Why Can't We Dispense with the Subject-Predicate Form
without Losing Something More?

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The subject-predicate form is the predominant sentential form in English and many other languages, as it seems to represent the two fundamental functions of a language if the language can ever be used to talk about particular things at all: the function of reference and the function of predication. The subject of a sentence is a referring expression, which mentions or refers to some particular thing, or singles it out, and the predicate is an expression which predicates of or characterizes what is mentioned, referred to, or singled out. But the subject-predicate form is not the only form in which assertions can be made. There are what Strawson calls "feature-placing" sentences, sentences such as "it is raining here" or "there is snow there." Feature-placing sentences are so called, because they are used to describe some feature of the world (water, snow, coal, etc.) to be found in some place and time, and the feature that is introduced is typically "a general kind of stuff," not a particular nor a property or characteristic of particulars.

According to Strawson, the difference between subjects and predicates is that subjects do not introduce their terms in any particular style, while predicates introduce their terms in a quite distinctive and important style, namely, the assertive or propositional style.[1] The difference in their "style of introducing terms" is embodied by the following grammatical features: subjects do not, but predicates (or the verbs within predicates) must, inflect in tense, number and person.[2] It is because of this that subjects are said to be complete and predicates incomplete. As Strawson puts it, "The name 'Socrates' might be completed into any kind of remark, not necessarily a proposition; but the expression 'is wise' demands a certain kind of completion, namely completion into a proposition or propositional clause. The latter expression looks fragmentary just because it suggests a particular kind of completion; the former expression looks non-fragmentary just because it carries no such suggestion."[3] Strawson argues that (1) there must be at least one part of a proposition that is incomplete, otherwise the parts of the proposition cannot be held together; (2) only that which is incomplete can serve as a link of different parts of a proposition; (3) the predicate-expression in a sentence is incomplete, so it serves as the link.

Like a subject-predicate sentence, a feature-placing sentence consists of two main components, a feature expression (e.g., "water") and placing (e.g., "here"). But the two components constitute no contrast of the sort that characterizes a subject-predicate sentence, the contrast

between completeness and incompleteness.[4] For instance, in the sentence "it is snowing here," both of the two constituents, "is snowing" and "here," may be considered incomplete. The feature expression "is snowing" looks as fragmentary as the predicate expression "is wise," just because it, like "is wise," demands a certain kind of completion, that is, completion into a sentence. However, the placing expression, "here," as a demonstrative adverb, is also incapable of standing alone; it also demands completion into a sentence. In light of this, "it" can be seen as the answer to the demand from both expressions. A grammatical subject notwithstanding, "it" is a dummy, as unlike "Socrates" which introduces a particular, "it" introduces nothing whatsoever. However, while superficially it functions only to satisfy the general requirement of the English language that every assertive sentence must have a (grammatical) subject, it may be understood to carry the assertive symbolism which differentiates feature-placing propositions from the mere juxtaposition of expressions which are in need of being incorporated into propositions. While the assertive symbolism in a subject-predicate sentence is carried by one of the expressions, that is, the predicate expression, the assertive symbolism in a feature-placing sentence is carried by neither of the two expressions, namely, the feature expression and the placing expression, for otherwise "is snowing" and "here" alone, which introduce the two elements (the feature and the placing), can form a feature-placing sentence, which is not the case. It is the dummy "it" that plays the role of combining the two expressions, and perhaps only in this sense "it" may be understood as carrying the assertive symbolism.[5]

