraja	roll	←→ dahrja
0) ∅	←→ munşafiq	slam	←→ ?inşafaqa	slam	←→ şafaqa
1) protruded	←→ mundaliş	protrude	←→ dalaşa	protruded	←→ dalaşa
2) ignited	←→ mudā?a	ignited	←→ ?adā?at	ignited	←→ ?adā?a
3) lowered	←→ hābit	∅	←→ habata	lowered	←→ habata
4) eclipsed	←→ kasīfa	eclipsed	←→ kasafat	eclipsed	←→ kasafa
5) thin	←→ nahīf	thin	←→ nahufa	thin	←→ ?anḥafa
6) led	←→ munsariha	∅	←→ ?insarahat	led	←→ saraha
7) crowded	←→ muzdahim	crowd	←→ ?izdahama	crowd	←→ zahama
8) ∅	←→ ∅	sneeze	←→ şatasa	∅	←→ şattasa
9) read	←→ maqrū?	read	←→ ∅	read	←→ qara?a
10) blue	←→ ?azraq	∅	←→ ?izraqqat	∅	←→ ∅
11) red	←→ ?ahmar	red	←→ ?ihmarra	red	←→ ḥammara
12) white	←→ ?abyad	whiten	←→ ?ibyadda	whiten	←→ bayyada
13) black	←→ ?aswad	blacken	←→ ?iswadda	blacken	←→ sawwada
14) green	←→ ?axdar	green	←→ ?ixdarra	green	←→ xaddara
15) yellow	←→ ?asfar	yellow	←→ ?isfarra	yellow	←→ şaffara
16) brown	←→ bunniyy	brown	←→ ∅	brown	←→ ∅
17) gray	←→ ramādiyy	gray	←→ ∅	gray	←→ ∅
18) raised	←→ murtafişa	∅	←→ ?irtafaşat	raise	←→ rafaşa

As we have seen in the chart, lexical decomposition is an important linguistic process because it shows different underlying semantic realities which have different logical structures in both Arabic and English. Thus the transitive/intransitive category can be perceived as state, process and action verb within the same domain. These verbs are often morphologically and semantically related to each other. The scope of four semantic derivational units can describe these relations.

- (1) Inchoative = changes a state to a process (iv), it adds the abstract predicate "COME ABOUT" to the structure, for example:

thick + inc = thicken (iv) → process

ḡaxīn + inc = ḡaxuna (iv) → process

- (2) Resultative = changes a process to a state, it subtracts the abstract predicate "COME ABOUT" from the structure, for example:

break (iv) + res = broken (adj) → state

?inkasara (iv) + res = maksūr (adj) → state

- (3) Causative = changes a process to a state; it adds the abstract predicate "CAUSE" to the structure, for example:

open (iv) + caus = open (tv) → action

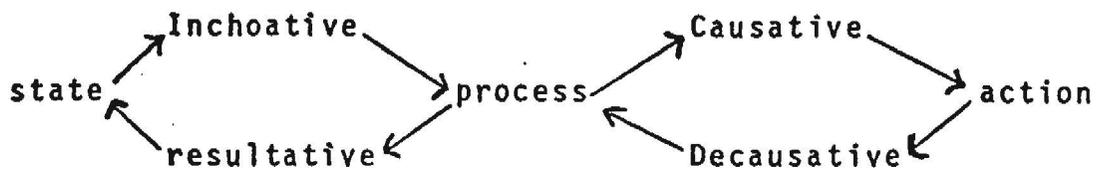
?infataha (iv) + caus = fataha (tv) → action

- (4) Decausative = changes an action to a process; it subtracts the predicate CAUSE from the structure, for example:

