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A FEW NOTES CONCERNING THE INTERPRETATION
AND CLASSIFICATION OF THE ENGLISH VERB

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Professor Josef Vachek's work is a veritable model of linguistic method applied in its pure form. A careful study of his monographs, papers, articles and even reviews will not fail to bring to light his fundamentally thorough approach to the material analysed or discussed. If the discussion deals with a synchronic problem, it is usually completed by both a diachronic perspective and a comparative (usually English-Czech) confrontation. A proposed solution has to stand its ground against counter-arguments put forward (and dealt with) by the author himself. His scrupulous effort not to leave any stone unturned and to take everything into consideration is the best means of achieving valid and reliable results.

In the following a modest attempt will be made to suggest possible ways and means of achieving better results by applying an all-round approach to a few problems connected with the interpretation and classification of the English verb.

I
Middle English

Language is to be considered a system, or a set of partial systems,[1] where every element assumes its respective place and particular function, which can only be assessed properly if seen on the background and within the frame of the total system, be it synchronically or diachronically.

In his monograph on the word-order in Late Middle English,[2] Alfred Reszkiewicz deals also with the structure of impersonal constructions. They show a fluctuation and the material bears proof of their transition to personal constructions.[3]

There are difficulties of interpretation both from the formal and the semantic aspects. We cannot concur with the author's interpretation of the following two constructions (op. cit., p. 30, note 4) as showing the same structure OVS: *ȝyf ȝow lyke it—me likyth to werkyn grace*. It is just the form of the verb telling us which is which. The glossary of *The Book* used by A. Reszkiewicz[4] is right in classifying *ȝow* as nom. plur. If it were the accusative, the following verb would have the form *lyketh*, parallel to the verb form of the other sentence. The construction of the first sentence is therefore SVO, there being agreement as to form between *ȝow lyke*, and not *lyke it*, as is seen from other similar constructions, where *it* as S requires *likyth*, so that on formal grounds *ȝow* is S and *it* is O (and not S). It also follows that *ȝyf it lyke ȝow* is OVS (and not SVD, p. 61; D = indirect object). *It* could be the S in each mentioned case only if *lyke* were interpreted as the subjunctive. But this is countered by the example *yf ȝow lyketh* (60), where *lyketh* (indicative) clearly relegates *ȝow* to the role

of indirect object (D). And it is unambiguous in *it lykyth me...* (61). This tells us that a clear, unambiguous interpretation is only possible in the case of D expressed by the oblique cases of the personal pronouns of the first and third persons sing. and plur. An interpretation of nouns in these functions and positions is no longer possible on formal grounds but rests on a semantic analogy offered by the use of the mentioned pronouns.

The sentence *it lykyn me wel þe peynes þat...* (61) is parallel to the German 'es gefallen mir gut die + plur. noun, welche...' There is no interpretation of this important sentence offered by the author. This sentence occupies, however, a unique place in the material. It shows that (1) the need was growing to have the sentence provided with a S, a formal one at least (*it*); (2) the position of the grammatical, formal, i.e., structurally necessary S was in front of the V, if the logical S followed VD; (3) the verb (*lykyn*) was in formal agreement with the logical S (*þe peynes*), disagreeing with the formal S (*it*). This again shows that formal, grammatical agreement was determined by semantic reasons where the centre of gravity rested with the logical, nominal S (*peynes*, plur.), and not with the formal, grammatical S (*it*, sing.), this resulting in the plural verb (*lykyn*). This is in disagreement with the author's contention about the verb being the most important and determining sentence element (17).[5] ModE has discarded this type of construction and in the case of a formal, grammatical S it has also introduced formal agreement S—V. This is the case of the well-known construction: *hit eom ic > it is I/me*,[6] but also: *it is us/them* (i.e., plural pronoun or noun), unlike ModGerman *es ist* + sing./*es sind* + plur. (or even Slovak: *to je* + sing./*to sú* + plur.). This points to the existence of differing trends in the development of various languages, but also to the coexistence of opposing trends in the development of a single language, English, in our case. Of this kind are, for inst., the two types of agreement, one as to form (The Government *has* agreed...), the other 'ad sensum' (The Government *have* agreed...), nonexistent, again, for instance, in Slovak.[7]

