On *going productive* in syntax (and elsewhere)

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Structures consisting of a copula/linking verb go and an adjective phrase functioning as a resultative subject complement (e.g. *go purple*) have not merited much space either in comprehensive descriptive works on English grammar or in some more theoretical studies cast within certain grammatical frameworks. A closer look at this construction reveals, however, that it raises a number of questions for syntactic theories. Most conspicuously, it invites us to consider the problem of the productivity of syntactic phenomena. It is argued here that a prototype-based, construction-centred account rather than a rule-and-principle-orientated one can answer these questions in a more satisfying manner.

1. Aim of the paper

The main concern of the present paper – the notion of productivity in syntax and in linguistics in general – will be discussed here against the background of English structures consisting of a copulalinking verb *go* and an adjective or noun phrase functioning as a resultative subject complement, illustrated in (1–3).

(1) Caldwell felt his face go wooden;...

(2) ... a subject which in itself made him go purple,...

(3) Deifendorf had gone fat and his hairline receded, but it was he.

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2. *Go*-construction: traditional accounts

The construction type in question has not merited much space in comprehensive descriptive works on English grammar, and is usually contrasted with some other constructions based on the same verb, such those as illustrated in (4–5):

(4) ... certain abrasive exchanges between the old man and his heir had not gone unnoticed and undiscussed.

(5) ... and they were all illiterate and went barefoot.

Provided the structures in (1–3) are considered to be worth a comment at all, there are, generally speaking, three types of statements:

a. observations about their low frequency;

b. remarks concerning the restricted range of adjectives and nouns that appear in this construction, implying occasionally that these can be simply listed;

c. semantic characterizations to the effect that, unlike *come, go* has an inherently negative meaning in this construction and combines with adjectives and nouns that are negative themselves.

Let us now examine these statements in some detail.

It is not surprising, in view of the admittedly marginal character of this construction type, that there are statements about their low frequency. But it is worth pointing out that some particular combinations have found their way into most monolingual and bilingual general-purpose dictionaries, either as separate entries or as recurrent examples:

(6) a. go: crazy, bankrupt, grey;

b. bananas, berserk, broke, public, etc. [Collins COBUILD]

(7) a. go: grey, sour, blind, mad, independent, white;

b. broke, berserk, native, public, etc. [LDCoCE]

(8) a. go: bananas, berserk, broke, dry, flat, haywire, native, phut;

b. bananas, berserk, native, public, etc. [OALDoCE]

Since we know very well that lexicographers are primarily interested in items and structures that occur with relatively higher token frequency and not in nonce formations, it appears that certain individual adjective (and noun) phrases collocate with go more frequently than some others do. This state of affairs is hardly consonant with the above attempt to sweep all particular combinations indiscriminately under a convenient rug of infrequency, the whole phenomenon thus sinking to grammatical oblivion.

Statements a. and b. seem at first blush to reinforce each other. What appears very frequently is built according to rules that easily lend themselves to formulation; what is rare, seems to be irregular, i.e. does not follow any general rules, and is therefore best accounted for by means of lists. Statements of type b. are attempts at defining the type by enumerating individual tokens. Such an extensive definition of a construction type in terms of a large number of tokens of low individual frequency is bound to be less successful than one cast in terms of limited number of items of higher frequency. One extreme example will suffice to bear this out. Hardly anyone will attempt to define the passive construction type by listing the predicates that partake of it. One of the reasons is that the frequency of the type is inversely pro-portional to the frequency of individual tokens. It appears now that we must drop either statement a. or statement b.

If we are ready to modify the former and want to adhere to the latter statement, we might consequently expect a finite list of predicatively used adjectives and nouns that partake of this construction. It is, however, surprising that there should as yet be no such definitive list in the relevant literature, not even in corpus-based works. Consider the tentative list of adjectives and nouns found in this construction type in (9):

(9) alpine, ashen, awry, bad, bald, balmy, bananas, bankrupt, batty, berserk, bitter, blank, blind, bloodless, blue, bright, broke, bust, chapter 11, circles, cold, cold turkey, condo, critical, crazy, daft, dark, dead, deaf, deep, defensive, defiant, dewy, digital, dizzy, dimply, dotty, drug-free, dry, empty, entrepreneurial, erect, elusive, fat, flat, flinty, furry, girlish, gray, green, grim, hoarse, hurt, incandescent, insane, invalid, loose, low, mad, mainstream, missing, motionless, mottled, multinational, national, native, nuclear, numb, nuts, nutty, pale, peaceful, pink, populist, potty, prim, public, puce, punk, punky, purple, rancid, red, rigid, rotten, round, sentimental, silent, silly, sleepy, soft, sour, stiff, straggly, stubborn, stupid, tense, thick, thin, Tory, transparent, underground, unstable, upscale, wary, watery, weak, white, wide, wild, wooden, wrong, yellow, etc.

As for their idiom-like treatment, there is no denying that some of the adjectives or nouns entering this construction either do not appear frequently outside the

construction (e.g. *be/go/send berserk*), or have a figurative meaning found elsewhere too (e.g. *go bananas, go nuts,* etc.).

