REPRESENTATION OF CONTROL AND RESPONSIBILITY BY MEANS OF ENGLISH SYNTAX

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Abstract

The paper studies the way a situation of reality as well as the attitudinal semantics such as control and responsibility attributed to its participants are represented in the English simple sentence. For this purpose, the paper analyses the way President Donald Trump's 2019 and 2021 impeachments were described by the English-speaking mass media. This topic seems to be a reasonable choice since, on the one hand, the situation itself is quite well-defined and, on the other hand, this particular news story received enormous press coverage and was depicted from all possible angles. The syntactic and semantic structure of the prototype impeachment situation (its argument structure) was defined and described based on the meaning and valency of the verb 'to impeach'. A selection of utterances describing impeachment was prepared via corpus and manual searches and then considered and classified in terms of various basic sentence patterns. They can be used to conceptualize one and the same situation by means of language, e.g. motion of an object (SPA_{DirLoc}), caused motion of an object ($SPO_{Dir}A_{DirLoc}$), object's action on another object (SPO_{Dir}), location of an object ($SP_{Link}A_{Loc}$). The role of cognitive metaphor and metonymy in syntactic conceptualization was studied and explained. The paper also looks into the motivation and meaning behind the variety of the impeachment formal representations. Each class of utterances revealed a number of semantic peculiarities such as the degree of control and responsibility (or lack thereof) attributed to the actors or the author's attitude to the event and person described.

1. Introduction

'To impeach' or 'impeachment', according to the Oxford advanced learner's dictionary, refers to a situation when a court or other official body charge an important public figure with a serious crime. Considered literally and in a pragmatic 'vacuum', the verb 'impeach' is a rather dry procedural term, akin to 'charge' meaning no more than an official accusation that is to be proceeded by a trial. It seems a rather clear-cut case in terms of syntax, too, with an authority acting as an agentive subject and the person being accused as a patient-object. However, the world media reveal a vast diversity of syntactical models describing impeachment that inevitably leads to the rethinking of the concept itself as well as the roles attributed to the actors involved in the situation.

2. Problem Statement

The paper analyses various syntactic representations of Donald Trump's impeachments in media texts. The former US president was indeed impeached two times: on December 18, 2019 for the abuse of power and obstruction of Congress and on January 13, 2021 for incitement of insurrection. The Senate acquitted him of all charges both times which, however, did not make the topic any less acute considering the never-receding avalanche of public indignation towards that particular politician. With few exceptions like the pro-Trump FOX, media coverage of the events was anything but neutral and impartial. This article will focus on the syntactic means of describing the 'Trump's being impeached' situation, particularly simple sentence patterns, that intend to convey various shades of the authors' attitude to the event in question.

To begin with, let us consider a few example utterances that we believe to be syntactically and semantically neutral and, thus, merely factual.

(1) <u>The House</u> <u>impeached</u> <u>President Trump</u> (cnbc.com)

(2) <u>President Donald Trump</u> <u>was impeached</u> by <u>the U.S. House</u> (apnews.com)

From the formal point of view, the above are two manifestations of one and the same SPO$_{Dir}$ structural pattern as both present the exact same set of syntactic arguments: a subject and a direct object. They are identical semantically as well, since 'impeach' is a predicate, a body authorized to impeach (the US House in this case) represents an active agent that – being in full control of the situation – acts over another person, the party to be impeached, who is a patient and does not control the situation at all.

However, there are other ways of conceptualizing impeachment in language, namely those based on the fundamental cognitive mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). In terms of syntax, this will imply reflecting this complex concept generally associated with a controlled action on another object through patterns inherent for motion-related actions or even static situations (Kuzmina, 2015). Changes in form, however, will unavoidably lead to changes in meaning, from shifting the focus of attention to splitting the agent's control, cases of which we are to detect and analyse as well.

3.   Research Questions

The paper as it is shown in the above premise will concentrate on the two main questions:

1. The first one has to do with the ways of formal representation of impeachment through syntax, particularly, English simple sentence.

2. The other one concerns the meaning behind various syntactic representations: whether and how they may serve to convey the author's attitude to the situation and its participants, if they can become indicators of semantic categories such as control and responsibility.