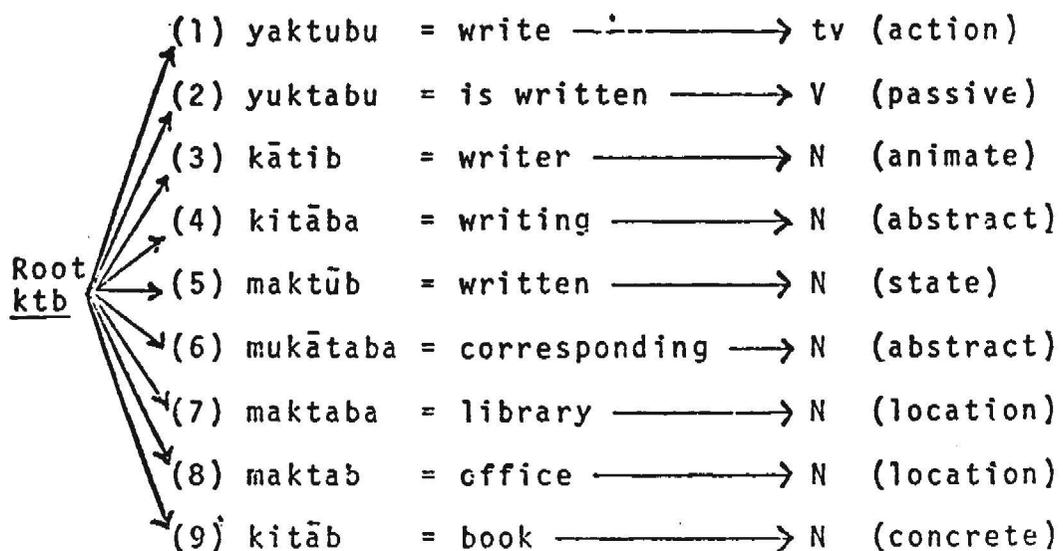
cut (tv) + decaus = cut (iv) → process

qaṭaṣa (tv) + decaus = ?inqaṭaṣa (iv) → process

The four derivations are summarized according to Chafe's model in Walter A. Cook (1970-1978:50-82, Case Grammar) as follows:



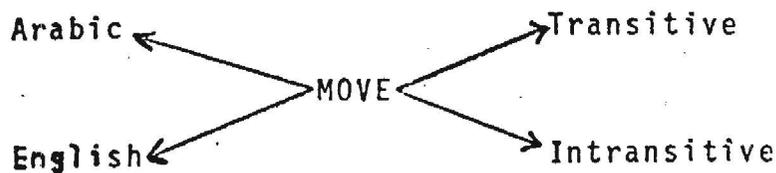
The process of lexical decomposition imposes a question such as, which form is basic and which form derived? According to Arab grammarians, neither the state nor the process and the action forms are basic, but rather it is the Root which is the basic form in linguistic reality from which all the state, process and action forms are derived. So, if we have the Root "ktb = write" for example, we can derive all linguistic forms possible from this root:



According to American linguists (like Walter A. Cook, 1980:13-24), the state is universally considered to be the basic form no matter what the morphology and syntax of the particular language indicates. The direction of derivation is shown in Cook (1980:19).

state + Inchoative = process + causative = action

The verb "MOVE" is another example of basic-derived process, in these English and Arabic sentences which have two semantic realities.



(1) The tree moved. = taharrakati <sup>YY</sup>SSajaratu.

S<sub>1</sub> MOVE ( <sup>v</sup>tree / <sub>v</sub>sajara ).

(2) John moved the tree. = Harraka Zaydun al-<sup>Y</sup>sajara.

S<sub>1</sub> MOVE ( John, <sup>v</sup>tree / Zayd, <sub>v</sub>sajara ).

There is a particular verb in English called "reciprocal verb." A reciprocal verb is a verb which, when used without an object, has a semantically plural subject. In this situation the subjects are also semantically the direct object:

(1) John and Mary met.

= John met Mary, and Mary met John.

