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INVITED LECTURE

VERBS AND THEIR OBJECTS AND THE ONE NEW IDEA HYPOTHESIS

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IN CHAPTER 9 OF *DISCOURSE, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND TIME* (Chafe 1994) I suggested what I called the 'one new idea' hypothesis, or more fully 'one new idea per focus of consciousness'. Briefly, it is the hypothesis that the human brain is constructed in such a way that under normal circumstances people are restricted to activating no more than one new idea at a time. To understand what that means, it is necessary to understand what is intended by the terms *focus of consciousness*, *idea*, *new*, and *one*. It is especially this last point—the question of what constitutes *one idea*—that is going to be the principal topic of what follows.

At the outset I need to mention that the one new idea hypothesis can be tested only by examining spontaneous spoken language. It is, in fact, extremely easy to invent examples that violate the hypothesis; for example, sentences one might well think were 'grammatical' but that contain more than one new idea in the sense to be described. The question is whether people really talk that way. This restriction to spoken language is important because writing distorts the normal flow of ideas that has, in the course of evolution, given language the shape it has. Writers do violate the one new idea constraint, which is determined by forces that come into play while people are creating language on the fly.

I have given in (1) a brief excerpt from a conversation in which the speaker was talking about some things that happened when he was in college in the 1960s, when most of the people he knew dropped out. In (1)d and (1)f the *mhms* of his interlocutor are given in italics.

- (1) a ...In the sixties,
b ...almost everybody I knéw,
c ...dropped out.
d ...*Mhm*,
e ..There were very few péople.
f ...*Mhm*,
g ..made it through.

When one listens to ordinary speech like this, one notices that it is produced in the spurts or prosodic phrases I have been calling *intonation units* (Chafe 1994:53–70). They are often separated by pauses, indicated in (1) with the sequences of two, three, or four dots at the beginning of each line, depending on their relative length. They often begin louder than they end, they often begin faster and end more

slowly, they may begin with a resetting of the overall pitch level, and they may exhibit a change of voice quality at the end, but their most consistent property is the presence of some kind of terminal pitch contour. Hence the appropriateness of the term intonation unit. In (1) these terminal pitch contours are shown in a rough way with punctuation, where the periods at the ends of (1)c, (1)e, and (1)g show a falling pitch that is likely to be perceived as expressing some kind of closure. The commas at the ends of (1)a, (1)b, (1)d, and (1)f show a non-falling pitch, perceived as expressing some kind of continuation.

Why is it that speech is produced in these spurts? The need to breathe must play a role, but it is certainly not the whole story. If one examines intonation units carefully, they reveal properties suggesting that they have cognitive and interactional as well as respiratory significance. It has proved fruitful to suppose that each intonation unit verbalizes a segment of content the speaker is focusing attention on at that moment (or possibly just before that moment), content that he or she would like the listener to focus on too as a result of hearing the intonation unit. From that point of view speech can be seen as verbalizing a succession of foci of consciousness, initially in the speaker's mind, but with some version of them induced in the listener's mind as a result of hearing each intonation unit. These foci of consciousness function as the fundamental building blocks of thought as it proceeds through time, at least to the extent that thought is molded by language.

That is a brief explanation of what is meant by a focus of consciousness. What, then, is an *idea*, as that term is used here? One quickly discovers that the one new idea hypothesis can be maintained only if the notion of an idea is limited to something quite specific that can be related to the familiar distinction between *content* words and *function* words. Content words belong to large open classes such as verbs and nouns, and any particular content word is likely to be low in text frequency. Function words belong to small closed classes, and some of them have much greater text frequency. Function words (as well as affixes) serve in a broad sense to *orient* and *tie together* whatever is expressed by content words. Content words and function words reflect two distinct aspects of thought, and here I will say that content words are manifestations of *ideas*, while function words (and affixes) express *orientations* of those ideas.

