

Remarks about some aspects of Semantic Ascent (by John Lyons 1989). A pragmatic alternative

Eduardo Varela Bravo
Universidad de Vigo

Abstract

We intend to make comments on some aspects of Lyon's important article on, among other things *nominals*, and, by doing so point at a feasible pragmatic explanation of phenomena that for the British linguist are: 1) semantic, 2) subject to a logical interpretation. Our first reaction was that of perplexity at Lyons' suggestion although *intuitively* we perceived what he was aiming at. Later on, when thinking about it, we framed a possible pragmatic alternative. The *thesis* we want to put forward is that the distinction between THAT complementation and *gerundival* complementation established by Lyons in terms of truth conditions (and of different *meanings* of the verb REMEMBER taken as example) presents problems once the isolated proposed utterances are put in a contextual frame. Those problems lead us: 1) to accept, on the one hand, Lyons' distinction as evident in normal everyday usage, 2) to search for a *pragmatic* rather than *semantic* explanation of the fact. We are not qualified to question Lyons' bold statement about the nominal nature of gerundivals beyond this point.

1. The problem

In his article Lyons establishes, among other things, a distinction between *first-order entities*, *second-order entities* and *third order entities* (reformulation of Lyons 1977). Lyons states that *the gerundivals in English* are second-order extensional entities. After this he uses four English constructions with the verb REMEMBER(ED) to distinguish further possibilities *with different truth values*. We will focus on *two* of these constructions in this paper.

According to Lyons, first-order entities and second-order entities are subject to the evaluation *real/unreal* while the *propositions* (third-order entities) are abstractions subject to the qualification *true/false*.

After having stated that and when dealing with the primitive generative premise axiom that transformations are *meaning preserving*, Lyons gives these four examples:

- 1) I remembered that I closed the door
- 2) I remembered to close the door
- 3) I remembered closing the door
- 4) I remembered myself closing the door

Apart from the different *meaning* of REMEMBER in each of the four cases, in 1) the THAT clause is a *proposition* while in the other three cases, although the *truth*

values are different, we have *nominals* (second-order entities). We intend to do a close reading of Lyons' text in order to comment on it and give our proposal. We will stick only to examples 1) and 3).

Lyons relies on the following premise:

“On the assumption that they are being used under normal conditions, to make descriptive statements (175)”

mentioning the existence, in all cases, of an *illocutionary agent*. Our interpretation is: 1) in a context, the speaker is performing a *Speech Act* (descriptive statement). As Lyons uses the verb in past tense and as REMEMBER is not a typical performative (?I hereby remember that...) we find an utterance which can be used either to make an *assertion* or in a *echoic* way. In this second case it would not show a definite *propositional attitude* about the proposition in question. We can only note this problem here, another problem raised by the handling of utterances outside a context.¹

Lyons gives us the following characterizations for the four REMEMBER:

“In uttering 1) the illocutionary agent is using the THAT clause to refer to a proposition (i.e. an intensional entity).” (175)

He does not describe 2) in the text.

About 3) and 4):

“... but in uttering 3) or 4) he or she is using the grammatically distinct gerundival complement to refer to an *act* (i.e. to a second-order extensional entity), an act in which he or she was involved as the agent. Admittedly, the current perceptual or experiential awareness of his or her involvement in the act of closing the door is, if I may so express it, memorial and in that sense purely mental, rather than perceptual. But that fact does not of itself bring it within the scope of the philosopher's catch-all category of so called propositional attitudes...” (175).²

Here we have *referring* again and abstract concepts as *perceptual* and *experiential awareness*. We deduce that REMEMBER is different from 1).

About the difference between 3) and 4) Lyons writes:

“As to the difference between 3) and 4). This is explained, *intuitively* at least, by saying that what is being reported in 3) is the *illocutionary agent's* reliving in memory -his or her memorial re-experiencing as the agent- of the act of closing the door; and in 4) the quite different mental act or state of perceiving or witnessing this act, as he or she might perceive (i.e. see, hear etc.), from outside as it were, a situation in which he or she was not, or had not been involved as the agent.” (176).

