

Impersonals

- A. Introduction
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A. Introduction

- (1)(a) *It is obvious that my novel will never be published.*
- (b) *It's hard to wash a cat.*
- (c) *It seems that the fire started in the attic.*
- (d) *It's embarrassing when you can't remember someone's name.*
- (e) *It's in April that we go to China.*
- (f) *It is very peaceful without the children around.*
- (g) *It rained last night.*

- (2)(a) *That my novel will never be published is obvious.*
- (b) *To wash a cat is hard.*
- (c) **That the fire started in the attic seems.*
- (d) **When you can't remember someone's name is embarrassing.*
- (e) **That we go to China is in April.*
- (f) **Without the children around is very peaceful.*
- (g) **Last night rained.*

- (3)(a) *It seems that **she** is very intelligent.*
- (b) *Il semble qu'**elle** est très intelligente.* [French]
- (c) *Parece que es muy inteligente.* [Spanish (“pro drop”)]

- (4) The central claim of Cognitive Grammar: Lexicon and grammar form a continuum fully describable as **assemblies of symbolic structures**, each of which pairs a semantic structure and a symbolizing phonological structure.

- (5) Semantic descriptions of *it* or its congeners:
 - (a) **mental space** (Lakoff 1987: 542; Smith 2000)
 - (b) **abstract setting** (Langacker 1993a)
 - (c) **immediate scope** (Achard 1998: 7.2)
 - (d) **field** (Langacker 2002, 2004a)
 - (e) “low situational deixis”; “general presence or availability”; “mere sceneness”—an entity is “on the scene”, but “the identity of that scene is immaterial” (Kirsner 1979: 81)
 - (f) “a ‘definite’ nominal with almost the greatest possible generality of meaning, limited only in the sense that it is ‘neuter’ ... it embraces weather, time, circumstance, whatever is obvious by the nature of reality or the implications of context” (Bolinger 1977: 84-85)

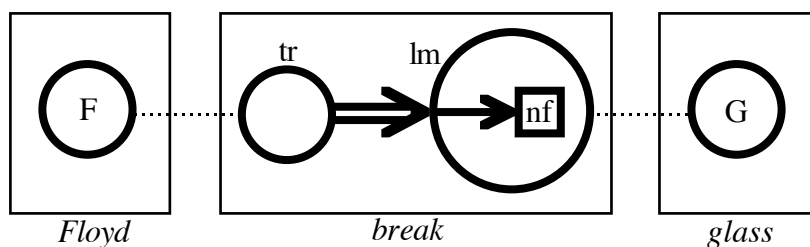
- (6) “Our mistake has been to confuse generality of meaning with lack of meaning.” (Bolinger 1977: 85)

B. Alternations in Focal Prominence

Basic Grammatical Notions

- (7)(a) Within the conception it evokes as its **base**, an expression **profiles** some substructure, i.e. puts it in focus as the entity it *designates* (refers to).
 (b) A noun (also a full NP) profiles a **thing** (abstractly defined).
 (c) A verb (also a full finite clause) profiles a **process**: a relationship apprehended by tracking its development through time.
 (d) An adjective, adverb, or preposition profiles a **non-processual** relationship.
- (8)(a) **trajector** (tr): *primary focal participant* in a profiled relationship
 (b) **landmark** (lm): *secondary focal participant* in a profiled relationship
 (c) **subject**: a nominal expression which specifies a trajector
 (d) **object**: a nominal expression which specifies a landmark

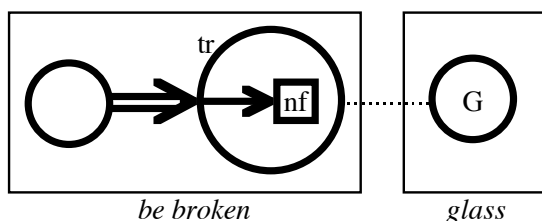
- (9) *Floyd broke the glass.*



- (10)(a) Profiling and focal prominence are *not inherent* to a scene, but *imposed* by the linguistic structures used to code it.
 (b) Different expressions allow us to construe and portray the same situation in alternate ways.
 (c) We can focus whatever we like—the elements made prominent linguistically need not be the most salient on non-linguistic grounds.
- (11)(a) *Jack teaches **American history** to immigrant children.*
 (b) *Jack teaches **immigrant children** American history.*
 (c) *Jack teaches **elementary school**.*
 (d) *Jack teaches **fourth grade**.*
- (12) **Impersonal** constructions provide alternatives to the usual situation in which a specific, clearly-identified referent—typically a person—is put in focus as a clausal subject.