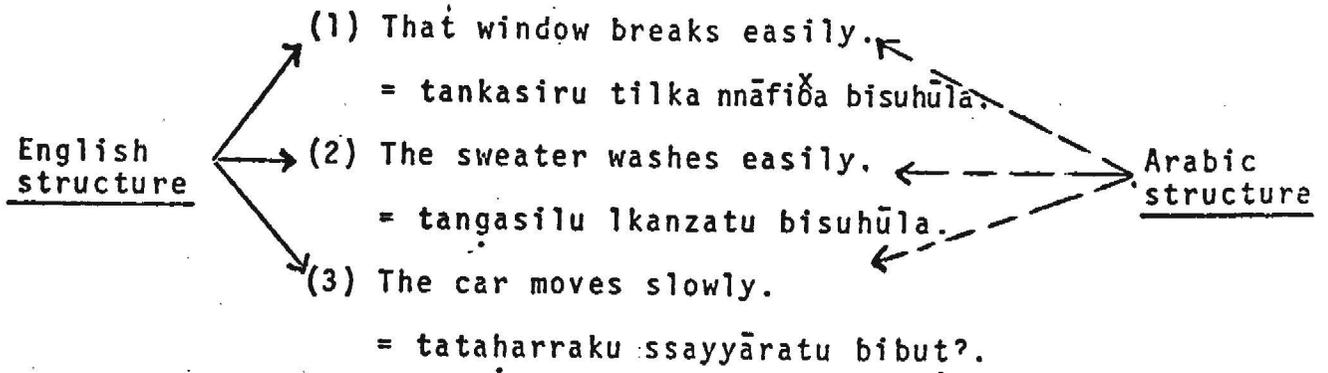
Some intransitive verbs are used transitively with what is morphologically called a cognate object. For example:

(1) He died the death of a hero.

(2) He slept the sleep of righteous.

Arab linguists, however, dealt with this kind of construction from an intransitive perspective considering the English objects "death, sleep" to be verbal nouns which can be formalized for emphatic and stylistic purposes.

In a similar situation, some transitive verbs can be used intransitively to express an idea of passivity like what we have seen before. This kind of linguistic construction is valid in English and Arabic (restrictively in Arabic). For example:



The syntactic subject in these sentences does not actually perform the action of the verbs; they are not the semantic agents.

There are some verbs which are restricted to English. They convey a different meaning as intransitive verbs than they do when they function as transitive verbs, for example:

- (1) He sang a good song. —————→ tv (action)
- (2) He sings. —————→ iv (process)
- (3) He wrote a long term paper. —————→ tv (action)
- (4) He writes. —————→ iv (process)

In the case where the verb functions intransitively, the verbs imply that he earns his living by writing or singing. A similar situation arises with other verbs, for example, the question "Do you drink?" is different from the question "Do you drink coffee?" These two questions have different semantic and underlying representations. Unlike the verbs "sing" and "write" the intransitive verb "drink" does not refer to someone's profession; it refers specifically to the drinking of alcoholic beverages. In all of these examples, the meaning of the intransitive verb is very specific. Because of the absence of the object the listener automatically understands the reference to a specific type of action.

There are many verbs in Arabic which have the peculiarity that they can exist with or without an object. Thus such verbs have two logical representations which function within two semantic domains. The grammarian

Al-suyuti listed some examples of verbs that can be both transitive and intransitive.<sup>1</sup>

(1)  $\overset{V}{n}a\overset{S}{z}a\overset{O}{f}t\overset{U}{u} \text{ } l\overset{O}{b}i\overset{O}{?}r\overset{a}{a} \longrightarrow tv \text{ (action)}$

= I exhausted the well.

(2)  $\overset{V}{n}a\overset{S}{z}a\overset{S}{f}a\overset{S}{t}i \text{ } l\overset{S}{b}i\overset{S}{?}r\overset{u}{u} \longrightarrow iv \text{ (process)}$

= \*The well exhausted.

(1)  $\overset{V}{S}a\overset{S}{r}a\overset{O}{h}t\overset{U}{u} \text{ } l\overset{O}{m}\overset{O}{a}\overset{O}{s}\overset{O}{i}y\overset{O}{a}t\overset{a}{a} \longrightarrow tv \text{ (action)}$

= I led the cattle.

(2)  $\overset{V}{S}a\overset{S}{r}u\overset{S}{h}a\overset{S}{t} \text{ } a\overset{S}{l}\text{-}\overset{S}{m}\overset{S}{a}\overset{S}{s}\overset{S}{i}y\overset{S}{a}t\overset{S}{u} \longrightarrow iv \text{ (process)}$

= The cattle moved.