Ideas themselves can be subcategorized into ideas of events and states—things that happen and the way things are, plus the participants in those events and states—the people, objects, and abstractions that cause events to happen and are affected by them, and that exist in states or enter into states. I will use the term *referents* for these ideas of participants in events and states. I have summarized this terminology in (2), distinguishing ideas (events, states, and their participants) from orientations of ideas, which may involve their placement in space and time, or epistemologically, or in the ongoing interaction, or with relation to other ideas being verbalized.

- (2) Major components of verbalized thought
 - a. Ideas
 - Events and states
 - Participants in events and states ('referents')
 - b. Orientations of ideas in space, time, epistemology, interaction, and the verbal context

Looking back at (1) with these distinctions in mind, one can see that in (1)a there was a focus on a temporal state, expressed as *in the sixties*. (1)b then focused on a referent, expressed as *almost everybody I knew*. (1)c placed that referent as a participant in the event of *dropping out*. (1)e introduced another referent, expressed as *very few people*. And (1)g placed that referent as a participant in the event of *making it through*. These ideas of referents, states, and events were oriented in various ways. For example, the *almost* in (1)b hedged the meaning of *everybody I knew*, and the past tense of *knew* oriented that idea in time, as did the past tense of *dropped* in (1)d, of *were* in (1)e, and of *made* in (1)g.

What, then, is meant by *new*? It has proved useful to regard a new idea as one the speaker assumes he or she is introducing into the listener's consciousness for the first time within the current conversation, activating it with the current intonation unit. Thus, (1)a activated the idea of being *in the sixties*, (1)b the idea of *almost everybody the speaker knew*, (1)c the idea of *dropping-out*, and so on. In contrast, a *given* idea is one the speaker assumes is already active in the listener's consciousness, for whatever reason. In (1)b, for example, there was the given idea of the speaker himself, expressed with the pronoun *I*. The speaker could assume that the idea of him was already active in the listener's consciousness just because he was the speaker.

With these brief explanations of what is meant by *focus of consciousness*, *idea*, and *new*, we can direct our attention to the term *one* in the one new idea hypothesis. As a first approximation it might be tempting to equate ideas simply with content words like verbs and nouns, so that if one were looking for evidence against the hypothesis one would look for intonation units in which there were, say, both a verb and a noun, each of which expressed a separate new idea.

Example (1) presents no problems here. (1)b contains both the noun *everybody* and the verb *knew*, but in terms of content we can suppose that *almost everybody I knew* expressed the idea of only one referent, which then became the participant in the event of *dropping out* in (1)c. In fact, (1) is the kind of example that gives some confidence in the hypothesis, since it predicts that cognitive limitations would force the new ideas in (1)b and (1)c to be distributed across two intonation units. The speaker could not have said *almost everybody I knew dropped out* as a single intonation unit. That may on the face of it seem difficult to accept, but in fact a great deal of ordinary speech suggests that it is true.

There are two ways in which ideas of events and states differ from ideas of their participants. First, our brains are evidently capable of activating the idea of a referent alone, without focusing on its participation in any particular event or state. This

ability is reflected in language when separate foci of consciousness—expressed in separate intonation units—are devoted to a referent by itself, as in (1)b, *almost everybody I knew*. But we do not find the opposite. That is, it seems not to be possible to focus consciousness on an event or state alone, except in a few cases of ambient events like *it's raining* or ambient states like *it's cold*. Aside from those cases, the idea of an event or state cannot be present in consciousness without including one or more participants. For example, in (1)c the *dropping out* event is inconceivable without the participation of the person who dropped out. In short, ideas of referents can be focused on independently, but ideas of events and states must include participants in order to exist at all.

A second difference between ideas of events and states and ideas of their participants is that event and state ideas are usually transient in the flow of thought. They are focused on only briefly, typically in single intonation units, whereas ideas of referents often continue to be active over longer intervals. Discourse consists in large part of activating one event or state idea after another, with roughly one or two seconds devoted to each, whereas ideas of referents, once they have been activated, may persist in the active state for longer periods. In (3) one can see how the idea of the person that was activated in (3)a persisted through (3)b and (3)c, whereas (3)b focused only briefly on the idea of going, and (3)c only briefly on the idea of knowing.