Actor Defocusing

(13) *The glass was broken (by Floyd).*



(14) Two complementary means of defocusing a participant:

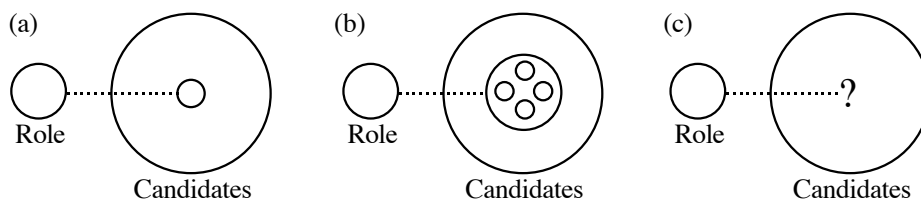
- (a) not according it focal prominence (trajector or landmark status)
- (b) leaving it implicit and unspecified

(15)(a) *Pa'ka-ngu-'tu'a-yi=anga.* '[One] is killing him.' [Southern Paiute]
kill-PNCT-IMPRS-PRES=him

(b) *Ti'ka-'ka-'tu'a-yi.* '[People] are eating.'
eat-PL:SUBJ-IMPRS-PRES

(16) *Taaqa-t niina-ya.* '[They] killed the man.' [Hopi]
man-OBJ kill-PL:SUBJ

(17)



(18)(a) *This truck steers quite easily.*

(b) *The truck steered quite easily (*by the workman).*

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| (19)(a)(i) <i>She tasted the soup.</i> | (ii) <i>The soup tastes salty.</i> |
| (b)(i) <i>She smelled the milk.</i> | (ii) <i>The milk smells sour.</i> |
| (c)(i) <i>She felt the cloth.</i> | (ii) <i>The cloth feels smooth.</i> |
| (d)(i) <i>She looked at the lawn.</i> | (ii) <i>The lawn looks healthy.</i> |
| (e)(i) <i>She listened to his voice.</i> | (ii) <i>His voice sounds pleasant.</i> |

Non-Participant Trajectors

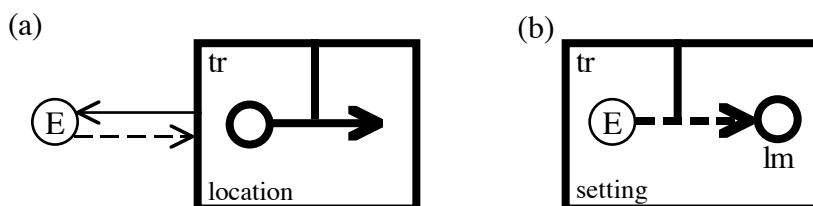
(20)(a) *The garden is swarming with bees.*

(b) *The nighttime sky was blazing with forest fires.*

(c) *The streets were ringing with church bells.*

(d) *My cat is crawling with fleas.*

(21)

(22)(a) *Florida experiences a lot of hurricanes.*(b) *This town has seen a long series of political scandals.*(c) *The last few decades have witnessed amazing scientific progress.*(23)(a) **A lot of hurricanes are experienced by Florida.*(b) **A long series of political scandals have been seen by this town.*(c) **Amazing scientific progress has been witnessed by the last few decades.*(24)(a) *It's raining big drops.*(b) **Big drops are being rained (by it).*(c) *It seems that the Florida election was rigged.*(d) **That the Florida election was rigged is seemed (by it).*

C. Pronouns

Nominal Organization

(25)(a) A lexical noun specifies a **type** of thing. A **nominal** (i.e. a full NP) profiles a **grounded instance** of some type.(b) The **ground** (G) comprises the speech event, its participants, and its immediate circumstances (e.g. the time and place of speaking).(c) **Grounding** is a grammaticized means of indicating how a profiled thing or process relates to the ground with respect to certain fundamental, “epistemic” notions (e.g. time, reality, identification).(26)(a) Nominals are either **definite** or **indefinite**.(b) In English, definite nominals are grounded by demonstratives (*this, that, these, those*) or the definite article (*the*). Proper names and personal pronouns are also definite.(c) Indefinite nominals are grounded by indefinite articles (*a, sm, zero*) or grounding quantifiers (*all, most, some, no, every, each, any*).(27)(a) A **definite** nominal is one that, in the current discourse context, is taken as being sufficient to identify its referent independently of the clause containing it.(b) An **indefinite** nominal introduces an instance of the specified type as a discourse referent but does not itself identify it. Its identification and status (specific vs. non-specific) depend on the clause containing it.

