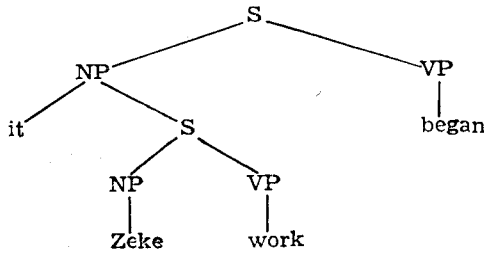


On the Syntax and Semantics of the Verb 'Begin'

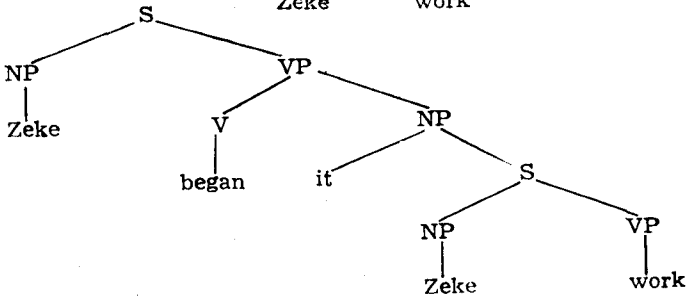
The surface syntactic realizations of the verb *begin* are both intransitive and transitive. Dictionaries record this fact with appropriate labels (*v/i*, *v/t*) and give examples to illustrate it, without considering the nature of the deeper relationship between this verb and its surface subjects and/or objects.

Perlmutter (1970) has examined the deep structure of the verb *begin* and concluded that it occurs both as an intransitive verb in deep structures with sentential subjects and as a transitive verb with deep-structure animate subjects and object complements. His graphic representation of the "two verbs *begin*" in the sentence *Zeke began to work* is the following (cf. Perlmutter 1970: 107—8):

(1)



(2)



By considering not only syntactic but also semantic arguments, we hope to show that only (1) is the correct representation of the deep structure of *begin* and that *begin* is an intransitive verb whose special function is to mark the verb of its deep-structure sentential subject for ingressive aspect (cf. Curme 1931: 377—8), also known as inchoative aspect.

1. The first semantic point that can be made about the verb *begin* concerns its application. Faced with the question of what it is that can begin, native speakers intuitively respond by saying that anything can begin which is conceived of as having a certain duration or extent and therefore also a beginning. Thus, actions, processes or states may begin, as may also physical objects or phenomena which extend in time and space. Animate beings and physical objects which lack this 'extending' property do not begin. Dictionary definitions of *begin* (cf. Webster's *Third*) express this fact with references to the 'first part', 'first steps or stages'.

The second semantic point to note about *begin* is that it is semantically incomplete. A sentence like

(3) They began at 8 o'clock.

is a grammatical sentence but it fails to supply the full, necessary information about the extralinguistic event which it reports and can only be properly interpreted if the deleted linguistic material is mentally supplied from the context of situation in which the discourse is located. Thus disambiguated, the sentence may have a number of readings, including

(3a) They began to exist 8 o'clock.

(3b) They began to work at 8 o'clock.

(3c) They began to study at 8 o'clock.

(3d) They began to quarrel at 8 o'clock.

(3e) They began the attack at 8 o'clock.

etc., etc.

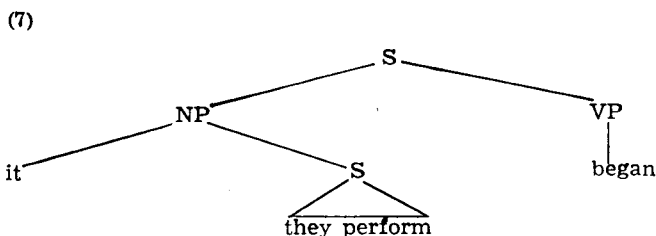
The surface subject of *begin* in (3) above does not necessarily stand for a noun referring to an action or state extending in time and space in such a way as to clearly have a beginning or first part. But it is important to note that *begin* is semantically incomplete even with nouns which do refer to such actions, states or phenomena:

(4) World War I began in 1914.

- (5) The road will begin here.
- (6) My day began with a glass of orange juice.

Such sentences are not ambiguous only because the semantic content of the deleted verb is uniquely determined by its collocability with the rest of the sentence. The deleted verb is not always easily recoverable and it is possible that what is deleted is not a fully lexicalized verb but rather a set of semantic verbal features which agree collocationally with the rest of the sentence. The fact remains, however, that the subject-predicate relationship (and the semantic content of *begin*) changes from one such sentence to another and that it is determined not by what is expressly stated in the sentence but by what has been deleted from it.