- (3) aAnd this gúy,
 b he wént,
 c ..and he knèw Lássie,

As mentioned above, the one new idea hypothesis cannot be maintained unless newness is restricted to ideas, to the exclusion of orientations. But that means that ideas of events and states and their participants can potentially all be new, independently of each other. Suppose there is an event idea that is new, as is often the case. What one often finds is a situation in which a new event includes one or more participants that are given. That is true, for example, of (3)b. The idea of the guy was first activated in a separate intonation unit in (3)a. By the time the speaker came to (3)b that idea was given and could be expressed with the unaccented pronoun *he*. In (3)b only the event idea expressed by *went* was new. But what can be said about (3)c? The same given idea of the guy was repeated, again with the pronoun *he*, but this time there was the idea of *knowing* along with the idea of *Lassie*. If knowing and Lassie were both new ideas, independent of each other, (3)c would violate the one new idea hypothesis. That is the kind of situation I will explore here, focusing on the verb-object construction. I will return to (3)c later, after discussing cases that are easier to deal with.

We can begin by looking at phrases like *have a talk*, included in (4).

- (4) a ..Thése gúys,
 b ...Í gotta go have a tálk with em.

(4)a activated the idea of some guys. (4)b then began and ended with pronouns that expressed given ideas. The *I* at the beginning expressed the idea of the speaker, and the *em* at the end the idea of the guys. This idea of the guys was, of course, given because it was activated in (4)a. What, then, can one say about the rest of (4)b, *gotta go have a talk with*? It is a sequence that begins with two orientations—first the deontic auxiliary *gotta*, and then the *go* that has an *andative* function, showing a change of location in order to do something. We are left with *have a talk with* expressing what needs to be interpreted as no more than one new idea if the hypothesis is going to stand up. It illustrates a construction that has often been discussed, but from very different angles.

Chapter 7 of volume 6 of Jespersen's *A Modern English Grammar* deals with what Jespersen called 'substantives from verbs without change', by which he meant deverbal nouns that have the same form as the verbs from which they are derived: nouns like *drink* or *fight*, or in this case *talk*. Regarding such nouns he wrote:

The most usual meaning of [substantives] derived from and identical in form with a [verb] is the action or an isolated instance of the action. This is particularly frequent in such everyday combinations as those... after *have* and similar 'light' verbs. They are in accordance with the general tendency of [Modern English] to place an insignificant verb, to which the marks of person and tense are attached, before the really important idea (Jespersen 1909–49, vol. 6:117).

Jespersen mentioned other verbs of this sort in addition to *have*, including examples like:

- (5) have a drink
- give a sigh
- take a walk
- make a bow
- give (someone) a kick

Hendrik Poutsma, in his *A Grammar of Late Modern English*, also wrote about this construction, describing it in a similar way:

There is also a marked tendency in Modern English to express a verbal idea by means of a combination consisting of a verb with a vague meaning and a noun of action. The latter is then the real significant part of the predicate, while the former mainly serves the purpose of a connective (Poutsma 1914–26:394).

More recently in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik, the same construction was recognized in terms of what was called an *eventive object* together with a 'common verb of general meaning':

A frequent type of object generally takes the form of a deverbal noun preceded by a common verb of general meaning, such as *do*, *give*, *have*, *make*, *take*. The EVENTIVE object... is semantically an extension of the verb and bears the major part of the meaning. Compare:

They are arguing. [verb only]
They are having an argument. [verb + eventive object]
 (Quirk et al. 1985:750–51)

Thus, all these authors noticed a subset of English verbs that were variously called ‘insignificant’, ‘light’, ‘with a vague meaning’, or ‘a common verb of general meaning’, and that occur with object nouns that express ‘the really important idea’ or ‘the real significant part of the predicate’, or ‘the major part of the meaning’. Several other linguists have elaborated on these observations in different ways. I will mention three of them.