- (28)(a) *Jill broke the pencil.* [particular pencil, identity established independently]
 (b) *Jill needs the pencil.* [particular pencil, identity established independently]
 (c) *Jill broke a pencil.* [particular pencil, identity established by the clause]
 (d) *Jill needs a pencil.* [no particular pencil singled out (non-specific)]

(29) *Jill needs {the/a} pencil—and she needs it now.*

(30) Because they do not themselves single out a specific, clearly-identified referent, **indefinites** lend themselves to impersonal use.

- (31)(a) *{Jill/That woman/That person/She} breaks a lot of pencils.*
 (b) *{Some woman/Some person/Someone} breaks a lot of pencils.*
 (c) *{A woman/A person/One} breaks a lot of pencils.*
 (d) *{Every woman/Everyone/Anyone} breaks a lot of pencils.*

- (32)(a) *Jill sharpened the pencil.*
 (b) *Someone sharpened the pencil.*
 (c) *The pencil was sharpened.*

Definites

(33) **Demonstratives** single out a specific referent by pointing to it, often with a physical pointing gesture [→]. In context, the contrast between **proximal** (*this/these*) and **distal** (*that/those*) may be sufficient to direct attention to the intended referent without a physical gesture.

- (34)(a) *I want **this** [→] **one**.*
 (b) *I like **this shirt** much better than **that other one**.*

(35) The **definite article** indicates that only one instance of the specified type is salient enough in the current discourse context to be a candidate for reference. Simple mention is thus sufficient for identification.

- (36)(a) *I bought a belt and a shirt. **The shirt** was too small.*
 (b) **I bought two shirts. **The shirt** was too small.*
 (c) ***The air-conditioning** was just turned off.*
 (d) ***The sky** is very blue today.*

(37) **Proper names** incorporate an *idealized cognitive model* which specifies that every person in the relevant speech community has a distinct name, known to all, so that simply mentioning the name is sufficient to uniquely identify the intended referent.

(38) **Personal pronouns** identify their referents in relation to the interlocutors (speaker and hearer). In the case of first and second person pronouns (*I, you, we*), this is usually sufficient for unique identification.

(39) Referents of **personal pronouns**:

- (a) *first person singular*: speaker
- (b) *first person plural*: group that includes the speaker
- (c) *second person singular*: hearer
- (d) *second person plural*: (group that includes the) hearers
- (e) *third person singular*: individual other than speaker and hearer
- (f) *third person plural*: group that excludes the speaker and hearer

(40) With third person pronouns (*he, she, it, they*), there are indefinitely many potential referents.

Like the definite article, they presuppose that only one instance of the specified type is salient enough in the current discourse context to be a candidate for reference. However, since the type is highly schematic, they presuppose that this instance has already been singled out as a focus of attention, either through explicit mention or by joint attention in the discourse context.

(41)(a) *The farmer chased the duckling, but he couldn't catch it.*

- (b) [seeing a farmer chase a duckling] *He'll never catch it.*

Definite Impersonals

(42)(a) *We know that the universe is expanding.*

- (b) *They have proved that smoking causes cancer.*

(43)(a) **Selection/singling out**: the process of directing attention to an instance of some type (as a profiled nominal referent), i.e. *choosing* an instance.

- (b) **Delimitation**: how the profiled instance projects to the world (or the relevant universe of discourse); the *size (extension)* of the instance itself or the pool of *eligible candidates* (those conforming to the type specification).
- (c) **Vagueness**: referring to some aspect of a situation without being able to specify precisely which aspect it is.