The grammatical features that distinguish subject-predicate sentences from feature-placing sentences in English we have just described may not be peculiar to English, but they are peculiar to a certain kind of inflected language, and hence are not common to all languages. Although English is a comparatively uninflected language, it is sufficiently inflected for the endings of its verbs, which provide the sufficient, if not necessary, conditions for the distinction. One can imagine that the absence of these grammatical features may leave nothing that can be identified as a contrast between completeness and incompleteness. It is possible that there exist languages whose sentences that are regularly translated as subject-predicate sentences in English are in fact all feature-placing sentences, sentences like "it is snowing here."[6] Thus, for instance, "Socrates is wise" may be rendered as "it is wise in Socrates," where "is wise" is no longer a predicate, but a feature expression, and "in Socrates" is a placing expression on a par with "here." "Socrates" is then understood as denoting a place where some feature, wisdom, is present, in much the same way "here" denotes a place where snow is found. That is, expressions that are predicates in the English subject-predicate sentences will all be treated as feature expressions, which introduce only feature universals, and not sortal or characterizing universals. However, other expressions such as "Socrates" may still be considered expressions that introduce particulars, that is, particular places, such that Socrates and Athens belong

to the same category.[7] To be sure, in the conceptual scheme implied by such a language, a categorial distinction between particular and universal can still be drawn, although particulars should be understood not in the Aristotelian fashion, that is, as being characterized or instantiated by universals, but as delimited regions where universal features are found, as all relations between particulars and universal are feature-placing. We are able to say "the same place" in the way we are able to say "the same object," as in the Aristotelian conceptual scheme, yet the identification of and distinction of places no longer turn on the identification and distinction of things, which is required when things and places are distinguished.[8]

But a question that immediately arises is whether such a conceptual scheme is coherent. Let us consider the sentence "Socrates is in Athens." It is in the subject-predicate form, with "Socrates" being the subject and "is in Athens" the predicate. If translated into a feature-placing sentence, it may become "it is being-in-Athens in Socrates" in accordance with the kind of analysis just proposed, where "is being-in-Athens" is a feature expression and "in Socrates" the placing expression, of which "Socrates" is a part and introduces a particular. Corresponding to the predicating a property of being in Athens of the individual Socrates conveyed by the subject-predicate sentence, the relation indicated in the feature-placing sentence is the placing a feature of being-in-Athens in the place of Socrates. The expression "is being-in-Athens" may be a bit misleading, as it contains "Athens," an expression that is supposed to introduce a particular, whereas it should rather be understood as holophrastic. However, this is certainly not the only way the original sentence can be translated. It is reasonable to treat "in Athens" as a placing expression, for after all, "Athens" is straightforwardly a place name. But if "in Athens" is a placing expression, "Socrates" has to be the expression that introduces a feature universal. So the sentence "Socrates is in Athens" should be translated as "it is Socrates (or it socrates) in Athens."

There seems to be no good reason to choose one as the only adequate translation and dismiss the other. But if we accept both, we must accept that the same term that appears as a particular in one sentence can appear as a feature universal in another, which amounts to denying the categorial distinction between particulars and feature universals, a distinction which is postulated as fundamental by the proposed conceptual scheme. This consequence we must avoid. One way, and perhaps the only way, of avoiding this consequence is to dispense with the notion of particular altogether. This is exactly how feature-placing sentences are originally conceived by Strawson. Feature-placing sentences, he emphasizes, "neither bring particulars into our discourse nor presuppose other areas of discourse in which particulars are brought in."[9] This means specifically that neither the feature expression nor the placing expression introduces a particular. In other words, proper names, descriptions and so on that denote particular places, such as "Athens," "the plains in the Midwest," "eight o'clock of this morning," or "the first day of the second millennia"

must be ruled out, and the only admissible expressions are adverbial demonstratives such as "here," "there," or "now," as they by themselves set no boundaries at all, nor do they introduce extensionless points or durationless instants, such that they do not independently identify places or times.[10]

The absence of the contrast between completeness and incompleteness in the feature-placing sentences is due to the fact that both the feature expression and the placing expression are incomplete. And the incompleteness of the feature expression suggests that the expression cannot be re-construed in any way as a subject, and hence as one that can introduce a particular. According to Strawson, the introduction of particulars into our discourse necessarily presupposes some facts that are statable only by feature-placing sentences which introduce no particulars. In other words, feature-placing sentences do not depend on sentences that introduce particulars, and can therefore exist alone. The idea is that we cannot, for instance, have the concepts of particulars like a pool of water, a fall of snow, or a lump of coal unless we already had the concepts of feature universals like water, snow, and coal. However, we can have the concepts of water, snow, and coal without having had the concepts of a pool of water, a fall of snow, or a lump of coal. It is the introduction of the particulars, a pool of water and a fall of snow, into our discourse that necessarily presupposes the facts that the feature-placing sentences, "there is water there," "it is snowing here," state, not the other way around.