(1)  $\overset{V}{d}a\overset{S}{l}\overset{O}{a}\overset{O}{f}a \text{ } Z\overset{O}{a}y\overset{O}{d}u\overset{O}{n} \text{ } l\overset{O}{i}\overset{O}{s}\overset{O}{a}\overset{O}{n}\overset{O}{a}h\overset{U}{u} \longrightarrow tv \text{ (action)}$

= Zayd protruded his tongue.

(2)  $\overset{V}{d}a\overset{S}{l}\overset{S}{a}\overset{S}{f}a \text{ } l\overset{S}{i}\overset{S}{s}\overset{S}{a}\overset{S}{n}\overset{S}{u}h\overset{U}{u} \longrightarrow iv \text{ (process)}$

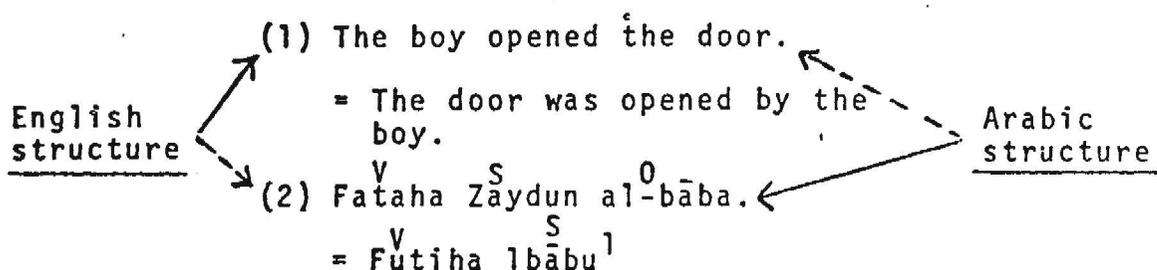
= His tongue protruded.

Transitive/intransitive verbs, then are expressed through a number of different surface structures, furthermore, we find that a variety of syntactic relationships exists between these two types of verbs. Transitive/intransitive verb in Arabic is also expressed through various syntactic structures, some of which are similar to English, some of which are different. While the surface structure of English and Arabic may differ in their treatment of transitivity, their deep and underlying structures are essentially similar.

<sup>1</sup>Al-Suyūti, *al-muzhir fii ṣulūm al-luḡa*, matbaʿat dar ʿihyāʾ al-kutub al-ṣarabiyya, pp. 236-38.

## 5. Comparative Point of View

In comparing English with Arabic, we notice how transitivity in each language differs in the surface structure. Arabic for example, restricts passive sentences derived from transitive verbs from expressing the agent while English does not:



However, because the surface syntax of a given sentence is connected with its semantic content, neither is profitably discussed without reference to the other. Each language uses syntactic arrangements to express the essential underlying semantic features. Therefore, Generative Semantics, that all languages draw upon a universal set of semantic primes consisting of various layers of structure, the propositional layer, the modality layer, and the performative layer, is very useful and adequate in such discussion of transitivity in English and Arabic. The chart below, based