(44)(a) *A zinc atom can be found at several **places** in this molecule.*

- (b) *That's a good **place** to put the vase.*
- (c) *They're looking for a suitable **place** to build a shopping mall.*
- (d) *China is an amazing **place**.*
- (e) *The world has become a very hostile **place**.*
- (f) *The universe is a very big **place**.*

(45)(a) ***This** is getting us nowhere.*

- (b) ***That's** just not fair!*

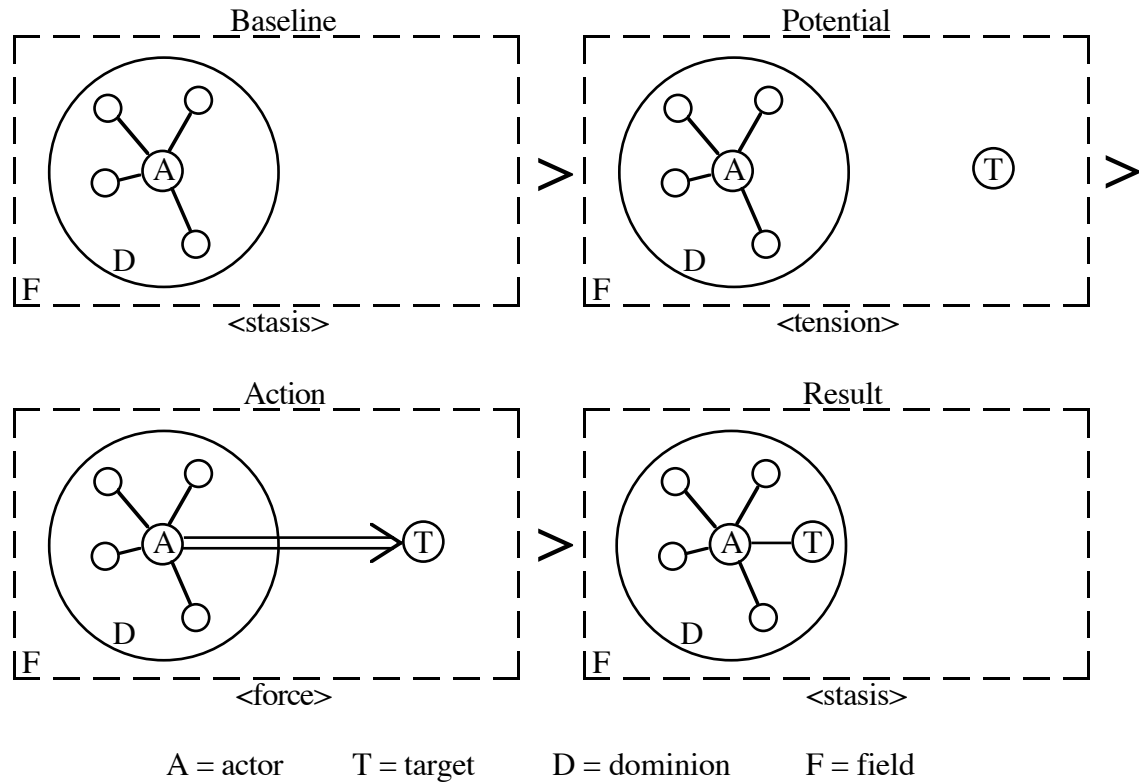
(46)(a) ***It's** just not fair!*

- (b) ***It's** obvious that corporate interests control the American government.*