It is important here for us: 1) Lyons considers that a *Speech Act* is performed; 2) there are two different mental acts in 3) and 4); 3) this distinction is at least *intuitive*. This is the key problem. Does this intuition come from Formal Semantics or from Pragmatics?

We are going to focus on utterances 1) and 3). We are going to explore: 1) the illocutionary force of the descriptions, 2) the propositional/non-propositional nature of the gerundival in context, always with the aim to show that pragmatics lies behind this intuitive distinction established by Lyons. We are cautious doing so among other things because 1) and each of the other utterances keep a difference that is *evident enough to require any commentary*, (196) according to Lyons.

2. *Illocutionary Force*

In both 1) and 3) there is an *illocutionary* agent. Leaving apart the problem of *tense* (and its echoic implications) we take for granted that the speaker is stating something. In 1) he states that he remembers that p. In 3), he states that he remembers x.

In 1) besides the illocution there is a particular *propositional attitude* provided by *remember*. The speaker uses it to qualify his/her statement. It is not that he/she believes it. It is a part of his/her experience, a memorial activity in whose frame an assertion is made.³

In 3) we assume, according to Lyons, that the speaker is still asserting something. REMEMBER now cannot be a distinct marker of the propositional attitude. It has to be a different verb, or a verb used differently. It has to be the *predicate* of a proposition that has *I* and *closing the window* as arguments, at least in the standard logic used in the standard books on linguistics.⁴ Changing the gerundival from third to second order entity presents, from our point of view, not only a problem about the propositional nature of the construction, but about the pragmatic characterization of REMEMBER in so far as Speech Acts are part of Pragmatics. Something, incidentally that is harder to admit in other verbs that accept both the THAT construction and the -ING form:

5) I denied that I closed the door

6) I denied closing the door

where the propositional attitude and the illocutionary force seem to fall on *deny* in both cases without possibility of further categorization of the second use of *denied*. We still, of course, perceive a difference in *meaning*, but we think that we had better account for it in context.

As we see it, Lyons, wanting to mark the difference between the THAT construction and the -ING construction with REMEMBER as different *mental* verb, complicates the illocutionary frame and the expression of the speaker's propositional attitude of the utterance. We wonder, at this point whether it would have not been better to tackle the difference *act-proposition* from a pragmatic point of view. We will come back to this idea at the end of our paper.

3. *The propositional/nominal nature of the gerundival*

We want to stress first that we share the common view that a gerundival is a difficult construction. It is not only that it presents characteristics of *noun* and *verb* from a grammatical point of view but it is also true that, in some cases we do consider

it a *nominal*... but not in all cases.⁵ We will start by pointing at this double nature of the gerundival by setting some examples that confirm Lyons' view. Later we will present our objections. That is, we will present examples *in context* that seem to defend a propositional view. Our final goal is to suggest that, perhaps, it is necessary to include Pragmatics as a premise for Formal Semantics rather than *perceive intuitively and work out a semantic description* in terms of truth values.

We are not against truth values, what we aim at is that, using Sperber & Wilson's (1986) approach, propositions are to be *enriched*⁶ before being operational in context and that only then they will be subject to a Formal Semantics study. That is, once again Pragmatics seems to interfere with a logically based Semantics, something that seems to be pretty frequent these days.

But first for the nominals.

3.1. *Existential Negation*

We have established before that if gerundivals are nominals, second order entities, they are going to be considered *real* rather than *true*. Therefore, they will be subject to an *existential negation* rather than to a *propositional negation*. Let's have a look at the following cases:

- 7) I remembered your visit=> You can't remember it.
There was no such visit.
It is false that you remembered my visit.
- 8) I remembered your visiting me=> You can't remember it.
There was no such (thing as my) visiting (you).
?My visiting you is false.
It is false that I visited you.
- 9) I remembered visiting you=> You can't remember it.
There was no such (thing as *your*) visiting (me).
?Your visiting me is false.
It is false that you visited me.
- 10) I remembered that I visited you=> You can't remember it.
There was no such (thing as *your*) visiting (me).
*There was no such thing that you visited me.
It is false that you visited me.