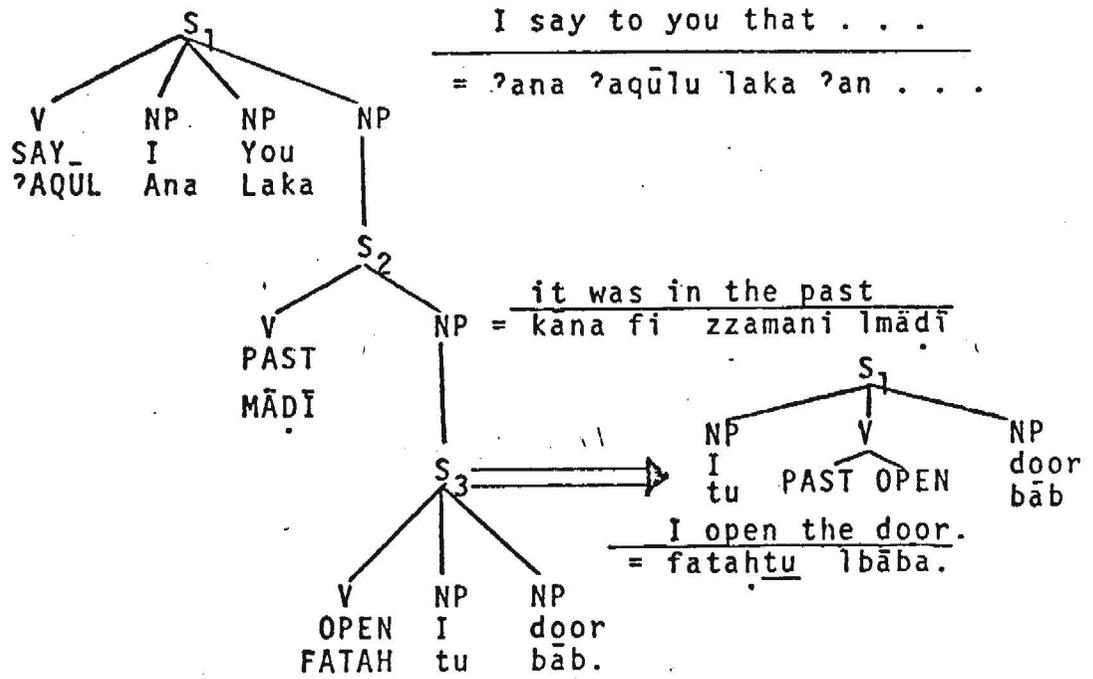
<sup>1</sup>In English, there is ambiguity in differentiating state-adjective constructions and passive constructions: e.g., "The window is broken." Arabic, however, has two separate syntactic constructions in this respect: e.g., (1) Al-nāfiḍatu maftūhatun (state-adj), (2) Futihat al-nāfiḍatu (passive).

on Cook's model (1980:9) illustrates how Arabic and English have different syntactic arrangement for the same semantic representation. The three layers of logical structure may be illustrated by setting up the logical structure for any simple declarative sentence: (1) is given in the tree structure diagram;(2):

(1) I opened the door.  
 = S<sub>1</sub> OPEN (I, door).

I opened the door.  
 ↓ ↓ ↓  
fatahtu al-bāba.

(1) fatahtu al-bāba.  
 = S<sub>1</sub> FATAHA (tu, bāb).



- (1) ONS<sub>2</sub>: Tense incorporation.
- (2) ONS<sub>1</sub>: Performative deletion

---

- (3) V-NP Inversion

The propositional layer contains the basic meaning of the sentence. The proposition is a set of relationships between a central predicate and a series of nounphrases required by that predicate. The modality layer is the next higher layer of logical structure. It contains the tense, aspects, modal verbs and mood of the sentence. It is dominated only by the performative layer. The performative layer is the highest layer of logical structure. This layer contains an abstract verb of SAYING, ASKING, or ORDERING, which can distinguish statements from questions and commands.

The specific ordering rules of English and Arabic will place either the objective or the agent arguments category in the subject slot, but the same deep structure tree diagram holds for both English and Arabic sentence. As far as the surface structure is concerned, unlike English, the subject argument in Arabic comes after the verb in a verbal sentence and at the beginning of the sentence, if it is a nominal sentence. In the case of the verbal sentence, if the agent is a pronoun it remains separated from the verb, as in the sentence:

V      Pr      O  
(1) Fataḥa howa al-bāb.

= He opened the door.

but the agent can also be indicated by the subject marker which is attached to the verb, for example:

V S O  
(1) Fatahtu lbāba.

= I opened the door.

The subject marker "tu" indicates that the agent is (I).

In addition to having different surface realizations of some of the argument categories, Arabic and English also have different surface ordering rules for elements of the sentence. Notice that we can put the object at the beginning of the Arabic sentence:

O  
(1) Al-bāba fatahtuhu.

= I opened the door.

Ibn jinnī, an Arab linguist, gives the following example to illustrate that this word order is a legitimate one in Arabic.<sup>1</sup>

O V S  
(1) Zaydan daraba ṣamrun.