2. It is in the light of such semantic considerations that the syntactic behaviour of *begin* should be viewed. The deep structure represented in (7) serves as the starting point in the derivation of sentences (8) — (11), each resulting from a different sequence of transformations:



- (8) The performance began.
(Obtained by (a) embedded-sentence subject deletion, (b) nominalization, (c) subject raising)
- (9) They began the performance.
(Obtained by (a) subject raising, (b) nominalization, (c) bringing the nominalized verb under the domination of the matrix-sentence VP)
- (10) They began to perform.
(Obtained through subject-raising and infinitivization)
- (11) They began performing.
(Obtained through subject-raising and gerundivization)

Notice that in case the embedded subject is deleted, *it*-replacement by the nominalized verb becomes obligatory and no linguistic material is left to be brought over under the domination of the matrix-sentence VP. If, on the other hand, the embedded subject is preserved, it supplies the subject

for the matrix sentence and the rest of the embedded sentence comes under the domination of the matrix VP.

In all these sentences the semantic content of the embedded-sentence verb has been preserved in nominalizations as the true, underlying subject of *begin*, regardless of its surface function. This is borne out by the commutability of (8) and (9), which does not obtain with transitive verbs followed by direct objects:¹

(12) They enjoyed the performance.

(12a) * The performance enjoyed.

However, the verb of the embedded sentence need not be preserved for *begin* to apply to it. The transformations of an underlying structure roughly represented as

(13) it [Sam write a new book] began

can produce (14), (15) or (16):

(14) The writing (by Sam) of a new book began.

(15) Sam began to write/writing a new book.

(16) Sam began a new book.

In (16) the embedded verb has been deleted and the sentence can be interpreted only by supplying the verb from the set of collocates which are compatible with 'Sam' as a subject and 'book' as an object. The most frequent collocates with this pair of nouns will be *write* and *read*, but they are by no means the only ones possible: the verb in that sentence may refer to any action that Sam can perform in relation to the book in a given situation, i. e. he may begin to write a new book, read it, bind it, illustrate it, tear it apart, burn it, eat it, etc.

3. With sentences such as (16) we get the surface structure which strongly resembles the structure of sentences containing transitive verbs and direct objects. The resemblance is made even more striking by the fact that such sentences undergo the passive transformation. Perlmutter (1970 : 113) cites passivization as one of the arguments in favour of the transitive

¹ Apparent counter-examples do not invalidate this claim. They concern verbs which are both transitive and intransitive, and the intransitive verb refers to the result or consequence of the action of the transitive verb:

He moved the stone and (consequently/as a result) the stone moved.

He opened the door and (consequently/as a result) the door opened.

He boiled the water and consequently/as a result) the water boiled.

The same relationship cannot be said to hold between a pair of sentences with *begin*:

*They began the performance and (consequently/as a result) the performance began.

interpretation of *begin* as a verb which takes direct objects in deep structure; thus, he gives the example

(17) Sam began the job.

and its passive transformation:

(18) The job was begun by Sam.

But this phenomenon is not at all inconsistent with the intransitive interpretation of *begin*. Notice, first, that (18) is as incomplete semantically as (17) and, second, that it is expandable in the same way. While the 'full' form of (17) is

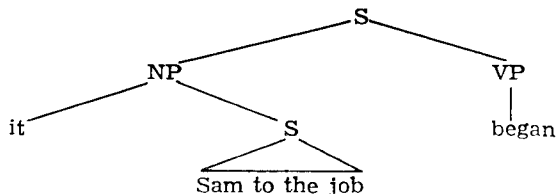
(19) Sam began to do the job.

the 'full' form of (18) is

(20) The job began to be done by Sam.

The deep structure for all four of these sentences can be represented as follows:

(21)



If *Sam* is raised to replace *it* as the subject of the matrix sentence and *do* is infinitivized, we shall get sentence (19); if *do* is deleted, we get (17). If the embedded sentence is passivized into *The job was done by Sam*, and *job* replaces *it*, we shall get (20) in the same way in which we get (19). Finally, if the embedded sentence is passivized and its verb (*was done*) is deleted, we shall get (18), with *job* as the subject of the matrix sentence, *begin* carrying the passive marker of the deleted verb, and the *by*-agent occupying the position to the right of *begin*.

4. The syntactico-semantic load carried by *begin* is considerable, but it is not its own. In a sentence like (18), *begin* carries the tense and the voice of the deleted verb and an indication that only the first stage of the action denoted by it is referred to, but it is important to note that the action itself is not specified in the sentence. There is, in fact, no action in the sentence as it stands. The inner drama of that sentence can be understood, and the question of what actually happened in the event reported by the sentence can be answered,

only by reference to something which is not present in its surface realization.

This means that *begin* cannot be a deep-structure transitive verb taking animate subjects, notwithstanding its use in the passive or in imperative sentences. An imperative sentence like

(22) *Begin to work.*

expresses an order to someone to work, and *begin* carries the imperative marker instead of *work*, while at the same time marking that verb for inception. When the verb is deleted, only its inceptive and imperative marker is left but its semantic content is gone. Therefore, predication is not achieved in (23) as it is in (24):

(23) *Begin.*

(24) *Work.*

Given an order to begin, the receiver of the message does not know what to do until he examines the context of situation to see what action he is being ordered to perform. The order may be to begin to work/walk/eat/sing/speak/read/write/dance, etc. These are all possible predicates for that imperative and these are the actions — not the action of beginning — that he will perform if he obeys the order.