In 1984 Ray Cattell published an entire book devoted to examples of this kind, with the title *Composite Predicates in English*. Cattell was concerned with explaining this phenomenon within the framework of Government and Binding (Chomsky 1981). He compared sentences like those in (6):

- (6) a Bill kicked the dog.
 b Bill gave the dog a kick. (Cattell 1984:6)

He evidently assumed that sentences like these mean more or less the same thing, and he wrestled with the problem created by the fact that in (6)a *the dog* is a patient or theme, whereas in (6)b he is a recipient or goal, not to mention the fact that *kick* appears to be a verb in (6)a but a noun in (6)b. Reconciling these observations with the ‘projection principle’ and the ‘T-criterion’ was something of a problem, whose solution by Cattell I am unable to evaluate, other than to mention that both the problem and the solution are internal to the Government and Binding framework.

A very different approach was taken by Anna Wierzbicka (1982), who concentrated almost exclusively on the semantics associated with the verb *have*, as in *have a drink*. She distinguished ten subtypes, distinguished by semantic properties of the deverbal noun, like *drink* (although in fact she interpreted *drink* as an infinitive verb). She suggested that all these subtypes share certain properties that are derived in part from the semantics of *have*, in part from the juxtaposition of the indefinite article with the infinitive verb. To give the flavor of these subtypes, the following are her characterizations of three of them:

Aimless objectless individual activity which could cause one to feel good. E.g.,
have a swim.

Action aiming at perception which could cause one to know something and which would not cause one to feel bad if it didn't. E.g., *have a taste (of)*.

Joint speech activity which could cause the people involved to feel pleasure. E.g., *have a talk*. (Wierzbicka 1982:762–63, 786)

Wierzbicka's article is full of subtle semantic observations which show that the meanings associated with expressions like these are distributed in ways that are by no means simple, but she also took pains to emphasize that 'such verbal expressions, far from being idiosyncratic, exhibit highly systematic behavior, are governed by strict rules, and constitute a vital part of English grammar' (753–54).

The last reference I will mention in this connection is Adele Goldberg's book on construction grammar, where she uses this phenomenon as an example of how 'constructions themselves carry meaning, independently of the words in the sentence' (Goldberg 1995:1). Of interest here is the following statement:

Metaphorical expressions such as *give a kick* focus attention on the action denoted by the nominal, here *a kick*. This is, in fact, what distinguishes *give a kick* from the verbal form *kick*, which can readily be used when the focus is not on the action performed... [The metaphorical extension of the ditransitive construction] can inherit the specification that the action (the metaphorical 'transferred thing') and not the recipient is the focused element (Goldberg 1995:95).

I take this to mean that *she gave John a kick* is appropriate in a situation where the speaker wants to focus attention on the kicking, whereas presumably *she kicked John* may focus attention on John. Such interpretations must in the end involve prosody, word order, givenness and newness, and discourse context, none of which Goldberg mentions, but her remarks can at least serve to redirect our attention to the point made by earlier authors who noticed that the *have* or *give* part of such examples has a 'light' meaning, while the other element, such as *kick*, expresses 'the major part of the meaning'.

How does all this relate to the one new idea hypothesis? Suppose we say that a light verb such as *have* does not itself enter into the *new* versus *given* distinction, but combines with its object to express one idea. In other words, there is only one idea that is conveyed by *have a talk*, so there is only one element that can be new. It may be useful to think of *have* as functioning as a kind of derivational element, deriving an event, *having a talk*, from a referent, *talk* (which is itself derived from the event *talk*). The important point is that *having a talk* is one idea, not two ideas expressed separately by *have* and *a talk*.

We can now take account of a different kind of observation, shifting for a moment from objects to subjects, and even to examples from written language. Jan Firbas, in *Functional Sentence Perspective in Written and Spoken Communication*

(Firbas 1992), looking at examples from literature, noticed that subjects that are new, or 'context-independent', are followed by a subset of verbs that express 'appearance or existence on the scene' (59–60). I will call them here *enabling verbs*, in the sense that they enable certain participants to exist or be present. Firbas gave examples from Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*, including the two in (7).