These examples are interesting to us because:

1. It is possible to use the existential negation with gerundivals.
2. It sounds odd conversationally to use the values *true/false* for the -ING construction.
3. The THAT clause, to have an existential negation, has to be changed into an -ING construction.
4. It is usual to *make the subject of the ING construction explicit* for the existential negation. This will be very relevant for us.

Gerundivals present problems, both from the grammatical and the semantic/pragmatic level. We have seen examples that support their nominal status. Let's see now some problematic cases.

3.2. *Tags*

We are not going to deal with the problem of the different values, in context and depending on intonation, of a tag question.⁷ What is relevant for us is, in the case of our two structures, if we can use the tag making reference to the main verb and/or the subordinate verb. If the subordinate verb can be subject to a tag question it is difficult for us to conceive it as a nominal. *Intuitively* we would consider it a *predicative* in a proposition. Checking examples with native speakers, we have to confess that it was not a thorough task, they tended to consider some cases as, at least ambiguous and, in the case of using REMEMBER in present they showed a tendency to relate the tag with CLOSING which was pretty consistent. They confirmed our intuition. Let's see a couple of examples:

11) I remembered that I closed the door. Didn't I? (doubt)

12) I remember(ed) closing the door. Didn't I? (challenge)

In 12) the tag seems to affect the subordinate construction. The use of a *pro-verb* did presuppose a verb in the main utterance that was invariably CLOSE when REMEMBER in present and ambiguous in past. The general idea was the tag challenging the listener about the speaker's actually doing what he stated. The tendency seemed to be much stronger in favour of REMEMBERED in 11), as a doubt, although there was also in some cases a feeling of ambiguity. For us the possibility of the tag affecting CLOSE suggests its predicative status. Once we have a context, the nominal nature of the gerundival does not seem so clear.

Maybe because, as Lyons says:

“Third, it might be objected that the interpretation of particular utterances in the everyday contexts in which they occur is often both indeterminate and indeterminable in terms of the ontological distinctions that I have been drawing; that the distinctions themselves are theory-laden; that ordinary, unreflecting, users of the language (and non-ordinary users of the language like philosophers and linguists, in much of their otherwise ordinary life, when, as Wittgenstein would have said, their minds are not idling) are unaware of applying them, and for the purpose in hand do not need to do so, in the daily round of business, recreation, and social intercourse; and that, when the semanticist seeks to impose a fixed and determinate interpretation upon this or that uncontextualized or decontextualized sentence, he is guilty of distorting the facts in the light of his preconceived theoretical ideas.” (178-179)

But we do believe that Lyons is aiming at something. But for this idling reflections would be better based on utterances inside a contextual frame than in their semantic isolation. One thing is that the two -of four- REMEMBER constructions mean the same, another thing is that a gerundival is out of necessity a second-order entity and

still another thing is that we, normal everyday speakers of the language, do not perceive differences in the use of these constructions. We have seen the first problem with *closing the door* and tags. Incidentally, and coming back to the first problem, the illocutionary, we have to note that:

13) I denied that I closed the door. Didn't I?

14) I denied closing the door. Didn't I?

do not present problems. In both cases the tag seems to make reference to DENY. The question of the gerundivals seems to be a very complex problem. REMEMBER's illocutionary force is another one.

3.3. *Clefts*

It is easy enough to see that we can have:

15) It is the door that I remembered closing.

16) It is closing the door that I remembered.

But, what about this exchange?:

17) -It is closing the door not the window that I remembered.

-That is *false*. You *closed* the window.

We suppose that one possible explanation would be:

18) It is closing the door not closing the window that I remembered.

in the sense of:

19) It is his performance not his personality that I remembered.

The problem is that in the second case we would have an answer on the following line:

20) That is not *true*. You *remembered* his personality very well.

That is, it is clear that nominal or not, in these cases:

1. We evaluate the gerundival as false/true in context.

2. We supply a proposition in which the verb is repeated with another *argument*.

The gerundival, in context, seems to have propositional behaviour.

3.4. *Conversational Context*

3.4.1. *Evaluation in Conversational Context*

As we have said, it is clear that there is a difference in "meaning" between our two utterances. Our argument is that this does not necessarily mean that gerundivals are second-order entities. We'll see now some further cases in context checked again with native speakers, who supported our view:

21) (situation: the door was left open)

-I remembered that I closed the door.