4.   Purpose of the Study

The present paper intends to analyse English utterances describing impeachment and is aimed at showing the various ways of conceptualizing impeachment in English syntax. The role of metaphor, metonymy and integration will be discussed in this respect. The study will also try to look into the motivation and meaning behind the variety of formal representations of impeachment, especially the hidden semantic categories such as control, responsibility.

5.   Research Methods

The research material is constituted by utterances about impeachment taken from English-language mass media. English corpora were used for the purpose of the study, e.g. Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), News on the Web (NOW), iWeb: The Intelligent Web-based Corpus. The lemma-search (CAPITALIZED), synonyms-search (=word), combining words (Asterisks *) modes allowed making search entries as close as possible to a desired syntactic pattern. Each entry contained the word IMPEACH in the lemma-search mode or IMPEACHMENT accompanied in most of the cases by some other words. They were intended to recreate a probable context and syntactic structure, e.g. '=toward impeachment', 'IMPEACH * out' and '=go =near IMPEACHMENT' for motion-related structures; 'BE * IMPEACHMENT' (for static patterns); simple entries such as 'Trump IMPEACH', 'himself impeached' and so on. Similar search was made in Google, mainly to include some major sources that tend to be excluded from the free corpora (or only allow access to older content) due to views limits, mandatory subscription, etc.

The obtained utterances were analysed, categorized and classified according to their syntactic structure and conceptualization mechanism. Semantic analysis was also performed based on the context, the inherent meaning of one or another syntactic pattern and the already existing research on various types of syntactic structures and semantic categories.

6.   Findings

Impeachment being an event of outstanding social and political importance always comes under the spotlight and often refuses to be reduced to a mere official act. Instead, it is depicted as a much more complex event that includes both the official impeachment procedure as well as all the events and actions on the part of the impeached party that have led to it. Via the omnipresent cognitive mechanisms of

metonymy and integration that allow for the representation of the whole event by one of its stages or another related event (Barcelona, 2009; Fauconnier & Turner, 2003), the focus is drawn to the President who is consciously committing impeachable offences that are going to result in the inevitable, thus restricting the role of the House of Representatives who are, actually, legally bound to take the final decision to an insignificant formality.

Control, or controllability, is at that one of the key concepts here, being inseparable from will, responsibility and freedom (Shatunovsky, 1989). Authors that write about control and related notions usually coincide at least in two things. The first renders that control is gradual and never absolute in real life which cannot, of course, be fully and adequately reflected when categorizing and classifying linguistic material. The second means that a controlled action consists of several phases: a mental one that will include the desire, intention and planning; the realization stage and the result (Silnitskiy, 2012; Zaliznyak, 1992). Information about the lack or degree of control can be rendered by the mere nature of the action, by the context, by special lexical units expressing intentionality (adverbial modifiers such as on *purpose, intentionally, willingly*; verbs indicating stages of a controlled action such as *try, plan, intend*). The latter is discussed in (Kutsevich, 2015; Shramko, 2002).

In fact, it seems that showing Donald Trump in control of the situation (even partial or metaphoric one), responsible for what is going on allows avoiding the former US President's favourite rhetoric of being a victim of bias, unjustly attacked and judged for the crimes he never committed. The fact that many Americans (and not only Americans) probably did think he deserved what had come upon him and were only eager to show their negative attitude, remains in place too.

The formal analysis of the selection of utterances revealed four groups of metaphoric representations. Some of the utterances have undergone both metaphoric and metonymic shifts that despite being very different by nature are not in any way exclusive (Goossens, 2009).

6.1. Impeachment as motion of an object (SPA$_{Dir.Loc.}$)

Impeachment (or sometimes passive infinitive *being impeached*) is shown as a directional complement, a destination point where the President is going to. Among the verbs that are used there are those that may either imply controlled motion or are also common to represent the one that is not necessarily controlled but is very steady and fast. Let us consider the examples below:

*(3) it seems even Kelly believes Trump might **be headed** toward impeachment (americanindependent.com).*

*(4) Is Trump **marching** to impeachment? (hollandsentinel.com).*

*(5) Trump may **be getting close** to being impeached (skepticalscience.com).*

The following examples feature the phrase *get impeached* that may well also be considered as representing controlled motion. The past participle *impeached* can be seen here as a directional complement. Such cases are described in (Goldberg, 1995). Examples (6) and (7) are set around Trump's first impeachment when rumor went he was actually trying to get impeached on purpose, number (8) is a sarcastic exaggeration, so the utterances should be understood quite literally.