- (7) a A very sweet look had come into the old lady's face.
 b A haze hovered over the prospect. (Firbas 1992:59–60)

In (7)a the idea of *a very sweet look* was new, and it was the subject of *had come into*, which functioned to present or introduce the idea of the sweet look. Firbas provided a partial list of verbs and verb phrases that function in this way, including *appear, arrive, come into view, commence, emerge, show up*, and so on. He mentioned that it is impossible to give an exhaustive list, because examples like (7)b suggest that the list would be open-ended. The idea of *hovering*, as a haze might hover, belongs to an open set of very particular situations.

We can ask first whether examples like those in (7) are counterexamples to the one new idea hypothesis, ignoring for a moment the fact that these examples are from literature. If the subjects in them, *a very sweet look* and *a haze*, do express new ideas, the question is whether the events expressed as *had come into* and *hovered over* are also new, independent of their subjects, so that each of these sentences contains at least two new ideas. The alternative is to regard the idea of the *haze* together with its appearance on the scene as one idea, not two.

Shifting back to speech, we can ask whether parallel examples can be found, where a subject expressing a new idea occurs in one intonation unit with an intransitive verb that has this enabling function. Perhaps (8) will serve.

- (8) a ...Then one afternóon,
 b ...this ván pulls in thère. (Chafe 1994:91)

In (8)b *pulls in* may qualify as an enabling verb, in the sense that it introduced the idea of *the van* and thus did not express an independent new idea. This interpretation is aided by the prosody. New ideas are always expressed with primary accents, and the idea of *pulling in* did not have such an accent. When a new subject is paired with a verb that does not have this enabling function, the two are necessarily distributed across two intonation units. We saw that in (1)b and (1)c, repeated here as (9). It would be difficult to make a case for *dropped out* being an enabling verb, and here the subject and verb seem unquestionably to express independent new ideas.

- (9) a ...almost everybody I knéw,
 bdropped óut.

Although new *subjects* are comparatively rare in spoken language, new *objects* are very common, and they provide a richer source of possible evidence against the one new idea hypothesis. We can start by looking at the examples in (10):

- (10) a they hired *súmmèr hèlp*,
 b they're *pàying sèven fifty*,

The ideas expressed by *summer help* in (10)a and *seven fifty* in (10)b were new. Should then the idea of *hiring* and the idea of *paying* be considered separate new ideas, or do these verbs too fit the category of enabling verbs? In favor of this interpretation is the observation that hiring involves an object that fits the category of 'help' in the sense of employees, and *paying* involves an object that is some amount of money. *Hiring* thus serves to introduce *help*, *paying* to introduce *money*.

The suggestion is that light verbs like *have* as well as enabling verbs like *pull* in (8) and *hire* and *pay* in (10) do not express new ideas that are independent of the ideas expressed by their subjects if the verb is intransitive, or by their objects if the verb is transitive, but merge with those participants to express unitary new ideas. We can now extend this recognition of unitary ideas to include familiar collocations. There are certain events and states that are encountered so often in daily life that the words used to express them have become fixed elements in the linguistic repertoire. Examples are phrases like the following.

- (11) eat breakfast
 read a book
 visit the dentist

When we talk about eating breakfast, for example, there is no need to activate the ideas of *eating* and of *breakfast* separately. Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1997) provide an extensive list of collocations of this sort.

In these collocations the meaning of the whole is largely derived from the meanings of its parts. But the eventual fate of some collocations can be to take on a life of their own, becoming idioms. An idiom is the final stage in the unification of an idea. In (13) there is no need to raise the question of separate ideas being expressed, for example, *by break* and *the ice*; there is clearly only one idea in each case.

- (13) break the ice
 hit the roof
 pull a fast one

I have now described four situations in which it is plausible to suppose that a verb and its object serve to express one idea, not two separate ideas. They can be seen as falling into two major categories: low content verbs and lexicalized phrases. Low content verbs consist of light verbs such as *have* in *have a talk* and enabling

verbs like *pay* in *pay seven fifty*. Lexicalized phrases consist of collocations like *eat breakfast* and idioms like *break the ice*. These four types are not necessarily mutually exclusive. An idiom, for example, may contain a light verb, as in *give someone the gate* or *get someone's goat*.