II

Modern English

Professor F. R. Palmer has attempted a new classification and interpretation of the Modern English verb.[8]

It is indispensable for an investigator, if he wants to claim reliability and general validity for his results, to go beyond a formal analysis and classification. To define an auxiliary simply as a verb 'which has negative as well as positive forms' (op. cit., 21) is correct in itself but not sufficient. To say that no auxiliary except *be* and *have* has a non-finite form is not simply a formal statement but is based on the study of verbal function and this, in its turn, is closely linked with verbal meaning. Although it is not explicitly stated in the definition, it is implicit, because without considering function and meaning the statement could not be reached. This shows, further, that to stop at formal description presents only one side of the picture, and a limited one at that. A discussion of the strong and weak verbal forms will show that their use is determined not so much by position as by function dependent on the meaning to be conveyed, which also determines position. By limiting ourselves to a mere formal description we would rob linguistic analysis of its main task, i.e., to detect the structure of language consisting in the close interrelation and interlocking of form

and function (or form and meaning). And the author's aim is 'a linguistic' (and not just a formal) study of the English verb. Without considering function and meaning as well, the full richness and complexity of language would be greatly flattened.[9] Only an all-embracing analysis can distinguish the various functions (and forms) of, for inst., the verb *be* used as an 'auxiliary' and a 'full' verb, but also as a 'modal' verb and 'copula' (these two uses are not considered in the book).

Professor Palmer must well remember his late teacher's, Professor J. R. Firth's dictum[10] to the point that a linguistic term should be, as far as possible, self-explanatory and free from other connotations. The term 'auxiliary' denotes, first of all, 'auxiliary function'. But this aspect does not come up in the author's formal definition of the auxiliaries. To lump in one group verbs of such widely differing functions as *do* or *can* (cf. 56: '...DO, which has a very special function and is quite unlike the secondary auxiliaries, ...') suggests that the term 'auxiliary' is not pertinent here. If we do stick to it, then the group of verbs denoted here by it should be limited to verbs performing 'auxiliary grammatical functions', i.e., the real auxiliaries *be*, *have*, *do*, etc. The term 'modal auxiliary' is a mixture of differing criteria. If, on the contrary, we want to keep all these verbs in one group, the latter should get another name appropriate to the given formal definition.

The author is aware of the fact that 'the most difficult question to be asked about the passive is why it is used rather than the active' (65). The only obvious and clear reason he can find is that the passive 'may be used where the "actor" is not specified' (*He's been killed*). This exposes the deficiency of the author's approach by isolating the phenomenon and not seeing it clearly embedded as an integral part of the total structure of the language. The author seems to be unfamiliar with the pioneering work done just in this area by the late Professor Vilém Mathesius, who as early as 1915 had discussed the problem of the English passive voice[11] and in 1924 linked it up with a discussion of the function of the English subject.[12] It is evident that the functions of both the subject and the passive voice must be viewed from the broader aspect of the functional sentence perspective. With this in mind, the author would not maintain that 'with the active form there must be an indication of the "actor", this being the function of the subject' (65). What about the function of the subject in sentences of the type 'this book *reads/sells* well'? These cases are left unnoticed. Similarly, the ease with which English can transform active sentences with an indirectly affected object into passive sentences (They *gave me* a book—*I was given* a book) is not brought out with sufficient emphasis. This is so because of the limitations of the author's method of analysis. Only a comparative approach putting English side by side with a structurally different language, where this transformation is quite impossible, would bring into clear prominence this structural speciality of English. Within the frame of this broader perspective the author would not leave us with the disarming statement maintaining that 'there is little that can be said' (65) apart from what he has actually had to say about voice.