Now that we have seen that the number of items entering this construction type is too large for them to be simply listed, it is only natural that there are attempts at semantic and pragmatic characterization of the set of adjectives and nouns in question. If it turned out that they formed a relatively compact and semantically closed set, we would be able to save at least the weakest of the three statements.

Contrary to statements of type c., there are predicative expressions in (9) that do not fit the above mentioned semantic-pragmatic generalization. It is difficult to claim that all of these are inherently negative in meaning. Consider the following counterexamples to the above generalization that contain items denoting neutral or even positive states/qualities:

(10) Painful as it was, the patient went drug-free and has never regretted it.

(11) When it went public in June by selling 20 percent of its stock,...

(12) Go entrepreneurial.

Claims that they denote some more temporary, reversible or gradual changes of state seem to be equally suspect in the light of the above examples.

The next step towards partial saving this semantic-pragmatic generalization is to admit that a unitary treatment is not possible and to attempt to establish several finer semantic-pragmatic groups of predicative expressions. We may thus detect that a number of them refer to colours (e.g. *white, gray, yellow,* etc.), while some others denote certain bodily deficiencies (e.g. *blind, bald, fat*), financial difficulties (*bankrupt, broke, bust*), mental disorders (*mad, crazy, insane,* etc.). It will be seen that there is some overlap between these groups. It is possible to establish some further more or less numerous and semantically compact groups, but it seems that their mutual relationships are difficult to order in hierarchical terms. Another ad-hoc group may comprise *public, national* and *multinational,* because they clearly have something to do with business, as do predicative expressions like *bankrupt, chapter 11,* etc. However, it is obvious that they differ with respect to the inherent (un)desirability of the states they refer to. While they seem to belong to the same word field, they seem to occupy positions of very different rank. Finally, note that there are many predicative expressions that do not lend themselves to any such grouping.

In conclusion, we might say that a coherent semantic-pragmatic characterization that would enable us to draw a sharp line separating the set of elligible adjectives and nouns from all the other predicative expressions that do not collocate with go seems impossible at present.

3. Productivity of syntactic phenomena: a rule- or construction-based approach?

Challenging the three initial statements is rewarding not only from a descriptive point of view. A closer look at this construction reveals that it raises a number of questions for syntactic theories that can hardly be dismissed as marginal. Most conspicuously, it invites us to consider the problem of the productivity of syntactic phenomena.

The first question we have to answer is: what do we mean by productivity in syntax? The notion of productivity might at first sight appear superfluous in syntax because this component is too open. However, not all syntactic phenomena are equally common and the notion of productivity can be very easily extended to this area of investigation as well. Even if we agree that the productivity issue is important in syntax too, its domain is still far from being immediately obvious. Should we consider the productivity of rules, syntac/tic and otherwise, or perhaps take something else as the starting point, e.g. syntactic constructions? Although they can appear as the two sides of the same coin, a construction being the realization of a rule, they are not really coextensive since focusing on the latter, i.e. on constructions, enables us to take a broader persective. It will be argued in the remaining part of this paper that a construction-centred account that is by necessity based on prototype theory can provide a more satisfying explanation of the facts observed with go as a linking verb than an account cast in terms of rules and principles.

Let us now consider the putative advantages of assuming syntactic rules as the focus of productivity research. It follows from Aronoff (1976:35) that we can distinguish between more or less productive rules, i.e. productivity is a matter of degrees. It does not take long to detect a fatal flaw if we assume rules to be in the focus of productivity research. If there exists a scale of productivity ranging from fully productive to semi-productive processes, to entirely unproductive ones, saying that some rules are entirely unproductive is a contradiction in terms. An unproductive rule is not a rule strictly speaking, and we should rather use lists to describe such phenomena. We have, however, seen that we cannot do away with our *go*-construction in this way because there does not seem to exist a finite list of items. On the other hand, it is also obvious that the phenomenon is not fully productive. We are thus compelled to admit that we cannot travel the whole continuum from unproductivity to full productivity if we assume rules as the starting point.

Another problem a rule-based approach cannot cope with is the link between the occurrent and the potential, i.e. with the dynamic aspect of productivity. As Aronoff (1980: 71), who is in fact more concerned with productivity in word formation, points out, it seems plausible at first sight to conceive of productivity in purely diachronic terms. Simplified, this view would amount to saying that one rule

is more productive than another if more words formed according to the former rule enter the language in the time between two given points. This procedure may appear justified as long as one can defend the mechanical approach to computing of the degree of productivity in terms of the number of words that enter a given language, i.e. its lexicon, but it does not promise to do much in syntax.

However, it is also possible to envisage an approach to productivity in synchrony. Reformulating the above statement so as to say that one rule is more productive than another at a given point in time if there exists in the lexicon of the language at that time a greater number of words formed according to the former rule than words formed according to the latter rule is, as Aronoff (1980: 72) shows, unsatisfactory. This approach would take into consideration only actual, i.e. already formed and attested words but it would tell us nothing about possible but yet not attested forms. He pleads for a more dynamic framework that could cope with the potential of the systems and tell us how likely it is that a new word will be formed according to a particular rule rather than by some other. This means that productivity can be incorporated into a synchronic description if expressed in terms of probability.