-No, you didn't (close it).

22) (same situation)

-I remembered closing the door.

-No, you didn't (close it).

as opposed to:

23) (at court)

-Your honour, I denied that I closed the door.

-No, you didn't (deny it).

24) (same situation)

-Your honour, I denied closing the door.

-No, you didn't (deny it).

Again the illocutionary problem, again the negation affecting what should be a nominal... once we have a context.... something like this happens:

25) I remembered that I closed the door.

-You think so? Think about it again. You left it open.

-? Good of you!

-? Don't worry. It was not your fault.

-How unlucky!

26) I remembered closing the door.

-? You think so? Think about it again. You left it open.

-Good of you!

-Don't worry. It was not your fault.

-? How unlucky!

Intuitively, at least. It seems that we would use, in a context, to refer to a *fact* that we want to present to the hearer a THAT clause. As such fact it is a piece of information open to debate and evaluated by the hearer in a particular way. When we want to refer to an *action* in which the speaker or somebody else was involved, an -ING form would be used. Again, the hearer would evaluate it in consequence. The *communicative intention* in one case and in the other is different and as such is perceived by the hearer. Perhaps this is the basis of the semantic distinction established by Lyons. This one part of the problem. Another thing is saying that the gerundivals are (always) nominals.

3.4.2. Different Subjects

Experimenting with our utterances and possible contexts, we reach the question of emphasis. Granted that Lyons has used the two utterances in a neutral declarative statement, but we cannot avoid keeping in mind cases like:

27) It is me (I)/him (he) (that) I remembered closing the door.

That is, in *contrastive* constructions we oppose what we would consider *arguments* of a proposition.

28) It is *my* not *his* leaving tomorrow that bothers you.

as contrasted with:

29) ?It is that *I* leave tomorrow not that *he* leaves tomorrow that bothers you.

Or...

30) I didn't remember that I closed the door but that he closed the door.

31) I didn't remember my closing the door but his closing the door.

Apparently 31) would be preferred when making it clear who is *responsible* for the action, the agent, apart from other things it is emphasized and subject to contrastive constructions. For us it seems to behave as an *argument*.

3.4.3. Looking for Relevance

If, *intuitively*, somebody asks us what we find *relevant* in "I remembered closing the door" as opposed to "I remember that I closed the door", we will say that in the first case somebody remembered that *somebody* did something. In the second case that somebody remembered that *something happened*. We would label them as *action* and *fact* respectively. Using Sperber & Wilson's (1979) ideas. Besides, we would say that *the grammatically ordered entailments* in one case and the other present a different arrangement. We would find both utterances relevant in different ways and *appropriate in different contexts for different communicative purposes*.

Something like:

32) *closing the door*.

1. Acknowledgement of the speaker's *communicative intention*: I/somebody did something.

2. Evaluation of the action as true/false. That is true: You/somebody did it.

3. Acknowledgement of the action from the point of view of the hearer. Yes, you/somebody did it.

4. Positive/negative evaluation in context: You/somebody did well/wrongly.

The utterance would interact with the context and would be functional in the conversational exchange.

33) *that I closed the door*.

1. Acknowledgement of the speaker's *communicative intention*: Something happened.

2. Evaluation of the fact as true/false. That is true.

3. Acknowledgement of the fact from the point of view of the hearer: Yes, that happened.

4. Positive/negative evaluation in context: That was fortunate/unfortunate.

The utterance would interact with the context and would be functional in the conversational exchange.

And, what about REMEMBERED? Of course it presents different characteristics in one case and in the other. But, talking about *semantic ascent*, perhaps we could talk about *pragmatic taint*. The use of the two structures would motivate: 1) a different characterization, 2) a different illocutionary act? 3) what about a different propositional attitude? Unfortunately we cannot but leave these questions open. We cannot forget, anyway, that other verbs, we have given the example of DENY, seem to have a different behaviour. All this is not the subject for one paper but for a very detailed study.

