

Events, States, and Actions: Some Clarifications

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In Higginbotham (1983) and subsequent work I offered to generalize the thesis, due to Donald Davidson, that ordinary heads in the $\pm N, \pm V$ system all had positions for events. Statives then have them too, though it jars the ear to call them events, as they do not involve change. Anyhow, the view, prosecuted in various places, is that argument-taking predicates all have an *E-position*, as I called it. From the beginning, there have been various issues about this view, some of which applied only to the generalization, whilst others applied even to the home domain of action predicates, for which Davidson had first proposed the E-position. Indeed, looking back over Davidson's various writings, one can see various tensions in his own development of the view. I propose here to discuss the major difficulties known to me, and to point out what seem to me the evident responses to them.

It should perhaps be stressed that the issue is not one of local damage control. The hypothesis of the E-position is an overarching hypothesis, in the sense that, while it suggests itself and is reinforced by various empirical evidence, there is no reason to expect that such evidence should always be abundant, for every single construction. The spirit of the thing, rather, is that, having adopted the E-position hypothesis, one is led to posit its application over a broad range of phenomena. Conversely, the issues that need to be addressed in response to legitimate problems when it is so applied are not isolated, but call for a comprehensive filling-out of the picture that the E-position hypothesis endorses.

The chief issues I will consider are the following:

1. Evidence for, and skepticism about, E-positions in statives and in light V such as 'do', 'give', 'suffer' in English. How can there be E-positions in Nouns?
2. Problems about action. All actions are events, though not all events are actions. Suppose I punch keys on my keyboard, and by that means write this sentence. Do I do two things, or only one? And what is the relation between them if I do two things?
3. Problems about θ -roles. Higginbotham (1985) and Carlson (1984) proposed that θ -roles are relations of participants to events. But these are hardly sharp. Parsons (1990) was willing to settle for "relative" θ -roles. But what could this mean? We should be able to separate the θ -roles from the heads, so that, e.g., 'John walks' comes out as 'walks(*e*) & Agent(John,*e*)'; but how could merely relative θ -roles be separated, since they have no meaning in isolation?

4. Issues about causation. We would like, e.g., transitive ‘break’ to be the causative of inchoative ‘break’. But the causation must be, as it is said, “direct?” What meaning does this have? If we can’t give a definition, must we conclude with Fodor that the lexicon is “atomistic?”

5. Causation is taken to be a simple relation between events (or events and states). If so, and if we follow the usual semantics for adverbials, it appears that (1) implies (2); but that looks wrong:

- (1) Pouring gasoline on the fire caused it to burn quickly; therefore,
- (2) Pouring gasoline on the fire caused it to burn.

The reason is that the complement of ‘cause’ is just

burn(*e*) & quick(*e*)

which of course implies

burn(*e*)

Davidson’s own response was to suggest that (1) is a case, not of causation, but of causal explanation. But the main predicate is just *cause*, nothing more.

6. Adverbs of quantification quantify over events. So in (3) we are likely speaking of John’s travels to work, and saying that most of them are walks, as in (4):

- (3) John mostly walks to work.
- (4) [Most *e*: (travel to work(John,*e*))] walk(John,*e*)

Now, when we have an ordinary sentence saying that there was an event of a certain kind, as in (5), we can form up a gerundive referring to the event, as in (6); and this is one of the successes of the theory as a whole:

- (5) Mary ate ice cream yesterday.
- (6) Mary enjoyed [PRO eating ice cream yesterday].

But we can *also* do the like for (3), as in (7):

- (7) John enjoys [PRO mostly walking to work].

and here the adverb is crucial to the meaning. But now, since by (4) the E-position in ‘walk’ does not survive to give us an object of reference, how are we to find an event in (7) for John to enjoy?