= ṣamr hit Zayd.

According to Sibawayhi, however, the ideal word order of the transitive verbs consists of the verb followed by the subject which, in turn, is followed by the object.<sup>2</sup>

V S O  
(2) daraba amrun Zaydan.

= amr hit Zayd.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibn Jinnī, al-xasāʾiṣ, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-ʿiḥyāʾ li-tṭibāʿa wannaṣir), p. 382.

<sup>2</sup> Sibawayhi, al-kitāb (maṭbaʿt būlāq), vol. 1, p. 14.

The Arabic syntactic surface structure also differs from English, in that the object of an Arabic sentence can be omitted, yet the meaning of the sentence will still be understood from the context. Ibn Jinnī gave this example from the Qurān.<sup>1</sup>

(1) waʔūtīta min kulli šayʔ.

= You have been given from everything.

instead of

(2) waʔūtīta minhu šayʔan.

= You have been given from it something.

The construction of the transitive Arabic sentence is very flexible. Its elements can often be added, deleted, or rearranged; for example, a transitive sentence might have a reference to the agent in addition to the subject marker:

(1) Kasar    tu            ana            lkaʔsa.  
           ↓            ↓                ↓                ↓  
           V    (S)marker (S)pronoun    O.

= I broke the glass.

Furthermore, Arabic syntax allows a variety in the word order of a transitive sentence that does not alter the sentence's message:

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibn Jinnī, supra, p. 372.

1. OVS.     <sup>O</sup> Al-nāfiḫata     <sup>V</sup> kasarahā     <sup>S</sup> Zaydan.  
           = Zayd broke the window.
2. VOS.     <sup>V</sup> Kasara al-nāfiḫata     <sup>S</sup> Zaydun.  
           = Zayd broke the window.
3. SVO.     <sup>S</sup> Zaydun     <sup>V</sup> kasarā     <sup>O</sup> al-nāfiḫata  
           = Zayd broke the window.
4. VSO.     <sup>V</sup> Kasara     <sup>S</sup> Zaydun     <sup>O</sup> al-nāfiḫata.  
           Zayd broke the window.
- One logical structure
- 

As mentioned earlier, the last example "VSO" represents what Arab grammarians considered the most common and preferred word order in transitive/intransitive category. Variation from this order result in changes in style, not in the deep structures; these stylistic variations can be used for different rhetorical purposes.

English syntax, on the other hand, is not nearly as flexible. Each object element fills a specific slot in a fairly specific order with the result that there is very little variation from the standard English word order, SVO. The argument category, object, does show some flexibility on occasion. For example, the English speaker has a choice between the sentences:

- (1) I bought him a book.
- (2) I bought a book for him.

His choice of one over the other does not reflect a difference in the deep structure. But he can never say:

- (1) \* \* bought I him a book.
- (2) \* \* him I bought a book.
- (3) \* \* a book, bought I him.

Variant constructions do occur in special instances. According to MacDonald (1978), the construction OSV in a sentence like:

- (1) Him I like.

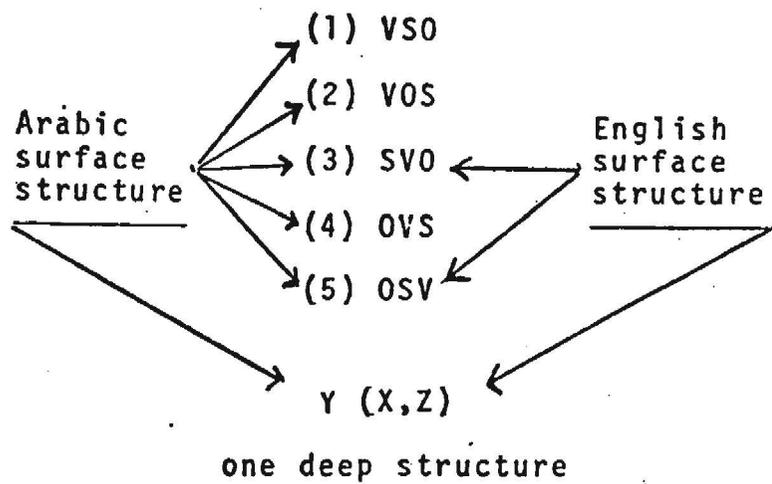
can be attributed either a New York dialect or an old fashioned style of speaking or writing.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, the object will appear initially in a sentence for special emphasis:

- (1) The heavy jobs Jack always leaves for me.