Let us return to, and conclude, our earlier discussion of the term 'auxiliary verb'. If a verb is incapable of expressing some required meaning in a synthetic form, it needs the help of another verb, an auxiliary. In our conception, an 'auxiliary verb' is one that is needed to create an analytical verb form. As part of the latter, the auxiliary verb is divested of lexical meaning (as a result of a historical development, of course), but contributes to the all-round meaning with its forms, which are bearers of the verbal grammatical categories (tense, voice, etc.). And here we come to the point where a clear distinction must be made between a genuine, or, for that matter,

an unmarked auxiliary verb, on the one hand, and a modal verb, on the other. As has been mentioned above, a genuine auxiliary verb form is divested of lexical meaning and assumes important grammatical functions. On the other hand, a verb called 'modal' displays its lexical meaning by adding some modal colouring to the meaning of the modified verb form. Of course, the typical modal verbs have also their characteristic formal features in so far as they lack a number of forms indispensable for the 'full' verbs. The former are therefore sometimes called 'defective', while the term 'full verb' should mean that the particular verb has a 'full', or complete, verbal paradigm. This differentiates the verb *want*, a 'full' verb, from *will*, a 'modal' or, rather, a 'defective' verb. In some of its meanings even the 'full' verb *want* is a 'modal' verb, as well as is *will*, a 'defective' verb. To use the term 'modal auxiliary', then, amounts to as much as a mixture of criteria, since 'modal' refers primarily to meaning, while 'auxiliary' to function. This is a 'contradiction in terms'. By definition, then, an 'auxiliary' verb is divested of lexical meaning; a 'modal' verb, again, modifies the meaning of another verb. If we place in one row and, consequently, on an equal footing all the 'modals', as the author has done in: *He will/shall/can/may/must/ought to/daren't/needn't come tomorrow* (107) maintaining that all the modals may refer to the future, this is true in so far as the sentence contains the adverbial *tomorrow*.

The problems, then, as I see them, are as follows: (1) how much is the reference to future time coupled here with the presence of *tomorrow*; (2) how much original lexical meaning of the 'modals' is involved?

Ad 1: if we leave out *tomorrow*, will all the 'modals' equally refer to the future? If the answer is 'yes', then there is no place for a grammatical future tense in English; if 'no', then either some of them do need the completion by *tomorrow* to refer to the future, and some can do without it. So far, grammar books have spoken of *shall/will* as the normal, unmarked referents to future. If, then, any of these verbs does require *tomorrow* to refer to the future, it is no auxiliary. If it does not require it, it may be called an auxiliary; this, in my opinion, can refer to *shall/will*, probably in the weak form *'ll*.

The position is really highly complicated. There does not exist any pure auxiliary or copulative verb, i.e., one devoid of any lexical meaning and only functioning as a mere form, unless, of course, we consider the auxiliary and copulative verbs as homonyms of other verbs sharing with them formal similarities. For instance, *be* and *have* can represent four (notional, modal, auxiliary, copulative) and *do* two different (notional, auxiliary) verbs. The author's criteria, although sound in principle, have not been applied consistently and without qualification. What is therefore needed is to bring the argument to its consummation, by using the proper terminology.

On the level of form, we should distinguish: (1) 'full' verbs, i.e., verbs capable of producing a full verbal paradigm; (2) 'defective' verbs (or 'anomalous finites'), i.e., those verbs that are incapable of producing a full verbal paradigm (here belong also the 'modal' verbs).

On the level of meaning, we can distinguish: (1) 'notional' (traditionally called 'full') verbs; (2) 'modal' verbs used to modify the meanings of other verbs; (3) 'semi-copulative' verbs (standing between the notional verbs and the copula); (4) semantically 'empty' verbs (the auxiliaries and the copula).