Now although the examples given here all involve feature expressions supplied by English, since every particular rests on, or unfolds into, a fact stated by feature-placing sentences which introduce no particulars, but only feature-universals, the principle of presupposition should also apply to those particulars that seem to have no corresponding feature universals of which there are natural expressions in English. For instance, "cat" in English is a word for a sortal universal, and not for a feature universal. "There is a cat here" (or "there are cats here") is a good sentence, whereas "there is cat here" is ungrammatical. However, with a little stretch of imagination, "cat" may just be reinterpreted as a feature expression, standing for the cat feature, on a par with "water" and "snow." In other words, all count nouns may be reinterpreted as mass nouns, such that "a cat" will be rewritten as something like "a lump of cat," in the way "a water" should be replaced by "a pool of water" or "a glass of water," etc. Just as the introduction of the particular, the pool of water, presupposes the fact stated by "there is water here," the introduction of the particular, the cat (the lump of cat) presupposes the fact expressed by "there is cat here."[11] Thus it is not "logically absurd to suppose that there might be a level of thought at which we recognize the presence of cat, or signs of the past or future presence of cat, yet do not think identifyingly of particular cats."[12]

In such a conceptual scheme there are no particular cats, but only cat feature or various occurrences of cat feature. Strawson suggests that this pre-particular level of thought is best

exemplified by the naming-game, comparable with one of the earliest things which children do with language: "when they utter the general name for a kind of thing in the presence of a thing of that kind, saying 'duck' when there is a duck, 'ball' when there is a ball &c."[13] Quine maintains a strikingly similar view. He postulates a primitive stage of thinking in which the distinction between count nouns, mass nouns, and adjectives breaks down, there is only concatenation of features, instead of attribution of properties to particulars, and the speaker of the language treats all he encounters as referents of mass nouns.

> We in our maturity have come to look upon the child's mother as an integral body who, in an irregular closed orbit, revisits the child from time to time and to look upon red in a radically different way, viz., as scattered about. Water, for us, is rather like red, but not quite; things are red, stuff alone is water. But the mother, red, and water are for the infant all of a type; each is just a history of sporadic encounter, a scattered portion of what goes on. His first learning of the three words is uniformly a matter of learning how much of what goes on about him counts as the mother, or as red, or as water. It is not for the child to say in the first case "Hello! mama again," in the second case "Hello another red thing," and in the third case "Hello! more water." They are all on a par: Hello! more mama, more red, more water.[14]

Thus the sentence "mama is smiling" in the child's conceptual scheme will not be a predication with "mama" the subject and "is smiling" the predicate, but rather a dyadic construction on "mama" and "smiling," best expressed in English as "it mamas here and it smiles here." The child assents to the "mama is smiling" when both mama-mass and smiling-mass are present and overlap, and dissents from it if either of them is absent, or both are present, but do not overlap.

Quine maintains that words like "mama" and "cat" will graduate from being mass nouns to being count nouns, once the child has become mature, that is, "the child has mastered the divided reference of general terms, he has mastered the scheme of enduring and recurring physical objects."[15] Strawson too thinks that the introduction of particulars is a fundamental conceptual step towards maturity, a step that leaves the primitive pre-particular level of thought as merely vestigial in language.[16] Now the question is whether maturity (possessing the conceptual resources for reference to particulars) makes any difference in describing the world, that is, whether the speaker of an "immature" language as just described can say things having approximately the force of the things the speaker of a "mature" language like English actually says, a language that introduces particulars and whose sentences break into subject and predicate. To this question, Ian Hacking gives an unequivocally positive answer. He contends that a language without particulars can be spoken by fairly cultivated people, and that speakers of such a language, with a quite different linguistic

mechanism, can compensate for the lack of expressions that introduce particulars, and therefore can express ordinary matters at the same level of ease as English.[17] I shall not go into the details of his argument, but shall limit my discussion to one particular question: whether a speaker of such a language can express one of the most ordinary matters, change in something, for instance, the change in a cat from being stinking to being not stinking.