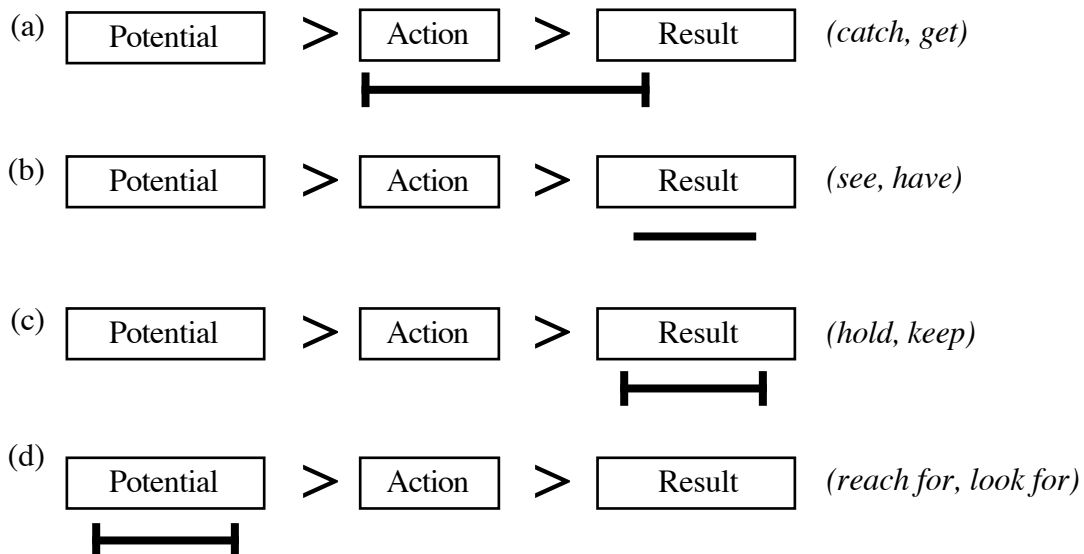
D. The Control Cycle

The General Model

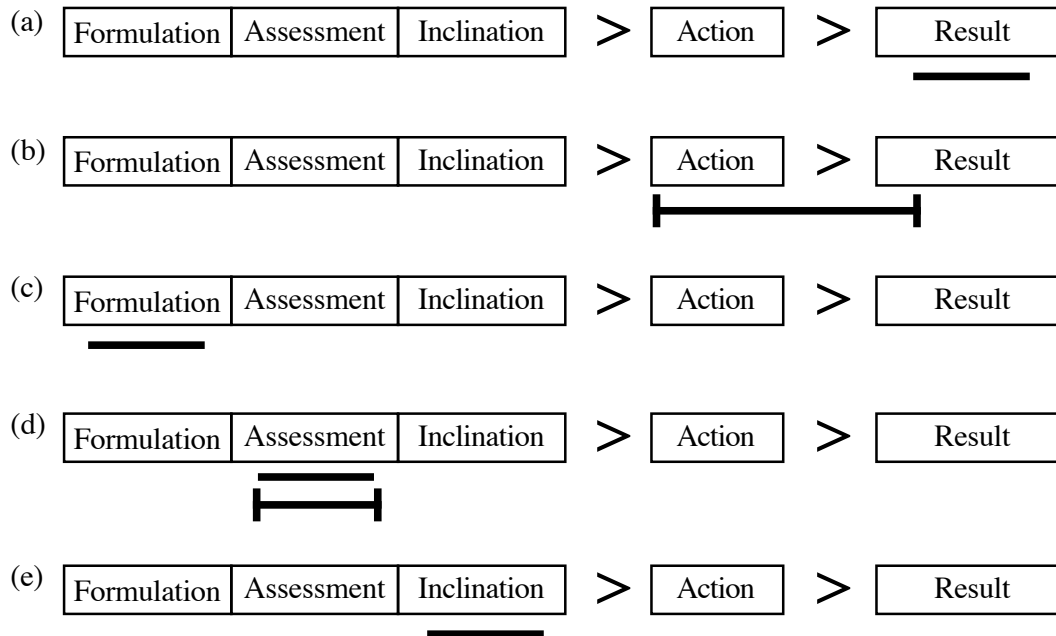
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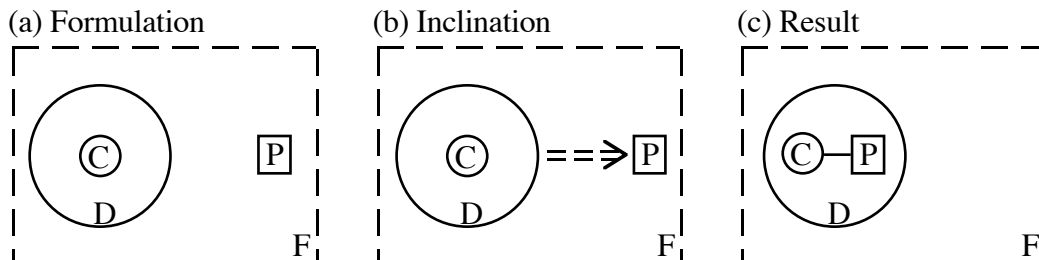
(49)