From the standpoint of function, finally, we have: (1) 'auxiliary' verbs (*be, have, do, may, shall, will*); (2) 'copulative' verbs: (a) copula (*be*), (b) semi-copulative (*have, get, become, grow*, etc.); (3) verbs of neither the one group nor the other.

This rough outline shows that the criteria of classification are closely interlinked:

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one criterion determines, completes or conditions the other. Since some verbs have various peculiarities, in agreement with their semantic potentialities, they may appear in more than one group. It has been mentioned that *be, have, do* are both 'auxiliary' and 'notional' verbs. The same applies to *want*, which in one of its meanings is parallel to *will*. Of course, from the standpoint of form *want* is a 'full' verb, while *will* is a 'defective' verb. Incidentally, the verbs traditionally called 'modal' are linked in one group not only because of their semantics but also by their formal peculiarities, which, of course, are of very old date.

This can also help to resolve the problem of the grammatical future tense. If it can be shown that in the row *he will/shall/...must...come* all the finite verbs retain their respective meanings, they are called 'modal' verbs. If, however, it can be shown that in *he'll come 'll* has not retained the modal meaning of the strong form *will*, while in *he may come... may* has no weakened form and retains its modal meaning, then *'ll* and *may* cannot be placed on the same level: *may* is here simply a 'modal' verb, not an 'auxiliary'. If it could be shown that *'ll* has no lexical meaning in *he'll come*, then it functions as an 'auxiliary'. It remains to determine how far and whether this *'ll* can form a verbal paradigm denoting the grammatical future tense, i.e., one without the help of extraneous, lexical elements (such as *tomorrow*, etc.). The difficulty about the 'pure future' lies in the full forms of *shall/will*, i.e., mainly in the interrogative.

Finally, then, the auxiliaries can really be classified as 'primary auxiliaries' (*be, have, do*) performing important grammatical functions, and 'secondary auxiliaries' (*shall, will, may*) being defective as to form and performing rather limited grammatical functions.

If the *'s* in *If he's ill tomorrow* (109) is called 'the non-modal (primary pattern) form', then it follows from this that *'ll* in *He'll be ill tomorrow* is classified as a 'modal' verb. In my opinion, however, this *'ll* is an auxiliary verb used to create an analytical verb form analogous to the synthetic future of other languages (Czech, Slovak *bude*; Russ. *budet*; Lat. *erit*, etc.).

The treatment of *be* cannot be considered exhaustive in the monograph. It has been noted above that the author does not make any mention of *be* functioning as 'copula'. Thus in *He is very sad* (140) *is* is not a 'full' (notional) verb but the copula. Its function consists in linking the subject with a nominal predicate, such as is *sad* in our case. (The same applies to other instances quoted in the book; p. 68: *They were married...*; p. 16: *John is happy. Sad, married, happy* cannot be qualified as complements.) That the copula is really semantically 'empty' and performs merely the function of a link being the bearer of some grammatical categories is demonstrated by some languages (f.i., Russian, Hungarian) where the copula can be dispensed with in some cases of the present tense (*eto Ø interesno — ez Ø érdekes = this* IS *interesting*). I should therefore classify *be* as follows: (1) from the standpoint of form, it is an anomalous finite; (2) it performs the functions of (a) an auxiliary; (b) copula (disregarded by the author); (c) a notional verb; (d) a modal verb; (3) from the standpoint of meaning, finally, it is (a) a notional verb; (b) a modal verb; (c) a semantically 'empty' verb (auxiliary, copula).

The treatment of *have*, again, shows that the terminology used is not the most suitable one. In its meaning analogous to *must, have* functions as a 'modal' verb. This term, then, refers to the semantic aspect. From the formal standpoint, however, *have* in the modal meaning can be a 'defective' (or an 'anomalous') finite or a 'full' verb. This latter term can evidently only apply to form, and not to meaning. What is

missing is a discussion of the semantic parallelism *be/have*, in instances like: *This is of great importance/This has a great importance*, etc.[13]

NOTES

[1] J. Vachek, 'Notes on the Development of Language Seen as a System of Systems', *Sborník prací filosofické fakulty brněnské university* A 6. 94—106 (Brno, 1958).—Cf. my note on it in my paper 'The Origin and Development of the Modern English Literary Language', *Philologica Pragensia* 6. 80, note 64 (Prague, 1963).