A change in something presupposes the persistence of that thing, as different from other things. To know whether a cat changes from being stinking to being no longer stinking, we must first of all have the concept of a particular cat, and distinguish the same cat, seen again, from another. Within the conceptual scheme implied by the feature-placing language, the idea of change as construed in the established conceptual scheme plays no role, as the idea of a particular thing, distinct from others and persisting through time, plays no role. However, this does not mean that anything we say of the change in the cat cannot be translated into a feature-placing language, and by translation it is meant saying roughly the same in a different way. What exactly is it that compensates for the lack of expressions that introduce particulars in such a language? Citing Boas's "Kwakiutl Grammar," an empirical study on the language spoken by natives of Vancouver Island, Hacking argues that reference to particulars can be made by linguistic mechanisms other than singular terms. One of such mechanisms is localization, which is "brought about partly by the use of local suffixes which define the exact place where an action is performed, without regard to the speaker, partly by the expression of location in relation to the speaker."[18] Localization is comparable to the use of complex demonstratives denoting places (e.g., "that room," "the top of this table"), it is formed by combining some place features and words such as "here," "there," as well as "this," "that," and even "the,"[19] for examples, "the place right behind a yellow tree there."

In essence, localization is reference to a particular by way of reference to a place, which itself is not a particular. Instead of saying "that cat" or "the cat behind the yellow tree over there," one should say "cat behind yellow tree there." To refer to a particular cat is to locate cat feature in a definite place. More specific spatial and temporal localization should be used if there are more than one cat behind the tree in the same time or/and in a sequence of time, but only one needs to be identified. While this, as it appears, can by and large solve the problem of identification, and thereby compensate for the lack of expressions that introduce particulars, it does not solve the problem of re-identification. For the same cat may be in different places. In virtue of what the cat in one place at a time is the same as the one in another place at another time, if we can only refer to a cat by referring to a place? Or to put it in feature-placing terms, in virtue of what it can be determined that some feature or a set of overlapping features in one location is the same feature or the same set of overlapping features at another if the identity of features depends on the identity of places?

Different cats must be expressed in feature-placing language as different features or different sets of features. But so may the same cat in different places and in different times.

It seems, therefore, that re-identification of features requires the existence of a feature or a set of features, which generates the kind of uniqueness as in a genuine definite description, and which must be present in the occasion of re-identification. There are two alternative ways in which we may understand this. A particular thing may be represented by a feature, understood as an equivalent of an individual essence, a unique property (e.g., Socratesness). The uniqueness of a property lies in the fact that it characterizes one and only one thing (e.g., Socrates). But what exactly is Socratesness? The question cannot be answered, because to answer this question is essentially to provide an analysis or definition of it. According to Quine, such a property is unanalyzable.[20] But it cannot be what the medievals called "haecceity" (or *entitas singularis*), for a haecceity, as defined by Duns Scotus, is a non-qualitative property responsible for individuation, a pure "thisness" as opposed to a "whatness," and hence it can never be represented as a universal or a set of universals, whatever kind of universals they may be.