The question that remains is whether there are other combinations of verb and object that fall outside these four categories. Are there situations in which both the verb and its object clearly express new ideas that are independent of each other? We have already seen that such a situation can indeed arise with a verb and its subject, and that in such cases the subject and the verb are forced by the one new idea constraint to appear in separate intonation units. We saw an example in (9), repeated here as (13):

- (13) a ...almost everybody I knéw,
bdropped óut.

If a verb and its *object* can be independently new as well, we might expect them, in parallel fashion, to be expressed in separate intonation units as well.

Interestingly enough, although examples like (13) involving subjects are by no means rare, I have found it difficult to locate analogous examples involving objects. The following comes close:

- (14) a ...Dóris,
b ..and Bill,
c ..were tálking about,
d ..that he líved there,

After the introduction of the two subjects in (14)a and (14)b, each of which was a new idea, the separate new event of *talking about* was expressed in (14)c. Precisely what Doris and Bill were talking about, *that he lived there*, was another new idea, and as a result it had to be assigned to a separate intonation unit in (14)d. But this example is quite special. The object of *talk about* was an entire clause, *that he lived there*, expressing a new event. Possibly it is only in cases where the object is an event that the one new idea constraint forces a verb and its object to appear in separate intonation units. If similar examples in which the object is just a simple referent cannot be found, it is tempting to entertain another and bolder hypothesis: that a verb and its object *always* express a single idea. That hypothesis is suggested by the apparent absence of examples of the type just discussed, but also by a deeper consideration of the nature of the verb-object construction itself.

The following amusing example contains several examples of verbs and their objects that can serve to direct attention to the question involved here. The conversation had been about how people who live alone don't like to wash dishes, and someone had mentioned that a person she knew used paper plates so he could just throw them away and not have to wash them. The speaker of (15) then proceeded

to talk about someone he knew. I have used the smiling faces to indicate laughter, and italic smiling faces show laughter by another interlocutor.

- (15) a One guy I knew,
 b ..hated to wash dishes so *bád*,
 c that his entire *cóoking* apparatus,
 d ...consisted ..of a little *próng* arrangement,
 e ..that you *plùgged* into a uh a *wáll* outlet,
 f ..☺☺☺
 g ...and you could spin a *hót* dog.
 h ..betwèen the two *próngs*.
 i ...so that when you plugged it into a *wáll* outlet,
 j ☺☺ ..☺☺☺
 k ..☺right,
 l ..the *elèctric* *cúrrént*,
 m would *rùn* ☺through the *hót* dog.☺

Among the verb-object combinations here, (15)b includes the collocation *wash dishes*. In (15)d *consist of* is an enabling verb, expressing the existence of the *little prong arrangement*. In (15)e, repeated in (15)i, *plug into a wall outlet* might conceivably be regarded as another collocation, although one not as familiar as *wash dishes*. Of greatest interest, however, is the phrase *spin a hot dog* in (16)g. Here the speaker seems to have created a rather peculiar and very specific nonce combination. Yet it too expresses the idea of a single activity performed by the person in question.

We are brought, then, to the question of just what objects do. What role do the participants verbalized as objects play in events? In Mithun and Chafe (1999) we suggested that the function of an object is to express the most immediately involved participant in an event. In a broader perspective such a participant fills the so-called absolutive role. Among the core arguments of a verb, an absolutive argument expresses, as it were, the 'corest' of the core. This role is realized in English by a grammatical object. But English gives priority to the discourse role expressed by subjects, the role of *starting points* for the presentation of an event or state (Chafe 1994:82–92). The result is that with intransitive verbs, where a language must choose between the two very different roles of immediate involvement and starting point, English chooses to mark starting points with its subjects, whereas so-called ergative languages choose to mark the most immediately involved participants as absolutives. But where a language is free to mark both roles, as it can with transitive verbs, English expresses both the starting point role with its subjects and the immediate involvement role with its objects.