*(6) Donald Trump is not **trying to get impeached** (deadspin.com).*

*(7) Is President Trump **trying to get Impeached** or is he setting the stage for his Resignation (medium.com).*

*(8) Honestly, there's a chance he's **trying to get impeached** so he can collect unemployment. – Seth Meyers (journalgazette.net).*

The verb *try* only adds to the idea of the controllability of the action and proves that *get* cannot be taken for a meaningless link verb (compare with (5) where *get* is clearly a verb of controlled motion). Hilary Chapell's 1980 article '*Is the Get-Passive Adversative?*' seems to provide a rather comprehensive picture of the matter (Chapell, 1980). However, we would prefer to avoid Chapell's term 'get-passive' to not create any confusion between what we believe to be a grammatical verb form (*be impeached*) and what is a part of a completely different sentence pattern (*get impeached*).

In Chapell's view, even though it is impossible to attribute some fixed set of connotations to the get-structures, they are certainly different from be-passive, only those differences may be more prominent in some contexts than in others. For example, they are used to show one's negative or positive attitude to an event or a person, as well as tend to convey a certain degree of responsibility on the part of the subject. The following group of utterances is, probably, an even better example of the latter.

6.2. Impeachment as caused motion of an object (SPO$_{Dir}$A$_{Dir.Loc.}$)

One of the most frequent caused motion patterns is the one where both the subject and the direct object represent the same person, in this particular case the President who is going to be impeached; and the participle 'impeached' serves as a directional complement. Chapell (1980) described the subject of such syntactical structures as 'tempting fate' through some actions that are considered inappropriate and unacceptable and are likely to result in an unfortunate state of affairs. It seems that different contexts should imply different degrees of control and consciousness, e.g. (9) is a sarcastic take that implies that Trump *got himself impeached* fully consciously and intentionally while (10) is closer to the 'tempting fate but not quite aiming at being impeached' definition.

*(9) Donald Trump is so afraid of Joe Biden that **he** went and **got himself impeached** (nypost.com).*

*(10) John Kelly's done trying to stop **Trump** from **getting himself impeached** (americanindependent.com).*

Another frequent option includes the person to be impeached as a subject, a motion-related term (step, move) as a direct object and 'impeachment' as a directional complement. It is similar to the controlled motion representation, although the objectification of a single movement or a single step is probably even more unambiguous in showing that the President's actions are so blatant and hard to believe in that they look intentional and calculated.

*(11) Donald **Trump took a significant step towards impeachment** last evening with the sacking of FBI Director James Comey (lbc.co.uk).*

6.3. Impeachment as object's action on another object (SPO$_{Dir}$)

Although the SPO$_{Dir}$ pattern is, actually, standard for the impeachment situation, in some utterances where it is used the roles of the participants are rethought and thus the meaning of the structure changes as

well. The subject of the sentence is the person to be impeached, the object is a reflexive pronoun representing that same person while the predicate is 'impeach' in its active form.

While in the previous cases the House of Representatives' participation in the situation was grammatically perceivable despite the lack of mentions thereof (there were metaphorical depictions of the President's intentional or caused movement towards the situation where he will be impeached by the authority), what remained of the Houses's responsibility and control over the situation is completely annihilated in the following utterances:

(12) *Trump is impeaching himself (edition.cnn.com).*

(13) *But if **you** persist in **impeaching yourself** on an almost hourly basis, that really wrecks the challenge for me (newyorker.com).*

The semantics of the concept and the situation behind 'impeachment' and 'impeach' has been changed completely. The metaphor is not, of course, about Trump eagerly voting about his own impeachment during the House session but about his actions being so outrageous that the impeachment may be taken for granted. The verb 'impeach' here means events that happened before the actual impeachment while the latter seems excluded at all. And there are even more drastic transformations such as the one in example (14):

(14) *It turns out Speaker Nancy Pelosi might have been onto something when she talked about **Trump being "almost self-impeaching"** several months ago (edition.cnn.com).*

The use of the self-compound approximates the verb 'impeach' even more to the verbs that actually mean doing something to yourself or by yourself without other people's interruption. Formally speaking, self-impeaching is not even an action on another object anymore but an activity since no grammatical object is possible.