Taking the notion of syntactic construction as the cornerstone in the study of productivity, we are able to explore the whole continuum, there is no inherent contradiction in calling a given construction unproductive, or potentially productive. According to Fillmore (1988), the grammar of a language may be viewed as a repertory of constructions and a set of principles which govern their nesting and superimposition into or upon one another. Grammatical constructions are defined as syntactic patterns which are »'assigned one or more conventional functions in a language, together with whatever is linguistically conventionalized« about their contribution to the meaning or the use of structures containing them. They possess an inherent construction meaning occupying an intermediate position between lexical meaning and sentence meaning.

4. *Go*-construction: degrees of productivity as dynamics- in-synchrony

Let us now return to our *go*-construction and try to approach its degrees of productivity as dynamics-in-synchrony, both with respect to form and meaning. In other words, we have to account both for the set of predicative expressions determining the form of the construction and the variation found on the content-side of the construction.

We have seen that no grammatical construction should be considered to be iso-lated from other constructions. This is well illustrated in our case by examples (4–5). There seems to exist a whole network of constructions and idioms based on *go*. All of them have their prototypes, very good examples that fit the grammatical templates both in terms of structure and meaning. It is not clear whether we would be at present justified in considering them as a case of syntactic polysemy and assume a super- or archiconstruction with a generalized meaning. It is interesting to point out that two constructions in which *go* is followed by both the current and by the resulting subject complements, are predominantly negative in meaning, while the predicative adjunct, or copredicative construction is neutral. All those combinations that are attested very early in the history of English but that do not fit the semantic templates of the first two syntactic constructions have simply not been incorporated and appear as individual idioms.

But it is also possible to observe family resemblance effects between individual constructions, i.e. their chaining and the straddling of constructions, probably as a reaction to the original unification, and an attempt to bring back some stability and order into the system, and keep the number of lexicon entries in check, which is a process that can be independently observed in languages like English. While there are several types of constructions and idioms with *go*, with some prototypical instantiations, there are also some syntactic amalgams arising through syntactic and semantic confusions. We must be careful not to forget the role of token frequency. It is just possible that the frequency with which individual tokens of a syntactic unit may eventually contribute towards the spreading of that particular type, and thus boost productivity at a higher level. The same effect may be expected with individual idioms based on *go*. All this may in the long run strengthen the whole super-or archi-construction, i.e. all individual constructions sharing go as their focal point, some of them getting a free ride on the back of others.

This may, however, affect their grammaticalization paths. In other words, while constructional peaks still may seem to retain their high profile, there is also a process of levelling off of contrasts at their margins. It will be seen that a number of predicative expressions in (9) is inherently neither negative nor positive. With some of them, a negative interpretation takes place only inside the *go*-construction. There are some such items that are not necessarily negative even inside the construction, but this interpretation is usually enforced by the context. With some highly polysemous items like *wild*, the non-negative or less negative senses may appear in the construction, too (e.g. in the headline *London Goes Wild*). Some of them appear in both types of contexts, and there are finally those that are rather positively orientated. This is what we may call family resemblance at the construction type level leading to the ultimate semantic extension of the construction type and the reintegration of idioms.

But this semantic extension can be observed at the token level, too. I have already pointed out that there many semantic classes of predicative expressions pertaining to specific domains lend themselves to cross-classification, linking them with other semantic classes, e.g. colour adjectives and adjectives denoting physical deficiencies. We can also establish clusters of hierarchically organized subgroups. It is significant that semantic extension, i.e. oasis of productivity, is admitted at various points at which these family resemblance effects manifest themselves, i.e. at the intersection of parallelly existing groups or at the switches of hierarchical levels. Finally, semantic shifts and an increase in internal productivity, a sort of productivity loop-hole, may be observed at a micro-token level when we consider various modifications of individual predicative expressions, most conspicuous among them being word-formation processes such as compounding:

(11) ... go boy-crazy and we can't wait to get married and have some babies and then stop having them and go man-crazy.

I hope that the evidence adduced in this paper justifies my conclusion that a prototype-based, construction-centred approach is capable of providing some important insights into the nature of the productivity issue in syntax.

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O POJMU PRODUKTIVNOSTI U SINTAKTIČKOM OPISU I JEZIČNOJ TEORIJI

Tip pridjevskog predikata u engleskom koji se sastoji od glagola go i pridjeva ili imenice (npr. *go crazy* »poludjeti«) unatoč svog marginalnog karaktera ukazuje na neka ključna deskriptivna i teoretska pitanja od kojih se naročito izdvaja problem produktivnosti ili plodnosti. U prilogu se pokazuje da je, kada je riječ o produktivnosti, opis koji počiva na prototipnom pristupu i pojmu konstrukcije u prednosti pred pristupom u čijem su središtu zanimanja pravila i načela.