What we should do is blame *do*[*]

Christopher Potts
UC Santa Cruz
potts@ling.ucsc.edu
http://ling.ucsc.edu/~potts

April 25, 2001

Dowty (1979:§2.2.2) observes that only non-stative predicates can appear in *pseudocleft* constructions. He provides the data in (1a-c); I round out the paradigm with a grammatical example involving an achievement, (1d).

(1)   a. *What John did was know the answer.   [state]

       b. What John did was run.   [activity]

       c. What John did was build a house.   [accomplishment]

       d. What John did was spot the mythical jackalope.   [achievement]

But Dowty's generalization is unsatisfactory, for two reasons. First, it is insufficiently delicate. As Shigeto Kawahara observes (personal communication, 3/10/01), it would be wrong to claim simply that pseudoclefts and statives are incompatible, in light of grammatical examples like (2), which involve the stative verbs *know* and *desire*.

(2)   a. What John knows is the answer.

       b. What Martha desires is a bowl of pea soup.

Second, Dowty's generalization, even if formulated so as to allow (2), is just a descriptive statement. The pseudocleft is a complex and variable construction. Which of its properties runs afoul of stativity? And why? This paper argues that Dowty's generalization is actually a special case of the much broader constraint in (3).

(3)   Main-verb *do* is incompatible with stative predicates.

Thus, it is not the pseudocleft construction as a whole that results in the star on (1a). Rather, the problem is with the verb *do* that appears in the pseudocleft clause. This generalization has the virtue of differentiating the pseudoclefts in (1) from those in (2), since the latter lack any

---

form of the verb *do*. But (3) is interesting only if it can be shown that main-verb *do* shows up elsewhere and manifests the same restriction in those constructions. And this depends on the assumption that there is a rigorous way of differentiating main-verb *do* from the auxiliary *do* in (4), which quite obviously has no trouble taking a stative complement.

(4)   a.   Clyde *do*es (too) know the combination to the safe!

        b.   Does Clyde desire to spend more time in jail?

        c.   Clyde knows the combination. And Bonny does, too.

I address the first task first: differentiating main-verb *do* from the auxiliary *do* in (4). This provides the tools for isolating other occurrences of main-verb *do* and testing to see whether they obey generalization (3).

First, main-verb *do* is clearly distinguished from auxiliary *do* in its ability to occur under auxiliary verbs. In this sense, it earns its "main-verb" moniker, since it patterns with main verbs like steal; see (5).

(5)   a.   Bonny has done a lot for Clyde.

        b.   Bonny has stolen a lot for Clyde.

        c.   Well, Martha has believed your claims in the past. *And George has done, too

Second, main-verb *do* does not invert in yes–no questions. Indeed, it takes its own auxiliary *do* in this environment. Here again, there is a parallel with verbs that are uncontroversially main:

(6)   a.   Did Ali do a good job?

        b.   *Does Ali a good job?

(7)   a.   Did Ali catch a butterfly?

        b.   *Caught Ali a butterfly?

Third, main-verb *do* can appear in infinitives and verbal gerunds. Auxiliary *do* is always unwelcome in any position in which it cannot bear tense inflection, so it is barred from such environments.

(8)   a.   Ali managed to do the homework on time.

        b.   *Ali managed to do complete the homework on time.

        c.   We noticed him doing strange things.

        d.   *We noticed him doing eat(ing) smelly but luscious durians.

So we have a trio of solid tests for distinguishing the *do*'s. As seen in (9), the auxiliary-verb and the infinitival occurrence tests show that pseudoclefts involve main verb *do*.

(9)   a.   What Ali has done is catch herself a butterfly.

        b.   What Ali might do is build an igloo.

        c.   What Ali managed to do is catch the flu.

Unfortunately, since pseudocleft clauses are incompatible with yes–no questions, this test is not applicable. But the inapplicability has nothing to do with *do*, as seen in (10b).

(10)   a.   *What did Ali do is build an igloo.

        b.   *What did Ali catch is a butterfly.

So it is clear that (3) does all the work of Dowty's generalization. But we are also now in a position to show that (3) represents a gain in empirical coverage. For instance, the diagnostics indicate that the form of *do* at work in the *do so* verb-phrase (VP) proform construction is a main verb. As (11) indicates, the same is true of the VP proform uses of it and that. (I believe this observation is originally due Lakoff and Ross (1976:105); see also Hankamer and Sag 1976:nt 27.

(11)   a.   Martha snarfed up a bowl of soup. Did George do {so / it / that} too?

        b.   Martha has snarfed up ten bowls of soup. George has done {so / it / that} too.

        c.   Martha hopes to snarf up ten bowls of soup. George hopes to do {so / it / that} as well.

Thus, (3) predicts that *do so / it / that* is incompatible with stative predicates. I illustrate in (12) with *do so* alone, to keep the examples readable. The facts for *do it* and *do that* are parallel.

(12)   a.   Bonny knows the combination. *And Clyde does so too.

        b.   Martha desires a bowl of soup. *George does so too.

Of course, both the examples in (12) are grammatical without *so*. But such instances of true VP-ellipsis involve auxiliary *do*, as seen in (5c).

A second environment that features main-verb *do* is the exceptive-type construction in (13).

(13)   a.   Juan did nothing except walk his llama.

        b.   Juan has done nothing all day except walk his llama.

        c.   Did Juan do anything except walk his llama?

Again, (3) correctly accounts for, but Dowty remains silent about, the incompatibility of this construction with stative verb phrases; see (14).

(14)   a.   *Juan has done nothing all day except own a llama.

        b.   *Did Bonny do anything except know the combination to the safe.

Thus, we have seen that (3) is superior to Dowty's descriptive generalization in that it properly allows the pseudocleft–stative mixes in (2), and also accounts for a wider array of data. We also have a principled answer to the question of what it is about pseudo-clefts that makes them incompatible with statives — the verb's to blame; I have in effect reduced the generalization to one about lexical semantics. The same strategy is likely to prove fruitful in getting to the bottom of other of Dowty's (1979:§2.2) diagnostics for aspect. For instance, Dowty observes that the verb *finish* distinguishes achievements, statives, and activities on the one hand from accomplishments on the other. He provides data such as those in (15).

(15)   a.   Sal finished writing his squib.   [accomplishment]

         b.   *Sal finished noticing the crushing counterexample.   [achievement]

         c.   ??Sal finished crying.   [activity]

         d.   *Sal finished desiring a bigger brain.   [state]

As Sara Finley observes (personal communication, 3/10/01), it seems correct to say that *finish* requires of its complement that it be (i) durative; and (ii) telic. These requirements handily block (15b,d), and explain why (15c) has a marginal existence, since speakers naturally try to save the example by inferring some predefined endpoint for Sal's crying spell. (I thank Perry Lubin for discussion of this point (3/10/01).) Again, the paradigm is easily explained by appeal to a lexical semantics clash. Thus, this squib can be read in part as the urging of a research strategy for better understanding Dowty's tests for verbal aspect: attention to the semantics of the individual lexical items is likely to yield dividends here.

References

Dowty, David. 1979. *Word Meaning and Montague Grammar*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishers.

Hankamer, Jorge and Ivan Sag. 1976. Deep and surface anaphora. *Linguistic Inquiry* 7:3 (391-426).

Lakoff, George and John Robert Ross. 1976. Why you can't *do so* into the kitchen sink. In James D. McCawley (ed.), *Syntax and Semantics 7: Notes from the linguistic underground*, 101-111. New York, NY: Academic Press.