This function of absolutives as expressing the most immediately involved participants in events accords with several observations that have been made by others. Edith Moravcsik, for example, noticed that transitive verbs constrain the semantics of their immediately involved objects in ways that do not apply to their

less involved subjects. For example, the object of transitive *smell* has to be something that emits an odor, and the object of *hear* has to be something that emits a sound (Moravcsik 1978). No similar limitations apply to people who smell or hear something, other than that they be normal organisms capable of such experiences. Edward Keenan (1984) noticed that the meanings of verbs are often determined by their objects. Thus, *cutting* refers to different actions in *cut your foot*, *cut your lawn*, *cut your whisky*, and so on. In some languages totally different verbs may be used, depending on the nature of the object, as when one verb means to kill one person and another means to kill many people. It is especially significant that English idioms typically consist of a verb-object combination, as in (12). Russell Tomlin has discussed still other ways in which objects are, as he says, 'bonded' more closely to the verb than subjects (Tomlin 1986:73–101). Here I am interpreting this bonding as reflecting the greater immediacy of involvement of the ideas expressed by objects. In brief, objects define the nature of events in ways that subjects do not.

If this approach is valid, the question that arose with (3), repeated here as (16), need no longer be problematic. The new idea of *this guy*, expressed as a subject, was forced by the one new idea constraint to appear in an intonation unit separate from the new ideas expressed by the verbs in (16)b and (16)c, but in (16)c the idea of *knowing* and the idea of *Lassie* could be expressed in a single intonation unit because the verb and its most immediately involved participant formed a single idea.

- (17) aAnd this gúy,
 b he wént,
 c ..and he knèw Lássie,

To summarize, language is produced as a succession of intonation units, each of which expresses a focus of consciousness. It has been fruitful to hypothesize that an intonation unit can express no more than one new idea—one idea that is being activated for the first time in the current conversation. This hypothesis depends, for one thing, on the restriction of the term *idea* to the mental representation of an event or state, or a participant in an event or state. Other linguistic elements express *orientations* of ideas. The hypothesis is useful in explaining how ideas are distributed across intonation units, as when subjects are separated from verbs by prosodic boundaries, but also in forcing us to be more precise about what constitutes *one idea*.

One site where we might at first expect to find the idea of an event and the idea of one of its participants both new, independently of each other, and for that reason assigned to separate intonation units, is the combination of a verb with its object. But it is difficult to find examples in actual speech where a verb and its object are distributed across separate intonation units for that reason. I discussed four situations in which a verb and its object can easily be interpreted as expressing a single idea. First, there is the construction of a light verb like *have* with a deverbal object like *a talk*. Second, there are enabling verbs like *consist of*, which serve to introduce the idea expressed by the object. Third, there are familiar verb-object col-

locations like *wash dishes*. Fourth, there are verb-object idioms like *break the ice*. But when one looks at verb-object combinations that might not fit any of these four categories, another hypothesis emerges: that *all* verb-object combinations express unitary ideas. That hypothesis accords with an interpretation of objects as absolutes, and of absolutes as functioning to express the most immediately involved participants in events and states. Can we, then, accept the suggestion that a verb and its absolute argument together—we might even say by definition—express a single, unitary idea? Only further data from natural speech will serve to confirm, modify, or rule out this possibility. The best disconfirming evidence would be clear cases of verb-object combinations that were distributed across two intonation units because of the one new idea constraint.

Back in the 1950s Anna Granville Hatcher conducted a perceptive study of word order in Spanish, and she discovered among other things that the special word order object-verb was confined to what I have been calling enabling verbs. In writing about this she included the following statement, which can serve as an appropriate epilogue here:

Can there exist any other task more worth doing in syntax than that of trying to learn how to think systematically about meaning and how meaning matters for language? to find the semantic distinctions that language recognizes in its constructions? The first step is to confess ourselves all ignoramuses—as Bloomfield did; but then, despising the practical conclusion he drew from his human ignorance of meaning, we in syntax must conclude instead that it is time we began to try to learn!

This crude, awkward demonstration has offered only the barest glimpse into that sublime design, that order underlying chaos in language, whose gradual revelation is the task of a syntax that seeks for meaning (Hatcher 1956:43).

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