Or alternatively the set of features is understood as constituting an equivalent of an individual essence in Leibniz's sense, that is, as a set of necessary qualitative properties, which are universals, uniquely identifying the thing under the principle of the identity of indiscernibles: if two objects A and B have all their qualitative properties in common, then A and B are identical. However Leibniz's individual essence cannot solve the problem either. As the properties of the set identifying an object are not present all at once, only some properties are present at one time and some different properties at another time. If the properties at different times are different, the sense of persistence through change must be found somewhere else. Simply put, there is no way to tell whether the properties at t2, which are different from the properties at t1, are the properties of the same object as the one which has the properties at t1, not just the properties of an entirely different object. Suppose that there are five objects A, B, C, D, and E. At time t1 at which only A, B, and C exist, A has a set of properties that sufficiently distinguishes itself from B and C, but does not distinguish itself from D and E. At t2 at which only A, D and E exist, A has a different set of properties that sufficiently distinguish from objects D and E, but does not distinguish from B and C. We can succeed in identifying A at t1 and A at t2, but that by itself does not provide the basis for us to re-identify A at t2 as the same as A at t1. A concept of object A is necessarily required to collect all these properties, and is in fact, to use Strawson's terms, presupposed by the talk of re-identification. Such a concept is not reducible to that of collection or bundle.[21]

The above discussion of properties only serves to help understand the conceptual scheme of feature-placing language, as properties are not features, and the talk of properties presupposes the existence of objects of which they are properties. But the analogy between properties and features

holds just because such a presupposition can be suspended in thought. We can see that without the concept of some object, the sense of persistence or sameness, which is part of the concept of an object that changes, cannot be preserved. Since the concept of an object must be filtered out when a particular unfolds into a feature-placing fact, the sense of change will be also filtered out along with the sense of sameness. That is, the sense of change will be lost altogether in translation into a feature-placing language. Therefore, at least with regard to the ordinary matter of change in something, speakers of a feature-placing language cannot say things having approximately the force of things we actually say in a subject-predicate language. I am not saying that speakers of a feature-placing language should be able to say that something changes, if they are able to say anything at all having approximately the force of things we actually say in a subject-predicate language. That will beg the question, for such a language is precisely one in which the idea of a subject of change plays no role. Rather I am saying that they are unable to express what is a *change in something* in a subject-predicate language as still a *change* in their feature-placing language. The sense of change in the idea of change in something is lost in translation. Thus, feature-placing sentences may be presupposed by, but cannot replace, subject-predicate sentences.

Notes

[1] P. F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1959) 148-149.

[2] Of course, this way of distinguishing subjects from predicates certainly does not apply to many other languages. In highly inflected languages such as Latin, for instance, the same expression which is normally identified as a subject may vary in grammatical form (case) when it occurs in different kinds of sentence. But according to Strawson, this does not in fact refute his conclusion which he seems to draw exclusively from the observation of English sentences, because such variations are irrelevant to the style of term introduction. Although "Socrates" will vary in its case inflection when it occurs in the Latin translations of the above sentences, the variation does not tell what general kind of sentence in which it occurs. In other words, in such a language, a particular style which the subject "Socrates" carries when it introduces its term in a particular sentence does not mark the difference between assertion from other types of remarks.

[3] Strawson 153.

[4] It may be argued that the lack of this contrast is not peculiar or unique to talk of stuff (e.g., water). "There are apples here," for instance, seems quite similar to "there is water here." This can be explained by the fact that the categories of mass nouns and plural count nouns have much in

common syntactically insofar as they are both "non-singular." But it is doubtful that this syntactical similarity must have any ontological significance.

[5] On Strawson's list of feature-placing sentences, "snow is falling [here]" (*Individuals* 202) is also included and is treated as equivalent to "it is snowing here." While the sentence is grammatically a subject-predicate sentence, and "snow" is not a dummy as "it" in "it is snowing here" is, it may be understood as the overlapping of two features, and hence be alternatively expressed as "it is snow and it is falling" (with "it" as a dummy, instead of a pronoun), which may then be understood as "it is snowing" unpacked. In a similar vein Quine is able to construct sentences which juxtapose features (e.g., "it mamas here and it smiles here") out of subject-predicate sentences (e.g., "mama smiles"). See below for details.