For the same reason, *begin* cannot be a deep-structure transitive verb without an overt object, like *eat* and *read*, as claimed by Perlmutter (1970 : 113). Verbs like *eat* and *read* may have their objects deleted but they still preserve their predicational force: we know what a person is doing when he eats just as well as we know what he is doing when he eats something. This is not the case with *begin*, however:

(25) *Mark began enthusiastically, but he got tired by noon.*
With *begin* stripped of the verb denoting the action whose inception is indicated, nothing is left in the sentence to predicate something about Mark: when we say that Mark began enthusiastically, it is not that we do not know what he began but that we do not know what he was doing. We simply do not know "what happened" in that sentence. Consequently, we cannot ask

(26) * *What did Mark do?*

if the corresponding affirmative sentence is

(27) *Mark began.*

Notice also that sentence (25) can be paraphrased as

(28) *Mark worked/played/walked/sang, etc. enthusiastically at the beginning, but he got tired by noon.*

Finally, the nominalized version of the first half of sentence (25) is not

(29) * Mark's beginning was enthusiastic.

but rather

(30) The beginning of Mark's work/play/walking/singing, etc. was enthusiastic.

5. Everything said about *begin* so far agrees with the view of this verb as an intransitive structural (rather than lexical) element, whose contribution to the total meaning of the sentence is to mark the true semantic predicate of that sentence as ingressive or inchoative. The predicate verb may or may not be overtly present in the sentence, but in either case *begin* serves to indicate its aspect by focusing on the inception of the action denoted by the verb.

In order to accept the inchoative marker, the verb itself must be imperfective and not perfective. (This is merely to say that for an action to have a beginning implies that it also has a certain duration. What is perceived synoptically as instantaneous cannot be perceived as having a beginning — or end, for that matter.) This is easily demonstrated in a language like Croatian in which aspect is expressed derivationally:

(31) On je počeo pjevati/raditi/skakati/jesti, etc.

(32) * On je počeo zapjevati/uraditi/skočiti/pojesti, etc.

The same regularity is found in the case of those Croatian verbs which can form the ingressive aspect derivationally: they must again be imperfective in order to accept the ingressive prefix *za-*, as shown by the examples such as *zaplesati* ('begin to dance') vs. **zaotplesati*, *zaplakati* ('begin to cry') vs. **zaisplakati*, *zakipjeti* ('begin to boil') vs. **zaiskipjeti*, *zavoljeti* ('begin to love') vs. **zaprivoljeti*, *zapuhati* ('begin to blow') vs. **zaotpuhnuti*, *zasvirati* ('begin to play') vs. **zaodsvirati*, etc. (Notice that *početi svirati* and *zasvirati* are synonymous and that *početi* ('begin') contributes only as much as the derivational ingressive prefix.)

English has no formal means to change the verb when its aspect changes, but the aspectual shift is noticeable when *begin* is used with a verb which is normally perfective:

(33) He fell in love with her.

(33a) He began to fall in love with her.

(34) He sat down.

(34a) He began to sit down.

The effect that *begin* has on the aspect of the verb is the same as the effect of the change into the progressive form:

(35) He was falling in love with her.

(36) He was sitting down.

It is also noteworthy in this connection that *begin* and the progressive form are mutually exclusive in the same sentence, which is not the case with genuinely transitive verbs taking infinitives as objects:

(37) * He began to be falling in love with her.

(38) * He began to be sitting down.

(39) * He began to be writing a new book.

but:

(40) He plans to be going there next month.

When the embedded verb has been deleted and no verb is present in the surface structure to indicate the duration of the action whose inception *begin* marks, the intuitive interpretation of the missing verb is again imperfective. Notice that when dictionaries speak of nouns which can serve as subjects of the intransitive *begin*, they note that these are nouns referring to actions, states, objects or phenomena having a first part or beginning. But they can have this not by being objects, states or phenomena but by virtue of the fact that their existence is dependent on some kind of action or activity. In examples (4) — (6) above, *war* presupposes fighting and in fact it only exists to refer to a particular mode of fighting; a road does not exist unless it extends from one point in space to another; and a day exists only as a period extending from one point in time to another point. Thus the definitions of these nouns necessarily include verbs, just as their etymologies ultimately lead to verbs too (cf. Webster's *Third* and O.E.D., s. v. *war*, *road*, *day*). That is why we postulate the existence of an underlying verb (or a set of unlexicalized verbal features) as the pivotal part of the embedded sentence which is the deep subject of *begin*. And the job of the verb *begin* itself in the matrix sentence is simply to mark that (lexically realized or unrealized) verb for the ingressive or inchoative aspect.

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