

**SYMMETRIC PREDICATES CONTAIN COMITATIVES**

Jeroen van Craenenbroeck & Kyle Johnson

**OUTLINE** We argue that verbs such as *meet*, which Wehbe (2025) characterizes as reciprocal versions of transitives (*Raj and Sue met* = *Raj and Sue met each other*) are instead underlyingly intransitive, and in fact unaccusative. We argue that it is the transitive versions of these intransitives that are derived, and that the process responsible for this is also the source of symmetric predicates (following Winter 2018). Our proposal is (1); our goal is to explain it.

(1) *you met me* = *I met you* = *we met* **because** *meet* is underlyingly intransitive  
*you kicked me* ≠ *I kicked you* ≠ *we kicked* **because** *kick* is underlyingly transitive

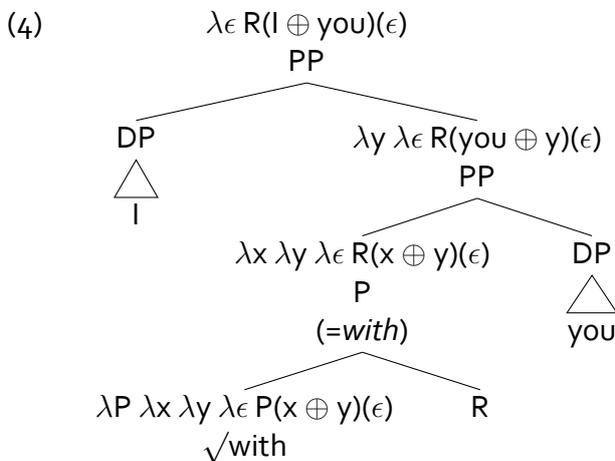
Our account correctly derives that verbs like *meet* must be unaccusative. It also makes symmetric verbs contain a comitative (Ginzburg 1990). Unlike Wehbe’s proposal, this explains why the transitive version of these verbs is always symmetric. Unlike Winter’s account, ours explains why inherent reciprocity never targets the external  $\theta$ -role of a transitive predicate.

**COMITATIVES & SYMMETRY** The link between comitatives and symmetry is well-established: many symmetric verbs require the preposition *with*, and predicates that oscillate between symmetric and non-symmetric mark the symmetric option with *with* (Winter 2018:6):

(2) a. Bill made love to George. *non-symmetric*  
 b. Bill made love with George. *symmetric*

**COMITATIVES VS. DEPICTIVES** We follow Dowty (1991) in that symmetric transitives are verbs that assign the same  $\theta$ -role to subject and object. Non-symmetric verbs like *kick* cannot do this. We argue that comitatives provide a way of overcoming the ban on assigning the same  $\theta$ -role to more than one argument (see Chomsky (1981)’s “Theta Criterion”). Consider (3)–(4). We propose that the word *with* is made of two pieces:  $\sqrt{\text{with}}$  and *R*, a free variable. The free variable *R* is responsible for *I am with you* being able to have a range of meanings that depend on context (e.g. *I am in a relationship with you*, *I am next to you*, etc.).

(3) *I wrote the abstract with you.*

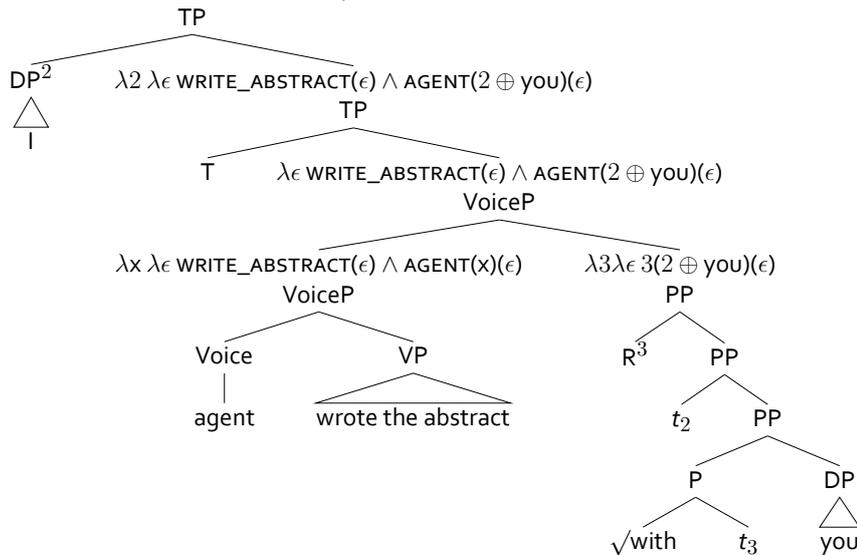


When *with* combines with just one DP, it is the right semantic type to be a depictive. This allows the *with* phrase in (3) to have an interpretation like that in (5a), parallel to (5b).