What is clear for us is that the characterization as nominal of the gerundival in this particular case is not clear. Granted that in some cases it seems to function as a nominal, but we hope to have shown that in some other cases in context, it “sounds” like a proposition or, at least, *that it is taken as a proposition by hearers in context*. Two different structures remain. *Intuitively* we foresee problems if we do not explore the context before talking about truth values.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have had as goals:

1) to give examples where Lyons’ generalization about gerundivals seems not to work. We accept that gerundivals are mixed forms, but this does not allow for the radical denial of their propositional status.

2) to make some remarks about the illocutionary force of REMEMBERED in the two cases we have studied and the problems that Lyons’ solutions present in the illocutionary frame.

3) to provide a possible *pragmatic* reading of the two utterances as showing a different order of grammatical entailments as previous to Lyons’ description.

4) and, by doing so, hint at an idea that is quite widespread in nowadays pervasive Pragmatics: that perhaps the sequence to follow is: GRAMMAR / GRAMMATICAL SEMANTICS / PRAGMATICS/ FORMAL SEMANTICS.⁸ About this, we cannot but quote what Lyons writes when anticipating the possible objections to a proposal that we have studied only partially:

(connecting with the above quotation):

“There is a good deal of force in this objection. And it is, of course, of much more general import than the context in which it has just been raised might suggest. It is an objection which, if pressed, *might seem to undermine the very foundations of descriptive semantics (and pragmatics), as currently practised.*” (178)

Our message is not negative in the sense that we, as speakers of one language, need not deal with philosophical and linguistic subtleties. We do think that these differences *have* to be accounted for but, perhaps we have to introduce changes in our approach, changes that will have *always* as their foundation: the context and our search for relevance.

Notes

1. Sperber & Wilson (1986) have interesting insights on the echoic nature of some utterances and also on propositional attitude. These two concepts show essential for a fully developed pragmatic theory. See also their article in Kempson, R. (ed) (1988) (pp. 133-154).
2. Lyons does not develop this point further, which does not allow us to discuss more in extent his view of the illocutionary frame in which these two uses of REMEMBER are inserted. We have to add, on the other hand, that Quine (1970), when dealing with *semantic ascent* does not reach a definite conclusion on propositional attitude and modality. See pp. 63-68 of the Spanish translation (1973).
3. We follow Sperber & Wilson (1986) in our interpretation.
4. For instance: Allwood, J., Anderson, L-G. & Dahl Ö. (1977) or McCawley, J. D. (1981).
5. Quirk et alii (1985) (pp.1290-92) is a clear example of the complexity of the -ING form.
6. See Sperber & Wilson (1986) pp. 188-91.
7. For a general discussion see Quirk et alii 1985 (pp. 810-14).
8. Carston (1988) hints at this possibility quite convincingly (p. 178).

References

- Allwood, J., L-G. Anderson & Ö. Dahl (1977) *Logic in Linguistics*, Cambridge: University Press
- Carston, R. (1988) "Implicature, explicature and truth-theoretical semantics", in Kempson, R. (ed.) (1988), 155-182
- Kempson R. (1988) *Mental Representations*, Cambridge: University Press
- Lyons, J. (1977) *Semantics*, vol. 2, Cambridge: University Press
- Lyons, J. (1989) "Semantic Ascent: A Neglected Aspect of Syntactic Typology", in Arnold, B. et al. (1989) *Essays on Grammatical Theory and Universal Grammar*, Oxford: University Press, 153-189
- McCawley, J. D (1981) *Everything that Linguists Always Wanted to Know about Logic*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- Quine, W. V. (1973) *Filosofía de la lógica*, (trad. Manuel Sacristán) Madrid: Alianza (ed. original 1971)
- Quirk, R. et alii (1985) *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, London: Longman
- Smith, N. & D. Wilson (1979) *Modern Linguistics*, Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Sperber D. & D. Wilson (1986) *Relevance*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- Wilson, D. & D. Sperber (1979) "Ordered entailments: an alternative to presuppositional theories", in Oh, C.-K. & D. A. Dinneen (1979) *Syntax and Semantics 11: Presupposition*, New York: Academic Press, 229-324