*Epistemic Level*

- (50)(a) Result: He {**knows** / **believes** / **thinks** / **realizes** / **accepts** / **is sure** / **is certain** / **is convinced**} that Bush is a pacifist.
- (b) Action: She {**learned** / **discovered** / **decided** / **concluded** / **realized** / **determined** / **found out** / **figured out**} that his whole story was a pack of lies.
- (c) Formulation: It is {**possible** / **conceivable** / **plausible** / **feasible** / **imaginable**} that they could be of some use to us.
- (d) Assessment: He {**wondered** / **considered** / **asked** / **was unsure** / **was undecided** / **was unclear**} whether the effort was worth the bother.
- (e) Inclination: I {**suspect** / **believe** / **suppose** / **think** / **figure** / **reckon**} they will never agree to my offer.

- (51) I don't {**suspect** / **believe** / **suppose** / **think** / **figure** / **reckon**} they will ever agree to my offer. [roughly equivalent to (50)(e): "negative raising"]

(52)



- (53)(a) **Albert** {*learned / decided / discovered*} *that aliens had stolen his shoes.*
 (b) **Albert** {*wondered / considered / asked*} *whether aliens had stolen his shoes.*
 (c) ***It** {*learned / decided / discovered*} *that aliens had stolen Albert's shoes.*
 (d) ***It** {*wondered / considered / asked*} *whether aliens had stolen Albert's shoes.*
- (54) ***We** *are* {*possible / conceivable / plausible / feasible / imaginable*} *that they could be of some use to us.*
- (55)(a) Formulation: *It is* {*conceivable / plausible / *possible / *feasible / *imaginable*} *to me that we could do it without getting caught.*
 (b) Assessment: *It is* {*unclear / *arguable / *uncertain / *unsure / *undecided*} *to me whether mosquitoes have souls.*
 (c) Inclination: *It* {*seems / appears / *is doubtful / *is likely / *is dubious*} *to me that she has enough money to buy Microsoft.*
 (d) Result: *It is* {*apparent / evident / obvious / *certain / *definite / *true / *undeniable*} *to me that China is destined to be the world's next superpower.*
- (56)(a) **I** *am certain that formalists will someday discover the meaningfulness of grammar.*
 (b) **It** *is certain that formalists will someday discover the meaningfulness of grammar.*

E. Impersonal *it*

What does *it* Mean?

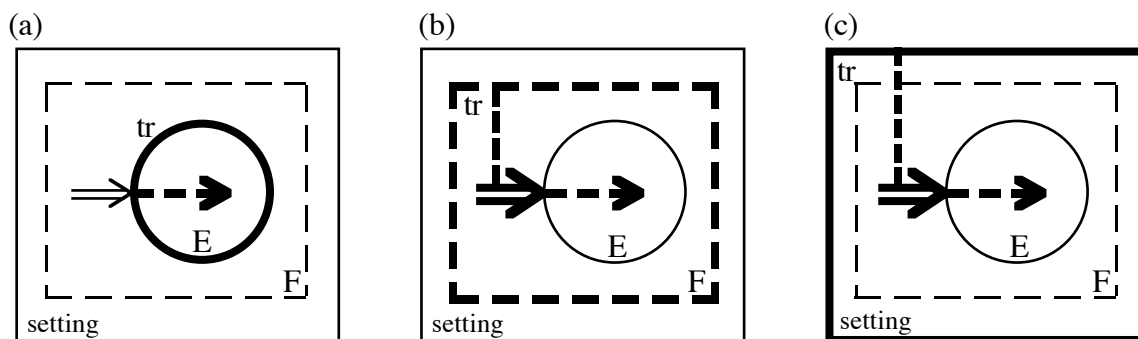
- (57)(a) *It* is always meaningful and referential.
 (b) Its meaning is just as expected for a third person singular neuter definite pronoun.
 (c) *Impersonal* uses of *it* represent extreme cases of vagueness and non-delimitation, but nonetheless conform to its general meaning.
- (58) Why *it* may fail to significantly delimit its referent:
 (a) Its deictic component (person) merely points away from the speaker and hearer.
 (b) Its type specification excludes very little:
 (i) no lexical type specification;
 (ii) 'neuter' excludes only humans;
 (iii) 'singular' excludes only plural entities.
 (c) The remaining pool of eligible candidates is extremely broad and variegated:
 (i) a non-plural mass of any size or type;
 (ii) any single physical entity other than a person;
 (iii) anything abstract.
 (d) Certain kinds of entities—including masses and locations—can be of any size and degree of inclusiveness.
 (e) Inherent vagueness of reference (imprecision or uncertainty about exactly what one is singling out).