(5) a. *I wrote the abstract with you* ≈ *I wrote the abstract while being with you*  
 b. *I wrote the abstract medicated* ≈ *I wrote the abstract while medicated*

Depictives require temporal overlap between the state denoted by the depictive and the event denoted by the verb they associate with. Only when the situation described by (3) does not involve that kind of overlap (like when the authors labored on this abstract at different times and locations), must *you* and *I* both be understood as agents of the writing event. Hence, we propose that (3) may also have the representation in (6). (See Kayne 1994, Zhang 2007 for the syntax.)

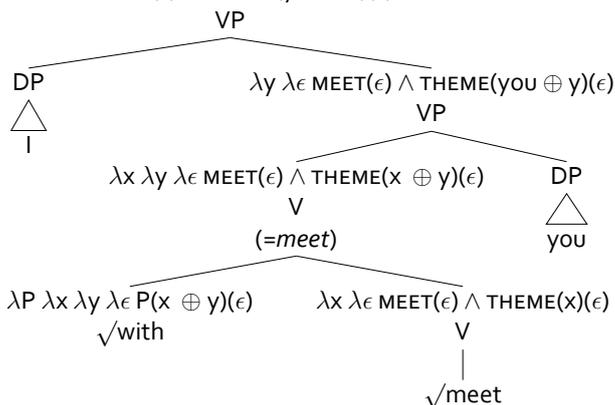
(6)  $\lambda\epsilon \text{ WRITE\_ABSTRACT}(\epsilon) \wedge \text{AGENT}(1 \oplus \text{you})(\epsilon)$



Note that R moves to create an abstraction. This allows *with* to cause *write*'s single external  $\theta$ -role to be assigned to two different positions, overcoming the Theta Criterion.

**PROPOSAL** We propose that symmetric transitives occur when  $\sqrt{\text{with}}$  is conflated with an intransitive root in the way that (7) illustrates.

(7)  $\lambda\epsilon \text{ MEET}(\epsilon) \wedge \text{THEME}(\text{you} \oplus \text{I})(\epsilon)$



This means that the intransitives from which symmetric transitives derive must be unaccusatives; unergatives are the wrong semantic type to conflate with  $\sqrt{\text{with}}$ . This is substantiated by a variety of tests, including Horn (1980)'s: the only intransitives *re-* prefixes to are unaccusatives:

(8) \**They resneezed yesterday. They reappeared yesterday. They remet yesterday.*

The pattern in (8) shows *meet* is unaccusative, like *appear*. When  $\sqrt{\text{with}}$  is conflated with a transitive verb it can affect the internal  $\theta$ -role (as in (9)), but not the external  $\theta$ -role.

(9) *She introduced us = She introduced you to me = She introduced me to you*

This, again, is because  $\sqrt{\text{with}}$  can only conflate with roots that have an internal  $\theta$ -role, which  $\sqrt{\text{with}}$  will distribute across two positions. Unlike Winter (2018), our account therefore correctly derives that symmetric verbs are always built from roots and their internal arguments.

**SUMMARY** The contrast in (1) is explained: because intransitive *meet* is unaccusative, it can conflate with  $\sqrt{\text{with}}$  and form a symmetric transitive. Because *kick* assigns two  $\theta$ -roles, it cannot be symmetric, and because there isn't a process that intransitivizes transitives by making them implicitly reciprocal (*pace* Wehbe 2025), intransitive *kick* cannot be reciprocal. In the talk, we will be more specific about the nature of the equivalence between *You met me, I met you, and We met*, and we argue that verbs like *kiss* have both a transitive and an unaccusative (and hence symmetric) guise. Finally, we will dispel any reservations you may be now harboring.

## References

- Chomsky, Noam. 1981. *Lectures on government and binding*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Foris Publications.
- Dowty, David. 1991. Thematic proto-roles and argument selection. *Language* 67:547–619.
- Ginzburg, Jonathan. 1990. On the non-unity of symmetric predicates: Mondadic comitatives and dyadic equivalence relations. In *The Proceedings of NELS 20*, ed. Juli Carter, Rose-Marie Dechaine, Bill Philip, and Tim Sherer, 135–149. Graduate Linguistic Student Association, University of Massachusetts at Amherst.
- Horn, Laurence. 1980. Affixation and the Unaccusative Hypothesis. In *Papers from the sixteenth regional meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*, ed. Jody Kreiman and Almerindo E. Ojeda, volume 16, 134–146. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society.
- Kayne, Richard S. 1994. *The antisymmetry of syntax*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Wehbe, Jad. 2025. Covert reciprocals: a scope-based analysis of reciprocal alternations. *Natural Language Semantics*.
- Winter, Yoad. 2018. Symmetric predicates and the semantics of reciprocal alternations. *Semantics and Pragmatics* 11:1–47.
- Zhang, Niina Ning. 2007. The syntax of English comitative constructions. *Folia Linguistica* 41:135–169.