

# What Gets Wetter When It Dries? Some Comments on Transitivity in English Verbs

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Students of English as a second language sometimes find difficulty in understanding and using those verb and sentence features which we characteristically label 'transitive' and 'intransitive.' The explanation below may help the teachers of such students by providing an approach-level explanation which can be used as a basis for developing and presenting these matters in the classroom.

## A Generative Grammar Explanation

Generative grammarians often cite as evidence of the existence of both surface structure and underlying structure the following pair of sentences:

1. *He is easy to please.*
2. *He is eager to please.*

The two sentences, it is said, show the same surface structure but must reflect different underlying structures, one evidence of which is that the two sentences paraphrase differently. *He* is the semantic object of *please* in the first sentence but the semantic subject of *please* in the second, i.e.:

1. *It is easy to please HIM.*
- but 2. *HE is eager to please somebody.*

## An Alternate Explanation

While the bilevel metaphor is often a useful explanatory device, another valid explanation of the structure of these two sentences is possible. It is the aim of this essay to explore that explanation by

focusing upon the transitive/intransitive distinction, a dichotomous terminological tradition which tends to force us into a two-part classification of English verbs.

According to a dictionary many of us use (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate), transitive is defined as "characterized by having or containing a direct object, and can be applied to types of verbs as well." That dictionary uses, for example, *vi* after verbs like *go* and *vt* after verbs like *hit*. In this paper, my stipulative initial definitions of the two terms echo these:

1. **Transitive verb:** One which language data show to be capable of functioning as the main verb in a transitive sentence.
2. **Intransitive verb:** One which language data show to be capable of functioning as the main verb in a intransitive sentence.

In the present analysis, transitive and intransitive functions in verbs inhere in the verbs themselves, and are as much a part of them as their "verbness".

But when one attempts to classify verbs as potentially either transitive or intransitive, another category elbows itself into view. "What gets wetter when it dries?" asks my title, citing an ancient riddle. The answer, of course, is a towel. The riddle is whimsical, but illustrates a serious grammatical point. The difficulty of the riddle (if it is difficult) derives from the nature of the verb *dry*. What allows the

riddle to exist at all is that dry is versatile enough to have a potential for either—in the riddle, both—transitive or intransitive function. The three definitions below thus replace my initial two:

1. **Transitive-only verb:** a verb which the language data show to be capable of appearing as the main verb in only a transitive sentence, e.g.: *enjoy, get, reach*.
2. **Intransitive-only verb:** a verb which the language data show to be capable of appearing as the main verb in only an intransitive sentence, e.g.: *are, come, die, go, happen, wait*.
3. **Transitive/intransitive verb:** a verb which the language data show to be capable of functioning as the main verb in transitive OR intransitive sentences, e.g.: *ask, awaken, believe, call, change, know, learn, pass, PLEASE*, and, of course *DRY*.

One can thus suggest that transitivity in an English verb is a built-in component of its meaning. This places discussions of the putative differences between pairs like *lie/lay* and *sit/set* in the lexical realm.

At this point let's return to:

1. *He is easy to please.*  
(It is easy to please him)
2. *He is eager to please.*  
(He is eager to please somebody)

We can now construct a hypothesis which explains the two sentences, but which does not need a surface/underlying structure premise: Only a verb belonging to the (transitive/intransitive) lexical category can appear in both sentences. The two sentences do not, from this perspective, reflect two different underlying

sentences but derive directly from the differing transitivity feature of the verb.

The examples belonging to this latter category are: *ask, awaken, believe, call, change, know, learn, pass, please, dry*.

The sentences they result in are...

*He is easy to ask.*

*He is eager to ask.*

*He is easy to awaken.*

*He is eager to awaken.*

*He is easy to believe.*

*He is eager to believe.*

*He is easy to call.*

*He is eager to call.*

*He is easy to change.*

*He is eager to change.*

*He is easy to know.*

*He is eager to know.*

*He is easy to learn. (?)*

*He is eager to learn.*

*He is easy to pass.*

*He is eager to pass.*

*He is easy to PLEASE.*

*He is eager to PLEASE.*

*He is easy to dry. (?)*

*He is eager to dry (?)*

#### A Pair of Cautionary Comments

Each of these is an acceptable sentence, but two cautionary addenda must be put forth. First, some of these represent situations which might only rarely occur—that is, they exhibit lexical incompatibility. *He is eager to learn* is possible, but *He is easy to learn* is less likely, since one does not often encounter situations where it is necessary to "learn" people; we resort to the intransitivity option and "learn *about* people." If,

however, one substitutes *they*, which can refer to people or things, there is no problem: They (the boys) are eager to learn; They (the lessons) are easy to learn.

Again, *He is easy to dry* and *He is eager to dry* might puzzle some. But one can without much difficulty set up a situation in which a baby is troublesome to bathe, but is *easy to dry*, and a boy who, late for an appointment, rushes from the ocean *eager to dry*. In fact, another situation could be set up about a spouse who refuses to wash dishes but, in compensation, is *eager to dry*. The contrast between the latter two is interesting because a hypothetical object of the tardy boy is to dry *himself*, whereas the presumed object of the spouse is to dry *dishes*. These examples, however, involve supplied semantic, or paraphrase objects, and not grammatical ones, and are slightly apart from the main issue here.

The second comment: Some dialects, idiolects, and styles might categorize particular verbs differently. For example, I have included *enjoy* as a verb that is only to be found in transitive sentences, yet the exhortation "Enjoy!" is sometimes heard. This merely transfers one item to a different category—perhaps limited to a

particular dialect, idiolect, or style. It does not, however, disturb the categories themselves. *He is easy to enjoy* is unlikely to be challenged; *He is eager to enjoy* would be acceptable only to those whose speech allows that verb to appear in intransitive sentences.

Similarly, one who, in a non-standard way, uses the verb *learn* to mean "teach" might well accept *He is easy to learn* (*larn?*) as well as *He is eager to learn*.

The rest is easy to complete, and I am eager to do so. Transitive-only verbs are restricted to use with *easy*: *He is easy to enjoy, to get, to reach*. Intransitive-only verbs cannot be so used: \**He is easy to come, die, wait* do not occur. But these intransitive-only verbs are quite possible in *He is eager to come, die, wait*, though *eager to die* or *to wait* quite possibly reflect rather unusual circumstances!

#### About the Author

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