While this type of variation in English syntax is indeed possible, it occurs in special circumstances and carries a particular stylistic effect. The chart below indicates that even Arabic and English have varieties of surface structures, yet the deep structure is the same:

---

<sup>1</sup>Rose Macdonald, various lectures in the course: "Morphology and Syntax," Spring 1978.



## 6. Conclusion

The biggest differences between transitivity in Arabic and English are their surface structures. Semantically, however, they are very similar. Both Arabic and English use similar predicates and a series of arguments to express the concept of a transitivity. Furthermore, both languages have areas of overlap and ambiguity both in lexical and semantic domains. This comparison of transitivity in Arabic and English is by no means a complete or exhaustive study. It does, however, give an indication of the elements that need to be examined in both areas of syntax and semantics.

When students try to learn a foreign language from surface to surface translation, the second language seems to be almost "illogical" and haphazard. By beginning with the deep structures, Arabic and English have in common, educators can approach the differing surface structures more systematically. Students can be made to realize that all languages choose their categories from a universal set of primes. Some languages happen to emphasize certain aspects or categories and other languages happen to emphasize other primes. Teachers can take

maximum advantage of the common elements between the two languages. Patterns that emerge in the foreign language can be compared to the patterns of the native language. A clear systematic analysis from a generative semantic perspective helps to avoid potential problems of interference. Thus, Generative Semantics is a useful and an adequate analysis in handling the universal semantic domain in all languages. I really doubt the statement which has been recently made by Chomsky when he said "Generative Semantics has essentially disappeared, as far as I can see. I do not think that anyone works in generative semantics anymore. At least I cannot think of anyone who does. About ten years ago there was a position that you could call "generative semantics," but at the moment I would not know even what the term describes. I think that the position that existed, say ten years ago, was interesting but wrong for the reasons that I discussed in a paper on it in a book called Studies on Semantics in Generative Grammar."<sup>1</sup> I think neither Generative grammar, nor Generative Semantics has the complete, adequate and general domain which can lead to a full linguistic revolution, even though such models have contributed a great deal to language. I do not think, along with Chomsky, that linguistics has yet undergone its real scientific

<sup>1</sup>Mazin Al-waer, "On Some Controversial Issues of Transformational Generative Grammar Theory," an interview with the American linguist Professor Noam Chomsky, MIT, 1980, p. 18.

revolution. It seems that linguistics is approaching it. Linguists (structuralists, syntacticians and semanticists) are really doing groundwork from which a major scientific revolution may sooner or later take place.

## REFERENCES

- Al-waer, Mazin. "On Some Controversial Issues of Transformational Generative Grammar Theory." An interview with the American linguist Professor Noam Chomsky, MIT, 1980.
- Al-Suyūti. al-muzhir fii sulūm al-luġa. maṭbaʿt dār 'iḥyā' al-kutub al-ṣarabiyya. N.D.
- Cook, Walter A. "Introduction to Generative Semantics." Georgetown University, 1980.
- . "Case Grammar: Development of the Matrix Model (1970-1978)." Georgetown University Press, 1973.
- Fillmore, Charles. "The Case for Case" in Bach and Harms. New York, 1968.
- Fries, Charles. Teaching and Learning as a Foreign Language. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1945.
- Ibn-Jinni. al-xasāʿs, Vol. 2. Beirut: Dār al-'iḥyā' Liṭṭibāʿa waḥnasir.
- Ibn yaqīn. Sarḥ al-mufasssal. maṭbaʿt dār 'iḥyā' al-kutub al-ṣarabiyya. N.d.
- Sibawayhi. al-Kitāb. maṭba t būlāq. N.d.