- (59)(a) *How's **it** going?* [cf. *How are **things** going?*]
 (b) ***It's** all finished between us.* [cf. ***Everything** is finished between us.*]
 (c) *I don't want to be rude—**it's** just that I have to go cook dinner.*
 (d) *Look, **it's** Harry!*
- (60)(a) ***It** was {raining / snowing / foggy / cold} last night.*
 (b) Possible referents of *it*: the atmosphere; atmospheric conditions; the spatio-temporal setting; the relevant scope of awareness (either the speaker's or that of a local observer).
- (61)(a) *We can't walk through this field—**it's** oozing oil all over.*
 (b) ***It's** our wedding anniversary.*
 (c) ***It's** quiet in the countryside.*
 (d) ***It's** chaotic in the Middle East.*
 (e) ***It's** fun when old friends get together.*
 (f) ***It's** awkward when your wife meets your lover.*
- (62)(a) ***It's** conceivable that we'll have to buy a new mattress.*
 (b) ***It's** uncertain whether he can finish the race.*
 (c) ***It** appears that the epidemic was caused by a virus.*
 (d) ***It's** very clear that our leaders cannot be trusted.*
- (63) Impersonal *it* profiles the relevant **field**, i.e. the conceptualizer's *scope of awareness* for the issue at hand.
- (64)(a) *Bush firmly believes that the rich should pay no taxes.*
 [specific, focused conceptualizer; profiles interaction of participants; transitive]
 (b) *It is obvious that the rich should pay no taxes.*
 [implicit, generalized conceptualizer; abstract, setting-like trajector; intransitive]
- (65)(a) **Dynamicity**: The *time course* of a conceptualization—how it develops and unfolds through processing time—is an important dimension of semantic structure.
 (b) **Reference point organization**: Invoking one entity as a *reference point* in order to mentally access a *target* associated with it; accessing one entity *via* another.
 (c) **Focal prominence**: *Trajector* and *landmark* are the *first* and *second reference points* accessed in building up to the full conception of a profiled relationship (the target).
- (66)(a) *In the driveway sat a brand new luxury car.*
 (b) *He's staying in La Jolla, at La Valencia Hotel, on the sixth floor, in room 619.*
 (c) *the book of Job, chapter 28, verse 17*
 (d) *finger nail, door handle, tire tread, tree root, jar lid, table leg, mountain top*

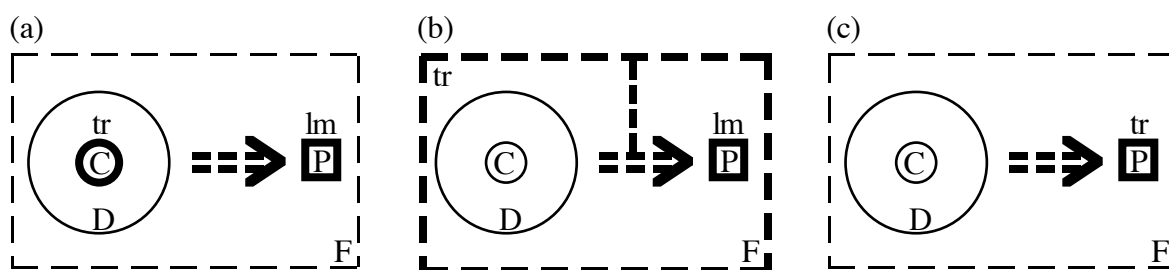
Impersonal Constructions

- (67)(a) *I'm {hot / cold / freezing / miserable} here in Chicago.*
 (b) *It's {hot / cold / freezing / miserable} in Chicago.*
 (c) *Chicago is {hot / cold / freezing / miserable}.*

(68)

(69)(a) *I {suspect / believe / imagine} that she will be elected.*(b) *It {appears / seems / is likely} that she will be elected.*(c) *That she will be elected is {likely / probable / doubtful}.*

(70)



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