6.4. Impeachment as location of an object (SP$_{Link}$A$_{Loc}$)

Impeachment can be depicted as a static situation where the President is the subject and the impeachment is a reference point regarding which the president's location in space is described.

(15) ***Their leader** just lost his reelection bid by 7 million votes, **is about to be impeached** for a second time and could well face criminal liability (washingtonpost.com).*

(16) *But he also warned that **the president was "perilously close" to impeachment** (theweek.com).*

(17) *Democratic Representative Al Green claimed that **President Donald Trump is "one step closer to impeachment"** (newsweek.com).*

On the one hand, static structures do not generally tend to make actions or situations look more controlled. On the other hand, put this way, impeachment resembles some kind of a danger from the physical world like swamps or rocks that should better be avoided (or may well represent an impending doom, however). And although Trump is not shown to be taking actual steps to being impeached unlike in the previous examples, the House's decision-making role is not very prominent either which again narrows the picture down to whether Trump's next move will bring him closer to the abyss or if he will choose to stay safe.

7. Conclusion

A variety of syntactic representations of one and the same rather simple situation of *President Trump being impeached* is mainly due to cognitive metaphor and metonymy (often both of them combined). Metaphor is what allows depicting a situation which is inherently about somebody producing an action on another person or object through other structural patterns, e.g., through describing movement or a static position. As for the metonymic shift, this is the reason which explains why 'impeach' or 'impeachment' can stand for the actions and events that triggered the impeachment instead of the actual impeachment procedure.

The analysis of the material revealed that the following syntactic patterns could be used to describe the situation in question:

1) motion of an object (SPA$_{Dir.Loc.}$);

2) caused motion of an object (SPO$_{Dir}$A$_{Dir.Loc.}$);

3) object's action on another object (SPO$_{Dir}$);

4) location of an object (SP$_{Link}$A$_{Loc}$).

In groups (1) and (2) where impeachment was depicted as motion, the President to be impeached posed as the sentence subject that possesses at least partial control over the situation while 'impeachment', 'impeached' or 'being impeached' served as directional complements. The predicate was represented by the verbs that tend to name either controlled motion or at least fast and steady motion ('be headed', 'march', 'get', etc.). In case of the caused motion pattern, Trump was shown as intentionally bringing *himself* towards impeachment. His responsibility for the upcoming events was sometimes highlighted by the use of such control markers as 'try', 'on purpose'.

Group 3 seems to show Trump be in full control of the impeachment to the point of metonymically using 'impeach' or even 'self-impeach' as actions attributed to the President solely, with the House of Representatives' role becoming null. Some other SPO$_{Dir}$ utterances are close semantically to the motion-related ones as in them the President takes steps towards impeachment, which makes his actions look even more deliberate and calculated.

Group 4 sees Trump and impeachment as two objects in space with Trump either wandering around the dangerous impeachment swamps or getting perilously close. This particular pattern does not seem to stress the President's control over the situation (linguists do not consider static situation from the point of view of control or agentivity at all). However, it removes the House's control form the picture as well, so that Trump is again the one to decide whether to close the remaining distance between himself and the impeachment or make a cautious step back.

The English simple sentence proves a rather productive and effective means of representation of one's positive or negative attitude to the person or event described and, even more importantly, an effective tool that conveys the semantics of control, controllability, responsibility and will.

Studying and understanding the principles of syntactic conceptualization is crucial for the correct interpretation of an English text as well as the current political and social context. A more thorough study of syntax and complicated cognitive processes that stand behind each syntactic structure is probably the missing link in foreign language and translation teaching too. It is no wonder that cognitive mechanisms

behind syntactic representations and specific syntactic structures, syntactic interferences between languages are generating considerable interest nowadays (Belyaeva & Sineokova, 2021; Kabanova, 2019; Rakhmankulova, 2020). One of the reasons why students' translations into Russian sometimes sound more English than those very students' essays written in English (actually, true for Spanish and probably other foreign languages as well) is the absence of any clear understanding of what a sentence and a text are structurally and if this structure is at all meaningful. Aside from some of its fundamental aspects, syntax often seems something that is supposed to be understood and used intuitively. Reading and listening helps, of course, but the thing is foreign language syntactic mechanisms may be, in fact, rather *counter*-intuitive, especially if you do not know what you are looking for.

Acknowledgments

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