[2] Main Sentence Elements in *The Book of Margery Kempe.* (A Study in Major Syntax.) (Wroclaw-Warsaw-Cracow, 1962). — Cf. my review of it in *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* (Berlin, forthcoming).

[3] Cf. the chapter 'Impersonal—Personal Verbs' in my monograph *Word-Order in the Winchester Manuscript and in William Caxton's Edition of Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur (1485)* — *A Comparison* 93—107 (Halle-Saale, 1957).

[4] *Early English Text Society* 212. 403 (London, 1940).

[5] Cf. B. Trnka, 'Categories of Syntagmatic Morphology', *Travaux linguistiques de Prague* 2. 167 (Prague, 1966): '...it is the predicate which is subordinated to the subject, as clearly indicated by the grammatical concord'.

[6] Cf. E. E. Wardale, *An Introduction to Middle English* 39. § 41 (London, 1937).—W. v. Wartburg, *Problèmes et méthodes de la linguistique* 50 ff. (Paris, 1946).

[7] Cf. J. Vachek—J. Firbas, *Lingvistická charakteristika současné angličtiny²* (*Linguistic Characterology of Present-Day English*) 66, also 111 (Prague, 1962, mimeographed).

[8] *A Linguistic Study of the English Verb* (London, 1965).—Cf. my review of it in *Philologica Pragensia* 10. 185—8 (Prague, 1967).

[9] Cf. F. Daneš—J. Vachek, 'Prague Studies in Structural Grammar Today', *Travaux linguistiques de Prague* 1. 24 (Prague, 1964): 'As... the very essence of language lies in the closest association of the phonic form and semantic content, a disregard of the latter would be as devastating for the work of the linguist as the disregard of the former—it would literally abolish what makes language a language.' (Note 21 on p. 30: 'This does not mean, naturally, that the disregard of one of the two basic elements of language cannot be attempted for the sake of experiment. But it must be kept in mind that the results of this experiment cannot be mechanically extended to refer lo language in its entirety.')

[10] Cf. his lectures on General Linguistics held in the University of London (1947—9).

[11] 'O passivu v moderní angličtině' [About the Passive Voice in ModE], *Sborník Filologický* 5. 198—220 (Prague, 1915).

[12] 'Několik poznámek o funkci podmětu v moderní angličtině' [A Few Notes on the Function of the Subject in ModE], *Čaropis pro moderní filologii* 10. 244—8 (Prague, 1924).

[13] More about this in J. Macháček, *Complementation of the English Verb by the Accusative-with-Infinitive and the Content Clause* (Prague, 1965). — Cf. my review of it in *Philologica Pragensia* 10. 185—8 (Prague, 1967).

RESUMÉ

Niekoľko poznámok k interpretácii a klasifikácii anglického slovesa

V príspevku sa navrhuje táto schéma zatriedenia anglického slovesa: I. Z hľadiska formy rozlišujeme 1. plnotvarové a 2. neplnotvarové (defektívne) aj anomálne slovesá. II. Z hľadiska významu rozlišujeme 1. plnovýznamové (nocionálne), 2. modálne, 3. polosponové (stoja medzi plnovýznamovými slovesami a sponou) a 4. sémanticky 'prázdne' slovesá bez lexikálneho významu (pomocné slovesá a spona). III. Z hľadiska funkcie sú 1. pomocné slovesá (*be, have, do, shall, will, may*), 2. sponové slovesá: a) spona (*be*), b) polosponové slovesá (*become, get, grow,* atď.), 3. slovesá nepatriace do týchto skupín.