[6] Chad Hansen proposes that (classical) Chinese ontology, which is basically a stuff ontology, an ontology that represents the world as a collection of overlapping and interpenetrating stuffs, goes along with a mass noun syntax that dominates Chinese and especially classical Chinese. See Chad Hansen, *Language and Logic in Ancient China* (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 1983). Richard Sharvy expressed a similar view with regard to the role of mass nouns in Chinese in his paper "Maybe English Has No Count Nouns: Notes on Chinese Semantics," *Studies in Language* 2 (1978): 345-65. It is perhaps easy to construe all assertive sentences in Chinese as feature-placing sentences, if all Chinese nouns are understood as mass nouns.

[7] Johannes Lohmann suggests that the Chinese words for places which are invariantly translated as part of the adverbial modifier indicating placing occupy the same position as those that are translated as subjects in English. For example, "there is snow in the field" is expressed in Chinese as "*tián lǐ yǒu xuě*" ("the field has snow" in English), identical in form to "*wǒ yǒu qián*" ("I have money"). So it is not too fantastic to translate the latter as "there is money in me." The two sentences may be understood as either both subject-predicate or both feature-placing, as the ambiguity of being either a placing expression or a subject "is only manifest in translation; it does not exist in the original Chinese." See Johannes Lohmann, "Heidegger's Ontological Difference," *On Heidegger and Language*, ed. Joseph J. Kockelmans (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1972) 333.

[8] Strawson 36.

[9] Strawson 203.

[10] Strawson 216.

[11] More specifically, between the introduction of a particular, e.g., the cat (or rather the lump of cat), and placing the cart feature, there are two stages of presupposition which correspond to the two kinds of introduction. The first kind of introduction is the introduction of individual particulars (e.g., "the pool of water," "the cat"), whereas the second is the introduction of particulars in general (e.g.,

a pool of water," "a cat"). For instance, the sentence "the cat is on the mat there," which introduces a particular, the cat, presupposes the existence of a cat, a fact that is stated by the existential sentence "there is (at least) one cat there." The latter sentence thus introduces a particular in general, a cat, which in turn presupposes some feature-placing fact expressed by "there is cat there." In other words, the first stage of presupposition is the presupposition of facts expressed by sentences involving the second kind of introduction, whereas the second is the presupposition of facts expressed by sentences involving no introduction of particulars.

[12] Strawson 205.

[13] Strawson 206.

[14] W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Objects*, (Cambridge, MA: Technology Press of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1960) 92. Quine's description of the child's learning process seems anticipated by Aristotle, when he writes in the *Physics*, "what is to us plain and clear at first is rather confused masses, … a child begins by calling all men father, and all women mother, but later on distinguishes each of them" (*Physics*, 184a22-184b13).

[15] Quine, *Words and Objects*, 94-95.

[16] Strawson 206. It should be pointed out that both Strawson and Quine speak of a "primitive" or "immature" stage of cognitive development in speculative terms, and hence quite independent of empirical psychological evidence. However, there is a large body of literature in psychology which addresses the question as to what exactly the early stage of cognitive development is like.

[17] Ian Hacking, "A Language without Particulars," *Mind* 77 (1968): 168-85.

[18] *Ibid.* 181.

[19] When the demonstratives and definite articles are attached to expressions introducing sortal universals and sometimes characterizing universals, they are used to form singular terms that introduce particulars. However, they can also be attached to mass terms (e.g., "this water", "that gold", and "the snow") to indicate incidences of matter. "This water", "that gold", are equivalent to "the water here", "the gold there", while "the snow" is simply an incomplete feature-placing expression. So they may all be regarded as localizers.

[20] W. V. O. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1953).

[21] As Laycock puts it, "The generally accepted criterion of particular-identity through time may be roughly characterized as follows: an object m at $t1$ is identical with an object n at $t1$ if m is spatiotemporally continuous with n between $t1$ and $t2$ under some covering concept F." Henry Laycock, "Some Questions of Ontology," *Philosophical Review* 81 (1972): 28.

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